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The [transvestite] Play: Is It the Thing ?

A [two-dimensional] literary-psychological re-reading of Shakespeare's
Macbeth with Jeremy Freeston and Henry Fuseli

I.

The transvestite play – is it the thing wherein we can catch the conscience of a king and queen? I am asking this question playfully relating Hamlet's words (2.2.600-1)¹ to *Macbeth* and *Lady Macbeth*. What really requires explanation is my addition of the word 'transvestite'.

It is common knowledge that transvestism is the practice of wearing the clothing of the opposite sex as a means of emotional or sexual expression. However, transvestism does not include all instances of this practice. Cross-dressing, for example, differs from transvestism because it is conducted for different reasons; namely, a person cross-dresses to make a comment on society or to entertain. Cross-dressing, therefore, does not necessarily involve transvestism.

Transvestites tend to perceive themselves either as women with masculine predispositions, or as men with feminine dispositions. For some, transvestism is limited to using the clothing of the other gender to provoke sexual excitement. However, for most transvestites, sexual behaviour is involved only slightly or not at all; the transvestite simply gains emotional satisfaction from dressing in the clothes of the

¹ References to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* are to the Arden editions, by Harold Jenkins (London and New York: Routledge, 1994) and Kenneth Muir (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), respectively.

opposite sex. Transvestites often describe their behaviour as expressing those attributes and behavioural characteristics of the other gender that they feel are important aspects of their own self-definition. Transvestism, however, does not necessarily involve abandoning one's original gender identity as a woman or man.

Current opinions about transvestism are divided. Some see transvestism as a symptom of failed gender socialization; others view it as a normal expression of the desire to blur the social distinctions between women and men. Whereas some psychiatrists view such behavior as symptomatic of a maladjustment that requires treatment, others believe that treatment is appropriate only if the person experiences conflict or disturbances in his or her social or professional life.

Cross-dressing has a long history, going back at least to ancient Greece. It was often a ritual practice during festivals or religious ceremonies. Cross-dressing is still common during carnivals such as Mardi Gras, on Shrove Tuesday, the last day of carnival before Lent. In this context, cross-dressing is a parody of social conventions and social mores, particularly as they relate to gender roles. Cross-dressing is also a means for providing comic entertainment and is a socially acceptable medium for transposing gender roles. There is a rich Western tradition which exploits the incongruities and confusions that can result from transvestism. These works range from Shakespeare's *As You Like It* to films such as *Some Like It Hot* (1959), *Victor/Victoria* (1982), and *Mrs. Doubtfire* (1993).

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As You Like It is not the only transvestite Shakespearean play. Shakespeare's characters are, in fact, forever changing their clothes, especially – but not exclusively – in the comedies. Shakespeare takes the inherited theme of mistaken identity, as old as Menander and Plautus, and turns it into a meditation on Renaissance role-playing. He is the first to reflect upon what has become a distressingly frequent theme in modern art: the fluid nature of gender and identity.

Images of clothing – especially images of changing one's clothing – have a special role in *Macbeth*.² Beginning with the first tailoring metaphor, which describes Macbeth fighting with Macdonwald “till he unseam'd him from the nave to th' chops” (1.2.22), there are many recurring images of this type in the play. Most of them refer to Macbeth and his new honours, which “sit ill upon him, like a loose and badly fitting garment” that belongs to somebody else. Macbeth himself expresses it just after the first appearance and the prophecies of the witches when Ross greets him as the thane

² Caroline Spurgeon. *Shakespeare's Imagery and What it Tells Us*: (Boston, Beacon Hill: Beacon Press, 1958) pp. 325-27.

of Cawdor: "The thane of Cawdor lives: why do you dress me / In borrow'd robes?" (1.3.108-9) Only a few minutes later, when he is turning over in his mind the remarkably quick confirmation of the witches' prophecy, the observing Banquo murmurs:

New honours come upon him,
Like our strange garments, cleave not to their mould
But with the aid of use.

(1.3.145-7)

Later, when Duncan is in Macbeth's castle, and Macbeth debates within himself whether or not to do "the deed," he uses the same metaphor of clothes:

I have bought
Golden opinions from all sorts of people,
Which would be worn now in their newest gloss,
Not cast aside so soon.

(1.7.32-5)

Lady Macbeth immediately retorts cynically: "Was the hope drunk / Wherein you dress'd yourself?" (1.7.35-6) After the murder of Duncan, when Ross says he will go to Scone for Macbeth's coronation, Macduff uses the same simile: "Well, may you see things well done there: adieu! / Lest our old robes sit easier than our new!" (2.4.37-8) And, at the end, when Macbeth is at Dunsinane and the English troops are advancing, the Scottish lords depict him as a man who narcissistically tried to fasten a large garment on him with too small a belt: "He cannot buckle his distemper'd cause / Within the belt of rule;" (5.2.15-6) says Caithness, while Angus presents the image by which the nobles have read Macbeth ever since he took over the kingdom:

now does he feel his title
Hang loose about him, like a giant's robe
Upon a dwarfish thief.

(5.2.20-2)

Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are obsessed with their appearance and clothes as well as with their gender and identity. Throughout the play, exclamations of the type – "Are you a man?" (3.4.57) – abound. In order to understand the real meaning of these references, we must examine the relationship of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, a relationship which – despite its constancy – is based on continual transformations.

In treating the genders and personalities of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, Shakespeare is a shapeshifter and master of transformations. He recognizes that Western identity, emerging from a long pagan tradition, is indeed impersonation. He

returns dramatic impersonation to its ritual origins in the cult of Dionysos, where masks were magic. Role in drama, in Kenneth Burke's definition, is "salvation via change or purification of identity (purification in either the moral or chemical sense)." The pattern of chemical breakdown, remixture of elements, is especially obvious in *King Lear*, where the mad king is set to boil on a stormy heath.

Transformation, whether chemical or moral, was the focus of alchemy. Alchemy was not just a quest for a formula to turn lead to gold but also a philosophical quest for the creative secrets of nature. Mind and matter were linked in a pagan way. Alchemy might, thus, be called pagan naturism. As Titus Burkhardt says, the spiritual aim of alchemy was "the achievement of 'inward silver' or 'inward gold' – in their immutable purity and luminosity." Jung calls alchemy not merely "the mother of chemistry" but "the forerunner of our modern psychology of the unconscious." The alchemical process sought to transform the *prima materia*, or chaos of mutable substances, into the eternal and incorruptible "Philosopher's Stone." This perfected entity was depicted as an androgyne, a *rebis* ("double thing"). Both the primal matrix and the finished product were hermaphroditic because they contained all four basic elements, earth, water, air and fire. The self-contained *magnum opus* of alchemical process was symbolized by the *uroboros*, the self-begetting, self-devouring serpent. The synthesis of contraries in the watery "bath" of the *opus* was the *hierosgamos* or *coniunctio* ("sacred marriage" or "union"), a "chemical wedding" of male and female.

The alchemists gave the name 'Mercury' to the allegorical hermaphrodite who constituted all or part of the transformative process. Mercury, the god and planet, is liquid mercury or quicksilver, the elixir of transformation. Arthur Edward Waite says that "universal Mercury is the animating spirit diffused throughout the universe."³ Mercury, conceived by Shakespeare, is undoubtedly the androgynous spirit of impersonation, the living embodiment of a multiplicity of *persona*. Mercury possesses verbal and hence mental power. Shakespeare's most well-known androgynous Mercury figure is the transvestite Rosalind, and after her the male-willed Cleopatra – but, first and foremost, there is Lady Macbeth. Their main characteristic is an electric wit, dazzling, triumphant, euphoric, combined with rapid alternations of *persona*. Lady Macbeth is Shakespeare's most uncontrolled and uncontrollable transvestite heroine, changing her gender with astonishing rapidity – a protean Mercury who (and this is her tragedy) seems to obey no law but her own. With her husband, she performs a most

³ All quotes from Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae. Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991) pp. 198-9.

peculiar transvestite show: a frantic and self-destructive change and exchange of gender and identity – an undertaking they cannot survive.

But Lady Macbeth surrenders an even more androgynous universe than her own: she becomes captured and dissolved, together with her husband, in the inviolable world of their wedlock – which is so constraining that, if left for an instant, serious, even irreparable, damage will be inflicted upon their oneness.

II.

In the characters of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, Shakespeare provided two strong roles long regarded as attractive vehicles for the leading actors of the world. Jason Connery and Helen Baxandale, in Jeremy Freeston's 1996 recreation of the play for the screen, provide a magnificent pictorial realization of the *hieros gamos* or *coniunctio* of male and female in Macbeth and Lady Macbeth as discrete characters and as a couple.⁴

Yet Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is generally assumed to be the story of the rise and fall of a self-made man who, led on by others and because of a defect in his own nature, succumbs to ambition.⁵ Truly the play is a harrowing study of ambition. It is the record of how, in his ambition to secure the Scottish throne, Macbeth dulls his humanity to the point where he becomes capable of any amoral act.

Jeremy Freeston's *Macbeth* – authentically set in eleventh century Scotland – conjures up a world of grim battlefields, desolate moors, forbidding castles and haunted caverns. Peopled by kings, queens, warriors, witches, and assassins the film moves at a breathtaking pace through scenes of war, murder, intrigue and revenge. Nevertheless, one immediately develops the suspicion that Freeston will destroy the image of a self-made Macbeth.

Shakespeare, as he does with all his androgynous women, both enriches and complicates Lady Macbeth's character by giving her wit, audacity, and masculine force of will. He makes Lady Macbeth kinetic rather than iconistic. Helen Baxandale's Lady Macbeth is, accordingly, kinetic: she is the wife who manages to drive her husband to kill and to take over a kingdom. She has a large amount of sex appeal, also a kind of raw appeal; to put it shortly: she is physically attractive and sexually beguiling. In fact,

⁴ *Macbeth by William Shakespeare*. A Helen Baxandale and Jason Connery film, directed by Jeremy Freeston. UK: Cromwell Productions, 1996.

⁵ Cf. Géher István, *Shakespeare-Olvásokonny* (Budapest: Cserépfalvi Könyvkiadó, Szépirodalmi Könyvkiadó, 1991) pp. 230-43.

all her attention, all her power, all her *self*, is turned towards the object of her enchantments: her husband.

Jason Connery's Macbeth, on the other hand, is not a brute whose life is nothing more than a never-ending quest for absolute power. He displays a more complex character. His Macbeth is always concerned with the people around him, the first and most important of whom is his wife. He is obsessed with time, and at every stage questions his own actions.

The most important feature of Freeston's *Macbeth* is its unusual focussing on the drama as a story of *two* people. He interprets the play as being fundamentally the tragedy of two people who – together – choose the wrong path. In this view, Macbeth is not at all a self-made man, he is much more like a half-made man who lives only by and for the inalienable supernatural (unnatural?) unity of the relationship between himself and his wife. Almost every meeting between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth is magically transformed into a tender and loving reunion in which their only authentic form of existence is restored. The way they steel themselves for the murder of Duncan, the way they gear themselves up to do it, the way they pluck up just enough courage to do “the deed”: they are never apart. And sexual desire is always hovering there as well, drawing them towards each other whether they be together or apart. But Freeston – like Shakespeare – is never overtly sexual, he – like Shakespeare – is more interested in psychology than pornography. Though Macbeth and Lady Macbeth never take their clothes off in the film, they keep putting on and taking off their mental or psychic robes. They follow an unusual ritual: when one, metaphorically speaking, gets fully dressed, the other removes his or her garments; when one loosens his or her protecting robes, the other tightens his or her belt. The husband and wife perform a most peculiar transvestite show – while wearing the external costumes that pertain to their own sex, they exchange between themselves their mental and psychic attire.

The usual “one-man-show” conception of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is thus undermined by Freeston when he interprets the play as a “two-(wo)man-show,” implying that otherwise it could be no more than a “half-man-show.” Freeston's main concern is obviously the *relationship* between Macbeth and his Lady. All other aspects of the tragedy, such as problematics of history and politics, and ambition and power, are subordinated to the revelation of the *conjunctio* of the two protagonists.



Macbeth and Lady ("Give me the daggers ...," 2.2; 1795-1800)

III.

If the relationship of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, despite its undeniable constancy and continuity, is based on transformations, the most interesting point in each transformation may be the moment when change begins. When, for instance, Lady Macbeth (who always knows what to do) suddenly changes roles with her husband and asks: "What's to be done?" (3.2.44). Film is an appropriate medium to show change in process; drawings and paintings – like specially selected shots from a film or photographic snapshots – might be better suited to catching the elusive moment when change commences.



Lady Macbeth (1.7; 1815)

Between the 1770s and 1820s – about the time of the English and European “Shakespeare Cult” – an amazing man of remarkably diminutive stature produced some of the most disturbing yet most penetrating and sensitive Shakespeare-criticism, in the form of around two hundred illustrations. He was the drawing master of England during his time, and his subject matter was dramatic, macabre, sensual and ghostly. He left nature alone, and modelled his human bodies on Michelangelo and used them to horrify and entertain the polite society of his time. He was born Johann Heinrich Füssli, in Zurich, Switzerland, in 1741. (Later in London he anglicised his name as ‘Fuseli’ to make it easier for the English to pronounce it.) “I was born in February or March – it was a cursed cold month, as you may guess from my diminutive stature and crabbed disposition,” he wrote.⁶ He came from a family of artists going back to the fifteenth century and as a boy helped his father draw and paint. While still a schoolboy he sold drawings to his friends to earn enough money to buy flame-coloured clothes. He was always a fancy dresser, with a heightened sensitivity and a not so innocent

⁶ Stephen Longstreet, *The Drawings of Fuseli* (Alhambra, California: Borden Publishing Company, 1969) p. 1. Cp. also: *Füssli pittore di Shakespeare. Pittura e teatro 1775 - 1825* (Milano: Electa, 1997).

exuberance. The pictures he based on *Macbeth* reveal a unique approach to clothes, or rather to the lack of them.

Macbeth was Fuseli's favourite Shakespeare-play, so much so that he attempted a German translation of it while he was still in his teens. We could borrow Macbeth's own words, "So foul and fair [...] I have not seen" (1.3.38), to describe the pictures he created for the play. The best known ones are huge paintings, but there are some smaller drawings that seem to represent the tragedy of the Macbeths' even more forcefully. They depict – in several versions – Macbeth and Lady Macbeth in the dagger scene (2.2), the three weird sisters appearing to Macbeth and Banquo (1.3), and the same sisters appearing to Macbeth alone (4.1). Others focus only on Lady Macbeth, either showing her sleepwalking (5.1), or visualizing her mental struggle (1.7), or presenting her part in the dagger scene. Fuseli's hero was undoubtedly Lady Macbeth.

A first encounter with Fuseli's Shakespeare pictures might lead one to think there were in fact two basic types of artist: one who builds the labyrinth, the other who gets lost in it, what is more: makes the viewers lose their ways, too. Fuseli would apparently fall into the latter category. Whether we know these pictures are Shakespeare illustrations, or we do not, we are not sure how to handle his pictures. After a while we realize that we must handle them with care – for our own sake

First of all, it is impossible to observe his pictures objectively. "Hell is murky," says Lady Macbeth (5.1.34). These pictures *are* murky: are they of Hell? They are dark, horrible nightmares, they are irrational, daemonic, sinister, pathological and, without exaggeration, perverse – far too mysterious. At first sight, they are like the products of a clouded or distorted mind, of someone who – like his figures – has been seeking redemption from some unbearable state of life, or state of mind. And, while doing so, has lost every point of reference, has cast himself out of every human relation.

What can we, then, expect from such illustrations? Illustration, according to its original meaning, is illumination – that is, "throwing light upon," explanation,



interpretation and comment upon the meaning of something. A literary illustration should, therefore, be able to “enlighten” as well as “sum up” the message of the literary work, that is, it could and should become a form of non-verbal criticism – especially if we accept the Chinese maxim that “a picture does the work of many words.”⁷ Fuseli’s *Macbeth*-pictures, however, do not seem to offer such a helping hand for the subtler understanding of Shakespeare; in fact, their figures – and possibly their artist creator – seem to need one themselves. Besides the macabre atmosphere, the sense of loneliness and extreme vulnerability are the most powerful emotions aroused by these pictures. “Transvestite” Macbeth and Lady Macbeth appear here almost or entirely naked. One might think it is not the subject – the horrible dagger scene or the appearance of the witches – or the figures themselves that are so fearful but their *nakedness*. Fuseli disrobes the Macbeths, bringing an end to their spectacular Shakespearean show. What remains is one or two bodies, *in puris naturalibus*, totally exposed to whatever surrounds them.



What does, then, surround them? In Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, besides the clothes, the other frequent images are, first of all, those of reverberating sound, echoing over vast regions, limitless spaces thus signifying the vastness, and in fact, limitlessness of space; secondly, the images of lightness as opposed to darkness, including images of sleep, usually referring to the contrasted notions of life, virtue, goodness and evil, sin and death.⁸ Although Fuseli appears to deviate from Shakespeare, he nevertheless remains faithful to Shakespeare’s settings in his pictorial effects: his characters are thrown into an undefinable, unidentifiable space where they cannot find any point of reference. There is hardly any difference between background and foreground; the pictures seem to show one whirling unit. The space of the pictures is an undecipherable, visionary space, a “u-topos,” unsettling in its unnaturalness. The apparent neutrality of the external world thus becomes hostile, in fact, the absolute indifference of the surroundings is shocking.

⁷ Jonathan Bate, *The Genius of Shakespeare* (London: Macmillan, 1997) p. 251.

⁸ Cf. Spurgeon pp. 230-43.

The simplicity of the pictures is thus deceptive; these pictures are more like riddles, or – perhaps with only a slight exaggeration – objects for meditation, like emblems. Emblems normally consist of three parts: a motto, an inscriptio or subscriptio, and the image. Formally, there is an obvious parallel between the emblem and the literary illustration, which itself has three parts: a title, a literary text it is based on or related to, and the picture. But there is deeper resemblance between the emblem, which is not merely an art form, but a mode of thought, and Fuseli's *Macbeth*-pictures: they both represent much more to the mind than to the eye.



The Three Witches Show Macbeth the Descendants of Banquo (4.1; 1773)

Fuseli's mind, in these pictures, seems to be occupied with something in Shakespeare that does not allow him to turn to anything else. And, like his characters, finding no satisfactory answer, he seems to reach the utmost limits of his tolerance.

His clear yet jerky lines well express the internal tension. The figures violate the rules of anatomy – this makes them absurd and ridiculous but, at the same time,

inescapably doomed. They are caught at a moment when they are paralyzed with astonishment and rooted to the spot. They would not be able to move on even if they wanted to: they are too petrified with terror.

Their strange position suggests, however, that they are tormented by antagonistic internal passions that pull them in different directions at the same time – as if they were constituted of warring selves. Or, as if they had two or more selves at a time. Their hair, head, eyes, limbs – all point in different directions. Their bodies lack natural, organic unity, they seem to have been dashed to pieces, then put together again with arbitrary fancy.

On their faces there are only traces of expressions: mostly eagerness, greed, and covetousness, but also delirium, frenzy, and fury. They do not seem to react to anything around them, they are unable to establish any relationship with an external entity. The figures never look each other in the eye, but look past each other, staring at an invisible point in the distance.

By now, the viewer is in serious doubt. Are we viewing Shakespeare's *Macbeth*? No order whatsoever can be found in the pictures. No system of values can be established. The characters are thrown into universal darkness where everybody and everything seems to be an enemy. The only possible reaction to such world, from the viewpoint of the characters, is constant, spasmodic struggle. Whether they are alone or watched, they battle on. The viewer, on the other hand, feels more and more forced into an unpleasant situation: into the attractive discomfort of voyeuristic peeping, even spying on the figures in their most intimate moments. For what we are witnessing here are images of the very moment of the birth of knowledge when Macbeth and Lady Macbeth feel not only the future but the past and the present – the entirety of their being – as they confront their innermost selves. Fuseli's pictures are illuminations: they light up the rare moments of illumination for Macbeth and Lady Macbeth which result in an ecstasy (an *ex-stasis* or 'stepping-out of themselves') which precedes agony and complete alienation. The viewer, by accepting and taking the peeping position, is drawn into the picture and forced to share the anguish of the characters. At this point we realize that the source of the characters' loneliness is their overwhelming awareness that they are irremediably estranged from the universe. They are, and must remain, caught in the abyss of their sinful souls.

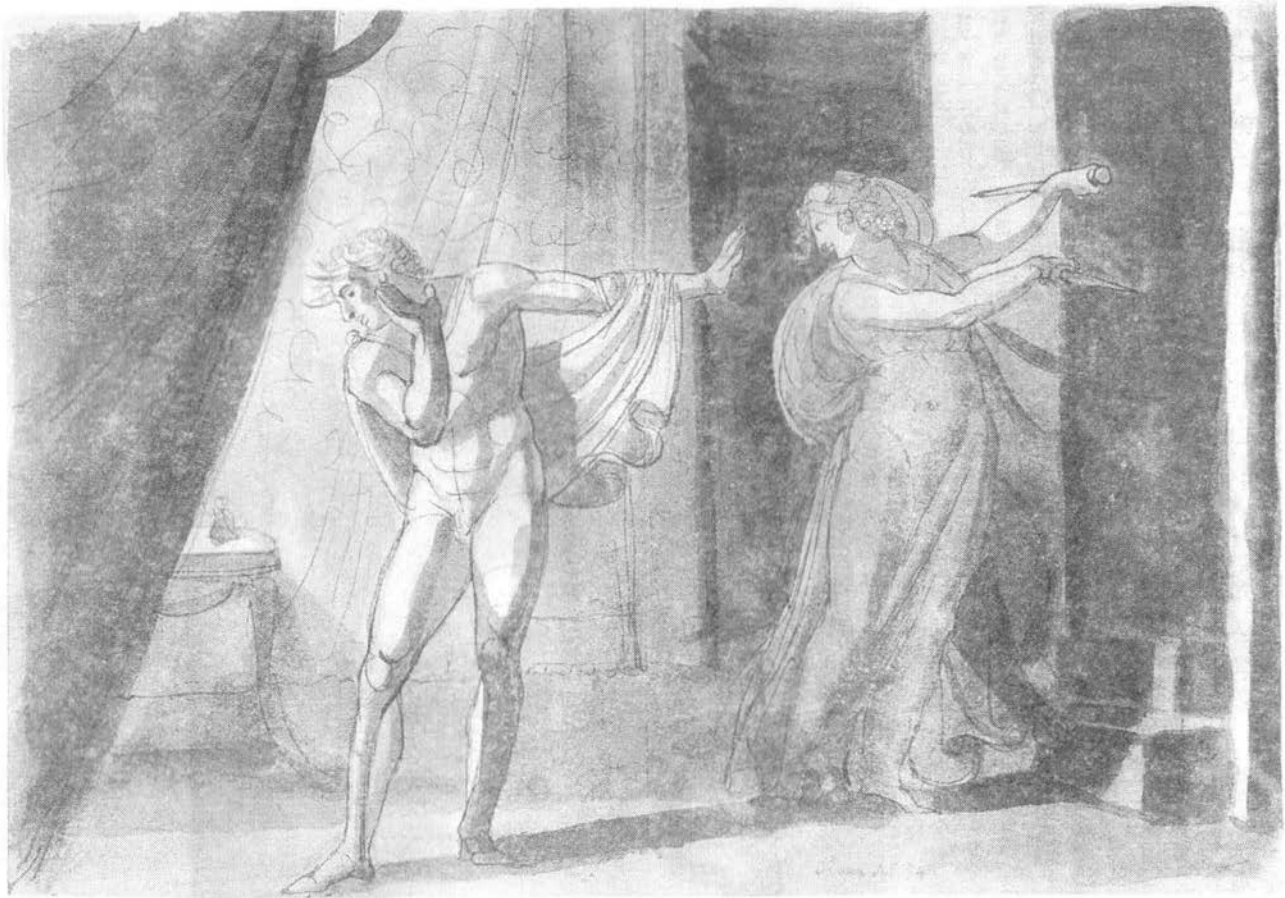
Fuseli abandoned all roundabout ways, eliminated all peripheral detail so that he could confront the unutterable, the Medusa-eyed evil, the *self*. He shows that the only solid point of existence is to be found at the most insecure place – in the fickle-minded mind itself: in the imagination. If this is true, as these pictures suggest, there is

no hope of redemption from anywhere except one's self. That's why his Macbeth-pictures are entirely free of illusions: there is nothing to ease the tension; nothing to mitigate the sense of abandonment; nothing to moderate, soothe, lessen, or break the agony of his damned souls.

Now we can answer our initial question: yes, it is the "transvestite thing" wherein Fuseli catches the conscience of the King and the Queen. But in a negative way. By showing behind the many different faces of the King and the Queen the Macbeths' murky hell of never-ending internal drama, he illustrates that no external veil, not even a royal costume, can hide or protect a person's real self once it has let in the Devil.



Lady Macbeth Sleepwalking (5.1; 1772)



Macbeth and Lady Macbeth ("Give me the daggers . . .," 2.2; 1774)



The Armed Head Appears for Macbeth (4.1; 1774)



Macbeth, Banquo and the Witches (1.3; 1792)