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Subversion of Traditional Gender Roles in *Macbeth*

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Shakespeare, often highly credited with being able to break through barriers of stereotypical gender roles of the Elizabethan Era, challenges these in his play *Macbeth* by creating characters unconfined to expected gender norms. Characters fluid in gender concepts attempt to resolve seemingly inherent contradictions in their gender and cultural values. The tension of the plot further exacerbates these contradictions. While schemes are crafted and blood is shed for the crown, Shakespeare investigates and questions the seeming binary of gender. The three witches leave the characters unsettled, blurring the line between male and female and driving the play through witchcraft. Macbeth, a traditional figure of paternal authority, is defined by stereotypically feminine qualities. Lady Macbeth opposes and even rejects maternity and womanhood, instead embracing sexlessness and seemingly masculine aspects in an effort to gain power and rid herself of the weaknesses and vulnerabilities associated with being female. Shakespeare consistently subverts gender roles throughout *Macbeth* in an effort to oppose traditional roles and thoughts on gender and perhaps even present the audience with thoughts toward progressing and changing the position of what was thought of as the social sexual norm.

When studying and attempting to understand *Macbeth*, it is important to note this work did not simply derive from the creative mind of William Shakespeare alone. Many believe Shakespeare wrote this play in approximately 1606, which is said to be in direct connection with the reigning monarch of England at the time, James I. Due to James's prominent Scottish lineage, the story of Macbeth is considered to be heavily influenced by Scotland's history found in *Raphael Holinshed's Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland*, which was published no more than twenty years ahead of the birth of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* in 1587. While the names of characters and events of war included in the play are quite accurate to Shakespeare's chosen primary source, some of the specific changes made from history to the stage are very interesting and even rather curious. If we take a look at Holinshed's depiction of the real King Duncan, he is described as a very weak ruler as he was often negligent in punishing criminals for their offenses (265). In stark contrast, the real Macbeth is described as a very honorable and successful king for punishing crimes, slaying tyrants, and appeasing unrest in many states in Scotland before being ultimately overthrown (270). The astronomical differences Shakespeare made from the original source could easily be interpreted by readers and audiences as a means of ensuring the main, male character of the play is portrayed as weak and unmasculine while Duncan, the king that is ultimately killed by Macbeth very early on in the work, is painted as a highly favored and honorable ruler. Through this clear reversal of characteristics directly from the primary source to the reimagined work of William Shakespeare, one can already assume the dramatized version of Macbeth is meant to represent a man who embodies all of the characteristics that would be considered undesirable in a masculine role of authority.

Because the first scene in *Macbeth* opens with the introduction of the three weird sisters, it is only fitting to begin by analyzing the purpose and intent of these peculiar characters. Just like in the play, Holinshed describes the real Macbeth's account with three strange women that are interchangeably referred to as "feiries," "nymphs," and even "goddesses of destinie" (269). Many have taken guesses at Shakespeare's true intent in including the witches in *Macbeth*. While belief in witches and witchcraft was very common during Shakespeare's time, many believe the most important factor that helped decide the inclusion of witches in Shakespeare's

story is King James's passionate interest in witchcraft and all things supernatural. The three witches essentially set the play in motion, dangling power and prestige in front of Macbeth. They set the eerie, foreboding tone of the play with their supernatural powers and tempting words. Despite a tendency to look at the witches as simply women, a closer inspection reveals a far more complicated gender identity. Upon first laying eyes on the witches, Banquo exclaims, "You should be women, / And yet your beards forbid me to interpret / That you are so" (1.3.45-47). In the article "Macbeth: Prisoner of Gender," Robert Kimbrough speaks to this complicated identity when discussing both the natural and unnatural aspects of *Macbeth*. Kimbrough explains the weird sisters are considered unnatural due to their being hermaphroditic beings. The author points out that what is often taken as a taunt from Banquo toward women as a whole is actually Shakespeare reminding the audience that witches are not confined to a normal sexual identity (179). This is why it is crucial to note Shakespeare ultimately decided to make the decision for the playwright to keep all three witches as female characters as described in the original story accounted in *Holinshed's Chronicles*, but he also ensures their physical characteristics are very masculine in nature to perhaps blur the lines of binary gender.

Anna Maria Cimitile's "Macbeth: Criticism, Gender and the Tragedy of the Human" encompasses the meaning of tragedy and how gender plays a large role in *Macbeth* qualifying as a true tragedy in the world of drama. Cimitile claims the weird sisters exhibit traits of both witches and demons. She even notes that Shakespeare, in fact, gives them a comic look and quality which prevents them from being labeled or fitting the definition of tragic. Although the weird sisters play a role that could be considered "evil agents" in Macbeth's story, they are not directly affected whatsoever by the outcome and tragedy of the play. Because of this, Cimitile suggests the weird sisters are simply written in the play to exist for interpretation. With this idea in mind, it could certainly explain the curious masculine physical attributes assigned to the witches despite their specific label of "sisters" in the story. Cimitile's analysis of the weird sisters could support the interpretation that the witches were placed in the story simply to allow the reader to assume whatever they would like considering the many conflicting labels, descriptions, and lack of being affected by the tragedy in the slightest. Due to the weird sisters only playing such a minor role in the introduction of the work, Shakespeare's decision to take the time to give them physical attributes of both genders can easily be viewed as his attempt to set the stage for the constant blurred lines of gender roles and expectations to follow in the rest of the drama.

Upon the reader's first introduction to Macbeth, he is portrayed as nothing less than an exceptional and shining example of a war hero. In the second scene of the first act of the play, Macbeth and Banquo heroically fight back against rebel troops raised by Macdonwald as well as a band of Norwegian troops. Directly following this victory, the captain describes Macbeth's efforts to King Duncan saying, "For brave Macbeth- well he deserves that name- / Disdaining fortune, with his brandished steel, / Which smoked with bloody execution" (1.2.16-18). After being described as noble, worthy, honorable, and brave by the Scottish noblemen and the king himself, the title of the Thane of Cawdor is bestowed upon Macbeth as a reward from King Duncan. After readers are initially greeted with this over-the-top description of Macbeth's heroism and valiance, they can assume he is a man of courage and bravery.

However, ironically, the first encounter in the play with Macbeth's wife, Lady Macbeth, suggests the first impression Macbeth makes on the audience may not be very realistic of his character. The person who would arguably know him best, his wife, immediately doubts him to the fullest extent and even pokes fun at her husband's assured inability to take the throne on his

own accord. Lady Macbeth single-handedly destroys the initial image set in readers' minds of Macbeth when she addresses Macbeth after reading his letter foretelling the prophecy of the weird sisters: "Glamis thou art, and Cawdor; and shalt be / What thou art promised. / Yet do I fear they nature; It is too full o' th' milk of human kindness" (1.5.14-16). In the article "The Soldier in the Theater: Military Masculinity and the Emergence of a Scottish Macbeth," Kristina Straub discusses how Macbeth's military status does not give his character a stable identity as expected of a military soldier. Instead, this status opens Macbeth to many varying interpretations in the history of eighteenth-century masculinity (429). Much like in the case of the weird sisters, there is the idea that the almost comical contradiction between initial affirmations of Macbeth's strength and vigor from the king and the earliest appearance of his wife leaves a gaping hole of room for interpretation from the audience as to whether or not Macbeth is truly the ideal, masculine soldier in Scotland or his true identity is a bit more concealed beyond the armor and prestigious titles given by the king.

At the very end of act one, Lady Macbeth delivers what is often considered in literature and drama as the infamous "unsex me" soliloquy. Upon being delivered the news of King Duncan's impending arrival, Lady Macbeth leaves no doubt about her concern for Macbeth's potential inability to successfully kill the king when she exclaims, "Come, you spirits / That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here, / And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full / Of direst cruelty" (1.5.41-44). In preparation for the King's arrival, it is very telling that Lady Macbeth's first instinct is to burden her mind with the obstacles associated with her God-given gender. In stark contrast to her husband, we see Lady Macbeth resolve herself to whatever means necessary for her and her husband's ambitions. In preparation for such bloody deeds, Lady Macbeth wishes for her feminine qualities to be cast aside. In the article "Birthing Death: A Reconsideration of the Roles of Power Politics and the Domestic in *Macbeth*," Laila Abdalla summarizes the many conflicts of *Macbeth* all under the umbrella of either political or domestic, which ultimately prove to be a recipe for calamity as seen in the play. Interestingly, Abdalla argues instead of becoming ungendered or masculine, Lady Macbeth finds herself in a form of twisted and perverse maternity. The author explains this argument when she states, "Her pursuit of the masculine engages her in a perverse maternity, one that matures from and gives birth to political power; Lady Macbeth propagates destructive and unregenerative power" (5). In an inversion of maternal concepts, Lady Macbeth asks for the milk of her breasts to be replaced with gall. Lady Macbeth rejects the feminine aspect of fertility in favor of masculine boldness to bring about bloodshed and murder. This rejection could easily imply that she views her femininity to be in opposition to the cruelty, violence, and murder all necessary to her goals. Abdalla supports this idea when she argues this iconic speech delivered by Macbeth's wife is often easily recognizable by readers and audiences because it reinforces the idea that when the world of masculinity is validated over the feminine, both of them no longer hold any real meaning (9).

It could also be inferred by readers and audiences alike that in the mind of Lady Macbeth, murder and violence are viewed as the apex of masculine acts. This concept would be very reasonable considering Abdalla's viewpoint: "The disjunction between the masculine goal and the feminine method of attaining it is borne out by the paradox of the speech's central metaphor— giving birth to destruction" (9). While the overall goal of physically carrying out the weird sisters' prophecy is seemingly recognized as a masculine act by Lady Macbeth herself, it seems the act of indirectly coercing Macbeth into fulfilling the prophecy is viewed as an ultimate act of feminism. Comparisons can be and certainly are often drawn here by many in Act 1

between Lady Macbeth and her siren-like behaviors. However, as the audience watches her mentally prepare herself for her impending coercion of her husband, it is quite ironic that the one thing she wishes for in preparation is the disappearance of her feminine qualities in order to do so.

In the final scene of the first act, Macbeth expresses his doubts in his and his wife's plan to kill the current king. After claiming he gave much thought to the newfound fame and gratitude from Duncan and the people of Scotland, he explains to Lady Macbeth he no longer has any intentions of following through with their preplanned scheme. It is only after this moment of proclaimed honesty that Lady Macbeth lets out an unexpected roar of fury and frustration. In response to his sudden withdrawal from their agreement, Lady Macbeth replies:

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 feely? From this time / Such I account thy love Art thou afeard / To be the same in thine own act and valor / As thou art in desire (1.7.36-41).

Upon first read, many would agree ridicule and mockery seem to be Lady Macbeth's weapon of choice in manipulation of Macbeth as she questions if he was simply intoxicated when he initially agreed to their plans of carrying out murder. Her implication that only the influence of alcohol could explain his initial determination to do whatever he must to usurp the crown from Duncan is a hard blow targeted directly at his masculinity or lack thereof. Despite this clever tactic Lady Macbeth primarily chooses to use against her husband, we see Lady Macbeth refer to her husband's love for her. This line could seem a bit odd or even out of place to some due to Lady Macbeth showing absolutely zero affection or marital love for Macbeth. Dennis Biggins explores this interesting topic in his article titled "Sexuality, Witchcraft, and Violence in Macbeth." The author presents the reader with an interesting idea in which sexuality and violence share an extremely important connection in the drama. Biggins proposes, "Lady Macbeth's murderous appeal to Macbeth is couched in sexual terms. She goads him into action by scornfully questioning his manhood, which she evokes equivocally as both virility and valor" (264). According to the argument presented in the article, the act of Duncan's murder could essentially be interpreted as the climax of sexual relations between Lord and Lady Macbeth. This would imply that another possible tactic Lady Macbeth uses in bending her husband to her will that is not as obvious is forcing him to follow through with his side of sexual favors in the partnership. Viewing the violence that ensues in their relationship and marriage as a form of twisted sexual favors and satisfaction would place Lady Macbeth as the dominant and more masculine partner in their arrangement. Despite her playing a mere agent in the assassination of King Duncan and not physically getting blood on her own hands, she proves to be the woman calling the shots over her husband's every decision and even at times convinces him to change his steadfast opinions.

Soon after this display of siren-like behavior from Lady Macbeth, there is another disturbing revelation for readers delivered from Lady Macbeth herself. In response to Macbeth's final doubts about following through with the murder of King Duncan, his wife degrades his masculinity in a soliloquy delivered at the very end of act one. It is in this very speech that Lady Macbeth delivers the lines that have baffled many reading and studying this play, saying, "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 so sworn as you Have done to this" (1.7.54-58). To much surprise, Lady Macbeth reveals that she has birthed a child at some point in time during her life. In the article "Macbeth

Appalled,” Stanley Cavell explores three topics of discussion that he believes to be physically absent from the drama, including the plan to kill Duncan, Lady Macbeth’s childlessness, and the relation of Lady Macbeth to the witches. The most interesting subject amongst these on the topic of gender is the matter of Lady Macbeth’s childlessness in the play. Cavell briefly discusses the idea of many critics claiming many scenes from Shakespeare’s original production of *Macbeth* are missing from the modern script that is hailed to be one of the primary classics in English literature even today. Despite these claims, the author believes what many see as missing parts from the play are not physically absent but are actually present in the play by saying nothing at all. Essentially, Cavell’s claim is that readers and audience members are meant to read into the silences of *Macbeth*. When speculators concern themselves with a possible missing scene, they are missing out on crucial response to scenes that actually are present within the play (9).

Because this is the one instance in the play that Lady Macbeth briefly breaks the silence about her childless marriage, the lack of any more explanation leaves plenty of room for interpretation as suggested by Cavell. As Lady Macbeth very briefly mentions the general joys of mothering a child and even her love for the baby, this picture is immediately contrasted by the image she provides of her bashing his brains against a wall. Even the word choice she uses before this when she mentions plucking her own nipple out of the child’s mouth points to how little the mother-baby connection means to Lady Macbeth. As breastfeeding is generally viewed as one of the most sentimental and bonding experiences a mother can share with their child, she demonstrates to readers and the audience that her own offspring is certainly not one of her priorities in life. It is quite telling of her lack of maternal instincts and desire that she uses her one mention of her absent child to create a very specific picture for her husband in the time of his serious uncertainty.

In the middle of act three, the audience can visibly see what remains of the marital relationship between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth diminish throughout the banquet held for Ross, Lennox, the Macbeth family, and the other lords. It is in this scene that Macbeth tries to position himself in the eyes of the nobles as not just the man of his house, but also a strong man worthy of ruling an entire country. We can see this extremely masculine persona he so desperately wants to portray at the beginning of the banquet when he welcomes his guests by saying, “Ourself will mingle with society / And play the humble house. / Our hostess keeps her state, but in best time / We will require her welcome” (3.4.4-6). Through his words, he places his wife in a box confined to stereotypical feminine duties while he believes all of his problems to have been taken care of prior to the start of the banquet. However, it is only when he comes to the self-realization of his declined mental state that his cocky demeanor quickly takes a drastic turn. Upon Macbeth’s first glimpse of the ghost of Banquo occupying his seat at the table, he publicly loses himself and reveals to the audience his true mental instability that has wreaked havoc on his body as a result of his bloody crimes against the former king and his friend Banquo.

In Subhadeep Mazumder’s article “Portrayal Of Gender Dynamics In Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*,” Mazumder essentially makes the argument that Shakespeare was an extremely progressive man and writer during his lifetime, especially considering the era in which he was actively producing dramas. The author discusses the importance of the banquet scene in *Macbeth* in terms of the power dynamic between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. He points out the confidence Macbeth seems to gain in creating a plan to carry out his second murder, and Mazumder wants readers to specifically note that “Macbeth having metaphorically taken birth from her womb, has gone so far in the world of crime that he did not even feel the need of telling his wife, his partner in crime, that he had commissioned the murder of Banquo” (2709). In

pointing out this small and often overlooked detail, readers are forced to realize Macbeth is either rapidly gaining confidence in his criminal capabilities or he simply wants to take back control of the partnership between himself and his wife. Either way, it is ironic that Lady Macbeth is the one person who saves Macbeth as he drowns in his own madness in front of his live audience. Despite Macbeth trying to portray her earlier in the evening as a mere hostess, she is the one who maintains a calm resolve and reassures the nobles there is nothing to worry about but also attempts to secretly snap her husband out of his fragile state with a firm hand without alarming the guests. With Mazumder's idea in mind of Shakespeare's possible progressiveness, Macbeth's swift change from his seemingly sexist attitude toward his wife at the beginning of the banquet is quite comical seeing as it is his wife he solely relies on to cover up his insanity in front of their esteemed dinner guests.

As proven through the clear subversion of gender roles in Shakespeare's characters of *Macbeth*, it could certainly be interpreted by audiences that Shakespeare truly was a progressive artist and was not secretive about it through his works. However, despite what many may view as a win for female characters in this play and literature in general, Uddin and Sultana's "Patriarchal Dominance in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*: Viewing from A Feminist Perspectives" encourages readers to read *Macbeth* through a feminist lens in order to truly see how Shakespeare paints Lady Macbeth in such a negative light as the leading female character in the story. The authors' main goal of the article is to depict how Lady Macbeth is portrayed as a villain whereas her husband is portrayed as quite the opposite, the hero of the story. Through recognizing what is considered very unfair and biased characterizations of the Macbeth family, the article aims to rid Shakespeare of his common praise for leveling the playing field when it comes to male and female characters in his plays.

In *Macbeth*, it is clear to readers and the audience that Lady Macbeth is steadfast and determined to meet her goal of making it possible for her husband to ascend to the throne the minute she hears the news of the weird sisters' prophecy for Macbeth. Uddin and Sultana interpret this scene by stating, "Hearing the prophecy, Lady Macbeth becomes highly ambitious. She gets the indication of Macbeth's hidden desire to be a king and Macbeth in his letter manipulates her to help him to achieve his goal" (69). It is quite presumptuous to jump to conclusions and assume Lady Macbeth is manipulated from the very beginning of the story by her male counterpart. Many would argue Lady Macbeth makes the decision to fulfill the possibility of the prophecy coming true on her own accord. Some would even agree Shakespeare did not intend for her to be depicted as a pitiful female character playing the role of a dutiful wife doing whatever is necessary to please her husband. There is a very large possibility she had her own plans in mind that had very little to do with Macbeth when making the decision to help him fulfill the witches' prophecy. Macbeth was simply the necessary male stepping-stone Lady Macbeth desperately needed in order to gain the crown herself due to the patriarchal society they are living in at the time in which the play takes place.

Lady Macbeth is widely known in the world of Shakespeare for her famous "unsex me" soliloquy. Uddin and Sultana explain their viewpoint on this scene when they claim, "Here Macbeth indicates to her to give up her womanliness which is compared with 'illness' to think how to fulfill his desire. So, Lady Macbeth tries to apply it in her character by wishing as Macbeth maps the structure to be a king" (69). It is interesting that the authors insinuate Macbeth desperately asks his wife to lose all of her feminine qualities in order to do all of the "dirty work" in order to help him obtain the crown. However, it seems like a very foolish request when the audience realizes Macbeth himself should already have all of the ideal masculine qualities that

come with his manhood, and yet, he proves to the audience time and time again that he is lacking in all areas of what is considered the prized male characteristics such as being daring, bold, and brave. It does not make much sense at all that Macbeth wants Lady Macbeth to lose her feminine characteristics while Macbeth is not able to accomplish his own goals with the “ideal” macho qualities society would agree with which he was born. As a female character, Lady Macbeth exhibits all of the bravery and confidence Macbeth should possess but certainly lacks despite being born into the gender that according to society should possess these qualities.

In the conclusion of their article, Uddin and Sultana explain Lady Macbeth ultimately falls short of ever having a chance at becoming the hero of this story due to her lack of masculinity and is even painted as a victim at times (75). A victim is not a label that many would associate with the character of Lady Macbeth. She is a woman who tirelessly manipulated her husband from the minute she saw the opportunity that fell upon her lap that could ultimately end in her own personal gain. It would even be considered fair to say she is the mastermind behind initially transitioning the weird sister’s weightless words into reality. Although it may not be as satisfying to the male audience, Lady Macbeth is not going out of her way to help her husband achieve his newfound dreams. She simply sees an opportunity that does not come around often for women and uses it to her advantage. Although women were often victimized in Shakespeare’s society, his iconic Lady Macbeth is certainly no portrayal of this in the infamous *Macbeth*.

From the very first scene of act one, audience members are greeted by three ominous and foreboding characters that blur the line of binary gender through their masculine physical characteristics despite being defined by female labels. Arguably, the main character of the play defines himself through not only feminine qualities but also through actions considered to be associated with the weaker sex during the time frame in which *Macbeth* was written despite his many honorable and distinguished titles granted by the King as an esteemed Scottish soldier. Most notably, Lady Macbeth rejects all maternity and feminine qualities all the while wishing for sexlessness in order to gain the power she so desperately seeks through Macbeth’s rise through the ranks. Throughout the play we see William Shakespeare flip societal gender roles and norms on its head through his characters in what can essentially be interpreted as an effort to oppose traditional roles and thoughts on gender and possibly even present the audience with thoughts toward progressing and changing the position of what was thought of as the social, sexual norm.

Despite the great deal of what many would consider progression throughout this work, at the end of the day, *Macbeth* was still written to be a tragedy, which by definition insists that none of the main characters truly win at the end of the story. Befitting the definition of a tragedy, Lady Macbeth slowly loses all of the power and progress she has gained throughout the plot of *Macbeth*. This can be seen when she even momentarily wishes for feminine qualities while being plagued by nightmares in her sleep of her crimes committed against Duncan, Banquo, and Lady Macduff. Although she has shown no weakness or guilt up until this point in the work, Lady Macbeth meets her tragic end at the hands of no one other than herself. Along with Lady Macbeth’s out of character self-inflicted undoing, Macbeth is slain on the battlefield and replaced on the throne by Macduff, a man who is defined by paternal authority and confident in his ability to rightfully avenge his father murdered at the hands of Macbeth. In this conclusion of the work, order is restored in the world of the drama as the rising woman of power is cut down at the height of her success by her own guilt and Macbeth is replaced with a more masculine and ideal ruler for Scotland. It is through this particular ending, many could assume order being

restored is Shakespeare's representation of the real-world patriarchal society he was living in during the era in which he wrote his play *Macbeth*.

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