

The Tautology of Prose and Poetry in the Carlyle and Browning Marriages:

The title of this evening's event, "A Tale of Two Marriages," has a distinctly allusive quality. On one hand there is *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) and Dickens, for whom marriage certainly was not the best of times. The title also alludes to the provisional title of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* (1875–77), "Two Marriages," which he began as a novel intended to feature a good marriage, that of Kitty and Levin, and a bad marriage, that of Anna and Alexy. Conventional wisdom offers a similar temptation in the case of the Carlyles and the Brownings; one was a good marriage, and the other a bad one. If it was that simply were true, we would not be here this evening. I contend that a more useful point of comparison would be to explore how much one marriage was born of prose, and the other of poetry.

The poetic quality of the Browning's marriage is well rehearsed, whether in the context of their meeting, or of their elopement, or of the genesis of *The Sonnets from the Portuguese* (1850), or of EBB's death in Robert's arms. In a sense poetry was all in all for the Brownings; it permeated their lives together and apart. Which is not to say that were not prosaic characteristics of their relationship.

For the Carlyles, marriage began as a matter of prose. In the months before the Carlyles married in 1826, Thomas wrote long missives to Jane out of deeply anxious insecurity regarding his prospects. At one point, he made the mistake of telling her that if there was another suitor she would prefer, then she was free to accept the offer. Her response says much:

But surely, surely Mr Carlyle, you must know me better, than to have supposed it possible I should ever make a new choice! To say nothing of the sentiments I entertain towards *you*, which would make a marriage with another worse than

death; is there no spark of honour, think you, in this heart, that I should not blush at the bare idea of such shame? Give myself to another, after having given myself with such unreservedness to you! Take another to my arms, with your image on my heart, your kisses on my lips! Oh be honest, and say you knew this would never be,—knew I could never sink so low! Let me not have room to suppose, that possessing your love, I am unfortunate enough to be without your respect! For how light must my open fondness have seemed; if you doubted of its being sanctified by a marriage-vow—a vow spoken, indeed, before no Minister, but before a presence, surely as awful, God and my Conscience— And yet, it is so unlike *you*, the sworn enemy of cant, to make high-sounding offers, in the firm confidence of their being rejected! and unless I lay this to your charge in the present instance how can I help concluding that there is some virtue in me, which you have yet to learn?— For it is in no jesting, or yet “half-jesting” manner that you tell me my hand is free— “If there be any other—*you do not mean whom I love more*—but whose wife all things considered I would rather be; you call upon me as my Husband—(as my Husband!) to accept that man.” Were these words really Thomas Carlyle’s, and addressed to *me*? Ah! ich kenne dich nicht mehr! Dearest! Dearest! it will take many caresses to atone for these words! (CLO: JBW to TC, [4 March 1826])

The Carlyles’ move towards marriage seems a long way from “I love your poems, and I love you, too,” the legendary beginning of the Brownings’ courtship.

The Carlyles finally made it to the altar on 17 October 1826 and then moved into Comely Bank, Edinburgh, from which Thomas wrote to his mother four weeks later: “The consequence is

considerable irregularity in regard to health, and of course to spirits and life generally. I have not yet learned to exist here without drugs” (*CLO*: TC to MAC, 16 Nov. 1826). Flash forward to the early 1850s and Jane’s “*The simple Story of my own first Love*,” in which she presents her own views on marriage:

Many a poor girl has been brought to *marriage*, and the Devil knows what all, by her *first love*,—actually—got married, “for better and for worse, till death do part,” on the strength of it! about as sensible and promising a speculation, it seems to me, as getting married “for better and for worse till death do part” on the strength of *measles* or *scarletina*!— But such reflections did I let myself go to them, might lead me too far,—to the length namely, of my whole pamphlet, *in petto* [in my breast] on *the Marriage-question*, which, I fear is too much in advance of the Century for being committed to writing. (*CLO* 30: *Simple Story*)

Jane’s pamphlet, written and unwritten could only be rendered in her remarkable prose, which is not to say that there her life and marriage were bereft of poetry.

Even the Carlyles’ relationship with the Brownings can be framed as a contrast between prose and poetry. Carlyle never turned down a chance to tell the Brownings they should turn from poetry, as he wrote in the margin of his copy of *Aurora Leigh*: “How much better had all of this been if written straight forward in clear *prose* utterance!” (*CLO* 30: TC’s Comments). Similarly, it seems certain that what Jane would have said in her prose pamphlet would have been different than EBB’s transcendent vision of poetic and marital unity in *Aurora Leigh*.

In spite of the suggested incompatibility of prose and poetry, the Brownings and the Carlyles remained friends. But here again conventional wisdom offers its temptation, that after Barrett Browning died, Browning was able to move from out of her shadow into the light of fame in his

own right (It took Browning a long time to forgive Carlyle of that ungracious sentiment), and that after Jane died Carlyle moved into the shadows of guilt and remorse. Again, poetry and prose offer an alternate view. She had once been frustrated by his hero-worship of Cromwell, “as if Shakespeare’s actions were not greater than Cromwell’s.” Barrett Browning could never yield primacy to prose over poetry, and the highest compliment she ever paid to Carlyle was to call him “a poet unaware of himself.” And then there was *Frederick the Great*, about which Barrett Browning wrote to her friend Isa Blagden: “Robert curses and swears over Carlyle’s *Frederick*, which is a relief to mine own mind too. Never was there a more immoral book in the brutal sense.” At least in part she responded this way because in the Proem of *Frederick* Carlyle had claimed the intellectual equivalency of poetry and prose: “the highest Shakespeare producible is properly the fittest Historian producible” (*Works* 12: 18). Perhaps an appropriation of Dorothy Parker is warranted. For Barrett Browning, *Frederick* was not a book to be tossed aside lightly; it should be thrown with great force. For the sake of their friendship, it was just as well that Barrett Browning did not live to see volumes 3, 4, 5, and 6 of Carlyle’s epic biography. Browning eventually forgave Carlyle for his unkind response to Barrett Browning’s death, and their friendship remained intact in their long years of widowhood. By the middle of the twentieth century, the Brownings had been enshrined in Rudolf Besier’s *The Barretts of Wimpole Street* (1930) as the great romantic victors over patriarchal oppression, no matter Virginia Woolf’s attempt to see more clearly through the eyes of Barrett Browning’s spaniel Fluff. By the mid-seventies, the Carlyles’ were established as exemplars of everything that could go wrong in a Victorian marriage, with Welsh Carlyle confined to the role of victim. Neither conventional view satisfies. Both marriages were successful—poetic in some ways and prosaic in others. The tale of these two marriages, at their best of times and their worst, reveals a tautology of poetry and prose

that helps to reveal the human essence of their lives together. Nowhere is this presence more revealing than in their letters.