

Example by StudyDriver

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Gender Roles in Macbeth Example

Shakespeare's Macbeth exhibits the patriarchal society of Shakespeare's time and the misogynistic view of women. Shakespeare uses characterization, tone, juxtaposition and metaphors to answer the question asked by Dennis Begins: Is Macbeth an oppressively conservative fable about what happens to men and women who refuse to act their proper parts? Or is it the opposite: a radical exposure of the destructive sociological codes governing masculinity and femininity? Lady Macbeth embodies a woman oppressed by the limited opportunities for women during the English Renaissance, limited by the traditional ideas of femininity she chooses to embrace her masculine personality traits.

Macbeth is considered by many to be one of Shakespeares most sexually pure tragedies. At first glance, sexuality seems to have little thematic importance in Macbeth. Some critics however have considered the exchanges between Lady Macbeth and Macbeth to have a sexual element.

Jan Kott said that Lady Macbeth "demands murder from Macbeth as a confirmation of his manhood, almost as an act of love". D.F. Rauber, another critic, believes that Lady Macbeth demanding Macbeth kill Duncan to prove his manhood is not an act of love but an act of manipulation from Lady Macbeth. Rauber declares that Lady

Macbeth's strategy of questioning her husband's manhood is "Saturated with sexuality" and that "her main weapon is clearly a kind of sexual blackmail". In essence Lady Macbeth is causing Macbeth to not just prove his manhood but his courage as well. It seems as if Lady Macbeth manipulates Macbeth to act as an agent of her murderous will, just as how the assassins of Banquo act on the behalf of Macbeth.

Lady Macbeth's sexual manipulation of Macbeth does not stop with the murder of Duncan but rather continues because of it. After killing King Duncan, Macbeth is horrified by the consummation of his criminal thoughts. Instead of comforting her husband, Lady Macbeth violates his insecurities with her violent sexual manipulation, "Was the hope drunk, Wherein you dressed yourself? Hath it slept since? And wakes it now to look so green, and pale, At what it did so freely? From this time, Such I account thy love. Art thou afeard To be the same in thine own Act, and Valour, As thou art in deed" (1.7.35-40). This scene could be compared to the modern phrase the "morning after" where upon waking up, an individual regrets the sexual acts of the previous night. Here Macbeth contemplates the murder shamefully as an intoxicated act of sexual passion. In her speech, Lady Macbeth parallels sexual action with murderous action and Macbeth's apprehension from regicide with sexual non performance.

Although many critics agree on Macbeth being manipulated by Lady Macbeth, fewer are willing to see her as an equally manipulated character whose insecurities of her femininity ultimately lead to her death. Macbeth is a play largely defined by masculinity and focuses on male characters engaged in war and the relationships between different men. The concept of masculinity does not only come from male characters though but from female ones as well such as Lady Macbeth who challenges the stability of masculinity and the theme of gender itself. From the beginning Lady Macbeth shows that she believes her husband's sexual inequality will prevent him from fulfilling his prophecy, "Glamis thou art, and Cawdor, and shalt be / What thou art promised. Yet do I fear thy nature" (1.5.16-17). In Macbeth femininity is associated with gentleness and therefore weakness and passivity. Lady Macbeth fears her husband's nature because he is "too full of the milk of human kindness"(1.5.18) Macbeth is considered by his wife to be too feminine and to have feminine attributes. The "milk" that Macbeth is too full of connotes the maternal realm. Lady Macbeth later asks to be "unsexed" so she can assassinate King Duncan herself because she worries her husband will be too weak to carry out the murder.

Since femininity is associated with gentleness and passivity, masculinity is associated with cold bloodedness and remorseless determination by default. Carolyn Asp sums up Lady Macbeth dilemma when she writes, "In a society in which femininity is divorced from strength and womanliness is equated with weakness, . . . the strong woman finds herself hemmed in psychologically, forced to reject her own womanliness" (Asp 159). Lady Macbeth longs to become a man so she does not have to rely on her too feminine husband to do something that her too masculine personality is better suited to complete. She wants to become a man so she can ruthlessly kill the meek feminine King Duncan.

Lady Macbeth's sexual anxieties about her gender identity: how she does not match the cultural definitions of the time of proper femininity, help her to skillfully manipulate her husband's own insecurities in his manhood. After arriving at the castle Lady Macbeth tries to convince Macbeth of the importance of murdering King Duncan she does this by "unsexing him". When she asks him if he is a coward he says "I dare do all that may become a man" (1.7.46). She challenges his assertion directly by telling him that the definition of manhood is one's willingness to act on one's desires, "When you durst do it, then you were a man" (1.7.49). Lady Macbeth tells Macbeth that he is proving his lack of manhood by not acting on his desires

Similar to how Lady Macbeth's inability to fit in to a purely feminine role causes her to embrace her masculinity the Weird Sisters do not fit into a purely feminine gender role. When Macbeth and Banquo first stumble upon them, Banquo marvels at the sisters unearthly appearances, declaring, "You should be women, / And yet your beards forbid me to interpret / That you are so" (1.3.45-47). Harvard professor Marjorie Garber an expert on sexuality in Shakespeare's writings says, "I think we can say with justice that those unisex witches, with their women's forms and their confusingly masculine beards, are, among other things, dream images, metaphors, for Lady Macbeth herself: physically a woman but, as she claims, mentally and spiritually a man" (Garber 713).

During Shakespeare's time, Women were defined by their roles as bearers and caretakers of children. Men were responsible for making the decisions for their families and wives. Wives were expected to act as their husbands companions, bear and raise his children and care for his home. A woman's role in Macbeth is being a good wife

and supporting the man by any means necessary. Lady Macbeth takes a great deal of pride in her husband's accomplishments. Lady Macbeth's inability to produce Macbeth an heir and therefore complete a basic task of an English Renaissance wife means that she has to prove herself to her husband in other ways. Although she plots her husband's future as a king, without an heir, Macbeth's power is fleeting. Stephanie Chamberlain explains that, "Lady Macbeth's indifference is a form of infanticide, rendering Macbeth's patrilineal future nonexistent... By erasing the possibility of an heir, i.e., lawful succession, Lady Macbeth likewise blots from the cultural memory future traces of Macbeth's lineage... the smiling babe she indifferently plucks from her gall-filled breast comes to represent nothing less than Macbeth's aborted patrilineal line"(Chamberlain).

Lady Macbeth's disregard of her husband's lack of an heir shows her indifference for anything other than present success.

Breastfeeding was a culturally significant act during Shakespeare's time and many writers during the English renaissance included it in their work. Because only women can breastfeed breastfeeding is seen as an incredibly feminine and maternal act. Lady Macbeth calls upon her ability to breastfeed and therefore her femininity while challenging the expectations of the time period of women to fulfill the role of a mother. While trying to convince Macbeth to Murder Duncan. She declares, "I have given suck, and know How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me; I would, while it was smiling in my face, Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums And dashed the brains out, had I sworn as you Have done to this," (I.7.54-59). She combines the semi-sacred and natural act of breastfeeding with the most unnatural and anti maternal action of infanticide. She uses the statement as a tool to guilt her husband into obeying her and her willingness to commit this heinous act as a way of expressing the hardness she associates with being male. She uses shocking and terrible things as a way of gaining power from her husband. In her speech she compares her husband breaking a promise to her to her murdering an infant. She uses the maternal power associated with breast feeding and the gore of infanticide to assert her dominance over her husband. Lady Macbeth tries to prove the bottomless limit of her will by exploiting maternal imagery. Lady Macbeth is able to combat her husband's masculinity by showing that since masculinity is action interrupted by conscience she is more of a man than Macbeth.

Macbeth responds by saying, —“Bring forth men children only, / For thy undaunted mettle should compose / Nothing but males”—shows Macbeth’s awareness of his wife’s power (I.7.73- 75) He recognizes not only that his wife has the courage of a man but also the ability to make men. Macbeth is saying that she is so full of masculinity that she could not possibly produce a female child.

Lady Macbeth’s speech considers what it means to be a murderous mother. Mothers are seen as nurturing and tender. A mother who murders her child not only rejects the social construct of motherhood but also violates nature. The murder of a child parallels Lady Macbeth’s murder of traditional gender roles. As she rejects the role of a mother. She takes on the masculine trait of violence and casts out the expectation of mothers to care for their children above all else. Although she talks about her ability to breastfeed and other feminine traits, she takes on a masculine role in order to make a difference in her marriage. Her character is that of a strong, nontraditional woman who rather than supporting Macbeth, challenges him and causes conflict.

The world of Macbeth is a brutal world defined by violence and war. Although the evil characters of the story, Lady Macbeth and The Weird Sisters, are female, the conflict of the play is not the characters femininity is their lack of it. The play associates femininity with maternalism, mercy and other humane virtues which these characters seem to lack. Lady Macbeth’s power however, comes from her being full of masculine energy despite her being female.