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The witches constitute our introduction to the realm of maternal malevolence unleashed by the loss of paternal protection; as soon as Macbeth meets them, he becomes.

. . . their “ wayward son” [III. v.

11]. This maternal malevolence is given its most horrifying expression in Shakespeare in the image through which Lady Macbeth secures her control over Macbeth: I have given suck, and knowHow tender tis to love the babe that milks me: I would, while it was smiling in my face, Have pluckd my nipple from his boneless gums, And dashd the brains out, had I so swornAs you have done to this.[I. vii. 54-9]This image of murderously disrupted nurturance is the psychic equivalence of the witches poisonous cauldron; both function to subject Macbeths will to female forces. For the play strikingly constructs the fantasy of subjection to maternal malevolence in two parts, in the witches and in Lady Macbeth, and then persistently identifies the two parts as one.

Through this identification, Shakespeare in effect locates the source of his cultures fear of witchcraft in individual human history, in the infants long dependence on female figures felt as all-powerful: what the witches suggest about the vulnerability of men to female power on the cosmic plane, Lady Macbeth doubles on the psychological plane. Lady Macbeths power as a female temptress allies her in a general way with the witches as soon as we see her. The specifics of that implied alliance begin to emerge as she attempts to harden herself in preparation for hardening her husband: the disturbance of gender that Banquo registers when he first meets the witches

is played out in psychological terms in Lady Macbeth's attempt to unsex herself. Calling on spirits ambiguously allied with the witches themselves, she phrases this unsexing as the undoing of her own bodily maternal function: 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! make thick my blood, Stop up th'access and passage to remorse; That no compunctious visitings of Nature Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between The effect and it! Come to my woman's breasts, And take my milk for gall, you murdering ministers. [I. v. 40-8] In the play's context of unnatural births, the thickening of the blood and the stopping up of access and passage to remorse begin to sound like attempts to undo reproductive functioning and perhaps to stop the menstrual blood that is the sign of its potential.

The metaphors in which Lady Macbeth frames the stopping up of remorse, that is, suggest that she imagines an attack on the reproductive passages of her own body, on what makes her specifically female. And as she invites the spirits to her breasts, she reiterates the centrality of the attack specifically on maternal function: needing to undo the "milk of human kindness" [I. v. 17] in *Macbeth*, she imagines an attack on her own literal milk, its transformation into gall.

This imagery locates the horror of the scene in Lady Macbeth's unnatural abrogation of her maternal function. But latent within this image of unsexing is the horror of the maternal function itself. Most modern editors follow [Samuel] Johnson in glossing "take my milk for gall" as "take my milk in exchange for gall," imagining in effect that the spirits empty out the natural maternal fluid and replace it with the unnatural and poisonous, one.

But perhaps Lady Macbeth is asking the spirits to take her milk as gall, to nurse from her breast and find in her milk their sustaining poison. Here the milk itself is the gall; no transformation is necessary. In these lines Lady Macbeth focuses the cultures fear of maternal nursery??” a fear reflected, for example, in the common worries about the various ills (including female blood itself) that could be transmitted through nursing and in the sometime identification of colostrum as witchs milk. Insofar as her milk itself nurtures the evil spirits, Lady Macbeth localizes the image of maternal danger, inviting the identification of her maternal function itself with that of the witch. For she here invites precisely that nursing of devil-imps so central to the current understanding of witchcraft that the presence of supernumerary teats alone was often taken as sufficient evidence that one was a witch.

Lady Macbeth and the witches fuse at this moment, and they fuse through the image of perverse nursery. It is characteristic of the plays division of labor between Lady Macbeth and the witches that she; rather than they, is given the imagery of perverse nursery traditionally attributed to the witches. The often noted alliance between Lady Macbeth and the witches constructs malignant female power both in the cosmos and in the family; it in effect adds the whole weight of the spiritual order to the condemnation of Lady Macbeths insurrection. But despite the superior cosmic status of the witches, Lady Macbeth seems to me finally the more frightening figure. For Shakespeares witches are an odd mixture of the terrifying and the near comic. Even without consideration of the Hecate scene [III. v] with its distinct lightening of tone and its incipient comedy of discord among the witches, we may begin to feel a shift toward the comic in the presentation of the witches:

the specificity and predictability of the ingredients in their dire recipe pass over toward grotesque comedy even while they create a (partly pleasurable) shiver of horror.

There is a distinct weakening of their power after their first appearances: only halfway through the play, in [IV. i], do we hear that they themselves have masters [IV. i. 63]. The more Macbeth claims for them, the less their actual power seems: by the time Macbeth evokes the cosmic damage they can wreak [IV.

i. 50-61], we have already felt the presence of such damage, and felt it moreover not as issuing from the witches but as a divinely sanctioned nature's expressions of outrage at the disruption of patriarchal order. The witches' displays of thunder and lightning, like their apparitions, are mere theatrics compared to what we have already heard; and the serious disruptions of natural order??” the storm that toppled the chimneys and made the earth shake [II. iii. 54-61], the unnatural darkness in day [II.

iv. 5-10], the cannibalism of Duncan's horses [II. iv. 14-18]??” seem the horrifying but reassuringly familiar signs of God's displeasure, firmly under His??” not their??” control. Partly because their power is thus circumscribed, nothing the witches say or do conveys the presence of awesome and unexplained malevolence in the way that Lear's storm does. Even the process of dramatic representation itself may diminish their power: embodied, perhaps, they lack full power to terrify: “ Present fears”??” even of witches??”” are less than horrible imaginings” [I. iii.

137-38]. They tend thus to become as much containers for as expressions of nightmare; to a certain extent, they help to exorcise the terror of female malevolence by localizing it. (pp. 96-9) Lady Macbeth brings the witches power home: they get the cosmic apparatus, she gets the psychic force. That Lady Macbeth is the more frightening figure??" and was so, I suspect, even before belief in witchcraft had declined??" suggests the firmly domestic and psychological basis of Shakespeares imagination. The fears of female coercion, female definition of the male, that are initially located cosmically in the witches thus find their ultimate locus in the figure of Lady Macbeth, whose attack on Macbeths virility is the source of her strength over him and who acquires that strength, I shall argue, partly because she can make him imagine himself as an infant vulnerable to her. In the figure of Lady Macbeth, that is, Shakespeare rephrases the power of the witches as the wife/mothers power to poison human relatedness at its source: in her, their power of cosmic coercion is rewritten as the power of the mother to misshape or destroy the child.

The attack on infants and on the genitals characteristic of Continental witchcraft belief is thus in her returned to its psychological source: in the play these beliefs are localized not in the witches but in the great central scene in which Lady Macbeth persuades Macbeth to the murder of Duncan. In this scene. Lady Macbeth notoriously makes the murder of Duncan the test of Macbeths virility; if he cannot perform the murder, he is in effect reduced to the helplessness of an infant subject to her rage. She begins by attacking his manhood, making her love for him contingent on the murder

that she identifies as equivalent to his male potency: “ From this time / Such I account thy love” [I. vii.

38-9]: “ When you durst do it, then you were a man” [I. vii. 49]. Insofar as his drunk hope is now “ green and pale” [I. vii.

37], he is identified as emasculated, exhibiting the symptoms not only of hangover, but also of the green-sickness, the typical disease of timid young virgin women. Lady Macbeths argument is, in effect, that any signs of the “ milk of human kindness” [I. v. 17] mark him as more womanly than she; she proceeds to enforce his masculinity by demonstrating her willingness to dry up that milk in herself, specifically by destroying her nursing infant in fantasy: “ I would, while it was smiling in my face, / Have pluckd my nipple from his boneless gums, / And dashd the brains out” [I. vii. 56-8].

That this image has no place in the plot, where the Macbeths are strikingly childless, gives some indication of the inner necessity through which it appears. For Lady Macbeth expresses here not only the hardness she imagines to be male, not only her willingness to unmake the most essential maternal relationship: she expresses also a deep fantasy of Macbeths utter vulnerability to her. As she progresses from questioning Macbeths masculinity to imagining herself dashing out the brains of her infant son, she articulates a fantasy in which to be less than a man is to become interchangeably a woman or a baby, terribly subject to the wife/mothers destructive rage.