

# Portrayal Of Gender Dynamics In Shakespeare's Macbeth

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## Abstract

William Shakespeare, like the quintessential iconoclast portrayed a progressive view of gender in an era when women were historically depicted as the 'weaker sex'. His representation of women was more mature and more profound. His treatment of women transcended the prevalent conception of them being inferior to men in every aspect and being susceptible to emotions. Shakespearean protagonists display traits that defy conventional gender stereotypes. His constant subversion of traditional gender roles in the subordination of men to dominant women exemplifies Shakespeare's feelings which were much improper in society's archetypal delineation of the "natural order."

Apparently, William Shakespeare's play, "Macbeth" is a magnum opus depicting an invincible hero who being enthralled by prophecies, chases a mirage of grandeur, and in an attempt to scale a personal pyramid of privatized ambition, wades through an unfathomable sea of blood but eventually fails to perpetuate power gained illegitimately. A deeper probe into the action of the play shows how the traditional gender norms surrounding masculinity and femininity are challenged. Both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth leverage their power and gender to mould their relationship. The turbulence of emotional vacillation between the lust for power and the torturous guilt that engenders from it affects their relationship, fueling the incessant struggle for dominance.

**KEY WORDS** Gender, Dynamics, Domination, Relationship, Masculinity, Femininity

## Introduction

The disruption in the gender roles in 'Macbeth' is evident in the opening scene of the play when the three witches strike the keynote of the play with their statement: "Fair is foul and foul is fair". The chiasmus establishes the reversal of the normal human values which is the principle of Satanism. Like the proverbial canker in the rose, it runs right through the plot of the play. This leads to the subversion of orderly life in political, social and personal life. Foulness, in pursuit of illegitimate ambition and power believes itself to be fair. The witches are represented as three sisters but their gender is ambiguous as Banquo points out: "You should be women, / And yet your beards forbid me to interpret / That you are so". Their beards can be treated as a symbol suggestive of their influence on the male-dominated warrior society of Scotland.

Macbeth is introduced as an unassailable hero who almost single handedly puts down a rebellion against the crown. He is called the 'Bellona's bridegroom' and 'Valour's minion' but his opening comment: "So foul and fair a day I have not seen" sets him unconsciously in tune with the witches. The witches are interested in him because with their knowledge and insight into human character, they know that he is predisposed to a performance of evil. They through their prophecies fire up the imagination in the keen and sensitive Macbeth and produce in him the turbulent thoughts of treachery.

The news of him succeeding the Thane of Cawdor, a sudden fulfilment of the witches' prediction, raises Macbeth's hopes and the idea of murdering Duncan immerses him in agitated thoughts. His ambition is exposed for the first time when he contemplates, "The greatest is behind". When a part of the prophecies is unexpectedly fulfilled, he is shaken by the conflict of his ambition ('the swelling act of the imperial theme') and the 'horrid image' of himself murdering Duncan. Neither his body nor his mind is under control- "My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical,/Shakes so my single state of man"-there is a powerful sense of psychological disintegration under the stress of moral conflict. This is the moment of the birth of evil in Macbeth- he might have had ambitious thoughts before, he might have even intended the murder, but now for the first time he feels its oncoming reality. He prefers the illusions of grandeur offered by the witches to the real honour he gets by serving Duncan. He mistakes false appearance for reality- 'and nothing is/But what is not'. Macbeth launches himself into the voyage of destruction of the self which he thinks to be the way to self fulfilment. The three weird sisters could be seen as the three sisters of fate, and hence their presence serves the purpose of exploring the theme of destiny versus an individual and the penalty of inordinate ambition in the ruling class. The ambiguity surrounding their gender as suggested by their unusual physical characteristics sparks intrigue and mystery, and Macbeth, the saviour of Scotland, is manoeuvred by them to such an extent that tumultuous thoughts of treachery are triggered in his mind as soon as the title of Thane of Cawdor is ironically bestowed upon him. When the witches win his confidence through their equivocation, the usual gender dynamics turns on its head as Macbeth, who had 'disdained' fortune in the battlefield, meekly plays into their hands.

Macbeth writes a letter to his wife, Lady Macbeth, informing about his strange experience and the prophecies of the witches. She as the 'fourth witch' plays a decisive role in clarifying Macbeth's thoughts. His lack of clarity is well expressed in her concise definition of one who 'wouldst not play false/And yet wouldst falsely win'. She says that he is 'not without ambition' but lacks the 'illness' that 'should attend it'. She fears that her husband's nature for it is 'too full of human kindness'. She is convinced that his moral scruples would prevent him to 'catch the nearest way', and is therefore, anxious to inspire him-" That I may pour my spirits in thine ear;/And chastise with the valour of my tongue"- to her own ruthlessness. She feels the future 'in the instant' and her determination is expressed with magnificent utterance: "Glamis thou art, and Cawdor; and shalt be/What thou art promised:" The words of the witches echo in her voice when she dismisses any religious considerations with her contemptuous statement-"What thou wouldst highly/That wouldst thou holily". Holiness is in the preservation of the self, and therefore, she is undeterred by the unnaturalness of the evil that she contemplates. Lady Macbeth is possessed by one ruling passion, that is, ambition. She aims at the crown which in her time was a miniature symbol of divinity. She is aware that her husband does not have enough guile to take the murder through. He is not able to dissimulate convincingly and this she reprimands as weakness-"Your face, my thane, is as a book where men/May read strange matters". Therefore she advises him-"look like the innocent flower,/But be the serpent under't." In the traditional husband-wife equation, it is usually the male who gives directions; here the roles have been reversed as it is the wife who tutors her husband as to how he should conduct himself in the pursuit of his evil purpose.

The tension of stealing himself to murder increases the disintegration of Macbeth's personality and if he could, he would conceal his intentions even from himself: "Stars hide your fires/Let not light see my black and deep desires" Malcolm's elevation to the Prince of Cumberland, Macbeth believes is a 'step' on which he 'must fall down' and he resolves to get over the hurdle. He is torn by the treacherous thoughts of Duncan's murder. He ruminates that if there were no dire consequences in this life, he should be quite content, for he would ignore the question of a future state. He contemplates an ideal murder that would 'trammel up the consequence' and obtain 'success' with its close. He is on the throne of bitter self conflict-the fact that he has to give himself so many reasons not to commit the murder, shows how strongly disposed to it he is. To the Elizabethans, to betray one's trust was to act as Judas. Moreover, Duncan was a relative and guest of Macbeth, and by killing him, he would betray his trust as a subject. He does not want to risk the murder for he would make himself available to others, inspired by him: "Bloody instructions, which being taught, return/To plague the inventor". Moreover people might have been indifferent to the killing of a tyrant but the murder of Duncan who had been meek and mild, would make it difficult for the assassin. Macbeth's dilemma is in stark contrast to Lady Macbeth's strength of conviction that contradicts her gender. Their words and their behaviour seem to suggest that they have swapped their persona but it was not so; it was Shakespeare's ingenuity in creating a character that is not endowed with the meekness

that the archetypal woman is. While Macbeth's oscillation of 'to be or not to be' appears human, Lady Macbeth's ruthlessness defies her gender. She is even willing to abjure her womanliness to her murderous intent. Her terrible invocation: "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" is a proof of her inflexibility of will that strangles feelings, imagination and conscience. She recognises that her feminine traits will surely stand as obstacles in her path to the crown, especially when her male counterpart being saturated with the 'milk of human kindness', does not exhibit the masculine qualities required for the attainment of their mutual dream.

When Lady Macbeth learns that her husband has decided to 'proceed no further in this business', she asks him with censure, "Art thou afeard/ To be the same in thine own act and valour/As thou art in desire?" Almost in the same breath she further asks him whether or not he would opt to 'live a coward'. Desperate to defend his manliness against her allegations, Macbeth replies, "I dare do all that may become a man". At this, Lady Macbeth ruthlessly asks him, "What beast was't then/That made you break this enterprise to me?" and adds, "When you durst do it, then you were a man". It is a direct assault on Macbeth's manliness. To instigate Macbeth into a desirable performance, his wife taunts him of his flagging masculinity. Weakness has always been associated with the female, and man grows in stature through might and courage in crisis and combat. However, Macbeth's courage deserts him at the crucial moment and Lady Macbeth takes upon herself his deadly commitment. His weakness is not only reprehensible in Lady Macbeth's eyes; his flagging manliness is also as uncharacteristic as her strength. In an attempt to show by contrast how steadfast she is in her purpose, Lady Macbeth tells him that rather than back out of the pledge to kill Duncan she would take "the babe that milks me:/I would, while it was smiling in my face, /Have pluck'd my nipple from his boneless gums/And dash'd the brains out". The 'valour of her tongue' has the desired impact on Macbeth who is almost won over by her aggressive persuasion. He asks, "If we should fail?" The question itself is an indication that she has succeeded in convincing him to go on with their plan. Lady Macbeth dispels all thoughts of failure from his mind and shows that they can act with impunity. As a resourceful lady, she reveals her plan and assures him how false appearances will cover their tracks. With pragmatic resourcefulness, she takes absolute command of the situation at this juncture. She displays the rare ability of wielding a man to befit her purpose and goals. All that Macbeth needs to do is perform. Macbeth whose 'courage' has now been 'screwed' to 'the sticking place', is full of admiration for the womb from which he has just taken birth as the perpetrator of devilish deeds: "Bring forth men-children only;/For thy undaunted mettle should compose/Nothing but males." The readers share Macbeth's sense of appreciation for the lady whose feminine form is nothing but a garb that camouflages her masculine temper.

Lady Macbeth's feminine nature peeps through her armour of determination when Macbeth has gone to kill Duncan. She is found not in complete control of the situation but a prey to her imagination. She oscillates between her dread of the present: "Alack, I am afraid they have awaked" and her tender affections of the past: "Had he (Duncan) not resembled/My father as he slept, I had done't". It is interesting to note that she has taken wine to fortify her spirit: "That which hath made them drunk hath made me bold". When Macbeth enters with the blood stained dagger in his hand, she exclaims for the first and last time, "My husband" and they look at each other for comfort and support. Macbeth is distraught and overcome by remorse whereas Lady Macbeth regains her composure and launches yet another ruthless assault on his manliness when he says, "I am afraid to think what I have done;/Look on't again I dare not." She takes the dagger accusing him of "Infirm of purpose". She resolutely goes to face the dead man and the drugged bodyguards. Her remorseless ambition suppresses and surpasses all humane feelings and she finishes the act which her husband, so valiant in the battlefield, did not have the courage to complete. When Macbeth is lost in his imaginative fears: "Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood/Clean from my hand?" Lady Macbeth exhibits tremendous self control as she assures her husband-"A little water clears us of this deed". Shakespeare succeeds in portraying a discrepancy between the masculine and the feminine as he revises the hierarchy of control. Although it was Macbeth's singular ambition, Lady Macbeth voluntarily participates in it and orchestrates its fulfilment. Lady Macbeth's intervention in the political culture originates from her ambition, and her virulent aspiration appears highly unnatural as a result of her gender. With what she thinks is an infallible plan, she reaches the crest of power with the belief that she is liable to none and is beyond

any censure. She ascends the throne whether by the virtue of her 'masculine femininity' or 'feminine masculinity' is difficult to discern but what is undisputed is that her persistence and perseverance provided the momentum for the power base.

The relationship between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth is built on the foundation of mutual trust, understanding and matter-of-fact ingenuity. After the murder of Duncan, they both experience disillusionment. Their failure to anticipate that one murder would lead to a series of murders, and that they would lose their peace of mind over the thoughts of their security results in mental trauma and agony. Macbeth's disenchanted voice: "To be thus is nothing/But to be safely thus!" resonates in Lady Macbeth's embittered utterance: "Naught's had all's spent/Where our desire is got without content". The power game of gender domination is at rest here as the representatives of both the sexes now complement each other in their realisation of nothingness. In spite of her disappointment with their achievement, Lady Macbeth attempts to comfort and support her husband but the roles have reversed and Macbeth intuitively understands that it is she who feels helpless and thus needs comfort. Therefore he curbs his desire of confiding in her. He chooses to spare her the horror of the mental 'scorpions' that trouble him. He tells her, "There's comfort yet! They are assailable,/ Then be thou jocund." Lady Macbeth is no longer the architect deciding on the plan of action; she looks up to her husband for a direction: "What's to be done?" Recognising her mental fragility, Macbeth tries to be jovial with her when he says, "Be innocent of the knowledge, dearest chuck" but little does he realise that by doing so he pushes her away from his life. The erosion of Lady Macbeth's masculinity and Macbeth's retrieval of his manliness is probably a dramatist's resignation to the demands of the social order that cannot accept the female in a position of dominance.

The banquet scene marks the climax of their dwindling relationship. Macbeth's ghostly hallucination generates the 'most admired disorder'. The disorder in the state reflects the discord in their relationship. They are not together when they begin; Lady Macbeth cannot see the ghost; and she no longer knows what is on her husband's mind. Macbeth having metaphorically taken birth from her womb, has gone so far in the world of crime that he did not even feel the need of telling his wife, his partner in crime, that he had commissioned the murder of Banquo. However, she still has the potential to come to his rescue when he is on the verge of spilling the secret. She attempts a cover for her husband, "Sit, worthy friends: my lord is often thus,/And hath been from his youth: pray you, keep seat;/The fit is momentary; upon a thought/He will again be well: if much you note him,/You shall offend him and extend his passion:/Feed, and regard him not". Employing the same taunts, that had proved so effective before, she asks her husband who is almost unmasked by his tortured imagination, "Are you a man?" On this occasion, however, her taunts fail to have the desired effect. So she tells the guests, "I pray you, speak not; he grows worse and worse;/Question enrages him. At once, good night:/Stand not upon the order of your going,/But go at once." Once again in a moment of crisis, the male who no longer requires the guidance of his mentor, requires the masculine support that Lady Macbeth provides.

Having disgraced himself before the noble guests, Macbeth looks forward to a meeting with the witches. Propelled by an irresistible urge to know what lies in store for him in future, he approaches the witches only to be deceived again. In response to his unspoken questions, the witches raise three apparitions. They deceive Macbeth with their words but the forms they take reflect the true meaning of their messages. The armed head that warns him to be careful of Macduff, foreshadows his predicament-at the end of the play it is his own head that will be severed. The bloody child, who assures him that no one born of a woman shall harm him, is symbolic of a blood stained infant born surgically. The crowned child with a tree in its hand promises Macbeth that he will not be vanquished till Birnam Wood comes to Dunsinane. Macbeth fails to understand that it is suggestive of young Malcolm who will approach his fort by hiding himself behind a branch from the Birnam Wood. Obviously, the symbolic meanings are too difficult for Macbeth to discern but his blind faith in them leads to the most obvious conclusion because they are what he wants to hear.

In the meanwhile, Lady Macbeth's temporarily restrained conscience emerges and causes her profound mental agony. She had deliberately blinded herself to all afterthoughts about the murder and her discovery of "Naught's had all's spent/Where our desire is got without content" appears identical to the 'Anagnorisis' of Greek Tragedies. Finally a complete decay comes over her-'a great perturbation of nature'-as the doctor calls it, and she passes

from the range of mortal remedy-“...more she needs the divine than the physician”. While Macbeth has hardened himself to repress his inner feelings, Lady Macbeth’s psychological defences have weakened, although it is only in sleep she reveals this. She, who had detested her husband’s imagination, is plagued by her dreams. The ironic reversal of her former attitude is well defined. She had summoned darkness but now she carries a lighted taper. She had confidently proclaimed that ‘A little water clears us of this deed’ but now she rubs her hands to wash imaginary blood which is a manifestation of her guilt. It is interesting that the woman, who had abjured her womanhood, wishes for a perfume, a feminine image, to wash away her guilt: “Will all great Neptune’s ocean wash the blood clean from my hand?” Though her imagination does not haunt her with accusing voices or images of overt denunciation, she realises that ‘things without remedy’ cannot be ‘without regard’. There is only one sign of any spiritual awareness in her, and that too is entirely pessimistic: “Hell is murky”. While plotting the murder of Duncan, she was geared up to “jump the life to come” but she gets punished in this life. Lady Macbeth’s hell is in the knowledge of the self. She had desired that her milk should be replaced with gall and all that she tastes now is its bitterness. At this stage, she has discarded her royal robes and wears a nightgown which is indicative of the gradual stripping away of her outer public shell. The erosion that the woman beneath it has undergone is quite obvious. The taper represents a feeble flame in an otherwise dark and lost soul. The flame is vulnerable and is about to be extinguished forever. Tortured by her imagination, badgered by her conscience and smitten by her terrible isolation, she needs her husband by her side but he is not there. The Gentlewoman tells the doctor that her sleep walking had started ‘since his majesty went into the field’. Her death relieves her from the living death that she had been enduring. Her death does not erase her from the annals of time but writes her history with indelible ink and grants her an insurmountable place-she is a lady who is not given a name of her own but treated as an extension of her husband’s identity but she surpasses her husband in the battle of sexes.

Macbeth is on the brink of despair much like his wife who disintegrates without him. Even he understands what it is to lose “...honour, love, obedience, troops of friends” but he never acknowledges the love that once made him describe his wife as ‘dearest partner of greatness’. Probably he realises only after his wife commits suicide. Though his reaction-“She should have died hereafter”-suggests insensitivity, it could be a complaint emanating from a jaded soul that she should not have deserted him in his hour of crisis. His wife’s death takes away all meaning from life. ‘Sound’ and ‘fury’ become inconsequential; life is shortened to an ‘hour’; its events are dismissed as ‘a tale/Told by an idiot; and ambition, royalty, sceptre and crown that had seemed everything, is reduced to ‘nothing’.

The human element of the play is provided by the relationship between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. Their hearts are bound by their love, their intuitive understanding of and unconditional support for each other. Their joint venture to attain an ambition annihilates them and when estranged from each other, they become despondent and die. Their crumbling relationship is a microcosmic representation of the gradual disintegration of the political and social stability of Scotland. A journey into the psyche of the ‘hell hound’ and his ‘fiend like queen’ reveals the upheavals in tormented hearts as their owners live a greater part of their lives through their imaginations that had been fired by the weird specimen of ambiguous gender.

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