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978-1-108-00126-7 - *The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines: In a Series of Fifteen Tales*, Volume 1

Mary Cowden Clarke

Frontmatter

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The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines

Mary Cowden Clarke (1809-98) was the daughter of the publisher Vincent Novello. She was a noted Shakespearian scholar who produced a complete concordance to his works in 1845, and her fascination with the plays led to her publishing in 1850 a series of imaginative accounts of the girlhood of some of his heroines. Her motive was 'to imagine the possible circumstances and influences of scene, event, and associate, surrounding the infant life of his heroines, which might have conduced to originate and foster those germs of character recognized in their maturity as by him developed; to conjecture what might have been the first imperfect dawns of that which he has shown us in the meridian blaze of perfection.' These 'prequels' offer a back-story which is surprising in its subversive interpretation of the plays and especially of the role of the 'hero'. This volume contains the stories of Portia, Lady Macbeth, Helena (from *As You Like It*), Desdemona, and Mistress Page and Mistress Ford from *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.

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The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines

In a Series of Fifteen Tales

VOLUME 1

MARY COWDEN CLARKE



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Frontmatter

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THE
G I R L H O O D
O F
SHAKESPEARE'S HEROINES ;
I N
A SERIES OF FIFTEEN TALES,
B Y
MARY COWDEN CLARKE,

Author of the Concordance to Shakespeare.

“as petty to his ends,
As is the morn-dew on the myrtle leaf
To his grand sea.”

Shakespeare.

TALE I.
PORTIA ; THE HEIRESS OF BELMONT.

L O N D O N :
W. H. SMITH & SON, 136, STRAND ; AND SIMPKIN, MARSHALL, & CO.,
STATIONERS' HALL COURT.

1850.

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[More information](#)

PREFACE.

If ever Preface were especially needful, it is surely so in the present instance, to state an explanatory word concerning the design of the work, and an exculpatory word touching the choice of its subject.

The design has been, to trace the probable antecedents in the history of some of Shakespeare's women; to imagine the possible circumstances and influences of scene, event, and associate, surrounding the infant life of his heroines, which might have conducted to originate and foster those germs of character recognized in their maturity, as by him developed; to conjecture what might have been the first imperfect dawnings of that which he has shown us in the meridian blaze of perfection: and it was believed that such a design would combine much matter of interesting speculation, afford scope for pleasant fancy, and be productive of entertainment in the various narratives.

Although little or no attempt will be found in these tales to give pictures of the times in which their chief actors may be supposed to have lived, yet it is hoped that no gross violation of probability in period, scene, or custom, has been committed. The development of character, not of history, has been the intention. In the case of the only historic personage who figures in these biographic tales—Lady Macbeth—names and facts have been used; but with as little regard to their strict place in history, as was paid by the poet himself, who took the story from the old chronicles, and modelled it after his own fashion.

If it be borne in mind that all *climax* in incident and sentiment was to be

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

iv.

PREFACE.

carefully avoided throughout these stories,—inasmuch as they are merely preliminaries to catastrophes already ordained,—the obstacles in the way of giving them startling features of romance will be understood. The aim has been to invent such adventures as might be supposed to color the future lives; to place the heroines in such situations as should naturally lead up to, and account for, the known conclusion of their subsequent confirmed character and after-fate; in short, to invest each story with consistent and *appropriate* interest.

I would also remind my indulgent readers (and may mine be such!), when they find me venturing to make Shakespeare's people act and speak, that here, his women are in their *girlhood*,—these are their “sallet days,” when they are “green in judgment,”—immature,—but the opening buds of the future “bright consummate flowers” which he has given to us in immortal bloom.

My exculpatory word—my word in extenuation—is this. I beseech my readers to believe that love, not presumption, prompted the subject of this series of stories:—

Not mine the sweetness or the skill,
But mine the love that will not tire;
And, born of love, the vague desire
That spurs an imitative will.

“*In Memoriam.*”

Shakespeare himself is my voucher that

Never anything can be amiss
When simpleness and duty tender it;
* * * * *
And what poor duty cannot do,
Noble respect takes it in might, not merit.

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TO
JOHN ROLT, Esq., Q.C.,
THIS TALE,—
WHOSE HEROINE BECOMES
THE *FAIREST* LAWYER ON RECORD,—
IS INSCRIBED,
WITH CORDIAL RESPECT,
BY
MARY COWDEN CLARKE.