



# Aesthetics and Ethics in Anna Jameson's *Characteristics of Women*

RESEARCH

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper I contribute to the recovery of women in the history of philosophy by giving the first modern-day philosophical account of the ideas on aesthetics and ethics of Anna Jameson (1794–1860). Although Jameson was massive in her time, she wrote in a place and period, nineteenth-century Britain, and on an area, aesthetics, that the recovery effort has hardly reached yet. Throughout her work Jameson argued that aesthetics and ethics were very closely connected. Here I focus on how she made that connection in her 1832 work *Characteristics of Women: Moral, Poetical, and Historical*. Looking at Shakespeare's female characters, Jameson argued that they provide moral examples of various sorts: role models, warnings, or a mixture of the two. The characters only provide these examples because they are rounded, psychologically complete individuals who are therefore in a certain sense real. In addition, because they are complete, the characters are aesthetic wholes, and art-works in turn are aesthetic wholes just when they depict characters as aesthetic wholes. The consequence for Jameson is that art-works can only be aesthetically good – in virtue of being wholes – if they are also morally good – in presenting characters that serve as moral examples.

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In nineteenth-century Britain, America, and beyond, the Anglo-Irish author Anna Jameson greatly influenced thinking about art, to an extent that scholars have only recently been rediscovering.<sup>1</sup> Ray Strachey observed in *The Cause* that by the 1850s Jameson was ‘the idol of thousands of young ladies. Her books on pictures, on Shakespeare’s heroines ... were exactly what the period admired’ (1928: 89). But the admirers were not only young ladies: The *Monthly Review* deemed Jameson a ‘remarkable writer and powerful thinker’ (*Review of Social Life* 1840: 414), the *Spectator* declared: ‘Among the small list of illustrious women who have done real work in connection with painting and sculpture, Mrs Jameson is rightly placed’ (*Review of Memoirs* 1878: 1470), and for the *Athenaeum*:

She has excellently shown the want under which we have till lately been labouring of anything like sound critical taste. ... She writes enthusiastically—poetically; brings to her task erudition, even in philological particulars; and has exhibited her taste for Art. ... To the artist and the connoisseur these volumes will be ... of incalculable advantage. For the interpretation of the mysteries of Sacred and Legendary Art he need henceforth look no further than to its pages. (*Review of The Poetry* 1848: 1335–36)

The pattern is clear: Jameson’s writing on art was highly esteemed.

What was the nature of that writing? Jameson has been called ‘the first professional English art historian’ (Holcomb 1983), yet this needs qualification, for Jameson wrote before professionalisation and specialisation. Accordingly, she ranged over history, biography and life-writing, literary theory and criticism, religion, art history and criticism, travel writing, politics, women’s studies, and philosophy. One philosophical preoccupation runs through her work like a red thread: the connection between ethics and aesthetics. We see this from the titles of some of her books: *Characteristics of Women: Moral, Poetical and Historical* (1832), *Memoirs and Essays Illustrative of Art, Literature and Social Morals* (1846), and *A Commonplace Book of Thoughts, Memories, and Fancies*, subdivided into *Part I – Ethics and Character* and *Part II – Literature and Art* (1854).

How does Jameson view the connection between ethics and aesthetics? In very general terms, she is an aesthetic moralist, for whom an artwork is better aesthetically the more morally sound it is.<sup>2</sup> Take her remarks in the *Commonplace Book*: ‘The morals of art, [are something] which ... we must never lose sight of. Art is not only for pleasure and profit, but for good and for evil’ (1854: 282). Whereas Goethe, who

laid down the principle that works of art speak to the feelings and the conscience, ... by some strange inconsistency places art and artists out of the sphere of morals. He is wrong. ... The idea that what we call *taste* in art has something quite distinctive from conscience, is one cause that the popular notions concerning the productions of art are abandoned to such confusion and uncertainty. (1854: 284)

So Jameson sees the moral and aesthetic aspects of artworks as very closely connected, such that we can only appreciate artworks aesthetically (with taste) if we also respond to them morally (with our consciences). Likewise, in the 1849 essay ‘Some Thoughts on Art’ she maintains:

Art is for pleasure and for contemplation. ... But not only must we have pleasure and contemplation associated together; they must be associated in equal measure. ... The intense feeling of Beauty, merely as such, without a due exercise of ... the intellect, or a

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<sup>1</sup> On Jameson’s cultural influence overall, see Johnston (1997) and Thomas (1967). For instance, she influenced the developing policies and collections of the National Gallery in London under its first director Charles Eastlake, her interlocutor and friend (see Avery-Quash 2019). Although Jameson and Eastlake were ‘Raphaelites’ (they saw Raphael as the model artist), Jameson’s thought heavily influenced the Pre-Raphaelite Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and he recommended her works to the other Pre-Raphaelites (see Ludley 1991). John Ruskin too, notwithstanding some sexist remarks about Jameson, was influenced by her (see Johnston 1997: 175–76), as when he declared: ‘Shakespeare has no heroes—he has only heroines’ (Ruskin 1865: 126)—which, we will see, comes from Jameson. Also strikingly, Jameson characterised Christian art as ‘Gothic’ in contrast to Classical art (Jameson 1849b: 104) and Ruskin soon followed suit (Ruskin 1853).

<sup>2</sup> There is considerable recent debate about aesthetic moralism—e.g., Gaut (2007)—but, as I will explain, rather than inserting Jameson’s views into current debates, I will be approaching her thought historically, on its own terms.

due subjection to the moral sympathies, produces ... if not a degraded and frivolous, at least a narrow and defective, taste in art. (1849b: 103).

To see how she conceptualises the ‘equal association’ of pleasure and contemplation, or taste and conscience, we must home in on particular works. I will examine her 1832 book *Characteristics of Women* (hereafter *Characteristics*), because this is where Jameson first theorised the way of linking art and ethics which she subsequently pursued and refined. *Characteristics* was foundational for Jameson’s thought; it also had a huge impact and made her name—as her friend Harriet Martineau later remarked, ‘Mrs Jameson’s world-wide reputation dates from the publication of this book’ (1869: 116). *Characteristics* was very widely reviewed, praised, and taken up, being reissued twenty-eight times in Britain and America over the nineteenth century (making it Jameson’s joint most popular work, along with her *Sacred and Legendary Art* book series, published from 1848 onwards).

Indeed, ‘So widely was *Shakspeare’s Heroines* read that almost every subsequent nineteenth-century writer on Shakespeare’s women characters mentions the book’ (Russell 1991: 35; as I explain below, the book became renamed *Shakespeare’s Heroines*). Candido and Tumelson document a slew of British Shakespeare critics and editors who adopted Jameson’s views either in whole or part, right up the 1920s (Candido 2021: 11–13; Tumelson 2006: 86). In striking contrast, after the 1920s the book fell into near-oblivion, until some welcome recent re-examinations.<sup>3</sup> Jameson thus presents the interesting case of a woman whose work and ideas were extensively discussed in the supposedly utterly patriarchal nineteenth century yet totally overlooked in the supposedly more progressive twentieth century, turning our stereotypes about these periods on their head.

The popularity of *Characteristics* in its day prompts a question: If Jameson was once so well-known, why is she virtually invisible to philosophers now?<sup>4</sup> But the pattern is hardly confined to Jameson—many historical women philosophers have been well-known in their own times but omitted from historiography. The question, then, is how to recover women’s past philosophical contributions, and here we may adopt several approaches, as Eileen O’Neill clarifies (2019: 9–10): (i) mining women’s writings for answers to current problems; (ii) taking a pure historical approach of reconstructing the past and making it intelligible within its own terms; (iii) combining the two by using historical reconstruction to inform current debates. I take the second, pure historical, approach, for while Jameson’s work could certainly be brought to bear on present debates about aesthetics and ethics, her exclusion from historiography means that our primary need is to familiarise ourselves with her thought in its own terms.

I shall adopt one of the particular forms of pure history that O’Neill identifies: reconstructing a past thinker’s (namely Jameson’s) arguments and project within a single text (*Characteristics*). As O’Neill says, one might also construct ‘revised canons of major philosophical figures, ... reshaping ... the history of philosophy to include philosophically significant, but forgotten, minor figures’ (2019: 11). I see recovering Jameson as part of a wider revision of the history of aesthetics, for standard narratives about its history include virtually no pre-twentieth-century women. Jameson’s body of work on art and aesthetics is large, complex, and ambitious enough that arguably she should count as a major historical aesthetician, on a par with Ruskin—with whom she was often compared at the time. For example, the *Saturday Review* stated that: ‘It is to ... Ruskin, [and] Mrs Jameson ... that we have to go for the “libri idiotarum”’ (i.e., for the meaning of visual art, ‘books for the illiterate’) (“The History” 1864: 791). And according to William King’s 1902 encyclopaedia of women’s achievements: ‘As a writer on matters of art and taste Mrs. Jameson probably surpassed all other women writers and on the literature of art she is conceded by many to stand next to Ruskin’ (King 1902: 369). Unlike Jameson, though, Ruskin’s ideas have been amply remembered and discussed. His and Jameson’s different fates exemplify the disparity in how historical male and female thinkers have been treated.

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3 These are by Booth (1999/2000), Dabby (2017: chap. 4), Gillett (2018), Hoekley (2011), Johnston (1997: chap. 3), Russell (1991), and Slights (1993).

4 However, in literary, cultural, and art history and criticism, and the history of religious thought, Jameson has undergone considerable recovery; besides studies mentioned elsewhere in this essay, see *inter alia* Adams (2001), Anderson (2020), Fraser (2014), Hughes (2016), Kanwit (2013), Palmer (2017), Robinson (2000; 2003), and Styler (2010: chap. 4).

Another factor in Jameson's fall into invisibility may have been her close connection of aesthetics with ethics. This put her at the heart of the aesthetic moralist climate that dominated mid-nineteenth-century Britain, so that when later generations reacted against that climate they necessarily turned against Jameson.<sup>5</sup> For instance, Vernon Lee, in a letter written in 1878, at a time when she was close to the aestheticist movement of the 1870s and 1880s, explained her adoption of a male pseudonym as follows:

There is an universal & very well founded distrust in women's critical powers, they ... have hitherto been such miserable ... Mrs Jamesons on matters of art & art history, that the fact of a work on aesthetics being by a woman, is enough to ... prevent my taking it up. (Lee 2017: 240)

In branding Jameson 'miserable', Lee implied that she imposed a dour yoke of moral restraint and judgement upon art. Fifty years later, Virginia Woolf's character Orlando was 'appalled' by the Victorian profusion of 'Smiths, Dixons, ... Buckles, Taines, Paynes, Tupperts, Jamesons—all vocal, clamorous, prominent, and requiring as much attention as anybody else' (Woolf [1928] 1995: 143). By implication, this clamour of Victorian critics impeded people from either having immediate aesthetic responses to artworks or leading lives of spontaneous aesthetic play. Orlando's horror exemplifies how the modernists, especially the Bloomsbury group, defined themselves against the Victorians.<sup>6</sup> Even so, Lee's and Woolf's critical reactions attest to the influence Jameson formerly had. Moreover, as critical judgements on Jameson they are unfair. Far from being miserable, *Characteristics* is light-hearted, exuberant, and optimistic. Jameson sought not to place moral barriers between artworks and audiences but to encourage the public to engage with, enjoy, and respond sensitively to artworks. For Jameson, though, moral considerations had to be an integral part of sensitive and cultivated responses to art.

Let us see how Jameson made her case to that effect in *Characteristics*. I shall look at her basic project in the book (Sec. II), her moral psychology (Sec. III), and then her aesthetics (Sec. IV), before drawing out how she conceived the aesthetics-ethics connection (Sec. V). To help situate her work historically, I shall bring in two of her key influences and interlocutors—the German Romantic aesthetician August Wilhelm Schlegel and the British playwright and drama theorist Joanna Baillie.

## II. THE PROJECT OF *CHARACTERISTICS OF WOMEN: MORAL PHILOSOPHY BY AESTHETIC EXAMPLE*

Jameson's two-volume, 500-page, signed work *Characteristics of Women: Moral, Poetical, and Historical* came out in 1832. What the title did not make apparent was that the book was partly a work of Shakespeare criticism, in which Jameson offered a moral reading of 23 of Shakespeare's female characters. To make this clearer, the first German translation of 1834 by Adolph Wagner (Richard Wagner's uncle) bore the title *Frauenbilder, oder Charakteristik der vorzüglichsten Frauen in Shakspeare's Dramen*<sup>7</sup> (i.e., *Pictures of Women, or Characteristics of the Most Excellent Women in Shakespeare's Dramas*).<sup>8</sup> The American editions of 1846 and 1848 were called *Heroines of Shakespeare*, and posthumous British editions from 1897 onwards adopted *Shakespeare's Heroines*, retained in the 2005 Broadview Press edition. It is not clear whether Jameson ever authorised these variant titles, since she retained the book's original title throughout its successive British editions until her death.

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<sup>5</sup> Ruskin was likewise associated with aesthetic moralism, so later generations reacted against him too; but his gender has counteracted this, keeping him on the historical record.

<sup>6</sup> A classic statement is Strachey ([1918] 2009); however, the Bloomsbury group were more entangled with Victorianism than they acknowledged (see Rosenbaum 1987).

<sup>7</sup> The possessive apostrophe, as in 'Shakespeare's', was accepted in some contexts in nineteenth-century German (see Heyse 1849: II: 790); it was only ruled ungrammatical later in the century.

<sup>8</sup> Two more German translations quickly followed in 1840. There was intense competition to translate Shakespeare into German at that time, so different factions produced their own translations of Jameson so as to enlist her authority in their support; see Gillett (2018) and Johns (2010). Jameson, evidently, was popular in Germany too: for example, Heinrich Heine brought out *Shakespeares Mädchen und Frauen* in 1838, attempting to emulate her success.

Jameson's reasons for preferring the original title are illuminating about her project. 'Characteristics', for Jameson, are *moral* character-traits (as the German title captured). Jameson explores different configurations of intellect, passion, and affection in Shakespeare's women and traces how they produced varying blends of virtue and vice. She thus reads Shakespeare's plays for examples of more and less virtuous women. Some examples, above all Portia from *The Merchant of Venice*, are uniformly positive—role models, as we now say. Other examples are more negative, like Lady Macbeth, serving primarily as 'warnings' of what to avoid (CW I:xl).<sup>9</sup> Most of the examples are in-between, mixtures of role model and warning. The title word 'Characteristics' thus indicates that the book deals with women *qua* moral examples.

Clearly, *Characteristics* is a singular work. Cheryl Hoeckley classifies it as a hybrid of a conduct manual, Shakespeare criticism, and a feminist argument for the reform of women's education and social position (Hoeckley 2005). Alison Booth further places it in the genre of collective biography of illustrious women (Booth 1999/2000). In addition, *Characteristics* does moral philosophy and moral psychology by aesthetic example, as Jameson explains in the light-hearted dialogue that introduces the book.

In this dialogue—which was written last and in a style of Shakespearean banter—Jameson's mouthpiece 'Alda', the imagined author, convinces the initially sceptical 'Medon' of the worth of her inquiry. As Alda clarifies, she seeks to teach morality not in a theoretical treatise but by examples:

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. (CW I:viii)

And at the end of this introductory dialogue, persuaded of the project's merits, Medon asks:

Medon. ... But now for the moral.

Alda. The moral!—of what?

Medon. Of your book. It has a moral, I suppose.

Alda. It has indeed, a very deep one, which those who seek will find. If now I have answered all your considerations and objections, and sufficiently explained my own views, may I proceed?

Medon. If you please—I am now prepared to listen in earnest. (I:lx–lxi)

Jameson is thus finding a way to do moral philosophy as a woman, outside the academy, in a form other than the systematic treatise. She turns to literature as a domain where morality can be taught, and moral psychology probed, through aesthetic examples. At a time when literature and publishing are open to women as universities are not, Jameson gravitates to this indirect, aesthetic way of doing moral philosophy.

It is useful to note that Harriet Martineau uses 'characteristics' in the same sense of 'virtues as exemplified in art' in her pair of essays on Walter Scott, published nearly simultaneously with *Characteristics* (Martineau [1832] 1836a; [1833] 1836b). For Martineau, Scott's 'characteristics' are his personal virtues (such as purity, modesty, and cheerful optimism), which find expression in the artistic merits of his work, which in turn has morally improving effects on the public (e.g., by displaying common humanity, exuding kindness). Scott

has taught us the power of fiction as an agent of morals and philosophy. ... We ... learn from him how much may be impressed by exemplification which would be rejected in the form of reasoning, and how there may be more extensive *embodiments* of truth in fiction than the world was before thoroughly aware of. (Martineau [1833] 1836b: 52)

However, for Martineau, Scott's artistic virtues express and reflect his personal virtues, whereas Jameson scarcely considers Shakespeare the person at all. Instead she focuses on the virtues of his *characters* as quasi-autonomous individuals. When she does refer to Shakespeare's virtues it is

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<sup>9</sup> All references are to the 1832 edition (Jameson 1832), abbreviated CW, except for occasional references to later interpolations.

as strictly as manifest in features of his work—in how the characters are delineated. And whereas Martineau is concerned with how the *author* can exemplify morals, Jameson is more concerned with how the *reader* can extract moral guidance from art. Insofar as *Characteristics* is an example of a moral reading of Shakespeare, she indirectly guides the reader in how to read literature for moral guidance. That is, by reading the heroines as moral examples, she provides a reading that serves as an example of a moral reading.

One way in which Shakespeare's plays give moral guidance, Alda suggests, is by providing a safe space for readers to witness the damaging consequences of uncontrolled passion:

We can do with them [these heroines] what we cannot do with real people: we can unfold the whole character before us, stripped of ... all disguises of manner. We can ... watch the rise and progress of various passions. ... And it is the safer and the better way [than in real life]. ... Passion, when we contemplate it through the medium of imagination, is like a ray of light transmitted through a prism; we can calmly, and with undazzled eye, study its complicated nature ... (CW I:xxi-xxii)

Literature allows the reader to learn, at a safe distance, from the warning example of characters who succumb to their passions, and avoid following in their footsteps. But Shakespeare's heroines do not only exhibit dangers; between them they display the full spectrum of 'the various modifications of which the female character is susceptible, with their causes and results' (I:vii). Characters such as Portia show that women can be intelligent, powerful, passionate, and virtuous. From Portia, with whom Jameson's book proper begins, down to Lady Macbeth, with whom it ends, a continuous spectrum of possibilities unfolds. Which ones any actual woman realises depends on her education, opportunities, and social circumstances. Portia shows what is possible, but social conditions determine how far any given woman can actualise this ideal. For, Alda continues:

The condition of women in society, as at present constituted, is false in itself, and injurious to them,—... 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 ... (I:viii)

Present conditions in which women are not educated to use reason or principled judgement, and have little chance to exercise and develop their intellectual powers in professional or public life, bring out the worst in women, by leaving them ill-prepared to regulate their passions and affections.

Evidently, Jameson's focus is women's virtues. As Judith Johnston has pointed out, Jameson enlarges Shakespeare's female characters into principal actors, looking at the male characters only in relation to the women—the opposite of the normal interpretive procedure (Johnston 1997: chap. 3). But, of course, Jameson's general view that literary characters embody varying degrees of virtue and vice can apply equally well to male characters and pertain equally well to male readers. What Jameson does is reverse the historical tendency to run together accounts of virtue in general with examples of male virtue in particular. By instead discussing virtue through female examples, Jameson emphasises not only that women are perfectly capable of cultivating virtuous characters but also that social arrangements need to encourage rather than inhibit them in doing so.

### III. JAMESON'S TAXONOMY OF FEMALE CHARACTERS: MORAL PSYCHOLOGY BY AESTHETIC EXAMPLE

Jameson divides *Characteristics* into four parts, each dealing with a particular class of Shakespearian women. Through this taxonomy she puts forward an indirect account of the best way to configure intellect, passion, and affection to achieve a virtuous character.

#### (1) CHARACTERS OF INTELLECT

Their paradigm is Portia, to whom Jameson gives 'the first rank' among Shakespeare's women (I:5). Portia's intellect is not separate from her moral fibre; rather, one aspect of her intellect is



her morality of principle. She also has powerful passions, but her intellect regulates them, so that their power animates her intellect while her intellect steers and directs her passions. This is the ideal balance, yielding ‘a human being, in whom the moral, intellectual and sentient faculties [are] exquisitely blended and proportioned’ (I:32).

Admittedly Jameson does say at the very start of her book, as women of this time often did, that women’s intellect is necessarily ‘inferior’ to men’s (I:1–2). But she immediately adds that men’s intellect is more self-contained whereas women’s is more bound to their ‘sympathies and moral qualities’ (I:2). That is, whereas men have the advantage in terms of pure intellect, women can equal men insofar as the intellect encompasses moral principles and regulates the passions and affections, as Portia’s example shows.

## (2) CHARACTERS OF PASSION AND IMAGINATION

Here Juliet is the paradigm and she furnishes, as Alda makes explicit, a warning. If a single passion takes a person over completely and expands to become the whole of their character, they will find no way to continue existing in the real world. Jameson emphasises repeatedly that Juliet’s entire being is love, and she embodies love under all its aspects (I:104). Indeed, Jameson argues, ‘Love, as a passion, forms the groundwork of the drama’ (I:90), the whole action of which is to develop the passion in full—by implication making the whole play into the unfolding of Juliet.

Jameson’s interpretation contrasts with that of the early German Romantics Caroline and August Schlegel, for whom *Romeo and Juliet*’s unifying principle is the unity of opposites—the sensual and the spiritual, love and death, bliss and suffering. This view is expressed in two long letters of Caroline to August (C. Schlegel 1797a; 1797b), and again in an essay published only under August’s name (A. Schlegel 1797) which drew heavily on these letters, and which he later admitted Caroline had co-authored (A. Schlegel 1828: xvii–xviii). Although Jameson engages extensively with other ideas of August Schlegel’s, she does not address this particular interpretive point (and she seems not to have known of Caroline’s work or involvement with August’s Shakespeare interpretations).<sup>10</sup> Anyway, unlike the Schlegels, Jameson maintains that love *alone* is the core of the drama and is ‘the passion which has taken possession of Juliet’s entire soul’ (I:96). Thus whereas the Schlegels take the play’s message to be the metaphysical and bitter-sweet one that we cannot have love without pain or life without death, for Jameson the message is instead moral and optimistic. Love taken to excess, driving out all other elements of character, may end in death, but this can be avoided if one cultivates a more balanced character. This is not to say that Jameson condemns Juliet: actually Jameson admires her, saying that Juliet ‘preserv[es] that moral and feminine dignity which harmonizes with our best feelings, and commands our unreprieved sympathy’ (I:120). For the passion of love is not *per se* bad; neither, therefore, is Juliet. On the contrary she is essentially good, yet her example shows that love, like other passions, needs to be balanced by intellectual principles if it is not to overwhelm a person and lead to their downfall.

## (3) CHARACTERS OF THE AFFECTIONS

Their paradigm is Imogen from *Cymbeline*. For Jameson, these:

characters in which the affections and the moral qualities predominate over fancy and all that bears the name of passion ... are all gentle, beautiful and innocent; all are models of conjugal submission, truth, and tenderness; and all are victims of the unfounded jealousy of their husbands (II:3–4)

(or of unjust suspicions from other male family members). In other words, these are precisely the sort of women who were conventionally extolled as role models. Yet their examples show that if one orientates one’s actions by dutiful obedience to male kin (i.e., by a morality of affection for others, not self-governing rational principles), then one is vulnerable to whatever these men may inflict on one. Thus Jameson subtly treats these characters as a warning example that indicts the idea that women’s primary duty is to obey their fathers and husbands.

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<sup>10</sup> Jameson did, however, write about his relations with Germaine de Staël (Jameson 1834: I:35–39), whom she esteemed highly, modelling her *Diary of an Ennuyée* on Staël’s novel *Corinne*.

Jameson's distinction between *passions* and *affections* figures into this. We see from what she says of these two sets of characters that she regards passions as powerful internal forces motivating action, whereas affections are sympathetic and other-oriented. Jameson ranks women of passion above women of affection because the former are more self-directed and self-willed. Although passions can lead one astray if they are not harnessed by rational principles, in themselves passions are desirable rather than malign; when properly harnessed, as by Portia, they confer energy and commanding force, which is admirable in women as in men. To be sure, other-regarding affections are desirable too, and so characters such as Imogen and Desdemona are again essentially good. And even 'Desdemona, with all her timid flexibility and soft acquiescence, is not weak' (II:47–48). Yet these characters exemplify the dangers of making other-regarding affections the centre of one's life and action. Desdemona is 'a victim consecrated from the first,—... all harmony, all grace, all tenderness, all truth! But, alas! ...—to see her—O poor Desdemona!' (II:49). That is, other-regarding affections may be 'all grace, all tenderness', but they need to be regulated by rational principles and complemented by strong internal passions if they are not to conduce to victimhood.

It is clear by now that most of the characters serve as *both* positive examples *and* warnings. Positively, they embody some of the necessary constituents of a virtuous character. Negatively, they show the insufficiency of each of these constituents on its own. Affections are insufficient if not combined with strong passion, and passion is insufficient if not regulated by intellect. But since both affection and passion are desirable, intellect is insufficient too unless it has these other currents to draw on and regulate. Underneath the deceptively easy readability of Jameson's work, then, she advances a multi-layered moral psychology.<sup>11</sup>

#### (4) HISTORICAL CHARACTERS

This category may sound disjointed from the others. But the clue is in the introduction, when Alda says: 'Women are illustrious in history ... generally in proportion to the mischief they have done or caused' (I:xviii). The historical women, then, are the 'mischievous' or bad characters, paradigmatically Lady Macbeth, whose 'ruling motive' and 'intense overmastering passion' is ambition, 'which is gratified at the expense of every just and generous principle, and every feminine feeling' (II:303). Her ambition has gained the upper hand over her intellect, other passions, and spousal affection. Her powerful intellect, determination, and courage are all put to the service of her ambition; her equally strong affection for Macbeth is perverted by her passion (ambition) into the overpowering desire to place him on the throne (II:308–9). This is not a person completely absorbed by one passion as Juliet is, but a character who retains a strong intellect and set of passions and affections but where one overgrown passion directs, disfigures, and misuses everything else. Lady Macbeth is not one-sided but multi-faceted; yet the facets are wrongly configured.

Crucially, though, even she is not entirely bad. To show this, and refute critics who condemned her as a 'monster of depravity' (II:304), was one of Jameson's central goals, yielding one of the book's most compelling—and controversial—sections.<sup>12</sup>

The crime of Lady Macbeth terrifies us *in proportion as we sympathize with her*; ... It is good to behold the possible result of the noblest faculties uncontrolled or perverted. ... She is a terrible impersonation of evil passions and mighty passions, never so far removed from our own nature as to be cast *beyond the pale of our sympathies*. (II:304; my emphasis)

Lady Macbeth's powerful intellect, her courage and resoluteness, her love for her husband—all are good. Even her ambition is not bad as such but only because it is 'extreme, and overleaping all restraints' (I:xxv): it has wrested control of all her other potentially good qualities.

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<sup>11</sup> Dabby likewise argues that for Jameson women should cultivate both intellect and sensibility, like men (2017: 105–11). But I am suggesting that Jameson's picture is finer-grained than this, including in subdividing sensibility into passion and affection.

<sup>12</sup> Martineau objected to Jameson's 'notorious mistake' of attributing to Lady Macbeth 'an intellect loftier than that of her husband' (Martineau 1869: 116).



Jameson's discussion of Lady Macbeth bears the influence of the British playwright Joanna Baillie. Baillie shot to fame with her 1798 *Series of Plays, in which it is Attempted to Delineate the Stronger Passions of the Mind*, known for short as the *Plays on the Passions*, which included the 70-page 'Introductory Discourse' setting out her theory of drama and tragedy. In essence, Baillie maintained that by showing us protagonists who succumb to their passions with disastrous consequences, tragedy educates us, expanding our sympathetic understanding of other minds, and helping us to learn to regulate our own passions so that we can lead better lives than the tragic characters (Baillie [1798] 1806: 29–30). Through their mistakes, the characters give us 'the instruction of example' ([1798] 1806: 32). This influenced Jameson's view, quoted earlier, of how certain characters act as warnings. Her above-quoted remark about watching the 'rise and progress' of passions compares closely with Baillie: 'It is for [tragedy] also to represent men under the influence of the stronger passions; and to trace the *rise and progress* of them in the heart ...' ([1798] 1806: 43).

Baillie and Jameson only became friends in the mid-1830s,<sup>13</sup> but Jameson knew Baillie's work long before that, not least because at the start of the nineteenth century Baillie enjoyed a 'fame almost without parallel' (Martineau 1877: I:270). And Jameson inscribed *Characteristics* in a line of women that included Baillie by dedicating it to the actress Fanny Kemble. Kemble was the niece of the equally famous tragic actress Sarah Siddons, on whom Jameson published a biographical essay in 1831 (Jameson 1831), later expanded and incorporated into her 1834 book *Visits and Sketches at Home and Abroad*. One of Siddons' most celebrated roles was as Jane de Monfort in Baillie's *De Monfort* when it was staged in 1800. Jameson remarked, 'In playing Jane de Montfort, in Joanna Baillie's tragedy, her audience almost lost the sense of impersonation in the feeling of identity. She was Jane de Montfort—the actress, the woman, the character, blended into each other' (Jameson 1834: I:282). Thus Jameson both knew Baillie's *Plays on the Passions* and presupposed her readers' knowledge of them. Furthermore, Baillie was widely perceived as Shakespeare reborn (see Dowd 1998: 482). As such, she hovers as a background presence over *Characteristics*, especially Jameson's treatment of the 'bad' tragic characters.

For Baillie, in seeing the fate of tragic characters and how they got into their bad ways, we sympathise with them rather than condemning them (Baillie [1798] 1806: 4). We observe how they have only taken further seeds of passion that are present in us all, and how these characters therefore contained much good, although their good elements have been overpowered by the passions that they have allowed to run to excess ([1798] 1806: 62; 1999: II:718–19). Likewise, for Jameson, we see in 'bad' characters like Lady Macbeth good traits such as a powerful intellect. Seeing how Lady Macbeth's ambition has perverted her intellect, we appreciate the need to restrain our own passions so as to avoid ruining our own potential. Had she done the same, she could have realised the good qualities with which she started out: 'What would not the firmness, the self-command, the enthusiasm, the intellect, the ardent affections of this woman have performed, if properly directed?' (Jameson 1833: II:375). Lady Macbeth only serves as a warning *because* she has features in common with everyone, has many admirable traits, and is no monster of depravity. This humane and optimistic message is the 'grand moral lesson' of *Macbeth* (1833: II:308).<sup>14</sup>

For Baillie, the tragic characters' lives go wrong through their own choices, which directs us to make better choices in our own lives ([1798] 1806: 42). For Jameson, the further implication is that women need better education and opportunities for public participation if they are to make better choices. For as Alda says in the introduction, currently women are forced to be 'always political through their affections, their prejudices, their personal *liaisons*, their hopes, their fears. ... For hence it is, that we make such blind partizans, such violent party women' (CW I:xlvii–xlviiii)—just as Lady Macbeth violently takes her husband's side against the king. So whereas Baillie advocates

<sup>13</sup> According to Jameson's niece and first biographer Geraldine Macpherson (1878: 95); Slagle adds that 'their mutual literary circle made their friendship inevitable' (Slagle in Baillie 1999: II:1021). By 1838 the pair were so friendly that Jameson considered moving near Baillie, though she opted to remain more independent (Macpherson 1878: 145). Macpherson observes that Baillie was one of Jameson's most cherished friends 'because of the great reputation as a poet which was once so willingly conceded to her'—i.e., to Baillie (Macpherson 1878: 185). Some of Jameson's correspondence with Baillie from the late 1830s to 1840s survives (see Baillie 1999), but it contains little philosophical discussion.

<sup>14</sup> Jameson added these remarks in 1833.

personal responsibility,<sup>15</sup> Jameson adds that women will only be able to assume that responsibility given social and educational reform.

Baillie and Jameson also differ somewhat in that Baillie primarily treats the passions as dangerous, whereas Jameson's view is more positive. As we have seen, it is integral to her taxonomy that not only intellect but also passions and affections are components of a good character. Jameson's ideal woman is not the sort of bloodless and passionless creature widely championed at the time. Rather, Jameson considers both the passions and the affections good in themselves, so long as they are regulated and channelled by the intellect. A rich emotional life is essential to the most complete, rounded type of character.

#### IV. THE AESTHETICS OF *CHARACTERISTICS*: AESTHETIC WHOLE AND MORAL EXAMPLES

So far, I have focused on Jameson's moral psychology in *Characteristics*; let me now turn to its aesthetic side and how Jameson integrates aesthetic and moral concerns.

Medon asks Alda why the moral lessons need to be taught via literary characters at all. Why not use real women, present-day or historical? First, Alda answers, she does not want to make criticisms of real-life people (CW I:ix); second, our knowledge of both past and present women is very limited and clouded with prejudices (I:xvii). In contrast, we see literary characters as a whole, with all their traits, the unity these form, and the actions that follow from them. We can therefore know the moral character of literary figures *better* than that of real people and learn moral lessons better from literary than real people. This is because (to return to a previously-mentioned statement of Jameson's) 'we can do with them [the literary figures] what we cannot do with real people: we can unfold the whole character before us, stripped of ... all disguises' (I:xxi). Literary figures are not merely ancillary to a moral project that could be done equally well using history or real people; the reference to literature is fundamental.

To draw out Jameson's views here it is helpful briefly to consider how they relate to what I will call the paradox of moral fiction. It arises out of the broader paradox of fiction, namely (under countless slightly different formulations) that we do not believe that fictional characters are real; we only care about what happens to people we believe to be real; yet we care about what happens to fictional characters. The further paradox of moral fiction may be expressed: we do not believe that fictional characters are real; we can only learn moral lessons from the actions and traits of real people; yet we can learn moral lessons from the actions and traits of fictional characters.<sup>16</sup> Jameson heads off this paradox but not simply, as we might suppose, by (in effect) denying the second premise. It is more that she modifies the first premise. Consider the following remarks:

Alda. ... the riddle which history presented I found solved in the pages of Shakespeare.  
... 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 may judge for themselves. (I:xx)

Of these four exquisite characters [Portia, Rosalind, Beatrice, and Isabel], considered as dramatic and poetical conceptions, it is difficult to pronounce which is ... most admirably drawn. ... But if considered in another point of view, as women and individuals, as breathing realities, clothed in flesh and blood ... [then Portia is the best]. (I:5)

Many women have possessed many of those qualities which render Portia so delightful. She is in herself a piece of reality, of whose possible existence we have no doubt ... (I:32)

Whenever we bring her [Ophelia] to mind, it is with the same exclusive sense of her real existence, without reference to the wondrous power which called her into life. (I:186)

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<sup>15</sup> On Baillie's voluntarism, see especially Colón (2009).

<sup>16</sup> On the paradox of fiction, see Radford (1975). What I am calling the paradox of moral fiction adjoins a number of puzzles about fiction and morality, but I am merely touching on this to bring out Jameson's position.

In a sense then Shakespeare's female characters *are* real and we believe, indeed know, them to be so.

To be sure, Jameson does not deny that these women are 'poetical conceptions'—after all, she says that drama shows us the passions through the prism of imagination, thus safely removed from real life. But though these women are imagined they have features in common with real-life women: they embody permutations of intellect, passion, and affection, as real-life women do. Thus what is crucial, Jameson states, is not 'the mode in which a certain character is manifested' but 'the combination of abstract qualities making up that individual human being' (1833: II:308). These combinations are what real and imagined women have in common. Because the imagined characters have combinations of traits also found in real people, these characters have a level of reality—they are *sufficiently* real for us to learn from them morally. Moreover, for Jameson, imagination, like prejudice and feeling, colours our judgements of real-life people (I:xvii). In respect of both shared qualities and this pervasive role of imagination in life, Jameson sees no hard-and-fast real/fictional divide.<sup>17</sup> This is reflected in that her key words for the status of Shakespeare's heroines are *imagined* and *poetical*, not *fictitious*—the latter suggests 'made-up' and 'unreal' as the former two terms do not.

From the foregoing we can see that, for Jameson, the reality of Shakespeare's heroines depends on their *completeness*. That is, these women are rounded individuals with a full complement of interrelated traits, giving each of them a complete personality out of which all their words and actions flow. This completeness, or wholeness, makes each of these women real because it gives them a complex personality structure, a 'combination of abstract qualities making up [an] individual human being', something that real-life people also have.

Jameson's understanding of completeness comes out of German Romanticism, by which she was influenced considerably. Unsurprisingly, a strand of German Romanticism that particularly influenced her was its engagement with Shakespeare. In *Characteristics* Jameson refers frequently, albeit often critically, to August Schlegel's interpretations of Shakespeare, specifically his *Course of Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature*, translated into English in 1815 (A. Schlegel 1815).<sup>18</sup> Jameson objects, for instance, that his description of Portia as a 'rich, beautiful and clever heiress' is dismissive (CW I:6), and she sets out her taxonomy of female characters in defiance of his stricture 'that it is impossible to arrange Shakespeare's characters in classes' (I:xxxiv; cf. A. Schlegel 1815: II:154–55). She went on to meet Schlegel, along with Ludwig Tieck, when visiting Germany in the 1830s,<sup>19</sup> also becoming a lifelong friend and close correspondent of Ottilie von Goethe (Goethe's daughter-in-law). Indeed, Jameson was a major force for 'British-German cultural transfer' in this period (to use Alessa Johns's apt phrase; 2014: esp. chap. 4).<sup>20</sup>

Schlegel and Tieck were the named authors of the monumental German translation of Shakespeare's plays known as the 'Schlegel–Tieck' Shakespeare, produced in stages from 1797 to 1833. In reality a substantial amount of translating was done during the 1797–1802 phase by Caroline Schlegel,<sup>21</sup> and in the 1825–33 phase by Wolf Baudissin and Tieck's daughter Dorothea. The principles underpinning the translation project were set out by August Schlegel in two essays published under his name (A. Schlegel 1796; 1797), one of which Caroline in fact co-authored. The principles are that the literary work to be translated is a complete whole, akin to an organism, where every detail flows out of its organising idea (1797: 560). The translator's task is to apprehend

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17 Hoeckley, Slights, and Russell are all dubious about Jameson's treatment of fictional characters as real (Hoeckley 2011: 11–15; Slights 1993: 388; Russell 1991), although they see it as having political uses in expanding the range of possibilities for real women. I am arguing, however, that Jameson had philosophical grounds for her view.

18 Originally *Über dramatische Kunst und Literatur*, 1809–11.

19 In 1833 she told Ottilie von Goethe: 'Schlegel was introduced to me and we had a long chatter ...' (Needler 1939: 35), and 'Schlegel became very amiable ... and they tell me it was a complete conquest. Pity I am married!' (Macpherson 1878: 108).

20 Or as Gillett puts it, 'Jameson was a pronounced Germanophile and played a not inconsiderable role in Anglo-German cultural relations' (2018: 120). See also Dabby (2017: 115–16).

21 On this complex authorship, see Stott (2009–22), Larson (1987), and Tieck (1830: iii–iv).

this idea intuitively and then recreate the whole work in the new shape of the translation. The latter must be utterly faithful to the original—the Schlegels repudiate the then-standard practice of freely amending one's source text. But the translation must be faithful to the spirit, not the letter, of the original—to its unifying idea, not its mere external details. If it recreates the unifying spirit of the source-work, then the translation will be a unity and a complete whole in its own right, and so have aesthetic worth (see [Adey 1989: 90](#)).<sup>22</sup>

Jameson knew of and fully subscribed to this view of translation. She discussed the 'Schlegel-Tieck' translation with Tieck,<sup>23</sup> and confessed with embarrassment to 'some of the great German critics' that Shakespeare's plays were routinely performed in England with 'omissions' and 'with absolute alterations, affecting ... the truth of character' ([Jameson 1834: I: 77–78](#)). She put Romantic translation theory into practice herself when she translated several plays by Princess Amalie of Saxony, stating: 'My translation is ... *faithful* even to literalness, except where such extreme fidelity, ... would be false to the *meaning and spirit* of the original. I have [ensured] that my picture might be *complete* in all its details' (1840: lxxviii; my emphases). Because of these views, in *Characteristics* Jameson takes special issue with the then-widespread practice of excising the sexually explicit bits of Shakespeare, complaining that editors and performers are obsessed with verbal propriety instead of reality (CW I:xxxvii). When it comes to reality, Shakespeare 'never confounds that line of demarcation which eternally separates good from evil' (II:317). Shakespeare himself, unlike the editors who wreak havoc with his texts, is 'true to the spirit and even to the letter of history; where he deviates from the latter, the reason may be found in some higher beauty' (I:lix).

More broadly, the German Romantic aesthetic of organic wholes influenced Jameson to locate aesthetic value in completeness, unity, and wholeness. For instance, advising Elizabeth Gaskell on the writing of *North and South* in 1855, Jameson wrote: 'the end is not in proportion with the beginning. This is a fault of construction—but what is done is *so beautiful and complete* that it is only in considering the work *as a whole* that we feel that too great compression' (quoted in [Johnston 1997: 4](#); my emphases). And in *Characteristics*, she repeatedly says that Shakespeare's portrayals of female characters are aesthetically good—'exquisite', 'admirably drawn, highly finished', 'developed with consummate skill', 'the supreme and consummate triumph of art' (I:5, 135, 186)—because they render the characters as complete wholes—e.g., they give 'a complete personification of ... female perfection', 'the complete development of the character' (I:5, 77).

This does not mean that for Jameson aesthetic value comes from wholeness alone and has nothing to do with morality. For Jameson, we have seen, what it is for the characters to be complete wholes is for them to be psychological unities, rounded individuals all of whose acts and utterances flow out of their entire personalities. But this psychological unity is what also makes them characters in a moral sense, with varying compounds of virtue and vice. That is, the characters can only be aesthetically complete wholes if they are psychologically rounded individuals, who therefore necessarily also have a moral character and exemplify moral lessons. Indeed the concept of 'character' distills this unity of the aesthetic and the moral, hence its centrality to Jameson's analysis. Her view, though, is not quite that the characters can only be aesthetically good if they are also morally good, for some characters like Lady Macbeth are superb aesthetic creations yet are on balance morally bad. Jameson's view is rather that an artistic delineation of a character can only be aesthetically good—presenting the character in their complete wholeness and reality—if that delineation is also morally good—in so presenting the character, as a complete whole, that they furnish a moral example.

But how exactly does the moral badness of some Shakespearian heroines fit into this view? First, we remember, for Jameson even Shakespeare's bad characters contain much good, it being one of his signal merits to bring this out. Second, another of his merits is to portray the bad elements of these characters *as bad*. He neither passes off vice as virtue nor simply depicts it flat, devoid of

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<sup>22</sup> On the valorisation of organic wholes in German Romantic aesthetics and philosophy, see *inter alia* Beiser (2006).

<sup>23</sup> Clearly Tieck failed to enlighten her that he and Schlegel were not the sole translators, as she remarked that 'the combination of their two minds has done perhaps what no single mind could have effected in developing, elucidating, and clothing in a new language the creations of that mighty and inspired being' ([Jameson 1834: I:208](#)).

moral qualification. Here she contrasts Shakespeare with Artemisia Gentileschi, who has ‘painted one or two pictures, considered admirable as works of art, of which the subjects are the most vicious and barbarous conceivable ... which I looked at once, but once, and wished then, as I do now, for the privilege of burning it to ashes’ (I:2). In contrast Shakespeare’s depictions remain morally good even when the characters depicted are bad, because Shakespeare presents their vices *as vices*, their virtues *as virtues*, and avoids portraying any of these individuals as being wholly without such redeeming virtues.

Jameson concedes that Shakespeare’s depictions might still seem questionable precisely because he enlists our sympathy for bad characters. She replies:

If it should be objected to this view of Lady Macbeth’s character, that it engages our sympathies in behalf of a perverted being—and that to leave her so strong a power upon our feelings in the midst of such supreme wickedness, involves a moral wrong, I can only reply in the words of Dr. Channing, that ‘in this and the like cases, our interest fastens on what is *not* evil in the character ...’ ... and might he not have added that many a powerful and gifted spirit has learnt humility and self-government, from beholding how far the energy which resides in mind may be degraded and perverted? (II:318–19)<sup>24</sup>

Likewise, Jameson maintains, Shakespeare’s Cleopatra fascinates and attracts us not for her bad qualities (temper, caprice, deceitfulness, inconstancy) but her good ones (grandeur, wit, vivacity, magnificence) (II:123–24). She combines ‘all that we most hate, with what we most admire’ (II:121), and the latter is what we find alluring.

Jameson has taken German Romantic aesthetics in a distinctive direction by making moral exemplarity a necessary concomitant of organic wholeness. As well as introducing this moral dimension, Jameson also appears to deviate from the Schlegels in that for her it is *characters* and their delineations that are organic wholes, whereas the Schlegels’ initial idea was that *artworks* such as Shakespeare’s plays are organic wholes. For instance, for the Schlegels *Romeo and Juliet*, the play, is an organic whole (e.g., C. Schlegel 1797b); whereas Jameson emphasises that Juliet, the character, is an organic whole (CW I:104). However, Jameson does consider the play to be a whole as well (I:90)—but she derives its unity from that of its central character. We recall that for Jameson, the unifying idea of *Romeo and Juliet* is love (I:90); but Juliet embodies the passion of love in its complete unfolding (I:104); thus, what unifies the play is in fact the unity of the character Juliet. Jameson takes the same approach with, for example, Imogen in *Cymbeline*: ‘she is the proper subject—the heroine of the poem’ (II:60), the entirety of its action serving to draw out and illuminate Imogen’s character.

For Jameson, then, dramatic works primarily unfold characters, not actions. Her views here are bound up with her expansion of the female characters into the principal characters. But although her examples and focus are female characters, her general view that artworks delineate characters is equally applicable to male characters. And because in Jameson’s view the plays in their entirety are delineations of character, her points about aesthetic wholeness depending on moral goodness apply to the plays as works, and by extension to artworks of other kinds, at least so long as they depict characters.

In sum, Jameson unites the German Romantic aesthetic of organic wholeness with the idea that delineations of characters, and artworks as delineations of characters, can only be aesthetically good (presenting the characters as wholes) if they are also morally good (presenting the characters as moral examples). This is how Jameson tightly links aesthetics and ethics: the characters only work as moral examples if they are aesthetic wholes, and they can only be delineated as aesthetic wholes if they are presented as morally exemplary. We can see how these views inform Jameson’s later remarks on taste and conscience which I quoted in Sec. I. To have a tasteful appreciation for artworks as organic wholes is necessarily to be conscientiously sensitive to the morally exemplary characters that these works depict, and *vice versa*.

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<sup>24</sup> The final sentence was added in 1833. Jameson quotes William Ellery Channing, an American Unitarian theologian.



## V. CONCLUSION: RECOVERING JAMESON'S IDEAS

Let me summarise how Jameson conceives the connection between aesthetics and ethics in *Characteristics*. Artworks that are aesthetically good are complete wholes, and this is because they delineate characters as complete wholes, rounded individuals who are psychologically real. If artworks succeed in presenting characters in this way then they necessarily also present these characters as moral examples, whether wholly positive ones, warning cases, or something in-between. For these reasons artworks can only be good aesthetically if they are also morally good.

This has consequences for the reader or audience. We cannot appreciate artworks as aesthetic wholes unless we simultaneously approach them with a view to their moral lessons, otherwise we are just not grasping what it is for the characters at the centre of artworks to be wholes. Taste therefore requires conscience. Reciprocally, learning moral lessons from art requires taste: we can only appreciate the moral examples that Shakespeare's characters offer if we apprehend the characters and in turn the plays as the aesthetic wholes that they are. So attending to the moral lessons conveyed by artworks does not obstruct us from relating to artworks as aesthetic objects but is necessary to those relations.

I remarked that the aestheticists and the modernists repudiated the aesthetic moralist views of the Victorian era, Jameson's included. But in *Characteristics*, Jameson's connection of aesthetics and ethics was more sophisticated and subtle than these critics allowed. Although Jameson went on to speak of the 'error' and 'evil' of the assumption that 'the individual fancy has a right of judgement unfettered by any moral responsibility' (1849a: 70), she did not effect a heavy-handed or rigid imposition of moral constraints on the aesthetic domain. Rather, in *Characteristics* she did moral philosophy and psychology indirectly through aesthetic examples, making a case that aesthetic wholeness and moral exemplarity necessarily go together.

By taking German Romantic aesthetics in a unique direction, and engaging with other theories such as Baillie's account of tragedy, Jameson linked aesthetics and ethics in a unique way. *Characteristics* was also infused with a subtle feminism, as Jameson celebrated women's virtues, foregrounded female characters, and argued for the reform of women's education. As I hope I have shown, then, there is much in Jameson's work to interest feminist philosophers, historians of women in philosophy, and historians of aesthetic thought. Her work deserves to be recovered and engaged with.

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