Activate: Starting with the extract from Act 5 Scene 1

Explore how Shakespeare presents the character of Lady Macbeth

Think about your understanding of female characters at the time.

Does this make Shakespeare cynical or optimistic about human nature?

The characters that Shakespeare created are almost always complex. Women in particular can be very complex. Women in the Jacobean era were subservient and below men in their society. The characters that Shakespeare creates in the play Macbeth are all very complex; especially the character of Lady Macbeth. Shakespeare presents Lady Macbeth as one which complex and changes dramatically throughout the play. At the beginning she desires to be manlier and is very manipulative to her husband; however at the end she acts frightened, guilty and worries about unchecked power.

Towards the beginning of the play Lady Macbeth is a woman, but she longs to have the characteristics of a man. She defies the Jacobean fear of witchcraft and pleads with the spirits, "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! make thick my blood;/Stop up the access and passage to remorse". Lady Macbeth does not want to have the qualities of a woman because she wants to be bold like a man which goes against the feminine ideal and replaces it with lethal ambition. When Lady Macbeth says, "make thick my blood", this suggests that because blood is vital to take care of the body feeding her heart which acts a symbol of her sensitivities and empathy for others; by asking the spirits to thicken her blood she wants to become desensitised so that she can be more determined in helping kill Duncan. Shakespeare may have done this in order to shock the audience because they would never have seen such a multifaceted, powerful women; capable of thinking and planning death and evil deeds.
Further into the play Lady Macbeth is desperate to persuade Macbeth to follow through with the evil plan, so much so that she becomes very manipulative. In Act 3 Scene 2 Shakespeare shows how dominant Lady Macbeth is over her husband by changing the line structure and iambic pentameter; Shakespeare allows Lady Macbeth or end Macbeth’s iambic pentameter, twice; highlighting her ability to overpower her husband. Lady Macbeth interrupts her husband, saying, “you must leave this”. This imperative suggests that she is demanding and dominant over her husband. The word ‘must’ is particularly striking because it highlights her demanding tone. In the Jacobean era, a wife would not be allowed to argue with her husband, however Lady Macbeth makes her husband kill the king and commit regicide which suggests that she has an insatiable desire for power and she won’t stop until she gets what she wants. Indeed – avoid over simplistic generalisations about women in the Jacobean era.

The extract shows a great change that occurs in Lady Macbeth’s character where she appears to get ill and continues to worsen, going in and out of sleep and having delirious visions which fills her with fear. The doctor closely monitors Lady Macbeth, which was groundbreaking at the time (studying psychological and subconscious), and the gentlewoman tells him, “she has light by her/continually; ‘tis her command”. This may suggest that she that she is afraid of the dark; afraid of evil and needs the light (goodness) near her ‘continually’. Her mind is affected by their action and her conscious is getting the better of her. The phrase ‘tis her command’ is particularly interesting because although she is suffering mentally she is still demanding and strong in ordering that the light must be near her all the time. You must contextualise quotes. This is an interesting contrast in her emotional state; a juxtaposition of fear and control just emphasises her confusing and conflicting state of mind. Shakespeare may have done this to suggest that those who willingly joined in and believed in witchcraft may have had some disability causing them to join in these criminal activities during this time. How does this link to Lady Macbeth?

Lady Macbeth’s state of mind is further deteriorating with her hallucinations linked to her guilt. In the extract her speech is fragmented and confusing to the audience especially when she says, “Out, damned spot! out, I say!” This gives the audience the impression of madness a psychological trauma. Good! These short,
assertive bursts of emotions are monosyllabic exclamations which emphasises panic sound of the ‘t’ in the ‘out’ and ‘spot’. Shakespeare was particularly brilliant in conveying her guilt over what she helped do because this mirrored the actions of Macbeth, after he murders Duncan and contradicts how calm Lady Macbeth was when she washed her hands after helping with the daggers. What does this suggest about the character of LM and the way her actions have caught up with her resulting her descent into madness?

Although Lady Macbeth appears to be incoherent and crazy at this point of the play she is still able to consider the consequences of unchecked powers. In her fit of madness she considers, “What need we/fear who knows it, when none can call our power to/account? Yet who would have thought the old man/to have had so much blood in him”. This suggests that it was the fact that there was no one to govern Macbeth’s actions which resulted in them both believing that they could get away with whatever they wanted in the pursuit of power. She says this, but it is clear that she does fear the consequences of her actions, yet the word ‘account’ may suggest or foreshadow that there are those who will judge their actions; in her case, God and in Macbeth’s case, Malcolm and Macduff. Shakespeare is trying to make a point that what Lady Macbeth says here that there must be people that watch over and govern people with unlimited power because with so much power there is a danger that they may abuse that power. Excellent! This is even relevant in modern times; with leaders of today.

To conclude, Lady Macbeth is a mysterious and complex character who starts out as cunning and bold, but ends the play as a scared, regretful woman that questions her and her husband’s quest for power. Her character leaves the audience questioning many facets of her personality and motives. What seems clear is that she is not the typical Jacobean woman. Macbeth is the man of their relationship, but he is the one that needs Lady Macbeth’s praise and acceptance; this is against the stereotype of the typical wife, which is to watch the kids, stay at home, and for only her husband to succeed in his career, which implies Lady Macbeth is defiantly not the normal Jacobean woman. Shakespeare makes his audience think that she is a one-dimensional character full of malice; however Shakespeare subverts expectations when he shows cracks in Lady Macbeth’s heartless persona. I think this would
captivate the Jacobean audience because they probably would never have thought that a woman could be powerful enough to act like Lady Macbeth. Most of the Jacobean audience were male and they would be surprised and possibly uncomfortable because this character was so unusual. They may have even disliked and distrust her, however in modern times this character may appear to current audiences seeing her as an empowered famine figure that can think and act for herself. And perhaps pity her as she faces the consequences of her actions. I think that Shakespeare was being incredibly perceptive of women and perhaps trying to tell his audience that women are much more complex than most of the men in the society though. Not quite! Shakespeare is a master writer and able to portray complex characters and intrigue audiences through the range of possibilities of the ways in which characters can be subverted and manipulated from expected stereotypical roles prescribed by society. His would make me think that Shakespeare is, although progressive, cynical about human nature because he may think complex women are dangerous and could easily lead to the downfall of men. Indeed! Consider how the context (attitudes to strong women and women who did not ‘fit’ the stereotypical roles for Jacobean women) would have influenced Shakespeare and his audience’s perceptions of Lady Macbeth.

Mark: 22/30 + 3/4 = 25/34

Oba, you have developed some thoughtful and insightful interpretations on the character of Lady Macbeth. You consider the context and make some interesting links about the influence of this in the way Lady Macbeth is presented.

To improve:
- Ensure you avoid generalisations about male/female roles during the Jacobean era. Rather, be suggestive as to how your knowledge of context could possibly influence Shakespeare’s presentation of characters.
- Think about society’s perceptions of women gaining power e.g. Elizabeth I and witches!
- Ensure your essay conveys a clear sense of direction throughout.