

“Nought’s Had, All’s Spent”: The Undoing of Lady Macbeth

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Abstract

Lady Macbeth is one of the most complex creations of William Shakespeare. Her character has been studied under multiple theoretical premises and her theatrical representation also has been varied. As a unique combination of masculine aggression and feminine fragility, she is an enigmatic figure who has broken all stereotypes of gender and identity. Yet she has been debarred from holding a commanding space in the text by her creator. This article assesses the dramatist’s delineation of a female character seeking for selfhood within a male domain. It examines the figure of Lady Macbeth from multiple perspectives including gender studies and psychoanalysis, and posits her in the context of the socio-political landscape of early modern England. It also probes deeply into the text to identify the subtle strategies through which the dramatist has worked out the development of her character within the generic constraints of a classical tragedy, particularly in contrast with the male lead Macbeth. Finally, the article endeavours to locate the possible reasons behind the diminution of the magnificent character within the textual space.

Key-words: identity, selfhood, patriarchy, empowerment, demoniac, feminine, frailty.

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Introduction

William Shakespeare’s tragedy *Macbeth* was an artistic re-creation of the life and times of a medieval king from Scotland as drawn primarily from Holinshed’s *Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland*,

(1587).¹ It traces the tragic downfall of a male protagonist, misled by the “deceptive words” (Braunmuller, 18) of three witches and prodded by the machinations of an evil wife. According to the source material, Lady Macbeth “was verie ambitious, burning in unquenchable desire to beare the name of a queene” (Braunmuller 14).

William Shakespeare, however, pours flesh, blood and a unique consciousness into the sketchy entry made in the original source-material and recreates Lady Macbeth as one of his most bewildering heroines, who has invited conflicting responses. She has been branded as the fourth Witch, the demonic mother or the scheming wife in early criticisms; on the other hand recent analyses assessing her in terms of feminist theories, Marxism or psychoanalytic approaches, posit her as the wronged woman, repressed by psychological pressures or

hegemonic control. This article examines the character of Lady Macbeth in the paradoxical duality of identity that marks the world of the drama *Macbeth* : she becomes the ‘nonpareil’ in the man’s world but in the process, she loses her own selfhood. Her making stamps her unmaking; the” all” that she sets out to achieve, ultimately yields a ”nought”. As such, her representation bears the hall-mark of an awesome tragic personality. However, the same artistic imagination which had created the portrait of Macbeth as an awe-inspiring tragic protagonist in spite of his criminal make-up, has not allowed a similar trajectory of development for his female counterpart. By analysing the strategies employed by the dramatist to destabilise and finally annihilate the character of Lady Macbeth, it is my

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intention to bring into spotlight the process of rejection of empowered ladies as a source of threat to patriarchy in Early Modern England.

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Aristotle’s definition of the tragic protagonist in his seminal work *Poetics* has exerted a considerable influence on European tragedy. He contends that the deal protagonist must be” the intermediate kind of personage, a man not pre-eminently virtuous and just, whose misfortune, however, is brought upon him not by vice and depravity but by some error of judgement.....”(Aristotle 50). Lady Macbeth is represented in the drama as an exemplary figure which places her on a high pedestal. She is introduced in the play as reading a letter sent by her husband. A literate woman on the Elizabethan stage is a strong representation of female empowerment. The letter moreover is a visible emblem of the closeness of the couple at the initial stages of the play. She is a devoted wife, regarded by her husband as his equal. Macbeth trusts her enough to share the witches’ prognostications with her which begin with an” earnest of success”(1.3.131,117). She has an instinctive understanding of his character and recognises his weakness-- the noble compassion which undermines his ambitious designs. With single-minded determination, Lady Macbeth goes on to pressurise her husband to avail the opportunity of King Duncan’s upcoming visit to their castle Inverness to fulfil his ambition of becoming the King of Scotland. Her advices to him demonstrate her Machiavellian shrewdness:

“ To beguile the time,

Look like the time; bear welcome in your eye,

Your hand, your tongue look like th’ innocent flower,

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But be the serpent under’t”. (1.5.61-64,127).

The first three acts of the play in fact situate Lady Macbeth at the centre of dramatic action. As a dignified hostess, she earns the respect of King Duncan. She is superbly aggressive in her attacks of her husband's "cat-in-the-adage" attitude (1.7.44,134). Her meticulous plan to murder Duncan and plant the damning evidences on the chamberlains finally wins Macbeth over and decides to move ahead with the project. In the climactic Banquet Scene, it is Lady Macbeth rather than her husband who shines, reminding Macbeth of his duties as the royal host with sovereign majesty:

" My royal lord,

You do not give the cheer; the feast is sold

That is not often vouched while 'tis-a-making

'Tis given with welcome." (3.4.32-35,177).

Demonstrating her exemplary tactfulness, Lady Macbeth juggles on the one hand with the visible signs of Macbeth's growing fear psychosis and on the other hand the increasing suspicions of the Scottish nobles. As Macbeth loses complete self-control and shouts incoherently at the nobles, Lady Macbeth unceremoniously hustles the nobles out of the banquet-hall, to save the situation. She is brutally forthright in holding her husband responsible for the entire fiasco:

" You have displaced the mirth, broke the good meeting

With most admired disorder." (3.4.109-110,182)

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Indeed with her grit and resolution, poise and self-control Lady Macbeth is an empowered female, with agency and voice, in every way parallel to the figure of Macbeth in terms of theatrical role, in the first three acts of the play.

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The figure of Lady Macbeth, however, starts to shift towards the periphery , right after the Porter Scene in Act II Scene iii. While Macbeth is at the core of the rising action, planning for the murders of Banquo and Fleance, Lady Macbeth remains largely silent. Her first significant speech—a short soliloquy of four lines—marks both the anagnorisis and peripeteia preceding her final downfall.

After becoming the King of Scotland, Macbeth becomes engrossed in his sinister schemes. He does not share his secrets with anyone, not even his wife who he had once regarded as the partner of his greatness. As Lady Macbeth sends a servant requesting for the King's 'leisure', in order to address a few words to him, she speaks out her inner thoughts which reveal her transition from a trusted wife to a distanced Queen:

“ Nought's had, all's spent

Where all our desire is got without content,

'Tis safer to be that which we destroy

Than by destruction dwell in doubtful joy.”(3.2.4-7,169)

Caught in the hiatus between the binaries of 'all' and 'nought', Lady Macbeth discovers that she has lost everything worthwhile to her in the process of ensuring the crown for her

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husband. The word 'all' encapsulates the core feminine values that is cherished and sacrificed by Lady Macbeth—" th' milk of human kindness"(1.5.15,123) that she has scorned, " the compunctious visitings of nature"(1.5.43,125) that she has rejected, the milk that she has replaced with gall, the suckling babe whose brains she would have dashed to prove the strength of her resolution. The greatest irony is that Lady Macbeth discovers and acknowledges the reality about her true self, at the very moment that she has realised that she has 'spent' it all.

Acts IV and V of the play diligently map the catastrophic downfall of Macbeth, but the towering figure of Lady Macbeth is silenced and invisibilised. She re-enters the stage for one last time, but as an object of gaze for a Doctor and a Waiting Gentlewoman who study her somnambulistic motions from behind a curtain, as if she is no more than a laboratory specimen under the microscope. The pain of emotions repressed over a long period of time, suspicions about her husband which she cannot iterate and a growing detachment from Macbeth, has finally taken its toll on Lady Macbeth, leaving her incapable of maintaining her sanity. There is a total collapse of her reason, balance and memory. Her brain is a repertoire of isolated moments with no coherent link, except for that of association. In the darkness of her insanity, she finally becomes free to ask all the questions bottled up inside her:

“ What need we fear? Who knows it, when none can call our power to account/ Yet who would have thought the old man to have so much blood in him?”(5.1.32-34,218)

But she gets no answer. She wrings her hands obsessively trying to remove the indelible stigma of blood which once she had been confident, would have been cleared by a little

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water. The burning candle she holds cannot light up the murkiness of her own private hell. With the terrifying clarity of insanity, she gains her final moment of truth:

“What’s done cannot be undone.”(5.1.57, 219).

Lady Macbeth goes to bed like a terrified child seeking to return to her mother’s womb, whining the litany,” To bed, to bed, to bed”(5.1.58,219). To the physician she is an “infected mind” in the danger of causing self-harm. At the end of the scene with terrifying irony the magnificent figure of Lady Macbeth is converted into a cipher, a “nought” without agency or voice, having undone wilfully the “all” that had given her an entity.

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Like the diseased Lady Macbeth, Macbeth too has his share of infirmities—he is insomniac, delusional and morbidly nihilistic. However, his moral and spiritual downfall is strategically accompanied by a meteoric rise in his heroism. Lady Macbeth’s suicide emerges as a weak woman’s escape from a situation she is not ‘man’ enough to handle especially when contrasted against Macbeth’s heroic decision to hold on to life. Bear-like, he indeed runs his full course and chooses to confront Macduff in a last combat, before being killed by him.

Lady Macbeth, on the other hand dies off-stage marking her transformation into an inglorious nonentity. The only epitaph she receives is that of the women crying within and a laconic one-line report about her death. Her beloved husband merely makes the cursory comment:

hereafter; “She should have died

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There would have been time for such a word.”(5.5.16-17,228).

The majestic stage presence is now merely a stage prop, to be discarded casually since she is not required in the play anymore. The figure of Lady Macbeth has been effectively converted into a voiceless nonentity who does not even qualify as an object to arouse pity and fear through her terminal scene. Ironically, at the end of the play she is only a “walking shadow”:

“.....a poor player

That struts and frets his hour upon the stage

And then is heard no more.”(5.5.22-25,229).

The celebrated Greek dramatist Euripides in his tragedy *Medea* created a tragic protagonist out of a witch who had murdered her own children. Her ascension as a tragic figure is represented in a spectacular terminal scene where she is seen rising upwards in a chariot sent by her grandfather, the sun-god Helios. The use of the *deus ex machina* is a powerful strategy used by the dramatist to indicate his authorial support to a feminine stereotype demonised by society—the mother who kills her children. Literature often provides an autonomous space for self-expression to the marginalised sections of the society, as illustrated for in Euripidean drama for instance. The representation of Lady Macbeth becomes an interesting counterpoint because of its duality—it is a space for both the making and the unmaking of the feminine ideal.

In contrast to the androgynous identity of the Witches, Lady Macbeth from her initial appearance is female incarnate. Her reference to her “woman’s breasts”(1.5.45,125) and

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breast-milk bring out her essential femininity. What is ‘fair’ for the woman is however ‘foul’ for the man and Lady Macbeth equates masculine fairness with violence and aggression. Hence she interprets her husband’s compassionate nature as his effeminacy which robs him of the edge required to snatch the crown of Scotland:

“ yet do I fear thy nature,
It is too full o’th’ milk of human kindness
To catch the nearest way .Thou wouldst be great
Art not without ambition, but without
The illness should attend it.(1.5.14-18,123).

James j. Green observes how murder is genderised by Lady Macbeth. He comments,”for Lady Macbeth, masculinity is equated with cruelty, violence and murder, and femininity with their opposites.(Green 158).

When she receives the news of the imminent arrival of King Duncan to Inverness, Lady Macbeth realises that a fruitful opportunity has created itself which has to be availed at all costs. But in order to convince her husband she needs to acquire the requisite “valour” in her tongue, which is a masculine forte and therefore she lacks it. It is with an acute awareness of her deficiency that Lady Macbeth prays to the Dark Spirits asking to be ‘unsexed’. The act of ‘unsexing’ strikes me as lady Macbeth’s perverted ritual of self-cleansing, to remove all that inside her which is detrimental to the masculine self that she strives to cultivate.

Julia Kristeva forwarded her Abjection theory in her work *Powers of Horror* to explain the repugnance as a source of the self/other divide in races, cultures and communities. According

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to her, abjection is caused by “.....what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules.....”(Kristeva 4). She suggests that taboos, totems and self-purification rituals in communities are ways to negotiate with the abject and to establish cultural norms and social order, enforcing a sharp distinction between the ‘fair’ and the ‘foul’, the acceptable and the unacceptable. I would suggest that Shakespeare envisages Lady Macbeth as a figure who deliberately subverts the natural instinct towards abjection by developing her own ritual of *self-impurification*(italics mine) as it were. The Cauldron Scene (4.1) upholds abjection as a strategy used by the Witches to otherise themselves. For the witches, however, it is a natural response to the social ostracisation they face as a community. Lady Macbeth, on the other hand, calls on the Dark Powers to purge herself from her inborn predilections as a woman and a mother and thereby aligns herself wilfully with all that is gruesome and revolting. In her invocation to the spirits (1.5.38-52,125-126), her speech is charged with a passion and an urgency, indicating the tremendous effort she requires in inviting impulses that are repugnant to her. She talks about unsexing in spite of her strong awareness about her woman’s breasts which marks her essential femininity; she asks the murdering ministers to take her milk for gall, when her very repeated references to breast-milk indicates her womanly veneration of it. Her very reference to the dark powers as mischief-makers and murderers, indicates her natural aversion towards them. In the Sleepwalking scene, her continuous obsession with the indelible mark of blood that she cannot cleanse, emphatically suggests her intrinsic disgust for violence and murder. In her effort to create a new masculine self for herself, Lady Macbeth is evidently otherising her own true self and this is the beginning of her undoing.

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In Act I, Scene vii, Lady Macbeth appears in her defeminised avatar, with gall and venom in her tongue as she critiques Macbeth’s hesitation to murder Duncan as a form of effeminacy and bestiality. Her language attains the same strenuous pitch as she hammers her own image of the devouring mother:

“ I have given suck and know

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

I would, while it was smiling in my face,

Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums

And dashed the brains out, had I so sworn

As you have done to this.”(1.7.54-58,135)

Velma Bourgeois Richmond in her essay studies the failure of Lady Macbeth from the perspective of a twisted feminine psyche. In this context she discusses the role of language in her development as a character:” Aggression is assumed to foster aggression and the language is a most cogent indicator of how costly and difficult is her self-violation.”(Richmond 21). Lady Macbeth forces her entry into the domain of man by murdering her own “worthy role” as a woman and that is why she fails.

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In Aristotelian terms, Lady Macbeth’s hamartia is her inability to acknowledge her forced alienation from her own true self. The” filthy witness” with which she smears her own “little hands” becomes her identity, which masks her inner fragility. Robert Munro in his essay

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Lady Macbeth: A Psychological Sketch argues that the clues to a true understanding of her real nature have been carefully embedded within the text by her visionary creator William Shakespeare from the very beginning. He points out the “wonderful fortitude” and the” enforced cheerfulness” with which Lady Macbeth bears the misery gnawing at her heart as she is left all alone in the palace. The Sleepwalking Scene strips her mask and reveals that she is not a demon or a witch, but “..... a veritable woman—our sister—for whom’ as much as we may detest her crimes, we can still cherish feelings of pity and compassion.”(Munro 84).

Yet, after this powerful scene, she is heard no more. This brings us back to the leading question regarding the authorial treatment of the character of Lady Macbeth and the space allocated to her within the text. It is difficult to explain why she is not given the completion that she deserves. Why does Shakespeare allow her to fade into the background in spite of her tragic potential ? I believe the answer lies in positioning the figure of Lady Macbeth in the context of her age. Early Modern England was a politically turbulent age witnessing a transition from the absolutist principles championed by the Monarchy towards a more inclusive world-view accommodating the newly emerging professional and trading classes. King James I’s interest in necromancy in particular made witchcraft a burning issue in contemporary England, illustrated in the rising number of publications like King James’ *Daemonologie* 2 or Reginald Scott’s *The Discovery of Witchcraft* 3. Never before had Britain become so conscious the pitfalls of feminine power, as most of the identified practitioners of black magic were female.

In the expository scene of the play, the three unnamed Witches are represented as embodiments of anarchy and misrule, threatening to rupture the order and stability manifested in the established patriarchal hegemony. Terry Eagleton sees them as “radical

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separatists who scorn male power” (Eagleton 3) and deconstruct the established system. The official system thus identifies them as forces of evil. But Shakespeare’s Witches are a continuation of the medieval figure of Vice—ugly hags, comical and ridiculous in their appearance, antics and even language and do not come across as potent symbols of evil. While the Witches represent a ritualization of evil, the figure of Lady Macbeth becomes the human apparatus through which the dramatist can map the working of evil on the personal and the psychological planes. Irving Ribner, on the other hand, while discussing the choral and symbolic roles of characters in *Macbeth*, examines Lady Macbeth as the evil angel of the Morality play, seducing the protagonist to the power of evil. (Ribner 153).

I, however, believe that Lady Macbeth is Shakespeare’s visualisation of the female imagination given a free rein. On receiving Macbeth’s letter in Act I Scene v of the play, she is transported to a space beyond time, where she can feel “The future in the instant” (1.5.56,126). This is a domain where she can fantasise the most impossible means to empower herself. She can freely think about defeminisation, demoniac transformation and even conversion of her milk into poison. La Belle interprets unsexing as a plea for the “suspension of her menstruation”. (La Belle 382). With her feminine intuition she attacks Macbeth at his weakest points; she chooses to interpret his hesitation as his lack of virility and courage. The climax of her overwrought imagination takes her to the image of herself dashing the brains of her suckling babe. Her terrifying imagination enables her to chalk out the perfect murder plan without incriminating themselves.

Janet Adelman studies *Macbeth* as “a representation of primitive fears about male identity and about those looming female presences who threaten to control one’s actions and one’s mind.....”(Adelman 105). Macbeth wins battles, beheads traitors and terrifies his

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enemies; but he has deep-seated fears of breaking the established order. Lady Macbeth on the other hand, has no such scruples. She is a threat to the notion of a stable socio-political system. The Witches may be undermined by being advertised as butts of ridicule. But a figure like Lady Macbeth cannot be ignored. She uses her feminine wiles when required and is not afraid to channelize untapped sources of power to fulfil her mission. She has the courage to break barriers of the self and build an alternative identity. Above all, she has the power to manipulate an alpha male like Macbeth. As Stephanie Chamberlain points out, Lady Macbeth invokes ‘a maternal agency, momentarily empowering the achievement of an illegitimate political goal.’”(

Chamberlain 235). She studies the problematic stance towards motherhood in early modern England. Mothers and care-givers had the power to destroy the children in their care through evil practices like improper nursing and infanticide. This made maternal power a threat to the patrilineal process which had to be suppressed or thwarted.

The criminal hero Macbeth may be a deviation from the formulaic representation of the tragic protagonist, but a male aggressor like him can be defeated by a counteractive “industrious soldiery”(5.5.16,227). Restitution of harmony and order through a justified act of revenge against an unjust ruler is an accepted model within the patriarchal set-up. But the figure of Lady Macbeth is a threat to the very fabric of stability. She refuses to be shackled by gender stereotypes or the sanctity of established familial codes. The Witches represent a feminine agency which proposes to break the existing patriarchal structure by enthroning a figure of their own choice. But Lady Macbeth, I would argue, is a downright challenge to the patriarchal conception of feminine power. She can plan and scheme, she can manipulate a male potentate, she can charm and mollify experienced noblemen, but she cannot be summarily dismissed like the Witches. I believe the dramatist deliberately disempowers

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the figure of Lady Macbeth by codifying her as a “rooted disease” that needs to be purged in order to ensure “a sound and pristine health” for the nation.(5.3.52,225). The figures of Edward the Confessor and Malcolm inculcate the patriarchal ideals of the established society and that is why they have been associated with the contrasting motifs of health and healing: they are the “sweet oblivious antidote”. I would argue that the awe-inspiring figure of Lady Macbeth needed to be deglamorised erased from the public memory as it represented a fascinating glimpse into an alternative system of power structure based on imagination and intuition(as opposed to the Renaissance ideals of rationality and intellectuality).

Conclusion

I conclude that Lady Macbeth’s undoing is essential to reconstruct the equilibrium in the ordered structure of the society which is essential for the resolution of a Renaissance political tragedy like *Macbeth*. As Chamberlain concludes:” Her solitary, anti-climactic death, unmourned either by Macbeth or his society, becomes punishment for the havoc Lady Macbeth’s infanticidal fantasy wreaks upon the social and political order.”(Chamberlain, 252). As an artist Shakespeare was responding to the call of protecting the enduring ideals of stability and equilibrium represented by a political system based on patrilineal succession (represented by Malcolm and his supporters) at the cost of the figure of Lady Macbeth who dares to disrupt the established practice, envision a decentred alternative space where women can be king-makers using their wiles, charms and innovation rather than muscle-power and institutional law.

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Words Notes

All quotations refer to the New Cambridge Shakespeare Edition of *Macbeth* by William Shakespeare.

1. For details refer to *Holinshed's Chronicles: England, Scotland and Ireland*. Retrieved from gutenberg.org
2. For details refer to *Daemonologie* (1597) by King James I
<https://archive.org>
3. For further details refer to *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584) by Reginald Scott.
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