

Politics of Gender and Power: Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth in Polanski's Film Adaptation

Hamalna Nizam*
North Western University

Abstract

Lady Macbeth is one of the most memorable of all Shakespearean characters. She stands out because of her disregard for social rules and extremely strong personality. In a male dominated society she dares to trade into the masculine world of power and authority. Such a dynamic woman is also interpreted as a psychologically weak character because of her mental ailment at the end of the play. The paper gives an analysis of Lady Macbeth's quest for power. It also tries to locate the reason of her neurotic behavior in the politics of patriarchal society that tries to subdue her. A parallel analysis of Lady Macbeth is also made with her character as presented in Roman Polanski's 1971 cinematic adaptation of *Macbeth*. At the same time it shows how Polanski creates a much more feminine and vulnerable character out of Shakespeare's heroine.

Keywords: politics, power, adaptation, film, feminine, courage, infanticide

Lady Macbeth, one of the most famous of all Shakespearean characters, is frequently interpreted as a woman challenging gender identity. In most social systems the existence of fixed roles for both men and women can be found. Literary texts as early as Aristotle's *Poetics* bear the example of the allotment of gender attributes: "a character may possess manly qualities, but it is not appropriate that a female character should be given manliness or cleverness" (51). This distribution of specific characteristics to both genders, if stated in a simple way, is due to man and woman's separate social obligations. Traditionally, in most societies men play the role of legislators,

* Lecturer, Department of English Language and Literature, North Western University, Khulna, Bangladesh

administrators, and preservers of the state while women get to play roles which are more oriented towards the domestic circle. Naturally, the social system wants both of them to be endowed with the qualities which compliment their allocated responsibilities. That is why traits like courage, authority, and aggression are often seen as being masculine and qualities like vulnerability, submission, and delicacy are considered to be *feminine*. Lady Macbeth is an example of a woman who desires to embody the qualities reserved only for men, and thus enter into the male world of freedom and power. While she works towards her aspiration, she automatically disrupts some established social rules. Shakespeare's depiction of Lady Macbeth's engagement in politics of power with society was translated on screen by Polish film maker Roman Polanski. Polanski's *Macbeth*, released in 1971, presents a Lady Macbeth who obviously goes through the same struggles as Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth, but the heroine in the film is less intense and more *feminine* in the traditional sense of the word. In the following paper I aim to offer a parallel reading of Lady Macbeth's quest for power and control as shown in Shakespeare's play *Macbeth* and Polanski's film adaptation of the same work. I also intend to highlight the points where Polanski has significantly differed from Shakespeare in order to imbue his Lady Macbeth with a different flavor.

Polanski's *Macbeth* has an intriguing background. Before making *Macbeth*, he directed some critically acclaimed films like *Repulsion* and *Rosemary's Baby*. In 1969, while Polanski was in Europe, his wife Sharon Tate was murdered in their Beverly Hills home, along with four of her friends, by Charles Manson and other members of the so-called Manson family. The murder became one of the most talked about cases of that time in the United States. Sharon Tate's murder had a profound effect on her husband and, in the following months, every subject he was thinking about for a film "seemed futile." Nothing was "worthwhile or dignified enough to spend a year or more on it" and at this critical moment what seemed to be the "most acceptable" choice for Polanski was to adapt Shakespeare on screen because that was "worth the effort" (Dubois 96). After the release of *Macbeth* in 1971, many critics attributed the explicit violence in the film to the murder of Sharon Tate and the child she was carrying at the time, and to other Manson murders, though Polanski himself never accepted the claim. In his autobiography *Roman*, he says in his defense,

Most American critics assumed that I'd used the film for some cathartic purpose. In fact, I'd chosen to make *Macbeth* because I thought that Shakespeare, at least, would preserve my motives from suspicion. After the Manson murders, it was clear that whatever kind of film I'd come out with next would have been treated in the same way. (297)

Being an adaptation, Polanski's film naturally differs from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Adaptation, which is a form of inter-semiotic translation, "does not happen in a vacuum" (Bassnett and Trivedi1). The translator's sensibilities and ideologies get

mixed with them to produce a unique work of art. William Shakespeare's works, canonical as they are, offer a greater opportunity for the translators to bring out multiple meanings or interpretations from it. "Translation is not an innocent, transparent activity but is highly charged with significance at every step" (2) and whether or not the murder of Sharon Tate or other violent events of Polanski's life have influenced his adaptation, there is undoubtedly something unique about it other than being completely Shakespearean. According to the ideas of post colonial translation, an adapted work simultaneously moves away from and comes closer to the original work because it helps us to see the original in a new light. About the cinematic interpretations of Shakespeare's plays, Anthony Davis says,

Charles Marowitz, whose productions of *Hamlet* and *The Taming of the Shrew* aroused such immense controversy, has maintained that the life force of a Shakespearean play is not embedded in the text, but results from an interaction between the imaginative mind and the text. (4)

Similarly, Polanski's *Macbeth* gets its meaning from the "interaction" between his ideas and the Shakespearean text. He casts Francesca Annis, just 26 years old at that time, to play Lady Macbeth who is commonly seen as a middle aged woman. Polanski adds and omits some scenes, changes dialogues, and introduces more violence in the film to give it a distinct flavor. Julie Sanders, in her book *Adaptation and Appropriation*, theorizes on the relationship between the original work and its adapted version which becomes helpful in explaining the difference between the power struggles of Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth and that of Polanski's Lady Macbeth,

Adaptation and appropriation are dependent on the literary canon for the provision of a shared body of storylines, themes, characters, and ideas upon which their creative variations are made. (45)

In William Shakespeare's tragedy *Macbeth*, the struggle for power and control occurs in the Macbeth couple. Lady Macbeth, unlike Lady Macduff, is not the kind of woman who finds refuge in the domestic world and becomes satisfied with her life. Rather, she feels a natural affinity towards implementing control and authority. The first half of the play is concerned with Lady Macbeth pursuing her husband to kill Duncan and thus attaining the desired end. While she provokes her husband we see a woman who can go to any length to materialize her desires. When Polanski adapts the play into his film, he creates a Lady Macbeth of much lesser intensity. In the film, Polanski highlights the guilt and remorse which the Macbeth couple goes through rather than emphasize the power struggle.

Much has been said and written about possible connections between the three witches and Lady Macbeth as both play pivotal roles in Macbeth's attainment of power. In the film, Polanski takes it a step further and tries to show physical

similarities between them. Both have long blond hair and pale skin; and towards the end of the film, Lady Macbeth's unclothed appearance echoes the witches' appearance in their den where Macbeth had gone to hear their prophecy. Polanski also shows other possible connections between the witches and Lady Macbeth. At the very beginning of the film the witches are seen burying a noose and an amputated hand which is holding a dagger. After that they smear blood on a little grave. This action is an addition to the film because in Shakespeare's play nothing of that description can be seen. In the film the image of a hand holding a dagger is later repeated when Lady Macbeth places a dagger in her husband's hand and the camera focuses on the weapon. The witches' burial ritual also expresses Lady Macbeth's connection with blood throughout the film.

In the play, when Lady Macbeth receives a letter from her husband (Act 1 Scene 5) and learns about the witches' prophecies, she understands two things very clearly. First, though the promise of kingship will spark ambition inside her husband, he ultimately will not be able to carry out any bloody deed by himself as Macbeth has a weaker side to his nature. And second, she cannot miss this opportunity to avail and exercise control beyond the domestic setting by instigating her husband to kill Duncan, thus enjoying real power and authority. Moreover, Lady Macbeth knows that she has what it takes to embark on such a dangerous as well as enthralling journey.

This excitement of knowledge and opportunity is supported by her rapidity of actions. In the play, she receives Macbeth's letter, reads about the witches' prophecies and her husband's blazing desires, then she becomes determined that he must attain the promised position but expresses doubts about his strength of purpose. A messenger enters to tell her about Duncan's visit, and after that she plans the murder, fully equipping herself with the power and strength necessary to pursue Macbeth as she pronounces "unsex me here" (1.5.40). Thus Lady Macbeth becomes completely charged with the strength and energy which is socially ascribed on males and which give her dominance over her husband in the following scenes. In the play, these happen in a single scene without any gap, so we get to see the rapidity of her actions. Polanski, in order to lessen the overwhelming impact Lady Macbeth often has when she is presented on stage, interrupts her actions by introducing other scenes in it. In the cinematic adaptation, there is a substantial time gap between her reading of Macbeth's letter and starting to pursue her husband. Here we see her receive the letter, read about the witches' soothsaying, and after that she says,

Glamis thou art, and Cawdor, and shalt be
What thou art promis'd (1.5.14-15)

Afterwards when Lady Macbeth utters her famous words, "That I may pour my spirits in thine ear," Polanski does not show Lady Macbeth's face holding a

determined expression. Instead, the camera focuses on the letter which she folds and puts in a box. At this moment, Polanski ceases to show her further actions as he takes us to Duncan's court where he is nominating his elder son Malcolm as the heir to his throne. Polanski then takes us back to Macbeth's castle where he has just returned from war. The famous words "unsex me here" (1.5.40) appear much later in the film and not in its original sequence. In the film, the director adds a scene where Lady Macbeth utters these words in her mind while she watches Duncan's arrival from her rooftop. However, the intensity is lost because the delayed delivery of the words makes her vocation of attaining power through unsexing herself less intense. Moreover, her voice-over does not raise the same excitement and awe in the audience as does her violent utterance of the words on the stage. Thus, Polanski makes Lady Macbeth less powerful than her theatrical counterpart. This also implies that her desire to counteract the *feminine* characteristics in order to attain power over her oscillating husband is less virulent in the film than it is in the play.

The scene of Macbeth's entry into his house becomes crucial for the interpretation of how power changes its source from a man to a woman. In the play, when Macbeth enters his bed chamber, his wife has just uttered words like,

... Come, thick night,
 And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell,
 That my keen knife see not the wounds it makes,
 Nor Heaven peep through the blanket of the dark
 To cry, "Hold! Hold" (1.5.49-53)

She feels invigorated with the energy achieved by unsexing herself which helps to suppress everything feminine within her. The cinematic adaptation, on the other hand, accentuates her *feminine* aspects. We see her getting ready for her husband; her anticipation and her love for Macbeth become very evident as she jumps into his arms as soon as he enters. In the dialogues that follow, Lady Macbeth continues to pursue her husband with her feminine charm.

Another instance where the cinematic production loses some of the original flavor is Polanski's omission of two significant monologues by Lady Macbeth which contribute to Shakespeare's character's courage and power. The first monologue which Polanski leaves out is where she trades her milk for gall (Act 1 Scene 5 in the play). Though he retrieves the portion in which she asks the spirits to unsex her, he omits the latter part of the long monologue. What makes Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth distinct from her cinematic counterpart is her courage to differ from society's definition of the ideal woman by disregarding the long standing rules and boundaries made for them. To be a woman, as society clearly articulates, she has to be subservient to her male guardian, in Lady Macbeth's case she needs to be submissive to her husband Macbeth. Again, an ideal woman is expected to embrace maternity with all her heart and cherish it as the biggest blessing of her life. Whether Lady Macbeth ever mothered a child or not is a matter of scholarly debate,

but the play seems to be preoccupied with images concerning maternity. Shakespeare offers us recurring images of mother and child which work to give an insight into Lady Macbeth's opinion about motherhood and power. The two notions are juxtaposed in order to show her preference of one over the other. In the famous soliloquy "unsex me here" (1.5.40), Lady Macbeth urges the spirits to

Come to my woman's breasts
And take my milk for gall, you murd'ring ministers, (1.5.46-47)

For a woman who would normally uphold the gift of motherhood higher than anything else, to trade her breast milk for poison which in turn will make her ruthless enough to attain a bloody deed for power is a major violation of social norms. A mother's milk is the first and purest source of nourishment for a child. Lady Macbeth's desire to obtain political power for her husband is so strong that she is ready to trade something that is unimaginable and odious for the society. The hypothetical trading of breast milk is imperative because by filling her with poison instead of nourishment she defies a major social rule. Motherhood or womanhood, for that matter, means the embodiment of everything nurturing and vulnerable. When she rejects milk and thinks of filling herself with poison, she achieves the power that only comes from the exorcism of everything sensitive within her. By doing so, she secures the power needed to pursue Macbeth to kill Duncan.

The second monologue that Polanski omits to downplay the issue of power is Lady Macbeth's imagination of infanticide. In the play, the imaginary killing allows Lady Macbeth to gain tremendous power which she uses to provoke and deride her husband. The relationship between a mother and a new born child is one of love and dependence. An infant has an intense somatic relation with its mother as it is completely dependent on its mother for care. Nursing a baby is perhaps the most intimate moment between a child and its mother which Lady Macbeth fills with images of horror,

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 plucked my nipples from its boneless gums
And dashed the brains out, had I so sworn
As you have done to this. (1.5.54-59)

Here Lady Macbeth juxtaposes two contradictory images: the first one is her tenderness for the infant and the second one is the infanticide. Lady Macbeth accepts the love a child can raise in her, at the same time she makes it clear that the purpose she has been working for is of a greater importance than her love for a child – a thought blasphemous for any woman who wants to be a part of society. Here Lady Macbeth implies, "how absolutely empowering such a fantasized moment proves to one struggling to break free from the gendered constraints that bind her"

(Chamberlain 82). Lady Macbeth's contravention of maternal images is less about the horror of infanticide or poisoning breast milk. In fact, they are more about a typical choices a woman dares to make outside the fixed laws of society.

Polanski further reduces Lady Macbeth's influence on her husband in the scene where a dinner is being held in the honor of the king's arrival at their house (Act 3 Scene 4, popularly known as 'The Banquet Scene'). In this scene, Macbeth's dilemma and anxiety is quite evident through his soliloquies. In the play, the scene projects Macbeth's transition from an oscillating man to a determined one. He switches from one state of being to another after Lady Macbeth chastises him for being a coward, tells him what manhood is, and offers the image of infanticide. The result of this "incredible mixture of insinuation and bullying is that Macbeth is forced to accept a concept of manliness that consists wholly in rampant self-seeking aggression" and only then is he propelled into action ((Ramsey 289). In the film, it is not Lady Macbeth's words that propel him; rather it is his jealousy of Duncan's elder son Malcolm which provokes him. From the beginning of the scene Lady Macbeth pleads with her husband to murder Duncan, not with untamed censure but with tears in her eyes which highlight her feminine charms and love. As soon as she utters the following lines,

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. (1.7.49-51)

Macbeth becomes so agitated by her that he physically moves away so that he does not have to listen to the plea again. What makes him determined about the murder is a brief encounter with the King's eldest son who is the newly entitled prince of Cumberland. As Macbeth pours himself a drink after moving away from his wife, Malcolm interrupts him with his empty glass. As Malcolm is now an heir to his father's throne, Macbeth has to serve him first. After that Malcolm sarcastically utters a hail to the Thane of Cawdor and moves away. At this moment, the camera focuses on Macbeth's face which holds a changed expression of resolution as opposed to his previously confused demeanor. This short encounter enkindles in him political jealousy and lust for power. The addition of this brief scene in Polanski's film gives a new dimension to the original meaning. Macbeth understands that Duncan's murder will bring his son under suspicion as he is supposed to inherit the throne from his father. This suspicion can drive Malcolm away from home to avoid any harsh outcome and then Macbeth will automatically be named king. By introducing this small encounter, Polanski makes Lady Macbeth less influential. Of course her enthusiasm and planning concerning the murder have significance, but her logic about manhood and bravery is not strong enough to set her husband into action.

Polanski omits some other significant lines that were important in showing Lady Macbeth's strength of character. In the cinematic adaptation, she does not utter the

words “That which hath made them drunk hath made me bold” (2.2.1) after she has drugged the Chamberlain’s wines. Rather, she directly voices her doubts about Macbeth committing the murder. Again, in the film she does not try to make the whole business of murder trivial by calling the bloody spectacle “brain sickly of things” (2.2.45) and “the dead/ Are but as pictures” (2.2.52-53) as she does in the play which makes her more controlled when juxtaposed with Macbeth’s apprehension. Here Lady Macbeth is more vulnerable than she is in the play. Her fear is most noticeable when she sees the two blood-stained daggers in Macbeth’s hand. Polanski captures Lady Macbeth’s fear-stricken face between two daggers held by Macbeth which the director highlights with a terrifying background score.

After Macbeth becomes the king, he pushes his wife to the background, eliminating her from his political decisions. In the play he openly gives clues to his wife about her socially ascribed duties once he has used her as an agent of encouraging and persuading him. Just after determining that he will commit the murder, he starts to corner his wife. Though he accepts his wife’s courage and energy, his double standards are prominently palpable in his deep-seated patriarchal vocabulary as he says,

Bring forth men- children only:
For thy undaunted mettle should compose
Nothing but males. (1.7.74-76)

With this comment Macbeth achieves two things. First, he articulates his wife’s function within the limits of maternity. He alludes to the “service” of giving birth and child rearing which John Stuart Mill talks about in his work *The Subjection of Women* (1015). Lady Macbeth, who has been imagining infanticide to become powerful and bold, becomes confined to the role which she has been consciously rejecting. Second, he asks Lady Macbeth to pass on her talents to the next generation of boy child, not girl child. As her courage, determination, strength of nerves are male qualities, so they should be passed on to a boy child, not a girl child. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in their *The Madwoman in the Attic* articulate that women are supposed to possess the exact opposite characteristics of men. Gubar and Gilbert quotes Ruskin in the chapter “The Queen’s Looking Glass: Feminine Creativity, Male Images of Women and the Metaphor of Literary Paternity” where he says that a woman’s power is “not for rule, not for battle, and her intellect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet orderings” (24). It implies that a woman should be passive, meek and submissive-everything Lady Macbeth is not. So her characteristics must be passed on to a male child. Unlike Macbeth’s blunt remarks in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, in the cinematic adaptation Lady Macbeth’s withdrawal into the domestic setting is less about her husband’s chauvinism and more about her anxiety of murder. Here Macbeth does not utter the above quoted words directly to his wife; rather it comes as a voice- over which the audience can hear but Lady Macbeth certainly cannot. These words in the film

adaptation become Macbeth's appreciation for his wife's mental strength rather than a direct reminder of her socially ascribed role.

After Duncan's murder, Malcolm and Donalbain escape to England and Ireland respectively and Macbeth is crowned as king. Then Macbeth starts plotting against those who pose a threat to him- Banquo, Macduff and even his wife Lady Macbeth. The activities involved in rising to the Scottish throne were something Macbeth was not capable of undertaking alone. But once he is the king all he cares about is securing his power as he was clearly told by the witches that his legacy will not continue. His lust for absolute power becomes so intense that he completely excludes his wife from political decisions as he has complete knowledge about her persuasive power. The instance (Act 3 scene 2) where Macbeth tells his wife about the threat Banquo poses to his rule, presents a striking contrast with the previous scenes in which Lady Macbeth pursues him to kill Duncan. Here, Lady Macbeth is not his confederate any more, rather he consciously keeps her outside his decision making process. When she asks her husband what he is planning to do with Banquo and gets the following answer,

Be innocent of the knowledge, dearest chuck,
Till thou applaud the deed- . . . (3.2.48-49)

Polanski's adaptation of this scene resembles Shakespeare's play very closely except the director's omission of Macbeth's following instruction to his wife,

Let you remembrance apply to Banquo,
Present him eminence, both with eye and tongue- (3.2.33-34)

In the play, where Macbeth is hiding his plans from Lady Macbeth, seems to mock her by saying this as he already has ordered his murder. In the film too, Macbeth keeps his wife out of his plans post King Duncan's murder, but he does not show a total disregard for his wife by mocking her. In both the play and its cinematic adaptation, we see Lady Macbeth's mental prowess for the last time in the banquet scene. In Shakespeare's play she appears next (and for the last time) in the sleepwalking scene where she has completely given in to mental ailment. The claustrophobic state in which Macbeth pushes her becomes the chief reason for her illness. Her existence is defined by her wit, strength of nerves, persuasive power and amazing intellectuality which has no use in the domestic life where she is forced to live devoid of any control and authority. Here she does not find any vent through which she can channel her energies. Polanski, on the other hand, allows Lady Macbeth more screen space by including some additional scenes and gives us a more detailed view of her neurotic behavior. In the film, we see a somber Lady Macbeth when her husband goes to seek the witches' prophecy, but here she has not started showing any sign of neurosis. Then we see her before Macbeth returns to his castle, and this time she has already started hallucinating blood on her hands. She is

withdrawn, semi-conscious, and is unaware of what is going on around her. She even murmurs, “Gracious Duncan’s dead” after she imagines blood on her hands. Thus Polanski emphasizes Lady Macbeth’s anxiety about the guilt as well as the uncertainty about the witches’ next prophecy which can decide their future. Next time she hallucinates blood in the sleepwalking scene. In Polanski’s film Lady Macbeth’s undressed appearance in the sleepwalking scene further projects her vulnerable condition. On the screen Lady Macbeth is continuously shivering and more than once the camera focuses on her fear-stricken face. She is now a lonely figure who is haunted by her own decisions; David Thomson explains Polanski’s treatment of his characters towards the end of the film *Macbeth*,

Much more characteristic is the underlying alienation and hostility: the feeling that people are cut off, unsupported by any shared view of life and society. From this solitariness, the move towards acts of violence is stealthy, remorseless, and even comic. (689)

Polanski makes it clear that the chief reason behind Lady Macbeth’s death was the guilt she incurred. He does that by giving one more scene to Lady Macbeth after we see her suffering from somnambulism. In the added scene, we see Lady Macbeth, this time fully clothed, but the signs of restlessness still visible in her appearance, reading the letter Macbeth sends her at the beginning of the play. She sobs while reading the letter and puts extra emphasis when she utters the words “Thane of Cawdor” and “King”. By the time she finishes reading it is clearly visible that psychologically she is shattered. This additional scene also contributes to the interpretation of her death. In the play it is not made clear whether Lady Macbeth dies a natural death or she commits suicide. In the film it is made quite clear that she commits suicide because the guilt has become too heavy for her. After Polanski presents the scene where she is re-reading the letter, he takes us to Macbeth and Seyton’s conversation about the warfare. Next, we hear the woman’s cry and then we are presented with the spectacle of Lady Macbeth’s mangled corpse in the courtyard and Polanski makes it clear that Lady Macbeth has jumped down to take her life. The multiple cases of hallucinations, the additional scene about re-reading the letter leading to her suicide, indicate that Lady Macbeth kills herself because she could no longer bear the sin. On the other hand, Shakespeare’s exclusion of Lady Macbeth in the latter part of the play except the sleepwalking scene indicates that the story is now about Macbeth where his wife does not have any place. In the play, Lady Macbeth dies because she cannot stand the state of her being totally powerless. The moment she loses power to express herself through her craft, her remorse returns and tears her from within- a state unimaginable for the woman we see at the beginning of the play. She dies because she has lost the game of power and control and cannot bear the miserable state.

The vocation of transforming a play into a cinematic art form, if termed technically, is called inter-semiotic translation. According to the rules of translation when a

work gets translated from one genre to another the translator's sensibilities become evident in the translated work along with some of its original flavor. I said earlier that Lady Macbeth is often read as a woman who bravely challenges established social norms. Her remorse and inner vulnerability have also been matters of literary discussion. Polanski's own interpretation of this character stands somewhere between these two facets of her character. What Polanski does in film is that he illuminates certain ambiguities like Lady Macbeth's mode of death or the reasons behind her hallucinations in order to create his own version of Lady Macbeth who surely has a very prominent Shakespearean root but her core belongs to Polanski.

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