

"Does she look like the innocent flower but become the serpent underneath ?": The Femme Fatal Lady Macbeth in the Misogynist *Macbeth***Huriyyah ALRaznah**College of Languages and Translation
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Riyadh, Saudi Arabia**Abstract**

Renaissance's society used to bring into play an ad nauseam cliché "a woman's place is the home". However, Lady Macbeth, one of William Shakespeare's dramatic characters, represents an image of the powerful woman. Because she enabled her husband Macbeth to ascend the throne of Scotland. This is when she urges him to commit a crime. Accordingly, Lady Macbeth was labeled as a femme fatale and a disastrous woman. However, when Macbeth becomes the king she switched to the role of the submissive wife. Contemporary readers would feel ambivalent toward Lady Macbeth's femininity; she is a mix of both a powerful woman and a formidable villain. Lady Macbeth's dilemma, in a nutshell, is that she is a disastrous wife to urge her husband to kill the king and she is a faint-hearted woman to feel guilty and let the pang of conscience destroy her mind. Thus, Lady Macbeth ends up marginalized, the same as her Renaissance counterparts. Correspondingly, this paper focuses on the connection of Lady Macbeth's demonic nature with gender discrimination and the misogynist attitude of Shakespeare. Bias against Lady Macbeth, here, is not just a product of individual male thought but is the result of the pervasive social norm of early modern patriarchy. The main methodological approach of this paper is the cultural study of the sixteenth-century feminism. Thus, interdisciplinary theory of feminist perspective in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* as well as the historical study of the marginalized Renaissance women are applied to probe into the reality of misogyny and negative representation of women in Shakespearean drama as alluring and evil figures. Therefore, the focused question within this non-thesis is why Shakespearean female characters, mainly including Lady Macbeth, are prejudicially undermined. In the end, the paper urges other researches to apply the sociological study of female power within Shakespeare's other plays to find out how all of the Shakespearean heroines are subordinate; following the Elizabethan social norm of disempowering women.

Keywords: empowerment, Elizabethan, Femme fatale, inferiority, Lady Macbeth, *Macbeth* Renaissance, Shakespeare, submission, Women

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Introduction

Female subservience was saliently prevalent during the Elizabethan era, in which dominant male society oppressed women, who were silent and dependent on their fathers, husbands, or sons. However, Shakespeare's *Lady Macbeth* represents the discrepant picture of the subordinate Renaissance women; she is an independent and powerfully determined woman. Nevertheless, although *Lady Macbeth* is one of the most overpowering female figures on the stage of the Shakespearean theatre, she cannot exceed male authority. This is more evident in what Kemp (2010) claims:

The kinds of female characters we see on the stage of dramatic scenarios they enact are largely a result of two key factors. The first factor is that Shakespeare wrote for an English stage on which only males acted (potentially limiting the number of female characters he might cast). The other factor is that he wrote for the tastes of audiences keen for stories ranging from a male-centered vision of human experience, rather than for experiences central to most women's lives (p.66).

This suggests that many of Shakespearean heroines are representative of Early Modern submissive wives, sisters, and daughters. For example, Ophelia in *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark (1599-1602)* is under the control of her father's guardianship. She abides by her father's decision upon her personal choice to make. "Polonius demands that Ophelia redefine herself as his commodity" (Findlay, 2010, p.100). Thus, once she lost connection with her father who has been murdered, she has been mentally drifted apart and tragically drowned herself in the river, as if her life is being purposeless to live without a male guardian.

In contrast to Ophelia's total submission, heroines in *The Tragedy of King Lear (1623)* show some of the female empowerment toward the monarch's authority. In the play of *King Lear*, Goneril and Regan have taken control of their father's kingdom as a gift of their fluttering praise and love toward their father the king. However, in the end, they ended up in tragic death, Regan was poisoned by her sister Goneril who killed herself in jealousy combat over winning the heart of a lover. This represents a female weakness in the face of male empowerment. "The presence of a man renders sisterhood ultimately self-destructive." (Findlay, 2010, p. 371)

On the other hand, in Shakespeare's comedies, the treatment of female submissiveness is less obtrusive and comparatively mild. If a woman wants to take any prominent role, she should disguise herself under the attire of a young page. A model of female disguised character is in *As You Like It (1623)*. Rosalind concealed herself under a young page identity to protect herself and her cousin Celia from any upcoming danger in the world of males in the Forest of Arden. "In plays like *As You Like It*, cross-dressing provides a theatrical holiday for the heroines, temporarily freed from the constraints that define their roles as women in a male-dominated society." (Rackin, 2005, p. 71) There is no way of independent women in Shakespearean drama. All dramatic heroines in comedies would be able to reveal their true selves under one condition, being married. This, whenever a woman tries to fulfill a happy ending it would be through marriage and becoming a housewife. All of the tangled plot in *AS You Like It* resolved with triple wedlock, a sign of heroines

happily ever afterlife. Rackin (2005) sums up the inevitable women's private security in the domestic life of being a housewife:

The heroines, in turn, abandon their own defiant and inappropriately masculine behavior because, 'Like all romances, these novels eventually recommend the usual sexual division of labor that dictates that women take charge of the domestic and purely personal spheres of human endeavor (p. 59).

Likewise, whether it is comedy or tragedy, all of the Shakespearean heroines cannot resist the power of their male counterparts. Whether it is Ophelia, Rosalind or, Regan and Goneril, they are all creation of conventional writer to per se disempower women, or literally to let them be marginalized. Thus, it might be a prior assumption of gender discrimination.

In a similar sense, what Kemp (2010) states as a " male-centered vision" on the Shakespearean stage is more evident in the tragedy of *Macbeth*, in which an ambivalent convention that oscillates between female empowerment and subjection is represented within the character of the femme fatal Lady Macbeth. It is obvious that Shakespeare's *Lady Macbeth* is a product of a male's imagination that balances with the societal expectations of the male audience who takes control of women. However, from the beginning of the play, Macbeth acts on behalf of his wife's plan. Lady Macbeth plots what her husband may do to gild his head with Duncan's crown. Even so, being a woman Lady Macbeth is unable to take the action of usurpation by herself. Macbeth has attained the power of Scotland by his hand that is stained with Duncan's blood. Moreover, Lady Macbeth is more persistent than her hesitant husband who looks forward to kingship depending on her championship. "As Macbeth vacillates by saying that one new title and honor is enough, it is the ambitious Lady Macbeth who pushes him toward the throne without consideration of the cost" (wright, 1939, p. 97).

Thus, Shakespeare's *Lady Macbeth* is more associated with the wicked and cruel picture of medieval women that was drawn by society's misogynist attitude. However, according to Mrs. Siddons who has played the role of *Lady Macbeth* "in this astonishing creature one sees a woman in whose bosom the passion of ambition has almost obliterated all the characteristics of human nature, in whose composition are associated all the subjugating powers of intellect and all the charms and grace of personal beauty" (Campbell, 1991, p. 31). Such a modern and feminist attitude that embraces the powerful mind and the strong "passion" of *Lady Macbeth* is incompatible with the conventional view of her as an avaricious and immoral woman. Shakespeare's *Lady Macbeth* is madly motivated to become the queen of Scotland, and this leads her to urge her husband, *Macbeth*, to accomplish her scheme of murdering Duncan, the king of Scotland. According to Wright (1939), "*Lady Macbeth* is a woman driven by the ambition to seek a higher position for herself and her husband. Upon hearing that *Macbeth* has been honored with a new title and more land, she quickly and coldly develops a plan whereby *Macbeth* can be more than a thane; he can be the king" (p.97).

Even that the supernatural power of the three witches, who predict Macbeth's kingship in the opening act of the play, is incomparable with Lady Macbeth's powerful inveiglement and manipulation. Adelman (2010) states that "But despite the superior cosmic status of the witches, Lady Macbeth seems to me finally the more frightening figure." (P. 33) This is because she beseeches her husband to assassinate the king and then usurp his throne. Adelman (2010) continues to confirm Lady Macbeth's empowerment, "Lady Macbeth acquires power over Macbeth more absolute than any the witches can achieve." (P. 43) Accordingly, Macbeth abides by his wife's decision instead of acting in accordance with his own commonsense. In this sense, Macbeth is a meek husband who acts on behalf of his wife, contrasting with the patriarchal value of male leadership. Therefore Lady Macbeth is taking the role of the family leader because she authorizes Macbeth to commit a crime.

Altruistically, if at least partially, Lady Macbeth's scheme of regicide by the hand of Macbeth is to raise him to the royal throne of Scotland. "Shakespeare appreciated the spirit of the new Renaissance women whom Lady Macbeth exemplifies as she relentlessly and ruthlessly obtains what she wants; she will not be stopped once her plan is in place" (Wright, 1939, p. 97). Lady Macbeth's overwhelming passion to aggrandize her husband's succession to the Scottish crown is her tragic flaw that anticipates Macbeth's hamartia. Hazlitt (2009) asserts that "...as Lady Macbeth by the force of passion! Her fault seems to have been an excess of that strong principle of self-interest and family aggrandizement, not amenable to the common feelings of compassion and justice, which is so marked a feature in barbarous nations and times" (p.25). By and by, Lady Macbeth paved the way for her husband's kingship because of her feminine passion to raise her family to royalty.

On that account, this paper will shed light on Lady Macbeth's role in Shakespeare's Macbeth as a strong woman who is decisive and compelling in taking control of Macbeth. In addition, the way she instigates her husband to rule Scotland will be elaborated all over this paper. Also, regardless of the real replica of marginalized and silent Renaissance women who were dedicated homemakers, Shakespearean Lady Macbeth intermediates in the advocate of the kingdom reformation under her husband's oligarchy. Moreover, the deterioration of Lady Macbeth's power under King Macbeth's autonomy is another issue that will be delineated in this paper.

The Marginalized Renaissance Woman

"When you durst do it, then you were a man" (1.7.49)

From the first scene of Lady Macbeth's appearance on stage, she plays the part of her husband's counselor to guide him in his vacillating manner towards the witches' gloomy prognostication of his ascendancy over the reign of Duncan. This is evident from Macbeth's letter that reveals his dependence on his wife's decisiveness and her championship of his high achievement of the throne. " 'Hail, the king that shalt be' This have I thought good to deliver thee, my dearest partner of greatness, that thou might'st not lose the dues of rejoicing, by, using ignorant of what greatness is promised thee. Lay it to thy heart, and farewell" (1.5.8-11).

This letter that has been delivered to Lady Macbeth quivers her verbal and evil power that excels the spiritual incantation and omnipotence. Lady Macbeth is more capable in urging Macbeth to follow her plan and act on behalf of her commands than the extramundane bewitchment of the Witches. According to Hazlitt (2009) :

This swelling exultation and keen spirit of triumph, this uncontrollable eagerness of anticipation, which seems to dilate her form and take possession of all her faculties, this solid, substantial flesh-and-blood display of passion, exhibit a striking contrast to the cold, abstracted, gratuitous, servile malignity of the Witches, who are equally instrumental in urging Macbeth to his fate for the mere love of mischief, and from a disinterested delight in deformity and cruelty (p. 25).

In consideration of Lady Macbeth's womanly competence, she depends on the exploitation of her eloquence and gift of gab. "As a class, women do not speak so well as men, but they excel him as a talker. In truth, it is less difficult for them to talk little than to talk well. Somebody has said that there is nothing a woman cannot endure if she can only talk. It is the woman who is ordained to teach talking to infancy" (Conwell, 1917, p. 7). This feminine capacity is apparent in Lady Macbeth's following monolog:

Lady Macbeth. Hie thee hither,
 That I may pour my spirits in thine ear
 And chastise with valour of my tongue
 All that impedes thee from the golden round,
 Which fate and metaphysical aid doth seem
 To have thee crowned withal. (1.5. 23-28)

On the whole, however, unlike Lady Macbeth's free will and independence, Shakespearean women were unable to speak on behalf of their husbands. They were restricted by the rules and conventions of their society that no woman was decisive over her husband's will. "Legally wife was chattel in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England. Her person and her property were under the control of her husband. He had the right to rule over, to dispose of her property, to teach and chastise her, even to beat her" (Hull, 1996, p. 31). For that, Shakespeare's Macbeth represents a different picture of the women during the Renaissance period, where art and literature revived, but submission of women to male authority and the medieval misogyny toward them did not ameliorate. "During the Renaissance, people believed that everyone could achieve greatness. However, they meant every man. Women were seen as inferior to men" (Huntley, 2010, p. 4). Concerning women's social status as wives, Hull (1996) claims that "The wife's special duty may fitly be referred to two heads. First, she must acknowledge her inferiority. Secondly, she must carry herself as an inferior" (pp.37-38). For that reason, although Queen Elizabeth I is in the power over others through her throne, she is aware of the inevitability of patriarchal restriction and control of husbands over their wives during the Elizabethan age "[Queen Elizabeth I] refusal to marry (which would have subordinate her as a wife to her husband and diminished the confidence of her

people as the nation's higher authority, under God alone)...further enhanced her ability to distance herself from the weakness attributed to her sex"(Kemp, 2010, p. 31).

Fearless Lady Macbeth but Powerless Woman

" Art thou afeard?...And live a coward in thine own esteem" (1.7.39-43)

Despite Elizabethan women's inferiority, Lady Macbeth plays a prominent role in Macbeth's glorious achievement. In pursuance of her murderous plan, Lady Macbeth as a maleficent hostess does the honor of receiving King Duncan with disguised hospitality. She pretends to be the benevolent mistress of the house who takes care of her husband's august guest. "Home is the true sphere for women; her best work for humanity has always been done there, or has had its first impulse from within those four walls" (Conwell, 1917, p. 5). Yet, Lady Macbeth's humanity has been disappeared by her invocation of the evil power to take off human kindness from her heart. "The dos and don'ts for wives were many and arduous. If a woman felt discouraged or needed support, she could always turn to prayer" (Hull, 1996, p. 44). This is evident in her most powerful and fearful monolog after the messenger's announcement of King Duncan is coming. "Come, you spirits/ That tends on mortal thoughts, unsex me here, /And fill me, from the crown to the toe, top-full/ Of direst cruelty! /Make thick my blood, ..." (1.5.38-41).

In this hateful speech of demonizing her emotions, Lady Macbeth sacrifices her feminine delicacy with evil wickedness to pursue Macbeth's greatness. "The deliberate sacrifice of all other considerations to the gaining ' for their future days and nights sole sovereign sway and monsterdom', by the murder of Duncan, is gorgeously expressed in her invocation on hearing of ' his fatal entrance under battlements' "(Hazlitt, 2009, p. 24).

As a consequence of her devilish invocation, Lady Macbeth is willing to commit infanticide and sacrifice her children to inveigle Macbeth determinedly to have a tenacious grip on his daggers. " Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums,/ And dashed brains out, had I so sworn as you /Have done to this"(1.7 .57-59). " [Lady Macbeth] would readily kill Macbeth's progeny to secure her husband's succession"(Chamberlin, 2005, p. 12). Perhaps, she expresses her bestial willingness of filicide as a mean to substantiate her allegiance to her husband's solemn promise of carrying out her bloody scheme. " Lady Macbeth's infanticide is performed as a potent rhetorical act to her husband the gravity of an oath" (Tassi, 2011, p. 62). This is obvious in what Chamberlin (2005) claims that "Fearing Macbeth's wavering commitment to their succession scheme, Lady Macbeth declares that she would have " dashed the brain out" of an infant to realize an otherwise unachievable goal" (p.2).

All the same, during the Renaissance period, it was a prevalent notion that mothers were the potential to murder their babies. Obviously, they were represented as criminal mind infanticide ,who were inevitably able to kill their own children regardless of motherhood's lenity. According to King (1919) " Though sometimes forgiven or overlooked, infanticide was nevertheless a crime committed by women, and women were condemned for murder with increasing frequency in the Renaissance centuries"(p.10). Chamberlin (2005) declares in regard to maternal care in general

“On the one hand, while mothers were praised for selfless devotion to their children, they were likewise condemned for harming the innocents entrusted to their care”(p.3).

Besides maternal matter, as a daughter, Lady Macbeth cannot sustain any further action to kill the king by her own hands because she hallucinates the reverent figure of her father in the sleeping Duncan. Had he resembled / My father as he slept, I had done' t”(2.2.12-13). The paternal authority proscribes Lady Macbeth's bloodthirst to assassinate the king. Indeed:

In Lady Macbeth's speech, ' Had he not resembled my father as he slept, I had done't ' , there is murder and filial piety together, and in urging him to fulfill his vengeance against the defenceless king, her thoughts spare the blood neither of infants nor old age (Hazlitt, 2009, p. 28).

It seems that the fatherhood's perpetual power is more dominant than any other male bond to Lady Macbeth. Dreher (1986) states that “Patriarchal norms allow women only two choices in life: domination by father figures or defiance and loss of love...Yet such repressed and imbalanced women have become models of traditional femininity”(p.11). Then, Dreher (1986) continues to claim that during the Renaissance “Women's life was a continuous lesson in submission. She was to conform patiently and silently to the will of her father”(p.16). Hence, the figure of Lady Macbeth's father averts her mind from slaughtering Duncan who might resemble her sleeping father; if she kills him herself, she may, in her mind's eye, commit patricide.

However, within the scene of the murder, Lady Macbeth remorselessly has deprived her heart of any tender pity and spiritual repentance toward the slumberous Duncan. On that account, Lady Macbeth is the image of the secularized Renaissance woman who disbelieves of the Divine existence. This worldly attitude is apparent when Lady Macbeth does not consider the dire consequences of murdering the king who is the deity reverence and the epitome of Heaven on the terrestrial microcosm. Apparently Klein's account (1938) proves such an unreligious belief of Lady Macbeth:

Lady Macbeth embodies in extremity, I think, the Renaissance commonplace that women reflect God's image less clearly than men and that consequently women are less reasonable than men. Right reason enables mankind to choose between good and evil and thus to know right from wrong. Lady Macbeth, however, seems to have repudiated whatever glimmerings of right reason she might once have possessed. She does not consider the ethical or the religious aspects of murder (p.214).

Also, this unreligious faith is apparent in Lady Macbeth's inconsideration of Macbeth's inability to assent the prayer of Duncan's chamberlains with “Amen”:

Macbeth. ...I could not say, “ Amen,”

When they did say, “ God bless us!”

Lady Macbeth. Consider it not deeply.

Macbeth. ...I had most need of blessing, "Amen"
Stuck in my throat.

Lady Macbeth. These deeds must not be thought
After these ways: so, it will make us mad. (2.2.27-33).

The above quote approves the fact of Lady Macbeth's tendency towards materialism. She ultimately throws away spirituality for the sake of worldly gain of royalty. "However, Lady Macbeth was in many ways caught between the harsh world of the church and its teaching and the more relaxed secular world which allowed women to be influential figures in the image of Elizabeth I. In some ways, Lady Macbeth's struggle for the throne was for herself as well as for Macbeth, for through him she could rule" (Wright, 1939, p. 99). Thus, becoming a queen and a wife of King is more desirable to Lady Macbeth than faithful prayer to the Heaven and absolute submission to the divine providence. Professor of the Humanities Harold Bloom (2010) declares that "a personal replacement for divine inspiration... perhaps as a consequence of such replacement of sacred by secular." (p. 1) Accordingly, while Macbeth is "struck" to pray, Lady Macbeth is inconsiderate of the spiritual matter. Somehow, Lady Macbeth represents a secularized Renaissance woman. To sum up, also, Lady Macbeth's indifference to religion shows her decline of faith for the sake of material power.

In spite of spiritual doctrine, beforehand, Lady Macbeth determinately insists on the conspiracy of silence of the king's murder. Later on, after the assassination, she urges Macbeth to become sham indifference to uncover their guilt. This is evident when she commands Macbeth "Get on your night-gown, lest occasion call us, / And show us to be watchers.-Be not lost/So poorly in your thoughts" (2.2.69-71). Therefore, when the household of the castle comes to the crime scene, while she and Macbeth are pretending innocently to be ignorant of their premeditated crime, they remained undetected. Although Lady Macbeth does not at once stab the king, she deliberately commits malice aforethought of regicide, thus she is an accomplice in the crime.

Consequently, when Lady Macbeth ascends over the royal court, and she becomes queen of Scotland, her mental decline becomes apparent. "Almost odds with mornings which is which..." (3.4.127). Everything is chaotic, and Lady Macbeth cannot consider the present moment she is living in. This is caused by the sin of premeditating the shedding of the venerated blood of Duncan. "Lady Macbeth is driven mad by guilt and remorse over a criminal career" (Szasz, 2010, p. 24). Moreover, Macbeth's displacement of her upper hand and guidance with his own manhood and supremacy pushes away Lady Macbeth towards degenerate insanity. As a king, he takes actions without acquainting his wife as his partner of greatness to dethrone King Duncan. Then, Macbeth independently plots to kill Banquo and anyone who might be threatening his throne without taking Lady Macbeth's advice. Paris (1919) declares "Lady Macbeth's deterioration is related, I believe, to the growing brutality of her husband, which deprives her of her mission and leaves her prey to her guilt"(p.153).

In the end, the overweight of shame and contrition forcefully accelerates Lady Macbeth's mental disorder. She is mentally sick of parasomnia, particularly sleepwalking. The hallucination

of Duncan's blood is taking over her mind. Consequently, she walks sleeping and cannot wash out her hands from the smell of guilt of Duncan's murder. "Here 's the smell of the blood still: all the perfumes of Arabia/ will not sweeten this little hand. Oh! Oh! Oh!" (5.1.40-41). Therefore, she cannot stand anymore her guilt of plotting the murder and carrying out the stained daggers in her hands; with which she painted the faces of the innocent drugged chamberlains with King Duncan's blood. " That Lady Macbeth dies unrepentant, unable either to wash clean the murderous hands which helped secure Macbeth's unlawful succession nor to the agency that enabled her crime speaks to guilt which cannot absolved" (Chamberlain, 2005, p. 17). Ultimately, Lady Macbeth commits suicide, and her "dusty death" is immediate as a "brief candle"(5.5.23), that flickers out after illuminating the path of kingship in front of Macbeth.

Conclusion

In sum, the misogynist ideas of men toward women as subordinate and inferior representatives were pervasive during the Renaissance period. Women as daughters, wives, and mothers were dependent on their dominant male relations. "...Renaissance ideas on [feminist nature], more classical than medieval, and almost exclusively a male product, expressed this new subordination of women to the interests of husbands and male-dominated kin groups and served to justify the removal of women from ... the position of power and ... independence"(Kelly-Gadol,1987, p. 197). However, all of the women's inferiority and silence during the Renaissance period contradicted with Lady Macbeth's empowerment on the stage of the Shakespearean theater. Interestingly, she breaks the silence on female powerlessness when she speaks out on behalf of Macbeth's ambition and raises him to ascend to the royal court. Nevertheless, Lady Macbeth ends up marginalized by her husband, the glorious king, and then she disastrously killed herself after being perpetually fanaticizing the scene of sinful regicide through her disordered mind, a tragic ending Shakespeare wrote, as a punishment of Lady Macbeth's transgression.

To conclude, Renaissance women, whether dramatized like Lady Macbeth or recorded in history, used to follow an archaic convention the ancient Greeks got in first, or particularly what the playwright Aeschylus, in *Seven Against Thebes*, (467 B.C.), wrote: "Let women stay at home and hold their peace" (as cited in Flexner,1993, p. 205).

Finally, researchers are recommended to examine female powerlessness and disguised misogyny in some other sixteenth-century plays, like William Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, *The Tempest*, *Taming of the Shrew*, *The Tragedy of Hamlet*, *Prince of Denmark* and scores of others.

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