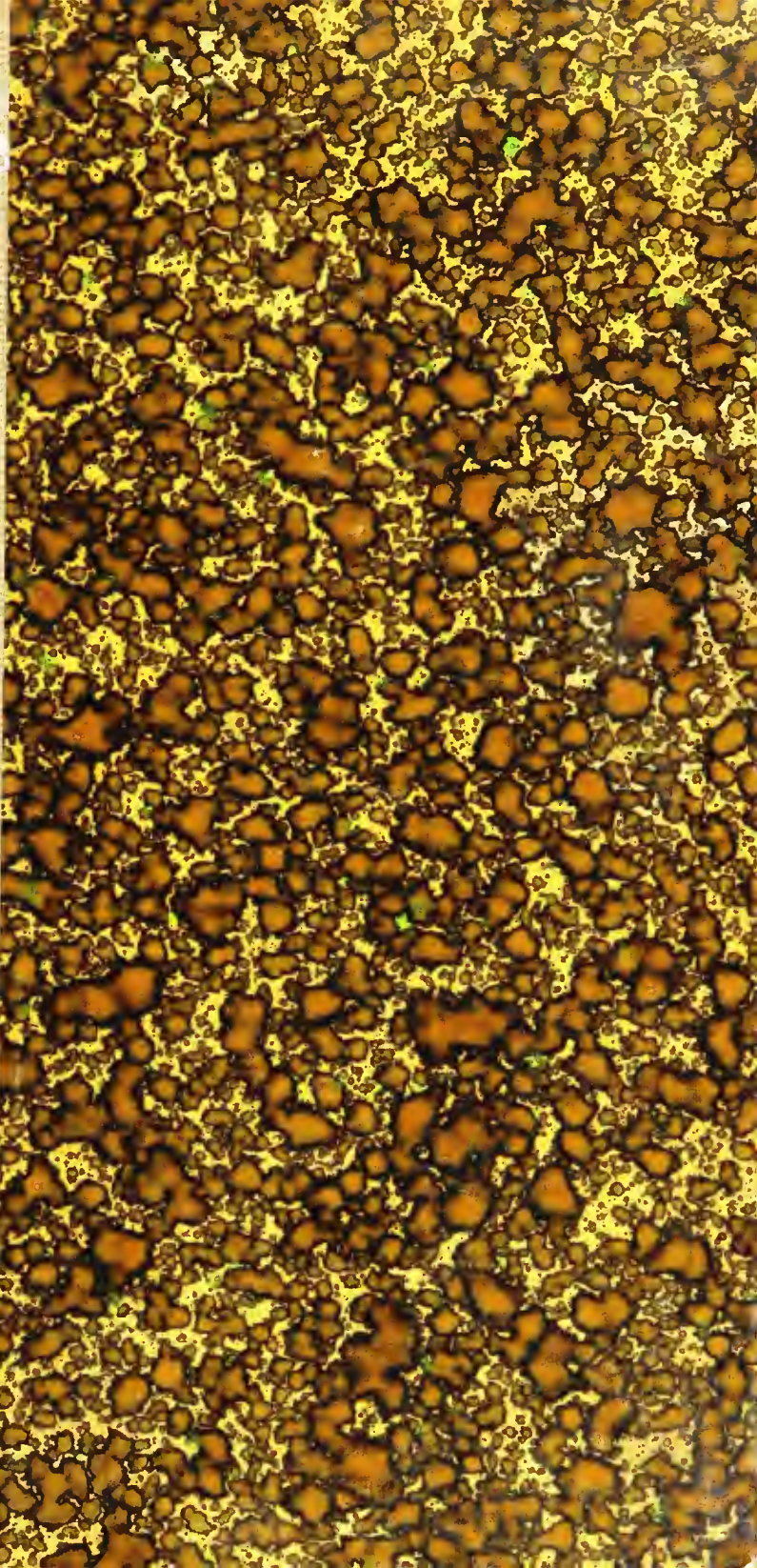
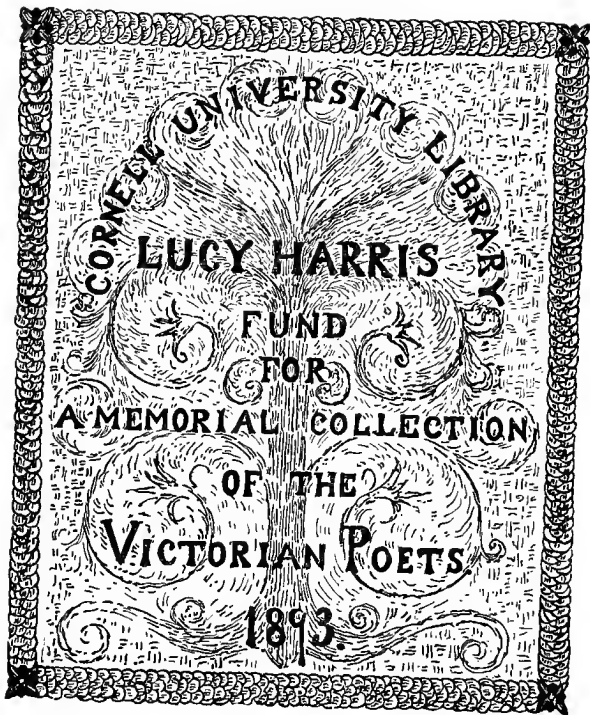


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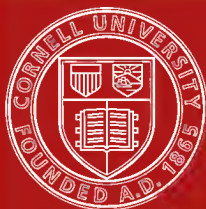
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*Antonie's*

*Alma Murray as Beatrice Cenci*



ALMA MURRAY

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PORTRAIT

AS

BEATRICE CENCI

WITH CRITICAL NOTICE CONTAINING FOUR  
LETTERS FROM

ROBERT BROWNING

LONDON

ELKIN MATHEWS, VIGO STREET

1891

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*“Tragic poetry combined with tragic acting produces the most exalted  
“impressions that the human mind is capable of receiving; a great tragedy  
“greatly acted being indeed the highest outcome of man’s faculties, his sole  
“complete, if but momentary, victory over the tyrannic conditions of his earthly  
“existence.”*

## ALMA MURRAY.

ACTING is an art, great and creative in a sense and to an extent that entitles it to rank as sister with the arts of painting and poetry themselves. How such a manifest truth can ever have been called in question it is not easy to understand; but that it has been and in some quarters still is, admits of no doubt. The result of this seeming openness of the question is that, in judging of histrionics, people do not feel themselves *compelled* to apply the same high standards as they must in dealing with arts that in universal opinion *are* arts. But for all this, it is only after these high standards have been, justly and rigorously, applied that anything like a solid judgment of the true rank of an actor or actress can be arrived at. The process is considerably simplified when at starting a wise discrimination is employed; when it is borne in mind that, after all, a great actor or actress must in the nature of things be as rare a phenomenon as a great poet; and that an actor, to be veritably great, has the most exacting of all conditions to fulfil—that, namely, of being not merely an artist but in himself or herself an organized and living *work of art*.

Alma Murray—the poetic actress without a rival, as she has been justly styled by “the most subtle and sincere, the most profound and piercing intelligence of our time,” Robert Browning—is the daughter of the late distinguished actor Leigh Murray, and wife of Mr. Alfred Forman, the translator of Richard Wagner’s tetralogy “*Der Ring des Nibelungen*.” She was born in London at No. 7 Clement’s Inn (a house which no longer exists) and made her first appearance on the stage, when quite a child, at the Olympic Theatre, since when she has been almost without intermission before the public and has played a list of parts too varied and too long to be enumerated here. The undermentioned *rôles* however may be selected as those in which she has made

her most signal and distinctive successes and as showing the extraordinary range and versatility of her powers.

In tragedy; Beatrice Cenci, (Shelley's "The Cenci,") Juliet, (Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet,") Constance, (Browning's "In a Balcony,") Mildred Tresham, (Browning's "A Blot in the 'Scutcheon,") Helena, (Todhunter's "Helena in Troas,") Soris, (Miss Graves's "Nitocris"): in romantic drama; Colombe, (Browning's "Colombe's Birthday,") Julie de Mortemar, (Bulwer's "Richelien,"): in comedy; Portia, (Shakespeare's "Merchant of Venice,") Titania, (Shakespeare's "Midsummer Night's Dream,") Miss Hardcastle, (Goldsmith's "She Stoops to Conquer,") Sophia Freelove, (Holcroft's "Road to Ruin,") Grace Harkaway, (Boucicault's "London Assurance,") Clara Douglas, (Bulwer's "Money,"): in melodrama; Ruth Branston, (Wilton Jones's "Haunted Lives,"): in other descriptions of play; Esther Eccles, (Robertson's "Caste,") Princess Christina (Lynwood and Ambient's "Christina,") Pauline March, (Conway and Carr's "Called Back,") Rachel McCreery, (Gillette's "Held by the Enemy,") Eleanor Brandon, (Lart's "The Monk's Room,").

Her regular stage performances have been supplemented by equally remarkable dramatic readings and recitals, in the course of which Rosalind, Pippa, Clytæmnestra, Brünnhilde, Isolde, have been taken, each at some pregnant and crucial moment of their dramatic existence, and presented with the keenest imaginative insight and the completest technical mastery of the various rhythms and metres in which they speak.

Her astonishing successes in tragedy and other acutely emotional descriptions of work have tended perhaps to somewhat obscure the recollection of her equally perfect achievements in comedy. Her Portia, for instance, it was that first completely revealed in her the inspired artist as distinct from the merely gifted and accomplished actress. This part she first played at the Lyceum in 1880, (during an illness of Miss Terry's) to the Shylock of Mr. Henry Irving, establishing herself at once in general favour and grounding the belief that she was an actress with a great career open to her. Her performance was inexhaustible both in exterior charm and inward resource. The subtle and pervading interpenetration of intellect and emotion in Portia's character was seized with unerring instinct and brought out with complete technical mastery.

Spirituality, poetic sensibility and distinction (both in conception and execution) combined to make the embodiment ineffaceable from the memory. Womanly *abandon*, tempered with queenly reticence, was the salient feature of her self-surrender to Bassanio ; her apparition in the trial scene was comparable only to that of an ambassador from some high court of superhuman righteousness, sent to plead silver-trumpet-tongued against Antonio's taking-off, to save Shylock from himself and, failing that, to show how stern against him could be the very justice that he had invoked ; while in the distinctively comedy scenes all was of that chaste and golden quality of workmanship which brought out the essential joyousness of the character without once suggesting, even, the condescensions or familiarities of common life. This was the first really great opportunity of her career. Another and far greater one was the production of Shelley's till then unacted tragedy, "The Cenci," on May 7th, 1886, her performance in which secured for her at one stroke an unassailable and world-wide reputation. Beatrice Cenci is, as the "Daily Telegraph" remarked at the time, "surely the longest part that any actress has ever studied, the most difficult, the most exhausting." In it Miss Alma Murray's success was complete and undisputed, proving conclusively that we had once more among us a great tragic actress in the fullest and most specific sense of the term. The audience assembled (to the number of nearly three thousand) was perhaps the most distinguished and critical that an actress has ever played to, completely representing as it did both the intellectual *élite* of the time and the ordinary play-going public in all its variety. Her treatment of the first great scene, that of the banquet, convinced the spectators that they were in the presence of authentic genius, and from that point forward the whole house watched and listened as if it felt that any single moment of distraction might rob it of some tone, gesture, or movement from the actress, too spontaneous and too precious to be heard or seen again in a life-time. After the final fall of the curtain, "the enthusiasm," says the Shelley Society's Note-Book, "reached a climax on Miss Murray's appearance in the simple yet very effective 'execution' dress of the last scene, the whole audience rising to their feet and cheering vociferously." The press (London, provincial, Parisian, and American) were absolutely unanimous and unreserved in their praise of her, and on the

day after the event she received the following letter from Robert Browning:—

“DEAR MRS. FORMAN,—I must say what many must already have said, perhaps more energetically, how much impressed I was by your admirable impersonation of that most difficult of all conceivable characters to personate: after such a display of passion and pathos, what is impossible for you—the Poetic Actress without a rival? \*  
Ever truly yours,

“ROBERT BROWNING.”

Such was the testimony of the greatest poet and greatest dramatist then living, and it was eminently characteristic of the man that he should have hastened to put his conviction on record without a moment's delay. Upon the same day, but from quite another quarter, Miss Murray received a second testimony, hardly less characteristic in its kind, in the shape of a letter from the most astute and practical of theatrical managers, Mr. Augustus Harris, written in terms of sincere and enthusiastic praise. Others quickly followed, and for many days letters continued to flow in from friends, strangers, and literary and dramatic critics. “You *did* succeed to a marvel with that grand part!” were the words of the veteran actress, Mrs. Dallas-Glyn, who in her youth had herself contemplated playing Beatrice Cenci, and who, if any one, was qualified to judge both of the difficulty of the task and of the manner of its accomplishment. Sir Percy and Lady Shelley were among the earliest to express to Miss Murray their admiration of her performance and their gratitude for the service she had rendered to the memory of the “beloved” poet whose name they bore; and a week or two later, Lady Shelley presented her with a locket bearing, in front, a miniature copy of Guido's portrait of Beatrice, and enclosing, at the back, a portion of the single lock of Shelley's hair which she possessed, and of which, up to that time, she had never parted with a particle to any one.

\* This letter was, with Mr. Browning's and Miss Murray's permission, printed in the Shelley Society's Note-Book, Part I. It will be opportune to supplement it here with another on the same subject, written in acknowledgment of a portrait of herself as Beatrice Cenci sent by Miss Murray to the poet on his last birthday but one. It is as follows:—

“29 DE VERE GARDENS, W., May 9th, 1838.

“DEAR MRS. FORMAN,—I very gratefully accept the charming photograph, and heartily thank its subject for enabling me to connect the undying memory of a display of true histrionic excellence with the kind sympathy of that woman of genius for myself, whom she honours with her friendship. With all regards to Mr. Forman, believe me, yours truly ever, ROBERT BROWNING.”

By this marvellous performance Miss Murray may be said to have challenged history. Never can the splendour, the horror and the beauty of tragedy at its highest have been presented in more intimate and unimpeachably balanced combination. Nothing in the annals of the stage points to any actress having previously ever even attempted so tremendous a task,\* the combined intellectual, ethical and physical demands of the part being beyond those of any other existing rôle. No other tragic heroine is sustained so long at so exalted a poetic pitch, no other has so appalling a moral problem to resolve or such a succession of great stage situations to pass through, and until something of equal dimensions has been accomplished with equal success Miss Murray's Beatrice Cenci will remain the greatest histrionic feat on record.

Detailed criticisms of her performance and an account of everything connected with the occasion are to be found in a published essay "Miss Alma Murray as Beatrice Cenci," by B. L. Mosely, LL.B. ; in a privately printed pamphlet "Shelley's Beatrice Cenci and her first Interpreter," by M. S. S. : and in another pamphlet entitled "The First Performance of Shelley's Tragedy 'The Cenci,'" compiled chiefly from the "Shelley Society's Note-Book" and containing the collected criticisms of all the principal newspapers. In this publication will also be found accounts of her *Colombe* in "Colombe's Birthday."

Her performance of this queenly and captivating rôle, Mr. Browning, being absent in Venice at the time, did not witness ; but, upon his return to London, Miss Murray received from him the following interesting and characteristic letter, dated December 29th, 1885 :—

"I could not have expected that the year would all but run out before I had written even a single word of the many I was minded to send you when, on returning to London, I heard from friends I could trust and strangers whose testimony there was no reason to doubt—how admirably you had done honour to my play by your performance of *Colombe*. There has been no attempt at the poor piece of flattery supposed acceptable to a playwright ; that 'his poetry had hardly been done justice to' and so

\* "Neither *Phèdre*, nor *Medea*, nor *Lady Macbeth*, nor *Juliet*, nor any other of the parts on which the great actresses of historic name established their renown, at all approaches Shelley's *Beatrice* in actual length, or in constancy and severity of tragic tension."—*Shelley's Beatrice Cenci and her First Interpreter*.

forth : it thoroughly delighted me to hear and to believe that you had realized my idea and probably added graces of your own. When I observe what preparations for a theatrical venture are supposed requisite for success,—the thousands of pounds spent on scenery and costume ; the hundreds of rehearsals—and the dozens of paragraphs-preliminary ; I look with wonder and no little satisfaction on the circumstance that an old play composed under the old conditions and brought out in the hope of living through one night only ; should have rewarded the efforts in its favour, as it has more than satisfied the author's ambition, I am sure. Take my renewed thanks, dear Mrs. Forman, and believe that you will be followed in your career by the deep interest of

“ Yours truly ever,

“ ROBERT BROWNING.”

In March, 1888, Miss Murray appeared as Mildred Tresham in Robert Browning's tragedy “A Blot in the 'Scutcheon.” This was the first occasion on which the great poet and thinker saw her in a play of his own, and immediately after the performance he wrote to her thus :—

“What am I to say of your performance yesterday? How thoroughly you understood: how perfectly you looked; how beautifully and how powerfully you acted the part of ‘Mildred’ I hardly can acknowledge in the quiet way which gives criticism its importance. But; criticism put aside for the moment; need I attempt to express the gratitude I must feel at your giving my work the generous help of your admirable histrionic genius?—no less than the poetic sympathy with which you have so long and so signally made me your debtor? Such treatment as yours to a play much maltreated so many years ago, goes near to reviving in its author something of the old impulse once strong in him to try afresh in that direction. Whether or no that is to be, one obstacle is completely removed; and could he but create the right character, it would be easy to find the adequate representative—capable besides of heightening his attempts by many graces all her own.

“ Believe me yours very sincerely,

“ ROBERT BROWNING.”



By this performance, added to her Beatrice Cenci, it is not surprising that the poet should have been stimulated to feel the possibility of returning to dramatic writing, recognizing as he must have done in Miss Murray the only actress of the English-speaking or, to tell the sober truth, French-speaking stage, since Miss Helen Faucit, capable of completely presenting the intellectual aspects of her art, of creatively interpreting great character on the highest literary ground, and of conveying truly tragic impressions. Subsequently to the date of the foregoing letter, much passed between Mr. Browning, Dr. Furnivall, and Miss Murray, regarding the contemplated new play, and there is little doubt that, had the poet's life been spared but a year or two longer, Miss Murray would have been accorded the supreme glory of appearing in a tragedy written expressly for her by one of the four greatest of her country's poets.

Of Miss Murray's personal appearance it is not easy to give a strict account, there being about her whole stage-presence a varied and magnetic charm which to a great extent baffles description. In height she is just of that fortunate medium which appears to vary in accordance with the dress and bearing she assumes, thus enabling her to undertake a wider range of parts than is possible to an actress who to any very marked extent either exceeds or falls short of the average stature. In figure she is at once slightly, firmly and flexibly built. The limbs move freely both from shoulder and hip, but the freedom never degenerates into looseness and always reserves to itself a prompt retractive power, so that the finger-tips, for instance, never, in the most violent moments of action, go a hairsbreadth beyond the proper outline of the gesture. There is no limit to the variety, subtlety, and vividness of the facial play. The forehead is soft in outline yet straight and high, and helps to imprint upon the whole face that fine intellectuality which begets in the spectator the sense of security so necessary for the full enjoyment of the actor's art. The eyes are sufficiently large, of a just distance apart, liquid and of a faintly reddish brown. In moments of tears or tenderness the brown appears to deepen and soften, but at the instigation of scorn or anger, or any other of the fiercer passions, there is frequently to be observed a strange preternatural invasion of the dormant red which gives them for a breathing-

space or so an aspect of almost devouring animal ferocity. The feet and hands are small and compact, the wrists slender and expressive. The walk and gestures vary at will from those of imperial and sweeping dignity (as in Dr. Todhunter's Helena) to those of captivating and dainty grace (as in Shakespeare's Titania). In the matter of voice, the histrionic artist's finishing triumph or primary despair, Miss Murray has been richly endowed. Its volume is not more than normally large; but it is *all quality*, and that quality exquisitely pleasurable to the ear. It is bright, melting, ringing, or thrilling, at command; always feminine and always certain of its effects, even at the most exacting moments, without violence or offending noise. Style, authority and distinction, those great primary requisites in the absence of which it is vain to look for high histrionic work, she possesses not only each in its utmost degree but in perfect proportion one with another. In all she does she is independent, original and essentially English, yet there are certain unindigenous aspects of her art which have led to her being compared, in comedy-drama, with Desclée, in melodrama and tragedy with Dorval and Rachel. The purity, melodiousness and vitality of her elocution are proverbial. She never emphasizes the details of a part to the detriment of its general design, but of all her great characters it may be said, to paraphrase the words of Matthew Arnold on Sophocles, that she has played them steadily and played them *whole*.

Amongst contemporary actresses, indeed, she stands out as the sole and typical example of the purest-blooded Aryan artist, who, without emphasis or set purpose, is able to make us as it were instinctively perceptive of the tragic contest she must have waged not only with the baser forces of the human soul itself but with the monstrous and deadly hindrances of its worldly surroundings, before arriving at the state of undistractable and purified vision upon which alone such self-coherent and aspiring art-work as hers can be based.

Fascinating and powerful no matter what class of work she is engaged in, it is when wearing classical or romantic dress, speaking blank verse, and portraying the great creations of the greatest poets, that her unique assemblage of qualities becomes most fully apparent. On these occasions, instead of disappointing expectation, falling short, and betraying a limited scope, she seems rather

to be seized by an additional inspiration which brings all her physical and mental attributes into their highest combination, transfigures her whole being, and enables her to stimulate the intellectual and exalt the ethical nature of the spectator in a way that can only have been paralleled by the great actresses of the past.

If (as none can doubt) it be incontrovertible that "he who is greatest in the highest reaches of his art is the greatest artist" and that "the highest actor is the one who understands and can interpret the highest author," then it will not be difficult for history to assign Miss Alma Murray her proper place among the greatest practitioners of her art, irrespective of the fact that an authority whose every clearly-recorded opinion on matters of art will be treasured as long as the English language lasts, has emphatically designated her "a woman of genius" and "the poetic actress without a rival."

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