Starting with the extract from Act 5 Scene 1, explore how Shakespeare presents the character of Lady Macbeth.

In ‘Macbeth’, Shakespeare uses Lady Macbeth as a catalyst, presenting her as the underlayer of choices that precede her mental capacity in the play, such as the murder of Duncan. As her character morphs throughout the play, from her dominating traits being the most evident onto her emasculating, callous traits, Shakespeare explores the importance of her character, and the consequences of when she absentmindedly refuses to accept and practise morality. In this extract, we see these consequences through her apparent insanity, as the mental toil and burden of her crime’s dawns on her. This opposes her character at the start of the play, where she was heavily perceived as being manipulative and domineering, further depicting her as the deuteragonist of the play. Therefore, rather than confining to Jacobean stereotypes as other characters – namely Macbeth at the start had done – Lady Macbeth largely opposes these standards. Men were automatically put on a pedestal within the Jacobean patriarchal society, hence assuming power within their relationships, a common practice which wasn’t apparent within Lady Macbeth’s relationship with her husband. Ultimately, Shakespeare, through the character of Lady Macbeth, explores the repercussions of going against your position in the Great Chain of Being, and describes the process of following ambition in the nonexistence of morality.

Lovely evaluation of LM’s character

At the start of the play, Shakespeare begins his depiction of Lady Macbeth by presenting her as the arguable antithesis to a Jacobean woman: unconventionally powerful in comparison to her husband’s authority and noticeably immoral. She describes Macbeth as being “too full o‘the’ milk of human kindness,” which alludes to her ruthless ambition, reiterated by the mimicry that is present through Macbeth’s major choice of committing regicide in Act 2; Lady Macbeth is the driving force behind her husband’s actions. In this quote, she is seen to criticise Macbeth for being kind, and is plausibly angry at him for not wanting to deviate from his morality, further suggesting how she is not restrained by the same morality that she wants him to rid of. This further demonstrates how she executes her actions irrespective of her role in the Great Chain of Being, further reiterated through her epithet
“human”. Lady Macbeth’s use of such disassociates her from the mortality associated to the concept of man, which, from the start of the play, creates an aggrandised perception of her, and how her already apparent immorality is characterised through her nature. Moreover, Lady Macbeth’s soliloquy further along Act 1 Scene 5, where she tells the spirits to “unsex her here” elucidates her wishes to eject herself of all emotion, which is further reinforced through “take my milk for gall”, also creating a lexical field of evil, evidently through her vast use of negative language and imagery. This further suggests how Lady Macbeth wants to be unburdened with feminine qualities, as she wants to rid herself of what facilitates life and replace it with toxic agents that destroy and ravage life. This arguably foreshadows her ultimate downfall, as the same way she destroyed life around her, she ended up ravaging her own. Thoughtful interpretation

Alternatively, the reversal of gender roles conveyed through Lady Macbeth in Act 1, Scene 5 would’ve been foreign to a woman conforming to stereotypes in the Jacobean Era, which shows them living a life subordinate to men and not being inclusive of men’s choices regarding politics and violence. This depiction of Lady Macbeth occurs early on in the play, staining a manipulative impression of her character on her audience, causing distain towards her character. Thoughtful analysis including assured understanding of context

Furthermore, Lady Macbeth’s apparent evil nature can be characterised with her relationship with the supernatural. In her soliloquy in Act 1, she speaks to the supernatural with a clear domineering and dominating tone, such as in “Come here you spirits…and fill me.” The ease with which Lady Macbeth addresses the supernatural, which was unbeknownst to even Macbeth and Banquo upon their first encounter, arguably outlines the similarities between Lady Macbeth and the supernatural: evil. Moreover, her increased use of imperative verbs ‘come’, and ‘fill’ suggests her devotion to the path of power; she is evidently keen, hence why she is trafficking with the supernatural. Lady Macbeth’s soliloquy also reflects some aspects of the witches, such as when she says “shall be”. This arguably foreshadows the evil and immorality that is beginning to consume her, that inevitably overpowers her as she weaves her own path to damnation. Alternatively, this depicts Lady Macbeth as virtually having become an Agent of Fate, much like the Three Witches. The same evil inside her, therefore, proceeds to convince Macbeth to murder a king whom he once had expansive respect for, again reflecting the accuracy of the early perception made of her. Lady Macbeth’s association with the supernatural
therefore violates her expected role as a domesticated and passive woman; she is immediately going against all socially expected norms. However, Lady Macbeth’s inability to execute the act of regicide – “hath he not resembled by father as he slept – conveys her emotional frontline. Shakespeare’s employment of this suggests the profound weakness that resides within this seemingly striking character, which perhaps was enough to toil the strict confines of her mentality. Perceptive and insightful! Although society expected women to be submissive to their husbands, Lady Macbeth not only subverts this idea of complete submission, but also decisively blurs gender boundaries. Therefore, the audience’s interest would’ve been sparked by not only her ‘masculine’ persona, but also by her similarity to the supernatural, presenting her as a direct abomination to the strict barriers that have been outlined by society.

Upon meeting her husband, the depth of Lady Macbeth’s manipulative aura is conveyed, proving that it is not only of surface, but pervades through her mannerisms and her interactions with others. She advises Macbeth to “look like the innocent flower but be the serpent under’t,” which reinforced her duplicitous nature, and also highlights the theme of appearances vs duality. Lady Macbeth, as opposed to discouraging her husband from following the evil pursuit of ambition, encourages him towards the path of deceit, proving that she is nothing less. She urges Macbeth to create a façade of conviviality, but under his guise his true nature should match that of a serpent. The use of zoomorphism ‘serpent’ has biblical connotations: a serpent tempts Eve to eat the forbidden fruit, leading to the downfall of humanity, similar to the ruination of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. Shakespeare arguably refers to Genesis to emphasise duplicity and evil, hence accentuating the power within Lady Macbeth’s manipulation. A serpent was also widely considered in the Jacobean Era to be an instrument of Satan, further reinforcing her association with the supernatural. Alternatively, the success of Lady Macbeth’s soliloquy where she tells the spirits to ‘unsex’ her has arguably influenced her, as she is now pointing out the feminine qualities within her husband but still appeals to the ‘valiant soldier’ within him by telling him to be the “serpent underneath”. This highlights the relationship between Lady Macbeth and her husband, yet shows the unrequited nature of it, as she is willing to gamble her relationships for a surge of power. As the Jacobean Era was heavily religious, Shakespeare’s use of allusion with ‘serpent’ would’ve struck fear amongst his audience, dragging Lady Macbeth’s character far beyond the point of being relatable,
therefore distancing her from humanity. Indeed - Why does Shakespeare do this?

However, Lady Macbeth is seen to oppose the early perceptions that were made of her, instead being portrayed as the plausible antithesis to her own demeanour. In the extract, there is a clear motif of disturbance, that permeates through both her angsty state of sleepwalking and her inability to function as she usually would. Well expressed observation about the way LM transforms from the start of the play! Lady Macbeth’s inability to sleep is arguably reflective of her guilt, despite her previous interactions with the supernatural and her graphic interactions with the concept of death. This ‘great perturbation in nature’ also coincides with the perturbation and disruption she caused within the Divine Right and Great Chain of Being, good! the mental burden of which is now described as being too much for her to bear. It is also an “accustomed action” for Lady Macbeth to “wash her hands” as she exclaims “Out, damned spot...”. This is a stark contrast to Act 2, Scene 2, where she informs Macbeth that “A little water clears us of this deed”. This projects the inability of even nature to battle with the crime that Lady Macbeth is associated with: the crime of regicide. The depth of her crimes is also reiterated through this scene, as the focus often shifts from her recounting Duncan’s murder, to Banquo’s murder, to Lady Macduff’s murder. This reiterates the intensity of the guilt that she is riddled with, that is also now becoming inescapable as she fails to battle it. Detailed exploration of extract The direct parallel and contrast between Lady Macbeth in Act 5 Scene 1 and in Act 2 Scene 2 suggests the longevity of the burden that she attempted to live down. Her suicide later on in the Act reiterates this, as this indicates how she was compelled to surrender to her inevitable damnation that she had paved the way for in the start. Therefore, Lady Macbeth’s peripeteia and hamartia is evidently reflective of the importance of natural order, Divine Right, and the Great Chain of Being. By not appealing to such, as Lady Macbeth did, was considered a great sin that was incomprehensible by man, hence the stark punishment that she was seen to endure. Shakespeare’s incorporation of such posed a warning to the Jacobean Era, a period of time where attempts and treason and alterations to the Great Chain were common. By choosing to graphically explain the downfall of the main characters in the play, Shakespeare warns anyone from the concept of such, especially following the Gunpowder Plot in 1606. thoughtful embedding of context here
Ultimately, Shakespeare connotes the intensity and depth of Lady Macbeth’s character by exploring the themes of appearances vs duality, the supernatural and gender roles. The development of Lady Macbeth reflects these themes, as she morphs from being the embodiment of evil to someone who crumbles under the weight of such. Her distressed state of mind at the end of the play is indicative of the consequences of someone who so strongly opposes morality and the confines of religion in the same, extreme manner that Lady Macbeth did, hence posing a lesson for a typical Jacobean audience.

Esha this is an outstanding response and analysis of LM. You thoroughly and thoughtfully explore the presentation and transformation of Lady Macbeth. You embed an assured and critical evaluation of the impact of context and the way LM would be perceived as a character at the time the play was written – well done!

Mark: 28/30 + 3/4

Consider:

- Ensure all written expression is 100% clear and accurate.
- Consider perceptions of LM to modern audiences