Thema: Lady Macbeth – A “Fiend-Like Queen?”

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1. Introduction

"However appalling she may be, she is sublime."

The figure of Lady Macbeth has always been of great interest, and each of the numerous interpretations cast light on her from a different point of view. She is often dismissed as a "fiend-like queen", regarded as Macbeth’s temptress and spur to his crimes: Being obsessed by her ambition, she urges her hesitant husband to the murder. Considered utterly monstrous and terrifying, Lady Macbeth arouses horror and repugnance when she cold-bloodedly states she would kill her own child, or when she signs away her soul to the evil spirits. For this reason, some critics conceive her as totally depraved, the “monster“ of Shakespearean creation. Others, G. Wilson Knight for instance, thinks her the tool of the dark powers, as no human characteristics could explain her viciousness:

She is not merely a woman of strong will: she is a woman possessed – possessed of evil passion. [...] The scope and sweep of her evil passion is tremendous, irresistible, ultimate. She is an embodiment – for one mighty hour – of evil absolute and extreme.

According to Knight, Lady Macbeth’s deliberate submission to the evil spirits cannot merely be put down to human will-power, however strong it may be: “To interpret the figure of Lady Macbeth in terms of ‘ambition’ and ‘will’ is, indeed, a futile commentary."
Her invocation “is inhuman – as though the woman were controlled by an evil something which masters her, mind and soul. [...] Whatever it be it leaves her a pure woman, with a woman’s frailty, as soon as ever its horrible work is done."
Other critics, however, show lenience towards her and try to find evidence that she has unjustly been called ‘fiend-like’ and is not guilty of tempting Macbeth. Some even tend to sentimentalise and ‘transfigure’ her, especially 19th century critics: “In this astonishing creature one sees a woman in whose [...] composition are associated all the subjugating powers of intellect and all the
charms and graces of personal beauty.“ This critic even goes as far as to conjecture about her physical appearance as “fair, feminine, nay, perhaps, even fragile.“

In my view, neither simply ascribing her malevolence to supernatural powers nor freeing her of all guilt does justice to this Shakespearean character. In this paper, I will examine three different issues concerned with the figure of Lady Macbeth. First, I will try to work out a characterization and show how the course of events affects her as much as her relationship with her husband, which I will focus on secondly. The last point of this paper will be a brief comparison of Lady Macbeth and the Weird Sisters which is supposed to point out parallels and connections between them.

2. Character and development of Lady Macbeth

Ardent ambition is Lady Macbeth’s driving force: She is willing to neglect and abandon all human qualities in order to become Queen of Scotland, which seems to offer her everything she wishes for: greatness and glory, “sovereign sway and masterdom” (Act I, v, 70). She shows great strength of will; her desire to see her husband and herself on the throne cannot be crossed by any scruples or doubts. Lady Macbeth’s remarkable will-power is ruled by her emotions and her passion. Her ambition holds sway over her mind; her reason does not come in save for the ‘most practical purposes’, that is, for putting her plans into action. She does not think about the consequences of her and her husband’s deeds; everything that presently appears to help her to get closer to their target comes in handy. Lady Macbeth is neither prone to reflect on past events nor to take into account the outcome of her actions; her philosophy of life is rather simple and short-sighted:

"Things without all remedy
Should be without regard. What’s done is done." (Act III, ii, 11-12)
When she learns about the witches’ prophecies, she instantaneously decides to “catch the nearest way“ and incite her husband to murder Duncan. Therefore, she conjures up the dark spirits to free her of all womanly characteristics, such as tenderness and compassion:

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
Th’ effect and it. Come to my woman’s breasts,
And take my milk for gall, you murd’ring ministers, (Act I, v, 40-47)

To her, womanly features are simply troublesome, so they have to be done away with. She aligns them with mere weakness and frailty. In particular, she wants to rid herself of the maternal functions of her body. In addition, she does not simply ask the evil spirits to take away her mother’s milk and thus free her of any nurturing ability, but she wants her milk to be poisoned. As a result, her female features remain within her to all appearances, but their life-giving, nourishing properties have become the opposite and are perverted.

However, her invocation shows that she is well aware of her femininity, which she fears might interfere and conquer her if she does not contrive to get rid of it entirely. Moreover, she knows she is not as self-determined and independent as to be able to act according to her purposes: She needs to call upon the dark spirits to take away her sympathy and gentleness.

Her conscience does not torture her; no moral scruples hinder her from giving herself over to the ‘murdering ministers’. She appeals to them for bold resolution and cruelty to make her immune to all womanly regrets.

Yet, femininity is a fundamental part of her nature, which strongly contrasts with her ‘masculine’ will-power and ruthlessness. While she successfully spurs her husband to the murder, she evokes the image of herself as a mother:
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. (Act I, vii, 54-59)

Here she rejects her essential femininity a second time: First, she depicts herself as a caring mother who knows the intensity of motherly love. Nevertheless she claims she would cold-bloodedly kill her own child, just to be faithful to a horrible oath. For a brief moment, she gives the powerful image of maternal affection in her, but soon she violates and destroys this idea completely. “Lady Macbeth rejects her very nature as a woman, turns her aim from creation of life to its destruction.“

Her repulsion for her female qualities is, as it were, a fight within herself which she carefully keeps secret. In public, she acts as she is expected to; she perfectly fulfils the various roles she is supposed to play: She is the “Fair and noble hostess“ (Act I, vi, l. 24), as Duncan greets her. In addition, she is eloquent and skilful at pretending to be loyal and harmless, which is a major point of her tactic:

To beguile the time,
Look like the time; bear welcome in your eye,
Your hand, your tongue; look like th’ innocent flower,
But be the serpent under’t. (Act I, v, 63-66)

Lady Macbeth excellently adopts the role of the “most kind hostess“ (Act II, i, 16) when she welcomes Duncan in her castle. Her speech is highly articulate and artful (Act I, vi, 14-20; 25-28), which seems the more ironic, considering her murderous intent. “In all public scenes in the play she acts ‘like the innocent flower’; in the private scenes we see the ‘serpent under’t‘“. Macduff wants to spare her the terrible tiding of Duncan’s murder:
O gentle lady,

‘Tis not for you to hear what I can speak!
The repetition in a woman’s ear
Would murder as it fell. (Act II, iii, 83-86)

This clearly mirrors the generally shared view of women as being too tender and fragile to cope with such appalling news. Women are not supposed to play any meaningful role in the male world of politics and war, hence anything connected with this area has to be kept away from them. Lady Macbeth is presumed to live up to this perception, which is utterly cynical, considering her attitude towards female characteristics and her efforts to ‘clear’ herself of them. Yet she does not master that completely; her natural womanly - or rather human - feelings cannot be wiped out wholly. Immediately before the murder of Duncan, she discloses that she has been drinking alcohol to pluck up courage:

That which hath made them drunk hath made me bold;
What hath quench’d them hath given me fire. Hark!
Peace!
It was the owl that shriek’d [...] (Act II, ii, 1-2)

She tries to convince herself of her courage, but it is nothing but a sham: She is extremely nervous and anxious, an owl’s cry makes her start.

Lady Macbeth never succeeds in becoming a completely ‘unsexed’ demoniac creature or a “fiend-like queen“ (Act V, viii, 69). It is her human nature that hinders her from acting out of ‘direst cruelty’; even though she originally seemed willing to murder the king herself: “That my keen knife see not the wound it makes“ (Act I, v, 51). Furthermore, she admits she could not kill the sleeping Duncan herself since he reminded her of her father (Act II, ii, 12f.):

“Lady Macbeth’s threats of violence, for all their force and cruelty, are empty fantasies. It is Macbeth who converts them to hard reality.“
Her rigid self-discipline and determination are outstanding; she is resourceful and quick-witted, which allows her to remain in control of the situation. This helps her to save appearances and dispel suspicion whenever Macbeth runs the risk of giving himself away, e. g. when the murder of Duncan is discovered (Act 2, iii), Macbeth nearly betrays himself with his very elaborate speech. Provided that Lady Macbeth only feigns to pass out, she certainly does so to draw the attention away from him who is going too far in expressing his alleged dismay at Duncan’s death. On the other hand, her response to the news of Duncan’s murder is a “mistake in acting”: “Woe, alas! / What, in our house?” (Act II, iii, 89-90). Her reaction to this terrible piece of news seems rather clumsy and inappropriate; it contrasts considerably with her other insincere speeches on different occasions, which are articulate and credible.

Another example of her practicality and presence of mind is her behaviour during the banquet, where Macbeth, overwhelmed with the horror of his own deeds, fails to distinguish between reality and his own delusions. Again, Lady Macbeth is able to maintain her self-control and rationality while she struggles to explain Macbeth’s strange manner and finally dismisses their guests – or rather urges them to leave. (Act 3, iv).

Lady Macbeth does not allow any ethical values to give rise to questioning her target. In fact, there are no direct hints throughout the whole play that point out that once she had a sense of right and wrong.

Even so she cannot adhere to her strength and her confidence: After the murder of Duncan she is in a desolate and hopeless state of mind; it is the first occasion where she shows despair and depression:

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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. (Act III, ii, 4-7)
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Lady Macbeth realises that all their evil deeds have not rewarded them with the pleasure and happiness they had been craving for; she is totally disillusioned. The expressions ‘destruction’ and ‘doubtful joy’ could indicate a trace of remorse, but this cannot be proved definitely.

Lady Macbeth invariably loses her strength and her influence; her efforts to master the banquet finally exhaust her last resources. She is only a shade of her former self then, and eventually in the sleepwalking scene, her feminine characteristics reassert themselves; she has nothing to set against them. – This is one of the most ironical moments in the play: Lady Macbeth, who had powerfully tried to banish her feminine nature and had seemed to be considerably ‘tougher’ and less emotional than her husband must eventually yield to her nature. Suffering a mental breakdown, she loses her mind and her consciousness, and never regains it. She is driven insane, haunted by nightmares, unable to consciously stand reality and the confrontation with herself and her own deeds. Ironically, she can neither bear darkness, even though she once conjured up the night to be her ally. Her former presence of mind and self-restraint have given way to an all-encompassing brittleness and lack of self-control. She takes refuge in cutting herself off from reality by ceasing to perceive any occurrence around her and falling into total absent-mindedness, completely withdrawing into herself.

However, this is neither due to any pity for the murdered, nor to any sense of guilt for having coerced her husband into his frightening deeds. She is rather tortured by the fact that she cannot flee from the memory of the murder.

The coherence of her utterances is gone, she verbalizes the different remembrances and conceptions as they come to her confused and dreaming mind:

Out, damned spot! Out, I say! One, two; why then
‘tis time to do’t. Hell is murky. Fie, my lord, fie! a
soldier, and afeard? What need we fear who knows it,
when none can call our pow’r to account? Yet who
would have thought the old man to have had so much
blood in him? (Act V, i, 32-37)
She has changed to prose now; her words reflect a strange mixture between her vain attempts to reassure herself and her admission that she is in hell. In her trance-like state, she is going through the past events again, though disjointedly and fragmentarily, there is no chronological order: She starts with trying to clean her hands from Duncan’s blood, which is another example of dramatic irony, as her thoughtless brushing aside of the consequences of the murder “A little water clears us of the deed. / How easy is it then !“ (Act II, ii, 67f.) proves bitterly fallacious. After that, she seems to hear the death bell for Duncan again, and then recapitulates her reproaches to Macbeth, the ideas that were to encourage and persuade her husband to commit the murder. After that, she tries to put up confidence by affirming that they are unassailable. Her last rhetorical question in this soliloquy makes clear that she does not feel even the slightest trace of remorse about the murder, instead, she ponders on the effects on her, as she cannot wash away Duncan’s blood from her hands. Her mentioning of Lady Macduff (l. 39) is no direct statement of regret, either; she immediately drifts back to her symbolic washing her hands clean (l. 40).

There is more evidence that she does not want to undo the crimes, but to simply be purified of their unpleasant aspects and consequences:

Here’s the smell of the blood still. All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand. Oh, oh, oh! (Act V, i, 46f.)

In addition, by recalling her anger about her husband’s frenzy during the banquet, she wishes to relive this situation, but this time be able to stop her husband from arousing suspicion and spoiling everything, so that they might succeed after all. Still there is no regret or remorse:

No more o’
that, my lord, no more o’ that; you mar all with this starting. (Act V, i, 40-42).

In the sleep-walking scene, Lady Macbeth cannot stand the strain any longer, she collapses and involuntarily drops all pretence she had contrived to hold up. In a way she ‘dissolves’; she is not aware of her present situation any longer, time loses its shape for her: Being imprisoned in herself and tormented by past events, she realises that “What’s done cannot be undone.” (Act V, i, 61f.),
which again contrasts sharply with her view. She is going through an eternal hell that finally destroys her.

3. Lady Macbeth’s relationship with her husband

Lady Macbeth and her husband seem to have an intimate loving relationship and to be very close to each other - at least it appears so in the earlier scenes of the play. Lady Macbeth appears to know her husband very well, at any rate, she can assess him and anticipate that he will not easily go to any lengths to achieve his aim:

Yet do I fear thy nature;

It is too full o’ th’ milk of human kindness
To catch the nearest way. Thou wouldst be great;
Art not without ambition, but without
The illness should attend it. What thou wouldst highly,
That wouldst thou holily; wouldst not play false,
And yet wouldst wrongly win. (Act I, v, 15-21)

She does not appreciate his soft, compassionate, even female sides but fears them. To her, feminine traits are merely flaws in his character that have to be eliminated – just like her own ‘weakness’ she tries to suppress a little later. “Lady Macbeth fears her husband’s human nature, as well as her own female nature“.

Macbeth on his part realises the powerful ‘masculine’ qualities of his wife:

Bring forth men-children only;

For thy undaunted mettle should compose
Nothing but males. (Act I, vii, 73-75)
Macbeth’s admiration is double-edged: On the one hand, he is impressed by her courage and determination that inspires him, on the other hand, her unfeminine willingness to murder scares him.

Macbeth does not consider himself superior to his wife but places himself on a level with her; he affectionately calls her his “dearest partner of greatness“ (Act I, v, 10f.) and lets her participate in political affairs and wants to share his success and joy with her:

This have I thought good to deliver thee, my dearest
partner of greatness, that thou mightst not lose the
dues of rejoicing by ignorant of what greatness
is promis’d thee. (Act I, v, 10-13)

This is very unusual, since societal conditions at Elizabethan times do not generally allow any active participance of women in political life, women are ‘harmless’ in the political world; and they are not told events since they cannot influence them. Accordingly, Lady Macbeth’s only means to interact is by influencing and manipulating her husband, by becoming an ‘adept plotter’.

Even though she often appears to be stronger and ‘tougher’ than her husband, she accepts her role as a wife: “Despite Lady Macbeth’s heavy ignorance of Christian marriage, she conceives herself almost exclusively as a wife, a helpmate. Thus she epitomizes at the same time that she perverts Renaissance views of the woman’s role.“

Corresponding to this perception, she is ambitious for her husband rather than for herself; she does not so much wish to achieve and enjoy greatness on her own but through her husband. When she reflects on his letter, she only dwells on the titles Macbeth is promised to attain: “Glamis thou art, and Cawdor“ (Act I, v, 14). In her thoughts, she refers to him as “great Glamis“ (l. 22). Being possessed by her ambition, she concentrates all her energy on the future and does not waste any time showing relief that Macbeth has survived the hard battles. “No womanly, no wifely joy at the return of her husband; no retrospection on the dangers he had escaped.“ Consequently, she welcomes him with “Great Glamis! Worthy Cawdor! / Greater than both, by
the all-hail hereafter!” (l. 54f.), which sharply contrasts with his greeting her as “My dearest love“ (l. 59).

Lady Macbeth has great influence on her husband; the degree of control she exerts on him is remarkable. She knows how to handle him and to spur his ambition by reproaching him, and he cannot find reply to her accusations. Her tactic consists of doubting his manliness: She taunts a man who has proved to be a pugnacious and intrepid warrior whose “brandish’d steel / [...] smok’d with bloody execution“ (Act I, ii, 17f.) with cowardice. Ironically enough, his manliness seems to be a sore point to him despite all his ‘achievements’ in battle. He never sees through her cunning but takes her reprehensions very seriously. Lady Macbeth’s concept of manliness is perverted; for her, being a man goes along with strictly following one’s ambitions. Consequently, a man is supposed to try his utmost, he must not hesitate to use every means to achieve his ends and thus not hesitate to even mercilessly kill whomsoever stands in his way:

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’ th’ adage? (Act I, vii, 39-45)

She tries to shame and to ridicule Macbeth by bringing him into line with fear and cowardice and comparing him with a cat that is afraid to wet its feet. Moreover, throughout the whole conversation between them in this scene, she appeals to his honour and insinuates that he does not love her if he abandons his murderous plot, which she implies would be an act of disloyalty towards her. It is by these personal attacks on his male identity that she manages to urge him to the murder, the “test of Macbeth’s virility“, and the test of his love to her. She contemnptuously sweeps away his reservation and explains how the murder is to be carried out: That is, she does not even impel him to the murder, but also provides him with the plans for its implementation. Once again, she proves to be highly practical and single-minded.
Macbeth finally lives up to her expectations and commits the murder: “His wife rouses him by appealing to his bravery, and Macbeth engages himself to the murder almost from fear of fear“. – When he returns, she proudly greets him with “my husband!“ (Act II, ii, 14) - the only time ever that she terms him so.

In the following part, however, they begin to drift apart from each other. The murder has completely different effects on them: Macbeth is horrified at himself, his vivid imagination shows him the possible consequences of his deed and destabilizes him, whereas Lady Macbeth is as detached and practical as ever: “To her, things remain at the most terrible moment precisely what they were at the calmest, plain facts which stand in a given relation to a certain deed, not visions which tremble and flicker in the light of other worlds.“ For instance, he shows a hint of regret while he looks at his bloodstained hands: “This is a sorry sight“ (Act II, ii, 20), but she scornfully dismisses that: “A foolish thought to say a sorry sight“ (l. 21). Her powers of imagination is either considerably weaker than his, or she perfectly masters to control them. In any case she harshly tries to prevent her husband from getting lost in his imagination: “Consider it not so deeply“ (l. 30); “These deeds must not be thought / After these ways; so, it will make us mad“ (l. 33f.). But she cannot reach him, nor does she understand what he feels: “What do you mean?“ (l. 40). Lady Macbeth shows no sympathy for his terror and contrition; to her, he is simply “Infirm of purpose!“ (l. 52).

This is the first step towards their alienation, and it shows clearly that, although they basically share the same ambition and love each other, they considerably differ in nature.

The change in their relationship becomes more prominent during their next private conversation in Act III, ii. Even if both suffer from the same disillusionment and depression and try to give comfort to each other, they have become notably estranged.

Lady Macbeth immediately makes out her husband’s mood, and, despite her own misery, she hides her own gloomy thoughts and takes on her usual role again: She attempts to confirm and strengthen her husband, make him fell more comfortable, and to bring him back to society in
order to keep up appearances. Still she retains the hierarchical order by addressing him with “lord” (l. 8).

She tries to make him forget his anguish by wiping off what has happened, once again referring to her basic principle: there is no use and no need to think about things that are past and could not be helped anyway (ll. 10-12).

Macbeth is grateful for her comfort, however, he has become increasingly independent of her support in the meantime. He is so absorbed in himself that he does not even seem to notice her in the beginning but rather resumes his own train of thought: He does not need her advice any more. Therefore, her hint that Banquo and his son are mortal might confirm him slightly, yet he only vaguely suggests that the murder has already been arranged. There is no need for him to take her into his confidence; after all his vicious and ruthless deeds, he has fully incorporated and lived up to her idea of manliness. In addition, he even seems fascinated by his own violence and destructiveness.

Macbeth is protective towards his wife, comforts her and uses many terms of affection which reflect great care: “dearest chuck” (l. 45); “love” (l. 29); “dear wife” (l. 36) This conversation might show tender moments between them, however, he no longer regards her as his “dearest partner of greatness”. She has no share in his plans; he wants her to be “innocent of the knowledge” (l. 45); the ‘balance of power’ has shifted in his favour. Ironically enough, Lady Macbeth is forced to a passive feminine role; she loses her initiative here and draws to the background. Even though she is still willing to offer support to her husband, her former ardent will-power is gone. Contrary to the murder of Duncan, she does not get involved in her husband’s murderous plot here. At this stage, he has become the more powerful character and is capable of reassuring himself. This time it is Macbeth who conjuges the dark powers (ll. 46-53) for assistance, turning away from his wife who can only gaze at him like a spectator:

\[\text{Thou marvell’st at my word; but hold thee still;}
\text{Things bad begun make strong themselves by ill.}
\text{So, prithee go with me.} \quad \text{(Act III, ii, 54-56)}\]
During the banquet, Lady Macbeth struggles to prevent her husband from losing control and giving himself away, but she barely manages to reach him. As usual, she tries to shame him on his manliness, yet her scornful remarks do not affect him notably. In his terror, he even seems to mock at them bitterly:

*Lady Macbeth*

[..] –Are you a man?

*Macbeth*

Ay, and a bold one that dare look on that
Which might appal the devil. (Act III, iv, 58-60)

Lady Macbeth carries on chiding him and attacking his masculinity, nevertheless she fails to bring him to his senses by her old method of reproving.

Alone with Macbeth, she feels worn-out and feeble, she only says very little. Far from contemptuously blaming him for his failure to play the jovial host, she pities him for the first time when she weakly states: “You lack the season of all natures, sleep“ (Act III, iv, 141).

In the course of time, their ways separate more and more, their alienation becomes complete. “Thinking of the change in him, we imagine the bond between them slackened, and Lady Macbeth left much alone. She sinks slowly downward.”

Macbeth only thinks of himself:

*For mine own good*

All causes shall give way. I am in blood
Stepp’d in so far that, should I wade no more,
Returning were as tedious as go o’er. (Act III, iv, 135-138)

He is far beyond the point of turning back; and since he cannot sink any lower, he is grimly determined to murder senselessly. He has cut himself off from society “And that which should
accompany old age, / As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends“ (Act V, iii, 24-25), and even from his wife.

The two of them are completely isolated in their own personal hell of terror and agony, which in a way resemble one another: Both have lost every human contact and are stuck in the past. There is no future for either of them, their crimes have made them gone mad in a different yet related way: Macbeth cannot sleep anymore, whereas Lady Macbeth has sunk in a sort of perverted sleep which is deprived of its natural renewing and life-supporting qualities. Macbeth, who before had to be brought back to reality by his detached and practical wife whenever his imagination was on the verge of overpowering him, might be totally insane, yet he is conscious. Lady Macbeth, however, has finally lost her acute consciousness and presence of mind, which used to be so striking and dominant in her formerly. In her nightmare, she re-enacts past events and takes up elements of her conversations with her husband. In spite of being on the edge of a complete breakdown because of all their horrible crimes, she remains equally faithful to her husband. Macbeth realises that he is irredeemably lost, therefore life has become futile and deceitful, and nothing really matters to him. “Macbeth has reached a state-of-being beyond, or above, time“.

He does not spend much time thinking about his wife, except for once inquiring the doctor about her condition (Act V, iii, 37). Rudely shouting at the doctor, he demands a cure, but he rather seems to be concerned about Scotland; his wife has soon slipped his mind. Not even the news of her death touches him, he simply states she should have died at a more appropriate time:

> She should have died hereafter;
> There would have been a time for such a word. (Act V, v, 17-18)

His words are ambivalent here: They might either express his total indifference, or they imply that she should have died when he could mourn for her. As the two of them are separated physically, Macbeth still forms an elementary part of his wife’s mind-sick fantasies, while he has become completely self-centred.
4. Lady Macbeth and the Witches

Lady Macbeth on the one hand and the witches on the other hand are often considered Macbeth’s two spurs that coerce him into his crimes: “the Weird Sisters are personified forces of disorder, disintegration, and conflict [...] The Weird Sisters are thus forces of tragedy and tempest, and their aim is to wreck the ‘state of man’ [...] – or nation.“

According to Suerbaum, Lady Macbeth can clearly be assigned to the hags; being the human representative of the evil principle, she belongs to the realm of chaos. Therefore, conceiving Lady Macbeth and the witches as working on the same task, that is, bringing out the evil sides in Macbeth, shows they fulfil a similar dramatic function. The main difference in influence between Lady Macbeth and the witches lies in the fact that the latter only lure him, while Lady Macbeth pushes him directly and aggressively to his crimes. The Weird Sisters never say that he must commit any crimes to accomplish what their predictions hold for him. Yet their prophecies are meant to tempt him to contemplate how to make them come true. Their powers are limited; they cannot implant evil in a person, “the impulse to evil must come from within man himself. They simply suggest an object which may incite the inclination to evil which is always within man because of original sin, and they do this by means of prophecy.“

Lady Macbeth and the witches might have the same purpose, namely to incite Macbeth to ruthless cruelty, but their motives are diverse: Lady Macbeth is goaded on by her personal fierce ambition for her husband and herself, whereas the witches seek to destroy order and harmony in society and nature and bring chaos and violence into the world. Since Macbeth is susceptible to their prophecies, they can use him to serve their destructive purpose, which in conclusion destroys him, too.

Another point that connects, though not parallels Lady Macbeth with the Weird Sisters are their respective relations to Macbeth: As Macbeth grows more and more inhuman, he loses all human
contacts and even retreats from his wife, who had initially been his adviser and accomplice. In the end, the only ‘persons’ he relates to and confides in are the hags.

There are some striking similarities between Lady Macbeth and the Weird Sisters: The witches are ambivalent, they have ‘hermaphroditic’ features, so to speak, since they cannot clearly be classified as female:

You should be women,
And yet your beards forbid me to interpret
That you are so. (Banquo in Act I, iii, 46-48)

Apart from their appearance, their behaviour and their traits do not make them seem very feminine, either: They are aggressive and relentlessly cruel. Lady Macbeth however, who unambiguously is a woman, denies her gender role and violates her femininity by wishing to be “unsexed“, and therefore becomes even “less than a woman."

Another aspect that links her up with the witches is her rejection of religion. She is not nihilistic, she believes in the supernatural and acknowledges that there must be a counterforce to the evil: “Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark“ (Act I, v, 53). But she deliberately signs away to the malevolent forces, and this unhesitating turning away from the good makes her seem the more ‘fiend-like’.

Even though Lady Macbeth tries to harden herself and become utterly callous and pitiless, she never succeeds in repressing her femininity. At last, her fight against her own nature hits back at her; she is destroyed by the pressure and the guilt that she has burdened herself with. Consequently, she cannot be aligned unreservedly with the witches, as the evil and the wickedness she attempts to retain finally turn out to be against her nature.

5. Conclusion

[It] can hardly be doubted that Shakespeare meant the predominant impression to be one of awe, grandeur, and horror, and that he never meant this impression to be
Lady Macbeth is possessed by an inextinguishable ambition that makes her go to any lengths and unhesitatingly call on the dark spirits for their support, but she is never possessed by them: “The way to be untrue to Shakespeare here, as always, is to relax the tension of imagination, to conventionalise, to conceive [...] Lady Macbeth as a whole-hearted fiend.”

Lady Macbeth is a highly ambiguous and tragic character: Her courage, will-power, strength, and eloquence could inspire unreserved awe and admiration if they were not directed towards evil purposes. In the beginning she seems able to reinforce those features she considers ‘male’, that is, “direst cruelty“, ruthlessness, and mercilessness at the expense of her soft, female sides. But she lapses, she is not as cold-blooded as she strives to be: She cannot murder Duncan, since he reminds her of her father; she can only urge her husband to the deed and keep up his steadfastness.

Her relationship to Macbeth is initially based on a mutual tender love, but this love gets watered down by ambition and by the string of crimes that irreconcilably alienate them from each other. In the end, though Macbeth is still present in his wife’s sick-minded nightmares, both are too isolated to have room for anything else than their own suffering.

Lady Macbeth has often been associated with the witches; and in fact, there are many similarities and connections between them. In their distorted feminity, both Lady Macbeth and the witches represent the female malevolence: “The Macbeth-evil clearly has its root in femininity.“ By sweeping away her womanly nurturing qualities in order to manipulate her husband, Lady Macbeth matches up with the Weird Sisters and their poisoned cauldron which helps them to gain power over Macbeth. For this reason, Lady Macbeth is, to a certain degree, the human parallel of the witches’ wickedness. Nevertheless she remains a human being, who, despite her fierce ambition, cannot adhere to her ‘fiend-likeness’ till the end.
6. Bibliography


