

## Breaking the Stereotypes?: Interpreting and Interrogating the Roles of Women in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*

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### Abstract

'Breaking the stereotypes' is one of the major key issues in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. At first Lady Macbeth is shown as a brave woman who is against the stereotypes and tries to access some male characteristics. She is presented as though she excels her husband in power and mental strength. According to Materialist Feminism theory, despite her earlier show of strength, her eventual weakness and suicide is a result of a patriarchal portrayal of her gender. As she does not apply her intelligence for any domestic duty, patriarchy defines her intelligence as a flaw and shows her as unnatural and unfulfilled as a woman. Patriarchal society always motivates her not to go beyond the periphery of her gender. Patriarchy controls her movement. The moment she tries to cross the so-called society-constructed female limit, she has been categorized as selfish and abnormal. Sandra M Gilbert thinks that Lady Macbeth is rendered a ridiculous figure because though she has been represented as undaunted at the first phase of the play, but gradually she loses her strength and stamina and has been turned into a figure to be pitied. The first words of her when she receives her husband's letter indicate her inversion of conventional gender roles. Her call to the devilish spirits suggests her desire to cross the social boundary of women. By unsexing herself, she is no longer playing the role of a conventional lady confined within domesticity, because she no longer performs the activities generally performed by a lady. She is represented by patriarchy as inhuman, dehumanized, unnatural and a dark parody of femaleness. Many Shakespearean scholars consider her to be an evil and a malicious being. She is the primary female character in the play, giving us insight into Shakespeare's construction of the female gender. He imbues Lady Macbeth not only with feminine qualities but also with masculinity. We should not consider her as a monster simply because she rejects the traditional role of a woman. She is also full of intense love and passion which motivate her to follow the path of evil only for her passionate love for her husband. Again, the witches having control over man is unnatural conventionally and naturally the witches carry with them a certain power than is usually reserved for men. The key arguments/findings of this paper are that patriarchy will never allow women to go beyond their periphery and if they try to do so, they will be dehumanized. The objective of the paper is to highlight that in relation to feminist ideas of subverting traditional roles held by society *Macbeth* is arguably a text that positively raises questions about unequal gender stereotypes and figures out challenges for equal rights of women.

**Keywords:** Patriarchy, gender, female, Lady Macbeth.

'Breaking the stereotypes' is one of the major key issues in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Initially Lady Macbeth appears before us as courageous and dauntless. She seems to be unconventional and goes beyond the gendered role of a woman. She is presented as though she excels her husband in power and mental strength. According to Materialist Feminist theory, despite her earlier show of strength, her eventual weakness and suicide is a result of a patriarchal portrayal of her gender. During the course of the play, Lady Macbeth is kept isolated from other women. While her strength is great, she is not powerful enough, able to deal with a murder. For being a woman, she is represented as inherently weak. She does not apply her intelligence for performing any domestic duty. Patriarchy defines her intelligence as a flaw and as an indicator that she is unnatural and unfulfilled as a woman. Patriarchal society always motivates her to play the role of a mother. She is seen as selfish and abnormal when she confesses in *Macbeth* that there is a situation in which she would "[dash] [her child's] brains out" (I, Vii), a very unnatural statement according to patriarchy's belief that women's desire to have and protect children is a part of "their natural biological make up" (Tyson 97). Though intelligent and strong at the beginning of *Macbeth*, she is reduced to an insignificant person, haunted by nightmares and guilt as a result of a patriarchal portrayal of her gender.

Sandra M Gilbert thinks that Lady Macbeth is rendered a ridiculous figure because though she has been represented as undaunted at the first phase of the play, but gradually she loses her strength and stamina and has been turned into a figure to be pitied. The first words of Lady Macbeth when she receives her husband's letter indicate the inversion of conventional gender roles. Her call to the devilish spirits suggests her desire to cross the social boundary of women as she says in the play "Come,... unsex me here... Make thick my blood,... That no compunctious visitings of Nature shake my fell purpose,... Come to my woman's breasts, And take my milk for gall..." (I, V, 40-48) By unsexing herself, she is no longer playing the role of a conventional lady, because she no longer performs the activities generally supposed to be performed by a lady. The breast milk which is a source of nourishment and life has no value to her. Rather she wants to be filled by cruelty and poison. Janet Adelman in her paper "Born of

Woman: Fantasies of Maternal Power in Macbeth” states, “Perhaps Lady Macbeth is asking the spirits to take her milk as gall, to nurse from her breast and find in her milk their sustaining poison...In these lines Lady Macbeth focuses on the culture’s fear of maternal nursery” (Adelman 40) Lady Macbeth negates the role of breast milk as sustainer of life as she wishes to fill her breast with poison. She asserts her role not as a caring mother but as an ambitious person. Adelman states “The metaphors in which Lady Macbeth frames the stopping up of remorse, that is, suggests that she imagines an attack on the reproductive passages of her own body, on what makes her specifically female”. (Adelman, 40) But for negating the conventional role of motherhood and going against the tradition, she is represented as inhuman, a dark parody of femaleness. She has been dehumanized and presented as unnatural being. Towards the end of the play, both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth’s roles have been inversed. Macbeth becomes courageous to kill one after another including the innocent Lady Macduff and her children. While, on the other hand, Lady Macbeth ultimately falls a prey to feminine helplessness losing her self-control in sleep-walking scene. She has been brought back to a role which is traditionally assigned to a woman by the society.

Many Shakespearean scholars consider Lady Macbeth to be an evil and a malicious being. Lady Macbeth is such creation of Shakespeare who gives us a thorough idea about Shakespeare’s representation of gender. At earlier stages, she has been represented as having qualities which society does not consider as ‘feminine’. But the fact is that she is degraded as ‘monster’ because she does not conform to the gender stereotype. In Shakespeare’s play what is to be considered is his presentation of women characters. Lady Macbeth is often considered as devilish and a “Species of female fury”. (Jameson 362) Lady Macbeth desires to unsex herself. What is indicated here is that females are generally considered as weaker than the males. As if Lady Macbeth tries to shrug off her ‘feminine frailty’ and fill her with ‘masculine strength’. She hoped that the menstrual cycle shouldn’t make her emotional to create obstruction in her initiative. Again we are given another glimpse into her tendency toward violence when she claims in *Macbeth*: “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”. (I, VII, 54-59) These

two statements would perhaps cause the readers to label Lady Macbeth as an evil woman who will murder anyone, even her own child to go ahead. But if we state that she “is nothing but a fierce, cruel woman exciting her husband to butcher a poor old king” (Jameson 360) is a misevaluation and understatement of this character. Her intense love and passion motivate her to follow the path of evil. Catherine Boyd says that “Her violation is inspired by human love, intense passionate love for her husband”. (Boyd 174) Lady Macbeth knows that her husband has a desire to be the king. Naturally she wants to offer full support to her husband to materialize his desire.

The witches, though women but having male features too as Banquo says, “You should be women, /And yet your beards forbid me to interpret/That you are so”. (I, iii, 46-48) They are the clear authority figure in Macbeth’s life. The fact is that the witches having control over a man is unnatural and naturally the witches are shown as unnatural. The witches and Lady Macbeth are represented in such a way as if they do not possess the so-called natural characteristics of a woman. She is constructed as unnatural in a more subtle way when she negates the conventional role of motherhood.

Shakespeare through his female characters shows multiple aspects. At one point we sympathize with her, at another we despise her. She shows duality in her character. She can be devilish, at the same time pitiable. Jameson states, “The crime of Lady Macbeth terrifies us in proportion as we sympathize with her and that this sympathy is in proportion to the degree of pride, passion and intellect we may ourselves possess. It is good to behold and to tremble at the possible result of the noblest faculties uncontrolled or perverted”. (Jameson 360) Lady Macbeth’s character is portrayed in such a manner as to prompt us to question the gender stereotype.

Lady Macbeth expresses her courage and strength and even goes beyond her husband at the initial stage of the play. When Macbeth hesitates to execute the murder of King Duncan, Lady Macbeth takes control of the situation and chastises him. She says in the play: “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”. (I, vii, 49-51) She wants to assert that when Macbeth first concurred to kill Duncan, he had his manliness, but now as he feels hesitant, he has lost his manhood. To further

state her point, she states: “I would, while it was smiling in my face,/ Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums/And dashed the brains out, had I so sworn”. (I, vii, 56-58) Adelman states, “Lady Macbeth notoriously makes the murder of Duncan the test of Macbeth’s virility; if he cannot perform the murder, he is in effect reduced to the helplessness of an infant subject to her rage” (Adelman 42) Lady Macbeth appears to be stronger than her husband because she has the power to make Macbeth feel that he may be regarded as a vulnerable infant if he cannot fulfil his promise.

Macbeth quickly starts to obey Lady Macbeth and even reverses her. He says, “Bring forth men-children only,/For thy undaunted mettle should compose/Nothing but males”. (I, vii, 72-74) He wants to state that Lady Macbeth’s personality is fitting for producing males. Macbeth says that Lady Macbeth can give birth to such children who will be equally courageous like her. By calling her a male, Macbeth tries to establish the supremacy of males in terms of strength and courage. Adelman states, “Macbeth imagines Lady Macbeth the mother to infants sharing her hardness, born in effect without vulnerability”. (Adelman 43) Gender roles are inversed in the play. Lady Macbeth tries to cross her feminine gender stereotype. At the later part of the play Lady Macbeth has been turned into a mockery having lost all her previous strength and stamina.

The fact that Macbeth can only be defeated by someone who is not born of woman also establishes the stereotypical role of women. Macduff is not considered as “born from a woman” because he was born from a Caesarian section. The fact is that the representation of women as inherently weak is utterly discriminatory. Macduff becomes a super-human man because he “was from his mother’s womb/Untimely ripp’d”. (V, viii, 15-16) The violence of the image suggests that he has been prematurely deprived of a nurturing maternal presence. But the prophecy indicates that this deprivation is the source of Macduff’s strength. The violent separation from the mother is the mark of the successful male. The final battle between Macbeth and Macduff thus replays the initial battle between Macbeth and Macdonwald. But Macduff has now taken the place of Macbeth. He carries with him the mere power given to him by the Caesarian solution and Macbeth is retrospectively revealed as Macdonwald, the woman’s man.

The play’s ultimate motif to restore order at the end also implies the radical exclusion of the women from the stage. The women, who initially seemed to be so powerful and dominating

at the initial stage, are pushed into the backstage. Lady Macbeth is represented in the later stage of the play in such a trivial manner that the news of her suicide seems meaningless. Macbeth's reaction to the news of Lady Macbeth's death further confirms her insignificance: "She should have died hereafter;/There would have been a time for such a word". (V, v, 17-18) Her hesitation to kill Duncan reveals her traditional inborn weakness assigned to a woman by society. Initially Lady Macbeth is shown to represent against gender stereotype but gradually as the play moves forward her weakness gets revealed. She ultimately becomes a gender stereotype. The suicide committed by her indicates that she ultimately fails to go against the stereotypes and that she is emotionally weak and fragile.

To speak about the witches, we may assert that they have literally departed from the stage and so diminished in their power and influence that Macbeth gives no further importance to them and accuses their male masters for his defeat, the fiends. Even Lady Macduff has been given an insignificant role as if she exists only to disappear. Again the prophecy regarding the Birnam wood suggests that the natural order will be restored excluding the females. Janet Adelman said, "The family tree, like the march of Birnam wood itself, is relentlessly male: Duncan and sons, Banquo and son, Siward and son. There are no daughters and scarcely any mention of mothers in these family trees. We are brought as close as possible here to the fantasy of family without women. In that sense, Birnam wood is the perfect emblem of the nature that triumphs at the end of the play: nature without generative possibility, nature without women". The fantasy of escape from the females can also be seen in the plays' psychological geography. Adelman said, "The shift from Scotland to England is strikingly the shift from the mother's to the father's terrain. Scotland is the realm of Lady Macbeth and the witches, the realm in which the mother is the grave, the realm appropriately ruled by their bad son Macbeth. The escape to England is an escape from their power into the realm of the good father-king and his surrogate son Malcolm "unknown to woman" (IV, iii, 126) At the end of the play when Malcolm returns to Scotland mantled in the power England gives him, in effect bringing the power of the fathers with him, supported by Macduff who was by birth not of "woman's born". Malcolm ultimately triumphs easily over Macbeth, the mother's son.

Thus in the conclusion we can say that though the play apparently broke the typical stereotypical boundary of women in society in the initial stage, but gradually in the later part of the play they were conventionalized. Suppression of the individuality of the females by categorizing their roles within domesticity is put into focus. In relation to feminist ideas of subverting traditional roles held by society *Macbeth* is arguably a text that positively attempts to raise questions about unequal gender stereotypes and figures out the challenges for equal rights of women.

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