

Lady Macbeth: A Reassessment

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Macbeth is one of the principal tragedies of Shakespeare and is usually clubbed together with Hamlet, Othello and King Lear. Having all the attributes of a Shakespearean tragedy, the play is a discovery of anatomy of evil. Among all Shakespearean plays, it is the play which is most obsessively concerned with evil. Hazlitt says, "she is a great bad woman whom we hate but whom we fear more than we hate" (web). Here Hazlitt finds that evil is more fascinating and effective than the dim representation of good. Until now the critical focus has been more on the tragic protagonist Macbeth. He has a 'gift' for bloodshed and is driven by his "over-vaulting" ambition which is spurred by the witches. However, Lady Macbeth who "wills" Macbeth to march ahead and is ready to "unsex" herself so that her husband realizes his ambition, does not get the critical attention she deserves. This paper endeavors to make an examination of Lady Macbeth's character and her role in the play.

It is a commonly held belief that a woman does not have an identity of her own. She is pleased to merge her identity into that of her husband and her family. According to Lois Tyson, "Women invest themselves in the accomplishment of their husbands and sons." (10).

About Lady Macbeth too, it is generally believed that she is a mere agent who helps her husband in the realization of his dormant ambition. The ambition which has been lying in the darkest recesses of his psyche is suddenly roused when the witches hail him as the "Thane of Cawdor" and "King here after" (Macbeth, 1.3.49-50). After that, the dialogue between Macbeth and Banquo is interesting and revealing:

MACBETH: Your children shall be kings"

BANQUO : You shall be king (1.3.86-87).

These "black and deep desires" again come to the fore when Macbeth in an aside says:

..... Stars hide your fires;

Let not light see my black and deep desires: The eye wink at the hand; yet let that be

Which the eye fears, when it is done, to see (1.4.50-53).

This desire to be the king is again manifested in the letter which Macbeth dispatches to Lady Macbeth. Addressing her as "my dearest partner of greatness, that might not lose the "dues of rejoicing" (1.5.12-13) he shares his ambitions and dreams with his wife.

However, Lady Macbeth who understands her husband well makes a fair evaluation of Macbeth when she speculates:

Yet do I fear thy nature;

It is too full o' th' milk of human kindness . Then wouldn't be great,

Art not without ambition" (1.5.16-19).

She also knows that this greatest warrior has a softer side. He will hesitate and dither before doing a dishonorable act. Hence, she decides to

pour my spirits in thine ear,

And chastise with the valor of my tongue

All that impedes thee from the golden round (1.5.26-28).

At this point one may pause and speculate whether Lady Macbeth is just an agent of support to her husband or she has her own hidden desires for which she uses the services of 'her gullible husband. Lady Macbeth's monologues give us an inkling about the nature of her ambition, the mechanics of her evil mind's working and the dark pall of evil that envelops her soul. She beseeches the spirits to:

Unsex me here. .

And fill me, from the crown to toe, top pall of direst cruelty. (1.5.40- 43).

She wants them to make her blood "thick" and make her devoid of remorse so that they may not shake her "full purpose". She wants them to come to her "woman's breast" and turn her

milk into "gall". She appeals to thick night so that her sharp knife may not see the wounds it makes. To realize this dream she pours her spirits in Macbeth's ear thus:

Bear welcome in your eye,
Your hand, your tongue; look like the innocent,
Flower,
But be the serpent under't. (1 :5.64-66).

Macbeth's monologue in Act I; Sc. vii, precedes a dialogue between him and Lady Macbeth which throws light on the underlying conflict that rages in his mind. He wants to murder his King but is indecisive. He feels that:

He is here in double trust:

First, as I am his Kinsman and his subject, Strong both against the deed, then his trust. (I should" against his murder shut the door nor bear the knife myself. (1.7.12-16).

But while he is pondering over all this, the evil ambition to be the King works in his heart. It is given a whetting by his equally evil wife who uses all the weapons of elocution at her disposal to persuade him for this heinous crime. She challenges his manliness and scolds him to live his own life as a coward: was the hope drunk.

Wherein you dressed yourself? Hath it slept since
And wakes now, to look so green and pale (1.7.35-38).

She takes the whole argument to a climax when she challenges his masculinity:

I have given suck, and know
How tender 'tis love the babe that milks me
I would, while it was smiling in my face
Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums.

Have done so. And dashed the brains out, had I so sworn as you have done to do this (1.7.53-58).

The evil Lady mocks Macbeth, scoffs at his manliness, cajoles him and ultimately manipulates him to murder the "noble" king. There is no doubt that the lady with an iron soul motivates and forces her weak-willed husband into the crime. Yet in her heart there is a soft streak also. When Macbeth has gone with his dagger to commit the foulest crime, her soul quakes:

Hark! I laid their daggers ready;

He could not miss 'em. Had he not resembled

My father as he slept, I had done 't (2.2.12-14).

But later in the scene when Macbeth dithers on going back and smear the guards with blood, she scoffs at him and says:

Infirm of purpose

Give me the daggers.

The sleeping and the dead

Are but pictures (2.2.52-54)

This heartless unscrupulous woman feels the tremors of murder. She is really ashamed to "wear a heart so white" but soon she recovers to proclaim: A little water clears of this deed

However is it then! (2.2.67-68)

Thus apparently-it seems that Lady Macbeth is intelligent enough to understand the ambition of her husband. For this, she has suppressed her own feminine instincts and even prepared to "unsex" herself. Here she seems to resemble Queen Elizabeth who too played this role. She is known to have said:

I know I have the body but of a weak feeble woman; but I

have the heart and stomach of a king, 'and I myself will take

up arms. I myself will be your general, judge and rewarder

of everyone of your virtues in the field.(web.)

Lady Macbeth is so strong willed and focused that in Act II Sc ii, when Macbeth is disturbed by Banquo's ghost, she single - handedly manages the situation. She distracts the attention of the Lords by suggesting that those who know Macbeth know about this infirmity in him. It is this evil single mindedness that has earned her the title of the "fourth witch" in the play. However, the same woman with steely nerves is stricken with heart- wrenching memories of the misdeeds done. In a wonderful delineation of her psychological state, Shakespeare presents the sleep-walking scene wherein the dark rings of her guilt- stricken conscience start uncoiling. Her misdeeds recoil on her and torment her, splitting her soul to smithereens.

Hell is murky: Fie, my lord, fie! A soldier and afraid? What need we fear who knows it yet who would have thought the old man to have and so much blood in him (5.1.35-39).

Her guilt continually pricks her. Her soul is torn apart. The woman who has heartlessly prompted her husband to kill the old king by suggesting that a little water would cleanse their hands, now bemoans " Here's the smell of blood skill. All the performances of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand. Oh! Oh !"(5.1.50).

These rantings go on:

Wash your hands; put on your nightgown: look not is pale!

tell you yet again. Banquo's buried. He can not come out on's grave. (5.1.60-61).

All the commands on the part of Macbeth to the doctor to "minister to a mind diseased" go waste as no doctor in the world can do that. Ultimately, this "unsexed" woman is not able to bear the pain of guilt. She dies, broken, battered and split.

So, how do we finally assess Lady Macbeth? Can it be said that she herself mutates her desires to the desires of her husband and plays a supporting role to create a situation where he can win? Mary Mc earthy supports this view when she comments:

"Lady Macbeth does not so much give the impression of coveting the crown her as of being weary of watching Macbeth covet it." (n.p.)

In the final analysis, it appears that this middle aged general is dominated by his wife. He might be a brave general out in the field, yet at home it is his wife, Lady Macbeth who calls the

shots. She appears to be a monster in Act I but she also has a heart which trembles at the sight of the feeble king sleeping unprotected as she is reminded of her father at his sight.

Another question that needs and he answered is whether Lady Macbeth has been able to unsex herself. The answer is a firm no. It is realized in the sleepwalking scene, which in spite of all the abuses hurled at her, shows that she is still a woman at heart. The sleepwalking scene confirms it that this "monster" or "the fourth witch" also has a heart which weeps, bleeds and feels pangs of guilt for evil deeds committed by her.

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