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Lady Macbeth as the Mourning Mother

Melancholy and Hysteria in Macbeth

THROUGHOUT THE SHORT TIME FRAME OF SHAKESPEARE'S *Macbeth*, Lord and Lady Macbeth are childless. However, textual evidence suggests that the Macbeths did conceive a child who passed away prior to the opening acts of the play. At the end of act 1, Lady Macbeth tells her husband, "I have given suck," clearly acknowledging her experience with motherhood and feeding a child (1.7.54). As suggested by Alice Fox, other references to death and childlessness occur throughout the text as the Macbeths use early modern language associated with gynecology and obstetrics to describe the events of the play (127). Because childlessness was such a prevalent issue in early modern England, "a Jacobean audience would have been alert to mere suggestions of a couple's frustrated attempts to have living issue." Fox's article suggests that Shakespeare deliberately used language connected to midwifery to connect with his audience on the widely relatable and personal topic of child loss (128).

Evidence of the Macbeths' lost child has been thoroughly discussed and the lost baby Macbeth has been generally accepted as part of the Macbeths' backstory (Fox 127; Companion 74). It has even been suggested that the grief over their lost child could have been the motive behind the Macbeths' murderous desires (Wells 6). Although suffering the loss of her child, Lady Macbeth has been labeled the "murdering mother" and villain of Shakespeare's famous tragedy (Chamberlain 83). In other explorations, Lady Macbeth is portrayed as an anti-mother who rejects all biological possibilities of motherhood including her menstrual cycle and who abuses her roles as a wife and mother to manipulate politics for sheer personal gain (La Belle 381; Reyes 83; Liston 233). By acknowledging the lost child of *Macbeth* (and subsequent grief felt by the child's mother) and yet continuing to vilify Lady Macbeth, critics have failed to appropriately sympathize with the play's female protagonist in light of her tragic loss.

Lady Macbeth has always been seen as the villain of *Macbeth* because of her murderous plan to ascend to the throne as Queen of Scotland. Furthering her condemnation, Lady Macbeth infamously declares that she would have “dashed the brains out” of her nursing child to accomplish her goals of ascending to the Scottish throne (1.7.58). While Lady Macbeth’s decree is quite incriminating, nothing has been said about the preceding line which lovingly states, “I have given suck and know / How tender ‘tis to love the babe that milks me” (1.7.54-5). Lady Macbeth’s sentiment in this line is far from villainous and proves that she loved not only her small babe, but the motherly act of feeding that small babe, as well. Because Lady Macbeth experienced powerful, maternal love for her child, the loss of that child would have been devastating and could potentially have led to “Madness” (Sharp 318). Instead of reading Lady Macbeth’s hysterical fits in act 5 as evidence of her guilty conscience after the murder of King Duncan, I propose Shakespeare describes Lady Macbeth as suffering from melancholy and hysteria (today’s equivalents of anxiety and depression) beginning in act 1 before any murders have been committed and continuously throughout *Macbeth*. By reading Lady Macbeth as a woman suffering from melancholy and hysteria throughout the entire play, her actions become less damning and more understandable. Through describing Lady Macbeth with symptoms of melancholy and hysteria, Shakespeare portrays Lady Macbeth not as a villain, but a loving mother mourning the loss of her young child.

In *The Midwives Book* published in 1671, experienced midwife Jane Sharp records her first-hand knowledge about the processes of conception, birth, and childcare. The book is also a great insight into the early modern perceptions of female wellness. According to early modern physicians, mental and physical health were one in the same and were affected by things like weather, the stars, life events, and especially the four humors. In *The Midwives Book*, Sharp explains how women are more likely to have ailments because “The womb . . . is subject to multitudes of diseases” including “Hysterical Passions, or strangling of the womb” which are “the most grievous” of all women’s illnesses (317). Complications with the womb could occur because of excess of liquids like breast milk or menstrual blood. Furthermore, because birth involves so many liquids, the conditions of melancholy and hysteria could be contracted after having a baby. Sharp describes placing “sheep-skin” over a woman’s vaginal area post-partum to “expel all ill melancholly blood from those parts” (210). If the blood wasn’t expelled symptoms would arise such as “Drowsiness,” “beating of the heart, Frenzy and Madness” (Sharp 318). In addition to excess of “melancholly blood” bringing on “Madness,” hysteria could also be contract-

ed after “a sudden fear” or “bad news” (Sharp 318). If a woman’s mental and physical wellness can be affected by “a sudden fear” or “bad news,” surely Lady Macbeth’s tragedy of losing her child would be reason enough to contract melancholy and hysteria.

Shakespeare describes Lady Macbeth attempting to rid herself of her femininity and by extension her womb which causes diseases like melancholy and hysteria. When Lady Macbeth is first introduced, she famously declares, “unsex me here” (1.5.39). This line has traditionally been read as Lady Macbeth’s rejection of her femininity which she equates with the “milk of human kindness”—the kindness she desires to remove from herself in order to commit the cruel act of murder. (1.5.15). However, “unsex me here” could also be referring to Lady Macbeth’s desire for her uterus (and its accompanying ailments) to be removed from her body. Later in Lady Macbeth’s monologue she cries, “Make thick my blood, / Stop up th’access and passage to remorse” (1.5.41–2). It has been explained in other explorations that the blood Lady Macbeth is referring to in this line is her menstrual blood (La Belle 381). Lady Macbeth could be hoping that by expelling both her uterus and period from her body, her sicknesses of hysteria and melancholy will be healed. Additionally, Lady Macbeth refers to her birth canal as “th’access and passage to remorse.” Lady Macbeth’s birth canal evokes in her feelings of remorse or shame, possibly because she feels partially responsible for the death of her child. Blaming the mother for unavoidable complications in conception, birth, or pregnancy were not uncommon in early modern England. In *The Midwives Book*, Sharp explains that if the “womb be too hot, or cold, or moist, or dry” the man’s seed would “prove unfruitful” (313). Women had a high level of responsibility to control their bodies in order to be successful child bearers. It’s reasonable to assume that women who lost a child, like Lady Macbeth, would feel guilty and culpable for the child’s death. Again, associating her female reproduction with guilt, Lady Macbeth calls her menstrual cycles “compunctious visitings of nature” (1.5.43). It seems that Lady Macbeth’s periods are monthly reminders of the remorse she feels for her child who has died as well as a reminder that she has not conceived and will continue to be childless. Because Shakespeare adds these descriptions of Lady Macbeth in act 1, it can be implied that Lady Macbeth suffers from “Madness” because of her birth or loss of her child and not because of guilt surrounding the murder of King Duncan.

Shakespeare demonstrates Lady Macbeth’s familiarity with melancholy and hysteria by portraying her with a calm demeanor after the murder of King Duncan in comparison to her hysterical husband in act 2 of *Macbeth*. Immediately after murdering King Duncan, Macbeth shows obvious symptoms of

hysteria. Early modern symptoms of hysteria include an altered complexion that is “pale and yellow,” a lost “sense of feeling,” the tendency to “cry out,” the “Beating of the heart,” and “Frenzy” (Sharp 318, 329). Macbeth is described with similar symptoms after murdering King Duncan. Macbeth describes to his wife that his guilt keeps him “pale” and in a “restless ecstasy” or frenzy (3.2.23; 3.3.49). Additionally, Macbeth begins hearing imaginative voices which increase his insanity (2.2.38). Shakespeare leaves no room for interpretation—murdering the king is what brings on Macbeth’s hysterical behavior. Lady Macbeth, however, remains calm immediately following the murder, and even helps her husband handle his hysteria by encouraging him to “Consider it not so deeply” (2.2.33). While Macbeth is rambling about the voices in his head, Lady Macbeth calmly takes the dagger which Macbeth forgot to leave at the crime scene and plants it as evidence against the king’s servants (2.2.51–9). Lady Macbeth scolds her husband, telling him he is thinking too “brainsickly of things” and that he should “Go get some water” (2.2.49). Her calm reaction and list of remedies to make her husband less nervous suggest that Lady Macbeth has experience with hysteria. Shakespeare provides more evidence that Lady Macbeth’s hysteria is not linked to guilt about the murder when she faints at the crime scene of King Duncan (2.3.115). Lady Macbeth had already seen the bloody scene the night previous when she staged the dagger which makes her fainting seem more likely a symptom of hysteria and not because of the murder.

Lady Macbeth continues with her calm demeanor after the murder of King Duncan until act 5 during her sleepwalking scene. It has largely been assumed that Lady Macbeth’s hysteria in act 5 is due to the guilt she feels because of King Duncan’s murder, yet much time passes between the murder and the sleepwalking scene when Lady Macbeth shows no signs of hysteria. So, what ultimately drives Lady Macbeth mad if not her guilt? Throughout Macbeth, Shakespeare creates feelings of anxiety around lineage and having children. It’s plausible that the stress of not having a child, in addition to having lost a child, triggers Lady Macbeth’s sleepwalking and suicide. It’s clear that Lady Macbeth’s husband has strong desires for a child. After becoming king, Macbeth calls his reign a “barren scepter” with “No son of mine succeeding” (3.1.62-4). When the witches tell Macbeth that “none of woman born / Shall harm” him, Macbeth obsesses over Macduff’s lineage and murders Macduff’s son (4.1.79-80). Shakespeare could be suggesting that Lady Macbeth’s melancholy and hysteria in act 5 are provoked by Macbeth’s obsessions with having offspring. As previously mentioned, women were held responsible for issues of infertility and Macbeth surely blamed his wife for their barren marriage.

Because Lady Macbeth suffers from hysteria and melancholy due to child loss, Shakespeare uses associations with children and mothers during Lady Macbeth's infamous sleepwalking scene as the catalyst for Lady Macbeth's increasing madness and eventual suicide. Lady Macbeth only directly persuaded her husband to commit one murder, that of King Duncan. However, Macbeth proceeds to murder, or hire other people to murder, several other people throughout the play including the wife and son of Macduff. Of all the murders in *Macbeth*, this is perhaps the most gruesome as the son cries, "He has killed me, mother" before his stab wounds lead to his untimely death (4.2.80). Although Lady Macbeth was directly involved with the murder of the king, the murder of Macduff's son and his wife are the ones that most seem to haunt her. Instead of lamenting the death of the king, who she simply calls "the old man," Lady Macbeth mourns the loss of Macduff's wife crying, "The Thane of Fife had a wife. Where is she / now?" (5.1.35, 37–8). By sympathizing more with the mother who witnesses the death of her own son and not the king, Lady Macbeth seems to be reflecting on her own experience with child loss. Shakespeare also seems to foreshadow Lady Macbeth's suicide through her fixation on Macduff's wife. The Thaness of Fife ultimately dies after the death of her son, and soon after Lady Macbeth also dies.

Additionally, during Lady Macbeth's famous sleepwalking scene, she obsesses over her hands and blood, rubbing her hands together crying, "Out, damned spot!" (5.1.31). While these references to hands and blood can be read as Lady Macbeth's attempts to wash herself of her sins, hands and blood both have strong associations with pregnancy and childbirth as well. Starting with pregnancy, hands were used to suggest to a mother whether she was having a boy or a girl. If an expecting mother leaned more "on her right hand when she reposeseth," it was assumed she would be having a boy (Sharp 105). During the process of childbirth, midwives used their hands to move the baby into position, remove the baby from the mother, and to cut women's vaginal skin to allow room for the baby to be born (Sharp 111). All these tasks during childbirth would have undoubtedly left midwives with blood-stained hands. Lady Macbeth seems to fixate on this particular aspect of her birth experience because before retiring to bed after her sleepwalking episode Lady Macbeth mentions the stench of blood which covers a "little hand" (1.5.45). When Lady Macbeth references her own hands throughout this scene, she uses the plural "hands," but this instance is unique because only one "little hand" covered in blood is mentioned. This "little hand" could very possibly be the hand of her deceased baby. In fact, it would make sense that Lady Macbeth, who'd

suffered so greatly the ailments of hysteria and melancholy after the loss of a child, would recall that lost child and its death directly proceeding her suicide.

By sympathizing with Lady Macbeth as a mourning mother suffering from hysteria and melancholy, Shakespeare's commentary on women's reproductive health becomes a contradiction to the early modern misconception that "Childbearing Women [had] to behave themselves" (Sharp). Throughout *Macbeth*, Shakespeare does not place the responsibility of bearing healthy offspring on Lady Macbeth. In fact, Shakespeare critiques Macbeth who obsesses over having his own heir and yet murders the son of Macduff. Though Lady Macbeth's character has commonly been villainized because of her role in the murder of King Duncan, I propose that Shakespeare intentionally placed Macbeth as the responsible murderer of King Duncan as a metaphor for men's lack of responsibility in childbearing. Lady Macbeth is not the one who stabs King Duncan in his sleep, yet Lady Macbeth commonly gets blamed for the act of murder. Similarly, women of early modern England were not responsible for the deaths of their offspring yet were held responsible for unsuccessful attempts to bear children. While Lady Macbeth's criminal actions cannot be excused because of her sicknesses, understanding her struggles with her mental health may help us to view Lady Macbeth as less of a villain.

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