

## When Lady Macbeth becomes a Man: Subversion of Sexuality and Gender in *Macbeth*

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*As a result, gender is not to culture as sex is to nature; gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which “sexed nature” or “a natural sex” is produced and established as “prediscursive,” prior to culture, a politically neutral surface on which culture acts”*

— Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*

Problem of gender and sexuality is not an alien issue in the play of Shakespeare. Most of his romantic comedies witnessed the reversal of the gender role in order to create either a comical situation or to criticize the follies of the society. Rosalind in *As You Like It*, Viola in *Twelfth Night*, Portia in *Merchant of Venice*, Cleopatra in *Antony and Cleopatra* are the few examples of reversal of gender role employed by Shakespeare to create a dramatic situation but what always have arrested our minds is the continuous question against the gender and sex. Shakespeare never seems to believe in the conventional gender role in the society. In *Macbeth*, Shakespeare totally changed the archetypal symbols of masculine and feminine. Macbeth shows a reversal in gender roles. Shakespeare makes us see the conflict between feminine and masculine in the character of Lady Macbeth, as they are intimidated in the traditional cultural norms. Lady Macbeth consciously rejects her instincts toward empathy, compassion, motherhood, and tenderness — associated with femininity — in favor of

ambition, ruthlessness, and a yearn for power. Shakespeare deconstructs gender through the speeches and bodies of both Lady Macbeth and the witches. Macbeth's long for for power is easily seen by the critics as natural and obvious, whereas Lady Macbeth's lust for power is a response to the oppressive gender roles sanctified by patriarchal society in early modern England. Lady Macbeth's incessant struggle to achieve manliness through her words and actions throughout the play are a means of freeing herself from a constricting gender role. Ambiguity of gender becomes a clear in the very opening of the play as the witches start chanting: *Fair is foul, and foul is fair*". Words and the gender of the witches are ambiguous. They are female yet are aggressive and authoritative like male. They are defeminized, androgynous figures. They are bearded which makes Banquo's rational mind puzzled.

Banquo: *“You should be women and yet your beards forbid me to interpret that you are so.”* (I. iii)

Witches are seen as an extreme type of anti-mother, even considered

capable of cooking and eating their own children and sometimes the character of Lady Macbeth becomes one with the witches because of her grotesque sense of brutality when she states that she would crash the babe's head. Lady Macbeth appears to rebuff her gender entirely in her prayer to the spirits to "unsex me here", praying to revoke all that makes her a woman in exchange for masculine characteristics: Lady Macbeth: "*come, you spirits/That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here...come to my woman's breasts,/and take my milk for gall.*" (I.v).

This passage draws a relationship between all that is seen as feminine and all that is seen as weak, as Lady Macbeth feels that if she is to succeed in executing the murder of Duncan, she must disavow her sexuality in favour of more typically virile characteristics. This passage shows several other things related to gender and sexuality also as the gender discrimination is deep rooted in the human psyche nurtured by the society. Question is why should Lady Macbeth think for disavowing her gender?

Perhaps she knew (made to know) that the violence, murder, brutality are appropriate for MAN not for a WOMAN. And thus, the change of gender role causes a feeling of disgust for Lady Macbeth. Lady Macbeth tries to take all the responsibility to carry out the plan to kill Duncan as she believes that Macbeth "is too full o'th' milk of human kindness". This assessment of Macbeth presents a conflict with Lady Macbeth's desires - to become a person of power - and her ability to fulfil these desires as a female. Lady Macbeth's identity is constituted by the expectation of the society and the allowances given to her which causes her powerless. It is this self-denigration that gives Lady Macbeth's character the inspiration to be brutal and ruthless in her manipulation of the only source of power she can control - her husband, Macbeth. She justifies herself a rebel, insolent, and empowered figure and

pose an explicit threat to a patriarchal system of governance. And through challenging his masculinity and the society's, norms, she manipulates Macbeth into murdering King Duncan. She taunts the manhood of Macbeth who is the epitome of manliness.

She asks: "*What beast wasn't, then, that made you break this enterprise to me? / When you durst do it, then you were a man; / And to be more than what you were, you would / Be so much more the man*" (I.vii).

Thus Lady Macbeth enforces a masculine conception of power after pleading to be unsexed, or defeminized. And by doing so, Lady Macbeth equates manliness with masculine power and violent, bloodthirsty murder; to kill the king is to become the man. That Lady Macbeth should show these qualities rather than her husband is heavily ironic, pointing to the blurring and fluidity of traditional and stereotypical gendered roles and conventions. As the witches possess both masculine and feminine gender just like their paradoxical language, lady Macbeth also walks in the same path by imitating this paradox in her desire to not by attaining a solely masculine identity, but rather accepting an ambiguous gender- both masculine and feminine constructions as the witches do.

The play questions what constitutes masculinity and femininity. It is important to Macbeth to be seen as a strong, powerful man. Lady Macbeth taunts him and mocks his sexuality to force him to get the courage to kill Duncan. He insists that "*I dare do all that may become a man, who dares do more is none*" (I.vii). The more Lady Macbeth takes the responsibility on behalf of Macbeth, the more he (Macbeth) loses his manhood. He has lost his previous manliness of being a warrior by trying too hard to be stronger than he should be, and ultimately failing. Lady Macbeth especially chastises her husband for her wants in him. She takes full control of Macbeth. It is

as if Macbeth loses his manliness and become barren and castrated. Even as Macbeth tries to logically argue against the murder plot by stating *"We will proceed no further in this business. / He hath honoured me of late, and I have bought / Golden opinions from all sorts of people, / Which would be worn now in their newest gloss, / Not cast aside so soon"* (I.vii), his wife remains unsatisfied. This so-called feminine attitude of Macbeth brings about frustration and anger in Lady Macbeth who starts to mock her husband's masculinity by suggesting he is a coward. Macbeth tries one last time to reason with her by offering *"I dare do all that may become a man; / Who dares do more is none"*, yet even this powerful assertion is not enough. Although Macbeth wishes his words to stress that he represents the quintessence of manhood, his wife takes them as more of a confession that he is no man at all. She proceeds to deliver her distorted and haunting idea of what it means to be a man. Lady Macbeth assumes a cold, indifference to violence, drawing upon notions of masculinity established earlier in the play. Infanticide symbolizes her figurative rejection of motherhood as a channel to social ascension altogether. *"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 his boneless gums,/and dash'd the brain out,"*( I.vii). It is practically unbelievable thing for any woman to say, but goes to show how Lady Macbeth has removed herself from her femininity which she obviously believed was holding her back. As a man, she believes she could commit any act of horror to get what she wants. Still, she relies on Macbeth to commit the deed itself, for even with all her newfound might, there is some sensitivity in her that she cannot seem to shake. In a very revealing passage she states *"Had he not resembled /My father as he slept, I had*

*done't"* , clearly indicating that Lady Macbeth has arrived in the symbolic state where she gets herself assimilated with the language of her father. The Lady Macbeth we are familiar with, at first, is a woman who seems to be mentally much stronger than her husband. When Macbeth voices his doubts regarding the murder-

*"Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood*

*Clean from my hand? No, this my hand will rather*

*The multitudinous seas incarnadine , Making the green one red."* (II.ii. 59-62) ,

it is she who dismisses them, saying- *"A little water clears us of this deed."*(II.ii. 66).

We feel that Macduff, unknowingly, underestimates Lady Macbeth when he announces the murder of Duncan-

*"Tis not for you to hear what I speak:*

*The repetition, in a woman's ear, would murder as it fell."* (II.iii 82-83),

because it is Lady Macbeth who plans the manner in which the king is to be killed and takes matters into her own hands.-

*"...He that's coming*

*Must be provided for; and you shall put*

*This night's great business into my dispatch;"*(I.v. 66-68)

But curiously, just as the "great business" is about to be accomplished, it is she who becomes the one "infirm of purpose" as opposed to Macbeth, who then has to execute the final action. This is where Shakespeare shows a possible gender bias. During the scene of in which Macbeth is terrified by Banquo's ghost, lady Macbeth several times turns on her husband contemptuously: *"Are you a man"*(III, iv,57). He is, she says, "quite unmann'd in folly"(iii,iv 72), and scornfully describes his terror as most suitable to " a woman's story at a winter's fire,/authorise'd by her grandma"(III. iv 64-65). Macbeth insists *"what man dare, I dare,"* and argues that only if he were to tremble facing a real enemy could he be called " the baby of a girl". When the ghost

vanishes, he sighs "*I am man again*".( III. iv 98-105). Lady Macbeth breaks the shackles of traditional norms of patriarchal society and takes a long flight far outside of the conventional gender roles in order to gain control of her own future. She uses her maternal power to manipulate the masculine power to change her position in the marginalized society. However after self-destructing the role of a traditional mother as a means to usurp Macbeth's masculine power, she cannot return to the basic, and thus cannot survive in the new order of the society. Though Shakespeare presents a female character that defies the traditional gender roles, he also shows that society will not allow this powerful ambiguity to exist. Lady Macbeth's tragic end tells the story of a society which pulls her back to the traditional society and ascertains her death. Her madness is justified by the society as they fail to see the method in it.

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