

SHAKESPEARE'S WOMEN

There are many who maintain that women understand men much better than men understand women, and that all men, in this respect, suffer a decided disadvantage. They will even assert that no man has ever fathomed a woman's mind. They must admit, however, that Shakespeare was an exception in this respect; for he, in creating feminine characters, has their thoughts and speaks their language.

Shakespeare's women are genuine, real and living, otherwise they would not have survived the divers tests to which they have been subjected by critics. They have even been taken out of their setting in the plays and have undergone severe examination. This, we must allow, is unfair to any character, and few, outside of Shakespeare's creations, have survived such an ordeal.

Shakespeare's women are more practical, and know how to attain their ends better than his men. They have more practical genius. The imagination of his men gets the better of them and takes them off the track. These differences between the men and women are maintained throughout all his plays. Lady Macbeth, who knows Macbeth well and has no patience with his vagaries, spurs him to action:

Lady Macbeth: "Was the hope drunk
Wherein you dressed 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 afeared
To be the same in thine own act and valour
As thou are 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?"

When she consented to the murder of Duncan she accepted the consequences and all the details of the crime. Macbeth commits the crime in a sort of frenzy which procures him oblivion.

Because they do not doubt or deliberate concerning the fundamental grounds for action, Shakespeare's women are, usually, good or bad. The middle region of character

where mixed motives predominate, belongs chiefly to the men. The women act on instinct and, having chosen a course, they admit of no argument.

Lady Macbeth's character is said to have been built on one sentence from Hollinshed's Chronicles:

"But especially his wife, Lady Macbeth, was very ambitious, and would be queen."

Shakespeare probably knew characters somewhat like Lady Macbeth, yet, even with these aids, his craftsmanship is nothing short of marvellous. He supplements Plutarch in his Roman plays, as in the speeches of Volumnia, and always surpasses this author in painting characters although he sometimes falls short of him in describing situations. He does not equal Plutarch in describing the god Hercules deserting Antony:

(music of hautboys under the stage)

Fourth Soldier: "Peace! What noise?"

First Soldier: "List, list!"

Second Soldier: "Hark?"

First Soldier: "Music i' the air."

Third Soldier: "Under the earth."

Fourth Soldier: "It signs well, does it not?"

Third Soldier: "No."

First Soldier: "Peace, I say

What should this mean?"

Second Soldier: "'Tis the god Hercules whom Anthony lov'd.

Now leaves him."

Plutarch describes the adverse portents in a beautiful way: "Several prodigies are said to have happened previous to this war. Pisaurum, a colony of Antony's on the Adriatic, was swallowed up by an earthquake. Antony's statue in Alba was covered with sweat for many days, which returned, though it was frequently wiped off. While he was at Patrae, the temple of Hercules was set afire by lightning, and at Athens the statue of Bacchus was carried by a whirlwind from the Gigantomachia into the theatre. These things concerned Antony the more nearly, as he affected to be a descendant of Hercules, and an imitator of Bacchus, in so much as he was called the younger Bacchus."

Cordelia, Desdemona and Ophelia are his greatest female characters. None of these are types. They are

born of the situation and inspired by it. Not one of them has a thought or feeling which forgets the situation and their part in it. They aim at popularity by their simplicity. The most beautiful of his characters depend for beauty on the impulse and their response to the need of the moment. These characters are so natural that differences of opinion about them serve only to throw light on the critic.

Ophelia has been a subject of great contention among the critics, and they often differ widely in their opinions of her. Coleridge thought her the purest and loveliest of Shakespeare's creations; other critics condemn her for timidity and bashfulness. Coleridge's opinion, is, I think, the right one. Ophelia is a maid without guile, and when she realizes the insinuations of Hamlet the shock deranges her. Her lamentations are like those of Aspatia in "The Maid's Tragedy" and are as genuine. To Hamlet the love of Ophelia becomes as a snare when he discovers the crime of his step-father and the unfaithfulness of his mother. He tells Ophelia this much, and she does away with herself. Ophelia, although a pure and innocent character, is not shielded from the world; like Miranda she suffers its shocks and surprises which she does not survive.

There are critics who compare Cordelia with Desdemona by interchanging their positions, and assert that there would have been no tragedy had Shakespeare done this. There would not have been even a play. Cordelia's pride would have dispelled Othello's suspicions, and Desdemona's generous nature would have prompted her to give Lear the required declaration of love. As it is, the refusal of Cordelia to own her love for Lear, the unsuspecting confidence of Othello in Iago, and Desdemona's trust in Othello, are postulates which Shakespeare asks us to take for granted before he can begin the plays. Both Desdemona and Cordelia strictly belong to the play, and do not make an observation which has not a bearing on their part in it. They use words as a vehicle of sentiment. A metaphor from them would be a shock to anyone. If Desdemona had been proud and energetic she might have averted a tragedy when she suddenly became aware of Othello's suspicions; but, as it is, the fact that Othello suspects her breaks her heart; she does not try

to argue or defend herself, but resigns herself to fortune. We see this plainly in her speech with Emilia:

Emilia: "Alas ! What does this gentleman conceive?
How do you, madam? How do you, my good
lady?"

Desdemona: "Faith, half asleep."

Emil: "Good madam, what's the matter with my
lord?"

Des: "With who?"

Emil: "Why, with my lord, madam."

Des: "Who is thy lord?"

Emil: "He that is yours, sweet lady."

Des: "I have none, do not talk to me, Emilia;
I cannot weep, nor answer have I none;
But what should go by water."

Neither is Cleopatra a type, but her own unparalleled self. There is nothing in her behaviour more characteristic of frowardness than her deliberate teasing. In this Shakespeare does not follow Plutarch. She gives a lesson on how to keep the lover:

Cleopatra: "See where he is, who's with him, what he
does;

I did not send you : if you find him sad
Say I am dancing; if in mirth, report
That I am sudden sick; quick and
return." (Exit Alexas)

Charmian: "Madam, methinks if you did love him
dearly

You do not hold the method to enforce
The like from him."

Cleo: "What should I do, I do not?"

Char: "In each thing give him way, cross him in
nothing."

Cleo: "Thou teachest like a fool; the way to lose
him."

Cressida and Doll Tearsheet know this lesson by instinct. But Cressida is weaker and more wavering than the tragic queen, who, when she hears that Antony has married Octavia is wounded to the quick and cries out: 'Pity me, Charmian, but do not speak to me.' Doll Tearsheet with only a small measure of the same craft

has a wealth of homely affection and fellowship which belongs to a lowlier world.

Doll (To Falstaff:) "Come, I'll be friends with thee, Jack; thou art going to the wars; and whether I shall ever see thee again or not, there is nobody cares."

In Cleopatra also, Shakespeare gives us an example of those quick flashes of thought which reveal the tension of the situation as a flash of lightning reveals the perils of a mountain climber. When Octavia, after advising Cleopatra to do nothing rash, goes away she says:

Cleo: "He words me, girls, he words me, that I
should not

Be noble to myself: but hark thee, Charmian"
(whispers to Charmian)

Iras: "*Finish, good lady; the bright day is done,
And we are for the dark.*"

In measure for measure critics often treat Vienna as a black pit of wickedness, and Isabella as a pure white creature against this background. Dowden says that Shakespeare intended to show, without disguise, a world of vice and corruption, while, in reality, it is the same world as ours is, and abundantly human. Shakespeare touches Isabella sometimes so that she seems to be much above the average person or too grand. Before entering the order she expresses a wish that it be strict. It was not natural that she was called back. She passed through the fire of trial and Shakespeare ultimately married her to the Duke.

Shakespeare represented every type of woman, subjected them to different vicissitudes, and laid open their minds under these conditions, and very often by one short sentence. Rosalind, on leaving Orlando says:

Rosalind: "He calls us back: my pride fell with
my fortunes;

I'll ask him what he would. Did you
call, sir."

Sir, you have wrestled well, and over-
thrown

More than your enemies."

Celia: "Will you go, coz?"

Ros. "Have with you, fare you well." (Exeunt.)

Both Hermoine and Perdita suffer wrong, but are restored. Shakespeare marries Imogen to the paltry Posthumus, but this often happens in the world. Octavia is something like Desdemona, but has Roman pride. Shakespeare shows the intuition of women in Calphurnia when she warns Caesar against going to the Senate. Juliet, surrounded by political intrigue, is thus somewhat kept from greatness. Miranda might, under the proper circumstances, have been a second Ophelia.

Shakespeare dared to follow the human mind into recesses where no other author has ventured. He pictures the mind perfectly when the person is in tense or trying situations, where the mind is oftentimes laid bare by a packed utterance. His ability to portray these deep workings of the mind is the main reason why his characters are living ones. He knew women perfectly, probably better than they knew themselves, and those who think themselves to be handicapped in this respect might find a potent remedy in the study of Shakespeare.

C. J. C. '26.

Then all were for the state,
 Then the great man helped the poor
 And the poor man loved the great.
 Then lands were fairly portioned,
 Then spoils were fairly sold;
 The Romans lived like brothers
 In the brave days of old.

—*MacAulay.*

In vain doth valour bleed when Avarice and Rapine share
 the land.

—*MacAulay.*

He is truly valiant, that can wisely suffer
 The worse that man can breathe; and make his wrongs
 His outsides; wear them like his raiments, carelessly;
 And ne'er repair his injuries to his heart,
 To bring it into danger.

—*Shakespeare.*