

Lady Macbeth

No, this is not a new cinematic version of the Shakespeare classic taken from the point of view of one of the principal protagonists; its source is not even the Bard (even at one remove). This new British import is quite a different tale whose origin is the 1865 novella "Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk" by Russian writer Nikolai Leskov, a subversive tale of its time, which also became the subject of a 1934 opera by Dmitri Shostakovich. This is not the story of a tortured queen crying "out damned spot" but of a teenage girl testing her feelings of lust against stolid male prerogatives.

Newly married Katherine (Florence Pugh) exists in a loveless and sexless marriage to the much older Alexander (Paul Hilton) and is mostly confined to his family's rural farmhouse and exhorted "to improve in her duties as a wife." An incident involving her family's mining enterprise sends her husband away for a time, and she comes under the thumb of Alexander's father Boris (Christopher Fairbank), a vile misogynist. Her personal strictures are mirrored by her physical ones, as we see her yanked into her Victorian apparel repeatedly by her black servant Anna (Naomi Ackie). Able to sneak away at times, she is smitten and succumbs to a groomsman on the estate, Sebastian (Cosmo Jarvis), and the two begin a clandestine affair.

Headstrong and clever, the repressed Katherine, now feeling emboldened, purposefully looks to rid herself of her male tormenters, poisoning the father by stealth (especially after Sebastian has been beaten by Boris) and then dispatching the husband in a fit of fury. Her actions are so lurid that they shock impressionable Anna into muteness, unable to testify as to her lady's actions. Her dander up, Katherine is then offended when a bastard son of Alexander shows up as a possible heir. Let's just say that her bodily lust, along with her blood lust, is not yet slaked.

First time film director William Oldroyd manages to place its shocking subject matter in a cool-as-a-cucumber environment. The farmhouse is explored so thoroughly that we could almost draw a floor plan, and time and again we see Katherine, confined in crinoline, in lovingly symmetrical shots, each room a kind of cage. It is these kinds of straight-on interiors that were recently on display in Terence Davies' "A Quiet Passion," another Victorian-era piece.

The test here is for Florence Pugh, who walks the high wire from sullen maiden through fervid lover to wicked schemer over the course of the drama. She acquits herself decently in all three modes, though perhaps less fully in the second role as a kind of Lady Chatterly on the Farm. There is some chemistry between her and the shaggy Sebastian, but she shines brightest when she turns to the calculating character in the last act. She remains, however, somewhat of a naïf when she doesn't realize how her murderous streak can turn off even a fervent lover. What she does is, of course, dastardly, but in the context of this narrative at least, it is partially justified by the overweening postures of the two other men in her life. That her antagonists are one-dimensional brutes with zero redeeming traits undercuts the drama of the piece but Pugh remains cool.

Let's just say that this English period piece in a bucolic setting is no "Masterpiece Theatre" episode, but rather a stern lesson in 19th C. grrlll power.

(The film, running 89 minutes, is not rated but contains sexual material)

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