

Lady Macbeth a character who changes

Sunday, the 11th of April 2021

Question

‘Lady Macbeth is a female character who changes during the play.’

Starting with this moment in the play, explore how far you agree with this view.

Write about:

1. how Shakespeare presents Lady Macbeth in this extract
2. how far Shakespeare presents Lady Macbeth as a female character who changes in the play as a whole.

[30 marks + 4 SPaG]

1 I THOUGHT THIS ESSAY HAD HOPE BUT I gave up...

Introduction

Macbeth, the didactic play, written in 1606 by the playwright William Shakespeare explores topics such as: the natural order, the supernatural and appearance vs reality through the changing character of Lady Macbeth. Having witnessed the gunpowder plot, yet also writing in a period where threats to his Majesty's welfare were high; Shakespeare wrote Macbeth with the King in mind - to ingratiate him. Yet the play also serves as a deterrent, warning those with regicidal thoughts what the consequences are as seen through how regicide affects Lady Macbeth.

Paragraph 1

Act 5 Scene 1 is a pivotal moment in the play. Shakespeare reduces Lady Macbeth to sleepwalking, portraying her as a character overwhelmed with guilt; whose onstage hysteria and guilty conscience are inextricably linked. She commands an invisible spot to vanish, “Out damned spot! Out I say”. The repetition of the imperative verb and interjection “out” is used by Shakespeare to illustrate her desperation to be freed from her guilt; encapsulating her heartache as the psychological torment seems excruciating to an audience. Shakespeare deploys the metaphorical “spot” as a motif, figurative of Duncan's blood; although he is dead Lady Macbeth remains haunted by the psychological stain of regicide - reinforcing the notion she is overwrought with guilt. She proceeds expressing, “One, two. Why then 'tis time to do't”. The littered syntax further elucidates the notion her guilt is overwhelming, as she can no longer form coherent sentences. Whereas, earlier in the play she spoke with confidence - suggesting her mental anguish has greatly impacted her trail of thought. Furthermore Act 5 Scene 1 is indeed a turning point in the play, this is the first time the audience hears Lady Macbeth speak in prose (which was traditionally used in theatre to illustrate insanity). Given this, Shakespeare illustrates to the audience how Lady Macbeth's guilt causes her to detach from reality, she has lost her confidence and assertiveness in her speech that the audience knew her to have, further insinuating the notion she is torn by her guilt. She continues lamenting, “Hell is murky”. Shakespeare's use of biblical references, the noun “hell” and adjective “murky” imply that it is God himself punishing Lady Macbeth for her. Shakespeare pairs the noun “hell”, which has connotations of eternal suffering, in tandem with the adjective “murky” which has connotations of darkness, illustrating Lady Macbeth's brooding fear of the afterlife. Painting far into the audience,

Shakespeare utilises Lady Macbeth's prescribed punishment of "hell" would strike fear into any members of the audience with regicidal thoughts, as hell was greatly feared at the time and would have further ingratiated the King. Lady Macbeth then draws to past events, "a soldier and afeard", "What need we fear who knows it...". Shakespeare illustrates to the audience through Lady Macbeth reliving past events, how her actions inevitably haunt her, she is unable to forget what she has done - further amplifying the magnitude of her guilt. Her speech is then broken down into snatches of rhyme, "The Thane of Fife had a wife; where is she now?". The semicolon serves as a break in her speech; Shakespeare illustrates to the audience how she is also haunted by the indirect consequences of her actions; further accentuating the notion that her guilt follows her.

However in stark contrast, Lady Macbeth appears dominating earlier in the play - the power dynamics between the couple are imbalanced as Lady Macbeth taunts her husband continuously. Lady Macbeth, in Act 1 Scene 7, proclaims, "Art thou afeard". The adjective "afeard" would send the Jacobean audience into an uproar, as it highlights not only her low regard for her husband but lack of respect. Contextually, Jacobean men who were "afeard" were shunned in society for being unmanly. Moreover, it was not a woman's place to question her husband, yet to be: obedient, submissive and domesticated. Lady Macbeth exceeds her place and values in society, subverting the great chain of being. This is further elucidated when she calls Macbeth's reaction to seeing the ghost of Banquo, "Shame itself! Why do you make such faces?". The use of the exclamatory sentence, encapsulates Lady Macbeth's pent-up frustration towards Macbeth, encapsulating her dominating side. Moreover, the adjective "shame" exemplifies her dominating nature, it highlights her lack of remorse for Macbeth's fear; she thinks it is childish. The rhetorical question further insinuates the notions she is dominant. She subverts expectations that a woman should be quiet and submissive, as she is authoritative and treats her husband as an inferior, subverting the great chain of being. Alternatively, it can be put forward that Lady Macbeth subverting the great chain of being was the catalyst for her demise. Her dominating nature pressured her husband to commit regicide, thus her ascribed punishment is "hell".

Paragraph 2

Moreover, in this extract Shakespeare portrays Lady Macbeth as a character who comes to terms with reality, she realises there is no redemption for herself. She exclaims, "What will these hands ne'er be clean?". The adverb "never" illustrates to the audience how the consequences of regicide will remain indefinitely; she cannot erase the guilt from her conscience. She proceeds expressing, "Here's the smell of the blood still". The adjective still encapsulates the permanence of her crime, she then proceeds expressing, "all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand". The verb "sweeten" coupled with the adjective "little" represent femininity and vulnerability, which she ironically asked the spirits to remove earlier in the play. The use of the hyperbole, encapsulates the magnitude of the crime Lady Macbeth committed, she realises there is no redemption for her.

However, earlier in the play she appears dismissive, colluding with the supernatural appearing as Machievellian. In Act 2, she exclaims "A little water clears us of this deed". The adjective "little" precisely encapsulates her dismissive attitude, she shrugs off the severity of the crime her husband has just committed. Moreover, the act of hand washing is an implicit parallel to the biblical story of Pontius Pilate, who washed his hands after sentencing Jesus to crucifixion, absolving himself from the guilt. Given this, Lady Macbeth hopes by emulating the symbolic act of purification she too will be wiped of guilt. This would evoke extreme hostility in the audience towards Lady Macbeth as one of the affirmed beliefs in the Jacobean period was the divine right of kings. Furthermore, she wishes to strengthen her dismissiveness, she conspires with the supernatural asking to be defeminized. Lady Macbeth exclaims, "Come you spirits that tend on mortal thoughts unsex me here". Lady Macbeth is seen as Machievellian here as she not asks, but demands the spirits to remove her gender and femininity; so that she may be able to convince her husband to kill the King. The disturbing imagery of a woman addressing the dark forces would have horrified the audience, who lived in a time of mass hysteria surrounding the supernatural. Shakespeare appears to be consciously linking Lady Macbeth and the witches in the Jacobean conscience, to despise her and better understand why she is punished. Moreover, the King was an avid persecutor of witches, writing a book called *Daemonologie* so it would be befitting for Lady Macbeth to be punished with the brutal reality of asking for the spirits to defeminize her.

Paragraph 3

Finally, Shakespeare portrays Lady Macbeth as insane. She chants, "to bed, to bed. There's knocking at the gate. Come, come, come. Give me your hand. What's done cannot be undone. To bed, to bed, to bed.". Shakespeare uses Lady Macbeth's almost rhythmic rhyming to illustrate to the audience her departure from

sanity, moreover the repetition indicates how frantic she has become. In stark contrast, to where she appears as ruthless. Finally, Lady Macbeth is portrayed as a villain by Shakespeare through her twisted perception of morals and her ruthless attitude towards motherhood and reality. Lady Macbeth exclaims, "I have given suck, and know how tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me". The verb given, evokes a sense of ambiguity and mysteriousness towards the Jacobean and contemporary audience, as it is unbeknownst to us whether or not Lady Macbeth was childless or was a mother. If the latter is to believe, her next lines would be horrifying to the audience. She proclaims, 'I would, while it was smiling in my face, Have pluck'd my nipple from his boneless gums, And dash'd the brains out.'" The adjective boneless encapsulates the infants innocence and frailness, in contrast to Lady Macbeth who is depicted as malicious. The verb "dash'd" encapsulates Lady Macbeth's violent and ruthless nature. This is further insinuated through the noun, "brain", which would evoke a vivid graphic image, evoking extreme hatred towards Lady Macbeth, as babies were seen to be pure in the eyes of a Jacobean audience. Lady Macbeth, claims she would kill her own child in cold-blood, encapsulating her warped sense of reality, if she had "sworn so". The verb phrase, highlights to the Jacobean audience her complete disregard towards her own child's life. However, it can also be argued that her ruthlessness is simply a false pretence in order to seem powerful. Finally, Lady Macbeth is portrayed as a villain by Shakespeare through her twisted perception of morals and her ruthless attitude towards motherhood and reality. Lady Macbeth exclaims, "I have given suck, and know how tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me". The verb given, evokes a sense of ambiguity and mysteriousness towards the Jacobean and contemporary audience, as it is unbeknownst to us whether or not Lady Macbeth was childless or was a mother. If the latter is to believe, her next lines would be horrifying to the audience. She proclaims, 'I would, while it was smiling in my face, Have pluck'd my nipple from his boneless gums, And dash'd the brains out.'" The adjective boneless encapsulates the infants innocence and frailness, in contrast to Lady Macbeth who is depicted as malicious. The verb "dash'd" encapsulates Lady Macbeth's violent and ruthless nature. This is further insinuated through the noun, "brain", which would evoke a vivid graphic image, evoking extreme hatred towards Lady Macbeth, as babies were seen to be pure in the eyes of a Jacobean audience. Lady Macbeth, claims she would kill her own child in cold-blood, encapsulating her warped sense of reality, if she had "sworn so". The verb phrase, highlights to the Jacobean audience her complete disregard towards her own child's life. However, it can also be argued that her ruthlessness is simply a false pretence in order to seem powerful.

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