Critical Study of Lady Macbeth

**Psychoanalysis**

With the possible exception of King Lear, no character in any of Shakespeare's plays undergoes such a radical devolution as that which transforms Lady Macbeth from a nearly superhuman character in the first act of *Macbeth* into a sleep-walking zombie at the start of Act V. When we first see Lady Macbeth on stage, she is plainly in command of her faculties. But after her ineffective efforts to control Macbeth's reaction to the Ghost of Banquo in Act III, scene iv., in which she says that all her husband and partner in crime needs is sleep, Lady Macbeth disappears from the play. We learn of her again at the start of Act V when a doctor and one of her ladies in waiting discuss her insomnia. This hardly prepares us for the spectral figure who next appears, as Lady Macbeth enters sleepwalking uttering words that are laden with guilt and a pathetic longing for the comfort of her absent husband.

We first see Lady Macbeth in Act I, scene v. alone and reading a letter from her husband that speaks about his meeting with the weird sisters and their prophecy that he will become Scotland's king. Lady Macbeth issues no response to Macbeth's fantastic story. She focuses instead on the prospects for Macbeth's acting to fulfill the prediction and finds that he may be too full of the milk of human kindness to carry out the required deed of killing Duncan. She then summons her husband in a conjuring spell: "Hie thee hither,/That I might pour my spirits in thine ear,/And chastise with the valor of my tongue/All that impedes three from the golden round,/Which fate and metaphysical aid doth seem/To have thee crown'd withal" (I, v., ll.25-29). Her designs are congruent with those of the weird sisters, but Lady Macbeth's invocation is far more splendid and powerful in its language than the inarticulate (but cunning) statements of the witches.

Learning that King Duncan is coming to their castle and thereby providing an opportunity to kill him, Lady Macbeth calls upon spirits to unsex her, "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" (I, v, ll.46-51). The speech resembles Macbeth's "stars hide your fires" speech in the prior scene, but we also note that Lady Macbeth fails to consider that "compunctious visitngs of nature" might arise after the crime has been committed, and that her voluntary "de-sexing" alters her natural bond with Macbeth.

After Lady Macbeth has ceremonially drained all feminine kindness from her spirit, Macbeth enters, and Lady tells him that Duncan must be "provided for," the innuendo being that it is murder that comprises the night's business. He puts her off, saying that they shall speak about the matter later, but we note that Lady Macbeth does not name the deed at hand, referring to as "this enterprise." When Duncan arrives in Act I, scene vi, he is greeted first by Lady Macbeth alone, she uses an ironic pun in saying that everything has been "doubly done" on Duncan's behalf, the connotation of duplicity suggests that Lady Macbeth may use her ability for verbal equivocation to some advantage.

Things do not go as planned. Not only does Macbeth fail to carry out his wife's instructions concerning the placement of the murder daggers, the blame does not fall upon Duncan's guards but upon Malcolm and Donalbain, the king's two sons, who have fled the scene. At the midpoint of the play, in Act III, scene ii, Lady Macbeth worries aloud, asks a servant whether Banquo is gone from the castle, and then sends him with a message for King Macbeth. For the first time we see that Lady Macbeth is not satisfied with the outcome of her plan, saying in a soliloquy, "Nought's had, all's spent/Where our desire is go without content;/'Tis safer to be that which we destroy/Than by destruction dwell in doubtful joy" (III, ii., ll.4-7). When Macbeth enters, she chastises him for leaving her alone and then advises him to "sleek over" his "rugged looks," and be "bright and jovial" at banquet. (III, ii. ll.27-28). In the banquet scene, Lady Macbeth is unable to rein in her husband's guilty horror at seeing Banquo's ghost, and her handling of the guests is inept.

Lady Macbeth is absent for the play and her reappearance at the opening of Act V is presaged by the worried comments of her doctor and one of her gentlewomen. They note her compulsive habit of washing her hands, and, consistent with this diagnosis, the first words that the devolved Lady Macbeth speaks are "a spot." We soon realize that in her own mind, Lady Macbeth's hands are unclean and that she cannot command an imagined "damn'd spot" to disappear. Completely oblivious to those around her, Lady Macbeth transfers this symptom of guilt to Macbeth, saying "Wash your hands, put on your nightgown, look not so pale. I tell you yet again, Banquo's buried; he cannot come out on 's grave" (V, i., ll.62-64). Macbeth, of course, is not present, for he has gone to the battlefield, but in her final speech, Lady Macbeth's desire for conjugal partnership comes forth, as she says to her imagined husband, "To bed, to bed, there's knocking at the gate. Come, come, come, come, give me your hand. What's done cannot be undone. To bed, to bed, to bed" (V, i., ll.66-68). In Act V, scene iii, Macbeth commands the doctor to cure Lady Macbeth, to which the physician replies, "Therein the patient must minister to himself" (V, iii, l.45), and shortly thereafter Macbeth is told of his wife's death, presumably as a result of suicide.

Looking back, After the murder of the King, Macbeth withdraws from his marital relationship to Lady Macbeth and no longer relies upon his wife's capacity to interpret events for him. He keeps his plans to have Banquo and Fleance killed from her, saying to his one-time partner, "Be innocent of the knowledge, dearest chuck/Till thou applaud the deed" (III, ii, ll.50-51). By the banquet scene of Act III, Lady Macbeth is no longer part of her husband's world, he no longer needs her as a spur to ambition. Deprived of her function in directing Macbeth's acts, Lady Macbeth is left alone and without further purpose. Long before Macbeth concludes that life is a tale told by an idiot, Lady Macbeth, no longer a wife nor even a natural woman, has entered into a twilight realm in which there is no active role for her to perform nor any means through which guilt can be extinguished.

### Lady Macbeth as anti-mother

Stephanie Chamberlain in her article "Fantasizing Infanticide: Lady Macbeth and the Murdering Mother in Early Modern England" argues that though Lady Macbeth wants power, her power is “conditioned on maternity”, which was a “conflicted status in early modern England.” Chamberlain argues that the negative images of Lady Macbeth as a mother figure (like when she discusses bashing the brain of the babe that sucks her breast) reflect the image of motherhood in early modern England. In early modern England, mothers were often accused of hurting the innocent lives that were placed in their hands. Lady Macbeth then personifies all mothers of early modern England who were condemned for Lady Macbeth’s fantasy of [infanticide](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Infanticide). Lady Macbeth’s fantasy, Chamberlain argues, is not struggling to be a man, but rather struggling with the condemnation of being a bad mother that was common during that time.

Jenijoy La Belle takes a slightly different view in her article, "A Strange Infirmity: Lady Macbeth’s [Amenorrhea](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amenorrhea)." La Belle states that Lady Macbeth does not wish for just a move away from femininity; she is asking the spirits to eliminate the basic biological characteristics of femininity. The main biological characteristic that La Belle focuses on is [menstruation](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Menstruation). La Belle argues that by asking to be unsexed and crying out “make thick [her] blood / Stop up th’ access and passage to remorse” Lady Macbeth asks for her menstrual cycle to stop. By having her menstrual cycle stop Lady Macbeth hopes to stop any feelings of sensitivity and caring that is associated with females. She hopes to become like a man to stop any sense of remorse for the regicide. La Belle furthers her argument by connecting the stopping of the menstrual cycle with the infanticide present in the play. La Belle gives examples of "the strangled babe" whose finger is thrown into the witches’ cauldron (4.1.30); Macduff’s babes who are "savagely slaughter’d" (4.3.205); and the suckling babe with boneless gums whose brains Lady Macbeth would dash out (1.7.57–58) to prove that Lady Macbeth as the ultimate anti-mother who not only would smash in a baby’s brains but goes even further to wanting to stop her means of procreation.[[5]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lady_Macbeth#cite_note-La_Belle-4)

### Lady Macbeth as witch

Literary critics and historians argue that, not only does Lady Macbeth represent an anti-mother figure, but they classify her as a specific type of anti-mother: the witch. Critic Joanna Levin defines a witch as a woman who succumbs to [Satanic](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Satan) force, a lust for [the devil](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_devil), and who, either for this reason or the desire to obtain [supernatural](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Supernatural) powers, invokes (evil) spirits. English physician [Edward Jorden](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edward_Jorden) published *Briefe Discourse of a Disease Called the Suffocation of the Mother* in 1603, in which he speculated that this force literally derived from the female sexual [reproductive organs](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reproductive_organs). Because no one else had published any other studies on the susceptibility of women, especially mothers, to becoming both the witch and the bewitched (i.e. [demonically possessed](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demonic_possession)), Jorden's findings helped create the foundation for the views popularized during the [Renaissance](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Renaissance) about the relationship between women and [witchcraft](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Witchcraft). Levin refers to Marianne Hester's *Lewd Women and Wicked Witches: A Study of Male Domination,* in which Hester articulates a [feminist](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Feminist) interpretation of the witch as an empowered woman. Levin summarises the claim of feminist historians like Hester: the witch should be a figure celebrated for her nonconformity, defiance, and general sense of empowerment; witches challenged patriarchal authority and hierarchy, specifically "threatening hegemonic sex/gender systems." This view associates witchcraft — and by extension, Lady Macbeth — not with villainy and evil, but with heroism.

Jenijoy La Belle assesses Lady Macbeth's femininity and sexuality as they relate to motherhood, and witchhood as well: The fact that she conjures the spirits likens her to a witch, and the act itself establishes a similarity in the way that both Lady Macbeth and the Weird Sisters from the play "use the metaphoric powers of language to call upon spiritual powers who in turn will influence physical events — in one case the workings of the state, in the other the workings of a woman's body." Like the witches, Lady Macbeth strives to make herself an instrument for bringing about the future She proves herself a defiant, empowered nonconformist, and an explicit threat to a patriarchal system of governance in that, through challenging his masculinity, she manipulates Macbeth into murdering King Duncan. Despite the fact that she calls him a coward, Macbeth remains reluctant, until she asks: "What beast wasn't, then, that made you break this enterprise to me? / When you durst do it, then you were a man; / And to be more than what you were, you would / Be so much more the man." Thus Lady Macbeth enforces a masculine conception of power, yet only after pleading to be unsexed, or defeminised. The Weird Sisters are also depicted as defeminised, androgynous figures. They are bearded (1.3.46), (which is associated with Lady Macbeth's [amenorrhea](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amenorrhea)). Witches were perceived as an extreme type of anti-mother, even considered capable of cooking and eating their own children. Although Lady Macbeth may not express violence toward her child with that same degree of grotesqueness, she certainly expresses a sense of brutality when she states that she would smash the babe's head.

### Lady Macbeth and gender stereotyping

Some critics identify gender stereotyping, in that Lady Macbeth must suppress her female instincts in order to become ambitious and violent.

Christina León Alfar discusses in her book "'Blood will have blood': Power, Performance, and the Trouble with Gender," that while scholars argue that Lady Macbeth violates the state of gender by asking the spirits to "unsex" her, she believes that Lady Macbeth has been falsely accused of being the source of violence in the play. Alfar contends that while it is viewed that Lady Macbeth was the driving force to Macbeth’s "bloody desire," she is also falling victim to the literary tendency of attacking strong female characters. She argues that Lady Macbeth never asserted her own desires or ambitions; she merely encouraged her husband's desire to be king.

Unlike Alfar, some critics claim that Lady Macbeth was in fact the source of violence in the play. Carolyn Asp explains in her article, "'Be bloody, bold and resolute': Tragic Action and Sexual Stereotyping in Macbeth" that Lady Macbeth openly attempts to reject her feminine traits and adopt a male mentality because she perceives that her society associates feminine qualities with weakness. Likewise, Robert Kimbrough argues in his article "Macbeth: The Prisoner of Gender" that in Elizabethan literature, especially *Macbeth,* there is the idea that to be "manly" is to be aggressive, daring, bold, resolute, and strong, especially in the face of death. And to be "womanly" is to be gentle, fearful, pitying, wavering, and soft, a condition signified by tears. He also argues that Lady Macbeth wants to become cruel, which she considers to be a masculine trait. However, in order for her to become cruel she must cut off the flow of blood to her heart, which is the seat of love, the source of "remorse," pity and compassion which are all attributes of human nature.

According to Asp, societal stereotypes play a major role in Lady Macbeth’s issue with gender. She is convinced that she must divest herself of her femininity if she is to have any effect on her husband’s public life. However, in spite of her constant efforts to take on male traits, her unconscious feminine traits pull to the surface just before the murder of Duncan. When addressing her husband Lady Macbeth refers to him as “thy love” (1.7.39) and challenges his self-image as a male, the foundation of his other roles. When Lady Macbeth challenges Macbeth’s manhood she is ultimately saying that in order to be king, the heroic warrior, he must take on the persona of a man, along with her. Therefore, only if Macbeth dares to kill Duncan will he be a man, in the eyes of Lady Macbeth; so much more than a man as she says "to be the same in [his] own act and valour / As [he is] in desire (1.7.40–41).

The British actress [Sarah Siddons](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sarah_Siddons), one of the leading tragic actresses of the 18th century, wrote that in her interpretation, Lady Macbeth has at once subjugated all her femininity to ambition, and at the same time maintained her feminine attractiveness to Macbeth. "Such a combination only, respectable in energy and strength of mind, and captivating in feminine loveliness, could have composed a charm of such potency as to fascinate the mind of a hero so dauntless, a character so amiable, so honourable as Macbeth.