

A Battle Against One's Soul: An Analysis of Lady Macbeth's Functions as the Other Self to Macbeth

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Abstract

The play *Macbeth* is one of William Shakespeare's most well-known tragedies. This research is intended to analyze the functions of Lady Macbeth as the other self to Macbeth. She is not only the motivator of Macbeth's self-assertion, but also the silent bearer of Macbeth's burden of conscience and the reflector of Macbeth's self-alienation. Undoubtedly, Lady Macbeth plays a crucial role in the tragic end of Macbeth since it's she that improvises Macbeth to commit crime. Her incitements and actions, nevertheless, are only the overt show of Macbeth's inward eagerness to assert himself as a brave man. Lady Macbeth, furthermore, conscientiously suffers the burden of Macbeth's sense of guilt later on. And her alienation from Macbeth indicates the latter's self-alienation, who has gone the wrong direction but can no longer find the way back. Their relationship shows the process of Macbeth's self-definition and vividly depicts the ambivalence of Macbeth's tortured self.

Keywords: Lady Macbeth, *Macbeth*, self-assertion, alienation

1. Introduction

The play *Macbeth* is one of the masterworks of Shakespeare, one of the greatest writers at the time (Moonik, Moge, & Sabudu, 2020). Like "disunited parts of a single psychic entity" (Kirsch, 1984), the relationship between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth is the dramatic center of the play, which represents vividly the ambivalence in the psyche of Macbeth. Through constantly challenging Macbeth's manhood and bravery, Lady Macbeth successfully prompts Macbeth to murder King Duncan. In the light of this, the tragic end of Macbeth can be partly blamed on Lady Macbeth. Nevertheless, it's still unfair to impute all the blame to Lady Macbeth since her incitements and actions are only the overt show of Macbeth's own inward evil desire for power and throne. Lady Macbeth is, in essence, the other self of Macbeth since she is the motivator of Macbeth's self-assertion, the silent bearer of Macbeth's burden of conscience, and the reflector of Macbeth's self-alienation. It presents how Macbeth asserts, transforms, and rejects himself.

2. The Motivator of Macbeth's Self-Assertion

As Jan Kott says, Lady Macbeth "plays a man's part. She demands murder from Macbeth as a confirmation of his manhood" (1965). She stimulates Macbeth's vaulting ambition, provokes Macbeth to murder King Duncan and secures the crown for himself (Sali, 2022). Nevertheless, her incitements and actions are only the overt show of Macbeth's inward eagerness to assert himself as a brave man.

2.1 The Motivator of Macbeth's Murder of King Duncan

Lady Macbeth's first appearance in Act I Scene v gives the audience a strong impression that evil is so thick in her blood that no remorse could run through. She is considered by Matthew Proser as "fourth witch" whose arguments "bewitch" Macbeth (Proser, 1978). She is strong in her will and self-restrain which can limit and control her imagination, feeling, and conscience. After receiving Macbeth's letter informing her the prophecies told by the three witch sisters that he shall be king, Lady Macbeth soliloquizes that Macbeth's nature is "too full o'th' milk of human kindness", thus she intends to pour the evil spirits into Macbeth and helps him to sweep the obstacles in his ascending to the throne. Her meeting with Macbeth later shows her ambition to take charge of the "great business". She focuses her eyes and attention on practical matters, taking charge, issuing orders concerning how to commit the murder of Duncan. However, Macbeth seems reluctant and would like to postpone this action, partly

because “the golden opinions” about his bravery in the battle “would be worn now in their newest gloss”. Lady Macbeth knows his weakness and wins largely by appealing to Macbeth’s “valour”, calling him a “coward” if he fears to do what he desires. She will disclaim her love and honor for him if he dares not to do what may prove him to be a man. She continually questions his manly virtue and shames him by indicating that even she, as a woman, would be crueller than him to dash out the brains of her baby. Those “abuses” have effectually pushed him to the “thread” and prove his manhood in violently self-assertive deeds.

2.2 *Macbeth’s Desire of Self-Assertion*

However, Lady Macbeth words and bold action are in fact the overt shows of Macbeth’s vehement passion for power and instinct of self-assertion which have been long resided in his heart. Shakespeare’s Scotland is a place where butchery and bloody brutality are valued. Macbeth commits murder “in order to put himself on a level with the world in which murder potentially and actually exists” (Kott, 1965). In Act I Scene ii Macbeth is described as “brave”, “valour’s minion”, “valiant”, “Bellona’s bridegroom”. Under that circumstance, manhood is equated with the ability to murder. For Macbeth, manhood is not a fixed quality, but something that he has to strive for through constant bloody actions. The evil influences have worked upon him, and the temptation of the throne, of a braver self, is already within him; “he was tempted only by himself” (Bradley, 1905) and Duncan’s murder is “subconsciously understood by Macbeth as the act which will prove him worthy it” (Proser, 1978). If not, Lady Macbeth’s incitements would never hold so much power of him. It can be seen from the following facts: in Act I Scene iii, when Macbeth first encounters the three wicked sisters, he is startled at the prophecy of crown, while Banquo holds himself rather calm and rational. The witches choose Macbeth because he is not innocent and has the proper condition for soliciting; they present him the fair end of becoming the king, but it is Macbeth who foresees the foul means. As he soliloquizes later:

[aside] This supernatural soliciting
 Cannot be ill, cannot be good: —if ill,
 Why hath it given me earnest of success,
 Commencing in a truth? I am thane of Cawdor:
 If good, why do I yield to that suggestion
 Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair,
 And make my seated heart knock at my ribs,
 Against the use of nature? Present fears
 Are less than horrible imaginings:
 My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical,
 Shakes so my single state of man, that functions
 Is smother’d in surmise; and nothing is
 But what is not (Shakespeare, 1992).

It clearly shows that either the thought of murder “was not new to him, or he had cherished at least some vaguer dishonourable dream, the instantaneous recurrence of which...revealed to him an inward and terrifying guilt” (Bradley, 1905). After Duncan names his eldest son Malcolm as the prince of Cumberland, Macbeth makes his firm decision of the murder. Fearing that his “vaulting ambition” is at stake, he exclaims:

... Stars, hide your fires;
 Let not light see my black and deep desires:
 The eye wink at the hand; yet let that be,
 Which the eye fears, when it is done, to see [Exit] (Shakespeare, 1992).

Macbeth is disembodied; the eye and the hand become two independent parts, with the former, or the heart, representing his conscience and his recognition of evil, while the latter his bloody actions of self-assertion. At this crucial moment, the hand will take charge and commit the deed. As Jan Kott says, Macbeth is split into two Macbeths, “one who is afraid to kill, and one who has killed” (1965); he cannot accept the former one, and this makes his commitment inevitable. To conclude, Macbeth commits murder not only to become the king, but to reassert himself.

3. The Silent Bearer of Macbeth's Burden of Conscience

The inward consequences are revealed early in Macbeth but later in his Lady. It is she who takes inward the misery and who suffers the burden of Macbeth's sense of guilt and demonstrates the punishment in the sleep-walking scene. Contrasted with her, Macbeth projects his thoughts out into action which "becomes more than a method of self-protection and a means of annihilating conscience" (Proser, 1978).

3.1 *The Silent Bearer of Macbeth's Misery*

Lady Macbeth is a symbolic embodiment of the disorder and sickness created by Macbeth. Before murdering Duncan, she is rational and firm in purpose because she never attends to the consequences. But her calmness serves only as a mask that she puts on to beguile Macbeth and herself. It is only when she realizes that her husband is hesitating, and their "business" may be at danger that she resumes the dominant role she would rather he played. She too is disturbed by the murder, and has to gain boldness with wine. As the play proceeds, "Lady Macbeth's activity diminishes, but her misery increases" (Bradley, 1905) because she takes all the misery inward. After the murder of Duncan, her transition from the realm of action to that of thought shows the after-effect of the guilt, while Macbeth's inability to feel indicates his leaving away the burden of conscience. A dawning realization of the nothingness she gains in return falls upon her. She soliloquizes in Act III Scene ii:

Naught'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 (Shakespeare, 1992).

Her sleep has been killed, and her mind is restless. She disappears commanding to Macbeth "the season of all natures, sleep" while reappears in the sleep-walking scene where she shows the outcome of their crime in actual life by collapsing and withdrawing into a hallucinating world (Kirsch, 1984). It reminds the reader of Macbeth's claim in fear that "Macbeth does murder sleep" and "Macbeth shall sleep no more" in Act II Scene ii. She is frightened of the darkness created by their own hands but which in return envelops them, so "she has light by her continually". During the sleep-walking her "eyes are open", the flood of guilt and fear runs out of her heart. She keeps washing her hands but ends in vain. Blood has poisoned her hands and soul so much that the smell of it can no longer be washed away and "all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand." This contrasts sharply with her earlier claim that "A little water clears us of this deed". Her suffering also echoes Macbeth's speech in Act III Scene ii:

...: better be with the dead,
Whom we, to gain our peace, have sent to peace,
Than on the torture of the mind to lie
In restless ecstasy... (Shakespeare, 1992)

3.2 *Macbeth's Murder of Conscience and Transformation of Himself*

After murdering Duncan, Macbeth no longer needs his wife to channel her courage to him, and Lady Macbeth from then on is not involved in decision-making. She ceases to take the initiative; likewise "conscience ceases to function as an agent capable of preventing further crimes" (Proser, 1978). To reconcile his imagination with the reality, he projects his soul into concrete actions and transforms himself.

Macbeth is a man with the imagination of a poet which is regarded by A. C. Bradley as "the best of him" (Bradley, 1905). It is from his conscience that his thoughts derive. His hand has committed the murder that scares the "eye", and his "thought", or more specifically, his imagination, keeps presenting him horrible images, condemning him that his actions have betrayed his thoughts. He frequently sees images that terrifies him and reminds him his hideous vileness of his deeds. Pities are "Striding the blast"; "Nature seems dead" and Neptune's ocean cannot wash the blood from his hand.

Macbeth is spiritually tortured largely because there exists a huge discrepancy between his "eye" and "hand", between "thought" and "action", in another term, the separation between will and deed. When the first crucial step of murdering Duncan has been taken, Macbeth has murdered his old self. His transition from the realm of thought to that of action which early belongs to Lady Macbeth, indicates his intention to throw away the burden of conscience and make "the hand and heart one", in order to free himself of guilt-hidden compulsion. He needs to reconcile the world outside of him with that inside of him, to resist reflection and definition. Thus, he chooses to enclose the abstract "thought" within concrete "action", and 'To crown my [his] thoughts with acts be it thought

and done”, claiming that “the very firstlings of my [his] heart shall be / The firstlings of my [his] hand’. There is a distinct change in Macbeth after Duncan’s murder, along with the brutalization of Macbeth’s soul caused by murder and his suppression of conscience (Proser, 1978). For Macbeth, “‘being a man’ has become synonymous with being invulnerable to conscience, fear, or compassion” (Asp, 1981), and release from feeling is a release from moral responsibility and sense of guilt. In Act III Scene iv, he says that:

... For mine own good,
 All causes shall give way: I am in blood
 Step in so far, that, should I wade no more,
 Returning were as tedious as go o’ver:
 Strange things I have in head, that will to hand;
 Which must be acted ere they may be scann’d (Shakespeare, 1992).

He sounds helpless in agony and the speech conveys the tone of self-destruction. He is so much isolated in his universe of thought, that his utter helplessness to tolerate any division between what is outside and what is inside himself and his lacking of “spiritual courage to meet...the evil on its own spiritual terms” pushes him to objectify his thoughts and projects them into action, in attempt to gain security (Proser, 1978). His fears are too formless and too many for him that he limits them upon Banquo who Macbeth regarded as the source of his fear. He feels unsafe in his throne and grasps the futility of the deed for which he has to “Put rancours in the vessel of my [his] peace”. Firstly, Banquo is hailed by the three sisters “father to a line of kings”; secondly, Banquo has suspected that Macbeth “play’dst most foully for’t [the throne]”. But most importantly, compared with Banquo’s “royalty of nature”, “wisdom that doth guide his valour to act in safety”, Macbeth confronts the ugliness of himself. He murders Banquo, despite not with his own hands, which shows that his “‘security’ is also connected with the preservation of his sense of himself-of his manhood” (Proser, 1978). Later, he becomes more paranoid and irrational. He seeks the three witches out this time and murders Macduff’s family without obvious reason. To conclude, “action becomes more than a method of self-protection and a means of annihilating conscience; it becomes an end itself.” (Proser, 1978)

4. The Reflector of Macbeth’s Alienation

As the play proceeds, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth drift away from each other. Lady Macbeth retires into the background and can hardly assert influence upon Macbeth. By contrast, Macbeth begins to take the initiative. By violent attempt he tries to hold himself together, only to find that he is alienated from himself. His suicide suggests his utter rejection of himself.

4.1 *Macbeth’s Alienation from Lady Macbeth*

To a considerable extent Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are alike, since they are both driven by the same passion of ambition which serves as the bond that connects them together besides marriage. Throughout the whole play, they show no care about other things except for throne and power. At the beginning, we perceive the love that exists between them. Macbeth calls his wife in intimate terms “my dearest partner of greatness”, “love”, “dear wife”. They plan the murder of Duncan together, go through it together and suffer together. It is with Lady Macbeth that Macbeth reveals his guilt and fear, even though the latter misreads his imaginings.

However, after the murder of Duncan, the two drift apart, just like Macbeth goes away from his old self. Lady Macbeth has fulfilled her function as a motivator and courage-lender. She is no longer needed and loses the superior role in the “great business”. She cannot take any actions that involved with the deed. In Act III Scene iii, when she asks: “What’s to be done?” Macbeth merely replies: “Be innocent of the knowledge.” Lady Macbeth begins to see what a cruel man her husband has become when he reveals his intention to search for Banquo and Fleance, ignoring her comfort that “...in them nature’s copy’s not eterne.” She is hid from the plan of murdering Banquo and Macduff’s innocent wife and son. Their ultimate alienation shows in the Banquet scene when Macbeth is terrified by the ghost of Banquo while his wife holds herself so calm and rational. He says:

... You make me strange
 Even to the disposition that I owe,
 When now I think you can behold such sights,
 And keep the natural ruby of your cheeks,
 When mine is blancht with fear (Shakespeare, 1992).

Macbeth takes her wife's indifference as the show of courage while the latter interprets his fear as mere insecurity. The failure of communication leads the two depart from each other.

4.2 *Macbeth's Alienation from and Rejection of Himself*

After Macbeth pours out all his misery to his wife, he departs from his old self, who still has the ability to feel pain, remorse and guilt. Lady Macbeth's breakdown heralds Macbeth's spiritual split between conscious life and sleep-walking unawareness. Macbeth is and is not himself at the same time. At the start, he cannot face the fear, thus he tries to evade them from fear to fear. Similarly, he is not able to face his true self; the witness of the ghost confronts him with his concrete evilness. He cannot "reconcile himself to his part, as if it were somebody's else" (Kott, 1965). He chooses himself by killing, but "after every act of choice he finds himself more terrifying and more of a stranger" (Kott, 1965). Though he hopes to recover the man that he was, all his attempts end in vain. At last, his deepest wish is to "annihilate the very self he asserts" (Kirsch, 1984). Having recognized and taken his vileness for true, he finally accepts himself because he comes to realize that the "the disproportion between what he has given and the nothing he has in return makes life seem senseless or 'absurd'" (Marsh, 1998). He laments what he has lost:

...: I had else been perfect;
Whole as the marble, founded as the rock;
As broad and general as the casing air:
But now I am cabin'd, cribb'd, confined, bound in
To saucy doubts and fears ... (Shakespeare, 1992).

In this speech, he sees the contrast between his two selves and sadly visions his future without "honour, love, obedience, troops of friends". At last, he can no longer bear the weariness of searching the meaning, of battling against time to regain the lost self with honours. There is only one truth he finds that:

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor prayer
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more: it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing (Shakespeare, 1992).

In the battle against Macduff, he rejects himself by committing suicide and obtaining the last glimpse of honour.

5. Conclusion

From the above analysis, we can conclude that Lady Macbeth is more the other self to Macbeth than a character. She is the motivator who Macbeth needs to drive him on towards the throne of Scotland; her overt actions reveal Macbeth's own hidden desire for self-assertion; she is the silent bearer who takes inward Macbeth's and her own burden of guilt, while Macbeth chooses the opposite path and defines himself through violent actions; her alienation from Macbeth indicates the latter's self-alienation, who has gone the wrong direction but can no longer find the way back. Their relationship shows the process of Macbeth's self-definition and vividly depicts the ambivalence of Macbeth's tortured self. They are villains but are sublime because of their suffering.

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