

Original Paper

Comparing and Contrasting: Ophelia and Lady Macbeth

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Abstract

Ophelia in “Hamlet” and Lady Macbeth in “Macbeth” have several comparisons and contrasts in their personalities. Both of them suffer from madness. However, Ophelia is submissive and Lady Macbeth is commanding. In this sense, they primarily appear like two opposed persons. But, they both display resemblances as they depend on men, and devoid of this dependence, they face devastations. The over-reliance of Ophelia on Polonius, Laertes, and Hamlet directs her into insanity once they are absent. Similarly, Lady Macbeth attacks the virility of Macbeth which leads to his rejection of her, triggering her eventual suicide.

Keywords

Compare, Contrast, Hamlet, Lady Macbeth, Macbeth, Madness, Ophelia, Suicide, William Shakespeare

1. Introduction

The depiction of ladies by Shakespeare in *Hamlet* is different from his depiction of them in *Macbeth*; all things considered, they have similitude that are found afterward in each play. Ophelia is tame and guiltless whereas Macbeth's spouse, Lady Macbeth, is cruel and undermining. Ophelia and Lady Macbeth are diverse characters as far as Ophelia's shortcoming, her compliance to Polonius, Laertes, and Hamlet and Lady Macbeth's persistence for control, and her cunning nature towards her spouse are concerned. In any case, Ophelia and Lady Macbeth both are badly in need of men to stay mentally healthy and exist in this world. They die after these men abandon them.

2. Ophelia and Lady Macbeth: Comparisons and Contrasts

In *Hamlet*, the character of Ophelia comes into the play as a happy, although immature, girl. She is torn between two opposing poles. Her father and brother think that Hamlet would exploit her by taking her virginity away. Her heart has persuaded her that Hamlet loves her although he vows that he never does. Oppositely, she is a sexual object, a dishonest and fraudulent beloved to Hamlet. She has no way of interpreting the opposing expectations since she has no mother to guide her. Just like Hamlet, the medieval teaching, that the father's word is undeniable, rules Ophelia. However, her Renaissance sense of passionate love also governs her. She cannot be subservient to her father and true to her love simultaneously. The dilemma forces her into insanity. When she tells a lie to Hamlet that Polonius is home while he is in the room spying, Ophelia demonstrates that she cannot live in both worlds. During Renaissance England,

women were second-class citizens who often were victims of repression... (O'Brien, 1994, p. 1)

Like Othello, Ophelia experiences a shocking incident that leads her to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). She starts suffering and frantically tries to stay away from anything linked with the shock. In *Hamlet*, the specific kind of madness that Ophelia suffers from is-

desperate passion. Love disappointed in its excess, and especially love deceived by the fatality of death, has no other recourse but madness... (Foucault, 2001, p. 27)

The weakness of Ophelia and effortlessly affected identity are just the opposite of Lady Macbeth's external appearance of power and freedom. Ophelia is dependent on her father and brother. She thinks and acts as instructed by them. She is unable to express her feelings without their assistance. They advise her as they know that she will comply with them. For example, Laertes tells Ophelia to stay away from Hamlet's shows of fondness. Moreover, Polonius asks Ophelia, "Do you believe his 'tenders,' as you call them? Ophelia replies, "I do not know, my lord, what I should think" (Shakespeare, 1973, p. 851). Whereas, Lady Macbeth can make her opinions and pursue her goals without help. She is the individual who thinks of murdering King Duncan so that she can follow the prophecy of the witches and make Macbeth the King.

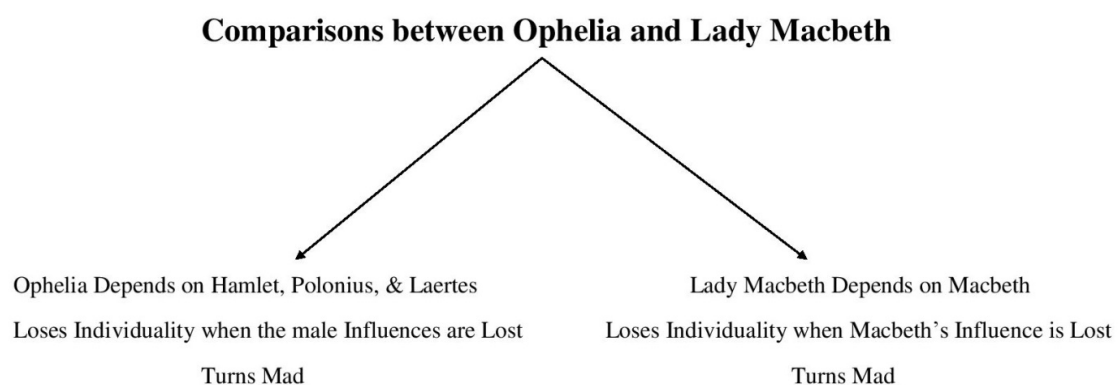


Figure 1. Comparisons between Ophelia and Lady Macbeth

Lady Macbeth's cruel leadership and power take control once more in return for Macbeth's fearful guilt after he comes back from the chamber after the killings. She states,

These deeds must not be thought

After these ways; so, it will make us mad (Shakespeare, 1973, p. 828)

The lady that appears is a shell, haunted by the remorse that lastly rushes her into insanity. It is caused as Lady Macbeth worries so much over the particular idea of getting and sustaining power and "being thrown too much on her own company" (Munro, 1887, p. 32). She would walk the corridors with a candle and squeeze her hands to sweep away the unreal blood from her doomed criminality. Her unconscious vocal admission comes out as proof of the uselessness of hiding such an offense. Finally, the annoyance devours her and she finds an escape by taking her own life. Lady Macbeth's fall is a disturbing example of how quashing one's real nature will certainly cause destruction.

The "inter-gender power differentials" is influential in evaluating the probable causes behind the madness of Shakespeare's characters—Ophelia in *Hamlet* and Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth*. "In analyzing the possible reasons behind the madness of Shakespeare's characters such as Ophelia in *Hamlet* and Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth*, such inter-gender power differentials take on great importance" (Bostrom, 1996, p. 38). "The Renaissance marked a turning point in the popular perception of insanity. Some people adhere to a belief in supernatural causes of madness while others were beginning to think that it might have other origins" (Neely, 1991, p. 315); "witchcraft or sin was still widely suspected to be at the root of madness" (Vey-Miller & Miller, 1985, p. 81). Besides, several people were previously endeavouring to detach madness from a heavenly or paranormal reason.

Marguerite Vey-Miller and Ronald Miller propose that "Ophelia and Hamlet have, in anticipation of their marriage, already enjoyed each other sexually" (Vey-Miller & Miller, 1985, p. 82). Ophelia is "...a figure without an identity of her own, Ophelia is not a thinking being. Rather, as Samuel Taylor Coleridge proposes, she feels too much where Hamlet thinks too much" (Showalter, 1985, p. 80).

Ophelia does not become mad because of her "impurity" and it is quite logical and acceptable. "The conflicting messages from Hamlet and Polonius seem a plausible explanation for Ophelia's madness...Shakespeare presents an image of madness as womanly in an Ophelia draped in garlands, singing and speaking in lyrics" (Bostrom, 1996, pp. 39-40). By contrast, Lady Macbeth is a regular foil to this portrayal of Ophelia as a lady who holds no basic personality without men. Even through the culmination of the nineteenth-century, writers stand by an explanation of the madness of Lady Macbeth as a development through the phases of demonic possession (Corson, 1896).

However, other writers do not agree with this viewpoint. For instance, a Danish actress of the nineteenth century named Johanne Luise Huberg suggests that Lady Macbeth suffers from a satanic intoxication of authority instead of a total possession. It means that desire and ambition drive her, not evil. Nevertheless, other writers have interpreted that the madness of Lady Macbeth is caused by her childlessness. Sigmund Freud suggests that she becomes insane as a reaction to her unproductiveness (Freud, 1992, p. 40). Now, "in seeking power, Lady Macbeth goes against her feminine nature; the

natural outcome of such action is madness” (French, 1992, pp. 18-19). Since “murder” is a masculine action, some scholars are of the view that Lady Macbeth’s endeavour to “unsex” herself is the cause behind her madness. Lady Macbeth asks the gods to remove her womanly nature so that she may fulfill her purpose. Indeed, Ophelia is “driven” mad by Hamlet, Polonius, and Laertes. On the contrary, Lady Macbeth “becomes” mad because of her inner sense of “guilt”.

Ophelia

O Ophelia

You are driven

Mad by Hamlet, Polonius

And Laertes’ remarks, gestures, acrimony (Ziaul Haque).

Contrasts between Ophelia and Lady Macbeth

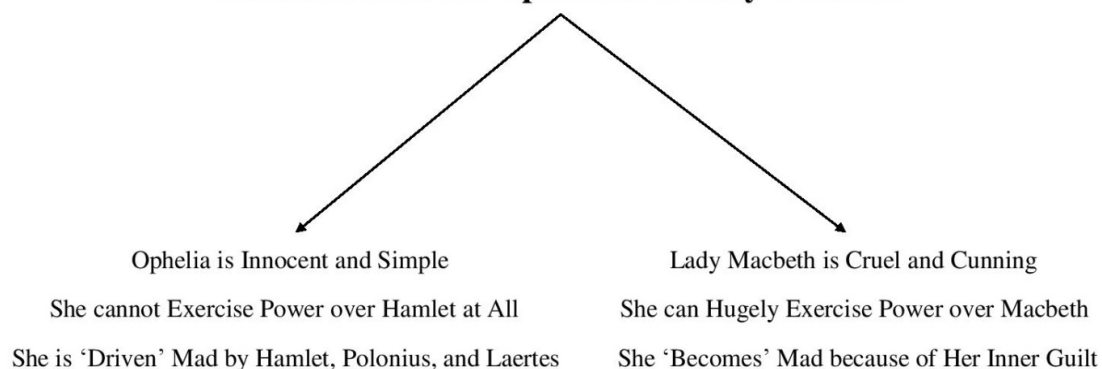


Figure 2. Contrasts between Ophelia and Lady Macbeth

Nonetheless, Lady Macbeth’s struggle to take away her feminineness is futile; her harshness cannot be constant. As a result, she becomes crazy. She tries to suppress her affections and such a suppression of feelings could cause insanity. In the tragedy, her major role is that of the hostess. Once Duncan reaches Inverness, Lady Macbeth becomes busy to entertain the guests. Nevertheless, by the coronation feast, Macbeth takes over her responsibilities in welcoming the guests and managing the preparation of the banquet. As she does not have a role to play, she feels like losing her individuality just like Ophelia. At one stage, Lady Macbeth cannot sleep because of her guilty feelings; she becomes insane and commits suicide.

She,

Was,

Macbeth’s Lady, cunning,

Committed sin, died feeling,

Guilty! (Ziaul Haque)

3. Conclusion

Despite several similarities and differences in their personalities, the madness of Ophelia and Lady Macbeth occurs from the building of their individuality by men. For Ophelia, it is the personality of the obedient daughter and virtuous beloved that destroys her psychologically. Once her father is dead, Hamlet has avoided her and is going to England, she does not feel like existing anymore, becomes mad, and dies. Correspondingly, Lady Macbeth suffers an analogous fate. Her individuality has been created by men as a hostess and a wife. When her husband does not need her, her existence becomes purposeless. Her insanity, like Ophelia's, is the rational outcome of losing her "self". These females are condemned to madness and death since they subvert their personalities to turn into the male structure of themselves. They surrender themselves to insanity once those men stop defining them.

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