

The Biblical Gender Bias in Shakespeare's Macbeth

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This is to present my paper on “Macbeth – “The Bible of Shakespeare”. At the time of Shakespeare, the relevance of the bible was very high. Shakespeare himself has used biblical references in many of his plays. The play Macbeth is about the regicide of King Duncan and its aftermath. The play has many biblical references that make this play “The Bible of Shakespeare”.

The story of banishment of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden is found in Genesis, chapter 3. God specifically told Adam and Eve not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge. Satan in the guise of serpent entices Eve to eat the fruit, which she does. She also gives some to Adam, which he eats. The punishment for the men was the struggle to get peace of mind and struggle for their food and the punishment for women was to suffer the pain of childbirth and to be subservient to their husbands. Adam did not want to disobey the God but Eve made him do it.

The parallel story in William Shakespeare's Macbeth begins with Macbeth being enticed by the witches for the throne of Scotland. At first, Macbeth hesitates to accomplish the task of killing the King. But his wife, Lady Macbeth, coerces him into committing the murder, which he does. The prophecy or the work of witches is accomplished. But Macbeth as Adam loses the peace of mind and throughout the play he struggles with his conscience. Macbeth's conscience forbids

him to make the mistake but Lady Macbeth who is also considered as the fourth witch compels Macbeth to commit the sin.

It is interesting to see the many ways where one can find similarity between the story of exile and Macbeth. The serpent tells Eve that eating from the tree will make her “like God” and Macbeth’s sin is for the sake of becoming King. Lady Macbeth is also enticed by her husband’s letter, telling her that she will be queen. That is what inspires her to become the fourth witch. Adam’s sin brought all suffering and evil into the world, and Macbeth’s regicidal act is the beginning of Scotland’s misery. The important factor or similarity is the woman who has tempted the man to sin.

Genesis which contains the story of The Fall is written by Moses. For centuries, men have oppressed women, and have often quoted the story of the fall as their justification. For one, Adam came before Eve. Eve is also responsible for original sin (as she gave the fruit to Adam), and God also included female submission as part of his punishment. And, lest we forget, God is also referred with masculine pronouns throughout the bible. Women have the power of giving birth but in the Bible the God who is presented as a male is shown as the producer of human beings. Even Eve is said to be formed from the ribs of Adam. In this way women have been the subjected to subjugation and oppression, since times immemorial.

Shakespeare can also be called a prejudiced Christian who believes in the Bible. The play Macbeth whose background is somewhat related to the Genesis follows the same path. First, the witches, Shakespeare chooses witches to make them responsible for every act of sin done by Macbeth. He could have used devils. But out of his prejudiced nature he chooses witches over devils. The second proof of his prejudiced mind is noticeable when we are introduced to the wicked and lethal character of Lady Macbeth. She can be seen as an Eve of the play who incites Macbeth to kill the king. Women are presented as source of evil. This can also be seen when it is prophesied that Macbeth’s killer will be “of no woman born”. The good characters are uncorrupted by women.

Macbeth, at the starting of the play, was as much loyal to Duncan as Adam was to God. Macbeth appears to us as brave, noble, gentle, loyal to the king and loved by all. His bravery against

enemy is compared with “eagles” against the “sparrows”; and “the lion” against “the hare”. He is described as “Bellona’s bridegroom”. Macbeth shows his loyalty to the King, when he say

“The service and the loyalty I owe to thee.”

As it was next to impossible to believe that Adam could disobey the commands of God in the same way at the starting of the play, it was difficult to believe that a man like Macbeth could be seized with an overpowering ambition and desire and can kill a respected king. If Lady Macbeth had not been there in the play, Macbeth would have exterminated the idea of killing the King. Shakespeare tells Macbeth’s responsibility by applying a common contemporary theatrical device of the time, the witches whose task is to misguide and confuse people and distort reality. To them,

“Fair is foul, and foul is fair;
Hover through the fog and filthy air.”

As Satan lures Eve to convince Adam to eat the fruit, in the same way Witches who are embodiment of Satan call Macbeth the “Thane of Glamis” which he already possessed, and the future “thane of Cawdor” and the king thereafter. Next when, having returned from a victory he is informed the king’s reward to him is to be the “thane of Cawdor”, he becomes confused and frightened that two of the prophesies have constantly proved right, and

“The greatest is behind”
But he fears, the third one is not possible without killing the king,
“Stars hide your Fires;
Let not light see my black and deep Desires.”

When the stimulation of Witches starts fading, we are introduced to the fourth witch, Lady Macbeth. She persuades Macbeth to commit the murder and even resorts to call him a “coward” and questions his manliness. She says that if she took an oathlike Macbeth, she could kill even her own baby even though it was suckling,

“I would while it was smiling in my face,
Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums
And dashed the brains out, had I sworn as you
Have done to this.”

As Adam could not deny Eve’s argument for eating the forbidden fruit in the same way Macbeth is entrapped when he hears these words from his wife. Lady Macbeth is presented as criminal, deceitful, voluptuous, and coldly calculating.

Shakespeare wants to impose the lion’s share of responsibility of the misdeed on the woman character. As Moses made Eve responsible for The Fall, in the same way Shakespeare holds Lady Macbeth responsible for the doom of Scotland. It was Adam who was responsible for The Fall because he also wanted to have knowledge. He could have denied the argument of Eve because of his service and loyalty to God. In the same way, Macbeth is responsible for the sin which he commits because it is his inner ambition which comes out when witches and Lady Macbeth entice him.

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