

Malcolm's description of lady macbeth as a "fiend – like queen" essay sample

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Lady Macbeth is without doubt, one of William Shakespeare's most infamous, interesting and notable creations. She is a character whose dramatic actions provoke a similarly dramatic change of opinion and reaction from the enthralled audience; who see her at first as a devoted wife and then recoil with utmost horror and revulsion at her appeal to the spirits to " unsex" her and fill her with " direst cruelty". Finally, the audience cannot help but feel sympathy when " by self and violent hands (she) took of her life".

In Shakespeare's time, women were identified with a homemaking and childbearing role. They had no input in to their husband's affairs, and certainly would have not taken on an advisory role. Lady Macbeth bears no resemblance to that description or to that role; in fact, she is clearly the more dominant partner in the marriage and she is very much in control of her husband who regards her as his " dearest partner of greatness". Her assertiveness would have been unbelievable to an Elizabethan audience, which leads us to the play's major theme of appearance versus reality. Lady Macbeth is very clever in that she plays on the accepted view of women at the time. Although she appears like a polite and ordinary wife, she is actually a remarkable woman, full of thoughts that would be frightening, not only by Elizabethan standards, but also by today's standards too- even women in the modern world who plan murders are regarded as ' unnatural'. Her outward appearance fools a lot of characters in the play, and plays a part in the death of Duncan, who thought that she was a ' charming hostess' on the night she

was actually planning his murder. Ironically, it was Duncan who said "There's no art to find the mind's construction in the face". She is the very epitome of the play's central theme, stated in the witch's incantation: "Fair is foul, and foul is fair"

The first time the audience meets Lady Macbeth is when she is reading the letter from her husband, informing her of the witches' prediction for their future. The letter is important as it shows us that the Macbeths are communicating in prose. Prose was the type of language used by people who were not highborn. For example, the drunken porter uses prose. However since the Macbeths are upper class, they should be communicating through blank verse. They are using prose, as the content of the letter is treasonous and contains information about the witches and Macbeth's deepest desires. At the time Shakespeare was writing, the king was God's anointed, so to plot to murder him went against all accepted belief- the audience would have been horrified.

The letter also reveals more about the Macbeths' relationship. The typical marital relationships in Elizabethan time were very rigid and structured. In fact, many marriages were arranged, and there was not a lot of love, contact or equality displayed between spouses. Wives were to stay at home and tend to their housekeeping duties and were not to interfere in their husband's affairs. However, the fact that Macbeth wrote to his wife with his news immediately after the witches' first prophecy came true, shows us that he has a lot of time and respect for his wife and values and needs her opinion. His respect for his wife is further underlined when he addresses her as his "

dearest partner of greatness". The Macbeths are deeply in love at this stage and very dependant on each other.

Lady Macbeth reads the letter without any emotion, despite the letter containing several dark and wicked fantasies and after she has finished she is immediately transported into the future. Regardless of the consequences, she plainly understands that Duncan must die and that her husband will become King. However, she knows that her husband is too loyal to murder Duncan and live out his destiny. She analyses her husband with great detachment and is almost cruel. Although she recognises that her husband has ambition, he hasn't " the illness (that) should attend it". She observes his good qualities as if they were bad and criticises his nobility and respect for Duncan. Another good quality of Macbeth's that she attacks is his kindness, which she regards, as feminine; "(he) is too full o' th' milk of human kindness (to kill)". This shows us her ruthless pursuit to get what she wants from her husband. She goes on to make it clear that she will talk him into committing the murder by any means, and with the help of fate and the supernatural will make Macbeth king.

After being briefly interrupted by a messenger who informs her of Macbeth and Duncan's impending arrival, Lady Macbeth returns to her soliloquy with more words which would further shock and infuriate the audience. Her plea for the spirits to " unsex" her shows us that, although she appears aggressive and stronger than her husband, she feels that, she as a woman isn't capable of doing something so treasonous and also sacrilegious. The moral Elizabethan audience would have been completely against her at this

stage. She creates an image which shows the audience that the crime that she will commit is truly heinous. "The raven himself is hoarse, that croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan." At this time, the raven was strongly associated with evil, so this heightens the sense of the unnaturalness of what she is planning. She goes on to demand these spirits to so alter her that she will not feel any guilt or shame. Nothing can get in the way of what she is planning on doing.

Again, the audience would be disgusted that she was so desperate for power that she would call upon unimaginable evil and also that she would risk her own soul by bringing this evil into her body. In a perverse prayer she cries "Come to my woman's breasts and take my milk for gall, you murdering ministers." She knows that she needs such bravery, not just for herself but for her husband too as Macbeth currently lacks the courage needed. When her husband enters, she greets Macbeth with great reverence, as if he were already King, even though she was condemning him as feminine and afraid of his own fate just moments before. From their conversation, we can see that the Macbeths are deeply in love, but also that Lady Macbeth is the one who is firmly in charge. She advises him that he should appear "like th' innocent flower, but be the serpent under't" and also reassures him that she will arrange everything; "leave all the rest to me", again taking on an unfeminine role. The audience would have viewed Lady Macbeth's 'unnatural' behaviour as a clear sign that she was in the grip of demonic possession- this would have been how they would have rationalised such behaviour.

Even though in a previous scene, Lady Macbeth indicates that it will be she who will murder Duncan believing “ That my keen knife (will) see not the wound it makes”, we are now aware that it will be a reluctant Macbeth who will kill his king. We see Macbeth in turmoil as he doesn't want to kill Duncan for several reasons: he fears being caught, they are cousins, he is Duncan's host and Duncan is a good king. We then see a great contrast in feelings when Lady Macbeth arrives. When Macbeth informs her that they cannot kill Duncan, she is insensitive when it comes to his feelings. We now see her at her manipulative and calculating finest when she uses many persuasive techniques to get what she wants: First she questions his manhood; “ When you durst do it, then you were a man”, next she questions his love for her; “ From this time, such I account thy love”, then she accuses him of cowardice; “ And live a coward in thine own esteem letting “ I dare not” wait upon “ I would”. Finally she reassures him; “ But screw courage to the sticking point, and we'll not fail.”

This shows us that Lady Macbeth was very clever indeed. At the time, women were believed to have smaller brains and to be less intelligent than their male counterparts; yet, Lady Macbeth goes further with a brutal persuasive technique that would lead the audience to believe that she was indeed a ' fiend- like queen'. Her assertion, “ I would while it (her baby) was smiling in my face, have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums and dashed the brains out, had I so sworn as you have done to this”, shows us how truly determined to achieve ' the golden round' she is. This would have appalled the audience so much, as here was a woman, discussing murdering

her own defenceless baby. She describes it vividly and with great conviction. It also horrifies Macbeth but has the desired affect on him as he goes on to murder Duncan.

As she waits for her husband to return, we see that in many ways Lady Macbeth has not the 'direst cruelty' that is so sorely required from the evil spirits and that she is not totally 'unsexed'. Firstly, she reveals how she needs alcohol to stop her fears. Then she tells us that she would have murdered Duncan "had he not resembled my father as he slept". This reveals that Lady Macbeth still has feminine traits and is quite delicate. She reverts to her usual assertive self when an anxious Macbeth returns. She insults him and accuses him of being a coward for not being able to go and smear blood over the servants to frame them for murder. Macbeth regrets the murder, and claims that he heard a voice telling him that he will never sleep again.

A comforting Lady Macbeth reassures him that "a little water clears us of this deed". This quote is important as it comes back to haunt Lady Macbeth towards the end of the play, when we see her brought low by guilt, repeatedly washing 'blood' from her hands. This scene is also important, as it is here that we see the Macbeths together for the last time before Macbeth is King. Their relationship now starts to weaken when Macbeth gets the 'golden round' and they aren't the loving couple that we saw at the start. Now they grow apart and it becomes apparent that despite all their hard work, the crown has not brought them happiness. Lady Macbeth finally admits, "Nought's had, all's spent". Macbeth now has a new-found

confidence and is aiming to protect his crown without the help of his wife. He patronises his once- powerful wife when she asks him how she can help by saying, " Be innocent of the knowledge, dearest chuck". Macbeth now starts to neglect Lady Macbeth and plans to kill his old friend Banquo by himself.

At the banquet, the Macbeths' crimes are almost exposed to the increasingly suspicious guests when Banquo's ghost comes back to haunt a startled and frightened Macbeth. He is saved by his wife who stops him from revealing the all. Even though Lady Macbeth is becoming more and more isolated from her husband, she knows that she too will be in trouble if Macbeth gets found out. To stop him talking to the ghost that no one else can see, she uses one of her most effective ploys and again questions his masculinity: " Are you a man?" She makes up a passable but vague excuse to the worried guests telling them Macbeth has been like this since youth. She tries to stop any further outbursts by taking over his role as host.

This would have been considered very discourteous and unfeminine in Shakespeare's time, as the man was to host any formal gathering. The audience would also have found it extremely rude and disrespectful when she dismisses the guests, ordering them to leave at once, even though it was customary for guests to leave in order of importance and rank. Lady Macbeth pays no attention to this and the banquet breaks up in confusion and disarray. This confusion points up the chaos in Scotland under the Macbeth's rule and further associates Lady Macbeth with breaking up the natural order by which the world is governed. Once everyone has gone, it appears that Lady Macbeth's once powerful appeal to her husband's manliness is now

ineffectual, as she has nothing else to say to him. She doesn't reprimand Macbeth for his actions but makes excuses for him and says that he lacks sleep. This shows us that there is nothing left to their relationship and Lady Macbeth is isolated further whereas Macbeth is now only concerned about his own situation. Their relationship has rapidly deteriorated and this is the last time where we see them together. We see as their relationship weakens, Lady Macbeth's mental state also declines.

When we see Lady Macbeth for the last time, we see a dramatic and shocking contrast to her assertiveness at the start of the play. She is sleepwalking and we see her deeply distressed and troubled. She is extremely emotional and remorseful over all her sins and crimes. This confirms to us that her pleas to be 'unsexed' have ultimately failed and we see her now as very fragile and feminine. At the start of the play, Lady Macbeth was ruthlessly ambitious; even her husband, a brutal warrior, is amazed by her unnatural aggressiveness when he remarks "Bring forth men-children only, for thy undaunted mettle should compose nothing but males" However, as Macbeth grows in courage and becomes more independent, Lady Macbeth finds no role in the marriage. She does not do the things the typical housewife did at this time and now that her husband does not need to rely on her to make the decisions he could not bring himself to make, he deserts her. She slowly falls into deep loneliness and mental despair.

The audience are now presented with an unrecognisable Lady Macbeth and one who is far from 'fiend-like'. Earlier in the play, she had welcomed the

dark; Crying "Come, thick night, and pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell". Now she is afraid of the dark and as the waiting gentle-woman explains "she has light by her continually. 'Tis her command". Lady Macbeth now clearly identifies darkness with evil and indeed the audience would have agreed that "Hell is murky". During this scene we see her cleaning imaginary spots of blood from her hand. This reminds us of her assertion that "a little water clears us of the deed" after Macbeth murdered Duncan. The blood that she imagines is on her hand is actually the guilt that she feels in her mind for all of her past misdemeanours and wrong-doings. She had hoped that she could simply wash away these guilty feelings as easily as she washed the blood from her hands after Duncan's murder, but it is not to be. At the end of the scene we see a woeful and feeble Lady Macbeth, who after carrying the burden of her guilt alone has broken down, and has now been reduced to an obsessive and tormented soul, beyond help and endurance.

At this stage, the audience would definitely feel a lot of sympathy for Lady Macbeth. Even though they would have had an extreme dislike for her at the start of the play, they would now see that she is clearly paying for her sins and is a nervous wreck. Although they would realise that her actions are being punished, they might not be able to help feeling that after all she has been through, it is only natural that she has become sick. The audience is aware that her fractured relationship with Macbeth is probably the most important reason for her downfall. While she is sleepwalking she imagines that she is still giving advice to her husband and reassuring him. This shows

us that Lady Macbeth misses her husband and misses being in control of the marriage.

As her husband has neglected her and treated her as if she was an ordinary wife, Lady Macbeth can do nothing but imagine in her dreaming state that she and her husband still have the relationship that they once had. The audience now know that Lady Macbeth truly did love her husband and everything that she did was for him. This makes it even more poignant that she has no one to talk to or to help her through her problems, in the way she did for Macbeth when he was tense and stressed before and after Duncan's murder. Lady Macbeth kills herself for two reasons: she feels she has been neglected by her once adoring husband and thus has nothing else to live for. She also feels guilty for the murderers that she was involved in. She is plagued by Duncan's blood and she is isolated in her ordeal. Her death comes as a welcome escape for her as she cannot deal with her conscience or the responsibility of what she has done. She can't live with her 'disease'.

In my opinion, Lady Macbeth is not a 'fiend-like queen'. I think that the things that she did such as demanding evil in her life and persuading her husband to kill Duncan in the early part of the play were definitely horrific, but not worthy of the description 'fiend-like'. Everything she did was for Macbeth. It was he who informed her that he wanted to be king and she saw his potential and ambition and encouraged him in his ambition. She did everything for him because she loved him, but once he realised that he did not need her encouragement to kill anymore, he just discarded her.

Initially, Lady Macbeth is definitely the stronger one in the marriage and after Duncan's murder she tends to his needs instead of dealing with her own guilt. Her problems escalate in to a mental problem and, finally her death. She regrets and feels guilty over the things she has done and if she was 'fiend-like', I do not believe that she would feel remorse for the crimes she had committed. I think that some of the things that Macbeth did were 'fiend-like', particularly organising the murders of his friend Banquo and Macduff's wife and children, but I believe that the only true fiends in the play are the witches, for it is they who brought so much misery to the characters' lives, who drove Lady Macbeth to plot murder in the hope that it would make her and Macbeth's relationship even stronger. Lady Macbeth dies alone and desperate, a remorseful woman, certainly too frail and sorry to be a 'fiend'.