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Analysis Paper #2

Feminine Foils in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*

The two main women in *Macbeth*, Lady Macbeth and Lady Macduff, are played off of each other as foils. Lady Macduff embodies stereotypical womanhood; Lady Macbeth defies the stereotype of womanhood—being gentle, nurturing, and soft—by exhibiting quite the opposite.

Lady Macbeth is supposed to be the domestic housewife who caters to her husband in a meek, servitude-like way; however, her actions prove that there is nothing in her that relates to domesticity. After her husband sends her his letter, explaining his new position and the prophecy of the Three Witches, Lady Macbeth confides to the audience “…yet do I fear thy nature; / It is too full o’ the milk of human kindness / To catch the nearest way” in which she is saying that kindness, normally seen as a virtue, is perceived, by her, as a weakness that she finds in her husband. She continues, “Hie thee hither, / That I may pour my spirits in thine ear; / And chastise with the valour of my tongue / All that impedes thee […]” (1.5). She wants to pour the poison of her cruel ambition into him so that he can complete the dastardly deed that she knows must be done for the prophecy to come true. However, she reaches the pinnacle of defiance when she exclaims

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!

[…] Come to my woman’s breasts,

And take my milk for gall, you murdering ministers,

[…] Come thick night,

And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell,

That my keen knife see not the wound it makes. (1.5)

She’s calling on the very fiends of hell to take away any vestige of feminine frailty that might be found within her so that she can carry out the murder if her husband cannot.

On the other hand, Lady Macduff, embodies domesticity. When she finds out her husband has left home without explanation and in a hurry, she exclaims “[…] the flight / So runs against all reason. [It is not] wisdom! To leave his wife, to leave his babes, / His mansion and his titles in a place / From whence himself does fly?” (4.2) she is shocked that her husband, the protector of her home, has fled to do some business she knows nothing about and has left his family to the mercy of whatever has caused him to flee. Lady Macduff is exhibiting all the signs of motherhood; she shows her capacity to protect her children when she says “the poor wren, / The most diminutive of birds, will fight, / Her young ones in her nest, against the owl” (4.2) and is concerned for the welfare of her children when she speaks to her son about the possibility of acquiring a new husband to replace Macduff. On that same vein, Lady Macduff has a witty, affectionate tête-à-tête with her son, which, if Lady Macbeth be substituted, is an unfathomable scene.

I can’t write a paper like this and not compare myself to these two women. I took a look at myself and felt that there were certain aspects of my character that coincided with Ladies Macbeth and Macduff. Like Lady Macbeth, I’m not a mother and I am ambitious in my career. However, I am fiercely protective of the children that I have a personal connection to—cousins, babies I was a nanny for, friends’ children—like Lady Macduff. Luckily for me, I’m not a stock character. The great thing about being real is also being dynamic.