

Power Above Gender: How Lady Macbeth Shapes Perceptions of Political Power

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In Dedication to Albert DeFehr

Political power lies within one's physical appearance to the public eye. In early modern England, the monarchy was compared to a complete body, with the king as the head and the citizens and ministers creating the body politic. Subjects were taught to follow the dealings of a patriarchal ruler and did not often see or know how to respond to a female in power. When Queen Elizabeth I ascended the throne, people were quick to vilify her because her rule went against the preconceived natural order as she was an instance of a female head on a male body politic. In his 15th century writings, John Knox attributes this disarray of the natural order to be in conjunction with religion. He writes, "it doth manifestlie repugne that any woman shal reign or beare dominion over man. For God first, by the order of his creation, and after by the curse and malediction against women...hath pronounced the contrarie [sic]" (15). Knox's ideas display that women were considered naturally inferior to men, and stepping out of this inferiority was an affront to not only the body politic, but God's order. While facing this mindset, any early modern woman who craved power would be forced to act in the shadows, instead controlling a figure that would be listened to. If, though, an easily swayed or malleable man was in a place of power, a woman could take control despite society's perception of her as a primary means of reproduction. Through his play *Macbeth*, William Shakespeare acknowledges and explores these concerns regarding the relationship between gender and power. I argue that in the play, a person's sex is based on emotional value, not biological. When Lady Macbeth asks to be "unsex[ed]," (1.5.43) she is speaking directly to the nurturing nature that comes along with being a mother and even though she will still maintaining her womanly appearance. While her plea to become part of the spirit realm is ultimately rejected, Lady Macbeth is still connected to the witches through her mortal body and helps to enact their prophecies through her manipulations of her husband, Macbeth. Lady Macbeth is the true political power in the play showing us that

while the public may follow a male figure, real political power lies instead in one's actions and abilities.

The outward appearance of gender does not stop genderless beings or women from holding power in *Macbeth*, and women are oftentimes in the shadows, wielding more power than any central character. Lady Macbeth is closely connected to the witches and knows that their prophecies will help her usurp the throne. In their writings, Dutta and Bhaduri claim “[t]hat Lady Macbeth has what may be called, a suppressed persona: consciously, she is the devoted wife, but subconsciously, she is one of the witches, who tries, though not in a very different way as compared to the others, to put an end to the tyrant” (12). When discussing her relationship with the witches, Dutta and Bhaduri support the claim that Lady Macbeth is one with the witches and that their thoughts and intents are connected. The authors, Dutta and Bhaduri, “note Lady Macbeth to be the fourth witch” and go on to explain “[i]f that be so, at least on the subconscious strata, then it is scarcely unreasonable to believe that her subconscious part dominates her conscious mind, influencing it to suit its needs” (13). Lady Macbeth's intentions align perfectly with that of the witches, making the connection clear. Due to her close relationship with Macbeth, she is also very valuable to them. Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking episodes can also be tied to this connection, as magical beings can influence both waking and sleeping life. Dutta and Bhaduri explain, “[t]his proposition can probably account for the sleepwalking scene as well: quite possibly, she becomes a hollow shell of her former self as her suppressed side slowly erases itself” (Dutta and Bhaduri 12) once she has completed her role in the witches plan. They bring in evidence as to why she is acting as one of the witches and further explain why she had the sleepwalking episodes through her connections to the spirit realm.

Lady Macbeth had previous relations or knowledge of the witches, and she used their prophecies to her advantage. These connections may not have run deep, but one can assume she believes in the power the witches hold. As Macbeth found the witches, Lady Macbeth may also have discovered them and gained interest in the power they possess. To further the connections, Hecate, the goddess of magic, visits the witches on occasion and is a head figure to them. Hecate is the bridge between the spirit worlds and the mortal worlds. While the witches flit along the boundaries of the physical world and the spirit realm, Hecate wholly resides in the spirit realm and shows that the sisterhood of witches spans across boundaries of spirituality and physicality.

This would make Lady Macbeth the mortal representation of the witches. As part of the witches' sisterhood, Lady Macbeth moves her pawn to be in line with the prophecies. The witches knew that their prophecies would be carried out through Lady Macbeth. Her cries to the spirits were to bring her closer to the witches; however, her purpose of ensuring the prophecy's success had already been fulfilled, and her commitment to the darkness was unnecessary and unwelcome. To better suit her tasks, Lady Macbeth was left a mortal. Though closely tied to the witches, she was never able to become one, and her duties were fulfilled through her mortal standing as the wife of Macbeth. Instead, she is united with them because of her cunning and ambition, along with her abilities to manipulate and unwillingness to accept her motherly nature.

In the play, it alludes that Lady Macbeth was once with child. In a moment to show her determination and coldness, Lady Macbeth states, "Does unmake you. I have given suck and know how tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me". She then follows her statement with far more shocking words when she describes how, "[she] would, while it was smiling in [her] face, have plucked [her] nipple from his boneless gums, and dashed the brains out." (1.7.22-23). The fact that she has no child now leaves us to believe the child has died. Along with this, Lady Macbeth shows a complete disregard for her motherly, nurturing qualities by stating that she would commit infanticide. This, in turn, brings her closer to the witches as witches are feared and considered disturbing due to their inability to have children. The power the witches hold shows that once again, it is actions above gender. They are assumed to be women, but overall are genderless beings, and one could argue that they are responsible for the series of events that follow Macbeth.

Despite their androgynous appearance and connotations, the witches also lend us to see the power in activities that society considered to be womanly. The potions that they create bring to mind domestic chores in a twisted and disturbing light, while once again emphasizing the witches' lack of motherly nature. Furthermore, while reciting the ingredients of this potion, the witches ask for "Finger of birth strangled babe." (4.1.30). This particular ingredient relates to the gruesome job of a midwife, who, when encountering a stillborn babe, would have to chop the dead infant into little pieces to extract the corpse from the mother in order to save her (Tootalian). Midwifery was also a job dominated by women, and they were demonized and distrusted for these midwifery practices. Shakespeare alludes to this domestic power and the fear

of it through the witches' potion, uniting Lady Macbeth with the witches in their unnatural interactions with children. It was not only a practice that put great stress on women but it also often was one of the most grotesque tasks that had to be done. Although the removal of the child was necessary to save the mother's life, it was considered unnatural and evil to kill the baby. Midwifery was a task of necessity and great importance because oftentimes, it was the midwife's responsibility to ensure a man's heir made it into the world alive. The witches demonstrate that actions outrank gender through their ability to be androgynous. They also confirm that even the political powerhead of the people can be swayed. It is their actions versus Macbeth's, and their words heavily influence him. The moment Macbeth lets the witches' prophecies into his head, he has transferred his power to the witches and from there to Lady Macbeth when he shares those words and his fears with her.

To be cunning and calculated, one must not be swayed or influenced by kindness or compassion. The sex that Lady Macbeth speaks about refers to the emotions and intuitions that make her womanly: warmth, kindness and nurturing natures. She wants the spirits to take away anything that may make her vulnerable or weak when presented with situations that need ruthlessness, such as her plan for regicide. Sex to the eyes is based around reproductive capabilities, but power comes from the way one acts. The warmth that a mother carries along with anything that may slow Lady Macbeth down is what she calls upon the spirits to take away. In her article "Fantasizing Infanticide," Stephanie Chamberlain states, "Lady Macbeth ultimately refuses masculine authority. What she craves instead is an alternative gender identity, one which will allow her to slip free of the emotional as well as cultural constraints governing women" (Chamberlain 79-80). Lady Macbeth is not asking to be a man but is wishing to have her womanly emotions taken away from her. Throughout the play, feminine characteristics are seen as a sign of weakness. Lady Macbeth even goes as far as to say, about her husband, "Yet do I fear thy nature; It is too full o'th' milk of human kindness" (1.5.16). Her words relay that she feels her husband is kind and nurturing as a breastfeeding mother would be, and this would be detrimental to their plan. Further emphasizing why she needs the spirits to take those qualities away from her. If the spirits are able to follow these requests as Chamberlain has written, then she will be able to perform the acts of regicide necessary for Macbeth to get the crown.

Unfortunately, Lady Macbeth is rejected by the spirits, and they do not fulfill her demands. However, her descent into madness displays that Lady Macbeth was less cold and heartless than she had thought. When the weight of the murders starts to creep up on her, and the “damned spot” (5.1.38) will not leave her hands, she starts a descent that would not have happened if the spirits had taken her as she commanded and hoped for. In the end, her demise was a result of some shred of conscience. After being rejected by the spirits, she still thought herself strong enough to fulfill her plans but was thwarted by her own, hidden, morality. Though her actions caused the natural order to fall out of balance, her death is a step towards returning order to the way people are in accordance with their gender, as well as a restoration of the body politic she helped destroy. Despite this return to normalcy and rejection by the spirits, Lady Macbeth had the strength required to complete her plan, proving that her sex is ultimately irrelevant to the level of power she could possess through manipulation.

One must be able to maintain power and hold influence where it matters to control political decisions. Macbeth was a weak-minded, gullible man and right from the start Lady Macbeth was already in control. She is a ruthless and cunning woman who already knows what she wants and how she is going to get it. In saying this, it shows that her willingness to give up her sex to the spirits was not as much of a sacrifice as one may have originally perceived. She already lacks the caring nature attached to her sex before offering herself to the spirits, and even after failing to be taken by the spirits, has an instance of speaking freely about how she could “Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums, and dashed the brains out” (1.7.22-23). This statement reinforces her desire for power. Not even her child would stop her pursuit of power. From the start, she is filled with coldness. To her, Macbeth is just a mere pawn in the grand plan. Lady Macbeth holds the true power and is the catalyst for regicide.

Macbeth was frightened by the prophecies, and those prophecies set everything into motion, supporting Lady Macbeth’s desire for power. Macbeth’s fate was decided the moment he allowed himself to listen to the prophecies. He had the ability to call the prophecies nonsense and be done with them, but instead, he allowed the words to creep into his mind and stay there. In doing this, he also allowed Lady Macbeth to take control. Throughout the play, Lady Macbeth spends much of her time convincing Macbeth to go through with her plans. She is unafraid to belittle him. Reflecting on a previous conversation, she tells Macbeth, “when you durst do it,

then you were a man”: he was only a man when he spoke confidently about their plans (1.7.22). When Macbeth wavers and questions the success of the regicide, she chides him and explains, “screw your courage to the sticking-place, and we will not fail” (1.7.23). As long as Macbeth is strong and cold like Lady Macbeth, they have little to worry about. Although Macbeth did desire to be king, he requires Lady Macbeth’s cunning and severity to set in motion the self-fulfilling prophecies that called for his ascent to power but ultimately ended in his doom. Because Macbeth allowed the witches foretelling to be true, Lady Macbeth became a voice in his ear, encouraging him and feeding off his paranoia. Frances E. Dolan writes, “Macbeth uses female characters—the witches and Lady Macbeth—to instill ambition, translate that ambition into violent action, and thus cast doubt on ambition and agency as associated with violence” (Dolan 227). Her idea supports the claims that Lady Macbeth is a figure of power within the play but also suggests that Lady Macbeth is an agent of violence. When she offers herself to the spirits to take away her sex, there is not much, emotionally, for them to take. She is already cold and calculated, and her ability to mother, as well as whether she even had such an ability to begin with, is questionable. Her request is a formality and an offering to give herself up to the dark spirits in the hopes that they will leave her plan without a fault. Women who know how to manipulate monarchs could easily hold power, and Lady Macbeth exemplifies this ability.

Macbeth does not act like a ruler making it easy to make him a personal pawn in the pursuit of power. In his essay, Harold Bloom writes, “It is a little difficult to imagine Macbeth as a father where he is, at first, so profoundly dependent on Lady Macbeth. Until she goes mad, she seems to be as much Macbeth’s mother as his wife” (522). His opinion supports the thought that she is a strong figure that Macbeth is dependent on. Bloom goes on to briefly explore the heavy influence she has over Macbeth despite her only being in the play for a short amount of time. This means that during Lady Macbeth’s life span, Macbeth is only a ruler by appearance. Like a snake, Lady Macbeth has herself intertwined in all of Macbeth’s political affairs. She holds the power because she takes initiative; she is the influence and the ultimate decision-maker. She is skilled in the sense that within their relationship she pays attention to Macbeth’s weaknesses and the way his mind works. From her observation, she applies her knowledge specific to Macbeth and guides his actions with ease. Her only downfall, unfortunately, coincides with her greatest strength. When she made a figurative deal with the devil, she was unknowingly trading her life for the pursuit of power. She was fully rejected by the spirits but still an integral part of the plan.

Her rejection from the spirits ensured she would not survive and that her mortal mind would lead to her death. When things go awry for Lady Macbeth, she is driven into killing herself by the guilt she thought she had left behind. This being said, in all the time she was alive, she was more powerful than Macbeth and even after her death, it is her voice and ideas, along with the witches' prophecies that guide his actions. Lady Macbeth was not in many scenes, and her presence in the play was one of potency, not quantity. With very few interactions, her character was still able to create lasting impressions. Furthermore, after her death, Macbeth finds himself going back to the witches for guidance, showing a dependence on strong (assumed) female voices. In both cases with the witches and Lady Macbeth, they are more influential to the political rulings than Macbeth, and both are not male characters. This further showcases that actions are stronger than appearances and social constructs.

When all is said and done, one can call to mind the implications that Shakespeare may be trying to make about women through the character of Lady Macbeth. She exudes cunning and dark mannerisms that can be tied back to biblical contexts. She encourages Macbeth to follow forbidden and dark knowledge as Eve encouraged Adam to eat the fruit. Historically, in European and western cultures, women have been oppressed, typically viewed as a vessel for reproduction and nothing more. In a time where women meant and were worth very little, to gain attention, women had to do things of significance, for better or worse. For example, if witches did not hold some sort of power, people during the Renaissance would not have been terrified of them. Furthermore, it shows great power in being able to frighten and control people as opposed to just being noticed or respected. Over time, women have always been kept in the shadows, away from autonomy. Having said this, across time, women have still managed to find their way to power, and due to always being pushed away from the light, most of this power was gained from within the shadows. In acknowledging this, one can assume that women have had hundreds of years to learn manipulation. Just as some rely on physical strength, a woman relies on cunning to assert herself. Shakespeare is displaying this trait through Lady Macbeth and exploring the different types of strength one possesses. Although Macbeth has all the physical strength and political, societal power, Lady Macbeth is still more powerful because her cunning is able to overcome all else. Lady Macbeth is also unique in the sense that throughout the play, it alludes that she, at one point, was a mother, and either gave birth to a stillborn or the baby died as an infant. Through this, Shakespeare has taken away the only purpose Lady Macbeth would have

served and instead made her seek out her own power after being unable to fulfill her purpose, as society would have seen it. Relevant to the time, this would have left her useless, and it would not have been unusual for a king to have her disposed of, and yet still, she is able to remain in Macbeth's kingdom and take control of him. Her power and purpose are found when she joins with the witches as a childless being, willing to give up her sex for power and knowledge. Lady Macbeth's character could be viewed as a powerful statement regarding the views of childless women at the time and how children relate to kindness, warmth and the natural order while being childless is related to darkness, evil, and chaos. Furthermore, in today's society, many women view having children as a sacrifice to their power and independence and, in a more positive manner than the play depicts, avoid having children in order to maintain a status of power, thus the feminine act of childbearing is still connected to weakness and lack of power. This once again displays that Shakespeare writes Lady Macbeth to show that power lies in one's actions and abilities and is not strictly tied to one's outward gender.

Between the witches' prophecies and Lady Macbeth's cunning and devotion to gaining power, Shakespeare shows that power lies in one's actions and not in one's sex. A woman can and does hold power throughout the play. Although socially, they follow a masculine figure, there are a woman's words holding tight on Macbeth's mind all the while. The witches planted the seeds of doubt and fear in his mind, and Lady Macbeth knew how to use those emotions to her advantage. Despite her demise and inability to fully complete her quest for the throne, it was her doings that lead Macbeth to where he ended up. Though there is comfort and familiarity in following orders of a king, they can easily become a pawn if they allow others to get into their heads. Lady Macbeth, all throughout the play, shows her cunning, calculated skills and refuses to let morality and her supposed motherly nature stand in her way of gaining power. Overall, Lady Macbeth is an intellectual character who held more political power than Macbeth himself. Her only downfall was that she was consumed by ambition and lost control. In life, Lady Macbeth was powerful due to her drive and actions, while her death was one of necessity to reverse the havoc she created within the natural order. She was always moving towards power, planning moves to bring her closer to the throne. Her actions carry her through the play. Between her abilities and the sway the witch's words held over Macbeth, one can conclude that power is not related to one's outward gender, but to their actions and ability to create change.

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