Shakespeare’s “Wonderful Woman”:
A Victorian Defense of Lady Macbeth

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Among the collection in Harvard’s Houghton Library resides a remarkable volume. This diminutive book, which measures roughly 4” x 6” and is 87 pages long, is one of only nine copies in circulation worldwide and is remarkable not for its unassuming size but for the powerful nature of its contents. The volume in question is Madeleine Leigh-Noel Elliott’s Lady Macbeth: A Study, published in London in 1884. In this critical work, Elliott defends Shakespeare’s notorious queen as a stifled woman whose actions, however horrific, stem from a misdirection of her admirable feminine traits. Through her analysis of Lady Macbeth, Elliott also critiques the nineteenth-century gender norms that dictated acceptable notions of femininity and the cultural restrictions placed upon women in Victorian England. In Elliott’s view, Lady Macbeth is a character who defies societal norms because society has denied her the opportunity to express her innate qualities in a healthy, productive manner. To make matters worse, according to Elliott, Lady Macbeth’s ambitious husband exacerbates the situation by making his political aspirations known to her, then looking to her for guidance, and ultimately relying on her determination to propel him forward. Although she does not approve of Lady Macbeth’s role in the plot to murder Duncan, Elliott sympathetically considers the root causes that motivate this character and draws parallels between Lady Macbeth’s behavior and nineteenth-century gender norms—namely, the social pressure to be a devoted wife and mother, to be resilient in the face of adversity, and to care selflessly for the needs of one’s family. These norms would have governed Elliott’s life as well and provide a sense of gender solidarity that forms the basis for her critical defense of the fictitious Lady Macbeth.

Very little is known about Elliott beyond the criticism that she produced.¹ What is known is that Elliott authored two critical texts, Lady Macbeth: A Study (1884)² and Shakspeare’s Garden of Girls (1885).³ In addition, her name appears in the minutes of The New Shakspeare Society’s Transactions for 1880-1886, when Elliott briefly outlined the evolving organizational plan for her Garden of
The Transactions for 1880-1886 record three such presentations made by Elliott in 1884, occurring on 24 October, 14 November, and 12 December. Aside from these brief references to Elliott’s presentations, there appears to be no other mention of her name in the Transactions that were published between 1874 and 1886, either as a member of the society or in reference to her earlier work, *Lady Macbeth: A Study*. The only other allusion to Elliott’s life that I have discovered is in the volume of *Lady Macbeth* that I examined, which carries a label marking it as an item from Algernon Charles Swinburne’s library and bears a handwritten inscription from Elliott (1884) addressed to Swinburne. Her presentation of *Lady Macbeth* to Swinburne is particularly significant because in his critical work, *A Study of Shakespeare*, Swinburne seems to diminish the need to analyze Lady Macbeth:

> There can hardly be a single point of incident or of character on which the youngest reader will not find himself at one with the oldest, the dullest with the brightest among the scholars of Shakespeare. It would be an equal waste of working hours or of playtime if any of these should devote any part of either a whole-schoolday or a holiday to remark or to rhapsody on the character of Macbeth or of Orlando, of Rosalind or of Lady Macbeth.

Although Swinburne’s critical study is primarily concerned with the authorship of the plays, his remarks suggest that the nature of the characters he names, including Lady Macbeth, are so self-evident that there is no need to explore them further. Elliott, however, sees the need to devote a substantial study to her exploration of Lady Macbeth’s character. Elliott surely would have been aware of Swinburne’s reference to Lady Macbeth in this work and clearly sought male readership of her critical study, knowing that her views on Lady Macbeth ran contrary to established perceptions of this character.

While Elliott gives more attention to Lady Macbeth than most of her contemporaries, she shares the popular tendency among Victorian critics of approaching Shakespeare’s dramatic figures as though they were characters in a novel, often treating these
characters as though they are firmly grounded in a familiar social and cultural context that exists apart from the stage. As Tricia Lootens notes in her discussion of Victorian scholarship, “Shakespearean texts become flesh or at the very least marble in the form of flesh, while critics become the masters who must reassemble the poet-hero’s disjointed textual members, revealing (or reviving) the true, transcendent body that gave them life.” To the Victorians the text was sacrosanct, and textual analysis, particularly regarding character development, was the foundation of their Shakespearean scholarship. Grace Latham, a critic who was quite active in the New Shakspeare Society and whose remarks appear in the Transactions for 1880-1886, demonstrates these prevailing attitudes toward the study of Shakespeare when she observes that “Only Shakespeare so individualizes his characters that we feel assured that they once really existed, and lived the whole of those lives, part of which is shown to us on stage.” Latham’s assessment nicely illustrates the attitude favored by many Victorian critics who tended to focus on character development as distinct from performance. In fact, a survey of the papers being presented to the New Shakspere Society between 1874 and 1886—the period prior to and including Elliott’s established activity as a critic—reveals that these scholars focused on the language, structure, and authorship of the plays, in addition to a pronounced study of character development. Rarely, if ever, do these critics focus on performance. Likewise, Elliott’s character study of Lady Macbeth often seems to treat this character as a living, breathing person; Elliott, however, further utilizes this approach to critique the societal norms and cultural influences that, in her view, would have shaped this character. While Elliott was not the first female critic to focus on Lady Macbeth, her analysis is certainly the most thorough Victorian study of this character and the most unapologetically sympathetic.

Much of the Victorian scholarship that focuses on Lady Macbeth is relatively concise and limited, often treating this character merely as a plot device, necessary to ensure the tragic hero’s downfall, or as a villain whose failure is a failure of gender. This latter treatment of Lady Macbeth can be traced back to the Romantic critic, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who sees Lady Macbeth as an aberrant creation and suggests that her failings are rooted in her gender inadequacy.
Coleridge contends that Lady Macbeth “evinces no womanly life, no wifely joy, at the return of her husband” and credits her with a “superhuman audacity” that leads to her ultimate end in “suicidal agony.” William Hazlitt also considers the influence of gender when he asserts that Lady Macbeth is a villainous character largely because she acts in a way that is contrary to expected gender norms:

She is a great bad woman, whom we hate, but whom we fear more than we hate. . . . She is only wicked to gain a great end; and is perhaps more distinguished by her commanding presence of mind and inexorable self-will, which do not suffer her to be diverted from a bad purpose, when once formed, by weak and womanly regrets, than by the hardness of her heart or want of natural affections.

Hazlitt sees Lady Macbeth as a frightening and dangerous character largely because she is able to suppress her feminine nature. Both Coleridge and Hazlitt act as precursors to subsequent Victorian critics who increasingly consider the influence of gender and femininity, or the lack thereof, when discussing Lady Macbeth.

Beginning with Anna Jameson, Victorian criticism surrounding Lady Macbeth tends to fall along gender lines, with female critics typically taking a more sympathetic approach when trying to understand the motivation of this character and male critics generally pointing to the monstrous nature of Shakespeare’s queen. Jameson’s early Victorian commentary on Lady Macbeth in *Shakespeare’s Heroines* (1832, 1858) echoes the focus on gender that Coleridge and Hazlitt had adopted, but also represents a significant shift in attitude by offering a more sympathetic view of this character. Jameson argues that audiences and critics alike are horrified by Lady Macbeth’s actions precisely because the character retains a degree of femininity: “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.” Jameson also points out that Lady Macbeth’s deference to her husband throughout the play is a feminine attribute as a well as a key example of this character’s
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essential womanhood. The critic stops short of arguing that Lady Macbeth is an empathetic figure and adamantly denounces that character’s actions, however misguided by affection she may have been.

Following the publication of Jameson’s book and prior to Elliott’s study, several members of the New Shakspere Society considered the nature of Lady Macbeth’s character. A male critic, J.R. Lowell, contributes to the discussion of Lady Macbeth by contending that this character is responsible for premeditated murder and that audiences are “made shuddering accomplices before the fact.” Lowell’s comments about Lady Macbeth are very brief and focus on the monstrosity of her behavior. Subsequently, in 1876, Annette Handcock, the Countess of Charlemont, addresses the perception that Lady Macbeth is monstrous when she presents her paper, “Gruach (Lady Macbeth),” to the New Shakspere Society. In her paper, Handcock asks a question that focuses on the issue of gender and monstrosity: “Was Lady Macbeth only a woman, or very woman and devil?” This question stresses the notion of gender and suggests the inherent incompatibility that Handcock perceives in the two categories of woman and devil. She ultimately comes to the somewhat tenuous conclusion that Lady Macbeth “was not all evil.”

Although Handcock concludes that Lady Macbeth is not all bad, she certainly does not offer any sort of unmitigated support for this character either; however, her tentative sympathy toward Lady Macbeth is enough to draw the ire of Frederick Furnivall, the Director of the New Shakspere Society. In his response to Handcock’s paper, Furnivall counters that “Any one desiring to spare Lady Macbeth . . . may make excuses for her; but to ask us to think that love for her husband was her only motive, is going too far.” Furnivall’s attitude conveys the popular critical view that Lady Macbeth carries the majority of culpability for the murder of Duncan. These critics also demonstrate the Victorian tendency to treat Shakespeare’s characters with an expectation of realism.

Much like Furnivall before him, William Bryant asserts that “only the insipid prating of a modern criticism has been able to consider [Lady Macbeth] as possessed of kindness of spirit.” The disdain with which Bryant treats criticism that diverges from the norm and the outrage expressed by Furnivall illustrate the animosity
of the critical debate over the nature of this character and the underlying tensions regarding gender that any discussion of Lady Macbeth seems to ignite. Clearly, the common tendency of Victorian critics to either condemn Lady Macbeth or to attempt to understand her character’s motivation suggests the role that gender might play in scholarly attitudes.

This is the critical debate into which Elliott enters with her 1884 publication of *Lady Macbeth: A Study*, a work that has gone largely unrecognized. Elliott takes up the challenge that was offered by Furnivall, defies the derision suggested by Bryant, and expands on the sympathetic approach to understanding this character that was offered by Jameson and, to a much lesser extent, by Handcock. Elliott argues that Lady Macbeth is motivated by positive feminine traits—her love for her husband and her displaced maternal instincts. Elliott, however, goes even further than Jameson had in her defense of Lady Macbeth and declares an outright admiration for this character as a fellow woman, devoting an entire book to this topic and solidifying Elliott’s place as an outspoken proponent of Shakespeare’s queen.

Elliott bases her adamant sympathy for Lady Macbeth on the grounds of a shared womanhood and draws on the cultural context of the Victorian era to inform her analysis of this character. In *The Women of England*, Victorian author Sarah Stickney Ellis observes that “women do know what their sex is formed to suffer; and for this very reason, there is sometimes a bond existing between sisters.” Elliott seems to use this same concept of shared suffering to form an imagined bond with the character and to create a sense of solidarity between herself and Lady Macbeth. In the preface to her critical study, Elliott makes it clear that she feels a personal connection to Shakespeare’s much maligned queen: “My impressions of Lady Macbeth were formed during a . . . time of solitude, when I was denied everything but the ‘heritage of suffering,’ and in my sick-room the image of this wonderful woman grew and grew before my mental vision, as the statue grows under the sculptor’s tool, until, at last, I saw her—as I wish to present her to my readers.” Elliott’s allusion to Lady Macbeth as a “wonderful woman” signifies that her perception of this character is anything but conventional. Elliott’s agency is also evident in the sculpting metaphor that the critic uses
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Elliott stresses her role in actively shaping and impressing her view on this character, as a sculptor might mold a statue from raw material. Although Elliott does not reveal the cause of her own illness when establishing her identification with Lady Macbeth, the fact that Elliott is confined to a “sick-room” and experiences “heavy solitude” and “suffering” conjures images of a particular type of middle-class Victorian woman—frail, vulnerable, and isolated. This conception of Victorian femininity, although divergent from the stereotypical image of the woman as wife and mother, stands in stark contrast to the accepted image of Lady Macbeth as a heartless monster. By identifying Lady Macbeth as a “wonderful woman” and announcing her own agency as a critic, Elliott implicitly challenges accepted literary scholarship regarding this character and the male authority that designates Lady Macbeth as a monster.

If there were any lingering doubt that Elliott intended to defy accepted critical views about Lady Macbeth and defend this character on the grounds of gender, her subsequent comments make her position crystal clear. Elliott observes that “almost all commentators and exponents of Shakespeare have agreed in their scathing denunciations of the character of Lady Macbeth, and seem to have taken no trouble to discover any extenuating circumstances that might modify the enormity of her crime or account for much of the odium that attaches to her name.” The “extenuating circumstances” to which Elliott refers are the socially imposed gender restrictions placed upon women that, in her view, have influenced this character, namely the expectation that women should remain within the domestic sphere and focus all of their intellect and energies toward promoting the goals of their families. Elliott subsequently notes that, “no one has been found to champion the cause of one who, with all her crimes, was a true woman; for I believe it requires only a little care and patience to discover in Lady Macbeth many true womanly traits and even endearing qualities.”

Elliott is not judging this character for her actions as much as she is considering and justifying the character’s motivation by establishing her “true womanly traits.” This is a typical example of Elliott’s tendency to discuss Lady Macbeth as a figure who is grounded in Victorian cultural norms, an approach that facilitates Elliott’s
critique of nineteenth-century gender attitudes and practices. Elliott is also clearly aware of her own agency as a defender of this character, a role that is based on her familiarity with these socially condoned gender norms—namely, Victorian era doctrines that apply to marriage and motherhood.

Devotion—an admirable Victorian feminine trait in wives and mothers—is, in Elliott’s view, the driving force behind Lady Macbeth’s actions; her devotion to Macbeth, however, is taken to an unhealthy extreme. Elliott contends that the character’s feelings of devotion toward Macbeth are intensified by Lady Macbeth’s maternal grief. In her reading of the play, Elliott relies on an earlier legend, which held that Lady Macbeth’s children had been slain. Shakespeare also alludes to this legend when he has Lady Macbeth say “I have given suck, and know / How tender ‘tis to love the babe that milks me.” According to Elliott, this presumed state of thwarted motherhood not only gives Lady Macbeth a more understandable motive for her subsequent actions, but also creates a sense of sympathy for the grief she must feel over her lost child. Elliott notes that, “of all the pathetic yearnings those of a childless mother are the most touching” and further contends that the suffering of such a one “can only be realized by those who have passed through such suffering.” In this instance, Elliott uses her own gender identification to validate her authority as a critic of Lady Macbeth and to foster a degree of understanding for this widely reviled character.

Many Victorians would likely have had sympathy for a woman who was unable to fulfill her “role” as a mother. The biological drive of a woman to have children, and the maternal instincts that this would awaken in her, were widely held principles of biological determinism, a school of scientific theory and philosophy that was quite popular during the Victorian era. Those adhering to such doctrines believed that women and men were biologically predetermined to participate in certain activities. For women, the primary activity would be childbirth and motherhood. As Cynthia Eagle Russett notes, “Not for one moment were Victorian women permitted to forget that their essence was reproductive.” This philosophy seems to underlie Elliott’s perceptions of this character and her belief that the deaths of Lady Macbeth’s children would have
interrupted her natural maternal instincts after they had previously been initiated, causing this character to redirect her maternal energies by focusing on another culturally approved means of expression for a woman—marriage. It is directly as a result of maternal sorrow, according to Elliott, that Lady Macbeth clings “more tenaciously to her husband.” In Elliott’s mind, this motive justifies, to some extent, the extreme measures that Lady Macbeth takes to protect her husband and to advance his political goals.

While it is acceptable to Elliott that Lady Macbeth wishes to promote the interests of her husband, she takes this desire too far. In Elliott’s view, Lady Macbeth’s flaw at this point in the play is that she is “blind in her wifely devotion,” which allows her to be swayed by her husband’s ambitions. In her analysis, the critic makes it clear that she does not see Lady Macbeth as the manipulator in this situation but as an example of a woman who is manipulated by her husband. According to Elliott, one of the first suggestions of Macbeth’s ill intent is the letter he sent to Lady Macbeth, telling her about his encounter with the “Weird Sisters,” who addressed him by saying “Hail, king that shalt be” (Macbeth, I.v.8-10). Elliott notes that, in the letter, Macbeth repeatedly refers to his greatness to come, thereby expressing his own political ambitions to his wife: “she is not the instigator to crime. The first suggestion comes from him. She reads between the lines of his letter and knows that in his mind there is more than his hand dare express.”

Elliott also notes that Macbeth had previously suggested his ambition in an aside: “Stars, hide your fires; / Let not light see my black and deep desires” (Macbeth, I.v.50-51). When discussing this allusion to Macbeth’s ambition and his dark intentions, Elliott asserts that “it is very clear that his wife understood from his letter more than he openly expressed.”

Elliott contends that this suggestion from Macbeth, given Lady Macbeth’s devotion to him, is enough to lead “his wife” to give “effect to his desires.” In Elliott’s eyes, Lady Macbeth is not the “fiend wife” that others claim her to be for initiating the foul murder; she is, instead, an example of a devoted wife who loses the perspective of her own morality and goes too far to assist her husband in achieving his goals. Ultimately, Elliott sees Lady Macbeth’s determination “that nothing shall stand in the way of her husband’s ambition” as “woman-like.” Essentially, Elliott argues that, by attempting to
satisfy her husband’s wishes, Lady Macbeth is functioning within her socially condoned role as wife, which the critic sees as an admirable motive.

Among the social ideals placed on Victorian women was the goal of remaining strong and resilient in the face of hardship for the sake of their families, a motivation that Elliott attributes to Lady Macbeth. Sarah Stickney Ellis describes “the most striking characteristics of the women of England” as being a “promptitude in action, energy of thought and benevolence of feeling” and notes “the necessity of making their own personal exertions conducive to the great end of promoting the happiness of those around them.” This assessment of the ideal Englishwoman’s essential character seems to inform Elliott’s perception of Lady Macbeth’s motivation. Elliott sees Lady Macbeth as a character who combines feminine devotion to Macbeth with the strength and willingness needed to carry out very unpleasant tasks that will ultimately benefit her husband. Elliott’s analysis of Lady Macbeth also reveals a complex critique of cultural norms. Elliott seems to suggest that some men (such as Macbeth) will not hesitate to exploit, for their own gain, the very qualities that society promotes in women, such as devotion and resilience, traits that are not inherently bad but can be used for bad effect. According to Elliott, in the case of Lady Macbeth, the plot to murder Duncan as a means of ensuring her husband’s success is the result of these impulses.

In an attempt to defend Lady Macbeth, to refute the perception of this character as monstrous, and to demonstrate Lady Macbeth’s inherent femininity and resilience, Elliott cites the same speech that many critics point to as evidence of her monstrosity: “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!” (Macbeth, I.v.40-43). Rather than serving as evidence of this character’s unnatural impulses, however, Elliott believes that Lady Macbeth’s request to “unsex herself” is actually necessary for her to commit the crime of murder, because she is otherwise too feminine to see it through. These lines are not spoken by Lady Macbeth as a demand, in Elliott’s view, but as a plea to give her the ability to act in a coldly masculine manner so that she can secure success for her husband. For Elliott, Lady Macbeth’s willingness to go to such extremes to
“unsex herself” is an indication of the combined effect of extreme devotion and inherent strength of will. Elliott also asserts that this character’s desire to please and help her husband somewhat mitigates even the heinous crime of murder: “she does not glory in crime; she shows no thirst for blood. In order to accomplish her purpose, she has to invoke supernatural aid to unsex her, and render her woman’s breast callous to pity and remorse.” In Elliott’s view, this character’s innate womanly nature and the socially condoned desire to please her husband and to remain resilient for his sake are taken to unnatural extremes, because she has become too devoted to Macbeth.

Lady Macbeth, in Elliott’s estimation, represents a woman who possesses the strength of will to put aside elements of her own feminine nature in order to fulfill her husband’s needs. As modern critic Naomi Conn Liebler has observed, “Lady Macbeth thinks that manhood is fearlessness . . . but fearlessness or fierceness is the woman’s part in this play.” Elliott notes that Lady Macbeth is able to act in a manner that is contrary to her gender because Macbeth is unable to do so. In Elliott’s view, when Lady Macbeth is coupled with an ambitious husband, who recognizes and wishes to harness his wife’s devotion for his own ends, the result is tragic and has potential implications for Victorian audiences. Elliott presumes that Lady Macbeth’s excess of devotion would not have been so dangerous in another woman, but, as Elliott notes, Lady Macbeth’s “strength of will was her distinguishing characteristic,” which leads her to “lay aside her womanhood, or rather all its sweeter and softer features to help her husband achieve his ambition.” Elliott’s view implicitly suggests the double standard of endowing men with legal and practical power within Victorian society, and particularly within marriage, while expecting women to submit to their husband’s wishes, and subsequently blaming women for submitting to husbands whose desires are contrary to social expectations. Elliott does not defend Lady Macbeth’s actions, but she does defend this character’s motivation, acknowledging it as proper for a wife to help her husband reach his goals, a very typical perspective of gender roles in Victorian England. What is not typical is Elliott’s analysis of the play, which points to Macbeth and social convention as sharing responsibility for this predicament. In this way, Elliott uses the
norms of socialized behavior to inform her analysis of this character and to attempt to exonerate Lady Macbeth to nineteenth-century readers.

Elliott also argues that what many critics have seen as indicative of an evil or caustic temperament in Lady Macbeth is actually an outward sign of the stress and strain that Macbeth has facilitated. As Elliott develops her defense of Lady Macbeth, she questions the relative strength and guilt of each character more fully, ultimately determining that Macbeth is the weaker and more guilty of the pair. Elliott asserts that Macbeth’s weakness of character necessitates his wife’s strength of character, as evidenced when Macbeth tells his wife that he wants to abandon their plan:

We will proceed no further in this business.
He hath honored me of late, and I have bought
Golden opinions from all sorts of people,
Which would be worn now in their newest gloss,
Not cast aside so soon. (Macbeth, I.vii.32-36)

Elliott speculates that Macbeth’s words to Lady Macbeth, being “such an excuse, put forward with the feeble uncertainty of a weak unstable mind, must have aroused all her contempt.” According to her, Lady Macbeth, having been previously spurred on by her husband to plot the murder of Duncan, can not simply stop her forward motion and is not so changeable as she perceives Macbeth to be. Elliott cites Lady Macbeth’s response to her husband’s hesitation and the determination that Lady Macbeth expresses:

Was the hope drunk
Wherein you dressed yourself? Hath it slept since?
And wakes it now, to look so green and pale
At what it did so freely? From this time
Such I account thy love. Art thou afeard
To be the same in thine own act and valor
As thou art in desire? Wouldst thou have that
Which thou esteem’st the ornament of life,
And live a coward in thine own esteem,
Letting “I dare not” wait upon “I would,”

(Macbeth, I.vii.36-45)

In Elliott’s view, Lady Macbeth’s response exhibits the sort of steadfast resolve that one might see as an attribute in other circumstances: “She recognizes [their plan] as a crime, and never parleys with her conscience, or attempts to excuse the fearful deed.” Elliott claims that this behavior is not cold or calculating, as so many previous critics have judged it, but is instead a direct result of the character’s marriage to an ambitious but weak man whom she loves as a mother would love a son. In The Mothers of England, Ellis describes “a mother’s love” as “that strongest of all principles in the female sex.” This culturally prominent attitude provides the context for Elliott’s analysis of Lady Macbeth. Now, however, Elliott sees this love as being inappropriately transferred to Macbeth and used to further his desires. According to Elliott, Lady Macbeth sees what needs to be done to promote Macbeth’s goals and she determines to do it, whatever the cost to herself may be. And the cost of what is an immoral and unnatural plan of action is high, in Elliott’s estimation: “The cold, stern reasoning with which she answers Macbeth manifests her scarcely concealed disdain. . . . [S]uch insinuations of cowardice . . . may appear unnecessarily cutting and unkind from the wife he loved so fondly; but they are scarcely unnatural when we take into account her wearied and overstrung condition.” Elliott believes that Lady Macbeth’s seemingly harsh reaction to Macbeth’s hesitation is actually brought about by her unmitigated devotion to her husband and the position that Macbeth has put her in. Elliott’s acknowledgment that Lady Macbeth has little patience for Macbeth’s hesitation is also in keeping with popular Victorian ideology regarding complementarity in marriage. As John Ruskin explains, complementary partnerships occur in marriage when “[e]ach has what the other has not: each completes the other: they are in nothing alike, and the happiness and perfection of both depends on each asking and receiving from the other what the other only can give.” Elliott seems to be applying this theory to the fictional Macbeth marriage; however, in the case of Lady Macbeth and her husband, the traits and behaviors of these two characters complement
one another for ill effect. Elliott attributes to Macbeth a “feeble uncertainty” and a “weak unstable mind,” features often associated with Victorian women as negative feminine characteristics, in order to establish Macbeth as the weaker of the two, implicitly suggesting that Lady Macbeth becomes more masculine out of necessity.\textsuperscript{50} Elliott is also essentially challenging the predominant Victorian belief that women are the weaker sex mentally and physically and seems to suggest that such behaviors are not inherent gender traits, but rather are environmentally induced.\textsuperscript{51} Essentially, Elliott argues that Lady Macbeth’s compensation for Macbeth’s lack of traditionally male traits and the strain that this places on the character are the reasons for Lady Macbeth’s seemingly harsh response, which places the blame on Macbeth’s deficiencies rather than on Lady Macbeth’s presumed monstrosity.

Clearly, Elliott sees Lady Macbeth as a representation of a capable, intelligent woman and argues that the lack of educational opportunities for women is a decisive factor in Lady Macbeth’s motivation. In Victorian England, women typically had much less opportunity than men to obtain an education, based on the notion that women were inherently less intelligent than men. In Elliott’s view, Lady Macbeth’s status as a thwarted intellectual facilitates her role in the murder of Duncan and she suggests that the lack of educational pursuits afforded to women may have been a factor in the crime. Elliott condemns society’s role in this affair by emphasizing that Lady Macbeth’s “strong intellectual capabilities” would have had no real outlet because of the limited opportunities available to women. Elliott sees this situation as an integral element in Lady Macbeth’s motivation: “she had nothing to do but live amongst her maidens at Inverness Castle,” which “could scarcely have afforded much scope for the exercise of her mental powers.”\textsuperscript{53} According to Elliott, when Macbeth expressed his ambition to his wife, he “opened up a vision of a field for her extraordinary activities.”\textsuperscript{54} By applying Victorian social issues to her analysis of Lady Macbeth, Elliott suggests the need for women to have access to legitimate intellectual pursuits. Elliott, once again demonstrating her application of social realism to Shakespeare’s fictional characters, here insinuates that, had Lady Macbeth been given more legitimate opportunities to engage her intellect in productive endeavors, she would not have jumped so
quickly into the role of a murderous plotter. Understanding Elliott’s sympathy for and identification with this character is the key to understanding her perspective of Lady Macbeth’s behavior. As a female scholar, Elliott, who has already claimed an affinity with this character, would have been well aware of the limitations placed upon obtaining an education for women in Victorian England. While there is no information available as to Elliott’s education, the educational environment of Victorian England forms the backdrop for her critical analysis of Lady Macbeth as well as her implicit critique of the Victorian restrictions placed on women.

Despite her efforts to justify Lady Macbeth’s motivation and to liberate this character from the monstrous reputation she had gained from other critics, Elliott does acknowledge the horror of Lady Macbeth’s part in the murder of Duncan. She seems very conflicted when discussing the murder scene and attempts to stress what she sees as Lady Macbeth’s repressed but still extant femininity whenever possible. Elliott imagines that Lady Macbeth’s role in Duncan’s murder would have had a fearful effect on the character’s femininity: “All womanliness, all lines of beauty are for ever erased from her face in that moment.” This comment reveals the critic’s adherence to an ideal of womanly beauty that also suggests a goodness of character, often attributed to women as an inherent trait. Elliott further describes the murder scene and Lady Macbeth’s successful attempt to “unsex” herself: “She is cold, malignant, fiendish, and her little hand grasps the murderous weapon with feverish intensity.” Elliott acknowledges the monstrosity of Lady Macbeth’s role in replacing the bloody dagger on Duncan’s pillow, but she also immediately notes Lady Macbeth’s inability to complete the act of murder because the sleeping Duncan had too closely resembled her father: “Had he not resembled / My father as he slept, I had done’t” (Macbeth, II.ii.12-13). Elliott suggests that the traits an ideal woman might possess are still present, in some degree, since Lady Macbeth is not able to murder Duncan because of her presumed affection for her father. By noting that, in Lady Macbeth’s current unsexed state, she is “cold, malignant and fiendish,” one might argue that, in an ideally feminized state, she would be warm, nurturing, and kind—traits that were typically seen in the nineteenth century as inherently feminine and traits that Elliott imagines Lady
Macbeth had once possessed but no longer actively demonstrates. She makes it clear, however, that sympathizing with this character on the grounds of a shared womanhood does not equate to approving of her nefarious actions. By noting what Elliott interprets as this character’s stifled but still present femininity, she attempts to condemn the action without condemning the character, which is a shift from the way that Lady Macbeth had typically been seen by Victorian critics.

Although Elliott acknowledges Lady Macbeth’s part in this heinous act, she sees the character’s separation from her feminine identity as temporary and attempts to rehabilitate this character more fully by establishing that prominent traits of femininity—particularly unselfishness—even eventually return to Lady Macbeth. Elliott observes that when Macbeth starts to regret their actions, his wife responds by trying to ease his mind. Elliott cites Lady Macbeth’s words to her husband: “Come on, / Gentle my lord, sleek o’er your rugged looks. / Be bright and jovial among your guests tonight” (*Macbeth*, III.ii.29-31). Elliott sees Lady Macbeth’s reaction as eminently unselfish: “Does it not speak for her unselfish womanliness that not a murmur escapes her; but, with infinite patience, she turns on all occasions to allay his fears, and to soothe the grief that, in her own case, is consuming her spirit? Not once does she hint at her own suffering; hence some have concluded she was callous.” Elliott’s assessment of Lady Macbeth clearly and explicitly challenges established critical views and draws on the gendered norms of Victorian England to defend this character—contending that Lady Macbeth is the selfless wife who puts her concerns for her husband above her own, like a truly devoted angel in the house, akin to the character in Coventry Patmore’s popular Victorian era poem, rather than acting as a callous self-promoter. What’s more, Elliott sees Lady Macbeth’s silence regarding her own suffering as more typically gendered behavior: “Women there are who suffer in silence and alone. They have a dual existence: one of mental and spiritual unrest, and another of apparent calm, which is the only one palpable to their nearest and dearest.” This comment calls to mind Elliott’s prefatory remarks about coming to admire Lady Macbeth while in a state of solitude and suffering. Here, Elliott presents Lady Macbeth as a figure of long-suffering womanhood who merits admiration and
sympathy, an image that stands in sharp contrast to the common view of Lady Macbeth as a murderous monster.

For Elliott, Lady Macbeth’s redemption is ultimately realized through the character’s descent into madness and her subsequent abandonment by Macbeth, rendering her a victimized object of sympathy. Elliott can tolerate much of Lady Macbeth’s behavior and sees it as being rooted in unselfishness; she finds Macbeth’s indifference to his wife’s situation unacceptable, however. She establishes Macbeth’s emotional abandonment of his wife by observing that, after the murder of Duncan, Macbeth begins to shut Lady Macbeth out of his daily concerns and to turn to her as a depository for his own guilt: “Macbeth did not ask her counsel now, but he made her the recipient of all his lamenting, unheedful of her growing agony.”

Elliott contends that Lady Macbeth neglects her own interests and well being in order to calm her husband’s rattled nerves out of a sense of duty and devotion. Elliott further surmises that Lady Macbeth’s emotional isolation, coupled with her alienation from her husband, must have weighed very heavily on her. It is this state of affairs that generates Lady Macbeth’s response to her husband that “What’s done is done” (Macbeth, III.ii.14). Unlike the view taken by most critics—who judge that the character’s response is harsh and cold—Elliott supposes that Lady Macbeth’s advice was borne of her intelligence and her pragmatic nature rather than of any inherent callousness. Elliott asserts that, even in this state of alienation from her husband’s support, Lady Macbeth remains unselfish: “A less unselfish nature would have wanted some outlet for her own perturbations, for the grief that was hurrying her to a dishonoured and unregretted grave; but she is still gentle and tender with him, and suppresses all exclamations of pain with stoicism.”

To associate Lady Macbeth with adjectives such as “gentle,” “tender,” and “unselfish” firmly grounds this character in established nineteenth-century feminine gender norms and marks Elliott’s attempt to liberate Lady Macbeth from her popularly held depiction as monstrous, callous, and cruel.

In Elliott’s assessment, Lady Macbeth’s ultimate madness serves as evidence of her essential humanity and her lack of monstrosity, shifting this character from the role of villainess into that of victim. Elliott emphasizes the feelings of guilt that emerge in Lady
Macbeth’s sleep-walking episodes to demonstrate this point: “When in the night-watches her perturbed nature still asserts itself, she acts and re-acts the dreary tragedy. It shows how great the physical strain must have been for her to give way to somnambulism as soon as she feels herself free to unbend. It speaks volumes for the secret torture of her poor brain that, when the need for exertion is removed, she sinks into the semi-imbecility of despair.” In this character’s sleep walking, Elliott sees evidence of the burden that Lady Macbeth’s actions have become to her. According to Elliott, if Lady Macbeth were a cold, callous murderer (as she is widely considered to be by Elliott’s male contemporaries), she would not have shown the least regret or guilt for her actions. Elliott notes that, within the context of the play, the queen’s attendant explains that she has seen Lady Macbeth “rise from her bed, throw her nightgown upon her, unlock her closet, take forth paper, fold it, write upon’t, read it, afterwards seal it, and again return to bed; yet all this while in a most fast sleep” (Macbeth, V.i.3-7). Elliott contends that Lady Macbeth’s sleep writing in this instance is proof of her humanity: “Might not Shakspere [sic] have meant to suggest that, burdened with the guilt of their terrible crime, her heart found relief in a written confession of what her lips dare not express.” In Elliott’s estimation, every impulse of Lady Macbeth’s being is to confess what she has done—from reliving the crime to conveying her role via writing and ultimately with the wringing of her hands—all of which indicates Lady Macbeth’s torment and guilt. Elliott argues that Lady Macbeth’s desire to regain or re-assert her essential femininity, as well as her essential humanity, merits notice, thus mitigating the suggestion of unrepentant monstrosity with which critics have typically portrayed this character.

The suffering of women is a common motif in Victorian ideology, particularly when such suffering occurs through selflessness or in the act of promoting a loved one’s interests. In Lady Macbeth’s suffering, Elliott finds the basis for sympathy: “As we mentally dissect the ‘sorely charged’ heart we are filled with pity for the miserable woman, and it is with a feeling of relief that she passes from our sight. The psychological study is too painful.” In Elliott’s assessment, this character’s excessive adherence to socially constructed ideals of femininity at the expense of her own morality
is the underlying cause of her downfall. Rather than contempt, however, the essentially feminine and, in Elliott’s view, noble motivation for Lady Macbeth’s crime and the subsequent mental anguish that she endures as a result, should prevent critics from merely disdaining her and should, instead, engender a feeling of compassion for this misguided woman: “we are more inclined to attribute her death to heartbreak than to suicide. Hers was a noble, though warped nature, one that, having devoted itself to a beloved and absorbing object could allow no bar or hindrance in its efforts to attain the desired end.”

Thus, in Elliott’s eyes, Lady Macbeth is an example of a woman whose legitimate desire to support, love, and assist her husband becomes corrupted by her husband’s willingness to take advantage of his wife’s devotion and to exploit the otherwise admirable elements of her nature, only to abandon her in the end.

Elliott draws on her perception of culturally condoned gender normative behavior to better understand Lady Macbeth. For Elliott to attempt to legitimize this character as a caring, if misguided, example of womanhood and as an unselfishly devoted wife is a courageous, defiant position. Georgiana Ziegler notes that, during the Victorian era, Lady Macbeth represents “a wife who is strong-minded, ambitious, and given to evil in a period in which most women did not have careers, when a good nature and grace, not aggressiveness, were admired, and when husbands were expected to have the last say in matters concerning their married life.” Despite this cultural reality, Elliott explicitly identifies with Lady Macbeth based on what she perceives as their shared femininity and, argues that idealized femininity can be taken too far, that excessive love for and devotion to one’s husband can be a dangerous practice, that female intelligence should be recognized and given constructive outlets for expression, and that society often demonizes that which it does not understand—in this case, the drives and psychology of a character whose ideals are not so different from those promoted for most women during the Victorian era. For Elliott, the responsibility for Lady Macbeth’s crimes does not belong exclusively to her or to her husband, but is also shared by the society that imposes such gender normative expectations upon women, particularly within the cultural paradigm of marriage. What separates Elliott from other critics of Lady Macbeth—both male and female—is her willingness
to defend this character’s motivation enthusiastically on the grounds of her gender. Although we know next to nothing about Elliott’s life, her critical study remains as evidence of her distinctly assertive and unapologetically sympathetic and revisionist view of Shakespeare’s frequently demonized queen.

Notes


4. The New Shakspere Society, a popular London association, was founded in 1873 to promote Shakespearean scholarship. Several prominent literary figures of the period belonged to this society, including Matthew Arnold, John Ruskin, Dante G. Rossetti, and Robert Browning, as well as several female critics, including Annette Handcock, the Countess of Charlemont, and Grace Latham, among others. See The New Shakspere Society’s Transactions (London: Trubner & Co.).

5. “Monthly Abstract of Proceedings,” The New Shakspere Society’s Transactions (London: Trubner & Co., 1880-1886) 8: 106-10. Although the bibliographic citation for these journals appears, collectively, as The New Shakspere Society’s Transactions 1874-1886, the journals were typically published in separate volumes, based on a range of years. To assist in locating original information, I am providing the specific years of publication for each cited reference.

6. Elliott’s handwritten note to Swinburne reads as follows:

“A. Swinburne keep
with the Author’s compts.
(Madeleine Leigh Noel)
St. Helier
Bexhill Sussex
April 1884.”

(Elliott, Lady Macbeth, n. p.)


9. Grace Latham, “‘O Poor Ophelia!’” *The New Shakspere Society’s Transactions* Series 1, nos. 8, 9, 10 (1880-86): 401.

10. Despite Elliott’s pronounced focus on conducting a textual analysis of Lady Macbeth, it is worth noting that there were several significant productions of Macbeth on the Victorian stage—Charles Macready’s production in 1838, Samuel Phelps’s in 1850, Charles Kean’s in 1853, and Henry Irving’s in 1888. Among some of the most prominent theatrical representations of Lady Macbeth are Sarah Siddons’s 1785 performance, Charlotte Cushman’s 1846 portrayal, Helen Faucit’s rendition of Lady Macbeth in the 1860s, and Ellen Terry’s version of Shakespeare’s queen in 1888. Given the cultural significance of the Victorian stage, these productions provide context for Elliott’s analysis of Lady Macbeth. For a more thorough discussion of the various productions of Macbeth in the Victorian theater, see Donald Mullin, *Victorian Plays: A Record of Significant Productions on the London Stage, 1837-1901* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987); Russell Jackson, *Victorian Theatre: The Theatre in Its Time* (Kent: New Amsterdam Books, 1994); Adrian Poole, *Shakespeare and the Victorians* (London: Arden, 2004); Nina Auerbach, *Ellen Terry, Player in Her Time* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987); and Carol Jones Carlisle, *Helen Faucit: Fire and Ice on the Victorian Stage* (London: The Society for Theatre Research, 2000).


17. Handcock’s allusion to the demonic in connection to Lady Macbeth illustrates the tendency of Victorian critics to demonize powerful women whose actions are contrary to social expectations. Although the character of Lady Macbeth clearly acts contrary to social mores by her involvement in murder, the same association is not always evident when a male character is under discussion. This recurring literary double standard is discussed in much greater detail in Nina Auerbach, Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).


19. Ibid., 198.


21. Contemporary scholar, Naomi Conn Liebler has noted the anxieties of gender that continue to be evident in much of the criticism surrounding Lady Macbeth. See Naomi Conn Liebler, Shakespeare’s Festive Tragedy: The Ritual Foundations of Genre (New York: Routledge, 1995). Moreover, Georgiana Ziegler astutely notes that Lady Macbeth is frightening “because of her perceived ability to empower the feminine while disempowering the masculine.” See Georgiana Zeigler, “Accommodating the Virago: Nineteenth-century Representations of Lady Macbeth,” in Shakespeare and Appropriation, ed. Christy Desmet and Robert Sawyer (London: Routledge, 2013), 138. The nineteenth-century criticism that provides a backdrop for Elliott’s view seems to illustrate, quite nicely, the points being made by Liebler and Ziegler.

22. The increasing presence of female scholarship during the Victorian period is noteworthy in regard to this discussion. Women were particularly well prepared to enter the field of Shakespearean criticism because most middle class women were encouraged to read Shakespeare’s plays from a young age. Gail Marshall examines the role that Shakespeare’s plays had in educating middle class Victorian girls and women, as well as the use of these plays to indoctrinate girls into socially condoned gender behavior. See Gail Marshall, Shakespeare and Victorian Women (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) for a more thorough discussion of this practice in Victorian England.


25. Ibid., 1.

26. Ibid., 1-2.
Shakespeare’s “Wonderful Woman”

27. While Shakespeare is generally thought to have based his characterization of Lady Macbeth on more than one character in Holinshed’s *Chronicles*, Elliott seems to be basing her analysis on the legend of Queen Gruoch of Scotland, an eleventh-century figure who had at least one child who was slain. Jameson refers to this legend in *Shakespeare’s Heroines*, 358. The title of Annette Handcock’s paper, “Gruach (Lady Macbeth),” suggests connections to this historical record as well. See Handcock, 194.


30. Beginning with Charles Darwin and his theories of sexual selection, Victorian theorists, most notably Herbert Spencer, debated the differing biological nature of the sexes and the inherent implications this may have had on the social and psychological development of each. The cultural pressure for women to focus on maternal instincts and nurturing the family is a well documented attitude among Victorians and is discussed in detail by nineteenth-century authors, such as Sarah Stickney Ellis in 1844 and John Ruskin in 1865. See Sarah Stickney Ellis, *The Mothers of England: Their Influence and Responsibility* (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1844); and John Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies*, ed. Deborah Epstein Nord (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002). Contemporary authors, such as Cynthia Eagle Russett, *Sexual Science: The Victorian Construction of Womanhood* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989) and Elizabeth K. Helsinger, Robin Lauterbach Sheets and William Veeder, *The Woman Question*, 3 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), provide a comprehensive discussion of this prominent attitude toward ideal femininity in Victorian England.

31. Russett, 43.


33. Ibid., 5.

34. Ibid., 6.

35. Ibid., 7.

36. Ibid., 8.

37. Ibid., 7.

38. Ibid., 8.

40. Elliott, *Lady Macbeth*.

41. Ibid., 8.

42. Liebler, 213.


44. The subject of women’s rights and the lack thereof, particularly within marriage, was the focus of extensive debate during the Victorian period. A series of legislative acts took place during the nineteenth century that attempted to rectify, to various degrees, the status of married women’s legal rights. The Child Custody Bill of 1839, the Divorce and Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857, the Custody Act of 1873, the Custody of Infants Act in 1886, and the Married Women’s Property Acts of 1870 and 1882 are among the most significant legislative attempts to expand the extremely limited legal rights of women during the period. For a more thorough discussion of the relevant legislation that was enacted during the Victorian era, see Helsinger, Sheets, and Veeder, *The Woman Question*.


46. Ibid., 24.


49. Ruskin, 77.


51. The notion that women were inherently less intelligent than men and ill-suited for matters of a political or public nature had been promoted by Victorian authors such as Coventry Patmore in 1854, Sarah Stickney Ellis in 1839 and 1844, Ruskin in 1865, and theorists who promoted the concept of separate spheres and propensities for the sexes—domestic and emotional for women versus public and rational for men. See Coventry Patmore, “The Angel in the House,” in *Poems* (London: G. Bell, 1906); Ellis, *The Women of England* and *The Mothers of England*; Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies*. Here, Elliott makes a strong case for masculine and feminine traits co-existing in each gender and suggests that the environment has effects on gender normative behaviors. This is a view that is subsequently expressed by theorists such as Havelock Ellis, some ten years later. Havelock Ellis states that a primary focus of his work is “the consideration of the question how far sexual differences are artificial, the result of tradition and environment, and how far they are really rooted in the actual constitution of the male and female organisms.” See Havelock Ellis, *Man and Woman: A Study of Human Secondary Sexual Characteristics* (New York: Arno
Press, 1974), vii-viii. This notion seems to be suggested in the argument Elliott presents regarding Lady Macbeth.


53. Ibid.

54. Ibid.

55. Although the debate over granting women access to education began in earnest much earlier in the period, perhaps most notably illustrated by John Stuart Mill in his treatise *On the Subjection of Women* (1869), the issues surrounding the education of women were by no means resolved at the time when Elliott was writing. As Laura Morgan Green points out, even those women who “were involved in university education in the 1870s and early 1880s often did not take the same classes or exams as men, receive the same or indeed any degrees upon completion of their course of study, or have the same rights of institutional affiliation.” See Laura Morgan Green, *Educating Women: Cultural Conflict and Victorian Literature* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2001), 5. This environment seems to inform Elliott’s analysis and provides a degree of context for her views on education.


57. The connection between goodness of character and outward beauty calls to mind the description of idealized womanhood offered by Sarah Stickney Ellis, when she describes women as possessing “all the noblest passions, the deepest feeling, the highest aspirations of humanity,” all of which “may be found within the brooding quiet of an English woman’s heart.” See Ellis, *The Women of England*, 29. Contemporary critic Georgiana Ziegler discusses this ideal in relation to the artistic representations of Lady Macbeth that permeated the nineteenth century, noting the range of representations—from fragile and frail to domineering and powerful. For a more thorough discussion of nineteenth-century visual representations of Lady Macbeth, see Ziegler, 120.

Nina Auerbach also notes the combination of the “divine” and the “demonic” in John Singer Sargent’s portrait of Ellen Terry in the role of Lady Macbeth, contending that this performance and its artistic rendition mark the “exaltation of the awesome powers of self-creating womanhood.” See Nina Auerbach, 207. The range of visual representation is intriguing when considered in connection with Victorian ideals of womanhood, as expressed by Ellis, and the various portrayals of this character.


59. Ibid., 50.

60. Patmore, “The Angel in the House.”

The image of solitary suffering in connection with Victorian women has been well established by critics such as Martha Vicinus, ed., *Suffer and Be Still: Women in the Victorian Age* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972). These essays deal with the subject of silence among women during the Victorian era as well as the conditions of life inherent for nineteenth-century women, particularly as evidenced through the literature of the period. For a treatment of similar issues as applicable to early modern women and Shakespeare’s female characters, see Lynda Boose, “Scolding Bridles and Bridling Scolds,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 42 (1991): 179-213 and Penny Gay, *As She Likes It: Shakespeare’s Unruly Women* (London: Routledge, 1994). These authors explore the extent of silence surrounding women and how this silence is represented in both cultural and dramatic settings as a means of imposing social control.


63. Ibid., 50-53.

64. Ibid., 64.

65. Ibid., 71.

66. Ibid., 72.

67. Ibid., 74.

68. Ibid., 84.

69. Ibid., 94.

70. Zeigler, 120.

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