

“If the assassination  
 Could trammel up the *consequence*, and catch  
 With his surcease success; that but this blow  
 Might be the be-all and the end-all *here*,  
 But *here*, upon this bank and shoal of time,  
 We 'd jump the life to come.”

That is, if the murder could thwart or control the possible consequences *here*, only *here*, in this world, he would risk whatever might follow in the life to come. But, as he goes on to say, there is the danger of retribution *here*. Our bloody deeds return to plague us *here*. The cup we have poisoned for another is thrust to our own lips. Those words, “We'd jump the life to come,” show that, in thinking of the possible consequences in this life, — the risk of detection, disgrace, and punishment, — he does not for the moment forget or ignore the retributions of another world. He deliberately defies them. Like the men who were supposed to sell their souls to the devil for wealth or power in this life, he is willing to pay the final price that the crime involves if present success can be assured. If Satan were present to pledge this, Macbeth would close the bargain at once; as this is impossible, he hesitates for the moment, but only for the moment — only while the thought of possible failure is uppermost in his mind. As soon as his wife has explained how the murder can be made to appear the act of the grooms, his hesitation is at an end. How exultantly he welcomes the assurance that others can be made to bear the imputation of the crime!

But while waiting for the fatal signal which the Lady is to give by striking the bell, he gives way again to horrible imaginings. The dagger he is to use floats before his eyes; but it does not frighten him from his purpose: —

“Thou marshalls't me the way that I was going,  
 And such an instrument I was to use.”

The visionary dagger becomes bloody, but the real one is not yet red, and he decides that the former is nothing but a “dagger of the mind” to which the anticipation of the bloody business has given apparent shape. His imagination reverts to the night — the time for “wicked dreams” and wicked deeds — for witchcraft and for Murder, with stealthy pace moving like a ghost toward his fell design. So will *he* move, invoking the sure and firm-set earth not to betray his approach to the sleeping victim. But he checks the poetic musings. It is the time for action. “Whiles I threat he lives.” The bell rings.

“I go, and it is done; the bell invites me. —  
 Hear it not, Duncan, for it is a knell  
 That summons thee to heaven or to hell.”

It is a knell that strikes for himself no less than for Duncan; and it summons him, not to the earthly heaven of his hopes, the joy he anticipates in the attainment of royal power, but to the hell of guilty fears that permit no sleep by night and no peace or

rest by day, but drive him on from crime to crime until retribution overtakes him at last.

Though, at this particular time, Macbeth would not have carried out his plot against Duncan if the Lady had not overcome his cowardly fear of the consequences, it does not follow that he would never have screwed his courage up for the deed without her influence. The vision of the promised crown, the glittering prize of his unholy ambition, would still hover above his head, stimulating his imagination and alluring him to the nearest way of gaining it. He would be ever on the watch for a favourable opportunity of doing the murderous deed necessary for its acquisition, and, with or without the encouragement of his companion in guilt, he would nerve himself to the fatal stroke that would enable him to clutch it. The exigencies of the drama require that he should do it *now*, and the Lady, with her clear head and strong will, furnishes the stimulus needed to spur him on to instant action.

Let us now turn for a time to her, and endeavour to get a fair conception of her character. As we have seen, the intention of murder occurred to her without any suggestion from her husband. So far as that was concerned, both were equally guilty. They were also equally ambitious; but I believe that she was ambitious for him rather than for herself. They are bound to each other by strong ties of conjugal affection; but her love, if not the stronger, is the more unselfish, as the love of woman is apt to be.

Mrs. Kemble (*Notes upon Some of Shakespeare's Plays*) calls Lady Macbeth "a masculine woman," but adds that "she retains enough of the nature of mankind, if not of womankind, to bring her within the circle of our toleration and make us accept her as *possible*." I believe, however, that she goes too far in denying to the Lady "all the peculiar sensibilities of her sex," and in saying, "there is no doubt that her assertion that she would have dashed her baby's brains out if she had sworn to do it, is no mere figure of speech but very certain earnest." To my thinking, it *was* a figure of speech in a sense, though "certain earnest" in another sense. Macbeth has sworn to do a dreadful deed from which he now shrinks. She says to him that if she had sworn to do *anything*, however horrible and unnatural, she would do it. The particular illustration of the quality of her resolution which she gives is the strongest she can imagine — the murder of her own babe at a time when to do it would be the utmost conceivable outrage to maternal affection; a deed which she knows she could never do or think of doing, much less swear to do, but which she would do *if* she had sworn to do it. That would be a murder infinitely worse than the one Macbeth has sworn to do, — the murder of an innocent and helpless babe — her own babe — a murder for which there could be no imaginable motive, — but the oath once spoken should be kept, though to keep it would tear her very heart-strings asunder.

It is significant that Lady Macbeth, when she first resolves to commit the crime, feels that she must repudiate the instincts of her sex before she can do it:

“Come, you spirits  
That tend on mortal thoughts, *unsex* me here,  
And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full  
Of direst cruelty! make thick my blood,  
Stop up the access and passage to remorse,  
That no compunctious visitings of nature  
Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between  
The effect and it!”

Elsewhere Shakespeare has depicted two women — the only two in his long gallery of female characters — who are *monsters* of wickedness, without a single redeeming trait; and he has emphasized the fact that such women have unsexed themselves and ceased to be women. They are Goneril and Regan, the unnatural daughters of Lear. Note what Albany says to Goneril:—

“See thyself, devil!  
Proper [native] deformity seems not in the fiend  
So horrid as in woman. . . .  
Thou changed and self-cover'd *thing*,

[that is, thou whose natural self has been covered or lost, so that thou art a mere *thing*, not a woman]

Bemonster not thy feature! . . .  
Howe'er thou art a fiend,  
A woman's *shape* doth shield thee.”

[Though a fiend, she still has the outward shape of woman, or she should die.]

Neither Goneril nor Regan prays to be unsexed, for they are only fiends in a female form; nor would the prayer have occurred to Lady Macbeth if she had not been a woman, notwithstanding her treason to womanhood. She feels that she must for the time abjure the natural instincts and sensibilities of her sex, if she is to do the bloody deed which is to give her ambitious husband the crown without waiting for fate to fulfil itself. She is not destitute of all feminine sensibilities, as Mrs. Kemble assumes, but struggles against them, represses them by sheer strength of will.

Mrs. Kemble even goes so far as to say that the Lady's inability to stab Duncan because he resembled her father as he slept “has nothing especially feminine about it,” but is “a touch of human tenderness by which most men might be overcome”; but to concede human tenderness to the Lady is inconsistent with the assumption that she could have murdered the infant at her breast. We cannot doubt that Shakespeare introduced this touch to remind us again that she was a woman, and not a monster, like the daughters of Lear. This is quite in his manner. It is like Shylock's allusion to the ring that Leah gave him when he was a bachelor, which shows that, hardened and merciless though he was, he was not utterly destitute of human tenderness.

Professor Moulton (*Shakespeare as a Dramatic Artist*) is more just in his conception of Lady Macbeth. As he remarks, “Her intellectual culture must have quick-

ened her finer sensibilities at the same time that it built up a will strong enough to hold them down"; and her keen delicacy of nature continually strives to assert itself. When she calls on the spirits of darkness to unsex her, "she is trembling all over with repugnance to the bloody enterprise, which nevertheless her royal will insists upon her undertaking." Her career in the play "is one long mental war; and the strain ends, as such a strain could only end, in madness." She seems to feel this herself when later Macbeth is lamenting that, though he had most need of blessing, "Amen stuck in his throat," and she exclaims:—

"These deeds must not be thought  
After these ways; so, it will make us mad."

But the next moment, when he refuses to take back the daggers he has brought from the chamber of death, her indomitable will enables her to do it herself. She must not allow her strength to give way while it is necessary to carry out the plan which is in danger of failing through his weakness. She can even indulge in a ghastly pun—the only one in the play—as she snatches the daggers from his hand:—

"If he does bleed,  
I'll *gild* the faces of the grooms withal,  
For it must seem their *guilt*."

And while Macbeth is still idly staring at his bloody hands with "poetical whining," as another aptly calls

it, she can return, with hands as red as his, and say with bitter sneers at his unmannerly wailing:—

"My hands are of your colour, but I shame  
To wear a heart so white. . . .  
A little water clears us of this deed."

But ah! the difference between man and woman! He, now so weak that he cannot look on the man he has murdered, he who laments that great Neptune's ocean cannot wash the stain from his hands, goes on from crime to crime until he himself can say:—

"I am in blood  
Stepp'd in so far that, should I wade no more,  
Returning were as tedious as go o'er;"

and later:—

"I have supp'd full with horrors;  
Direness, familiar to my slaughterous thoughts,  
Cannot once start me."

He revels in murder, knowing neither fear nor remorse.

She, on the other hand, though now she can ridicule his weak moaning over his bloody hands and display her own that are red with the gore of the same murder, calmly declaring that a little water will clear them of the stain—she has nerved herself to this seeming brutality by force of will, desperately repressing all feminine sensibility out of love for him and sympathy in his ambitious purposes. She can do this while it is necessary to strengthen him and save him from failure

and detection; but when she is once assured that he is no longer dependent on inspiration and support from her, the woman nature reasserts itself. She is not, as he is, insensible to remorse. She can silence for the time the voice of conscience, but it soon makes itself heard.

We have the first evidence of this in the scene (ii. 3) where the murder is discovered by the nobles. Macbeth has made the mistake of killing the grooms, but when Macduff asks, "Wherefore did you so?" he gets out of the predicament by ascribing the act to "the expedition of his violent love," which outran the dictation of his "reason." Then follows the hypocritically pathetic description of the dead king:—

"His silver skin lac'd with his golden blood,  
And his gash'd stabs [looking] like a breach in nature  
For ruin's wasteful entrance;"

and the supposed assassins:—

"Steep'd in the colours of their trade, their daggers  
Unmannerly breech'd with gore."

Lady Macbeth sees that he does not need her help at this critical moment, and the strain upon her nerve and will is at once relaxed. This sufficiently explains her fainting, which I believe to be real and not feigned; though the vivid picture of the scene of murder may have been in part, if not wholly, the cause of the swoon, the enormity of the crime being thus brought home to her conscience. Macbeth may have thought that the

fainting was a trick to divert attention from his mistake, if his attempt to justify it should not be successful, and this may account for his paying no attention to her at the moment; but this is quite as likely to have been due to his excitement, or to the promptness with which Macduff and Banquo "look to the lady."

When she next appears on the stage (iii. 2), we see that the attainment of the coveted prize has brought no relief from the remorse she suffers. She is unhappy in her new dignity—the more because he whom her love had helped to gain it likewise finds no joy in the acquisition. She laments for him as for herself—more for him than for herself—when she says:—

"Nought 's had, all 's spent,  
Where our desire is got without content;  
'T is safer to be that which we destroy  
Than by destruction dwell in doubtful joy."

This to herself—and it is the cry of a broken heart that has brought wretchedness upon itself and the object of its devotion by a crime to which it was prompted by love; and with the same unselfish affection she tries in the very next breath to comfort him, hiding the wound in her own breast:—

"How now, my lord! why do you keep alone,  
Of sorriest fancies your companions making,  
Using those thoughts which should indeed have died  
With them they think on? Things without all remedy  
Should be without regard; what 's done is done."

These sorry fancies, as we have just seen, are her companions no less, but she will not let him see it.

But *her* misery is that of a troubled conscience, together with pity and sympathy for him. *His* is the same that first made him shrink from the crime — no pang of conscience, no touch of remorse, but cowardly fear of the consequences of his crime : —

“ We have scotch'd the snake, not kill'd it ;  
She 'll close and be herself, whilst our poor malice  
Remains in danger of her former tooth.”

It is not that he has committed the crime, but that he must eat his meals in fear, and sleep in the affliction of terrible dreams — dreams of detection and retribution. “ Better be with the dead ” than live in this “ torture of the mind ! ” Already he meditates new crimes to save himself from the results of the first. “ Things bad begun make strong themselves by ill. ” And the new crimes he can commit without stimulus or help from her.

After this she appears in the drama only twice : in the banquet scene, where again he is saved by her presence of mind from the exposure of his guilt which his distracted imagination threatens to bring about ; and in the scene where her own share in that guilt is unconsciously disclosed as she walks in sleep.

After the banquet is broken up, instead of giving way to bitter reproaches, she endeavours to sooth his troubled spirit. As Mrs. Jameson remarks, there is “ a touch of

pathos and tenderness ” in this which makes it “ one of the most masterly and most beautiful traits of character in the play.”

Shakespeare evidently intended that Lady Macbeth's complicity in the guilt of her husband should be limited to the murder of Duncan. It is a significant fact that Macbeth does not make her a confidant of his plot for killing Banquo and Fleance. Indeed, he distinctly avoids doing this after having vaguely hinted at the design. This partly because, as I have said, he does not need her help, but partly, I believe, because he has an instinctive feeling that she would not approve the course he has resolved upon. She certainly would have opposed it as at once impolitic and unnecessary. The Witches had not predicted that Banquo should be king, but only that his children should, and Fleance was but a boy as yet. There was far greater danger to Macbeth from the suspicions which the death of Banquo and his son might excite than from a possible attempt of theirs to play the bloody part Macbeth had played in the assassination of Duncan. Macbeth himself lays more stress on the prediction that Banquo's issue are to be his successors on the throne than he does on his fears that Banquo may suspect he killed Duncan, and that this may lead to his own overthrow. Banquo's “ royalty of nature ” is a perpetual rebuke to his own baser self, and his knowledge of the prophecies of the Witches is a menace, but the thought that most rankles in the breast of Macbeth is that all he has gained by the

murder of the gracious Duncan is a "fruitless crown" and "barren sceptre," which are to be snatched from him by "an unlineal hand."

Some critics have thought that the Lady meant to suggest putting Banquo and Fleance out of the way when, in reply to Macbeth's reference to the fact that they are still living, she says, "But in them Nature's copy 's not eterne"; but she simply reminds him that they are not immortal. This interpretation is fully confirmed by the fact that, on his replying, "There 's comfort yet; they are assailable," and adding that before the night passes "there shall be done a deed of dreadful note," she does not understand his hint, but asks, "What 's to be done?" — a question which he evades. It is plain, however, that he still feels doubtful of her approval of the deed, which he would not have been if he had understood her preceding speech as suggesting it.

For myself, I am inclined to believe that the disappearance of the Lady from the stage after the banquet scene indicates that, from the time of Banquo's murder, Macbeth was less and less inclined to seek her company and sympathy. In the conversation before the banquet she asks him, "Why do you keep alone?" and it is in the same scene (iii. 2) that he avoids telling her that he has already engaged the murderers to waylay Banquo and his son. Even then their lives had begun to separate, and they would naturally get farther and farther apart. There is no reason to suppose that she knew of the plot for the destruction of Macduff's family, against

which she would have protested more earnestly than against his designs upon Banquo, if he had made them known to her. His fears and suspicions urge him on to the bloody deeds which later Macduff describes to Malcolm:—

"Each new morn  
New widows howl, new orphans cry, new sorrows  
Strike heaven on the face."

Ross confirms the reports:—

"Alas, poor country!  
Almost afraid to know itself. It cannot  
Be call'd our mother, but our grave; where nothing,  
But who knows nothing, is once seen to smile;  
Where sighs and groans and shrieks that rend the air  
Are made, not mark'd; where violent sorrow seems  
A modern ecstasy. The dead man's knell  
Is there scarce ask'd for who; and good men's lives  
Expire before the flowers in their caps,  
Dying or ere they sicken."

A terrible picture of what Macbeth is doing alone, in his insane suspicion of those about him and of everybody, near or far, who might suspect his guilt and be moved to avenge it. After his second interview with the Witches, who have deluded him with false assurances of safety and success, he seeks no other counsel and has no other confidant.

The Lady meanwhile, left to herself, ignorant of what is going on abroad, bears the burden of her remorse alone. Shut out from all sympathy, she broods over the crime to which she was tempted by love and the

hope that it would bring not only royal power but all its accompaniments of pleasure and honour, but the fruits of which have been only disappointment, disgust, and misery to her husband and herself; and the consciousness of her sin and folly is like a consuming fire in her breast. Bereft of all worldly hope and all human sympathy, she is driven to despair. The season of all natures, sleep, denies her its comfort and relief. In perturbed wanderings at night she lives over the events of that other night when her hands were bathed in the life-blood of Duncan. No water now will clear them of the stain. The agonizing cry, "Out, damned spot!" is vain; and "there's the smell of the blood still," which all the perfumes of Arabia cannot remove or disguise.

The Doctor's direction that the means of self-destruction be removed from her, and that she be watched closely, indicates his apprehension of what the end may be; and though it is not distinctly stated afterwards that she did lay violent hands on herself, we can hardly doubt that this was the manner of her death.

When her death is announced to Macbeth (v. 5), he is already so estranged from her, and so absorbed in his selfish ruminations on his own situation, that it excites only a feeling of vexation that it should have occurred just then. "She *should* have died hereafter" — not, he seems to mean, when he had so much else to worry and annoy him. In his talk with the Doctor

about her, in a former scene (v. 3), he appears to be impatient, rather than sympathetic, because she is sick; and now that the sickness has proved fatal, he indulges in no expressions of grief, but, after this brief reference to her ill-timed decease, he relapses into mournful reflections upon his own condition and prospects. He does not refer to her again, nor is there any allusion to her except in Malcolm's last speech, where he couples her with Macbeth as "this dead butcher and his fiend-like queen." The son of the murdered Duncan might naturally call her so; but, except for her share in that single crime she does nothing to deserve the title; and for that one crime she has paid the penalty of a life of disappointment, wretchedness, and remorse.

Let me say, before dismissing her from our consideration, that I cannot think of her as a masculine woman, or, as Campbell describes her, "a splendid picture of evil, . . . a sort of sister of Milton's Lucifer, and, like him, externally majestic and beautiful." Beautiful, indeed, we can imagine her to be, but with a beauty delicate and feminine — perhaps, as Mrs. Siddons suggests, even fragile. Shakespeare gives us no hint of her personal appearance except where he makes her speak of her "little hand"; but that really settles the question.<sup>1</sup>

Macbeth's career from first to last confirms the esti-

<sup>1</sup> For a summary of critical opinion on the subject, see the *Appendix*.



mate we form of him when he hears the predictions of the Witches. At that time, as I have said, he seems as noble as he was valiant. He is ambitious, but two paths to power and fame are open to him — the path of rectitude, of loyalty, of patriotism, of honour; and the nearer way of treason, regicide, and dishonour. He lacks the moral courage and strength to choose the former. He cannot wait for fate to fulfil itself, but anticipates the working out of its decrees by impatiently taking the first step in the other path. He knows it is the wrong path, but it is only the first step that costs him even any transient struggle. Thenceforward, as we have seen, he can go on from crime to crime with only brief spasms of hesitation, due not to compunction or shrinking from sin, but only to his apprehensions of the possible consequences of his first deed of blood — discovery, disgrace, disaster, retribution in this life. The life to come he ignores, as he did at the start, and pursues the downward course, selfish, pitiless, remorseless, impious, to the inevitable tragic end.

## MACBETH