



## ANTIFEMINISM IN *MACBETH*

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### ABSTRACT

*In Shakespeare's play Macbeth, he presents the conflicting character of Lady Macbeth. Upon receiving her husband's letter about the witches' prophesies, she attempts to be like a man in order to exude the strength needed to gain additional social status as royalty. Lady Macbeth appears to be very influential in planning – deciding when and how they should kill King Duncan – and chiding her husband for not acting more like a man; yet, despite these capabilities, she is the main reason for the revealing of the Macbeth's part in the usurpation of the throne. First shown as an iron-willed character willing to "[pluck] my nipple from [my child's] boneless gums, And [dash] the brains out, had I so sworn as you Have done to this" to later being shown as possessed by nightmares of guilt (I. vii), how could such a strong character so quickly fall prey to uneasiness? According to materialist feminism theory, despite her earlier show of strength, Lady Macbeth's eventual weakness is a result of a patriarchal portrayal of her gender. It is in the line of antifeminism.*

**Key Words:** Antifeminism, Oppression, Feminism, Patriarchy

### INTRODUCTION

In Shakespeare's play Macbeth, he presents the conflicting character of Lady Macbeth. Upon receiving her husband's letter about the witches' prophesies, she attempts to be like a man in order to exude the strength needed to gain additional social status as royalty. Lady Macbeth appears to be very influential in planning – deciding when and how they should kill King Duncan – and chiding her husband for not acting more like a man; yet, despite these capabilities, she is the main reason for the revealing of the Macbeth's part in the usurpation of the throne.

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A popular speculation on why the oppression of women is not more commonly recognized than the oppression of certain ethnic or religious groups, is that “women’s allegiance to men from their own [background] always supersedes their allegiance to women from different classes” (Tyson 97). While certain social and economic factors separate people from different walks of life, within these groups women are also separated from each other. Women remain isolated which prevents them from making significant changes because they have no strength in size. This shows antifeminist tendencies of the dramatist.

Similarly, Lady Macbeth, while being notably strong compared to other members of her gender, has no way to enact her schemes as she is kept isolated from other women during the course of the play. While her strength is great, she is not powerful enough alone to deal with a murder. She does not reveal the secret of their murderous deeds because she is a woman and thus inherently weak, but she reveals the secret because she is a woman and thus has been selectively isolated from finding strength in number.

From the very beginning of Macbeth, Lady Macbeth is shown as a character who relents in creating rebellious plots. According to Lois Tyson, “women [invest] themselves...in the accomplishments of their husbands and sons” (97). Lady Macduff – the epitome of motherhood – does not concoct some evil plot because she invests all of her intellectual powers into the achievements of her husband and children.

On the other hand, Lady Macbeth, not as bound to domestic duties as Lady Macduff, sharpens her intellectual capabilities for her own use. While intelligence from a male character would be seen as a beneficial trait, patriarchy defines Lady Macbeth’s intelligence as a flaw and as an indicator that she is unnatural and “unfulfilled” as a woman.

Patriarchal society encourages Lady Macbeth to invest herself in the role of mother. Lady Macbeth is seen as selfish and abnormal when she confesses that there is a situation in which she would “[dash] [her child’s] brains out” (I.vii), a very unnatural statement according to patriarchy’s belief that women’s desire to have and protect children is a part of “their natural biological makeup” (Tyson 97). Though intelligent and strong at the beginning of Macbeth, Lady Macbeth is reduced to an insignificant person haunted by nightmares and guilt as a result of a patriarchal portrayal of her gender.

Macbeth is a play that seeks to understand morality, especially how it relates to healthy and unhealthy expression of gender. Feminism is a movement that seeks equality for all people,



and an elimination of classical ideas of gender (male intelligence versus female inferiority; male strength versus female emotional weakness) as gender is a social construct rather than something that a person is born into. Many feminist interpreters of literature have examined Macbeth for its presentation of characters displaying their unconventional thoughts on gender. I will present three different feminist interpretations of Macbeth, and discuss how the ideas they offer may help to clarify the motives of the complex characters of this play.

In *Comic Women, Tragic Men*, Linda Bamber presents the idea of the feminine other in relation to the male Self. A feminine other is one who exists within the world of women, exemplifying the socially accepted qualities of love, fertility, family, and a sense of the body. She also serves as a figure who presents a challenge to the male self when necessary. Bamber believes that a character, Lady Macbeth's problem lies in that she has an unhealthy focus on the world of men, valuing it above all other things (Bamber 91).

Lady Macbeth presents herself as her husband's collaborator, rather than as a being with her own self-interests. Because her identity is based upon her conceptions of manliness, she serves to block Macbeth's exits from the world of men, when she should be offering alternatives to it. The character of Lady Macduff is, however, able to fulfill this role for her partner. She is hostile towards her husband's public life when it takes him away from his family, being first concerned with his obligation to the home. In this way, she can appear to be a demanding and critical wife. However, by being the other to Macduff's Self, her death invokes a paralyzing disbelief in her husband, and he seeks revenge for her death. Contrarily, Macbeth simply shrugs off the suicide of a woman whom he had only weeks before called his "dearest partner of greatness" (1.5.2). Lady Macbeth was an empty figure, offering no feminine balance for Macbeth, and hence he has lost nothing in her death (Bamber 93).

Bamber concludes by offering that Macbeth's death does not resonate with the viewer because by the end of the play, he has simply exhausted all of his options, as there has been no other to oppose him. Macbeth continues to be a murderer throughout the course of the play; his problems don't change nor do they develop. His wife fails in provoking any sort of true passion within him, and ultimately, even his death exhausts the audience (Bamber 97-106).

The concept of a static Macbeth without the presence of a gender balance to challenge him works well for me in reading the play. The story is cyclical, with themes and dialogue looping throughout the text. However, Macbeth's story doesn't go on as Macduff's will in his children. In this way, Lady Macbeth seems to have failed her husband. He is extremely linear, making only one mistake and then allowing himself to be degraded continually for it, until his inevitable defeat. In his death, he won't be idolized or sympathized with, but lost as only one in a series of insurgents. If he had been made to step outside his ideations of power and look to what would be best for the kingdom by a nurturing woman, the story could have been different.



In Women's Worlds in Shakespeare Plays, Irene G. Dash writes of a Lady Macbeth torn between ideals of morality and power. Lady Macbeth desires to renounce her sex and powerlessness and in the process has to renounce morality, which she ultimately cannot follow through on. In the beginning of the play, she believes that she the strong figure in her union. However, she is only attempting to deny the double standard that she's been subjected to: the subservient and obedient woman versus the creature of morality, taking a stand for what is right. Lady Macbeth finds the classical concept of femininity repulsive, but cannot deny womanhood without denying morality as well. Unfortunately, neither of her desires can carry through: she is unable to commit the initial murder herself because the sleeping king reminds her of her father. In this, she exhibits tenderness as well as a moral code. Still, in the beginning of the work she appears to be a strong, masculine figure, but, by the end of the play, resorts to mothering her husband, who, after the desired gaining power, no longer needs to regard her. As Dash says, "Lady Macbeth's tragedy [is the] futility of her attempt to move into the male world, and, having adopted her moral standards, her ever-increasing isolation from him" (Dash 161-171).

The scene after Duncan's murder is a perfect example of this. Previously, the audience saw a strong woman in command of herself and her husband, stepping, without flinching, over the lines of morality. In this scene, she faints several times, and is simply waved away by the men surrounding her. Often, directors will decide to cut this scene, as the audience tended to laugh when Lady Macbeth would fall. This was due to the fact that what the director had created was an evil woman that the audience could not identify with. If the actress succeeds in creating a Lady Macbeth who is suppressing her moral nature rather than one who lacks morality, the faints will not invoke a humorous response (Dash 171).

In her essay, "Born of Woman" Fantasies of Maternal Power in Macbeth, Janet Adelman argues that the play is a representation of man's primitive fears his identity and autonomy being threatened by women. Her belief is that Macbeth wants to eliminate women from the life process to create a world comprised exclusively of males (Adelman 105).

The play begins for Adelman with the androgynous parental figure of Duncan. Duncan is said to exemplify the father in that he is the authoritative center for the men around him, however, he is also the nurturer, planting children (in granting his soldiers power) and fostering their growth. The sort of maternal power Duncan represents the opposite to the destructive natures of Lady Macbeth and the Weird Sisters. In his death, the peaceful union of man and woman is broken, and we are left only with the malevolent mothers (Adelman 108-9).

The play focuses on the images of blood and birth. Lady Macbeth herself uses a metaphor for blocking her remorse that could liken itself to plugging her menstrual flow, and in that regard, serves as an attack on what makes her body, and ultimately, her entire person, female. The characters of Macbeth, especially Lady Macbeth herself, are hostile to what it means to be a woman, and laud instead the strength and power of a man. When Macbeth exclaims,

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“...For only thy undaunted mettle should compose nothing but males” (1.7.73-75), he puns on the concept of mail and male, metal and mettle. Hence, Lady Macbeth becomes the breeder of armored men, rather than vulnerable babies (Adelman 113-115).

By the end of the play, Macbeth’s fantasies completely eliminate women from the birthing process. Lady Macbeth is pushed to the background and almost forgotten, and Macbeth becomes obsessed with the prophecy that no man born of a woman shall be able to threaten his new position. Adelman argues that Macbeth comes to believe that not only is he infallible because all those around him were born of women, but he is infallible because he was not. Macduff’s destruction of Macbeth proves him wrong, yet enforces the idea that the mark of the successful man is a violent separation from his mother. Adelman sees the lesson as being, “heroic manhood is exemption from the female” (Adelman 120-123).

The image of the heroic Macduff not needing women contradicts Linda Bamber’s argument for the Other, however, both readings appear legitimate. As Adelman suggests, Macduff does not need women to exert his power. Although he loves his wife, she was not necessary for him neither to make his choices nor to fall the tyrant Macbeth had become. At the end, the stage is dominated by men. Lady Macduff might be there to be Macduff’s Other, or, she might be there to create a more heroic Macduff--a man a with a family, with a nurturing wife (rather than a “malevolent mother” as in Lady Macbeth), who is strong even in his separation from them.

Questions of gender and morality run through this play, and there are many legitimate ways of interpreting the characters and their relationships. There is no one answer as to what is means to be a man or a woman, just as there’s no way to definitively draw the line between right and wrong--we can only know it when we get there.

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