

**“The Dark side of Femininity”
A Comparative Exploration of Vittoria and Lady Macbeth**

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Abstract:

This research intends to conduct a comparative analysis of the Shakespearean and Jacobean eras. The most prominent authors are William Shakespeare's "Lady Macbeth" and John Webster's "Vittoria." The most articulate female characters that defied conventional expectations and maneuvered freely inside a patriarchal culture that repressed women and perceived them as inferior to men. The female characters of the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras, as depicted by William Shakespeare and John Webster, reflect the influence of a patriarchal society. These authors have depicted people who exemplify determination and resilience in the pursuit of their ambitions. This study presents a comparative literary analysis of the masculine character 'Lady Macbeth' from 'Macbeth' and the clever 'Vittoria' from 'The White Devil.' The purpose of this study is to compare both subjects. They are analogous in certain aspects; yet, a significant distinction exists between them. Vittoria is egocentric and self-serving. She is motivated by self-interest in her actions; conversely, Lady Macbeth is driven by a desire to elevate her husband Macbeth and acquire power for him. Both female characters employed violence to attain sovereign power. This study adopts a qualitative methodology, employing meticulous textual analysis of Macbeth and The White Devil to examine the issues of power, gender, and ambition.

Key words: Lady Macbeth, Vittoria, Power, Ambition, and Gender in Jacobean and Shakespearean Eras.

Introduction

16th century considered as Elizabethan period or we can say renaissance period but Joan Kelly – Gadol addressed a crucial question in 1977: Did women enjoy a renaissance? Mery E – Wiesner argues that this inquiry promoted an essential re-examination of that particular period of literature, especially when Kelly-Gadol answered her own question with a very startling “no” (Wiesner 1). Kelly- Gadol goes on to suggest that women experience a

setback during the Renaissance that their male counterparts did not, “a contraction of personal and social options’ (Wiesner 1). Nonetheless, significant re-evaluation has occurred among new historicists since Kelly’s assertion, and the prevailing consensus indicates that although women may have encountered a reduction in their public roles, they frequently resisted or opted to disregard the constraints placed upon them. The restrictions impacted not only upper-class women but also those from middle and lower classes (Wiesner 3).

The *White Devil* offers a comprehensive portrayal of Jacobean era. The play contests an antiquated order necessitating reform due to pervasive corruption and exploitation. Characters are compelled to exist in a realm of disorder and absurdity, where ambiguity and superficiality serve as the guiding methods. Vittoria and Monticello adeptly utilize them to attain power and social advancement. Shakespeare resided during the English Renaissance in the late 16th and early 17th century., which like our present world, was also dominated by patriarchal ideology. In Shakespeare’s tragedies, the female characters are usually negatively portrayed. Shakespeare’s plays often portray violence that is rewarded or condemned, depending on which system of power it serves and to what ends. The Jacobean and Shakespearean periods were considered as the shifts regarding power, gender, and ambition, particularly in relation to women. Both Shakespeare’s *Lady Macbeth from Macbeth* and Webster’s *Vittoria Corombona* from the *White Devil* are strong, ambitious women who subvert the traditional gender norms of their time. Their path however, diverge in significant ways, offering different insights into how female ambition was viewed in early modern England

This paper aims to show the comparison between these two characters ambition, goal and dark ways which they used to subvert societal norms of Jacobean and Shakespearean Era, in which it was difficult for the women to oppose the male dominating society where women were considered weak from their male counterpart.

Research Gap

A substantial gap exists in comprehending how these female characters, originating from many eras and literary traditions, embody the changing perspectives on gender, power, and morality. *Lady Macbeth's* character has been thoroughly examined from many perspectives of Shakespearean tragedy, emphasizing her involvement in socio-political events and her manipulative ambition to incite her husband to commit regicide. Conversely, *Vittoria's* character is frequently analyzed through the lens of Jacobean drama's preoccupation with violence and corruption. Limited comparative research has been conducted to comprehend how overarching transitions between the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods affected the depiction of ambitious women such as *Lady Macbeth* and *Vittoria*.

Historical and cultural Context

The Jacobean and Shakespearean eras were distinct yet overlapping, each characterized by particular cultural, social, and political dynamics. The two eras are distinct

yet comparable in certain contexts. Shakespeare's early works, characterized by relative political stability and the endurance of the monarchy, were significantly impacted by the Elizabethan era. This era of Queen Elizabeth's reign presented a distinctive model of female authority that undoubtedly defied conventional gender roles.

Conversely, the Jacobean period under King James's reign exhibited a more conservative social milieu, characterized by heightened apprehension regarding societal moral deterioration and the perils of unrestrained ambition. Revenge tragedies such as "The Duchess of Malfi" and "The White Devil" thrived during this period. Frequently concentrating on themes of corruption, treachery, and moral ambiguity. The transformation of culture profoundly influences the representation of female characters. Female characters such as Vittoria Corombona and Lady Macbeth occupied roles in narratives that were questioned or challenged during their respective eras.

In Shakespeare's play Macbeth, Lady Macbeth is shown as a complex woman with contradicting traits. Upon reading her husband's letter regarding the witches' prophecies, she endeavors to adopt masculine traits to project the strength necessary for acquiring enhanced social standing as royalty. Lady Macbeth demonstrates significant influence in strategizing the assassination of King Duncan and reproaches her husband for his perceived lack of masculinity; nonetheless, despite her powers, she ultimately catalyzes the exposure of Macbeth's involvement in the takeover of the throne.

Lady Macbeth is a ferocious, malicious, completely ruthless female. She is neither kind hearted nor gentle, totally different from many other female characters. She is a thorough negative image and is unscrupulous in achieving her goals. It is she who leads to Macbeth, the hero's falling. In the play, she is a witch and a danger-maker. Her image is also a reflection of Shakespeare's internalization of patriarchal ideology and his stereotype of females.

Lady Macbeth's ambition to elevate her husband's status in Scotland is evident from her initial appearance in the play. She contends with the witch's prophecy and underscores the remarkable accomplishments he could attain if he possessed the ruthlessness to execute the necessary actions, while other historians assert that Lady Macbeth subverts the gender norms of her time. Cristina Leon Alfar contends that Lady Macbeth's persona serves as a parody of the archetypal early modern wife (Alfar, 113). She explicitly asserts that Lady Macbeth embodies "The image of himself (Macbeth) he seeks." Lady Macbeth persists in her interrogation of Macbeth's propensity for violence, asserting that "You would not be great without ambition, but without the malice that should attend it.

In these remarks, Lady Macbeth elaborates on the notion that Macbeth harbors ambition, yet requires ruthlessness to actualize these aspirations; her subsequent "Unsex me here" soliloquy illustrates her readiness to embrace cruelty within herself to assist him.

To facilitate her husband's rise to the throne, she must renounce the elements of her corporeal tasks linked to frailty. Lady Macbeth's aspiration to reject the "weaker" facets of her femininity parallels the rhetorical aggression she employs against Macbeth. She employs rhetorical violence on Macbeth. Lady Macbeth once more draws attention to the spirit. She implores, "Come, you spirit that attends to mortal thoughts, unsex me here and fill me completely with the utmost cruelty from crown to toe!" (1.5.38-41). She would be liberated from the notion that women were the inferior sex due to their physiological functions. As Lady Macbeth utilize rhetorical violence to push Macbeth to regicide, she relies on an inherently masculine from of gaining power to advance her husband position. Lady Macbeth is often regarded as one of Shakespeare's most complex characters. She embodies ambition and power. Lady Macbeth's initial strength and determination deteriorate into madness and guilt reinforcing the societal belief that women cannot sustain power without dire consequences.

Lady Macbeth approached the prophesy as if it were her own, insisting on its fulfillment by any means necessary, including manipulating her husband to perpetrate a crime to attain the Scottish kingdom. Consequently, Shakespeare presents a distinct portrayal of women; malevolence manifests within a woman's heart through a corrupted influence, exemplified by the character of Lady Macbeth.

The white Devil, John Webster revenge tragedy It is a first play parallel between the Italian setting and Shakespeare's England is shown, with the vivid description of sixteen century in Webster's play the focus is on the consequences for the female protagonist after her adultery. In the trial scene, the woman faces the situation using her daring eloquence as a defense, her transgressive words lead her to dark consequences. A parallel between the play and historical accounts of Vittoria Accoramboni is also explored.

Vittoria Corombona is a Venetian woman who was initially wed to Camillo and subsequently to Brachiano. Vittoria, akin to her brother Flamineo, hails from the esteemed Venetian family of Vitelli. Their familial circumstances had deteriorated. She faced the dilemma of selecting her future: to remain with her husband, who is both financially and sexually incapacitated, or to pursue a lover or surrogate spouse who fulfills her financial and sexual needs, along with providing esteemed power and social prestige. These considerations pave the path for her decision-making; nevertheless, the circumstances have changed, as it is her own brother who will assist her in making a subsequent choice by eliminating her spouse and seeking a new partner. This substitution embodies diverse interpretations and may depict a society where respectable women have not participated.

Marriage is Vittoria's sole means of attaining social standing, or she endeavors to live according to her own principles, so contributing to the degradation of those who cannot appreciate, accept, or explain their deviations from the requisite behavioral norms. To achieve this and make a choice in her favor, she needed to enlist the assistance of her brother Flamineo; despite being married, Vittoria desires to alter her marital situation. Her brother assists her, although his support is motivated not by affection or acknowledgment of a woman's autonomy in selecting her spouse, but rather by a pursuit of wealth and influence. Vittoria's decision of changing her husband went wrong as it led her, her husband and her brother to the tragedies as well as other characters had to face different type of accusations.

But Vittoria had overcome from all these accusation by herself. In an analysis of this issue, Marriott Claims that "(...) Vittoria is her antisocial conduct do not aim to subvert the social order, but seek only self-fulfillment" (77). For her, the price of freedom may be a difficult and costly decision, as she lost her first husband, her brother and her life.

Vittoria corombona with her beauty, her ambivalence, her facetious, brilliance, ability to intrigue, and her slippery promise of something special, something beyond the mundane. Surprise me, one might ask, and she would. Critics have found in her goodness. And nobility, courage fidelity, and truth to oneself: She is capable of courageous love, "a creature of suffragette eloquences who suffers the agonies of sexual and social ambition". She posses "intelligence and courage... and brings with her all the ambiguity of response that men can give to a woman whose head is as strong as her heart". Some have considered her less attractive features to the extent that they conclude that webster has presented his her a mixture of good and evil or a deliberately ambiguous character, only a few have felt that webster allows evil to dominate her.

Gender, Ambition, and Power Lady Macbeth and Vittoria Corombona exemplify the apprehensions of their eras concerning female ambition. Nonetheless, their methodologies toward power and the consequences of their deeds vary markedly, illustrating the divergent socio-political contexts of the Shakespearean and Jacobean periods. Lady Macbeth's aspiration to renounce her femininity reflects the Elizabethan conviction that women were intrinsically inferior to men, both physically and morally. Conversely, Vittoria exists in a Jacobean context where moral depravity transcends gender boundaries, and ambition is perceived as perilous for both sexes.

Lady Macbeth's ambition is limited by her dependence on her husband's. As she orchestrates his actions to fulfill her objectives, she remains in the periphery, and her power wanes as the play unfolds. In contrast, Vittoria is a more proactive agent in determining her own destiny. Her ambition is not contingent upon a male figure but is instead propelled by her own desire for power and survival in a corrupt society.

Both individuals experience catastrophic declines, however the essence of their downfalls mirrors their distinct cultural backgrounds. Lady Macbeth is undone by shame and madness, highlighting the moral repercussions of female ambition within a Shakespearean framework. Vittoria's decline is more indicative of the corrupt environment she occupies than a personal failing, resonating with the Jacobean focus on the deterioration of

Conclusion

Lady Macbeth and Vittoria Corombona exemplify formidable representations of female ambition within their distinct literary contexts. Lady Macbeth's tragedy stems from psychological disintegration due to her departure from conventional gender roles, but Vittoria's narrative exemplifies survival and perseverance within a morally corrupt society. This study compares two characters to illuminate how the Shakespearean and Jacobean periods confronted the notion of women pursuing power, providing separate yet complimentary perspectives on the issues related to gender, ambition, and moral order. In conclusion, despite numerous similarities, the most crucial distinction is that Vittoria is self-loving, whereas Lady Macbeth loves her husband Macbeth and seeks to attain power via him. However, the aspirations and fortitude of both female characters were rendered futile by their deceitful and avaricious actions.

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