The Academic
International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research

An Online Peer Reviewed / Refereed Journal
Volume 4 | Issue 3 | March 2026
ISSN: 2583-973X (Online), SJIF IF: 5.6
Website: www.theacademic.in

Fair is foul, and Fouler Still: Macbeth as the Unacknowledged Fourth Witch and the Gendered Politics of Salvation

Dr. Debarati Ghosh

Hod & Assistant Professor, Department of English, St. Xavier's College, Burdwan, India

DOI : https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19542633

ARTICLE DETAILS

Research Paper

Accepted: 25-03-2026

Published: 10-04-2026

Keywords:

Gendered politics, equivocation, tragedy, feminist criticism, agency

ABSTRACT

This paper reconsiders *Macbeth* by William Shakespeare through the provocative lens of witchcraft embodiment, arguing that Macbeth himself, rather than Lady Macbeth, emerges as the most complete realization of the witches' epistemology. While Lady Macbeth is conventionally framed as the "fourth witch" due to her invocation of spirits and transgression of gender norms, this study demonstrates that her engagement with the supernatural remains rhetorical and ultimately collapses under psychic strain. Macbeth, by contrast, internalizes the witches' logic of equivocation, paradox, and ontological instability, transforming prophecy into action through his imagination and agency. His subjectivity becomes the primary site where the supernatural is not merely invoked but produced. Despite this deeper alignment with witchcraft, Macbeth retains tragic dignity and philosophical depth, whereas Lady Macbeth is narratively contained through madness and erasure. Drawing on early modern discourses of witchcraft—especially Daemonologie by James VI and I, and feminist criticism by scholars such as Elaine Showalter and Janet Adelman, this paper argues that this asymmetry reflects gendered politics embedded in early modern constructions of power, agency, and transgression. Ultimately, it proposes that Macbeth's masculinity mediates his moral reception, allowing him a degree of narrative redemption denied to Lady Macbeth, thereby exposing enduring biases in literary interpretation.

Few Shakespearean tragedies have invited as sustained a critical engagement with the supernatural as Macbeth. The Weird Sisters—enigmatic, paradoxical, and unsettling—have traditionally been read as the primary agents of disorder, shaping the trajectory of the play through prophecy and equivocation. Their famous declaration, "Fair is foul, and foul is fair" (1.1.10), establishes not only the thematic but also the epistemological foundation of the drama: a world in which categories collapse and meaning becomes unstable. Yet, to confine the supernatural to these figures is to overlook a more insidious and transformative process unfolding within the human characters themselves. The witches do not act; they suggest. They do not kill; they prophesy. Their power lies in language—in the capacity to destabilize perception. The question that follows, then, is not whether the witches control events, but who actualizes their logic.

Critical tradition has often identified Lady Macbeth as the "fourth witch," citing her invocation of spirits and her rejection of normative femininity. However, such readings risk overemphasizing performative transgression while underestimating the deeper psychological and epistemological transformations occurring within Macbeth himself.

This paper argues that Macbeth, not Lady Macbeth, emerges as the true "fourth witch." Through his internalization of paradox, his generative imagination, and his active engagement with equivocation, he becomes the human embodiment of the witches' worldview. Crucially, however, this embodiment does not result in total moral condemnation. Instead, Macbeth retains tragic dignity, philosophical insight, and narrative centrality. This paradox of being both more "witch-like" and more redeemable can only be understood through the lens of gender. By situating the play within early modern anxieties about witchcraft, masculinity, and female transgression, this paper reveals how gendered frameworks shape both the narrative and its critical reception.

The witches' opening chant, "Fair is foul, and foul is fair," does more than establish atmosphere; it inaugurates a mode of perception. This epistemology collapses binary distinctions, rendering moral categories unstable and truth contingent. Macbeth's immediate echo, "So foul and fair a day I have not seen" (1.3.38) signaling an uncanny alignment. While critics often interpret this as susceptibility to influence, it is more productively read as a pre-existing cognitive affinity. Macbeth is not merely influenced by the witches; he is predisposed to think within their framework.

This alignment deepens as the play progresses. Macbeth's soliloquies reveal a mind increasingly governed by paradox and ambiguity. He oscillates between desire and restraint, certainty and doubt, reality and hallucination. His famous reflection, "Nothing is, but what is not" (1.3.141), encapsulates this

ontological instability. Such statements do not merely echo the witches; they extend their logic into human consciousness. Macbeth becomes the site where the supernatural is internalized, where language reshapes reality. Importantly, the witches themselves remain static. They do not evolve, reflect, or act beyond their initial function. Macbeth, however, develops. His engagement with paradox becomes increasingly sophisticated, moving from passive reception to active manipulation.

Lady Macbeth's invocation of spirits,"Come, you spirits / That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here" (1.5.39–40) has long positioned her within the discourse of witchcraft. Her desire to be "unsexed" reflects a rejection of early modern ideals of femininity, particularly those associated with nurturance and passivity. Her subsequent plea to "take my milk for gall" further reinforces this inversion of maternal identity. In early modern England, such imagery would have resonated with contemporary fears surrounding female bodies and their perceived susceptibility to corruption.

However, Lady Macbeth's engagement with the supernatural remains fundamentally rhetorical. She calls upon spirits but does not demonstrate an ability to internalize or sustain their logic independently. Her power is contingent, dependent on performance and persuasion. This distinction becomes evident as the play progresses. While Lady Macbeth initially dominates Macbeth, orchestrating Duncan's murder, her influence wanes rapidly. She does not participate in subsequent acts of violence, nor does she exhibit the imaginative capacity that drives Macbeth's actions.

Her eventual descent into madness, marked by fragmented speech and compulsive gestures, signals the collapse of her constructed identity. As Elaine Showalter argues, representations of female madness often function as mechanisms of containment, reasserting normative boundaries. Lady Macbeth's fate, therefore, is not merely personal but ideological. Her transgression cannot be sustained within the cultural framework of the play.

If Lady Macbeth's engagement with the supernatural is performative, Macbeth's is generative. His imagination becomes the primary site of supernatural activity, producing visions that blur the line between perception and reality. The dagger soliloquy exemplifies this process. Macbeth's vision is not externally imposed; it emerges from his own psyche. The question, "Is this a dagger which I see before me?" (2.1.33) is less about the object than about the instability of perception itself.

This capacity aligns Macbeth more closely with the witches, whose power lies in shaping perception rather than controlling events. However, Macbeth goes further: he acts upon his visions. The witches suggest; Macbeth executes. This distinction is crucial. Macbeth's imagination is not passive but

productive. It generates both the impetus and the justification for action. In this sense, his mind becomes a site of continuous supernatural production. The banquet scene further illustrates this dynamic. The appearance of Banquo's ghost is visible only to Macbeth, reinforcing the idea that his psyche is generating its own horrors. Unlike Lady Macbeth, who attempts to dismiss the vision, Macbeth engages with it, deepening his immersion in psychological and moral chaos.

Equivocation, the use of ambiguous language to obscure meaning, was a concept of significant cultural relevance in early modern England, particularly in the context of religious and political conflict. The witches' prophecies are quintessentially equivocal. They offer statements that are technically true but open to misinterpretation. However, it is Macbeth's interpretive choices that transform these ambiguities into instruments of destruction. The prophecy that "none of woman born shall harm Macbeth" (4.1.80–81) exemplifies this dynamic. Macbeth interprets it literally, ignoring the possibility of metaphor or exception. This misreading is not imposed upon him; it is chosen. In this sense, Macbeth becomes complicit in his own deception. He adopts the witches' logic, not only in language but in thought. His reliance on equivocation reflects a deeper ethical failure: the refusal to engage critically with ambiguity. This interpretive failure extends to his moral reasoning as well. Macbeth repeatedly acknowledges the consequences of his actions yet chooses to proceed. His declaration—"I am in blood / Stepp'd in so far…" (3.4.136–137) reflects a conscious decision to continue rather than repent. Such decisions underscore his alignment with the witches' ethos: a world in which moral boundaries are fluid and consequences deferred.

Macbeth's Transformation gradually occurs from recipient to practitioner. By Act IV, Macbeth actively seeks out the witches, marking a significant shift in his role. He is no longer a passive recipient of prophecy but an active participant in the supernatural economy. His greeting, "How now, you secret, black, and midnight hags!" (4.1.48) signals familiarity and authority. He demands answers, engages with their rituals, and interprets their visions with increasing confidence. This transformation culminates in his decision to murder Macduff's family, a gratuitous act of violence that exceeds the scope of prophecy. Unlike Duncan's murder, which is motivated by ambition, this act is driven by paranoia and cruelty. At this stage, Macbeth no longer requires the witches. He has internalized their logic to such an extent that he can operate independently. He has become the fourth witch.

The divergent fates of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth cannot be understood without reference to early modern gender ideologies. Witchcraft was overwhelmingly associated with women, who were perceived as more susceptible to diabolical influence. Texts such as *Daemonologie* reinforce this association,

depicting witches as morally and physically deviant. Lady Macbeth's invocation of spirits and rejection of maternal identity place her squarely within this framework. Her punishment, madness and death, is therefore culturally overdetermined. She must be contained. Macbeth, by contrast, operates within a masculine framework that accommodates violence and ambition. His actions, while extreme, are extensions of traits valorized in patriarchal society. As Stephen Greenblatt suggests, early modern subjectivity is shaped by cultural scripts. Macbeth's script allows for transgression within limits; Lady Macbeth's does not.

Macbeth's classification as a tragic hero grants him narrative privileges denied to Lady Macbeth. His actions are interpreted through the lens of a fatal flaw, ambition, rather than inherent monstrosity. This framework enables psychological depth and moral complexity. Macbeth reflects, doubts, and ultimately confronts his fate with a degree of dignity. His final soliloquy, "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow…" reveals existential awareness. He recognizes the futility of life, achieving a level of philosophical insight that elevates him beyond mere villainy. Lady Macbeth, however, is denied such articulation. Her madness fragments her language, preventing coherent reflection. Her death occurs offstage, diminishing her narrative presence. Thus, the disparity reflects a gendered distribution of narrative privilege.

Feminist critics have sought to recover Lady Macbeth from reductive interpretations. Janet Adelman emphasizes the cultural anxieties surrounding female agency, particularly in relation to maternity and power. Lady Macbeth's actions can thus be read not as inherent monstrosity but as responses to restrictive gender norms. At the same time, Macbeth's relative absolution must be interrogated. His actions are no less transgressive, yet they are framed in ways that invite empathy and understanding. By repositioning Macbeth as the true embodiment of witchcraft, this paper challenges traditional hierarchies of culpability and calls for a reassessment of gendered assumptions in literary criticism.

Macbeth's journey from valorous warrior to tyrannical ruler is often framed as a moral decline. However, when viewed through the lens of witchcraft, it becomes a process of transformation, an internalization of the witches' epistemology. He does not merely fall; he evolves into something else. That this transformation does not result in total condemnation reveals the power of gender in shaping narrative and interpretation. Macbeth's masculinity affords him complexity, dignity, and partial redemption. Lady Macbeth, despite her initial transgression, is denied these privileges.

Thus, to recognize Macbeth as the "fourth witch" is not merely to reinterpret his character but to expose the cultural biases that inform both the text and its criticism. Such a reading invites broader reflection on how gender continues to shape our understanding of agency, morality, and power in literature.

Works Cited :

- Adelman, Janet. *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare's Plays*. Routledge, 1992.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, 1990.
- Cixous, Hélène. "The Laugh of the Medusa." Signs, vol. 1, no. 4, 1976, pp. 875–93.
- Eagleton, Terry. *William Shakespeare*. Basil Blackwell, 1986.
- Greenblatt, Stephen. *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*. University of Chicago Press, 1980.
- James I, King of England. *Daemonologie*. 1597.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Columbia University Press, 1982.
- Macdonald, Joyce Green. *Women and Race in Early Modern Texts*. Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- Shakespeare, William. *Macbeth* (Arden Shakespeare Third Series). Edited by Sandra Clark and Pamela Mason, Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2015.
- Shakespeare, William. *Macbeth*. Edited by Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine, Folger Shakespeare Library, 2013.
- Showalter, Elaine. "Representing Ophelia: Women, Madness, and the Responsibilities of Feminist Criticism." *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*, edited by Patricia Parker and Geoffrey Hartman, Methuen, 1985, pp. 77–94.
- Sinfield, Alan. *Faultlines: Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading.* University of California Press, 1992.
- Stone, Lawrence. *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500–1800*. Harper & Row, 1977.
- Willis, Deborah. *Malevolent Nurture: Witch-Hunting and Maternal Power in Early Modern England*. Cornell University Press, 1995.