

“Penini means to be very good *tomorrow*”: The Browning Marriage and Their Son

It is true that the Brownings’ marriage has become an exemplar of Victorian romance. This is not to say that theirs was a perfect marriage. In his 1855 poem “A Lovers’ Quarrel,” Browning considers the subject of marital disputes and refers to at least two things on which he and his wife Elizabeth differed, but it was in a letter to their close friend Isa Blagden in September 1867 that Browning declared that there were “seven distinct issues to which I came with Ba, in our profoundly different estimates of thing and person.” Although he didn’t specify them, it seems without doubt that one of these issues was the matter of raising their son Pen.

The birth of the Brownings’ son was one of the happiest events in the Brownings’ marriage. After Pen’s birth, Elizabeth’s letters overrun with references to her son, revealing not only the differences between her and Browning, but her comments also offer a rich source for her psychology and habits of mind; for example, her remarks about his prayers offer insights into her religious convictions, as do her frequent asides assuring her sister that his religious notions are not hers or Browning’s: “He has his own ideas, I assure you,” and she insisted that she did not “instruct” Pen in his religious thoughts. Of course that’s not at all true. Elizabeth’s satisfaction with Pen being mistaken for an Italian (especially a Tuscan) and her determination that he should be cosmopolitan suggest her own notions of citizenship: “he ... is frightfully Italian, talking of you ‘English’ with contempt.” Browning, however, insisted on speaking English to his son while Elizabeth took great pride in Pen’s abilities to speak Italian and French.

A mature mother with a poetical mind and heart, such as Elizabeth had, was understandably indulgent and lenient. She felt that her sister Henrietta and her cousin Arlette were too strict as parents, and strongly disagreed with them whipping their children: “Whipping may be necessary to some children,” but her child was “far too sensitive & tenderhearted.” She idealized her child, keeping his hair in long curls, to match her description of him as a “poetical child.” Needless to say, her husband did not share her views, and Browning was horrified when Pen was mistaken for a girl.

The Brownings disagreed on most aspects of Pen's upbringing. Most often, Elizabeth prevailed, but when Browning was determined she was forced to yield. Several factors may have affected Elizabeth's response to motherhood. Unquestionably, the very fact that she gave birth at her age was one reason; she suffered two miscarriages before Pen's birth and two more afterwards. She was also concerned that her weak physical condition might pass to her son, so she determined not to breastfeed him—a decision supported by her physician. Nevertheless she was jealous of the bond that developed between Pen and his wet-nurse, and Elizabeth decided early on that she would spoil him as a result. She declared herself victorious when the wet-nurse announced that “she ‘never *would* nurse baby when I was in the room. What was the use of it? He attended to nobody but me.’” Clearly, Elizabeth did not want Pen to prefer any other female, and even if only subconsciously it pleased her that Pen was more attached to her than to Browning.

As with most children, Pen knew how to read his parents' tempers and how to respond to them individually. When he was nearly ten, Elizabeth explained how he had become “more susceptible of being found fault with ... particularly by Robert.” She readily admitted that he “doesn't care as much for *my* displeasure.” In one instance, she said to Pen, “‘What shall I say to papa when he comes in & asks me if Penini has been good?’, he answered quite softly, ‘Tell him that Penini means to be very good *tomorrow*.’” Elizabeth's leniency had long-term effects. Years later when Pen was sitting for examinations at Oxford, Joseph Milsand, who was staying with Browning, wrote to his wife and daughter that Pen would probably not succeed at his examinations, not, “from lack of talent,” Milsand explained, “but talent is not what is needed. It is an examination of minutiae of Greek and Latin grammar, of arithmetic, etc. and his home schooling did not prepare him. . . . Moreover he feels the effects of his mother: he has trouble focusing his attention and is liable to forget everything he has learned.”

Browning was hardly a traditional Victorian patriarch, but he was just as devoted as a father as Elizabeth was as a mother; however, his experience and relationship with his son changed considerably after his wife died. A few months after Elizabeth's death, Browning told

Isa Blagden that he was learning things about his son “which I am glad to discover,” and nearly a year later, writing of Pen’s progress since his mother’s death and expressing approval of his habits, he said “I like him better & better.” Browning’s comments about the change in Pen’s appearance and behavior clearly indicate that he had distinctly different views from his wife, and with her out of the picture he exercised his paternal privilege.

As the years passed there were incidents that tried the father/son relationship. Pen eventually went to Antwerp to study art, but he was soon spending time in Dinant, where he became involved with an innkeeper’s daughter. As Milsand explained to his daughter, had Browning attempted to interfere, Pen “who is most jealous of his independence might be provoked into resistance. But Robert was wise enough not to mention the love affair, and simply remonstrate on his discontinuing his studies in Antwerp.” Father and son survived the crisis of this ill-conceived love affair, but Madame Milsand’s description of Pen at this time is very telling about the father/son relationship: “when you have visited with him some time, he becomes very congenial; his ideas are much wiser than his actions; he thinks about politics and religious matters with much more good sense than his father and his aunt. He has none of the prejudices of his compatriots, the English. That makes him very pleasant to live with; but this difference in viewpoint *about everything* alienates him from his father more each day.” One can’t help but wonder what Elizabeth would’ve thought of this description of her son. In any case, one can say that their marriage was much more human than ideal.