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CHARACTERISTICS OF WOMEN.

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 physical 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 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, which 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 So the Millamants and Belindas, the Lady Townleys and Lady Teazles are out of date, while Portia and Rosalind, in whom nature and the feminine character are paramount, remain bright and fresh to the fancy as when first created.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 Isabella, 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 farther, the wit of Portia is like attar of roses, rich and concentrated; that of Rosalind, like cotton dipped in aromatic vinegar; the wit of Beatrice is like sal volatile; and that of Isabella, like the incense wafted to heaven. Of these four exquisite characters, considered as dramatic and poetical conception, 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 affectation, and confess she is not a

* 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, the privilege of burning it to ashes.

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