

AQA English Literature GCSE

Macbeth: Character Profile

Lady Macbeth

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Lady Macbeth

SYMBOLISES APPEARANCES VS REALITY

INTRODUCTION

Lady Macbeth can be viewed as an **antagonist** because of how she drives her husband, Macbeth, towards murder and bloodshed despite his protests. Alternatively, she can be viewed as a **tragic heroine**, meaning she starts out in a position of glory and success but falls from grace due to an error in judgement of her own making.

Lady Macbeth is the wife of a Thane, so her husband owns land given to him by the king. She can't possess any land herself, but she lives in luxury and has a good reputation. It's possible that she had children at one point, but at the time of the play she's childless and we don't see any of her family.

After receiving a letter from Macbeth that informs her of the Witches' prophecies, she is determined for Macbeth to become king. She worries that Macbeth is too tame and hesitant to do it himself, so commits to mocking and tempting him until he gives in. After Duncan's murder, she **grows more anxious and blunt**, but is kept out of most of her husband's actions and plots. Ultimately, she is broken by grief and guilt and takes her own life.

There is a lot of debate about what **motivates** Lady Macbeth in ensuring her husband becomes King. One argument is that, traditionally, **wives had to be supportive of their husbands' careers and aspirations**. By pushing Macbeth to be king, Lady Macbeth could be **fulfilling her role as the devoted, helpful wife**. It's also a demonstration of her love for Macbeth, as she wants him to succeed. Alternatively, her motivation is **her own ambitions and goals**. Her position as a woman in society means her own career prospects are limited, so the only way to move up the social ladder is for Macbeth to. **She wants to be queen** and reap the benefits of Macbeth's successes. Furthermore, becoming queen could be compensation for her lost children. If we do conclude that she had children but they died in infancy, then Lady Macbeth has lost her 'purpose' as a woman.

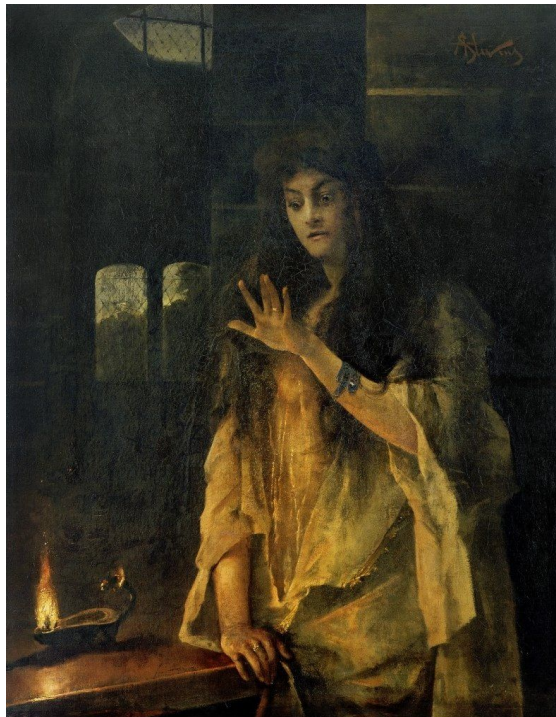
APPEARANCE

One of Shakespeare's resounding messages in the play of 'Macbeth' is that **nothing is as it seems**. Appearances cannot be trusted as they rarely match up with reality. One of the most significant, and destructive, examples of this is the character of Lady Macbeth.



Lady Macbeth's main role in the play is to shake things up and cause havoc, meaning her aim is to fool and manipulate as many people as possible with her deceitful ways. She benefits hugely from the **divide between appearances and reality**. Furthermore, she relies on people's prejudices and assumptions to get away with her actions. For example, the male characters see she is a woman so assume she would not get involved with violence, these **miscalculations** of her character allow her to get away with a lot.

Some would argue she uses her **feminine wiles** to persuade Macbeth to kill for her: either way, the social conventions surrounding gender come to her advantage. Something she tells



Macbeth over and over is to make sure he puts on a **facade** for other people. She believes that as long as they can maintain their deceitful masks, they will get away with murder and so much more. Of course, she underestimates the power of her own remorse.

Another way Lady Macbeth exploits appearances is by **transferring her desires and plans into Macbeth**. She is the villain kept behind the scenes. Though Macbeth is the one acting and killing, he is fulfilling Lady Macbeth's wishes. It is as if she has possessed him, or transformed herself into him through persuasion. It looks like Macbeth is the murderer, but in reality she is.

Lady Macbeth's **manipulation of appearances** is the connection between her and the Witches. In fact, like the Witches, her **gender identity is ambiguous**. On the outside, she looks feminine, but if her spells were successful, then she is wombless and full of gall on the inside.

Lady Macbeth isn't even fully honest to her husband. Only we, the audience, know the extent of her plots and motivations. By allowing us to **hear her soliloquies**, Shakespeare emphasises the **divide between appearances and reality** and how extreme her deceit really is. Other characters on stage are oblivious of who she really is, but we know the dark truth. Moreover, as the plot develops, Lady Macbeth's own **sense of self deteriorates**. Her suffering, torment, and hallucinations could all be side effects of her **fragmented self**. She has manipulated her identity so much that she is no one at all.



CHARACTER IN CONTEXT

Femme Fatales

Otherwise known as the maneater or vamp, this is a **common archetype** for female characters in literature and art. The term refers to a woman who is **mysterious and seductive**, using her charm to ensnare men and lead them into dangerous or deadly situations. Typically, **femme fatales are villains** and create a sense of unease for other characters and the audience.

Common traits include **heightened sexuality** and a **rejection of motherhood**. This was seen as particularly threatening because by rejecting motherhood, a femme fatale is denying a man his immortality and ability to leave a legacy, ultimately leading to the destruction of all men.

Overall, the key aspect of a femme fatale is her **use of feminine wiles** (e.g. beauty or sexual allure) to exploit men and accomplish her own goals. Shakespeare uses these aspects of the **femme fatale archetype** in the character of Lady Macbeth. She threatens to **emasculate** Macbeth, and uses her power over him as his wife to get her own way. Some productions of 'Macbeth' even show Lady Macbeth using sexuality and seduction to explicitly manipulate her husband. All of this is for her own ulterior motives, and clearly she drives Macbeth to his own death. More so than warning of the dangers of unrestrained female sexuality, though, Shakespeare seems to be demonstrating the **dangers of unrestrained female ambition and power**.

Eve and the Fall of Man

The theme of 'The Fall', particularly of man, is used a lot in literature, and is linked to the concept of the **tragic hero**. The Fall is an **archetype** where a character descends from a higher to a lower state, often because something happens to them that means they **lose their innocence** and happiness. Typically, the character is kicked out of their 'paradise' as a punishment for their actions. Commonly, a woman is responsible for the fall of an honourable man.

→ The most famous example of this is Eve, in the story of the Garden of Eden. The story given in the Bible goes that, when the world was first created by God, Adam and Eve lived with Him in the Garden of Eden. They were told not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge, and for a while they obeyed and lived in harmony. However, Satan came to the Garden disguised in the form of a serpent: he tempted Eve into eating the Forbidden Fruit. After she ate it, she convinced her husband, Adam, to do the same. They lost their innocence, and when God found out, he expelled them from the Garden.

- ◆ There are many **parallels** between Lady Macbeth's story, the archetype of 'The Fall', and the Biblical tale of the Garden of Eden. You could even say there are parallels between how Eve was historically viewed as the cause of mankind's Fall, and the way Lady Macbeth's character has been interpreted as being the **root of Macbeth's evil**.



Arthurian Legend

Arthurian Legend refers to the legends of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table. These stories were incredibly popular, and were seen as examples for **ideal kingship** and **chivalry**. King Arthur was brave, noble, kind, and loving. His knights, too, were chivalrous, adventurous, and determined to protect their kingdom. Lady Macbeth takes a similar role to Morgan le Fay: she is the lover of the story's main hero, but she is also his downfall.

Marriage and Motherhood

In the Jacobean Era, women had no legal rights in society, and this meant that when they married, they became the property of their husbands. Their role was to have children and run the household. Domestic abuse, and even domestic murder, was extremely common. Maternal mortality (how common it was for a woman to die from pregnancy, childbirth, or the period after birth) was also extremely high. A woman's destiny was to get married and have children. Any education she was offered was geared towards these two occupations: women were taught to cook and clean, and for the upper classes, they might be taught to dance or embroider, all in the hopes of attracting a man. Men were entitled to divorce or disown their wives at any time if they felt she had dishonoured them, disobeyed them, or brought shame to their reputation.

In 'Macbeth', Shakespeare allows us to see how Lady Macbeth copes with these aspects of life for women in the Middle Ages. Within her marriage, she is a **dominant figure** with her own clear identity and purpose. Outside of her marriage, she is viewed only as Macbeth's wife and a good host. Her relationship with motherhood is much more complicated. It seems like, at some point, she had children, but they must have died, as there are no signs of children when the play unfolds. She tries to banish all her reproductive organs from her body, rejecting the role of mother altogether.

Gender

Whether Shakespeare intends to show the **perils of femininity** or of androgyny through Lady Macbeth depends on how successful you think her prayers to the spirits were. If we are to believe she was successful in unsexing herself, then her villainy and disturbing personality suggest that **gender nonconformity** is dangerous. By losing her feminine identity, she loses her humanity. Alternatively, if we still view her as a female character, her acts of manipulation and seduction portray women as deceitful, wicked beings.

She also plays a pivotal role in Macbeth's **perception** of his own gender. Her highly critical attacks on his manhood, and her **perception of masculinity** as violent, drives Macbeth to murder and tyranny. This adds to Shakespeare's **exploration of manliness**.

Lady Macbeth is a very **unconventional female character** by traditional and Jacobean standards. She is given **multiple soliloquies** - something that usually only male characters were allowed. When Shakespeare first introduces her to us, she has the dominant role in her marriage, which would have been unheard of. Rather than appearing weak or idiotic, she is smart, cunning, and bloodthirsty, and embraces the occult and villainy in order to achieve her



goal. She is so powerful that a Jacobean audience would view her as unnatural, possibly even **supernatural**.

Shakespeare suggests through her character that giving women power is dangerous and unnatural. It also appears that the only way for a woman to be so brutal and strong is to be evil and supernatural, which is why she prays to evil spirits. Her character allows Shakespeare to examine gender roles, marital relations, and the division of power in his society.



KEY CHARACTERISTICS

- Ambitious:** Lady Macbeth's ambition is much more intense and violent than Macbeth's. She doesn't hesitate or deliberate: immediately she decides to pursue the promise of Macbeth's kingship. She **craves power** and, later, protection. She has been a 'weak' woman all her life, and now is her chance to answer her desires and reach her full potential. Her **ambition is infectious**. How authentic or committed Lady Macbeth's ambition is appears unclear. She speaks in a very violent, brutal fashion, but never acts on these impulses. Her words aren't supported by her actions. Plus, she admits that she can't bear looking at Duncan's corpse because he resembles her father.
- How successful her wish to be "**unsex[ed]**" and made cruel was is questionable. After Duncan's murder, she loses a lot of her confidence. Her ambition disappears, and she is fixated on her **paranoia**. It seems her ambition was all bravado. Lady Macbeth is quite a frightening character because of how she commits herself entirely to her ambition. Ambition for her is an **act of sacrifice**: she abandons all hopes of virtue or salvation by calling upon evil spirits. Like with Macbeth, Shakespeare argues that ambition itself isn't the issue, but the way Lady Macbeth embraces its control. On the other hand, Lady Macbeth doesn't care for morality and natural order. She doesn't care for other people: they're just obstacles to her goal.
- Supernatural:** There's a lot of evidence for Lady Macbeth being the fourth Witch (excluding Hecate), but unlike the three Macbeth meets on the heath, Lady Macbeth is instrumental in planting the idea of murder in his head. She speaks in **rhyming couplets** while persuading Macbeth to agree to her plan, and her command of rhetoric and manipulation **imitates the Witches' spells** and trickery. Equally, her plan rests on her ability to use facade to manipulate reality, meaning her relationship with appearance vs. reality is similar to the Witches'.



- Her **subversion of femininity** was, in Jacobean times, more than enough evidence that she was a witch. Shakespeare implies her unnatural power as a woman is due to her **supernatural** links. Lady Macbeth could be called the ‘creator of evil’ in Macbeth. She is the main conspirator out of the Macbeths, and plants the idea of evil in Macbeth’s mind. The methods she uses to manipulate him hold explicit links to the supernatural. She wants to **“pour [her] spirits in [his] ear”**, an **allusion to demonic possession**.
 - This quote also connotes the story of the Garden of Eden, where the serpent tempted Eve to sin, and Eve then whispered in Adam’s ear so that he might join her. Lady Macbeth can be viewed as an imitation of Pandora from Roman mythology: Pandora opened the box that brought all evil and sin into the world. Shakespeare associates the Fall of Man with seduction, femininity, and the supernatural.
- **Guilty:** Guilt and remorse are the undoing of Lady Macbeth, leading her to her death. Unlike Macbeth, she isn’t killed after an uprising: she kills herself. Her mind is her enemy. Her ambition took her down violent paths that she couldn’t cope with, and Shakespeare suggests guilt and regret are the most destructive consequences of that. Everyone underestimates the power of their own conscience. The **insanity** and **torment** she feels at the hand of her guilt is punishment for her villainy.
- At first, Lady Macbeth shows no signs of guilt or remorse. In fact, she’s the one telling Macbeth off for worrying and panicking. She is convinced that washing the blood off their hands will free them from their deeds altogether, assuming that there will be no lasting impacts. This might also suggest that she is incapable of seeing how murder has psychological consequences. To her, the only link to the murder is the literal blood on her hands. She fails to anticipate that the murder will live with her beyond that night. This shows how she views herself to be cruel and ruthless. She represses any morality she has. Alternatively, this may reveal how desperate she is to put the murder behind her and continue with her life as normal.
- The act of washing your hands of blood becomes **symbolic** in the play. Shakespeare uses it to show how guilt persists beyond physical evidence. Lady Macbeth’s bold words **“a little water clears us of this deed”** come back to bite her, as in her final scene, we watch her repeatedly try to wash invisible blood off her hands. However, there are signs early on that Lady Macbeth isn’t as tough and cold-hearted as she wants to appear. She never refers explicitly to the murder or to blood: she uses euphemisms, such as **“deed”** and **“great business”**. This implies she can’t confront reality, and can’t face the grotesque or macabre. Shakespeare argues that guilt is the direct opposite of ambition. One focuses on the future, the other on the past. Ambition longs for power regardless of consequence, whereas guilt forces us to face the reality of our deeds.





CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

Beginning (1.1 - 2.1)

Lady Macbeth's most striking and significant performances happen at the beginning of the play. From them, we get a clear idea of who she is - or, arguably, who she wants to be. Her first lines are a **soliloquy**, demonstrating her **importance and strength of will**. Though she doesn't appear on stage until the 5th scene, she has a large impact on the direction the plot takes, and it is her plots and wishes that get fulfilled in the first two acts.



Lady Macbeth's speech at the beginning of the play is littered with deceit, treachery, and omens of death. The prospect of being queen and controlling the fate of another empowers her, and she doesn't want anything to come between her and the crown. Violence and cruelty are a means to an end for her because they bring her closer to getting what she wants and allow her to prove herself. Alternatively, you could argue that there are signs Lady Macbeth enjoys gratuitous violence - violence for the sake of violence. She knows that Macbeth will become king regardless of her own actions, but opts for the murderous route to the throne. She vows to smash a baby's head open for Macbeth as a sign of loyalty, despite him never asking for her to do such a thing. Both interpretations explain why Lady Macbeth doesn't care about moral consequence: her bloodlust and her selfish persistence leave no room for others and their feelings.

Shakespeare most wants to convey that Lady Macbeth's character is her ability to **manipulate**, **tempt**, and **seduce**. She is the root of Macbeth's evil, and this comes hand in hand with her supernatural contacts. It isn't just significant that she has soliloquies in her first scenes: the **allusions to witchcraft** and the **diabolical** portray her as a villain, and it's as if she's **casting her own spells**. She wants the power of the occult to achieve her aim, suggesting she is willing to sacrifice everything to be queen.

She bullies Macbeth with cruel and cutting insults, but also entices him with promises of power and success. The way she greets him, calling him a soon-to-be king, mimics the Witches' own. After Macbeth's soliloquy where he concludes that he has ***"no spur to prick the sides of [his] intent, but only / Vaulting ambition"***, Lady Macbeth appears on stage, suggesting that she is that very ***"spur"***, ***"vaulting ambition"*** personified. This all means she knows his weaknesses and temptations, and exploits them for her own gain. He has no hope of beating her. She is the Serpent and Eve combined, the call of the Sirens luring sailors to their graves.



Middle (2.2 - 3.4)

In the climax of the murder in Act 2 Scene 2, we see how Lady Macbeth takes charge and remains calm while Macbeth has a personal crisis. This elaborates on what we saw in the first act: Lady Macbeth is in control and is the dominant planner out of the two Macbeths. Except for one moment of honesty when she admits she couldn't kill Duncan because he looks like her father, she is cold and unruffled, completely **remorseless** and ruthless.



She is frustrated with Macbeth because of his guilt, hysteria, and fear - something that happens continually for the rest of the middle section - portraying her as **unempathetic** and closed-off. It's as if her spells were successful and she is an invincible, **amoral villain**, presenting her as a Witch. To her, guilt goes as far as the blood on her hands, and can be disposed of just as easily. The **contrast** between her and Macbeth's reactions - her coldness against his panic - makes her appear far-removed from humanity and its worries. On the other hand, her one display of **emotional vulnerability** could **foreshadow** her guilt and torment later.

In Act 2 Scene 3, Lady Macbeth gets a chance to demonstrate her acting skills. So far, her plan is chillingly successful. The way she feigns grief and manages to fool everyone in the vicinity with her performance suggests she has an uncanny ability to imitate and replicate human emotion. As an audience, we learn that she is an **unreliable character**: we don't know how much of what she says and does is genuine.

As we enter Act 3, we see cracks starting to appear in Lady Macbeth's calm. She's still **unaffected by guilt**, but she's **paranoid**. Moreover, she's **anxious** about how Macbeth is faring. His own paranoia and guilt are causes of great concern for her, and she doesn't want his incompetence to ruin her plan. This tension and frustration comes to a head when Banquo's ghost appears. She can't understand why Macbeth is behaving the way he is, and is angry that he would be so terrified by something so foolish, putting her in danger by doing so. She **mocks** and **chastises** him (tells him off) for displaying weakness, implying she's very passionate about keeping in control.

Despite her best efforts, we see Macbeth spinning out of control and away from Lady Macbeth's grasp. She can't stop him from seeing ghosts. She knows they need to be wary of Banquo, but Macbeth won't tell her what he has planned. By the end of the banquet scene, we know that the two are on separate paths, each isolated in their paranoia despite having the same fears. The Lady Macbeth we saw in Act 1, the wife who had an unbreakable hold over her husband, is nowhere to be seen.



Ending (3.5 - 5.9)

We next see Lady Macbeth on stage in Act 5 Scene 1. This is also the last time she ever appears before her death. The person we see is even further away from the person who plotted the death of a king in Act 1: she is entirely **absorbed in her fear**, talking to herself while oblivious to her surroundings. Her last line in the banquet scene was **“you lack the season of all natures, sleep”**, so it’s fitting that now she paces at night, sleepwalking but unable to rest. Finally, her sins have caught up to her.

Shakespeare uses the characters of the doctor and Lady Macbeth’s Lady in Waiting to emphasise how insane and alien Lady Macbeth has become. She never speaks to anyone, and it’s only through the exchange between these two minor characters that we know what’s going on. Along with the doctor, the audience observes, studies, and diagnoses her, like she’s a specimen for a scientist. Any strength or influence she had is gone. Furthermore, she’s **speaking in prose rather than blank verse**, so that her speech lacks sophistication and control. Shakespeare used prose for characters who were lower class or insane. Hence, Lady Macbeth isn’t as impressive or intimidating as she once was.



Lady Macbeth’s speech is incoherent, frantic, and continuous, as her **internal monologue is said aloud**. She alternates between worrying about her growing guilt and telling an imagined Macbeth off for jeopardising their plot. For example, in one long string of monologue, she says, **“The Thane of Fife had a wife. Where is she now? What, will these hands ne’er be clean? No more o’that, my lord, no more o’that. You mar all with this starting,”** going from panicking about their growing body-count to scolding Macbeth for being jumpy in an instant. The **random, disjointed structure** of her speech reflects how she’s torn between her ambition and her guilt. Part of her is holding onto the woman she was before, someone who was fearless and unsympathetic of Macbeth’s fear, while the rest of her is descending into remorse and grief. Therefore, there is a level of hypocrisy in her character. A case of **situational irony** is the way she worries about being unable to wash the blood from her hands: earlier, she thought a **“little water”** would clear her of guilt, but now she learns this isn’t true.

Lady Macbeth is hardly mentioned by the other characters for the rest of the play. Only upon her death does Macbeth think of her, highlighting how separate the two of them have become. She



drifted away from the outside world, caged inside the castle. Before the murder, Lady Macbeth could never have imagined fading into such insignificance.

Lady Macbeth is forgotten until the last scene of the play, where she is referred to not by name, but by the epithet “*fiend-like queen*”. On the one hand, this summarises who Lady Macbeth wanted to be at the start, suggesting she will be remembered for her villainy and cruelty. On the other, the use of “*queen*” presents her as Macbeth’s sidekick and wife, reducing her to the back bench as all women were in Jacobean society. She has no individual identity, and is known only by her relation to Macbeth. Little do they know that she was the one who put the whole plan into motion.

RELATIONSHIPS

Macbeth | Both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are incredibly ambitious and power-hungry. Most of what we see of their marriage is their plotting and conspiring. Both are weakened by guilt and paranoia as the plot develops, and by the end have isolated themselves from each other. The main difference between them is their **confidence**: Lady Macbeth is determined, ruthless, strong-willed, and self-assured, whereas Macbeth is uncertain, weak-willed, and hesitant. The **power dynamic** between them switches. Initially, Lady Macbeth holds the power in their relationship, despite being in an inferior position according to society. She relies on Macbeth for power and status, but controls Macbeth like he’s her own puppet. Eventually, Macbeth breaks away from her, plotting without her and keeping secrets.



KEY QUOTES

“Glamis thou art, and Cawdor, and shalt be / What thou art promised; yet do I fear thy nature, / It is too full o’th’ milk of human kindness / To catch the nearest way.” (A1S5)

- Follow the same structure as the Witches’ prophecies, implying she has her own psychic abilities and associating her with the supernatural.
- Lady Macbeth **“fear[s]”** Macbeth’s kind nature; fear is typically associated with evil or the supernatural, but in this statement, Lady Macbeth reverses this thought. By fearing Macbeth’s kindness, she implies that **morality is a frightening, threatening thing**. Alternatively, **“fear”** reveals how desperately Lady Macbeth wants to become queen. The **noun “nature”** alludes to Macbeth’s mortal soul and shows that she is referring to Macbeth’s true identity, the parts of himself that he can’t change. Therefore, she is presenting Macbeth as a person whose moral compass and compassion are inherent or permanent.
 - Moreover, by calling it **“human kindness”**, she implies Macbeth’s personality is universally recognised to be kind. Shakespeare implies kindness is exclusive to **“human[s]”**, and is an objective thing, meaning it can’t be disputed or interpreted differently. Macbeth shares his goodness with the rest of the human race, but Lady Macbeth wants to rid herself of it, and take him with her.
- Lady Macbeth continues to portray Macbeth’s **“human kindness”** as an **unfavourable trait** for him to have. The phrase **“too full”** again suggests his nature will be an obstacle to her plans, and might also be interpreted as a sign of corruption.
 - In ancient medicine, people believed that your health depended on having a balance of four different fluids, or ‘humours’. By suggesting Macbeth is **“too full”** of **“milk”**, Lady Macbeth might be implying he is ill or mentally unbalanced. The **metaphor “milk of human kindness”** presents kindness as a fluid, changeable thing. Milk can expire, go rotten, or be poisoned, so Shakespeare may be hinting that though Lady Macbeth is worried about Macbeth at the moment, she believes she can corrupt him. Alternatively, **“milk”** connotes breastfeeding, and so associates **“human kindness”** with femininity. This presents **compassion as a weakness**, something that emasculates Macbeth and stops him from being the strong, brave king she wants him to be. The use of the **“milk” metaphor**, as well as applying a ‘feminine’ trait to Macbeth, **suggests gender is fluid**.



“Hie thee hither, / That I may pour my spirits in thine ear / And chastise with the valour of my tongue / All that impedes thee from the golden round.” - Lady Macbeth, (A1S5)

- Lady Macbeth summons Macbeth with a **“hie thee hither”** in the same way that the Witches summoned their familiars (animal companions) in the opening scene. This suggests she views him as a means to an end, or a tool to help her get her way.
- The **imagery** of **“pour my spirits in thine ear”** evokes **demonic possession**, showing how Lady Macbeth wants to overpower Macbeth with her own villainy.
- This whole extract might seem sexual, and one interpretation is that sex is used in the subtext to illustrate the power dynamics Lady Macbeth is manipulating. Typically, to **“pour [your] spirits”** would be a masculine action, while the one receiving those **“spirits”** would be seen as the female. However, in this case, Lady Macbeth wants to take the **masculine role**, reflecting how she consistently strips Macbeth of his manliness. In keeping with the theme of gender that Lady Macbeth uses in her first soliloquies, she wants to **subvert** traditional gender roles as a way of getting what she wants.

“Come, you spirits / That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here / And fill me from the crown to the toe topfull / Of direst cruelty; make thick my blood, / Stop up th’access and passage to remorse / That no compunctious visitings of nature / Shake my fell purpose nor keep peace between / Th’effect and it. Come to my woman’s breasts / And take my milk for gall, you murd’ring ministers.” (A1S5)

- This is a pivotal moment in her character development. She is dedicating herself entirely to her conspiracy, even willing to sacrifice her own mind and body to whatever evil **“spirits”** will help her reach her goal. She views herself as a harbinger of death for Duncan, and so it’s fitting that what follows is, for all extents and purposes, a witch’s spell.
- The use of **anatomy**, such as **“the crown to the toe”** and **“breasts”**, makes her speech feel very invasive and uncomfortable, as well as illustrating how Lady Macbeth is trying to mutate into something else. Furthermore, the reference to **“blood”** and **“milk”** shows how her soul and mind will also be affected. Because of the theory of the four humours in medieval medicine, a person’s bodily fluids (such as Lady Macbeth’s **“blood”**) would have determined their true nature. By asking the spirits to tamper with her insides, Lady Macbeth is asking for a complete makeover. Alternatively, the



combination of **“blood”** and **“gall”** could be an allusion to Jesus’ crucifixion. Jesus’ side was pierced to prove he was dead, and blood came gushing out; before he died, the Roman soldiers offered him a wine laced with gall, or poison. Lady Macbeth is welcoming these substances, suggesting she is on the side of the Roman soldiers.

- The other key aspect of this quote is the **theme of gender**, summarised in Lady Macbeth’s use of the **verb “unsex”**. Though the attributes Lady Macbeth desires, including cruelty, are typically associated with masculinity, Lady Macbeth isn’t asking to be made into a man: she is asking to be rid of the parts that make her a woman. **“Unsex”** conveys androgyny and ambiguity. Lady Macbeth seems to associate goodness with humanity (**“human kindness”**), and Shakespeare implies that gender is a sign of humanity (**“single state of man”**). By being **“unsex[ed]”**, Lady Macbeth would escape the **gender binary** altogether, and so would be removed from humanity. This would free her from the burdens and weaknesses of morality and conscience.

“To beguile the time, / Look like the time, bear welcome in your eye, / Your hand, your tongue; look like th’innocent flower, / But be the serpent under’t.” (A1S5)

- This quote is an explicit nod to the **theme of appearance vs. reality**, as Lady Macbeth instructs her husband on how to fool everyone around them. Shakespeare shows how she intends to **exploit** the differences between appearance and reality, as well as exploit how gullible our senses are, to achieve her goal. Once again, Shakespeare uses **anatomical imagery**, such as **“eye”**, **“hand”**, and **“tongue”**, as well as a **semantic field of sight**, **“look”** and **“eye”**, in Lady Macbeth’s descriptions of emotion. She tells Macbeth to make sure that any **“welcome”** or kindness he shows others is purely surface level. This suggests that their **public personas** are **superficial** and hollow, with no genuine meaning behind them. The body parts she lists implies that emotion can be replicated and imitated, as if it is a physical product rather than an abstract feeling. The **theme of sight** conveys how our senses can be tricked: we are taken in by appearances and performances.
- The **parallel structure** in **“to beguile the time, / Look like the time”** emphasises the idea of **mirroring**. Lady Macbeth tells Macbeth that the best way to trick people is by reflecting back at them what they want to see. Again, their identities are surface level, with no substance behind the reflective glass. The **verb “beguile”** conveys **menace** and **manipulation**. Also, it connotes



enchantment and witchcraft, continuing to present Lady Macbeth as an enchantress.

“Nought’s had, all’s spent / Where our desire is got without content. ‘Tis safer to be that which we destroy / Than by destruction dwell in doubtful joy.” (A3S2)

- Something significant about this quote is that Lady Macbeth says it when she’s alone on stage. This implies we can trust it more than other things she says, because she isn’t performing for an audience: as far as we can tell, she is being her genuine self. We see that she is admitting she is worried, something she would never want to confess to her husband. Both of the Macbeths are suffering from the same case of paranoia, but neither will confide in the other. The **parallel phrases “nought’s had, all’s spent”** shows how Lady Macbeth’s thinking is black-and-white. She goes from one extreme to the other: from **“nought”** to **“all”**. Shakespeare implies that she sees no value in what they did unless they succeed fully - in other words, unless they never face consequences, and can enjoy life to the fullest. This portrays her as a selfish, unsatisfied character, and implies that currently, Duncan died for nothing. Shakespeare hints that the Macbeths will never be satisfied, and so will always have **“nought”**. Fulfilling your **“desire”** isn’t enough, because you need to be **“content”**, too. The list keeps growing.
- We can also detect fear in Lady Macbeth’s character. The use of the **comparative adjective “safer”** suggests Lady Macbeth is aware of their dangerous position, and wishes she could feel more at ease. Shakespeare suggests to his audience that this is a just punishment for her actions. The phrase **“dwell in doubtful joy”** is full of uncertainty and hesitancy, reflecting the unstable environment of the play. Shakespeare shows how nothing can be guaranteed, and this eats away at a person. The consonance of **“d”** could mimic the chattering of teeth or stuttering, reflecting how Lady Macbeth is struggling to adapt to her new life.

