

«Unsex Me Here»: Bodies and Femininity in the Performance History of Lady Macbeth by *Chelsea Phillips*

Abstract

Jenijoy La Belle argued that Lady Macbeth's "unsex me here" speech expresses Lady Macbeth's desire to be made more masculine through amenorrhea. This amenorrhea enables Duncan's murder, but leaves her barren. La Belle's essay is predicated on Lady Macbeth's female and initially fertile body, which is rendered barren by her actions in the first act.

This paper considers alternative readings of Lady Macbeth's femininity and amenorrhea codified by two historical bodies: the male body of Shakespeare's original actor and the pregnant body of Sarah Siddons in 1785 and 1794. In the original performance, the boy actor seeks an amenorrhea that, like his inability to bear children, already, and always, exists. Siddons' Lady Macbeth likewise requests an existing amenorrhea, but one which is a symptom of a pregnancy, not barrenness. The original boy actor's body contains no potential for maternity; Siddons' pregnant body, in contrast, is visibly fertile, offering the possibility of dynastic continuance for Macbeth.

A barren Lady Macbeth denies the possibility of dynasty through amenorrhea; a pregnant Lady Macbeth's amenorrhea reinforces her fertility.

Introduction

Lady Macbeth's femininity, perhaps more than any other female character in Shakespeare's works, is a site of contest in scholarship, categorized as corrupted, fraught, inescapable, and unnatural¹. Her infanticidal language, willingness to promote (and to a degree perpetuate) violence in the service of ambition, and manipulation of her husband, open the character to alignment with some of the worst stereotypes of both masculinity and femininity: violence, ambition, lack of compassion, manipulation, seduction, and ruination. Such ambivalence of gendered activity coincides with Lady Macbeth's desire to be "unsexed" by supernatural powers. Howsoever an actor chooses to emphasize "masculine" or "feminine" behavior in her or his interpretation of the role, the body of the actor playing the character can drastically impact the audience's perception of Lady Macbeth's unsexing.

Stressing the tension between text and performance, Ellen Donkin writes, «Performance and text constitute two distinct sets of signs that are more or less equally weighted in the way an audience assigns them importance. The text of a play [...] is not privileged as “truer” than the actions of actors on stage or any other component of production»². These “other” components of production traditionally include costume, make-up, mask, props, set, music, sound, lighting, and special effects, but can and should also include the body of the actor. We can speak of Lady Macbeth as though she is a tangible and immutable character, but in performance we must wrangle with the reality of a real body through which the character appears.

I am interested in recovering the place of actors’ bodies in historical performance, particularly in moments when the bodies of the actor and character, the image and the text, conflict³. In this paper, I wish to focus on the fraught femininity of Lady Macbeth, and the ways in which the bodies of two actors from the historical archive give us a tangible place from which to reconsider this femininity. I am specifically interested in one moment and two bodies. The moment is Lady Macbeth’s request for “unsexing” in act one, scene five of *Macbeth*; the bodies are those of Shakespeare’s original Lady Macbeth actor, a boy c. 1606, and the pregnant body of Sarah Siddons as Lady Macbeth at the end of the eighteenth century. I will examine alternative readings of Lady Macbeth’s femininity as codified by these historical performances. In doing so, I am leaving many paths unexplored, but I wish to focus, for now, on the extremes to which each of these bodies might prompt our reading of Lady Macbeth’s femininity and request for “unsexing”.

First, however, what is the feminine? The “feminine” in relation to the body is composed of outward, culturally recognized signs, including but not limited to breasts, the vagina, menstruation, and pregnancy, and clothing that variously covers and reveals the same. More generally, the term denotes anything which is (stereo)typically described as being inherent or appropriate to women and girls and has therefore often been associated with weakness, passivity, submission, decoration, beauty, softness, and so forth. In Shakespeare’s words, for example, tears are often “womanish” and Macbeth’s hesitance to kill Duncan puts his masculinity into question. In Romance languages “feminine” describes gendered language, often, though not always, drawing on the associations above. In poetic meter, an extra unstressed syllable at the end of a metrical line, an effluvia, is called a “feminine ending”. In the physiological theory of bodily humours, the female body, like the “feminine” metrical ending, refuses to be regimented and contained, it is “leaky”; it contains too much, issues forth too much. This is due to a perpetual imbalance in the humours of the female body, which necessitates menstruation. When pregnant, however, this same blood nourishes the child in the womb. After birth, the body converts the excess blood into breast milk⁴. Feminine, then, continually implies both the stereotypes of weakness, decoration, and passivity, as well as an unruliness, a fullness, an excess.

Jenijoy La Belle has examined Lady Macbeth's «unsex me here» speech through the lens of the physical body. In this speech, La Belle argues, Lady Macbeth expresses her desire to be made more masculine through amenorrhea, and this argument is based on the character body of Lady Macbeth: female but not visibly fertile, which is typically also the kind of body seen in contemporary performance. Specifically, La Belle pinpoints Lady Macbeth's desire for amenorrhea as illustrative of a desire to «[move] away from the female» both psychologically and biologically. Using contemporaneous medical texts, she specifies the biological processes working in the speech: «visitations of nature» refer to menstruation, the «passage to remorse» references a belief in the connection between a woman's womb and her heart; and trading her wholesome milk for gall both parodies and denies maternal nurture. Amenorrhea and the loss of wholesome milk also rid her of the feminine leakiness, the humoural excess, of which menstruation and breast milk are exterior signs. Lady Macbeth therefore renders herself barren by asking for a stoppage of her menstruation, and guarantees a «fruitless crown» for the Macbeths. This unnatural state also leads to her madness, as she suffers many of the presumed side effects of amenorrhea in 16th and 17th century medical texts, such as fainting, melancholy, fear, and sleeplessness⁵.

When considering the historical bodies of the original boy actor and of a gravid Sarah Siddons in performance, this moment of unsexing, of what La Belle categorizes as a rejection of the female, offers two divergent readings of Lady Macbeth's body and femininity. In the original performance, the boy actor seeks an amenorrhea that already, and always, exists. Siddons' Lady Macbeth likewise requests an existing amenorrhea, but one which is a symptom of pregnancy, not barrenness. The original boy actor's body contains no potential for maternity; his barrenness and his masculinity (or masculine femininity) are pre-existing and inevitable. Siddons' pregnant body, in contrast, is hyper-feminine and visibly fertile, the fullness or excess of her femininity offering the possibility of dynastic continuance for Macbeth.

When Lady Macbeth requests “unsexing”, the separation between actor body and character body becomes particularly thin. Her speech focuses audience attention intensely on the body (woman's breasts, the “sex” that is being unsexed, crown to toe, blood, access and passages) of the character, which is seen as, on top of, within, or through the body of the actor. When the Lady Macbeth actor's body (the image) comes into conflict with that of the character (the text), then, a series of new readings become available. I will argue that the boy actor's body has the effect of abstracting much of the imagery in the “unsexing” speech and relies on the audience to imagine it as concrete. Siddons' visibly pregnant body, in contrast, provides such abstractions a local habitation (and a name): her body contains the possibility for a loss (of fetus, blood, milk and gall) that is only imagined for the boy actor.

«Nothing but males»

The first actor to embody Lady Macbeth is lost to history. If we try to imagine him, we see only a nameless, faceless boy actor, between the ages of 14 and 22, whom the company trained to perform female roles. He likely worked closely, and possibly lived, with the actor playing Macbeth, and this part was probably one of many he performed for the King's Men over a number of years before either leaving or becoming an adult member of the company⁶. Almost the only thing we can be sure of about this actor is that he was not female, but that he performed Lady Macbeth as a female character. Taking the gender and youth of the actor as factors through which we read or see the character, what might we say Lady Macbeth's most famous speech?

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 compunctious 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,
Wherever in your sightless substances
You wait on nature's mischief... (1.5)

On the page, in the mind of the reader, who knows that Lady Macbeth is a woman, “unsexing” implies a stripping away of femininity (codified by «woman's breasts» and «visitings of nature») presumably with the intention of making the subject more masculine. When the original performance is considered, however, there are two bodies on stage asking to be “unsexed” simultaneously: the character's body, a female body, and the actor's body, a male body.

The female character's body enables La Belle's reading of Lady Macbeth's amenorrhea: this character is a healthy, fertile woman until she asks for supernatural intervention into the normal workings of her body; indeed, we are given no textual evidence otherwise, particularly if the youth of the body is considered. The male actor's body, which quite literally underlies that of the female character, offers something else to our interpretation. A male body is incapable of (or always/already in a state of) amenorrhea. Technically, and biologically, it is correct to say that a male cannot lack or suffer the cessation of something that did not first exist, but when a male body performs a female role, femininity (or at least female-ness) is enacted/projected onto that body. We accept the blushes and shrill voice Orsino applies to the disguised Viola, we accept that Iachimo sees Imogen's (female) breast in *Cymbeline*. When the male actor asks for amenorrhea, we accept that he also has the menstrea-

tion necessary for the lack thereof. When he invites the spirits to come to his woman's breasts and take his milk for gall, we allow this as well, though both the breasts and the milk are abstract, metaphoric symbols and do not literally exist within the body of the male actor. The femininity of Lady Macbeth is activated in this speech to remind the viewer of the character's gender (which should be projected onto the male body), while that gender is simultaneously being denied by the character's request for unsexing – the female character, in unsexing herself, moves closer to the body of the male actor. The young male actor, who is already “unsexed” in that he is embodying a female character, in turn moves closer to the body of his character.

The “unsexing” of the male actor also has implications for the body's permeability. In Joanna Levin's *Lady Macbeth and the Daemonologie of Hysteria*, the author points out that women were associated with witchcraft in part because their feminine, leaky, unregulated bodies were considered more susceptible to supernatural invasion and influence⁷. In this sense, then, the male body requesting to be unsexed is asking to be made more open, more penetrable, so that he might be filled with, and become a nurse to, inhuman forces. The woman's breasts filled with gall are a parody of the nursing mother, granting to the male body the exterior shows of femininity he lacks, and suggesting that the male body must become less male to perform an act of cruelty.

Read together, these diametrically opposed bodies, each asking to be stripped of their sex, move closer to each other, toward the goal of melding the body of the actor and the body of the character. This actor/character melding is both productive and dangerous, as it focuses audience attention on the elements of the actor's body that underlie and belie the gender of the character, even while simultaneously evoking the image of what is lacking to compensate.

«Woman's breasts»: Sarah Siddons

The body of the male actor contains no potential for biological procreation with the (male) Macbeth actor/character. Macbeth's “scepter” is already barren, long before he hears the witches' prophecy. There is no hope for dynasty. La Belle's assertion that «unsex me here» signals Lady Macbeth's sacrifice of her procreative potential for demonic power, however, only works when separating the character's body from its initial enactor. In the body of the male actor, his sacrifice, like his femininity, is superficial.

When Sarah Siddons (1755-1831) took London by storm in 1782, women had been on the professional stage in Britain for over one hundred and twenty years. She was twenty-seven, and played Lady Macbeth for the first time in London just short of her thirtieth birthday; she continued to play it until her sixtieth. Unlike the sexless (or dual-sexed) boy actor, Siddons presented an unambiguously female Lady Macbeth, particularly when she performed the role while visibly pregnant in 1785 and again in 1794.

Theatrical history considers Sarah Siddons the greatest tragic actress of her time, and Lady Macbeth was arguably her iconic role. James Boaden claimed, «The character of Lady Macbeth became a sort of exclusive possession to Mrs. Siddons. There was a mystery about it, which she alone seemed to have penetrated»⁸. Thomas Campbell reported, «The moment she seized the part [Lady Macbeth], she identified her image with it in the minds of the living generation»⁹. She was an imposing figure, both physically and vocally. Laura Rosenthal argues that her powerful onstage presence earned her the epithet “sublime”, a term usually applied only to male artists and performers¹⁰. Balancing this forceful, perhaps masculine, stage presence was Siddons’ beauty, her reputation as a devoted wife and mother offstage, and her frequent appearances on stage in the visible stages of pregnancy, «an unambiguous signifier of the feminine»¹¹. If the original boy actor of Lady Macbeth was a male with something of the feminine about him (enacted or innate), Sarah Siddons was most certainly female with something of the masculine about her.

Between 1774 and 1794 Siddons gave birth to seven living children, and her last two children, George (b. 1785) and Cecilia (b. 1794), were born during the height of her career in London. She performed Lady Macbeth during the late stages of both pregnancies¹². In both seasons when Siddons played the role during pregnancy, audiences were well aware of her condition; her 1785 pregnancy was watched with avid interest, the papers reporting on when she would leave the stage, and which parts she would play before and after the birth. One reporter, in 1794, wrote of the pregnancy as though it were just another of Siddons’ performances: «Mrs. Siddons performs only a few nights when she retires to act the maternal character upon a *private* Theatre»¹³. Whether or not Siddons “did” anything with her pregnancy to make it part of her performance, the fact that her body was there meant that it, unavoidably, was part of the performance. In April of 1794, while Siddons’ was performing Lady Macbeth during the last trimester of her final pregnancy, her friend Hester Piozzi wrote to a friend, «Mrs Siddons is very Big but looks beautifully on the stage»¹⁴.

If we seriously consider this historical body, as we have that of the boy actor, an entirely different interpretation of Lady Macbeth’s femininity emerges. Siddons’ visibly fertile body denies interpretations of the Macbeths as a barren couple with no dynastic hopes; yet her pregnancy still fulfills the textual demand that Macbeth «has no children». Sarah Siddons’ pregnant performances of Lady Macbeth exhibit a femininity that is directly opposed to that displayed by the boy actor. Where the male body creates an abstraction of the bodily signs of femininity, Siddons’ body brings those abstracts into reality. Not only did Siddons possess the woman’s breasts, and «access and passage to remorse» (the womb), but perhaps most significantly, the milk that could turn to gall.

If the use of supernatural power demands a sacrifice (Lady Macbeth’s femininity, her milk offered to familiars), does Siddons’ body mean the sacrifice

becomes the child in her womb?¹⁵ When Siddons played Lady Macbeth while pregnant, she remained pregnant for the duration of the play; from the moment a pregnant woman requests unsexing, however, the potential codified by the pregnant body has changed: she has rendered her body monstrous, cruel, and unnatural.

I do not want to wander into the territory of needless and unproductive speculation about the Macbeths' offstage history, such as that rightfully criticized by L. C. Knights¹⁶, but when considering bodies in performance, especially those historical bodies which we have little direct access to, we must take into account more than simply the words on the page, if for no other reason than the descriptions of these performers and performances were just as influenced by the physical reality of the body enacting character then as they are now. Actors' bodies influence the perception of the character in performance. Siddons' pregnant body suggests an alternate reading of the imagery in the play, particularly that which directly addresses maternity, dynasty, and infanticide¹⁷.

Conclusion

Reading Lady Macbeth through her embodiment in these historical performances enables us to begin considering the extremes to which embodied performance can define and drive the "femininity" of Lady Macbeth. Like many of the associations with this word, given at the beginning of this paper, Lady Macbeth desires too much; when pregnant, she is even too full. The male body of the original Lady Macbeth foregrounds an inevitable failure of the Macbeths' ambitions to rule and create dynasty; Siddons' pregnant body keeps these hopes alive, even as the witches' prophecies warn of disaster. The femininity of the male actor is superficial, abstracted, and performative; Siddons' is no less performative, but deeply embedded within concrete and visible signs of the feminine.

Critics and audience members alike often focus on the consonance or dissonance the image of a particular body can offer to the text of a role: Paul Giamatti's 2013 *Hamlet* at Yale Repertory Theater in New Haven, Connecticut, had critics variously bemoaning or defending what his age and physical condition meant to the part and his performance¹⁸. 58-year-old Greg Hicks spoke on receiving criticism for being "too young" to play Lear despite the fact that the part was written for an even younger Richard Burbage¹⁹. Derek Jacobi, who feared playing Lear too young, gave his first performance of the part at 72²⁰. Conversely, Mark Rylance joked he would need a facelift to play Olivia at age 51²¹, but how many 51-year-old actresses would even be considered for the part?²² The bodies of the actors, upon which the character appears (or from which the character is revealed), alternately enhance or alienate the audience's perception of the character.

If we allow ourselves to consider the body of the actor as a site for communication (intentional and unintentional) of character, a host of questions arise. Shakespeare's first Lady Macbeth was quite young, what might such a young body do to/for the character? An older body? What about physical type? A Lady Macbeth actor's stature and body type, alone and when coupled with that of the Macbeth actor will change the audience's perception of the characters, their relationship, and the story as a whole. Makeup and costumes layer meaning onto the body, but the body remains foundational to the audience's experience.

Critical and popular response to the age, race and body types of performers today, especially when women play men and men play women, help to illustrate our preoccupation and fascination with what an actor's physical body can do to and for a fictional role. Historical bodies, such as those of Shakespeare's boy actors or a pregnant Sarah Siddons at the end of the eighteenth century may be less accessible, but are no less important to the history of performance. Recovering these bodies, these performances, these voices, gives us a deeper understanding of text in performance, and of the history of theatre.

Notes

1. See, for example, J. Levin, *Lady Macbeth and the Daemonologie of Hysteria*, in "ELH", 69, 1, 2002, pp. 21-55; J. Ramsey, *The Perversion of Manliness in Macbeth*, in "Studies in English Language Literature, 1500-1900", 13, 2, Spring 1973, pp. 285-300; J. Larsen Klein, *Lady Macbeth: "Infirm of Purpose"*, in C. R. S. Lenz, G. Greene, C. T. Neeley (eds.), *The Woman's Part: Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana 1980, pp. 246-50; S. Chamberlain, *Fantasizing Infanticide: Lady Macbeth and the Murdering Mother in Early Modern England*, in "College Literature", 32, 3, Summer 2005, pp. 72-91.

2. E. Donkin, *Mrs. Siddons Looks Back in Anger*, in J. G. Reinelt, J. R. Roach (eds.), *Critical Theory and Performance*, Revised and Enlarged Edition, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor 2010, p. 319.

3. This work comes, in part, from my dissertation, "*Carrying All Before Her*": *Pregnancy and Performance on the British Stage in the Long Eighteenth Century 1688-1807*.

4. J. La Belle, "A Strange Infirmary": *Lady Macbeth's Amenorrhoea*, in "Shakespeare Quarterly", 31, 3, 1980, p. 383.

5. Ivi, p. 382.

6. See D. Kathman, *How Old were Shakespeare's Boy Actors?*, in P. Holland (ed.), *Shakespeare Survey 58. Writing about Shakespeare*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2005, and S. McMillin, *The Sharer and His Boy: Rehearsing Shakespeare's Women*, in P. Holland, S. Orgel (eds.), *From Script to Stage in Early Modern England*, Palgrave MacMillan, New York 2004.

7. See Levin, *Lady Macbeth and the Daemonologie of Hysteria*, cit., pp. 28-30.

8. J. Boaden, *Memoirs of Mrs. Siddons Interspersed with Anecdotes of Authors and Actors*, H. Colburn, London 1827, p. 143.

9. T. Campbell, *Life of Mrs. Siddons*, vol. 2. Containing Siddons' *Remarks on the Character of Lady Macbeth*, Effingham Wilson, Royal Exchange, London 1834, vol. 2, p. 56.

10. L. J. Rosenthal, *The Sublime, the Beautiful, The Siddons*, in J. Munns, P. Richards (eds.), *The Clothes that Wear Us: Essays on Dressing and Transgressing in Eighteenth-Century Culture*, University of Delaware Press, Newark (NJ) 1999, pp. 56-79.

11. Ivi, p. 57.

12. *The London Stage 1660-1800, Part 5: 1776-1800*, Edited by C. B. Hogan, Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale (IL) 1968.
13. Oracle, "The Arts", April 16, 1794. Burney Collection of 17th and 18th Century Newspapers. Access provided by Ohio State University.
14. L. D. Bloom, E. A. Bloom, *The Piozzi Letters: Correspondence of Hester Lynch Piozzi, 1784-1821 (formerly Mrs. Thrale)*, 6 vols., University of Delaware Press, Newark (NJ) 2002, vol. 2, p. 173.
15. With an actress who is actually pregnant, the pregnancy does not go away, as does Lady Asaji's (never visible) pregnancy in Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* (1957).
16. L. C. Knights, *How Many Children Hath Lady Macbeth?*, in Id., *Explorations*, George W. Stewart, New York 1947.
17. For a much more detailed discussion of the influence of Siddons' pregnancy on the play as a whole, see my chapter, 'I Have Given Suck: The Maternal Body in Sarah Siddons' *Lady Macbeth*, in K. Moncrief, K. McPherson, S. Enloe (eds.), *Shakespeare Expressed: Page, Stage, and Classroom*, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, Madison (NJ) 2013.
18. See, for example, C. Isherwood, *Middle-Aged, Yet a Prince, Slouching but Haunted*, in "New York Times", 26 March 2013; M. Fine, *Onstage: Paul Giamatti in Hamlet*, in "The Huffington Post", 10 April 2013; and J. Marcus, *Paul Giamatti plays Hamlet as antic Everyclub*, in "The Boston Globe", 25 March 2013.
19. See Hicks' interviews with Jocelyn Noveck, *King Lear: The Exquisite Torture of Playing Shakespeare*, in "The Huffington Post", 8 November 2011; and J. Herman, *He wanted to be a rabbi, now he's playing King Lear*, in "The Jewish Chronicle Online", 25 March 2010.
20. C. Cadwalladr, *Derek Jacobi's King Lear: "I've always felt slightly young for the role, but now I'm 72..."*, in "The Guardian", 28 November 2010.
21. L. Jury, *"I'll need a facelift to be Olivia again" Mark Rylance returns to the Globe*, in "Evening Standard", 2 December 2011.
22. Recent productions such as the Old Vic's *Much Ado About Nothing* with Vanessa Redgrave (75) and James Earl Jones (81), and Siân Phillips' performance of Juliet at 79, might give us hope for seeing new types of bodies in familiar parts.

