

Choice 11

Lady Diana Beauclerk's Drawings for *The Mysterious Mother*

Before 1962 when I was asked, "What would you most like to find?" I answered promptly, "Lady Diana Beauclerk's drawings for *The Mysterious Mother*." After praising Gibbon's recently published *Decline and Fall*, Walpole asked Mason, "Do I know nothing superior to Mr Gibbon? Yes . . . I talk of great original genius. Lady Di Beauclerk has made seven large drawings in soot-water for scenes of my *Mysterious Mother*. Oh! such drawings! Guido's grace, Albano's children, Poussin's expression, Salvator's boldness in landscape and Andrea Sacchi's simplicity of composition might perhaps have equalled them had they wrought all together very fine." High praise, but not a bit too high for Lady Di's drawings. He wrote Mann, "Lady Di Beauclerk has drawn seven scenes of [*The Mysterious Mother*] that would be fully worthy of the best of Shakespeare's plays—such drawings that Salvator Rosa and Guido could not surpass their expression and beauty. I have built a closet on purpose for them here at Strawberry Hill. It is called the Beauclerk Closet; and whoever sees the drawings, allows that no description comes up to their merit—and then, they do not shock and disgust like their original, the tragedy." Walpole described the Beauclerk Closet in an Appendix to the '74 *Description* and bound the manuscript of it in Choice 8.

[The Closet] is a hexagon, built in 1776, and designed by Mr Essex, architect, of Cambridge, who drew the ceiling, door, window, and surbase. . . . The closet is hung with Indian blue damask, and was built on purpose to receive seven incomparable drawings of Lady Diana Beauclerk for Mr Walpole's tragedy of the *Mysterious Mother*. The beauty and grace of the figures and of the children are inimitable; the expression of the passions most masterly, particularly in the devotion of the countess with the porter, of Benedict in the scene with Martin, and the tenderness, despair, and resolution of the countess in the last scene; in which is a new stroke of double passion in Edmund, whose



One of Lady Diana Beauclerk's drawings for *The Mysterious Mother*, 1776.

right hand is clenched and ready to strike with anger, the left hand relents. In the scene of the children, some are evidently vulgar, the others children of rank; and the first child, that pretends to look down and does leer upwards, is charming.

A writing-table of "Clay's ware" in the Closet contained "the play of *The Mysterious Mother*, to explain the drawings, bound in blue leather and gilt," a modest description of a beautiful book that is now at Farmington. Walpole wrote in it, "This copy to be kept in the Beauclerc Closet to explain Lady Di Beauclerc's Drawings. H.W."

Where, I used to wonder, had these drawings got to? They were bought at the Strawberry Hill sale by Lord Portarlington, but his descendant to whom I wrote knew nothing about them. Then one morning in 1962 I walked into the back office of Pickering and Chatto's shop in London where the proprietor, Dudley Massey, an old friend from 1925, as I tell in Choice 13, was expecting me. The drawings were turned over on his desk and were switched round so that Walpole's notes on their backs were upside down. I stared at them, transfixed in the doorway, for I recognized them immediately. When I asked without moving, "What do you want for them?" Dudley dropped a land mine. To my question at lunch, "Where did I go wrong?" he answered promptly, "You asked the price too quickly," adding truthfully, "You would have given even more." One of the seven drawings is still missing, but those that Walpole described are now at Farmington.

The Mysterious Mother, *A Tragedy* is set in the dawn of the Reformation; the scene is a castle, of course. There are two villainous friars, a faithful friend, a faithful porter, damsels, orphans, mutes. The plot turns on a double incest. Sixteen years before the play begins its chief character, the Countess of Narbonne, took the place of a girl she knew her son was about to seduce and now sixteen years later she fails to stop him from marrying their daughter. Byron called the play "a tragedy of the highest order, and not a puling love-play," and I agree with those who rank it above *The Castle of Otranto* as a work of art. Walpole tried to forestall possible criticism; but the subject, he said, was "so truly tragic in the two essential springs of terror and pity" that he had to write it. To palliate the countess's crime, and to raise her character he bestowed upon her, he tells us, "every ornament of sense, unbigoted piety, and interesting contrition." Although he protested that the subject was too "horrid" for the stage, he hoped to see it acted; unfortunately, no one was up to playing the Countess and she has yet to be performed.

Walpole kept nearly all fifty copies of the play he printed at the Press. Those he gave away were eagerly read; five transcripts are at Farmington. In thirteen years he let Dodsley publish the play in London to forestall a pirated edition. Four more editions of it appeared before 1800, after which there was none until the Chiswick Press brought it out in 1925 with *The Castle of Otranto* and an introduction by Montague Summers. *The Mysterious Mother* is known today only to students of eighteenth-century tragedy, a small audience.

Seven copies of the Strawberry edition are at Farmington. On the most interesting one Walpole wrote, "With MSS alterations by Mr Mason." In his "Postscript to the Alterations" Mason wrote that they were "To make the foregoing scenes proper to appear upon the stage." Walpole thanked him with deepest gratitude, which he repeated years later, but what he really thought of the alterations is shown in his note written on Mason's letter to him of 8 May 1769 (now at Farmington) that accompanied Mason's alterations: "N.B. I did not adopt these alterations because they would totally have destroyed my object, which was to exhibit a character whose sincere penitence was not degraded by superstitious bigotry." Mason's copy of the play was the Walpole item bought by Maggs in the Milnes Gaskell Sale of 1924. A dozen years later I discovered the new owner who obligingly took me to Messrs Robinsons' in Pall Mall for me to see it. As he dropped me off at Brown's Hotel afterwards he said, "I don't care much about this book, but you want it so badly I think I'll keep it." When death, the ally of collectors, took him away members of his family kindly turned the book over to me. Two of my letters to their relative, written on the Yale Walpole letter-head, were inside. They show that I had not yet learned to perform sedately the English gavotte of letter-writing, a clumsiness that has frustrated countless American scholars.

In my Mellon Lectures, *Horace Walpole*, 1960, I wrote of *The Mysterious Mother*, "The twentieth century has been initiated into the mysteries of the unconscious and needs no gloss on *The Mysterious Mother*, but one point should perhaps be noted for what it may be worth. When Walpole came to arrange his works for posthumous publication he printed his 'Epitaph on Lady Walpole,' with its praise of her sensibility, charity, and unbigoted piety, immediately after *The Mysterious Mother*."

Lady Di's drawings of the *Faerie Queen* at Farmington seem to me superior to her drawings of *The Mysterious Mother*, but the runner-up in this Choice is the Lady Diana Beauclerk Cabinet. *The Description of Strawberry Hill* reads: "An ebony cabinet, ornamented with ormolu, lapis-



Lady Diana Beauclerk's Cabinet.

lazuli, agates, pieces of ancient enamel, bas-reliefs of Wedgwood, and capital drawings of a gipsy girl and beautiful children by Lady Diana Beaucler, with other drawings by her; and with strawberries and Mr Walpole's arms with crest." The Strawberry Hill sale catalogue adds that it is "on a gothic stand with gilt border," but doesn't begin to suggest its elegance or mention the four drawers on which are stuck the semi-precious stones. Walpole put a brass plaque on the inside of the door, "This cabinet was ordered by and made at the expense of Mr Horace Walpole in 1784 to receive the Drawings which were all design'd and executed by the Right Honourable Lady Diana Beauclerc." Beneath this in very small letters is "The cabinet was designed by Mr. E. Edwards." It was sold in 1842 to a dealer for fifty guineas and bought by Sir Robert Peel. I heard of the 1938 owner from Kenneth Clark, whose first book was the admirable *Gothic Revival* and who had most generously given me a book from Walpole's library for which Walpole wrote a title-page: "Six views in Italy drawn and etched by William Marlow, Scholar of Samuel Scott." Lord Clark kindly took me to the 1938 owner's house in Belgrave Square to see the cabinet where it stood, very elegant, in the drawing-room. The owner said she would sell it for a thousand pounds to buy a twenty-sixth Augustus John, whose pictures she greatly admired. As Clark and I walked away I asked what he thought the cabinet was worth. "Oh, £300," he said, and that is what I offered the owner by cable the day war was declared in 1939. The cabinet, like the Ladies Waldegrave, sailed safely through the German mine fields and is now one of the joys of the New Library at Farmington where it has been visited by the Wedgwood Society on pilgrim feet to honor its unique bas-reliefs by Lady Di.

A daughter of the second Duke of Marlborough, she married the second Viscount Bolingbroke in 1757 and was Lady of the Bedchamber to Queen Charlotte from 1762 to 1768. Bolingbroke divorced her in 1768 for *crim. con.* with Dr Johnson's friend Topham Beauclerk. Taking her side against Dr Johnson, Boswell stated that Bolingbroke "had behaved brutally to her, and that she could not continue to live with him without having her delicacy contaminated" and so on. Johnson replied, "My dear Sir, never accustom your mind to mingle virtue and vice. The woman's a whore, and there's an end on't." Two days after her divorce she married Beauclerk, with whom she was even worse off. Lady Louisa Stuart said that in his personal habits Beauclerk was "what the French call *cynique* beyond what one would have thought possible in anyone but a beggar or a gypsy. He and Lady Di, made part of a great Christmas party at Blenheim, where

soon after the company were all met, they all found themselves as strangely annoyed as the Court of Pharaoh were of old by certain visitants—"in all their quarters,"—It was in the days of powder and pomatum, when stiff frizzing and curling, with hot irons and black pins made the entrance of combs extremely difficult—in short, the distress became unspeakable. Its origin being clearly traced to Mr Beauclerk, one of the gentlemen undertook to remonstrate with him, and began delicately hinting how much the ladies were inconvenienced—"What!" said Beauclerk. 'Are they so nice as that comes to? Why, I have enough to stock a parish . . . ' In the latter part of Beauclerk's life," Lady Louisa went on, "the man of pleasure grew morose and savage, and Lady Di had much to suffer from his temper; so had his children, to whom he was a selfish tyrant, without indulgence or affection." Neither Lady Louisa nor the *DNB* mentions that he built a library of some 30,000 volumes that Walpole wrote Lady Ossory reached half way from Great Russell Street to Highgate to "put the Museum's nose quite out of joint."

After death mercifully carried Beauclerk off in 1780 Lady Di moved to Twickenham and added much to Walpole's pleasure. In our print room hang two water-colors of her house, Little Marble Hill, that Walpole commissioned Edward Edwards to draw. Thither he hurried to comfort her when her daughter Mary eloped with her married half-brother Lord Bolingbroke, by whom she already had two children. The couple stayed abroad and ultimately she married Graf von Jenison zu Walworth and he married a Baroness Hospesch. A copy by Powel of Reynolds's portrait of Lady Di hung in the Beauclerk Closet; G. P. Hardings's water-color of it is at Farmington. Reynolds, who praised Lady Di's drawings, had her holding a portfolio of them in her left hand and a crayon in her right, according to his pleasant use of accessories to show the occupations and interests of his sitters.

Although Lady Di was easily first among Walpole's talented ladies, Margaret Smith Lady Bingham, afterwards Lady Lucan, should be mentioned among them. A recent arrival at Farmington is her portrait in water-color on the back of which Walpole wrote in his most elegant hand: "Margaret Smith/Wife/of Sir Charles Bingham/an excellent Paintress;/ by/[Hugh Douglas] Hamilton, 1774.

Without a Rival long on Painting's throne
Urbino's modest Artist sat alone.
At last a British Fair's unerring eyes

In five short moons contests the glorious prize.
 Raphael by Genius nurs'd by labour gained it;
 Bingham but saw perfection and attained it.

Walpole transcribed the above in his copy of the 1774 *Description of Strawberry Hill* at Farmington "with the prices of such pieces as I can recollect. H.W." and printed it in the 1784 edition. He wrote Lady Ossory in 1773,

Lady Bingham is, I assure you, another miracle. She began painting in miniature within these two years. I have this summer lent her several of my finest heads; in five days she copied them, and so amazingly well, that she has excelled a charming head of Lord Falkland by Hoskins. She allows me to point out her faults, and if her impetuosity will allow her patience to reflect and study, she will certainly very soon equal anything that ever was done in watercolours. They are amazingly bold, high-coloured and finished, she draws them herself, and so far from being assisted, no painter in England could execute them in half the time. It is still more surprising that she copies from oil full as well, and her only fault is giving more strength than the originals have.

Talented amateurs of the arts and letters found a teacher in Walpole as well as a patron. Chief among his poetesses was Lady Temple whose *Poems by Anna Chamber Countess Temple* he printed in 1764 in a hundred copies. He wrote introductory verses for them that begin "Long had been lost enchanting Sappho's Lyre" until it was discovered and played upon ravishingly by Lady Temple. In Walpole's copy of her *Poems* at Farmington he pasted a contemporary engraving of Sappho singing to her lyre and identified several of the ladies mentioned by Lady Temple.

Walpole's "Book of Materials, 1759," has many notes for a fifth volume of the *Anecdotes of Painting*, which was published by F. W. Hilles and P. B. Daghljan in 1937. Chapter VIII is called, "Ladies and Gentlemen Distinguished by Their Artistic Talents." In Choice 9 I mentioned Walpole's "Works of Genius at Strawberry Hill by Persons of rank and Gentlemen not Artists." Works of the artists marked *F.* are at Farmington.

Catherine Lady Walpole, paintings in watercolours.

Richard Lord Edgcumbe, Ditto.

Lady Diana Beauclerc, Drawings and bas reliefs in wax. *F.*

Caroline countess of Ailesbury. Needleworks.

Anne Mrs Damer, her daughter, works in terra cotta and wax, and marble.

Margaret Lady Lucan, paintings in watercolours. *F.*

Lavinia Countess Spencer, her daughter, drawing in bister.

Mrs Harcourt, wife of General Harcourt. Do.

Mrs Delany's flowers in paper-mosaic.

Miss Jennings, Do.

Richard Bentley Esq. drawings. *F.*

John Chute Esq. Drawings of Architecture. *F.*

Rev'd Mr Gilpin, washed Drawing.

Volume of Engravings by various persons of quality. *F.*

Henry Bunbury Esq. a large Drawing, and Etchings by him. *F.*

Lady Hamilton, wife of Sr William, cuttings in paper and card. *F.*

Paintings in watercolours by Miss Agnes Berry. *F.*

Drawing by W. Lock Junr. for the box that contains D. Julio Clovio's prayerbox.

The work I prize most among them is the "Volume of Engravings by various persons of quality." It has four title-pages printed at the Press, the first of which is "A collection of Prints, Engraved by Various Persons of Quality." Separate title-pages introduce the work of Lady Carlisle, Lady Louisa Greville, and Lord Nuneham (later Lord Harcourt). Walpole described this volume to Mason: "I have just made a *new book*, which costs me only money, which I don't value, and time which I love to employ. It is a volume of etchings by *noble authors*. They are bound in robes of crimson and gold; the titles are printed at my own press, and the pasting is *by my own hand*." His arms are stamped on the covers in elegant gilt cartouches. It is, I think, the most sumptuous book I have ever seen. A second volume bound after 1842 is labelled merely "Etchings by Amateur Artists." Walpole ranked Lord Harcourt first among them, going so far as to say that Harcourt's views of the ruins at Stanton Harcourt "are the richest etchings I ever saw," and to write Harcourt that he was "the best engraver in England."

The discovery of talent in persons of quality whose gifts were generally unrecognized gave Walpole, the champion of the neglected, great pleasure. His gallery of well-born geniuses was assembled to do justice to their talents. At its head was Lady Di who had suffered so cruelly and had borne her lot with such fortitude and dignity.