

Character analysis: Lady Macbeth

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In this scene, Lady Macbeth's characterisation is used to continue the play's steady ratcheting up of tension. The suspense of this passage is enhanced by the fact that Lady Macbeth's soliloquy, after the messenger has left, is uttered in a stolen moment of stillness before action and fretful dialogue commences. It is a fleeting opportunity for her to consider her own feelings and responses to the unfolding events before Macbeth enters with weaknesses that will inevitably require her 'tending'. This time pressure accounts for the strikingly condensed nature of the soliloquy. In just 17 lines, the audience are offered a dense series of images that speak of Lady Macbeth's own complexities, contradictions and itchy anxiety about the ungodly acts she and her husband are about to commit.

The soliloquy's opening image – a croaking raven – is a telling one. The bird not only has associations of ill omens but was also renowned for eating the decayed flesh of fallen soldiers on battlefields, closely linking to the idea of the Macbeths – and Lady Macbeth in particular – being a sinister, parasitical couple feeding on the lives of those more powerful and benevolent than themselves.

This idea recurs (but taking the argument in a different direction) when Lady Macbeth calls on 'spirits' for assistance; in some ways what she seeks is for her own body to be decomposed. She asks dark agents to 'come' and strip her of her femininity, to 'unsex' her body, using a series of listed imperatives that foreshadow the persuasive techniques she will subsequently use on Macbeth towards the end of the scene.

But, having called upon malevolent presences to help disintegrate her body, she does not want to remain in a sexless, physically diminished state. She also wants to be reconstituted and refigured as a being hard and armoured like her warrior husband; as a monstrous being with unnaturally thickened blood and breasts that produce deadly poisonous 'gall'.

That Lady Macbeth calls on mystical, external forces to assist her with this transformation is worth interrogating too, for two reasons. Firstly, it clearly gives weight to the reading of the character being a fourth witch, whose speech here has incantatory rhythms that lend it a distinctly supernatural quality. Secondly, this request for the support of others also perhaps reveals a sense of lacking beneath the surface of Lady Macbeth's boldly assured malevolence: Lady Macbeth does not 'naturally' possess the zeal and evil required to undertake her plan, and so has to seek out the power of 'murth'ring ministers' to help her do it.

Alternatively, rather than interpreting Lady Macbeth's requests for dark assistance literally, we can see them as more metaphorical utterances: the speech is, in fact, a kind of 'pep talk' directed to herself and designed to undermine the merest inkling of 'remorse' she might feel. It is a moment of self-encouragement to help bolster and 'thick[en]' the most reprehensible parts of her character.

Images of obscurity abound in this passage: 'dark ... sightless ... thick night ... pall ... dunnest smoke', all clearly chiming with Lady Macbeth's desire for her wrongdoing to pass unseen by prying eyes. These images serve as a counterpart to Macbeth's transparency – his open face where 'men can read strange matters' without any difficulty. These allusions, of course, carry with them the obvious associations of impure intent and evil. But, in this instance, they also reflect Lady Macbeth's need to conceal and hide her own weakness and misgivings from herself and from Macbeth. With such a reading in mind, when Macbeth enters and Lady Macbeth presents him with careful guidance about how to dissemble, her instruction about controlling appearance to ensure that guilt does not reveal itself is as much for herself as it is for Macbeth.