

Original Paper

Two Victorian Women Loved by Randolph Henry Ash

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Abstract

Randolph Henry Ash, a great though fictional Victorian poet, loved two women: Ellen, his wife, and Christabel, a poetess. He and Christabel shared a passion for poetry. Their love was like a madness, a possession. Most Ash scholars thought that Ellen was a dull woman and did not pay much attention to her. But she had a secret wish to be a Poet and a Poem which remained unfulfilled.

Introduction

Judith Thurman calls Byatt "one of England's most visible literary dons"¹⁾. Byatt, a scholar of Robert Browning, George Eliot and Iris Murdoch, praises Robert Browning as one of England's three great love poets. Her praise is based mostly on his attitude towards women which is to see them as complex human beings, with their own minds, desires and hopes for dialogue. She also admires his description of sexual passion with a freedom avoided by both novelists and poets in his time (the Victorian Age)²⁾. Similar praise can be dedicated to Byatt, though she, a modern writer with far more scientific knowledge about sexuality, paradoxically emphasizes the Victorians' sensuality. She explains that the reason why she uses mostly

Victorian settings for her works is because characters who live in country manors haunt the imaginations of most people.³⁾ This is really true of her novel *Possession*. All the Victorian characters in it, including servants and a dog that appear as supporting players, truly haunt us. Her expansive knowledge about the Victorian age and its people prevails through the story and makes it enchanting. We easily become possessed by it. In the story, Randolph Henry Ash, a great Victorian poet who is presumably modeled after Browning, loved two women: Ellen, his wife, and Christabel, a poetess. The fact that Christabel and Ash were lovers is not known to Ash scholars, and most of whom think that Ellen was a dull wife. In this paper, Ellen's hidden character will be revealed through her relation to her husband and to Christabel.

1

Christabel, known as the author of an epic, *The Fairy Melusina*, was against keeping a diary as she said in a letter to one of her nieces, condemning it as “the habit of morbid Self-examination” (p.41)⁴. She had a strong opinion that thought should be shaped into Art. In contrast, Ellen, who had been Randolph’s wife for more than forty-five years, left a lengthy journal which was full of everyday trivialities and which went unnoticed by almost all Ash scholars. One scholar, Beatrice, however, perceives some strangeness, a baffling quality to the journal. Only she notices something that Ellen tried to protect as “the mystery of privacy”(p.115), although she cannot find out what it is. What Ellen was trying to do was to make her married life look perfect and ideal. Why did she have to do that? In spite of her elaborate effort, some parts of her journal betray her true feeling. The following entry in the journal, written just after she had finished reading Christabel’s *Fairy Melusina*, is one of them. In her extravagant admiration of the author’s talent, she looked back on her innocent maiden days when she was dreaming of being not only the object of all knights’ devotion but also the author of high Romances. She wrote:

I wanted to be a Poet and a Poem, and now am neither, but the mistress of a very small household, . . . I hit on something I believe when I wrote that I meant to be a Poet and a Poem. It may be that this is the desire of all reading women, as opposed to reading men, who wish to be poets and heroes, but might see the inditing of poetry in our peaceful age, as a sufficiently heroic act. No one wishes a man to be a Poem. (p.122)

This entry appears to express just a sentimental, nostalgic feeling and the pain in it can be easily overlooked. When we consider that these sentences were written just after her unusual outburst of her excitement over the talent of the author of *The Fairy Melusina*, we can easily understand her secret lament over her inability to become a poet. But why was Ellen, who had finally become Randolph’s wife after his fifteen years’ wooing, no longer a Poem? It remains a mystery to us.

Her description continues as follows:

Perhaps if I had made his life more difficult, he would have written less, or less freely. I cannot claim to be the midwife to genius, but if I have not facilitated, I have at least not, as many women might have done, prevented. This is a very small virtue to claim, a very negative achievement to hang my whole life on. (p.122)

This passage hints that she was in a situation which would make ordinary women upset and a hindrance to their husbands’ fruitful life. Later we will find out that when she wrote this passage she had already come to know of her husband’s affair with Christabel and of how they had spent one summer together in Yorkshire on a trip he was supposedly spending alone looking for biological specimens. Thus the passage has much deeper meaning. Ellen was facing the cruel fact here that Christabel was a Poem and a Poet. But her excessive humility is still mysterious to us. The question of why she clung to such a small claim also arises. Ellen praises Christabel’s talent, and then follows it with a rather self-assertive comment which is most unlike the modest Ellen: “I now think — it might have been better, might it not, to have held on to the desire to be a Poet?”(p.122) This is most surprising.

2

At his first encounter with Christabel, who was passionately talking about the life of language, at the breakfast party at Crab Robinson's, Ash instinctively thought she was for him, although he did not fail to see that she was a woman from whom ordinary men would step back. Later he even confessed to her, "I have known you were my fate." (p.192) Soon after their correspondence began, Christabel realized the danger in it and wrote to him:

I say nothing of Honour, nor of Morality, though they are weighty matters — I go to the Core, which renders much disquisition on these matters superfluous. The core is my solitude, my solitude that is threatened, that you threaten, without which I am nothing. (p.195)

Christabel put solitude, which is indispensable for her work, above honor and morality. She explained the necessity of her solitude by using the riddle of a doorless and windowless egg, in which she was perfectly free and secure. But the general concept of an egg is that it offers only a temporary shelter until the time will come to hatch. It must be broken. Though she stubbornly repeated her need for her solitude, and did not accept his claim of being no threat to her solitude, we can feel some possibility of her separating from it in the following explanation:

... my Solitude is my Treasure, the best thing I have. I hesitate to go out. If you opened the little gate, I would not hop away — but how I sing in my gold cage — (p.137)

Even her following description of an egg seems to put stress rather on her anticipation of getting out of seclusion than on perfect

confinement, as we see if we reexamine the passage by focusing on the words "Wake" or "Wings to spread":

... an Egg, a perfect O, a living Stone, doorless and windowless, whose life may slumber till she be Waked — or find she has Wings to spread — which is not so here — oh no — (p.137)

Christabel's secluded life is compared not to Martha but to Mary in the New Testament⁹). It shows her dogged resolution to live only for the thing essential to her. Strange to a Victorian woman, what matters to her was neither honor nor morality but solitude which enabled her to devote herself to making poetry. She explained why she was a poet not a novelist. It was because a poet wrote for the life of language while a novelist wrote for the betterment of the world. The following passage shows she lived for the words and words were her life. Any other way of life is inconceivable and impossible to her.

... words have been all my life, all my life — this need is like the Spider's need who carries before her a huge Burden of silk which she must spin out — the silk is her life, her home, her safety — her food and drink too — and if it is attacked or pulled down, why, what can she do but make more, spin afresh, design anew — you will say she is patient — so she is — she may also be Savage — it is her Nature — she Must — or die of Surfeit — (p.180)

To lose the seclusion, necessary to devote herself to making poetry, was a matter of life or death to her. Randolph also wrote equally radical comments to her on what he thought about the poet and poetry as she maintained her solitude and tried to turn down his appeal to keep up correspondence:

... poets don't want homes, ... they are not creatures of hearths and fire-dogs, but of heaths and ranging hounds ... I have always supposed it [poetry] to be a cry of unsatisfied love. ... (pp.131-132)

This is a surprising comment, which is totally against the modern Ash scholars' impression of him as an exemplary husband. Christabel feared Randolph's fierce passion and wrote, "I cannot let you burn me up." (p.194) He answered her fear by calling her "my Phoenix" (p.195) and wrote that she was immortal and would fly up from the flame as an even brighter being. All through his wooing, Christabel's anxiety and distress at being torn between him and Blanche, her artist friend, with whom Christabel shares a devotion to art, are symbolized in her painful headache. Finally Christabel answered his love and stepped out of her seclusion: "I am out of my Tower and my Wits." (p.197) But Randolph wrote that their love is a kind of "a love for which there is no place in this world ... a love ... can and will do neither of us any good," (p.193) not only because they lived in the Victorian age when the married Randolph's affair would have been socially unacceptable and sharply censured, but because of the unworldly nature of their love. We can guess they were destined to be separated from each other because of the ferocity of their love and also because of Christabel's demonic aspect — she already referred to herself as a "savage spider". Their affair would be only within a limited space and time. When he explained about the legendary seal-wives, "women from the sea, who come for a time and then must leave" (p.280), he recognized that she must leave, just like the seal-wives. When Christabel talked about her Fairy Melusina⁶, a long nursed theme, Melusina's contradictory aspects — the half-

woman and half-serpent or hearth-foundress and destroying demon — were described. Many years later she identified herself with Melusina in the letter addressed to Randolph on his death bed. From all this and from the "short animal cries" uttered by her on the first night, in Yorkshire, show Christabel's demonic aspect. The fact that he called the lost Christabel "my dear demon, my tormentor" (p.457) in his last unmailed letter, and that he said, "it was a sort of madness. A possession, as by daemons" (p.453), in his confession to his wife, also show the same aspect of Christabel

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While they were in Yorkshire sharing their burning passion and sexual joy, Ellen, who chronically suffered headaches, was suffering from an even worse headache. Even when he was with Christabel, her husband did not forget to send affectionate letters to his wife. The following poem which he sent with a jet brooch on which a white Yorkshire lily was carved, shows that he had no intention to leave her.

So may our love, safe in your heart from harm
Shine on, when we are grey, and make us bright. (p.229)

During his absence, she was troubled how to deal with Bertha, a servant of the Ashes, who became pregnant. Ellen remembered how her mother had treated the servants in such a case: mother beating and servants screaming. She did not follow her mother's example. She tried to be generous to Bertha thinking as follows:

He [Jesus] came even to the least, and perhaps more urgently to the least — to the mean, to the poor — in goods or

spirit. (p.227)

Bertha's pregnancy foreshadows of Christabel's pregnancy. Ellen's generosity to Bertha suggests that she would accuse neither her husband nor Christabel. She was informed of her husband's affair when Blanche showed her the poem which her husband sent to Christabel. Blanche went mad because of the jealousy that she felt towards him. Ellen remained staunch and, instead, blamed Blanche for stealing the poem from Christabel. She never lost self-control whatever might be said to her. This does not mean that Ellen did not feel mental upheaval. The contrast between her outer calm and her inner suffering, just after she was informed of her husband's affair, is clearly seen in the scene in the dark room where everything was suspended around her as she stayed in the bed, motionless, for a whole day. Darkness, quietude and stillness emphasizes her suffering. Even in that extreme agony, she was a woman who resolutely thought: "When he [Randolph] returns, I must be quick and lively. It must be so."(p.232) The contradiction in Ellen's character between outer appearances and inner reality, will be also seen in her liking for the idea of crystalline formations:

Ellen liked the idea of these hard, crystalline things, which were formed in intense heat, beneath the 'habitable surface' of the earth and were not primeval monuments but 'part of the living language of nature'. (p.458)

Conclusion

In her old age, when her husband was on his death bed, Ellen found his unmailed letter addressed to Christabel and she thought that her life had been built round a lie, a house to hold a lie. The description of their honey-

moon, which Ellen remembered with horror, discloses her secret which nobody except her husband and herself knew. Ellen kept on telling people that they were perfectly happy, although they unfortunately had no children. The truth was that their married life was without sex. Ellen thought that Christabel, who shared sexual passion and joy with Randolph at least briefly, was in a sense his true wife. He actually gave Christabel a ring on their way to Yorkshire. Even though Ellen thought her life had been based on a lie, we cannot think his love seen in the poem sent from Yorkshire to her was not true. We rather think it reveals his long lasting affection for her and his true wish to live with her.⁷⁾ On his death bed, he said, "What shall I be without you?" — the words he had written many years before to Christabel, who tried to refuse to continue their correspondence. Those words must have been truthful both times. We can understand Ellen's misery and her effort to make up for her inability to give sexual joy to her husband. Whatever her feeling was, he truly loved her. In his last letter to the lost Christabel, he begged her to tell him what became of his child by using the phrase, "I am in your hands". Christabel, who knew he was dying, begged Ellen in the same way, repeating the same phrase, "in your hands" four times in her first and last letter addressed to Ellen. What Christabel begged Ellen was to allow Randolph to read an enclosed sealed letter; whether Ellen read it or not was up to her. Christabel wanted a note of forgiveness or of pity or of anger from Ellen. She also begged Ellen to let her know if Randolph died peacefully. Ellen did not want to listen to her husband's confession, nor did she want to read the sealed letter, nor did she want to allow her husband to be disturbed by it. Although Ellen composed a letter to Christabel again and again in her mind, she ended

up being unable to answer her. What Ellen did was to put everything “in Your hands”, that is in God’s hands, and allowed the letter to be buried with him unopened. She wanted justice for herself only after everyone concerned died. Ellen, whom scholars thought unsuitable to be a wife to Randolph, a great poet, was thoughtful enough to do that. She could have destroyed everything and the truth could have remained undiscovered forever. Ellen, who loved crystalline forms and the heat under habitable surfaces holding her secret passion for her whole life, only left a dull-looking journal. But when Maud Bailey, scholar of Christabel, says, “she [Ellen] can

write”, justice must have been partly done to Ellen and she must have been, in part, rewarded. The secret of their married life, Ellen’s frigidity and Randolph’s many years’ of abstinence, was safely protected because neither of them told anyone. Ellen’s honor was tightly kept.

Christabel’s passion, sensuality, autonomy and truthfulness to art may appeal to modern people, but it should not be forgotten that Ellen, once dancing in muslin and beautiful like a princess, who lived “in the obligations and affections of Daily Life”(p.41) as truthfully as possible, had a secret wish to be a Poet and a Poem which remained unfulfilled.

Notes

- 1) Thurman J (1990) Books: A Reader’s Companion. *The New Yorker*, November 19, 151.
- 2) Byatt A (1991) *Passions of the Mind*. Chatto & Windus Ltd., London, pp29–30.
- 3) (1995) Interview: Fiction Past and Future. *Newsweek*, June 5, 58.
- 4) Citations with pages are from Byatt A (1990) *Possession*. Chatto & Windus Ltd., London.
- 5) Luke Ch10:38-42 in the New Testament.
- 6) Jobes G ed. (1962) *Dictionary of Mythology Folklore and Symbols*. The Scarecrow Press, Inc., New York, p1087.
- 7) Byatt admits that Iris Murdoch’s 1961 essay ‘Against Dryness’ influenced her about the nature of fiction. See Byatt A (1991) *Passions of the Mind*. Chatto & Windus Ltd., London, p3. We may see some influence here from Murdoch who respects a long lasting marriage. See *The Sand Castle and The Message to the Planet* by Iris Murdoch.