Lady Macbeth and Gertrude: A Study in Gender

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LADY MACBETH AND GERTRUDE: A STUDY IN GENDER

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By
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The detailed examination of two of Shakespeare's female leads, Lady Macbeth and Gertrude, is designed to determine whether or not these particular characters were free from the confines of their society, or if they were content within its oppressive grasp. A combination of Feminist Criticism and New Historicism reveals that Lady Macbeth and Gertrude did not overstep the bounds of their gender, but in fact were suppressed within them.

The limited rights and freedoms of a woman during the Renaissance is heavily discussed, and aids in giving the reader a vivid impression of Lady Macbeth's and Gertrude's subjugation. As Renaissance women were considered and treated inferior to their husbands in all respects, so are these two characters. Once the supposed driving force behind her husband's actions, Lady Macbeth makes a swift but devastating departure after Macbeth expels her from both his personal and political matters. No longer needing his wife to appease his conscience, Macbeth finds his own aptitude for evil. Torn between her roles as a wife and mother, Gertrude forfeits her happiness to please her overemotional son. Long before her actual death, Gertrude sacrifices a part of her identity to meet Hamlet's expectations. Both women relinquish their hopes and dreams to fulfill those of the men around them. Their blinded selflessness and misplaced devotion result in their ultimate undoing.
Though the typical reader of *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* sometimes considers these particular female characters to be strong, bold, and selfish, the values of Shakespeare's era and his actual text suggest otherwise. The playwright's time was marked by a bitter gender struggle that pervaded all areas of Renaissance life, including his own work. Upon first glance, Lady Macbeth and Gertrude might come across as women who were strikingly independent. Throughout the progression of the plays, however, both women take a backseat to more important matters, such as politics and war. Even their deaths do not truly belong to them, as they seem to serve as mere asides to the inevitable "manly" action. Striving to meet the expectations of the men they loved, Lady Macbeth and Gertrude lose themselves in the process.
Shakespeare's Women: Confined or Liberated?

Much discussion has arisen throughout the literary world concerning William Shakespeare and his female characters. Many literary critics agree that these unusual women are well worth mentioning, but they sometimes disagree about what is most noteworthy about them. Are they simply reflections of the cultural world in which Shakespeare lived? Or, was Shakespeare trying to go against society's treatment of women by creating female leads that would challenge the status quo? To grasp the true meaning of "Shakespeare's woman," one must explore the Renaissance period and the gender struggle that enveloped it. This era was marked by an all-encompassing anxiety that pushed the male population to vehemently keep a hold on what was "rightfully" theirs: their women.

Since one may gain much from setting the women in the plays in their context, a combination of Feminist Criticism and New Historicism will be employed in this paper. Critic Claire McEachern asserts that "New Historicism [. . .] does move beyond a strictly mimetic version of the text-context relationship to offer a more comprehensive [. . .] sense of a text's location in history; and it is this commitment to history from which feminism might profit" (271). Together, New Historicism and Feminist Criticism are modes of investigation that will give a realistic glimpse of what a woman's life was like during the Renaissance, and how William Shakespeare sought to capture it on stage.

While studying the legendary playwright, it is easy to fall into one of two enthusiastic schools of thought. On the one hand, some researchers declare that Shakespeare was a rebel who stood up for women's rights by confronting society with assertive female characters. On the other hand, other researchers believe that
Shakespeare wrote women as they actually were: confined, restricted, and controlled, which would lead the reader to assume that Shakespeare was a mere accomplice to society's oppression. Either way, critics seem to be torn: "Advocates of both proto-feminist and a patriarchal Shakespeare have posited a mimetic/deterministic relationship between art and society--the text is either an innocent mirror of cultural process or the no-less-idealized agent of patriarchal ideology" (McEachern 270). Both sides of the research spectrum play tug-a-war with the reader. Thus, it is necessary to look to the past for answers. Although it is impossible to know Shakespeare's true intentions, one, by way of history, can reach a logical hypothesis.

In her book, Still Harping on Daughters: Women and Drama in the Age of Shakespeare, Lisa Jardine also mentions the division of Shakespearean scholars. Jardine says that, considering the two extremely different interpretations of Shakespeare's women (menaces to society or victims of society's chauvinism), it is no wonder that they appear "warped and distorted" (3). The author goes further to define the non-aggressive and aggressive strands of Shakespearean study:

The non-aggressive approach takes it that Shakespeare did his best to be a true reflecting glass, but that contemporary society's limited understanding of women combined with his own male viewpoint have skewed the resulting picture. [. . .] The aggressive strand sees Shakespeare's work as out-and-out sexist, and sets out to uncover his prejudices to the reader. (4)

Evidently, one must consider Shakespeare either a hero for women's rights or a suppressor of women. I refuse to be so easily classified. Others are also reluctant to rush into a decision. Like McEachern, Jardine insinuates that the researcher will have
difficulty finding a middle ground. In fact, after years of historical research, Jardine maintains "Shakespeare's plays neither mirror the social scene, nor articulate explicitly any of the varied contemporary views on 'the women question'" (6). If this is indeed true, then what is all the fuss about?

Jardine may have an answer. Due to the overwhelming attention that Shakespeare's female characters have attracted, she concludes that our scholarly obsession has little to do with Shakespeare, and more to do with the gender and social struggle of Shakespeare's time. Specifically, she refers to the overwhelming male anxiety typical of the period: "The strong interest in women shown by Elizabethan and Jacobean drama does not in fact reflect newly improved social conditions, and greater possibility for women, but rather is related to the patriarchy's unexpressed worry about the great social changes which characterize the period" (6). Apparently, men became somewhat anxious when their status as the superior gender was threatened or questioned. Unfortunately for them, their manhood was under scrutiny throughout the Renaissance. As a result, men repeatedly felt the need to reassert their control over women, and to extinguish any sign of rebellion on behalf of the female population. What is especially shocking is that they sometimes further suppressed women under the guise of liberating them - talk about the ultimate Trojan Horse!

As the reader will learn, Renaissance men painstakingly set out to demolish the female independence and autonomy they so feared. Understandably, this built-up gender tension affected Shakespeare and his writings. Two of his characters that clearly reflect the male anxiety predominant in the playwright's era are Macbeth's Lady Macbeth and Hamlet's Gertrude. Lady Macbeth seems to be a wicked puppet-master, pulling the
strained strings within her weak husband, moving him in the direction of multiple murders. The widow Gertrude comes across as a woman who desires both physical and emotional comfort, and is unhesitant to go after both, despite the fact that her actions push her fragile son to violence. Both women, to the Elizabethan audience, would have served as examples of what happens when "girls go wild." Stronger than their husbands, they pollute and corrupt the minds of the men around them.

Both Lady Macbeth and Gertrude show signs of independence, intellect, and sexuality, which would have made them appear sinful and dangerous in the eyes of Renaissance men. Many scholars have concluded that these particular female characters overstepped the bounds of their gender, and as a result, caused chaos and turmoil for the otherwise invulnerable male leads. In my thesis I hope to prove, however, that Lady Macbeth and Gertrude had no power and authority, and were in fact dependent upon the very men they supposedly set out to destroy. The only control they ever had existed solely in the imaginations of the men they loved, and as independent characters, they are emotional, compromising, and subservient. Far from breaking through the barriers of their gender, I hope to show that both women repeatedly reinforced their femininity through their speeches and actions. Finally, Lady Macbeth and Gertrude were typical of many Renaissance women, thus proving that Shakespeare, despite his many talents, failed to write women, at least in these two tragedies, who were free from the confines of their gender.

Chapter one examines the lives and times of a typical woman of the Jacobean period. The chapter's focus is on a woman's rights in the fields of education, marriage, and inheritance, all of which showed initial promise during the Renaissance, but
ultimately aided in women's oppression. Also included are men's unrealistic and fearful perceptions of women's minds and bodies, which was particularly apparent in the fields of mental health and childbirth. Finally, this chapter offers a glimpse of the dark side of the period, by divulging the methods of torture used upon the women who were unfortunate enough to be labeled *shrews* or *scoolds*. Overall, the chapter covers a woman's limited opportunities and possible perils, confirming that the Renaissance women were undoubtedly suppressed by their husbands, fathers, doctors, preachers, and communities.

Chapter two deals directly with the ferocity and tenacity of Lady Macbeth. First, I examine her role as a shrew, and Macbeth as the victim of her demeaning and abusive remarks. Due to her bullying behavior, Macbeth caves under the pressure of her ambition, it seems. The next section returns to the Renaissance's perceptions of women, and their unfounded fear of women's sexuality. Included are passages that exhibit Lady Macbeth's sexual references, and the dramatic effect they have on her husband's behavior. This section also covers Macbeth's fear of the mother, and how he tries to escape his wife's maternal grasp. The final section sets out to find the less obvious but more realistic side of Lady Macbeth. I explore her role as a supportive and concerned wife, ambitious and driven only to fulfill her husband's deadly desires. After her husband becomes consumed with his own ambition, she is shut out of his world, only allowed to converse with him in her sleep.

Chapter three is devoted to the incestuous widow Gertrude. The first section weighs in on the debate of Gertrude's fidelity. I briefly discuss Renaissance society's rules for widows and remarriage, and how a widow was considered to have committed
adultery on her late husband by marrying her second. I also examine crucial parts of the play that point both to and away from Gertrude's adultery while King Hamlet was alive. In the next section I analyze Gertrude's remarriage in terms of Hamlet's jilted inheritance, and question whether or not Gertrude married Claudius for the sole purpose of denying Hamlet the throne. I discuss the terms of a widow's quarantine, and show how Gertrude used it to her son's disadvantage. The third section returns to a theme covered in the previous chapter: fear of a woman's maternal and sexual qualities. I explore Hamlet's fevered interest with his mother's sexuality, and his fear of life without his father to protect him from a predominantly maternal world. Finally, the last section uncovers the divided Gertrude, one who is void of sexual dominance and treachery, but is filled with a desire to please both her son and her new husband. In her attempt to be the woman they both envision, she loses herself, and until her death, exists only in bits and pieces.
Did Shakespeare's female characters shake society, or did they merely reinforce society's ongoing repression of women? To find an answer, I will explore a woman's role in the following avenues: education, marriage, legal rights, public perception, and male anxiety. I will end my introduction with a brief discussion on women's rebellion and punishment. My research will act as a springboard into a discussion about two of Shakespeare's controversial women: Lady Macbeth and Gertrude. By finding a woman's place in society, and a man's feelings about it, I intend to determine if these particular characters broke the mold, or if they simply reflected society's subjugation of women.

**Education: A Woman's Road to Assured Subservience**

Critics often disagree about whether or not education offered to women during the Renaissance liberated or stifled them. Of course, one can find data to support either conclusion. The answer lies in which Renaissance writer the historian chooses to believe:

Authors like Erasmus and Vives, who have in mind a readership of [...] noblewomen, [...] suggest that the daughters of the nobility should share the new cultural treasures first extended to their brothers. [...] For authors like Stubbes and Knox [...] opinionated women symbolize the negative outcome of too much indulgence of the weaker sex, which in turn confirms a general breakdown of 'law and order'. (Jardine 39)

This passage seems to suggest what many scholars suspect: that women were allowed to be educated *to an extent*, meaning they were only encouraged to learn what could improve them as *wives*, but by no means were encouraged to learn anything that would put them on the same playing level as men. The Trojan Horse made its first appearance
by way of Protestant Reformers who ordained that women should be able to read the scripture and participate in their own salvation: "Protestant reformers stress the democratic impact of religious change: even women and low-born will have access to the Scripture" (Jardine 48). Women were finally allowed to speak about religious matters and join in philosophical debates. What freedom! What they failed to mention, however, was that a woman who opted to do such a thing "could be effortlessly condemned as 'monstrous' and against nature [. . .]" (50). Women were now equipped with the knowledge of the Bible, but could not arm themselves with it to voice their opinions.

Despite the restrictions, one could argue that the emancipation of women had begun. After all, during this era education was considered much as it is now: a powerful tool that could better one's position in society. The reader must keep in mind, however, that women were not afforded the same education as men. Instead of learning about the world of politics, women were permitted to have a humanist education, which enforced the importance of arts, languages, and domestic responsibilities. What is most noteworthy, however, is that "charm' and 'femininity' are of the essence of humanistic studies" (Jardine 52). Once again, women were offered what seemed to be a remarkable opportunity, but were hindered by it. Even though the study of literature and language sounds promising, it really did not grant women any major strongholds. Also, not all women were included in this new educational movement: "Education, in the early modern period, was only available to high-ranking women; and education for these women was regarded as an ornament - an adornment along with beauty and manners, needlepoint and music" (Jardine 51).
The men of the period, of course, were not threatened by a new wave of theory regarding women's education as long as it made them better wives. Despite humanism's ambitious implications, the educational movement was no more than an elite charm school for the wealthy. In fact, one could conclude that "humanist education conveniently distracted able women from any studies which might have led them to notice that change was opening up possibilities for emancipation in social and political fields" (Jardine 52).

What the reader learns about the educated women of the Renaissance seems rather disheartening. Either these women were fooled into believing that they were receiving something equal to men, or they were conscious of the fact that their place was in the home and no amount of education was ever going to get them out of it. A few courageous women chose not to settle into domestic life, and continued with their humanist educations. These women usually lived lonely lives; they were educated but had no avenues to pursue:

The learned woman of the Renaissance received no degrees. She wrote no truly great works. She exerted no great influence on emerging trends in the history of ideas. She was probably unhappy. [...] men applauded, of course, their [women's] retreat to quiet studies apart from male society. There, in solitude, they were both magnificent and chained. [...] Thus confined, it is no wonder they won no battles. (King qtd. in Jardine 58)

Marriage: The Ultimate Domination

Since education did not open any doors for women (they barely pushed them ajar), one can easily see why a woman was eager to get married, even if it was under less
than ideal circumstances. Unfortunately, a woman of the Renaissance depended heavily on a man. If she did not marry young, she would be labeled a spinster and live the remainder of her life under gossip and ridicule. A woman's only alternative to marriage and spinsterhood was the nunnery, which probably did not appeal to many young women. Marriage, however, did not always have to be a prison: "A number of clerics and moralists [of the period] do stress the desirability of intelligent give-and-take between man and woman within marriage" (Jardine 39). What the clerics and moralists wrote, though, did not always represent reality. For instance, the men of the Renaissance relied heavily on the scientific "facts" of Aristotle. As one may already guess, the renowned philosopher was not the quintessential champion for women's rights. He wrote:

Woman is more compassionate than man, more easily moved to tears, at the same time more jealous, more querulous, more apt to scold and strike. [. . .] more prone to despondency and less hopeful than man, more void of shame or self-respect, more false of speech, more deceptive, and of more retentive memory. (qtd. in Jardine 39)

Historical documents imply that no woman could be completely trusted, and had to be under constant watch by her husband. Women, however, were considered a necessary component to any man. A popular writer read during the renaissance, Cornelius A. Lapide, noted that "woman is an excellent ornament of man since she is granted to man not only to help him to procreate children, and administer the family, but also in possession and, as it were, in dominion, over which man may exercise his jurisdiction and authority" (qtd. in Jardine 40). It seems that a woman could be a part of a
successful marriage, as long as she understood that she was first and foremost her
husband's supporter, caregiver, and inferior.

So what could the Renaissance woman expect from matrimony? Obviously, much of that depended on her husband. A wife could try to be "good," but ultimately, the marriage was only as happy as the husband wished it to be. Since the marriage was not her own, the Renaissance woman had little to do with its success or failure. Her role was very clear: "The wife performed a number of clearly allotted tasks (including reproduction), and would be better or worse off depending on whether she became the wife of a good- or ill-natured husband. [. . .] But the quality of the relationship lay only minimally within her control" (Jardine 42).

A few women rejected subordination and took control of their own households. Some husbands probably welcomed the wife taking charge of the domestic responsibilities. It is likely, though, that these husbands did not readily admit this to others, considering the fact that their manhood was on the line: "All too easily, an equal share in household decisions could be interpreted as a female licence - the licence of the scold, the shrew, the woman on top, an ever-present threat of the 'world turned upside down'" (Jardine 48). Men were not exactly living the high life in a world of suppressed women. It was, after all, their responsibility to keep their women in line. If they failed to do so, others viewed them as womanish or weak, and they sometimes suffered grave humiliation by the townspeople.

The Legal Status and Rights of Women: Momentary Power

Despite the restrictions of a married woman, one might be pleasantly surprised by the "freedom" of certain single noblewomen and widows during the Renaissance period.
In fact, many women during Shakespeare’s era were not married, and for the most part, managed their own affairs (Greenblatt 10). Women, depending on their social standing, often had rights that were considered impressive *for the age*. If one compares the rights of English women to the rights of other women throughout Europe, one could argue that these particular women were indeed emancipated:

Foreign visitors were struck by their [English women’s] relative freedom [. . .] by the fact that respectable women could venture unchaperoned into the streets and attend the theatre. Single women [. . .] could, if they were full of age, inherit and administer land, make a will, sign a contract, possess property. [. . .] But married women had no such rights under the common law. (Greenblatt 9-10)

Essentially, a married woman signed her life away to her husband. She had no autonomy over her affairs. The only women who could move freely about were most likely wealthy; one should not assume that poor women possessed property, attended theatre, or inherited anything of real value. The young noblewomen and the older widows probably enjoyed a life completely unknown to the typical Renaissance woman.

Surprisingly, during the marriage proceedings, a woman could momentarily possess power. Since men were sometimes more attracted to a dowry than to the woman, a woman could entice or repel him based on what she was worth. The laws of primogeniture stated that property from the father automatically transferred to the oldest son, but that was more of an idea than a reality: "Demographic studies indicate that [. . .] some 40 percent of marriages failed to produce a son, and in such circumstances fathers often left their land to their daughters, rather than to brothers, nephews, or male cousins"
Based on this evidence, it would seem that certain women were not always forced into marriage for financial security.

Shakespeare's era, though, was not marked by unmarried women who owned acres as far as the eye could see. Often, single daughters and widows were used as mere pawns by the men in their families. Although widows were encouraged to live chaste lives in memory of their dead husbands, they were sometimes forced into remarriage: "[. . .] the widows of wealthy men were married off again with quite undignified haste where those responsible for them considered it financially advantageous to the line to do so" (Jardine 83). The Elizabethan family desired to keep the wealth and property in the family. If both things had to be temporarily handed over to a woman to assure that reality, it was considered a reasonable sacrifice for the next male in line: "[. . .] women are potentially powerful, albeit within a basically patrilinear system - they intrude and intervene where necessary to amend the simple law of male inheritance, either as subsidiary heirs, or in marriage settlements" (Jardine 84-85). It would seem that women were not that powerful after all.

What is particularly shocking about this blatant manipulation of women is the fact that a woman's inheritance right was the most powerful weapon she had. After all, the reader must remember that "the economic freedom of Elizabethan and Jacobean women far exceeded their political and social freedom. [. . .] women who asserted their views too vigorously [. . .] came to be regarded as a threat to public order, to be dealt with by the local authorities" (Greenblatt 10). Even though a woman might own property, she still could not go to the courthouse steps and express her dissatisfaction about anything
without suffering severe repercussions. The modes of punishment for a rebellious "scold" will soon be discussed.

*The Perception of Women: Mad Creatures*

As one might assume, the restriction on women in their everyday lives was often trying to the mind and body. To better understand the physical and mental health of both men and women, one can consult Michael MacDonald's book, *Mystical Bedlam: Madness Anxiety, and Healing in Seventeenth Century England*. MacDonald studies the records of Dr. Richard Napier, who treated approximately sixty thousand patients between the years of 1597 to 1634 (Neely 87). What is most interesting about MacDonald's research is that it uncovers the "medical" proof of gender anxiety, especially the strain it put on women, who visited the doctor more than men: "Women consulted Napier for all causes more often than did men [...] they consulted him more for mental disorders than men [...] and reported suffering almost twice as much stress as men" (Neely 87).

What is more distressing than the doctor's charts is his analysis of the patients. In his practice, "men are more likely to be designated melancholy. [...] Women more often "take grief," "grieve," and are "troubled in mind"" (Neely 88). One can already see the stereotype begin to take shape. It was not suitable to consider a man mentally ill, so he was labeled as somewhat "melancholy." The woman, meanwhile, had an array of words to describe the full extent of her madness. Moreover, according to hospital records, Napier often considered female patients more "mad" than their male counterparts:

The designations for the men speak to their administrative status; they are termed "fitt to bee kepte," "not fitt to bee kepte," [...] none of them are
called "mad," but many of the women are; they are explicitly characterized as "very ill," "madd," "very madd," "a mad woman," [ . . . ] These unconsciously chosen designations suggest a tendency to identify the women with their illnesses and the men, instead, with their institutional disposition. (Neely 89)

It seems as though it was not politically correct to find madness in men. After all, if the doctor recognized madness in a male patient, then he would also be capable of recognizing it in himself. It was safer for men to assume that they were fixable; only women had severe mental problems, which also conveniently explained away any bad behavior. For example, "Napier [ . . . ] viewed wives who wanted to leave their brutal husbands [ . . . ] as mentally unstable and was severe with them" (Neely 94). It seems that even the medical field was propelled to subdue women at all cost. Any sign of rebellion could be contributed to "mad" female tendencies.

**Male Anxiety: A Constant Battle**

As I stated before, men had power over women, but they often had to pay a hefty price for it. Even though women were considered the inferior sex, men obviously felt intimidated and threatened by them. It is no coincidence that witches (usually women and often midwives) were feared during this period more than any other. The female body held awe over men mostly because they were sexually drawn to it, but also because it could do things that seemed magical or wicked, like giving birth:

Renaissance belief [ . . . ] reinforced the association of magic with the maternal body, constructing that body as especially unpredictable and difficult to control: woman was the "disorderly" sex, the site of a
bewildering and often contradictory array of special dangers and powers, associated variously with her womb and its appetites, her milk and menstrual blood. (Willis 111)

Men were not permitted in the birthing room, which led many to conjecture about what the female body was capable of, and what services the midwives provided. Midwives were often accused of witchcraft because they had personal knowledge of the birthing process. It is little wonder that "historically [...] the childbed would become the threshold of male science, where a tense struggle was to place between doctor and midwife for authority over delivery" (R. Wilson 127).

Men were also intimidated by women because it was considered "unmanly" for a man to show lust for a woman: "Renaissance gendered it [lust] feminine, attributed more of it to women, and regarded excessive lust in men as a mark of effeminacy" (Rackin 74-75). It must have been torture for men to constantly hide their passion, for fear of being perceived as "womanish" by their peers. Attraction to women was also frowned upon because the female was the inferior gender, and it was a sign of weakness to succumb to a woman's suggestive powers. Much of this thought affected all areas of the Renaissance, even biological terminology:

[...] women were regarded as appetitive creatures, easily enslaved by bodily lusts and irrational passions. Incapable of rational self-government, they were associated with the lower parts of the body. Male authority resided in the higher regions. The king was head of the state; the husband was the head of the household. (Rackin 76-77)
Women were perceived as potential out of control sex fiends. Men were not to stoop to their level. Therefore, it was common for a man to resent and fear a woman's body because of the feelings it aroused in him, and the possible consequences.

Rebellion and Punishment: Putting the Woman in Her Place

Understandably, some women during the Shakespearean era were less than enthused with their treatment. Many courageous females rebelled against their male-dominated society. Ultimately, their rebellion made the men of the era go to drastic measures to silence them. It is true that Shakespeare's society was going through many social changes, and women were not always at the forefront of these. One cannot deny, however, their particular part in turning the Elizabethan world upside down.

One form of rebellion for women in the Renaissance was to don a man's dress. Crossdressing was not something unheard of in Shakespeare's day; after all, young boys played female characters on stage. Women, perhaps, saw this as an opportunity to experiment with their own sexuality and image. Their experimentation, however, "threatened a normative social order based upon strict principles of hierarchy and subordination, of which women's subordination to man was a chief instance [. . .]" (Howard 418). Since women discovered an area of expression that made them appear as men, men took the defensive. A woman who crossdressed was often accused of being a whore, and men concluded that such a woman's "sexual desire was both a mark of her inferiority and a justification for her control by men" (Howard 424). The woman's rebellion, therefore, eventually turned into another reason for her subordination.

Though it was considered bold and unspeakable, crossdressing did not make the Renaissance men as nervous as their wives' natural sinful instrument: their tongues. It
was the ability of speech that many women used to their advantage, and it was the most common reason for their severe punishment. Throughout the Elizabethan age, men sought to silence women; they often claimed that history had taught them to do so:

Through Eve's open mouth [...] sin and disorder entered the world. [...] if Eve's sin [...] through employment of her tongue is [...] imagined as the usurpation of the male phallic instrument and the male signifier of language, the images of woman speaking and woman's tongue become freighted with heavy psychic baggage. Perpetually guilty, perpetually disorderly, perpetually seductive, Eve and her descendants become the problem that society must control. (Boose 204)

Many women who used their tongue freely and offensively were termed "scolds."

According to historical records kept by William Sheppard, "a scold in a legal sense is a troublesome and angry woman, who by her brawling and wrangling amongst her Neighbors, doth break the publick Peace, and beget, cherish and increase publick Discord" (qtd. in Boose 186). Today, historians have concluded, considering the original source, that a scold was probably "any woman who verbally resisted or flouted authority publicly and stubbornly enough to challenge the underlying dictum of male rule" (Boose 189). Honestly, a woman who did less than this was probably often labeled a scold, if someone in the town had something against her and wished to see her suffer.

As one may imagine, scolds were severely punished for their lack of respect to their husbands and their communities. Though one commonly considers the Renaissance a period of enlightenment, the torturous devices that were invented and used for scolds suggest otherwise. The first mode of punishment, a cucking stool, "was a chair-like
apparatus into which the offender was ordered strapped and then, to the jeers of the crowd, was dunked several times in water over her head - water that might be a local river but was equally likely to have been the local horsewash pond" (Boose 185). This mechanism was most likely used to embarrass and discomfort the offender, instead of causing her actual harm. The scold, however, was not alone in her humiliation. First, the townspeople would strip the scold and her husband from their bed. While the scold was on her way to the stool, the “henpecked” husband would be forced to ride backward on a donkey while another man who impersonated his wife beat him with a ladle (Greenblatt 10). Only the woman received a ride on the infamous cucking stool, though, and she would forever remember her experience on it.

A more severe and shameful punishment was the bridle. The bridle was allegedly illegal, but it makes appearances throughout history nonetheless. Women who were unfortunate enough to experience a bridle "were yanked through town, a lead rope attached to the metal bridle locked firmly around their heads, their tongues depressed by a two-to-three inch metal piece called a "'gag'" (Boose 205). The sheer pain of this device achieved physical agony, but the end result assured a woman's mental anguish, as well as her discomfort: "[...] finally the offending shrew would be tied up and made to stand in the town square, an object to be pissed on and further ridiculed at will" (Boose 205). It is easy to understand why most women allowed society to oppress them; the alternative was too frightening to entertain.

Based on the knowledge I have gathered about womanhood during Shakespeare's era, I will now put his most spellbinding female leads, Lady Macbeth and Gertrude, in the spotlight, where they belong. Using my historical research, I will determine whether or
not Shakespeare created truly aggressive women, or if he merely reinforced an inherent stereotype.
Chapter Two: Lady Macbeth

Undoubtedly one of Shakespeare's most infamous female characters, Lady Macbeth is, perhaps, the most striking of Shakespeare's characters to perform on stage because she symbolizes everything that made men of the Renaissance uncomfortable: a woman who was assertive, intelligent, and most important, sexually domineering. Despite his heroism in battle, Macbeth cannot find the adequate courage to stand up to his wife before she sends him in a tailspin from which he will never recover. Alas, she will also plunge from greatness to despair. Long before her demise, however, this "meager" woman manages to propel her husband to the throne, and assures the slaughter of many innocents along the way.

The Cuckold and Her Innocent Victim

Many critics focus on the strong, masculine qualities of Lady Macbeth, which, during the Renaissance era, would have made her a shrew in the eyes of others. For this reason, it is easy to cast Macbeth in the role of the naïve, innocent, and manipulated, and Lady Macbeth in the role of the sophisticated, sinister manipulator. After all, in the first act of the play the reader immediately witnesses Lady Macbeth's assertive entrance, judging what she believes to be her husband's meek character. Once Lady Macbeth is informed of the witches' prophecy, and her husband's potential chance at the throne, she fears that Macbeth is too weak to finish what has been started for him: "Yet I do fear thy nature./ It is too full o' th' milk of human kindness / To catch the nearest way" (1.5.14-16). Lady Macbeth is chastising her husband for his feminine qualities; "milk of human kindness" can be associated with the breast milk of a mother. It is this softness that Lady Macbeth wishes to eradicate from her husband's personality: "Lady Macbeth knows that
love, compassion, pity, remorse are all emotions which Macbeth has in his nature and which she must repress in him in order for Macbeth to carry on with the "bloody" business" (Kimbrough 180). Despite his valor in combat, Lady Macbeth seems convinced that Macbeth will cower away from the task at hand: murdering Duncan.

Understanding the nature of her husband's spirit, his wife resolves to become the man she believes he cannot. A shrew was often known as the one who "wore the pants" in the relationship, thus becoming the authoritative male. Lady Macbeth calls on deadly spirits (which immediately makes the reader associate her with the witches) to "unsex" her, not so she will become androgynous, but so she will be without feminine attributes, leaving her only with masculine: "Come to my woman's breasts, /And take my milk for gall [. . .]" (1.5.45-46). Hastily, the reader forms an opinion of Lady Macbeth based on her attempted communion with the supernatural, which, during the Elizabethan era, was considered an evil enterprise. Lady Macbeth is no longer a Lady; in the reader's mind, she becomes something other: "In rejecting that which she has been made to think is weak and womanly within her in order to become cruel and manly, she moves away from her humanity toward the demonic, [. . .]" (Kimbrough 181).

Soon after Lady Macbeth's "unsexing," her husband appears on the scene. In his letter, Macbeth addressed his wife as his "dearest partner of greatness." Upon seeing Lady Macbeth, he warmly refers to her as his "dearest love." It is clear by his language, both written and verbal, that he considers his wife to be a worthy equal: "Macbeth [. . .] shows himself remarkably free from the chauvinistic attitudes that dominate his society. It certainly seems his intent to share power with her [Lady Macbeth] and establish a kind of joint-rule that would fly in the face of custom" (Asp 159). The reader must assume,
however, that Lady Macbeth has been historically aggressive throughout their relationship. Perhaps it is this manly side of his wife that Macbeth considers worthy enough to be his equal in the political and social world, where a typical woman of Shakespeare's day was always excluded.

Once the couple is face-to-face, talk of murder ensues. By all outward appearances, Lady Macbeth is the first to mention the murder of Duncan. The reader sometimes forgets the fact that Macbeth has been contemplating Duncan's murder ever since he heard the witches' prophecy. Proof of his own murderous thoughts can be found in his reaction to Malcolm's new title:

The Prince of Cumberland - that is a step
On which I must fall down or else o'erleap,
For in my way it lies. Stars, hide your fires,
Let not light see my black and deep desires;
The eye wink at the hand; yet let that be
Which the eye fears, when it is done, to see. (1.4.49-53)

Although the previous passage does not shock the reader as Lady Macbeth's plea for a change of gender, Macbeth is essentially asking for the same thing as his wife: the courage to fulfill the witches' prophecy. Macbeth does not call on spirits to aid him; he depends on his own ambition to carry him through the ordeal. Like many tragic heroes, his ambition will most likely be his tragic flaw.

Nonetheless, the reader usually accredits Lady Macbeth with planting the seed of evil in her husband's vulnerable psyche. When Macbeth informs her of the King's coming to the castle, and his plans for leaving the next day, she boldly asserts that
Duncan will not live so long: "O never / Shall sun that morrow see" (1.5.58-59). Macbeth lets his wife be the first to speak the unspeakable, even though his short, cryptic remarks about Duncan's arrival give way to his own deadly thoughts. Macbeth's conscience, however, will benefit from her bold assertion: "Having allowed her to take the verbal lead, he may now attribute all initiative to her" (Dash 164). Lady Macbeth then instructs her husband on his behavior when Duncan arrives:

[. . .] look like the innocent flower,

But be the serpent under't. He that's coming

Must be provided for, and you shall put

This night's great business into my dispatch, [. . .]. (1.5.63-66)

Lady Macbeth gives her husband the assurance he is secretly looking for. She will instigate the unthinkable; he will be allowed to play the innocent.

Unfortunately, Macbeth wavers in his confidence. When the time for Duncan's murder is imminent, he informs his "partner of greatness" that the deal is off: "We will proceed no further in this business" (1.7.31). The business he refers to, of course, is the slaughter of the unsuspecting Duncan. During this portion of the play, the reader's perception of Lady Macbeth as the shrew or cuckold is usually solidified. Once Macbeth questions their actions, Lady Macbeth instantly finds a weak spot she knows exists in all men: the ego. She cleverly and manipulatively hits Macbeth where it hurts by repeatedly referring to his manhood, or lack thereof:

Art thou afeard

To be the same in thine own act and valour

As thou art in desire? Wouldst thou have that
Which thou esteem'st the ornament of life,
And live a coward in thine own esteem, [. . .]. (1.7.39-43)

What man is not going to be threatened when his wife calls him a coward?

Understandably, Macbeth feels the need to prove himself, even if it means Duncan's life.

Evidently, Lady Macbeth's idea of manhood, and womanhood for that matter, is completely warped. She asks the spirits to "unsex" her because she believes a woman cannot commit acts of cruelty. In her mind, only a man can carry out unspeakable horror:

"Manhood for her [Lady Macbeth] consists in ambition, resolute action, physical courage, and aggression in seeking one's own ends and overcoming opposition. [. . .] Lady Macbeth [. . .] commits him [Macbeth] to the role not of manhood but of what she imagines manhood should be" (Harding 246). Macbeth will take on the male persona Lady Macbeth envisions for him. Nevertheless, it will be Lady Macbeth, not her Lord, who will pay the heftiest price for it.

Despite her shrewish and masculine attitude, Lady Macbeth constantly reminds the reader of the femininity she claims to despise. When Macbeth attempts to renege on their original plan, she makes it painfully clear she is still a woman, even when she is in the midst of playing the part of the man:

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 plucked my nipple from his boneless gums

And dashed the brains out, had I so sworn

As you have done to this. (1.7.54-58)
While her image is horrifying, it serves as a strong reminder of Lady Macbeth's maternal qualities:

Lady Macbeth's femininity is an essential feature of the theme, and any impression that she has cast it off cannot survive more than a casual reading of the play. [...] when she upbraids Macbeth with shrinking from what he has sworn to do she chooses the murder of her suckling babe as the most dreadful thing she can contemplate. (Harding 245)

Aside from her bravado speeches, Lady Macbeth cannot escape the attributes of her gender. Early in the play, she does manage, however, to convince her husband that she is more akin to his masculine side than he is. Macbeth is most visibly awed by her masculinity when he cries for Lady Macbeth to "Bring forth men-children only, / For thy undaunted mettle should compose / Nothing but males" (2.1.73-75). Through the progression of events, Lady Macbeth's character slowly disintegrates back to its feminine self. In fact, it seems as if Lady Macbeth, like any good shrew, was more talk and less action when it came to the actual deed of murdering Duncan:

In spite of her pragmatic and ruthless rhetoric, it is obvious that the gall in her breasts has not been sufficient to unsex Lady Macbeth. She admits that she has relied on wine to make her bold and give her fire, qualities normally associated with the masculine temperament. (Asp 161)

Lady Macbeth claims she could not kill Duncan because of his appearance: "Had he not resembled / My father as he slept, I had done't" (2.2.12-13). We are again reminded of Lady's Macbeth's femininity, as her reference to family devotion is clearly perceived as a
more feminine than masculine trait. It is unlikely Lady Macbeth would have murdered Duncan no matter who he resembled.

Shortly after Duncan retires for the evening, and the time of his death approaches, the Lady Macbeth who so scornfully reproached her husband's cowardice makes a brief departure. She sends Macbeth to do the job she could not finish and shows fear for the first time: "Alack, I am afraid they have awaked, / And 'tis not done" (2.2.9-10). The murder of Duncan indeed gives the audience a glimpse of a Lady Macbeth who is lost without her man: "The staccato rhythm of her speech preceding and just after her husband's entrance betrays an anxiety that not even the wine can mitigate." (Asp 161).

When Macbeth returns from Duncan's chamber, though, he instantly begins to crack, and once again, Lady Macbeth must verbally berate him to get results. Macbeth is initially frightened because he could not pronounce the word "Amen" after the murder: "I had most need of blessing, and 'Amen' / Stuck in my throat" (2.2.30-31). Immediately, he feels guilt and remorse for the sin he has committed. Lady Macbeth warns her husband of such feelings: "These deeds must not be thought / After these ways. So, it will make us mad" (2.2.33-34). She is more right than she can imagine.

When Lady Macbeth orders her husband to put the daggers in their rightful places, he gives her the frightened refusal of a small child: "I'll go no more. / I am afraid to think what I have done, Look on't again I dare not" (2.2.47-49). Without delay, she pounces upon his weakness:

Infirm of purpose!

Give me the daggers. The sleeping and the dead

Are but as pictures. 'Tis the eye of childhood
That fears a painted devil. (2.2.50-53)

Yet again, Lady Macbeth treats her husband as a mere boy, and her his scolding mother. She will humiliate him enough to get him through the morning, but she will be unable to control him far past it. Macbeth will become the man his wife wants him to be.

Afterwards, he will slowly begin to exclude his "partner of greatness" from all political decisions:

After he [Macbeth] fully assumes the stereotype she urges upon him, there is nothing in him she can manipulate. Her dream of being partner to his greatness is doomed by the very means she has used to insure that greatness. By making him "manly" she has guaranteed that he will think of her as subordinate and unworthy of sharing power. (Asp 162)

There is much evidence to support the fact that Lady Macbeth was a shrew and that Macbeth, exhausted from the belittlement, sought to end her tirade by giving her exactly what she wanted. One must consider, however, what other circumstances might have pushed Macbeth over the edge, and whether or not Lady Macbeth was the sole reason for his unraveling.

The Fear of the Female

How does Lady Macbeth so craftily manipulate her husband? I have explored her role as a shrew, and it is completely understandable that Macbeth might have been susceptible to her bullying. Perhaps, however, Shakespeare was also thinking about the inherent fear that males in his society often had of females, particularly because of their sexual dominance and "magical" bodies. As I discussed in the previous chapter, Renaissance men were often intimidated and threatened when they perceived their
women to be sexually experienced, or when it was implied that they themselves were sexually inadequate. Some of Lady Macbeth's speeches carry sexual sentiments, which made her bold for a woman of Shakespeare's time, but more important, made her husband feel impotent.

It is no coincidence that we see Macbeth with the witches before we see him with his wife. It is conceivable that Shakespeare was trying to instill in the audience the sense that Macbeth's life was purely under feminine control. Even though the witches' gender is briefly questioned by Banquo's declaration—"You should be women, / And yet your beards forbid me to interpret / That you are so" (1.3.42-44)—it is nonetheless accepted that they are indeed females, beards or no. The witches immediately wield power over Macbeth because they offer something he desires: the chance to be king. After Macbeth has long left their presence, their power over him is still alive in Lady Macbeth:

The fears of female coercion, female definition of the male, that are initially located cosmically in the witches thus find their ultimate locus in the figure of Lady Macbeth, whose attack on Macbeth's virility is the source of her strength over him [. . .]. (Adelman, "Born" 114)

While attacking her husband's competence, Lady Macbeth utilizes language that simultaneously places him in the juxtaposing roles of dependent infant and inadequate lover. "Lady Macbeth notoriously makes the murder of Duncan the test of Macbeth's virility; if he cannot perform the murder, he is in effect reduced to the helplessness of an infant subject to her rage" (Adelman, "Born" 114).

In fact, when Macbeth is in panic mode after Duncan's murder, Lady Macbeth comforts him by taking control, and telling him exactly what to do:
I hear a knocking

At the south entry. Retire we to our chamber.

A little water clears us of this deed.

How easy is it then! (2.2.64-66)

Lady Macbeth is treating her Lord as if he were a toddler who just had an accident. Macbeth easily reverts to this childhood state upon her coddling. Whenever Lady Macbeth wants Macbeth to act, however, she stings him with insult after sexual insult. She pushes Macbeth to kill by questioning his ability as a lover, "making her love for him contingent on the murder that she identifies as equivalent to his male potency" (Adelman, "Born" 114). Her language might not be sexually overt, but it carries an undertone that both Macbeth and Shakespeare's audience were bound to pick up on:

Was the hope drunk

Wherein you dressed yourself? Hath it slept since?

And wakes it now to look so green and pale

At what it did so freely? From this time

Such I account thy love.

[........................]

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. (1.7.35-51)

Lady Macbeth's subtle use of the word "drunk" could have a couple of different meanings, but most people would relate it to intoxication, and its effects on sexual performance: "The drunkenness and hangover images connect this speech with the
Porter scene, where drunkenness is linked with lechery and with the impotence paradoxically accompanying the impetus one gives to the other" (Biggins 267). Indeed the Porter remarks to Macduff that alcohol "is a great provoker of three things" (2.3.24), one of which being sexual stamina: "it [alcohol] provokes the desire but it / takes away the performance" (2.3.27-28). The words "green" and "pale" also imply someone who is sickly, or unable to exert much energy. During Shakespeare's era, there was something known as "the green sickness," which was "the typical disease of timid young virgin women" (Adelman, "Born" 114). Finally, Lady Macbeth tells her husband that he will be more of a man when he finally manages to "do it." This phrase might refer the reader to Ophelia's mad song in *Hamlet*, and its sexually explicit declaration: "Young men will do't if they come to't, / By Cock, they are to blame" (4.5.59-60). For Lady Macbeth, *it*, of course, refers to Duncan's murder, but like Ophelia's song, *it* also serves as another pun on words that sexually drives the character's speech.

Lady Macbeth cleverly interchanges the sexual charge of her speech with that of a demanding mother. Both personas place Macbeth in the position of an inferior; he is either a disappointing lover or a helpless infant. Proof of Lady Macbeth's "motherly" intimidation lies not only in her treatment of Macbeth as a small child, but also in her reference to "dashing the brains out" of her own baby:

That this image has no place in the plot, where the Macbeths are strikingly childless, gives some indication of the inner necessity through which it appears. For Lady Macbeth [. . .] articulates a fantasy in which to be less than a man is to become interchangeably a woman or a baby, terribly subject to the wife/mother's destructive rage. (Adelman, "Born" 115)
Macbeth is forced to confront the fact that his life is in the hands of women. The witches are informing him of his destiny, and his wife is pushing him towards it. During the first two acts of the play, it would seem that he has little to no control over his own actions. To cower away from killing Duncan would be equivalent to denouncing his own masculinity and adulthood.

Duncan's murder becomes more appealing to Macbeth because the King takes on the facade of the vulnerable child. He is elderly and defenseless, far past his prime. The fact that guards are at his door also implies he needs protection: "The satiated and sleeping Duncan takes on the vulnerability that Lady Macbeth has just invoked in the image of the feeding, trusting infant; Macbeth releases himself from the image of this vulnerability by sharing in the murder of this innocent" (Adelman, "Born" 115). In murdering Duncan, Macbeth attempts to escape the control of his wife, even though he is doing what she wishes. By transferring the image of a helpless child from himself to Duncan, he is temporarily released from Lady Macbeth's command. Later in the play, Macbeth will become obsessed with the fact that none "born of woman" can harm him. For him, the phrase evokes an image of an all male family, free from female control.

Macbeth so fears becoming the child to the "mothering" Lady Macbeth because male children of the Renaissance were slow to form a masculine identity. Often, mothers would dress children of both sexes in androgynous clothing, which put them on an even keel with one another. As a result, gender differences were not recognized in children under the age of seven, and young boys were often viewed as irrational as young girls (Lamb 530). Mothers were certainly in control of their male children. Lady Macbeth, who is not exactly the "motherly" type, even reproaches Macbeth for putting so much
belief in old wives' tales, the type he would have surely heard during his boyhood from his mother. She ridicules her husband when he sees Banquo's ghost:

O, these flaws and starts,

Impostors to true fear, would well become

A woman's story at a winter's fire

Authorized by her grandam. (3.4.62-65)

Worse than insulting his manhood, Lady Macbeth is making her husband remember a time when he had no solid identity, and was ruled by the weaker sex: "Lady Macbeth represents fearfulness as a degrading regression to the androgyny of childhood. Her anxious allusion to women's tales in this context suggest their continuing and threatening power, and the effeminizing attraction of the early bonds with women they signify" (Lamb 529).

Seeing Lady Macbeth from this perspective, one could conclude that she had complete power over Macbeth, and that he chose a path his wiser self would have not, if it had not been for her crafty manipulation. The witches also play heavily into this perception, for they have old narratives of their own, such as the First witch's tale about the sailor's wife: "It is through their compelling narratives that Lady Macbeth and the witches create their absolute authority over the infant that Macbeth in some sense becomes. Fleeing the effeminacy of his childhood, Macbeth acts out not only his desires, but also the magical narratives told by women who dominate him" (Lamb 538). In this context, Lady Macbeth seems to share many similarities with the witches. Seemingly, through the power of their own gender, Lady Macbeth and the witches successfully pervaded the male world.
The fear of the female is alive and well in Macbeth. One can find numerous instances to support the fact that Macbeth, while cruel and commanding in combat, was rendered helpless by the very women he sought for comfort. Even though the play seems to deal with the importance of the male, political world, it is charged by the "wicked" female presence. Even after Lady Macbeth is virtually done away with, the witches still represent the woman's autonomy: "Within Macbeth there is no clear escape from women's power, even in the political arena. [...] The survival of Banquo's heirs still depends upon the terrifying and uncontrollable powers invested in the female reproductive body" (Lamb 541). If Lady Macbeth was indeed the shrew, the intimidator, the manipulator of manhood, what happened to her seemingly unstoppable power?

Powerless After All: What Really Drove Lady Macbeth

Lady Macbeth comes on so strong in the beginning of the play that many readers become locked onto the notion that she is a devious, self-serving shrew. In most instances, Lady Macbeth is usually played as a dominating, domineering woman, who is "justly" punished for her evil desires. Little attention is given to Macbeth's own ability for evil, as his sinful acts are often considered the result of a mental breakdown, brought on by the prodding of a pushy wife. The reader must question, however, how Lady Macbeth could have suddenly collapsed if she was as powerful as was originally suspected. Possibly Lady Macbeth was power-hungry not for herself, but for her husband, which would explain why she is hopelessly devastated when he closes himself off from her, emotionally as well as politically.

Soon after Macbeth's encounter with the witches, the reader finds Lady Macbeth vigorously reading the notorious note. Believing herself to be her husband's equal
partner, she expresses her desire for him to achieve his full potential: "Glamis thou art, and Cawdor, and shalt be / What thou art promised" (1.5.13-14). The reader usually believes that Lady Macbeth says this for her own benefit, but she never mentions becoming Macbeth's queen. All of her thoughts seem focused on her husband's prospects instead of her own: "[. . .] she does not once refer to herself. It is of him she thinks: she wishes to see her husband on the throne, and to place the scepter within his grasp" (Jameson 328). When she asks the spirits to "unsex" her, she is doing it to better her husband's position. By requesting that the milk in her breast be turned into gall she is giving up her own identity to establish his: "Lady Macbeth [. . .] vows by those things she, as a mortal, holds dear: her role as a wife [. . .] and as a mother [. . .]" (Dash 162).

It is possible to see Lady Macbeth's mention of murdering Duncan as evidence of her cold, shrewish ways. Her verbal declaration, though, should not rule out the possibility of Macbeth's own desire to see Duncan dead. Macbeth offers no insight into his own vicious thoughts because he does not have to. His wife has verbalized everything he has internally felt. After Lady Macbeth begins to plot out the plan to her husband, he utters a hasty departure--"We will speak further" (1.5.68)--and gives no impression of how he feels about what she has said. Because of her apparent interest, and Macbeth's seeming disinterest, "Lady Macbeth's vehement language [. . .] has marked her as the more vicious of the two. Audience sympathy moves toward Macbeth and against his wife" (Dash 165).

Lady Macbeth is viewed as the culprit, but the importance of her role begins to diminish soon after Duncan's murder. Her gender-bending days are over as soon as they have begun, as Macbeth will choose a path all his own, without his dearest partner: "After
the murder is discovered, Shakespeare begins to unfold Lady Macbeth's tragedy - the futility of her attempt to move into the male world, and, having adopted her husband's moral standards, her ever-increasing isolation even from him" (Dash 170-71). As soon as Macduff enters the castle the morning after Duncan's murder, Shakespeare immediately cues his audience to the fact that Lady Macbeth is a woman who does not matter in situations of extreme importance. When she inquires about the commotion upon the discovery of Duncan's body, she is quickly put in her rightful place by Macduff: "O gentle lady, / 'Tis not for you to hear what I can speak. The repetition in a woman's ear Would murder as it fell" (2.3.79-82). The audience is not fooled by Macduff's "chivalrous" attitude because he will tell Banquo what he is supposedly sheltering the Lady from, right in front of her.

Desperate to play a part in the fraternal togetherness that follows, and to ensure that her husband does not say anything damaging, Lady Macbeth faints: "Help me hence, ho!" (2.3.115). Critics have argued that her faint could be authentic, but it is most likely that she wanted to deter the others away from suspecting her beloved husband. Whatever the reason, it does not produce the intended result. Macduff notices, and blurts out a casual "Look to the lady" (2.3.116). Evidently, no one does, as Banquo has to reiterate the sentiment a few lines after: "Not until the line is eventually repeated is she carried off. What a remarkable bit of stagecraft, and how it emphasizes her unimportance and the peripheral place of women in this world" (Dash 172). Faked or genuine, the reaction to Lady Macbeth's faint is a reminder of her apparent lack of power.

In the third act of the play, the audience also becomes more aware of Macbeth's aptitude for evil. He chooses to have his best friend killed to ensure that his offspring
will not threaten his own chances for greatness. Macbeth's speech with Banquo's murderers is characteristic of a man who is quite comfortable playing the role of the manipulator, as he convinces the murderers that Banquo has severely wronged them:

Know

That it was he in the times past which held you
So under fortune, which you thought had been
Our innocent self.

[................]

Do you find

Your patience so predominant in your nature
That you can let this go? Are you so gospelled
To pray for this good man and for his issue,
Whose heavy hand hath bowed you to the grave
And beggared yours for ever? (3.1.77-92)

In his careful handling of the murderers, Macbeth seems to surpass his wife in her previous attempts at manipulation. Here, the audience witnesses a Macbeth who needs no encouragement to carry out immoral crimes. In his discussion with Banquo's murderers, "[...] Macbeth reveals his scorn for people, his manipulativeness, and the intensity of his name-calling" (Dash 179). Lady Macbeth, while appearing to manipulate her husband in the beginning of the play, is never seen abusing her power with any other character. She does not desire the deaths of Banquo or Macduff, and she does not set out to meet the witches in an attempt to know her future. Macbeth, on the other hand, will begin using and deceiving a string of people immediately after Duncan's murder, and he
will berate the witches for more predictions. Her unwillingness to use her power beyond her husband, and his willingness to use his power impartially, reiterates the extreme difference between husband and wife. Macbeth will do whatever it takes to achieve his goal; Lady Macbeth will only do what is required of a wife: encourage him.

Before we see the desperate Lady Macbeth who is viciously rubbing out imaginary blood, we witness the departure of the "shrewish" wife, and her last moment of glory. Perhaps Macbeth's most notable mental lapse occurs at the banquet, where Banquo's spirit appears to Macbeth only. Obviously Macbeth excluded his wife from the planning of Banquo's murder, as when she questioned him about future plans, his response was short and evasive: "Be innocent of the knowledge, dearest chuck" (3.2.46). This term of endearment will become nonexistent in their relationship after the banquet scene. Macbeth's sole purpose in life will be to guard his throne, and his wife will be shut out of all affairs, both public and private.

In front of the entire court, Macbeth rails at Banquo's spirit like a madman, going so far as to challenging it to a duel:

Or be alive again,

And dare me to the desert with thy sword.

If trembling I inhabit then, protest me

The baby of a girl. Hence, horrible shadow,

Unreal mock'ry, hence! (3.4.102-06)

At this point in the play, Lady Macbeth is still attempting to conceal her husband's blunders. She mocks Macbeth's masculinity--"What, quite unmanned in folly?" (iii.iv. 71)--and scolds him for his childish behavior--"Fie, for shame!" (3.4.73)--hoping the
belittlement will make him act more the man. Her tactics for controlling Macbeth, however, will not serve their purpose as they did during the ordeal of Duncan's murder. Macbeth is too far gone into his own chaotic world, a world in which Lady Macbeth has been expelled.

Not only does Lady Macbeth have to control her husband's emotions, but she also has to play the perfect hostess to the most important political people in the kingdom. She is put under an intense amount of pressure to get her Lord and herself through the evening, without drawing suspicion. The murderers have made their unexpected appearance, which probably drew the eyes of others. As soon as they depart, she must deal with her husband's childish outcries. Cool under pressure, Lady Macbeth assures her guests that all is well with her husband: "Sit, worthy friends. My lord is often thus, / And hath been from his youth. Pray you, keep seat." (3.4.52-54). While she is reassuring the guests, she is also reminding Macbeth of their presence: "My worthy lord, / Your noble friends do lack you" (3.4.81-82). Eventually, however, Macbeth will be uncontrollable. Lady Macbeth authoritatively dismisses her guests, in a tone that lets them know she will not entertain stragglers:

He grows worse and worse.

Questions enrages him. At once, good night.

Stand not upon the order of your going,

But go at once. (3.4.114-17)

Often overlooked are Lady Macbeth's multiple roles during this scene, and how she successfully juggles them under the peering eyes of the men in the room:
All she [Lady Macbeth] knows and sees is her husband exploding against nothing. [...] She must face these men. She must explain, entertain, and distract them from her husband. She must, in fact, act the supremely gifted hostess, as well as wife and mother-figure chiding Macbeth to be a man. (Dash 183)

Despite her derogatory remarks, Lady Macbeth soon changes her attitude. When her husband asks about Macduff, she responds to him meekly and obediently: "Did you send to him, sir?" (3.4.128). For all her taunting remarks, when they are alone Lady Macbeth ultimately wishes to serve and comfort her husband: "[...] not a syllable of reproach or scorn escapes her: a few words in submissive reply to his questions, and an entreaty to seek repose, are all she permits herself to utter" (Jameson 333).

The next time the audience sees Lady Macbeth she is utterly hopeless. Even in her sleep she attempts to exert some kind of control over her husband with talk of his cowardice—"Fie, my lord, fie, a soldier / and afeard?" (5.1.31-32)—and motherly bossing—"Wash your hands, put on your nightgown, look / not so pale" (5.1.52-53). Yet there is one utterance that betrays the true pain in her heart: "The Thane of Fife had a wife. Where is she / now?" (5.1.36-37). Oddly enough, Lady Macbeth does not say Lady Macduff's name: "She is merely "'a wife,'" the indefinite article reaffirming Lady Macbeth's belief in women's non-importance in this man's world" (Dash 200). Lady Macbeth is also searching for her own identity under the guise of searching for Lady Macduff. What happened to Lady Macbeth? This is certainly not the force of nature who asked to be "unsexed." Apparently, her womanhood was never done away with.
More evidence of Lady Macbeth's gender can be found in her less obvious statements. For example, in her sleep Lady Macbeth vehemently attempts to wash the blood off her hands: "Here's the smell of the blood still. All the perfumes / of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand. O, O, O!" (5.1.42-43). It is important to note that Lady Macbeth desires "perfume" and refers to her hand as "little." Suddenly, she seems like a small schoolgirl to Macbeth's juvenile delinquent. Her femininity is more apparent than ever: "As critics have often noted, Lady Macbeth's constant reference to her hands, to their diminutive size, and her wish for perfume, are peculiarly feminine" (Dash 200). It seems as if Lady Macbeth's gender has been intensified rather than diminished.

In the end, Macbeth learns of his wife's illness. No longer the anxious and nervous boy he seemed in the beginning, Macbeth accepts the Doctor's news stubbornly but calmly. His tranquil state can be due to the fact that he ended the play with the comfortable role he began it in: that of a soldier. While the Doctor is breaking what should be disheartening news, Macbeth is simultaneously gearing up for battle: "Throw physic to the dogs; I'll none of it. / Come, put mine armour on. Give me my staff" (5.3.49-50). Upon hearing of his wife's death, Macbeth is even philosophical: "Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player / That struts and frets his hour upon the stage, / And then is heard no more" (5.5.23-25). Really, he does not care too much about his wife's demise.

For all her scornful words and wicked plans, it seems that Lady Macbeth was like many other wives during the Renaissance period; she was her husband's inferior. Macbeth never had any attention of a joint rule with his wife, or he would have included her in the planning of Banquo's death. One could argue that Macbeth left her out of the plans to protect her, but he purposely drops enough hints to make her suspect. It is as if
Macbeth wants his wife to see how well he has become the man she initially wanted, so much so that he does not need her encouragement anymore (Asp 163). As soon as he got the kingdom, his conscience no longer needed his "vicious" wife. He was never helpless or under her control. He merely used her to take the emotional burden off himself.

Shakespeare knew the potential power he created with Lady Macbeth, and at the end of the play, felt the need to switch control back to where it belonged:

The play that begins by unleashing the terrible threat of destructive maternal power and demonstrates the helplessness of its central male figure before that power thus ends by consolidating male power, in effect solving the problem of masculinity by eliminating the female. (Adelman, "Born" 122)

The men are meant to rule. Shakespeare's audience would have demanded that ending, and he would have delivered it. Still, Shakespeare was perhaps trying to tell the audience throughout the play that he was aware he was suppressing Lady Macbeth, and he also knew what it meant to her womanhood to do away with her so hastily: "Significantly, Lady Macbeth's demise is announced by the wailing of her woman" (Asp 167).

Womankind has been set back, once again reminded of their inferior status. Lady Macbeth, who began the play with a bang, leaves without even a whisper. It would seem that Shakespeare, terrified by the prospects of his creation, felt pressured to make things "right" again at the end. Lady Macbeth never escaped the confines of her gender; she simply threatened to.
Chapter Three: Gertrude

Queen Gertrude has substantially fewer lines than her male counterparts in *Hamlet*, but nonetheless, she is a presence that looms over Hamlet from the beginning of the play to its bitter end. Upset over his mother's "o'er-hasty" marriage, Hamlet spends the entire play coming to terms with what he believes to be her incestuous, sinful behavior. In the process, Gertrude becomes, in Hamlet's eyes, the epitome of whoredom, and all that is wrong with women. Dumbfounded by his mother's repulsive and rebellious behavior, Hamlet attempts to force Gertrude to respect the restrictions of her gender. In the end, the audience never knows Gertrude's intentions; we only see her through the eyes of the men she loved. In order to discover whether she broke through the barriers of her gender, one must go beyond the assessment of her put forth by her son and her husbands (prior and former) to estimate her true character.

*The Incestuous Adulteress: Gertrude's Original Sin*

In Act I scene 2, the newly crowned Claudius makes a grand entrance to the court with "Th' imperial jointress of this warlike state" (1.2.9) at his side. His and Gertrude's first official appearance as husband and wife seems enveloped with their love and admiration for one another. In fact, the whole scene carries a fairy-tale quality; there is the capable King alongside his beautiful and adoring Queen. All is right in this "Camelot." King Arthur's Camelot, however, was brought down by the "sinful" Guinevere, and at least in the beginning, Gertrude is the temptress, the adulteress, and the ultimate ruin of her King (in this case, the previous King Hamlet). Though an audience of today might not make this correlation, the Elizabethan audience would have easily accepted Gertrude as the treacherous whore, due to her incestuous marriage to Claudius.
As I discussed in chapter one, widows were in rather tricky situations. They were encouraged to remarry when it benefited the remaining males in the family, as in matters of inheritance, for example. Aside from this exception, however, widows were often expected to remain loyal and faithful to the memory of their late husbands. This expectation, of course, was not always met. A widow's remarriage was often frowned upon, but it happened nonetheless, and men considered widows a real threat:

"Widowhood is problematic not only because the weaker vessel survives the stronger but because she may remarry, thus, some would say, cuckolding her former husband(s), albeit belatedly. In consequence, remarrying widows are liable to be figured as "lusty widows" (Kehler 400). Even in death, men still wanted to remain the superior gender.

Shakespeare must have been influenced by society's belief that widows should remain chaste, for he draws on the chastity of widows several times in his plays: "Of some thirty-one widows in Shakespeare, ten remarry. [...] Six of them die - or seven, if we include Regan. Two of them are killed by their husbands [...] and two die by their own hands" (Kehler 400). It is not mere coincidence that, in Shakespeare, a remarried widow's situation usually turns out badly. Perhaps he knew the audience would not accept it any other way. In the widow Gertrude's case, however, it is not only the hasty remarriage that makes her instantly loathed and suspect; it is the fact that her remarriage to her former husband's brother is (to Shakespeare's audience) incestuous. Modern day readers might have trouble understanding the depth of Hamlet's wrath,

Yet no one who reads the first soliloquy in the Second Quarto text [...] can doubt for one moment that Shakespeare wished here to make full dramatic capital out of Gertrude's infringement of ecclesiastical law, and
expected his audience to look upon it with as much abhorrence as the Athenians felt for what we should consider the more venial, because unwitting, crime of the Oedipus of Sophocles. (J. Wilson 39)

Hamlet is not oversensitive. Though there were times in history that encouraged the remarriage of widows to their brother-in-laws, the religious community of the Elizabethan era preached vigorously against it. Hamlet's anger at his mother "rests on the biblical principle that man and wife form a union of one flesh. In this context, Gertrude's incestuous liaison with Claudius pollutes the blood of both the younger and the elder Hamlet" (Blincoe 20).

Hamlet, already sensitive to the biblical implications of his mother's new marriage, is also overcome by the immediacy of it. When Horatio tells the Prince that he "came to see your [Hamlet's] father's funeral" (1.2.175), Hamlet's response acknowledges the truth: "I think it was to see my mother's wedding. [...] The funeral baked meats / Did coldy furnish forth the marriage tables" (1.2.177-80). If Hamlet is not exaggerating, and the funeral food was still edible for the wedding reception, then he is not over dramatizing the short passage of time between the two events: "At the outset of the action, it is the hasty marriage which disturbs the Prince. He grew up under his mother's influence rather than that of his father, who often busied himself with battles in distant lands" (Braddy 16). At the very least Hamlet feels neglected. He probably envisioned that his mother would give him special attention after his father's death, and grieve alongside him. Never did he imagine another man, especially his uncle, would so soon distract her.

In fact, his mother's quick and incestuous marriage troubles Hamlet long before he sees his father's ghost and learns the truth about Claudius. He is short when answering
Claudius about his mood, and he is downright insulting when responding to his mother. Her tranquil attitude regarding King Hamlet's death probably has something to do with the tension between mother and son. Gertrude tells Hamlet to accept his father's death as a part of life:

Do not for ever with thy valed lids
Seek for thy noble father in the dust.
Thou know'st 'tis common - all that lives must die,
Passing through nature to eternity. (1.2.70-73)

When Hamlet begrudgingly agrees with her, she questions his sincerity: "If it be, / Why seems it [King Hamlet's demise] so particular with thee?" (1.2.75). What an odd question. How could his father's death not be personal to him? Hamlet immediately lashes out by referring to Gertrude as "good-mother," or stepmother, highlighting the newfound distance between them. Her lack of grief, along with the ghost's message, will make Hamlet suspect her of much worse than a hardened heart.

When Hamlet sees his father's spirit, he is understandably overcome with many emotions. He learns of Claudius' involvement in his father's death, which he might have already supposed, but the ghost also leaves him with an ambiguous statement about his mother that seems to take him by surprise. King Hamlet refers to Claudius as "that adulterate beast" (1.5.42) and continues to remark on his powers of seduction: "O wicked wit and gifts, that have the power / So to seduce!" (1.5.44-45). The ghost seems to imply that Claudius was able to trick Gertrude, which would make her an innocent bystander. But by the careful addition of the word "adulterate," the ghost has now opened the door to the possibility of his wife's infidelity while he was alive: "The ghost stigmatizes
Claudius as an adulterer, thereby imputing infidelity to the partner in sin" (Braddy 23). Conversely, King Hamlet’s order for his son to spare his mother could be an indication of her innocence. He also tells Hamlet, however, to "Leave her to heaven, / And to those thorns that in her bosom lodge / To prick and sting her" (1.5.86-88). This statement seems to suggest that King Hamlet is simply more concerned with seeking vengeance on Claudius, and is content to let Gertrude pay for her sins after death.

Certainly, the play does not rule out the possibility of a relationship between Gertrude and Claudius before King Hamlet’s death, nor does it fully support the notion either. Also, one could not necessarily blame Gertrude for such a slip, once one examines the character of King Hamlet: "As a living man, he dealt directly with his critics and confronted his enemies openly; he was a man's man, not a woman's" (Braddy 24). Maybe Gertrude, due to the long absences and seeming disinterest of her husband, found comfort or solace in the company of her brother-in-law. Claudius is the younger brother, and might have been more attentive to the needs of a lady:

His flattering speeches to her [. . .] attest that he has not forgotten the manner and blandishments which melt the feminine heart. [. . .]

Throughout the play Claudius displays nothing but affection for Gertrude [. . .] perhaps his love for her weighed as heavily in the balance as his lust for the crown. (Braddy 24)

At the very least, it is quite probable that Claudius and the Queen shared an intimate friendship, which would help explain their sudden marriage.

King Hamlet’s mention of the word “adulterate” can also be interpreted in different ways: "The Ghost's reference to "'adulterate beast'" extends the meaning of
adultery, as is common in biblical scriptures, to unchastity generally" (Blincoe 19). The indication is that King Hamlet might have considered his wife to have committed adultery simply because she was not chaste and virtuous after his death. As we have already learned, during the Elizabethan era widows were encouraged to remain single after their husbands' deaths, in honor of their memory. In fact, "when we acknowledge that in the sixteenth century the term "adultery" could also refer to a widow's infidelity, we can better understand the nature of Gertrude's guilt" (Blincoe 22). Though modern day audiences are accustomed to widows remarrying, it was considered disrespectful and disgraceful during Shakespeare's time. Whether or not Gertrude had sexual relations with Claudius, Shakespeare's audience would have viewed her as tainted nonetheless.

Knowing that the word adultery did not have to mean a sexual relationship, the reader can better reconcile the ghost's speech to the dumb show Hamlet puts on later in the play. Obviously, Gertrude's reaction to the player queen is a good indication that she and Claudius did not have an intimate relationship before King Hamlet's death. Hamlet, who claims to put on the play to prove Claudius' guilt ["I'll observe his looks, / I'll tent him to the quick" (2.2.573-74)], is more concerned with proving his mother's fidelity to his father. Throughout the play, "Hamlet does not "rivet'" his "eyes'" on Claudius, as he promised. Instead, he has been glancing at Gertrude" (Braddy 27-28). Hamlet's remarks to Ophelia also reveal his true interest: "For look you how cheerfully my mother looks, / and my father died within 's two hours" (3.2.114-15). Before the play even begins, Hamlet has found his mark. He will use the play not only to discover whether or not his mother was faithful to his father but also to remind her, through the words of the player queen, of her indecent and inexcusable behavior.
Hamlet's *Mousetrap* is designed to reveal Claudius' murderous thoughts, but
Hamlet also ensures that it will reveal the "conscience of the Queen." The player queen reinforces society's belief about chaste widows through her repeated references to a widow's behavior:

In second husband let me be accurst;
None wed the second but who killed the first.

[.................................]
The instances that second marriage move
Are base respects of thrift, but none of love.
A second time I kill my husband dead
When second husband kisses me in bed. (3.2.161-67)

Thinking these lines would be enough to prove or disprove Gertrude's complicity in both King Hamlet's murder and her own infidelity, Hamlet slyly asks her: "Madam, how you like this play?" (3.2.209). Gertrude, unsuspecting and unmoved, replies in kind: "The lady protests too much, methinks" (3.2.210). When Claudius is overcome with guilt and attempts to flee the show, Gertrude innocently inquires about his health: "How fares my lord?" (3.2.245). It is noteworthy that Gertrude never feels the need to flee, or to evade Hamlet's peering eyes. Obviously, she feels no guilt because she is unaware of the situations pertaining to her first husband and Claudius: "The dumb show is an anchor point in support for Gertrude's innocence. This show dramatizes events that preclude Gertrude from being guilty of adultery in the modern sense of the word" (Blincoe 22). Unknowingly, Gertrude has assured Hamlet that, though she is "unfaithful" to her husband's memory, she did not commit adultery when he was alive, nor did she aid in his
death. Nevertheless, her marriage to her late husband’s brother signifies her rebellious streak, and shows her willingness to go against society's rules.

The Queen's Betrayal of the Prince

Even though it is commonly accepted that Hamlet detests his mother for her sinful marriage, the political ramifications of Gertrude's marriage to Claudius, and how their union forever changed Hamlet's professional future, are also important. Not mother Gertrude, but Queen Gertrude, made a conscious choice, which dashed Hamlet's hopes for the throne. The reader often perceives Gertrude as an unimportant queen who is transferred from one king to another. Her entrance with Claudius seems to spotlight his importance and her role as only a lovely adornment. At this moment in the play, the reader usually forms an opinion that the Queen

is guilty, or at least hopelessly weak; [. . .] that, being of a fickle will, she has let herself be seduced, and proven frail and inconstant, [. . .]. For the more traditional, mythical mind, on the other hand, the Queen simply exercises a prerogative, and it is her deliberate choice that results in [. . .] another man's enthronement: The Queen is indeed the life in the crown.

(Aguirre 169)

Though Shakespeare does not give the audience absolute proof, he does hint at the possibility that Gertrude was the one with the power all along, and that it was she, not Claudius, who secured Hamlet's loss of the crown. In fact, the play deals heavily with legal jargon and inheritance rights: "The allusions run the gamut from points of common knowledge by landowners or litigants, to technical subtleties only lawyers would
appreciate, but their common theme is disinherirtance and the way it can occur" (Burton 71).

Proof of Gertrude's autonomy can be found in her introduction by Claudius. The word "jointress" is often considered to mean a mere partner, or joint-ruler, "yet there is good reason to take the technical significance of the word very seriously. A jointure agreement raised certain very real threats to the heirs of a widow's late husband [...]" (Burton 71). By referring to Gertrude as "jointress," many critics believe Claudius is simply trying to make her feel included in his coronation. Legally, however, the word puts Gertrude in a whole new light, and opens up the possibility of Hamlet loathing his mother not because of her incestuous marriage, but because of what her marriage denied him:

"Jointress" fits smoothly into and directs attention toward the larger pattern of legal allusions. As a group, they unfold a progression of unlikely but legally significant facts which reveal that Gertrude is in the process of destroying Hamlet's expectation of a substantial inheritance. (Burton 71)

No longer a meager partner, the legal term of Gertrude's title shows her significant power in her relationship with her kingdom, her new husband, and her disgruntled son.

We are initially introduced to the tensions of inheritance and landholding through the account of Fortinbras, who "Did forfeit with his life all those his lands / Which he stood seized on to the conqueror" (1.1.87-88). This situation left the young Fortinbras with nothing, facing the same lackluster future as Prince Hamlet. Upon first glance, Hamlet might not seem disappointed at losing the throne, thus his inheritance to
Claudius, but at the end of the play, when he is listing the many ways Claudius has wronged him, he throws in the fact that his uncle "Propped in between th' election and my [Hamlet's] hopes" (5.2.66). Of course, his uncle could not have done so if his mother had not agreed to marry him; therefore, all fault can be traced back to her.

Perhaps, however, Gertrude had little to do with Claudius’ kingship. Since Claudius was the younger brother to the king, he had no possibility of acquiring property while Hamlet was alive. Without the kingship, Claudius was unlikely to have any real inheritance (Burton 76). The court might have sympathized with Claudius, and handed him the kingship because they felt he was more deserving than his nephew. It is probable that Hamlet was overlooked because he was considered too young, too rash, and too immature:

Possibly the electors of the Danish court believed that Claudius was a strong man and that they should install him in the kingship to quell the growing threat from Norway. Perhaps they disregarded Hamlet, not because he was away at Wittenberg but because they deemed him too young and unproved in war to become their monarch. (Braddy 15)

In addition, Hamlet's father never makes any mention of Hamlet's loss of inheritance and kingship. It would seem as if King Hamlet would be just as outraged over his son's stolen future as he would be over Claudius' marriage to Gertrude. Except for the brief reference in Act V, Hamlet never overtly mentions his lost inheritance either. Perhaps both men choose not to broach the subject because they know Hamlet would never be considered for the kingship, or they both might "regard the injustice as too rank to require special mention" (Braddy 16). Possibly King Hamlet did not mention Hamlet's lost
inheritance because he knew the fault lay with Gertrude, and he had already encouraged Hamlet not to harm or harbor any ill feelings toward his mother.

The inheritance issue would explain, however, Hamlet's insistent harping on the quickness of his mother's marriage. In Elizabethan times, there existed a widow's quarantine, a period of time which could not exceed forty days, in which a widow was allowed to remain in her late husband's residence before she had to leave for her own dower lands. As stated in the Magna Carta,

A widow [...] shall forthwith and without difficulty have her marriage portion and inheritance: nor shall she give anything for her dower, or for her marriage portion, or for the inheritance which her husband and she held on the day of the death of her husband; and she may remain in the house of her husband for forty days after his death, within which time her dower shall be assigned to her. (qtd. in Burton 78)

It is true that Hamlet seems unable to give an exact date of his father's death and his mother's remarriage, but we do know that Horatio told Hamlet that his mother's wedding "followed hard upon" (1.2.178) his father's funeral. Also, before seeing Horatio, Hamlet remarked to himself that "within a month [...] she [Gertrude] married" (1.2.153-56).

One has to wonder what motivated Gertrude to remarry before the end of the quarantine. Did she intentionally begrudge her son his inheritance so Claudius could have it?

Even if Gertrude's intentions were completely innocent, and the suspicion of her guilt is unfounded, one cannot deny the ramifications of her actions. If she exceeded the quarantine before her marriage to Claudius, "Hamlet would inherit Elsinore and the rest of his two-thirds share in forty days, or earlier if she moved to her dower share before
then" (Burton 78). After his father's death, Hamlet probably expected his mother's departure. He might have returned to the castle under the initial impression that he was going to send her on her way: "Instead, Gertrude remarried immediately. Not to just any eligible nobleman but to the new king; and he, very conveniently, was already holding his court at Elsinore and therefore in possession at the moment of his marriage" (Burton 78). Not only must Hamlet deal with the shock of his mother's remarriage, but he must also accept what it has cost him politically.

*Queen* Gertrude had both Hamlet and Claudius at her mercy. If she had refused to marry Claudius, he might not have been the obvious choice for king, even if Hamlet was considered too young to fulfill the obligation. When one considers the legalities of her situation, one could surmise that she purposely married Claudius within forty days in an effort to deny Hamlet the kingship. This assumption gives way to an authoritative albeit deceptive Gertrude. What could have motivated her to jilt her son in favor of her brother-in-law? The logical answer would be that she and Claudius had had an intimate relationship before King Hamlet's death, and she wished to see her lover by her side. Perhaps she even had something to do with her husband's murder. Once again, Gertrude is viewed as the adulterous whore. Hamlet, outraged at losing his inheritance, might have jumped to these same conclusions, which would readily explain his anger at his mother. What is most frustrating about Gertrude is that she does not reveal her true intentions. The reader will never know for certain whether or not she purposely denied Hamlet the throne, though there is some evidence to support the fact that she did. Needless to say, these are not the actions of the stereotypical, nurturing mother of the Renaissance period.

*Gertrude's Maternal and Sexual Malevolence*
Once again, we return to the Renaissance's fear of all that is female or feminine. Indeed, it is not so much his mother's marriage that bothers Hamlet as it is the sexuality she presumably practices within it. When Hamlet confronts his mother in her closet, his words have little to do with the quickness of her marriage and more to do with the consummation of it:

Nay, but to live

In the rank sweat of an enseamed bed,

Stewed in corruption, honeying and making love

Over the nasty sty-. (3.4.80-83)

Later in the scene, he goes so far as to ask her to refrain from sex with Claudius altogether: "Assume a virtue if you have it not. [. ..] Refrain tonight, / And that shall lend a kind of easiness / To the next abstinence" (3.4.151-54). Throughout this portion of the play more than any other, Hamlet is overcome with the visualization of his mother having sex.

Gertrude is naturally shocked and appalled by her son's perverse speech, and she repeatedly asks him to stop the verbal onslaught: "O, speak to me no more! / These words like daggers enter in mine ears, / No more, sweet Hamlet" (3.4.84-86). Hamlet also accuses his mother of playing a part in King Hamlet's death: "A bloody deed - almost as bad, good-mother, / As kill a king and marry with his brother" (3.4.27-28). Shocked and confused, Gertrude has trouble believing what she has heard: "As kill a king?" (3.4.29). It is her marriage that Hamlet obsesses over, however, and the remainder of the "closet" conversation preoccupies itself with Gertrude's sexuality. For the first time Gertrude appears weak and exhausted. She obediently asks her own son "What shall I do?"
(3.4.164), hoping to appease his anger. Hamlet, attempting merely to tell her not to disclose the information she has learned to Claudius, is overcome by the image of his mother and Claudius in bed:

> Not this, by no means, that I bid you do:
> Let the bloat King tempt you again to bed,
> Pinch wanton on your cheek, call you his mouse,
> And let him for a pair of reechy kisses,
> Or paddling in you neck with his damned fingers,
> Make you to ravel all this matter out, [...]. (3.4.165-70)

One would assume Hamlet could have found an easier way to tell Gertrude to keep quiet. He is almost intoxicated, however, with the notions of his mother in the "incestuous" sheets. It seems to matter little that she is in them with Claudius; it is tormenting enough that she is in them at all.

The closet scene is essential to the understanding of Gertrude's character for many reasons, but it is most beneficial because it gives the audience an insight into the depth of Hamlet's preoccupation with his mother's sexual identity. The thought of his mother in a sexual capacity utterly repulses Hamlet because "her chief crime is her uncontrolled sexuality; that is the object of their [Hamlet and the Ghost's] moral revulsion, a revulsion as intense as anything directed toward the murderer Claudius" (Adelman, *Suffocating* 15). Even though Hamlet is filled with thoughts of his mother in sexual situations, the play does little to support the notion of Gertrude's supposed sexual appetite. Hamlet and the Ghost draw attention to her sexuality, "but the Gertrude we see is not quite the Gertrude they see. And when we see her in herself [...] we tend to see a woman more muddled
than actively wicked; even her famous sensuality is less apparent than her conflicted solicitude both for her new husband and for her son" (Adelman, *Suffocating* 15). Not once in the play does Gertrude act overtly sexual with her new husband in the presence of her son.

Nonetheless, in Hamlet's mind, Gertrude does take on the persona of a whore who is without morals or limits. Hamlet's soliloquy in the beginning of the play truly expresses his overwhelming disgust with his mother's body: "'Tis an unweeded garden / That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature / Possess it merely" (1.2.135-37). Hamlet's comparison of his mother to a garden can easily divert the reader to the story of the original garden, and the sinful, gullible Eve. Alas, Gertrude is compared with the woman who disrupted all creation. Eve's sin, however, was not listening to the advice of Adam. Gertrude's sin runs much deeper; she has had sex with a man other than her husband: "Woman's sensuality may then, as countless poets have told us, be felt not merely as a source of attraction but as a snare leading to sin, destruction, and eternal damnation" (Jones 106). Either way, the garden reference signals the reader to the limited role of women; they are either chaste virgins, or tempestuous sluts:

Insofar as the soliloquy expresses Hamlet's sense of his mother's body as an enclosed garden newly breached, it implies the presence of a formerly unbreached garden; the alternatives that govern Hamlet's imagination of his mother's body are the familiar ones of virgin and whore, closed or open, wholly pure or wholly corrupt. (Adelman, *Suffocating* 19)

In fact, Hamlet seems to remember his mother's explicit sexuality long before Claudius married her. Hamlet's remarks about King Hamlet's and Gertrude's marriage
lead the audience to believe that he thought she was an openly sexual woman prior to the king's death: "Why, she would hang on him / As if increase of appetite had grown / By what it fed on [...]
(1.2.143-45). Hamlet, however, does not seem to be bothered with his mother's sexuality until she takes a new husband. After her marriage to Claudius, Hamlet sees a Gertrude who is out of control, irresponsible, and apparently, easily aroused. Hamlet firmly believes his mother to be a loose woman who needs constant watch before she has another sexual slip: 
"[...]
for Gertrude's appetite is always inherently frightening, always potentially out of control; as the image of the unweeded garden itself implied, it has always required a weeder to manage its over-luxuriant growth" (Adelman, *Suffocating* 20).

What about the men who participate in Gertrude's alleged wild ecstasy? Are they not also "whores" and prone to be led by their desires instead of their heads? Evidently not. Hamlet is primarily concerned with Claudius as the murderer of his father; the fact that he is his mother's lover is just insult to the aforementioned injury. As King Hamlet is deceased, he can hold no blame either. Moreover, King Hamlet exemplifies the innocent male authority who is catapulted into damnation by his wife's sinful behavior: "The existence of Gertrude's appetite itself threatens the image of the father's godlike control; and in his absence, Gertrude's appetite rages, revealing what had been its potential for voraciousness all along" (Adelman, *Suffocating* 20). Without his father, Hamlet is left alone in Gertrude's wild garden, subject to her powers of seduction: 
"[...] his disappearance in effect throws Hamlet into the domain of the engulfing mother, awakening all the fears incident to the primary mother-child bond" (Adelman, *Suffocating* 30).
Furthermore, his father's ghost might have inflamed Hamlet's agitated anxiety over his mother's sexual identity. The ghost encourages Hamlet to kill Claudius and spare Gertrude, but he also asks Hamlet to "Let not the royal bed of Denmark be / A couch for luxury and damned incest" (1.5.83-84). By placing the importance of Gertrude's sexuality alongside Claudius' treachery, the ghost is telling Hamlet that Gertrude's sexual desire is as aberrant, wicked, and punishable as Claudius' crime. Indeed, the ghost spends more time harping on Gertrude's sexuality than he does Claudius' murderous schemes: "The ghost first asks Hamlet for revenge, describes his present purgatorial state, spends ten lines sketchily outlining the secret murder, and then begins a vivid sixteen-line attack on the sexual relationship of Claudius and Gertrude" (Smith 197). The king's ghost has inadvertently assured that his son will, in fact, not make Claudius his top priority, but instead become overly concerned with redeeming Gertrude. Hamlet begins to share in the ghost's preoccupation with Gertrude's sexuality, and becomes fixated on his mother's bedroom behavior (Smith 197). After the brief visit from his father's spirit, Hamlet will spend the remainder of the play trying to separate his mother from her sexuality, thus eliminating her role as a wife.

As was previously mentioned, Gertrude fails to present the personality traits the men in the play attribute to her. In fact, she has trouble forming a distinct personality at all. One thing is for certain, though, she never comes across as a woman who is prone to constant sexual arousal, or as a woman who harbors guilty feelings due to her sexual escapades. In the beginning of the play, she best exhibits her role as a mother. Gertrude knows what is troubling her son--"I doubt it is no other but the main - / His father's death and our o'er-hasty marriage" (2.2.56-57)--and she wants him to stay close to her--"Let not
thy mother lose her prayers, Hamlet. / I pray thee stay with us, go not to Wittenberg” (1.2.118-19). If anything, Gertrude is guilty of neglecting her son's emotional state so soon after his father's death. For some reason, however, she becomes, in the minds of the men, something much more powerful and sinister:

She is kept ambiguously innocent as a character, but in the deep fantasy that structures the play's imagery, she plays out the role of the missing Eve: her body is the garden in which her husband dies, her sexuality the poisonous weeds that kill him, and poison the world - and the self - for her son. (Adelman, *Suffocating* 30)

Hamlet's masculinity and selfhood becomes contingent on extinguishing his mother's sexual appetite. Hamlet cannot salvage his masculinity until he saves his mother from a part of her femininity. Her sexual prowess has already claimed one victim. In order for Hamlet to save himself, he must force Gertrude to give up a part of her womanhood.

Gertrude's reconstruction begins in the closet scene, when Hamlet sets out to show his mother the whore he feels she has become: "Come, come, and sit you down. You shall not budge: / You go not till I set you up a glass / Where you may see the inmost part of you" (3.4.18-20). When Hamlet's mother desperately exclaims, "O Hamlet, thou hast cleft my heart in twain!" (3.4.147), Hamlet insensitively tells her to "throw away the worser part of it, / And live the purer with the other half!" (3.4.148-49). Hamlet then tells Gertrude to "go not to mine uncle's bed" (3.4.150), in effect demanding that his adult mother remain celibate. Gertrude is now forced to relinquish part of her identity, a part that was repressed to begin with, and only thrived in her son's imagination. Hamlet's "attempt to end the specifically incestuous union rationalizes an
attempt to remake his mother pure by divorcing her from her sexuality" (Adelman, *Suffocating* 33). In the end, Gertrude must choose between the already constricting roles of wife and mother, and "whatever individuality she might have had is sacrificed to her status as mother" (Adelman, *Suffocating* 34). In her last moments, Gertrude will attempt to regain the respect of her son by disobeying her beloved husband.

Are the men's perceptions of Gertrude evidence of her wicked powers of seduction? The fact that Gertrude marries her brother-in-law (quickly) and worries little about the repercussions seems to imply that she is indeed an independent woman who saw nothing wrong with making herself happy. Gertrude's speech, however, does not match her actions. She does not come across as someone who is in control. On the contrary, if one examines Gertrude's speech one will find a woman who is content to let others control her.

*The Divisions of Gertrude*

For argument's sake, let us say that Gertrude was faithful to King Hamlet while he was alive. Let us also say she had absolutely nothing to do with the murder. What still is in question, however, is the quickness of her marriage, who she married, and her apparent lack of grief for both her husband's death and her son's obvious pain, all of which angers and depresses Hamlet. However, if we look at Gertrude outside of the other characters' perceptions of her, she does not seem like a woman who is capable of multiple monstrosities:

Although she may have been partially responsible for Claudius's monstrous act of fratricide and although her marriage to Claudius may have been indirectly responsible for making a "monster" of Hamlet,
Gertrude is never seen in the play inducing anyone to do anything at all monstrous. (Smith 199)

Even though Hamlet insists that his mother has an out of control sexual desire, we do not see it once displayed with her husband. Though Hamlet declares that Gertrude is the "most pernicious woman" (1.5.105), we never witness her in the midst of committing an evil deed. Hamlet's perceptions of others, since he is the main character, tend to influence the reader's perceptions as well. As an individual character, though, Gertrude cannot be reduced to the evil, scheming temptress her son sometimes sees. In fact, "her own words and actions compel one to describe Gertrude as merely a quiet, biddable, careful mother and wife" (Smith 201).

Indeed, one could argue that Gertrude is no more than a wife and a mother, and that she does not develop beyond these two roles. Even though Gertrude is a queen, she seems to care little about her sovereignty. When she and Claudius arrive at court as husband and wife, he does all the talking, expressing both sorrow at King Hamlet's demise and elation at his and Gertrude's marriage:

Therefore our sometime sister, now our queen,

Th' imperial jointress of this warlike state

Have we as 'twere with a defeated joy,

[.........................]

Taken to wife. Nor have we herein barred

Your better wisdoms, which have freely gone

With this affair along. For all, our thanks. (1.2.8-16)
It is important to note Claudius' careful use of words here. He and Gertrude have not simply married, but he has taken her to wife: "Although these lines suggest her position as co-ruler, the King's subsequent statement [taken to wife] belies such equality, emphasizing instead his dominance in their relationship" (Dash 112). Gertrude's silence serves as proof of her subservience to her new husband. Although Gertrude was married to King Hamlet and is a part of this new marriage, she is not expected to express sorrow or gratitude regarding either event. Her role as a wife is clear; she is quiet and adoring, while her husband is verbose and commanding.

This is not to say that Claudius takes advantage of Gertrude. It seems as if both are content with the dynamics of their relationship. Claudius does include Gertrude in decisions regarding her son. When they are discussing Hamlet's erratic behavior as a result of his love for Ophelia, Claudius relies on Gertrude's opinion--"Do you think 'tis this?" (2.2.152)--and she answers him with an equal air--"It may be; very likely" (2.2.153). When Hamlet flees the court after killing Polonius, Claudius seems to depend upon Gertrude's help in publicly remedying the situation: "Come, Gertrude, we'll call up our wisest friends / To let them know both what we mean to do / And what's untimely done" (4.1.37-39). Though she speaks very little in public, one gets the impression that Gertrude speaks openly and freely with her husband in private.

At other times throughout the play, however, Claudius seems to treat Gertrude as a child instead of an equal, excluding her from "grown-up" plans. When Claudius is devising a scheme against Hamlet, he dismisses Gertrude from the room:

Sweet Gertrude, leave us too,

For we have closely sent for Hamlet hither,
That he, as 'twere by accident, may here

Affront Ophelia. (3.1.30-33)

Even though this important matter concerns her son, Gertrude is content to leave the situation in Claudius' hands. Ever eager to please, Gertrude assures her husband of her compliance: "I shall obey you" (3.1.39). Gertrude does all she can to fulfill her husband's wishes, thus playing the perfect wife: "She repeatedly leaves scenes after being ordered out by Claudius, which he does both to protect her from the discovery of his guilt and to confer with her privately about how to deal with Hamlet" (Smith 200-01). Though Claudius might exclude Gertrude from certain matters for her own benefit, it is important to recognize that Gertrude never questions his commands. She stays, leaves, follows, comes, and goes; whatever he desires.

Gertrude also agrees to play an active part in Claudius' plan against her son by spying on him, and she is especially obedient when she agrees to use her son's lover as a decoy (Smith 201). Not only does Gertrude obey her husband's wishes, but she also gives Ophelia the impression that a woman's subordination is essential to any marriage by encouraging her to go along with Claudius' plan without hesitation:

And for your part, Ophelia, I do wish

That your good beauties be the happy cause

of Hamlet's wildness; so shall I hope your virtues

Will bring him his wonted way again [. . .]. (3.1.40-43)

As Ophelia has already presented her weak character repeatedly throughout the course of action, there is no question that she will readily follow the men's plan to the letter:

"Neither woman considers its [the plan's] morality, honesty, or wisdom. Most important,
neither questions the directives given her. Before the scene is over, that happy reliance on men's judgment - their "better wisdom" - is shown to be the ordinary weakness of these women" (Dash 119). Ophelia will be unable to deal with the strain of being trapped in her identity as the obedient daughter. Gertrude, older and much wiser, will remain content in her role of inferior wife for a little longer. It is combining this role with the role of mother that will eventually set her world askew.

The first indication of Gertrude's strain of juggling her dual roles occurs when she admits to Claudius that Hamlet's "father's death and our o'er-hasty marriage" (2.2.56-57) is what is troubling him. Claudius easily dismisses Gertrude's claim, not even going to the trouble of disagreeing with her. His concern lies with what Polonious has to say, and what other excuse he can offer for Hamlet's behavior. As soon as Claudius sees an opportunity to divert Gertrude from her first admission of guilt, he instantly asks Valtemand about the state of affairs: "Say, Valtemand, what from our brother Norway?" (2.2.59). Although her statement was ignored, it is a clear sign of Gertrude's inner turmoil: "In this momentary disagreement with Claudius, Gertrude shows a character at war with herself. Although her protest quickly slides into oblivion, it presages the future" (Dash 117). The future, of course, is the closet scene, where Hamlet bullies Gertrude into confronting the "black and grained spots" (3.4.80) of her soul.

Hamlet's intention in the closet scene is clear: He wants his mother to feel the guilt of the multiple sins she has committed. Although Hamlet's emotions are running high when he first confronts his mother in her closet, by the middle of the scene his speech becomes controlled, careful, and manipulative. First, he compares the greatness
of his father to the meagerness of his uncle, simultaneously confessing shock at his mother for not seeing such a difference:

See what a grace was seated on this brow-

Hyperion's curls, the front of Jove himself

[.................................]

This was your husband. Look you now what follows.

Here is your husband, like a mildewed ear

Blasting his wholesome brother. Have you eyes?

Could you on this fair mountain leave to feed,

And batten on this moor? Ha, have you eyes? (3.4.54-66)

Hamlet is making his mother question her judgment. What was it about Claudius that made her so easily forget the impressive qualities of her first husband? Surely their relationship cannot compare to her relationship with Hamlet's father. Hamlet also tries to convince Gertrude her marriage is wrong because it cannot be based on passion: "You cannot call it love, for at your age / The heyday in the blood is tame, it's humble, / And waits upon the judgement; [. . .] (3.4.67-69). Clearly, Hamlet wants his mother to feel that she is too old to act like a woman coming into her sexual prime. Her sexual desire should be diminishing, and the death of her first husband should have been enough to extinguish it altogether.

Hamlet waits until he sees his mother at her weakest point, and then scolds her like a disobedient child who has been caught doing something abhorrently wicked: "What devil was't / That thus hath cozened you at hood-man blind? / O shame, where is thy blush?" (3.4.70-73). Only at this point does Gertrude confess to Hamlet her
imperfections, the dark spots on her soul that "will not leave their tinct" (3.4.81).

Gertrude does not, however, confess what these particular blemishes are supposed to represent. Essentially, Hamlet forces Gertrude to feel guilt that is quite possibly nonexistent: "Gertrude does readily admit her one self-acknowledged source of guilt - that her marriage was "'o'erhasty,"' but in all other instances she feels guilt only after Hamlet has insisted that she be ashamed" (Smith 203). After this point in the play, Gertrude undergoes a dramatic change. She recognizes she is failing at her role of a mother by fulfilling her role as a wife: "For the first time, she realizes she must choose between husband and son" (Dash 123).

After the closet scene, Gertrude struggles to come to terms with her combating roles. She keeps Hamlet's accusations about Claudius from him, admitting only that her son is "Mad as the sea and wind when both contend / Which is the mightier" (4.1.6-7). She does divulge to Claudius, however, that Hamlet committed murder. She could be merely trying to distract Claudius from her son's true source of anger. When Laertes storms the castle for Claudius, though, it seems clear to whom the queen has devoted her allegiance. Gertrude steps in between the two men--"Calmly, good Laertes" (4.5.113)--without hesitation or instruction from her husband. Evidently she has physically restrained the agitated Laertes, as Claudius remarks twice: "Let him go, Gertrude" (4.5.119, 123). Gertrude's ultimate devotion to her husband occurs when Laertes is informed that his father is dead, and Gertrude quickly adds "But not by him [Claudius]" (4.5.124). If Claudius is not responsible for Polonius' death, it will not be long before Laertes begins to suspect the other man of the household: "Compassion for Claudius has led her, unwittingly, to provoke Laertes to murder her son. In this scene, stage directions
defined her power, whereas these lines reveal her confusion and mixed allegiance" (Dash 124). Since Gertrude is protecting her son from Claudius, it is unlikely she would have intentionally pointed Laertes in his direction. Nonetheless, she was not about to let her husband pay for her son's deed.

By the end of Act 4, however, Gertrude seems to steer away from her dear husband. Her change, of course, is marked by Ophelia's death. Ironically, the bulk of Gertrude's speech is devoted to the particulars of Ophelia's demise. Her descriptive language gives the audience a sense of her emotional sensitivity, especially when she describes Ophelia's body sinking under the weight of her clothes, till she is pulled “to muddy death” (5.1.154). Gertrude feels intense grief, and for the first time, wants to share it (Dash 125). Her description is noticeably feminine, tender, and heartfelt:

Her clothes spread wide,
And mermaid-like a while they bore her up;
Which time she chanted snatches of old tunes,
As one incapable of her own distress, [. . .]. (4.7.146-49)

While Laertes is naturally touched by the queen's words, Claudius shows a severe lack of tact and sensitivity: "How much I had to do to calm his rage! / Now fear I this will give it start again; Therefore let's follow" (4.7.164-66). As the queen utilized her usually limited verbosity to describe this particular event, she was probably expecting a more gentle and attentive response from her husband: "While his anger may be directed at the situation, his lack of sympathy, of pity at the news of Ophelia's death, further distances husband from wife. Thus the close of the act refines their relationship, continuing to develop a schism between them" (Dash 125).
Feeling she can no longer trust Claudius, Gertrude transfers her faith from one untrustworthy man to another: her son. Even though he has condemned her as a whore, during the fencing match Gertrude strives once again to become the virtuous mother Hamlet remembers. She mothers him when he battles with Laertes: "Here, Hamlet, take my napkin. Rub thy brows. / The Queen carouses to thy fortune, Hamlet" (5.2.231-32). Gertrude's alliances, however, are still confused. "In fact, Gertrude's death is symbolic of the internal disharmony caused by her divided loyalties. In order to honor Hamlet, she directly disobeys Claudius for the first time" (Smith 206). Gertrude drinks the poisoned cup without hesitation, which insinuates that she wants to break free from her husband. In denying Claudius' request, however, she still gives a response fashioned after the obedient and ready to please wife: "[. . .] my lord, I pray you pardon me" (5.2.234). Even in her rebellion Gertrude remains courteous and aware of her place in her marriage.

In the end, Gertrude is torn between husband and son. Even though her maternal instincts revived during the fencing match, in her dying breath it still seems she is not ready to break from her role as the dutiful wife: "Gertrude dies asserting that she is poisoned and calling out for her "[dear Hamlet," but still not attacking Claudius" (Smith 206). Even though Gertrude supposedly helped to drive her son to desperate measures, her new husband to murder, and her old husband to seek vengeance, she individually seems to be a character with a weak and battered will: "She is easily led, and she makes no decisions for herself except, ironically, the one that precipitates her death" (Smith 207). Gertrude must carry both the blame for disrupting the lives of the men around her and the responsibility of repairing them. Regrettably, Shakespeare never created a woman who could effectively tackle such a task.
Conclusion

Lady Macbeth and Gertrude have little in common; nonetheless, both women suffer the same predestined and dire fate. Lady Macbeth, who begins the play with the promise to become something either diabolically sinister or breathtakingly independent, ends the play in a lifeless heap on a cold castle floor. Gertrude, a woman who snubbed her nose at society by marrying her brother-in-law, buckles under the pressure of an overemotional son, and alas, also ends the play in a lifeless heap on a cold castle floor. Both women are blamed as the source of the evil deeds that sprout around them, yet both women prove to be frail, weak, and emotionally wrought. Moreover, both women set out to please the men in their lives, and in the process, sacrifice the more lively part of themselves. Shakespeare, after much debate, seems to have known the typical Renaissance woman rather well.

In these two women, Shakespeare ultimately failed, however, to write a woman outside the confines of her gender. In fact, he seemed to reinforce his society's perceptions of women through these two tragedies. Shakespeare sets high expectations for Lady Macbeth, but he falls short before she becomes what we envisioned for her in the beginning. Only then do we see what she was all along: "In spite of the view of some critics that Lady Macbeth is the evil force behind Macbeth's unwilling villainy, she seems to epitomize the sixteenth-century belief that women are passive, men active" (Klein 244). Lady Macbeth's insistence on Macbeth to be a man of action emphasizes her inability to be a woman of action. She is a Renaissance wife pushing her husband to become all he can become.
Lady Macbeth clearly cares more for her husband's desires than her own, as she never once in the play refers to what she would gain if she were to become queen. From the beginning of the action to the end, her focus is on helping Macbeth achieve his goals. In her attempts to be the perfect lady to her lord, Lady Macbeth's view of marriage and love becomes warped. She becomes, finally, a warning to all women to practice gentleness and restraint. One could argue that Shakespeare reduced her to no more than a visual aid, showing the Renaissance wife both what she is and what she is incapable of: "Lady Macbeth embodies in extremity [...] the Renaissance commonplace that women reflect God's image less clearly than men and that consequently women are less reasonable than men" (Klein 241). It is appropriate, therefore, that at the end Macbeth, the reasonable man, is gearing up for battle, while Lady Macbeth, the frantic woman, is lost in her own hellish nightmare, rubbing at blood that is not there.

As the ultimate insult to her femininity, Shakespeare diminishes Lady Macbeth to a raving lunatic before her death, never to redeem herself or once again become the devoted wife she once was: "With her husband out of reach and society in shambles, Lady Macbeth no longer has any reason for being" (Klein 247). All she wanted was to be in her husband's new world. By helping him get there, however, she has assured her exile: "At the end of the play she is completely removed from the masculine world she so desperately wanted to enter and which so effectively has excluded her" (Asp 167).

The end of Macbeth, of course, returns to the all important battle of good and evil. Unfortunately, women in literature are almost never allowed to be a part of this type of finale. Lady Macbeth is no exception.
Gertrude's supposed malevolence is also extinguished in order to make way for the betterment of men. At the end of *Hamlet*, Shakespeare once again returns to manly matters: politics and the stability of the kingdom. Gertrude is altogether erased from the picture, which leaves the reader unsure about whether or not she would have left Claudius to please Hamlet: "In the end, we do not know whether or not Gertrude herself has been morally reclaimed; it is the mark of the play's investment in Hamlet's fantasies that, even here, we are not allowed to see her as a separate person" (Adelman, *Suffocating* 34). In her last words she offers no insight to her true character, unless we take her exclusion of Claudius as proof of her devotion to her husband, or her warning to Hamlet as proof of her devotion to her son. Either way, her death seems to serve one man or the other, but not herself.

What is so disheartening about Gertrude is that her primary function throughout the play has been to reflect the emotions of the male characters. She has either been viewed as the neglectful mother or the incestuous adulterous. Both roles limit and betray the Gertrude we actually see. Though she shows signs of power fleetingly, there is never enough substance to her speech to divulge much of her personality. The only character she truly forms is one that is confused and divided: "She loves both Claudius and Hamlet, and their conflict leaves her bewildered and unhappy" (Smith 194). As she serves only to please these two men, one could hardly conclude that she was a feminine force to be reckoned with.

Though Hamlet views her as a woman who must be suspected, watched, and ultimately reformed, Gertrude never becomes, in the mind of the reader, the fraudulent woman her son so clearly sees. We are suspicious of her because of her hasty remarriage,
but we generally believe her when she expresses disgust and revulsion at the thought of killing her husband. We also do not despise her for marrying her brother-in-law, as their marriage seems to be based on mutual love and affection. Finally, her own words never give a glimpse of the sinful woman that has been so vividly created in her son's troubled mind: "[...] Gertrude may be the object of violent emotions, but she displays no passion, only quietly consistent concern for the well-being of the two other characters: Claudius, and most profoundly, Hamlet" (Smith 207). Even though her actions are questionable, her speech leads us to believe that Gertrude was originally unaware of Hamlet's pain or Claudius' deceit.

Despite the fact that Lady Macbeth and Gertrude start out with all the qualities that would make a Renaissance man quake at the knees, they end up reiterating their society's belief about women. Most certainly shaped by the society in which he lived, Shakespeare wrote women who were eventually punished for their independent actions or "masculine" ambitions. What the reader is left with at the end of each play is a female lead who never forms into a complete character; she only helps to compose the male characters who surround her:

Despite Shakespeare's sometimes astonishing moments of sympathetic engagement with his female characters, his ability to see the world from their point of view, his women will tend to be like Gertrude, more significant as screens for male fantasy than as independent characters making their own claim to dramatic reality; [...]. (Adelman, *Suffocating* 36)
Lady Macbeth will usually be seen as the shrew who, due to her overwhelming selfishness and ambition, pushed her husband to a murder he never wanted to commit, which triggered a series of events that would be the end of them both. Gertrude will most likely be perceived as the insensitive, adulterate mother, caring so little for her society, her son, and her own esteem that she committed incest to assure her personal satisfaction. Why are these women so often viewed this way? - because this is the way the men they loved saw them. Their opinion, of course, supersedes all else.
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