Claire Underwood And The Rise Of The Modern Lady Macbeth

By Meghan O'Keefe

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Mad Men, Breaking Bad, and House of Cards are celebrated dramas that focus on complicated men flouting the laws of morality to achieve some greater goal. Oh, and each man has a blonde wife. While Betty Draper and Skylar White were perceived by some as needles in their “cool” husbands’ sides, House of Cards’ leading lady, Claire Underwood (Robin Wright), is an entirely different beast. She may be a stone cold bitch, but she’s not a nag. She is her husband’s literal partner in crime. She is a ruthless schemer who will stop at nothing to push herself and her husband further. She is a modern Lady Macbeth and it’s glorious to watch.

Lady Macbeth is one of the most profoundly interesting female roles ever written. She uses her love and her cunning to compel her husband to murder his king and take the throne by force. She is a villainess, but she’s doing it all for her man. Many scholars consider Lord and Lady Macbeth to have one of the few — if only — “healthy” marriages in Shakespeare because, at the beginning of Macbeth, they have been married for a long time, love each other, and seem to want the best for each other. Which is precisely what Frank and Claire Underwood are like.

A fresh take on Lady Macbeth has popped up in another Netflix drama this year. The most interesting character on Marco Polo wasn’t the show’s titular leading man, the towering historic figure, Kublai Khan, or first the season’s big bad guy, Jia Sidao (and he would give a monologue to a grasshopper!). No, the most riveting, powerful, and influential character was Joan Chen’s Empress Chabi. She seems like the picture of serenity, but we soon see how through her sway over the Khan, she is the true leader of Mongolia, and she’s a vicious one. She is fond of suggesting to her husband to commit murder to maintain the crown.

Other popular shows are starting to feature highly intelligent, yet seemingly meek wives, who are the not-so-secret powers behind their husbands’ thrones. Just last week on the political soap opera Scandal, First Lady Mellie Grant (Bellamy Young) revealed that she wanted to be president. The confession wasn’t too shocking. The “ornamental” Mellie has repeatedly shown that she is made of a tougher mettle than anyone else on the show. She once monologued that while she hated Olivia Pope for sleeping with her husband, she hated him more because, as she said, “I found him. I cleaned him up after that monster who raised him damaged his spirit. I am the one who told him he was someone. I am the one who cheered him on and listened to him ramble about his hopes and his dreams. I am the one who focused him. I did all the work…I made him. He exists because I say he exists.” It’s a fierce declaration and a modern prose monologue worthy of an embittered Lady Macbeth.

Lady Macbeth is invading the big screen, too. While Jessica Chastain was unduly shut out of the Oscar conversation when nominations were announced this fall, most critics I know can’t stop talking about her trashy take on Lady Macbeth in A Most Violent Year. In the film, she positions herself as her husband’s constant support. She takes care of the boring task of balancing his books. She looks after the kids. She dolls herself up in Armani. She’s the moll, but as the film goes on, it becomes clear that she will not only fight any force that threatens her man — she also has a sting that she will use against him should he not stick to the plan that she has carefully (and coldly) orchestrated. Oh, and those books? She might have sort of cooked them, you know, because she loves him — and because doesn’t trust his commitment to moral integrity.
The Lady Macbeth archetype is intriguing because she can be simultaneously perceived as uniquely feminist and as a perfect supporter of the patriarchy. She is the original ride-or-die bitch. She is the woman who could be running the show, but she usually prefers to support her man’s rise to the top. In fact, she only turns on him when he fails to see her worth, and then she usually returns to his side. As cunning, calculating, and altogether powerful as she is, she is still the wife. She is the lady, not the lord. Her name is her husband’s and her worth is coiled around his status.

That ambiguity is precisely why she remains such a compelling character. She appeals to women (and men) who want to see a strong, self-possessed woman who is willing to break the laws of society to get what she wants, but she also appeals to traditionalists who want to see a woman stand by her man. She is not the nag who is standing in her man’s way. She is the viper striking down those idiots who get in their way. She excels, to loosely quote Lady Macbeth herself, not just by looking the innocent flower, but being the serpent under it.

House of Cards twists this because Claire Underwood has always harbored her own personal agenda. She wants her clean water charity to excel, she wants her own enemies to suffer, and she wants her own name and her own causes to be equal to Frank’s. When the third season debuts, we won’t just be watching to see if the Underwoods can maintain the power they have scrapped for, but if they can maintain their partnership. Will Claire continue to support her man, or is this a tale where Lady Macbeth will screw her own courage to the sticking point and take her own husband out?

Q&A

1. How is the relationship of Frank and Claire similar to that of Lord and Lady Macbeth? Please explain, using examples from the reading.

2. What makes Claire such an intriguing archetype?

3. How does Claire differ from Lady Macbeth?

4. Do you feel that the term ‘bitch’ is used effectively in today’s society? Please explain. Is it used correctly in this article, and why do you think so?