

He says/She says: Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (A Gender/Personality Study)

Q: What causes Macbeth and Lady Macbeth to change personalities?

He says:

As in any proverbial "battle of the sexes," isn't the answer obvious? What would make *any* man change his personality? Marriage! Without a doubt, Macbeth's real tragedy is his marriage! If marriage can be defined as a coming together of opposites to form a third entity that is, as *Gestalt* psychology informs, "more than the sum of its parts," then marriage is indeed Macbeth's unfortunate undoing. And, of course, the fault lies with his wife: Lady Macbeth.

Think of it. Think of Macbeth's marriage to that "fiendlike" queen of his. She is the one who turns his noble and valiant conquests on the fields of war into "butchery" in the eyes of his former friends and countrymen. Macbeth was once a hero, and what Malcolm at the end of the play calls his "butchery" was, on the battlefield in service of Malcolm's father Duncan, not only lauded as "bravery" but also rewarded:

For Brave Macbeth -- well he deserves the name--
 Disdaining Fortune, with his brandished steel,
 Which smoked with bloody execution,
 Like valor's minion carved out his passage
 Till he faced the slave,
 Which ne'er shook hands nor bade farewell to him
 Till he unseamed him from the nave to th' chops,
 And fixed his head upon our battlements. (1.2.16-24)

At war, Macbeth's violent behavior is correctly understood as, and deemed to be, bravery because it is in service of his friends and "cousins." His loyalty is what is being lauded. But, mangled by the blood-spotted hands of his wife, he becomes a traitor -- to his "brother band" and to himself. Her monomaniacal ambition changes him into a monster, one -- not so ironically -- whose loyalty even she cannot control to the point where she is literally "awakened" by her blind and vaulting ambition to realize she did not want the kind of man she thought she wanted. When ultimately confronted by his total depravity and emotional abandonment of their marriage (which she, herself, brutally brought about), she is forced to change her countenance, an epiphany that, in turn, reveals her guilty conscience: "Out, damned spot! Out, I say!" And, like the proverbial Frankenstein monster run amok, the monstrous man she creates can only be "undone" by one *not* of woman born -- as if Macbeth had to be "reborn" into death through a male process that equates wound with womb, beheading with the infant's first crowning at birth.

But how does this all happen? How does Lady Macbeth "change" the unassuming and self-sacrificing Thane of Cawdor into an insensitive brute? First, she has very little regard for her husband's humanity and actually derides him for being "too full o'th' milk of human kindness" (1.5.17). Then, she manipulates him through a meticulous process of cruel and piercing emasculation, purposefully designed to attack his warrior status, an identity of utmost importance in his medieval and brutish realm: "Art thou afeard/To be the same in thine own act and valor/As thou art is desire" (1.7.40-42).

Indeed, her mocking is relentless. When he tries to defend his masculinity, "I dare do all that may become a man;/Who dares do more is none," she attacks even more brutally:

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 . (1.7.50-52)

She even goes so far as to embarrass him by proving she is, herself, more "the man" than he is,

...I have given suck, and know
how tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me;
I would, while it was smiling in my face,
Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums
And dashed the brains out, had I so sworn as you
Have done to this. (1.7.55-60)

Her last line above is also insulting on another level, for she accuses him of breaking his promise to her. In fact, when he tries to put an end to her ever-increasing pressure by daring to assert, "We will proceed no further in this business," she taunts him for his weakness and lack of loyalty:

... Was the hope drunk
wherein you dressed 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 valor
As thou art in desire? Wouldst thou have that
Which thous 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'th'adage? (1.7.36-46)

Macbeth is a "poor cat" indeed, more "whipped" than worthy of the crown. Her assault is, once again, on his manhood and courage. She taunts him with the adage of the cat that wanted to eat fish but didn't want to get its feet wet, inferring he lacks heart, is effeminate, something considerably less than a warrior, and an untrustworthy liar, whose vows cannot be believed. (As an aside, the joke, though, is really on her because she insults him for lacking heart but then suffers because he becomes heartless.) Worse -- to her, he is incompetent, for the moment he is a little bit late returning from the commission of the "deed," she cries, "Alack, I am afraid they have awakened,/And 'tis not done" (2.2.9-10).

To add the proverbial insult to injury, she is a scolding nag, who bosses him around because she feels he cannot carry out even the simplest of her commands, "...Go get some water/And wash this filthy witness from your hand" (2.2.50-51). And, when she

realizes he has "messed up," she scolds him, "Why did you bring these daggers from the place?" No wonder he acts immaturely around her. She treats him like a child. For example, when she orders him to return to the scene of the crime to smear the grooms with blood and he refuses, she impatiently lashes out at him with words that more than infer his adolescence and bolster her role of domineering mother:

...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.... (2.2.57-59)

Obviously, what we have here is "a failure to communicate." And lack of communication is the number one cause of divorce, isn't it? But Lady Macbeth's most serious character flaw isn't just her inability to communicate with her husband in a civil manner; it is her inability to know herself or, at least, to admit the truth: She is out of touch with her own identity, and this absence of self-awareness is the cause, ironically, of her downfall. Once this is realized, the question of what causes her to "change" identity from an apparently strong, confident woman to a guilt-driven hallucinator can be easily answered: She never does change identity; she is consistent throughout -- only her awareness of whom she is changes. From the beginning, she is always the instigator, never the perpetrator. Like the cat in the adage, she wants the deeds done without getting her feet wet. Consequently, she always has a ready excuse for her inability to act: She's at a disadvantage because she is not a man; the sleeping king looks like her father; her husband is weak -- on and on. And, all along, she is quite well aware of her pretensions. She continuously advises her husband to be like her and put on a façade to cover one's true identity: beguile the time and be the serpent under the innocent flower. Furthermore, she deplores honesty and admonishes him for openly and genuinely displaying his emotions on his face for others to "read." Obviously, she knows how duplicitous and phony she is; she just allows her ambition to blind her to the truth about her personality. She convinces herself she can handle the wickedness and brutally she equates with masculinity and kingship -- until she sees its disastrous results and suffers its punishing consequences.

When she realizes she has turned her husband into a caricature of pure evil, one who has lost all feeling and the ability to love or even display empathy, she awakens to her true self, the self she had been repressing, the self that recoils in destructive anger. Her anger at her self-ignorance is what causes her guilt and self-punishment. Succinctly, she doesn't change; she simply comes to realize the deceptive nature of her personality, which once brought to light causes her to suffer from her change of countenance, a change that reveals her guilty conscience. We see it from early on, in this expression of her driving ambition --

...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
 Which fate and metaphysical aid doth seem

To have thee crowned withal. (1.5.25-30)

-- when it is juxtaposed with the truth of her inability to do the deed: "Had he [Duncan] not resembled/My father as he slept, I had done't" (2.2.12-13). Her guilt doesn't suddenly hit her; rather, it was there all the time -- in conflict with, and suppressed by, her "vaulting ambition." Indeed, it is *her* ambition that is the driving force, not his. This is brilliantly illustrated in 1.7, following almost immediately upon the above, when Macbeth is debating his motivation for the "deed" and realizes everything cries out against the regicide except one thing:

...I have no spur
to prick the sides of my intent, but only
Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself
And falls on th' other -- (25-28)

As soon as he utters these words (or thinks these thoughts in his soliloquy), guess who enters? Lady Macbeth! His wife almost metaphysically appears as if she were the concrete materialization of the abstract thought that is his "spur": vaulting ambition. She is the very personification of the vaulting ambition that pricks the sides of his intent.

And it is her blind ambition that, ironically, blinds her to the truth about herself, that she is advocating a marriage of deception, that she believes deception is not only virtuous but also a necessity to achieving one's ambition, the crown. Disappointed and angered by her husband's decision to let "chance" crown him "without my stir," she shrillishly and impatiently scolds him for his innate inability to deceive:

Your face, my thane, is as a book where men
May read strange matters. To beguile the time,
Look like the time; bear welcome in your eye,
Your hand, your tongue. Look like th' innocent flower,
But be the serpent under't. (1.5.62-66)

And, when he tries to suggest they need to "speak further," she once again cuts off any line of communication to shrewishly impose her will over his:

...Only look up clear.
To alter favor ever is to fear.
Leave all the rest to me. (1.5.71-73)

What she means is any altering of one's countenance is a betrayal of one's guilty conscience. (Again, simply as an aside, this is quite true, ironically, for her more so than for her husband because isn't her later change of countenance a show of her guilty conscience?) Ultimately, the problem for Lady Macbeth is she does not know herself or, more accurately, is so unhappy with herself that she tries to deny her own identity, seeking to adopt the masculinity she doesn't find in her husband for herself. Succinctly, she wishes to become the man she wanted to marry. Unfortunately, however, her ideal male is merely a caricature of real masculinity, the fantasy of a bored, "desperate

housewife" desiring the excitement a ruthless lover -- the proverbial "bad boy" -- promises. As a result, when she asks to become herself the man of her dreams, her wish is to passionately embody the very soul of ruthless savagery, so she can achieve her vaulting ambition:

...The raven himself is hoarse
 That croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan
 Under my battlements. 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 murd'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!" (1.5.38-54)

Again, paralleling the later scene (1.7) when she interrupts Macbeth's thoughts to personify his "vaulting ambition," as soon as the words form themselves in her imagination, her husband in like manner enters as the embodiment of the "holding" force from which she wishes to free her herself. Similarly, the opening lines of this soliloquy also demonstrate her desire to escape marriage to a less than ideal mate and to "go it alone"; Duncan doesn't enter "their" castle -- rather, as she phrases it, the doomed king finds fatal entrance "under my battlements." It is all about *her*. This selfishness can only destroy a marriage and a husband. But it's obvious she does not care about her husband; it is her desire to use him as the most efficient means to get what she wants, the crown.

Consequently, if there is any change in Macbeth -- and there certainly is -- it is because of his wife, not the weird sisters. They only get him thinking. She gets him "doing." Succinctly, her wish to be "top-full of direst cruelty" was made manifest in him to the point that even her death wasn't felt by the monster she created who, when informed of her demise, utters heartlessly, "She should have died hereafter" (5.5.17). Indeed, his momentary, impassive reflection on the report of her death apparently makes him realize his role; he is but a "walking shadow, a poor player" strutting and fretting. But, more accurately, isn't this really a description of *her*? Did she not strut and fret? Was she not a poor player? And, now that she is dead, is she "heard no more"? And what was her tale to him, the one about unleashing the vaulting ambition one has despite any and all remorse? Was it not one "told by an idiot"? Isn't this proven by her suicide? Was she not "full of sound and fury,/ Signifying nothing"? Wasn't it all for nothing? The life he should have had, the one that would have been satisfying to any married man, she

"plucked" from him as she would have plucked her nipple from her babe's "boneless gums." Despite his heinous identity now, he knows only too well what *should* have been:

And that which should accompany old age,
As honor, love, obedience, troops of friends,
I must not look to have, but in their stead
Curses, not loud but deep, mouth-honor, breath
Which the poor heart would fain deny and dare not. (5.3.24-28)

Isn't it Macbeth's curse that he should fulfill his wife's ambition and become king only to suffer a barren throne? No child of his will ever wear the crown. No one knows this better than he -- except, perhaps, Macduff. For Macduff, too, has lost a wife and all his children. The difference, however, is in the heart of the two men. Macbeth has "supped full of horrors" to the point where "Direness, familiar to my slaughterous thoughts,/Cannot once start me" (5.5.14-15). He has come to realize,

...I am in blood
stepped in so far that, should I wade no more,
returning were as tedious as go o'er. (3.4.137-39).

For him, there is no sense in turning back. He has been changed so much that all he can do is embrace his new personality, as hateful as it is, "blood will have blood." As "pure evil," he will tolerate no guilt, no conscience. The moment he gives birth to an evil thought, it will become deed:

...From this moment
The very firstlings of my heart shall be
The very firstlings of my hand. And even now,
To crown my thoughts with acts, be it thought and done.... (4.1.146-49)

The "firstlings" of his heart are thoughts of self-preservation. And, to ascertain these thoughts, he will murder without remorse.

Macduff has also acted selfishly out of self-preservation and has, as a result, condemned his wife and children to slaughter at the hands of Macbeth. He knows this only too well, and so does his wife, who calls his action in defense of his country, a sin "unnatural" because it opposes the natural function of his role as husband: to sacrifice himself in the protection of his wife and children. When Ross tries to defend him to Lady Macduff by suggesting that her husband's fear may actually be wisdom, she replies quite angrily,

Wisdom? To leave his wife, to leave his babes,
His mansion, and his titles in a place
From whence himself does fly? He loves us not,
He wants the natural touch; for the poor wren,
The most diminutive of birds, will fight,
Her young ones in her nest, against the owl.

All is the fear and nothing is the love,
 As little is the wisdom, where the flight
 So runs against all reason. (4.2. 6-13)

His "blinding" ambition in service to the throne ironically parallels Lady Macbeth's ambition for that same crown. Indeed, it is an intoxicating gold ring but, alas, not the one that symbolizes a perfect marriage.

Ultimately, as Lady Macduff knows only too well and as Macduff comes so tragically to realize, he was wrong to put his ambition in service to the throne above marriage, and in this epiphany is his redemption. Unlike Macbeth, who heartlessly waves off the report of his wife's demise with an expression of indifference, Macduff's reaction to the news of his wife's death demonstrates he still has a loving heart. When Ross tells him that his wife and children have all been slaughtered, he breaks down, so much so he is rebuked by Malcolm to "Dispute it like a man." It is Macduff's answer that redeems him: "I shall do so;/But I must also feel it as a man" (4.7.221-22). This genuine expression of love is the difference between this impassioned man who would be "husband" and the tragic husband who is transformed into a monstrous king and "butcher" by his "fiendlike queen." Macduff may suffer from being a man not of woman born, "from his mother's womb/Untimely ripped," but he recovers to save the crown and, more importantly, his soul.

No such salvation is there for Macbeth in the crown or for his soul. For he is the man cursed to be first born then tragically reborn of woman.

She says:

In Macbeth, both the title character and Lady Macbeth undergo a role reversal of sorts by the end of the play. In a world where fair is foul and the natural order is completely subverted, Macbeth becomes completely confident in his grab for power, while Lady Macbeth wanders the castle corridors at night bemoaning her unclean hands following the murder of Duncan and his guards. The question, then, is why these two characters change so much in their attitudes in the relatively short space of the drama. What could cause Macbeth, referred to by his own wife as "too full o' the milk of human kindness to catch the nearest way" (1.5.17-18), to become completely remorseless in his bid for the crown, even to the point at which he eliminates not only his competitors for the throne but their progeny as well? And why has Lady Macbeth, who was so bent on ambition and power in the opening acts that she begged whatever spirits might be listening to "unsex me here / and fill me from the crown to the toe top-full / of direst cruelty!" (1.5.41-43), become a guilt-ridden somnambulist?

Clearly, this role reversal revolves around the question of gender, specifically, the attempt to break out of rigidly defined roles for which persons might be unsuited. Lady Macbeth has several problems, the most notable of which are as follows: She is intelligent, she craves power, she is strong enough to determine what action she must take to achieve her goals, and she is willing to turn to unsavory means to achieve her ends. Oh, yes, and she happens to be a female living in medieval Scotland. In short, Lady Macbeth's dramatic role reversal and subsequent demise at her own hand can be traced back to one source: her own desire for some sort of power and the attempted overthrow

or altering of the patriarchal order of her society that dictates a passive role for which she was completely unsuited.

Tellingly, *Macbeth* opens with an initial act and scene populated entirely by female characters, the only Shakespeare play to do so. Immediately, by the very presence of the weird sisters, the audience is given to understand something unnatural is afoot. While clearly women, the witches display androgynous characteristics, leading Macbeth and Banquo to question their gender: "You should be women, / And yet your beards forbid me to interpret / That you are so" (1.3.45-47). The difficulty of gender characterization and the attempt on the part of the male characters to neatly file other people into a clear, gender-specific role (the witches *should* be women) foreshadows Lady Macbeth's plea two scenes later -- she too wishes her sex to be taken away or at least fundamentally changed, so she will not display the weaknesses inherent in all females: compassion and tender-heartedness. The reason for her desire for this change is apparent when the audience beholds her ambition. Macbeth refers to her as his "dearest partner of greatness" (1.5.11), something unheard of in the paternalistic and bloody-minded society in which she lives. How else can Lady Macbeth hope to live up to the faith that Macbeth has placed in her unless she rids herself of her female imperfections of kindness and mercy? In a society that rewards bloody murder if done in the service of the state (three scenes earlier, the captain is heard praising Macbeth for dispatching the traitorous Macdonwald when he "unseamed him from the nave to the chops / And fixed his head upon our battlements" (1.2.22-23)), how can a mere woman hope to achieve any power if not through her husband? And if that husband is too plagued by conscience or kindness to commit murder without cause, how can Lady Macbeth not pray to have her femininity revoked, so she may be the one to do the deed herself?

The only way for a man to be successful in Macbeth's world is to take arms and end the life of another. Macbeth's early success against the traitorous Macdonwald paves the way for other bloody acts that will allow him to gain greater glory and fame. At first unsure of his course toward what he views as greatness, he progresses nevertheless toward his destiny. The speech in which he speaks of his hallucination of the bloody dagger indicates the only tools of his creativity: an unsheathed weapon, first clean and then covered with blood and gore. While most characters in the play cling to this warlike and vengeful ideal of the masculine, one character displays what more modern readers might determine to be a "real man," one who exemplifies the often conflicting characteristics of physical strength and emotional depth. When Macduff discovers his wife and children are slaughtered, he is understandably moved. Malcolm, however, advises him to "Dispute it like a man" (4.3.221), or take up arms against Macbeth and bring him down. In this masculine world, the only acceptable reaction to treachery and murder is vengeance. Macduff acknowledges action is important and that he will soon seek revenge, but emotions also must play a role:

I shall do so;
But I must also feel it as a man.
I cannot but remember such things were,
That were most precious to me. (222-225)

This brief interlude into acknowledgment and even valuing of emotion is short lived, for in the next few lines Macduff “pulls himself together” and steels himself for what he must do as a man:

Oh, I could play the woman with mine eyes
And braggart with my tongue! But, gentle heavens,
Cut short this intermission. Front to front
Bring thou this fiend of Scotland and myself;
Within my sword's length set him. (232-236)

The only male character willing to recognize his “feminine side” is quickly pulled back into the world of brutality and vengeance, and it is in this world and against this backdrop of violent tendencies that Lady Macbeth exists.

A clearly intelligent and ambitious woman, Lady Macbeth's role is completely determined by her husband's. Without even a name of her own, the only way she can achieve power is if her husband first attains it. Only with Macbeth as king can Lady Macbeth be queen. How frustrating it must be for such a strong woman to be forced to rely on such a weak vessel! Following the lead of all the successful males of whom she knows, Lady Macbeth plans a quick succession to the throne for her husband and taunts him into participation with what she views as his own weakness and lightness of affection towards her. When Macbeth's conscience torments him to the point at which he decides he cannot go through with the planned murder, she responds:

. . . Was the hope drunk
Wherein you dressed 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. (1.7.36-40)

This response to her husband's qualms makes her seem cruel and manipulative, a shrew who must use her sexuality to twist her husband's love to her own selfish ends, and to a certain extent this is true. On the other hand, what other options were available to her? If she wanted power for her husband (and, by extension, for herself) she must force Macbeth back on the bloody path to regicide. And when Macbeth responds he cannot kill Duncan because, “I dare do all that may become a man; / Who dares do more is none.” (1.7.46-48), Lady Macbeth rightly points out what manly behavior means in her experience:

. . . 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. (48-52)

The idea for the murder was her husband's -- Lady Macbeth has simply determined a practical course of action to help fulfill the weird sisters' prophecy and now that the time

for completion is nearing, Macbeth is having pangs of conscience that are disrupting the scheme. How intolerably infuriating this must be to the “dearest partner of greatness,” to see everything she had been allowed to hope for slipping away through the perceived weakness of one man!

In one sense, Lady Macbeth fulfills her role as helpmate of her husband, although in an admittedly gruesome fashion. She attends her husband at the murder, eggs him on, and completes the task of incriminating the grooms by smearing them with blood, all of which is completely outside the guidelines of acceptable female behavior but is done to assist her husband. Had she been a stereotypical Scottish wife of the period, she would have known nothing of her husband’s business dealings and would have been content to wait for Macbeth to bring home guests for her to entertain. Instead, when Duncan is admitted to her home, she plans and participates in the murder, and she shows much self-awareness of prospective guilt as she does so, informing Macbeth, “These deeds must not be thought / After these ways; so, it will make us mad.” (2.2.37-38). The realization of wrongdoing is upon her; nevertheless, she knows that her own mind might turn on her if she dwells too heavily on what she has done. Macbeth’s mind already displays some misgivings, but as the play progresses, he will follow the second counsel of the witches and rush headlong toward his doom in the surety of his invincibility. The strong female in this case is the one whose mental capacities will degrade as the drama moves to its end, since the idea of a thinking woman in a position of power was still viewed as unnatural and could not be allowed. It would not be possible to have Macbeth killed and Lady Macbeth left alive -- what would the male-governed society do with her? Would Malcolm or any of the others hold her guilty for her actions? Could they even conceive of the idea of a woman so filled with cunning and treachery? After all, Macduff speaks of Malcolm’s mother in 4.3 as an ideal woman who was “Oft’ner upon her knees than on her feet.” (111) In this society, all women are fit to do is watch, wait, and pray. Would Malcolm have been able to execute a woman, even one he knows to be a “fiendlike queen”? No, leaving Lady Macbeth alive and having the question of punishment appropriate for a female would have been a loose end in an otherwise tight drama, and so Lady Macbeth must punish and quietly remove herself from the reach of male justice by taking her own life. She operates completely in her own sphere, untouched by interaction with any character other than her husband. Even in her dealings with him, Lady Macbeth is the stronger of the two, taking the lead and pushing for her goals. Only in her sleep does her femininity or her conscience have free reign, and even then the physician recognizes she is the only one who can minister to herself. Throughout the drama, no man can truly assist Lady Macbeth.

Perhaps this isolation occurs because, through much of the play, Lady Macbeth is viewed as an outsider even by herself. The laws of nature do not apply to her in the same way they do to everyone else in the play. When the grooms are lulled to sleep by alcohol, Lady M notes, “That which hath made them drunk hath made me bold; / What hath quenched them hath given me fire” (2.2.1-2). Even strong drink acts differently in her system, making her appear an aberration indeed. When Macbeth realizes the extent of his villainy immediately after Duncan’s murder and begins to fear he hears knocking, Lady Macbeth responds to his qualms:

My hands are of your color, but I shame

To wear a heart so white. (*Knock.*) 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. (68-73)

Lady Macbeth hears the same sounds as Macbeth, but they raise no feelings of guilt or panic; rather, they bring out her practical nature, and she supports her husband as he falters in his purpose. She will continue fulfilling at least one role of the attentive wife and will be at Macbeth's side to assist him when his hallucinations worsen, and he sees the ghost of Banquo. It is Lady Macbeth who again subverts the natural order by allowing all the guests to leave the chamber quickly and without regard for rank as she directs them to, "Stand not upon the order of your going, / But go at once." (3.4.120-121) Attempting to function in male society while still outwardly appearing to be a dutiful wife, she throws aside the masculine rules of order, perhaps out of ignorance or perhaps out of desperation.

None of this is meant to excuse the reprehensible actions of either character, however. It is merely an explanation of why one woman could act with such a stony heart and dauntless purpose to kill an old man of whom she was admittedly fond. (Indeed, the only reason Lady Macbeth cannot bring herself to kill Duncan when Macbeth falters is Duncan's passing resemblance to her own father. The primitive ban against patricide still exists in her psyche, even if regicide is an acceptable course of action in her desperation and ambition.) Both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are acting in unnatural ways, or at least in ways in which a perversion of the "might makes right" principle is in play. They have departed from violence in service of the State and moved to violence for personal gain, something which the playwright has a duty to condemn. The message of the drama resonates: Unnatural behavior on the part of both sexes can only lead to calamity as Nature itself rebels and rises up to restore accepted order. In this, one of the only Shakespeare plays in which the protagonist can be classified as evil rather than simply flawed, Shakespeare seems to be indicating that a woman as unnatural as Lady Macbeth cannot be allowed to live or flourish. The only acceptable outcome for this rebel against her sex is for her to take her own life.

Lady Macbeth is not the first unruly woman in the drama to be constrained or returned to her acceptable role. We see the three witches have overstepped their bounds when Hecate appears in 3.5 and chides them for their support of Macbeth, "... a wayward son, / Spiteful and wrathful, who, as others do, / Loves for his own ends, not for you" (11-13). Even the witches have an established hierarchy, and their prophecies can only be used for the benefit of an acceptable subject. Macbeth is not a good choice for the hearing of the prophecy, and the three sisters must now restore the balance they had disturbed. Their last prophecy to Macbeth, of course, leads him to the false sense of security when he believes he can never be harmed. When he listens to and heeds this prophecy, he and Lady Macbeth begin to switch roles in the drama. He becomes completely blind to any danger to himself, and Lady Macbeth changes from a murderer who philosophically states, "Things without all remedy / Should be without regard. What's done is done" (3.2.13-14) to a disturbed sleepwalker who paces futilely every night in search of enough water to cleanse her of her sins. Macbeth is stepping up to the

role he wanted but was afraid to kill for, and Lady Macbeth's strength is no longer needed. A displaced person, she has no further role in the support of her husband and will revert to the more traditional feminine role. As he becomes stronger, she weakens, for two such blindly driven characters are not needed to rule. Finally, with her suicide, she removes herself from the stage completely, leaving her husband not to mourn her passing but to simply comment, "She should have died hereafter."

Lady M's downfall comes more quickly than Macbeth's, for she has rebelled more against her femininity than he has against his masculinity. Macbeth has taken society's approval of state-sanctioned murder too far, to the extent of killing and supplanting the head of state, but his behavior is an extension of appropriate masculine action for his military-minded world. Lady Macbeth, however, has stepped completely outside the bounds of femininity and must be punished, even if it is by her own hand. More self-aware than Macbeth to the end, she does not wait for anyone else to end her unnatural existence -- she does it willingly to herself, quietly and offstage. Macbeth, on the other hand, determines not to surrender and not to fall upon his sword, for at the end his overconfidence blinds him to any possible danger, and he only completely understands his own doom when nature itself, in the form of a mobile Birnam Wood, and another man outside of nature yet willing to restore order, Macduff, takes his life away from him.

Of final interest in this commentary on gender psyche in the drama, one last area of symbolism exists and is particularly important in the context of Lady Macbeth's suicide. If nature is personified as a female presence, it is interesting to note the male use of the feminine boughs of the Wood as a shield until subterfuge is no longer needed, at which time nature is cast away and steel swords again become the most important implements. Likewise, Macduff was once sheltered by a woman who was later discarded as unnecessary in the birth process -- after all, "Macduff was from his mother's womb untimely ripped." (5.8.16) Even the witches who opened the play are displaced, and it is a male figure who will offer the final words to sum up the moral and message of the work. The drama ends with the natural (and, what else? patriarchal) order of society and rank being restored, as is evidenced by Malcolm's final statement, "... what needful else / we will perform in measure, time, and place" (5.8.72-73). However, try as Malcolm might, the audience knows that his reign will end with or shortly after his own death, for according to the prophecy it is the murdered Banquo whose children will gain the throne. If the weird sisters' prophecy is correct, how long can it be until nature is again in upheaval? While Shakespeare himself must stress the return of the genders to their rightful places, it seems only a matter of time until the feminine intrudes once again in this masculine world, no matter how carefully kings attempt to structure their legacy.

Prof. Mary Ives Thompson
Dr. Francesco Aristide Ancona