III.   Parallels with Shakespeare's *Macbeth*

i.   Thematic convergences: Agency in tragedy

There would likely be little consensus over whether the plays depict a tragedy of character, or a tragedy of fate. All the same, the narrative structure of both plays does emphasize that individual choice plays a role in determining a person's fate.

By definition, a tragedy of character arises when the hero of the play is brought down due to some deficiency in character, therefore emphasizing the role of human choice and accountability in our fate. Both plays may be understood as tragedies of character because ambition is the key, even defining trait in Macbeth/M. But arguably, none of these characters are naturally or temperamentally inclined to commit murder; they are only motivated to do so because of their ambition, and struggle very much with the psychic consequences of those acts. As such, both plays explore the dangers of unchecked ambition.

By contrast, a tragedy of fate focuses on a moral message about not trying to outrun destiny, as certain preordained outcomes are inevitable. Both plays may be understood as tragedies of fate because they involve supernatural beings communicating a specific outcome to the protagonist, who is consequently unable to prevent the realization of those outcomes.

Nevertheless, it can also be argued that by planting certain ideas in the protagonists' minds, the witches/Dirty Girl created a temptation they could not resist, therefore guiding them onto the path of their own destruction. Consider that Banquo/BF exist as a foil to Macbeth/M: Banquo/BF are equally susceptible to ambition, but also exercise a type of caution that stops them from committing regicide/murder. Therefore, even if certain outcomes may appear inevitable, it is only because those outcomes are the logical conclusion to the traits and thinking already exhibited by the character in question. In other words then, the individual choices each character makes are influenced by their personality, but these factors in turn shape the inevitability of their fates.

ii.   Thematic divergences: Gender

Macbeth is a play which inverts the natural order in order to depict an inversion of the moral order. Political perturbations are reflected and amplified by events in the natural world, with the clearest parallel drawn between death and sleep—for example, following Duncan's death, Lady Macbeth is seen sleepwalking.

In particular, *Macbeth* inverts normative gender roles, which critics have argued is also part of the play's natural disorder. The inverted gender roles are most clearly exemplified by Lady Macbeth and the three witches. Unlike traditional expectations of feminine behavior, Lady Macbeth and the witches are deeply violent, and orchestrate much of the play's chaos. In particular, Lady Macbeth demonstrates how women can be just as ambitious and ruthless as men, and resorts to expert manipulation and deception to get her way.

Lady Macbeth's machinations include leaning on traditional expectations of masculinity in order to manipulate Macbeth to her will. Equally, Macbeth himself goads the murderers he employs by

appealing to their manhood. As such, masculinity is associated with aggression, and the characters are ultimately punished for their transgressive masculinity by being removed from the feminine natural order; likewise, the restoration of the moral order involves restoring the feminine natural order.

Nevertheless, *Macbeth* does conclude by returning to traditional gendered values. That, along with its depiction of women as the essential source of the play's disruption (as the factors which push Macbeth to commit murder), has led to some academic critiques of the play as being misogynistic.

By contrast, *peerless* creates its own gender dynamic, notably by rendering its Macbeth derivative as female. Consequently, although all its characters are ambitious and independent, the male characters of *peerless* are almost uniformly more passive and less violent than their female counterparts—with the exception of D's brother.

The effect of this choice is to downplay the gender dynamic originally present in *Macbeth*. For example, ambition and violence—qualities originally, irrevocably tied to the masculine in *Macbeth*—are no longer invoked in tandem with manliness. They become qualities which exist in the male and female characters alike, which consequently renders them qualities to be pursued for their own sake, and not in pursuit of a gendered ideal.

However, *peerless* does manage to maintain *Macbeth*'s use of an inverted natural order to reflect a distorted moral order. It accomplishes this in two ways: by stylizing the application of affirmative action in a college admissions process, and by transferring *Macbeth*'s gendered concerns towards racial ones instead. Consequently, in the world of *peerless*, affirmative action policies are reduced to highly restrictive quotas, and the importance of race is weighted towards the superficial. For example, it doesn't matter what ethnicity M and L actually are; they only need to be generally identified as Asian, in order that they may leverage traditional expectations of their ethnicity in classes and college admissions. The same applies to D, whose Native American heritage is also denied specificity, and instead stereotyped to a satirical degree.

      iii.   *Macbeth*'s relation to *peerless*

How do the thematic convergences and divergences between *Macbeth* and *peerless* inform the latter play's message?

If *Macbeth* is about the dangers of excessive ambition in the face of political power, then *peerless* is about the price of cut-throat competition and intense pressure to excel for the sake of a prestigious college admission.

By pushing the college admissions preparation process to its logical extreme, *peerless* considers how the unnecessary stress of the process warps the judgment of those caught within the education system. Specifically, the play dissects the stereotypes associated with an overachieving Asian community in order to ask: Is a prestigious college admission really worth the price incurred to qualify for admission?