



Macbeth

by William Shakespeare

About Lady Macbeth

Lady Macbeth and her Husband

At the play's beginning, Lady Macbeth is a powerful figure: she's charming, attractive, ambitious, and seems to be completely devoted to her husband. (We might think of the pair as the original power couple.) She's also a teensy bit worried that her man isn't quite "man enough" to do what it takes to be king. According to Lady Macbeth, her husband is "too full o' the milk of human kindness" (1.5.1). If her husband's going to be the powerful figure she wants him to be, Lady Macbeth's got to take things into her own hands. Check out this famous speech where, after learning about the witches' prophesy that Macbeth will become king, Lady Macbeth psyches herself up for murder.

*The raven himself is hoarse
That croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan
Under my battlements. Come, you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,
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! Come to my woman's breasts,
And take my milk for gall, you murdering ministers,
Wherever in your sightless substances
You wait on nature's mischief! Come, thick night,
And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell,
That my keen knife see not the wound it makes,
Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark,
To cry 'Hold, hold!' (1.5.3)*

It's astonishing that Lady Macbeth calls on "spirits" to aid her while she prepares to help her husband murder the king. (Shakespeare's leading ladies don't usually go around saying stuff like this. Not even [Katherine Minola](#), who's notorious for having a tongue like a "wasp" in [Taming of the Shrew](#), summons "murderous" spirits.)

First things first, though. What the heck does Lady Macbeth mean when she asks the spirits to "unsex" her? Essentially, she's asking to be stripped of everything that makes her a reproductive woman, including menstruation or, the "visitings of nature." She also asks that her breast milk be exchanged for "gall" or poison.

But why? In Lady Macbeth's mind, being a woman - especially a woman with the capacity to give birth and nurture children - interferes with her evil plans. Lady Macbeth construes femininity as compassion and kindness and also suggests that masculinity is synonymous

with "direst cruelty." When Lady Macbeth says (earlier) her husband is "too full o' the milk of human kindness," she's implying that Macbeth is too much like a woman in order to wield the power necessary of a monarch (1.5.1). As we know, Lady Macbeth will use this notion of Macbeth's "kindness" against her waffling husband when she pushes him to murder the king: "When you durst do it, *then* you were a man" (1.7.4). It turns out that Lady Macbeth's attack on Macbeth's masculinity is the final nudge Macbeth needs to murder Duncan.

Witchy Woman

This makes Lady Macbeth sound pretty dangerous, kind of like the "bearded" sisters, who are also associated with an outside force that seems to push Macbeth into murderous action. In fact, Lady Macbeth's whole "unsex me" speech aligns her with witchcraft and the supernatural (calling on spirits and talking about "smoke of hell" and "murdering ministers" sure sounds witchy to us). We also want to point out that when Lady Macbeth calls on supernatural "spirits" to "fill" her with "direst cruelty," she reminds us that she also intends to "pour [her own] spirits in [Macbeth's] ear" when he returns home from battle (1.5.1). Clearly, she means to literally fill her husband's "ear" with harsh words that will help convince him to take action against Duncan but, there's also a sense that Lady Macbeth will "fill" her husband's body in the same way that women's bodies are "filled" or, impregnated by men. All of this is to say that Lady Macbeth is portrayed as masculine, and therefore, an "unnatural" figure. You can read more about the inversion of such social roles by going to "Gender."

What Happens to Lady Macbeth?

OK, sounds like Lady Macbeth is a powerful figure and may evoke some fears about dominant women. What happens to her? Soon after Macbeth proves his "manhood" by killing Duncan and becoming king, Lady Macbeth disappears into the margins of the story and becomes the kind of weak, enfeebled figure she herself would probably despise. You want specifics? When she learns that the king's dead body has been discovered, she grows faint and must be carried from the room. (Hmm. It's almost as though Lady Macbeth has literally been drained of that "spirit" she said she was going to pour into her husband's "ear.")

Later, when Macbeth decides to murder Banquo in order to secure his position of power, he excludes his wife from the decision making altogether (3.2.5). By Act V, Lady Macbeth has been reduced to a figure who sleepwalks, continuously tries to wash the imaginary blood from her hands, and talks in her sleep of murder (5.1.1-6). She's grown so ill that the doctor says there's nothing he can do to help her. "The disease," he says, "is beyond" his "practice," and what Lady Macbeth needs is "the divine" (a priest or, God), not a "physician" (5.1.12-13).

OK, fine. So what? Well, we can read this as a kind of psychological breakdown. Lady Macbeth is so consumed by guilt for her evil acts that she eventually loses her mind. We can also say that her transformation (from a powerful and "unnaturally" masculine figure into an enfeebled woman) is significant insofar as it reestablishes a sense of "natural" gender order in the play. In other words, Lady Macbeth is put in her place as a woman - she's no longer the dominant partner in her marriage and Macbeth makes all the decisions while she sleepwalks through the palace. However we read Lady Macbeth's transformation, one thing's certain. In the end, Lady Macbeth is all but forgotten. When Macbeth learns of her death, he says he has no "time" to think about her - "She should have died hereafter; / There would have been a time for such a word" (5.5.3).

Lady Macbeth in Performance

Depending on the production, Lady Macbeth is portrayed as a virago (a brazen, war-like woman) and a manipulator, as the seed of Macbeth's evil thoughts, or as his devoted queen. (We're partial to Judy Dench's powerful and nuanced performance in Trevor Nunn's 1979 production of *Macbeth*. Watch it [here](#).) In some productions she weeps incessantly, in some she sneers, and in some no one's really sure what she's doing. In some interpretations, she uses sexuality to convince Macbeth to do the murder the King. So, how would *you* stage Lady Macbeth?