
Gender Roles in Macbeth By William Shakespeare

What signifies a man? What signifies a woman? The answer is simple, nothing. Gender socialization and predetermined stereotypical gender roles have always existed in society, playing a significant role in how people are expected to function as individuals. When analyzing gender roles among different cultures, one can find that they are not always similar and that the expectations of males and females differ immensely. However, defined gender roles have changed over the years and these changes are reflected in our modern society today. In William Shakespeare's play, *Macbeth*, a tragedy is caused by the reversal of gender roles as characters attempt to gain power. In *Macbeth*, it shows how the desire to fulfill gender roles according to the ideal representation of masculinity set by society leads to consequences such as losing one's identity or committing immoral acts that will be regretted in the future. This idea is revealed through Lady Macbeth's sacrifice of femininity to be more masculine, Macbeth's efforts to prove his masculinity and the Witches' presentation with physical attributes of males.

Firstly, Lady Macbeth is portrayed to have the more dominant role in her marriage as she takes upon the role of a male. This being contradictory to the typical dominant role of the male within a marriage. One of the many actions Lady Macbeth dictates to Macbeth is the idea of murdering Duncan after reading a letter from Macbeth informing her of the Witches' prophecy. Although Macbeth hesitates to take the crown by murder, Lady Macbeth shows no fear as she says, "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." In addition to foreshadowing the violence to follow Lady Macbeth's intentions, it also emphasizes the ambition behind Lady Macbeth's plan. In other words, showing no fear like how true men are supposed to be. Also in the same soliloquy, she continues to emphasize her willingness to do what is necessary to seize the throne as she states, "Come to my woman's breasts,/ And take my milk for gall, you murd'ring ministers." The symbolism of feminine characteristics depicts a sacrifice of femininity to be more masculine in order to carry out the act of murder. Therefore, Lady Macbeth's abandonment of feminine qualities in an attempt to fulfill the role of a man indicates the tragedy that follows a reversal of gender roles.

Secondly, Lady Macbeth's belief of Macbeth's lack of masculinity leads Macbeth on a path in need to prove that he is a man who possesses the qualities to wear the crown. At first, Macbeth understands that murder is immoral and refuses to take Duncan's life in exchange for the throne. However, Lady Macbeth insinuates that he is a coward, threatening his manhood as she says, "When you durst do it/ then you were a man." , when he objects her plan. When Macbeth was challenged of his manhood, he tells Lady Macbeth "Prithee, peace/ I dare do all that may become a man/ Who dares do more is none." Therefore, falling into Lady Macbeth's manipulation to prove his masculinity and committing the immoral act of murdering King Duncan.

Apart from the gender role reversal between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, an inconsistency in gender roles is also seen in the presentation of the witches. Their physical appearance reflects the power they have over mankind as they are the only ones with the ability to control fate. This is proved in Banquo's first encounter with the witches as he says, "Upon her skinny lips; you should be women,/ And yet your beards forbid me to interpret/ That you are so."

This contrasting both the feminine and masculine traits the witches possess. Also, representing a balance between femininity and masculinity despite being presented as unnatural due to being female owning male personas. The Witches also manifest similar ambition as Lady Macbeth, however, are more powerful as their prophecies are definitive. As the Witches prophecy of Macbeth, "no man that's born of woman/ Shall e'er have power upon thee." (V.iii.6-7) comes true, the power the Witches have over all men is emphasized. Thus, power as a masculine trait re-establishes the consequence of violence as gender roles are reversed.

In conclusion, in Macbeth, the repetitive association of violence with attempts to obtain masculinity results in tragedy. This is seen through Lady Macbeth's sacrifice of femininity to be more masculine, Macbeth's lack of masculinity and the Witches exhibiting both masculine and feminine traits. Although, in Macbeth a reversal of gender roles results in tragedy, in today's society, with movements of feminism, gender roles and ideal masculine and feminine traits are becoming insignificant as a result to promote equality. In contrast to the characters in Macbeth who lived their life trying to fulfill gender roles and prophecies, it is important to live freely, with morals to guide our actions.

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