

Title: Lady Macbeth
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[(essay date 1929) *In the following excerpt, Gerwig interprets Lady Macbeth as a psychological "study in ambition," albeit a self-sacrificing form of ambition that risks everything for another.*]

Shakespeare's negative studies are as interesting and as valuable as his positive, for often the lessons of life may be learned quite as well from an example of what not to do as from an example of what to do.

Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth* represents the extreme of one form of temptation that may beset a woman, ambition; Cleopatra, the extreme of another, passion.

The life and crimes of Macbeth and his wife are so closely connected that the study of one necessarily embraces a study of the other. Here, as always, Shakespeare has differentiated his characters, and so successfully in this instance that Lady Macbeth will stand for all time as an example of one phase of woman nature, with all its intricacies of thought and feeling, while her husband, so close to her in every way, is yet a man in each of his processes as characteristically as she is a woman.

In its structure the drama of *Macbeth* is nearer the modern short story than anything else Shakespeare has written. In no respect is this more true than in the skill with which it presupposes the comparatively unimportant portions of Lady Macbeth's life--her girlhood, the wooing of Macbeth, the birth and death of her child--and takes up the story just at the artistic beginning of the soul's crisis.

As an introduction to the study of Lady Macbeth, and indeed of any one of Shakespeare's heroines, no one can do better than to read the proper chapter in *The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines*. These studies, in a remarkably sympathetic way, deal with the earlier life of each of the heroines up to the point at which the particular drama opens. They not only supply much additional data regarding the times, the circumstances of the play and the earlier relations between the actors, but they also help materially in understanding the development of the characters.

All those who attempt to enact the part of any of Shakespeare's characters not only learn the words, but strive, as fully as possible, to put themselves into the actual place of the particular character, living the part, in the scenes presented in the play, as well as in the days which precede or follow.

It is a comparatively simple task to present an incident in the middle of a human life. It requires, however, both an artist and a genius to mirror such an incident so that it will really be a cross-section of a life's vital history, reflecting alike not only the present status of the character development, but likewise suggesting how each character cause may be traced back to its origin. Each inevitable consequence may be foreseen, or at least understood and appreciated when it comes.

Macbeth and his wife Lady Macbeth are individually and jointly among the very keenest minds of their time. They stand high in the esteem of King Duncan to whom they are bound by ties both of blood and of patriotism. King Duncan is a lovable, but not a strong monarch. He is kept on his throne almost entirely by the ability and the military genius of Macbeth, who is his leading general. The throne of Scotland, at this time, is not entirely hereditary, but elective from a certain group, of which Macbeth is the leading member. Neither he nor his wife, however, are content to rest their chance of promotion entirely upon their merits. They each feel keenly the weakness of the king and superiority of Macbeth. They keep harboring in their minds the desire for something which is wrong, until, as is always the case in such instances, their consciences are corrupted, and their characters utterly honeycombed with evil. They keep giving themselves, in imagination, to pictures of what might be, if the things which they know are right are ignored. So they first determine that if an opportunity comes to place Macbeth on the throne they will seize it. Then they contribute toward making such an opportunity, murder King Duncan while he is their guest and seize his throne. Neither Macbeth nor Lady Macbeth, however, have fully reckoned with the consequences of their evil action. They learn to their sorrow that the task of appearing innocent, while actually guilty, is one to which they are unequal. The tragedy is a story of the self-punishment of crime.

Shakespeare never wastes words, and least of all in *Macbeth*. Lady Macbeth is first introduced to us reading the latter portion of a letter she has just received from her husband, telling her of his meeting with the witches and of their prophesy that he is to be king. The letter, and Lady Macbeth's soliloquy which follows, describe Macbeth's character and interpret her own. They show us many things--that Lady

Macbeth is the source of his mental strength and resolution, that they have talked over the situation of affairs in the kingdom, with all its possibilities, both those which may be depended upon to come unaided and those which may be forced to an issue. The extent to which the consciences of both have been undermined by harboring unlawful desires is evident. That Macbeth holds himself in readiness to be beguiled by the witches is made apparent by the fact that Banquo, who is present at the time, who is given by the witches equally alluring prophetic promises, but whose soul is too true to be corrupted by the virus which infected the self-weakened conscience of Macbeth, comes away from the identical encounter absolutely uncontaminated.

It is equally evident from the letter and Lady Macbeth's words that both she and her husband stand mentally committed to any action which will further their ambitious schemes. When any one has mentally consented to an unlawful action the committing of it only awaits a fitting opportunity.

This soliloquy, following the reading of the letter, gives us one of the best views we have of Macbeth, and indirectly of Lady Macbeth. She has analyzed this husband of hers to the last trace of character. She knows that he wants the throne more than he wants anything else in the world; she knows that, unaided, he will in all probability fail to secure it on account of the milk of human kindness in his heart and a remnant of conscience which makes him hesitate about doing a thing he knows is wrong. All her tenderness for her husband takes the form of a desire to do something for him. She makes, not the typical sacrifice of a woman, that of her body to the man she loves, but the greater sacrifice of her soul itself. She has been endowed with a regal imagination, along with superb and daring resolution. She wants this kingdom, not in any sense for herself, but for her husband. She has set her heart supremely upon this, thinking that she has counted the cost, but, woman-like, really seeing nothing between her wish and its fulfilment.

Ambition has laid its stealthy fingers upon her conscience. Yet it is the self-sacrificing ambition of a woman, rather than the selfish ambition of a man. It has benumbed her woman's sensitiveness so effectually that most readers take her words literally, assuming that they represent the normal manner in which her mind works. Instead she is constantly saying and doing things to herself which stimulate her to do things for her husband. She desires to do these things for him. She feels that they must be done, and be done by her, to further his success.

If her words and actions were really indicative of her usual mental and spiritual state, instead of the mistaken stimulus of a really disinterested purpose, she would indeed be the monster of cruelty and selfish ambition she is often pictured. She is instead the extreme example of a finely organized sensitive woman who, with no possible thought of the consequences to herself, gladly places her all on the altar of service for her husband.

Time after time Lady Macbeth has gone over the situation--the deserts of her husband, the weakness of the king, the opportunity which *may* perhaps come to place her lord upon the throne. In imagination she has already signed and sealed with the blood of her soul the compact with Satan to do his bidding if he will but grant this boon, not for herself but for her husband. For her own selfish benefit she would probably hesitate to violate the lightest of the laws. But for her husband she is all too willing to lose even her soul forever.

So, when the opportunity of which she has dreamed, and for which she has prayed has actually come--as opportunities, good and bad ever come to those who court them, she is for the moment fairly crazed at the prospect of the possibilities that come with it.

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!

She thinks she realizes fully where she stands; she believes she has counted the cost; she declares herself ready to pay it, if she may but have this boon for her husband. The lines Shakespeare uses in making Lady Macbeth equal to the task of forcing her husband to murder King Duncan contain over thirty terms and phrases of darkest and direst association.

Macbeth's first words to his wife indicate that his mind, too, is filled with the possibilities of the opportunity which, thus far, has come without any guilt on their part:

My dearest love,
Duncan comes here tonight.

But they also indicate that in his case no corresponding resolution has been taken. It is Lady Macbeth who comes to the point, who nerves him to action.

He that's coming
Must be provided for: and you shall put
This night's great business into my dispatch;
Which shall to all our nights and days to come
Give solely sovereign sway and masterdom.

So he puts himself entirely in her hands--as she intended he should. It is not sufficient, moreover, that she point out for him the way. It is she, rather than the Thane, who must welcome the King, and at every turn, both before and after the murder, it is she who must be both thoughtful and resolute for both. All too well has she estimated the amount of the milk of human kindness in his nature. Left to himself he would never have taken the steps necessary to secure the crown. Between his conscience and his recognition of the inevitable consequences he would have hesitated. But his wife has determined, once for all, that he shall have the crown, and that she will pay whatever the penalty may be. So she holds him relentlessly to his portion of the task.

Nothing is more interesting, more significant, and often more dramatic in life than the way the same fact or situation will affect different persons. It is one of the most fascinating ways of studying the difference between objective and subjective life. One of these contrasts, pregnant with meaning, the dramatic effect of which an audience always grasps, is King Duncan's peaceful entrance under the stone archway of the castle of his kinsman. Confidingly and unconsciously he walks to his doom.

Lady Macbeth, speaking of the same spot had called them *her* battlements. But King Duncan says:

This castle hath a pleasant seat; the air
Nimbly and sweetly recommends itself
Unto our gentle senses.

And Banquo follows with one of those bits of nature-lore for which Shakespeare is forever famous.

Scarcely less fine, in the way of human contrasts, is the presentation of the characters of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth at this point. The character of Lady Macbeth is often, and indeed usually, misinterpreted in two important particulars. She is charged with being both selfishly ambitious and cruel, because her words, on their face alone, seem to warrant such an interpretation. A woman, however, who is as selfishly ambitious and as cruel as Lady Macbeth is alleged to be, would simply act, without the necessity of stimulating herself to action either by words or by wine.

The history of Lady Macbeth's ambition, its beginnings, its full development and its consequences, is clear enough. The prize, however, had no value whatever for her. There is not a line in the play which indicates that Lady Macbeth desires that Macbeth have the throne because of any possible advantage to her. She is never shown either wishing for it on her own account or in the enjoyment of it. Lady Macbeth seeks the throne for her husband, and stands ready to sacrifice her very soul in order that he may have it, purely and solely from a woman's desire to give her husband the one thing in the world which he wants most.

It is mistakenly assumed too that she is naturally cruel. Nothing could be farther from the truth. No woman, cruel by nature, could suffer as she suffered in the final scenes of her life. The stimulation of cruelty is merely one of the prices she must pay, and which she stands ready to pay, in order to be able to present this much-desired gift to her husband. *Macbeth* is a tragedy of the inability to endure the consequences of crime.

Macbeth's soliloquy, which corresponds with Hamlet's famous soliloquy, gives not only the innermost elements of his nature but of all human nature in its struggle with temptation. No one is wholly good or wholly bad. The King is kind, good, innocent. The crime Macbeth is about to commit is a violation of all that he has heretofore held sacred in his life. He argues it all out with himself, as which of us has not, and feels that he can not acquiesce in his wife's determination. The game is not worth the candle. He craves the crown as much for himself as his wife does for him. But his life has taught him, as the life of man will, that the cost of crime and of violation of conscience must be paid. Lady Macbeth understands nothing of this. She has never had the same experience with the consequent results of the violation of right. She merely assumes that she will be able to pay the cost because she is willing to do so. That crime ever brings its own self-punishment is a proposition of which she is as yet ignorant.

The union between Macbeth and his wife is temperamentally an ideal one, for each is the complement of the other. The misfortune was that their joint lives were not consecrated to some holy end. Had their child lived it might have been different. Lady Macbeth has divined that her husband is hesitating, so she comes to strengthen his resolution. She has had to do this before; she will have to do it again. Her intuition, as well as her experience with, and thorough knowledge of men tell her how to go about the matter in the most effective way. Macbeth is proud, and justly proud, of his bravery; but it is physical, rather than mental or moral bravery, as is abundantly shown by what he says when confronted later by the ghost of Banquo. So Lady Macbeth appeals to his fear of seeming afraid.

Art thou afeard
To be the same in thine own act and valor
As thou art in desire?
I have given suck, and know
How tender 't is to love the babe that milk's me;
I would, while it was smiling in my face,
Have pluck'd my nipple from his boneless gums,
And dash'd the brains out, had I so sworn as you
Have done to this.

Their babe is dead--yet she can say this! Her resources, and the relentless way in which she employs them, are simply appalling, unless

we bear constantly in mind that it is not for herself, but for her husband that she is striving so hard.

Macbeth begins to yield; she assumes his consent, and he is at last forced into the crime in spite of all his scruples.

Macbeth has not a murderer's heart; he is already suffering more than his victim will, and this is only a prelude to the suffering which will come to him.

The necessity of taking the wine, which emboldens her, is one of the great proofs that Lady Macbeth is not of coarse fibre. If she had been brutal enough to act without the stimulus of wine the sleep-walking scene would have been impossible.

Macbeth has gone on his errand of murder, but has not dared to shut the door behind him. He hears, or thinks he hears, some one moving. He calls out, in a last hope of being interrupted. But Fate is pitiless and at length he strikes the blow which Lady Macbeth is waiting, trembling to hear. She has made all the preliminary arrangements, even to laying out the daggers. But she finds that she is not quite so strong as she supposed, for a fancied resemblance between King Duncan and her father keeps her from striking the blow with her own hand.

The reaction is upon them both at once. Macbeth is unnerved, perplexed, horrified, and Lady Macbeth can only for the moment echo her husband's half-coherent words. She is the first to recover, however, and the progress of her return to her former daring tone is one of the finest psychological studies in the language.

Macbeth has forgotten all his directions and has fearfully endangered their lives by bringing the daggers with him. They must be returned, and at once--but he is abjectly unequal to the task, and his wife assumes it. Then comes one of the most dramatic climaxes in literature. Macbeth is trembling, alone, shut up in his castle with the consciousness of his crime, and the outside world in the form of the tipsy porter comes suddenly, but relentlessly knocking for admission.

Lady Macbeth saves the day, as usual, and is by this time a miracle of cool, collected thinking. Her location of the knocking as at the south entry is one of the wonderful examples of the incisive way her mind works. The tragedy is full of examples of condensation, of appeals to the imagination, of those challenges for an emotional explanation which are of the very essence of art, many of them the finest in the entire realm of dramatic writing. It is not especially hard to kill a king, nor indeed to commit any crime. The real difficulty begins with the attempt to act naturally the part of one who is innocent, and continues with the task of carrying, day and night, the consciousness of the crime. Macbeth blunders at once and continually, adding the first of his long line of subsequent murders. Even the keen wit of Lady Macbeth fails under the ordeal and strikes a false note in regretting that Duncan's murder occurred in *their house*, as though that were the unfortunate feature. A moment later her swoon prevents Macbeth from betraying the entire state of affairs.

After all, we see Macbeth as king but once and even then it is but a sorry spectacle. The real tragedy is beginning to develop in different ways in the consciences of the pair. Once begun, Macbeth's moral disintegration proceeds apace. Another soliloquy shows us his abject fear of Banquo, as well as the determination to have him killed. So much has Macbeth suffered, and so completely is his mind obsessed with the murder that he is constantly on the point of speaking out to the world. Lady Macbeth continually does her best to rally him, and succeeds while she is with him. But more and more he is coming to need support. He generously shields her, however, from the knowledge of his later crimes. That he disguises himself and is the third murderer seems apparent from a close study of the lines.

At the banquet scene he falsifies a desire to have Banquo present. His punishment comes swift and sure, for the ghost of Banquo appears in answer to his challenge. Macbeth's terror is abject and marks for us the degree of his previous suffering, the amount of sleep he must have lost. His words tell us that his courage is physical, not mental or moral. So intense is his agony that he talks openly of his secret. Lady Macbeth can do no more than hurry the guests off, leaving them to conjecture what they will. That Macbeth is the confessed murderer of King Duncan is now an open secret. When he forgets that his secret *is* a secret what must have been his state of mind?

The guests are gone at last, and the guilty husband and wife are alone. There is no chiding on Lady Macbeth's part. Each has failed in a way, and there is only a difference of degree between them. The things which creep into his speech show Macbeth's mental attitude--he keeps a spy in every house; he is always expecting to sleep, always failing. The two have the reckoning with themselves to make, and in addition to this, their reckoning with the world, which is becoming more and more clamorous.

In the first act the witches come to Macbeth; in the fourth he goes to them. Shakespeare gives us a group of the most powerful evil associations in all literature for the purpose of bringing down our hero at a stroke. As king of Scotland he is bound to stamp out witchcraft, yet we find him intimately associating with witches. And we hold him responsible for the company he keeps. In Shakespeare one only becomes the victim of fate in so far as one permits one's self to be victimized. The witches were merely the occasion, not the cause of Macbeth's downfall. Banquo had a soul which was immune.

Shakespeare shows us both his own fondness for children and Macbeth's utter oblivion to all the dictates of humanity by the murder of Macduff's family. How universal this law of the soul is, will be remembered from the events of the great war. The execution of Miss Cavell, and the outrages against women and children, instead of terrorizing the hearts of freemen, only served to steel their determination as this murder did the heart and arm of Macduff. This incident in the drama serves the double purpose of exhibiting the gratuitous cruelty of Macbeth and of providing an instrument for his punishment.

Both dramatically and psychologically the sleep-walking scene is the greatest scene of the play, if not the greatest in all Gothic literature. It would have been utterly impossible with a woman of coarser fibre. It shows both the depth and the helplessness of her despair. She lives over again, as she has countless times, each incident of the tragedy, and, like an x-ray, the artist reveals for us, through the broken lines that all can interpret, the innermost tragedy of her soul. She keeps ever washing the hands that will never be clean. The spots of blood are indelible. She hears once more the strokes of the bell which were to be the signal for the murder. She trembles again at the blood gushing from the wounds of her king. She bravely attempts to rally Macbeth. She returns, again and again to the task of cleansing the stain from her hands. She dies a thousand deaths before the great conqueror comes to end her sufferings. In scarcely more than a dozen lines she has given the greatest challenge to the imagination ever made in English, and preached the greatest sermon on the self-punishment of crime to be found in literature, sacred or profane.

The degree to which Macbeth must have suffered is measured by the effect produced upon him by the announcement of Lady Macbeth's death. She had been the life of his life. Yet so completely has his soul been lost to all finer sensibilities that the news of her death comes to him as a mere fact, leaving him to go to his doom without trace of emotion.

Life, dealt with through mere facts, either physical, mental or spiritual, is dull, cold and uninteresting. It is only as those facts are interpenetrated by ideals, and inspired, quickened and interpreted by the light of these ideals, that life has power, meaning and beauty.

What happens when the finer sensibilities of the soul are permitted to atrophy until they are so weak they almost die, is the basis of all tragedy of the life of the spirit. Shakespeare has shown it in the disintegration and downfall of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. The world war shows what happens when a whole nation deliberately teaches its people to neglect and ignore their finer sensibilities of the soul, generation after generation, in pursuit of materialistic standards. No possible lesson is more needed by the world today than that taught by Shakespeare in his depiction for us of the manner in which Macbeth and Lady Macbeth lost their souls, unless it be the opposite and constructive lesson that the souls of men and of nations are aroused, quickened, strengthened and finally saved for themselves and for the world, by supplying to every one, day by day that soul-manna which will properly nourish, invigorate and energize the spirit. All reforms must begin first in the hearts of men. The proper training of the emotions and the sensibilities through the fine arts is the best method.

Lady Macbeth then, is a study in ambition, just as Cleopatra is a study of passion. There was the same temptation to misread one of the eternal laws of the spirit. The world is full of instances which *seem* to prove, to a superficial observer, that they prosper best who sin most. But Shakespeare shows us so plainly that he who runs may read--so forcefully as never to be forgotten--that man or woman, born with Anglo-Saxon conscience, pays to the last farthing the penalty fixed for every transgression. *Nothing in life brings real happiness unless received under proper conditions.* Live as we may, we are in no danger of forgetting Lady Macbeth with her sin-stained hands and her sleepless eyes. The supreme lesson that every crime brings inevitably its own reward is taught once and forever.

It is not for his graceful diction that we prize Shakespeare most, not for the magic of his numbers, the fire of his eloquence, the force of his logic, neither for the regal beauty of his poetry, nor for the crystal clearness of his prose, but because, next to the Saviour himself, he has taught the men and women of the world their greatest lessons in living.

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