

ROBERT BROWNING

MEN AND
WOMEN

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Robert Browning

Men and Women

INTRODUCTION

Thirteen years after the publication, in 1855, of the Poems, in two volumes, entitled "Men and Women," Browning reviewed his work and made an interesting reclassification of it. He separated the simpler pieces of a lyric or epic cast—such rhymed presentations of an emotional moment, for example, as "Mesmerism" and "A Woman's Last Word," or the picturesque rhymed verse telling a story of an experience, such as "Childe Roland" and "The Statue and the Bust"—from their more complex companions, which were almost altogether in blank verse, and, in general, markedly personified a typical man in his environment, a Cleon or Fra Lippo, a Rudel or a Blougram. These boldly sculptured figures he set apart from the others as the fit components of the more closely related group which ever since has constituted the division now known as "Men and Women."

Possibly the poet took some pleasure in thus bringing to confusion those critics who, beginning first to take any notice of his work after the issue of these volumes of 1855, discovered therein poems they praised chiefly by means of contrasting them with foregoing work they found unnoticeable and later work they declared inscrutable. Their bland discrimination, at any rate, in favor of "Men and Women" became henceforth inapplicable, since the poet not only cast out from the division they elected to honor the little lyrical pieces that caught their eye, but also brought to the front, from his earlier neglected work of the same kind as the monologues retained, his Johannes Agricola of 1836, Pictor Ignotus of 1845, and Rudel of 1842. Later criticism, moreover, that even yet assumes to ring the old changes of discrimination against everything but "Men and Women," is made not merely inapplicable by this re-arrangement, but uninformed, a meaningless echo of a borrowed opinion which has had the very ground from under it shifted.

The self-criticism of which this re-arrangement gives a hint is more valuable.

All the shorter poems accumulated up to this period, various as they are in theme and metrical form, are uniform in the fashioning of their contour and color. As soon as this underlying uniformity of make is recognized it may be seen to be the coloring and relief belonging to any sort of poetic material, whether ordinarily accounted dramatic material or not, which is imaginatively externalized and made concrete. This peculiarity of make Browning early acknowledged in his estimate of his shorter poems as characteristic of his touch, when he called his lyrics and romances dramatic. He became consciously sensitive later to slight variations effected by his manipulation in shape and shade which it yet takes a little thought to discern, even after his own redivision of his work has given the clew to his self-judgments.

Not only events, deeds, and characters—the usual subject-matter moulded and irradiated by dramatic power—but thoughts, impressions, experiences, impulses, no matter how spiritualized or complex or mobile, are transfused with the enlivening light of his creative energy in his shorter poems. Perhaps the very path struck out through them by the poet in his re-division may be traced between the leaves silently closing together again behind him if it be noticed that among these poems there are some with footholds firmly rooted in the earth and others whose proper realm is air. These have wings for alighting, for flitting thither and hither, or for pursuing some sudden rapt whirl of flight in Heaven's face at fancy's bidding. They are certainly not less original than those other solider, earth-fast poems, but they are less unique. Being motivated in transient fancy, they are more akin to poems by other hands, and could be classed more readily with them by any observer, despite all differences, as little poetic romances or as a species of lyric.

They were probably first found praiseworthy, not only because they were simpler, but because, being more like work already understood and approved, adventurous criticism was needed to taste their quality. The other longer poems in blank verse, graver and more dignified, yet even more vivid, and far more life-encompassing, which bore the rounded impress of the living human being, instead of the shadowy motion of the lively human fancy—these are the birth of a process of imaginative brooding upon the development of man by means of individuality throughout the slow, unceasing flow of human history. Browning evidently grew aware that whatever these poems of personality might prove to be worth to the world, these were the ones deserving of a place apart, under the early title of "Men and Women," which he thought especially suited to the more roundly modelled and distinctively colored exemplars of his peculiar faculty.

In his next following collection, under the similar descriptive title of "Dramatis Personae," he added to this class of work, shaping in the mould of blank verse mainly used for "Men and Women" his personifications of the Medium Mr. Sludge, the embryo theologian Caliban, the ripened mystical saint of "A Death in the Desert"; while Abt Vogler, the creative musician, Rabbi ben Ezra, the intuitionist philosopher, and the chastened adept in loving, James Lee's wife, although held within the embrace of their maker's dramatic conception of them, as persons of his stage, were made to pour out their speech in rhyme as Johannes Agricola in the earlier volume uttered his creed and Rudel his love-message, as if the heat of their emotion-moved personality required such an outlet. Some such general notion as this of the scope of this volume, and of the design of the poet in the construction, classification, and orderly arrangement of so much of his briefer work as is here contained seems to be borne out upon a closer examination. On the threshold of this new poetic world of personality stands the Poet of the poem significantly called "Transcendentalism," who is speaking to another poet about the too easily obvious, metaphor-bare philosophy of his opus in twelve books. That the admonishing poet is stationed there at the very door-sill of the Gallery of Men and Women is surely not accidental, even if Browning's habit of plotting his groups of poems symmetrically by opening with a prologue-poem sounding the right key, and rounding the theme with an epilogue, did not tend to prove it intentional. It is an open secret that the last poem in "Men and Women," for instance, is an epilogue of autobiographical interest, gathering up the foregoing strains of his lyre, for a few last chords, in so intimate a way that the actual fall of the fingers may be felt, the pausing smile seen, as the performer turns towards the one who inspired "One Word More." The appropriateness of "Transcendentalism" as a prologue need be no more of a secret than that of "One Word More" as an epilogue, although it is left to betray itself. Other poets writing on the poet, Emerson for example, and Tennyson, place the outright plain name of their thought at the head of their verses, without any attempt to make their titles dress their parts and keep as thoroughly true to their roles as the poems themselves. But a complete impersonation of his thought in name and style as well as matter is characteristic of Browning, and his personified poets playing their parts together in "Transcendentalism" combine to exhibit a little masque exemplifying their writer's view of the Poet as veritably as if he had named it specifically "The Poet." One poet shows the other, and brings him visibly forward; but even in such a morsel of dramatic workmanship as this, fifty-one lines all told, there is the complexity and involution of life itself, and, as ever in Browning's monologues, over the shoulder of the poet more obviously portrayed peers as livingly the face of the poet portraying him. And this one—the admonishing poet—is set there with his "sudden rose," as if to indicate with that symbol of poetic magic what kind of spell was sought to be exercised by their maker to conjure up in his house of song the figures that people its niches. Could a poem be imagined more cunningly devised to reveal a typical poetic personality, and a typical theory of poetic method, through its way of revealing another? What poet could have composed it but one who himself employed the dramatic method of causing the abstract to be realizable through the concrete image of it, instead of the contrary mode of seeking to divest the objective of its concrete form in order to lay bare its abstract essence? This opposite theory of the poetic function is precisely the Boehme mode, against which the veiled dramatic poet, who is

speaking in favor of the Halberstadtian magic, admonishes his brother, while he himself in practical substantiation of his theory of poetics brings bodily in sight the boy-face above the winged harp, vivified and beautiful himself, although his poem is but a shapeless mist.

Not directly, then, but indirectly, as the dramatic poet ever reveals himself, does the sophisticated face of the subtle poet of "Men and Women" appear as the source of power behind both of the poets of this poem, prepossessing the reader of the verity and beauty of the theory of poetic art therein exemplified. Such an interpretation of "Transcendentalism," and such a conception of it as a key to the art of the volume it opens, chimes in harmoniously with the note sounded in the next following poem, "How it Strikes a Contemporary." Here again a typical poet is personified, not, however, by means of his own poetic way of seeing, but of the prosaic way in which he is seen by a contemporary, the whole, of course, being poetically seen and presented by the over-poet. Browning himself, and in such a manifold way that the reader is enabled to conceive as vividly of the talker and his mental atmosphere and social background—the people and habitudes of the good old town of Valladolid—as of the betalked-of Corregidor himself; while by the totality of these concrete images an impression is conveyed of the dramatic mode of poetic expression which is far more convincing than any explicit theoretic statement of it could be, because so humanly animated.

"Artemis Prologizes" seems to have been selected to close this little opening sequence of poems on the poet, because that fragment of a larger projected work could find place here almost as if it were a poet's exercise in blank verse. Its smooth and spacious rhythm, flawless and serene as the distant Greek myth of the hero and the goddess it celebrates, is in striking contrast with the rougher, but brighter and more humanly colloquial blank verse of "Bishop Blougram's Apology," for example, or the stiff carefulness of the "Epistle" of Karshish. It might alone suffice, by comparison with the metrical craftsmanship of the other poems of "Men and Women," to assure the observant reader that never was a good workman more baselessly accused of metrical carelessness than the poet who designedly varies his complicated verse-effects to suit every inner impulse belonging to his dramatic subject. A golden finish being in place in this statuesque, "Hyperion"-like monologue of Artemis, behold here it is, and none the less perfect because not merely the outcome of the desire to produce a polished piece of poetic mechanism.

Browning, perhaps, linked his next poem, "The Strange Medical Experience of Karshish, the Arab Physician," with the calm prologizing of the Hellenic goddess, by association of the "wise pharmacies" of AEsculapius, with the inquisitive sagacity of Karshish, "the not-incurious in God's handiwork." By this ordering of the poems, the reader may now enjoy, at any rate, the contrasts between three historic phases of wisdom in bodily ills: the phase presented in the dependence of the old Greek healer upon simple physical effects, soothing "with lavers the torn brow," and laying "the stripes and jagged ends of flesh even once more"; and the phases typified, on the one side, by the ingenious Arab, sire of the modern scientist, whose patient correlation of facts and studious, sceptical scrutiny of cause and effect are caught in the bud in the diagnosis transmitted by Karshish to Abib, and, on the other side, by the Nazarene physician, whose inspired secret of summoning out of the believing soul of man the power to control his body—so baffled and fascinated Karshish, drawing his attention in Lazarus to just that connection of the known physical with the unknown psychical nature which is still mystically alluring the curiosity of investigators.

From the childlike, over-idealizing mood of Lazarus toward the God who had succored him, inducing in him so fatalistic an indifference to human concerns, there is but a step to the rapture of absolute theology expressed in the person of Johannes Agricola. Such poems as these put before the cool gaze of the present century the very men of the elder day of religion. Their robes shine with an unearthly light, and their abstracted eyes are hypnotized by the effulgence of their own haloes. Yet the poet never fails to insinuate some naive foible in their personification, a numbness of the heart or an archaism of soul, which reveals the possessed one as but a human brother, after all, shaped by

his environment, and embodying the spirit of an historic epoch out of which the current of modern life is still streaming.

The group of art poems which follows similarly presents a dramatic synthesis of the art of the Renaissance as represented by three types of painters. The religious devotion of the monastic painter, whose ecstatic spirit breathes in "Pictor Ignotus," probably gives this poem its place adjoining Agricola and Lazarus. His artist's hankering to create that beauty to bless the world with which his soul refrains from grossly satisfying, unites the poem with the two following ones. In the first of these the realistic artist, Fra Lippo, is graphically pictured personally ushering in the high noon of the Italian efflorescence. In the second, the gray of that day of art is silvering the self-painted portrait of the prematurely frigid and facile formalist, Andrea del Sarto. In "Pictor Ignotus" not only the personality of the often unknown and unnamed painting-brother of the monasteries is made clear, but also the nature of his beautiful cold art and the enslavement of both art and personality to ecclesiastical beliefs and ideals. In "Fra Lippo Lippi" not alone the figure of the frolicsome monk appears caught in his pleasure-loving escapade, amid that picturesque knot of alert-witted Florentine guards, ready to appreciate all the good points in his story of his life and the protection the arms of the Church and the favor of the Medici have afforded his genius, but, furthermore, is illustrated the irresistible tendency of the art-impulse to expand beyond the bounds set for it either by laws of Church or art itself, and to find beauty wheresoever in life it chooses to turn the light of its gaze. So, also, in "Andrea del Sarto," the easy cleverness of the unaspiring craftsman is not embodied apart from the abject relationship which made his very soul a bond-slave to the gross mandates of "the Cousin's whistle." Yet in all three poems the biographic and historic conditions contributing toward the individualizing of each artist are so unobtrusively epitomized and vitally blended, that, while scarcely any item of specific study of the art and artists of the Renaissance would be out of place in illustrating the essential truth of the portraiture and assisting in the better appreciation of the poem, there is no detail of the workmanship which does not fall into the background as a mere accessory to the dominant figure through whose relationship to his art his station in the past is made clear.

This sort of dramatic synthesis of a salient, historical epoch is again strikingly disclosed in the following poem of the Renaissance period, "The Bishop Orders his Tomb at Saint Praxed's Church." In this, again, the art-connoisseurship of the prelacy, so important an element in the Italian movement towards art-expression, is revealed to the life in the beauty-loving personality of the dying bishop. And by means, also, of his social ties with his nephews, called closer than they wish about him now; with her whom "men would have to be their mother once"; with old Gandolf, whom he fancies leering at him from his onion-stone tomb; and with all those strong desires of the time for the delight of being envied, for marble baths and horses and brown Greek manuscripts and mistresses, the seeds of human decay planted in the plot of Time, known as the Central Renaissance, by the same lingering fleshliness and self-destroying self-indulgence as was at home in pagan days, are livingly exposed to the historic sense.

Is the modern prelate portrayed in "Bishop Blougram's Apology," with all his bland subtlety, complex culture, and ripened perceptions, distant as the nineteenth century from the sixteenth, very different at bottom from his Renaissance brother, in respect to his native hankering for the pleasure of estimation above his fellows? Gigadibs is his Gandolf, whom he would craftily overtop. He is the one raised for the time above the commonalty by his criticism of the bishop, to whom the prelate would fain show how little he was to be despised, how far more honored and powerful he was among men. As for Gigadibs, it is to be noticed that Browning quietly makes him do more than leer enviously at his complacent competitor from a tomb-top. The "sudden healthy vehemence" that struck him and made him start to test his first plough in a new world, and read his last chapter of St. John to better purpose than towards self-glorification beyond his fellows, is a parable of the more profitable life to be found in following the famous injunction of that chapter in John's Gospel, "Feed my sheep!" than

in causing those sheep to motion one, as the bishop would have his obsequious wethers of the flock motion him, to the choice places of the sward.

So, as vivid a picture of the materialism and monopolizing of the present century sowing seeds of decay and self-destruction in the movement of this age toward love of the truth, of the beauty of genuineness in character and earnestness in aim, is portrayed through the realistic personality of the great modern bishop, in his easy-smiling after-dinner talk with Gigadibs, the literary man, as is presented of the Central Renaissance period in the companion picture of the Bishop of Saint Praxed's.

In Cleon, the man of composite art and culture, the last ripe fruitage of Greek development, is personified and brought into contact, at the moment of the dawn of Christianity in Europe, with the ardent impulse the Christian ideal of spiritual life supplied to human civilization. How close the wise and broad Greek culture came to being all-sufficing, capable of effecting almost enough of impetus for the aspiring progress of the world, and yet how much it lacked a warmer element essential to be engrafted upon its lofty beauty, the reader, upon whose imaginative vision the personality of Cleon rises, can scarcely help but feel.

The aesthetic and religious or philosophical interests vitally conceived and blended, which link together so many of the main poems of "Men and Women," close with "Cleon." Rudel, the troubadour, presenting, in the self-abandonment of his offering of love to the Lady of Tripoli, an impersonation of the chivalric love characteristic of the Provencal life of the twelfth century, intervenes, appropriately, last of all, between the preceding poems and the epilogue, which devotes heart and brain of the poet himself, with the creatures of his hand, to his "Moon of Poets."

As these poetic creations now stand, they all seem, upon examination, to incarnate the full-bodied life of distinctive types of men, centred amid their relations with other men within a specific social environment, and fulfilling the possibilities for such unique, dramatic syntheses as were revealed but partially or in embryo here and there among the other shorter poems of this period of the poet's growth.

In one important particular the re-arrangement of the "Men and Women" group of poems made its title inappropriate. The graceful presence and love-lit eyes of the many women of the shorter love-poems were withdrawn, and Artemis, Andrea del Sarto's wife, the Prior's niece—"Saint Lucy, I would say," as Fra Lippo explains—and, perhaps, the inspirer of Rudel's chivalry, too, the shadowy yet learned and queenly Lady of Tripoli, alone were left to represent the "women" of the title. As for minor inexactitudes, what does it matter that the advantage gained by nicely selecting the poems properly belonging together, both in conception and artistic modelling, was won at the cost of making the reference inaccurate, in the opening lines of "One Word More," to "my fifty men and women, naming me the fifty poems finished"?—Or that the mention of Roland in line 138 is no longer in place with Karshish, Cleon, Lippo, and Andrea, now that the fantastic story of Childe Roland's desperate loyalty is given closer companionship among the varied experiences narrated in the "Dramatic Romances"? While as for the mention of the Norbert of "In a Balcony"—which was originally included as but one item along with the other contents of "Men and Women"—that miniature drama, although it stands by itself now, is still near enough at hand in the revised order to account for the allusion. These are all trifles—mere sins against literal accuracy. But the discrepancy in the title occasioned by the absence of women is of more importance. It is of especial interest, in calling attention to the fact that the creator of Pompilia, Balaustion, and the heroine of the "Inn Album"—all central figures, whence radiate the life and spiritual energy of the work they ennoble—had, at this period, created no typical figures of women in any degree corresponding to those of his men.

CHARLOTTE PORTER HELEN A. CLARKE

"TRANSCENDENTALISM: A POEM IN TWELVE BOOKS"

1855

Stop playing, poet! May a brother speak?
'Tis you speak, that's your error. Song's our art:
Whereas you please to speak these naked thoughts
Instead of draping them in sights and sounds.
—True thoughts, good thoughts, thoughts fit to treasure up!
But why such long prolusion and display,
Such turning and adjustment of the harp,
And taking it upon your breast, at length,
Only to speak dry words across its strings?
Stark-naked thought is in request enough:
Speak prose and hollo it till Europe hears!
The six-foot Swiss tube, braced about with bark,
Which helps the hunter's voice from Alp to Alp—
Exchange our harp for that—who hinders you?

But here's your fault; grown men want thought, you think;
Thought's what they mean by verse, and seek in verse.
Boys seek for images and melody,
Men must have reason—so, you aim at men.

Quite otherwise! Objects throng our youth, 'tis true;
We see and hear and do not wonder much:
If you could tell us what they mean, indeed!
As German Boehme¹ never cared for plants
Until it happened, a-walking in the fields,
He noticed all at once that plants could speak,
Nay, turned with loosened tongue to talk with him.
That day the daisy had an eye indeed—
Colloquized with the cowslip on such themes!
We find them extant yet in Jacob's prose.
But by the time youth slips a stage or two
While reading prose in that tough book he wrote
(Collating and emendating the same
And settling on the sense most to our mind)
We shut the clasps and find life's summer past.

¹ Boehme: Jacob, an "inspired" German shoemaker (1575-1624), who wrote "Aurora," "The Three Principles," etc., mystical commentaries on Biblical events. When twenty-five years old, says Hotham in "Mysterium Magnum," 1653, "he was surrounded by a divine Light and replenished with heavenly Knowledge . . . going abroad into the Fieldes to a Greene before Neys-Gate at Gorlitz and viewing the Herbes and Grass of the Fielde, in his inward light he saw into their Essences . . . and from that Fountain of Revelation wrote <De Signatura Rerum>," on the signatures of things, the "tough book" to which Browning refers.

Then, who helps more, pray, to repair our loss—
Another Boehme with a tougher book
And subtler meanings of what roses say—
Or some stout Mage like him of Halberstadt,²
John, who made things Boehme wrote thoughts about?
He with a "look you!" vents a brace of rhymes,
And in there breaks the sudden rose herself,
Over us, under, round us every side,
Nay, in and out the tables and the chairs
And musty volumes, Boehme's book and all—
Buries us with a glory, young once more,
Pouring heaven into this shut house of life.

So come, the harp back to your heart again!
You are a poem, though your poem's naught.
The best of all you showed before, believe,
Was your own boy-face o'er the finer chords
Bent, following the cherub at the top
That points to God with his paired half-moon wings.

NOTES

"Transcendentalism" is a criticism, placed in the mouth of a poet, of another poet, whose manner of singing is prosaic, because it seeks to transcend (or penetrate beyond) phenomena, by divesting poetic expression of those concrete embodiments which enable it to appeal to the senses and imagination. Instead of bare abstractions being suited to the developed mind, it is the primitive mind, which, like Boehme's, has the merely metaphysical turn, and expects to discover the unincarnate absolute essence of things. The maturer mind craves the vitalizing method of the artist who, like the magician of Halberstadt, recreates things bodily in all their beautiful vivid wholeness. Yet the poet who sincerely holds so fragmentary a conception of art is himself a poem to the poet who holds the larger view. His boy-face singing to God above his ineffective harp-strings is a concrete image of this sort of poetic transcendentalism.

[It is obvious that Browning uses the Halberstadt and not the Boehme method in presenting this embodiment of his subject. The supposition of certain commentators that Browning is here picturing his own artistic method as transcendental is a misconception of his characteristic theory of poetic art, as shown here and elsewhere.]

² Halberstadt: Johann Semeca, called Teutonicus, a canon of Halberstadt in Germany, who was interested in the unchurchly study of mediaeval science and reputed to be a magician, possessing the vegetable stone supposed to make plants grow at will, having the same power over organic life that the philosopher's stone of the alchemists had over minerals, so that, like Albertus Magnus, another such mage of the Middle Ages, he could cause flowers to spring up in the midst of winter.

HOW IT STRIKES A CONTEMPORARY

1855

I only knew one poet in my life:
And this, or something like it, was his way.

You saw go up and down Valladolid,³
A man of mark, to know next time you saw.
His very serviceable suit of black
Was courtly once and conscientious still,
And many might have worn it, though none did:
The cloak, that somewhat shone and showed the threads,
Had purpose, and the ruff, significance.
He walked and tapped the pavement with his cane,
Scenting the
world, looking it full in face,
An old dog, bald and blindish, at his heels.
They turned up, now, the alley by the church,
That leads nowhither; now, they breathed themselves
On the main promenade just at the wrong time:
You'd come upon his scrutinizing hat
Making a peaked shade blacker than itself
Against the single window spared some house
Intact yet with its mouldered Moorish work—
Or else surprise the ferret of his stick
Trying the
mortar's temper 'tween the chinks
Of some new shop a-building, French and fine.
He stood and watched the cobbler at his trade,
The man who slices lemons into drink,
The coffee-roaster's brazier, and the boys
That volunteer to help him turn its winch.
He glanced o'er books on stalls with half an eye,
And fly-leaf ballads on the vendor's string,
And broad-edge bold-print posters by the wall.
He took such cognizance of men and things,
If any beat a horse, you felt he saw;
If any cursed a woman, he took note;
Yet stared at nobody—you stared at him,
And found, less to your pleasure than surprise,
He seemed to know you and expect as much.
So, next time that a neighbor's tongue was loosed,

³ Valladolid: the royal city of the kings of Castile, before Philip II moved the Court to Madrid, where Cervantes, Calderon, and Las Casas lived and Columbus died.

It marked the shameful and notorious fact,
We had among us, not so much a spy,
As a recording chief-inquisitor,
The town's true master if the town but knew
We merely kept a governor for form,
While this man walked about and took account
Of all thought, said and acted, then went home,
And wrote it fully to our Lord the King
Who has an itch to know things, he knows why,
And reads them in his bedroom of a night.
Oh, you might smile! there wanted not a touch,
A tang of . . . well, it was not wholly ease
As back into your mind the man's look came.
Stricken in years a little—such a brow
His eyes had to live under!—clear as flint
On either side the formidable nose
Curved, cut and colored like an eagle's claw,
Had he to do with A.'s surprising fate?
When altogether old B. disappeared
And young C. got his mistress, was't our friend,
His letter to the King, that did it all?
What paid the Woodless man for so much pains?
Our Lord the King has favorites manifold,
And shifts his ministry some once a month;
Our city gets new governors at whiles—
But never word or sign, that I could hear,
Notified to this man about the streets
The King's approval of those letters conned
The last thing duly at the dead of night.
Did the man love his office? Frowned our Lord,
Exhorting when none heard—"Beseech me not!
Too far above my people—beneath me!
I set the watch—how should the people know?
Forget them, keep me all the more in mind!"
Was some such understanding 'twixt the two?

I found no truth in one report at least—
That if you tracked him to his home, down lanes
Beyond the Jewry, and as clean to pace,
You found he ate his supper in a room
Blazing with lights, four Titians⁴ on the wall,
And twenty naked girls to change his plate!
Poor man, he lived another kind of life
In that new stuccoed third house by the bridge,
Fresh-painted, rather smart than otherwise!
The whole street might o'erlook him as he sat,

⁴ Titian: pictures by the Venetian, Tiziano Vecellio (1477-1576), glowing in color, presumably of large golden-haired women like his famous Venus.

Leg crossing leg, one foot on the dog's back,
Playing a decent cribbage with his maid
(Jacynth, you're sure her name was) o'er the cheese
And fruit, three red halves of starved winter-pears,
Or treat of radishes in April. Nine,
Ten, struck the church clock, straight to bed went he.

My father, like the man of sense he was,
Would point him out to me a dozen times;
"'St—'St," he'd whisper, "the Corregidor!"⁵
I had been used to think that personage
Was one with lacquered breeches, lustrous belt,
And feathers like a forest in his hat,
Who blew a trumpet and proclaimed the news,
Announced the bull-fights, gave each church its turn,
And memorized the miracle in vogue!
He had a great observance from us boys;
We were in error; that was not the man.

I'd like now, yet had happy been afraid,
To have just looked, when this man came to die,
And seen who lined the clean gay garret-sides
And stood about the neat low truckle-bed,
With the heavenly manner of relieving guard.
Here had been, mark, the general-in-chief,
Thro' a whole campaign of the world's life and death,
Doing the King's work all the dim day long,
In his old coat and up to knees in mud,
Smoked like a herring, dining on a crust,
And, now the day was won, relieved at once!
No further show or need for that old coat,
You are sure, for one thing! Bless us, all the while
How sprucely we are dressed out, you and I!
A second, and the angels alter that.
Well, I could never write a verse—could you?
Let's to the Prado and make the most of time.

NOTES

"How it Strikes a Contemporary" is a portrait of the Poet as the unpoetic gossiping public of his day sees him. It is humorously colored by the alien point of view of the speaker, who suspects without understanding either the greatness of the poet's spiritual personality and mission, or the nature of his life, which is withdrawn from that of the commonalty, yet spent in clear-sighted universal sympathies and kindly mediation between Humanity and its God.

⁵ Corregidor: the Spanish title for a magistrate, literally, a corrector, from *corregir*, to correct.

ARTEMIS PROLOGIZES

1842

I am a goddess of the ambrosia courts,
And save by Here, Queen of Pride, surpassed
By none whose temples whiten this the world.
Through heaven I roll my lucid moon along;
I shed in hell o'er my pale people peace;
On earth I, caring for the creatures, guard
Each pregnant yellow wolf and fox-bitch sleek,
And every feathered mother's callow brood,
And all that love green haunts and loneliness.
Of men, the chaste adore me, hanging crowns
Of poppies red to blackness, bell and stem,
Upon my image at Athenai here;
And this dead Youth, Asclepios bends above,
Was dearest to me. He, my buskined step
To follow through the wild-wood leafy ways,
And chase the panting stag, or swift with darts
Stop the swift ounce, or lay the leopard low,
Neglected homage to another god:
Whence Aphrodite, by no midnight smoke
Of tapers lulled, in jealousy despatched
A noisome lust that, as the gad bee stings,
Possessed his stepdame Phaidra for himself
The son of Theseus her great absent spouse.
Hippolutos exclaiming in his rage
Against the fury of the Queen, she judged
Life insupportable; and, pricked at heart
An Amazonian stranger's race should dare
To scorn her, perished by the murderous cord:
Yet, ere she perished, blasted in a scroll
The fame of him her swerving made not swerve.
And Theseus, read, returning, and believed,
And exiled, in the blindness of his wrath,
The man without a crime who, last as first,
Loyal, divulged not to his sire the truth,
Now Theseus from Poseidon had obtained
That of his wishes should be granted three,
And one he imprecated straight—"Alive
May ne'er Hippolutos reach other lands!"
Poseidon heard, ai ai! And scarce the prince
Had stepped into the fixed boots of the car
That give the feet a stay against the strength

Of the Henetian horses, and around
 His body flung the rein, and urged their speed
 Along the rocks and shingles at the shore,
 When from the gaping wave a monster flung
 His obscene body in the coursers' path.
 These, mad with terror, as the sea-bull sprawled
 Wallowing about their feet, lost care of him
 That reared them; and the master-chariot-pole
 Snapping beneath their plunges like a reed,
 Hippolotos, whose feet were trammelled fast,
 Was yet dragged forward by the circling rein
 Which either hand directed; nor they quenched
 The frenzy of their flight before each trace,
 Wheel-spoke and splinter of the woful car,
 Each boulder-stone, sharp stub and spiny shell,
 Huge fish-bone wrecked and wreathed amid the sands
 On that detested beach, was bright with blood
 And morsels of his flesh; then fell the steeds
 Head foremost, crashing in their mooned fronts,
 Shivering with sweat, each white eye horror-fixed.
 His people, who had witnessed all afar,
 Bore back the ruins of Hippolotos.
 But when his sire, too swoln with pride, rejoiced
 (Indomitable as a man foredoomed)
 That vast Poseidon had fulfilled his prayer,
 I, in a flood of glory visible,
 Stood o'er my dying votary and, deed
 By deed, revealed, as all took place, the truth.
 Then Theseus lay the wofullest of men,
 And worthily; but ere the death-veils hid
 His face, the murdered prince full pardon breathed
 To his rash sire. Whereat Athenai wails.

So I, who ne'er forsake my votaries,
 Lest in the cross-way none the honey-cake
 Should tender, nor pour out the dog's hot life;
 Lest at my fane the priests disconsolate
 Should dress my image with some faded poor
 Few crowns, made favors of, nor dare object
 Such slackness to my worshippers who turn
 Elsewhere the trusting heart and loaded hand,
 As they had climbed Olumpos to report
 Of Artemis and nowhere found her throne—
 I interposed: and, this eventful night
 (While round the funeral pyre the populace
 Stood with fierce light on their black robes which bound
 Each sobbing head, while yet their hair they clipped
 O'er the dead body of their withered prince,
 And, in his palace, Theseus prostrated

On the cold hearth, his brow cold as the slab
'T was bruised on, groaned away the heavy grief—
As the pyre fell, and down the cross logs crashed
Sending a crowd of sparkles through the night,
And the gay fire, elate with mastery,
Towered like a serpent o'er the clotted jars
Of wine, dissolving oils and frankincense,
And splendid gums like gold) my potency
Conveyed the perished man to my retreat
In the thrice-venerable forest here.
And this white-bearded sage who squeezes now
The berried plant, is Phoibos' son of fame,
Asclepios, whom my radiant brother taught
The doctrine of each herb and flower and root,
To know their secret'st virtue and express
The saving soul of all: who so has soothed
With layers the torn brow and murdered cheeks,
Composed the hair and brought its gloss again,
And called the red bloom to the pale skin back,
And laid the strips and lagged ends of flesh
Even once more, and slacked the sinew's knot
Of every tortured limb—that now he lies
As if mere sleep possessed him underneath
These interwoven oaks and pines. Oh cheer,
Divine presenter of the healing rod,
Thy snake, with ardent throat and lulling eye,
Twines his lithe spires around! I say, much cheer!
Proceed thou with thy wisest pharmacies!
And ye, white crowd of woodland sister-nymphs,
Ply, as the sage directs, these buds and leaves
That strew the turf around the twain! While I
Await, in fitting silence, the event.

NOTES

"Artemis Prologizes" represents the goddess Artemis awaiting the revival of the youth Hippolytus, whom she has carried to her woods and given to Asclepios to heal. It is a fragment meant to introduce an unwritten work and carry on the story related by Euripides in "Hippolytus," which see.

AN EPISTLE CONTAINING THE STRANGE MEDICAL EXPERIENCE OF KARSHISH, THE ARAB PHYSICIAN

1855

Karshish, the picker-up of learning's crumbs,
The not-incurious in God's handiwork
(This man's-flesh he hath admirably made,
Blown like a bubble, kneaded like a paste,
To coop up and keep down on earth a space
That puff of vapor from his mouth, man's soul)
—To Abib, all-sagacious in our art,
Breeder in me of what poor skill I boast,
Like me inquisitive how pricks and cracks
Befall the flesh through too much stress and strain,
Whereby the wily vapor fain would slip
Back and rejoin its source before the term—
And aptest in contrivance (under God)
To baffle it by deftly stopping such—
The vagrant Scholar to his Sage at home
Sends greeting (health and knowledge, fame with peace)
Three samples of true snakestone⁶—rarer still,
One of the other sort, the melon-shaped,
(But fitter, pounded fine, for charms than drugs)
And writeth now the twenty-second time.

My journeyings were brought to Jericho:
Thus I resume. Who studious in our art
Shall count a little labor un-repaid?
I have shed sweat enough, left flesh and bone
On many a flinty furlong of this land.
Also, the country-side is all on fire
With rumors of a marching hitherward:
Some say Vespasian⁷ comes, some, his son.
A black lynx⁸ snarled and pricked a tufted ear;
Lust of my blood inflamed his yellow balls:
I cried and threw my staff and he was gone.
Twice have the robbers stripped and beaten me,
And once a town declared me for a spy;
But at the end, I reach Jerusalem,

⁶ Snakestone: a name given to any substance used as a remedy for snake-bites; for example, some are of chalk, some of animal charcoal, and some of vegetable substances.

⁷ Vespasian: Nero's general who marched against Palestine in 66, and was succeeded in the command, when he was proclaimed Emperor (70-79), by his son, Titus.

⁸ Black lynx: the Syrian lynx is distinguished by black ears.

Since this poor covert where I pass the night,
 This Bethany, lies scarce the distance thence
 A man with plague-sores at the third degree
 Runs till he drops down dead. Thou laughest here!
 'Sooth, it elates me, thus reposed and safe,
 To void the stuffing of my travel-scrip
 And share with thee whatever Jewry yields.
 A viscid choler is observable
 In tertians,⁹ I was nearly bold to say;
 And falling-sickness¹⁰ hath a happier cure
 Than our school wots of: there's a spider here¹¹
 Weaves no web, watches on the ledge of tombs,
 Sprinkled with mottles on an ash-gray back;
 Take five and drop them . . . but who knows his mind,
 The Syrian runagate I trust this to?
 His service payeth me a sublimate
 Blown up his nose to help the ailing eye.
 Best wait: I reach Jerusalem at morn,
 There set in order my experiences,¹²
 Gather what most deserves, and give thee all—
 Or I might add, Judaea's gum-tragacanth
 Scales off in purer flakes, shines clearer-grained,
 Cracks 'twixt the pestle and the porphyry,
 In fine exceeds our produce. Scalp-disease
 Confounds me, crossing so with leprosy—
 Thou hadst admired one sort I gained at Zoar¹³—
 But zeal outruns discretion. Here I end.

Yet stay: my Syrian blinketh gratefully,
 Protesteth his devotion is my price—

⁹ Tertians: fevers, recurring every third day; hence the name.

¹⁰ Falling-sickness: epilepsy. Caesar's disease ("Julius Caesar," I. 2, 258).

¹¹ There's a spider here: "The habits of the aranead here described point very clearly to some one of the Wandering group, which stalk their prey in the open field or in divers lurking-places, and are distinguished by this habit from the other great group, known as the Sedentary spiders, because they sit or hang upon their webs and capture their prey by means of silken snares. The next line is not determinative of the species, for there is a great number of spiders any one of which might be described as 'Sprinkled with mottles on an ash-gray back.' We have a little Saltigrade or Jumping spider, known as the Zebra spider (*Epiblemum scenicum*), which is found in Europe, and I believe also in Syria. One often sees this species and its congeners upon the ledges of rocks, the edges of tombstones, the walls of buildings, and like situations, hunting their prey, which they secure by jumping upon it. So common is the Zebra spider, that I might think that Browning referred to it, if I were not in doubt whether he would express the stripes of white upon its ash-gray abdomen by the word 'mottles.' However, there are other spiders belonging to the same tribe (Saltigrades) that really are mottled. There are also spiders known as the Lycosids or Wolf spiders or Ground spiders, which are often of an ash-gray color, and marked with little whitish spots after the manner of Browning's Syrian species. Perhaps the poet had one of these in mind, at least he accurately describes their manner of seeking prey. The next line is an interrupted one, 'Take five and drop them. . . .' Take five what? Five of these ash-gray mottled spiders? Certainly. But what can be meant by the expression 'drop them'? This opens up to us a strange chapter in human superstition. It was long a prevalent idea that the spider in various forms possessed some occult power of healing, and men administered it internally or applied it externally as a cure for many diseases. Pliny gives a number of such remedies. A certain spider applied in a piece of cloth, or another one ('a white spider with very elongated thin legs'), beaten up in oil is said by this ancient writer upon Natural History to form an ointment for the eyes. Similarly, 'the thick pulp of a spider's body, mixed with the oil of roses, is used for the ears.' Sir Matthew Lister, who was indeed the father of English araneology, is quoted in Dr. James's Medical Dictionary as using the distilled water of boiled black spiders as an excellent cure for wounds." (Dr. H. C. McCook in Poet-lore, Nov., 1889.)

¹² Gum-tragacanth: yielded by the leguminous shrub, *Astragalus tragacantha*.

¹³ Zoar: the only one that was spared of the five cities of the plain (Genesis 14. 2).

Suppose I write what harms not, though he steal?
 I half resolve to tell thee, yet I blush,
 What set me off a-writing first of all,
 An itch I had, a sting to write, a tang!
 For, be it this town's barrenness—or else
 The Man had something in the look of him—
 His case has struck me far more than 'tis worth.
 So, pardon if—(lest presently I lose
 In the great press of novelty at hand
 The care and pains this somehow stole from me)
 I bid thee take the thing while fresh in mind,
 Almost in sight—for, wilt thou have the truth?
 The very man is gone from me but now,
 Whose ailment is the subject of discourse.
 Thus then, and let thy better wit help all!

'Tis but a case of mania—subinduced
 By epilepsy, at the turning-point
 Of trance prolonged unduly some three days:
 When, by the exhibition of some drug
 Or spell, exorcisation, stroke of art
 Unknown to me and which 't were well to know,
 The evil thing out-breaking all at once
 Left the man whole and sound of body indeed,
 But, flinging (so to speak) life's gates too wide,
 Making a clear house of it too suddenly,
 The first conceit that entered might inscribe
 Whatever it was minded on the wall
 So plainly at that vantage, as it were,
 (First come, first served) that nothing subsequent
 Attaineth to erase those fancy-scrawls
 The just-returned and new-established soul
 Hath gotten now so thoroughly by heart
 That henceforth she will read or these or none.
 And first—the man's own firm conviction rests
 That he was dead (in fact they buried him)
 —That he was dead and then restored to life
 By a Nazarene physician of his tribe:
 —'Sayeth, the same bade "Rise," and he did rise.
 "Such cases are diurnal," thou wilt cry.
 Not so this figment!—not, that such a fume,
 Instead of giving way to time and health,
 Should eat itself into the life of life,
 As saffron tingeth flesh, blood, bones and all!
 For see, how he takes up the after-life.
 The man—it is one Lazarus¹⁴ a Jew,

¹⁴ Lazarus . . . fifty years of age: in *The Academy*, Sept. 16, 1896, Dr. Richard Garnett says: "Browning commits an oversight, it seems to me, in making Lazarus fifty years of age at the eve of the siege of Jerusalem, circa 68 A. D." The miracle is supposed to

Sanguine, proportioned, fifty years of age,
The body's habit wholly laudable,
As much, indeed, beyond the common health
As he were made and put aside to show.
Think, could we penetrate by any drug
And bathe the wearied soul and worried flesh,
And bring it clear and fair, by three days' sleep!
Whence has the man the balm that brightens all?
This grown man eyes the world now like a child.
Some elders of his tribe, I should premise,
Led in their friend, obedient as a sheep,
To bear my inquisition. While they spoke,
Now sharply, now with sorrow, told the case,
He listened not except I spoke to him,
But folded his two hands and let them talk,
Watching the flies that buzzed: and yet no fool.
And that's a sample how his years must go.
Look, if a beggar, in fixed middle-life,
Should find a treasure, can he use the same
With straitened habits and with tastes starved small,
And take at once to his impoverished brain
The sudden element that changes things,
That sets the undreamed-of rapture at his hand
And puts the cheap old joy in the scorned dust?
Is he not such an one as moves to mirth—
Warily parsimonious, when no need,
Wasteful as drunkenness at undue times?
All prudent counsel as to what befits
The golden mean, is lost on such an one:
The man's fantastic will is the man's law.
So here—we call the treasure knowledge, say,
Increased beyond the fleshly faculty—
Heaven opened to a soul while yet on earth,
Earth forced on a soul's use while seeing heaven:
The man is witless of the size, the sum,
The value in proportion of all things,
Or whether it be little or be much.
Discourse to him of prodigious armaments
Assembled to besiege his city now,
And of the passing of a mule with gourds—
'T is one! Then take it on the other side,
Speak of some trifling fact, he will gaze rapt
With stupor at its very littleness,
(Far as I see) as if in that indeed

have been wrought about 33 A. D., and Lazarus would then have been only fifteen, although according to tradition he was thirty when he was raised from the dead, and lived only thirty years after. Upon this Prof. Charles B. Wright comments in *Poet-lore*, April, 1897: "I incline to think that the oversight is not Browning's. Let us stand by the tradition and the resulting age of sixty-five. . . . Karshish is simply stating his professional judgment. Lazarus is given an age suited to his appearance—he seems a man of fifty. The years have touched him lightly since 'heaven opened to his soul.' . . . And that marvellous physical freshness deceives the very leech himself."

He caught prodigious import, whole results;
And so will turn to us the bystanders
In ever the same stupor (note this point)
That we too see not with his opened eyes.
Wonder and doubt come wrongly into play,
Preposterously, at cross purposes.
Should his child sicken unto death, why, look
For scarce abatement of his cheerfulness,
Or pretermission of the daily craft!
While a word, gesture, glance from that same child
At play or in the school or laid asleep,
Will startle him to an agony of fear,
Exasperation, just as like. Demand
The reason why—"t is but a word," object—
"A gesture"—he regards thee as our lord
Who lived there in the pyramid alone,
Looked at us (dost thou mind?) when, being young,
We both would unadvisedly recite
Some charm's beginning, from that book of his,
Able to bid the sun throb wide and burst
All into stars, as suns grown old are wont.
Thou and the child have each a veil alike
Thrown o'er your heads, from under which ye both
Stretch your blind hands and trifle with a match
Over a mine of Greek fire¹⁵, did ye know!
He holds on firmly to some thread of life—
(It is the life to lead perforce)
Which runs across some vast distracting orb
Of glory on either side that meagre thread,
Which, conscious of, he must not enter yet—
The spiritual life around the earthly life:
The law of that is known to him as this,
His heart and brain move there, his feet stay here.
So is the man perplexed with impulses
Sudden to start off crosswise, not straight on,
Proclaiming what is right and wrong across,
And not along, this black thread through the blaze—
"It should be" balked by "here it cannot be."
And oft the man's soul springs into his face
As if he saw again and heard again
His sage that bade him "Rise" and he did rise.
Something, a word, a tick o' the blood within
Admonishes: then back he sinks at once
To ashes, who was very fire before,
In sedulous recurrence to his trade

¹⁵ Greek fire: used by the Byzantine Greeks in warfare, first against the Saracens at the siege of Constantinople in 673 A. D. Therefore an anachronism in this poem. Liquid fire was, however, known to the ancients, as Assyrian bas-reliefs testify. Greek fire was made possibly of naphtha, saltpetre, and sulphur, and was thrown upon the enemy from copper tubes; or pledgets of tow were dipped in it and attached to arrows.

Whereby he earneth him the daily bread;
And studiously the humbler for that pride,
Professedly the faultier that he knows
God's secret, while he holds the thread of life.
Indeed the especial marking of the man
Is prone submission to the heavenly will—
Seeing it, what it is, and why it is.
'Sayeth, he will wait patient to the last
For that same death which must restore his being
To equilibrium, body loosening soul
Divorced even now by premature full growth:
He will live, nay, it pleaseth him to live
So long as God please, and just how God please.
He even seeketh not to please God more
(Which meaneth, otherwise) than as God please.
Hence, I perceive not he affects to preach
The doctrine of his sect whate'er it be,
Make proselytes as madmen thirst to do:
How can he give his neighbor the real ground,
His own conviction? Ardent as he is—
Call his great truth a lie, why, still the old
"Be it as God please" reassureth him.
I probed the sore as thy disciple should:
"How, beast," said I, "this stolid carelessness
Sufficeth thee, when Rome is on her march
To stamp out like a little spark thy town,
Thy tribe, thy crazy tale and thee at once?"
He merely looked with his large eyes on me.
The man is apathetic, you deduce?
Contrariwise, he loves both old and young,
Able and weak, affects the very brutes
And birds—how say I? flowers of the field—
As a wise workman recognizes tools
In a master's workshop, loving what they make.
Thus is the man as harmless as a lamb:
Only impatient, let him do his best,
At ignorance and carelessness and sin—
An indignation which is promptly curbed:
As when in certain travel I have feigned
To be an ignoramus in our art
According to some preconceived design,
And happed to hear the land's practitioners
Steeped in conceit sublimed by ignorance,
Prattle fantastically on disease,
Its cause and cure—and I must hold my peace!

Thou wilt object—Why have I not ere this
Sought out the sage himself, the Nazarene
Who wrought this cure, inquiring at the source,

Conferring with the frankness that befits?
 Alas! it grieveth me, the learned leech
 Perished in a tumult many years ago,
 Accused—our learning's fate—of wizardry,
 Rebellion, to the setting up a rule
 And creed prodigious as described to me.
 His death, which happened when the earthquake fell
 (Prefiguring, as soon appeared, the loss
 To occult learning in our lord the sage
 Who lived there in the pyramid alone)
 Was wrought by the mad people—that's their wont!
 On vain recourse, as I conjecture it,
 To his tried virtue, for miraculous help—
 How could he stop the earthquake? That's their way!
 The other imputations must be lies;
 But take one, though I loathe to give it thee,
 In mere respect for any good man's fame.
 (And after all, our patient Lazarus
 Is stark mad; should we count on what he says?
 Perhaps not: though in writing to a leech
 'Tis well to keep back nothing of a case.)
 This man so cured regards the curer, then,
 As—God forgive me! who but God himself,
 Creator and sustainer of the world,
 That came and dwelt in flesh on it awhile!
 —'Sayeth that such an one was born and lived,
 Taught, healed the sick, broke bread at his own house;
 Then died, with Lazarus by, for aught I know,
 And yet was . . . what I said nor choose repeat,
 And must have so avouched himself, in fact,
 In hearing of this very Lazarus
 Who saith—but why all this of what he saith?
 Why write of trivial matters, things of price
 Calling at every moment for remark?
 I noticed on the margin of a pool
 Blue-flowering¹⁶ borage, the Aleppo sort,
 Aboundeth, very nitrous. It is strange!

Thy pardon for this long and tedious case,
 Which, now that I review it, needs must seem
 Unduly dwelt on, proluxly set forth!
 Nor I myself discern in what is writ
 Good cause for the peculiar interest
 And awe indeed this man has touched me with.
 Perhaps the journey's end, the weariness
 Had wrought upon me first. I met him thus:

¹⁶ Blue-flowering borage: (*Borago officinalis*). The ancients deemed this plant one of the four "cordial flowers," for cheering the spirits, the others being the rose, violet, and alkanet. Pliny says it produces very exhilarating effects.

I crossed a ridge of short sharp broken hills
Like an old lion's cheek teeth. Out there came
A moon made like a face with certain spots
Multiform, manifold and menacing:
Then a wind rose behind me. So we met
In this old sleepy town at unaware,
The man and I. I send thee what is writ.
Regard it as a chance, a matter risked
To this ambiguous Syrian—he may lose,
Or steal, or give it thee with equal good.
Jerusalem's repose shall make amends
For time this letter wastes, thy time and mine;
Till when, once more thy pardon and farewell!

The very God! think, Abib; dost thou think?

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