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Till Death Do Us Part: Marriage and Murder in *Macbeth* and *Julius Caesar*

In both *Macbeth* and *Julius Caesar*, the tragic hero is supported and pushed to action by his wife—Macbeth is loved and dominated by Lady Macbeth and Brutus is cajoled and challenged by Portia. These women seek to rid themselves of their femininity and, either intentionally or by implication, push their husbands into bold demonstrations of their own masculinity. This excess of the masculine results in the separation of the couples and the ultimate deaths of both women and men. Although they relate to their husbands in very different ways, Lady Macbeth and Portia both assume masculine attributes and, in doing so, push their husbands towards murder and away from themselves, resulting in the deaths of both couples.

Lady Macbeth and Macbeth clearly love each other, but Lady Macbeth maintains a position of authority over her husband. In his letter to Lady Macbeth, Macbeth refers to her as "my dearest partner in greatness," and later as, "My dearest love" (1.5.10-11, 1.5.57). By addressing his wife this way, Macbeth leaves no doubt that the couple maintains a deep affection and respect for each other. Subhadeep Mazumder et al. write that "[t]he relationship between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth is built on the foundation of mutual trust, understanding and matter-of-fact ingenuity" (2709). Lady Macbeth takes it as a given that her husband has come to her with what weighs on his heart and is immediately determined to help him seize the throne, no matter the cost. To achieve this goal, she is not afraid to speak bluntly to her husband and immediately takes the dominant role in plotting Duncan's murder. She instructs her husband on how to behave in front of the king and his attendants and then tells him to "put / This night's great business into my dispatch" (1.5.66-67). Lady Macbeth assumes the dominant position and

takes care of all the details, while her husband must only look the part. As Mazumder et al. argue, “it is the wife who tutors her husband as to how he should conduct himself in the pursuit of his evil purpose,” flipping traditional marriage dynamics (2707). Lady Macbeth is assuming the hierarchical position of the authoritative husband, confining Macbeth to the wife’s traditional duty to follow.

Brutus and Portia’s marriage, while also one of love, is undercut by Portia’s need to prove herself to her husband. Brutus shows a clear concern for his wife from the start, declaring, “It is not for your health thus to commit / Your weak condition to the raw cold morning” (2.1.235-236). He is expressing worry that his wife will be hurt by the cold weather, but his concern is based on her perceived physical weakness. Esther B. Schupak points out that “While anxiety for the health of his wife is certainly the dominant note here, also present is an undertone of belittling and diminishment” (109). Reference to Portia’s weak health implies her subordinate status as a woman. Portia, however, responds, “Nor for yours neither,” putting the two of them on equal ground (2.1.237). Schupak observes that, over the course of the scene, “there is a strong element of love and concern, but underlying this emotion is a consistent refusal on Portia’s part to accept a subordinate position in their relationship” (109). Portia must continually assert herself as an equal partner in the relationship, rejecting the domineering authority of the husband. However, she is not afraid to do so, showing her own strength and commitment to gaining equality in their marriage as well as a say in her husband’s affairs.

Portia goes on to kneel before her husband and use their wedding vows as an argument that he should tell her what is on his mind. She states,

upon my knees,

I charm you, . . .

> By all your vows of love and that great vow
> Which did incorporate and make us one,
> That you unfold to me, your self, your half,
> Why you are heavy. . . . (2.1.270-275).

Portia takes a submissive posture before her husband and reminds him that she is a part of him and therefore should be privy to what has been on his mind. Schupak suggests that Portia's kneeling is "a strategy to render her demand for equality less threatening to her husband by reducing and subordinating herself physically" (110). By taking a posture of submission and deference to her husband, Portia is physically giving him the dominant position in the marriage while arguing that she should have one of equality. In addition, Portia is demonstrating to Brutus how she feels in their marriage—bent to his will and in a position of servitude—and inviting him to raise her up by his side. Brutus does just that, declaring, "Kneel not, gentle Portia" (2.1.278). Although he raises her up by his side, Portia is still giving him the authority to call the shots and determine her place in the marriage. While Portia fights for equality, it is Brutus who holds the power in the relationship.

Both Lady Macbeth and Portia unsex themselves, attempting to rid themselves of their femininity in order to aid their husbands. Lady Macbeth calls on evil spirits, saying:

> Unsex me here,
> And fill me, from the crown to the toe, top-full
> Of direst cruelty. . . .
> Come to my woman's breasts,
> And take my milk for gall. (1.5.39-47).

Lady Macbeth believes that, in order to help her husband ascend to what she sees as his rightful place as king, she must abolish her feminine nature and become more like a man. James J. Greene writes that "for Lady Macbeth, masculinity is equated with cruelty, violence and murder, and femininity with their opposites" (158). If she is to help her husband murder another man, she must first purge herself of her womanhood. She must become like a man in order to support her husband and push him toward gaining the throne.

Lady Macbeth then uses Macbeth's own masculinity against him to goad him into action. She asserts, "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" (1.7.49-51). Lady Macbeth claims that Macbeth was a man when he told her about the prophecy and implies he will lose his manhood if he does not follow through with his ambition. She is using his pride and masculinity to push him toward the murder itself. When Macbeth emerges from the bedchamber, hands covered in blood, she greets him with the cry, "My husband!" (2.2.14). By using this title, Lady Macbeth is equating his murderous actions with the fulfillment of his role as her husband. As Greene points out, this is "the only time she so addresses him in the entire play" (157). The only time Lady Macbeth calls her husband by that title, one that heavily carries the weight of authority and masculine identity, is after he has committed the violent act of murder.

Portia also claims masculine traits for herself in order to push her husband into action. In seeking to gain Brutus' confidence, she associates herself with the men in her life, calling herself "A woman that Lord Brutus took to wife," and "Cato's daughter," and asks, "Think you I am no stronger than my sex, / Being so fathered and so husbanded?" (2.1.293-297). Portia is asserting her own value as a wife by reminding her husband of the strength of both himself and his father-in-law Cato, who was also his uncle (Schupak 112). Portia proceeds to declare that she will give

herself "a voluntary wound / Here in the thigh" to prove her strength to him (2.1.299-300). Through stabbing herself, Portia proves to her husband her trustworthiness in a language that he will understand—courage and the ability to bear physical pain. Schupak writes that "Portia proves her constancy on male terms. . . . [B]y wounding herself, she literally opens her body, as if to resolve the disparity between her exterior, bodily femininity and her interior masculinity" (117). Portia, in proving herself to her husband, seeks to associate herself with the masculine. Furthermore, by making this association, she forces Brutus to compare his own masculinity to hers.

By asserting her masculine strength, Portia is pushing her husband to act and modeling for him what manly action looks like. After seeing Portia's self-mutilation, Brutus declares, "O ye gods, / Render me worthy of this noble wife!" (2.1.303-304). Brutus' response shows that Portia has established a standard of nobility and strength through her violence that he must live up to. While she intended to convince him to confide in her, her actions instead shove him deeper into the murderous plot. Shortly after, Brutus follows Portia's example by murdering Caesar. Cynthia Marshall asserts that "Brutus emulates her action when he stabs Ceasar and later when he stabs himself" (473-474). Brutus is goaded into action by his wife's demonstration of what it means to be a man. Marshall goes on to say that Portia's act "inspires [Brutus] to carry out the conspiratorial plan, partially because his own personality includes sensitive and nurturing attributes marked as feminine. Thus, he must prove himself more manly, more Roman—and inevitably, more violent—than Portia" (476). Through Portia's demonstration of what masculine nobility looks like, Portia pushes Brutus further into the conspiratorial plot, away from herself and towards his own death.

Both Lady Macbeth and Portia end their own lives when their husbands leave them. After murdering Duncan, Macbeth departs to assert his rule over Scotland, leaving Lady Macbeth behind with her guilt. She begins to sleepwalk and talk in her sleep, imagining conversations between herself and Macbeth. She cries, "What, will these hands ne'er be clean?" (5.1.42). She cannot rid herself of the deep crushing guilt of the actions that she and her husband have committed. Mazumder et al. write, "Tortured by her imagination, badgered by her conscience and smitten by her terrible isolation, she needs her husband by her side but he is not there" (2710). She has no support, nor anyone who knows what she has done; there is no one to whom she can speak of her pain. Furthermore, she no longer has anyone to exercise authority over. Henry Gray writes that she is "left behind inactive and unconsulted" (127). Up until this point, she has been privy to Macbeth's thoughts and plans and has been the driving force behind his actions. Now, however, she is isolated both from her husband and from what he is accomplishing. By pushing her husband to become a man, she has driven him away from her and broken the partnership of their marriage.

This isolation and pain lead to Lady Macbeth's death, which is presumed to be a suicide. When Macbeth is informed of her death, he remarks, "She should have died hereafter; / There would have been a time for such a word" (5.5.17-18). Although this seems to be a harsh and unfeeling response to the death of his beloved, he then reflects on the frailty of life and the human inability to control it, saying that life is "a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing" (5.5.26-28). He believes that life has no meaning or order to it but is merely full of emotion and chaos. Mazumder et al. suggest that, instead of a lack of feeling, Macbeth's response is "a complaint emanating from a jaded soul that she should not have deserted him in his hour of crisis. His wife's death takes away all meaning from life" (2710). With the death of

his wife, he begins to believe that there is no order or purpose to life—it is merely suffering and chaos. Broken by his search for power, Macbeth then dies at the hand of Macduff, a fellow man.

Portia, not included in the conspiracy to kill Caesar, is left at home to worry while her husband commits the murder. She expresses concern for her husband and asks Lucius to run to the capitol and to bring word, "if thy lord look well, / For he went sickly forth" (2.4.13-14). She is worried about the health of her husband and whether his plans have succeeded. Schupak writes that Portia is "apparently aware of Brutus's plan to assassinate Caesar and displays extreme nervousness and anxiety about the outcome of the day's events" (116). Now that her husband has confided in her, she is nervous about how his plans will go. She begins to experience auditory hallucinations, saying, "I heard a bustling rumour like a fray, / And the wind brings it from the Capitol," to which Lucius responds, "Sooth, madam, I hear nothing" (2.4.18-20). Like Lady Macbeth, Portia is deeply distressed at the absence of her husband and experiences what appears to be an unsteadiness of her mind. She has driven her husband to prove his masculine strength, resulting in the loss of their partnership.

After the murder of Caesar, Brutus departs for war, leaving Portia behind. Portia then commits suicide, which Brutus recounts, saying:

> Impatient of my absence,
>
> And grief that young Octavius with Mark Antony
>
> Have made themselves so strong: . . .
>
> . . . with this she fell distract,
>
> And, her attendants absent, swallowed fire. (4.3.150-154).

Portia kills herself in pain at the separation from her husband and fearing that he will lose the battle. Schupak writes that "Portia acts on the same stoic ideals that later impel the male

republicans to kill themselves" and that Shakespeare characterizes her as "a stronger personality, a true companion to Brutus, a woman who destroys herself rather than face public defeat and humiliation" (118). Through her death, Portia is once again placing herself in the male sphere, showing herself to embody the masculine traits of the heroes and sacrificing herself to spare both herself and her husband the humiliation of her capture.

Brutus is then informed once again of Portia's death, perhaps due to a revision of Shakespeare's original text, perhaps because of his own feigned ignorance (Smith 153-155). This second time, he responds, "Why, farewell, Portia. We must die . . . / With meditating that she must die once / I have the patience to endure it now" (4.3.188-190). Brutus here expresses a similar attitude to Macbeth, expressing strength and lack of emotion in the face of his wife's death. His attitude points to an imitation of his wife's strength and noble character. Furthermore, it is notable that Portia kills herself without assistance. Brutus himself bids his fellow soldier, "Hold then my sword, and turn away thy face, / While I do run upon it" (5.5.47-48). Brutus requires the help of another in order to kill himself, while Portia needs no such aid. Schupak asserts, "Portia demonstrates more courage than Brutus and Cassius, who both require help in killing themselves" (118). In her death, Portia proves herself to be more honorable and closer to the ideal of masculinity than even her husband or his companions. She is the standard for masculine expression that her husband is imitating.

Both Lady Macbeth and Portia demonstrate how women, when they take on the masculine, drive men to assert their own masculinity, often through violence. While Lady Macbeth does this through her ambition and goading her husband to action, Portia merely gives her husband a model to emulate. In this search to prove themselves, both men desert their wives, who begin to lose their sanity and end their own lives when the war takes a turn for the worse.

Shakespeare thereby offers a warning to women who would seek to abandon their femininity and for men who would allow their wives to push them toward toxic masculinity.

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