

THE CONCEPT OF FEMININITY IN DAVENANT'S
*MACBETH**Eva Bilská***Abstract**

This paper concentrates on the concept of femininity in Davenant's adaptation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, which premiered in 1664 and was first printed in 1674. It takes into consideration the cult of celebrity that became characteristic for the Restoration theatre, as well as the philosophical context of the period. Analysing both the Macduffs' and the Macbeths' marriages by using the soul-body metaphor, it seeks to interpret the relationship dynamics and the roles within. Considering social and gender expectations in Restoration England, the paper further discusses the way in which the spectacle and the soul-body metaphor helped to shape the leading female characters' femininity.

Keywords

Restoration theatre, *Macbeth*, William Davenant, soul and body, femininity, early modern actresses, cult of celebrity, spectacle

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DESIGNED to attract and captivate the audience, the spectacle of Restoration theatre productions offered not only music and dancing, but also sophisticated staging. Complex stage machinery and scenery ensured a flux of theatregoers, as well as steady income for theatre companies. With the first actresses officially on the stage, a new theatre culture emerged, in which the character of an actress became just as important as the role that she portrayed. Given the growing power of spectatorship, adapting Shakespeare's *Macbeth* thus meant catering to an audience with different tastes and heightened awareness of performers' private lives.¹ William Davenant's version of the play therefore offered characters that would suit these new expectations. At the same time, however, this adaptation also became a medium both supporting and challenging Restoration notions of femininity. The leading female

¹ For more on the interest of the audience in performers' private lives, see, for instance, King 1992, 85–86, or Eisaman Maus 1979, 599, who both see it as an impetus for Restoration dramatists to write their plays with particular actors and actresses in mind.

figures of the play, Lady Macbeth and Lady Macduff, may therefore be seen as characters whose femininity is influenced by various cultural and intellectual phenomena including the phenomenon of celebrity, the nature of the spectacle, as well as philosophical background and social expectations.

Staged for the first time in 1664 at Lincoln's Inn Fields and praised by Samuel Pepys in 1667 for its spectacular witches (Pepys 1667, 7), the play was seeking support for the newly restored monarchy by equalling Macbeth with Cromwell (Kroll 1990, 855). Malcolm's concluding wish to have the tyrant's dead body hanged on a tree (5.2.17–20), a symbol of kingship, must have corresponded in the minds of the Restoration audience with the digging up of Cromwell's corpse in 1660 and his subsequent hanging at Tyburn (Kroll 1990, 855). However, while this political message was an outcome of a pursued agenda, it was rather due to artistic than political ambition that the play earned its popularity.

Captivating the audience with an impressive spectacle that offered not only music and dances, but also such sophisticated tricks as flying witches, the production of *Macbeth* helped the Duke's Company to establish itself and to increase its popularity (Greenfield 2013, 39). The Restoration theatre, however, opened the door not only to new technical possibilities. This new chapter in the history of English theatre brought with it also a new perception of actors and actresses.

The Restoration audience that came to see plays and mingle with others did not come to see only the characters on the stage. Neither did their appreciation go out to actors for their impersonations, but rather for how well these actors managed to combine the given character with their own personality. Actors, and actresses in particular, were praised for how well they *animated* the character, not for how well they *embodied* it, as it was rather self-expression than true acting abilities that became appreciated (Eisaman Maus 1979, 599).

This self-expression therefore determined the success of an actress in the eyes of her audience as well as inspiring the doubling of bodies and performances: there existed a performance of a character and, simultaneously, an actress's self-expression of the character (King 1992, 78–81). Consequently, two bodies of female actresses could be perceived at the same time: the real and the fictional (King 1992, 78–81). As both were taken into consideration by the audience, dramatic tension appeared which gave rise to cults of celebrity surrounding female actresses (Eisaman Maus 1979, 599). Discussing William Chatwood's *A General History of the Stage*, first printed in 1749, Katharine Eisaman Maus points out how the choice of an actress shaped the response of an audience to the play:

Ann Bracegirdle, who resisted the advances of enamored aristocrats throughout her career . . . was applauded when, as Cordelia in the revised *Lear*, she described herself as “Arm’d in my Virgin Innocence” although the promiscuous Mrs Barry, “in the same part, more fam’d for her Stage Performance than the other, at the words, *Virgin Innocence*, has created a Horse-laugh . . . and the scene of generous Pity and Compassion at the close turn’d to Ridicule.” (Eisaman Maus 1979, 599)

Perceived at the same instant, the actresses’ two bodies simultaneously generated two interpretations that either supported each other – and, consequently, earned applause and admiration from the audience – or contradicted each other and elicited only jeers and laughter.

This preoccupation with private lives inevitably sparked the interest in the actresses’ lower-class status: William Oldys’s *Biographical Dictionary of Actors* published later in the eighteenth century stresses the low origin of the first famous actresses; likewise, it does not forget to mention the belief that Nell Gwyn’s mother was a brothelkeeper in Drury Lane (King 1992, 85). The first Restoration actresses therefore had to face an audience that tended to equal their low-born status with sexual availability, a tendency that inspired unmasking scenes, whose object was to strip an actress of her theatre character, to expose her as a sexual object and thus present her as more approachable and available than the character she epitomized (King 1992, 86).

Yet, despite having their low-born origin exposed, actresses, and particularly the famous ones, became the only group of females able to negotiate for themselves a publicly acknowledged status that ensured them a certain independence, as Eisaman Maus points out:

The employment of actresses does not, however, coincide with a more general broadening of female participation in public life. In fact, during the second half of the seventeenth century women seem to have been losing rather than acquiring opportunities for gainful employment. Men were encroaching upon such traditionally female occupations as brewing, textile manufacture, dressmaking, and midwifery. Women were less and less likely to run businesses or enter trades independently of their husbands[.] (Eisaman Maus 1979, 600)

With many female occupations in decline, the rising celebrity cult enabling actresses to enjoy a publicly accepted social standing can therefore be interpreted as one of the available means by which the perception of femininity could have

been influenced. With missing a clear-cut distinction between fiction and reality, the portrayal of femininity on the Restoration stage did not reflect, but either explicitly or implicitly shaped, challenged and contested the general perception of this theme.

Although re-working an already existing play, Davenant's adaptation can be read as a reaction to this tension surrounding female characters that began to characterize the theatre culture. The popularity of Jane Long may thus well have been the reason why Lady Macduff became such a prominent character (Greenfield 2013, 45), while the wish to have a real couple in leading roles may have been the reason for casting Mary Saunderson Betterton as Lady Macbeth alongside her husband in the role of Macbeth. Inheriting from Shakespeare the strong and remorseless Lady Macbeth and the innocent Lady Macduff, Davenant extended their roles by elaborating on their relationship with their husbands.

However, although fictitious, neither the Macbeths' nor the Macduffs' relationship is unreal by seventeenth-century standards. Using evidence from diaries – such as the preacher Henry Newcome's or the high-ranking gentlewoman Lady Grace Mildmay's – Keith Wrightson comments on the emergence of strong personal relationships:

The picture which emerges indicates the *private* existence of a strong complementary and companionate ethos, side by side with, and often overshadowing, theoretical adherence to the doctrine of male authority and *public* female subordination. (Wrightson 1998, 92)

The “strong complementary and companionate ethos” characterizes both fictitious couples and reveals how much the hidden private aspect of a relationship and a need for the publicly acceptable presentation of femininity correlate.

Contrasting the Macbeths and the Macduffs with one another, Davenant presents his characters as couples with a strong private streak that would not have been unknown to his audience. Furthermore, Davenant intensifies the couples' marriages by giving each husband the lines that betray how much they rely on their wives for their well-being. The instance when Macbeth is sick because his wife is ill – “I am sick in her, and my Kingdom too” (4.1.272) – or the moment when Macduff advocates the murder of Macbeth by relying on the moral character of his wife – “Though Sickly in my self, yet Well in you” (3.1.184) – are both examples of mutual dependence that transgresses the borders of individuality. The wives' purity and spiritual health correlate directly with the husbands' moral integrity and strength.

Compared to Shakespeare, Davenant was criticized for stripping the play of his predecessor's great poetry without substituting it with anything substantial (Spencer

1925, 643). However, this mutual dependency between the wife's purity and the husband's health tends to suggest otherwise. Just as the strong private aspect characterizing the stage relationships can be seen as the result of the growing social changes in the way relationships began to be understood, so, too, could this conspicuous soulful connection be interpreted in the light of philosophical and religious ideas existing at that time. Understanding it metaphorically, this theme of the soul-body connection could be expected to influence the theatrical concept of femininity and the existing cult of celebrity presented in the play, and to either challenge or support these. The femininity of Davenant's female characters in *Macbeth* can thus be seen as a construct comprised of remnants of former Renaissance characters on the one hand and the revived interest in soul-body philosophy on the other, both of which became reshaped by the Restoration theatre culture and the phenomenon of celebrity that brought actresses independence.

Historically speaking, the soulful connection, characteristic of the married couples in Davenant's *Macbeth*, is the result of a long philosophical tradition that goes back to the Greeks. Reacting to Plato, Aristotle proposed a concept in which the soul became married to the body because it was only through the vehicle of body that it could realize its potential (Porter 2003, 32). This soul-body dualism then found its place in Christianity, particularly in the story of Adam and Eve, in which Eve was assigned the role of tempting flesh that could seduce the soul – represented by Adam – into sin (Osmond 1974, 285–86). Throughout the Middle Ages, this concept underwent numerous transformations. For Thomas Aquinas, for instance, the body was an instrument, while for Christian Platonists, it became the soul's dungeon (Porter 2003, 37). The same variety was apparent in the use of metaphors: while the soul was usually masculine because it referred to the biblical Adam and through him to reason, it was also occasionally described as a woman, particularly when a visual description was offered, such as in the medieval work *De Querimonia et Conflictu Carnis et Spiritus seu Animae*, attributed to Hildebert of Lavardin, where the soul is described as a woman in mourning (Osmond 1974, 284–85).

The seventeenth century continued this theme and expounded this inherited philosophical tradition, as can be seen in the letter (1663) by Sir Kenelm Digby, an English courtier and diplomat, where the soul stands for guidance: "And as the Feminine Sex is imperfect and receiveth perfection from the Masculine; so doth the Body from the Soul" (quoted in Osmond 1974, 288). Andrew Marvell's poem "A Dialogue between the Soul and the Body," written in the 1650s, echoes the idea of a body as the soul's dungeon: "O who shall from this Dungeon, raise / A Soul inslav'd so many wayes?" (quoted in Porter 2003, 40). While it may be no surprise

that the soul-body theme suited the artistically austere period of the Interregnum (Osmond 1974, 371), it may come more of a surprise that the interest continued well after the ascension of Charles II. Research conducted independently by Rosalie Osmond and Roy Porter demonstrates that, although the prevailing tone became philosophical rather than pious, “the ‘body and soul’ pairing remained as pervasive as ever” and that “[o]f all the metaphorical analogues . . . the most popular and explosive [pairing] was that of husband and wife” (Porter 2003, 41).

With this prevalent husband-wife analogy used metaphorically to describe the soul-body relationship, Davenant had at his disposal a tool that was both philosophical and poetic. His treatment of the theme is artistic and therefore bound up with the plot and the characters. Since the artistic way enables all the possible combinations to be brought out, and not just the most basic one in which the soul is masculine and stands for the husband and the rational, while the body is feminine and stands for the wife and temptation, subtle differences can be identified in the marriages of both Lady Macduff and Lady Macbeth when the soul-body philosophy is applied. As the religious discourse of the seventeenth century presented the soul as both masculine and feminine, two different types of femininity become more distinct when the dialogues of both couples are analysed with these analogies in mind.

Lady Macduff's deep soul connection with her husband could thus be read in the light of an analogy suggested, for instance, by James Howell's dialogue *The Vision: or A Dialog between the Soul and the Bodie* (1651), in which the soul resembles a veiled nun – a feminine figure:

At last I found it was my Soul which useth to make sollices in time of sleep . . . Afterwards, the fantasma varying, she took a shape, and the nearest resemblance I could make of it was to a veild Nunn with a flaming cross on the left side of her breast. (quoted in Osmond 1974, 287)

In this dialogue, the soul is a woman governing and leading the body which is presented here as a man. The character of Lady Macduff seems to function in a similar way. Meeting the witches in Act 2, Scene 1 (306–404), she proves mentally and spiritually stronger than her husband who becomes courageous only after she has refused to submit to fear: “Am I made bold by her? how strong a guard / Is innocence?” (2.1.382–383). Howell's image of the soul as an innocent nun seems to correspond well with Lady Macduff's spiritual innocence that gives her moral strength to support her husband and steer him onto the right path.

She thus repeatedly takes on the role of a motivator who leads her husband away from an unjust and undue course of action. Her opposition to her husband's plan to kill Macbeth generates a discussion on tyranny (3.1.132–200), out of which she tends to emerge again as the metaphorical soul guiding the metaphorical body (her husband). In the extract from Howell's dialogue quoted above, the soul is a woman, as distinct from the classic analogy, where the soul is equalled with masculinity, rationality and the biblical Adam. Representing the rational, Lady Macduff's supposed soul's masculinity bonds well with her courage and leadership.

Although her conspicuously virtuous character seems to foreshadow the theme of virtuous heroine in distress, her innocence is not of a suffering kind. Famous for her stage fighting and tavern scenes, Jane Long, who performed Lady Macduff, became famous, as Anne Greenfield points out, for her portrayal of "bold, comedic, conspiring, and at times sexually-explicit heroines, and after 1667 . . . for her sexy breeches roles" (Greenfield 2013, 45). Although there is no contemporary witness account about Long's performance of Lady Macduff, the actress's vivacious character that earned her roles of sexually bold heroines might suggest how the (on paper) submissive role could have been shaped on the stage (Greenfield 2013, 45). If actresses were to animate the performed character, not to embody it, then Long's Lady Macduff would not have been a submissive wife, a gentle advisor appealing to her husband's moral integrity, but a lively and decisive companion. Standing for the soul and the rational, Lady Macduff's femininity thus goes against the general notion of female subordination.

If boldness was the hallmark of Jane Long's performance, then Mary Saunderson Betterton's personal perseverance and capability could have well enriched her portrayal of Lady Macbeth also. Becoming one of the only two female shareholders of the Lincoln's Inn Fields Company in 1695 (the second was her stepdaughter Ann Bracegirdle – Eisaman Maus 1979, 600), Betterton was also one of the few actresses who managed to keep her life private and gossip free. Yet, while avoiding attention from the audience that relished hearing about actors' private lives, her appearance next to her husband, Thomas Betterton, who played Macbeth, must have been intentional. The real and the fictional couples overlapped, and the audience was invited to make the connection.

Furthermore, as the play continued to be performed, a rather slightly ironic interpretation may have been made by the audience in the case of Mrs Betterton, who later in her life began to teach acting not only to young actresses, but also to the Royal daughters to whom she became a mentor and voice coach. As she taught acting in her real life, some of her lines in *Macbeth* must have become particularly powerful for those in the audience who did not fail to make the connection

when she as Lady Macbeth instructed her husband to “Let your looks be clear, / Your change of Count’nance does betoken fear” (1.1.433–34), or when she advised him to “Look like the innocent flower, / But be the serpent under’t” (1.1.427–28). That she indeed played the role in an intense powerful way well into her advanced years may be seen from the praise her performance received by Colley Cibber in his memoir *Apology for the Life of Colley Cibber*:

Mrs. *Betterton*, tho’ far advanc’d in Years, was so great a Mistress of Nature, that even Mrs. *Barry*, who acted Lady *Macbeth* after her, could not in that Part, with all her superior Strength, and Melody of Voice, throw out those quick and careless Strokes of Terror, from the Disorder of a guilty Mind, which the other gave us with a Facility in her Manner that render’d them at once tremendous and delightful. (Cibber 1740, 134)

Together with her husband, who performed the part of Macbeth until the end of his career (Spencer 1925, 622), she thus created a couple that was characterized by intensity.

In Davenant’s version of the play, the strong bond between the Macbeths is illustrated by the fact that they are both plagued by ghosts (Macbeth by Banquo’s, his wife by Duncan’s), as well as the fact that they share their feelings and plans long after the murder is committed. Lady Macbeth becomes unambiguously informed about both Banquo’s death and the intended murder of Macduff because she remains Macbeth’s confidant: “He and *Banquo* must embrace the same fate” (3.1.405). The Macbeths have no children. Instead, they have a goal that turns them into business partners. As neither of them happens to be satisfied and comfortable in the given role, blame is constantly shifted. Macbeth accuses his wife of blowing his “Ambition up into a Flame” (4.1.322), while she reproaches him, “You were a Man. / And by the Charter of your Sex you shou’d / Have govern’d me, there was more crime in you / When you obey’d my Councils, then I contracted / By my giving it” (4.1.324–328). While Lady Macbeth’s reproachful lines may be calling for individual responsibility, her speech can also be interpreted metaphorically with the help of the soul-body analogy.

Rather common among the religious texts, this metaphor appears, for instance, in Nicholas Mosley’s *Natural and Divine Contemplations of the Passions and Faculties of the Soul of Man* (1653), where the body is presented as a wife that is to be married to the soul – a husband. The body is described here as an adorned bride, while the wedding itself is the day of her Resurrection:

Even such is the inward grace and outward Magnificence, Pomp and State of the body in the morning of her Resurrection and Ascension from the Chamber of death, to be Espoused again to the Soul in an everlasting Wedlock. (quoted in Osmond 1974, 289)

Because it was expected of the soul to govern the body just as the husband governs his wife, problems could be expected when it turned the other way round, as Jeremy Taylor argues in his sermon *The Marriage Ring*:

The dominion of a Man over his Wife is no other than as the soul rules the body . . . the soul and body make a perfect man, when the soul commands wisely, or rules lovingly. . . . But if the body shall give lawes, and by the violence of the appetites first abuse the understanding, and then possesse the superior portion of the will and choice, the body and soul are not apt company, and the man is a fool and miserable. (quoted in Osmond 1974, 283)

The relationship of the Macbeths can be interpreted by using this metaphor because allusions to both the body and the soul appear in the text. After reading her letter, Lady Macbeth asks spirits to transform her body, while Duncan's murder makes Macbeth complain, "For *Banquo*'s issue, I have stain'd my soul" (3.1.60). These ideas are taken over from Shakespeare's original play, but their meaning alters when Lady Macbeth accuses her husband of not governing her. Her accusations intensify the soul-body distinction and highlight the marriage analogy.

Her wish to be controlled and dominated is, however, not so much an expression of desired submission, as of a desire to be held in check by reason. Because Davenant omits the lines in which Lady Macbeth abuses love as an argument for murder, leaving out her exertion, "From this time / such I account thy love" (Shakespeare 1.7.39–40), the appetite for power which Lady Macbeth stands for does not become tainted by emotion. It remains solely within the physical sphere. As assertiveness and ambition are generally understood as masculine traits, Lady Macbeth is also a subject to the process by which these masculine traits begin to define her female body.

While it could at first glance seem that ambition would deprive Lady Macbeth of her femininity, the opposite is true. As the conversations and disputes with her husband reveal, she remains feminine throughout the play. Just like the biblical Eve, she poses as a seductress and represents the body – the weak flesh endangering and seducing the soul, her husband, to an unreasonable act of murder. She remains feminine even when she proves ambitious and assertive because the act of murder turns these masculine traits into weakness associated with the feminine body.

The surreptitious killing of Duncan and an open fight in a war are the complete opposite. When Lady Macbeth argues, “Can you fear / To be the same in your own act and valour, / As in desire you are?” (1.1.510–12), she abuses the concept of valour turning assertiveness into cowardice, a positive trait into a negative one. Even though she denounces her femininity (1.1.396–412) and considers herself more masculine than her husband whom she perceives as “too effeminate” (1.1.384), it is her who stands for the body and weakness associated with it because the act of murder she proposes transforms assertiveness and courage into cowardice.

When the soul-body philosophy is taken into consideration, the dialogues in Davenant's *Macbeth* tend to question, if not even subvert, the strict division between the feminine and the masculine. While Lady Macduff could seem very feminine because of her submissiveness, innocence and virtue, she is, in fact, rather masculine because she stands for the guiding soul/reason/masculinity. Similarly, Lady Macbeth is very feminine although her ambitious, even ruthless, behaviour could suggest otherwise.

The choice of the actresses and the fashioning of the characters support this interpretation. Jane Long as Lady Macduff most likely enhanced the suggested masculinity while Mary Saunderson Betterton probably imbued her Lady Macbeth with the similar intensity and ambition that she may have shown when teaching acting or working as a voice coach for Royalty. Therefore, even though the leading female characters also function as their husbands' conscience (Lady Macbeth) and moral support (Lady Macduff), the Restoration fashioning turned them into much more complex characters that the audience could have enjoyed interpreting. Particularly as Davenant's production employed the spectacle to demonstrate the difference between the powers of reason and unreason.

While it is possible to interpret Lady Macduffs' moral strength as overconfidence in her own virtue leading to her politically imprudent behaviour and eventually also her death (Miller 2008, 872–73), her boldness becomes striking when taken in the context of the spectacle in Act II. Although characterized by music and singing, the scene is more than a spectacle of magic since it follows the rules of the Restoration aesthetics which considered music suitable only for the supernatural scenes (Plank 1990, 395). Perceived as a means by which the irrational and the supernatural could be made comprehensible, music rather suited the scenes with witches and other supernatural creatures whose existence was taken with a pinch of salt (Plank 1990, 395).

Given the status of music that appears in this scene, the encounter between the Macduffs' and the witches can be interpreted as the meeting between the rational and the irrational (with the magic and supernatural representing irrationality). Performed by male actors (Plank 1990, 398–99), the witches highlight an unusual

division of male-female characteristics. Contrary to the period expectations, irrationality and unreason are in this scene represented by male figures: the witches and, to a certain extent, also by Macduff who can overcome his irrational fears only with the help of his wife.

This scene does not contain the traditional male superiority, as championed by George Savile in his *The Lady's New-Year Gift, or, Advice to a Daughter* (1688):

We are made of differing *Tempers*, that our *Defects* might be mutually supplied: Your *Sex* wanteth our *Reason* for your *Conduct*, and our *Strength* for your *Protection*: *Ours* wanteth your *Gentleness* to soften, and to entertain us. (Savile 1688, 27)

On the contrary, the Macduffs co-operate and rely on each other, but both reason and strength are expressions of innocence and virtue – attributes of Lady Macduff, not of her husband. Despite appealing to her femininity when her husband is to depart for England (3.1.440–441), her courage on the heath and in her imperatives, such as “May you be never by Ambition led: / Forbid it Heav’n, that in revenge you shou’d / Follow a Copy that is writ in blood” (3.1.138–40), tend to confirm her masculinity.

Davenant himself, as the author of this Restoration version, goes against the notion of gentleness and subordination as solely feminine qualities. Not only because he gave Lady Macduff to actress Jane Long, whose acting career rested on strong, active female roles, and polarized her against irrational male witches that serve as a foil for her strong femininity, but because he supported this notion of strong femininity by the underlying soul-body philosophy. Lady Macduff is, contrary to general expectations, the embodiment of the rational soul which protects her husband from doing wrong. Lady Macbeth, on the other hand, although also guiding her husband, proves to be a bad influence because ambition, which seems to be of masculine quality, is, in the context of the soul-body philosophy, a sign of weakness when promoted by a wife. Lady Macbeth thus symbolizes the body that needs to be guided by the soul, but her femininity can also be understood as an expression of anxieties surrounding the social position of women in Restoration England. As diaries and advice books testify, women were expected to remain subordinate since they were perceived as wanting reason and guidance. Lady Macbeth, unlike Lady Macduff, can be seen as an example confirming these general expectations. The audience could therefore enjoy a special dramatic tension that was born from the cult of celebrity as the reputation of Mary Saunderson Betterton as that of a capable businesswoman coincided with the business-like character

of the infamous Lady Macbeth, whose venture confirmed the anxieties held about incapable women that Betterton as an actress proved false. Davenant's *Macbeth* thus reveals ambiguous concepts of femininity all of which were extant in Restoration England but could be presented only on the stage.

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Eva Bilská is a PhD. student in the English Literature Section at the Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures at Charles University in Prague. Her research focuses on politics in Shakespeare's plays.

Contact: eva.bilska@ff.cuni.cz



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