Heroines in Shakespeare

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The Renaissance Reign of England's Elizabeth was closely associated with the consummate age of English drama, whose artists catered tirelessly to the Queen's insatiable thirst for lustful praise. In fact, an essential part of England's literary Golden Age was the hero-worship of Elizabeth. Among her dramatist admirers was William Shakespeare, who, in his delineation of women, appears to have followed Robert Greene as the «Homer of Women». In *Much Ado About Nothing,* Shakespeare sings in words such as those that might pour from the pens of followers of the recent feminist movement:

> Sigh no more, ladies, sigh no more,
> Men were deceivers ever;
> One foot in sea, and one on shore,
> To one thing constant never.
> Then sigh not so,
> But let them go,
> And be you blithe and bonny,
> Converting all your sounds of woe
> Into Hey nonny, nonny.
>
> Sing no more ditties, sing no more
> Of dumps so dull and heavy;

The fraud of men was ever so,
Since summer first was leavy.
Then sigh not so,
But let them go,
And be you blithe and bonny,
Converting all your sounds of woe
Into Hey nonny, nonny.[1]

Some critics maintain that "The praise of 'single-blessedness' in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* may have been designed to please the ears of the maiden Queen"; while E. K. Chambers states, in reference to Helena's beauty seen 'in a brow of Egypt' that "darkness was a blemish in the age which adored the blond Elizabeth".[2] So, we find Juliet a "fair saint" in Romeo's eyes—and Portia not only fair, but "fairer than that work of wondrous virtue".

Many controversies have arisen over the value of Shakespeare's characterizations, especially those of his heroines. Samuel Johnson in his "Preface to Shakespeare" asserts that "neither his gentlemen nor his ladies have much delicacy, nor are sufficiently distinguished from his clowns by any appearance of refined manners". Johnson felt that a writer should select the finest mode of gaiety of his time—which in Shakespeare's day was stateliness, formality and reservation. On the other hand, a modern critic, William J. Grace, supports The English dramatist when he explains that:

> The modern, emancipated woman, possessing the benefits of a college degree, may consider the I.Q. of a Desdemona or an Ophelia somewhat low (such analyses have been applied to Shakespeare's heroines in complete misunderstanding of the romantic glory of Shakespeare's poetry). But the apparent lack of sophistication, the convention of submissiveness which surrounds the Shakespearian heroine, may lead the modern reader to misunderstand the real force and vitality of her character.[3]

Grace continues along this theme holding that: "Since the Shakespearian heroine is youthful, rather sheltered, and tending towards a marked idealism, she is seen at a disadvantage in the more cynical, more morbid world of tragic affairs."[4] Likewise, Hardin Craig, another modern critic, attests that Shakespeare "had an equal genius for comedy and tragedy. His female characters which have been found fault with as insipid are the finest in the world".[5] However, F. E. Schelling asks: "By the bye, is there anyone who can tell me why it is that Shakespeare's heroines are, so many of them, orphans, or at least motherless?"[6] Blanche Mary Kelly, while posing no questions, supposes that "the Catholic sense of Shakespeare's" is nowhere more clearly demonstrated than in his portrayal of women, whom he depicts (says the critic) "to be either wise and holy, with a beauty of countenance which reflects the beauty of their souls, or monstrous, as if they are lovely, but perverted".[7] They are not only peerless creatures, but intellectual, graceful, forceful, high-spirited and witty, she concludes. Kelly insists that:

> They are women who stand on the value of their immortal quality and match their worth with men's; and at the same time recognizing their human faults and weaknesses. An illustration of this is found when Rosalind asserts: "Do you not know that I am a woman? When I think I must speak." In Shakespeare's women is exemplified at least by aspiration, the great dignity which is theirs through the Christian dispensation... When she sinks below it, she is lashed with scorpions as doubly false—false to herself and false to her image in the hearts of men.[8]

In general, then, we find that most Shakespearian critics agree with John Dryden's appraisal of the famous Elizabethan dramatist: "He was the man who of all modern and perhaps ancient poets had the largest and most comprehensive soul." No one else had such insight into human motive; no one else has created characters so life-like, as Homer and William Watt observe:

> His characters are true to life and consistently developed. He mixed the elements of tragedy and comedy in his plays as they are mixed

1. William Shakespeare, *Much Ado About Nothing* (1598-99), II, iii, 64 ff.
2. E. K. Chambers, *Shakespeare: A Survey* (Cambridge: University Press, 1951), p. 174.
3. William J. Grace, Notes, *Why Read Shakespeare?* (1953), p. E-1.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Hardin Craig, *Shakespeare* (New York; Scott, Foresman & Co., 1931), p. 201.
6. F. E. Schelling, *Shakespeare and "Demi-Science"* (1927), pp. 181-193.
7. Blanche Mary Kelly, *The Well of English*, Chap. VII (New York: Harper & Bros., 1936), p. 101.
8. *Ibid.*

in life. Essentially he was a romanticist, but with his romanticism he compounded realism. He knew the formulas of the classical critics, and could follow them when he wished; but he was too natural an artist to be bound by rules for composition. He knew life first and knew how to present it in lively action...And thus it was that his friend and fellow dramatist Ben Johnson could write in praise of him: "He was not of an age, but for all time." [9]

What Shakespeare touches comes alive—and who can deny that he has touched many, if not all the possible traits of womanhood.

E. K. Chambers notes that:

> It is a little curious to observe how the type of Shakespeare's women varies at different periods of his career. Is one supposed that Shakespeare, like many more recent dramatists, found himself obliged to write "round" the personality of the "leading lady", who starred in it for the first time being in his company? Or is he merely following the wavering of the modish taste in his heroines, a taste set, perhaps, as some think, during the period of his final plays, by the sentimental tragicomedies of Beaumont and Fletcher? [10]

A more recent critic explains that "Shakespeare's heroines may be simpler and more virtuous than we have been taught to believe... Shakespeare ignores psychological realities because of moral conventions." [11] Meanwhile, Mrs. Anna Jameson has classified and analyzed the female characters under such titles as: Characters of Intellect, Characters of Passion and Imagination, Characters of the Affections, and Historical Characters. In so doing, Mrs. Jameson was not unaware that some of the heroines could fall under two or more of these headings—that perhaps some could be contained under all these titles; however, each is classified under the dominant trait which the author is discussing. To comment on all such characters might be the subject matter of an extensive thesis. The object here is to choose two examples: one intellectual heroine and one character of passion and imagination in order to compare and contrast Shakespeare's delineation of them as models of his many other women.

9. Homer A. and William W. Watt, *A Handbook of English Literature* (New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 1959), pp. 249-50.
10. E. K. Chambers. *Op. cit.*, p. 176.
11. Maurice Charney. *How to Read Shakespeare* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971), p. 82.

Before 1592, William Shakespeare's skill in creating real life-like characters was becoming supreme. In that year, however, his maturing artistry was best illustrated in his portrayal of "the unfolding of the womanhood of Juliet under the influence of her great love," as Benjamin Brawley expresses it.[12] Four years later, a tremendous advance in character analysis had taken place in Shakespeare, and Portia is brought forth—an ideal compound of intellect and romance. This change is brought out by Mrs. Jameson in her complete study of heroines in Shakespeare. Chambers satirizes this critic's conclusions as "gushing statements". While I agree in general with his justifiable criticism, I find that Mrs. Jameson proposes some good points which might help in comparing and contrasting the characters in question here, namely: Juliet and Portia. "Juliet, like Portia, is the foster-child of opulence and splendour; Juliet dwells in a fair city—Verona; Portia on some lovely promontory called Belmont...Both have been nurtured in a palace." [13] The dramatist pictures each with much force of contrast, much depth of light and shade. In Juliet, Shakespeare shows his ability to create the lyric passion that breathed through her lips on her wedding morning. "In Portia, Shakespeare drew his second great portrait of a woman. She is the elder sister of Juliet—less vehement, with a larger experience of life, a stronger and more practised intellect." [14] Yet, Shipley harshly berates Portia: "of radiant outward beauty", but who is "at the most charitable estimate completely self-satisfied. She is wholly content to be adored..." [15]

Shipley further castigates the lady of Belmont when he points out that "of all Shakespeare's fair-seeming heroines, Portia of Belmont' richly left' is poorest in character, complacent, vulgar, unfeeling".[16] Yet, others, in contrasting the two heroines argue that Juliet impresses us with her extreme simplicity in the midst of complex situations; Portia with her happy-heartedness, sensi-

12. Benjamin Brawley, *A Short History of the English Drama* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Co., 1921), p. 66.
13. Mrs. Anna Jameson, *Shakespeare's Heroines* (London: G. Bell & Sons, 1913), p. 55.
14. Moody and Lovett, *A History of English Literature* (New York: Charles Scribner's, 1930), p. 312.
15. Joseph T. Shipley, *Guide to Great Plays* (Washington, D. C., Public Affairs Press, 1956), p. 610.
16. *Ibid.*

bility, virtue, and noblemindedness. Juliet is a romantic enthusiast—Portia, a self-possessed, profound thinker. Shipley notes that Juliet moves toward bodily death but triumphs spiritually when she spurns the lust of her nurse's urging that she wed Paris "...She consents to the agonizing simulacrum of death to hold steadfast in love to her husband."[17]

Anna Jameson, too, speaks gently of Juliet: "All Shakespeare's women, being essentially women, either love or have loved, or are capable of loving; but Juliet is love itself."[18] Love is "chaste and dignified in Portia"; love is fearless, confiding, playfully fond, constant, devoted, fervent, and tender in the other heroines—but love in Juliet is each and all of these. The energy displayed by Juliet is different from that of Portia. Juliet's energy is founded on her strength of passion, not, as Portia's is, on her strength of character. Yet, a rich glow of life and reality distinguish them both—"surely they are carved straight from the red heart of humanity, and in their vitality rests the gift of their immortality".[19]

Juliet appears almost silently in her first scene; a calm, graceful maiden with unawakened emotions. As Harrison expresses it: "Juliet begins as a demure girl who is prepared to listen respectfully to the advice of her mother. When she has fallen in love, she becomes suddenly a woman of great courage and resource who will face even death and fantastic horror to regain" Romeo.[20] Portia on the other hand, immediately exhibits her buoyancy of spirit—her decision of purpose. The latter in describing her suitors speaks in a tone almost tinged with hardness. Harrison confirms this when he comments: "Portia is witty, attractive, courageous, intelligent, but nevertheless feline in her treatment of Shylock and of her husband over the ring."[21] (Yet, it is said that the woman of the source was much more cruel.) It may be remarked of both these heroines that as they gradually unfold before us, we can trace their component qualities. We find in the character of Juliet a mixture of self-will and timidity, of strength and weakness, of confidence and reserve, each developing as the action grows. The

17. *Ibid.*, p. 614.
18. Anna Jameson, *op. cit.*
19. *Ibid.*
20. G. B. Harrison, *Shakespeare: The Complete Works* (New York: Harcourt Brace and World, Inc., 1968), p. 472.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 582.

crisis in her character is reached when the nurse basely encourages Juliet to forget about Romeo. Juliet retaliates in these momentous words: "Go, counsellor! Thou and my bosom henceforth shall be twain", and "If all else fail, myself have power to die". Portia's greatest characteristics, nevertheless—her intellectual genius, her religious sense, her ideals, her true self are brought out in the trial scene. She maintains self-command, appeals to mercy, but when this proves to no avail, eventually her patience reaches a crisis—and she bursts forth with: "Shed thou no blood...no more than just the pound of flesh." She is victorious by her brilliance, and returns to her former self-possession. However, one of the latest Shakespeare critics notes that: "There are times in *The Merchant of Venice*...when Portia at certain moments might seem Mercy herself, although it is only at certain moments, and for the rest she may be all too human."[22]

Juliet does resemble Portia in her tremendously vivacious imagination. Still, there is a careful distinction to be made. Portia's imaginative power is highly developed, yet intermingled with the other intellectual faculties. It does not reach excess, but rather is subject to reason. In Juliet, however, the imagination is part of her temperament, controlling and modifying her entire character, finally subjecting even her reason to its passionate power. Portia's confession of her love contains nothing of the passionate self-abandonment of Juliet. Heart-strings are pulled tightly in the growth of the plot of *The Merchant of Venice,* but, unlike *Romeo and Juliet*, the former is not essentially written in a tragic key. Portia dominates the story, which throughout is harmoniously in tone with Portia's sunny hair, her sunny wit, her sunny temper. The temper of *Romeo and Juliet* is essentially high and serious. Even as Romeo, masked, enters Capulet's house, he is overcome by a grim foreboding:

> My mind misgives
> Some consequence, yet hanging in the stars.
> Shall bitterly begin his fearful date
> With this night's revels...

Juliet echoes a similar emotional strain:

22. John Arthos, *Shakespeare: The Early Writings* (New Jersey: Rowman and Littlefield, 1972), p. 142.

I have no joy of this contract tonight;
It is too rash, too unadvised, too sudden.

Juliet, with Romeo, becomes a shuttlecock of fate, involved in
catastrophe brought about by accidental instruments. Thus, w
see the pure, submissive Juliet change into a passionate, darin
woman. Even at her death, Capulet speaks in similes which ad
to the already lengthy description of his young patrician daughte

Death lies on her, like an untimely frost
Upon the sweetest flower of all the field.

Portia's profound brilliance reflects itself in the other wom
characters in *The Merchant of Venice,* preserving harmony ami
contrasting elements; while Juliet's timid tenderness is paint
against the harshness of haughty parents and the courseness
her plebeian nurse. These two immortal heroines voice the geni
of their imperishable artist, "for they seem so real that the wor
accepts them as actual people who loved, laughed and suffered
we do".[23] William Grace suggests that:

> Under all circumstances, both in tragedy and comedy, woman is
> presented as the more practical of the sexes. It is particularly
> noteworthy in *Romeo and Juliet* that Juliet makes the practical
> arrangements regarding the marriage ceremony, while Romeo con-
> tributes the larger share of poetry. It is, of course, even more
> noticeable in the comedies than in *Romeo and Juliet* that the
> Shakespearian heroine is infinitely resourceful in securing the man
> she wants to marry; but then, the comedies belong to the heroines,
> the harrowing tragedies to the men.[24]

Shakespeare surely makes vital what he touches. For, as Mart
S. Day concludes: "He is a writer who has fascinated succeedi
ages right down to the present... In mirroring his own time
well, he has given to all succeeding ages an accurate glass in whi
to see themselves."[25] Shakespeare, who looked upon women wi
the spirit of humanity, wisdom and deep love, has done justi
to their natural good tendencies and kindly sympathies.

23. John Calvin Metcalf, *Know Your Shakespeare* (Boston: D. C. Heath
Co., 1944), p. 78.
24. William J. Grace, *op. cit.*, p. E-3.
25. Martin S. Day, *History of English Literature to 1660* (New Yo
Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1963), p. 325.