

## A GLIMPSE OF THE LIFE OF ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING

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*Elizabeth Barrett Browning is an English poetess of genius who attempted to write, both in prose and verse at the age of ten and made too much progress at the age of fifteen that she was known among her friends as a writer. As a voracious reader she took interest in Shakespearean plays, Milton's Paradise Lost and some of Pope's Homeric translations before the age of ten. Her life was uneventful but surely it was worth relating. Like John Keats, she is much interested in Greek literature and Greek philosophers. She has keen desire to learn Greek language as she wants to read Homer and to know the richness of Greek's glory and history. In 1821 she composed a long poem The Sorrows of the Muses dealing the conflict between Greece and Rome. She presents this conflict through the comparison between herself and her brother. She represents Greece's energy, pride enthusiasm and ambition while her brother presents Rome. She took her themes from the Greek mythology and treated them with great originality. Actually she had a keen desire to be the female counterpart of Homer and Aeschylus.*

At the age of twelve she wrote an epic The Battle of Marathon consisting of four books of rhyming couplet. She was so much enamored of Greek language that she read Pope's and read Greek in the company of her brother Edward under the tuition of Mr. Scwiney. But when Edward went to Charterhouse in 1820, she was deprived of the great pleasure she get in learning Greek. She says:

*To comprehend even the Greek alphabet was delight inexpressible. Under the tuition of Mr. Scwiney I attained that which I so fervently desired. For eight months during this year I never remember having directed my attentions to any other object than the ambition of gaining.*

Under the guidance of Mr. Scwiney she learnt how to enjoy the kingdom of Homer. Her joy was limitless to know the depths of the treasures of the Greek and Latin authors. She also read Dante's Inferno. As an invalid, she had no friends or mentors with whom she could discuss her thoughts about Homer, Aeschylus and other writers yet she did not remain idle in her sickness. Her parents supported her taste and poetic talent Her father, a man of discipline and religious authority encouraged her poetical pursuits and when she wrote her grand epic The Battle of Marathon, his joy was boundless and he went to a printer and had fifty copies made to be distributed among the friends and relatives. As a religious child he also learnt Hebrew to read the Old Testament. She read Odyssey again and again as Dorothy Mermain remarks:

*She was enamoured – the word is not too strong of Greek poetry, especially Homer’s; of the ideal of political freedom in ancient Athens and in modern Greece, where the struggle for liberation was made doubly glamorous by the participation of Byron; and of the classical Greek languages... She imagined Greece itself as a place of noble excess, free effusions of primitive energy: In a draft of a juvenile essay she speaks of the wild. Spontaneous flashes of Greek genius of talent unimpaired & genius unconstrained. Later, in the preface to her translation of Prometheus Bound. She describes Aeschylus in terms which match her early descriptions of herself as spontaneous, energetic and innately rebellious, her passions held down by an iron self – control.*

Since childhood she had been a lover of poetry. Hugh Stuart Boyd and Uvedale Price, the great Greek scholars were much impressed with her poems and Elizabeth got the opportunity to get their scholarly suggestions and advice. Hugh Stuart Boyd was a blind scholar of Greek language and she got from him the translations of Basil, Gregory and Synesisus etc. Both Elizabeth and Hugh Stuart Boyd read their favorite authors together, or it may be said that the young student read to her old master. Elizabeth had great respect for Mr. Boyd and regarded him as an angel who has the fair vision and insight. To her, he is the God-loved man who is one of the most simple and upright of human beings who is one of the most simple and upright of human beings who has the eyes to recognize what is good and beautiful. Her beautiful poem wine of Cyprus is dedicated to Mr. Boyd, to whom she was indebted for her knowledge of that dainty vintage:

*I think of those long mornings  
Which my thought goes for to seek,  
When, betwixt the folio’s turnings,  
Solemn flowed the rhythmic Greek.  
Past the pane the mountain spreading,  
Swept the sheep – bell’s tinkling noise,  
While a girlish voice was reading  
Somewhat low for ai’s and oi’s.*

Actually Hugh Boyd was a man of strong fantasies and prejudices and he certainly led her eccentric dance through Greek literature. It is from him that she gained the facility of reading Greek. Both had a very tender and picturesque relationships.

Hugh Boyd suggested her to translate Aeschylus's Prometheus Bound. To her Prometheus was one of the most original, grand and attaching characters ever conceived by man. In her works, she expresses her appreciation for Prometheus's victory when he refuses to grand Zeus the foreknowledge of the over throw of his realm.

Actually she had great admiration for Lord Byron who was political ideal who fought for liberty. She is so much fascinated by him that she used to think seriously of dressing up like a boy and running away to be Lord Byron's page. Her poem Leila: A Tale presents her liking for Lord Byron and Campbell. In the poem stanzas On The Death Of Lord Byron she calls him Britannnia's Graecia's hero and says:

*He was, and is not! Graecia's trembling shore,  
Sighing through all her palmy groves, shall tell.  
That Harold's pilgrimage at last is o'er –  
Mute the impassioned tonque, and tuneful shell...  
For lo! the great Deliv'rer breathes farewell!  
Gives to the world his memory and a grave –  
Expiring in the land he only lived so save !*

Though she did not get any regular education in school, she studied the classical and modern writers at home. Her earliest volume, an Essay On mind was published in her seventeenth year in 1826 and reveals the influence of abundant reading and a just appreciation of the great writers such as Plato, Bacon, Locke, Boling broke and Condillac. In the poem wine, of Cyprus she expresses her devotion to Aeschylus, Euripides, Plato etc. To her, Plato had a divine power as she says:

*And my Plato, the divine one,  
If men know the gods aright  
By their motions as they shine on  
With a glorious trail of light!  
And your noble Christian bishops.  
Who mouthed grandly the last Greek,  
Though the sponges on their hyssops  
Were distant with wine – too weak.*

As an invalid, she remained absorbed in her own world, full of imagination and passed her time in reading various writers. Her father ordered her not to read Henry Fielding's Tom Jones and Gibbon's History and she never disobeyed his orders and read Tom Paine's Age of Reason, Voltaire's Philosophical Dictionary, Hume's Essay, Spenser Rousseau, Voltaire and Mary Wollstonecraft etc. She also had the knowledge of the stories of Athena, Cassandra, Godiva and the biblical stories of Eve and Mary Magdalene. As a religious poetess, she studied the works of Greek Fathers, and English divines and was influenced by them. She read the Bible daily. Since childhood, she had her religious independence was against the empty rituals and dogmas.

In 1836, she came into the contact of Miss Mitford, who, in her charming volume Recollection of a Literary Life presents a sketch of Elizabeth and declared –

*“She (Elizabeth) was certainly of the most interesting persons I had ever seen. Her figure was slight and delicate, with a shower of dark curls falling on either side of a most expressive face; large, tender eyes, richly fringed by dark eye lashes; a smile like a sunbeam, and such a look of youthfulness, that Miss Mitford had some difficulty in persuading the friend in whose carriage she rode to see her at Chiswick, that this translates of the ‘Prometheus’, the authoress of the Essay on Mind was old enough to be introduced into Company.*

In spite of the difference in their ages, both Elizabeth and Miss Mitford became close and warm friends as Miss Mitford supported her literary tastes. Both had the same thoughts, zeal and

taste. Elizabeth loved the dog, Flush greatly, given to her by Miss Mitford. While she led the life of an invalid, Flush was her only companion.

Miss Mitford discovered her genius and wrote a letter to her father from Russell Square on May 27, 1836, about visit she had made to the giraffes and the diorama with Mr. John Kenyon who, by the way, was a relative of Miss Barrett's:

*A sweet young woman, whom we called for in Gloucester Place, went with us – a Miss Barrett – who reads Greek as I do French and has published some translations from Aeschylus, and some most striking poems. She is a delightful young creature; shy and timid and modest. Nothing but desire to me got her out at all, but now she is coming to us tomorrow night also...*

*She is so sweet and gentle, and so pretty, that one looks at her as if she were some bright flower, and she says it is like a dream that she should be talking to me, whose works she knows by heart.*

Actually she had seen little enough of the world in her ample, opulent home and except for her father and her favorite brother; it does not appear that her family formed more than a harmonious background to life. Her sisters were younger than she and her strength began to fail as she grew up, and she was recognized as the fragile in the family. Her mother seemed to have been somewhat pressed by the cares of bringing into the world her huge family. Her brother Edward was two years younger than she and he alone gave her full companionship and sympathy. It was he on whom she lavished the whole strength of her love. It was the time when she prepared herself for the calling of a poet as her devotion to poetry had at least the quality of endurance. To her poetry was her life's work as remarks:

*Poetry was to be her life's work. It was not to be merely a pleasant adornment to life, a beautiful object to be taken out at intervals and put away again. It was to be an integral part of her existence, a sacred mission, demanding perpetual industry and enthusiasm. Moreover, though she had as yet written nothing showing unusual promise, she seems to have been harassed by no doubt on the subject. She was under no illusion; she felt the possibility of failure; she was conscious of her smallness, her inadequacy, as she stood before the mysterious shrine. But of her vocation, her duty to consecrate her life to the august service, of this she seems never to have had a moment's misgiving. Perhaps a little less solemnity would have done her poetry no harm, but the sight has its impressiveness for all that.*



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