



LADY MACBETH AS AN AMBITIOUS LADY IN SHAKEAPEARE'S *MACBETH*

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ABSTRACT

William Shakespeare is a greatest poet and dramatist in the English literature. He wrote quite powerful roles for the women in his plays. He cleverly made the women a mere authoritative figure than the men. His tragic women have a beauty and an appeal all their own. Lady Macbeth is the wife of a general whom she advises and assists in killing the king so that her husband will obtain the throne. Lady Macbeth uses her husband to gain power. she learns of her husband's ascent into Royalty. She is a cunning character who is wise to the way of men. She enlightens Macbeth as to how far she would go to succeed. The beauty of Lady Macbeth's cunningness is that she seems to have no fear. Her character is combined wickedness and womanliness in almost equal proportions. She is less cruel, vicious and less violent than Euripides' Medea. Lady Macbeth is no way an idealist like Sophocles' Antigone but, like her, she is single-minded. Lady Macbeth had so much of the milk of human kindness in her. She is a monster and instigates her husband to the act of murder. So Lady Macbeth is ambitious for the sake of her husband.

In order to enable her husband to achieve ambition, she actually goes through a process of unsexing herself for her reproaches and her challenging Macbeth's love. Macbeth might not have launched into crime and she makes up her mind as to the course of action to be. Lady Macbeth is a realist. She is the female counterpart of the evil which is represented in this play by Macbeth. She supplements the part played by the witches in bringing Macbeth's secret ambition to the surface and her part in it goes far beyond that of the witches. This is why she has been called a "supper witch". Her role in the play and part is very consistent, but she is a woman whom we can never forget. Her force of will and firmness of her determination make her an exceptional woman even though ultimately she completely breaks down under her overwhelming sense of guilt and kills herself. Ambition was the cardinal sin of this soul finally ruined by crimes.

Key Words: Witch, Antigone, Cardinal, Ambition, Piccolomini, Thane, Macdonwald, etc.

LADY MACBETH AS AN AMBITIOUS LADY

Lady Macbeth is the wife of a general whom she advises and assists in killing the king so that her husband will obtain the throne. Lady Macbeth uses her husband to gain power. Macbeth, the Thane of Glamis, is a valiant soldier who defeats the Norwegian army and kills Macdonwald, a rebel. The current king of Scotland, Duncan promotes Macbeth to Thane of Cowdar. As Lady Macbeth learns of her husband's ascent into Royalty, she acknowledges that her husband does not have the ruthlessness to further his position. She claims that she has the ambition, but not the gumption to action it, so she will. As Macbeth arrives at Inverness, Lady Macbeth advises him on how to behave when Duncan makes an appearance at their home. She incites that he "look like the innocent Flower. But be the Serpent under't" (1.5. 67-68). Her plan of manipulation requires



both to act natural and calm something she feels Macbeth could not do without her assistance. Lady Macbeth is a cunning character who is wise to the way of men; men who will climb their way to the top, without thought or consideration of who they obliterate on their way up. Lady Macbeth bears the masculine courage to overtake the throne that her husband does not.

Lady Macbeth has the foresight and the wisdom to carry out her plan to her husband. Macbeth fears the death and the consequences of his wife's planned usurpation. As Lady Macbeth interrupts his thoughts he informs her that he does not desire to follow through her intention of regicide. It is here that Lady Macbeth shows her tenacious and ravenous side. She enlightens Macbeth as to how far she would go to succeed. The beauty of Lady Macbeth's cunningness is that she seems to have no fear. She never doubts that her tactics will be successful. She also strips herself of all feminine qualities to obtain this level of confidence. She asks spirits to "unsex" her, so she will no longer possess any feminine qualities such as remorse and peace. She sees these female characteristics as negative and weak. This is why she calls Macbeth womanly when he says he will refuse to kill Duncan.

Lady Macbeth is a study in wickedness but she is wicked with a difference. In her character is combined wickedness and womanliness in almost equal proportions. She is less cruel, vicious and less violent than Euripides' Medea. Lady Macbeth is no way an idealist like Sophocles' Antigone but, like her, she is single-minded. It is rather strange, as Dr. Johnson says that "Lady Macbeth is no better than a kind of ogress and he bluntly stabs that she is merely detested." (Wimsat : 134)

Mrs. Jameson is absolutely right when she analyses the character of Lady Macbeth in a different way altogether. And so she remarks:

She is a terrible impersonation of evil passions and mighty powers, never so far removed from our nature as to be cast beyond the pale of our sympathies for the woman herself remains a woman to the last, still linked with her sex and with humanity.

Lady Macbeth wants to goad her husband into action by casting aspersions upon the nature of his love for her: "From this time such I account they love. Art thou afraid to be the same in thine own act and valour as thou art in desire?"

She retains the name 'affection' for her husband after his breakdown and does not take him to task. The maternal tenderness and filial affection of Lady Macbeth are not directly portrayed by Shakespeare but there are revealing suggestions in the play. Take for instance, those well-known lines: 'I have given suck, and know/How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me'. Every word bespeaks her great motherly love. The lines that follow are given as:

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 sworn as you have done to this. (1.vii-54-59)

are often regarded as an evidence of 'a merciless and unwomanly nature' in Lady Macbeth. Nothing can be farther from the truth. All she means is that rather than break the kind of solemn pledge that Macbeth had taken, she was ready to do even that which was most repugnant to her. Lady Macbeth had so much of the milk of human kindness in her. As H.N. Hudson so pertinently points out in this regard as:

That some facial resemblance to her father should thus rise up and stay her uplifted arm, shows that in her case conscience works quite as effectually through the feelings, as through the imagination in that of her husband. And the difference between imagination and feeling is that the one acts most at a



distance the other on the spot. This gush of native tenderness, coming in thus after her terrible audacity of thought and speech has often reminded us of a fine in Schiller's noble drama. The Piccolomini IV.iv : Bold were my words because my deeds were not. (Hudson's Shakespeare:129)

Lady Macbeth's persuasion helps Macbeth in becoming more resolute in his wickedness. She is 'both the better and alter ego of Macbeth'. Her taunting words make Macbeth protest that he can do 'all that may become a man.' Her references to 'manliness and masculine vigour are purposely made to rouse the chivalrous element in Macbeth. Lady Macbeth is described here by Cheung, King Kok as:

assumes the role of a nagging wife determined to get things done, irrespective of any moral concern for the deed. Yet she too is tender, for Duncan reminds her of her father and she is unnerved to do the ghastly deed. (Cheung, King Kok : 436)

Lady Macbeth finished her comments upon her husband's letter when a messenger comes and gives her the news that King Duncan is arriving at her castle that very night to stay in there as a guest. Lady Macbeth in a soliloquy describes the expected arrival of the king as "the fatal entrance of Duncan under my battlements." Thus the thought of the assassination of Duncan has already taken her firm root in her mind and without the least moral scruple. She decides that the assassination must be carried out at that very night. It is noteworthy that she takes this decision even though her husband has not yet returned home from his military exploits.

In this soliloquy she calls upon the supernatural power to "unsex" her and to fill her from the head to the toe with the "direst cruelty", so that she may feel not the least pity with regard to the contemplated assassination of Duncan. She calls upon the spirits which attend upon murder to come to her women's breast in order to take away the milk from them and put "gall" there. She then calls upon the night to cover itself in the darkest smoke of hell so that the knife with which Duncan is murdered does not see the wounds it makes. This soliloquy shows the determination which Lady Macbeth has already formed in her mind regarding the means by which her husband can become the king without delay

This soliloquy is most horrifying as it comes from the lips of a woman and gives us a feeling that Lady Macbeth is a monster. Macbeth now arrives, and Lady Macbeth without any formalities in receiving him on his safe return from the danger of war straight to the point, and greets him in terms of the prophecies made by the witches. When Macbeth tells her that Duncan is coming there as a guest, she says that Duncan will never go back from there and in a tone of the greatest determination she urges him to get ready for the task of the assassination.

In Act I Scene VI, King Duncan arrives and is suitably greeted by Lady Macbeth. A little later we find Macbeth making a soliloquy in which he considers both the practical and moral objections to the proposed assassination of Duncan and comes to the conclusion that his enterprises should be abandoned. Accordingly, when Lady Macbeth meets him a few moments later, he says to her: "We will proceed no further in this business." He tells her that Duncan has only a short time ago conferred honours upon him and that he has moreover on high tributes from all sorts of people. Macbeth would like to enjoy those honours and tributes rather than murder Duncan. At this, Lady Macbeth feels annoyed with him for having first vowed to murder Duncan and for now backing out of his original resolve. The situation is described

She asks him if he is now afraid of acting bravely in order to achieve his heart-felt desire to acquire the kingship which she calls 'the ornament of life'. She asks him if he would now live a coward in his own estimation. If he is not going to act, she could regard his love for her to be a poor show. (Dwivedi : 127-129)

Again Lady Macbeth does certainly instigate her husband to the act of murder, and with her chiding tongue, sweeps away all his scruples. It ought to be admitted that Macbeth's weakness of will gives his wife such an ascendancy over him. It is useless to debate the point, whether Macbeth should have resisted his wife's suggestions, and kept his soul untainted by crime. Macbeth's weakness of will is temperamental and there is no getting away from it. What should strike every reader of the play is Lady Macbeth's love for her husband and her exclusive devotion to his material interests. So Lady Macbeth is ambitious for the sake of her husband. In order to enable her husband to achieve ambition, she actually goes through a process of unsexing herself for her reproaches and her challenging Macbeth's love. Macbeth might not have launched into crime and she makes up her mind as to the course of action to be followed. She knows better than Macbeth that the way to the throne lies through murder, and she knows that she will have to take the initiative in the murder. To describe the situation Dr. S. K. Banerjee reproduces the following speech of Lady Macbeth in his book, Shakespeare:

The raven himself is hoarse,
That croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan
Under my battlements. 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, you murdering ministers,
Wherever in your sightless substances
You wait on nature's mischief? (Banerjee : 110)

She also realises that she has done little good to her husband by instigating him into the act of crime, as she notices her husband's distracted looks and put the following question to him as quoted by Banerjee:

How now my lord! Why do you keep alone,
Of sorriest fancies your companions making,
Using those thoughts which should have died.
With them they think on? (Ibid. : 111)

The point is that her unsexing of herself has been temporary as the woman reasserts in her. After hearing all the words of Lady Macbeth, Macbeth replies that he is brave enough to do all that is worthy of a man. Lady Macbeth reminds him that he was very keen to accomplish the proposed task when neither time nor place was favourable. She points out that both time and place are now at his disposal. She goes on to say that, if she had taken a vow to do the task, she would have done it at any cost, even if it had necessitated her plucking the nipple of her breast from the mouth of her baby and dashing out the baby's brains.

In Act II, Scene ii, Lady Macbeth has drunk to fortify herself. The king's grooms are in a stupor after a lot of drinks. She heard the owl a while ago and thinks that Macbeth should be at his work now. The doors leading to Duncan's room are open and his chamberlains are drunk and soundly asleep. Suddenly Macbeth cries from within the king's room "who is there?" Lady Macbeth apprehends that the grooms have woken up and the murder has not been done. She has laid the daggers of the grooms ready. She wonders how Macbeth could miss them. She herself could kill the king had he not resembled her father while asleep. At this point Macbeth enters and announces that he has done the deed. On his asking whether she heard any noise, Lady Macbeth replies that she heard only the noises of owls and crickets.

She tells him to go and wash his hands. She sees the daggers in his hands and asks him to leave them near the grooms and smear their faces with blood. Macbeth cannot go again. He is afraid of his deed and cannot go to see the murdered king again. She snatches the daggers and goes in to smear the faces of the grooms with Duncan's blood if it is still liquid. Lady Macbeth returns and showing her blood-stained hands to him says that she is ashamed of his timid-heart. She so calmly states that "a little blood will cleanse their hands." (2.2.65). The washing of the blood from their hands will erase the guilt for her. She makes it seem so simplistic when one has no conscience. It is the murder scene. Lady Macbeth waits in suspense for her husband's successful action. She could herself murder Duncan had he not resembled her father. This thought in her is elaborated by the following remarks from S.N.A. Rizvi's *The Story of Macbeth* :

That some fancied resemblance to her father should thus rise up and stay her up-lifted arm shows that in here conscience works quite as effectively through the feelings as through the imagination in that of her husband. And the difference between imagination and feeling is, that the one acts at a distance, the other on the spot. (Rizvi : 197-198)

Lady Macbeth is certainly more resourceful than her husband. It is she who takes the initiative, plans the murder of Duncan, and even partly assists Macbeth in carrying out the plot. After the act of murder, Macbeth loses all control over himself, and is tormented by imaginative terrors. It is Lady Macbeth then who comes to his help.

Why worthy Thane,
You do unbend your noble strength to think
So brain-sickly of things. Go get some water.
And wash this filthy witness from your hand.

The amazement of Lady Macbeth is described by J.P. Dyson in his paper, "The Structural Function of Banquet scene in Macbeth as:

This is the great dramatic symbol of order disrupted the martlet setting of harmony and union into which the raven world erupts in the form of the demonic visitation. (Dyson : 378)

Lady Macbeth's lack of conscience contributes to her demise. And as Macbeth becomes stronger and confident, Lady Macbeth experiences distress over what they have done. There is a polarity between the husband and wife; when she has a positive outlook, he has a negative one, when he possesses evil thoughts; he feels guilt etc. Lady Macbeth begins to have visions and sleepwalks. Her speech overportrays her troubled mind wherein previous acts she has been more eloquent. One night as she sleepwalks, she confesses to the murderer of Duncan and also Banquo whom she advised Macbeth to kill. The blood on her hands or the guilt has returned in her mind and she nervously in washing her hands to clean her soul of the guilt, feels she is relieved the nights of the murders. "What will these hands never be clean?" (Ibid. : 383)

In Lady Macbeth's sleep walking, while she is hardly asleep, her guilty thoughts surge up into her conscience and it becomes clear that the past will never let her have any peace. The situation is clearly described by the following remark:

For the first and last time in literature sleep-walking is used with great and terrible dramatic effect". The broken prose of Lady Macbeth points to be breaking of her self-control under natural pressure. The comments of the Doctor and the Waiting Gentlewoman are like the pronouncement of the chorus in a Greek tragedy. (Rizvi: 212-213)



Lady Macbeth is the female counterpart of the evil which is represented in this play by Macbeth. She supplements the part played by the witches in bringing Macbeth's secret ambition to the surface and her part in it goes far beyond that of the witches. This is why she has been called a "supper watch". Her role in the play and part of the play, is very consistent, but she is a woman whom we can never forget. Her force of will and firmness of her determination make her an exceptional woman even though ultimately she completely breaks down under her overwhelming sense of guilt and kills herself.

CONCLUSION:

Lady Macbeth is a terrible impersonation of evil passions and mighty power, never so far removed from our nature as to be cast beyond the pole of our sympathies for the woman herself remains a woman to the last, still linked with her sex and with humanity. She is the female counterpart of the evil which is represented in this play by Macbeth. She supplements the part played by the witches in bringing Macbeth's secret ambition in the surface and her part goes far beyond that of the witches. That is why she has been called a "supper watch". Her role in the play is very consistent, but she is a woman whom we can never forget. Her force of will and a firmness of her determination make her an exceptional woman even though ultimately she completely breaks down under her overwhelming sense of guilt and kills herself.

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