

Not Just Another Brick in the Wall: Gender Subversion in *Macbeth* and *Richard III*

It is no question that William Shakespeare grew up surrounded by a patriarchal, unjust society. It is this very fact that makes it remarkable that he penned such strong female characters. In some cases, these women go as far as to subvert traditional gender roles and exert intense power over the men in their lives, essentially thwarting authority in their time. Nowhere is this clearer than in the cases of Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth* and Elizabeth Woodville in *Richard III*. While quite different in personality and story's end, these two ladies share an undeniable power in their respective plays. Through their acknowledgement of their gender and their control over the men in their lives, Lady Macbeth and Elizabeth Woodville are, without a doubt, Shakespearean heroes of gender subversion.

It is essential to first note, however, a key difference between these two characters. They acknowledge their gender in very different ways: Lady Macbeth denies hers, whereas Elizabeth owns and utilizes it. This is seen with some immediacy in both plays. In Lady Macbeth's first appearance onstage, after hearing of the witches' prophecy, she demands, "Come, you spirits/That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,/And fill me from crown to the toe top-full/Of direst cruelty!" (*Macbeth*; 1.5, 38-41). In her annulment of her gender, Lady Macbeth is assuming the power assigned to a man; in a way, she is performing a literal usurpation of Elizabethan gender roles. Conversely, Elizabeth illustrates her feminine plight within her first few speaking lines, lamenting that, should her husband die and son take the throne, "his minority/Is put unto the trust of Richard Gloucester,/A man that loves not me nor none of you" (*Richard III*; 1.3, 11-13). She understands the situation that has been thrust upon her, being the previous Queen and the much-despised sister-in-law of Richard. This does not defeat her,

though, as the audience is shown time and again throughout the play. As Allison Machlis Meyer observes in her essay, “Dialogue assigned to Richard indicates that he sees Elizabeth as a formidable enemy with the potential to prevent his manipulation of dynastic succession and to turn public opinion against him” (Machlis Meyer 158). Her very womanhood and ability to understand and manipulate it “ascribe[s her] a privileged knowledge of Richard’s aspirations” (158), thus allowing her more power, albeit less forward than Lady Macbeth’s.

This power over the men in their lives, regardless of gender acknowledgement or denial thereof, is explicit in Shakespeare’s writing. Richard III himself, after ascending the throne, tells the audience that Elizabeth is “bold, quick, ingenious, forward, capable” (*Richard III*; 3.1, 154); in short, he is frightened of what she can accomplish. She is a brilliant woman, and one who is dedicated to protecting her family and her lineage. Her intelligence is never hidden from anyone. In fact, in her final scene of the play, Elizabeth engages in verbal warfare with Richard; her parrying of his words is the only time any character defeats him before the literal battle. She meets him word for word, completing his verse:

“Now, by the world—”

“’Tis full of thy foul wrongs.”

“My father’s death—”

“Thy life hath dishonored.”

“Then by myself—”

“Thyself thyself misusest.”

“Why then, by God—”

“God’s wrong is most of all.”

(*Richard III*; 4.4, 292-295)

Richard is unable to win. Elizabeth knows precisely what to say to him, and, in the end, he gives up in the wooing of her daughter. Elizabeth of York (the daughter in question) will become the next Queen of England, marrying Henry VII. By defeating Richard in this verbal thrust-and-parry, Elizabeth Woodville has won. Her power is unquestionable, and, in that, she subverts the typical gender structure.

Lady Macbeth's authority over her husband is even more obvious, infamous within the canon. She is quite clearly the one deciding every strategy, every move, in propelling her husband to the crown. As observed by Pragati Das, she "assumes the absolute power of the state" as "her insistence provide[s] the impetus for the power base" (Das 46). Although it is Macbeth himself providing the public face, Lady Macbeth is the true King behind the scenes. She is the one pushing her husband onward, ensuring his triumph; in fact, it is Lady Macbeth who solidifies King Duncan's murder, scathingly telling her husband, "When you durst do it, then you were a man;/And to be more than what you were, you would/Be so much more the man" (*Macbeth*; 1.7, 49-51). By questioning Macbeth's manhood and proving herself to be the stronger (albeit more sadistic) of the two, Lady Macbeth firmly establishes herself as the powerhouse in this relationship dynamic. This is a clear inversion and subversion of Shakespearean gender roles. After all, "typically, weakness is associated with the female, and man gains integrity through strength and boldness in battle" (Das 47), yet it is Lady Macbeth who becomes the strategist and immoral hero. She assumes the male role within the play.

Both Lady Macbeth and Elizabeth Woodville are powerful, unbeatable women. Although their endings are quite different, both have won: in Lady Macbeth taking her own life, she ensures she dies still seated at the apex of her power; Elizabeth Woodville is now the Queen Mother, and will continue to have a powerful say in the governing of the kingdom. Giving

female characters this much undeniable power was unheard of in Elizabethan England.

Shakespeare's writing of gender subversion was unprecedented, and still provides food for thought today. There is a reason these two women, these two stories, have prevailed throughout history: after all, what actress doesn't want to play a woman who wins? And who doesn't want to watch her?

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