**The “fiend-like queen” and her influence on the Gothic**

Shakespeare needs this play to focus on gender in order to help to establish the patriarchal Jacobean monarch on his throne. He can not really write a series of weak females at this late stage in his career since for so many years he has been creating “masculine” heroines in order to win the favour of Queen Elisabeth. Lady Macbeth needs to be seen in light of what came before, as well as in the light of the direction that Jacobean theatre in general is moving – all the heroines of Jacobean tragedy seem to have a well developed ruthless streak.

Given this background, Lady Macbeth begins to slot into place. She is feminine in her care for Macbeth shown in 3.2 and again in 5.1 when her guilt has made her so remorseful that she is a tormented soul – all she chides Macbeth for in 3.4. She is wonderfully strong in Act 1 when reading the letter, but we are not really prepared for the shock of “unsex me here/and fill me…direst cruelty”. This prayer to the “spirits that tend on mortal thoughts” must be seen as the key to this character and to the writing that would follow later. Coming so early in the play, the prayer is directly linked to the Witches, themselves symbols of mixed gender and this wish to be unsexed must be considered.

Firstly, it is not a plea to be made male. Nor is it focused solely on her sexuality, since it makes demands on Macbeth as well. You will need to decide whether the wish for the spirits to “take my milk for gall” is a neutral act, or a genuine subversion of her femininity. If the wish is for a substitution – a denial of one of the defining characteristics of her gender - then the act is passive. If, however, you believe the idea that the line is an invitation for the spirits and “murdering ministers” to suckle at her breast, receiving her milk as their gall, then Lady Macbeth has moved considerably further away from a vague wish to exhibit more manly characteristics. In short, this wish to nurture the evil spirits would go some way to define her as a “fiend-like Queen”. After this debate, the advice she gives to her husband has a somewhat feminine quality – “bear welcome in your eye,/ your hand your tongue – a far cry from the violent warrior described in the opening scenes. This dichotomy increases in the course of Act 2 as Macbeth is repeatedly upbraided for his weakness. It seems natural that with his overpowering “milk of human kindness” the new Lady Macbeth should seek to goad him to action by criticising his unmanly behaviour. After all, hasn’t she just got rid of her own milk? Indeed in Act 1.7, between cries of “then you were a man”, she tells the tale of the suckling baby who she would rather “have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums / And dashed the brains out”. Again she focuses on her breasts as instruments of nurture denied and on the masculine child, thus establishing herself as stronger than the males in her circle at this time.

Macbeth is not at the bottom of the masculine table. Duncan sits below him, curiously for this character who needs to represent such a good king. In 2.1, when Macbeth is preparing to murder Duncan, he imagines himself approaching “with Tarquin’s ravishing strides”. This is a surprise since it immediately equates this murder with the rape of Lucretia, whilst at the same time linking Macbeth with Tarquinius Superbus, a Roman tyrant who would be murdered and removed from the throne after a bloody civil war. We seem to have a three part inversion here – the lowest status in contemporary society has attained the strongest position, and the highest is raped/killed by a man who is in thrall to his wife. This is a play where “fair is foul” and such reversal should not surprise.

Almost as soon as the murder is committed, Lady Macbeth begins to fade. We learn that Duncan “resembled (my) father as he slept” to an extent that she could not take the deed on herself. Furthermore, after smearing the grooms with blood, the knocking begins that will herald the transformation of the castle into a metaphorical hell and the pair retire, though not before Lady Macbeth chides Macbeth for his blood stained guilt – “go get some water…”. The irony is that this will be the lasting image of her in 5.1 as she sleepwalks, wracked with guilt. From this point her role recedes.

In the banquet (3.4) she attacks Macbeth repeatedly about what she perceives as his lack of manhood, and though she takes the male role by dismissing the guests, we see little of her strength or masculine cruelty. She has, in 3.2, been shut out of Macbeth’s plans as he begins to dominate the play and is left playing the traditional feminine role of concerned wife, albeit one whose concern stems from her fear that Macbeth will give away the secret of Duncan’s murder.

By the time we meet her in 5.1, her condition is so far gone that the Doctor says she “more needs… the divine than the physician”. As her mind wanders back through the play, the focus is on her guilt and on the need to take care of Macbeth, urging him to return to bed, much as she did in 3.2. It seems that for all the cruelty of the opening scenes, she is to die in a very unmasculine manner, if not a wholly feminine one, but certainly in a manner which leaves no trace on Macbeth when he is told the news. By the end of the play all women are dead and a patriarchal monarchy is established- one which is meant to thrive and produce the contemporary line of monarchs.

There is much here that is reflected in the Gothic writing you will encounter. The real difference seems to be in the willingness of the writers of the Eighteenth Century and beyond to allow their heroines to retain their strength throughout the piece. But it is relatively straightforward to trace the thematic links back to Lady Macbeth or to other heroines of this period in Shakespeare’s writing such as Goneril and Regan. Certainly we see a wish to subvert gender and a wish to dominate the males in the narrative, but there is little sense in Macbeth of a strand of Gothic writing that will develop – the entrapped or persecuted female or the male who perverts the natural order of things to establish a hold over a woman.

From this point, it is not a huge jump to the post-modern world of Angela Carter where two forms of female seen in Gothic writing can develop and emerge from one another. The first type as seen in much male writing is the passive or docile female, the second, the active and proactive-as seen in Lucy and developing from Lady Macbeth. Students are reading the Bloody Chamber and should look at the Tiger’s Bride to see the transformation clearly. At first the heroine describes how ““I watched with the furious cynicism peculiar to women whom circumstances force mutely to witness folly, while my father [...] rids himself of the last scraps of my inheritance.” Here we see a passive female, entrapped and at the mercy of her father – a classic Gothic construct. She is handed over to the Beast and it is here that a change from the usual trajectory of such writing takes place. This character will not fall in thrall to her male “owner” and nor will she be “saved”… Instead she willingly gives herself to the Beast and unleashes a violent sexual response from him until “each stroke of his tongue ripped off skin after successive skin, all the skins of a life in the world, and left behind a nascent patina of shining hairs. My earrings turned back to water and trickled down my shoulders; I shrugged the drops off my beautiful fur.” In the Twentieth century, the Gothic heroine is in control of her own destiny and wears her inner sexuality with pride. She does not need to be “unsexed” in order to triumph, instead she recognises her inner strength - the power of her gender.