Development

Lady Macbeth turns the promise of kingship into a plan for murder. Her commanding language tries to suppress conscience and make Macbeth associate violence with being a man.

Journey through the act or stave

1.5: Reads Macbeth's letter and fears his kindness will obstruct ambition.

1.5: Calls on spirits for cruelty; instructs Macbeth to hide their intentions.

1.6: Performs the welcoming hostess while the audience knows the danger.

1.7: Attacks Macbeth's courage and love, then explains how to frame the guards.

1. "too full o' th' milk of human kindness"

Lady Macbeth, 1.5

Method: Nurturing metaphor

She treats compassion as a weakness. The image of milk links kindness to nourishment, preparing her disturbing attempt to exchange care for cruelty.

2. "unsex me here"

Lady Macbeth, 1.5

Method: Imperative and invocation

She asks spirits to remove qualities she associates with womanhood. This exposes her own gender assumptions, not proof that Shakespeare endorses them.

3. “take my milk for gall”

Lady Macbeth, 1.5

Method: Antithesis and bodily imagery

Milk suggests nurture; bitter gall suggests cruelty. She imagines remaking herself so compassion cannot interrupt the crime.

4. “Look like th’ innocent flower”

Lady Macbeth, 1.5

Method: Simile and imperative

Her next image, the concealed serpent, turns hospitality into a performance. The audience knows the planned danger that Duncan cannot see.

5. “When you durst do it, then you were a man”

Lady Macbeth, 1.7

Method: Conditional statement and manipulation

She makes masculinity depend on murder. Macbeth’s earlier moral limits become, in her argument, a shameful failure of courage.

6. “screw your courage to the sticking place”

Lady Macbeth, 1.7

Method: Imperative and mechanical metaphor

Courage becomes something to tighten and hold. Her practical plan replaces Macbeth’s moral objections with confidence about getting away with it.

Connections to other characters

Macbeth: his hesitation gives her an opening, but he still chooses to agree.

Duncan: her outward welcome contrasts with the betrayal planned inside his host's household.

Themes: ambition, gender, appearance and reality, conscience and the supernatural.

Develop your interpretation

Basic: she pressures Macbeth to kill Duncan.

Further: her private invocation contrasts with her public hospitality.

Advanced: her repeated calls for cruelty may suggest that ruthlessness is something she must construct rather than a quality she effortlessly possesses.

Pair the evidence

"milk of human kindness" ↔ "take my milk for gall" (1.5): nourishment is rejected in favour of imagined cruelty.

Context

A host should protect a guest, while a subject owes loyalty to the king. Her plan violates both obligations. The serpent can recall biblical temptation; explain its effect rather than treating it as a fixed character label.

Recall questions

Why does Shakespeare show her speaking privately before she welcomes Duncan?

How does her definition of manhood differ from Macbeth's in 1.7?

Writing task

How does Shakespeare present Lady Macbeth's power over Macbeth in Act 1? Discuss language and dramatic contrast.