

THE THREE WITCHES: DECIPHERING AUTONOMOUS VIABILITY WHERE UNSEXING NECESSITATES A THICK BEARD RATHER THAN MASCULINITY

Harshika Arora

Mata Sundri College for Women, Delhi University, student, Department of English, New Delhi, India

E-mail : harshikaa2003@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

In the syntax of early society of England, women unsexing themselves necessitate a thick beard rather than masculinity. In the age where the beard advertised the completion of apprenticeships and the acquisition of freeman status, I argue that witches with their beards were sexually independent beings belonging to the natural world. At the same time, they are comparable to women and a consequence of being neglected by society and pure patriarchy. Lady Macbeth's choice of opting for non-masculinity in the act of unsexing herself is thus a social and economic choice that is in keeping with the societal status of the beard found in a hegemonic and all-pervasive gender discourse. Particularly in the Elizabethan theatres, male apprentices who performed as women exhibited the blatant gender ambiguity through cross-dressing. These effeminate men received criticism for being less manly and unethical in light of the Bible. It emphasized men as the dominant and opinionated sex over women, in keeping with the beard's status as a symbol of masculinity. In the end, the beard stands for autonomous viability outside of a gendered societal discourse.

Keywords: *Unsexing, Beard, Patriarchy, Cross – dressing, Autonomous Viability.*

Mark Albert Johnston says, “*Since the male facial beard operated in both economic and sexual registers to signal the privileges of autonomous viability, the female facial beard challenged that spectacular system of signification by which patriarchy naturalized its own constitution*” (Mark Albert Johnston : 2007) . In this context, the bearded man provided a critical hegemonic discourse to explain the appearance of witches. Unsexing is a strange concept once more because when a woman requests it, she doesn't want to transform into a man; she just needs a beard to advance socially and financially. Indeed, it is a curious and largely unappreciated art-historical fact that nearly all of the men depicted in portraits from the English Renaissance have beards. In England, starting around 1540 and continuing for at least a century after that, males over the age of twenty-one are almost always depicted with some sort of facial hair. As an instance, some academics have argued that giving male actors feminine roles was just "a mundane habit in Renaissance dramatic practice, but rather a risky "source of homoerotic attraction" that stirs up "deep-seated worries" of a "unstable and grotesque," feminized self. Cross-dressing involved struggle, subversion, and resistance in addition to adaptation, healing, and "reduction of the system of gendered patriarchy. Many investigations of the literature from the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras reveal that gender and clothing concerns captured early modern England's attention, and that the theatre provided special spaces for the discussion of sexual topics. “*The woman shall not weare that which pertaineth vnto a man, neither shall a man put on a womans garment: for all that doe so, are abomination vnto the Lord thy God.*” (Deuteronomy 22, 5). According to J.W Binns, “*This verse was taken up as one of the central objections to the theater. This is an exegesis which counted for a good*

deal in the Puritan criticism of a stage in which boys habitually took the female parts."(J. W. Binns: 1974). Men's androgyny and effeminacy as a result of their lack of facial hair made them less manly and hence less powerful. For the most part, the idea of masculinity for men with beards was one of independent viability, sexual freedom, and financial independence. (Will Fisher: 2001).

Why then are we unable to discuss whether witches shared the same concept of autonomous viability? They can, after all, grow a moustache, which is a sure sign that they have grown to be more than just a vulnerable woman. A man being singled out by witches as the model of society, as they say, *'I'll drain him dry as hay: sleep shall neither night nor day.... He shall live a man forbid*, (Payal Nagpal: 2016) Witches could have forbid the sailor's wife from having children, but instead they disregarded the fact that men and manhood must be prevented. The witches, on the other hand, had nothing in common with those fifteen predominant beard styles; instead, they had odd, dispersed, small or big hair, spread unevenly over their faces, which further supports the idea that they had rejected the strict patriarchy. As Banquo also mentioned that those unearthly beings or withered hags had 'skinny lips', chapped ('choppy') fingers and beards.



*Figure 1: Details. Charles I wearing a stiletto beard (ca. 1625-1625), attributed to Jacob Van Doort
Photo: The Royal Collection, Windsor Castle (The Renaissance Beard, pp 161)*

There is also the noteworthy fact that Lady Macbeth never shared the strange sisters' dubious womanhood.

The Early Modern age was heavily influenced by mounting concerns about mothers' contributions to the maintenance of patrilineage and the dependence of the female authority pushed into the hands of men. Women who had illegitimate children were either hanged or sentenced to death, and such mothers and the concept of motherhood were debased to the point where even the legislature referred to such women as monstrous and violent (Stephanie Chamberlain: 2005). Women were defined by the weak regulatory patriarchy, which served as its definers. To which Joanna Levin also says, "*many feminist historians and literary critics celebrate the witch as the nonconforming figure who threatened "hegemonic sex/gender systems." Some even reveal certain nostalgia for the witch, claiming that her disappearance resulted in*

the greater triumph of male hegemony. Based on a direct correlation between witchcraft belief and female power, such an argument assumes that the end of witchcraft prosecutions meant that female deviance, real or symbolic, no longer posed a threat to male dominance." (Joanna Levin: 2002)

However, despite the text's extraordinary supernatural elements like thunder and clouds, which can be symbolic of a struggle against the heavily sexist society, as the witches say, "*Weary sevnnights rietimes nine, Shall he dwindle, peak and pine. Though his bark cannot be lost, yet it shall be tempest-tossed. Look what I have.*" (Payal Nagpal: 2016) which can be simply translated as for eighty-one wearying weeks he'll slowly become sickly, and waste away from grief.

Although I can't destroy his ship/Can still buffet it with storms by controlling the winds. / Look what I've got. What sorrow can a man bear when he is fully unconscious of the circumstances affecting the witches, which I find particularly ambiguous? Then, how does the spoken word grief come into play when it is brought up as a term utilized for an elevated cause and goal that the situation does not depict? What about the storms and winds that were mentioned? limitless natural elements with no boundaries have given us a grip on a gender hegemonic discourse about the age of manhood. We are being taught about much more than their mere existence, both directly and indirectly. The rare presence of witches represents the social and cultural rejection of them.

In the reign of James I, witchcraft and witch hunting were undoubtedly pervasive, which devalued the fundamental principles of motherhood. The 1624 Infanticide Act made it a crime to "secretly bury or conceal the death of their child," which was a response to the rise in infanticide murders during the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras. Lady Macbeth is one such noteworthy example. She was a "disturbing threat to phallic power" and primarily a paternalistic construct; she was deceptive yet completely somatized. Such contradictions are present in the figure of Lady Macbeth. To which Dymrna Callaghan notes, "*women were persecuted as mothers: as bad old mothers for witchcraft, and as bad young mothers for infanticide*" (Stephanie Chamberlain: 2005). Therefore, the idea of motherhood became consistent with infanticide, witchcraft, and illegitimacy, which led to the creation of a corrupted caricature of maternal kindness. In this regard, Lady Macbeth's unsexing is anything but impeccable; she was well versed in the power dynamics of the dominant political world. In this view, Lady Macbeth can also be seen as a fourth witch in the play, acting as a maternal agency. Unsexing herself was a way for her to escape the constraints of the most passive sex, without, of course, crossing over into a pure patriarchy or masculine affirmations.

However, the indispensable child of Lady Macbeth, whom she mentions, also provides us with an indication about motherhood. "*How tender tis to love the babe that milks me and dashed the brains out, had I sworn as you have done to this.*"(Payal Nagpal: 2016). These quoted words from Lady Macbeth possibly foreshadow her pre-marital life with an illegitimate child of her own, due to which she would have been ignored by the society, and the fear of cultural discrimination may have further motivated her to decide to unsex herself. The violent act of infanticide was once again perceived as an intrusive activity for women. To which, Marvin Rosenberg also says, "*All of Macbeth's violence is in the service of a son of his own. If Macbeth were childless, the succession of Fleance would be no great matter; it could come after Macbeth had peacefully paid*". (Marvin Rosenberg: 1974) .

With regards to Anne Hathaway, Shakespeare's wife, who had already been pregnant before they were married, I have my suspicions that she could have been proven as a witch or a monster if the public had known about it. This can also support claims that Shakespeare wrote in King James I's favor, among

other things, and that she was the mother of an illegitimate child. The subject is once more controversial and open to numerous disputable discourses because the character of Lady Macbeth foreshadows the real-life character of Anne Hathaway on numerous occasions.

Despite being utterly absurd, at last the concept of a beard presents a comprehensive panorama of early modern England and its rulers. Social, sexual, economic, and political factors were undoubtedly biased in favor of one sex over the other, so achieving autonomy and, in particular, sexual independence, required natural transgression. The witches, in my opinion, are perfectly natural creatures of the natural world, but they have been elevated above mere social hierarchies as a result of hegemonic cultural and societal discourse. As Mark Albert Johnston says, "*the female facial beard challenged that spectacular system of signification by which patriarchy naturalized its own constitution and so figured as a site at which the female body's economic/erotic significance required reassertion.*" (Mark Albert Johnston: 2007).

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