Gender And Power: The Wife In A Patriarchal Society In Shakespeare’s Macbeth

Lady Macbeth and Lady Macduff are characters defined by their gender and their role as wives. Although there are differences in how they portray this role, as oppressed women in a patriarchal society, they both endure painful loss and tragedy when their husbands abandon them to obtain power.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines a wife as the woman that somebody is married to or a married woman. This definition does not present a wife as an equal partner in a marriage, but it does convey that a wife is at least part of a marriage. The old-fashioned medieval definition of the word is, a woman, especially an old or uneducated one. This second definition devalues women, presenting them as old and uneducated, or weak and powerless, and not part of a marriage. This definition does not acknowledge the relationship between married people it just portrays a wife as a powerless woman. This is the definition that was commonly understood during Shakespeare’s time, and this gives us insight not only into how women were viewed and treated by others during that time, but also how women viewed themselves.

Sara McDougall, an assistant professor of history at John Jay College, is a specialist in late-medieval canon law and conducts research in the history of marriage. McDougall presents that medieval marriage was both a private and social matter (McDougall 164). “According to canon law, the law of the Catholic Church, marriage was a concrete exclusive bond between husband and wife; giving the husband all power and control in the relationship” (McDougall 164). Wives were excluded from politics, could not own property, and the husband’s decisions stood for both spouses. McDougall explains that even though wives had to submit to their husbands' authority, they still had certain rights in their marriages (McDougall 165). Just as Lady Macbeth and Lady Macduff were known by their husbands’ names, many women today still choose to take the last name of their husbands, perpetuating a practice reminiscent of a traditional patriarchal society. This practice comes from the idea that a wife and children are the husband’s property and not seen as independent from the husband.

Early in Shakespeare’s Macbeth, we see Lady Macbeth as the dominant partner in her marriage. This is unusual and untraditional for the time. She is determined for Macbeth to become the King of Scotland. To achieve this she encourages him to murder King Duncan. Lady Macbeth shares with us that she is worried that Macbeth is too kind and too timid to execute a murder.

“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” (1.5.16-20).

Believing that Macbeth is not “man” enough to do it, she criticizes him until he feels he must prove his manliness to her by murdering the King. In this scene Shakespeare uses soliloquy, personification, and symbolism when Lady Macbeth tells us what she thinks of her husband. In the phrase, “nature is too full o’ th’ milk of human kindness” Lady Macbeth personifies Macbeth’s character as too soft to succeed. Milk is a symbol of innocence and purity, qualities Lady Macbeth views as weaknesses that will get in the way of Macbeth gaining power.

Despite living in a society where wives have little power, Lady Macbeth desires and attempts to assert power. Lady Macbeth exclaims that if only she were a man she could obtain power on her own.

“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” (1.5.47-50).

Shakespeare again uses soliloquy here. Macbeth also implies that she has the soul of a man, as he believes in order to be ambitious, you must be a man. Societal attitudes toward women make it impossible for Lady Macbeth to pursue her ambitions on her own.

Lady Macbeth is relentless and determined during the murder of King Duncan, while Macbeth shows hesitation. Once Macbeth becomes King, he grows power hungry and plans other murders to protect his power, without the involvement of Lady Macbeth. He becomes detached from his acts of immorality, showing little remorse, while Lady Macbeth who had been ruthless, becomes distressed and suffers from feelings of guilt. Lady Macbeth cries:

“Here’s the smell of blood still.

All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand. O, O, O!” (5.1.53-55).

In this scene, Lady Macbeth compulsively washes her hands, a metaphor for washing away the guilt she feels. Her guilty feelings torment her as she obsessively talks and walks in her sleep. Desperately trying to escape her pain, she eventually commits suicide.

In Marion Davis’ article, “A Brief Look at Feminism in Shakespeare’s Macbeth”, Davis considers how Lady Macbeth is first shown as an iron-willed character, and questions how such a strong character could so quickly fall prey to uneasiness (Davis 1). “According to materialist feminism theory, despite her earlier show of strength, Lady Macbeth’s eventual weakness is a result of a patriarchal portrayal of her gender” (Davis 1). Materialist feminism sees patriarchy as the cause of women’s oppression. It strives for a society in which women are treated equally to men.

Macbeth shows little remorse and in contrast, Lady Macbeth cannot manage her intense distress. Over the course of the play, Lady Macbeth exhibits more sensitivity, and as a result we begin to view her more femininely. Davis suggests the oppressive attitudes ingrained in a male dominated society led to Lady Macbeth’s downfall. To protect himself from threats, Macbeth

hires men to kill Macduff’s family.

“The castle of Macduff I will surprise,

Seize upon Fife, give to th' edge o' th' sword

His wife, his babes, and all unfortunate souls

That trace him in his line” (4.1.171-174).

The phrase, “all unfortunate souls That trace him in his line” reinforces the idea that wives and children are powerless and that their destiny is determined by their marriage or lineage.

In contrast to Lady Macbeth, Lady Macduff portrays an honest, nurturing, loving wife and mother. Our first encounter with Lady Macduff is surprising, as we are not expecting to see her criticize her husband. Here she exclaims:

“Wisdom! To leave his wife, to leave his babes,

His mansion and his titles in a place

From whence himself does fly? He loves us not;

He wants the natural touch. For the poor wren,

The most diminutive of birds, will fight,

Her young ones in her nest, against the owl.

All is the fear and nothing is the love,

As little is the wisdom, where the flight

So runs against all reason” (4.2.8-16).

This quote is interesting for many reasons. Women at this time were expected to accept whatever actions their husbands chose and were not permitted to criticize them. This criticism illustrates that she is not passive. Her expression of anger implies her belief that she has rights as his wife, such as the right to protection. In addition, it is interesting that even Lady Macduff refers to herself as “his wife”. She names herself in a list like a possession along with Macduff’s babes, mansion, and titles. The metaphor of the wren and the owl illustrates that she feels powerless and at the same time, protective of her children as a devoted mother. Shakespeare uses imagery of birds throughout the play as metaphors to convey traits about his characters.

Lady Macduff is determined to keep her family in tact. Unfortunately, she is not able to protect her family when Macbeth’s men attack them. She is only in this predicament because of her husband, and she has no power to control the unfortunate outcome. Both Lady Macbeth and Lady Macduff die tragic deaths as a result of being a powerless wife in a patriarchal society.