

his cheek The poet draws our attention to the fact by Banquo's pointed question as to the reason of his strange behavior.

Upon the correct interpretation of this passage depends the comprehension of the whole piece, which centers in the character of Macbeth. One is not naturally horrified by a joyful message. It is evident therefore that the prophecy of the Witches strikes terror into the soul of Macbeth, only because it coincides with his own long cherished thoughts and wishes. In the final soliloquy of the same scene, after he has received news of the fulfilment of part of the prophecy, his thoughts have shaped themselves already into dim resolutions, "whose murder is yet fantastical." If we compare these utterances with his outburst of joyous exultation in the seventh scene of the same act, when Lady Macbeth reveals to him the means of performing the crime meditated without fear of detection, thus removing from his soul the only remaining obstacle to its commission, there can remain no further doubt in our minds as to whom is to be imputed the original conception of the fearful deed. Nor will we be tempted to share the strange opinion of those who speak of Macbeth as the gallant hero nobly given, who is urged upon his fiendish course by the instigations of his wicked spouse. Still less will we fall into the error of those extremists who conceive Lady Macbeth as a modern Fury, as the incarnate principle of evil, as a creature destitute not only of all feminine, but almost of all human feeling. If the existence of such a woman were possible, a woman without a trace of modesty, pity, fear or remorse, Shakespeare would certainly have known that she was unfit for all poetic representation.

The careful student of this strange character, however, cannot fail to perceive that in its deepest foundation it rests upon a strong and unselfish devotion for the one she loves; a devotion which exceeds even that other towering passion of hers, ambition, for even her ambition relates not to herself, but finds its highest complement in his greatness and success. And so unselfish is it, that, as long as her reason holds out, she guards the fearful struggle in her own breast from all outward observers. To uphold her husband's vacillating merits, she

suppresses the surging floods of woe that begin to assail her own heart, and bids her eyes and her lips utter nothing but hopeful assurance. She thinks not of herself, she cares and fears only for him, who thinks of nobody but himself. Thus while she is perfect devotion, he is selfishness personified, who in the last act, when her sad end is announced to him, does not even bestow upon her memory the passing tribute of a sigh, but consoles himself with some fatalistic platitudes.

This fund of strong devotion, however, Lady Macbeth shares with the whole galaxy of Shakespeare's noble womanhood, and with true womanhood in general, but she stands apart by that unbounded ambition and by an equally boundless will-power. Whatever in her solitary musings her fancy has seized upon as the highest aim of her life, she has also the fearful courage to pursue with an undaunted tenacity of purpose. She is an enemy, therefore, to all irresolution, because she knows well that by half measures and lack of determination the prize of an evil deed is lost and yet the inner peace is not regained. What her imagination once has dwelled upon with ardent longing, after it has crystallized into a determined effort of the will, no afterthought can shake, no reflection arrest.

Lady Macbeth, however, in the economy of the play, has a twofold mission: first, to remove all scruples and resistance from the mind of Macbeth and to rescue him from the wavering impulses of his own heart, and secondly, to exhibit in her own sad doom the vindication of the moral order that stands above all human destiny. On the other hand, she is not to be imputed with first kindling in her noble lord that fatal ambition and that mad lust for kingly power. They have long lain lurking at the bottom of his soul, and need only the kindling spark of the Witches' prophecy to start them into full blaze which finally enwraps all other aspirations in its fiery embrace. Macbeth could not be the hero of the tragedy if his mind lacked all initiative and had to receive the inspiration of his ambition from his wife. On the other side, if her own part were so limited in its scope as to serve merely the purpose of impelling her husband unto his fell career, she would sink to the level of a secondary instrument in the development of the