

SHAKESPEARE'S HEROINES

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Illustrated by
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BEATRICE.



HERO.

SHAKSPEARE has exhibited in Beatrice a spirited and faithful portrait of the fine lady of his own time. The deportment, language, manners, and allusions are those of a particular class in a particular age; but the individual and dramatic character which forms the groundwork is strongly discriminated, and being taken from general nature, belongs to every age. In Beatrice, high intellect and high animal spirits meet, and excite each other like fire and air. In her wit (which is brilliant without being imaginative) there is a touch of insolence, not unfrequent in women when the wit predominates over reflection and imagination. In her temper, too, there is a slight infusion of the termagant; and her satirical humour plays with such an unrespective levity over all subjects alike, that it required a profound knowledge of women to bring such a character within the pale of our sympathy. But Beatrice, though wilful, is not wayward; she is volatile, not unfeeling. She has not only an exuberance of wit and gaiety, but of heart, and soul, and energy of spirit; and is no more like the fine ladies of modern comedy,—whose wit consists in a temporary allusion or a play upon words, and whose petulance is displayed in a toss of the head, a flirt of the fan, or a flourish of the pocket-handkerchief,—than one of our modern dandies is like Sir Philip Sidney.

In Beatrice, Shakspeare has contrived that the poetry of the character shall not only soften, but heighten its comic effect. We are not only inclined to forgive Beatrice all her scornful airs, all her biting jests, all her assumption of superiority; but they amuse and delight us the more, when we find her, with all the headlong simplicity of a child, falling at once into the snare laid for her affections; when we see *her*, who thought a man of God's making not good enough for her, who disdained to be o'ermastered by a "piece of valiant dust," stooping like the rest of her sex, vailing her proud spirit, and taming her wild heart to the loving hand of him whom she had scorned, flouted, and misused, "past the endurance of a block." And we are yet more completely won by her generous enthusiastic attachment to her cousin. When the father of Hero believes the tale of her guilt; when Claudio, her lover, without remorse or a lingering doubt, consigns her to shame; when the Friar remains silent, and the generous Benedick himself knows not what to say, Beatrice, confident in her affections, and guided only by the impulses of her own feminine heart, sees through the inconsistency, the impossibility of the charge, and exclaims, without a moment's hesitation:

O, on my soul, my cousin is belied!

Schlegel, in his remarks on the play of "Much Ado about Nothing," has given us an amusing instance of that sense of reality with which we are impressed by Shakspeare's characters. He says of Benedick and Beatrice, as if he had known them personally, that the exclusive direction of their pointed raillery against each other "is a proof of a growing inclination." This is not unlikely; and the same inference would lead us to suppose that this mutual inclination had commenced before the opening of the play. The very first words uttered by Beatrice are an inquiry after Benedick, though expressed with her usual arch impertinence:

I pray you, is Signior Montanto returned from the wars, or no?

I pray you, how many hath he killed and eaten in these wars?
But how many hath he killed? for indeed I promised to eat all of his killing.

And in the unprovoked hostility with which she falls upon him in his absence, in the pertinacity and bitterness of her satire, there is certainly great argument that he occupies much more of her thoughts than she would have been willing to confess,



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even to herself. In the same manner, Benedick betrays a lurking partiality for his fascinating enemy; he shows that he has looked upon her with no careless eye, when he says:

There's her cousin (meaning Beatrice), an she were not possessed with a fury, excels her as much in beauty as the first of May does the last of December.

Infinite skill, as well as humour, is shown in making this pair of airy beings the exact counterpart of each other; but of the two portraits, that of Benedick is by far the most pleasing, because the independence and gay indifference of temper, the laughing defiance of love and marriage, the satirical freedom of expression, common to both, are more becoming to the masculine than to the feminine character. Any woman might love such a cavalier as Benedick, and be proud of his affection; his valour, his wit, and his gaiety sit so gracefully upon him! and his light scoffs against the power of love are but just sufficient to render more piquant the conquest of this "heretic in despite of beauty." But a man might well be pardoned who should shrink from encountering such a spirit as that of Beatrice, unless, indeed, he had "served an apprenticeship to the taming school." The wit of Beatrice is less good-humoured than that of Benedick; or, from the difference of sex, appears so. It is observable, that the power is throughout on her side, and the sympathy and interest on his: which, by reversing the usual order of things, seems to excite us *against the grain*, if I may use such an expression. In all their encounters she constantly gets the better of him, and the gentleman's wits go off halting, if he is not himself fairly *hors de combat*. Beatrice, woman like, generally has the first word, and will have the last. Thus, when they first meet, she begins by provoking the merry warfare:

I wonder that you will still be talking, Signior Benedick; nobody marks you.

Benedick. What, my dear Lady Disdain! are you yet living?

Beatrice. Is it possible Disdain should die, while she hath such meet food to feed it as Signior Benedick? Courtesy itself must convert to disdain, if you come in her presence.

It is clear that she cannot for a moment endure his neglect, and he can as little tolerate her scorn. Nothing that Benedick addresses to Beatrice personally can equal the malicious force of some of her attacks upon him: he is either restrained by a feeling of natural gallantry, little as she deserves the consideration due to her sex (for a female satirist ever places herself

beyond the pale of such forbearance), or he is subdued by her superior volubility. He revenges himself, however, in her absence: he abuses her with such a variety of comic invective, and pours forth his pent-up wrath with such a ludicrous extravagance and exaggeration, that he betrays at once how deep is his mortification, and how unreal his enmity.

In the midst of all this tilting and sparring of their nimble and fiery wits, we find them infinitely anxious for the good opinion of each other, and secretly impatient of each other's scorn: but Beatrice is the most truly indifferent of the two, the most assured of herself. The comic effect produced by their mutual attachment, which, however natural and expected, comes upon us with all the force of a surprise, cannot be surpassed: and how exquisitely characteristic the mutual avowal!

Benedick. By my sword, Beatrice, thou lovest me.

Beatrice. Do not swear by it, and eat it.

Benedick. I will swear by it that you love me; and I will make him eat it that says I love not you.

Beatrice. Will you not eat your word?

Benedick. With no sauce that can be devised to it: I protest I love thee.

Beatrice. Why, then, God forgive me!

Benedick. What offence, sweet Beatrice?

Beatrice. You stayed me in a happy hour. I was about to protest I loved you.

Benedick. And do it with all thy heart.

Beatrice. I love you with so much of my heart, that there is none left to protest.

But here again the dominion rests with Beatrice, and she appears in a less amiable light than her lover. Benedick surrenders his whole heart to her and to his new passion. The revulsion of feeling even causes it to overflow in an excess of fondness; but with Beatrice, temper has still the mastery. The affection of Benedick induces him to challenge his intimate friend for her sake, but the affection of Beatrice does not prevent her from risking the life of her lover.

The character of Hero is well contrasted with that of Beatrice, and their mutual attachment is very beautiful and natural. When they are both on the scene together, Hero has but little to say for herself: Beatrice asserts the rule of a master spirit, eclipses her by her mental superiority, abashes her by her raillery, dictates to her, answers for her, and would fain inspire her gentle-hearted cousin with some of her own assurance.



BEATRICE: *What fire is in mine ears?*

But Shakspeare knew well how to make one character subordinate to another, without sacrificing the slightest portion of its effect; and Hero, added to her grace and softness, and all the interest which attaches to her as the sentimental heroine of the play, possesses an intellectual beauty of her own. When she has Beatrice at an advantage, she repays her with interest. in the severe, but most animated and elegant picture she draws of her cousin's imperious character and unbridled levity of tongue. The portrait is a little overcharged, because administered as a corrective, and intended to be overheard:

But Nature never fram'd a woman's heart
Of prouder stuff than that of Beatrice:
Disdain and scorn ride sparkling in her eyes,
Misprising what they look on; and her wit
Values itself so highly, that to her
All matter else seems weak; she cannot love,
Nor take no shape nor project of affection,
She is so self-endear'd.

Ursula.

Hero.

Sure, sure, such carping is not commendable.
No: not to be so odd, and from all fashions,
As Beatrice is, cannot be commendable:
But who dare tell her so? If I should speak,
She'd mock me into air: O, she would laugh me
Out of myself, press me to death with wit.
Therefore let Benedick, like cover'd fire,
Consume away in sighs, waste inwardly:
It were a better death than die with mocks,
Which is as bad as die with tickling.

Beatrice never appears to greater advantage than in her soliloquy after leaving her concealment "in the pleached bower, where honeysuckles, ripened by the sun, forbid the sun to enter": she exclaims, after listening to this tirade against herself:

What fire is in mine ears? Can this be true?
Stand I condemned for pride and scorn so much?

The sense of wounded vanity is lost in bitter feelings, and she is infinitely more struck by what is said in praise of Benedick, and the history of his supposed love for her, than by the dispraise of herself. The immediate success of the trick is a most natural consequence of the self-assurance and magnanimity of her character; she is so accustomed to assert dominion over the spirits of others, that she cannot suspect the possibility of a plot laid against herself.

A haughty, excitable, and violent temper is another of the characteristics of Beatrice; but there is more of impulse than of passion in her vehemence. In the marriage scene, where she has beheld her gentle-spirited cousin,—whom she loves the more for those very qualities which are most unlike her own,—slandered, deserted, and devoted to public shame, her indignation, and the eagerness with which she hungers and thirsts after revenge, are, like the rest of her character, open, ardent, impetuous, but not deep or implacable. When she bursts into that outrageous speech—

Is he not approved in the height a villain, that hath slandered, scorned, dishonoured my kinswoman? O that I were a man! What! bear her in hand until they come to take hands; and then with public accusation, uncovered slander, unmitigated rancour—O God, that I were a man! I would eat his heart in the market-place!

And when she commends her lover, as the first proof of his affection, "To kill Claudio," the very consciousness of the exaggeration—of the contrast between the real good-nature of Beatrice and the fierce tenor of her language—keeps alive the comic effect, mingling the ludicrous with the serious. It is remarkable that, notwithstanding the point and vivacity of the dialogue, few of the speeches of Beatrice are capable of a general application, or engrave themselves distinctly on the memory; they contain more mirth than matter; and though wit be the predominant feature in the dramatic portrait, Beatrice more charms and dazzles us by what she is than by what she says. It is not merely her sparkling repartees and saucy jests, it is the soul of wit, and the spirit of gaiety in forming the



BEATRICE AND BENEDICK.

whole character,—looking out from her brilliant eyes, and laughing on her full lips that pout with scorn,—which we have before us, moving and full of life. On the whole, we dismiss Benedick and Beatrice to their matrimonial bonds, rather with a sense of amusement than a feeling of congratulation or sympathy; rather with an acknowledgment that they are well matched, and worthy of each other, than with any well-founded expectation of their domestic tranquillity. If, as Benedick asserts, they are both “too wise to woo peaceably,” it may be added, that both are too wise, too witty, and too wilful to live peaceably

together. We have some misgivings about Beatrice—some apprehensions that poor Benedick will not escape the “predestinate scratched face,” which he had foretold to him who should win and wear this quick-witted and pleasant-spirited lady; yet when we recollect that to the wit and imperious temper of Beatrice is united a magnanimity of spirit which would naturally place her far above all selfishness, and all paltry struggles for power—when we perceive, in the midst of her sarcastic levity and volubility of tongue, so much of generous affection, and such a high sense of female virtue and honour, we are inclined to hope the best. We think it possible that, though the gentleman may now and then swear, and the lady scold, the native good-humour of the one, the really fine understanding of the other, and the value they so evidently attach to each other’s esteem, will ensure them a tolerable portion of domestic felicity, and in this hope we leave them.