## Chapter III

The women of Lyly's works are not all cast in one mold, but almost all have one thing in common: they are educated members of a refined society. This was the basis upon which Lyly built his feminine characterization. As individuals, Lyly's women range from shrews to maidens, from intellectuals to ante-chamber gossipers, but none is a wench. There are only two serving girls in his writings, but they are such obviously stock characters, play such minor roles, and are so characteristically unlike the majority of Lyly's women that they hardly deserve treatment in this study.

None of Lyly's women occupies a subordinate position to man in conversation. Many of the women actually guide and rule the men, but there is no feminine character in all of Lyly's works who feels herself an inferior in conversing with men. Much of this is no doubt due to the atmosphere of the Renaissance which had made conversation a fine art. The emphasis upon conversation had created a corresponding emphasis upon the mechanical means of conversing: words, choice of phrases, elegant and florid methods of expression. Euphuism, therefore, was the ideal verbal vehicle for conversation, and the "Euphuistic ladies of

Lyly's dramas"[12] were particularly representative of the upper-class women of the age. It is significant to note that Miss Gagen uses the term "ladies" rather than "women" to describe Lyly's feminine characters.

The Lylian woman is also representative of the woman in Renaissance literature in that she likes to debate the topic of love. Indeed, it is this topic which fascinates Lyly's courtly ladies -- and also his courtiers. Euphues employed love and love-making as the chief subject of conversation, "the underlying motive and mainspring of social intercourse."[13] This description is also applicable to Lyly's plays, for they are, in a sense, attempts to reproduce the success of Euphues.

In Lyly's writings the social status of his women is predetermined. They generally represent that group of sixteenthcentury women who were alive to the latest influences in education, social customs, and literature. But using this predetermined status as a basis, "Lyly...faces the mystery of human personality."[14] Sapho, Sophronia, Ceres, and particularly Cynthia, are Lyly's most elevated ladies. They demonstrate what the well-trained woman can become, in this following the best example of the age: Queen Elizabeth herself. Sapho is regal but relatively passive, but Cynthia, Ceres, and Sophronia convey a sense of power and authority over the dramatic worlds which they inhabit. The reader feels that each has a capacity

12. Gagen, p. 88.
13. Bond, I, p. 161.
14. Knight, p. 157.

for ruling and managing consistent with her royal position. This group of Lylian ladies is wise, "faire," and exalted.

A more general class of Lylian ladies is the group of simply cultivated ladies who are consistent characters, though perhaps rather colorless. Certainly they are all theoretical women of the age, but none has those particularly notable personalities or social positions that mark the rest of Ly ly's ladies. Serena is a fine example of this type of woman, and, in their own maidenly ways, so are Phillida, Gallathea, Lady Frauncis, and Camilla. This group of ladies is not always wise and witty, but always educated. We should call these ladies wise or educated and "faire."

But Lyly's most lively and notable group of ladies consists of Mileta, Suavia, Livia, Celia, Nisa, and Niobe. This group is wise and "faire," but they are also witty, impudent, obstinate, bold, and caustic. These women have traditionally been considered the sources for such Shakespearian heroines as Katherine, Rosalind, and Beatrice, for "elles possèdent en commun le babil etourdissant, la verve cruelle, la moquerie lancinante, et surtout cet art de diriger contre les hommes empêtrés dans leur amour les resources d'un cervaus féminin rompu aux espièglieres sentimentales."[45] Campaspe should be added to this group, for the early Campaspe, at least, has the same characteristics. The sophisticated, educated, and clever shrewishness of these ladies was one of Lyly's really amazing contributions to the drama if we

45. Feuillerat, p. 489.

consider the rowdy and physical buffoonery which passed for humor at the time.

Only a few of the women in Lyly's works fall outside the realm of these three classifications:

1. The wise, "faire," and exalted.
2. The simply wise or educated and "faire."
3. The wise, "faire," witty, impudent, and caustic.

One exception to these classifications is the sensually passionate Tellus. Venus is a man-hunting villainess. Lucilla, of Euphues, is also a villainess in a sense, although she is almost too vapid to make the reader at first completely aware of this quality. Although Semele might seem to qualify for class three, she is actually too determinedly and boringly shrewish to be ranked with the clever Mileta and Livia. Silena, the simple-minded girl, as with Lyly's two serving girls, seems too clearly a stock character to be considered characteristically Lylian. And the two enchantress-figures in Lyly's plays, Mother Bombie and Dipsas, seem more personifications of folklore figures than real people. Bombie is completely characterless, and Dipsas serves chiefly as a sort of scape-goat for Lyly's attack on witchcraft, "that detested wickedness."

Pandora of The Woman in the Moone must be studied separately. In the first place she is not a consistent dramatic character, but rather a sort of allegorical representation of womankind at its worst. We can ascribe no particular character to Pandora because she is no more than

a composite. This play does not necessarily prove Lyly a woman-hater. In his previous work he had created a series of admirable, intelligent, and witty women who were usually more memorable than their male partners. Instead, The Woman in the Moone is Lyly's contribution to the misogynous tradition of the Renaissance. It is not really dramatic and shows little of the inspiration and dramatic movement of plays like Campaspe and Endimion. The Woman in the Moone, like Mother Bombie, appears to be Lyly's particular version of a popular literary tradition.

This does not mean, however, that Lyly's works are not without criticism of women. This criticism, though, must be studied in the context in which it appears. Courtiers criticize the fickleness and vanity of women -- but Lyly balances this with his courtly ladies' criticism of men. This was all part of the love debate, and was not necessarily sincere. Indeed, if we are to believe the sixteenth century satirists like Marston and Donne, hypocrisy was an invaluable courtly attribute. A major portion of the love debate was given to deciding whether man or woman loved best, which of the two was more trustworthy, for example, etc. In the course of these love discussions, criticism of the opposite sex was hardly more than rhetorical, and it lent some fire to the tedium of debating Petrarchan and neo-Platonic philosophy, a social convention which, in itself, seems superficial.

It is obvious, however, that Lyly had a positive attitude toward women. Bond says, "Considering Lyly's date and the

condition of dramatic art, we may speak of his women merely as a single class."[45] This is true. Lyly's personal development in the field of feminine characterization, beginning with the bland Lucilla of Euphues and flowering in the outstanding women of his plays, overrode all previous works in this field and served as a great influence. As a dramatist in general Lyly was something of a pace-setter. His dramas are not always dramatically and theatrically interesting, and his characters are not often drawn with great depth, but, considering the condition of the theatre when Lyly began writing, his overall achievements are praiseworthy. There can hardly be any reservations in speaking of Lyly's ladies, however. They are remarkable creations.

The compostie Lylian woman would be educated, of high estate, wise, clever, fair, a bright conversationalist, and a poised social animal. Lyly's "gentlewomen," whether "wise," "newfangled," or "vpstart," introduced the Renaissance woman to the English literary and dramatic world. Lyly's dramas seem so much more civilized and polished if we compare the brittle wit of Niobe or Mileta and the respectable conversational powers of Camilla and Campaspe with the physically motivated and farcical humor of Gammer Gurton.

> On the whole Lyly is most successful when he is drawing women, which was only as it should be, if we allow that the feminine element is the very pivot of true comedy. This he saw, and it is because he was the first to realise it and to grapple with the difficulties it entailed that the title of father of English comedy may be given him without the least reserve or hesitation...."[46]

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45. Bond, II, p. 282
46. Wilson, p. 125

In his (Lyly's) plays women meet men on equal terms, and it is only when such a relation has been established between the sexes that comedy of the higher type can come into being. (1)

Lyly was the first writer in English ~~who~~ to showed that intellect, too, was a part of the feminine organism, and his noble queens, refined maidens, and witty courtesans marked the emergence of the representative woman in English literature and were the forerunners not only of Shakespeare's heroines but also those of Congreve's and of Meridith's.

(1) Boas, p. 87

Accepted in draft 3/9/09

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