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SHAKESPEARE'S HEROINES AS HUMAN BEINGS



Henry VIII. Act I. Scene IV.

By heaven, she is a dainty one; Sweetheart, I were unmannerly to take you out And not to kiss you.

Others Gave Only Femininity to Their Women Characters

Written for THE NEW YORK TIMES.
By Charlotte Perkins Gilman.

IN so large a picture of life as opens to the reader of Shakespeare we may look with confidence for the facts, even as we should look for them in studying the vast original.

Indeed, as the artist sees more than an ordinary observer, and, by virtue of his art, makes the ordinary observer see what he would not otherwise have noticed, we find the characteristics of humanity more plainly to be studied through the great dramatist than as they push and tumble confusedly before us in living persons.

To point out, as shown by Shakespeare, that all men were cowards—if he had so presented them—would be a heavy charge against manhood; and if he had represented women as all fools, or all liars, or all unchaste, it would either have to be taken as heavy testimony that they were so, or as proving the poet himself a fool or liar, and acquainted only with the vicious among women.

Among the immense literature of comment on this master there are books and to spare about his presentation of women—their nobility, their wit, their virtue, their wisdom, their courage, their devoted love, and, to admit all sides, their weakness and criminality.

The special point here chosen to illustrate is that in this great array of womanhood the depicter of character, by virtue of his truth in observation, has shown far more than was intended. In these many pages there stand recorded not only the womanly virtues of these heroines, but their broad humanness, that predominant quality to which we are still so generally oblivious.

In our whole previous world view we have overlooked this quality in women, attributing it perforce to men, as types of race, but seeing in women only feminine qualities. Always we have fixed our eyes on "the true woman," seeing only her womanliness, and, if she did not agree with the specifications already in mind, she was branded as "unwomanly," as being like a man.

To give a conspicuous instance from another source, even more widely studied than Shakespeare, note the characteristics set forth in that long-standing Ideal Woman, whose price was above rubies, and our interpretation of them. She has been preached about for centuries, and held up from a thousand pulpits as a model to be imitated, but how many preachers and commentators have dwelt upon the really remarkable human qualities of that Virtuous Woman? Always they dilate on her domestic devotion, her care for that scarlet-clothed household of hers, her kind words and charity; but never on the conspicuous fact that she earned her own living, and possibly supported her family—her husband had "no need for spoil." Indeed, so universal is the masculine preconception that small notice is taken of the fact that the immortal description is by a woman, by the mother of King Lemuel. It will refresh many memories to look at that last chapter of "Proverbs"—to realize the humanness of her, and see what a good manufacturer, merchant, viticulturist, and real estate dealer that lady was.

So, in our Shakespeare, we have dwelt long and lovingly on the pronounced—and premature—passion of the child Juliet; on the superb chastity of Isabel; on the husband-dominating criminality of Lady Mac-

beth or of Queen Dioneza. We have enjoyed the ruthless repartee of Beatrice, and admired the daring flight and merry play of Rosalind; even recognized, as we must, the wisdom of Portia; but in the whole brilliant procession, good, bad, and indifferent, it is the qualities we call womanly that we look for, and what we look for we see.

Even Portia, while traversing all the traditions of her sex, did so at the behest of love, to save the life of her lover's friend and win a happy marriage—quite womanly this. Had she, naturally pleased by her successful excursion into the law, chosen to remain a lawyer, this we should have unsparringly condemned as unwomanly.

Before going further, let us clearly and without offense define what is this Humanness here discussed.

All living creatures, above the early tentative stages of asexualism and of hermaphroditism, are male and female. As such, they have their several qualities, pertaining to each sex, and found, throughout nature, so distinguishing each. The males, in all species, have their masculine qualities—predominant desire for the female, the impulse to combat, and self-expression or pride. The females, in all species, have their power of attraction for the male, and the instincts of motherhood, that widening flow of tenderness, patience, protective care, and ingenious industry, out of which has grown so much of our later development. But quite aside from these sex qualities, belonging to all kinds of males and females, each kind has its race qualities, common to both, peculiar only to that species.

Humanness is our distinguishing race quality. It is that which differentiates us from all other animals, and which develops in us as we evolve to higher social stages; we grow more human as we progress.

The human qualities outnumber and outweigh the sex qualities so preponderantly that they cannot escape notice; but we have failed to recognize their nature because of misnaming them in the beginning. We called them "masculine." We thought all the widening powers of the human intellect, the breadth and depth of human feeling, the accumulating wonders of human invention and execution, were masculine qualities, peculiar to men as such. Having this conviction firmly in mind, no array of facts could move us from it, and when, without dogmatism, a great artist paints us women by scores, differing in men differ, showing, as men do, all shades of character, all grades of power, we see them still only as women, and call this wide variety of humanness just "womanly."

Yet, with the new conception held in mind, how clearly we may see the difference.

Let us allow Juliet to be purely feminine, a precociously passionate young thing—poor baby, coming out at 14!—and her mother boasting that she bore her daughter at about the same age. No wonder that she showed small human distinction—she might, perhaps, had she lived to grow up.

Strange that these amorous young things should stand so high in our estimation as "lovers," when Romeo was so swift in the transfer of his light affection that even the good Friar must cry out on him. Let Ju-

liet pass—she was a beautiful and over-ardent child.

Yet even at that age, another damsel, one Marina, stands out as sharply different as marble from moonshine. Not Shakespeare's, some say, this Marina? Never mind, she makes a good contrast. She was but 14, and while inevitably described as beautiful, the marvel of her was in her human attributes—trained in music, letters; who hath gained of education all the grace which makes her both the heart and place of general wonder.

Neither music nor letters pertain to sex. This proficiency was quite human. But note further:

This youthful paragon is stolen by



Ellen Terry as "Beatrice"



Julia Marlowe as "Portia" in The Merchant of Venice

pirates and sold to a most evil madam in a strange city. In Elizabeth Robins's pitiful and too true story of "My Little Sister" there is no help for the child. She was but a helpless young female and sank to utter ruin. But Marina, instead of succumbing, used her human faculties. She so preached to the gentlemen who approached her that they went away resolved on virtue. She persuaded the Governor himself to forego his desires, and when the hardened menial of the house was sent to compass her downfall she out-reasoned him and persuaded him to get her pupils instead of customers.

So we have her, at Juliet's age, earning honest money by the use of human faculties, and thereby preserving her feminine honor so above approach that the afore-said Governor marries her—after assuring himself that she is of suitable lineage. Let us turn to Volunmia, that noblest

Roman of them all. She was a type of the honor worshipper, military honor at that; not herself "seeking the bubble reputation at the cannon's mouth," or at the sword's point, but joyfully desiring it for her son. Virgilia is but a wife, a timid, affectionate thing, weeping sadly in her husband's absence and refusing to go and make calls with Valeria. A nicely touched person, Valeria, with her Usher—a good talker and none too patient of housewifery. Virgilia remains in dolorous femininity, but Volunmia—she was a Person, an able and determined human being. See how she reasons with that crazy-tempered son of hers, the heroic, brave, insolent, and injudicious Calus Martius Coriolanus; he who would not refrain from insulting the citizens long enough to get himself elected; he who talked so loudly of his "country" and evidently thought of nothing further in it than the first families.



Lillie Langtry as "Rosalind" in As You Like It.



Mary Anderson as "Juliet"



adultery, which she naturally refuses. One feels as if there was not much faith in this same chastity if it was supposed likely to give way on such attack.

The bad human qualities we find in both men and women, but in this world of drama, as in our common life, there is more wickedness and baser, among men. In many cases the women do their mischief to promote the interests of those they love. For her daughter, Philoten, does Dionyza order Marina's destruction. She was jealous for her own child's advancement. For her son, Cloten, does Cymbeline's Queen plot and poison. For her husband does Lady Macbeth urge murder.

Now, the men villains are villains on their own account, light-minded at times, at others profoundly evil. We may call the evil characteristics human, shared by men and women; but the saving grace of doing it for the good of others seems feminine.

There is no lack of instances of the feminine, the ultra-feminine, the super-feminine, and, alas! of that poor wreck and ruin of femininity, the victim and victimizer of men. Anything more painfully exhibiting woman's weakness could hardly be devised than the scene where Lady Anne, in the full height of her grief and fury, mourning her husband, Prince Edward, and his father, King Henry, both killed by the unspeakable Richard, yet gives way to his suit under no other pressure than the sheer force of compliment.

Yet in spite of all the too-evident proof of arrested human development in women, reared as they then were in an atmosphere calculated to bring out and intensify every feminine attribute, and in spite of the world tradition, recognizing only those attributes, this Seer, looking at life open-eyed, observes and reproduces the human qualities which will manifest themselves in spite of all neglect.

That any woman should show courage in an age when they were utter dependents on the favor of men—when a girl was told:

To you your father should be as a God,
One that composed your beauties; yea—
and one
To whom you are but as a form in wax,
By him imprinted, and within his power
To leave the figure, or disfigure it—

shows a braver spirit than was needed by men.

See, then, the magnificent humanness of Cordelia—no "feminine weakness," no "feminine flattery," no "feminine timidity"; in the face of offending the parent she did love so dearly, and losing her rightful share in the division of the country, Cordelia tells the truth.

This high courage no one will say is characteristic of women as such; their very sympathy and tenderness militate against it; nor is it in the least to be confounded with the belligerent bravery of men. It is a human quality, one of the noblest.

Neither is the sordid flattery and double dealing of the weaker sisters feminine; the drama and all history show such conduct frequently in men.

It is true, from the limitations of women's estate, and the further limitations of "the heart interest" in drama, that most of these ladies are introduced as daughter of this man, wife of that one, or "beloved of Proteus," "beloved by Valentine," or "in love with the Duke." The only human distinctions allowed them are those of rank—the Queens seem fully as conscious of their power and as able to use it as the Kings; and the serving women of the servile positions they share with serving men. Their dignity and pride are human; their loyalty and devotion are human; and while registering perforce the inevitable emphasis upon their feminine relationships, it surely seems as if the great poet delighted in bringing out these characteristics of our common race, wherever he found them.

Intelligent, clever creatures! How they read the facts as far as visible! Listen to the chaste Diana planning with her mother and Helena how that lady may secure her rights as Bertram's wife: "My mother told me just how he would woo, as if she sat in his heart. She says, all men have the like oaths. He had sworn to marry me when his wife died; therefore I'll lie with him, when I am buried." Wise Diana!

As we review them all, from best-known Rosalind, through all the fair ladies, wise and pure or too gaily disposed, it is their wit, wisdom, courage, ingenuity, perseverance, nobility, cheerfulness, devotion, and high duty that we love—in a word, their humanness.