

## **Cognitive Distortions, Gender Performativity, and Psychological Collapse: A Cognitive-Behavioural Reappraisal of Lady Macbeth in Shakespeare's *Macbeth***

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### **Abstract**

This paper offers an interdisciplinary re-evaluation of Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth* by synthesizing Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) with gender theory to illuminate the psychological underpinnings of her actions and eventual disintegration. While earlier scholarship has alternately cast Lady Macbeth as a transgressive figure, a catalyst of ambition, or a moral aberration, the present study foregrounds her cognition—specifically, the role of systematic thinking errors—in structuring her behaviour and affect. Drawing upon foundational CBT principles articulated by Aaron T. Beck, the paper identifies a pattern of cognitive distortions in Lady Macbeth's speech and conduct, including dichotomous thinking, catastrophizing, emotional reasoning, and personalization. These distortions are not treated as isolated mental habits but are situated within a gendered matrix shaped by early modern patriarchy.

Engaging with the concept of gender performativity developed by Judith Butler, the analysis demonstrates how Lady Macbeth's attempt to repudiate femininity and appropriate masculine-coded power produces a sustained cognitive dissonance. Her iconic invocation to be "unsexed," her strategic orchestration of Duncan's murder, and her later descent into obsessive guilt are read as stages in a trajectory where maladaptive beliefs intensify rather than resolve conflict. The paper further extends its scope through a comparative reading of Ophelia in *Hamlet* and Desdemona in *Othello*, showing how different configurations of gendered expectation yield distinct cognitive vulnerabilities.

By bringing together literary criticism, feminist theory, and clinical psychology, this study proposes that Lady Macbeth's tragedy is neither purely moral nor purely political but fundamentally cognitive—an outcome of entrenched distortions interacting with internalized gender norms. The findings underscore the value of CBT-informed literary analysis for reinterpreting canonical texts and for tracing the historical textures of psychological experience.

**Keywords:** Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, cognitive distortions, gender performativity, Lady Macbeth, Shakespeare, patriarchy, psychological criticism, early modern drama

Among Shakespeare's tragedies, *Macbeth* has persistently invited readings that probe the nexus of ambition, morality, and power. Central to these inquiries is Lady Macbeth, whose dramatic presence is at once catalytic and enigmatic. Early criticism often reduced her to an emblem of unnatural ambition—a figure who violates normative femininity and thereby unleashes chaos. Later feminist scholarship complicated this view by interpreting her as a site

where gender constraints are both contested and reinscribed. Yet, even as these approaches have enriched our understanding, they frequently stop short of examining the *processes of thought* that animate her actions.

This paper argues that Lady Macbeth's trajectory can be productively reinterpreted through the framework of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), a model that emphasizes the constitutive role of cognition in shaping emotional and behavioural outcomes. Rather than treating her as simply "ambitious" or "evil," a CBT-oriented reading asks: *What patterns of thinking enable and sustain her decisions? How do these patterns interact with the gendered scripts available to her?* Such questions shift the focus from moral judgment to cognitive mechanism.

The relevance of CBT to literary analysis lies in its identification of recurrent thinking errors—cognitive distortions—that bias perception and decision-making. When mapped onto Lady Macbeth's speeches, these distortions reveal a consistent reliance on absolutist categories, anticipatory dread, and affect-driven inference. At the same time, these cognitive tendencies are not free-floating; they are embedded in a cultural field where gender is regulated through norms and expectations. Here, the insights of Judith Butler are crucial. Butler's notion that gender is constituted through repeated acts—performances that cite and reiterate social norms—helps explain why Lady Macbeth experiences her aspiration to power as requiring a repudiation of femininity.

The central claim of this paper is that Lady Macbeth's downfall is best understood as the cumulative effect of *cognitive distortions operating within a gendered regime*. Her attempt to "unsex" herself does not simply mark rebellion; it inaugurates a sustained internal conflict wherein incompatible belief systems coexist. As the play progresses, this conflict intensifies, culminating in the sleepwalking scene where cognition, affect, and bodily action collapse into compulsive repetition.

To substantiate this claim, the paper proceeds in five stages. First, it outlines the relevant principles of CBT, with attention to specific distortions. Second, it situates these within a gender-theoretical frame. Third, it offers close readings of key scenes in *Macbeth* to demonstrate how Lady Macbeth's cognition unfolds. Fourth, it introduces a comparative perspective through Ophelia and Desdemona. Finally, it reflects on the broader implications of a CBT-informed literary methodology.

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) is grounded in the fundamental premise that cognition, emotion, and behaviour are interdependent systems that continuously interact with one another. According to Aaron T. Beck, individuals do not respond directly to external events but rather to their interpretations of those events, which are often shaped by automatic thoughts. These automatic thoughts may not always be accurate reflections of reality; instead, they frequently take the form of systematic cognitive distortions that bias perception and emotional response.

Such distortions include dichotomous or black-and-white thinking, where experiences are interpreted in extreme and mutually exclusive categories without acknowledging nuance or gradation. Another common distortion is catastrophizing, in which individuals anticipate the worst possible outcomes and treat them as inevitable or uncontrollable. Emotional reasoning further distorts cognition by equating subjective feelings with objective truth, leading individuals to assume that what they feel must necessarily reflect reality. Overgeneralization

extends isolated events into broad, sweeping conclusions, while personalization involves attributing excessive responsibility to oneself or others for events that may be influenced by multiple external factors.

Taken together, these cognitive distortions contribute to the formation of maladaptive belief systems that influence emotional stability and behavioural patterns. Within a literary framework, this model becomes particularly useful as it allows characters to be read not merely as moral or symbolic figures but as psychologically structured subjects whose actions emerge from identifiable patterns of thought. Applying CBT to literary analysis thus enables a more nuanced understanding of character motivation, emotional trajectory, and psychological complexity, especially in texts where internal conflict plays a central dramatic role.

Importantly, CBT does not treat these distortions as random errors but as patterned responses linked to underlying schemas—often formed through socialization. This emphasis on learned cognition opens a productive interface with gender theory.

In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler reconceptualizes gender as performative, arguing that it is constituted through repeated acts rather than anchored in a stable essence. Within patriarchal contexts, these acts are regulated by norms that prescribe appropriate behaviours for men and women. Femininity, in early modern England, was associated with obedience, compassion, and moral restraint; masculinity, with authority, aggression, and decisiveness.

Lady Macbeth's desire for power thus confronts a structural constraint: the available script for female identity does not accommodate sovereign ambition. Her response is to reconfigure her identity by rejecting femininity altogether—"unsex me here"—and adopting traits coded as masculine. However, as Butler would suggest, such a reconfiguration is never complete; it remains haunted by the norms it seeks to displace. This produces a condition akin to cognitive dissonance, wherein incompatible beliefs generate psychological strain.

Lady Macbeth's first appearance (Act 1, Scene 5) is mediated through Macbeth's letter, which recounts the witches' prophecy. Her immediate reaction—"Glamis thou art, and Cawdor; and shalt be / What thou art promised"—reveals a rapid extrapolation from partial evidence. Here, we see **overgeneralization**: a prophecy is treated as a guaranteed outcome. The modal "shalt" converts possibility into certainty.

Her subsequent reflection—"Yet do I fear thy nature; / It is too full o' the milk of human kindness"—introduces a schema regarding masculinity and power. Kindness is construed as an impediment, suggesting an underlying belief that effective agency requires emotional hardness. This schema sets the stage for her later interventions.

The invocation to spirits—"Come, you spirits / That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here"—is perhaps the most cited instance of Lady Macbeth's rejection of normative femininity. The speech proceeds through a series of imperatives: "take my milk for gall," "stop up th' access and passage to remorse." The language constructs a stark binary: milk/gall, nurture/cruelty, feminine/masculine.

From a CBT perspective, this is **dichotomous thinking** in its most explicit form. Rather than integrating qualities, Lady Macbeth seeks total substitution. The extremity of the request indicates a belief that partial transformation is insufficient—an absolutist stance that forecloses flexibility.

At the same time, the speech reveals **emotional reasoning**. Her aversion to “remorse” is grounded not in a rational assessment of consequences but in the feeling that compassion is incompatible with success. Emotion becomes the criterion of truth.

In Act 1, Scene 7, Lady Macbeth confronts Macbeth’s hesitation. Her rhetorical strategy combines **catastrophizing** and **personalization**. She implies that failure to act will permanently foreclose their future—“From this time / Such I account thy love”—thereby framing inaction as catastrophic not only politically but relationally.

Simultaneously, she personalizes the issue by equating Macbeth’s reluctance with a deficiency in masculinity: “When you durst do it, then you were a man.” This statement reflects her internalized schema linking action with gender identity. It also exerts pressure by transforming a political decision into a test of personal worth.

Her shocking declaration—“I would, while it was smiling in my face, / Have pluck’d my nipple from his boneless gums / And dash’d the brains out”—extends the logic of dichotomous thinking. Maternal tenderness is not merely set aside but violently negated. The hyperbolic imagery underscores the extremity of her cognitive framework.

Following Duncan’s murder, Lady Macbeth initially exhibits composure: “A little water clears us of this deed.” This line exemplifies **minimization**, a related cognitive distortion whereby the gravity of an act is downplayed. The metaphor of water suggests a simple, external solution to what is in fact a profound moral and psychological rupture.

However, cracks soon appear. When Macbeth fixates on the imagined voice crying “Sleep no more,” Lady Macbeth attempts to regulate his cognition—“Consider it not so deeply.” Her strategy is to suppress intrusive thoughts, but this suppression is itself unstable. CBT literature notes that attempts to forcibly exclude thoughts often intensify their recurrence.

In Act 3, Scene 4, during the banquet, Lady Macbeth must manage Macbeth’s public unraveling. Her aside—“You have displaced the mirth, broke the good meeting”—reveals an acute awareness of social perception. Here, **personalization** operates at a collective level: Macbeth’s behaviour is experienced as a reflection on her own status.

Her attempt to dismiss his visions—“This is the very painting of your fear”—again invokes emotional reasoning, but now in a defensive mode. She attributes his perception to fear, yet cannot fully contain its effects. The scene marks a transition from control to strain.

The sleepwalking scene (Act 5, Scene 1) provides the most vivid representation of Lady Macbeth’s psychological collapse. Her fragmented utterances—“Out, damned spot! out, I say!”—enact a compulsive ritual aimed at erasing guilt. The “spot” becomes a metonym for the crime, resistant to removal.

This is **emotional reasoning** at its most debilitating: the persistent feeling of guilt is taken as incontrovertible evidence of contamination. The body becomes the site where cognition and affect converge, producing repetitive action without resolution.

Her recollection—“Who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?”—signals the return of repressed content. The earlier minimization (“a little water clears us”) is undone by the sheer magnitude of imagined blood. The mind oscillates between denial and inundation.

Lady Macbeth's distortions are inseparable from the gendered constraints she navigates. Her ambition must be articulated through Macbeth, as she lacks direct access to sovereign power. This structural limitation intensifies her reliance on cognitive strategies—persuasion, reframing, emotional manipulation.

Her performance of masculinity is thus both strategic and symptomatic. It enables action but also generates internal conflict. The repeated need to assert control—over Macbeth, over herself, over perception—reflects an underlying instability. The very traits she adopts to secure power become sources of strain.

A comparative reading of Shakespearean female characters such as Ophelia in *Hamlet* and Desdemona in *Othello* further clarifies the relationship between gendered expectations and cognitive processes in early modern drama. These characters, while differing significantly in temperament and narrative function, both illustrate how patriarchal constraints shape psychological vulnerability in distinct ways.

Ophelia's trajectory is marked by emotional fragility and increasing passivity, largely shaped by the absence of autonomous agency within the social and familial structures that govern her life. Her cognitive world is profoundly influenced by external authority figures, particularly Polonius and Hamlet, resulting in a fragmented sense of selfhood. This lack of psychological autonomy contributes to her eventual mental disintegration, which can be understood as emerging from sustained emotional overload and unresolved trauma. Her madness, expressed through disjointed speech and symbolic song, reflects a breakdown in coherent cognitive processing, where suppressed emotions and conflicting loyalties surface in distorted and nonlinear forms.

Desdemona, by contrast, is characterized by steadfast loyalty and emotional consistency, particularly in her devotion to Othello. However, this very trust becomes a cognitive vulnerability, as she is unable to recognize or fully process the growing signs of deception and manipulation around her. Her interpretive framework is shaped by an overreliance on emotional certainty and relational trust, which limits her capacity for critical reassessment of evidence. This results in a form of selective perception in which contradictory cues are either minimized or rationalized, ultimately contributing to her tragic fate.

In contrast to both Ophelia and Desdemona, Lady Macbeth's psychological configuration is marked by an opposing tendency. Her cognitive distortions arise not from passivity or excessive trust but from an overcompensatory drive toward control and dominance. This manifests as rigid dichotomous thinking, suppression of vulnerability, and an aggressive restructuring of identity in relation to power. Her psychological trajectory therefore highlights a different dimension of gendered cognition, wherein internalized expectations of strength produce their own form of instability. Collectively, these three figures illustrate how Shakespeare constructs female subjectivity as a site where cognition, emotion, and gender norms intersect in complex and often destabilizing ways.

The analysis presented here suggests that integrating CBT with literary study can yield insights that neither framework alone fully captures. By attending to patterns of thought, we can trace how characters negotiate internal and external pressures over time. When these patterns are situated within gendered structures, their stakes become clearer.

Lady Macbeth's tragedy, in this light, is not reducible to ambition or moral failure. It is the outcome of a sustained engagement with incompatible schemas—power versus femininity, action versus remorse—mediated through distorted cognition. Her initial certainty gives way to fragmentation, revealing the limits of absolutist thinking.

Re-reading Lady Macbeth through CBT and gender theory reveals a character whose actions are driven by identifiable cognitive mechanisms shaped by social norms. Her invocation to be “unsexed,” her orchestration of regicide, and her eventual descent into compulsive guilt are stages in a process where distorted thinking intensifies conflict rather than resolving it.

This approach not only enriches our understanding of *Macbeth* but also demonstrates the broader applicability of psychological models to literary texts. By foregrounding cognition, we can better appreciate the complexity of Shakespeare's characters and the enduring relevance of their struggles.

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