

## Revisiting Shakespeare: Subverting Heteronormativity – A Reading of William Shakespeare’s Macbeth

*Sub-Theme – Shakespearean Studies – Queer Theory –Reinventing Shakespeare*

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**Abstract:** *Revisiting Shakespeare: Subverting Heteronormativity – A Reading of William Shakespeare’s Macbeth, aims to study how Shakespeare and the Queer studies are very deeply intertwined. Shakespeare while portraying all the traits surrounding what it means to be 'human', talks about affection, abhorrence, mistrustfulness, identity, sexuality, thereby positing it as biased if a 'queer ' interpretation of Shakespeare is overlooked. For the reason that though Queer Studies is comparatively a modern development, even in the sixteenth century, it found its voice in Shakespeare - which includes Shakespeare the playwright, the works, and the concepts behind it. Along with considering the fluid beliefs of queer theory, the paper will also try to reflect how trans identities contest the notion of gender as a biological or social construct and as an alternative, explore that which is undefined and anti-normative.*

*William Shakespeare's works are masterful representations of all times and his masterpieces are able to successfully diminish the cultural and varied differences across time and place. All the more so in this twenty-first century, the variations and differences find an utterance, an expression and a space to open up, be dealt with and thereby, transform. And the play that substantiates and exemplifies it in totality is Macbeth, one of the masterworks by the Bard. Shakespeare begins the play with words such as “weird” and “fairy” which today we associate with queerness and the marginalized. In “Queer and Now” (from the anthology Tendencies, 1993) Sedgwick persistently argues against a ‘monolithic understanding of sexuality’ that presume sexual identity as a static identity category and instead works to ‘destabilize common sense’ approaches to sexual identity. Shakespeare in Macbeth can be seen to apply the same destabilizing technique by blurring the boundaries between the masculine and the feminine in the character of Lady Macbeth and the three witches.*

**Keywords:** *Queer Theory, Shakespearian Studies, Revisiting Shakespeare, Subverting Heteronormativity, Reinventing Shakespeare, Lgbt Issues, Transgender, , Gender Studies*

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As MadhaviMenon in her seminal work Shakesqueer points out, what is so queer about Shakespeare is the fact that he does not belong to the historical specificity of the queer theory that is post 1800 and one can never be sure if he was gay, a question that will always remain unanswered, adding to its queerness. Shakespeare many a times is 'queered' though innately it is a 'queer Shakespeare', the difference being one of chronology and the other 'identitarian', the former implies applying a 20th century theory on a 16th century playwright while 'queer Shakespeare' implies locating the queerness inherent in the Bard. Chronology is important with regards to Queer Studies because only in the 19th century homosexuality was identified and institutionalised, and the writers post 1800 were working

with the same vocabulary which in Shakespeare's case is quite different since it calls for a merging of Shakespeare of 'then' and the Queer theory of 'now'.

But before going into a queer interpretation of Shakespeare, we have to comprehend with the term 'Queer theory' and also delve on the question "how a queer interpretation of such a stalwart figure is practicable?"

Queer Theory can be said to be an academic revolt which rose as a reaction against the hegemony of heterosexuals on what is to be considered as the norm of normalcy, with regard to sex, gender and sexuality – Sex (the Fact of being male, female or transsexual), Gender (the State of being male or female with regards to social and cultural differences) and Sexuality (a person's sexual preference). Thus it includes any variation which is considered unnatural to the dominant system of sexual classification, the many types of sexual non-conformity, be it gays/lesbians, cross dressers, transsexualism, bisexualism, sadomasochism, BDSM, butch/femme etc. It questions what seems to be the dominant understanding of sexuality, gender, sex, identity or difference and sameness. It thus, places itself against the normal rather than only the heterosexual.

To quote Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, one of the pioneers in Queer theory in her seminal work Tendencies who defines 'Queer' as -

the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically. (Sedgwick 8)

Donald E. Hall and Annamarie Jagose in their Introduction to The Routledge Queer Studies Reader defines Queer studies as "the institutionalization of a new - or at least newly visible - paradigm for thinking about sexuality that emerged simultaneously across academic and activist contexts in the early 1990s, constituting a broad and unmethodical critique of normative modals of sex, gender and sexuality."

And where can one discover a better site for scrutiny/critique than Shakespeare, the imposing figure who was left untouched and unquestioned in the past since they were considered "normative modals of sex, gender and sexuality". Shakespeare's male actors dressed as girls, only to seduce other man in his plays, is an apt example of the queerness, inherent in Shakespeare's works. To delve deeper on the question we can take the example of Macbeth, one of the queerest plays written by the Bard. But the fact that needs mention is though Queer theory and Shakespeare are much separated in time, still he is the antecedent of the former, as oblivious of their etiology, many presently used queer terms were initiated by Shakespeare. And the play that substantiates and exemplifies it in totality is Macbeth, one of the masterworks by the Bard. Shakespeare begins the play with words such as "weird" and "fairy" which today we associate with queerness and the marginalized.

In "Queer and Now" (from the anthology Tendencies, 1993) Sedgwick persistently argues against a 'monolithic understanding of sexuality' that presume sexual identity as a static identity category and instead works to 'destabilize common sense' approaches to sexual identity. Shakespeare in Macbeth can be seen to apply the same destabilizing technique by blurring the boundaries between the masculine and the feminine in the character of Lady Macbeth and the three witches. Lady Macbeth, though her sex is female and gender feminine, her sexuality is masculine. Her self-perceived gender assignment is that of the male, and so are her traits of personality, as noticed in the first four Acts in the play. Even her procreative choice is negative and her sexual fantasies are "stronger in intensity" (a characteristic feature of the masculine) which can be seen in her planning and murder of King Duncan, paralleling sexual foreplay and orgasm.

With the three witches on the other hand, Shakespeare deals with a totally exclusive area, that of the transgender. The witches imply a transsexual body since though they are feminine in their self-perception, referring each other as well as by other characters as "sisters", and by Macbeth as "weird sisters", they have beard, thus representing the co-existence of the masculine and the feminine, in their transgendered body. To quote Banquo from the play, in Act1 scene 3,

What are these?

So withered and so wild in attire,

that looked not like the inhabitants o' the earth

And yet are on't? Live you? Or are you aught  
That man may question?  
...You should be women,  
And yet your beard forbid me to interpret  
That you are. (1.3.39-46)

Madhavi Menon in Shakespeare reiterates that queerness is not limited to particular bodily acts or practices and it can be located even in texts having no homosexual element. If we are to dissect the above quoted lines, what needs to be noted is, Shakespeare within the ambit of Banquo's words, lays bare the transgendered world, here represented by the three witches. First, the word 'witch' itself implies the non-conformist, 'wild' being that were not accepted within the 'tamed' social setting. Second, the 'withered' figure of the transgender, lost amidst the gender politics (the essentialist assumption that heterosexual and homosexual are universal- Jay Prosser). Third, the significance of the word 'attire', since a great deal of queer identity lies in dressing and cross-dressing. Fourth, the witches did not 'look like the inhabitants of the earth', Shakespeare thereby questioning on their 'space' and 'place' within the traditional heteronormative society which until recently did not accept that being transgender is a fact and not a choice. And last but not the least, the words 'man may question' explores how throughout history, transgenders are the unaccepted and the questioned lot.

And it is through these three 'Wild Witches', (even referred to as 'devil') that Shakespeare starts off his play and they are the ones who foresees the events thus acting as soothsayers or prophets, foreseeing and controlling the characters in the play.

Even language is used as a technique to stress the inherent queerness in the play. While Shakespeare's other characters speak in blank verse (rhymed iambic pentameter), Shakespeare has the three witches speak in rhyming couplets. To separate them from the other characters and to allusively bring forward their 'peculiarity', he reserved the Trochee (~ /) instead of the iambic considered to be the 'norm', for the 'Weird sisters' as they concoct their poisonous potion from which Macbeth will be shown his future.

Round about the cauldron go;  
In the poison'd entrails throw-  
Toad, that under cold stone  
Days and nights has thirty one  
Swelter'd venom sleeping got,  
Boil thou first i' the charmed pot. (4.1.1-9)

In the essay "Judith Butler : Queer Feminism, Transgender and the Transubstantiation of Sex" Jay Prosser asserts that the image of the transsexual has been central to the development queer theory because the figure of the transgender made possible the overlap between the gay and the lesbian, which forms the ground for this new theory of homosexuality different from feminism.

Shakespeare the critique, can be seen to be working simultaneously with Shakespeare the playwright, because it seems, through these works, by portraying the queerness, Shakespeare tried to critique the normality, explore its aspects and thereby give a voice to the unheard and the silent. For Judith Butler, Queer is seen as "marking a space where sexuality eludes the normative consolidations of identity formations." Seen in this light the character of the three witches addresses the queer potential, blending perfectly the feminine and the masculine attitudes, traits and behaviours.

The witches' identities are thus 'undefined' by Shakespeare, leaving it on the audience and the readers to explore their true selves which is 'anti-normative' thereby this stance of their social abjection allows them to be in the ambit of the 'unrestricted'. As Madhavi Menon aptly puts it, "Shakespeare has always already been Shakespeare, that Queer Theory as we know it today is already Shakespearean, and the time has arrived for us to acknowledge that fact."

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