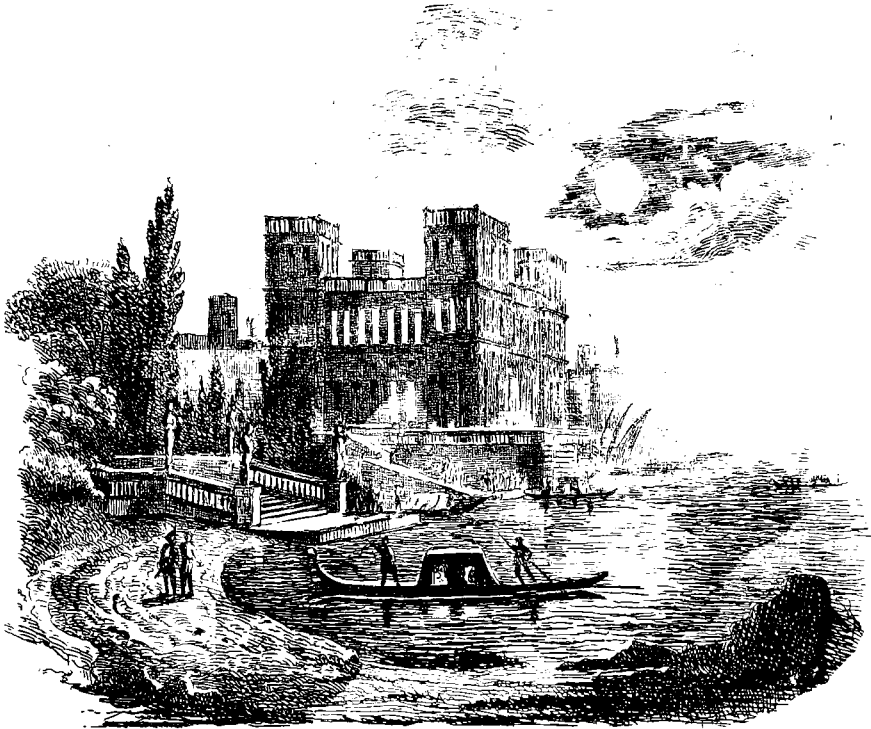


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Excerpt

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CHARACTERS OF INTELLECT.

PORTIA.

WE hear it asserted, not seldom by way of compliment to us women, that intellect is of no sex. If this mean that the same faculties of mind are common to men and women, it is true; in any other signification it appears to me false, and the reverse of a compliment. The intellect of woman bears the same relation to that of man as her phy-

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sical organization ;—it is inferior in power, and different in kind. That certain women have surpassed certain men in bodily strength or intellectual energy, does not contradict the general principle founded in nature. The essential and invariable distinction appears to me this: in men the intellectual faculties exist more self-poised and self-directed—more independent of the rest of the character, than we ever find them in women, with whom talent, however predominant, is in a much greater degree modified by the sympathies and moral qualities.

In thinking over all the distinguished women I can at this moment call to mind, I recollect but one, who, in the exercise of a rare talent belied her sex, but the moral qualities had been first perverted.* It is from not knowing, or not

* Artemisia Gentileschi, an Italian artist of the seventeenth century, painted one or two pictures, considered admirable as works of art, of which the subjects are the most vicious and barbarous conceivable. I remember one of these in the gallery of Florence, which I looked at once, but once, and wished then, as I do now, for the privilege of burning it to ashes.

allowing, this general principle, that men of genius have committed some signal mistakes; they have given us exquisite and just delineations of the more peculiar characteristics of women, as modesty, grace, tenderness; and when they have attempted to portray them with the powers common to both sexes, as wit, energy, intellect, they have blundered in some respect; they could form no conception of intellect which was not masculine, and therefore have either suppressed the feminine attributes altogether and drawn coarse caricatures, or they have made them completely artificial. Women distinguished for wit may sometimes appear masculine and flippant, but the cause must be sought elsewhere than in nature, who disclaims all such. Hence the witty and intellectual ladies of our comedies and novels are all in the fashion of some particular time; they are like some old portraits which can still amuse and please by the beauty of the workmanship, in spite of the graceless costume or grotesque accompaniments, but from which we turn to worship with ever new delight the Floras and goddesses of

Titian—the saints and virgins of Raffaele and Domenichino. So the Millamants and Belindas, the Lady Townleys and Lady Teazles are out of date, while Portia and Rosalind, in whom nature and the feminine character are paramount, remain bright and fresh to the fancy as when first created.

Portia, Isabella, Beatrice, and Rosalind, may be classed together, as characters of intellect, because, when compared with others, they are at once distinguished by their mental superiority. In Portia it is intellect, kindled into romance by a poetical imagination; in Isabel, it is intellect elevated by religious principle; in Beatrice, intellect animated by spirit; in Rosalind, intellect softened by sensibility. The wit which is lavished on each is profound, or pointed, or sparkling, or playful—but always feminine; like spirits distilled from flowers, it always reminds us of its origin;—it is a volatile essence, sweet as powerful; and to pursue the comparison a step further, the wit of Portia is like attar of roses, rich and concentrated; that of Rosalind, like cotton dipped

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in aromatic vinegar; the wit of Beatrice is like sal volatile; and that of Isabel, like the incense wafted to heaven. Of these four exquisite characters, considered as dramatic and poetical conceptions, it is difficult to pronounce which is most perfect in its way, most admirably drawn, most highly finished. But if considered in another point of view, as women and individuals, as breathing realities, clothed in flesh and blood, I believe we must assign the first rank to Portia, as uniting in herself in a more eminent degree than the others, all the noblest and most loveable qualities that ever met together in woman; and presenting a complete personification of Petrarch's exquisite epitome of female perfection:

Il vago spirito ardento,
E'n alto intelletto, un puro core.

It is singular, that hitherto no critical justice has been done to the character of Portia: it is yet more wonderful, that one of the finest writers on the eternal subject of Shakspeare and his perfections, should accuse Portia of pedantry and af-

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fection, and confess she is not a great favourite of his,— a confession quite worthy of him, who avers his predilection for servant maids, and his preference of the Fannys and the Pamelas over the Clementinas and Clarissas.* Schlegel, who has given several pages to a rapturous eulogy on the Merchant of Venice, simply designates Portia as a “ rich, beautiful, clever heiress:” whether the fault lie in the writer or translator, I do protest against the word clever. Portia *clever!* what an epithet to apply to this heavenly compound of talent, feeling, wisdom, beauty, and gentleness! Now would it not be well, if this common and comprehensive word were more accurately defined, or at least, more accurately used? It signifies properly, not so much the possession of high powers, as dexterity in the adaptation of certain faculties (not necessarily of a high order) to a certain end or aim—not always the worthiest. It implies something common-place, inasmuch as it speaks the presence of the *active* and *perceptive*, with a deficiency of the *feeling* and *reflective* powers: and,

* Hazlitt's Essays, vol. ii. p. 167.

applied to a woman, does it not almost invariably suggest the idea of something we should distrust or shrink from, if not allied to a higher nature? The profligate French women, who ruled the councils of Europe in the middle of the last century, were clever women; and that *philosopheress* Madame Du Châtelet, who managed at one and the same moment, the thread of an intrigue, her cards at piquet, and a calculation in algebra, was a very clever woman! If Portia had been created as a mere instrument to bring about a dramatic catastrophe—if she had merely detected the flaw in Antonio's bond, and used it as a means to baffle the Jew, she might have been pronounced a clever woman. But what Portia does, is forgotten in in what she *is*. The rare and harmonious blending of energy, reflection, and feeling, in her fine character, make the epithet *clever* sound like a discord as applied to *her*, and place her infinitely beyond the slight praise of Richardson and Schlegel, neither of whom appear to have fully comprehended her.

These and other critics have been apparently

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so dazzled and engrossed by the amazing character of Shylock, that Portia has received less than justice at their hands: while the fact is, that Shylock is not a finer or more finished character in his way, than Portia in her's. These two splendid figures are worthy of each other; worthy of being placed together within the same rich frame-work of enchanting poetry, and glorious and graceful forms. She hangs beside the terrible, inexorable Jew, the brilliant lights of her character set off by the shadowy power of his, like a magnificent beauty-breathing Titian by the side of a gorgeous Rembrant.

Portia is endued with her own share of those delightful qualities, which Shakspeare has lavished on many of his female characters; but, besides the dignity, the sweetness, and tenderness which should distinguish her sex generally, she is individualized by qualities peculiar to herself: by her high mental powers, her enthusiasm of temperament, her decision of purpose, and her buoyancy of spirit. These are innate: she has other distinguishing qualities more external, and which

are the result of the circumstances in which she is placed. Thus she is the heiress of a princely name and countless wealth; a train of obedient pleasures have ever waited round her; and from infancy she has breathed an atmosphere redolent of perfume and blandishment. Accordingly there is a commanding grace, a high bred, airy elegance, a spirit of magnificence in all that she does and says, as one to whom splendour had been familiar from her very birth. She treads as though her footsteps had been among marble palaces, beneath roofs of fretted gold, o'er cedar floors and pavements of jasper and porphyry—amid gardens full of statues, and flowers, and fountains, and haunting music. She is full of penetrative wisdom, and genuine tenderness, and lively wit; but as she has never known want, or grief, or fear, or disappointment, her wisdom is without a touch of the sombre or the sad; her affections are all mixed up with faith, hope, and joy; and her wit has not a particle of malevolence or causticity.

It is well known that the Merchant of Venice

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is founded on two different tales; and in weaving together his double plot in so masterly a manner, Shakspeare has rejected altogether the character of the astutious lady of Belmont with her magic potions, who figures in the Italian novel. With yet more refinement, he has thrown out all the licentious part of the story, which some of his cotemporary dramatists would have seized on with avidity, and made the best or the worst of it possible; and he has substituted the trial of the caskets from another source.* We are not told expressly where Belmont is situated; but as Bassanio takes ship to go thither from Venice, and as we find them afterwards ordering horses from Belmont to Padua, we will imagine Portia's hereditary palace as standing on some lovely promontory between Venice and Trieste, overlooking the blue Adriatic, with the Friuli mountains or the Euganean hills for its background, such as we

* In the "Mercatante di Venezia" of Ser. Giovanni, we have the whole story of Antonio and Bassanio, and part of the story, but not the character, of Portia. The incident of the caskets is from the *Gesta Romanorum*.