

**THE ESSAYS OF SAINTE-
BEUVE, VOL. III:
PORTRAITS OF WOMEN**

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The essays of Sainte-Beuve, Vol. III: Portraits of women by William Sharp

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WILLIAM SHARP

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BEUVE, VOL. III:
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THE ESSAYS OF
SAINTE-BEUVE

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EDITED, WITH CRITICAL MEMOIR

BY

WILLIAM SHARP

VOL. III.

PORTRAITS OF WOMEN



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MADAME DE MAINTENON.

MADAME DE MAINTENON.

1851.

THE present seems a favourable time in which to approach the subject of Mme. de Maintenon. Popular taste inclines to display a keen interest in matters which relate to that great century when Louis XIV. reigned ; and as soon as we begin to consider that epoch intellectually, it becomes evident that she must occupy in it a very prominent place. Mme. de Maintenon's mental qualifications cause us to pardon her all those errors with which history justly reproaches her. Her faults were greatly exaggerated at the time by the general public. Mme. de Maintenon did not in reality originate any of the great political acts of the time. Except in one or two instances, which, however, are quite open to dispute, she did no more than favour very zealously the wrongs which were perpetrated during that closing reign. Her chief concern seems to have been to find interesting and amusing occupations, within his necessarily restricted circle, for the latter years of Louis XIV. This is the attitude, indeed the sole part she assumes in her language, her conversation, and also her correspondence, which certainly proves this clearly the more carefully it is studied. She is one of those persons we may hastily condemn, but who, on

closer criticism, cannot be so misjudged. She commands respect by her tone of noble simplicity and dignified discretion ; she pleases by the piquancy and excellence of her reasoning. There are even moments when we would call her charming ; although we no sooner find ourselves beyond her spell than the charm is broken, and we resume our former prejudice against her. I do not know if I am expressing the sentiments of others, but this is my own feeling each time that I approach the subject of Mme. de Maintenon. I shall endeavour to make out a few of my reasons, and to explain them.

Mme. de Maintenon has of late years found a very desirable historian in one of her own kinsmen, M. le Duc de Noailles, who writes most gravely and delicately. The last half of his History is anxiously looked for ; I shall make ample use of the two volumes already published, allowing myself, however, a little more freedom or licence in my judgment.

Born in 1635, in the conciergerie of the prison of Niort, where her father was for the time confined, Françoise d'Aubigné began life as in a romance, and, indeed, the strangest romance which could have happened to a person who above all her other characteristics was sensible. A grand-daughter of the illustrious Captain d'Aubigné, who distinguished himself in the sixteenth century, the daughter of the profligate Count Constant d'Aubigné and of a wise, good mother, she had early experience of the strangeness and harshness of fate ; yet her heart held a drop of the noble blood of her ancestor, which gave her pride, and she would not have changed her condition for a more fortunate one of lower degree. As a child she accompanied her parents to Martinique. On her return, being under the care of a Huguenot aunt, she had, although born a Catholic, embraced the doctrines of Calvin, when

another relation, Mme. de Neuillant, came with an order from the court to rescue her from heresy. Placed first in a convent at Niort, then removed to Paris, the young D'Aubigné, now altogether orphaned, felt every moment of her life the bitterness of dependence. Mme. de Neuillant, so zealous for her spiritual welfare, was so miserably mean that she allowed her to want for everything. However, the young girl began in her visits to Paris to see the world, and from the first she made a successful appearance there. "That was the epoch of elevated conversation, of gallant compliments; in a word, of what was called the *ruelles*." Wit easily attained a position which was almost honour. *La jeune Indienne*, as she was called on account of her sojourn in America, was remarkable even at first sight, and she lost nothing on closer acquaintance. The Chevalier de Méré, a fashionable wit of the time, became her lover and instructor, and proclaimed her praises. He has described her at this time as possessing a calm and even temper, "very handsome, with a kind of beauty which always pleased." He recommended her to the Duchesse de Lesdiguières, who travelled much, as one who had many charming resources. "She is sweet, grateful, trustworthy, faithful, modest, intelligent, and, to crown her charms, she uses her wit only to amuse or to make herself beloved." When Mlle. d'Aubigné, on her return to Poitou, wrote to her young friends in Paris, her letters were passed round as *chefs-d'œuvre*, and kept up her growing reputation. It was about this time she came to know Scarron, the cripple, a man of gay humour, which passed at that time for delicate wit. Surrounded by affectation, Scarron, with his merry, comical style, was as an antidote. He saw Mlle. d'Aubigné, and, to his credit, was at once interested in her. After some