

Women and Patriarchal Power in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and *King Lear*: A Feminist Reading

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Abstract

Shakespeare's Macbeth and King Lear demonstrate a variety of images of women, both at the center of, and sidelined by, men's power and influence within a male-dominated social and political system. Through a feminist reading, this essay investigates how these female characters navigate the obstacles, provoke rebellion, and are ultimately victimized by social structures governed by patriarchy and rigid notions of gender. Specifically focusing on Lady Macbeth, the three witches, Cordelia, Goneril and Regan, the essay provides an analysis of female characters, the relationship between their power, ambition, gender and social constraint, how they negotiate patriarchal authority. Lady Macbeth's rejection of traditional feminine identity and his attempt to manipulate the political machinations in Macbeth exposes how the society limits the ambition of women and her subsequent mental breakdown illustrates the dire effects of subverting expectations imposed on femininity whereas in King Lear the challenge to the traditional role of the women, which is that the authority figure has to be a man, is evident in all women, but is illustrated clearly through Cordelia's rebellion to paternal order versus Regan and Goneril's manipulation of politics. The women's treatment and the decisions made through their identity is clearly dictated and affected by masculine ideals, therefore their interactions prove to us how the characters' lives differ and how these differences are a result of the patriarchal framework of society, however these plays simultaneously uphold and at the same time create doubt within the patriarchal traditions of the Elizabethan world.

Keywords: Shakespeare, Feminism, Patriarchy, Gender, Female Agency, Macbeth, King Lear, Women and Power.

1. Introduction

William Shakespeare's plays often focus on issues of power, authority, gender, and hierarchy. As they were written in a patriarchal society, England in the Renaissance era, *King Lear* and *Macbeth* demonstrate social and political structures in which men's identities are predominantly defined through political power or societal strength and in which female identities have to conform to notions of quietude, deference, obedience, chastity and domesticity. Despite these limitations, however, Shakespeare's female characters do not always adopt passive stances or characters: in either case they negotiate and contend with patriarchal structures, through resistance, manipulation or

coercion; be they Lady Macbeth or the witches in *Macbeth*, Cordelia or even Goneril and Regan in *King Lear*, these female characters illustrate a conflict between personal desires and the expectations imposed upon them to meet social expectations regarding both male dominance in a male ordered society, and woman's place and power within it.

This paper uses a feminist lens, or viewpoint to explore Shakespeare's depiction of women, patriarchal power, female authority and agency within *King Lear* and *Macbeth*. It compares female characters' roles; namely the roles of Lady Macbeth, the witches in *Macbeth*, Cordelia and the villainous Goneril and Regan within *King Lear*, in relation to patriarchal pressures on women and agency in

Shakespeare. I will argue that Shakespeare's portrayal of women does represent patriarchal notions of his time while paradoxically showing how women's agency can potentially resist or subvert this, as well as limit these freedoms for some of his female characters.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Feminist Literary Theory and Shakespeare

Feminist literary criticism provides a framework through which we can explore a range of issues in literature; gender, power, identity, and the relative position of women. For the sake of Shakespearean literary criticism, a feminist approach to his texts has proved particularly fruitful due to the presence of women on his stage that both operate and defy the existing patriarchies. Such scholarship seeks to move beyond simplistic analyses of whether Shakespeare himself was 'patriarchal' or 'feminist' to analysing the tensions and contradictions within his constructions of gender and power. As Chedgzoy's 1998 publication, *Shakespeare, Feminism and Gender*, highlights, feminist perspectives are essential for comprehending the politics of gender and sexuality in texts from *King Lear* to *Macbeth* (Chedgzoy, as discussed in Tredennick 2001).

A Feminist perspective acknowledges the fact that, ultimately, women cannot be understood in isolation from the existing society within which they exist. Gender expectations often shape the behaviour of women: how they speak, act, wield power, and what they have done judged by other women,

as well as by men. Perhaps the most interesting area to use.

Feminist interpretation is the idea of gender performance. The performativity theory, devised by Judith Butler has a number of uses when analysing Feminist theory; it does not see Gender as a singular identity, but rather something which is 'iteratively performed through a series of socially regulated acts and expectations' (Chambers, 2006, p.55).

2.2 Patriarchy and Gender in Shakespearean Drama

In terms of family structures, political authority, marriage, and Gender relations, patriarchy remains a seminal critical idea through which we can analyze "shakespeare's images of family". In the "*King Lear*", patriarchal Authority could be seen with the help of the role of Lear as a king and a father; the way he asked for open display of daughters' love in return for his empire can be taken as the way paternal rule and political power was supported by female submission. Most of feminists critique the views that look upon the king's two cruel daughters as two devils only and they instead suggest that in the patriarchal arena which all the three daughters had to adjust their identity and position. [Kordecke and Koskinen].

Similar situation could be analyzed when in "*macbeth*" the political sphere is dominated by the male and lady Macbeth's manipulation over her king and her despising of female attributes reveal the fight of any attempt for women's assertiveness towards male controlled patriarchy, it is argued today

that this violence is both an opposition to the gender role and in addition it is still within the frame of the already patriarchal control on power (Reyes and Kenney). Therefore, the role played by the females and it might have been neither that of victims only nor rebellion of an organized society, but as individuals to compromise with restricted society.

2.3 Female Agency and Resistance

Feminist Shakespeare has also sought to uncover the idea of female agency within the plays. By agency, I mean the potential of women to perform, make, will, desire, manipulate, and make a difference to the structures of authority. In Macbeth, Lady Macbeth's considerable capacity for agency is visible in the first half of the play. It can be seen in her provocation of her husband by criticizing his manliness and questioning his willingness to act on the deed planned in the play.

Her interference with events during the plotting of Duncan's murder and in influencing the direction of politics and public events challenges woman's identity as passive and domestic. Ultimately, though, her mental instability toward the second half of the play raises questions on the nature of her resistance to traditional gender roles and whether a woman could possibly attain authority in a patriarchal context such as Macbeth itself portrays (Reyes and Kenny). Similar examples of feminine agency can be found in King Lear. The play features three female characters who demonstrate varying degrees of agency - Cordelia, Goneril and Regan. Cordelia attempts to escape and defy Lear's demand to

express herself through exaggerated rhetoric; Goneril and Regan fully take control of politics during the play.

The play has traditional interpretation as it often shows them in stark contradiction to each other and negatively represented characters. Feminist criticism seeks to reinterpret these characters by focusing on the patriarchal frameworks within which their actions are interpreted. Both Kordecki and Koskinen suggest a more intricate reading of King Lear's daughters, who can indeed achieve a role of active and effective female agency against patriarchal power (751; 748)

2.4 Feminist Readings of Macbeth

The extant analysis on Macbeth generally concerns Lady Macbeth, being among the most contentious portrayals of female ambition in Shakespeare. As one might recall, she invokes this ambition by stating that she be "unsexed," an invocation highlighting her resistance to gender roles conventionally considered 'feminine' (1.5). Instead, it suggests her desire to participate in a public sphere of political and public power historically situated in and constituted by male interests. Consequently, feminist criticism analyzes Lady Macbeth's characterization within contexts pertaining to gender performance, ambition, agency, violence, and power.

Reyes and Kenny's feminist perspective to this end stresses the paradox that is central to Lady Macbeth; the character simultaneously defies notions of sex and sexuality while simultaneously articulating and seeking power through patriarchal mechanisms and social structures (Reyes and

Kenny). This paradox is essential for without it, we might simply interpret Lady Macbeth as a woman taking on or a woman suffering by patriarchy. Rather, this is where the character shows how hard it is to take action where power is culturally identified as masculine.

2.5 Feminist Readings of King Lear

Feminist readings of King Lear have for some time now cast doubt on the simple dichotomy of good Cordelia, bad Goneril and Regan. To take such a reading at face value, perpetuates a patriarchally inscribed notion that docility in a woman makes her good and rebellion makes her dangerous. The book by Kordecki and Koskinen entitled 'Re-Visioning Lear's Daughters' argues specifically against simplistic readings of all the daughters and explore their individual and group processing in a patriarchal world.

For the first and foremost, the Lear and his daughter's interaction and the dynamic within such a relationship provides a way in which patriarchal authority in the text and its inherent nature and workings may be analysed. The authority of a King and a Father become inextricable as he expects absolute and unproblematic deference in both cases; the personal authority of the Father and the political authority of the King become entwined. The refusal of Cordelia' to participate in the public spectacle of affection and the eventual independent power of both Goneril and Regan destabilise this expected order and it is the tragedy which becomes a battle of patriarchal authority against female agency, with the aid of the insights provided by feminist scholarship.

2.6 Comparative Perspective and Research Gap

Recent research has indicated that issues of gender, along with the notion of a patriarchal ideology continue to occupy a prominent role in Shakespearean studies of these plays. The critics working on Macbeth tend to concentrate on Lady Macbeth, relating her experience to issues of female agency, violence and expectations associated with the Patriarch.

Readings of Lear's daughters and their negotiation of Patriarchal authority has begun to take on a new dimension of complexity with newer interpretations of gender readings of the play (Reyes and Kenny; Kordecki and Koskinen). Recent comparative work on the themes of gender and patriarchal Ideology across his tragedies, including Macbeth and King Lear have come about, 1500/2007 However there is still room for a specific comparative examination that will explore female action versus Patriarchal power and not that of the individual female characters in King Lear and Macbeth.

It will discuss how Lady Macbeth's relationship with patriarchal authority differs from that of Cordelia, Goneril and Regan's negotiation of Patriarchal constraints, focusing on what different roles they enact - some as rebels, some as loyal figures, as women with power ambitions of their own or of the Patriarchal figures around them etc. The essay will show that Shakespeare's depiction of women is neither as passively conforming nor purely liberating.

3. Theoretical Framework: Feminist Literary Theory

Feminist literary theory is a most helpful framework for analysing the role and construction of the representation of woman, the relationship between the sexes, power of the patriarchy and agency of women, in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and *King Lear*. Unlike earlier approaches which considered the role of female characters purely as ancillary, feminist critics analyses how women, and concepts of masculinity and femininity are constructed in the literary text in relation to power relations (social and political). It is through the seminal works of Simone de Beauvoir that we begin to establish an understanding for placing the construction of Woman as the 'Other' with its inherent implications of subordination within patriarchy (Beauvoir), a useful approach given that women in the Shakespearean tragedies in question are mainly constructed in relation to fathers, husbands, kings or some other masculine power figure.

3.1 Simone de Beauvoir and the Construction of Womanhood

In Simone de Beauvoir's work *The Second Sex* she states that women have been presented as the 'Other' against men as the (Beauvoir) dominant 'subject'. This has a relevance to how gender inequality operates in *Macbeth* and *King Lear* where the dominant paradigm of masculinity operates creating the space wherein female beings can survive and have political (and or) personal influence. These men act the parameters of where and how a woman exists, through the parameters of

acceptable behavior such as those women be obedient, feminine, loyal, and not outwardly aggressive. This can apply to both lady *Macbeth* and *cordelia* whereby lady *Macbeth* desires political power and so must subvert what is seen as feminine where 'unsex me here', shows her awareness of this where masculine deeds and actions appear to demand the abdication of traditional femininity (1.5.39) and *cordelia* is unable to play along to a game set up by her male parent and immediately denied any kind of autonomy where she refuses to perform and play at love.

3.2 Kate Millett and Patriarchal Power

Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* can also serve as a critical reference for the current research. Millett writes how the relations between the sex is closely tied with the system of power, where males dominated women historically (Millett). Her notion of 'sexual politics', I believe, is highly functional when applied to the study of Shakespearean plays, in that the fathers-and- daughter's relationship, husbands-and-wife's relationship, or ruler-and-ruled relationship often blends private and public authorities. In *King Lear*, Lear's fatherly authority is inextricable from his royal authority.

His daughters have to show submissiveness toward him as long as he is their father, even when his demands appear so irrational as can be perceived in the plot. So Goneril and Regan's defiance simultaneously challenges their father personally as kin and politically. Similarly, Lady *Macbeth*'s relationship with her husband in *Macbeth*, reflects how gender relates with power. Lady

Macbeth wants her husband to follow through with the action that she proposes, precisely because she is aware that males control all the means of obtaining political power.

For example, her provocation of Macbeth against his manhood 'When you durst do it then you were a man'(Macbeth, 1.7. 49) also reveals the utility of masculinity in achieving political power.

3.3 Elaine Showalter and Feminist Literary Criticism

"Writing Like a Man" Elaine Showalter's approach to feminist criticism stresses the significance of women and writing or representations of women and in representations to the literary historical record. Her suggestion for the distinction between the 'imitation and originality of the tradition' within female literary traditions highlights that we must explore the representation of gender on the page, in response to the social conditions which allow representations. So for us when viewing female characters within the plays this must mean that female characters need to be viewed within the gender expectations of that society, not our own, thus Lady Macbeth in Macbeth may be seen as striving against an innate desire, by rejecting feminine constraints to act as a man does [that is, aspiring to power. 'The problem women authors face is to write as freely and intensely as any male writer, but avoid the constraints of the female literary canon...' (Showalter)], whilst Goneril, Cordelia and Regan in King Lear all demonstrate various responses to the dictates of their male-dominated world, and no one form of resistance is portrayed.

3.4 Judith Butler and Gender Performance

Butler's notion of gender performativity is yet another framework which can facilitate a reading of the female characters in each play. For Butler, gender is not a fixed natural identity but is rather constituted performatively through repeated social practices and conventions (Butler).

This becomes relevant to Lady Macbeth due to her deliberate attempt to abandon feminine practices: her wish to be "unsex'd" may therefore be read as a performance of defiant renunciation of the performance demanded of women by virtue of their gender (Macbeth 1.5.39).

A reading through Butler's framework of performativity helps make sense too of the alternative performances undertaken by women in King Lear, by looking at Cordelia's refusal to make the demands of her father a performative display of love and at Goneril and Regan's performative staking of political claim through their speeches, to defy what are regarded by patriarchy to be women's expected behavior-be they "silent, subjugated and deferred to" men (Butler). While the characters' disastrous destinies and lives do show these efforts were costly attempts at performative variations to societal and familial conventions within patriarchal norms.

3.5 Feminist Theory and Female Agency

The theme of female agency the focus of this investigation is an essential consideration of the study. It does not follow that in feminist analysis of literature, female agency is always a matter of freedom from society.¹² Women's agency can, therefore, be

defined in relation to characters 'making their way' or making the best that they could within their imposed boundaries of the social matrix. This is a highly relevant approach to Shakespeare, whose female characters have substantial degrees of power yet are simultaneously involved with patriarchal structures such as politics and marriage.

For example, lady Macbeth holds some power over her husband but it is ultimately the politically and psychologically dependent and the familial structures.

For example, Cordelia resists her father's demands and attempts to keep her sense of truth and affection but on the other hand Goneril and Regan seek power as political players in a social system traditionally male-dominated. Their experiences indicate complexity concerning the women in this study; the limitations that patriarchy places upon them.

3.6 Application of the Theoretical Framework

Using Beauvoir's theory of woman as the "Other" to understand women's positioning as the subordinate sex, Millett's theory of sexual politics that relates constructions of gender to systems of power, Showalter's feminist criticism of the feminine representative in history and literature, and Butler's theory of performativity of gender in relating the social expectations to the performances of the feminine and masculine subject, the two works may be analyzed from these differing but equally enlightening angles (Beauvoir; Millett; Showalter; Butler).

4. Methodology

This paper employs qualitative, interpretative, and comparative research method to look into presentation of women and patriarchy in William Shakespeare's Macbeth and King Lear. It depends mainly on detailed close read to the two plays and to the dialogues, characterisation, dramatic devices, imagery, and female-male interactions to see how gender, patriarchal authority, female actions, agency and protest are portrayed, represented and expressed (Showalter; Chedgzoy). Feminism approach of this research is adopted in to analyse the social gender role, patriarchal supremacy, women's will, action and protests as represented (Millett). This research uses in depth reading of the plays to analyze representation of women in Macbeth such as Lady Macbeth, the three witches and those in King Lear such as Cordelia, Goneril, and Regan through close read to their significant speeches, expressions and actions and looking at their position towards power, authority, roles that the men and women have played, social constraints faced and the restrictions exerted on them, all of which we refer to using theories of feminist literary criticism such as De Bouvoir, Millett, Showalter, and Butler.

In this study also a compare is being presented between representation of women in the two plays in terms of agency of women, and their confrontation with patriarchies as their actions had different consequences at different political states and by so we don't regard them like victims or rebellion, but as social beings subject to limitations and constraints that the patriarchy had put on

women (Dusimberre; Kordeci & Korinen). So they represent characters that simultaneously depict patriarchy and its inherent contradiction, hence make significant texts for critical feminist reading (Dusimberre; Kordeci & Korinen).

5. Women and Patriarchal Power in Macbeth

5.1 Lady Macbeth and the Rejection of Conventional Femininity

Lady Macbeth is one of Shakespeare's most fascinating portrayal of the ambitious, rebellious woman struggling against the restrictive dictates of patriarchal society that are imposed upon women as their "natural" role. We see from her earliest scene of importance that she desires to engage herself directly in politics, refusing to stand by idly. Upon learning of the witches' prophecy from Macbeth's letter, she instantly forms plans to "catch the nearest way" in his journey to ascend to the throne. Lady Macbeth thus immediately subverts our stereotypical notion of a woman as simply a devotedly supportive spouse, and shows her desire to become actively involved in the political sphere. This feminist reading might represent her effort to break free from the limitations imposed on women in a patriarchal framework (Millett, Showalter).

We see Lady Macbeth's abrogation of female stereotypes, more clearly perhaps when she calls upon evil powers to 'unsex me here' (I.5.39). Perhaps the significance of the use of this specific word lies in Lady Macbeth's understanding of women being associated with traits which limit her potential. In calling

to have such attributes stripped from her, she wishes for the strength, aggression and ruthless capability that she associates as requisite for a political figure. In terms of Butler's interpretation, her call to be 'unsexed' can be seen as the creation of an alternative, gender performative act, moving away from the expected performance of a woman (Butler).

5.2 Ambition, Masculinity, and Political Power

The link between masculinity and politics can be observed in Lady Macbeth's relationship with Macbeth. Faced with Macbeth's doubts about killing Duncan, Lady Macbeth challenges his masculinity asserting. "When you durst do it, then you were a man" (Macbeth 1.7.49). Her argument shows how masculinity serves as a form of social control; she knows that Macbeth's masculinity is in some way dependent upon his determination, and thus that he can be browbeaten by attacking his courage.

Millett's argument about the operation of sexual politics directly relevant, as female sexuality is explicitly tied to political power in her conception (Millett). At the same time, Lady Macbeth's rise to political power relies on ambiguity of her desire. In her actions of challenging male authority, it is also true that she seeks power within patriarchal structures; she does not attempt to construct an alternative hierarchy, but instead to share that already set in place, through Macbeth.

5.3 The Witches and the Disruption of Gender Expectations

Adding another layer of complexity to the display of masculinity and femininity are the three witches. These witches are made physically ambiguous as well as linguistically ambiguous, which refuses their placement within predefined notions of both masculinity and femininity. Banquo cannot determine if they are female based on their appearance; he asserts: 'you should be women, and yet your beards forbid me to interpret that you are so' (Macbeth 1.3.45-47). The ambiguous bodies deny male and female identities a separate designation. This knowledge held by the witches in turn impacts on the political fate of Scotland; while the three agents do not physically force Macbeth to murder Duncan, they initiate a chain of consequences that will later redefines his vision of self and fate. The supernatural power possessed by them therefore invalidates the relationship between knowledge, power and male bodies. In feminism, this presentation shows Shakespeare's focus on women and gender identities beyond established limits (Showalter).

5.4 Female Agency and Its Consequences

Despite demonstrating a great degree of authority within her role during the start of the play, this dramatically shifts after the death of Duncan. Despite being confident that 'a little water clears us of this deed' (Macbeth 2.2.86), Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking scene shows the effect of what she endured as she attempts 'to wash this filthy witness from [her] hand' (Macbeth 5.1.42). Her confidence earlier in the play therefore is proved a false illusion

when we see her psychological trauma and the effects it has had on her.

Such scenes have often been said to present a narrative through which a woman who does not follow traditional gender norms is ultimately punished by Shakespeare. Such an approach may be a slightly simplistic one; her collapse also appears a testament to the vicious political situation which not only she and her husband are navigating, but to which they aspire. Therefore, she demonstrates that ambition and aspiration are not inherently "female"; they serve to illustrate the damage done by a political context where dominance, conquest, violence and desire play a dominant role.

She embodies what may be said to be a paradox in Shakespeare's portrayal of women, representing someone who can step outside of the constraints placed upon her as a woman to compete with the male political elite yet one who remains within this masculinity's influence through her aspirations and desired position; it ultimately goes against the patriarchal structure she wishes to join. She stands as one of Shakespeare's more complicated female characters, whose presence neither completely negates patriarchal assumptions of woman, or perfectly illustrates a "liberated female voice", rather exploring the complex nature of what they represent.

6. Women and Patriarchal Power in King Lear

6.1 Cordelia and Patriarchal Authority

Cordelia's relationship with Lear, the king, represents an obvious manifestation of

conflict between feminine sincerity and patriarchal power. At the outset of King Lear Lear commands his three daughters to display on a public stage how much he loves him before he gives away his kingdom to two of them; the other two, Goneril and Regan, comply with Lear's expectations in floridly exaggerated speech while Cordelia will not pretend beyond truth: "I cannot heave / My heart into my mouth." (King Lear 1.1.90-1). Cordelia's response is, according to a feminist reading, a demonstration of the inviolability of woman's interiority under patriarchal imposition, inasmuch as her father both legally rules and authoritatively directs her actions (Lear being the father and king).¹Lear's own display of authority shows what is at stake in this interaction: he rejects and ostracizes Cordelia for telling the truth; he tells her, "Here I disclaim all my paternal care." (King Lear 1.1.111).

Cordelia's being a daughter is predicated upon her submission, so her resistance banishes her from family and kingdom. This incident echoes Beauvoir's idea of woman as the Other in which woman is defined not by herself but by the men whom she must regard with submission.

6.2 Goneril and Regan as Women Exercising Power

Goneril and Regan have a different kind of female agency. Unlike Cordelia, their agency is outspoken about their desire to have authority over a portion of Lear's kingdom; their political actions undermine the implicit expectation that women's voices be silenced by the authoritative presence of men. When

Goneril insists on controlling the size of her father's retinue and delineating borders of her estate within her realm, she is attempting to exert political and domestic power that is independent from the will of her father. Similarly, when Regan sides with Goneril in restricting Lear's influence over her domain, she actively participates in this exercise of power.

These attempts to exercise female authority prove threatening to Lear's worldview partly because this challenges the very patriarchal authority to which his daughters are expected to defer. From a feminist point of view, neither Goneril nor Regan should be simply understood as malevolent "nags" or disrespectful daughters. We can conceptualize their political assertiveness as negotiations within a patriarchal framework to attempt to gain authority and power (Kordecki and Koskinen 105, 106).

6.3 Lear's Attitude Toward Female Authority

Lear's responses to the actions and speech of his daughters illustrate his struggles with female autonomy. Lear is comfortable with female obedience because his daughters are supposed to obey him on account of their being women as well as Lear's children. He reacts with indignation to Goneril and Regan because their assertion of authority makes him lose something of his own self-respect. His rage illustrates the fact that patriarchy as a political system is maintained by expectation as well as by state power.

Lear becomes much angrier when he believes his authority is undermined and his language consequently becomes much cruder. For example, he calls Goneril "a detested kite" (King Lear, 1.4.249), an index of the rage that his daughters' challenges cause in him. That Lear cannot easily accept female independence on an intellectual as well as a political level shows his sense of what links patriarchal masculinity to political authority; Millett's concept of sexual politics provides a lens for understanding how gender dynamics can, in fact, be thought of in terms of authority relationships because women (or femininity more generally) are conditioned to be obedient in the patriarchal framework (Millett).

6.4 Female Agency, Resistance, and Punishment

The three daughters embody three distinct responses to patriarchal power; Cordelia resists through forthrightness, unwilling to perform the kind of obedience Lear requests. Goneril and Regan resist through assertion of political power once they have control of their respective domains; the distinct ways in which they resist highlights the non-monolithic structure of female agency. Butler's theory of gender performativity may be apposite; for all the daughters defy different conventions regarding the way a woman should voice, act, and exert authority. (Butler) Nonetheless, the tragic results incurred by these women's actions highlight the narrow constraints imposed on female agency.

Cordelia suffers her execution, whilst Goneril and Regan are eliminated through the violence they ultimately instantiate, a violence

which contributes to the restored political stability central to the tragic outcome, but which may imply limits exist in Shakespeare's fictional arena concerning women's autonomy. This sentencing does not preclude this work's approval of female autonomy, but may indeed serve to document and even condemn the instability and violence which occur when patriarchal authority is undermined.

6.5 Comparative Significance of Lear's Daughters

In conclusion the differences between Cordelia, Goneril and Regan serve to illustrate Shakespeare's complex attitude toward women. Cordelia seems to struggle against patriarchal power through honesty and an independent, untroubled sexuality, while the other two attack such power in order to attain an explicitly political authority. None of the women can be neatly classified as apolitical female; in fact, Lear's daughters prove that women' in Shakespeare's tragic universe can affect the courses of events-in both political and domestic contexts--even if they are excluded from political power by patriarchal structures.

The figure of Lear's three daughters thus serves to buttress a feminist analysis of King Lear as a tragedy the matizes issues of gender and authority. Shakespeare illustrates patriarchal power both as a basis for social hierarchy and for social discord. Lear's demand for the obedience that ultimately destroys his household and state shows how personal and political authority, as exemplified in the daughters' relationships to

their father, inevitably collide and undermine the social structure.

7. Comparative Discussion

7.1 Female Agency in Macbeth and King Lear

The male-defined feminine roles, challenged as each of these women are, are reflected in how both Macbeth and King Lear have female characters rebelling against their roles. Goneril and Regan are given reigns of their own father's kingdom, and the desires Lady Macbeth exhibits the need to control Macbeth and play a part in the politics. Cordelia's resistance is the act of defying her king through rejecting her father and not stating the words he wants her to. These varied roles are an indicator that Shakespeare did not portray feminine autonomy in a single, definitive way (Millett; Showalter).

7.2 Patriarchal Authority and Gender Expectations

There is an obvious portrayal of patriarchy in both tragedies. It is one of the recurring symbols of the strength, violence and political power in Macbeth, where gender can apparently be equated with these characteristics; however, women's right to own such characteristics as the exclusive possession of men is challenged in the case of Lady Macbeth by the discourse of the King Lear. As father and ruler, Lear expects his daughters, Goneril, Regan and Cordelia, to obey him and his struggle with the daughters shows a case of what can result from the inability of women to conform to patriarchy (Beauvoir; Butler).

7.3 Resistance and Its Consequences

Both female protagonists suffer devastating retribution as a result of confronting patriarchal and political hierarchies. Macbeth deteriorates both psychologically and spiritually as a result of Macbeth's brutal take-over whilst Cordelia, Goneril and Regan reap what they sow. Such tragic conclusion can either reaffirm how limited the possibility for women's power is within patriarchal systems or reinforce how influential Shakespeare's female characters are to the play (Chedzoy).

7.4 Comparative Analysis of the Female Characters

Aspect	Macbeth	King Lear
Principal female characters	Lady Macbeth and the Witches	Cordelia, Goneril, and Regan
Main form of agency	Ambition and political influence	Resistance and political authority
Patriarchal structure	Male political and marital authority	Paternal and royal authority
Challenge to gender roles	Lady Macbeth rejects conventional femininity	Lear's daughters challenge female obedience
Major consequence	Psychological collapse and death	Conflict, punishment, and death
Feminist significance	Female ambition challenges masculine power	Female independence challenges patriarchal authority

7.5 Overall Comparison

By reading the two plays against each other, Shakespeare does not provide female power with no means of control, nor women's resistance in utter success. All four women, Lady Macbeth, Cordelia, Goneril, and Regan "have a measure of agency, but [their] experiences are inscribed within the political and social matrices of patriarchy." The tragedies illustrate an inherent conflict between women's need for agency and the

powers of patriarchy. Shakespeare's multifarious portrayals of women in these two tragedies ensure that Macbeth and King Lear continue to be important works for our exploration into issues of gender, power, resistance, and women's agency in English Renaissance (Showalter; Butler).

Conclusion

In conclusion, this comparative exploration of William Shakespeare's Macbeth and King Lear suggests that women's position is a complex one within the male-dominated social, political and familial spaces evoked in the two plays. Female characters such as Lady Macbeth, Cordelia, Goneril, and Regan are never simply passive objects determined by the men around them: instead, they reveal an aptitude for scheming, an awareness of political realities and the possibility of resistance (and for that matter, assertion). Lady Macbeth transgresses against femininity through her drive and ambition; Cordelia refuses to perform the hollow declarations that Lear requires of her; and Goneril and Regan demonstrate their exercise of political power in a realm where it exclusively belongs to men. These forms of feminine agency do not offer a case for feminism in as much as they challenge the constraints imposed on women by patriarchal structures, but rather raise questions about how gender intersects with power and autonomy (Beauvoir; Butler; Millett).

Furthermore, however, the ultimate misfortunes of these women, their tragic downfalls, reveal the ways in which patriarchal structures limit female autonomy;

their experiences, rather than providing a simple defence or argument against empowerment per se, point to the complexities of power relations (Chedgzoy; Kordecki and Koskinen). However, because they interrogate these power structures, they offer a useful contribution to feminist literary studies, which in turn provides the insight that Shakespeare's depictions of women in these two plays help us to see not how patriarchy must necessarily be overthrown, but rather how patriarchal structuring of experience complicates and challenges individual possibility, while demonstrating that resistance has both personal and public cost.

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