# The Tragic Trajectory of Lady Macbeth

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**Undergraduate thesis / Završni rad**

**2016**

*Degree Grantor / Ustanova koja je dodijelila akademski / stručni stupanj:* **University of Rijeka, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences / Sveučilište u Rijeci, Filozofski fakultet u Rijeci**

*Permanent link / Trajna poveznica:* https://urn.nsk.hr/urn:nbn:hr:186:807375

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*Download date / Datum preuzimanja:* **2024-03-28**

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# THE TRAGIC TRAJECTORY OF LADY MACBETH

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the B.A. in English Language and Literature at the University of Rijeka

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Rijeka, September 2016

**ABSTRACT**

Lady Macbeth as one of the most potent and notorious Shakespeare's characters has underwent numerous discussions and analyses in trying to make sense of her violent and crude disposition. She had puzzled the critics for years some of which have described her as a monstrous, cruel and ambition-driven while others have taken a more sympathetic view labeling her as a frail woman aspiring to be diabolical. This essay sides more with the latter interpretation but its aim is to encompass the complexities of her persona rather than outline the ambivalence of it. It is an in-depth analysis of her appearances in the play in the chronological order noting the transformation she undergoes leading to her demise. I am focusing on the psychological characterization discussing both what is explicit in the text but taking into account also what is perhaps omitted in my efforts to reveal peculiarities of such a mystifying character.

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## INTRODUCTION

*The Tragedy of Macbeth* is a play written by William Shakespeare which probably premiered in 1606. It was first published in 1623, seven years after the death of the author, together with 35 other plays in the collection of works known as the First Folio. It is known to be one of the most brutal and violent Shakespeare's plays following its protagonist Macbeth in his strives of unrightfully seizing the throne. The play is set in Scotland presumably between years 1040 and 1057 since these are the years Macbeth, the historical figure, occupied the throne on whom the play is loosely based. In the theatre world it is sometimes referred to as "the Scottish play" or "the Bard's play" as it is thought to be cursed either because of the witches featured in the play or because of the accidents that occurred on rehearsals and performances.

*Macbeth* problematized political ambition and thirst for power with its destructive and oftentimes lethal consequences. Macbeth's rise to power, however, is not a sole endeavor but a joint effort of him and his wife, Lady Macbeth, who is put in the limelight in this thesis. What I am interested in is her transformation throughout the play, internal as well as external motivators of her actions, her deteriorating mental state and the reasons behind it. My aim is to explore her character to the depths capturing all that is Lady Macbeth. I will do that by close reading of the original text and interpreting the scenes in which she appears in the chronological order with consulting the texts of the literary critics.

## 1. LADY MACBETH'S MURDEROUS INVOCATION

Lady Macbeth is introduced to us for the first time in 1.5 where she reads the letter sent by Macbeth in which he accounts for the events that took place on the battlefield. He tells her about the witches and their prophecy of him becoming a king.

> *'They met me in the day of success: and I have*
> *learned by the perfectest report, they have more in*
> *them than mortal knowledge. When I burned in desire*
> *to question them further, they made themselves air,*
> *into which they vanished. Whiles I stood rapt in*
> *the wonder of it, came missives from the king, who*
> *all-hailed me 'Thane of Cawdor;' by which title,*
> *before, these weird sisters saluted me, and referred*
> *me to the coming on of time, with 'Hail, king that*
> *shalt be!' This have I thought good to deliver*
> *thee, my dearest partner of greatness, that thou*
> *mightst not lose the dues of rejoicing, by being*
> *ignorant of what greatness is promised thee. Lay it*
> *to thy heart, and farewell.'* (1.5.1-13)

This part summarizes the events that occurred up to this point in the play. What is more interesting is the fact that Macbeth tells her about the strange occurrence which gives it a certain weight. We get a sense of their synchronicity and it seems that Macbeth may be appealing to it; them being a team or should I say „partners in crime". He also uses the pronoun „thee" in „what greatness is promised thee" which could also be his clever way of manipulating her into taking some kind of action and it might mean that there is a certain

premeditated ambition of hers to become a queen prior to the events shown in the play of which Macbeth is aware. What I find to be more plausible, though, is that the motivator is ambition but that of Macbeth. He is contemplating regicide but waiting for Lady Macbeth's go ahead on the matter the greatness promised being the greatness of her husband in which she would rejoice. By using „thee“ he just may be trying to come off as modest. The following lines could corroborate the latter explanation:

*Glamis thou art, and Cawdor; and shalt be*
*What thou art promised: yet do I fear thy nature;*
*It is too full o' the milk of human kindness*
*To catch the nearest way: thou wouldst be great;*
*Art not without ambition, but without*
*The illness should attend it: what thou wouldst highly,*
*That wouldst thou holily; wouldst not play false,*
*And yet wouldst wrongly win: thou'ldst have, great Glamis,*
*That which cries 'Thus thou must do, if thou have it;*
*And that which rather thou dost fear to do*
*Than wishest should be undone.' (1.5.14-25)*

She is not dwelling in what she will be promised but she is focusing on him: „Glamis thou art, and Cawdor; and shalt be/What thou art promised“(1.5.14-15) One could argue that it could go both ways meaning that it is her ambition he is aware of and she saying he shall be what is promised to him is her way of concealing her own ambition. We have to take into account the nature of their lines as Macbeth's are in the letter addressing her while hers are part of a soliloquy. Macbeth has an incentive to appear coy since he is ultimately unsure of what they are to do and is concerned about the effect the letter would produce in Lady

Macbeth while she is alone having no concerns about how her words would affect the listener. Thus, I would argue that it is Macbeth's ambition which he is subtly referring to in the letter.

After she is informed about the prophecy and the future prospects of theirs to take over the throne her mind jumps straight to the idea of killing the king, not only that but to the possible incapability of her husband to do so. It feels as if she skipped a few commonsensical steps a regular person would go through which means that her husband had cunningly implied regicide which she was able to decipher by reading between the lines, therefore belonging to the sphere of their lives which we haven't witnessed in the play. The witches' prophecy does state that Macbeth will be king but it does not say when or by what means. The fact that she decides right off the bat that they must kill him goes in the favor of suggestiveness of the letter. Susan Snyder's interpretation is on the same note as:

> (...) the letter told only of outcomes; but like her husband on hearing those prophecies, Lady Macbeth in her mind leaped easily from desired end to murderous means – so easily that she might well think later, or wish to think, that the letter actually talked of killing Duncan.(...)There may well have been some predisposition on Macbeth's part to get rid of Duncan and take over the throne, but the play denies us any clear assessment of his guilty intentions before the encounter with the Weird Sisters. (76)

Killing Duncan is what has to be done and she will do her best to entice Macbeth to do it as seen from the lines:

> *(...)Hie thee hither,*
> *That I may pour my spirits in thine ear;*
> *And chastise with the valour of my tongue*
> *All that impedes thee from the golden round,*
> *Which fate and metaphysical aid doth seem*
> *To have thee crown'd withal. (1.5.25-30)*

Being aware that Macbeth lacks the resolution to do it on his own she is the one who has to take charge. The question that presents itself is: what is her motivation? Some would argue that it is Lady Macbeth's ambition and while that may be the case it is less probable that it is her main motive. There may be room to postulate that what drives her to plot the murder is not her only own ambition but her love for Macbeth and his ambition. Her ambition is amplified by the desire to realize Macbeth's greatest aspirations. Even though it is Macbeth's fate to be the king she's resolved to give it a little push so the prophecy might just be the trigger needed for them to justify taking the throne rather than being a mystical force which would magically nudge the events in their favor.

Immediately following the aforementioned soliloquy enters a messenger who notifies her that King Duncan will be arriving the following night followed by one of the most famous and discussed soliloquies in the play:

*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! Come, thick night,*

*And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell,*

*That my keen knife see not the wound it makes,*

*Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark,*

*To cry 'Hold, hold!' (1.5.38-54)*

We see here that she does not take the notion of murder lightly though she has her mind set on it. It serves as an invocation to homicide in which she conjures up the help from evil spirits to transform her into a person who would be capable of committing such a murderous deed. This could suggest that she by herself does not have what it takes to do it and that she is aware of it. This passage could be hinting at her biting off more than she can chew already, which ultimately leads to her demise as shown later in the play as she's unable to live with the toll it takes on her psyche. It is also plausible that she is even now dealing with possible feelings of guilt trying to shift a part of the blame and responsibility on something other than her; on the external powers which would enable her to do it, meaning that she's does not want to think of herself as being the sole perpetrator since she could not live with herself if she were.

In interpreting this part it would be fitting to touch upon the dichotomy of genders as: „Critics have traditionally read this scene as an attempt by Lady Macbeth to seize a masculine authority perceived necessary for the achievement of her political goals.“ (Chamberlain 79) This hypothesis further implicates that the fact that she is getting riled up to concoct the murderous plan is because she thinks Macbeth is too feeble to carry it out on his own. It could be her way of making herself into a man as Macbeth is not the man enough to follow through meaning she is single handedly masculinizing herself and demasculinizing Macbeth. These lines serve as a critique or an attack on Macbeth's manhood. The evidence to support that

thesis are brought to light later in the play when Macbeth is having second thoughts about killing Duncan and she hits the nerve by implying that he's lesser of a man because of it but I will deal with that in a while.

Chamberlain's view somewhat differs as she:

> „would argue, that Lady Macbeth's „unsex me here“ speech tends to deconstruct gender categories, unfixing the rigid cultural distinctions as well as attributes which define male and female“. She goes on to say that Lady Macbeth does not aspire to overtake the position of male authority but rather to obtain an „alternative gender identity, one which would allow her to slip free of the emotional as well as cultural constraints governing women.“(80)

This is a very plausible solution since Shakespeare is well known for breaking his characters out of traditional gender roles as seen in *The Midsummer's Night Dream* and *As You Like It*. In favor of the Chamberlain's claim goes the way Lady Macbeth stings Macbeth's masculinity which, in my opinion, primarily serves to assert dominance over him rather than reflects her own opinions on gender dichotomy.

I would go a step further and argue that her abandonment of stereotypical gender entailments is her way of parting with humanity. I think that she is not just trying to defeminize herself to capacitate herself of murder but that she is trying to dehumanize herself therefore distancing herself even further from herself as a person. In a way she wants to transform herself into a being devoid of humanity. I think that the lines: “make thick my blood; / stop up the passage and access to remorse“(1.5.44-45),“unsex me here“(1.5.42), and “take my milk for gall“(1.5.49) would deny her functions characteristic of human nature; her being in touch with her emotions, having a gender and its properties necessary for bringing forth and sustaining human life.

## 2. THE POWER PLAY BETWEEN MACBETHS

The play's tipping point is 1.7 as it directly precedes the killing of Duncan after which things drastically change in their kingdom. It is the last chance for them to change their mind before they go through with it. All our eyes are on Macbeth and Lady Macbeth the scene being an exclusive chance for the spectator to observe the dynamic of their relationship. It starts off with Macbeth's monologue:

*If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well*
*It were done quickly: if the assassination*
*Could trammel up the consequence, and catch*
*With his surcease success; that but this blow*
*Might be the be-all and the end-all here,*
*But here, upon this bank and shoal of time,*
*We'ld jump the life to come. But in these cases*
*We still have judgment here; that we but teach*
*Bloody instructions, which, being taught, return*
*To plague the inventor: this even-handed justice*
*Commends the ingredients of our poison'd chalice*
*To our own lips. He's here in double trust;*
*First, as I am his kinsman and his subject,*
*Strong both against the deed; then, as his host,*
*Who should against his murderer shut the door,*
*Not bear the knife myself. Besides, this Duncan*
*Hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been*
*So clear in his great office, that his virtues*
*Will plead like angels, trumpet-tongued, against*

*The deep damnation of his taking-off;*

*And pity, like a naked new-born babe,*

*Striding the blast, or heaven's cherubim, horsed*

*Upon the sightless couriers of the air,*

*Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye,*

*That tears shall drown the wind. I have no spur*

*To prick the sides of my intent, but only*

*Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself*

*And falls on the other. (1.7.1-27)*

Macbeth is considering not the sole act of assassination but the consequences it could bring if they got caught. As seen from the lines one through seven the killing would pose no problem if it would be the „be all and the end-all"(1.7.5) in this life and possibly in the afterlife. However, what concern him are the moral repercussions it would have in this world where justice is valued and enforced. He is aware of the hypocrisy and treachery his doing would entail relishing in the authority he possesses by being a thane and a would-be-king while at the same time orchestrating a regicide. He knows that "violence begets violence" and that it is a vicious circle which could turn full circle putting him at the forefront of a similar fate to Duncan's. Furthermore, Macbeth is not only a faithful subject in his service but a host of the evening thus the betrayal of the trust given to him by Duncan would be twofold. In addition to that Duncan is a virtuous and honorable king who is loved and admired by many, even by Macbeth. There is no other motive to killing him beside Macbeth's ambition.

Comparing Macbeth's monologue with the previously analyzed soliloquy of Lady Macbeth we can discern a sharp contrast between the two. Lady Macbeth is preoccupied with the execution of the deed preparing herself for the horror of taking a human life. She seems desperate in attempts to bridge the gap between her emotions and the actions necessary for her

to take. Dissimilarly, Macbeth is concerned with the toll it would take on his reputation and the risk of being punished for his wrongdoings. While he is perceptive about his actions being perfidious he seems to be bothered by the thought of their wrongfulness but lacks the corresponding emotion which would go with it. He appears to resonate with the grieving emotions which would be felt by the people losing their loved king and which he himself does not show a great deal of. His soliloquy resembles an argument with the listing of premises that go against their murderous plot. It is not clear whether he is just out of touch with his emotions or if he really feels none. The reason for the former may lie in him being a warrior with years of experience on the battlefield which could have desensitized him to the act of killing and where different moral code is adhered to – that of honor and allegiance to the king and fellow soldiers which holds precedence over the moral offense of killing another person. The same norms with whose breaching he is bothered in this passage.

The scene continues with a dialogue between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. Macbeth seems to have given up on their plan proclaiming the following:

> *We will proceed no further in this business:*
> *He hath honour'd 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. (1.7.30-35)*

He seems to be backing down from the plan realizing he has it good now being praised by the king and upholding a certain reputation which he is unwilling to tarnish. He has got a good thing going for him being in Duncan's good graces.

Lady Macbeth does not hold his views:

*Was the hope drunk*

*Wherein you dress'd yourself? hath it slept since?*

*And wakes it now, to look so green and pale*

*At what it did so freely? From this time*

*Such I account thy love. Art thou afeard*

*To be the same in thine own act and valour*

*As thou art in desire? Wouldst thou have that*

*Which thou esteem'st the ornament of life,*

*And live a coward in thine own esteem,*

*Letting 'I dare not' wait upon 'I would,'*

*Like the poor cat i' the adage? (1.7.35-45)*

She is now starting to employ all the tricks she has hidden in her sleeve to goad him into proceeding which goes on throughout this scene. Janet Adelman provides a valuable insight:

> She begins by attacking his manhood making her love for him contingent on the murder that she identifies as equivalent to his male potency: "From this time / Such I account thy love" (1.7.38-39); "When you durst do it, then you were a man" (1.7.49). Insofar as his drunk hope is "green and pale"(1.7.49), he is identified as emasculated, exhibiting the symptoms not only of hangover, but also of the green-sickness, the typical disease of timid young, virgin women.(42)

As we can observe Lady Macbeth goes out of her way to attack his manhood. Such harsh comparisons seem to be a bit uncalled for especially since she uses them for the purpose of controlling Macbeth rather than really believing in them and Macbeth's preceding lines are significantly tamer than her reaction to them.

Her reply to me seems precipitous bordering on neurotic, but why is that? Why is her immediate response belittlement? We can assume that she knows Macbeth and the right way of approaching him in order to produce a wanted effect but I feel that here she goes straight for the big guns. Jarold Ramsey notices this as well:

> The curious thing about her exhortation is that its rhetorical force is almost wholly negative. Dwelling hardly at all on the desirability of Duncan's throne, she instead cunningly premises her arguments on doubts about Macbeth's manly virtue. (288)

Possibility is that Macbeth's resolute line "We will proceed no further in this business" (1.7.30) was the one to set her off; him deciding without consulting her just informing her of the final verdict on the matter. Macbeth assuming the position of authority does not sit well with her chiefly since she's harboring some insecurity about their relationship and her fear of abandonment. An alternative explanation is that she has mentally prepared herself for the act. Whether or not she genuinely wants to do it she has already gone through the whole process in her mind. She is unsexed, her blood is thickened, her milk taken for gall. The only thing left for her is the execution of the deed, not contemplative argumentation with Macbeth.

Being clearly disrupted by her retort Macbeth responds:

> *Prithee, peace:*
>
> *I dare do all that may become a man;*
>
> *Who dares do more is none. (1.7.46-48)*

It is obvious that she hit the nerve questioning his manhood by denying his tenacity. At this point where we are riddled with the notion of „being a man" and what that exactly entails.

Ramsey offers us one possible definition:

> Clearly its meaning must be grounded in the context of the play in question, in the range of human examples it offers to us. But beyond this seem to lie two wider, concentric fields of significance: a code of manliness, the special virtues of the male gender (misogynists would point out that no one in the plays ever declares "This was a woman"); and wider yet, an ethos based on what best distinguishes the race itself, irrespective of gender (...)Macbeth's career may be described in terms of a terrible progressive disjunction between the manly and the humane. In any civilized culture-even among the samurai, Macbeth's counter- parts in feudal Japan-it would be assumed that the first set of values is complementary to and subsumed in the second. (286)

As we have discerned earlier in the play Macbeth possesses both manly and humane qualities being “too full o' the milk of human kindness / To catch the nearest way.“ (1.5.17-18). Lady Macbeth sees the humane part as weakness and she disintegrates the two by isolating manly and attacking it, convincing Macbeth that one without the other could not only exist but thrive.

Even though Ramsey's explanation is potent we cannot ignore the open-endedness and permeability of it and justly so as “Robert Heilman has observed about this and other plays, the psychic forces concentrated in that code [of manlines] are all the more potent for being ill-defined“ (Ramsey 288). We are fishing in troubled waters here since we do not know what the concept of manliness exactly entails. Even today the jury is still out on what makes a man, it being an artificial concept constantly changing throughout years used often as a tool to assert power over or marginalize women and being equally subversive to men who do not fall under the traditional notion of it which has never been clearly defined. Shakespeare was aware of the flaws that lie in identification with such ambiguous notions:

> (...)time and again in the great Shakespearean tragedies, when man is invoked as an ideal or as a spur to action, we are compelled to wonder whether the word really stands for a coherent set of male virtues or a constant, "given" human nature, or whether the existentialists are right in supposing that man in either sense denotes an unfixed, evolving, unappealable nature.(...) the play is unique for the persistence and subtlety with which Shakespeare dramatizes the paradoxes of self-conscious "manhood." In recoiling from Macbeth's outrageous kind of manliness, we are prompted to reconsider what we really mean when we use the word in praising someone. (Ramsey 286)

And so was Lady Macbeth it giving her leverage to deconstruct and relativize Macbeth's "code of manliness" rewiring it to her liking. We have an opportunity to witness to the harmful delineation between genders based on the stereotypical conceptions instilled in us by the society.

Additionally, Macbeth's role as her husband opens him up to a certain intimate vulnerability which being misused by her makes it harder for him to argue against her accusations of incompetence or inadequacy. Thus, it would be problematic to outline Lady Macbeth's principles indirectly from her opposition to Macbeth's inasmuch as we are not certain whether her antagonism is genuine or she is just using it for manipulation.

He is unsettled by her remarks and this is the last self-assured thing he says in this scene. Lady Macbeth delivers a finishing blow to his ego by saying:

*What beast was'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. Nor time nor place*

*Did then adhere, and yet you would make both:*

*They have made themselves, and that their fitness now*

*Does unmake you. 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 pluck'd my nipple from his boneless gums,*

*And dash'd the brains out, had I so sworn as you*

*Have done to this. (1.7.47-57)*

She ensures him that he was a man when he decided to kill Duncan and doing it would make him that much more of a man. She uses disturbing imagery of killing an infant to hammer the point home saying that she would pluck the breast out of its mouth and bash its head if she had sworn to do so to Macbeth. This image is one of the most discussed in the play.

A traditional interpretation among critics is that she uses the imagery of an infant to escape the gender constraints. It is her final attempt of „unsexing“ herself and adapting the masculine proving herself to be more cruel and violent and as such more manly than Macbeth. Piotr Sadowski offers us similar interpretation:

> To spur her husband toward action Lady Macbeth cleverly plays on gender stereotypes, and the evoked image of an innocent and vulnerable infant sucking its mother's breast is calculated to contrast in Macbeth's mind her female sex with her present unblinking manly resolution, and to embarrass her husband by showing that a woman can be even more manly than a man, if she puts her mind to it. (165)

Janet Adelman's views differ as she interprets this imagery as Lady Macbeth's “fantasy of Macbeth’s utter vulnerability to her”(43). According to her, Macbeth being less of a man

assumes the position of either a child or a woman both of which could be subjected to the wrath of a destructive mother. (Adelman 43) She reduces Macbeth to a vulnerable child who is at mercy of Lady Macbeth as a maternal figure. Disarming him thus she shifts the imagery of a baby to Duncan giving Macbeth room to step out of this helpless and weak figure she made him out to be and assume the dominant position alongside her. Duncan is the one who is transformed into a baby as Lady Macbeth says: "What cannot you and I perform upon / Th'ungarded Duncan?"(1.7.70-71), him being innocent and vulnerable in his sleep and pending the same outcome as the metaphorical one.

Stephanie Chamberlain grants us with yet another analysis of this image in her essay "Fantasizing Infanticide: Lady Macbeth and the Murdering Mother in Early Modern England" where she writes:

> (…) the child comes to represent Macbeth's patrilineal future. While she does not, of course, literally kill Macbeth's heir, Lady Macbeth's infanticidal fantasy does directly manipulate the murder of Duncan, altering in turn the body politic. The hypothetical murder of this would-be child thus comes to represent the demise not only of Macbeth's moral and political legitimacy within the tyrannized world of the play, but that of his line itself. (82)

I found all of these explanations valid and deeply illuminating. I would just like to elaborate further to say that by evoking this image she not only denies her femininity but tries to strip herself of humanity. She uses gender as a means of maneuvering Macbeth in the wanted direction but I think this is not the matter of battle between genders as it is between humane and inhumane. I find it hard to discern any firm stances she has in employing her gender based onslaughts so we cannot be sure she has any. I do not see the line she would not cross in violating Macbeth's manhood. The only time she feels out of her depth is in the

"unsex me" monologue (1.5.) where she has to invoke evil spirits to turn her into a being which lacks human characteristics.

At this point Macbeth is utterly subjugated and it is clear that Lady Macbeth holds the reins which can be interpreted from the next line he utters: *If we should fail?* (1.7.58)

This single line can reveal to us the hold Lady Macbeth finally attained over him as it reeks of insecurity. We can observe the steady degradation of his confidence in this scene which starts with his uncompromising and lengthy monologue but as the scene progresses he loses his vigor being downgraded to fewer and fewer lines consequently being reduced to a single timid line. Lady Macbeth resembles a python that upon catching its prey is gripping tighter and tighter until it finally gives in. In the following lines she knows that she has won him over and goes on to plan the execution which I will not pay a great deal of attention to. What I find relevant to the account are:

> *Bring forth men-children only;*
> *For thy undaunted mettle should compose*
> *Nothing but males. (1.7.73-75)*

Macbeth is using the same weapon with which she chastised him to compliment her. I find it odd that after the imagery we have just witnessed Macbeth is thinking she would be suitable for giving birth to their children which can only go to show the admiration he feels for her strength and perseverance.

I think this scene has almost nothing to do with killing Duncan and everything to do with their marriage. It seems to me that she gets frustrated and vicious with Macbeth not because he is reluctant to kill Duncan but because he is breaching the promise he made to her. She may feel like he is letting her down. The most startling part where she uses the imagery of infanticide does not deal with him murdering the king but with his swearing to do so to her.

She is using everything she has to make him do what he promised her thus trying to convince herself that he would still do anything for her and making him believe that, too. Their marriage is in ruins and she is clutching not to lose him. Hence, their conversation is about something else more subtle and refined than their conniving plot. They are both insecure in themselves and each other. Sure, she wants him to take over the throne but I think they are just focusing their energies on that as to avoid dealing with underlying issues they both have.

## 3. THE REGICIDE

Lady Macbeth appears again in the play after Macbeth kills Duncan in 2.2 with these lines:

> *That which hath made them drunk hath made me bold;*
> *What hath quench'd them hath given me fire.*
> *Hark! Peace!*
> *It was the owl that shriek'd, the fatal bellman,*
> *Which gives the stern'st good-night. He is about it:*
> *The doors are open; and the surfeited grooms*
> *Do mock their charge with snores: I have drugg'd*
> *their possets,*
> *That death and nature do contend about them,*
> *Whether they live or die. (2.2.1-10)*

According to their plan Lady Macbeth gave the guards alcohol which would make them sleepy and inattentive to what they were about to do. As we can interpret from these lines Lady Macbeth also had a few making her bolder and even more daring while it made them drunk and sluggish. What we could gather is that alcohol gave her another dose of false courage which could mean that she's not as tenacious as she would like to be. Her meekness is subtly searing through the fearless composure she is trying so desperately to pertain. She cannot withstand the Duncan's murder clear-headed so she dulls her senses which does help her for a while but as we will see it does not last very long.

Macbeth returns clearly distraught and Lady Macbeth is the one holding him together. Again, she is the one controlling the situation.

*MACBETH.* *One cried 'God bless us!' and 'Amen' the other;*

*As they had seen me with these hangman's hands.*

*Listening their fear, I could not say 'Amen,'*

*When they did say 'God bless us!'*

*LADY MACBETH.* *Consider it not so deeply.*

*MACBETH.* *But wherefore could not I pronounce 'Amen'?*

*I had most need of blessing, and 'Amen'*

*Stuck in my throat.*

*LADY MACBETH.* *These deeds must not be thought*

*After these ways; so, it will make us mad. (2.2.36-49)*

She's telling him not to overthink it as it will „make them mad“. In addition to trying to comfort him she is trying to comfort herself as it has already begun to mess with her mind but she's trying to soldier through being strong for the both of them. Macbeth forgot to leave the daggers with chamberlains in his hysteria so she goes back to return them:

*Infirm of purpose!*

*Give me the daggers: the sleeping and the dead*

*Are but as pictures: 'tis the eye of childhood*

*That fears a painted devil. If he do bleed,*

*I'll gild the faces of the grooms withal;*

*For it must seem their guilt. (2.2.66-71)*

She is calling him a coward and taking matters into her own hands proclaiming that the sleeping and the dead are not to be feared since they are like pictures and only children are afraid of pictures. It is surprising how nonchalant Lady Macbeth is being here considering

how mad distraught she gets later in the play. Even though she crashes in a while there is a certain strength to her which would be almost admirable were it not for the morally condemning circumstances in which it surfaced. She is holding herself together and her husband who is supposed to be a great warrior from falling apart while being collected enough to go to the murder scene to set the chamberlains up for the murder. She returns with this: *"My hands are of your colour; but I shame / To wear a heart so white." (2.2.79-80)*

What I find perplexing is the fact that since people are very impressionable and empathetic panic is often contagious. How is it then that Lady Macbeth is so levelheaded when her husband is clearly losing it? So much so that she finds the time to berate him and resent him in the process.

A reasonable explanation could be that her survival instincts kicked in so she is running on her „kill or be killed" impulse. Both of their lives are on the line here as treachery is indisputably punished by death. Additionally, I feel that she is using Macbeth as a crutch in a sense that she is feeding of his distress. By seeing him chicken out she is forced to take the responsibility thus becoming an authority which is clearly empowering. Macbeth is like a child and she is the one taking care of him. As long as that is the case she will keep a clear head.

From this point on her presence in the play diminishes as Macbeth regains the hold over himself appearing when Macbeth's guilt-ridden frenzy starts acting up again trying to defuse the situation. That may very well be the thing that keeps her going knowing that Macbeth needs her firm, guiding hand. In spite of their wayward symbiosis their marriage seems to suffer irreparably by these events which Emma Smith denotes in her book *Macbeth: Language and Writing*. She points out that the text in this scene is fragmented which is representative of:

> (...) the edgy, nervous athmosphere in the immediate aftermath of the murder of Duncan. It also shows us how the couple are drawing apart.(...) Her urging 'these deeds must not be thought' (2.2.32), for example, entirely fails to interrupt Macbeth thinking obsessively on these deeds, as he replies 'Methought I heard a voice cry "Sleep no more"'(2.2.34-5), repeating his inability to pronounce 'Amen' four times in seven lines. Questions are answered with other questions: all is choppy, dull of doubt. (183)

*MACBETH.* *My dearest love, Duncan comes here tonight.*

*LADY MACBETH.* *And when goes hence?*

*MACBETH.* *To-morrow as he purposes*

*LADY MACBETH.* *O, never*

*Shall sun that morrow see!"*

*Your face, my thane, is as a book where men*

*May read strange matters. (1.5.58-65)*

Contrary to their previous dialogue which is pregnant with implied meaning showing their synchronicity we observe the disruption of that harmony reflective of their estrangement. Smith goes further in her language analysis:

> She focuses on specific objects and concrete nouns: possets, owls, crickets, daggers. Macbeth, by contrast, inhabits a different reality: '(…) His anchoring is in prayers, God, sleep, death life, minds, nature, oceans'(Rodenburg 2002:376) These different linguistic patterns correspond to an increasing gap between the couple, a gap that will open out as the play unfolds. (184)

Moreover, their marriage is not the only thing affected. Despite Lady Macbeth's composure her experience of the horrid scene of murder in person will be one of the things that pushes her over the edge. It is the physical manifestations of their vile intentions which makes it all the more real and palpable for her as these will be the images that haunt her which we will see in the Sleepwalking scene.

## 4. MACBETH’S KILLING RAMPAGE

The last dialogue between these two occurs in 3.2 which is preceded by Macbeth's hiring of assassins to kill Banquo and Fleance.

*Nought's had, all's spent,*
*Where our desire is got without content:*
*'Tis safer to be that which we destroy*
*Than by destruction dwell in doubtful joy.*

*Enter MACBETH*

*How now, my lord! why do you keep alone,*
*Of sorriest fancies your companions making,*
*Using those thoughts which should indeed have died*
*With them they think on? Things without all remedy*
*Should be without regard: what's done is done. (3.2.2-10)*

They got what they wanted but they are not content with it as it is eating them up. They had spent everything, including their sanity and peace and gained nothing. She comes to the realization that it is better to be the one suffering affliction than to be the one causing it to others as instead of being ecstatic for taking the throne they are frantic and restless. There is a change in her attitude upon Macbeth's entering as she again puts on a brave face telling him there is no use in ruminating about what happened as “what's done is done“(3.2.10) although she was doing exactly the same thing before he came in. Macbeth does need such reassuring words but they serve for Lady's consolation as well as we've previously seen in 2.2.

Macbeth is troubled by similar thoughts as his lady:

*We have scotch'd the snake, not kill'd it:*

*She'll close and be herself, whilst our poor malice*

*Remains in danger of her former tooth. (3.2.13-15)*

Comparatively, he discloses his concerns to her while she is still acting poise telling him to try and do the same:

*Come on;*

*Gentle my lord, sleek o'er your rugged looks;*

*Be bright and jovial among your guests to-night. (3.2.26-28)*

While she still serves as a support for Macbeth he is reclaiming his resoluteness. However, he seems to be more pained by others standing between him and the throne or them being found out. As Lady Macbeth is hung up on Duncan's murder Macbeth is going on a killing spree ordering the murders of Banquo and Fleance and then of Macduff's family.

*MACBETH.* *There's comfort yet; they are assailable;*

*Then be thou jocund: ere the bat hath flown*

*His cloister'd flight, ere to black Hecate's summons*

*The shard-borne beetle with his drowsy hums*

*Hath rung night's yawning peal, there shall be done*

*A deed of dreadful note.*

*LADY MACBETH.* *What's to be done?*

*MACBETH.* *Be innocent of the knowledge, dearest chuck,*

*Till thou applaud the deed. Come, seeling night,*

*Scarf up the tender eye of pitiful day;*

*And with thy bloody and invisible hand*

*Cancel and tear to pieces that great bond*

*Which keeps me pale! Light thickens; and the crow*

*Makes wing to the rooky wood:*

*Good things of day begin to droop and drowse;*

*While night's black agents to their preys do rouse.*

*Thou marvell'st at my words: but hold thee still;*

*Things bad begun make strong themselves by ill.*

*So, prithee, go with me.(3.2.41-56)*

In this scene despite Macbeth being affected by Duncan's murder the roles appear to be reversed. Though he is still not fully himself we can feel the power slowly shifting from Lady Macbeth to Macbeth. The lines uttered by Macbeth recall Lady Macbeth's obstinate lines from earlier while Lady Macbeth's lines resemble the earlier Macbeth's. The question „What's to be done?"(3.2.47) is correspondent of the Macbeth's „If we fail?"(2.2.58). "Come, seeling night,"(3.2.49) lines are parallel with the Lady Macbeth's lines „Come, thick night"(1.5.50). The whole dialogue echoes the one we've previously witnessed.

Piotr Sadowski recognizes that:

> "he is no longer dependent on his wife in decision making and in fact does not need her psychologically, emotionally, or otherwise. It is now Macbeth who does all the reasoning and independently takes all the murderous decisions, while the main quality that connects him now with his wife is the mutually shared and almost paranoid sense of fear and insecurity." (166)

While we are kept in the dark about Lady Macbeth's paranoid state of mind which is revealed to us just later, Macbeth might be sensing the change in her as Williams discloses in her essay „In Defense of Lady Macbeth":

> It is made clear that Macbeth has an intuition of her incipient frailty when he does not make her a party to the murder of Banquo but urges her to "be innocent of the knowledge, dearest chuck" (3.2.45)

Lady Macbeth put the killing machine that is Macbeth in motion and while she is exhausted by the one murder which was more than enough for her Macbeth is just getting started. More relentlessly and independently than before since he does not need her, to the point where he does not even include her. In a way, she has created a monster. Her hold over him is on a steady decline and he needs her less and less leaving her to battle the demons instilled in her mind alone. Her guilty conscience is complemented with the feeling of losing Macbeth and her feelings of isolation and disposability. She might feel hurt being downgraded to the position of a frail wife after being in charge of both of them in the previous scenes.

## 5. THE BANQUET

Another poignant scene is 3.4 where they host a banquet which is disrupted by Macbeth's hallucinations of Banquos ghost. Lady Macbeth is yet there to save their face but she is not able to excel at it. Things look to be going well until Macbeth starts losing it:

*MACBETH.* *Which of you have done this?*

*Lords.* *What, my good lord?*

*MACBETH.* *Thou canst not say I did it: never shake*
*Thy gory locks at me.*

*ROSS.* *Gentlemen, rise: his highness is not well. (3.4.48-52)*

Macbeth sees the ghost of Banquo sitting on a chair around their table and Lady Macbeth makes excuses for him:

*LADY MACBETH.* *Sit, worthy friends: my lord is often thus,*
*And hath been from his youth: pray you, keep seat;*
*The fit is momentary; upon a thought*
*He will again be well: if much you note him,*
*You shall offend him and extend his passion:*
*Feed, and regard him not. Are you a man?*

*MACBETH.* *Ay, and a bold one, that dare look on that*
*Which might appal the devil. (3.4.53-59)*

She ensures the guests that Macbeth is suffering from some kind of fits from a young age instructing them to go on with their meals and not to pay attention to him while she directs a scolding remark to him: „Are you a man?“ which we have seen is her recurring

manipulative device. In contrast to his previous reaction to such criticism he now sounds stronger and more sure of himself though he is in a manic rage.

She proceeds in her attempts to gain control over him since he cannot:

> *O proper stuff!*
> *This is the very painting of your fear:*
> *This is the air-drawn dagger which, you said,*
> *Led you to Duncan. O, these flaws and starts,*
> *Impostors to true fear, would well become*
> *A woman's story at a winter's fire,*
> *Authorized by her grandam. Shame itself!*
> *Why do you make such faces? When all's done,*
> *You look but on a stool. (3.4.60-68)*

She is comparing his trepidation to a woman's listening to a scary story told by her grandmother followed by reprimanding him like a child with: "*Shame itself!"(*3.4.66) which should be a fierce attack on his ego. She is going all in here as Macbeth is spiraling out of control. Lady Macbeth is desperate in her attempt to calm the situation but as Macbeth does not settle she sends the guests away from the banquet:

> *I pray you, speak not; he grows worse and worse;*
> *Question enrages him. At once, good night:*
> *Stand not upon the order of your going,*
> *But go at once. (3.4.116-19)*

Dissimilarly to previous times, Lady Macbeth does not succeed in taming him in this scene. The best shield for her shrewd attacks seems to be Macbeth's madness. This could hint at them tinkering with something much bigger than themselves where their mutual influence

over each other, primarily that of Lady Macbeth over Macbeth gets brushed aside. As Macbeth is losing grip with reality Lady Macbeth's hold over him weakens. He is murdering people left and right and seeing ghosts, it is not surprising that her calling him a coward produces little effect. Lady Macbeth is discouraged by his strange behavior as he pays almost no attention to her. When they are left alone Macbeth reveals his frantic thoughts:

*I hear it by the way; but I will send:*
*There's not a one of them but in his house*
*I keep a servant fee'd. I will to-morrow,*
*And betimes I will, to the weird sisters:*
*More shall they speak; for now I am bent to know,*
*By the worst means, the worst. For mine own good,*
*All causes shall give way: I am in blood*
*Stepp'd in so far that, should I wade no more,*
*Returning were as tedious as go o'er:*
*Strange things I have in head, that will to hand;*
*Which must be acted ere they may be scann'd. (3.4.130-40)*

He is able to recognize that there is no going back from all they did. He decides to go to the three witches again to see how their situation will play out. Likewise, he is suspicious of Macduff's absence from their gathering and in the following scenes he orders the murder of him and his family. He has adopted an in for a penny, in for a pound mentality as he has bodies piling up and he is desperate to eliminate every possible threat to their impending reign. As the play progresses his tragic ending is becoming more transparent and anticipated.

Lady Macbeth might also be sensing that and feeling there is no place for her anymore inasmuch as she plays part neither in plotting murders nor in pulling Macbeth's strings. She

just suggests that they go to sleep, probably to stop Macbeth from filling her mind with these horrid and guilt-inducing images. In addition to that I think she knows she had opened a can of worms by persuading him to kill Duncan. Thus, complementary to tormenting guilt she feels for Duncan's murder and being tortured by the gruesome images of it, she may be feeling responsible for all the other murders which even though not orchestrated nor carried out by her were facilitated by her efforts of persuasion.

## 6. THE SLEEPWALKING SCENE

We encounter Lady Macbeth for the last time in 5.1. famously dubbed as The Sleepwalking scene which directly precedes her suicide. In this scene apart from Lady Macbeth appear a doctor and a gentlewoman whose purpose is probably to attest her somnambulism, as were it not for them we would probably think she is walking around completely conscious, to place emphasis on her gestures and to comment on her psychological deterioration.

This scene is a compilation of motifs from many previous scenes which are juxtaposed with this scene in revealing and comparing her previous and actual mental states.

*Enter LADY MACBETH, with a taper*

*Gentlewoman.* *Lo you, here she comes! This is her very guise;*
*and, upon my life, fast asleep. Observe her; stand close.*

*Doctor.* *How came she by that light?*

*Gentlewoman.* *Why, it stood by her: she has light by her*
*continually; 'tis her command. (5.1.22-26)*

Lady Macbeth enters with a candle which she ordered to have by her side at all times indicating she cannot stand to be in the dark. The darkness which she once summoned in with „Come, thick night,/And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell“(1.5.51-2) now vexes her as she is unable to escape it.

*Doctor.* *What is it she does now? Look, how she rubs her hands.*

*Gentlewoman.* *It is an accustomed action with her, to seem thus washing her hands: I have known her continue in this a quarter of an hour.*

*LADY MACBETH.* *Yet here's a spot. (5.1.30-34)*

She is rubbing her hands in a washing motion from which we can infer that she is trying to wash the blood of her hands figuratively as she stained them in 1.7. when she went to retrieve bloody daggers to the murder scene.

Though we have seen Lady Macbeth collected in the scenes after Duncan's murder, here it is brought to light that she had been struggling with it all the while. It is becoming apparent that she managed to put on an act of stability, probably for Macbeth's sake, while falling to pieces inside.

*Out, damned spot! out, I say!--One: two: why, then, 'tis time to do't.--Hell is murky!--Fie, my lord, fie! a soldier, and afeard? What need we fear who knows it, when none can call our power to account?--Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him. (5.1.39-44)*

This is one of the most famous monologues in the play and justifiably so, I might add, because it is pregnant with emotions of intense desperation and remorse. It almost sounds like a succession of shrieks. It refers back to the 1.7. where Macbeth is afraid to get caught and she's reassuring him “Fie, my lord, fie! a soldier, and afeard?“ (5.1.40-41). She is recollecting their conversation from that night and her rationalization of their fears which now has none of

the comforting qualities being paired with the line *"Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him."(5.1.43-44)*

> *The thane of Fife had a wife: where is she now?--*
> *What, will these hands ne'er be clean?--No more o'*
> *that, my lord, no more o' that: you mar all with*
> *this starting. (5.1.47-50)*

Lady Macbeth is now referring to the murders of Macduff's family being guilt but also grief stricken by Macbeth's startling killing rampage.

> *Here's the smell of the blood still: all the*
> *perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little*
> *hand. Oh, oh, oh! (5.1.57-59)*

Her facing the Duncan's bloody murder made the acts more vivid in her mind having a great impact on her with the following murders. It made the subsequent murders all the more horrifying; transforming the actual blood on her hands to metaphorical blood which is impossible for her to wash off.

Lady Macbeth's next lines refer to the scene at the banquet where she is trying to comfort Macbeth:

> *Wash your hands, put on your nightgown; look not so*
> *pale.--I tell you yet again, Banquo's buried; he*
> *cannot come out on's grave. (5.1.69-71)*

It almost seems that their feelings become entangled and the merger of their guilt becomes too much for the poor lady to take. As much as she feels responsible for the other

murders Macbeth's guilt is somehow a burden she also has to carry thus magnifying her own emotions.

> *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! (5.1.73-75)*

The knocking she think she hears is the knocking in 1.7 in the succession of Duncan's murder. „What's done cannot be undone“(5.1.74-75) echo the lines „Things without all remedy / Should be without regard: what's done, is done.“(3.1.11-12)

This scene is the conjunction of the gruesome scenes which are here all joint together in her mind without relation to the chronological occurrence or places of events by which Shakespeare is emphasizing her distorted mental state. As Berry writes: “Shakespeare, as Brian Vickers remarks, has „not only shown her perspective of time as being totally blurred, but has made her oscillations return always to the moments of severest guilt.“(112)

All of the scenes are confined to one fragile mind which is on the brink of suicide unable from keeping them in. In contrast to most of the previous scenes this one is written in prose and though it is retrospective the tense is present:

> “Only 6.5 percent of the play’s lines are in prose, which is an unusually low proportion for plays of this period. The other instances of prose are the reading of Macbeth’s letter in 1.5 and the Porter’s Scene in 2.3. Here in 5.1, it is almost as if the verse-line, already strained by the events of the play, cannot cope with her fractured memories.” (Smith 142)

The general interpretation of this scene is it being the final rupture of Lady Macbeth's psyche in which she discloses her feelings of remorse and grief after keeping them in for most of the play. We are challenged to re-evaluate her actions from before and invited to feel pity

for her since she turns out not be as cruel and heartless as the rest of the play suggests. Williams elaborates:

> Lady Macbeth of Act V whose madness is the heart-rending devastation brought about by the remorse whose access and passage she was unable to stop up as she had anticipated. Her despair that her hands will „ne'er be clean," her whimsical moment of tenderness for the dead Lady Fife, her longing to „sweeten this little hand" speak of a conscience far from dead. (222)

Piotr Sadowski, however, offers us an opposing view of this scene:

> It is difficult to interpret most of what Lady Macbeth says or does in her sleepwalking as an expression of her guilty conscience and Bradley was probably right in saying that "in Lady Macbeth's misery there is no trace of contrition." (168)

He goes on to interpret the hand washing as a sign of „avoiding detection"(168) concluding that „this scene lies therefore not so much in the feelings of pity in the supposedly guilt-stricken Lady Macbeth as in the reenactment of her past crimes and her present helplessness and isolation as indications of the ultimate pointlessness and futility of these crimes."(Sadowski 268)

While his interpretation is valid and well-argued I would side with Williams on this. Lady Macbeth's isolation and Macbeth turning his back on her undoubtedly did contribute to her mental state but it does not make her feelings less real. If she weren't isolated and helpless her suicide may have been prevented but she would still be riddled with guilt and horrific images that haunt her. Avoiding detection, in my opinion, would better suit the character of Macbeth since he was pondering the social consequences of their action while she was conjuring spirits to „make thick her blood" to „stop the passage for remorse." Not to mention

she commits suicide which would be almost inexplicable from the point of view that suggests she was not remorseful.

## CONCLUSION

Once again we attest to Shakespeare's extraordinary ability to capture the complexities of the human condition. His rendition of interpersonal relations and the pitfalls implicated in them are nothing if not didactic being applicable in the contemporary setting as well as to the Early Modern period. We have seen the corrupting properties of ambition which is the default interpretation of this play but it would be unwise to settle for that as it offers us a whole gamut of subtleties that are human nature. Even though we would be able to point out a villain of the play we would surely engage in the fruitful and versatile discussion about their peculiarities offering numerous and contrasting readings of the play. The character of Lady Macbeth which was the focus of this thesis evokes in us an array of emotions whether they are disapproval, aversion, abhorrence or pity. Her attempts at escaping the constraints thrust upon her is yet another portrayal of human nature that is never content with the present state of affairs but is always striving for the unattainable sometimes resorting to destruction and violence to procure it.

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