Lady Macbeth, Ruthless Murderess or Career Scapegoat

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Abstract: Our paper seeks to investigate Lady Macbeth's critical career, focusing on her hypostases, as they emerge from various readings of Shakespeare's text. Following the motif of the double present in the play, the critical images of Lady Macbeth's character oscillate between the magically empowered ruthless murderess at the beginning of the play and the passive carrier of her husband's guilt. The article offers two other interpretations of the character, based on Roger Caillois' study on the praying mantis and on the Derridean concept of *pharmakos,* respectively. The research also dwells on the relationship between the critical approaches to Lady Macbeth's character and the evolution of social attitudes towards women.
Keywords: *Lady Macbeth, witch, praying mantis, hysterica passio, pharmakos.*

Our paper seeks to investigate several moments in the critical afterlife of Shakespeare's character, Lady Macbeth, who, given the crafty ambiguity of the Shakespearean text, seems to be still pending between two main opposing stances, that of a ruthless, ambitious, possibly demonic murderess, on the one hand, and a docile, passive carrier of her husband's guilt on the other.

The historical context that surrounds the play's coming into existence is marked by two important texts that will shape the negative criticism issued around Lady Macbeth. In 1603, King James succeeded Queen Elisabeth to the throne of England. In the same year, two important volumes were published: King James' book on black magic, *Daemonologie*, that had initially been printed in Scotland in 1597, and Edward Jorden's *Brief Discourse of A Disease Called The Suffocation of The Mother*. The king's study dealt, among other things, with the pressing problem of witchcraft and presented a series of witchcraft cases (one narrating a witch conspiracy against the king himself) and the subsequent punishment of the 'witches'. In his book, Eduard Jordan offered an alternative view to the mystical approach and claimed that *hysterica passio*, also known as 'the suffocation of the mother', or simply, the Mother, could trigger manifestations that might be mistaken for demonic vexation: "The satanic force animating both the bewitched and witches alike could thereafter be relocated within the female body, especially within

her sexual and reproductive functions" [Levin, 2002: 22]. Joanna Levin argues that, while Jordan's study facilitated a "politicized transition from witchcraft to hysteria, he absorbed and promoted many of the assumptions about femininity inscribed within the demonological treatises" [Levin, 2002: 25].

In "Animal Sex. Libido as Desire and Death", Elisabeth Grosz [2002] dwells on female sexuality, bringing forth Roger Caillois' study on the praying mantis. According to Grosz, it is "its close and curious association with femininity, with female sexuality, and, above all, with the fantasy of the *vagina dentata*; with orality, digestion and incorporation; and with women's (fantasized) jealousy of and power over men" [Grosz, 2002: 281] that made the insect so attractive to human study. The female praying mantis is known to devour the male when engaged in coitus. Lady Macbeth goading her husband into murder at the beginning of the play,: "From this time, /Such I account thy love. /Art thou afeard /To be the same in thine own act and valour, /As thou art in desire?"[I.7.38-41] may be seen as an example of voracious female sexuality at work. Just like the praying mantis, she "may serve as an apt representation of the predatory and devouring female lover, who ingests and incorporates her mate, castrating or killing him in the process" [Grosz, 2002: 282]. Studies show that the female praying mantis decapitates its mate to improve its sexual performance as the male, "through the ablation of the inhibitory centers of the brain, [can perform] a better and longer execution of the spasmodic movements of coitus" [Caillois, cited in Grosz, 2002: 283].

Lady Macbeth symbolically starts consuming her lover at the very beginning of the play, when deciding to pour her spirits into his ear [I.5.24]. To take the analogy further, while the decapitated male mantis is able, according to Caillois, to perform a wide range of reactions, from walking, to playing dead when threatened, Macbeth engages in impulsive actions meant to protect his safety and his crown. If, as Levin argues, the interaction between Lady Macbeth and her husband "can be read as a sexualized relation in which murderous intent emerges as the final product" [Grosz, 2002: 42], Macbeth is consumed and 'killed' before Duncan's murder, despite the fact that the actual beheading happens long after. Just as Caillois' insects, Macbeth camouflages as king, inhabiting 'borrowed robes' [I.3.107][1] or 'strange garments' [I.3.144] and lives his captive existence not as himself, but as another. The consequence of this mimetic endeavour is, according to Caillois, the "disintegration of the bond tying consciousness to the body: the subject feels outside him- or herself, what is inside may be perceived as coming from another" [Grosz, 2005: 281]. The Macbeths are both expelled from the center of their own existence, as Duncan's murder results in self-loss and ultimately in self-destruction.

Lady Macbeth is, most of the times, seen as a "transgressive force" [Moschovakis, 2010: 9] that carries the responsibility for the destructive metamorphosis of her husband, and the interpretation above is one such example. Critics portray her as the witches' accomplice, or even as the only real demonic

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[1] All examples are taken from R.A.Braunmuller's edition of *Macbeth*.

character in the play, as the witches might very well be figments of Macbeth's imagination, and, for the mere conjuring of evil spirits, "she would have been considered a witch according to the witchcraft statute of 1604" [Levin, 2002: 39]. While, in psychoanalytic theory, the woman as witch is positioned as a phallic woman, the core of monstrous sexuality, "in terms of patriarchal discourse, she is defined as abject by being antithetical to the symbolic order" [Daniel, 2006: 117]. Lady Macbeth defies, according to some critics, the view "of womankind as essentially nurturing, gentle, and incapable of violent and brutal acts. Her speech reflects her treasonous and murderous intents as she transforms the imagery of breastfeeding into the destruction of infanticide" [O'Reilly, 2010: 660]. Her powerful words meant to have a strengthening effect on Macbeth's indecisive behaviour turn Lady Macbeth into a "a picture of monstrous motherhood" [Hopkins, 2004: 262] that emanates both ferocity and masochism as the critics seem to ignore the persuasive conditional in her opprobrious speech: "I would, while it was smiling in my face,/Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums/And dashed the brains out, had I so sworn/As you have done to this" [I.7. 56-9]. As Derrida points out, "persuasive eloquence is the power to break in, to carry off, to seduce internally, to ravish invisibly. It is a furtive force per se" [Derrida, 1981: 116], but critics generally ignore Lady Macbeth's rhetoric ability, superficially limiting her role to that of evil temptress who lures Macbeth into darkness and makes him lose the 'eternal jewel'.

The view of Lady Macbeth as the root of all evil readily shared by male and female critics alike should come as no surprise as motherhood is, at the very least, a dicey subject. As pointed out in a collection of papers edited and written by 'maternal scholars', "mothers unmask themselves when they speak truthfully and authentically about their experiences of mothering. […]because no mother can live the idealized perfection of the mask of motherhood…" [Podnieks, 2010: 3]. The strange case of Lady Macbeth is somewhat different because she only betrays her maternity to bring an irrefutable argument against her husband's vacillation. As wife and mother she deserts the domestic sphere that would traditionally be ascribed to her and invades the phallocentric order, disturbing it with 'the valour of her tongue'.

Other critics, however, consider that "drawing on the semiotics of breastfeeding, Lady Macbeth creates a graphic, physiological signifier of her determination to establish her emotional resolve. She uses rhetorical infanticide to externalize her inner passions to the audience" [Kenny, 2019: 60]. Narrating the fictitious murder of a child brutally removed from her breast has a threeofold purpose: to signal her Scotish identity, as English mothers did not breastfeed their children but hired nurses, to underline her need to be understood solely as a wife, and not as a mother, and finally, to prove that her husband's sexual desires are her priority, as breastfeeding and sexual activity were incompatible in the early modern period [Kenny, 2019: 60-61]. The same key should be used, according to Kenny, when one is trying to understand Lady Macbeth's speech in I.5.40-50, where she

"draws on the contemporary notions of menstruation and lactation to constrain her feminine excess and create a more contained, classical body" [Kenny, 2019: 64-65].

In spite of the historical evidence that could help diversify Lady Macbeth's character readings, traditional criticism insists on her monstrous womanhood and unruly femininity. Sarah Werner [2002: 33] cites Alan Sinfield, who considers that character analyses of Lady Macbeth (or Desdemona), do not dwell on individualizing traits that develop under specific circumstances, but, rather, "derive from patriarchal stereotypes of normative female behaviour". When women transgressed such norms, they were seen either as witches, and hunted down and punished accordingly, or, in a more modern perspective, as hysterics that needed a medical approach. According to Levin, Lady Macbeth is a connecting link between the ancient witch and the early modern hysteric who "remained 'possessed', only now she was controlled by her womb, rather than the devil" [Levin, 2002: 36]. Kenny comments on the occult rhetoric used by early modern physicians to describe the womb, considered by Jorden 'strange' or 'preternatural', which "absorbs the pathological descriptors generally assigned to the supernatural as a way of explaining its unusual, secretive capacity" [Kenny, 2019: 70]. Witch-hunt and persecutions were replaced with subtler forms of control. As Levin notes, "the suppression of the witches in *Macbeth* occurs largely through their consolidation in the figure of Lady Macbeth, however, and the hystericized woman emerges as the exemplar of disorderly femininity most in need of proper patriarchal governance [Levin, 2002: 45].

Defiance of the "the qualities deemed natural to the female sex" [O'Reilly, 2010: 660] will have fierce consequences, as Alex Sinfield remarks:

> […] initial bold behavior is succeeded eventually by a reversion to "feminine" passivity, with an episode of nagging the husband in between... because this sequence seems plausible in our cultures, it seems satisfactory as character analysis, but in fact it is a story about the supposed nature of women. Strength and determination in women, it is believed, can be developed only at a cost, and their eventual failure is at once inevitable, natural, a punishment, and a warning. [Sinfield, 1991: 56, cited in Werner, 2001: 33]

The transgression of the social limits imposed on her will have consequences both for Lady Macbeth's critical posterity and for the evolution of the character in the play. Outside the text this trespassing reflects in the waves of negative criticism against Lady Macbeth and the fact that a great deal of it dwells upon her maternity only shows once again that "whenever a woman is represented as monstrous it is almost always in relation to her mothering and reproductive function" [Daniel, 2006: 118]. Inside the text, it results in her confinement in the solitude of her own room/mind. Having fulfilled her part she can now play the textual scapegoat, resting silently/muted together with the other mothers in the text, the disposable Lady Macduff or the carcass womb from which Macduff was untimely ripped. Lady Macbeth's existence is reduced, in the play, to the sleepwalking scene and she then fades away as a walking shadow.

The scene of confinement in her chambers reveals Lady Macbeth in a hypostasis of feminine 'passivity', occurring, as Sinfield argued, as a sort of anticlimactic episode after the initial overpowering determination and courage in the first acts of the play. Amy Kenny identifies in the text the symptoms of 'the suffocation of the mother' such as incoherent speech, delusion, lack of sleep that may be the result of her previous attempt to suppress her humoral composition. Her fainting when she receives the news of Duncan's death is not, therefore, a deceitful display of innocence in front of her guests, as it is traditionally interpreted, but one of the first signs of the disastrous physiological effect of her plea to the immortal spirits:

> By centralizing blockage in Lady Macbeth's disease, Shakespeare offers his audience a contemporary illustration of the defining feature of 'suffocation of the mother'. Her thick womb requires humoral purging in order to maintain balance, which her amenorrhea and lack of sexual release prevent from occurring. [Kenny, 2019: 71].

Joanna Levin also identifies Lady Macbeth's *hysterica passio* in her somnambulism, despite the fact that the 'suffocation of the mother' is never mentioned as such in Shakespeare's play. When it comes to hysterics, Levin notes, "it is possible that some may have benefited from their sick role, temporarily absenting themselves from the obligations of domestic life and receiving the nurture that they themselves were supposed to dispense" [Levin, 2002: 37]. Nonetheless, this does not ring true for Lady Macbeth. It is precisely Macbeth's departure, his withdrawal from the marriage, her exclusion from the planning of future events that exile her to the sickbed.

Exiles or killings were part of exit rites used to achieve purification of the community in the ancient world. Lady Macbeth exits the play in a somnambulist trance, carrying, even beyond the limits of the text, all the burdens of Macbeth's actions. This easily leads to a possible decoding of her character in terms of the ancient scapegoat or *pharmakos* rituals. However, given the ambivalent energies of Shakespeare's play, we think of complicating this interpretation one step further. Derrida places the *pharmakos* in the immediate proximity of the word *pharmakon*, "added and attached like a literal parasite…, installing itself inside a living organism to rob it of its nourishment": "aprehended as a blend and an impurity, the pharmakon also acts like an agressor or a housebreaker, threatening some internal purity and security […]. The purity of the inside can then only be restored if the *charges are brought home* against exteriority as a supplement, inessential yet harmful to the essence, a surplus that ought never to have come to be added to the untouched plenitude of the inside" [Derrida, 1981: 128]. The solution to stay pure would be, according to Derrida, to keep the outside out. Macbeth's nourishing 'milk of human kindness' might have been spoiled when Lady Macbeth poured her spirits into his ear. However, as far as she is concerned, the struggle would have been to keep the inside in. Amy Kenny dwells on Bakhtin's distinction between the classical, contained body and the grotesque body which "is unfinished, outgrows

itself, transgresses its own limits [where] stress is laid on those parts of the body that are open to the outside world" [Bakhtin, cited in Kenny, 2019: 64]. Lack of bodily containment often resulted in the perception of women as grotesque, but Lady Macbeth struggles to keep the inside in, "by forgoing her excessive leakiness" [Bakhtin, cited in Kenny, 2019: 64].

The spirits poured in her husband's ear, may be seen as a *pharmakon*, a poison, aggressively threatening Macbeth's purity and security, but in the same note of ambivalence that 'plagues' Shakespeare's text, Derrida's *pharmakon* can be read in more than one key.

> It is not simply a poison. It can mean the exact opposite – a healing remedy or medicine. And it can mean a potion, an enchantment, a charm or spell. And if this is the case, if *pharmakon* can have many meanings, then it is already in the process of reversing and unraveling the entire tapestry of binary opposites it is supposed to be upholding.
> [Zlomislic, 2007: 43].

Sarah Levin comments upon the attitude of English King James, of Scottish origin, on his having been breastfed by a Protestant wetnurse, thankful for sucking the "milk of God's truth", but, at the same time, "blaming his inebriety on his nurse" and debating, in 1604, on the various moral effects on nursing. As Levin argues, "the very fact that such a debate occurred suggests that the Jacobeans did not unambivalently connect nursing and the 'milk of human kindness' [I.5.17]. Maternal milk could both nourish and destroy the morals of the hapless babe" [Levin, 2002: 40].

Derrida focuses on another term, *pharmakos*, which is absent in Plato's text, but is a partial synonym of another term Plato uses, *pharmakeus*, meaning "wizard, magician, poisoner". In Derrida's theory, what makes the term *pharmakos* special is "the unique feature of being overdetermined, overlaid by Greek culture with another function. Another *role*, and a formidable one. The character of the *pharmakos* has been compared to a scapegoat. The evil and the outside, the expulsion of the evil, its exclusion out of the body (and out) of the city – these are two major senses of the character and of the ritual" [Derrida, 1981: 130].

Lady Macbeth's character, inside the play, but mostly outside, carries both meanings of the word *pharmakos*. Being at once the recipient for the *pharmakon*, as the remedy for Macbeth's impotent aspirations, and the repository of all instincts and magic powers that promote violence and even murder, the choice between one of the alternatives offered by the term *pharmakos* for the understanding of Lady Macbeth's character depends on the dominant *episteme,* as proven by the way in which Lady Macbeth's character develops in various social and cultural contexts. As Derrida points out, "the comprehension is an act of both domination and decision" [Derrida, 1981: 117].

The image of Macbeth as a noble man, manipulated and goaded into murder by his maleficent wife is enrooted in David Garrick's 18th century performance, when Hanna Pritchard, impersonating Lady Macbeth, took the

initiative of Duncan's murder. Garrick's acting is said to have been so brilliant, that "it dwarfed that of later rivals in the part. Yet it was Pritchard's virago who absorbed the opprobrium that Garrick's ruined hero would have had to bear" [Moschovakis, 2010: 9-10]. Garrick and Pritchard's performance established a long-dominant tradition, taken by John Philip Kemble and his sister Sarah Siddons to the 19th century. Siddons's performance is said to have portrayed the same blood thirsty murderess who drives her heroic husband to more and more violent acts [Braunmuller, 1997: 68]. Laura Engels, however, writes about Siddons' reading of Lady Macbeth's character from the perspective of her biographical notes on her theatrical performances, *Remarks on the character of Lady Macbeth*, which offer quite a different approach to Shakespeare's character. Siddons recommends that the audience should reconsider the image they have long been accustomed with, and to open their minds to a different understanding of Lady Macbeth: "smothering her sufferings in the deepest recesses of her own wretched bosom, we cannot but perceive that she devotes herself entirely to the effort of supporting him" [Siddons, cited in Engel, 2010: 251]. Siddons presents Lady Macbeth as having "an underlying, if repressed, 'feminine' nature – one still somehow related to a recognizable "model of acceptable womanhood" [Moschovakis, 2010: 10]. Siddons even transcended the limitations of her own body and performed Lady Macbeth while she was five months pregnant. As Engel remarks, "the double nature of her persona as the character and the pregnant actress must have collided in these moments and helped to underscore Siddons's characterizations of Lady Macbeth as a potentially sympathetic figure" [Engel, 2010: 249-250]. The burdens of her personal life offstage and her exhausting acting career helped Siddons form a more intimate bond with her character, thus enabling her to "convince audiences that underneath Lady Macbeth's mask of ambition and cruelty lies a fragile feminine body that will ultimately be destroyed" [Engel, 2010: 252].

In his introductory study to the new Cambridge edition of *Macbeth*, Braunmuller notes that "the theatrical and critical history of Macbeth often reflects changing social attitudes towards women and the relation between women and men" [Braunmuller, 1997: 67]. As Laura Engles brilliantly notes, "ironically, Lady Macbeth's rise and fall remains a perfect paradigm for the paradoxes inherent in society's view of famous women. Contemporary female celebrities, from Hillary Clinton to Madonna, still consistently face the challenge of conquering a public uneasy about women in power" [Engles, 2010: 254]. Just as Sarah Siddons, who won the affection of her public and was a much respected celebrity because she managed to maintain the appearance of a devoted wife and mother, such women will have to develop a schizoid existence, following the doubling pattern in Shakespeare's play, outwardly projecting a personality subsumed to conventionally established norms to be accepted by society.

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