

A Note on the Character of Lady Macbeth

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The ethical and psychological complexities and predicaments that constitute and problematize the tragedy of Macbeth are poignantly accentuated by the nuanced character of Lady Macbeth. From her very first appearance in the play Lady Macbeth attracts the audience's attention by her appalling ferocity and vehemence that sharply contrast her husband's moral cowardice and indecisiveness. She has been presented by Shakespeare as a shrewd judge of the character of Macbeth as well as a foil to that. It is she who keenly perceives that Macbeth is "too full o'th'milk of human kindness/ To catch the nearest way", and astutely summarizes the inner paradox of his character by describing him as one who "wouldst not play false,/ And yet wouldst wrongly win". Being herself free from such dichotomy, she decides to "chastise with the valor of [her] tongue/ All that impedes [Macbeth] from the golden round". It is beyond question that without her positive aid and constant encouragement, Macbeth would never have been able to commit the regicide even after being incited by the ambiguous "supernatural soliciting". In fact, the witches never provoke or tempt Macbeth in his choice of the evil vocation; rather, it is his wife who effectively and relentlessly urges and finally compels him to murder King Duncan. It is because of her motivating role in Macbeth's path of crime that Malcolm in his concluding speech not unjustly denigrates Lady Macbeth as the "fiend-like queen" who suited her "butcher"-like husband.

However, it would be too simplistic to consider a complex character like that of Lady Macbeth to be merely a demonic one devoid of multifarious human merits and vices. It is because she is a flesh and blood woman with her human sensibilities that she invokes the "murth'ring ministers" in order to "unsex" her and to fill her "from the crown to the toe top-full/ Of direst cruelty" which she naturally lacks. She is in desperate need to be unsexed because she in her usual state cannot muster the cruelty she deems requisite for committing the regicide. And though she is fervent and compelling in her continuous appeals to her husband, she herself never commits any cruel and masculine deed; she keeps on trying to assume a masculine guise by uttering maxims of cruelty, but fails to do away with her innate feminine tenderness. The ferocity that she assumes is only verbal: she never really performs such a cruel act as that of dashing out the brains of an infant, but uses this exemplary act just in order to remind her husband of the requisite amount of mental strength and determination for executing the regicide they have planned. In spite of sharing with her husband the same lust for power, Lady Macbeth too is a moral coward who invokes "thick night" to conceal the wound that her "keen knife" would make, but, ironically, refrains from attempting the murder because in sleep Duncan resembled her father. Hence, it is evident that however earnestly Lady Macbeth may try to assume the masculine guise of cruelty, she cannot afford to do away with her innate feminine tenderness.

There is no denying of the fact that Lady Macbeth is not a virtuous character. She has, like her husband, unjust ambition, and in addition to it she is endowed with the malice and determination that Macbeth lacks. It is she, and not Macbeth, who hatches the precise plan to assassinate Duncan. Except the act of killing itself, all other necessary arrangements are accomplished by her while Macbeth is lost in speculation and moral dilemma. When Macbeth is hesitant and about to recede, it is she who sets him on by rebuking and cajoling him. However, she does all these in order to fulfil the aspiration of her husband,

and not for any personal interest of her own. Her selfless devotion to her husband is a remarkably positive aspect of her character in spite of the vile and impious way she chooses to assist him. Unlike the witches, Lady Macbeth does not try to dissociate herself from Macbeth after she has provoked him to tread the fatal path, and she does share the responsibility of the crime as well as the frustration and mortification ensuing from it.

Lady Macbeth's anagnorisis of the futility of their endeavour coincides with that of Macbeth as she realizes that all their efforts have been uselessly "spent" since their "desire is got without content". In a state of utter disillusionment and hopelessness following the regicide, the guilt-ridden and anxiety-stricken Lady Macbeth admits, "'Tis safer to be that which we destroy/ Than by destruction dwell in doubtful joy." Nevertheless, she tries her best to suppress her own disappointment and keeps on encouraging Macbeth, even assuming a somewhat guardian-like role with which she protects him during the banquet when Macbeth verges on insanity. However, the dichotomy between her natural feminine self and her assumed, artificial guise of masculinity tells upon her psychic temperance and stability. Her inordinate will force with which she kept up her pretensions gradually breaks down under the heavy burden of remorse, and the collapse of her psychic integrity culminates in the sleepwalking scene. The same lady who has earlier sought refuge to "the dunkest smoke of hell" and invoked "thick night" now feels insecure in darkness, and keeps a candle by her side. She who had earlier told that "[a] little water" would easily clean trace of blood from her hands is now hysteric to find the illusory and indelible "damned spot" of blood whose smell, she imagines, cannot be suppressed even by "[a]ll the perfumes of Arabia". In this very scene, Lady Macbeth's character is stripped of all pretention, disguise and assumption, revealing the core of her suffering, weakened, mortified feminine self which arouses the audience's pity and fear notwithstanding her former fiendish attitude.

Shakespeare's subtle and nuanced portrayal of the character of Lady Macbeth illustrates the aporia of appearance and reality that permeates the entire play. By her outstanding strength of mind and selfless devotion to her husband, Lady Macbeth initially subjugates her essential feminine self and assumes the mask of monstrous masculinity in order to prompt Macbeth's unlawful attainment of kingship. But later she yields to the immense burden of anxiety and remorse, and proves to be a frail, weak, morally coward woman who even lacks due sympathy and attention from her husband in her moments of crisis. Her character acts as a perfect foil to that of Macbeth as she reflects the precise merits and foibles of her husband: Macbeth's soldierly prowess is matched by her "valor of ... tongue"; both have illicit ambition and moral cowardice; and both of them possess an astute self-observation by which they can judge themselves. With such varied spectrum of relative virtues and vices Lady Macbeth remains one of the most complex Shakespearean characters problematizing any easy and singular categorization.

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