
Sex and Sensibility: Shakespearean Actresses Rebel on the Page

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In 1890, George Bernard Shaw wrote *The Quintessence of IBSENISM*, a collection of essays celebrating the new realism of Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen, whose plays had scandalized London society during the 1880s. In his discussion of Ibsen's new realistic approach to theater, Shaw notes that British actors and playgoers alike eschewed what they saw as an attack on Victorian society's ideals and values. Shaw, on the other hand, defends Ibsen and praises him for "his thesis that the real slavery of to-day is slavery to ideals of virtue" (63). Ever the champion of the rights of women, Shaw included a chapter entitled "The Womanly Woman," in which he attacks the Victorian ideal of womanhood. While noting society's decree that women must be "pure" and more importantly, self-sacrificing, he points out that in reality, "a womanly woman . . . is not only taken advantage of, but disliked . . . for her pains" (17). According to Shaw, "a typical Ibsen play is one in which the 'leading lady' is an unwomanly woman.... It follows that the leading lady is not a heroine of the Drury Lane type" (23). Indeed, at a time when Melodrama was at its most popular, the leading ladies of Drury Lane and other theaters of the Victorian period portrayed the Victorian ideal: pure, self-sacrificing, womanly women.

The Victorian ideal was also portrayed by the two most popular Shakespearean actresses of this period: Helena Faucit (1817-1898) and Dame Ellen Terry (1847-1928). Even though they were playing Shakespearean rather than typical melodramatic heroines, Faucit and Terry felt compelled to conform to the image of women dictated by the cultural politics of the Victorian era; thus, they projected the image of the womanly woman when performing onstage. In addition, they were directed by actor/managers who dominated them and dictated the interpretation of the characters they played. In their writings about these characters, however, they felt free to "direct" the roles themselves and rebelled against the Victorian ideal, basing their interpretation of character on their own study of the texts and their own understanding of the characters.

Although they were born forty years apart, Faucit and Terry lived parallel lives. Both were members of established theatrical families and went on the stage early in their lives, eventually emerging as the foremost Shakespearean actresses of their respective generations. Loved by the public, revered by prominent critics and literati, both actresses had lengthy professional careers. And although they were lauded for their performances in Shakespeare's tragedies, both preferred Shakespearean comedies in which they could play characters labeled by Terry in *Four Lectures on Shakespeare* as "triumphant women": Beatrice in *Much Ado About Nothing*, Portia in *Merchant of Venice*, and Rosalind in *As You Like It*. Thus, it seems no accident that when she emerged from retirement in 1879 for the opening of the Memorial Theatre at Stratford-upon-Avon, Faucit, who might have played Lady Macbeth (long considered one of her greatest roles), instead chose to play Beatrice. (Beauman 21-22). Likewise, while Terry's Lady Macbeth was considered one of her great roles, for her Jubilee performance in 1906, Terry also opted to play Beatrice.

Both actresses established themselves professionally in partnership with two of the great Shakespearean actor/managers of their time—Faucit with William Charles Macready from 1836 to 1843; Terry with Henry Irving from 1879 to 1902. Although both Macready and Irving were married, both actresses shared closet romances with their respective directors. In her biography of Terry, Nina Auerbach has convincingly argued that Irving's influence over Terry was Svengali-like. Terry's reminiscences and the letters between her and Bernard Shaw verify this. Shaw's comments are particularly telling when he writes to Terry in 1897: "Your career has been sacrificed to the egotism of a fool." In particular, Shaw complains that Irving 'cannot work out his slow, labored, self-absorbed stage conceptions unless you wait for him and play to him. This is a frightful handicap for you' (qtd. in Manvell 268). Similarly, Faucit's memories of Macready reveal that for several years, he, like Irving with Terry, dominated Faucit both on and off the stage. Macready's journals contain many examples of his grudging acceptance of Faucit's passion for him and his insistence on teaching her the craft of acting. During this period, some of Faucit and Terry's sister actresses were emerging as powerful authorities in their companies: Madame Vestris (1797-1856), Ellen Tree {Mrs. Charles Kean} (1806-1880),

Madame Celeste (1814-1882) in London; and Laura Keane (1820-1873) in America. On the continent, two actresses known primarily by their last names—Bernhardt (1844-1923) and Duse (1858-1924)—had by the 1880s established companies of their own in which they performed as actors, managers, and directors. Indeed, Bernhardt's lifestyle, which reflected her desire to be free of anyone else's influence or control, seems almost the opposite of Terry's desire to be "useful," which is her excuse to Bernard Shaw for remaining under Irving's control for so many years: "I appear to be of strange use to H. [Irving], and I have always thought to be *useful, really* useful to any one person is rather fine and satisfactory" (Terry/Shaw 370-71).

Despite the fact that both Faucit and Terry revealed a potential for directing, they were allowed few opportunities to practice.¹ Even so, Faucit and Terry had the last word. Dominated on the stage by Macready and Irving, so much so that they often could not play the roles that they wanted or could not act their characters as they wished; in their writing, they chose, directed, and interpreted their roles themselves. Ironically, despite being perceived as models of Victorian femininity and labeled "womanly women" on the stage; in their writing, both found evidence of masculinity in characters they favored. Masculinity—the ability and desire to control—was the opposite of the womanly woman described by Shaw and attacked by Mary Wollstonecraft in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in which she laments: "All women are to be leveled, by meekness and docility, into one character of yielding softness and gentle compliance" (151). During a period when Shakespeare's heroines were interpreted both on the page and on the stage as the epitome of femininity, Faucit and Terry found evidence to the contrary. Their partiality for the roles of Beatrice, Portia, and Rosalind is clearly based on their perception of them as strong central characters who direct and control themselves as well as other characters in the plays in which they appear.

Faucit's *On Some of Shakespeare's Female Characters* appeared in 1855 in response to a friend's request to share her knowledge of Shakespeare; Terry's *Four Lectures on Shakespeare* reappeared in 1932 and was based on a series of lectures that she had presented years earlier during tours of Australia and America. Both actresses' books have invited comparisons to Anna Jameson's *Characteristics of Women, Moral,*

Poetical, and Historical (1832) and to Mary Cowden Clarke's *The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines: in a Series of Tales* (1874). Indeed, like Faucit and Terry, Jameson and Clarke's books involve extensive fabrications of the lives of Shakespeare's women outside the text, but their purposes are not the same as Faucit and Terry's. Jameson, an early feminist, attempts to show that women of the Victorian era had fewer opportunities to achieve their potential than some of the heroic women in Shakespeare's plays.² Clarke, as her title suggests, "fabricates" the early lives of each heroine, attempting to show them in their formative years. Faucit and Terry's purpose, on the other hand, is to show part of their acting process and to reveal their personal interpretation of characters and scenes. In doing so, they reveal their shared habit of creating full lives for their characters during the process of preparation for a role. For them, the text was not enough; in order to enact characters to their satisfaction, both invented versions of characters' lives outside the texts and within themselves. According to Faucit, "I have had the great advantage of throwing my own nature into theirs, of becoming moved by their emotions: I have, as it were, thought their thoughts and spoken their words straight from my own living heart and mind" (Martin viii-ix). Terry felt the same; according to her, an actress's

task is to learn how to translate this character into herself, how to make its thoughts her thoughts, its words her words. It is because I have applied myself to this task for a great many years, that I am able to speak to you about Shakespeare's women with the knowledge that can be gained only from union with them. (Terry, *Four* 80)

In order to understand their compulsion to write about this process, we should note that Faucit and Terry shared the conviction that their preparation of characters for the stage enabled them to become one with those characters. The result was conflict with their directors who often interpreted those characters differently than they.

While maintaining what appears to be an objective candor, both actresses reveal their subjective and negative attitudes toward their all-powerful actor/managers. Even though she admitted that "Mr. Macready was a great actor, and a distinguished man in many ways," Faucit was not one to forget that "he would never, if he could help it, allow any one to stand upon the same level with himself." With tongue in cheek, she

reminds us that *Punch* "supposed Mr. Macready thought Miss Helen Faucit had a very handsome back, for, when on the stage with her, he always managed that the audience should see it and little else." (Martin 293). Similarly, Terry, though she considered Irving to be a genius, knew that he, like Macready, possessed a supreme egotism:

So much absorbed was he in his own achievements that he was unable or unwilling to appreciate the achievements of others. I never heard him speak in high terms of the great foreign actors and actresses who from time to time visited England. . . . He simply would not give himself up to appreciation. (qtd in Manvell 113)

Faucit and Terry's working relationships with their directors appear strikingly similar. Often, they were not allowed to play their parts as they felt the texts indicated they should; at other times, they were given no direction at all. Faucit, for example, tells of the first time that she acted *Lady Macbeth* in Dublin. After only one rehearsal, during which Macready taught her only the "business of the scene," Faucit "confided to him the absolute terror [she] was in." He assured her that she "should get on very well." After the curtain, "desirous of running away from and forgetting it as quickly as possible," Faucit changed and immediately left the theatre only to learn later that Macready had wished to honor her with a curtain call (Martin 288). This is uncannily like Terry's first-ever performance as *Ophelia* and her first as Irving's leading lady at the Lyceum Theatre. Like Macready, Irving could appear "diffident" when it came to giving direction to women, especially his female co-star (Manvell 119). During rehearsals for *Hamlet*, he ignored the scenes with *Ophelia*. But when Terry asked him about this oversight, he merely replied, "We shall be all right." Similar to Faucit in her first performance as *Ophelia*, Terry, after her first performance as *Lady Macbeth*, left the theatre immediately, feeling that she had failed, and rode "up and down the Embankment in a cab before she . . . had the strength to go home." And similar to Faucit's experience with Macready, Terry later learned that Irving had wanted her to go on for a curtain call (Manvell 120).

Faucit complains somewhat bitterly about Macready's direction when she compares his methods to those of Charles Kemble:

Each helped me, but by processes wholly unlike. The one, while pointing out what was wrong, brought the balm of encouragement and hope; the other, like the surgeon who "cuts beyond the wound

to make the cure more certain," was merciless to the feelings, where he thought a fault or a defect might so best be pruned away. (Martin 372)

Although Macready did not see himself as "merciless," in recalling some of his directorial advice to Faucit, he, himself, reveals his cutting tone:

Spoke to Miss Faucit about her habit of acting with her arms *in* to her side, and thus bringing herself so close to another person as to destroy all outline; also about her *smothering up* the last scene. She behaved very weakly upon these kind and good-natured remarks, and I thought would have had an hysteric in my room. I was distressed and annoyed. (Macready, 2: 173)

According to Terry, Irving's methods were not so surgical; he sounds more like a subtle steamroller: "He was very diplomatic when he meant to have his own way. He never blustered or enforced or threatened" (Terry, *Memoirs* 170). In preparing for Ophelia, for example, Terry planned to wear a "transparent black dress" rather than traditional white in the mad scenes because it seemed to her "*right*—like the character, like the situation." After trying gently to dissuade her, Irving seemed to approve of her choice of costume, but the next day, allowed her to know his true opinion through his assistant, Walter Lacy, who told her: "My God! Madam, there must be only one black figure in this play, and that's Hamlet!" Immediately, Terry backed down and wore the traditional white dress (Terry, *Memoirs* 171). She soon became very good at backing down. Always, when playing Beatrice, for example, although she wanted Beatrice to be "swift, swift, swift," she was forced to slow down in order to match Irving's plodding Benedick.³ Eventually, Terry gave up fighting the inevitable, and in her own words, became a "useful" actress, there only to serve Irving, the genius, in every way.

The similar experiences of these two actresses with their Svengalis may explain why in their writing, their favorite Shakespearean roles became those "triumphant women" who dominate their respective plays and direct those around them: Beatrice, Portia, and Rosalind.

Both Faucit and Terry describe Beatrice as being brilliant, witty, intellectual, and independent. Moreover, both celebrate the way in which Beatrice wins out over her adversary, Benedick. Winning out over Irving's Benedick must have pleased Terry immensely, since behind the scenes, she could not win out over Irving. During rehearsals for *Much*

Ado, Terry appears to have been thwarted at every turn. Told that as Beatrice she was to play some traditional "gags" in the Church scene, Terry balked. When Walter Lacy directed her to reveal her "jealousy" when Benedick supports the fainting Hero by "shoo[ing] him away," she refused because "it was so inconsistent with Beatrice's character that it ought to be impossible for any actress impersonating her to do it." (Terry, *Four* 96). She held out against Lacy but not against Irving when it came to two other "gags" which she did not want to perform (although they are different gags, she seems to have conflated them, telling one version in her autobiography and the other in *Four Lectures*). The first gag involved ending the church scene with "Kiss my hand again"; the second ended the scene with Terry's Beatrice saying, "kill him if you can" and Irving's Benedick responding "As sure as I'm alive, I will!" According to Terry, she held out against the first for "many rehearsals" (Terry, *Four* 96) and against the second for a week (Terry, *Memoirs* 178). But in recounting both stories, she ends with the memory of bursting into tears and giving in to Irving. This directorial decision did not, however, result in Irving's Benedick being hailed by critics. Indeed, neither Irving nor Macready's Benedick succeeded in being viewed as the quintessential Benedick. Macready, for example, was reviewed at Drury Lane as follows: "Macready's Benedick though able wants ease and grace—he is violently gay." (Robinson 170). How delicious it must have been for Faucit and Terry (both viewed as supreme Beatrices) to outdo their Benedicks within the parameters of the play and the stage.

As with Beatrice, Faucit and Terry are in general agreement about Portia's qualities. Both perceive her as a woman of power and authority who directs the actions of others. But there is an ironic quality about Terry's discussion of her impatience "when [she was] told that it is strange that a woman of this type, in the habit of *directing* herself and *directing* others, should be willing to be *directed* by a man so manifestly inferior to her as Bassanio" [author's italics] (Terry, *Four* 117). Both also celebrate what they see as Portia's masculine qualities. Faucit's Portia, for example, "combines all the graces of the richest womanhood with the strength of purpose, the wise helpfulness, and sustained power of the noblest manhood." (Martin 30). Faucit even refers to Portia as "he" in the trial scene (Martin 41). Similarly, in her discussion of Portia, Terry sees fit to quote Norwegian critic Georg Brandes who says, "in spite of her self-

surrender in love there is something independent, almost masculine in her attitude towards life. . . .She is used to acting on her own responsibility, without seeking advice first" (qtd. in Terry, *Four* 117). As well, both Terry and Martin argue that it is a mistake to play Portia as a comic role since such an approach undercuts her dignity and nobility (Martin 295; Terry *Four* 116). Of course, their approaches on the stage differed somewhat. Faucit believed that Portia would follow the dictates of her father's will to the letter; Terry, on the other hand, was convinced that Portia should sing the song in the casket scene and make the words "bred, head, nourished, fed" important enough to lead Bassanio to choose the lead casket (Foulkes 31). This difference in attitude may explain why Terry's portrayal of Portia on-stage was viewed by some critics as being too forward in the scenes with Bassanio. Henry James, for example had this to say: "When Bassanio has chosen the casket which contains the key of her heart, she approaches him, and begins to pat and stroke him. This seems to us an appallingly false note. 'Good heavens, she's touching him!' a person sitting next to us exclaimed" (James 143-44). Obviously, for some, Terry's Portia at this moment had gone too far and was not portraying the "womanly woman."

Neither Faucit nor Terry accepts the idea that Portia's victory over Shylock is the result of advice from Bellario; instead, they both believe that Portia's intellectual ability defeats Shylock. Faucit insists that Portia herself discovers "the flaw in the bond" before she leaves Belmont to visit Bellario for legal advice (Martin 37), and Terry maintains that during the trial, Portia discovers the "flaw" and sets "the trap in which Shylock [is] caught" (Terry *Four*, 120).⁴ One must wonder if the triumph over Shylock tickles their fancy so much because for them, it suggests or reflects their triumphs as actresses over the Shylocks portrayed by Macready and Irving. Indeed, Henry James found that Irving's Shylock was "neither excited nor exciting, and many of the admirable speeches, on his lips, lack much of their incision. . . . The great speech . . . this superb opportunity is missed; the actor, instead of being 'hissing hot,' . . . draws the scene out and blunts all its points" (qtd in *Victorian Actors*, 258). Terry agreed with James. In her *Memoirs*, she points out that "Irving's Shylock necessitated an entire revision of my conception of Portia, especially in the trial scene, . . . I had considered . . . that Portia in the trial scene ought to be very quiet. I saw an extraordinary effect in the quietness. But as

Henry's Shylock was quiet, I had to give it up. His heroic saint was splendid, but it wasn't good for Portia." (128). Of course, Irving believed that Shylock was the central character in *Merchant*, so much so that soon after the play opened, he did away with the final scenes in Belmont. Instead, the play ended with Shylock's tragic exit from the trial scene.

While celebrating the characters of Beatrice and Portia, both Faucit and Terry viewed the role of Rosalind as their favorite. Unfortunately, Terry was never allowed to act it. Indeed, it was one of Terry's "greatest disappointments" that she never played Rosalind: "Would that I could say 'I have been Rosalind.' Would that the opportunity to play this part had come my way when I was in my prime! I reckon it one of the greatest disappointments of my life that it did not!" (Terry, *Four* 97).⁵ The reason: Irving could find no appropriate leading role for himself in the play (although like Macready, he might have played Jacques). Like Terry, Faucit "loved Rosalind with [her] whole heart" (Martin 295), and long before Terry, she used the same adjective as Terry in describing Rosalind as "triumphant" (296). She considers the cross-dressing scenes "delightful" and celebrates Rosalind's "playfulness: the wit, the sarcasm bubble up, sparkle after sparkle, with bewildering rapidity" (328). Most uncanny, perhaps, are the similarities between Terry and Faucit's comparisons of the cross-dressed Rosalind and Viola in *Twelfth Night*. According to Terry: "Viola is less witty than either Rosalind or Beatrice. She seldom says a clever thing. . . . Imagine Rosalind or Beatrice in Viola's situation! Could either of them have resisted a jest at the unfortunate Orsino's mad passion?" (Terry, *Four* 126-7). Faucit sees Viola as "gentle, self-sacrificing, generous, but with no spirit of the heroic in her nature. . . . if placed in Viola's situation, Rosalind's mother-wit and high spirit would, I fancy, have enabled her to extricate herself handsomely" (Martin 330). Obviously, it is Rosalind's wit plus her control of the "situation" that makes her a more "triumphant woman" than Viola.

Proof of Faucit's ability as Rosalind to outshine her co-star occurred in 1843 when Queen Victoria commanded a performance of *As You Like It* with Faucit as Rosalind. Macready, playing Jacques, recorded his response: "I was much annoyed by the selection, which does me *no good*. Suffered from annoyance about the Command, the benefit of which is gone, as far as any remote good is concerned" (Macready, 2:, 212). Obviously, Macready felt that the queen should have selected a play in

which *he* could shine instead of one dominated by Faucit. Doubtless, had Terry played Rosalind to Irving's Jacques, she too would have irritated and annoyed him by her domination of the production. Clearly, both actresses viewed Rosalind as the power figure in her play and realized that playing her meant being able to direct the action of the play, to resolve conflicts, and to bestow bounty to all. No wonder both actresses found Rosalind to be their favorite character.

Before Virginia Woolf announced that Shakespeare was an androgynous writer, Faucit and Terry too found evidence to suggest it. Both understood that Shakespeare was able to project himself into the mindset of women just as easily as that of men. Better still, he was capable of creating female characters whose strength and power were alien to Victorian perceptions of what women should be. Clearly, their freedom as actresses allowed them to see beyond the narrow bonds of Victorian sensibility. And just as surely, their bondage to dictatorial directors led them to revolt against that sensibility in the pages of their books. For them, Shakespeare spoke for independent women of his own time as well as theirs. Terry, for example, speaks of Shakespeare's "vindication of woman in these fearless, high-spirited, resolute and intelligent heroines" (Terry, Four 81). Moreover, Terry shares views with modern critics like Juliet Dusinberre, when she notes that Shakespeare created strong women based on real women of his own time, citing: Lady Jane Grey, Mary Stuart, Queen Elizabeth and Katharine of Aragon (Terry, Four 81-2).⁶ We can only wonder what kind of productions Faucit and Terry might themselves have mounted had the mores of Victorian society allowed them the freedom and power enjoyed by Macready and Irving. Unfortunately, we can never know for sure; but we can imagine, just as they did, through their writings.

Notes

1. Note: Terry became manager of the Imperial Theatre in 1903, where she had artistic control, but the venture was short-lived.
2. See Gail Marshall's discussion of Jameson's book in relation to Helena Faucit in "Helena Faucit: Shakespeare's Victorian Heroine." *Translating Life: Studies in Transpositional Aesthetics* (1999) 298-300.
3. See Nina Auerbach's discussion of Terry's problems with Irving's Benedick in *Ellen Terry: Player in Her Time* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1987) 225.
4. For a study that includes the differences between the two performances, see Richard Foulkes, "Helen Faucit and Ellen Terry as Portia" *Theatre Notebook* 31:3 (1977) 27-37. Also see Georgianna Ziegler, "The Actress as Shakespearian Critic: Three Nineteenth-Century Portias," *Theatre Survey* 30 (May/Nov. 1989) 93-109.
5. For further discussion of Terry's identification with the role of Rosalind and her disappointment at not being allowed to play the role, see Nina Auerbach, *Ellen Terry: Player in Her Time* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1987) 230-32, 237.
6. See Juliet Dusinberre, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1996) 2, in which Dusinberre cites Catherine of Aragon, Catherine Parr, Princess Elizabeth, Lady Anne Bacon, Lady Margaret Beaufort, etc.

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