



LADY MACBETH'S MADNESS: AN ENQUIRY INTO THE PROBABLE CAUSES

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Abstract

This paper uses post-structural analysis to analyze the madness of the character of Lady Macbeth in William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* with a feminist perspective. New historicism reveals that *Macbeth* was written allegedly to appeal the newly crowned King James I of England, who is historically known to be a notorious witch-hunter, as until the middle of 16th century bewitchment was considered to be the cause for madness, and later on, a woman's womb was diagnosed to be the root of hysteria. It is in the context of madness and misogyny, this paper unravels the layered character of Lady Macbeth, explores Lady Macbeth's attempt at 'unsexing' with respect to Beauvoir's concept of woman 'constructed'. This paper defies Freud's psychoanalytic claim that her childlessness resulted in her cruelty and death, and investigates the probable cause of Lady Macbeth's madness; whether it was her guilty conscience, patriarchal conditioning based on ignorance, or Shakespeare's deliberate attempt at balancing *Macbeth*'s cruelty by making Lady Macbeth a pawn.

Keywords: Madness, Misogyny, Woman, Guilt, Murder

The reign of Queen Elizabeth I in England was sustained against rampant misogyny and ecclesiastical dispute with cunning and strategy. James I of England, the heir to Mary, Queen of Scots, inherited the Crown only to add fuel to the burning fire, literally and symbolically, as thousands of alleged witches were burnt during his reign. It was against this backdrop that William Shakespeare wrote *Macbeth*, which was first staged for King James I of England or James VI of Scotland. Set in Scotland, the Thane of Glamis, Macbeth traverses a bloody path accompanied by his wife, Lady Macbeth, killing Duncan following the prophecies of three witches. Lady Macbeth's character remains a crucial literary figure owing to her madness, crime and guilt. This paper analyzes the various scholarly

opinions regarding the cause of her madness, and opposes them with a feminist interpretation of the text using deconstruction and new historicism. It aims at interpreting the character and madness of Lady Macbeth in a new light, as opposed to her being framed as an evil woman responsible for the fall of Macbeth.

King James' fascination for witchcraft and magic enabled him to lead the persecution of witches, and publish a treatise, *Daemonologie* where he wrote, "[a]s that sex is frailer than man is, so is it easier to be entrapped in these gross snares of the Devil" (qtd. in Gordon). He later commissioned a new version of the Bible in which all references to witches were rewritten in the female gender. Shakespeare's unusually mild treatment of Scotland,

involvement of witches, and demise of Lady Macbeth, all hint at the deliberate attempt to appease the new King. Thus, one can also infer that the fate of Lady Macbeth was due to the influence of King James. Perhaps Shakespeare deliberately penned her tragic death to resonate with the King's undeniable detestation towards the female kind. In Elizabethan society, women were declared witches when found non-confirmative or queer. In *Discoverie of Witchcraft* Reginald Scot attributes women's unbridled sense of fury and passion to be the reason for their vulnerability to witchcraft, echoing the mainstream narrative (Usher 49). Associating witchcraft with female gender gradually changed form as physicians in the middle of the sixteenth century began research on the subject of madness in women, who were rumoured to be witches. It was Edward Jorden who made the distinction between a possessed woman and a mad woman in *Suffocation of the Mother*, thereby shifting the blame from supernatural forces to a woman's biology for her nonconformity. The cure for madness was supposedly marriage and sexual relationships with men. The "wandering womb" or strangulated uterus caused by retention of menstrual fluid was considered the cause of insanity in women (Neely). Thus, the archetypal image of a woman in the form of the 'Terrible Mother' was abundantly prevalent in English society's treatment of women as they experienced witch-hunt and exile on the pretext of being insane. Using New Historicism and placing the literary text of *Macbeth* in the historical context, the misogyny at function behind Lady Macbeth's madness and her coming out as a femme fatal can be minutely analyzed. The prevalent political and social events established the 'woman' to be weak and frail. Such misogynistic beliefs run in the subtext while Shakespeare constructs the caricature of Lady Macbeth.

Shakespeare paints a dramatic picture of Lady Macbeth's madness, after she learns about the murder of Macduff's wife and children. She is possessed by grief as she sleepwalks and utters lengthy unconscious sentences. These unnatural fits are also accompanied by incessant washing of her hands to wash off the blood of Duncan:

Who knows it when none can call our power to account? Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him? ...

Here's the smell of the blood still ... all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand ... look not so pale ... to bed, to bed, there's a knocking at the gate, give me your hand. (5.1.40-50)

As Eve, Helen of Troy, Aphrodite and Pandora were blamed for the sins of men, Lady Macbeth too finds herself in a similar point of blame. She has often been called the Fourth Witch, responsible for the fall of a loyal soldier to the King, when in truism Macbeth was the man whose mind first bore thoughts of betrayal:

...why do I yield to that suggestion

Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair,

And make my seated heart knock at my ribs.
(1.3.136)

The method Shakespeare uses to create a passionate picture of the character highlighting her ambition, resembles Alfred Adler's take on "will to power", i.e., when a woman strives to achieve more than what is described as womanly. In an attempt to transcend the conventions defining a woman, she engages in what Simone de Beauvoir calls "masculine protest". Thus, just as Adler associates 'weak' with feminine and 'strong' with masculine, Shakespeare describes what is womanly. In the following excerpt from the play, Lady Macbeth stresses on undoing her female sexuality that renders her weak to harbor murderous thoughts:

Come, you spirits

That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,

And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full

Of direst cruelty. Make thick my blood.

Stop up the access and passage to remorse,

That no compunctious visitings of nature

Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between

The effect and it! Come to my woman's breasts,

And take my milk for gall, you murd'ring ministers. (1.5.40)

Through Lady Macbeth's sensual plea to the dark forces of nature, Shakespeare paints a vivid dramatic picture of a woman. Lady Macbeth seems to summon spirits to take over her body and fill her with cruelty, leaving no space for remorse. On deconstructing the text, her cry for 'unsexing' implies that a woman's body or a woman's mind is not appropriate to plot a murder, hence she must be free from the traits defining of a woman, and that cruelty and courage are attributes not of a woman, thereby establishing her frailty in the subtext. A post-structural reading reveals that Lady Macbeth's wish to be filled with direct cruelty only implies the absence of it; her desire to be free from remorse only proves her unavoidable conscience. Her plea to be deprived of all attributes called womanly only proves the unhinging presence of them. Her attempt at cruelty is to shed off the weight of her conscience from the scale balancing her unbridled ambition and her humanity on both sides. Thus, the intended message eludes the reader and Lady Macbeth emerges out of the text as a woman 'trying' to be vicious. In an attempt to destroy and deconstruct the woman in her, she inadvertently establishes the 'construction' of a woman and answers the question, woman created or constructed? Margaret Atwood's portrayal of Grace in *Alias Grace* as a murderess bears uncanny resemblance with Lady Macbeth as both the women bear labels of being possessed or mad. Grace feels the brunt of patriarchal society in Canada that is too hesitant to accept her as a woman capable of killing in her feminine body, without being possessed or maddened. Though the truth behind Grace's crime is a mystery, Lady Macbeth's crime is to harbor intentions to kill. Camati also suggests that her madness was a result of negating the 'feminine' qualities. The connotation of 'manliness' and 'male' is attached with a woman's ambitions:

Completely circumscribed by male power, she is forced to repress not only her sexuality, but also to efface her identity, constructed

exclusively in reference to others, being prevented from healthy spiritual growth and maturation as an individual. Her psychic identity collapses under the excessive strain she has submitted to, resulting in the loss of her sense of reality. (Camati)

The madness of Lady Macbeth and Grace reveal the society's willingness to label a woman mad when she trespasses feminine virtues. Hysteria and madness were equated with women's congested genitals, diseases of hearts and minds (Neely 69). Society was not conducive to women attaining power, evil or otherwise. It is perhaps for this reason women were cast off as witches or mad, when they started to show signs of being a threat.

Professor Herschel Prins makes a curious analogy between the madness of Lady Macbeth and Macbeth. When Macbeth hallucinates in the banquet after the death of Banquo, Lady Macbeth excuses himself by saying, "My Lord is often thus, and hath been from his youth" Had Lady Macbeth lived too and shown signs of madness being a woman in her time, she would have been indefinitely labelled as mentally unfit or mad to rule (Prins). Such an analogy is profound and leads one to wonder how European societies have been repulsive to female monarchs because of their biology and trusted male monarchs better, despite their mental illnesses.

Lady Macbeth in the following excerpt is observed to have overestimated herself and the extent of her cruelty:

I have given stick, and know

How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me:

I would, while it was smiling in my face,

Have plucked the nipple from his boneless gums,

And dashed the brains out, had I so sworn

As you have done to this. (1.7.58)

This excerpt is significant in the light of Freud's psychoanalysis that concludes Lady's Macbeth's childlessness responsible for her madness and

demise. Knights suggests that the excerpt cannot be classified by the usual labels of 'fear' or 'disgust' (Prins). When analyzing the Freudian analysis of Lady Macbeth's madness as a consequence of her childlessness, this excerpt is profound. However, such an inference, that her childlessness caused her to be evil and later on mad, can be countered by the argument that it was not her childlessness but rather the overestimation of her own self. Lady Macbeth is conceited and delusional of her own will and courage. In these verses, she boasts that her determination is unshakeable, however, later on she finds herself unable to kill Duncan as he resembles her father in deep sleep. Contrastingly and ironically, Lady Macbeth fails to kill a man who merely resembles her father when she estimates herself capable of killing a suckling infant. In the play Macduff asserts that Macbeth has no children, although the historical Lady Macbeth had a son from her previous marriage (Shakespeare 169). Childlessness was rather the reason behind Macbeth's ruthless murders following Duncan's, as the anxiety of the prophecy coming true (that Banquo's progeny will produce a line of kings) was tormenting him, as he had no heir to inherit the throne. Freud's claim that Lady Macbeth is childless and hence gave in to madness is less relevant. However, it is true that Macbeth and Lady Macbeth do not have an heir, which makes Lady Macbeth childless in her marriage. Thus, in Lady Macbeth we see the archetypal femme fatal, who is maddened by her rebellion against the characteristics that make a woman weak. As against Marilyn French's view, her madness was not an outcome of failing to be an ideal woman, but rather the overestimation of her own self, the failure of which resulted in a guilt that was the end of her (14-24).

The pressing question is the cause of Lady Macbeth's madness and eventual suicide. Shakespeare delineates a character that fails to commit a murder and falls victim to sleepwalking and extreme guilt, which leads to her tragic death. On the other hand, Macbeth is guilty of the murders of Duncan, the grooms, Banquo, Macduff's wife and children and attempted murder of Fleance. Jekel poses a similar question, why does Lady Macbeth kill herself after successfully attaining her objective?

(Sinfield) Freud's answer to the question in 1916 was to do with Lady Macbeth's childlessness. However, a reader can derive various reasons for Lady Macbeth's violent demise. The reason why Lady Macbeth is often considered a greater culprit could be Shakespeare's portrayal of her guilt. The audience naturally accepts the peripeteia in the play through Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking and washing away blood from her hands, which is perhaps because she blames herself for the crime. It is Lady Macbeth's own sense of responsibility for the crime of her husband that leads a reader into viewing her in the same light. One must note that only a reader knows that although Lady Macbeth is responsible for persuading her husband to commit the crime, she is not guilty of incepting the very idea of murder in the mind of Macbeth. Lady Macbeth made several ignorant assumptions, one about her determination and cruelty, and the other about Macbeth's innocence:

Art not without ambition, but without

The illness should attend it. What thou wouldst highly,

That wouldst thou holily; wouldst not play false...(1.5.19)

She was vastly mistaken about the ambitions of her husband and the cruelty he was already capable of. Thus, her demise was not only because of her overestimation of her cruelty but rather her misjudgment of Macbeth.

Critics remain conflicted about the ambiguity in the characters of Lady Macbeth and Macbeth. Jekel's theory of Macbeths being two halves of a whole helps a reader understand the incoherence in the storyline (Sinfield). It is crucial to note the unmistakable balance between the actions and words of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. Prior to the murder of Duncan, Lady Macbeth's fiery ambition and ruthless words surface prominently in sharp contrast to Macbeth's apparent unwillingness and quiet hesitation. After the murder, the culpability and remorse of Lady Macbeth is balanced by Macbeth's unrestrained savagery and thirst for power. With this end in view, perhaps Lady Macbeth's death was to maintain the balance when

Macbeth was walking a bloody path. Mangan suggests that perhaps Lady Macbeth's character was drawn to justify Macbeth's actions or to 'reduce the feelings of hatred and horror' towards Macbeth. Lady Macbeth is,

envisaging killing her own suckling child ... she is conjuring up the tenderest moment she can imagine in order to bring home the urgency of her appeal to Macbeth ... Lady Macbeth achieves a level of brutality which is specifically and consciously dependent upon the denial of her own capacity for pity. What she says to Macbeth is so shocking, not simply because it is an image of "un-natural womanhood", but because what she is rejecting and shutting out of life is so vividly and precisely imagined. (qtd. in Prins)

The deconstruction of the character of Lady Macbeth reveals her as a woman who merely tried to be evil and failed at it. The cause behind her madness is nuanced. This paper establishes that it was her ignorance and overestimation that pushed her to hallucinate and led her to suicide. However, on using New Historicism, one can infer that it was Shakespeare's deliberate act to balance the two characters and their actions. Whether it was Lady Macbeth's ignorance or Shakespeare's deliberate act of balance, she emerges as a typical woman who is remembered as the evil wife of a fallen hero. The idea of a woman turning mad after deviating from the morally upright road suitable for her, is thus reiterated in the text by Shakespeare.

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