

It would be well, therefore, if a little of the time now swallowed up in the heterogeneous current literature of the day, were given to studying Shakespeare, who is second only to the Bible itself as a teacher concerning our complex humanity with its manifold hidden springs of action. If "the noblest study of mankind is man," Shakespeare is one of the best masters in the study. In the following brief notes on Shakespeares female characters and their characteristics, no originality is claimed as they are chiefly reminiscences of lectures on the subject by a competent authority. But they may set some readers to studying the subjects for themselves and so to studying Shakespeare. If so the object will have been gained.

In Shakespeare's women we can see even more than in his men, the wonderful creative genius which makes him many sided as nature herself. His "nature" is "an art that nature makes." Sixteenth century critics indeed were wont to say that his *women* are inferior to his *men*, but no one who asserts this can have studied him with any attention. It must be borne in mind, however, that his dramas were of course intended for the stage of that day, when all the female characters were personated by him, which placed the author at a disadvantage as regarded his female characters.

Poetry at that time gave prominence to women, Spencer's Faery Queene being a notable instance of this. The women of Shakespeare excel, however, in their *reality*. His women is no angel, but a dearer being, coming closer to our hearts, with all her faults and short comings. They are abundantly diversified, also, for the inexhaustible variety of Shakespeare is nowhere more striking than in his portraiture of women. *He* never repeats himself. Most novelists, even such masters as Dickens and Thackeray, have certain types and tones of character into which they naturally fall, certain pet ideal characters that they reproduce again and again. Not so Shakespeare. The separate individuality of his characters is perfect as that of nature herself. You can study his characters as real men and women. The girlish impetuosity of Juliet; the constancy of Ophelia, like a crushed violet, breathing sweetness in her very despair, in wild wondering music as of an Æolian harp; the characters of Portia and Volumnia, Romans matrons with Pagan principles, but true womanly instincts, all stand forth with a vividness that make them appear to us like people we have seen and known, rather than mere creations. In Shakespeare, as in nature, we have the distinction between man's courage, proceeding chiefly from his greater physical strength and energy and woman's courage, consisting rather in moral strength and endurance.

In Constance, the mother of Arthur, in King John, we have the impersonation of genuine maternal affection carried out with as consistent individuality as the more complex character of Lady Macbeth. Each type of womanhood is true to the deepest instincts of the sex, with the truth that pervades all Shakespeare's characters,

which are never ideal phantoms, his best never being too perfect, while, in his worst, he always keeps within the range of human nature. He never copied nor caricatured, but, like all artists of true creative power, *studied human nature*, and his development of individual character does not consist in studies from individuals, but from *humanity*. In an age when it was only too common to gratify personal piques and dislikes by caricaturing enemies, Shakespeare's freedom from such a practice won for him from Ben Jonson the appellation of "gentle Shakespeare." Mr. Justice Shallow indeed might have suggested Falstaff, and other characters may have been similarly suggested by people he had known, but in all Shakespeare rises to the universal truth of common humanity, and recognizes the good alike in Protestant and Roman Catholic, not, like some celebrated authors, allowing his estimate to be coloured by personal predilections. While true to the great principles of human nature, however, his numerous anachronisms show that he cared but little for the local and temporary truth of place or time, caring more to present his dramas vividly to the men of his own time than for the exactitude of an antiquarian.

In the same way, in his historical dramas, Shakespeare by no means adheres closely to historical accuracy, seeming only anxious for truth to *life*. His Constance in King John is wholly his own creation; the Constance of history being no such woeful widow, but twice remarried; while Arthur, instead of being a child, as the play represents him, must have been at least a youth of fifteen. The Constance of the play, however, if not a *historical* character, is a *real* one, blending the weakness of a commonplace woman with the intensity of maternal love, which is predominant in her over every other feeling—her very violence borrowing dignity from the circumstances that call it forth, exhibiting, not strength of *character*, but strength of *affection*, possessing only the kind of courage *peculiar* to woman, yielding to every impulse; a woman, not wise, very wilful, passionate, uncontrolled, yet a truthful picture of an ordinary woman in extraordinary circumstances. Her character contrasts with that of Isabella, manifesting kindred impulses,—of Cleopatra, in her uncontrolled wilfulness, a devotee to pleasure, a gay, many-coloured butterfly of pleasure and fashion,—of Portia, the high-minded wife of Brutus in Julius Cæsar, an old Roman type, worthy of the noblest ideal, as she appears in the speech beginning:

"I grant I am a woman, but withal
A woman that Lord Brutus took to wife, &c."

Cleopatra lives under the same law of duty, and says:

"What's brave, what's noble,
Let's do it after the high Roman fashion."

Yet, under all her sensuous beauty, she is only a coward, who dares not apply the asps till her waiting-woman has anticipated her in the act.

The source of pleasure in tragedy is indeed a curious question. That of pleasure in comedy and epic poetry is easily understood, the latter concerning itself with that of the heroic deeds of man. But tragedy seems to concern itself with beauty, love and helplessness hastening to a wretched fate, as in the case of Juliet, Cordelia, or poor Ophelia, as placed before us in the affecting lines:—