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Book Review of Anna Brownell (Murphy) Jameson's The Beauties of the Court of Charles the Second

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Nothing is more true, than that the appetite for pleasure grows by indulgence, and that, pushed to the verge of what is lawful, it is too apt to pass into criminal excess. But innocent pleasures men will have. What security that they will be content with these? None but the influence of public sentiment, constraining them to respect the almost viewless boundary that divides the extreme of lawful indulgence from the beginnings of licentiousness. The exercise of this influence is a duty society owes to itself; but to exert it, we must bear to look upon the scenes where its authority should be felt. If we fastidiously turn away, and refuse to the young, the gay, the sanguine and the thoughtless, the benefit of that aggregate judgment concerning right and wrong, which we distinguish by the name of "public sentiment," we incur more risk of becoming "purveyors of the sins of others," than we should by looking on with that complacent smile of benevolent sympathy, which its objects would not willingly exchange for the frown of merited disapprobation. In this smile and this frown are the sanctions for that "regulated indulgence" which a wise and good man has pronounced to be "the best security against excess."

When Charles on his accession avowed a disposition to claim for himself, and to allow to others the unbounded license which his foreign habits had rendered necessary to him, it was of course, that multitudes should eagerly avail themselves of the privilege. It was not wonderful that even the virtuous should acquiesce in this new scheme of things, instead of endeavoring to apply correctives which they had just seen so much abused. The consequence was, that during that most flagitious reign, the mind was left to put forth all its wild unpruned luxuriance. Human nature displayed itself in all the forms of all of its varieties, each in the most extreme dimensions. Vice walked abroad in naked deformity; and orgies, such as the sun had never before been permitted to look on, were perpetrated in the face of day. But if the "poor virtues of the age lacked countenance," how conspicuous was that virtue, which still resolutely resisted all the allurements with which fashion invests pleasure, and in the midst of a corrupt generation, preserved its purity inviolate. God has never left himself without a witness. There were, even in that day, men devoted to all their duties to him, to their fellows, and to themselves, and their light did but shine the brighter for the darkness that surrounded it. The pacific policy of a monarch, who is now known to have been the pensioner of the natural enemy of his

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Few portions of history are more replete with characters illustrating the good and evil of human nature, in both extremes, than that of the reign and court of Charles II. The stern dominion of a sour and superstitious bigotry had just passed away; the disgusting hypocrisy which had disguised all vice under the mask of religion and virtue had been exposed; and the disclosure had awakened a doubt, even in the minds of the wise and good, whether unbounded license was not more tolerable than the enormities practised in those hiding-places of crime, into which the severe discipline of the Protectorate had driven it. The public eye might impose some restraint; but when the indulgence of harmless mirth and the enjoyment of innocent amusement were unsafe, except in private, who could tell what unseen abominations might be perpetrated in recesses which the world was not permitted to look into.
country, afforded few opportunities to acquire fame in the service of the crown. It was chiefly in private life that virtue led to seek that honorable distinction which it naturally secures. That distinction the character of the age rendered more conspicuous and honorable, and it was therefore the more eagerly sought.

We are not particularly anxious about this theory, but it helps us to understand, not only how it was that the pure and unadulterated waters mingled without blending, but how it happened that the unaccompanied excellence of an Ormonde and an Ormond were found side by side with the unheard of depravity of a Buckingham and a Rochester.

Of the private as well as public history of the courtiers of Charles II, we have the most authentic records, and they are full of amusement and instruction. It has been lamented that they have been, for the most part, transmitted to us through channels which must soil the reader's mind, and endanger an injury more than commensurate to the value of the information. We have reason to rejoice therefore, that we are at length permitted to receive them through the refining filter of a female mind, from which they are transmitted pure and "bright as diamonds Spark.

What must be the history of Grammont without lamenting that it was impossible to impart any portion of his delight to his mistress. The difficulty is now removed; and Mrs. Jessomm prescribes the thanks of her sex, for having rendered accessible to them, not only a theme of most amusing gossip, but one of the most instructive and edifying chapters in the history of man. We especially recommend this work to their perusal. The witty Hamilton and the gay Grammont will perhaps be most read by the noe, but even they will derive advantage from looking, through the chaste eyes of a virtuous female, on the pictures of virtues, the exact opposite of the vices of the human character.

Of the manner in which this work is executed, nothing need be said to those familiar with the writings of Mrs. Jessomme. It is in every way worthy of her well merited reputation. We extract a few passages, which may serve as examples of the work. But they are not selected for any particular merit, but merely to illustrate the foregoing remarks. They are not consecutive pictures of virtues, the exact opposite of the vices which characterized the age; and we are not sure that they do not as widely differ from the average standard of the human character.

What can be more captivating than this account of Lady Hamilton.

"She was then just arrived at that age when the budding girl expands into the woman: her figure was tall, rather full, but elegantly formed; and, to borrow Lord Herbert's beautiful expression, "airy itself into every grace that can belong either to rest or motion." She had the finest neck and the broadest brain and arm in the world; her forehead was fair and open; her hair dark and luxuriant, always arranged with the most exquisite taste, but with an air of natural and picturesque simplicity, which means beauties in vain essay to copy; her complexion, at a time when the use of paint was universal, owed nothing to art; her eyes were not large, but sparkling and full of expression in her mouth, though not a little launghness is implied in the curving of the upper lip, was charming, and the contour of her face perfect.

"The soul which heaven had lodged in this fair person was worthy of its shrine. In those days, the very young were of a fickle and affectionate spirit, the beauties, by their prescriptive right, might be divided into two factions, whom I shall call the languishers and the sparklers; the languishers were those who, being slight by nature, or at least not brisk, adopted an extreme softness—lounged and lolled—sighed and slapped, or drawled out their words, half shut their eyes, and moved as if they were not born to carry their own weight. The sparklers were those who, upon the strength of bright eyes and some natural vivacity and imperiousness, set up for female wits; in conversation they attempted to dazzle by such solaces as would now be severely tolerated from the most abandoned of their sex; they were witty, airy, flattering, fantastical, and affective—they dealt in boasts and repartees—they threw their glances right and left, a tout a troncon, and piqued themselves upon taking hearts by a compulsion. Miss Hamilton belonged to neither of these classes: though lively by nature, she had perhaps the necessity of maintaining a reserve of manner which should keep presumptuous laps at a distance. She wore her feminine dignity as an advanced guard—her wit as a body of reserve. She did not speak much, but what she said was to the purpose, just what the occasion demanded and no more. There were times, whenever she was called upon to stand on the defensive, she was less possessed with the idea of her own merit than some people would be supposed; and far from thinking her consequence increased by the number of her lovers, she was singularly fastidious with regard to the qualifications of those whom she admitted upon the list of aspirants.

"In the family of Ormond we have a galaxy of excellence. The following extracts make us balance the truth of history and our experience of real life. Whom do we know like old Ormond and his wife? Whom like his noble son and his charming countess?

"Take the character of the Duchess from the lips of an enemy.

"When the Duke of Ormond withdrew to France, in 1655, he found himself obliged to leave his wife and family behind; and soon afterwards Cromwell caused the Earl of Ormond to be arrested upon no specific charge and committed to the Tower. His mother waited upon the protector to remonstrate, and to solicit his enlargement, pleading the quiet and inoffensive life which she led with her children in London. Cromwell told her plainly, that he had more reason to fear her than any body else. She replied with dignity and spirit, and in the presence of a numerous drawing-room, that she desired no favor at his hands, but merely justice to her innocent son;—and that she thought it strange that the woman, who had never been concerned in a plot in her life, nor opened her mouth against his person and government, should be represented as so terrible a person. 'No, madam!' replied Cromwell, 'that is not the case; but your worth has gained you so great an influence over all the commanders of our party, and we know no well your power over your own party, that it is in your ladyship's breast to act what you please.'"

"The following descriptions of the Earl and Countess of Ormond are delightful."

"At this time, the Earl of Ormond was about four and twenty; he was tall, well made, and handsome; with an open expressive countenance, and fine teeth and hair; he rode, fancied, and danced remarkably well; played on the lute and the guitar; spoke French eloquently, and Italian fluently; was a good historian; and seems to have had a taste for light and elegant literature, for Sir Robert Southwell represents him as so well read in poetry and romance, that 'in a gallery full of pictures and hangings, he could tell the stories of all that were there described.' These however were the
more superficial graces which enabled him to please in the drawing-room; but he added to these an innate nobility of soul which could distinguish a man in the cabinet and in the field. He was wise in counsel, quick and decided in action, as brave in battle as an Annalist of Cervantes. He filled the fiction of romance with life, humanize, courtesan, affable, temperate, generous to passion, and open almost to a fault. "It is a woman," says the historian; "his virtue was unpolluted in the centre of a luxurious court; his integrity unblemished amid all the vices of the times; his heart untroubled through the course of his whole life;" and it is most worthy of remark, that in those days, when the spirits of men were heated with party rage; when profane pens were wielded by profligate and obscure individuals, and satire "unstuck and environment," was levelled at whatever was weak, or beastly, or beautiful, or good in the land; not a single expression can anywhere be traced to contend or invalidate this universal testimony. "No writer," (I quote again from history,) "ever appeared then or since, so regardless of truth and of his own character, as to venture one stroke of censure on that of the Earl of Ormonde." "

"She was, indeed," adds the grave historian of the family, "an admissible economist; always cheerful, and never known to be out of humor, so that they lived together in the most perfect harmony imaginable. Lord Ormonde never found any place or company more agreeable than he found at home; and when he returned thither, they could not sufficiently express their joy, with kind embraces, and the most moving expressions of mutual tenderness." "

"But this picture, bright and beautiful as it is, had its shades. In this world of ours, 'where but to think is to be full of sorrow,' Lady Ormonde was so far most happy, that though she suffered through those she loved, (and must do who embark their happiness in their affections,) she never suffered by them; but she lost several of her numerous family at an early age; and the frequent absence of Lord Ormonde, whilst engaged in the highest civil and military employments, must have doomed her to many widowed hours. The reckless valor too, with which he expressed his life, and which was such as even to call down a rebuke from his brave father, must have filled the gentle bosom of his wife with a thousand fond anxieties; yet might not those partings and meetings, those alternations of hope and fear, those troubling terrors for his safety, those vexatious fears which greeted his return, have assisted to keep freshly alive, through a long series of years, all the presentiment? And was not this much? Did Lady Ormonde buy too dearly the proud happiness of belonging to that man, upon whom the eyes of all Europe were fixed to gape and to admire? who from every new triumph brought home her love and her unchangeable—depicting his honors at her feet, and her comrades in her gentle arms? Let the woman who reads this question, answer it to her own heart." "

The following anecdote, with the appended note, illustrates a point of character on which we always dwell with delight, though it is not often found associated with prudence and wisdom. "

"In 1671 occurred that extraordinary attempt on the life of the Duke of Ormond by the ruffian Blood, of notorious memory; it is supposed at the instigation of Buckingham. There was, in fact, something so audacious and so theatrical in the idea of hanging the duke upon the gallows at Tyburn, that it could only have originated with that 'Favonron de crimes.' Such, at least, was the general opinion at the time. A few days after this event, Lord Ormonde meeting the Duke of Buckingham in the King's chamber, the color flinted to his temples with passion, and his eyes sparkled with such fire that the duke took refuge behind the king's chair. "My lord," said Ormonde, "I am indebted to you for this; I know well that you are at the bottom of this late attempt of Blood upon my father, and therefore I give you fair warning, if my father comes to add his woes to the rest, for Blood, or pistol, he be by the hand of a ruffian, or the mere secret of passion. I shall not lie at a loss to know the first author of it; I shall consider you as the assassin; I shall treat you as such, and shall pistols you, though you wound beside the king's chair; and I tell you in his majesty's presence, that you may be sure I keep my word." So saying, he turned upon his heel, leaving the duke completely overawed, that he had not even spirit to utter a de- nial." "

We will conclude by adding the character of a lady (the wife of Hyde Earl of Rochester,) of which it is praise enough to say, that she was beautiful, rich, noble and powerful, and chose to love her husband, nurse her children, and live in obscurity. "

"It is perhaps the highest eulogium that could be pronounced on the character and conduct of his lady, genteel-looking, and really amiable wife, that while her husband was treading the steep and tortuous paths of court diplomacy, rising to rank and honors, and filling the highest offices in the state, we do not even hear of her, except in her domestic relations. In the recent publication of the Clarendon papers, Lady Rochester is seldom mentioned; but from the manner in which she is alluded to, we may infer, without danger of being mistaken, that she was such an excellent and submissive wife of an impotent and despotic husband; that she lived in the utmost harmony with her children and her relatives; that she frequently assisted the court treasury. "

"It should seem that her days flowed along in one even course of unpretending duties and blameless pleasures; duties such as her age and station prescribed, pleasures such as her rank and fortune permitted,—interrupted and cloaked by such cares and infirmities as the common lot of mortality. This description of Lady Rochester may appear a little aspid after the picturesque adventures of a Cleveland and a Chesterfield, and others of her more brilliant and interesting contemporaries; yet there is in its respect and simplicity something that not only refreshes, but sweetens the imagination: as in a garden where honeysuckles, and pinks, and carnations, and tulipiles, "

"Anducker bloosam, with full as deep a die, As the perfittum tincture of the tourn," I flout to the eye and allure the sense, should we suddenly find a jasmine, trundling its light tendrils and luxuriant foliage round a lordly elm, with what delight should we be permitted toEarly unsullied bloomers, and place them in our bosom!" "

* I believe no writer has remarked the singular coincidence between the character and fortunes of the Duke of Ormond, and his ancestor, the Earl of Ormonde, of Elizabeth's time. Both were brave, popular, enthusiastically loyal, and infinitely honest; both were accomplished courtiers, and lived to experience the ingratitude and injustice of the princes they had served; both experienced many changes of fortune, and lived an extreme old age, as to be held in their day the most illustrious. Both were opposed to the reigning favorites, for the esteem of the Duke of Ormond and Buckingham was at least equal to that of the Earl of Ormond and Lord Leicester. As Buckingham was believed to have instigated Blood in his attempt on the Duke of Ormond, so Leicester was known to have attempted the assassination of Ormond, by means of a hired cut-throat, who was afterwards, like Blood, forgiven and rewarded. The following anecdote is very characteristic;—The Earl of Ormond coming one day to court, met Lord Leicester in the antechamber: after the usual salutations, "My lord," said Leicester, insolently, "I dreamed of you last night." "Indeed," replied Ormond, "what could your best dream be, but of me?" "I dreamed that I gave you a box on the ear." "Dreams are interpreted by contumely," replied the high spirited Irishman, and turned his back upon the ear, and shook off the voice which made the favorite stigmer; for this he was condescending to the tower by Elizabeth.
By the way, we do not recollect which,-nor is it important to know. For the present we will answer the question somewhat in the Irishman or Yorkean style, by a remark which is not exactly responsive; and that is, that if Sir Walter Scott himself were living, he would have the endeavor and honor to acknowledge that "Calavar" was vastly superior to some five or six of the best litter of his own great genius, and not very far behind the very best of those renowned performances which have thrown a classic glory over the bleak hills and barren moors of Scotland. But whether that would have been the award of Sir Walter or not, impartial critics on both sides of the Atlantic, and coming generations, if "Calavar" should escape the vortex of oblivion,—will undoubtedly render a judgment somewhat similar. It is certainly the very best American novel, excepting perhaps one or two of Mr. Cooper's which we have ever read; that is, if holiness of design, vigor of thought, copiousness and power of language,—thrilling incident, and graphic and magnificent description, can constitute a good novel. For the first fifty or sixty pages, it is confessedly somewhat heavy; still the reader will perceive that a master spirit is at work, to whose guidance he confidently trusts. In a short time the whole interest of the narrative rushes upon him; he gazes in imagination upon the beautiful and Eden-like valleys of Mexico; he throws with pain at the spectacles of slaughtered thousands of the brave aborigines, and he sympathizes with the tender sorrows and heroic sufferings of the only female who figures in the story, and she too in the unsubstantial garb of a page, destined to perform the somewhat curious, and certainly very unthankful office, of a would-be hero’s lover. Here we think the author has decisively failed,—we mean in the invention and arrangement of his story. He is entirely too unnatural even for romance. There is too much improbable and miraculous agency in the various life-preserving expedients, and extraordinary rescues which are constantly occurring,—and which, although taken singly, do not surpass the strange events of actual life, shock us nevertheless by their perpetual succession, and impart to a tale founded upon historical truth, an air of criminal fiction which is not agreeable. The author, who is vastly superior to Cooper in dialogue, is, we fear, equally unqualified with that writer, to depict the female character in all its exquisite traits and attractive graces,—else why not give us more than a mere glimpse at the daughter of Montezuma, (the beloved of the melancholy De Moras,) whose image we behold as in a glass darkly,—and whose wretched fate we regard with the less anguish, knowing so little as we do of the fair and unfortunate victim. Even Jacinto is a mysterious and shadowy, though lovely being, with whom we have not, and cannot well have much sympathy. Some few passages indeed, illustrate the disguised princess with great force,—and throughout there is an uncountable anxiety felt towards her; but she is not sufficiently presented in the foreground of the picture, to awaken a positive and powerful interest in her behalf. Jacinto, alias Leila, is nevertheless a most delightful vision,—seen always under very unfavorable circum-

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