The Lost Boys
Masculine Confusion and Anxiety in Macbeth

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1 Introduction

‘I dare do all that may become a man; / Who dares do more is none.’ (1.7.46-47)

*Macbeth*, also known as the Scottish play or the cursed play among theatre folk as uttering its name in a theatre is believed to cause disaster, is the shortest and quite possibly the bleakest of all of Shakespeare’s tragedies. Popular lore tells us the belief stems from the premiere of the play when a boy named Hal Berridge, who was supposed to play Lady Macbeth, died and Shakespeare himself had to step in to play the part. Egan, however, tells us no record of such an actor exists (236). Even if it seems the modern superstition was born in the nineteenth century (Perkins Wilder 393), the fact remains that today the play is associated with many accidents and some believe that Shakespeare quoted actual witches who were offended by the play. It is then probably not a surprise that the theme of evil seems to be the most prominent in studies of *Macbeth*. Most scholars interested in masculinity and Shakespeare turn their attention to the comedies and cross-dressing as the material found in plays such as *Twelfth Night* and *As You Like It* is plentiful, but to me Macbeth’s battle with his masculinity and society’s and his wife’s expectations of him as a representative of the male sex is inseparably entwined with everything Macbeth does in the play and thus even the theme of evil cannot be discussed without discussing gender. The question of what it means to be a man, a proper man or even a good man, does form the backbone of the play as the characters one after another appeal to each other’s or their own masculinity either to justify their actions or in search of guidelines for appropriate behaviour.

This study was born out of curiosity and frustration. My studies of gender and Shakespeare had mostly dealt with femininity and had left me with a feeling I knew hardly anything about masculinity. I was curious about this seemingly uncharted terrain that was still taken for granted as the opposite force of femininity. I felt I could not properly grasp the feminine side of the texts without a genuine understanding of the masculine. What was masculinity besides oppressive patriarchy? Was there something else to masculinity besides brawn and bravery and not crying? I had often felt masculinity had been simplified or modernised in order to better fit modern feminist ideas and, indeed, I would find myself often utterly
confused by the confusing and mixed messages I read. I wanted to clear out masculinity, but what I found was that there was no clear answer. Early modern masculinity was just as confused and personal as modern masculinity and dependent on changing society and social circles. This study will, however, attempt to map out early modern masculinity and masculinity and gender in *Macbeth* as carefully, objectively and honestly as possible.

Masculinity is a performance, something to be acted out every day. It’s a set of virtues that a man should attain and any deviation from these neuters a man, but the problem is that everyone seems to have a slightly different idea of what it really means to be a man. For Lady Macbeth it means violence and ambition, for Macbeth it is courage and loyalty, for Malcolm it is restraint from emotions and for Macduff it is allowing room for emotions. In the end it seems Macduff has the right idea as he is represented as the most perfect of all the characters that wins the day and restores peace and order. It seems either that Shakespeare had rather progressive ideas of gender roles and their ambivalence or that Shakespeare or his king, James I, for whom the play was written, valued the kind of valiant but emotive masculinity that Macduff represented. In this study I aim to map out the different sorts of masculinities represented in *Macbeth* and exactly how Macduff’s masculinity rises above the others as better than the rest to explain what it actually meant to be manly. After looking at the historical background of the play, I will study fear and control as masculinity’s corner stones and look at how the dynamics of these two relate to the different forms of masculinity present in *Macbeth*. Finally I will discuss women’s place and role in *Macbeth* and in the masculine world.

### 2 History

Masculinity is often thought of as the neutral gender, something women could be if they just were “unsexed” like Lady Macbeth, but in truth masculinity does not exist without femininity because “[g]ender is always a relationship” (Mangan 9). To be masculine is to be somehow unfeminine, but masculinity is not just about the relationship between men and women - the relationships between men have to be taken into account as well. As gender is a discourse and tied to the surrounding culture, in order to discuss masculinity in *Macbeth* we must find out what
masculinity meant in Shakespeare’s time as the ideas of gender and masculinity change quite a lot throughout the ages, cultures and countries. Or as Mark Breitenberg puts it: ‘both “masculine” and “feminine” are historically specific deployments of gender differences sensible only in relation to one another” (7-8). With Macbeth we might even want to consider whether we should differentiate between the men of England and the men of Scotland. Was the idealisation of violence more an English than Scottish idea or perhaps something both cultures shared in the early seventeenth century? Or should we perhaps ask what masculinity meant in the eleventh century or what the people of the seventeenth century thought of the eleventh century? In this section I am going to examine the ideas of masculinity prevalent in and around the time of Macbeth and give an overview of the historical context of the play.

The first thing to bear in mind when discussing gender in early modern times is that gender was not neatly divided in two between males and females. While there was an idea of just one gender of which the female side was just a somehow lacking or broken version, gender roles were tightly connected to age, marital status and social status. Male existence was basically divided into three phases that were “approaching manhood”, “manhood”, and “decay from manhood” and this division implied that the ten to twenty years’ period of manhood was the ideal form of existence (Shepard 9). However, it was not enough to just be a man: a man had to act out his role as a man in a way that served the goals of the patriarchal society. So even though men in general, if we ignore all the aspects of age and status, were seen as higher than women, they did not have complete power over themselves as society, other men and finally God dictated how each and every man should behave in any given situation and position. As demonstrated by the advice given in conduct books, for example, if there was a problem with manhood, it was not about manliness or the lack of it, but about restraining this manliness so that it would benefit society or at the very least would not harm it (Shepard 10). In this light “anxious masculinity” was not anxious just about femininity and holding power over women, it was also concerned with holding power over masculinity. Even if men and masculinity were seen as higher than women and femininity, not everything masculine was held perfect and holy in and of itself.
Women all in all were seen as sort of faulty men, men who were born with the unfortunate birth defect of not being men. Their sexual organs were thought of as the indrawn version of the male genitalia that had failed to pop out because women’s bodies were cooler and moister than men’s. As Brett D. Hirsch tells us, in the print literature available in early modern England women could theoretically turn into men. Hirsch brings up a 1594 translation of Juan Huarte’s *Examen de Ingenios* where it is stated that should a woman grow a beard and her menstrual cycle cease she ‘should become as perfect a man, as nature could produce’ (97). Hirsch also tells of Tomas Garzoni and Antonio de Torquemada, who both tell of women who actually transformed into men. Growing a beard was an essential part of this process and as the exception confirming the rule Hirsch points out how Torquemada feels the need to specify that even though Marie, or Manuell, Pacheco ‘issued forth a perfect and able member masculine’ (qtd. in Hirsch 97-98) she or he never grew a beard. That that the lack of a beard should be mentioned particularly proves how important a beard was for masculinity, as Hirsch points out. Curiously, though, the story of Marie Germane, who suddenly at the age of twenty-two leapt over something and as a result of the physical strain grew a penis, was used as a warning example for girls. (98) Even if women were faulty they were not to actually aspire to become men and it was assumed a girl would not even want to be a boy, she was to be happy with her female part. This story goes to show that these converts were not lauded for shaking the disease of femininity and finding their way to male perfection. Perhaps the idea of faulty women is appealing only to the extent that it gives men power and the feeling of superiority. When a woman turns into a man it suggests that perhaps all women could be cured. For a proud man an all-male society wouldn’t be appealing because it would destroy the existing power structure in which even the lowest of men always had at least one woman below him. Women are needed as the opposite that makes it possible for the concept of man (as opposed to woman) or masculinity to even exist.

Even though the early modern concept of gender was that of a single gender model and women could at least theoretically and in stories turn into men, it was, however, impossible for a man to turn into a woman and thus it would not even cross one’s mind to say someone looked like a man except for his breasts or wide hips. Or at least this was the case in public discourse. Secretly it was feared that the
transformation could work both ways and wearing women’s clothes, for example, might actually effeminate a man and even turn him into a woman. The opposition to theatre because of boys playing the parts of women is tied to the anxiety caused by the dawning realisation that gender just might be a performance and the resulting fear for patriarchy’s future. As Hirsch reports, the growing international interaction resulted in growing awareness of cultural differences and observations made about other cultures with slightly different ideas about beards and masculinity can have only strengthened the suspicions about the fixed nature of gender.

As genders were defined by humoural science where females were cool and moist and corresponded to the elements of earth and water, it is curious that melancholy, one of the four main humours in a body, is also described as cold and dry with earth as its corresponding element. Melancholy seems to also be the overarching term for anything and everything unbalanced and excessive. (Breitenberg 37) These definitions make melancholy sound very feminine. Breitenberg argues that melancholy is ‘the most profound danger to [the] masculine subject’ and at the same time ‘a necessary and enabling condition of masculinity’ (36). Breitenberg sees Robert Burton’s melancholy as ‘a discourse of otherness – an Other not beyond the pale but more insidiously present within’ (38). We could easily replace “melancholy” with “femininity”. Breitenberg sees this as the most misogynist view of melancholy and mentions that ‘[f]or Burton . . . “woman” figures interchangeably as the source of melancholy and as the character of the melancholy man: taken together, the at least implicit consequence is that women cause men to act like women’ (48). Women are ‘seductive, lustful, inconstant and deceptive – the subversive force --- that overthrows masculine reason and self-control’ (Breitenberg 48). In other words femininity and effeminacy were not simply frowned upon but were considered a disease. Women were not just inferior, they were dangerous to men and masculinity as femininity rubs off on men in women’s company. Women cause melancholy which in turn makes men behave like women. Burton’s ideas about the anatomy of melancholy might represent the more misogynist side of thinking, but his writing does offer a valuable glimpse at the anxiety inherent in early modern masculinity. The popularity of the book, combined with its being presented as a medical text, tells us Burton was not alone with his ideas.
As seen in many of the conduct books (Shepard 30) the keys to ideal manhood were balance, moderation and control. This is illustrated nicely in the divided three period male life cycle of youth, manhood and old age, of which youth was the time of excess, when it was nearly impossible for a young man to control all his lusts, manhood was the time of control and moderation, living life in harmony with one’s wife, and old age was the time of nothing left to control. It is manhood that is balanced and only manhood that is ideal. Control manifested itself in the form of control over one’s self, control over women, control over business and control over one’s subordinates. While young women, too, were told to control and moderate themselves, it was believed it was inherently easier and more natural for women than for men to achieve control. Men were prone to outbursts of excess since their bodies were believed to be hotter and drier than the cool and moist female bodies. Perhaps for this reason if a woman misbehaved, she was declared deranged while a man was just called prodigal. Misbehaving women were that much rarer, so that what for men was slight deviation was such an outrageous leap away from the “normal” for women that it had to be classified as a mental illness. As a wayward woman was seen as clearly more dangerous to herself and to society than a wayward man, all women needed to be controlled - first by their parents in childhood and then by their husbands in adult life.

This creates a strange paradox as the gender that was assumed to have easier time controlling themselves in youth was also seen as the one needing external control (Shepard 32). Still, in domestic settings, should their household fail in some way, men were the ones held more responsible for this failure. Men should be able to control their household and even if the wife failed to fulfil her duties and was partly at fault, a husband could never make the wife take all the blame since that would have meant admitting weakness, that the wife had power over the husband. While women were basically given only one rule, “obey”, men were given a set of rules and guidelines and ideals they should follow, thus placing them under peer pressure of sort. As superior as men were, it was believed no man was truly right and complete until he was married to a woman who made him honest and put him in right course (Shepard 74). This way women, too, had some control over men, even if it was a kind of self-control practiced because of women - much in the same manner unruly children are given positions of trust in hopes of the responsibility reining them in.
Shepard quotes Dod and Cleaver’s A Godly Form of Householde Government (76) to illustrate to what extent women were expected to be passive. In the lengthy list wives are told to be silent, private and humble. They should recognise the husband’s power over them in all situations and accept this with love. While the husband is supposed to earn money and travel around and interact with many men in order to build business and relationships, the wife should remain at home, be solitary and withdrawn and talk to as few men as possible. While the husband is supposed to be a silver-tongued orator, the wife should take pride in her silence.

The early modern period was an interesting time for gender. For decades England was ruled by a queen that behaved like a king and was followed by a king who was seen as more feminine than the queen. The flaw both Elizabeth and James shared was their gender. Queen Elizabeth may have been a strong ruler, but she was always regarded with certain reservations because of her sex. According to Steven Mullaney who quotes here André Huralt, Sieur de Maisse and Ambassador Extraordinary from Henri IV, towards the end of Elizabeth’s reign ‘the sentiments of the nobility were such that ‘the English would never again submit to the rule of a woman’. King James on the other hand was welcomed with festive ‘We have a king!’ cries. (Mullaney 161) England was excited to have a king after such a long period under the rule of a woman, a concept that, after all, went against the basic and most fundamental ideas of gender hierarchy set even in the Bible. Only the nation was in for a disappointment as it turned out Elizabeth had been “more of a man” than the new king (Capps and Carlin 692-94). King James preferred diplomacy and strategic marriage instead of war and aimed for universal pacification through a General Council of Christian Monarchs in Europe. In addition to his self-claimed name ‘Beatus Pacificus’ his idealism and tactics earned him the title of ‘the wisest fool in Christendom’. (Zimmermann 378)

Mangan points out how Elizabeth, on the other hand, purposefully built her image to be one of various gender roles as her sex was a hindrance to her politics even if she was accepted as the lawful ruler. As Elizabethan ideas of gender were rather different from the modern politically correct idea she even went and said outright that she had the ‘heart and stomach of a king’ (80). King James, on the other hand, represented the new idea of gentlemanly masculinity that was to become the
norm in the eighteenth century. If Elizabeth had worked hard to fit the image of a strong warrior king, James preferred the image of a wise philosopher king. Rather than try to gain glory on the battlefield, he tried to keep England away from wars and battles.

Elizabethan and Jacobean England was one of royal gender confusion and according to Jennifer C. Vaught early modern England was living through a time of change as the image of brave blood-stained warriors started to give way to the idea of sensible gentlemen that became the undisputed ideal in the eighteenth century. It should be borne in mind that this development is applicable to the upper classes alone, but this is not a problem as *Macbeth* is a royal play and all the central characters are nobles. The gender confusion is also tied to the period being ‘decidedly nervous about social disorder in general’ (Breitenberg 21). The early modern period is thus marked by change and disagreement that inevitably follows any changes in cultural fabric as modernist and conservative views clash. In the case of emotion, Vaught names these opposing views as Augustinian and Stoic: ‘Augustinian defenders of passionate Protestantism focused on the spiritual value of the emotions, whereas representatives of stoical classicism advocated indifference toward them’ (26). Augustinians saw the iron-hearted Stoic sneering at tears and emotions as turning one’s back to God since one’s heart and soul were gifts from God. Augustinians were especially concerned with tears as they believed one should follow Christ’s example and one very literal example regarding emotions was given in the Bible: ‘And Jesus wept’ (John 11.35 qtd in Vaught 14). Zurcher calls the ideology of the late Elizabethan and early Stuart era ‘the new humanism’ which she describes ‘as politic ideology, a blend of scepticism, Tacitism, and reason of state theory that advertised itself as disillusioned and therefore realistic about politics and history where the old humanism had been naïve’. Stoicism and new humanism were seen by James as a threat to the monarchy as the ideology implies removing oneself from under political authority or rebelling against this authority. Implied is, also, that ultimately all political agents only aspire to reach their own goals regardless of whether or not it is for the good of the commonwealth. Obviously this is not something a king wants to hear because not only does it encourage rebellion against the king, it also suggests that the king himself is thinking of himself before his kingdom and as if that was not bad enough, new humanism and stoicism are against
romanticised history writing which would deny the heroic legends of the king’s lineage and would possibly even question his divine right to rule. This goes, also, against the caring image of the king Ian McAdam brings up when he quotes Stephen Orgel: ‘the King describes himself in Basilikon Doron as ‘a loving nourish father’ providing the commonwealth with ‘their own nourish-milk’. This brings us back to the idea of balance as well as James combines in this image the roles of both mother and father making himself at the same time androgynous as McAdam points out when he refers to Adelman who draws lines between James and Duncan’s references to his planting and growing seeds. (237-8)

In analysing the components of early modern masculinity, Eugene Wraith focuses on the relationship of valour and masculinity and brings up the Christian idea of true masculinity consisting of more than just physical valour as mere physicality leaves men too close to the beasts that are supposed to be below men (263). Men are faced with the principal dangers of becoming brutish or effeminated by idleness. According to this Christian ideal Macbeth should be more than a fighter and beware of getting ambitious as this is the particular sin tempting soldiers. This is interesting in relation to James’ ideas of a king’s role. I will next look at how these ideas affected James and Elizabeth and the play itself.

I have already referred to James and Elizabeth in passing, but to understand Macbeth I feel it is necessary to be familiar with its background more largely: why it was written and how it was possibly perceived when the play was first written in 1606. Macbeth differs from Shakespeare’s other historical plays in that instead of being aimed for the regular theatre goers at the Globe it was written to please the new king James VI of Scotland and I of England who had moved down from Scotland to take the crown after Elizabeth’s death in 1603. James I was largely unknown in England and the first to join England and Scotland under common rule so it was important to both please him and make James’s lineage more familiar among Englishmen. James I was an educated man and was interested in genealogy and proud of being descended from Banquo as for an early modern man his worth was dependent on his ancestors as much as on himself if not even more so ‘For a man’s very being as honourable had been transmitted to him with the blood of his ancestors, themselves honourable men. Honour therefore was not merely an
individual possession, but that of the collectivity, the lineage’ (325), so it was important for Shakespeare to get his facts straight in a way that pleased the royal viewer. All in all Shakespeare included in the play five characters James descended from, namely Banquo, Fleance, Siward, Duncan and Malcolm, and was careful to leave them morally squeaky clean (Paul 150). Banquo is a loyal and good soldier, the forefather of a line of kings, Fleance is his son, Siward is a good, practically emotionless soldier, Duncan is a good king that praises his loyal subordinates and Malcolm is a clever king that fights to save his kingdom from the tyrant. Already we have a variety of different types of masculinity, but what they all have in common is that none of them acts against the rightful king.

James I believed strongly that kings and queens were appointed by God and this is probably why Banquo is introduced and prophesied to beget a line of future kings. A detail like this would be important because James I was not directly descended from Duncan and Malcolm III and the prophesy of the weird sisters (1.2.65-67) would give his rule the predestined flavour of the divine. It is also worth noting that in 1722 Richard Hay became the first to claim that Banquo and his son Fleance never actually existed and this view still holds today (Paul 152). Most of the minor characters are, also, somehow related to James I. Lennox stands by Duncan as the Duke of Lennox in James’s time was his good friend and cousin Ludowic Stuart. Siward was the Danish king Christian’s ancestor and James just happened to be married to Christian’s sister Anne. James I had generally preferred male company over females and had close relationships with his male companions. This has led to speculations of his sexuality although he did marry Anne, with whom he had eight children, and was in his writings strictly against sodomy. Esmé Stuart, the first Duke of Lennox and father of Ludowic Stuart, is one of James’s close friends that have been speculated to have been James’ lovers as the young king was reportedly extremely affectionate with the older man, granted him many favours to which Lennox responded by giving up his family and Catholic faith in order to devote himself to James.

How, then, is James I important in understanding gender in Macbeth? As we look to James we can see what he valued in men and what he deemed appropriate or admirable. Malcolm’s list of ‘king-becoming graces’, for example,
surely seems to match James’s idea of himself as a philosopher king: ‘justice, verity, temperance, stableness, / Bounty, perseverance, mercy, lowliness, / Devotion, patience, courage, fortitude’ (4.3.92-5). None of these graces could really be applied to Macbeth’s name and thus Malcolm gives us a guideline for interpreting Macbeth’s character as King James would probably have seen him. Consequently in Basilikon Doron James himself lists some princely virtues and does not forget to stress moderation: ‘And as I said of justice, so say I of Clemencie, Magnanimiteit, Liberalitie, Constancie, Humilitie, and all other Princelie vertues; Nam in medio stat virtus’ (86). As we are focusing on gender it is perhaps worth noting that while James’s enemies did not dare to accuse him of sodomy, which was a very serious sin and a crime in the seventeenth century, he was, however, accused of being effeminate and ‘lacking in manliness’ (Capps and Carlin 691). The Early Modern relationship with homosexuality and male intimacy was somewhat complex. What we should bear in mind is that homosexuality did not exist as a separate identity in the way it does today and thus homosexuality was seen as an act similar to adultery. Like homosexuality, adultery was a sin, but there was no specific adulterer identity. Furthermore while sodomy was a serious sin, young men in their excessive lustfulness were almost expected to sin and homosexuality was something that lived in every young man and it was just a question of self-control for it not to surface in the homosocial environment they were living in. Homosexuality was seen effeminate not because of the act itself per se, but because of a loss of control like this was seen as effeminate. Thus even though James’s relationships with his favourites like Robert Carr and George Villiers were not exactly secret, the accusations of effeminacy seemed to stem more from James’s pacifistic nature and reluctance to take the country to war than actual homosexuality. James was not the kind of king people expected so accusations of effeminacy became a complex tangle of evidence, expectations, associations and plain political power play. Homosexuality was associated with effeminacy and effeminacy was associated with passivity and James’s critics did not look favourably at the way James seemed to be led by his feelings and his favourites who were also deemed effeminate. James himself was proud to call himself an intellectual, but in his critics’ eyes this very trait made him effeminate and less a man than his predecessor Queen Elizabeth. (Capps and Carlin 692-94) James’s embracing of emotions, albeit always in moderation if we believe
him to have practiced what he preached, was a natural weapon especially for those critics who had been taken by stoicism and complete denial of emotions.

Alan Sinfield sums up early modern masculinity as ‘hanging out with other males and fighting’ (Shakespeare 88) whereas effeminacy was emotionality, excessive devotion to women or spending too much time in domestic circles. Sinfield sheds more light on the meaning of James’s avoidance of war when he quotes one of the warlords in *Henry VI Part I*: ‘Shall we at last conclude effeminate peace?’ (5.4.107). Lack of control regarding emotions is what causes effeminacy. In modern eyes it is peculiar that as Sinfield points out, in *Romeo and Juliet* Romeo declares himself effeminate because of his love for Juliet. His love for his friend Mercutio, however, is perfectly fine and masculine even (Shakespeare 89). Men are allowed to love each other because of soldierly camaraderie. Loving another man is manly and useful when it makes men want to fight side by side or help one another build social networks. And even when it does none of this, we can at least pretend that manly love is equal and based on clear rational reasons in the manner of ‘you scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours’. There is a use for love between men, but love for a woman is always hopelessly unequal and based on pure emotion and useless things like pretty eyes.

James’s avoidance of war and thus violence is significant when we remember the role of violence in early modern society: ‘Violence was one of the main props of patriarchy in early modern England, and as such was central to the regulation of social relations between men as well as between men and women' (Shepard 128) Before the king had been above violence in that the subjects were not allowed to harm him, but the king or queen had proved his or her worth through violence by leading armies to battle. The king had had to prove his worth in the context of violence. When discussing *The Boke of Saint Albans* Mervyn Evans James even points out that ‘[t]here is no reference in these early expositions of honour to the sense, prominent in the Bartolan tradition, of learning as a qualification for nobility: that honour might be attained by the pen, as well as the sword’ (311). Granted, *The Boke of Saint Albans* was originally published already in 1486, but it was edited and reprinted several times till 1614 (Berners 71) which shows it was considered valid and important. With his diplomacy and pacifism James, however,
refused to prove himself. Now, if we put ourselves in the boots of an early modern man, we might find this suspicious. Perhaps the king refused because he knew he would fail? And while James declined proving his manhood on battle fields, he at the same time took the opportunity from his people: not only did he effeminate himself, but the whole of England. Abhorring violence went against the public ideals: ‘It is significant that very few litigants sought to condemn acts of violence as unseemly, brutish, or contradictory to normative codes of manhood which emphasized control and restraint. Instead, many cases were argued on the grounds of foul play: the offence lay not merely in resorting to blows, but primarily in disregarding the implicit codes of conduct expected to regulate physical confrontation.’ (Shepard 147) There was simply nothing wrong with violence, it was manly even, if just conducted in the appropriate manner and what could be more appropriate than a noble war. Shepard also marks that ‘[t]he early modern period has traditionally been characterized as a comparatively violent era marking the turbulent transition from feudalism to capitalism, and the subsequent decline in levels of violence has been associated with a qualitative shift towards less violent cultural norms, often with reference to Norbert Elias’s theory of a ‘civilizing process’’ (128). According to Vaught, the lessening of violence was caused by changing masculine ideals which in turn were caused by change of profession among the upper-class. More and more men abandoned the militaristic life and adopted the civil arts (8).

Knowing James I helps us understand certain dramatic decisions and gives us guidelines as to how the play should be read to get the message as it was probably intended in 1606. Understandably this Jamesian reading is very popular, but Sinfield criticises this view claiming that Shakespeare’s contemporaries were quite able to criticise the king and his absolutist ideas, as the Gunpowder Plot proves, and thus we, too, should be able to see past James I (Faultlines 100). King James sitting in the audience does not mean everything in the play was, indeed, a mirror image of his ideals. Even though it seems that all James’s relatives were good characters and the ones who threatened the divine order of the kingdom were punished, the fact remains that as the protagonist it is possible for Macbeth to be closest to viewers’ hearts despite, or even because of, his evil ambitions. Macbeth is the character we are most familiar with as we get to witness his inner turmoil like no one else does and as a character he is round enough for us to find something to relate to. Thus, instead of
rejoicing with the victorious Macduff and Malcolm when we see Macbeth’s head, we might easily feel sorry for him. Even if Macbeth was a murderer, we might have trouble feeling entirely happy with royal justice. It is then possible that Shakespeare would have hinted at unhappiness with the crown despite the royal audience. Wells, however, argues that Sinfield cannot see past the propaganda against James as despite striking against those who threatened his life, he was quite humane and accepting of different religious views (122-24). I quite agree with Sinfield that there is more than one way to read Macbeth, but recognising this does not diminish the importance of understanding James I, as his influence on the play cannot be denied.

The most obvious signs of aiming to please the royalty, as Wells, too, points out, can be seen in how the play completely ignores the many good years of the real Macbeth’s rule and turns the relatively young and weak Duncan into a good and beloved long-reigning king. Wells, also, finds evidence of the play echoing Virgil’s Aeneid which in return reflected James’s favourite themes of prophecy, empire, the predestined peacemaker and the return of a golden age (130).

As part of his intellectual aspirations James wrote Basilikon Doron, a book where he gives advice to his son Henry about being a good king. Even if Basilikon Doron was written by a father to his son, it became very popular among the reading elite after James was crowned the king of England. It was one of the books every self-respecting intellectual was supposed to have on his shelf and thus gives us some idea of not only James’s ideas, but the ideas and influences the reading public had at the time. In the second book James tells his son not to be a tyrant and not to let his wife meddle with state affairs. While men were often referred to as the head of a married couple and were supposed to be rational, in Basilikon Doron James promotes the same idea of balance already seen in the male life cycle: ‘Keepe true Constancie, not onely in your kindenesse towards honest men; but being also inuicti animi against all aduersities: not with that stoicke insensible stupiditie, wherewith manie in our daies, preassing to winne honour, in imitating that ancient sect, by their inconstant behauiour in their owne liues, belyes their profession. But although yee are not a stocke, not to feele calamities; yet let not the feeling of them, so ouer-rule and doazen your reason, as may stay you from taking and vsing the best resolution for remedie, that can be found out.’ (97-98)
The Augustinian idea of balance is the thread that runs through *Basilikon Doron*. In all his advice James stresses moderation, balance and correct timing, an idea that he expands all the way to the level of age appropriate behaviour. When discussing the sports befitting a king James reminds his son to practice moderately and to respect his seasons of age, ‘For it becometh best, as kindliest, every age to smell of their owne qualitie, insolence and un-lawfull things being always eschewed: and not that a colte should drawe the plough, and not an old horse run away with the harrows’ (116). James gives very detailed instructions on what to eat, how to eat and how much to eat in order to keep the body fit and not appear gluttonous or seem like a tyrant. Instructions on clothes are just as specific: ‘Be also *moderate* in your raiment; neither ouer superfluous, like a deboshed waister; nor yet ouer base like a miserable wretch; not artificiallie trimmed & decjed, like a Courtizane; nor yet ouersluggishly clothed, like a country-clown; not ouer lightly, like a Candie-souldier, or a vaine yong Courtier; nor yet ouer grauely, like a Minister. But in your garments be proper, cleanelie, comely & honest: wearing your cloathes in a carelesse, yet comely forme keeping in them a *midd forme*’ (110, my emphasis). In book two, moderation is mentioned four times and in book three it comes up five times altogether in the context of sleep, clothes and sport. James also specifies that meat should be eaten manly in a round and honest fashion. Manly meat eating, however, has a slightly different echo here to the image of various modern sausage and beef advertisers who want to associate manliness with almost beastly excessiveness as in *Basilikon Doron* manly means moderate, not daintily ladylike, but not uncivilised gorging either.

Curiously when listing the types of sport and exercise that would be acceptable for his son, James specifically forbids football as a rough and violent sport that is more likely to cripple than strengthen the body. Other sports like running, tennis, fencing and archery are promoted as ‘fair and pleasant field games’ (120). Important here is to notice the lack of team sports and avoidance of physical contact. James’s ideal is quite opposite to the modern stereotype of every father wishing their son would engage in sports such as football, ice hockey or rugby specifically because of the team aspect and the manliness of the physical contact. Early modern England on the other hand was anxious about masculine intimacy, possibly because before marriage and manhood young men spent their time in an
almost exclusively homosocial environment. On the one hand young men were kept away from young women to avoid any improper and unwanted contact with the opposite sex, but on the other it was at the same time acknowledged that young men were lustful and people were aware that homosexuality might be an outlet for the young men who were practically bursting with carnal desires (Shepard 26). As Shepard points out, early modern England was at once homophilic and homophobic. Young men rebelled against the rules and order of patriarchy by revelling in excess with their male comrades. This youth culture had a largely unacknowledged air of homoeroticism. The fraternal camaraderie was more or less accepted and seen as something that would bolster manhood up, but deep male friendship was cause for anxiety. The frolicking of fraternal camaraderie posed no real threat to patriarchal society since it was transient, it did not bind men in any way, whereas the “entire friendship” specifically implied long-term commitment, debt and obligations which was a threat to the holy communion of marriage ‘for shee must bee neerer unto you, then anie other companie, being Flesh of your flesh, and bone of your bone, as Adam said of Heuah’ (James 72). Shepard makes the threat even clearer: ‘Entire friendship presupposed utmost loyalty and self-denial. Couched in terms of love, the commitment and intensity of such friendships was likened to marriage and often compared favourably to it. A true friend was characterized by one author as ‘deere as a good wife, more deere than a brother’, and according to another on the death of such a ‘mate’, his friend ‘accounts himself but halfe alive’. (124) Fraternal camaraderie was thought mutually exclusive with marriage, but entire friendship might last a lifetime. As the homoerotic tension in fraternal camaraderie was unacknowledged it posed no threat, but the vocal expressions of love that accommodated friendship were getting dangerously close to what was reserved for married couples only.

Women, in their inferiority, were thought as complementing men. Just as men were necessary for women to be controlled and guided, women were necessary for a man to have someone to protect and guide and make babies with. The hierarchy is clear and the necessity of balance is evident. Macbeth is seen as an example of the tragedy that follows if this balance is shaken. Kimbrough takes the idea of balance a bit further and to the level of an individual as he believes the play is part of Shakespeare’s greater androgynous agenda where he tried to show that only a
person embracing both female and male attributes can be a whole and completely human person. He sees the same theme repeated throughout Shakespeare’s works and believes Shakespeare wanted to abolish all gender restrictions as the tragedy of Macbeth was born from both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth being held back from being true to their personas by restrictive gender roles. Kimbrough sees balance as the key to happiness. He believes overt masculinity as well as overt femininity without the balancing effect of the qualities of the opposite gender is always a guaranteed road to destruction.

Carolyn Asp is going along the same lines with Kimbrough. She sees Lady Macbeth’s suicide as a direct result of ‘dichotomy between role and nature’ and the ‘mental disintegration’ (153) caused by this. Curiously what Asp and many modern readers might call an unfortunate tragedy caused by society’s unfair restrictions and expectations was in early modern days deemed a punishment to be expected for deviating from the female norm. While Asp notes that Shakespeare took some liberties in turning Holinshed’s courageous women into a more passive early modern form and sees the stereotypical manhood in Macbeth as having been raised from the violent warrior stereotype to the next level of retaliatory violence, she also notes that Macbeth himself is ‘remarkably free from the chauvinistic attitudes that dominate his society’ (159) until Lady Macbeth has coaxed him into her, and possibly early modern, ideal masculinity that means Macbeth must think of Lady Macbeth as his subordinate. Asp suggests that the Weird Sisters’ power stems partly from their freedom from gender stereotypes, they are bound by no rules and can come and go as they please and are not answerable to anyone. Asp and Kimbrough seem to agree that excessive masculinity is Macbeth’s demise. Asp suggests that in becoming more than a man Macbeth has abandoned humanity; he has, in fact, aspired for godlike invulnerability while young Siward, for example, proves his manhood by dying.

Sinfield counters Asp and Kimbrough’s views, saying: ‘Nor as Critics have hoped, is a convenient resolution available in the “softening” or “balancing” of manly attributes such as appear in Henry V by placing him in negotiation with the French princess, or even with the love-death of Suffolk and York. For the terms of such negotiations still presuppose, not only the oppressive initial construction of genders
and sexualities, but also the anxieties and power assumptions that remain inscribed within them. Critics who believe that Henry becomes more fully human through interaction with the feminine qualities of the princess do not dream of suggesting that the effeminate as such might in any way be redeemed: that remains the “wrong” kind of femininity, the “wrong” kind of compromise.’ (Faultlines 142)

Heiner Zimmerman, on the other hand, thinks that Macbeth ‘takes sides in the controversy between King James and a faction of noblemen at Prince Henry’s court in the early years of his reign, which contested the king’s policy of conciliation and peace and glorified the chivalrous ideal of the ruler based on martial strength’ (357) and that ‘Shakespeare shares St Augustine’s scepticism concerning reliance on natural reason to warrant moral action.’ (376) He bases his argument on the way Macbeth’s heroic valour fails morally when he becomes a tyrant. The witches also put him back on the path of a heroic warrior by telling him to be ‘bloody, bold and resolute’ (4.1.78), but Macbeth is forced to face all that he has lost by choosing heroic valour over humanity (376). Ian Frederick Moulton counters Zimmerman with his claim that ‘effeminate rulers and mannish women destabilize the traditional patriarchal power structure and gender hierarchy of England, leaving the realm in chaos’ and ‘[h]ere masculine aggression runs rampant in the figure of Richard, who refuses to subordinate himself to traditional patriarchal power structures and lines of succession. In contrast to the feminine and effeminized disorder staged in the Henry VI plays, a specifically masculine disorder plagues the kingdom in Richard III until proper patriarchal proportion is reintroduced with the accession of the earl of Richmond as Henry VII. In what follows I will argue that Shakespeare's characterization of Richard III functions as both a critique and an ambivalent celebration of excessive and unruly masculinity and, in so doing, highlights the incoherence of masculinity as a concept in early modern English culture.’ While Macbeth is the opposite of a celebration of unruly masculinity, this incoherence Moulton discusses is what makes the various masculinities in Macbeth, too, so interesting.

Early modern masculinity is ambivalent, fluid, confused and anxious. There is no single right masculinity and the model of masculinity we get from authorities such as the king is clearly not accepted by all as proven by the critique
aimed at James’s ideas and person. Masculinity is constant negotiation on both the personal and societal levels, both between men as well as between men and women. Or a ‘difficult negotiation of separating from the mother, an originary moment that is re-enacted throughout the man’s life’ as Coppélia Kahn and Janet Adelman have argued (Breitenberg 14). Masculinity as opposed to femininity is anxious because it represents power and unlike femininity it is always fearing it will lose control. Masculine ideals are used to guide men in becoming society’s best possible servants. When men are anxious about showing the right kind of masculinity, they are in fact afraid of losing power and usually in the eyes of other men rather than in the eyes of women. When man is effeminate or masculine in the wrong way it is synonymous to weak. It is hard for a man to be empowered by breaking the norms of masculinity whereas women often gain power and control by breaking the rules even if the society would label them as “bad women”. In early modern England men were nervous about their position also because the line between the sexes was not as clear as it is today: ‘on a corporeal level (always at the same time psychological), masculinity is understood scientifically as precarious – the enemy may be named “femininity” but it resides within the very definition of masculinity proffered by humoural science in the first place’ (Breitenberg 14). The line was mostly defined by temperature (men were hot and dry, women cool and moist) and masculine anxiety is thus always related to women who might break free and threaten the position of masculinity. In Macbeth, however, the anxiety stems mostly from confusion. Everyone knows there is an idea of a perfect man, but no one seems to know or agree what it is exactly. The anxiety becomes more understandable when we remember that ‘the early modern period discovers identity in the more public context we associate with shame cultures, where such factors as property, reputation and status are preeminent’ (Breitenberg 12). If it is hard today, it would have been even harder for an early modern man to proudly sing ‘I am what I am...I am as good as you’.

At the end of this section on history we can then conclude that Elizabeth’s long reign and the start of the reign of a decidedly different breed of a monarch caused excitement, confusion and unrest and King James falling victim for the failed gunpowder plot proves the King’s status as an unquestionable leader was not that certain and it must have shaken the king’s security both on a personal and an official level – as much as these two can be separated. He would have been anxious
about his personal safety and about the whole social order collapsing if it was to be revealed that the king didn’t have absolute power, after all. When James was crowned king of England, many things changed. First of all James was a man, he was a different sort of man, and he was also the king of Scotland. The people of England had to reorient themselves on many levels in order to approve James. The identity of a warrior state was traded for that of a diplomat state and while King James may have been sure of his own gender identity and ideals, his subjects did not agree with him. Not long ago Elizabeth had psyched her people into battle and praised warrior qualities such as bravery, implying that these qualities were admirably masculine, and now the people pledged allegiance to a king with strangely feminine ideas about masculinity and what his people were supposed to be or do. Suddenly the people were seen as children in the care of their motherly king who would nurture them lovingly instead of lead them into proud and bloody battles. The unrest and upheaval reached people on a more personal level, too, as Mangan points out by quoting Angnew: ‘Mobility begot confusion over the structure of rank and occupation; confusion over the division of labour, in its turn, bred perplexity over the place of gender in the assignment of tasks, and that in turn, raised questions ... concerning the conditions and future of patriarchal authority’ (Agnew 1986, 129, qtd in Mangan 91) Women were gaining more power within the household and even though wives were still subordinate to their husbands, Breitenberg, for example, points out how in Of Domestical Duties Gouge advices husbands to make their wives “joint governors of the family”. Women gained more respect which caused anxiety and uncertainty among men. Conduct books were trendy probably because of this anxiety, but the books were also to blame for causing that anxiety as there were contradictory guidelines and advice. (Breitenberg 25-26). Women’s sexuality was another cause of anxiety as the catholic ideal of virgin women was replaced by the protestant ideal of a chaste wife. Family was central and wives were supposed to reproduce and this was believed to happen only through mutual orgasms. So men were to please their wives enough to keep them satisfied and to produce children, but had to restrain from exciting the women so much as to send the wife to another man. Cuckoldry was a constant and real fear for an early modern man and thus even marital sex was all about balance and control.
The scales of public opinion may have been slowly tipping towards James’s model, but in a way he was ahead of his time. Change always causes uncertainty and James had ample amounts of both to juggle with. With *Macbeth* Shakespeare had to reassure both the king and the people. His king would want to see his own history and ancestry in a positive light and he probably wouldn’t have objected to his subjects seeing that positive history assuring his people about their king’s abilities and qualifications. The changing times are reflected in the portrayals of masculinity in *Macbeth*. There are almost as many ideas as there are characters and these ideas are constantly measured and reflected on other characters. True masculinity is brought up constantly as if in fear of masculinity disappearing should it be left unattended. The characters are constantly reminding each other that there is, in fact, this role of masculinity they need to act out and act it out appropriately. Even though the image of masculinity changes and varies constantly, what remains throughout *Macbeth*, however, is control. Men, at least noble men, are to be in control both of themselves and of others. Control is the backbone of masculinity and losing that control is what makes masculinity anxious. Not to belittle or bypass individual feminine anxieties, but in this context femininity as the underdog had nothing to lose so even in captivity it could be free and careless in a way masculinity never achieved.

In *Macbeth* there are then several layers of anxiety: uncertainty about the status of masculinity, uncertainty about the nature of masculinity, uncertainty about the hierarchy among men and uncertainty about the hierarchy between men and women. In the next section we will examine these anxieties.

3 Masculine fear and control

All the male characters in *Macbeth* show signs of masculine anxiety, but they all express this underlying current of fear differently. Some of them even know how to benefit from it. If courage and control is the mark of a true man, then nothing measures a man like the way he deals with this anxiety. In this section I am going examine exactly how masculine anxiety is expressed in *Macbeth* and how the
characters’ masculinity centres on what they are trying to control. Macbeth is set apart from the rest of the men by his need to control fear rather than emotion.

None of the characters fall victim to the anxiety quite like Macbeth does. He is the poster boy for anxious masculinity. His story is Burton’s worst nightmare come true in that he is too involved with his wife whose feminine wiles rub off on Macbeth. Macbeth gives in to his desires and to excess and loses his masculine control in the process. To add insult to injury Lady Macbeth manipulates her husband through masculine anxiety: ‘Art thou afeard / To be the same in thine own act and valour / As thou art in desire?’ (1.7.39-41). This is precisely what an early modern man would have been afraid of. Desire and especially uncontrollable desire is the road to destruction. The anxiety and confusion is glaringly obvious in Macbeth’s defensive reply ‘I dare do all that may become a man; / Who dares do more is none’ (1.7.46-7). Macbeth is trying to dance on that thin rope of moderation and control. In Burton’s world should Macbeth cross the line to excess, he wouldn’t just lose his manhood, he would become feminine. Even if the feared destructive desire was usually sexual in nature, it can be extended to mean any kind of wanting and coveting that would make a man lose his control. It is not sexual desire per se that is dangerous, but the excess of it and letting it rule one’s actions. Macbeth’s desire’s destructive effect is his excessive violence and paranoia. Ironically Lady Macbeth manages to persuade her husband by hinting that not acting on his desires is the unmanly thing to do. It is a sign of Macbeth’s masculine uncertainty that he falls for this.

All the two Macbeths’ actions circle around their concepts of gender and Kimbrough even calls it ‘a fierce war between gender concepts of manhood and womanhood’ (176). According to Kimbrough, manhood in Elizabethan literature means aggressiveness, daring, boldness, resolution and strength whereas womanhood encompasses gentleness, fearfulness, pity, wavering and softness (177). Based on these definitions it would seem that when it comes to the couple’s interaction, at least at the beginning of the play, Lady Macbeth is, indeed, more of a man than Macbeth and is trying to change her husband to fit the image of an alpha male that she has in her head. Lady Macbeth’s first appeal to her husband’s manhood and Macbeth’s defiant reply ‘I dare do all that may become a man; / Who dares do more is none.’
(1.7.46-47) is repeated later slightly varied when Banquo’s ghost haunts Macbeth at dinner. Lady Macbeth asks Macbeth if he’s a man and summoning courage Macbeth replies: ‘Ay! and a bold one, that dare look on that, / Which might appal the devil.’ (3.4.58) Lady Macbeth sneers at her husband fearing these imaginary ghosts and when Macbeth insists that there is something to see and talks to the ghost, Lady Macbeth exclaims ‘What! quite unmann’d in folly?’ (3.4.72) Giving in to his imagination and conscience Macbeth has neutered himself in Lady Macbeth’s eyes. He has lost control of himself and his surroundings and Lady Macbeth is annoyed and unnerved. She tries to appeal to Macbeth’s masculinity to snap him back to his senses, but Macbeth is already appealing to his own masculinity for courage to face his fears. In Lady Macbeth’s eyes Macbeth should be enough a man to have no ill conscience in the first place.

Macbeth’s manliness does not, however, depend on his feeling remorse or seeing the ghost, but on how he reacts to the vision. If we keep in mind that in early modern England the sphere of concrete and material was for women and the abstract sphere was for men, as women were incapable to understand it, the face-off with the ghost gets an interesting twist. When Macbeth commands Banquo to ‘Take any shape but that, and my firm nerves / Shall never tremble!’ (3.4.102-3) and declares himself ‘a man again’ (3.4.109) after the ghost has disappeared, he represents the confusion of masculinity. If the abstract and immaterial world belongs to men, then a manly Macbeth should have no problems facing a ghost. The relief he shows at returning to the concrete material world makes Macbeth feminine. The scene could be read as purposefully ironic, mocking Macbeth’s ideas about manliness. The ironic interpretation is supported by Macbeth calling his nerves firm when they clearly are not firm in this new and unexpected situation. If we choose to believe that no such things as ghosts exist, the irony deepens as Macbeth says his firm nerves would never tremble if only his nerves had not trembled and created this image of his dead friend. If we do read the scene as ironic, we must also question Macbeth’s other ideas about manliness and his entire character and the type of masculinity he represents is shown in a questionable light. He confuses courage with lack of fear. He thinks that as a man he cannot feel fear or that if he does feel fear, it is effeminising. At Banquo’s ghost’s return, Macbeth again exclaims: ‘What man dare, I dare!’ (3.4.99) and tells the ghost to take whatever physical form so they
could fight it out and Macbeth would know no fear. The ghost vanishes and Macbeth declares: ‘Why, so; being gone, / I am a man again.’ (3.4.108-9) When the ghost disappears Macbeth is free of the unmanly fear and tries to assure himself that he is back in control. But he is still affected by the episode and feels the need to defend his strange behaviour to his guests and shows how his grip is slipping by almost confessing to murder before Lady Macbeth hastily cuts him short and throws the guests out. Here when Macbeth is losing his manhood, he is actually slipping away from what Mangan calls “the stereotype of rational, controlling masculinity” (17). For Asp, Banquo’s ghost represents Macbeth’s slipping away from humanity (163) and Kimbrough argues that when the couple is aiming for pure masculinity, suppressing all traits deemed feminine, they are actually murdering humanity. It should be noted, though, that in the eyes of us viewers the episode just might make Macbeth more human, he actually feels remorse for murdering his friend. If the banquet guests knew what was happening in front of their eyes, they, too, might feel Macbeth to be more of a man for regretting his betrayal. It is thus only in the private shared universe of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth that remorseless murdering is a sign of true manliness. If Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are, indeed, murdering humanity, it is not masculinity that is to be blamed but a misconception of masculinity. Control is the key word to early modern masculinity, and that is what Macbeth loses: ‘I am in blood / Stepp’d in so far, that, should I wade no mor / e, / Returning were as tedious as go o’er’ (3.4.136-8) He tried to control his fear by eliminating the sources, but in the process of desperate search for control and security Macbeth manages to mess up with not only one but two of the key elements of early modern masculinity: control and balance. Such a “pure” form of uncontrolled masculinity the Macbeths are aiming for was not admired in early modern times. On the contrary, uncontrolled masculinity was feared even. Courage and honour mean nothing if man forgets social order – the glue that keeps civilisation from falling apart.

Fear is brought up repeatedly throughout the play and seems to be Macbeth’s constant companion. Tragically, in Macbeth’s world fear is unacceptable and makes a man automatically worthless and deserving of punishment. Towards the end of the play he does not allow fear even among his subordinates, but orders: ‘Hang those that talk of fear’ (5.3.38). Macbeth seems to be terribly afraid of fear when just mentioning it is deadly and Lady Macbeth managed to turn his head by
just hinting at Macbeth being too chicken to realise his dreams. Of all the numerous times fear is mentioned in the play the vast majority of these utterances come from Macbeth. He is almost obsessed with fear and when he gets rid of Banquo, he is trying to get rid of his fear. Lady Macbeth even calls Macbeth’s hallucinations ‘impostors to true fear’ (3.4.64). Banquo’s ghost is an image of Macbeth’s fear and that fear is what makes Macbeth lose his honour and manhood. Lady Macduff’s opinion is that ‘Our fears do make us traitors’ (4.2.4). Macbeth’s fear breeds more fear all around him. Had Macbeth just killed Duncan and left it at that, he would have been a traitor, but could have been a good king. What truly makes his rule evil, what makes him betray the kingdom, is the constant all-encompassing fear. As Caroline F. E. Spurgeon puts it: ‘In [Shakespeare’s] view a state of fear is the worst kind of evil, leading to every other kind of evil’ (154). It is ironic that ultimately the tragedy was born of Macbeth’s fear of fear. Fear is a vicious cycle in the play and mirrors the irony of the Weird Sister’s self-fulfilling prophecies. Yet, as Macbeth finally erases all fears, when he thinks he has become untouchable, he seems almost nostalgic of it: ‘I have almost forgot the taste of fears’ (5.5.9). He seems numb and reminisces of the feeling of fear and how it raised his hair ‘As life were in’t’ (5.5.13). His hair did rise like it was alive, but it also made him feel alive. Fear is the ultimate feeling that makes a man thrive and now Macbeth has killed it. Spurgeon suggests fear and love are polar opposites in the Shakespearian vision (154), but in Macbeth we see that there is no fear without love. That moment when Macbeth has lost all fear is also the moment when he has lost all he loved. Spurgeon says that ‘all pervading fear has inevitably cast out love’ (154), but fear is intertwined with love and while love could do splendidly without fear, fear ceases to exist without love. If there is nothing to love, there is nothing to fear for.

Young Siward’s words echo the sentiment of fear being the root of all that is evil:

YOUNG SIWARD. The devil himself could not pronounce a title
More hateful to mine ear
MACBETH. No, nor more fearful
(5.7.7-9)
He equates Macbeth with the Devil and Macbeth equates himself with fearfulness. The Devil is fearful and the maximum of hate and fear go hand in hand in Macbeth’s character. Macbeth’s obsession with fear gives another layer of meaning to the reply he gives young Siward. This retort is, also, the last time fear is mentioned in the entire play. A moment before Macbeth is to meet the man not of woman born and fear again. As Macbeth slays young Siward there is reason for the young man to be afraid of the fierce soldier, but declaring his own name fearful Macbeth also admits his own fears and foresees his future. It is up to Young Siward and the audience to decide whether Macbeth’s retort was threatening or self-deprecatingly pitiful. He is at a turning point where he gets to prove his manly soldierly type of courage and gets to have his humanity back in the form of fearing for his life. In a complex twist, then, fear becomes the core of humanity while masculinity is paired with courage. This complexity could be seen as criticism of stoicism. Macbeth misunderstands courage to be synonymous with fearlessness and in an almost stoic sense he tries to eliminate all the external sources of fear as he is helpless in front of the actual feeling of fear. Ironically while it is shown how this fear of fear is evil, it is only through deadening all his feelings, becoming resolutely numb, that Macbeth again reaches the level of admirable soldierly courage. However, the criticism towards Stoicism becomes evident again at the moment Macbeth has reason to fear again and still decides to fight. Macbeth’s battle before Macduff makes him a robotic killing machine, impressive, but not particularly admirable. When Macbeth loses his will to fight and gets back in the ring just to prove that he is not a coward, he is given a chance to show that he still knows what honour is and knows how to turn his emotions into tools. Macduff is a device used to show that Macbeth is still a man not paralysed by fear. Macbeth admits Macduff “cowes” the better part of his masculinity when he momentarily loses his will to fight, but Macduff makes Macbeth a man again by appealing to Macbeth’s fear of cowardice. Macduff both gives Macbeth his feeling back and simultaneously allows him to prove his manly prowess by coaxing him to fight till the end. Even with all the different ideas about masculinity and manliness it seems that the ultimate proof of manhood can be found on the battlefield alone. No matter how traitorous a man has been, he can still restore his manly honour through an honest fight. Even if Macbeth is hated, he does not lose his soldierly honour. Macbeth’s head on a pike is not to be seen as humiliation for Macbeth but as victory and honour for Macduff and Malcolm won through an honest battle.
Considering that Malcolm’s words to Macduff about using grief as a tool could just as well have been directed at Macbeth who, indeed, lets grief blunt his heart, the comparison of fear of fear and fear of grief offers an interesting window into the core difference between Macbeth and Macduff. I will examine next how the difference in emotional focus and response sets Macbeth apart from the others. Macbeth is not afraid to throw himself into a relationship on an emotional level. He has given everything he has to his wife and is completely committed to her on an emotional level. Lady Macbeth is the centre of Macbeth’s world. Macduff on the other hand does not offer any glimpses of a deeper emotional connection between him and Lady Macduff. At first blush, this might seem like going against the idea of division into stoicism and Augustinianism, but we need to focus on the characters’ fears rather than their actions. Macduff has successfully managed to keep his life balanced between home and business. His wife is the perfect wife; she has been fruitful and given Macduff children and stays loyally at home managing the home front. Macduff himself has managed to keep good relations in society and is a well-respected man. He is morally balanced too, not losing sight of what is right, moral and just. While he shows moments of emotion, he has all in all managed to stay awfully rational about everything in his life. Even when the kingdom as well as his family along with Macduff himself is under threat, he refrains from running head over heels to his family and makes the most rational choice instead. In comparison, many modern Hollywood film heroes will go through hell and high water just to get to their loved one. Macduff’s decision might not have been the best for him personally, but it was the best for the kingdom. Herein perhaps lies the most significant difference between modern and early modern thinking. Even if Lady Macduff expresses bitterness over her husband’s actions, in the play he is a tragic hero precisely because he sacrificed his family for the king. The king is a representative of God and no man should put himself or his family before God. For a modern audience a man willing to sacrifice or even risk his loved ones for the good of the king is heartless and just plain unheroic. Sacrificing oneself for the greater good is very noble, but family is sacred and untouchable in the more individualistic modern society. No matter how irrational, the first priority is always making sure the family is alright and if the family has not died at the beginning of a film, then it is almost impossible for them to die during the film. If a member of the family dies, it
is always the hero who saves others at the end of the story. Macbeth puts his family first before the king and this leads to his destruction.

Macduff’s number one fear then, grief, reflects the biggest threat to the order of his life. He is afraid of uncontrollable grief because it would ruin his rationality. Grief represents deep emotional attachment which can quickly turn into something dangerously all-encompassing. Even if Macduff embraces feelings as an essential part of his masculinity, he also realises that the structure of his life and identity is built on the control of these emotions. Everything we know about Macduff’s feelings and emotions is tied to his family and the picture we are painted is of a man not emotionally fully invested in his family: ‘What, all my pretty chickens and their dam’ (4.3.224) is Macduff’s response to the news of the death of his family. His lament is more about guilt caused by his failure at fulfilling his manly duty as provider and protector than it is about truly personal loss. Macduff is above his family which he sees as poultry. Lady Macduff believes her husband has no love at all for his family, that ‘all is the fear and nothing is the love’ (4.2.12). Macduff is so afraid to truly feel that he has lost the ability to love and in the context of anxious masculinity everything is about Macduff’s fear of losing masculine control. We can even interpret this everything in question as a prolonged situation in which Macduff has been preoccupied by the political situation and neglected his family. Everything is the fear of Macbeth and Macduff’s leaving is just the final straw.

Lady Macduff even claims there is something inherently wrong with her husband as ‘he wants the natural touch: for the poor wren, / the most diminutive of birds, will fight, / her young ones in the nest, against the owl.’ (4.2.9-11) Lady Macduff believes the family should be Macduff’s number one interest. It is unclear, however, if Lady Macduff means her husband is an exception among men or if she means he as a representative of men lacks the natural instinct Lady Macduff as a woman possesses. Referring to the bird as a female, however, would suggest Lady Macduff is bitter about the male gender’s general lack of nurturing instincts. Macduff allows fear rather than love to steer his actions. Ross tries to defend him saying ‘you know not whether it was his wisdom or his fear’ (4.2.5), but the fact remains that Macduff lets his wife down. Regardless of Macduff’s motives or intentions Lady Macduff dies without her husband at her side. She does not appreciate the particular
form of masculinity Macduff represents. In Lady Macduff’s eyes, masculine political wisdom has no worth: ‘As little is the wisdom, where the flight / So runs against all reason.’ (4.2.13-4) Lady Macduff’s reasoning is based on feelings of love and caring and she is unable to understand or accept any other kind of reasoning. It is up to the audience to decide whether Lady Macduff is right in her criticism or whether she as a woman just does not understand the bigger picture and the complex machinations at work. Still, Lady Macduff accuses her husband of lacking that feminine side while Lady Macbeth accuses her husband of possessing too much of that feminine quality.

Macbeth on the other hand does not know to be afraid of grief. He is already deeply attached to his wife and does not really give much thought to grief until it engulfs him. But even then Macbeth does not even try to harness the emotion. He wallows in it in an ironically stoic manner. What Macbeth fears is fear because he lacks true courage or authority and is not sure he can overcome his or others’ feelings of fear. Macbeth would like to see himself as a faultless warring engine, the ultimate peak of indestructable masculinity. Ultimately Macbeth is very insecure in his masculinity as evidence by his need to tell himself and his wife that he is, indeed, as manly as the next man. Lady Macbeth has convinced her husband that as King Macbeth is the alpha male and thus when he feels his position is threatened it is actually his masculinity that is in danger. He strives for stoicism; a state where no emotion keeps him from moving forwards, where no pointless emotions like sympathy can crumble his resolve or power over his subjects who, ironically, are afraid of him. While being the basis of Macbeth’s power, fear is also the number one threat to his rule and to his masculinity. Try as he might Macbeth cannot deny the existence of fear everywhere around him. Stoicism simply does not work for him. He cannot spell fear away and even if he managed to become completely emotionless himself, his subjects would not follow as evidenced by their lack of loyalty and unwillingness to fight for Macbeth. When Macbeth denies his subjects the right to fear, he is trying to ensure that their failure in masculinity will not stain his own success. Numbing grief is no threat to Macbeth as it greatly resembles stoicism. Blunting his heart sounds exactly like what Lady Macbeth told him to do. He has finally got rid of the root of his fear and has nothing left to feel for. His grief has actually released him. Yet, no one is rooting for him in the final battle. In being free of emotional attachment, the number one stumbling stone on the way to complete
control, Macbeth has made an island out of himself and proven that control through elimination is ineffectual.

Waith argues that Macbeth’s lack of reaction at Lady Macbeth’s death means Macbeth has finally reached the level of hardiness Lady Macbeth aspired for. He doesn’t fear death, but on the other hand he is not particularly keen on life either anymore:

Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more: it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing ---
(5.5.24-28)

I would still argue that rather than proving Macbeth’s soldierly lack of emotion, Macbeth’s hollow lament echoes with numb depression – a very different state from cold disregard. Macbeth knows no fear at this point because the horrors he has witnessed and conducted have numbed him. It is often the unknown we are scared of and “direness” is familiar to him. He realises his actions have brought him no joy and there is no way out of the situation. The death of Lady Macbeth is the final nail. What he has achieved has no meaning without his companion. Macbeth has only his life to lose and that he has just pronounced meaningless. Of course, he is also under the impression that he cannot be harmed. This so-called hardiness is nothing but a lack of direction. The unmanly fear returns for a moment when Macbeth realises he has been deceived and here, perhaps for the first time, we can honestly say that his fear is something shameful and completely unmanly. Still, unmanly here does not equal womanly. The allusions both Macbeth and Macduff use for the battle are related to animals. Macbeth decides to fight like a bear until Macduff’s revelation cows him and Macduff even calls him a coward and threatens to put Macbeth on display like a hunting trophy. This awakens Macbeth’s pride and he exits damning the one who cries for mercy first. This gives Macbeth and his courage a nice full circle as he exits the play the way he entered, as an admirably courageous soldier that seems to also be the role Macbeth is most comfortable in and hence it could be argued that this variation of Macbeth is his true self. The worth of Macbeth’s death is
immediately confirmed by Siward who, after hearing how his son died in a fair battle, declares that he could not have wished for a better way for him to go.

For Malcolm and Macduff fear is not an issue like it is to Macbeth. They measure their masculinity by their control of emotions like grief. Malcolm and Macduff’s interaction is dominated by Malcolm who manipulates Macduff like a puppet master pulling all the strings of masculinity. At the beginning of Malcolm and Macduff’s private exchange Malcolm wants to just sit and weep for Scotland in peace: ‘Let us seek out some desolate shade, and there \ Weep our sad bosoms empty’ (4.3.1-2) whereas Macduff replies they ought to grab their swords and fight for their country ‘like good men’. To Macduff defending the country is the manly thing to do and ironically he laments all the new widows and orphans born every day. He speaks like the women and children were the reason to fight, like they, in fact, were Scotland, and still he has abandoned his own family in order to seek out Malcolm. Lady Macduff calls her husband a traitor thinking he has left them out of fear and to save himself, but it seems Macduff is just a desperate man of action. While as a husband and a father it might have been more honourable to stay and defend his family, in the greater scheme of things it seems Macduff thought he was defending everyone’s wives and children by leaving. As the roles of Malcolm and Macduff are reversed when Ross delivers the news of the death of Macduff’s family, it would be safe to assume that Malcolm’s earlier desire to do nothing was part of his strange test of Macduff’s character. As Malcolm lists all the qualities he does not possess and tries his best to paint as unfavourable a picture of himself as possible, it would not be farfetched to say Malcolm must consider passive emotionality as something unfitting for a man and especially for a king. For Malcolm emotions are acceptable and inevitable, but the measure of a man is seen in how he deals with them:

Merciful heaven! ----
What, man! ne’er pull your hat upon your brows.
Give sorrow words; the grief that does not speak
Whispers the o’erfraught heart and bids it break.
(4.3. -210)
Ignoring one’s feelings stoically is unhealthy as the stumped emotions will not just disappear but will instead quietly break a man inside. Curiously while Malcolm promotes the importance of putting feelings into words, he seems to allow no room for just feeling. Wallowing in any kind of emotion would have gone against the early modern ideas of balance and control. Any kind of indulgence was bad and hence Malcolm wants Macduff to immediately embark on a journey for revenge: ‘Be comforted! / Let’s make us medicine of our great revenge, / To cure this deadly grief.’ (4.3.214-15) The exclamation point makes Malcolm sound almost excited and he rather intrusively includes himself in Macduff’s private sorrow by speaking of making medicine for them both and speaking of their revenge rather than Macduff’s revenge. Granted, Malcolm has had his father murdered, but Macduff’s sorrow is brand new and the excitement tells a story of a man incapable of true sympathy. Malcolm is glad to have someone to share the personal revenge with and more than anything he is glad to have an active partner. As a result in his attempt to comfort Malcolm comes across as insensitive.

Perhaps he does not really care about Macduff’s family and is secretly excited to have Macduff by his side to help him claim the throne. In this case ‘our great revenge’ could be seen as a slipped royal plural that Malcolm adopts in the last line of the play: ‘Whom we invite to see us crown’d at Scone’ (5.7.104). While Duncan was a genial and almost simple king that fitted the well-off Scotland, Malcolm, regardless of whether we interpret his excitement as thinly-veiled manipulation or insensitivity, is the wily, tough king befitting hard times. Quite obviously for Malcolm, grief is the worst of all emotions. He calls it deadly and would much prefer anger: ‘Be this the whetstone of your sword; let grief / Convert to anger. Blunt not the heart, enrage it.’ (4.3.227-8) Malcolm’s reaction is in accordance with the Elizabethan ideal Marianne Novy has found in the work of Lawrence Stone and other historians: ‘an ideal that on one hand kept feelings of attachment and grief under strict control, but on the other hand was more ready to express feelings of anger’ (64). At the same time Malcolm’s fear of grief is fear of inactivity as all his attempts at comforting are attempts at spurring Macduff into action. Inactivity is, also, decidedly feminine as confirmed by Macduff’s ‘O! I could play the woman with mine eyes’ (4.3.229). Grief is not outright denied from men, but it is acceptable only as fuel for anger and action. Thus Malcolm urges Macduff to let go of the final
remains of stoicism and embrace his emotions to make good use of them. Macduff acts accordingly and becomes a prime example of Augustinianism which, according to Tilmouth ‘revalued the affections as controlled but morally constructive forces, qualities to be harnessed, not eliminated’ (1). In the next section I will examine how the ideal of control arches over from the individual to the society at large and how the various types of masculinities were tools to show men where they stood in an ordered and civilised society.

4 Social order of masculinities

James’s belief in absolutist power brings a certain twist to interpreting Macbeth’s character. It would be easy to say that since the play was written with James in mind and to show the origins of his rule, Macbeth’s character is inherently bad. Belief in absolutist monarchy includes, however, the belief that all rulers are put on place by divine order and if a nation is under the rule of a tyrant or a usurper, that is just what God thinks they deserve. Thus rebelling against even a tyrant means rebelling against God. Malcolm even refers to Macbeth as ‘an angry god’ (6.3.17) and it should be remembered that in Scotland the line of succession did not go directly from father to son and Shakespeare would have been well aware of this as the issue is handled in Holinshead. Macbeth would have had every right to the throne because of his birth and heroic deeds on the battlefield. Malcolm was also young and inexperienced, in other words not as much a man as Macbeth. (Adams commentary 139-141) But this dilemma is cleverly dodged by the witches as their prophesies free both Macbeth and Malcom of responsibility. In this context the witches, too, are freed of responsibility and become the flunkies or messengers of some higher power. Possibly the witches are doing God’s bidding unwittingly and while they are not exactly angels they are definitely not evil either. This responsibility avoidance is interesting from the point of view of masculinity, too, if we remember the three periods in man’s life of which manhood is the best. In Macbeth Duncan is aged. His rule has been good, but now he is old. When Macbeth, plotting with a woman, manages to murder the king, it is the ultimate sign of his loss of power. Duncan is not merely an innocent victim. He is a man and a king at that so he should always hold power and be in control. As he is a man, he is never truly free of responsibility. It is only natural that a man in his prime should take over when a man gets old and loses his groove. Macbeth, obviously, is
the wrong man to hold power so he becomes a mere pawn in this fateful play whose purpose, besides entertaining, is to show just how and why Macbeth was wrong and Malcolm right. Malcolm could not very well commit patricide without staining his future rule and neither could he kill Macbeth as, again, killing the king, no matter how tyrannical and unlawful, is against God’s will, so it is just convenient that Macbeth and Macduff should do the dirty work of transferring power from the old man to the man of proper age. Malcolm the king gets to keep his record clean. Macbeth’s rule averts the problem Malcolm’s rule would have had had he directly inherited the crown from his father as when Duncan declares ‘Our eldest, Malcolm, whom we name hereafter / The prince of Cumberland’ (1.5.38-9) he is acting against the law. It is obvious that Shakespeare’s Macbeth is fashioned to the tastes of English audiences and particularly to the tastes of the king.

As we have discussed above, Augustinian views on emotions seem to be celebrated in Macbeth at the expense of Stoicism and we are now examining how this preference shows in the social order of gender types. Vaught mentions how in Winter’s Tale men and women are quite free to change gender roles and to a degree the same could be said about Macbeth. Vaught discusses Winter’s Tale and Walton’s Life of Dr. John Donne and says that they ‘exhibit a number of connections in relation to shifting categories of masculinity and the emotion of grief in the seventeenth century’ (177). It was increasingly acceptable for men to show emotion while at the same time, as Vaught points out, the women in the plays were presented as the stoic rational opposite to the men’s irrational and raging emotions. Lady Macbeth adopts the role of a stoic that was traditionally reserved for men and is thus free to move between gender roles. But while the role of a stoic is what makes Lady Macbeth masculine, the form of masculinity she adopts is starting to go out of fashion in Shakespeare’s time and Augustus even called stoics “monstrous” and lacking in “humanity” (qtd in Veigh 14). Thus Lady Macbeth’s attempt at being one of the boys fails since she is behind the times and all the true men have moved on to Augustinian humanism. Lady Macbeth falls over the usual stumbling block of a “wannabe” as she tried to be more of a man than the men of the play. Or more accurately she failed to recognise the nuances of masculinity and tried to force the wrong kind of masculinity on her husband as well as on herself. While the form of masculinity did still exist, the noble men were supposed to subscribe to different kind
of masculinity. Overemphasising soldierly qualities of violence in the wrong context was as successful as wearing a tuxedo to a sweaty rock concert. Veigh, also, brings up Erasmus’ *Praise of Folly*, a critique on stoicism. The title of the book is interesting in relation to Lady Macbeth’s stoicism as she criticises Macbeth’s cracking and remorse with the exclamation ‘What! quite unmann’d in folly?’ (3.4.72) Clearly Lady Macbeth thinks rationalism and stoicism are the way for a true man. Lady Macduff confirms the values of the society: ‘I am in this earthly world, where to do harm / Is often laudable, to do good sometime / Accounted dangerous folly’ (4.3.73-5, emphasis mine). As these are the only instances in the play the word ‘folly’ is used, Macbeth is automatically paralleled to Lady Macduff. ‘Why then, alas, / Do I put up that womanly defence, / To say I have done no harm?’ (4.3.75-7) Lady Macduff realises how her chosen defence mechanism is doubly useless in a world where both goodness and femininity are scorned. The two wives seem to have similar views of the surrounding society, but react to it in opposite ways. This is the key to the difference between what Shakespeare describes the 11th century Scotland is like, the imagined reality of the period the play is set in, and how Shakespeare writing a few hundred years later thinks of that reality. Were there in Shakespeare’s mind no conflict between his or society’s values and the violence inherent in the system, the tragedy would not exist.

According to Kimbrough, Shakespeare is trying to show that only a person embracing both female and male attributes can be a whole and completely human person. The character of Macduff would seem to back this up as he is presented as the sort of hero of the story, the chosen one who can rid the world of the evil that is Macbeth. Macduff is all man in his abilities as a warrior, but allows room for feminine emotions as well. When Ross brings the news of the slaughter of Macduff’s wife and children, Malcolm urges Macduff to ‘Dispute it like a man’ (4.3.218), to harness the sorrow for revenge, but Macduff replies that he ‘must also feel it as a man’ (4.3.220). The emoting does not effeminate Macduff as he quickly recovers from his womanly tears and, in fact, does turn his grief into anger and wants to see Macbeth face to face as soon as possible. Malcolm approves and tells Macduff that ‘This tune goes manly’ (4.3.234). While I do agree that any balanced person must embrace both feminine and masculine aspects of his or her personality, I’m hesitant to say that this balance of genders would have been Shakespeare’s intended
message. There are too many problematical characters for such a streamlined assumption. I believe a slight shift of emphasis is appropriate and argue that if Shakespeare had something to say about gender, it was that we should disregard any gendered demands. In other words, it is acceptable for a man to be feminine or at least embrace feminine qualities every now and then and that will not make a man any less a man. However, if we do read such a message of “free gender” into the play, I am afraid it says more about us and our time than it says about the play or early modern England. The gendered social classes were too ingrained into the society to make modern individualistic demands likely. I feel that the androgynous message is a misinterpretation or a complete oversight of the Augustinian values and the realities of Shakespeare’s period. Allowing moderate room for feminine emotions in men echoes the ideas of Augustinian humanism. The key word here is moderate. It is hard to picture a scene where it would be Lady Macduff who left Macduff behind. Lady Macbeth’s activity might be interpreted as a quiet suggestion that women might perhaps have some hidden strengths in their character, but considering her faith, we cannot claim Macbeth to be an androgynous manifesto.

According to Kimbrough when Macduff feels it as a man, he could have just as well said ‘woman’ as it is ‘a fully realized human response’ (178), but I would claim that the choice of word is important because when Macduff ‘feels it as a man’, he is saying precisely that men have feelings too, and that feelings are not an exclusively feminine attribute. He is not any less of a man because feelings are manly. A message like this might have pleased James I. However, in Macbeth there is a special manly way to feel. Feelings are not completely denied, but neither is it alright to weep helplessly like a woman might do. Also, the various different kinds of shows of masculinity would, to me, suggest that it is just as alright to be overtly manly. Siward, for instance, is a fine example of the hardy soldier type. There is hardly anything feminine about him, but he is a noble character and even if his lack of emotion at his son’s death is slightly startling, there is really nothing in the play that would suggest there was something inherently wrong about his attitude. And if the character was built to please the Danish king Christian, then we are to assume there really is no fault to be found in Siward. Perhaps Siward’s character even echoes some particular image of Danish masculinity the English had, possibly a nod to the
Vikings. There are different types of masculinity and they are all acceptable because they serve different purposes.

Macbeth is introduced as the pinnacle of admirable masculinity that befits a loyal servant of the king. As a captain he has just led his men to victory and killed an Irish rebel Macdonwald by his own hand and an admiring sergeant recounts the events to king Duncan:

For brave Macbeth – well he deserves that name!
Disdaining Fortune, with his brandish’d steel,
Which smok’d with bloody execution,
Like Valour’s minion carv’d out his passage
Till he fac’d the slave;
Which ne’er shook hands, nor bade farewell to him,
Till he unseam’d him from the nave to the chaps,
And fix’d his head upon our battlements.
(1.2.16-23)

Obviously these people do not shy away from violence and an act like using a dead enemy’s head as a trophy, which in modern days might seem distasteful and brutal, is cheered. Duncan even exclaims ‘O valiant cousin! worthy gentleman!’ (1.2.24) in reply. To modern eyes such a scene is far from gentlemanly behaviour. What makes this praise particularly masculine in nature is the opposing of two words: Macbeth is said to have disdained Fortune, a decidedly feminine word and character, while acting as a minion of Valour which, as Waith shows by quoting Plutarch, has been presented in literature throughout the ages as ‘an all-inclusive virtue, and hence the very emblem of manhood’ (262). The way the praise is worded seems to, also, make the feminine and masculine characters mutually exclusive and thus the gender division is set right at the beginning. Macbeth is glorified for certain disregard for his own safety and his battle tactics seem to be more about force and action than strategy and planning. The depiction of his prowess gives us no hint of any finesse. It seems Macbeth flailed his sword with such ferocity that the heat of action practically made it smoke, possibly the hot blood on the sword steamed in cold air. There is nothing of modern ideas of gentlemanly fencing here and the sergeant even calls it straight out execution. Macbeth is said to have ‘carv’ed’ his way to Macdonwald. This is a good
manly and robust verb that objectifies the warriors who fell before Macbeth’s sword. There is no room for feeling or philosophy when Macbeth seems to act like an unstoppable machine until the metre breaks at ‘Till he fac’d the slave;’ and the action halts before Macbeth’s target. Macdonwald is stripped of all dignity and human worth by being called a slave and being denied any greeting or last words. His specialty shows only in the small pause and in his head being put on display. What is curious about Shakespeare’s choice of words in describing how Macdonwald was cut in half is that they echo those of Christopher Marlowe’s in Dido when Neoptolemus smilingly kills Priamus despite the old king’s pleading. This naturally puts Macbeth in Neoptolemus’s shoes and makes the speech a foreshadowing of Macbeth’s wickedness as in Dido even the statue of Jove is disgusted by Neoptolemus’s actions.

If we keep to the ironic reading and put the text in the early modern context of change where ideas of intellectual and peaceful gentlemanly behaviour were slowly taking over from the more aggressive warrior images as the goal for upper-class men, ‘worthy gentleman’, too, becomes a foreshadowing. According to the new standards Macbeth would not be a gentleman. He is a warrior who was not expected to be learned or gentlemanly, his behaviour is not gentlemanly and he is not worth of that particular title. The lesson we learn from Macbeth’s story, then, is that nothing good follows from confusing a good warrior with a good monarch. For all that we cannot deny Macbeth made a good soldier, it is just as clear that he made a very poor king. Thus Macbeth seems to support James’s ideas about the different kinds of masculinity.

But this only means a warrior like Macbeth was not a good king, not that he could not have been a good man. To be admired as a warring man, one should be brave and able in battle, should not flinch at the sight of blood and violence and should be loyal and especially to the crown. Of course, as the rebel Donwald’s fate shows, violence and loyalty go hand in hand as there is also a clear difference as to how admirable violence is when it does not serve the crown. As masculinity is about control, society’s top dog should have control of masculinity – which in the early modern world manifested itself through violence. Control and violence together as values meant that a man should always know his place and stick to it or otherwise the whole society was at risk of falling apart. Even if violence was accepted, violence
alone was not admired as it was not honourable to prove one’s masculinity by just slaying one’s superiors and taking their place. As social mobility grew in early modern times, it would have been even more important to stress this rule. This is, however, just the official, socially accepted stand on the matter. Not long after when Macbeth agonises over his decision to pursue the throne and decides against any treason, Lady Macbeth coaxes her husband to be a proper man and pursue the glory the witches prophesied for Macbeth by murdering his king: ‘When durst do it, then you were a “man”! / And to be more than what you were, you would / Be so much more the “man”.’ (1.7.49-51). For Lady Macbeth ruthless ambition is more honourable and manly than loyalty. For her manliness is connected to the highness of a man’s social status. Rather than seeing different, but equally manly men whose differently oriented masculinities all serve a purpose, she sees one alpha male whose subordinates are all somehow lacking in manhood. Curiously the roles of Lady Macbeth and Macbeth echo those of Elizabeth and James. Elizabeth, like Lady Macbeth, seemed to lean more towards the brutish and ambitious type of masculinity brought up by Waith than James who was of the humanitarian kind. Perhaps to cancel the negative expectations her gender produced, Elizabeth took action and was ambitious in proving her worth. At this point Lady Macbeth is the more ambitious of the two and while Macbeth has the last word, Lady Macbeth is the one initiating all action.

I have named Macduff the most perfect man in *Macbeth* as he is the one who gets to play the role of a hero as far as there are heroes in *Macbeth*. Macduff gets to be the one to destroy the villain and that is enough to make him special, but Macduff’s specialty goes beyond his own actions. The prophecies and his birth make him a chosen one of sorts and Macduff’s ultimate show of superior masculinity is almost a superpower. As he ‘was from his mother’s womb / Untimely ripp’d’ (5.7.45) he was not born of woman and thus manages to avert the originary moment and the resulting difficult negotiation Breitenberg mentions as masculinity’s root problem with femininity. Macduff has no problem with his masculinity, he is certain of and in his masculinity. He is self-assured enough to oppose his lawful king when he is given advice on proper masculinity. As Macduff is independent of his wife, too, he is not present when she criticises him. Macduff is appropriately detached from his wife both physically and emotionally not to be affected by her appeals to his
masculinity. The physical distance symbolises Macduff’s immunity to female string pulling and mind games. Somehow Macduff’s seemingly impossible independence of women makes him the only one capable of restoring order to the society. Not only was he separated from his mother but he was also, regardless of whether his motives were born of wisdom or cowardice, able to ditch his wife and family and was free to attend to the masculine world of war, revenge and politics.

Jennifer C. Vaught and Christopher Tilmouth help us understand the framework in which a man like Macduff is raised above the other characters. We must remember that early modern England was living through a time of change in which the bloody warriors represented by Macbeth were starting to give way to the idea of a more spiritual and controlled gentleman represented here by Macduff. The early modern period is thus marked by change and Macduff marks the change in Macbeth and can be categorised as an Augustinian character. Macduff vouches for Augustinian humanism when he states that he must ‘feel it as a man’, man here referring to both his masculinity and humanity, but his show of emotion is still an appropriately controlled and watered-down version of the passionate outbursts of Malcolm who is steering Macduff towards the Augustinian ideal in an almost divine manner. Malcolm’s test of Macduff’s character is a prime example of such manipulation. Malcolm tries to scare Macduff off by claiming to be sexually insatiable and uncontrollable:

Your wives, your daughters,
Your matrons, and your maids, could not fill up
The cistern of my lust; and my desire
All continent impediments would o’erbear
That did oppose my will.

(4.3.61-5)

This is a foreshadowing of what is later in the seventeenth century to become admirable and accepted behaviour with ‘the emergence of a libertine ethic of indulgence, an outlook preoccupied not with restraint but with sexual conquests, the cultivation of power, and a longing for constant motion’ (Tilmouth 1), but now this confession together with all Malcolm’s supposed sins clearly broadcasts what is not admirable for a man as Malcom finishes off with declaring even Macbeth a better
king than such a man as Malcolm pretends to be like. Malcolm shows how he has supposedly fallen into the trap of femininity and desire and assumes it is something unforgivable and something that especially proves he is not fit to govern: he has lost control and has become dependent on women. Malcolm has painted a picture of himself as the personification of patriarchy’s worst fears realised. And yet Macduff is willing to overlook this and help Malcolm have all the women he could possibly want – in secret. He sees lustiness as temporary and fixable, unlike greed which is a permanent character trait. For Macduff greed is more serious than lustiness as it directly harms other men and cannot be done behind the scenes. Macduff’s attitude shows how no matter what authorities preached and what the official stand on the matter was, for men sexual desire has never been truly discriminating. In Malcolm’s case keeping up appearances seems to be more important than truly living up to the standards as being a king is as much a performance as being a man is. There is a double standard as between men promiscuity is not something to be frowned upon and might even make a man more masculine, but in the eyes of authority or God, a man is to restrain himself. If a man’s sexual desire is insatiable it is fine as long as he keeps it a secret between him, his closest circle and his lovers. King Malcolm would be God’s representative on earth and hence he should outwardly show divine control. His subjects should believe he was above them as the king’s existence on another higher level is, after all, the very thing that justifies his rule over his people.

When Malcolm pronounces himself innocent, he cannot be judged for it officially, but privately this makes him a boy instead of a man. Privately his fellows would think less of him because of his inexperience and it might even reflect negatively on his abilities to rule a kingdom. It is possible that Malcolm exaggerates when he underlines his own purity, but Macduff’s reaction is still valid as he is still confused over what to believe and how to react to Malcolm. Another curious twist to Malcolm’s idea of virtuous masculinity appears when he takes his self-deprecating words back and tries to assure Macduff of his true virtuous nature:

I am yet
unknown to woman, never was forsworn,
Scarcely have coveted what was mine own,
At no time broke my faith, would not betray
The devil to his fellow, and delight
No less in truth than life
(4.3.125-130)

In trying to convince another man of his virtue, Malcolm shows himself in a decidedly feminine light. Were he a girl, he would be perfect, forged after the image of Virgin Mary, but he is a man and a future king. He admits he is young, but now he seems to just highlight his boyhood as even women were appreciated more as married child-producing women and the Virgin Mary image was reserved for unmarried girls. While excessive desire was considered destructive for masculinity, it is hard to imagine a situation where boys or young men would brag about their innocence. It is as if Malcolm is overcompensating in his desperation to prove himself despite his young age. Macduff’s reply after stunned silence ‘Such welcome and unwelcome things at once / ‘Tis hard to reconcile’ should probably not be read as mere confusion and surprise about being so fooled to think Malcolm was a completely rotten man even if Malcolm probably takes it as such. Added might be distaste at just how young Malcolm is. Surely it is welcome that Malcolm is not as bad as he first pictures himself, but he does not exactly come across as the paragon of manhood. Even Macbeth calls him off for this when he refers to him sneeringly as ‘the boy Malcolm’ (5.3.3). With his exaggerating depictions of his own virtues and faults Malcolm also reveals his youthful passion and tendency to gravitate towards extremes. Malcolm also claims to barely want anything and declares himself a servant of both the country and Macduff. Macduff came looking for a steady leader to raise them from the ruin, but now it seems Macduff is to lead the resistance while Malcolm is happy to just tag along, let others do the work and take the glory. He has Siward and his ten thousand men to back him up and it is up to the audience to decide whether Malcolm is cowardly or just a smart strategist.

Malcolm’s list of virtues is curious in that none of them actually seem to relate to Malcolm himself:

But I have none. The king-becoming graces,
As justice, verity, temperance, stableness,
Bounty, perseverance, mercy, lowliness,
Devotion, patience, courage, fortitude,
(4.3.91-4)

Granted, he is trying to convince Macduff that he would make a poor king, but contrary to what you might expect, Malcolm’s actions do not really prove his words false. In fact, what we see of Malcolm’s character is him either steering people or giving his judgement or approval. Macduff, however, seems to possess quite a few of these virtues that paint a picture of a king that has moved far from the fierce warrior. It could even be said that Malcolm has taken the position of God and made Macduff his representative on earth. But the listed virtues do shout loud and clear what we are supposed to expect from a nobleman and what school of emotionality we should lean towards. Especially lowliness, mercy and patience are qualities that smack of the early modern humanism. Mercy in earlier times might have been a sign of weakness and lowliness would never have earned the title of a king or would have lost it fast. There is no mention of strength or any battle-prowess; all the virtues are distinctly spiritual. Courage might be seen as useful in a battle, but this list tells more of a father-figure who looks over his people and leads them spiritually with his example rather than physically with his sword.

It is, also, interesting that mercy should be mentioned. It is a very Christian virtue, indeed, and befits the times, but there is not a single instance of mercy in Macbeth and while showing mercy is admirable, asking for it is shameful as Macbeth’s last words declare: ‘And damn’d be him that first cries, “Hold, enough!”’ (5.7.63). Macduff certainly does not offer it freely either. While his little monologue gives us a great show of his sense of justice, perseverance and fortitude, there is no sign of mercy. Macduff hungers to avenge his family and says:

If thou be’st slain and with no stroke of mine,  
My wife and children’s ghosts will haunt me still.  
I cannot strike at wretched kerns, whose arms  
Are hir’d to bear their staves: either thou, Macbeth,  
Or else my sword with an unbatter’d edge  
I sheathe again undeeded.  
(5.7.15-20)
Echoing Malcolm’s ‘We have met with foes / That strike beside us’ (5.7.29-30), Macduff acknowledges that the soldiers he is supposed to fight are there just for show, and he refrains from killing innocent people, he sees no other point to the battle than revenge and eliminating the tyrant, there is no fighting for the joy of fighting. It is generally acknowledged that there really is no fight and as he is surrounded by two armies with no one willing to defend him, Macbeth could probably be made to surrender and given a fair trial in which he might have been granted an amnesty. Admittedly, considering the severity of Macbeth’s crimes, this is a highly unlikely turn of events both because of the reality of the early modern as well as eleventh century periods and because Macbeth is a tragedy. Such an ending would be an odd anti-climax for such a bleak story, but entertaining the possibility of such an ending reveals that the admirability of mercy is purely rhetorical or such a high form of virtue that no one in *Macbeth* reaches this level of virtuousness. In this light the audience is made just as guilty as the characters as even if one is rooting for Macbeth, no one probably wants to see the play end with a celebration of mercy. It would flatten the drama as well as it would shame and neuter Macbeth. When Macbeth dies in a fair battle instead of a fair trial, he gets to keep his pride and masculinity. Those who have grown attached to Macbeth can find comfort in that at least Macbeth died a proper warrior’s death and those who want the evil tyrant to pay get their satisfaction served to them in Macbeth’s head on a pike.

Another man meeting the criteria of a virtuous king better than Malcolm is Duncan, the most rightful king in the play. He shows bounty by giving Lady Macbeth a diamond as a reward for a great hostess and showers his noble subordinates in open and unrestrained praise. He shows absolute trust in his noble subordinates and is pictured as a just ruler when he thanks the noble men who fought for him and assures that ‘signs of nobleness, like stars, shall shine / On all deservers’ (1.4.42-3). However, as Duncan is old and thus past his prime, it is left to the audience to decide whether his trusting and generous nature makes him a truly good man or a senile fool who fails to keep the reins of the kingdom in his hands.

Even though not much of Siward is seen in the play, he is a curious character in his relation to Malcolm. He has come to Malcolm’s aid, but unlike Macduff, he is not there to serve as an underling. Even if he is just an earl to
Malcolm’s king, as a general of the English forces, he is an ally and thus more equal with the king than Macduff. Siward is the only one who can matter-of-factly disagree with Malcolm: ‘He’s worth no more. / They say, he parted well, and paid his score: / And so, God be with him!’ (5.7.80-2) Siward is, also, a paragon of the blood-stained warrior whose only goal in life is to die proudly on a battlefield. For him the true measure of a man is his battle prowess and once a man has shown up on a battlefield and managed to die there, his life is complete, he has served his purpose and will be welcomed by God. There is almost a cultural difference between Siward and Ross and Malcolm which could be either because Siward is not Scottish, because he is probably of Scandinavian descent or because he is a soldier by profession whereas Ross and Malcolm are nobility first and soldiers second:

You, worthy uncle,
Shall, with my cousin, your right-noble son,
Lead our first battle; worthy Macduff and we
Shall take upon’s what else remains to do,
According to our order.
(5.6.2-6)

Ross and Malcolm bring to mind Elizabeth I’s well-dressed aristocratic courtiers that according to Vaught were of a peaceful time and helped make gender categories more fluid towards the end of the sixteenth century (146). Even though Macbeth opens right after a victorious battle, we can assume that Ross and Malcolm have lived most of their lives in a relatively peaceful kingdom under the just and steady rule of Duncan and are thus more prone to eloquent speeches about the glories of war. Ross and Malcolm speak of the terrible grief the loss of young Siward brings and give the sorrow words by praising him and lamenting the endlessness of the sorrow, but Siward is only interested to know if his son died the proper way and comes across as almost irritated by the Scots’ grand words. His son must not be raised on a pedestal as he is most honourable as a common dead soldier. Siward is a firm believer in lowliness. Siward’s son is not the only one whose worth is measured at death. Malcolm praises the way the first Cawdor died repenting and says that ‘Nothing in his life / Became him like the leaving it’. As Cawdor died as someone willing to throw away everything he believed in in order to confirm the justness of
his king’s rule and the wrongness of his actions, Malcolm is ready to give him some credit. Cawdor’s death thus raises Malcolm again to the same level with God. In a very Christian way Cawdor repents at his death and is forgiven for his life by Malcolm.

All in all everything about Malcolm and his masculinity come across as godlike. He manages to steer and guide and manipulate the people around him and he at least claims to be above and beyond any sexual desire. If he truly has no desires, he has the key to the ultimate masculine control and is even more successful at masculinity than Macduff. No woman can sway him from his chosen path. He is above other men and shows divine purity and control. If Malcolm sees himself as a godlike figure, his list of virtues must be seen in another light. All the points are marks of a good man, but rarely have we heard of a humble God at least in the context of early modern England. A god does not have to answer to people, it is the people who answer to God. Malcolm’s list is actually supposed to describe Macduff who symbolically becomes the king, Malcolm’s representative on earth. Malcolm cannot kill Macbeth himself so as not risk becoming a usurper himself. Who delivers the actual death blow might seem a minor detail when Malcolm and Macduff are clearly plotting together and Malcolm is orchestrating it all, but it is an important technicality that protects Malcolm and his rule from judgement. Macduff does the actual killing when the throne is left unoccupied and Malcolm just happens to be the most rightful option for a ruler in the crowd. It is important that Macduff should be lowly so as to make sure he would not follow in Macbeth’s footsteps and come up with any strange ideas about heroic deeds and battle prowess needing to be rewarded with crowns.

5 Masculinity and the Women of Macbeth

The women of Macbeth are a mirror showing us the true colours of the men in the play. The women reflect the early modern anxious patriarch fearing the loss of control over the presumably uncontrollable female Shepard discusses. Lady Macbeth and Lady Macduff represent the nightmare and the ideal woman respectively, but they also function to showcase their husbands’ level of control. Besides being a plot device whose function is to bring more drama to the story, Lady Macduff’s sole
purpose in the play is to underline Macduff’s difference from Macbeth. She does not actually do anything in the play besides talk about her husband. The nightmare and the ideal man cannot be identified without observing their relation to women and hence it is impossible to discuss masculinity in *Macbeth*, or anywhere for that matter, without including women in the discussion. Femininity gives birth to masculinity and keeps it alive. No matter how independent men and masculinity would like to be of women, in *Macbeth* masculinity cannot help but justify itself through femininity.

If Lady Macbeth and Lady Macduff are the nightmare and ideal of femininity respectively, the witches on the other hand are the threat of uncontrolled gender materialised. They are not tied to any of the male characters and are not exactly women so they are a few steps further down on the road to ruin than Lady Macbeth. The witches are so detached and out of control that they have freed themselves of the shackles of femininity and simultaneously of all social control. By adopting the beard and still maintaining their feminine figures they have managed to avoid the duties and demands of masculinity, too.

### 5.1 The Weird Sisters

The witches, who ultimately orchestrate the whole tragedy, are women with beards and they are completely out of masculine control as seen when Macbeth first encounters them and the witches respond to his impotent commands ‘Stay you imperfect speakers! Tell me more!’ (1.3.69) and ‘Speak, I charge you!’ (1.3.78) by just vanishing without another word. It can be questioned whether the witches are women at all, but their first encounter with Banquo and Macbeth can be taken as a guideline as to how we should interpret their gender. Banquo tries to make sense of the sight before him by wondering aloud how

> You seem to understand me,
> By each at once her choppy finger laying
> Upon her skinny lips. You should be women,
> And yet your beards forbid me to interpret that you are so.
> (1.3.43–46)

It does not even cross his mind that the witches could be men. He does not even entertain the idea that since the witches have beards they should be men. To Banquo
it seems obvious that they are definitely not men, he is confused because the beards go against his idea of women, too, and he is running out of options. Banquo’s confusion probably stems from the basic idea of gender and how it works.

Even if women are faulty men, actual faulty men do not exist as they become women. A man with a flaw of some kind in his biological gender cannot be called a man. Yet, no such thing as a bearded woman is supposed to be possible either. There is just one gender and varying degrees of it and still Banquo’s startled reaction to the witches reflects the idea of fixed gender division and just how bizarre bearded women were thought to be. In all its fluidity early modern gender concept did not recognise bigenderism of any kind. In Banquo’s head the division into men and women is clear without any grey area in between. There is no third gender. Beards were thought of as the ultimate symbol of full manhood as without a proper beard a boy was still a boy and the concept of a beard on a woman is foreign enough for him to have trouble believing the witches are of this earth:

What are these,
So wither’d and so wild in their attire,
That look not like th’ inhabitants o’ the earth,
And yet are on’t?
(1.3.39-42)

The way Banquo leaps to the conclusion that the witches must be something supernatural because of the beards proves just how fixed the gender division is despite of early modern records of gender deviants. Witches are supposed to ‘have no normative sexual identity’ (Kimbrough 179), but still Banquo prefers to refer to them as women instead of as men, as seen in the repeated use of “her”, despite the trouble he has with the concept of beards on women. The witches are, indeed, seen as supernatural women with beards, not men with breasts and thus I am going to treat them as representatives of femininity instead of something androgynous or even masculinity.

The weird sisters’ existence slap bang in the middle of the borderline between femininity and masculinity is a physical representation of the anxiety caused by women trying to creep over the wall to the side of masculine. They cannot be
controlled once they have left behind the cage of femininity. And yet, since they are not fully men either, they cannot be shackled with the rules and demands of masculinity. The Weird Sisters are the personification of the worries raised by cross-dressing actors and the anxieties caused by the blurring of the boundaries of masculinity. The witches have stolen something that was supposed to be irrevocably manly – the beard. If we cannot trust in this surest of signs of masculinity and manhood in particular, then what can we trust in?

That Macbeth should go back to the witches for advice is telling. He, too, wishes to break free from the restraints of his social class and clearly the sisters are experts on the matter. Not only have they broken free of their social class, they have broken free from society and seem to be able to do whatever they want. They stir the peace and bring mischief with them wherever they go. The Weird Sisters are empowered by their confused gender and disregard for social rules. But this is only because they are supernatural beings. Or they have become supernatural beings because their rebellion does not fit in the natural world. Banquo describes the witches as ‘wild in attire’ in addition to being of ambiguous gender. This wildness in their appearance coupled with the confused gender underlines how far they have escaped from the circle of ordinary society and how uncontrollable the witches are. They are like wild animals or children raised by wolves. Were they beautiful, attractive and well-groomed, they would still show signs of abiding by the rules of society. The witches are outside the circle of society as such rebellion simply does not work within the delicately engineered social structure of the natural world Macbeth occupies. Macbeth however misses the warning signs and does not understand that following advice from the chaotic supernatural world might not be the best option for someone wanting to rule in the natural world. Breaking the rules of society leads to mayhem. Without realising it Macbeth foresees his own future when he spits: ‘Infected be the air whereon they ride; /And damn’d all those that trust them!’ (4.1.138-139). Had Macbeth not trusted the witches’ prophecies, he would not have paved the path to his own eventual fall from grace. For characters that are present in only four scenes in the play the Weird Sisters do hold a lot of power over Macbeth and the destiny of the whole kingdom.
Even with the relative fluidity and flexibility of the concept of masculinity and with women hopping over to the side of masculine, there still needs to be two clear genders: male and female. The Weird Sisters are unnerving and dangerous because they cannot be defined. Even their reply to Macbeth’s inquiry as to what they are doing comes as ‘A deed without a name’ (4.1.49). In a society where everyone needs to be administered a clear title and position such vagueness and avoidance is alarming. Even the woman who suddenly turned into a man truly and fully became a man. She or he was a curiosity, something improbable, but not apparently impossible like the Weird Sisters. In the world of Macbeth things or people should not exist in the twilight zone between labels. Yet, the impossibility of the Weird Sisters’ physical form is what captures everyone’s attention. Quite possibly if they looked like three normal old ladies, no matter how ugly or pretty, the witches would have had more trouble convincing Macbeth to hear what they had to say. The Weird Sisters emphasise their otherness by speaking in rhyming couplets as the only characters in the play, but the beards are what immediately mark them as something decidedly supernatural. Not only does Banquo leap to the conclusion that the witches must be female despite their beards, he also leaps to the conclusion that because of the beards these females cannot be human. He asks ‘what are these’ (1.3.39) not ‘who are they’ and doubts they can even understand his speech. In Banquo’s eyes disregarding gender equals disregarding humanity.

The Weird Sisters are not once referred to as witches by anyone in the entire play. It would be tempting to leap to conclusions about the witches being such deviants that everyone mutually agrees to call them weird, but in Shakespeare’s time ‘weird’ did not translate to ‘odd’ or ‘strange’ as it does today. The name of the trio is usually linked back to the Old English word ‘wyrd’ meaning fate and considering the sisters’ role in the play this explanation is hardly farfetched. Still, I cannot bypass the fact that in the first folio the sisters are first called ‘weyward’ and later ‘weyard’. Even though the spelling could be on account of English still being in the process of settling on a standard spelling, ‘weyard’ is still too close to ‘wayward’ to be ignored. If the sisters were, indeed, intended as wayward, then their role as emblems of lost masculine control becomes even more pronounced. The synonyms of wayward include ‘unruly’, ‘ungovernable’, ‘contrary’, ‘refractory’ and ‘perverse’.
Perhaps the slip in spelling was even intended as the wordplay it seems to be. After all, the Weird Sisters are wayward even in relation to their supernatural superior Hecate and are neglecting their duties and overstepping their boundaries as ‘weird’ sisters:

FIRST WITCH. Why, how now, Hecate! you look angerly!
HECATE. Have I not reason, beldams as you are, Saucy and overbold? How did you dare To trade and traffic with Macbeth In riddles and affairs of death; And I, the mistress of your charms, The close contriver of all harms, Was never call’d to bear my part, (3.5.1-8)

The sisters are both gender and fate gone wayward. Even Hecate has no true control over the sisters and therein lies the biggest fear or threat of uncontrolled gender and uncontrolled social class: there are absolutely no borders that cannot be crossed if we give up gender and class. That Hecate should call the sisters beldams is also significant as their apparent old age adds to the horror of their wildness. Old unmarried or widowed women who had never given birth were problematic in early modern society since they were living outside the patriarchal family unit. They were not attached to or controlled by anyone and were beyond giving birth and falling back into the natural order of society. Thus old witches seem even more uncontrollable than young ones. There is absolutely nothing men could hold over their heads. The Weird Sisters lack moral codes even within their own evil and misbehaved circle. Of course the sisters do listen to Hecate’s scolding, but at that point it is too late. The control has been lost and the damage has been done.

Even Hecate has standards she would like to stand up to. She is not peeved just because the sisters have acted without coming to her first or because she has been robbed of the chance to show off and boast with her powers. She specifically mentions that the absolute lowest thing is that the sisters have spilled their secrets to Macbeth of all people. Hecate does not see him as worthy:
And, which is worse, all you have done
Hath been but for a wayward son,
Spiteful and wrathful, who, as others do,
Loves for his own ends, not for you.
(3.5.10-3)

Here the sisters are likened to Macbeth in their waywardness. Perhaps the sisters were attracted to Macbeth precisely because his character is similar to the sisters’. The sisters, too, are spiteful and wrathful as proved by one sister’s retelling of the incident with a sailor’s wife and her chestnuts. The sisters, too, ‘love for their own ends’. Without any concern for their surroundings they do what they do to amuse themselves and further their own ends, not for some sense of duty for a greater purpose their powers are supposed to serve. They have no selfless dignity or professional pride and they do not respect the gift Hecate has given them in the form of their powers. The sisters are like ungrateful children who have no respect for the gift of life their parents have given them and Hecate sees the pattern repeated in the manner Macbeth treats the gift of foresight. The sisters’ out of control gender releases Macbeth from the constraints of his social status. Hecate’s low opinion of Macbeth is further emphasised by how she calls him son instead of man or soldier even. By calling him son she puts Macbeth below herself in status and simultaneously strips him of his masculine prowess when he is likened to a boy instead of a full grown adult man. In Hecate’s eyes Macbeth is like a little insolent and unruly child who only thinks of himself and his own desires. The sisters’ actions lower Hecate’s status, too.

While the Weird Sisters are the emblem of the loss of patriarchal control, the human women in Macbeth were specifically shaped to fit the early modern concepts of women and family. In eleventh century Scotland Lady Macduff would have protected herself and defended the castle while her husband was away, but Shakespeare turned her into a whiny and helpless little pet who, instead of protecting her offspring, whinges that she has done nothing wrong and doesn’t deserve to be attacked (Rackin 134-135). And as such Lady Macduff is an admirable and faultless woman who is let down by circumstances. Lady Macbeth, on the other hand, gets to act in a rather masculine manner even if she has to realise her ambitions
through her husband. But this unnaturalness does not last for long as Lady Macbeth’s stepping into the masculine territory of murder and power play becomes the death of her. Lady Macbeth strives to become like the witches. She wants to break free from the shackles of her gender and she wants to eliminate all those standing between her and what she wants and she urges her husband to listen to the witches’ guidance. But in pushing into the territory of masculinity she is not looking to become a man. She does not want to be tied down by the duties and loyalties of the masculine world. And ultimately she does want to get rid of her humanity that she feels is just a hindrance to her goals. When Lady Macbeth fails to completely shake her remorse, she fails to shake her humanity and follow in the footsteps of the witches. This failure of Lady Macbeth’s confirms the impossibility and unnaturalness of the Weird Sisters. Even the toughest of women cannot completely rid themselves of their gender even if they wanted to. And so Lady Macbeth’s death is a relief to the anxious masculinity. The deviant gender of the witches is more or less safely isolated in the supernatural world and when its influence leaks over to the human world, it will sooner or later be suffocated by its sheer impossibility.

5.2 Lady Macbeth and Lady Macduff

If the witches are the personification of gender roaming wild and free, Lady Macbeth with her ambitions is a personification of the feared and suppressed female desires that thrum below the surface of masculine control. Much is made of Lady Macbeth’s aspirations and eventual death. Her influence on Macbeth is such that it is hard to discuss Macbeth or his masculinity as separate from Lady Macbeth. As a married couple Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are truly one. Their interaction is the complete opposite of that of Macduffs. As I mentioned earlier Lady Macbeth refuses to submit to the role of a subordinate. She is forced by the society to act through Macbeth, but unlike Lady Macduff she refuses to just sit at home and wait for her husband, although even she admits that this goes against her nature as a woman:

Come you spirits
that tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,
And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full
Of direst cruelty! Make thick my blood!
Stop up the access and passage to remorse,
That no compunctions visitings of nature
Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between
The effect and it! Come to my woman’s breasts,
And take my milk for gall, you murdering ministers,

(1.5.39-47)

She feels she must ask for spirits to come and take her feminine tenderness in order to reach her goal. By wanting to be unsexed she claims that it is her femininity in particular that would stop her from committing the cruelties she has planned.

Moments before she worried her husband was ‘too full o’ the milk of human kindness’ (1.5.16) and now she tells the spirits to take the milk from her ‘woman’s breasts’, a clear sign that the tenderness is feminine in origin. All the things Lady Macbeth wants to get rid of or achieve, she accuses her husband of, thus questioning his masculinity indirectly in addition to the verbal abuse she flings at him. It almost seems as though the tragedy truly starts from this soliloquy: In some manner Macbeth gets her milk, their gender roles are reversed and order is disturbed until they start to slide back to their appointed roles towards the end and finally order is restored when both of them die gender appropriately.

Kimbrough among others argues that when Lady Macbeth wishes to be “unsexed” she is actually wishing to get rid of gender altogether rather than become more masculine. This argument, however, is only valid in a modern context, as in early modern eyes there was only one gender and different degrees of it. If Lady Macbeth wanted to get rid of gender, she wanted to get rid of humanity. In this form the argument would not be too farfetched, but when Lady Macbeth says ‘Make thick my blood’(1.5.42) she seems to directly ask to be made a man. Blood was central to early modern masculinity as true honour did not exist without honourable bloodlines and sperm was thought to be blood in its purest form that was only reached in the heat of manhood. Women’s blood on the other hand was weak and it escaped every month as the coolness of women could not hold it inside or find any purpose for it. Menstruation was seen as lack of control whereas ejaculation was a sign of ultimate control and manhood as blood was released at will. (Breitenberg 49-50) Thus I
cannot fully accept Kimbrough’s claims of Shakespeare having a clear androgynous agenda in mind when writing Macbeth, but one can hardly bypass the many references to sex and gender in the play and the gender confusion that was the royalty of England during the reigns of Elizabeth and James. Lady Macbeth’s desires to become more masculine at least in the sense of what she understands masculinity to be about, she echoes Elizabeth’s purposefully built image of a warrior queen with the attitude and mentality of a king. She, too, feels she is restrained by her femininity in ways that are hard to understand today. Lady Macbeth truly believes that what she feels and does is tied to her biological sex. If she feels horrified thinking of murder, it is because she is a woman and her weak feminine body has betrayed her. While it is still easy for modern audiences to recognise how certain attributes were seen as masculine in Macbeth, are people, and especially women, today allowed more leeway with their gender identity while still being considered proper men and women. And more importantly most modern people when praying for courage or resolve would probably not even think of their biological sex playing into the equation. Where modern people are likely to think any possible restrictions their gender poses are due to the attitudes of society, early modern people were likely to see any restrictions as natural and unavoidable physical differences. Modern gender is social and psychological first and biological last – at least the politically correct idea of gender is. Those who say women can’t because of their female bodies are labelled chauvinist in the case of men and suck-ups, traitors or oppressed and ignorant in the case of women.

Even though Lady Macbeth prayed to some higher power to take her femininity away she has also actively broken the rules of femininity on her own just by using violence when she should be a nurturer. But even though she boasts to be ready to smash the head of a baby and thinks she has no traces of remorse left in her, she just cannot handle the sight of blood. This would not come as a surprise to Macduff, who replies to Lady Macbeth’s inquiries:

O gentle lady,
'Tis not for you to hear what I can speak:
The repetition, in a woman's ear,
Would murder as it fell.

(2.3.84-86)

Macduff thinks Lady Macbeth and all ladies are so delicate that they should not even hear of such horrors as murder. Even though she appeals to her husband by accusing him of eating his word and suggesting she herself would never break a promise, thus hinting at honour and loyalty as well, she is not really moved by the morality of her actions. It almost seems that even though Lady Macbeth knows which strings to pull to get to her husband, she is not bound by the same ties of loyalty as the men are. The only signs of loyalty she shows are to her husband and to her father and even these ties are not completely sacred: ‘Had he not resembled / My father as he slept, I had done’t. – My husband!’ (2.2.13-14) Lady Macbeth explains her incapability of murder in a manner that suggests that it would be self-evident that patricide is beyond her. The image of her father either reminds her of the humanity of her victim or more likely her reaction is of more personal nature and murdering even just the image of her own father is a step too far on her path of betrayal. Yet she immediately calls her husband who emerges from the chamber with bloody hands. Even though murder is beyond her, making someone else do the deed for her is not and she has made her oblivious husband kill the image of her father. This one scene then shows the patriarchal fears come true. Not only is the duo betraying the highest patriarch, the king, but Lady Macbeth kills the highest male authority in her own personal ranking as well. She has already removed herself from under her father’s rule by marrying, but as getting married was probably the father’s will in the first place, the break-up is not complete until with the symbolical murder she makes her husband the alpha male. And yet while Lady Macbeth is unusually active for a female she does rely on the man in her life to act. In the resulting complex power play the man in this scene is controlled and played by the uncontrollable female who still remains shackled by her gender.

Even though Lady Macbeth scorns her husband and questions his manhood for being so squeamish, she ends up crumbling under the weight of her own guilty conscience.

Out, damned spot! out, I say! —

One; two: why, then, 'tis time to do't. — Hell is
murky! — Fie, my lord, fie! a soldier, and afeard? – What need we fear who knows it, when none can call our power to account? — Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?

(5.1.38-44)

Fixating on the blood Lady Macbeth shows she cannot handle the masculine violence whereas Macbeth’s fear of facing the dead Duncan and Banquo shows he cannot handle the guilt of betrayed trust. While both Lady Macbeth and Macbeth show signs of mental distress and slight insanity the ways these guilt induced hallucinations materialise show clear gender division. Lady Macbeth washes her hands clean of the imaginary blood and Macbeth is haunted by the ghost of his old friend. Their different approaches to murder are already visible right after the first murder when Macbeth thinks he hears a voice crying about him murdering innocent sleep, he cannot bring himself to go back to the crime scene because he cannot face his betrayal. ‘Look on’t again, I dare not’ can be read as Macbeth being ashamed, he cannot look his victim in the eye. Lady Macbeth, however, is much more practical in a traditionally masculine way and, ironically enough, tells Macbeth that ‘’Tis the eye of childhood / That fears a painted devil’ (act, scene, line). The different symptoms of guilt show us how Lady Macbeth and Macbeth, while basically conducting the same crime, have actually broken different sets of rules and how little by little their roles, possibly as a punishment, are reversed over the course of the play until at the end they are back in the appropriate gender frames. She is surprised by the amount of blood involved in a murder, cannot get rid of the violent image and finally shows the ultimate weakness by killing herself while her husband is getting ready for a battle. Whereas Macbeth’s hallucination of his dead friend tells a story of betrayal, Lady Macbeth doesn’t seem to feel sorry for the betrayal, but is shocked by the violence itself - something Macbeth as a man and a soldier would be used to. Mere violence is not enough to stir Macbeth and he is not particularly bothered by the messy side of murder. How could he be when he has just split a man in two with his sword? But he does feel enough guilt for his betrayal of the sacred masculine loyalty to start to hallucinate about his dead friend.
Lady Macbeth or Lady Macduff, on the other hand, do not seem to have life outside the circle of home and thus do not even have any friends to betray. Their lives are restricted to their families and as Lady Macbeth has no family besides her husband, everything she does is somehow related to Macbeth. What is notable about Lady Macbeth as opposed to Lady Macduff is that she seems to be as equal with her husband as possible within the conventions of early modern society. She speaks of their power instead of just Macbeth’s and Macbeth calls her his ‘dearest partner of greatness’ (1.5.10) and wants to make sure she is not ‘ignorant of what greatness it promised thee’ (1.5.12). He wants to share the moment with his wife and instead of writing about the greatness awaiting him alone, he not only includes Lady Macbeth and allows her to tag along, but shifts the emphasis so that Lady Macbeth becomes the centre as if everything was happening for her and she was somehow active in the process.

The difference to the relationship between the Macduffs is striking. Lady Macduff has practically no power over her own life and has no say in anything her husband does. We never see the two interact, but based on the evidence we see of their relationship it would be safe to assume Macduff would never consult his wife, much less allow her to sway his resolve once he has made up his mind. The one time Lady Macduff criticises her husband he is not there to hear it. In modern society we would probably call Macduff a chauvinist and cheer Macbeth’s advanced idea of marriage as an equal partnership, but in Macbeth allowing the wife to meddle in the manly affairs leads to destruction. Lady Macduff evidently has nothing to do with her husband’s affairs. She is firmly tied to the home front where she never meets her husband. Of course, Lady Macduff dies because of this arrangement, but in the greater scheme of things she gets to die a proper femininely innocent death that approaches martyrdom. Her death is, also, the fuel that rages Macduff into the fury he needs to defeat Macbeth and restore order. Lady Macbeth’s meddling, however, causes the kingdom nothing but pain, misery, and sorrow, but when she dies Macbeth crumbles, too, and the rest of the men’s affairs are solved in a manly and fair manner face to face in a battle. The difference, though, is that whereas Macduff is moved to action because of his wife’s death, Macbeth loses his purpose along with his wife. The scenario is, again, reflective of anxious masculinity. In the early modern period a new idea was rising of women being partners in marriage. They
were still lower than men, but not mere servants. It was men’s job to keep their wives happy and satisfied so that they would not have any reason to complain or rebel. It was women’s duty to obey, but ultimately it was men’s duty to be in control.

Macbeth gives his wife a little too loud a voice in their partnership and his control slips. Macbeth has also lost part of himself to his wife. Macbeth once again touches one of the root problems of masculine anxiety. His wife is supposed to be closer to him than anyone else on earth and yet his love for her is effeminising. There should be the golden middle somewhere between the demands, but Macbeth has failed to find it and as result compares unfavourably to Macduff. Macbeth’s love resembles that of a boy’s. In his own way Macbeth resembles Romeo in the way he closes everyone and everything outside the circle of his and his loved one’s desires.

Whereas Macbeth has committed himself to his wife on an emotional level, Macduff has committed himself to his wife and family as a provider. He has love for his family, but his exclamations of loss and sorrow give no sign of Macduff having lost something of himself. As important as his family was to Macduff, it was separate from his self. Whereas Macbeth’s wife’s death harms Macbeth himself, Macduff’s wife’s death comes across as a violation of his property rights.

In all her supposedly unfeminine plotting under the surface Lady Macbeth remains very family oriented, which is obviously commonly thought of as a feminine trait. Partly out of necessity her desires seem to all be tied to her husband. She wants to see him on the throne, but not one word is uttered about what this means to her, not once does Lady Macbeth dream of being a queen or having power over others. Obviously we can assume that Lady Macbeth enjoys the new social status she rises to alongside her husband, but all textual evidence points only to her desire for her husband’s advancement. Thus Lady Macbeth is so thoroughly under masculine control that she is unable to even dream of gaining personal power that would be independent of her husband or any man. While Lady Macbeth is a threat to the divine order of the kingdom, with all her suspect desires and actions she is still not a threat to patriarchy itself as she is unable or unwilling to think beyond her role as her husband’s sidekick. She wishes to be unsexed so she realises her gender is a restriction, but she only wants to be able to perform a task for her husband, not to become her husband. Lady Macbeth is highly ambitious, but it is ambition for the team. She does not exist without her husband and ultimately all the wrongs and evils
the couple commits are due to Macbeth’s failing at masculine control. Thus Macbeth himself is a bigger threat to masculinity as his failing at control drags the society down with him.

Lady Macbeth is an active character whereas Lady Macduff is passive to the point that she can’t move herself to action even when her and her children’s lives depend on it. When Macbeth returns to his wife she has already heard the news of Macbeth’s new status and has formed a plan and when Macbeth hesitates she uses all her powers of persuasion to keep them moving towards the goal. In all their interaction Macbeth is the one doubting and holding back while the often exasperated Lady Macbeth either kicks her husband into action or gets up and acts herself. She talks Macbeth into the first murder and she grabs the daggers and takes them back to the crime scene when Macbeth is too anguished to do it himself. She is the one keeping the public facade up when Macbeth nearly gives them away and as a final show of her self-sufficiency Lady Macbeth kills herself. Lady Macduff, on the other hand, refuses to take responsibility either and instead curses her husband for not acting and failing to fulfil his duty. Lady Macbeth on the other hand takes responsibility in a rather twisted manner by killing herself. She might escape the situation she has got herself into, but at least she does take action once more and the end result is the same as it would have been had she been judged guilty of murder and treason. Ironically this is at the same time the ultimate show of weakness that also makes her wholly feminine again as she dies a gender appropriate weak and private death that her husband equates to ‘Roman fools’ (5.7.39) as opposed to her husband’s public demise on the battle field.

In Asp’s view it is the ‘dichotomy between role and nature’ (153) that is Lady Macbeth’s downfall while Kimbrough argues that it is society’s gendered shackles preventing Lady Macbeth from becoming who she really is that leads to the misguided dismissal of humanity. Asp seems to argue that as a woman Lady Macbeth cannot possibly be naturally capable of the murderous ambition she shows whereas Kimbrough argues that Lady Macbeth is trying to find an outlet for her ambitions within the restraining role of a female. The views approach the conclusion from opposite directions, but the end result remains the same: Lady Macbeth dies because she does not fit the gender role she finds herself in, be it then self-imposed
or socially predetermined. Her husband on the other hand dies because he did not fit the role he had taken. Even if Macbeth does fail at control, it is not so much his masculinity that is at fault, but the mismatch between his inherent type of masculinity and the demands of the role of a king. Macbeth failed to control his wife’s desires and lets himself be sucked into the whims of womankind in the form of Lady Macbeth and the Weird Sisters. In doing so Macbeth loses control of his own life when he tries to have more control than his natural position in the society would permit. Thus we can deduce that Macbeth’s fall from grace was not just preordained and foreseen, it was simply natural. Macbeth was born into a role and position that naturally suited him and his abilities. His type of masculinity was perfect while he stayed in the role of a soldier and subject. As he climbed up the social ladder, he had to fight his own nature and it was only inevitable that he would lose the battle between his own desires and God’s will. He simply was not a natural born king. As he tried to adjust to his new role Macbeth was unable to switch off his natural violence. In Macbeth’s previous life everything had been settled through violence and killing and not killing was a sign of a bad man or possibly even a dead man. When Macbeth kills the obstacles on his way, he is ultimately just doing what he has done so far. He has only taken his actions to a new territory. The biased picture we get of Macbeth and his masculinity becomes obvious when we remember that the historical Macbeth actually managed to rule quite successfully for quite a long period.

6 Conclusions

Masculinity in early modern England was a decidedly different concept from what we in the modern western world understand it to be. Not only has our understanding of human biology changed, but the structure of our societies has changed in ways hard to fully even grasp by modern man. While discussing Shakespeare from a modern perspective that puts his plays in a modern context is interesting, if we truly want to understand the nuances and mechanics of Shakespeare’s plays, must we try to see past our own views of gender and its meaning. It is impossible to completely forget our modern surroundings, but we must try to set our world aside and use it as a tool of comparison. Often discussion of gender in Shakespeare is focused on the female characters and neither can they be avoided when the focus is on the men. As
much as men are seen as the primary sex neither side exists as feminine or masculine without the other. Still the Shakespearean gender discussion often focuses on men and women as if there were just two groups, one dominant and one oppressed. I am not so much interested in how masculinity and femininity are presented in comparison to each other. The comparison cannot be avoided, but my main focus and interest lies in understanding what masculinity is, what characteristics and qualities are deemed masculine, how different qualities of masculinity compare to each other, and what men should strive for and what it means to be a man among other men.

Observing the characters from the point of view of two competing genders is interesting for a modern audience, but does not say much about the early modern period. Gender was simultaneously stricter and more fluid than it is today. Rather than being two separate entities, the female and male were just two ends of one gender line. Yet it was practically impossible to shake the gender role any one person was born into. We must also bear in mind that the early modern gender role was not constructed of the biological sex alone but depended on such things as age, occupation, marital status and social class. There were fewer acceptable gender roles available but simultaneously the early modern period lacked the unifying all-embracing concept of masculinity that the modern audience has. Even though we are freer to deviate from the abstract idea of pure masculinity or femininity, we do have a concept of manliness that is the same for everyone regardless of age or class. We are freer to decide the degree of masculinity or femininity we would like to present whereas in the early modern period ready slots existed for different types of men of different purpose. The class and position the man was born into decided what form of masculinity was appropriate. While social class still directs our identities on the gender front as well and we still risk ridicule, scorn and even violence if we deviate too far from the norm, we can in most cases in modern Europe aspire for a position and role that feels natural to us without being judged too severely.

I hope I have managed to shed some light on what early modern masculinity was, how it varied and how the different types of masculinity worked together. The thread running through gender in early modern England is confusion and uncertainty. This confusion is evident in Macbeth as well. When we try to pinpoint one particular form or ideal of masculinity that rises above others, we run
into contradictions and subcategories. When we find a clue of what masculinity is, there will soon be another clue claiming the opposite. There is a general idea of man versus woman, everyone knows and feels it, everyone can tell there is a difference, but when asked for details the lines get blurred and there are no two same answers. Everyone is confused and the men even scared. Scared to cross some unclear but critical line and to be found out as the actors they are. The uncertainty is good breeding ground for anxiety and questioning someone’s manhood or appealing to their masculinity becomes an unbeatable psychological weapon. The power of the question ‘are you a man at all?’ lies in that nobody knows. Even the ones preaching about proper masculinity are in the end just trying to convince themselves and everyone around them of their own masculinity and superiority. When James wrote down a set of detailed rules for his son, the aim was not to have his son grow up to be a good man per se, but to have him follow a set of rules or stage directions that would allow him to perform for his audience in such a manner that they would believe in his superiority. Not once in the play are Lady Macbeth and Lady Macduff put in a similar crossfire of expectations Macbeth finds himself in. No one questions femininity as it is a state of being that has nothing to lose. Were a woman reply that no, as a matter of fact I am not a woman she would just claim a higher social status. The masculine construction, however, is held together by fear and suspicion. Anyone can be outed as not quite man enough by anyone and the little power women have over men is in relation to their masculinity. Having his masculinity questioned by his wife makes Macbeth desperate to prove her doubts unfounded and Lady Macduff’s last words are used to criticise Macduff’s performance as a husband. The contradiction between the play and modern life is curious as nowadays when women are freer they have also fallen victim to the power of questioned femininity. By wearing the wrong clothes or wrong style of hair in wrong places a woman risks being asked ‘are you a woman at all’ and the role and place of a proper woman is a continuous debate that surfaces whenever stay-at-home mothers or career women are brought up. Questioning a woman’s femininity has become a weapon and women have claimed some of the previously masculine anxiety.

Even the king is not safe from this doubt, scrutiny and evaluation. Even though a king is the head of the state and a representative of God, even he does not hold the power to define what proper masculinity is. The best he can do is to try to
convince his subjects of his masculinity. The power lies in the hands of the confused and uncertain masses that constantly renegotiate the rules of masculinity. A king can try to steer public views in his preferred direction, but when he does question the established boundaries of masculinity, he always risks his own position of power as seen with the reception of James’ ideas of himself as a philosopher king. In Macbeth as in actual early modern England and in modern reality questioning someone’s gender performance is the ultimate social weapon. Accusing King James of effeminacy has the same function as internet commenters and members of parliament calling Finland’s female president a lesbian. In both cases the commenters try to undermine power by questioning gender performance. In the minds and words of the political opposition James was not masculine enough or represented the wrong type of masculinity to be credible as a head of state whereas the president of Finland was not feminine enough and had defended sexual minorities. In modern Finland, the president’s sex was not quite enough to discredit her presidency so flaws had to be found in her femininity. The true issue is political, but gender performance is an easy and powerful way to discredit authority. Where James’ affection for his male friends and companions combined with his peaceful politics made him a target of accusations of effeminacy, the president’s supposed sexual orientation made her too masculine or at least not feminine enough. Both heads of state broke some gender norm and disturbed the border between the genders which discredited their authority in some circles. Usually in the kind of circles that would have been in the political opposition anyway. This is why Macduff is prepared to hide Malcolm’s supposed promiscuity. It is the wrong kind of masculinity, but it doesn’t matter since Macduff agrees with Malcolm’s politics. He does, however, recognise the need to cover up this flaw in Malcolm’s public image. For Elizabeth the issue was reverse as she had to prove she was not held back by her sex and had to show how masculine she was. By building an image as a virgin queen she also made her status less threatening to the men as there was no fear of her seducing even more power away from them.

Gender and masculinity especially is about control. Control over self, others and society. In early modern England gender was more obviously tied to social class than it is in modern Finland, for example. The masculine code of conduct was dependent on what the man’s position and purpose in society was. Increasing social mobility blurred the boundaries within masculinity as the changing attitudes
towards emotion blurred the external boundaries of masculinity. As a result men were anxious not only about staying within the circle of manhood, but about keeping their position within that circle in relation to others too. Both anxieties are at play in Macbeth both on a personal level and on the level of society at large.

Gender roles and class are seen as necessary for the social order. In Macbeth crossing boundaries leads to chaos and order can be restored by putting everyone in their rightful social place. Aspects such as the appropriate level of emotionality can be negotiated, failing to control emotions can at worst make a man feminine, but failing to adhere to the social order can make a man inhuman. There is no single ultimate masculinity that would hold all the answers for everyone. Masculinity and its many forms are there to serve a greater good. The general ideal form of masculinity has changed throughout history and will continue to change. The preferred expression of masculinity has always reflected the needs of the times and the surrounding society. Early modern England was moving from warfare to diplomacy with the lead of James and hence masculinity, too, was to be more diplomatic, more gentlemanly and less physical. Malcolm, however, needed Macduff’s physicality and decided that violence, attack and avenging were the manly thing to do. Situations change, but whatever is the wanted or needed mode of action is always the manly thing to do. ‘Why don’t you be a man and…’ can be followed by virtually any kind of request depending on the context. Sometimes crying in public is the manly thing to do, sometimes it is apologising and sometimes it is beating up whoever insulted a woman’s honour. Therefore looking at the responses different performances get we can get a good idea of the general mood of the period or a particular situation.

Macbeth’s death and fall from the throne is symbolic of the change from Elizabeth’s warrior queen with the heart of a king to James’ diplomatic philosopher king. Warrior masculinity still has its place in the likes of Siward, but the mentality is not befitting for a king. The Macbeths and Macduffs represent two schools of masculinity and gender. There are other characters who bring colour to the varieties of gender, but the main focus is on these two couples. The Macbeths represent a dangerous blurring of boundaries. They have taken all the wrong ideas and put them together into an explosive mix and become the ‘double, double, toil and
trouble’ (4.1.10) the witches were boiling in their cauldron. They forget what proper
and honourable manliness is about, they try to abandon Lady Macbeth’s femininity
and they mix the disregard of masculine code of conduct with the appraisal of stoic
values and become cruelly selfish, disloyal and dangerous. The Macbeths both lose
sight of humanity and their roles in regards to gender and class and all that follows is
death, fear and misery. Macduffs on the other hand fit perfectly into their demanded
roles in every way. They might not gain much personal happiness from their dutiful
attitudes, but they do save the kingdom and hold on to their honour. All the misery
brought onto them is courtesy of the Macbeths anyway.

While there are various rules about appropriate social circles and
behaviour, the one thing that truly sets men and women apart in the early modern
mind is emotion. Women are supposedly wells of unpredictable emotion whereas
men are rational. The most important chapter in the guide book to proper masculinity
is how to deal with emotion. This question has remained a cornerstone of masculinity
through the centuries and is still relevant today. After the war hardened generations
our society has gone through a change and come to a point where it is no longer self-
evident that boys don’t cry. This evolution of male emotion is curiously similar to the
change experienced in Shakespeare’s time. Even among all the confusion and
seemingly chaotic gender we can still find Shakespeare’s preferred degree of
emotionality. The form of masculinity showed in the most favourable light has a
distinct Augustinian flavour. Men are to be in touch with their emotions, but not have
them overrule their reason. Macduff declares feeling manly, but only to a certain
degree. Crying incessantly is still hopelessly womanly and if a choice has to be
made, not crying at all is still preferable as demonstrated by Siward’s character.

We can conclude that among early modern nobility, admirable
masculine qualities included bravery, courage, loyalty, humility, action, moderation
and control. Natural masculinity, the core of every man, was not particularly
moderate or controlled, it was animal and dangerous if let loose and this is why the
control of it was so important. Raw masculinity was a threat to society and the
complex class structure was part of controlling that threat. Gender roles were based
on biological sex, but true manhood was only achieved through conscious action.
Gender roles and the class system were both tools for keeping human nature in
control. In other words the demands, duties and expectations were what separated a civilised society from savages. Masculinity was innate, but manhood was something that demanded time and cultivation. In Macbeth there is not one instance where a man would appeal to his masculinity as reason for failing personally or failing to abide by the rules of society. ‘I could not help myself because of my masculine nature’ would have only been a further proof of unmanliness.

Macbeth’s name could be replaced with ‘anxious masculinity’ and the play would make just as much sense. His story is masculine fear dramatized and Macbeth the anxiety personified. Macbeth is a warning example of what happens when a man gives in to his doubts and uncertainties on a personal level and the tragedy shows us the effects on a societal level. Forgetting the order of society and one’s rightful place in it leads to misery for all. The gender confusion and uncertainty in Macbeth cannot be separated from class confusion. Gender is to such an extent part of the class structure that it is impossible to single it out and look at gender independent from all the other social and societal factors. When James instructs his son in appropriate kingly behaviour, it is impossible to separate the recipient’s gender and social status. Had the son been a daughter instead or had they been peasants instead of royalty, the guidelines would have been very different. The extraordinary amount of detail put into James’ instructions proves that the guidebook is choreography for a specific role. Since there was no unified male identity James could not rely on a few sentences and general rules to guide his son on his path to proper manhood. Society expected more than a good lad who respected his mother and said please and thank you. James would have been very aware of the importance of performance and would have been anxious to see his offspring accepted as a true and rightful king. Malcolm’s list echoes the same ethos in that the graces are not man becoming, but king becoming. What anxious masculinity is afraid of then is the established social structure falling apart. In his personal life a man would be afraid of losing power, face and status while on the societal level the patriarchy would have been afraid of losing hold of the power or the masses, or at least half of the masses, protesting and questioning the social order that had so far worked so well in favour of the men.
Making the characters rattle the border fences of gender makes their restless shifting in their appointed slot in the social structure more unnerving because gender was and is seen as the most unchangeable and firmly set of all the social factors. When Lady Macbeth wants to be unsexed, witches grow beards and the rightful king wants to just sit and weep, anything is possible and all is lost. There is no androgynous agenda in *Macbeth* because Shakespeare is a product of his time and androgyny would have equalled a society free of class. There is no evidence of support for class-free society and the embracing of both female and male characteristics goes only so far. Manly feelings are still restricted and women cannot cross the line to the side of masculine without paying the price. The only relatively androgynous characters, the bearded sisters, live outside the society and bring chaos and mayhem with them. There is not much to admire or aspire for in the Weird Sisters unless one feels particularly rebellious.

I started out wanting to get a better understanding of the manly and masculine in *Macbeth* as it was so often brought up in the play and what I had read about the tragedy had mostly centred on femininity and Lady Macbeth especially. In being seen as the primary gender masculinity had almost become overlooked and foreign to me. It seemed that the assumption was that everyone knew what masculinity was and the goal was to get the women noticed. For me, however, masculinity was unknown territory and even a very current issue with frustrated voices in the public political discourse complaining about men being run over and ignored because of feminist demands. No one heard the male voices or understood the pressures men faced. Men had been forgotten. In literature masculinity had mostly come up as side effect of focusing on femininity. Studying masculinity is necessary in order to dispel misunderstandings and downright wrong claims or arguments based on a limited understanding of gender. Public discourse would often have us believe masculinity is something unchangeable, a biological quality set in stone, something natural and untameable, but this is not true as evidenced by *Macbeth*. Even if the tragedy is set a thousand years ago and was written four hundred years ago, understanding any matter starts from understanding its history. Shakespeare’s plays offer a window to another time and another way of thinking and by no means are the play’s historical curiosities known only by a few experts. The plays are alive and regularly performed all over the world and the most popular of
them can be counted as part of modern western popular culture that still shapes and reflects our views of gender whether we realise it or not. ‘Boys don’t cry’, ‘boys are boys’ and ‘I am only a man’ are platitudes and excuses that can be seen in a new light just by looking at historical records of what has been deemed manly in earlier times and in different cultures. The true androgynous agenda is in the hands of those who study gender. When gender, masculinity and femininity are shown as changeable cultural fabrications, we might start to look at the individuals behind the gender roles. What I understand by androgyny, though, is not complete dismissal, disappearance and blending of femininity and masculinity, but the understanding that gender cannot be used as an excuse. The ideal would be a situation where the individual is not subjected to gendered prejudice and each and every person and character could be evaluated on the grounds of their true potential. Feminine and masculine both ought to be embraced without stigmatising the other, both are valuable and it is up to the individual to which degree they feel comfortable expressing these. Even though some aspects of our lives are tied to the biological sex we are born into, the ideally androgynous situation would be one where an individual could feel comfortable expressing or not expressing emotion, nurturing or not nurturing without feeling obligated to or stigmatised for it because of their gender. In such an utopian situation neither masculinity nor femininity would need to be anxious.
Works Cited


