

## **Shakespeare's Dramatic Skill in Depicting Lady Macbeth as 'Malignant' and Cleopatra as 'Charismatic'**

**Dr. C. Ramya, M.B.A., M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.**

Asst. Professor

Department of English

E.M.G. Yadava College for Women

Madurai – 625 014.

Tamil Nadu, India.

[rramyachelliah@gmail.com](mailto:rramyachelliah@gmail.com)

### **Abstract**

This paper is an appraisal of Shakespeare's dramatic skill in exposing the 'Malignant' attitude of Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth* and 'charismatic' attitude of Cleopatra in *Antony and Cleopatra*. This paper clearly presents Shakespeare as one of the greatness men of genius whose mind, soul and his essence are extraordinarily superior in his sensitive and sentimental approach to women through his heroines of his plays. Thus, Shakespeare's exposure of varied emotions such as over-flowing ambitions, valour, love, passion etc. are well portrayed in this paper.

**Keywords:** Shakespeare, Lady Macbeth, Cleopatra, ambition, valour, assertiveness, heroines, womanliness, magnificent, emotions

Undoubtedly, almost everyone agrees that William Shakespeare is the greatest writer in the English language. He wrote more great plays of different kinds than anyone else in the world. Shakespeare became a great dramatist because he was a professional man of the theatre. He learnt to write by seeing and acting in plays written by others. As is known to all, every age has its own difficulties in the appreciation of Shakespeare. The age in which he lived was too near to him to see him truly. From his contemporaries and those rare and curious inquirers who collected the remnants of their talk, it is learnt that "his plays took well" and that he was "a handsome, well-shaped man; very good company, and of a very ready and pleasant smooth wit" (Raleigh 1). The easy-going and casual critics who were privileged to know him in life regarded him chiefly as a successful member of his own class, a prosperous actor-dramatist whose energy and skill were given to the business of the theatre and the amusement of the play-going public.

Such a supreme actor-dramatist was born in April 1564, at Stratford-on-Avon in the country of Warwick. His mother Mary Arden descended from nobility and his father John was a prosperous businessman of the village and Mary had eight children – four sons and four daughters. William Shakespeare, the third and first son, was christened on 26<sup>th</sup> April 1564. It is widely accepted that Shakespeare's supreme gift is his universality. He was not of an age but for all times, because his

characters are true to the eternal aspects of human life and not limited to any contemporary society. John Seldon observed, “No man is the wiser for his learning; it may administer matter to work in, objects to work upon but wit and wisdom are born with a man” (Narayan, 103).

“Not of an age but All Time”. Johnson elaborates this aspect of Shakespeare: “his characters are not modified by the customs of particular places, unpracticed by the rest of the world; by the peculiarities of students or professions, which can operate but upon small numbers or by the accident’s transient fashions or temporary opinions: they are the genuine progeny of common humanity, such as the world will always supply and observation will always find.” Enright points out how the dramatist belongs to a ‘timeless, spaceless order.’ An Indian student need not pick intellectual crumbs at the table of the English critics, as themes and thoughts are universal. Modern psychology makes one aware that there is no such thing as a fixed and thoroughly consistent character. Man is full of surprises and contradictions, full of paradox and unpredictableness, inscrutable and elusive. This has pinpointed the relevance of Shakespeare to our age. No logic can formulate human behavior. The complexity and contrariety of the Shakespearean men and women must help us to discover ourselves in our potentialities.

The universality of Shakespeare is in his ability to lend himself to interpretation; the myriad minded dramatist is plastic enough to be moulded to shape wished for by the whims of the reader. “It is we who are Hamlet” illustrates the point. The speculative mind sees affinity in a character endowed with meditative temperament but unable to act. Psychological probe can see Oedipus complex as the malady of Hamlet. Frank Kermode in his essay “The Patience of Shakespeare” observes:

“In one respect he is on his own, and that is in his enormous patience, his ability to answer to anything and everything, to absorb speculation” (P 108).

No doubt, Shakespeare is “the greatest of all dramatists because his characters seem real and he included all kinds of people. We laugh or suffer with them and leave the theatre happy or sad because of what we have learnt about life” (P 6). Shakespeare’s plays give pleasure to people of all times and help them to understand life better. This is partly because the plays are full of exciting scenes and wonderful speeches, and the characters are still real for us because they have a special way of speaking that suits them personally. The range and variety of women characters in Shakespeare has tempted many critics to assert that Shakespeare has comprehensively covered the entire gallery of women in his plays and that his portraits of women have never been surpassed. Critics have also taken pains to classify his heroines. Mrs. Jameson’s classification may be accepted as briefer and simpler than most others. The common sense classification, however, would be to differentiate them as clever and assertive like Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*, Beatrice in *Much Ado About Nothing*, and Rosalind in *As You Like it*. The next group will be the loving and fanciful like Juliet, Helena, Viola, Ophelia and Miranda. In the third group would come the tragic heroines,

Desdemona and Cordelia, even Hero in *Much Ado About Nothing* as also, Hermione. The last group would comprise aggressive and dominant creatures like Lady Macbeth, Goneril and Regan and Cleopatra.

Women who stand out for their cleverness, their assertiveness and who come out unscathed from the conflicts in which they are involved are the favourites among Shakespeare's heroines. Among these may be included Viola, Beatrice and Rosalind of Shakespeare's most brilliant comedies, as also Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*. These glittering heroines, bright, beautiful and witty, always hold the front of the stage. They achieve the purpose by their practical wisdom and single-mindedness. Lady Macbeth has a negative shade to her character. She arouses fear and less pity in the hearts of others. She is a "fiend like queen as portrayed by Malcolm and this shows how abominable she is to him. No trace of pity is found in the words of Malcolm.

Lady Macbeth is endowed with a strange masculine valour. In her case, the principal motive behind her valour is her ambition. Every woman, not Lady Macbeth alone, is ambitious and is by nature more ambitious than man. Ambition varies from woman to woman. Some are ambitious of possessing wealth and the best garments, still some others are ambitious of being known as the prettiest woman, and many desire the praise. "Was this of the face that launched a thousand ships to sail" as Helen of Troy or "Age cannot wither her" as Cleopatra. But married women are ambitious on behalf of their husbands and it is to this category that Lady Macbeth belongs to. The only ambition that has risen to its fullest height is to be the Queen of Scotland. Lady Macbeth has a ravenous hankering for greatness and imagines herself a queen and her husband a king and the people of Scotland honouring and respecting them. Macbeth has the same ambition but is bound to reason, but Lady Macbeth is unaware of men and their power of reasoning.

Lady Macbeth brings to light the true nature of Macbeth. She knows that he is ambitious and can do any foul deed to achieve what he wants but he appears to her as denuded of all 'spirits' and 'valour'. She wants to lend her valiant spirit and encourage him to attain the kinship.

"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  
Which fate and metaphysical aid doth seem  
To have thee crown'd with all"

(Act – I – Scene – IV, Lines 24-28)

Lady Macbeth is in high spirits. She is rapt for she knows that she can provoke her husband to achieve what he wants. Her joy becomes double when the news of the king's arrival to the castle is conveyed to her. But suddenly all her masculine strength is lost and the woman in her comes up. She becomes frail. She fears that her womanliness may crop up in her way and sabotage her attempts. So, she cries out in agony:

"..... Come, you spirits

---

**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 19:4 April 2019

Dr. C. Ramya, M.B.A., M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.

Shakespeare's Dramatic Skill in Depicting Lady Macbeth as 'Malignant' and Cleopatra as 'Charismatic'

That tends on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,  
And fill me, from the crown to the toe, top-full  
of direct cruelty!" (Act-I, Sc-v, Lines 41-44).

Lady Macbeth is no doubt, devilish but yet she wants Heaven not to intervene and interrupt her cruel deed. Macbeth's arrival gives her joy and she is not an ordinary woman to sit beside her husband and shower accolades on his achievements, nor is she so sensitive to enrapture him with all her feelings of love and relate to him how separation was never so painful. As A.C. Bradley puts it,

"On the moment of Macbeth's rejoining her,  
After braving infinite dangers and winning  
infinite praise, without a syllable in these subjects  
or a world of affection, she goes straight to her  
purpose and permits him to speak of nothing else.  
She takes the superior position and assumes the  
Direction of affairs – appears to assume it even  
More than she really can, that she may spur  
Him on" (P 367).

When Macbeth tells her that Duncan is arriving there to Inverness, she questions when the king would leave. Macbeth tells her that he would leave the next day. Though Macbeth is full of treachery and ambition, he is incapable of immediate action as he lacks resourcefulness. But Lady Macbeth wants to take every advantage of the situation, she being more resourceful than him. Every step she takes is towards her Queenship: Whatever makes it possible for attaining this is good and whatever hinders her attempts appears bad for Lady Macbeth. She, in an excitement, as a response to Macbeth's words utters:

"O, never  
Shall sun that morrow see!  
Your face, my thane, is a book where men  
May read strange matters: to beguile the time  
Look like the time, bear welcome in your eye,  
Your hand, your tongue; look like the innocent flower  
But be the serpent under't. He that's coming  
Must he provided for, and you shall put  
This night's great business into my dispatch.  
Which shall to all our nights and days to come  
Give solely sovereign sway and masterdom"  
(Act-I, Scene – IV, Lines 59-69)

She cautions her husband to look as normal as others look. She warns him to conceal his wicked thoughts and look as innocent as a blossom. Even today in our normal life. We find woman

like her, woman more ambitious, woman who want their husbands to rise up to fame and encourage them to achieve the so-called greatest end through the foulest means. They are dauntless and Lady Macbeth exhibits great valour in her persuasions. She is the one who is the cause of the whole action. The seed of ambition is sown, and it grows and bears fruit in Lady Macbeth. Lady Macbeth tells her husband.

“Only look up clear;  
To alter favour ever is to fear;  
Leave all the rest to me” (Act-I, Sc-V, Lines 69-71)

Macbeth is certainly not a henpecked husband, but he needs her support at least in this foulest deed. Such is the boldness of Lady Macbeth. Lady Macbeth displays greater courage in receiving Duncan and rendering him hospitality. King Duncan hails her ‘honoured hostess’. In the words of Mrs. Jameson,

“In the mind of Lady Macbeth, ambition is represented as the ruling motive, an intense overmastering passion, which is gratified at the expense of every first and generous principle and every feminine feeling. In the pursuit of her object, she is cruel, treacherous and daring. Her remorse arises from a wounded conscience. It is as strong as her soul, deep as Her guilt, fatal as her resolve, and Terrible as her crime” (P 105)

Lady Macbeth is firm in the execution of her plan. She contrives the murder of Duncan after his supper. She has no patience to ponder or to wait. She tells Macbeth that when Duncan is asleep, she will make his two guards fully drunk, so that when Duncan has been murdered, the suspicion for murder might fall upon those guards who would be found lying in the stupor of drunken sleep. Macbeth is fully convinced by her reasoning and all his apprehensions and moral hesitations are driven away by her vehemence and persistence and logic. Lady Macbeth is in a state of more frenzy after the murder. The sight of her husband causes self-repulsion in her. When looking at his blood-stained hand, she says,

“A fooling thought, to say a sorry sight”  
(Act-II, Sc-ii, Line – 24).

When her husband paints a gruesome picture of the murdered king and relates that the vehemence of his excessive love for the king made him forget his reason power and he in a rage killed the murderers, she swoons as if hit on her head by a heavy hammer.

“Help me hence, oh!

(Act – II, Scene – iii, Line – 100)

Laxmikant Mohan brings out a psychological point left unexplained by A.C. Bradley:

“Lady Macbeth is a sort of megalomaniac. Now megalomania is a mental disease caused by incessant and excessive desire for greatness, a desire which goes beyond normal human bonds. Such persons are high strung, though not very rare and took normal when the circumstances at a given time do not concern their desire. They are mentally like a malarial patient whose temperature raises high but falls low when the fit is off ... Now, Lady Macbeth’s psychology can be well-understood by her motto; “to catch the nearest way” .... Lady Macbeth who is emotional and who has not fore felt the impact of the murder and its aftermath, is naturally shocked now and swoons, not having been ‘unsexed’ by the spirits” (PP 52-53)

What concerns most in this context is not her megalomania but her anxiety to save her husband from the imminent peril. A right exhibition of her valour through her swooning even in such a drastic situation, though dramatic, is highly commendable. Macbeth usurps the throne and Lady Macbeth attains what she desired most; the queenship only to be followed by restless days and nights. Remorse sets in Lady Macbeth as she herself expresses:

“Naught’s had all’s spent,  
Where our desire is got without content  
This is safer to be that which we destroy  
Than by destruction dwell in doubtful joy”

(Act – III – Scene – ii, Lines 4-8)

At last, she realizes what peace of mind is to an individual in her attainment of queenship, she has lost everything and there is no contentment in her mind. She is a perfect blend of a companion and a comrade. In the sudden emergency of the banquet scene she makes a prodigious and magnificent effort and her strength which seems to be lost returns and she saves her husband from an open disclosure. No doubt, Lady Macbeth is a prudent woman and good hostess, but she is obsessed with doubts and suspicious. The future appears hazy. The assassinations of the king results

---

**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 19:4 April 2019

Dr. C. Ramya, M.B.A., M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.

Shakespeare’s Dramatic Skill in Depicting Lady Macbeth as ‘Malignant’ and Cleopatra as ‘Charismatic’

in socio-political cyclone that keeps on increasing in its intensity. She grows pessimistic as she is worried about Macbeth's safety. She has fanned the fire of ambition in him and she wants to put it down. The most courageous becomes the most-timid. She feels that she is the cause of his mental illness and unstable political position. She undergoes a psychological trauma and she becomes somnambulistic and her soliloquies portray to us her pathetic situation. Her innocence in the successive murders is brought out in the words:

“The thane of Fife had a wife;  
Where is she now? – What, will these  
Hands ne'er be clear? – No more O'  
That, my lord, no more O' that: you  
Mar all with starting” (Act – v, Sc-I, Lines 41-44).

Her mental agony is clearly brought out as she says,

“Here's the smell of the blood still; all the  
Perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten  
This little hand, oh, oh, oh!”  
(Act – v, Sc-I, Lines 49-51)

She cannot bear darkness anymore. She carries a light in her hand during her sleep walk. The doctor who has watched her sleep walk and her strange utterances finally declares that the disease is beyond his practice. Lady Macbeth even in a state of mental trauma thinks of her husband and is quite concerned about his safety.

“To bed, to bed; there's knocking at the gate;  
Come, come, come, come, give me your hand;  
what 's done.  
Cannot be undone; to bed, to bed, to bed”  
(Act – v, Sc-I, Lines 65-69)

The repetition of the word 'come' and 'to bed' shows the intensity of her anxiety. She has trusted too much to an unsafe reliance upon her human will. She needs the divine more than the physician. Despite the advice of the physician and the desperate effect of the gentle women in keeping sharp things away from her, she commits suicide. Lady Macbeth is wretched as appears to be. But her desire that her husband should usurp the throne drives her mad. The thought is with her day in and day out and she exhibits the greatest valour in the execution of her plans. Later, she finds herself in a miserable state. There is no trace of repentance in her remorse for she was too strong a woman to repent. To sum up in the words of A.C. Bradley, “The greatness of Lady Macbeth lies almost wholly in courage and force of will (P 371).

The next to be considered among Shakespeare's women characters but certainly not the least of them is Cleopatra whose ability to attract and hold men like Pompey, Julius Ceasar and Antony lies in her skilful wit and feminine changeableness. Enobarbus says about her thus in the following words:

“Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale  
Her infinite variety, other women cloy  
The appetites they feed, but she makes hungry  
Where most she satisfies”

(Act – II, Scene –ii, Lines 239-242)

These words of Enobarbus to his friends Agrippa and Maacenas do sufficiently portray the manifold graces of Cleopatra. The charms of this magnificent lady do not wane with age nor does familiarity make her beauty stale and insipid. The more one knows her, the more one desires her. Her actions, unpredictable and her form, fresh render the Egyptian Queen an incredible charm. Shakespeare has taken utmost care in the depiction of this marvelous maverick. Plutarch in his 'Life of Antony' attached a little importance to Cleopatra but Shakespeare has exalted and glorified the Egyptian Queen and has given her a prominent place equal to that of Mark Antony proclaiming to the woman that woman in no more a weaker sex. A.C. Bradley opines:

“Finally, in *Antony and Cleopatra*, the heroine equals the hero in importance” (P 64)

Cleopatra is a woman born to rule with an unquenchable thirst for supremacy. She is possessive, demanding that everything around her should be hers and a change in this would drive her crazy. She confines not only herself but also everything to her sphere of influence and this is because she possesses a strange valour which is inherent but floats to the surface in her death. Cleopatra stands for true feminine freedom. She expects no favours and bestows favours on none. The only favour which she gives is 'love' – not as a sacrifice of the self, but as a profound seeking of the pleasures for self. Cleopatra never talks of marriage. She binds him in love and mutual pleasure than in the ambiguous emotions of honour and duty. Her inner strength makes her feel so confident in her relations with Antony that she feels marriage as a cowardly compromise of society. Shakespeare renders incredible charm to Cleopatra. In the opening scene of *Antony and Cleopatra*, Philo, Antony's friend, brings to light her mysterious influence on Antony:

“Look, where they come  
Take but good note and you shall see in him  
The triple pillar of the world transform'd  
Into a strumpet's fool: behold and see”

(Act – I, Scene –I, Lines 10-14.)



Though Cleopatra is looked at with contempt as a strumpet, she is indeed the queen of Antony's heart. His love for her is immeasurable as is evident from the words between the lovers:

“Cleopatra: I'll set a bourn how far to be belov'd  
Antony: Then must thou needs find out new heaven  
new earth”

(Act-I, Scene-I, Lines 18-20)

His love for Cleopatra is extremely massive. It is a wonder how Mark Antony, a synonym of courage, a man who could convince and fire the Roman mob with his reasoning power at Caesar's funeral could become a slave to the charms of a woman and to put it in the words of Philo could 'cool a gypsy's lust', but it is not simply the physical attraction that plays a priest role in their relationship. As the saying goes, “Birds of the same feathers flock together”, this man of valour might have seen something valiant in the Egyptian Queen that he could not prevent himself from being drawn to her. Cleopatra exerts so much influence on Antony that the whole world loses its charm for Antony and even the message from Caesar cannot force him into action. In the intoxication of her love, he utters:

“Let Rome in Tiber melt and the wide arch  
of the ranged empire fall! Here is my space.  
Kingdoms are clay; our dungy earth alike  
Feed beast as man the nobleness of life  
Is to do thus; when such a mutual pair  
And such a twain can do't in which I bind  
on pair of punishment, the world to meet  
we stand up peerless”

(Act-I, Scene-i, Lines 32-40)

Arthur Symons is all praise for Cleopatra. He calls *Antony and Cleopatra* the most wonderful of all Shakespeare's plays because Cleopatra is the “most wonderful of Shakespeare's women” (P 1).

To conclude, it may be stated that Shakespeare appears to be feminist in his treatment of women. The works of Shakespeare testify him to be a staunch supporter of women. No doubt, Desdemona's endurance, Lady Macbeth's ambition and Cleopatra's majority and valour – these qualities produced in them all captivate the readers to the core. Shakespeare's works are, no doubt, not confined to a period or a place as learnt from the thorough study of his characters. It is really a marvel how Shakespeare could delineate women in their varied emotions say love, passion, ambition and make them valiant through these emotions. One can find a number of Desdemona, Lady Macbeth and Cleopatra often in the present-day society. Shakespeare may be called one of the greatest men of genius whose mind, soul and his glassy essence get unmistakably revealed in his

works bring home the point that Shakespeare is a man with a woman's heart which is neatly evident in his sensitive and sentimental approach to women.

---

### Works Cited

1. Bhatt, Dilip. *Shakespeare's Comedies: An Objective Analysis*. Bareilly: Prakash Book Depot, 2015, Print.
  2. Bradley, A.C. *Shakespearean Tragedy, Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth*. London: Macmillan, 1926. Print.
  3. Iyengar, K.R.S. *Shakespeare – His World and His Art*. New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1964.
  4. Jameson, Anna Murphy. *Shakespeare's Heroines*. Canada: Broad View Press, 2005. Print.
  5. Mohan, Laxmikant. *Shakespeare's Men and Women A Psychological Interpretation*, Vol. I. Hyderabad: Sri Saraswathi Book Depot, 1969.
  6. Narayanan, K.R. *Shakespearean Theme*. Madurai: Browsers, 1977. Print.
  7. Raleigh, Walter. *Shakespeare*. Delhi: Macmillan, 1982. Print.
  8. Symons, Arthur. *Studies in Elizabethan Drama*. London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1919.
-