*How does Shakespeare’s treatment of masculinity and femininity figure in Macbeth’s tragedy?*

Fittingly, the tragedy of *Macbeth* largely revolves around its principle and titular characters, Macbeth and his Lady. Shakespeare toys with conventional gender roles and characteristics through his portrayal of these two anti-heroes and the relationship between them.

From Lady Macbeth’s initial introduction in 1.5, Shakespeare subverts expectations of her femininity. Shakespeare presents Lady Macbeth as a ruthless character from the start, conventionally unfeminine. She is as filled with ambition as her husband and counterpart, but lacks the hesitation towards violence and immorality that Macbeth shows in 1.3 when first contemplating the murder of Duncan. Indeed, almost immediately after receiving Macbeth’s letter citing his becoming King as a prediction and prospect, Lady Macbeth seeks to purge her own femininity, to steel herself for what is to come. “Come, you spirits... unsex me here, / And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full / Of direst cruelty! Make thick my blood, / Stop up th’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...” (1.5, 38-46). Lady Macbeth wishes for ethereal powers, reminiscent of the fierce and devilish witches of prior, to 'unsex’ her, replace her feminine and motherly milk with metaphorically liquified courage. It is unclear whether the ‘compunctious visitings of nature’ she wishes stoppered are specifically feminine instincts towards care and compassion, or more broadly natural human qualities of conscience and remorse, but nevertheless, her pleas set her up to subvert audience expectations of the role of female characters as the play continues. A further example of this subversion is in 1.7, when Lady Macbeth proclaims “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” (55-59). This rash and violent proclamation undermines the image of women as mothers, gentle and doting. Though Lady Macbeth absolves her femininity on an inner level early on, she continues to perform femininity as necessary, as when she coerces Macbeth into action by taunting him about his desire, valor, and manhood. Lady Macbeth also wields her femininity as a weapon for her defense in 2.3, fainting in response to Duncan’s murder and prompting the infamous “Look to the lady!” In performing as she would be expected to respond, Lady Macbeth seeks to affirm her femininity and innocence both, driving suspicion away from herself and her husband. Lady Macbeth is not a typical woman, and Shakespeare uses her character and dissonant femininity as a driving force throughout *Macbeth*.

Gender roles also trouble Macbeth as the play unfolds, but unlike Lady Macbeth, who actively seeks to defy her gender, Macbeth endeavors to perform his own masculinity and gender expectations. Many of his doubts regarding gender are planted by his Lady, who is scornful of all traits not decidedly masculine and therefore strong, as suggested above. In 1.7, Lady Macbeth taunts: “Art thou afeard / To be the same in thine own act and valor / As thou art in desire?” (39-41). By equating Macbeth’s desire with his performance of valor, Lady Macbeth challenges Macbeth’s masculinity, whether he lives up to her standards as a husband and as a man both. The term 'screw’ in her iconic “screw your courage to the sticking place” (1.7, 60), again incorporates sexuality as a component of Macbeth’s masculinity and thus his choices moving forward in the play. Each time Macbeth falters, the standards of masculinity Lady Macbeth presents bolster him onwards. Another instance is in 3.4, when Macbeth startles at the image of Banquo’s ghost. Lady Macbeth challenges: “Are you a man?” (59). To berate Macbeth for his delusional behavior and warn him away from revealing their guilt, Lady Macbeth questions his masculinity. Later in the scene, when Banquo’s ghost vanishes, Macbeth states: “I am a man again” (109). This line could refer to his restored state of humanity when no longer haunted by Banquo, or it could exemplify a reassertion of his masculinity and the qualities of strength and valor that accompany it. Macbeth’s defense of his masculinity drives his choices just as his ambition does, alas to unfortunate ends.

Conclusions of the play and its characters’ arcs alike demonstrate the dangers of Lady Macbeth’s disregard of femininity and Macbeth’s hyper-fixation on masculinity alike. Though Lady Macbeth seeks to absolve her femininity, compassion, and in some ways overall humanity, her guilt plagues her in her sleep, a state in which she lacks control (“Out, damned spot!”) Shakespeare must end Lady Macbeth’s storyline with her death, because such a woman could not be permitted to survive the play. Lady Macbeth is radical, courageous, and wicked, defying the norms of femininity. She cannot be permitted to get away with these deeds, must be aptly punished. Shakespeare cannot set the societal norm that such a woman can perform such acts and survive. Macbeth too pays the price of his performative masculinity. In defense of his title so harshly won, in defense of his courage that he perceives as necessary to his masculinity, Macbeth condemns himself to a losing battle. “They have tied me to a stake. I cannot fly, / But bearlike I must fight the course,” he states in 5.7. In striving towards ambition, towards the standards of masculinity Lady Macbeth sets for him, Macbeth forgets his humanity. “I have almost forgot the taste of fears... / I have supped full with horrors. / Direness, familiar to my slaughterous thoughts, / Cannot once start me” (5.5, 9-15). In stark contrast to the play’s start, when Macbeth can’t even contemplate the murder of Duncan without experiencing physical revulsion, here the cries and alarms of those he holds dear, heralding his own destruction, cannot even shake him.

*Macbeth* is a tragedy because it shows how no act can go without sacrifice, and no true goodness exists in the world. Lady Macbeth’s shirking of femininity leads her to deny that which ties her to morality and humanity, allowing guilt to consume her. Macbeth’s insecure masculinity and ambition become his tragic flaw. The audience follow both Macbeth and his Lady as anti-heroes, their morals and actions too questionable to be true protagonists. The audience journeys alongside these characters, understand their hope and their guilt, meet devastation with them when fate doesn’t run as they suppose. Shakespeare’s treatment of masculinity and femininity throughout this play contribute to its tragedy and the misguided choices the characters make.