

# Lady macbeth, an honoured hostess and a fiend-like queen

[Literature](#), [British Literature](#)



The audience witness a total transformation of Lady Macbeth from a powerful, scheming woman to a sad and lonely wretch. By the end of this tragedy she has nothing to live for, is riddled with guilt and has lost all sanity.

At the opening of the play the audience see how fervent her hunger for power and status is when she summons evil spirits; “ Fill me from the crown to the toe top-full of the direst cruelty;” (Act One, Scene 5, lines 40-41).

This statement displays Lady Macbeth’s character deeply nefarious, it would perturb the superstitions of the Christian spectators.

The audience might also perceive her to be disturbed as in that same soliloquy she asks the spirits to, “ Make thick my blood,” At the time that the play was written thick blood was associated with illness and derangement. It would have been most horrific for the audience to listen to the character persisting that she did not want to be womanly, especially for someone of her status in society.

Pronouncing that she wished to be unsexed and that she wanted the spirits to “ Come to my woman’s breasts, and take my milk for gall,” would outrage their fervid Christian views as women were supposed to be maternal and loving whereas she uses the oxymoron to intensify her wish to become corrupt and inhuman.

Immediately after she calls the spirits, Shakespeare returns Macbeth to the stage, scheduling his wife the ideal time to discuss her plan. Lady Macbeth begins to instruct him as she says, “ Look like th’ innocent flower, but be the

serpent under't." She uses this metaphor to reassure her husband and make known to him that others won't realise he'd be doing anything wrong but at the same time urging him to commit the deed, ergo underlining the way in which it is her evil inventions which will destroy Duncan. The Shakespearean audience would be very disturbed to witness such wicked schemes emanating from a female character; women were particularly governed by society's expectations and considered to be the fairer, gentler sex, leaving political machinations to their male counterparts.

Along with manipulating Macbeth into executing all of her schemes, she also is competent to cover up after him when he is vulnerable to suspicion. Without her help and guidance, Macbeth would have not been able to consummate his feats. After Macbeth's first act in which he commits regicide by killing his dear king Duncan, he is incapable of coming to terms with his actions and returning with the weapons to Duncan's chamber. His ever-dutiful wife finishes the task. " Give me the daggers. The sleeping and the dead are but pictures." Her control here reveals her power and determination.

We see her draw a veil over Macbeth's behaviour again after he has taken King Duncan's life as Macbeth makes the mistake of killing the guards, when he knows that as a soldier himself he should interrogate suspects. After Macduff attempts to question Macbeth on his reasons, Lady Macbeth faints (Act 2 Scene 3 line 112). This shows her ability to extemporise when the situation requires it. Indeed there are several occasions when Lady Macbeth steps in to avoid her husband being put under suspicion.

Her role in the banquet scene after Macbeth sees Banquo's ghost has a reason. Macbeth shows signs of weakening before the spirit of Banquo. However, Lady Macbeth shows her authority over the proceedings. She instructs all but herself and Macbeth in Act 3 Scene 4 lines 118-9 to "Stand not upon the order of your going. But go at once," thus managing to clear their estate of all the guests who had been visiting, which would have been a difficult feat especially for a woman yet her determination impels her capable.

We sporadically notice that she is not such a nefarious character, as she would like to believe. An example of her vulnerability is when she needs a drink to give her courage in order to go through with the plan for the murder of Duncan, "That which hath made them drunk hath made me bold." If she were truly a 'fiend' she would feel nothing. Similarly, when she is anxious and awaiting Macbeth's return she utters that, "Had he not resembled my father as he slept, I had done't." Had she been entirely evil she would have distanced herself more and be unable to draw comparisons.

The decisive moment however for Lady Macbeth is when she detects that she is no longer needed. Act 3 Scene 3 lines 6-7 describe this further when she asks Macbeth, "What's to be done?" and he proves to her that he is no longer the mere student but the master as he replies, "Be the innocent of the knowledge, dearest chuck, till thou applaud the deed." Macbeth's use of 'dearest chuck' would have been supposed to be playful however in this context would have aggravated his wife and spurred on the doubts that would have been forming in her mind. The quotation is also analogous to

what Lady Macbeth had said to him in Act 1 Scene 5 about looking innocent, thus extra proof of his imitation of his wife's influence.

Lady Macbeth's return to the action in Act 5, scene 1 is dramatic in its irony. She is a mere shadow of her former self, unable to sleep and riddled with guilt she re-enacts the role she played in Duncan's murder, and in so doing betrays her guilt to her waiting woman and, of course, the audience. The constant washing of her hands and utterances " Out damned spot... Who'd have thought the old man to have so much blood..." serve to expose her crimes, her sentiments in Act Two " A little water cleans me of this deed" are shockingly highlighted in the closing Act with poignant irony.

Delirious and disturbing outbursts: " Here's the smell of blood still; all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this hand. Oh, oh, oh!" (Line 44-6) and her use of metaphor amplifies her acute mental torture and pain, she is a woman so construed by guilt that she loses all sanity.

Lady Macbeth's downfall, like her husband's, is a tragic one as she ultimately dies from her terrible crime. Like Macbeth, Lady Macbeth enjoyed reputation and status as the wife of the greatest Scottish warrior, much loved and honoured by king and county. However, she is as much Macbeth, guilty of ' vaulting ambition' and when she succumbs to that fatal flaw she can no longer function. Indeed, so consumed by guilt, Lady Macbeth commits suicide knowing that her crimes have involved interfering with the divine right of kings.

Interestingly, however, the audience see many times throughout this drama when Lady Macbeth is not so cold as she is made out to be. We know that

she is not a ' fiend' as we see on numerous occasions her inability to carry out acts herself, act 2 Scene 2, line 13-4, " Had he not resembled my father as he slept. I had done't." She is unable to distance herself from the stunt and even helping to carry out the act she finds difficult as she needs help to bring the courage she needs: " That which hath made them drunk hath made me bold;" illuminating further how she has some empathy for Duncan. The audience see just how terrible an effect all the events since the witches first met Macbeth have had on her mental state as they hear how she has taken her own life in Act 5 scene 5 from Malcolm.

To conclude, it is clear that Lady Macbeth begins her role as ' honoured'; she certainly enjoys the wifely role of Scotland's hero. However, through greed and ambition, she forfeits her reputation and status. Certainly her actions are ' fiend-like' but she does betray some small shreds of conscience and is therefore well aware of her choices. A totally fiendish character would not experience guilt, but Lady Macbeth goes insane simply because she knows she has been immoral and sinful.

Lady Macbeth, " an honoured hostess" and " a fiend-like Queen".