Lady Macbeth and the Reversal of Gender Roles

Song, Il-Sang
(Cheju National University)

I

Shakespeare was sensitive to the problems that Elizabethan women faced under the patriarchal systems of English society and so, the female characters in his plays reflect his concern for those issues. According to Coppelia Kahn, Shakespeare was critically aware of the masculine fantasies and fears that shaped his world, and how they falsified both men and women (20). Lady Macbeth in Macbeth seeks more power than a woman of her time could normally expect to have, and she is subconsciously reacting to the patriarchal convention which restrains a man. Lady Macbeth's reactions to the politics and the concept of human nature, which are imposed by the patriarchy, direct her behavior throughout the play. She reaches out for more power, appears to grasp it for a short time, and then loses all her power after Macbeth commits the murder. When she realizes that all is lost, and that she has sacrificed her integrity, her peace, and her relationship with her husband in her grasp for power, she is deluged by despair and commits suicide. In other words, Lady Macbeth faces polarized expectations for masculinity and femininity. She adopts the masculine stereotype because it is associated with power. Bruce R. Smith notes, "Tragedy portrays the female other as a destructive force [. . .] The most destructive of these women are those who aspire
to male power" (113). Since masculinity generally includes a cruel and destructive force, Lady Macbeth embraces evil to gain power. This manliness is manifested in her sexuality, her relationship with Macbeth, and her interpretation of life. Her role-changing results in disaster, ending in madness and suicide. So, I will explore how Lady Macbeth deals with her masculinity within the power structure of her society and in her kingdom.

II

In the patriarchal society, women were temptresses who drew men to their destruction. In this respect Lady Macbeth adheres to common negative stereotypes of women who use their speech to corrupt men, and her manipulation is verbal as well as sexual. Her use of words to scold and mold her husband defies a commonplace Elizabethan belief that a woman should remain silent and be guided by her husband. Some Elizabethan people reasoned that since Eve used speech to convince Adam to eat the forbidden apple, women’s speech was generally used to lead men into sin. The Elizabethans felt that the man was also the head of the woman because they believed that he possessed greater powers of reasoning, and that since women were guided mainly by passions, they would use these passions to lead themselves and their husbands into sin if they gave vent to them in speech (Jordan 25). David Bevington notes that Macbeth "knowingly shares his wife’s sin through fondness for her" (Complete Works 1221). While these beliefs denigrate women’s powers of reason and women’s morals, they do credit women’s speech with a great deal of power by considering it to be so dangerous. Lady Macbeth recognizes the power of her speech over Macbeth, “That I may pour my spirits in thine ear/ And chastise with the valor of my tongue/ All that impedes thee from the golden round,” (1.5.26–28). Lady Macbeth’s use of “chastise” and “valor” demonstrates her intention clearly. She is the one with the valor, which resides specifically in her speeches, and her husband must be chastised in order to be bent to her will.

Though patriarchy gives men control over women, it also makes them