

## **Revenge, Female Agency and Masculinity in Lisa Klein's *Lady Macbeth's Daughter***

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Lady Macbeth's Daughter* by Lisa Klein is a young adult novel that re-visions the storyline of William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Klein's text introduces the female voice and perspectives on the power struggle of men wanting to become King of Scotland. She also increases the supernatural elements in her novel, linking nature and the supernatural to the feminine element of life and being. This paper closely analyses and compares two different corpora, the original text and the re-visited text, in analysing *Lady Macbeth* and her daughter, Albia's, desire for revenge from the female perspective by looking at their agency and their longing for masculinity. Through comparative analysis of both the novel and the play, the researcher finds that *Lady Macbeth* views a crime such as murder as a reflection of manhood. Therefore, she desires to have this masculine characteristic although she lacks agency in completing the task. Albia does not appear to need this sense of masculinity as she has a strongly rooted sense of her inner strength as a woman, thus she has a stronger sense of agency. She is also able to tap into the feminine supernatural due to her clairvoyant ability. This research will conceptualise female agency as an element that will be utilised in other literary texts with female characters who feel the need for a masculine proxy in order to fulfil their desire for revenge.

*Keywords:* Female agency, *Macbeth*, masculinity, re-vision, revenge

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Re-visionary fiction is a relatively new term used to describe canonical texts that have been 're-visited' or revisited with a different context (Plate, 2008). It is a new and improved genre of fiction that has been re-worked from the original text. The

selected text of this study, *Lady Macbeth's Daughter* by Lisa Klein is classified as re-visionary young adult fiction. This is because the selected text is a re-working of the original play, *Macbeth*, re-written for young adult readers. Both Plate (2008) and Widdowson (2006) describe re-visionary fiction as critical works that transform the readers' understanding through a re-telling of the original stories. Therefore, it is evident that revisionary fiction is a creative act of re-writing past fictional texts, which are made familiar for its intended audience; in this case the audience refers to young adult readers.

Transforming canonical texts such as the play *Macbeth* into young adult re-visionary fiction is a trans-generic process (Hutcheon, 2006). This trans-generic process involves reimagining the literary texts in one medium to another, often from play to print or play to screen (Hutcheon, 2006). It is an attempt to make the original texts meaningful to their new readers.

The term 're-vision' can be described as an innovative tool for the creation of new stories from the past. It is a process of re-writing canonical texts to form a new perspective of the texts to make it suitable for a new generation of readers. A famous revisionist, Rich (1972, p.18) defines re-visioning as "the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction." Re-visioning is described as the process of re-telling stories written in the past to alter readers' understanding of the past. Plate (2008) views re-visioning as a tool for

generating stories from the past by tapping into our cultural imaginary to create new literary texts through the perspective of post colonialism, feminism, gender and queer studies.

The popularity and universality of Shakespeare's works has resulted in his works being re-invented through the decades, introducing them to new audiences. His works often undergo an evolving process of re-visioning that results in authors modernising his works and making them relevant to new readers (Bradley, 2010). In the late 20th century and early 21st century, the moral values and virtues embedded in Shakespeare's plays have encouraged authors of young adult fiction to re-write Shakespeare's plays with the focus now on the young adult as the protagonist. These novels are transformed from the original plays to match the young adult reader's interest in the linear narrative form (Isaac, 2000). Revisionary fiction retells the original text through the perspective of young adult characters while maintaining similarity to the original plot. The utilisation of young adult characters enables young adult readers to seek identification with the characters as their circumstance and challenges may be similar to the characters illustrated in the texts (Bushman & Bushman, 1997).

## DISCUSSION

Revenge and masculinity are the basis for the plotline of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Although Lady Macbeth may seem to play a small role in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, Shakespeare has cleverly made Lady

Macbeth the central character to illustrate these themes. Through her actions and ways, readers are able to understand and identify with Lady Macbeth's character and her depiction of revenge and masculinity. Understanding the importance of the character, Lady Macbeth, to the plotline of *Macbeth*, Klein, the author of *Lady Macbeth's Daughter* (2009), made her one of the main characters in the re-visioned text to illustrate the themes of revenge and masculinity. This is because Klein is aware that these themes are central to the plot of the play and that Lady Macbeth plays a significantly important role in illustrating these themes. Through the character Lady Macbeth, the theme of revenge is seen in her familial revenge for Duncan, who had seized her family throne, while the theme of masculinity is illustrated through her need to fulfil her family revenge. Her deep sense of revenge towards Duncan and her need for masculinity to achieve her revenge are the main catalyst for the tragedy of *Macbeth*, and this element is retained in the re-visioned text.

Macherey (1978) mentions that a good reproduction of original texts entails a good understanding and interpretation of the texts. In Klein's re-visioning of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, *Lady Macbeth's Daughter* (2009), it is clear that she has a good understanding of the original text, as she understands the centrality of Lady Macbeth to the plot of the original. This results in her utilising the character Lady Macbeth to portray the themes developed in the original text, and this consequently directs her to make

Grelach the main character in her re-visioned novel.

A clear depiction of the importance of Lady Macbeth's character in Klein's re-visioned text is in her provision of a name for the nameless Lady Macbeth, Grelach. She creates empathy for Lady Macbeth when she allows Grelach to narrate her harsh back story. Grelach was a noble princess whose bloodline is royal. "I am Grelach, granddaughter of Kenneth, who was once Scotland's king..." (Klein, 2009, p. 5). However, Duncan's family seized the throne. "My grandfather the King was slain by his own cousin, Malcom, who became the king and declared that his grandson Duncan would inherit the throne. I never forget how this angered my father" (Klein, 2009, p. 6). Her father vowed revenge. Her father's revenge resulted in Grelach being used as a political pawn in an attempt to rebuild their power base. This suggests Grelach's lack of agency through her inability to stop the people around her from dictating her life. Grelach was made to marry a cruel warrior called Gillam when she was 13, and when Macbeth killed Gillam, he took Gillam's lands and wife as spoils of war.

In a medieval world where seizing and consolidating power through slaying is the norm, her harsh upbringing also filled her full with revenge towards Duncan, who now proudly sits on a throne that she feels does not belong to him. "How dare Duncan – whose grandfather shut my kin out of the succession [...]. The injustice of it brings my blood to the boiling point" (Klein, 2009, p. 62). That Grelach does not

have a lot of agency is reflected in the fact that she unconditionally believes in the rightness of her family's desire for revenge. Due to her immaturity, she was not able to form her own thoughts and opinions on the issue. The researcher opines that Lady Macbeth sees the prophecy by the Wyrd Sisters to her husband as the means for getting her revenge, and this causes her to instigate Macbeth to commit the crime, a crime that never crossed Macbeth's mind as he was a true and loyal knight to King Duncan, a crime that led to his downfall and death. Scholars like Hateley (2006) and Chamberlain (2005) liken Lady Macbeth to a dangerous woman who has the ability to manipulate Macbeth through sweet words to achieve her ambition, signalling that she has significant influence over her husband.

Klein was able to illustrate Lady Macbeth's dominance over Macbeth through her re-visioning by focussing her plot on the theme of revenge and masculinity, which brings greater richness to her re-visioning (Tynan, 1925). This provides a new perspective to her readers on the character of Lady Macbeth, who desires to embrace masculinity as a method for her to achieve her family's revenge over Duncan's throne.

However, although Klein is re-visioning the play *Macbeth* by turning the spotlight on Grelach, putting flesh and emotions to her character and providing motivations, Klein realises that Grelach is still a woman. Klein, therefore, feels the need to imbue her with feminine qualities of softness and gentleness at the beginning of her story.

Besides illustrating Grelach as the weaker gender, Klein has also cleverly foreshadowed Grelach's lack of agency in chapter one, where Grelach is seen to be helpless, unable to stop her daughter from being killed by Macbeth. Their baby daughter was born with a club foot, and Macbeth did not believe that the baby girl was his as the Wyrd Sisters had prophesied that he would have a healthy baby boy. She is devastated when Macbeth decrees that the baby is to be taken away to be killed. "I am sixteen years old and have nothing to live for, now that my baby daughter is dead" (Klein, 2009, p. 5).

Zeigler (2002) informs that it is difficult to re-define cultural structure that is already embedded in a society, in which women are always seen as subordinate to men. Similarly, Levin (1988) mentions that in a patriarchal world, stereotypes are imposed, and one overriding one is that women are always viewed as the gender that possesses less strength than men. Consequently, Klein echoes Shakespeare in the manner of illustrating the character Lady Macbeth by crafting the character Grelach to fit into the 19th century image. Ziegler (2002) notes that gender stereotyping is one of the elements inherited from the 19th century, a period that refined and idealised the notion of womanhood while trying to challenge the boundaries of the stereotype.

Consequently, in re-visioning Lady Macbeth's character, Klein depicts Grelach as having no awareness of her own wants or needs as she continues her father's quest for revenge on Duncan's family. However,

realising she lacks physical strength, she buys into the male discourse, believing she needs to achieve masculinity; thus, she summons the spirit of the underworld, Neoni, to make her more of a man than a woman so that she has no womanly emotions and is able to make her goal a success. "Come to me, you ancient spirits. Come Neoni, who brought everything from her vast empty womb. Thicken my blood that no womanly remorse may flow in my veins" (Klein, 2009, p. 63).

This resonates with Shakespeare's depiction of Lady Macbeth as illustrated in Scene 5 of Act 1 when she desires masculinity, as she associates authority with masculinity. Critics of Shakespeare have interpreted that in this scene, Lady Macbeth attempts to gain masculine authority, which she believes is important for her to achieve her goal:

Lady Macbeth: Come, you spirits  
 That tend on mortal  
 thoughts, unsex me here  
 And fill me from the  
 crown to the toe top-full  
 Of direst cruelty! Make  
 thick my blood,

According to Harding (1969) in his work on Shakespeare's play, Lady Macbeth views manhood as a vital quality that she needs to achieve her ambitions as she believes it provides physical courage and a way of overcoming opposition. Furthermore, the phrase "unsex me here" shows that she does not want to be associated with the stereotypical qualities related to women

such as compassion; she desires to have masculine, warrior-like toughness so that she is able to commit the crime and regain the throne. Tankersley (2014) argues that Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth desires wickedness and brutality as she equates these characteristics with masculinity. Larsen-Klein (1980) suggests that Lady Macbeth wants to be unsexed because she wants to be able to act cruelly, and so, she ignorantly and irrationally identifies with male strength. Therefore, her desire to adopt masculinity is her attempt to prove herself manlier (Tankersley, 2014).

Although readers are made aware of Lady Macbeth's desire for masculine characteristics, Klein depicts Grelach as lacking covert agency to commit the crime. Grelach realises that she needs Macbeth to act as her proxy to fulfil her heart's desire because she knows that only a man has the legitimacy and physical strength to commit the crime that will remove Duncan from the throne. The reader can see this depicted in the re-visioned novel right after Klein's Lady Macbeth summons the ancient spirit of Neoni and then realises that she needs Macbeth as her tool to achieve her desired goal.

"Come thick night and hell smoke,  
 hide the wound this knife will  
 make," I murmur through clenched  
 teeth. My mind swims from the  
 wine. What knife? I have no knife.  
 Must I slay Duncan? I hear my  
 lord's footsteps approaching upon  
 the stairs. No, it must be his deed.  
 (p. 63)

The knife symbolises her agency to complete her ambition for revenge. Unfortunately, her realisation of her physical inability to perform the task, “I have no knife,” suggests that she lacks covert agency to complete the deed because she recognises that she is a woman. Davis (2009) informs that Lady Macbeth lived in an age where gender was filtered through patriarchal lens that depicted women as soft, gentle and full of compassion. This contextualises her fear at performing the task because her actions would transgress the cultural ideology of women of the 19th century (Tankersley, 2014).

Grelach’s choice to embrace her femininity makes her leave the task to Macbeth to complete; “No, it must be his deed,” she decides (Klein, 2009, p. 63). Lady Macbeth realises that for her dreams to be fulfilled, she needs a proxy, a male to be exact, because she believes that masculinity involves physical strength, courage and the ability to commit crimes such as murder. Her husband is her best choice as he is the king’s knight, he has easy access to the King and, as a man, he possesses more strength and ability to commit murder. In addition, Macbeth has also won many battles for Scotland, which makes him a good candidate to help her fulfil her dream. However, to get Macbeth, the king’s loyal knight, to kill the king is not an easy task.

Therefore, she utilises her femininity to cunningly sweet talk and manipulate Macbeth into killing Duncan so that he can be next in line to reign as King as foretold by the Wyrd Sisters; “Think of what the Wyrd

Sister’s promised you, ” she reminds him, “That crown sits on Duncan’s head like a bright confection. It may fall into your lap as easily as Glamis and Cawdor did – if you still wish to be king” (Klein, 2009, p. 59).

Ramsey (1973) notes that Lady Macbeth’s shrewd method of doubting his manliness managed to persuade Macbeth to agree to her wish because his sexuality is called into question if he refuses to abet with her. On the one hand, Harding (1969) argues that Macbeth’s abetting to her plots reflects that Lady Macbeth has managed to gain control over Macbeth. On the other hand, using her husband as proxy implies her determination to achieve her goal. This indicates the depths of her vengeance towards Duncan. The depiction of Grelach by Klein is seen similar to Shakespeare’s, where Macbeth is used as a tool to fulfil Lady Macbeth’s desire of wanting Duncan murdered.

Lady Macbeth: Such I account thy love. Art thou afeared  
To be the same in thine own act and valour  
As thou art in desire?  
Wouldst thou have that  
Which thou esteem’st the ornament of life  
And live a coward in thine own esteem,  
Letting ‘I dare not’ wait upon ‘I would’  
Like the poor cat ‘i’ the adage?



Macbeth: Pr'ythee, peace.  
 I dare do all that may  
 become a man;  
 Who dares do more is none.  
 (Shakespeare, trans 2010, 1.7)

Both Klein and Shakespeare depict Lady Macbeth as lacking in covert agency to achieve her goal of killing Duncan and ruling the realm.

Although Macbeth manages to kill Duncan, it remains an unnatural act for him. "Nay, I cannot look upon what I have done" (Klein, 2009, p. 66); thus, he cannot complete the task set, which is to frame the guards, and comes back with the incriminating dagger, dripping blood. Grelach is angry with her husband and thinks he is a coward, acting like a child. She ends up telling him to go to bed, like a mother punishing a child, and realises that she has to finish the job. Grelach has the presence of mind to return to the murder scene to plant the murder weapon by the side of the drugged guards at the scene and frame them for the murder to deflect attention from her husband. However, upon reaching the murder scene, her feminine weakness surfaces momentarily. "The scene outside Duncan's bedroom makes the wine in my stomach rise up into my mouth..." (Klein, 2009, p. 66). She appears to be shocked and frightened at seeing the evidence of the murder that Macbeth has committed. Macbeth had not only killed Duncan, but his guards too. "Not one, but three dreadful deeds have been done here, never to be undone" (Klein, 2009, p. 66). The phrase "dreadful deeds" implies that

she has her feminine qualities intact as she is able to empathise and sympathise with the murdered.

Here, Klein has not painted a similar image of Grelach as Shakespeare has of the original Lady Macbeth. Shakespeare is able to show the hardened emotional state of Lady Macbeth, who is able to return to the murder scene without suffering any pangs of womanly emotions. This is reflected in her response to Macbeth, who seems to be feeling guilty:

Macbeth: This is a sorry sight.  
 Lady Macbeth: A foolish thought, to say a  
 sorry sight.  
 (Shakespeare, trans 2010, 2.2)

However, this is unlike Grelach, who seems to retain her womanly emotions as she is able to sympathise with the murder victims. Therefore, by re-visioning Lady Macbeth's character, Klein tries to illustrate to her readers that Grelach still possesses a womanly nature and feminine characteristics.

In her re-visioning of Grelach, Klein wants to illustrate the fact that Grelach still remains a woman who is in touch with her femininity and humanity. This further suggests that Grelach lacks agency in committing murder although she has the ambition for it. It is her ambition and determination that make Grelach appear stronger as she is able to overcome her shock and horror to complete the deed, which is more than what the husband can do. "It's all I can do to place the daggers near their hand without fainting into the gory mess myself" (Klein, 2009, p. 66).

Klein, through her re-visioning of the character of Lady Macbeth, is able to show readers that although Grelach was able to fulfil her family's revenge on Duncan by embracing her femininity, she is unable to reign as she is a woman. This indicates that although Grelach intends to be superior in a male-dominated world, she instead becomes a pawn to the needs of power in a patriarchal world. Harding (1969) informs that Lady Macbeth fulfils her ambition through her husband's effort, therefore, his opportunity seems to be vastly greater than hers. Thus, Macbeth reigns as King, taking over Duncan's throne but his wife will probably continue to be the real power behind the crown, an active manipulator of Macbeth.

However masculine or manly she wants to be, her feminine side cannot be repressed for long. She does feel regret and remorse over the murder especially with the deaths of the two innocent guards. This is similar to Shakespeare's *Macbeth* as he too portrays Lady Macbeth in agony after the crime has been committed. In the original text, Shakespeare shows Lady Macbeth slowly losing her grasp on reality as, wanting nothing but to be left alone with her inner demons, filled with regret, fear and distress, which result in her sleepwalking, she finally fades away, insignificant in the ending of the play. In Klein's re-visioning, Grelach is able to cope with these feelings as she is not alone, but in the company of another woman. Davis (2009) informs that a woman who remains isolated has no strength, and is thus prevented from making significant

changes. Understanding this element, Klein gives Lady Macbeth a handmaid called Rhuven as her confidante, enabling her to share her feelings with Rhuven.

Rhuven is an important character in Klein's re-visioning of *Macbeth*. Rhuven is one of the Wyrd Sisters and is also instrumental in keeping Grelach's daughter, Albia, alive. Despite the difference in status, they are very close and Rhuven is like an elder sister to Grelach, giving advice and providing solace. The company and comfort of another woman like Rhuven makes Grelach feel safe and secure, and eases her fear and distress. This in return makes her stronger as she gains strength from the comfort of another woman.

The fleshing out of the Wyrd Sisters as healers and seers and Albia's guardians adds a new dimension to the tale. In Shakespeare's play the tale focusses on the male characters and their power plays. Klein's text introduces the female voice and perspective on power play, using Grelach and Albia to show the differing fates of women depending on how much agency they have over their lives. Grelach is all too aware of her lineage and her role as a pawn in the power play. She tries but fails to use her femininity to influence the situation to her advantage as she does not have a clear sense of herself and the amount of agency she has.

It is different with her daughter, Albia. Albia grows up in a loving environment, with female role models who teach her to be strong and independent and to believe in herself. As she reaches puberty, she is



sent to work in Banquo's family. There she comes in contact with men like Banquo, who provides her with a father figure, and Fleance, who teaches her discipline through sword-fighting. She also learns of the cruel king, Macbeth. She incorporates this male knowledge in her inner feminine strength, and her innate leadership qualities come through when her mettle is tested by men like Angus and Macduff.

Albia is unaware of her true lineage and her quest for revenge is fuelled by the fact that she considers Macbeth a cruel king who has blighted the land due to his unnatural act of killing King Duncan. However, when Albia is presented with the opportunity to exact her revenge and kill Macbeth, she falters as she realises that she would have the blood of a king on her hands, perpetuating the vicious cycle of murder and bloodshed initiated by the men. She does not go down the slippery slope her mother took. In addition, when she finds out that she is Macbeth's daughter, she tries to leverage that fact so that the thanes and earls would listen to her before they storm Dunsinane. The fact that they do not take her seriously shows the insidious power of patriarchy and the extent of her agency as a woman.

After Macbeth is killed, Albia appeals to Duncan's son, Malcolm, to stop the fighting and to "restore justice and peace to Scotland" (Klein, 2009, p. 263). She tries to reason with him, but he refuses to be altruistic, focussing on his personal vendetta and agenda. She realises this because, "My mother's grandfather was the great King Kenneth. My father was a king. That makes

me quite a prize. Whoever weds me puts his hands on a great deal of power" (Klein, 2009, p. 272). It is clear that Malcolm only sees her as a mere woman, a chattel to be used as a pawn to strengthen his claim to the throne of Scotland. Even Banquo's son, Fleance, despite the fact that he loves her, also sees her in the same light. Caught up in the tussle for power between her half-brother Luoch, Malcolm and Fleance, she realises that "nothing in this land will ever change ... men still clamour for revenge and power over each other" (Klein, 2009, p. 272). She flees, refusing to become a pawn in the game. However, she has done enough, as with "Macbeth's death, nature is reclaiming Scotland ... [and] slowly the land is freed from tyranny" (Klein, 2009, p. 284).

Klein also strengthens the supernatural element in her re-visioning. In the original play, the supernatural element exists only in the otherworldly trio of the weird sisters and Hecate, the goddess of witchcraft. The sisters pronounce a number of prophecies regarding Macbeth's fate, which turn out to be like a double-edged sword. The rest is smoke and mirrors due to Shakespeare's skilful evocation of fear and unseen menace. In Klein's re-visioning, the supernatural exists side by side with the natural. It is the female characters like Lady Macbeth, Albia and Helwain who can tap into this spirit world and summon a variety of ancient nature spirits like Neoni, Banrigh and Guidlicht to aid them in their endeavours. Albia is tested by the wild boar spirit before Sight is revealed to her, and together with her friend, Caora, she becomes a female avenger

to right the wrongs inflicted by men on the land. Using the trope of the Fisher King, Klein links the fortunes of the country and its people to the king. With a good king, the country prospers; an unworthy king would blight the land and the people would suffer. Macbeth becomes king through murder, and the country begins to suffer as his tyranny reaches new heights. Albia senses this and sees it as her duty to rid the country of this tyrant and heal the land.

In the novel, the Wyrd Sisters do not really have supernatural powers. Helwain, one of the sisters, has knowledge of healing, herbs and potions, and appears to have the Sight, but it eventually emerges that she does not. Instead, she is well-versed in reading human nature and uses that ability to provide people with oracles they want to hear, so that they become self-fulfilling prophecies. It is Albia who has true Sight, which emerges when she reaches puberty. Even as a child she was close to the 'Other' world; she felt things and saw visions, which she understood only in hindsight as an adult, after certain events take place. She thinks she is a servant of the Sight, until she realises that Sight is a feminine aspect of herself. "It was not my visions that drove me to act, but my actions that revealed what those visions meant. ... I could not understand, until time and my deeds unfolded the truth" (Klein, 2009, p. 279). At first she thinks her actions are driven by revenge and an attempt to kill the evil in her that is represented by her parents. Ultimately, she realises that "the fact that I share Macbeth's and Grelach's blood does not force me to repeat their

evil. My deeds are my own. As Macbeth's deeds were his" (Klein, 2009, p. 279). This revelation finally frees her from the shackles of the past and enables her to face her mother, Grelach, and forgive her when they finally meet at Pitdarroch, a place where "where the four worlds meet ... a place of peace and healing" (Klein, 2009, p. 280).

## CONCLUSION

Klein's novel is her attempt at giving "an entirely new perspective on the events of Shakespeare's play" (Klein, 2009, p. 288). Her re-visioning inserts a feminine voice and perspective on the power struggles of men wanting to rule that is lacking in the original play *Macbeth*. She also increases the supernatural elements in her novel, linking nature and the supernatural to the feminine element. Klein makes revenge the main theme of her text, exploring the motivations and the amount of agency of a female character in avenging a wrong.

Klein's re-visioned text incorporates a back story for Grelach and the patriarchal power that impinges on her. Transforming Lady Macbeth's character into a character called Grelach, Klein is able to show that Grelach lacks overt agency as she has limited options as a woman within her society to act as she wants. She thus feels that she has to take on more masculine characteristics before she can commit murder and exact revenge.

Albia does not appear to need this sense of masculinity as she has a strongly rooted sense of her inner strength as a woman, thus, having a stronger sense of agency.

She is also able to tap into the feminine supernatural and gain strength from it. Even though her agency is still constrained by the social conventions of her patriarchal society, she does not play by their rules. Her innate feminine qualities make her an avenger, able to right the wrongs inflicted on the land by men.

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