CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-00025-3 - On Some of Shakespeare's Female Characters
Helena Faucit Martin
Excerpt
More information

I.

OPHELIA

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-00025-3 - On Some of Shakespeare's Female Characters
Helena Faucit Martin
Excerpt
More information

I.

OPHELIA.

BRYNTYSILIO, *August* 10, 1880.

"O rose of May! Sweet Ophelia!"

AND so you ask me, my friend—indeed, I may almost say that you insist—after our late talk over her, that I should put down in writing my idea of Ophelia, so that you may make, as you say, a new study of her character.

Accustomed as you are to write fluently all your thoughts, you will hardly believe what a difficult task you have set me. My views of Shakespeare's women have been wont to take their shape in the living portraiture of the stage, and not in words. I have, in imagination, lived their lives from the very beginning to the end; and Ophelia, as I have pictured

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-00025-3 - On Some of Shakespeare's Female Characters
Helena Faucit Martin
Excerpt
More information

her, is so unlike what I hear and read about her, and have seen represented on the stage, that I can scarcely hope to make any one think of her as I do. It hurts me to hear her spoken of, as she often is, as a weak creature, wanting in truthfulness, in purpose, in force of character, and only interesting when she loses the little wits she had. And yet who can wonder that a character so delicately outlined, and shaded in with strokes so fine, should be often gravely misunderstood?

Faint and delicate, however, as these shadowings are, they are yet so true to nature, and at the same time so full of suggestion, that I look on Ophelia as one of the strongest proofs our great master has left us of his belief in the actor's art (his own), and of his trust in the power possessed, at least by sympathetic natures, of filling up his outlines, and giving full and vivid life to the creatures of his brain. Without this belief, could he have written as he did, when boys and beardless youths were the only representatives of his women on the stage? Yes, he must have looked beyond "the ignorant present," and known that a time would come when women, true and worthy, should find it a glory to throw the best part of their natures into these ideal types which he has left to testify to his faith in womanhood, and to make them living realities for thousands to whom they would else have been unknown. Think of a boy as Juliet! as "heavenly Rosalind!" as "divine Imogen!" or the gracious lady of Belmont, "richly left," but still more richly endowed by nature—"The poor rude world," says Jessica, "hath not her fellow." Think of a boy as Miranda, Cordelia, Hermione, Desdemona—who "heavenly true"—as the bright Beatrice, and so on, through all

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-00025-3 - On Some of Shakespeare's Female Characters
Helena Faucit Martin
Excerpt
More information

the wondrous gallery! How could any youth, however gifted and specially trained, even faintly suggest these fair and noble women to an audience? Woman's words coming from a man's lips, a man's heart—it is monstrous to think of! One quite pities Shakespeare, who had to put up with seeing his brightest creations thus marred, misrepresented, spoiled.

But to come back to Ophelia. She was one of the pet dreams of my girlhood—partly, perhaps, from the mystery of her madness. In my childhood I was much alone—taken early away from school because of delicate health; often sent to spend months at the seaside, in the charge of kind but busy people, who, finding me happy with my books on the beach, left me there long hours by myself. I had begged from home the Shakespeare I had been used to read there—an acting edition by John Kemble. This and the *Arabian Nights*—how dear these books were to me! Then I had the *Pilgrim's Progress* and Milton's *Paradise Lost.* Satan was my great hero. I think I knew him by heart. His address to the council I have often declaimed to the waves, when sure of being unobserved. I had also a translation—I do not know by whom (poor enough, but good enough for me then)—of Dante's *Inferno,* some lines of which sank deep into my heart. I have not seen the book for years and years; but they are still there:—

> "Up! be bold!
> Vanquish fatigue by energy of mind!
> For not on plumes or canopied in state
> The soul wins fame!"[1]

---

[1] I have recently found among my old school-books this little volume, which first introduced me to Dante. It is entitled, *The Inferno of Dante Alighieri,*

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-00025-3 - On Some of Shakespeare's Female Characters
Helena Faucit Martin
Excerpt
More information

How often since, in life's hard struggles and troubles, have these lines helped me!

My books were indeed a strange medley, but they were all that were within my reach, and I found them satisfying. They filled my young heart and mind with what fascinated me most, the gorgeous, the wonderful, the grand, the heroic, the self-denying, the self-devoting.

Like all children, I kept, as a rule, my greatest delight to myself. I remember on some occasions, after I had returned home to my usual studies, when a doubt arose about some passage which had happened to be in the little storehouse of my memory, being able to repeat whole chapters and scenes of my favourites to the amused ears of those about me. But I never revealed how much my life was wrapped up in them, even to my only sister, dear as she was to me. She was many years older than myself, and too fond of fun to share in my day-and-night dreams. I knew I should only be laughed at.

Thus I had lived again and again through the whole childhood and lives of many of Shakespeare's heroines, long before

translated into English Blank Verse with Notes by Nathaniel Howard. London: 1807. The passage referred to in the text occurs in canto xxiv. (lines 46 to 54 of the original). It is scored in pencil on the margin with an emphasis, which shows how much it had impressed me. My memory deceived me as to the sequence of the lines, which are as follows:—

> "Up," cried the sage, "now needs thy arduous strength,
> For not on plumes, or canopied in state,
> The soul wins fame, without whose vital smile
> Whoe'er consumes away his gift of life,
> Expires, and leaves such vestige of himself
> As smoke in air, or unregarded foam
> Quick-dying in the water. Up! be bold!
> Vanquish fatigue by energy of mind,
> That conquers every struggle, if uncrushed
> Beneath the burden of the body's frame."

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-00025-3 - On Some of Shakespeare's Female Characters
Helena Faucit Martin
Excerpt
More information

it was my happy privilege to impersonate and make them, in my fashion, my own. During the few years I acted under Mr Macready's management, almost the first, as you know, in my theatrical life, I was never called upon to act the character of Ophelia—I suppose, because the little snatches of song (though merely, one might say, the humming of a tune) kept still alive the tradition that an accomplished singer was required for the part. I had my wish, however, when in Paris, a little later, I was asked, as a favour, to support Mr Macready in *Hamlet* by acting Ophelia. I need not say how nervous I felt—all the more because of this *singing* tradition. The performances were given in the Salle Ventadour, on the "off-nights" of the Italian Opera.

Oh how difficult it is, however much you have lived in a thing, to make real your own ideal, and give it an utterance and a form! To add to my fright, I was told, just before entering on the scene, that Grisi and many others of the Italian group were sitting in a private box on the stage. But I believe I sang in tune, and soon forgot her and all else. I could not help feeling that I somehow drew my audience with me. And what an audience it was! No obtrusive noisy applause, for there was no organised *claque* for the English plays; but what an indescribable atmosphere of sympathy surrounded you! Every tone was heard, every look was watched, felt, appreciated. I seemed lifted into "an ampler ether, a diviner air." Think, if this were so in Desdemona, in Ophelia, what it must have been to act Juliet to them! I was in a perfect ecstasy of delight. I remember that, because of the curtailment of some of the scenes in *Romeo and Juliet* (the brilliant Mercutio was cut out), I had to change my dress

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-00025-3 - On Some of Shakespeare's Female Characters
Helena Faucit Martin
Excerpt
More information

very quickly, and came to the side-scene breathless. I said something to Mr Serle, the acting manager, about the hot haste of it all—no pause to gather one's self up for the great exertion that was to follow. He replied, "Never mind, you will feel no fatigue after this." And he was right. The inspiration of the scene is at all times the best anodyne for pain and bodily fatigue. But who could think of either before an audience so sensitively alive to every touch of the artist's hand?

But to return to "sweet Ophelia." I learned afterwards that, among the audience, when I first played her, were many of the finest minds in Paris; and these found "most pretty things" to say of the Ophelia to which I had introduced them. Many came after the play to my dressing-room, in the French fashion—to say them, I suppose; but, having had this ordeal to go through before, after Desdemona, the character in which I first appeared in Paris, my English shyness took me out of the theatre as soon as I had finished, and before the play ended. All this was, of course, pleasant. But what really gratified me most was, to learn that Mr Macready, sternest of critics, watched me on each night in the scenes of the fourth act; and among the many kind things he said, I cannot forget his telling me that I had thrown a new light on the part, and that he had never seen the mad scenes even approached before. How I treated them specially, it would be difficult to describe to you in words, because they were the outcome of the whole character and life of Ophelia, as these had shaped themselves in my youthful dream.

And now to tell you, as nearly as I can, what that dream was.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-00025-3 - On Some of Shakespeare's Female Characters
Helena Faucit Martin
Excerpt
More information

I pictured Ophelia to myself as the motherless child of an elderly Polonius. His young wife had first given him a son, Laertes, and had died a few years later, after giving birth to the poor little Ophelia. The son takes much after his father, and, his student-life over, seeks his pleasure in the gayer life of France; fond of his little sister in a patronising way, in their rare meetings, but neither understanding nor caring to understand her nature.

The baby Ophelia was left, as I fancy, to the kindly but thoroughly unsympathetic tending of country-folk, who knew little of "inland nurture." Think of her, sweet, fond, sensitive, tender-hearted, the offspring of a delicate dead mother, cared for only by roughly-mannered and uncultured natures! One can see the lonely child, lonely from choice, with no playmates of her kind, wandering by the streams, plucking flowers, making wreaths and coronals, learning the names of all the wild flowers in glade and dingle, having many favourites, listening with eager ears when amused or lulled to sleep at night by the country songs, whose words (in true country fashion, not too refined) come back again vividly to her memory, with the fitting melodies, only, as such things strangely but surely do, when her wits have flown. Thus it is that, when she has been "blasted with ecstasy," all the country customs return to her mind: the manner of burying the dead, the strewing the grave with flowers, "at his head, a grass green turf; at his heels, a stone,"—with all the other country ceremonies. I think it important to keep in view this part of her supposed life, because it puts to flight all the coarse suggestions which unimaginative critics have sometimes made, to explain how Ophelia came to

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-00025-3 - On Some of Shakespeare's Female Characters
Helena Faucit Martin
Excerpt
More information

utter snatches of such ballads as never ought to issue from a young and cultured woman's lips.

When we see Ophelia first, this "Rose of May" is just budding; and, indeed, it is as a bud, never as a full flower, that she lived her brief life.

> "Et, rose—elle a vécu, ce que vivent les roses,
> L'espace d'un matin."

She was still very young, in her early 'teens, according to what Laertes says, when he last sees her. We can imagine her formal, courtierly father, on one of his rare and stated visits to his country home (ill spared from his loved court duties), noting with surprise his little daughter grown into the promise of a charming womanhood. The tender beauty of this budding rose must be no longer left to blush unseen; this shy, gentle nature must be developed, made into something more worthy of her rank. She must imbibe the court culture, and live in its atmosphere. She must become a court lady; and this hitherto half-forgotten flower must be made to expand, under his own eye and teaching, into the completeness of a full-blown hothouse exotic.

When we first see her, we may fairly suppose that she has been only a few months at court. It has as yet taken off none of the bloom of her beautiful nature. That is pure and fresh and simple as she brought it from her country home. One change has taken place, and this a great one. Her heart has been touched, and has found its ideal in the one man about the court who was likely to reach it, both from his rare and attractive qualities, and a certain loneliness in his position not very unlike her own. How could she

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-00025-3 - On Some of Shakespeare's Female Characters
Helena Faucit Martin
Excerpt
More information

help feeling flattered—drawn towards this romantic, desolate Hamlet, the observed of all observers, whose "music vows" have been early whispered in her ears? On the other hand, what sweet repose it must have been to the tired, moody scholar, soldier, prince, dissatisfied with the world and all its ways, to open his heart to her, and to hear the shy yet eloquent talk which he would woo from her—to watch the look, manner, and movements of this graceful child of nature—watch, too, her growing wonder at her new surroundings, the court ceremonies, the strange diversities of character, and to note the impressions made upon her by them,—what delight to trace and analyse the workings of this pure, impressionable mind, all the more interesting and wonderful to him because of the contrast she presented to the parent stem! In all this there was for him the subtle charm which the deep, philosophical intellect must ever find in the pure unconscious innocence and wisdom of a guileless heart.

One can see how the pompous officiousness and the platitudes of Polonius irritate Hamlet beyond endurance. What a contrast the daughter presents to him! Restful, intelligent, unobtrusive, altogether charming, and whom he loves "best, O most best, believe it. . . . Thine evermore, most dear lady, while this machine is to him, Hamlet." And to Ophelia, how great must have been the attraction of an intercourse with a mind like Hamlet's, when first she saw him, and had been sought by his "solicitings"! How alluring, how subtlely sweet to one hitherto so lonely, so tender-hearted, shy, and diffident of her power to please; yet, though she knew it not, so well fitted to understand and to appreciate all the finest qualities of the young Lord Hamlet! We see how

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org