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Balancing Masculinity and Humanity in the Relationship Between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth

Manhood is a central theme in *Macbeth*. Throughout the play, the concretization of what makes a man is constantly scrutinized. The word "man" is used incessantly, both to examine masculinity and mankind. This is most prevalent in the relationship between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. At the beginning of the play, Macbeth is easily defined as a masculine figure– an honored war hero, there is no doubting his status as a man. However, with the introduction of the prophecy, his fear and hesitance prompt Lady Macbeth to assert her own masculinity, changing the dynamic of their relationship. She compels him to reassert his masculinity, and in doing so eventually seals her own fate as the subordinate feminine counterpart. In turn, Macbeth's excessive masculinity ends up costing him his humanity.

Man is situated between God and beast in the Great Chain of Being (specifically, between angel and beast). He has, beyond the brute strength of the animal, the ability to reason. He does not have, however, the intuition or divine powers of the angel or God. By confusing these abilities (for instance, by assuming the power to challenge fate or converse with the dead), man can jeopardize his humanity, which is the trap that Macbeth eventually falls into. Masculinity cannot be used as a substitute for manhood; that requires a more even balance of the masculine and feminine, as well as a balance of the four humors, to ensure that the ability to reason (which defines mankind) is kept intact.

Masculinity is not inherently bad– the proper Elizabethan man is expected to display more masculinity than femininity (without tipping the scales too far). However, it is frequently defined too narrowly and transforms into a stereotype that disallows the balance that femininity can provide. "The male stereotype is associated with violence made socially and ethically acceptable through the ritual of warfare" (Asp 154). In the opening of the play, Macbeth has

undisputedly achieved this– he is “noble Macbeth” (I,ii,67) to King Duncan by virtue of his glory in battle. Despite this, with the introduction of the prophecy, Macbeth is eventually compelled to fulfill the male stereotype to a disorderly degree by exhibiting violence not only on the battlefield but in his personal life, even against the very man that he won his honor by defending. Ironically enough, this transformation is encouraged and facilitated by his wife, Lady Macbeth.

Lady Macbeth is a woman, and therefore is man’s subordinate by all Elizabethan accounts, and should be particularly subservient to her husband, whom God created her as a companion for. Yet Lady Macbeth is not a character many would dare to describe as “subservient.” While she is not the first female character to display such traits– not even Shakespeare’s first– she is a particularly clear example of an imbalance of masculinity and femininity, not entirely unlike Macbeth, but made entirely more inappropriate by the fact that she is a woman. Since we hear little of her character before her appearance, we have no true frame of reference as to the balance she possessed before the inciting action. However, we do know how she responded to the situation and to her husband’s failure to act, and these are the examples we will focus on to examine her character.

Lady Macbeth is often perceived as villainous, and the driving force behind her husband’s eventual ruin. Particularly in older examinations of the text, she is arguably given more blame than Macbeth himself for the events that transpire. In an article written in 1887, Munro asserted that “She knew his strength and weakness, his hopes and fears, and with a skill that is almost demoniac, and too horrible to conceive as existing in woman, the weaker vessel and ministering angel, she played upon his nature with as much ease as if she were fingering the strings of her native harp” (31). On the other hand, Macbeth is seen as a pure and innocent soul who is corrupted not by his own ambition but by his wife’s evil. Munro writes that “He was a genuine Celt, to whom reputation for bravery was dearer than conscience, dearer even than life itself; and so he was goaded and lashed by the “valor” of his wife’s tongue into the doing of an act from which his soul otherwise utterly recoiled” (32). He fails to address the existence of Lady

Macbeth's own conscience, or the fact that by the end of the play Macbeth needs no urging from his wife and is perfectly capable of committing unspeakable crimes all by himself.

While Lady Macbeth is given total blame, she still isn't afforded acknowledgement of her ability. Even though Macbeth's decisions and actions are supposedly her responsibility, Munro hypocritically deems her "so constituted as to lack the muscular and nerve power needed for being such a great and persistent criminal as her brother man. Her intentions may be equally bad, perhaps even more subtle and diabolic, still she cannot carry them through as he can" (32). Her failure to act herself– perhaps he is thinking specifically of her refusal to kill Duncan as he slept on grounds that he looked like her father– is seen not as evidence of a conscience but rather as a womanly weakness. However, we can assess Lady Macbeth instead as a character who willfully chose to disrupt her own internal balance and eventually came to regret it. One of the most famous passages in *Macbeth* is where Lady Macbeth declares:

> Come, you spirits
> That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here
> And fill me from the crown to the toe topful
> Of direst cruelty! Make thick my blood,
> Stop up the access and passage to remorse,
> That no compunctious visitings of nature
> Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between
> Th' effect and it! Come to my woman's breasts,
> And take my milk for gall" (I,v,40-48)

She asks that she be "unsexed" to aid her in helping her husband, which she can do more readily with the masculine affinity for strength and violence at her disposal. "In a society in which femininity is divorced from strength and womanliness is equated with weakness, where the humane virtues are associated with womanliness, the strong woman finds herself hemmed in psychologically, forced to reject her own womanliness, to some extent, if she is to be true to her strength" (Asp 159).

Another early point of contention was her "demonaic" call to the spirits to alter her God-

given nature as a woman in favor of a man's power. However, this was more of an internal plea than one meant to conjure devilish spirits. Elizabethans believed that melancholy was conducive to crime, aided by the presence of choler for courage (or "gall," in Lady Macbeth's words) (Kocher 348). She asks that her blood be thickened, an effect of melancholy, in order to "stop up the access and passage to remorse" (I,v,43-44) to preemptively rid her of the torment that her conscience eventually wreaks upon her anyway.

It is clear that she is not inherently evil and struggles with the morality of her actions– if nowhere else, this is distinct in her eventual suicide. However, we see it earlier in the play as well, particularly during her sleepwalking episode, where she famously cried "Out, damned spot!" (V,i,35) She has an obvious reversal from her initial claim that a "little water clears us of this deed" (II,ii,64) to her lament that "all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand" (V,i,50-51). She, like Macbeth, is unable to prevent her conscience from calling into question her humanity.

Their relationship goes through a significant shift through the course of the play. It is apparent in the first act that Macbeth considers Lady Macbeth not only his wife, but his confidant and advisor. He writes to her "This have I thought good to deliver thee, my dearest partner of greatness, that thou mightest not lose the dues of rejoicing by being ignorant of what greatness is promised thee" (I,v,10-14). He affords her here an importance that is not given to her by any other man in the play (and that no men give to their wives). Macduff is a prime example. When Lady Macduff asks "what's the business" (II,iii,81) he responds to her by saying "O gentle lady, 'Tis not for you to hear what I can speak: The repetition in a woman's ear, Would murther as it fell" (II,iii,84-86).

Conversely, Macbeth relies upon Lady Macbeth for not only advice, but physical aid in the implementation of plans which she initially makes for him. Lady Macbeth takes on a masculine form, actively participating in violence and taking up the slack when his conscience prevents him from fulfilling his manly role as she prescribes it. She taunts him by pointing out his femininity and weakness, saying things such as "From this time/ Such I account thy love"

(I,vii,38-39). He responds by saying “I dare do all that may become a man,/ Who dares do more is none” (I,vii,46-47) and makes it clear the effect that her words have had on him. Less obvious is the contradiction that in order to encourage Macbeth’s masculinity, Lady Macbeth must sacrifice her own and use the more effective tool of femininity.

She uses images that actively refer to her female form, such as “I would… /Have pluck’d my nipple from his boneless gums” (I,vii,56-57). Macbeth’s response, although seemingly affirming her masculinity, ironically affirms her feminine, maternal instinct, saying “Bring forth men children only! For thy undaunted mettle should compose nothing but males” (I,vii,72-74). Asp asserts that “her dream of being partner to his greatness is doomed by the very means she has used to insure that greatness. By making him “manly” she has guaranteed that he will think of her as subordinate and unworthy of truly sharing power” (162).

In the second half of the play, it becomes apparent that Lady Macbeth is no longer her husband’s advisor or confidant. When she asks him “what’s to be done?” he responds “be ignorant of the knowledge… till thou applaud the deed” (III,ii,45-46). Effectively, he treats her exactly as Macduff did earlier with his wife, with no regard for his initial claim that she was his “partner in greatness” or the aid that she inarguably gave him. Even then, she continues to support him and encourage the masculinity that he feels the need to continually prove. When he sees the ghost of Banquo at their feast, she covers for him to the other guests, saying “Think of this, good peers, But as a thing of custom. ‘Tis no other” (III,iv,95-96) and privately challenges him by asking “Are you a man?” (III,iv,57). He replies “Aye, and a bold one, that dare look upon that which might appall the Devil” (III,iv,58-59) which although she does not readily believe, is evidence that this is a continuous point of contention between them despite his earlier assumption that he no longer needs her as a partner. I would assert that it’s entirely possible that his dismissal of her significance is a contributing factor in her eventual suicide.

When Lady Macbeth dies, she is mourned by the cry of women. She is completely removed from the masculine world she tried to infiltrate that, in the end, succeeded in excluding her. “A victim of her “thick-coming fancies,” she, like her husband, loses touch with her

humanity except within the ambiance of a dream world" (Asp 167). Macbeth, in turn, sacrifices his humanity by choosing to ignore the balance of masculinity and femininity in trying to fulfill some sort of unnatural, godlike potential. "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" (Ramsey 286-287).

Perhaps Lady Macbeth's simple question is the most significant in *Macbeth*: "Are you a man?" It asks us to define what exactly makes a man– is it the balance between masculinity and femininity? Is it the balance between the humors? Is it the balance in a marriage? Regardless of the right answer, it's tragically clear that Macbeth and his wife never found it.

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