



Lady Macbeth's Desire and Body

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ABSTRACT

One of the greatest tragedies in the universe, *Macbeth* exploring the desire, usurpation, fear, and death of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, is Shakespeare's most compelling study of the nature of evil. In a sense, it is a narrative of desire, both of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, and their desire is dynamic to push the plot forward and to destroy their humanity and integrity. Significantly, Lady Macbeth, who has undergone a fundamental process of physical transformation and mental madness, has a key role to play in the completion of this tragedy. Lady Macbeth presents her narrative of a woman, a wife, a queen, a potential mother, and both a powerful and a fragile female through her marked, and narrative body, which is involved in varied kinds of events and practices, becoming one of the central figures of *Macbeth*.

Keywords: Shakespeare, Lady Macbeth, Macbeth, desire, body

1. Introduction

Generally hailed as one of the greatest tragedies in the universe, *Macbeth* has been the object of intense critical study for more than four hundred years. The play, which successfully explores the desire, usurpation, fear, and death of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, is Shakespeare's most compelling study of the nature of evil. In *Macbeth*, Shakespeare "fulfils the function of the philosophical poet as surely as did Dante in the Divine Comedy" (Ribner, 1959: 149). The principle themes of *Macbeth* are "darkness, sleep, raptness and contradiction" (Stirling, 1956: 139-156), and too much criticism has been devoted to the struggle between good and evil of fallen tragic hero Macbeth, with inadequate attention to Lady Macbeth, along with her narrative as a woman, a queen, a future mother, and both a powerful and a fragile female. "Narratives both tell of desire - typically present some story of desire - and arouse and make use of desire as dynamic of signification" (Brooks, 1993: 37). In a sense, *Macbeth* is a narrative of desire, both of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, and their desire is dynamic to push the plot forward and to destroy their humanity and integrity. Significantly, Lady Macbeth, who has undergone a fundamental process of physical transformation and mental madness, has a key role to play in the completion of this tragedy.

Following Dryden, Macbeth himself is mostly considered a traitor to his king, his friends, his country, and God, as a result, he is the symbol of evil, betrayal and tyranny, a Satan-like hero by many critics. On the contrary, Lady Macbeth fluctuates between the polarization of witch, seducing Macbeth to cast into the evil, and loyal wife, which is pointed out by A. C. Bradley that Lady Macbeth, trying to help and provide everything best to her husband, is the most perfect wife (1991). Such statements are based on Macbeth's desire to be a king, Lady Macbeth's desire for identity, thus Shakespeare marks the couple's bodies as lack, desire, seek, and meaning. Primarily, the subject lives as a body (qtd. in Ouyang, 2015: 77). According to Brooks, the bodies we know, as at once, are marked, organized, and produced as cultural bodies, have been imagined and symbolized, and particularly they have been made key tokens in narratives. The body, a cultural construct and its

other is something outside of language that language struggles to mark and to be embodied in, linking our identification and conception of self and the world (1993: xii). The core of a body of desire is erotic and feeling, intending to possess or know one thing, thus attain the identification of self and the existence of meaning. Modern narratives appear to “produce a semioticization of the body which is matched by a somatization of the story: a claim that the body must be a source and a locus of meanings, and that stories cannot be told without making the body a prime vehicle of narrative significations”(ibid: xii). Lady Macbeth presents her narrative of a woman, a wife, a queen, a potential mother, and both a powerful and a fragile female through her marked, and narrative body, which is involved in varied kinds of events and practices, becoming one of the central figures of *Macbeth*.

2. Lady Macbeth’s Dominating Desire and Body

Lady Macbeth’s first sign is the wife of Macbeth, even without a name. The Middle Age demanded the ideal wife to be passive, submissive, selfish, angle-like, which can be seen from the letter come to her addressing her as “dearest partner of greatness” (A1, S5, 10), a brilliant title of collaborating, however, it is still subordinate to Macbeth. She is only a corp until she has the desire, thus becoming the dynamics of *Macbeth*. Reading the letter aloud, Lady Macbeth rose out of silence bravely. Unlike innocent and naive Ophelia learning little about Hamlet, Lady Macbeth, an image of a powerful woman, knows her husband’s nature very well, “it is too full o’ the milk of human kindness/ To catch the nearest way/ Thou wouldst be great/ Art not without ambition,/ but without/ The illness should attend it” (A1, S5, 15-18). It is no wonder that Ophelia is told to keep away from Hamlet, used to test Hamlet’s state of mind, mocked even humiliated by Hamlet, forced into madness by her father’s death, finally drowns herself. Never content with just standing “rapt in the wonder of it” (A1, S5, 5), Macbeth projects his desire for the throne by delivering it to Lady Macbeth and demanding her to “lay it to thy heart” (A1, S5, 13). Internalizing the desire of Macbeth being the king and she the queen, Lady Macbeth knows what to do: she will pour her spirits in his ear, and chastise with the valour of her tongue to wipe away all that “that impedes thee from the golden round” (A1, S5, 26). Becoming a body with desire, Lady Macbeth transforms the obedient, disciplined, weak female body into the container of desire, getting out of domestic trivialities and responding to the relationship between individual and world, Duke and King, Duchess and Queen.

Intending to complete her husband’s desire, Lady Macbeth sacrifices her own body, the agent and object of desire. Not being a witch with power, Lady Macbeth asks the spirits of darkness to deal in her soliloquy, turning both mentally and psychologically ready to become a murderer. Mark the toe, blood, breasts, milk and gall as different parts of her semiotic body, Lady Macbeth hopes to achieve a change in her personality, “unsexing” her by first taking away her “basic biological characteristics of femininity” (Belle, 1980:381). Since Elizabethan medical believed there was a bond between mind and body, by pleading “make think my blood, / Stop up th’ access and passage

to remorse” (A1, S5, 41-42), she is seeking to prevent the blood flowing into the heart, where guilt, remorse will be generated. Then she appeals to free herself from the “compunctious visitings of nature” (A1, S5, 43-44), that is to say, the menstruation, which is the regular reminder of her sex. Moreover, she urges the minister to come to her breasts to take her milk for gall, completing the “movement from the image of the womb to the image of the corrupted breasts” (Belle, 1980: 382), which are the pollution of the primary and secondary feminine organs in Elizabethan medical beliefs. By doing so, the milk expected to feed the baby is changing into cruelty. As observed by Foucault, “the image of the female organ rising to the breast and to the head gave a mythical expression to an upheaval in the great Platonic tripartition and in the hierarchy that was intended to assure its immobility” (186: 150). The biological unsexing foreshadows Lady Macbeth’s mental defeminization, serving as an “essential preparation for the murder of King”(Belle, 1980: 382). The body is radically defined by its sexuality, which “belongs not simply to the physical body but to the complex of phantasies and symbolizations which largely determine identity” (Brooks, 1993: xiii). By unsexing herself, Lady Macbeth acquiring the body she desires changes into a crucial key to Macbeth’s falling into the hands of the evil and the classical scenario of persuasion and sleepwalking.

Lady Macbeth’s unsexing in the play signifies that she gets the male power more or less, she is more decisive, aggressive, and powerful than the state hero Macbeth who has to be advised, pushed, disciplined, urged, to move toward his desire. In a sense, both Goneril and Lady Macbeth have denied their female roles and achieved an assumption of the male role. When Macbeth leaves the welcome supper and declares “We will proceed no further in this business”(A1, S7, 31), Lady Macbeth learns that she has to begin her urging all over again, thus comes one of the greatest persuasion scenes. Naming Macbeth "coward"(A1, S7, 43), "I dare not"(ibid, 44), "beast" (ibid, 48) as a lack of masculinity, she indicates that only by saying "I would" (ibid, 44) will Macbeth be "so much more than the man" (ibid, 53), and seals up the persuasion with a horrifying inhuman image of a mother who dashes out her sucking baby's brains. During this persuasion, it is Lady Macbeth that dominates it.

Belle has very aptly written that the unnatural menstrual cessation leads to amenorrhoea, and symptoms, like fainting after Duncan’s murder, are found, swooning, melancholy passions, fearfulness, desperation, inability to sleep which haunts both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, nightmare, dejection of mind, much discontent, follow (1980: 383). What is more important, the specific event connects with a pattern of images of baby/child in *Macbeth*: no regular menstruation equals no hope for a child, thus Macbeth is fruitless but Banquo is the father of many kings; pity, like a “naked newborn babe” (A1, S7, 21) which Macbeth murmurs; the imaginary sucking baby who Lady Macbeth dash out its brains to encourage Macbeth; the “finger of the birth-strangled babe” (A4, S1, 30) which is thrown into the witches’ cauldron; Macduff’s wife and babes are “savagely slaughtered” (A4, S1, 30). Lady Macbeth’s body, fully diseased and negative, engineers the pessimistic, bloody narrative of the human paradox. Dashing the baby’s brain out is not only

selfish, performed out of pleasure principle, but also transgresses the role of being a female, especially a mother (Zhang, 2017:44). In Terry Eagleton's words, she, a capitalist feminist, endeavours to go beyond the patriarchal dominance and masculinity, more overly, incites Macbeth to deconstruct and overthrow the existing society (1991:6).

The embodiment of the slain babies is blood, along with fire, sleep, animal nature and the pervading mood of darkness and fear, combining to convey not merely a poetic recreation of an atmosphere of evil, but also related to the ethical system (Ribner, 1959:148). Lady Macbeth intentionally stops her menstrual flow abnormally, making the blood from the womb a part of the blood which darkens the whole play. The natural flow of the menstrual blood, the spray of Duncan's blood, the smell of the blood, and the stains on their hands, all ceaselessly alter the couple, Lady Macbeth in particular, of their crime.

Macbeth's hallucination of the dagger shows that he suffers bitterly for his moral conscience and hesitation to accept the full deal of the evil. Like Doctor Faustus, Macbeth reveals his ambition through the witches' mouths since the weird sisters can not spur anything evil that is not in man's heart. Eventually, Macbeth chooses to "realize his fantasy into action, to make the dagger of the mind a dagger, in fact, Macbeth chooses to bring pure negation into being"(Lynch,1988:36), making his transactions closed. Still weak-ill, Macbeth returns with the bloody daggers in his hand. Connecting the conscience, morality in the mind and the visionary dagger at the body, Macbeth's body also becomes the evil, morbid, fallen, heroic, tragic body many critics admire, regret, and mourn. Hand, the visual sign of evil and whose movements change the movements of the soul, smothers Macbeth's every vision or "imaginary thought in blind, destructive action"(ibid).

3. Lady Macbeth's Vanishing Body

With Macbeth usurping the throne successfully, Lady Macbeth gradually disappears. They undergo the evolution of one's growth and another's decline. Lady Macbeth, who unsexes herself to help Macbeth to murder Duncan, plots with him, persuades him to act, attempts to console him and affirms their closeness by reaching for his bloody hands, is excluded from his action starting from assassinating Banquo. Lady Macbeth, who cannot see the ghost of Banquo which haunts Macbeth, loses her advantage and her power ever since. The departure of vision, an important part of the body, signifies their alienation of mutual affection, or, Macbeth's desire to control. Language, the verbalization of the body, endows Lady Macbeth to shame the king into composure as well as lose her dominance. Afterwards, she vanishes into the desire for sleep.

Tragically, as well as ironically, Lady Macbeth receives the male power but does not possess it long. Her pseudo-male publication and agency disappear, and her real sex as female returns. Lighting a candle yearning for light, the subconscious and unending hand rubbings, Lady Macbeth "turns her guilt inward; she has always slower to action, more susceptible to retarding fantasy than her husband, holding off"(Lynch, 1988: 36) even from the actual murder of Duncan because he resembles her father. The doctor, during the cure of her sleep-walking scene, confesses that "This

disease is beyond my practice./ Yet I have known those which have walked in their sleep who have died holily in their beds” (A5, S1, 51-53), which states clearly that Lady Macbeth is in a madness condition, her reason has left her body. Merleau-Ponty wisely has suggested that anybody is specifically spatial, contextualized and the space is also embodied by the body, thus the body and the space are in the process of matching and acclimatizing. The sleeping walking scene, where Lady Macbeth murmurs about their crime and speaks to the fictive Macbeth, links her existence in past, present and future. Ophelia’s “pretty and pathetic madness and death is her reward and solution” as a slight and ineffective girl (Gray, 1913: 126), while Lady Macbeth is much more than that. Becoming madness, or hysteria, Lady Macbeth, on one hand, degenerates into a mechanical object which could not control her own desire and reason, and on the other hand, unmasks her fragility as a normal female. The feeling of vulnerability and transitoriness out of her suicide distinctly implies the physical dimensions to the audience, thus stirring up strong empathy. Lady Macbeth, leaving the stage in a hysteric trance in her nightgown, replaces the mighty, aggressive, dominant, vicious image in a flash. What leaves to the critics is the accessible, non-phallic, sensual, frail body, metaphorically or literally. Lady Macbeth is not undefeated, but only a mortal.

The setting of the doctor is the embodiment of the protagonists’ illness (Chen, 2018:27). Furthermore, in the inter-conversion of the couple’s madness, Shakespeare dexterously blurs the sex of Lady Macbeth in a sense, in addition, manifests the other image of the castrated hero as extremely characteristic deformed. Through madness, “a work that seems to drown in the world, to reveal there its non-sense, and to transfigure itself with the features of pathology alone, actually engages within itself the world's time, masters it, and leads it; by the madness which interrupts it, a work of art opens a void, a moment of silence, a question without an answer, provokes a breach without reconciliation where the world is forced to question itself” (Foucault, 1986:288). When Macbeth responds “Signifying nothing”(A5, S6, 28), he shows his own self-estrangement and lack of desire.

4. Conclusion

The images of blood, and the desire for the “perfumes of Arabia” to “sweeten this little hand” (A5, S1, 45) more deeply exposes the return of Lady Macbeth’s femininity. Her body, as a narrative method, strings the crucial plots in the play: Macbeth’s desire and deterioration; the disintegration of the family; bloody deaths of the babies and children; unnatural forces falling on the couple. Suicide is a bliss from the God, thus Lady Macbeth’s eventual suicide “driven to despair by guilt unrepented”(Kocher, 1954: 354) is endowed by Shakespeare as well as a recognition of her female power and agency. Oppositely, the ill-fitting robes attained unscrupulously must be strengthened by more evil, Macbeth’s body becomes a signifier, signifying the well-fitting robes, the rightful kingship he desires. Recognized by Ribner, Macbeth’s spiritual destruction must be reflected in ignominious physical destruction, since Shakespeare will not allow him the heroic gesture of

suicide that he grants to Brutus and Othello (1959:159). Throughout the body of the narrative, the tragedy of all-around Lady Macbeth is fully revealed, bestowing Macbeth with an everlasting fascination.

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