

# Evil and gender archetypes in macbeth



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At the heart of William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is an examination of the nature of evil and its many faces and facets. The principal evil characters in the play, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, are both evil, but the manifestation of evil is different in each. Macbeth's evil is a dynamic character trait. He begins the play as a celebrated hero, loyal to his friends and dedicated to his king. He is strong and noble, a man to be admired by his audience. Then he and Banquo are visited by the three witches, who promise him that he will be king. This veiled intimation ignites a secret ambition within Macbeth.

Evil has dawned within him, but at this early stage of his transformation Macbeth is ashamed of his evil urges. He says, " Stars, hide your fires;/ Let not light see my black and deep desires;/ The eye wink at the hand; yet let that be,/ Which the eye fears, when it is done, to see. " (I, iv, 50) Soon, however, Macbeth is overcome by his ambition and his fall begins. He says, " I have no spur to prick the sides of my intent, but only/ Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself/ and falls on the other. " (I, vii, 25) As soon as the decision to murder Duncan is made, and until his death, Macbeth is a vessel relentlessly filling with evil.

Macbeth is the source of all the dastardly deeds in this play. The witches ignite his evil ambition, Lady Macbeth stokes the fire, but the blame for Duncan's murder rests squarely on the shoulders of Macbeth. Macbeth may not have held the knives that killed Banquo or Macduff's family, but the aggression is his. Lady Macbeth does not descend into evil. She wallows in it. From the first moment the audience meets her, she has blatantly committed herself to evil. She longs to be even more evil, and tries to commune with unseen spirits to help her.

She says, “ 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 the access and passage to remorse, That no compunctious visitings of nature/ Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between/ The effect and it! come to my woman’s breasts,/ And take my milk for gall, you murdering ministers,/ Whatever in your sightless substances/ You wait on nature’s mischief! Come thick night,/ And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell,/ That y keen knife see not the wound it makes,/ Nor Heaven peep through the blanket of the dark,/ To cry ‘ Hold, hold! ” (I, v, 36)

For all the sound and fury, Lady Macbeth’s evil signifies nothing. She has no goal which requires this sinisterness. When she learns of the witches’ promise, Duncan is nothing to her but a suitable victim. Her true goal is not to gain the throne. Her motive is only to increase her personal perception of her power. It is interesting to note the importance of gender in the personifications of evil in Macbeth. Lady Macbeth is as obsessed with her gender as her evil. When she implores evil to “ unsex” her, to take her “ woman’s breasts for gall” she reveals the sense of powerlessness and weakness she feels.

Being a woman makes her dependant on her husband for her social standing. She feels that her femaleness is the cause of the sympathy, compassion, and remorse that stand in the way of free action. She feels that her gender makes her physically weak. It is idle posturing when she assures Macbeth, “ 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 nipple from his boneless gums,/ And ashed the brains out” (I, vii, 54).

This comment is purely a rejection of her womanly self, in favor of physical power to “dash brains out.” She is trying to convince herself, to believe that she can overcome her natural emotions. She urges Macbeth to kill Duncan for the same reason: to prove to herself that she possesses the cruelty to do it. However, it remains a struggle for her, as she admits after seeing murdered Duncan. She says, “Had he not resembled/ My father as he slept, I had done’t.” (II, ii, 13) In addition, the murder does not relieve her of her self-doubt and insecurity.

The evil deed has not imparted the feelings of power she had expected. This is what she means when she says, “Naught’s had, all’s spent,/ Where our desire is got without content.” (III, ii, 4) Lady Macbeth does not seem to realize that her greatest advantage in evil is her womanly intelligence. She makes the plans and handles the emotional and mental consequences of the deed, where Macbeth is overcome. Macbeth’s evil is physical. Where Lady Macbeth schemes and waits, Macbeth rushes to violence. His evil is brutal and impatient. His weakness is his inability to control his mind.