

## MRS. BROWNING'S THOUGHTS ABOUT WOMEN.



In her "Vision of Poets," Mrs. Browning, then Elizabeth Barrett, enumerated forty of the world's singers. Amongst them she placed but one woman—Sappho. Her omission was just. Time, the great master of perspective,

who forces many authors, bepraised in their own days, to retire to the vanishing point, while he shows others, once little noticed, in colossal proportions, has had little acquaintance with the genus "Poetess." The nineteenth century, however, has excelled its predecessors in producing women, not only of literary tastes but of literary genius, possessing not only gracefulness but inevitableness of expression, not only tenderness but originality. Queen among these, by virtue of her supreme gift of lyrical thought, stands Elizabeth Barrett Browning.

Life is made up of the masculine and the feminine elements. We cannot imagine a complete society lacking either. It is an insult to common sense to declare that a woman's brain and heart are facsimiles of those of a man. It is an insult to God's wisdom to suppose that He would have done better to repeat Himself and create Eve in the exact likeness of Adam. The two natures are two halves forming a perfect whole, and the wise-hearted desire to develop their natural powers, rather than to win the qualities of the opposite sex. Literature is the representation of life. If we are to have a perfect literature, men and women must be at work in its production. Nature waves off the majority of women from many walks of literature. Few tread the paths of science or of logic. Some are admitted to them by special license. But fiction, biography, and poetry are a field in which the feminine mind may well labour. These deal with thought and action, with passion and feeling. In their province the affection rules, the heart is empress. A sex capable, as the ages have declared, of infinite poetry of action, cannot be wholly incapable of poetic expression. Those who are acquainted with all the secrets of the home may fairly be expected to describe the little doings, hopes, and joys which make up the sum of household life. Those who offer themselves on the altar of Great Love can surely sing its praises.

It is natural for a woman to individualise. It is difficult for her to deal with generalities, or to comprehend systems. She is touched through her sympathies. Her reasoning is inductive. Let her see a single sorrow, and she will be eager to relieve it, but the "great sum of evil" is a thing too impersonal to affect her. Now, poets and novelists must individualise. The world cannot be dealt with in a lump. Men are not saved in bundles. To raise the masses is to raise the units. No regeneration is effected save by the elevation of individuals. The personal is linked with the universal, explaining and emphasising it.

We see the vast in the little. The type reveals the genus. The sun is mirrored in the dewdrop as perfectly as in the ocean. The artist's duty is to single out from the seething crowd individual men and women, to teach us to distinguish their form and features of body and of soul. By this knowledge we guess at the life conditions of others. Thus characters true to poetical if not to actual fact stir within us a sympathy for characters of flesh and blood, whom we have hitherto elbowed with indifference. Those whom we have not seen teach us to love those whom we have seen. "Uncle Tom's Cabin" was a more powerful protest against slavery than the vague generalities and fervid accusations of many an orator. "The Cry of the Children" stirred the heart of England, when columns of statistics in the *Times* hardly quickened its beating.

The greatest authors can look into both the masculine and the feminine heart. But the gift is rare. More often, one or the other eye is short-sighted. Therefore we want men to write as men, women as women. By this means we gain an inside and an outside view of each sex. We cannot walk gracefully in clothing not our own. Imitation results in exaggeration. A mannish woman or a womanish man, either in life or in life's photograph—literature—is unlovely and unmeaning. If there be not in a woman's work something distinctively womanly she has missaid her nature and denied her vocation. With such self-denial Mrs. Browning cannot be charged. Feminine faults and virtues are everywhere present in her poems. We find her occasionally prejudiced, too ready to jump at conclusions with scanty premisses, sometimes throwing the rein to imagination, or allowing full license to passion. In the last part of "Aurora Leigh" a heart is thrown upon the page; we see its every throb and quiver. We find in her works, too, that tendency to morbid sadness common to the feminine mind when physical pain is frequent and the sense of humour undeveloped.

On the other hand we find a purity, a deep tenderness, a holy and passionate enthusiasm, a strength of pitifulness and love such as make beautiful the characters of the world's heroines. Further, her women are real creations, while her men are only waxwork. The fact is in some measure explained by the circumstances of her personal history. For years only a few of her closest friends were admitted to the darkened chamber of the "poetess" who learnt to sing through suffering. On her marriage with Robert Browning she seemed to "yield the grave for his sake, and exchange her near sweet view of heaven for life with him." Therefore it is not strange that one of her chief faults, which, even under the influence of her husband, that Herr Professor of Psychology, she never wholly outgrew, was a lack of comprehension of the masculine mind. An unwritten law condemns close scrutiny and exact delineation of the failings, follies, and limitations of a father or a brother. But introspection taught her to judge other women. She had probed her own soul, measured its yearnings, hopes, fears, possibilities of love, passion, and self-sacrifice; and her work, as she wrote in the preface to a volume of poems, was the "fullest expression of the personal being to which she could attain."

One of her earliest published poems is "The Drama of Exile." Its chief interest is set upon Eve, first and deepest, not only in the transgression but in the sorrow. Most natural, although the idea seems to have entered the mind of no other author, is Eve's unbearable sadness at the thought of having brought ruin upon one dearer to her than Eden itself;

her pleading that Adam should regain God's favour by spurning her; her resolve, when assured of unchanged human love, not to be afraid of human death; her patient acceptance of the pang incurred by sin.

In "Isobel's Child" is revealed the depth of a woman's power of renunciation. "The Romaunt of the Page" and "The Rhyme of the Duchess May" are tales of woman's devotion, even unto death. "Bertha in the Lane" is a woman dying for lack of love; "Bianca among the Nightingales" a woman forsaken. "The Lay of the Brown Rosary" is the story of an unhallowed love, seeking to grasp joy in defiance of God. Human love resting on the refusal of Divine love has an unsure foundation. Happiness for whose sake righteousness has been cast away is poisonous.

"Lady Geraldine" is one who sees, as clearly as Charlotte Brontë's "Shirley," that the riches of virtue outweigh gold, and that nobility of soul outmeasures many acres. Mrs. Browning feels that a woman, poor or rich, despised or honoured, is no more or less than just a human soul. Where she gives herself, her possessions, large or small, are given also, mere appendages of which love takes little account. Thus in her poem, "Crowned and Wedded," written on the occasion of the Queen's marriage, Mrs. Browning pleads with the Prince to "Esteem the wedded hand less dear for sceptre than for ring. And hold her uncrowned womanhood to be the royal thing."

In "Aurora Leigh" we find two types of womanhood. Almost all our actions are the outcome either of love of peace, or of love of justice. According as the one or the other principle gets the upper hand, we are ruled or rule. The lover of peace wishes to leave undisturbed existing arrangements, the lover of justice desires to set everything right. The lover of peace hates war; the lover of justice is ready for battle. The lover of peace submits to conventionalities. The lover of justice is often iconoclastic. The lover of peace and justice pulls down and builds up. Mrs. Browning loved both peace and justice. She did not fear for Italy a war of renovation and purification; she did not shrink from attacking social evils which cry for remedy. Similarly, she paints two women, actuated by these principles, which, opposite as they may seem, can so easily be brought into harmony.

Marian Erle was submissive as Griselda, desiring to be Romney's servant rather than his wife. She felt herself merely his to do his pleasure and his bidding. She would gladly have offered him a draught from the fabled "Well of St. Keyne." She sinned against him and against herself by not questioning whether or no he loved her, for a marriage without equality, a marriage where worship on the one side and pity on the other strive to supply mutual love, has no sure guarantee of continuing peace.

On the other hand, Aurora Leigh was so eager for justice to her own powers, so intolerant of interference in her life, that she neglected justice to Romney, and missed many years of joy and helpfulness.

In "Aurora Leigh," also, Mrs. Browning recognises the existence of women whose thoughts were not as her thoughts, the prey of vanity and frivolity, too occupied in observing their own beauty to see how pale the "pitiful remainders of the world have grown"; spiteful women, eager to hurt, and skilful to carry out their will; shrivelled souls, narrow in thought, word, and deed, engrossed in trifles, and believing in a great gulf fixed between them and their neighbours. Thus does she make good her claim to knowledge of a woman's heart.



Naturally the education of girls was intensely interesting to her. She herself had studied under her brother's tutor, Hugh Stuart Boyd. As a child she had learnt Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, and passionately delighted in reading. Her "Essay on Mind," written at the age of sixteen, was not indeed strikingly original, but it proved her acquaintance with authors unknown to many a collegian. During one of her illnesses she was guilty of cheating an over-fearful doctor by having her dearly-loved Plato bound as a novel to elude the prohibition of study. With almost bitter sarcasm, Aurora Leigh inveighs against the shallowness of ladies' school education forty years ago—the general insight into useful facts, brushing with extreme flounce the circle of the sciences; the fancy work, spun glass, wax flowers, stuffed birds, impossible shepherdesses; the unmusical music, the books on womanhood to prove woman's "potential faculty in everything of abdicating power." Matters have improved since Mrs. Browning wrote. Year by year education is becoming more thorough. Still, however, there is too much veneer and too little mahogany. The mind does not keep pace with the manners. Too much is put into the head, and too little drawn out. Some of us resemble the dog in the fable, who dropped his morsel of meat in trying to grasp a second piece. We ought to grip the knowledge already gained before stretching after more. That which we assimilate, not that which is poured upon us, is really valuable. Children sometimes kill their flowers with too much water. We injure our minds with cramming. Life develops from within. The unfolding of the best qualities of mind and heart is the real aim of education.

While Mrs. Browning thinks the soil of a feminine mind neither too thin nor too stony to bear culture, she is no advocate of "blue-stockingism." A really learned person does not obtrude learning, nor make a perpetual claim to admiration in virtue of culture. The child who has picked up a little knowledge boasts of it; increasing wisdom proves to him his own slight cause for boasting. As soon as a closed room is opened, light pours in and reveals the cobwebs. The light of learning shows us the cobwebs of ignorance in our minds. Mrs. Browning's poems have been called pedantic. It is true that they abound in allusions to classical stories and philosophical opinions. The reason is simple. She had lived from childhood in the company of philosophers and poets of all ages and countries. Homer and Euripides were as familiar as nursery rhymes. She had mixed little in present-day society, and had had no opportunity of fathoming the depths of educated ignorance. Her conversation was far enough removed from the coxcombry of the pedant. The account given by Mary Russell Mitford of the charm of her manners, her womanly sweetness and modesty, is echoed by those who met her later. She never shook the red flag of superiority in the eyes of her listeners, but was willing to hear as well as to speak. She was one of those who attract, with magnetic power, the happiest thoughts and the finest expressions of those in conversation with them, who make us surprise ourselves by clear ideas and vigorous speech. Some lines from her poem, "My Kate," which perhaps describes her ideal woman, form a perfect description of herself.

"Her air had a meaning, her movements a grace,  
You turned from the fairest to look at her face.  
I doubt if she said to you much that could act  
As a thought or suggestion; she did not attract

In the sense of the brilliant or wise; I infer  
'Twas her thinking of others made you think of her.

She never found fault with you, never implied  
Your wrong by her right; and yet men at her side  
Grew nobler, girls purer, as through the whole town  
The children were gladder that pulled at her gown.  
None knelt at her feet confessed lovers in thrall,  
They knelt more to God than they used—that was all."

There is a model that any woman might do well to copy.

Mrs. Browning held that a poet's heart could be lodged in a woman's breast, and by logical demonstration she proved her theorem. Whatever faults her critics discover, they cannot refuse her the singer's crown. Insight to see, patience to strive, power to utter, these three requisites of genius were hers. Genius brings with it responsibility. Talents involve duties. Each gift is for trading. The seed must be planted, the tree pruned. No one conscious of bearing a light ought to cover it with a bushel. It would be a crime for one who felt within the glowing of poetic fire, to smother it, for, as Dante says, he who sees a need and does not supply it, is leaning towards unkindly refusal. The world will never ask us for the best we can give. The thing a woman ought to do, says Mrs. Browning, emphatically, is "whatever perfect thing she can in life, in art, in science." She is not over-concerned to plead for woman's rights, because she believes that work honestly done is the one unanswerable plea. Women hitherto have talked too much, and done too little. Let them act, and the universe shall witness that they were born to action. The poetess must be serious and earnest in aim, must not shift the types for tolerable verse, nor be content with rhymes devoid of life; must not wish to belittle art to suit her stature, but strive to be worthy of her art, though she must endure hardship in the service; must not (as she is too apt to do) look to one for praise, but take as her motto—"Art for art, and good for God Himself, the essential good." Such resolve is the foundation of every noble deed in life, in art, in science.

But the happiest place, undoubtedly—the right place, frequently, for a woman—says Mrs. Browning, is "the safe warm corner of the household fire, behind the heads of children." She herself had found her genius for feeling and for thinking perfected in that union from which book-writing women are sometimes supposed to be cut off. Her love for Robert Browning drew from her those wonderfully beautiful sonnets from the Portuguese, and other poems, which have been described as "marvels of a delicate and tender passion, triumphs of spirituality in love." Her marriage deepened her insight, and increased her force of expression. To her love is a thing beautiful and sacred, a consecration and a glory, a union of souls. There is nothing sensual or coarse in her presentation of it. She will not believe that its romance and purity are lost in this matter-of-fact nineteenth century. But marriage is not an end, but a beginning; not a *grand finale*, but an introduction. It opens the door upon many duties and sorrows as well as joys. It is not true that a cultured woman is incapable of knowing matters of the home. Higher education should teach the sanctity of duty, and lead us to do well the most trivial actions. The darning of stockings and the translation of Greek are not incompatible. The heart need not be starved to feed the head. Smallest

deeds may be greatly done, and the best gift of God is work. Heaven itself is work without failure and weariness. Aurora and Romney Leigh, at last united, do not dwell on their personal joy, but think of labour to be accomplished. Each happiness entails a duty. God looks for work for others as the result of the love of wedded souls. Such love is like a rose, whose petals are outreaching affections. Its first outcome is the love of children. For a discrowned queen Mrs. Browning can frame no purer wish than that she may win "that which is sweetest in womanly fate—sunshine from heaven, and eyes of a child." The love of children which is instinctive in the heart of a woman reveals itself in Mrs. Browning's poems on this most poetical subject. "A Child's Grave at Florence," "A Child's Thought of God," "Sleeping and Waking," and "The Swan's Nest," are examples. In "Aurora Leigh" there is to be found a perfect picture of a baby asleep. In the same poem occurs this exquisite saying—"Angels are less tender wise than God and mothers." And again—

"Women know  
The way to rear up children (to be just):  
They know a simple, merry, tender knack  
Of tying sashes, fitting baby-shoes  
And stringing pretty words that make no sense,  
And kissing full sense into empty words,  
Which things are corals to cut life upon,  
Although such trifles; children learn by such  
Love's holy earnest in a pretty play,  
And yet not over early solemnised,  
But seeing, as in a rosebush, Love's Divine,  
Which burns and hurts not,—not a single bloom,—  
Become aware and unafraid of Love.  
Such good do mothers. Fathers love as well—  
Mine did, I know—but still with heavier brains,  
And wills more consciously responsible,  
And not as wisely, since less foolishly;  
So mothers have God's license to be missed."

Mrs. Browning thinks that the mother-love is in itself a training. A child is given to sanctify a woman, to lead her upwards. It gives practice in loving, and softens the heart to the world; for the crown of womanhood is love. Self-sacrifice is the highest, because the most Christ-like virtue. Poets and historians have, through all ages, credited woman with an almost infinite self-devotion. Mrs. Browning endorses their verdict. She knows a woman's weakness, burning tears, heart aches, self-doubt, but she knows that the need for strength brings strength with it, and thinks that if Cervantes had been Shakespeare he would have made his Don a Donna. Side by side with her theory—so well supported by her practice—that the woman artist is a reality, we may fitly place the conception of woman's rights, duties, and rewards (the rights and duties being synonymous) found in the blessing given to Eve on the threshold of mortal life—

"Rise, woman, rise  
To thy peculiar and blest altitude  
Of doing good and of enduring ill,  
Of comforting for ill, and teaching good,  
And reconciling all that ill and good  
Unto the patience of a constant hope.

Thy love  
Shall chant itself its own beatitudes  
After its own life-working. A child-kiss  
Set on thy sighing lips shall make thee glad;  
A poor man served by thee shall make thee rich;  
A sick man helped by thee shall make thee strong;  
Thou shalt be served thyself by every sense  
Of service which thou renderest."

E. ORSMOND PAYNE.