

AND SEEN AS MODERN TYPES, PEOPLE OF TODAY

Lady Macbeth a Politician's Wife, Rosalind the Alert, Up-to-Date Girl

Written for THE NEW YORK TIMES
By Viola Allen.



Viola Allen as "Rosalind" — — —
"She was that modern type, the woman of direct, brave, and intelligent action"

AS in the midst of a season of hard work—presenting one Shakespearean play and rehearsing another—I obediently sit down to comply with the request of THE NEW YORK TIMES to write something about Shakespeare. I am at once struck with a sense of the futility of my undertaking such a task. Certainly everything has been said before, said exactly and authoritatively, said by scholars who have devoted their lives to the study of Shakespeare's works.

There are so many volumes dealing with Shakespeare himself and with various aspects of his genius. If merely the English books of Shakespearean criticism and interpretation were brought together the collection would fill, I suppose, a large part of the New York Public Library. And the books about Shakespeare written in the language which Shakespeare glorified are only a small fraction of the whole mass of Shakespearean criticism. Think of the German commentators on England's greatest writer—those erudite and painstaking men, with their meticulous observation of the most infinitesimal details of spelling and punctuation! Think of the French savants who have through the centuries turned upon Shakespeare the light of their understanding! Think even of the Oriental students of Shakespeare—especially of the wise men of India who have found in Shakespeare some strange reflections of their own philosophy! I do not think that there is a written language without its many volumes of Shakespearean commentary, most of it written by those who have made the study of Shakespeare their life-work. And with all this literature in existence, you expect a rather harassed player to write you something new about the world's famous author!

At first thought it would seem that one actively engaged in an effort to interpret Shakespearean roles might be able to give something interestingly personal about the greatest of dramatists, that she might be able to tell of her own reactions to the mighty poetry which it is her high privilege to utter. And yet perhaps my present occupation, putting, as it does, a sort of Shakespearean obsession upon me, really hinders rather than fosters the sort of revelation that you desire. I am too close to Shakespeare to write about him. One cannot describe the emotional or intellectual reactions while experiencing them. Poetry, you know, is emotion remembered in tranquillity, and the emotional—I may say the spiritual—experience of acting Shakespearean roles just now fills my life so completely that I cannot, in my moments of tranquillity, remember it so as to write about it either good poetry or good prose. When I am a very old woman, and have not spoken a line of Shakespeare for twenty years—then I shall be able, if THE NEW YORK TIMES asks me, to tell just how an actress feels when she is speaking the lines of the greatest dramatist that ever lived.

But there is one thought which is of in-

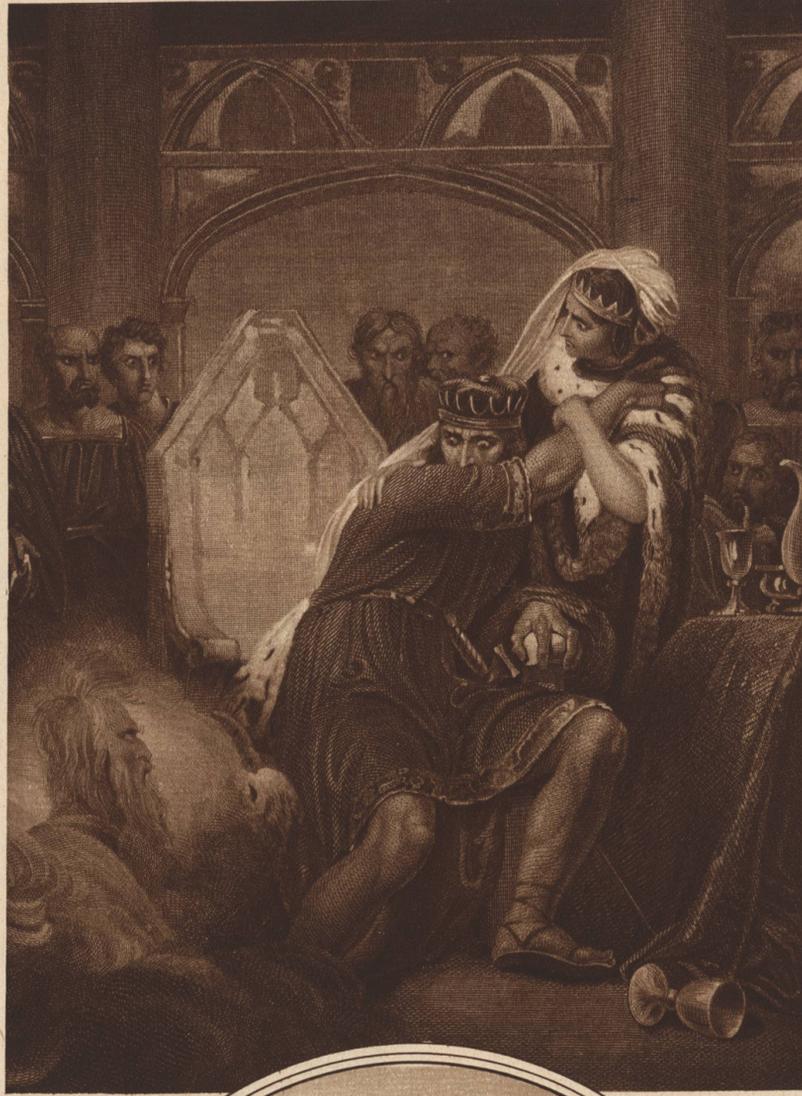
Lady Macbeth.
Are you a man? — — —

terest to me, at any rate, and I hope that so much has not been written about it already as to make it a ridiculous subject for me to treat. And that thought is the enduring vitality of Shakespeare's women.

I do not mean so much that Shakespeare's women endure because they are the creations of genius. There are many figures in literature that have that sort of immortality. What I refer to is the fact that Shakespeare's women endure not only as great poetic creations, and therefore peculiar to no one age and to no one land, but also as types, portrayed with extraordinary prophetic power, and recognizable about us every day. Shakespeare's heroines, Shakespeare's evil women, even Shakespeare's minor female characters, are about us here in New York all the while, and in London and Paris and all the cities of the civilized world.

I do not think that this is true of the women of any other writer. Congreve's women, Sheridan's women—they belong to the centuries of their authors. The dramatist's art makes it possible for us to see them as they were, but we feel that they are creatures of an age in which people thought and lived differently from the way in which they think and live today. They are distinctly of their own period, and of no other.

But Shakespeare's women are so astonishingly contemporary! Where did he get his intimate and extensive knowledge of twentieth-century womanhood? Take Portia, for example. Her contemporariness, so to speak, does not depend upon the fact that she became, for a glorious time, a lawyer, and successfully defended a difficult case. It was not so extraordinary for Shakespeare to have anticipated the idea of the woman lawyer. But it was extraordinary for him to have anticipated Portia—for him to have created so distinctly modern a type, as we would say. Portia's acumen, her firm purpose, and, above all, her resolute courage and amazing resourcefulness, are qualities which seem to us peculiarly up to date, as the phrase goes. We are accustomed—perhaps it is our conceit that is to blame—to think that such qualities as Portia shows belong to the women of our generation. And, indeed, I do not think that this is altogether conceit; it is certainly true that Portia belongs more to our time than to that in which she lived. If I had to select from all literature, including the novels written in our own time, the character most thoroughly representative of what is best in



PAINTED BY RICHARD WESTALL

And the potentialities of energy, will, and ambition evident in the wives of our political leaders indicate their kinship with Lady Macbeth. She is not exactly a caricature of them; she might be called a highly intensified composite portrait of their natures.

Lady Macbeth has been much maligned. There are so many things that we must take into consideration in trying to form a just estimate of her character. There is the matter of attitudes toward murder, for example. Ethical points of view are not invariable; they differ among the various races. And in eleventh-century Scotland murder was not—according to the collective conscience of the people—the enormity that it is in twentieth-century America.

And then there is the much-discussed subject of the degree of Lady Macbeth's culpability. Of course, we find it almost impossible to forgive any one who has deliberately planned a murder. But did Lady Macbeth deliberately plan the murder of Duncan? Was she not merely more ready to decide on his removal as necessary to her husband's plan? Everything she did, you know, she did for her husband's sake, and not for her own. Certainly he suggested the death of Duncan. And her tenacity of purpose—evil though that purpose was—her resolute fidelity to the plan which she thought was in her husband's best behalf, has something about it that is distinctly feminine, and, in spite of the perverted morals of the idea, almost admirable.

All this, I suppose, has been said before. But now that I am launched I must recklessly continue, regardless of the fact that I can have little that is new or interesting to say. And I want to mention the fact—for which I can give absolutely no adequate explanation—that in acting Shakespearean roles I always feel that the poetic passages are more convincing than the prose passages.

I don't know why this is. Theoretically, the prose lines, the passages in which the language of ordinary human intercourse is used, should have the greater actuality. But this is not the case. I think every actor feels the reality of the blank verse, and knows that the audience feels it. The actor is not reciting a poem, he is interpreting a part, and the things he says are not artificial creations, but authentic utterances, the expression of genuine emotion and thought.

This is not true of other poetic drama.



— — — Viola Allen as "Lady Macbeth"
"She represents to me the modern politician's wife"
PHOTO BY WHITE

modern womanhood. I should without hesitation name Portia. None of the brilliant novelists who are devoting their energies to the task of interpreting what they call the new spirit of woman has been able to approach the portrait of the modern woman's soul that Shakespeare drew three centuries ago.

And there is Rosalind—how contemporary she is! She did not fold her hands and await the pleasure of circumstances. She was no Patient Grizel, virtuous only in compliance. She was that modern type, the woman of direct, brave, and intelligent action. She did not hesitate to put on a disguise and take desperate chances to accomplish her purpose. In putting on a

disguise to discover what she desired to discover she showed knowledge of the strange, and perhaps unpleasant, fact that by deceit one may sometimes most effectively reach the truth.

Lady Macbeth has, of course, always been taken as the type of the scheming woman, the woman viciously ambitious and selfishly cruel. But that is not what she represents to me. What she represents to me is the modern politician's wife. I do not mean that the wives of the men who administer the affairs of our country are murderers, but being a murderer was not Lady Macbeth's chief business, after all; it was one of the tragic accidents of her career.

From The Rosciad "To Shakespeare"

IN the first seat, in robe of various dyes,
A noble wildness flashing from his eyes,
Sat Shakespeare.—In one hand a wand he bore,
For mighty wonders famed in days of yore;
The other held a globe, which to his will obedient turn'd, and own'd the master's skill:
Things of the noblest kind his genius drew,
And look'd through Nature at a single view:
A loose he gave to his unbounded soul,
And taught new lands to rise, new seas to roll,
Call'd into being scenes unknown before,
And passing Nature's bounds, was something more.
—Churchill.

"To Shakespeare"

THE soul of man is larger than the sky,
Deeper than ocean, or the abyssal dark
Of the unfathomed centre. Like that ark,
Which in its sacred hold uplifted high,
O'er the drowned hills, the human family,
And stock reserved of every living kind,
So, in the compass of the single mind,
The seeds and pregnant forms in essence lie,
That make all worlds. Great poet, 'twas thy art
To know thyself, and in thyself to be
Whatever love, hate, ambition, destiny,
Or the firm fatal purpose of the heart
Can make of man. Yet thou wert still the same,
Serene of thought, unhurt by thy own flame.
—Hartley Coleridge.

The Spirit of Shakespeare

THEY greatest knew thee, Mother Earth;
Unscour'd
He knew thy sons. He prob'd from hell to hell
Of human passions, but of love deflower'd
His wisdom was not, for he knew thee well.
Thence came the honey'd corner at his lips,
The conquering smile wherein his spirit sails
Calm as the God who the white sea-wave whips,
Yet full of speech and interlarding tales,
Close mirrors of us: thence had he the laugh
We feel is thine; broad as ten thousand beaves
At pasture! thence thy songs, that winnow chaff
From grain, bid sick Philosophy's last leaves

Whirl, if they have no response—they en-
forced
To fatten Earth when from her soul di-
vorced.
II.
How smiles he at a generation rank'd
In gloomy noddings over life! They pass,
Not he to feed upon a breast unthank'd,
Or eye a beautiful face in a crack'd glass.
But he can spy that little twist of brain
Which mov'd some weighty leader of the blind,
Unwitting 'twas the god of personal pain,
To view in curs'd eclipse our mother's mind,
And show us of some rigid hierid
The wretched bondmen till the end of time.
O liv'd the Master now to paint us Man,
That little twist of brain would ring a chime
Of whence it came and what it caus'd, to start
Thunders of laughter, clearing air and heart.
—George Meredith.