How does Shakespeare use language, imagery, and form to present Lady Macbeth’s character in Act 1, Scene 5 of ‘Macbeth’?

‘Macbeth’ is a play written by William Shakespeare in the 17th century. The audience meets Lady Macbeth in the fifth scene of the first act, while the viewers have watched the first four scenes of the play, they expect Lady Macbeth to have a gentle and kind personality, although supportive of Macbeth and someone who would go to great lengths to present him well. The fifth scene starts with Lady Macbeth reading a letter from Macbeth,

Once Lady Macbeth reads the letter, she makes seemingly soft and nurturing references to “thy nature” and “the milk of human kindness” in her soliloquy, although it quickly turns into preparation for the murder of anything that “impedes thee from the golden round,” referring to the crown. Lady Macbeth calls on the spirits, which brings feelings of fear throughout the audience, for witches and spirits were firmly believed in Shakespeare's time, especially considering that King James I had even written a book called “Daemonolgie.” She asks the spirits to remove her of here woman-like thoughts and to fill her with “direst cruelty.” The “d” in “direst” creates an intense, hard-hitting sound. She continues, requesting the spirits to make her blood thick, painting a picture of the darkness with the spirits practically remaking Lady Macbeth, despite no one else being on stage. Her use of imperative presents her as slightly dominant over the spirits, as if they are her slaves or servants. Overall her sudden transformation from gentle to a wild woman makes her seem like a somewhat intemperate character, while the use of commands evolves on the theme of dominance and hierarchy.

In her next speech, she starts with half-rhyme between the words “hoarse” and “entrance” due to the “s” sound. At the beginning of the scene, Lady Macbeth spoke about nature and milk, but Shakespeare uses antithesis to turn her into a character with “no access and passage to remorse,” she talks about “no compunctious visitings of nature” and for the spirits to “take her milk for gall.” This creates an element of persuasion of the spirits to do this for Lady Macbeth. Also, the alliteration in “murdering ministers” adds to the harsh dark tone and a repeat alliteration in “sightless substances” and two “s” sounds create associations with hissing and snakes, only reinforcing the spirits’ behaviour. In Jack Gold’s 1983\* production Lady Macbeth is shown burning the letter, and because her face being half hidden by the flames, she seems even more associated in her behaviour to the spirits. In general, this portrays Lady Macbeth as a brave and manly character, for she is talking with the spirits, which the audience would have been afraid of in Shakespeare’s time.

When Macbeth enters the room, he tells his wife that “Duncan comes here to-night,” and Lady Macbeth responds with “look like that innocent flower, / But be the serpent under’t,” which continues on the theme of snakes. She evolves on the motif of serpents with a triple alliteration in “solely sovereign sway,” which portrays her as a rather concealed due to her snake-like hiss – snakes usually are soundless and well camouflaged and hidden. At the end of the scene, Macbeth says they “will speak further,” and Lady Macbeth continues, in the form of hemistichomythia, creating half-rhyme in the words “further” and “ever” and rhyme in “clear” and “fear.” This presents her as a stable, decisive and yet concealed, character.

To conclude, in the first few scenes Shakespeare creates the idea that Macbeth’s wife would be a caring and kind character, but once the audience meets her, they see how cruel and merciless she truly is on the inside. Overall, due to her stability and her strong influence on Macbeth, we do not blame Macbeth as much for the murders he is about to commit, but instead see Lady Macbeth as the vile and violent driving force inside Macbeth.