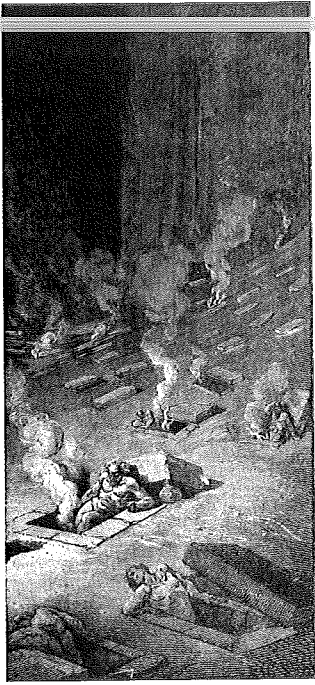


PORTRAIT OF A MARRIAGE



The marital state rarely features in Shakespeare's plays – except for *Macbeth*, where, as **Michael Dobson** reveals, it is one of the few positive things in a world of perpetual war and bloodshed.

Shakespeare spent a great deal of his career dramatizing betrothals, but very little of it depicting marriages. With the exceptions of Oberon and Titania in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (who spend the bulk of the play engaged in a bitter custody dispute, and appear to have been serially unfaithful for years) and of Leontes and Hermione in *The Winter's Tale* (whose relationship is even more cruelly disrupted by jealousy, to the extent of being put into a 16-year state of suspension for the whole of the fourth act), the only couples he shows us who are already securely married belong to history and tragedy rather than to comedy. The usually political or dynastic alliances we see in the histories are rarely very satisfactory: in *Henry IV Part I*, for instance, Mortimer and his Welsh wife lack a common language, so that they have to use her father Glendower as an interpreter, though even under these trying conditions these pretenders to the throne seem happier with one another than do actually crowned couples such as Richard III and Lady Anne or Henry VIII and Katharine of Aragon. In the tragedies, by contrast, marriages sometimes look more promising than this, but they are correspondingly likelier to be cut short – like that of Romeo and Juliet, condemned to the Capulet tomb long before their relationship can mature into the sort of sour, mutually distrustful public institution inhabited by Juliet's parents, or that of Othello and Desdemona, destroyed by Iago before the briefly-happy couple have even returned from their enforced Cyprian honeymoon. Even for the more pragmatic Gertrude and Claudius in *Hamlet*, till death us do

part does not turn out to be very long. Audiences who come to Shakespeare hoping to eavesdrop on the intimacies of the married – an appetite which most of the rest of mainstream English drama from Vanbrugh through Pinter and beyond is more than happy to satisfy – are generally disappointed.

The one shining exception to this is *Macbeth*, which may well be, as is often said, 'Shakespeare's supreme exploration of evil' or 'Shakespeare's most powerful dramatization of murder', but which is also his greatest depiction of a marriage. This is something which is often overlooked, largely thanks to a long-standing simplification not only of this play's characterization but also of its politics. According to popular stereotype, *Macbeth* tells the story of how Scotland's proper hereditary monarchy gets briefly interrupted when, during an epidemic of witchcraft, a power-hungry monster of a wife succeeds in nagging her husband into killing the rightful king and usurping the throne, until normality is triumphantly restored by an army of avenging patriots. Seen in this light, *Macbeth* has repeatedly served as a stern moral fable aimed primarily at wives who might be tempted to pursue ideas above their proper domestic station. Even today journalists seem to be trained to mention Lady Macbeth whenever a woman shows any sign of wielding political authority, or even just of conversing as an equal with a powerful husband, whether she be Hillary Clinton or Cherie Blair. Mary Cowden Clarke typifies this treatment of Lady Macbeth as exemplary unwomanly woman in her fictionalized account of 'The

ere thrown back and within came forth such fearful at here sad tortured spirits Virgil in the City of Diss. From ated edition of Dante's *Divine*

re and corrupt others. They eir next victim, as he is the e man at the top of fortune's down. They also detect that

tions about 'the Scottish

ved that because *Macbeth* was dark conditions, many At least we won't have that – fingers crossed!

elance theatre writer.

Thane's Lady' in *The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines* (1850-2): here the future Lady, 'destined to read a world-wide lesson, how unhallowed desires and towering ambition can deface the image of virtue in a human heart', begins her life (predictably, during a thunderstorm) by causing the death of her own mother, who dies of disappointment on learning that her child isn't a boy.

This familiar reading of the play, though, gravely misrepresents Lady Macbeth, a character who actually feels herself to be so feminine that she needs to summon spirits to 'unsex' her before entering into conspiracy with her husband, and who, shocked by what she sees as Macbeth's disloyalty when he tries to withdraw from it, is so maternal that the idea she invokes as the worst thing she can possibly imagine is that of dashing a baby's head to the floor. (Actresses who have nonetheless insisted on playing Lady Macbeth as though this is the sort of thing she does for fun the whole time have simply misread this passage's syntax). Perhaps just as seriously, this view of *Macbeth* greatly distorts Shakespeare's picture of the world against which its protagonists' relationship is counterpoised. The Scotland of *Macbeth* isn't initially a hereditary monarchy at all, and it isn't clear that all of its inhabitants think of themselves as Scots, never mind as subjects of King Duncan: at the start of the play the country, overrun by the Norwegians and by Irish mercenaries, is in what appears to be a customary state of savage civil war. It is only after Macbeth, Banquo and the rest of Duncan's army have

imposed Duncan's rule by extreme violence that, to the surprise of many within his court, the king newly monopolizes power within a single family by declaring his son Malcolm to be his heir. Macbeth's choice, however badly and wickedly he chooses and however disastrously things turn out for all concerned, isn't that between leaving everything in settled peace and becoming a killer: it's that between continuing to commit mass slaughter in order to keep Duncan and his kin in power and committing assassination in order to replace them.

As for the normality happily restored at the end of the play, the Macbeths' opponents present a pretty strange anthology of alternative models for domestic life. It's as if Shakespeare deliberately decides to make his play's central conflict more interesting by compensating the Macbeths for being in the wrong by making their relationship visibly richer and more engaging (until their mutual guilt destroys it) than any other in the play. Ranged against them in the last act are Macduff, who inexplicably leaves his wife and children at Macbeth's mercy, and who is enabled to kill Macbeth by the fact that he was untimely ripped from his mother's womb (presumably killing her in the process); the alienatingly stoical Siward, who does not care how many sons he loses in battle so long as they are all doing their proper masculine duty; and Malcolm, who has become an accomplished liar during his exile, but who seems to be telling the truth when he insists that one of his chief qualifications for kingship is the fact that he is 'unknown to woman.' (As for Malcolm's

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fully restored at the end of his opponents present a variety of alternative models for Shakespeare deliberately makes the play's central conflict more engaging (until their mutual destruction) than the Macbeths for making their relationship more engaging (until their mutual destruction) than any other in the play. Ranged against them are Macduff, who kills the Macbeths, and Malcolm, who is enabled to kill Duncan, and Banquo, who is killed at he was untimely ripped from her (presumably killing her in the process). Ranged against them are Siward, who kills Macduff's sons he loses in battle so that they can be proper masculine men. Malcolm has become an exile, but who seems to insist that one of the facts of kingship is the fact that Malcolm is a man.' (As for Malcolm's



Laura Rogers, Lucy Bailey and Elliot Cowan in rehearsal. Photo Ellie Kurtz

patriotism, his first act on having claimed the Scottish throne via an English invasion is to bring its honours system into line with that of the neighbouring state of which he is now a client by redesignating his thanes as earls). In the ritually bloodstained, all-male warrior world of *Macbeth*, achieving any male-female relationship as close, confiding and mutual as that of the Macbeths is an anomaly. The tragedy at the heart of this play isn't just that they destroy Duncan, and Banquo, and Macduff's family, however shocking and affecting these losses are: it's that they destroy their own marriage in the process.

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