

## AKA Dearest Chuck

By Kathleen Watt

MACBETH, LAST GREAT KING of ancient Scotland, reigned prosperously with his queen from 1040 to 1057. Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles* . . . (1587), which was William Shakespeare's source for *The Tragedy of Macbeth*, dispatches the role of Macbeth's uncontent wife in a single terse reference:

. . . especially his wife lay sore upon him to attempt the thing [the murder of the sitting king, Macbeth's predecessor], as she that was very ambitious, burning in unquenchable desire to bear the name of a queen . . .

From the distance of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Shakespeare then writes into his Lady Macbeth the passion, determination, frustration and despair which remains untold in the *Chronicles*. Near the end of the play, King Malcolm, whose function is principally to restore order to the body politic, calls Lady Macbeth a "fiend-like queen," in the vocabulary of patriarchy and witch-hunting. So she is regarded by scholars and critics like A. W. Schlegel, who writes of Shakespeare in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, "The bad is radically odious, and to endeavor in any manner to ennoble it, is to violate the laws of propriety."

But to some, it's not clear that this view reflects Shakespeare's intention in *Macbeth*. For one thing, regicide *per se* was not an uncommon avenue to the Scottish throne in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. "The attempt and not the deed Confounds us," says Lady Macbeth. And then, Malcolm speaks as Malcolm. Shakespeare, with famous impartiality, merely offers his characters to us, to know them ourselves. Here, Shakespeare suggests an evil feasting on the flesh of this body politic, more nefarious than any ambitious woman, and more insidious. It is discernible in the predilections of the playwright's own king, James I.

Oxford-educated and literary, King James I became patron of "The King's Men," a theater group headed by Shakespeare, who is believed to have written *Macbeth* as a *pièce d'occasion* expressly for the new King of England. With astonishing dexterity, Shakespeare crafted an entertainment both true-tongued and utterly—prudently—flattering. In 1603, when James I succeeded his childless cousin, Queen Elizabeth, he had already been Sixth King James of Scotland for thirty-seven years, proudly claiming descent from legendary Banquo

(Macbeth's comrade and, in 1051, his victim). James I portrayed himself as patriarch-king, a new Augustus, and penned several treatises serving his particular interests. He held forth on absolutism and the divine right of kings. He published *Daemonologie*, a detailed manual of witches—revealing and purifying them—which ignited an obliging wave of witch-hunting, – torture, and –burning. Then, he authorized a new translation of the Bible, forever after called *The King James Version*. From its noble prose springs the dogma that officially authenticates the Jacobean hierarchies—and no end of exhortation to women.

For example, regarding the sexes and marital order, *A Godly Form of Household Government (1598)* heeds the admonitions of Apostles Paul and Peter:

The duty of the husband is to be lord of all . . .

The husband ought not to be satisfied that he hath robbed his wife of her virginity, but that he hath possession and use of her will . . .

The wife, her duty is, in all reverence and humility, to submit and subject herself to her husband . . .to obey his commandments in all things . . .

If she be not subject to her husband . . .if she will seek to have her own way . . .there will be doing and *undoing*. Things will go *backward*, the house will come to *ruin*, for God will not bless where his ordinance is not obeyed.

According to Renaissance laws of the Correspondences (“a Household is as it were a little Commonwealth . . .”), disorderliness in the home—that is, an ungoverned woman—threatens the Commonwealth, and she must, by law, be bridled.

*The Commonwealth of England, and Manner of Government Thereof (1558)* declares “. . .God hath given to the man great wit, bigger strength, and more courage to compel the woman to obey by reason, or force: and to the woman, beauty, fair countenance, and sweet words to make the man obey her again for love.”

*Of Domestic Duties (1622)* adds that she must do all “with contentment.” And though the Apostles also stress that God is most pleased by genuine mutuality between men and women, we’re reminded that “[e]ven in those things where there is a common equity, there is not an equity, for the husband hath verily even in all things a superiority.”

By this compassed measure, Lady Macbeth is nothing less than faithful in her godly role as wife and helpmeet. She is found at home managing household economies, awaiting Macbeth's return from battle, harbingered by his happy letter. She is his "partner in greatness," his "dearest chuck." She is all duty and skillful hospitalities, greeted as "hostess" by King Duncan, who favors her way-station. Later, serving Macbeth, and having proper knowledge of "natural herbs and all things physick," she prepares a potion to ensure the chamberlains will sleep through Duncan's murder. She catches Macbeth's faltering resolve by what means she has—sweet words and bitter—that his promise might be fulfilled (his own concern is, mainly, what people will think of him). After her husband forgets to plant the murder weapons at the scene, Lady Macbeth gets the plan back on track—appalled, but efficient. She tidies up after the murder. She bids him wash his hands and change his bloody clothes. On hearing news of the night's abomination, in a dangerous but telling misstep she answers as hostess: "What, in our house?" Lady Macbeth is so duty-bound that the emotion she counterfeits is altogether the wrong one. Yet when Macbeth begins to rant, it's she who feigns a swoon to distract the confused company. Maybe she actually faints. These are, after all, impossible burdens upon a "weaker vessel." But whether she faints, or fakes it to protect Macbeth, she delivers faultlessly as his consort, obedient to the parameters of her gender.

What can have so pressed Lady Macbeth to unleash this furious disorder, that even she realized—so soon and too late—would ruin everything? Shakespeare poses the question, showing her bared nature as she walks in her sleep, so pricked by the horrors of the crime that she rehearses them nightly. From the outset, Lady Macbeth is battling for efficacy of self, in a way that, for comparison, Lady Macduff doesn't (however much she harangues her husband). On receipt of his letter in Act I, she addresses Macbeth:

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. . .

She knows her husband (as he does not know her) and this promise of the crown offers her a purpose worthy of partnership. An oblique integrity lies at the heart of her struggle not to be rendered as nothing, though in desperation her object becomes ghastly, her lust for it

voluptuous and malignant. Finding gentler humors in Macbeth, she condemns them, for *action* is the husband's domain. She eschews the merits of her gender, praying “. . .unsex me here . . .stop up the access and passage to remorse” that she herself may *act*, if need be. But, assuming masculine traits “of direst cruelty” on his behalf, to spur him to action, she proves only that fatal disorder follows where there is no integration of feminine principle.

Nor can she sustain her own life without it. The feminine principle returns to indict her—never successfully “unsexed”—and drive her mad. She tells us she'd have killed the king herself, “. . .Had he not resembled/My father as he slept.” No simple guilt assails her, but a pervasive, unanswerable remorse. A sorrow for confounded potentialities, unrealized self, unborn children. And despair. “What's done cannot be undone.” She could as well be referring to her marriage.

When Duncan is dead, Macbeth finds his wife increasingly superfluous, condemning her to a *skimmington* (the prescribed shaming ritual for scolding wives) of isolation in plain view. She has been dismissed. And stripped of any reason for being, Lady Macbeth goes crazy. Evil has little to do with it. Except in perverse inventions of those who fear urgent women. Except for the mapping of others' nightmares onto any social anomaly—especially those imperially fixed by a king's *Daemonologie* or *Authorized Bible*. In effect Lady Macbeth joins the community of wayward sisters—called witches—beyond society's harborage, disenfranchised, failed in her effort to survive the disorder of a world defined by brute force, in opposition to feminine principal.

In our century, after another five hundred years, the *King James Bible* is still misappropriated. Patriarchy still misdirects. And, though to say so invites the charge of postmodern revisionism, the virulent disorderliness in Lady Macbeth—a. k. a. fiend-like queen, a. k. a. dearest chuck—though repugnant, is not really so unfathomable.