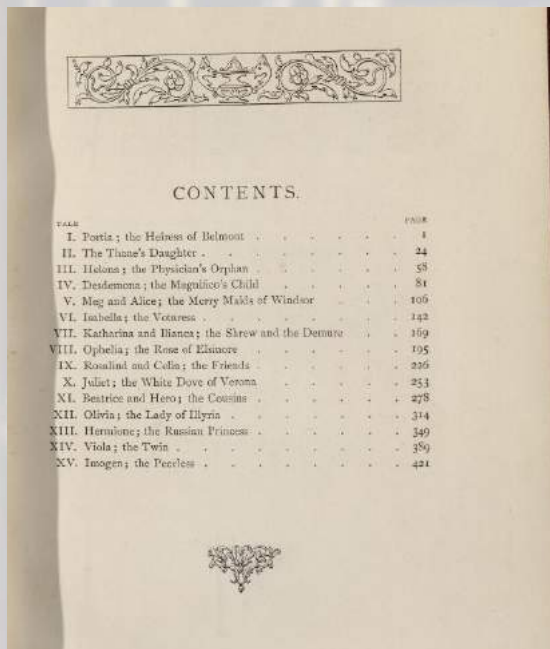


# A 'Scope for Pleasant Fantasy': Fanfiction, Feminism and Shakespeare.

By Olivia Hall

When using the words archive and fanfiction together in the same sentence, a person may think less of traditional archives, and more of popular fanfiction websites such as 'An Archive of Our Own'. With the increased popularisation of fandom and fanfiction in the 21<sup>st</sup> century through the advent of social media, many believe fanfiction itself to be a modern creation.

However, after being given the opportunity to explore the Shakespeare Collection at the Library of Birmingham archives, I now understand that the artform of fanfiction has been in existence for centuries.



What has inspired this exhibition is a book published in 1851 by author Mary Cowden Clarke entitled '*The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines*'. The book contains a series of fifteen novellas, each telling the story of the childhood of one of Shakespeare's female leads. This includes characters such as Juliet, Lady Macbeth and Ophelia. This exhibition includes extracts from the stories of 'Desdemona; the Magnifico's Child' and 'Viola; the Twin'. More broadly however, this exhibition looks at how fanfiction, both in this book and in its current uses today, has often been utilised as a feminist form for literary expression.

The works of Shakespeare include many memorable female parts, just some of whom have already been mentioned. Mary Cowden Clarke more than most understood this, as an expert and appreciate of Shakespeare's work, having published '*The Complete Concordance to Shakespeare*' as a volume in 1845. The memorability of these characters though, often does not stem from any overwhelming amount of agency they are given in their respective texts, nor from the rationality of their characters. It is in creating such characters that Shakespeare's work allowed for Cowden Clarke's. That these heroines were pre-existing characters written by Shakespeare provided the novel with the literary legitimacy to exclusively explore the lives of female protagonists. Nevertheless, the desire to explain and give context to the behaviours of the female characters in Shakespeare's plays existed because the playwright often neglected to do so himself.

"For me, papa? Why, bring me that nice boy, the little duke Orsino you were telling of, one evening, that would make such a good play-fellow for Sebastian and me. You said he was 'a noble lad.' I should like to have him here with us."

"And what shall I bring home for my Sebastian?" he said.

"My mother;" answered the boy, in a low voice. "They took her away—she is gone. Bring her back; bring her home. I want to see her. I want her with us again."

The father turned away.

"Papa!" said Viola, "I want to say good-bye to my mole. Lift me up, that I may kiss it and tell it I shall think of it every night when I go to bed, and send a hundred times 'felicissima notte' after it!"

"Upon my word!" exclaimed monna Marcella, in a tone least to a peacock's cry before rain. "Pretty doings, truly! Who began this? Who set the example? But I said I'd match you, and I will! I'll punish you both this time; and then there can be no mistake. You shall both be locked up."

"I shan't mind that; we shan't mind being locked up together," said Viola, suddenly relieved.

"I know who says that! It must be that coward of a girl!" said monna Marcella. "But no, child; I mean no such thing. You shall both be locked up; but separately—in your separate rooms; while I go to spend the evening at messer Gervasio's 'campagna.'"

It is possible that even this 'good manager' might have shrunk from inflicting so much of what she thought salutary misery, could she have guessed its amount. As it was, she was struck with its effects, when she returned home. She went at once up to Viola's room and found the child lying upon the bed. Its bright hair was in disorder; its cheeks very pale; its eyelids swollen and stained with tears, while the lips lay parted, and almost colourless.

It was not at all in such a woman's system of management, to speak to the child the next morning soothingly, with respect to the future. Therefore little Viola had no idea that there was anything softened in the state of affairs between herself and the harsh-visaged personage, who sat watching her and her brother next morning, as they took their breakfast meal beneath her eye.

"What ails ye, child? What's amiss? Why don't you eat your polenta, and drink your milk?"

"I'm not hungry, thank you," said Viola.

So, what can be said for the content of the novellas? The writing in the book itself is not explicitly feminist, rather it often expresses the heroines' childhood through what would be considered acceptable standards of Victorian femininity. In the extract from Viola's girlhood the author writes that even as a young girl Viola desired most as a present from her father the courtship of Orsino, after being informed that he was handsome young man. However, this is not to remove merit from the characterisations, as they do provide more depth to these heroines. In the story of Desdemona, we are helped to understand why she is written as such an unrealistically angelic character through learning more about the relationships she had with her mother and her maid; both of whom are only briefly mentioned within 'Othello' yet are here given character and agency. The insecurity of Viola is too given reason through exploration of the traumatic events within her childhood, and the favouritism placed upon her brother Sebastian due him being male. What is most significant is that in all these stories the reader sees how the events of childhood impacted each character, and so we understand how these girls felt about their circumstances up to the point of them entering their respective plays. By understanding the mindset of each character when they are canonically introduced to us, Mary Cowden Clarke shows her adept knowledge of Shakespeare's characterisation, and moreover, her additions enabled more people to share her insight into these heroines.

The little Desdemona repaid this devotion with her whole heart. She never voluntarily quitted her mother's side; and hour by hour would she sit close to her, getting her to tell the long stories she loved so to hear of those old bygone times, when her gentle mother had been a girl herself, and had lived in retirement and even penury, with her old blind father and her sailor brother; and then Desdemona would utter longing wishes that she could behold and know the gallant sailor-uncle so long absent and unknown to her, but whom she loved for the sake of her mother.

DESDEMONA; THE MAGNIFICO'S CHILD. 105

On her entering the assembly of senators, the duke spoke; then her father; and then her uncle heard her soft voice—gentle and low, but wonderfully calm, as if she willed it not to tremble—utter these words:

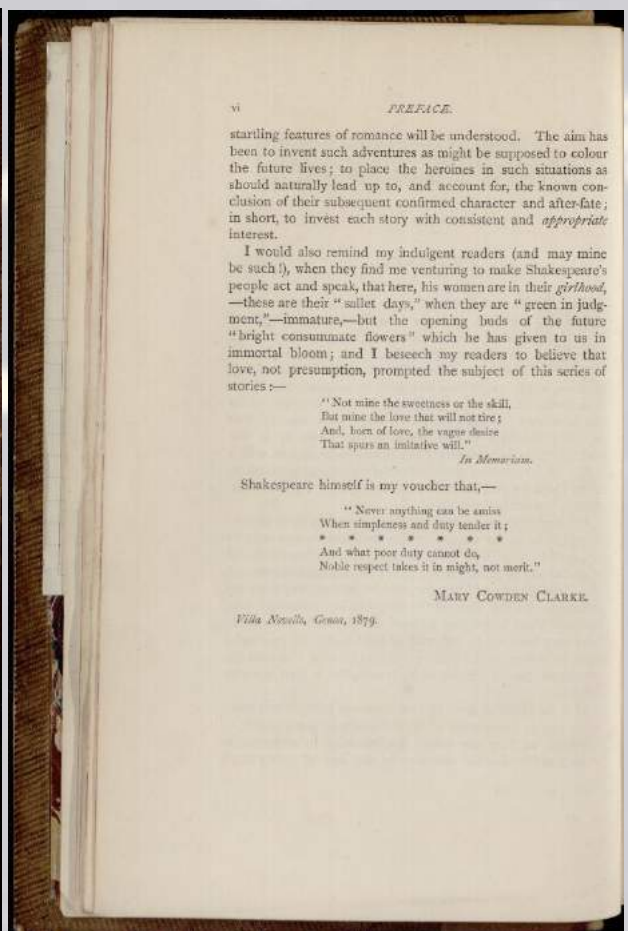
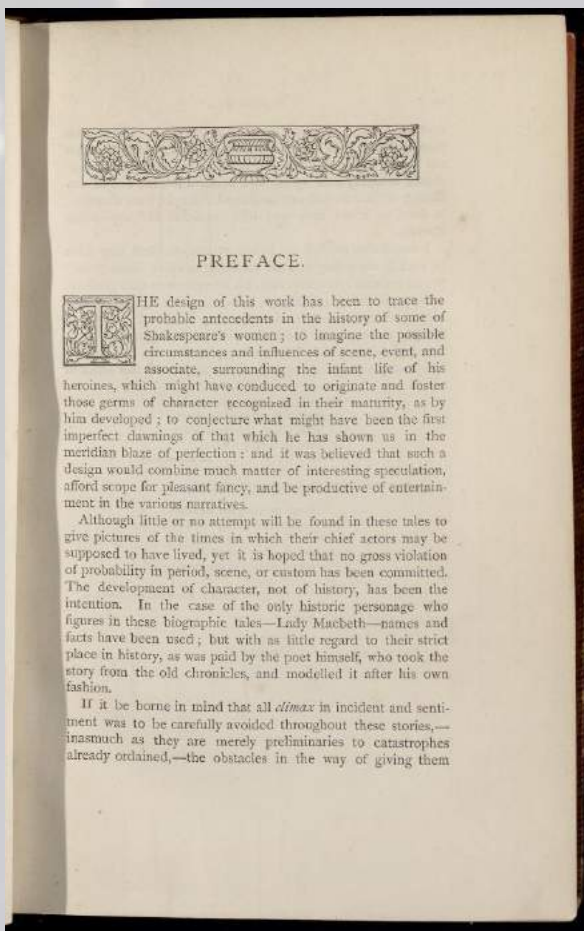
"My noble father,  
I do perceive here a divided duty;  
To you, I am bound for life, and education;  
My life, and education, both do learn me  
How to respect you; you are the lord of duty,  
I am hitherto your daughter. But here's my husband;  
And so much duty as my mother show'd  
To you, preferring you before her father,  
So much I challenge that I may profess  
Due to the Moor, my lord."

OTHELLO, Act i. Sc. 3.

But though he thus recognized and worshipped gentleness in the characters of his wife and daughter, his own nature gained nothing of corresponding suavity. He was still the same imperious Brabantio; proud, harsh, despotic. He was fond of his daughter for her attention and submission to him; he took pleasure in her beauty, her accomplishments; he was intensely conscious of her grace and loveliness; he indulged her in every desire she could form of taste or luxury. But he was as far as ever from any power of winning her confidence, or responding to the sympathies and hidden instincts of affection and imagination which lurked within her heart. She was hardly aware of them herself; but had she known them ever so palpably, she would all too surely have felt they could meet no response from him. What aspirations she was imperfectly conscious of, therefore, she locked close within her own thoughts, and let the only satisfaction they sought, be found in secret and in silence.

It might be, that she was swayed by a spice of that romance which had, in his youth, led her own father to take a sort of delight in the mystery attending his secret marriage with Erminia; certain it is, that, inherited or not, there was a strong tendency to the imaginative and the romantic, in Desdemona's disposition. Her fancy had always been strangely excited about that absent sailor-uncle of hers; his probable adventures had always possessed a singular charm of wonder and speculation for her mind, and had occupied many an hour of solitary musing. The fascination which all that presented food for her imagination had for her, might thus have been one source of the unobserved way in which she chose to pay her visits—both of piety and charity. But the main-spring of her reserved conduct, was undoubtedly, awe of her father.

If we are to understand how this book relates to feminism in fanfiction more broadly, we should only have to look to the preface of the novel. Cowden Clarke states the purposes of her novellas are to ‘combine much matter of interesting speculation, afford scope for pleasant fantasy, and be productive of entertainment in the various narratives’. It is the idea of ‘pleasant fantasy’ which has incited this exhibition, as I believe this to be a whimsical phrase which answers how women have used fanfiction as a feminist artform. Writing and reading fanfiction is a more common interest of women than it is of men, and I believe the draw to this literary form is that it is a space where women and girls are able to express agency - not only through characters they adapt but through the ability to write. Literature is a space which from Mary’s time to our current time remains dominated by male writers and protagonists, with books featuring a male lead and author statistically likely to sell more copies than books with a female author or protagonist. Cowden Clarke herself published her novels under then masculine or gender-neutral pen names of ‘M.H.’ and ‘Harry Wandsworth Shortfellow’. Through adapting beloved characters (often) legitimised through their male authorship, women have been able to engage in a ‘pleasant fantasy’ where female characters are protagonists with agency and context behind their actions. Clarke also writes in her preface that she is doing what Shakespeare himself did when writing: he ‘took the story from the old chronicles, and modelled it after his own fashion’. Like Shakespeare added his expertise to the stories he adapted, Cowden Clarke adds her expertise and perspective as a female author and intellectual. Furthermore, it is in this fashion, of adding women’s experiences and perspectives to existing works that feminism has been given a place in literature through fanfiction, both historically and present.



MARY COWDEN CLARKE