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FREUD AND HISTORICAL SCHOLARSHIP:
THE CASE OF LADY MACBETH

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In Act I, scene v, of Macbeth, Lady Macbeth receives in quick succession two revelations. A letter from her husband describes the witches' prophecy of kingship, and a messenger brings tidings of Duncan's imminent arrival. Lady Macbeth then begins her remarkable invocation in which she starts to prepare herself for the momentous events to follow:

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 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

At the beginning of Freud's discussion of Lady Macbeth's character in "Some Character-Types Met with in Psycho-Analytic Work," he quotes four lines from this speech and asks what is it "that broke this character which had seemed forged from the toughest metal?"² After commenting that "it seems to me impossible to come to any decision," Freud tentatively suggests that it has something to do with her childlessness. A closer consideration of the language of Lady Macbeth's speech and of the physical and psychological symptoms she experiences later in the play provides a more complete answer to Freud's question. Further, a historically informed approach to Lady Macbeth's psycho-sexual character will exemplify some virtues and limitations of Freud's methodology, even when applied to the psychology of composition.

The language in Lady Macbeth's soliloquy clearly has a psychological dimension: it deals with her mind and will as she devises to become a murderer. But the address has its biological as well as its psychological referents in some of the words specifying the human body: "crown to the toe," "blood," "woman's breasts," "milk," "gall." This intertwining of the diction of spirit and body has its intellectual context in Elizabethan physiological psychology in which functions and processes of the body were believed to have mental consequences. To understand how Lady Macbeth hopes to achieve a change in her personality, it is important to read the entire speech

in light of its simultaneous references to the physiological and the psychological. When Lady Macbeth commands the spirits of darkness to "unsex" her, it is not just a wish for a psychological movement away from the feminine. To free herself of the basic psychological characteristics of womanliness, she is asking the spirits to eliminate the basic biological characteristics of that femininity. Since there is a bond between mind and body, the only way for her to achieve an unfeminine spirit capable of murdering Duncan is for her to attain an unfeminine physiology.

Lady Macbeth asks that "no compunctious visitings of Nature" shake her "fell purpose." The Signet edition of Macbeth interprets these "visitings of Nature" as "natural feelings of compassion," the New Cambridge edition as "conscientious scruples."³ But this phrase also has a biological meaning. Thomas Brugis, in Vade Mecum: Or, A Companion For A Chyrurgion (London, 1652), discusses "the overmuch flowing of womens naturall visits," defining "visits" as occurrences of menstruation.⁴ For a woman, menstruation is the most apparent natural visitation intimately associated with her sexuality and her ability to conceive. More than any other natural and usually unavoidable occurrence in a woman's life, it is menstruation that repeatedly reminds her of her sex. Because of this biological reference, earlier images in Lady Macbeth's speech become significant. When she pleads, "make thicke my blood, / Stop up th' access and passage to remorse," she is asking for the periodic flow to cease, the genital tract to be blocked. Renaissance medical texts generally refer to the tract through which the blood from the uterus is discharged as a "passage." Thomas

Raynalde, in The Byrth of Mankynde, otherwyse named the Womans Booke (London, 1560), writes, "The necke of thys wombe, otherwyse called the womans privitie, we wyll call the wombe passage, or the privie passage" (fol. vii recto). John Sadler explains in The Sicke Womans Private Looking-Glasse wherein Methodically are handled all uterine affects, or diseases arising from the wombe (London, 1636) that during "the suppression of the Termes [menses]," the blood thickens and coagulates: it becomes "viscuous and grosse, condensing and binding up the passages, that it cannot flow forth" (p. 15). Sadler also points out that "the wombe communicates to the heart by the mediation of those Arteries which come from Aorta" (p. 20). Thus if the thickened blood blocks the passage to the womb, it also stops up the access to the heart from which remorse could flow.

In a very literal and physical way, Lady Macbeth is asking the spirits to "unsex" her. This literal meaning has both a metaphoric and a causal relationship to the psychological transformation that must occur before she can participate in the murder of Duncan. That is, the suggestions of biological unsexing foreshadow the mental defeminization, the blocking of pity and remorse. Further, given the causal links between body and mind of Elizabethan physiological psychology, the biological unsexing will produce the spiritual unsexing. For Lady Macbeth, this murder of her femininity is an essential preparation for the murder of the king.

After her entreaty for the suppression of menstruation, Lady Macbeth urges the "murth'ring ministers" to come to her "woman's breasts" and exchange her "milk for gall." There is a movement from the image of the womb (which would become infected from what one

seventeenth century medical directory for midwives calls "the burden of putrified blood"⁵) to the image of the corrupted breasts. Since these image clusters deal with the pollution of the primary and secondary feminine organs, this movement of images seems generally appropriate, but once again the context of Elizabethan medical beliefs shows that there is a direct causal connection between the two images. In The Sicke Womans Private Looking-Glasse, Sadler defines the menstrualls as "a monethly flux of excrementitious blood," the "finall cause" of which is "the propagation and conservation of mankinde":

And all will grant it for a truth, that the childe, while it is in the matrice [womb] is nourished with this blood; and it is as true, that being out of the womb, it is still nourished with the same; for the milke is nothing but the menstruous blood made white in the breasts; and I am sure womans milke is not thought to bee venomous, but of a nutritive quality, answerable to the tender nature of an infant. (pp. 9-10)

The Complete Midwife's Practice also characterizes "the menstruous Blood" as "the matter of the womans seed" (p. 87):

Whilst the Birth remains in the Womb, it is cherished up with blood attracted through the Navel, which is the reason that the flowers [menses] do cease alwayes in Women, as soon as they have conceived.

Now this blood, presently after conception, is distinguished into ... parts; the purest part of it drawn by the Child for the nourishment of its self;

the second, which is less pure and thin, the
Womb forces upwards to the breast, where it is
turned into milk. (pp. 92-93)⁶

Menstrual blood is meant to nourish the infant -- during pregnancy as blood and after pregnancy in its transformed state as milk. A stoppage of the menstrual blood prevents the formation of mother's milk. In its place, Lady Macbeth wishes for a venomous liquid ("gall" or bile rather than "nutritive" fluid) to rise to her breasts. Here again Shakespeare is unfolding Lady Macbeth's character according to the language and functional theories of contemporary medicine.

If Lady Macbeth is asking for a cessation of her menstrual cycle, then we could expect to see later in the play symptoms of such an unnatural stoppage. She abjures her womanhood in order to be impregnated with cruelty, but the amenorrhoea has further results which she may not have considered. Indeed, we find in the course of the play that Shakespeare attributes to his character those very symptoms that contemporary and near-contemporary medical books claim will occur when a woman's natural visitings cease.

"Amongst all diseases incident to the body," Sadler writes, "I found none more frequent, none more perilous than those which arise from the ill-affected wombe" (the "Epistle Dedicatory" in Sicke Womans Looking-Glasse). The author offers the following symptoms which ensue to the woman whose menstrual periods are suppressed: "faintings," "swoonings," "melancholy passions," and "fearfulness" (pp. 20-21). In the chaotic scene in Macbeth (II.iii) in which the murder of Duncan is discovered, Lady Macbeth has a fainting fit. Fear and melancholy torture her throughout the play. The "blood" which was made "thick" in the

"thick Night" of the first act results in the "thick-coming fancies, / That keep her from her rest" in the last act. In The Anatomy of Melancholy, Robert Burton, quoting Lodovicus Mercatus and Rodericus à Castro, records many of these same symptoms produced in the brain and heart of a woman who is "offended with those vicious vapours which come from menstruous blood ... that fuliginous exhalation of corrupt seed."⁷ According to Burton, "care, sorrow, and anxiety, obfuscation of spirits, agony, desperation, and the like" come from spoilt menstrual blood ("à sanguinis menstrui malitia"). Burton lists additional indications of this kind of melancholy in women, such as the inability to sleep or else a kind of "troublesome sleep" with "terrible dreams in the night, dejection of mind, much discontent" (478). Macbeth talks to his queen about "the affliction of these terrible dreams, / That shake us nightly" (III.ii.18-19), and Lady Macbeth's somnambulism dramatizes her own inability to sleep in peace.⁸ Burton writes that such women find that almost everything is "tedious to them" and "they pine away, void of counsel ... they take delight in nothing for the time, but love to be alone and solitary, though that do them more harm." Lady Macbeth's "Nought's had, all's spent" (III.ii.4) reflects the ennui Burton describes. Her question to her husband -- "why do you keep alone, / Of sorriest fancies your companions making?" (III.ii.8-9) -- is also a self-description. Burton concludes that "weary of their lives," some of these women "will attempt to make away themselves" (479) and "will by violent death at last be revenged on themselves" (476). In the last speech of Macbeth, Malcolm says, "'tis thought" that Lady Macbeth "by self and violent hands / Took off her life" (V.ix.36-37). Lady Macbeth's character is, of course, not simply a personification

of these medical diagnostics, but the consistency with which her troubled character embodies these symptoms indicates that she has indeed called down upon herself, with unfortunate success, the stoppage of her menstrual cycle.

Lady Macbeth's call to the spirits to "unsex" her resembles a witch's curse or conjuration -- in this case a curse perversely directed at the conjurer herself. She becomes another one of the Weird Sisters in Macbeth, not so much predicting the future as preparing herself as an instrument to bring about future events. Both the witches and Lady Macbeth use the metaphoric powers of language to call upon spiritual powers who in turn will influence physical events -- in one case the workings of the state, in the other the workings of a woman's body.⁹ Much as Lady Macbeth suffers from the consequences of defeminization, so too the witches have characteristics that reveal them as also unsexed. Their beards (I.iii.46) are the most obvious outward sign of their defeminization and associate them with the symptomatic consequences of catamenial retention and stoppage. According to the chapter on "The Diseases of the Womb" in the Second Part (1676) of A Directory for Midwives: Or, A Guide for Women, in their Conception, Bearing; And Suckling their Children (London, 1675), Nicholas Culpeper quotes Aristotle as saying "that some Women have hairs in their Chin, when their Courses [menses] stop" (p. 20). Sadler writes in his chapter on "the retention of the months" that Hippocrates tells of a woman who, when "her termes were supprest," had "a beard, with a countenance like a man" (Sicke Womans Looking-Glasse, p. 17).

Once we realize the specific menstrual references in Lady Macbeth's invocation, we can see that this crucial speech near the

beginning of the play is intimately connected with some of the major patterns of imagery in Macbeth. The stopping of the processes of procreation is tantamount to a murdering of infants -- albeit yet unborn. Thus Lady Macbeth's speech relates to the various murdered babes in the play: the strangled babe whose finger is thrown into the witches' cauldron (IV.I.30); Macduff's babes who are "savagely slaughter'd" (IV.iii.205); and the suckling babe with its boneless gums whose brains Lady Macbeth would dash out (I.vii.57-58). The language of Lady Macbeth's blood-curdling invocation to be unsexed echoes the opening speech of Seneca's Medea where Medea calls "with cursed throate" upon spirits of darkness and Hell as she prepares to murder her "Babes." In John Studley's translation (1581), Medea foreshadows both Lady Macbeth and the witches: she wishes to "Exile all foolysh Female feare and pity" from her mind as she wreaks "hurly burly."¹⁰

The menstrual flow abnormally stopped by Lady Macbeth is part of the blood that darkens the entire play and finds its clearest parallel in Macbeth's stoppage of the natural flow of blood in Duncan's veins. In both cases the result is corruption -- in the body or in the state -- and thus is in turn linked with the disease imagery of the last act. The smell of blood and the stains on her hands obsessively remind Lady Macbeth not only of Duncan's spilled blood but also of that natural spillage of menstrual blood she has tried to prevent as a necessary prelude to the killing of the king.

The most devastating outcome of Lady Macbeth's call to be unsexed is that she thereby renders herself barren. She is calling for the same destruction of generative faculties that Macbeth wishes for in his curse against "Nature's germens" (IV.i.59).¹¹ Her way of life, like

Macbeth's at the end of the play, "is fall'n into the sere." "If you would have Children," Nicholas Culpeper admonishes, "see that the Menstruis come down in good order" (A Directory for Midwives, p. 96). According to The Complete Midwife's Practice, if "the Menstruous blood ... come not down according to their accustomed times, and seasons, or do not come down at all, the woman neither can conceive nor engender" (p. 87). As Lady Macbeth wills away her feminine sympathies, she wills away her ability to conceive. She is "blasted" like the heath -- both barren and accursed -- and "withered" like the "secret, black, and midnight hags." It is a commonplace that the play is full of images of fertility and growth, embodied primarily in Duncan. Just as Macbeth kills this royal symbol of fruitfulness, Lady Macbeth destroys her own fertility. The spirits she calls on are indeed "murth'ring ministers" because they first murder the possibility of children for her. Macbeth comes to learn that his crown is "fruitless," his scepter "barren," the succession "unlineal." Macbeth's sterility is in part a consequence of Lady Macbeth's fruitless and barren womb: the destruction of the menstrual flow ultimately destroys the lineal flow. Like Ross's image of Scotland, Lady Macbeth is not the mother of her children, but their grave (IV.iii.166). Since it is Lady Macbeth's own will to murder that causes her sterility, she is like the sow that "hath eaten / Her nine farrow" (IV.I.64-65) and whose blood is used by the witches in their hell-broth.

Lady Macbeth brings upon herself the malediction that Lear calls down upon one of those "unnatural hags," his daughters:

Suspend thy purpose, if thou [Nature] didst intend
To make this creature fruitful!

Into her womb convey sterility!
 Dry up in her the organs of increase,
 And from her derogate body never spring
 A babe to honour her!
 (I.iv.285-90)

After these curses of barrenness in both plays, Goneril and Lady Macbeth assume the responsibilities that would usually be the man's. Goneril states, "I must change arms at home, and give the distaff / Into my husband's hands" (IV.ii.17-18). Lady Macbeth's outbursts to her husband such as "Infirm of purpose! / Give me the daggers" (II.ii.51-52) and "What! quite unmann'd in folly?" (III.iv.72) suggest the way in which her denial of the female role leads her to an assumption of the male role.

The metaphoric significance of Lady Macbeth's opening soliloquy in Act I has been understood, but its literal meaning has heretofore not been recognized. Her words are usually read as a general plea to be free of pity and remorse. The biological specificity of her speech gives it greater physical impact and horror, yet does not ultimately limit its range of meanings to the merely somatic. Indeed, the corporeal aberration is both metaphor and cause of her psychological condition. Lady Macbeth's unnatural desire for amenorrhea is part of a larger syndrome, not only of symptoms but of images and themes that lie at the heart of "this most bloody piece of work."

As is often the case, Freud's intuitions are splendid. He sensed somehow that childlessness was at the center of the play and that it became a destructive force in Lady Macbeth's personality. What he failed to observe was the specific sixteenth and seventeenth century medical context

in which Shakespeare created Lady Macbeth's physical symptoms and their psychological consequences. Thus Freud's comments on Macbeth reveal the all too familiar limitation of Freudian psychology when applied in a reductive way to fictive characters. By concentrating on possible sub-conscious motivation, the psycho-analytic critic can easily overlook the author's consciously constructed characterizations, much as the more conventional literary critics have overlooked the literal meaning of Lady Macbeth's soliloquy in their pursuit of its metaphoric dimensions.

We need not delve further into the specific virtues and limitations of Freud's analysis of Lady Macbeth. Yet there are larger questions that attend upon this issue. There would seem to be a divergence between Freud's approach to micro-history (the life of the individual in time) and his much less developed conception of macro-history (the changes in a culture through time). The history of an individual is at the core of Freud's conception of personality, whether this be treated on the basis of particular case histories or through the general terminology of categories of sub-conscious motivations and their behavioral manifestations. These categories of psychological development are assumed to be universally present in all historical periods. However true this may be for real people, it cannot be true for fictive characters. Although an author may, through the varieties of projection familiar to psychoanalytic studies, subconsciously create a character in his own image, authors invariably create character in light of the psychological conventions of their own time. As these conventions change, fictive structures change with them.

These questions, implicit in the case of Lady Macbeth, concerning the thoroughness of the psychoanalytic approach to dramatic characters may seem to have no effect on what is surely a more productive area of

Freudian studies, the psychology of composition. Yet, may not the conventions of an age also influence the very processes of artistic creation as well as the fictions those processes create? Since we know those conventions only through artifacts (in this case Shakespeare's words which create the character of Lady Macbeth) one might say that from this point of view the character writes the author. What I am suggesting is a reflexive relationship between literary-cultural conventions and their psychic equivalent -- i.e., the categories of mind as defined by Kant, Freud, or others.

By integrating Freud's methodology (and some of the underlying patterns of the mind he defined so clearly) with a historically informed concept of cultural conventions and their changes, I think we can achieve several goals. The most significant and far reaching is to find a basis of commonality between macro and micro history, between culture and the individual. More specifically we can relate the analysis of fictive character to the analysis of authorial character, and join together in a productive way the insights of historical scholarship with concepts of universal categories toward which Freud and all philosophical criticism strive.

Notes

¹ William Shakespeare, Macbeth, ed. Kenneth Muir, The Arden Edition (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957), I.v.40-54. All quotations from the play are taken from this edition.

² "Those Wrecked by Success," section II in "Some Character-Types Met with in Psycho-Analytic Work," first published in Imago, 4 (1916), 317-36. English translation quoted from The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1957), XIV, 319.

³ Macbeth, ed. Sylvan Barnet (New York: The New American Library, 1963), p. 51; The Complete Plays and Poems of William Shakespeare, eds. William Allan Neilson and Charles Jarvis Hill (Cambridge: Houghton Mifflin, 1942), p. 1189.

⁴ p. 113. See also Brugis, The Marrow of Physicke (London, 1640), where the author refers to "the retention of Womens Visits" (p. 99). These medical treatises contain proverbial knowledge repeated in books of both the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Although Brugis' Vade Mecum and The Marrow of Physicke, like some of the other books I refer to later, were published a good many years after the composition of Macbeth (c.1606), the medical knowledge they contain was known in Shakespeare's day. The authors of these treatises frequently base their statements on classical and medieval sources.

⁵ Sir Thomas Mayern, Dr. Chamberlain, Mr. Nich Culpeper, The Complete Midwife's Practice Enlarged, In the most weighty and high concernments of the Birth of Man, 4th ed. (London, 1680), p. 19. The first edition was published in 1656. See also The Marrow of Physicke, p. 69. Brugis, discussing "menstruous fluxe," explains that "blood restrained putrifies."

⁶ See also Chapter xv on "howe the mylke commeth to the womans breastes" in The Byrth of Mankynde, fol. xxxv-xlii.

⁷ ed. A. R. Shilleto (London: Bell, 1896 reprinting of the sixth edition, 1651-52), I, Part. I. Sect. III. Mem. II. Subs. IV., 476-77. The first edition was published in 1621. See also Chapters LIII (DE SVPPRESSIS MENSIBVS) and LVI (DE VTERI SVFFOCATIONE) in Philip Barrough, The Method o Phisick, containing the causes, signes, and cures of Inward Diseases in Mans Body from the Head to the Foote (London, 1596).

⁸ In another subsection, Burton describes a kind of melancholy associated with the stoppage of the "months in women" and with blood which is "gross and thick" that has among its many symptoms a fear of "dead men's bones." Burton writes, "all the bugbears of the night and terrors, fairybabes of tombs and graves are before their eyes and in their thoughts, as to women and children, if they be in the dark alone" (Subs. III, 476). Lady Macbeth's fear of the dark, her desire to have "light by her continually" (V.i.21), and her concern in her sleep-walking speech with the body of murdered Duncan and with Banquo's "grave" suggest that she suffers from these symptoms described by Burton.

- ⁹ The insistent repetition and suspended rhyming in these lines stress the incantatory nature of the speech -- similar to the witches' chants. In the fifteen lines of Lady Macbeth's speech are the following rhymes: come/from; you/through/to; toe/no; my/cry; top/stop; keep/peep; gall/pall; make/shake/take; me/thee; fell/Hell. The rhyming is intensified and extended by consonance, as in shake, take, make, milk, thick (twice), smoke, dark and fill, full, fell, Hell, gall, pall.
- ¹⁰ Seneca, His Tenne Tragedies, ed. Thomas Newton (New York: AMS Press, 1967 reprinting of the London, 1581, edition), II, 57. Notice in this same speech Medea's references to "wombe," "breast," "gall," "mischiefe," "night," "darke," "bloudy handes."
- ¹¹ "Germens" here suggests sperm or seeds, as it does in King Lear, III.ii. 7-9:

Strike flat the thick rotundity o' th' world!

Crack Nature's moulds, all germens spill at once

That makes ingrateful man!