

*Selective Affinities: The Browning and Carlyle Marriages  
Through Their Correspondence*

It is tempting to represent the Browning and Carlyle marriages as a study in Victorian contrasts. On the one hand, there were the Brownings, Robert and Elizabeth Barrett, whose marriage seemed to be the perfect conjunction of intellect and passion, symbolized by the latter's defiant affirmation of the transcendent power of their love in *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (1845-47): "When our two souls stand up erect and strong, / Face to face, silent, drawing nigh and nigher, Until the lengthening wings break into fire / At either curved point—what bitter wrong / Can the earth do to us, that we should not long / Be here contented?" On the other, we have the Carlyles, Thomas and Jane, the perfect disjunction of sympathy, embroiled in a perpetual battle of frayed nerves and fractious misunderstanding, their relationship pithily—and inaccurately—summarized in the withering verdict of Samuel Butler: "It was very good of God to let Carlyle and Mrs Carlyle marry one another and so make only two people miserable instead of four." To a considerable degree, the Brownings and Carlyle marriages do offer a study in opposites, but it would be a mistake to exaggerate the dissimilarity. From a twenty-first century perspective, the affinities are as revealing as the differences, and both are informed by qualities—personal ambition and conviction, as well as devotion and loyalty—that resonate in an age too often dominated by "me-ness."

The Browning and Carlyle marriages were unusual in their own time because of the manner in which they lived up to the ideal of a union between equals, which many members of the Victorian intelligentsia championed. In *The Subjection of Women* (1869) the philosopher John Stuart Mill memorably denounced the Victorian "command and obedience" model of marriage and insisted on the primacy of mental compatibility between men and women in the conjugal sphere. Mutual intelligence, both emotional and psychological,

inevitably fostered mutual interests. As Mill pointed out, “when each of two persons, instead of being a nothing, is a something; when they are attached to one another, and are not too much unlike to begin with; the constant partaking in the same things, assisted by their sympathy, draws out the latent capacities of each for being interested in the things which were at first interesting only to the other; and works a gradual assimilation of the tastes and characters to one another ... by a real enriching of the two natures, each acquiring the tastes and capacities of the other in addition to its own.” The result of this interaction, conducted on a basis of respect and curiosity, was the creation of a “solid friendship, of an enduring character, more likely than anything else to make it, through the whole of life, a greater pleasure to each to give pleasure to the other than to receive it.” In these remarks Mill set a standard that some thought was too high. One remembers Mrs. Allonby’s remarks in Oscar Wilde’s *A Woman of No Importance* (1903): “How can a woman be expected to be happy with a man who insists on treating her as if she were a perfectly normal human being?”

In their best moments the Browning and Carlyle marriages demonstrated the benefits of “solid friendship” grounded in a sense of mental and emotional reciprocity. Neither Robert Browning nor Thomas Carlyle could be accused of choosing women who were in any respect inferior to them, and in both cases, their careers as writers were enhanced immeasurably by the extraordinary literary and critical skills of their partners. In certain respects the Brownings and the Carlyles were fortunate in their unions. Victorian novels, which served as sounding boards for the inner domain of life, were full of ominous examples of the fatal consequences of masculine and feminine misjudgment. In her novel *Middlemarch* (1872) George Eliot delineated the corrosive psychological effects of marriages built on warped foundations. The moral and the spiritual destruction of the brilliant young physician and scientist Tertius Lydgate is apparent in her first impressions of the beautiful, refined, and impenetrably superficial Rosamond Vincy. Luminously giving voice to Lydgate’s stream of thoughts, Eliot

writes: “Certainly, if falling in love had been at all in question, it would have been quite safe with a creature like this Miss Vincy, who had just the kind of intelligence one would desire in a woman—polished, refined, docile, lending itself to finish in all the delicacies of life, and enshrined in a body which expressed this with a force of demonstration that excluded the need for other evidence. Lydgate felt sure that if ever he married, his wife would have that feminine radiance, that distinctive womanhood which must be classed with flowers and music, that sort of beauty which by its very nature was virtuous, being moulded only for pure and delicate joys.” Lydgate soon discovers, at the cost of his self-respect and his career, that his self-absorbed attraction to such “pure and delicate joys” will yield only impure and indelicate misery. Rosamond too is undone by this attachment, which thwarts her desire to escape from the drudgery of ordinary life through wealth and renown.

The Browning and Carlyle marriages began with the advantage of a shared interest in the life of the mind and the power of the written word. To both couples, literature offered the readiest means by which they could gratify their mutual desire to release their imaginative energies from the often suffocating conventions of Victorian middle-class society. It was the rock on which their relationships either flourished or floundered. Whereas for the Brownings, literature, and in particular, poetry, became a deeper means of communication—what Robert referred to as “fresh strange music, the affluent language, the exquisite pathos and true new brave thought”—for the Carlyles, literature too often proved to be a source of conflict and confrontation. Their example highlights the failure of personal equality in a marriage to transcend the constrictions of the inequality between men and women in Victorian society. It was no coincidence that the Brownings escaped to Italy from “those mean red houses through the fog” (as EBB called them in *Aurora Leigh*) to experience the liberating impact of their emotional and creative interdependence. For the Carlyles, no. 5 Cheyne Row in Chelsea became the claustrophobic prison-house of a marriage that increasingly drove them from one

another with only intermittent gleams of respite and contentment. What they shared together lacked the consistent visceral warmth and spontaneity of the Brownings' union, yet when they felt threatened by its demise, they fought tenaciously to hold their precarious bond together.

Assessing Victorian attitudes to marriage, Gertrude Himmelfarb has trenchantly observed that “if there is any message to be found ... it is not in the realm of ‘sexual politics,’ in the struggle for domination or liberation, equality or individuality, but in the realm of morality, the struggle to preserve the sanctity of marriage, as of all moral institutions, even when the form and substance were wanting.” If there is one recurring leitmotif in the Browning and Carlyle marriages it is precisely this concern “to preserve the sanctity of marriage” amidst the stormy and uncharted turbulence of modernity. From the vantage point of the twenty-first century, this concern might seem to be old-fashioned, even archaic, but the earnestness (a word that Oscar Wilde regarded as the unforgivable sin of the Victorians) with which they fought against the threat of dissolution engaged them wholeheartedly. Even Jane Welsh Carlyle, who quoted Madame de Stael’s condemnation of marriage—“better one slave than two *esprits forts*”—was not prepared to abandon Thomas, despite her deep regrets about the direction that her marriage had taken. As her friend the feminist Geraldine Jewsbury wrote, “Her allegiance was never broken... She did not falter from her purpose of helping and shielding him but she became warped.” In the throes of physical and mental anguish in 1864, Jane writes to Thomas: “Oh my Dear, my dear, shall I ever make fun of you again—Or is our life together indeed past and gone! I want so much to live—to be to you more than I ever have been—but I fear, I fear.” It was a plea that Elizabeth, beset as she was through her life by physical hardship, could readily understand. In his poem “A Woman’s Last Word” (1855), Robert Browning pays tribute to the power of a love that overcomes dissent and argument: “Let’s contend no more, Love, / Strive nor weep: / All be as before, Love, / —Only sleep!”

In both the Browning and Carlyle marriages, the words that counsel endurance continue to endure.