

Gender inequality in the elizabethan era



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How often do you see female prime ministers, househusbands, or lady soldiers? Although there are a larger variety of jobs and characteristics both men and women can possess in these modern times, gender inequality thrived in the Elizabethan era. Men were seen as the leaders who were brave and subject to war, whereas women were portrayed as their usual quiet self who are usually unable or not supposed to interfere with their husbands' affairs.

Shakespeare's play, *Macbeth*, employs the use of conventions to portray female characters as more dominant and controlling compared to males, challenging the naturalised notions of masculinity and femininity. Women in general are given a lot of power in the play, such as being able to control things like their own destinies. From the first Act of the play, the three witches immediately create the impression of horror, evil and violence. During the witches' conversation, the second witch was said to be "Killing swine" whilst the third planned to kill a sailor for his wife's selfishness (Act 1, Scene 3).

Everything that the witches do implies otherworldly power and a sense of inescapable and enchanting evil. Since harmless and kind hearted females were the norm in society at the time, 'the witches' roles are reversed, showing masculine traits of violence and bravery. Furthermore, the witches are also very manipulative in their actions slowly taking control over Macbeth's mind. The power of the witches is shown through their ability to manipulate people. Banquo acknowledges that the dark forces do tell honesty and truth but lead to betrayals that induce "deepest consequence" (act 1 scene 3). Macbeth, unlike Banquo, is easily manipulated by the

witches, leading to the spree of tragedies occurring to him. Further on in the play, Macbeth came running back to the witches seeking assurance and guidance, asking them to control his destiny or speak into his life. Women were stereotypically seen as unable to make decisions without a supporting male character, following under the man's command. In this case, Macbeth is controlled by the witches, further enhancing the idea of role reversal.

By twisting the stereotypes that females possess, the play challenges the naturalised notion of weakness and reliance on others. Although the Three Witches are shown to be masculine in their power to control people, they cannot even compare to the power that Lady Macbeth holds. Lady Macbeth has a very ambitious mindset, with the single determination to assist Macbeth to become king. She shows a very strong sense of courage even before she removes her femininity. Prior to killing Duncan, she calls on spirits to “ Unsex [her] here... Making] thick [her] blood; stop up the access and passage to remorse” (Act 1, Scene 5) in order to remove her femininity. The phrase “ Make thick my blood” can be interpreted on a figurative level, showing how Lady Macbeth wants to become strong willed, challenging the naturalised notion of women being indecisive. To enhance her cruelty, she asks to “ take [her] milk for gall” (Act 1, Scene 5) for milk is a very important part of females; being the source of life for a child's early stage. Gall on the other hand is poisonous and is a substance for digestion and decomposition.

By replacing milk for gall, it conveys the idea that Lady Macbeth's motifs are to kill instead of nurture. Aforementioned, a lady's role in a relationship back in Elizabethan Era was to bear children and support the family; the play challenges these notions by removing Lady Macbeth's kindness and child

nurturing properties. Lady Macbeth also possesses the ability to control many of Macbeth's actions. She claims to be able to “pour [her] spirits in thine ear” (Act 1, Scene 5) when she speaks with Macbeth, asserting dominance over him.

When Macbeth was hesitant on killing Duncan, Lady Macbeth attacks her husband's bravery and manliness saying “Which thou esteem'st the ornament of life, and life a coward in thine own esteem”. She plays with her husband's mind, calling him cowardly and weak if he does not follow through to killing Duncan. Being the dominant partner of the relationship, the play challenges the naturalised notions of males being the leader of families or couples. Apart from the unusual female characterisation of Lady Macbeth and The Three Witches, the main character himself, Macbeth, is portrayed to show very feminine like characteristics.

The relationship between Macbeth and his wife can be seen as role reversal, as though Macbeth was the woman in the marriage. It is clearly shown in the play that many of Macbeth's immoral actions are due to him being easily manipulated by Lady Macbeth and the Witches. Even Lady Macbeth states that she “[fears his] nature; it is too full o' the milk of human kindness” (Act 1, Scene 4) before killing Duncan. This supports the femininity that Macbeth possesses; being kind hearted, filled with “human kindness”, and lack of manhood.

With the lack of masculine characteristics, it easily allows him to be manipulated and controlled by people, leading to his great downfall.

Masculinity is defined in the play mainly by ambition and the power the

individual possesses. Although Shakespeare infers that Macbeth has power as the Thane of Cawdor and is respected by both the King and his men, his ambition is not as strong willed when compared to his wife's. As Lady Macbeth's ambition for her husband to become king was stronger than Macbeth's kind-heartedness, it lead to Macbeth being controlled and ultimately his downfall.

Macbeth's great tragedy falls into the hands of a malicious mix of women and ambition and just a hint of the supernatural. Role reversal, unusual characteristics and different ambitions of power all contribute to Shakespeare's mind blowing masterpiece. Macbeth definitely awestruck many of the people during the Elizabethan Era, portraying female characters to be masculine and males to possess feminine characteristics. Even in our modern times, the play challenges the naturalised notions of genders, having brave and dominant women together with kind hearted and easily manipulated men.