Power and Gender in ‘Macbeth’

‘Macbeth’ explores the role of femininity and masculinity in Macbeth’s and Lady Macbeth’s search for power, examining the extent to which the social construct of “feminine” compassion and familial love undermine power. This “feminine” identity constructed throughout the play must be understood within its historical context. At the time, women had a very limited role in society. As the burden of financial sustainment fell upon men, the women’s social position was reduced to that of a mother. Women were expected merely to be good, devoted housewives, looking tenderly after their children. Altogether, they were therefore seen as the weaker gender, submissive towards men, for while they were seen to be emotionally unstable, constantly taken by different moods, men were considered as consistent, ruthless and strong. The characters therefore appear to identify this social construct of femininity as a vulnerability, and therefore seek to de-feminize themselves in order to be able to follow their ambitions. In doing so, however, the flaws of extreme masculinity are revealed, such as in Macbeth’s downfall resulting from his excessive ambition, so that, as opposed to the clear picture of femininity as weakness and masculinity as power, the play is in fact a much more complex exploration of gender roles, where both “masculine” and “feminine” traits are present in the characters’ actions depending on their intentions. Ultimately, the plot alternates between ambition and compassion, familial love and power, breaking the dichotomy between the two.

The characters assess their different traits and attitudes in terms of femininity and masculinity, so that there is a constant clash between the masculine concepts of ambition, power, and ruthlessness, and the familial love, compassion, and kindness associated with femininity. Lady Macbeth, for instance, claims Macbeth’s weakness to be the fact that his nature “is too full o’ th’ milk of human kindness”. The motif of children and babies, frequently represented through the idea of ‘milk’, recurs throughout the play, expressing virtues such as innocence and gentleness in connection to the image of a motherly figure. Later in the play, for instance, as Lady Macbeth demands evil spirits to “Come to my woman’s breasts, / And take my milk for gall”, she is essentially giving up this innocence and motherly love in order to make herself ruthless. By presenting the quality of kindness as a maternal tendency, and therefore a feminine one, Lady Macbeth is essentially questioning Macbeth’s manliness in ascribing to his character this feminine element. In the same way, as Macduff discovers his family has been killed by Macbeth and retreats into a state of bewilderement, he exclaims that he “could play the woman with mine eyes.” Crying, and overtly expressing emotions, is therefore regarded as a feminine quality, portraying women as weak and emotionally unstable. Malcolm, instead, urges him to “dispute it like a man.” Taking strong action and defending one’s honour are therefore masculine attitudes. Without taking on these masculine traits, Macduff would not be able to fight against Macbeth, just as Macbeth is initially too gentle to have the courage to kill Duncan. If Macduff had indeed ‘play[ed] the woman’ and resigned himself to a futile lamentation, he would not have achieved his objective of killing Macbeth, suggesting that feminine traits are a vulnerability
and must therefore be renounced in order to succeed. As a result, the characters are caught in the midst of a tug-of-war between love and power - between the feminine and masculine influences within their personalities, attempting to counter the vulnerabilities that arise from either approach.

Initially, it is primarily “femininity” that seems to be hindering the characters’ efforts to come to power. Lady Macbeth, for instance, argues that “had [Duncan] not resembled / My father as he slept, I had done’t.” Her feminine instincts of familial love and compassion undermine her strength of character and ambition. However, such traits are necessary in order to kill Duncan and therefore rise to power. In this way, her inclination to respect the sanctity of family ties in not killing someone that looks like her father is an impediment in her quest for power. Macbeth struggles under such ties as well, for at first he is reluctant to kill Duncan due to the fact that he is “his kinsman”. Familial love once again disrupts the characters’ plans of rising to power, showing its importance and influence over them. They are bound by such ties, finding it highly immoral to go against them. Therefore, as family ties hold the characters back, a person that is not bound by these will have the advantage in taking power. This is the case with Macbeth. Once Macduff is told his family has been killed by him, he recognises that the fact Macbeth “has no children” allows him to commit such atrocities and therefore rise to power. The absence of family ties and therefore of feminine, familial love is what makes it possible for him to guiltlessly carry out these murders, for if he had a son, he would arguably not have the courage and ruthlessness to kill someone else’s son. As a result, it seems that only by abandoning feminine inclinations such as familial love and compassion and fully surrendering themselves to the masculine qualities of bravery and ambition can the characters fulfill their aspirations. This is due to the fact that feminine kindness seems to be, at this instance, a weakness, and makes the characters vulnerable and therefore easy victims. This could be interpreted from Macduff’s remark, for although it appears to mean that, essentially, Macbeth does not know what it is like to lose a child and therefore has no problem in killing one, it could also mean that Macduff cannot take revenge on him, for “he has no children” and therefore he could not make Macbeth suffer in the same way as he does. Both interpretations suggest that being bound by familial ties makes you weak, and therefore Macbeth is strong, for he has no descendants.

Given that it appears that, in order to achieve power, femininity has to be renounced, characters seek to de-feminize themselves. Lady Macbeth is the clearest example of this, as she gradually gives up all of her womanly qualities, attempting to replace them with strong, “masculine” attitudes instead. For instance, as Macbeth admits that he is doubting whether to kill Duncan or not, Lady Macbeth rebukes him, arguing that “I have given suck, and know / How tender ‘tis to love the babe that milks me: / I would, while it was smiling in my face, / Have pluck’d my nipple from his boneless gums, / And dash’d the brains out, had I so sworn / As you / Have done this.” She begins by setting up an innocent, motherly description, using once again the image of a pure, inoffensive baby, so that, when she goes on to kill the child, the violence and absolute cruelty of the act is highlighted through its juxtaposition with the
former maternal description. The verbs “pluck’d” and “dash’d” are violent and evocative in their sound, abruptly shattering the tenderness of the image described immediately before. In doing this, she is presenting her own masculinity of character as superior to Macbeth’s, who does not have the courage to murder Duncan, while she would willingly commit infanticide while the baby “was smiling in my face”. In this manner, she denies her femininity, replacing it with the ruthlessness that she is encouraging in Macbeth, therefore shaming him as not being enough of a man. Another example of this is the fact that, as she realises that the murder of Duncan is necessary in Macbeth’s rise to power, she implores evil spirits to “unsex me here, / And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full / Of direst cruelty!” She is fundamentally giving up her femininity to be made more like a man. However, whereas elsewhere masculine qualities were seen to be virtuous ones, such as courage and ambition, Lady Macbeth refers to “direst cruelty” instead, perhaps foreshadowing the fact that the masculine traits revered initially are in fact negative, at least when taken to an extreme like she doing, by demanding to be filled “from the crown to the toe top-full” with it.

Due to this, while for the most part it is femininity that seems to impair men and undermine manliness, masculinity itself also creates liabilities. The ambition that Macbeth requires in order to rise to power is also the cause of his doom, leading to his downfall, as he follows it to the extreme. Banquo, unlike him, “to that dauntless temper of his mind, / hath a wisdom that doth guide his valour / To act in safety.” Although he has the same quality of manly bravery that Macbeth possesses, in his case it is tempered with a gentler, feminine wisdom that ensures his safety even in following his ambitions. This suggests that perhaps it is not an absolutely masculine posture that should be sought, but rather a careful balance between masculinity and femininity, for only in this manner can the shortcomings of either sex be avoided. For instance, while power is achieved through valour and ambition, it is only through family ties that such power is maintained, so that although Macbeth becomes the king, he considers that “to be thus is nothing. / But to be safely thus.” His absolute power therefore means nothing to him without having a heir that may prolong his lineage. This idea introduces a paradox into the idea of gender roles, for while his power is only significant if he has offspring to maintain his power, such power comes from the lack of vulnerability that not having any children allows to Macbeth. The lack of offspring is therefore his greatest strength, as well as his greatest weakness. The necessity of both gender’s characteristics is thus evident, for manly bravery is needed to achieve power, but the maternal concept of family ties is needed to maintain it – both femininity and masculinity play a role when it comes to power. Macbeth alludes to this idea, by arguing that “upon my head they plac’d a fruitless crown / And put a barren scepter in my gripe.” The words ‘fruitless’ and ‘barren’ hold a connotation of infertility and the inability to bear any children. This has a historical resonance, for Queen Elizabeth, the reigning monarch at the time of Shakespeare, died childless, leading the throne to be given to a distant relation, which Shakespeare presents as Macbeth’s main preoccupation throughout the play once he has risen to power. This also links back to Lady Macbeth’s demand to the spirits to “unsex me here”, for in making such a
request she was giving up the possibility of an heir for power, sacrificing her femininity over masculinity, when in fact the lack of children subverts Macbeth’s power. The fact that, once having completely given up her femininity in the murder of Duncan, she eventually collapses into insanity shows that seeking absolute manliness was not the adequate way to achieve power.

In fact, beyond highlighting the importance of establishing a balance between both gender influences, the play goes as far as to invert such gender roles. When Malcolm tells Macduff to “Dispute it like a man”, Macduff replies that he “must also feel it as a man.” This response is one that would initially be associated with women, not men, as he is refusing to handle the situation in a manly, proactive way, before first stopping to mourn his loss. In this manner, he is pointing out that feeling and affection are not exclusive to women, but common to men as well, going against the distinct feminine and masculine identities created throughout the play and therefore breaking the dichotomy between what is perceived as masculine and feminine. Although he does ultimately decide to go after Macbeth and seek revenge, complying with the manly attitude Malcolm expected of him, he first stops a moment to lament the death of his family, so that both familial love and affection and manly courage are present in his actions, showing that masculinity and femininity can in fact be reconciled.

As a result, the overall portrayal of femininity and masculinity, in terms of familial love and ambition, respectively, initially appears to suggest that the feminine qualities of affection and compassion impede different characters from achieving power – Lady Macbeth is unable to actually kill Duncan, while Macbeth is initially uncertain in regards to whether the murder should be carried out – leading them to move away from their feminine inclinations and to seek to become manly. However, the inability of masculinity by itself in leading a person to achieve significant power also becomes evident, as Macbeth’s lack of familial ties renders his present power meaningless, and Lady Macbeth is unable to cope with such power. Therefore, while at first there seems to be a clear divide in the play between feminine influences and manly qualities, ultimately the characters in the play present a complex relationship between masculinity and femininity, so that either gender is employed in the characters’ actions at different moments, according to their intentions and objectives, leading to the impression of a certain balance throughout the play between femininity and masculinity, between familial love and power.