

Gender roles and lady macbeth

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Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is a male dominated play. Most of the noticeable characters in *Macbeth* are male, including Macbeth, Macduff, Banquo, King Duncan, and Malcolm. Despite the lack of female power by numbers, Lady Macbeth proves to be a formidable force of influence. She accomplishes this by psychologically switching genders when the situation is more favorable to a particular sex. Each gender switch brings Lady Macbeth closer to what she thinks she wants. However, switching genders is a feat which requires immense mental strength and towards the end of the play, Lady Macbeth's mental power wanes with guilt and eventually leads to an untimely death.

Lady Macbeth's first mental gender transformation occurs after she reads the letter sent to her from Macbeth and hears of King Duncan's intended visit. She pleads to spirits in Act 1, Scene 5, "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." Lady Macbeth is aware that her intentions of murdering King Duncan are not considered lady-like. Hence, she commands the spirits to "unsex" her, or to strip her of her female sex and replace it with one more suited to such sinister intentions, the male sex. She further insists on the mental change from female to male by telling the spirits to "Come to my woman's breasts, // And take my milk for gall." By requesting that the spirits come to her "woman's breasts" and take her "milk for gall", her life-giving purely female nourishment is destroyed and replaced with the opposite.

Now that Lady Macbeth has mentally changed her sex from female to male, she assumes the role that Macbeth should be playing if she did not consider him "too full of the milk of human kindness to strike aggressively". Lady

Macbeth uses her newfound gender psyche to bully Macbeth and tease his male ego into murdering King Duncan. For example, in Act 1, Scene 7, she argues with him, “ What beast was’t, then, // That made you break this enterprise to me? // When you durst do it, then you were a man; // And, to be more than what you were, you would // Be so much more the man.” Lady Macbeth uses her male mind to pick on Macbeth’s male ego. She says that he was a man when he was thinking of murdering King Duncan, and if he does so, then he will be greater than a man; if not, then what beast is he? Lady Macbeth assimilates with the male sex so well that even Macbeth alludes to it in Act 1, Scene 7, “ Bring forth men-children only; // For thy undaunted mettle should compose // Nothing but males.” Macbeth tells Lady Macbeth that her fearless spirit is so man-like, that her children should all be men.

Although Lady Macbeth currently has the will power to maintain her unsexed disposition and male mind, her mentality begins to noticeably wane as time progresses. The first sign of Lady Macbeth’s female consciousness beginning to surface over her supposed heartless, evil male consciousness is in Act 2, Scene 2 when she admits to herself, “ Had he not resembled // My father as he slept, I had done’t.” When Lady Macbeth mentally transformed from a female to a male, she made sure in Act 1, Scene 5 to request that the male side would consist of making “ thick my blood, // stop up the access and passage to remorse, // That no compunctions visitings of nature // Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between // The effect and it!” However, by not killing King Duncan because he resembled her father, Lady Macbeth allows a “ compunction visiting of nature”, or moment of regret from human nature,

to influence her actions revealing that her thick-blood, male mind is beginning to thin and make way for her female consciousness.

As Lady Macbeth's female consciousness begins to ebb its way back to the surface of her mind, her words reflect this re-surfacing in Act 3, Scene 2.

Lady Macbeth notices that Macbeth is not entirely well and instead of bullying, teasing or badgering him like her "unsexed" self frequently did, she says, "Gentle my lord, // sleek o'er your rugged looks; // Be bright and jovial // Among your guests to-night." Lady Macbeth instead addresses Macbeth kindly, telling him he should relax because she can see the effects of his constant worrying by his "rugged looks". Macbeth replies, "So shall I, love. // And so, I pray be you." His reply is the first time he has called Lady Macbeth, "love" since the murder, revealing that this is the first time since the murder that Macbeth sees Lady Macbeth as a woman and his wife.

Macbeth continues by saying that Lady Macbeth needs to flatter Banquo and "make our faces vizards to our hearts, // Disguising what they are," a tactic they both used on King Duncan before murdering him. However, Lady Macbeth's male doppelganger is receding and her lady self is beginning to dominant, leading her to tell Macbeth, "You must leave this." Lady Macbeth no longer has the male brutality in her, and she does not want to kill anyone else. Her female instincts are also apparent in Act 3, Scene 4 when Lady Macbeth notices that Macbeth's worries will keep him up and her womanly wife instinct triggers. As a result, she tells Macbeth, "You haven't slept" after Macbeth says that he is going to see the witches again. Lady Macbeth returns to her female mentality and Macbeth is now the remorseless, thick-blooded male.

Once back, Lady Macbeth's female mentality does not stay with her long. Her guilt eventually cracks her female mentality, leaving her in a sexless, deranged state that causes her to sleepwalk. In Act 5, Scene 1, the doctor watching her comments that, " Unnatural deeds // Do breed unnatural troubles: infected minds // To their deaf pillows will discharge their secrets." The secret has finally broken Lady Macbeth, and unconsciously escapes for the nurse and doctor to see. No more is heard from Lady Macbeth throughout the rest of the play. The thick-blood, aggressive bully has no more manly boasts. The worried and concerned wife has no more womanly comfort. Her husband no longer pays any attention to her. Lady Macbeth is now sexless, just a body of guilt, until death comes.

At the beginning of Macbeth, Lady Macbeth is a prominent woman with a respected husband who loves and acknowledges her. Later, she mentally transforms into a man in order to be cold-hearted enough to murder King Duncan. Even though Lady Macbeth tries to keep her secret by being " unsexed", the secret keeps her guilty. The strong mentality that once made her a remorseless man wanes until she reverts back to her female self. In the end, the guilt overpowers Lady Macbeth's female consciousness, and she becomes a sleepwalking performer acting out her scenes of guilt until she is pronounced dead.