

Feminist Study of Lady Macbeth

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ABSTRACT. As one of the four great tragedies written by the world's literary giant Shakespeare (1564-1616), *Macbeth* (1606) has attracted a lot of literary critics. Thus, Lady Macbeth as the most prominent female character in the play, should have been highly discussed. However, scholars at home and abroad have focused on the social background of the play, the tragic image of Macbeth and the supernatural and bloody images in the play. Little domestic research of Lady Macbeth from the feminist criticism can be found. This thesis therefore aims to use traditional feminist criticism as a theoretical basis and the play as an analytical text to study the image of Lady Macbeth. This thesis draws inspiration from feminist Shakespearean criticism and follow its research perspective and methodology to give a new interpretation of Lady Macbeth.

1. Introduction

William Shakespeare (1564-1616) is recognized as the finest of all Elizabethan dramatists, as well as the greatest of all English playwrights. He writes 37 plays, two narrative poems, and 154 sonnets during his lifetime. He creates his best tragedies during the third stage of his writing career, from 1600 and 1608, which is his mature period, among which *Macbeth* is the last written and shortest [1].

Macbeth, or *The Tragedy of Macbeth*, is one of William Shakespeare's shorter tragedies, and was most likely composed between 1599 and 1606. During the reign of James VI, who is a sponsor of Shakespeare's performing troupe, Shakespeare writes the play. *Macbeth*, more than any other of Shakespeare's works, may better depict Shakespeare's connection with sovereign nobility.

Lady Macbeth, one of Shakespeare's most well-known and memorable female characters, has been recognized as the most nasty and cruel female character ever seen since the publication of *Macbeth*. Goethe, the great German poet regards her as a super witch to show the evil power she has that are more horrible than the three prophetic witches in the play [2]. Critics claim that she is more ambitious than her husband, but less virtuous. She is widely regarded by the common as the pinnacle of evil in popular culture, with the appearance of her images over and over again in a variety of cultural backgrounds. She has attracted numerous negative comments and, she has been regarded as the fourth witch, the only culprit of her husband's treason.

Such a tendency of remarks directs against Lady Macbeth has persisted for a long time until the feminist criticism appears and the feminist Shakespeare studies grows into an independent school. Comments on Lady Macbeth have become not biased but more moderate [3].

In 1838, Heinrich Heine suggests that the image and

reputation of Lady Macbeth have been improved in Germany. There is a trend that said Lady Macbeth does terrible things out of her deep love for her husband. She is deeply misunderstood and she does not deserve those biased and extreme comments. Heine, on the other hand, maintains the traditional view of Lady Macbeth, and believes that this shift is just temporary. However, until the mid-20th century, this trend has intensified instead of ebbing. Although Lady Macbeth's moniker of "Devil Queen" has not been completely eliminated, the negative controversy caused by Macbeth has indeed decreased [4].

Critics' view of Lady Macbeth becomes more tolerant with the passage of time. By the middle of the 20th century, Louis B. Wright and Virginia A. LaMar excuse Lady Macbeth. They state that Lady Macbeth is far more than the manly and heartless woman shown by some actresses. They hold the point that Lady Macbeth is just a woman. All she does is helping her husband, but her help is evil.

In the past 30 years, domestic research on *Macbeth* has focused on the social background of *Macbeth*, *Macbeth's* tragic images, supernatural factors and bloody images in the play, but there is not much research on Lady Macbeth. There are some studies related to Lady Macbeth from the theories of Marxism. According to Tian Junwu and Tong Xindan, the traditional Marxist view holds that Lady Macbeth is a vicious, cruel and heartless poisonous woman. Tian and Tong themselves state that Lady Macbeth has both the demonic character and human nature. The demonic character makes her have the characteristics of virago, while the human nature makes her remain the feminine characteristics.

Zhang Xueyan analyzes Lady Macbeth from the perspective of Sartre's existentialism. She states that Lady Macbeth acts according to the principle of existentialism, and her every action is a choice accompanied by a very natural and strong sense of responsibility towards herself

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or mostly towards her husband.

Xu Xiaoxi does research about Lady Macbeth from the perspective of post-feminism. She states that Lady Macbeth is not a wicked woman in general male-dominated discourse, nor is she mad to death because she cannot bear the oppression and persecution of male-centered society. Lady Macbeth is a woman who actively pursues power, dares to satisfy her own desires, and tries to reconstruct her own discourse. Her death is not inevitable, but the result of her choice.

To summarize, despite the fact that Lady Macbeth's appraisal has evolved from utter denial to progressive forgiveness, she is still judged from a patriarchal perspective, and she never really gets rid of the label of "evilness". With the rise of feminist criticism, the research on Lady Macbeth at home and abroad has made new progress.

2. The Image of Lady Macbeth in Traditional View

In the first part, the paper systematically sorts out the stereotype against Lady Macbeth, and analyzes why Lady Macbeth is misunderstood. The world's extreme evaluation of her mainly falls into two categories: "the evil witch" and "the schemer".

2.1 "The Evil Witch"

The most well-known evaluation of calling Lady Macbeth a witch is Goethe's judgement of her as a super witch, which is used to describe the evil forces she has that are more terrible than the three witches in the play. This is not a total misunderstanding, because in Macbeth, there are many lines that show the image of Lady Macbeth as a witch.

After Lady Macbeth has read the letter from her husband Macbeth telling the prophecies that he would be the future king, she soliloquizes "Under my battlements. Come, you spirits / That tend on moral thoughts, unsex me here" [5]. The lines show a classic scene of Lady Macbeth playing her "witchcrafts" by portraying the scene when she summons the spirits. It can be seen that Lady Macbeth's line does not conform to the manners of an aristocratic woman, but is like a witch's spell. Indication shows that Lady Macbeth gets a sense of witchcraft can be found in "And take my milk for gall, your murdering ministers, Wherever in your sightless substances" [5]. In these lines, she calls "murdering ministers" with "sightless substances". These words demonstrate clearly that Lady Macbeth is turning to demons for help. Just as it is said that people have to pay their souls to make a deal with the devil, Lady Macbeth chooses to pay her milk from her own breasts as ministers' nourishment. These words all show the image of Lady Macbeth as an evil witch.

Lady Macbeth shows how brutal she is when she encourages her husband to murder King Duncan. It can be seen that Lady Macbeth is so outrageous that she can kill the infant she is milking. Caring for the children has always been regarded as a mother's instinct. So, it's hard

to believe that there is a mother in this world who treats her baby so cruelly. One's evilness is unimaginable if she treats her own child in a ruthless way. Thus, Lady Macbeth is defined as "evil witch" by critics. But it is important to note that the definition is extreme and one-sided because critics deprived all other identities Lady Macbeth has besides "mother". So, this judgement is more like a stereotype.

2.2 "The Schemer"

Lady Macbeth has always been regarded as a schemer. Critics blame her for Macbeth's treason. It is believed that her instigation led her husband to commit the murder of the King Duncan. The reason for this misunderstanding is that Lady Macbeth's first lines left a deep impression on the audience, which causes the audience to define Lady Macbeth as a "schemer" at the very beginning [6]. No matter how the later plot develops, the deep first impression will never be forgotten.

Lady Macbeth makes her debut by reading a letter from her husband. In the letter, Macbeth tells the prophecies heard from the witches. After reading this letter, she says "That I may pour my spirits in thine ear / And chastise with the valor of my tongue / All that impedes thee from the golden round" [5].

These lines indicate that she will pass on her spiritual strength to Macbeth to help him become the King. This line portrays a scene that Lady Macbeth imposes her murdering consciousness on Macbeth. The image of Lady Macbeth as a schemer is thus engraves in the audience's consciousness. But this is a very one-sided understanding, because before this line, there are two lines from Lady Macbeth that can be seen as the evidence of Macbeth's very own ambition.

The first one is "Art not without ambition, but without / The illness should attend it" [5]. The following lines also showed Macbeth's ambition: "And that which rather thou dost fear to do / Than wishest should be undone" [5]. Lady Macbeth knows her husband very well, she immediately gets her husband's inner contradiction. She is very worried, knows what her husband desires, and worries that his hesitation will stand in the way. So, Lady Macbeth encourages him and inspires him -- just to get him to change his indecisive character. But in doing so, she is seen to be instigating and enticing her husband to satisfy his own selfish desires, and her zeal and true love are misinterpreted. As a bold woman who loves her husband dearly, although she makes what seems to be an unusual move, her original intention is still the expectation and ardor of an ordinary woman.

So, although these lines do reveal Lady Macbeth's scheme, Macbeth himself is not innocent. He does have the ambition of becoming a king, but he doesn't bother to take unholy measures, and he doesn't dare to bear the accusation of treason. Unfortunately, Lady Macbeth takes the blame and becomes a schemer, when in fact she is only a catalyst.

3. The True Characters of Lady Macbeth

In the previous section, the thesis lists the traditional views of Lady Macbeth, which tend to portray her as a “wicked witch”, a “schemer”, and analyzes why Lady Macbeth has been misunderstood in this way. Thus, it reveals that those views are improper. So, in this section, the thesis looks through the surface and reveal the true characters of Lady Macbeth - vulnerability, unsophisticatedness and the patriarchal consciousness rooted in her mind.

3.1 A Vulnerable Wife

It is widely believed that Lady Macbeth’s vulnerable personality is stimulated by the guilt of the murder of the king later in the play, but in fact, it is evident from earlier in the play: “That which hath made them drunk hath made me bold” [5]. On the night of Macbeth’s murder of King Duncan, Lady Macbeth is responsible for getting the chamberlains drunk, and from this line it can be inferred that although Lady Macbeth does not kill the king herself, she is still afraid and needs to drink to increase her courage. These lines portray a timid Lady Macbeth to the audience which is an indication of her vulnerability. Lady Macbeth also says: “Had he not resembled /My father as he slept, I had don’t” [5]. This is the strong evidence of the vulnerability of Lady Macbeth’s character in that she cannot kill the king by herself because his appearance looks like her father. Like this line, the scene in Act 1 when Lady Macbeth says that she cracks a baby’s brain, it is likely that Lady Macbeth does not mean what she says, but she is only trying to push Macbeth to do the murder.

Lady Macbeth’s vulnerability can be seen from other character’s attitude towards her. When she hears the hideous trumpet for King Duncan’s death, she asks Macduff, a nobleman what had happened, and Macduff replies to her: “Tis not for you to hear what I can speak: The repetition in a woman’s ear /Would murder as it fell” [5]. It can be inferred from Macduff’s words that Lady Macbeth is a timid and vulnerable wife who will be horrified at the mere news of the king’s murder.

Lady Macbeth’s madness is also a sign of her inner vulnerability. Her madness is foreshadowed when Lady Macbeth advises Macbeth not to think of the sin he has committed after the successful murder of Duncan. Actually, Lady Macbeth is not only telling Macbeth not to think about the murder he has committed, but she is also being self-referential and forgetting the crime she has committed, for she knows full well that she will go mad with vulnerability and guilt, and it turns out to be just as she has predicted. Lady Macbeth is tormented by the guilt of committing the crime of participating in the King Duncan’s murder, and her vulnerability leads her step by step to insanity as she began to sleepwalk and hallucinate. Lady Macbeth then is tortured by the fantasy of her hands covered in blood and she had to wash her hands over and over again. If Lady Macbeth has no vulnerability in her character, she will never feel guilty and go to mad.

3.2 An Unsophisticated Lady

Lady Macbeth’s eloquent language gives the impression of her being sophisticated, but the opposite is true.

Lady Macbeth’s unsophisticatedness can be proved by the educational model she has taken. When King Duncan sends Banquo to present Lady Macbeth with a diamond on the evening of the banquet she is hosting. Banquo tells Macbeth that the king regards Lady Macbeth as “most kind hostess” [5] and the banquet she holds shuts Duncan up in measureless content. It can be inferred that Lady Macbeth is groomed on the model of becoming a noblewoman who is good at hosting parties to the great satisfaction of King Duncan. This approach to grooming is shaped by the norms of female identity in a patriarchal society where male discourse is dominant and women are subordinate to men. Even in Elizabethan age, the high society women are not given full rights to political behavior -- Macbeth and Macduff could fought in wars and participated in politics, while noble ladies like Lady Macbeth and Lady Macduff are confined to their mansions, tending to their husbands’ domestic affairs, their greatest value being to keep the mansion in order and to throw the parties in a manner to be admired.

Lady Macbeth’s unsophisticatedness leads to her lack of foresight in politics, which explains why the plan to murder Duncan is haphazard and simple. Her flawed scheme is obviously lack of scheming. The king has successors: his two princes, so why she believes her husband will inherit the throne after the murder? She does not consider the consequences of the death of the beloved King Duncan. She is only concerned with leaving the throne available to make place for her husband. In Lady Macbeth’s plan, they can have blamed the drunken chamberlains for King Duncan’s death, an illogical plan that is inferred to have very little credibility through another nobleman, Ross’ exclamation “What good could they pretend?” [5]. In a hierarchical feudal society, a squire will never dare to murder a monarch, even when drunk, so Lady Macbeth’s plan can be considered unwise even bordering on the ridiculous. Coincidentally, the two princes realize the crisis of the situation and flee abroad. In the light of two princes’ exile, people think that the two princes order the chamberlains to kill the king and abscond, so that the Lady Macbeths’ plot is not exposed.

3.3 A Patriarchal Woman

Since the development of the women’s independence movement, Lady Macbeth has been increasingly revered as a pioneer of feminism, but this thesis argues that what is deeply rooted in Lady Macbeth’s mind is actually patriarchal rather than feminist awakening consciousness.

Firstly, Lady Macbeth’s patriarchal consciousness has been implied by Shakespeare in her appellation. As an individual, Lady Macbeth is an unnamed person who takes her title from her husband. Throughout history, women have often been relegated to their original names in their married lives and have instead been named after their husbands, becoming “Lady so-and-so”, a self-explanatory phenomenon under the countless ethical rules established

by man over a long period of social life. The seemingly reasonable title of “Lady Macbeth” is a confirmation of the fact that in the interaction between Macbeth and his wife, Macbeth is the subject and Lady Macbeth is a subordinate part of him. Lady Macbeth, as a woman, has to erase her name and exists in dependence on her husband. Thus, Lady Macbeth does not have an independent personality, but is in a position to be repressed by the male authority represented by Macbeth.

According to the previous two sections, Lady Macbeth’s actual characters are vulnerability and unsophisticatedness. Hence these two natures make Lady Macbeth’s fearless action confusing: Why a vulnerable and unsophisticated woman participates in a murder? In fact, Lady Macbeth’s fearless behavior is the result of her blind worship for her husband which indicates her patriarchal consciousness.

In the first act of the play, Macbeth’s letter to his wife reflects the situation that Lady Macbeth is under the absolute control of her husband. While the letter appears to be a love letter and a gentle forewarning of a husband’s desire to share his forthcoming power with his partner, Macbeth actually expresses his intention to be king in an unquestionable tone. Writing “Lay it to thee heart” [5] not only informs Lady Macbeth of his acceptance of his impending kingship, but more than that, he is implicitly ordering her to do her best to assist him in obtaining the throne. There is only one explanation for Macbeth’s letter, and that is Lady Macbeth always obeys his demands and never has an independent will of her own, let alone the right to disagree with her husband’s desire. Women are not born, according to Simone De Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*, but rather made by a society which is dominated by the male according to their wish. Lady Macbeth is deeply influenced by the norms made by men, and for her, Macbeth is dominant, and it becomes her instinct to submit to Macbeth’s rule.

Above all, it can be concluded that Lady Macbeth is a patriarchal woman with inner vulnerability and unsophisticatedness. Her vulnerability nourished by the norms built by the patriarchal society and becomes a cause of her madness. People may easily mistake her for a sophisticated woman. On the contrary, her unsophisticatedness can be easily discovered by reasoning about the education she has taken and the buggy plan she has made. Her patriarchal consciousness can be witnessed through her title, her husband’s attitude towards her, her unsexing action and her awe for the implicit “father”.

4. The Tragedy of Lady Macbeth

After analyzing Lady Macbeth’s true character, the next section will expound on Lady Macbeth’s tragedy. This essay holds that the factors that caused Lady Macbeth’s tragic end can be divided into two: the social factor and personal factors. The social factor is the “Other” status she was put in by the patriarchy society in which Lady Macbeth lived and the personal factors are Lady Macbeth’s lop-sided marriage and the lack of relationship between Lady Macbeth and other females.

4.1 Lady Macbeth’s Status as an “Other”

Simone De Beauvoir states that the patriarchy society rivets women into a lop-sided relationship with men: he is the “One”, she the “Other”. Lady Macbeth, as a female, is unfortunately but undoubtedly the “Other” in *Macbeth*.

Before the murder, Macbeth asks Lady Macbeth to plan a banquet for King Duncan to welcome him. The right of planning a banquet is the only management right for the women at that time. After Macbeth becomes the King, it is Macbeth who plans the banquet. In this way, Macbeth deprives Lady Macbeth of her identity and right as a hostess. However, he does this not because he wants to experience what it is like to be a host, but in order to deliberately hide from his wife the fact that he has sent two servants to kill Banquo. Macbeth knows clearly that Banquo will not come to the banquet, but instead he reminds Lady Macbeth to remember to flatter and please Banquo at the banquet. Thus, Macbeth puts her into the “Other” place. It can be seen from this episode that Macbeth does not respect his wife, whom he does not consider to be his equal, but rather a tool to be used at parties to please the guests.

Lady Macbeth’s status of “Other” can be witnessed through the attitudes from other characters. In the second act, when King Duncan’s death is revealed, Lady Macbeth asks Macduff what has happened, but Macduff refuses to answer her questions. The neglect Lady Macbeth suffers as “Other” is evident in the refusal of a noble hostess to be told by a guest what has happened in her own Inverness.

4.2 Lady Macbeth’s Lop-sided Marriage

Lady Macbeth’s marriage is one of the major factors in her tragic end. In this relationship, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth contributes grossly unequal affection to each other.

Lady Macbeth loves her husband so deeply. She is a model wife who trusts, respects and even worships her husband in an extreme way. The fact is, nor does Lady Macbeth despise Macbeth when he shows hesitation and cowardice about killing King Duncan, but rather despises what stands in the way of Macbeth’s following treasonous action.

As the thesis analyzed before, Lady Macbeth is willing to unsex herself in order to fulfil her husband’s ambition, while Macbeth thinks only of himself. Hecate, the mistress of three witches charms calls Macbeth “loves for his own ends, not for you” [5]. When Duncan’s death is exposed to the public, Macbeth, the one who knows exactly what has happened totally forgets about his wife. While Banquo and Macduff, who are immersing in grief still asks others to take care of Lady Macbeth.

Macbeth’s indifference attitude towards his wife is even more harrowing after he becomes king. When Lady Macbeth is tortured by the guilt and illness, Macbeth, however, asks Seyton in detail about the war before asking the doctor briefly: “How does your patient, doctor” [5]. The number of Lady Macbeth’s appearances also shows how Macbeth’s attitude towards Lady Macbeth changes

from “needy” to “indifferent”. There are five acts and twenty-seven scenes in the play, but Lady Macbeth appears in only nine scenes.

4.3 Lady Macbeth’s Lack of Relationships with Other Females

Throughout the whole play, female companions are hardly found around Lady Macbeth. Lady Macbeth’s only female companion appears in Act 5, Scene 1, the sleepwalking scene. A gentlewoman attends her and shows the doctor about her sleepwalking situation. Yet this does not count for a real companion, because at that time, Lady Macbeth has already lost her mind. The fact is that Lady Macbeth has lost the opportunity for female companionship since Macbeth murdered Lady Macduff, as she is the most likely one to become friends with Lady Macbeth.

The most sympathetic part of Lady Macbeth’s tragedy is that, she does try to revolt the patriarchal society. During her sleepwalking, Lady Macbeth washes her hands over and over again because her hands are covered with blood in her hallucination. It can be seen that Lady Macbeth is drowned by her guilt of participating in the murder. As the thesis analyzes in Chapter 2, it is Lady Macbeth’s patriarchal consciousness which makes her get involved in the crime. Since the action of washing hands indicates her remorse for what she has done, it also symbolizes her inner denial of patriarchy. Her action of writing and reading letters in her sleepwalking symbolizes her desire to release her guilty feelings and to talk to someone, but she has no one to talk to: her husband, who is a man, is one of her perpetrators and she cannot turn to him for comfort, not to mention the fact that her husband does not care about her. She has no female friends, which makes her small resistance end in death.

Lady Macbeth’s devotion to her marriage places her in a position of complete isolation in the patriarchal world: she maintains only close relationship with Macbeth throughout the play. Sadly, as analyzes in the last section, Macbeth does not love her at all. So, when Macbeth abandons Lady Macbeth, she is left with nothing but loneliness. She has no one to turn to, she has no one to support her revolt, which leads her to be tormented by hallucinations and eventually to death. The absence of relationship with other women undoubtedly accelerates her tragic end.

5. Conclusion

Lady Macbeth is the most discussed character in Macbeth, not only because she is the main female character in the play, but also because her personality is so complex that she is much more than the “scheming, vicious woman” which the actresses show. Thankfully, feminist criticism is born, providing a perspective that reexamines Lady Macbeth and subverts the stereotype of her as an absolute bad woman.

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