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Masking Femininity: Women and Power in Shakespeare's Macbeth, As You Like It, and Titus Andronicus

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Masking Femininity: Women and Power in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, *As You Like It*, and *Titus Andronicus*

Abstract

This paper analyzes the power that Lady Macbeth from *Macbeth*, Rosalind from *As You Like It*, and Tamora from *Titus Andronicus* assert and answers the questions of how women assert power in Shakespeare and the role gender plays in power.

Keywords

Shakespeare, Feminism

Subject Categories

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Masking Femininity: Women and Power in Shakespeare's
Macbeth, As You Like It, and Titus Andronicus

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Power. This theme occurs in so many of William Shakespeare's plays because it is essential to the creation of conflict within a storyline. The Plot of *Macbeth* would have never advanced if the prophecy given by the witches did not make Macbeth eager to take power away from Duncan and become king himself. Many of Shakespeare's female characters have also been eager to obtain power, however, attaining power was not as casual as it was for men. Women were not thrust into leadership roles as easily as men were; they had to seek them out. Lady Macbeth from *Macbeth*, Rosalind from *As You Like It*, and Tamora from *Titus Andronicus* are all examples of women who took action to control their own lives and the lives of those around them. This paper will analyze the power that these three characters assert and will answer the questions of how do women assert power in Shakespeare, and, what role does gender play in power? Shakespeare did not write any of his plays with the intention for them to be seen as feminist because that thought did not exist in his time. As Peter Erikson writes in his essay, "Shakespeare, Feminist Criticism Of," "Shakespeare cannot be usefully labeled either misogynist or feminist since he occupies an intermediate position between these extremes" (Erikson 1). The following analysis will be about *how* women are portrayed in Shakespeare's plays, not *why* he chose to portray them a certain way. Power will be defined, as the opportunity to take action and lead others in an outcome that is desirable to you. Using this definition, the women in these Shakespearean plays are able to assert power when they mask or ignore their femininity, whether purposefully or not. These women are only powerful when they can control the men around them, and they lose that power when men feel threatened by the effects of female speech and sexuality.

I. Lady Macbeth

Lady Macbeth is one of the most dynamic characters in all of Shakespeare because no other character is as manipulative as she is. For the first half of *Macbeth*, it is Lady Macbeth who puts herself in a position of power by taking the lead in the decision to murder Duncan. To get her power, Lady Macbeth not only openly rejects her femininity, but the thought of belonging to any gender at all.

The first time the audience meets Lady Macbeth is in 1.5. She has just read a letter from Macbeth telling her about the witches prophecy that he will be king and how he was just named Thane of Cawdor. Lady Macbeth knows this means Macbeth has to kill Duncan and she is immediately skeptical of Macbeth's abilities. She says:

Yet I do fear thy nature.

It is too full o'th' milk of human kindness

To catch the nearest way. Thou wouldst be great,

Art not without ambition, but without

The illness should attend it. (I.v.14-18)

It is interesting that Lady Macbeth thinks of Macbeth as being too kind, when the audience has only heard of him as a fierce warrior. In telling King Duncan of his victory against Macdonald, the Captain says, "For brave Macbeth- well he deserves that name!" (I.ii.16). Joan Larson Klein explains this behavior in her essay, "Lady Macbeth 'Infirm of Purpose.'" Klein states, "It is Lady Macbeth, not Macbeth who feels the bonds of kind, Lady Macbeth who has, as women were supposed to have, something of the milk of human kindness in her" (Klein 246). This shows Lady Macbeth's association with

femininity equating to weakness. Since, as Klein states, women were expected to have a certain level of kindness in them, Lady Macbeth is saying that Macbeth has too much womanliness to commit a murder. In return, she is also acknowledging the fact that she cannot commit the murder herself because as a woman, she naturally possesses too much kindness to do so. Lady Macbeth begs Macbeth to come home quickly so that she can persuade him to murder Duncan before he can talk himself out of it by saying, “That I may pour my spirits in thine ear/ And chastise with the valour of my tongue/ All that impedes thee from the golden round” (I. v. 24-26). Lady Macbeth is taking on the role of the aggressor in Duncan’s murder because she is already prepared to convince her husband to accept what the witches said his fate was. It is interesting that Shakespeare chose to use the phrase “with the valour of my tongue” because *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines valour it as, “worth or importance due to personal qualities or to rank,” and also, “the quality of mind which enables a person to face danger with boldness or firmness; courage or bravery, esp. as shown in warfare or conflict; valiancy, prowess” (“Valour”), Lady Macbeth has a high rank in their relationship, and also has the ability to face danger.

What follows this statement is one of Lady Macbeth’s most famous soliloquies.

She exclaims:

Come, you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,
And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full
Of direst cruelty. Make thick my blood,
Stop up th’access and passage of remorse, (I.v.38-42)

This passage is extremely important in understanding the logic behind Lady Macbeth's decisions. She is jealous that Macbeth is the one who gets to murder Duncan, when she does not think he is fit to. In an attempt to make her worthy of murder, she asks spirits to "unsex me here," implying that being a woman means she cannot be powerful. This is the first example of Lady Macbeth purposefully rejecting her femaleness to gain power. She continues her soliloquy saying, "Come to my woman's breasts, / And take my milk for gall, you murd'ring ministers," (I.v.45-46). According to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, "gall" is defined as "the secretion of the liver, bile" ("Gall"), which means Lady Macbeth is asking to be filled with something so bitter and severe it could poison an infant. This statement alludes to the "milk of human kindness" she spoke of before. Lady Macbeth is asking the spirits to take the milk, which she equates with human kindness, out of her breast. By replacing milk with poison in her breast, she is exchanging a form of nourishment and life to a cause of death. She thinks that the only thing holding her back from "direst cruelty" is being a woman. Janet Adelman takes a deeper look at Lady Macbeth's rejection of her femininity in her paper "Born of Woman: Fantasies of Maternal Power in *Macbeth*." Adelman states, "perhaps Lady Macbeth is asking the spirits to take her milk as gall, to nurse from her breast and find in her milk their sustaining poison...In these lines Lady Macbeth focuses on the culture's fear of maternal nursery" (Adelman, 40). By turning her milk into poison, Lady Macbeth is rejecting the idea that breasts function to feed infants. Being a nursing mother would make her a source of life so she negates that by filling her breasts with poison. Adelman states, "the metaphors in which Lady Macbeth frames the stopping up of remorse, that is, suggests that she imagines an attack on the reproductive passages of her own body, on what makes

her specifically female” (40). Lady Macbeth wishes to be rid of the association that nursing has with femaleness so that she can control the events around her. Since men cannot nurse, she is rejecting that fact that she can if she were to have a child, by filling her breasts with poison. Even though she is not literally unsexed, after this soliloquy, Lady Macbeth feels effects of her desired masculinity. When she speaks with Macbeth about Duncan’s stay, she immediately starts telling him what to do so that they can make their plan effective. She states, “To beguile the time, /Look like the time; bear welcome in your eye, /Your hand, your tongue; look like the innocent flower, /But be the serpent under’t” (I.v.61-64). Lady Macbeth is telling Macbeth to deceive Duncan and be something Macbeth is not. She is telling Macbeth that he needs to look innocent on the outside, but “the serpent under’t” on the inside. This statement is ironic because Lady Macbeth is doing exactly this by masking her femininity. As a woman, she appears to be innocent on the outside, but is really the creator of the entire plan. This allows her to instantly gain power over her husband.

Lady Macbeth continually has strength over Macbeth because she diminishes his manliness and her womanliness. When Macbeth starts having second thoughts about murdering Duncan, Lady Macbeth steps in and threatens his masculinity. She states, “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” (I. vii. 49-51). Lady Macbeth is saying that when Macbeth first agreed to kill Duncan he was manly, but now that he is questioning it, he has lost his manhood. To further her point, Lady Macbeth states, “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” (I. vii. 56-58). Here, Lady Macbeth states that she would

willingly kill her child if she promised to do so. In saying this, she is making Macbeth seem weak because he is going back on his promise that seems less significant now that Lady Macbeth has said that she would do it. Adelman states, “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” (42). Lady Macbeth has strength over Macbeth in this scene because she can make him imagine himself as a vulnerable infant. If he does not do what he promised, he will be the infant ripped from her breast.

Macbeth quickly starts to obey Lady Macbeth and even worships her. He states, “Bring forth men-children only, / For thy undaunted mettle should compose/ Nothing but males” (I.vii.72-74). *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines “mettle” as “a person's character, disposition, or temperament; the ‘stuff’ of which one is made, regarded as an indication of one's character” (“Mettle”), which shows how Macbeth is saying that her personality is fitting for producing males. Macbeth is saying that Lady Macbeth can only give birth to children who have the same strength that she has. He equates this quality to males, so he is effectively calling Lady Macbeth a male. Adelman states, “Macbeth imagines Lady Macbeth the mother to infants sharing her hardness, born in effect without vulnerability; in effect, he imagines her as male and then reconstitutes himself as the invulnerable male child of such a mother” (43). Gender roles are being twisted in many different ways in this scene, resulting in an established male gender of Lady Macbeth.

In her essay, "Fantasizing Infanticide: Lady Macbeth and the Murdering Mother in Early Modern England" Stephanie Chamberlain writes about the expectations of women in Shakespeare’s time. She defines infanticide as “a crime against both person

and lineage” (Chamberlain 75). Killing a child is a crime against a person and a lineage because men rely on women to give birth so that their lineage can go on. Chamberlain states, “Lady Macbeth’s infanticidal fantasy does directly manipulate the murder of Duncan, altering in turn the body politic. The hypothetical murder of this would be child thus comes to represent the demise not only of Macbeth’s moral and political legitimacy within the tyrannized world of the play, but that of his line itself” (82). By stating her willingness to kill her own child, Lady Macbeth is effectively ending any chance of lineage for Macbeth. However, she is not directly using her femaleness to control Macbeth, she is looking for a way out of the trap of the female gender. Chamberlain states, “While on one hand mothers were praised for a selfless devotion to their children, they were likewise condemned for harming the innocents entrusted to their care” (73). Lady Macbeth refuses to accept this standard, which is why she invokes the image of killing her innocent child. Chamberlain states, “Although she may well fantasize killing an infant, Lady Macbeth expressly rejects the masculine power which would allow her to wield a dagger... what she craves instead is an alternative gender identity, one which will allow her to slip free of the emotional as well as cultural constraint governing women” (79-80). Although Macbeth equates masculinity with power, in this scene, all Lady Macbeth wants is to not have the pressures of femininity on her. This is why she rejects the feminine standard of being a loving and protecting mother and is able to persuade Macbeth to kill Duncan.

Feminine qualities are seen less in Lady Macbeth than they are in some of the male characters in the play. King Duncan is the king of Scotland and therefore holds the power that Macbeth strives for. The death of Duncan represents the death of the

androgynous parent, which confuses gender roles in the play even more. Duncan does not have a wife, and his two sons do not have a mother. Adelman states, “he is the center of authority, the source of lineage and honor, the giver of name and gift; but he is also the source of all nurturance, planting the children to his throne and making them grow” (Adelman, 36). Macbeth is unsure about wanting to kill Duncan at first because Macbeth has responded so well to Duncan’s kindness. After Macbeth’s actions in battle, Duncan says to him, “O worthiest cousin, / The sin of my ingratitude even now/ Was heavy on me!” (I. iv.14-16). Duncan immediately thanks Macbeth for his service and offers him to be the new Thane of Cawdor which gives Duncan characteristics typically associated with females. Adelman states, “Hardened by Lady Macbeth to regard maleness and violence as equivalent, that is, Macbeth responds to Duncan’s idealized milky gentleness as though it were evidence of his femaleness” (38). Duncan is the opposite of Lady Macbeth because he can be powerful and ruthless, but also nurturing and kind. Since it is ultimately his feminine attributes that lead to his downfall, he does not succeed as the androgynous parent.

When speaking about the traitor, former Thane of Cawdor, Duncan says, “There’s no art/ To find the mind’s construction in the face” (I.iv.12-13). Adelman explains that Duncan “is nonetheless killed for his womanish softness, his childish trust, his inability to read men’s minds in their faces, his reliance on the fighting of sons who can rebel against him” (37). Here the play is suggesting that any hint of compassion will lead to a character’s downfall, which is seen later in Lady Macbeth. Throughout the play Macbeth struggles with possessing the characteristics of being a man, and has a wife that constantly reminds him that he is not man enough. Adelman states, “the reconstruction of

manhood becomes a central problem of the play in part...because the vision of manhood embodied in Duncan has already failed at the play's beginning" (38). Duncan's femininity blurred the lines between genders. The witches and Lady Macbeth also continue to question the roles of gender in *Macbeth*.

The witches in *Macbeth* challenge gender expectations early on in the play. When Banquo first meets them he says, "You should be women,/ And yet your beards forbid me to interpret/ That you are so" (I.iii.43-45). Chamberlain explains, "It is their self-assured authority more than their bizarre physical appearance which destabilizes the patriarchal world of the play" (Chamberlain 80). It is not the witch's femininity or masculinity that makes them powerful; it is their confidence in what they are saying that compels Macbeth and Banquo.

Macbeth's interpretation of the witch's prophecy is to use force to get the crown. The witches and Lady Macbeth showed power by creating an unknowable gender identity and have successfully controlled Macbeth by doing so. Adelman states, "Largely though Macbeth's relationship to them, the play becomes a representation of primitive fears about male identity and autonomy itself, about those looming female presences who threaten to control one's action and one's mind, to constitute one's very self, even at a distance" (34). Macbeth fears the witches and Lady Macbeth because they make him question his own gender identity by not identifying with a gender of their own. As Adelman states, Macbeth "wields the bloody axe in an attempt to escape their dominion over him" (36). The prophecy from the witches and the pressure from Lady Macbeth are enough to convince Macbeth that in order to get power and be a man, he must kill Duncan. As Frances Elizabeth Dolan states in her book, *Dangerous Familiars*:

Representations of Domestic Crime in England, 1550-1700, “Macbeth uses female characters—the witches and Lady Macbeth- to instill ambition and agency as associated with violence” (Dolan 227). The forces of Lady Macbeth and the witches create power-hungry, murdering Macbeth because they convince him that in order to be a man he must be violent. Once Macbeth has killed Duncan, the power of Lady Macbeth quickly lessens.

When everyone has found out about Duncan’s murder, Lady Macbeth quickly loses her place in rank that she had before. As part of an act, Lady Macbeth faints, exclaiming, “Help me hence, ho!” (II.iii.115). Even though this is her acting, fainting is a sign of weakness, which shows Lady Macbeth’s diminishing power. Klein states, “As soon as Duncan’s murder is public fact, Lady Macbeth begins to lose her place in society and her position at home. She does so because there is no room for her in the exclusively male world of treason and revenge” (Klein 248). As involved as Lady Macbeth was in Duncan’s murder, Macbeth starts to exclude her from his future plans. When she asks what he is going to do about Banquo and Fleance, Macbeth says, “Be innocent of the knowledge, dearest chuck, / Till thou applaud the deed” (III.ii.46-47). Now that Macbeth has masculine power, Lady Macbeth’s role goes back to the stereotypical female. Lady Macbeth has been reduced from a co-conspirator to an admirer, and Macbeth begins to isolate her from the rest of the events in the play.

Lady Macbeth is not only isolated from Macbeth, but from other women throughout the play. Klein states:

Lady Macbeth was never seen with friends or woman-servants in whose presence she could take comfort. Even when she appeared in company, she was the only woman there. Consequently, once she begins to lose her

husband, she has neither person nor occupation to stave off the visiting's of nature. (Klein 249)

Once Macbeth goes off on his own, Lady Macbeth starts to lose her sense of purpose and power. The last time the audience hears Lady Macbeth talk before her final scene is during the banquet scene when Macbeth has already had Banquo murdered without her knowledge. She tries to control Macbeth during the party stating, "Are you a man?" (III.iv.58), but she is not as successful as she was in her past. Macbeth's response is more confident than before saying, "Ay, and a bold one, that dare look on that/ Which might appall the devil" (III.iv.58-59). Macbeth alienates her from his power, which eventually drives Lady Macbeth mad.

In 5.1, a doctor and gentlewoman enter and discuss the state of Lady Macbeth as she wanders the halls sleepwalking. The gentlewoman tells the doctor to "Observe her. Stand close" (V.i.17). Lady Macbeth is no longer speaking for herself, she is being observed like a patient. Carol Thomas Neely writes in her essay, "'Documents in Madness': Reading Madness and Gender in Shakespeare's Tragedies and Early Modern Culture," "The alienation of Lady Macbeth in sleepwalking is, like Ophelia's, psychologized represented by means of quoted speech, read by representatives of the community, associated with symbolic purification, and it culminates in suicide" (Neely 327). The fact that Lady Macbeth does not get a chance to defend her actions through her own explanation shows how quickly her power has diminished.

After watching her sleepwalk, the doctor says, "This disease is beyond my practice" (V.i.49). Lady Macbeth has gone mad with the guilt she has for Duncan and Banquo's murders. The guilt, compassion, and fear that she chastised Macbeth for

throughout the play have now engulfed her. She even accepts her womanliness when she says, “The Thane of Fife has a wife. Where is she/now?” (V.i.36-37). She is admitting that she is a woman and fears the same fate as the wife of the Thane of Fife.

Macbeth hardly even notices his queen’s disappearance and is not shaken when he learns that she is dead. He states upon hearing the news, “She should have died thereafter. /There would have been a time for such a word” (V.v.17-18). This shows the true evolution of Lady Macbeth’s character. When she ignored her femininity, she had complete power over Macbeth and he was dependent upon her. Once she started feeling guilty for her crimes, she lost control and killed herself, becoming irrelevant to the now powerful Macbeth. Adelman states:

Initially construed as all-powerful, the women virtually disappear at the end, Lady Macbeth becoming so diminished a character that we scarcely trouble to ask ourselves whether the report of her suicide is accurate or not, the witches literally gone from the stage and so diminished in psychic power that Macbeth never mentions them and blames his defeat only on the equivocation of their male masters, the fiends; even Lady Macduff exists only to disappear. (Adelman 49)

Lady Macbeth is never able to gain the full power she initially coveted. Klein concludes her analysis of Lady Macbeth saying, “As long as she lives, Lady Macbeth is never unsexed in the only way she wanted to be unsexed—able to act with the cruelty she ignorantly and perversely identified with male strength” (Klein 252-253). Lady Macbeth was not successful in her fight for power because she lost the will to overcome feminine

stereotypes. The ending of the play ultimately diminishes any ability for females to have power.

The only way Macbeth can be defeated is by a man not born from a woman. The witches state, “Laugh to scorn/ The power of man, for none of woman born/ Shall harm Macbeth” (IV.i.95-97). Since Macduff was born from a cesarean section, he was not technically “born” from a woman. The significance of the downfall of Macbeth is very important to the representation of women in the play. By equating someone born from a woman to weakness, Shakespeare diminishes the power women have to bring life into the world. Adelman states that the final solution “is to imagine a birth entirely exempt from women, to imagine in effect an all-male family, composed of nothing but males, in which the father is fully restored to power” (Adelman 44). Childbirth, an act that women can do that men cannot, is made less significant by the witches prophecy. Macduff becomes a super-human man because he came into the world without the help of a woman. Adelman states, “repeated seven times, the phrase ‘born to woman’ with its variants begins to carry for Macbeth the meaning ‘vulnerable’, as though vulnerability itself is the taint deriving from woman” (45). The way women lose power in Shakespeare is when men are threatened by the power of their femininity. Chamberlain states, “The caesarean birth represents...a conquest over the maternal body which otherwise threatens to consume the precious offspring. In doing so, it likewise comes to represent the preservation of the patrilineage itself” (Chamberlain 85). The play ends with full masculine power because of the witches prophecy. Adelman states, “the play will finally reimagine autonomous male identity, but only through the ruthless excision of all female presence, its own peculiar satisfaction of the witches’ prophecy” (Adelman 34). Any form of femininity

that usually gives a female power does not do so in *Macbeth*. Women in *Macbeth* have to mask their femininity in order to get power. Lady Macbeth is initially very successful at rejecting her femaleness. She is in control of her own and Macbeth's actions. Once Duncan is murdered, Macbeth gains back his confidence and subjects Lady Macbeth to a lesser role. This shows that the power that comes with masking femininity is only temporary and cannot be kept for an extended period of time. As seen from the final prophecy, there is no power in womanliness in *Macbeth*.

II. Rosalind

Out of all of Shakespeare's plays, there is not one named solely after a woman. The closest examples are *Romeo and Juliet* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, but there is no play named after a singular female character. This fact is important when it relates to the play *As You Like It*. The story revolves around the character of Rosalind by the way she manipulates Orlando and some of the other characters in the play. Rosalind has all the power in *As You Like It*, because she takes the initiative to disguise herself as a man named Ganymede so she can easily persuade those around her. As Clara Claiborne Park states in her essay "As We Like It: How a Girl can be Smart and Still Popular," "Rosalind's decisions control the progress of *As You Like It*, and it is by her agency that the four couples assemble in the concluding nuptial dance" (Park 107). It is Rosalind's independent mind and reliance on no one but herself that give her the drive to bring all of the couples together at the end of the play, but it is the masking of her femininity that allows for it to happen.

The first time the audience meets Rosalind she is upset about the banishment of her father. She says to Celia, “Unless you could teach me/ to forget a banished father you must not learn me how to/ remember any extraordinary pleasure” (I.ii.3-5). She is clearly upset about the banishment of her father, which is why Celia is trying to cheer her up. Interestingly, in the next scene, after Rosalind meets Orlando, she has something very different on her mind. Rosalind meets Orlando after she sees him wrestling. This display of masculinity causes her to say to Orlando, “Sir, you have wrestled well, and overthrown/ More than your enemies” (I. ii. 220-221). Rosalind is clearly attracted to Orlando’s sexuality. When Celia asks her if her silence is all because of her father, Rosalind responds, “No, some of it is for my child’s father” (I.iii.9). After just meeting Orlando, Rosalind is already in love with him, and talking about him like he is the father of her future child. This scene is important to note because it shows that Rosalind chooses Orlando on her own accord. Her father is not a part of her life at this time, and she chooses to fall in love with and marry Orlando by herself. Louis Adrian Montrose states in his essay, “ ‘The Place of a Brother’ in *As You Like It*: Social Process and Comic Form,” “Rosalind avoids her father’s recognition and establishes her own household within the forest; Orlando desires the Duke’s recognition and gladly serves him in his forest-court” (Montrose 48). Already the idea of gender roles are being switched because Orlando craves the acceptance of the patriarchy while Rosalind does not. Phyllis Rackin states in her book, *Shakespeare and Women*, “Rosalind’s marriage to Orlando is motivated not by her father’s wishes but by her own long-standing desire” (Rackin 15). In fact, none of the marriages in the play are arranged by a father. Rosalind, not her father, gives herself away to Orlando when she says, “To you I give myself” (V. iv. 106).

Rosalind was able to make these decisions for herself by because of the actions she took as Ganymede.

Rosalind knew right away after she was banished that she would not survive in the woods dressed as a woman. She states, “Beauty provoketh thieves sooner than gold” (I.iii.104), which is why she comes up with the idea of dressing as a man. Rosalind says:

Were it not better,
Because that I am more than common tall,
That I did suit me all points like a man,
A gallant curtal-axe upon my thigh,
A boar-spear in my hand, and in my heart,
Lie there what hidden woman’s fear there will.
We’ll have a swashing and a martial outside,
As many other mannish cowards have,
That do outface it with their semblances. (I. iii. 108-116)

Rosalind herself equates femininity with weakness when she says this. She feels that she has to cover up her womanliness so that she does not feel the fear that the forest will offer her. She could have gone into the forest with a curtal-axe and a boar-spear, but she can only use those if she is dressed as a man. Celia follows up with the statement by saying, “Now go we in content, /To liberty, and not to banishment” (I. iii.131-132). Here she is saying that being a man in the woods is more liberating than being a woman in the security of their home. This quote also shows how men had more freedom than women. It was acceptable for a man to venture off into the woods, while for a woman it was dangerous and uncommon. When Rosalind is dressed as Ganymede she says, “I could

find in my heart to disgrace my mans apparel/ and to cry like a woman” (II. iv. 3-4).

Rosalind is saying that it would be unlike her gender as a man to cry, making it a singularly feminine emotion. The implications of what gender roles mean are tested in Rosalind and Orlando’s relationship.

As characters, Rosalind and Orlando’s purposes overlap each other throughout the play. As Margaret Boerner Beckman states in her essay, “The Figure of Rosalind in *As You Like It*,” “it is Rosalind who intelligently and realistically speaks from the head...and it is Orlando, the man, who speaks from the heart” (Beckman 47). An example of this is when Rosalind, disguised as Ganymede, and Orlando meet in the forest and converse about Orlando’s love for Rosalind. Rosalind/Ganymede knows of a way to cure Orlando of his lovesickness. Rosalind/Ganymede states, “And this I/ cured him, and this way will I take upon me to wash your liver/ as clean as a sound sheep’s heart, that there shall not be one/ spot of love in’t” (III. iii. 375-378). This approach to love that Rosalind/Ganymede insists upon is very intellectual and thought out; a decision made with the head, a characteristic typically associated with men. Orlando’s response to this comment is, “I would not be cured, youth” (III. iii. 379). Orlando is very emotional and making decisions with his heart, which was traditionally associated with women. Celia even tells Rosalind later on, “You have simply misused our sex in your love-prate” (IV. i. 205-206), which shows that women were not thought of as leaders or decision makers, which is the role that Rosalind takes on throughout the play.

Rosalind is the most dynamic of the couple because of the multiple sides the audience sees of her. Carol Thomas Neely states in her book, *Distracted Subjects: Madness and Gender in Shakespeare and Early Modern Culture*, Rosalind plays:

the dependent girlfriend with Celia in Act I; the protective youth, Ganymede, who parodies the self-importance adolescent boys project hopefully around girls; another Ganymede with Orlando—the youthful misogynist, wise in the ways of women and love; the aggressively promiscuous wife, Rosalind; the woman in love who weeps and faints; and the self-subordinating daughter and wife. (Neely 126)

The many roles that Rosalind plays contribute to the complex relationship she has with femininity. Beckman states, “we see her both as a protecting masculine figure and as the faint-hearted female figure” (Beckman 47). When talking to Celia in the forest about Orlando, Rosalind suddenly becomes overcome with emotion and says:

What did he when thou sawest him? What said he? How
looked he? Wherein went he? What makes he here? Did he
ask for me? Where remains he? How parted he with thee? And
when shalt thou see him again? Answer me in one word. (III. ii. 200-203)

Rosalind does not have control over her situation when she acts like this. It is when she takes charge as Ganymede that she more composed. When Rosalind, disguised as Ganymede tells Orlando to come over and pretend Ganymede is Rosalind, she is able to get the outcome she desires by controlling Orlando. When Orlando is an hour late for this meeting she says, “Nay, an you be so tardy, come no more in my sight. I had as life be wooed of a snail” (IV. i. 45-46). When Rosalind is disguised as Ganymede, she shows more confidence than when she is just herself. When Rosalind is alone with Celia thinking about Orlando, she is completely distraught and terrified that he will not love her. The fact alone that Rosalind plays three different characters at once shows the

complexity and importance of her character over Orlando. Beckman states, “She has a more complicated function in the play than Orlando, and in some sense she alone stands for the same thing that they stand for as a couple” (47). When she is with Orlando pretending to be Ganymede, she calls him out for all of his wrongdoings and makes him answer to her. Park states, “dressed as a man, a nubile woman can go places and do things she couldn’t do otherwise...once Rosalind is disguised as a man, she can be as saucy and self assertive as she likes” (Park 108). An example of this is in her interactions with Silvius and Phoebe. Rosalind says to Phoebe, “What though you have no beauty-/ As, by my faith, I see no more in you/ Than without candle may go dark to bed” (III. v. 38-40). Rosalind is not afraid to speak her mind here because by masking her femininity she has power over the other characters and is able to get away with saying whatever she wants. This shows that men had more freedom than women in Shakespeare. Rosalind was not questioned for her statement to Phoebe because men had more liberty to speak their minds. Park states, “the characters, male and female, will accept her behavior because it does not offend their sense of propriety; the audience, male and female, because they know she’s playing a role” (108). As a man, Rosalind has more power and authority and she starts to lose that when she stops dressing up as Ganymede.

In 5.2, Rosalind, dressed as Ganymede is speaking with Orlando about his love for Rosalind and his need to marry her soon. Rosalind again takes control of the situation, but does so in a different way than before. She states, “Believe then, if you please, that I can do strange things” (V.ii.52-53), and says, “I am a magician” (V.ii.63). This sudden proclamation of magical powers seems strange because there is no other magic in the play. Beckman states, “it therefore seems strange that Shakespeare has Rosalind resolve

the plot by appearing to work magic rather than by simply stripping off her disguise” (Beckman 44). Rosalind uses magic while still in her Ganymede disguise so she is able to convince all the others that what she says is true. She says to Phoebe, Orlando, and Silvius:

(To Silvius) I will help you if I can.

(To Phoebe) I would love you if I could. – Tomorrow meet me all together. (To Phoebe) I will marry you if ever I marry a woman, and I’ll be married tomorrow. (To Orlando) I will satisfy you if ever I satisfy man, and you shall be married tomorrow (V.iii.102-107).

Rosalind is able to get away with calling herself a magician because she has the power of a man’s body. Beckman states, “Rosalind ends the play as a magician because throughout the whole play she has made extraordinary, seemingly impossible—and—thus ‘magical’ – conjunctions between contrary things” (44). This is Rosalind’s last defining moment as Ganymede before she takes off her disguise and loses her power to the patriarchy.

Rosalind finally emerges as herself in the final wedding scene and immediately gives up all the power she attained throughout the play. Penny Gay states in her book *As She Likes It: Shakespeare’s Unruly Women*, “Rosalind’s last two speeches in the play’s narrative are a ritual of voluntary re-entry into the patriarchy” (Gay 48). Gay is referring to Rosalind’s line, “To you I give myself, for I am yours” (V.iv.106). Rosalind repeats this phrase once to the Duke, and once to Orlando. In doing so she is giving up the rights and power that she had by giving them to the men in her life.

The final word the audience hears from Rosalind is in the epilogue. She starts off by saying, “It is not the fashion to see the lady/ the epilogue” (Epilogue 1-2), pointing out that she is breaking gender norms by speaking at that moment. She has already given her power away to Orlando and the Duke, so by speaking the epilogue as herself, she is continuing on after having given that power away. She addresses men and women separately saying, “I charge you, O women, for the/ love you bear to men, to like as much of this play as please you” (Epilogue 10-11). She also asks the same of the men in the audience. Rackin responds to this epilogue stating, “it addresses female and man playgoers separately, beginning with women...thus suggesting that the ‘you’ in the play’s title refers primarily to them” (Rackin 46-47). In the end, Rosalind transfers her power to the women of the audience to decide how much they want to applaud the performance. In *As You Like It*, Rosalind has power once she disguises herself as Ganymede. In other Shakespeare plays like *Titus Andronicus*, power is coveted and fought for.

III. Tamora

The action that drives the plot of *Titus Andronicus* starts right away in 1.1 of the play. Titus enters with four of his living sons, and two of his dead sons, followed by Tamora, Queen of the Goths, and her three sons. Titus has just been nominated to be Emperor of Rome, and his first order is to sacrifice Tamora’s oldest son, Alarbus, in exchange for Titus’s own dead children. Tamora pleads for Titus to spare her son’s life saying, “A mother’s tears in passion for her son-/ And if thy sons were ever dear to thee, / O, think my son to be as dear to me!” (I. i. 106-108). Tamora kneels and cries, begging Titus to reconsider, but he does not saying, “To this your son is marked, and die he must”

(I. i. 125). This act is what drives Tamora to be the malicious, vengeful character she is through the rest of the play.

Tamora is a character often associated with lust and sexuality in Shakespeare. Although she does have sexual relations with Aaron the Moor, it is not her sexuality that drives her or gives her power. Tamora's villainy unfolds from her reaction to the horror of her son's death by torture, dismemberment, and fire. In Deborah Willis's essay, "'The Gnawing Vulture': Revenge, Trauma Theory, and *Titus Andronicus*," she states, "It is as if the tenderhearted mother simply dies with Alarbus and in her place stands an insulted, vindictive queen" (Willis 38). Tamora's actions throughout the rest of the play are a result of her need to get revenge on Titus.

Titus refuses the position of emperor and insists that Saturninus accepts it because he is the eldest son. In return, Saturninus says he will take Titus's daughter Lavinia as his empress, but she refuses and runs away with Bassianus, leaving Tamora to become the new empress. When Lavinia escapes with Bassianus, her brother Mutius comes to her aid, and Titus kills him in a rage. In his essay, "Interpreting" her Martyr'd Signs": Gender and Tragedy in *Titus Andronicus*," Douglas Green states, "The murder of Mutius gives weight to her (Tamora) view of Titus' Roman moral code—his strict adherence to the oppressive laws of his fathers, and his own claim to absolute paternal authority. We know Titus, and sometimes Titus even knows himself, by his mirror image in Tamora" (Green 320). Tamora starts to mirror Titus after the murder of her son. She starts rejecting her feminine nature and sexuality, which she is so well known for, and finds real power in replicating the actions of men around her. Green states:

When Tamora reappears as Revenge, she reminds us not only that her own unforgiving will, so cruel in the scene with Lavinia, has made her the very essence of evil, but also that she has had as much cause for vengeance as has Titus...In one sense, Tamora embodies dangers already inherent in the rule of men like Saturninus, Titus, and even Marcus. (321)

To be able to understand how Tamora acquires power, it is necessary to analyze how she loses power.

The threat of female sexuality is shown clearly in Tamora, but it is not what gives her power. In her essay, "Sexuality as a Signifier for Power Relations: Using Lavinia, of Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*", Bernice Harris discusses the reasoning behind the fear of female sexuality. She states, "A woman's ability to have multiple orgasms probably accounted for a more serious concern—that a woman's sexual needs would drive her to illicit sexual couplings" (Harris 387). Whenever Tamora uses her sexuality, she is not able to elicit any sense of power. When Tamora is trying to seduce Aaron she says, "And after conflict such as was supposed/ The wand'ring prince and Dido once enjoyed" (II. iii. 21-22). Tamora is not able to control Aaron with her sexuality. In response he says:

Madam, though Venus govern your desires,
Saturn is dominator over mine.
What signifies my deadly-standing eye,
My silence, and my cloudy melancholy,
My fleece of woolly hair that now uncurls
Even as an adder when she doth unroll
To do some fatal execution?

No, madam, these are no venereal signs.

Vengeance is in my heart, death in my hand,

Blood and revenge are hammering in my head. (II. iii. 30-39)

Aaron instantly rejected the power Tamora was trying to achieve through her sexuality. David Willbern states in his essay "Rape and Revenge in *Titus Andronicus*," "Aaron rejects her proposition while simultaneously affirming his own threatened phallic potency...Revenge is both a substitute for sexuality and a defense against it" (Willbern 166). This implies that Tamora focuses on her revenge against Titus because her sexuality is not working with Aaron. She realizes that she does not have as much power using her sexuality as she does masking her femininity. Willis states, "Tamora's lustful nature at first appears to distract her from the project of revenge" (Willis 39). Tamora is seducing Aaron again when Bassianus and Lavinia find them in the woods and start belittling her for their relationship. It is this rejection of her femaleness that causes Lavinia to regain focus on revenge. Tamora loses the power she had over Aaron in this scene because she poses the threat of female sexuality. It is only when she masks her femaleness in the rape scene that she is able to take control of the events around her.

Tamora gets the most brutal form of revenge against Titus in her son's rape of Lavinia. The rape is inspired by Aaron the Moor, but Tamora does not hesitate to support the violent violation of Titus's only daughter. After Bassianus is killed, Lavinia begs Tamora to take her life as well. She says, "O Tamora, be called a gentle queen, / And with thine own hands kill me in this place" (II. iii. 168-169). Lavinia's resort to begging only reminds Tamora of when she begged Titus to spare her sons life and he ignored her. Judith Karr writes in her essay, "The Pleas in *Titus Andronicus*," "When Lavinia

tearfully pleads with Tamora for mercy, Tamora's heart is hardened once and for all as Lavinia commits the tactical error of reminding Tamora that Titus was merciful in sparing the Queen's life. Tamora only remembers Titus' refusal, despite her tears, to spare her child; she will never, therefore, be 'called a gentle queen' and save Titus' child" (Karr 279). As the ultimate act of revenge, Tamora tells Chiron and Demetrius:

Hadst thou in person ne'er offended me
Even for his sake am I pitiless.
Remember, boys, I poured forth tears in vain
To save your brother from the sacrifice,
But fierce Andronicus would not relent.
Therefore away with her, and use her as you will-
The worse to her, the better loved of me. (II. iii. 161-167)

Lavinia's pleading only encourages Tamora's urge for revenge on Titus, which makes the line "the worse to her, the better loved of me" all the more eerie. She does not get this power by using her femaleness, Lavinia reminds her several times that they are both women so she should spare her, and Tamora rejects any sense of femaleness. Lavinia says, "O Tamora, thou bearest a woman's face-" (II. iii. 136), and "No grace, no womanhood-ah, beastly creature, / The blot and enemy to our general name" (II. iii. 182-183). Lavinia is calling Tamora a disgrace of a woman because women should help each other, especially in a case of sexual violence. In her essay, "Shakespeare and the Soil of Rape", Catharine Stimpson says, "She (Tamora) ignores the plaintive cry...and denies, as Lady Macbeth will do, her own femaleness" (Stimpson 60). Tamora's need for revenge has come full circle, bringing back the mirror image of herself and Titus. Willis states,

“Tamora reclaims dominance through enacting a fantasy of undoing the past through reversal, purging her own feelings of humiliation and powerlessness by projecting them onto Titus” (Willis 41). The result of the rape of Lavinia put Tamora in a position of higher power than Titus and gives Lavinia a new sense of worth.

Since Lavinia’s virginity represented power for Titus, her rape is a shame upon their family. Harris states, “As a virgin maid or chaste wife she is valuable and desired property and politically very useful. Once raped, her ability to serve as a mark of authority or power is undone” (Harris 391). Once Lavinia is able to communicate her situation to her father, she still does not have enough power to decide what is going to happen to her. Lavinia writes the words “Stuprum- Chiron- Demetrius” (IV. i. 77), in the ground to indicate to Titus and Marcus that Chiron and Demetrius have raped her. Marcus says, “That we will prosecute by good advice. Mortal revenge upon these traitorous Goths, / And see their blood, or die with this reproach” (IV. i. 91-93). Before Lavinia can get any input on what she wants to happen next, the men are off planning their revenge. Green states, “Though Lavinia names crime and criminals, only Titus and the other male family members can decide on revenge” (Green 325). This shows that Lavinia’s rape was not about her; it was about Titus’ power. In the book *Roman Shakespeare: Warriors, Wounds and Women* Coppélia Kahn writes, “Even when she still had her hands, Lavinia’s use of them was limited to lute- playing and sewing ‘tedious samplers,’ the ornaments of her chastity; she has no access to agency” (Kahn 61). Although Lavinia’s muteness represents powerlessness, she now possesses the threat of female speech. Green states, “Lavinia’s speech—or any uncurtailed mode of signification on her part—could expose to the public (and to the audience) her subjection to the

arbitrary wills of men, to the contradictory desires of father, husband, rival, fiancé, brothers, and rapists. Her voice might not only bring down Chiron, Demetrius, Aaron, and Tamora, but might also accuse Titus as well” (Green 323). Suddenly, Lavinia poses the threat of female power, and the shame of having sex out of wedlock, which is why her father kills her. Titus says, “Die, die, Lavinia, and thy shame with thee” (V. iii. 45). The damage that Lavinia could have done made her dangerous, showing how men in Shakespeare are afraid of powerful women.

The reason Lavinia was an object of power at the beginning of the play was because of her virginity. Titus says to her, “Lavinia, live; outlive thy father’s days/ And fame’s eternal date, for virtue’s praise”(I. i. 167-168). Titus is telling Lavinia to stay virtuous because her virginity is a sign of his political power. As long as Lavinia is a virgin, more men will want to marry her and Titus has the power to choose who does. When Lavinia enters the play again with her hands and tongue cut off, she no longer represents the same power as she did before. Stimpson states, “In Shakespeare, only well-born women are raped, their violation becomes one of property, status, and symbolic worth as well” (Stimpson 58). The rape of Lavinia is not only an attack on Titus’s family, but also an attack on his power. In his reaction to Lavinia’s state, Titus says, “Here stands my other son, a banished man, / And here my brother, weeping at my woes. / But that which gives my soul the greatest spurn. Is dear Lavinia, dearer than my soul” (III. i. 99-102). Kahn writes, “In this placing dramatic emphasis on her injuries, rather than on the murder of her brothers, Shakespeare calls attention to the role of women in Rome’s sexual politics” (Kahn 49). Titus’s main worry is not about the lives in his family that he has lost or might lose, but of the impact Lavinia’s rape will have on social order. Since

Lavinia is no longer a virgin, she has no worth to Titus. Her chastity is what gave her worth and without that, she no longer has the place in social order that she did before.

Titus Andronicus starts out with a transfer of power. A new emperor of Rome must be named, and Lavinia is a critical piece in that puzzle. Harris writes, “Lavinia’s introduction into the play is as a device to effect a transfer of power” (Harris 385).

Lavinia is introduced by Bassianus saying, “Gracious Lavinia, Rome’s rich ornament” (I. i. 53), which reduces her to a token or jewel. When Saturninus accepts the position of emperor, he tells Titus that he will make Lavinia his empress for his gratitude. Saturninus says, “Lavinia will I make my empress, / Rome’s royal mistress, mistress of my heart” (I. i. 240-241). Even though Lavinia is in love with Bassianus, she is used as a piece of an agreement. Titus also gives Saturninus Tamora stating, “Receive them, then, the tribute that I owe” (I. i. 251). This is an example of Titus using women as an object of power. Harris explains how Tamora owns and likes her sexuality; however, “she is transferred as if she were property, because she refuses to be owned sexually, she remains a threat to social order” (388). This is an early example of how women lose their power in Shakespeare when men are threatened by their sexuality. Men are threatened by Tamora because she is not the object of power for anyone like Lavinia is. Tamora’s sexuality makes her a threat to society because as a single woman she is not sexually owned by anyone and can therefore have relations with whomever she pleases. Tamora is offered to Saturninus so that she will be grounded with a husband instead of being a threat of a single sexual woman. Lavinia’s virginity is a sign of power for the men around her. Harris states, “Lavinia is a means by which power is marked as masculine and is then transferred and circulated” (385). Since Lavinia is a symbol of power for men, Harris

states, “That Lavinia might make choices on her own functions even more to destabilize power arrangements and negotiations. Thus Lavinia can potentially function as a primary agent for the construction of masculine power and authority for any one of them (Titus, Bassianus, Saturninus)” (390). Lavinia is being used for the power of her chastity, and Tamora is being used because of the threat of her sexuality. Saturninus says of Tamora, “A goodly lady, trust me, of the hue/ That I would choose were I to choose anew” (I. i. 261). Women’s sexuality is what makes them an object of power; it does not give them any agency themselves. Even though Lavinia was one of the most coveted women in Rome, she did not get to decide whom she married. When she ran away with Bassianus, it was a huge insult and embarrassment to Titus because to him, Lavinia was to marry as a negotiation, not out of love. The desire to tame Tamora’s sexuality was seen when Titus offered her to Saturninus. Tamora’s sexuality did not give her power; it made her an object of power because the men around her wanted to tame her sexuality.

Another way women in *Titus Andronicus* are sexualized is by the feminization of Rome. In the beginning of the play, Marcus personifies Rome stating, “That you withdraw you and abate your strength, / Dismiss your followers, and, as suitors should, / Plead your deserts in peace and humbleness” (I. i. 43-45). Marcus is saying that Rome has suitors like a woman. Here, Rome is similar to Lavinia at the beginning of the play. Lavinia had multiple suitors and whoever won her would have more power than those that did not. At the beginning of the play, the role of emperor of Rome is open and the position has many suitors. Whoever ends up getting that position will have more power than those that did not. Equating Rome to a woman means that women can be used as an opportunity for societal advancement. Rome is again personified when a Roman Lord

says, "Let Rome herself be bane unto herself" (V. iii. 73). Willbern connects the feminization of Rome to the interpretation of Tamora and Lavinia stating, "Both Lavinia and Tamora may be seen as symbolic personifications of female Rome. They enact contrasting aspects: the pure and virtuous mother, threatened with attack and invasion, who needs protection and recuse; and the dangerous, seductive, threatening mother, from whom one needs protection" (Willbern 164). This interpretation shows how Lavinia was used for Rome's success and Tamora was the threat of feminine control. It was Titus' main goal to protect the virginity of Lavinia, and her rape was the ultimate invasion. Since Tamora was the one to initiate Lavinia's rape, Tamora is the danger that Lavinia needs protection from. Tamora clearly disassociated herself with femininity in the scene with the rape of Lavinia. She rejected her feminine sexuality in order to focus on power and revenge.

The representation of women in *Macbeth*, *As You Like It*, and *Titus Andronicus* answers the questions: how do women assert power in Shakespeare? And, what role does gender play in power? Lady Macbeth, Rosalind, and Tamora all reject their femininity in order to gain power, and lose that power when men are threatened by female control and sexuality. This is significant because it allows the reader to understand why women in Shakespeare have to make such dramatic decisions in order to achieve their goals. Lady Macbeth spoke of killing her first-born son if she promised to because it made her more powerful. Rosalind had to dress as a man because she would not have been taken seriously had she not. Tamora allowed her sons to brutally rape Lavinia because it was

the only way she could see herself getting revenge. Not all of these actions are right or wrong; they are what these women felt they had to do to gain power. Lavinia's only worth was through her chastity, and by losing that, she lost her social position and ultimately her life. With feminine qualities being associated with weakness, rejecting or masking those qualities offered a new chance for women to take control of their lives.

In the book *Shakespeare Without Women*, Dymphna Callaghan states, "it is not the perfect similitude of women that was the goal of early modern dramatic representations of femininity but the production of an aesthetic of representation that depicts sexual difference defined as the presence or lack of male genitalia" (Callaghan 51). Callaghan is saying that women in Shakespeare are defined as not having male reproductive organs, but that is not how the women in Shakespeare define themselves. Lady Macbeth does not define herself by any gender role and prefers to remain genderless. Rosalind disguises herself as a man and tricks enough people to gain the power that a man would gain. Tamora rejects her feminine principles when it is time for her to take action.

Lady Macbeth, Rosalind, and Tamora are able to take leadership roles in their stories and influence the way the people around them act. They each control the men in their lives to do what they desire. They are able to have such control because men had more freedom than women. Men's choices and authority were not questioned as much as a woman's would have been, so Lady Macbeth, Rosalind, and Tamora had the liberty to decide their fates. Lady Macbeth shames Macbeth into murdering Duncan, Rosalind makes Orlando the perfect husband, and Tamora gets revenge on Titus by putting him in the weak position that he first put her. Although these women are able to obtain power, it is only temporary. Once Macbeth gains confidence, he leaves Lady Macbeth out of the

rest of his plans. Rosalind is able to manipulate Orlando and the other characters she encounters in the forest, but she ultimately chooses to give her power away when she marries him. Tamora was successful in her plot for revenge, but suffered even more when Titus killed and cooked her other two sons. Lady Macbeth, Rosalind, and Tamora are only successful at temporarily suppressing their gender. They cannot mask their femaleness for good.

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