SELÇUK ÜNİVERSİTESİ YAYINLARI

SEFAD, 2024; (52): 105-118
e-ISSN: 2458-908X
DOI Number:
Research Article / Araştırma Makalesi

Lady Macbeth Breaks the Mould: Reconstruction of the Female Identity in Zinnie Harris's *Macbeth (an undoing)*

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Çankırı / TÜRKİYE

Received / Gönderim:
15 Mart 2024
Accepted / Kabul:
26 Temmuz 2024
Field Editor / Alan Editörü:
Enes Kavak

Abstract

Zinnie Harris (1972 -) is a prominent contemporary British playwright known for her original plays and rewritings of renowned Western male playwrights' works. In her rewritings, Harris gives new stories to the popular female figures of Western drama to challenge the dominant strand of criticism about the original plays, especially regarding the common reviews of these female characters often produced by male critics with gendered biases. Although her recent play, *Macbeth (an undoing)* (2023), is explicitly based on William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, it apparently differs from it since Harris portrays Lady Macbeth as a self-conscious character aware of her fictionality who aims to offer her version of the plot generated by Shakespeare and indicate several gaps in it. In Harris's version, Lady Macbeth emerges as a strong-willed woman with no intention to kill herself while Macbeth appears as the one with mental disorder. Besides giving more voice to Lady Macduff, who appears in only one scene (4.2) where she and her son are killed in *Macbeth*, Harris's Lady Macbeth aims to acquit the women labelled as witches in Shakespeare's period. Within this context, this article argues that Harris's play is a medium through which she aims to reconstruct the female identity embodied by Lady Macbeth, Lady Macduff and the witches in *Macbeth* and its later criticism by sexist voices. The purpose of the study is to focus on the individual stories of these female characters in Harris's rewriting to question their conventional criticisms from a contemporary perspective offered by the playwright.

Keywords: Zinnie Harris, *Macbeth (an undoing)*, William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, female identity.

Lady Macbeth Ezber Bozuyor: Zinnie Harris'in *Macbeth (bir yıkım)* Oyununda Kadın Kimliğinin Yeniden İnşası

Öz

Zinnie Harris (1972 -), özgün oyunlarının yanı sıra tanınmış Batılı erkek oyun yazarlarının eserlerinden adapte ettiği oyunlarıyla bilinen, çağdaş bir Britanyalı oyun yazarıdır. Harris, yeniden yazımlarında Batı tiyatrosunun bilinen kadın karakterleri hakkında genellikle erkek eleştirmenlerce yapılmış, taraflı yorumları sorgulamak amacıyla bu karakterlere yeni hikâyeler yazar. Yazarın *Macbeth (bir yıkım)* (2023) adlı oyunu açık bir şekilde William Shakespeare'in *Macbeth* (1606) oyununa dayansa da, Harris'in Lady Macbeth'i kendi kurgusallığının farkında olan ve Shakespeare'in anlatısındaki bazı boşlukları tamamlamak için bu anlatıya alternatif, yeni bir hikâye sunan bir karakter olarak tasvir etmiş olmasından ötürü oyun *Macbeth*'ten net bir şekilde ayrılır. Lady Macbeth kendi anlatısında hayatına son vermek gibi bir düşüncesi olmayan, irade sahibi bir kadın olarak çizilirken, akli dengesizlikleri olan Macbeth'tir. Lady Macbeth, *Macbeth*'te sadece tek bir sahnede (4.2) gördüğümüz ve bu sahnede oğluyla birlikte öldürülen Lady Macduff'a daha fazla konuşma ve kendini ifade etme fırsatı

sunmasının yanı sıra, Shakespeare'in yaşadığı dönemde cadı olarak yaftalanan kadınların gerçekte suçsuz olduklarını ortaya koymaya çalışır. Bu bağlamda, bu makale Harris'in son oyunu aracılığıyla *Macbeth* ve onun geleneksel eleştirilerinde Lady Macbeth, Lady Macduff ve cadıların temsil ettiği kadın kimliğini yeniden inşa etmeye çalıştığı fikrini ele alır. Harris'in yeniden yazımında bu kadın karakterlerin kişisel hikâyelerine odaklanan bu çalışmanın amacı, bu kalıplaşmış eleştirilerin geçerliliğini sorgulamaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Zinnie Harris, *Macbeth (an undoing)*, William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, kadın kimliği.

INTRODUCTION

Born in Oxford in 1972 and raised in Scotland, Zinnie Harris is a contemporary British playwright currently living in Edinburgh. With a distinguished career in theatre and a number of highly esteemed works which have been performed at such theatres as the Royal Court Theatre, Royal National Theatre, the National Theatre of Scotland, the Royal Shakespeare Company and translated into different languages, Harris is the recipient of many significant awards for her plays like *Further than the Furthest Thing* (1999), *Midwinter* (2004) and *The Wheel* (2011). In addition to her notable reputation for her original plays like *How to Hold Your Breath* (2015) and *Meet Me at Dawn* (2017), which have drawn remarkable scholarly interest, she is also celebrated for her adaptations where she aims to recreate the familiar female figures in western drama with postmodern touches to urge her audience to question the reality of well-known dramatic representations based on patriarchal clichés.

How to Hold Your Breath, premiered at the Royal Court Theatre in February 2015, portrays a Europe living through an unprecedented economic catastrophe where systems of law and healthcare break down. The protagonist Dana Edwards, a researcher of customer-business relations, and her sister, Jasmine, happen to find themselves on a journey to Alexandria where they become refugees (Harris, 2015) in a state of "*liminality*" (İzmir, 2023). Echoing the real experiences of many people trying to go to Europe from Eastern countries, the play aims to portray that anyone can find themselves as refugees in the contemporary world (Şenlen Güvenç, 2020, p. 231).

Meet Me at Dawn, first performed at Traverse Theatre as a part of Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 2017, is essentially about grief. The play, in which two women, Robyn and Helen, wash up on an unfamiliar shore after a boating accident, portrays Robyn's struggle to face Helen's death and her process of grieving (Harris, 2017). Thematically, the play recalls the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice in which Eurydice goes to the underworld after being bitten by a poisonous snake and Orpheus, the legendary musician, follows her. Though Hades allows him to take her back, he does not let him look at her until they go out of the underworld. However, Orpheus looks at Eurydice before they leave the underworld and she has to stay with Hades forever. As Sıla Şenlen Güvenç remarks, although love and grief have traditionally been tackled by poets and authors within heterosexual relations, Harris prefers to delineate them as unique experiences of women in her play (2020, p. 256) and, in this respect, Robyn and Helen become universal characters representing all humans (p. 270).

This Restless House, premiered at the Citizens Theatre in Glasgow in April 2016, is Harris's own version of Aeschylus's *Oresteia* where she "*relocates the play to the present time and decentres the male characters to give voice to Clytemnestra and Electra as traumatized characters who are haunted by the past*" (Karadağ, 2022, p. 20) and strips them off their conventional (patriarchal) representations as a murderer and a mad woman. *The Duchess (of Malfi)*, premiered at the Royal Lyceum Theatre in Edinburgh in May 2019, is Harris's reworking of John Webster's famous revenge tragedy where she intends to "*explore different versions of masculinity*" (Harris, YouTube, 21 May 2019). As such examples from the playwright's oeuvre suggest, in her original plays Harris generally tackles archetypal motifs to re-present them as peculiar to women and universalizes female experiences and narratives while in her rewritings she usually intends to subvert the authority of stereotypical presentations of female characters and induce a "*feminist intervention in the western dramatic canon*" (Rebellato, 2023, p. 157) by letting these characters go beyond the hackneyed interpretations of partial critics.

Her recent play, *Macbeth (an undoing)*, first performed at the Royal Lyceum Theatre Edinburgh on 4 February 2023 and directed by the playwright herself, is a rewriting of William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (1606) in which she 'undoes' Shakespeare's tragedy in order to liberate its female characters, Lady Macbeth, Lady Macduff and the witches from the yoke of clichéd, prejudiced, male-centred

portrayals and analyses. Because it follows the plot of Shakespeare's play to a large extent with similar major characters and settings borrowing many quotations from it, Harris's play is overtly based on *Macbeth*. However, this parallelism between the two plays starts to fade away through the second half of the play where Lady Macbeth emerges as a self-conscious character with an awareness of her fictionality openly displaying the metatheatricality of the play and challenges the prevalent descriptions of herself as a witch and mentally sick wife. She also gives voice to Lady Macduff, another impotent woman in *Macbeth*, and puts into question the whole notion of witchcraft in Shakespeare's time. In this way, Lady Macbeth, in Harris's undertaking, conceives both a formally and a thematically revisioned female subjectivity. As a response to biased criticism generated mostly by male authors, Lady Macbeth provides her own narrative where it is this time her husband who loses his sanity in the couple's journey towards political power and authority. It is him we see washing his hands again and again to get rid of the burden of his conscience after the murders the couple commit. Thus, as Dan Rebellato states in the play's afterword, "*Shakespeare's and Harris's plays are both wildly different and uncannily similar*" (2023, p. 157).

The play's attack on the established gender and literary norms can safely be linked to the fact that it is an adaptation. As Linda Hutcheon and Siobhan O'Flynn emphasize, one of the purposes of adaptation is to *"critique"* (2013, p. 3) and *"call […] into question"* the meanings purported by the original work (2013, p. 7). By adapting Shakespeare's play, Harris does not merely borrow the plot, characters and settings of *Macbeth*, but also interrogates the gender norms and literary conventions of Renaissance England. As Julie Sanders further highlights, adaptation is generating comments on a sourcetext and one way of achieving this is *"voicing the silenced and marginalized"* (2006, pp. 18-19), which is the main purpose of the playwright who aims to let Lady Macbeth, Lady Macduff and the witches, whose stories have mostly been told by male authors and critics, tell their own stories. In this respect, it can be commented that adaptation provides Harris both the material and the content she needs in her portrayal of ongoing patriarchal bias against women in real life and dramatic representations in the contemporary world. In the next section, the analysis will focus on Lady Macbeth's point of view of Shakespeare's narrative which aims to address certain gaps in the original play.

Unsettling Literary, Historical and Psychoanalytic Narratives in *Macbeth (an undoing)*

In dramatic works, some phenomenal characters embody such complex and common feelings that even if the details of the work are forgotten, these characters are always distinctly remembered. In Shakespeare's oeuvre, for instance, certain female characters such as Ophelia, Portia and Katherina are eminently recollected by readers and audiences since they symbolize complicated and universal emotions. Undoubtedly, one such Shakespearean heroine is Lady Macbeth who has confused, annoyed and fascinated the critics due to her enigmatic character which "*is much more difficult to understand than that of Macbeth*" (Noble, 1905, p. 30). This "*complex*", "*curious*" character (Flint, 2022, n.p.) is such an enthralling stage personage that the two famed actresses, Sarah Siddons (see McPherson, 2000) and Ellen Terry, owed the success of their theatrical careers to their performances of the character of Lady Macbeth in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries respectively (Wills, 1995, p. 77).

In literary criticism, Lady Macbeth, whose evil often pertains to hell-bent women characters seeking authority, has a place of "*almost peerless malevolence*" (Alfar, 1998, p. 180). The traditional critique of Lady Macbeth as "*[t]he [e]vil [w]itch*" and "*[t]he [s]chemer*" (Cheng, 2023, p. 2), which judges her on the basis of the Renaissance notion of femininity, has tended to condemn her for her dare to go against the accepted norms of womanhood in the period. In such criticism, she symbolizes "*everything that made men of the Renaissance uncomfortable: a woman who was assertive, intelligent, and most important, sexually domineering*" (Ferguson, 2002, p. 21) and "*challenges modes of thinking that are only now beginning to be interrogated*" (Burnett, 1993, p. 2). Such negative criticism of Lady Macbeth was not only common in the

period in which *Macbeth* was written because later critics also followed the same critical course in their remarks on the character. For example, Samuel Taylor Coleridge describes her as a woman "*deluded by ambition*" who "*shames her husband with a superhuman audacity of fancy which she cannot support, but sinks in the season of remorse, and dies in suicidal agony*" (1961, p. 64). Besides, Charles and Mary Lamb say that "*[s]he was a bad, ambitious woman, so as her husband and herself could arrive at greatness, she cared not much by what means*" (1973, p. 143). Sigmund Freud states that Lady Macbeth is a woman who "*is ready to sacrifice even her womanliness to her murderous intention*" (1992, p. 39), and according to Joan Larsen Klein, she denies God and "*is without charity*" (1983, p. 241) and, unlike Macbeth, unable to sense kindness (p. 242). In spite of such depreciating interpretations, Lady Macbeth still "*eludes us all*" (King, 2019, p. 1), continuing to inspire contemporary playwrights like Zinnie Harris.

The play commences with a twist in expectations around the form of tragedy. At the beginning of *Macbeth (an undoing)*, Carlin, the narrator, whose name means both a witch and a disliked old woman, breaks the fourth wall and addresses the audience as "*[m]isery seekers*" (Harris, 2023, p. 11) who go to the theatre merely to see bloody, doleful tragedies personifying fall and death of people, which they call "*entertainment*" (p. 11). She announces that in their play there is "*no thunder to speak of, no lightning, no rain*", "*[n]o pit, no withered women*" (Harris, 2023, p. 11), implying Harris's metatheatrical rewriting is going to diverge from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Considering the sudden turn in the formal elements that constitute the overall tragic effect, it is possible to say there is an evident questioning of the concept of tragedy formulated by Aristotle in *Poetics* here. As it is well-known, Aristotle defines tragedy as "*the imitation of a whole and perfect action, having a proper magnitude*" (1819, p. 19), implicating a tragic hero is naturally male since women were not thought to be capable of achieving meritorious deeds in his time. Showcasing an immediate departure from such conceptions of tragedy, it can be inferred that Harris aims to deconstruct the very notion of (Aristotelian) tragedy as she employs a female protagonist – a dramatic strategy which recalls her intention of universalizing women's experiences in her original plays - and inverts the expectations of the audience from such tragedies regarding the details of setting, spectacle and characterization. More specifically, she suggests Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, which bears the general features of Aristotelian tragedy, is going to be put into an interrogation from a contemporary feminist perspective in her own version. However, Carlin also informs the audience that the "*story will be told, the way it has always been told*" and assures them they will "*get what [they] paid for*" (Harris, 2023, p. 12), which reveals much of *Macbeth*'s plot is going to be retained in Harris's play.

In this manner, many scenes in Harris's version echo those of Shakespeare. For instance, Bloody Soldier, who has replaced Captain in *Macbeth*, appears on the stage to inform about Macbeth and Banquo's achievements in a battle against the Norwegians: "*It was as if their cannons were double charged with shot so they doubly redoubled their blows on the foe like they meant to bathe themselves in blood –*" (Harris, 2023, p. 15). Before Macbeth and Banquo arrive, Missy and Mae emerge and Missy retells the poetic lines of Shakespeare's witches: "*Fair is foul and foul is fair, /Crawl through the fog and filthy air*" (Harris, 2023, p. 18), after which the three witches compel Bloody Soldier to repeat after themselves:

> *Carlin: Hail Macbeth thane of Glamis -*
> *Bloody Soldier: Hail Macbeth thane of Glamis.*
> *Missy: Hail Macbeth thane of Cawdor -*
> *Bloody Soldier: Hail Macbeth thane of Cawdor.*
> *Mae: Hail Macbeth who will be king hereafter –*
> *[…]*
> *Bloody Soldier: Hail to thee who will be king hereafter.* (Harris, 2023, pp. 18-19).

In addition to acknowledging Macbeth's current title, the witches force Bloody Soldier to hail Macbeth with new titles. Bloody Soldier rejects being a part of the "*hellish game*" the witches play (Harris, 2023, p. 19) and when they threaten him that they will boil his baby (p. 19), which was a common crime

attributed to the witches (Martin, 2007, p. 55), Bloody Soldier becomes sure he has been talking to the witches as he utters: "*So you are what they say –*" (Harris, 2023, p. 19). Macbeth and Banquo hear the hailing, but they are not sure who has hailed them. Bloody Soldier explains to Macbeth that he has been obliged to hail him that way by the witches and, in order to prevent the tragedy that is going to happen, he warns him not to pay attention to what he has heard (Harris, 2023, pp. 19-20). When Macbeth urges the women to prophesize more about his future, they merely laugh and call him "*King*" three times without any more details; yet they deliver that Banquo "*shall get kings though [he] be none*" (Harris, 2023, pp. 20-21), confusing both men. After the witches disappear into the air, Ross shows up and notifies Macbeth of his appointment as the thane of Cawdor since the previous thane has been deposed because of his treason, and thus, the first prophecy of the witches comes true (Harris, 2023, p. 23). Apparently, Harris's play begins with a pretty familiar scene which sows the seeds of the tragedy of Macbeth and his wife in Shakespeare's play, reaffirming the accepted Renaissance beliefs about witches that define them as cannibalistic, perilous women with supernatural knowledge and desire to destroy men (see Ünlü, 2017; Ünlü Çimen 2023a).

Upon a careful analysis of Shakespeare's play, one could notice that Lady Macbeth spends most of her time alone since her husband is generally fighting at war. Because she does not seem to have any friends, she is seen talking only to the witches other than her husband and the servants. Considering it was an era of ongoing wars, which negatively influenced the socio-economic circumstances and the psychological states of many people, she was often isolated at the castle (Mertoğlu, 2019, pp. 45-46). In Harris's version, however, in addition to Macbeth, servants and the witches, she converses with Lady Macduff, her cousin, whom she calls "*sister*", and thus, we get a chance to learn more about the details of Lady Macduff's story like her relation with Banquo and the possibility that he is the father of her unborn baby. In *Macbeth*, Lady Macduff openly declares her disappointment with her husband as she outspokenly expresses: "*He loves us not*" (Shakespeare, 2008, p. 178). She is aware that his political security is more important to Macduff than his family as she bemoans after he leaves Scotland to support Malcolm: "*All is the fear, and nothing is the love*" (Shakespeare, 2008, p. 178). In the criticism of *Macbeth*, Lady Macduff has generally been described as a passive woman left alone by her husband and victimized by patriarchy. For example, Angelica Lemke states she is a woman who is "*left helpless by her husband's departure*" (1998, p. 9) and Cristina León Alfar argues she is *"powerless"* against her culture's brutality (2003, p. 118). In spite of her compliance, Lady Macduff fulfils an important role since she demonstrates the death of submissive wives in the play, which Lady Macbeth cannot exemplify because she is a voluntary partner of her husband in the murders they commit, and therefore, deserves a punishment (Lemke, 1998, p. 9). In *Macbeth (an undoing)*, however, Lady Macduff openly says that her husband hardly talks to her (Harris, 2023, p. 78), thus, both Lady Macbeth and Lady Macduff are mostly lonely since their husbands are not always with them.

Following Macbeth's return from battle, Lady Macbeth succeeds in tempting him to kill Duncan and, as in Shakespeare's play, she discloses that if the sleeping Duncan had not resembled her father, she would have killed him herself (Harris, 2023, p. 53), echoing the psychoanalytical concept of 'killing the father'. Killing Duncan, whom she sees as a father figure, she aims to make her husband the king, which paves the way for her tragedy in the end (Mertoğlu, 2019, p. 47), showing the climate of the period was not apt for her to 'kill the father', that is, to disregard the established social and cultural codes, norms and rules. Despite her emotional mood in the scene, Lady Macbeth is still highly cold-blooded as she dictates her husband to bring the daggers back "*and smear the sleepy grooms with blood*" (Harris, 2023, p. 55) to put the blame on them. Committing the murder, Macbeth is haunted by a sense of remorse as he says: "*Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood clean from my hand?*" (Harris, 2023, p. 56) while Lady Macbeth preserves her nonchalance: "*a little water clears us of this deed*" (Harris, 2023, p. 56).

After Banquo's slaughter, which was essential for Macbeth to secure the throne, his mental situation aggravates as he sees imaginary bloodstain on his hands. He thinks that the witches are the reason for his current suffering and regrets talking to them and informing his wife about their prophesies (Harris, 2023, pp. 100-101), underlining the significance of the witches as the ignitors of the whole action in the play. In addition to their catchy appearance in the first scene, the witches also arise in Act One, Scene Six, when Lady Macbeth's Servant, who performed as Carlin at the beginning, tells her some women want to see her. She asks her mistress to give the witches something to eat; yet Lady Macbeth orders her to send them away (Harris, 2023, pp. 45-46). One more time, in Scene Twelve, the witches come to see Lady Macbeth, but she does not want to see them. It is revealed that these women, who are cold and hungry, sometimes wait the whole day to talk to Lady Macbeth without disclosing what they want (Harris, 2023, p. 80).

Lady Macbeth, in such moments, seems to be the one within the marriage with the mental capacity to maintain the integrity of the complex relations they have set up. In order to show Macbeth that the witches are not powerful beings as he assumes them to be, and that they cannot have such significant influences on their lives, she states: "*This is not a supernatural soliciting, this is fear –* " (Harris, 2023, p. 101). She explains that she has known these women and supplied them for a while. She tries to relieve Macbeth by explaining they are not fantastical or extraordinary creatures; they haunt him for she has lately refused to feed them (pp. 101-102). In addition, she reveals that she visited them before she was delivered of her fifth baby: "*What harm is there in a little medicine, I thought*" (Harris, 2023, p. 102) and complains that although the baby died, the women still asked for money (p. 103). In this context, while Lady Macbeth reworks the supernatural element in a rather rationalist discourse, the scene also maintains certain sociological biases that one finds in Shakespeare's play: Macbeth's accusing the witches of the murders they committed and Lady Macbeth's revelations about them strikingly reflect the male fear against witches in Renaissance England.

In the period when Shakespeare's *Macbeth* was written, the common crimes attributed to witches were "*nocturnal orgies, devil-worship, invocation of demons, [and] blasphemy*" (Martin, 2007, p. 55). As Brian P. Levack explains, it was believed that witches caused harm by mixing powders in food and drink, or rubbing them on naked bodies or scattering them over clothes which might cause illness. Moreover, the witches were thought to poison people by breathing or blowing on them (2005, p. 91). In *Malleus Maleficarum* (1486), the two witch-hunters, Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger, claim that among all the witches the midwives are the most wicked of all (1971, p. 41) since they cause abortion or offer the new-born babies to the devil (p. 66). Although these women knew lots of remedies they tested for years, like belladonna, which they used to inhibit uterine contractions in case of a threat of miscarriage, which is still used as an anti-spasmodic today, (Ehrenreich & English, 2010, p. 47), Kramer and Sprenger wrote that "*[n]o one does more harm to the Catholic Church than midwives*" (p. 45). These healers who offered help with pregnancy, birth-prevention or abortion were thought to be interfering with God's scope of authority in life and death, thus they were charged with witchcraft (Spoto, 2010, pp. 58-59). Male doctors did not want to lose their authority over the female body to control the processes of life and death, and therefore, midwives were their natural targets (Ünlü, 2017; Ünlü Çimen 2023a). Harris's version, however, questions the motif of witchcraft and has a fundamentally different take on what it means to possess the medical skills that women in the past practiced in daily matters. In order to demonstrate that the witches Macbeth talked to are poor peasants who earn their living through nursing and midwifery, Lady Macbeth goes to find the women to persuade them to tell Macbeth they are ordinary people without magical abilities:

> *Carlin: Why find us […] ?*
> *Lady Macbeth: To prove you are women, not witches, you were raised in the same town as I was – I used to see you as a child. And I need you to tell my husband. His state is fragile and if only you would –* (Harris, 2023, p. 109).

With such a request, Lady Macbeth tries to pull the witches, the so-called supernatural beings, into a daily reality and challenges the whole Renaissance narrative of witchcraft induced by men's fear of losing their authority on birth, life and death. Rather than fulfilling her request, the witches warn Lady Macbeth against the thanes and Macduff (Harris, 2023, p. 109), but Lady Macbeth believes that the thanes will no longer be a problem when Macbeth gains his health back. Carlin comments: "*Be bloody, bold, and resolute; laugh to scorn the power of man; for none of woman born shall harm Macbeth*" (Harris, 2023, p. 110) and Missy adds: "*Macbeth shall never vanquished be, until great Birnam wood to Dunsinane Hill shall come against him*" (Harris, 2023, p. 110), for which Lady Macbeth feels assured and alleviated. Yet, in spite of the witches' assurance that her husband is safe, Lady Macbeth is again restless and, as a grusome sign of her responsibility in the murder of Duncan and Banquo, she notices some bloodstain on her hand and dress. This is a crucial moment in the overall tragic effect that *Macbeth* traditionally achieves; however, rather than follow the dramatic course that one could find in the original form, Harris's piece takes a radical turn in tackling the issue of 'bloodstain'. From this moment on, the play departs from its Shakespearean course and gains an overtly metatheatrical status since Lady Macbeth asks the Servant to call the stage assistant to bring her a new dress (Harris, 2023, p. 105), reminding the audience of the fictional status of Harris's play. When the Servant replies the assistant is too busy, Lady Macbeth responds: "*Call the assistants' assistant. I won't have a dirty dress. Stage manager, technician, anyone backstage – "* (Harris, 2023, p. 105) and, as it mostly happens in metatheatrical plays (Ünlü Çimen, 2023b), she strongly breaks the imaginary fourth wall between the audience and the theatrical world. Such metatheatricality allows the play to both 'undo' the ongoing narratives around the assumed madness of Lady Macbeth and add a playful twist to the overall effects that the tragic form claims to possess. Again, Harris achieves the strategy of 'undoing' on multiple fronts by weaving a series of dramatic moments together through non-dramatic means that conventional audiences of tragedies are not accustomed to.

This does not mean that the play completely loses its fictive atmosphere. On the contrary, *Macbeth* as a source material still fundamentally matters in that it provides the thematic impetus behind the play's moments of undoing. As Macbeth's mental and physical health gets worse, he starts to speak and walk in his sleep and rub his hands to clean imaginary bloodstain, and the Doctor comes to talk to Lady Macbeth about his health (Harris, 2023, pp. 111-113). Due to his mental fall, Macbeth's opponents are obtaining more power to dethrone him. As Lennox informs Lady Macbeth, the council will meet without Macbeth the next week, and the thanes do not accept him as their king (pp. 117-118). Hearing from him that the spies meet at Macduff's home, Lady Macbeth orders the murderers take Lady Macduff to her (Harris, 2023, p. 119) and we get more chance to find out further about Lady Macduff who has given birth to her son. She resents that her husband has not seen the baby yet (pp. 123-124) and underlines her loneliness and abandonment again. Since she does not agree to give her baby to Lady Macbeth, she is killed on her order.

The emergence of Lady Macbeth as an empowered heroine becomes more evident through the course of the play. Because her husband lacks the power, authority or courage to overcome his enemies, Lady Macbeth finds herself in a situation in which she feels obliged to act in accordance with the prescribed roles of masculinity. The dialogue below between her and Murderer 3 displays traditional gender roles have changed due to Macbeth's loss of mental stability:

> *Murderer 3: Good job sirrah.*
> *Lady Macbeth: Why do you call me sirrah?*
> *Murderer 3: Because you are the king.*
> *Lady Macbeth: No the king is there not here –*
> *Murderer 3: I see a king before me.*
> *Lady Macbeth: And he there – that walks as if in sleep -?*
> *Murderer 3: But that is the queen – that is what they have said.*
> *Lady Macbeth: That is not the queen, that is the king –*
> *Murderer 3: That is what they say down below* – (Harris, 2023, p. 120).

Since Macbeth is no longer a prestigious figure, the Murderer starts to see Lady Macbeth as his king, which in fact contradicts the gender roles of the Renaissance period in which only men were supposed to be authorities on political matters. When Ross and Lennox come in and Ross calls her "*My lord*" (Harris, 2023, p. 130), Lady Macbeth decides to be the king as she says: "*This is the very construction of your fears, you cannot see me as your queen because some lens of artifice is in your eye – alright, you want the king, I'll be the king. So now I am the king. Are you contended?*" (Harris, 2023, p. 131). Since it is not possible for her to exert her power on her subjects as a queen, she has to accept the role assigned to her by the people around her and act like a king. This might seem at first a bizarre turn of events, but its is undoubtedly in line with Harris's strategy of 'undoing' in that the scene brings the very concept of 'power' to the fore as something that is 'constructed' in social terms, which again points to the ways Lady Macbeth is 'constructed' as a character in dramatic history.

After seeing the ghosts of Duncan, Banquo and Lady Macduff, blood emerges on Lady Macbeth's clothes again and she orders another dress, which soon becomes bloodstained (Harris, 2023, pp. 133-136), for which she scolds her servant:

> *Is this a game you play? To bring me yet another dress that is marked? Is this the limit of your villainy? To see a woman in front of you, you must tease and disrupt not even call her by the title but insist that she be something that she is not. I am not fragmenting – I am not mad. Mad you will not say the queen was. The king lost his mind yes but the queen, she held it together and made it work as women must when men fold as little children – why is the queen and not the king that was given to the conscience? Why can you not see a queen before you?* (Harris, 2023, p. 136).

The scene is evidently ripe with implications. On the one hand, Lady Macbeth charges a critique on the social prescriptions which are prejudiced against women's capacity to rule; on the other, she challenges the conventional literary criticism of her character according to which she got mad because of the unbearable burden of her conscience as a result of her role in the death of several characters. Instead of taking a step back, she reminds how she "*held it together*" and could deal with her husband's opponents when Macbeth was not well to act like a king. Thus, it can be argued that, in Harris's play it is not her conscience which causes Lady Macbeth to lose emotional control, but rather the social descriptions which limit women's roles merely as wives and mothers ignoring their administrating abilities, and she challenges the literary critics who review her on the basis of such entrenched, biased gender roles.

The tension between genders takes manifold forms, including professional ones. As Lady Macbeth bleeds, the Doctor comes to see her and says "*this disease is beyond [his] practice*" and "*the patient must minister to herself*" (Harris, 2023, p. 137). The exchange between the Doctor and Lady Macbeth incorporates an almost metaphorical chain of actions and reactions accompanied with a medical language brimming with further implications about the gender battle between the two. Although the Doctor recommends Lady Macbeth must be "*sedated*", she rejects any treatments, and he comments that "*she snarls*", to which Lady Macbeth replies all she does is to defend herself (p. 138). The doctor and Ross put something in Lady Macbeth's teeth to silence her and she is forced to wear a straitjacket. Ross's declaration that "*She was a woman most confused, why even times we saw her not as a woman at all –*" (Harris,

2023, p. 138) reveals the disdaining and discriminatory attitude of men to her and shows her emotional complexity is more a result of her entrapment within the patriarchal system than a consequence of her regret for the murders she instigated. Within this perspective, it is possible to argue that, like Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth who "*lacks an effectively powerful counter language*", Harris's Lady Macbeth "*does not destroy herself but is harmed by patriarchy in the manipulation of female roles and in her efforts to find voice, to be heard, and to become an authentic subject. In short, she is less a victim of biology than of culture*" (Burnett, 1993, p. 2).

The fact that the antagonistic energy between the two characters in this scene is upholded by the presence of a male doctor clearly resonates with feminist criticism of the medical profession, especially psychiatry. It is possible to see here a feminist criticism of the methods of treatment used by male doctors in order to cure women who were labelled as 'hysteric' in the early twentieth century since the Doctor's methods recall the ways 'women hysterics' were treated in this period by certain neurologists and psychoanalysts like Sigmund Freud. To put it simply, psychiatry, which was a primarily male profession from the outset, considered women as simply prone to several psychological ailments like hysteria due to a number of 'natural' reasons. For example, in *Studies in Hysteria*, Freud and Joseph Breuer claim that while sexual injuries arising from insufficient gratification lead to anxiety neurosis in men, they cause hysteria in women (1937, p. 185), delivering a gender-biased approach to psychological illnesses. Likewise, psychiatrist and neurologist Isador H. Coriat makes a misogynous interpretation on Lady Macbeth's mental health: "*Lady Macbeth is a typical case of hysteria; her ambition is merely a sublimation of a repressed sexual impulse, the desire for a child based upon the memory of a child long since dead*" (1912, pp. 28-29), implying Lady Macbeth's sexual energy is transformed into an "*ambition complex*" (p. 50) and attributing her psychological downfall to her unsatisfied sexuality and infertility. Within this framework, both in Shakespeare's and Harris's versions, Lady Macbeth is treated as a hysteric while Macbeth's case is displayed as mental breakdown because of the burden of the slaughters the couple committed. The uneven treatment of these characters clearly stem from their difference in terms of gender, and while Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth has little to say against such injustice, Harris's heroine can at least disturb the functioning of this masculinist discourse.

The ending of the play also raises similar questions; yet, Harris also incisively interrogates what it means to 'end' within the theatrical context of Lady Macbeth. Servant, who now looks more like Carlin, Missy and Mae appear around Lady Macbeth and Missy brings Lady Macbeth a knife, which she needs to end the play. Carlin informs Lady Macbeth the wood of Birnam is approaching Dunsinane and the play is going to end in the same way as in *Macbeth*. Although Lady Macbeth refuses this ending, Missy simply replies, "*We just do the play*" (Harris, 2023, p. 142). However, Lady Macbeth answers that she knows of another final scene in which she does not die, and instead, talks to the witches, makes amends with them, regrets for not helping them years ago, and finds who killed Lady Macduff. Yet, the witches make fun of the idea of such a project. Lady Macbeth tries to bear out her decisions as she puts forth that although the death of Lady Macduff's child was a tragedy, the mother's death was appropriate (pp. 142-143). In addition to keenly rejecting being a hysteric, she tries to justify her questionable actions along her path to power: "*even if I was given to remorse and grief what would I fall down upon. For taking the options that a man would? Of living in a life and a place that was so brutal that power by any other means was impossible – Pull curtain I won't repent*" (Harris, 2023, p. 143), suggesting she acted in a way that any man, or simply her husband, would have done and underlining she did not have any other chance but become a manly woman and kill some people since political power in a precarious age would not have been possible otherwise.

Through the end of the play, Lady Macbeth challenges the (male) playwrights about their sided portrayals of their heroines: "*We've been stuck in these played-out scenes for hundreds of years*" (p. 144) and

offers her own perspective of the character she is performing: "*I know I don't kill myself / Would never./ Can't ever. I know it was him that was obsessed with sleep and not I*" (Harris, 2023, p. 144), subverting the traditional gender roles ascribed to Macbeth and Lady Macbeth by Shakespeare and later biased critics. In the confrontation between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, Macbeth implies that she is a witch and puts all the blame on her for the blood they shed. When he asks her why all their children died, she replies: "*So I am reduced to my infertility after all*" (Harris, 2023, p. 148), recalling a major issue which has been so frequently focused on by the critics in the analysis of the character of Lady Macbeth in Shakespeare's play.

The issue of lack of a legitimate heir was common in Renaissance drama since *Gorboduc*. Shakespeare, too, dealt with the issue of succession in his plays like *Julius Caesar* and *King Lear*. However, in *Macbeth*, the problem is also presented from a female point of view which reflects Lady Macbeth's experience with the issue of lacking a son (Richmond, 1973, p. 20). Throughout history, having a male heir was very significant for a ruler, and their queens often worried about the birth of a male baby since the blame for the lack of an heir was mostly put on women (Kaličanin and Miladinović, 2019, p. 218), as it can also be observed both in Shakespeare's and Harris's plays. In Harris's version, even though Lady Macbeth tries to defend herself by saying they killed Duncan to ensure the future of their children, Macbeth replies they have no children, which Lady Macbeth corrects: "*living*" (Harris, 2023, p. 74), purporting they had children once, but they died. She believes they may have children in the future, declaring her hopes for the continuation of their rule through their children and emphasizing her anxiety about succession.

Lady Macbeth attempts to kill her husband with the knife sent by the assistant in Act Two, Scene Eleven, but Macbeth stops her hand and reminds her that no man born of women can kill him. Yet, Lady Macbeth retorts: "*No man perhaps but woman of woman born?*", and "*slits his throat*" (Harris, 2023, p. 149). In the end, she addresses the backstage team: "*Curtain fall now. This is the end of the fragment*" (Harris, 2023, p. 150), indicating she has provided her own version of *Macbeth* in which she does not commit suicide but kills her husband. Although, according to the rules of tragedy, she knows that she must die in the end, she asks the assistant not to let the audience see her being murdered on the stage. Instead, she demands an ending in which the audience sees "*the final image of this […] woman broken free of bonds*" (Harris, 2023, p. 150) and wonders why the curtain does not fall since they have provided everything the audience wants to see. In an attempt to take his wife's revenge, Macduff appears and claims that Lady Macbeth is a witch, reaffirming the entrenched perception of this character. For the first time, Lady Macbeth gets afraid and asks Macduff to allow her to be remembered as a "*fearless, powerful and unrepentant*" woman (Harris, 2023, p. 151). Yet, Macduff kills her and announces that her body will be burnt, and he will show the burnt body to his son, who was in fact spared by Ross (pp. 151-152).

Lady Macbeth's request to be recollected as a freed and impertinent stage character is significant for an unprejudiced examination of such a major female character of Western drama from a contemporary feminist perspective. Her challenge to clichéd portrayals of her character is a questioning of the whole Western dramatic canon and its gender-based commentaries from within, which reveals the biased attitude of the playwrights and the critics behind the commonplace interpretations of familiar stage personages. In this way, the play demonstrates that accepted reviews of literary figures may not always be true or objective since they are produced by the power-holders who have the means to shape the artistic perception of the society.

Lady Macbeth's failure to construct herself as an emancipated stage character can be seen as a questioning of the limits of the play as a "*feminist intervention*" into Western canonical drama. Despite her considerable efforts to change her widespread perception in literary criticism as a witch and

hysteric, Lady Macbeth cannot overcome the persistence of such a conventional thinking and is killed in a similar way the witches were killed in Shakespeare's time, paving the way for Malcolm to become the new king of Scotland. Therefore, it can be remarked that rather than creating a vigorous Lady Macbeth who razes traditional gender norms and literary convictions, Harris creates a much more realistic character who is entrapped within the contemporary society which still limits women into the domestic sphere, ignoring their potentials and capabilities as decision-makers and rulers.

CONCLUSION

In her recent play *Macbeth (an undoing)*, Zinnie Harris, much more than Shakespeare did, ignores the rules of tragedy set by Aristotle in *Poetics* by inserting a female tragic hero whose kindness is questionable and who refuses to perform in a corny tragedy and chides the audience for their preference for such bloody plays. Moreover, with direct addresses, the playwright often reminds the audience of the fictional status of the play they are watching. In this way, she also hints that gender roles fostered by the socio-cultural atmosphere of the period, which are her main focus in the play, are also man-made. In addition, the playwright gives the audience clues about what is going to happen in the end, displaying no concern for bringing out catharsis in them. Therefore, although the play ends up with the death of several noble characters, it remarkably moves away from the closed and confined worlds of tragedies, turning into a more open sphere the audience is allowed to get into.

The playwright makes up new stories for the female characters of Shakespeare's play who have not only been pictured by Shakespeare as the embodiments of Renaissance notion of femininity, but reviewed accordingly by male literary critics throughout centuries. Lady Macbeth, portrayed as a victim of her own decisions without the psychological strength to bear the burden of her conscience, who ends up as a hysteric and commits suicide, is turned into a woman of great self-awareness with an ability to manage difficult situations, through which the character challenges the psychoanalysts' examination of her as a hysteric and invalidates the accuracy of conventional psychoanalytic approaches to this character. In *Macbeth*, Lady Macbeth is last seen in 5.1 and declared to be dead in 5.5. Although Shakespeare gives no details regarding how she died, it is generally agreed by the critics that she killed herself. Harris addresses this fragment and imagines what might have happened if Lady Macbeth had not killed herself as the critics usually say. In her play, although Lady Macbeth is still the perpetrator or the accomplice of several murders and her crimes constantly become visible through the blood on her clothes, she is strong enough to bear the consequences of her actions as she maintains her emotional control and calmness. However, the people around her are not yet ready to accept a woman as their ruler and she ends up being stigmatized as a hysteric and witch like Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth. Though she is killed by a man in the end, she fulfils a very significant function as she rebukes the male playwrights who have portrayed women characters in stereotypical ways throughout literary history and declares her wish to end her story in her own way - not appearing dead on the stage - which is disregarded by the assistant. Thus, it is possible to contend that, although Harris tackles the tragic form with a subversive take on its generic conventions, she also portrays a new Lady Macbeth within the boundaries of the form of the tragedy without completely disregarding its norms. Rather than justifying her bloody actions and uncontrolled ambition, she creates a Lady Macbeth who is courageous enough to violate literary clichés but is hindered by the people around her who are the representatives of the traditional, patriarchal worldview in which such clichés rise.

Lady Macduff is the second woman to whom the playwright gives a new story. In the only scene in which she appears in *Macbeth*, she emerges as a lonely woman who has to take care of her children in the absence of her husband and not much detail is provided about her and, in the end, it is announced that she was killed along with her son. In *Macbeth (an undoing)*, although Lady Macduff is still a powerless woman entrapped within the marriage institution and ignored by her husband, she

disregards the rules of marriage as she is seen flirting with Banquo and Lady Macbeth declares Banquo as her son's father. Therefore, it can be seen that she rejects waiting at home in solitude when her husband is away for his own political interests. In this way, within the boundaries of the period's established gender norms, she defies the literary convictions which merely label her as a weak, passive wife.

Lastly, Harris challenges the whole historical accounts of witchcraft that stigmatized poor women living in rural areas as witches. For centuries, a large number of books were written by misogynous male authors that reinforced the belief in witches and their noxious deeds. It was in the twentieth century that the patriarchal background of witch-hunts was finally understood. In a way which reflects this historical confrontation, Harris's Lady Macbeth aims to deconstruct such narratives by showing that the witches in Shakespeare's play did not have any supernatural power to initiate men's downfall since they were poor women who tried to earn their living helping those who needed medical support and attacks the whole patriarchal accounts of Renaissance witchcraft. Consequently, Zinnie Harris's recent play subverts the literary, historical and psychoanalytic narratives of the female characters in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* generated by the playwright himself and later gender-bound criticisms.

Article Information

Ethics Committee Approval:	It is exempt from the Ethics Committee Approval.
Informed Consent:	There is no participant in the study to explain the purpose or to ask for consent.
Financial Support:	The study received no financial support from any institution or project.
Conflict of Interest:	The author declares no conflict of interest.
Copyrights:	No material subject to copyright is included.

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