

An Bataillean Analysis of Lady Macbeth's Dynamics of Power, Desire and Death

Huang Siqi

University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, China

Abstract

In *Macbeth*, as one of the most crucial Shakespearean women characters, Lady Macbeth incarnates a dramatic personality heatedly controversial for her desire and pursuit of power. She is often regarded as a representative of the absolute evil force, the whistle blower of the devil, and the "pillow talk" to instigate Macbeth's killing villainies. From the perspective of a female subject, this essay integrates French philosopher Bataille's philosophical arguments on death, desire, violence and sovereignty as a unifying theoretical framework, against which, her course of life that evolves from a desire for material power to inner conflicts and to the terminus of death is inspected with an aim to illuminate her hidden motives and explore the dynamic escalation of her power and desire. By so doing, this essay seeks to frame up a new means of interpretation to address William Shakespeare's classic characterizations.

Keywords

William Shakespeare; *Macbeth*; Lady Macbeth; Bataille.

1. Introduction

Shakespeare's *Macbeth* presents a profound exploration of ambition, fate, and moral corruption, with Lady Macbeth serving as the play's initial, driving force of action. This study moves beyond traditional character analysis to investigate her narrative arc through the lens of modern philosophical thought, specifically drawing upon Georges Bataille's theories on transgression and the sacred. Instead of simply charting the events of her power grab, this essay argues that Lady Macbeth's trajectory is a dialectical movement from the "homogeneous" world of social order into the "heterogeneous" realm of violence and excess. Her ambition is interpreted not merely as a desire for a crown, but as a struggle for sovereignty—an attempt to achieve absolute freedom beyond the constraints of 17th-century femininity and the domestic "wife" role.

2. Three Phases in Lady Macbeth's Pursuit of Power

2.1. First Phase : To Lust for Earthly Power

Among all Shakespearean roles, Lady Macbeth is one that is characterized within Scotland's rigid patriarchal structure of the 17th century, a period which marks a significant turning point in the British history. The social unrest and prevalent political conspiracies of the time provide a rich backdrop for the creation of *Macbeth*, with the turbulent elements of power struggles adding a mysterious overtone to Shakespeare's plays. As a woman in a hierarchical society, Lady Macbeth is constrained by the limitations imposed on women's agency as are typical of the 17th-century Scottish context. Though her marriage to Macbeth works to solidify her social status, it also confines her to the traditional role of a wife. However, delimited by the established social structure, her ambitions and aspirations are not stifled by external constraints, but rather catalyze a process of self-realization. She exhibits a strategically planned, assertive and intelligent approach to advancing her ambitions, utilizing available resources and favorable conditions to achieve her objectives in a rational and decisive manner. Her

actions demonstrate an indomitable defiance of the conventional social boundaries set on women, and a relentless pursuit of power that transcends traditional expectations for females.

Macbeth's desire for power flames up in his letter to Lady Macbeth, according to which, he "burned in desire", wanting to know more about the outcome of his royal position.[6] Lady Macbeth begins to demonstrate her lust for power after reading the letter sent by Macbeth about the three witches' prophecy."Glamis thou art, and Cawdor, and shalt be"[6] She encourages Macbeth to claim the throne, but she is worried about his weakness of character might prevent him from taking necessary actions to achieve that glorious goal of a man's life. So in Act 1, Scene 5, she called to the darkness, chanting for more strength, "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!"[6] In her soliloquy, she displays remarkable determination and ambition, even invoking the "Mysterious power" to overcome her feminine compassion and vulnerability, thereby becoming stronger and more resolute. Lady Macbeth's lust for power is not merely about gratifying her personal ambition but also asserting her dominance over her living conditions and shaping her own destiny by exerting control over all the others. Additionally, her desire for power is satisfied through her self-confirmation achieved by controlling Macbeth's behaviors, which is to fully embody her uncompromising will for self-realization. In her view, becoming a queen would grant her great satisfaction, glory and meaning in life. Her crazy desire filled her with wisdom and strength.[10] Her ignited flame of desire fuels her determination to help Macbeth advance his plan for murder, and so, build up her sense of selfhood in the process.

2.2. Second Phase : To Clench the Royal Power

In Act II, Scene 2, Lady Macbeth showcases how insightful she as a woman strategist is and assists her husband Macbeth in maintaining his composure while executing the regicide plan with precision and discretion so as to cover his crime up. As Macbeth is too forgetful to cleanse the traces of his crime committed, she urges him to wash off the blood and place the murder weapon in the hands of the guards. Subsequently, Lady Macbeth ascends the throne, altering her destiny and attaining greater royal authority. She also assumes the role of a leader in handling the gravest possible problem that arises when Macbeth experiences a mental breakdown in public, which testifies to her distinctive leadership abilities and command of royal power. In this phase, she reaches the apex of earthly power and desire gratification. However, as the story progresses, Macbeth performs deeds that are growing more and more brutal and reckless, and Lady Macbeth, as a result, is thrown into a bottomless pit of internal conflict and pain, whose psychological well-being is torn apart by the tension between post-crime remorse and thirst for power. This phase progresses as Lady Macbeth reaches the summit of her power and then entails a downward potentiality.

2.3. Third Phase : Renunciation of Earthly Power

In Act V, Scene 1, Lady Macbeth suffers severe moral conflicts and therefore exhibits all the distinctive symptoms of a mental breakdown. During her sleepwalking she repeatedly washes her hands while uttering her line of "the blood can never be washed away", which is to suggest that the lady is entertaining hurtful feelings of guilt to her involvement in Duncan's murder as "the transgression itself is a sign of anxiety" [13]. The murder is a transgression that feeds Lady Macbeth's anxiety increasingly difficult to control. Moreover, Macbeth in this stage has become a tyrant, who killed Duncan, Banquo, Lady Macduff and Macduff's Son in quick succession. Unable to call an end to this frenetic bloodbath, Lady Macbeth begin to bear her share of the "blood debt". Being consumed by guilt and experiencing the ongoing pain of self-destruction, she comes to terms with the harsh truth that this royal power is not attainable. She has lost control of Macbeth and thus found that being a queen can not help her exert real power because

as Macbeth's wife, she is both in theory and in practice no more than Macbeth's immediate subordinate. Therefore, she ends her life by committing suicide, renouncing all her earthly power and hoping to retrieve her former self by means of volunteering to die a premature death.

3. Three Worlds Theory: The Interplay of Animality, Humanity, and Sovereignty.

French postmodernist philosopher Georges Bataille distinguishes his research by its critique of traditional rationalism. He explores the inherent "heterogeneity" of human beings. His philosophy discussed taboo topics such as religion, desire, eroticism, death and transgression to not only reveal deep conflicts and inner struggles essential to human existence and but also probe into the possibility of transcending the limits of reason. Bataille emphasizes the heterogeneity of the human mind. In the meantime, he explores the darkness of human nature and man's desire to go beyond moral limits. Lady Macbeth is the embodiment of this "heterogeneity", and in her we can see human's pursuit of power and fulfillment of personal wishes.

The central thrust of Bataille's thought can be summarized as a theory of the 'three worlds', which are the animal world, the secular world and the sacred world. [9] His theory represents a distinctive conceptualization of human existence and social structure. It seeks to elucidate the underlying dynamics that shape human behaviors. The phases-based development of Lady Macbeth's pursuit of power substantiates how she traverses Bataille's three worlds.

Bataille divides the world into three dimensions. The first realm is the Animal World (*le monde animal*) which represents the most primitive state of human beings. In this world, human beings are no different from animals, who are driven by pure desire and seeking immediate gratification of sensual pleasure. The concept of "desire," with its inherent negating force, serves as the cornerstone of Bataille's "Three worlds" theory. [9] In the beginning of the play, Lady Macbeth's lust for power well manifests her inflated ambitions and desires. The news that Macbeth might take the throne by force lights a fire of ambition deep within her. She realized that this was not only her husband's chance, but also her opportunity to seize the reins of power and shape her own destiny. Coveting supreme royal power, she does not seem to mind staining her hands with innocent blood of other people. Instead, she wishes to become more cruel and resolute, which could not be more manifestly evidenced by her saying that "I don't mind pluck my nipple from baby's gums while breastfeeding" [6] This demonstrates the animality in her. It is a survival of the fittest instinct, which amounts to a predator's hunting impulse. But, paradoxically, she is not the one who thrusts the knife into the chest of the king, and she flinches before King Duncan's face distorted of pain and woe. She states: "If he had not looked like my father, I would have done it myself." This concession shows that beneath her ruthless, power-hungry veneer of personality, there remains a vestige of human compassion. Although her actions are often driven by the desire for power, this moment of hesitation, pity or forgiveness could serve as a nuanced revelation of the human compassion hidden deep within her.

But in the end, King Duncan is dead, which illustrates that Lady Macbeth's animal desire completely overrides her human compassion. And she does express her consent and willingness to have committed the murder in the play. At this stage, it is indisputable that Lady Macbeth does not object to the act of murder. The act of taking a life is inherently sinister, and the plot to frame another is despicable. Nietzsche takes examples of frenzied human behaviors to illustrate the ineradicable and terrifying eruption of animalistic cruelty in human beings. [13] With her treatment of the infant and her manipulation of

Macbeth, Lady Macbeth radically challenges traditional notions of femininity and motherhood. Her repudiation of maternal instincts and her embrace of violence underscore her desire for power and control. Lady Macbeth's subversion of conventional gender role and social expectations on one's motherhood demonstrates her willingness to sacrifice traditional feminine virtues satisfy her appetite for absolute power.

Then there follows the second realm which is the Secular World (*le monde profane*). It represents the social order, rules, and labour that result from human socialization. In this world, people work to survive and reproduce, and are bound by codes of morality and rules of law. Entering the secular world, people begin to differentiate between the good and the evil and therefore formed their own moral standard. The greatest change in this stage is the development of "human nature" on the basis of the suppression of human animality, which is characterized by an effort to separate oneself from the animal world, the good and the evil are thus told apart and conscience thus formed.[12] In this realm, Lady Macbeth has entered the second phase of her self-realization, which is her ascension to the peak of the royal power. Within the societal constraints that relegated women to subservient roles, Lady Macbeth defied social expectations on her by perceiving power and control as the means of self-actualization. She believed that by transcending the behavioral limits of traditional gender roles and seizing control of the throne, she could reach the highest rung of the kingdom's social ladder and there win herself respect from all her subjects. Examined from a feminist perspective, Lady Macbeth is a complex and paradoxical figure who both highlights the limitations imposed on women by the patriarchal society and exposes the psychological and moral dilemmas inherent in a woman's pursuit of power. In the early part of this period, her possession of power shows the characteristics of a confident, calm, resourceful and competent queen. She offers great support and encouragement to her husband during his struggles in a moral predicament. She inspires Macbeth to act courageously and overcomes his hesitation and weakness, which evidences her decisiveness and effectiveness expected to be both embodied in the person of a partner and decision maker. In addition, Lady Macbeth demonstrates a leader's qualities in the court. She is responsible for the management of the royal affairs and plays a pivotal role in maintaining the kingdom's stability. At this stage, Lady Macbeth's dignity of a woman politician is heightened to its fullest extent, revealing the most pronounced and distinct features of her character.

However, Macbeth's killing endeavor escalated, much of which is executed without him consulting Lady Macbeth. As a result, more and more innocent people die from his unwarranted suspicion. Lady Macbeth's sense of guilt gradually increases and her view about power, law and morality is being changed drastically. She begins to question and doubt whether her husband's acts of violence are justifiable or not. While moral norms are established to guide human behavior, they can also paradoxically become instruments of constraint and oppression.[12] Lady Macbeth's internal conflict between remorse and ambition highlights the complex interplay of conflicting desires, which is an inevitable part of humanity.

The third realm is the Sacred World (*le monde sacré*), which is the dimension beyond the mundane. It is a realm that encompasses taboo, transgression and death. In this realm, the individual strives to transcend the ego and ultimately returns to the inner self, thereby experiencing the sacred. Bataille argues that the satisfaction of desire is often accompanied by violence, as desire seeks to transgress the boundaries and subvert the existing order.[8] In the third phase, violence has escalated to its very extreme and thus become uncontrollable. By this point, Macbeth has transformed himself into a tyrant, and he and Lady Macbeth has become increasingly estranged though Lady Macbeth, having developed a strong sense of agency, reaches the pinnacle of self-awareness.

Heidegger once states that the most authentic mode of 'Being' is 'Being-toward-death,' or a 'Being' that exists toward death. In this way, the awareness of death constitutes the deepest foundation of self-awareness, fostering the awakening of the 'spirit' and the emergence of a subject with 'self-consciousness. [3] At this point, she steps into the sacred world. The sacred is a transgression, a rupture in the fabric of the world, and a force that shatters all that is. Bataille's "Three worlds" theory presents a dynamic interplay which explores the tensions and conflicts between the forces of "animality," "humanity," and "sovereignty." [9] Her humanity has triumphed over her animalistic instincts. Therefore, having witnessed so much bloodshed, she is now caught in an increasingly intense internal conflict between her moral conscience and her desire for power. The greatest despair resulting from her unappeasable inner conflict can be seen from the play where she says: "The Thane of Fife had a wife. Where is she now? "[6] Upon learning that Macbeth had ordered the slaughter of Macduff's wife and son, Lady Macbeth is being consumed by despair. Her words indicate a profound compassion on her part for Macduff's wife and son. She becomes even more acutely aware of the pain and limitations imposed upon women. Power, regardless of its magnitude, cannot free her from the constraints and limitations of the role of a wife. " The sacred is the impossibility of mastering the forces of nature, of life and of death. It lies in overflow, in excess, in that which escapes all forms of control." [7]

Lady Macbeth therefore tries to repent of the sins she has committed with her husband. In the play, she shouted: "Out, damned spot! Out, I say!" [6] This hysterical cry indicates that Lady Macbeth is being haunted by the guilt of murder. And the "damned spot" symbolizes the blood of King Duncan. "The sacred, in its essence, is linked to violence, rupture, and irrationality. It is in excess and overflow that it finds its true form." [1] In the end, Lady Macbeth ends her life by committing suicide, renouncing all secular power and therefore embodying "sovereignty". "The sacred arises from the order of chaos, it is in the destruction of balance, in that which escapes both man and the world." [5] In a desperate act of agency, she chose darkness as her only destination of escape. She completely severs her ties with the earthly life, abandons the role of a "wife" and a "queen", embraces the sacred by plunging herself into the last and extreme resort of empowerment.

4. A philosophical Analysis of Death in Macbeth

Lady Macbeth's suicide is not described in detail in the play, leaving readers room for further interpretation. This essay argues that Lady Macbeth's suicide can be regarded as an extreme transgression, which is a final desperate attempt aimed at breaking free from all secular contradictions and burdens. Through this death, she trades her "mortal coil" for a spiritual ascension. "Death is the key to absolute power; it is the irrational force that destabilizes the established order and connects us to the infinite." [4] For Bataille, death is the contradictory convergence of life and destruction and the moment when existence is most strongly affirmed and denied. It is in death that life manifests its limitation and fragility in the most intense way. And he also posits that the political power of a monarch merely represents the capacity to be exempt from servile labor. True autonomy, however, is a spiritual absolute, a death-defying impulse. [11] Having attained the zenith of secular power as a queen, Lady Macbeth remains to be a prisoner of absolute reason and morality. She is trapped within the confines of reality that denies her the absolute freedom she craves. Her longing for unyielding rationality, a stable political regime, and an intimate marital bond proves unattainable. By choosing death, she effects a radical rupture with a reality that has become irrevocably destabilized. This act of self-destruction, while tragic,

can also be seen as a courageous assertion of a different kind of freedom. Following Bataille, we can interpret Lady Macbeth's suicide as a simultaneous rejection of finite existence and an embrace of the infinite. "Death is the condition of life, the corruption of death is precisely the breeding ground for the generation of life. Death is both the origin and the end of life. Death is the most luxurious expenditure of life." [2] The multitude of deaths Lady Macbeth bears witness to in the secular world can be interpreted as grand sacrifices to be made before the altar of power. Death, in this context, not only signifies the ultimate annihilation of the physical body but also, paradoxically, serves as a vehicle through which life is experienced at its most intense. However, a paradox thus arises: when violence serves as an extreme means to overthrow the existing order and facilitate Macbeth's rise to power, why does Lady Macbeth, initially an advocate for regicide, later condemn herself so severely and therefore feel strongest possible senses of guilt and inner conflicts in face of Macbeth's excessive killings?

As an observer, Lady Macbeth, after having witnessed many deaths, is gradually aware of the "brutal force of death." This ritual of sacrificing human life, a kind of "living death," fills her with trepidation and unease. In this sacrifice, "death experiences human life." [9] When considering that the duality of death is manifested as a kind of interleaving of life and destruction, or the conflict between finite and infinite, one can conclude that Lady Macbeth's choice is not only a rejection of her finite life, but also an attempt to pursue some kind of infinite liberation. In death, she tries to get rid of all the shackles of pain and find a sense of "freedom." The consciousness of death is an intrinsic component of self-consciousness and a fundamental condition of being human. When she embraces the darkness, the intensity of her self-awareness reaches its apex.

5. Conclusion

Macbeth, a timeless masterpiece of tragedy, continues to strike heartstrings of countless readers with its ever growing stock of effulgent glamour. The character of Lady Macbeth, often perceived to be vilified, can be reinterpreted through the lens of Bataille's philosophy. His dialectical philosophy on violence, desire, and power offers us an alternative lens of research to examine the underlying motivation and psychological complexities of Lady Macbeth. It offers us much needed guidance to analyze this character from a feminism-centered critical perspective, which is certainly conducive to developing a deeper and more nuanced interpretation.

References

- [1] Georges Bataille: *La Souveraineté. Oeuvres Complètes, Tome 8* (Gallimard, France 1976).
- [2] Georges Bataille: *History of Eroticism* (Commercial Press, China 2003).
- [3] Andrew Bowie: *Heidegger on Philosophy, Science, and Metaphysics: A Critical Study* (Routledge, UK 2023).
- [4] Julia Kristeva: *Bataille and the Sacrifice of Death: The Mystical Power* (Editions du Cerf, France 1995).
- [5] Élisabeth Roudinesco: *The Sacred in Disorder: Bataille's Extremes and Religious Thought* (Editions Flammarion, France 2001).
- [6] William Shakespeare: *Macbeth* (Cambridge University Press, UK 1997).
- [7] Jonathan Smith: *Theories of the Sacred: Bataille's Critique of Religion*, *Journal of Postmodern Studies*, Vol. 7 (2005) No.2, p.82-94.
- [8] Simon Townsend: *The Exploitation of Sacred Desire: Rethinking Georges Bataille's Political Theory*, *Theory & Event*, Vol. 21 (2018) No.4, p.844-864.
- [9] Cheng Danggen: *Bataille's View of "Sacred" Desire*, *Nanjing Social Sciences*, No.6 (2006), p.55-62.

- [10] Tian Junwu, Tong Xindan: *On the Devilish Character of Lady Macbeth*, Journal of Guangxi University (Philosophy and Social Science Edition), Vol. 32 (2010) No.1, p.76-79.
- [11] He Lei: *Sacred "Violence" and Wordless "Selflessness": Bataille on Eros*, Foreign Literature, No.3 (2021), p.171-180.
- [12] Zhang Sheng: *Evil, Simulative Consumption and Sovereign Communication: On Bataille's Literary View*, Journal of Soochow University (Philosophy and Social Science Edition), Vol. 34 (2013) No.6, p.137-142.
- [13] Zhang Sheng: *On Bataille's Theory of Transgression: Animality, Taboo and Totality*, Journal of Tongji University (Social Science Edition), Vol. 27 (2016) No.3, p.9-26.