

JULIA,

A

NOVEL;

interspersed with some

POETICAL PIECES.

Copyright
by

HELEN MARIA WILLIAMS.

in two volumes.

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ADVERTISEMENT

The purpose of these pages is to trace the danger arising from the uncontrolled indulgence of strong affections; not in those instances where they lead to the guilty excesses of passion in a corrupted mind – but, when disapproved by reason, and uncircumscribed by prudence, they involve even the virtuous in calamity; since, under the dominion of passion, if the horror of remorse may be avoided, misery at least is inevitable; and, though we do not become the slaves of vice, we must yield ourselves the victims of sorrow.

The materials of the following sketch are taken from nature. The perfection, however, of a picture does not depend on the colours, but on the hand by which they are blended; and, perhaps, the pen which records this narrative may, in vain, have attempted to rescue it from oblivion.

I have been encouraged, by the indulgence which my former poems have met with,¹ to intersperse some poetical pieces in these volumes; but the uncertainty of being able to engage the continuance of favour, leads me to offer these farther productions in verse, with as little confidence as this first attempt in prose.

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VOL. I.

CHAP. I.

An officer, to whom we shall give the name of Clifford, derived from his ancestors a very honourable descent, being able to trace their possession of an estate in the northern part of England thro' several centuries. That estate, however, was dissipated by the imprudence and extravagance of his parents; and Captain Clifford, who had received a very liberal education, and was brought up with the expectation of an ample inheritance, found his only remaining possession was his commission in the army. He married a beautiful young woman, the daughter of a neighbouring family, to whom he had been long attached, and who died a few years after their marriage, leaving him one daughter. To this child he transferred the tenderness he had felt for her mother, and undertook himself the charge of her education. Dispirited by his domestic misfortune, wounded by the disappointment of his early views in life, and the mortification of seeing many raised above him in the army, because he was unable to purchase promotion, he retired in disgust, and lived upon a captain's half-pay,² in a small village in the neighbourhood of London, where his father, who was far advanced in years, made a part of his family.

In this retreat Captain Clifford found consolation and employment, in devoting his time to the improvement of his daughter; and his own mind being highly cultivated, she derived greater advantages from his instructions than she could have received from the most expensive education, under a less anxious as well as a less able preceptor.

Nature had liberally bestowed upon Julia Clifford the powers of the understanding, and the virtues of the heart: her sensibility was quick,³ her disposition affectionate, and her taste was improved by the society of her father, till it attained an uncommon degree of elegance and refinement; but of her superiority to others she seemed intirely unconscious. Her manners were perfectly modest and unassuming; her conversation simple and unstudied; she spoke from the impulse of her heart, and she possessed the most amiable candor and frankness of disposition. Julia was above the middle size: her figure had not been much molded by the dancing-master; but nature had given it a gracefulness 'beyond the reach of art.'⁴ She had a madona face, and an expression of intelligence and sensibility in her countenance, infinitely engaging.

Captain Clifford's younger brother, after the paternal estate was disposed of, went in pursuit of fortune to the East Indies⁵ – he was a man of a plain understanding and an excellent heart. Just in his principles, and generous in his disposition, he acquired wealth slowly, but honourably. Mr. Clifford married at Bengal, and his only daughter, Charlotte, was sent when a child to England for education, and committed to the care of her aunt Mrs. Melbourne, the sister of Charlotte's mother. – At eighteen Charlotte was taken from school at Queen Square, to live with her aunt, till the return of her father from the East Indies. Charlotte was one of those sweet lively characters, whose unaffected manners and invariable good-humour strongly engage the affections, and with whom one would wish to pass thro' life. The gay powers of wit and fancy are like those brilliant phenomena which sometimes glow in the sky, and dazzle the eye of the beholder by their luminous and uncommon appearances; while sweetness of temper has a resemblance to that gentle star, whose benign influence gilds alike the morning and the evening.⁶ But the distinguishing and most amiable trait of Charlotte's character, was her perfect exemption from envy. She was sensible of her inferiority to Julia, whom she tenderly loved; and whenever any preference was shewn to herself she seemed conscious of its injustice. Quite content to remain in the back-ground, she embraced with the most natural and lively pleasure every opportunity of displaying the accomplishments of her cousin. – Charlotte was little, her features were not regular, but her countenance had a very agreeable and animated expression. Her chief motive for rejoicing at her removal from school, was the hope of a more frequent intercourse with Julia, for her aunt had small hold on her affections.

Mrs. Melbourne's maiden name was Wilson – her father, who was an eminent merchant in the city, became a bankrupt when she had just attained her twenty-third year. A young man who had been her father's clerk, and was now married and engaged in a flourishing business, invited Miss Wilson, from a principle of gratitude towards her father, to take up her residence at his house, where his wife received her with great kindness. Meanwhile her younger sister, who was then eighteen years of age, was fitted out at the expence of her relations, and sent to the East Indies in pursuit of a husband; or rather in search of the golden fleece,⁷ which is certainly the aim of such adventures, and the husband is merely the means of attaining it. – The God of Love in the East frames his arrows of massy gold; takes the feathers of his quiver not from the soft wing of his mother's dove, but from the gaudy plumage of the peacock; and points all his shafts with the bright edge of a diamond.⁸ – Miss Charlotte Wilson was married soon after her arrival in Bengal to Mr. Clifford, and died some years before his return to England.

At the house where Miss Wilson found an asylum, Mr. Melbourne frequently visited, the mistress of the house being his near relation. – He was a man of parts, and had attained considerable eminence in the law, a profession in which above all others eminence is honourable, since it is invariably connected with distinction of mind.⁹ – Miss Wilson was tolerably handsome, and Mr. Melbourne paid her some attention: she had an admirable degree of sagacity, and perceived that this young man, notwithstanding his superior understanding, was the dupe of vanity. She soon betrayed the most violent passion for him; and this display of fondness, which would probably have excited disgust and aversion in a man of delicacy, had a very different effect on Mr.

Melbourne. He was handsome, and vain of his figure, as well as of his talents – he did not think it unlikely that he should inspire a violent passion – Miss Wilson appeared desperate in her love; and he married her in good nature, and merely to prevent suicide. Mrs. Melbourne continuing with great judgment to flatter his weaknesses, he made her an excellent husband, and at his death left her a considerable jointure, and her daughter an independent fortune of twenty thousand pounds.

Mrs. Melbourne had a large acquaintance, by whom she was respected as a woman of sense, but not beloved; for her manners were stiff and disagreeable. – She gave some alms to the poor, because she thought a little charity was requisite to secure a good place in heaven; but she found no duty more difficult, and wished that any other had been enjoined in its place. ‘One cannot help pitying the unfortunate,’ (she would exclaim) ‘and yet there is not one in a thousand who is not so in consequence of imprudence; one must therefore be sorry for the imprudent, or not sorry at all.’ She penetrated with nice discernment into the characters of her acquaintances; could perceive all their follies, and descant upon them with great acuteness; – no foible escaped her accurate observation; and her friends met with none of that species of partiality which shades the weaknesses of those we love. Whenever her visitors departed, they were sure of being analysed, and of having their defects weighed in a rigorous scale, without the slightest peculiarity being omitted. She had, indeed, too strict a regard for truth to invent any slanders of her acquaintance. All Mrs. Melbourne could be charged with, was interpreting every word and action her own way, which was invariably the worst way possible; and with great perseverance refusing to assign a good motive for any thing, when a bad one could be found. She often remained silent in company, while she was storing her memory with materials for future animadversion; and Mrs. Melbourne’s memory was like a bird of prey, which seizes on such food as milder natures would reject. This lady was unfortunately quick in discovering imperfection, but very liable to overlook what was worthy of regard: she left others to enjoy the flowers which are scattered over the path of life, while she employed herself in counting the weeds which grew among them. She might, indeed, have acknowledged with Iago, ‘that it was her nature’s plague to spy into abuses;’ and might properly enough have added with him, that ‘oft her jealousy shap’d faults that were not.’¹⁰ In her family Mrs. Melbourne was morose and ill-humoured. She scolded her servants with little intermission, which she considered an indispensable part of the province of a good housewife; and her servants, whom habit had reconciled to reproach, listened to her with the most perfect indifference; as those who live near the fall of a cataract, or on the banks of the ocean, hear at length the rushing of the torrent, or the rage of the billows, without being sensible of the sounds. The only seasons memorable for Mrs. Melbourne’s tenderness were, when any of her connections or family were ill. She was then the most courteous creature existing, and began to love them with all her might, as if she thought there was no time to lose, and that she must endeavour to crowd such an extraordinary degree of fondness into the short space which was left, as might counterbalance her neglect or unkindness through the whole course of their lives. The way to make her regard permanent was to die – her affection was violent when her friends came to the last gasp; and after having settled the matter with her own conscience by these parting demonstrations of sorrow, she submitted with pious

resignation to her loss. The ruling passion of Mrs. Melbourne's soul was her love of her daughter; but it was carried to an excess that rendered it illiberal and selfish: her mind resembled a convex glass, and every ray of affection in her bosom was concentrated in one small point. She considered every fine young woman as the rival of Miss Melbourne, and hated them in proportion as they merited regard. She could not forgive Julia for being young, beautiful, accomplished, and amiable, till her own daughter was married. After that period she pardoned these intrusive qualities; and at the request of Charlotte, upon her removal from school, invited Julia to spend a short time at her house in Hanover-square.¹¹

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ENDNOTES

Volume I

1. *the indulgence which my former poems have met with*: By 1790, Helen Maria Williams had already published her *Edwin and Eltruda* (1782); 'Ode on the Peace' (1783); *Peru: A Poem in Six Cantos* (1784); *Poems in Two Volumes* (1786); and 'Ode on the Bill Lately Passed Regulating the Slave Trade' (1788). Mary Wollstonecraft begins her 1790 review of *Julia* in the *Analytical Review* by stating, 'Miss W. is already known to the literary world as a poet,' *Analytical Review*, 7 (May 1790), p. 97. Williams's early success as a poet is also attested to by an anonymous review of *Julia* in the *English Review*'s 'Monthly Catalogue for April 1790', which begins, 'The author of these volumes has already recommended herself to a considerable share of the public favour by specimens of her poetry,' *English Review*, 15 (April 1790), p. 304. For early reviews of Williams's poetry see *Monthly Review*, 71 (1784), p. 12–20; *Gentleman's Magazine*, 2 (1784), p. 613; *European Magazine* (1786), pp. 89–93, 175–80.
2. *lived upon a captain's half-pay*: Any non-commissioned officer – either permanently, i.e. retired, or temporarily, awaiting a new commission – would be put on half-pay, which was actually slightly more than half of what they earned when commissioned. As a captain in the army, Julia's father is a low-ranking officer who does not have the funds necessary to move up through the ranks. It appears that he has taken a form of early retirement. The creation of a character who feels frustrated by the army's failure to function as a meritocracy suggests Williams's early democratic and revolutionary leanings. The British army is decidedly not a place of liberty, fraternity or equality for Captain Clifford. Helen Maria Williams's own father was a Welsh army officer who died when she was eight years old.
3. *her sensibility was quick*: In Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary* (1786 edition), 'sensibility' is defined as '1. Quickness of sensation; 2. Quickness of perception'. Next, 'sensible' is defined as '1. Having power of perceiving by the senses ... 5. Having moral perception; having the quality of being affected by moral good or ill; 6. Having quick intellectual feeling; being easily or strongly affected'. Williams's poem 'To Sensibility' (1786) conveys a more emotional inflection, opening, 'To Sensibility's lov'd praise / I tune my trembling reed; / And seek to deck her shrine with bays / On which my heart must bleed', ll. 1–4.
4. *'beyond the reach of art'*: A. Pope, *Essay on Criticism* (London: W. Lewis, 1711), i.155.
5. *went in pursuit of fortune to the East Indies*: Julia's uncle has profited from the rapidly growing expansion of trade with the East Indies; the English East India Company was chartered in 1600 and by 1720 had exceeded the Dutch East India Company in size and profit.

6. *benign influence gilds alike the morning and the evening*: A similar contrast between imagery of a suddenly dazzling light and a softly enduring glow appears in ‘Ode on the Bill Lately Passed for Regulating the Slave Trade’, within which Williams advocates for the complete abolition of slavery by writing: ‘Valour is like the meteor’s light, / Whose partial flash leaves deeper night; / While Mercy, like the lunar ray, / Gilds the thick shade with softer day’ (ll. 51–4).
7. *in search of the golden fleece*: In Greek mythology Jason and the Argonauts set out in quest of the golden fleece of the winged ram Chrysomallos.
8. *The God of Love in the East frames his arrows of massy gold ... bright edge of a diamond*: Williams depicts European matches made in the East Indies as more materially motivated than romantic matches in England. She does so by contrasting imagery of Eastern gold, gaudy plumage, and diamonds, with the soft feathers of the doves that surround Venus and provide her son Cupid with arrows in Greek mythology.
9. *man of parts*: an accomplished gentleman; Samuel Johnson defines ‘part’ as ‘7. Particular office or character ... 10. Action; conduct ... 13. [pl.] Qualities; powers; faculties; or accomplishments’.
10. *her nature’s plague ... faults that were not*: This description hyperbolically associates the satirical figure of Mrs Melbourne with one of William Shakespeare’s villains, Iago. In Shakespeare’s tragedy *Othello*, Iago states, ‘I perchance am vicious in my guess, – / As, I confess, it is my nature’s plague / to spy into abuses, and oft my jealousy / Shapes faults that are not’, III.iii.145–8. In Williams’s novel, Mrs Melbourne, with her similarly scheming and jealous nature, stands in contrast to Charlotte, who the narrator depicts as completely free from envy.
11. *Hanover-square*: a district of London developed in the early eighteenth century and occupied primarily by Tory aristocrats. The fact that the heavily satirized and unsympathetic character Mrs Melbourne chooses to live a life of luxury in this Tory stronghold further suggests Williams’s democratic, republican sympathies.
12. *Shades of Banquo’s line*: In Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* the witches reveal a line of eight king’s descending from Banquo in IV.i.130–46.
13. *Ariel’s flight*: an image of freedom. See Ariel’s release from bondage in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, V.i. 320–2.
14. *hags of night ... frighted bosom spare*: see *Macbeth* IV.i. In her *Essay on the Writings and Genius of Shakespeare* (1769), bluestocking Elizabeth Montagu defends Shakespeare against Voltaire’s charge of barbarism, writing, ‘The incantations of the witches in *Macbeth* are more solemn and terrible than those of the Erichtho of Lucan’ (p. 142). Montagu argues that ‘Gothic manners, and Gothic superstitions, are more adapted to the uses of poetry than the Grecian’ (p. 143), and then calls Shakespeare ‘our Gothic bard’ (p. 147). She admires his ability to inspire ‘that unlimited terror which we feel when Macbeth to his bold address “How now! Ye secret, foul, and midnight hags, / What is’t ye do?” is answered, “a deed without a name”’ (p. 152–3). The exact phrase ‘deed without a name’ appears in Shakespeare, IV.i.54. For Montagu, it is the terror evoked by this phrase that proves Shakespeare ‘to have had a fertile, a sublime, and original genius’ (p. 169). Helen Maria Williams was mentored by Montagu through her contact with the Bluestockings.
15. *Let true Cordelia ... sigh*: See Shakespeare, *King Lear*, I. i.89–107.
16. *Desdemona ... eye*: See Shakespeare, *Othello*, IV.2.25–98.
17. *Opebelia ... despair*: See Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, IV.V.21–67 and 169–202; and also IV.Vii.167–84.