

A Study of Lady Macbeth's Tragedy from the Perspective of Feminist Criticism

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Macbeth is one of the four great tragedies penned by English playwright, William Shakespeare. Lady Macbeth, the primary tragic female character in the play, seems to be different from other typical female roles portrayed by Shakespeare, and is often characterized by the world as vicious and ambitious. Being in a patriarchal society, Lady Macbeth awakens to female self-awareness and lust for power. She silently rebels against the oppression and constraints imposed by the society, ultimately paying the price of her life. By analyzing the process of Lady Macbeth's subversion of the identity of the Other from the perspective of feminist criticism, this article offers a new interpretation of Lady Macbeth's image and delves into the underlying causes of her tragedy. It suggests that it is often difficult for women to break free from the oppressive shackles of a patriarchal society in their pursuit for equality, freedom and power. The path to women's liberation is long and arduous, which still requires unwavering efforts and perseverance from all.

Keywords: Lady Macbeth, tragedy, feminist criticism, the Other, *Macbeth*, Shakespeare

Introduction

As a kind of textual criticism or discourse criticism, feminist criticism developed rapidly with the rise of feminist movement in the 1960s, which is concerned with the living state and fate of women in literary works. Eagleton (2005) once commented on feminist criticism, saying that it was probably the most popular of all approaches to literary studies. Shakespeare is the most prominent playwright and poet in the Renaissance, and there are many female images with distinct characters in his plays. Many scholars have thus introduced feminist criticism into the study of Shakespeare and his works.

Lady Macbeth is perhaps one of the most impressive female characters in Shakespeare's oeuvre who has caught the attention of many critics. Her appearances, though not numerous, play a pivotal role in advancing the plot development of the play. As the most significant female character in *Macbeth*, Lady Macbeth breaks the traditional image of women. For a long time, she was regarded as an evil woman who is the instigator of intrigue and the prime mover of Macbeth's tragedy. In a patriarchal society, Lady Macbeth initially behaves so differently that she seems to disrupt the position of women as the Other. However, she still inevitably comes to a tragic end. Comments on Lady Macbeth are mixed, yet most previous research depicts her as a "monster",

with some attributing her tragedy to love. Feminist critical analysis remains insufficient and often limited to interpreting Lady Macbeth's image. Therefore, this article aims to analyze Lady Macbeth's transition from being the Other to subverting the position of the Other through the lens of feminist criticism, so as to reevaluate Lady Macbeth and further explore the more profound causes of her tragedy.

Lady Macbeth's Original Position of the Other

During the Renaissance, aristocratic women who had more rights than before could manage large estates and farms, while lower-class women could also be active in some fields traditionally considered to be in charge of by men, such as running a wine shop (Rackin, 2005). Women's rights had indeed improved compared to the past, but they were still greatly restricted. At that time, ordinary women did not have the right to higher education, could not pursue any knowledge-related profession; married women did not have the right to dispose of their own property, and it was considered normal for wives to experience violence from their husbands in domestic disputes (Wang, 2013).

Shakespeare undoubtedly lived in a time of traditional patriarchy, despite the fact that aristocratic women had more privileges than ordinary women. Jeanne Gerlach et al. (1995) observe that in the majority of Renaissance societies, women always exemplified virtues that were significantly defined in relation to men, such as "obedience, silence, sexual chastity, piety, humility, constancy and patience" (p. 188). Compared with the Renaissance, the patriarchy of the past societies was more stable. The story of *Macbeth* takes place in the 11th century, when the society was centered on patriarchy and men always occupied a dominant position. The only purpose of women's lives was to care for their families. Additionally, women were also prohibited from participating in politics, which prevented them from showcasing their talents and forced them to suppress the desire to fulfill themselves.

The French feminist critic Elena Ceausescu argues that men are the Self and women the Other, and there are only two situations in which women exist: either passive and denied, or non-existent (as cited in J. Zhang, 1992). In this patriarchal world, Lady Macbeth is totally the Other at the beginning of the story. As a woman, she has no independent voice and is oppressed by the male power represented by Macbeth.

First of all, as an individual, Lady Macbeth has no surname or first name of her own. She is referred to as "Lady Macbeth" at all times. It seems to be the norm for women to be named after their husbands when they get married. However, this is exactly the suppression of women by the patriarchal society from the perspective of feminism. Lady Macbeth is like an appendage of Macbeth, unable to exist without him. Moreover, the main female characters in Shakespeare's works all have their own names, except for Lady Macbeth. This is a blatant sign that Lady Macbeth is perceived by Shakespeare as being on the edge of the patriarchal society.

After the first prophecy of the three witches, Macbeth writes to Lady Macbeth:

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. (Shakespeare, 1998, 1.5.1-14)

On the surface, it could seem like the husband cannot help sharing the good news with his wife, but in fact, it can be seen that Lady Macbeth is under her husband's absolute control. From the words "perfectest", "mortal knowledge", and "what greatness is promised thee", Macbeth is convinced of the witches' prophecy. He does not ask Lady Macbeth to give him advice, but says "lay it to thy heart", which is a notice to Lady Macbeth that he is about to become king. Not only is Macbeth not worried that Lady Macbeth will inform on him, but he is more inclined to ask her to use all of her efforts to assist him in gaining the throne. This implies that before this, Lady Macbeth was always playing a subordinate role to Macbeth. She never refused his requests, and she had no right to object. She seems to have become accustomed to this state of being ruled and repressed.

The Disruption of the Other

Lust for Power and Great Ambition

The patriarchal culture of the West determines and consolidates gender cultural differences and inequalities that cannot be eradicated by constantly reinforcing the gender difference (Chen, 1995). It is widely believed that women are supposed to be kind, docile, fragile and always focused on the family. If a woman has masculine characteristics or aspires to male-specific power, then she is not in line with the social gender image, and will not only be despised by the society, but will also cause people's psychological resentment (Liu, 2006). Feminism aims to change the power relations between men and women, and it is the fact that strong power is in the hands of men that drives women's desire for male-dominated power.

Lady Macbeth is such a woman who is thirsty for power and has extraordinary ambitions. This is inconsistent with the image of the female Other in the patriarchal society. Lady Macbeth's desire has been suppressed by male authority for a long time before the arrival of Macbeth's letter. However, after reading Macbeth's letter, her latent ambition and yearning for power can no longer be suppressed. She shouts:

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! (Shakespeare, 1998, 1.5.44-54)

Obviously, Lady Macbeth already has gender consciousness at this point. In addition to "unsex me here", her words also involve "take my milk for gall". According to the theory of Humorism, "gall" is the masculine

and “milk” is feminine (Zhang, 2019). This indicates that Lady Macbeth has become aware of her own situation of being marginalized. Dissatisfied with her inferior female status, she decides to pursue the power traditionally held by men. These extreme words not only represent the outbreak of her ambition and lust for power, but also symbolize the awakening of her subjective sense, the sprouting of women's liberation ideology, and the subversion of her identity as the Other.

The ambitions and urges of Lady Macbeth are quite strong. Even before her and Macbeth's murder plan is carried out, she already “feels now the future in the instant” (Shakespeare, 1998, 1.5.62-63). She expresses her greed for power explicitly: “Which shall to all our nights and days to come give solely sovereign sway and masterdom” (Shakespeare, 1998, 1.5.77-78). However, she is aware that in this society she is unable to participate directly in politics, so she decides to make use of her husband to display her ability and thus gain power.

Extraordinary Boldness and Firm Determination

In a patriarchal society, the female Other is fragile, kind and docile. In Act II, Scene III, Macduff is reluctant to tell Lady Macbeth about the death of King Duncan for fear that she will not be able to bear it. He says, “'tis not for you to hear what I can speak: The repetition, in a woman's ear, would murder as it fell” (Shakespeare, 1998, 2.3.101-103). This shows that in his imagination, women are fragile and sensitive.

As mentioned above, Lady Macbeth's soliloquy includes the following lines: “Stop up the access and passage to remorse, that no compunctious visitings of nature shake my fell purpose” (Shakespeare, 1998, 1.5.48-50). It reflects her rejection of the goodness of her original nature. After this, her firm determination to commit murder and extraordinary boldness emerge, subverting the image of the female Other in the patriarchal society.

After learning that King Duncan is coming to Macbeth's castle, Lady Macbeth wants to carry out the murder plan immediately. She says to Macbeth, “he that's coming must be provided for: and you shall put this night's great business into my dispatch” (Shakespeare, 1998, 1.5.74-76). Hearing this, Macbeth hesitates, so Lady Macbeth continues to strengthen Macbeth's resolve by saying “only look up clear; To alter favour ever is to fear: Leave all the rest to me” (Shakespeare, 1998, 1.5.80-82). These words unequivocally demonstrate Lady Macbeth's determination to take advantage of this fantastic opportunity to carry out her plot to seize power.

What is more, Lady Macbeth has extraordinary boldness and strong will. After King Duncan arrives at Macbeth's castle, she calmly orders her husband to execute the murder plan step by step. She concludes that “when Duncan is asleep—whereto the rather shall his day's hard journey soundly invite him” (Shakespeare, 1998, 1.7.68-70). By the time she gets the two officers drunk, they can “perform upon the unguarded Duncan” (Shakespeare, 1998, 1.7.76-77), and let his officers “bear the guilt of great quell” (Shakespeare, 1998, 1.7.77-79). She also intends to deceive people by bawling with Macbeth after the news of Duncan's death gets out. The plan goes well at first, but surprisingly, Macbeth brings back the two daggers after the murder, and he does not dare to go and put them with the officers. Lady Macbeth reproves his cowardice, saying that “the sleeping and the dead are but as pictures: 'tis the eye of childhood that fears a painted devil” (Shakespeare, 1998, 2.2.68-70). She takes the daggers and then places them under the pillows of the two officers, after which she smears Duncan's blood on their faces. Lady Macbeth's guts is absolutely shocking. Also, at the feast in Act

III, Scene IV, Macbeth has a hallucination of seeing Banquo's ghost. He is so nervous and horrified that he begins to speak to Banquo's ghost without regard to the occasion. Although Lady Macbeth also feels painful and highly nervous after relying on bloody means to achieve the goal, she still pretends to be fine with a strong will to stabilize the situation. She keeps reminding her husband to stay calm and entertain the guests while keeping an eye on the guests' reaction and giving them explanations. Finally, she ends the party decisively to prevent Macbeth from revealing the truth about the murder.

Outstanding Eloquence

In patriarchal societies, language is a male privilege, which is taken advantage of by men to prove their existence and value, and as a tool used to gain status and power (Zhang, 2008). In their eyes, the female Other is supposed to be silent. Nevertheless, Lady Macbeth breaks this stereotype. With her outstanding eloquence, Macbeth finally stops wavering and succeeds in the murder of Duncan.

When Macbeth hesitates, Lady Macbeth uses a series of rhetorical questions in a heckling tone to point out that Macbeth is a weak-willed and easily shaken coward, and to arouse his courage by provoking:

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? (Shakespeare, 1998, 1.7.39-49)

Then Lady Macbeth continues to provoke, question, and torture his manhood: "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" (Shakespeare, 1998, 1.7.55-57). Macbeth is afraid of failure, so Lady Macbeth assures him "we'll not fail" (Shakespeare, 1998, 1.7.67-68). Through these words Lady Macbeth cleverly plays on the castration anxiety in Macbeth's mind and helps him regain his courage.

Causes of Lady Macbeth's Tragedy

Lady Macbeth's subversion of the position as the Other does not seem to last long. Since the murder of Duncan, Lady Macbeth's power and influence has begun to weaken. *Macbeth* has 27 scenes in 5 acts, in which Lady Macbeth appears in 9. Lady Macbeth appears in eight scenes in the first three acts. In the last two acts, however, she appears in only one scene. By the time Lady Macbeth is last seen, she has developed severe sleepwalking and hallucinations, always thinking that her hands are red with blood. No matter how hard she washes them, she cannot clean them. "Out, damned spot! out, I say!" (Shakespeare, 1998, 5.1.31). "Here's the smell of the blood still: all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand. Oh, oh, oh!" (Shakespeare, 1998, 5.1.45-47). It can be seen that Lady Macbeth has already have a nervous breakdown, almost insane. In Act V, Scene V, Lady Macbeth finally comes to ruin and ends her tragic life.

How does the previously ruthless Lady Macbeth end up in this position? As mentioned in the previous section, Lady Macbeth represses the goodness in her female nature in order to pursue power. She says,

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. (Shakespeare, 1998, 1.7.60-65)

These words may seem vicious, but the real reason for her saying them is to suppress and deny the better aspects of her female nature. Here, "babe" represents "compassion" and "milk" represents "tenderness". From her perspective, it is difficult for her to help Macbeth succeed in his murder plan by having feelings of goodwill in herself. Therefore, she has to harden her heart with these words, and try to strengthen her guts against fear and conscience. Besides, after reading Macbeth's letter, Lady Macbeth says, "yet do I fear thy nature; It is too full o' the milk of human kindness to catch the nearest way" (Shakespeare, 1998, 1.5.16-18). In fact, "the milk of human kindness" is as much about Macbeth as it is about her. Yet it is never that easy to completely remove the fragility and goodness of one's own nature, and to separate from a part of oneself in the past. At the end of the feast, Lady Macbeth exclaims, "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" (Shakespeare, 1998, 3.2.6-9). After the bloody murder, she is still unable to escape the influence of her nature and thus feels pain and anxiety that cannot be relieved. To some extent, this leads to her final madness.

Furthermore, her estrangement from Macbeth also results in the tragedy. Lady Macbeth appears in eight scenes in the first three acts because Macbeth still needs her help to take the throne. Lady Macbeth, as a woman living in a patriarchal world, has no means for her ambition, so she has to obtain power through her husband (Klett, 2003). In order to do so, Lady Macbeth temporarily subverts the identity of the Other, occupying a dominant position. In the fourth and fifth acts, Lady Macbeth only appears once, because Macbeth has ascended to the throne of the king, and his political career no longer needs Lady Macbeth's participation. Lady Macbeth consequently loses the opportunity to pursue and enjoy power, losing her temporary dominant position and ending the subversion of the position as the Other. Her repression of the nature fails to achieve its purpose. She longs to go back to the past but can never be the original self who was not stained with blood. As a result, she can no longer find her own way out.

In essence, however, all of this is Shakespeare's plot setup. Because in Shakespeare's four great tragedies, all the female characters are the foil for the male characters, and their tragedies only serve to set off the greater tragedy of the men (Wang, 2013). Lady Macbeth's death is a necessity for the development of the plot, and she is a victim of Shakespeare's choice. It is difficult to determine whether Shakespeare is a feminist or a misogynist, because it can also be interpreted as an indictment of the situation of women in a patriarchal society at the time. Anyway, there is no doubt that the root cause of Lady Macbeth's tragedy lies in the marginalization of the female Other in a patriarchal society.

Conclusion

Through the interpretation of Lady Macbeth's subversion of the original identity of the Other and her eventual destruction, we find that Lady Macbeth is not a completely evil woman in the traditional sense. After awakening to the idea of women's emancipation, she resolutely chooses to rebel, and demonstrates the excellent qualities she possessed, such as firm determination, extraordinary boldness, and outstanding eloquence. Although she chooses to use harsh tactics to fight for equal status with males, her nature actually has a good side, which reflects the complexity of human nature. Moreover, Lady Macbeth's tragedy illustrates that women have a tender nature that is hard to entirely give up, and that women's pursuit of equality and self-awareness has always been constrained by patriarchal societies. Lady Macbeth's rebellion ends in failure, but her pioneering spirit undoubtedly holds profound enlightening significance for future generations. It also signifies that the road to women's liberation is still long and necessitates the concerted efforts of everyone.

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