

III

The Conclusion

The women of Lyly's plays 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 dramas, 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 dramas 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"³⁷ were particularly representative of the upper-class women of the age. It is

³⁷ Gagen, p. 88.

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."³⁸ This description is also applicable to Lyly's plays, for in them Lyly was trying to reproduce some of the success he had enjoyed with Euphues.

In Lyly's plays the social status of his women is pre-determined. They generally represent that group of sixteenth century women who were alive to the latest influences in education, social customs, and literature. But using this pre-determined status as a basis, "Lyly...faces the mystery of human personality."³⁹ 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 for ruling and managing consistent with her royal position. This group of Lylian ladies is wise, "faire," and exalted.

³⁸ Bond, I, p. 161.

³⁹ Knight, p. 157.

A more general class of Lylian ladies is the group of simply cultivated ladies who have minor roles in his plays. Certainly they are all theoretical women of the age, but none is particularly colorful. Serena is a fine example of this type of woman, and, in their own maidenly ways, so are Gallathea and Phillida. 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 Miletta, Suavia, Livia, Celia, Nisa, and Niobe. This group is wise and "faire," but 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 étourdissant, la verve cruelle, la moquerie lancinante, et surtout cet art de diriger contre les hommes empêtrés dans leur amour les ressources d'un cerveau féminin rompu aux espégliaires sentimentales."⁴⁰ 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 consider the rowdy and physical buffoonery which passed for humor at the time.

Only a few of the women in Lyly's plays 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.

⁴⁰ Feuillerat, p. 489.

One exception to the Lylian rule is the sensually passionate Tellus. Venus is a man-hunting villainess. 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 dramatic character to be considered characteristically Lylian. 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 scapegoat 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 figure, 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 misogynist 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 plays are not

without criticism of women. This criticism, however, 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. A major portion of the love debate was given to deciding whether man or woman loved best, which of the two was the more trustworthy, 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.

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."⁴¹ This is true. 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 composite Lylilian 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 stage. Lyly's dramas seem so much more civ-

⁴¹ Bond, II, p. 282.

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