**Lady Macbeth**

Character Analysis

The Macbeths are the original power couple: where her husband is a courageous, skillful warrior, she's charming, attractive, and completely devoted to her husband's career.

Murderously devoted.

**Witchy Woman**

Lady Macbeth is a teensy bit worried that her man isn't quite man enough to do what it takes to be king; he's "too full o' the milk of human kindness" (1.5.1). If her husband's going to be the powerful figure she wants him to be, Lady Macbeth's got to take things into her own hands. Check out this famous speech where she psyches herself up for murder (but make sure the lights are on first):

*The raven himself is hoarse
That croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan
Under my battlements. 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 the 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,
Wherever in your sightless substances
You wait on nature's mischief! Come, thick night,
And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell,
That my keen knife see not the wound it makes,
Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark,
To cry 'Hold, hold!'* (1.5.3)

Are you thoroughly creeped out? If not, read it again—and really dwell on the part where she asks the spirits to "fill me from the crown to the toe top-full/ Of direst cruelty" [1.5]. And note that Shakespeare's leading ladies don't usually go around saying stuff like this. Not even Katherine Minola, who's notorious for having a tongue like a "wasp" in Taming of the Shrew, summons "murderous" spirits.

Remind us who the witch(es) are, again?

**Woman Up**

In fact, Lady Macbeth's whole "unsex me" speech aligns her with witchcraft and the supernatural (calling on spirits and talking about "smoke of hell" and "murdering ministers" sure sounds witchy to us). She also intends to "pour [her own] spirits in [Macbeth's] ear" when he returns home from battle (1.5.1). Literally, she means she's going to fill her husband's "ear" with harsh words that will help convince him to take action against Duncan, but there's also a sense that Lady Macbeth will "fill" her husband's body in the same way that women's bodies are "filled" or, impregnated by men.

All of this is to say that Lady Macbeth is portrayed as masculine and unnatural. It's pretty explicit: she asks the spirits to "unsex" her, stripping her of everything that makes her a reproductive woman. She wants her "passage to remorse" to be stopped up—i.e., her vagina. (What? Well, being a woman and a mother makes her compassionate, so she wants the "passage" of childbirth to be blocked.) She wants her blood to be make thick, meaning both the blood in her veins but also her menstrual blood, the "visitings of nature." Finally? She asks that her breast milk be exchanged for "gall," or poison.

In Lady Macbeth's mind, being a woman —especially a woman with the capacity to give birth and nurture children —interferes with her evil plans. Femininity means compassion and kindness, while masculinity is synonymous with "direst cruelty." When Lady Macbeth says that her husband is "too full o' the milk of human kindness," she's implying that Macbeth is too much like a woman in order to wield a monarch's power (1.5.1). And she uses this notion of Macbeth's "kindness" against her waffling husband when she pushes him to murder the king: "When you durst do it, then you were a man" (1.7.4).

It sounds to us like Lady Macbeth is man enough for both of them.

**Lady Who?**

Okay, sounds like Lady Macbeth is a powerful figure and may evoke some fears about dominant women. You know, just maybe. But what happens to her?

Soon after Macbeth proves his "manhood" by killing Duncan and becoming king, Lady Macbeth disappears into the margins of the story and becomes the kind of weak, enfeebled figure she herself would probably despise.

When she learns that the king's dead body has been discovered, she grows faint and must be carried from the room. (Hmm. It's almost as though Lady Macbeth has literally been drained of that "spirit" she said she was going to pour into her husband's "ear.")

Later, when Macbeth decides to murder Banquo in order to secure his position of power, he excludes his wife from the decision making altogether (3.2.5).

And by Act V, Lady Macbeth has been reduced to a figure who sleepwalks, continuously tries to wash the imaginary blood from her hands, and talks in her sleep of murder (5.1.1-6). She's grown so ill that the doctor says there's nothing he can do to help her. "The disease," he says, "is beyond" his "practice," and what Lady Macbeth needs is "the divine" (a priest or, God), not a "physician" (5.1.12-13).

Would could easily read this as a kind of psychological breakdown. Lady Macbeth is so consumed by guilt for her evil acts that she eventually loses her mind. But we could also say that her transformation from a powerful and "unnaturally" masculine figure into an enfeebled woman reestablishes a sense of "natural" gender order in the play. In other words, Lady Macbeth is put in her place, sleepwalking through the palace while her man makes all the decisions.

However we read Lady Macbeth's transformation, one thing's certain. In the end, Lady Macbeth is all but forgotten. When Macbeth learns of her death, he says he has no "time" to think about her —"She should have died hereafter; / There would have been a time for such a word" (5.5.3).

**Lady Macbeth**

From *Shakespeare Studied in Six Plays* by Albert Stratford George Canning. London: T. F. Unwin.

Lady Macbeth hears both of the coming royal visit, and also of the appearance and words of [the three witches](http://www.shakespeare-online.com/plays/macbeth/macbethchars.html). Although a bold, ambitious, worldly woman, she from the first believes them, implicit faith in witchcraft and magic being evidently general, if not universal, in Scotland at this period.1 She has all her husband's ambition, without a particle of his loyalty to the King, which prevents his following her counsels as speedily and eagerly as she wishes. Directly she hears of the King's visit, she resolves in her own mind that he shall never leave [Macbeth's castle](http://www.shakespeare-online.com/plays/macbeth_1_6.html) alive. For she thoroughly believes the witches' prediction about her husband's becoming king, and, though they never suggested crime as necessary to confirm their prophecy, she resolves to persuade Macbeth to remove every obstacle to its fulfillment.

She reads in her husband's castle [a letter from him](http://www.shakespeare-online.com/plays/macbeth/macbethglossary/macbeth1_1/macbethglos_letter.html) announcing his strange meeting with the witches, their telling him he will become King of Scotland and be previously made Lord of Cawdor. The title of Glamis he possessed before, but he and she now foresee or expect the two future distinctions, and she therefore exclaims eagerly to herself, as if addressing him:

"Glamis thou art, and Cawdor."

This last title she might likely expect for Macbeth owing to the rebellion of its unfortunate owner, who was of course proclaimed a traitor. But the sovereignty of Scotland, though Macbeth is related to the King, is a delightful astonishment to her, as King Duncan has two sons, Malcolm and Donalbain, both loyal to their reigning father. She therefore proceeds with some doubt, yet determined:

"And shalt be,
What thou art promis'd: yet do I fear thy nature;
It is too full of [the milk of human kindness](http://www.shakespeare-online.com/plays/macbeth/macbethglossary/macbeth1_1/macbethglos_milkkindness.html),
To catch the nearest way. . . .

Hie thee hither,
[That I may pour my spirits in thine ear](http://www.shakespeare-online.com/plays/macbeth/macbethglossary/macbeth1_1/macbethglos_pourspirits.html)
And chastise with the valour of my tongue
[All that impedes thee from the golden round](http://www.shakespeare-online.com/plays/macbeth/macbethglossary/macbeth1_1/macbethglos_chastise.html),
Which fate and metaphysical aid doth seem
To have thee crowned withal."

It is, perhaps, strange that the idea never occurs to her superstitious mind that probably Duncan and his sons were alike fated to die before Macbeth, which would ensure his lawful as well as predicted accession to the Scottish throne. This hope apparently occurred to Macbeth himself, on first hearing the prophecy, when he exclaimed:

"If chance will have me king, why, chance may crown me, Without my stir."

But Lady Macbeth, more relentless as well as more ambitious than her husband, immediately conceives the horrible idea of murdering her royal guest, which she urges upon Macbeth, against his will, with the most ruthless determination. Such a crime, involving deliberate regicide, with the most fearful violation of the duties of hospitality, the real Lady Macbeth never contemplated, though a resolute woman, and personally hostile to King Duncan.2

On Macbeth's arrival home, soon after his wife hears of the royal visit, she congratulates him on his new dignity and promised royalty, immediately suggesting to his agitated, unwilling mind the murder of their guest and sovereign.3 She is a thoroughly hardened, ambitious woman, resolute and utterly unscrupulous. Her love for Macbeth, upon which so much stress has been laid, seems, when considered in reference to her worldly position and interests, worthy of little, if any, commendation. She knows her fortunes are now linked with his, and that with his increasing power her own will rise proportionately, owing to her influence over him. Shakespeare's noble language alone gives an apparent dignity to a base, shameless character, whose ambition is selfish and worldly. The language with which this hateful woman persuades her brave yet weak husband to slay the King is in Shakespeare's grandest style. She exclaims joyfully, at meeting and congratulating him on his new distinctions in due course —

"Great Glamis, worthy Cawdor!
Greater than both, by the all-hail hereafter!
Thy letters have transported me beyond
This ignorant present, and I feel now
The future in the instant."

He replies

"My dearest love, Duncan comes here to-night."

She asks an important, dangerous question, the secret meaning of which he very likely apprehends at once, or guesses:

"And when goes hence?"

He replies, as if hesitating:

"To-morrow as he purposes."

She promptly if not vehemently rejoins:

"O never
Shall sun that morrow see!
Your face, my Thane, is as a book, where men
May read strange matters."

She proceeds to give him certainly able instructions in her odious designs against the trustful King:

"[To beguile the time,
Look like the time](http://www.shakespeare-online.com/plays/macbeth/macbethglossary/macbeth1_1/macbethglos_beguiletime.html); bear welcome in your eye,
Your hand, your tongue: [look like the innocent flower,
But be the serpent under it](http://www.shakespeare-online.com/plays/macbeth/macbethglossary/macbeth1_1/macbethglos_innocentflower.html). He that's coming
Must be provided for: [and you shall put
This night's great business into my dispatch](http://www.shakespeare-online.com/plays/macbeth/macbethglossary/macbeth1_1/macbethglos_dispatch.html),
Which shall to all our nights and days to come
Give solely sovereign sway and masterdom."

To this prospect of the somewhat doubtful joys and delights of royalty, Macbeth at first makes a rather cold or disappointing reply:

"We will speak further."

And she boldly if not enthusiastically rejoins, noticing his depressed look:

"[Only look up clear](http://www.shakespeare-online.com/plays/macbeth/macbethglossary/macbeth1_1/macbethglos_clear.html);
To alter favour ever is to fear:
Leave all the rest to me."

The same ideas, methods, and designs expressed in common parlance would surely excite only horror and disgust, with a laudable desire to punish both the temptress and tempted. For there is really nothing redeeming in their thoughts; nothing palliating in their circumstances; nothing, in short, to arouse the least sympathy for their conduct in any way. Were they suffering from any sense of real or supposed injustice, or had they any object whatever beyond their ambition and the worldly pleasures expected from its gratification, there would be some reason, even if morally insufficient, for the deep interest, resembling compassion, if not sympathy, with which the Macbeths have been often regarded. But if their expressed thoughts are carefully examined, apart from Shakespeare's splendid language, they are merely a cruel, ungrateful, selfish couple, "choked with ambition of the meaner sort,"4 who commit crime after crime without the least provocation, and only for the mean object of obtaining power and wealth, with their attendant pleasures.

Yet Lady Macbeth has been represented both on the stage and in essays with a dignity and grandeur almost worthy of Catherine of Aragon, Joan of Arc, or Margaret of Anjou. In truth, she ought to be ranked with Goneril and Regan, the wicked daughters of King Lear; as, except in her love for Macbeth, with whom her worldly interests are completely involved, she never evinces an unselfish feeling, never utters a single noble sentiment, and seems never inspired by a single generous motive.

Perhaps the most morally affecting scene in the whole play is where Macbeth, while still innocent and not ungrateful to his kind sovereign, almost begs his wife to let him abandon the assassination scheme. But she is thoroughly determined, using her influence over him with far more fiendish purpose and success than the witches had attempted to do. For, even after his interview with them, he retains some touch of right feeling, of which she never shows the least sign; and he gradually yields completely to her wishes and persuasion.

"Macbeth. We will proceed no further in this business:
He hath honour'd me of late; and I have bought
Golden opinions from all sorts of people,
Which would be worn now in their newest gloss,
Not cast aside so soon.

Lady Macbeth. [Was the hope drunk,
Wherein you dress'd yourself? hath it slept since?](http://www.shakespeare-online.com/plays/macbeth/macbethglossary/macbeth1_1/macbethglos_hopedrunk.html)
And wakes it now, to look so green and pale
At what it did so freely? From this time,
Such I account thy love. Art thou afeard
To be the same in thine own act and valour,
As thou art in desire? Wouldst thou have that
Which thou esteem'st the ornament of life,
And live a coward in thine own esteem ? "

These and many other such high-sounding words, when spoken by [Mrs. Siddons](http://www.shakespeare-online.com/plays/macbeth/sarahsiddons.jpg) and other great actresses, have apparently invested Lady Macbeth with a grandeur and interest of which her character and conduct are quite undeserving. They might well become a heroine inspiring some craven ally with courage to attempt a daring exploit. In this case, a cruel, hardened woman is urging a brave, ambitious, but not yet thoroughly unscrupulous husband to murder an old, helpless man — their benefactor — while asleep in their house, for the purpose of obtaining his kingdom and possessions.

Lady Macbeth's courage is often mentioned; but, considering the many artful precautions she and her husband take while committing murder in their own castle, surrounded by adherents, and without giving their helpless victims the least chance either of defence or flight, it is not easy to see where they display any courage, except in braving possible consequences.

Had not Macbeth's troubled conscience beset him, which his wife always dreaded, but could not entirely foresee, his usurpation of the Scottish throne might have been a permanent success. The young Princes had fled the country. Macbeth was both powerful and popular with the army, and all Scotland acknowledged his rule. When tormented not only by his conscience, but by the ghosts of his victims, he was, of course, confounded, amazed, and unable to refute the suspicions which his own nervous fears aroused. Had he been as hardened as his wife, and not troubled by ghosts, his enterprise promised as good a chance of success as any bold usurper would have wished, or at least expected. But neither in the successive murders of King Duncan, his two servants, Banquo, Lady Macduff and her children, is the least sign of courage shown by either Macbeth or his wife. In each case, their safety is nearly as well secured as they could have desired.

The old King is slain asleep, while his two attendants, having been drugged into heavy slumber, are also killed, when all three are helpless and unconscious. The gallant Banquo is murdered by two hired armed ruffians, who, had they failed, would never have been believed, if Macbeth disavowed employing them. Lastly, Lady Macduff, a helpless woman, in her husband's absence, with her children, are also slain by hired assassins. Throughout these cowardly atrocities, Macbeth and his wife are exposed to no risk, and yet they exhort, praise, and animate each other, in grand language worthy of a true hero and heroine, which is entirely owing to Shakespeare's genius and fancy, their acts and designs being alike incompatible with true courage or heroic sentiment of any kind. When planning the King's murder, and after its commission, this wicked pair never say a word about the state of Scotland, or express any idea of advancing its prosperity.5

Footnotes

**1.** "The high pretensions of Scotch witchcraft never degenerated, as in other countries, into a mere attempt at deception, but always remained a sturdy and deep-rooted belief." — Buckle's "Civilisation," vol. iii.

**2.** Scott's "History of Scotland."

**3.** Mrs. Jameson truly says that Lady Macbeth bears less resemblance to her historical prototype than Cleopatra and Octavia to theirs, and is, therefore, more of Shakespeare's own creation. "She revels, she luxuriates in her dream of power" ("Characteristics of Women "). Mrs. Jameson thinks that her ambition is more for her husband's sake than her own; yet her words and conduct scarcely warrant this assumption.

**4.** *Henry VI* [Part 1 (2.5)]

**5.** "The real Macbeth killed his sovereign Duncan in battle, and not in his own castle, and was a just and equitable ruler." — Scott's "History of Scotland," vol. i.