

LETTERS FROM THE CAPITAL.

WASHINGTON, April 5, 1852.

Verily 'tis a curious thing to have one's serious, long-settled opinions, or pleasant, pertinacious fancies, suddenly rebutted, reversed, unsettled, overturned, scattered, and set at naught. Such an utter and unlooked-for revolution has been wrought in my mind by the reading of an able article in the last number of the *Westminster Review*, on Mary Stuart. I confess hitherto to have been one of the blindest and wilfullest worshippers of this fair, sad-fated princess—sovereign not of Scots alone, but the queen universal of love and beauty, trebly crowned by royalty, loveliness, and misfortune—this regal sorceress, who bewitched the world, laid her spells on time, and sent her weird charms down enchanted ages. I never voluntarily read anything in her disfavor, or patiently heard anything to her disparagement. I swore by Walter Scott, Agnes Strickland, and the royal lady's French biographers and poetical adorers. With an unsophisticated trustfulness, an innocent faith in virtuous impossibilities, only to be surpassed by that displayed by the sturdy Puritan champions of Lola Montez, the "respectable" school commissioners of Boston, I looked upon her beheaded majesty as a deeply-injured and much-calumniated woman—one who, it may be, had been "wild and wayward, but not wicked," to quote from the tender and touching "appeal" of the houri-eyed *danseuse* above referred to. But this time I was in for it, before I was aware; and captivated by the calm strength, the lucid argument, the totally conclusive reasoning of the paper, I read on and on, grieving, but not, alas, dissenting. And then the proof contained in private letters under the perfidious Queen's own hand—letters of "damning import," and of whose authenticity there can be no reasonable doubt. They were not discredited at the time, in the tribunals of church and state, or by the people, though they were afterwards arbitrarily set aside, but are now brought forward, and their claims to genuineness strongly urged.

In all her errors, Mary's friends have defended her on the ground that she acted not for and of herself, but was merely the innocent, helpless tool, in unscrupulous hands. These letters prove her to have had a clear, scheming head, and a bold, pitiless heart, of her own.

Well, surely it is strange how things come round and come out! May we not imagine it possible that at some distant future day, some casket of letters may be discovered, some curious private papers may be brought forward, to prove to the descendants of the Lola Montane party of our time, that the dancing divinity of their "respectable" forefathers was, after all, a long way from being "the wisest, virtuous-est, discreetest, best," of all her sex. "Let her that thinketh she standeth, take heed lest she fall"—especially when she *pirouettes*.

So, it is past—my pleasant, early, long-guarded, carefully-nursed faith, not alone in the proud purity of the wedded Queen, but in her warm, impulsive, earnest, though often erring womanliness. That generous, impressible, suffering heart, in which we have believed, seeing that death itself could not still it, but that it has throbbled on, and on, in the song and sorrow and glory of Scotland, in the life of the world—was, she herself affirmed, "as hard as diamond." Ah, she herself was the diamond—cold, sharp, costly and shining—giving out light without warmth—bringing peril, temptation, and destruction, to him who would wear her on his heart, and wounded to the death the foot that trod upon her; and not that glorious crushed flower of royal womanhood, crimsoning with its soft appealing beauty the hand of tyrannous power, and sending its sorrowful fragrance through all countries and down all time. She now stands before me, this half-mythic creature of my early romantic dreams, as a magnificent incarnation of unholy passions—as the very splendor of sin—as the fair ideal both of subtle intrigue and defiant crime. The question arises, what has blinded us to evidences of guilt and shame we could hardly for a moment dispute if brought against another than Mary Stuart? Not her royalty, nor her misfortunes; for other Queens as unfortunate have sorrowed, suffered, and been forgotten, since she laid down her head at Fotheringay. Her wondrous beauty was the spell which she glamour'd the world. Those splendid eyes are dust and darkness these two hundred and sixty years, yet their deathless flash blinds the gaze that would peer ~~so curiously into that stormy private history~~—the impartial biographer hears on his paper the dropping of tears which have marked their piteous course down those cheeks of immortal bloom; and lo, his stern judgment is blotted out forever!—the stout heart of the grave historian is shaken with the sobs that once heaved that lovely bosom, and so he touches with fatherly tenderness on the faults of the beautiful sinner—but, to ease his conscience, gives to those of poor Queen Elizabeth, who had red hair, an angular, grenadierish figure, and was an old maid, the full measure of his righteous reprobation.

The performances of Miss Cushman at the National Theatre, in our city, have been subjects of much interest for the week past. She has been playing a farewell engagement. To you, I know I need say nothing of the merits of this truly great actress. I can tell you little in that regard which you know not already by heart; yet, for mine own pleasure, I will indulge myself in a few words. To me, it seems that to all lovers of the histrionic art the acting of Miss Cushman must be not alone a rare pleasure, but for the time an absorbing study. It takes such a wide, free, fearless sweep, and yet in artistic detail, combination, balance, and symmetry, is so exquisitely true. And then, there is about it that captivating, indescribable, irresistible spirit of *abandon*, the ever-new, exhaustless enthusiasm of the genuine artist. No true feeling ever loses its truth in her utterance—no great passion is ever dwarfed in her conception. She may exaggerate, but she never belittles—she may over-pass the idea of the poet, or our own, but she never falls behind it. Her genius is wonderfully strong and individual—full of glowing vitality, palpitating with a rich, vigorous life. Her power in high tragedy has much of regal sway and consciousness—somewhat too much, it may be, of arrogance and fierceness at times; but she grasps you, holds you, and conquers you, finally, whether you rebel, or submit at the first. She compels your half-bewildered admiration, she commands your awe-struck sympathies, she gives you sudden electric shocks of passion, she storms upon you with all the fire and flood of maddened love, hate, revenge, anguish, and despair. But this is only the night side of the picture—there is another side of sunshine, of glad, golden, Italian sunshine. In scenes of playful tenderness, her voice, her look, her manner, have a most subduing sweetness and a peculiar, child-like charm. Yes, child-like; for there is always something of pride and sovereignty about a child, and, in comedy, she ever seems to me to be playing with her wildest wit, sovereignly and proudly, as though half-divining that grave fates sometimes come under forms of humorous fancies—as imperial Juno might have trifled with the cuckoo which nestled in her bosom, all unknowing that she fondled an adventitious god, masquerading under borrowed plumage.

There is another picture of her genius, neither of darkness nor full day, but of soft and tender moonlight. In scenes of great soul-wounding sorrow, of holy womanly love in adversity, desertion, and death, Miss Cushman's deepest power is no longer stormy, imperious, or exigent, but seems to steal upon you like the soft step of a beloved friend, who comes to join you in your sadness, and grieve with you, rather than to ask you for your tears. And in her most passionate personations the lulls in the tempest, the deep-breathing times, the after calm, are especially delicious. There are nowhere such pleasant rests to our impassioned interest as in her splendid representation of *Romeo*. Never shall I forget the exquisite tenderness, the refined passion, the wonderful blending of manly strength and womanly softness of this noble personation. Before her, I had never seen any rendering of this character which was not a caricature, or a profanation. But who could do justice to the lightness, the sparkle, the mirthful abandon, the absolute deliciousness of her *Rosalind*? It is a wonder of art, and yet a delight for its pure, spontaneous naturalness, for its fulness of glorious wit and matchless humor, for its truth to life, womanhood, and Shakespeare. There is about this part an exultant, exuberant joyousness, which must make it a brilliant impossibility, a beautiful despair, to any but an *artiste* who has preferred much of the flush and freshness of early girlhood, like the joy and fragrance of past May-day-crownings lingering about her yet. Miss Cushman's triumph in this part proves that the heart of eighteen now throbs in her bosom—

that the springs from which her genius first drank have not failed, but gladden, refresh, and sustain it still.

In regarding Miss Cushman, I cannot pay all tribute to the genius and art which have won her such distinction; for the tireless energy, the will, the courage, the indomitable perseverance of the woman, claim yet more of my admiration. She has built, block by block, the structure of her own fame and fortunes; she has cut her own way through "the forest of difficulty," has herself bridged all the chasms and floods which lay in her path. And for this I honor her.

Well, I have made a long leap from Mary Stuart to Charlotte Cushman—from the actress-queen of Shakespeare's time to the queen-actress of our day—from her who played on the broad stage of state, with the world for an audience, so fearlessly yet fatally, her own passionate and improvised *role*, tragedy on tragedy, to its dark and bloody *finale*—to her who so well presents for our admiring homage the great poet's grand and gay, sweet and sorrowful creations. Adieu.

GRACE GREENWOOD.