

#### 4. Psychology in Literature.

*Insanity in some of Shakespeare's Female Characters and Feminine Psychology* [*Follia nelle Donne dello Shakespeare e Psicologia Femminile*]. (*Il Manicomio*, January, 1915.) Prof. Fr. Del Greco.

One is sometimes tempted to ask whether foreigners understand Shakespeare. We know that with all their boasted study of his plays, and their—save the mark!—emendation of his text, the Germans do not and never did understand him. The Hamlet that one meets in *Wilhelm Meister* is Goethe's Hamlet, not Shakespeare's. Dr. Hermann Ulrici reads his own fantastic ideas into the Englishman's honest work. Gervinus is possibly a little more rational, but very little.

There is no doubt that the Italians understand the English dramatist better than other foreigners. This may be due to the fact that directly or indirectly Shakespeare wrote under the influence of Italian literature. He was acquainted with the works of Boccaccio, Ariosto, and others, either in the original or by means of translations. The scenes of many of his plays are laid in Italy. Do not the names of Venice, Verona, Padua, long before they evoke the recollection of some fact in history, call up to our minds the story of Portia and Shylock, the feuds of the Montagues and the Capulets, the quarrels of Katherine and Petruchio? Would it have been possible for the story of Romeo and Juliet, with all its colour and its passion, to have been written of any but Italian lovers? Nay, more, would it have been possible for it to have been written by any man who was not impregnated with the genius, the life, the very perfume of "the land where lemon-trees do bloom?"

Prof. Del Greco is himself conscious of the difficulties that a foreigner meets with in interpreting the English poet.

"William Shakespeare!" he exclaims. "He is so different to us. How can we understand him? As his dramas unroll themselves, we see the most varied human characters moving among the multitudinous vicissitudes of life. They follow a logical course, and the logic reveals itself distinctly in every character amid its changing fortunes. Certainly, there are apparent disorders, due to the complex, the casual, and the unexpected, which are found in human actions."

The first of Shakespeare's heroines, studied by the Professor, is Ophelia. She is a charming girl, and in his earlier and happier days before the shadow of his father's murder fell across his path, Hamlet made love to her, brought her flowers, and wrote madrigals in her honour. Her father, Polonius, and her brother, Laertes, growing suspicious of the object of Prince Hamlet's attentions, forbade her to receive him, and Ophelia, though she loved him with all her heart, obeyed.

Strange coincidence! The refusal of Ophelia to receive Hamlet occurred about the same time that the story of his father's murder was revealed to him. Ophelia's father and the Queen, Hamlet's mother, believe that the extraordinary conduct assumed by the Prince is due to love. To test the case, they arrange a meeting between the girl and

the young man in the Palace. At first Hamlet speaks gently. Then he perceives that he is being spied upon, and his suspicions fall upon Ophelia. His manner changes; he speaks bitterly, cruelly. The poor girl suffers intensely; partly because she thinks that she is abandoned, but far more because she sees, or at any rate, believes, that her beloved Hamlet is mad.

The poet with happy expressions indicates the development of Ophelia's heart-felt sorrow.

In the play-scene, Hamlet lies at Ophelia's feet. But he behaves cruelly to her. His whole attention is bent upon the King. What he says to the girl is hard and pungent, and is spoken with a sneer upon his lips. When she is alone, Ophelia broods over her sorrow, her agony, which is a mixture of pity, disillusion, and wounded pride.

Then comes the decisive event. Hamlet accidentally kills Polonius, and Ophelia becomes mad.

Through a maze of dark events and sad presentiments the poet leads us to the culmination of the tragedy. In spite of some opposition, Ophelia makes her way into the royal presence. She, the flower of modesty, is dissolute in her speech. Her dress is in disorder. She sings snatches of songs, which she interrupts with disconnected and incoherent phrases. From these phrases, as from the fragments of a broken crystal, one can reconstruct a mind, the agony of a mind; they are expressions of a love betrayed, of suspicions, of mental pain, all mingled with fleeting images of the secret funeral of her murdered father.

The last scene shows us the poor, mad girl, crowned with flowers, clinging to a willow-tree on the bank of a brook. She slips, loses her hold, and falling into the water, is drowned.

Having thus briefly sketched Ophelia's case, the Professor proceeds to consider it from a medico-psychological point of view:

"Is this picture of Ophelia's madness exact?" he asks. "It is to a certain point." "From what form of madness was she suffering?" "From dementia præcox."

Shade of Kraepelin! Ophelia suffering from dementia præcox!

Young men and young women, proceeds the Professor, of pleasing mental constitution, who have previously shown themselves bright and intelligent, gradually or suddenly, sink into madness. They are delicate plants which quickly wither in the flower of their age at the shock of oncoming puberty. Such was the madness of Ophelia.

But after all, the Professor has some doubt about his diagnosis.

If this, he goes on to say, had been a picture of true madness, there would have been in the language of Ophelia phrases more empty and more disconnected. The sphere of the emotions would not have been deep and susceptible to suffering, but gentle and colourless. The nature, which feels profoundly, does not become mad in this way. Certainly, among the prodromes of dementia præcox there are delusions of love, mysterious rapes, and vain dreams of ambition. But all from the beginning have the impress of an affectivity capable of little resistance. The apathy, so characteristic of this form of disease, is marked from the commencement, and gives to the combat of the affections a note of superficiality and incoherence. In Ophelia there was a painful

superabundance of the affections : there was a feeling of outrage when she saw herself suspected and derided. A person predisposed to dementia præcox before all this would have been indifferent. Was not after all the case of Ophelia one of minor gravity? Have we not before us an episode in a case of simple "*confusio mentale*," which might have been cured? After all, it was a sad accident, and nothing else, which caused the death of the poor girl. The clinical picture does not leave that in doubt.

There is one point that Prof. Del Greco has not mentioned. If Ophelia had been suffering from dementia præcox, would she have cared a brass farthing about her lover? And Shakespeare certainly indicates that she cared a great deal about him. Would she have been distressed at the idea that he was mad, at his altered demeanour, his rudeness, his untidiness in dress, he, who in her eyes, and in the eyes of all the world, had been the very flower of chivalry?

The Professor next proceeds to the consideration of the case of Lady Macbeth.

Macbeth has communicated the witches' prophecy to his wife. The old king, Duncan, is their guest that night in their own castle. The idea of murdering him springs up in both their minds. Macbeth hesitates, and his ferocious wife with words of pungent sarcasm spurs him on to commit the crime. We see Macbeth, through all the unfolding of this terrible scene, hesitating, agitated by thoughts of remorse and fear—thoughts, in the midst of which glitters a solemn, grandiose philosophy. We see the varying phases of the consciousness of Macbeth. And beside him stands his strong, violent, and cunning wife.

Duncan is murdered, and Macbeth is king, and the latter, giving way more and more to massacre and slaughter, becomes the victim of frightful visions. Lady Macbeth, a clear-sighted and profound dissimulator, rules and comforts him.

At this point, the position of the two characters changes. The savage energy of Macbeth rises supreme among all the horrors that surround him. Lady Macbeth disappears from the drama. Suddenly, when the catastrophe is imminent, when the ruin of the tyrant is approaching, Lady Macbeth reappears. A doctor and a maid are beside her. With a lamp in her hand, and dressed in white, she moves like a phantom across the stage. With broken, feverish words, with a profound sigh, with gestures which reproduce the terrible circumstances of the night of the assassination of Duncan, she passes from our sight. The tragic effect of the scene is extraordinary.

Is that scene true to nature? The somnambulism of Lady Macbeth is true. It is true also that the words and acts of long ago, buried in the memory and the mind, repeat themselves in such a state. It is true that there are ferocious women like Lady Macbeth who never experience remorse. They are grave neuropathics. They may be sufferers from hysteria. Somnambulism is not uncommonly a manifestation of hysteria. But this is a feminine malady *par excellence*. Terrible women, such as the one we are considering, have both feminine and masculine characteristics. It is common for hysterical criminals to poison their victims, and if Lady Macbeth did not poison hers, she came very close to it. It was not to make them drunk only that she

put drugs into the wine of those who guarded Duncan. However, somnambulism is only a morbid episode; it is not a serious disease, and it does not cause death, which appears to have taken place suddenly after her sleep-walking, in the case of our heroine.

Then follow some remarks which it would be well if those of us, who are fond of searching for evidence of mental disease in the characters and actions of personages in fiction and even in ancient and modern history, would read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest.

But it is ridiculous, says Prof. Del Greco, to criticise Shakespeare from an alienist's point of view at the distance of several centuries. What was known about psychiatry at that time? Besides, a poet is not compelled to follow the objective-truth of facts and ideas in all their minute particulars. He must convey the appearance of truth. That is all. He must move the feelings of his audience, and sometimes in doing so his genius leads him away from the truth. If Ophelia had been drawn as her form of madness demanded that she should be, she would have appeared insignificant. Without the terrible somnambulism of Lady Macbeth, she would have aroused in our minds only the feelings of fear, horror, and repulsion.

Those modern poets who describe facts in all their crudity, those artists who reproduce disease and madness with great fidelity upon the stage are imitators, not poets and artists. One cannot help thinking that this is going a little too far. Surely, when it is necessary to describe disease or madness, fidelity is better than monstrosities which offend common sense, or travesties which verge upon the ridiculous.

The writer then passes on to consider the passion of love as it is revealed in Shakespeare's women; pure and all-else-forgetting as in the case of Juliet, selfish and interrupted by memories of past amorous entanglements as in that of Cleopatra.

Shakespeare, says the Professor, endows his women with great fatality of the affections and impulses. He makes them terrible by that, not by the mind or the will. They have no power of long-continued resistance; they have not the energy of men. Hamlet, Macbeth, Othello, in tremendous circumstances only reveal the original disequilibrium of their minds. They are not mad at all. Shakespeare has only one study of a madman—old King Lear—and he in the end is cured. Ophelia and Lady Macbeth, on the other hand, show grave signs of mental disease.

In spite of charming writing and a wealth of illustration, ranging from the female as found among the lowest and most disagreeable forms of animal life to Sappho singing her love songs by the shores of the Ægean Sea, the remainder of the paper, that which deals with the psychology of woman, is rather commonplace. The writer tells us nothing new. He only presents us with well-known facts arrayed in beautiful language. His conclusion practically comes to this: that the masculine and feminine minds, even where they seem most to differ, are not opposed, but are merely complimentary the one to the other.

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