

The Medusa of Shakespeare, Helene Cixous and Greek Myth

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Abstract

Lady Macbeth, the legendary creation of William Shakespeare and Medusa, the mortal gorgon from Greek mythology- both contradict the weak and submissive roles that most female characters seem to be placed in archetypal presentation. Their characters in general, their manipulating power and their overall existence emerged to be a threat to the egotism of the patriarchal tyranny. Considerably this is the reason of Lady Macbeth's turning into the fourth witch and Medusa's beheading only glorified the heroism of her assassin, Perseus. Few critics have already explored the opposite side of Lady Macbeth rather than the incarnation of evil itself. On the other hand, Helene Cixous in 'The Laugh of Medusa' has depicted Medusa with a beautiful smiling face rather than a moral and physical monster. This paper will attempt to reveal the procedure of these two characters turning into evil by the discourses of the patriarchal domination from the ancient era to the age of Shakespeare and the continuation of this typical presentation of the females by others till present. It will attempt a critical analysis of such representation and the suggested way of restoration by Cixous through the females' writing by themselves and recreating reality through the access in language.

Keywords: Patriarchy, domination, female, power, threat, phallogocentrism, representation, feminist writing, language, restoration.

Introduction

Who doesn't believe that Adam was thrown out of paradise because of Eve? Lady Macbeth is equally blamed for the downfall of Macbeth. The tragic flaw or hamartia in the character of Macbeth can be simplified in that he acted according to the design of a female who just ruined his life. During that era of Shakespeare, high ambition was rather regarded as a virtue, not a sin. Lady Macbeth did not consider the murder of King Duncan as a crime; she felt it was required. Machiavellian theories did not only exist during the Renaissance but also his ethics were practiced, so the very relationship was to be blamed where a female had complete control over the male. On the other hand, Medusa was introduced as a gorgon in Greek myth, who had snakes instead of hair and turns onlookers to stones. She emerged as a threat to the Hellenes who invaded Greece and Asia Minor early in the second millennium BC. The interpretations of these Greek myths refer to the politico-religious history, where the victory of the Hellenes against the triple goddess, Medusa and her two sisters represents the victory of patriarchy over female spirit. Lady Macbeth and Medusa both conflict with the absolute authority of males. Lady Macbeth may be called the Medusa of Shakespeare, depicted as a monstrous personality equally victimized by patriarchal misogynistic politics due to her rejection of expected submissive humbleness of femininity.

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In the 20th century many women adopted Medusa as a symbol of female rage; Medusa can lead them towards their strength and a new identity through their rage. Helene Cixous, a French feminist writer, summons that the female has to enthusiastically and deliberately interfere in the popular culture to get rid of this condition. They can achieve their goal to regain the deserved admiration and secure an honorable position in history, literature and all types of discourses through language. Cixous asserts that a female must not be presented by others, she must tell the story of her own self only by writing herself. This paper at first will demonstrate the typical negative depiction of these two Medusas, the gorgon from the Greek mythology and the Medusa of Shakespeare, that is Lady Macbeth and will attempt to investigate the reason of their being detested by the patriarchal politics. It will also scrutinize the solution by Helene Cixous where she claimed that the only way to free the females from this negative image is female writing, which she called "*écriture feminine*", accessing the language with the experience of their own body to present themselves.

A General View of Lady Macbeth

Lady Macbeth is one of Shakespeare's most prodigious and horrifying female characters. Shakespeare sketched her with a dreadful image where she greets us almost as she enters, when she prays to spirit of cruelty to thicken her blood so that pity cannot flow along her veins. We find her already plotting Duncan's murder and she is stronger, more malicious, more determined and ambitious than her husband. She is fully aware of this and concerned that Macbeth will not willingly be driven out for the assassination. She blames her womanhood and female frailty at this stage and asserts that she could have solved it herself otherwise. Lady Macbeth can be recognized by this individuality, this distinctive relationship between power and gender. Macbeth, the general of the husband involves her ambition and violence with masculinity and defines her state as a male soul inhabiting a female body.

Lady Macbeth influences her husband with incredible competence; superseding all complaints; when Macbeth hesitates to slay Duncan, she repeatedly strikes the ego of Macbeth questioning his manhood until he considers the murder to be the only means to prove his masculinity. She takes pleasure in the power of manipulating her husband in doing whatever she wants. Her stubbornness continues and Macbeth kills the king. After the murder Macbeth lost his nerves and was overwhelmed with terror, the lady again proves her stability by comforting him and camouflaging the murderer.

The affect of this crime was stronger in Lady Macbeth, just like the ambition was higher than her husband. She gradually turned towards insanity; sense of guilt took its toll both on her body and mind:

There is a fearful pathos in Lady Macbeth's cries of "To bed" in her madness, and a terrifying proleptic irony in her earlier outcry, "unsex me here" (Bloom, 1998:529).

Afterwards Lady Macbeth was depicted in a different condition, degraded to sleepwalking and revealing the secrets in her disorderly speech. She was insanelly trying to remove the bloodstains from her hands that she thought was there since the night of that murder. Her ultimate death signifies her incapability to cope up with the legacy of her crime.

Turning into the Fourth Witch

Barbara Hendershott in her essay, "The Concept of Femininity in Shakespeare's Macbeth" states that Lady Macbeth and witches had similar roles in the play that they weaved the fabric of Macbeth's actions as a catalyst; they designed but did not take part in it. This plotting and guiding does not match with the subordination of the females and thus indirectly identify them with each other, by their parallel role in the play.

The three witches are the most notorious characters in this play; they are called as "weird sisters" not only for their wickedness but also for being extremely powerful. The witches embody both masculine and feminine traits, not only in their appearance but in their actions as well. They are a clear authority figure in Macbeth's life. They notify him about all the upcoming events in his life but they never let him realize how he will be in danger or what could be the probable barriers to reach his destination. In this way, the witches dominate and control Macbeth throughout the play. The fact that this relationship of women having complete control over a man is unnatural, is somehow alleviated for the audience by making the witches themselves unnatural (Hendershott, 2012).

The witches are presented with a prominent and noticeably deliberate similarity to the Fates, the three goddesses in both Norse and Greek mythology who preside over the birth and life of humans, often design the destiny and downfall in a style of measuring and cutting a thread spun. Some of their prophecies seem self-fulfilling.

On the other hand, Lady Macbeth appears on scene and displays the manlike ambition while she receives a letter from her husband informing the prophecies of three witches:

Come you spirits
And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full
Of direst cruelty; Make thick my blood,
Stop up th'access and passage to remorse,
That no compunctious visitings of nature
Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between
Th'effect and it. Come to my woman's breasts
And take my milk for gall, you murd'ring ministers,
Wherever in you sightless substances
You wait on nature's mischief. (Macbeth 1.5.38-48)

The interpretation of this unnerving and shocking speech of Lady Macbeth is always confusing and debated. She begs for the spirits to "unsex" her. This outcry refers to the urge of Lady

Macbeth to be freed from female frailty and provide her with the masculine strength of will that is required to accomplish the act that she has decided to be performed by her husband.

She had the total control over her husband in plotting the murder of Duncan and chiding Macbeth for his cowardly, women like attitude; not only that, she seems to be the main motivation for the revealing of the Macbeth's stand in the usurpation of the throne:

Hie thee hither,
That I may pour my spirits in thine ear,
And chastise with the valor of my tongue
All that impedes thee from the golden round
Which fate and metaphysical aid doth seem
To have thee crowned withal.(Macbeth 1.5.23-28)

Next to this part some of her speeches for ambition of power portray her as an unnatural character that almost certify her as the fourth witch of the play. During her persuasion her cruelty and tendency for violence is intentionally brought to light when she claims even to kill her own child for what she has promised to do:

I have given suck, and know
How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me.
I would, while it was smiling in my face,
Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums
And dashed the brains out, had I so sworn as you
Have done to this. (Macbeth 1.7.54-59)

The above mentioned statement is good enough for the readers or viewers of the play to label Lady Macbeth as an evil female who will kill anyone, even the child of her own womb, to get forward. This perversion of a mother enhances the horror that how far she may go to succeed. However, it also implies that considering Lady Macbeth as merely a brutal, malicious woman stirring her husband to slaughter a poor old king- is a misevaluation and understatement of this character.

In Defense of Lady Macbeth

An attempt to investigate who actually planned the murder of Duncan, can be referred to the findings of A. C. Bradley in the essay, "When Was the Murder of Duncan First Plotted", in his *Shakespearean Tragedy*:

A good many readers probably think that, when Macbeth first met the Witches, he was perfectly innocent; but a much larger number would say that he had already harboured a vaguely guilty ambition, though he had not faced the idea of murder. And I think there can be no doubt that this is the obvious and natural interpretation of the scene. (Bradley, 1992:454)

Bradley then refers to a famous passage from the play that seems to require us to go further still, and to suppose that, even before the actions start taking places; Macbeth and Lady Macbeth openly discussed the idea of killing Duncan at earliest convenience, and had approved to implement the plan. The passage where Lady Macbeth is urging her husband to the deed:

Macb. Prithee, peace:
I dare do all that may become a man;
Who dares do more is none.
Lady M. What beast was't, then,
That made you break this enterprise to me?
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. Nor time nor place
Did then adhere, and yet you would make both:
They have made themselves, and that their fitness now
Does unmake you. (Macbeth 1.7.47-54)

Here Lady Macbeth asserts (i) that Macbeth proposed the murder to her: (ii) that he did so at a time when there was no opportunity to attack Duncan, no 'adherence' of 'time' and 'place': (iii) that he declared he would *make* an opportunity, and swore to carry out the murder. (Bradley, 1992: 455)

We find some more for citation where the involvement of Macbeth in plotting the murder of Duncan is supported.

Nietzsche's insight may be the clue to the different ways in which the Macbeths desire the crown: she wills it, he wills nothing, and paradoxically she collapses while he grows ever more frightening, outraging others, himself outraged, as he becomes the nothing he projects. (Bloom, 1998:522)

After the slaying, Macbeth seemed to be overwhelmed with guilt and fear, whereas Lady Macbeth was continuing with her wisdom and did not delay to remove the proofs of the murder. She went back to the royal chamber with the blood stained dagger and was horrified to see Duncan's corpse, who she wanted to kill herself but could not because of his resemblance with her old father.

Next to this when the murder was revealed and Macbeth has already killed the grooms and was pretending to repent for his fury, Lady Macbeth fainted. Did she pretend? Let us find the answer from another essay of A. C. Bradley, 'Did Lady Macbeth Really Faint?' where he presents arguments for both:

In favor of the pretence it may be said (i) that Lady Macbeth, who herself took back the daggers, saw the old King in his blood, and smeared the grooms, was not the woman to faint at a mere description; (ii) that she saw her husband over-acting his part, and saw the faces of the lords, and wished to end the scene - which she succeeded in doing.

But to the last argument it may be replied that she would not willingly have run the risk of leaving her husband to act his part alone. And for other reasons, I decidedly believe that she is meant really to faint. She was no Goneril. She knew that she could not kill the King herself; and she never expected to have to carry back the daggers, see the bloody corpse, and smear the faces and hands of the grooms. (460)

Barbara Hendershott mentioned in "The Concept of Femininity in Shakespeare's Macbeth" that "Ambition is represented as the ruling motive, an intense overmastering passion, which is gratified at the expense of every just and generous principle and every feminine feeling". (qtd. In Jameson 363.)

This ambition for power made her almost insane to proceed toward the malicious and violent path of murder but she gradually lost all her will power, even she lost her mental stability, intellectual decisiveness and also the power to have control over her husband. An ambitious lady could not bear this ironic fate of weakness though power ultimately cost her life.

The fatherly affection Lady Macbeth mentioned for a moment that stopped her from killing Duncan herself, or the fear when she uttered, "Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?" nor her fainting proves her innocence but assures the least of humanity in her nature which finally was defeated by her ambition.

Afterward Lady Macbeth faces a gradual turn into insanity. The way ambition overpowers her more strongly than Macbeth before the crime, so does repentance affect her more strongly afterwards. On the other hand, Macbeth himself was nervous and overacted just after the murder was discovered, he started suffering from fears. The fear of losing power made him commit series of crimes of killing innocent people, started with the grooms, Banquo, Macduff's innocent wife and children. He was a warrior, killing people was nothing new for him, but not for the lady. Macbeth was skilled to remove the stain of blood from his hand but the Lady even failed to wash it out from her memory as the blood never stained her hands. Still the question rises how could such a strong character fall prey to uneasiness? "According to materialist theory, despite her earlier show of strength, Lady Macbeth's eventual weakness is a result of a patriarchal portrayal of her gender" (Davis 1/1).

Medusa the Mortal Gorgon

In Greek mythology, Medusa, was a monster, a Gorgon, generally described as having the face of a hideous human female with living venomous snakes in place of hair. Gazing directly into her eyes would turn onlookers to stone. Most sources describe her as the daughter of Phorcys and Ceto, though the author Hyginus interposes a generation and gives Medusa another chthonic pair as parents. Medusa had two gorgon sisters, Stheno, and Euryale. (<http://en.wikipedia.org>)

The Roman poet Ovid, in his book *Metamorphoses*, linked that Medusa was initially an exceptionally attractive maiden, "the jealous aspiration of many suitors." She became the victim of the wrath of goddess Athena as she was raped by Poseidon in her holy temple. The poor Medusa was transformed into a hideous creature, her hair turned into serpents and her face turned so horrible that the mere sight of it would turn onlookers to stone.

In most adaptations of the myth, Medusa was beheaded by the hero Perseus. King Polydectes of Seriphus assigned him to bring her head. The king wanted to marry Piraeus's mother during the absence of her gallant son. The gods were sympathetic and aided Perseus with various weapons. Athena gave him a reflecting shield made of gold, Hermes gave a pair of winged sandals, Hephaestus gave a sword and Hades gave him the helm of invisibility. Perseus succeeded to kill her avoiding looking directly at her; he advanced with the help of the reflection on the mirrored shield. Medusa was the only mortal of the three Gorgon sisters. According to Ovid, Perseus claims Medusa's punishment by Minerva (Athena) as just and well deserved.

Historical Interpretation of Medusa Myth

Some early classics researcher explained the myth of Medusa as a quasi-historical or exaggerated reflection of a real invasion. Robert Graves, in his book, *The Greek Myths* mentioned that a major portion of Greek mythology mirrors politico-religious history. The literal meaning of the word Perseus is 'the destroyer' but he was not an archetypal Death-figure. This incident probably refers to the invasion of the Hellenes towards Greece and Asia Minor early in the second millennium BC and fought against the Triple Goddess. The legendary adventure of Perseus and the beheading of Medusa can be interpreted as a sublimated presentation of the invasion of the Hellenes to the chief shrines of the goddesses, unmasking her priestesses out of their Gorgon camouflages, and capturing the sacred horses. Jane Ellen Harrison has mentioned in *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* that, "Medusa was once the goddess herself, hiding behind a prophylactic Gorgon mask: a hideous face intended to warn the profane against trespassing on her Mysteries" (Harrison, 1991).

Medusa as Social Trauma

“There occurred in the early thirteenth century B.C. an actual historic rupture, a sort of sociological trauma, which has been registered in this myth, much as what Freud terms the latent content of a neurosis is registered in the manifest content of a dream: registered yet hidden, registered in the unconscious yet unknown or misconstrued by the conscious mind” (Campbell 1968).

The socio-political history which is found in the researches of the classics is more or less similar but Freud’s psychoanalysis revealed the threat or the reaction that reflects the history of humankind since its creation. Freud introduced Medusa as “the supreme talisman who provides the image of castration.” He referred to the fear and the attempt to deny the fact by the dominating patriarchal society. The feminist of the 20th century exposed:

“The name “Medusa” itself is often used in ways not directly connected to the mythological figure but to suggest the gorgon’s abilities or to connote malevolence; despite her origins as a beauty, the name in common usage “came to mean monster.”” (<http://en.wikipedia.org>)

Does it really mean that she was ugly and her activities were same as her appearance or it is the same fear that creates anxiety due to the exercise of power by the subordinate females that made the gorgons ugly? Is it the role played by the females which are totally unexpected and unacceptable?

Medusa “knows” that she has been raped and made monstrous, doubly wronged by a punishment that implies her complicity in the crime. As Jay Clayton observes, the struggle between Athena/Minerva and Medusa is a struggle between wisdom and what wisdom once found it necessary to shut out... What wisdom found necessary to shut out is the Medusan knowledge of patriarchal oppression (DeLong, 2012).

The dangerous unveiling of Medusa’s body represents the moment when these truths about oppression are revealed and realized by both Medusa as victim and her “victims”, the beholders. This is dangerous unveiling in which something monstrous, something that is not meant to be seen is revealed. The attempts can be easily traced to shield the beholders from Medusan revelations, enforcing patriarchal order by veiling herself from the early truth of oppression.

Similarities of Medusa and Lady Macbeth

As we never come to know the name of Lady Macbeth, was she Catherine, Victoria or Margaret- let us call her Medusa. She may not be the personified wrath of the female but she had the individuality which was never expected by the ever dominating patriarchy. Lady Macbeth is exposed with her variation from recommended female subordination, by her role as catalyst to Macbeth’s actions. Lady Macbeth restrains her instincts toward compassion, motherhood, and tenderness — associated with femininity — in favor of ambition, ruthlessness, and the single-

minded pursuit of power. Lady Macbeth, not as imposed to domestic duties as Lady Macduff, practices her intellectual potentiality for her own use. While intelligence from a male character would be seen as a beneficial trait, patriarchy defines Lady Macbeth's intelligence as a flaw and as an indicator that she is unnatural and "unfulfilled" as a woman. (Marion1.) This conflict between femininity and masculinity, designs the entire drama, and sheds light on gender-based preconceptions from Shakespearean England to the present.

On the other hand, Medusa did not directly control the existing authority but no one had the power to deny her, the onlooker will turn into stone- may symbolize the inability to act in the old-fashioned way. According to the late classical poets, Medusa was once a stunning maiden who was malformed by Athena into a fiend as punishment for making love with Poseidon in her holy temple, which was a violation of a determined ancient custom.

Beth Seelig analyzes Medusa's punishment from the aspect of the crime of having been raped rather than having willingly consented in Athena's temple as an outcome of the goddess' unresolved conflicts with her own father, Zeus. (<http://en.wikipedia.org>.)

Still she was punished as it was easy to punish a mortal female but not Poseidon who was a mighty Olympian deity.

Medusa's head, an apparently uncomplicated motif linked to the myth of Perseus, was freed through being severed and cut loose from the bindings by the hero in the remote depths of the world.

“There is something paradoxical about the story since the monster was all the more indestructible because it had been killed. Indeed, the figure of Medusa is characterized by paradox, both in terms of the actual mythical stare, which turned men to stone, and in the interpretations that have been given to it. The fascination that she applies arises from a combination of beauty and horror” (Brunel, 1992).

Her head was used, in Ancient times, as an apotropaic mask- a sort of talisman or amulet which both killed and redeemed. Whatever was the practice of Medusa, living presence as gorgon or the severed head was extremely authoritative to be denied, and so was Lady Macbeth fashioned by Shakespeare.

Medusa of Helene Cixous

Helene Cixous's "LE RIRE DE LA MEDUSE" was published in 1975. Translated as "The Laugh of the Medusa", this famous poststructuralist French feminist text introduced Medusa as a beautiful smiling female instead of a horrifying gorgon. According to Cixous, this monstrous appearance of this beautiful maiden is actually the patriarchal discourse or politics and she was detested due to her strong hold against oppression, archetypal weak femininity and misogynic custom. Concerned with these traditional representations of women by men in literature and other scholarly texts, Cixous begins her analysis by invoking the classical figure of Medusa, but she

does so by refiguring the way Medusa has been represented through the ages. In this way, Cixous retrieves her from the traditional portrayal as a physical and moral monster; with snakes in place of hair, who turns the onlooker to stone. However, Cixous's Medusa laughs, which is both a joyful and a disruptive act that can lead to new directions for women's (feminist) writing.

Cixous's Way of Restoration

Cixous advocates new dimension of thinking and writing about women and literature. The essay has become a prominent feminist criticism because of its perceptive critique of patriarchal politics, its post-structuralist feminist philosophy and psychoanalytic theory, and its proposed potential of *ÉCRITURE FÉMININE* ("feminine writing")—what Cixous calls 'White Ink'.

Barbara A. Biesecker argues that:

"The Laugh of the Medusa" "can be read as more than an elaborate philosopheme, indeed as rhetoric, as a treatise that seeks to provide women with the means by which they may, through language, actively and strategically intervene in the public sphere" (Biesecker89).

According to Cixous, a woman must "write her self" which means they must write about their own self and take steps to secure a space in the text, into the world and into history. She focuses on the term Phallogentrism, a male-dominated, masculine-coded linguistic and philosophical system - prevents women to enter their own stories. Women have different ways of becoming women except for being born as a woman; if they 'have no body' is thus 'nobody'. Biesecker argues that the only way to move to action is to begin from where you are. The body is where women begin.

Cixous and other poststructuralists think language is able to construct 'reality', so the different use of language can produce different 'realities'. She finds language itself is responsible for women's oppression and invites women to writing, transformation of masculine languages into an "*ÉCRITURE FÉMININE*": a feminine mode of writing. Cixous insists that this feminine way of writing can be accessed through a rediscovery of the lived female body and that can change pervasive phallogentrism and thus lead to new ways of thinking and living.

Language, written and oral, historical and literary, has been defined, used and valued on phallogentric terms. The masculine mode of writing has powerfully shaped reality and likewise the feminine mode of writing has the potential to do so because writing is, according to Cixous, "*THE VERY POSSIBILITY OF CHANGE*" (879). The feminine mode of writing can shape reality in new ways.

In developing a feminine mode of writing, women need not to be bound by what Cixous describes as "the language of men and their grammar" (887). Instead of a structured, linear format, the females can write in their own creative fashion and express their spontaneous feelings. The new feminine mode of writing will emphasize continuity and wholeness; merge the boundaries and open the door of possibilities. It will shape the world in new and different ways.

Conclusion

Jack London uses Medusa in his novel *The Mutiny of the Elsinore* representing notions of nihilism and interpreted that the attempt to avoid looking into Medusa's eyes represents avoiding the ostensibly depressing reality that the universe is meaningless. For the females, this is time to produce different reality rather than avoiding the unpleasant, represented and stereotypical position in the society. Medusa is represented to be a gorgon as she was powerful and not under the control of the patriarchal domination. Though intelligent and strong at the beginning of *Macbeth*, Lady Macbeth is reduced to an insignificant person haunted by nightmares and guilt as a result of a misogynist portrayal of her gender. These portrayals of females can only be altered if females write by themselves. Helene Cixous asserts:

“She must write herself, because this is the invention of a NEW INSURGENT writing which, when the moment of her liberation has come, will allow her to carry out the indispensable ruptures and transformations in her history” (880).

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