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BROWNING'S WOMEN

by

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PLAN.

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 - (a) Mildred.
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 - (d) Colombe.
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 - (g) Pompilia.
4. THE WOMAN MARRIED.
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BROWNING'S WOMEN.

No movement of the past one hundred and fifty years has been more completely revolutionary in its many phases than the woman's movement. "Line upon line, precept upon precept, here a little, there a little", woman's sphere has been broadening until today, there is scarcely a country which has not conceded the same rights to women as to man.

The history of the ages is ^{the} survival of the fittest. Semi-barbaric ages decreed that woman must be governed by man since strength was the deciding factor. Here originated the idea that woman, because physically weaker, is inferior.

All through the ages, this idea has been universally held. In recent years, however, so numerous were the protests raised against this supposition that it was changed to women's so-called "superiority". Considering the treatment accorded to women, one might be excused for being credulous as to the stability of the pedestal upon which women were placed, and lay this preconceived idea at the root of the struggle women have had to make for higher education and the privileges and responsibilities of citizenship.

Woman's position in literature has been determined to a great extent, by this superiority. Although a few great thinkers, among them John Stuart Mill, had written books on the slavery in which one half of the race was held, the majority retained the old ideas. But the nineteenth century however, the intelligence displayed by the outstanding women figures of the preceding centuries, and the steady progress of the sex, even under such a stigma as inferiority, caused a change in the world's conception of woman.

This change was nowhere more apparent than in the literary works of the age. Until the nineteenth century, this change was almost imperceptible. The writers of this epoch however, helped to bring the cause of womanhood to the fore. Wordsworth revered woman; Keats idealized her; Tennyson made a strong appeal for a higher, broader education for woman; it remained for Browning to blaze the trail for her complete emancipation. (1) "In the time of Plato, woman was the slave of man's passion; in the time of Dante, she was the Goddess of his sentimental love; in the time of Browning she had become the object of his personal esteem, loved for her own sake, and because he found in her a companionship which supplemented and revealed his own individuality."

Browning was one of the few men who did not believe in woman's inferiority. He agrees with George Willis Cook, who states in his address to the Browning Society. (2) "We have found in woman an equal, not an inferior, that becomes in some strange mystical way the symbol to us of the divine life." Because the fundamental principles underlying Brownings treatment of women were not circumscribed by convention and prejudice, Browning was able to depict woman accurately and with great discernment; he could understand the deep intricate currents of a woman's soul.

We see, in Browning's works, women who are distinct from all others in our literature. He does not exalt, - nor on the other hand does he condemn. He leaves women where they are, and writes of them as living, thinking individuals. He does not, it is true, go into rhapsodies over their physical charms, or write sonnets on my "lady's eyebrow", nor does he set womanhood up before him, examine her critically, then expound theories as to the treatment she should receive

(a)
 223--George Willis Cook, "Romantic Love." Browning's Society Papers.

as Tennyson seemed to be doing in the Princess, but Browning is content to let live. He sees in womanhood something of intense interest, worthy of acute observation, indeed it has been urged that Browning took more delight in portraying a woman than he did a man. Undoubtedly, she is given a prominent place in his poems. A great many poems are named from the woman whom they depict--Pauline, Pippa, Colombe, Balustion, and certainly Mildred, Polyxena, and Pompilia are drawn with as much sympathy and understanding as Henry Mertoun, Charles or Guidp.

~~Henry Mertoun, Charles or Guido.~~

The fact that Browning even in his youth, was modern in his ideas, is shown by his attitude toward "Pauline". This, his first poem, published in 1833, seemed to contain the narrow idea of a woman who lived only as a supplément to her lover, a weak clinging creature, endowed with mere physical charm. Yet, even here, Browning broke away, for in the note in French which he affixes to Pauline, Browning showed her gifted with a much stronger character than her lover imagined her to have. Moreover, Browning himself was so strongly prejudiced against this poem that he withdrew it from the publishers, and always disliked it. He was afraid lest there be the slightest opportunity to accuse him of being narrow-minded and dwarfed in his attitude toward women.

It is impossible to classify Browning's heroines. They are all possessed of such striking individuality and distinctiveness that each has a place indisputably her own. It is very suggestive to note that no two of Browning's critics agree as to who is the best of his woman characters. Some emphasize Pompilia, some Pippa, others Mildred. Then too, each critic takes interest in some of the minor poems-- but nearly all choose different ones. Thus it would seem that nowhere, even in the smallest poem has Browning portrayed a woman who does not hold some special interest for one or the other of Browning students.

There is something curiously refreshing about the very names of Browning's heroines. Gather them together-- Colombe, Pippa Anael Polyxena, Balaustion Pompilia-- do they not give promise of

unusual interest? They may not be called types- they are individuals- some English-some Italian- some French. That ^{is} was an odd thing about Browning- the nationality- the class, the age or the temper^ament, ^{does} did not seem to concern him- he deal^s with souls. He ^{is} was daring in his democracy. He ventures to depict those of the misjudged unfortunate ones, who, having not kept to the straight and narrow path of Duty, in the eyes of the world are to be avoided, spoken of in whispers, with significant glances and a mocking laugh. Browning lifts the curtain which hides the woman's soul, and portrays it in moments when it rises above all sordidness. He does not omit from his poems therefore, women whom the world refuses to recognize, but says rather-

"How the world is made for each of us,

"How all we perceive and know in it

"Tends to some moment's product thus,

"When a soul declares itself- to wit,

"By its fruit, the thing it does". (1)

Browning, in his broad minded, optimistic love, watches for that moment when the soul will betray itself. Ottima, apparently so steeped in sin that she is beyond the reach of any good influence, at the psychological moment is carried away from her carnal passions. Her love becomes unselfish. Her last breath is a prayer to God- for another- not for herself.

"Not me- to him, O God be merciful". (2)

With the possible exception of Pompilia, Browning did not paint any full length portraits of women. He was, as I have said, a strong believer in moments. He would seize upon a character at some

(1) from By the Fireside XLIV., (2) from Pippa Passes.

critical point in its development. When an unusual situation was presented, and with a few sharp strokes— a touch here— a dash there, he would portray women who each and all have their special niche to fill. Complex, subtle, intricate problems attract him— Anael, with the struggle between love for the man and adoration for the God; Colombe, forced to choose between wealth and love; Pompilia, with a forked path before her— Duty seeming to call both ways; Mildred, an innocent girl betrayed by that very innocence. Yet, never for one moment does Browning let us forget that he reveres and honors womanhood, and that this reverence and honor, based upon a clear, impartial understanding of woman's essential nature.

Did Browning make his women serve any definite purpose? Both his men and women act as mediums through which he portrays his own soul. Through them, we see the poet— the man, and we learn the philosophy of life and love in which he so firmly, optimistically believed. There is a deep sincere protest breathed against the treatment which outcast women receive from the hands of the world, in *Fifine*. There we see the strong humanitarianism of the man through the words of the poet. In the "Flight of the Duchess," he expounds his theory,

"How love is the only good in the world"

While "In the Balcony" portraying Constance, who with each additional falsehood, involves herself in further difficulties, is a strong plea for truth, for sincerity.

Because of his attitude toward women, Browning's treatment of love is different from that of other poets. Browning is

essentially a poet of love, but he goes farther than most poets. He does not deal with only one phase of love, but depicts it in a variety of ways. The love of friend for friend, parent for child, man for maid- in each portrayal Browning is master. Dealing with the love between man and woman, Browning excels. He believes in a love which is eternal, which grows stronger as it grows older. There is more than the mere passion of the senses- there is an additional soul passion which transcends the others. Love to Browning is not sickly sentimentalism, but his lovers remain in full possession of their senses; for them "love greatens and glorifies". The optimism which was the outstanding characteristic of his nature, is well shown in his conception of love. He believed that no love was lost. "Evelyn Hope" is perhaps the most beautiful example of this.

Evelyn Hope has passed away at the age of sixteen, before she was aware of the love she had awakened in the man who speaks in the poem. He is standing in her room and gazes around him at the surroundings in which she bloomed, a pure soul, for so brief a space. He is told, but will not believe,

"Each was nought to each"

He answers simply, and in his answer we have a wonderful thought on Immortality and Love.

"No indeed, for God above

"Is great to grant, as Mighty to make,

"And creates the love to reward the love:

"I claim you still, for my own love's sake,

"Delayed it may be for more lives yet,

"Thru' worlds I shall traverse, not a few:

"Much is to learn, much to forget

"Ere the time be come for taking you" (1)

We might call Browning's woman, the woman triumphant. Where the world could see only failure, Browning could see success. The calibre of which his women are made is responsible in some measure for this. A strong soul can never fail. "In a year" shows the attitude assumed by a girl whose lover has ceased to care for her. Another poet might make her pine away, and lose interest in life, or at least rail against the perversity of fate. Browning turns her gaze upward- to God.

"Dear the pang is brief,

"Do thy part,

"Have thy pleasure; How perplexed

"Grows belief"

"Well, this cold clay cold

"Was man's heart:

"Crumble it and what comes next?

"Is it God? "

In James Lee's Wife, Browning deals with a different situation- one which convention would call certainly a failure. Yet, through the Poet's eyes we see again, still more clearly the "Triumphant woman"- another "soul" victory.

Fate has been unkind to James Lee's wife. Her husband has lost interest in her. Coolly and methodically she arranges the facts before her, concluding at the last, that he loves her no longer. But the failure is not on her side- for she does not cease

to love him.

"The man was my whole world

"With his flowers to praise, or his weeds to blame

"And either, or both to love".

Although it is extremely hard for her to realize his lack of understanding, when she eventually does, her decision is made, and she leaves him. She has not failed- her love is true. After all his indifference, as she leans over the rail of the vessel which takes her from him, she can say,

"How strange it were if you had all me

"As I have all you in my heart and brain,

"You whose least word brought gloom or glee

"Who never lifted the hand in vain-

"Will hold mine yet, from over the sea".

In spite of the loss of all life holds dear, James Lee's wife does not bow her head before the storm, but faces it bravely. Her words are those of a soul which does not know defeat,

"Simple? Why this is the old woe o' the world:

"Tune to whose rise and fall we live and die.

"Rise with it, then. Rejoice that man is hurled

"From change to change unceasingly,

"His soul's wings never furled."

I have always been sorry that Browning never finished "In a Balcony". It would be interesting to know what would have happened. Constance and the Queen are both characters needing careful study. The former is unattractive, for she is so insincere

and speaks and acts entirely without reason. I wonder that Norbert, who is so straightforward can love her. The Queen I pity and admire. Norbert's declaration of love to her arouses a depth of feeling—a passion of love that Constance is utterly unable to understand. So long restrained, ^{the Queen's} her emotions carry her out of herself, and she is right when she exclaims

"I have the strong soul: let me teach you here

"I think I have borne enough, and long enough

"And patiently enough, the world remarks

"To have my own way now, unblamed by all"

Constance, ~~who~~ though she loved before, must learn something from the vibrant words of the Queen,

"You will have many lovers, and love one.

"Love him, like me. Give all away to him

"Think never of yourself: throw by your pride,

"Hope, fear, — your own good as you saw it once,

"And love him simply for his very self

"Remember I (and what am I to you?)

"Would give up all for one, leave throne, lose life

"Do all but just unlove him. He loves me.

We are not told what the Queen did when she left the balcony after Norbert had shattered her new found happiness. In the first revulsion of grief and anger, she will probably want Norbert and Constance both to suffer, to atone for her suffering. Hence the guard comes to take them to prison. But later— the Queen will think it over. She loves Norbert, he is not to blame for that— nor

is he to blame for his inability to return her passion. Constance she will begin to pity, ^Her nobility of character enabling her to conquer her desire for vengeance, she will send for Constance and her lover and in the supreme unselfishness of a love which does not seek its own happiness, she will grant to Norbert his heart's desire. Here is another "woman triumphant"— a woman capable of a great love, a love which is service, a love which does really "greaten and glorify". ^POne may never really understand Browning's women, without making a careful study of at least those figures which he has most fully sketched. His treatment is always suggestive, rather than complete. Yet this serves to create additional interest in them, because it leaves room in which the readers imagination may run riot.

"The Blot on the Scutcheon" it is declared was Browning's most popular drama. The character of Mildred, the girlish heroine, ~~a~~ has created more controversy than any other of Browning's female characters. To understand Mildred one must not only be familiar with the story, but one must try and look at her through Browning's glasses. Mildred is a young girl whose guardian is her brother, Thorold Lord Tresham. She has been receiving, for some time, secret midnight visits from a lover. When the play opens, this ~~a~~ same lover is asking Thorold for Mildred's hand in marriage. He is accepted, and ^Guendolyn, the wife of Mildred's brother Austin, goes up to Mildred's room to tell her about the new suitor. Guendolyn suspects something, for Mildred seems most anxious to get rid of her. Well may she be— for in spite of the fact that soon they may be together forever, that night Henry comes again to her room. They

agree that the following night shall be the last visit before their marriage.

A servant, unfortunately had seen Henry entering Mildred's window. She is summoned to the library and accused by Thorold, who demands the name of her seducer. Mildred denies nothing, but for some reason, refuses to give his name. Guendolyn, by her intuition discovers his identity, but yields to Mildred's entreaties to conceal her knowledge. The poor thoughtless child, in spite of the events of the day, gives the accustomed signal. Her brother, Thorold, anticipating this, is waiting in the garden. He compels the youth to disclose his identity, then makes him fight. Offering no resistance, the boy falls. Then, and only then, does Thorold relent, and consent to listen to his dying words. At this moment Guendolyn and Austin appear on the scene although too late to avert the tragedy. Thorold filled with remorse, hastens to Mildred whose tender heart, failing her at the news of her lover's death, she dies in her brother's arms. Her death is followed a few minutes later by Thorold's who has taken poison- and the play closes with Guendolyn's words-

"We can but- remember you".

A great deal of criticism has been adversely extended to Browning for his character portrayal of Mildred. Thomas R. Lounsbury declares that had she possessed the lofty characteristics which her brother and lover attributed to her, she could never have surrendered so completely to her lover. Again- this same professor remarks that the song which Mertoun sings as he

(1) Thomas R. Lounsbury - Four Lectures on B.
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