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Shakespeare's Stance on Women, Kinship, and Manhood: An Exploration of  
Hamlet and Macbeth

Central to one's deep understanding of a societal and cultural ideology is the exploration of its people – their beliefs, attitudes, character, and background. As such, although historically, women were considered subservient to men, Shakespeare's plays and sonnets often challenged these preconceived notions, providing a rich tapestry of perspectives on kinship, loyalty, and manhood. This paper will discuss and prove Shakespeare's intended characterizations of male and female relationships in the context of leadership roles. It will also analyze the playwright's nuanced view of women, highlighting their strength, agency, and ambition while examining the fragility and instability of male characters in their struggle to meet societal masculinity demands. Finally, it will further investigate and prove these theories within two famed tragedies - *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* – by analyzing the portrayals of female characters such as Gertrude, Ophelia, Lady Macbeth, and *Macbeth's* witches to understand better the playwright's thoughts on gender roles within familial bonds, kinship, and ultimately, betrayal.

In a literary sense, the philosophy marking medieval culture's transition from the fifteenth to the sixteenth centuries is "Shakespearean Masculinity," defined by Feather as a conglomeration of influences based on age, social class, societal location, patriarchal bonds with a past hierarchal male, and most importantly, inspired readings that temper and "question the association of men with... strength, aggression, and stoic reserve," (134-135). Equating maleness

with this philosophy is the key to understanding Shakespeare's philosophy. Due to the substantial criticism male characters have received, the study of "Shakespearean Masculinity" exposes the mechanisms by which social hierarchies of gender systematically erased both women and non-normative males (Feather 136). Shakespeare, therefore, stood to challenge thoughts on silencing women and male hierarchies during his lifetime. However, scholars studying manliness in Shakespeare have recently begun to move beyond simply highlighting these discipline systems to reworking them as a standalone ideology (Feather 140).

In *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, Shakespeare establishes an acute awareness of the societal constraints placed upon women, the often-destructive consequences of loyalty to one's kin, and the complexities of manhood beyond mere physical strength or aggression. By portraying his characters as complex and multifaceted in their relationships, Shakespeare argues for re-evaluating traditional gender roles, the importance of individual morality over blind loyalty, and a broader understanding of manhood. For example, in analyzing *Hamlet's* power dynamics and family bonds, Shakespeare makes a delicate relationship between Hamlet, Gertrude, and her influence over King Claudius. Trapped between loyalty to her son and the king, she is left to simultaneously navigate the limitations imposed on her merely because of her gender. Although the focus on Gertrude's role and reputation in *Hamlet* often lends to topics other than leadership and being a woman, Graf (5) comments that Shakespeare crafts his characters around what he understands and knows from life. Likewise, as to female headship, Graf states that most of Shakespeare's reigning female roles revolved around Queen Elizabeth I (5). It is, therefore, understandable to associate Elizabethan culture with Gertrude and vice versa.

To further illustrate the playwright's philosophy on female headship and Gertrude's influence and authority as a seventeenth-century leader, in Act 1, Scene 2, Gertrude addresses

Hamlet's sadness after his father's death and her subsequent marriage to Claudius. She encourages Hamlet to accept the new circumstances and let go of his grief: "Good Hamlet, cast thy nighted color off, And let thine eye look like a friend on Denmark. Do not forever with thy veiled lids Seek for thy noble father in the dust. Thou know'st 'tis common. All that lives must die, Passing through nature to eternity" (1.2.68-73). While this quote may not display overt leadership or power, it showcases Gertrude's ability to navigate a difficult situation and assert her perspective as a queen and mother. Act 3, Scene 1 relates Gertrude's acknowledgment of her power and influence when interacting with Polonius about Hamlet's madness: "I do wish that your good beauties be the happy cause Of Hamlet's wildness. So shall I hope your virtues Will bring him to his wonted way again, To both your honors" (3.1.8-41). Finally, Gertrude demonstrates awareness of her position as queen, hoping that her virtues can help restore Hamlet's sanity in Act 6, Scene 1: "Mad as the sea and wind when both contend Which is the mightier. In his lawless fit Behind the arras, hearing something stir, Whips out his rapier, cries 'A rat, a rat!' And in this brainish apprehension kills The unseen good old man" (4.1.7-12). Though Gertrude does disclose that Hamlet killed Polonius, she omits any mention of Hamlet's accusations against Claudius, revealing her capacity to maintain power through selective disclosure of information. These examples suggest that Gertrude's power and leadership manifest subtly through her influence and ability to navigate complex situations (Graf 5).

Ophelia's character in *Hamlet* illustrates the patriarchal expectations and restrictions placed upon women during the Elizabethan era. Her submissiveness, obedience, and tragic end signify the limited agency and autonomy granted to women within the family dynamics of the time. To illustrate, Heilbrun argues that Ophelia represents these very limitations in Elizabethan culture precisely because she mirrors "a figure of obedience, a representation of a woman whose

task is to be passively and unquestioningly compliant” (Heilbrun, 298). This sentiment recounts in Ophelia’s interactions with her father and brother, as she follows explicit instructions and behaves as expected to adhere to societal norms. Two of many examples to support the analysis exist in Act 2, Scene 1, when Polonius instructs Ophelia to avoid any interaction with Hamlet: “I would not in plain terms, from this time, forth, Have you slander any moment leisure, As to give words or talk with the Lord Hamlet” (II.i.120-122); and as Hamlet cruelly disregards Ophelia, denying their past relationship, feigning madness: “Get thee to a nunnery! Why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners?” (III.i.121-122). Predictably, in both instances, Ophelia responds out of devastation and submission: “I shall obey, my lord” (II.i.123); (III.i.136).

Finally, as Gates suggests, Shakespeare depicts Ophelia as finding a middle ground somewhere between “guilt and innocence or acting and suffering” and that her “quietus” is just as effective of an intentional barrier to “blur [the] conscience” as Hamlet’s “masculine vengeance” (237). Accordingly, Shakespeare’s characterization of Ophelia is intentionally weak - a woman only there for the sake of men girding her, which becomes a defining trait and a symbol of betrayal within the kinship. Thus, Ophelia’s character reflects the patriarchal expectations and restrictions placed upon women during the Shakespearean and Elizabethan eras. Her submissiveness, obedience, and tragic end illustrate the limited agency and autonomy granted to women within family dynamics.

As a centerpiece of Shakespearean tragedy, research reveals that emphasizing female ambition, strength, and agency was pivotal to the playwright’s tragic endings. For example, Adelman confirms Lady Macbeth’s manipulation of her husband’s ambition, and the reversal of gender roles in *Macbeth* is critical to Shakespeare’s philosophy on female headship (97). Therefore, the function of a solid, parallel female character in shaping outcomes establishes that

Lady Macbeth's "aggressive ambition is in direct opposition to the woman's role in Renaissance" (Neely 327).

Lady Macbeth likewise plays a crucial role in controlling and influencing her husband's conduct, particularly in their joint pursuit of power. In this way, she challenges his masculinity, questions his ambition, and drives him to decimate his ego. As an illustration, in Act 1, Scene 7, Lady Macbeth manipulates her husband by questioning his courage, stating, "When you durst do it, then you were a man" (I.vii.54). Her influence prompts Macbeth to proceed with the murder of Duncan. Further, in A.C. Bradley's (1904) hallmark critique of *Macbeth*, he asserts that her "dominance is not that of a gentle partner but of a woman playing on a man's fears" (Bradley 25). Ultimately, Shakespeare himself proves Lady Macbeth is a manipulative albeit powerful and ambitious woman within her character who rawly subverts traditional gender norms by influencing her husband to take the king's life.

Lastly, the witches in *Macbeth* reprove a mighty female influence over the protagonist, challenging societal beliefs and gender roles within family bonds and kinship. Their prophetic role in Macbeth's thought process (Act 1, Scene 3) and their greeting with the title of Thane of Cawdor predict his eventual rise to the throne, kindling his ambition. Later, in Act 4, Scene 1, the witches warn him of Macduff's potential threat, provoking him to murder Macduff's family. In his analysis of *Macbeth*, Wilson confirms the witches' model as an ideal - "an external force acting upon a man to make him a criminal" (Wilson 99). Moreover, the sisters' influence on Macbeth challenges traditional gender roles and masculinity as he increasingly relies on their prophecy to define his identity and sense of worth. Macbeth's hesitation to act and questions about his manhood confirm societal expectations placed upon men to be dominant and powerful. Another example in Act 1, Scene 7 is Macbeth's doubt in his ability to carry out the murder of

Duncan, commenting, “I have no spur, To prick the sides of my intent, but only, Vaulting ambition, which o’erleaps itself, And falls on the other” (I.vii.25-28). His anxieties about masculinity again demonstrate the social pressure on men to assert authority and force. Lastly, Hapgood verifies” that [when] kinship [and] moral bonds are perverted or ignored, man is cast adrift, seeking some outside authority or identity to sustain him” (266).

The literature reveals clear societal expectations through evidence of how male and female characters in both tragedies struggled with relationships in general and in leadership roles. Hamlet’s introspection, emotional turmoil, and Macbeth’s initial reluctance to pursue power through violence prove that Shakespeare’s progressive ideas exist (Sinfield 54). Further, as proven, exploring alternative forms of masculinity in both plays, the playwright challenges *Hamlet’s* traditional concept of manhood as Macbeth grapples with expectations of masculinity and the pressure to take violent action in the name of honor. Likewise, Macbeth, driven by his ambition and false belief that fulfilling the prophecy will prove his manhood undermines his moral compass. Additionally, through an analysis of the characters Gertrude, Ophelia, Lady Macbeth, and the witches, Shakespeare’s intended characterizations of male and female relationships are proven.

A discussion regarding Shakespeare’s nuanced view of women proved his baseline drew mainly from experiences in his life, with notable observations and characters patterned after Elizabethan (Elizabeth I) reign and culture. Further, articles across the decades demonstrated female strength, agency, and ambition while investigating Shakespeare’s philosophy on the fragility and instability of male characters in their struggle to meet societal masculinity demands. Additional analysis proved theories within familial bonds and kinship that ultimately ended in betrayal as Shakespeare continued to stretch the conventions of gender-assigned roles within

leadership in his female characters. Finally, the paper proved the destructive results of loyalty in kinship, Hamlet, and *Macbeth*'s ability to explore societal expectations of gender roles within manhood and the destructive consequences of unhealthy family bonds when altered or ignored. By investigating these aspects of Shakespeare's work, the analysis proved Shakespeare's progressive views on women, family, and the definition of maleness— all compelling themes that have and will continue to resonate.

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