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RESEARCH ARTICLE

POWER AND MONARCHY: SHAKESPEARE'S PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN MACBETH AND HAMLET.

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Abstract

William Shakespeare began writing and performing plays in the latter quarter of the fifteen hundreds. Elizabeth Tudor began her reign as Queen in 1558, and died on March 23, 1603. Thus, two of the most prominent individuals from sixteenth and seventeenth century English history lived as contemporaries. They interacted with each other at Court. Both walked the streets of London. Shakespeare's company performed for the Queen. Did such level of interaction between the monarch and the playwright lead to Elizabethan influence on Shakespeare's writing? Shakespeare does give female protagonists power within many of his plays. In his comedies, the female protagonists act in authoritative ways with success. Yet, these plays do not address the role of women royalty. As concern about the monarch's gender formed one of the primary social considerations of Shakespeare's day, one might expect to see these gender considerations revealed in Shakespeare's writing. Indeed, the popular and politic writer can hardly dissociate himself from societal concerns. In two of Shakespeare's tragedies, Hamlet and Macbeth, Shakespeare implicitly suggests the danger of women's involvement in politics at the sovereign level. Through Gertrude's marriage to Hamlet's uncle and also through Lady Macbeth's unbridled political ambition, Shakespeare dramatizes real political concerns that evolved from and during the reign of Elizabeth Tudor. In the characters, Shakespeare reflects political gender anxieties; in the themes, he develops a schema of conflict and chaos erupting from such anxiety, and in the plays' contextual resolutions, he fulfills the desire for a return to state stability through a solidification of the patriarchal system. Hamlet and Macbeth do not make an explicit political argument regarding Elizabeth's monarchy, but in these plays Shakespeare does invoke the tensions of the day as related to female leadership.

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II. Thematic Concern

Undoubtedly Shakespeare considered current issues in his writing. Scholars debate, however, the degree to which his plays should be interpreted as contemporary political writing versus universal philosophical statement. In the book Shakespeare's Politics, authors Allan Bloom and Harry V. Jaffa criticize the limitations of interpreting Shakespeare within historical terms. Nonetheless, they concede that his writing produced an accurate thematic picture of the

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current social concerns: “The poet is an imitator of nature; he reproduces what he sees in the world, and it is only his preoccupation with that world which renders him a poet” (1996, p.8). In reproducing the world, the playwright necessarily reconstructs current social and political concerns as well as universal themes. Other scholars also contend that the historical depiction cannot be overlooked in significance. Leonard Tennenhouse (1986), author of *Power on Display: The Politics of Shakespeare’s Genres*, acknowledges that Shakespeare was distinctly a Renaissance individual and playwright, and his writing cannot be separated from this perspective:

Where the literary figure is presumed to have written truths that obtain over time and across cultures, the man Shakespeare is situated in a Renaissance context. His writing is largely topical and allegorical as he comments on the figures and policies of his time in relation to which, then, one can fix his political identity... Shakespeare becomes a means of turning the canonized Shakespeare into a window onto Renaissance social relations, a mirror of his times, a text that presupposes a context ‘outside’ of itself. (p.1)

Tennenhouse suggests that Shakespeare’s writing reveals the character of the Renaissance world as well as it portrays individual characters in the plays. Regardless of the perspective under which scholars suggest Shakespeare should be studied, they agree that his writing provides an opportunity to examine cultural perspectives during and immediately after Elizabeth’s reign. Shakespeare opens a window on the nature of the Elizabethan world.

Not only does Shakespeare capture some of the cultural currents of the day, his writing has a decidedly political bent. Shakespeare’s subject and themes often revolve around issues of power and politics. John Wain,(1994), author of the book *The Living World of Shakespeare*, finds that “Shakespeare is from first to last an intensely political writer. He knows that the happiness of the common man is very much bound up with the question of who has power at the top” (p.23) .

Wain elaborates on Shakespeare’s thematic goals and finds that the stability of the sovereignty had greatest importance: “The English scene, viewed from an Elizabethan standpoint, was dominated by one urgent need: the need for political stability, guaranteed by an undisputed monarchy” (Ibid., 24). The instability of the Tudor monarchy, plagued with the problems of Henry’s succession, the failed marriage of Mary, and the ambivalence of Elizabeth’s feelings toward matrimony, had created a desire within the culture for a stable monarch. Female rule lacked stability and thus contained an inherent danger.

This danger resulted in an undefined anxiety among the English people who questioned whether Elizabeth provided fit rule. In some ways, her gender itself suggested that she did not. Carole Levin (1994), an Elizabethan historian, presents the dilemma of Elizabeth’s womanhood for the typical English subject:

Many of the English reacted with ambivalence to the idea of a woman ruler. The ambivalence centered directly on the conflict between her rule and her femininity. If a queen were confidently to demonstrate the attributes of power, she would not be acting in a womanly manner; yet womanly behavior would ill-fit a queen for the rigors of rule. (p.3)

A female monarch created many troubling questions. Could a womanly queen lead the state through war? Could a womanly queen rule over male subjects? Could a womanly queen provide an heir without transferring power to her husband and possibly to his family? And at a core gender relations level, was a woman fit to represent the great English nation? Or did the inadequacy of her gender debase the state itself ? Many Elizabethan English struggled with these questions, and among them was Stratford’s own, William Shakespeare. Ultimately, the anxieties produced by these concerns led the culture to long for the stability represented by a king, not a queen.

This desire for stability manifests itself in the themes of both *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*. In *Macbeth*, a strange and an unreal suggestion of future kingship leads Lady Macbeth to convince and help her husband to commit treason by killing the king and claiming an offered crown. The play *Hamlet* portrays the murder of a monarch by his brother and the subsequent marriage of this brother Claudius to Queen Gertrude. This union subsequently throws the power of the crown in disagreement between Hamlet, the King’s son, and Claudius, now spouse of the Queen. In both of these plays, women’s actions lead to political instability, and a disturbance of natural harmony occurs because of their involvement in the political processes. Although neither play is a direct commentary on Elizabeth, each drama reflects

social anxieties from decades of female monarchical rule. Analysis of these plays reveals their specific correlation to the Renaissance world and especially the concerns surrounding the leadership of Elizabeth Tudor.

Lady Macbeth's disruption to the political culture stems from her ambition, and this dangerous ambition is made highly unnatural by her gender. When she reads Macbeth's revelation of the witches' predictions, she immediately assumes that only her persistence will lead Macbeth actively to pursue and acquire the desired kingly position of power and authority. She summons the absent Macbeth with reproached words:

Hie thee hither,
That I may pour my spirits in thine ear;
And chastise with the valour of my tongue
All that impedes thee from the golden round. (Macbeth, I.v.25-28.)

Lady Macbeth claims an ability to handle the character of Macbeth to her purposes and goals. Tennenhouse describes her characterization in influential political terms: "At the outset of Macbeth, Shakespeare gives Lady Macbeth the very same elements which other Jacobean playwrights use to display the absolute power of the state. He shows how these might be used subversively" (p.128). Certainly Lady Macbeth's suggestions are subversive in that she leads her husband into murdering the rightful, current monarch in their home. With this play, she assumes the absolute power of the state by acting as if she were accountable to none and deserves no censure. Thus, Lady Macbeth exemplifies a negative representation of female ambition and power within a Renaissance context.

In considering Lady Macbeth's characterization, one must remember that feminine desires for power were seen as unnatural. In fact, Shakespeare expresses these desires in emasculating terms to give them increased gravity. Lady Macbeth renounces her femininity for power:

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! (Macbeth, I.v.40-43)

When Lady Macbeth desires to be "unsexed," her words reveal the assumed disagreement between feminine nature and political ambition. By putting these desires in masculine- or gender-neutral-form, Lady Macbeth explicitly suggests their unnaturalness. Shakespeare's language here encourages tension and reflects the political gender tensions already existent in the Elizabethan world. Wallace MacCaffrey (1993) comments upon this discrepancy between femininity and political strength in his biography of Elizabeth I: "For a woman the demands made on the occupant of the throne were supremely difficult to meet, since the characteristic qualities which a monarch was expected to display were largely masculine" (p. 358). While Lady Macbeth wishes to be "unsexed," Elizabeth asserted the title King as frequently as Queen and sought to establish her own power by transcending the gender issue. Nonetheless, as Levin (2013) notes, not even Elizabeth could escape her femininity: "Elizabeth might incorporate both male and female in her sovereignty, but her body was a very human female one and, hence to both Elizabeth herself and to her people, an imperfect one" (p.147).

Just as Elizabeth had difficulty asserting political authority as a woman, and thus adopted male gender characteristics, Shakespeare defeminizes Lady Macbeth to give her ambitions credibility. Such unnatural positioning created tension in the play and reflected anxiety in the Elizabethan world. Shakespeare pushes Lady Macbeth's oddity so far as to reverse the Macbeths' gender roles. Indeed, Macbeth displays considerably less determination than his wife. As a result, Lady Macbeth disdains him for his weakness. In bloodying her hands in the death of the king, she chastises her husband:

My hands are of your colour; but I shame
To wear a heart so white. (Macbeth, II.ii.63-64)

Typically, weakness is associated with the female, and man gains integrity through strength and boldness in battle. But Macbeth loses his courage at the crucial moment and Lady Macbeth assumes his bloody obligation. Her husband's weakness is not only shameful in Lady Macbeth's eyes; his weakness is also as unnatural as her strength. Such a reversal carries with it significant social ramifications. Tennenhouse comments upon the gender reversal and its political symbolism:

Most other Jacobean tragedies presuppose this same connection between sexual relations and the condition of the political body. In staging *Macbeth*, Shakespeare simply literalizes the homology which makes unruliness on the part of an aristocratic woman into an assault on the sovereign's power. He allows Lady Macbeth to overrule her husband in order to show that such inversion of sexual relations is also an inversion of the political order. Her possession of illicit desire in its most masculine form — the twisted ambition of the malcontent — leads directly to regicide. (p.131)

Positioning woman over man has not just domestic but political connotations as well. Lady Macbeth's authority over Macbeth reflects the larger issue of female involvement in the political structure and a woman's possible dominion as monarch over man as subject.

Even so, Lady Macbeth's power resonates with the confused Elizabethan world. Tennenhouse suggests that the Elizabethan era actually was an "age which thought of state power as female" (*Ibid.*, p. 24), due to the lengthy tradition of female rule from Mary to Elizabeth. Female rule lasted for a full generation of English people. At the same time a tendency to think about state power as female does not necessarily correspond with a cultural desire for state power in female's hands.

While the Elizabethan world may have accepted the non-traditional rule of the female monarch, the anticipated outcome was always the return to political stability in the form of a male monarch. Tennenhouse comments upon this gender restoration as it relates to *Macbeth*:

The same homology between kinship and kingship accounts for the curious means Shakespeare uses in the play to restore the world to its natural hierarchy. Perhaps most obvious among these is the gendering of patriarchal prerogatives. If Macbeth's assault on genealogy began with his wife's possession of certain male features associated with political ambition, then the play creates a clear distinction between male and female in restoring the proper dissymmetry of monarch and subject. (*Ibid.*, 131)

Lady Macbeth's strength worsens as she falls into periods of lunacy and sleepwalking. The female cannot survive in a role of dominion. Lady Macbeth puts forward that "none can call our power to account," (*Macbeth*, V.i.37) but apparently she mistakes the power of her own conscience. Her manic fixation with bloodied hands and her final act of suicide indicate a personal trial and conviction. Ironically, Lady Macbeth's death eases tension by marking the beginning of the end, an end which corresponds with a return of normalcy to the political structure. This thematic correlation transfers to the contemporary culture. The Elizabethan English also anticipated and desired the return of male rule:

However effective a ruler Elizabeth in particular might be, the fact that she was a woman was insurmountable. There never was a tradition envisioning a savior queen. The pattern of the male monarch as savior echoes through sixteenth-century England, so that the fears caused by female rule manifested themselves in a longing for the safety and tradition of the king. (Levin, 1993. p. 120)

Shakespeare reflects this cultural anticipation through Lady Macbeth's tragic fall from power. While *Macbeth* portrays the unnatural and ambiguous aspects of female political power and gender, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* explores the issues of dominion and sexuality. Because both sovereignty and virtue reside within the queen's body, sexual actions carry increased significance for the female supreme ruler. Thus, *Hamlet* reflects the gender and sexuality anxieties prominent within the Elizabethan world.

In discussing the sexuality of the Tudor queens, one must consider the connection between the natural body of the monarch and the symbolic sovereignty of the state embodied within the monarch. This connection determined and

restrained the relational activity of the royalty. Biographer Susan Frye (1993), expands upon this cultural understanding within the context of Elizabeth's reign: "Because questions of marriage and the succession connected her natural and political bodies in ways that Elizabeth constantly sought to control, the queen herself became the most politically significant sign of her reign" (p.24). The physical body of the queen thus gained significance. However, the vulnerability of the symbolic component of the sovereignty within this enhanced natural body produced anxiety within the Elizabethan culture.

Because this dominion, in a sense, both for its union in name and for its physical implications, marriage of the female monarch caused great concern. Previous to Elizabeth's reign, Mary's marriage to Philip II of Spain proved disastrous. As a foreign ruler, Philip was not welcomed by England, and many feared that he dominated Mary, both domestically and politically. Early 20th century scholar John Ernest Neale (1974) suggests that "Elizabeth was prejudiced by the knowledge that Mary's major blunder had been her marriage" (p.80). Perhaps Elizabeth's decision not to marry encompassed a desire to avoid English animosity toward a joint ruler. Her pattern of courtship and her flirtation with proposals simply danced around the issue of matrimony. Yet, the marriage ability of Elizabeth produced constant anxiety within Elizabethan society. If Elizabeth married, her husband might assume royal authority. If Elizabeth married a non-Englishman, foreign rule might come to England. If Elizabeth married an Englishman, a new family might assume royal status. Given these concerns, no man could be an ideal husband for Elizabeth. Therefore, she assumed the weight of the sovereignty on her own. Unlike Mary, Elizabeth made no choice of a king for England.

Hamlet's Gertrude, however, chose a new king for Denmark. Shakespeare reveals the consequences that result from this choice. In marrying Claudius, Gertrude gives him access to the symbolic seat of the sovereignty. Tennenhouse captures the thematic centrality of Gertrude's natural body: "The dilemma of the play therefore arises from and turns upon the meaning and disposition of Gertrude's body" (p. 112). He further comments that "the fate of Gertrude makes Hamlet an Elizabethan play. Upon the condition of her body depends the health of the state" (Ibid., p.114).

Claudius's access to Gertrude's body leads to state upheaval just as Lady Macbeth's ambitions cause chaos. The fates of Gertrude and Denmark do not rest solely upon Gertrude's resumption of sexual activity, but also upon her poor choice of husband. While Gertrude's decision to marry her brother-in-law bears no specific resemblance to the decisions of either Tudor queen, the play does reflect the anxieties remaining from Mary's marriage to Philip and attendant to Elizabeth's marriage ability. Claudius himself describes his rise to power in terms of his marriage:

Therefore our sometime sister, now our queen,
Th' imperial jointress of this warlike state, Have we.
... Taken to wife (Hamlet. I.ii.8-10, 14).

In making the queen his wife, he makes himself the new king. But Claudius murdered his brother to accomplish this feat. He has no moral right to the throne. In addition, the marriage of Claudius to the Queen strips Hamlet of some of his sovereign authority and creates ambivalence regarding the proper ruler of the state. Likewise, Hamlet characterizes Claudius in terms which suggest a distrust of males who achieve power through marriage to the female monarch: "My father's brother, but no more like my father I Than I to Hercules" (Ibid., I.ii.152-53). Hamlet describes Claudius as a malicious usurper of power through sexual manipulation:

A murderer and a villain;
A slave that is not the twentieth part the tithes
Of your precedent lord; a vice of kings;
A cutpurse of the empire and the rule,
That from a shelf the precious diadem stole,
And put it in his pocket.(Ibid., III.iv.97-102).

Such a contemptible and larcenous characterization of the monarch's spouse reflects both the English hatred of Mary's Philip and the suspicions surrounding suitors for Elizabeth. Hamlet's malicious comments touch not only Claudius, but also his mother Gertrude. He accuses his mother of corruption because of her improper sexual activity and marriage. Even though a matrimonial bond existed between Claudius and Gertrude, the rushed and incestuous aspects of that marriage enraged Hamlet. The couple was married less than a month after the death of Hamlet's father, and Claudius himself calls Gertrude his "sometime sister, now our queen" (Ibid., I.ii.8-9). Thus, Hamlet

attacks his mother, warning that “rank corruption, mining all within, / Infects unseen” (Hamlet. III.iv,139-40). . In Hamlet’s eyes, Gertrude’s sexual activity corrupts her character.

Hamlet’s perception reflects moral standards of the day. Royal sexual activity created concerns about both power and purity in the Elizabethan world. As women had no opportunity to fight on the battlefield, chastity was the principal measure of their honor and virtue. Levin (2013), reports that “for a woman, her only source of honor is her sexual ‘credit’” (p.68). Thus, Hamlet’s charges of impurity impugn Gertrude’s virtue. Not surprisingly, Elizabeth’s sexual conduct also drew public attention. In large measure, the Queen capitalized on society’s connection between female honor and chastity. She publicly affirmed her purity, even adopting the title, “Virgin Queen.” This image combined the virtues of sexual purity with attributes of the royal sovereignty, serving to reinforce the legitimacy and moral authority of her rule.

Elizabeth’s image as “Virgin Queen,” however, had its critics. Levin relates that the English felt “free to speculate about her lovers and supposed bastards” (Ibid., p.77). These implied accusations threatened Elizabeth’s position in significant ways. Levin explains: “In accusing the queen of sexual improprieties, people were charging her with dishonorable behavior in a way that would not be the case in a similar rumor about a king” (Ibid., p.78). Some of this speculation took on political significance with treasonous import. In a 1588 treatise entitled Admonition to the Nobility and People of England, Cardinal William Allen suggested that Elizabeth failed to marry “because she cannot confine herself to one man” and that this resulted in “the whole worlde deriding our effeminate dastardie, that have suffered such creature almost thirty years together to raigne both over our bodies and soules” (Ibid., p.81).

The Cardinal suggests by implication that the English should not support their queen. Although steeped in religious contention, this and other charges of “whorish” activity threatened the integrity of both the queen’s person and her sovereignty. An impure maiden queen was not fit for the throne.

Certainly Elizabeth’s royal assertions of chastity invited some of this speculation, but the criticisms also reflect a general distrust of women. Shakespeare captures this cultural misgiving as well. Hamlet’s accusation of his mother rests on a general indictment of the female sex: “Frailty, thy name is woman” (Hamlet.I.ii,46). His peculiar criticism of Gertrude’s sexual behavior reflects the pervading and controlling perception that women were the weaker sex. Just as women’s integrity relied upon their chastity, their very gender made them liable to accusations of corruption. In the Elizabethan world, women were weak and could not be trusted. Such a societal attitude characterizes the anxieties accompanying Elizabeth’s reign.

Many of Shakespeare’s themes develop from historical occurrences in his time. In Macbeth and Hamlet, subtle nuances distinctly reflect the Elizabethan desire for a stable male monarch. Shakespeare presents pictures of chaos and upheaval partially caused by female ambition or exploitation. Critic Alexander Leggatt (2002), couches Shakespeare’s thematic concentration within the context of reality portrayals and ideal visions: “He is concerned both with things as they are and with things as they ought to be, and his depiction of public life includes clear appraisals of the one and powerful images of the other”(p.47). This summation directly applies to the gender anxieties presented in Hamlet and Macbeth. In both plays, female monarchs exist and female power suffers. Yet Shakespeare’s presentation also suggests that there should not be such sovereignty or such resultant suffering. Such a societal attitude describes the cultural framework within which Elizabeth struggled. Frye (2002), provides some insight into the nature of Elizabeth’s role as a Renaissance ruler:

By engaging in her own construction through language and action, by declaring herself to be a woman at the same time that she acted outside defined female roles, by politicizing the language of virginity, and by establishing herself as the mediator among those special-interest groups that sought to define her within the parameters of their needs, Elizabeth constitutes a challenge to the essentialist patriarchal sign system that presents gender identity as natural and immutable.(p.6)

Nonetheless, the anxieties manifested in Macbeth and Hamlet suggest that women, perhaps even Elizabeth, cannot acceptably overcome the patriarchal system.

Conclusion:-

The state of women in power is not the way things “ought to be.” Scholar James Emerson Phillips (1940) emphasizes how Shakespeare advocates a return to unquestionably patriarchal systems to restore harmony: “Although it claims its heroic victim, the evil power is in none of the great Shakespearean tragedies allowed to emerge triumphant at the end of the play. Claudius is killed and Fortinbras restores order to the kingdom of Denmark; Malcolm is restored to his rightful throne and civil peace returns to Scotland at the death of Macbeth” (p.144). Shakespeare’s resolutions do not suggest positive involvement of women within the political structure. In fact, the resolution comes with the ablation of women from the political realm.

Thus, Shakespeare’s drama reflects the Elizabethan world. Within the plays Hamlet and Macbeth, one sees potential conflicts arising from female ambition for sovereign power and corruption of the politic body through corruption of the female sovereign body. In both plays, Shakespeare mirrors anxiety from within the Elizabethan culture relating to the existence of and dependence upon a female monarch. Also, both plays end with the diminution of female sovereign authority and an apparent return to a state of normalcy within a more traditional, patriarchal framework. This return to patriarchy represents both Shakespeare’s political resolution and the Elizabethan cultural desire.

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