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978-1-108-00098-7 - Characteristics of Women, v1: Moral, Poetical, and Historical, Volume 1

Anna Jameson

Frontmatter

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Characteristics of Women (1832) by Anna Jameson was the first-ever attempt by a woman to analyse the characteristics of twenty-three heroines of Shakespeare's plays. In this book, Jameson, an English writer, feminist, and art historian, addresses problems of women's education and participation in public life while providing insightful and original readings of Shakespeare's women. She divides the heroines into four classes, two of which—Characters of intellect and Characters of passion and imagination—are discussed in Volume 1. Portia, Isabella, Beatrice, and Rosalind—the characters of intellect—are sufficiently connected by that common tie and are distinct from Juliet, Helena, Perdita, Viola, Ophelia, and Miranda, who are categorised as characters of passion and imagination. Illustrated with fifty attractive etchings made by the author herself, this eloquent book is a must-have for Shakespeare collectors, students of women's studies and others interested in the Victorian period.

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Characteristics of Women, v1

Moral, Poetical, and Historical

VOLUME 1

ANNA JAMESON



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CHARACTERISTICS
OF
WOMEN,
MORAL, POETICAL, AND HISTORICAL.

With Fifty Vignette Etchings.

BY MRS. JAMESON,
AUTHOR OF "THE DIARY OF AN ENNUYEE," "MEMOIRS OF
FEMALE SOVEREIGNS," &c.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

LONDON:
SAUNDERS AND OTLEY, CONDUIT STREET.
1832.



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** * * It has become necessary to state thus publicly what is known to most of my friends, viz. that the whole of this little work, with the exception of the historical life of Constance of Bretagne and the character of Desdemona, was written previous to October 1831, and sent to the press in March last.*

The little vignettes, except those in p. 160, vol. 1, and pp. 209 and 300, vol. 2, are from original sketches. All the etchings are by the Author, without exception.

A. J.

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“ L’alto intelletto, e’l puro core.”
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5. LOVE AND VANITY.
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7. PORTIA’S RING.
8. A VENETIAN SERENADE.
9. A CEDAR TOWERING ON A CLIFF.
10. PRIDE AND PLAYFULNESS.
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Scene—A Library.

MEDON—ALDA.

ALDA.

You will not listen to me?

MEDON.

I do, with all the deference which befits a gen-

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tleman when a lady holds forth on the virtues of
her own sex.

He is a parricide of his mother's fame,
And with an impious hand murders her fame,
That wrongs the praise of women; that dares write
Libels on saints, or with foul ink requite
The milk they lent us.

Yours was the nobler birth,
For you from man were made—man but of earth—
The son of dust!

ALDA.

What's this?

MEDON.

“Only a rhyme I learned from one I talked
withal;” ’tis a quotation from some old poet that
has fixed itself in my memory—from Randolph, I
think.

ALDA.

’Tis very justly thought, and very politely
quoted, and my best curtsey is due to him and to
you;—but now will you listen to me?

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MEDON.

With most profound humility.

ALDA.

Nay, then! I have done, unless you will lay aside these mock airs of gallantry, and listen to me for a moment! Is it fair to bring a second-hand accusation against me, and not attend to my defence?

MEDON.

Well, I will be serious.

ALDA.

Do so, and let us talk like reasonable beings.

MEDON.

Then tell me, (as a reasonable woman you will not be affronted with the question,) do you really expect that any one will read this little book of yours?

ALDA.

I might answer, that it has been a great source

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of amusement and interest to me for several months, and that so far I am content : but no one writes a book without a hope of finding readers, and I shall find a few. Accident first made me an authoress ; and not now, nor ever, have I written to flatter any prevailing fashion of the day for the sake of profit, though this is done, I know, by many who have less excuse for thus coining their brains. This little book was undertaken without a thought of fame or money : out of the fulness of my own heart and soul have I written it. In the pleasure it has given me, in the new and various views of human nature it has opened to me, in the beautiful and soothing images it has placed before me, in the exercise and improvement of my own faculties, I have already been repaid : if praise or profit come beside, they come as a surplus. I should be gratified and grateful, but I have not sought for them, nor worked for them. Do you believe this ?

MEDON.

I do : in this I cannot suspect you of affecta-

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tion, for the profession of disinterestedness is un-called for, and the contrary would be too far countenanced by the custom of the day to be matter of reserve or reproach. But how could you, (saving the reverence due to a lady-authoress, and speaking as one reasonable being to another,) choose such a threadbare subject ?

ALDA.

What do you mean ?

MEDON.

I presume you have written a book to maintain the superiority of your sex over ours ; for so I judge by the names at the heads of some of your chapters ; women, fit indeed to inlay heaven with stars, but, pardon me, very unlike those who at present walk upon this earth.

ALDA.

Very unlike the fine ladies of your acquaintance, I grant you ; but as to maintaining the supe-

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riority, or speculating on the rights of women—nonsense! why should you suspect me of such folly?—it is quite out of date. Why should there be competition or comparison?

MEDON.

Both are ill-judged and odious; but did you ever meet with a woman of the world, who did not abuse most heartily the whole race of man?

ALDA.

Did you ever talk with a man of the world who did not speak with levity or contempt of the whole race of women?

MEDON.

Perhaps I might answer like Voltaire — “*Helas! ils pourraient bien avoir raison tous deux.*” But do you thence infer that both are good for nothing?

ALDA.

Thence I infer that the men of the world and

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the women of the world are neither of them—
good for much.

MEDON.

And you have written a book to make them
better?

ALDA.

Heaven forbid! else I were only fit for the
next lunatic asylum. Vanity run mad never con-
ceived such an impossible idea.

MEDON.

Then in few words, what is the subject, and
what the object of your book?

ALDA.

I have endeavoured to illustrate the various
modifications of which the female character is
susceptible, with their causes and results. My life
has been spent in observing and thinking; I have
had, as you well know, more opportunities for the
first, more leisure for the last, than have fallen to

the lot of most people. What I have seen, felt, thought, suffered, has led me to form certain opinions. It appears to me that the condition of women in society, as at present constituted, is false in itself, and injurious to them,—that the education of women, as at present conducted, is founded in mistaken principles, and tends to increase fearfully the sum of misery and error in both sexes ; but I do not choose presumptuously to fling these opinions in the face of the world, in the form of essays on morality, and treatises on education. I have rather chosen to illustrate certain positions by examples, and leave my readers to deduce the moral themselves, and draw their own inferences.

MEDON.

And why have you not chosen your examples from real life? you might easily have done so. You have not been a mere spectator, or a mere actor, but a lounge behind the scenes of existence—have even assisted in preparing the puppets for the stage ; you might have given us an

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epitome of your experience, instead of dreaming over Shakspeare.

ALDA.

I might so, if I had chosen to become a female satirist, which I will never be.

MEDON.

You would at least stand a better chance of being read.

ALDA.

I am not sure of that. The vile taste for satire and personal gossip will not be eradicated, I suppose, while the elements of curiosity and malice remain in human nature: but as a fashion of literature, I think it is passing away :—at all events it is not my *forte*. Long experience of what is called “ the world,” of the folly, duplicity, shallowness, selfishness which meet us at every turn, too soon unsettles our youthful creed. If it only led to the knowledge of good and evil, it were well ; if it only taught us to despise the illusions and retire from the pleasures of

the world, it would be better. But it destroys our belief—it dims our perception of all abstract truth, virtue, and happiness; it turns life into a jest, and a very dull one too. It makes us indifferent to beauty, and incredulous of goodness; it teaches us to consider *self* as the centre on which all actions turn, and to which all motives are to be referred.

MEDON.

But this being so, we must either revolve with these earthly natures, and round the same centre, or seek a sphere for ourselves, and dwell apart.

ALDA.

I trust it is not necessary to do either. While we are yet young, and the passions, powers, and feelings, in their full activity, create to us a world within, we cannot look fairly on the world without:—all things then are good. When first we throw ourselves forth, and meet burrs and briars on every side, which stick in our very hearts;—and fair tempting fruits which turn to bitter ashes in the taste, then we exclaim with impatience, all things are evil.

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But at length comes the calm hour, when they who look beyond the superficialities of things begin to discern their true bearings; when the perception of evil, or sorrow, or sin, brings also the perception of some opposite good, which awakens our indulgence, or the knowledge of the cause which excites our pity. Thus it is with me. I can smile,—nay, I can laugh still, to see folly, vanity, absurdity, meanness, exposed by scornful wit, and depicted by others in fictions light and brilliant. But these very things, when I encounter the reality, rather make me sad than merry, and take away all the inclination, if I had the power, to hold them up to derision.

MEDON.

Unless by doing so, you might correct them.

ALDA.

Correct them! Show me that one human being who has been made essentially better by satire! O no, no! there is something in human nature which hardens itself against the lash—something

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in satire which excites only the lowest and worst of our propensities. That line in Pope—

I must be proud to see

Men not afraid of God, afraid of me!

—has ever filled me with terror and pity, and sends me to think upon the opposite sentiment in Shakespeare, on “the mischievous foul sin of chiding sin.” I remember once hearing a poem of Barry Cornwall’s, (he read it to me,) about a strange winged creature that, having the lineaments of a man, yet preyed on a man, and afterwards coming to a stream to drink, and beholding his own face therein, and that he had made his prey of a creature like himself, pined away with repentance. So should those do, who having made themselves mischievous mirth out of the sins and sorrows of others, remembering their own humanity, and seeing within themselves the same lineaments—so should *they* grieve and pine away, self-punished.

MEDON.

’Tis an old allegory, and a sad one—and but too much to the purpose.

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ALDA.

I abhor the spirit of ridicule—I dread it and I despise it. I abhor it because it is in direct contradiction to the mild and serious spirit of Christianity; I fear it, because we find that in every state of society in which it has prevailed as a fashion, and has given the tone to the manners and literature, it marked the moral degradation and approaching destruction of that society; and I despise it, because it is the usual resource of the shallow and the base mind, and, when wielded by the strongest hand with the purest intentions, an inefficient means of good. The spirit of satire, reversing the spirit of mercy which is twice blessed, seems to me twice accursed;—evil in those who indulge it—evil to those who are the objects of it.

MEDON.

“Peut-être fallait-il que la punition des imprudens et des foibles fût confiée à la malignité, car la pure vertu n’eût jamais été assez cruelle.”

ALDA.

That is a woman’s sentiment.

MEDON.

True—it *was* ; and I have pleasure in reminding you that a female satirist by profession is yet an anomaly in the history of our literature, as a female schismatic is yet unknown in the history of our religion. But to what do you attribute the number of satirical women we meet in society ?

ALDA.

Not to our nature ; but to a state of society in which the levelling spirit of persiflage has been long a fashion, and, above all, to a perverse education which fosters it. Women, generally speaking, are by nature too much subjected to suffering in many forms—have too much of fancy and sensibility, and too much of that faculty which some philosophers call *veneration*, to be naturally satirical. I have known but one woman eminently gifted in mind and person, who is also distinguished for powers of satire as bold as merciless ; and she is such a compound of all that nature can give of good, and all that society can teach of evil—

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MEDON.

That she reminds us of the dragon of old, which was generated between the sun-beams from heaven and the slime of earth?

ALDA.

No such thing. Rather of the powerful and beautiful fairy Melusina, who had every talent and every charm under heaven; but once in so many hours, was fated to become a serpent. No, I return to my first position. It is not by exposing folly and scorning fools, that we make other people wiser, or ourselves happier. But to soften the heart by images and examples of the kindly and generous affections—to show how the human soul is disciplined and perfected by suffering—to prove how much of possible good may exist in things evil and perverted—how much hope there is for those who despair—how much comfort for those whom a heartless world has taught to contemn both others and themselves, and so put barriers to the hard, cold, selfish, mocking, and leveling spirit of the day—O would I could do this!

MEDON.

On the same principle, I suppose, that they have changed the treatment of lunatics; and whereas they used to condemn poor distempered wretches to straw and darkness, stripes and a strait-waistcoat, they now send them to sunshine and green fields, to wander in gardens among birds and flowers, and soothe them with soft music and kind flattering speech.

ALDA.

You laugh at me !—perhaps I deserve it.

MEDON.

No, in truth: I am a little amused, but most honestly attentive, and perhaps wish I could think more like you. But to proceed: I allow that with this view of the case, you could not well have chosen your illustrations from real life. But why not from history?

ALDA.

As far as history could guide me I have taken

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her with me in one or two recent publications, which all tend to the same object. Nor have I here lost sight of her ; but I have entered on a land where she alone is not to be trusted, and may make a pleasant companion but a most fallacious guide. To drop metaphor : history informs us that such things have been done or have occurred ; but when we come to inquire into motive and characters, it is the most false and partial and unsatisfactory authority we can refer to. Women are illustrious in history, not from what they have been in themselves, but generally in proportion to the mischief they have done or caused. Those characters best fitted to my purpose are precisely those of which history never heard, or disdains to speak : of those which have been handed down to us by many different authorities under different aspects we cannot judge without prejudice ; in others there occur certain chasms which it is difficult to supply ; and hence inconsistencies we have no means of reconciling, though doubtless they *might* be reconciled if we knew the whole, instead of a part.

MEDON.

But instance—instance !

ALDA.

Examples crowd upon me: but take the first that occurs. Do you remember that Duchess de Longueville, whose beautiful picture we were looking at yesterday?—the heroine of the Fronde?—think of that woman—bold, intriguing, profligate, vain, ambitious, factious!—who made men rebels with a smile,—or if that were not enough,—the lady was not scrupulous,—apparently without principle as without shame, nothing was *too* much ! And then think of the same woman protecting the virtuous philosopher Arnauld, when he was denounced and condemned ; and from motives which her worst enemies could not malign, secreting him in her house, unknown even to her own servants—preparing his food herself, watching for his safety, and at length saving him. Her tenderness, her patience, her discretion, her disinterested benevolence, not only defied danger, (that were little to a woman of her temper,) but endured a lengthened

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trial, all the ennui caused by the necessity of keeping her house, continual self-controul, and the thousand small daily sacrifices which to a vain, dissipated, proud, impatient woman, must have been hard to bear. Now, if Shakspeare had drawn the character of the Duchess de Longueville, he would have shown us the same individual woman in both situations ;—for the same being, with the same faculties, and passions, and powers, it surely was : whereas in history, we see in one case a fury of discord, a woman without modesty or pity ; and in the other an angel of benevolence, and a worshipper of goodness ; and nothing to connect the two extremes in our fancy.

MEDON.

But these are contradictions which we meet on every page of history, which make us giddy with doubt or sick with belief ; and are the proper subjects of inquiry for the moralist and the philosopher.

ALDA.

I cannot say that professed moralists and philo-

sophers did much to help *me* out of the dilemma ; but the riddle which history presented I found solved in the pages of Shakspeare. There the crooked appeared straight, the inaccessible, easy, the incomprehensible, plain. All I sought, I found there ; his characters combine history and real life ; they are complete individuals, whose hearts and souls are laid open before us—all may behold and all judge for themselves.

MEDON.

But all will not judge alike.

ALDA.

No ; and herein lies a part of their wonderful truth. We hear Shakspeare's men and women discussed, praised and dispraised, liked, disliked, as real human beings ; and in forming our opinions of them, we are influenced by our own characters, habits of thought, prejudices, feelings, impulses, just as we are influenced with regard to our acquaintances and associates.