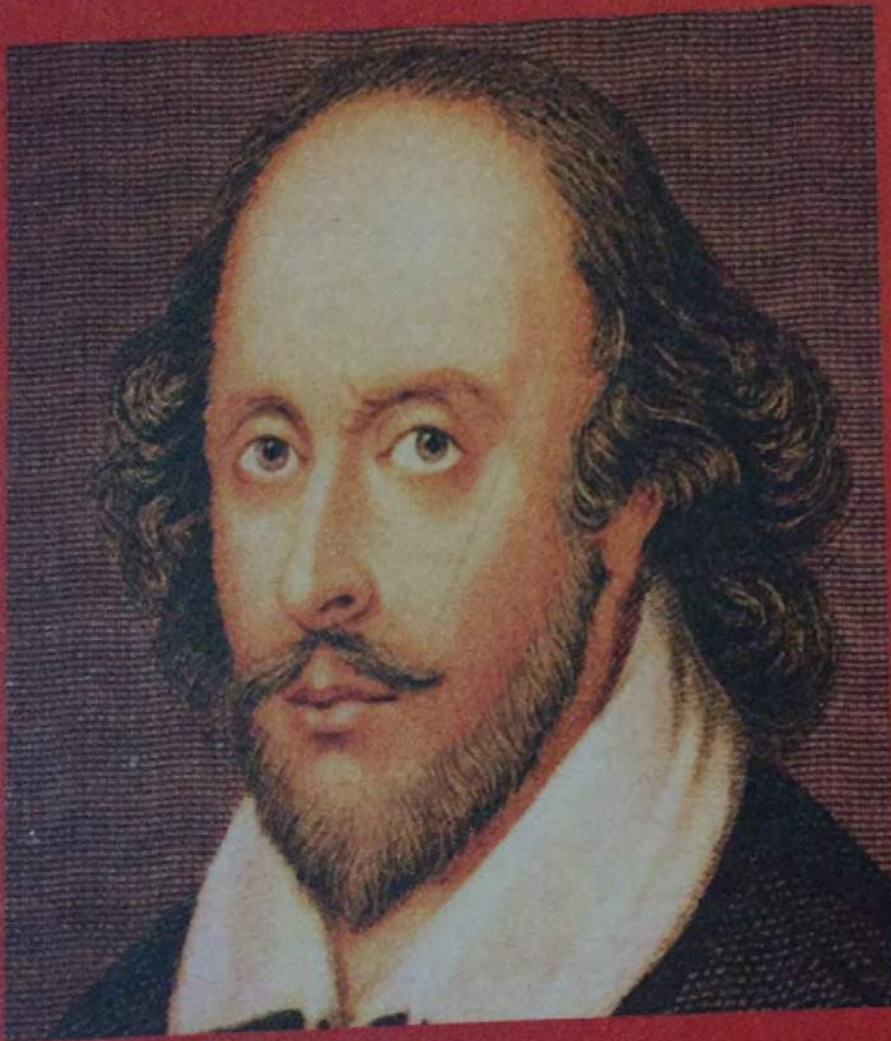


SHAKESPEARE FOREVER

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SHAKESPEARE'S TRAGIC HEROINES: ENIGMATIC PROTOTYPES OF FEMININITY

ANGELINE SORNA

Although Shakespeare reflects and at times supports the English Renaissance stereotypes of women and their various roles and responsibilities in society, he is also a writer who questions, challenges, and modifies those representations. A keen observer of people and society the bard was, he had created an array of the most fascinating women of infinite variety. Though strong female characters are found in many of his plays making Ruskin's statement, "Shakespeare has no heroes, only heroines" true, it is surprising to note that in none of Shakespeare's four great tragedies women are the central figure. In Greek tragedies, as in such plays as Euripides' *Medea* and Sophocles' *Electra*, the eponymous heroines dominate the plays. French tragedies of Jean Racine also show a similar trend. Racine introduced the drama of the passions of the heart and his dominating characters are women, for instance Phedre and Andromaque. As Stendhal has pointed out in his *Racine et Shakespeare*, Shakespeare does not depict the passions in the same way as Racinian tragedy does but Shakespeare's tragic heroines do have an appeal and beauty of own. They may be as much creatures of circumstances as his tragic heroes but they have qualities of character which makes them glow forth with an added poignancy and a special dignity. A study of the four great tragedies of Shakespeare reveals a pattern how the tragic

represents wickedness and Desdemona nobility. All these four characters seem to be antithesis and counterparts to one another striking a beautiful balance in Shakespeare's presentation of women. The portrayal of Ophelia as a meek woman of inferior intellectuality is compensated by the character of Cordelia who is an epitome of superior spirituality. The wickedness of Lady Macbeth is neutralized by the nobility of Desdemona.

What David Cecil writes of Hardy's characterization is also true of that of Shakespeare- His sensitiveness to feminine charm and his power to distinguish its quality are the chief means by which his tragic heroines live. They are vibrant with a vitality of their own, though one has to admit that compared to his other heroines like Cleopatra the tragic heroines are less complex in temperament and motivation. They are individualized less strongly than the tragic heroes and they do not have the same three- dimensional effect. Shakespeare in all his wisdom must have had his own reasons for this. The role and function of the hero of a Shakespearean tragedy is far more important than that of the heroine and he could not afford to allow more complexity to the character of the tragic heroine. But we can safely say that he did not make them 'flat' characters either and had provided them with wonderful human depth.

Lily B. Campbell says: "... every character in Shakespearean play is engaged in saying exactly what Shakespeare wanted the audience to know and in saying it over

and over again... It is quite safe to trust the characters to tell the truth about themselves". Shakespeare's tragic heroines are no exception. They reveal their character themselves, which truth is reinforced by the estimates of their characters offered by some other characters in the play. There is hardly any scope for misunderstanding Shakespeare's intentions in regard to them.

Ophelia:

Ophelia typifies meekness often verging on weakness. She is as fragile as she is passive and is completely engulfed in the torrential waves of tragedy. Meek, gentle and submissive as she is, her very virtues have an air of passivity about them. In the words of Georg Brandt, "She is a soft, yielding creature, with no power of resistance; a loving soul, but without the passion which gives strength". "*Frailty, thy name is woman*" exclaims Hamlet, mainly Gertrude in mind. Ophelia does not share the moral lapse of Gertrude but she is too frail for the harsh realities of the world. 'Ophelia is a doll without intellect' writes John Masefield. This no doubt is an exaggeration but it is an exaggeration of a vital truth. Shakespeare must have been aware of this aspect of her character and he introduces as A.C. Bradley says, 'an element, not of deep tragedy, but of pathetic beauty'. It is precisely because she is weak that pathos is more appropriate in her case than the element of grandeur. Bradley refers to her 'childlike nature' and her 'inexperience' and these are some of the qualities that contribute to Ophelia's weakness. Her immaturity, uncertainty and inexperience are very characteristic of adolescence. Keats wisely writes in his Preface to *Endymion*:

'The imagination of a girl is healthy, and the mature imagination of a woman is healthy, but there is a space of life between, in which the soul is in a ferment, the character undecided, the way of life uncertain...'

This is so true of Ophelia and this uncertainty prevents her from rising to the occasion and helping her beloved to fulfill his task. The word 'decoy' readily comes to the mind of critics like Coleridge and Brandes when they write of Ophelia, however they do not take into account the fact that it was because of her innocence that she could be made a mere tool in the hands of Polonius and Claudius. In the very first scene in which Ophelia is introduced (Act I, Sc, iii) her lack of worldly wisdom is stressed. 'You speak like a green girl' says Polonius and when Ophelia confesses, "I do not know, my lord, what I should think" Polonius acidly retorts, "Marry, I'll teach you: think yourself a baby". For her father's commands usually her only answer is "I shall obey, my Lord". Reminding the readers of the beauty of delicate flowers, meek and mild is Shakespeare's Ophelia. When the reader is almost convinced that Shakespeare thinks of women as weak and intellectually inferior, he creates Cordelia- an epitome of fortitude, truth and moral strength.

Cordelia:

In King Lear, Shakespeare seems to provide us with a balance to Ophelia's meekness in Cordelia's fortitude. Her name is derived from 'cor'-heart and Cordelia is heart's strength personified. Rightly did Shakespeare retain the name which he found in Holinshed's *Chronicles*.

...though like
...powerful. John F. Danby
...life and holiness of heart's
...adversely interpreted
...When her father declares:
"Here I disclaim all my
Propinquity and proper
And as a stranger to m
Hold thee from this fo
Cordelia refuses to be brow-beaten b
...would have meekly submitted
...Cordelia is her fortitude. Only
...prisoner, for a moment sh
...
We are not the first
Who, with best meaning
For thee oppressed king,
Myself could else out-fr
(Act V. iii)
No better definition of fo
...Cordelia is the very embodimen
...something heavenly about it. I
...could hail her as 'a soul of bl
...bound 'upon a wh-

Though like Ophelia, Cordelia makes only brief appearances in the play the impression she makes on the readers is deep and powerful. John F. Danby asserts that 'to understand Ophelia is to understand the whole play'. Cordelia stands to represent life and holiness of heart's affections. She is often misunderstood; Freud considered Cordelia as symbol of death Coleridge adversely interpreted her character as proud and arrogant. When her father declares:

“Here I disclaim all my paternal care,
Propinquity and property of blood,
And as a stranger to my heart and me.
Hold thee from this forever.” (Act I. i)

Cordelia refuses to be brow-beaten by her father. Ophelia in her place would have meekly submitted. The first thing that strikes Cordelia is her fortitude. Only once when her ailing father is taken prisoner, for a moment she feels utterly dejected and

“We are not the first
Who, with best meaning have incurr'd the worst.
For thee oppressed king, am I cast down;
Myself could else out-frown false Fortune's frown
(Act V. iii)

No better definition of fortitude could be found than this. Cordelia is the very embodiment of fortitude of soul which has something heavenly about it. It is but natural that her father should hail her as 'a soul of bliss' when he himself felt that he was bound 'upon a wheel of fire' (Act IV, vii) It is her smile of

love that made life worth living for Lear even in the moment of unbearable agony.

'What shall Cordelia do? Love and be silent' (Act I.i) are the first words spoken by Cordelia in the play. This silence comes from the strength of her heart. 'No coward soul' is hers. Cordelia's strength was misconstrued by Lear as obtuse obstinacy, 'So young and so untender?' Her reply is only a statement of fact: 'So young, my lord, and true' (I.i) Cordelia stands on this vantage point of truth and it is from truth that she derives her strength. Cordelia is not as Freud takes her to be, an embodiment of death-wish; she is a martyr who sacrificed herself in the alter of filial love.

Lady Macbeth:

In Lady Macbeth, Shakespeare presents us with a study of wickedness but Lady Macbeth is wicked with a difference. In her character are combined wickedness and womanliness in almost equal proportions and this makes her one of Shakespeare's most remarkable women characters. She is less cruel and vicious than Aeschylus' Clytemnestra and less violent than Euripides' Medea. She is not an idealist like Sophocles' Antigone but, like her, is single-minded. In Macbeth we find combined elements of a hero and a villain and Shakespeare has made a match for him in Lady Macbeth. In both their cases there are redeeming features and extenuating circumstances. This is the reason why Lady Macbeth retains our sympathy till the end. This, the reader cannot feel with characters like Goneril or Regan. Certainly they are not only more evil, they are also more

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fierce and more savage. After the portrayal of crude wickedness in women in *King Lear*, Shakespeare offers us a much finer picture of wickedness in *Macbeth*. Critic Mrs. Jameson makes a precise analysis of the character of Lady Macbeth when she says, "She is a terrible impersonation of evil passion and mighty powers, never so far removed from our own natures as to be cast beyond the pale of our sympathies for the woman herself remains a woman to the last, - still linked with her sex and with humanity".

There are a number of good qualities which Shakespeare invests her character. She is a devoted wife. The mutual love of the husband and wife seems to be the solitary star of their life when it is engulfed in darkness. She retains the same affection for her husband after his breakdown and does not take him to task. When Macbeth confides: 'Strange things I have in head that will to hand/ Which must be acted ere they may be scann'd', she only gently points out his lack of rest and sleep: 'You lack the season of all natures, sleep' (III.iv) She might have misguided her husband but her love and loyalty are beyond question.

The maternal tenderness and filial affection of Lady Macbeth are not directly portrayed by Shakespeare but there are revealing suggestions in the play. The well-known lines: 'I have given suck, and know/ How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me'. (Act I.vii) Every word bespeaks her great motherly love. Her allusion of dashing a suckling baby's brains out has often been misinterpreted as an evidence of being 'merciless and unwomanly'. Nothing can be farther from the truth as she only states that rather than break the solemn pledge that Macbeth has

taken, she is ready to do even that which was most repugnant to her. There is another passage no less suggestive of the gentler aspect of her character: 'Had he not resembled/ My father as he slept I had done't' (Act I.ii.) This side of her is surprising and the readers cannot help but wonder that Lady Macbeth had so much of the "milk of human kindness" in her. Critic H.N. Hudson pertinently points out: 'that some fancied resemblance to her father should thus rise up and stay her uplifted arm, shows that in her case conscience works quite as effectually in that of her husband'. It would not be necessary for a woman like Goneril or Regan to pray that she might be 'unsexed'. Lady Macbeth is too much a woman not to know that she must have some supernatural soliciting to augment her strength to execute her purpose.

These glimpses of the better and gentler side of Lady Macbeth's character are necessary for Shakespeare's artistic purpose. Shakespeare wanted to create a character who is a plausible human being, and a woman at that. She might have been 'unsexed' for a while, otherwise it was not possible for her to do what she did but her feminine nature soon becomes too heavy for her to bear. While crime hardens Macbeth, it makes his wife gradually disintegrate. Never before was a broken and contrite heart more poignantly portrayed: 'Out, damned spot! Out, I say! One; two: why, then, 'its time to do't. Hell is murky!' (Act V.i) She experiences living death and becomes a ghost of her former self. One can only wish her peace: 'Rest, rest, perturbed spirit!'

Desdemona:

Desdemona is Shakespeare's portrait of a great woman in the true sense of the term and a perfect antithesis to the wickedness of Lady Macbeth. She is every inch a noble woman. If Lady Macbeth is 'magnificent in sin', 'divine' Desdemona is magnificent in virtue. She is Shakespeare's portrait of 'the Eternal Feminine'. 'The Eternal Feminine' or 'the woman-soul', Goethe tells in his *Faust*, Part II, 'leadeth us upward and on'. The phrase can be used for Desdemona, who at a critical moment of her life can reach alpine heights of greatness unattainable to ordinary mortals. Bradley calls *Othello* the most painful of all tragedies and it is the 'wretched fortune' of the heroine that makes the play so painful as a tragedy. The name 'Desdemona' is derived from Greek *dusdaimon*- 'ill-fate' meaning the ill-fated woman. It is difficult to find a woman more 'star-crossed' than Desdemona; 'So sweet was ne'er so fatal'. She is a truly noble lady who is dogged by ill luck to the last but she remains unvanquished in her spirit. If there is any prevarication about the loss of the handkerchief, that is clean washed away by one more falsehood, a sacred lie that is truer than truth itself.

Emilia. O! Who, hath done this deed?

Desdemona: Nobody; I myself; farewell.

Commend me to thy kind lord. O! Farewell! (V.ii)

A true tragic heroine, Desdemona retains her love for her husband till the very end, filling the readers with awe and admiration. Her end is piteous in the extreme but it is no less terrifying. The Desdemona of the last phase has been raised to celestial heights, shining forth aspects of the 'Eternal Feminine' -

unpredictability and they are inscrutable and elusive. Shakespeare in his wisdom has understood this and in his portrayal of the tragic heroines had struck a fine balance and antithesis reflecting women in all their strength, weakness, intelligence, meekness, individuality, silence, fortitude, love, motherly kindness and other nuances of feminine character. Though not as complex as his tragic heroes, the characters of the four unforgettable women are equally fascinating if not more than the heroes and they serve as prototypes to enigmatic women we find around us in daily life and discover even in ourselves such potentials. Not projecting his own stand or idea on women but faithfully...

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