

How Shakespeare's portrayal of Lady Macbeth is used to represent the gender dilemma during this time.

Natasha Anne Bowles

May 2021

Word Count: 2660

How Shakespeare's portrayal of Lady Macbeth is used to represent the gender dilemma during his time.

The themes of power and ambition are prominent throughout the play 'Macbeth' and are visible with Lady Macbeth, with reference to her want for masculinity to secure her ambitions, which inevitably causes her downfall. Her character can be seen as a representation of the gender dilemma facing women of power during the 16th and 17th Centuries, when Shakespeare was actively writing. By approaching key figures and influences of Shakespeare, such as Queen Elizabeth I and feminine opinions there is a note-able link between Lady Macbeth and the gender dilemma. The dilemma I am referencing is the concept that a woman could not be ambitious within herself or as a woman. It approaches the idea that ambition is a purely masculine trait and can only be performed by the male gender, therefore a woman can only be their *helpmate* in achieving their goal and not complete an ambitious task themselves.

During the 16th and 17th Centuries ambition was a common desire seen in men, as women were taught to not get involved with these issues, this ranged from the lowest of classes to the court of the monarch. The character of Lady Macbeth contradicts this way of life and yields to Shakespeare's original female character principles, with them being so different "as a whole, from the ideals of the feminine type prevalent in the literature of his day." (Zimmern & Lewes, 1895, p.4). Even though, in Lady Macbeth's first speech she establishes herself as a dominant figure who has her own ambitions, this ambitious nature is riddled with masculine objection; her first thought after ambition is how she cannot harbour this trait. After learning that Macbeth will one day be king, she immediately starts planning a murder, so they "shalt be what thou art promis'd" (Macbeth, A1, Sc5) However, her understanding that as a woman she cannot perform this murder, as her female features make her weak, drives her promptly to call upon the spirits to "make thick [her] blood, / stop up th'access and passage to remorse" (Macbeth, A1, Sc5). La Belle (1980, pp.381-386) argues that the blood mentioned is in relation to a woman's menstruation, making this passage a call for Lady Macbeth to be stripped of all her feminine biological characteristics, where she will not only think like a man, but organically be a man. During this time a woman was told she should not be ambitious, as her natural traits were seen to make her fragile and less intelligent, thus "for Lady Macbeth to achieve an unfeminine consciousness capable of murdering Duncan is for her to attain an unfeminine physiology." (La Belle, 1980, p.381). This conscious effort from Lady Macbeth, affirms the gender dilemma, and expresses that to be completely ambitious, you have to be completely a man. During the time of writing Shakespeare would have used many different references and influences, a likely one being the life of Elizabeth I, whose ambitions and characteristics mirrors those of Lady Macbeth's in the first act. Research by Roller (2021) confirms her ambitious nature propelled her into great achievements during her reign including the defeat over the Spanish Armada, development of exploration and economic prosperity. However, as she was posing with her virginity (a characteristic she was celebrated and honoured for), she was presenting herself, willingly or not, as a woman who could only rule alone, without a man or a child, meaning that if she were to give in to her feminine duty, she would have to, in some way, relinquish her power. In her first speech to parliament in 1559, she addressed the commons plea for marriage by saying she is second to God and that 'they had no right to "drawe [her] love to [their] lykinges or frame [her] will to [their] fantasies"' and to 'put the matter "cleane out of [their] heads"' (The History of Parliament Online, n.d.)

It could be argued she was in fear of marriage, as she had so far proved that she was successful as a Queen alone without a husband. Mary I, her sister and predecessor, had married the Spanish King Philip II, and although provisions in their marriage terms would stop Philip taking charge of the country

at the event of her death (Samson, 2020), the marriage caused numerous bad outcomes, like the loss of Calais as an English hold and the dampening of Mary I's character and will. Mary had done little for the country and executed no ambitions, and died a frail shadow of herself, therefore we must assume that Elizabeth's experiences with marriage caused her to believe that she could only be successful alone. She had to give up the thought of marriage and other female responsibilities at the time to be ambitious and dedicated to her country. According to a highly acclaimed author of Elizabeth I, "feminists were attracted to the sight of a woman defying conventions and ruling alone [...] Everyone wants to know how Elizabeth could rule successfully in a man's world without a husband." (Doran, 2018). Like Lady Macbeth, Elizabeth I deployed masculine techniques, she also went as far as adopting male attire during her speech at Tilbury [See Appendix A]. Fyre (1996) offers the argument that when she affirmed "I have the body of a feeble woman, but the heart and stomach of a king" (British Library, n.d.) she was conscious of the effect of cross-dressing and epitomized her self-representation. By dressing in male attire and admitting that women are feeble, she directly denounces her feminine traits and for a moment commits to the concept that she is a man. This only confirms the dilemma, that even as a god anointed queen, people with female biological parts cannot be ambitious, not just by social convention, but because their bodies aren't built for it and couldn't withstand it.



Cate Blanchett as Elizabeth I wearing Alexandra Byrne's interpretation of the armour at Tilbury. (2007) Elizabeth: The Golden Age. Universal Pictures

As part of Lady Macbeth's deal with the spirits, she willingly calls for the agents of evil to remove her chance to bear children. Elizabeth could have been very sceptical to have a child as the contemporary processes would have limited her ability to rule, for example, if she were to have a child, during the labour and the common confinement period, it would be custom for her to 'close herself off from the world' (Ridgway, 2015), during this time she would have had to hand her power over to the men in her council, which in turn could have lost herself her control and influence. Hence, to secure her power she would not be able to have a child. Shakespeare reflects this idea in Lady Macbeth, who remarks that the spirits "unsex me here" (Macbeth, A1, Sc5) and "come to my woman's breasts and take my milk for gall" (Macbeth, A1, Sc5) this act would no longer make her a conventional woman "because she has refused to behave as dutifully as her society suggests she should, she seems to become an inhuman creature". (Gilbert, 2016). This only highlights the idea that as a woman or prospective mother she could never perform the task because of her maternal instincts that make her inherently weaker than men. She asks for her milk to become acid so that she could not even wean a child, showing that she would rather, much like Elizabeth I, be able to be ambitious and motivated, than have children. She confirms this, when she notes that she would murder her own child for the purpose of ambition: "I have given suck and know how tender tis to love the babe that milks me: I would, while it was smiling in my face, have plucked my nipple from its boneless gums and dashed the brains out, had I so sworn as you have done to this." (Macbeth, A1, Sc7) Other than showing Lady Macbeth's cruelty and violence, this passage enhances the argument that during this period, women could only be childless to achieve any ambitious plan, thus they have to be male, as in society it was a woman's god given right and duty to produce and care for children. When dehumanising herself Lady Macbeth acts much like Elizabeth I; they both gave up their god given right and sex to be fruitful in their ambitions.

Most of Elizabeth I's troubles, which led to her life of chastity and sole rule were guided by social conventions and beliefs of the day, which in turn possibly developed Lady Macbeth as a warning to

ambitious women. Biologically women have been developed more fragile, with a physical inborn weakness that Shakespeare would have witnessed. Whether he was a protofeminist or not, this idea would have played an important role in the writing of his female characters. The idea of mental and physical weakness amongst women still stands today with many believing that women are not strong enough; even in the vote for leadership, as “stereotypically masculine traits, such as strength of leadership and quick decision-making, are often prized over stereotypically feminine traits like deliberation and compromise.” (Jalalzai, 2020). This continues further, looking at the differences between men and women’s chemistry, with the assumption often being made that women can make spur of the moment decisions. Without truly understanding female brain chemistry women went through changes, like menstruation, without truly understanding it. Thus, women and men, during Shakespeare’s time, would have seen this as common female behaviour, thus linking emotional behaviour (hysteria) to woman and not seeing it as a natural chemical change. Hysteria “derives from the Greek word for womb (hystera) and refers to psychological disorders deemed particular to women” (Tyson, 2012, p.86), with many of the unexplained characteristics being overemotional, irrational behaviour, insomnia, and nervousness, all common symptoms leading up to a woman’s period. In *Macbeth*, as soon as Duncan’s death is made public, Lady Macbeth starts to lose herself and her mind. Her sleepwalking reflects this showing her to be mentally disturbed after the murders, with her eyes open but “their senses shut” (*Macbeth*, A5, Sc1), displaying cerebral weakness within women. This disturbance reinforces the dilemma, proving that women were seen to not be able to handle the consequences of ambition which they are not fit for, linking hysteria to the feminine role within the play. In a character description of Lady Macbeth, Rotscher (1844) offers the argument that her role in the drama is not just to clear away her husband’s doubt, and to save him from hesitation of committing the murder, but also “to afford a lesson, in her own fate, of the eternal laws of the moral world” (Rotscher, 1844, p.140). Even though not mentioned in Holinshed’s account, the sleepwalking scene has great influence on how Lady Macbeth is viewed in the final half. This behaviour and lack of Lady Macbeth in the last Act certifies the idea that “there is no room for her in the exclusively male world of treason and revenge. Therefore, her true weakness and lack of consequence are first revealed in the discovery scene.” (Neely, 1980, p.246). Shakespeare’s introduction of Lady Macbeth’s hysteria and somnambulism solidify the motive that women are not mentally strong enough to deal with the ambition’s consequences, thus acting as a warning to women, whilst also representing the dilemma.

The gender dilemma dictates that Lady Macbeth couldn’t be “the intellectual originator of the murder; the evil spirit goading her husband to crime.” (Rotscher, 1844, pp.140-141). However, Lady Margaret Beaufort, contradicts the gender dilemma as her character and ambition express the idea that women, like Lady Macbeth, in power could use their womanhood to their advantage. The dilemma, therefore, was only that to women who could not think of ways to get around it. To do so, this meant using the men around her to gain favour, status and achieve goals of ambition. In the play Lady Macbeth understands that because she is a woman, she cannot complete the task (*Macbeth*, A1, Sc5), therefore, she manipulates her husband to complete the murders so that she may become queen. This is a reflection of Lady Margaret Beaufort who married Sir Thomas Stanley, a Yorkist supporter and ally of King Edward. It is said that Beaufort “negotiated the [marriage] settlement very much on her own terms and secured a generous annual allowance...she allied herself with another great noble house” (Jones and Underwood, 1992, p.145) gaining herself a great stance within the court. It gave her the appearance of being a Yorkist supporter, whilst also training her son, Henry Tudor, to become king. Her friendship with her son’s uncle had gained them support in Wales, meaning now she had a Welsh and English Army ready for her son’s arrival. Stanley was known for changing sides during a battle and Margaret hoped that her husband would do this for her, therefore, scheming against the King. Her games and manipulations led to her son becoming King of England in 1485.



Meynart Wewyck (1598) Lady Margaret Beaufort. University of Cambridge.

“On Henry’s accession, Margaret took on something of the role of Queen Dowager ... and began by setting out the furnishings and decorations to be prepared in the Queen’s chamber.” (Norton, 2010, p.35) These act of self-promotion secured her place at the court of Henry VII before he was anointed, securing her power and making it known that she would rule with her son. Jones and Underwood (1992) expressed that these arrangements placed her in a similar position as Cecily (mother of Edward IV), who enjoyed an important and influential role within court, and was seen to “rule the king as she pleases” (1992, p.145). Lady Macbeth, like Beaufort, knew that she could not rule, or gain power by herself, so she used her femininity to manipulate and use men for her own political and personal gain. Her words to Macbeth deem him a “coward” (Macbeth, A1, Sc7) and convince him to do the deed. This clever line shows her using his masculinity against him, playing on the idea that he can only be a man if he commits the murder; “When you durst do it, then you were a man” (Macbeth, A1, Sc7). Her cunning nature also reflects the deceit of Beaufort, where she faints with the words, “Help me hence, ho!” (Macbeth, A2, Sc3), and is helped out of the scene. If Shakespeare had intended this to be a false faint, the playwright has done well to portray Lady Macbeth as cunning, as she’s taken advantage of the weak female stereotype to cover up the reality of her cruel ambitious nature, much like Beaufort’s deceit at court. The link between Lady Beaufort and Lady Macbeth argues against the dilemma in question, and shows that women could be ambitious by playing men and using them through means of manipulation and cunning.

Within Shakespeare’s ‘Macbeth’ the idea of the gender dilemma is seen throughout, being represented and reflected in the character Lady Macbeth. Ambition is a prominent theme within the play and shows how too much of this, especially if achieved through unjust means, can corrupt its host and lead to a violent end. Lady Macbeth is indeed ambitious within the play; however, this nature represents more than corruption. Her wishes to be stripped of all female biological traits and femininity to achieve or even have ambition, express male superiority and female servitude. Her insanity and hysteria towards the end of the play, show that biologically women are too weak to carry out such an activity, without becoming hysterical as a result. Furthermore, even though Lady Macbeth manipulated her husband, the need of Macbeth in this enterprise proves that a female at this time would need an association with a male figure to achieve a high rank or status, through such means as marriage. The character magnifies the issue that women could only gain power through men, consequently the gender dilemma of this time is reinforced and deeply routed within the play, and shows that even the highest status women of the era faced this issue.

Bibliography

Books

- Fyre, S. (1996). *Elizabeth I: The Competition for Representation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Jones, M. K., & Underwood, M. G. (1992). *The King's Mother: Lady Margaret Beaufort, the Countess of Richmond and Derby*. Cambridge University Press.
- Neely, C. T. (1980). *The Woman's Part; Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare*. University of Illinois Press.
- Norton, E. (2010). *Margaret Beaufort: Mother of the Tudor Dynasty*. Amberley Publishing.
- Rotscher, H. T. (1844). *Cyclus Dramatischer Charactere* (Vol. i). Berlin.
- Samson, A. (2020). *Mary and Philip: The Marriage of Tudor England and Habsburg Spain*. Manchester UK: Manchester University Press
- Shakespeare, W., & Sprague, H. B. (1889). *Shakespeare's Tragedy Macbeth*. Silver, Burdett & Company.
- Tyson, L. (2012). *Critical Theory Today: A User Friendly Guide*. Taylor and Francis.
- Zimmern, H., & Lewes, L. (1895). *The Women of Shakespeare* (Harvard University ed.). Hodder.

Articles

- La Belle, J. (1980). "A Strange Infirmity: Lady Macbeth's Amenorrhea". *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 31(3), 381-386.

Websites

- British Library. (n.d.). *Elizabeth's Tilbury Speech, July 1588*. Available at: <https://www.bl.uk/learning/timeline/item102878.html> (Accessed: March 2021)
- Doran, S. (2018). *Elizabeth I: the great unifier*. Available at: <https://www.historyextra.com/period/elizabethan/elizabeth-i-queen-great-unifier-enemies-protestant-power/> (Accessed: March 2021)
- Gilbert, S. M. (2016). 'Unsex Me Here': *Lady Macbeth's 'Hell Broth'*. Available at: <https://www.bl.uk/shakespeare/articles/unsex-me-here-lady-macbeths-hell-broth> (Accessed: April 2021)
- Jalalzai, F. (2020). *Why the US still hasn't had a woman president*. Available at: <https://theconversation.com/why-the-us-still-hasnt-had-a-woman-president-131125> (Accessed: May 2021)
- Ridgway, C. (2015). *Childbirth in Medieval and Tudor Times by Sarah Bryson*. Available at: <https://www.tudorsociety.com/childbirth-in-medieval-and-tudor-times-by-sarah-bryson/> (Accessed: March 2021)
- Roller, S. (2021). *10 of Elizabeth I's Key Achievements*. Available at: <https://www.historyhit.com/elizabeth-i-key-achievements/> (Accessed: March 2021)
- The History of Parliament Online. (n.d.). *The First Parliament of Queen Elizabeth I*. Available at: <https://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1558-1603/parliament/1559-0> (Accessed: March 2021)

Appendix

Appendix A

Transcript of Elizabeth I's Speech to the Troops at Tilbury, July 1588. In her own hand-writing. British Library, [Harley 6798, f.87]

My loving people,

We have been persuaded by some that are careful of our safety, to take heed how we commit our selves to armed multitudes, for fear of treachery; but I assure you I do not desire to live to distrust my faithful and loving people. Let tyrants fear. I have always so behaved myself that, under God, I have placed my chiefest strength and safeguard in the loyal hearts and good-will of my subjects; and therefore I am come amongst you, as you see, at this time, not for my recreation and disport, but being resolved, in the midst and heat of the battle, to live and die amongst you all; to lay down for my God, and for my kingdom, and my people, my honour and my blood, even in the dust.

I know I have the body but of a weak and feeble woman; but I have the heart and stomach of a king, and of a king of England too, and think foul scorn that Parma or Spain, or any prince of Europe, should dare to invade the borders of my realm: to which rather than any dishonour shall grow by me, I myself will take up arms, I myself will be your general, judge, and rewarder of every one of your virtues in the field.

I know already, for your forwardness you have deserved rewards and crowns; and We do assure you in the word of a prince, they shall be duly paid you. In the mean time, my lieutenant general shall be in my stead, than whom never prince commanded a more noble or worthy subject; not doubting but by your obedience to my general, by your concord in the camp, and your valour in the field, we shall shortly have a famous victory over those enemies of my God, of my kingdom, and of my people.