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The Ideal Woman as She Is Represented by the Best English Writers from Chaucer’s Time to the Present

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Butler University Early Theses Collection

Summary

Volume of Collection
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Collection Dates
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Scope and Content Note

The collection contains early theses manuscripts from Butler University dating from 1887 until 1911 on subjects including Literature, Religion, Science, Greek and Latin. Until 1897 Butler required all students, including undergraduates, to write a theses statement in order to receive a degree. One year after Butler University joined the University of Indianapolis and became Butler College the theses requirement for undergraduate students was dropped. Postgraduate theses are available in this collection ending in 1911. While the majority of these manuscripts are handwritten, as early as 1908 graduate students were required to type theses statements. The documents are arranged alphabetically by author.
The Ideal Woman as She is Represented by the best English Writers from Chaucer's Time to the Present

It has been said that every man holds hidden somewhere in the recesses of his heart the image of his ideal woman. Whether this secret picture be clearly or but dimly outlined in his mind, it stands for him as a real woman whom he has found or else hopes someday to find. Perhaps it may be added that every woman also has an ideal of manhood, even though she may not strive to attain it. This ideal is a creature of growth, it is a part of the soul itself, and although it may change more or less with the course of years and education some characteristic traits of the early impression will always linger.

Usually the mother is the first ideal for the child and this mother influence seldom, if ever, becomes wholly indistinct in the fully matured ideal. Thus come the ideals arising from Bible stories, the mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalene, Rebecca, and Ruth, who are followed and oftentimes intermingled in the childish mind with pictures of the beautiful queen and enchanted princesses of the fairy stories. After the child is able to read, he soon discovers that a wonderful world has opened to him and he realizes in time that his ideal is changing.
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After the child is able to read he soon discovers
that a wonderful world has opened to him and he
realizes in time that his ideal is changing, that
she is growing freer and more human, that she is
taking on the form of a real woman and gradually
drawing nearer and nearer. The door which opens
from the dream world into the real world.

The old ideal, for which we are probably more
indebted to English writers than to any others, was
"fragile in form", with "tiny hands and fairy feet."
Her voice was like music, and she was utterly unable
to speak a harsh word. She soothed her husband's
troubled brow, comforted him with her sympathy, cheer-
ed him by her smile, divided his cares and sorrows
and always endured with perfect meekness and sweet-neress any amount of exclusion from his pleasures;
receiving gladly every crumb of his company.

These characteristics have furnished the staple material
for writers both in prose and poetry when they wished
to portray the ideal woman, and it has only been within
recent years that the world has cared to ask for any
thing else. But, notwithstanding the shining
example of history, there are many people who seem to
think that the better the woman, the more she is
destined to distinctive character, yet this cannot
be true. Real virtue forms the greatest character,
and the day will come when men shall know
that goodness only, can be great."
is not found in the greatest poets. Homer's women are all strongly individual; likewise the women of the great Greek dramatists. It is true that the satirists of olden times likened them to all kinds of beasts and placed them on the same level. But the poets have always exalted them above the angels and even to-day one writer says that they are held as the sole proprietors of all the virtues. And Roman writers of note have immortalized women to such an extent that we still speak of certain characters created by them as models of beauty, grace, and intelligence. He has this charming picture of the Roman woman: "The Roman nation reared mistresses in her own household. As the husband took charge of external transactions, so the wife was supreme in household arrangements. The marriage was a community in all affairs and within the home the utmost diligence, reverence, and harmony prevailed." And it is a source of much pleasure to all lovers of the good and beautiful to those who instinctively feel the charm of truth and nobility in literature, that the first great English poet was a man whose admiration for virtue and beauty, for strength and gentleness have been considered as remarkable for the time in which he lived. If Chaucer had this nature, if he sympathized with the chivalric ideals of his day
he must have had a high ideal of womanhood. We need but examine his works to find this verified, and although we see faults in some of his best women characters—faults that seem too inexcusable—nevertheless we can understand that they must have stood in his age as idealized types and perhaps existed only in the poet's mind. His Princess is a flesh and blood woman who is as gentle as she is in her own way strong. Griselda, the heroine of the " Clerk's Tale," is a character whose unselfish submission to her harsh and unappreciative husband seems carried to an excess. Her trials are severe, but she is very much and patient. She represents an ideal strikingly medieval and Chaucer acknowledges that he does not expect the women of his day to imitate her humility. His excuse for telling us the story is to show that "Every wight in this degree shold be constant in adversity, as was Griselda." The central figure of the " Lawyer's Tale" is also a woman of great patience and humility but here is a submission to sorrow and trouble. Constance bows uncomplainingly to the will of a God in whom she puts her constant trust. Time after time she is rescued from danger by Divine power and it is this Divine care of innocence in adversity that is the keynote of the story.
Nothing can be more noble than her words to the setting country people who love her and who are gathered around her as she stands upon the sea-shore about to be cast adrift with her little child. Even then her faith stands firm:

"Firm that kept me from false blame
While I was on the land amongst you,
To keep me safe from harm and sick thoughts,
In salti see, although I see nought how
As strong as ever he was he is yet now."

There is in Chaucer's poetry so much of his own personality that as we read we feel that he must have loved the men and women whom he admires and that even though he portrayed some unlovely characters he saw their defects as well as we see them. Of such figures as the Wife of Bath flaunt themselves through his pages with noisy laughter and flaring garments, in these same pages is also found the flower of a pure and noble womanhood.

"The first great manifestation of English intellectual power terminated with the death of Chaucer." A period of decadence followed during which there were no examples of literary genius. It was not until the year 1579, when the "Shepherd's Calendar" of Edmund Spenser was published, that a worthy successor to Chaucer appeared. Spenser's purpose was to write
more in the spirit of Chaucer and Petrarch than to imitate the spiritless versifiers of the preceding century. He stands alone, as the one great undramatic poet of a play-writing period. He combined the artist's eye for color and the musician's ear for harmony, his utterance was rich and fluent, but he lacked the sense of humor and the insight into actual life so necessary to the dramatist. He was highly imaginative and romantic; he lived in a dream world; virtue, innocence, and beauty were to him the noblest attributes of character. Thus we find the men and women of his poetry highly idealized. Especially did he admire noble womanhood, and what ever was wanting in the real women about him, he supplied from his fertile imagination.

He gives us glimpses of virtuous and beautiful women all through his works, indeed the lovely pure-minded and courageous maiden is a marked feature of his poetry. We do not, however, find the consummation of his ideal until we read his Amoretto, or love Sonnets, which, to the number of eighty-eight, were addressed to the charming Irish girl whom he married. She seemed to him so far above the ordinary creatures of earth that he wonders how mortal man dare aspire to her love.
"For being as she is, divinely wrought,
And of the blood of Angels heavenly born;
And with the crew of blessed canyts upbrought;
Each of which did her with theyr quites adorn;
The bed of joy, the blossom of the morn,
The bame of light, whom mortal eyes admire;
What reason is it then but she should scorn
Base things that to her love too bold aspire?"

But it is in the seventy-ninth sonnet that we admire and respect him most and find ourselves joining with him in love for the "fair Elizabeth". Of all the Amorists, it expresses the loftiest sentiment and gives the best insight into his own nature as well as into that of the lady herself.

"Now call you faire, and you do credit it,
For that your selfe ye daily such do see:
But the true faire, that is the gentle wit,
And virtuous mind, it much more prized is:
For all the rest, however faire it be,
Shall turn to nought and lose that glorious hue:
But only that is permanent and free
From fragile corruption, that doth flesh insult;
That is the true beautie: that doth argue you
to be divine and born of heavenly seed;
Deriv'd from that faire Spirit from which all true
And perfect beautie did at first proceed;"
"So only fayre, and what he fayre hath made;
All other fayre, lyke flowers, untimely fade."

Contemporary with Spenser we find the greatest dramatic poet of the century and indeed of any century. Shakespeare in his many plays has represented more numerous and more varied types of women than any other writer. While he has much to say in praise of gentleness, tenderness, modesty and similar virtues, yet there are in his plays no character like a scrap of straw and mud in masquerading under the titles of women. His particularly feminine creations have their distinguishing characteristics, and no one of them can be said to be in any way a copy of another. True, there are faults and crimes which stain some of his strongest women; but while we grant the wickedness of Lady Macbeth, the spitefulness of Constance, the voluptuous love of Cleopatra, we yet have strength and humility, character and beauty, in Portia in Beatrice, in Katherine of Aragon, in Isabella, in Hermione, and even in Kate the Curnet. Portia of Belmont had a true feminine nature, her chief charm was her womanliness. Even when she assumed the dress and calling of a man, she was a gentle womanly man and all her actions and words in the trial appealed to the gentler, more emotional side
of man's nature. She could be cool, deliberate and firm—even stern—when the occasion required; but she never urged a wrong deed, she used her power only for right and good—never for evil or injustice.

"Portia makes an epoch in the poet's creation of female character." In her for the first he shows his power of uniting the elements necessary in the formation of noble and cultivated women. She charms not by the strength of one or two superior qualities but by the harmony of many attributes rarely found combined. She is refined and strong in intellect, cultured in taste, tender and ardent of heart, pure and modest, but she was earnest and fearless; she had the courage to face the court of Venice clothed in male attire to save her husband's friend. We find in her sympathy and compassion along with justice and cool, deliberate reason. She feels with Isabella and with Queen Katherine that human weakness requires some other law than rigid justice. Even in Beatrice, brilliant and delightful as she is with her mirth, her warm heart, her courage, we miss the grace and dignity of Portia who can be mirthful without the least effrontery or undue cleverness, and who can utter her noble plea for mercy with an earnestness and calmness which we feel beyond the power of Beatrice.

Again in Katherine of Aragon, although we do
Sometimes his readers are inclined to feel that his standard
was too exact, too severe. But when we reflect upon the
class of women who flourished at court, the women who
led the fashions and who moved in the places where all
eyes turn to seek examples in manners and in
morals, we cannot be surprised that he felt the need
of sterner rules and purer aspirations for the sex.

In "Paradise Lost" he makes Adam say of Eve:
"Such as I saw her in my dream, adorned
With what all Earth or Heaven could bestow
to make her amiable."

Again in "Comus," the play that he wrote to prove
that virtue and innocence need have no fear since
they are protected by Divine power, he has the youthful,
pure-minded maiden who passes unharmed through
great dangers. Her brother says:

"I do not think my sister so unprincipled in virtu".
And the sweet peace that godliness becometh ever,
As that the single want of light and noise
Could stir the constant mood of her calm thoughts,
And put them into mischief-coming flight,
Virtue could see to do what Virtue would
By her own radiant light though sun and moon
Were in the flat sea sunk."

"It is chastity, my brother; chastity:
She that has that is clad in completeness."
After the excesses of the Restoration a reaction was inevitable. It was characteristic of the century to fluctuate from one extreme to another. Milton saw and lamented the vice and folly of a profligate court society, but his censure and his standard were too stern, too rigid for the people; they needed to have their defects brought before them in another manner. This need was supplied by Joseph Addison, who did not attack the fault with angry indignation or bitter scorn, but with abundant good humor and admirable tact. He regretted the emptiness and frivolity of the fashionable women; and set himself the task to bring new ideas and purpose into their lives. Speaking of his paper, *The Spectator*, he says, "There are none to whom this paper will be more useful than to the female world." Then in another place he adds, "I know there are multitudes of women of a more elevated life and conception, that move in an exalted sphere of knowledge and virtue, that join all the beauties of mind to the ornaments of dress, and inspire a kind of awe and respect, as well as love into their male beholders." This direct appeal to his women readers is memorable in the history of literature. While Addison has given us no picture of his ideal woman, we can with little difficulty form a very good one of her by reading such of his papers...
us, "The Fine Lady's Journal," The Exercise of the Fim, and the Direction of a Coquette's Heart. His descriptions of what he thought woman should not be, give me a clear idea of that which he evidently thought she should be. He would have admired a woman whose beauty of character was equal to, or greater than, her beauty of face, a woman who cared less for the improvement of her complexion than for the improvement of her intellect. His ideal would be gentle but strong, patient but firm, cultured and dignified, with a sympathetic, amiable disposition.

After leaving Addison we find no more eminent authors who give a worthy representation of woman until we reach the latter part of the eighteenth century. During the greater part of this century great and rapid changes were affecting in numerous ways public and private life in England. As we near the middle of the century the political corruption, the coldly intellectual temper, the studied repression and the brilliant cynicism melt before the forces of a rising spirituality, and new generations, activated by diametrically opposite ideals of life, crowds forward to displace the old. This fresh national life asserts itself in new forms of literature, and with the rise of modern England we reach the beginning of a literary period surpassed only by that of the Elizabethans."
The spirit of change which pervaded the literary atmosphere manifested itself in various ways. In England it was expressed by a decided reaction against all that was shallow and artificial in the life and literature of an earlier period. William Wordsworth was one of the great leaders in this era of change who wished to destroy the old "poetic fiction" and to set up instead a truer and simpler style. The love of Nature and of man was the inspiration of his poetry. His love of Nature is almost a religious emotion. So intense is it that he loses sight of the external man and feels only the spirit. He should be apt to think that the woman held by such a disposition as its ideal would be an extremely etherealized and spiritual creature, a being more spirit than human, more angel than woman. But from the few poems in which he has allowed us to see this ideal, an ideal embodied in the person of his wife, we find her a real flesh and blood woman, very gentle and good, nevertheless thoroughly human. It may perhaps be said of Wordsworth that he has given us one of the truest pictures of a really ideal woman that we may find anywhere in literature unless we except one or two of Shakespeare's heroines.
"A creature not too bright or good
For human nature daily food,
For transient comic, simple viles,
Praise, blame, love, kissee, tears and smiles."

"A perfect woman nobly planned
To warn, to comfort, and command;
And yet a Spirit still and bright,
With something of angelic light."

Thus far, the writers who have been most noteworthy and who have given us the best idealizations of character have been poets; but now as we enter upon the nineteenth century we find another class of writers coming to the front, the writers of novels. The novel has developed to a perfection such that it holds the position of being the distinctive literary form of the modern world. Since the publication of Richardson's 'Pamela,' in 1740, the scope of the novel had broadened immeasurably and it has become to a surprising degree an important factor in intellectual and social life. William Godwin (1756-1836) found in the novel his means of expressing opinions. Dr. Caleb Williams' was the first of novels with a purpose. Maria Edgeworth (1767-1849) created charming pictures of Irish life and gave that country a place in literature.
Shortly before Scott produced his first historical works, Jane Austen began writing her stories of the everyday home life of the rural gentry of England. Gradually people were realizing that there was much of value and interest in the lives of those about them, that there was beauty and grace in those things which the old censors of art scorned. Someone has said of this period that, it was one of the special features in the literary reformation which was going on at this period, that the favorite of poetic taste now, and only now, began to be found in the huts where poor men live.” The Ideal and the Real were slowly but surely uniting.

It is to the works of Walter Scott that we turn to find the truest and highest expression of this new found instinct in literature. He had an intense admiration for the period of chivalry and he desired to revive its glories in his poetry and romance. He had a still more intense love and admiration for his country. Combined with these two characteristics he had a keen eye for the beautiful in Nature and a warm heart whose sympathy went out to all mankind. As a writer of chivalric stories Scott would necessarily have to be an admirer of the good and beautiful in women. In the days of chivalry woman held a sacred place. She was the inspiration of the weary knight in distant lands. In “The Talisman,” Sir Kenneth says,
"The beauty of our fair ones gives point to our spears and edge to our swords; their words are our law." It was the music of Ellen's voice that soothed the fiery Robenick; it was the beautiful Rebecca who caused Robin Hood to break his vow of knighthood; and it was Edith's radiance of thought and action which kept King Richard from injuring the mild men in the welcome to the soldier's camp.

One of Scott's greatest charms is his skill in portraying character. He finds in his men and women that noble and high-minded grace that seems an echo from his own heart. People say that he idealizes his characters too much; that his heroines are more beautiful and noble, his heroes braver and more daring than the men and women met with in real life. But have they not lived and died, and will there not live forever, characters as noble as the gentle Ellen, the fearless Rebecca, the bold Douglas, and the upright, manly Sir Kenneth? In Rebecca, Amy Robsart, and Jeanie Deane, we have three distinct types of women. Rebecca, the Jewess, strong, fearless, beautiful, noble-minded, represents an ideal purity seldom attained by mortals. Amy Robsart, the noble man's daughter, lovely, gentle, weak and submissive to a fault in her love for the man who was too proud and yet too cowardly to own her as his wife, typifies an ideal often found in
chivalric times. Jeanie Deans, the peasant girl, whose
modesty, simplicity, and courage lift her above her position,
makes a departure in idealization, a breaking away from
the old customs. She stands out as a heroine of truth
storing and forgetfulness. The choice she was called
upon to make was a mighty test of character, but she
did not falter. Rather than tell a lie and save her
sister's life, she told the truth thereby condemning her
sister to be hanged. We all know the story of her
lonely journey on foot from Edinburgh to London to
appeal to the king for commutation of the sentence.
No finer piece of eloquence exists than this simple
peasant maid's speech to Queen Caroline and which
concludes thus: "Is it not when we sleep softly and make
merily ourselves that we think of other people's
sufferings. Our hearts are waxed light within us
then, and we are for sitting and smoking and
fighting our air bottle. But when the hour of
trouble comes to the mind, or to the body—and
rarely may it visit your ladyship—and when the
hour of death comes, that comes to high and low—
long and late may it be yours! Oh my lady! Then it is na what we have done for ourselve,
but what we have done for others, that we think
on maist pleasantly."
William Thackeray was the next great novelist after Scott and we find him very different from the writer of the Waverley novels. We know Thackeray best as a keen but kindly satirist of the world of frivolity and fashion. His seriousness is deeper and more vital than his cynicism; though the smile of the man of the world be on his lips, few hearts are more gentle, more compassionate, more tender; though he is quick to scorn, few eyes have looked out upon this unintelligible world through more kindly or more honest tears. Satirist he may have been, but he had the sincere and whole-hearted reverence of Chaucer, of Shakespeare, and of Milton, for innocence and goodness. Surrounded by the knavery, the pettiness and the shallowness of Vanity Fair, we find the gentle Amelia and the sincere, faithful Dot thin un- tainted by the contact.

Her simplicity and good nature, her affection and trustfulness do not make Amelia an ideal woman. Her fault is weakness, lack of individuality. In comparison with Becky she is, although less interesting, much preferable, but she is insipid and dull like. Luna Pendennis, cheerful, animated, sensible, and sympathetic, a woman of culture and a lovable disposition, is perhaps the best of Thackeray's women. By those, however, who would widely separate the
ideal from the real, Laura is considered as an ordinary creature, too much of the earthy to be an ideal. But, although she is truly feminine, she is neither passively weak like Amelia, nor afraid to live up to her opinions. Mrs. Amelia, and she did not have any of Becky Sharp's wicked cleverness. Ethel Newcome is said to have been Thackeray's favorite woman character. Her beauty, generosity, and refinement cause her to contrast strikingly with the other women of the story and we are not surprised to find her congenial with Laura. Her ideas and opinions regarding many subjects were in advance of the society women of her day, but she did not find encouragement even in her own family. If she had only been true to her love for beauty and had not hesitated to break away from old customs and society rules which she felt were unjust, Ethel would have been a really ideal woman.

In the same city, at the same time that Thackeray was writing, Charles Dickens lived and wrote the stories which have made his name a household word. He wrote of the lower class, of the poor, the paupers who drudged and suffered unheeded by the aristocratic class found in Thackeray's books. But in his novels we do not find much idealization in his novels. It has hi
said of him that, "he is for the most part a
world of caricature, peopled not with real living
persons, but with eccentricities and oddities, skillfully
made to seem like flesh and blood." Although this
may be true to a certain extent, nevertheless we
know that he had a warm, tender heart, a loving,
sympathetic nature; that his eye could see and his
mind could enjoy the beauty and gladness of the
world; and that he could but admire and wree
virtue and nobility in mankind. If Dickens has
given us his ideal woman, as doubtless he has, we
should like to think that she is represented by
Agnes in "David Copperfield" or by Lucie Manette
in "The Tale of Two Cities." Very sweet and romanly
are these two women. In each we find an affectionate
and dutiful daughter, a kind and sympathetic
friend. Especially do we admire Lucie. She is like
and yet very unlike other women. Her gentleness
and innocent grace are united with strength and
courage. How noble are her words in defence of
Sidney Carton: "My husband, it is so, I fear he is
not to be reclaimed; there is scarcely a hope
that anything in his character or fortune is repairable
now. But I am sure that he is capable of good things,
gentle things, even magnanimous things."
George Eliot is the third of this group of novelists belonging to the first part of the nineteenth century, who brought a new spirit into literature. Her purpose and the way in which she has expressed her opinions has been severely criticised. It has also been said of her that she does not give us ideals; that her characters are too real and their reality is faulty. But we feel that she must have had an ideal and some of its traits may be found in many of her women. Although we do not believe that she has given us the picture of an ideal woman, we should say that she probably comes nearer her ideal in Maggie Tulliver than in any other of her characters. Self-sacrifice, submission to fate, and faithful devotion are characteristic of George Eliot's best characters. Her women are also noteworthy for their unhappiness; those who are virtuous have some weakness or some trial which darkens their life, and for the most part her stories end tragically or in sadness even though this sadness is tinged with melancholy sweetness. We come nearer the faults and trials of humanity in George Eliot's works, though pity and compassion for her men and women we are inspired with sympathy for those near us who likewise may be suffering. We cannot say truly
whether her ideal woman was really ideal, but we
must at least grant that she probably seemed such
to the author herself. Moreover we feel that she had
a purpose, be it worthy or not, which she evidently
tried to accomplish conscientiously, sincerely, and
earnestly.

The ideal woman represented by the author
of the nineteenth century is a most complicated
creature. She may belong to any class of society, she
may follow whatever path in life she please, and
she is represented by every imaginable type of woman.
She may be dark or fair, tall or short, poor or rich;
she may be plain, even ugly but if a writer nec-
some trait in her of originality he straightway puts
her in his story and she becomes a heroine. It is
perhaps well that the old ideal of docility, sub-
mission, and dependence magnified to the extreme,
have gone out of fashion. These traits are to apt to
become weakness. On the other hand we do object
against this cosmopolitan creature of the present
with her masculine mannerisms, her impassive
independence, and her feverish desire for change
and novelty. We are glad that as far she exists not
in fiction than in reality, that the majority of
nineteenth century women are still women and
not indefinable beings made up of duty and hate,
Ficile units, dauntless energy, and a determination to vote. But writers are running great risks when they put such creatures into their stories as leading characters for there is a class belonging to the coming generation who reckless and eager in their rush for novelty seize upon these new woman ideas with an avidity which is appalling and who imitate the opinions and mannerisms of these would-be heroines of the modern novel.

We are fully satisfied that the idea of subjection and dependence in woman must give way, and has been doing so for some time to a new ideal, an ideal adorned with the grace of strength and freedom, a woman who shall regulate and control her own life and conduct, and who shall be in a truer sense than ever before a companion and helpmeet to man and to her fellow-women.

It is comforting to think that this monstrosity of womankind in vogue to-day among some writers and their admirers has not come to stay; the very fact that she is a novelty indicates that even now her decline may have commenced and her glory is vanishing. She is only a feature of the transition from the old to the new ideal, and because she is daily growing more and more absurd and unlovely we may be assured that her day is drawing to a close.
The twentieth century is dawning. Human nature
is prone to go to extremes. Let us hope that from the
present extremes the writers of the coming ages may
strive after an ideal, not extremely opposed to reality
but uniting the ideal and the Real in proper pro-
tortion, not creating a perfect woman, for that
would be impossible, but a womanly woman.
This ideal of the future should have all her
faculties cultivated and be able to use every
power with which she is endowed. "She must
have endurance, foresight, strength and skill," qualities
which in the nature of things do not
stand toward carelessness or self assertion.
"There is no distance in a true life between the
real and the ideal, the practical and the
poetical are one."

Emma B. Strongly
June 1897.