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6/7 Honors Block

Act Two Paragraph

### Historical Interpretation of Gender Roles

In Shakespeare's play *Macbeth*, Lady Macbeth's characterization counters the expected submissive feminine gender roles at the time, ultimately leading Renaissance and modern audiences to have contrasting perspectives on the validity of Shakespeare's commentary on the patriarchal society. When Lady Macbeth hears about a possibility for her husband to obtain royalty, she immediately begins plotting to make the prophecy come true. In a soliloquy, she asks the spirits to "unsex me here, / And fill me from the crown to the toe-top full of direst cruelty. Make thick my blood" (I, v, 48-50). Shakespeare characterizes Lady Macbeth as an eccentric character with her use of the phrases "unsex" and "direst cruelty." During the Renaissance, when *Macbeth* was first beginning to appear on stages, such phrases from a woman would be very uncommon - due to the expectations by men that women should be passive. Therefore, Lady Macbeth's character would shock some viewers as it goes outside the societal norms. However, nowadays, such powerful and direct women, such as Lady Macbeth's character, are congratulated and encouraged to inspire others to break out of the submissive nature of the past. This contrast between the understandings of Shakespeare's work influences how the different readers would appreciate the value of the play's messages. Likewise, the marital dynamic between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth is interpreted differently depending on the viewer's time period and expectations for a "typical" marriage. After Lady Macbeth sends

Macbeth to kill Duncan, he begins to feel some remorse and does not complete all the steps of the plan. When Lady Macbeth hears that he forgot to frame the guards, she chastises and teases him: "The sleeping and the dead / Are but as pictures.'Tis the eye of childhood / That fears a painted devil" (II, ii, 69-72). In this section, Shakespeare uses the metaphor of childhood to further characterize Lady Macbeth as glib and confident, two more characteristics that were discouraged in women during the Renaissance. Additionally, this section establishes the power dynamic in the Macbeths' marriage where Lady Macbeth tends to be more controlling, while Macbeth is more passive. During Shakespeare's lifespan, such a marriage would seem radical, for it is the opposite of the expected power dynamic between women and men. Shakespeare's use of this unconventional marriage demonstrates that he - to some extent - disagreed with the patriarchal structure of the society during his life. When viewed in a more modern time period, most viewers tend to be more open towards the idea of a more unconventional marriage dynamic, causing them to value Shakespeare and his ideas more.