

Marx Hardy Machiavelli Joyce Austen
Defoe Abbot Melville Montaigne Cooper Emerson Hugo
Stoker Wilde Christie Maupassant Haggard Chesterton Molière Eliot Grimm
Garnett Engels Byron Schiller
Goethe Hawthorne Smith Kafka
Cotton Dostoyevsky Hall
Baum Henry Kipling Doyle Willis
Leslie Dumas Flaubert Nietzsche Turgenev Balzac
Stockton Vatsyayana Crane
Burroughs Verne
Curtis Tocqueville Gogol Busch
Homer Tolstoy Whitman
Darwin Thoreau Twain
Potter Zola Lawrence Dickens Plato Scott
Kant Freud Jowett Stevenson Andersen Burton Harte
London Descartes Cervantes Wells Hesse
Poe Aristotle Wells Voltaire Cooke
Hale James Hastings Shakespeare Chambers Irving
Bunner Richter Chekhov da Shaw Wodehouse
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Characteristics of Women Moral, Poetical, and Historical

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Imprint

This book is part of TREDITION CLASSICS

Author: Mrs. (Anna) Jameson

Cover design: Buchgut, Berlin - Germany

Publisher: tredition GmbH, Hamburg - Germany

ISBN: 978-3-8472-2543-0

www.tredition.com

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CHARACTERISTICS OF WOMEN
MORAL, POETICAL, AND HISTORICAL

BY

MRS. JAMESON

From the last London Edition



BOSTON AND NEW YORK
HOUGHTON, MIFFLIN AND COMPANY
The Riverside Press, Cambridge
1889

PREFACE

TO THE NEW EDITION.

In preparing for the press a new edition of this little work, the author has endeavored to render it more worthy of the approbation and kindly feeling with which it has been received; she cannot better express her sense of both than by justifying, as far as it is in her power, the cordial and flattering tone of all the public criticisms. It is to the great name of Shakspeare, that bond of sympathy among all who speak his language, and to the subject of the work, not to its own merits, that she attributes the success it has met with,—success the more delightful, because, in truth, it was from the very first, so entirely unlooked for, as to be a matter of surprise as well as of pleasure and gratitude.

In this edition there are many corrections, and some additions which the author hopes may be deemed improvements. She has been induced to insert several quotations at length, which were formerly only referred to, from observing that however familiar they may be to the mind of the reader, they are always recognized with pleasure—like dear domestic faces; and if the memory fail at the moment to recall the lines or the sentiment to which the attention is directly required, few like to interrupt the course of thought, or undertake a journey from the sofa or garden-seat to the library, to hunt out the volume, the play, the passage, for themselves.

When the first edition was sent to press, the author contemplated writing the life of Mrs. Siddons, with a reference to her art; and deferred the complete development of the character of Lady Macbeth, till she should be able to illustrate it by the impersonation and commentary of that grand and gifted actress; but the task having fallen into other hands, the analysis of the character has been almost entirely rewritten, as at first conceived, or rather restored to its original form.

This little work, as it now stands, forms only part of a plan which the author hopes, if life be granted her, to accomplish;—at all events, life, while it is spared, shall be devoted to its fulfilment.

CHARACTERISTICS OF WOMEN.

INTRODUCTION.

Scene – A Library.

ALDA.

You will not listen to me?

MEDON.

I do, with all the deference which befits a gentleman when a lady holds forth on the virtues of her own sex.

He is a parricide of his mother's name,
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? [Pg 10]

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 courtesy is due to him and to you: – but now will you listen to me?

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? [Pg 11]

ALDA.

I might answer, that it has been a great source 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 affectation, for the profession of disinterestedness is uncalled 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? [Pg 12]

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 superiority, 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 men?

ALDA.

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

MEDON.

Perhaps I might answer like Voltaire—"Hélas [Pg 13] 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 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 conceived such an impossible idea.

MEDON.

Then, in a 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 [Pg 14] 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 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, [Pg 15] 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 burs 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. But at length comes the calm [Pg 16] hour, when they who look beyond the superficies 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 in satire which excites only the lowest and worst of our propensities. That avowal in Pope—

I must be proud to see
Men not afraid of God, afraid of me!

—has ever filled me with terror and pity—

MEDON.

From its truth perhaps? [Pg 17]

ALDA.

From its arrogance,—for the truth is, that a vice never corrected a vice. Pope might be proud of the terror he inspired in those who feared no God in whom vanity was stronger than conscience: but that terror made no individual man better; and while he indulged his own besetting sin, he administered to the malignity of others. Your professed satirists always send me to think upon the opposite sentiment in Shakspeare, 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.

ALDA.

I abhor the spirit of ridicule—I dread it and I despise it. I abhor it because it is in direct contradiction [Pg 18] 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 faibles fut 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 [Pg 19] which the levelling spirit of *persiflage* has been long a fashion; to the perverse education which fosters it; to affections disappointed or unemploved, which embitter the temper; to faculties misdirected or wasted, which oppress and irritate the mind; to an utter ignorance of ourselves, and the common lot of humanity, combined with quick

and refined perceptions and much superficial cultivation; to frivolous habits, which make serious thought a burden, and serious feeling a bane if suppressed, if betrayed, a ridicule. 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—

MEDON.

That she reminds us of the dragon of old, which was generated between the sunbeams 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 [Pg 20] 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 condemn both others and themselves, and so put barriers to the hard, cold, selfish, mocking, and levelling 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 dis-tempered 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 [Pg 21] 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 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 motives 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! [Pg 22]

ALDA.

Examples crowd upon me; but take the first that occurs. Do you remember that Duchesse 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 trial, all the ennui caused by the necessity of keeping her house, continual self-control, 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 Duchesse 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 [Pg 23] 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 philosophers 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 [Pg 24] as we are influenced with regard to our acquaintances and associates.

MEDON.

But we are then as likely to misconceive and misjudge them.

ALDA.

Yes, if we had only the same imperfect means of studying them. But we can do with them what we cannot do with real people: we can unfold the whole character before us, stripped of all pretensions of self-love, all disguises of manner. We can take leisure to examine, to analyze, to correct our own impressions, to watch the rise and progress of various passions — we can hate, love, approve, condemn, without offence to others, without pain to ourselves.

MEDON.

In this respect they may be compared to those exquisite anatomical preparations of wax, which those who could not without disgust and horror dissect a real specimen, may study, and learn the mysteries of our frame, and all the internal workings of the wondrous machine of life.

ALDA.

And it is the safer and the better way — for us at least. But look — that brilliant rain-drop trembling there in the sunshine suggests to me another illustration. Passion, when we contemplate it through [Pg 25] the medium of imagination, is like a ray of light transmitted through a prism; we can calmly, and with undazzled eye, study its complicate nature, and analyze its variety of tints; but passion brought home to us in its reality, through our own feelings and experience, is like the same ray transmitted through a lens, — blinding, burning, consuming where it falls.

MEDON.

Your illustration is the most poetical, I allow; but not the most just. But tell me, is the ground you have taken sufficiently large? — is the foundation you have chosen strong enough to bear the moral superstructure you raise upon it? You know the prevalent idea is,

that Shakspeare's women are inferior to his men. This assertion is constantly repeated, and has been but tamely refuted.

ALDA.

Professor Richardson? —

MEDON.

He is as dry as a stick, and his refutation not successful even as a piece of logic. Then it is not sufficient for critics to assert this inferiority and want of variety: they first assume the fallacy, then argue upon it. Cibber accounts for it from the circumstance that all the female parts in Shakspeare's time were acted by boys — there were no women on the stage; and Mackenzie, who ought to have known better, says that he was not so happy [Pg 26] in his delineations of love and tenderness, as of the other passions; because, forsooth, the majesty of his genius could not stoop to the refinements of delicacy; — preposterous!

ALDA.

Stay! before we waste epithets of indignation, let us consider. If these people mean that Shakspeare's women are inferior in power to his men, I grant it at once; for in Shakspeare the male and female characters bear precisely the same relation to each other that they do in nature and in society — they are not equal in prominence or in power — they are subordinate throughout. Richardson remarks, that "if situation influences the mind, and if uniformity of conduct be frequently occasioned by uniformity of condition, there *must* be a greater diversity of male than of female characters," — which is true; add to this our limited sphere of action, consequently of experience, — the habits of self-control rendering the outward distinctions of character and passion less striking and less strong — all this we see in Shakspeare as in nature: for instance, Juliet is the most impassioned of the female characters, but what are *her* passions compared to those which shake the soul of Othello?

"Even as the dew-drop on the myrtle-leaf
To the vex'd sea."

Look at Constance, frantic for the loss of her son—then look at Lear, maddened by the ingratitude of [Pg 27] his daughters: why it is the west wind bowing those aspen tops that wave before our window, compared to the tropic hurricane, when forests crash and burn, and mountains tremble to their bases!

MEDON.

True; and Lady Macbeth, with all her soaring ambition, her vigor of intellect, her subtlety, her courage, and her cruelty—what is she, compared to Richard III.?

ALDA.

I will tell you what she is—she is a woman. Place Lady Macbeth in comparison with Richard III., and you see at once the essential distinction between masculine and feminine ambition—though both in extreme, and overleaping all restraints of conscience or mercy. Richard says of himself, that he has "neither pity, love, nor fear:" Lady Macbeth is susceptible of all three. You smile! but that remains to be proved. The reason that Shakspeare's wicked women have such a singular hold upon our fancy, is from the consistent preservation of the feminine character, which renders them more terrible, because more credible and intelligible—not like those monstrous caricatures we meet with in history—

MEDON.

In history?—this is new!

ALDA.

Yes! I repeat, in history, where certain isolated [Pg 28] facts and actions are recorded, without any relation to causes, or motives, or connecting feelings and pictures exhibited, from which the considerate mind turns in disgust, and the feeling heart has no relief but in positive, and I may add, reasonable incredulity. I have lately seen one of Correggio's finest pictures, in which the three Furies are represented, not as ghastly deformed hags, with talons and torches, and snaky hair, but as young women, with fine luxuriant forms and regular features, and a single serpent wreathing the tresses like a bandeau—but *such* countenances!—such a hideous expression of malice, cunning, and cruelty!—and the effect is beyond conception

appalling. Leonardo da Vinci worked upon the same grand principle of art in his Medusa—

Where it is less the horror than the grace
Which turns the gazer's spirit into stone—

* * * *

'Tis the melodious tints of beauty thrown
Athwart the hue of guilt and glare of pain,
That humanize and harmonize the strain.

And Shakspeare, who understood all truth, worked out his conceptions on the same principle, having said himself, that "proper deformity shows not in the fiend so horrid as in women." Hence it is that whether he portrayed the wickedness founded in perverted power, as in Lady Macbeth; or the wickedness founded in weakness, as in Gertrude, Lady Anne, or Cressida, he is the more fearfully [Pg 29] impressive, because we cannot claim for ourselves an exemption from the same nature, before which, in its corrupted state, we tremble with horror or shrink with disgust.

MEDON.

Do you remember that some of the commentators of Shakspeare have thought it incumbent on their gallantry to express their utter contempt for the scene between Richard and Lady Anne, as a monstrous and incredible libel on your sex?

ALDA.

They might have spared themselves the trouble. Lady Anne is just one of those women whom we see walking in crowds through the drawing-rooms of the world—the puppets of habit, the fools of fortune, without any particular inclination for vice, or any steady principle of virtue; whose actions are inspired by vanity, not affection, and regulated by opinion, not by conscience: who are good while there is no temptation to be otherwise, and ready victims of the first soliciting to evil. In the case of Lady Anne, we are startled by the situation: not three months a widow, and following to the