Can a man be masculine and still demonstrate emotion? Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, set in the wilds of eleventh-century Scotland but fraught with danger and personal loss, is well placed to illuminate this question: and, though loathe to have their manhood questioned, its characters wear their hearts on their mail sleeves. Although Lady Macbeth suggests any emotion is weakness, the men of *Macbeth* see no contradiction between emotion and bravery so long as the former does not inhibit the latter. While the list of displayed emotions is infinite, this essay will focus on grief and fear and the degree to which they are accepted. As grief’s expression channels a warrior’s sorrow to fury, it is lauded as a way to improve battle acuity. Fear, however, is more complicated, for although it can motivate, it can also incapacitate and thus is rebuked when displayed inappropriately.

To start, Lady Macbeth thinks any display of emotion not only a weakness but a feminine one. In her famous call to “unsex me here,” she speaks of “direst cruelty” as the masculine substance with which she wishes to replace her own “passage to remorse” and “compunctious visiting of nature” (1.5.#). In other words, all guilt, all sentiment, all inkling of connection to another fellow—all is weak; all is feminine; all is jettisoned by true men and by those who would truly masquerade as such. Conscience, too, is seen as weakness; she pleads for “thick night” to wrap her “in the dunnest smoke of hell” so that her “keen knife see not the wound it makes,” wanting no “heaven” to “peep” through the “dark” and stop her from her sin (1.5.#). Such conscience she sees as womanly and an impediment to progress, mere distractions to accomplishment of what she desires but knows is wrong. In Lady Macbeth’s perception of manhood, action is everything, and anything that impedes that action is feminine and must be denied.

Contrary to Lady Macbeth, Macbeth’s male characters believe emotion imperative to action,
believing that proper expression of grief both helps the bereaved to recover from his loss and galvanizes his fury for revenge. When Macduff is struck dumb by his family's murder, for example, Malcolm, thinking him concealing his emotion, commands that he “n’er pull your hat upon your brows; give sorrow words: the grief that does not speak whispers the o’er-fraught heart and bids it break” (IV.iii.#). This exhortation suggests that Malcolm realizes that suppressing emotion ultimately incapacitates one far more than does the shedding of a few tears. Expressing emotion, for men of action, is not only permissible but wise. Ironically, to “pull your hat upon your brows” is one of the stoic images that so reverberates with our—and Lady Macbeth’s—traditional conception of masculinity. Along with “tightening your belt” or keeping a “stiff upper lip,” the image of a cap pulled low over one’s eyes perpetuates the notion that men (or anyone else who wishes to be “tough”) must choke down their tears, shielding any emotion beneath an impassive façade.

Malcolm’s advice directly contradicts this expectation. Instead of advocating Zeno’s Stoicism, he pushes a different Ancient Greek concept: catharsis. Emotion, he suggests, must be expressed to be purged—then, grief released, one may channel love and loss all the more effectively into revenge.

And indeed, while one may submit temporarily to grief, the ultimate expectation is that one returns to fight. Although Malcolm encourages Macduff to “blunt nor the heart,” he does say to “enrage it,” to let “grief convert to anger” and be the “whetstone of [his] sword” (IV.3.#). Amidst all these cries for battle, however, Macduff allows himself unmitigated sorrow: when Malcolm chastises him for his lamentations by exhorting him to “dispute [the murder] as a man,” his friend rebukes him, saying, “I shall do so; but I must also feel it as a man (IV.iii.#). Taking the time to absorb the situation fully not only lets his emotions settle but imparts an understanding that makes his later revenge all the more driven. The nostalgia implicit in how he “cannot but remember such [precious] things were” calls forward his affection; the injustice of how “Heaven look[ed] on, and would not take their part” calls for revenge, and the realization that “not for their own demerits but
for [his own] fell slaughter on their souls” ties direct responsibility between Macduff and his family’s death, raising all the higher the necessity that he kill Macbeth on their behalf. Yes, Malcolm and Macduff disagree as to what extent pure emotion may be expressed, with Malcolm calling to “make medicines of our great revenge, to cure this deadly grief” before Macduff, having not even reached his poultry metaphor, has just begun to express his woe, both men agree that sentiments like sorrow are invaluable motivational tools. Macduff’s impetus to kill his rival is far stronger having reflected on his loss than had he “kept calm and carried on” without that momentary break, suggesting that manliness allows for the expression of emotion.

This allowance, however, is not infinite. While justified emotion, especially that which fuels traditional “manly” traits like valor, is commended, unsubstantiated emotion or that which incapacitates is disdained. Macbeth’s treatment of fear exemplifies this distinction, particularly in the Macbeths’ quarrel over Banquo’s ghost: while Macbeth considers his reaction completely legitimate, commending himself for facing the ghost without flight, his wife repudiates his outbursts as weak and womanly responses to a figment of a weak and womanly imagination and thus subject to ridicule. The couple, however, does not so much disagree as talk past each other: while Macbeth believes he is facing down the “gory locks” of an “unreal mockery,” his wife sees him shouting at a stool (III.iv.#). Had they both the same vantage point, their judgments would most likely have been much more in concert, for both believe that fear is appropriate in only certain circumstances.

In what circumstances, then, is fear allowed? First, there must be a legitimate threat. While Macbeth’s standing white-faced before a stool spurs Lady Macbeth’s call of “Are you a man?” (III.iv.#), his confronting the bloody apparition of a dead supposed friend merits his responding “ay, and a bold one, that dare look on that which might appall the devil” (III.IV.#). While a stool poses no danger, a ghost that scares the devil threatens not just Macbeth but the entire Christian order: fear, then, is to be ridiculed in the first instance but accepted in the second, as Shakespeare
suggests that fear is merited only against threats that not only pose danger but are beyond the expected sphere. Had Young Siward demonstrated fear against Macbeth, it would have been unmanly, for he had been trained in swordplay all his life. Macbeth’s outburst, however, is legitimate, for no knight’s upbringing prepares him to battle ectoplasm.

True to this vein, Macbeth proclaims that his “firm nerves shall never tremble” if Banquo’s ghost “approach[ed]…like the rugged Russian bear, the arm’d rhinoceros, or the Hycran tiger,” for quotidian threats like death or danger are nothing to a warrior like him. Indeed, “any shape,” no matter how “rugged” or “arm’d” or “Hycran”* would be fine--anything, that is “but that…unreal mockery” (iii.iv.#). While bears, tigers, and rhinoceroses are terrestrial and thus within Macbeth’s supposed God-given dominion, the supernatural is beyond not only Macbeth’s sphere but the Almighty’s: having spited the afterlife, ghosts are beyond His jurisdiction. Such escape turns the laws of nature upside down. No wonder, then, Banquo gave Macbeth pause: his symbolic threat to the established order would have scared silly not only the audience but the entire Church of England as well. Ironic though it is for a usurper to fear upheaval, the magnitude of the subversion Banquo’s Ghost represents makes Macbeth’s reaction not at all incompatible with his describing his “nerves” as “firm.” Indeed, it is the reaction of a warrior: loss of control threatens not only a fighter’s safety but that of his mission. Emotion in such a scenario, so far as it alerts the warrior to this danger so he can act accordingly, can be a life-saving move.

When emotion is not acceptable, however, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth unite in linking it derogatorily towards women. Both have choice words for inappropriate fear, linking its displays to female insufficiency. Macbeth links fear and femininity through his promise that one may “protest

*Historical Hycrania is today a part of Iran. In Shakespeare’s time—and even more so in Macbeth’s—it would have represented an exotic locale.
[him] the baby of a girl” (III.iv.#) if he were to “tremble” before the aforementioned beasts, a phrase that, given how he is defending his courage by promising his bravery in other circumstances, is most likely the most shameful epithet he could concoct. Shakespeare’s use of not just “girl” but “baby of a girl” suggests the Elizabethan chain of disdain: women are cowards, children are cowards, infants are the most cowardly of all; therefore, an infant fostered by a girl-child (or, depending on interpretation, simply a baby girl) is as debilitating an insult to one’s manly gut as it can get. Lady Macbeth, on the other hand, insults the same gender but a different age. Disgusted at what she thinks are her husband’s “impostors to true fear,” she says his reaction to Banquo’s Ghost would “well become a woman’s story at a winter’s fire, authorized by her grandam.” Her derision is double: not only does making the fire a “woman’s” suggest it must contain nothing of danger, but her addition that it must be “authorized by her grandam” diminishes its dread further still. Under the same rule of them recommended to guide Facebook posts today, if the grandmother approves something, then it must be entirely innocuous. “Strong” woman though Lady Macbeth is sometimes called, she presents no comradery with her sex: indeed, she bears no qualms about calling any similarity to women’s habits “shame itself” (III.iv.#).

Emotion and masculinity in Macbeth may have as intricate a relationship as do the thanes and kings of medieval Scotland. While emotions are allowed and even commended, the focus remains on man’s responsibility to fight. In certain circumstances, like after losing loved ones, demonstration of feelings like sorrow may help to improve the individual’s battle abilities by cleansing him of grief that would otherwise distract. Bringing emotions to the forefront also enables their transformation into other emotions that can serve as motivation, like how Macduff channeled his grief into bloodlust for Macbeth. However, warlike as Scottish--and perhaps general male--society is, emotions are disdained if displayed without proper cause. While the murder of a man’s wife and children justifies tears, for example, a stool, however scary it may look, does not. Macbeth and Lady Macbeth’s disagreement
over whether Macbeth gibbered at a spirit or a piece of wood demonstrates the volatility of these rules of conduct and how much proper or improper masculinity depends both on perspective and interpretation. Macbeth and Lady Macbeth saw two very different sights in that Great Hall, sights that produced two very different judgments. Their discrepancy begs the question: when two stories diverge, by which one should a man be evaluated? What he or what everyone else sees?

Whatever complexity is acknowledged in man’s allowance of emotions, however, excessive emotion remains just as ever tied to women. Even though in Shakespeare’s lifetime England’s queen rode in full armor to inspire her troops to fight the Spanish Armada, the term “woman” remains as derogatory as ever. Instead of decrying this continuity, however, we might look at \textit{Macbeth’s} commendation of male emotion as one step in the direction of psychological egalitarianism—a direction towards which we continue to march today.