Zuzanna Koziatek

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Dr. Conti

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Lady Macbeth's Malevolence Rewritten

In the magical and tragic world of William Shakespeare's *Macbeth,* gender ambiguity becomes a significant theme in the play's opening scenes. Banquo's assessment of the three sisters begins Shakespeare's avalanche of blurred gender binaries. Banquo tells the anomalous sisters: "You should be women, / And yet your beards forbid me to interpret / That you are so" (1.3.46-48). Despite their beards, Banquo settles that the sisters are indeed women. Physical appearance thus proves an important determinant in the assignment of gender in *Macbeth's* imaginary and very patriarchal universe. Yet Lady Macbeth's "unsexing" soliloquy further complicates gender identity in the play, and the character's motivations remain enigmatic to literary scholars. Unlike the sisters, Lady Macbeth is not a witch and does not have supernatural powers, so what exactly does Lady Macbeth mean when she asks the spirits to "unsex" her, and what exactly does she hope to accomplish through this "unsexing"? Could the initial "unsexing" have anything to do with Lady Macbeth's mental decline?

Over the years many scholars found Lady Macbeth's character and the question of her gender performativity particularly intriguing. Janet Adelman's Freudian reading of *Macbeth* positions Lady Macbeth as a reflection of the maternal malevolence typically attributed to the witches of Shakespeare's time. Moreover, Adelman's Lady Macbeth evokes this maternal malevolence to achieve power over her husband, becoming an even more frightening figure than the cosmic and supernatural witches. Likewise, in "'Mortal Thoughts' and Magical Thinking in

Macbeth," a reading that blends two psychoanalytic strains of criticism—the Oedipal complex and the mother/infant matrix—Marina Favila establishes Lady Macbeth as "the queen mother of doubles" as she wields her gender in accordance with her desires (10). For Joanna Levin in "Lady Macbeth and the Daemonologie of Hysteria," Lady Macbeth exemplifies the historical shift in classification of demonic-like symptoms associated with maternal malevolence from witchcraft to the diagnosis of hysteria. Nonetheless, Levin asserts that Lady Macbeth's character exemplifies early modern fears of a corrupt femininity. Stephanie Chamberlain views Lady Macbeth's gender ambiguity as symptomatic of the anxiety associated with maternal agency and patrilineal order and argues that Lady Macbeth wishes for an alternate gender identity, one that does not constrain her to cultural boundaries associated with traditional gender roles. Unlike other critics, Cristina Leon Alfar relies on the Lacanian concept of the phallus to assert that Lady Macbeth's character reflects Macbeth's desires. Alfar argues that considering Macbeth's ambitions, Lady Macbeth proves to be an obedient and dutiful wife committed to helping in her husband's success.

Whereas critics tend to view Lady Macbeth as an epitome of corrupt femininity, Alfar's reading proves refreshing in that she minimizes the malevolence typically ascribed to Lady Macbeth. The less appealing part of Alfar's criticism, however, is her insistence on Lady Macbeth as a figure without her own ambition. In fact, Lady Macbeth's initial speeches prove that her character has an ambitious nature and a thirst for power that is separate from her husband's. What Alfar and other critics do successfully point out, however, is Lady Macbeth's relation to the patriarchal world she must endure; it is a world in which violence and ambition are highly celebrated masculine traits. Judith Butler's "Imitation and Gender Insubordination" helps inform the inconsistencies of Lady Macbeth's gender in the play. According to Butler,

gender is always performative, and Lady Macbeth clearly struggles to identify with femininity according to patriarchal standards. Though Lady Macbeth does enact the role of the malevolent mother, it is only through this role that Lady Macbeth could potentially gain access to an active part in the patriarchal system. Lady Macbeth intends to live out her dreams of power through her easily manipulated husband, but this becomes an impossibility when Macbeth chooses to skip her recommendations. Ultimately, Lady Macbeth's attempt to infiltrate the public sphere leads to a remorseful somnambulistic episode in which Lady Macbeth realizes the impossibility of this infiltration. Although Lady Macbeth uses gender performance and the "unsexing" to her advantage, this is simply not enough for Lady Macbeth to establish power.

Although Shakespearean criticism tends to connect Lady Macbeth to the weird sisters, their motivations are vastly different from one another, and that should not be ignored. Most notably, Adelman argues that Shakespeare reconfigures the wicked and supernatural powers of the witches to the domestic sphere through Lady Macbeth: "In the figure of Lady Macbeth, that is, Shakespeare rephrases the power of the witches as the wife/mother's power to poison human relatedness at its source; in her, their power of cosmic coercion is rewritten as the power of the mother to misshape or destroy the child" (137). However, Levin traces the historical roots of the witch as "the nonconforming figure who threatened 'hegemonic sex/gender systems,'" (22-23) and only this truly seems to be the common dominator between Lady Macbeth and the witches. Rather than a symbol of malevolence that the witches most certainly represent in *Macbeth,* Lady Macbeth merely associates power and ambition to the violence through which the patriarchy survives. As a woman with ambition, Lady Macbeth finds no other choice but to use her female body as a site of perverse nurturance; it becomes her only way to the achievement of an active role in the patriarchal system which celebrates "femininity as compliance, masculinity as

violence, and violence as power" (Alfar 180). Moreover, Alfar points out that "the differences between legitimate and illegitimate violence, it seems, are ideological fictions" as "violence underwrites both legitimate and illegitimate power usurpation" (188). In this way, there is very little difference between Duncan and Lady Macbeth except that "violence and evil are all too easily displaced onto female characters who are caught up in already established systems of brutality that they are compelled to guarantee" (188). Although I disagree with Alfar in that Lady Macbeth merely wants to guarantee Macbeth's seat of power as a helpful wife because Lady Macbeth clearly has ambitions of her own, I do agree that Lady Macbeth's actions have been too easily framed as malevolent. Lady Macbeth does not necessarily wish to cause her husband harm like the weird sisters, she only aligns her psyche with that of the witches to actively partake in the patriarchy which does not allow women that role. In short, there are similarities between Lady Macbeth and the witches, but while Lady Macbeth strives to secure power in the patriarchy, the witches capriciously wreak havoc upon it.

In the speeches that follow Lady Macbeth's realization of the prophecy, Lady Macbeth discloses her highly ambitious character as she finds herself more masculine than her husband in that respect. She worries that Macbeth's nature "is too full o'th' milk of human kindness" to murder the king (1.5.15). Shakespeare intentionally associates the words "milk" with "human kindness" here since "milk" connotes motherly care. In Lady Macbeth's assessment of Macbeth, he is simply too fragile to successfully secure the throne. She continues, "Thou woudst be great, / Art not without ambition, but without / The illness should attend it" (1.5.16-18). Considering the preceding lines, Lady Macbeth presumably associates the potential for "the illness," or violence, with masculinity. However, this very "illness" is something she admits to possessing later in the soliloquy: "Hie thee hither, / That I may pour my spirits in thine ear / And chastise with the valor

of my tongue / All that impedes thee from the golden round" (1.5.23-26). Here, Shakespeare emphasizes Lady Macbeth's own self-realized potential for securing power; she has the "spirits" necessary for this to happen. Since Lady Macbeth's "spirits" will help Macbeth achieve the crown, a purely masculine endeavor in the patriarchy, these spirits must be of a masculine nature. What Macbeth lacks with "his milk of human kindness," Lady Macbeth wishes to "pour" into him; her "spirits" represent the masculine "illness" that Macbeth needs. Moreover, Shakespeare's choice of the word "valor" here proves significant as it conjures ideas of masculine resolve and military courage. Unlike Macbeth who proves his manhood on the battlefield, Lady Macbeth's only weapon is her own voice, yet Shakespeare uses "valor" here to emphasize Lady Macbeth's masculine ambitions. In fact, it seems as though Lady Macbeth would rather live Macbeth's life for him. Instead, the only thing left for her to do is manipulate him in order to achieve power in a patriarchal setting that shuns the idea of a woman with ambition. That Lady Macbeth admits to ambition right before the "unsexing" only emphasizes the powerlessness she feels in a man's world.

The continuation of Lady Macbeth's soliloquy encapsulates Lady Macbeth's inner psychological turmoil between self-knowledge and culturally imposed gender norms. Although Lady Macbeth first establishes herself as a character capable of masculine action, she cannot escape the confinement of her biological sex. Therefore, she asks the spirits to "Unsex me here / And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full / Of direst cruelty!" (1.5.39-41). The "unsexing" works almost like a pep-talk for Lady Macbeth—a woman with a desire for greatness which in the patriarchal world only rightly belongs to a masculine ambition. Since "the patrilineal order's survival depends on 'masculine' violence, which is rewarded highly and praised as nobility and goodness," (Alfar 188) Lady Macbeth must couple her ambition with the necessary "cruelty" to

obtain power. As Ana Penjak points out, "The 'unsexing' enacts Lady Macbeth's awareness of being an inferior gender, as well as of her socially defined body expectations and roles. Because the concept of her female body and her identity in a male-dominant society includes connotations such as passivity and inferiority, the need for 'unsexing' or 'trans-gendering' must be adapted" (238). Unlike Penjak who views Lady Macbeth as "embracing her hidden 'inward masculinity,'" (237) Alfar argues that since patrilineal order finds its basis in brutality and violence, Lady Macbeth's encouragement of Duncan's murder merely reflects her husband's desire for power (182). Moreover, Alfar relies on Butler's ideas about gender performativity to conclude that "gender is a performance constituted by oppositional phallic relations" and that "the performance of femininity compels women's renunciation of desire in favor of the desire of the Other" which "presupposes a repressed desire, a desire that must be repressed in order to support the desire of the Other, so that the Other will have power (the phallus)" (183). As such, Alfar concludes that Lady Macbeth "is" the phallus allowing Macbeth to "have" the phallus (184). However, Lady Macbeth seems to comprehend her ambitious nature in the opening of her speech. In fact, she wants some of it to transfer to her husband whether he wants this to happen or not; thus, Lady Macbeth clearly has her own desires which she acts upon.

Without Butler's notion that all gender is drag, Lady Macbeth feels she needs to talk herself into the possession of violence and therefore a typically more masculine identity through the "unsexing." For Lady Macbeth, this "unsexing" helps solidify her unladylike ambitions as well as introduce the necessary violence into the power equation. Whereas this "unsexing" could potentially refer to a simple stripping of Lady Macbeth's femininity, considering Lady Macbeth's doubts of Macbeth's masculinity, it becomes clear that in order to feel her own characteristics come to fruition, Lady Macbeth feels she needs a little more faith in her own

capabilities as she asks the spirits to “unsex” her. Like the rest of the patriarchal society she lives in, Lady Macbeth cannot separate who she is from her biological sex, yet she is also astutely aware she is not just a compliant or passive wife. In other words, Lady Macbeth lacks confidence in her own personality traits because her biological sex does not align with what society expects of it. Being a part of this society, Lady Macbeth feels doubtful too; thus, she asks the spirits to “unsex” her.

Shakespeare further equates masculinity with violence and ambition through a series of biological metaphors. After asking to be “unsexed,” Lady Macbeth announces she would like to lose very particular parts of her feminine nature in order to go forth with what must be done to secure power, yet Lady Macbeth’s appeals here are more symptomatic of an oppressive patriarchal social structure and rigid gender norms than her own malevolence. Lady Macbeth asks the spirits: “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” (1.5.41-45). As a direct result of her “blood thickening,” Lady Macbeth would no longer experience “compunctious visitings of nature,” or monthly menstrual cycles that gender her specifically female (La Belle 382). Lady Macbeth assumes that biological changes to her body would also provoke other changes to her character, but this assumption merely reflects Lady Macbeth’s own inability to accept her identity as is. How could she be a woman and ambitious at the same time? She associates the loss of her menstrual cycle with an inability to feel remorse and a resolve to go through with what must be done in order to satisfy her own ambition for power. Chamberlain notices that “even Adelman, who argues for a competing female authority, tends to structure Lady Macbeth’s invocation in terms of gender defined boundaries which maintain a culturally constructed masculine/feminine dichotomy” (79). Unlike previous critics,

Chamberlain suggests that "Lady Macbeth's 'unsex me here' speech tends to deconstruct gender categories, unfixing the rigid cultural distinctions as well as attributes that define male and female" (79). Lady Macbeth's initial confidence in her ambition clashes with what she already knows about societal expectations for women, but rather than reinvent her own gender classifications, Lady Macbeth knowingly aligns herself with some of the only women who wield power in the patriarchy: witches. Chamberlain points out that Lady Macbeth "deconstructs gender categories," yet Lady Macbeth's ability to think outside of gender binaries seems impossible.

In another reference to perverse motherhood, Lady Macbeth asks the spirits to exchange her "milk for gall" (1.5.46). Whereas many other critics read Lady Macbeth's plea to the spirits to "take [her] milk for gall" as part of her transformation in which the spirits would turn her milk into poison, Adelman's interpretation differs in that she views this plea as Lady Macbeth's open invitation to the "murth'ring ministers" to take her milk *as* gall instead. Therefore, in Adelman's scenario, Lady Macbeth needs no transformation; her milk is already poisonous and ready to corrupt (135). For Adelman, this solidifies Lady Macbeth's association to the witches as the early modern audience would have been aware that witchcraft accusations often relied on "the presence of supernumerary teats" and "perverse nursery" (134-135). Moreover, Levin informs,

> Maternal milk could both nourish and destroy the morals of the hapless babe. This understanding of nursing cautions against a view of witchcraft as the absence of maternal capacities; rather, witchcraft extended and elaborated dominant fears of noxious, perverse mothering. Just as maternal milk could transmit pestilence and immorality, so could witches suckle their demonic familiars and nourish them with evil. (40)

Lady Macbeth asks for her milk to be either transformed or taken as gall because her ambition for the crown does not call for nurturance or kindness; it calls for violence. As a woman, Lady Macbeth must therefore align herself with witches in order to make sense of her own ambition and her gender too. A biological sex change is out of the question as Lady Macbeth does not possess supernatural powers to make this "unsexing" happen. According to Butler, "There is no 'proper' gender, a gender proper to one sex rather than another, which is in some sense that sex's cultural property" (955). Moreover, Butler argues that "heterosexualized genders are produced through imitative strategies; what they imitate is a phantasmatic ideal of heterosexual identity, one that is produced by the imitation as its effect" (956). Lady Macbeth does not accept that there is "no 'proper' gender" and as an ambitious woman, the only possible feminine example left for Lady Macbeth to imitate is that of a witch. Interestingly, Lady Macbeth already stated that she has the necessary ambition and qualities in the soliloquy preceding the "unsexing" and before the entrance of the servant. By worrying Macbeth is "too full o'th' milk of human kindness" and later wanting to "pour [her] spirits in [Macbeth's] ear," Lady Macbeth implicitly reveals herself as Macbeth's opposite (1.5.15, 24). Therefore, Lady Macbeth knows she is not full of the milk of human kindness and knows she already has what it takes to get the job done. Whether or not Lady Macbeth asks for her milk to be exchanged for gall or to be taken as gall, she cannot believe her own ambitious personality because her biological sex does not align with what she considers to be her masculine traits.

Lady Macbeth's perceived misalignment of her masculine personality traits with her biological sex propels her to manipulate Macbeth on the grounds of his gender identity. In an address to her husband, she intrudes on Macbeth's masculinity. First insisting that Macbeth is being less than a man for not wanting to go through with the murder, Lady Macbeth proves the

effectiveness of her charisma as she undermines Macbeth's masculinity by raising the status of her own masculine characteristics. Shakespeare harkens back to Lady Macbeth's earlier soliloquies and illuminates the idea of motherhood. "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 plucked my nipple from his boneless gums / And dashed the brains out, had I so sworn as you / Have done to this" (1.5.54-58). Initially, Lady Macbeth highlights the best of her femininity—the tender love for her own baby. Moreover, she describes a scene in which the baby finds itself completely dependent on its mother and unaware of any impending danger. However, in order to persuade Macbeth into the murder, Lady Macbeth takes a violent turn and paints a perverse image of a mother killing her own child. If she were to make a vow to kill her baby, she would do it coldheartedly without skipping a beat.

Lady Macbeth's evocation of the infanticide image does not portray Lady Macbeth's malevolence but her absolute resolve to obtain power through whatever means necessary. She relies on the same gender binaries which haunt her psychologically to sway Macbeth. Adelman pinpoints Lady Macbeth's reference to infanticide as the "most horrifying expression" of her "maternal malevolence … through which Lady Macbeth secures her control over Macbeth" (134). Furthermore, Adelman equates Lady Macbeth's imaginary evocation of this murderous motherhood to the witches' toxic cauldron as both serve to situate Macbeth in the position of complete subservience to feminine control (134). According to Chamberlain, Lady Macbeth uses maternal agency in order to defy the patriarchal order. Disrupting this order involves her infanticide fantasy; in this fantasy, "she would readily kill Macbeth's progeny to secure her husband's succession, but in killing the progeny she must likewise destroy his patrilineage, rendering his short-lived reign a barren one." Though just a fantasy, Chamberlain points out that

this fantasy is instrumental to Duncan's murder and, in turn, literally causes a domino effect leading to Macbeth's barren reign (82). Thus, for Chamberlain, Lady Macbeth only partially executes her plan to undo the patrilineal order as by the end of *Macbeth,* this patrilineal order restores itself with Malcolm's succession to the throne. Although it is true that Lady Macbeth relies on maternal rhetoric to persuade Macbeth, unlike the witches, Lady Macbeth does not mean to impose harm upon her husband. Yet perhaps as Chamberlain suggests, Lady Macbeth defies the patrilineal order in this fantasy, and this should not be surprising as the same patrilineal order excludes her from an active participation in politics. Moreover, Alfar comments, "Her juxtaposition of the love she felt for the son she nursed with a willingness to kill him is not evidence of a lack of maternal feeling but of the monstrosity of her husband's forswearing of his word … For a man to swear and then forswear is as monstrous as for a woman to kill the son and heir she nurtures" (191). Indeed, between a woman committing infanticide and killing an old man, Macbeth must prove his masculinity or else he faces emasculation by his own wife. Lady Macbeth, in all her ambition, knows where to hurt Macbeth the most with this manipulative but not malevolent tactic. Gender performance becomes central to the progression of *Macbeth* as Lady Macbeth successfully manipulates Macbeth into performing the normative idea of masculinity in order to satisfy her own goals.

Although Lady Macbeth's inherent characteristics like ambition inform her character, she switches back and forth between masculine and feminine gender performance and uses this to her advantage. Favila observes: "Lady Macbeth is the queen of doubles. As a gracious hostess, she plans a banquet and a burial for her guest of honor. As a loving wife, she invokes demons to unsex her, drain her of her womanly compassion, and replace the life-giving milk in her breasts with gall" (10). Indeed, it seems that Lady Macbeth's conception of gender helps her achieve her

means. In order to inspire Macbeth's murderous rampage, Lady Macbeth depreciates the idea of motherhood, but once in the public eye, Lady Macbeth enacts the other popular symbol of femininity, the damsel in distress. During the chaotic exchange following the finding of Duncan's murder, Shakespeare limits Lady Macbeth's lines; she is silenced in the company of men and most of the attention falls upon Macbeth. In response to Macduff's revelation, Lady Macbeth only exclaims, "Woe, alas! What, in our house?" (2.3.84). Of course, Lady Macbeth is a co-conspirator in the murder so she is only acting surprised, but it must be noted that she knows exactly how to play the silenced woman. Moreover, in Lady Macbeth's other line following her fake shock, she pretends to be the victim. It is highly unlikely that Lady Macbeth truly faints after yet another exclamation: "Help me hence, ho!" (2.3.115) Lady Macbeth only performs what is expected of her in a situation as alarming as the murder of a king in her own home. In this situation, Lady Macbeth knows she must show utmost fragility even though that is contrary to her real personality.

Perhaps the best representation of Lady Macbeth's ability to manipulate her gender performativity to her advantage occurs at the banquet. Once again in the public eye, Lady Macbeth initially performs according to the expectations required of a female host as she exudes feminine kindness; "Pronounce it for me sir, to all our friends, / For my heart speaks they are welcome" (3.4.8-9). Surely, speaking from the heart is not an unconventional phrase, but it emphasizes Lady Macbeth's ability to empathize with others as well as her ability to control the domestic realm. After the First Murderer exits, Shakespeare once more underlines Lady Macbeth's femininity connecting her to the domestic sphere through the idea of food: "To feed were best at home; / From thence the sauce to meat is ceremony: / Meeting were bare without it" (3.4.36-38). As Macbeth begins to hallucinate, Lady Macbeth continues to keep up with

appearances with a kindly speech. However, the caesura created by a stage direction in this same speech highlights just how well Lady Macbeth switches her roles; “Feed, and regard him not. [*She converses apart with Macbeth*] Are you a man?” (3.4.59) In the first half of the line Lady Macbeth roams the domestic sphere through her focus on hospitality; in the second half, Lady Macbeth angrily attempts to bring Macbeth back to sanity with an attack on his masculinity that is not unlike her initial manipulation. Whereas Lady Macbeth proves clearly capable of diminishing herself to domestic bliss, her derisive question to Macbeth “Are you a man?” signals Lady Macbeth’s belief that she could perform his duties better than he can.

Most critics agree that the banquet scene provides a bitter psychological turn for Lady Macbeth in which Macbeth no longer responds to her manipulation. For instance, Alfar argues that at the banquet:

> The reflection of power [Macbeth] now desires requires his wife’s passivity … It is at this point that the destructive nature of her phallic role becomes most acute. Despite her desire to share with her husband an active role, she must defer to his desire. We can see therefore that she is denied any independence as subject because ‘being’ the phallus requires a negation of herself, of her own desire always and already in favor of Macbeth’s. In this context, Lady Macbeth’s insanity must be read not as an inherent feminine response but as the effect of gender prescriptions. Her descent into madness and subsequent suicide, therefore, are responses to the subjectivity to which is consigned by her culture and by her husband’s rejection of her in favor of the witches. (193)

Indeed, Alfar effectively observes that Lady Macbeth’s insanity stems from her inability to actively partake in her husband’s leadership role. Lady Macbeth can no longer successfully “pour [her] spirits in [Macbeth’s] ear” and finds herself back where she began before Duncan’s

murder but without any remaining ambition or agency. Throughout Alfar's article, she argues that Lady Macbeth represses her desire in order to satisfy Macbeth's desire, but this is precisely the point where her argument falls apart; if Lady Macbeth merely enacts the expectations of wifehood in the play as the "phallus," then her desires should always reflect that of Macbeth's regardless of how much activity or passivity that entails. I do agree with Alfar that Lady Macbeth's madness is most certainly a byproduct of gender prescriptions, but overall, I disagree with her Lacanian argument that Lady Macbeth urging Macbeth to murder Duncan is a selfless endeavor.

In her final appearance following the banquet, Lady Macbeth suffers from a somnambulistic episode that expresses her regret of Duncan's murder, yet it seems quite possible that this regret is more closely tied to Lady Macbeth's loss of identity as Macbeth denies her an active role in his decision-making. Lady Macbeth first recalls:

> Out damned spot! Out, I say! One, two, why,
> Then, 'tis time to do't. Hell is murky. Fie, my lord, fie, a sol-
> dier and afeard? What need we fear? Who knows it when
> none can call our power to account? Yet who would have
> thought the old man to have had so much blood in him? (5.1.31-35)

Although Duncan's murder was meant to solidify both Lady Macbeth and Macbeth's power, Lady Macbeth finds that the murder only left her with bloody recollections of the old man's corpse. For Lady Macbeth, emulating witches, enacting maternal malevolence, and Duncan's murder all but helped her solidify power, and in fact, it significantly reduced her control as her husband's aid. Simply, the "masculine violence" that Alfar informs results in "nobility and goodness" (188) fails Lady Macbeth in the end. Significantly to this point, Lady Macbeth

questions: “The Thane of Fife had a wife. Where is she / now?” (5.1.37-38) Here, in this nostalgic moment, Lady Macbeth realizes that her high and masculine ambitions led her astray from who she once was; there is no longer a place or role for her to fill as the patriarchal order will continue to shut her out. If, like Adelman and others suggest, Lady Macbeth acts as a malevolent mother to the monstrous Macbeth, then she truly has no one to blame but herself in this situation. Interestingly, Levin argues that the somnambulism is a part of Shakespeare’s plan to position Lady Macbeth as a non-conforming figure, only during her last appearance, it is not as a witch but as a hysteric (43-45). Historically, both witches and hysterical women were regarded as threats to the established patriarchy, and right around the time this play was written, the symptoms associated with both figures started to merge (Levin 22). Lady Macbeth’s final words in the play remind the audience of her past ability to control Macbeth: “To bed, to bed. There’s knocking at the gate. / Come, come, come, come, give me your hand. What’s done / cannot be undone. / To bed, to bed, to bed” (5.1.59-61). For Levin these final lines words “enunciate a half-sexualized command, and the femininity recuperated and constituted by her somnambulism remains a goad to patriarchal action” (43). Nonetheless, this same demand of Lady Macbeth’s has nothing to do with politics or power but with the realm of domesticity she finds herself confined to, only now with blood on her hands. If Duncan’s murder had been beneficial to Lady Macbeth, it is rather unlikely she would have gone mad.

Lady Macbeth’s inability to construe an identity outside of traditional gender binaries leads to her own undoing. Surely, Lady Macbeth equates her ambition with a need for violent action, but this does not automatically reflect the malevolence which Shakespearean critics associate her with. Instead, Lady Macbeth’s gender trouble lies within the same patriarchal hierarchy which portrays non-conforming women as either witches or hysterics. With the

knowledge Lady Macbeth possesses about this hierarchy, she finds no other way to express her ambition but to imitate a witch-like persona that involves maternal malevolence. In the past, Lady Macbeth has been presented as the center of corruption in the play, but that only seems to fuel the patriarchal standards which put Lady Macbeth in this unfortunate position. It is time to view Lady Macbeth as a human being and a victim of an oppressive system.

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