

THE TRAGEDY OF LADY MACBETH

An essay

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ACT ONE

Macbeth indiscriminately murders men, women and children, and dies fighting for his own survival, but he qualifies to be called a tragic hero. His wife, who never killed anyone except herself, goes down in literary history as the personification of evil ambition. Something is rotten in the state of literary criticism.

If we are to understand the nature of Lady Macbeth's tragedy, we must first understand the nature of her husband (which she herself fatally fails to do). This is a man whose sword, before he turns assassin, smokes with bloody execution, who unseams his enemy from the navel to the chops and fixes his head upon the battlements. He is a soldier, and a soldier must kill in order to survive. You cannot be a soldier if you are afraid of blood. This does not mean that everyone in the military is capable of cold-blooded murder, but it does mean that once his own survival is threatened, the shedding of blood will not present an obstacle.

"But he would never have committed the murder if she hadn't egged him on." Thus cry the Lady-Macbeth-haters, and Act I Sc. 7 appears to support this view. When Lady Macbeth enters, he tells her: "We will proceed no further in this business", but by the time she has finished with him, he is "settled" and ready to commit "this terrible feat". In the reasons for this change of heart lie the seeds of Lady Macbeth's tragedy, but they have been sown much earlier – indeed even before the play began.

When Macbeth and Banquo meet the witches, and Macbeth is greeted as "King hereafter", his reaction is surprising:

"Good Sir, why do you start, and seem to fear
Things that do sound so fair?"

Why indeed? Would not an ambitious man be pleased rather than afraid? The answer is not long in coming. When given the news that he has been made Thane of Cawdor, Macbeth becomes lost in his own thoughts. And these thoughts are terrifying: He asks why he yields to that suggestion

"Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair,
And make my seated heart knock at my ribs,
Against the use of nature? Present fears
Are less than horrible imaginings.
My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical
Shakes so my single state of man,
That function is smother'd in surmise,
And nothing is but what is not."

What "murder"? Who said anything about murder? This reaction makes no sense at all unless the idea of killing Duncan was already in his mind. If a fortune-teller informs you that you are going to be rich, do you immediately start sweating because this means you will have to go and rob a bank? It is clear that the plan to murder Duncan already existed in Macbeth's mind. What is not yet clear, and will only become explicit in Act I Sc. 7, is the fact that it was his idea in the first place, and he had sworn that he would implement it. However, the seeds of Lady Macbeth's tragedy continue to be sown even before that decisive dialogue.

Duncan's appointment of Malcolm as Prince of Cumberland is the next occasion on which we see into the depths of Macbeth's mind:

“The Prince of Cumberland! That is a step
On which I must fall down, or else o'erleap,
For in my way it lies. Stars, hide your fires!
Let not light see my black and deep desires;
The eye wink at the hand; yet let that be,
Which the eye fears, when it is done, to see.”

The resolution which we shall hear about explicitly in Act I Sc.7 is firm. He wants the murder to take place. This man, whose only spur is his “vaulting ambition”, is determined to kill Duncan and to find a means of removing Malcolm. And yet in all these private thoughts, there is not one mention of his wife. The two asides in Sc. 3 and Sc. 4 are filled with references to himself, to what he wants and what he intends to do. This is a pattern that will develop as the play goes on, leading to his total preoccupation with himself, and to the isolation that forms one aspect of Lady Macbeth's tragedy.

At this stage, however, their relationship is close and deeply affectionate. What else could it be, since – as we shall see later – he has confided the very deepest and darkest of his thoughts to her? In the meantime, he has written her a letter, and our first glimpse of her, his “dearest partner of greatness”, is while she is reading it. He tells her of the witches' prophecy, because he does not want her to “lose the dues of rejoicing, by being ignorant of what greatness is promis'd thee”.

It is at this point that the traditional Lady Macbeth takes over (although at least in some more recent productions there has been a physical rethink). Hard-faced, hard-voiced, often middle-aged, she scares the living daylights out of you the moment she announces that Macbeth will be what he is promised. If we bear in mind that Macbeth is a warrior of immense power and stamina (he has just fought two battles, and personally defeated the two enemy leaders), we shall have to assume that he is in peak condition. The historical Macbeth was 35 when he mounted the throne, and although of course Shakespeare's play is vastly different from the sources that inspired him, it is hard to imagine a middle-aged Macbeth surviving those battles in such good shape. There is no reason, then, to suppose that Lady Macbeth would not be in equally good condition. A young and beautiful wife can also, of course, be a villain – and such a portrayal could be even more disturbing – but it is not so easy to gain sympathy for an older, harsher, harder battleaxe.

After she has read the letter, Lady Macbeth's immediate reaction is as follows:

“Glamis thou art, and Cawdor; and shalt be
What thou art promis'd. Yet do I fear thy nature:
It is too full o'th'milk of human kindness,
To catch the nearest way. Thou wouldst be great;
Art not without ambition, but without
The illness should attend it: what thou wouldst highly,
That wouldst thou holily; wouldst not play false,

And yet wouldst wrongly win; thou'dst have, great Glamis,
That which cries, 'Thus thou must do' if thou have it;
And that which rather thou dost fear to do,
Than wishest should be undone. 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,
Which fate and metaphysical aid doth seem
To have thee crown'd withal."

The "nearest way" being murder, and the letter having promised the throne but made no mention of how the throne is to be gained, it again makes no sense to have her even think of such a thing unless, like Macbeth, she had thought of it before. But the evidence and implications of this prior discussion must wait until Sc. 7.

In contrast to Macbeth's monologues, her speech contains only two references to herself: her fear of his kind nature, and her intention to encourage him. The rest is devoted entirely to his character, and as will become more and more apparent, she has misread him – not completely, for there are moral scruples in him, but she seems unaware of certain features that will later come to dominate their lives. As we shall see in Sc. 7, it is not his kind nature, his desire to act holily, that will hold him back, but his fear of the consequences. The milk of human kindness will never at any time dilute the blood. She will pay dearly for this overestimate of his kindness and her underestimate of his soldierly instincts for survival at all costs.

The burning question, however, is why she is so determined to see him commit the murder and take the throne. "Ambition!" is the cry of the critics, but compare the speeches of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. Where does the focus lie? In his case, on himself; in hers, it lies only on him, on what he wants, on what he is to have. She does not say one word that even remotely suggests her own burning desire to become Queen. She will pour her spirits in his ear to have him crowned. Why, if she is ambitious for herself, does she not – as he does – say so? The speech quoted above is not made to impress others; it represents her innermost thoughts, but in those thoughts is not one shred of evidence that she is ambitious for herself.

"...let that be,/Which the eye fears when it is done to see," said Macbeth, and Lady Macbeth's speech shows her total awareness of his desire and his fear. He wants the murder to happen, and she knows how much he wants it.

Lady Macbeth, however, has two problems: one with her husband, who will need her support; the other, with herself. It is the second of these that now emerges. Her spirits and the valour of her tongue may seem natural to her detractors, but they are not natural to her, and so she prays to a different sort of spirit:

.....unsex me here,
And fill me, from the crown to the toe, top-full
Of direst cruelty! make thick my blood,
Stop up th'access and passage to remorse;
That no compunctious visitings of Nature
Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between

Th'effect and it! Come to my woman's breasts,
And take my milk for gall, you murth'ring ministers,
Wherever in your sightless substances
You wait on Nature's mischief! Come, thick Night,
And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of Hell,
That my keen knife see not the wound it makes,
Nor Heaven peep through the blanket of the dark,
To cry, 'Hold, hold!'"

It is hard to sympathize with someone who prays to be made evil. The very idea is repugnant. We have far more sympathy with those who have done wrong and pray to be made good. But we are at the beginning of a tragic tale, not at the end, and tragedies arise because of fatal errors for which the protagonist is made to pay the highest price. Lady Macbeth is here embarking on her fatal error: to help her husband, she is deliberately seeking to suppress her own nature. We do not pray for what we have; her prayer therefore paints her character by negatives: she is not by nature cruel, she is open to remorse and to compunction, and she has milk not gall in her breast. How long can anyone suppress his or her own nature? As the play progresses, so these elements of her character will reassert themselves, whereas the natural cruelty of her husband will make a mockery of her initial image of him and his brand of milk.

Just as she fails to read his heart, she also fails to read the future. She lacks his astonishing power of imagination, which is why the future comes as such a shock to her. Imagination gives him a kind of immunisation, but naively she thinks that by killing Duncan, they will gain what they want and live happily ever after.

“.....You shall put
This night's great business into my dispatch;
Which shall to all our nights and days to come
Give solely sovereign sway and masterdom.”

From Macbeth's soliloquy in Scene 7, we know that he sees the future differently. He is fully aware of the turmoil that will result from the murder – and it is this knowledge, not the milk of human kindness, that will hold him back. But she is prepared to take the terrible step because she thinks this blow will be the be-all and the end-all. We cannot and must not excuse her. This is a crime of appalling proportions and with not one jot of moral justification, as Macbeth himself will declare in Sc. 7. But it was Macbeth's idea, and he wants it to take place. She sees her task – with a hideous inversion of values that makes foul things fair – as being to help him get what he wants.

It is an alienating feature of Lady Macbeth's that she is so consummate an actress. When we see vicious rogues like Iago or Edmund hiding their villainy with convincing outer shows, we may even experience a tinge of admiration for their histrionic prowess, but we expect women to be more open and transparent. We have no admiration for a fallen Eve who tells her husband to look like the innocent flower but be the serpent under it. We forget at once that the absolute firmness of her resolve is a front, a serpent covering a flower. She prayed for the strength to play this role, and yet the role is taken for the real person.

Macbeth, by contrast, in her presence betrays his real self. His face “is as a book, where men/May read strange matters.” At this point in their relationship, he hides and has hidden

nothing from her. She knows what he wants, what he thinks, and what he feels. He need not play an unnatural part.

When Duncan arrives, once more the actress takes the stage, and her hypocrisy jars on us. Should it do so any more than Macbeth's hypocrisy when, in Sc. 4, he told the King that "The service and the loyalty I owe,/In doing it, pays itself"? Yet Macbeth is a tragic hero.

Sc. 7 holds the key to the past as well as the future of this extraordinary couple, and in his opening soliloquy, Macbeth makes the reason for his hesitancy quite explicit:

"If it were done, when 'tis done, then 'twere well
It were done quickly: if th'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."

So much for the milk of human kindness. It is the consequences that he fears, and those consequences do not even include the judgement of God. Like Faustus, he is quite prepared to give his "eternal jewel" to "the common enemy of man". What he fears is that he will be made to suffer the same fate as his victim:

".....But in these cases,
We still have judgment here; that we but teach
Bloody instructions, which, being taught, return
To plague th'inventor: this even-handed Justice
Commends th'ingredients of our poison'd chalice
To our own lips."

Only after he has articulated these fears for his own future safety does he turn to the moral reasons against the assassination: he is Duncan's kinsman, subject and host, Duncan has been a good king, and there is no good reason for killing him other than Macbeth's own ambition. As we shall see, the moral reasons – sound though they are – will carry little weight, for it is fear of the consequences that really holds him back.

The dialogue that now takes place between him and Lady Macbeth is probably the single most telling factor in literary history's condemnation of her. He has made up his mind not to go ahead: "We will proceed no further in this business." And yet by the end of the scene, she has persuaded him to change his mind. There, say the critics, is the proof that a basically virtuous man has been led astray by an evil, scheming woman. We remember the good man's terror at the very idea of the murder (Sc. 3), and we remember Lady Macbeth's own description of his kindly nature, and we remember the moral objections listed only a moment ago. Conveniently we forget the passionate desire for the murder to take place ("yet let that be,! Which the eye fears, when it is done, to see"), the sinister ambiguity surrounding the planned time of Duncan's departure ("Tomorrow, as he purposes"), and the fact that Macbeth would willingly lose his soul if only he could avoid judgment on earth.

We may forget all this, but Lady Macbeth will not. Perhaps that is why he offers a new reason for his hesitancy:

“He hath honoured me of late; and I have bought
Golden opinions from all sorts of people,
Which would be worn now in their newest gloss,
Not cast aside so soon.”

So feeble is this argument that she ignores it totally, and instead accuses him of cowardice. Let us keep in mind that she believes him to be too kind-hearted to commit the murder. He rejects the criticism:

“.....Pr’ythee, peace.
I dare do all that may become a man;
Who dares do more, is none.”

Once more, we nod our heads and admire this moral stance of a basically noble man, and we condemn the wicked creature that strives to turn him away from his chosen path of good. We may even prefer to gloss over the implications of Lady Macbeth’s response, but in these next few lines we are given the history of the plot. There is no ambiguity here, and they offer a clear explanation of Macbeth’s conduct when he first met the witches, and of Lady Macbeth’s reaction when she heard of that meeting:

“.....What beast was’t then,
That made you break this enterprise to me?
When you durst do it, then you were a man;
And, to be more than what you were, you would
Be so much more the man. Nor time, nor place,
Did then adhere, and yet you would make both:
They have made themselves, and that their fitness now
Does unmake you.”

It was Macbeth who broke the enterprise to her, and he did so at a time when there was no ready opportunity to commit the murder. Since the opportunity arose immediately after the battle, when Duncan decided to visit Inverness, the conversation can only have taken place before the battle, i.e. before Macbeth left home to go and fight. Some critics suggest that it was all said in the letter, or in another letter, but is it likely that so vital a message would be omitted from the text we do have, or would be broached in a text we do not have, written when Macbeth was on his way to the battlefield? Would Macbeth, who shares everything with his wife, not raise such a huge subject in her presence, where he could gauge her reaction? Would he swear in a letter that he would “make” both the time and the place, though still not even knowing if she would support him? Indeed, would he dare to commit such an appalling project (with all its attendant motivation) to paper, let alone to a messenger? There is no need for any such speculation. The text that we have is all that we need. We know how ambitious Macbeth is. We know that circumstances force him to lead Duncan’s army against Macdonwald, exercising his mighty talents in order to keep Duncan on the throne that he so desperately desires for himself. What better moment could there be for his ambitious thoughts to crystallize, and for him to confide them in his “dearest love”?

He tells her he wants to be king (though she may well have known that already), and he breaks the “enterprise” to her: he is going to kill Duncan. He does not know where or when, but he swears that he will do it. Will she support him? The answer is an unequivocal yes, which we must condemn, but this yes is her tragic error, and we must understand why she

says it. In order to do so, we can only speculate on the implications of the text, but that after all is the nature of interpretation. The epithet “fiend-like” is also a matter of interpretation.

We have already seen in the soliloquy that follows Lady Macbeth’s receipt of the letter that all her thoughts centre on Macbeth’s nature, and what she can do to strengthen him. This is a pattern that continues throughout the play. Even when she is alone, she is waiting for him, and when she is with him, her behaviour is always dictated by his. If he is weak, she is strong, and if he is strong, she becomes weak. It is almost as if she were there to fill the spaces he creates for her, and when ultimately there are no spaces left for her to fill, she falls ill and dies. Macbeth is her life. And if Macbeth feels so passionately about the throne that he tells her he is prepared to kill for it, there can be little doubt that without that throne, he will never be a happy man. And while he himself may have the clarity of vision to know that in these cases we still have judgment here, she believes that this one crime will bring “solely sovereign sway and masterdom”. In other words, she can see no further than the fulfilment of her husband’s dream and that means performing the action he has insisted he wants to perform.

That Macbeth and Lady Macbeth love each other seems clear from the intimacy of their early contacts, but the nature of that love is different. His thoughts are always of himself, and she functions as a support. Her thoughts are always of him, and she is happy to serve him. Misguided though she is, her motive for killing Duncan is to give her husband what he wants, because otherwise he, and therefore she, will never rest. It is a situation perfectly summed up later by Macbeth himself:

“.....Better be with the dead,
Whom we to gain our peace, have sent to peace...”

Once we acknowledge that Lady Macbeth’s motivation is to bring peace of mind to the man she loves, the subsequent development of the relationship and of her own tragedy is as logical as is Macbeth’s descent from popular general to detested butcher. She is able to suppress her own nature so long as she is required to play her supporting role, but once this function has become superfluous, her true nature reasserts itself, and there can be no relief from her suffering except death.

In Act 1 Sc. 7, though, she is totally immersed in her role. Macbeth’s resolve has weakened, and so her task is to stiffen it. She finds the most terrible image a woman can summon up:

“..... 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.”

And her detractors point the finger as if she had really done it, whereas her noble husband, who will indeed have babes slaughtered, wears the mantle of tragic hero. This image is part of the role-playing, but can we really believe that this woman, who could not kill Duncan because he resembled her father, would perform such a deed? Lady Macbeth’s cruelty consists of nothing but words, and these words – although chosen, of course, to have maximum effect – have no relation to any reality.

And yet even now, Macbeth is not convinced, because the fact of the matter is that she has not solved the problem that has really caused his hesitation. Only after she has come up with a plan to drug the grooms and blame them – only then does he change his mind. Why? What has happened to the moral scruples, to the duties of kinsman, subject and host, to the virtues that will plead, trumpet-tongued, against the deep damnation of this deed? They have become irrelevant, because what was holding Macbeth back was fear of the consequences to himself. Her plan would seem to offer an escape route.

Would Macbeth have gone ahead if it hadn't been for his wife's influence? The question is tempting, but any answer must remain pure speculation. Far more apposite is the question: could Lady Macbeth have forced him to do something he did not want to do? The enthusiasm with which he greets her plan, and indeed immediately begins to elaborate on it, suggests that she has read him accurately:

“.....Bring forth men children only!
For thy undaunted mettle should compose
Nothing but males. Will it not be received,
When we have mark'd with blood those sleepy two
Of his own chamber, and us'd their very daggers,
That they have done't?”

The escape route does not make the feat any less terrible, but he has known this from the very beginning, since the power of his imagination set his heart knocking at his ribs in Scene 3. Lady Macbeth, however, has had no such vision of the murder, and indeed is unlikely to have had any encounter with the brutal shedding of blood to which her husband is so accustomed. She will, in due course, find that words and reality are not the same thing.

In Act I Sc. 3 Macbeth's conscience and imagination worked together to make his heart knock and his hair stand on end at the thought of the murder. Now, before he commits the crime, they confront him with the sight of the dagger. He is completely alone, and so we hear his innermost thoughts. It is clear from all he says that his wife plays no part in them. He thinks only of what he has to do, but the deed will be his alone, and there is no question of reluctance or fear of what his wife might say if he fails. The only pressure is from within.

As for Lady Macbeth, this so-called fiend has needed a drink to give herself courage: “That which hath made them drunk hath made me bold.” Nevertheless, her jumpiness is all too evident when the owl shrieks. Her thoughts, as ever, are with her husband: he is “about it” . and when he calls out, her fragmented lines again show her agitation. And yet when the even more agitated Macbeth appears, she dismisses the very noise that had made her jump earlier: “I heard the owl scream, and the crickets cry.” In his presence, she must resume the role of the calm executioner, even if Duncan's resemblance to her father apparently prevented her from playing it literally.

Macbeth's state of near panic produces nothing but straightforward answers and comments from her, balancing his weakness with her strength. There is an unusual degree of prescience in her remark that “...These deeds must not be thought/After these ways: so, it will make us mad”, but even here, we may find the same separation that marks so much of their relationship. The death of sleep and the threatened madness have different roots: in him they grow from fear of future retribution; in her they grow from the terrors of the past. The

distinction is fundamental: he will not sleep because of what may be done to him: she will not sleep because of what has been done to others.

Macbeth's failure to leave the knives behind brings forth more bold talk and action: what Macbeth cannot do must be done by her. And while we share in his horror at what he has done, and sympathize with his expression of that horror, she must conquer her own hidden fears and cover her hands with blood. Not until Act 5 will we learn her true feelings at this moment, for now she has no choice but to make light of them. "A little water clears us of this deed," she tells him, and we compare these cold, conscienceless words with Macbeth's stricken: "Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood/Clean from my hand?" And we take the appearance for the reality. Had we known at the time that she was thinking, "All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand," perhaps we should have been less horrified by her callousness. She has to hide her true feelings. Without her self-discipline and matter-of-factness, Macbeth will give their secret away, and since he is incapable at this moment of organizing their actions, she must do it.

A significant feature of Macbeth's character is his swift powers of recovery, and these are closely connected to his relationship with Lady Macbeth. From near paralysis at the end of Scene 2, he is able just a few minutes later to conduct a normal conversation with Macduff and Lennox, and then to move on to his next murders. We shall see precisely the same phenomenon after the Banquet Scene, when terror at the appearance of Banquo's ghost gives way almost at once to plans for the next possible murder (Macduff) and a visit to the witches. There is no mystery to this. Macbeth hides nothing from his wife. His powerful emotions spill out, and once they have found expression, they are gone. It is Lady Macbeth who absorbs them, but she can never express her own terrors. In her self-imposed role she must suppress every sign of doubt, fear, horror. And so these feelings fester inside her, revealing themselves only indirectly, as in Scene 3, with the discovery of the body and all its attendant circumstances.

What is most striking in this scene is the self-control of Macbeth and the single action of Lady Macbeth. His genuinely moving speech, with all its double meanings, reveals a man now fully in command of himself and of his language. ("Had I but died an hour before this chance,/I had liv'd a blessed time...") Only when he has to defend his murder of the grooms does that language lose some of its naturalness, with talk of silver skin laced with golden blood. It is this unnaturalness that causes some critics to speculate on the genuineness of Lady Macbeth's fainting fit, the argument being that she is afraid he will give the game away, and so tries to distract attention from him. In other words, her motive is to protect both him and herself from any conduct that might arouse suspicion. To do so, she will certainly have to remain in his presence, and yet astonishingly her cry is: "Help me hence, ho!" and then she allows herself to be carried out – away from the man whom she must at all costs protect. There is an inconsistency in such thinking which scarcely conforms to what we have seen of her character. After the murder, and later during the Banquet Scene, she takes the most practical line, and is always articulate and concise in her dealings both with Macbeth and with others. A mere "Help me hence, ho!" will convince nobody of anything.

If, however, we consider this scene in relation to Lady Macbeth's whole story, it takes

on a very different logic. Here is a woman who has deliberately suppressed the more tender qualities of her nature in order to help her husband gain what he longs for. She prepares the way for him, chatting with the grooms and getting them drunk and drugged, waiting with them until at last they are fast asleep. She even drinks with them, to give herself courage. Then she strikes on the bell and waits in agitated suspense to see whether he will commit the murder. He does so, but is in such a state that she must hide her own nervousness and take command. He refuses to go back with the daggers, leaving her to walk past the snoring grooms, to confront the appalling sight of the blood-covered Duncan, to dip her own hands in his blood (“...who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?”), then to smear it over the grooms. Macbeth, a hardened soldier, could not bear to do this, and so what must have been her emotions? Yet on returning, once again she must hide them, and pretend that it is all nothing: “My hands are of your colour; but I shame / To wear a heart so white.”

Now the two grooms are also dead. Macbeth, a man too full of the milk of human kindness to catch the nearest way, has killed them quite spontaneously. He stands there describing the bloody scene: gashed stabs, ruin’s wasteful entrance, the daggers unmannerly breeched with gore. How much can Lady Macbeth take? Even if her conscious control will never waver, there are forces far more powerful than the conscious mind. Eventually they will make their presence felt most forcibly in Act V Sc. 1, but here in Act II Sc. 3 they break through for the first time. “Help me hence, ho!” is the cry of a woman who cannot remain in this blood-soaked place any longer. She is carried out because she is incapable of carrying herself out. Briefly, her nature has reasserted itself, and the separation from her husband marks the beginning of the breakdown of their marriage.

ACT THREE

When Macbeth is sure of himself, he has no need of his wife, and so her role automatically becomes peripheral. This is the case at the beginning of Act III, where he subtly questions Banquo about his and Fleance’s movements. Apart from one gracious comment on Banquo’s expected presence at the feast, she has nothing at all to say and, even more significantly, she finds herself dismissed along with all the others: “To make society the sweeter welcome,/We will keep ourself till supper-time alone.” No acknowledgement of her, no reason given, no special word of reassurance. Just what this means to her will become clear in Scene 2, but for the moment she must disappear from view while he prepares the murder of Banquo:

“To be thus is nothing, but to be safely thus...”

Fear of the consequences, which had held him back from his first murder, now dominates all his actions. Banquo could be the man to punish him, and so Banquo must die. No moral scruples here, no milk of human kindness and no thought of or consultation with his wife. His thoughts are only of himself:

“For Banquo’s issue have I fil’d my mind;
For them the gracious Duncan have I murther’d;
Put rancours in the vessel of my peace,

Only for them; and mine eternal jewel
Given to the common Enemy of man..."

Lady Macbeth is irrelevant. And therein lies the supreme irony of her story. She "fil'd" her mind for Macbeth; she helped to murder Duncan, put rancours in the vessel of her peace, and lost her soul for him. And the price she must now pay is a terrible one. Already he is beginning to ignore her – not because he has turned against her, but because she simply does not matter any more. He does not need her. While her world revolves around him, his world revolves around himself, and he will only draw her in when it suits him to do so.

It is evident from the development of Scene 2 that Lady Macbeth knows nothing of her husband's plan to murder Banquo – and indeed, why should he have consulted with her, since he is the military hero, at ease with matters of strategy and death. Nevertheless, perhaps she has an inkling that something is wrong, since she asks the servant whether Banquo has left the court. No doubt in the interim she has been pondering over the conversation her husband had held with Banquo, for his pointed questions could not have escaped her attention.

Back in the days when Macbeth needed her support, he would come to her. Now she must send messages to gain his attention:

"Say to the King, I would attend his leisure
For a few words."

We shall see in a moment precisely why she wants to talk to him, but before he comes, we are given the briefest of insights into her torment:

".....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."

The lines apply equally to her own situation and to Macbeth's, and indeed the two are inseparable. If he is unhappy, she cannot be happy. They have gained the crown, but it has not brought them "solely sovereign sway and masterdom" as she had expected. Only she has not understood what has gone wrong, just as she never understood the real reason for Macbeth's initial hesitation. Her doubtful joy has quite different roots from his.

When he enters, her very first words explain her need to talk to him, and they shed a telling light on her silent departure in Scene 1:

"How now, my Lord? why do you keep alone..."

This man is the centre of her world, and he seems now to be avoiding her. Being Queen of Scotland is an irrelevance, since she remains locked in the role of Lady Macbeth, her husband's wife. What is this role worth if she is not required any more to play it?

The answer to her question has already been given to us in Macbeth's soliloquy ("To be thus" etc.), but she knows nothing of this or of the dialogue with the murderers. She has been left to ponder the reasons for herself, and the explanation she comes up with is pathetically wide of the mark:

"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."

Into his mind she places all the feelings of guilt and remorse that should spring from the milk of human kindness she attributed to him. She imagines him sitting alone, weeping over Duncan, whereas we know that he is sitting alone planning to protect himself from future dangers. But her words do not only betray her misreading of his character. The revelations of Act V Scene 1 make it all too clear that what's done is not done, and it does not take a great deal of psychological insight to divine that her own "doubtful joy" derives as much from thoughts of Duncan as from her husband's aloofness. "'Tis safer to be that which we destroy" shows that her mind is working backwards into the past, and not forwards into the future. Macbeth's reply gives a succinct summary of his own reasons for doubtful joy. He envies Duncan:

"After life's fitful fever he sleeps well;
Treason has done his worst: nor steel, nor poison,
Malice domestic, foreign levy, nothing
Can touch him further!"

The terrible dreams that shake him nightly are of future dangers, whereas Lady Macbeth's are of past horrors.

In vain she tries to play her role of the supportive wife, telling him to be jovial at the banquet, to stop resenting the need for hypocrisy, not to worry about Banquo and Fleance, since they too are mortal, but he is already far ahead of her. As ever, he wants to talk about what is on his mind, and as he paints the gruesome picture of the "deed of dreadful note", her silence is far more eloquent than any speech:

"Thou marvell'st at my words: but hold thee still;
Things bad begun make strong themselves by ill.
So pr'ythee, go with me."

Does she have a choice? At no time in the play does Macbeth himself ever lay one word of reproach on his wife for her part in setting him on this road to evil. He knows, even if some of us do not, that what he has done is his own responsibility, and he knows, even if some of us do not, that killing is his profession, not hers. She is still his "dearest chuck", but she has no control over him, no further part to play in his career, no function other than to watch the horrors accumulate.

Only once will she again be called upon to act, to resume the tough veneer so necessary when his resolve falters. Graciously she reminds him to pay attention to his guests when he busies himself with the murderer, and then, on the appearance of Banquo's ghost, she has to cover up for him and bring him back to reality. We learn

now that he had told her about the vision of the dagger – yet another instance of his unloading his nightmares onto her. And it is she who must cope now with his repeated vision of Banquo’s ghost. She takes command, struggles to calm his terror, dismisses the lords, and then – astonishingly – finds him already moving forwards to the next stage of his murderous career. His terror has gone, and he seems to have found new energy, while her responses are brief and, by comparison with his firm and resolute speeches, unmistakably weary.

MACBETH: How say’st thou, that Macduff denies his person
At our great bidding?

LADY M: Did you send to him, Sir?

The very formality of “Sir” denotes the gulf between them, and the declarations that follow owe nothing to her influence:

“..... For mine own good,
All causes shall give way.....”

Indeed, this has been the case right from the start, but now she will see the full extent of the horrors she must learn to live with:

“..... I am in blood
Stepp’d in so far, that, should I wade no more,
Returning were as tedious as go o’er.”

He is unstoppable, and her attempt to explain the irrationality of his intended cruelty is almost pathetic in its irrelevance:

“You lack the season of all natures, sleep.”

Perhaps she is hoping that a good night’s sleep will bring back the kind man she thought she had married, but no amount of sleep will change a nature that puts its own interests before all others:

“Come, we’ll to sleep. My strange and self-abuse
Is the initiate fear, that wants hard use:
We are yet but young in deed.”

There is nothing more that she can do or say, and just as his natural instincts for survival will destroy all humane feelings within him, so will the compunctious visitings of Nature open up the passage to remorse in her, ultimately driving her to suicide.

ACT FOUR

Lady Macbeth does not appear in Act IV, and while Macbeth’s murderous presence continues to overshadow even the scenes in which he plays no part, his wife has become virtually superfluous. He has no need of her, and indeed he does not even think of her.

His second meeting with the witches has one purpose only: he is “bent to know,/By the worst means, the worst.” In fact, he is seeking reassurance, which is why he is so willing to be misled by the prophecies, but what is important to our understanding of Lady Macbeth is his total dedication to himself. The man who is willing to see “the treasure / Of Nature’s germens tumble all together, / Even till destruction sicken” is not the one she thought she had married – the one whom she thought to be without the illness that should attend ambition, the one who would gain his desires holily, the one who would not play false. We saw already in Act One that she had misread whole areas of his character, for she would never have experienced his ruthlessness in battle, and she was unaware that his hesitancy was due far less to moral scruples than to his fear of the consequences. His resolution at the end of Act III (“For mine own good, / All causes shall give way”) is only an articulation of the egotism that has marked his behaviour from the very beginning. The scene with the witches now reinforces this total dedication to self, as well as stating openly the nature of his preoccupation:

“.....our high-plac’d Macbeth
Shall live the lease of Nature, pay his breath
To time and mortal custom.”

Nothing has changed since Act I, when he was in fear of the bloody instructions that might return to plague the inventor. What will have changed is Lady Macbeth’s view of him. The savagery of his next resolution – the senseless slaughter of Macduff’s family – merely confirms the pattern started with the murder of the grooms. She had thought that the murder of Duncan would be the end-all, leaving them with “solely sovereign sway and masterdom”, but as the play has progressed, she has had to witness more and more bloodshed, while herself becoming more and more isolated. By attempting to suppress her own nature, she helped to bring out the inherent and ruthless self-centredness of his. The effect on her, as we shall see in Act V is devastating.

ACT FIVE

In less than 100 lines, Shakespeare takes Lady Macbeth back through all the nightmares that will lead to her suicide, but by now it is certainly too late for the anti-Lady-Macbeth lobby to register the full significance of these relived experiences. Just as she held her own weaknesses in check for Macbeth’s sake, so too must she forfeit the critics’ sympathy for not making those weaknesses explicit right from the start. Instead of asking the evil spirits to fill her top-full of the direst cruelty, she should have told us that she was frightened. Instead of praying for remorse to be kept out, she should have told us that remorse might hold her back. Instead of offering her milk for gall, she should have told us that she had milk and not gall. Upon such niceties do judgements rest.

There is, however, another reason why Lady Macbeth fails to arouse our sympathy earlier in the play: her astonishing self-control. Our hearts do not warm to those who fail to show their suffering, whereas an openly repentant and weeping sinner will bring tears of recognition to our eyes. Of all races, the British are traditionally most adept at hiding their emotions, but the emotions are there nonetheless. At one moment in Act V Scene 1, they surface with a force that appals the listeners, but that is not

enough to counterbalance the prejudices already formed. Self-control is taken for lack of feeling, and since Macbeth has the foresight occasionally to show his feelings (off-loading them onto his wife), he is the tragic hero.

Scene 1 begins with the fact that the doctor and gentlewoman have been watching for two nights and nothing has happened. The implication seems to be, then, that during the day Lady Macbeth reveals none of her secrets – in other words, when she is conscious, she maintains her self-control. Some critics talk of her madness, but sleep-walking does not constitute insanity. It is true that Macbeth refers later to “a mind diseas’d”, but clearly the nocturnal revelations are regarded by the gentlewoman as being special, in which case the day sickness must be one of concealment and not confession. Most likely, she sits in total silence, lost in her terrible thoughts.

The sleep-walking began only when Macbeth “went into the field”, and so one may speculate that either he kept her quiet, or her latest experience of isolation has tipped the balance. It makes little difference either way. What matters here is the nature of her thoughts. The significance of the paper that she folds, writes on, reads and seals can again only be a matter of speculation. A confession, or a letter? If a letter, to whom? Perhaps to Macbeth, since he is away and since, in the past, they did correspond. But what, in her unconscious state, might she write to him? It is evident from the events that are to follow that her unconscious is preoccupied only with the past, and a letter to her husband recounting the past seems unlikely. The confession would fit in better with what follows, because she has no other way of unburdening herself. Her unconscious mind is desperate to tell its secrets, and if “deaf pillows” are one possible confidant, deaf paper may well be another.

Lady Macbeth has “light by her continually; ‘tis her command.” Her terror of the night is in stark contrast to her invocation in Act I:

“.....Come, thick Night,
And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of Hell,
That my keen knife see not the wound it makes,
Nor Heaven peep through the blanket of the dark,
To cry, ‘Hold, hold!’”

As late as Act III Scene 3, Macbeth continued to see the night as his ally: “Come seeling Night, / Scarf up the tender eye of pitiful Day...” and he has no fear of the secret, black, and midnight hags. But for Lady Macbeth, hell is murky, and murk is hell.

Before we listen in to the nightmares of Lady Macbeth, it is important to note that these are not retrospective views. There is no question here of conscience catching up with a villain, for she is unconscious, and her words are not reflective but immediate. She relives events of the past, and she speaks both words and thoughts of the time, not of her present. Thus she relives not only past emotions but also the role that she had to play, for that must in itself have been a nightmare, making her face and her voice vizards to her heart.

She begins by washing her hands, and finds herself unable to remove the blood. The damned spot is also the damning spot. She continues to wash (“What, will these hands

ne'er be clean?") but fails to remove the blood, a failure that culminates in the one moment of direct pathos that Shakespeare allows her:

“Here's the smell of the blood still: all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand. Oh! Oh! Oh!”

“What a sigh is there!” observes the doctor. “The heart is sorely charged.”

But this sigh is not of the present, for every utterance is of the relived past. And so the woman who informed her husband that “A little water clears us of this deed” was, at that very time, sighing inwardly with the appalling knowledge that her guilt would never be lifted from her. At the time, our hearts went out to Macbeth, as he cried:

“Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood
Clean from my hand? No, this my hand will rather
The multitudinous seas incarnadine,
Making the green one red.”

Lady Macbeth was forced to hide her real feelings, in order to lend her strength of purpose to her husband, but now in Act V we at last see the natural feelings which she then had to suppress. Her unconscious mind juggles with all the key moments that have ruined her life. “One; two: why, then 'tis time to do't.” Some critics take this as a reference to the clock, or to the bell she strikes, but the murder is not to be committed according to the clock, and the “why, then....” comment would surely precede the striking of the bell. The time to do it is when the two grooms are drunk and incapable, and so here she may well be reliving the moment at which she has succeeded in rendering them both unconscious. This would give added depth to her following comment that hell is murky, since both they (and she) are now in different forms of darkness. When she called upon thick night to pall itself in the “dunkest smoke of Hell”, she already knew – as did Macbeth – that they were damning themselves, but hell's darkness would have taken on a tangible reality when she stood confronted by the grooms who were to bear the guilt of the great quell.

“Fie, my Lord, fie! a soldier and afeard? .What need we fear who knows it,
when none can call our power to accompt?”

The remark that follows shows that she is reliving the moments of terror immediately after Duncan's death – perhaps when the two of them were washing their hands and putting on their nightgowns. The greater Macbeth's fear, the greater the effort required of her to calm it. No-one can deny that her remark represents the most cynical abuse of power, but how else could she have calmed her husband? The thoughts that were seething underneath this piece of dialogue are far less controlled, far less rational, far less cold-hearted:

“Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in
him?”

Her horror of that blood is already clear from her desperate attempts to wash it off her hands. The juxtaposition of her spoken words and her thoughts gives us a precise

account of the split between the role she must play and the real nature which she is suppressing.

“The Thane of Fife had a wife: where is she now?” News of the senseless and brutal murder of Lady Macduff and her children would have filled Lady Macbeth with horror. And she knows that by supporting her husband in that initial crime, she set in motion an unstoppable process of slaughter that will leave more and more blood on her hands. (“What, will these hands ne’er be clean?”) But again we must remind ourselves that these are past thoughts, not present. There is no sudden change – only the relentless reassertion of her true nature.

“No more o’ that, my Lord, no more o’ that: you mar all with this starting.” Not only must she cope with his panic, but she must also overcome the self-same feelings in herself. The little hand can never be sweetened, and yet she must go on pretending for his sake that they are cleared of the deed. The great sigh that escapes from her heart as she sleeps is the great sigh that lay in her heart all through the murder and its endlessly savage consequences.

The rest of the scene mixes moments from after the murders of Duncan and Banquo, but then comes the final irony: “What’s done cannot be undone.” She had said the same thing to him in Act III Scene 2:

“.....Things without all remedy
Should be without regard: what’s done is done.”

If we now bear in mind the sigh that broke from the sorely charged heart, we may reflect that the impossibility of changing the past, allied to her helplessness in the present as she sees her world disintegrating about her, constitutes a reality no-one could possibly bear indefinitely. She can talk about it to nobody, and even if there were a “divine” rather than a physician treating her, there is no possible undoing of what has been done.

Macbeth’s inquiries after his wife’s health are perfunctory. He knows what sorrows are rooted in her memory, and he knows that her case is incurable. But true to his nature, he is able to dismiss all thoughts except those pertaining to himself. Her illness is transformed into an image for what threatens him:

“.....If thou couldst, Doctor, cast
The water of my land, find her disease,
And purge it to a sound and pristine health,
I would applaud thee to the very echo.”

Since he knows that she cannot be cured, and since he has more immediate problems on his mind, there can be no question of his having summoned the doctor to the court – and in any case, she sleep-walking only began when he had gone forth into the field. Lady Macbeth herself would certainly not have sent for the doctor, for she too knows the nature of her illness, and knows that she can tell no-one of its causes. Presumably, then, the lure of profit was offered to him by the gentlewoman, and this shows a clear concern for the well-being of her employer. The cry of women that greets the death of

Lady Macbeth may also be a sign of concern, and it is certainly in stark contrast to the triumph that greets the death of her husband.

If Lady Macbeth were indeed the “fiend-like Queen” described by Malcolm, one wonders whether her personal attendant, and all those who make up her household, would indeed show concern or grief. Perhaps they know something the critics do not. Undoubtedly Macbeth does. Even when she dies, and even when, shortly before, he has been wallowing in self-pity (“that which should accompany old age,/As honour, love, obedience, troops of friend,/I must not look to have...”), there is not one tiny suggestion that anyone is to blame except himself. This is not thanks to some noble spirit of self-sacrifice. A man so totally dedicated to himself would scarcely miss the opportunity to lay blame on someone else, especially if that someone else were genuinely guilty. But she remains irrelevant to the very end.

It is thought that the Queen “by self and violent hands / Took off her life”, and the implications of this alone make nonsense of the epithet “fiend-like”. Fiends do not kill themselves because of the burden of evil on the conscience. Fiends rejoice in evil.

Lady Macbeth kills herself before the battle, and so it makes no difference to her whether Macbeth wins or loses. Her death, then, has nothing to do with their hopeless situation (though Macbeth himself does contemplate suicide for that reason: “Why should I play the Roman fool, and die / On mine own sword?”). It is her only means of escape from the terrors of the night that she helped to create. The conscience that drives her to suicide is that area of her nature which she set out to repress in Act One. We may argue that it is evil in itself to repress one's better nature, but a fiend does not have a better nature to repress. Lady Macbeth's tragedy lies precisely in the fact that she was not a fiend, but a vulnerable woman who misguidedly hardened her heart in order to help the man she loved.

Perhaps, then, we might retell her story as follows:

There was once a woman who greatly loved her husband. He was a military leader racked with ambition, and before he left home to fight a battle on behalf of the ageing King, he told his wife how much he longed for the crown, and informed her that he intended to kill the present King. She knew that he would never rest until he had achieved his desire. Despite his ambition, she thought that basically he was a kind and gentle man, and she knew that he was depending on her support to help him fulfil his dream. Therefore she resolved to help him. This meant ignoring her own scruples and conscience, and suppressing all the feminine traits of her own nature, but she thought that such a sacrifice would bring them happiness. Only when the murder had been committed, and the sight of the blood had become a reality, did she realize that this had been an appalling mistake. Her conscience would never leave her in peace, but she could not express any of her horror or her fears because her husband needed reassurance. At the same time, she began to see another side of his character: a ruthlessness that led him to further murders (and ultimately to monstrous egotism and cruelty). Increasingly she found herself isolated as he pursued his own security without consulting her. When she tried to rebuild their relationship, wrongly imagining that he was suffering from pangs of conscience similar to her own, she discovered that there were no such scruples: he was totally preoccupied with protecting himself from future dangers. Coping with his fears still entailed hiding her

own, but the strain of doing so gradually began to take its toll. In her isolation, she lost her one function in life –to help her husband – and was left to brood over the past and the terrible crimes taking place all around her in the present. Her guilt and her unhappiness were inescapable and unbearable, and so she killed herself.

If this is not a tragic story, then what is?

Other plays by David Henry Wilson

Short plays:

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“Mr Wilson’s writing has a freshness and individuality of its own. He clearly has an instinct for what ‘comes off’ on the stage.” *Financial Times*

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David Henry Wilson’s plays have been performed at many well-known theatres, including the Hampstead, Theatre Royal Stratford East, The King’s Head Islington, Leicester Haymarket, Sheffield Crucible, and many other fringe and provincial theatres, as well as abroad. His children’s books, especially the Jeremy James series, have been translated into several languages, as has his novel *The Coachman Rat*. He is married, with three grown-up children, and lives in Taunton, Somerset.

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Time Out

THE TRAGEDY OF LADY MACBETH

An essay

David Henry Wilson

**The Tragedy of
LADY MACBETH**

All inquiries to elaine@hopecorner.net

The Tragedy of LADY MACBETH

Characters:

Lady Macbeth
Catriona, a gentlewoman
Doctor
Macbeth
3 witches
2 grooms
Banquo
3 voices
Messenger

NOTE: The play may be performed by 6 actors/actresses, with the roles divided as follows:

Lady Macbeth
Catriona – 1st Witch – 2nd Voice
Doctor
Macbeth – 1st Voice
2nd Witch – 1st Groom – Banquo
3rd Witch – 2nd Groom – 3rd Voice – Messenger

The stage is bare, but divided into two sections. Stage left is considerably smaller and permanently lit. Stage right is the scene of all past actions, and is lit according to directions.

The Tragedy of LADY MACBETH was first performed at Christ's Hospital Theatre, Horsham, on 4 November 1994, and subsequently at the Mill Studio, Guildford, with the following cast:

Lady Macbeth	Amanda Beard
Catriona/1 st Witch	Christine Shields
Doctor	Richard Owens
Macbeth	Stephen Chance
2 nd Witch/2 nd Groom/Banquo	Nick Fawcett
3 rd Witch/1 st Groom/Messenger	Benn Totterdell
Director	Michael Friend
Designer	David Mysercough-
	Jones
Lighting	Leigh Porter
Production Manager	Amanda Jameson

The first London production was at the Jermyn Street Theatre on February 6 1995, with the following cast changes:

Doctor	Joe James
Macbeth	Andrew Wheaton

**The Tragedy of
LADY MACBETH**

Lights up stage left on Lady Macbeth, staring into space. Catriona enters stage left.

CATRIONA: The doctor's here, my lady.

LADY M: Let him enter.

Catriona brings in the doctor.

Thank you, Catriona. Now you may leave us.

Catriona goes.

Canst thou not minister to a mind diseased?

The doctor is embarrassed.

Pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow?

DOCTOR: No, your highness.

LADY M.: So you informed my husband.

DOCTOR: I did, your highness.

LADY M.: And he mocked your art.

DOCTOR: He said he would throw physic to the dogs.

LADY M.: He would kill the physician
And the fee bestow upon the foul disease.
I did not send for thee?

DOCTOR: No, your highness.

LADY M.: I could not, would not do't. Yet thou art here
To see the final battle lost and won.
Do you hear anything, sir, of a battle toward?

DOCTOR: I think the King will keep in Dusinane
And endure the English setting down before't.

LADY M.: That cannot be. Fate has decreed a battle.
And he will die, slain by the Thane of Fife.

DOCTOR: How do you know ...

LADY M.: All that live must die,
Passing through nature to eternity.
The readiness is all. Confess and die.
Hear my confession, doctor. Wilt thou hear it?
For such an act of kindness shalt thou have

A diamond that King Duncan gave to me,
Greeting me with the name of most kind hostess.

DOCTOR: I am no priest, your highness.

LADY M.: The priests have gone.
They flee from places so unsanctified.

She holds out the diamond. He hesitates, then takes it.

I will a round unvarnished tale deliver
Of one that loved not wisely but too well.

She crosses to stage right. Lights up on Macbeth.

MACBETH: My dearest love, Madonald has rebelled.

LADY M.: Has he an army?

MACBETH: Kernes and Gallowglasses
Brought from the western isles, and other rebels.

LADY M.: Then you must fight.

MACBETH: Yes, to defend the King.
Is not the King's name a tower of strength?
So excellent a King, so meek, so clear
In his great office. All must serve this King.

LADY M.: You're bitter.

MACBETH: As coloquintida.

LADY M.: He loves and honours you.

MACBETH: And so I'll fight,
And then the King will honour me again.
With honours deep and broad he'll load our house.
But there's no honour can remove or choke
The strong conception I do groan withal.

LADY M.: What is't you mean?

MACBETH: The crown. I want the crown.

Pause.

LADY M.: One day you may be King.

MACBETH: One day! May be!
I know my price! I am worth no worse a place!
I want the balm, the sceptre and the ball,
The sword, the mace, the crown imperial,
The intertissued robe of gold and pearl,

The farcèd title running 'fore the king,
The throne he sits on, and the tide of pomp
That beats upon the high shore of this world.

LADY M.: When Duncan dies, you could be chosen King.

MACBETH: Duncan may live another twenty years,
Or make young Malcolm Prince of Cumberland.
Where is my kingship then?

LADY M.: You must have patience.

MACBETH: Patience shares his apples with the worms.

LADY M.: There is no other way.

MACBETH: One way there is.

LADY M.: What way?

MACBETH: The nearest. Removing of the King.

LADY M.: How do you mean, removing of the King?

MACBETH: Murder most foul, as in the best it is.
But foul is fair when good cometh from bad.

LADY M.: To kill a king?

MACBETH: Kings have been killed ere now.
I cannot rest. I had rather be a toad,
And live upon the vapour of a dungeon,
Than keep a corner in the thing I love
For others' uses.

Pause, as she studies his face.

LADY M.: When could you do this deed?
Nor time nor place do now adhere.

MACBETH: But I
Will make them both. Do thou with me stand,
And the deed is done. By yond marble heaven,
In the due reverence of a sacred vow
I here engage my words. The King shall die,
And you and I will mount the throne of Scotland.

Another pause as she hesitates.

If you do love me, you will stand with me.

LADY M.: Witness, you ever-burning lights above!
You elements that clip us round about!
Witness that here I give up wit, hands, heart

To serve my King, what bloody business ever.

*They embrace. Macbeth goes off, and Lady M. returns to the doctor.
Lights out stage right.*

DOCTOR: My lady, I have heard what I should not.

LADY M.: Hear my speech, good doctor, say thou nought.
That I do love Macbeth to live with him,
And die with him, my downright violence
May trumpet to the world. I stayed behind,
A moth of peace, and he went to the war.
But he and I needed reassurance,
And so to make assurance double sure
I journeyed to the heath.

Thunder. Lights up stage right on the witches. Lady M. stands to one side, watching.

1st WITCH: Where has thou been, sister?

2nd WITCH: Digging hemlock.

1st WITCH: And sister, thou?

3rd WITCH: Nightshade gathering.
What hast thou done, sister?

1st WITCH: A deed of kind.
A soldier's wife walked I' the wood,
And from her eyes let fall a flood.
Her husband's fighting in the war.
She fears she'll see him nevermore.
"Alas?" she cries, "he will be killed
Upon the bloody battlefield!"
"Fear not," I told the soldier's wife,
"No sword will take your husband's life."
In gratitude the foolish thing
Then gave to me this precious ring.
She does not guess – so blind is hope –
The traitor will die on a rope.

The witches laugh.

1st WITCH (contd.): For us no rest.
We have a guest.
Stand not apart,
Whoe'er thou art.
The Weird Sisters stand in wait
To answer questions on thy fate.

Lady M. enters hesitantly.

LADY M.: I am

1st WITCH: Do not insult our charms.
Thy husband is the Thane of Glamis.

LADY M.: How do you know this? How do you know
I come to ask you questions on my fate?

1st WITCH: Why would so great a lady come
To visit us in our poor home?

2nd WITCH: The past is passed, the present's here,
Only the future is to fear.

3rd WITCH: And mortals ever make assay
To view tomorrow from today.

LADY M.: Will you tell me what I want to know?

1st WITCH: Pay us well,
And we shall tell.

2nd WITCH: Pay us badly,
'Twill go sadly.

3rd WITCH: Pay us high,
Thou shalt not sigh.

LADY M.: I bring you this in payment.

She hands them a small bag. They gather round and peer inside it.

Is it enough?

1st WITCH: Ask thy questions. Have no fear,
For we shall speak what thou wilt hear.

LADY M.: Will the Thane of Glamis be King of Scotland?

3 WITCHES: He shall be King.

LADY M.: What must be done for him to gain the crown?

1st WITCH: In hidden futures we are wise,
But do not ask us to advise.

LADY M.: Then tell me how King Duncan is to die.

1st WITCH: King Duncan will yield forth his life
To the murderer's sharp knife.

Lady M. gasps

LADY M.: What must be shall be. Is your art so fine
That you can tell whose hand will wield the knife?

It is too full o' the milk of human kindness
To catch the nearest way. It is too full
O' the milk of human kindness!...

She breaks down. The doctor comes across to her.

DOCTOR: Your highness, you live upon the rack ...

LADY M.: *(in despair)* I was wrong!

Pause. She regains control.

Let me tell my story.

The doctor withdraws.

There is a message: Duncan comes here tonight.
The time and place are made.

The following prayer is an urgent plea, through which it is clear that 'remorse' and 'compunctious visitings' are her nature, which she is desperate to suppress.

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 th'access and passage to remorse;
That no compunctious visitings of Nature
Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between
Th'effect and it! Come to my woman's breasts,
And take my milk for gall, you murth'ring ministers,
Wherever in your sightless substances
You wait on Nature's mischief! Come, thick Night,
And pall thee in the dunkest smoke of Hell,
That my keen knife see not the wound it makes,
Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark,
To cry, 'Hold, hold!'

DOCTOR: What Devil's prayer is this?
Why did you do this thing?

LADY M.: To help my husband.

DOCTOR: A prayer to crack Nature's mould!

LADY M.: *(crying:)* To be made strong!

DOCTOR: Strength would have been to wait and not to kill.

LADY M.: I could not look into the seeds of time.

DOCTOR: We have not more in us than mortal knowledge.

LADY M.: My husband had. Through his imagination.

Imagination, doctor, bodies forth
The forms of things unknown. He saw beyond,
While I saw nothing. Nothing beyond the crown.
When he came home, I told him he must put
The night's great business into my dispatch,
Which would to all our nights and days to come
Give solely sovereign sway and masterdom.
All our nights and days! This I believed!
The stars would hide their fires for one dark night,
And then we'd come with heaven's benediction
Into the warm sun. I saw no blood.
And when my husband wavered, I stood firm,
Thinking without the crown he'd never sleep,
Not knowing that the crown would kill all sleep.

Macbeth has entered. During the following dialogue it must be borne in mind that his hesitancy is due to his fear of the consequences (1, 7, lines 1-12). His decision and resistance are therefore half-hearted, and Lady M. knows that deep down he wants to be persuaded. Her tone is not aggressive but gently reasoning.

MACBETH: We will proceed no further in this business:
He hath honour'd me of late; and I have bought
Golden opinions from all sorts of people,
Which would be worn now in their newest gloss,
Not cast aside so soon.

LADY M.: Was the hope drunk
Wherein you dress'd yourself? Hath it slept since?
And wakes it now, to look so green and pale
At what it did so freely? From this time
Such I account thy love. Art thou afeard
To be the same in thine own act and valour,
As thou art in desire? Would'st thou have that
Which thou esteem'st the ornament of life,
And live a coward in thine own esteem,
Letting 'I dare not' wait upon 'I would'.
Like the poor cat I' the adage?

MACBETH: Pr'ythee, peace.
I dare do all that may become a man;
Who dares do more, is none.

LADY M.: What beast was't then,
That made you break this enterprise to me?
When you durst do it, then you were a man;
And, to be more than what you were, you would
Be so much more the man. Nor time, nor place,
Did then adhere, and yet you would make both:
They have made themselves, and that their fitness now
Doth unmake you. 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

Of revels. But one cup. I'll drink for you.

2nd GROOM: But we must guard the King!

LADY M.: What? In our house?
He's safe in our house. Who would harm him here?
Come, I'll drink one last round with you myself.

She sings as she doctors the drinks, and they join in:

And let me the cannikin clink, clink.
And let me the cannikin clink, clink.
A soldier's a man,
A life's but a span,
Why then let a soldier drink.
Take it. And you. To the health of His Majesty.

1st GROOM: The health of His Majesty.

2nd GROOM: His Majesty.

Lady M.: (*also drinking*): There. Good wine is a good familiar creature
If 't be well used.

1st GROOM: It's using me for sleep.

2nd GROOM: We mustn't sleep. We must guard the King.

LADY M.: The King doth wake tonight and takes his rouse.

2nd GROOM: No, he sleeps!

1st GROOM: My spirits grow dull, and fain
I would beguile the tedious day with sleep.

He lies down upstage. The 2nd Groom sits.

LADY M.: I'll watch for you. Sleep rock thy brain,
And never come mischance between you twain.

The 2nd Groom lies down. She opens a door, and gazes off stage.

Innocent sleep. To sleep: perchance to dream.
One, two. Why then, 'tis time to do it.
Could I do it? (*Full of pity*) Foolish, fold old man.
(*Self-reproachful*) I lack iniquity to do me service.

She rings a bell.

DOCTOR: What are you doing?

LADY M.: Signalling to my husband.

She now becomes very agitated:

That which hath made them drunk hath made me bold:

What hath quench'd them hath given me fire. – Hark! – Peace!
It was the owl that shriek'd, the fatal bellman,
Which gives the stern'st goodnight. He is about it.
The doors are open; and the surfeited grooms
Do mock their charge with snores: I have drugg'd their possets,
That Death and Nature do contend about them,
Whether they live or die.

MACBETH: *(off)* Who's there? What, ho!

LADY M.: Alack! I am afraid they have awak'd,
And 'tis not done: - th'attempt and not the deed
Confounds us. – Hark! – I laid the daggers ready;
He could not miss 'em – Had he not resembled
My father as he slept, I had done't. My father!
To be tender-hearted does not become the assassin.
And yet My father – methinks I see my father

DOCTOR: Where, my lady?

LADY M.: In my mind's eye, doctor.
He looks upon me, and he shakes his head.

Macbeth has entered upstage.

Why did you bring these daggers from the place?
They must lie there: go, carry them, and smear
The sleepy grooms with blood.

MACBETH: I'll go no more:
I am afraid to think what I have done;
Look on't again I dare not.

LADY M.: Infirm of purpose!
Give me the daggers. The sleeping, and the dead,
Are but as pictures; 'tis the eye of childhood
That fears a painted devil. If he do bleed,
I'll gild the faces of the grooms withal,
For it must seem their guilt.

She goes upstage, but away from the grooms, and stands in evident terror.

It must be done.

She steels herself, and goes off, returning a moment later, horror-struck.

Yet who would have thought the old man
To have had so much blood in him?

She gazes wide-eyed at her hands.

Oh God, forgive me!

She pulls herself together, crosses to the grooms, lays the daggers beside them, and smears them with blood.

All the perfumes of Arabia will not
Sweeten this little hand. Oh! Oh! Oh!

Sound of knocking. She is startled.

Whence is that knocking? No, be calm, be calm.
You heavens, give me courage, courage I need!

She returns to Macbeth.

My hands are of your colour; but I shame
To wear a heart so white. I hear a knocking
At the south entry: - retire we to our chamber.
A little water clears us of this deed;
How easy is it then! Your constancy
Hath left you unattended. Hark! More knocking.
Get on your nightgown, lest occasion call us,
And show us to be watchers. - Be not lost
So poorly in your thoughts.

MACBETH: To know my deed, 'twere best not know myself.
Wake Duncan with thy knocking; I would thou couldst!

Macbeth goes out.

LADY M.: I would thou couldst. What's done cannot be undone.

DOCTOR: What happened when the body was discovered?

LADY M.: He killed the grooms.

DOCTOR: Wherefore did he so?

LADY M.: Security. Men put an enemy
In their mouths to steal away their brains,
But waking may see half-remembered things -
The hand that held the cup, or swung the knife.
Blood will have blood. Now I began to feel
Our secret murder sticking on our hands.
Duncan is dead. We are yet but young in deed.
Duncan is dead, after life's fitful fever.
Life's fitful fever. Duncan is dead, the grooms,
And we shall sleep no more! Help me hence, ho!

*She faints. Lights out stage right. Silence. A sudden piercing scream.
Lights up on Lady M., sitting wide-eyed.*

DOCTOR: Was it a dream?

LADY M.: Duncan. Always Duncan.
Had I as many eyes as he had wounds,

They'd weep as fast as he streamed forth his blood.

DOCTOR: You asked to be helped from thence, and then you fainted.

LADY M.: What was done could never be undone,
And would to all our nights and days to come
Give solely sovereign fear and martyrdom.

Macbeth enters.

MACBETH: Banquo suspects. Macduff was asking questions.

LADY M.: These are the very paintings of your fear.
Just as you saw the dagger, heard the voice,
So now you read into these men's speakings
Meanings they do not have.

MACBETH: Why did you faint?

LADY M.: A mere pretence, to stop you mammering on
Of Duncan's silver skin and golden blood.

MACBETH: I had to kill the grooms. I had to act.

LADY M.: You also had to grieve.

She crosses to the doctor.

DOCTOR: You lied to him.

LADY M.: He must not know!

DOCTOR: That way madness lies.

LADY M.: I am not mad. Better I were distract.
So should my thoughts be severed from my griefs.

DOCTOR: Why did you lie?

LADY M.: If he had known my thoughts,
How could he have told his thoughts to me?

DOCTOR: My lady, you have supped full with horrors.

LADY M.: I threw a stone. The ripples never ended.
Thou hast it now: King, Cawdor, Glamis, all
As the Weird Women promised. And I fear.

Banquo enters stage right. Lady M. stands halfway between Macbeth and the doctor.

MACBETH: Here's our chief guest.

LADY M.: If he had been forgotten,
It had been as a gap in our great feast,

And all-thing unbecoming.

MACBETH: Tonight we hold a solemn supper, Sir,
And I'll request your presence.

BANQUO: Let your Highness
Command upon me, to the which my duties
Are with a most indissoluble tie
For ever knit.

MACBETH: Ride you this afternoon?

BANQUO: Ay, my good Lord.

MACBETH: We should have else desir'd your good advice
(Which still hath been both grave and prosperous)
In this day's council; but we'll take tomorrow.
Is't far you ride?

The dialogue continues inaudibly.

LADY M.: Why does he question him?
Why do his fears in Banquo stick so deep?
There was a time when I could find his mind's
Construction in his face, but now his face
Is vizard to his heart.

MACBETH: Goes Fleance with you?

BANQUO: Ay, my good Lord: our time does call upon's.

MACBETH: I wish your horses swift and sure of foot;
And so I do commend you to their backs.
Farewell.

Banquo bows and goes out.

Let every man be master of his time
Till seven at night.
To make society the sweeter welcome ...

He looks directly at Lady M.:

We will keep ourself till supper time alone.

She stands gazing at him.

While then, God be with you.

He goes out.

LADY M.: What have I done? Oh, by this light of heaven,
I know not how I lost him. Yet he's gone.
Comfort forswear me! Unkindness may do much;

And his unkindness may defeat my life,
But never taint my love. Why has he gone?
For his dream have I defiled my mind,
Put rancours in the vessel of my peace,
And to the common enemy of man
Given mine eternal jewel. For what?
Discharging secrets only to deaf pillows?
No, I must talk to him. He must confide
His deep to me, so I may quench his guilt.
Why did he question Banquo? Catriona!

Catriona enters.

Is Banquo gone from court?

CATRIONA: Ay madam, but returns again tonight.

LADY M.: Say to the King, I would attend his leisure
For a few words.

CATRIONA: Yes, madam.

She goes out.

LADY M.: 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.

Macbeth enters.

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.

She turns away from him.

Oh wrong! Wrong! Wrong! Wrong! Wrong!

DOCTOR: What do you mean, your Highness? What was wrong?

LADY M.: The sorry fancies that were his companions
Never contained one jot of Duncan's blood,
Nor one small milky sip of human kindness.
I was the one whose thoughts ought to have died
With them they thought on. He had no regard
For what was done.

MACBETH: We've scorched the snake, not killed it:
She'll close and be herself; whilst our poor malice
Remains in danger of her former tooth.

DOCTOR: What is this snake?

LADY M.: The deadly snake of fear.
His thoughts ran forward. Only I looked back.

MACBETH: Let the frame of things disjoint, both the worlds suffer,
Ere we will eat our meal in fear, and sleep
In the affliction of these terrible dreams
That shake us nightly.

DOCTOR: So he dreamed as well.

LADY M.: But not of Duncan! His dreams were of Banquo!
I dreamed of the blood that we had shed,
But in his dreams the blood shed was his own!
Oh doctor, within the hollow crown
That rounds the mortal temples of a king,
Keeps Death his court. My husband lived in terror.
And so alone he planned his secret murders,
Not to be thus, but to be safely thus.
He had no need of me to fight his battles.
And scarcely had he buried Banquo's ghost,
When he began to scorch another snake.

MACBETH: What is the night?

LADY M. (*exhausted:*) Almost at odds with morning, which is which.

MACBETH: How say'st thou that Macduff denies his person
At our great bidding?

LADY M.: Did you send to him, Sir?

MACBETH: I hear it by the way; but I will send.
There's not a one of them but in his house
I keep a servant fee'd.

LADY M.: (*returning to the doctor:*) How can a man,
Almost dead for fear, within bare minutes
Contemplate new murders? Duncan's death
So rooted him that he could scarcely move.
I had to make him go and wash his hands,
Put on his nightgown lest occasion call us,
And when she called, at once he killed the grooms.
When at the feast he saw the ghost of Banquo,
He was unmanned. His cheeks were blanched with fear.
And yet so swiftly Banquo was forgotten,
And in his place there stood the Thane of Fife.
While I still trembled at the blood of Duncan,
My husband killed, and killed, and killed again.
How can this be?

DOCTOR: Your husband is a soldier.
A soldier sheds man's blood as easily

3rd WITCH: Yet they come our help to hire,
 Knowing that we feed the fire.

They laugh. Lady M. joins them.

1st WITCH: Sisters, curtesy to the Queen,
 Before she asks us what we've seen.

2nd WITCH: Welcome.

3rd WITCH: Welcome

1st WITCH: Welcome hither
 But be warned, your hopes will wither.

LADY M.: I've brought you gold and jewels in this bag.

1st WITCH: Though you brought us Scotland's treasure,
 We've no words to give you pleasure.

2nd WITCH: There is nought but bane and death
 Awaiting you.

3rd WITCH: And King Macbeth.

LADY M.: I do not come to ask about my future.
 Only tell me what awaits my husband.
 Let me know the truth, as it will happen.

1st WITCH: Malcolm, Scotland's future King,
 An English army here doth bring.

2nd WITCH: Macbeth assassinates the wife
 And children of the Thane of Fife.

3rd WITCH: The battle's lost. Macbeth is dead.
 The Thane of Fife cuts off his head.

LADY M.: Oh! Then all is cheerless, dark and deadly.

1st WITCH: To the wheel you both are bound.
 Rise to the sky, fall to the ground.

LADY M.: The King will come to see you in the morning.
 He seeks assurance. Find some way to give it,
 And you shall have this treasure for your pains.

1st WITCH: There is no treasure can create
 A shield against the sword of Fate.

2nd WITCH: Sister, let the truth be spare.
 There is no foul that can't seem fair.

3rd WITCH: Sweeten sour, perfume offence,

With words that hide their fatal sense.

The 1st Witch takes the treasure.

1st WITCH: His flame of hope shall flicker bright
Once more before eternal night.

LADY M.: I thank you.

Lights out stage right. Thunder.

1st VOICE: Macbeth! Macbeth! Macbeth! Beware Macbeth;
Beware the Thane of Fife. – Dismiss me. – Enough.

2nd VOICE: Be bloody, bold, and resolute: laugh to scorn
The power of man, for none of woman born
Shall harm Macbeth.

3rd VOICE: Be lion-mettled, proud, and take no care
Who chafes, who frets, or where conspirers are:
Macbeth shall never vanquished be, until
Great Birnam Wood to high Dunsinane Hill
Shall come against him.

Thunder. Lights up on Macbeth and Lady Macbeth.

MACBETH: No man can kill me. Therefore have no fear.
We'll live the lease of Nature, pay our breath
To time and mortal custom. Do you hear?

LADY M.: I hear.

MACBETH: Then keep this soul of yours well leashed.
Why, when I went forth into the field,
Did you send for the doctor? That was folly.

LADY M.: It was not I! Did you not send to him, Sir?

MACBETH: Why would I do so? Then it was your servant.
What could she have seen?

LADY M.: I told her nothing.

MACBETH: We'll have their heads if we survive this push.

The doctor puts his hand over his mouth.

And if Birnam Wood do come to Dunsinane,
I care not if they do for me as much.

LADY M.: What will you do?

MACBETH: Remain within the castle.

LADY M.: You will not fight?

MACBETH: What can this little arm
And this good sword do against ten thousand?

LADY M.: If you should fight, beware the Thane of Fife.

He looks at her strangely.

MACBETH: There's none but he whose being I do fear.

Lady M. embraces him. There is a sudden change of tone and pace:

LADY M.: Husband, farewell.

MACBETH: Thou know'st we near the end.

LADY M.: But thou wast King.

MACBETH: The crown was dearly bought.

LADY M.: To win the world, I think we lost the world.

MACBETH: Thou shouldst have been a man. A man can fight.
But from a woman's thoughts there is no flight.

He goes out.

DOCTOR: My lady, I am afraid.

LADY M.: You need not fear.
Birnam Wood will come to Dunsinane,
The King will fight, and you shall keep your head.

DOCTOR: Your gentlewoman?

LADY M.: She's provided for.
Yet my heart throbs to know one thing.

DOCTOR: My lady?

LADY M.: Tell me why she sent for you.

DOCTOR: That I should not.

LADY M.: I was never ill.
Why did she summon you?

DOCTOR: Call her in, my lady.

LADY M.: Catriona!

Catriona enters

CATRIONA: I am here, my lady.

DOCTOR: Her Majesty has asked the reason why
You summoned me to come to Dunsinane.

Catriona looks frightened.

LADY M.: If you love me, you will answer me.

Catriona looks at the doctor, who nods.

CATRIONA: When his Majesty went into the field, I saw you rise from your bed,
throw your nightgown upon you, unlock your closet, take forth
paper, fold it, write upon it, read it, and afterwards seal it, and
again return to bed; yet all this while in a most fast sleep.

LADY M.: In a sleep? I did this in a sleep?

CATRIONA: Ay, madam.

LADY M.: Did I also speak?

CATRIONA: You did.

LADY M.: What did I say?

CATRIONA: Madam, I should not tell.

LADY M.: You may to me, and 'tis most meet you should.

Catriona again looks at the doctor.

DOCTOR: We must needs tell her all. She has confessed,
But needs to know our story. *(To Lady M.)* Thus it was:
You entered, sleeping, carrying a taper,
And I was told that it was your command
To have light by you, and continually.

LADY M.: Night is the frame of Hell. What did I say?

The doctor consults his notes.

DOCTOR: Your first action was to rub your hands.

CATRIONA: Madam, it is an accustomed action with you,
Always thus to seem washing your hands.

LADY M.: I know the action. Tell me what I said.

DOCTOR: I wrote down every word that you did speak,
To satisfy my remembrance, as follows:
"Yet here's a spot. Out damned spot! Out, I say! – One;
two: why, then 'tis time to do't. – Hell is murky. – Fie,
my Lord, fie! A soldier and afeard? – What need we fear

who knows it, when none can call our power to accompt? –
Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much
blood in him?”

He stops and looks at her.

LADY M.: Go on.

DOCTOR: “The Thane of Fife had a wife: where is she now? –
What, will these hands ne’er be clean? – No more o’
that, my Lord, no more o’ that: you mar all with this
starting. Here’s the smell of the blood still. All the perfumes of
Arabia will not sweeten this little hand.”
And then you sighed, my lady, a rending sigh
That welled up from the cellars of your soul.

LADY M.: What else?

DOCTOR: “Wash your hands, put on your nightgown; look not so pale. I tell
you yet again, Banquo’s buried: he cannot come out on’s grave.”

Once more he looks at her. No reaction.

“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.”

LADY M.: Each new morn I wake to find myself
Bound on a wheel of fire, that mine own tears
Do scald like molten lead. I am forbid
To tell the secrets of my prison house,
And yet I told them. Truth will come to light,
If not by waking day, by sleeping night.

She weeps.

CATRIONA: My lady, do not weep. All is not lost.
Our castle’s strong. The King is still the King.

Lady M. regains control.

LADY M.: The King is King. Even a minute’s joy
Is worth the having. Come. Catriona.

She embraces her, and gives her a small bag.

This is for you.

CATRIONA: But madam

LADY M.: Take it now.
Doctor, you have your fee.

DOCTOR: I do, my lady.

LADY M.: Now leave me, for there is much to do.

DOCTOR: Madam, it is not meet that we should leave you.

LADY M.: The Queen is still the Queen. Be then desired
By her that else will take the thing she begs,
To leave me to myself. I shall be safe.

CATRIONA: Let me stay, my lady.

LADY M.: It must not be.
Now go, and may God's benison go with you.

The doctor bows and Catriona curtseys. They go out. Lady Macbeth kneels.

Dear God, I kneel and ask of Thee forgiveness.
And kind King Duncan, noble Banquo, all
Whom we to gain our peace have sent to peace,
Be comforted to see this deadly grief.
Oh Father, cleanse me. Is there not rain enough
In the sweet heavens to wash this little hand
As white as snow? Nay, I am damned for ever.
Blow me about in winds! Roast me in sulphur!
For what is foul is foul, and fair is fair.
Thy law is general as the casing air.

A messenger enters.

Whither goest thou?

MESENTER: To the King, my lady.

LADY M.: Thou goest to use thy tongue. Thy story, quickly.

MESENTER: Gracious madam, I stood upon the hill,
And looked towards Birnam, and anon, methought ...
The wood began to move.

LADY M.: So be it, then.
Birnam Forest comes to Dunsinane.
Go to the King and tell him what you saw.

MESENTER: Ay, madam.

He goes out. Lady Macbeth draws a knife.

LADY M.: The sisters keep their promise.
We did begin our fall with such a knife.
And thus we close the circle of our life.

She stabs herself. Blackout.

THE END

