

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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Themes in Shakespeare

## Lady Macbeth (Unconscientious)

**Character** Lady Macbeth is the risk-taking ambitious wife of Macbeth, a general of the army of Scotland. She is eager to do what she must to advance her husband to the position of supreme power in Scotland, and spurs him—for this purpose—to the murder of Duncan, King of Scotland, who has come to visit Macbeth's castle. This brutal deed, which she more than her husband has conceived, will soon haunt both her husband and her, and drive them both to a rapid death, which of course wipes away any of the benefits the couple hoped to acquire by regicide.

**Ambitious** Lady Macbeth first appears to us reading a letter from her husband, in which he reports to her the encounter he has had with three witches on the heath, at the outset of the play. The witches have used wild sibylline words to imply that Macbeth is in line for the throne of Scotland, and Lady Macbeth reads the message with intense interest. She believes that her husband will become King, though she does not yet have a plan that will lead to the throne. She is clearly ready for any path that will lead her and her husband to this level of grandeur. Her conscience has no power at all over her behavior.

**Shrewd** Immediately after reading Macbeth's message, his wife reflects on what she fears most, that her husband would not be 'strong' enough to carry through on his desire for supreme power. 'Yet do I fear thy nature,' she muses, thinking of him; 'it is too full of the milk of human kindness to catch the nearest way.' He is, she goes on to think, sufficiently ambitious, but wants power without the 'illness,' that is wickedness, which must attend it. She suspects her husband would ultimately be turned off by what he would need to do to succeed; she is shrewd and planning, **unconscientious** and ready to act, but she turns out to be limited in her own insight.

**Scheming** Lady Macbeth, still in the rich introductory lines, decides what path she must take to drive her husband further, into the rough patches of their mutual ambition. 'Hie thee hither,' she says to herself—and to her husband, that 'I may pour my spirits in thine ear,' and lead you forward in your quest for the 'golden round,' the crown. She goes on, in her unconscientious mind, to make much of the seeming predictions laid out by the witches on the heath, and to rest her conviction on the 'metaphysical'—that is supernatural—aid that appears to be promised to her and her mate.

**Scheming** When Macbeth returns to his castle—after he has tendered an invitation to the King—Lady Macbeth meets him with the advice that he should look innocent and welcoming, when the king arrives. 'Look like the innocent flower, but be the serpent under it.' 'Leave all the rest to me,' she says, as she goes to prepare her role in the reception of the King. No sooner has the King dined, and asked to see Macbeth, than Lady Macbeth confronts her husband with the charge that he is avoiding the King. Hearing from her husband that he is reconsidering their murderous plan, Lady Macbeth grows contemptuous and sarcastic. She finds her husband's conscience ridiculous.

**Parallels** Lady Macbeth is ambitious and ruthless, for her man's ascent, but of course for her own power too. Many parallels simply nibble at her complexity. The Wife of Bath, in the *Canterbury Tales* (14<sup>th</sup> century) is a no holds barred feminist before her time, who insists on her rights to social power as well as to the bed. Jane Eyre, in the novel of 1847 by Charlotte Bronte, is a woman of conscience, unlike Lady Macbeth, but shares with Lady Macbeth a clearly unfolding and passionate female inner life, which is vividly tracked. *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928) depicts the growth in passion and independence of a woman determined to have her way at all costs—and for whom her husband is only a stepping stone. Any of the major figures of Feminism—Betty Friedan (*The Feminine Mystique*, 1963) or Germaine Greer (*The Female Eunuch*, 1970)—provides a framework for seeing Lady Macbeth from the inside, scheming and ruthless, but sure in her sex' power.

**Discussion questions**

Does Lady Macbeth feel any remorse for her lack of conscience, in carrying out her ambitious plan for her husband?

What destroys Lady Macbeth, by the end of the play? Is it her tortured conscience?

Why is Lady Macbeth so ambitious? Is it for herself? For her husband? Or simply to acquire power?