Chapter 3

The Female Grotesque as ‘Spectacle’

The root of the spectacle is that oldest of all social specializations, the specialization of power. The spectacle plays the specialized role of speaking in the name of all the other activities. It is hierarchical society’s ambassador to itself, delivering its official messages at a court where no one else is allowed to speak. The most modern aspect of the spectacle is thus also the most archaic.

Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*

The native seized as a token and then displayed, sketched, painted, described, and embalmed is quite literally captured by and for European representation.

Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvellous Possessions*

This chapter explores the processes through which the female grotesque is produced as a spectacle in early modern cultural practices, with special focus on the theatre as the privileged site of such productions or constructions. I begin with a brief introduction on early modern culture’s preoccupation with the spectacle in various forms. The first section focuses on different aspects of the female grotesque as spectacles of ‘otherness’ in Shakespeare’s two Roman plays, *Titus Andronicus* (1594) and *Antony and Cleopatra* (1606). In the second section I turn my attention to the representation of the ‘weird sisters’ in *Macbeth* (1606) and those of the hags in *The Masque of Queens* (1609) as spectacles of ‘strangeness’.

Foucault describes the Renaissance or the early modern period as ‘a time of direct gestures, shameless discourse, and open transgressions, when anatomies were shown and intermingled at will.’¹ It was a culture that had invested in the spectacle in numerous ways. Since the culture’s dynamic was ‘dramaturgical at heart’² the line, between the theatricality involved in cultural display and the spectacle in the theatre, where the ‘rehearsal of cultures’ took place, was very thin. As an example of the bleeding between culture’s pervasive and often perverse engagements with exhibitions and displays and the spectacle offered by the stage, one could cite the case of ‘the spectacle of the scaffold.’³ This is constituted by instances of capital punishment in which the body of the guilty or condemned was subjected to gruesome torture in front of the public gaze, an actual spectacle compounded by the several instances of spectacular dismemberment on the Renaissance stage.⁴ Indeed, the
distinction between the real and the simulacrum was often blurred in interesting ways: Mullaney refers to how French sea men, merchants and adventurers dressed as Brazilians were made to mix with ‘authentic’ Tabbagerres and Toupinaboux Indian tribes in Rouen on the occasion of Henry II’s royal entry into the town.\(^5\) Further, as Mullaney points out, customarily the royal procession would halt outside the city gates and the king became ‘more spectator than actor in the drama at hand and prompted by his gaze, a mock battle or schiamachy would commence.’\(^6\) [Emphasis mine.]

A spectacle involves a complex dynamics of power / knowledge depending on whether one is exhibiting oneself or being displayed. As critics have noted, Renaissance official ceremonies provided an occasion for the monarch to present him/herself as a spectacle of power. Elizabeth’s penchant for theatricality and displaying herself was evident in her coronation ceremony; as she progressed through London the city became a ‘a stage wherein was shewed a wonderfull spectacle.’\(^7\) King James had similarly evoked the metaphor of the stage in Basilikon Doron to describe the role of the monarch as an exemplary figure: A king is as one set on a stage, whose smallest actions and gestures, all the people gazingly do behold.’\(^8\) The authority figure derived power and pleasure from such occasions because these royal displays validated the monarch’s special status. In contrast, the person displayed as an object of curiosity or contempt is rendered powerless and simultaneously relegated to the status of the ‘other’. In effect, the self-displayer is a subject or agent, and the displayed figure is an object or patient: this dichotomy between subject and object reproduces within the schema of the spectacle one of the most familiar oppositions of Renaissance epistemology.

The first section of this chapter looks at the spectacle of the mutilated body in Titus Andronicus, focusing on the representation of Lavinia. My argument is that Shakespeare’s negotiation with Ovid is sited on the body of the ‘learned lady’ resulting in her double mutilation. The second instance of the female grotesque concerns the representation of women belonging to non-Roman cultures. In both Titus Andronicus and Antony and Cleopatra the threat of the alien other is sited on the body of Tamora and Cleopatra respectively. Tamora, the Gothic barbaric ‘other’ is a malevolent maternal figure who brings about the downfall of the house of Andronici with her desire to avenge the death of her son. Tamora’s amour with Aaron, the black
Moor, establishes the sexual deviance of the alien feminine. Cleopatra is an alluring fabulous spectacular ‘other’ who enthralls Mark Antony, emasculating him symbolically. She simultaneously fascinates and creates anxiety in the masculine order of imperial Rome.

I. Spectacles of Otherness: *Titus Andronicus* and *Antony and Cleopatra*

Jacques Petit, who saw a performance of *Titus Andronicus* in 1596, remarked that he thought *la monstre* to be the best part of the play.9 The French word translates as ‘spectacle’ and refers to the brutal killings, mutilation and cannibal banquet in this sensational Elizabethan play that was highly popular in its own times. However, it is possible to read *la monstre* as a freighted term suggestive of the English words ‘monster’ and ‘monstrous’. According to the OED, the etymology of the word ‘monster’ (from the Latin *monstrum*) indicates something that is marvellous, originally a divine portent or warning. A popular broadsheet of 1566, called ‘The True Description of a Child With Ruffes—which accompanied a monstrous baby exhibited at fairs and carnivals—was meant as a warning to women who dressed in ruffes that if they did not take heed they could also end up bearing such babies.10

In the early modern period, the term ‘monster’ was used to denote a wide range of creatures from animals ‘deviating in one or more of its parts from the normal type’, human beings ‘affected with some congenital malformation, a misshapen birth’(OED) as well as non-European races. The drunken Trinculo’s first response to Caliban, described as a ‘savage and deformed slave’, is that in England this ‘monster’ could be displayed as a spectacle for ‘holiday-fools’ and this lucrative business would ‘make a man’ (*The Tempest*, II. ii. 27-33).11 Mullaney cites the example of an Eskimo couple who had been brought back by Martin Frobisher from his voyage to the Arctic regions. These ‘tokens’ of New World explorations hunting swans and ducks on the Thames in skin-covered boats made to resemble canoes were on display for the public. The display of strange or alien beings inheres in the term monster, derived from the Latin *monstrare*, it also implies to demonstrate or to exhibit (as a monster). It has close links with the word ‘freak’ which is defined as a ‘living curiosity exhibited in a show.’12 Thus, in its original or etymological sense the monster had close links with the ‘spectacle’. When he realizes that he has been double-crossed by Cleopatra, Antony vents his anger by telling her that as Octavius Caesar’s captive she would be hoisted up to the ‘shouting plebeians’ of Rome and ‘Most monster-like be shown / For
poor’st diminutives, for dolts’ (Antony and Cleopatra, IV. xii. 36-7). At one level, Antony’s words establishes the close associations between the two terms; and on the other, it drives home the point that the only punishment befitting the duplicitous queen is to be turned into a ‘spectacle’ for male gaze.

Laura Mulvey observes that within the gendered economy of patriarchy ‘pleasure in looking has been split between active / male and passive / female.’ She further notes: ‘women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at ness.’ If in patriarchy, women are always-already coded as spectacles it is possible to posit that the female grotesque is to-be-looked-at ness in its most acute condition.

‘A craftier Tereus, cousin, hast thou met’: Lavinia’s double mutilation

These images of the body are not instances of the arbitrary perversity of single dramatists . . . but the insistence in the spectacle of a corporeality, which is quite other than our own. The visibility of the body in pain . . . is systematic rather than personal; not the issue of an aberrant exhibitionism, but formed across the whole surface of the social as a locus of the desire, the revenge, the power and the misery of this world.

Francis Barker, The Tremulous Private Body: Essays on Subjection

Jacques Petit’s comment seems to have set the tone for nineteenth and early twentieth century critics who focused almost entirely on the element of spectacle in Titus Andronicus, finding its display of blood and gore shocking and disgusting. The play’s engagement with violence was read as a sign of Shakespeare’s capitulation to the ‘crude’ taste of the groundlings. A dramatic reversal of the play’s fortune occurred with close attention to its linguistic texture and to its classical sources. Titus Andronicus has now acquired the status of a sophisticated play whose ‘literariness’ is evident in its bravura display of rhetorical strategies inculcated through humanist learning and its self-conscious allusion to one of its classical sources—Ovid’s tale of the rape of Philomel. It is now recognized that the ‘literary’ language of Titus Andronicus works through a literalization of figures of speech—making the ‘word become flesh’—displaying macabre humour through its punning on heads and hands, while these body parts are dismembered on stage. Not only does Shakespeare rework the Ovidian tale of female sexual violation and mutilation within the strategies
of a Senecan revenge tragedy, but he also manages to collapse ‘Roman history, known to him from Plutarch and Livy, into a single action.’

Critics have commented on the generic uncertainty of Titus Andronicus and it is possible to argue that its hybrid nature—with its uneasy mixing of characteristics and conventions of different genres both dramatic and narrative—contributes to the text’s status as literary grotesque. Amongst the classical authors it was probably Ovid who played a crucial role in this context. The Roman poet’s playful irreverence towards the decorum of genres, juxtaposing the tragic and the grotesque, the comic and the pathetic, served as a classical precedent for the Renaissance playwright who excelled in hybridization, ‘mingling kings and clowns’ to use Philip Sidney’s words, and creating ‘mongrel tragi-comedy.’ Shakespeare also imbibed Ovid’s strategy of transforming inherited stories and myths, metamorphosing them into something rich and strange. Most importantly it was Ovid’s skill in rhetorical ingenuity, verbal fertility or copia and exploration of the human psyche during moments of extreme emotion that Shakespeare culled from the classical author.

The Roman Poet and the Renaissance Playwright
In 1598, Francis Meres wrote an essay entitled ‘A Comparative Discourse of our English Poets with the Greeke, Latine, and Italian Poets’. Comparing Shakespeare to Ovid, Meres asserted that ‘the sweete wittie soule of Ovid lives in mellifluous and hony-tongued Shakespeare.’ Meres’ comparison draws upon the notion of Pythagorean metempsychosis or transmigration of souls as expounded in the fifteenth book of Ovid’s Metamorphoses and serves as an appropriate trope for Shakespeare’s skill in imitatio and translatio, the twin processes through which the humanist educational system ensured the transmission of classical authors.

Jonson’s legendary remark in his elegy on his fellow rival’s ‘small Latin and less Greek’ notwithstanding, contemporary scholarship has established beyond doubt that Shakespeare was acquainted with the original works of Ovid and did not depend entirely on Golding’s English translations. It was Shakespeare’s education in the grammar school (established in 1553) at Stratford-upon-Avon that paved the way for his lifelong engagement with the versatile and ingenious Roman writer. The curriculum of education in the King’s New School, in accordance with those of other grammar schools, included an intensive study of Latin writers like Horace, Virgil,
Cato and most importantly Ovid. In addition to Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, students would be acquainted with the *Fasti*, his poem on Roman festivals and ceremonies, the *Heroides*, his elegies in the form of imaginary epistles from legendary heroines to their lovers and husbands and *Tristia*, his laments written in exile.

Bate suggests that within Ovid’s oeuvre it was his *Metamorphoses*—with its radical exploration of the violent and disturbing dynamics of psychic and corporeal transformation—that was particularly congenial to Shakespeare. Though Shakespeare continued throughout his career to translate key dramatic passages from the *Metamorphoses* and use the text as a rich storehouse of mythologies in his plays, the year 1593-4, when Shakespeare turned thirty, seems to have been his most fertile Ovidian moment. *Metamorphoses* Book X is the source of his erotic narrative poem *Venus and Adonis* (1593). For *The Rape of Lucrece* (1594) he turned to Ovid’s *Fasti* using also Book XIII of *Metamorphoses* for the description of Ajax, Ulysses and Hecuba in the painting of Troy. *Titus Andronicus*, which appeared in print in 1594, has as its textual crux, the tale of Tereus’s rape of Philomela in Book VI of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. The play also refers to the myth of Acteon’s transformation into a stag and his gruesome dismemberment by his own hounds, as expounded in *Metamorphoses* Book III (ll. 195-250).

Ovid’s presence permeates these texts not only as the source of their stories but also in the way they explore the complex relation between desire and destruction, mutability and permanence through the violent mutilation of fragile human bodies. *Titus Andronicus* in particular, with its self-conscious allusion to Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, shows how the paradigm for the creative process lies in the gruesome violation of the female body. Lavinia becomes the site for Shakespeare’s negotiation with sexuality, textuality and creativity.

*Rape, revenge, reading and writing: The grotesque intertextual weave*

The tragedy’s concern with the fate of the house of the Andronici, the issues of transfer of authority, the governance of Rome and the establishment of order after chaos establishes its link to both Roman and history plays. However *Titus Andronicus* displays greater similarity to the *Rape of Lucrece* than other Roman or history plays in following and elaborating on the narrative poem’s pattern of rape, revenge and revolution.
In what may seem a case of bizarre incongruity, the issues of rape and revenge in *Titus Andronicus* are integrally linked to acts of reading and writing. However, the relationship is not really inappropriate; as critical studies of humanism have emphasized, reading and writing, in the humanist pedagogy, involved a degree of social and psychological violence. Mary Thomas Crane argues that humanists depicted the transformation of the self through education as ‘painful violation, closely related to corporal punishment’ and ‘students as fragmented subjects, both alienated from and controlled by language.’ It may be interesting to observe that the metaphorical fragmentation that Crane refers to in the context of humanist education is literalized in the figure of Lavinia, the learned lady. In *Titus Andronicus* it is Lavinia’s fragmented body that foregrounds how acts of literacy become violent, visualized ones. This is first seen in Titus’s reference to his intention of understanding the gestures of his mute and mutilated daughter: ‘But I of these will *wrest* an alphabet’ (III. ii. 44). The second, more explicit enactment of violence occurs when Lavinia takes Marcus’ staff into her mouth and guiding it with her stumps writes the Latin term for rape and the name of her rapists (IV. i. 76: stage directions) on the ‘sandy plot’ (IV. i. 69).

In this overtly ‘literary’ revenge tragedy, almost all characters display their classical learning in varying degrees. It is only through the mediation of classical texts that they can anticipate, formulate and negotiate the grisly events of rape and revenge. Demetrius, before he rapes Lavinia (II. i. 35-6) quotes from the Latin text of Seneca’s *Hippolytus*; and so does Titus, after he discovers the rape and begins to anticipate revenge (IV. i. 81-2). Titus sends a quotation from Horace’s *Odes* to Demetrius and Chiron as a coded message that he has ‘deciphered’ that they are the ‘villains marked with rape’ (IV. ii. 8-9).

Access to classical texts ironically and even comically dismantles the distinction between the civilized Romans and the barbaric Goths. *Titus Andronicus* is suffused with the atmosphere of the schoolroom through its many instances of figurative speech like ‘handle not the theme’, ‘I’ll teach thee’, ‘I was but the tutor to instruct them’ and ‘well has thou lessoned us.’ Therefore it is hardly surprising that Demetrius and Chiron have been pupils in the grammar school and can recognize a Latin phrase from Horace used in Lily’s Latin grammar book (IV. ii. 20-2). Earlier, after raping and mutilating Lavinia, the brothers mock her helpless condition, daring
her to ‘play the scribe’ with ‘signs and tokens’ (II. iv. 4-5), thus indicating that they are acquainted with Ovid’s myth of Philomel who could sew her tale in needlework.

Not only does the black Moor Aaron—the significant ‘other’ of civilized and educated Rome—decipher the real implication of Titus’ message (IV. ii. 26-8), but he is also an example of the astute reader of classical texts who provides the first instance of how reading may instigate rape when he tells Demetrius and Chiron:

Lucrece was not more chaste
Than this Lavinia, Bassianus’ love.

(II. i. 109-10)

Clearly Aaron has imbibed the Erasmian principle of humanist education where exempla from history or the fiction of antiquity ‘serve as lessons to the world.’ A brilliant, albeit corrupt, humanist educator, Aaron uses Lucrece’s rape as a Roman exemplum to initiate the Goth’s ‘sharp revenge’ (I. i. 140). In their attempts to interpret the message that the hideously disfigured Lavinia embodies, the learned Andronici turn to the same text. Titus invokes the story of Lucrece, encouraging his ‘sweet girl’ Lavinia ‘to give signs’:

What Roman lord it was durst do the deed:
Or slunk not Saturnine, as Tarquin erst,
That left the camp to sin in Lucrece’s bed?

(IV. i. 61-4)

Later on Marcus refers to the same legend of Livy’s account of the defilement and suicide of Lucrece, the chaste Roman matron whose violation led Junius Brutus to swear that he would overthrow the Tarquin’s dynasty and establish the Roman republic, as an exemplum—‘prosecute by good advice / Mortal revenge upon these traitorous Goths’ (IV. i. 92-3). Finally, he cites Livy’s story of Virginius’ killing of his daughter as ‘A reason mighty, strong and effectual / A pattern, precedent and lively warrant’ (V. iii. 42-3) before he murders Lavinia. Titus thus locates the pattern of rape and revenge in a historical continuum, legitimizing his role as a patriarchal avenger and authority figure.

If Livy’s legend of Lucrece’s rape functions as one textual frame through which Lavinia’s situation is read, then Ovid’s tale of the sexual violation and mutilation of Philomel provides the more powerful interpretative lens. Book VI of
Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* is the play’s textual crux both figuratively and literally. Once again it is Aaron who first invokes the classical text by referring to Lavinia as Bassianus’ ‘Philomel’ who ‘must lose her tongue today’ (II. ii. 42-3) in the course of outlining his plot of vengeance to Tamora.

Coppelia Kahn observes that in Shakespeare the stories of Lucrece and Philomel are always evoked together, but there are significant divergences in their treatment of the Ovidian myth. In Shakespeare’s version of the legend in his Lucrece, the raped heroine delivers a twenty-one-line apostrophe to Philomel, beginning ‘Come Philomel that sing’st of ravishment / Make thy sad grove in my dishevelled hair’ (*The Rape of Lucrece*, 1128-9). However, Lucrece refers to and identifies with the already metamorphosed Philomel—the nightingale—stressing that they will ‘tune’ their ‘heart-strings to true languishment’ (1141). In contrast, the Philomel in *Titus Andronicus* is the mutilated, mute female figure of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, whose loss of tongue also symbolizes her severance from language since the Latin term *lingua* signifies both. Ovid’s verse indulges in a grotesquely vivid description of Philomel’s severed lingua that twitches convulsively ‘and with its last dying movement it seeks its mistress’s feet.’ Philomel’s loss of lingua comes as punishment for daring to declare that she will proclaim Tereus’s wicked deed to the world, ‘fill the woods with my story and move the very rocks to pity.’ Bereft of lingua, Philomel forges a new language through her tapestry needlework, traditionally a specifically feminine form of art.

In *Titus Andronicus*, Shakespeare effaces this possibility of female agency and empowerment by making the rapists chop off Lavinia’s hands. The question as to why Shakespeare needs this additional bit of mutilation is usually answered as his attempt to self consciously allude to his own role as: ‘A craftier Tereus’ who with one stroke of his pen denies Lavinia the means of expression that Ovid’s Philomel had. As Marcus puts it:

Fair Philomela, why she but lost her tongue,
And in a tedious sampler sewed her mind;
But, lovely niece, that means is cut from thee;
A craftier Tereus, cousin, hast thou met.
And he hath cut those pretty fingers off.

(II. iv. 38-42)
However, Greene’s ‘upstart crow’ is not indulging in this gratuitous display of violence and mutilation only to stage his competition with Ovid. By further mutilating his heroine, the patriarchal bard is also paying his debt to his favourite author. This homage involves his exploration of the Renaissance notion of allusion. As Jonathan Bate points out, the etymology of the word—from the Latin al-ludo [lit. ‘to play with’]—indicates that in allusion ‘the source text is brought into play, its presence does significant aesthetic work of a sort which cannot be performed by a submerged source.’36 In *Titus Andronicus*, the Ovidian text is *brought into play* several times. Marcus responds to the sight of his raped and mutilated niece through reference to Philomel’s rape and mutilation by Tereus:

But sure, some Tereus hath deflowered thee,
And lest thou should detect him, cut thy tongue

(II. iv. 26-7)

Later, when he takes her to Titus, Marcus continues to interpret Lavinia’s silence—her muteness—by reference to the tale of Philomel using the gruesome image of the tongue as a ‘sweet melodious bird’ torn from the ‘pretty hollow cage’ of her mouth (III. i. 83-7). Yet at no point does this continued allusion to Ovid constitute real knowledge of Lavinia’s condition. Gillian Murray Kendall observes that the reference to Ovid’s myth ‘further distances the reality before him’37 and as Coppelia Kahn perceptively points out, the ‘text flaunts the rape, then conceals it, points it out, then censors it.’38 The rationale for this disjunction lies in Shakespeare’s sophisticated understanding of the politics of textuality. After a series of textual aporia, the climactic revelation occurs when Ovid’s text is literally brought into the play as young Lucius’ copy of *Metamorphoses* (IV. i. 42). In a desperate attempt to convey the truth of her rape, the mutilated Lavinia turns the pages of *Metamorphoses* in a mad frenzy till she reaches the ‘the tragic tale of Philomel’ (IV. i. 47). The physical presence of Ovid’s text lays bare the truth of what the learned Andronici had failed to understand and interpret despite the references to the Philomel story in their own rhetoric. For Titus, Lavinia’s gesture constitutes a moment of revelation:

Soft, so busily she turns the leaves!
What would she find? Lavinia shall I read?
This is the tragic tale of Philomel,
And treats of Tereus’ treason and his rape-
And rape, I fear, was the root of thy annoy

(IV. i. 45-9)

Ovid’s influence on Shakespeare is perhaps best brought out through Marcus’ much-maligned description of his niece. The passage has earned the censure of critics for the shocking disparity between its figurative language, and Lavinia’s physical presence—bleeding and mutilated on stage. Marcus has been reviled for the incongruous use of the language of love poetry as well as images of gruesome corporeal violation from *Metamorphoses*, that of Orpheus and Cerberus (II. iv. 48-51) in this pastiche.  

An alternative is to read this passage as Shakespeare’s deployment of the Ovidian mode in which brutality done to the human body serves as a metaphor for the creative process itself. Elena Theodorakopoulos in her analysis of the creative process in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* makes brilliant use of Melanie Klein’s psychoanalytic writings on ‘object relations’.

In Klein’s theory, ‘anxiety situations result from a sense of despair at perceiving a loved object in a state of dissolution.’ Reparation, in children’s play, but also in art and creativity, ‘makes good the imagined dissolution or destruction of the loved object.’ Thus instead of the view that Lavinia’s mutilated body is further dismembered and re-fragmented in metaphor, the alternative perception is that Marcus’s description of Lavinia’s hands ‘her two branches, those sweet ornaments, / Whose circling shadows kings have sought to sleep in’ (II. iv. 18-19) and later her ‘lily hands’ that trembled ‘like aspen leaves upon a lute’ and made the ‘silken strings delight to kiss them’ (II. iv. 44-6) are attempts to create the fantasized perfection of his beloved niece whose body is mutilated and fragmented. Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* explores the relationship between mutability and permanence through fragile human bodies subject to violence and change. Through Marcus’s response to Lavinia, Shakespeare evokes the Ovidian creative process in which coherence is premised upon brutal and violent destruction of fragile human bodies. Lavinia’s grotesque double mutilation transforms her into a terrifying work of art.

This psychoanalytic reading of creativity is not to detract from the feminist critique of the tragedy. For the feminist critic, Lavinia’s initial presence creates a discomforting sense of lack of agency and identity. She is integrated into the patriarchal order as an impossibly perfect embodiment of the ideal feminine.
Described by Bassianus as ‘Rome’s rich ornament’ (I. i. 55), Lavinia’s status as a prize object of possession is reiterated in Aaron’s incitement to Demetrius and Chiron to ‘revel in Lavinia’s treasury’ (II. i. 132). As Coppelia Kahn points out:

The virgin daughter’s womb is the hidden, prized treasure of the father, to be guarded, given or exchanged as he determines.\(^{44}\)

Kahn further notes, that this status of the daughter’s virginity may be traced to the idea of what Page DuBois calls ‘thesaurization’ in Greek culture and art, where the female body was represented as vase, oven, temple—objects whose function was to preserve and ensure the safe keeping of goods that were brought into the household.\(^{45}\)

It is the violation of Lavinia’s ‘sacralized chastity’ that provides the justification for Titus’ role as a patriarchal Roman hero and avenger.\(^{46}\)

Saturninus’ choice of Lavinia as his bride clearly indicates that he regards it as the trade-off in a political alliance between himself and Titus. (I. i. 238–45). It is Titus whose support wins him the coveted ‘empery’ who exercises the prerogative of the gift-giver and Lavinia’s role is merely to function as an object in this patriarchal exchange. She displays a silent acquiescence to the wishes of her father and Saturninus.\(^{47}\)

Immediately afterwards she is claimed by Bassianus as his betrothed, and accompanies him as uncomplainingly as she had agreed earlier to her betrothal to Saturninus. Even prior to her rape and mutilation, Lavinia is a silent pawn between her father and her fiancé, both of whom have a role to play in her ultimate mutilation. Lavinia’s muteness is continually stressed in the play; she can neither speak of her rape, nor of how her tragedy is ultimately constituted by patriarchal arbitrariness, with which her father had unthinkingly undone her betrothal, uniting her temporarily with Saturninus. As Douglas E. Green puts it, ‘For Lavinia to speak now would undermine the play’s design—the reconstitution of patriarchy under Lucius.’\(^{48}\)

Lavinia’s mute body becomes the site of a patriarchal battle for possession at multiple levels, as her family members stake their claims to understand and interpret her. Titus portrays himself as a patient and good reader of the text that his daughter’s body provides. Not only is Lavinia ‘a map of woe’ (III. ii. 12) that he must read, he will also interpret ‘all her martyr’d signs’ (III. ii. 36):

Thou shalt not sigh, nor hold thy stumps to heaven,
Nor wink, nor kneel, nor make a sign,  
But I of these will wrest an alphabet,  
And by still practice learn to know thy meaning.

(III. ii. 42-5)

Though Titus Andronicus foregrounds and endorses the patriarchal project of reading the grotesquely mutilated body of Lavinia as a text, the play forwards also the gendered implication of humanist education.

_Lavinia: the tragedy of the learned lady_

As discussed in Chapter 1, the avowed aim of humanist education was to create the _vir virtutis_ or ‘manly man’ by inculcating the values of personal ethics, spirituality and civic responsibility through its new curriculum. However, in theory women were not entirely left out of the humanist programme and educators like Juan Luis Vives, Erasmus and Thomas More—all encouraged women’s education, though they reinforced its containment with traditionally sanctioned roles.49

As Lisa Jardine notes, there was a paradox at the heart of humanist discourses about women’s learning. On the one hand, it saw an education in the classics necessary for strengthening the moral fibre, and for making women active members of a social elite; and on the other, it had misgivings that this very learning and its articulation in the public sphere would rob women of their most prized possession, namely modest silence and passivity.50 A woman’s ability to suffer and to maintain silence was seen as a sign of ideal feminine conduct; the wide circulation and popularity of stories of women’s patience in the face of adversity bear testimony to its value in patriarchy. According to Lisa Jardine, ‘the two most persistent symbols of patient female suffering of the early modern period were Lucretia and Griselda.’51

Discourses of the early modern period, however, draw attention to the equally powerful notion that a woman’s body ‘is naturally grotesque.’52 The grotesque body, following Bakhtin’s formulation, is:

unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits. The stress is laid on those parts of the body that are open to the outside world, that is, the parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world;53
But unlike Bakhtin, who celebrates the grotesque body in the context of the carnival, the writers of conduct books and sermons see the grotesque body as potentially threatening. The woman’s mouth and vagina—and the two were often collapsed—are viewed as potentially dangerous orifices capable of turning her into a grotesque transgressive body. Thus a woman had to be kept under constant surveillance and this surveillance concentrated upon three specific areas, the mouth, chastity and the threshold of the house.\textsuperscript{54} Taking off from Stallybrass’ powerful formulation, it is possible to posit that the learned lady was potentially grotesque; through her access to knowledge and the possibility of its articulation in the public space, the woman of letters could not be contained with the ‘patriarchal territory’ and hence became a threat in the social and sexual sphere.’\textsuperscript{55}

In \textit{Titus Andronicus}, Shakespeare seems to address the paradox inherent in humanist discourses about female education by having a heroine who is erudite in her classical learning yet completely silent through her mutilation. Her classical learning is referred to first by Titus’ admonition to the young Lucius to pay heed to his aunt who has admirably performed the function of his tutor:

\begin{quote}
Ah, boy, Cornelia never with more care
Read to her sons than she hath read to thee
Sweet poetry and Tully’s Orator
\end{quote}

(IV. i. 12-14)

and then by his comment:

\begin{quote}
But thou art deeper read, and better skilled:
Come, and take choice of all my library
\end{quote}

(IV. i. 33-4)

Yet, it is this classical education that functions as the textual imperative of her double mutilation. Barkan sees Shakespeare fascinated with the ‘language-denying metamorphosis’ that compels Ovid’s victims like Philomela to ‘create a new medium, a composite of words and pictures.’\textsuperscript{56} Unlike Philomel who could forge a new language, or to use Patricia Joplin’s perceptive phrase, speak with ‘the voice of the shuttle’,\textsuperscript{57} Lavinia as the learned lady cannot have recourse to the art of textiles, but must be constrained by the new learning that stresses the importance of texts. She becomes, to hark back to Jacques Petit’s term, le monstre—a ‘spectacle’, grotesquely
demonstrating both the necessity and the limitation of her classical learning. Bereft of her tongue and hands, Lavinia can only have recourse to ‘citation from one of the master texts of Latin culture’ which alone can decode for her family members the mystery of her violated and mutilated body.

In a play where negotiation with the pedagogical process is depicted as the means through which subjecthood is constructed for the male protagonist, Lavinia, reduced to a bleeding and mutilated grotesque spectacle, provides an example to the contrary. The function of reading and writing for Lavinia is to deny her agency and re-inscribe her more painfully within the patriarchal territory. Lavinia’s function as a grotesque spectacle is underscored most effectively when, following the injunctions of her uncle Marcus, she ‘scrawls’ on the sandy plot; the term with its variant spelling ‘scrows’ is defined in the OED as ‘to spread the limbs abroad in a sprawling manner.’ As critics have argued, this scene in which Lavinia takes Marcus’ staff into her mouth and struggles against her handicap becomes a re-enactment of the sexual violation that has not been represented on stage. Moreover, as Mary Laughlin Fawcett points out, Lavinia’s use of stuprum, the Latin term for rape, demonstrates that she is constrained by the ‘language of the fathers, the cultural dominators.’

As the play proceeds, Lavinia, the dutiful daughter of patriarchy, is literally and grotesquely transformed into her father’s handmaiden first when Titus asks her to carry his hand in her mouth (III. i. 280-3) and later when he instructs her to hold with her stumps the basin (V. ii. 182-3) to contain the blood of Chiron and Demetrius whose throats he slits. The final ritual of this ‘symbolics of blood’ is enacted when Titus, taking on the role of Virginius, kills his daughter. Lavinia, the potentially grotesque learned lady, undergoes a series of mutilations to ensure that she is finally enclosed, like Virginia, within the territory of revenge marked by her father. Lavinia’s fate harks back to the vexed issue of Shakespeare’s complicity in the culture’s misogyny that makes women ‘symbolically central’ while affecting their erasure through suicide or honour killing.

In his rewriting of the Ovidian tale of rape and revenge, the patriarchal bard scripts another woman Tamora, a malevolent maternal figure as responsible for Lavinia’s tragedy. The angry and vengeful Tamora, incites her sons Demetrius and Chiron to rape Lavinia as a form of vengeance against the Roman patriarch.
Tamora enters the play as a spectacle of the ‘other’. Brought back as a prisoner of war, she is the most striking proof of Titus’ victory after his ten long years of ‘weary wars against the barbarous Goths’ (I. i. 28). Deborah Parker’s 1987 production dramatized the humiliation and ignominy of Tamora as a Roman slave by having her wear a dog collar with Titus holding the end of the leash. When Tamora speaks for the first time she expresses proud disdain, critiquing the Roman practice of treating prisoners as spectacles:

Sufficeth not that we are brought to Rome
To beautify thy triumphs, and return
Captive to thee and to thy Roman yoke?

(I. i. 112-114)

As Tamora points out, despite their claims to marital and chivalric codes, the Andronici fail to understand and honour the enemy’s values which are based on the same Roman principle of ‘valiant doings in their country’s cause’ (I. i. 116), when they decide to slaughter Alarbus, the eldest son of Tamora, to appease the ‘groaning shadows that are gone’ (I. i. 129). It is Titus’ refusal to pay heed to Tamora’s pleas to show mercy to her son (I. ii. 119-23) that sets off the tragedy’s scheme of revenge and retribution.

At one level Titus Andronicus is constructed around the clash between the two civilizations—the Gothic and the Roman—in explicitly gendered terms: the defeat of Tamora, ‘the queen of Goths’ (I. i. 142) by Titus ‘Rome’s best champion’ (I. i. 68) marks the ‘eclipse of female sovereignty by the rule of civil fathers.’ On another level, the play also breaks down this antithesis by making Tamora parallel to, and echo Titus’ role as a patriarch, mourning the death of his ‘five and twenty valiant sons’ (I. i. 82), when she pleads to him shedding ‘A mother’s tears in passion for her son’ (I. i. 109). Later in the play, Aaron remarks that had their ‘witty empress’ been present, she would ‘applaud Andronicus’ conceit’ (IV. ii. 29-30) of sending messages from Horace as a warning to his enemies, thus underscoring Tamora’s classical learning and wit, which make her Titus’ equal and worthy opponent.

It is of course deeply ironical that it is Saturninus—whose claims to the ‘Roman empery’ (I. i. 22) have been endorsed by Titus—who paves the way for the
fulfillment of the Goth’s ‘sharp revenge’ (I. i. 140). In a striking instance of the sudden and inexplicable turn of events that mark the opening scene, Bassianus claims that Lavinia is his betrothed. Saturninus who is already enamoured of his prisoner, promising not only to treat her with the respect that befits her status, but even expressing a wish to make Tamora ‘greater than the queen of Goths’ (I. i. 273) finds this an occasion to spurn Lavinia as a ‘changing piece’ (I. i. 314). Addressing Tamora in hyperbolic terms, comparing her to ‘the stately Phoebe’ ‘mongst her nymphs’ who outshines ‘the gallant’st dames of Rome’, he declares his ‘sudden choice’ of making her his ‘bride’ and the ‘empress of Rome’ (I. i. 319-24). It may be surmised that the unstated cause of Saturninus’ change of heart is the exotic, racialized sexual allure of the Gothic queen.

In what constitutes a striking deviation from patriarchal constructions of gender stereotypes, Tamora combines the roles of an enchantress and a mother. On the one hand, Tamora stresses the maternal aspect of her femininity when she accepts Saturninus’ proposal of marriage, promising to be ‘A loving nurse, a mother to his youth’ (I. i. 337); but on the other, she is also, as Aaron remarks, the ‘siren who will charm Rome’s Saturnine’ (II. i. 23) keeping him enthralled even while she cuckolds him. By constructing Tamora simultaneously as a powerful matriarch and a lascivious wanton woman, the play intensifies early modern culture’s horror of deviant female sexuality embodied in a foreign woman.

The power of this foreigner to politically control and manipulate the Roman emperor is brought out very early in the play. Displaying an astute understanding of Roman politics and of the psychology of the masses and the patricians, Tamora entreats the rash and impetuous Saturninus to make a public show of accepting Titus as his ally to consolidate his newly won position as an emperor (I. i. 449-53). In understanding the need for duplicity and hypocrisy as tools of Machiavellian realpolitik Tamora is a precursor of Lady Macbeth, another strong-willed woman who plays a dominant role in marital and political partnership. But unlike Lady Macbeth, whose concern is to secure the crown for her weak-willed but ambitious husband, Tamora’s hypocrisy is a step to fulfilling her vengeance on the Andronici for subjecting her to humiliation and ignominy: to ‘make them know what ’tis to let a queen / Kneel in the streets and beg for grace in vain’ (I. i. 459-60).
The queen and her ‘swarth Cimmerian’: the horrors of miscegenation

The second act of Titus Andronicus begins with a soliloquy by Aaron, the black Moor, in which he flaunts his relationship with the empress who is ‘Fettered in amorous chains’ to ‘Aaron’s charming eyes’ (II. i. 15-16). The disclosure is startling because Tamora’s image as a wanton lascivious woman—a ‘Semiramis’, a ‘nymph’ and a ‘siren’ (II. i. 22-3)—is at odds with the dignified vanquished warrior queen and bereaved mother of the opening scenes. Aaron’s soliloquy reinforces the notion of the duplicitous nature of the ‘subtle queen of Goths’. Tamora’s illicit amour, a sign of her unbridled sexuality, subverts the norms of Roman patriarchy and marks her out as a deviant female. This adulterous relationship provides the site on which the play’s complex negotiation with the ‘universe of foreign others’ is played out. Aaron’s soliloquy provides an excellent example through which the ideological underpinnings of the erotic charge between Moor and the Queen may be explored. Using images that are strongly reminiscent of the chorus’ rhetoric in Marlowe’s Doctor Faustus, Aaron envisages Tamora climbing to Olympus’ top:

Safe out of fortune’s shot, and sits aloft
Secure of thunder’s crack or lightning flash
Advanced above pale envy’s threatening reach
And having gilt the ocean with his beams,
Gallops the zodiac in his glistening coach
And overlooks the highest-peering hills,
So Tamora.

(II. i. 2-9)

However, Aaron’s choric commentary on Tamora’s ascent to dizzying heights of power is not one of disinterested observation. Since Aaron is a malcontent social climber, Tamora’s rise is crucial to his own ambition of shaking off the ‘slavish weeds and servile thoughts’ (II. i. 18) to ‘be bright, and shine in pearl and gold’ (II. i. 19). Intending to bask in the glory of his socially and politically powerful lover, his ‘imperial mistress’ (II. i. 13) Aaron uses the terminology of falconry to express his desire to ‘mount her pitch’ (II. i. 14). Though he is aware that his social status befits him to ‘wait upon this new-made empress’ (II. i. 20) his confidence in his own sexual prowess, allows him to reject this in favour of a more exalted condition ‘to wanton with this queen’ (II. i. 21). As Stallybrass points out:
Within literary discourse, the class aspirant can be displaced onto the enchanted ground of romance, where considerations of status are transformed into considerations of sexual success.65

Since Aaron imagines his role as shifting between service and making love, his image of Tamora is conspicuous by its duality: she is both an invincible omnipotent goddess, and a lascivious whore, imprisoned in the fetters of his sexual charm. As Stallybrass succinctly puts it, the class-aspirant’s attitude to the woman belonging to the social elite oscillates between the image of her as ‘the enclosed body (the purity of the elite to which he aspires) and the open body (or how else could he attain her?).’66.

Aaron the moor occupies a privileged position vis-à-vis his ‘mistress’, who he in ‘triumph long / Hast prisoner held.’ (II. i. 14-5). Tamora’s willing sexual enslavement strengthens the dominant patriarchal assumptions about the deviant nature of the ‘barbarous’ Gothic woman. By desiring Aaron, who is not only her social inferior but also a black man, the empress demonstrates the monstrous nature of her sexuality, which in turn may be traced to her barbaric foreign origins. In the context of early modern stories involving a black man and a white woman, Lynda Boose comments, ‘this is most frequently depicted as the ultimate romantic-transgressive model of erotic love.’67

Indeed, in Titus Andronicus, Tamora’s secret assignation with Aaron is the play’s only romantic moment. Like Venus in Venus and Adonis, it is Tamora, the sexually mature woman, who takes on the role of the active and passionate partner. She tries to arouse her ‘lovely Aaron’ from his sadness (II. ii. 10) by drawing his attention to the idyllic landscape (II. ii. 12-15). The description of the place as a locus amoenus68 conducive to amorous dalliance, leads Tamora to allude to the love story of ‘the wandering prince and Dido’ (II. ii. 22). The allusion is daring because, if Tamora is the new Dido, then her Aeneas is Aaron, a black man—the very antithesis of white civilized Rome—passionately committed to its destruction. By invoking Virgil’s Aeneid in the context of her liaison with Aaron, Tamora subversively re-writes the founding legend of Rome. As Joyce Greene MacDonald observes:

Tamora’s fanciful comparison also revises the ending of the story of Carthage’s fateful encounter with Rome: the Goths may have been
conquered, but she has not been, and she is laying the groundwork for the ultimate destruction of the Roman empery.\textsuperscript{69}

In \textit{Titus Andronicus}, the subversive potential of such black male-white female amours is undermined by the act of miscegenation, which brings out the conservative racist ideology of the European white culture that denounces and demonizes the racial ‘other’. Critics have noted that taxonomy of colour may not have been the sole determining factor of racial otherness in the early modern period;\textsuperscript{70} however, it has also been pointed out that ‘in the long run . . . Englishmen found blackness in human beings a peculiar and important part of difference.’\textsuperscript{71} The English encounter with the black races can be traced to England’s economic investment in Africa with John Hawkins organizing ‘the first successful slave trading venture between Africa and the West Indies in 1563.’\textsuperscript{72} As Ruth Cowhig notes, Hawkins brought black moors to England; so there were ‘several hundreds of black people living in the households of the aristocracy and the landed gentry.’\textsuperscript{73} The presence of this black community in England caused a great deal of alarm to the state as is brought out in Queen Elizabeth’s letter to the Lord Mayor of London, where she observed that ‘there are of late divers blackmoores brought into this realme, of which kinde of people there are already to manie . . .’\textsuperscript{74} It may not be entirely fortuitous that the year 1596, in which this letter was written, is also the year of the composition of \textit{Titus Andronicus}. The threat and anxiety caused by the ‘blackmoores’, made her Majesty license Casper Van Senden, who had earlier freed eighty-nine Englishmen imprisoned in Spain and Portugal ‘to take up so much blackmoores here in this realme and to transport them to Spain and Portugal’\textsuperscript{75} ostensibly to meet his expenses. Ania Loomba notes that the warrant issued on 18 July 1596 contrasting the blacks with the white Christian subjects reveals a clear racist bias since the European culture constituting ‘us’ is posited as superior to the inferior non-European cultures. Such a split also forms the crux of the discourse of Orientalism.\textsuperscript{76}

That the derogation of blackness was clearly an integral part of the racial discourse of the early modern period is evident from the OED’s list of negative connotations of the term black in the sixteenth century, which ranged from soiled, dirty, foul to malignant, sinister, atrocious, indicating disgrace and liability to punishment.\textsuperscript{77} Bassianus draws upon such discursive derogations of blackness in his sneering comment.
Believe me, queen. Your swarth Cimmerian
Doth make your honour of his body’s hue,
Spotted, detested and abominable

(II. iii. 71-3)

The pervasiveness of this discourse of white racism is brought out in the brilliant opening scene of Othello, where Iago and Roderigo also draw upon the imputed uncontrolled and rampant sexual character of the black man—‘black ram’, ‘lascivious Moor’—in order to arouse and manipulate Brabantio’s patriarchal and racial anxieties. The myth of the black man’s excessive potency had a long history and can be traced to the writings of Herodotus, Diodorus and other classical writers. Early modern travel narratives confirmed the link between blackness and monstrous sexuality in their ‘empirical evidence’ of black men who were ‘furnisht with such members as are after a sort burthensome unto them.’78 Possessor of the monstrous phallus, the black man who is an ‘imputed competitor for possession of the white male’s . . . assumed ownership of white females’,80 poses a specific sexual threat to the dominantly white Venetian society in Othello. The peculiarly gender-marked racial anxiety culminates in the horror of miscegenation, expressed through Iago’s warning to Brabantio as he vividly conjures up Othello and Desdemona’s sexual intercourse as animal coupling:

Even now, now, very now, an old black ram
Is tupping your white ewe; arise, arise!
Awake the snorting citizens with the bell,
Or else the devil will make a grandsire of you,
Arise I say.

(Othello, I. i. 88-92)

The anxiety of miscegenation, which exists as Iago’s lurid fantasy in Othello, is made real in Titus Andronicus. In another instance of the play’s literalization of figures of speech, Bassianus’ racist comment about Aaron’s hue that stains Tamora’s honour, is made flesh when the Roman empress gives birth to a black boy. The baby’s startling blackness, which seems to indicate that white Tamora had no contribution in his making, recalls the anecdote by George Best about ‘an Ethiopian as black as cole’ who married an Englishwoman and fathered a child ‘in all respects as black as the father was’ though the baby was born in England. In an age where latitudinal
explanations of skin colour—derived from classical sources—were still popular, Best’s anecdote of miscegenation was a startling discovery about the intrinsic characteristics of races. The ideological import of the tale is expressed through Best’s explanation about the child’s blackness which:

proceedeth rather of some natural infection of that man, [emphasis mine] which was so strong that neither the nature of the Clime, neither the good complexion of the mother, concurring, could anything alter.\textsuperscript{81}

Best went one step further to establish the Biblical origins of this ‘infection’ of blackness by tracing it to Cham’s disobedience of his father Noah’s commandment to practice continence while on the Ark. Accordingly, God punished this transgression of patriarchal and Divine order by his decree that not only Chus, the son born of this intercourse, but his progeny should be ‘so black and loathsome, that it might remaine a spectacle of disobedience to all the world. And of this blacke and cursed Chus came all these blacke Moores which are in Africa.’\textsuperscript{82} Miscegenation thus provided the occasion for an alternative discourse about racial origins; the cunning use of Biblical exegesis endorsed the specifically racist ideology by connecting blackness with sexual lasciviousness and with the subversion of authority and good governance.

In \textit{Titus Andronicus}, the responses evoked by the birth of the black boy are clearly within such racist paradigms. The nurse laments that the child is ‘Our empress’ shame and the stately Rome’s disgrace’ (IV. ii. 61). Similar sentiments are echoed by Chiron and Demetrius when they comment that, ‘our mother is shamed forever’ (IV. ii. 114) and that ‘Rome will despise her for this foul escape’ (IV. ii. 115). While Demetrius and Chiron may have been complicit in their mother’s illicit amour with Aaron—the man who masterminded their schemes of revenge—miscegenation reverses the situation. Demetrius now denounces the black moor as a ‘hellish dog’ (IV. ii. 79) who has ‘betrayed thy noble mistress’ (IV. ii. 108) and both brother’s accuse Aaron of having ‘undone’ their mother. However, the birth of the black baby is not merely a scandal. The community expresses its loathing and abhorrence for the newborn baby in terms that are distinctly racist; the nurse describes him as a ‘devil’ (IV. ii. 65), a ‘joyless, dismal, black and sorrowful issue’ (IV. ii. 68) that is ‘loathsome as a toad’ (IV. ii. 69). Tamora is horrified at the birth of the child; as the nurse tells Aaron, it is Tamora who has sent him to the father ‘And bids thee christen it with thy dagger’s point’ (IV. ii. 72). Chiron immediately agrees with the
decision, proclaiming that ‘It shall not live’ (IV. ii. 82) and Demetrius curses the child as ‘the offspring of so foul a fiend’ (IV. ii. 81).

As Joyce MacDonald provocatively asks, ‘Why is the birth of Aaron and Tamora’s illegitimate child the occasion of such shock among people who have every reason to hate Rome and Romans?’83 The birth of the black baby is an occasion that dramatically encapsulates the truth that Titus Andronicus enacts a moment in history in which the distinction between civilized Romans and savage barbaric Goths has collapsed completely. At the very beginning of the play, the apparent contrast between the two cultures is dismantled in the behaviour of the future emperor of the Andronici, whose ‘cruel irreligious piety’ (I. i. 133) is expressed through his bloodthirsty cry to slaughter Alarbus:

Away with him! And a make a fire straight;
And with our swords, upon a pile of wood,
Let’s hew his limbs till they be clean consumed.

(I. i. 130-2)

Chiron scathingly comments that Scythia, renowned for the barbarity of its nomadic tribes was never ‘half so barbarous’ (I. i. 134) as the civilized Romans.

*Titus Andronicus* depicts a twilight zone in which civilizations do not clash but get thoroughly interpellated into one another. Hence Lucius can only restore order and lay the foundation of a new Roman empire with the aid of the ‘band of warlike Goths’ (V. ii. 113) which has unexpectedly risen to the defense of the Roman ideal embodied in Titus. Demetrius and Chiron may resort to crimes of rape and murder against Titus’ family but they too have naturalized the ideology of Roman ness and on the issue of miscegenation speak with the voice of the Romans. Tamora lives up to her declaration that ‘I am incorporate in Rome’ (I. i. 467)) by savagely denouncing her own offspring who does not bear the stamp of Roman identity.

Following feminist appropriations of Lacanian psychoanalysis it is possible to posit that as the empress of Rome Tamora has internalized the Roman patriarchal ideology in which her symbolic value is as:

the empty vessel through whom . . . the father’s phallus and the sign of the father’s authority is passed to the son . . . The son receives the
externally evident sign of the father and becomes synonymous with him at birth.\textsuperscript{84}

In her refusal to acknowledge as the black baby and her determination to have him killed, Tamora enacts the dominant (Roman) culture’s horror of her perverse maternal function, her monstrous femininity.

The ‘destested, dark, blood-drinking pit’: The monstrous womb

The play’s most powerful image evoking the masculine dread and loathing of monstrous maternal femininity is the ‘abhorred pit.’ (II. iii. 98) It is Tamora who first invokes the pit in the fiction that she had been enticed to it by Lavinia and Bassianus:

They told me here, at dead time of the night,
A thousand fiends, a thousand hissing snakes,
Ten thousand swelling toads, as many urchins,
Would make such fearful and confused cries,
As any mortal body hearing it,
Should straight fall mad or else die immediately

(II. iii. 99-104)

The pit full of repulsive and poisonous creatures evokes the image of hell as depicted in classical literature of the underworld,\textsuperscript{85} while its fecundity also makes it a symbol of the female genitals, evoking patriarchal revulsion. Quintus’ horrified response to the pit into which his brother Martius has fallen provides a bold onstage counterpoint\textsuperscript{86} to Lavinia’s rape that is taking place offstage:

What subtle hole is this
Whose mouth is covered with rude-growing briers
Upon whose leaves are drops of new shed blood
As fresh as morning dew distilled on flowers?

(II. ii. 198-201)

Chiron’s instruction to Demetrius to drag the corpse of Bassianus to ‘some secret hole / And make his dead trunk pillow to our lust’ (II. iii. 129-30), provides a realistic explanation of the drops of blood near the pit. It is of course part of Aaron’s ploy to lure Titus’ sons to this pit and have the murder of Bassianus pinned on them. However, the symbolic function of the pit, as brought out through its imagery, is to
evoke a bleeding vagina calling attention to the Lavinia’s rape as the deflowering of a chaste maiden. As Coppelia Kahn perceptively comments:

Though Lavinia is a ‘new-married lady’ (II. i. 15) when she is raped, Tamora uses the term ‘deflower’ (II. ii. 191) to describe what is done to her, thus representing her as a virginal daughter rather than chaste wife.87

The pit is an ‘unhallowed and bloodstained hole’ (II. ii. 210) literally because it contains the bloodied corpse of Bassianus. Symbolically, however, the ‘blood stained’ hole becomes obscene and ‘unhallowed’ through its fusion of marital consummation with rape. Bate notes that it is as if Lavinia is being deflowered ‘for the second time in a few hours, with the difference that on the wedding-night it was consensual.’88

Psychoanalytic readings indicate that even before the culminating image of the pit as a ‘swallowing womb’ (II. ii. 239) the metaphoricity of the pit traces its anatomical links with the maternal womb. In this specific context, where Tamora, the vengeful mother, has abetted the rape of Lavinia and the murder of her husband, this womb as a ‘detested, dark, blood-drinking pit’ (II. ii. 224) becomes a symbol of maternal malevolence.89 The mythical reference to Pyramus’ dead body bathed in ‘maiden blood’ reinforces the association of death with deflowering, intensifying the horror of the womb as a tomb.

The fascinated revulsion displayed by Quintus and Martius may be linked to patriarchy’s fear of and anxiety about the female genitals and reproductive organs, the hidden hence mysterious and dangerous parts of the female anatomy. In the description of the pit as ‘this fell devouring receptacle / As hateful as Cocytus’ misty mouth’ (II. ii. 235-6) the female genital becomes the vagina dentata or the gaping ‘other’ mouth. Grotesque descriptions of the female genitals as the devouring mouth are found in the works of early modern Italian writers like Folegno.90

The horror and revulsion of the vagina as a gaping ‘other’ mouth may be linked to the Freudian theory of castration. According to Freud, the terror associated with Medusa’s decapitated head is the fear of castration, aroused in a boy when he ‘catches sight of the female genitals, probably those of an adult, surrounded by hair.’91 In Freud’s psychoanalytic reading the representation in art of Medusa’s hair as coiled snakes and the terror of castration has to be understood in the context of the ‘strongly
homosexual’ Greek culture, which made inevitable the construct of a ‘woman as a being who frightens and repels because she is castrated.’

A mature woman of dangerous sexual allure and fecundity, as well as a vengeful murderous mother, Tamora, the queen of the Goths, epitomizes both the castrated and castrating female. Through the over-determined symbolic significance of the pit as vagina, womb, tomb and mouth, the play projects early modern patriarchal anxiety and dread of the maternal feminine.

Revenge, Rapine and Murder: the grotesque spectacle

In her psychoanalytic reading of the play Coppelia Kahn argues that Titus’ recoil from revenge even when he has knowledge about his enemies has to do with masculine anxieties about the maternal feminine embodied in Tamora. Ironically, it is Tamora who takes the initiative to rouse the procrastinating avenger hero and create the situation through which the savage and barbaric denouement of the revenge tragedy can take place. Like its opening scene the final act of Titus Andronicus presents Tamora as a spectacle of ‘otherness’; she dresses in ‘strange and sad habilment’ (V. ii. 1) to dupe the semi-deranged Titus into believing that she is ‘Revenge sent from below / To join with him and right his heinous wrongs’ (V. ii. 3-4). She is accompanied by Demetrius and Chiron disguised fittingly as Rapine and Murder. In order to regain control of the rapidly deteriorating political situation Tamora stages this grotesque and perverse ‘morality’ interlude to ferret information from Titus about his son Lucius and ‘find some cunning practice out of hand / To scatter and disperse the giddy Goths.’(V. ii. 77-78). While playing the role as Revenge, Tamora tells Titus that:

There’s not a hollow cave or lurking place,
No vast obscurity or misty vale
Where bloody murder or detested rape
Can couch for fear, but I will find them out.

(V. ii. 35-8)

It is of course ironically fitting that Tamora’s words should evoke the actual incidents of Lavinia’s rape and Bassianus’ murder in the ‘obscure plot’ (II. iii. 77) where Aaron had outlined the scheme of the dual ‘revenge’ to her. For the audience or reader Tamora’s play-acting is an act of ‘re-membering’ of her earlier ruthlessness, when
like a ‘beastly creature’ (II. iii. 182) incapable of pity, she had turned a deaf ear to Lavinia’s pleadings, egging on her sons to rape and then kill her:

When ye have the honey ye desire
Let not this wasp outlive us, both to sting

(II. iii. 130-1)

Having referred to Lavinia’s rape in a vulgar and callous manner as the deflowering of the ‘trull’ (II. iii. 190) Tamora had demonstrated that she was indeed the epitome of the monstrous unfeminine, a ‘blot and enemy’ to womanhood (II. iii. 182-3). Titus, who is fully cognizant of Tamora’s intentions, manipulates her ruse of the ‘play within the play’—an integral aspect of the generic convention of revenge tragedy—to achieve his revenge.

The patriarchal underpinning of revenge in Titus Andronicus expresses itself most powerfully in the cannibal banquet arranged by Titus. Keeping up the pretence that Demetrius and Chiron are indeed Rapine and Murder, he kills them to fulfill his vengeance, telling them:

For worse than Philomel you used my daughter,
And worse than Progne I will be revenged

(V. ii.194-5)

Titus’ reference to Philomel’s sister Progne completes the Shakespearean transformation of the Ovidian myth, marking the final patriarchal appropriation of a tale of female vengeance. According to Jane Burns, in Ovid’s story, Philomel and Progne ‘repudiate patriarchal positionings of women through the answering of one sister’s story of rape by the second sister’s story of maternal infanticide.’ In Titus Andronicus, the complex figure of Progne—torn between loyalties to her natal and marital families—is totally excised. Titus’ declaration, to be revenged ‘worse than Progne’ erases, even as it evokes, the scope of female anger at rape and agency in punishing the crime. As Karen Robertson argues, the tragedy’s exclusion of women from activities of just vengeance may be linked to contemporary ‘Tudor prohibitions against feminine anger and participation in the operation of justice clearly articulated in the homiletic injunctions.’ Titus’ appropriation of Progne’s role allows the patriarchal bard to give a final misogynist twist to the Ovidian tale through its reworking of the cannibal banquet. As Karen Robertson perceptively points out:
In the Philomel story, the rapist’s punishment conflates rape with unlawful eating; the male body out of control manifests disorder through cannibalism. In *Titus Andronicus* the cannibal feast is prepared for Tamora . . . the violent intrusion into the body of Lavinia is punished by a horrific ingestion, not by the rapists but by their mother.97

The play’s abhorrence and dread of the malevolent mother culminates in the cannibal banquet in which Tamora is transformed literally into a grotesque devouring swallowing womb ‘Eating the flesh that she herself hath bred’ (V. iii. 60).

Roman patriarchy’s need to expel the monstrous, alien female—the Kristevan ‘abject’—finds powerful expression in the last lines of the play. Lucius, the newly crowned emperor of Rome, pronounces judgement on Tamora the ‘ravenous Tiger’ (V. iii. 194) declaring:

No funeral rite nor man in mourning weed,
No mournfull bell shall ring her burial;

(V. iii. 195-6)

The play, which began on a note of dissent and strife over the issue of funeral rites, fittingly ends with Lucius’ authoritative and unchallenged decision to deny the last rites to Tamora. The feminized savage ‘other’ of masculine civilized Rome continues to be punished even after her death; Tamora is transformed into a grotesque spectacle, a body for ‘beasts and birds to prey.’ (V. iii. 197)

According to traditional interpretations Lavinia, the dutiful daughter and chaste matron, and Tamora, the malevolent mother and adulteress, occupy morally antithetical positions. However, this antithesis does not adequately answer the ‘problematized’ position of Lavinia in the patriarchal sex / gender system. As a figure of ‘sacralized chastity’ Lavinia is Roman patriarchy’s most treasured possession, but as the learned lady—the ambiguously empowered female subject of humanist education—she is also potentially transgressive. Thus Lavinia’s grotesque mutilation is doubly necessary; she has to lose her chastity, her tongue and hands in order to ensure her containment within the ‘patriarchal territory’. It is her rape and mutilation—rather than the murder of her two brothers—that is instrumental in shaping Titus’ subjectivity as a tragic hero and in providing the ultimate justification.
of the Roman revenge against the barbaric Goths. Tamora, the savage queen of Goths, is an unambiguous figure of racialized ‘otherness’; her dangerous sexual allure captivates Saturninus thus ensuring the infiltration of the ‘other’ into the civilized Roman world. Empowered as the empress of Rome Tamora pollutes its patriarchal and patrician order through her illicit amour with Aaron the black Moor. Yet most importantly, she is a subversive figure who perceives her raison d’être as the downfall of the house of Andronici.

Pitted against each other in the play’s binaries of sacramental / diabolic, familiar / alien, Lavinia and Tamora are nevertheless discomfortingly close to each other. The play’s savage denouement spares neither. Both the polluted and the pollutant woman have to be violently excised from the Roman ‘patriarchal territory’. It is through their deaths that masculine Rome consolidates its imperial project.

‘To give a kingdom for a mirth’: Roman anxieties and the Egyptian queen

In Antony and Cleopatra (1608), written almost fourteen years after his early Roman play Titus Andronicus, Shakespeare revisited the topic of Rome’s encounter with an alien civilization. Though it is not customary to regard the two plays together, they merit comparison with regard to their generic quality, their ideological oppositions between Rome and its ‘other’ brought out most significantly in their representations of ‘alien’ female figures.

Shakespeare draws upon Roman sources in both texts: while Ovid’s presence permeates Titus Andronicus, the influence of Plutarch is clearly identifiable in passages that—in the form of North’s translation of The Life of Marcus Antonius—virtually echo the Roman historian’s work. Like Titus Andronicus, Antony and Cleopatra too is a generic hybrid. A Roman play, a tragedy laced with comedy, Shakespeare’s text testifies that literary hybrids or grotesques were the rule in the Renaissance. But more importantly, Shakespeare’s last Roman play resembles Titus Andronicus in the way it elaborates upon the relation between an alien culture / civilization and Rome through the structure of binary opposition.

In Antony and Cleopatra such schematization is central to an understanding of the play and is related also to its varying prose styles. The gendering of cultures hinted at in Titus Andronicus dominates the symbolic opposition between Rome and Egypt. Rome—marked by measure, stability, austerity, duty and commitment—is
male; conversely, Egypt—described through images of excess, disorder, irrationality, sensuousness and changeability—is characterized as female. However, the gender binaries have been challenged by recent feminist criticism. Most notable among these is the postcolonial feminist critique that identifies the gendering of binaries as integral to both colonialist and Orientalist discourses so that oriental Egypt is always-already feminine within the overarching imperial imagination of Rome. Within this schema, Cleopatra, identified persistently with Egypt through the play’s allusions and direct addresses, is both Oriental feminine and an embodiment of Egypt’s abundance.

The gendering of the two cultures carries a special resonance in the context of the play’s images of Egyptian Bacchanal. In contrast to masculine Rome’s measure and severity feminized Egypt has been identified as a space of excess. Following Bakhtin it may be argued that if Rome symbolizes the Lenten ‘world of official order and official ideology’ then Egypt enjoys a licensed ‘extraterritoriality’ that is characteristic of the Carnival.

The most vivid evocation of Egypt as a land of carnivals occurs in Octavius’ moral censure of Antony (I. iv. 3-7, 17-28) Shakespeare’s Egypt is marked by unending feasts, drunken revelry, where Antony ‘fishes, drinks, and wastes / The lamps of night in revel’ (I. iv. 4-5) and social leveling in which Antony keeps ‘the turn of tippling with a slave,’ (I. iv. 19). This carnivalesque topsy-turvy endorses gender inversions; Octavius mockingly evokes the blurring of gender roles when he refers to the relation between Antony and Cleopatra in the following terms: Antony ‘is not more manlike / Than Cleopatra, nor the queen of Ptolemy / More womanly than he.’ (I. iv. 5-7)

The terms that dominate Octavius’ description of Egypt—‘waste’, ‘sweat’ ‘voluptuousness’ and ‘surfeit’—evoke the carnival’s grotesque corporeality. Cleopatra is central to this carnivalesque grotesque world of Egypt. Thus Cleopatra talks of her love for Antony as her ‘sweating labour’ (I. iii. 95); Antony’s ‘serpent of old Nile’ (I. v. 26) embodies the overflowing fecundity of the Nile. Adelman points out that Egyptian fecundity is mysterious and perceived as both creative and destructive. Cleopatra evokes the mythical Isis—the goddess of fertility and generation—an allusion reinforced by their common association with the serpent. The Egyptian queen is fertile land herself: Caesar ‘ploughed her and she cropped’
The images that cluster around Cleopatra closely align her with the Bakhtinian concept of the carnivalesque body, an open, leaky, fertile entity that is constantly in touch with the world outside and is in the process of becoming.

Cleopatra’s status as grotesque is perhaps best expressed in the play’s contrast between her and Octavia. The Romans identify Cleopatra as a lustful gypsy (I. i. 9) and a strumpet. (I. i. 13); Pompey’s desire, ‘Let witchcraft join with beauty, lust with both/ Tie up the libertine, in a field of feasts’ (II. i. 22-3) transforms her into a Circean figure, an enchantress who has bewitched and incapacitated Antony. A ‘boggler ever’ (III. xiii. 115), Cleopatra betrays her lover twice. As the heartbroken Antony tells Eros, she has ‘Packed cards with Caesar, and false-played my glory / Unto an enemy’s triumph’ (IV. xiv. 19-20).

Unlike the duplicitous, flamboyantly amoral Cleopatra, Octavia is a ‘piece of virtue’ (III. ii. 28), ‘a gem of women’ (III. xiii. 113). The messenger from Rome, terrified of rousing the wrath of Cleopatra, the ‘dread Queen’ (III. iii. 8), tells her that Octavia is ‘low-voiced’ (III. iii. 13) which the jealous Cleopatra immediately interprets as ‘Dull of tongue’ (III. iii. 16). Having got his cue, the messenger goes on to describe Octavia: ‘Her motion and her station are as one / She shows a body rather than a life / ‘A statue than a breather’ (III. iii. 19-21). The holy, cold and still Octavia epitomizes the Bakhtininan categories of the classical body, closed, monumental and sealed off from the world.

Within patriarchy’s ‘sex/ gender system’ women operate not as partners but as objects of exchange between men. Octavia is prized by Rome because her marriage to Antony will heal the rupture between him and her brother Octavius, hold them in ‘perpetual amity’ (II. ii. 132) thereby consolidating male bonding: ‘Her love to both/ Would each to other, and all loves to both / Draw after her’ (II. ii. 142-4). Octavia is clearly femininity ‘produced by Rome and submitted utterly to the imperatives of the empire.’ Cleopatra in contrast continually threatens patriarchal order by entering into the privileged masculine space as a sovereign queen, making and marrying both her fortune and Antony’s in the battlefield. Though she is a failed virago escaping inexplicably ‘i’th’ midst o’th’fight’ (III. x. 11), she nevertheless plays at being a man, switching gender roles with Antony in her festive and drunken revelry: ‘I drunk him to his bed / Then put my tires and mantles on him whilst / I wore his sword Phillipan’ (II. v. 27-9). In appropriating the phallic symbol Cleopatra is an Omphale who
unarms and emasculates her Herculean hero; she is like the armed Venus who wins victory over Mars. When Antony tells Mardian, ‘O thy vile lady / She has robbed me of my sword’ (IV. xv. 22-3) he draws attention to the debilitating effects of his emasculation.

Transvestite disguise is just one among the gamut of roles she plays. Cleopatra’s self is in continual flux, a state not of being but of what she terms her ‘becomings’ (I. iii. 97). She is not only described in hyperbolic terms by both Enobarbus and Antony, but is also verbally copious. Cleopatra is the possessor of what Hélène Cixous terms ‘the unimpeded tongue’ which ‘bursts partitions, classes and rhetorics, orders and codes . . . of phallogocentrism.’ Cleopatra’s powers of performance are manifested in the several roles through which she fashions her self/identity.

Following Stallybrass, who argues that patriarchal discourses regarded ‘all women as naturally grotesque’, and laid down strictures of the closed mouth, chastity and enclosure within the household, it may be argued that Cleopatra embodies feminine transgression in its extreme form. Flouting all norms of proper feminine conduct with great élan, Cleopatra is an epitome of the female grotesque.

Cleopatra’s ‘infinite variety’: theatre and the grotesque, fabulous ‘other’

To regard Cleopatra as grotesque may seem bizarre and even blasphemous. Shakespeare’s Egyptian queen is the most celebrated female character in Renaissance drama holding centre stage in critical debates over centuries. However, my submission is that it is Shakespeare’s Cleopatra’s ‘infinite variety’ (II. ii. 246) that attests to her status as the grotesque. The play’s self conscious attention to the processes through which the myth of Cleopatra is created open up entirely new dimensions when read in the light of twentieth century theories of grotesque.

Adelman has pointed out that the Roman poets and historians who have written about Cleopatra have displayed a combination of ‘attraction and repulsion.’ This unusual response that Cleopatra elicits—a simultaneous fascination and revulsion—is analogous to the ones evoked by the grotesque. In Shakespeare’s play it is Antony’s contrary emotional response that determines the audience and the critics’ perception of Cleopatra. In the beginning of the play he describes his enthrallment to the ‘wrangling queen / Whom everything becomes’—to chide, to laugh
To weep’ (I. i. 50-52) acknowledging that ‘every passion fully strives / To make itself, in thee, fair and admired!’ (I. i. 52-3). Yet, soon after he identifies her as the ‘strong Egyptian fetters’ that he must break (I. ii. 109) in order to prove his mettle in the battlefield and the affairs of the state. In spite of this awareness he succumbs to her fatal charms jeopardizing his role as a military general by ‘following her like a doting mallard’ (III. ix. 19). When he becomes aware that Cleopatra has betrayed him to Caesar, the angry and bitter Antony fulminates against ‘the foul Egyptian’ (IV. xiii. 10), the ‘Triple turned whore’ (IV. xiii. 13), the ‘false-soul of Egypt’ (IV. xiii. 25). However, it is the false news of Cleopatra death (IV. xiv. 27-34) that cleaves his heart. The valiant and irate hero like Ajax is ‘No more a soldier’ (IV. xiv. 39); fusing images of death and desire, he becomes ‘A bridegroom in my death’ (IV. xiv. 101).

Cleopatra evokes these responses also because one of the play’s functions is to draw attention to the process of her representation as an amalgam, yoking together disparate elements. Indeed there are several instances of incongruous mixing of high and low, the tragic and the comic in Cleopatra. Perhaps the most infamous is her response to the dying Antony; refusing to climb down from her monument she insists on hoisting her lover up to her: ‘Here’s sport indeed! How heavy weighs my lord! / Our strength is all gone into heaviness; / That makes the weight’ (IV. xv. 33-5).

This section chooses Enobarbus’ phrase about Cleopatra’s ‘infinite variety’ as the key to her status as a fantastic hybrid creature that aesthetic discourses identify as grotesque. Immediately after he evokes the magnificent vision of Cleopatra sailing in the barge to meet Antony at Cydnus in hyperbolic terms (II. ii. 201-215, 216-228) he describes having seen the queen ‘Hop forty paces through the public street, / And having lost breath, she spoke and panted, / That she did make defect perfection, / And breathless, pour breath forth’ (II. ii. 239-42). The descriptions juxtapose several contraries: a stately spectacle which is curiously reminiscent of Elizabeth’s ceremonious processions is set beside a scene of ‘playing holidays’ among plebeians; the vision of a female monarch whose posture and attire evokes the mythical Venus is off set by the image of an ordinary breathless mortal being. The response of the audience shifting between the high magnificent and the petty is confused and perplexed. Critics have noted that the sense of grotesque is intrinsically linked with the confusion created in the mind when it encounters a phenomenon that cannot be
easily categorized. But if the confusion is not absolute, we have an inkling of the unity and the character in the midst of the strangeness of the form, then we have the grotesque. ‘It is the half-formed, the perplexed, and the suggestively monstrous.’

Enobarbus’ Cleopatra unfixes and unsettles the mind because she beggars all description (II. ii. 208). In his attempt to convey Cleopatra’s ‘infinite variety’ Enobarbus plans a strategy in which Cleopatra can only be located at a juncture where mutually exclusive categories—hunger / satiety, vile / holy—collide. In her analysis of this passage, Carol Cook draws attention to a significant linguistic lack:

Cleopatra not only threatens to make a gap in nature—she is a gap in the speech. Enobarbus has words for the barge, its trappings, the smiling Cupids and Nereids surrounding Cleopatra, but she herself beggars all description’ escaping the language that would fix her as a spectacle.

In his theoretical postulations on the grotesque, Harpham points out that the grotesque ‘occupies a gap or an interval: it is the middle of a narrative of emergent comprehension.’ He posits that grotesque must take into account the elements of understanding and perception, noting, ‘The perception of the grotesque is never a fixed or stable thing, but always a process, a progression.’

Cleopatra, who exists outside the reach of language in a linguistic gap or ‘interval’ creates a response that may be understood as grotesque. This notion of grotesque as a gap / interval also aligns it with the experience of paradox. Harpham points out that the grotesque and paradox are comparable in so far as ‘Paradox is a way of turning language against itself by asserting both terms of contradiction at once.’

Enobarbus’ strategy of expressing Cleopatra’s ‘infinite variety’ turns her into a paradox:

but she makes hungry
Where most she satisfies; for vilest things
Become themselves in her, that the holy priests
Bless her when she is riggish.

(II. ii. 247-250)

Drawing upon the writings of late Romantics like Hugo, Harpham explains that the grotesque may be related to the experience of sublime. ‘A shift of vision, often from the literal to symbolic and suddenly the deformed is revealed as sublime.’ As Carl
Cook puts it, ‘Cleopatra is always and never identical with herself: her identity is the refusal of identity, of essence . . . her evasion of fixity.’

The play’s refusal to grant her a fixed, stable, essential identity leads to an affirmation that Cleopatra’s selves are constituted through performance—a continual self conscious role-playing, often expressed as exaggerated theatricality.

Traditionally understood as traits of the duplicitous femme fatale, feminist criticism has seen Cleopatra’s theatricality as a source of empowerment. On a contrary note Loomba argues that Cleopatra’s status as ‘the supreme actress, artifice herself’ is integral to the Orientalist / colonialist stereotype of the feminine ‘other.’

While the play does indeed evoke such gendered otherization, it also problematizes category formation itself. Thus, if Egypt / Cleopatra is Rome’s ‘other’ in its abundance, then such excess also threatens to swamp binary divisions through the play’s pervasive images of ‘melting’. Thus Cleopatra is a figure of the play’s larger fluid principle, ‘which destabilizes principles, overflowing the confines of categories as the Nile overflows its banks.’

Cleopatra’s resistance to Roman attempts to transform her into a spectacle of ‘otherness’ is the play’s final celebration of this ‘infinite variety’. In a sense the whole of Act V can be read as a struggle between the Roman emperor and the Egyptian queen over the control of representation; it is a contest that foregrounds the dynamics of power in a culture which is ‘dramaturgical at heart.’ Both Octavius and Cleopatra realize that the ultimate proof of Roman Imperial power lies in being able to turn the conquered into a spectacle.

Octavius Caesar’s intention to capture Cleopatra and turn her into a Roman display is clearly stated: ‘For her life in Rome / Would be eternal in our triumph’ (V. i. 65-6). As Proculeius tells Cleopatra during their encounter: ‘Let the world see / His nobleness well acted, which your death / Will never let come forth’ (V. ii. 43-45). Cleopatra retorts with her declaration to ruin ‘this mortal house’ (V. ii. 50), throwing a challenge to the messenger: ‘Do Caesar what he can’ (V. ii. 51) and asserting, that she ‘Will not wait pinioned at your master’s court’ (V. ii. 52). Later, agonizing over the consequences of her fate as Octavius’ captive, she creates a vivid scenario of how she and her women will be turned into ‘spectacles’ of entertainment for the Roman mob:

Nay, ’tis most certain, Iras. Saucy lictors
Will catch at us like strumpets, and scald rhymers
Ballad us out o’tune. The quick comedians
Extemporally will stage us, and present
Our Alexdrian revels;

(V. ii. 213-17)

Feminist critics have commented extensively on the multiple implications of her famous ‘and I shall see / Some squeaking Cleopatra boy my greatness / I’th’ posture of a whore’ (V. ii. 218-20). It has been seen as a ‘theatrical equivalent of the quibble’ since the Renaissance acting convention would have a boy actor ‘a squeaking male voice’ speak these lines.130 This metatheatrical device thus draws attention to ‘to the absence of Cleopatra from this scene’—an absence which constitutes ‘the unrepresentable woman, the unassimilable other.’131 Within the play’s immediate context—the power struggle over representation—the passage about the boy-actor serves as a prologue to Cleopatra’s own theatre / stage show intended ‘To fool their preparation and to conquer / Their most absurd intents’ (V. ii. 223-4).

Cleopatra’s decision to commit suicide—a typically Roman stoic phenomenon—has generated controversy among feminist critics. Loomba, for example, argues that Cleopatra’s suicide marks a shift ‘from unruly theatricality to . . . the conventional ‘climax’ and stock devises of formal drama.’ Loomba’s reading that the play presents Cleopatra as capitulating to the dominion of Rome132 seems to be validated by Cleopatra’s own admission: ‘Now from head to foot / I am marble-constant. Now the fleeting moon / No planet is of mine’ (V. ii. 238-40). Yet what appears to be a capitulation to the Roman principle and its valorization of the classical closed monumental body is merely another sign of Cleopatra’s duplicity. By having a rural labourer smuggle in the ‘pretty worm of Nilus’ (V. ii. 243) in a basket of figs Cleopatra chooses a mode of death that is most appropriate for the cunning and duplicitous ‘serpent of Old Nile’. She compares the suicide to the moment when she appeared before Antony at Cydnus (V. ii. 227-8) preparing for death as she had done for seduction. She dresses herself in full regalia, asking her women to ‘Give me my robe. Put on my crown.’(V. ii. 279). The Egyptian queen who is full of ‘immortal longings’ (V. ii. 280) imagines the ‘stroke of death’ to a ‘lover’s pinch’ (V. ii. 294) The erotic and the maternal fuse together in the visual spectacle of the asp at her breast which is imagined as the babe that ‘sucks the nurse asleep’ (V. ii. 309). Even as
she appropriates the ‘high Roman fashion’, the infinitely variable actress subverts it through mockery and parody.  

Shakespeare’s Antony and Cleopatra significantly problematizes Caesar’s attempt to bring Egypt under his domination. Though he gains political control of Egypt he fails to produce the ultimate proof of his triumph—that of having the Egyptian queen displayed as a ‘spectacle’. Instead, Cleopatra seems to subversively appropriate the patriarchal notion of woman as ‘looked-at-ness’ by organizing and executing her own spectacular suicide. As Jyotsna Singh has argued, the play’s celebration of Cleopatra’s theatricality, her ‘role-playing’, has to be historicized in the context of contemporary anti-theatrical polemics of the period which reveal great anxiety about the ‘feminizing’ potentials of theatre itself. Shakespeare’s Cleopatra is a celebration of the female grotesque, because she is represents the ‘infinite variety’ of the Renaissance stage/play world.

This section on the female grotesque as spectacle has explored Shakespeare’s transformation of a grotesque Ovidian narrative—the tale of Philomel’s rape and mutilation by Tereus in Metamorphosis Book X—into a theatrical spectacle of the female grotesque in Titus Andronicus. An embodiment of sacralized Roman chastity, Lavinia, is not only raped by Tamora’s two sons but also has her tongue and hands cut off. This section has drawn attention to the gendered ideology of the humanist education system and locates Lavinia as an example of the tragedy of the woman of learning, which necessitates her grotesque ‘double mutilation’. In Titus Andronicus the paradoxical combination of literary rivalry and homage is sited on the body of Lavinia; she is transformed into a grotesque theatrical spectacle of a mutilated woman struggling to express the enigma of her tragedy.

In the second part of this section, I have discussed the play’s representation of Tamora, the queen of Goths. As Titus’ captive she is introduced into the play as a spectacle of ‘otherness’; noting how her aggressive maternity and sexual lasciviousness posit her as the threatening, unnatural, ‘monstrous’ ‘other’ of civilized Rome. From this discussion, I move on to Cleopatra, arguing that her ‘infinite variety’ is the key to her status as an aesthetic grotesque. I have also noted that within the play’s overarching gendered topographical binaries images of Egypt as space of carnivalesque excess also reinforce the notion of Cleopatra as the embodiment of grotesque realism. Her leaky, fertile sexuality, her verbal copia, evoke the Bakhtinian...
carnivalesque grotesque body. Finally I have argued that her theatrical inventiveness and continual role-playing break down the stable boundaries and categories of identity. The culmination of this theatricality occurs in the final act when Cleopatra transforms herself into a spectacle through her suicide.

As noted earlier, she poses a major threat to the Roman Imperial venture through her Circean quality. Yet Cleopatra is captivating also because she can be displaced into the space of the Orient, the exotic ‘other’. However, the threat of the transgressive bewitching ‘alien’ takes on a different dimension when it comes home in the form of women who lay claim to powers of witchcraft. Patriarchy’s negotiation with this threatening witch often involved turning her into a comical yet terrifying grotesque spectacle of ‘strangeness’.

In my next section, I shift focus from the exhibition of female figures belonging to different cultures as spectacles of ‘otherness’ to the cultural practice in which the witch was produced as a theatrical spectacle both in witch trials as well as on the stage. I argue that the representation of the weird sisters in Shakespeare’s Macbeth and Jonson’s Masque of Queens should be viewed in this light.

II. Spectacles of strangeness: Witches in Macbeth and The Masque of Queens

The demonization of women who subvert the meaning of femininity is contradictory in its implications. It places them beyond meaning, beyond the limits of what is intelligible. At the same time it endows them with a (supernatural) power, which it is precisely the project of patriarchy to deny. On stage such figures are seen as simultaneously dazzling and dangerous.

Catherine Belsey, The Subject of Tragedy

Witchcraft accusations reached ‘epidemic proportions’ in sixteenth and seventeenth century Europe. In England hundreds of women were prosecuted and tried in the assizes and when they confessed under torture were sentenced to death by hanging. Yet around the same time, they were gaining an afterlife in the theatre. Apart from Shakespeare’s Macbeth, witches were the subject of several plays, the most notable of which are Middleton’s The Witch, Dekker, Ford and Rowley’s The Witch of Edmonton, Heywood’s The Wise Woman of Hogsdon, Lyly’s Mother Bombie and Ben Jonson’s The Masque of the Queens. One may include in this list Shakespeare’s 1 Henry VI in which Joan la Pucelle is burnt at stake as a witch. As critics have argued, the witch could be produced as a stage spectacle for the London’s theatre going
audience because witch-belief became a contested field created through various contemporary and often contradictory discourses on witchcraft. Thus the witch became a muddled signifier a hybrid grotesque created through bits of folklore as well as learned discourses—both credulous and skeptical. As a bizarre spectacle that created a pleasurable frisson among the audience, the witch had great histrionic potential.

This section focuses on the witches in *Macbeth* and *The Masque of Queens* as instances in which the female grotesque is produced as spectacles of strangeness. Associated with filth and noxious substances, harbingers of chaos and anarchy, the transgressive witches in both texts represent perverted and demonized femininity. Their intertextual relationship is equally fascinating: Though the first performance of *Macbeth* predates Jonson’s *The Masque of Queens* by three years, the printed text (the 1623 Folio) shows signs of later interpolations / interpellations. Not only does it have a direct ‘quotation’ from Middleton’s *The Witch*, it is, as Diane Purkiss argues, a ‘play reworked for the witch-fashion set by Jonson’s masque.’ This section begins with a brief overview of the early modern discourse on witchcraft arguing that despite the ubiquitousness of such phenomena, witch-lore was not a simple one of shared beliefs but a contested field subject to various forms of claims and counterclaims. Notions of what constituted witch practice were heterogeneous and thus heterogeneity generated controversy among the learned, especially in those involved in the actual handling of witchcraft cases. The discussion moves on to James I’s investment in witchcraft as integral to his ideology of monarchy and the monarch’s modus operandi in his intervention in which witch-trials—turning them into ‘spectacles’ to assert the king’s absolutist power and knowledge. This thesis argues that while both texts negotiate James I’s complex investment in contemporary witch-beliefs and witchcraft, the imperatives and the strategies of such negotiation are, however, markedly different. It does so through a detailed reading of the witch-scenes in *Macbeth*, and the antimasque of the ‘hags’ in *The Masque of Queens*, noting the different strategies through which the witches are ‘produced’ as the female grotesque.

*The debate concerning witch-belief and witchcraft*

The Church itself seemed to be strongly divided on whether it was belief in witchcraft that constituted heresy or its contrary position of theological doubt. Renaissance England inherited a controversy that stretched back over three centuries at least. The
tenth century text De Ecclesiasticis Disciplinis by Reginone of Prum had held that women were more prone to be seduced by ‘the phantasms and illusions of demons.’\textsuperscript{140} The Canon Episcopi by Burchard, bishop of Worms, contemptuously dismissed ideas of the witches’ ability to transport themselves through great distances at night and also kill, though without visible arms, people baptized and redeemed by the blood of Christ, and cook and eat their flesh, after putting some straw on a piece of wood or something in place of their heart.\textsuperscript{141}

At the other end of the spectrum was an influential work, the Malleus Maleficarum or the Hammer of Witches (1486) by Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger, which strenuously maintained that disbelief in witchcraft was proof of one’s heretical nature.\textsuperscript{142} The book, which cites classical and biblical authority along with contemporary accounts, was geared towards establishing the truth about the existence of witches, their sexual relation with Devils, power to harm children and affect generative and reproductive facilities in human beings and many such diabolic functions. The work had the Papal Bull of Innocent VIII affixed to it as Preface, which not only gave its Dominican authors exceptional inquisitorial authorization but also served to catapult the work to a position of ‘ultimate, irrefutable and unarguable authority.’\textsuperscript{143} It became mandatory for judges and magistrates in charge of witch trials to consult it, and the text played a key role in the witch-hunts that swept through Europe in the early modern period.

Reginald Scot in his Discoverie of Witchcraft (1584) refers to the dangerous inquisitorial and prosecutorial power wielded by the text, when despite the temptation to dismiss its collection of anecdotes and ‘obscene jokes’ he concedes the seriousness of its impact, ‘for they be written by them that were and are judges upon the life and deaths of those persons.’\textsuperscript{144} Scot was a sceptical empiricist who sifted through the evidence given in cases of witch-hunts and persecutions to present a serious and sustained argument against the very possibility of demonic magic and prove that witchcraft is a cozening art ‘wherein the name of God is abused, prophaned and blasphemed, and his power is attributed to a vile creature.’\textsuperscript{145} Alan MacFarlane is of the opinion that Scot was ‘goaded into writing his classic work by the 1582 Essex trials.’\textsuperscript{146} He also acquainted himself with the major works of his time on the topic, primarily those of continental theorists and prosecutors like Nider and Bodin.\textsuperscript{147}
Though the Papal Bull affixed to *Malleus Maleficarum* refers to ‘persons of both sexes’ who have ‘abandoned themselves to devils, incubi and succubi, and by their incantations, spells, conjurations, and other accursed charms and crafts’ as culpable, it is evident that the text is largely concerned with the ‘frail feminine sex’. The authors cite biblical authority to prove women’s natural propensity to evil primarily on three accounts: first, women are more credulous than men, second, ‘they are naturally more impressionable and more ready to receive the influence of a disembodied spirit’, and third,

that they have slippery tongues, and are unable to conceal from their fellow women those things which by evil arts they know; and since they are weak, they find an easy and secret manner of vindicating themselves by witchcraft.

It would be interesting to compare this account in *Malleus Maleficarum* with what Scot has to say about certain kinds of women who,

know no religion; in whose drousie minds the divell hath gotten affine seat; so as, what mischeefe, mischance, calamitie or slaughter is brought to pass, they are easily persuaded the same is done by themselves; imprinting in their minds an earnest and constant imagination thereof . . . They are doting, scolds mad, divelish; and not much differing from them that are thought to be possessed with spirits.

At one level both *Malleus Maleficarum* and *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* draw upon the misogynistic assumptions about the nature of women that circulate in patriarchal culture but the differences between the two lie in their interpretative and ideological positions. Kramer and Sprenger use the stories of women’s vulnerability as proofs of their easy submission to demonic powers whereas for Scot they provide the very ground of skeptical questioning. For the former this is an irrefutable argument for the existence of demons and for the latter a sure sign of the deceptive powers of imagination. It is thus evident that the ‘history’ of early modern belief in witches is an unstable field of contestations. There was also little consensus on what constituted witchcraft practices with marked differences between witchcraft theories as understood on the continent and in England. The Papal Bull affixed to *Malleus*
Maleficarum enumerates the offences committed by the practitioners of the damned art as follows:

[They have] slain infants yet in their mother’s womb, as also the offspring of cattle, have blasted the produce of the earth . . . nay men and women, beasts of burthen . . . ; these wretches furthermore afflict and torment men and women, beasts of burthen, herd beats, . . . with terrible and piteous pains and sore diseases both internal and external; they hinder men from performing the sexual act and women from conceiving.\textsuperscript{152}

This passage neatly sums up the witches’ powers of maleficium, the technical term for the actual means by which witches were believed to harm society at large. However, as Keith Thomas points out, beliefs about witchcraft practices had existed in primitive and ancient societies and magical power, both curative and destructive, had been attributed to the ‘cunning folk’. The importance of a text like Malleus Maleficarum and its Prefatory Bull lies specifically in its ideological imperative that linked witchcraft practices to the agency of the Devil and thus established witchcraft as a form of Christian heresy.\textsuperscript{153} The argument was that it was the Devil who granted the witch her powers of maleficium in return for total allegiance to him. This Devil’s pact took place in nocturnal gatherings termed ‘sabbats’ that parodied and blasphemed Catholic rituals.\textsuperscript{154}

Critics have argued that notions of witchcraft involving explicit Satanic covenants like sexual congress with the devil and cannibalistic banquets were characteristic of Continental beliefs but did not gain currency in England.\textsuperscript{155} There was, for example, no English translation of the Malleus Maleficarum, which was extremely popular and influential in the continent) until the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{156} The 1542 and 1563 Acts of Parliament that made witchcraft a statutory offence did not link witchcraft to the Devil’s powers but regarded the offences as felony.\textsuperscript{157} However, sometimes the Devil’s presence was indirectly acknowledged in trials where the witch would be identified by the ‘devil’s mark’, an ‘unnatural’ protuberance that was supposedly insensible to pain and would not bleed when pricked.\textsuperscript{158} It was also believed that the English witch was accompanied by ‘familiars’—animals like the cat or dog or toad—which could perform magical services for the mistress. These were either given by the Devil or purchased from another witch. The witch’s mark was
sometimes regarded as an extra teat from which the familiar would suck the mistress’s blood as nourishment.\textsuperscript{159}

As Alan Macfarlane’s findings show, in England witch-lore was confined largely to notions of the witch’s ability to perform a kind of maleficium that affected the rural community. Margery Stanton of Wimbish, Essex, was accused in 1578 of

> tormenting a man, killing chickens, causing a woman to swell so that she looked pregnant and nearly burst, making cattle give ‘gore stinking blood’ instead of milk, making a child ill, and tormenting another so that it ‘fell into such shrikyng and staryng, wringing and writhing of the bodie to and fro, that for all that saw it, were doubtful of the life of it.’\textsuperscript{160}

These accusations may be regarded as typical of the harm that English witches were believed capable of doing. In Discoverie of Witchcraft Scot discounts the credibility both of witchcraft accusations and the diabolic claims made by old village women thus accused. Describing these women as ‘commonly old, lame, bleare-eied, pale, fowle, and full of wrinkles; poore, sullen superstitious’, he gives the opinion that they are ‘doting, scolds, mad divelish’;\textsuperscript{161} and whenever some ‘mischeefe, mischance, calamitie, or slaughter is brought to passé, [they] are easilie persuaded the same is done by themselves.’\textsuperscript{162}

Shakespeare’s representation of the ‘weird sisters’ in Act I, Scene iii as petty, squabbling, senile old women planning to take revenge on the sailor’s wife because she has refused tit-bits (I. iii. 1–27) appears like an account from Scot’s text:

> These miserable wretches are so odious unto all their neighbors, and so feared, as few dare offend them, or deny them anie thing they aske; whereby they take upon them; yea, and sometimes thinke, they can doo such things as are beyond the abilitie of humane nature.\textsuperscript{163}

Stephen Greenblatt points out that in The Comedy of Errors (1594) the representation of demonic possession as fraudulent may be regarded as textual evidence that Shakespeare was acquainted with The Discoverie of Witchcraft and also shared Scot’s views.\textsuperscript{164} However the attempt to search for Shakespeare’s ideological consistency regarding witchcraft issues proves to be frustrating. If The Comedy of Errors creates the impression of a dramatist who takes sides with Scot and skepticism
then *1 Henry VI* (written around 1591-2) presents a playwright sharing the belief of witch-mongers. As Greenblatt argues such changing / shifting positions would indicate that Shakespeare’s ultimate commitment is to his theatre; as a competent professional playwright he is concerned with the inner imperatives of genre. Thus while the ‘comedy’s decorum rests upon the strict absence of supernatural agency’ the generic requirement of the history play creates a teleological compulsion to discredit the entire French cause through the final portrayal of Joan la Pucelle as an agent of demonic forces.

When Shakespeare wrote *Macbeth* more than a decade after his early comedy and history play, contemporary witch discourses had gained a specific political relevance. James VI of Scotland, who ascended the throne of England in 1603 as James I, had displayed an avid interest not only in witchcraft but had made it central to his ideology of kingship.

*The monarch and the witch: the ideology of kingship*

The full force of continental witchcraft beliefs was felt in England only during the Stuart regime. The knowledge of the continental theories of witchcraft came via *Daemonologie* (published first in Edinburgh 1597 and in London in 1603) the work of their new monarch James I (earlier James VI of Scotland). The popular notion is that royal intervention was directly responsible for the mass scale witch-hunts resulting in the persecution and horrific torture of hundreds of women. However, as Stuart Clark has pointed out, statistics prove that actual rate of persecutions after 1603 dropped from the earlier Elizabethan rate; also there was very little change in the 1604 statute that replaced the apparently lenient Elizabethan one of 1563. Yet the myth of draconian measures adopted by James with regard to witch persecution remained potent primarily because of the monarch’s open and avowed interest in witchcraft. Drawing upon the work of Christina Larner, Stuart Clark argues that James acquired the specifically continental beliefs:

in the winter of 1589 during a six months’ nuptial stay at the Danish court which included a meeting with Niels Hemmingsen, an authority cited in the *Daemonologie*. Clark opines that it was in 1590/91 with James’ personal involvement in the North Berwick trials where Gillis Duncan, Agnes Sampson, John Fian, Barbara
Napier, and others were accused of diabolic compact, that things changed dramatically. A significant aspect of the North Berwick trials was that they provided valuable ‘evidence’ of witchcraft as high treason. James ‘discovered’ that he himself was the target of diabolic machinations; and apparently it was his cousin, Francis Stewart, Earl of Bothwell, who had commissioned the witches to make his wax image (to be destroyed by fire) and to prepare a concoction of noxious poisonous substances to infect the royal linen.¹⁷¹

James’ initiative to personally extort the confession of Agnes Sampson has to be read in the light of the contemporary political anxiety regarding the links between witchcraft and treason. However, the monarch’s intervention was not only a preventive, pre-emptive measure against demonic conspiracy but had a larger ideological agenda. Through his personal involvement in witch trials and confessions James established the relation between Continental discourses about the diabolic nature of witchcraft and the issue of ideal monarchy.¹⁷² Continental theorists of witchcraft like Bodin and Remy had put forth the idea that the witches’ occult powers became ineffectual in the face of godly magistrates, a notion that was particularly conducive to James’ political ideology.¹⁷³

Perhaps the most crucial aspect of Agnes Sampson’s testimony was that the devilish charms of the witches could not affect the king; she also testified that the Devil had acknowledged that it was impossible to harm one of God’s own men.¹⁷⁴ Her confession thus became the proof of James’s claim to divine authority; the politics of demonism as expounded in Daemonologie was that as a true Christian king James was the principal target of the Devil and yet invincible.¹⁷⁵ The role of the witch in James’ political ideology was thus crucial and indispensable; she operated as the ultimate locus of the ‘other’ necessary for the fashioning of James’ divine royal ‘self.’

Since it is generally agreed that James I was in more than one way the shaping spirit behind Macbeth,¹⁷⁶ it would seem reasonable to expect it to tow the line of the monarch who prided himself on being a learned authority on matters of witch-belief and witchcraft. However, I argue in the next section that Shakespeare negotiation with witch discourses in Macbeth is fraught with ambiguity.
The powers of equivocation in the ‘royal play’

*Macbeth* is a topical play in several senses. It was performed before King James and Christian IV of Denmark at Hampton Court on 7 August 1606. It attempted to please the king through veiled references to him in the text—the witches present Macbeth ‘a show of eight kings and the last with a glass in his hand’ (IV. i. 110, stage directions) creating the spectacle of Banquo’s heirs. This is read as a flattering allusion to James I who claimed to have traced his genealogy from Banquo. In *Macbeth* it is Banquo who warns Macbeth about the deceptive quality of the prophecies uttered by the ‘weird sisters’ who ‘Win us with honest trifles, to betray’s / In deepest consequences’ (I. iii. 125-6); ‘And oftentimes, to win us to our harm, / The instruments of darkness tell us truths’ (I. iii. 123-6).

Since England had a history of ambitious earls and dukes seeking the aid of necromancers to commit regicide, it became necessary to produce powerful discourse about its dangerous consequences for the person(s) who believed in the powers of necromancy. This accounts for Shakespeare’s reworking of Holinshed’s account of ‘three women in strange and wild apparel, resembling creatures of an elder world’ who were commonly believed to be ‘goddesses of destinie’ or ‘nymphaes and feiries’; into sinister, androgynous bearded hags. As Stallybrass perceptively comments, to present the ‘weird sisters’ as godly sibyls would be inimical to the antithetical structure of the play. Moreover, there is a strong ideological imperative in the play to establish the ‘divine right of kingship’. It is to achieve this end that the playwright transformed the ‘dialectical’ material of play’s major source, Holinshed’s *The Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland* (1587), into a structure of antithesis. Apart from the issue of divine right of kinship, the moral opprobrium of regicide could only be strengthened by transforming Duncan, the weak ineffectual king of the chronicles into a monarch who,

> Hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been  
> So clear in his great office office, that his virtues  
> Will plead like angels, trumpet-tongu’d, against  
> The deep damnation of his taking- off

(I. vii. 17-20)
It is similarly argued that the reference to the healing powers and the gift of prophecy of the English king (IV. iii. 149-161) was meant to flatter the king who made several claims to divine right of kingship.\textsuperscript{180} It may seem obvious that James would have welcomed this institution as a sign of his legitimacy and sovereign power. However, in reality, James did not accept the Catholic custom of the sign of the cross and though he could not dispense entirely with the ritual he believed that no royal touch had the power to heal scrofula. The reference to the English king’s healing touch is thus an allusion fraught with ambiguity; it seems on the surface a paean to James who claimed the divine right of kinship but also contains a sly suggestion that as a Scottish king coming to claim the English throne he could only, like Malcolm, observe its potency from a distance.\textsuperscript{181}

The case of the king’s healing power may not be the only instance of the play’s ambivalent attitude vis-à-vis James and his ideology of monarchy. The representation of the ‘weird sisters’ presents an equally intriguing site of the play’s ambiguous position vis-à-vis the royal belief. As noted earlier there is a strong resonance of the skeptical Scot (James’ adversary in the witchcraft debate) in the representation of the ‘weird sisters’ (I. iii. 1-32). They appear as old village women whose claims to maleficium are never proved; the ‘weird sisters’ make these claims of petty vengefulness but there is no proof of their ability to harm the community or the individual. Nor is there any real evidence of their powers to create cosmic disorder, anarchy and topsy-turvy; the play merely presents accounts of these as Macbeth’s itemization of popular ‘beliefs’ in the power of witches:

\begin{verbatim}
Though you untie the winds, and let them fight
Against the Churches; though the yesty waves
Confound and swallow navigation up;
Though bladed corn can be lodg’d, and tress blown down;
Though castles topple on their warders’ heads;
Though palaces, and pyramids, do slope
Their heads to their foundations; though the treasure
Of Nature’s germens tumble all together,
Even till destruction sicken,
\end{verbatim}

(IV. i. 52-60)
Moreover, the play does not endorse the continental theory of witchcraft that we find in *Daemonologie*. There is no reference to the diabolic pact, Black Mass or other occult rituals that the European demonologists posited as signs of the witch practice. Even more intriguing is the absence of witch trials in the play or any attempt at persecution or legal prosecution of witches. As Stephen Greenblatt argues:

> It would have been simple enough to have the victorious Malcolm declare his determination to rid the kingdom of witches, but he does no such thing.\(^{182}\)

Thus while the play makes respectful allusions to James, catering to his interest in witchcraft as a spectacle of entertainment it pays little heed to his belief in continental witch practices and the power of the monarch to dispel their subversive/anarchic powers. Shakespeare refuses to subscribe to any single discourse on witchcraft or witch-belief by turning the ‘weird sisters’ into muddled signifiers. It is not only the witches who speak in riddles—making equivocal prophecies to Macbeth—it is the playwright who exhibits his skill as an ‘imperfect speaker’ (I. iii. 70) both to his king and his audience. As Lucy Gent has argued, ‘Equivocation is not so much a major theme in the play, as a number of critics have observed, but the very condition of the play.’\(^{183}\) Shakespeare’s ability to equivocate, to ‘palter with us in a double sense’ (V. viii. 20) is most potent in his depiction of the ‘weird sisters’.

Indeed, the ‘weird sisters’ are grotesque in the etymological sense of term; they are fantastic hybrids fashioned out of bits and pieces of English folkloric witch-beliefs as well as certain continental notions of witch practice. As a popular dramatist Shakespeare is interested in exploiting the ambiguity surrounding the witchcraft debate. As Diane Purkiss argues, the playwright seems to be catering to the ‘novelty-hungry news culture of Jacobean London as well as a court and intellectual elite’ for whom the witch-lore exists as a source of sensational entertainment.\(^{184}\) The existence of the ‘weird sisters’ in this liminal space, this zone of instability, uncertainty and ambiguity accentuated by the very illusory nature of theatrical practice, makes them simultaneously grotesque and deeply fascinating.

*The ‘black and midnight hags’: the ‘weird sisters’*

That the weird sisters are grotesque has been pointed out by critics such as Sanders, but within the paradigm of the comic.\(^{185}\) According to Sanders,
The witches’ terror is mediated through absurdity. The filthy gruel of Act IV Scene 1 would not have the power to revolt and repel if it were not enriched in the naïve metric of children’s rhyming games. The accents of infantile malevolence are alarming because we sense that these figures of childish spite somehow hold the stage and that the kingdom of the rational and the human has been given into their power.\textsuperscript{186}

Taking a cue from Sanders’ notion of ‘absurdity’ as the key to the witches’ powers, this section will make a close textual reading of the three occasions on which the witches make their appearance in \textit{Macbeth}. It will draw upon Geoffrey Harpham’s theory of grotesque as a condition of the anomalous or ambivalent, embodying a confusion of types where the mind is perplexed and repulsed by that which eludes any attempt to be categorized. Further, I argue that the weird sisters create an impression of grotesque through the language they speak, their very physical presence and finally through their association with the unclassifiable noxious and taboo substances comprising the ‘filthy gruel’ that the witches boil.

The very first scene of \textit{Macbeth}, described by Wilbur Sanders as the ‘unheralded, abrupt, thirty-second scene of doggerel and melodrama’\textsuperscript{187} provides an instance of grotesque as a condition of being just out of focus, just beyond the reach of language.\textsuperscript{188} Answering the first witch’s question about the time of their proposed meeting, the second witch answers,

\begin{quote}
When the hurly burly’s done,
When the battle’s lost and won
\end{quote}
(I. i. 3-4)

This couplet is the first of the riddles that characterize the witches’ later prophecies to Banquo:

\begin{quote}
Lesser than Macbeth and greater
Not so happy yet much happier
\end{quote}
(I. iii. 63-64)

The phrase ‘the battle’s lost and won’ brings together words of opposing valence such as losing or winning that can only exist as an \textit{either/or} possibility in the normal
scheme of things. Linked through the conjunction and the phrase creates a linguistic ambivalence, the ultimate expression of which is the couplet:

    Fair is foul and foul is fair
    Hover through the fog and filthy air

(I. i. 12-13)

This marks the end of this enigmatic and sensational scene. One of the devices that the play exploits to create the metaphysic of evil in Macbeth is language. The witches’ ability to blur the boundaries of two moral absolutes ‘fair’ and ‘foul’ looks forward to Banquo’s question, pointing to a moral chaos where words become signifiers wrenched free from their meanings and that both the words are free-floating and unfixed, thus providing an instance of grotesque, which is, as Harpham points out, the witches’ later prophecies to Macbeth (IV. i. 78-93) are riddles where the questions of ambivalence take on the specific status of equivocation. In the play’s immediate context, this is replete with associations of rebellion and treason. The witch relied upon the specifically fantastic quality of her / his language, making a prophecy expressed as a riddle. As Steven Mullaney posits, ‘The riddle of treason lies, it seems, in the riddle itself.’

Interpreting prophecies and riddles as constituting, ‘a rhetoric of rebellion’, and following George Puttenham, Mullaney identifies this rhetoric as amphibology, which occurs when ‘we speak or write doubtfully’, the meaning may be taken in two ways. The power of amphibology lies in its ability to create uncertainties or doubts ‘bifurcating choice and intentionality.’ He reiterates:

    Amphibology marks an aspect of language that neither treason nor authority can control. It is a power that cannot be trammelled up, mastered or unequivocally defined, but it is a power.

Taking off from Mullaney it is possible to argue that the untrammelled, equivocal power of the rhetoric that ‘palters with us in a double sense’—and which is termed amphibology—inhabits a transgressive space linked both to treason and to other violations of societal and epistemic order that may be classed as grotesque.

Banquo’s response to the ‘weird sisters’ is a useful clue to their uncertain status as well as their gender ambiguity:
What are these,
So withered and so wild in their attire,
That look not like the inhabitants o’th’earth,
And yet are on’t? Live you, or are you aught
That man may question? 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.

(I. iii. 37-44)

The weird sisters clearly pose an interpretative challenge to Banquo. It is significant that the words ugly or hideous have not been used to describe the weird sisters because these adjectives belong to a definable and known category. The purpose of the two interrogative sentences is to indicate the confusion that is created in Banquo’s mind in this eerie encounter with creatures that seem to be in a position of indeterminacy or in-between-ness. They do not look ‘like the inhabitants o’th’earth’ but their physical presence contradicts this. Banquo continues to puzzle over the fact:

Are ye fantastical, or that indeed
Which outwardly ye show?

(I. iii. 51-52)

The apparition is one which introduces a new kind of uncertainty: not the familiar contrast of seeming and being that the theatre traditionally exploits, but a difficulty within the category of appearance itself, which is essential to the grotesque. What the sisters seem to be outwardly is itself productive of confusions regarding their nature and the purpose of their presence here. Banquo asks whether they are ‘aught that man may question’; they understand him, but their gesture imposes silence. In this scene at least, they speak, but must not be spoken to. It is telling that the climactic expression of the puzzle should be their gender ambivalence, which transforms the weird sisters into the ‘beard[ed] sisters’. Their beards confer upon them, somewhat fantastically, the appearance of prophets or sages in the Biblical tradition, though their purpose is indeed to pervert the function of prophesy.
It is worth noting that Banquo’s initial response is not one of sheer amazement caused by witnessing something that is entirely beyond the reach of human cognition. There is much that he can recognize (the fact that however strange their withered and skinny appearances are, they are women) and the weird sisters present for Banquo a case of what Harpham refers to as ‘corrupted or shuffled familiarity’. After they vanish, Banquo and Macbeth are shown in a state of bewilderment and the former searches for alternatives that will provide an adequate explanation:

The earth hath bubbles, as the water has,
And these are of them.

(I. iii. 77-78)

But even this metaphor of insubstantiality is not enough, and posits them as hallucinatory images:

Were such things here as we do speak about?
Or have we eaten on the insane root,
That takes the reason prisoner?

(I. iii. 81-83)

The weird sisters defeat all attempts to be classified within knowable categories and can be accounted for only in the realm of human unreason and the unconscious.

The third instance of the grotesque associated with the witches is the cauldron scene (Act IV, Scene i), and in particular what Sanders describes as the ‘the filthy gruel’ they are concocting. The list of requirements for the broth begins with the venomous toad and the ‘fillet of a fenny snake’ (IV. i. 12) and goes on to provide minute details of parts of insects, amphibians, animals, and birds of prey:

Eye of newt, and toe of frog,
Wool of bat, and tongue of dog,
Adder’s fork and blind-worm’s sting,
Lizard’s leg and howlet’s wing

(IV. i. 14-17)

The ingredients of the witches’ broth is an example of what Harpham, in describing the creatures attacking the saint in Martin Schongauer’s engraving ‘Temptation of St. Anthony’ refers to as a ‘sickening jumble of scales, wings, claws, hooves and hands.’¹⁹⁴ What is common to the substances required for the witches’
broth is their repulsive nature, which as critics have observed is one of the responses of a culture to objects that belong to the grotesque. It is this that Julia Kristeva understands as abject. Moreover, the witches’ gruel becomes a grotesque non-thing because it does not follow either ‘English or Continental practice; the sole point is to transgress the boundaries of the acceptable and clean.’

Purkiss stresses:

They are not a sincere list of what someone really thought witches might use, but a piece of infantile gothic. Their messiness, disorder and rather simplistic otherness involving a body-part from every racial or religious other available do indeed invert order.

Purkiss also points out that the witches’ list of ingredients, which constitutes the incantation, is a form of a parodic recipe. She argues:

this becomes more tenable when we recall that books of housewifery were often composed in rhyme in the early modern period, as an aide-memoire, and when we remember that some counter magical charms were preserved in recipe books.

The cauldron scene thus becomes doubly grotesque; its list of ingredients is a jumble and assortment of animal and human parts and its ideological purpose is to affect a grotesque parody of cooking. The activity that is commonly associated with women in their roles as keepers of the household becomes significantly enough in the words of the weird sisters, ‘A deed without a name’ (IV. i. 48). It is interesting to note that the cauldron scene where Macbeth himself comes seeking the aid of the ‘secret, black and midnight hags’ (IV. i. 46) follows close on the heels of the interrupted banquet (III. iv). Just as the drunken Porter’s entry after the murder of Duncan transforms Inverness into hell, similarly the cauldron scene retrospectively affects our understanding of aborted banquet as a behind-the-scenes source of all that corrupts the feeding and feasting in the Macbeth household. The witches’ activity of boiling the broth becomes a grotesque inversion and parody of the feminine function of nurture, the more fantastic and startling expression of which has occurred earlier in Lady Macbeth’s resolution to ‘dash the brains out’ of her own suckling infant (I. vii. 54-58).

The ‘cauldron scene’ marks the last appearance of the witches. In what appears to be the most baffling moment of disjunction in their theatrical
representation, the witches indulge in a song and dance performance to cheer up Macbeth’s spirits minutes after displaying their awesome powers in conjuring up spirits who can foretell Scotland’s political future. It is of course perfectly possible that this scene is not Shakespeare’s, but what is of interest here is not the hypothetical ‘intention’ of a single dramatist, but an intention of the text residing in the work as it is received or performed. The sudden transformation of the forces of darkness and prognosticators of future to a singing-dancing entertaining troop may owe itself to the success of the ‘grotesque’ song and dance performed by the antimasque of hags in Jonson’s *The Masque of Queens*. As Diane Purkiss argues, the text of *Macbeth* that survives ‘is a play reworked for the witch fashion set by Jonson; in this Borgesian sense, Jonson is Shakespeare’s precursor and not vice versa.’

‘A spectacle of strangeness’: *The antimasque in The Masque of Queens*

*The Masque of Queens*, celebrated at Whitehall on 2 February 1609, was written at the behest of Queen Anne who had from the beginning played an active, participatory role in the court masques. In the preface to *The Masque of Queens*, Jonson writes that he was commanded by Queen Anne to ‘think on some dance or show that might precede hers and have the place of a foil, or false-masque.’ In accordance with the wishes of the queen, Jonson devised the antimasque of ‘twelve women, in the habit of hags, or witches’ (ll. 14-15) whose function was to provide ‘a spectacle of strangeness, producing multiplicity of gesture, and not unaptly sorting with the current, and the whole fall of the device’ (ll. 16-18).

The term ‘spectacle’ had a specific connotation vis-à-vis the Jonsonian masque. It was used to denote what Jonson termed the ‘bodily part’ or the stagecraft of the masque; in discussing the décor of the *Masque of Blackness* Jonson credited ‘master Ynigo Iones’—with whom he had twenty-five long years of successful and stormy partnership—as the designer of the ‘bodily parts’ of the masque. In the *Masque of Blackness* Inigo Jones used pageant cars and machinery for clouds and waves, and his unique contribution was the *machina versatilis*, the turning machine that reflected the carefully planned lighting as it turned. In *The Masque of Queens* too, it was Inigo Jones who devised the scene in the first part of the Masque, as ‘an ugly hell, which flaming beneath, smoked unto the top of the roof.’ The eleven witches who enter to the accompaniment of ‘a hollow and infernal music’ are:
all differently attired: some with rats on their head, some on their shoulders; others with ointment pots at their girdles; all with spindles, timbrels, rattles, or other venefical instruments, making a confused noise with strange gestures. (ll. 27-30)

The preface also states that Jonson provided the exact knowledge of the ‘properties of vipers, bones, herbs, roots and other ensigns of their magic out of the authority of ancient and late writers’ (ll. 32-4).

The term ‘false masque’—used in the preface to The Masque of Queens—is another expression for the Jonsonian ‘antimasque’. The term ‘antimasque’ was derived from the ‘antic masque’ that comprised special kinds of dances borrowed from French ballet masquerades and became fashionable in England in the early seventeenth century. In this context it may be interesting to note that Florio’s Dictionary (1611) has the term ‘crotesca’ or grotesque explained as ‘antique’ or ‘antic’. Thus antic masque would imply a certain grotesque performance or dance. In The Haddington Masque the truant Cupid is accompanied by a troop of twelve boys who are described as ‘most antickly attyr’d’204 Cupid addresses them as his ‘little iocound sports’ and instructs them to:

Advance your light.
With your Reuell fill the roome,
That our triumphs be not dumb.205

This is followed by the description of their dancing:

Wherewith they fell into a subtle capriccious Daunce, to as odde a Musique, each of them bearing two torches, and nodding with their antique faces, with other varietie of ridiculous gesture, which gaue much occasion of mirth, and delight, to the spectators.206

The function of antimasque as a source of entertainment involving the grotesque is reinforced in The Masque of Queens when towards the end of the masque the hags dance to music in order to enhance their ‘charm’:

At which with a strange and sudden music they fell they fell into a magical dance full of preposterous change, and gesticulation, but most applying to their property, who at their meetings, do all things contrary to the custom of men, dancing, back to back, hip to hip, their
hands joined, and making their circles backward, to the left hand, with strange fantastic motions of their heads, and bodies (ll. 327-32).

It is not entirely speculative to link Jonson’s representation of witchcraft, as a spectacular and entertaining performance for royalty, to James’ own involvement in the North Berwick trials. The king, was reportedly fascinated by evidence of Agnes Sampson, summoned Gillis Duncan and asked her to play the trump as well as sing and dance a short reel—activities that she had apparently engaged in during the witches’ coven.207

*The monarch and the masque: The case of the North Berwick trials*

The royal command may be regarded as significant on several counts; it brings out the complexity of James’ *modus operandi* in dealing with the issue of witchcraft evidence and trials. At one level James, who prided himself on being a sceptic, was testing the veracity of Agnes Sampson’s evidence. By summoning Gillis Duncan and ordering her to repeat the secret occult rituals of witches’ coven for him, James was examining whether the case was fraudulent or genuine. This gives the lie to the popular notion of James as a witch hunter in the same league as Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger, who would use any pretext to torture and kill large numbers of women by accusing them of being in infernal pact with the devil. In fact James considered himself as an avant-garde intellectual who took a keen interest in the sixteenth century scientific / medical methods that were being increasingly used to determine the fraudulence of cases of witchcraft and demonic possession.

In France in 1598, Henry IV ordered the physician Michael Marescot and a group of medical colleagues to investigate the popular claims to demonic possession of Martha Brosier.208 Marescot carried out a series of experiments on Brosier which had become widely accepted by the late sixteenth century as signs of the possessed, namely: that in the state of possession a person was able to understand and speak languages that she/he did not know, became clairvoyant, developed immense bodily strength and was insensitive to pain, and expressed revulsion in brought in contact with holy objects.209 Martha Brosier failed all these tests thereby proving that hers was a case not of authentic possession but a fraud.210

In England, Edward Jordan had published *A Brief Discourse of a Disease called the Suffocation of the Mother* (1603) drawing upon his experience of
examining Mary Glover. Like Marescot, Jordan too pronounced Glover’s ‘possession’ as hysteria; James personally intervened to get Elizabeth Jackson released after he read Jordan and consulted him later in the case of Anne Gunter. There seem to be curious parallels between the ways these cases of witchcraft and demonic possession had been dealt with. Martha Brosier, Mary Glover, and Gillis Duncan were women who had deliberately or unwittingly laid claims to special ‘powers’; these claims had to be examined through a system of ocular, aural and other corporeal proofs that patriarchal authority demanded. In all these cases, the accused women had been turned into ‘performers’ who were expected to put on a credible repeat show of their abilities and satisfy the curiosity of the monarch or the medical practitioner.

Since Gillis, when accused of being a witch, had to ‘perform’ her own identity, symbol and reality merged seamlessly in her presence and performance. Gillis Duncan became the impossibly perfect theatrical sign where the signifier and signified were one. Diane Purkiss argues that James was staging Gillis Duncan’s performance as his own masque in which he occupied the privileged role of the chief spectator as well as the discerning interpreter. By asking Gillis Duncan to dance and sing for him, James turned her into a theatrical entertainment and thus neutralized and rendered powerless the dangerous albeit dubious power of witch practice. Her function was to stimulate and feed the appetite of the courtly elite for fascinating spectacle of ‘strangeness’ and ‘otherness’. It may not be entirely speculative to suggest that Gillis Duncan’s performance paved the way for the antimasque of grotesque singing and dancing hags of The Masque of Queens. Purkiss’ analysis closely echoes Stephen Orgel’s influential thesis about the masque as a theatre of power. Exploring the relation between the masquers and the spectators in terms of the site of the stage and the single point perspective of the illusionist scenery, Orgel asserts that the king was the perfect spectator. This act of viewing replicated the hegemony of court and the masque became a cultural production in which aesthetic and political economies reproduced one another seamlessly. Orgel’s work anticipates New Historicist critical work on the theatre of the early modern period; preoccupied with the mechanism through which power is legitimated, New Historicism finds a happy hunting ground in the court theatres, in which the spectacle of the masque served as an ideological apparatus of the state proclaiming the absolutism of monarchical powers.
Drawing upon Purkiss’ argument it may be possible to trace the relation between Gillis Duncan’s role and the ideological function of the ‘antimasque’ in Stuart court masques. The antimasque, especially as it obtained in Jonson’s masques, represented a state of temporary discord, and barbaric anarchy; its chaos created typically by ‘fools, satyrs, baboons, wild men, antics, beasts, sprites.’\textsuperscript{214} As an example one may cite the role of the satyrs in Jonson’s \textit{Oberon, The Faery Prince} (1611).\textsuperscript{215} Their plan to wake the sleeping Syluanes guarding the palace gates indicates that these are no innocent pranksters but sadistic creatures bent on inflicting pain. The satyrs debate whether they should whip the guards (176), put wasps into their nostrils (179-80), push a nail through their temples (185-6) or put an eel in their guts(188-9). Not content with these the First Satyr suggests they be rolled down the hill to break their bones or be ducked into a river (200-4). The desire for this orgy of violence reaches its climax when the Third Satyr tells the Syluanes that they were wondering whether to bore their eyes with red-hot iron and turn them into Cyclops (227-30).

This unleashing of scenes of wildness, violence and anarchy so close to the seat of majesty has been interpreted variously. Critics have argued that the very presence of the libidinous and unruly antimasque created ruptures and fissures in the ideology of monarchical absolutism making the masque a polyvocal discourse on power.\textsuperscript{216} This in fact contests the New Historicist ‘subversion versus containment’ thesis according to which the masque’s teleology—the establishment of harmony and order—necessitates the potentially subversive antimasque. The disorderly and anarchic antimasque makes possible a spectacular triumph the masque’s and by extension the monarch’s powers of containment of subversive elements.\textsuperscript{217}

There is nothing remotely sinister or diabolic about the hags. Though the witches are accompanied by a familiar and carry about their person ‘ensigns of their magic’ the very manner of their staging or representation in the masque reduces the subversive potential that witchcraft carried in the early modern period. The purpose of their elaborate paraphernalia—pots of ointment, spindles, timbrels, rattles—and the ‘confused noise’ and ‘strange gesture’ (ll. 28-30) is to turn them into slightly ridiculous and contemptible bogeys, figments of adult imagination to scare children. The sing-song nursery rhyme of the ‘charm’ they chant for their Dame to come and join them accentuates this aspect of their representation (ll. 45-86) The witches are
semi-comical grotesque spectacles evoking laughter and revulsion as well as the pleasure of seeing dangerous female ‘otherness’ reduced to a mere spectacle. The description of the Dame, the mistress of the wretched hags, is a further study in the bizarre. She enters: ‘naked armed, barefooted, her frock tucked, her hair knotted with vipers; in her hand a torch made of a dead man’s arms, lighted; girded with a snake’ (lines 87-9).

However, the false masque of hags is not only to provide an entertaining ‘spectacle of strangeness’; the antimasque serves as an antithesis to the masque’s teleology of harmony and order. The ideological or political implication of the antimasque becomes clear in the series of rhetorical questions with which the Dame greets her retinue of servants:

And come we fraught with spite
To overthrow the glory of this night?
Holds our great purpose?

(ll. 100-3)

As an entertainment that was meant exclusively for the court and performed by the members of the nobility, the Stuart masque evolved as a sophisticated cultural apparatus, drawing upon classical myths to legitimize an idealized image of the aristocratic community headed by the sovereign. In the splendour of its spectacles that provided a vehicle for its myths of royalty and political power, as well as its scheme of grand closure proclaiming the power of the sovereign, the masque became royalty’s most marvellous possession.

Since the masque as a genre is a celebration of the triumph of monarchial powers, it is natural for Jonson to have created an antimasque of witches whose magical disappearance would affirm James’ godly magisterial authority. Moreover, the Masque of Queens addresses one specific aspect of James’ ideal of monarchy; namely his pacifist foreign policy. The malevolence of the Dame is directed in particular at the peace in the kingdom brought about by the piety of its monarch:

I hate to see these fruits of a soft peace,
And curse the piety gives it such increase

(ll. 132-3)
In his first speech to the parliament James had claimed that he had brought peace to the new kingdom and the image that he preferred to project was that of Solomon, *Rex Pacificus*.\(^{219}\) However, James’ attempt to avoid religious factionalism in the question of foreign policy was not well received by militant Protestant groups who perceived James’ rapprochement attitudes as unpatriotic. For them the militant chivalric honour code had been embodied in Elizabethan heroic courtiers who had fought for the glory of a Protestant nation.\(^{220}\) The contesting ideological positions on Jacobean peace versus Elizabethan military honour and glory were subtly enmeshed into court masques like Samuel Daniel’s *The Masque of Twelve Goddesses*. Apparently committed to paying homage to James’ pacifism, Daniel’s masque ‘redescribed peace as war by blurring the discourses of peace and glory.’\(^{221}\) Jonson’s *Masque of Queens* negotiates this vexed issue by inventing the antimasque of hags who are simultaneously conceived as an abstract set of vices namely Ignorance, Suspicion, Credulity, Falsehood, Murmur, Malice, Impudence, Slander, Execration, Bitterness, Rage and Mischief.\(^{222}\) Together they are committed to opposing the ‘Fame and Glory’ of the Stuart court, its ideal of harmony and peace. The Dame exhorts them to confound the natural order of things and create a topsy-turvy condition:

Mix hell with heaven, and make Nature fight
Within herself; loose the whole hinge of things,
And cause the ends run back into their springs.
(ll. 135-137)

In her invocation to the Fiends and Furies, the Dame makes tall claims of their achievements of natural and cosmic disruption:

When we have set the elements at wars;
Made midnight see the sun; and day the stares;
When the winged lightning, in the course, hath stayed;
And swiftest rivers have run back, afraid
To see the corn remove, the groves to range,
Whole places alter, and the seasons change;
(ll. 213-8)

Taken together these passages are strongly reminiscent of the deeds of calamity and chaos that Macbeth ascribes to the witches (IV. i. 49-57) in which the
treasure of ‘nature’s germen tumble altogether’ (IV. i. 58). However, unlike the Shakespearean weird sisters whose equivocating and riddling prophecies play a key role in regicide, turning Scotland into a nightmare kingdom of murder and mayhem, the hags in Jonson’s masque are entirely ineffectual. The Dame invokes the Furies and fiends to:

Darken all this roof,
With present fogs. Exhale earths rott’nest vapors;
And strike a blindness, through these blazing tapers
(ll. 225-7)

However, all this is mere blood and thunder rhetoric and the Dame is roused to impotent rage:

Not yet? My rage begins to swell;
Darkness, devils, night and hell,
Do not thus, delay my spell.
(ll. 279-81)

The point of similarity between Shakespeare’s ‘weird sisters’ and the Jonsonian hags lies in the way they are associated with repugnant and taboo substances, with filth and dirt. The hags recount how they collect the ingredients required for their infernal magic from ‘charnel house’, ‘private grots and public pits’ (l. 156) Along with magical herbs like roots of mandrake, hemlock, henbane, nightshade, moonwort, the witches’ collection includes parts of animals like frog’s blood and backbone, bat’s wing, scritch-owl’s eggs, the black cat’s brain and mad dog’s foam, adder’s ears. (ll. 155-198) In popular imagination most of these birds and beasts carried links with practices of black magic used to invoke the devil.

The text of the masque has Jonson’s marginal notes to indicate that he is drawing upon classical authorities like Agrippa, Ovid, Horace, Lucan and Pliny in describing the material that the witches are likely to gather. In other words, Jonson is putting the tag of learning to impress his readers whereas the immediate visual and aural effect of the antimasque is to add variety to the ‘spectacle of strangeness’.

Given the possibility that some of the witch scenes in Macbeth may have been incorporated later in keeping with the trend set by Jonson’s masque the activities described by each of the eleven hags serve as a kind of behind-the-scenes preparation
for the broth\textsuperscript{224} that Shakespeare’s witches boil in their cauldron (IV. i. 5-34). Not only do the witches collect noxious and repugnant animal parts but they also evoke the specific sense of the unholy through their association with dead bodies. The 4\textsuperscript{th} hag speaks of ransacking charnel houses and public pits to gather skulls (167-69) and the 7\textsuperscript{th} hag relates with relish how she snipped the sinews of a corpse hanging from the gallows. Their activity also includes the killing of infants a particular form of maleficium commonly associated with witches in continental witchlore. The 5\textsuperscript{th} hag boasts that:

\begin{quote}
Under a cradle I did creep, \\
By day; and, when the child was asleep, \\
At night, I sucked the breath.
\end{quote}

(ll. 158-60)

The 6\textsuperscript{th} witch similarly recounts how she killed an infant with her dagger ‘to have his fat’ (l. 163). In each of these cases the act of killing the child or sacrilege to the dead is accompanied by anecdotes that are meant to evoke laughter. One of the hags frightens ‘a Sexten out of his wits’ (l. 157) the other ‘pluck’d the nodding nurse, by the nose’ (l. 161); the sixth hag bid the Piper ‘again blow wind i’the tail’ (l. 165). The juxtaposition of the macabre with the ridiculous simultaneously evoking horror and laughter makes the witches grotesque.

The grotesque spectacle reaches its climax in the dance that the hags engage in after chanting the final charm. The marginal notes in the text make claims that these are ‘authentic’ witch dances because the source is none other than the continental expert on witchcraft practice, Jean Bodin. This spectacle of dancing witches and the scene of hell vanishes with the sound of loud music, and is replaced by the glorious and magnificent building of the House of Fame (ll. 334-41). The transformation is abrupt and does not allow any confrontation between the antimasque and the revels. The antimasque, which is inimical and antithetical to the main masque, is thus dispelled magically with the aid of technical devise, namely Inigo Jones’ machinery that is itself a triumph of spectacle.\textsuperscript{225}

Though in both texts, the hags and witches vanish towards the end, their disappearance signals distinct ideological functions. In \textit{The Masque of Queens}, the function of the antimasque is to establish the powers of the monarch, his authority and
control. The hags represent the ignorant, the chaotic and disorderly feminine ‘other’; hence it is imperative that they be successfully brought under control, interestingly not by the direct intervention of James himself but by Queen Anne and her ladies in the guise of Amazonian queens. Though the Amazon was not an unambiguous figure of female martial valour—Amazonians were also notorious for their violence against men—in Jonson’s masque their presence does not signify disruptive or subversive potential. As Diane Purkiss argues:

Their martial strength is devoted to dispelling the feminised disorder of the witches. Whatever the history of the figures they are shown as antagonists of feminised barbarism; their power is the power of civility and true fame, a power which is capable of overcoming the primitiveness and corporeality, the ignorance and superstition of untutored femininity. 226

Indeed the masque ends with yet another spectacle in which the hags are yoked to the queens’ carriage drawing it to its grand finale; the disruptive unruly feminine is literally subordinated to the ‘feminine’ authority that has the approval of patriarchy. 227 The ideological compulsion of the court masque propels Jonson’s Masque of Queens to turn the antimasque into spectacles. Resolutely ‘otherised’ and turned into obvious spectacles of strangeness, the function of the hags is quite unambiguous and ideologically constrained. The spectacle of the female grotesque is harnessed to James’ ideology of kingship and to forms of monarchical power.

In contrast, the sudden disappearance of the ‘weird sisters’ in Macbeth is not in response to the presence of any authority figure. Indeed though the ‘weird sisters’ do not appear after the cauldron scene the impact of their prophecies continues to be felt to the very end of the play. Even as Macbeth attempts to fortify himself against his enemies by relying upon the prophecy of the witches, the power of their double-speak asserts itself in the surreal arrival of Birnam Wood at Dunsinane. The Messenger reports: ‘As I did stand my watch upon the hill, / I looked toward Birnam, and anon, methought, / The wood began to move’ (V. v. 33-5) Till the very end thy make their absent presence felt. The ‘equivocation of the fiend / That lies like truth’ (V. v. 43-4) is most potent in Macduff’s account of his own birth who was ‘from his mother’s womb/ Untimely ripped’ (V. viii. 15-6). If Macbeth acknowledges any power at his own end, even by an act of disavowal characteristic of his repeated effort
to cancel out what cannot be cancelled—such as the ‘great bond’ that makes him pale—it is the power of the witches and their prophecies. Macbeth’s life, and his end, is in their hands, however much he may seek to take it into his own. Though they are absent, the ‘weird sisters’ continue to speak to the audience at the close, even under erasure, as it were.

Possessors of ambiguous gender identities, the squabbling old ‘bearded’ ‘weird sisters’ in Macbeth are grotesque hybrid in their combination of being absurd yet enigmatic, petty yet profound. The result is the production of the ‘weird sisters’ as a spectacle of the Freudian ‘uncanny’, the unclassifiable, which ‘arouses dread and horror.’ They belong to an uncertain liminal zone where illusion and reality, fantasy and fact merge effortlessly. In Macbeth Shakespeare is concerned with the close links between witchcraft and theatre. As Stephen Greenblatt argues:

Macbeth manifests a deep, intuitive recognition that the theatre and witchcraft are both constructed on the boundary between fantasy and reality, the border or membrane where the imagination and the corporeal world, figure and actuality, psychic disturbance and objective truth meet.

As I have noted earlier, in Macbeth the playwright refuses to adhere to any single discourse of witchcraft either popular or learned. Instead he exploits the sensation value of contemporary witch-lore for the novelty-craving theatre audience thus creating the witch ‘as a stage spectacular.’ This thesis argues that the peculiar unsettling power of the ‘weird sisters’ stems from the playwright’s commitment to representing the witch as a theatrical spectacle. Though Macbeth is often regarded as a ‘royal play’ meant as homage to James I, the play does not subscribe to the monarchial position on witchcraft. It could be argued that it is not just the ‘weird sisters’ themselves, but Shakespeare’s mode of representation, which equivocates, ‘plays with us in a double sense’: it never allows us, as audience, to settle into a preferred frame of viewing or reception. Like the protagonist himself, we too are confused and uncertain: the witches unsettle both moral and intellectual categories, forcing us to question the relationship of the known to the unknown, the familiar to the strange, in the hermeneutic process.
My final submission is that one can turn to a most unlikely text—Michel Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality*, Volume I—for an analysis of the double impetus of power and pleasure involved in Shakespeare’s negotiations with James’ complex investment in the cases of witchcraft and demonic possession. As argued earlier, contrary to popular opinion, James did not invent and institute new and gruesome forms of torture and execution of witches. Indeed as the various instances of his intervention—either in the Scottish witch trials or in the cases of demonic possession—demonstrate he regarded himself as an avant-garde intellectual and a discerning knower. In all most all cases the king posited himself as the privileged interpreter of the truth claim made by women to the demonical. In the witch –trials he turned witch practices into ‘spectacles’ of entertainment by asking the accused witches to give credible repeat performances of their rituals of subversion. In all these cases the pleasure of the monarch ‘comes of exercising a power that questions, monitors, watches, . . . searches out, palpates, brings to light’; the power of Shakespeare’s theatre on the other hand and the pleasure associated with it ‘kindles at having to evade this power, flee from it, fool it travesty it.\(^{232}\)

The weird sisters in *Macbeth* exemplify perverted feminine control over the life of its protagonist and their function is politically subversive; their prophecies unleash thoughts of regicide in the mind of Macbeth propelling him to actions in which the nation is steeped in chaos, disorder and blood bath. The weird sisters, like Tamora and Cleopatra, are examples of the early modern unruly ‘woman on top’. Though Cleopatra’s political role seldom receives attention in critical discussions the bewitching ‘fairy queen’ is also a ruler. Like Elizabeth, the culture’s iconic androgynous female monarch, Shakespeare’s Egyptian queen belongs to Knox’s infamous ‘monstrous regiment of women.\(^{233}\)

In my next chapter, I explore Shakespeare’s representation of the female grotesque in the context of early modern culture’s negotiation with the unruly ‘woman on top’. I argue that women who destabilize gender status quo by assuming political authority are denigrated as ‘monstrous’ while the culture’s preoccupation with women’s unbridled tongues manifests itself in tales about the shrew.
Notes


2 Mullaney, *The Place of the Stage*, p. 63.


5 Mullaney, *The Place of the Stage*, p. 66.

6 Ibid. p. 66.


11 Mullaney, *The Place of the Stage*, p. 65. Mullaney points out that exhibitions of people belonging to the New Worlds was a cultural commonplace in sixteenth century England. ‘Martin Frobisher brought an Eskimo couple back from his second voyage to Meta Incognita . . . The captives survived in England for over a year, a lengthy duration for such ethnic ‘tokens’ of New World Voyages.’


Bate, Shakespeare and Ovid, p. 8. Bate makes a detailed analysis of Prospero’s last speech renouncing magic and shows how it echoes Medea’s words in Metamorphoses Bk VII. He suggests that Shakespeare skillfully combined Golding’s translations of Ovid’s Metamorphoses and his own translation of the Latin source.

Ibid. p. 19-21.

Ibid. p. 6.
Ibid. p. 23, for a detailed list of the plays where Shakespeare uses Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* as his source.


Bate, *Shakespeare and Ovid*, op.cit, p. 104.


Kahn, *Roman Shakespeare*, p. 65.


Ibid. p. 326, lines 545-50.


Bate, *Shakespeare and Ovid*, p. 10.


Kahn, *Roman Shakespeare*, p. 58.


Ibid. p. 143.

44 Kahn, Roman Shakespeare, p. 50.


46 Patricia Klindienst. ‘The Voice of the Shuttle Is Ours’, in Julie Rivkin and Michel Ryan ed. Literary Theory: An Anthology (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), p. 618. Klindienst, points out that ‘female chastity is not sacred out of respect for the integrity of the woman as a person; rather, it is sacred out of respect for violence.’

47 Kahn, Roman Shakespeare, p. 51.

48 Green, ‘Interpreting’ her martyr’d signs’, p. 323.


50 Ibid. p. 4.


58 Kahn, Roman Shakespeare, p. 61.


62 Ibid. p. 202


64 Bate ed, Titus Andronicus, p. 87. Bate points out that Aaron’s soliloquy, ‘has the distinct smack of Faustian heights’.


66 Ibid. p. 134.


68 Bate ed, Titus Andronicus, p. 169.

69 MacDonald, ‘Black Ram, White Ewe’, p. 203.

70 Bose, ‘The Getting of A Lawful Race’, pp. 35-6. Bose points out that for the English the first group/community of people to be shunted into the category of the racial other were the Irish.


74 Quoted in Newman, Fashioning Femininity, p. 81.

75 Ibid. p. 81.

76 Ania Loomba, Gender, Race and Renaissance Drama (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989), p. 43.

77 Quoted in Newman, Fashioning Femininity, p. 75.

78 Ibid. p. 81.

79 Ibid. p. 81.


81 George Best, Discovery [1578]. Quoted in Newman, Fashioning Femininity, p. 78.

82 Ibid. p. 79.

83 MacDonald. ‘Black Ram, White Ewe’, p. 203.
87 Kahn, Roman Shakespeare, p. 54.
88 Bate ed, Titus Andronicus. p. 182. See foot note 232.
89 Kahn, Roman Shakespeare, p. 54.
92 Ibid. p. 106.
94 Kahn, Roman Shakespeare, pp. 67-8.
97 Ibid. p. 203.
99 The most famous example being Enobarbus’ description of Cleopatra’s arrival at Cydnum to meet Antony.


110 Ibid. pp. 67, 81

111 Rubin, ‘The traffic in women’, p. 534. A complex notion that draws upon the works of Marcel Mauss in *Essay on the Gift* and Claude Levi Strauss in *The Elementary Structure of
Kinship, the ‘sex / gender system’ posits that kinship structure and social system are dependent on the ‘exchange of women’ as gifts.


117 For an overview of the critical responses to Cleopatra, see Linda T Fitz, ‘Egyptian Queens and Male Reviewers: Sexist Attitudes in ‘Antony and Cleopatra’, *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Vol. 28, Summer 1977, pp. 297-316. Fitz argues that the dominant male response to Shakespeare’s heroine is informed by sexist bias.


119 Adams, op. cit.


124 Ibid. p. 20.

125 Ibid. p. 20.


128 Loomba, *Gender, Race and Renaissance Drama*, p. 78.

130 Ibid. p. 245.

131 Ibid. p. 245.

132 Loomba, Gender, Race and Renaissance Drama, p. 264.


136 Greenblatt, ‘Shakespeare Bewitched’, p. 22.

137 Ibid. p. 41. Also see endnote 42.


140 Quoted in Stephen Greenblatt, ‘Shakespeare Bewitched’, p. 17.

141 Ibid. p. 18.

142 Ibid. p. 18.


Ibid. p. 44.


See Norman Cohn, *Europe’s Inner Demons* (London: Paladin, 1976), pp.100-2 for an account of what was popularly held to have occurred in these orgies that included worshipping / adoring the devil by kissing his arse or genitals and finally engaging in copulation after a cannibalistic banquet.

See Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, p. 522. See also, pages 528-9 for a discussion that that there were no references to oral compact with the devil before 1612 and it was only in the 1640s during the investigations of Mathew Hopkins, the professional witch-finder that there was sworn evidence to the satanic covenant. Questions of the sexual assault by incubusor succubus and the witches’ ability to transform themselves to animals or fly on broomsticks were rare.

Ibid. p. 523.

Ibid. p. 525. Also see Dolan, *Dangerous Familiars*, pp. 170-210 for summaries of contemporary witch-beliefs and practices of witch-persecutions.


Ibid. p. 530.


Scot, *The Discovery of Witchcraft*, p.4.

Ibid. p. 4.

Ibid. p. 4.

Greenblatt, ‘Shakespeare Bewitched’, p. 28.

Ibid. p. 28.

Ibid. p. 29.

Ibid. p. 161.

Ibid. p. 157.

Ibid. p. 158.

Ibid. p. 166.

Ibid. p. 156.

Ibid. p. 166.

Ibid.


Stallybrass. ‘Macbeth and Witchcraft’, p. 29.

Ibid. p. 29.

Ibid. p. 383. English historians traced the king’s power of healing to Edward the Confessor. Elizabeth herself developed the ritual of healing into a highly formalized practice, thus appropriating Catholic images and rituals even while officially separating herself from them. As Keith Thomas notes, along with the development of the royal ceremony there was legal prohibition of such practices among common people, cunning women or travelling magicians, thus consolidating and centralizing all charisma in the figure of the sovereign. See Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, pp. 197-211.


Greenblatt, ‘Shakespeare Bewitched’, p. 20.


Wilbur Sanders, *The Dramatist and the Received Idea: Studies in the plays of Marlowe and Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), p. 277. Sanders says that ‘Not even the most credulous of groundlings could have missed the element of grotesque and the ridiculous in this unheralded, abrupt, thirty second scene of doggerel and melodrama.’

Ibid. p. 277.

Ibid.


Ibid. p. 111.

Ibid. p. 112.

Ibid. p. 115.

Purkiss, *Macbeth and the All-singing, All-dancing Plays*, Almost all critics have remarked upon the sexual / gender ambiguity of the weird sisters but feminist critics of Shakespeare have laid special emphasis on its implications.

Harpam, *On the Grotesque*, pp.4-5.


Ibid. p. 229.

Ibid. p. 227.

Ibid. Purkiss points out that the cauldrons ‘were once simply the ordinary cooking utensil of those too poor to own an oven. The witches’ cauldron is a reminder of women’s control over food production.’

Ibid. p 220.


The turning machine was used first in *Hymenaei* and *The Haddington Masque* and the *Masque of Queens*. 


Ibid. ll. 168-70.

Ibid. ll. 171-5.

*) News from Scotland, Declaraing the Damnable Life and Death of Dr Fian. [1591]; reprinted in Barbara Rosen ed. *Witchcraft in England* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1991), p. 195: ‘. . . they together went by sea, each one in a riddle or sieve, and went in the same way substantially with flagons of wine, making merry and drinking by the way in the same riddles or sieves, to the kirk of North Berwick in Lothian, and after they had landed, took hands on land and danced this reel or short dance, singing all with one voice: Commer ye go before, comer go ye / If ye will not go before , commer let me. At which time she confessed that this Gillis Duncan did go before them playing this reel and dance upon a small trump, called Jew’s trump, until they entered the kirk.’

See D P Walker, *Unclean Spirits: Possession and Exorcism in France and England in the Late Sixteenth and Early Seventeenth Centuries* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981), p. 35. Marescot’s *Discourse veritable sur le fait de Marthe Brosier de Romorantin pretendue demoniaque* appeared in 1599, to be translated immediately into English. The overall verdict of Marescot’s investigation was stated in a memorable line: ‘Nothing from the devil, much counterfeit, a little from disease.’

Ibid. p. 12.

Ibid. pp. 34- 35 and p. 38. Curiously enough, Marescot and his colleagues did not entirely deny the possibility of demonic possession. Their attempt was to establish that in this particular case of ‘possession,’ Martha Brosier was a deluded and psychologically unbalanced woman whose symptoms had been exploited by her family and by a group of Catholic clergy, for both financial gain and for the seditious purpose of stirring up anti-Huguenot sentiment.


216 See Hugh Craig, ‘Jonson, the antimasque and the ‘Rules of flattery’ ’ in David Bevington and Peter Holbrook eds. *The Politics of the Stuart Court Masque* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 177: ‘The inclusion of the antimasque in court masquing gave an opportunity for scenes of barbaric anarchy to be played out in the court with a king as chief spectator.’ Also see Peter Holbrook for the ambiguous position of the antimasque of satyres in *Oberon*.

217 For a complex and brilliant account of New Historicist criticism’s ‘containment versus subversive’ debate, see Jonathan Goldberg, *James I and the Politics of Literature: Jonson, Shakespeare, Donne and Their Contemporaries* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983). Goldberg situates masques in relation to the fragmented Jacobean discourse of sovereignty which actively instantiated James’ ‘sustaining contradictions’. According to Goldberg, James cultivated a strategic doubleness, the outward show as a glorious Emperor while simultaneously functioning as a secretive politician. This doubleness, Goldberg argues, is visible in the shifts between satire and adulation, the anarchy of the antimasque and the order and harmony proclaimed by the choruses. James allowed both as strategies within the contradictory double vision of his authority.

218 Peter Holbrook ‘Jacobean Masques and Jacobean Peace’ in Bevington and Holbrook eds. *The Politics of the Stuart Court Masque*, p. 68. Holbrook argues that James’ pacifism was not only a reaction to the continental wars of his day but ingrained in his personality through his own early experiences in Scotland.


221 Ibid. p. 78.

222 In *The Masque of Queens*, lines 105-129, the hags answer to a kind of roll call by their Dame.


224 This will be discussed in detail in Chapter 4 of this thesis.


227 Ibid. p. 205.


229 Greenblatt, ‘Shakespeare Bewitched’, p. 32.

230 Purkiss, ‘Macbeth and the All-Singing, All-dancing Plays’, p. 221.

231 Ibid. p. 221.


233 Cf. Loomba, *Race Gender and Renaissance drama*, p. 76.