

The Reversal of the Mother Goddess Image in Shakespeare's Tragedies

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The view is often met that the world of Shakespeare's tragedies is an essentially masculine world where women are forcibly suppressed physically, sexually and psychologically. Hence it is a patriarchal world tending towards tyranny and power divorced from responsibility, often leading to a separation of the man from the mantle he inherits or usurps. It is a world of kings, generals, Machiavels, fathers, brothers and husbands and, therefore, a belligerent, hard and cynical one. Women who do gain a foothold in this world, at least temporarily, are women who have forcibly repressed their femininity. Lady Macbeth unsexes herself with the aid of the spirits of darkness, Portia slashes her thigh to gain access into her husband's confidence, Regan and Goneril assume the role of rebellious sons and unleash anarchy within the kingdom. The softer, feminine side of nature, the forces of innocence represented by the Ophelias and Cordelias, are deliberately sacrificed and silenced.

The purpose of this paper, however, is to expose the paradox of the situation by examining the role women *do* play in the tragedies despite assertions to the contrary. In the process, it is necessary to break down structured identities and defined parameters and above all to show that none of these equations are fixed.

Tragedy happens when certain factors spin out of control, when elements which the ruling powers that govern society or individual lives have officially distanced as the unacceptable 'other' encroach upon clearly defined peripheries. Let me briefly list the factors that led to the crystallization of an identity that was essentially white, English and male in the day of Shakespeare and his contemporaries. The Elizabethans and Jacobean were great believers in 'degree,' under which everything from stars to rocks, from man to the basest forms of life, had its own fixed position in the structured hierarchy of the universe. The official declaration of James I, the sovereign was equated to God. In addition, the governing factors of that definition of an English identity were not only political and racial, but also religious and ethical. Stephen Greenblatt, in his essay "Shakespeare and the Exorcists," talks of the strategies that were part of an intense and sustained struggle in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries in England to redefine the central values of society. At the heart of this struggle was the definition of the sacred, "a definition that directly involved secular as well as religious institutions, since the legitimacy of the state rested explicitly on its claim to a measure of its sacredness.... In early modern England rivalry among elites competing for the major share of authority was characteristically expressed not only in parliamentary factions but also in bitter struggles over religious doctrines and practice" (Greenblatt, 259). The boundaries of the sacred and the demonic or diabolical were redefined with the struggle between Catholics and Protestants in Tudor England, and, often, also between the religious proclamations of the

ruling monarch and the lingering religious residue from an older faith in sections of the population. Anything beyond this pale was rejected as 'otherness' unacceptable to the concept of an ordered society. In this patriarchal set-up, as also Jews and Moors were alienated, women were either forced to embody the Elizabethan image of the chaste, obedient queen, wife, mother, sister and daughter, or were exposed and suppressed by outraged fathers as Ophelia and Cordelia were, or worse, were exorcised and burnt at the stake as witches. It is such a world then, that Shakespeare apparently represents in his tragedies.

However, it is also true that a certain fluidity was already creeping into this pre-defined set-up by the time Shakespeare composed his major tragedies. The voyages of discovery had opened up new social and cultural horizons and an awareness of them within the national consciousness, whether willingly or unwillingly. Burgeoning of trade had led to the change from a fixed feudal hierarchy to a more fluid capitalist one where capital could propagate a shift up the social order from *nobilitas minor* to *nobilitas major*, where money could fetch a citizen a baronetcy. Above all, it brought up a more multi-racial and multi-religious society to challenge the national identity, though racial and religious segregation continued. In other words, it was no longer possible to deny or ignore the identity of that 'other' in any stratum of society.

Tragedy is a recognition that the unpredictable, the unidentifiable, the untameable exists and can erupt without warning, wreaking havoc within the structured hierarchy and also within the human mind. It is cathartic because it invites us to recognise this paradox as being deeply rooted in the individual's psyche and therefore to control it. Roles can be reversed and the inherent associated functioning can be violated, leading to a fluidity that threatens to destabilize the order within the pre-defined system. It is a paradox that allows for such Manichean contradictions as light and darkness, fertility and barrenness, sacred and demonic, life and death, chastity and wantonness, to become interchangeable by relaxing their boundaries.

Since I am talking of the role of women in the tragedies and the power they can exercise over the patriarchy within which they function, let me begin by illustrating this paradox through an examination of the goddess cults in several ancient religions. In most European goddess cults, the mother goddesses are recognised as a triad, e.g. as the Celtic Macha in her three aspects of prophetess-warrior-matriarch, or the Greco-Roman triad of Persephone-Demeter-Hecate. However, none of these roles are unidimensional, and their influence upon an essentially patriarchal society appears to be multifaceted. In Celtic mythology, Daghdha the mighty one, must mate with the goddess of war, who is also the fertility symbol, in order to increase his potency. Macbeth himself is referred to as Bellona's bridegroom at the height of his valour and strength. Sex and war occur together in a number of Celtic legends. Medhbh of Connact is said to have controlled the armies of Ireland. No king could rule in Tara without having first mated with her. The king in myth must be married to his kingdom in a ceremony at which a libation may appear as an ugly hag, symbol of a desolate and bloodied kingdom. We recall Macbeth's meeting with the witches before his unrightful accession to the throne. In the Celtic legend, the ugly hag is transformed into a beautiful goddess when kissed by the rightful claimant to the throne. However, Macbeth was a usurper who still had the power to be a successful administrator, given his valour and strength, as Claudius tried to be in Denmark. Nonetheless, when the usurper turns bloody tyrant, the barren, destructive hag-like image assumes control and the forces of fertility gradually die away. In the Celtic myth, Daghdha the mighty one had as

his symbol a club, one end of which kills and the other brings back to life, thus balancing the forces of destruction and re-creation. Similarly, in Indian goddess myths, Durga the ten-armed goddess, armed with the collective might of the male gods to destroy evil, is also worshipped in a harvest festival in autumn, with rituals which include both the shedding of sacrificial blood and the offering of *navapatrika*, symbolising nine fruits of the field. The imbalance in *Macbeth* is clearly seen, for while we have repeated references to the “seed” of Banquo, Macbeth talks of an “unlineal hand,” a “barren sceptre,” a “fruitless crown” (III.i), all images of infertility and desolation, though Scottish history does speak of sons of Macbeth, a fact corroborated by Lady Macbeth’s words: “I have given suck, and know / How tender ‘tis to love the babe that milks me” (I.vii.). The earth cannot be regenerated till blood is spilt to drown the weed and water the real sovereign flower, in a therapeutic process required for the prosperity of the denuded kingdom of Scotland.

Turning to another aspect of the goddess myth, in the Persephone-Demeter-Hecate triad of Greco-Roman tradition, it is generally accepted that Persephone symbolizes virginal innocence, while Demeter, Earth-goddess and grain-giver, is a full-breasted and large-hipped symbol of fertility. Hecate, on the other hand, is barren, aged, shrivelled and associated with death, darkness and evil. However, a closer examination of their mythical roles in various aspects of the tradition may focus on the fluidity and interchangeability of their iconic status. Demeter the life-giver also ushers in the death-bringing forces of Winter in her terrible anger at the abduction of her daughter Persephone. Persephone herself represents innocence and chastity, violated by the “Host of many,” as Pluto is referred to in the Homeric hymns. To my mind, Persephone also represents a repressed sexuality forcibly kept under control by her vigilant Earth-mother. She loses her innocence when she unwittingly pulls out the root of the narcissus blooming on the plains of Enna by the will of her father Zeus. The gateway to the underworld that she opens up in the process is like the genital orifice which leads her to sexual union with Pluto, son of Kronos and gives her a sense of power, as ratified by the repeated references to her as the “dread” Persephone throughout the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. This union which brings about her empowerment is sealed with her acceptance of the pomegranate which ensures her stay as Queen of the Underworld for at least one-third of the year.¹ In Shakespeare, the obvious Persephone-image of repressed sexuality occurs in Ophelia hemmed in on all sides by harsh, dominating and callous men and finally driven mad. Ophelia does not see herself as “monastery-bound” like the coldly chaste Isabella of *Measure for Measure*. The flowers she bedecks herself with in her madness reflect both her enforced virginity and her unconscious urge for sexual fulfilment. Thus on the one hand we have fennel² and columbines³, while on the other we have the dichotomy inherent in the lines:

Fantastic garlands
Of crow-flowers, nettles, daisies and long-purples
That liberal shepherds give a grosser name
But our cold maids do dead men’s fingers call them.
(*Hamlet*, IV.vi)

In the tragedies, female sexuality is not allowed to develop. Hamlet is more alarmed by his mother’s desire for sexual fulfilment than by his uncle’s treachery, and has an almost immature revulsion against such desires, as seen in his treatment of Ophelia. Desdemona breaks through her codified status of the “a maiden never bold” (I.iii) imposed upon her by her father and the state, by embracing a wild adventurous Moor and in so doing challenges

the essentially white European Renaissance identity. It is ironical that the Moor himself should refer to her in the coldly chaste terms that he wished to promote and for which he strangled her without chance of self defence: “Cold, cold, my girl! / Even like thy chastity” (V. ii). In *King Lear*, female sexuality is demonised: “But to the girdle do the gods inherit / Beneath is all the fiends” (IV.vi.).

The Mother Goddess is generally represented by fertility rites and harvest symbols and in ancient Stone Age icons, with large breasts, full hips and a pronounced vulva.⁴ She is the Magna Mater, the Great Mother, Demeter-Ceres-Annapurna, who regenerates and fertilises the Earth. She is the benign counterpart of the destruction and dissolution threatened by the Terrible Mother. This last version of the triad may be found in Kali, whose lust for blood is magnified by blood-shot eyes, her garland of heads and her gory tongue, and in Hecate, of shrunken body and shrivelled breasts, associated with death and the ghosts of the nether world. Kali also represents untamed sexuality, as seen in her image astride Shiva, her consort, and in the sacrificial offerings of blood, flesh and wine. In Indian mythological terms, this tension inherent in the two versions of the Great Mother may be identified as the contrast between fertility and destruction, “Anna-purna” and “Anna-rikta Bheeshana.” This contrast is also seen in the *Rg Veda*, between Usas, light- and life-bringer and Nirrti, death-bringer. Usas is often represented as a cow that yields her udders for the benefit of mankind (*Rg Veda*, 3:58, 4:5), like Prithvi in the *Atharva Veda* (12:1). Nirrti, on the other hand, in scattered references in the *Rg Veda*, is associated with death and destruction and, in the *Taittiriya Upanishad*, as a dark force, dressed in dark clothes, receiving dark husks as her share of the sacrifice. David Kinsley, in his book on Hindu goddesses, says that Kali’s shocking appearance puts dharma in perspective and is realized as “a threat to society’s feeble attempts to order what is essentially disorderly: life itself” (Kinsley, 129). However, the *Devi Mahatmya* shows how when Durga, the embodiment of Beauty and Power, is attacked by Canda and Munda, her face darkens to an inky hue (‘masheevnamabhuttada’) with anger, and suddenly Kali emerges from her forehead, wearing a garland of human skulls and wielding a skull-topped staff (*Devi Mahatmya*, VII.vi). More important is the assumption in the *Devi Mahatmya* that when Durga and her fierce band of Matrkas cannot contain the uncontrollable fertilization process in the demoniac orgy unleashed by Raktabija, it is Kali who stems the process by sucking the blood from the demon’s body (*Devi Mahatmya*, VIII. 52-4, 57). Thus there is blood-letting as well as blood-sucking, both recognisably therapeutic in their own ways. The spilling of blood is also recognized as a necessary process to purge the land and regenerate it, as earlier mentioned in this essay.

Just as destruction and recreation are interchangeable in ancient myths, the symbols of barrenness and fertility are constantly switched in Shakespearean tragedy, thus changing what is potentially life-giving into a death-bringing process. Though Lady Macbeth has often been referred to as the fourth witch in the play, contributing to her Hecate-like image, there are ample references to her as a fertility symbol as well, in the breast and milk images: “I have given suck...” (I.vii); “Come to my woman’s breasts...” (I. V) Thus, while Lear curses his treacherous daughters with barren wombs and destroyed seed, Macbeth invokes the blessing of fertility on his wife: “Bring forth men-children only” (I.vii). Ironically, he himself is destined to die at the hands of one who has symbolically circumvented the usual channel of birth. Similarly, there are references to the “milk of human kindness” (I.v.) and the “sweet milk of concord” (IV. iii.). The breast image of overflowing milk representing prosperity is reversed in *Richard II*, when York chastises the Duchess for breeding traitors:

Thou frantic woman, what dost thou make here?
 Shall thy old dugs once more a traitor rear?
 (*Richard II*, V.iii.)

In *Macbeth*, life-giving and life-rearing in the womb, breast and milk images are swiftly turned into death-bringing ones which irrevocably denude Lady Macbeth of her essential womanliness, when she invokes the “murdering ministers” of the nether world to take her milk for gall and promises to dash out the brains of her suckling child. In so doing she exchanges her Demeter- role for a Hecate-like one. In the Hindu scriptures, while Prithvi the Earth-goddess oozes life-giving nectar from her breasts, Bhairavi the destroyer smears her breasts with blood. Within the text of the play of course, the obvious parallel to the mother’s reversed role of destruction occurs in the sow that has eaten her nine farrow, referred to in the apparition scene.

The juxtaposition of life and death in the womb and breast images is also seen in Cleopatra’s comparison of the asp to a babe suckling at the breast:

Peace, peace!
 Dost thou not see my baby at my breast
 That sucks the nurse asleep?
 (*Antony and Cleopatra*, V. ii)

This woman of waning lip and eye seems to surmount age and consequent termination of fertility and rides forth surrounded by Caesarion and all the unlawful issue that the aged pair have produced between them. In fact the play seems to defy what might have been its association with the aging third of the Greco-Roman triad of goddesses by its repeated images of fertility like “the fire that quickens Nilus’ slime” (*A&C*, I.iii) or “The higher Nilus swells / The more it promises” (II.vii), and Cleopatra is but a serpent of old Nile. The images of uncontrolled fertility contrast starkly with the discipline and rationality embodied by the stern Roman culture, which ironically seems to place the widow Octavia in a barren, shrivelled Hecate-like role in Antony’s eyes. In *Julius Caesar*, Calpurnia’s barrenness is publicly flaunted by Caesar at the feast of Lupercal.

Coming to Hecate, whose name means “influence from afar” in Greek, she represents the last and the most barren and aged of the triad of goddesses. Demonised by Christianity and by Greek patriarchs, she is associated with evil, black magic and the netherworld, to be worshipped at three-way crossroads at night. She was one who could coerce the gods at will, like Kali dominating the prostrated Shiva and unlike Durga, who, though an embodiment of female power, symbolises the amalgamated strength of the male gods. In *Macbeth*, Hecate represents an avenging force that will ultimately bring the wayward son to his downfall when her female subordinates have been lax or unwilling. However, as mentioned by Hesiod, Hecate was originally a moon goddess, who did some good by reporting the abduction of Persephone. In the original triad, she was represented as a wise old woman. In *Macbeth*, too we have lingering echoes, as in the reference: “Upon the corner of the moon / There hangs a vaporous drop profound” (*Macbeth*, III.v.) Further, as in the life-giving, life-taking breast images in the play, there is also a paradox inherent in Hecate and her witches. For while the witches are generally represented as withered, wild, bearded women with skinny lips and bony fingers, antithetical to the images of femininity discussed so far, there are hidden references to the sexual power they

wield over their male victims.⁵ The apparition scene in Act IV represents a wild orgy, where decency, reason and order are dissolved to give way to primal chaos, in much the same way as Egypt overpowers Rome in *Antony and Cleopatra*. In *Macbeth*, the forces of darkness, here embodied by an uncontrolled feminine presence, overtake the structured patriarchal society of Scotland. Lady Macbeth, who has herself exchanged her Demeter role for a Hecate-like one, anticipates this orgy in her taking of wine, her drugging of possets (to induce a swinish sleep) and her reference to “the receipt of reason / A limbeck only” (*Macbeth*, I.vii). The masculine valour of Bellona’s bridegroom already having succumbed to the power of his wife, he is now overwhelmed by the enormity of feminine forces till he acknowledges their power to strike at the very pillars of civilisation:

Though you untie the winds, and let them fight
Against the churches; though the yesty waves
Confound and swallow navigation up;
Though bladed corn be lodg’d and trees blown down
Though castles topple on their warder’s heads...
(*Macbeth*, IV. I)

These forces are a reminder that what is distanced by a well-ordered structured society as the ‘other,’ exists and lurks around the fringes of that society, ready to strike at will. The virtuous Banquo confesses to wicked dreams that abuse the curtained sleep. The darker face of the feminine is often represented in a succubus image that can seduce men in their sleep, and provoke erotic dreams and nocturnal emissions in men to propagate their own demonic species.⁶ The *Book of Isaiah* associates Lilith, Adam’s first wife who represents unfettered sexual dominance and power, with demons, owls and jackals, nocturnal creatures who strike unexpectedly “to lead astray the spirit of knowledge.” (*Isaiah*, 34:14). In *Macbeth*, the overtaking of the tragic hero by dark feminine forces is anticipated by the sailor of Act I Scene iii, who will be drained as dry as hay:

Sleep shall neither night nor day
Hang upon his penthouse lid.
He shall live a man forbid ...

He is a man, in other words, who loses his masculine identity and falls victim to the female succuba.

Joyce Carol Oates, in an essay on *King Lear*, says: “When the feminine or maternal is not objectified, it begins to take on too powerful an essence. It ‘haunts’ the conscious mind. Denied finite objectivity, the feminine is inflated out of all proportion to an individual’s ability to contain it, just as any unconsolidated, unvoiced yearning becomes inflated and deadly, threatening to crowd consciousness out altogether.” (Oates, 23). The feminine factor in tragedy therefore represents the unconscious, the untameable, the unpredictable forces of existence. Man, in the ordered, rational superstructure that he carefully constructs around himself—in the “queenless” kingdoms of Lear, Duncan, Malcolm, or in those where the queen is allowed to play little or no part, like Claudius, Caesar’s or the later Macbeth’s—is really in a state of somnambulism. His inability to recognise the feminine force, to acknowledge it and thereby confront the chinks in his social and psychological armour, endows him with what is essentially a false sense of security. This makes him all the more vulnerable. Lear’s definition of his own rising hysteria: “O how this mother sucks up towards my breast / Hysterica Passio” (II.iv)

reveals a man divided within, lost in his battle to crush the forces of the feminine. Othello, “whose subdu’d eyes, / Albeit unused to the melting mood, / Drops tears as fast as the Arabian trees / Their med’cinal gum” (V.ii.), and Macduff, who must bear his loss like a man but also feel it like a man, are also strong men on their way to recognising the feminine factor of existence which they had, in their prime, sought to suppress.

The ancient Greeks acknowledged the innate power of feminine forces and the necessity to control the dominance of the male in social and political life. In Homer’s *Odyssey*, Book X, the “dread Persephone” gives judgement even in death only to the Theban Teiresias, the blind soothsayer, who is essentially androgynous and therefore more complete, “that he alone should have understanding, but the other souls sweep shadow-like around” (*Odyssey*, 159). The male Roman priests of Magna Mater were required to castrate themselves in her cave temples, so that the land could be given a new lease of life. It is the function of tragedy to recognize the essential duality of existence, to break down the rigid dichotomy between the norm and the exception, between the pre-defined identity and the alienated ‘otherness,’ and excavate the paradoxes within.

Notes

- 1 It is possible to compare with the image of Shodasi, in Hindu mythology, the most youthful version of the Mahavidyas, the Devi’s incarnations in the *Devi-Mahatmya*, who is seen as a girl of sixteen astride the prone body of Shiva, with whom she is having intercourse on a pedestal made up of the male pantheon of Brahma, Visnu, Rudra and Indra. The *Devi-Mahatmya* consists of 700 mantras on Sri Durga, contained in thirteen cantos of the *Markandeya Purana* (LXXXI to XCIII).
- 2 Stephen Greenblatt, in “hakespeare and the Exorcists” 262), talks of the *benandanti*, members of a northern Italian folk cult who went forth seasonally to battle with *fennel stalks* against their enemies the witches. If the *benandanti* triumphed, the harvest would be good. Later the Inquisition pronounced the witch-fighting *benandanti* themselves as witches and had them persecuted. Fennel stalks may then be taken as symbols of fertility.
- 3 Queen Elizabeth I propagated her image as the Virgin Queen by associating herself with flowers that symbolised chastity and virginity (the eglantine, the wild white rose).
- 4 Among the *pithas* where parts of Sati’s body is supposed to have fallen after the Daksha Yagya in Hindu mythology, the Kamakshya pitha is where her yoni or sexual organ is worshipped in stone smeared with red paste, symbolizing menstrual blood.
- 5 The Greeks performed the Eleusinian Mysteries in the Temple of Demeter, essentially recognizing the ambiguity of existence. This worship was not only a propitiation of the Earth Mother by fasting and purification, it also involved a ritualistic descent into the underworld to bring renewed life back out of the jaws of death. The characteristic feature was a pig sacrifice. Since pigs were associated with fertility and potency, it was believed that mingling their blood with the seeds of grain would increase the yield of the harvest. In the apparition scene in *Macbeth*, the blood of the sow is mixed in the cauldron with other poisonous or nocturnal animal parts, thus mingling the life-giving and the death-bringing.
- 6 In the Talmud, it is said that after separation from Eve for 130 years, when her son Cain caused death in the world, Adam fathered evil spirits, which happened as a result of ‘wet dreams.’

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