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[In the excerpt below, Maginn, an Irish essayist, calls *Macbeth* “the gloomiest” of Shakespeare 's plays and examines the blood imagery that runs throughout the drama. Like Anna Brownell Jameson, Maginn defends the character of Lady Macbeth. He argues that her “guiding passion” is her love for her husband and that her participation in Duncan's murder is motivated by her concern for him. Maginn further states that Lady Macbeth is “not the tempter of Macbeth,” and that her only sin is her energetic devotion “to minister to his hopes and aspirations.” He concludes that “it is [a] pity that such a woman should have been united to such a man” and encourages “a kindly construing” for her motives. Such kind “construing” of Lady Macbeth's motives is later challenged by A. C. Bradley, and further discussion of her character is presented by H. N. Hudson and Isador H. Coriat. Maginn's essay was first published in *Bentley's Miscellany* in 1837.]

*Macbeth* is the gloomiest of the plays. Well may its hero say that he has supped full of horrors. It opens with the incantations of spiteful witches, and concludes with a series of savage combats, stimulated by quenchless hate on one side, and by the desperation inspired by the consciousness of unpardonable crime on the other. In every act we have blood in torrents. The first man who appears on the stage is the *bleeding* captain. The first word uttered by earthly lips is, “What *bloody* man is that?” [I. ii. 1] The tale which the captain relates is full of fearful gashes, reeking wounds, and *bloody* execution. The murder of Duncan, in the second act, stains the hands of Macbeth so deeply as to render them fit to incarnadine the multitudinous seas, and make the green—one red. His lady imbrues herself in the crimson stream, and gilds the faces of the sleeping grooms with gore.... Gloom, ruin, murder, horrible doubts, unnatural suspicions, portents of dread in earth and heaven, surround us on all sides. In the third act, desperate assassins, incensed by the blows and buffets of the world, weary with disasters, tugged with fortune, willing to wreak their hatred on all mankind, and persuaded that Banquo has been their enemy, set upon and slay him, without remorse and without a word. The prayer of their master to Night, that she would, with

*Bloody* and invisible hand,  
Cancel and tear to pieces that great bond  
[III. ii. 47-8]

which kept him in perpetual terror, is in part accomplished; and he who was his enemy in, as he says—

Such *bloody* distance,  
That every minute of his being thrusts  
Against my life  
[III. i. 115-17]

lies breathless in the dust. The murderers bring the witness of their deed to the very banquet-chamber of the expecting king. They come with *blood* upon the face. (pp. 187-89)

The sanguine stain dyes the fourth act as deeply. A head severed from the body, and a bloody child, are the first apparitions that rise before the king at the bidding of the weird sisters. The blood-boltered Banquo is the last to linger upon the stage, and sear the eyes of the amazed tyrant. The sword of the assassin is soon at work in the castle of Macduff; and his wife and children fly from the deadly blow, shrieking “murder”—in vain. And the fifth act—from its appalling commencement, when the sleeping lady plies her hopeless task of nightly washing the blood-stained hand, through the continual clangor of trumpets calling, as clamorous harbingers, to blood and death, to its conclusion, when Macduff, with dripping sword, brings in the freshly hewn-off head of the “dead butcher,” to lay it at the feet of the victorious Malcolm—exhibits a sequence of scenes in which deeds and thoughts of horror and violence are perpetually, and almost physically, forced upon the attention of the spectator. In short, the play is one clot of blood from beginning to end. (pp. 190-91)

Of such a gory poem, *Macbeth* is the centre, the moving spirit. From the beginning, before treason has entered his mind, he appears as a man delighting in blood.... The witches had told him he was to be king: they had not said a word about the means. He instantly supplies them:

Why do I yield to that suggestion

Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair,  
 And make my seated heart knock at my ribs  
 Against the use of nature?  
 [I. iii. 134-37]

The dreaded word itself soon comes:

My thought, whose MURDER yet is but fantastical,  
 Shakes so my single state of man, that function  
 Is smothered in surmise.  
 [I. iii. 139-41]

To a mind so disposed, temptation is unnecessary. The thing was done. Duncan was marked out for murder before the letter was written to Lady Macbeth, and she only followed the thought of her husband.

Love for him is in fact her guiding passion. She sees that he covets the throne—that his happiness is wrapped up in the hope of being a king — and her part is accordingly taken without hesitation. With the blindness of affection, she persuades herself that he is full of the milk of human kindness, and that he would reject false and unholy ways of attaining the object of his desire. She deems it, therefore, her duty to spirit him to the task. Fate and metaphysical aid, she argues, have destined him for the golden round of Scotland. Shall she not lend her assistance? She does not ask the question twice. She will. Her sex, her woman's breasts, her very nature, oppose the task she has prescribed to herself; but she prays to the ministers of murder—to the spirits that tend on mortal thoughts—to make thick her blood, and stop up the access and passage of remorse; and she succeeds in mustering the desperate courage which bears her through. Her instigation was not, in reality, wanted. (pp. 193-95)

[Macbeth's] wife has not to suggest murder, for that has been already resolved upon; but to represent the weakness of drawing back, after a resolution has once been formed. She well knows that the momentary qualm will pass off—that Duncan is to be slain, perhaps when time and place will not so well adhere. Now, she argues—now it can be done with safety. ... She therefore rouses him to do at once that from which she knows nothing but fear of detection deters him; and, feeling that there are no conscientious scruples to overcome, applies herself to show that the present is the most favorable instant. It is for him she thinks—for him she is unsexed—for his ambition she works—for his safety she provides. (p. 196)

Lady Macbeth is stigmatized as the fiend-like queen. Except her share in the murder of Duncan—which is, however, quite sufficient to justify the epithet in the mouth of his son—she does nothing in the play to deserve the title; and for her crime she has been sufficiently punished by a life of disaster and remorse. She is not the tempter of Macbeth. It does not require much philosophy to pronounce that there were no such beings as the weird sisters; or that the voice that told the Thane of Glamis that he was to be King of Scotland, was that of his own ambition. In his own bosom was brewed the hell-broth, potent to call up visions counselling tyranny and blood; and its ingredients were his own evil passions and criminal hopes. Macbeth himself only believes as much of the prediction of the witches as he desires. The same prophets who foretold his elevation to the throne, foretold also that the progeny of Banquo would reign; and yet, after the completion of the prophecy so far as he is himself concerned, he endeavors to mar the other part by the murder of Fleance. The weird sisters are, to him, no more than the Evil Spirit which, in *Faust*, tortures Margaret at her prayers. They are but the personified suggestions of his mind. She, the wife of his bosom, knows the direction of his thoughts; and, bound to him in love, exerts every energy, and sacrifices every feeling, to minister to his hopes and aspirations. This is her sin, and no more. He retains, in all his guilt and crime, a fond feeling for his wife. Even when meditating slaughter, and dreaming of blood, he addresses soft words of conjugal endearment; he calls her “dearest chuck,” while devising assassinations, with the fore-knowledge of which he is unwilling to sully her mind. Selfish in ambition, selfish in fear, his character presents no point of attraction but this one merit. Shakespeare gives us no hint as to her personal charms, except when he makes her describe her hand as “lille.” We may be sure that there were few “more thorough-bred or fairer fingers,” in the land of Scotland, than those of its queen, whose bearing in public toward Duncan, Banquo, and the nobles, is marked by elegance and majesty; and, in private, by affectionate anxiety for her sanguinary lord. He duly appreciated her feelings, but it is pity that such a woman should have been united to such a man. If she had been less strong of purpose, less worthy of confidence, he would not have disclosed to her his ambitious designs; less resolute and prompt of thought and action, she would not have been called on to share his guilt; less sensitive or more hardened, she would not have suffered it to prey for ever like a vulture upon her heart. She affords, as I consider it, only another instance of what women will be brought to, by a love which listens to no considerations, which disregards all else besides, when the interests, the wishes, the happiness, the honor, or even the passions, caprices, and failings of the beloved object, are concerned; and if the world, in a compassionate mood, will gently scan the softer errors of sister-woman, may we not claim a kindly construing for the motives which plunged into the Aceldama of this blood-washed tragedy the sorely-urged and broken-hearted Lady Macbeth? (pp. 204-08)

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