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Rare-Item Analysis

“A Wonderful Variety of Mud”

Correspondence Related to Robert Browning’s *The Ring and The Book*

Several letters gathering information for Robert Browning’s *The Ring and the Book* and the correspondence between Browning and Julia Wedgwood which capture her first reactions to the volumes as they are published are currently held in the Browning Letters collection at the Armstrong Browning Library. The full transcripts and scans of these valuable letters are searchable from their [website](#). Though the letter to Panizzi on 19 March 1866 has been referenced in at least one scholarly article, and the letters between Browning and his friend, Julia Wedgwood have been of general interest since their discovery, the discussion of the relationship between raw fact and dramatized fiction in these letters should be of particular interest in classroom discussions and scholarship. Julia Wedgwood’s critical response balances the more effusive praise of such readers as Browning’s long-time friend, Isa Blagden. These letters show Browning’s response to a reader engaging with his own *The Ring and the Book* in the same way that he engaged with *The Yellow Book*.

Robert Browning’s *The Ring and the Book* is a retelling of a murder trial that took place in Rome in 1698. While exploring the bookstalls in Florence in June of 1860, Browning discovered the Old Yellow Book, a collection of records and letters related to the murder trial. The first book of his poem describes how he read his “prize” (1.109) as he walked home from the market that day. This began a fascination that would not end until he had published his own twelve book, poetical interpretation of the event in four volumes from November of 1868 to

February of 1869. That it is primarily composed of dramatic monologues, adopting the voices of those concerned in the trial, is important for the letters between Julia Wedgwood and Robert Browning over the months that the poem was published.

On [November 19, 1862](#), a year and a half after Elizabeth Barrett Browning died, Robert Browning tells Isa Blagden in a letter that he intends to “begin on [his] murder-case” after he has finished a new edition of poetry, and on March 19, 1866, a [letter to Anthony Panizzi](#), the chief librarian at the British Museum, indicates that he was deep in research for the book. Of particular interest to Michael Meredith is Browning’s request for information on Arezzo, the location for half the action of *The Ring and the Book*, but a town only a little known to Browning. He asks for “an exact account of the city, a plan of its streets and neighbourhood, the genealogy of its chief families; any old prints of costumes &c.” Browning was evidently interested in the facts and details of the case so that he could present a realistic picture (Meredith 101).

It was this very realism to which Wedgwood took such exception when she complained that he “presents us with a wonderful variety of mud.” Julia Wedgwood was initially an intimate friend who decided for reasons not well known to end the early ardor of the relationship after a few years of frequent correspondence and visits. Later, Browning and Wedgwood rebuilt their friendship, but “it is a calmer friendship now, a friendship of letters alone, and yet, underlying the surface, there is a sort of irritability in Browning’s attitude and an increasing tendency to criticize in Miss Wedgwood’s” (Curle xvi). *The Ring and the Book* was published in four volumes from November of 1868 to February of 1869, and Wedgwood read and responded to them as Browning sent them. The relational tension is evident in these letters, but the difference in opinion also arises from differing views on the purpose of poetry and the balance between fact and fiction.

On [November 19, 1868](#), just a few days before the publication of the first volume, Browning responds to Wedgwood's complaint that he likes to study morbid cases.

:...the business has been, as I specify, to explain fact—and the fact is what you see & , worse, are to see. The question with me has never been, “Could not one, by changing the factors, work out the sum to better result?”—but—declare and prove the actual result, & there an end. Before I die, I hope to purely invent something,—here my pride was concerned to invent nothing: the minutest circumstance that denotes character is true: the black is so much,—the white, no more.

Browning is defending his choice of subject in this letter, but he may also be making his reader aware of her role in the creation of that morbidity. How are we to read lines like “the fact is what you see &, worse, are to see.”? Is the “worse” in the books which are to come (she has yet to read the monologue of the villain and the “buffoon lawyers.”) Or does Wedgwood, in reading, make it worse than he wrote it? We must remember, that when he read the Yellow Book, he made a story of his own. He *claims* to reproduce “the minutest circumstance” and his letters of research indicate that this was one of his intentions, but a great deal of imaginative fiction yet forms the alloy that holds the golden facts of this book together. “What’s this then, which proves good yet seems untrue?/ this that I mixed with truth... what’s your name for this? (I.701-705). How then, does the reader of his book mix their own alloy of imagination with this story to make meaning?

Julia Wedgwood's response on [January 30th, 1869](#) gives us some insight into these questions. This was written the day that Volume 3 was published, and begins “Pray make haste to send me the old Pope to take the taste of the lawyers out of my mouth!” But this is a letter that exists in two drafts, both held at the Armstrong Browning Library. The end of the first letter tells us the reason for the two drafts. After a remarkably frank letter of objection to the subject and tone of the book Wedgwood writes,

“I laugh at myself for writing this long criticism to (say) the 2nd most impatient man I know! Certainly I should not venture on it if my writing necessarily implied your reading. – Well that seems ungenerous after what you have said. But it all seems so indistinct to me when I have said it. I send it in a curious confidence that after all these years you still...”

Here the draft ends. She apparently decides that she has no basis for her confidence, and then in her revision softens and hedges much of the criticism, though the content is essentially the same. When she reaches the last page again, she adds a long paragraph on the “blunt pencil of Language” which “always recalls its own imperfections to one’s mind when one wants to draw anything subtle.” She leaves off the “2nd” bit to read “This is a long letter to give the *most* impatient man in the world to read.” It appears in her first draft that she is disturbed by the darkness of Browning’s reality and at her friend’s participation in that darkness, but she is also not wanting to offend, to presume on a friendship which she cannot quite trust. It would seem that there is something she hoped he would still be or do, which she cannot quite believe, and the amendment of the “2nd” is key; She does not believe him at all patient enough to read with charity.

Yet she read Browning’s books with more fear than charity herself. She complains, “You have a photographic impartiality of attention that I cannot understand – you lead us through your picture gallery & your stable yard at exactly the same pace.” Later, the reason for the objection becomes clearer. “I cannot bear to see your thoughts on loan to deck out a sleek pedantic buffoon (lawyer).” This fear is more directly articulated in the draft version: “This it is makes me so hate your contemptible characters, you lend them so much of yourself. I cannot endure to hear your voice in those Advocate’s pleadings.” She seems to believe that if he can perform the villains and lawyers so well, there must actually be a villain and a lawyer in him, too. She fears that the drama is more than drama – that the fiction is actually fact.

Differences in questions of the dramatic evolve gradually as the ideological basis for the disagreement between these correspondents. In the January 30th letter, Wedgwood repeats variations on: it is the “consistent dramatic feeling I quarrel with,” and “... one of the many instances where your thoughts overflow the dramatic channel.” Browning responds on [February 1, 1869](#) that if “the good is not mine (as you fancy) in the sense that it is copied from a model, - why may not the uglinesses be copied too, and so not mine neither?” He seems aware that a reader is adding her fancy to his work, just as he added it to his. Whether he is conscious of this parallel or not is unclear, but he is certainly defensive about it. He then tries to convince her about some of the less believable facts of the case, and then complains, “As for the lawyers, why who is going to find fault with me, in the other world, for writing about what I, at least, wish had never been made?” Then he jokes that she is herself being a little “dramatic” too. In a letter dated the [22 February, 1869](#), Browning concludes that “the whole story is true!” and decides that “We differ apparently in our conception of what gross wickedness can be effected by cultivated minds.” In an earlier letter ([21 January 1869](#)) Browning confessed of the *Ring and the Book* “I think this is the world as it is, & will be.” Wedgwood initially threatened to publish a “finely expurgated” edition of his works which would leave out much of the Lawyers and Guido, (draft version of the January 30, 1869 letter) but finally acknowledged that “There is a sense of the great schism of life being healed in some chords of yours... that I have never felt equally in any one else ([14 February 1869](#)).

Browning’s conversational comments in the February 14th letter and in many of these letters speak to the same issues. “...[T]he very spirit of truth is in the “lies”, like an odour one has to imprison in an oil, or some such vehicle:...” In light of Julia Wedgwood’s flustered complaints about the limitations of language and her concerns over Browning’s well-being, it appears that both author and reader are equally aware of the presence of falsehood in all truth, the alloyed nature of the gold of truth, and the alloy of fiction which yet forms the truth into a comprehensible shape. Further exploration of these letters, I

think, can shed new light on Browning's interest in the fact and fiction question, but also on his personal relationship with his readers. If he is reading the yellow book and interpreting it into a story, how does he feel about his own book being redacted in a similar way? Is there a question of ethics in his appropriation of another person's story? While all of these letters address these issues, I especially recommend Wedgwood's January 30, 1869 letter and draft and Browning's letters around that date. Of all the letters, it most directly engages with the limitations of language and the response of a reader to an author who is himself, a reader.

Works Cited

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