

Emotions and reasoning in macbeth

[Literature](#), [British Literature](#)



Power and social status is commonly determined by one's drive and ambition. Successful people are set apart by their willingness to make sacrifices to accomplish their goals. Emotions are often cast aside in order to more easily make difficult moral decisions. While this callous attitude can be helpful in reaching one's goals, it can also have detrimental effects on the well being of others. Emotional indifference is especially promoted in male positions of power; while women are expected to be compassionate and warm even in business, their male counterparts are praised for their apathy. In a culture such as this, masculinity is rooted in a suppression of feelings and strong-willed mentality. In the society of Macbeth, characters regard political power extremely high. They are power hungry and determined, willing to do nearly anything to increase their dominance. Characters are concerned with appearing as the strongest, manliest, and most dominant in their society. One's legacy is determined by how much power they held and how honorably they held it. This tunnel vision for power can leave other areas, such as compassion, neglected. Personal relationships and loyalties are cast aside in pursuit of success. The value one places on power and masculinity often dictates their ability to feel and express emotions.

Over the course of the play Macbeth increasingly values masculinity and power. He begins with an incredibly strong relationship with his wife, Lady Macbeth. They are quite literally partners in crime, as they plan the murder of King Duncan together. Lady Macbeth carries the guilt from this deed for Macbeth, bearing the pain to ensure his personal success. She believes they will rise together, as a couple. However, once Macbeth becomes king he begins to reject his wife's love. He plots the murder of a longtime friend

Banquo and his son all the while keeping it a secret from Lady Macbeth. He becomes more introverted and unfeeling, killing innocent men without a second thought. His gains in power go hand in hand with his emotional separation from his wife, highlighting the prevalent theme that power corrupts and isolates. This separation reaches its peak in one of the final scenes as Macbeth learns that his wife has died: " She should have died hereafter; there would have been time for such a word" (77). Macbeth was putting all his focus into the coming war, he cannot bear to become emotional and grieve just before battle. Though he did really love Lady Macbeth he forgets about her completely in his pursuit of power. Macbeth cannot mourn his wife with a clean conscious as he knows his selfish ways brought her to an early death. He feels intense regret, contemplating the importance of the throne he deserted his wife for: "[Life] is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing" (77). The loss of his wife makes Macbeth realize the triviality of his title; he worked tirelessly to become king but only realizes the true cost once it is too late. Power and masculinity go hand in hand in Macbeth; as Macbeth assumes the highest political position he acts in an increasingly ' manly' way. He no longer relies on his wife and shares his power with her; instead he forces her to fit the stereotype of a quiet and passive wife. His power blinds him to the great love he once shared with his wife and directs all his focus on battle and keeping his crown.

The character Siward further displays this distorted sense of masculinity. Siward is a leader of the English army and though he is seeking to overthrow Macbeth, he shares many similar traits with him. He is single-mindedly

focused on battle, willing to do anything to defeat the enemy. He places extremely high value on bravery and honor; when he learns his son has died at the hands of Macbeth, his main concern is that he had died fighting. As long as Siward's son never gave in to the enemy and sacrificed his honor, his death is acceptable. This plays into the theme of overblown masculinity; all that is remembered after Young Siward's death is his aggressiveness in battle. His death is put into terms of his masculinity: " He only lived till he was a man; the which no sooner had his prowess confirmed in the unshrinking station where he fought, but like a man he died" (81). Young Siward's death isn't seen as a tragic fatality of war but as an exciting entrance into manhood. He died an honorable death and so Siward sees no reason to mourn him. Bravery and patriotism are clearly valued above all, as shown through Siward's initial reaction to the death of his son: " Why then, God's soldier he be! Had I as many sons as I have hairs, I would not wish them to a fairer death: And so his knell is knoll'd" (81). Siward believes that his son has fully carried out his purpose, he was a good soldier. He sees his son as nothing more than a way to advance his power, someone who could be used and discarded once his " purpose" has been served. In his quest for power, Siward emotionally disregards his own son. In this way, Siward's reaction is similar to Macbeth's; they both have used their loved ones for political gain, and in doing so neglected their personal relationships

The character Macduff is in sharp contrast with both Siward and Macbeth. Macduff is the only character in the play to demonstrate a true balance between masculinity and femininity; he does not let the prominent masculine culture of his time dictate his actions. He keeps the strength and bravery of

a man but allows himself to feel “feminine” emotions of grief and sorrow. When he hears of the brutal murder of his wife and children, he is utterly devastated. He is uncaringly told to, “dispute it like a man” (67). To which he replies, “I shall do so, but I must also feel it as a man: I cannot remember such things were, that were most precious to me. Did heaven look on, and would not take their part? Sinful Macduff, they were all struck for thee!” (67). Macduff blames the heavens and then himself, showing extreme guilt for not being able to protect his family. Macbeth’s intent while killing Macduff’s family was solely to harm Macduff, and so Macduff feels it is his fault they were killed. Rather than brushing off his role in their death like Macbeth did to Lady Macbeth, Macduff accepts full responsibility. He carries the weight of this burden and it drives him to avenge their deaths. Macduff kills Macbeth not to gain power, but to reverse the wrongdoing that Macbeth has caused. Unlike Macbeth and Siward, Macduff fully and openly feels the traumatic loss of his loved ones; he does not attempt to stunt his emotions to appear stronger and more masculine. His character demonstrates that gender role balance is integral to success; he is an honorable war hero but rejects toxic masculinity standards.

The varying reactions to death across characters Macbeth, Siward, and Macduff demonstrate how difficult it is to grieve in a society that discourages male displays of emotions. Power and dominance are the defining factors of manliness, to show any emotions is to appear weak. Macbeth attempts to rule without any feminine influence; he exaggerates his masculinity and rejects his wife’s guidance. This extreme imbalance of gender roles leads him to his demise.

Macduff however, as the hero of the play, shows that masculinity and femininity must coexist together in order to be successful. Had Macduff bottled in his grief over his wife and children, he would not have been able to seek justice onto Macbeth. His emotional balance provides him the strength and motivation necessary to kill the tyrant Macbeth. Siward and Macbeth are emotionally stunted due to their exaggerated ideas of masculinity and cannot properly grieve their loved ones. The rejection of traditional masculine standards allows for one to experience love and emotion freely and openly. Success must derive from an individual balance between masculine and feminine traits, one cannot stand without the other.