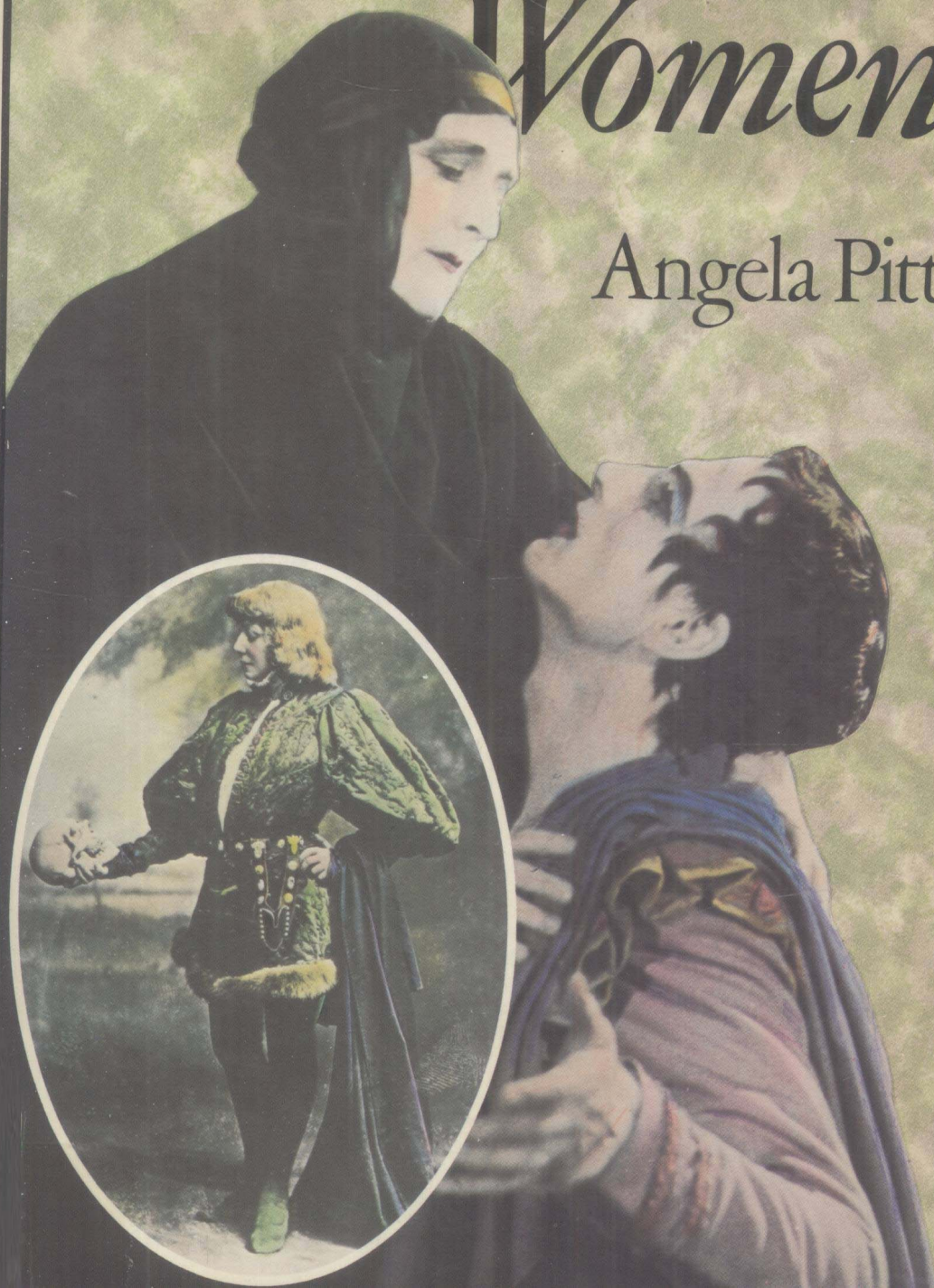


Shakespeare's Women

Angela Pitt



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Introduction

‘Thousands and thousands of books have been written about Shakespeare, and most of them are mad,’ wrote a distinguished critic¹ in the 1930s. To this startling revelation could have been added the fact that not one of these books contained a comprehensive study of the women in Shakespeare’s plays, an omission that should indeed have merited the charge of insanity. Even now, nearly half a century later, despite the fascination that Shakespeare continues to hold for authors and readers, there is still no book exclusively devoted to his women. Some authors (notably Frank Harris in *The Women of Shakespeare* and Ivor Brown in *The Women in Shakespeare’s Life*) have selected female characters from the plays for discussion, but only as illustrations to support their theories about Shakespeare’s own life. Other books and articles have focused on a group of the plays or heroines for close academic analysis.

The present book represents an attempt to fill the gap between the two, and is not intended for the Shakespeare-specialist. It seeks first to explore the attitudes towards women current in Shakespeare’s time, and then to examine the various female roles in the plays, bearing these attitudes in mind. It also traces the history of Shakespeare’s women on stage.

There is a great temptation to see Shakespeare’s heroines as reflections of the women among his friends and family, and then to take the next step and create a biography based on the plays. It is highly likely that Shakespeare did base his characters (and not just the women) on people he knew, but how can we tell who, when and where? What we do know from the evidence of the plays themselves is that he had an extraordinarily subtle mind and a seemingly boundless imagination. It is crassly naïve to suppose that a man with such creative gifts would, of necessity, transpose his day-to-day life and relationships directly into his plays. It may well be that we glimpse his daughters in Perdita or Miranda, his wife in Adriana and his mother in Volumnia, but seizing on such resemblances is the result of speculation alone and ultimately can only obstruct our view.

The only factual information we have about the women Shakespeare knew comes from the records of birth, deaths, marriages and legal transactions. Even these can pose problems. We know that Shakespeare married Anne Hathaway, but the event is not recorded in the parish register. Instead we find that the Bishop of Worcester granted a special licence for William Shakespeare to marry Anne Whately on 27 November 1582. In records for the following day a bond of £40 is said to have provided for Shakespeare’s marriage, but this time the

¹ Logan Pearsall Smith.

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woman's name is Anne Hathaway. Some scholars claim that the confusion results simply from the local clerk muddling up the names and that Anne Whately either never existed or else had no connection with Shakespeare. It does seem rather a major error to make, however, particularly as the clerk also wrote that she came from Temple Grafton, a place-name difficult to confuse with Stratford, Anne Hathaway's home. As it is likely that Shakespeare's marriage was hastened or even forced by Anne Hathaway's pregnancy (she gave birth to their daughter Susanna barely six months later), there is also the theory that Shakespeare tried to marry the mysterious Anne Whately but was prevented by the Hathaway family. Ingenious arguments have been advanced on both sides, but the truth remains elusive

Other information about women Shakespeare knew comes from chance remarks by his contemporaries, but it is difficult to know how much weight can be placed on them. An example is an entry in the diary for 1602 of one John Manningham. He refers to an incident which took place when the good looks of Richard Burbage, who was playing Richard III, so attracted a woman in the audience that before she left the theatre she arranged to meet him later that night. He was to bang on her door and say he was Richard III. Shakespeare overheard the plan and got to her first. He was 'at his game ere Burbidge came. Then message being brought that Rich. the 3d was at the dore Shakespeare caused returne to be made that William the Conqueror was before Richard the 3'. It is an amusing story with a good punch-line, which is no doubt why Manningham bothered to record it. How true it is, is another matter! By 1602 Shakespeare was already quite a well-known and probably envied figure and therefore likely to be the butt of a few scurrilous jokes and anecdotes. Manningham's story sounds a little too pat to be true, an Elizabethan version of those present-day jokes that begin with the formula: 'Do you know the one about...?'

Such tales apart, it is not too difficult to piece together the facts we have about Shakespeare, his mother, wife, daughters, niece and granddaughter, but what we cannot tell from the parish registers is the quality of his relationships with these women. Neither, of course, is any mistress recorded there, or anywhere else for that matter, although this has not deterred many of Shakespeare's biographers from assuming he had one, and attempting to prove her identity. Their arguments invariably rest on what they decipher from that extraordinary sequence of one hundred and fifty-four poems: the sonnets.

Because of their candid tone the sonnets sound as though they chronicle a series of personal revelations, and they have been used by generations of readers as a potential mine of information about Shakespeare's private life. If the information is indeed there, it is very well hidden, for the sonnets are fraught with ambiguities and mysteries. We do not know when most of them were written, whom they address, or even to whom the complete collection was dedicated. What we do know is that to write poignantly about matters of the heart in sonnet-form was as much a literary convention in Elizabethan England as the stylisation of love and lovers in a pastoral poem with its nymphs and shepherds. Reading the sonnets from a standpoint in the twentieth century, when such conscious conventions in poetry seem artificial and are alien to our

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taste, it is easy to assume that because Shakespeare writes so movingly and directly, the situations, people and feelings in these poems are 'real'. It may well be that what we are witnessing in the best of the sonnets is Shakespeare at the height of his art, creating the supreme dramatic illusion for his readers: the illusion that we can see directly into his heart and mind.

Scholars who believe that the sonnets are autobiographical are frequently at pains to identify the man who is addressed in many of the first one hundred and twenty-six poems and the Dark Lady of the remainder. Inevitably, perhaps, some writers have seen the lady as the mysterious Anne Whately, but there is no evidence to support their claim. Neither can the sonnets be used to prove that Shakespeare was exclusively heterosexual, although most of his biographers make a point of stressing that the sensual language in many of those addressed to another man is explicable as a convention of the time. It is a curious but persistent example of double-thinking that whereas the sonnets addressed to the Dark Lady are usually accepted at face-value, as the proof of a traumatic love affair, those that speak of yearning for a man's love are rapidly explained away as conventional gestures of friendship or loyalty or a desire for patronage. In all probability this is indeed the case, but it cannot be *proved* from the sonnets. Another factor is that a large number of these poems could have been addressed either to a man or a woman, but are invariably taken by readers as intended for the Dark Lady because this fulfils their own expectations of Shakespeare.

In the present book no attempt has been made to extract biographical information from the sonnets because of the perils and ambiguities they present. The focus is on the women in the plays, women more real to us than Anne Hathaway or Susanna and Judith, women whose grace, caprice, dignity and power has brought them alive for each generation of play-goers: Shakespeare's women.

I

The Historical Setting for Shakespeare's Women

England is a woman's paradise, a servant's
prison and a horse's hell.

Sixteenth century proverb

With some surprise, and perhaps even a hint of censure, the Duke of Württemberg, visiting England in 1602, noted that, 'the women have much more liberty than perhaps in any other place'. It is the word 'liberty' that trumpets out from his remark. What kind of freedom does he mean? Can it be, that in England at least, there was a working notion of Renaissance Woman to parallel the concept of that fortunate demi-god, Renaissance Man? At its most narrow level of interpretation 'liberty', or rather 'more liberty', seems to imply that Elizabethan women had some considerable measure of independence and a sense of their own identity compared with their sisters across the channel.

Württemberg's statement is frustratingly provocative as it stands, but serves as an excellent flame to kindle discussion of the real position of women in both Elizabethan and Jacobean England. Without such consideration of their living counterparts it would be ludicrous to attempt a just description and analysis of the women in Shakespeare's plays. No matter how subtly his characters are evolved in psychological and literary terms so that they seem magically 'contemporary' to any reader in any age, their creation is still firmly rooted in the years between 1588 and 1613. Shakespeare did not write in a social vacuum. His livelihood depended on his audience being pleased, and his audience would have given short shrift to plays whose characters were hopelessly out of keeping with current attitudes. It is worth remembering that Shakespeare's audiences were notoriously unruly. If they did not enjoy a play they would hiss and 'mew' at the actors, crack nuts on the floor and probably end up noisily drunk, completely disrupting the performance. The 'groundlings', who had the cheapest tickets and stood in the bottom



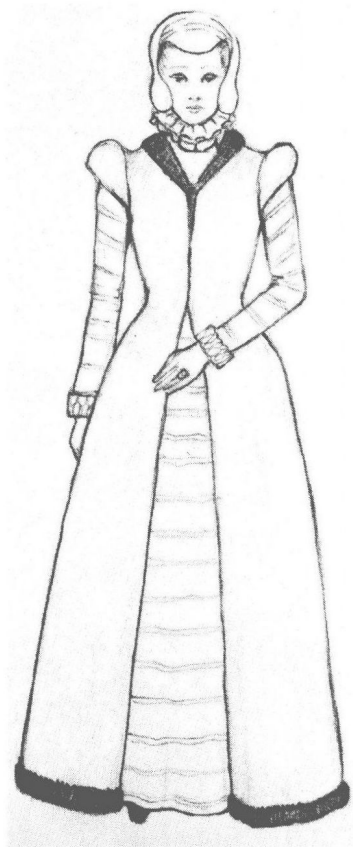
1 The hint of wilfulness and capricious humour in her expression suggests that this unidentified sixteenth-century woman had a mind of her own

gallery of the theatre, were the worst offenders and were termed 'penny stinkards' by a contemporary courtier. Stinkards or not, they were powerful arbiters, and no theatre-owner would dare persist with performances of a play that they found boring. Most of Shakespeare's plays were popular in his own lifetime. This was not because the audiences realised they were watching the works of a genius, but for the more down-to-earth reason that he captured their imaginations by showing them the personalities of their friends, their wives, their mistresses, their husbands and lovers, and themselves. The outward shape of Shakespeare's characters might well be that of kings and queens, and the plays themselves set in foreign lands, but the relationships and reactions evolved were totally comprehensible to the Elizabethan play-goer who might never have rubbed shoulders with the aristocracy nor been closer to the Continent than the south bank of the Thames.

To understand both the conception and full impact of Shakespeare's female characters it is therefore crucial to see them in their historical setting. The Duke of Württemberg can help us.

It had become fashionable in the late sixteenth century for continental gentlemen, particularly Germans, to consider a visit to England as indispensable to the rounding off of their education. Such visits appear to have taken the form of a fairly standardised package-tour, which would cover the sights of London and might be extended to include a brief visit to Oxford or Cambridge. A detailed journal of sights seen and eccentricities observed was often kept, presumably for subsequent reading at home by incredulous friends and relatives. Some of these journals have survived, and although their contents often sound so similar as to suggest that it is the words of a paid English guide that are recorded rather than the personal observations of the diarist, they must, in essence at least, be true. There would be no reason for traveller after traveller to report the same snippets of information if contrary evidence presented itself.

In keeping with this continuity, the Duke of Württemberg's comment on women is an echo of similar remarks made three years earlier in 1599 by Thomas Platter of Basel. He writes that women 'have far more liberty than in other lands and know just how to make good use of it'. He adds that English men have to put up with their wives' behaviour, for if they protest, their wives will beat them! This may well be a piece of national chauvinism on Platter's part, to assert the superior, vigorous masculinity of his own countrymen who were famed for keeping their

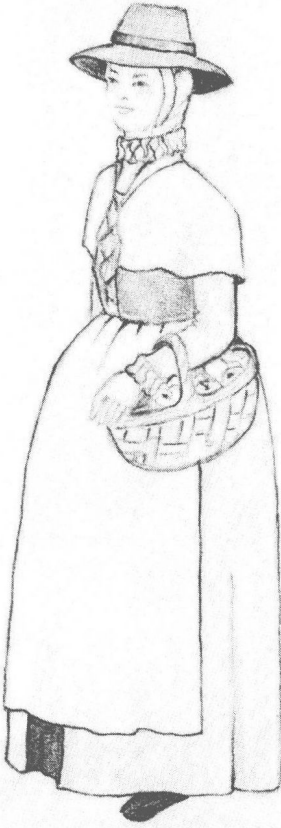


2 The Elizabethan citizen's wife had some measure of independence for she could enjoy such diversions as a visit to the theatre or the tavern without her husband

women under control, but one cannot dismiss so lightly his more specific remarks on English social behaviour. He tells us that women are frequently seen at the plays, bear-baiting and cock fights, and also:

What is particularly curious is that the women as well as the men, in fact more often than they, will frequent the taverns or ale-houses for enjoyment. They count it a great honour to be taken there and given wine with sugar to drink; and if one woman only is invited, then she will bring three or four other women along and they gaily toast each other.

The close attention to detail (the sugared wine) and the lively picture he presents of women drinking each other's healths are unique among such tourist-journals and must spring from personal observation. It is not prostitutes, whom no man would have been surprised to find in an ale-house, but ordinary middle-class women who are meant here. They would be wives of city tradesmen or merchants, and it is interesting to



3 Whether a humble country-woman like this or a lady at court, a woman was legally her husband's property

note that it was socially acceptable for such women to go to taverns at all, let alone without a man. Platter evidently found it surprising, and had another shock when he went to eat with an old friend of his, a theologian. He discovered that 'in England it is not customary to invite a man without his wife', and so the wife came too.

From the shape of Platter's comments we can see that he is taking his homeland as the norm and, like any tourist, picking out anything at variance with it to store up for telling his inquisitive friends when he got back. Typical of such curiosities are the odd collection of animals belonging to the Queen which he saw in the Tower of London: six lions, a lioness, a wolf, a tiger and a porcupine. Almost as if to prove he was there, Platter adds that a lion tried to claw one of his servants through the bars of its cage. Personal anecdotes of this kind give his journal entries a lively immediacy, whether writing of the habits of Elizabeth's lions or English women, but we must be wary of placing too much importance on them.

Platter, Württemberg and other travellers give us fascinating glimpses of Elizabethan life, including Elizabethan women, but seen through continental eyes and contrasted with continental standards. The last thing these tourists intended was to make profound social judgements. To see if the 'liberty' they mention for Elizabethan women does in fact point to fundamental freedoms and rights we need to consult different sources. For women to have meaningful rights they would need to be stated in the laws of the land, the doctrines of the church and shown in the practices of the time.

Elizabethan law offers no general statement on the position of women. There is no text or statute specifically concerned with their rights—or lack of them. It is only from references to the woman's place under laws governing such areas as marriage, inheritance and tenure that we can determine her legal position. At first glance the women appear to have had a surprisingly good deal. While unmarried they had virtually all the rights of a man. But the catch lies in the word 'unmarried'. In practice it was virtually impossible for a woman (unless she was Queen of England!) to remain unmarried and independent. Marriages were still arranged, as they had been in the Middle Ages, to further the interests of land-owning families. On marriage all the girl's legal rights ceased and she became as much the property of her husband as his horse or barn. Concern about this contractual, property-owning side of marriage, particularly as it affects the girl's father and the prospective suitors, occurs in some of Shakespeare's plays, notably *The Merchant of Venice*. It is interesting also to look at Katharina's long speech in *The Taming of the Shrew* when she has finally been subdued by Petruchio. Here she voices the 'correct' attitude of a wife:

Such duty as the subject owes the prince,
 Even such, a woman oweth to her husband;
 And when she is froward, peevish, sullen, sour,
 And not obedient to his honest will,
 What is she but a foul contending rebel,
 And graceless traitor to her loving lord?

(V.ii 153–8)

Although some husbands broke with medieval conventions and allowed their wives to take part in running businesses (such as printing and bookselling) or to join a Guild, this did not give the wives any kind of legal independence. No doubt they gained confidence and a greater sense of personal identity through being allowed out of the traditional

sphere of the house, but they were still their husbands' chattels.

If for some reason it was impractical for a girl to marry—there might be insufficient dowry if there were several daughters in the family—she was encouraged to enter a nunnery. On entry, all her possessions were made over to the religious house and she lost all secular rights.

The only time a woman might be able to wield some influence was if her husband died and she was left in charge either of a business (like Mistress Quickly who runs the Boar's Head Tavern in *King Henry IV*, Parts 1 and 2 and *King Henry V*) or of the family estates. Francis Bacon's mother, Lady Anne Bacon, was just such a tough, formidable old woman. Francis got into debt and asked his mother to sell off some land in order to pay his bills. She sent him a tartly-worded letter demanding a precise list of the debts before she would proceed with the sale. He was obliged to provide it for her, even though he was thirty years old and a Member of Parliament! Her counterpart in Shakespeare must surely be Volumnia, the powerful, possessive mother of Coriolanus.

In the eyes of the law then, a woman was theoretically the equal of a man. But in practice, most women were never able to wield any significant legal or political power because they 'belonged' either to a man or to the Church.

The Church was immensely influential in shaping society's expectations of women. To understand something of Elizabethan ecclesiastical attitudes, we need to look back through the 1500s to the beginnings of Protestant Reform.

Elizabeth's father, Henry VIII, had made himself head of the Church in England. This meant that for the first time in English history, the monarch could, if he wished, dictate church policy to his bishops. Predictably, there were many changes brought about. Some affected the wealth and influence of the Church (Henry VIII seized land, plate and money to pay royal bills); others affected Church doctrine (reformed under Edward VI); yet others affected the basic sectarian nature of the Church (Mary attempted the forceful restoration of Roman Catholicism). At no time, however, did any monarch attempt to change or even question the Church's attitude towards women. This attitude was the same one that had been doggedly maintained throughout the Middle Ages: women were the daughters of Eve, temptresses who would lead men down the primrose path to fornication. Their women's bodies proclaimed that they were the living symbols of Man's First Disgrace. Everyone knew that, because it was not only in the Book of Genesis, but in the New Testament where St Paul spoke of women as being inferior to



4 Shakespeare created a forceful intellectual in Portia, here portrayed by Fay Davis, in 1909

men. Early Church Fathers, such as St Jerome, enlarged on the subject of women's inferiority with a misogynist vengeance. Their views, reinforced by the authority of the scriptures, became accepted as 'fact' by both men and women alike. The official ecclesiastical view, up to and well beyond Elizabeth's reign, was that man represented the supreme height of God's creation, while woman was secondary, inferior to him in every way. This was the official view, but we have only to look at the strong, respected figure of Elizabeth herself and the lively heroines in Shakespeare's plays to know that there must be another side to the social picture.