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Codependents Medieval Style

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When we repeat the truism "Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely," it is usually obvious who is being corrupted. However, in William Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, the reader is left to wonder who has been corrupted by the temptation of absolute power—Macbeth or Lady Macbeth? Whose motives are at play and what are they?

As Lady Macbeth encourages her husband to perform his evil deeds, I feel that she is feeding her own desires and perceptions rather than his ambition. According to James L. Calderwood in *If It Were Done*, “Macbeth does not reckon profit against loss and conclude that murdering Duncan is his likeliest route to kingship. In fact... he scarcely mentions kingship” (49). Lady Macbeth convinces herself that Macbeth wants to be king, but needs her help:

Glamis thou art, and Cawdor, and shalt be  
What thou art promised: yet do I fear thy nature;  
It is too full o’ the milk of human kindness  
To catch the nearest way...  
Art not without ambition, but without  
The illness should attend it... (1.5.15-20)

Thus, Lady Macbeth decides she must do what she can to ensure that the prophecy is fulfilled and not rely on fate or her husband.

In *Public and Private Man in Shakespeare*, J.M. Gregson asserts that “Lady Macbeth has limited imagination and thus no fear of the consequences of her actions in this world and the next” (194). However, I believe quite the contrary is true: Lady Macbeth demonstrates a vivid imagination and is the mastermind of the
diabolical duo. It takes her cunning resolve to "pour [her] spirits in [Macbeth's] ear,/ And chastise with the very valour of [her] tongue" to set the portentous events in motion, sealing their fates (1.5.27-28). Finally, Lady Macbeth artfully uses psychology to spur Macbeth into action, employing the most effective tool at her disposal—the questioning of his manhood. Her imagination eventually is her undoing as she imagines her hands are stained with blood that won't wash away and dies in a state of guilt-ridden dementia.

Although she may appear to be without a conscience, her attempt to convince Macbeth that "Things without all remedy/ Should be without regard: what's done is done" may be a means of trying to persuade herself as well (3.2.11-12). The truth of this statement becomes all too evident to Lady Macbeth as she utters, "what's done cannot be undone" shortly before her death (5.1.70). All along Lady Macbeth is the schemer in the devilish plot, while Macbeth is the one who actually gets his hands dirty by committing the violence. The irony is that Lady Macbeth is the one who imagines that she can't get her hands clean. Ultimately, it is Macbeth who is capable of accepting the consequences of the evil ascent to power that has begun. Macbeth has killed in battle, and although murder is different, he implies that each murder will get easier. As he reminds Lady Macbeth that they "are but young in deed" (3.4.144), Macbeth hints that he will become hardened in time to Duncan's murder, and Shakespeare foreshadows the future acts of violence necessary to fulfill the prophecy.

When Lady Macbeth dies, so does the conspiracy, for Macbeth has lost his partner in crime: she provided the brains while he supplied the muscle in their fiendish plot. As both of them were necessary to move the scheme from idea to fruition, the two demonstrate a medieval version of codependence. Assuming that alone he can do nothing to change the course that has been set, Macbeth resolves himself to whatever fate awaits him. His now extremely cynical view of life becomes apparent when he declares:
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more: it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing. (5.5.24-28)

Thus, Macbeth expresses his hopelessness and resignation.

According to Calderwood, “Finding the origin of an act is no
easier than finding its end, and Macbeth testifies to the impossibility
of that” (49). However, Macbeth’s ambition and desire for power
seem to materialize only after conversations with his wife. In addition,
she appears to be the driving force behind the means to the prophesied
ends. If there is a strong woman behind every successful man, then
maybe Lady Macbeth is the power behind Macbeth’s actions.
Consequently, his motive dies with her.

Works Cited

Calderwood, James L. *If It Were Done: Macbeth and Tragic Action.*
Gregson, J.M. *Public and Private Man in Shakespeare.* London:
Croom Helm, 1983.