Power Beyond Sex: A Foucauldian Reading of Lady Macbeth

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Abstract— Shakespeare's most haunting tragedy, Macbeth, has been regarded as one of his best tragic trios. One of the most significant characters of the play – Lady Macbeth – often realized as the 'antagonist' of the play, is portrayed as the impetus and motivational factor behind Macbeth's brief victory and, apparently, even his ultimum ruinam. With her actions within the course of the play, it becomes a daunting task to justify them without referring to the history of Lady Macbeth. Most of the past studies have focused on her earlier marriage and multiple miscarriages in order to condone her behaviour. The present research essay, however, reviews the play in a deconstructive approach and delves into a deep exploration of the representation of Lady Macbeth in Shakespeare's renowned tragedy. The study focuses on the influence of normalizing power and gender distinction upon the actions of the characters. It studies the theory of Normalizing Power (as given by Michel Foucault) and views it in the context of how femininity is depicted within Macbeth. It further reinvestigates the patriarchal dominance and looks at the existing power structures that subconsciously affect Lady Macbeth's motivation, leading to the tragic fall of the characters. By visiting the play from the lens of power and femininity inherent in the subconscious mind of the readers, the research aims to portray Lady Macbeth in a different light, one that is not dominated by supporting ideologies of male dominance or the notion of power in the hands of the phallus.

Keywords— Macbeth, Michel Foucault, Feminism, Patriarchy, Normalizing Power

> *Macbeth: ... Stars, hide your fires!*
>
> *Let not light see my black and deep desires (1.4.50-51)*

I. INTRODUCTION

William Shakespeare has illustrated several strong female characters in the world of English theatre. The women in his tragedies have often been labelled into the category of either angels or monsters; they have been distinctively remarked for their purely good or evil characteristics. Despite these binaries set within his works, the heroines portrayed by Shakespeare have been subjected to immense sympathy from the audience – Cordelia, for her quiet stoicism; Imogen, for controlling her own fate; Juliet, not only because of her unfortunate death but for the familial circumstances that lead to her tragic end; and Miranda, for her exemplary feminine strength and firm beliefs.

Conversely, the tables become overturned when Lady Macbeth comes into discussion.

Lady Macbeth, commonly disregarded for her actions within the play, has a jarred reputation since its first performance. She is infamously known as the 'fourth witch' or the 'super witch,' and is often linked with pessimistic and unfavourable opinions for her courage and resilience while supporting Lord Macbeth in his endeavours. Critics have dissected her character through monolithic lenses and finally labelled her as one of the pre-eminent antagonists within the play. Unconvinced that Lady Macbeth acts within the cultural ideologies of women, several critics have claimed that she desired

masculine characteristics to 'become' powerful. Nevertheless, when it came to disposing her into a female or male position, they regarded her to be unfit for either of the binaries. She is, then, "stigmatized as the fiend-like queen" (Maginn 204), and loved only for her feminine thoughtlessness or for "really seeing nothing between her wish and its fulfilment" (Gerwig par. 11). Further, there are critics who have added the agency of God and claimed that her self-destruction stands "in opposition to grace – that is, God's favour … [thereby constituting] a graceless or godless act" (Tassi 263).

With the complex character-build of Lady Macbeth, Shakespeare has portrayed layers for the audience to unravel that, on the prima facie, elicit negative feelings among the viewers. The only sympathy gained by her is one that is evoked by prequels explaining her earlier marriage and multiple miscarriages, thereby diminishing her character to a pigeon-holed identity. The present paper argues that Macbeth can be viewed from different angles; one of those is by examining Lady Macbeth's actions and their speculated consequences from the lens of Foucauldian thought. It borrows, as its theoretical framework, Michel Foucault's concept of normalizing power, and attempts to recuperate the tarnished image of Lady Macbeth by focusing on the motivation behind Lady Macbeth's actions.

II. FOUCAULT AND THE NOTION OF POWER

Power is often realized in a dialectic relationship between the powerful and the powerless. It is associated with the ability of those in power to exert force upon the less powerful. Furthermore, it is conceptualized as a possession – a thing that can be owned and given up. Michel Foucault (1926-1984), a prominent literary critic, criticizes these views on power and its existence in the social milieu. His concept of power relations is scattered across many of his notable works, including *Discipline and Punish* (1977), *The History of Sexuality* (1978) and *Power/Knowledge* (1980). His oeuvre condemns the generalized perception of power to be concerned with possession, exertion, oppression and constraint.

According to Michel Foucault, power can be most clearly observed by examining the relationship between the individual and the social structures (Mills 33). In *The History of Sexuality* (1978), Foucault talks about power as something that functions not as an isolated effect, but within a network of institutions. Thus, he replaces the traditional notion of power as something that can be held onto, with a contemporary concept of power being a function. Instead of looking at power as repressive, he conceived power to be productive – something that can create forms of behaviour and events. He maintains, "power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth" (194). Although this conception rejected the popular early-feminist theory of power as oppressive, it paved the way for an unconscious system of power relations, which came to be called the normalizing power.

Foucault viewed individuals in society to be active participants instead of passive recipients of power. He looked at power structure as a "net" or a "chain" that is spread within the society, as opposed to something shared within a dialectic. Wendy Brown reiterates this approach when she maintains power as something that cannot be approached "head-on or in isolation from other subjects" (207). Several feminist theorists continue to be inspired by Foucault's notion of power as subjecting individuals and simultaneously making them subjects by subjecting them to power. His theory of normalizing power claims to produce the maximum control with the minimum exertion of force. In its essence, it ideologically controls the power reproduction in society and hinders the recognition and analysis of the "normalized norms" (Taylor 47). Thus, normalizing power makes actions 'normal,' reducing interrogation and criticism. Such a system can be observed more clearly in patriarchal societies where instead of questioning the prevalent norms and attitudes that have been 'normalized', women subconsciously but actively participate in upholding the same institutions. Foucault, in *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the College de France 1977-78,* claims that such normalized norms or techniques are developed "from and below the system of law, in its margins or even against it" (56). Normalization, thus, is a process of "norms" that "become embedded to the point where they are perceived not as a particular set of prevailing norms, but instead simply as 'normal', or 'inevitable'" (Taylor 47).

III. ROLE OF NORMALIZING POWER AND 'UNSEXING' LADY MACBETH

Shakespeare has portrayed both Macbeth as well as Lady Macbeth sinking into madness and insanity. However, most scholars have often associated the actions of Macbeth with "bravery", whereas those of Lady Macbeth as "monomaniacal ambition" (Thompson and Ancona par.4). Her behaviour is considered to be lapsing from 'womanliness', and even her death is often overlooked by many readers and critics alike. The present analysis views Lady Macbeth's actions from the Foucauldian lens, and attempts to exorcise her from the foregrounded association of the 'fiend-like' queen. By rejecting Lady Macbeth as being a part of the dialectic of powerful and powerless, and

allowing her to be an active participant of the power relationships within the society, her role transforms from a subject subjected to power into a subject that acts as a "vehicle of power" (Foucault 98).

Lady Macbeth is the embodiment of the renaissance notion of women being the support and help of men. Such notions, established much before the renaissance (continuing yet), are constantly performed by the characters within the play to solidify the naturalized norms. The first lines uttered by Lady Macbeth are those of her husband, marking her limitations from the beginning of the play. After reading Macbeth's letter, which is filled with words of endearment, Lady Macbeth immediately asserts that the prophecy delivered by the witches would be true. She says: "Glamis thou art, and Cawdor; and shalt be / What thou art promised" (1.5.14-15). Here as well as throughout the play, she mentions her motives very clearly – her wishes are restricted to Macbeth's achievements. It is not for a selfish or selfless love but for an act that is expected out of her that she continues to "have thee [Macbeth] crown'd withal" (1.5.29). She claims to know that her husband is "too full o' the milk of human kindness," and wants to let his worries away by pouring her "spirits" in his ear (1.5.16-25). She subconsciously associates the act of kindness and valour with feminine and masculine actions, a naturalized concept that has been working within society for centuries. Moreover, her mention of Macbeth's cowardice is quite contrary to the popular notion of Macbeth as shown in the initial scenes where he is compared to "cannons overcharg'd with double cracks" (1.2.36). In return, she is also suggesting that she cannot commit murder as she is a woman. Her subjection to the normalized power can further be seen in her following speech, which is addressed to the evil spirits of the night.

The soliloquy assigned to Lady Macbeth demonstrates the heights of the normalizing power system. After getting to know of Macbeth's arrival, Lady Macbeth starts to prepare herself and becomes willing to submit to the "spirits that tend on mortal thoughts," thereby allowing the nightly spirits to "unsex" her (1.6.39-40). Her speech here portrays her understanding of what is 'expected' out of a woman, a wife, a housewife. She does not allow, instead, she insists these "murdering ministers" to change her into a cruel person – a person that is not 'feminine.' Her insistence on transforming her body into one that is filled with dire cruelty showcases her subconscious desire to discard the 'weak' parts of her body and help her husband in his ascension to greatness. Her compliant attitude in altering her body for Macbeth showcases the "lengths that she will go through to support her husband" (Reyes and Kenny 83).

Lady Macbeth embodies the naturalized norms of society and, at the same time, also transcends them to help her husband. The role of a supportive wife moves towards conventional compliments and then shifts to rhetorical violence, all for motivating Macbeth to achieve the crown. She starts by advising him to be like a serpent underneath flowers, but when she fails to motivate him enough, she resorts to verbal abuse, thereby emasculating him to crystalize his intentions. She constantly shifts from 'femininity' to violence. Her attack on Macbeth's hypocrisy and the paradoxical use of unnatural means to provoke her husband, upon a close reading, can be considered as the use of means for an end. She is, as most women have been, constantly reminded of how women are supposed to have a vital role in men's success. This takes a more violent form when Lady Macbeth gives hints of infanticide in order to encourage Macbeth to commit regicide. She refers to her hypothetical child and says:

Lady Macbeth: I would, while it was smiling in my face,

> Have pluck'd my nipple from his boneless gums.
>
> And dash'd the brains out, had I so sworn as you
>
> Have done to this. (1.7.56-59)

Once again, her 'feminine' warmth gets replaced with "direst cruelty" when she tries to support Macbeth by using fanciful imagery. As Kenny notes in his essay, "this fantasy solidifies her unwavering allegiance to Macbeth, as she yearns to be understood solely as a wife, not as a mother" (60). Such a fantasy reiterates the normalized notion of the conduct of a supportive and domestic wife who serves her husband beyond her sufferings. Her domestic actions are further portrayed when she does not take part in the act of murder but at the same time does her duties to make sure everything is served on a platter for Macbeth to perform his task. She engages with the chamberlains with "wine and wassail" and sets the scene ready for the murder. She also sets the daggers ready before the murder, and when the murder is committed, she helps Macbeth put the blame on the guards by taking up the task to "gild the faces of the grooms withal; / For it must seem their guilt" (2.2.56-57).

Lady Macbeth's sole duty throughout the play seemed to revolve around taking Macbeth back towards his ultimate goal and assisting him in his actions. When Macbeth was vexed by the blood on his hands, Lady Macbeth's reaction was not of panic but of courage and resilience:

Lady Macbeth: My hands are of your colour, but I shame

> To wear a heart so white.
>
> …

A little water clears us of this deed;

How easy is it, then! (2.2.64-68)

Her words defy her actions by the end of the play when she conversely suffers from the same anxiety of bloody hands. Such a contradiction clearly portrays the two sides of Lady Macbeth – one as a wife, and one as a woman. Her constant struggle in acting towards the normalized power, to be a better wife, a supportive wife, a wife that was 'expected' to sacrifice herself and replace her "milk for gall" ultimately led her to her doom, a hellish place in the angel/monster dichotomy of readers and critics.

After "it were done, when 'tis done," i.e., after murdering Duncan, Lady Macbeth takes a backseat. Her role succumbs to that of a homemaker, restricted to activities related to household chores. She is not even involved in the further plans of Macbeth. Ironically, Macbeth, who initially lacked the "illness" to attend to his ambition, now does not need any assistance from Lady Macbeth in conspiring against his next set of victims. When asked what the next course of action is, Macbeth brushes her off by asking her to "Be innocent of the knowledge … Till thou applaud the deed" (3.2.45-46). At the outset, the situation is considered to be 'natural' to the audience, for it is normalized within the society to reserve women only up to such an extent. Macbeth's positioning as the king of Scotland does not guarantee any power or purpose to the supposed "fiend-like queen." Her domestic role is heightened in the banquet scene when her duties are reduced to welcoming the guests. Her performance shifts back and forth between a timid homemaker and a courageous helpmate when she notices Macbeth losing his sanity. She welcomes the guests when demanded, advises Macbeth when needed and defends her husband when essential. All her actions are structured around the established norms of the 'perfect wife.'

Finally, when Lady Macbeth is overlooked in all courses of action, she topples down to insanity. She confesses her actions when she is alone, as normalized for women to live behind closed doors. Without her husband by her side and nothing left to hold onto, her 'role' as a wife is over, and she is relegated to die in a corner – she is considered as a dissolved creature who "no longer has any reason for being" (Klein 249). Many critics are left to the question of whether her death does justice to her role as a significant character. However, when we look at Macbeth from what has been normalized within power structures, one can clearly notice why her death is portrayed backstage. It is not because it is justified for her character to die without any notice, but instead, it is the normalizing power that functions when she is not given much importance, and all cameras shift to Macbeth's valour in fighting and losing the war. Even in her guilt-ridden sleepwalking scene, her lines capitulate Macbeth's aid as she advises:

Lady Macbeth: Wash your hands, put on your night-gown;
look

not so pale. I tell you yet again, Banquo's buried;

he cannot come out on 's grave.

…

To bed, to bed: there's knocking at the gate. Come,

come, come, come, give me your hand. What's

done cannot be undone. To bed, to bed, to bed.
(5.1.59-65).

Her final words also include domestic acts of cleaning, advising, helping and cautioning. Her constant efforts to help Macbeth in conquering the "golden round" are juxtaposed with her husband's reaction after her death. Macbeth responds to her death by saying, "She should have died hereafter" (5.5.17). He wished Lady Macbeth to be beside him as a helpmate during the battle. Here, we can see Macbeth realizing the futility of life without her by his side to motivate him. Macbeth dons a nihilistic attitude and mentions that the "time for such a word," i.e., the news of Lady Macbeth's death, would have come later (5.5.18). After his brief speech, he soon shifts his focus to the battle scene, and the moment of grief is soon replaced by the actions on the field.

Lady Macbeth, throughout the course of the play, acts not only as a vehicle through which normalizing power is carried within the society, but she also is portrayed as an over-achiever of this power. The motivation behind her actions is posited within how women are expected to act in a certain way; however, she fluidly moves between such norms and the unnatural means through which she attempts to be Macbeth's support system. Like most of Shakespeare's characters, she seems to be faced with an existential crisis, but this crisis leads to a dilemma between existential and essential, forcing her towards her doom by the end of the tragedy.

As Klein mentions, "Like the damned in the Inferno, she exists solely within the present memory of past horrors" (251), the readers oftentimes forget her by the end of the play as her actions, although of great importance, are victimized by power existing within society.

IV.   CONCLUSION

The Foucauldian lens and the operation of normalizing power provides an insight of Shakespeare's "fiend-like

queen." Lady Macbeth not only showcases the traditional renaissance notion of what it is like to be a woman and a wife in a patriarchal society, but she also embodies the infamous proverb of women as helpmates. In its essence, the paper argues that besides Macbeth, it is also Lady Macbeth's tragedy within the play. Her actions are justified by locating them within what is 'expected' out of wives to do for their husbands. Her ambition is not considered 'unsexed' or unwomanly; instead, her feminine faith in her husband and her actions to fulfil his dreams are considered to be what led to her tragic end.

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