

# Lady Macbeth

**Critic:** Anna Brownell Jameson, Mrs.

**Source:** *Shakespeare's Heroines: Characteristics of Women, Moral, Poetical, & Historical*, George Newnes, Limited, 1897, pp. 309–31. Reprinted in *Shakespearean Criticism*, Vol. 3

**Criticism about:** William Shakespeare (1564-1616)

**Genre(s):** Plays; Comedies (Plays); Romantic comedies (Plays); Tragicomedy; Sonnets; Historical drama; Poetry; Tragedies

[Jameson was a well-known nineteenth-century essayist. Her essays and criticism span the end of the Romantic age and the beginning of Victorian realism, reflecting elements from both periods. She is best remembered for her study *Shakspeare's Heroines* (1833), which was originally published in a slightly different form in 1832 as *Characteristics of Women: Moral, Poetical, and Historical*. This work demonstrates both her historical interests and her sympathetic appreciation of Shakespeare's female characters. In the excerpt below, Jameson presents the first full interpretation of Lady Macbeth, a character later analyzed by William Maginn, H. N. Hudson, and Isador H. Coriat. While Jameson admits that Lady Macbeth is "a terrible impersonation of evil passions," she contends that her character is "never so far removed from our own nature as to be cast beyond the pale of our sympathies." In defense of Lady Macbeth, Jameson points out that the idea to murder Duncan occurs first to Macbeth and that Lady Macbeth does not incite Macbeth to commit the subsequent "gratuitous murders." Jameson also attributes to Lady Macbeth an "amazing power of intellect," a "superhuman strength of nerve," but also a "touch of womanhood." She further observes that at those moments when Lady Macbeth appears most savage, her speeches are so worded as to "place the *woman* before us in all her dearest attributes, at once softening and refining the horror, and rendering it more intense." Of Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking, Jameson states that it evokes sympathy and "we rather sigh over the ruin than exult in it." She concludes that Shakespeare never presents evil without "a consciousness of the opposite good which shall balance and relieve it." Although Jameson's relatively positive assessment of Lady Macbeth is supported by Maginn and is a significant break from earlier, more condemnatory views of her nature, such sentimentalizing of the character is challenged by later critics such as A. C. Bradley.]

Generally speaking, the commentators seemed to have considered Lady Macbeth rather with reference to her husband, and as influencing the action of [*Macbeth*], than as an individual conception of amazing power, poetry, and beauty....(pp. 312-13)

In the mind of Lady Macbeth, ambition is represented as the ruling motive, an intense overmastering passion which is gratified at the expense of every just and generous principle, and every feminine feeling. In the pursuit of her object, she is cruel, treacherous, and daring. She is doubly, trebly, dyed in guilt and blood; for the murder she instigates is rendered more frightful by disloyalty and ingratitude, and by the violation of all the most sacred claims of kindred and hospitality. When her husband's more kindly nature shrinks from the perpetration of the deed of horror, she, like an evil genius, whispers him on to his damnation. The full measure of her wickedness is never disguised, the magnitude and atrocity of her crime is never extenuated, forgotten, or forgiven, in the whole course of the play. Our judgment is not bewildered, nor our moral feeling

insulted, by the sentimental jumble of great crimes and dazzling virtues, after the fashion of the German school, and of some admirable writers of our own time. Lady Macbeth's amazing power of intellect, her inexorable determination of purpose, her superhuman strength of nerve, render her as fearful in herself as her deeds are hateful; yet she is not a mere monster of depravity, with whom we have nothing in common, nor a meteor whose destroying path we watch in ignorant affright and amaze. She is a terrible impersonation of evil passions and mighty powers, never so far removed from our own nature as to be cast beyond the pale of our sympathies; for the woman herself remains a woman to the last--still linked with her sex and with humanity.

This impression is produced partly by the essential truth in the conception of the character, and partly by the manner in which it is evolved; by a combination of minute and delicate touches, in some instances by speech, in others by silence: at one time by what is revealed, at another by what we are left to infer. As in real life, we perceive distinctions in character we cannot always explain, and receive impressions for which we cannot always account, without going back to the beginning of an acquaintance and recalling many and trifling circumstances--looks, and tones, and words: thus, to explain that hold which Lady Macbeth, in the midst of all her atrocities, still keeps upon our feelings, it is necessary to trace minutely the action of the play, as far as she is concerned in it, from its very commencement to its close.

We must then bear in mind, that the first idea of murdering Duncan is not suggested by Lady Macbeth to her husband: it springs within *his* mind, and is revealed to us before his first interview with his wife--before she is introduced, or even alluded to. ... (pp. 314-15)

It will be said, that the same "horrid suggestion" presents itself spontaneously to her on the reception of his letter; or rather, that the letter itself acts upon her mind as the prophecy of the Weird Sisters on the mind of her husband, kindling the latent passion for empire into a quenchless flame. We are prepared to see the train of evil, first lighted by hellish agency, extend itself to *her* through the medium of her husband: but we are spared the more revolting idea that it originated with her. The guilt is thus more equally divided than we should suppose, when we hear people pitying "the noble nature of Macbeth, " bewildered and goaded on to crime, solely or chiefly by the instigation of his wife.

It is true that she afterwards appears the more active agent of the two; but it is less through her pre-eminence in wickedness than through her superiority of intellect. The eloquence--the fierce, fervid eloquence, with which she bears down the relenting and reluctant spirit of her husband, the dexterous sophistry with which she wards off his objections, her artful and affected doubts of his courage, the sarcastic manner in which she lets fall the word coward--a word which no man can endure from another, still less from a woman, and least of all from the woman he loves--and the bold address with which she removes all obstacles, silences all arguments, overpowers all scruples, and marshals the way before him, absolutely make us shrink before the commanding intellect of the woman with a terror in which interest and admiration are strangely mingled. (pp. 315-16)

Again, in the murdering scene, the obdurate inflexibility of purpose with which she drives on Macbeth to the execution of their project, and her masculine indifference to blood and death, would inspire unmitigated disgust and horror, but for the involuntary consciousness that it is produced rather by the exertion of a strong power over herself than by absolute depravity of disposition and ferocity of temper. This impression of her character is brought home at once to our very hearts within us, the most subtle mastery over their various operations, and a feeling of dramatic effect not less wonderful. The very passages in which Lady Macbeth displays the most savage and relentless determination are so worded as to fill the mind with the idea of sex, and place the *woman* before us in all her dearest attributes, at once softening and refining the horror, and rendering it more intense. Thus, when she reproaches her husband for his weakness --

From this time,  
Such I account try love!

[I. vii. 38-9]

Again--

Come to my woman's breasts,  
And take my milk for gall, ye murd'ring ministers.

[I. iv. 47-8]

\* \* \* \* \*

That no compunctious visitings of nature  
Shake my fell purpose, &c.

[I. v. 45-6]

I have given suck, and know  
How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me, &c.

[I. vii. 54-5]

And lastly, in the moment of extremest horror comes that unexpected touch of feeling, so startling, yet so wonderfully true to nature --

Had he not resembled  
My father as he slept, I had done it!

[II. ii. 12-13]

Thus, in one of Weber's or Beethoven's grand symphonies, some unexpected soft minor chord or passage will steal on the ear, heard amid the magnificent crash of harmony, making the blood pause, and filling the eye

with unbidden tears.

It is particularly observable that in Lady Macbeth's concentrated, strong-nerved ambition, the ruling passion of her mind, there is yet a touch of womanhood; she is ambitious less for herself than for her husband. It is fair to think this, because we have no reason to draw any other inference either from her words or actions. In her famous soliloquy, after reading her husband's letter, she does not once refer to herself. It is of him she thinks: she wishes to see her husband on the throne, and to place the sceptre within *his* grasp. The strength of her affections adds strength to her ambition. Although in the old story of Boethius we are told that the wife of Macbeth "burned with unquenchable desire to bear the name of queen," yet, in the aspect under which Shakspeare has represented the character to us, the selfish part of this ambition is kept out of sight. We must remark also, that in Lady Macbeth's reflections on her husband's character, and on that milkiness of nature which she fears "may impede him from the golden round" [I. v. 28], there is no indication of female scorn: there is exceeding pride, but no egotism in the sentiment or the expression; no want of wifely and womanly respect and love for *him*, but, on the contrary, a sort of unconsciousness of her own mental superiority, which she betrays rather than asserts, as interesting in itself as it is most admirably conceived and delineated. (pp. 317-19)

Nor is there anything vulgar in her ambition: as the strength of her affections lends to it something profound and concentrated, so her splendid imagination invests the object of her desire with its own radiance. We cannot trace in her grand and capacious mind that it is the mere baubles and trappings of royalty which dazzle and allure her: hers is the sin of the "star-bright apostate," and she plunges with her husband into the abyss of guilt, to procure for "all their days and nights sole sovereign sway and masterdom" [I. v. 69-70]. She revels, she luxuriates in her dream of power. She reaches at the golden diadem which is to sear her brain; she perils life and soul for its attainment, with an enthusiasm as perfect, a faith as settled, as that of the martyr, who sees at the stake heaven and its crowns of glory opening upon him.... (pp. 319-20)

Lady Macbeth having proposed the object to herself, and arrayed it with an ideal glory, fixes her eye steadily upon it, soars far above all womanish feelings and scruples to attain it, and stoops upon her victim with the strength and velocity of a vulture; but having committed unflinchingly the crime necessary for the attainment of her purpose, she stops there. After the murder of Duncan, we see Lady Macbeth, during the rest of the play, occupied in supporting the nervous weakness and sustaining the fortitude of her husband.... But she is nowhere represented as urging him on to new crimes; so far from it, that when Macbeth darkly hints his purposed assassination of Banquo, and she inquires his meaning, he replies --

Be innocent of the knowledge, dearest chuck,

Till thou applaud the deed.

[III. ii. 45-6]

The same may be said of the destruction of Macduff's family. Every one must perceive how our detestation of the woman had been increased, if she had been placed before us as suggesting and abetting those additional cruelties into which Macbeth is hurried by his mental cowardice.

If my feeling of Lady Macbeth's character be just to the conception of the poet, then she is one who could steel herself to the commission of a crime from necessity and expediency, and be daringly wicked for a great

end, but not likely to perpetrate gratuitous murders from any vague or selfish fears. I do not mean to say that the perfect confidence existing between herself and Macbeth could possibly leave her in ignorance of his actions or designs: that heart-broken and shuddering allusion to the murder of Lady Macduff (in the sleeping scene) proves the contrary --

The thane of Fife had a wife: where is she now?

[V. i. 42-3]

But she is nowhere brought before us in immediate connection with these horrors, and we are spared any flagrant proof of her participation in them. This may not strike us at first, but most undoubtedly has an effect on the general bearing of the character, considered as a whole. (pp. 320-22)

Lastly, it is clear that in a mind constituted like that of Lady Macbeth, and not utterly depraved and hardened by the habit of crime, conscience must wake some time or other, and bring with it remorse closed by despair, and despair by death. This great moral retribution was to be displayed to us--but how? Lady Macbeth is not a woman to start at shadows: she mocks at air-drawn daggers: she sees no imagined spectres rise from the tomb to appal or accuse her. The towering bravery of *her* mind disdains the visionary terrors which haunt her weaker husband. We know, or rather we feel, that she who could give a voice to the most direful intent, and call on the spirits that wait on mortal thoughts to "unsex her," and "stop up all access and passage of remorse" [I. v. 44]--to that remorse would have given nor tongue nor sound; and that rather than have uttered a complaint, she would have held her breath and died. To have given her a confidant, though in the partner of her guilt, would have been a degrading resource, and have disappointed and enfeebled all our previous impressions of her character; yet justice is to be done, and we are to be made acquainted with that which the woman herself would have suffered a thousand deaths of torture rather than have betrayed. In the sleeping scene we have a glimpse into the depths of that inward hell: the seared brain and broken heart are laid bare before us in the helplessness of slumber. By a judgment the most sublime ever imagined, yet the most unforced, natural, and inevitable, the sleep of her who murdered sleep is no longer repose, but a condensation of resistless horrors which the prostrate intellect and the powerless will can neither baffle nor repel. We shudder and are satisfied; yet our human sympathies are again touched: we rather sigh over the ruin than exult in it; and after watching her through this wonderful scene with a sort of fascination, we dismiss the unconscious, helpless, despair-stricken murderess, with a feeling which Lady Macbeth, in her waking strength, with all her awe-commanding powers about her, could never have excited.

It is here especially we perceive that sweetness of nature which in Shakspeare went hand in hand with his astonishing powers. He never confounds that line of demarcation which eternally separates good from evil, yet he never places evil before us without exciting in some way a consciousness of the opposite good which shall balance and relieve it. (pp. 323-25)

**Source:** Anna Brownell Jameson, Mrs., "Lady Macbeth," in her *Shakespear's Heroines: Characteristics of Women, Moral, Poetical, & Historical*, George Newnes, Limited, 1897, pp. 309-31. Reprinted in *Shakespearean Criticism*, Vol. 3.

**Source Database:** Literature Resource Center