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Manhood and Masculine Identity in William Shakespeare's The Tragedy of Macbeth.

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Maria L. Howell's *Manhood and Masculine Identity in William Shakespeare's The Tragedy of Macbeth* is a concise, interesting, and intriguing read. The monograph primarily focuses upon Lady Macbeth and her husband, delving into the gendered qualities that make these characters who they are. Professor Howell's study of *Macbeth* also seeks to answer the following questions: "What is a man?"; "How do we define masculinity?"; and "What values constitute true manhood?" (1). Howell's work answers these questions as they pertain to *Macbeth*, while developing the idea that adherence to the masculine stereotype carries a double edge.

Chapters 1 and 2 spend the bulk of their time providing foundational information and defining crucial terminology and ideology. Professor Howell's definition of "masculine," as it relates to the early modern period, is particularly useful in setting up her overall argument. This term, as it applied to Shakespeare, encompassed the ideals surrounding martial prowess as well as the more traditional roles of husband and father. Howell's discussion of Galenic and Aristotelian theory as it

applies to masculinity is also valuable; this information is key to developing her idea that “gender polarities” in the play “are arbitrary, unstable, and elusive” (7).

Though the aforementioned chapters are important, the true worth of Howell’s book comes in her analytical discussion of the play itself. Chapter 3 is devoted to *Macbeth*’s early scenes, particularly I.v, I.vi, I.vii, and II.ii. This chapter argues that “gender in the early modern period is a construct, constituted as a function of performance and interpretation” (16). Howell focuses upon Lady Macbeth and her subversion of Macbeth. Howell does an excellent job of interweaving the ideas from this chapter to the foundational information she provides in Chapters 1 and 2.

Chapters 4 and 5 are linked in their discussion of Shakespeare’s title character. Howell correctly characterizes Macbeth in these chapters as a bloody tyrant, one who casts aside reason to the detriment of his country and, by doing so, wounds his masculinity in the process. Howell’s more intriguing ideas surface towards the end of Chapter 5, where she links Macbeth’s adherence to martial prowess with barbarity. As a masculine ideal, martial prowess was prized throughout the early modern period. Macbeth’s blind adherence to butchery, according to Howell, becomes his primary weakness – one that destabilizes the country and brings about self destruction.

In the end, Professor Howell moralizes that “Shakespeare’s understanding of true manhood is the notion that the masculine ideal is, first and foremost, a man of

tempered action and moderation” – ideas that Macbeth fails to embody (41). I would agree with Professor Howell, based on her careful construction of argument and attention to detail. Professor Howell’s book also succeeds due to its methodical approach. Teachers and academics will certainly find Howell’s work useful, particularly if they are interested in developing their own ideas on *Macbeth* or converting her study into a lesson plan for future use.