



Lady Macbeth and Rebecca West: The Masculine Woman's Oedipal Complex

Yael Greenberg

Abstract

Freud likened Lady Macbeth and Rebecca West to patients destroyed by success due to guilt. In my paper, I show that these masculine women feel overwhelming guilt for the deaths of their respective fathers, and commit suicide in order to expiate this guilt. Lady Macbeth feels *as if*, by instigating the murder of the King, she had murdered her father, and Rebecca West finds out that the invalid she had cared for, and whose death she had caused, *was* her father. This trajectory bears resemblance to that of Oedipus, who felt no compunction for having killed Laius as long as he regarded him as a stranger, but was overwhelmed with guilt when he realized that Laius was his biological father. *Macbeth* and *Rosmersholm* constitute artful presentations of the masculine woman's oedipal complex, and the structural parallels between the two plays strongly suggest that *Macbeth* served as a template for *Rosmersholm*.

To cite as

Greenberg, Y., 2017, 'Lady Macbeth and Rebecca West: The Masculine Woman's Oedipal Complex', *PsyArt* 21, pp. 13–19.

In his paper, "Some Character-Types met with in Psycho-Analytic Work," Freud (1915) discusses patients who collapse on attaining their goal due to "forces of conscience which forbid the person to gain the long-hoped-for enjoyment from the fortunate change in reality" (92). In order to illustrate his point, Freud adduces two literary figures—Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth and Ibsen's Rebecca West. Concerning Lady Macbeth, Freud concludes that there is no way of knowing what changed the "steely-hearted instigator" into a "sick woman gnawed by remorse" (97). As to Rebecca, Freud claims that there is only one explanation for her refusal of Rosmer's marriage proposal, after having done her utmost to obtain it: she had unwittingly committed incest, and the resulting guilt leads her to reject Rosmer. As I have shown in my article

“The Hidden Architecture in Ibsen’s *Rosmersholm*” (1994), Rebecca’s guilt derives from a source other than that postulated by Freud: she had brought about the death of the man whom she discovers to be her biological father, and the ensuing guilt leads her to commit suicide.

In this paper, I will demonstrate that Lady Macbeth and Rebecca West commit suicide in order to expiate their guilt toward their respective fathers: Lady Macbeth feels *as if* she had murdered her father, and Rebecca West finds out that the invalid whose death she had brought about *was* her father. This trajectory represents the masculine woman’s version of the father-daughter oedipal complex.

Variations on the theme of a daughter who commits suicide in order to expiate her guilt for unwittingly causing the death of her father are found in all of Shakespeare’s major tragedies, growing more and more elusive with each successive tragedy.

In *Hamlet* (1602), Ophelia believes that it was her rejection of Hamlet that led to the murder of her father, Polonius. Her depression following her father’s death is aggravated by her loneliness: her father has been killed, Hamlet has been sent out of the country insane, and her brother is abroad. Overwhelmed by guilt, she commits suicide (Bradley 1919, 164).

In *Othello* (1604), Desdemona’s oedipal attachment to her father, Brabantio, leads her to marry Othello, a man much older than her, who is a good friend of her father. Shakespeare ingeniously cloaks this oedipal attachment through Brabantio’s racially-motivated rejection of Othello. Both Bradley (1919, 206) and Strong (1971, 203) point out that in the final moments of the play, Desdemona passively accepts her undeserved fate as if she were guilty. Strong avers that her sense of guilt stems from her feeling that in marrying Othello she had betrayed the standards of her father and her society. However, a close analysis of the text reveals that it was her father’s death—about which we learn when Gratiano says, “Poor Desdemona, I am glad thy father’s dead. / Thy match was mortal to him, and pure grief / Shore his old thread in twain” (5.2.244–46)—which triggered Desdemona’s guilt. She must have been overwhelmed with guilt upon hearing of her father’s death, and it is this guilt which caused her suicidal acquiescence to Othello. Shakespeare artfully obfuscates Desdemona’s guilt by mentioning her father’s death only after her murder, thus ensuring that this guilt would be understood by the audience only on the unconscious level.

In *King Lear* (1605), Cordelia refuses her father’s demand that she declare exclusive love for him as she contemplates marriage. According to Bradley, “she had knowingly to wound most deeply the being dearest to her” (1919, 317). Instead of living with Cordelia as he had planned, Lear decides to alternate between the homes of her sisters Regan and Goneril. Cordelia’s guilt must have been overwhelming, since she was well-acquainted with the malevolence of her sisters: “I know you what you are” (1.1.297). When Lear registers the depth of Goneril’s and Regan’s depravity, he is filled with

“burning shame” and refuses to see Cordelia. She, worried lest her father commit suicide, beseeches the doctor: “Seek, seek for him! / Lest his ungoverned rage dissolve the life / That wants the means to lead it” (4.4.20-22). In an attempt to save her father’s life, she makes a suicidal move by visiting him in the rebels’ stronghold without the protection of her army: “The Queen on special cause is here, / Her army is moved on” (4.6.234-35). Ironically, after the battle, the victorious Goneril and Edmund command their men to hang Cordelia and “lay the blame upon her own despair / That she fordid herself” (5.3.302-5).

In *Macbeth* (1606), a daughter commits suicide in order to expiate her guilt for having instigated the murder of the King, who resembled her father. The murder of King Duncan has been viewed by psychoanalysts, following Otto Rank, as a parricide (Holland 1966, 219). In all likelihood, Shakespeare replaced the portrait of a weak and cowardly king, about the same age as his cousin Macbeth, in his source (Raphael Holinshed’s *Chronicle of Scottish History*), with an aged, generous one, in order to portray the oedipal relationship.

The unconscious link between the King and Macbeth’s father is established by the Witches:

FIRST WITCH. All hail, Macbeth! Hail to thee, Thane of Glamis!

SECOND WITCH. All hail, Macbeth! Hail to thee, Thane of Cawdor!

THIRD WITCH. All hail, Macbeth, that shalt be King hereafter! (1.3.48-50)

Macbeth became Thane of Glamis when his father, Sinel, died. By juxtaposing “Glamis,” “Cawdor” and “King,” Shakespeare weaves a link between Macbeth’s oedipal strivings and his ambition to become King. Thus, in Macbeth’s unconscious, as well as that of the audience, the murder of King Duncan is tantamount to parricide. That is why Macbeth is perturbed upon hearing the Witches’ words, prompting Banquo to say, “Good sir, why do you start, and seem to fear / Things that do sound so fair?” (1.3.51-52). Macbeth’s affinity with Oedipus is hinted at later on when he cries out, “What hands are here? Ha! They pluck out mine eyes!” (2.2.58).

Whereas the displacement from Macbeth’s father to King Duncan is based on social rank (Glamis—Cawdor—King), the displacement from Lady Macbeth’s father to King Duncan is based on physical likeness: “Had he not resembled / My father as he slept, I had done’t” (2.2.12-13). Under the guise of Lady Macbeth’s reluctance to commit the murder, Shakespeare communicates to the unconscious of the audience the implication of the murder for her: due to the physical resemblance between King Duncan and Lady Macbeth’s father, the murder of the King is unconsciously perceived as the murder of her own father. That is why she is overcome by contrition and faints (I agree with Bradley that her fainting is real) immediately upon hearing Macbeth’s description of King Duncan’s corpse: “His silver skin laced with

his golden blood” (2.3.114). Her fainting parallels Macbeth’s perturbation upon hearing the words of the Witches. As he had done with Desdemona, Shakespeare presents Lady Macbeth’s unconscious guilt toward her father in such a way that the audience will understand it only on the unconscious level.

Scholars have pointed out the intensely masculine nature of Lady Macbeth. Janet Adelman (1992, 54) states that the disturbance of gender that Banquo registers when he first meets the Witches—“You should be women, / And yet your beards forbid me to interpret / That you are so” (1.3.45-47)—is played out in psychological terms in Lady Macbeth’s attempt to unsex herself. According to Adelman (56), the image of murderously disrupted nurturance—“I would, while [the babe] 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” (1.7.56-58)—is the psychic equivalence of the Witches’ poisonous cauldron. Interestingly, Helene Deutsch (1944) avers, in a discussion unrelated to *Macbeth*, that the sadistic witch in folklore reveals the connection between aggression and masculinity in women (292).

Just as Lady Macbeth brings about the murder of her guest, whose well-being she is responsible for, Rebecca West causes the deaths of those whose care she is entrusted with. While working as the caretaker of Rosmer’s wife, Beata, Rebecca had pushed her to commit suicide with the intention of becoming Rosmer’s second wife. When Kroll, Beata’s brother, reveals to Rebecca that Dr. West, her adoptive father, was in reality her biological father, she becomes very agitated. I have shown (1994) that Rebecca’s agitation stems from her realization that the invalid she had taken care of for many years, and whose death she had brought about, was her biological father (142-43). Rebecca’s agitation parallels Lady Macbeth’s fainting. Like Oedipus, these two women ruthlessly kill an elderly man, and are overcome by guilt when they perceive the murder as a parricide. (Kroll recalls Creon, Iocasta’s brother, who reveals to Oedipus important facts about his past.)

Before the murder of King Duncan, Lady Macbeth is her husband’s “dearest partner of greatness” (1.5. 11-12). As Murray Schwartz (1980, 29) points out, the two of them constitute a “we” who will murder Duncan and live isolated from each other for the rest of the play:

MACBETH. If *we* should fail?

LADY MACBETH. *We* fail?

But screw your courage to the sticking-place,
And *we’ll* not fail. (1.7.59-61; Schwartz’s italics)

Similarly, Rosmer refers to himself and Rebecca as “we” when he insists to Kroll that they are innocent of Beata’s death:

ROSMER. But my dear Kroll, you could never imagine we were so thoughtless as to let the poor ailing creature get hold of ideas like that? I give you my

solemn assurance *we* are not to blame. It was her own disordered mind that drove her to those wild aberrations. (324-5; my italics)

In the beginning, Lady Macbeth and Rebecca are very much in control. Lady Macbeth instigates the murder of King Duncan, returns the blood-stained daggers to the murder scene when Macbeth is too frightened to do so, and finds a pretext for dismissing the guests at the banquet. Similarly, Rebecca pushes the impressionable Rosmer, a clergyman from a family of Conservative clergymen, to rebel against his father by becoming an apostate, to abandon the Conservatives and support the radical progressive policy. As Kroll puts it, “While poor Beata was still alive, you were already in charge of things here. You and you alone” (298). Lady Macbeth commands her husband: “Get on your nightgown,” (2.2.69), and Rebecca says to Rosmer, “Now you really must have your walk, my dear. A nice long one, really long, do you hear? Here is your hat and here is your stick” (352).

Following the murder of King Duncan, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth become isolated from each other because of the different effects the murder has on them. They both feel disillusionment and despair, and the only desire they have in common, though they cannot share it, is the desire for extinction (Kirsch 1984, 274). Similarly, a vast abyss opens up between Rosmer and Rebecca when she realizes that she had brought about the death of her biological father.

The chasm between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth is portrayed by having him continue alone on his murderous rampage, whereas the one between Rosmer and Rebecca is presented through their use of unwittingly ambiguous locution. Thus, in Rosmer’s first marriage proposal, when he expresses his unwillingness to go through life with a “corpse” on his back, he is referring to his guilt about the suicide of his wife, whereas for Rebecca “corpse” represents her own guilt for having caused her father’s death. Rebecca interprets Rosmer’s words as an accusation against her, and, therefore, rejects his marriage proposal (Greenberg 1994, 141). In response to Rosmer’s second marriage proposal, she cries out: “It’s impossible...! I think you ought to know, Johannes, I have...a past” (372). Freud interpreted “past” to mean that Rebecca had unwittingly been her father’s mistress. However, I have shown (1994, 144) that Rebecca’s guilt stemmed from her realization that she had been instrumental in the death of her father, and it is this guilt which leads her to reject Rosmer’s marriage proposal.

Lady Macbeth and Rebecca West never admit to their respective crimes. However, they unwittingly betray their guilt through their actions and the imagery that they use. In the sleepwalking scene, Lady Macbeth obsessively washes her hands and uses the imagery of blood: “Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him? [...] What, will these hands ne’er be clean?” (5.1.42-46). Rebecca crochets the white shawl, which, as I have shown (1994), represents her evolving sense of guilt toward her crippled

father, felt as a paralysis within: “Rosmersholm has *paralysed* me. My will-power has been sapped, my spirit *crippled*. Once I dared tackle anything that came my way; now that time is gone. *I have lost the power to act*, Johannes” (370; my italics).

Ulrik Brendel, Rosmer’s former teacher, is the counterpart of the Witches in *Macbeth*. The Witches are spiteful, poor, and hideous women (Bradley 1919, 341). The feeling they give is one of bewilderment, uncertainty, and a fear of the unknown (Holland 1964, 52). Similarly, Brendel is slovenly, poor, and cynical, engendering bewilderment through his constant use of metaphor. Like the Witches, he represents disorder: he had been thrown out of the house by Rosmer’s father because of his revolutionary ideas. Like the Witches, he is the catalyst for the action. However, whereas the Witches are “equivocators,” who deliberately entrap their victim, Brendel creates ambiguity unwittingly, and is completely ignorant of being the catalyst for Rebecca and Rosmer’s suicide. Whereas the equivocation of the Witches in *Macbeth* bears resemblance to the Greek Oracle of Delphi, the ambiguity created through Brendel’s metaphors results from the associative thinking of the interlocutors.

Whereas *Macbeth* literally fights to the death against his adversaries, in *Rosmersholm*, “war” is used metaphorically when Kroll warns Rosmer that his defection to the Liberal camp means “a fight to the death against every one of your friends” (329).

Macbeth and Lady *Macbeth* commit suicide separately: he, by insisting on fighting *Macduff* even after finding out that the latter “was not of woman born,” and she, “as ‘tis thought, by self and violent hands / Took off her life” (5.8.70-71). Although Rosmer and Rebecca commit suicide together (by jumping from the bridge into the millstream), they, like *Macbeth* and Lady *Macbeth*, commit suicide each for his/her own reasons. She—out of her fully evolved guilt for having caused the death of her father, and he—for having succumbed to his father’s authority.

Freud rightly stated that Lady *Macbeth* and Rebecca West collapse on attaining their goal due to forces of conscience. I have shown that the similarity between these two women is much more specific: each ruthlessly brings about the death of an elderly man and commits suicide out of guilt when she perceives him as her biological father. The two women’s trajectory parallels that of *Oedipus*, who felt no compunction for having killed *Laius* as long as he regarded him as a stranger, but was overwhelmed with guilt upon finding out that *Laius* was his biological father.

In both *Macbeth* and *Rosmersholm*, we see the masculine woman’s version of the father-daughter oedipal complex alongside that of father-son. The compelling structural parallels between the two plays strongly suggest that *Macbeth* served as a template for creating a modern version of the masculine woman’s oedipal complex in *Rosmersholm*.

References

- Adelman, Janet. 1992. “‘Born of woman’: Fantasies of Maternal Power in *Macbeth*.” In *New Casebooks: Macbeth*, edited by Alan Sinfield, 53-68 New York: St. Martin’s Press.
- Bradley, A. C. 1919. *Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth*. Second Edition. London: Macmillan.
- Deutsch, Helene. 1944. *The Psychology of Women: A Psychoanalytic Interpretation*. Vol. 1. New York: Grune & Stratton.
- Freud, Sigmund. 1915. “Some Character-Types met with in Psycho-Analytic Work.” In *On Creativity and the Unconscious: Papers on the Psychology of Art, Literature, Love, Religion*, edited by Benjamin Nelson, 84-110. New York: Harper & Row, 1958.
- Greenberg, Yael. 1994. “The Hidden Architecture in Ibsen’s *Rosmersholm*.” *The Modern Language Review*. 89.1: 138-48.
- Holland, Norman, N. 1964. *The Shakespearean Imagination*. New York: Macmillan.
- Holland, Norman, N. 1966. *Psychoanalysis and Shakespeare*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Ibsen, Henrik. 1886. “Rosmersholm.” Vol. 6 of *The Oxford Ibsen*, translated and edited by James Walter McFarlane, 289-381. London: Oxford UP. 1960-77.
- Kirsch, Arthur. 1984. “Macbeth’s Suicide.” *ELH* 51: 269-96.
- Schwartz, Murray M. 1980. “Shakespeare through Contemporary Psychoanalysis.” In *Representing Shakespeare: New Psychoanalytic Essays*, edited by Murray M. Schwartz and Coppelia Kahn, 21-32. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP.
- Shakespeare, William. 1602. *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*. New York: Washington Square Press, 1962.
- . 1604. *The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice*. Edited by Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine. New York: Washington Square Press, 1993.
- . 1605. *The Tragedy of King Lear*. Edited by Louis B. Wright. New York: Washington Square Press, 1963.
- . 1606. *The Tragedy of Macbeth*. Edited by Sylvan Barnet. New York: The New American Library, 1963.
- Strong, L. A. G. 1971. “Shakespeare and the Psychologists.” In *Talking of Shakespeare*, edited by John Garrett, 187-208. Freeport, New York: Hodder and Stoughton.