

Joan Larsen Klein

Lady Macbeth:

"Infirm of Purpose"

In the Elizabethan marriage service, in the Elizabethan homily on marriage, in books like Vives's *Instruction of a Christen Woman* and Tilney's discourse on marriage, women were said to be weaker than men in reason and physical strength, prone to fears and subject to the vagaries of their imaginations. The second account of the creation in Genesis even suggests that the perfect woman was an afterthought, created later than the perfect man, shaped from his rib in order to forestall his loneliness and to be a "helpe meet for him" (Chapter II, verse 20). The serpent was able to seduce Eve, many theologians said, because she was the weaker vessel. When she seduced Adam, they concluded, she reversed the order and denied the purpose of her own creation. On account of the original created estate of woman and the curse of the Fall, therefore, it was said that women were bound by nature and law to obey their husbands as well as their God. Only when husbands acted in opposition to divine law, said all the treatises, could their wives disobey them, however, the chief duty of good wives was to try lovingly to bring their errant husbands back into virtuous ways.

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Lady Macbeth violates her chief duty to her husband and her God when she urges Macbeth to murder his king. For these and other reasons, most critics believe that Lady Macbeth, the "fiend-like queen" (v.viii.69), lapses from womanliness. I want to suggest, however, that Shakespeare intended us to think that Lady Macbeth, despite her attempt to unsex herself, is never able to separate herself completely from womankind—unlike her husband, who ultimately becomes less and worse than a man. At the beginning Lady Macbeth embodies certain Renaissance notions about women. But when she wills actions that are opposed to the dictates of charity and fails in her chief duty, her wifely roles of hostess and helpmate are perverted. She is deprived of even these perverted roles in the banquet scene as Macbeth abandons his roles of host and husband. Her occupation gone, Lady Macbeth is left anguished, alone, and guilty in ways which are particularly "feminine."

Lady Macbeth embodies in extremity, I think, the Renaissance commonplace that women reflect God's image less clearly than men and that consequently women are less reasonable than men. Right reason enables mankind to choose between good and evil and thus to know right from wrong. Lady Macbeth, however, seems to have repudiated whatever glimmerings of right reason she might once have possessed. She does not consider the ethical or the religious aspects of murder. She seems to believe, for instance, that ambition is attended with "illness" (I.v.21). That which one craves "highly," she says, cannot be got "holily" (21-22). The dying grooms' prayers for blessing and Macbeth's inability to say "Amen," she insists, must not be considered "so deeply" (II.ii.26-29). She refuses, in fact, to think of "These deeds . . . After these ways" (32-33). Thus she seems to have forgotten or repudiated the dictates of reason and her own conscience. Shakespeare may even intend us to conclude that she has renounced her God.

Having put away the knowledge of good, Lady Macbeth is without charity. She is without, in other words, the virtue enjoined on mankind by Christ when He told man to love his neighbor as himself, the virtue which gave man the will to act upon his knowledge of good. Macbeth him-

self appears to be imperfectly rational and infected in will. That the witches wait for no other purpose than to meet him suggests that he has long since opened his mind to demonic temptation, for "that olde and craftie enemye of ours, assailes none . . . except he first finde an entresse redde for him." In fact, it is Macbeth who seems originally to have thought of murdering Duncan (see I.vii.47-48). Yet Macbeth, unlike Lady Macbeth, can at first perceive goodness. He knows that "Duncan . . . hath been / So clear in his great office" (I.vii.16-18) and that Banquo is royal "of nature" (III.i.50). He also, for one short moment, seems to understand that charity, not cruelty, ought to motivate human action and that pity, not cruelty, is strong—that pity strides the blast and tears drown the wind. His momentary vision of pity as a newborn babe, furthermore, evokes not only the image of Christ triumphant but also the emblem of charity—a naked babe sucking the breast. We should remember, however, that charity was associated more often with women than it was with men because women, like children, were thought to be physically weak: "hit is natural for women to be kynde and gentyll / bicause they be feble / and nede the ayde of other," said Vives (sig. M^r). But the woman who denies her nature and is consumed with "outrageous ire and cruelte," said Vives, "hit is jeopardie / leest she be destroyed / and have everlastyng payne / bothe in this lyfe / and in an other" (sig. M^r-Mii). Portia argues for mercy; Cordelia practices it. It is Macbeth, however, not Lady Macbeth, who has right reason enough to glimpse both the strength of pity and its chief resting place. But he never acts upon his vision and she never sees it.

Having apparently denied her God, Lady Macbeth puts her trust in the murdering ministers of Hell. Thus she disobeys the first rule of marriage as it was formulated in the sixteenth century. A wife, said Tilney in the language of natural fruition common to *Macbeth*, must trust wholly in God: a wife "must being of hir selfe weake, and unable besides hir owne diligence, put hir whole trust in the first . . . author thereof, whome if she serve faythfullye, wyll no doubt, make thys Flower [of Friendship in holye Matri-

monie] to spring up in hir abundantly" (sig. E[7]). Nothing in life can prosper, say all the authorities, when faith is dead, and the commandments of Christ denied. Thus, despite her wish to aid her husband, Lady Macbeth cannot give him that lasting companionship under God which the *Homilies* saw as true marriage. Furthermore, although Lady Macbeth may once have had a child, its absence from her life and her willingness to contemplate its destruction contradict the *Homilies'* view that children are an end of marriage, a blessing upon their parents, and a means of enlarging God's kingdom. Macbeth at first tries crookedly to keep to the ways of faith even as he dwells on the prospect of damnation and feels the loss of grace: "Wherefore could not I pronounce 'Amen'?" he asks (II.ii.30). But Lady Macbeth refuses from the outset to consider the first author of her being, the last judge of her actions, and the life to come.

Perhaps because of her separation from God, Lady Macbeth is as mistaken about her own nature as she is about her marriage. She says she could dash out the brains of her suckling child. She thinks of wounding with her keen knife. But she has no child and can not murder the sleeping Duncan. She begs to be unsexed, but is never able to assume in fact what she wrongly believes is the masculine attribute of "direst cruelty" (I.v.41). Lady Macbeth, therefore, cannot act out of cruelty. But she refuses to act out of what Latimer called "charitable" love. As she forfeits the power for good which derives from the practice of pity, she is left only with loss and weakness. She is further enfeebled to the point of madness by what Bright called the awareness of sin. Along this path to despair, she does not even seem to notice that she also loses her husband. But Macbeth loses too. He exchanges the fellowship of his badly founded marriage to Lady Macbeth for union with the weird sisters. He exchanges his hopes for men-children born to his wife for the grisly finger of a birth-strangled babe and tormenting visions of the crowned children of other men.

Despite Lady Macbeth's heavy ignorance of Christian marriage, she conceives of herself almost exclusively as a

wife, a helpmate. Thus she epitomizes at the same time that she perverts Renaissance views of the woman's role. Macbeth, she says, shall be what he is "promised" (I.v.17). "Great Glamis" must have the "golden round" (23, 29). When Lady Macbeth reads Macbeth's letter, she speaks not to herself but to her husband: "Thou wouldst be great . . . wouldst not play false, / And yet wouldst wrongly win" (16-20). (Macbeth, on the contrary, absents himself in soliloquy even in company.) Lady Macbeth will "chastise" Macbeth with the "valor" of her tongue so that he, not she, might have what he wants (28). Nowhere does she mention Macbeth's implied bribe—that she, too, has been promised "greatness" (14). When Lady Macbeth later speaks to Macbeth in person, she measures what she takes to be his love for her by his willingness to murder. But love for Lady Macbeth never figures in Macbeth's stated desires for the kingdom or for an heir. Nor does he give in to her persuasions out of love. On the contrary, he responds to her only when she impeaches his manliness and arouses his fear. "If we should fail?" (I.vii.59), he asks. In a grim perversion of married companionship, Lady Macbeth responds by assuming the feminine role of comforter and helper: "we'll not fail" (61). But Macbeth never includes Lady Macbeth in any of his visions of the deed successfully done.

Although Lady Macbeth always thinks of herself as a wife, Macbeth thinks of himself as a husband only when she forces him to do so. Otherwise he is concerned solely for himself: "I am Thane of Cawdor . . . My thought . . . Shakes . . . my single state of man" (I.iii.133-40). (The witches recognize Macbeth's self-interest better than Lady Macbeth does; they never discuss her with him.) In his soliloquy during the first banquet, Macbeth uses the royal *we* proleptically when he describes his readiness to jump the life to come and the first person singular when he thinks about his own ambition and his present relationship to a loving king. Nowhere in this soliloquy does he speak of a wife or future queen. When Macbeth goes to murder Duncan, it is the fatal vision of his own mind that materializes before him. The "I" sees the dagger of his own

fantasy and the "I" draws the dagger of steel. After the murder of Duncan, there is almost no husband to talk to a wife, for Lady Macbeth can scarcely reach Macbeth. "What do you mean?" (II.ii.39), she asks him. "Be not lost / So poorly in your thoughts" (70-71), she begs him, quite uselessly. After the murder of Banquo, Macbeth is wholly dominated by self: "For mine own good / All causes shall give way" (III.iv.136-37).

In spite of the view of some critics that Lady Macbeth is the evil force behind Macbeth's unwilling villainy, she seems to epitomize the sixteenth-century belief that women are passive, men active: "nature made man more strong and courageouse, the woman more weake fearefull and scrupulouse, to the intente that she for her febleness shulde be more circumspecte, the man for his strengthe moche more adventurouse." It is Macbeth, the man, who must be the "same in [his] own act and valor / As [he is] in desire" (I.vii.40-41), Macbeth, who must "screw [his] courage to the sticking-place" (60). Lady Macbeth's threats of violence, for all their force and cruelty, are empty fantasies. It is Macbeth who converts them to hard reality. He does so in terms of his single self and his singular act: "I am settled, and bend up / Each corporal agent to this terrible feat" (79-80).

One can suggest, I think, that the virtues which Lady Macbeth sees as defects in Macbeth's character and obstacles to his success are in fact the better parts of her own being—which she determines to suppress. She says that she fears Macbeth's nature because "It is too full o' th' milk of human kindness" (I.v.18), but we have never seen Macbeth "kind." On the contrary, we were told about a man whose sword "smoked with bloody execution" and were shown a man whose thought was taken over by murderous "imaginings" (I.ii.18; I.iii.138). It is Lady Macbeth who knows "How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks" her (I.vii.55). It is Lady Macbeth who could not kill because she remembered her father as he slept. Thus it is Lady Macbeth, not Macbeth, who feels the bonds of kind, Lady Macbeth who has, as women were supposed to have, something of the milk of human kindness in her, and who,

to rid herself of it, begs murdering ministers to come to her woman's breasts and take that milk "for gall" (I.v.49). She also begs those demonic ministers to stop up in her "th' access and passage to remorse" and thus forestall the "compunctious visitings of nature" which result when bonds of kind are violated (I.v.45-46; "compunction" = the stings of conscience, *OED*, 1). But Lady Macbeth's prayers are never granted by any of the murdering ministers we see waiting on nature's mischief. Unlike Macbeth and until her own suicide, Lady Macbeth does not succeed in breaking that great bond which keeps him pale and ties her to her kind.

Remorse and guilt finally overtake Lady Macbeth. But she manages for a short time to slow their advent by occupying herself with the practical details of murder. Indeed, Lady Macbeth's preparations for the clearing up after Duncan's murder become a frightening perversion of Renaissance woman's domestic activity. As Vives said, "the busynes and charge within the house lyeth upon the womans hande" (sig. Kii). Unlike Goneril, Regan, Cordelia, and Desdemona—all of whom take to the field of battle—Lady Macbeth waits for Macbeth at home, where good-conduct books told her to stay: "whan her husbände is forth a dores, than kepe her house moche more diligently shutte" (Vives, sig. Kii). At home, Lady Macbeth remembers to give "tending" to the messenger who comes with the news of Duncan's arrival (I.v.32). She remembers that the king "that's coming / Must be provided for" (I.v.67-69). She is called "hostess," "Fair and noble hostess" (I.vi.10, 24, 31). As she connives at murder, she thinks to assail the grooms with "wine and wassail" (I.vii.64). Even the images she uses to describe her domestic battleground evoke the limbeck and fumes of home-brewed liquor (I.vii.66-67). Before Duncan's murder, it is Lady Macbeth who unlocks the king's doors and lays the daggers ready—although Macbeth draws one of his own. After the murder, it is Lady Macbeth who smears the grooms with blood. In her last act as housekeeper, Lady Macbeth remembers to wash Duncan's blood off their hands and to put on nightgowns.

As soon as Duncan's murder is a public fact, Lady Macbeth begins to lose her place in society and her position at home. She does so because there is no room for her in the exclusively male world of treason and revenge. Therefore, her true weakness and lack of consequence are first revealed in the discovery scene. Lady Macbeth's feeble and domestic response, for instance, to the news she expected to hear—"What, in our house?" (II.iii.89)—is very different from the cries and clamors she said she would raise. When she asks Macduff the domestic question, "What's the business" that wakes the "sleepers of the house?" (83-85), he refuses to answer a "gentle lady": "'Tis not for you to hear what I can speak" (86). It is apparent, therefore, that Lady Macbeth has as little place in the male world of revenge as she had in the male world of war. Thus it may be that her faint is genuine, a confirmation of her debility. On the other hand, if her faint is only pretended in order to shield Macbeth, it is still a particularly feminine ploy. True or false, it dramatically symbolizes weakness. It has the further effect of removing her from the center of events to the periphery, from whence she never returns. It is characteristic that Macbeth, busy defending himself, ignores his lady's fall. Only Banquo and Macduff in the midst of genuine grief take time to "Look to the lady" (121, 128).

After Macbeth becomes king, he, the man, so fully commands Lady Macbeth that he allows her no share in his 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). Macbeth does not tell Lady Macbeth that he plans to murder Banquo before his feast or even that he wanted Macduff to attend it. Although Macbeth needed Lady Macbeth to keep house during Duncan's murder, he disposes of Banquo well outside the castle walls. Thus Lady Macbeth is now neither companion nor helpmate. Finally, in the great banquet scene, she loses even her faltering role as hostess. Because Macbeth is

there beyond her reach and her comprehension, she is powerless. Ross, not Lady Macbeth, gives the first command to rise. When Lady Macbeth twice tries to tell the nobles that Macbeth has been thus since his youth, no one pretends to believe her. When she attempts to preserve the "good meeting" (III.iv.110), even Macbeth ignores her. As soon as she is forced by Macbeth's actions to give over her last role, she dissolves in confusion the very society upon whose continuance that role depends. With her husband out of her reach and society in shambles, Lady Macbeth no longer has any reason for being.

As soon as Macbeth abandons her company for that of the witches, Lady Macbeth is totally alone. In fact, Macbeth's union with the witches symbolizes the culmination of Lady Macbeth's loss of womanly social roles as well as her loss of home and family. But her growing isolation had been apparent from the moment her husband became king. Unlike Portia or Desdemona or even Macbeth himself, Lady Macbeth was never seen with friends or woman-servants in whose presence she could take comfort. Even when she appeared in company, she was the only woman there. Consequently, once she begins to lose her husband, she has neither person nor occupation to stave off the visitings of nature. All she has is time, time to succumb to that human kindness which, said Bright, no one could forget and remain human. Thus, in Lady Macbeth's short soliloquy before Macbeth's feast, even though she still talks in terms of "we," she seems to be speaking only of herself. Alone and unoccupied, she is visited by the remorse and sorrow she had hoped to banish:

Naught's had, all's spent,
Where our desire is got without content.
'Tis safer to be that which we destroy
Than by destruction dwell in doubtful joy. (III.ii.4-7)

Lady Macbeth's existence now is circumscribed by the present memory of past loss. Absent from her mind is the sense of future promise she had anticipated before Duncan's murder when she thought herself transported beyond

the "ignorant present" and felt "The future in the instant" (I.v.58-59). In her words we also hear, I think, what Bright calls the afflictions of a guilt-ridden conscience, that "internal anguish [which] bereave[s] us of all delight" in "outward benefits." Even after Macbeth joins Lady Macbeth, her words seem to continue her own thoughts, not to describe his: "Why do you keep alone, / Of sorriest fancies your companions making" (III.ii.8-9). For we know, as Lady Macbeth does not, that Macbeth is thinking of the coming murder of Banquo, not the past murder of Duncan. We know his recent companions have been murderers, not "fancies." Only Lady Macbeth suffers now the "repetition" of the "horror" of Duncan's death which Macduff had feared "in a woman's ear / Would murder as it fell" (II.iii.82, 87-88). When Lady Macbeth thinks to quiet her husband, she does so with advice she has already revealed she cannot herself take: "Things without all remedy / Should be without regard" (III.ii.11-12). But Macbeth no longer needs her advice: "Duncan is in his grave," he says, "nothing, / Can touch him further" (22-26). Thus Shakespeare shows us that the differences between husband and wife are extreme. Macbeth wades deeper and deeper in blood in order to stifle the tortures of a mind which fears only the future: Banquo's increasing kingliness, Fleance and his unborn children, all living things and their seed. Lady Macbeth, her husband's "Sweet remembrancer" (III.iv.38), does little else but think of horrors past: of the "air drawn" dagger which led Macbeth to Duncan (63), of the king slaughtered and her hands bloodied, of Banquo dead and Lady Macduff in realms unknown.

In the banquet scene, Lady Macbeth's words reveal an increase in weakness, emphasize the loss of her womanly roles, and lay bare her present isolation. Her scolding, for instance, is no more than a weak, futile imitation of the cruelty of her earlier goading. Her images, correspondingly, are more obviously feminine: "these flaws and starts," she tells Macbeth, "would well become / A woman's story at a winter's fire, / Authorized by her grandam" (III.iv.64-67). But her images also evoke a kind of homeliness and comfort she can never know: the security that other women

feel when they sit at their warm hearths and tell tales to their children. In fact, Lady Macbeth's words describe the comforts of a home she so little knows that she uses the picture her words evoke to castigate a man who will soon destroy the only real home we see in the play. Thus it is not surprising that Lady Macbeth at the end of the banquet scene does not seem to realize that Macbeth is leaving her as well as the community of men in order to join the unsexed witches in an unholy union—one wherein they joy to "grieve his heart" (IV.i.110). As soon as Macbeth joins the witches, Lady Macbeth no longer has any place anywhere. Offstage, she is neither wife, queen, housekeeper, nor hostess. When we see her next, she will have lost the memories of motherhood and childhood she remembered so imperfectly and used so cruelly at the beginning of the play. She will also have lost that fragmented glimpse of womanly life she repudiates during her last banquet.

In her sleepwalking scene, Lady Macbeth exists (for she cannot be said to *live*) in the perpetual darkness of the soul which no candle can enlighten, although she has a taper by her continually. This is the darkness of the soul which, said Bright, "is above measure unhappy and most miserable." Cut off from grace, Lady Macbeth is without hope. Like the damned in the *Inferno*, she exists solely within the present memory of past horrors. In fact, her existence seems to exemplify—but only in relation to herself—medieval definitions of eternal time as the everlasting "now," the present during which all things that have happened or will happen are happening. For she relives outside of any temporal sequence all Macbeth's murders and senses, as if damnation were an already accomplished fact, that "Hell is murky" (V.i.39). Without grace, Lady Macbeth cannot envision a world outside her own where Lady Macduff might possess another kind of being. Nor can she conceive of a power greater than that which she still seems to think she and Macbeth possess, a power which might call theirs "to accompt" (42). In the prison of her own anguish, she is ignorant of good and the God she long ago renounced. This is the illness that Bright said no physic could cure: "Here no medicine, no purgation, no cordial,

no tryacle or balme are able to assure the afflicted soule and trembling heart." This is the infection of the mind which the physician hired by Macbeth says only a divine can cure—although Shakespeare shows us no priest in Scotland.

It is painfully ironic that Lady Macbeth, who had once thought that drink could make "memory, the warder of the brain," into a fume and sleep into something "swinish" (i.vii.65-67), can now neither forget her guilt nor sleep the sleep of oblivion. Unlike Macbeth, however, who revealed his guilt before the assembled nobility of Scotland, Lady Macbeth confesses hers when she is alone. She does so because she has always been, as women were supposed to be, a private figure, living behind closed doors. She also reveals her anguish in sleep partly because she has no purposeful waking existence and partly, as Banquo said, because in repose the fallen, unblessed nature "gives way" to "curs'd thoughts" (ii.i.8-9; see also v.i.69-72). Macbeth's guilty soul is as public as his acts. Lady Macbeth's is as private as memory, tormented by a self whose function is only to remember in isolation and unwillingly the deeds done by another. So tormented is Lady Macbeth that the gentlewoman—the first we ever see tending her—says she would not have that heart in her "bosom for the dignity of the whole body" (v.i.59).

Our final glimpse into the afflicted and brainsick mind of Lady Macbeth reveals that her doctor is either mistaken or lying when he says she is troubled with "thick-coming fancies" (v.iii.38). Her madness is not that melancholy which springs from delusion, but rather than which stems from true and substantial causes. Her mind, like her being as mother, child, wife, and hostess, has also been twisted by her destructive longing for Macbeth to murder cruelly and deliberately. When we see Lady Macbeth at the end, therefore, she is "womanly" only in that she is sick and weak. All the valor of her tongue is gone, as is her illusion of its power. The hands which she cannot sweeten with the perfumes of Arabia are the little hands of a woman. As long as she lives, Lady Macbeth is never unsexed in the only way she wanted to be unsexed—able to act with the

cruelty she ignorantly and perversely identified with male strength. But she has lost that true strength which Shakespeare says elsewhere is based on pity and fostered by love.

She is not now—perhaps she never was—of real concern to her lord, whom she remembers and speaks to even as she sleepwalks. Macbeth does not think of her as he prepares himself for war. When her doctor forces Macbeth to speak about her troubled mind, Macbeth renounces physic on his own account, not hers. "I'll none of it," he says (v.iii.47). It is ironic, therefore, that Lady Macbeth, offstage and neglected, is able at the last to unsex herself only through the act of self-murder—in contrast to her husband, whose single attribute now is the "direst cruelty" she begged for, who wills himself to murder others tomorrow after tomorrow so long as he sees "lives" (v.viii.2). The cry of women which rises at his wife's death is no more than another proof to him that he is fearless, that no "horrors" can move him. (v.v.13). Even her death to him is only a "word," a word for which he has no "time" (v.v.18).