

Why Lady Macbeth is literature's most misunderstood villain

Article written by Hanna Flint

Shakespeare's murderous queen has long been demonised as a wicked seductress. Yet Frances McDormand is the latest actor to show she deserves far more understanding, writes Hanna Flint.

Seductress. Manipulator. Madwoman. The Fourth Witch. These are just a few of the more hostile descriptors that Lady Macbeth has been saddled with ever since *The Tragedie of Macbeth* (the full title of the Scottish play) was first performed 416 years ago. As a schoolgirl studying William Shakespeare's timeless tale of ambition, morality, betrayal and murder, my first impression was that she was all of the above: a straightforward, out-and-out villain. A wife who, after learning of a witches' prophecy declaring her Scottish general husband would become king, persuades him to commit regicide, take power and subsequently ignites a bloody civil war? Lady Macbeth is certainly no angel.

In act five, scene seven of the play, Macbeth's rival for the throne Malcolm declares her a "fiend-like queen," and that label has stuck. The fact that men played female roles in Shakespeare's day likely only compounded this unflattering caricature, but even after women were welcomed on stage, a narrow portrayal of the character has continued. "My experience of Lady Macbeth in the theatre, to begin with, was quite difficult," Erica Whyman, Deputy Artistic Director of The Royal Shakespeare Company tells BBC Culture. "She's cast in the popular imagination as the instrument of evil and that then latches onto stereotypes of women through the ages. It's a caricature of a woman who seeks power through her husband; when you combine that with the idea that she goes mad, you have this toxic combination."

It's this two-dimensional representation that Oscar-nominated actor Ruth Negga is hoping to combat when she takes on the role opposite Daniel Craig in Sam Gold's Broadway production this spring. "I'm very interested in discussing what I think is the long-standing demonisation [of Lady Macbeth]," she tells BBC Culture. "[The play is] a complex excavation of this relationship and desire, fate and power but it feels like we've just plastered it with misogyny. The problem isn't the play, it's the interpretation."

Contemporary feminist readings and criticism have similarly reappraised Lady Macbeth as a far more sympathetic figure than the one that has been traditionally depicted. She might not have been

historically perceived as a tragic hero like her husband – and Shakespeare didn't give her as much stage time either – but the play's title speaks to more than just his devastating fall from grace. It speaks to hers too. With this in mind, films and theatre productions have increasingly offered a deeper engagement with her, and with Shakespeare's progressive ideas about gender, motherhood and the patriarchy that are as relevant today as they were back then. "He would not have recognised what we mean by women's rights or what we mean by equality but what he did was treat every human being in his plays as though they had something to say that we should listen to."

King James I might have been the British sovereign when Macbeth was published but his predecessor, Elizabeth I, was an obvious influence on Shakespeare. Upon her ascension to the throne, the monarch challenged gender roles; she refused to submit to marriage – arguing she was "already bound unto a husband, which is the kingdom of England" – while clinging to her feminine identity in her aesthetic and various speeches, describing her subjects as her "children" for example. But she also displayed the royal traits (considered masculine because of the traditionally male hierarchy) of active agency and decision making, and was referred to using royal male descriptors, like "princely" and "Prince of Light" , as well as being classified as "king" in Parliamentary statute for political purposes. However, where Elizabeth I embraced political androgyny and reigned for 45 years, Lady Macbeth unsexes herself and loses her way. "She thinks the only way to get success is to follow a set of rules that are patriarchal," says Whyman. "She's not a kind of power-hungry, man impersonator – she's wholly in her skin, but she does think the only way to have agency in the world is to do this terrible deed and she's quite wrong about that. If she held onto her morals, so her femininity in that sense, it wouldn't have happened."

Shakespeare was miles ahead when it came to female representation and Lady Macbeth is a character that has too frequently been painted in a two-dimensional light. Had she been afforded more scenes in the play, her motivations might not have appeared so ambiguous to narrow-minded viewers. As it is, Lady Macbeth exits the play after her sleepwalking scene and in act five scene seven is reported as dead, evidently by suicide if Malcolm's comment that she "by self and violent hands took off her life" is to be believed.

Lady Macbeth is a timeless, tragic heroine who should be cherished not scorned. "It's unhelpful to portray her as wicked or to suggest that because she hasn't got a child she's, in some ways, hollow and barren and inevitably evil," says Whyman. "She's not a villain; she's complex, she's curious – we should admire her."