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Ladies Macbeth and Macduff: The Wives' Role

The tragedy of Shakespeare's Macbeth would not have been possible without the presence of the extremely influential and dynamic female presence throughout the entirety of the play. Directly and indirectly, they serve as the driving force of the main characters in both negative and positive ways. While both Lady Macbeth and Lady Macduff serve to define both the gender and moral standards, Lady Macbeth serves to represent the same ideas that resulted in the tragedy, while Lady Macduff represented ideas that would counter and motivate to expel Lady Macbeth's. These foil characters are integral to the outcome of the tragedy.

According to William Poel, the author of "The Character of Lady Macbeth" states that the "most marked feature, then, in Lady Macbeth's character is her femininity..." (Poel 352). A significant scene in the play is when King Duncan's body is discovered, and the guests individually discover his fate. At this point, Macduff is feels weary of telling Lady Macbeth of what treacherous things have been committed in her home. William Poel goes on to say that because of the guests' prejudice of the average woman, it has allowed Lady Macbeth to get away with deceiving them with a false anxiety to "rescue her husband from a perilous position" (Poel 352). This scene utilizes concepts of how femininity is interacted within certain social situations. In this case, to avoid suspicion, she takes advantage of the idea that women are feeble to cover up an atrocious act that would be considered far more than unladylike. The gender qualities alone are what give the women themselves a defined and strong role throughout Macbeth. As Poel puts

it, “She knew that her persuasive power over men lay in her womanliness, and that in there was nothing compromising” (Poel 352). Because Lady Macbeth is the Macbeth’s wife, she is in a position to manipulate him and define his masculinity. This control is so entwined into Macbeth that, of course, he will do what his wife demands. Her husband then, kills King Duncan, and her materialistic needs are met. Despite Macbeth’s actions being driven by Lady Macbeth and less by his own need to gain power, they both will suffer mental and social conflicts that will ultimately result in the tragic fate of many more people, including themselves.

Lady Macduff appears for a relatively short amount of time throughout the play, but her role is of great significance non the less. The time we do see Lady Macduff is when she finds out her husband had left her to search for allies in hopes of ending Macbeth’s tyranny. In this moment, Lady Macduff gives us a clear insight into her defined morals and integrity expressed through her extremely feelings of betrayal. To her son, she interchangeably refers to her husband as a traitor, or “one that swears and lies” (Shakespeare 4.2.45-48). Instinctively, she tells her son that every traitor “must be hanged” (Shakespeare 4.2.50-51). According to Ted H. Miller, “Lady Macbeth cannot see the higher responsibility to the political order” (Miller 75) despite Macduff, also displaying a high amount of proven virtue and responsibility for “restoring moral order” (Miller 75). Although they both displayed a high sense of morality, their priorities clashed. Macduff saw the necessity in bringing peace to his home land, while Lady Macduff saw the importance of family and the sanctity of marriage. This is an extremely notable dissonance between the characters as it is comparable to the first couple Lady Macbeth and her husband.

At the beginning of the play, Macbeth has set values and boundaries, but he allows his mind to explore the thought of seizing power. This idea had little substance, as ambitious thoughts do. Lady Macbeth, the same in exploring the thought, creates the character’s dissonance

by acting upon the opportunity. These actions challenge the moral side of Macbeth in which he instinctively rejects the idea. This dissonance introduces another power that the female roles hold. Defining masculinity is a self-adopted idea that both Lady Macbeth and Macduff express as the conflict between the characters. Macbeth was not a man for killing his king, and Macduff was not a man for breaking his promise to his wife. It becomes an ironic comparison to realize that Macbeth's initial instinct is inherently good, while Macduff can be interpreted as blatantly abandoning his wife. Non the less, both men were judged for their actions by their wives, regardless of the men's reasoning. This is noted by Poel, as he states that "unfortunately for both women, neither Macbeth nor Macduff were fine types of manhood" (Poel 351).

This introduces us to the most direct way that Lady Macduff interacts with the development of the play is when she was killed in her own home by murders sent by Macbeth. As Ted Miller describes it,

Lady Macduff's Murder is in some respects Macbeth's worst offence. In killing her Macbeth is not merely sowing ruin by slaying an innocent person. He subjects this innocent to an ordeal that actually deprives her of her innocence, and thereby robs her of some of the sympathy the audience might have granted Macduff's wife (Miller 75).

Among the countless murders of Macbeth, this murder would essentially fuel his demise. Lady Macduff's death is left to echo in the conscience of the plot, and in the heart of Macduff. When the news is broken to the already passionate Macduff, Malcom urges him to make "this the whetstone of your sword. Let grief Convert to anger. Blunt not the heart, enrage it" (Shakespeare 4.3.235-236). Already, with preconceived moral integrity, and now with knowledge of the execution of his wife and family, Macduff would press forward with even more vigor and righteousness than before. Macduff would feel worthy and deserving to be the one that brings

Macbeth to his fate. A story of pride and love for one's nation, turned to be one of vengeance for his fallen wife as Macduff declares, "Front to front Bring thou this fiend of Scotland and myself. Within my sword's length set him; if he 'scape, Heaven forgive him too" (Shakespeare 4.3.239-242).

With the death of Lady Macduff, we are brought to compare the impact of the loss with Lady Macbeth's own death. As we know, Lady Macduff's death was the event that made Macduff passionate in bringing back peace to Scotland. It was his deciding factor in going into combat with the powerful tyrant, Macbeth, and forcing him to meet his fate. In the case of Lady Macbeth, her husband is delivered the news of her suicide and instead of an immensely powerful moment, we are given a nihilistic speech about living. No doubt, these foil reactions are representative of what the women preached, and stood for. Macbeth, after being manipulated and pushed into a paranoid and lucid state, gives an honest and reactionary response to the loss of his wife, "She should have died hereafter. There would have been a time for such a word. Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow... It is a tale Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, Signifying nothing" (Shakespeare 5.5.17-29). The cold and eerie response, given by her husband is what is left of her legacy. She wanted greatness; instead, the actions she took resulted in her being damned and cursed by her own people, referred to as a "fiendlike queen, Who, as 'tis thought, by self and violent hands Took off her life" (Shakespeare 5.8.70-72). In the end, she committed actions that only exemplified her materialistic and shallow nature, at the cost of the Macbeths' sanity and reputation. As for Lady Macbeth, we see the value he had invested into his family, and wanted nothing more than to avenge them. She preached morality and integrity, in turn, she was remembered and honored in the eyes of the play's hero.

Lady Macbeth and Lady Macduff's contribution to the story lies within its moral backbone and indirect interaction with key characters throughout the play. Both characters were able enough in the lives of Macbeth and Macduff to actively change the narrative of the entire tragedy. Without the manipulation of Macbeth, and the moral structure Lady Macbeth embodied, Macbeth himself would have not killed King Duncan, and his masculinity and mental health would not have been in question. Macduff would not have had the same drive to bring forth justice had the death of his wife not occurred. Considering the impact that the wives had in the tragedy and development of the plot, their roles are clearly regarded as crucial and necessary for the cohesive message of the play.

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