

William Morris and Robert Browning

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Robert Browning was born in Camberwell in 1812, twenty-two years before Morris. Coming from a Dissenting family, he was educated privately and at the recently established and secular London University in 1828–9. He published his first volume of poems, *Pauline*, in 1833, followed by *Paracelsus* in 1835 and *Sordello* in 1840. Eight volumes of *Bells and Pomegranates* appeared between 1841 and 1846, the year of his marriage to Elizabeth Barrett, and a two-volume edition entitled *Poems* came out in 1849. He published *Christmas-Eve and Easter Day* in 1850, and *Men and Women* in two volumes in 1855. None of these early poems were well-received, criticism focussing on alleged obscurity and affectation.¹

However, the poems had some admirers. In a 'a biographical talk' Morris gave at Kelmescott House on 28 November 1892, recorded by Sydney Cockerell, he remarked, 'After the Tennyson period Rossetti introduced me to Browning, who had a great influence on me. I have read *Sordello* from beginning to end, though I don't remember what it is about'.² Fiona MacCarthy tells us that *Sordello* was 'read over and over by Morris and his friends',³ and Rossetti gave a copy of Browning's poems to Bernhardt Smith in 1849, adding the initials PRB to the name on the fly-leaf.⁴ Both Robert and Elizabeth Browning were included in the 'List of Immortals' drawn up by the Brotherhood in 1848.⁵ Donald Thomas observes that Rossetti called on Browning in 1852 to express his admiration. 'Despite the general indifference to his poetry, there were younger men, loosely grouped round the Pre-Raphaelites, who had begun to take it up'.⁶ When the Brownings came to London in 1855 to see to the publication of *Men and Women*, they invited Rossetti to dinner and became good friends. On the evening when Tennyson memorably read *Maud* – as sketched by Rossetti – Browning was also present, and read 'Fra Lippo Lippi', perhaps, as Jan Marsh suggests, 'in honour of the young PRBs, spiritual heirs to the Florentine painter'.⁷ Thomas records that Rossetti 'heard with delight the first reading of "Fra Lippo Lippi"': Browning read 'with as much sprightly variation as there was in Tennyson of sustained continuity ... Truly a night of the gods, not to be remembered without pride and

pang'.⁸ Rossetti described Browning's poetry at the time as 'my Elixir of Life'.⁹ Marsh tells us that Rossetti's favourites from *Men and Women* were 'Fra Lippo Lippi', 'Cleon', 'Karshish', 'Bishop Blougram's Apology', 'How it strikes a Contemporary', and 'Childe Roland'.¹⁰

The poems specified evidently appealed to both Morris and Rossetti, who perhaps discussed them with each other before Morris published his review in the March 1856 issue of *The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*. The review is the work of a young and unsophisticated enthusiast, its style is direct and its approach down-to-earth. It begins by declaring a sensible approach, not derived from Browning's apparently random ordering of the poems:

I am not going to attempt a regular classification of Robert Browning's 'Men and Women', yet the poems do fall naturally into some order, or rather some of them go pretty much together; and, as I have no great space, I will go through those that do fall together, saying little or nothing about the others.¹¹

Morris follows the contemporary practice of quoting at length from the poems he discusses; the following account is more selective, but presents all the material in the form quoted in the review. What evidently appeals to Morris is the quality suggested by Browning's title; he is excited to encounter a number of vividly evoked characters in interesting situations. By contrast with modern literary criticism, he has little to say about Browning's poetic technique, and struggles when he tries to do so in the later part of the review.

The first group identified by Morris consists of three poems of 'belief and doubt', 'The Epistle of Karshish', 'Cleon' and 'Bishop Blougram's Apology', all of them 'dramatic' in 'not expressing, except quite incidentally, the poet's own thoughts'. (p. 326) Morris is interested in the protagonists; he contrasts the Arab physician Karshish with the poet and artist Cleon: the 'Arab is the more genial of the two, less selfish, somewhat deeper, I think'. (p. 326) Morris quotes the words wrung from Cleon in the agony that the approach of death produces in him; Cleon is said to decline into 'a kind of careless despair', (p. 328) and he ends by expressing what Morris sees as jealousy of Paulus and his followers – the apostle Paul has come to preach in the locality, and Protus wishes Cleon to pass a letter on to him. (Morris quotes only the concluding two lines, but the whole passage is effectively realised):

And (as I gathered from a bystander)
His doctrines could be held by no sane man.

Morris's concluding comment is: 'Poor Cleon! he was not wont to accept things on hearsay; yet now has his pride so lowered him ...'. (p. 328) Frederick Kirchoff provides a psychological explanation; for him, Cleon is perceived as the 'alienated aesthete' that Morris fears he may become; the young Morris is sympathetic to

Cleon's 'frustrated desire for intensity of life' but shocked by his élitism, which 'frightens Morris into a denunciation of revealing passion'.¹² At all events, is striking that Morris does not reflect on what may be seen as the central issue touched on by Browning, the Christian promise of immortality not available to believers in the old Greek gods.

In the poem whose full title is 'An Epistle containing the strange medical experience of Karshish, the Arab physician', Morris is again interested primarily in the central character. Morris finds Karshish more sympathetic than Cleon, and writes thoughtfully about his perplexity in writing, for his old master in medicine, an account of a remarkable recent experience. He has met 'one Lazarus, a Jew,/Sanguine, proportioned, fifty years of age', who claims to have been brought back to life by one Jesus several decades previously. Karshish is impressed by the integrity of Lazarus, but cannot believe what he has been told, and must think him mad. For Morris, it is all 'gloriously told', although no account is given of the how the narrative achieves its force. What impresses Morris is how sensitively Karshish responds to the extraordinary story that he has been told and cannot believe:

The very God! think, Abib; dost thou think?
 So, the All-Great were the All-Loving too;
 So, through the thunder comes a human voice
 Saying "O heart I made, a heart beats here!
 Face, my hands fashioned, see it in myself.
 Thou hast no power nor may'st conceive of mine,
 But love I gave thee, with myself to love,
 And thou must love me who have died for thee!"
 The madman saith He said so: it is strange.

Morris likes the humility of Karshish's response, which he contrasts with Cleon's "it is not possible"; Karshish only says, 'it is strange'. (p. 329) But again Morris's interest is in the character portrayed rather than the belief under discussion. Other Victorians, particularly Tennyson, were drawn to the theme of doubt and belief, but this was never a preoccupation for Morris.

Morris gives less space to the more expansive 'Bishop Blougram's Apology', a poem which runs to 1014 lines, perhaps because 'it embraces so many things'. He finds himself disliking the Bishop, of whom he gives an accurate account: 'he is more selfish even than Cleon, and not nearly so interesting: he is tolerably well content with the present state of things as regards himself, has no such very deep feelings, and is not so much troubled with doubts probably as even he says he is'. (p. 330) Morris concludes with the line, 'For Blougram, he believed say half he spoke', perhaps with some exasperation. The skilful casuistry of the bishop – or the poem – which attracts modern readers had no appeal to Morris. No one could

have been less of a casuist.

Morris identifies ‘the next band that seem to go together’, those on the theme of art: ‘Andrea del Sarto’, ‘Fra Lippo Lippi’, ‘Old Pictures at [for, in] Florence’, ‘A Toccata of Galuppi’s’ and ‘Master Hugues of Saxe-Gotha’. The poems about the two painters ‘Andrea’ and ‘Lippo’ are praised for their vividness in terms that we have come to expect and which reach an extravagant climax here: ‘What a joy it is to have these men brought up before us, made alive again, though they have passed away from the earth so long ago; made alive ... shown to us as they really were’. (pp. 330–331) Morris finds himself taken into the mind of Andrea as he sits by Lucrezia, whom he knows to be unworthy of his love but from whom he cannot free himself: ‘Oh! true story, told so often, in so many ways’. Again, it is the vivid portrayal of a scene that Morris enjoys, as when Lucrezia becomes bored with Andrea’s loving speech, because her ‘cousin’ is waiting below: ‘and so you can almost see the flutter of her dress through the doorway, almost hear her feet down the stairs, and the greeting of the bad woman without a heart with that “cousin”. Almost? nay, quite!’ (p. 332)

Morris then considers ‘Fra Lippo Lippi’, quoting Lippo’s self-justifying account of his life as artist and monk, given to the officer who is questioning him, and his resentment of his pious critics:

And yet the old schooling sticks, the old grave eyes
 Are peeping o’er my shoulder as I work,
 The heads shake still: “It’s art’s decline, my son!
 You’re not of the true painters, great and old:
 Brother Angelico’s the man, you’ll find:
 Brother Lorenzo stands his single peer –
 Fag on at flesh, you’ll never make the third”.

Morris calls this, in a rather world-weary way, ‘an oft-told tale, to be told many times again, I fear, before the world is done with’. (p. 333) He then quotes from Lippo’s speech about the value and purpose of art:

For, don’t you mark? we’re made so that we love
 First when we see them painted, things we have passed
 Perhaps a hundred times nor cared to see;
 And so they are better, painted – better to us,
 Which is the same thing. Art was given for that;
 God uses us to help each other so,
 Lending our minds out.

To this, Morris adds what feels like a heartfelt gloss:

It is very grand, this intense love of art; and I suppose that those who cannot paint, and who therefore cannot feel quite the same herein, have nevertheless sometimes had a sick longing for the power to do so, without being able to give any reason for it, such a longing as I think is felt for nothing else under the sun, at least for no other power. (pp. 334–335)

It is not clear whether Morris is expressing his opinion about the appeal of painting – which he was to undertake as a result of Rossetti's encouragement – or whether he sees painting as one of the range of arts in which a man might desire to excel. His final comment returns to Lippo the painter, with whom Morris feels some sympathy: 'you see, he had not a very good education, and yet is not so selfish as one might have expected him to be either'. (p. 334) Browning has brought him into a world in which Lippo is a convincing human presence.

Morris thinks equally highly of a less well known poem, 'Old Pictures at Florence'. Not surprisingly, he enjoys its 'indignant vindication' of the early medieval painters, whose art is not perfect, like that of the Greek sculptors, but is preferable because of its higher aim: 'higher in the thoughts that it called up in men's minds; higher too, that in its humility it gave more sympathy to poor struggling, falling men'. (p. 334) Browning had clearly read his Ruskin on this topic in *The Stones of Venice*,¹³ as of course had Morris, who goes on to quote the telling stanza:

Wherever a fresco peels and drops,
 Wherever an outline weakens and wanes
 Till the latest life in the painting stops,
 Stands One whom each fainter pulse-tick pains!
 One, wishful each scrap should clutch its brick,
 Each tinge not wholly escape the plaster,
 A lion who dies of an ass's kick,
 The wronged great soul of an ancient Master. (p. 334)

Here, unusually, Morris is responding to the poem's argument rather than to any dramatisation of character.

Morris then praises the two poems dealing with music. He quotes enthusiastically from 'A Toccata of Galuppi's', saying that the music itself could hardly be more effective than the poem, which 'rings so gloriously throughout; not one line in it falls [*sic*] from beginning to end'. (p. 335) 'Master Hugues of Saxe-Gotha' is judged of equal merit: 'exquisite in melody, it is beautiful also in its pictures, true in its meaning'. He quotes the first stanza as being 'almost as good as any for its music':

Hist, but a word, fair and soft!
 Forth and be judged, Master Hugues!
 Answer the question I've put you so oft:
 What do you mean by your mountainous fugues?
 See, we're alone in the loft. (pp. 335–336)

Here Morris shows awareness of the effects of the music of poetry, but he struggles to express his admiration for its 'melody'; 'there is something perfectly wonderful to me in the piling up of the words from verse to verse. The thing fascinates me, though I cannot tell where the wonder is: but it is there'. This is a dimension of poetry which he lacks the vocabulary to explore.

Morris then moves on to his third group of poems, which he identifies as 'more concerned with action than thought' and 'wholly dramatical'. (p. 336) These are 'Before' and 'After', 'Childe Roland to the dark tower came', 'The Patriot' and 'A Light Woman'. Morris begins with 'The Patriot'. In his view, 'the man's life is shown wonderfully, though the poem is so short'; he admires the protagonist, who has done his best although aware that the people he has freed would not remain faithful to him. Again, it is the character and his story to which Morris is attracted. 'A Light Woman' is described as 'slight sketch' about '[T]elling lies for truth's sake', told 'in a masterly way'; the last lines – 'And, Robert Browning, you writer of plays/ Here's a subject made to your hand!' – suggest to Morris that 'we may hear something more about it soon' – presumably in the form of a play. 'Before' and 'After' are described as 'rather parts of the same poem, than separate poems'. The former is said to be written in 'a splendid fighting measure', giving the point of view of 'a bystander, just before a duel' – though Ian Jack and Robert Inglesfield suggest convincingly that he is one of the seconds.¹⁴ Characteristically, Morris is interested in the psychology of the results of what he calls a 'terrible unrepented sin', and refers to Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, published in 1850, which deals powerfully with this topic. To conclude his account of the situation shown, which is left inconclusive – 'death may equalize it somewhat' – Morris quotes the whole of the companion poem, 'After'. He regards these two poems as among 'the most perfect that Robert Browning has written, as perfect in their way as "Evelyn Hope" among the love-poems'.

Morris is at least equally enthusiastic about 'Childe Roland'. He deplores a critic who had called the poem an allegory and faulted Browning for not having revealed what happened to Roland in the tower. In Morris's view, 'the poet's real design is to show us a brave man doing his duty, making his way on to his point through all dreadful things. And has not Robert Browning shown us this well? Do you not feel as you read, a strange sympathy for the lonely knight, so very, very lonely, not allowed even the fellowship of kindly memories?' (p. 339) Morris

quotes a passage which describes one of the knights who has evidently failed in the quest:

... I fancied Cuthbert's reddening face
 Beneath its garniture of curly gold,
 Dear fellow, till I almost felt him fold
 An arm in mine to fix me to the place,
 That way he used. Alas! one night's disgrace!
 Out went my heart's new fire and left it cold.
 Better this present than a past like that –
 Back therefore to my darkening path again.

Morris has again been drawn into the story, and to admire what we are shown of the calm and determined knight. He applauds the poet's decision to leave the reader 'with that snatch of old song ringing through our ears like the very horn-blast that echoed all about the windings of that dismal valley of death', quoting the poem's celebrated three last lines:

I saw them and I knew them all; and yet
 Dauntless the slug-horn to my lips I set,
 And blew. "*Childe Roland to the dark tower came*". (p. 340)

Any reader aware of Morris's admiration of the courage he associates with the Middle Ages, and later with Iceland, will not be surprised by his asserting at this point: 'In my own heart I think I love this poem the best of all in these volumes'. Kirchhoff observes that Morris over-simplifies the poem and makes Roland 'the heroic figure he wishes to be'.¹⁵ This seems to me too severe; the heroic reading is one of the possibilities open to the reader. But there are certainly others; Marsh tells us that, for Rossetti, the poem 'spoke eloquently of the artist's dreams and frustrations',¹⁶ a reading which seems to be accepted by the editors of the Oxford Browning, whose note on the 'lost adventurers, my peers' referred to by Roland in Stanza XXXIII states: 'Here the reference is probably to earlier poets'.¹⁷

But Morris admits that he is not sure of his judgement of 'Childe Roland', because 'this and all the other poems seem to me but a supplement to the love-poems, even as it is in all art, in all life; love, I mean, of some sort: and all that life or art where this is not the case is but a wretched mistake after all' (p. 340) – a highly romantic assertion which we might want to relate to Morris's feelings for Jane at the time. At all events, this leads him into an account of his fourth grouping, the love-poems. Morris argues that Browning offers more in this area than do other poets, and admits that he finds it particularly difficult to discuss these poems, as 'love for love's sake, the only true love' can be adequately expressed only in poetry. His personal involvement is shown in the dramatic exclamation

'Pray Christ some of us attain to it before we die!', an exclamation which goes well beyond what we think of as literary criticism. 'Evelyn Hope' is found to be 'quite perfect in its way; Tennyson himself has written nothing more beautiful'. (p. 341) Morris finds himself driven to quote at some length from this poem commemorating the death of a sixteen-year-old girl. He begins in the fourth stanza and continues to the last:

I loved you, Evelyn, all the while;
 My heart seemed full as it could hold;
 There was space and to spare for the frank young smile
 And the red young mouth and the hair's young gold:
 So, hush! I will give you this leaf to keep;
 See, I shut it inside the sweet cold hand.
 There, that is our secret! go to sleep;
 You will wake, and remember, and understand. (pp. 341–342)

This conclusion again shows Morris's admiration for Browning's ability fully to realise a dramatic scene, as he writes of 'the darkened room [and] the wise, learned, world-worn man hanging over the fair, dead girl, who "perhaps had scarcely heard his name" '.

Of the other love poems, 'A Woman's Last Word' is found 'perfect in thought as in music', conveying 'intense passion'. (pp. 341–342) Morris's quotation shows that he was sensitive to the lyrical effects that can be achieved by the use of short lines:

Meet, if thou require it,
 Both demands,
 Laying flesh and spirit
 In thy hands!

That shall be to-morrow
 Not to-night:
 I must bury sorrow
 Out of sight.

Must a little weep, Love
 Foolish me!
 And so fall asleep, Love,
 Loved by thee.'

But, as we have come to expect, Morris does not try to analyse the lyrical effect achieved here.

Morris then praises 'By the Fireside', with its focus on the lover's total com-

mitment. Parts of the poem – which runs to fifty three five-line stanzas – remind him of Tennyson's *Maud*, perhaps the effect of its 'melody; it is all told in such sweet, half-mournful music, as though in compassion to those who have not obtained this love, who will not obtain it while they live on earth, though they may in Heaven' (p. 343) – an unusually wistful conclusion. Again, Morris shows awareness of the poem's musical quality, although he cannot analyse it. He also praises the love conveyed for 'the beautiful country where the new life came to him' and the poem's 'pictures of the fair autumn-tide':

Oh, the sense of the yellow mountain flowers,
 And the thorny balls, each three in one,
 The chestnuts throw on our path in showers,
 For the drop of the woodland's fruit's begun,
 These early November hours.

This is the first reference in the review to pictorial qualities, not often notable in Browning's poetry but prominent in Morris's middle-period poetry, as in the poems for the months in *The Earthly Paradise*.

Morris then turns to 'The Statue and the Bust', a poem which runs to two hundred and fifty lines, though he does not remark on its length. He accuses the lovers in this 'sad story' of 'cowardly irresolution', again treating them as if they were living beings. Morris thinks it one of the best poems in the two volumes: 'the rhythm is so wonderfully suited to the story, it draws you along through the days and years that the lovers passed in delay, so quietly, swiftly, smoothly'. (p. 344) The reference to rhythm here shows Morris becoming more aware of the formal qualities of the poems he discusses in the later part of the review. Jack and Inglesfield, writing in the era of modern literary criticism, remark appositely that the stanza used in the poem is 'an abbreviated form of *terza rima*, which creates a rapid movement that contrasts with the failure of the lovers to take action'.¹⁸

In 'The Last Ride Together' Morris again finds himself drawn into the dramatic situation of the lovers, with a prevailing mood of accepted failure. He is struck by 'strange feeling' at the end, when we are aware of the narrator's wonder about the meaning of his beloved's silent presence in the final stanza:

What if we still ride on, we two,
 With life for ever old yet new,
 Changed not in kind but in degree,
 The instant made eternity, –
 And Heaven just prove that I and she
 Ride, ride together, forever ride? (p. 345)

In 'Riding Together: William Morris and Robert Browning' in 1992 Amanda Hodgson drew attention to the similarity of the title of this poem to Morris's

'Riding Together', and to the two poems' shared dramatic qualities.¹⁹

Morris admits he is puzzled by 'In a Balcony', but gives an account of his understanding of the two central characters; unlike less sympathetic critics, he is not put off by the fact that 'it is all intricate and difficult, like human action'. (p. 345) He refers to an earlier reviewer who had found 'Women and Roses' obscure, and offers his own understanding of the situation evoked. He admits that his account 'does not sound very well', and generalises from this into the view that

it does not often help poems much to solve them, because there are in poems so many exquisitely small and delicate turns of thought running through their music and along with it, that cannot be done into prose, any more than the infinite variety of form and shadow and colour in a great picture can be rendered by a coloured woodcut; which (in the case of the poem) is caused, I suppose, by its being concentrated thought. (p. 346)

The idea of 'solving' a poem, as if it were a kind of puzzle, is of course contrary to all Romantic ideas of poetry. That Morris finds the issue difficult is evidence both of his youth and of his insight. He is aware of the peculiar quality of poetry, and feeling his way towards an adequate response to it.

Morris considers that 'the final dedication to E.B.B' ['One Word More'] provides a worthy crown to the love poems, and quotes its conclusion:

Oh their Rafael of the dear Madonnas,
Oh, their Dante of the dread Inferno,
Wrote one song – and in my brain I sing it;
Drew one angel – come, see, on my bosom! (p. 346)

Morris ends his review less than tidily. He apologises for not having discussed a number of other poets that he clearly admires, such as 'Saul', 'A Grammarian's Funeral', 'Lover's Quarrel' ['A Lover's Quarrel'], 'Mesmerism' and 'Any Wife to Any Husband', offering as his consolation the thought that 'we shall have a great deal more to say of Robert Browning in this Magazine and then we can make amends'. It certainly shows that the young Morris did not regret the demands made by Browning on his readers. He argues that it is deplorable that Browning's reputation for obscurity has led readers to neglect him, but that is the usual course of events: 'it was so last year with "Maud"; it is so with Ruskin', whose popularity has declined as 'his eager fighting with falsehood and wrong' is now denounced as unfair. Something similar happened with the Pre-Raphaelites, but fortunately the public seems to have come round – 'though to this day their noblest pictures are the least popular'. Morris concludes wryly: 'Yes, I wonder what the critics would have said to "Hamlet Prince of Denmark", if it had been first published by Messrs. Chapman and Hall in the year 1855!' (p. 348) Morris's enthusiasm is conveyed in the extrava-

gant judgement that Browning is worthy to be compared with Shakespeare.

Eugene LeMire rightly finds in the review 'honest independence combined with moral and aesthetic sensitivity and soundness of judgment that position Morris in advance of his time',²⁰ MacCarthy praises the review as 'generous and conscientious'²¹ and Frederick Kirchoff goes so far as to call it 'a prime document of Morris's development as a poet'.²² It certainly shows the young Morris as a perceptive and thoughtful reader of contemporary poetry, and we can link his observations to the poems that were to constitute *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems*, published two years later.

After encountering Morris's intelligent enthusiasm, it is striking to be reminded that *Men and Women*, which both Robert and Elizabeth had hoped would establish Browning's reputation, was negatively received by reviewers in England. Indeed, Jack and Inglesfield state that 'The critical reception of *Men and Women* was no doubt the greatest disappointment of Browning's poetical career. No second edition was called for in England' – though the reception was 'distinctly better' in the United States.²³ The first review to appear, in *The Athenaeum*, enquired 'Who will not grieve over energy wasted and power misspent?' to be followed by *The Saturday Review*'s opening statement, 'It is really high time that this sort of thing should, if possible, be stopped'.²⁴ Carlyle, though he praised the 'opulence of intellect' in the poems, advised the poet to mend the fault of 'unintelligibility': 'That is a fact – you are dreadfully difficult to understand, and that is really a sin'.²⁵ Ruskin recognised the power to be found in the poems, but questions 'the Presentation of the Power', going so far as to say that 'when I take up these poems in the evening I find them absolutely and literally a set of the most amazing Conundrums that ever were proposed to me'.²⁶ Browning defended himself in a dignified way in a letter to Ruskin a week later: 'Do you think poetry was ever generally understood – or can be? ... A poet's affair is with God, to whom he is accountable, and of whom is his reward: look elsewhere, and you find misery enough. Do you believe people understood *Hamlet*?'²⁷ Rossetti was one of the few to share Morris's view. He wrote to William Allingham, 'What a magnificent series is *Men and Women*. Of course you have it half by heart ere this'.²⁸ In this context, we can understand Elizabeth's observation in April 1860 that no-one in England 'except a small knot of pre-Raffaelite men, pretends to do him justice'.²⁹

On 1 May 1891, when Morris was trying to put together material for his *Poems by the Way*, he told Charles Fairfax Murray that he liked 'The Long Land' – of which Murray had evidently sent him a draft – in a way, but then exclaimed:

But O the callowness of it! It cannot be altered, and I should shudder at seeing such ingenuous callowness exposed to the public gaze. Item it is tainted with imitation of Browning (as Browning then was).³⁰

This confirms the influence of Browning on the young Morris; although the poem was not included in *Poems by the Way*, May Morris did print it in a section of 'Early Poems' in the *Collected Works*, Vol. XXIV, pp. 58–62. In this context, it is surprising to find that when Morris gave the 'biographical talk' in November 1892, quoted earlier, he spoke more of the influence of Elizabeth Barrett Browning than of her husband:

I read Mrs. Browning a good deal at Oxford. She was a great poetess – in some respects she had greater capacity than Browning, though she was a poor rhymers. I refer to the earlier work; Aurora Leigh I consider dull.³¹

Elizabeth Barrett Browning had successfully published her *Poems* in 1844, *Sonnets from the Portuguese* in 1850 and *Casa Guido Windows* in 1851. Morris did not follow her example of writing social-problem poems such as the popular if sentimental 'The Cry of the Children'. We may see it as a limitation in Morris that he found dull *Aurora Leigh*, one of the finest Victorian narrative poems, which engages powerfully with social issues from a point of view admired by modern feminists. Mackail was presumably referring to Morris's 1892 talk when he mentions his having paid tribute to her influence shortly before he died; he states that Mrs Browning's poetry was popular during Morris's Oxford years, and suggests that her influence may account for the 'slovenly rhymes' in some of Morris's early poems.³² Later critics have sometimes found these rhymes adventurous rather than careless.

When Morris published *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems* in 1858, to largely uncomprehending reviews, Browning seems to have been one of its defenders. Mackail recorded that 'Browning himself, it may not be without interest to know, was one of the earliest and most enthusiastic admirers of this volume'.³³ Mackail also quotes J. W. Hoole of Queen's College as having asked Morris about the influences on the style of his Arthurian poems, to receive the reply: 'More like Browning than anyone else, I suppose'. Mackail goes on to develop the idea cogently: 'What both alike aim at and attain is the realization, keen, swift and minute, of some tragic event or situation ...' Of Morris's Froissartian poems, Mackail remarks, 'They might aptly be headed Dramatic Lyrics and Dramatic Romances of the fourteenth century. The range is much less than Browning's; but the intensity of realization is even greater, and it is free from the slightest trace of parade or pedantry'.³⁴ Mackail's argument is convincing, although it does not apply to all the poems in Morris's volume. Mackail does not employ the term 'dramatic monologue', although that term had come into use as a critical term to characterise a poem with 'a first-person speaker who is not the poet', to use an abbreviated version of Alan Sinfield's 1977 definition.³⁵

If we try to relate the poems of *The Defence of Guenevere* to the four groups Morris found in Browning, we will find that the categories of 'belief and doubt'

and 'art' yield no examples at all; Morris was highly unusual among Victorian writers in not having been troubled by – or indeed interested in – the issue of religious belief, and although he wrote about artists and craftsmen in prose, they did not feature prominently in his poetry. It is the poems concerned 'more with action than thought' that constitute by far the majority of the collection, and include those usually characterised by editors as Arthurian and Froissartian because of their subject-matter. A magnificent example is 'The Haystack in the Floods', while 'Concerning Geffray Teste Noire' shows evidence of Morris's preparedness to risk obscurity rather than to lose drama. MacCarthy writes perceptively about Browning's influence on Morris as having encouraged him to launch into dramatic action without any preamble, and not to find resolution essential: 'These are difficult poems, unsettling and demanding'.³⁶ As to love poetry, Morris is nowhere near as prolific as Browning, despite his expressed admiration for the genre, but he has the beautiful 'Praise of My Lady' and the less direct 'Summer Dawn'. In addition, Morris also wrote the remarkable group of fantasy or symbolist poems, such as 'The Blue Closet' and 'The Tune of Seven Towers', which have no parallels in Browning, with his preference for forms of realism. It is in the poems of action that the influence of Browning makes itself felt.

Morris's review of *Men and Women* appeared in March 1856, but he does not appear to have met Browning until he moved to London in August 1856, where he took lodgings with Burne-Jones at 1 Upper Gordon Street; they moved to 17 Red Lion Square in November. MacCarthy tells us that by that time Morris and Burne-Jones were on friendly terms with Robert Browning, 'the greatest poet alive', and that both the Brownings were impressed by Morris's 'dramatic' poetry.³⁷

However, no significant relationship developed between Browning and Morris, and their poetry – and lives – came to follow very different paths. Morris did send Browning copies of *The Life and Death of Jason* and at least the first volume of *The Earthly Paradise*. Browning acknowledged the *Jason* in a letter of 25 May 1867, showing his awareness of its pictorial qualities:

What a noble, melodious and most beautiful poem you have written! I lay it down, at the last line, to say this – but often and often again do I hope to read it, and see the pictures in it by your help. I don't at all wonder that you have done so admirably, however – how should I, with your other book, which has been my delight ever since I read it? I did not think that I should be easily reconciled to your keeping silence this long while, but this poem justifies you indeed. Thank you heartily and affectionately.³⁸

His acknowledgement of the *Earthly Paradise* volume, dated 7 June 1868, was equally positive, and thoughtful about Morris's relating of past and present:

Here is your book read at last, – and beautiful it proves: affecting me much as do Handel's fine 'suites', as he calls them, for the clavecin of his day: all the newer for their archaic tinge, all the more varied (to the appreciatively observant) because of the continuous key and recurring forms, – the New masked in the Old and perpetually looking out of the eyeholes of its disguise. It is a double delight to me – to read such poetry and know you, of all the world, wrote it, –you whose songs I used to sing while galloping by Fiesole in old days, – 'Ho, is there any will ride with me?'³⁹

In this context, it is disconcerting to find Browning writing to Isabel Blagden on 19 January 1870 about *The Earthly Paradise* and suggesting that his admiration was directed exclusively to Morris's early work: 'Morris is sweet, pictorial, clever always but a weariness to me by this time. The lyrics were "the first sprightly runnings" – this that follows is a laboured brew with the old flavour but no *body*'.⁴⁰ It is clear that by 1870 the two poets' practices had nothing in common, and any contact between them was on social and political rather than poetic lines.

Morris clearly regarded Browning as a liberal thinker likely to support some of the causes he himself believed in. Browning's liberalism was well known, and he was indeed one of the convenors of the first national conference of the Eastern Question Association in December 1876,⁴¹ to which Morris was to devote so much of his energy at that period. When Morris wrote to Browning in November 1879 about the threat to St Mark's, Venice, he received Browning's assurance that he agreed with Morris's view, although he would not speak at the protest meeting being organised in Oxford: 'I never speak'.⁴² Morris also invited Browning to sign the petition against the widening of Magdalen Bridge in Oxford in December 1881,⁴³ and sent a long letter to him in November 1887 asking him to sign a letter, organised by the Socialist League, seeking for mercy to be shown in the case of the Chicago anarchists.⁴⁴ But Browning was no socialist, and indeed supported the British occupation of Egypt in 1882 and dissented from Gladstone's truly liberal policy when he committed himself to Home Rule for Ireland.⁴⁵ Browning's sonnet 'Why I am a Liberal', written in 1885 in response to an invitation from a left-wing Liberal journalist for contributions on that theme which became a book with the same title,⁴⁶ shows his public position in its last six rhetorical lines:

But little do or can the best of us:
That little is achieved through Liberty.
Who then dares hold – emancipated thus –
His fellow shall continue bound? Not I,
Who live, love, labour freely, nor discuss
A brother's right to freedom. That is 'Why'.

Trevor Lloyd has remarked that ‘in general his desire for liberty did not express itself in a belief that everybody has an equal claim to an equal amount of liberty’.⁴⁷ At the same time Morris was publishing *The Pilgrims of Hope in Commonweal*. His hopes, conveyed through the protagonist Richard and going far beyond Browning’s range, were for the millions to be emancipated from their drudgery through revolutionary change:

Tis the lot of many millions! Yet if half these millions knew
The hope that my heart hath learned, we shall find a deed to do,
And who or what shall withstand us? And I, e’en I, might live
To know the love of my fellows and the gifts that earth can give.⁴⁸

By this time Browning was a public figure, and the founding of the Browning Society in October 1881 by F.J. Furnivall and Miss Emily Hickey confirmed his public position, though also arousing criticism as a piece of self-advertisement. Max Beerbohm’s splendid cartoon, ‘Browning taking tea with the Browning Society’, shows him, as Thomas puts it, ‘seated smugly among earnest young men and intense maiden ladies’.⁴⁹ This is perhaps unfair; Browning did not attend meetings of the Society, although he was grateful for its support – no other Society existed to celebrate a living poet. It is in this context that we find Morris’s last reference to Browning in his correspondence. It occurs in letter to Theodore Watts-Dunton of 25 March 1892, thanking him for his review of *Poems by the Way*. In the review, Watts-Dunton had made some critical remarks about Wordsworth and Browning as having gained the attention of the British public through the ‘unpoetic’ part of their writings: the ‘versified prose of Wordsworth and the prose without versification of Browning can by their very defects reach the British public’. Morris, never an admirer of Wordsworth, has been struck by these remarks – they ‘raised a grin in me’ – and he responded interestingly and in some detail:

You know, though Browning was a poet, he had not a *non-* but an *anti-*poetical side to him; and this is why he has achieved a popularity among the ‘educated middle-classes’. Who though they are badly educated are probably over-educated for their intellect. Yes the Briton has no interest in a book if it is merely a work of art, ie if it is meant to endure, the ephemeral is all he cares about; as he naturally thinks his own dear life so damned important. And yet though I am not a patriot (as you know) I doubt if said Briton is more anti-poetical than the men of other nations. Only he seems more anti-artistic, I think because he has gone further through the mill of modernism; some survivals of the old artistic spirit still cling in a queer paradoxical way to Frenchmen & Germans: to Englishmen none, unless they have gone through the mill and come out at the other.⁵⁰

Here Morris brings the letter to a rapid conclusion, as if embarrassed by these musings: 'Excuse this yarn and with thanks again & best wishes'. But the letter shows that Morris was interested in Browning as a figure in late nineteenth-century English culture as it passed through 'the mill of modernism', a figure he has come to see as very different from the vigorous and demanding poet he had encountered with such excitement in 1855.

NOTES

1. Donald Thomas, *Robert Browning. A Life Within a Life*, New York: Viking Press, 1982, *passim*. Subsequently Thomas.
2. May Morris, ed, *The Collected Works of William Morris*, London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1910–15, Vol. XXII, Introduction, p. xxxii. Subsequently *CW*.
3. Fiona MacCarthy, *William Morris. A Life for Our Times*, London: Faber & Faber, 1994, p. 142. Subsequently MacCarthy.
4. Jan Marsh, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Painter and Poet*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1999, p. 57. Subsequently Marsh.
5. Marsh, p. 44.
6. Thomas, p.147.
7. Thomas, p.145.
8. Thomas, p.160.
9. Thomas, p.145.
10. Marsh, p.152.
11. *CW*, Vol. I, pp. 326–348. Quotations are given as they appear in the review. Page references are given in brackets after quotations.
12. Frederick Kirchoff, *William Morris*, Boston, Mass.: Twayne Publishers, 1979, p. 33. Subsequently Kirchoff.
13. John Ruskin, 'The Nature of Gothic', Ch. 6 of the second volume of *The Stones of Venice*, in E. T. Cook & Alexander Wedderburn, eds, *The Works of John Ruskin*, London: George Allen, Vol. X, 1904, p. 190.
14. Ian Jack & Robert Inglesfield, eds, *The Poetical Works of Robert Browning*, Vol. V, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995, Introduction p. xxxv. Subsequently Oxford Browning.
15. Kirchoff, p. 34. In his own poems, though, Kirchoff feels that Morris is less conclusive and more ambiguous.
16. Marsh, p. 156.
17. Oxford Browning, p. 149.
18. Oxford Browning, p. 160.

19. Amanda Hodgson, 'Riding Together: William Morris and Robert Browning', *Journal of the William Morris Society*, Vol. IX, No. 4, Summer 1992, pp. 3–7.
20. Eugene LeMire, ed, *The Hollow Land and Other Contributions to the Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*, Bristol; Thoemmes Press, 1996, p. xx.
21. MacCarthy, pp. 100–101.
22. Kirchhoff, p. 33.
23. Oxford Browning, p. xxxv.
24. Oxford Browning, p. xxix.
25. Oxford Browning, pp. xxxi–xxxii.
26. Oxford Browning, p. xxxii.
27. Oxford Browning, pp. xxxiv–xxxv.
28. Oxford Browning, p. xxxi.
29. Oxford Browning, p. xxxv.
30. Norman Kelvin, ed, *The Collected Letters of William Morris*, 4 Vols in 5, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984–1996, Vol. III, p. 298. Subsequently Kelvin.
31. *CW*, Introduction, Vol. XXII, p. xxxi.
32. J. W. Mackail, *The Life of William Morris*, London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1922. Vol. I, p. 60. Afterwards Mackail.
33. Mackail, Vol. I, p. 137.
34. Mackail, Vol. I, p. 136.
35. Alan Sinfield, *The Dramatic Monologue*, London: Methuen & Co. 1977, p. 7. Sinfield begins his discussion with two poems by Browning, 'Fra Lippo Lippi' and 'My Last Duchess', and also considers 'Karshish' (p. 16). But he makes no mention of Morris, or Rossetti. In her chapter on the dramatic monologue in *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Poetry*, Cambridge: CUP, 2000, Cornelia Pearsall refers to Tennyson, Browning, Barrett Browning, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Swinburne, Augusta Webster, and Amy Levy (p. 84), but makes no reference to Morris; however, Karen Alkalay-Gut in her chapter 'Aesthetic and Decadent Poetry' discusses 'The Defence of Guenevere' as a dramatic monologue (p. 237).
36. MacCarthy, p. 143.
37. MacCarthy, p. 116.
38. May Morris, ed, *William Morris: Artist, Writer, Socialist*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1936, Vol. I, p. 641. Subsequently *AWS*.
39. *AWS*, Vol I, pp. 641–642.
40. T.L. Hood, ed, *The Letters of Robert Browning*, Yale: Yale University Press, 1933, p. 134.
41. MacCarthy, p. 381.
42. MacCarthy, p. 416.

43. Kelvin, Vol. II, p. 85.
44. MacCarthy, p. 566.
45. Trevor Lloyd, 'Browning and Politics'. In Isobel Armstrong, ed, *Robert Browning*, London: G. Bell & Sons, 1974, p.163. Subsequently Lloyd.
46. Lloyd, p. 161.
47. Lloyd, p. 166.
48. Conclusion of Part VI of *Pilgrims of Hope*; in *CW*, Vol. XXIV, p. 388.
49. Thomas, p. 273.
50. Kelvin, Vol. III, p. 384, and Note 2, p. 385.