



Lady Macbeth between Ambition and Femininity in William Shakespeare's Macbeth

Fuad Nabhan ^{a*}

^a Department of English language and Literature, Faculty of Arts /Al-Quds Open University, Palestine

Abstract: Lady Macbeth is considered one of the of the main characters in William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. She is the wife of Macbeth who kills the king of Scotland (Duncan) and becomes the king of Scotland. Macbeth is instigated by his wife lady Macbeth to commit this heinous crime and she in her role becomes the queen of England. This study aims to give an analysis of Lady's Macbeth character between her ambition and her femininity to reach authority. The study also gives a comparison study between Lady Macbeth's character and her husband regarding who is lesser devil. The study concludes with the fifth act 'Sleep- Walking ' scene in which lady Macbeth suffers the death which seems to be a kind of committing suicide.

Keywords: *Lady Macbeth; ambition; femininity; sleepwalking.*



1. Introduction

Every woman is by nature more ambitious than man; but she is ambitious only vicariously i.e. on behalf of her husband if she is married; otherwise a woman is ambitious only of possessing lots of fine clothes and ornaments, and above all, she is ambitious of being known as the prettiest woman in the world-a Cleopatra or a Helen. Lady Macbeth, however, had no such ambition; as a matter of fact, she had no other ambition than being the Queen of Scotland particularly when her husband wrote to her about the predictions of the Weird Sisters and how two of the predictions had been already fulfilled, and how the greatest prediction about Macbeth's kingship was yet to be fulfilled. These are the words of Macbeth to his wife on this particular occasion:

'Whiles I stood rapt in the wonder of it, came missives from the king, who all-hailed me " Thane of Cawdor ' ; by which title, before, these weird sisters saluted me, and referred me to the coming on of time, with 'Hail, king that shalt be!' This have I thought good to deliver thee, my dearest partner of greatness, that thou mightst not lose the dues of rejoicing, by being ignorant of what greatness is promised thee. Lay it to thy heart, and farewell!" (Act1, Scene5, Lines 5-10)

2. Lady Macbeth's Ambition

According to Langis (2012), it is the words of her husband which actually made Lady Macbeth ambitious just as part-fulfillment of the predictions or the Witches made Macbeth ambitious; otherwise, neither Lady Macbeth nor Macbeth would have dreamt of being the queen or the king of Scotland. Here are the words of Lady Macbeth in response to the great news conveyed to her by the messenger of Macbeth:

"Hie thee hither, -
That I may pour my spirits in thine ear;
And chastise with the valour of my tongue
All that impedes thee from the golden round,

*Corresponding author

Email address: fmottlaq@qou.edu (Fuad Nabhan)

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31559/baes2020.4.2.1>

Received Date: 14/4/2020

Accepted Date: 23/5/2020

Which fate and metaphysical aid doth seem
To have thee drowned withal. (Act one, Scene5, Lines 21-26)

When a woman becomes ambitious, she becomes far more frantic than a man. She actually loses the balance of her mind. Lady Macbeth's words ,when she receives the message of king Duncan's proposed visit to her castle and staying as her guest for sometimes; also how daringly she plans to be the murderer herself of Duncan without being advised by her husband to do so; again how she invokes the spirit of hell to unsex her, to fill in all her veins with nothing but cruelty ; and last of all to shut out the sun and the moon and the stars from seeing the terrible deed of murder she is going to commit upon King Duncan who is going to be her guest, are obvious at the most psychological moment :

"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, your murdering ministers,
Wherever in your sightless substances
You wait on nature's mischief! Come, thick night,
And pall thee in the dunkest smoke of hell,
That my keen knife sees not the wound it makes,
Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark,
To cry, "Hold, hold!" (Act one, scene 5, lines 36-50)

3. Her Femininity

However, much Lady Macbeth may put on the appearance of **femininity**; she can never be unsexed or be made as bold or hard-hearted as a man. What Macbeth actually performs; Lady Macbeth can never perform. She is bold and spirited only in her tongue, and that also in order to kindle her husband's ambition for the "golden round," and also to make him commit the terrible deed- i.e. the murder of Duncan, which she could never commit whether Duncan looked like her father during his sleep or not. Lady Macbeth talks a lot of courageous things and even of impossible things which no woman on the earth can do, for example, Lady Macbeth says to her husband that while giving a suck to her child in her breast, she can easily pull out the lips of the child from her nipple and dash the child's brains out against the wall if she has ever made such a promise to honour or to fulfil. (Lall, 1988)

If Lady Macbeth were really a masculine type of woman as she claims to be, she would not have allowed her hesitating husband to get into the bed-chamber of Duncan but she would have done the deed (murder) with her own hand. But then, her womanliness comes out its truest color when she can no longer stand her husband's guilt of committing series of murders, particularly, the massacre of Lady Macduff and her little children, and as the result of her womanliness (soft-heartedness) she suffers so much distraction of her mind that she begins to walk and talk in sleep and ultimately destroy herself by throwing herself down the high terrace of her castle.

According to Dutt (1987), a few critics wrongly believe that Lady Macbeth possesses strength of will and singleness of purpose. Dutt does not seem to follow Stanley Wood, who defends Lady Macbeth on this particular point. He says in this connection, "Of her strength of will she affords examples every time she appears upon the scene. We need not, therefore, multiply instances, but will only suggest to the reader how fearful must have been the inward struggle before she could return to the chamber of dearth, there to replace the daggers by the side of the murdered Duncan. Her singleness of purpose is to be attributed in great measure to her lack of imagination ". She will not allow her thoughts to wander beyond the accomplishment of the murder and the realization of her husband's ambition:

"Which shall to all our nights and days to come
Give solely sovereign sway and masterdom." (Act 1, Scene5, Lines 65-66)

4. Contrast between Lady Macbeth and her husband

The only difference between them is that there is no cloud or sentimental self-deception about Lady Macbeth. Having made up her mind she goes straight to her point-even to the point of murder. Macbeth also travels to the same goal-but with what infinite canting and whining, what needless deception towards his wife and even towards himself. Macbeth almost humbugs himself into the belief that there is a strong vein of tenderness in his character. But this tenderness is sentimental force-at bottom there is only evil in his nature. There is another significant point of contrast between husband and wife. Lady Macbeth had keyed herself up to one supreme deed of horror-the murder of Duncan. That finished, she has no art or part in the long series of Macbeth's subsequent assassinations. She is innocent -of Banquo's blood, innocent of the blood of Lady Macduff and her little children.

There is another noticeable point of contrast between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. Macbeth grows case-hardened in bloodshed. He murders so often that murder loses all its horror for him. Not so with his wife. Her one deed of bloodshed so preys upon her soul that, in spite of her stern self-suppression, it breaks out in the unguarded hours of sleep and hurries her to a premature grave. (Shakespeare, 1992).

5. Lady Macbeth is a lesser devil

Lady Macbeth is a lesser devil than her husband in the sense that she never instructs or advises her husband to murder Banquo or to massacre Lady Macduff or any of her innocent children. One murder is enough to upset the equilibrium of her mind; and besides, she cannot, like her husband, foresee what dangers may follow from Banquo or his son or from Macduff who actually flies to England in order to secure help from Malcolm and the King of England in order to bring about the ruin of Macbeth; otherwise she (Lady Macbeth) would have positively taken all sorts of precaution in order to safeguard her own interest as well as the interest of her husband. A woman may be ambitious, may be greedy, may be hypocritical, maybe even treacherous to her husband, but she can never commit any murder with her own hand as man can kill any number of men even without any serious interest at stake. That is why, Lady Macbeth is a lesser devil than Macbeth who loses his conscience altogether as he wades through blood while Lady Macbeth goes mad altogether through remorse and even -commits suicide while Macbeth lives till, he-is killed by Macduff. (Dutt, 1987)

Although Lady Macbeth, by sheer force of will, succeeded for a time, in stifling her conscience, and although she refrained from all outward expression of remorse Shakespeare has most skillfully contrived to make us know that such feelings did at times threaten to visit her. When she chides her husband in the words,

"These deeds must not be thought

After these ways; so, it will make us mad" (Act two, scene 2, Lines 33-35)

Lady Macbeth may have felt premonitions of the fate that eventually overtook her. When at last her mind gave a way under the fearful strain, she had put upon it, then her unconscious utterances show us something of the nature which she has all the while been striving to annihilate. Her stifled remorse reveals itself in her agitated sleep in the awful sigh thrice repeated that bespeaks a heart sorely charged. In her assumed character she had once striven to encourage her husband by urging the fact that little water would wash away the evidence of the deed, but now her natural feminine abhorrence of the sight and smell of blood finds expression, "Here's the smell of the blood still, all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand. Oh, oh, 'oh'!" (Act Five, Scene 1, lines 39-40)

She has trusted too much to an unsafe reliance upon her human will. More needs she the divine than the physician. Her death was sudden and self-inflicted, and in the awfulness of her end we are constrained to suspend our judgment upon her crimes, and but to repeat with the doctor,

"God, God forgive us all! Look after her;
Remove from her the means of all annoyance,
And still keep eyes upon her, So, good night.
My mind she has mated, and amazed my sight.
I think, but dare no speak." (Act5, Scene 1, lines 61-65)

Even Mrs. Jameson has been misled to some extent by the mere words of Lady Macbeth to interpret her character which Mrs. Jameson, as a woman critic, should not have done, because a woman is expected to know a far more correctly than any man can possibly know her. Mark what Mrs. Jameson can possibly know her:

"In the mind of Lady Macbeth, ambition is represented as the ruling motive, an intense overmastering, passion, which is gratified at the expense of every just and generous principle, and every feminine feeling. In the pursuit of her object, she is cruel, treacherous, and daring. She is doubly, trebly, dyed in guilt and blood; for the murder she instigated is rendered more frightful by disloyalty and ingratitude, and by the violation of all the most acted claims of kindred and hospitality. When her husband's more kindly nature shrinks from the perpetration of the deed of horror, she like an evil genius, whispers him on to his damnation. The full measure of her wickedness is never disguised, the magnitude and atrocity of her crime is never extenuated, forgotten or forgiven, in the whole course of the play." (Jameson, 1897)

It is the power of religion could alone have controlled such a mind, but it is the misery of a very proud, strong and gifted spirit, without sense of religion, that, instead of looking upward to find a superior, it looks round and sees things as subject to itself. Lady Macbeth is placed in a dark, ignorant iron age; her powerful intellect is slightly tinged with its credulity and superstitions, but she has no restraint the force of will. She is a stern fatalist in principle and action-"what is done, is done", and would be done over again under the same circumstances; her remorse is without repentance, or any reference to an offended Deity; it arises from the pang of a wounded conscience, the recoil of the violated feelings of nature; it is the horror of the past, not the terror of the future; the torture of self-condemnation, not the fear of judgment. It is strong as her soul, deep as her guilt, fatal as her resolve, and terrible as her crime. (ibid)

6. Walking and Talking in sleep

In the first scene of the fifth act, Lady Macbeth gets out of her bed-room with a lighted candle in her hand and begins to walk and talk to herself quite loudly although she is actually fast asleep. Her eyes are open but they have no power of vision for the time being. This is not only a physical but a psychological phenomenon. Some people say that it is a kind of nervous disease. Whatever it may be, it is undoubtedly the result of some serious disturbance in the body as well as in the mind of a person. In the case of Lady Macbeth, it is entirely a psychological phenomenon, and it is the result of a serious mental stress or disturbance. (Cariot, 2010)

Generally, when a person suffers from a serious shock of disappointment, failure or grief, he or she develops this kind of nervous disease which takes the form of walking and talking in sleep. But in the case of Lady Macbeth, it is due to her guilty consciousness that she suffers from. She utters some of the very same words which she uttered to her husband on the night when Macbeth committed the murder of King Duncan.

Lady Macbeth does not seem to know that Lady Macduff and her children have all been butchered by Macbeth's agents; and that is why, she speaks like the following: "The Thane or Fife had a wife; where is she now? - What, will these hands never be clean? No more of that, no lord, no more of that :you mar all with this starting." That is how the memory of the bloody hands of Macbeth sticks to her mind, and that is why she speaks out in agony and despair,

"Here's the smell of the blood still; all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand. Oh, oh, oh!" (Act Five, Scene 1, lines 39-40)

Again, her words, "Wash your hands, put on your nightgown; look not so pale. -I tell you yet again, Banquo is buried; he cannot come out on 's grave." (Act5, Scene 1, lines 48- 50)

7. Conclusion

Lady Macbeth's fiction of masculinity is never more than a valour of the tongue. She cannot suppress her true nature, as is evident from her inability to murder Duncan with her own hands. She wills to do evil and she dyes her will in her ambition. Lady Macbeth's last words are most significant and clearly reflective of her panic soon after the commission of the murder: "To bed, to bed! there is knocking at the gate. Come, come, come, give me your hand. What's done cannot be undone. To bed, to bed, to bed!" (Act Five, Scene 1, Lines 53-55)

The knocking comes to remind lady Macbeth that there is justice and that she can't escape punishment. Lady Macbeth has been so rudely shaken by her guilty consciousness that she ultimately jumps from her terrace and commits suicide-that is the end of all guilty souls who are not hardened criminals. (Majdoubeh and Al-Khader, 2013)

Bio:

Dr. Fuad Nabhan has been a lecturer at AL-Quds Open University, Palestine since 2002. He worked at Modern College-Palestine from 1995-1997. He also worked as a part-time lecturer at Al-Quds Open University from 1998-2002. He has a B.A. (English) degree from Aligarh Muslim University- India (1990) , an M.A.(English) degree from Aligarh Muslim University - India (1992) , and A Ph.D degree in English Literature from University of Rajasthan- Jaipur- India (1995).He has attended and participated in many conferences and training courses , especially in Distance and e-learning in Higher Education Institutions . He has published articles and papers in various journals.

References:

- [1] Berggren. P., *The Woman's Part: Female Sexuality as Power in Shakespeare's Plays*, In the Woman's Part: Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare, by Gayle Greene, Carol Thomas Neely, and Carolyn Ruth Swift Lenz, 17-34. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, (1980).
- [2] Bloom. H., *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*. New York: Riverhead Books, (1998).
- [3] Cariot. I., *The Hysteria of Lady Macbeth*, Boston: Four Seas Co., (1920), Shakespeare Online. 10 Aug. 2010. < <http://www.shakespeareonline.com/plays/macbeth/macbethsleepwalking.html> >.
- [4] Dennis, K., *Shakespeare without His Language*, Shakespeare, Theory and Performance. Ed. James C. Bulman. London: Routledge, (1996), 133-48.
- [5] Dut. T.K., *Studies in Dramas: Shakespeare's Macbeth*, Rangpur Bagh: Student Store, (1987).
- [6] Halio. L., *Understanding Shakespeare's Plays in Performance*, Scrivener, New York, (2000).
- [7] Holinshed. R., *Holinshed's Chronicle as Used in Shakespeare's Plays*, Edited by Allardyce Nicoll and Josephine Nicoll. London: Everyman's Library, (1927).
- [8] Homad, N., *Survey of English Literature*, Amman: The National Library, (1996)
- [9] Jameson. A., *Mrs. Source: Shakespear's Heroines: Characteristics of Women, Moral, Poetical, & Historical*, George Newnes, Limited, (1897), pp. 309-31. Reprinted in Shakespearean Criticism, Vol. 3 Criticism about: William Shakespeare (1564-1616).

-
- [10] Lall. R., *William Shakespeare: Macbeth*, New Delhi: Surjeet Publications, (1988)
- [11] Langis, U., *Shakespeare and Prudential Psychology: Ambition and Akrasia in Macbeth*, Shakespeare Studies, (2012), 44-52.
- [12] Majdoubeh. Y. & Al-khader. M., *Literature (1)*, Amman: The National Library, (2013)
- [13] Neely, T., *Distracted Subjects: Madness and Gender in Shakespeare and Early Modern Culture*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, (2004).
- [14] Pfordresher. J, Veidemanis. G. & McDonald, H., *England in Literature*, United States of America: Scott, Foresman Company, (1988)
- [15] Shakespeare. W., *Macbeth*, New York: Washington press, (1992).
- [16] Tales from Shakesear, BookII, New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, (1994)