

A portrait of Lady Macbeth: two different characterizations

ABSTRACT

This paper aims at analyzing the characterization of Lady Macbeth, from Shakespeare's play *Macbeth*, in two different productions, namely: Roman Polanski's filmic version (1971) and Trevor Nunn's stage version (1976) performed at the Royal Shakespeare Company in Stratford. I am particularly interested in close analyzing Act V, scene I (1-80), when Lady Macbeth, in her sleepwalking (compounded by guilt and insomnia), plays out the washing theme that runs throughout the play. Her sleepwalking may be seen here as a state of mind where she can express what she is repressed for in a waking state, showing her duplicity of personality, oscillating around repression and bravery, free expression and cowardice.

KEYWORDS: Characterization. Macbeth. Lady Macbeth. Sleepwalking.

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É à noite, a sós com o próprio travesseiro, que – segundo o pensamento popular – o sujeito confronta-se com sua consciência e com o sentido mais íntimo de seus pensamentos e atos do dia. É apenas aos justos, supõe-se, que o sono tranquilo estaria reservado (Pereira, 2002)

This paper aims at analyzing the characterization of Lady Macbeth, from Shakespeare's play *Macbeth*, in two different productions, namely: Roman Polanski's filmic version (1971) and Trevor Nunn's stage version (1976) performed at the Royal Shakespeare Company in Stratford. I am particularly interested in close analyzing Act V, scene I (1-80), when Lady Macbeth, in her sleepwalking (compounded by guilt and insomnia), plays out the washing theme that runs throughout the play¹. The focus of this analysis is the construction of the character—how the actor conceives the role, if there is one right way of portraying a character, the role of the audience in understanding the character, among other considerations—which depends much on the subtext, set design, stage business, music and other effects, and obviously the matter of coherence, or the overall interpretation. The theoretical parameter for this essay is grounded on the work of Jay L. Halio, *Understanding Shakespeare's Plays in Performance* (2000), and on Zacaria Borge Ali Ramadam's *A Histeria* (1985) for a brief study on hysteria and somnambulism, under the light of psychoanalysis. Therefore, I shall begin with the study on hysteria and somnambulism in order to capture the obsessive nature of this specific scene (V.i). The next stage is to present an overall interpretation of the productions, and then to analyze the construction of Lady Macbeth in these productions, taking into account the issues aforementioned.

So far, the studies on the scene of Lady Macbeth's delirium have settled this psychotic manifestation as somnambulism, but my intention is to investigate if Lady Macbeth's delusion can be understood as an act of hysteria. Thus, for such a purpose, I intend to briefly analyze the scene taking into account Ramadam's propositions for hysteria. This subject is relevant to the main proposal of this essay in the sense that the knowledge of the psychological density of the scene can help actors to build the complexity of a character, which is likely to enhance the performance in many aspects.

Lady Macbeth, in the scene under discussion, goes mad and is no longer connected with reality. Her critic judgment of things is altered, due to her feeling profoundly guilty for the crime she and her husband committed. According to Coriat, "...somnambulism is not sleep, but a special mental state arising out of sleep through a definite mechanism. The sleep-walking scene is a perfectly logical outcome of the previous mental state. From the very mechanism of this mental state, such a development was inevitable. She is not the victim of a blind fate or destiny or punished by a moral law, but affected by a mental disease." (CORIAT, 1920)

The dramatization, the dream and the daydream, and the delusion all belong to the same process of madness that she presents throughout the play, and they only differ in terms of levels of commitment between consciousness and reality. Lady Macbeth appears in the condition of sleepwalker, in an extreme delusion, in a situation where there is no conscious command, which allows her to admit the crime. According to Ramadam's accounts on hysteria,

[...] sob o impacto de intensa emoção, durante algum tempo a histérica passa a apresentar um comportamento automático, chamado de "estado Segundo" de consciência, como se estivesse fora de si. Esse comportamento lembra os

estados hipnóticos ou de sonambulismo, sendo que, voltando à consciência normal, a histérica não se recorda claramente do que fez ou do que se passou com ela. (p. 13)

Her madness appears latently in the somnambulism crisis, but her obstinate nature *per se* is a clear evidence that she has been, in a certain way, insane since the beginning, for example when we analyze the first words uttered by the Doctor, attesting that she had had several previous somnambulistic attacks, shown by the description of the eyes being open and not shut. The doctor's behavior in this scene is interesting in that it closely resembles the work of a psychoanalyst, but precedes the "father of psychoanalysis", Freud, by centuries. Like a Freudian psychoanalyst, the doctor observes Lady Macbeth's dreams and uses her words to infer the cause of her distress. Like a psychoanalyst, too, the doctor decides to "set down what comes from her" as he listens (V.i p. 34-35). After witnessing her distress, the doctor declares it the result of an "infected mind" (V.i p 76); this too sounds like the diagnosis of a modern-day psychiatrist. Not surprisingly, Lady Macbeth repeats the act of washing hands during the delirium as to clean the spots of blood that she believes are still in her hands: "Out, damn'd spot! out, I say!" (V.i.p. 35); a desire to clean herself and her soul, if water could "wash" and take away the remembrances of the deed. Lady Macbeth's dissolution is swift. This sleepwalking scene is the last time she appears in the play, and a few scenes later, Macbeth receives news that she has died; as the somnambulism can be recurrent, it might be possible that she committed suicide during a crisis, since in the description of the scene no reason is given for her death: "A cry within of women [...] *Macb.* Wherefore was that cry? *Sey.* The Queen, my lord, is dead." (V.v. p. 8-16)

Still according to Ramadam (1985), hysteria is a simulation, often referred to as "the great copycat", and one of the factors that increase the suspect of simulation is the fact that "the degree of commitment of the function never surpasses the level of patient knowledge about herself, almost always coinciding with her habitual use from it, differently from the physiological organization of her organism." (p. 8). To illustrate the point, Ramadam gives some examples, including one from *Macbeth* (Act V, scene I² 24-25), suggesting that Lady Macbeth in the dialogue between the doctor and the gentlewoman about her "blindness"³, presents a symptom of hysteria because there is no physical harm of sight, but only a psychological block to seeing. Thus, he argues, "The hysterical individual suffers a lot [...] victim of conflicts that his psychological state cannot solve, however[...] goes through tortuous unconscious ways, resulting in a symptomology that carries more suffering (RAMADAN, 1985 p. 10). Important to emphasize here is that in hysteria, the consciousness suffers alterations due to the incapacity of leading and assimilating intense and contradictory emotions, in other words, psychic conflicts. Such conflicts often emerge from the opposition between the natural instincts of the subject, and the blocks or moral censorship.

Like her husband, who prophesies the insomnia in Act II, scene ii⁴, Lady Macbeth's ambition for power leads her into an unnatural, phantasmagoric realm of witchcraft, insomnia, and madness. The insomnia can be related to a feeling of anxiety and fear, following a traumatizing event, as in the case of the crime in the tragedy. Moreover, the event that caused the condition often comes back at night leaving the person fearful and torn apart by anxiety. In the case of Lady Macbeth, it seems that "[...] o Eu desiste do desejo de dormir, porque se sente incapaz de

inibir os impulsos reprimidos liberados durante o sono—em outras palavras, em que renuncia ao sono por temer seus sonhos” (PEREIRA, 2002 p. 31).

Having set the propositions and considerations on hysteria in Lady Macbeth’s sleepwalking scene, I now present an overview of the traits and tones that each production has and how these traits contribute to the characterization of the scene. Considering that the scope of this paper comprehends one filmic production and one stage production, Halio’s observation on the differences between both media is somehow relevant:

[...] perhaps the most significant difference between watching a film or television production and watching a live stage performance is that on film we can see only what the director or editor intends us to see. On stage, we are freer to focus our attention where we please, to accept or reject the domination of an actor’s delivery, except as the lighting designer may occasionally limit our freedom. (p. 19)

Thus, in film productions we are confronted with (sometimes excessive) elements such as zoom focusing, close-ups, overhead unusual back lighting, elements applied to enhance hallucinatory and other effects, and that have a certain advantage over live stage performances. Yet, still according to Halio, “[o]n the whole [...] both film and television tend to cling to realism as their dominant mode of representation” (1988, p. 18). Regarding live stage performances, José Roberto O’Shea reflects on theater in performance asserting that “[t]heater is spoken language signifying side by side visual, aural, and sensorial language, by means of actors, space, movement, propos, light, music, and the complex interrelations among these, all coming to fruition in reception”, ensuring the hegemony of signification over written and spoken language.

Regarding set design, Halio believes to be evident that “[...] there are many ways to design sets and costumes for a Shakespeare play and no single ‘right’ way. But some ways may be more appropriate and effective than others, given the audience, the circumstances, and the particular play” (1988, p. 22). Thus, for instance, both the set design and costume in Trevor Nunn’s production evoke minimalists traits, in the sense that the aim of the experience is to allow the viewer to reflect on the work more intensely without the distractions of composition, theme and so on, by thriving on simplicity in both content and form, and seeking to remove any sign of personal expressivity. One may argue that “modern-dress productions are more ‘Shakespearean’ than historically costumed ones”, Halio comments (and that is the case in Nunn’s version), but “there are obvious objections to this position [...]”. What can be an argument in favor of these modern-dress productions is that they “appear fresher and more relevant to present audiences” (HALIO, 1988, p. 22).

Macbeth in Polanski’s conception is a brutal and bloody work, in the tradition of Artaud’s “Theatre of Cruelty” (1935), in which terror and pain were integrated as vital parts of the concept. The set design, historically costumed, assaults us with red tones, fire motifs, and carnage. The cinematic application of Artaud’s philosophical and theatrical principles is referred to “Cinema of Cruelty”, and, according to Will H. Rockett,

For these films try one, test one, push one through terror of the supernatural or supranatural to emotional and mental limits in which one is reduced to the most primitive of human spiritual levels, fearful wonder and astonishment at

the inexplicable. To achieve this, these films work upon the most primitive level of human consciousness, for they require their audience to construct a coherent universe and a narrative meaning from a chaos of a series of shots, uttered in the synaesthetic language of the film. This savage, powerful nonverbal language of shocks and the collision of images appear almost tailor-made for provoking terror. The audience instinctively seeks to establish limits upon what is indeterminate, and to classify it; when balked, they are left uncertain and in terror. The terror is underscored by the physical and psychological savagery that the demonic can exact upon humanity, and which is portrayed on the screen. While the transcendent cause of such savagery remains indeterminate and terrifying, its horrible effects are quite concrete and clear, so as to lend credence to the terrible reality of that cause. (1988, p. 88)

It pays to mention that Polanski's version was shot within the context of the murder of Sharon Tate, his pregnant wife, by Charles Manson's disciples. Therefore, he portrays meaningless violence, as acted out by animals struggling for survival in a wasteland, and the blame is attached to society rather than individuals. Thus, the director uses the play "for some particular—personal or social—interpretation, which makes the play [film] 'a vehicle of exploitation'" (HALIO, 1988 p. 23).

When constructing a character, it is essential to construct the subtext for the character. The subtext comprehends "inner feelings and thoughts an actor must have to produce effective, honest representation" (HALIO, 1988 p.39), and, moreover, the subtext refers to "unwritten, or unspoken, indications—those feelings, ideas, thoughts—that help make characters what they are, or make them behave in certain ways" (HALIO, 1988, p.40). For instance, Judi Dench in Nunn's stage version, which follows more rigidly what the original play text provides, characterizes Lady Macbeth as a less sexualized woman, who does not portray femininity (she wears a black gown almost without showing parts of her body, and she wears a black scarf to hide her hair since hair is commonly associated with lust (GOODLAND, 2016 p. 1057). Thus, in act V, she enters in the stage with a taper (following the directions of the original play text), and there is neither sound effect nor other elements in the *mise en scène* due to the minimalist focus of the play. She is muttering and moaning, the eyes fixed somewhere, and her hands in the mouth; moaning in pain she passes through the doctor and the gentlewoman without actually seeing them, and then she is flinched and sits on the floor repeating the act of washing hands obsessively. She stands washing her hands with the candle illuminating her pale and mad face, just moaning, weeping. The silence before she starts speaking arouses tension while she is in the dark with the candle illuminating her face. She pronounces the first words quietly, almost *sotto voce*, but when she pronounces "'tis time to do't" (V.i.p.36) she raises her voice in a tone of command, maybe remembering the deed, and with a deep sigh of anguish she stands up, and, again in *sotto voce*, continues "Hell is murky." (V.i.p.36), with an expression of fear for what she believes would be her destiny. (NUNN, 1976)

The essential of the character in this case lies on the obsessive nature of a woman that is extremely passionate, loves her husband desperately, but at the same time proves to be too ambitious and even cruel. Halio reflects upon the essential of a character by calling the attention of the audience to the fact that the search for this "essence" depends on lots of things that we experience in the world, and that "[w]e must begin, like actors, with a close reading of the text along with our own experience of reality, of other people and ourselves in action and

reflection". Thus, Halio confirms the role of the audience in understanding the "main thrust of the character" and "also the subtleties of behavior" (p. 32).

One of the most notable traces of Judi Dench's interpretation is her voice modulation and the changes of pitch she can reach in a single utterance, besides her capacity to incite expressive pauses and silences. In line 39-40, after "old man" she pauses, and then she continues: "so – pause – much – pause – blood (highly stressed) – pause – in him". This fragment is so well modulated, in terms of voice, face expression, body tension, etc., that at this point the audience is compelled to feel sympathy for her, acknowledging her madness and, possibly, her remorse, and feeling the same anguish of that tortured soul. Lady Macbeth cries, yelling, and raising her voice, and seems to recover the consciousness (in a brief lucid moment) when she asks "[...] where is she [The Thane of Fife' wife, herself] now?" (p. 42-43). She stops washing the hands moments after and contemplates them, smelling one of the hands and saying, "Here's the smell of the blood still" (p. 50) in a very ominous way, then she pauses and screams bringing down her hands, observing them, and then she sadly continues the speech slowly saying the words "this-pause-little-pause-hand" (p. 51), as if she admits her fragile and human nature, while contemplating the hands that committed a crime. How could so little and fragile hands have done that deed? What kind of creature is capable of doing such a horrible thing? The contemplation of the hands arouses these questions to the audience, maybe in her mind as well.

The most incredible and deep moment of Judi Dench's entire speech and that proves her interpretation to be powerful, is when she begins weeping quietly and starts raising the intensity of the cry until she screams loudly, trembling the voice. This scream is the major proof of her profound sadness and weakness; her anguish and despair reaches a degree that it is impossible to revert. Ultimately, she pauses staring at the camera, still, eyes fixed, paralyzed, and says the powerful lines that may lead her to commit suicide later in the play: "What's done – pause – cannot be – pause – undone (crying remorsefully)" (p.68). She once had the power of persuasion over Macbeth, and she was so ambitious that even renounces her femininity in the search for power, and now she is presented as a sympathetic human being, losing her strengths and her consciousness, fighting to be lucid, but the burden now seems to be too heavy.

Polanski's Lady Macbeth is not so strong and persuasive as Nunn's, yet she seems more lovely and her relationship with Macbeth more intense rather than obsessive. Concerning the issue of language and media (film instead of play), it is interesting to note that in Nunn's version the text is more preserved, close to the "original" (old English), with no intralingual translation, little interpolation, and almost no variations, while, specially due to requirements of the medium, Polanski opted for a strongly "cinematized" version of the play, with cuts, interpolations, and lots of variations. Thus, in the two versions under analysis, the speeches are delivered differently, and the most evident difference between the productions relies on the *mise en scène*. Dennis Kennedy has developed a strong and crucial point regarding the use of the original play text in the Anglophone world when he observes that "[the Anglophone critics] have constructed a universal Shakespeare based on the value of his original language" (1996, 134). Thus, the hegemony of the original, and the status of literary canon of Shakespeare's plays, (sometimes) creates new "situations of enunciation"⁵ without updating the language, as in the case of Nunn's stage production. But important to be emphasized is that there is

no single correct way of interpreting Shakespeare's texts and that there are alternative ways of playing determined roles, without losing the validity or authenticity of reproducing Shakespeare, and as Halio points out, the actors understand and portray the characters they are to perform in different ways, but there is "a single constant" in these cases, that is through the reading and rereading of the text, the actors find the clues that are essential to understand the roles they portray (p. 33). Thus, however different, Polanski's version cannot be understood as not being Shakespeare instead, it is meant to be a renewed performance.

In the sleepwalking scene, Francesca Annis enters the room, where there is a fireplace, nude, with her long red hair loose. Lady Macbeth in Polanski provokes ambiguous feelings in the viewer: by one side the viewer is acquainted to her artless manipulation, and by the other side the viewer realizes the slow failure of her marriage and her ever-quickening descent into madness. Lady Macbeth seen nude in her sleepwalk is deeply related to feelings of guilt, her being is stripped of her shrewdness, her pretensions, and being viewed so objectively by the doctor and the nurse. She is particularly vulnerable, fragile, and pathetic: a nude woman wandering around a cold castle. Later, she sits in front of a dressing table and starts the ritual of washing hands, but differently from Dench, she is more delicate in her gestures. She is mute, looking straight ahead, and suddenly she stares at her hands and (imaginatively) finds a spot of blood, and with eyes fixed pronounces: "Yet here's a spot" (p. 31), with coldness in her voice, as if it was real, giving the viewer the impression that she is actually mad. She stands up and shivers pronouncing, "Hell is murky" (p. 36), fearful, but in the same tone of voice as in the beginning of the speech. It is possible to infer that she is more traumatized in some sense than Nunn's Lady Macbeth, because she seems petrified, paralyzed, in a deep hysteria crisis. The speech is fast, almost without pauses or silences. Then, after other lines of the speech, she briefly screams, with despair, and walks towards the bed murmuring "To bed, to bed", intermingling "What's done cannot be undone", and "To bed, to bed". The ambivalence is clear: with an objective account of this scene, the viewer is compelled to believe that she deserves her fate, while the nudity compels sympathy for her.

Therefore, the complexity of constructing a character depends upon a series of factors, such as the actor finding the essential clues for the role, the interaction among actors working in the production, the construction of the subtext by part of the actor and production, and the presence of the directors, that can help actors to find their ways into roles. It is not an easy task, but Judi Dench and Francesca Annis, despite their different interpretations, prove that through dedication and motivation, an actor can marvelously construct a character with so many complexities as Lady Macbeth.

Um retrato de Lady Macbeth: duas caracterizações

RESUMO

Este artigo visa analisar a caracterização de Lady Macbeth, da peça de Shakespeare *Macbeth*, em duas produções diferentes: uma versão cinematográfica dirigida por Roman Polanski (1971), e uma versão teatral dirigida por Trevor Nunn (1976), encenada pela Royal Shakespeare Company em Stratford. Especificamente, analiso o Ato V, cena I (1-80) no qual Lady Macbeth, em seu sonambulismo (composto por culpa e insônia), começa a lavar suas mãos compulsivamente, tema que é desenvolvido ao longo da peça. Seu sonambulismo pode ser visto como um estado da mente no qual ela pode expressar o que a reprime quando acordada, mostrando sua duplicidade de personalidade e caráter, oscilado entre repressão e coragem, liberdade de expressão e covardia.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Caracterização. Macbeth. Lady Macbeth. Sonambulismo.

NOTES

1 After killing Duncan, she flippantly tells Macbeth that "a little water clears us of this deed" (II.ii 65); now it is evident that this is not true, as the sleepwalking lady tries in vain to scrub the stain of blood off her hands.

2 The same act and scene being analyzed in this work.

3 "*Doct.* You see her eyes are open.

Gent. Ay, but their sense are shut."

4 "Methought I heard a voice cry, "Sleep no more! Macbeth does murther sleep"—the innocent sleep ..." (II.ii p. 34-42)

5 Borrowing the term from Pavis (1993, p.136), that defines "situation of enunciation" as "a text presented by the actor in a specific time and place, to an audience receiving both text and *mise en scène*".

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