

Unsex me here: the lady behind macbeth

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On the same level of notoriety as the namesake of Macbeth is Lady Macbeth. The role of this persistent seductress is evident upon the introduction of her in the play. She becomes a symbol of greed and triggers the ambition in her husband that will eventually lead to both of their downfalls.

In her famous soliloquy, Lady Macbeth calls upon the supernatural to make her crueler in order to fulfill the plans she conjured to murder Duncan. “... Unsex me here...” (1. 5. 48) refers to her plea to rid of her soft, feminine facade and obtain a more ruthless nature. She desires an internal transformation, but not an external one.

She tells Macbeth to do the same when she exclaims, “ Look like th’ innocent flower, But be the serpent under ‘ t” (1. 5. 76-78) expressing to him that in order to be productive, he must appear innocent like a flower while, in reality, being deceptive as a serpent would be. This demonstrates Lady Macbeth’s taking on and encouraging of the “ foul” described by the Weird Sisters. (1.

1. 12) When Macbeth is hesitant as to killing Duncan, Lady Macbeth begins to mock Macbeth and challenge his masculinity. In this way she acts as a bully towards her husband. Ethan Hawke describes Lady Macbeth as Macbeth’s “ partner-in-crime”. This is true in that she is the driving force behind Macbeth’s ambition and eventual serial-killing mindset. The Weird Sisters may have prophesied the idea that Macbeth would be king, however, it was she that pursued the idea and aided him in committing such crimes.

Professor Tanya Pollard of Brooklyn College describes the many interpretations of Lady Macbeth throughout the ages. One such is the

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aforementioned idea of bullying. Towering over the character of Macbeth, Charlotte Cushman played the role in this way. As Lady Macbeth, “...she knew what she wanted, she knew how to get there, and she knew how to get her husband there.” Another outlet of portrayal is Lady Macbeth as a seductress; upping the sex appeal to use as a sly mechanism of trickery.

Sarah Bernhardt played this version so much so that audience members often found it offensive. Whatever Lady Macbeth is perceived as however, it is no doubt that she is a woman of passion and pursuit. However, as Macbeth becomes more ruthless, she seems to be falling apart at the seams. Had she always intended for the mass murder of the Scottish court? Or was this just the unforeseen consequence of a single selfish motive? Rupert Goold’s 2010 movie adaptation of Macbeth presents an interesting take on the medieval play. As the movie and characters progress, we witness Lady Macbeth’s emotional depreciation. However, in the movie, we also have a visible aspect in which we can see her physical deterioration as well.

She begins to look frailer and fatigued which adds to the effect of her sleep walking scene. These notions are such that are unable to be sought in a simply read adaptation. When she is “ possessed” by her own greed and the longing for royalty imposed upon her by the Weird Sisters, Lady Macbeth is at her strongest-willed and most ambitious, however when she is no longer under the influence of the witches, she takes on a more sympathetic character due to her newfound and uniquely human guilt. This is the point in which we see Lady Macbeth at her most vulnerable.