**Lady Macbeth’s Gender Paradox: Representations of the Masculine and the Feminine**

In Macbeth, the female body is represented in two primary ways: as demonic and as maternal. the distinction between the two collapses at key moments, especially with the character of Lady Macbeth. Lady Macbeth's divergence from the conventional depiction of early Renaissance women is a subject of scholarly discourse, with many scholars characterizing her as an external force of malevolence akin to the three witches who propel individuals towards nefarious deeds. This association is particularly emphasized in Banquo's query in Act 1, Scene 3, where he questions the gender of the witches, drawing parallels between Lady Macbeth and these supernatural entities. This connection alludes to Lady Macbeth's gender-neutral essence, aligning her with an unnatural cruelty that defies traditional patriarchal notions of femininity.

Renowned feminist scholar Simone De Beauvoir, in her analysis of femininity within patriarchal constructs, defines it as adherence to roles marked by nurturing, submission, passivity, and dependence on men—a characterization starkly contradicted by Lady Macbeth.

Lady Macbeth's departure from the submissive and meek archetype is evident in her engagement with masculine realms of political ambition and status, rather than conforming to the expected feminine roles of domesticity and reproduction. Unlike her contemporaries, Lady Macbeth displays political acumen and intellectual prowess, manipulating men to fulfill her ambitions. Despite the witches' mystical prominence, Lady Macbeth emerges as a more formidable and influential figure due to her capacity for emotional exploitation and corruption. Her ability to exert influence over Macbeth surpasses the reach of the witches, underscoring her dominance in the narrative and her role as a potent force driving the tragic events of the play. In Act 1, Scene 5 the audience is introduced to Lady Macbeth’s verbal and evil power.

*“Yet do I fear thy nature; It is too full o’ th’ milk of human kindness To catch the nearest way: thou wouldst be great, Art not without ambition, but without The illness should attend it.*

*What thou wouldst, highly, That wouldst thou holily; wouldst not play false, And yet wouldst wrongly win. Thou’ld’st have, great Glamis, That which cries, “Thus thou must do,” if thou have it,* *And that which rather thou dost fear to do, Than wishest should be undone. Hie thee hither, That I may pour my spirits in thine ear and chastise with the valor of my tongue all that impedes thee from the golden round, Which fate, and metaphysical aid doth seem To have crowned*

*withal.”*

In these lines, Lady Macbeth utilizes rhetoric to challenge traditional gender norms and question her husband's masculinity. She characterizes Macbeth as excessively kind and humane, traits traditionally associated with femininity. By linking violence with the attainment of power, she suggests that Macbeth must shed his compassionate nature to achieve his ambitions. The phrase "milk of human kindness" is used to depict kindness negatively, implying Lady Macbeth's contempt for feminine attributes.

Lady Macbeth further diminishes Macbeth's masculinity by asserting his reluctance to employ deceit, murder, and manipulation to secure the position of the Great Thane of Glamis. According to her, he requires her guidance and critique to overcome his apprehensions and progress towards his goals. These dynamics challenge the conventional patriarchal notion of male dominance, as Lady Macbeth assumes the role of the family leader, traditionally associated with masculinity. Her encouragement for Macbeth to assassinate Duncan demonstrates her as the driving force behind his actions, disrupting the expected male leadership.

In her notable monologue in Act 1, Scene 5, Lady Macbeth goes beyond merely defying gender norms; she actively rejects what the Shakespearean audience would have deemed essential femininity, particularly maternal characteristics. Her speech, laden with imagery related to female fertility and bodily functions, illustrates her fervent desire to eradicate these aspects of herself. This deliberate renunciation aligns with the paradoxical belief that, by shedding her womanhood, she can acquire the ruthless qualities associated with masculinity.

Lady Macbeth's adept manipulation of societal expectations around gender adds complexity to her character and highlights the intricate relationship between femininity and power in the patriarchal world depicted in "Macbeth."

*“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. Stop up the access and passage to remorse, That no compunctious visitings of nature Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between the effect and it! Come to my woman’s breasts, And take my milk for gall, you murd’ring ministers, Wherever in your sightless substances You wait on nature’s mischief. Come, thick night, And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell, That my keen knife see not the wound it makes, Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark to cry “Hold, hold!”*

"Unsex me here" reflects Lady Macbeth's desire to defy her inherent femininity, suggesting that she perceives her gender as a hindrance to committing the ruthless and sinful acts she deems necessary. The metaphorical plea, "Take my milk for gall," underscores her aspiration to eliminate maternal aspects within her and replace them with something corrosive and conducive to her sinister purpose. Additionally, her request to "Make thick my blood. Stop up the access and passage to remorse" references the female menstrual cycle, symbolizing her desire to halt it and, by extension, relinquish a fundamental feminine trait—the ability to reproduce.

Aligned with prevailing gender stereotypes of the time, associating femininity with softness, weakness, and sympathy, Lady Macbeth rejects these characteristics. By blocking her womb, traditionally linked to remorse and compassion, she seeks to shed conventional attributes ascribed to women. This renunciation is emphasized by repeated references to the body, highlighting her deliberate rejection of womanhood.

Her aspiration to become a supernatural entity akin to the witches reveals her desire to transcend the moral constraints imposed by her humanity. Paradoxically, her wish to abandon her femininity echoes the prevalent belief of the era, rooted in Aristotelian thinking, which considered women as incomplete or distorted versions of men. Lady Macbeth's renunciation of her femaleness, in this context, is a means to access the perceived cold and calculated nature traditionally associated with masculinity, enabling her to become a ruthless killer akin to a man.

While some argue that Lady Macbeth challenges the gender norms of her time, Shakespeare portrays her in a fascinating way by exploring the nuanced interplay between her feminine and masculine qualities. She resists easy categorization into traditional notions of femininity and masculinity, creating a complex and ambiguous character.

Cristina Leon Alfar, a Shakespeare professor at Hunter College, suggests that Lady Macbeth embodies the ideal early modern wife. She dutifully supports her husband's goals, expressing this commitment through rhetorical violence. This violence, however, arises from an excessive devotion to her role as a wife, pushing her to extreme measures in supporting Macbeth, regardless of personal or political consequences.

Lady Macbeth's monologue in Act 1, Scene 5 exemplifies her readiness to inflict cruelty on herself to assist her husband. She temporarily sets aside her femininity, fearing it might hinder Macbeth's royal ambitions. The reference to spirits implies an inner consciousness guiding malicious actions, seeking the cruelty necessary for Macbeth to commit regicide. Her dedication to the role of a wife is underscored in the lines "Come to My woman’s breasts and take my milk for gall," where she rejects her maternal duties to fully embrace her role as a wife.

Her willingness to alter both her physicality and mental state for Macbeth illustrates the extent of her commitment, portraying her as the archetypical wife—a paragon of virtue and dedication.

Furthermore, while some argue that Lady Macbeth's use of rhetorical violence challenges the expectation of submissive femininity, it can be contended that she employs a form of violence rooted in feminine traits to enhance her family lineage and influence in Scotland. Instead of resorting to traditional masculine forms of violence like murder or physical aggression, she leverages her feminine skills—particularly her eloquence and persuasive abilities. This feminine capacity is evident in Act 1, Scene 5, where Lady Macbeth demonstrates her gift for gab.

*“Hie thee hither, That I may pour my spirits in thine ear And chastise with the valor of my tongue All that impedes thee from the golden round, Which fate and metaphysical aid doth seem To have crowned withal.”*

Lady Macbeth employs verbal harm, including insults, mockery, and emasculation, to achieve her objectives. While her use of rhetorical violence challenges the expectation of women being "silent and meek," it aligns with the existing hierarchical power structures where women are perceived as incapable of resorting to physical violence. Her utilization of rhetorical violence to prompt Macbeth's actions stems from her role as a highly supportive wife.

As the play progresses, Lady Macbeth's femininity becomes more pronounced, especially after Duncan's murder. Initially deeply involved in the crime, Macbeth gradually isolates her from his decision-making. In Act 3, Scene 5 when she questions him about Banquo and Fleance, Macbeth states “Be innocent of the knowledge, dearest chuck, / Till thou applaud the deed “ implying that her knowledge should remain innocent until the deed is approved. This shift suggests that, as Macbeth embraces his masculine power, Lady Macbeth's role reverts to the stereotypical female, diminishing her leadership to that of a co-conspirator and observer, leading to a loss of power and purpose.

Macbeth's growing alienation leads Lady Macbeth to madness due to the guilt of murder. The very qualities—guilt, kindness, and fear—that she had ridiculed and emasculated Macbeth for throughout the play now consume her, accentuating her womanliness. In Act 5, Scene 1, she acknowledges her womanhood by expressing concern for the wife of the Thane of Fife, fearing a similar fate. “The Thane of Fife has a Wife. Where is she now?” This marks a transformation in Lady Macbeth's character. Initially dismissing her femininity, she held sway over Macbeth. However, as remorse takes hold, she surrenders control, ultimately taking her own life and becoming inconsequential to the now-dominant Macbeth.

Ultimately, Lady Macbeth's journey from a powerful and influential force to a tragic figure speaks to the complexities of power dynamics, morality, and identity within the confines of a patriarchal framework. Her constant transformations reflect the delicate balance between embracing and rejecting established norms, offering a poignant commentary on the multifaceted nature of gendered identity.