Macbeth Couple: A Declining Family Tree and Tradition

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Abstract

Plays and theatrical acts are in a sense considered to be efficacious on the stage for their use of soliloquys, supernatural turns, and different forms of literary concepts. They convey social pressures not only inside the minds of characters but also in the form of emotions provoked from the audience. Shakespeare’s plays treat universal themes which consist of different eminent dynamics which do not alter through time. Shakespeare’s works are always critically blurred by falling within the scope of psychological and social tendencies. The main characters can be examined through different point of views. There are certain Shakespearean plays where the playwright challenges prevailing views on gender and power. Macbeth can be considered as a play open to examination through different psychological and social interpretations. Lady Macbeth and Macbeth stand among those complex dramatic characters who are open to psychological and feministic interpretation. This study attempts to illustrate the dark side of the challenge between gender and power, the consequences of crime, and the guilt felt inside the characters’ minds, all to show the main characters condition as that of declining characters.

Keywords: Feminism, Gender, Inescapable guilt, Macbeth, Lady Macbeth, Natural hierarchy.
1. Introduction

William Shakespeare was an English playwright who reflected all the characteristics of a Renaissance Humanist with an exceptional determination to gain the truth about human sorts. Shakespeare’s plays are reliable mirrors of manners and of life to his readers. His characters are common people with universal passions and principles. Grebanier (1957) remarks that Shakespeare is imaginably the seamless manifestation of Renaissance humanism, for his profound sympathy for humanity enables him to penetrate the very essence of his characters, and his unexcelled gifts as a poet make his men and women unforgettable beings of flesh and blood.

Shakespeare’s plays are deeply moral and deal with man’s ethical and moral responsibility for their acts. Shakespeare is a psychologist who believes that it is we who think and label some things as good and others as bad, because there is no such thing as good and bad. Hence, these views and principles are susceptible to fault as a result of misunderstanding and misinterpretation. Montaigne (1811) remarks that if what we call evil and torment is neither torment nor evil and is only a figment of our minds and fancy with such an assumed quality, then we are capable of changing it, and having the choice to create and destroy it, if nobody compels us, it would be very unwise of us to bend for that party which is draining us. Therefore, the recognition of events and their later significance based on one’s understanding or belief causes one to act. In Macbeth, Shakespeare indicates the depth of the human mind and spirit, the morality and immorality of human acts, and their share in the play.

Fate is a very important influence in Shakespeare’s plays. Especially in Macbeth, fate is represented through the three witches. The three witches are Shakespeare’s voice implanted within the play. Although Shakespeare himself wants to relate the three witches to supernatural forces, Lady Macbeth recognizes them as agents of fate. Lady Macbeth is psychologically examined and her character acts as a parallel to Macbeth.

Shakespeare instructs his readers of their true responsibilities in this world. In Macbeth, the characters encounter many universal apprehensions. Shakespeare believes that the adverse doom of humanity lies in its failing or the delusional side of its own character. He states that Macbeth is a symbol of the noble man with high esteem who does not abolish his illusions as his own immediate enemy, what eventually results in killing others and himself. Sigmund Freud asserts that human acts are rooted in their minds as the origin of human characteristics. Freud believes that there are three parts in the human psyche which shape his personality for the best or worst, so he proposes that the human psyche be divided into three parts: Id, ego and super-ego. Freud discusses this model in the 1920 essay Beyond the Pleasure Principle, and fully elaborates on it in The Ego and the Id (1923), in which he develops it as an alternative to his previous topographic schema (i.e., conscious, unconscious and preconscious). The id is the completely unconscious, impulsive, childlike portion of the psyche that operates on the “pleasure principle” and is the source of basic impulses and drives; it seeks immediate pleasure and gratification (Hothersall, 2004). Therefore, the darkest part of the mind, the id, incites the character to plan evil action. He assumes that the mind has internal psychological obstacles in learning. Accordingly, the problem of the mind is a central matter to human life. Hence, drawing on Freud’s model, Macbeth is a psychopathological tragedy that refers to the conflict between humanism and counter-humanism. The conflict is between reason and evil, ethics and darkness, and as such Shakespeare explains that the sins of man stem from his so-called unconscious dark desires, which are repressed by his conscious mind. According to Bloom (2004), Shakespeare’s dramas are the wheel of

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all our lives and teach us whether we are fools of love, or of times, or of fortune, or of ourselves, or of parents.

2. Discussion

Lady Macbeth becomes Macbeth’s alter ego, and such a disturbance of traditional characterization signifies the disruptive force of evil operating upon the hero. The very concept of manliness is associated with criminal and depraved acts, and womanliness is a term of opprobrium, that is, shame and insult. Lady Macbeth serves the supplementary function of bringing into the national and political arena of the play certain domestic and familial scenes. (Lawrence, Seifter, & Ratner, 1985)

As the sentence “fair is foul, foul is fair” shows, the atmosphere of the play is blurred between different forces such as fate, the unnatural, violence, courage, fair, unfair, and valor. It is a very difficult task to distinguish between fair and foul. It is similar to the two sides of a coin acting as good and evil. The characters are shaped much real to life. They are mixed of different qualities. Thus, real characters can successfully arouse emotions from the audience, because the characters are close to life, and they are more tangible. According to Boyd (1952), we can consider Lady Macbeth from a feminist point of view, because she both cuts herself off from all sympathy, consolation, and companionship by her passionate cry and feels Macbeth’s nature is “too full of the milk of human kindness to catch the nearest way” (I. v. 16). She calls upon the spirits “that tend on mortal thoughts” (I. v. 39) to deprive her of her remorse, compunction, and kindness, to fill her from “the crown to toe top full of direst cruelty” (I. v. 40), to “unsex her” (I. v. 39).

Lady Macbeth reveals a protest against the complications of gender relations in society. She protests against the deep meanings of the play, against the confinements barred on women by the social conditions of the time. Women are considered in society to be inferior, to be unable to do cruel deeds. Lady Macbeth utterly breaks the stereotype of women in the first act. She is full of ambition, regarding her love for her husband. Once Macbeth’s ambition is at its highest, Lady Macbeth keenly stakes all to assist him get the crown. She acts against her husband, requesting from spirits, to release her from the consequences of the crime, thus compensating Macbeth’s irresolution with a merciless thirst for command and riches.

Lady Macbeth thinks that she cannot commit violent acts because a woman is born with a nature full of kindness and tenderness, the same characteristics that she relates to Macbeth in “Yet do I fear thy nature, It is too full of the milk of human kindness” (I. v. 15-16). The fact that she doesn’t have a name shows that she is considered to be empty of identity and dependent on her husband. She does these transgressions in order to justify her love to her husband. In Act I, she is shown as a self-authoritative woman, who happens to knows that Macbeth’s conscience will stand in the way of his ambition; however, this results in her isolation from the society, because she breaks the natural law. Thus, as a result of the violation of the hierarchy, she suffers both mentally and physically. An unnatural act shows itself in nature by chaos:

- Tis unnatural, / Even like the deed that’s done. On Tuesday last / A falcon towering in her pride of place / Was by a mouse hunting owl hawked at and killed. (II. iv. 11-4)

Lady Macbeth is suffering from womanish borders and feelings. Pay attention to this part from the play:

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- Come you spirit / That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here / And fill me from the crown to the toe topful / Of direst cruelty! Make thick my blood / Stop up the access and passage to remorse, / That no compunctions visiting of nature / Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between / The effect and it. (I. v. 38-46)

There are two outcomes of this sad soliloquy. First she is unsexed and freed from her tenderness and delicacy. She’s is full of supreme cruelty. Second, the access and passage to remorse is only attained by her through a recognizable suicide and suffering.

According to Williams (1973), Lady Macbeth taunts her husband with being as cowardly as the cat in the adage, in addition to the recognition of blood as the visual manifestation of an inescapable guilt which is consuming her being. Williams describes the dominance of Lady Macbeth over her husband and how she makes him her slave. The humeral disturbance is considered one of the most important reasons of crimes in Shakespeare’s plays. Macbeth is under humeral pressure from his wife and there exists master/slave relationship based on the bilateral love between them. Different symbols act upon different ideas in the play such as blood, dagger, withes, etc. Imagery in Macbeth is one of the means of concentrating on key ideas. For example, the repeated images of blood reinforce the themes of violence and unnatural upheaval.

Lady Macbeth acts to show us the inner desires in the human race, and she doesn’t think of the consequences as Macbeth does; therefore, she is troubled at the end. There is a great distinction between the surface meaning and the deep meaning of this play, the deep meaning being the war between sexes. Lady Macbeth wants to prove herself not to be inferior to the opposite sex. She is literally playing the roles of men to prove herself. She is acting violently to hold pressure against the inferiorities oppressed by men toward women.

Munro (1887) believes that lady Macbeth lives in her mask, as if she is playing parts in life:

She who, when awake, restrained her will with such indomitable power, had at last, when pressed by the shadows and the suggestion of the night, to yield, and throw off forever the mask she had worn so long. Life has its nightly side as well as the side that is to its day. (p. 36)

Lady Macbeth seems to be unaware of her weak points and she speaks lightly of the crime:

- The sleeping and the dead / Are but as pictures, 'tis the eye of childhood / That fears a painted devil. If he do bleed, / Ill gild the faces of the grooms withal, / For it must seem their guilt. (II. ii. 53-7)

- A little water clears us of this deed / How easy is it then. (II. ii. 67-8)

Shakespeare is considered very clever and also very religious, and he considers the soul to be apart from the body. Shakespeare expresses his own idea through the doctor after the sleepwalking scene as argued in Kocher (1954) the doctor confessed that this disease being beyond his practice, at its end he wished that he be replaced by a clergyman:

- Foul whisperings are abroad: unnatural deeds / Do breed unnatural troubles; infected minds / To their deaf pillows will discharge their secrets: / More needs she the divine than a physician / God, God forgive us all! Look after her, / Remove from her the means of all annoyance, / And still keep eyes upon her. (V. i. 63-9)

Lady Macbeth is suffering not physically but spiritually, and the treatment can come from within the repentance for the sin. In the sleepwalking scene, the cause is the conscience but her character is
very open to criticism. Lady Macbeth is one of the unique characters that can be examined from different point of views. The sleepwalking scene shows that Lady Macbeth has paranoia in place of the course after the crime. If human conscience, is harmed after such a crime based on the gender differences, women are more fragile according to conscience, so Lady Macbeth is suffering more than Macbeth himself and she doesn’t have a way to escape her fatal thoughts. The sexist point of Shakespeare is crystal clear throughout his major works, especially in the declining character of Lady Macbeth.

Two kinds of people reside on the earth. The first group are the people who have curiosity and ambition and deserve higher places but are not determined. The second group are the people who are determined to go on whether the way is dangerous or not. They don’t know what is at the end of the action: whether loneliness or happiness is awaiting them, but these relentless people continue their acts. Lady Macbeth falls in the second group.

Lady Macbeth is made in the first act a woman with a great determinism, cruel, and very dominant over Macbeth. Shakespeare makes her far from human nature and dehumanizes her in order to show the human inner desires. But in the next acts she is more close to human nature and less determined. She unmasks herself, and introduces us into the natural desires of humankind such as fears, worries, and guilt:

- Alack, I am afraid they have awaked / and ‘tis not done. The attempt and not the deed / Confounds us. Hark! I laid their daggers ready / He could not miss ‘em. Had he not resembled / my father as he slept, I had done’t. (II. ii. 9-14)

Lady Macbeth and Macbeth foil each other in their characteristics. She is one of the rare characters of literary works that has a voice within the play. In that time, women were considered passive, but Lady Macbeth through the protests against gender and role in the society proves the opposite. Shakespeare breaks the usual character types in the play.

Lady Macbeth has good and bad qualities, and is not a one-sided character. She is a dominant, ruthless heroine who doesn’t pay attention to her conscience, but throughout the course of the play she is turning toward her nature. She feels remorse for what she has done under the mask:

- Here’s the smell of the blood still: all the / Perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little / Hand. Oh, oh, oh. (V. i. 43-5)

- Wash your hands, put on your nightgown; look not so / Pale. I tell you yet again, Banquo’s / buried; he / Cannot come out one’s grave. (V. i. 54-6)

- To bed, to bed! There’s knocking at the gate: / Come, come, come, give me your hand. / What’s / Done cannot be undone. To bed, to bed. (V. i. 58-60)

She is at last completely unsexed, being neither male nor female, whose sole substance is cruelty, conscious sadistic cruelty that has become so supreme it has for the nonce no faint excuse of being. It is the tragic common knowledge of wrong, the consciousness of violation of laws of God and man, and the full awareness of insecurity of power gained by evil. It is accompanied by falling apart in loneliness of this sinful man and woman. (Boyd, 1952)

Macbeth, the hero of the play is a very favorable and respected member of a social group. He is a man with a nature “too full of the milk of human kindness” (I. v. 15-16) who has a secure home and a
loving wife. The plot of the play is set in darkness. Darkness forms the evil atmosphere of the play. This darkness is combined with blood, death, destruction, destiny and evil. Bradley (2006) regards darkness in Macbeth as such blackness that broods over the tragedy with almost all the remarkable scenes taking place either at night or in some dark spot. The vision of the dagger, the murder of Duncan, the murder of Banquo, the sleep-walking of Lady Macbeth, all come in night scenes. The witches dance in the thick air of a storm, or, ‘black and midnight hags’, receive Macbeth in a concern. The blackness of night is the hero, a thing of fear, even of horror; and that which he feels becomes the spirit of the play. The faint glimmerings of the western sky at twilight are here menacing: it is the hour when the traveler hastens to reach safely in his inn, and when Banquo rides homeward to meet his assassins; the hour when ‘light thickens’, when night’s black agents to their prey de rouse. When the wife begins to howl, and the owl to scream, and withered murder steals forth to his work. Macbeth bids the stars hide their fires that his ‘black’ desires maybe concealed; Lady Macbeth calls on thick night to come, palled in the dunnest smoke of hall.

The Superego is conspicuous in Macbeth’s charisma, and can be specified by Macbeth’s fantasies, dreams, and fears. Macbeth’s Superego is in his mind and making him remember what wrong he had done. Macbeth and Lady Macbeth recognize their own irrational deeds. This exhibition is achieved with the struggle between Macbeth’s ambitious side and good side of his character. Macbeth experiences the false effect of prophecy which distorts his understanding of reality where the conception of weird sisters’ prophecy made him murder the king. It is possible that the evil may be connected to the supernatural powers as it may be the deeds of the criminal souls or both. The hallmark of evil lying dormant in Macbeth’s soul indicates itself at the words of the witches. Bradley (2006) argues that the witches and their prophecies, if they are to be rationalized or taken symbolically, must represent not only the evil slumbering in the hero’s soul, but all those obscurer influences of the evil around him in the world which aid his own ambition and the incitements of his wife. Such influences, even if we put aside all belief in evil spirits’ are as certain, momentous, and terrifying facts as the presence of the inchoate evil in the soul itself; and if we exclude all reference to these facts, from our idea of the witches, it will be greatly impoverished and will certainly fail to correspond with the imaginative effect. The union of the outward and the inward must be realized here.

The blackness dominate his character when he commits crimes and plots the murder of Duncan. In fact Macbeth is the victim of the dark side of his mind which Freud refers as “id” that causes to do evil action where he says: “O; full of scorpions is my mind” (III. ii. 41). Although Macbeth’s id form ambition and greed, his conscience is combined with loyalty and fear. He fears to kill Duncan but his ambition forces him to kill. He is between conscience and ambition, when he says: “I have no spur/ to prick the sides of my intent, but only/ vaulting ambition, which overleaps itself. /and falls on the other” (I. vii. 25-28).

Trieu maintains that darkness affects the characters by refereeing to Shakespeare’s use of darkness to emphasize evil, wickedness, and negativity. Macbeth’s initially thinks of darkness as a blanket which covers his evil and manslaughter; therefore, darkness is a tool as the three witches conjure darkness with thunder to give the readers an impression that vile is to take place. Banquo, a noble thane, describes the wicked witches as “the instruments of darkness” (I. iii. 133). Lady Macbeth, too, employs darkness as an aid to accomplish the murder of King Duncan. An example can be found in Act I, Scene V when Lady Macbeth calls onto the night, “come thick night, and pall thee in the dun
nest smoke of hall, that many keen knife see not the wound it makes, nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark to cry, Hold, hold!” (I. v. 52-55). As the play develops, darkness advances as a personality that plagues both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth transforming them into more ruthless characters who inflict further malevolence. (Trieu n.d., cited in Malas, 2012)

Macbeth’s miseries have turned him into a tragic character that his physical failure is threatening. After the death of Lady Macbeth, he gradually enters into the light of dignity as a warrior, which existed before meeting the three witches and get to its point of completion, turning Macbeth into a tragic protagonist. The two selves of the same person are developed through the play. The first one stays in the dark and gets to the climax when Macbeth is prepared for death, and the second one progresses in the gleam of heroism and reaches a climax with the death of Macbeth in the hands of Macduff. Macbeth is deal with the tragic flaw, hamartia, of ambition who forces him to commit the crimes and enter the realm of darkness and it becomes very difficult to sympathize with him. The soliloquies of the play show this darkness. Macbeth in Act II, Scene I arrive into the scene of darkness, before murdering of king Duncan and shows the conflict in his mind,

Macbeth….Is this a dagger, which I see before me, / The handle toward my hand? Come, let me clutch / Thee:- / I have thee not, fatal vision, sensible / To feeling, as to sight? Or art thou bed / A dagger of the mind, a false creation, proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain? / I see thee yet, in form as palpable / As this which now I draw. (Muir, 2004, pp. 47-48)

Macbeth is totally aware that darkness is in his mind to achieve his criminal desires. This darkness helps Macbeth to hide his criminal acts of his ambitious soul. In Act II, Scene I, before going into the chamber of King Duncan, Macbeth discloses that part of his evil ambition which encourages him to murder Duncan. He says,

- Macbeth….Now o’er the one half-world / Nature seems dead, and wicked dreams abuse / The curtain’d sleep: witch craft celebrates / Pale Hecate’s off’ring; and wither’d murther, / Alarum’d by his sentinel, the wolf, / Whose howl’s his watch, thus with his stealthy pace, / With Tarquin’s ravishing strides toward, his design / Moves like a ghost. (Muir, 2004, pp. 48-49)

In Act I, Scene IV, Duncan claims that his son, Malcolm to be the prince of Cumberland. It was an obstacle for Macbeth in reaching to throne. He starts thinking about murdering Duncan and his sons in his soliloquy where he says:

- Macbeth. (Aside) The Prince of Cumberland! That is a step / On which I must fall down, or else o’erleap, / For in my way it lies. 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. (Muir, 2004, p. 25)

Lady Macbeth is also a product of this darkness. In Act I, Scene V, after informing about Macbeth’s future from the prophecies of the three witches, Lady Macbeth exhibits the dark side of her mind:

- Lady Macbeth…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 th’ 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 murther’ring 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.’ (Muir, 2004, pp. 30-31)

Evil in Macbeth’s character is let loose and enables him to commit vices. Malcolm says: “I grant him bloody, / Luxurious, avaricious, false, deceitful, / Sudden, malicious” (IV. iii. 58-60).

Finally Macbeth understands his dreadful sin. Nothing left for him and no event could put him in dignity. The sorrow of his words are totally clear:

- To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow, / Creeps in his petty pace from day to day; / To the last syllable of recorded time; / And all our yesterdays have lighted fools / The way to dusty death. Out, out brief candle! / Life’s but a walking shadow; a peer player, / That struts and frets his hour upon the stage. / And then is heard no more: it is a tale / Today by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing. (V. v. 19-28)

The annihilation of evil and reconstruction of goodness is accomplished in the role of the Macduff, Malcolm and King Edward, the confessor. Macbeth becomes punished as the evil-doer when Macduff arouses against him, Malcolm claims his legitimate kingship, and King Edward take arms against him. In Act IV, Scene II, King Edward as an agent of God cures a dreadful disease from the body of the individual man. He tries to remove the unnatural evil in the state. Malcolm’s kingship to Scotland restores peace and truth. He says: “we will perform in measure, time and love” (V. ix. 39) indicates the reconstruction of order, peace and harmony.

3. Conclusion

Shakespeare uses traditional allegorical images of light and darkness to emphasize the Elizabethan concept of the Great Chain of Being in his play. As well as the Chain is held in accordance with the other members of it, everything is pleasant and right, but when the Chain is violated, evil and darkness becomes the dominant force. The Great Chain of Being was broken, when Macbeth killed King Duncan and embraced his thrown. After Macbeth broke the Great Chain of Being, light was destroyed and darkness was ever-present. Shakespeare defines mankind through their internal characteristics which head to their greatness or even to their misery. He has explained how man’s irrational and unknown thoughts can be threatening. On the contrary, if man knows his dignified situation as the archetype of animals, he does not let dark desires occupy his mind. Humans are capable of change, and they can do both good and evil. Shakespeare tries to warn the audiences and readers about the illusive nature in all humans that lead to annihilation. Macbeth’s race to regain his former heroic stature and his death makes him a tragic protagonist. Although Macbeth is conquered physically he has succeeded in conquering the darkness that was there in him and has turned into a heroic figure. This play mirrors realistic and universal view on psychological and psychoanalytical human features in life affairs.
References


