

## Gender and Manliness in Macbeth

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### Abstract

Macbeth has remained one of the most fascinating works produced by Shakespeare which is why commentators have analyzed it from multiple dimensions. This paper analyzes the gender roles that Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, and Macduff and Lady Macduff perform during the action of the play. It traces how the concept of manhood in the sixteenth century hierarchy of gender roles is challenged and defended by the mentioned couples respectively. Both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth display a deviation from the gender roles already established in the then society. They defy the stereotypical gender roles between a dominant husband and a submissive wife which were quite common in medieval times. In contrast, Lady Macduff and Macduff reflect the established equation of gender roles as per the norms of the society they lived in. In the course of the play, the notion of manliness has been challenged, and reshaped throughout the action of the play; however, in the first part, it is mainly reduced to inhumaneness of character and blind aggression. The aggressive and inhuman ideals of masculinity are countered in the second half of the play with the focus shifting to Lord and Lady Macduff. The playwright shifts the audience's attention to these two characters at a point when Lord and Lady Macbeth appear to fail in their "perverted" way of life. However, at the end of the play, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth's faulty sense of gender expectations stops them from differentiating between manliness and monstrosity, which ultimately transforms them from becoming a worthy gentleman and honorable lady.

### Keywords

Gender, manliness, monstrosity, male, female, society, role, hierarchy.

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## Introduction

The question of order and hierarchy has been bolstered or challenged repeatedly in the plays of Shakespeare, including in *Macbeth*. The anxieties of the sixteenth century, full of dynastic and religious conflict in England, are both consciously reflected and unconsciously embedded in the dramatic texts. The late-medieval genre of the morality plays also influences Renaissance characters, who fight on moral and social grounds and go through a journey towards redemption or damnation. In the process, the social, cultural, and religious environment of the time affects the characters' psyche and decisions for good or for worse. The tragedy of *Macbeth* is no different. During the Elizabethan period in which Shakespeare wrote *Macbeth*, there were distinct societal expectations about the roles of men and women. Women were supposed to remain in the private sphere of life while men moved about in the public sphere. As women were thought to be physically and morally weak, their opinion was not considered in taking important decisions regarding daily affairs. In Juan Luis Vives's conduct book "Instruction of a Christen Woman" and Edmund Tilney's discourse, "Women were said to be weaker than men in reason and physical strength, prone to fears and subject to vagaries of their imaginations (Larsen 240). In addition to these manuals, the teachings of the church in the Medieval period also restricted women's role to being mere facilitators to men. In Genesis, the idea of the perfect woman is presented as an afterthought, created later than the perfect man, shaped from his rib in order to forestall his loneliness and to be a "helpe meet for him" (Chapter II, verse 20). The religio-cultural thought was set to define and guard these gender roles. In this paper, We discuss the gender relationship of the two couples i.e. *Macbeth* and *Lady Macbeth*, by comparing them to *Macduff* and *Lady Macduff*. We also focus on the concept of manhood and its effects on the domestic and social realms in the play. We argue that from the play's onset, the former couple challenges the sixteenth-century hierarchy of gender roles, while the latter reflects the "natural" hierarchical order in their relationship.

## Discussion

The concept of manhood is first introduced in the play in Act I, scene. ii, where the captain of Duncan's army boasts the valor of *Macbeth* on the battlefield:

but all's too weak:

For brave *Macbeth*—well he deserves that name

Disdaining fortune, with his brandish'd steel,

Which smoked with bloody execution,

Like valour's minion carved out his passage

Till he faced the slave;

Which ne'er shook hands, nor bade farewell to him,

Till he unseam'd him from the nave to the chaps,

And fix'd his head upon our battlements. (1.2. 13- 23)

The description by the captain gets *Macbeth* and *Banquo* the king's praises as "worthy gentlemen" and a title of Thane of Cawdor for *Macbeth*. Although a close reading of the lines

displays considerable aggression and viciousness acted by Macbeth on the battlefield, in the age of political and military pride, it was usual for soldiers to give the worst possible treatment to the opposition army and be lauded as a “man of honor.” Ironically, the king, who deems Macbeth a worthy man, deserving of higher political status, does not realize that not far off in the future this “manliness” will cost him his life.

Macbeth’s personality is revealed in person when, on his way back from the battlefield, he meets the witches, who predict a prosperous but improbable future for him. The part of their prediction about his political accession gets confirmed as soon as the king’s messenger arrives. It is quite startling that the man of valor so suddenly loses control over his mind and starts reflecting on killing the king. However, along with his ambitious and vicious plan, comes the voice of his conscience warning him about the consequences of the deed:

My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical,  
Shakes so my single state of man that function  
Is smother'd in surmise, and nothing is  
But what is not. (1.3.136-141)

He writes a letter to his wife sharing his intended course of action. Interestingly, he calls Lady Macbeth “my dearest partner of greatness” and shares with her the joy of being a part of “the greatness” which may soon become their lot. It is very unusual for a sixteenth-century lord to make his wife a part of his political ventures and to discuss with her what it might have in store for her. Unlike the husbands of the time, he treats his wife as an equal partner in their marriage, as a result, she is a part of her husband’s professional pursuits. They defy the stereotypical gender roles between a dominant husband and a submissive wife which were quite common in medieval times. On the contrary, we feel the hierarchy of marriage is challenged when Lady Macbeth expresses her mind in response to the letter. She feels “transported” from the “ignorant present” and feels future “in the instant.” After her exhilarating initial thought, she suspects that he does not have the right “stuff” to do what needs to be done. She speaks of his gentleness as an unmanly trait that will keep him from taking “the nearest way” to their supposed greatness:

yet do I fear thy nature;  
It is too full o' the milk of human kindness  
To catch the nearest way: thou wouldst be great;  
Art not without ambition, but without  
The illness should attend it. (1.5.16-18)

Joan Larsen Klein suggests that “the virtues which lady Macbeth sees as defects in Macbeth’s character and obstacles to his success are in fact the better parts of her own being” (245). Unlike Macbeth’s contemplative remarks about his vicious plan of murdering the king, she does not take any time to reflect upon the consequences of the intended murder. By calling it the “nearest way” of achieving her goal, she reveals her lack of sensitivity to the life of another

human being. She is set on the task and now her job is to make Macbeth do the deed for which she thinks Macbeth has to learn from her:

Hie thee hither,

That I may pour my spirits in thine ear;

And chastise with the valour of my tongue

All that impedes thee from the golden round. (1.5.23-26)

The “perverse” nature of the relationship between Lord and Lady Macbeth is hinted at when Lady Macbeth makes her first appearance in the play. Unlike the society of the time, where man is the actor and controller of affairs, and woman, a passive object of reception and obedience, the gender dynamic of this couple resists the pattern. Lady Macbeth's usurpation of the dominant role in Macbeth's marriage not only subverts the idea of complete submission from a wife but also challenges the idea of manhood and her husband's masculinity. On the gender relations of the times, Robert Kimbrough maintains that “to be manly” is to be aggressive, daring, bold, resolute, and strong. “To be womanly “is to be gentle, fearful, pitying, wavering, and soft, a condition often signified by tears” (177). It was the husband who was in charge of his wife's life, not the wife instructing the husband. Edward Bever explains, "European male leaders considered patriarchal families to be the foundation of society. . . 'Assertive and aggressive' women challenged this order and could be beaten by their husbands, punished for moral offenses ranging from scolding to adultery, or, at the extreme, burned for witchcraft" (956). Lady Macbeth, instead of being appreciative of her husband's humanity, chastises him for his fears and gentle disposition. She appeals for the want of undaunting courage that may take all mercy away from her heart. The image of Macbeth cutting and defiling the enemy soldier's body on the battlefield appeals to her ideals of manliness. She views cruelty and aggression as necessary attributes for attaining grandeur and becoming a “man”. In her desperation, she speaks of de-feminizing herself and exchanging her milk for gall so she may not have the womanly remorse that may hinder her path. She expresses her desire to lose her feminine qualities and gain masculine ones when she appeals:

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! make thick my blood;

Stop up the access and passage to remorse,

Come to my woman's breasts,

And take my milk for gall.... (1.5.38-46)

The patriarchic order is openly disrupted when Macbeth has second thoughts and considers backing off from his decision. In his opinion, if he kills the king who is both his kinsmen and guest for the night, the deed becomes dishonorable and therefore unmanly. In contrast, Lady Macbeth suggests putting up an appearance of hospitality and deceiving the king. She encourages him to take make time his accomplice:

To beguile the time,  
Look like the time; bear welcome in your eye,  
Your hand, your tongue: look like the innocent flower,  
But be the serpent under't. (1.5. 61-64)

It is not hard to see the analogy of Adam and Eve, in which the man is misled by the cunning of the woman. With this comes the question of order and hierarchy—a notion deeply important for the sixteenth-century audience. It holds that men and women outside their gender roles are bound to transgress and ultimately destroy themselves. Macbeth's refusal to adhere to Lady Macbeth's definition of "manliness," allows him to attain the feminine energy in their marriage which Lady Macbeth relents earlier in the play. According to H.W. Fawcner, "Lady Macbeth comes to assume all the obnoxious aspects of patriarchal thinking. She patronizes Macbeth, seeks to bring him back into the logical system of masculine dialectic and male dominance in the name of order" (92). Considering that they do not have children, Lady Macbeth taunts Macbeth for not being "man enough" and belittles him for being "impotent":

And live a coward in thine own esteem,  
Letting 'I dare not' wait upon 'I would,'  
Like the poor cat i' the adage? (1.7. 39-44)

In response, Macbeth claims to be a man in the only capacity he knew i.e. to be moderate and not to cross the boundaries, as doing anything in excess would make him unmanly. He says, "I dare do all that may become a man; who dares do more is none" (1.7.45-47). Regardless, Lady Macbeth stays firm in her cause and does not let Macbeth step back from his words. By evoking her husband's vulnerability, Janet Adelman suggests, that Lady Macbeth acquires more absolute power over Macbeth than any witches could achieve. The play's central fantasy of escape from woman seems to unfold from this moment (115). She repels his hesitance and seeks "greatness" that she visualizes "in the instant." She resolutely defines that to be a man, he must be firm and resolute to his initial plan and dares that if she was in his place, she would not deter from making any possible sacrifice. A grueling picture of her determination can be seen in the given lines:

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 pluck'd my nipple from his boneless gums,  
Have done to this. (1.7.50-57)

Lady Macbeth's vision of masculinity has no place for gentle virtues a man can share with women, as members of their kind; these are for women alone, as lady Macbeth's violent rejections of her femaleness prove. Macbeth replies to her ferocity by saying "bring forth men-children only; for thy undaunted mettle should compose nothing but males" (73-75). Harry Berger, Jr., in discussing the "Dialectic of Gender Conflict," claims that Lady Macbeth exhibits a "mimetic desire to join the male ranks" (72). However, Klein points that "as long as she lives,

Lady Macbeth is never unsexed in the only way she wanted to be unsexed—able to act with the cruelty she ignorantly and perversely identified with male strength” (250). Ironically, her idea of manliness is inevitably connected with the coldness of the heart. Although the play represents the gender ideals of the time through the characters’ beliefs, their deeds betray them. Lord Macbeth expresses his reluctance in killing the king; he, nonetheless, performs the deed by the dictates of his wife. Unfamiliar with the heartlessness of a murderer, Macbeth is overwhelmed by guilt throughout the act:

A dagger of the mind, a false creation,

Proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain?

I see thee yet, in form as palpable

As this which now I draw. (2.1.33-41)

Despite the warnings in the image of the dagger, he murders the king. From this point onwards there is no looking back. Gripped by his guilt for not being able to say “Amen” at Duncan’s death, he is terrorized about his future. The witches’ prophecy about Banquo and Macduff’s children’s accession to the throne haunt him day and night. His whole existence is threatened by the thoughts about his uncertain future as his wife’s is by the deed of the past. The moment Duncan’s murder is discovered, Lady Macbeth feigns fainting which can be a part of deceiving the characters present there or it may well be a genuine response to the unfolding of the drama so suddenly and unexpectedly. Macduff’s response to Lady Macbeth’s unawareness implies the unfamiliarity of women’s role in politics of the time. He tells her that the viciousness of the deed is not suitable for a woman’s gentle ears. When she is about to faint, only Macduff and Banquo take notice of her, as Macbeth is losing interest in playing the “game” by his wife’s rules anymore. Unlike her intended plan of raising uproar and loud cries at the revelation, she seems to lose control of both her voice and her life.

Macbeth fears that the murder being discovered at his home will destroy his reputation than that of Lady Macbeth’s, who may easily escape public censure. In his mind his wife is only the instigator, for it is he who acts out the deed and loses the nobility of his character—the better part of his manhood. Jarold Ramsay suggests that the more Macbeth is driven to pursue what he and lady Macbeth call manliness—the more he perverts that code into a rationale for reflexive aggression—the less humane he becomes, until at last he forfeits nearly all claims on the race itself, and his vaunted manhood, as he finally realizes, becomes meaningless (286-87). Observing Macbeth’s lack of reaction to the horrific deed, Lady Macbeth calls him “infirm of purpose.” It seems that the playwright intended some irony here, as “infirm” may well point towards his breakdown after the deed, or it could possibly suggest his lack of control over his wife. In both ways, Macbeth’s manhood is under question. Not left with much humaneness, Macbeth asks his comrades to put up “manly readiness” to deal with the situation. From this time onwards in the play, Lady Macbeth is confined by her guilty mind and becomes incapable to assist in her husband’s killing spree.

Klein admits that as soon as Duncan’s murder is a public fact, Lady Macbeth begins to lose her place in society and her position at home. There is no room for her in the exclusively male world of treason and revenge... Lady Macbeth has as little place in the male world of revenge

as she had in the male world of war (246). With a mind “full of scorpions,” Macbeth decides to kill Banquo. This time though he ignores his wife becoming his confidante. G. Wilson Knight concurs that, “as her husband grows rich in crime, her significance dwindles” (152). Unlike being the partner of his greatness in Act I, Macbeth calls her “chuck,” who must “be innocent of the knowledge” and hear about it only when it is time to “applaud the deed” (3.2. 45-47). The shift in Macbeth’s language and attitude may appear as a resetting of the domestic and social order that he had forsaken to act as a “man.” Janet Adelman observes that the play becomes a representation of primitive fears about male identity and autonomy itself, about those looming female presences who threaten to control one’s mind, to constitute one’s very self, even at a distance” (105). Macbeth’s present concern becomes his patriarchal male identity which is conditioned only upon the perpetuation of his patrilineal line. He cries in desperation:

Upon my head they placed a fruitless crown,  
 And put a barren sceptre in my gripe,  
 Thence to be wrench'd with an unlineal hand,  
 No son of mine succeeding. If 't be so,  
 For Banquo's issue have I filed my mind;  
 For them the gracious Duncan have I murder'd;  
 Put rancours in the vessel of my peace  
 Only for them; (3.1.62-65)

Without an heir to continue the family name, his lineal identity would be lost. Coppelia Kahn argues that it is “fatherhood that makes him Banquo’s rival” (182). In the banquet scene, when Banquo’s ghost haunts him, Lady Macbeth again taunts him with her negative exhortation, “Are you a man? And he replies, “Aye, and a bold one, that dare look on that which might appal the devil” (3.4.58-59). But in a short span Lady Macbeth realizes her loss of control over her husband and her importance in his life. She observes Macbeth drifting away from her, as a result, a constant sense of uncertainty and loneliness haunts her. According to Joan Larsen, her existence now is circumscribed by the present memory of past loss. H. R. Coursen claims that even though she has a sense of who Macbeth is (or was) under the male persona, she had access only to the male stereotype. It does not strengthen her; it blocks her humanity and fatally weakens her (104). The sense of a future promise, where she thought herself transported beyond the “ignorant present” and felt “the future in the instant,” deserts her in her agonizing state. She envies the unfeeling state of the murdered when she says:

Nought's had, all's spent,  
 Where our desire is got without content:  
 'Tis safer to be that which we destroy  
 Than by destruction dwell in doubtful joy. (3.2. 6-9)

In her growing isolation, remorse and sorrow become her only companions. “Like the damned in the Inferno, she exists solely within the present memory of past horrors” (Klein 248-49). Her peripheral existence can be felt in her absence from the rest of the scenes apart from one

which shows her ultimate doom. Unlike Macbeth who is constantly in the public sphere, on the move to make his dreams turn into reality, Lady Macbeth becomes a prisoner of her own “perverted” and tormented mind. Her last appearance shows her full of remorse with a complete loss of control over her mind. She hallucinates about cleaning the blood off her hands and confesses her guilt. She is so tormented that the gentlewoman, the only company she is shown to have, speaks that she would not have such a heart in her “bosom for the dignity of the whole body” (45-46). Her departure from the play is yet another attempt to make the unnatural workings of things reversed into a natural order. Larsen remarks that “the cry of women” which rises at his [Macbeth] wife’s death is no more than another proof to him that he is fearless, that no “horrors” can move him (5.5.13). Even her death to him is only a “word,” a word for which he has no “time” (221). In Lord and Lady Macbeth’s characters, one can see the playwright indicating the betrayal of “natural” gender roles, and the suffering following as completion of nature’s cycle. The doctor emphasizes the idea when he observes Lady Macbeth’s condition:

Unnatural deeds

Do breed unnatural troubles: infected minds

To their deaf pillows will discharge their secrets:

More needs she the divine than the physician.

God, God forgive us all! (5.1. 61-65)

To keep his “manly” spirit with time and stifle the tortures of his mind, Macbeth drowns deeper and deeper in blood. Mark Thornton Burnett suggests that in the end Macbeth “is left with the empty symbol of royalty..., brooding upon the imminent disappearance of his name” (5). It rightly happens that after killing Duncan, Banquo, and many more people, he realizes his ultimate failure. He finally recognizes his beguilement by the witches and gives a final blow at his fate. He acknowledges the fact that the better part of his manhood was not his violent persona, but his dignity as an honorable man, which he lost forever.

The notion of manliness has been questioned/challenged, and shaped/reshaped throughout the action of the play; however, in the first part, it is mainly reduced to inhumaneness of character and blind aggression. The aggressive and inhuman ideals of masculinity are countered in the second half of the play with the focus shifting to Lord and Lady Macduff. The playwright shifts the audience’s attention to these two characters at a point when Lord and Lady Macbeth appear to fail in their “perverted” way of life. When Macbeth completely loses control over his reasoning power and Lady Macbeth over her mind, the audience is exposed to an alternate view of gender roles presenting a sharp contrast to their “transgressive” way of life. It is

here that the narrow code of manliness is separated from general natural humanity in these characters.

Macduff’s character is brought into focus on his visit to England, a geographic location used as a symbol of masculinity in the play. Adelman suggests that the shift from Scotland to England in Macduff’s movement is strikingly the shift from the mother’s to the father’s terrain. Scotland “cannot/ Be call’d our mother, but our grave” (4.3.156-66). Macduff departs from his country leaving behind his wife and children, for a higher purpose of saving his country—from the

tyranny of Macbeth. Although Lady Macduff and Macduff are never seen together in the play, their relationship is presented to be an ideal relation, where a husband is the sustainer of the family, and wife, the caretaker of the house and children. Michael Davis suggests that King Edward and his support of Malcolm indicates “an alternate understanding of man as not confronted with a hostile nature, but as living within a beneficent nature... the alternative to manliness is womanliness, and ...the two need not be understood as incompatible” (25). In this regard as opposed to Lady Macbeth’s disgust with her husband’s excess in “milk of human kindness”, Lady Macduff thinks of her husband in want of the “human touch,” which for her is a sign of a complete man. Lady Macduff complains to Ross about her husband’s disappearance and compares her and her children’s situation to helpless birds who need protection from the wild world:

Wisdom! to leave his wife, to leave his babes,  
His mansion and his titles in a place  
From whence himself does fly? He loves us not;  
He wants the natural touch. (4.2. 6-9)

Even though Ross tries to restore her trust in Macduff, she maintains that wisdom, gentleness, and responsibility are the very qualities that make the man. Moreover, she tells her child that he is “fatherless” because without his protection they do not have anywhere to go. To her, a man is as good as dead if he cannot take care of his family. She even regards Macduff dishonest and calls him a traitor, for he cannot keep his word and has fallen back on his loyalty. When Macbeth sends men to kill her and her children, she gives vent to her feminine dependency as quite typical for the women of the time. Unlike Lady Macbeth, she does not reject her femininity or threaten to fight the situation. Instead, she surrenders with a helpless cry:

Whither should I fly?  
I have done no harm. But I remember now  
I am in this earthly world; where to do harm  
Is often laudable, to do good sometime  
Accounted dangerous folly: why then, alas,  
Do I put up that womanly defense,  
To say I have done no harm? -4.2. 73-88

In these words, her relatively marginal part is elucidated, and the traditional social role of a weak woman is brought to light. In contrast to Lady Macbeth, Lady Macduff in the situation does not strive for ridding herself of her female gender, rather she acknowledges it as a fact. The next scene brings into focus Macduff’s role as a man, with allegiance to his home and country. His loyalty to the hereditary right of kingship outweighs the fear of the horrid images Malcolm conjures up in his mind. In his loyalties, we find the sixteenth-century concepts of strict hierarchical order. However, being a man of the family, he almost breaks down when Ross brings him the news of his family’s killing. He cannot imagine the extent of cruelty practiced by any man. He laments that maybe Macbeth, who did not have any children of his

own, could not feel the pain he caused Macduff. As Macduff collapses under the news of his family's slaughter, Malcolm exhorts him to convert his grief and guilt without delay into a manly vengeful rage. He asks him to "dispute it like a man." In response, Macbeth replies, "I shall do so, but I must also feel it as a man" (4.3. 222). In his character, it is obvious to observe that Shakespeare presents an alternate view on what it means to be a man and how important it is to have both the qualities of head and heart to have a claim to healthy masculinity or humanity. Macduff unlike Macbeth is not ashamed to express his feelings of sorrow and believes in keeping in touch with his gentle nature. He tells Malcolm, "O, I could play the woman with mine eyes, and braggart with my tongue!" (4.3. 32-33) and takes an oath to avenge his family's death. Adelman remarks that Macduff's response to the news of his family's destruction insists that feeling is central to the definition of manhood (IV.3.221) ... in insisting that mourning for his family is his right as a man, he presents family feeling as central to the definition of manhood (120). He further voices his masculine identity in saying that if he fails to avenge his family's murders, he will be haunted by their memory, and he would not fail them as a man.

In the end, being a man "not of woman born," Macduff does not fear his rival and is ready to avenge the beastly acts of Macbeth. In his blinding arrogance Macbeth, while fighting and killing young Siward, proudly announces:

Thou wast born of woman,

But swords I smile at, weapons laugh to scorn,

Brandished by man that's of a woman born. (5.7. 13-15)

The final irony of the situation is that even after his loss, partly at the hands of the woman who was his co-conspirator and instigator, he laughs at a man who he thinks is a woman born and, therefore, weak. He has conveniently forgotten the deadly influence his wife exercised over him till late. Adelman explains that "the loss of his family enables his accession to full masculine action even while his response to that loss insists on a more humane definition of manhood" (120). In Macduff, Macbeth finally finds a man who was "from his mother's womb, untimely ripped" and who becomes his end. At that point, Macbeth realizes his emasculation through the hands of his wife and the witches, who were both identified as feminine by the rules of society but had strong masculine spirits. His notions of genders are shattered when he realizes the "double sense" of meaning in words and life. Macbeth and Lady Macbeth's faulty sense of gender expectations stops them from differentiating between manliness and monstrosity, which ultimately transforms them from becoming a worthy gentleman and honorable lady into a "dead butcher and his fiend-like queen."

## **Conclusion**

At the end of the play, female power both in the form of Lady Macbeth and the witches is shown as threatening to the patriarchal order and the masculine world. In Adelman's words "the play seems to vest diseased familial relations in Macbeth and the possibility of healthy ones in Macduff" (120). Hence, the expulsion of female characters from the political sphere at the end attempts to reestablish the "masculine," the "natural" order over the feminine.

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