Lady Macbeth and the Loss of a Child
by Scott McAteer

Abstract
The purpose of this article is an examination of the character of Lady Macbeth in William Shakespeare’s Macbeth. The examination follows three primary tracks, firstly the complexity of Lady Macbeth’s character, including the psychological symptoms she displays. Secondly, the supernatural elements of the play and how Lady Macbeth interacts with them. Thirdly, the question of whether Lady Macbeth had children. These aims will be achieved through examinations of the text itself and the various works of theorist and critics.

Introduction
Through the course of this article the motivation of Lady Macbeth’s character will hopefully become clear. The examination will look at the various cultural theories and their impact on performance. This will lead us to conclusions both about aspects of Lady Macbeth’s character and the underlying themes of the play.

Literature review
Shakespeare scholarship generally falls into three types, Internal (which delves into the meaning of the play, such as Bradley), External (which extrapolates the themes of the plays to socio-political areas, such as Ward) and the Active (which develops not just a deeper understanding for a reader; but a richer performance or production). It is this final kind of thought that continues to make Shakespeare dynamic and relevant; as Bartholomeusz says when talking of removing the spectacle from a production "The notion that Shakespeare's words alone can speak for themselves on the stage is a notion that out to be entertained only by those who see drama not as a thing done but as a thing read." (Bartholomeusz, 1969) Too much critical analysis of Macbeth approaches from this perspective.

Most postmodern analysis generally stress an active approach and postmodern and Iconoclastic productions are usually done to either:

- Make the text accessible to a new audience (such as Baz Lurman’s Romeo and Juliet, or Orson Welles’ voodoo Macbeth at the Lafayette theatre in 1936)
- To highlight an aspect of the text (there is a notorious production of Taming of the Shrew which highlighted the sexism of the ending, one treated quite lightly in most productions (Elizabeth Taylor’s wink to camera for example). In this play the problematic last scene was done completely strait and then the actress playing Kate revealed slit wrists. The text of Shakespeare does allow multiple interpretations; but the nature of a cohesive performance generally means that some themes come through stronger than others (even in a minimalist production like Kosky’s 2002 King Lear)
The complexity of Lady Macbeth’s Character

Much is made of Lady Macbeth as being simply a reflective character within the play. Feminist theorist Bruana Gushurst says that in Macbeth the ‘power is masculine in origin and reality’ (Gushurst in Balderstone, 1999). And in the Pidgin English version Lady Macbeth is translated as “Kuk blong Makbed” (cook who belongs to Macbeth). (Rasche, 1999)

Fiedler further attempts to reduce Lady Macbeth’s complexity by labelling her as “the real witch of the play” (Fiedler, 1972:71); going on to say that she shares so much in common with the weird sisters that in a film version one actress could play all four characters (Fiedler, 1972).

While it is indisputable that there are links between the evil of the witches and the evil of Lady Macbeth, many things separate them, not least of which is the language of the text. The witches’ harsh trochaic verse is at odds with all other characters in the play (including their queen Hecate) and their speeches much richer in imagery. Lady Macbeth is an independent character who is affected by the evil.

It is stated by many that the ideal woman in Shakespeare is docile and meek (Freitas, 1999) and therefore Lady Macbeth represents an evil force simply by being strong. But in Macbeth the ideal male character are peaceful as well. Macbeth’s battle role is vividly and gruesomely described, Banquo’s is not; one of Duncan’s chief virtues is his meekness:

Besides, this Duncan
Hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been
So clear in his great office, that his virtues
Will plead like angels
(I.vii)

In one of Macbeth’s problematic elements, it is not the bold warrior Macduff who is lifted to the highest station, but Malcolm the mild character who takes flight to England.

A quantitative analysis of the text allows us some insights into Lady Macbeth’s character and refutes allegations of selfishness. Lady Macbeth’s use of “you” rather than “I” is in inverse proportions to Macbeth’s:

Here is the use of the word “you” in relation to other words used by the characters:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lady Macbeth</td>
<td>2.021%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Macbeth</td>
<td>1.119%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Compare this to the occurrences of “I”:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lady Macbeth</td>
<td>1.399%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Macbeth</td>
<td>2.518%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Given the amount of speeches these two characters have together, we can draw some conclusions from these figures. Lady Macbeth’s objectives are centred on him, whereas Macbeth is centred on himself.

An analysis of Lady Macbeth’s use of Positive words, words such as amen, god, good, goodness, grace, great, peace, natural; is also interesting. These words are spoken with a much higher frequency by Macbeth than Lady Macbeth (she speaks almost none).

This can lead us to one of two conclusions, first that she is utterly evil. This is reflected in Act 2, Scene 2:

MACBETH. One cried, "God bless us!" and "Amen" the other,  
As they had seen me with these hangman's hands.  
Listening their fear, I could not say "Amen,"  
When they did say, "God bless us!"
LADY MACBETH. Consider it not so deeply.  
MACBETH. But wherefore could not I pronounce "Amen"?  
I had most need of blessing, and "Amen"  
Stuck in my throat.
(II.ii)

This is not just regret or remorse but a sign of actual evil presence that prevents him speaking a prayer. There exists a belief that the devil catches the tongues of those who would speak prayers falsely (Muir, 1977) and this could be taken as an example of that. Perhaps we can suppose that Lady Macbeth has reached the point where she can speak no words of goodness.

The second option is that it can be seen to demonstrate that Macbeth is the worse character, for he can speak good words without fear or shame. Such as in this instance from just after Duncan’s corpse is discovered:

MACBETH. Had I but died an hour before this chance,  
I had lived a blessed time, for from this instant  
There's nothing serious in mortality.  
All is but toys; renown and grace is dead,  
The wine of life is drawn, and the mere lees  
Is left this vault to brag of.
(II.iv)

The dramatic irony of him speaking remorse when it is he that has done the deed is heightened by the nature of the words that he speaks; he invokes goodness and godliness when what he has done is against god. He invokes goodness to cover the evil.

But Lady Macbeth’s reaction:
LADY MACBETH. Woe, alas!  
What, in our house?
(II.iv)
Is simple, human and selfish. It is less of a deception and more of duplicity. Lady Macbeth’s reaction is consistent both with a guilty party covering for themselves and with an innocent party.

The fainting later in this scene be interpreted as Lady Macbeth trying to draw attention away from Macbeth to reduce suspicion (Bradley, 1930); or it can be seen as the division between what is evil in her and what is good, what still abhors what has been done and the hypocrisy of what Macbeth is doing. If we take it further, that there is an evil force that pervades Scotland during this time, we could take this as the first point that it loosens its grasp on Lady Macbeth to totally encompass Macbeth.

Lady Macbeth exhibits sharp mood swings in the first act. She calls on spirits to “unsex her” but Bartholomeusz explores the womanly virtues that must be displayed by Lady Macbeth. In relation to Sarah Siddons’ performances in the early 19th century he says “She [Sarah Siddons] recognised that Lady Macbeth had a certain kind of intellectual power and argued on logical grounds that she must have 'personal beauty' as well. It was only the association of these two qualities in Lady Macbeth, a 'subjugating intellectual power' and 'the graces of personal beauty' that could make Macbeth’s capitulation to her believable. That Lady Macbeth should be "both 'fiend-like' and beautiful, a creature who fascinated not Macbeth only but the audience as well”( Bartholomeusz, 1969:122)

We can almost split Lady Macbeth’s speech in Act 1 scene 5 into two characters.

Glamis thou art, and Cawdor, and shalt be
What thou art promised. Yet do I fear thy nature.

(This could mean that she fears his violence and then her mood changes dramatically)

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

And the mood swing upon hearing from the messenger that Duncan is coming.
The shock implicit in:

MESSENGER. The King comes here tonight.
LADY MACBETH. Thou'rt mad to say it!

Quickly shifts to an explanation of why the news of Duncan’s approach should shock her so:

Is not thy master with him? who, were't so,
Would have inform'd for preparation.

(The emphasis above is from Bartholomeusz (1969), noted from an early 19th century production with Sarah Siddons as Lady Macbeth)
The sleep-walking scene is of a consistent tone, but can be read as a conversation with herself from earlier parts of the play:

    A little water clears us of this deed.
(II.ii)

Is answered by

    What, will these hands neer be clean?

And she responds to

    Things without all remedy
    Should be without regard. What's done is done.
(III.ii)

With her final line

    What's done cannot be
    undone. To bed, to bed, to bed.

(Bradley, 1930)
This shows a dualistic element of Lady Macbeth’s character.

Cakebread (1999) and others note Lady Macbeth taking on male characteristics to complete the difficult task ahead of her:

    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!
(I.v)

Even the nature of Lady Macbeth's death offers insight into her character. If we accept Chesler's view on suicide, that "suicide attempts are the grand rites of "femininity"... Women who succeed at suicide are, tragically, outwitting or rejecting their "feminine" role."(Chesler, 1972:49) then Lady Macbeth's successful suicide is another example of how she has failed at a test of womanhood. It shows her behaving in a masculine fashion.

But in performance it has been shown that Lady Macbeth’s delicate feminine nature provides contradictions that entrance the audience (Bartholomeusz, 1969); and there are indications in the text, such as:

    LADY MACBETH. Here's the smell of the blood still. All the
    Perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand.
(V.i)

That Lady Macbeth would attempt to turn her back on traditional feminine values (Cakebread, 1999) suggests that either she sees no value in that role or that she
has already been pushed from that role. It is interesting to note that Macbeth’s contemporaries (Banquo, Macbeth, Siward) all have children who are a central focus in their lives. Surely the Macbeths have tried.

Lady Macbeth and the Evil forces
Freitas links Lady Macbeth’s strong will to demonic possession: “Suppose that Shakespeare used the possession-jargon of the day to create a strong-willed, intelligent women, who was driven to consorting with devils because the male demons of her own culture prevent her from doing what men assumed by right?” (Freitas, 1999: 4)

Psychoanalytical theory (of course) dismisses the supernatural elements as “Hallucination” and “delusions” (Freud, 1916); but this is a difficult thread to follow given the weird sisters’ scenes.

The role of the witches in Macbeth’s downfall inverts what Thomas Szasz call "the sexocidal hatred of women". According to Szasz "... the image of the knight in armour, the symbol of mobility, and of the black witch as a symbol of depravity embodies the sexocidal hatred of women" (Szasz, in Chesler, 1972:101). In Macbeth the knight in armour who on horseback ("a drum a drum" referring to the gallop of hooves see Bartholomeusz, 1969 for incidents of horses and the Elizabethan stage) encounters the "black and midnight hags" but he does not triumph over them; they, through prophecy not action, reveal him to be the darker force. The witches show the brave knight to be blacker and more evil than they.

The mystical nature of the witches is reflected in their number. Three occurs in relation to some of the darkest elements of the play. It is on the third night that Lady Macbeth’s madness surfaces.

    DOCTOR. I have two nights watched with you, but can perceive no truth in your report. When was it she last walked? (V.i)

And after the third night Lady Macbeth is dead; this links it to the evil force of the witches:

    Thus do go about, about, 
    Thrice to thine, and thrice to mine, 
    And thrice again, to make up nine. 
    Peace! The charm’s wound up. 
    (I.iii)

Macbeth is also the victim of three; the three prophecies are his undoing (because of the threat of Macduff he slaughters his family, creating the foe that needed to kill Macbeth for vengeance, and the two other prophecies which cause him to fail to adequately fortify the castle and to fight recklessly). And Banquo is killed by three murderers.
It is clear that the witches bring an element of supernatural evil to the play, but the evil seed they plant is one that demands action from its victims. It is not a directly active force. This is illustrated in Act 1, scene 3:

FIRST WITCH. A sailor's wife had chestnuts in her lap,  
   And mounch'd, and mounch'd, and mounch'd. "Give me," quoth I.  
   "Aroint thee, witch!" the rump-fed ronyon cries.  
   Her husband's to Aleppo gone, master the Tiger;  
   But in a sieve I'll thither sail,  
   And, like a rat without a tail,  
   I'll do, I'll do, and I'll do.  
SECOND WITCH. I'll give thee a wind.  
FIRST WITCH. Thou'rt kind.  
THIRD WITCH. And I another.  
FIRST WITCH. I myself have all the other,  
   And the very ports they blow,  
   All the quarters that they know  
   I' the shipman's card.  
   I will drain him dry as hay:  
   Sleep shall neither night nor day  
   Hang upon his penthouse lid;  
   He shall live a man forbid.  
   Weary se'nnights nine times nine  
   Shall he dwindle, peak, and pine;  
   Though his bark cannot be lost,  
   Yet it shall be tempest-toss'd.  
(I.iii)

The winds that attack the sailor are to explain that the evil forces won't attack directly, but toss their victims in directions that lead them to accept evil. Macbeth himself mentions these winds in the final witches' scene:

MACBETH. I conjure you, by that which you profess  
   (Howeer you come to know it) answer me:  
   Though you untie the winds and let them fight  
   Against the churches, though the yesty waves  
   Confound and swallow navigation up,  
(IV.i)

As Balderstone points out: “The power they seek comes through influencing events, and this is effectively achieved” (Balderstone, 1999), and Bartholomeusz observes that “Lady Macbeth deliberately chooses evil”(1969:101) and that she revels in her choice boasting:

LADY MACBETH. My hands are of your color, but I shame  
   To wear a heart so white.  
(II.ii)

This leads us to consider why Lady Macbeth would choose evil.
Lady Macbeth’s Child

Karin Thomson believes the only explanation for Lady Macbeth’s behaviour is the shock of a past experience, and that “The past experience, which causes such a deep disturbance in Lady Macbeth, is the loss of her child.” (Thompson, 1999)

Older scholars usually relegate Lady Macbeth’s mention of having had a child as being a dramatic convenience, so that she can conform to Shakespeare’s notion of an evil woman bereft of maternal love; (Fiedler, 1972) but when we consider the importance of other children in the play (Fleance, Malcolm and Donalbaine, Macduff’s son, Siward’s son) and that Lady Macbeth’s invoking the direst image she could think of to spur Macbeth:

I have given suck and know
How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me—
I would, while it was smiling in my face,
Have pluck’d my nipple from his boneless gums
And dash’d the brains out had I so sworn as you
Have done to this. (I.vii)

It would be folly to ignore the importance of this baby and its absence to Lady Macbeth’s character; it is much more than just a convenient signifier of her evil.

Chesler stresses the importance of motherhood to women in a patriarchal society: "maternity has been glorified and feared, by ancient and modern people as the most eloquent and effective human response to the fact of biological death. Mothers have been eulogized as more powerful than kings and soldiers..."(Chesler, 1972) the medieval society that Lady Macbeth is living in exacerbates this (Ward, 1999) and it has been argued by Ward that the dual role of mother in the family unit arose in the renaissance time that Shakespeare was writing; she is both a beautifully ideal and yet is routinely subjugated by the patriarch (Ward, 1999).

Lady Macbeth’s symptoms fit with seven of the ten most common in bereaved mothers:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MOST PREVALENT SYMPTOMS BY BEREAVED MOTHERS</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Symptom</td>
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<tr>
<td>----------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General nervousness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sleeplessness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Headaches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excessive Tiredness</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nightmares</td>
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<tr>
<td>Persistent fears</td>
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<tr>
<td>Depression</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fear of a nervous breakdown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feelings of panic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repeated unusual thoughts</td>
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</tbody>
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(Nicol, 1989:14)
Examples these occur in the banquet scene (III.iv) and the Sleep-walking scene (V.i).

The feelings described by the mothers detailed in the study cited in Loss of A baby include anger, bitterness and feelings of failure. It is interesting that the majority of Lady Macbeth's symptoms occur not before the crime, but after her plans to rule the kingdom fall apart. When she has lost not her child, but the child that is Scotland. If we suppose that she already knows that her marriage with Macbeth will be fruitless she has lost her last chance of progeny, the only chance she has to be a mother again is to be a mother to Scotland.

The historical Lady Macbeth did have a child, but not with Macbeth. Lulach the Fool was her child with Gillacomgain and he was of sub-normal intelligence. In reality he lived on, but in they play it is clear by his absence that he is not alive (Muir, 1977). The historical progeny of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth clearly do not exist within the play; too much is made of the sterility of their line:

> Upon my head they placed a fruitless crown  
> And put a barren sceptre in my gripe,  
> (III.i)

Freud regards barrenness. “The fitting nature of one who takes sons from fathers (Macduff) and fathers from sons (Banquo). “ (Freud, 1916:2) And that the means that Lady Macbeth uses to achieve her ends (unsexing) makes that end futile (Freud, 1916).

It is significant that Lady Macbeth says

> Had he not resembled  
> My father as he slept, I had done't.  
> (II.ii)

The parricide is not just representative of her own father; but representative of Duncan as the father of the nation (Rogers, 1996). Lady Macbeth reacts to the loss of her child by wanting to be mother of Scotland, what is called in psychoanalysis sublimation (Thomson, 1999).

It is Lady Macbeth that is on high in the banquet scene while Macbeth sits with the thanes (Holmes, 1972)

MACBETH. Ourself will mingle with society  
And play the humble host.  
Our hostess keeps her state, but in best time  
We will require her welcome.  
LADY MACBETH. Pronounce it for me, sir, to all our friends,  
For my heart speaks they are welcome.  
(III.iv)
But Shakespeare goes to great lengths to show that Lady Macbeth and her husband are bad regents. Consider the aloof and formal nature of Lady Macbeth’s and Macbeth’s speech to Banquo after the coronation:

MACBETH. Here's our chief guest.
LADY MACBETH. If he had been forgotten,
   It had been as a gap in our great feast
   And all thing unbecoming.
MACBETH. Tonight we hold a solemn supper, sir,
   And I'll request your presence.
(III.i)

Compared it to the open dialogue between Malcolm and Macduff

MALCOLM. Let us seek out some desolate shade and there
   Weep our sad bosoms empty.
MACDUFF. Let us rather
   Hold fast the mortal sword, and like good men
   Bestride our downfall'n birthdom. Each new morn
   New widows howl, new orphans cry, new sorrows
   Strike heaven on the face, that it resounds
   As if it felt with Scotland and yell'd out
   Like syllable of dolor.
(IV.iii)

This shows us that a good ruler should be able to speak with his subjects. It shows the type of rule that Lady Macbeth wants to enforce reveals why Shakespeare felt that their reign must fail.

It is usually to argue that Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are evil because they violate the Elizabethan natural order that places kings and queens above their subjects; a closer examination of the behaviours of Macbeth & Lady Macbeth vs. Duncan, Malcolm and (importantly) King Edward of England show the opposite to be true. The scrofula scene in Act 4, scene 3 is usually taken as an example of Edward’s divine powers, but it also shows that he is unafraid to walk (and touch) the lowliest of his subjects. In the final battle scenes Macbeth is alone on stage, but Malcolm always appears with another character. This produces a very significant picture on stage (Holmes, 1972) and the impression that a contemporary audience could get is that a ruler who respects not his subjects is bound to fall. This is a message that James would see as both cautionary and supportive of his reign. Muir suggests the idea that Shakespeare drew from Seneca’s plays in order to "write a play which would make kings fear to be tyrants" (Muir, 1977:211).

Lady Macbeth is part of what makes Macbeth into a tyrant. Winstanley links Lady Macbeth to the French matriarch Catherine de Medici. Lady Macbeth eggs on Macbeth; just as Catherine egged on Charles IX towards the massacre of St. Bartholomew’s. (Winstanley, 1922) The matriarchal figure dictates evil to the weak men around her. But Lady Macbeth loses control of Macbeth. As Bradley
notes (Bradley, 1930), his violent acts escalate and he keeps her from being part of them:

LADY MACBETH. What's to be done?
MACBETH. Be innocent of the knowledge, dearest chuck,
Till thou applaud the deed. Come, seeling night,
Scarf up the tender eye of pitiful day,
(III.ii)

He becomes a rampant crazed child and wreaks havoc on Scotland. This is what drives Lady Macbeth mad. It is not the first child she has lost, but the second. The child that is Scotland; the many miscarriages of justice under Macbeth’s rule become a literal miscarriage for Lady Macbeth.

Conclusion
We can see a clear progression in Lady Macbeth’s character. She attempts to obtain the highest womanly post she can hope to – that of the mother of a nation. That she would invite evil powers to help her and turn to murder shows the importance placed on a maternal role for women in a patriarchal society.
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