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The Thane of Glamis Had a Wife¹

Bedard: The Thane of Glamis Had a Wife

B. J. Bedard

The role of Lady Macbeth frequently appears more significant in dramatic performances than the text warrants. To consider the character of Lady Macbeth at a conference whose emphasis is upon performance should be to attempt to recapture the dramatic traditions of this often performed play. Every production incorporates an interpretation of Lady Macbeth. Many major English and American Shakespearean actresses have essayed the role: Mrs. Betterton, Mrs. Barry, Mrs. Pritchard, Sarah Siddons, Ellen Terry, Fanny Kremble, Charlotte Cushman, Mrs. Patrick Campbell, Judith Anderson, Vivian Leigh. The play was particularly a favorite vehicle for noted husband and wife acting teams. Playgoers like Pepys and Hazlitt continue the dramatic records that began with Simon Forman's account of the 1610 performance of *Macbeth* he saw. Mrs. Siddons and other actresses have left memoirs. The Sargent portraits of Ellen Terry in her role, photographs and recordings of modern productions, reviews and criticisms, prompt books, costumes, and other memorabilia have helped to preserve past stage performances, but unlike the film performances, we can never capture the full nuances of these stage interpretations. The early years are particularly elusive. After eighty years of the Davenant text, Garrick on January 7, 1744, partially restored the folio text to the stage. It is to that full text and its sources that we must ultimately come if we are to comprehend the basis for the character of Lady Macbeth as it has been interpreted in so many different performances. Despite the attempts of L. C. Knights and others to discredit character study, Harry Levin acknowledges in the recent Riverside edition that "character remains the central factor in our apprehension of Shakespeare."² It is now possible to resist the temptation of character extraction and to accept the limitation of our knowledge of a character like Lady Macbeth to what she says, what she does, and what others in the play say about her.

The final mention of Lady Macbeth in the play is in Malcolm's closing speech. In reporting the rumors that she "by self and violent hands/Took off her life" (V, ix,36-37), he describes her as "field-like queen" coupled with the "dead butcher" (V,ix,35). This adjective describing Lady Macbeth is an echo of Macduff's earlier reference to Macbeth as "fiend of Scotland" (IV,iii,33). Malcolm's judgment is not grounded upon a thorough investigation of the character of Macbeth's queen but merely reflects suspicion of her complicity, not only in Duncan's death, but also in the other crimes ascribed to Macbeth.

Critical judgement of Lady Macbeth's character has frequently been milder. While there has always been a tradition to see her embracing of the "murth'ring ministers" (I,iv,48) as evidence of demonic possession and her end as the culmination of a Faustian compact, there has also been a continuing attempt to salvage for her womanly attributes that partially redeem the character. To Samuel Johnson she was "merely detested," while Johnson, on the other hand, found the courage of Macbeth "preserves some esteem."³ In the absorption with character so evident in nineteenth-century commentaries the tendency to sentimentalize and thus reduce the criminality of Lady Macbeth is evident. Mrs. Siddons' notion of "that character which I believe is generally allowed to be most captivating to the other sex,—fair, feminine, nay perhaps even fragile" found critical admirers who while accepting her "splended fiend" also were

captured by the splendours of her dark blue eyes. The confirmation of this tradition is apparent in Bradley's assertion: "However appalling she may be, she is sublime."⁵ It is Bradley's account that was the occasion thirty years later for L.C. Knights' taunting question, "How many children had Lady Macbeth?"⁶ Although directed principally at Bradley's detective-like footnotes, the effect of his speech was to re-focus attention on the play as poem and away from considerations of character apart from dramatic context: to see, as Johnson asserted, that *Macbeth* had "no nice discriminations of character"⁷ and that the action of the persons was determined by necessities of the plot. Despite reactions against elaborate character analysis, investigations of motivation continue but now against a fuller background of the implication of the imagery and with a greater understanding of *Macbeth* as an acting play than Bradley possessed.

Clues to Lady Macbeth's character in Holinshed and other possible sources are few. She is essentially Shakespeare's creation. In Holinshed, he found a Lady Macbeth who "lay sore upon him [Macbeth] to attempt the thing, as she that was verie ambitious, burning in unquenchable desire to beare the name of a queen."⁸ This brief mention is combined by Shakespeare with the account of Donwald's wife who participated with him in arranging the murder of King Duff. Even though Donwald's wife is developed more, her motives in prompting her husband to murder are simply ambition to be queen and revenge for Duff's action taken against their relatives. Additional hints were to be found in the portraits of Scottish women in the chronicles, particularly Fenella who ingeniously murdered Kenneth III. M. C. Bradbrook found in the "Description of Scotland" section of Holinshed the passage in which the importance of mothers nursing their children is coupled with an account of Scottish women's fierceness in battle.⁹ Shakespeare's memory of Seneca contributes only minor parallels; Medea is not a prototype for Lady Macbeth.

Both Lady Macbeth and Donwald's wife had some reasons for their actions which Shakespeare does not carry over into the play. Gruoch, the historical Lady Macbeth, had a son, Lulach, by her first husband Gillecomgain, who following Macbeth's death was set up as king by Macbeth's party only to be killed by Macduff in the next year. By the tanist system of selection of kings from alternate family lines both Macbeth and his stepson had a claim to the throne—a claim that was threatened by Duncan's naming of Malcolm as Prince of Cumberland in an attempt to establish hereditary succession by primogeniture. Lady Macbeth might even have had an additional motive for the murder in that her father had been killed by Malcolm II, the grandfather of Duncan, to ensure Duncan's succession. The fact remains that Lady Macbeth's direct role in the murder of Duncan, her later remorse, her sleepwalking, and her apparent suicide have no counterparts in Shakespeare's sources.

Shakespeare's desire to make Duncan's murder a secret act, rather than a public assassination, to include only Lady Macbeth as co-plotter, and to exonerate Banquo from complicity in this act enlarged the role that she played. In this shortest of the tragedies in which all the subordinate characters are curiously flat, her role naturally has attracted more critical attention than any character other than Macbeth. Because the horror of the offstage murder and her practical role in this action and her later sleepwalking are among the most arresting scenes in the play, the audience comes away from the performance with a larger impression of her importance in the drama than the text may warrant. Indeed Simon Forman, the first to record his impression of the drama, was so struck by her remarks about the blood that he may have thought he had

seen the futile attempt to wash blood from their hands as actual stage action. It is not surprising that his account should conclude with the note: "Observe also how Macbeth's queen did rise in the night in her sleep and walk, and talked and confessed all, and the doctor noted her words."¹⁰

Shakespeare, however, has carefully limited our knowledge of Lady Macbeth. In the action of the play, she is seen only in relation to Macbeth. It is in her role as wife and hostess that she appears. To no one other than Macbeth can she reveal herself. She is willing to suppress her own nature to serve what she perceives as Macbeth's desire. From her first appearance in the fifth scene in which Macbeth salutes her in his letter as "my dearest partner of greatness" (V,iv,ii), she is determined that he "shalt be what thou art promised (I,iv,15-16). Throughout her initial soliloquy she addresses him directly in phrases that rehearse those she will employ when she confronts him. Even in her sleepwalking the absent Macbeth walks as the unseen partner she addresses as "my Lord" (V,i,37,44) while enjoining him to start no more, to wash his hands, to put on his nightgown, and finally to give her his hand as she goes off to bed. There is no evidence of the personal ambition to be queen seen in Holinshed or even of a sharing of Macbeth's desire for lineal descendants to inherit the throne. Her cry when Macbeth returns from the murder, "my husband" (II,ii,13), sums up her role. There are allusions to her as mother and as daughter:

I have given suck, and know
How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me;
I would, while it was smiling in my face,
Have pluck'd my nipple from his boneless gums,
And dash'd the brains out, had I so sworn as you
Have done to this. (I,vii,54-59)

and later:

Had he not resembled
My father as he slept, I had done't. (II,ii,12-13)

These passages literally cancel each other. Grim as they are they tell us little of Lady Macbeth's relationship to children or to father. Even Macbeth's tribute "bring forth men children only" (I,vii,73) is a compliment to her masculine resolve and not to her past or impending motherhood. It may, however, establish the fact that she is still of childbearing years. It is not surprising that the catalog of victims in her sleepwalking scene does not include Macduff's children, "pretty chickens, and their dam" (IV,iii,218), but rather only the Lady is recalled in the jingle "the Thane of Fife had a wife" (V,i,42). Although much of the play revolves on the childlessness of Macbeth and his fears of Fleance and abounds in images of children, there is no textual evidence for a child for Macbeth. Other sons and heirs are presented: Malcolm Donalbain, Fleance, Lady Macduff's son, even young Siward. What Shakespeare does not take from his sources is frequently as significant as his borrowings. Holinshed had provided material about Lulach, whom he called Lugtake, which Shakespeare could have used.

Thus whiles Malcolme was busied in setting orders amongst his subjects, tidings came that one Lugtake [Lulach] surnamed the foole, being either the sonne, or (as some write) the coosen of the late mentioned Makbeth, was conueied with a great number of such as had taken part with the said Makbeth unto Scone, and there by their support receiued the crowne, as lawfull inheritor thereto. To appease this businesse, was Makduffe earle of Fife sent with full commission in the kings name, who incountring with Lugtake at a village called Essen in

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the matter with them in such wise, that afterwards there was no more trouble attempted in that behalfe.¹¹

Even if Shakespeare knew that Lughtake was Macbeth's stepson, he chose not to mention any descendant. Though there may be some uncertainty that Macduff's statement: "He has no children" (IV,iii,216) applies to Macbeth, there is no real evidence that Macbeth had children shown in the play. Though some performances have added suggestion of progeny, no domestic scene of mother and child balancing Lady Macduff's appearance was ever devised for Lady Macbeth. Her function is simply to be foil to Macbeth: her determination emphasizing his scrupulousness; her practicality in executing the details of the murder highlighting his sensitive reaction to the deed; her fainting as a reaction to his further murders; her guilt and apparent madness contrasting with his resolve to wade in blood. The cry of women which precedes her death serves to invoke in him the memories of the fears which she attempted to quell. The terse announcement of Seyton: "The Queen, my lord, is dead" (V,v,16) serves only to remind Macbeth of the past and to trigger the final tragic recognition of the "tomorrow and tomorrow" speech. She serves as confidante in the early portions of the play, but once her function is fulfilled she recedes into the background, disappearing from the end of Act III until the beginning of Act V and having no part when Macbeth confronts the witches again.¹² Fascinating as her role is, the text reveals little of her beyond her obsession to bend all things to her husband's ambition and to unsex herself that she may become the man needed both to prompt him to the deed and to assist in its execution. She is destroyed because she does not know the effect of her action upon herself. She is the only person to associate Macbeth with "the milk of human kindness" (I,V,17), but it is clear that she understands him as little as she does herself. Even one of her most devoted admirers, Bradley, makes clear at the beginning of his discussion of her character that "To regard *Macbeth* as a play, like the love-tragedies *Romeo and Juliet* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, in which there are two central characters of equal importance, is certainly a mistake."¹³ The "dearest partner in greatness" (I,V,ii) is clearly subordinated to the husband whose interests she serves. Her end is not tragic though it does contribute to an increased admiration for Macbeth's courage in confronting his destiny.

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NOTES

- ¹ This article is a slightly revised version of the paper delivered at the Ohio Conference under the title "Lady Macbeth: Woman or Fiend."
- ² Harry Levin, "General Introduction," to *The Riverside Shakespeare* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974), p. 23. All quotations from *Macbeth* are from this text.
- ³ Samuel Johnson, "Miscellaneous Observations on Macbeth" (1745), in William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, ed. Horace Furness, Jr., New Variorum, Vol. 2 (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1915), p.400. In subsequent references noted as *Variorum*.
- ⁴ Sarah Siddons, "Remarks on the Character of Lady Macbeth," in T. Campbell, *Life of Mrs. Siddons* (London, 1834), rpt. *Variorum*, p. 473.
- ⁵ A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1905), p. 368.
- ⁶ A paper read to the Shakespeare Association (1933), rpt. in L. C. Knights, *Explorations* (1947; rpt. New York: New York University Press, 1965), pp. 15-54.
- ⁷ *Variorum*, p. 400.
- ⁸ Raphael Holinshed, *Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland* (1587 ed.), Vol. 5 (London, 1808; rpt. New York: AMS, 1965), p. 269.
- ⁹ M. C. Bradbrook, "The Sources of Macbeth," in *Shakespeare Survey* 4, ed. Allardyce Nicoll (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1951), pp. 35-48.
- ¹⁰ Simon Forman (1610), in *Variorum*, p. 357.
- ¹¹ Holinshed, 5, 278. The passage is quoted at length because it is omitted from most collections of sources for *Macbeth*.
- ¹² Although her death in the text is off stage, three of the four film versions presented her suicide and/or corpse onscreen.
- ¹³ Bradley, p. 366.

