

Lady Macbeth

When fixed Jacobean patriarchal gender norms are subverted disorder results, this is most powerfully expressed through lady Macbeth who is not only recognised as a cynical avatar of evil, but also as symbolic of gender trouble. In order to obtain the power, she desires she must subvert the sexual hierarchy she was forced into, this perhaps comments on the how women are equated to powerlessness in Jacobean patriarchal society. On receiving her husband's letter, we witness the beginning of a gender reversal that marks their marriage. She views Macbeth as "too full" of the metaphorical "milk of human kindness" to go through with regicide. Milk was symbolic of nurturing and feminine qualities that would be expected of Lady Macbeth rather than Macbeth, showing her malevolent and masculine nature. This milk does not stand in her way as she combats it with the "valour of [her] tongue" displaying her dominance over Macbeth. This is symbolic of the power imbalance in the relationship and her fiendish desire for power.

Lady Macbeth then transcends her gender role to a greater extent through her imperative calling on spirits to "unsex" her emphasising her desire to strip herself of feminine attributes. The same milk that fills Macbeth plagues her too, hence why she commands spirits to "take [her] milk for gall". She rejects the effeminate milk and calls for gall, a poison, to replace it. This suggests that rather than nurture a child with milk, she now nurtures her dark and evil desires with gall. This unnatural deed would have been out of the natural order, symbolic of disorder and evil to the Jacobean audience. Lady Macbeth could be seen to have dehumanised herself to such an extent that she is devoid of gender and possibly bereft of humanity.

When Macbeth, still wavering, confides his ambivalence to regicide and it is apparent he opposes the idea through his imperative "we shall proceed no further in this business", Lady Macbeth responds with a savage description of infanticide. She describes how she would have "plucked [her] nipple from his boneless gums and dashed his brains out". The verb plucked not only shows the ease in which she would commit such an act but also the ease in which she rejects motherhood, the primary function of a woman in the Jacobean era. The innocence connoted by "boneless gums" juxtaposes the ruthless action presenting Lady Macbeth as a malevolent character who preys on the weak.