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CHARACTERISTICS
OF
WOMEN,
MORAL, POETICAL, AND HISTORICAL.

With Fifty Vignette Etchings.

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FEMALE SOVEREIGNS," &c.

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<vignette -- Lady Macbeth>

LADY MACBETH.

I doubt whether the epithet *historical* can properly apply to the character of Lady Macbeth; for though the subject of the play be taken from history, we never think of her with any reference to historical associations, as we do with regard to Constance, Volumnia, Katherine of Arragon, and others. I remember reading some critique, in

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which Lady Macbeth was styled the "Scottish

queen;" and methought the title, as applied to *her*, sounded like a vulgarism. It appears that the real wife of Macbeth, -- she who lives only in the obscure record of an obscure age, bore the very unmusical appellation of Graoch, and was instigated to the murder of Duncan, not only by ambition, but by motives of vengeance. She was the granddaughter of Kenneth the Fourth, killed in 1003, fighting against Malcolm the Second, the father of Duncan. Macbeth reigned over Scotland from the year 1039 to 1056: -- but what is all this to the purpose? The sternly magnificent creation of the poet stands before us independent of all these aids of fancy: she is Lady Macbeth; as such she lives, she reigns, and is immortal in the world <>to imagination. What earthly title could add to her grandeur? what human record or attestation strengthen our impression of her reality?

Characters in history move before us like a procession of figures in *basso relievo*: we see one side only, that which the artist chose to exhibit to us;

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the rest is sunk in the block: the same characters in Shakspeare are like the statues *cut out* of the block, fashioned, finished, tangible in every part: we may consider them under every aspect, we may examine them on every side. As the classical times, when the garb did not make the man, were peculiarly favourable to the developement and delineation of the human form, and have handed down to us the purest models of strength and grace -- so the times in which Shakspeare lived were favourable to the vigorous delineation of natural character. Society was not then one vast conventional masquerade of manners. In his revelations, the accidental circumstances are to the individual character, what the drapery of the antique statue is to the statue itself; it is evident, that, though adapted to each other, and studied relatively, they were also studied separately. We trace through the folds the fine and true proportions of the figure beneath: they seem and are independent of each other to the practised eye, though carved together from the same enduring substance; at once perfectly distinct and eternally inseparable. In history

we can but study character in relation to events, to situation and circumstances, which disguise and encumber it: we are left to imagine, to infer, what certain people must have been, from the manner in which they have acted or suffered. Shakspeare and nature bring us back to the true order of things; and showing us what the human being *is*, enable us to judge of the possible as well as the positive result in acting and suffering. Here, instead of judging the individual by his actions, we are enabled to judge of actions by a reference to the individual. When we can carry this power into the experience of real life, we shall perhaps be more just to one another, and not consider ourselves aggrieved because we cannot gather figs from thistles and grapes from thorns.

In the play or poem of Macbeth, the interest of the story is so engrossing, the events so rapid and so appalling, the accessories so sublimely conceived and so skilfully combined, that it is difficult to detach Lady Macbeth from the dramatic situation, or consider her apart from the terrible associations of our first and earliest impressions. As the vulgar

idea of a Juliet -- that all beautiful and heaven-gifted child of the south -- is merely a love-sick girl in white satin, so the common-place idea of Lady Macbeth, though endowed with the rarest powers, the loftiest energies, and the profoundest affections, is nothing but a fierce, cruel woman, brandishing a couple of daggers, and inciting her husband to butcher a poor old king.

Even those who reflect more deeply are apt to consider rather the mode in which a certain character is manifested, than the combination of abstract qualities making up that individual human being; so what should be last, is first; effects are mistaken for causes, qualities are confounded with their results, and the perversion of what is essentially good with the operation of positive evil. Hence it is, that those who can feel and estimate the magnificent conception and poetical development of the character, have overlooked the grand moral lesson it conveys; they forget that the crime of Lady Macbeth terrifies us in proportion as we

sympathize with her; and that this sympathy is in proportion to the degree of pride, passion, and

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intellect, we may ourselves possess. It is good to behold and to tremble at the possible result of the noblest faculties uncontrolled or perverted. True it is, that the ambitious women of these civilized times do not murder sleeping kings: but are there, therefore, no Lady Macbeths in the world? no women who, under the influence of a diseased or excited appetite for power or distinction, would sacrifice the happiness of a daughter, the fortunes of a husband, the principles of a son, and peril their own souls?

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The character of Macbeth is considered as one of the most complex in the whole range of Shakspeare's dramatic creations. He is represented in the course of the action under such a variety of aspects; the good and evil qualities of his mind are so poised and blended, and instead of being gradually and successively developed, evolve themselves so like shifting lights and shadows playing over the "unstable waters," that his character has afforded a continual and interesting subject of ana-

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lysis and contemplation. None of Shakspeare's personages have been treated of more at large; none have been more minutely criticised and profoundly examined. A single feature in his character -- the question, for instance, as to whether his courage be personal or constitutional, or excited by mere desperation -- has been canvassed, asserted, and refuted, in two masterly essays.

On the other hand, the character of Lady Macbeth resolves itself into few and simple elements. The grand features of her character are so distinctly and prominently marked, that though acknowledged to be one of the poet's most sublime creations she has been passed over with comparatively few words: generally speaking, the commentators seem to have considered Lady Macbeth rather with reference to her husband, and as influencing the action of the drama, than as an individual conception of amazing power, poetry,

and beauty: or if they do individualize her, it is ever with those associations of scenic representation which Mrs. Siddons has identified with the

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character. Those who have been accustomed to see it arrayed in the form and lineaments of that magnificent woman, and developed with her wonder-working powers, seem satisfied to leave it there, as if nothing more could be said or added./*

But the generation which beheld Mrs. Siddons in her glory is passing away, and we are again left to our own unassisted feelings, or to all the satisfaction to be derived from the sagacity of critics and the reflections of commentators. Let us turn to them for a moment.

Dr. Johnson, who seems to have regarded her as nothing better than a kind of ogress, tells us

/* Mrs. Siddons left among her papers an analysis of the character of Lady Macbeth, which I have never seen; but I have heard her say, that after playing the part for thirty years, she never read it over without discovering in it something new. She had an idea that Lady Macbeth must from her Celtic origin have been a small, fair, blue-eyed woman. Bonduca, Fredegonde, Brunehault, and other Amazons of the gothic ages, were of this complexion; yet I cannot help fancying Lady Macbeth dark, like Black Agnes of Douglas -- a sort of Lady Macbeth in her way.

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in so many words that "Lady Macbeth is merely detested." Schlegel dismisses her in haste, as a species of female fury. In the two essays on Macbeth already mentioned, she is passed over with one or two slight allusions. The only justice that has yet been done to her is by Hazlitt, in the "Characters of Shakspeare's Plays." Nothing can be finer than his remarks as far as they go, but his plan did not allow him sufficient space to work out his own conception of the character, with the minuteness it requires. All that he says is just in sentiment, and most eloquent in the expression; but in leaving some of the finest points altogether untouched, he has also left us in doubt whether he even felt or perceived them; and this masterly criticism stops short of the *whole* truth -- it is a little superficial, and a little too harsh./*

In the mind of Lady Macbeth, ambition is re-

presented as the ruling motive, an intense overmastering passion, which is gratified at the expense of every just and generous principle, and

/* The German critic Tieck, also leans to this harsher opinion, judging rather from the manner in which the character is usually played in Germany than from its intrinsic and poetical construction. <add 1833, om 1836>

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every feminine feeling. In the pursuit of her object, she is cruel, treacherous, and daring. She is doubly, trebly dyed in guilt and blood; for the murder she instigates is rendered more frightful by disloyalty and ingratitude, and by the violation of all the most sacred claims of kindred and hospitality. When her husband's more kindly nature shrinks from the perpetration of the deed of horror, she, like an evil genius, whispers him on to his damnation. The full measure of her wickedness is never disguised, the magnitude and atrocity of her crime is never extenuated, forgotten, or forgiven, in the whole course of the play. Our judgment is not bewildered, nor our moral feeling insulted, by the sentimental jumble of great crimes and dazzling virtues, after the fashion of the German school, and of some admirable writers of our own time. Lady Macbeth's amazing power of intellect, her inexorable determination of purpose, her superhuman strength of nerve, render her as fearful in herself as her deeds are hateful; yet she is not a mere monster of depravity, with whom we have nothing in common, nor a meteor

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whose destroying path we watch in ignorant affright and amaze. She is a terrible impersonation of evil passions and mighty powers, never so far removed from our own nature as to be cast beyond the pale of our sympathies; for the woman herself remains a woman to the last -- still linked with her sex and with humanity.

This impression is produced partly by the essential truth in the conception of the character, and partly by the manner in which it is evolved; by a combination of minute and delicate touches, in some instances by speech, in others by silence: at one time by what is revealed, at another by what

we are left to infer. As in real life, we perceive distinctions in character we cannot always explain, and receive impressions for which we cannot always account, without going back to the beginning of an acquaintance and recalling many and trifling circumstances -- looks, and tones, and words: thus to explain that hold which Lady Macbeth, in the midst of all her atrocities, still keeps upon our feelings, it is necessary to trace minutely the action of the play, as far as she is con-

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cerned in it, from its very commencement to its close.

We must then bear in mind, that the first idea of murdering Duncan is not suggested by Lady Macbeth to her husband: it springs within *his* mind, and is revealed to us, before his first interview with his wife, -- before she is introduced or even alluded to.

MACBETH.

This supernatural soliciting
Cannot be ill; cannot be good. If ill,
Why hath it given me earnest of success,
Commencing in a truth? I am thane of Cawdor --
If good, why do I yield to that suggestion,
Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair,
And make my seated heart knock at my ribs,
Against the use of nature?

It will be said, that the same "horrid suggestion" presents itself spontaneously to her, on the reception of his letter; or rather that the letter itself acts upon her mind as the prophecy of the Weird Sisters on the mind of her husband, kindling the latent passion for empire into a quench-

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less flame. We are prepared to see the train of evil, first lighted by hellish agency, extend itself to *her* through the medium of her husband; but we are spared the more revolting idea that it originated with her. The guilt is thus more equally divided than we should suppose, when we hear people pitying "the noble nature of Macbeth," bewildered and goaded on to crime, solely or chiefly by the instigation of his wife.

It is true that she afterwards appears the more active agent of the two; but it is less through her pre-eminence in wickedness than through her superiority of intellect. The eloquence -- the fierce, fervid eloquence with which she bears down the relenting and reluctant spirit of her husband, the dexterous sophistry with which she wards off his objections, her artful and affected doubts of his courage -- the sarcastic manner in which she lets fall the word coward -- a word which no man can endure from another, still less from a woman, and least of all from a woman he loves -- and the bold address with which she removes all ob-

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stacles, silences all arguments, overpowers all scruples, and marshals the way before him, absolutely make us shrink before the commanding intellect of the woman, with a terror in which interest and admiration are strangely mingled.

LADY MACBETH.

He has almost supp'd: why have you left the chamber?

MACBETH.

Hath he ask'd for me?

LADY MACBETH.

Know you not he has?

MACBETH.

We will proceed no further in this business:
He hath honour'd 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.

LADY MACBETH.

Was the hope drunk,
Wherein you dress'd 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 valour,

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As thou art in desire? Would'st 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,
Like the poor cat i' the adage?

MACBETH.

Pr'ythee peace:

I dare do all that may become a man;
Who dares do more is none.

LADY MACBETH.

What beast was it then,
That made you break this enterprize to me?
Where you durst do it, there you were a man;
And to be more than what you were, you would
Be so much more the man. Nor time nor place
Did then adhere, and yet you would make both;
They have made themselves, and that their fitness now
Does unmake you. I have given suck, and know
How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me:
I would, while it were smiling in my face,
Have pluck'd my nipple from his boneless gums,
And dash'd the brains out, had I so sworn, as you
Have done to this.

MACBETH.

If we should fail, ----

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LADY MACBETH.

We fail./*

But screw your courage to the sticking-place,
And we'll not fail.

Again, in the murdering scene, the obdurate inflexibility of purpose with which she drives on Macbeth to the execution of their project, and her masculine indifference to blood and death, would inspire unmitigated disgust and horror, but for the involuntary consciousness that it is produced rather by the exertion of a strong power over herself, than by absolute depravity of disposition and ferocity of temper. This impression

/* In her impersonation of the part of Lady Macbeth, Mrs. Siddons adopted successively three different intonations in giving the words *we fail*. At first as a quick contemptuous interrogation -- "*we fail?*" Afterwards with the note of admiration -- *we fail!* and an accent of indignant astonishment, laying the principal emphasis on the word *we* -- *we fail!* Lastly, she fixed on what I am convinced is the true reading -- *we fail.* with the simple period, modulating her voice to a deep, low, resolute tone, which settled the issue at once -- as though she had said, "if we fail, why then we fail, and all is over." This is consistent with the dark fatalism of the character and the sense of the line following, and the effect was sublime, almost awful.

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of her character is brought home at once to our very hearts with the most profound knowledge of the springs of nature within us, the most subtle mastery over their various operations, and a feeling

of dramatic effect not less wonderful. 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. Thus when she reproaches her husband for his weakness --

From this time,
Such I account thy love!

Again,

Come to my woman's breasts,
And take my milk for gall, ye murdering ministers,
That no compunctious visitings of nature
Shake my fell purpose, &c.

I have given suck, and know how tender 'tis
To love the babe that milks me, &c.

And lastly, in the moment of extremest horror

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comes that unexpected touch of feeling, so startling, yet so wonderfully true to nature --

Had he not resembled my father as he slept,
I had done it!

Thus in one of Weber's or Beethoven's grand symphonies, some unexpected soft minor chord or passage will steal on the ear, heard amid the magnificent crash of harmony, making the blood pause, and filling the eye with unbidden tears.

It is particularly observable, that in Lady Macbeth's concentrated, strong nerved ambition, the ruling passion of her mind, there is yet a touch of womanhood: she is ambitious less for herself than for her husband. It is fair to think this, because we have no reason to draw any other inference either from her words or actions. In her famous soliloquy, after reading her husband's letter, she does not once refer to herself. It is of him she thinks: she wishes to see her husband on the throne, and to place the sceptre within *his* grasp. The strength of her affections adds strength to her ambition. Although in the old story of Boethius we are told that the wife of Macbeth

"burned with unquenchable desire to bear the name of queen," yet in the aspect under which Shakspeare has represented the character to us, the selfish part of this ambition is kept out of sight. We must remark also, that in Lady Macbeth's reflections on her husband's character, and on that milkiness of nature, which she fears "may impede him from the golden round," there is no indication of female scorn: there is exceeding pride, but no egotism in the sentiment or the expression; -- no want of wifely and womanly respect and love for *him*, but on the contrary, a sort of unconsciousness of her own mental superiority, which she betrays rather than asserts, as interesting in itself as it is most admirably conceived and delineated.

Glamis thou art, and Cawdor; and shalt be
 What thou art promis'd: -- Yet do I fear thy nature;
 It is too full o' the milk of human kindness,
 To catch the nearest way. Thou would'st be great;
 Art not without ambition; but without
 The illness that attends it. What thou would'st highly,
 That would'st thou holily; would'st not play false,

And yet would'st wrongly win: thou'dst have, great Glamis,
 That which cries, *This thou must do, if thou have it;*
And that which rather thou doest fear to do,
Than wishest should be undone. Hie thee hither,
 That I may pour my spirits in thine ear,
 And chastise with the valour of my tongue
 All that impedes thee from the golden round,
 Which fate and metaphysical/* aid doth seem
 To have thee crowned withal.

Nor is there anything vulgar in her ambition: as the strength of her affections lends to it something profound and concentrated, so her splendid imagination invests the object of her desire with its own radiance. We cannot trace in her grand and capacious mind that it is the mere baubles and trappings of royalty which dazzle and allure her: hers is the sin of the "star-bright apostate," and she plunges with her husband into the abyss of guilt, to procure for "all their days and nights sole sovereign sway and masterdom." She revels, she luxuriates in her dream of power. She reaches at the golden diadem, which is to sear her brain;

/ Metaphysical* is here used in the sense of spiritual or preternatural.

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she perils life and soul for its attainment, with an enthusiasm as perfect, a faith as settled, as that of the martyr, who sees at the stake, heaven and its crowns of glory opening upon him.

Great Glamis! worthy Cawdor!
Greater than both, by the all-hail *hereafter*!
Thy letters have transported me beyond
This ignorant present, and I feel now
The future in the instant!

This is surely the very rapture of ambition! and those who have heard Mrs. Siddons pronounce the word *hereafter*, cannot forget the look, the tone, which seemed to give her auditors a glimpse of that awful *future*, which she, in her prophetic fury, beholds upon the instant.

But to return to the text before us: Lady Macbeth having proposed the object to herself and arrayed it with an ideal glory, fixes her eye steadily upon it, soars far above all womanish feelings and scruples to attain it, and <>stoops upon her victim with the strength and velocity of a vulture; but having committed unflinchingly the

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crime necessary for the attainment of her purpose, she stops there. After the murder of Duncan, we see Lady Macbeth, during the rest of the play, occupied in supporting the nervous weakness and sustaining the fortitude of her husband; for instance, Macbeth is at one time on the verge of frenzy, between fear and horror, and it is clear that if she loses her self-command, both must perish --

MACBETH.

One cried, God help us! and Amen! the other,
As they had seen me with these hangman's hands
Listening their fear, I could not say *Amen*!
When they did cry *God bless us*!

LADY MACBETH.

Consider it not so deeply!

MACBETH.

But wherefore could not I pronounce amen?
I had most need of blessing, and amen
Stuck in my throat.

LADY MACBETH.

These deeds must not be thought on
After these ways: so, it will make us mad.

MACBETH.

Methought I heard a voice cry
"Sleep no more." &c. &c.

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LADY MACBETH.

What do you mean? who was it that thus cried?
Why, worthy Thane,
You do unbend your noble strength to think
So brainsickly of things: -- Go, get some water, &c. &c.

Afterwards in act iii. she is represented as muttering to herself,

Nought's had, all's spent,
When our desire is got without content.

yet immediately addresses her moody and conscience-stricken husband --

How now, my lord? why do you keep alone,
Of sorriest fancies your companions making;
Using those thoughts, which should indeed have died
With them they think on? Things without remedy
Should be without regard; what's done, is done.

But she is nowhere represented as urging him on to new crimes; so far from it, that when Macbeth darkly hints his purposed assassination of Banquo, and she inquires his meaning, he replies,

Be innocent of the knowledge, dearest chuck,
Till thou approve the deed.

The same may be said of the destruction of Macduff's family. Every one must perceive how our detestation of the woman had been increased,

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if she had been placed before us as suggesting and abetting those additional cruelties into which Macbeth is hurried by his mental cowardice.

If my feeling of Lady Macbeth's character be just to the conception of the poet, then she is one who could steel herself to the commission of a crime from necessity and expediency, and be daringly wicked for a great end, but not likely to

perpetrate gratuitous murders from any vague or selfish fears. I do not mean to say that the perfect confidence existing between herself and Macbeth could possibly leave her in ignorance of his actions or designs: that heart-broken and shuddering allusion to the murder of Lady Macduff (in the sleeping scene) proves the contrary:

The thane of Fife had a wife; where is she now?

But she is no where brought before us in immediate connexion with these horrors, and we are spared any flagrant proof of her participation in them. This may not strike us at first, but most undoubtedly has an effect on the general bearing of the character, considered as a whole.

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Another more obvious and pervading source of interest arises from that bond of entire affection and confidence which, through the whole of this dreadful tissue of crime and its consequences, unites Macbeth and his wife; claiming from us an involuntary respect and sympathy, and shedding a softening influence over the whole tragedy. Macbeth leans upon her strength, trusts in her fidelity, and throws himself on her tenderness.

O full of scorpions is my mind, dear wife!

She sustains him, calms him, soothes him --

Come on;

Gentle my lord, sleek o'er your rugged looks;
Be bright and jovial 'mong your guests to-night.

The endearing epithets, the terms of fondness in which he addresses her, and the tone of respect she invariably maintains towards him, even when most exasperated by his vacillation of mind and his brain-sick terrors, have by the very force of contrast a powerful effect on the fancy.

By these tender redeeming touches we are im-

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pressed with a feeling that Lady Macbeth's influence over the affections of her husband, as a wife and a woman, is at least equal to her power over

him as a superior mind. Another thing has always struck me. During the supper scene, in which Macbeth is haunted by the spectre of the murdered Banquo, and his reason appears unsettled by the extremity of his horror and dismay, her indignant rebuke, her low whispered remonstrance, the sarcastic emphasis with which she combats his sick fancies, and endeavours to recall him to himself, have an intenseness, a severity, a bitterness, which makes the blood creep.

LADY MACBETH.

Are you a man?

MACBETH.

Ay, and a bold one, that dare look on that
Which might appal the devil.

LADY MACBETH.

O proper stuff!

This is the very painting of your fear:
This is the air-drawn dagger, which you said
Led you to Duncan. O, these flaws and starts

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(Impostors to true fear) would well become
A woman's story at a winter's fire,
Authoriz'd by her grandam! Shame itself!
Why do you make such faces? When all's done
You look but on a stool.
What! quite unmann'd in folly?

Yet when the guests are dismissed, and they are left alone, she says no more, and not a syllable of reproach or scorn escapes her: a few words in submissive reply to his questions, and an entreaty to seek repose, are all she permits herself to utter. There is a touch of pathos and of tenderness in this silence which has always affected me beyond expression: it is one of the most masterly and most beautiful traits of character in the whole play.

Lastly, it is clear that in a mind constituted like that of Lady Macbeth, and not utterly depraved and hardened by the habit of crime, conscience must wake some time or other, and bring with it remorse closed by despair, and despair by death. This great moral retribution was to be displayed to us -- but how? Lady Macbeth is

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not a woman to start at shadows; she mocks at air-drawn daggers; she sees no imagined spectres rise from the tomb to appal or accuse her./* The towering bravery of *her* mind disdains the visionary terrors which haunt her weaker husband. We know, or rather we feel, that she who could give a voice to the most direful intent, and call on the spirits that wait on mortal thoughts to "unsex her," and "stop up all access and passage of remorse" -- to that remorse would have given nor tongue nor sound; and that rather than have uttered a complaint, she would have held her breath and died. To have given her a confidant, though in the partner of her guilt, would have been a degrading resource, and have disappointed and enfeebled all our previous impressions of her character; yet justice is

/* Mrs. Siddons, I believe, had an idea that Lady Macbeth beheld the spectre of Banquo in the supper scene, and that her self-control and presence of mind enabled her to surmount her consciousness of the ghastly presence. This would be superhuman, and I do not see that either the character or the text bear out this supposition.

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to be done, and we are to be made acquainted with that which the woman herself would have suffered a thousand deaths of torture rather than have betrayed. In the sleeping scene we have a glimpse into the depths of that inward hell: the seared brain and broken heart are laid bare before us in the helplessness of slumber. By a judgment the most sublime ever imagined, yet the most unforced, natural, and inevitable, the sleep of her who murdered sleep is no longer repose, but a condensation of resistless horrors which the prostrate intellect and the powerless will can neither baffle nor repel. We shudder and are satisfied; yet our human sympathies are again touched: we rather sigh over the ruin than exult in it; and after watching her through this wonderful scene with a sort of fascination, we dismiss the unconscious, helpless, despair-stricken murderess, with a feeling which Lady Macbeth, in her waking strength, with all her awe-commanding powers about her, could never have excited.

It is here especially we perceive that sweetness of nature which in Shakspeare went hand in hand

with his astonishing powers. He never confounds that line of demarcation which eternally separates good from evil, yet he never places evil before us without exciting in some way a consciousness of the opposite good which shall balance and relieve it.

I do deny that he has represented in Lady Macbeth a woman "*naturally cruel*,"/* "*invariably savage*,"/† or endued with "*pure demoniac firmness*."/‡ If ever there could have existed a woman to whom such phrases could apply -- a woman without touch of modesty, pity, or fear, -- Shakspeare knew that a thing so monstrous was unfit for all the purposes of poetry. If Lady Macbeth had been *naturally* cruel, she needed not so solemnly to have abjured all pity, and called on the spirits that wait on mortal thoughts to *unsex* her; nor would she have been loved to excess by a man of Macbeth's character; for it is the sense of intellectual energy and strength of will overpowering

/* Cumberland. /† Professor Richardson.
/‡ <>Forster's Essays.

her feminine nature, which draws from him that burst of intense admiration --

Bring forth men children only
For thy undaunted metal should compose
Nothing but males.

If she had been *invariably* savage, her love would not have comforted and sustained her husband in his despair, nor would her uplifted dagger have been arrested by a dear and venerable image rising between her soul and its fell purpose. If endued with *pure demoniac firmness*, her woman's nature would not, by the reaction, have been so horribly avenged, -- she would not have died of remorse and despair.

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We cannot but observe that through the whole of the dialogue appropriated to Lady Macbeth, there is something very peculiar and characteristic in the turn of expression: her compliments, when she is playing the hostess or the queen, are elabo-

rately elegant and verbose; but, when in earnest, she speaks in short energetic sentences -- sometimes

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abrupt, but always full of meaning; her thoughts are rapid and clear, her expressions forcible, and the imagery like sudden flashes of lightning: all the foregoing extracts exhibit this, but I will venture one more, as an immediate illustration.

MACBETH.

My dearest love,
Duncan comes here to-night.

LADY MACBETH.

And when goes hence?

MACBETH.

To-morrow, -- as he purposes.

LADY MACBETH.

O never

Shall sun that morrow see!
Thy face, my Thane, is as a book, where men
May read strange matters. To beguile the time:
Look like the time, bear welcome in your eye,
Your hand, your tongue; look like the innocent flower,
But be the serpent under it.

What would not the firmness, the self-command, the enthusiasm, the intellect, the ardent affections of this woman have performed, if properly directed?

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but the object being unworthy of the effort, the end is disappointment, despair, and death.

The power of religion could alone have controlled such a mind; but it is the misery of a very proud, strong, and gifted spirit, without sense of religion, that instead of looking upward to find a superior, it looks round and sees all things as subject to itself. Lady Macbeth is placed in a dark, ignorant, iron age; her powerful intellect is slightly tinged with its credulity and superstition, but she has no religious feeling to restrain the force of will. She is a stern fatalist in principle and action -- "what is done, is done," and would be done over again under the same circumstances; her remorse is without repentance, or any reference to an offended Deity: it arises from the pang of a

wounded conscience, the recoil of the violated feelings of nature: it is the horror of the past, not the terror of the future; the torture of self-condemnation, not the fear of judgment; it is strong as her soul, deep as her guilt, fatal as her resolve, and terrible as her crime.

If it should be objected to this view of Lady

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Macbeth's character, that it engages our sympathies in behalf of a perverted being -- and that to leave her so strong a power upon our feelings in the midst of such supreme wickedness, involves a moral wrong, I can only reply in the words of Dr. Channing, that "in this and the like cases our interest fastens on what is *not* evil in the character -- that there is something kindling and ennobling in the consciousness, however awakened, of the energy which resides in mind: and many a virtuous man has borrowed new strength from the force, constancy, and dauntless courage of evil agents."/*

This is true; and might he not have added that many a powerful and gifted spirit has learnt humility and self-government, from beholding how far the energy which resides in mind may be degraded and perverted?

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In general, when a woman is introduced into a

/* See Dr. Channing's remarks on Satan, in his essay "On the Character and Writings of Milton." -- Works, p. 131.

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tragedy to be the presiding genius of evil in herself, or the cause of evil to others, she is either too feebly or too darkly portrayed; either crime is heaped on crime, and horror on horror, till our sympathy is lost in incredulity, or the stimulus is sought in unnatural or impossible situations, or in situations that ought to be impossible, (as in the Myrrha or the Cenci) or the character is enfeebled by a mixture of degrading propensities and sexual weakness, as in Vittoria Corombona. But Lady Macbeth, though so supremely wicked, and so consistently feminine, is still kept aloof from all base alloy. When Shakspeare created a female character purely detestable, he made her an ac-

cessary, never a principal. Thus Regan and Goneril are two powerful sketches of selfishness, cruelty, and ingratitude; we abhor them whenever we see or think of them, but we think very little about them, except as necessary to the action of the drama. They are to cause the madness of Lear, and to call forth the filial devotion of Cordelia, and their depravity is forgotten in its effects.

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A comparison has been made between Lady Macbeth and the Greek Clytemnestra in the Agamemnon of Eschylus. The Clytemnestra of Sophocles is something more in Shakspeare's spirit, for she is something less impudently atrocious; but, considered as a woman and an individual, would any one compare this shameless adulteress, cruel murderess, and unnatural mother, with Lady Macbeth? Lady Macbeth herself would certainly shrink from the approximation./*

/* The vision of Clytemnestra the night before she is murdered, in which she dreams that she has given birth to a dragon, and that in laying it to her bosom, it draws blood instead of milk, has been greatly admired, but I suppose that those who most admire it would not place it in comparison with Lady Macbeth's sleeping scene. Lady Ashton, in *The Bride of Lammermoor*, is a domestic Lady Macbeth; but the developement being in the narrative, not the dramatic form, it follows hence that we have a masterly portrait, not a complete individual: and the relief of poetry and sympathy being wanting, the detestation she inspires is so un-mixed as to be almost intolerable: consequently the character considered in relation to the other personages of the story, is perfect; but abstractedly, it is imperfect; a basso relievo -- not a statue.

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The *Electra* of Sophocles comes nearer to Lady Macbeth as a poetical conception, with this strong distinction, that she commands more respect and esteem, and less sympathy. The murder in which she participates is ordained by the oracle -- is an act of justice, and therefore less a murder than a sacrifice. *Electra* is drawn with magnificent simplicity, and intensity of feeling and purpose, but there is a want of light, and shade, and relief. Thus the scene in which Orestes stabs his mother within her chamber, and she is heard pleading for mercy, while *Electra* stands forward listening exultingly to her mother's cries, and urging her brother to strike again, "another blow! another!"

&c. is terribly fine, but the horror is too shocking, too *physical* -- if I may use such an expression: it will not surely bear a comparison with the murdering scene in Macbeth, where the exhibition of various passions -- the irresolution of Macbeth, the bold determination of his wife, the deep suspense, the rage of the elements without, the horrid stillness within, and the secret feeling of that infernal agency,

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which is ever present to the fancy, even when not visible on the scene -- throw a rich colouring of poetry over the whole, which does not take from "the present horror of the time," and yet relieves it. Shakspeare's blackest shadows are like those of Rembrandt; so intense, that the gloom which brooded over Egypt in her day of wrath was pale in comparison, -- yet so transparent that we seem to see the light of heaven through their depth.

In the whole compass of dramatic poetry, there is but one female character which can be placed near that of Lady Macbeth; the **Medea**. Not the vulgar, voluble fury of the Latin tragedy,/* nor the Medea in a hoop petticoat of Corneille, but the genuine Greek Medea -- the Medea of Euripides./†

/* Attributed to Seneca.

/† The comparison has already been made in an article in the "Reflector." It will be seen, on a reference to that very masterly Essay, that I differ from the author in his conception of Lady Macbeth's character.

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There is something in the Medea which seizes irresistibly on the imagination. Her passionate devotion to Jason, for whom she had left her parents and country -- to whom she had given all, and

Would have drawn the spirit from her breast
Had he but asked it, sighing forth her soul
Into his bosom,/*

the wrongs and insults which drive her to desperation -- the horrid refinement of cruelty with which she plans and executes her revenge upon her faithless husband -- the gush of fondness with which she weeps over her children, whom in the next moment she devotes to destruction in a

paroxysm of insane fury, carry the terror and pathos of tragic situation to their extreme height. But if we may be allowed to judge through the medium of a translation, there is a certain hardness in the manner of treating the character, which in some degree defeats the effect. Medea talks

/* Appollonius Rhodius. -- Vide Elton's Specimens of the Classic poets.

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too much: her human feelings and superhuman power are not sufficiently blended. Taking into consideration the different impulses which actuate Medea and Lady Macbeth, as love, jealousy, and revenge on the one side, and ambition on the other, we expect to find more of female nature in the first than in the last: and yet the contrary is the fact: at least, my own impression, as far as a woman may judge of a woman, is, that although the passions of Medea are more feminine, the character is less so; we seem to require more feeling in her fierceness, more passion in her frenzy; something less of poetical abstraction, -- less art, fewer words; her delirious vengeance we might forgive, but her calmness and subtlety are rather revolting.

These two admirable characters, placed in contrast to each other, afford a fine illustration of Schlegel's distinction between the ancient or Greek drama, which he compares to sculpture, and the modern or romantic drama, which he compares to painting. The gothic grandeur, the rich chiaro-

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scuro, and deep-toned colours of Lady Macbeth, stand thus opposed to the classical elegance and mythological splendour, the delicate yet inflexible outline of the Medea. If I might be permitted to carry this illustration still further, I would add, that there exists the same distinction between the Lady Macbeth and the Medea, as between the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci and the Medusa of the Greek gems and bas-reliefs. In the painting the horror of the subject is at once exalted and softened by the most vivid colouring, and the most magical contrast of light and shade. We gaze -- until from the murky depths of the back-ground

the serpent hair seems to stir and glitter as if instinct with life, and the head itself, in all its ghastliness and brightness, appears to rise from the canvass with the glare of reality. In the Medusa of sculpture how different is the effect on the imagination! We have here the snakes convolving round the winged and graceful head: the brows contracted with horror and pain: but every feature is chiselled into the most regular and

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faultless perfection; and amid the gorgon terrors, there rests a marbly, fixed, supernatural grace, which, without reminding us for a moment of common life or nature, stands before us a presence, a power, and an enchantment!

<vignette -- the Medusa>

FINIS.