

AQA English Literature GCSE

Macbeth: Themes Gender

This work by [PMT Education](https://www.pmt.education) is licensed under [CC BY-NC-ND 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)



Gender

The concept of gender, and the roles the characters are confined to because of it, come up throughout the play. Masculinity is seen as the **desired trait** and the male characters are often offended if someone questions their manhood. Lady Macbeth, for example, asks if Macbeth is a **“man” (3.4)** and Macduff explains he must feel his grief **“as a man” (4.3)**. Characters, particularly the Macbeths, feel **restrained** by the expectations of their gender.

Gender in context

In the Jacobean era, gender was a very **strict and rigid construction** and for the most part determined male and female roles within society. Gender was also an **establishment** upon which the **hierarchy of society was built**.



<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/03/25/follow-lady-macbeths-advice-good-nights-sleep/>

Women were expected to be **loyal and respectful daughters, wives, and mothers**. Angering the men in their lives could result in being kicked out or killed, and it was near impossible for women to **support themselves financially**. They received little to no education, and were very **restricted** in their movements and decisions in life.

Men had a significantly easier time than women. They were **householders, politicians, landlords**. They were encouraged to be **aggressive**, particularly in their sexuality - male sexuality was **celebrated**. However, there were still expectations of how men should act. They were the bread-winners, and needed to be financially independent. Being a **warrior** was viewed as one of the most **honourable** things a man could be, and dying in battle was the **idealised way to die**, especially in the Medieval Era, when the play is set.

The Men

Within the play Shakespeare presents the audience with many **different types of masculinity**. You should consider **why** his male characters are so different and what message he is trying to give his audience.

Macbeth

Many times throughout the play Lady Macbeth **taunts** her husband about his masculinity. It is evident that Macbeth does not like his manhood being questioned which **highlights his insecurity**.



When Lady Macbeth accuses him of being a **“coward”**, he replies, **“Prithee, peace. / I dare do all that may become a man; / Who dares do more is none,” (1.7)**. The **plea “Prithee, peace”** suggests that he **cannot withstand the attack on his masculinity**, as Shakespeare conveys how **sensitive and fragile he is**. It seems as if a man’s sense of manhood is **dependent** on the women in his life.

Lady Macbeth is implying Macbeth is not **“a man”** because he refuses to murder Duncan, suggesting that masculinity is proven with **violence**, but Macbeth disagrees. The line **“I dare do all that may become a man; / Who dares do more is none”** suggests manhood is tied to **honour**. He argues those who go against the natural order or pursue more power aren’t men, either because they aren’t human or because they aren’t noble. Shakespeare implies there are two ‘types’ of man that people can choose from: one is **violent**, the other is **chivalrous**.

Eventually Macbeth gives into his wife’s insults and accusations. Indeed, he becomes obsessed with **proving** his masculinity and changing into the man she wants him to be.



<https://operaballet.be/en/programme/2019-2020/macbeth>

When Lady Macbeth asks, **“Are you a man?”**, he replies, **“Ay, and a bold one, that dare look on that / Which might appal the devil,” (3.4)**. The words **“bold”** and **“dare”** emphasise his **manly bravery**. The phrase **“might appal the devil”** serves to prove he is stronger than the ultimate source of evil, providing an **exaggerated** perspective of his manhood.

It is important to consider the different **types** of masculinity Shakespeare portrays within the play and which characters represent those characteristics. It’s also interesting to note what happens to them. Both Duncan, the noble and virtuous king, and Macbeth, the dishonest and violent king, end up dead. Does this mean that Shakespeare didn’t agree with either type?

Fear and masculinity

Fear and paranoia are deemed to be **incompatible** with the **Jacobean view of masculinity**. Within the play the male figures do everything they can to **repress** or **reject** these feelings and thereby retain their masculinity.

Shakespeare presents Macbeth as a **conflicted character** who struggles to keep his fear at bay. In giving into his fear, Macbeth becomes **feminised** and these **contradicting forces** add to his fear. After Duncan’s murder he is both scared of the man he has become but also of the masculinity he is losing.



Fleance's escape

When he hears that Fleance escaped, Macbeth admits he is scared again, adding, ***“I had else been perfect; / Whole as the marble, founded as the rock, / As broad and general as the casing air: / But now I am cabined, cribbed, confined, bound in / To saucy doubts and fears,”*** (3.4).

- The use of the adjective **“perfect”** implies fear somehow **pollutes or taints manhood**. Macbeth is a **flawed man** because of his **“doubts and fears”**.
- The **similes** referring to **“marble”**, **“rock”**, and **“air”** portray men as powerful, strong, and dominant, like nature itself. **“Marble”** connotes sculptures or luxury, suggesting masculinity is **flawlessly constructed by God**.
- His **“doubts and fears”** overwhelm and surround him, and Shakespeare argues this is why Macbeth continues murdering others and being a tyrant - as a means of escape.

Final battle

Yet Macbeth's attitudes towards masculinity almost do a full circle. In his final battle he decides he will fight to the death rather than surrendering or committing suicide. He knows he is going to lose but he fights anyway, suggesting that some of his **courage and honour have been restored to him**. He says, ***“I'll fight till from my flesh be hacked,”*** (5.3), and later, ***“Why should I play the Roman fool and die / On mine own sword? Whiles I see lives, the gashes / Do better upon them,”*** (5.5). In the army, it was considered more **honourable** to die in battle than to surrender.

Shakespeare's audience would recognise this decision as the sign of a noble hero and a real man.

However, it is possible that this scene shows Macbeth can only thrive in **battle**, thus masculinity is associated once more with violence.



<https://www.lesalonmusical.it/cremona-macbeth-quando-una-mano-lava-laltra/>

Malcolm and Macduff

Though most of the play explores masculinity through the **definition of violence and bravery**, Shakespeare offers an alternative, deeper, more **emotional** form of manhood through Malcolm and Macduff. This form of masculinity seems to triumph overall, as Malcolm becomes king. He **restores** order to his kingdom even though his **understanding of manhood differs from the norm**.



Controlling emotions

Malcolm's attempts to test Macduff's morals and loyalties are interesting in their presentation of the **ideal man**. He warns Macduff of **"the cistern of [his] lust"**, his **"desire"**, his **"stanchless avarice"**, and his **"voluptuousness"** (4.3), associating masculinity with **unstoppable sexual desire**. His fabricated personality is the **epitome** of the **aggressive lust** society encourages in men.

Macduff admits, **"Boundless intemperance / In nature is a tyranny,"** a line that is a perfect summary for the whole play, but also serves to suggest **men are encouraged to be tyrants**. Patriarchy grants men **unconditional power**, allowing them to indulge every need.

A **revelatory moment** in the presentation of masculinity in Macbeth is when Macduff learns of the slaughter of his children and wife. He cries, **"All my pretty ones? / Did you say all? O hell-kite! All? / What, all my pretty chickens and their dam / At one fell swoop?"** (4.3). The **repetitive questions, exclamations, and broken speech** convey his extreme emotional distress, making him appear unmasculine in the **traditional** sense. The phrase **"my pretty ones"** expresses **deep paternal love**, suggesting masculinity can be **tender and loving**.

Masculine response

Malcolm tells Macduff, **"Dispute it like a man,"** (4.3), planning to **"make us med'cines of our great revenge / To cure this deadly grief,"** (4.3) suggesting the appropriate **manly** response would be to wage war on his enemy. At this point, Malcolm's idea of masculinity seems to be **close-minded**, in line with his society's. Macduff's reply, **"I shall do so; / But I must also feel it as a man; / I cannot but remember such things were / That were most precious to me,"** marks a moment of **learning** both for Malcolm and Shakespeare's audience. Macduff implies that **repressing his grief would be a denial of his love**, and would be unfair to his family's memory. Shakespeare suggests the stone heart of masculinity is unnatural.



<https://ardentheatre.org/event/macbeth/>

The Women

The female characters **transcend** gender boundaries within the play and are given **agency** by Shakespeare. Their **words** and the consequences they have are the driving force behind the plot. Yet they have **rejected their femininity** in order to have this power.



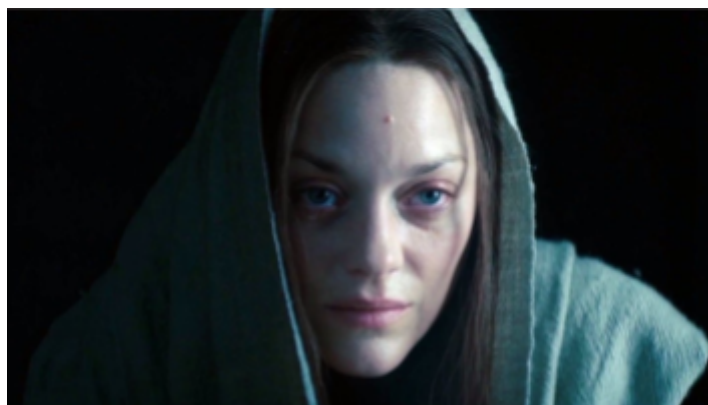
Lady Macbeth

Lady Macbeth's character is highly **significant** in Shakespeare's **presentation** of gender. The traditional subservient wife figure has been entirely rejected by Shakespeare, instead she is **manipulative** and **domineering** in her marriage. Her **lust for power** drives the plot forward and she attacks Macbeth's manhood to get what she wants. Yet it's important to note that her power is purely mental, while she orchestrates their plan she doesn't commit any acts of violence herself.

Religion and the supernatural

Lady Macbeth's manipulation of Macbeth **associates femininity with the fall of man**. Her bullying leads to Macbeth's tragic downfall in the same way **Eve convinced Adam to eat the Forbidden Fruit**. She can be viewed as a **femme fatale**, an **archetype** of femininity where a woman charms and seduces her lover, to his detriment.

She hopes Macbeth will return home quickly so she **"may pour [her] spirits in [his] ear"** (1.5), showing how she wants to **persuade him to do her bidding**. The reference to



<https://anotherbookonashelf.wordpress.com/2017/03/14/lady-macbeth-the-literary-devil-on-a-shoulder/>

"spirits" connotes the **occult**, as if she wants to **possess** Macbeth. Shakespeare links **witchcraft** with a woman's dominance over her husband, implying that it is **unnatural** for women to have power over men.

An alternative interpretation is that Shakespeare is **criticising** how society denies women their own **freedom** and **autonomy**. Lady Macbeth only has to manipulate and possess Macbeth because her

power and status are **directly tied to his**. **"Pour[ing]"** her **"spirits"** into his **"ear"** may be a metaphor for how her desires can only be fulfilled by a male form. Macbeth is her **puppet** because she cannot do it herself, instead she has to **rely on her husband for everything**. Shakespeare could be showing that men bring their downfalls **on themselves** by denying women power.

Lady Macbeth's Soliloquy

It is important to note that Lady Macbeth **rejects her femininity** within the play, and it is implied that this act is what enables her to pursue her ambition. Her most famous **soliloquy** is in **Act 1, Scene 5**, when she calls upon **"spirits"** to **"unsex"** her.

She asks to be filled **"from the crown to the toe top-full / Of direst cruelty"**, for her **"blood"** to be made **"thick"**, for **"the access and passage to remorse"** to be stopped up, and for **"no compunctious visitings of nature [to] / Shake [her] fell purpose"**. This first set of demands deal with the **emotional or hormonal aspects of womanhood**. **Early medicine** believed people's emotional states were determined by different fluids in their



bodies, the humors. Thick blood meant someone had a cold heart. Thick blood would also stop her menstruating, a sign of her femininity and therefore weakness preventing her from killing the king.

She goes on, ***“Come to my woman’s breasts, / And take my milk for gall, you murdering ministers,” (1.5)***. This addresses the **physical and visible proof** of her femininity more directly than before. She wants all proof of it gone, as all signs are obstacles to her plan. Her **“breasts”** and **“milk”** are significant for **motherhood**, so Lady Macbeth is rejecting her duty to be a mother. This has historically been seen as one of the most threatening things a woman can do, and is often associated with **femmes fatales**. Refusing to be a mother meant **denying a man the ability to immortalise himself** through his children.

It should also be noted that in the Jacobean era, witches were believed to have **“thick blood”**. Most ‘witches’ were **old women**, meaning they were menopausal, and could no longer produce **“milk”** to feed their children. Lady Macbeth therefore is not only calling upon **“spirits”** to help her: **she wants her body to become like that of a witches.**

This soliloquy is important when considering Shakespeare’s presentation of femininity because of what Lady Macbeth is asking for. Firstly, she is summoning evil **“spirits”**. This **aligns her with witchcraft**, which in Shakespeare’s time was associated with women who **challenged the status quo or the superiority of men**. Witchcraft was a serious crime that went against God, and here, Lady Macbeth is shamelessly and explicitly calling upon **“spirits”** to help her. This suggests all her actions in the play are evil, maybe even suggesting **all powerful women are in league with the Devil**.

Secondly, she relies on being **“unsex[ed]”** to be able **to do all the cruel and violent things she plans**. Therefore, while as a female character she serves to present femininity



<https://thirdcoastreview.com/2018/05/09/chicago-shakespeare-brings-proper-prestidigitation-macbeth/>

as powerful and violent, her language suggests the opposite. If she is successful in **“unsex[ing]”** herself, then her murderous behaviour is the **opposite of femininity**. Shakespeare either associates it with being **genderless** or being **masculine**. By linking being **“unsex[ed]”** with **“spirits”**, Shakespeare suggests **you lose your humanity if you defy your gender roles**.

Manipulation

The play centralises around Lady Macbeth’s manipulation of her

husband. She frequently **questions his masculinity** and uses this as leverage to get him to do what she wants.. When she sees him afraid, she asks, ***“Are you a man?” (3.4)*** and



“What, quite unmanned in folly?” (3.4) which **perpetuates** the idea that a man must always put on a brave face and not be **emotionally sensitive**. Although it is Lady Macbeth who convinces him, it is only possible for her to do so because Macbeth’s masculinity is so **fragile**.

Another way Lady Macbeth manipulates Macbeth is through their marriage. When she learns that he has gone against his promise she implies that she is breaking their wedding vows. She asks, **“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,” (1.7)**. By accusing him of **“break[ing] this enterprise”** to her, she accuses him of being a **bad husband** and breaking the **Code of Chivalry**. She implies she will only deem him a **“man”** if he kills Duncan, linking the **validation of his manhood with the fulfillment of her own desires**. In contrast, she calls him a **“beast”** for betraying her, **dehumanising** him and calling him a **villain** for denying her what she wants.

The Witches

A lot of the **conflict and tension surrounding gender** in the play is **concentrated** in the characters of the Witches. Typically, witches were known to be women, but in Macbeth, it is **unclear if the Witches are female or even human**. Though their characters are certainly linked to the presentation of femininity because of the **historical association between witchcraft and women**, it is debatable whether Shakespeare intends them to be female characters or **symbols of ambiguous gender**.

The Witches are an **archetype** of ‘ugly’ femininity. They represent the classic **old hag trope**, and they occupy the very **isolated edges of society**, meeting on heaths and in caves. Shakespeare supports the common notion that women who refused to meet the expectations of femininity would be rejected by society and punished for their actions.



<https://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/shows/macbeth-on-tour>

There are three of them, perhaps symbolising an **anti-holy trinity**. Their ambiguous femininity contrasts with the masculinity of the Holy Trinity. Their prophecies are the **catalyst** (cause) for the murder of Duncan and the following chaos. Therefore, like Lady Macbeth, they seem to be ‘Eve’ figures, **temptresses** who lead men to their downfalls.

The Witches’ appearances are presented as **grotesque** and **revolting** because they aren’t **purely feminine**. Banquo provides a description of them, saying they are **“so withered and so wild in their attire”**, with **“choppy finger[s]”** and **“skinny lips” (1.3)**. They **personify** the typical **Jacobean perception of witches**.



Development of the Theme

The presentation of gender **varies greatly** throughout the play. Different characters have their **own opinions** about what it means to be a man, to be a woman, or to be neither. What is obvious, though, is that **gender can't be avoided**. It comes up time and time again as characters try to **define themselves, define others, or understand what is happening to them**. Gender was viewed as a sign of **order and logic**, which is why **subverting** these gender norms was so disturbing to audiences.

'Macbeth' is arguably Shakespeare's most **misogynistic** play. All of the women, except for the supernatural witches, are dead by the end. The women are either **manipulative conspirers** who call upon spirits to **"unsex"** them, **hags** who talk directly to those spirits, or **helpless mothers** who are pointlessly slaughtered. Moreover, the main female characters all contribute to Macbeth's downfall, tempting him with power or persuading him to commit murder. If Macbeth is a retelling of the **Garden of Eden**, the Witches is the serpent and Lady Macbeth is Eve.

Furthermore, the death of Lady Macbeth and Lady Macduff suggests **women suffer from the sinful deeds of men**. Lady Macbeth is driven to madness partly by Macbeth's murder spree. At the same time, her death (or suicide) seems to signify **her feminine kindness winning over her masculine or genderless wickedness**. Similarly, Macduff's sensitivity encourages the same compassion in Malcolm, and so **these feminine qualities take the throne**.

