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Femininity and Masculinity: A Theoretical Analysis and Its Approach to Shakespeare's *Macbeth*



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ABSTRACT : "Femininities" and "masculinities" describe gender identities. It refers to the degree to which persons see themselves as masculine or feminine given what it means to be a man or woman in society. Femininity and masculinity are rooted in the social (one's gender) rather than the biological (one's sex). It is important to distinguish gender identity, as presented above, from other gender-related concepts such as gender roles, which are shared expectations of behavior given one's gender. A gender stereotype consists of beliefs about the psychological traits and characteristics of, as well as the activities appropriate to, men or women.

The paper aims at understanding the concept of masculinity and femininity, gender roles and gender stereotypes. It will also look into the historical origin of the above terms, major theories that explain the development of femininity and masculinity. Further, there will be an analysis of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* from the perspective of femininity and masculinity.

Keywords : Masculinity, femininity, gender roles, social status, *Macbeth*

Research Paper :

"Femininities" and "masculinities" describe gender identities. It refers to the degree to which persons see themselves either as masculine or feminine or what it means to be a man or woman in society. Femininity and masculinity are rooted in the social (one's gender) rather than the biological (one's sex). Members in the society decide what being male or female means for example human characteristics such as to be dominant, passive, aggressive, brave, timid, or emotional. These characteristics are attached with gender roles. Dominant, aggressive, brave are attached with male or masculine identity whereas to be passive, timid and emotional as female or feminine identity.

Femininities and masculinities are not descriptors of sexual orientation. Femininities and masculinities are plural—there are many forms of femininity and many forms of masculinity. What gets defined as feminine or masculine differs by region, religion, class, national culture, and other social factors.

Cultural notions of “feminine” and “masculine” behavior are shaped in part by observations about what women and men do. This kind of “gender marking” tends to discourage women or men from entering “gender-inauthentic” occupations (Faulkner, 2009).

According to Hofstede, “Masculinity stands for a society in which social gender roles are clearly distinct: Men are supposed to be assertive, tough, and focused on material success; women are supposed to be more modest, tender, and concerned with the quality of life.” “Femininity stands for a society in which social gender roles overlap: Both men and women are supposed to be modest, tender, and concerned with the quality of life.”

It is important to distinguish *gender identity*, as presented above, from other gender-related concepts such as *gender roles*, which are shared expectations of behavior given one's gender. For example, gender roles might include women investing in the domestic role and men investing in the worker role (Eagly 1987). The concept of gender identity is also different from *gender stereotypes*, which are shared views of personality traits often tied to one's gender such as instrumentality in men and expressiveness in women (Spence and Helmreich 1978).

In western culture, stereotypically, men are aggressive, competitive and instrumentally oriented while women are passive, cooperative and expressive. Early thinking often assumed that this division was based on underlying innate differences in traits, characteristics and temperaments of males and females. In this older context, measures of femininity/masculinity

were often used to diagnose what were understood as problems of basic gender identification, for example, feminine males or masculine females (cf. Terman and Miles 1936).

A **gender stereotype** consists of beliefs about the psychological traits and characteristics of, as well as the activities appropriate to, men or women. Gender roles are defined by behaviors, but gender stereotypes are beliefs and attitudes about masculinity and femininity. The concepts of gender role and gender stereotype tend to be related. When people associate a pattern of behavior with either women or men, they may overlook individual variations and exceptions and come to believe that the behavior is inevitably associated with one gender but not the other. Therefore, gender roles furnish the material for gender stereotypes. Gender stereotypes are very influential; they affect conceptualizations of women and men and establish social categories for gender.

R.W. Connell (1995) explored the historical origins of attitudes toward masculinity. Connell looked back into 16th-century Europe and the changing social and religious climate to trace the development of individualism. He contended that industrialization, world exploration, and civil wars became activities associated with men and formed the basis for modern masculinity. Pleck (1984) also reviewed the social climate of the late 19th century, citing examples from the late 1800s of the increasing perception that men were not as manly as they once had been. Growing industrialization pressured men to seek employment in order to be good providers for their families, roles that became increasingly difficult for men to fulfill (Bernard, 1981; Faludi, 1999), thus endangering their masculinity. In addition, education became a factor in employment, and men often held better jobs (and were thus better providers) when they were educated. Pleck discussed how the occupation of early-childhood educator became the province of women, and how these female elementary school teachers tried to make boys into well-behaved pupils—in other words, “sissies.” This issue remains part of a debate over boys in the classroom (Kimmel, 2000; Sommers, 2000).

The prohibition against being a sissy and the rejection of the feminine are strong components of modern masculinity. According to Robert Brannon (1976), No Sissy Stuff is one of the four themes of the Male Sex Role. The other three themes include The Big Wheel, which describes men’s quest for success and status as well as their need to be looked up to. The Sturdy Oak component describes men’s air of toughness, confidence, and self-reliance, especially in a crisis. Finally, the Give ’Em Hell aspect of the Male Sex Role reflects the acceptability of violence, aggression, and daring in men’s behavior.

Connell (1987, 1992, 1995) argued that gender has been constructed as part of each society throughout history, a view that is consistent with the belief that gender is something that people do rather than part of what people are (West & Zimmerman, 1987). This construction of masculinity includes both sanctioned and less accepted behaviors. Thus, masculinity varies with both time and place, creating a multitude of masculinities. For each society, Connell contended that one version of masculinity is sanctioned as the one to which men should adhere, which he termed *hegemonic masculinity*. This version of masculinity attempts to subordinate femininity as well as less accepted versions of masculinity, such as male homosexuality. Like Pleck, Connell recognized many disadvantages to this narrow, dominant form of masculinity and saw many problems for society and for individual men who adhere to it.

Despite the notion that masculinity has undergone drastic changes in the past two decades, evidence indicates little change in hegemonic masculinity and strong representation of the four themes of the Male Sex Role (Bereska, 2003). Boys and men are still supposed to be stoic, aggressive, dependable, and not feminine.

The Development of Femininity and Masculinity

There are at least three major theories that explain the development of femininity and masculinity: psychoanalytic theory (Freud 1927), cognitive-developmental theory (Kohlberg 1966) and learning theories that emphasize direct reinforcement (Weitzman 1979) and modeling (Mischel 1970). In all of these theories, a two-part process is involved. In the first part, the child comes to know that she or he is female or male. In the second part, the child comes to know what being female or male means in terms of femininity or masculinity.

According to psychoanalytic theory, one's gender identity develops through identification with the same-sex parent. This identification emerges out of the conflict inherent in the oedipal stage of psychosexual development. By about age 3, a child develops a strong sexual attachment to the opposite-sex parent. Simultaneously, negative feelings emerge for the same-sex parent that is rooted in resentment and jealousy. By age 6, the child resolves the psychic conflict by relinquishing desires for the opposite-sex parent and identifying with the same-sex parent. Thus, boys come to learn masculinity from their fathers and girls learn femininity from their mothers.

A more recent formulation of psychoanalytic theory suggests that mothers play an important role in gender identity development (Chodorow 1978). According to Chodorow, mothers are

more likely to relate to their sons as different and separate because they are not of the same sex. At the same time, they experience a sense of oneness and continuity with their daughters because they are of the same sex. Consequently, mothers will bond with their daughters thereby fostering femininity in girls. Simultaneously, mothers distance themselves from their sons who respond by shifting their attention away from their mother and toward their father. Through identification with their father, boys learn masculinity.

Cognitive-developmental theory is another psychological theory on gender identity development (Kohlberg 1966). As in psychoanalytic theory, this theory suggests there are critical events that have a lasting effect on gender identity development, but they are cognitive rather than psychosexual in origin. Unlike psychoanalytic theory and learning theory that is next discussed, the development of a gender identity comes before rather than follows from identification with the same-sex parent. Once a child's gender identity becomes established, the self is then motivated to display gender-congruent attitudes and behaviors, well before same-sex modeling takes hold. Same-sex modeling simply moves the process along.

Kohlberg identifies two crucial stages of gender identity development: 1) acquiring a fixed gender identity, and 2) establishing gender identity constancy. The first stage begins with the child's identification as male or female when hearing the labels "boy" or "girl" applied to the self. By about age 3, the child can apply the appropriate gender label to the self. This is when gender identity becomes fixed. By about age 4, these gender labels are appropriately applied to others. Within a year or two, the child reaches the second critical phase of gender constancy. This is the child's recognition that her gender will not change despite her change in outward appearance or age.

The most social of the theories of gender identity development are the learning theories. In these theories it is the social environment of the child, such as parents and teachers that shapes the gender identity of a child. Here, the parent or teacher instructs the child on femininity and masculinity directly through rewards and punishments, or indirectly through acting as models that are imitated. Direct rewards or punishments are often given for outward appearance as in what to wear (girls in dresses and boys in pants), object choice such as toy preferences (dolls for girl and trucks for boys), and behavior (passivity and dependence in girls and aggressiveness and independence in boys). Through rewards and punishments, children learn appropriate appearance and behavior. Indirect learning of one's gender identity emerges from modeling same-sex parents, teachers, peers, or same-sex models in the media.

A child imitates a rewarded model's thoughts, feelings, or behavior because it anticipates that it will receive the same rewards that the model received.

Feminist theory has examined men, patriarchy, and masculine characteristics predominantly as sources of power, domination, inequality, and subordination.' Various theories of inequality developed by feminists challenge and reveal structures and discourses that reinforce explicitly or implicitly the centrality of men and the male identity of a hierarchical power and economic structure. Even where women are formally equal, feminists have sought to explain their ongoing real inequality in relation to men. In doing so, they have exposed how even the process of reform can contain the seed of reconstituted inequality.

The most important accomplishment of 20th-century feminist theory is the concept of gender as a social construction; that is, the idea that masculinity and femininity are loosely defined, historically variable, and interrelated social ascriptions to persons with certain kinds of bodies—not the natural, necessary, or ideal characteristics of people with similar genitals.

In reaction to claims that women were irrational, weak, vicious, and sinful, the early defenders of women repeated a number of strategies. They claimed women were equal or superior to men, writing, for example, books about heroic, saintly, learned, and otherwise exemplary women. In another common strategy, they asserted equality less by raising the image of women than by lowering the image of men.

Twentieth-century liberal feminism continued the tradition of seeking for women the privileges already enjoyed by men. Betty Friedan (1963) and the National Organization for Women (founded in 1966) believed that changing laws and educating people against erroneous prejudices would remedy gender discrimination, giving women equal opportunities with men to exercise individual choices in life. They sought gender equity through changes in law and childhood socialization.

Shakespeare's *Macbeth*

Now let us have a look at the play *Macbeth* by William Shakespeare taking in mind the concept of masculinity and femininity. I would like to start with one of the dialogue narrated by Lady Macbeth:

LADY MACBETH Glamis thou art, and Cawdor; and shalt be What thou art promised: yet do I fear thy nature; It is too full o' the milk of human kindness To catch the nearest way: thou wouldst be great; Art not without ambition, but without The illness should attend it: [...] Hie thee hither, 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, Which fate and metaphysical aid doth seem To have thee crown'd withal.
(1.5.1)

According to Lady Macbeth, her husband is ambitious, but he's also too "kind" to do what it takes to murder Duncan so that he, Macbeth, can be king. So what's a wife to do? Lady Macbeth plans to "chastise" Macbeth with the "valour of [her] tongue," which is another way of saying she's going to nagged her husband into taking action so he can be "crown'd withal." This speech establishes Lady Macbeth as the dominant partner in the relationship, which inverts typical 17th century gender and social roles. Since husbands were supposed to "rule" their wives in the same way that kings ruled countries, Lady Macbeth's plan is just another version of treason: taking power that doesn't belong to you.

The world that Shakespeare has created in *Macbeth* is a world of men and women living with gender stereotypes: crossing them, fighting against them, and the blurring of roles. Interestingly, according to Holinshed's *Chronicles of Scotland*, the inspiration for many of Shakespeare's plays, we learn that in the days of the historic Macbeth, once the actual King of Scotland, women were not kept in a quiet, weak, uninvolved role.

Men and women do have differences, to be sure, and Kimbrough refers to these differences as "infinitesimal." The differences really exist not in the body, he says, but in the mind, and by Shakespeare's era, the separation between men and women had become "an absolute division of humanity, not into subtypes of one species, but into separated types, each treated as if it were itself a separate species" (175). The separate species of the male was on top, women below. Shakespeare examines these strict distinctions in his plays. Women dress as men, as just one example, who were really boys playing women. He enjoys the opportunity to examine human nature, and clearly, he can see the reality beyond the roles played by men and women - the each is capable of the characteristics and strengths of the other.

"Shakespeare sensed that human hood embraces manhood and womanhood. Shakespeare sensed that so long as one remains exclusively female or exclusively male, that person will be restricted and confined, denied human growth. . .his works move toward liberating humanity from the prisons created by inclusive and exclusive gender labeling" (Kimbrough 175).

Although both the men and women of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* are important, the focus of this curriculum unit is the women of the play: Lady Macbeth and the witches. Macbeth may appear at first to be a stereotypical, uncomplicated man, and will become more complex later on; Lady Macbeth, however, reveals her complicated personality from the start.

Lady Macbeth is one of the strongest women in all of Shakespeare's plays. However, consider how she must contend with the role of women in her world. In order for Lady Macbeth to carry out her plans, she feels she must pray that the gods "unsex [her] here." Even then, it is not her intent to carry out the murder of Duncan herself, but to spur on her husband to "catch the nearest way." "And the irony of this attempt to masculinate herself is highlighted by the fact that she was trying to be the 'good and dutiful' wife of the newly emerging middle-class culture, trying to 'better' her husband" (Kimbrough 187).

Lady Macbeth is not aligned with the stereotypes in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, but nonetheless she must contend with them from both inside and outside herself. Despite Lady Macbeth's desire to be more like a man for the task at hand, she proves to be still the weak female when it comes to the actual deed. She needs wine to maintain her courage. As she says, "That which hath made them drunk hath made me bold" (II, ii). She jumps and starts at every sound saying, "Hark! Peace! It was the owl that shriek'd" while waiting for her husband to return from his murderous act. She thinks of killing Duncan herself when she has the daggers in her hands, but holds back, saying, "Had he not resembled/My father as he slept, I had done 't"(II, ii). The speech of both Macbeths is "staccato," demonstrating the fear they are both feeling at that moment. Coursen suggests, in fact, that the story of Adam and Eve underlies the entire play.

The witches in *Macbeth* fly in the face of the patriarchal society. Early in the play, the witches seem to have no such male superior. Macbeth and Banquo meet three strange women on the heath with no man in sight. Or are they women? Banquo wonders this when he says, "you should be women, / And yet your beards forbid me to interpret /That you are so" (I, iii). So even their appearance sets them apart from normal women.

In *Macbeth* masculinity equals chivalry. An ideal knight showed more than "loyalty" to those he served. He also showed "solidarity" to his kinsmen and "orthodoxy" in the conduct of his duties (Long 54).

Another way to understand Shakespeare's construction of femininity in the play is to look closely at the role of the witches and their relation to Lady Macbeth. These two powerful female forces influence, and at times control Macbeth's actions. Lady Macbeth "and the witches are indirectly identified with each other by their departures from prescribed female subordination, by their parallel role as catalysts to Macbeth's actions, and by the structure and symbolism of the play"(Neely 57). By adopting male personas(and even appearances in the case of the witches) the women escape their female roles while still remaining decidedly

feminine, "still linked with [their] sex and with humanity"(Jameson 363). Without a thorough understanding of these women, we cannot fully comprehend the scope and intentions of the play. The central issue is how Shakespeare constructed these women and how he intended for them to be viewed and received not only by the audiences in his time but also for future generations.

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