

Macbeth and His Relationship with Lady Macbeth

In his letter to his wife about the witches' prophecies, Macbeth writes, "This have I thought good to deliver thee, my dearest partner of greatness, that thou mightst not lose the dues of rejoicing, by being ignorant of what greatness is promised thee"(1.5.10-13). He knows that his "partner" will like the idea of being Queen and seems to offer the news as a kind of present.

Lady Macbeth does indeed like the idea of being Queen, but she's afraid that her husband is "too full o' the milk of human kindness / To catch the nearest way" (1.5.17-18). But she's sure she has no such problem, and she's eager for the chance to make him see things her way. Holding the letter, and speaking to Macbeth (even though he hasn't arrived yet) she says, "Hie thee hither, / That I may pour my spirits in thine ear; / And chastise with the valour of my tongue / All that impedes thee from the golden round," (1.5.25-28). We might say that she's going to nag him, but she believes that she is going to enable him to reach his potential. She will "chastise" (make him ashamed of) everything in him that prevents him from being evil enough to be king.

Shortly, Macbeth arrives. She greets him as "Great Glamis! worthy Cawdor! / Greater than both, by the all-hail hereafter!" (1.5.54-55), and tells him that she feels "The future in the instant" (1.5.58). In other words, she already feels like a queen. Macbeth then says that Duncan is arriving that night, as though he's just telling her the news. However, Lady Macbeth already knows about Duncan's arrival, and Macbeth probably knows that his wife knows, because he's the one who sent the messenger. Given this, it seems likely that he's sounding her out, that he wants to know if she's thinking what he's thinking.

Of course she is. When he says that Duncan will leave "to-morrow," she responds, "O, never / Shall sun that morrow see!" (1.5.60-61). The sun will rise, but not on a tomorrow in which Duncan is alive. She goes on to give him a little advice, which is that "Your face, my thane, is as a book where men / May read strange matters" (1.5.62-63). In other words, he's not a very good hypocrite. Now we use the word "matter" a little differently, and we would say that just by looking at his face, anyone could see that something is the matter with Macbeth. He should, says his wife, "look like the innocent flower, / But be the serpent under't" (1.5.65-66).

Macbeth answers, "We will speak further" (1.5.71), but if he intends to appear noncommittal, he hasn't fooled his wife. She tells him that all he has to do is put on a pleasant face, and "Leave all the rest to me" (1.5.73). With that, the partners in crime hurry out to welcome the King they are going to kill.

While King Duncan is having supper in Macbeth's castle, Macbeth steps out to think about the plan to kill the King. When Lady Macbeth finds Macbeth, she exclaims, "He has almost supp'd: why have you left the chamber?" (1.7.29). Then, in order to keep Macbeth committed to the murder plan, she verbally assaults his courage and manhood. She accuses him of being the kind of person who can dream of wearing kingly robes only when he's drunk. She asks sarcastically, "Was the hope drunk / Wherein you dress'd yourself? Hath it slept since?" (1.7.35-36). This is harsh enough, but it gets worse. She says that it appears that the thought of killing the king is making him sick, and "From this time / Such I account thy love" (1.7.38-39). In other words, if he won't follow through on their plan, he doesn't really love her, and he's a coward, no better than the "poor cat i' the adage" (1.7.45), who wants a fish, but doesn't want to get its feet wet.

Macbeth tries to defend himself by saying, "I dare do all that may become a man; / Who dares do more is none" (1.7.46-47), but Lady Macbeth declares that she's more man than he is:

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." (1.7.54-59)

After this, it's really all over. Lady Macbeth wins. Macbeth asks what happens if they fail, and his wife scorns the very idea. She will get King Duncan's two attendants drunk, so they won't be able to protect him, and then they'll take the blame for the King's death. Macbeth replies with admiration (or fear?), "Bring forth men-children only; / For thy undaunted mettle should compose / Nothing but males" (1.7.72-74).]

As she waits for her husband to come with the news that he has murdered King Duncan, Lady Macbeth says to herself, "I laid their daggers ready; / He [Macbeth] could not miss 'em" (2.2.11-12), but she's worried he won't get the job done. Then, after murdering the King, Macbeth comes to her with his hands all covered with blood and carrying the grooms' daggers. Not only that, but he's so unnerved that all he can do is look at his hands and talk about voices that he heard. She tries to be reasonable, saying, "Why, worthy thane, / You do unbend your noble strength, to think / So

brainsickly of things" (2.2.41-43), but he's paralyzed with horror. Finally, she has to do what he should have done. She takes the daggers from him, carries them back to place them with the grooms, and smears the grooms with the King's blood.

When she returns, Lady Macbeth hears Macbeth talking about his bloody hands, and she comments, *"My hands are of your colour; but I shame / To wear a heart so white" (2.2.61-62)*. She means that her hands are red, too (because she has been busy smearing the King's blood on the grooms), but that she would be ashamed to have a heart as white as Macbeth's. A white heart is white because it has no blood, and the person with a white heart is a coward. As she delivers this insult, we hear the knocking again, and Lady Macbeth takes her husband away, telling him that *"A little water clears us of this deed" (2.2.64)*.

At this point in the play, it appears that Macbeth would be helpless without his wife.

After the murder of King Duncan, Lady Macbeth does all she can protect herself and her husband from suspicion. When Macduff discovers the body of King Duncan and rings the alarm bell, she comes in and calls out: *"What's the business, / That such a hideous trumpet calls to parley / The sleepers of the house? speak, speak!" (2.3.81-83)*. Of course she's only pretending that she doesn't know what's wrong. Later in the scene, just after Macbeth explains why he killed the King's grooms, Lady Macbeth faints, which keeps anyone from actually thinking about Macbeth's explanation.

The first time we see Macbeth and Lady Macbeth as King and Queen, Macbeth makes point of inviting Banquo to a feast that night. Lady Macbeth chimes in, saying, *"If he had been forgotten, / It had been as a gap in our great feast, / And all-thing unbecoming" (3.1.12-13)*. However, this is her only speech in the scene, and a little later, when Macbeth dismisses everyone so that he can plan the murder of Banquo, Lady Macbeth is dismissed, too.

Without telling his wife a thing about it, Macbeth arranges for the murder of Banquo. In the next scene, Lady Macbeth has a short soliloquy in which she expresses what's weighing on her mind: *Nought'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" (3.2.4-7)*. Because of the rhyme, her lines sound a bit like proverbial

folk wisdom such as "a stitch in time saves nine." The first rhyme expresses a common experience, which is that if we get what we want, but aren't happy with it, we really don't have it. The second rhyme deepens the thought by saying that it would be better to be dead than to feel what Lady Macbeth is now feeling. She and her husband destroyed King Duncan, who is now safe from all the world's problems. In contrast, the lady and her husband live in "doubtful joy." In Shakespeare's time the word "doubt" was commonly used to mean "suspicion" or "fear," and the present king and queen live in fear that their guilt will be discovered and punished.

Despite her own depression, Lady Macbeth tries to make her husband cheer up. She asks him why he has been keeping to himself, and why he has been keeping company with his *"sorriest fancies" (3.2.9)*. A "fancy" is a daydream or fantasy; a "sorry" fancy is one that is depressing or frightening. He starts talking about the danger presented by Banquo and Fleance and hints that something will be done. Lady Macbeth asks what's going to be done, but her husband answers, *"Be innocent of the knowledge, dearest chuck, / Till thou applaud the deed" (3.2.46)*. "Chuck" is a pet name, a variant of "chick." So it seems that now Macbeth has the upper hand in their relationship. He's telling her that she doesn't need to worry herself about anything until it comes time to be his cheerleader.

The night that he has Banquo murdered, Macbeth hosts a banquet for his nobles. Lady Macbeth, who does not know what has happened to Banquo, tries to play the gracious hostess, and says of the guests, *"my heart speaks they are welcome" (3.4.8)*. However, just as she says this, her husband goes to the door and whispers with someone there. (We see that it's the First Murderer, reporting Banquo's death.) This goes on for so long that she has to remind Macbeth that he's neglecting the guests. Then, when Macbeth starts to take a seat among his guests, he suddenly starts reacting and speaking to the empty stool.

Lady Macbeth covers for her husband. She asks everyone to stay seated, and explains that Macbeth is often like this, and has been ever since he was young. He'll recover in a moment, she says, but if they stare at him, it will only make him worse, so they should just eat and pretend that nothing has happened. The guests do as they are told, and Lady Macbeth takes her husband aside. As she did early in the play, Lady Macbeth challenges her husband's manhood. The first thing out of her mouth is the insulting question, *"Are you a man?" (3.4.57)*. Macbeth answers that he's not only man, he's a bold man who can look at things that might frighten the devil. His wife is not impressed. She exclaims sarcastically, *"O proper stuff!"* Then she tells him that *"This is the very painting of your fear: / This is the air-drawn dagger which, you said,*

/Led you to Duncan" (3.4.59-62). She also informs him that he's making such ridiculous faces, that he reminds her of a woman telling a scary story that she heard from her grandmother. His fear is shameful because, "When all's done, / You look but on a stool" (3.4.66-67). This time -- unlike earlier in the play -- Lady Macbeth's scorn seems to have no effect on Macbeth. He calms down only after the Ghost of Banquo leaves and she says (gently?), "My worthy lord, / Your noble friends do lack you" (3.4.82-83).

When Banquo's Ghost reappears to Macbeth, the guests stare and ask questions, so Lady Macbeth gets rid of them by telling them that if they stay they will only make things worse. When they're alone, he hints that he's going to take action against Macduff and that he's going to visit the witches, but she says little. By the end of the scene, she seems to have forgotten her anger against her husband. She says "You lack the season of all natures, sleep" (3.4.140).

In her sleepwalking scene, Lady Macbeth thinks that a spot of King Duncan's blood is on her hand and she tries to wash it off. She also relives other horrors, including her attempt to persuade her husband that Banquo couldn't possibly rise from his grave. As she exits, she imagines that Duncan has just been murdered, and that she is once again taking care of Macbeth. Her last lines in the scene are, "To bed, to bed! there's knocking at the gate: come, come, come, come, give me your hand. What's done cannot be undone.--To bed, to bed, to bed!" (5.1.66-68).

As he tries to prepare himself for battle with the forces arrayed against him, Macbeth asks the doctor how Lady Macbeth is doing. The doctor replies, "Not so sick, my lord, / As she is troubled with thick coming fancies" (5.3.37-38). (The "fancies" are the things that the lady sees and remembers as she walks in her sleep.) Macbeth replies:

Cure her of that.
Canst thou not minister to a mind diseased,
Pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow,
Raze out the written troubles of the brain
And with some sweet oblivious antidote
Cleanse the stuff'd bosom of that perilous stuff
Which weighs upon the heart? (5.3.39-45)

The "cure her of that" appears to be an order, but the rest of the speech (which may be as much about Macbeth as his wife) seems to indicate that that Macbeth has no real

hope that she can be cured, and the doctor replies, *"Therein the patient / Must minister to himself" (5.3.45-46)*. This angers Macbeth, and he curses medicine. Then he arms for battle. Apparently he has no more time to worry about his wife.

As the forces under Malcolm approach Macbeth's castle, Macbeth receives the news that *"The queen, my lord, is dead" (5.5.16)*, but that is all he is told. There's nothing about how or why she died, and he doesn't ask. In a show of callousness, he says he doesn't have time for her: *"She should have died hereafter; / There would have been a time for such a word" (5.5.17-18)*. Thus begins the most famous passage in the play. The rest of the speech is despair masquerading as cynicism:

*To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
To the last syllable of recorded time,
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more: it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing. (5.5.19-28)*