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NO MORE THE LADY OF THE HOUSE: LADY MACBETH'S DOWNFALL AS A RESULT OF DISPLACEMENT FROM HER ROLE AS WIFE

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WINNER OF THE 1998 ROBERT T. WILSON AWARD FOR SCHOLARLY WRITING

In his introduction to the Oxford Edition of *Macbeth*, Stanley Wells gives the usual praise for Shakespeare's character Lady Macbeth, saying that her "steely determination, her invoking of the powers of evil, and her eventual revelation in sleep of her repressed humanity...have given [her character] its long-proven power to fascinate readers and to challenge performers" (975). Lady Macbeth is often viewed as the driving force behind the actions of Macbeth, the half of the Macbeth couple who is able to reject "the milk of human kindness" and act solely from her own ambition. Is this so? In fact, Lady Macbeth seems unconcerned with her own desires; instead, she places all her energies into the desire of her husband to be king. It might rather be asserted that Lady Macbeth acts solely from her husband's ambition. Contrary to the traditional view that Lady Macbeth's demise is a result of her ability to "unsex" herself and abandon so-called "womanly" ideals of kindness and compassion, it is Lady Macbeth's adherence to the Renaissance ideal of a wife who exists only to serve her husband's needs that leads her into madness following Macbeth's rejection of her role in his new revenge-centered kingdom. Once Macbeth begins to act without consulting his wife, he has eliminated her ability to act for him and therefore her ability to act at all.

The Ideal Renaissance Wife

Lady Macbeth first speaks the words of her husband, reading his letter. Rather than entering the play as a woman with her own thoughts, ambitions and schemes, she is introduced as Macbeth's mouthpiece. In the soliloquy which follows Macbeth's letter, she speaks only in terms of what her husband wants and the obstacles which stand in the way: Glamis thou art, and Cawdor, and shalt be

What thou art promised. Yet I do fear thy nature. It is too full o' the milk of human kindness To catch the nearest way. Thou wouldst be great, Art not without ambition...(I. v. 3-7).

Lady Macbeth goes on to plan how she will speed Macbeth to action, the chastisement she will serve to him for not acting on his desires, though she has revealed in the latter part of this speech that she does not endorse the murder. Irene Dash notes, "Tantalizing us with the contradiction, 'Wouldst not play false, / And yet wouldst not wrongly win,' [Lady Macbeth] reveals her own moral judgement with the word 'wrongly.' She then jettisons these values in favor of being the fully supportive wife" (160). Before Lady Macbeth has even begun her mighty charges to her husband, it is revealed that she is willing to deny her own morality to serve his purposes, to help him to the goal that he wishes to attain. Her often-cited "choice" to descend into evil methods seems to spring wholly from her desire to serve Macbeth, rather than desire for the kingdom. She asks that smoke surround her so that her "keen knife see not the wound it makes," that her conscience may remain ignorant to the acts she undertakes to serve a god who is higher than divinity in her world, her husband.

Macbeth's arrival allows Lady Macbeth to assume fully her role as wife. She greets him at the door, reassures him about the coming murders and sets the preparations for Duncan's visit in motion, with only two sentences from her husband's mouth. She has acted in precisely the way a Renaissance wife was expected to act. Among the requirements for proper wifely behavior, Lady Macbeth would find that her "behavior was carefully prescribed. She was to tend to her household duties industriously, so as not to waste her husband's goods" (Dunn 17). As the scene closes, she says, "Leave all the rest to me" (I. v. 71),

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implying the crucial role she will have in the murders as well as the crucial, gender-specific role she will assume as hostess to the evening's meal. She will not trouble her husband with the affairs of the household, but instead, she leaves Macbeth no charge but to prepare mentally for the murder.

"What cannot you and I perform...?"

She greets Duncan, showing him much grace and honor, though her sentences are fraught with double-meanings, using the plural pronoun to refer to the household. She is not, as Duncan is, using the royal "we" in this situation, as is indicated by the fact that she is speaking to the king himself; rather, she is speaking as one half of a couple. This distinction becomes important in Act One, scene seven, when Macbeth shows his final moment of hesitation before the murders. Macbeth seems to be using plurals in the royal sense as the scene opens:

But in these cases

We still have judgment here, that we but teach
Bloody instructions, which, being taught, return
To plague th' inventor. This even-handed justice
Commends th' ingredience of our poisoned chalice
To our own lips (I. vii. 7-12).

His concern is with the punishment that he, as an individual, would receive if he committed the murder, the turning of fate against him.

Lady Macbeth, conversely, uses singular pronouns as the scene begins, but her statements are clearly about what she, as an individual, would give up to fulfill her duties as wife, that is, to keep a vow sworn to her husband as he has vowed to her that he will commit this murder:

I have given such, and know

How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me:

I would, while it was smiling in my face,
Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums
And dashed the brains out, had I so sworn as you
Have done to this (I. vii. 54-59).

It is made clear with this speech that Lady Macbeth would do even the most horrible things for her husband; it must again be stressed that Lady Macbeth has never spoken of personal desire to be queen, given that here she expresses the personal desire to be a mother. Though the fate of the child to which she has "given suck" is unknown, there is some insinuation here that this child was somehow lost because Lady Macbeth put her wifely duties before

her maternal duties and desires.

Having given this provocative speech in singular, she proceeds to speak of the business at hand in plural pronouns. In response to her husband's doubts, she says, "We fail? / But screw your courage to the sticking place / And we'll not fail" (I. vii. 59-61). She conceives of the plot as a mutual effort, asking Macbeth, "What cannot you and I perform upon / Th' unguarded Duncan?" (I. vii. 69-70). While Macbeth's speech, both in this scene and throughout the play, is largely concerned with the effect that he, as an individual, has on Duncan and his kingdom, Lady Macbeth stresses that she is, as he called her, his "partner of greatness," that they can "perform" anything on Duncan or otherwise, if they work as a couple. Her devotion to her marriage seems unquestionable.

As Macbeth stands hopelessly in shock, bloody dagger in hand, Lady Macbeth takes immediate action to preserve her husband. She returns the weapon to Duncan's chamber, smears blood on Duncan's attendants. Macbeth is rambling about the guilt which he feels, guilt which Lady Macbeth seems to share, saying, "These deeds must not be thought / After these ways; so, it will make us mad" (II. ii. 32-33), again using the plural pronoun, considering life from the perspective of a couple, but Lady Macbeth is able to put these things aside for the larger purpose of preserving his safety, risking her own by going to the murder scene after the deed. Washing her hands as well as her husband's hands and instructing him to change his clothes to look appropriate during the discovery of the body, Lady Macbeth performs her final act of wifely duty in the play.

Woman's Work?

Macbeth's murder of Duncan and subsequent rise to the throne upsets the natural order of the kingdom. It is not surprising, then, that the institution of marriage should be upset as well. Lady Macbeth is quickly removed from her post:

Lady Macbeth [has] no share in [Macbeth's] new business. No longer his accomplice, she loses her role as housekeeper. Macbeth plans the next feast, not Lady Macbeth. It is Macbeth who invites Banquo to it, not Lady Macbeth, who had welcomed Duncan to Inverness by herself. When Macbeth commands his nobles to leave him alone, Lady

Macbeth withdraws silently and unnoticed along with them (III. I. 39-43)...Thus Lady Macbeth is now neither companion nor helpmate (Klein 246-247).

Lady Macbeth has not only lost her role in the household, but has also lost her power to sway Macbeth's opinion and actions. The same woman who brought Macbeth from the point of abandoning his plan to firm resolution and completion is suddenly unable to move him in the slightest way:

MACBETH. Unsafe the while, that we must lave
Our honors in these flattering streams
And make our faces vizards to our hearts,
Disguising what they are.
LADY. You must leave this.
MACBETH. O, full of scorpions is my mind, dear
wife!

*

Be innocent of knowledge, dearest chuck,
Till thou applaud the deed...
Things bad begun make strong themselves by ill.
So prithee go with me (III. ii. 32-36, 45-46, 54-56).

Macbeth all but ignores his wife's urging to put off his doubt and fear about the security of his reign, while Lady Macbeth, having been already displaced by Macbeth's preparation of the feast, has become startlingly inarticulate. She, like any other member of the court, is told to remain "innocent of knowledge," and therefore, is excluded from Macbeth's world, excluded from her position as his wife, to help and support his actions and desires.

Lady Macbeth's complete lack of influence on her husband is made finally apparent in Act Three, scene four, as Macbeth is confronted with Banquo's ghost. Though she speaks much to calm him and explain his bizarre actions to the court, Macbeth and his lords all but ignore her presence in the scene. No response is made to any of her excuses for his behavior, nor does he acknowledge the value of her work to cover his deeds. Macbeth ends the scene saying that he will consult the "weird sisters," the only other female characters to appear thus far in the play, about what action he should take next, rejecting Lady Macbeth as his accomplice entirely.

The Death of Wifeliness

Lady Macbeth's absences from Act Four of the play is conspicuous, especially given the introduc-

tion of another woman, the third and final significant female element in the play, Lady Macduff. The relationship between these two noble ladies, one of which is wife of the murderous king, the other who is wife of the man who will avenge that king's deeds, is such that their comparison is inevitable:

The women characters who most win our sympathy and respect insist on reasoning for themselves. Lady Macduff belongs in this group. In a play where a wife's major concern has been to help her husband reach his goal, Lady Macduff questions her husband's value system, unwilling to accept his power of reasoning over her own...She perceives [Macduff's] flight as characterizing both fear and lack of reason when it endangers family, no matter what the ultimate goal may be. Goals do not excuse morally insupportable actions...Lady Macduff illustrates those qualities that highlight Lady Macbeth's deficiencies (Dash 192-193).

Lady Macduff, then, stands as a foil to Lady Macbeth in that she is a woman who, though left helpless by her husband's departure, can think and act independently of her husband. She values the safety of her family, her *entire* family, above her husband's desires or even his personal safety. She represents that which Lady Macbeth has not yet been, but she is not representative of something which Lady Macbeth could not become. Given that Lady Macbeth has been denied her role of submissive partner, an alternative role for her to assume might be that of an autonomous woman not unlike Lady Macduff. She is, however, not given this chance.

While Lady Macbeth is denoted in the play by "Lady," Lady Macduff's dialogue is indicated by the generic term "Wife." Here Shakespeare reveals how even the most independent of women is defined by her husband, and he also adds another dimension to her relationship to Lady Macbeth, making her not only subject to comparison, but allowing her to stand as a symbol for all wives. Lady Macduff's character is necessary because she both demonstrates the severity of Macbeth's descent into evil, being an innocent victim, and the death of wives, of women who are partners with their husbands, in the play. Lady Macbeth cannot take up this role because of her guilt in the murders; she must have a clear retribution in her death, but her foil is able to die the death of wifeliness in her place.

When Lady Macbeth makes her final appearance in the play, her concern for Lady Macduff reaches even into her thoughts as she sleepwalks, though we have no previous knowledge of any personal relationship between these women:

The Thane of Fife had a wife. Where is she now? What will these hands ne'er be clean? No more o' that, my lord, no more o' that! You mar all with starting (V. i. 39-42).

She seems to accept guilt in Lady Macduff's murder, a murder which was committed without Macbeth consulting his wife, perhaps because her behavior as a submissive wife has in some way led to the silencing, or death, of even the most autonomous of wives. This is one way in which one might read Lady Macduff's rejection of the "womanly defense" that she "has done no harm" (IV. ii. 79-80), that she is attacking her counterpart's lack of independent action.

Lady Macbeth's madness, her haunted nightmares, then, seems less a result of her role in the murders (She has, after all, continued to act without apparent mental anguish in all preceding scenes of the play.) and more a result of her adherence to a doctrine of complete devotion to a husband, even to the point of personal sacrifice, both material and moral. She acts as the Renaissance would have wanted her to act, as Catherine Dunn states, "The law, too, had dictated that a woman's first commandment was submission and obedience to her husband. Furthermore, women were considered inferior...in power and position" (15). Having completely fulfilled this duty, she has brought about her own death.

It is no wonder that Lady Macbeth's death brings forth "the cry of women" (V. v. 8); she has died as a result of being the ideal woman, and women mourn her death as they would their own; these women are nameless creatures, no other speaking woman remaining alive in the play but Lady Macbeth's gentlewoman, and thus are able to represent all of womankind. Macbeth's mild reaction to her death, saying "She should've died hereafter" (V. v. 17), indicated how marginalized the female is in this society, as well as reveals that her death was inevitable in a world which binds a wife's fate to that of her husband. Lady Macduff offers an alternative to Lady Macbeth's behavior, but she dies as well because of the prevailing view of women. Lady Macduff, an innocent victim, inspires more sympathy than does

Lady Macbeth, who had opportunity to sway her husband away from his misguided ambition and chose instead to support his desires rather than act on her own morality.

Lady Macduff's behavior, then, represents that which should be embraced, independent thought and action of a wife, rather than that which should be rejected wholeheartedly, Lady Macbeth's submission to her husband in all things. Had Lady Macbeth rejected this role as well, it seems the women of the play might have found some strength to avoid the tragic end in each other's independence; because she does not, the only independence they gain is through their deaths.

"Dearest partner of greatness"

Lady Macbeth, then, is done a disservice by the traditional reading of her character as, "the ravenous wolf [whose] hungry ambition for her husband to be king over-rides all other desires and responsibilities" (Pitt 65). Her character is not so simple as that. She is not the creature of ambition; Macbeth is the originator of the murder plot. He is the one who commits multiple murders to maintain his usurped position. She is merely acting as his ever-supportive wife. It is this role which "over-rides all other desires," not personal desire for greatness.

Macbeth refers to his wife as his "dearest partner of greatness" (I. v. 10-11), but she is actually never his partner in the crimes. Rather, she acts only to move her husband to that which she knows *he* desires. Her only concern is with Macbeth's contentment. When he does not find contentment, she is rejected as part of that which cannot satisfy him. It is then that her lack of place in society becomes clear. She is essentially nothing in the eyes of the court and kingdom.

Her identification with Lady Macduff allows Lady Macbeth to be viewed as a multi-dimensional creature, a character who can both call up the powers of darkness to serve her husband as well as feel remorse for actions in which she had no direct role. Furthermore, the fact that she had no direct role in that murder and is still haunted by it leads one to see the relationship that all women in the society bear each other. The weeping of women at Lady Macbeth's death represents the weeping of all women who have not found a true partnership of greatness in their marriage.

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