

CHAPTER III

THE INSUPERABLE DIFFICULTY

I WISH to speak of the greatest difficulty with which the Japanese students of English literature, or of almost any western literature, have to contend. I do not think that it ever has been properly spoken about. A foreign teacher might well hesitate to speak about it—because, if he should try to explain it merely from the western point of view, he could not hope to be understood; and if he should try to speak about it from the Japanese point of view, he would be certain to make various mistakes and to utter various extravagances. The proper explanation might be given by a Japanese professor only, who should have so intimate an acquaintance with western life as to sympathize with it. Yet I fear that it would be difficult to find such a Japanese professor for this reason, that just in proportion as he should find himself in sympathy with western life, in that proportion he would become less and less able to communicate that sympathy to his students. The difficulties are so great that it has taken me many years even to partly guess how great they are. That they can be removed at the present day is utterly out of the question. But something may be gained by stating them even imperfectly. At the risk of making blunders and uttering extravagances, I shall make the attempt. I am impelled to do so by a recent conversation with one of the cleverest students that I ever had, who acknowledged his total inability to understand some of the commonest facts in western life,—all those facts relating, directly or indirectly, to the position of woman in western literature as reflecting western life.

Let us clear the ground at once by putting down some facts in the plainest and lowest terms possible. You must

try to imagine a country in which the place of the highest virtue is occupied, so to speak, by the devotion of sex to sex. The highest duty of the man is not to his father, but to his wife; and for the sake of that woman he abandons all other earthly ties, should any of these happen to interfere with that relation. The first duty of the wife may be, indeed, must be, to her child, when she has one; but otherwise her husband is her divinity and king. In that country it would be thought unnatural or strange to have one's parents living in the same house with wife or husband. You know all this. But it does not explain for you other things, much more difficult to understand, especially the influence of the abstract idea of woman upon society at large as well as upon the conduct of the individual. The devotion of man to woman does not mean at all only the devotion of husband to wife. It means actually this,—that every man is bound by conviction and by opinion to put all women before himself, simply because they are women. I do not mean that any man is likely to think of any woman as being his intellectual and physical superior; but I do mean that he is bound to think of her as something deserving and needing the help of every man. In time of danger the woman must be saved first. In time of pleasure, the woman must be given the best place. In time of hardship the woman's share of the common pain must be taken voluntarily by the man as much as possible. This is not with any view to recognition of the kindness shown. The man who assists a woman in danger is not supposed to have any claim upon her for that reason. He has done his duty only, not to her, the individual, but to womankind at large. So we have arrived at this general fact, that the first place in all things, except rule, is given to woman in western countries, and that it is given almost religiously.

Is woman a religion? Well, perhaps you will have the chance of judging for yourselves if you go to America. There you will find men treating women with just the same respect formerly accorded only to religious dignitaries or to

great nobles. Everywhere they are saluted and helped to the best places; everywhere they are treated as superior beings. Now if we find reverence, loyalty and all kinds of sacrifices devoted either to a human being or to an image, we are inclined to think of worship. And worship it is. If a western man should hear me tell you this, he would want the statement qualified, unless he happened to be a philosopher. But I am trying to put the facts before you in the way in which you can best understand them. Let me say, then, that the all important thing for the student of English literature to try to understand, is that in western countries woman is a cult, a religion, or if you like still plainer language, I shall say that in western countries woman is a god.

So much for the abstract idea of woman. Probably you will not find that particularly strange; the idea is not altogether foreign to eastern thought, and there are very extensive systems of feminine pantheism in India. Of course the western idea is only in the romantic sense a feminine pantheism; but the Oriental idea may serve to render it more comprehensive. The ideas of divine Mother and divine Creator may be studied in a thousand forms; I am now referring rather to the sentiment, to the feeling, than to the philosophical conception.

You may ask, if the idea or sentiment of divinity attaches to woman in the abstract, what about woman in the concrete—individual woman? Are women individually considered as gods? Well, that depends on how you define the word god. The following definition would cover the ground, I think:—“Gods are beings superior to man, capable of assisting or injuring him, and to be placated by sacrifice and prayer.” Now according to this definition, I think that the attitude of man towards woman in western countries might be very well characterized as a sort of worship. In the upper classes of society, and in the middle classes also, great reverence towards women is exacted. Men bow down before them, make all kinds of sacrifices to please them, beg for

their good will and their assistance. It does not matter that this sacrifice is not in the shape of incense burning or of temple offerings; nor does it matter that the prayers are of a different kind from those pronounced in churches. There is sacrifice and worship. And no saying is more common, no truth better known, than that the man who hopes to succeed in life must be able to please the women. Every young man who goes into any kind of society knows this. It is one of the first lessons that he has to learn. Well, am I very wrong in saying that the attitude of men towards women in the West is much like the attitude of men towards gods?

But you may answer at once,—How comes it, if women are thus revered as you say, that men of the lower classes beat and ill-treat their wives in those countries? I must reply, for the same reason that Italian and Spanish sailors will beat and abuse the images of the saints and virgins to whom they pray, when their prayer is not granted. It is quite possible to worship an image sincerely, and to seek vengeance upon it in a moment of anger. The one feeling does not exclude the other. What in the higher classes may be a religion, in the lower classes may be only a superstition, and strange contradictions exist, side by side, in all forms of superstition. Certainly the western working man or peasant does not think about his wife or his neighbour's wife in the reverential way that the man of the superior class does. But you will find, if you talk to them, that something of the reverential idea is there; it is there at least during their best moments.

Now there is a certain exaggeration in what I have said. But that is only because of the somewhat narrow way in which I have tried to express a truth. I am anxious to give you the idea that throughout the West there exists, though with a difference according to class and culture, a sentiment about women quite as reverential as a sentiment of religion. This is true; and not to understand it, is not to understand western literature.

How did it come into existence? Through many causes,

some of which are so old that we can not know anything about them. This feeling did not belong to the Greek and Roman civilization, but it belonged to the life of the old northern races, who have since spread over the world, planting their ideas everywhere. In the oldest Scandinavian literature you will find that women were thought of and treated by the men of the North very much as they are thought of and treated by Englishmen of to-day. You will find what their power was in the old sagas, such as the Njal-Saga, or "The Story of Burnt Njal." But we must go much further than the written literature to get a full knowledge of the origin of such a sentiment. The idea seems to have existed that woman was semi-divine, because she was the mother, the creator of man. And we know that she was credited among the Norsemen with supernatural powers. But upon this northern foundation there was built up a highly complex fabric of romantic and artistic sentiment. The Christian worship of the Virgin Mary harmonized with the northern belief. The sentiment of chivalry reinforced it. Then came the artistic resurrection of the Renaissance, and the new reverence for the beauty of the old Greek gods, and the Greek traditions of female divinities; these also coloured and lightened the old feeling about womankind. Think also of the effects with which literature, poetry and the arts have since been cultivating and developing the sentiment. Consider how the great mass of western poetry is love poetry, and the greater part of western fiction love stories.

Of course the foregoing is only the vaguest suggestion of a truth. Really my object is not to trouble you at all about the evolutionary history of the sentiment, but only to ask you to think what this sentiment means in literature. I am not asking you to sympathize with it, but if you could sympathize with it you would understand a thousand things in western books which otherwise must remain dim and strange. I am not expecting that you can sympathize with it. But it is absolutely necessary that you should understand its relation to language and literature. Therefore I have to

tell you that you should try to think of it as a kind of religion, a secular, social, artistic religion, not to be confounded with any national religion. It is a kind of race feeling or race creed. It has not originated in any sensuous idea, but in some very ancient superstitious idea. Nearly all forms of the highest sentiment and the highest faith and the highest art have had their beginnings in equally humble soil.