

Analyse and evaluate the dramatic contribution of lady macbeth to the play as a w...

[Literature](#), [Play](#)



Lady Macbeth's first appearance in Shakespeare's tragedy 'Macbeth' is in Act I Scene V, after she has received a letter from Macbeth. He refers to Lady Macbeth as his 'dearest partner of greatness'. This is an expression of his affection and gives the impression that they plan things together, giving clues about their relationship. Then, in Lady Macbeth's first soliloquy, she says:

'Glamis thou art, and Cawdor; and shalt be

What thou art promis'd. Yet I do fear they nature;

It is too full o'the milk of human kindness'

This is very dramatic because the first line repeats the witches' prediction, and so the audience start to link Lady Macbeth with the witches. This happens earlier in the play, when Macbeth echoes the witches' line 'So foul and fair a day I have not seen.' It makes it seem like the witches have already started to take control of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. Also, the audience may find it very strange that Lady Macbeth is worried that Macbeth is 'too full o'the milk of human kindness'. This is very different to the Macbeth that the Captain describes as 'brave Macbeth'.

Later in the scene, Lady Macbeth makes a powerful speech about how she wants 'evil spirits' to 'unsex' her and take away all her tenderness, love and pity, that makes her a woman, so she can murder the king. This scene is very shocking, both when the play was written, when people believed evil spirits and witches were real, and now, because it is someone wanting courage to murder. It can be interpreted in many ways. To some it may

sound almost as if she is the fourth witch, already evil like them, and wanting to be more so, wanting to lose her last shred of humanity; her womanliness. The language Shakespeare uses is very similar to the witches spell:

' And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full

Of direst cruelty'

The speech contains imagery of hell, death and darkness, like the witches' spell. In some productions of ' Macbeth', Lady Macbeth says this speech in an evil, forceful way, similar to how the witches cast their spell. However, I think that this speech relates more to the time that Lady Macbeth was living in. Men had all the power, all the choices, all the ambition, and used to kill others in battle. Women were not ambitious on this scale, and because she was ambitious, it must have seemed very unwomanly. Yet I think that Lady Macbeth is asking to be more masculine because she is scared, not of the actual act of killing someone, but of not having the courage to go through with it. If I were to present this speech, I would make it emotional, tense, upsetting, as Lady Macbeth desperately tries to rid herself of something that, in her eyes, is holding her back, before she has to appear strong for her husband. When he enters, they almost talk in code about their plan. Throughout the play shared lines between Lady Macbeth and Macbeth adds to this feeling. This shows that they can understand each other, and their hidden meanings, and maybe that they have plotted before about the death of the king.

At the end of the scene, Lady Macbeth is shown as a complex character. She seems equal with Macbeth in her marriage, and whether controlled by the witches or not she is incredibly ambitious, and associated with darkness and the supernatural.

In Act I Scene VII, the audience learns a lot about how Lady Macbeth thinks. Macbeth has said, ' We will proceed no further in this business' (of killing Duncan), and has convinced himself it is a bad idea. Lady Macbeth wants to finish what they started and mocks Macbeth for being ' afeard'. She taunts and bullies him, and in those times it was very unusual for a wife to talk to her husband like this, and ironically is probably more common and relevant to today's society. She questions his manhood, a theme recurring in the play. Finally, she says:

' I have given suck, and know

How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me:

I would, while it was smiling in my face,

Have pluck'd my nipple from his boneless gums,

And dash'd the brains out, had I so sworn as you

Have done to this.'

These lines are very famous, even today, I think because they show just how incredibly ruthless Lady Macbeth is - considering killing a young defenceless baby. Yet is she just saying this to convince Macbeth? Would she REALLY do

this? There has been a lot of speculation about the baby she is referring to. Shakespeare loosely bases the play on Scottish history, and it is noted that the real Lady Macbeth had one child in her first marriage, but none with Macbeth. However some productions, like 'Macbeth on the Estate' (1997) think that they had a baby together that died. If this is the case then why have they not had another? Lady Macbeth may be bringing up a painful memory to persuade Macbeth to kill the king.

The dramatic effect of these lines does contribute to the whole play; especially when compared to Lady Macduff. We only see Lady Macduff in one scene, and we get the impression she is a typical devoted wife and mother, caring for her children, very similar to how women were in Shakespeare's time. This makes Lady Macbeth look even more monstrous, and unnatural. There is an underlying message in the play that the 'evil' king who encounters the supernatural and takes the throne by force fails in the end. I think this also applies to Lady Macbeth - an 'evil' woman who is 'unwomanly', and has masculine qualities, who prays for evil, meets an unhappy end. The effect of her having no children adds to her unnaturalness, and is later described as a 'fiend-like queen'. To Shakespeare's audience, I think that the unnatural relates to the supernatural. The imagery of milk is dramatic, as it seems to indicate innocence and youth, the opposite to blood and murder. At the end of the scene, Macbeth has changed his mind and praises Lady Macbeth saying 'Bring forth men-children only'. Again, we see this recurring theme of 'being a man'. They then agree and work in harmony together, and the language reflects this as shared lines are used.

' Have done this.

If we should fail -

We fail?'

Act V Scene I is Lady Macbeth's last appearance, and is arguably one of the most dramatic scenes of the play. Her speech reveals her feelings, and her mental state. No stage directions were written by Shakespeare, and a few vague ones are supplied by the doctor and gentlewoman, so it is up to the actor/ess how to present the sleepwalking and obsessive hand-washing. This is where the audience sees the breakdown of Lady Macbeth, and how much she has changed. When the king is killed, Lady Macbeth takes control of the situation when Macbeth fails to, and again at the feast. Yet here she seems so broken:

' She has light by her continually; 'tis her command'.

Earlier, Lady Macbeth wanted darkness and evil, now she is afraid of it. ' Hell is murky!' Both the doctor and the gentlewoman are afraid of her in this state, and the doctor implies she is suicidal. The language used is simple prose, almost childish, repetitive, and makes what was a strong, ambitious woman seem like a vulnerable child:

' Yet who would have thought the old man to have

had so much blood in him?'

Prose is used because it is natural and creates a different atmosphere to that of her stronger self, and she even refers to a king as an 'old man'. Imagery of blood and darkness are still common in her speech.

Lady Macbeth is all alone, with no one to talk to, as earlier in the play it shows Macbeth has stopped trusting her, and they are not seen together after Banquo's ghost appears. This scene was well portrayed in Polanski's 'Macbeth' (1971) as it really showed the drama, guilt, loneliness and fear felt by Lady Macbeth. She is the one who has had to sooth Macbeth previously, and I think she has unburdened Macbeth of all his emotions, and has taken them on herself, and her mind has become overloaded with evil thoughts which have driven her insane.

In Jacobean England this scene would have been terrifying to Shakespeare's audience, as they would have thought her evil and possessed. King James I himself believed in witchcraft, and wrote a book about it. Also, he thought he had once had an encounter with a witch, called Agnes Sampson, who put a spell on him. Shakespeare wrote 'Macbeth' and knew it would be performed in front of the King, so he probably added the witches and the supernatural themes to frighten the audience and also interest him. Nevertheless I still think it is dramatic and unsettling to today's audiences, as although mental illnesses are more widely understood, it is quite upsetting to see someone deteriorate into madness.

Personally, I think Lady Macbeth's death was suicide, and she could not bear the pain any longer, and in Shakespeare's time this would have been a

fitting death for someone considered evil. It adds to the tragedy that such a determined character became so weak and died off stage, and her husband did not even mourn her:

‘ She should have died hereafter;’

Lady Macbeth contributes hugely to the drama of the play, by her scheming actions and persuasions, her unpredictability, and her ruthless nature. I think that she is not just pure evil, but more complex, and is driven by brutal ambition. Sadly, at the beginning of the play, she thinks she knows what she wants, but it destroys her in the end.