What is it that they [men] do
When they change us for others? Is it sport?
I think it is. And doth affection breed it?
I think it doth. Is’t frailty that thus errs?
It is so, too. And have not we affections,
Desires for sport, and frailty, as men have?
Then let them use us well, else let them know
The ills we do, their ills instruct us so.

(Othello 4.3. 95–102)

The aim of this chapter is to examine women who appear to overrun the measure. Any sign of independence in a woman is considered unnatural and deviant. Such women are either marginalized or demonized as they refuse to toe the patriarchal line. The tendency to excess is seen as subversive and unacceptable in society. This tendency to excess in a woman is described in terms of power which gives her the independence and ability to question and compete with the patriarchal order. Mistress Quickly wields some influence after her husband dies; Mistress Overdone represents the plight of the prostitutes in society. They are marginalized but the men who visit them are not condemned. The witches in Macbeth are presented as ugly. They have transgressed the boundary by gathering scientific knowledge. Women were supposed to read only scriptures and holy books. This chapter discusses three groups of such women in Shakespeare. First, there are the prostitutes, who are marginalized by society, but
are financially independent and less bound by the codes of conduct. Second, there are women who transgress the traditional boundaries of knowledge and their allotted space – Joan of Arc is a fine example – and venture beyond scriptures and social norms. They are deemed unacceptable to society and disposed off. A key to the representation of such women is that they are vilified as witches and often tarred with sexual transgression. Third, there are women who are seen as guilty of excessive sexuality, and therefore appear dangerous. Women like Helen and Cressida are presented as sexually insatiable and transgressive, and therefore must be avoided. However, the ambiguous figuration of Cressida, who is made to cross over to the enemy’s camp, as symbolic substitute of Helen, foregrounds a homosocial order peculiar to early modern Europe. Helen’s abduction by Paris and Cressida’s removal to the Greek camp are acts that are symptomatic of homosocial investments (see Gil, Before Intimacy 17-20; 79-90), made by patriarchal societies. This chapter shows how Helen, a stolen woman, is strategically presented, both by the Greek side that loses her and Trojan the side that owns her, as one whose sexuality is dangerous for the men fighting over her. For the Greek and Trojan generals to continue doing whatever it is that they may be doing at a given moment, a strategic homosocial order is important. Even though the war was started by a Greek man who stole a Trojan woman to start with, subsequent happenings are sought to be subsumed under deviant or excessive female sexuality. Female sexual excess is seen more as a product of male anxieties or of a patriarchal search for homosocial utopias.
Women in the shifting English society of Shakespeare’s times were marginalized, and the prostitute occupied an especially precarious place since her profession identified her as an outsider, legally and morally. In *Political Shakespeare* Johnnathan Dollimore says that prostitutes are “doubly spoken for: that is, others lay claim to them even as they speak for them; they are possessed both sexually and politically” (135). Whether or not the women characters were given to sexual adventurism, they were branded as such. Angelo in *Measure for Measure* calls it “the destined livery of a woman" (2.4.137). Moreover, women were reminded of their sexuality to put them in their place. It was an extension of their commodification and where necessary, a means of their marginalization. An example of such "deviancy" is Joan in *1 Henry VI*. She is presented as a promiscuous creature because of her military prowess.

Interestingly, promiscuity is projected as a threat because it could undermine the laws of succession. No man could be sure that "his mother had play'd" his "father fair" and he is his father's son (*Measure* 3.1). This male anxiety is in turn connected with other forms of anxiety when faced by a woman who threatens or appropriates a vaunted male space. A powerful woman, a rich woman, a woman with special knowledge, or a woman with exceptional energy poses a threat to the patriarchal world which can only be rationalised as a violation of nature or in terms of the preternatural. Cleopatra who poses a threat to the Roman world is seen as a gypsy, a whore, a sorceress by masculine Rome. That she undermines Roman succession by giving birth to Julius Caesar's son
only deepens the threat she poses. Added to that her fabulous wealth and power present her as a major threat to Rome which chooses to see the 'Other' (both Cleopatra and Egypt) in feminine terms. If Cleopatra's contestation of Roman power is hateful to Rome, the English or French women who try to enter the world of power-politics are equally discouraged.

It follows that the privileged scene of heroic history, is a problematic place for women. In the early history plays Joan and Margaret and Elinor do usurp masculine prerogatives and turn soldier, but always at the risk of stigmatization. The most powerful of these female warriors, Joan, is also the most demonic. Her inexplicable military power, first explained as deriving from the Blessed Virgin, is finally defined as witchcraft and punished with burning. Initially portrayed in positive terms – as “Deborah” (1.1.105) and “Astraea’s daughter” (1.6.4) – that associate her with Queen Elizabeth, Joan is finally degraded to resolve the ideological paradox of female power. By the end of 1 Henry VI, her shocking military success is explained as the the illicit supernatural power of a disorderly woman who has refused to abide by the limits of her natural role. Joan’s witchcraft is closely related to her appropriation of masculine dress and masculine behavior.

Edward Hall, a major historiographic source for 1 Henry VI links Joan’s masculinity with her demonic power when he describes her as “this wytch or manly woman” (see Jackson 64; Hall, 157). Using the two terms as if they were synonymous and interchangeable, Hall suggests an unexamined connection
between them in Renaissance ideology. Sexual difference constituted the necessary ground of patriarchal order. For a woman to perform manly deeds and so to transgress gender categories could render her and her deeds demonic (witchlike) or literally unspeakable. The single combat between Joan and Talbot (an encounter that Shakespeare invented) in 1 Henry VI is characterized in similar terms—as emasculating, shameful, and indescribable. Deprived of his “strength,” “valor,” and “force” (1.5.1), Talbot cannot understand the female power that makes him impotent: “My thoughts are whirled like a potter’s wheel, I know not where I am, nor what I do” (1.5.19-20). All he can do is lament the shame” (1.5.39), of his defeat at Joan’s hands and, ascribing it to supernatural forces, conclude that Joan is a witch. The emblem of social and spiritual transgression, Joan’s transvestite costume associates her with accounts of Queen Elizabeth’s appearance at Tilbury dressed in armor, but it also prepares for Joan’s final association with the demonic.

Female authority is always absent in Shakespeare’s histories, but it hovers at the edges of the stage, a repressed knowledge that escapes the historiographic narrative. Essential to the exercise and transmission of patriarchal authority, the women in Shakespeare’s histories can never exercise authority in their own right. Some of the women have power, but authority – the right to exercise power – is always defined in patriarchal terms, so whatever power the women exercise is defined in terms of menace to the patriarchy that contains them. Joan’s masculine attire, like the beards of the witches in Macbeth, is the sign of the
uncanny. It associates sexual ambiguity with the dangers that lurk at the boundaries of the known, rationalized world of sexual difference and sexual exclusion constructed by patriarchal discourse.

In *1 Henry VI*, the oppositions between masculine English history and feminine theatrical subversion can be seen in their simplest terms, and history is clearly privileged. Here, as in Nashe’s defense of playgoing, theatricality is associated with the effeminating forces of a degenerate modernity, history with the redeeming virtues of a heroic masculine English past. The protagonists of Shakespeare’s narrative are aristocratic men. In the play these oppositions between masculine English history and feminine theatrical subversion can be seen in their simplest terms, and history is clearly privileged. Here, as in Nashe’s defense of playgoing, theatricality is associated with the effeminating forces of a degenerate modernity, history with the redeeming virtues of a heroic masculine English past.

The protagonists of Shakespeare’s narrative are aristocratic English men. Conceived both as subjects and as writers of history, they repeatedly allude to history, past and future. They define their military struggle to retain Henry V’s French conquests as an effort to preserve his historical legacy and add their own names to the historical record. And they present themselves as the sons of noble fathers. The leader of the opposing forces, by contrast, is not only French and female but also low-born, sexually promiscuous, and insistently theatrical. A common French woman in a vain attempt to save her life, claims to have engaged
in illicit sexual liaisons with virtually every member of the French court. An important function of history, in the Renaissance as in antiquity, was to repair the ravages of mortality.

In 1 Henry VI, the past is idealized in heroic terms as the repository of English honor, and its loss is defined as a process of effeminization. The play begins in a dangerously degenerate and unstable world mourning the death of an idealized hero. The opening scene depicts the funeral of Henry V, the legendary warrior-king who was, we are told, “too famous to live long” (1.1.6). Other deaths of England’s great warriors punctuate the action. Salisbury is cut down at Orleans, Bedford at Rouen, Talbot and his son on the plains before Bordeaux. The entire play can be seen as a series of attempts on the part of the English to preserve Henry’s fame, along with the fame of English martial heroes, and with them the manhood of the English nation.

Bedford’s speech defines the English predicament in this play by constructing a gendered antithesis: if Henry’s heroic legacy is lost, England will become an island of weeping women. What interrupts Bedford’s funeral oration, and with it his attempt to establish the dead king’s place in history, is a messenger who rushes in to announce that eight French cities have been lost. In this play, and even more so in 2 Henry VI, the loss of Henry’s French territories is blamed in part on dissension among the English nobility. Winchester, the churchman, and Gloucester, the Lord Protector, fight. In the Temple Garden, the descendents of the two branches of England’s ruling dynasty—Yorkists and
Lancastrians – pluck white and red roses to symbolize their opposing allegiances. In France, quarrels among the English nobles prevent reinforcements from being sent to Talbot at Bordeaux. But in this play an even greater threat to Henry’s legacy in France are the French themselves, especially when they are led by the charismatic and wily Joan of Arc.

Joan explicitly identifies the French effort to drive the English from their country with the erasure of Henry’s and England’s place in history when she claims, Glory is like a circle in the water, Which never ceaseth to enlarge itself, Till by broad spreading it disperse to nought. With Henry’s death the English circle ends, Dispersed are the glories it included. (1.2.133-7). Implicit in Joan’s entire performance, however, is a threat to English historical renown even more dangerous than her military victories: the vivid theatrical presence that makes her the most memorable character in the play. Joan’s only rival for theatrical pre-eminence is Talbot. Henry VI, the boy king who gives the play its name, does not even appear on stage until act 2, and the gendered opposition between Joan and Talbot defines the meaning of the conflict between France and England.

A youthful peasant whose forces resort to craft, subterfuge, and modern weapons, Joan embodies a demonized and feminine modernity threatening to the traditional patriarchal order. Shakespeare invented the single combat in which Joan fights Talbot to a draw (1.5), and he also shaped their characterizations around a series of binary oppositions. He repeatedly calls attention to the fact that the French champion is a woman, defining the conflict between England and
France as a conflict between masculine and feminine force, as well as between chivalric virtue and pragmatic craft; historical fame and physical reality/theatrical presence; patriarchal age and subversive youth; high social rank and low. It is significant that the great Salisbury is shot by a French boy sniper and that Joan recaptures Rouen by sneaking in, disguised as the peasant she really is, to admit the French army. Joan’s disguise is the visible emblem of her theatricality as well as her low social rank and anti-heroic status.

Most obvious in this moment of explicit role-playing, Joan’s theatricality is actually her salient quality. Her role as leader of the French army involves her in the same transgressions against God and the social hierarchy that were repeatedly charged against the players in Shakespeare’s England: wearing a costume and playing a part that belie her true social rank and natural sex. Moreover, her female gender, her sexual promiscuity, and her deceptiveness all imply the vices that were associated with theatrical performance. Paradoxically, the only time when Joan’s “true” identity appears on stage is in that scene at the gates of Orleans. Dressed as a peasant woman, she also declares her true station in life when she responds to the watchman’s challenge, “Qui là?” by announcing, “Paysans, la pauvre gens de France” (3.2.13–14). But in the very next line she returns to English, and to deception, when she continues, “Poor market folks that come to sell their corn.”

Although Joan is repeatedly identified as French, this is the only time in the play when she speaks the French language, and there is very little sense of
“France” as either a nation or a kingdom in this play. The Countess of Auvergne charges that Talbot has “Wasted our country, slain our citizens,/And sent our sons and husbands captivate” (2.3.41–2); and Joan’s dialogue with Burgundy provides a momentarily poignant image of a French nation; but in the authoritative words of the English men who define the terms of the conflict, France is simply a rebellious English territory. Talbot explains to the countess that the French have “rebellious necks” which he has “yoke[d]” (2.3.64).

The messenger who comes to the English court with the bad news that the Dauphin has been crowned king in Rheims defines the meaning of the coronation by announcing that “France is revolted from the English quite” (1.1.90). In fact, even when Joan comes to the Dauphin with the claim that “God’s Mother” appeared to her in a vision and willed her to “leave my base vocation/And free my country from calamity” (1.2.78-81), the liberation of France is associated with the insubordinate act of abandoning a “base vocation.” The glimpses of a sense of French national identity that can be dimly seen in the words and actions of the French women and in the language that Joan attributes to the Virgin Mary are superseded by the insistent and explicit sense of hereditary entitlement that authorizes the English right to France, along with Englishmen’s understanding of their own identities. The principles of inheritance that warrant the English claim to territories in France also determine personal identity.

What is most at stake in the battles between France and England is the verification of English history. The issue of verification frames the conflict
between Joan and Talbot as an opposition between the historical record that Talbot wishes to preserve and the physical reality that Joan invokes to discredit it. Joan’s challenge takes two forms. As pointed out by Rackin, "What she does threatens to deprive the English of their martial honor by defeat at the hands of a woman; and what she says attacks both the English version of history and the values it expresses, with an earthy iconoclasm that threatens to discredit the traditional notions of chivalric glory invoked by the English heroes" (58). We see this opposition in its purest form after Talbot’s death when Sir William Lucy calls for him in heroic language:

    But where’s the great Alcides of the field,
    Valiant Lord Talbot, Earl of Shrewsbury,
    Created, for his rare success in arms,
    Great Earl of Washford, Waterford, and Valence,
    Lord Talbot of Goodrig and Urchinfield. (5.7.60–65)

Rejecting the grandiose pretensions in the string of titles Lucy uses to mark Talbot’s absence, Joan derides his language as a silly stately style. Joan relies on what she can see, rejecting the masculine historical ideals and significance that Lucy’s glorious names invoke, and Joan’s subversive speech has an obvious appeal for an audience. "Her vigorous, colloquial language, tied to the material facts of earth, threatens to topple the imposing formal edifice Lucy has constructed with his tower of names. Despite her lack of ideological authority,
Joan’s vivid voice and energetic theatrical presence provide the basis for a serious challenge to the logocentric, masculine historical record "(59).

The female characters in *Henry VI*—Joan, the Countess of Auvergne and Margaret of Anjou—are united not only by gender and nationality but also by the threats they pose to the English protagonists and to the heroic values associated with history as the preserver of masculine fame and glory. Like Joan, the countess attacks Talbot; like Joan, she resorts to craft and stratagem; and like Joan she threatens to subvert the English historical project by calling attention to the difference between Talbot’s unimpressive physical presence in the person of the actor who played his part and the verbal record of the historical Talbot’s heroic honor.

The countess’s preference for physical evidence over historical report associates her with the French and female forces in the play as a theatrically empowered threat to the authority of English history. The threat is resolved in an antitheatrical joke which insures that the countess, and the audience along with her, will be clearly instructed in the superiority of historical report over theatrical presence. Just before Talbot summons the hidden soldiers who will free him from her trap, he announces, “I am but shadow of myself./You are deceiv’d, my substance is not here” (2.3.50–1); and a minute later the countess acknowledges that the verbal reports she doubted were really true. For the audience, Talbot’s lines were doubly significant: a “shadow” was a common term for an actor, and in that sense the man who spoke those lines was quite literally “but a shadow” of
the elusive Talbot, the emblem of a lost historical presence, celebrated by
historiographer and playwright, but never present in substance even to the
countess who thinks she has him captured in her castle.

However, the masculine authority of history is sustained against the
feminine challenge of physical presence as the play is revealed as a
representation. Presence remains ineluctably absent—the elusive Other, that, like
the feminine principle itself, must be suppressed in order to sustain the masculine
historiographic narrative. The theatrical challenge posed by the women’s appeals
to physical fact is discredited by reminders that the drama contains no physical
facts, and the verbal construction of Talbot’s glory survives. In this context the
scene of Talbot’s death is instructive. A long contention between Talbot and his
son—a son repeatedly addressed by his father as “Talbot,” the father’s own name
—in which each urges the other to save his life by fleeing from battle and in
which neither, of course, will flee, ends with the death of both. Despite Talbot’s
paternal solicitude, the boy refuses to leave because “flight” would “abuse” his
father’s “renowned name” (4.5.41): “Is my name Talbot? and am I your
son?/And shall I fly?” (4.5.12–13).

The boy’s willingness to die means that only the name will survive,
stripped of any living human referent but glorious in historical memory. The
argument that finally convinces Talbot to allow his son to stay with him and die
in battle is the boy’s claim that if he runs away, he will lose his patriarchal
English title and become “like …the peasant boys of France” (4.6.48): “if I fly, I
am not Talbot’s son…. If son to Talbot, die at Talbot’s foot” (4.6.51–3). Talbot and his son both make the traditional heroic choice to sacrifice their lives in order to preserve their honor and their heroic titles. The son must sacrifice his life to secure his legitimate place in the patriarchal line: “O, if you love my mother,/Dishonor not her honorable name/To make a bastard and a slave of me!/The world will say, he is not Talbot’s blood,/That basely fled when noble Talbot stood” (4.6.13–17).

In direct contrast, Shakespeare contrives Joan’s final interview with her father to show her placing life above historical glory. We see her rejecting her father, revealed as a bastard, and claiming to be pregnant with yet another bastard, all in a futile effort to save her life (5.4). The historical prototype for Talbot’s son was already in his late twenties when he died, and already had children. Moreover, he was not the only son of Talbot’s to die at this battle. It is reported that Talbot’s bastard son Henry was also killed there. Shakespeare rewrites the historical record to produce a sharp contrast between the strong bond that unites the male Talbots and Joan’s denial of her peasant father, thus completing his representation of Talbot and Joan as opposites and connecting the various terms in which their opposition has been defined—historian vs. anti-historian, noble man vs. peasant woman, dynastic pride vs. the shame of bastardy. Joan’s sexual promiscuity and her association with bastardy are hinted even in her first appearance, as she quickly becomes the object of the courtiers’ lascivious jokes (1.2). The suggestion of illicit sexuality that always surrounds
Joan associates her with the third French woman in the play, Margaret of Anjou, soon to become the adulterous queen of Henry-VI.

Although Joan is burned at the stake at the end of 1 Henry VI, the subversive forces she embodies survive in Part II in the persons of unruly women and rebellious commoners. Unlike Part I, where much of the action takes place on French soil, Part II is set entirely in England, an England descending rapidly into the chaos of civil war; and the domestic dissension already represented in Part I becomes the focus of the action. These two early plays are united, however, in their representation of women as a principal cause of England’s problems. Foretold at the very end of Part I and announced in the opening scene of Part II, Margaret’s marriage to Henry VI brings the subversive forces embodied by the French women in Part I to the heart of the English court. The French women who threaten to subvert the English historical project in Part I are unmarried; in Part II, the dangers they embody quite literally come home to England in the form of ambitious wives, married to the men who govern the land. These women threaten both the authority of their husbands and the stability of the kingdom.

Margaret openly defies her husband, engages in an adulterous love affair with an ambitious courtier, and takes a leading role in dangerous court intrigues. Eleanor Cobham, wife of Gloucester, the upright Lord Protector, defies his wishes, scheming to put him on the throne so she herself can become queen. Fundamental to the play’s brutal representation of political disorder, then, is its
emphasis on the gender disorder at the heart of the English state and the English family. While Joan in *1 Henry VI* is accused of various kinds of sexual impropriety and often talked about in sexualized terms, Margaret in this scene commands the stage as a sexually mature and erotically powerful figure in a way Joan never does. This sexuality is in part what makes her a powerful presence in the play, but it is clearly represented as dangerous to men and to the good order of the kingdom. To depict Margaret as a figure of open and excessive sexual passion is one way of demonizing her and representing the dangers of a femininity not firmly under the control of a father or husband.

Another strong-willed wife in the play is the Duchess of Gloucester, Eleanor Cobham, whom the husband cannot control. Depicted as enemies and rivals, Margaret and Eleanor are, in a way, united by their assertive, ambitious natures. Against Gloucester’s express wishes, Eleanor pursues her ambition, thereby posing a threat to his public position. She dreams of usurping power from the present king and queen and having them kneel at her feet.

Were I a man, a duke, and next of blood,
I would remove these tedious stumbling-blocks,
And smooth my way upon their headless necks;
And being a woman, I will not be slack
To play my part in Fortune’s pageant. (1.2.61-67)

Eleanor’s frequently noted sartorial extravagance is another signal of her ambition, as well as making plain the fact that the Lord Protector’s wife is much
wealthier than the poverty-stricken queen. Not born a queen, she plays the part of one by her sartorial displays and troops of followers.

Eleanor’s subsequent traffic with priests, witches, and conjurors further discredits her, just as Margaret is discredited for her sexuality. It also connects Eleanor to Joan of Arc in Part I, a woman shown summoning spirits to her aid. In the early 1590s there was considerable interest in England in the question of witchcraft. In fact, anxieties about female challenges to patriarchal authority frequently lay at the root of early modern witchcraft hysteria (see Stallybrass 190-1). When she is shown in the company of Margery Jordan, a witch, and two of her companions, a conjuror and two priests, the effect is damning. Eleanor is represented as an ambitious woman who would resort to any means including blasphemy to secure desired ends.

That Eleanor ends up on the Isle of Man is historically accurate; but it is also symbolically appropriate. A female overreacher, she is condemned to live out her life in the space of “man.” The shaming of Eleanor is complete when she becomes a public spectacle. Her rich attire is exchanged for a white robe of penitence, and her troops of followers are replaced by jeering crowds that mock her. She stumbles, barefoot, over the flinty stones of London’s streets. Interestingly, this theatrical taming of a proud woman is not only placed at the virtual centre of the play (2.4), but also is an enactment of a special kind of gendered violence. While her rank saves Eleanor from burning, the progress through London’s streets strips her of her social identity. She is no longer the
second-greatest woman in England, the Lord Protector’s wife, but a criminal displayed in public view.

Not only as punishment for her own illicit ambition, Eleanor’s humiliation is also the prelude to Gloucester’s fall. With his death, chaos descends on England. As the king has been rendered effeminate by his strong-willed queen, so Gloucester has been fatally undermined by the actions of his ambitious wife. In both cases, the men’s failure to control their wives has more than personal consequences; it also undermines the stability of the kingdom.

All three parts of _Henry VI_ feature women in what are now considered “untraditional” roles—as generals leading victorious armies on the battlefield and as political actors who exercise significant power in the conduct of state affairs. In _1 Henry VI_, Joan leads the French armies to repeated victories. In the subsequent Henry VI plays, Margaret turns out to be a better general than her husband, and she has no difficulty in overriding Henry’s efforts to make peace with his Yorkist antagonists.

In _1 Henry VI_, where the emphasis is on alien threats to English greatness, Joan endangers Talbot’s attempt to retain control of the French territories that represent Henry V’s legacy. In _Part II_, where the focus is on the internal dissension that threatens England’s unity, Margaret and Eleanor are convenient figures who represent domestic disorder that mutate into political disorder. They
emerge as unruly women whose transgressive ambitions are inextricably linked to excessive sexuality that overtakes the realm.

In *Part II*, Margaret continues to wield power to the end, which is one reason why the play concludes so open-endedly. Female ambition has not been entirely quelled. But while Margaret escapes Eleanor’s fate, she loses Suffolk, who is banished, and after Gloucester’s death she is faced with her most formidable opponent in the person of Richard.

According to Rackin, feminist critics have valued plays that represent women in demonic terms, but although the early plays tend to demonize female characters, they also record women’s power as orators, as warriors, as custodians of dynastic legitimacy. So long as the authority of monarchs rests on genealogy, as in the first tetralogy, its guarantors—and its potential subverters—are women; for no man could know that he was truly the son of his mother’s husband or the father of his wife’s son. Because the transmission of patrilineal authority could take place only through the bodies of women, it was vulnerable at every stage to subversion by female sexual transgression. Since this anxiety could not be addressed fully, there was a tendency to connect sexuality with transgression and even anarchy. The supposedly unruly world of *Measure for Measure* manifests some of the constructions put on the people by the persons in authority.

*Measure for Measure* explores the theme of sexuality and society’s regulation of it in much more direct terms than any other of Shakespeare’s plays.
A prominent theme of the play is the tensions between those, who wish to eradicate sin from Viennese society, and those who either participate in the sex industry or earn their living by it. In the play, the Duke of Vienna temporarily steps down from power, leaving Angelo, a nobleman, to attempt to curtail the rampant sexual activity, both commercial and private, that has seemingly begun to disrupt society. Later in the play, the Duke observes, “I have seen corruption boil and bubble / Till it o’errun the stew” (5.1.326-27). Corruption is presented in terms of rampant sexuality. The play reflects the ethical relativism and sexual politics in the world of Vienna. While the duke displays a sinister manipulative side, there is an unruly, ludic subversion from below of an oppressive official ideology of order.

Ostensibly, there appears to be a link between anarchy and sexuality. Both imply a lack of control. If a person is not controlled in his personal conduct, he might fail to be a caretaker of the state. Since the authorities perceive sexuality as a problem in society, they project marriage as a solution to the problem. The authorities prefer to persist with the link between sexuality and anarchy although as Dollimore points out "Whatever subversive identity the sexual offenders...possess is a construction put upon them by the authority which wants to control them; moreover control is exercised through that construction" (Political Shakespeare 73). The authorities know that the real problem in the State centres in and around the abuse of power, but prefer to trace it downwards to the common people and their sexuality.
In this context Mistress Overdone, an elderly bawd who runs her own brothel, speaks for the women who make their living in the sex trade. Her plight in the play represents the position of prostitutes who were the most exploited section of society. Virtually everything that happens in the play takes their trade for granted, yet they have no voice no presence. In act 1, scene 2, she and Pompey, a tapster and fellow bawd who helps her in running the brothel, discuss the hardships endured by those in the sex industry during the period. Mistress Overdone topically alludes to recent wars, the plague, and the threat of harsh punishments to those who harbour prostitutes or their customers. She complains that “what with the war, what/ with the sweat, what And what with/ poverty, I am custom-shrunk” (1.2.81-83). Her assessment of her trade in war and peace resembles that of another character from a play by a contemporary of Shakespeare: the Maltan whore Bellamira.

Mistress Overdone’s assessment of the hardships faced by prostitutes illustrates their physical, legal, and economical vulnerability. As the scene continues, Pompey tells her that there is a new proclamation that all the houses in the suburbs of Vienna must be “plucked down,” Mistress Overdone exhibits great concern on hearing the news because she knows of no other way to earn a living. As women’s public roles were restricted, poor women in Shakespeare’s England had few choices to earn a living. This trade was one of the very few accessible to women, even if it was not desirable. Prostitution was clearly not the ideal
occupation, but it did offer many women the means for survival. However, the fact that economic compulsions, death or desertion of male relatives, or failed love lives, among others, may be behind the choice of their trade is customarily drowned out by moral questions. A prostitute is typically represented as an oversexed woman, and her only cure is an overdose of sex. This prejudice is behind the life that women like Mistress Overdone lead.

Pompey is arrested, and in the first trial scene (2.1), Escalus and Angelo question him about his position with Mistress Overdone. Here, Pompey wittily defends the profession, asking the Duke if he means “to geld and splay all the youth of the city?” Later, after Pompey’s second arrest, the Duke decides that “correction and instruction must both work/ ere this rude beast will profit” (3.2.33-34). Pompey’s putative redemption lies in his acceptance of the Duke’s offer to become the hangman’s apprentice. Abhorson, however, reacts with distaste, protesting that Pompey will “discredit our mystery” (4.2.28-29). The hangman’s jeers, though meant for Pompey, are actually directed at female sexuality.

Mistress Overdone, however, does not receive the same chance at redemption as Pompey. Lucio, fearing that she will implicate him in an illegitimate birth, accuses her of being a bawd, or procurer of prostitutes. However, she reveals his indiscretion upon arrest, informing those in the prison that “Mistress Kate Keepdown was with/ child by him in the Duke’s time:” he promised her marriage./ His child is a year and a quarter old” (3.2.194-96).
Officers then escort Mistress Overdone to jail, where she presumably remains for the rest of the play. Nevertheless, the Duke later punishes Lucio, ordering him to marry Mistress Kate before he is to be whipped and hung (5.1.518-24). At this command, Lucio pleads to the Duke not to “recompense me in making me a cuckold,” as if marrying the prostitute he patronized is a fate worse than death; even though the Duke later retracts his death sentence, Lucio’s last lines still reflect his displeasure about his impending marriage, as he complains that “Marrying a punk, my lord, is pressing to death, whipping, and hanging” (5.1.33-34). This discomfort of men, who visit the prostitutes but are unwilling to accept any relationship with them, is also evident in the treatment of Bianca in Othello.

In Othello, Shakespeare designates Bianca as a courtesan in his *dramatis personae*. She functions primarily to further the plot, but her minor yet necessary presence evokes perhaps the greatest sympathy of all of Shakespeare’s prostitutes. Eamon Grennan observes, “As a woman conventionally scorned, desired, used, and abused, she underlines the theme of female abuse at the heart of the play” (282). Grennan views Bianca as a “passionate, spontaneous, and honest human being,” one who speaks her mind and never betrays her own emotions, which Iago will eventually exploit to further his machinations (282-283). Bianca carries on a long affair with Cassio, but her vulnerability as a courtesan emerges towards the end of the play when Iago accuses her of instigating the attack on Cassio.

When she first appears on stage, in act 3, scene 4, Cassio addresses her in affectionate terms, calling her “my most fair Bianca,” “sweet love,” and “Sweet
Bianca‖ (3.4.170, 172, 180). He clearly has affection for her, and she reciprocates his affection openly and enthusiastically, thereby establishing a relationship similar to that of Doll and Falstaff. Bianca even takes the liberty of chastising Cassio for staying away from her for so long, playfully scolding him:

“What, keep a week away?
Seven days and nights?
Eightscore-eight hours?
And lovers’ absent hours
More tedious than the dial eightscore times?
Oh, weary reck’ning!” (3.4.174-177).

Their relationship appears to extend beyond a sexual bond to one of genuine affection, perhaps even love, challenging the traditional portrayals of prostitutes. Bianca even exhibits jealousy when Cassio presents her with Desdemona’s handkerchief and asks her to make a copy of it. She rebukes him, and he truthfully replies, “You are jealous now/ that this is from some mistress, some remembrance./ No, by my faith, Bianca” (3.4.187-189). He shows concern for how Bianca feels; more specifically, he worries that she may think he has been unfaithful, which is remarkable for a woman of her position to expect from a man of his status. However, Cassio also exhibits society’s preoccupation with the “Madonna/whore” dichotomy that causes the other male characters in the play to suffer.

In Act 4, Scene 1, Iago encourages Cassio to make ribald jokes about Bianca, while Othello, eavesdropping, believes that the jokes are aimed at his
wife, Desdemona. Iago tells Cassio that Bianca "gives it out that you shall marry her" (4.1.118), to which Cassio, perhaps somewhat ashamed of his affection for Bianca derisively replies: "I marry her? What? A customer? Prithee, bear some charity to my wit; do not think it so unwhole-some. Ha, ha, ha" (4.1.122-24). His use of the word "customer" exposes the economic aspect of their relationship, and it taints any hope that Bianca has of marrying him.

Clearly, Cassio does not desire to marry her, even though he harbours affectionate feelings for her; he does not see her as a potential wife because of her profession, preferring instead to marry someone like Desdemona, the "virtuous" wife of Othello, and a woman whom he can place on a pedestal. Carol Thomas Neely insists that "play's humanization of her . . . underlines the folly of the male characters who see her as merely whore" (140). Shakespeare elicits great sympathy for Bianca by emphasizing her precarious position in society. Cassio speaks dismissively of Bianca, demeaning her: "'Tis such another fitchew! Marry, a perfumed/ one" (4.1.148-49), but then he agrees to see her that night for dinner. Bianca functions as a pleasant distraction for Cassio, but to Bianca he represents a chance to escape from her lifestyle by marrying a respected man of society. Bianca exhibits the desire to abandon her profession as a courtesan and establish a respectable life with Cassio. Bianca, however, fails to attain this goal; But Bianca does not see herself as a whore in her relationship with Cassio and "is surprised when he treats her like one" (Neely 148).

In the fight scene (5.1), Roderigo wounds Cassio as directed by Iago. A crowd gathers, and Bianca enters, having "brave[d] the confusion of the night and
the ugliness of Iago’s insinuations to Cassio’s side when he is wounded” (Neely 145); as soon as she realizes that Cassio has been seriously hurt, she cries out, “Oh, my dear Cassio!/ My sweet Cassio! Oh, Cassio, Cassio, Cassio!” (5.1.77-78), obviously distraught because of his injuries. Seeing an opportunity to frame Bianca for Cassio’s injuries because her reputation as a prostitute automatically places her in a suspicious position, Iago immediately calls her “notable strumpet,” (5.1.79) and then accuses her outright: “Gentleman, I do suspect this trash/ to be a party in this injury” (5.1.86-87). Iago continues to implicate Bianca in the crime, asking her, “Look you pale, mistress?” and querying the men standing nearby, “Do you perceive the gastness of her eye?” (5.1.107-8). Bianca suffers from the “fruits of whoring,” and cannot defend herself because “guiltiness /will speak, though tongues were out of use” (5.1.118; 110-12).

Haselkorn explains that “prostitutes are society’s scapegoats, whose persecution is justified by rhetoric. Society first subjugates them and then cites their oppressed status as proof of their inferiority” (19). Bianca tries to defend herself after Emilia joins the other accusers, replying, “I am no strumpet, but of life as honest/ as you that thus abuses me” (5.1.124-5). Unfortunately, her reputation prevents her from seeming innocent of the crime because her profession sullies her name, although ironically, Cassio’s association with a prostitute does not sully his name and he remains “good Cassio” despite his illicit relationship with Bianca. Thus the play highlights the double standard whereby the patriarchal discourse allows for male indiscretions, but condemns the women
with whom they commit these indiscretions. This is further illustrated in perhaps Shakespeare’s most detailed and famous treatment of a lady of easy virtue is Mistress Nell Quickly who appears in both parts of *Henry IV* and in *Henry V*.

The continued presence of Mistress Nell Quickly, the Hostess of the Boar’s Head Tavern, helps to link the three plays. Sited in the seedy and unfashionable district of Eastcheap, Nell, Her Tavern and her customers represent London’s low life. However her character undergoes a remarkable metamorphosis in the course of the three plays. In *1 Henry IV*, she is presented as a tavern or inn keeper, a profession often used to mask bawdry activities. In act 1, Hal teases Falstaff about his fondness for prostitutes, to which Falstaff replies, “And is not my hostess of the tavern a most sweet wench?” (1.2.39-40). The two men then tease each other about frequenting her establishment, and Falstaff reminds the prince that he himself “hast called her to a reckoning many a time and oft” (1.2.48).

Falstaff hints that Prince Hal may have frequented the same brothels as Falstaff, including the one run by Mistress Quickly, whose name implies a certain sexual prowess. Later in the play, Falstaff teasingly refers to Mistress Quickly as “sweet queen,” and “good tickle-brain,” revealing a fondness for this easily confused yet loyal woman (2.4.388, 394). In addition to affection, Falstaff’s term of endearment also includes an insult; the term *quean* or *quene* was commonly used to mean “harlot,” a pun also found throughout *Henry VIII*. Falstaff, with his quick wit, easily dupes Mistress Quickly out of money owed to her as she
justifiably points out to him, “You owe me money, Sir John, and now you pick a quarrel to beguile me of it. I bought you a dozen shirts to your back” (3.3.66-8). Thus Mistress Quickly is economically independent; her position even allows her to loan money to Falstaff. Falstaff’s duping of Mistress Quickly also shows the disrespect that society in general held for this marginalised group in society.

Falstaff’s accusations are only possible because he knows that any judge would rule in the favor of a knight before that of a female bawd. Falstaff proceeds to challenge the Hostess’s integrity by accusing her:

“There’s no more faith in thee than in a stewed prune, nor no more truth in thee than in a drawn fox; and for womanhood, Maid Marian may be the deputy’s wife of the ward to thee. Go, you thing, go” (3.3.113-16).

This passage shows the ill-treatment meted out to the prostitutes. Falstaff exploits Mistress Quickly’s body as well as her wallet. He refers to her as a thing, which demonstrates Falstaff’s attempts to commodify and objectify her in order not to feel guilty about exploiting her. The scene highlights the vulnerability of those who work outside the boundaries of society. Their questionable professions obviously cast doubt upon their integrity, a point that probably would not have garnered much sympathy with Shakespeare’s audience.

In the 2 Henry IV Shakespeare continues to present Mistress Quickly as both victim and scapegoat, making Mistress Quickly the butt of even more jokes, as she clearly performs the role of bawd for Falstaff and Doll Tearsheet, a whore
in the Tavern. In this play both Nell and Doll are shown to be completely under Falstaff’s thumb. Nell has gone as far as suing Falstaff for debt, but when challenged as to the amount it becomes clear that it is not the money that is at the root of her complaint. Falstaff has, in fact, not kept his word in another way: “Thou didst swear to me …to marry me and make me my lady thy wife. Canst thou deny it?” (2.2.89-91).

Doll has a relationship with Fastaff that contains real emotion, which is evident in their playful exchanges. She rebuffs the advances of Pistol, Falstaff’s companion who later marries Mistress Quickly. Doll insults him, calling him a “swaggering rascal,” “scurvy companion,” and a “cutspur rascal” (2.4.70, 122,127). According to Doll, Pistol has abused her in the past, “tearing a poor whore’s ruff in a bawdy house,” and she refuses to do business with him again (2.4.144-5). Doll here refers to herself as a “whore,” and, according to Stanton, “this is the only instance in Shakespeare’s canon of the word’s use as spoken by a female character in her own chosen description of herself” (89). She makes no apologies for who she is. Of all of Shakespeare’s prostitutes and the men with whom they are involved, Doll and Falstaff share the closest, healthiest relationship. In Doll’s first scene in the play, they banter back and forth over the spread of venereal disease, making light an otherwise serious subject. Falstaff chides her:

“If the cook help to make the gluttony, you help make the diseases, Doll. We catch of you, Doll, we catch of you. Grant that, my poor virtue, grant that” (2.4.45-7).
Doll then responds by pointing out Falstaff’s proclivity to steal, charging, “Yea, joy, our chains and our jewels” (2.4.48). She clearly enjoys the bantering jests that they share, and she tells him, “Come, I’ll be friends with thee./ Jack. Thou art going to the wars, and whether I shall/ ever see thee again or no there is nobody cares” (2.4.66-8). Doll addresses Falstaff as Jack, the familiar nickname for John, another sign that she cares deeply for and enjoys a close relationship with the fat knight.

Doll is very much a woman but because of her profession she cannot hope of any emotional bond with Falstaff. During this scene, Doll and a drunken Pistol heatedly argue over his past mistreatment of her. Falstaff soon tires of Pistol’s insults and defends Doll. The two men fight, which flatters Doll, so she flatters Falstaff in return:

Ah, you sweet little rogue, you! Alas, poor ape, how thou sweat’st!
Come, let me wipe thy face. Come on, you whoreson chops. Ah, rogue,
I’faith, I love thee. Thou art as valorous as Hector of Troy, worth five of Agamemnon, and ten times better than the Nine Worthies. Ah, villain!

(2.4.214-19)

Doll’s spirited praise of Falstaff demonstrates both respect and true affection for the dissolute, yet engaging rogue, even if it is tempered with affectionate mockery, an always-present component of their relationship. She then promises Falstaff, “I’ll canvas thee between a pair of sheets,” offering him a sexual reward for his defense of her honor (2.4.223). The entrance of a disguised Prince Hal
interrupts their celebration, and Doll abruptly asks Falstaff “what humor’s the Prince of?” (2.4.235). Whether or not she knows that the tapster is really the Prince remains uncertain. However, after Falstaff makes disparaging remarks about the two men, Doll and Falstaff resume their flirtatious dialogue. Falstaff teases her, “Thou dost give me flattering busses,” to which she replies, “By my troth, I kiss thee with a most constant heart” (2.4.268-70).

Once Prince Hal unmask[s] himself, Falstaff, thinking that Doll helped set him up, proceeds to denounce Mistress Quickly and Doll in an effort to save his face in front of the Prince. He uses rhetoric that emphasize the lowly status of the prostitutes in order to appeal to Prince Hal’s forgiveness; Falstaff explains, “I dispraise him before the wicked, that the/ wicked might not fall in love with thee” (2.4.319-20). He also says of Doll, “she’s in hell already and/ burns poor souls,” insinuating that she will continue to cause others to suffer from venereal disease after her death (2.4.338-9). The women forgive him, however, once Bardolph announces the news of Falstaff’s imminent departure. Doll appears to harbour genuine concern for Falstaff as he prepares to leave; she displays sincere emotion but uses few words to convey them: “I cannot speak. If my heart be not ready to/ burst—well, sweet Jack, have a care of thyself” (2.4.381-2). Their relationship shows the poignant reality of a soldier and a prostitute. The moment passes quickly, however, when Bardolph breaks the spell to “Bid Mistress Tearsheet come to my master” (2.4.388-9). As a prostitute summoned by a prince, she cannot afford to remain with Mistress Quickly and lament Falstaff’s departure;
she must do as Prince Hal orders, yet Doll “comes blubbered” to the Prince, with her emotions unchecked (2.4.391).

As in Part I, in Part II of Henry IV, Falstaff takes advantage of Mistress Quickly and belittles her simultaneously. In Part II, he again insults her by calling her a “queane,” Later, in act 2, scene 1, Mistress Quickly attempts to have Falstaff arrested for non-payment of a debt, charging that “when the Prince broke thy head for/ liking his father to a singing-man of Windsor, thou/ didst swear to me then, as I was washing they wound,/ to marry me and me my lady thy wife” (2.1.87-90). She clearly harbours resentment over Falstaff’s failure to marry her, since such a marriage could elevate her status in society. Mistress Quickly also has affectionate feelings for Falstaff since she has waited for so long to marry him, despite his repeated attempts to exploit her financially. While on the surface the situation seems comical, this humorous facade hides the sadness of a woman who has failed to attain her desire. Later in the play, shortly after Prince Hal becomes King Henry V, Mistress Quickly and Doll are arrested and ordered to be whipped.

The two women are punished solely for their position as prostitutes, since the officer arrests them because of their association with Pistol, whose uncontrolled temper has resulted in a man’s death. Doll and Mistress Quickly are used as convenient scapegoats, and Pistol, named as the guilty one, is free. As they are being dragged away by the officers, Doll announces her pregnancy and warns the officers, “Come on, I’ll tell thee/ what, thou damned tripe-visaged
rascal, an the child I go with do miscarry, thou wert better thou hadst struck thy mother” (5.4.7-10). Mistress Quickly reveals that Falstaff is the child’s father, which further complicates her relationship with the unfaithful knight, and her jealousy emerges as she curses Doll, “I/ pray God the fruit of her womb miscarry!” (5.4.12-3). Doll’s pleas fail to sway the officers to leniency, however, and both she and Mistress Quickly are removed to prison. Despite Falstaff’s vow to “deliver” Doll, no action appears to be made to rescue her from punishment (5.5.38). Falstaff neither frees her, nor does he facilitate the birth of their child, since the new King promptly banishes him, and the Epilogue informs us that Falstaff will shortly “die of the sweat” (28), alluding to venereal disease. We must assume that Doll indeed miscarries since no other mention of the child appears in this play or its sequel.

In the next play, Henry V, which resumes shortly after the conclusion of 2 Henry IV, prostitution functions minimally, almost as a footnote to the previous play. Doll, we learn from one of Pistol’s insults, has retreated to a “spital” to lie in a “powdering tub of infamy” to receive treatment for venereal disease (2.1.75-6). Shortly after, Pistol reveals, “Falstaff he is dead” (2.3.5). In a singularly moving speech, Mistress Quickly recounts Falstaff’s death, including Theobald’s famous emendation, “and ‘a babbled of green fields’” (2.3.9-25). Discussing Falstaff’s death, Mistress Quickly agrees that he may have spoken disparagingly of wine, but she refuses to believe that he would repent his former lifestyle and decry women since he loved their company so much. Despite their differences,
the remaining members of this group of outcasts decide to honour Falstaff in his last hours. The loyalty that the “lowlife” frequenters of Eastchap feel for each other also arouses a feeling of sympathy from the audience. At the beginning of *Henry V*, we learn that Mistress Quickly has experienced profound changes in life. She and the hot-tempered Pistol have wed, which illustrates how society would allow a man to redeem a prostitute through marriage, thus legitimizing her and finally controlling her sexuality.

Both Mistress Quickly and Pistol are now concerned with appearing respectable. When Nym, another of Falstaff’s tavern mates, refers to Pistol as “Host,” another moniker for a brothel-keeper, Pistol adamantly proclaims, “I swear, I scorn the term!/ Nor shall my Nell keep lodgers” (2.1.30-1). Pistol and his new wife seek legitimacy now that they are married, and they attempt to distance themselves from their former lives. They ultimately fail, however, since Mistress Quickly dies “I’th’ spital of a malady of France” (5.1.81). Only Pistol mourns for her, and her death leaves him bitter and angry. Distraught over the loss of his wife, he vows, “Well, bawd I’ll turn,” perhaps seeking to maintain a link with her by entering her former profession (5.1.84). Though Pistol tries to redeem a bawd society perhaps would not allow him to do so. The death of all these women shows how society refuses to accommodate them and considers them as ‘excess’. The irony however is that a woman who offers her body as a service, mostly to earn a living, is called a prostitute. But there is no equivalent term for a man who visits the prostitutes.
Thus, Shakespeare offers various portrayals of prostitutes, ranging from the humorous Mistresses Quickly and Overdone to the sympathetic Bianca. Through these characters, Shakespeare focuses on the hypocritical attitude of a society that demonized prostitution even as it profited from it. These women who struggle for survival in an unfriendly economic and social environment are looked upon as evil temptresses. Their sad fates draw attention to the hypocrisy of Tudor-Stuart society, which simultaneously required and rejected prostitutes. While the prostitutes are rejected by society as sexual excess, the witches are vilified and portrayed as monstrous because with their venture into scientific knowledge they pose a clear threat to patriarchy.

*Macbeth* is a play woven from the threads of political intrigue, rebellion, nature and the supernatural. It has been argued by scholars such as Henry JamesNeill, that of all of Shakespeare’s plays it most closely represents the political climate of the Jacobean Era. It reflects James’ own fascination with witchcraft and notions of kingship, as well as the culturally prevalent masculine anxieties concerning feminine agency. The play resonates with the threat of a dark, mysterious evil. This threat is best seen in the representation of the witches who are vilified to portrayed negative trait against a positive masculine identity. The witches are looked at as a familiar and pervasive threat, which must be identified and enclosed in order to maintain a successful social order.

The identity of the witches is ridiculed in order to perpetuate the discourse of patriarchal power. As the witches have access to the unknown and mysterious
in nature they are labelled as less than human and as the dangerous ‘Other’. As Peter Stallybrass maintains, “Witchcraft in Macbeth...is not simply a reflection of a pre-given order of things: rather, it is a particular working upon, and legitimation of, the hegemony of patriarchy” (26). Thus, the witches in Macbeth have transgressed the boundary by gathering scientific knowledge, useful to exercise power and control in the medieval world. They are threats to the patriarchal power-nexus, and are presented as ugly and ‘moustached’.

In Macbeth, nature is presented as a threatening force with an air of mystery and uncontrollability. As a result, Shakespeare’s Weird Sisters appear as strange and unknowable creatures. Their sex, the extent of their powers, and even their corporeal bodies are in doubt. In fact they are not ever referred to as witches. Macbeth constructs the image of the witch as a distinctly feminine threat to the natural social order. It is an element of the supernatural, capable of tapping into Satanic powers in order to wreak havoc on nature and the state. Based upon their threat to the patriarchal order we find three specific categories of women in the play. The witches represent the most dangerous and unstable incarnation of femininity. Lady Macbeth occupies the middle ground of a woman enclosed by marriage yet still transgressive. Lady Macduff is presented as the dutiful, compliant subject of the patriarchy.

Macbeth constructs the identity of the witches and other aberrations of the natural world as the direct result of feminine agency. The play explodes the gap of the male/female binary by establishing masculinity as the measure of all things
good and femininity as a danger to the successful ordering of the universe. In its established masculine state the feminine principle is shown to pose a threat to the natural order and precipitate violence. Order is restored in the play only when all aspects of feminine power, including the supernatural, manifested by the witches, have been removed. The witches’ representation of superstitious, old knowledge is seen as a danger to the new, enlightened knowledge of the patriarchal rule: hence it requires repression.

The play begins in a storm conjured by the Sisters in the first scene. As the play progresses even more unnatural events begin to occur. “Night’s predominance” (2.4. 8.) is established when the darkness blots out the light of the midday sun; the power of the masculine/light side is subdued by feminine/dark. Even the animals run amuck as supernatural forces turn the very earth on its ear. Predators become prey, and horses, the most noble of animals and the most subservient to men, become predators. The most significant example of the witches’ ability to disrupt the natural order can be seen in their elemental control of the air. The play begins during a thunderstorm that they have conjured through their ability to turn the fair into foul. They also reveal their ability to “Hover through fog and filthy air” (1.1.11). Each time the witches appear on the stage they vanish “as breath in the wind” (1.3.82), or “make themselves air” (1.5.4).

The “unkempt” and “wild” appearance of the weird sisters acts as an immediate signifier of their abject status. They have transgressed socially
prescribed gender roles so far that they are almost unrecognizable as Banquo says:

What are these
So withered, and so wild in their attire,
That they look like th’ inhabitants o’ th’ earth,
And yet are on’? Live you, or are you aught
That men 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. (1.3.39-47)

It is interesting to note that Shakespeare never refers to them as witches. While Banquo cannot recognise them, other characters in the play call them “instruments of darkness,” “midnight hags,” “oracles” and the “juggling fiends,” yet none uses the word witch. Shakespeare’s failure to provide the Sisters with any name strips them of their humanity; they are no more than the air into which they vanish.

The Witches have a pervasive control of the atmosphere and they practice their craft in covens. While they can act autonomously to cause storms and kill animals, they must rely on other supernatural powers in order to make their most significant predictions for Macbeth. In act 4, scene 1 when Macbeth calls upon them for another prophecy, the Witches ask, “Say, if th’ hadst rather hear it from
our mouths, /Or from our masters?” (4.1.62-63). Realizing that the witches are merely mouthpieces and not the source of true power, Macbeth demands that they call upon the spirits. It functions as yet another instance of negating the feminine agency. The power of prophecy, the most definitive power of the witches within the text, is not truly within their control; Macbeth’s choice to rely on the masculine spirits removes the witches from the power structure.

Nowhere in the text do the Witches, or the apparitions that they conjure, suggest any action to Macbeth: the details of his murderous plot are of his own imagining. The witches are thus merely the adoring slaves of their masters: their familiars, whose continued calls must be answered, and the apparitions, which provide them with their access to the power of divination. In the first scene their identity as witches is solidified when they call for their familiars, Greymalkin and Paddock. Greymalkin was used to refer to a gray cat, while Paddock was a common term for a toad. The familiar of the third witch is named as Harpier, otherwise known as a screech owl.

Thus, the power of the witches demonstrates the destructive power inherent in the feminine principle which becomes a threat to the masculine order. The action of the witches is shown to interfere with the fate of the nation and cause acute disruptions of the social order. The play depicts woman and witch as the roots of chaos. It represents a world in which rational masculinity is able to overcome the threat of feminine agency by repressing the natural and the supernatural. The play reveals the gendered anxiety of the patriarchal hegemony.
The mysterious weird sisters embody a kind of gender ambiguity with their strange appearance and uncertain nature of their powers.

Given that in Shakespeare a woman’s strength, beauty and independence often morph into some form of social or sexual excess, the representation of women in marital or martial discourses calls for ways to rid her of the excess. It is interesting to note, however, that in patriarchal ideology, women, even when they answer to heterosexual calls, define a spectrum of sexual relations amongst men. This spectrum, sometimes explored in terms of a homosocial order defines sexual as well as power relations within and across communities. In *Troilus and Cressida*, for example, Greek and Trojan soldiers discuss the role played by Helen in the war, and in spite of the fact that the war is over Helen’s abduction, neither side is willing to see Helen as one of their own. In fact, the war notwithstanding, both sides see Helen as a whore—a market good—that has no specific value outside the market economy. In other words, a woman’s body is useful only insofar as it carries a price tag that is acceptable to all. When Troilus says “What’s aught but as ’tis valued?” (2.2.52), it is not difficult to see that the object of his provocative use of relativism and exchange rhetoric is none but Helen.

In the martial ideology of the play, Helen acquires a mythic identity that defies the logic of space and time. This mythic identity, by implication, is a complex male construct that legitimates war and transforms woman into a producer-consumer-catalyst of male egos. In such a scenario, the woman’s body
becomes a currency that guarantees that the exchange mechanism of the market stays in place. She is:

   a theme of honour and renown,
   A spur to valiant and magnanimous deeds,
   Whose present courage may beat down our foes. (2.2.199-201)

The identification of Helen changes, of course, depending on the position of those identifying her and their reasons for so doing. That she is at once the condition and consequence of male pride should not be missed here. However, there is also the not-so-implicit hint that Helen does not belong just to Paris, the man who brought her to Troy, and presently enjoys her favours. Her presence should be seen as a source of combined erotic investment, again a condition for male sexual pride and fulfilment. As Hector puts it:

   I propend...
   In resolution to keep Helen still,
   For it’s cause that hath no mean dependence
   Upon our joint and several dignities. (2.2.192-3)

In what is clearly a major ironical turn in the play, both sides debate ways to end the war, and the Trojan princes express their willingness to return Helen to the Greeks. Irrespective of what happens later in the play, we see that the war is an excuse for enhancing male pride, male friendships, and male mythologies. In a move that will match the stealing of Helen by Paris, which brings her to the city of Troy, the Greeks and Trojan generals agree on swapping a Trojan prisoner
with Cressida, Troilus’ lover. In fact, on both Trojan and Greek sides, Helen and Cressida are sexual tools that threaten the homosocial order where men are bound to men in acts of friendship or fraternity.

In Troy, Helen’s presence among men, and her apparent proximity to one man, triggers endless speculation in the world of servants as well as masters. That Helen’s beauty and fairness act as her only insurance against possible male abuse in an alien society is never forgotten. Pandarus uses references to Helen’s attractiveness as a tool to excite Cressida and generate feelings for Troilus in her mind. When Hector has a good day in the battlefield, it is Paris who persuades her to unarm the battle-weary hero. He says:

His stubborn buckles,
With these your white enchanting fingers touched,
Shall more obey than to the edge of steel
Or force of Greek sinews. You shall do more
Than all the island kings – disarm great Hector. (3.1.137-43)

While Paris and other men are not shy of admiring Hector, their admiration bordering on homoeroticism, Helen’s reply to Paris in this connection is quite instructive. For, she says not only that it will “make us proud to be his servant” but also that “what he shall receive of us in duty/ Gives us more palm in beauty than we have, ... overshines ourself” (3.1.145-47). Here Helen makes an interesting distinction between a woman’s love for a man in return for a favour as against love for an admirer. Here “duty” is a kind of tribute or tax for the
protector who is entitled to that which he protects. On the other hand, “palm” 
refers to the fame that can only come from cumulative reports of male admirers 
seeking her favours. That she attaches more value to her “duty” to Hector is not 
only ironical but also disruptive. While she may have illusions of autonomy in 
this performance, she cannot possibly ignore the fact that she is being pushed to 
Hector by Paris, the Trojan prince who in a way owns her.

However, both Greek and Trojan camps also recollect with anger and 
regret the amount of destruction caused on her trail. Hector speaks of having “so 
many tenths of ours/ To guard a thing not ours nor worth to us” (2.1.21-22). On 
the Greek side, Diomedes cannot hide his disdain for Helen even as he speaks to 
Paris, the man responsible for taking her away from Menelaus: “She’s bitter to 
herself country; ... For every false drop in her bawdy veins a Grecian’s life has sunk; 
for every scruple/ Of her contaminated carrion weight/ a Trojan hath been slain” 
(4.1.68-72). In other words, Helen is seen as symptomatic of sexual excess that 
is disruptive and destructive.

The key to managing such excess lies in de-materialising it. So Helen has 
to be transformed into a plaything that can launch a thousand ships and yet 
cannot do anything by herself. That she needs men to praise her or prise her open, 
and that she must be seen as nobody without men surrounding her, is suggestive 
of her power over men that is empty in a sense. She is ironically dispossessed of 
her body, her personal erotic capital, at the very moment that she is owned by a 
man, whether husband or lover, Menelaus or Paris.
In fact, the cynical Diomedes yet again provides a key to male imaging of Helen. On being asked by Paris whether his claims on Helen are greater than her husband’s, Diomedes says: “Both alike” (4.1.54). About her husband’s claims on Helen he says: “He merits well to have her that does seek her,/ Not making any scruples of her soilure” (4.1.85-86). Menelaus is clearly a man who has lost her but still clings on to a state of prelapsarian sexuality that is no longer tenable. Again, in presenting her sexuality as non-negotiable, Menelaus follows the tradition of men who see their wives as non-erotic beings, interpreting their sexuality only insofar as it is the condition of their materiality as mothers or producers of children.

The transformation of the wife-woman into a social being that would not admit erotic investment is crucial to a certain transcendent purity that Menelaus attaches to Helen. It is this non-negotiable, near-transcendent materiality of Helen’s soilure that ensures that there is no question of her sexuality being more or less than required. For, soilure refers both to soiling in the sense of making dirty, or making fertile. In any case, it is Paris who has soiled her in both ways. Either way, Menelaus’ investments in Helen are either misplaced or futile. This time Helen’s body is dispossessed of its true worth, and invites investments that either cannot stand scrutiny or may prove to be irrelevant. In other words, the Greek world of Menelaus denies Helen her power by robbing her of her sexual attraction, given that any erotic investment that a man may make must of
necessity be in male friendship. The role played by Paris is no less ignoble. For he keeps and defends her “With such a hell of pain and world of charge/... Not palating the taste of dishonour,/with such a costly loss of wealth and friends” (4.1.58-60). In an act of incremental hollowing out of their male pride, Dionedes calls Menelaus a “puling cuckold [who] would drink up/The lees and dregs of a flat tamed piece” (4.1.61-62). To Paris, on the other hand, he says:

You, like a lecher, would out of whorish loins
Are pleased to breed your inheritors. (4.1.63-64)

When Diomedes catalogues the losses suffered by both Greeks and Romans on Helen’s count, Paris rebuffs him by saying: “You do as chapmen do,/Dispraise the thing that you desire to buy” (4.1.75-76). If the Greeks feign dislike for the object they want to buy, lest the seller should increase the price, the Trojans will not “commend what we intend to sell” (4.1.78), lest the buyer should doubt the quality of the goods on offer. Helen is a commodity that Troy is prepared to trade off, in spite of Paris. She is compared to an article in the used-goods market, bought and sold in desperation.

It is no surprise that while Greek and Trojan men pride on their fighting skills, there is a studied reluctance when it comes to fighting for Helen. That she is seen in terms of excess also explains her representation as a harbinger of death and destruction. Given that her sexuality, presented as excessive and unnatural, defines her, men seek to see her body as transgressive. She is seen as one who is responsible for disrupting male love and hero-worship. In the world of Greek
generals, homosexuality is the condition and consequence of homosociability, and the best possible insurance against female excess.

Interestingly, when Hector throws an open challenge to the Greek camp for a one-to-one to spare needless killings, the Greek men are scared. As Achilles, the greatest Greek warrior, remains for most part closeted with his male lover, this challenge to the masculine pride of the Greeks is likely to go unmet. Achilles’ desire to see the Trojan hero Hector is apparently driven by “a woman’s longing,/An appetite that I am sick withal” (3.3.237-38). Further, Achilles wants “To see great Hector in his weeds of peace,/To talk with him and to behold his visage,/Even to my full view” (3.3.239-41). The fact that Achilles admires Hector is doubly disruptive in a sense. If by taking away Helen, Paris caused the first disruption, by admiring Hector, an enemy male, Achilles causes the second disruption in the homosocial order. The Greeks have been made to look like women first by an enemy and then by one of their own.

If they were to redeem themselves, they must find out ways to restore male pride, and do with a Trojan woman what Paris seems to be doing with Helen. The Greeks must have woman to fill the space created in the homosocial order by Helen’s abduction. The exchange of a Trojan prisoner for a Trojan woman whose father has deserted Troy is ironical and suggestive. Cressida by definition is a kind of excess in the sense of something that is expendable. The Trojans get a man back by offering her to the Greeks in exchange. While this man was in captivity and was keen on returning to Troy, Cressida is a free
woman, and is love with Troilus, a Trojan prince, and is not particularly keen on returning to her father.

The Troilus-Cressida relation is ambiguous. In spite of the love and loyalty they profess to each other, there is an element of uncertainty that Troilus notes. However, the uncertainty in the relation is reflected first not in anything that Troilus says or does, but in Cressida’s expression of a lack. Cressida says that sexual refusal or unattainability is a safe position for a woman to be in, given that that “Women are angels, wooing; / Things won are done” (1.2.278-79). In fact Cressida wishes to become a man: “I wished myself a man, / Or that we women... had men’s privilege / Of speaking first” (3.2.123-25). Clearly, Cressida’s desire has to do with the fact that because men are authorized to woo and can take risks that women cannot.

While this speech in itself may sound a little rhetorical in the play’s dramatic space, it seeks to radicalize the woman’s space in the social and sexual narrative of the play. Cressida regrets not having a man’s advantage in the early stages of a courtship. A man is expected to make all the moves in a relationship, and a woman is expected to play her part. The fact that Cressida wants more than her part is suggestive of a quest that Troilus cannot understand. In his scheme a woman can be a man’s partner in a sexual situation, and may even be an equal partner in his sex life, but the lead is always provided by the man. In other words, a woman may have sex but cannot desire it. Cressida wants to talk about her desire.
Troilus sees signs of excessive sophistication in this desire to articulate. In early modern Europe this sophistication was available either in the form of coquetry or of wanton desire that could be accepted in a harlot but not in a wife or a sister. Cressida wants to talk about sex without being misunderstood as a loose woman. In spite of his attempts to rationalize his beloved’s radical desire as a mark of sophistication, Troilus is clearly uncomfortable in this relationship. When his long-awaited meeting with Cressida is within sight, Troilus imagines himself slipping. His insecurity conjures up the image of a battle he is losing. As he imagines himself in bed with Cressida, he fears “that I shall lose distinction in my joys, / As doth a battle, when they charge on heaps / The enemy flying” (3.2.25-27). This fear of defeat is ironically realized when the Greeks attack Hector in a group.

As Troilus broods over his lover’s sophistication, Diomedes is given the task of escorting Cressida to the Greek camp. He sees his opportunity to get even with the Trojans when he is appointed her official protector in the Greek camp. Cressida both fears and enjoys the male attention in the Greek camp. The sexual banter of the men makes her nervous, but she is no longer worried about speaking out. As Troilus spies on Cressida seeking out Diomedes, even as the Greek men flirt with her, the imbalance in the homosocial world caused by the abduction of Helen is repaired. While Helen’s excess can be addressed in the Trojan camp, Cressida’s excess can be addressed in the Greek camp. Cressida must therefore slide in the eyes of her Trojan lover, which she does by giving to her Greek suitor a brooch that was gifted to her by the former.
As Diomedes promises to wear it to war the next time, ostensibly to show what he has gained, and thereby prove what his Trojan rival has lost, the exchange rhetoric of the early scenes comes to the fore. The Cressida-Troilus-Diomedes story replays the Helen-Menelaus-Paris story in reverse (a parallel emphasized by Thersites while he spies on Ulysses and Troilus while they spy on Cressida and Diomedes). Shakespeare’s treatment of Cressida is ambiguous, and what is central to this ambiguity is the anxiety of patriarchal utopias regarding breaches in their order. Ulysses’ long speech on the place of order in the family, the state, the globe, the orb, and the cosmos is rounded off with the virtues of temperance in eating and sleeping. The suggestion is that excessive sexuality, presumably of women, is the root cause of disruption.

If we can interpret this episode in the light of excess meeting excess, the Greeks appear in poor light in view of the whore-like treachery, especially Achilles’ killing of Hector. That Hector is more powerful and manly also means that any social transaction between Achilles and Hector is likely to be disruptive. To end this incompatibility, some of the excessive force associated with Hector must be drained out. In a peculiar blending of Eros and Thanatos, the disarmed Hector is killed when he is expected to relax after a day’s good show. Achilles acts like an evil woman who kills her lover in bed when he is at his most vulnerable. In fact, in the scene where Hector is killed by Greek generals, Achilles resembles a whore who kills for profit. The exchange is against Cressida’s will, but she does not protest her virtual deportation. In fact as the play
comes to a close, we see signs of Cressida preparing to bear the pawing of Greek generals lightly. A love story is ruined, and the inability of the play to decide who is to blame, tells a story regarding the fear of female or feminine excess in early modern Europe.

In the world of men women like Mistress Overdone and Mistress Quickly play a necessary role to contain men’s excesses but are themselves seen as excess. Similarly, Margaret, Eleanor, and Joan compete for political space in a men’s world, and as they deal with the situation with greater efficiency than their male counterparts, their competence is explained in terms of dark and dangerous ambitions, which, in turn, can be attributed to excessive sexuality. Helen and Cressida are pushed to the centre of a world crowded by aggressive men and cling to whoever is available at a given point of time, primarily to save themselves from greater abuse. This is a destiny thrust on women by men who, characteristically, will not take the responsibility. Whether driven by economic compulsions, political insecurity or simply the compulsion to save themselves among hostile crowds, women appear as threats to a male world otherwise considered safe.