

THE DISCOVERER OF THE FEMALE CHARACTER

Shakespeare First, Says De Quincey, to See and Bring Out Its Beauty

From Thomas De Quincey's Essay on Shakespeare.

It was a most witty saying with respect to a piratical and knavish publisher who made a trade of insuing the memories of deceased authors by forged writings that he was "among the new terrors of death." But in the greatest sense it may be affirmed of Shakespeare that he is among the modern luxuries of life; that life, in fact, is a new thing, and one more to be coveted, since Shakespeare has extended the domains of human consciousness and pushed its dark frontiers into regions not so much as dimly described or even suspected before his time, far less illuminated (as now they are) by beauty and tropical luxuriance of life.

For instance—a single instance, indeed one which in itself is a world of new revelation—the possible beauty of the female character had not been seen as in a dream before Shakespeare called into perfect life the radiant shapes of Desdemona, of Imogene, of Hermione, of Perdita, of Ophelia, of Miranda, and many others. The Uta of Spenser, earlier by ten or fifteen years than most of these, was an idealized portrait of female innocence and virgin purity, but too shadowy and unreal for a dramatic reality. And as to the Grecian classics, let not the reader imagine for an instant that any prototype in this field of Shakespearean power can be looked for there. The Antigone and the Electra of the tragic poets are the two leading female characters that classical antiquity offers to our respect, but assuredly not to our impassioned love, as disciplined and exalted in the school of Shakespeare. They challenge our admiration, severe and even stern, as impersonations of filial duty, cleaving to the steps of a desolate and afflicted old man; or of sisterly affection, maintaining the rights of a brother under circumstances of peril, of desertion, and consequently of perfect self-reliance.

Iphigenia, again, though not dramatically coming before us in her own person, but according to the beautiful report of a spectator, represents us with a fine statuesque model of heroic fortitude, and of one whose young heart, even in the very agonies of her cruel immolation, refused to forget, by a single indecorous gesture, or so much as a moment's neglect of her own princely descent, that she herself was "a lady in the land." These are fine marble groups, but they are not the warm, breathing realities of Shakespeare; there is "no speculation" in their cold, marble eyes; the breath of life is not in their nostrils; the fine pulses of womanly sensibilities are not throbbing in their bosoms. And besides this immeasurable difference between the cold, moony reflexes of life, as exhibited by the power of Grecian art, and the true sunny life of Shakespeare, it must be observed that the Antigone, &c., of the antique put forward but one single trait of character, like the aloofness of the blossom.

This solitary feature is presented to us as an abstraction and as an insulated quality; whereas in Shakespeare all is presented in the concrete; that is to say, not brought forward in relief, as by some effort of an anatomical artist; but embodied and imbedded, so to speak, as by the force of a creative nature, in the complex system of a human life; a life in which all the elements move and play simultaneously, and with something more than mere simultaneity or coexistence, acting and reacting each upon the other, nay, even acting by each other and through each other. In Shakespeare's characters is felt forever a real organic life, where each is for the whole, and where

the whole is for each and in each. They only are real incarnations.

The Greek poets could not exhibit any approximations to female character without violating the truth of Grecian life and shocking the feelings of the audience. The drama with the Greeks, as with us, though much less than with us, was a picture of human life; and that which could not occur in life could not wisely be exhibited on the stage. Now in ancient Greece women were secluded from the society of men. The conventional sequestration of the female apartment of the house and the Mohammedan consecration of its threshold against the ingress of males had been transplanted from Asia into Greece thousands of years perhaps before either convents or Mohammed existed. Thus barred from all open social intercourse women could not develop or express any character by word or action.

Even to have a character violated to a Grecian mind the ideal portrait of feminine excellence; whence, perhaps, partly the too generic, too little individualized, style of Grecian beauty. But prominently to express a character was impossible under the common tenor of Grecian life, unless when high tragical catastrophes transcended the decors of that tenor, or for a brief interval raised the curtain which veiled it. Hence the subordinate part which women play upon the Greek stage in all but some half dozen cases. In the paramount tragedy on that stage, the model tragedy, the "Oedipus Tyrannus" of Sophocles, there is virtually no woman at all; for Jocasta is a party to the story merely as the dead Laius or the self-murdered Sphinx was a party, viz., by her contributions to the fatalities of the event, not by anything she does or says spontaneously.

In fact, the Greek poet, if a wise poet, could not address himself generally to a task in which he must begin by shocking the sensibilities of his countrymen. And hence followed not only the dearth of female characters in the Grecian drama, but also a second result still more favorable to the sense of a new power evolved by Shakespeare. Whenever the common law of Grecian life did give way it was, as we have observed, to the suspending force of some great convulsion or tragical catastrophe. This for a moment (like an earthquake in a nursery) would set at liberty even the timid, fluttering Grecian women, those doves of the dovecot, and would call some of them into action.

But which? Precisely those of energetic and masculine minds; the timid and feminine would but shrink the more from public gaze and from tumult. Thus it happened that such female characters as were exhibited in Greece could not but be the harsh and the severe. If a gentle lameness appeared for a moment in contest with some energetic sister Antigone (and chiefly, perhaps, by way of drawing out the fiercer character of that sister) she was soon dismissed as unfit for scenic effect. So that not only were female characters few, but, moreover, of these few the majority were but repetitions of masculine qualities in female persons. Female agency being seldom summoned on the stage, except when it had received a sort of special dispensation from its sexual character by some terrific convulsions of the house or the city, naturally it assumed the style of action suited to these circumstances.

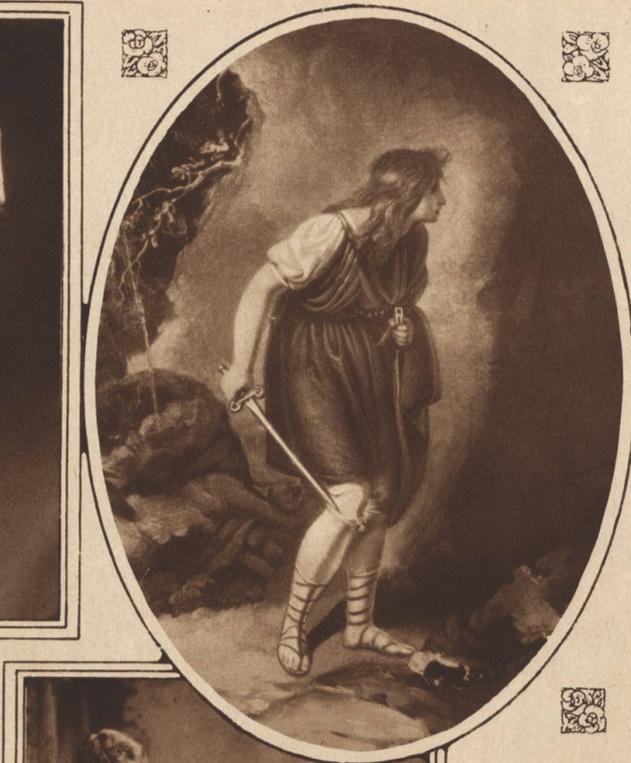


Lillie Langtry as "Lady Macbeth"

And hence it arose that not woman as she differed from man, but woman as she resembled man—woman, in short, seen under circumstances so dreadful as to abolish the effect of sexual distinction—was the woman of the Greek tragedy. And hence generally arose for Shakespeare the wider world, and the more astonishing by its perfect novelty, when he first introduced female characters, not as mere varieties or echoes of masculine characters, a Medea or Clytemnestra, or a vindictive Hecuba, the mere tigress of the tragic tiger, but female characters that had the appropriate beauty of female nature; woman no longer grand, terrific, and repulsive, but woman "after her kind"—the other hemisphere of the dramatic world; woman running through the vast gamut of womanly loveliness; woman as emancipated, exalted, ennobled under a new law of Christian morality; woman the sister and coequal of man, no longer his slave, his prisoner, and sometimes his rebel.

"It is a far cry to Loch Awe," and from the Athenian stage to the stage of Shakespeare, it may be said, is a prodigious interval. True, but prodigious as it is there is really nothing between them. The Roman stage, at least the tragic stage, as is well known, was put out, as by an extinguisher, by the cruel amphitheatre, just as a candle is made pale and ridiculous by daylight. Those who were fresh from the real murders of the bloody amphitheatre regarded with contempt the mimic murders of the stage. Stimulation too coarse and too intense had its usual effect in making the sensibilities callous.

Christian Emperors arose at length, who abolished the amphitheatre in its bloodier features. But by that time the genius of the tragic muse had long slept the sleep of death. And that muse had no resurrection



Cymbeline, Act III, Scene VI - Imogen at the cave. "Best draw my sword, and if mine enemy but fear the sword like me, he'll scallily look on't."



Adelaide Neilson as "Imogen" "I see a man's life is a tedious one"

until the age of Shakespeare. So that, notwithstanding a gulf of nineteen centuries and upward separates Shakespeare from Euripides, the last of the surviving Greek tragedians, the one is still the nearest successor of the other, just as Connaught and the islands in Clew Bay are next neighbors

to America, although 3,000 watery columns, each of a cubic mile in dimensions, divide them from each other.

A second reason, which lends an emphasis of novelty and effective power to Shakespeare's female world, is a peculiar fact of contrast which exists between that

and his corresponding world of men. Let us explain. The purpose and the intention of the Grecian stage was not primarily to develop human character, whether in men or in women; human fates were its object; great tragic situations, under the mighty control of a vast cloudy destiny, dimly described at intervals and brooding over human life by mysterious agencies and for mysterious ends. Man, no longer the representative of an august will, man, the passion-puppet of fate, could not with any effect display what we call a character, which is a distinction between man and man, emanating originally from the will, and expressing its determinations, moving under the large variety of human impulses.

This will is the central pivot of character; and this was obliterated, thwarted, canceled by the dark fatalism which brooded over the Grecian stage. That explanation will sufficiently clear up the reason why marked or complex variety of character was slighted by the great principles of the Greek tragedy. And every scholar who has studied that grand drama of Greece with feeling—that drama, so magnificent, so regal, so stately—and who has thoughtfully investigated its principles and its difference from the English drama will acknowledge that powerful and elaborate character, character, for instance, that could employ the fiftieth part of that profound analysis which has been applied to Hamlet, to Falstaff, to Lear, to Othello, and applied by Mrs. Jameson so admirably to the full development of the Shakespearean heroines, would have been so much wasted, nay, would have been defeated, and interrupted the blind agencies of fate, just in the same way as it would injure the shadowy grandeur of a ghost to individualize it too much.

Milton's angels are slightly touched superficially touched, with differences of character; but they are such differences, so simple and general, as are just sufficient to rescue them from the reproach applied to Virgil's "fortemque, fortem, fortunam, Cioanthem;" just sufficient to make them knowable apart. Pliny speaks of painters who painted in one or two colors; and, as respects the angelic characters, Milton does so; he is monochromatic. So, and for reasons resting upon the same ultimate philosophy, were the mighty architects of the Greek tragedy. They also were monochromatic; they also, as to the characters of their persons, painted in one color.

And so far there might have been the same novelty in Shakespeare's men as in his women. There might have been, but the reason why there is not must be sought in the fact that history, the muse of history, had there been no such muse as Melpomene, would have forced us into an acquaintance with human character. History, as the representative of actual life, of real man, gives us powerful delineations of character in its chief agents, that is, in men; and therefore it is that Shakespeare, the absolute creator of female character, was but the mightiest of all painters with regard to male character.

Take a single instance. The Antony of Shakespeare, immortal for its execution, is found, after all, as regards the primary conception, in history. Shakespeare's delineation is but the expansion of the germ already pre-existing, by way of scattered fragments, in Cicero's Philippics, in Cicero's Letters, in Appian, &c. But Cleopatra, equally fine, is a pure creation of art. The situation and the scenic circumstances belong to history, but the character belongs to Shakespeare.

In the great world, therefore, of woman, as the interpreter of the shifting phases and the lunar varieties of that mighty changeable planet, that lovely satellite of man, Shakespeare stands not the first only, not the original only, but is yet the sole authentic oracle of truth.

VIOLA'S DELICACY SET OFF FROM ROSALIND'S FROLIC HUMOR

Her Femininity "Is Forever Breaking Through Her Masquerade"

From Mrs. Anna Jameson's "Characteristics of Women," the Standard Work on the Subject.

AS the innate dignity of Perdita pierces through her rustic disguise, so the exquisite refinement of Viola triumphs over her masculine attire. Viola is, perhaps, in a degree less elevated and ideal than Perdita, but with a touch of sentiment more profound and heart-stirring; she is "deep-learned in the lore of love"—at least theoretically—and speaks as masterly on the subject as Perdita does of flowers.

DUKE

How dost thou like this tune?

VIOLA

It gives a very echo to the seat Where love is thrond.

And again,

If I did love you in my master's flame, With such a suffering, such a deadly life, In your denial I would find no sense, I would not understand it.

OLIVIA

Why, what would you do?

VIOLA

Make me a willow cabin at your gate, And call upon my soul within the house; Write loyal cantons of contemned love, And sing them loud even in the dead of night.

Holla your name to the reverberate hills, And make babbling gossip of the air Cry out, Olivia! O you should not rest Between the elements of air and earth, But you should pity me.

OLIVIA

You might do much.

The situation and the character of Viola have been censured for their want of consistency and probability; it is therefore worth while to examine how far this criticism is true. As for her situation in the drama, (of which she is properly the heroine,) it is shortly this. She is shipwrecked on the coast of Illyria; she is alone and without protection in a strange country. She wishes to enter into the service of the Countess Olivia; but she is assured that this is impossible; "for the lady having recently lost an only and beloved brother, had abjured the sight of men, has shut herself up in her palace, and will admit no kind of suit." In this perplexity, Viola remembers to have heard her father speak with praise and admiration of Orsino, the Duke of the country; and having ascertained that he is not married, and that therefore his court is not a proper asylum for her in her feminine character, she attires herself in the disguise of a page, as the best protection against unwell comments, till she can gain some tidings of her brother.

If we carry our thoughts back to a romantic and chivalrous age, there is surely

sufficient probability here for all the purposes of poetry. To pursue the thread of Viola's destiny,—she is engaged in the service of the Duke, whom she finds "fancy-sick" for the love of Olivia. We are left to infer, (for so it is hinted in the first scene,) that this Duke—who with his accomplishments, and his personal attractions, his taste for music, his chivalrous tenderness, and his unrequited love, is really a very fascinating and poetical personage, though a little passionate and fantastic—had already made some impression on Viola's imagination; and when she

comes to play the confidante, and to be loaded with favors and kindness in her assumed character, that she should be touched by a passion made up of pity, admiration, gratitude, and tenderness, does not, I think, in any way detract from the genuine sweetness and delicacy of her character, for "she never told her love."

Now all this, as the critic wisely observes, may not present a very just picture of life; and it may also fail to impart any moral lesson for the especial profit of well-bred young ladies; but is it not in truth and in nature? Did it ever fail to charm

or to interest, to seize on the coldest fancy, to touch the most insensible heart?

Viola then is the chosen favorite of the enamoured Duke, and becomes his messenger to Olivia, and the interpreter of his sufferings to that inaccessible beauty. In her character of a youthful page, she attracts the favor of Olivia, and excites the jealousy of her lord. The situation is critical and delicate; but how exquisitely is the character of Viola fitted to her part, carrying her through the ordeal with all the inward and spiritual grace of modesty!

What beautiful propriety in the distinction drawn between Rosalind and Viola! The wild sweetness, the frolic humor which sports free and unblamed amid the shades of Ardenness, would ill become Viola, whose playfulness is assumed as part of her disguise as a court page, and is guarded by the strictest delicacy. She has not, like Rosalind, a saucy enjoyment in her own incognito; her disguise does not sit so easily upon her; her heart does not beat freely under it. As in the old ballad, where "Sweet William" is detected weeping in secret over her "man's array," so in Viola a sweet consciousness of her feminine nature is forever breaking through her masquerade:

And on her cheek is ready with a blush Modest as morning when she coldly eyes The youthful Phoebus.

She plays her part well, but never forgets nor allows us to forget that she is playing a part.

OLIVIA.

Are you a comedian?

VIOLA.

No, my profound heart! and yet by the very fangs of malice I swear, I am not that I play!

And thus she comments on it: In disguise, I see thou art a wickedness, Wherewith the pregnant enemy does much; How easy is it for the proper false In women's waken hearts to set their forms! Alas! our frailty is the cause, not we.

The feminine cowardice of Viola, which will not allow her even to affect a courage becoming her attire, her horror at the idea of drawing a sword, is very natural and characteristic, and produces a most humorous effect, even at the very moment it charms and interests us. Contrasted with the deep, silent, patient love of Viola for the Duke, we have the ladylike willfulness of Olivia; and her sudden passion, or rather fancy, for the disguised page takes so beautiful a coloring of poetry and sentiment that we do not think her forward. Olivia is like a Princess of romance, and has all the privileges of one; she is, like Portia, high born and high bred, mistress over her servants—but not, like Portia, "a queen o'er herself." She has never in her life been opposed; the first contradiction, therefore, rouses all the woman in her, and turns a caprice into a headlong passion; yet she apologizes for herself:

I have said too much unto a heart of stone, And laid mine honor to uncharity out; There's something in me that reproves my fault; But such a headstrong potent fault it is That it but mocks reproof!

And in the midst of her self-abandonment, never allows us to condemn, even while we pity her:

What shall you ask of me that I'll deny, That honor, saved, may upon asking give?

The distance of rank which separates the Countess from the youthful page—the real sex of Viola—the dignified elegance of Olivia's deportment, except where passion gets the better of her pride—her consistent coldness toward the Duke—the description of that "smooth, discreet, and stable bearing" with which she rules her household—her generous care for her steward Malvolio, in the midst of her own distress—all these circumstances raise Olivia in our fancy,

and render her caprice for the page a source of amusement and interest, not a subject of reproach. "Twelfth Night" is a genuine comedy—a perpetual spring of the gayest and the sweetest fancies. In artificial society men and women are divided into castes and classes, and it is rarely that extremes in character or manner can approximate. To blend into a harmonious picture the utmost grace and refinement of sentiment, and the broadest effects of humor; the most poignant wit, and the most indulgent benignity—in short, to bring before us in the same scene, Viola and Olivia, and Malvolio and Sir Toby, belonged only to nature and to Shakespeare.

Goethe on the Plan of "Hamlet"

From Goethe's "Wilhelm Meister," Thomas Carlyle's Translation.

SERLO, at this moment entering, inquired about his sister, and, looking in the book which our friend had hold of, cried: "So you are again at 'Hamlet'? Very good! Many doubts have arisen in me, which seem not a little to impair the canonical aspect of the piece as you would have it viewed. The English themselves have admitted that its chief interest concludes with the third act, the last two lagging sorrowfully on, and scarcely uniting with the rest; and certainly about the end it seems to stand stock-still."

"It is very possible," said Wilhelm, "that some individuals of a nation, which has so many masterpieces to feel proud of may be led by prejudice and narrowness of mind to form false judgments; but this cannot hinder us from looking with our own eyes, and doing justice where we see it due. I am very far from censuring the plan of 'Hamlet'; on the contrary, I believe there never was a grander one invented; nay, it is not invented, it is real."

"How do you demonstrate that?" inquired Serlo.

"I will not demonstrate anything," said Wilhelm; "I will merely show you what my own conceptions of it are." Aurelia rose up from her cushion; leaned upon her hand and looked at Wilhelm who, with the firmest assurance that he was in the right, went on as follows: "It pleases us, it flatters us, to see a hero acting on his own strength; lovings and hating as his heart directs him; undertaking and competing; casting every obstacle aside; and at length attaining some great object which he aimed at. Poets and historians would willingly persuade us that so proud a lot may fall to man."

"In 'Hamlet' we are taught another lesson: the hero is without a plan, but the piece is full of plan. Here we have no villain punished on some self-conceived and rigidly accomplished scheme of vengeance;

and render her caprice for the page a source of amusement and interest, not a subject of reproach. "Twelfth Night" is a genuine comedy—a perpetual spring of the gayest and the sweetest fancies. In artificial society men and women are divided into castes and classes, and it is rarely that extremes in character or manner can approximate. To blend into a harmonious picture the utmost grace and refinement of sentiment, and the broadest effects of humor; the most poignant wit, and the most indulgent benignity—in short, to bring before us in the same scene, Viola and Olivia, and Malvolio and Sir Toby, belonged only to nature and to Shakespeare.

To Shakespeare

THOU, who didst lay all other bosoms bare, Impenetrable shade didst round thee throw; And of the ready tears thou makest flow, Monarch of tears, thou hast not any share. Sad Petrarch, sadder Byron their despair Unlocked, their dismal theatres of woe Unclosed; thou showest Hamlet, Romeo, And maddened Lear, with tempest on his hair; Hadst thou no sufferings men's tears could suage? No comedy of thine own life, shut in? No lurid tragedy—perhaps of sin— That walked with muffled steps its curtain'd stage? Confession troubles ne'er thy godlike look; Thou art, thyself, thy one unopened book. —Richard Edwin Day.



Marie Wainwright as "Viola"—"She has not, like Rosalind, a saucy enjoyment in her own incognito"