

Teacher Extraordinary of Shakespeare

Ethel Feuerlicht Guttman '17

"Gay-graced with bells that ever chiming are"

Those of us who knew the enchantment of sharing in Helen Gray Cone's passion for Shakespeare remember perhaps most clearly of all her voice, which could range from bell-like or comic-gruff to organ tones of noble beauty. Yet it was not only that rare voice, "as sweet and musical as bright Apollo's lute," which gave us her rich gift of Shakespeare "Enough, with over-measure." It was her salty humor, her faultless sense of drama, her deep involvement with the beauty of life, and the strangeness and greatness of human beings, her whole emotional vitality, which interpreted for us forever the plays that have no peer in all the literature of all the ages.

When we followed, with her, the zany conversation between Hamlet and Polonius in which the dotard agreed that the cloud they were looking at did, indeed, look exactly like a camel, then a weasel, then a whale, or when she drew to the life one of Shakespeare's raffish clowns, we were, unlike Queen Victoria, truly amused. When her dramatic powers brought Antony into that room on the second floor of the "new building" (circa 1918), how we hung on the words . . .

I come not, friends, to steal away your
hearts,

or when she spoke Hamlet's:

There are more things in heaven and earth,
Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in all your philosophy.

The beauty and wonder of life was daily bread to Helen Gray Cone, and she shared this good sustenance with us. One might best describe her gift of evoking and sharing beauty in the words from King Henry VIII,

Yet in bestowing, madam,
He was most princely.

When she said, "O swear not by the moon, the inconstant moon," we were transported to that moonlit balcony where Juliet leaned, and again were moon-drenched when she read,

How sweet the moonlight sleeps upon this bank!

. . . Look how the floor of Heaven
Is thick inlaid with patins of pure gold.

Who can see *The Tempest* without remembering that voice declaring,

Our revels now are ended . . .

We are such stuff

As dreams are made on, and our little life

Is rounded with a sleep.

Or, on rereading *Hamlet*, the remembrance of things past chimes gloriously in the words of that unhappy Prince:

What a piece of work is a man! how noble
in reason! how infinite in faculty! . . . in action
how like an angel! in apprehension, how like a god!

For teachers of English who yearn to "Sail like my pinnacle to those golden shores" and to give their own pupils a like transfusion of beauty, understanding and entrancement is not a simple matter. One would have to have had a lifetime of intellectual and emotional excitement over William Shakespeare.

In her own poems, Helen Gray Cone reflects this devotion. If one wants to understand the depth of her feelings, one should read her sonnet sequence on the *Merchant of Venice*, her poem, "Elsinore," her tributes to Salvini's Othello and Ellen Terry's Beatrice, she of the bells that "ever chiming are." One should read through Helen Gray Cone's own play about Shakespeare's daughter, *Judith Shakespeare*. Intermingled with her love for Shakespeare, Helen Gray Cone also felt a great devotion for England:

This blessed plot, this earth, this realm,
this England!

To teach Shakespeare, this love of his beloved land is a requisite.

It is only right to record too that Helen Gray Cone was an autocrat in her classroom, who permitted no discussion, no deviation or questioning of her interpretation of Shakespeare. This disturbed me occasionally, not only because I was brought up to speak my mind (and found it almost impossible to contain what I thought) but also because I knew that the Shakespeare class of which I was a member was unusually perceptive and articulate. To sit in good company and to be forced to share in imposed silence, troubled me, in spite of my reverence and love for our teacher. Today, however, having sat in and squirmed through many a seminar where partly-informed classmates interrupt the speaker, for the purpose of listening to themselves talk, I no longer have rebellious thoughts about Helen Gray

Cone's iron hand. She knew Shakespeare better than almost any other scholar in our ken. She had edited a number of his plays, for the Riverside Literature Series published by Houghton Mifflin, had studied and re-studied all of him. She was able to impart his essence fully and wonderfully. It would have been folly to dilute this over-measure of wisdom.

We find in Shakespeare — where else? — the apt, the goodly tribute to our great teacher and scholar, Helen Gray Cone. To paraphrase *Two Gentlemen of Verona*:

She is (our) own,
And I as rich in having such a jewel,
As twenty seas, if all their sand were pearl,
The water nectar and the roots pure gold.

Shakespeare at Hunter

Edward McAleer

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(From Address at the College on February 19)

This year marks the 400th anniversary of the birth of William Shakespeare, and all over the world people are honoring the poet in the seventy-nine languages into which his plays have been translated. Were we in Toronto this week, we could see Richard Burton in *Hamlet*. Were we in Ankara, Turkey, we could see the Turkish actress Sevda Aydan in *Macbeth* tonight and tomorrow night in a musical drama with the Turkish title *Op Beni, Kate*. *Op Beni, Kate* in Turkish means in English *Kiss Me, Kate*, which means in Elizabethan English *The Taming of the Shrew*, which was written by Shakespeare. From Toronto around the world to Ankara and around to world again to Toronto Shakespeare is proving himself to be the one man in literature, art, music, or science, best able to elicit honor and affection from all people who know him in whatever country.

Hunter College has arranged its own Shakespeare Festival to be celebrated throughout the spring semester. The festival began on January 8 when the American Shakespeare Festival Company of Stratford, Connecticut, gave a "final run-through" of *Romeo and Juliet* in the Playhouse. We paid the actors the compliment of overflowing the theater, and the actors paid us the compliment of wishing to return, because we proved to be an intelligent and responsive audience.

Today the Departments of Music, Physical Education, Speech and Drama combine their talents for this Founder's Day Convocation, presenting us with Elizabethan music, songs, dances, and readings.

On March 15, selected undergraduates from some dozen colleges in the New York area will come to Hunter College to take part in a Shakespeare essay contest. The winner of the first prize will spend the summer studying at Shakespeare's birthplace in Strat-

ford-on-Avon. This contest is financed by the participating colleges, and Hunter's contribution of \$100 is made by our Student Council. Last year the winner of the first prize was a Hunter College senior.

March 17 marks the founding of Roosevelt House, and the Theater Workshop will present scenes from Shakespeare in the form of a Theater-in-the-Round at Roosevelt House.

During April the Department of Art will display in the lobby of the Playhouse an exhibit of photographic Elizabethan graphics, approximately fifteen large graphics arranged in a three-dimensional exhibit. On the Bronx campus there will be an exhibit of Elizabethan costumes from April 13 to April 17, and the libraries on both campuses will show rare books having to do with Shakespeare, his contemporaries, and his stage.

On April 14, we hope to have a distinguished Shakespearean scholar from Scotland deliver the Louise Draddy lecture on Shakespeare's *Othello*, and the next day and for the remainder of the week the Theater Workshop will present *Othello* as its major spring production. For this production the American Shakespeare Festival Company is making available to us its wardrobe of Elizabethan costumes.

On Sunday April 19 the Theater Workshop will join with the Opera Workshop in the presentation of parallel scenes from Shakespeare's *Othello* and Verdi's *Otello* in both matinee and evening performances. We shall have the opportunity to see how a great dramatist handled a situation and emotion and then immediately to see how a great musician thereafter handled the same material. We shall also have as commentator a distinguished Shakespearean actor to interpret and to tell us what it all means. With gracious generosity, the Alumni