

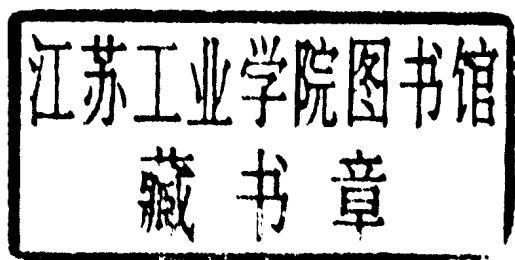
SHAKESPEARE
AND
VICTORIAN WOMEN

—
GAIL MARSHALL

CAMBRIDGE

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Introduction

In 1895, Kathleen Knox wrote the article 'On the Study of Shakespeare for Girls' in the guise of a letter to her young friend Dorothy. Dorothy had begun to study Shakespeare at school, and was not enjoying it:

- I. You have recently been moved up into the 'Senior Cambridge' form, and, therefore, been obliged to take their studies, one of which is the systematic reading of a play of Shakespeare's, with the laborious study and committing to memory of many notes, and you have found the occupation dry, difficult, and uninteresting.
- II. You want to know why what was meant for a pleasure in one generation should be a pain and grief to another.
- III. You want to know what there is in Shakespeare to make people rave about him as they do.
- IV. You have a lurking suspicion that the fault is in yourself, and you want to be told the remedy.
- V. In short, why should one 'learn Shakespeare' at all?¹

Knox's response is practical and briskly admonitory, initially citing Dorothy's taste for the reading of contemporary weekly newspapers and magazines, supplemented by the fiction of 'Conan Doyle, Rider Haggard, Stanley Weyman, or Anthony Hope' (p. 222), as part of her problem. The dangers of such a state of affairs cannot be overstated:

it is as certain now as it was in the days of the Renaissance that, if we habitually saturate our minds in mediocre or commonplace literature, they will sink below even the level of what we read, and that, unless we strenuously seek and study the best and highest in art and literature, we shall remain weak, childish, puerile, ignoble, and, therefore, less fitted to do a noble work in the world. (p. 222)

Arnoldian concepts of culture are invoked as a mainstay against the decline represented and facilitated by an immersion in popular culture, and specifically in the culture of the present day and its alleged advances: 'the best kind of literature has no affinity with bicycles and telephones!' (p. 222).

It soon becomes clear, however, that Knox's aim for Dorothy, and indeed for Shakespeare, is rather more specific than her cultural framework might have suggested. The specific moment of 1895 is giving Knox serious cause for concern, representing as it does the proliferation of the 'new woman' movement in literature and politics. Whilst not precisely condemning the new woman, she is nonetheless emphatic that her example and activities will be destructive unless leavened by the lessons of Shakespeare. Precisely what those lessons are is initially unclear:

in this age of feminine eagerness and prominence, when everything in life, literature and science is being attempted by women, and often – as must infallibly be the case at the beginning of every great movement – with woful lack of judgment, it will be well to have such a standard of sanity, moderation, and harmony as is presented to us by Shakespeare's world, where the men, even, fail when they are immoderate, violent or unbalanced in character or aim. I would have every would-be 'new woman' before she begins her crusade against this wicked world, especially if the pen be her weapon, study and lay to heart the lessons contained in 'King Lear', 'Hamlet', 'Macbeth' or 'Julius Caesar'. (p. 223)

This list of plays is intriguing, containing as it does no single discernible pedagogic aim, and an extraordinary range of female characters not usually noted for their didactic functions, moral or otherwise. The lack of a unitary lesson within these plays suggests that Knox intends that the plays should stand synecdochically for all that Shakespeare is deemed able to teach, or, as she puts it, 'all the human wisdom that is to be found in Shakespeare', and which Dorothy can 'imbibe unconsciously to bear fruit in the woman's life [she] will have to lead hereafter' (p. 223). This, then, is Dorothy's part of the inheritance of the English reader who is privileged by birth to come into close connection with Shakespeare, representative of 'the best that has been thought and said in the world', as Knox quotes from Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* (1869).²

Should all this prove 'too deep' for Dorothy, however, Knox ends by suggesting a further reason for her continuing her study of Shakespeare: his standing 'pre-eminent in the creation of lovely women – lovely in body and soul' (p. 223). By imbibing his lessons on this subject, Knox suggests, Dorothy will not only achieve loveliness herself, but will also be able to moderate the impulses of the late-Victorian period which seem to threaten those qualities most prized in Shakespeare, or at least in Knox's reading of him:

The nineteenth century has given education, enlightenment, and freedom, the twentieth century will, it is to be hoped, temper these somewhat stormy elements into a serene and harmonious whole, but what is it all without what the sixteenth

century has said first? If for no other reason, my dear Dorothy, than your own embellishment, study Shakespeare's women, and be assured that without the deep heart of Cordelia, the devotion of Imogen, the patience of Hermione, the generosity of Portia, the gentleness of Desdemona, the joyousness of Rosalind, and the grace of Perdita, all the enlightenment and freedom of the nineteenth century will but serve to make you a byword in your generation. (p. 223)

The strength and terms of the admonition are startling, and signal both all that Knox feels about the advances of the 1890s, and how important Shakespeare might be in the attempt to counter the threats of contemporary culture and specifically of contemporary women. She ends by enjoining Dorothy, 'while yet in [her] teens', to be a "Shakespeare woman" (p. 223), studying him exhaustively, learning his lessons, and only then adding what modern civilisation has to offer.

The thrust of her comments is undoubtedly conservative, both culturally and politically, as well as in terms of women's aspirations, in advocating that Dorothy's relationship with the heroines primarily be one of emulation, and in finding in those heroines a form of apparently timeless and morally exemplary femininity. Knox is far from alone in her approach, with John Ruskin simply the best known of the many writers who, as we will see, would hold up Shakespeare's heroines as an example to their countrywomen. In *Sesame and Lilies* (1865), he seeks to consult the greatest men of the past as to their testimony 'respecting what they held to be the true dignity of woman, and her mode of help to man'. He begins with Shakespeare:

□:56. Note broadly in the outset, Shakespeare has no heroes; – he has only heroines ... Whereas there is hardly a play that has not a perfect woman in it, steadfast in grave hope and errorless purpose: Cordelia, Desdemona, Isabella, Hermione, Imogen, Queen Catherine, Perdita, Sylvia, Viola, Rosalind, Helena, and last, and perhaps loveliest, Virgilia, are all faultless; conceived in the highest heroic type of humanity.

□:57. Then observe, secondly, The catastrophe of every play is caused always by the folly or fault of a man; the redemption, if there be any, is by the wisdom and virtue of a woman, and, failing that, there is none.³

He goes on to exemplify this view with considerations of *King Lear*, *Othello*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Cymbeline*, *Measure for Measure*, *Coriolanus*, *All's Well That Ends Well* and *Much Ado About Nothing* before turning to Portia, the 'unlessoned girl' (*Merchant of Venice*, III.ii.160):

who appears among the helplessness, the blindness, and the vindictive passions of men, as a gentle angel, bringing courage and safety by her presence, and defeating the worst malignities of crime by what women are fancied most to fail in, – precision and accuracy of thought. (□57)

He proceeds via a brief view of Ophelia, the ‘only weak woman’ in Shakespeare, and Lady Macbeth, Goneril and Regan – ‘frightful exceptions to the ordinary laws of life, fatal in their influence also, in proportion to the power for good which they have abandoned’ (158) – to conclude:

Such, in broad light, is Shakespeare’s testimony to the position and character of women in human life. He represents them as infallibly faithful and wise counsellors, – incorruptibly just and pure examples – strong always to sanctify, even when they cannot save. (158)

Thus is Shakespeare enrolled by Ruskin in his attempts to articulate the ‘guiding function of the woman’ (167).

Both Knox and Ruskin, however, belie the evidence of the enormous variety of ways in which Victorian women read, quoted, responded to, argued with and countered Shakespeare in their work, conversations, letters, education and performances. Far from the inert presence Knox and Ruskin would make of him in their attempts to create generations of ‘Shakespeare women’, the playwright inhabits a space in Victorian women’s culture which, as we will see in the body of this book, is characterised by a discursive, interrogative energy. Indeed, even when a woman takes on the mantle of the ideal figure that Knox and Ruskin extract from Shakespeare, as Helen Faucit arguably does in her stage performances, and in her subsequent book on Shakespeare’s heroines,⁴ the resulting figure is far from the simple icon that the commentators envisage. As far as Faucit is concerned, Shakespeare enables her to support a career, first as an actress and then as an author, which won for her a considerable measure of fame and financial reward, and a degree of influence which went far beyond Knox’s and Ruskin’s visions.

To say all of this is, of course, to recognise how Victorian women’s responses to Shakespeare have helped to shape current critical opinion on Shakespeare’s Victorian position and significance. No longer content unthinkingly to accept the accuracy of the Carlylean ‘King Shakespeare’, recent scholars have done much to uncover the influence of one ‘whose voice’, according to Adrian Poole, ‘is not singular but carnival, teeming, multitudinous’.⁵ Far from imbibing his influence unconsciously, as Knox suggested they might do, absorbing him passively as part of the culture of their country, the women dealt with here, from the schoolgirls learning about Shakespeare at Cheltenham Ladies College to the most eminent women writers of the period, are all engaged in debating Shakespeare’s cultural capital, in investigating his various legacies for them, and in seeking to realise his influence upon them. Even those who are most intimate with

him, those writers whose language is infiltrated to its core by Shakespeare's linguistic and literary legacy, are concerned to penetrate the nature of his hold over them and their century, and to contest that legacy where necessary. George Eliot's work as a novelist is shot through with her reading of Shakespeare, but her relationship with him is in no way complicit, and neither is her sense of how her century has itself remade Shakespeare's legacy.

These women read, argue with, 'talk back'⁶ to Shakespeare, both in his works and also in his guise as metonym for a form of institutionalised power, what Christy Desmet engagingly terms the 'Big-time Shakespeare', who 'serves corporate goals, entrenched power structures, and conservative cultural ideologies'.⁷ But women's negotiations with Shakespeare occupy other arenas too, most notably the domestic spaces where they grew up and where many of them first encountered Shakespeare, and where adult relationships subsequently evolve through the language and structures provided by Shakespeare. To draw attention to this aspect of women's links with Shakespeare is not to try to insist on autobiographical readings of their work, but rather to assert the importance of the genealogy of their relationship with Shakespeare, and to demonstrate his position as a writer who can mediate, uniquely perhaps, between private and public, personal and professional. To suggest this is not to seek to instantiate a gap between public and private spheres, a notion which anyway seems to hold increasingly less validity as a tool for modelling the Victorians, but rather to stress how readily Shakespeare inhabits both spaces, mediating public words with the intimacies of the romantic and family relationships through which he is often best made known, and which colour his afterlife. His is a language which is spoken on stage, quoted in novels, and appropriated for advertising in this most commercial of ages,⁸ but he also slips almost unnoticed into love letters and the textures of everyday life. This book seeks to address the particularities of such private moments, as well as some of the cultural dynamics of women's public engagement with Shakespeare, and in doing so makes clear that their private use of Shakespeare far exceeds the terms of the ideal of the 'Shakespeare woman'.

The very possibility of this ideal rests upon the unexamined assumption of its timelessness in the works of writers and artists such as Ruskin and Knox, the actress Helen Faucit, and artists such as those gathered together by Charles Heath for his successful collections of portraits of Shakespeare's women, which appeared in 1836 and 1848. Each of these commentators upon Shakespeare's women was concerned to emphasise the timelessness of the ideal Shakespeare woman and of her attributes. There is no hint in

Ruskin's work, for instance, of the financial and class status which enables Portia's education and underpins her successful functioning in Venice, and which indeed makes it possible for her to travel independently to Venice in the first place. Such an observation would be completely out of line with an agenda that seeks to elevate even the most modest of women into a Shakespearean pantheon that is simultaneously deemed to denote the best of Victorian womanhood. The rhetoric of timeless femininity works to deny the agency of history and contingency within a profoundly aspirational ethic, and consequently makes synonymous Shakespearean and Victorian feminine ideals.

However, the concept of the timelessly ideal feminine is, of course, deeply problematic as applied to Victorian gender ideology, confident though both Ruskin and Knox are that they are able to articulate that notion through Shakespeare's women. Questions of its precise constitution apart, the very possibility of such an ideal demands further interrogation, for it is deeply oxymoronic: it is both timeless, eternal, and hence other in historical terms; and also ever-present, ever relevant, and available to be incorporated within the terms of contemporary culture. In theoretical terms, Shakespeare's women and their qualities, and indeed the playwright himself, are thus both in the realm of the semiotic, the transcendent, beyond history; and yet are also expected to operate within the symbolic order, inscribed and incorporated as they are within institutional frameworks and apparatuses. This fissure lies at the heart of the variety of ways in which Shakespeare and his women were celebrated throughout the Victorian period, and their assessment and negotiation of it defines Victorian women's relationships with Shakespeare.

Throughout this book, I will argue, we see women variously negotiating their Shakespearean legacy and attempting to plot its meaning for themselves and for their culture along the temporal and ideological axes I've outlined. Women negotiate their political, personal and professional relationships with Shakespeare and his women via this matrix, whereby, broadly speaking, an historicist attentiveness to the cultural situation of the playwright and his women generally signals a recognition of Shakespeare as fundamentally, and often liberatingly, non-Victorian. This is certainly the case in Anna Jameson's work on Shakespeare's heroines, which was published in 1832 as *Characteristics of Women, Moral, Poetical, and Historical*, and which came to be known in later editions as *Shakespeare's Heroines*. This gallery of portraits, as we will see, recognises the crucial, determining impact of historical contingency on characterisation, an aspect of the work which, as Anne E. Russell notes, becomes submerged in its later title.⁹ Jameson emphasises that Portia

is, like other characters, 'individualised by qualities peculiar to herself; by her high mental powers, her enthusiasm of temperament, her decision of purpose, and her buoyancy of spirit. These are innate; she has other distinguishing qualities more external, and which are the result of the circumstances in which she is placed.'¹⁰ More controversially, she suggests that such a heroine

constituted like Portia, and placed in this age, and in the actual state of society, would find society arm'd against her; and instead of being like Portia, a gracious, happy, beloved, and loving creature, would be a victim, immolated in fire to that multitudinous Moloch termed Opinion. With her the world without would be at war with the world within; in the perpetual strife, either her nature would 'be subdued to the element it worked in', and bending it to a necessity it could neither escape nor approve, lose at last something of its original brightness; or otherwise – a perpetual spirit of resistance, cherished as a safeguard, might perhaps in the end destroy the equipoise; firmness would become pride and self-assurance, and the soft sweet, feminine texture of the mind settle into rigidity. Is there then no sanctuary for such a mind? – Where shall it find a refuge from the world? – Where seek for strength against itself? Where, but in Heaven? (pp. 92–3)

Unlike Ruskin, Jameson finds herself defeated by the imaginative effort to situate such a woman within the nineteenth century, and is indeed confident that she could not survive its prejudices. As we will see, George Eliot and Eleanor Marx share Jameson's sense of the affront that, correctly interpreted, Shakespeare's women offer to the Victorians. They stand in stark contrast to Faucit's and Marie Corelli's enrolling the heroines within an aspirational rhetoric designed to appeal to their contemporaries. There are of course ironies within this model, which mean for instance that Corelli's championing of Shakespeare and his women earned political recognition for her as well as the popular status as a novelist for which she is best known.

This book does not claim to be exhaustive, but proceeds through broadly chronological chapters to deal with a number of women whose lives were shaped by their reading, viewing and acting Shakespeare. It begins with an examination of some of the ways in which Shakespeare was introduced to the Victorian girl through education or childhood reading, and of the implications of that early immersion in Shakespeare, and argues that despite the best efforts of their educators, Victorian girls – and women – found in Shakespeare an energy and vigour which operated beyond the parameters prescribed for Shakespeare's influence on them. In this opening chapter too, I draw on the visual arts as a context which both complements the more prescriptive side of girls' education, and offers scope for women's more liberal and inquiring engagement with their Shakespearean sources.

The next three chapters examine the lives and works of individual women and their relationships with Shakespeare. Helen Faucit and Fanny Kemble were close contemporaries whose lives demonstrated remarkable superficial similarities, and a fundamental difference in the uses to which Shakespeare was put in their careers. In their differences, the pair illuminate the practical distinctions between the semiotic and symbolic Shakespeares outlined above, and provide models against which their contemporaries may be read. In the case of Faucit, it is crucial to recognise the essentially self-conscious impulse of her work, and of her desire to represent one of the Shakespeare women celebrated by Knox and Ruskin, for in such a deliberate cultural identification we can find the roots of an aspiration to be culturally determining. By contrast, Kemble eschews such spheres, remaining instead within a childhood-inspired love of Shakespeare which continually reiterates the terms of her first engagement with him.

Chapters on Elizabeth Barrett Browning and George Eliot examine the presence of Shakespeare and his words in the lives and works of these two authors, in their letters and journals as well as in their printed work, and suggest that Barrett Browning finds in Shakespeare a language of intimacy not otherwise available in the Victorian period. For Eliot, Shakespeare was of the essence of her relationship with G. H. Lewes, as he was of her professional life, threaded through as her novels are with references to him, as Marianne Novy has so amply demonstrated elsewhere.¹¹ However, I want to suggest that Eliot is also concerned, as a fellow author, with the Victorians' tendency to co-opt Shakespeare for contemporary purposes, and specifically to use his women rather reductively as markers of modern femininity.

In the last two chapters of the book, the narrative moves on to the late Victorian period, as we examine first the unlikely congruence of the socialist radicals Eleanor Marx and Mathilde Blind, and the novelist Marie Corelli at Stratford in the 1890s. For all three women, Shakespeare represented something pre-lapsarian, essentially non-Victorian, and hence fundamentally enabling to them in their very varied ideologies. The chapter also shows how important it is to all three women to contest the commodification of Shakespeare within the tourist industry based in Stratford. In the last chapter, we return to the stage, and to the theatres of London in the 1890s. It was a decade initiated by the debates over Ibsen, but in which Shakespeare enjoyed a continuous presence. We will examine the impact of new theatrical and cultural conditions on the century's most pre-eminent Shakespeare actress, Ellen Terry, and how the new theatre's influence is manifested in actresses' performances in Shakespeare. We will end by considering responses

to Sarah Bernhardt's 1899 *Hamlet*, a performance which insisted upon the strength and vitality, the Protean aspects, of the ongoing relationship between Shakespeare and Victorian women, a relationship which was constantly being recalibrated in order to accommodate the new conditions of the century.

How then should we speak of the processes by which Shakespeare is both known and made known by the Victorian period and its women? A host of tropes and metaphors describe how subsequent generations produce and reproduce Shakespeare: appropriation, engagement, re-visioning, reconstruction, reinventing, mythologising, to name but a few.¹² These terms do not, however, necessarily accommodate the intimacy of the relationships struck up between women and Shakespeare, nor do they emphasise that what is being built here is precisely a relationship. Neither do they necessarily convey the kind of mutuality which seems to me to be at the heart of the relationship between Shakespeare and the Victorian women whom I discuss here, for as surely as they accrue cultural status, an enriched language, and psychological insights from him, so is he indebted to them for their ongoing recognition of him and the considerable extent to which their witness of his acuity and complexity, their appreciation of his wisdom, actively contribute to his status in the nineteenth century. We have need also of a term that articulates the chronological difference and distance between Shakespeare and the Victorians, for a recognition of that distance is, as I have argued above, central to the way in which Victorian women were able to make use of Shakespeare. And finally, it needs to connote the vitality of the relationship, the extent to which Victorian women give Shakespeare's language and characters new life beyond the moments of their initial delivery or inscription.

The term which most comprehensively embraces all these attributes is 'translation', and it is that which I would suggest is the most appropriate metaphor or mechanism through which to speak of the relationship between Shakespeare and Victorian women. Translation was arguably of the essence of the Shakespeare experienced by the Victorians. Their theatres hosted German, Italian and French touring companies, whose repertoire would often include Shakespeare in translation. Tommaso Salvini, Ernesto Rossi, Adelaide Ristori, Eleanora Duse, Sarah Bernhardt, Charles Fechter, and the Duke of Saxe Meiningen's company are simply the best known names of a century's intensive European fertilisation of Britain's Shakespearean theatre.¹³ Though a handful of performers attempted English versions of Shakespeare, most notably Ristori, who played Lady Macbeth in English in 1882 after several seasons of playing the role in an Italian version, and the Polish Helena Modjeska whose 1881 *Juliet* fell foul of critics who were protective of

the character as something of a national icon, most actors performed in their own languages, watched by audiences prepared to bring along play scripts to help them through the evening. And as it happens, four of the women on whom I concentrate in the body of this book (Barrett Browning, Eliot, Marx and Blind) are also notable translators, for whom this mode of work was simply another part of the varied literary portfolio typical of the Victorian woman of letters.

However, I would want to argue here that translation is not simply a matter of moving between languages, important though that is to Victorian theatrical and literary culture. Rather it is of the essence of the transactions between Shakespeare and Victorian women, as it is, according to George Steiner, of 'any thorough reading of a text out of the past of one's own language and literature'.¹⁴ Steiner's sensitivity to the historical aspect of translation and interpretation is crucial to the relationships I'm positing here, and indeed, as I will go on to argue, to the Victorian women I write about, but I would want to develop further his sense that 'When using a word we wake into resonance, as it were, its entire previous history', and that 'To read fully is to restore all that one can of the immediacies of value and intent in which speech actually occurs' (p. 24). That emphasis on restoration and rediscovery is crucial, but we need to go beyond it to highlight also the additional value accrued to the source text by the work of the translator, and the way in which the translator enables the 'growth of the original, which will complete itself *in* enlarging itself'.¹⁵ This insight recognises the capacity for texts to renew themselves through what Kurt Mueller-Vollmer and Michael Irmscher describe as 'a complex practice of cultural transfer'¹⁶ and subsequently then to become 'a simultaneous network of reciprocal relationships',¹⁷ between translators and text, between old texts and new contexts, between the imagined persona of the writer of the source text and the translator. Appropriately, given the translator's power to create a new moment of origin for the source, contemporary translation theory gives prominence to the person responsible for the process of translation, a prominence which Barbara Godard capitalises upon in the case of the feminist translator, arguing that she 'flaunts the signs of her manipulation of the text', of her active participation 'in the creation of meaning' (Godard, p. 94). In this creation of course, the credibility of the source text's 'production of a singular truth and meaning [is] suspended' (p. 90), if not wholly abandoned, as emphasis shifts instead to the possibilities opened up by the relationship between translator and text.

Victorian women who write of, quote, act and variously re-present Shakespeare to their contemporaries are all, I would argue, involved in the