

THE DUALITY OF DESIRE: LADY MACBETH IN A PATRIARCHAL WORLD

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ABSTRACT

Undoubtedly, Shakespeare is one of the world's most influential poets and dramatists. His works resonate through time across cultures. His plays are rich with the grim realities of human conscience and have been transformed into films and live performances that continue to shape society. His plays have been dissected from countless perspectives, and every time, they have yielded different explanations or understandings of human behavior.

Shakespeare's plays are mainly male-centric. The central characters are male. The number of male characters in the plays is almost seven times that of female characters. The number of dialogs delivered by female characters is substantially low compared to their male counterparts. Despite this, it cannot be disregarded that female characters in Shakespeare's plays occupy a pivotal position. Often, the story twists, centering the lead female character. Lady Macbeth in Macbeth is such an intriguing, complex character. Macbeth has been in the researcher's dissection table for a long. Countless papers have been published on various aspects, including its themes, characters, historical context, and adaptations. However, when it comes to Lady Macbeth, the number of research papers aiming to understand her is very limited. There has been a general tendency to mark Lady Macbeth as a cruel, evil, power-haunting lady – "The fourth Witch." People generally blame Lady Macbeth for misguiding and provoking Macbeth for the crime and for being solely responsible for Macbeth's misfortune, which might not be entirely true. This paper tries to reanalyze Lady Macbeth's character from the modern perspective, adopting a feminine angle.

KEYWORDS: *Lady Macbeth, Tragedy, Women Power, Feminine Ambition*

INTRODUCTION

Shakespeare was a star of the English literature. He is an author who has inspired many writers of our time. His life was full of knowledge, devotion, and determination. He taught us the real meaning of literature. Shakespeare's extensive work encompasses approximately 39 plays, 154 sonnets, and several poems written over about 20 years. The plays have a total of 981 characters, out of which only 155 are women— 16% of all Shakespearean characters, which is considered normal during that period. The female characters have less than half the number of lines compared to male characters. The women who have the most speeches (Cleopatra in "Antony and Cleopatra" delivers 204 speeches, and Rosalind in "As You Like It" delivers 201 speeches, the most out of all Shakespearean female characters) also have less than half as many as their male counterparts [1]. Despite the smaller presence, each female character plays a pivotal role in Shakespeare's plays – "Macbeth" could not be imagined without Lady Macbeth, and "Romeo & Juliet" could not be without Romeo. Shakespeare's portrayal of women reflects his deep understanding of their inner lives and societal roles. He presents two types of women: those who were submissive, obedient, and moral, following the general perception of women's character

in Elizabethan England, and those who were independent, dominating, ambitious, and evil counterparts – reflecting both the constraints of his time and a more nuanced view of gender roles, allowing the female characters to emerge as multi-dimensional and impactful figures within their stories - each female character presenting a different value and essence of life – often Complex and multifaceted, challenging the stereotypes of their time.

Macbeth, Shakespeare's shortest and bloodiest play, is a dramatic and praiseworthy creation. Since its staging, Lady Macbeth has been recognized as the nastiest, cruel, complex, and intriguing character. Goethe, the great German poet, regards her as a super-witch, a portrayal that emphasizes her powerful and evil nature. She has attracted numerous comments – Critics claim she is more ambitious than her husband but less virtuous. She is widely regarded by the common as the pinnacle of evil in popular culture, with the appearance of her images repeatedly in various cultural backgrounds; she has been considered the fourth witch, the only culprit of her husband's treason.

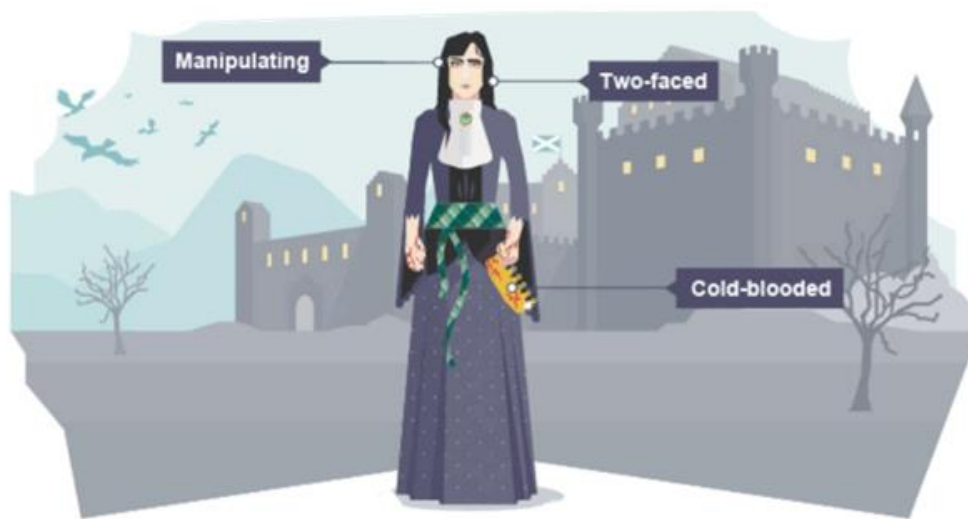


Figure 1: Patriarchal Depiction of Lady Macbeth's Character.

Picture source: BITESIZE BBC: Macbeth – character [2]

Such criticism of Lady Macbeth persisted for a long time until recently when some critics started viewing the character from a feminine angle. Comments on Lady Macbeth became not biased but more moderate. A newly developed trend suggests that Lady Macbeth does terrible things out of her deep love for her husband. She is deeply misunderstood and does not deserve those biased and extreme comments. Critics' view of Lady Macbeth becomes more tolerant with time.[3] By the middle of the 20th century, Louis B. Wright and Virginia A. LaMar excused Lady Macbeth. They state that Lady Macbeth is far more than a manly and heartless woman, as shown by some actresses. They hold the point that Lady Macbeth is just a woman. All she does is help her husband, but her help is evil.[3] Despite all these arguments and counterarguments, the critics have not studied the tragedy of Lady Macbeth with sufficient importance. This lack of attention to Lady Macbeth's tragedy is a significant shortfall in understanding Macbeth in a modern context, and it is a topic that cannot be ignored.

Women's empowerment is an absolute necessity of modern society. Men alone can never carry society along the path of progress, and women must have an equal share in all matters. Shakespeare's plays allow us to understand women's responses to any situation. Dr. Yousif Khorsheed Saeed, in his study, has observed that even though Shakespeare's women characters lived in a different age with different beliefs, traditions, and customs, it is still so relatable to the conditions of

today in the modern world - the modern generation of women are so much like them. The actions and reactions are very closely similar. Personalities in the modern age are much associated with those of that age [4]. This makes it more relevant and essential to delve deeper into the available critical analysis of Lady Macbeth's character and reanalyze her unique qualities based on the text that set her apart from other Female characters in Shakespeare's works, with a prime focus on her ambition, will, and tragedy.

REVIEW AND ANALYSIS

“Infirm of purpose!

Give me the daggers. The sleeping and the dead

Are but as pictures; 'tis the eye of childhood

that fears a painted devil.”

(Act 2, Scene 2)

Lady Macbeth is arguably Shakespeare’s most robust female lead. Her ruthlessness in her quest for power (albeit via her husband, Macbeth) goes beyond all expected of a ‘woman’ at that time. She is unforgiving in her quest for power, ungentle, and ceases to relent before it is too late. It often seems impossible to regard Lady Macbeth as anything other than an out-and-out villain with limitless ambition for power and manipulative ability.



Figure 2: Ellen Terry as Lady Macbeth (by John Singer Sargent) Oil on Canvas, Location Tate Britain, London.
Picture Source: Wikipedia

"Glamis, thou art; and Cawdor; and shalt be / What thou art promised."(Act 1, Scene 5)

The dialogue shows her acceptance of and eagerness for Macbeth’s future kingship.



Figure 3: Lady Macbeth before the Murder – As Perceived by Society.
Picture Source: BITESIZE BBC: Macbeth – character [2]

"Come, you spirits / That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here, / And fill me from the crown to the toe topful / Of direst cruelty!"(Act 1, Scene 5)

Here, Lady Macbeth is asking to be rid of her femininity, which she associates with weakness, and to be filled with cruelty to carry out the murder.

"What beast was 't, then, / That made you break this enterprise to me? / When you durst do it, then you were a man."(Act 1, Scene 7).

This dynamic highlights her as a complex character who wields considerable power in her relationship with Macbeth, which was unusual for women in Shakespeare's time.

All these above have provoked the critics having traditional patriarchal perspectives to lash the character of Lady Macbeth with adjectives like "The Evil Witch," "The Schemer," etc.

However, these quotes and scenes do not capture the total character which develops throughout the play. On close reading of the text, it can be seen that Lady Macbeth has an urgent and bright moral center that ultimately refuses to let her live; she shows regret and repeatedly evinces a morality that her husband is increasingly bereft of. She quickly fades out of the action. It is only a matter of days between the point where she is driving Macbeth to kill Duncan and the end when she loses touch with him completely. Lady Macbeth's initial strength and resolve crumble. Her role in the murder and her subsequent guilt manifest in her psychological deterioration. Her sleepwalking scene is one of the most powerful depictions of her guilt.

"Out, damned spot! Out, I say!—One; two; why, then, 'tis time to do 't. Hell is murky!—Fie, my lord, fie! A soldier, and afeard? What need we fear who knows it, when none can call our power to account?"(Act 5, Scene 1).

In this scene, Lady Macbeth attempts to wash away imagined bloodstains, symbolizing her deep-seated guilt, inner turmoil, and belief that she cannot cleanse her conscience. She never saw the evil of the murder lasting in this way. Duncan's blood haunts her. She re-runs her part in the murder to come to terms with her guilt—an important point. She does not try to blame anyone but herself. Her words come back to haunt her.



Figure 4: Lady Macbeth after the Murder.

Picture source: *BITESIZE BBC: Macbeth – character [2]*

"The thane of Fife had a wife: where is she now? / What, will these hands ne'er be clean?" (Act 5, Scene 1).

This line illustrates her obsessive guilt over her role in the murder and her realization that she cannot escape the consequences of her actions.

In the mold of Shakespeare's Julius Caesar, Lady Macbeth might be better understood as a tragic hero whose fatal flaw is her vaulting ambition.[6] Lady Macbeth's descent into madness illustrates how the misogyny of her patriarchal society forces her to use her husband as a surrogate for power, ultimately creating a monstrous ambition that spirals out of control. Her growing regret and morality starkly contrast with Macbeth's escalating brutality, as she becomes horrified by his continued killings and the murder of Lady Macduff and her children, ultimately recognizing that her initial vision of power and security after Duncan's death has devolved into chaos. She was never evil; however, the will to help her husband materializes the will underlying her husband's subconscious, which Lady Macbeth read between the lines of her husband's letter, provoked her to cross all limits since she believed there was no faster way. The isolation drove her mad as Macbeth no longer seemed to exist for her; Lady Macbeth always instinctively saw herself as part of a couple. Macbeth gradually broke away from her, leaving her isolated in her chamber while she desperately wanted their former closeness.

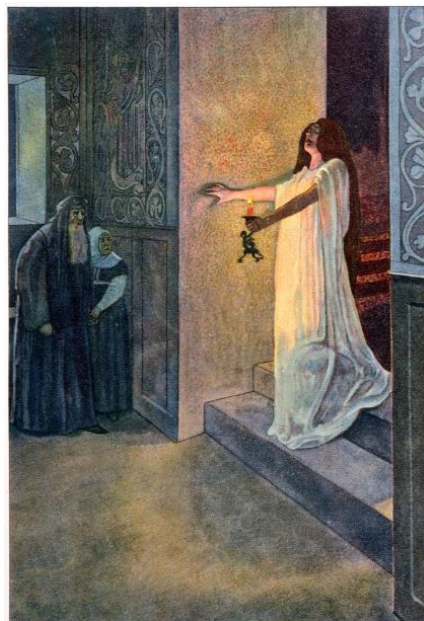


Figure 5: Lady Macbeth Sleepwalking Illustration from "Macbeth" by William Shakespeare (c.1900)
Picture Source: Artus Scheiner [Picture ID 146693]

Tian Junwu and Tong Xindan, having traditional Marxist views, opine that Lady Macbeth is a vicious, cruel, heartless, poisonous woman. They state that Lady Macbeth has both a demonic character and a human nature. The demonic character gives her the characteristics of a virago, while human nature makes her retain feminine characteristics.[3] Zhang Xueyan has rated Lady Macbeth's deeds as being governed by the principle of existentialism – a very natural and strong sense of responsibility towards herself, specifically to her husband. Xu Xiaoxi, with a perspective of post-feminism, states that Lady Macbeth is not a wicked woman in general male-dominated discourse, nor is she mad to death because she cannot bear the oppression and persecution of male-centered society. Lady Macbeth is a woman who actively pursues power, dares to satisfy her desires, and tries to reconstruct her discourse. Her death is not inevitable but the result of her

choice [3]. Howard says, “She has failed to foresee the long-range consequences of her sinful ambition, and so becomes a temptress to her husband.”[5] Sirajul Islam, in his paper, says that Lady Macbeth bore burdens upon herself – more than one. One burden is about ill-reputation, and another one is about over-ambition. It is easy to call her a witch. She, herself, provided the ground for this. Her husband killed the King and usurped the throne. It would never have been possible for him had Lady Macbeth not backed him. She, by encouraging and showing the way to do so, has become the notorious example of a destructive wife”. [5] However, as Bradley says, “if the Lady Macbeth of these scenes were really utterly inhuman, or a ‘fiend-like queen’, as Malcolm calls her, the Lady Macbeth of the sleep-walking scene would be an impossibility. The one woman could never become the other. And in fact, if we look below the surface, there is evidence enough in the earlier scenes of preparation for the later.”[5]

Sirajul Islam Chowdhury explanations[5]

Lady Macbeth is very devoted to her husband, and also very dependent to him. Again, she nurtures him as a mother nurtures her child. She knows about Macbeth’s ambition, at the same time, she is quite aware of the compassionate nature of her husband. She knows very well that if kindness and pity interfere and obstruct Macbeth cannot kill Duncan; cannot be the king. That is why she takes the leadership and assumes the demonic cruelty to keep her husband away from pity and kindness. Actually, the cruelty is not there in her own nature; she assumes it to tackle the situation.

From a Psychoanalytical point of view, Peter Barry observes: [5]

... when some wish, fear or memory, or desire is difficult to face we may try to cope with it by repressing it, that is, eliminating it from the conscious mind. But this does not make it go away: it remains alive in the unconscious, like radioactive matter buried beneath the ocean, and constantly seeks a way back into the conscious mind, always succeeding eventually. As Freud famously said, ‘There is always a return of the repressed.’

The above comments from Critics establish beyond doubt that Lady Macbeth’s character can be studied from different perspectives. Some see her as a loving wife driven by ambition, while others view her as manipulative and influenced by dark forces. However, a careful study of the text shows Lady Macbeth is a far more complex character who defies simple labels. Her desire to “unsex” herself reveals her awareness of societal limitations and her cunning nature. Ultimately, her psychological decline reflects the tragic consequences of her ambition, showcasing the tension between personal desires and moral boundaries. This duality makes her one of Shakespeare's most intriguing characters.

Joan Larsen Klein suggests that Lady Macbeth suffers from defying traditional feminine roles, indicating that her anguish stems from this rejection. However, it’s crucial to see that her struggle is not simply a passive response to guilt. When she feigns fainting, she isn’t merely playing the part of a delicate woman; she is cleverly distracting the men around her, using their expectations against them. This act reveals her deep understanding of gender dynamics and her ability to manipulate them to her advantage.[6]

Raewyn Connell’s concept of emphasized femininity further illuminates Lady Macbeth’s character. She rejects the notion of being compliant and nurturing, instead striving for control in a male-dominated world. Despite her ambition, she becomes increasingly trapped by the very desires that drive her.

The dramatic irony in Macduff's words adds another layer to her character. While Macduff believes she is too gentle to handle the truth of the murder, the audience knows she has blood on her hands. This awareness amplifies her tragic trajectory as she grapples with her desire for power while facing societal constraints.

In this light, Lady Macbeth's journey transforms into a poignant exploration of ambition, gender, and identity. She is a woman fighting for agency in a world that seeks to silence her, embodying strength and vulnerability. This perspective invites us to appreciate her significance in the play, revealing her as a deeply layered character whose struggles resonate with the challenges faced by many women in seeking power and identity.

Her desire to be "unsexed" is a response to patriarchal constraints and emphasizes her awareness of gender limitations. While Klein argues that Lady Macbeth ultimately fails to transcend her femininity, it's important to recognize that her moral struggles and guilt connect her to universal human experiences shared with male characters like Macduff. Both characters grapple with deep empathy and guilt, suggesting that these qualities are not limited to femininity. Lady Macbeth's tragic arc reflects the complexities of ambition and conscience, portraying her as a figure of pity and a profoundly human character. This perspective invites a reevaluation of her legacy, emphasizing her profound humanity rather than her failure.

Aditya Bhowmick [7] considers that Lady Macbeth succumbed to patriarchal power politics, sacrificed her feminine self, and died a disconsolate death. The patriarchal world victimized her. She argues that by being submissive like Lady Macduff or Empowered like Lady Macbeth, all women ultimately get victimized by the patriarchal society.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

In summary, Lady Macbeth's character is insightful and nuanced, capturing the complexities of gender and power dynamics in the play. She embodies traditionally masculine traits—ambition, decisiveness, and a willingness to defy societal norms—yet her journey ultimately reveals the tragic consequences of these qualities within a patriarchal context.

Lady Macbeth's initial embrace of hegemonic masculinity reflects her desire for agency in a male-dominated society. However, this pursuit leads to profound moral turmoil. Her capacity for remorse and empathy distinguishes her from typical villains, revealing her depth and humanity. The tragic irony lies in her attempts to wield power through masculine traits, which not only result in her own downfall but also exacerbate her husband's decline.

This interplay between gender and power underscores that her tragedy is not solely due to her being a woman; it's a broader commentary on the dangers of seeking power in a world defined by violent masculinity. The expectations of manliness she invokes become a double-edged sword, leading to her eventual self-destruction.

If Caesar can be seen as a tragic hero whose hamartia was ambition, then the same can be found in Lady Macbeth, who is also brought down by her hubris. While Lady Macbeth's story is deeply tied to her experiences as a woman, it resonates universally as a tale of sin, ambition, and the quest for redemption. The play critiques both the oppressive structures of patriarchy and the destructive nature of hegemonic masculinity, revealing the tragic consequences of navigating such a treacherous world.

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