

SHE OBEYS THE FOURTH COMMANDMENT MARY RUSSELL MITFORD (1787-1855)



Among the writers whom Coleridge encourages, is the young woman Mary Russell Mitford, who is in many respects his contrary. A reformer in politics, an admirer of Napoleon, and an essentially non-denominational Christian, she has no interest in the intricacies of theology and philosophy, and despises natural science; she greatly prefers French literature to German, esteems clarity and simplicity in language, and prefers poetry and fiction that treat the actions of believable human characters. When

The Prelude, Wordsworth's introspective blank verse epic, is posthumously published, she dismisses it as a worthless production. The love of nature, however, is a passion she does share with its author and with Coleridge. "I cannot understand," she asserts, "how any one can live in a town." Rural scenes, trees, and wild and cultivated flowers are among her special delights. Yet her life, blighted by her father's folly and lack of self-control, is less than a happy one. Reading her letters is like listening to a bird's joyous song interrupted by long, plaintive cries.

As Mary Mitford—"the clever Mary Mitford," a cousin calls her, to distinguish her from several namesakes—moves from her schooldays into early adult life in the first decade of the nineteenth century, the letters she writes show how odd is the intensity of her attachment to her parents. When she enjoys an excursion to London with her father, Dr. George Mitford, after a few days she writes home to her mother, "I am dying to pet and kiss and love my own dear, dear granny." Her father is not only her "papa," but is also "my best beloved darling," "my own dear boy," "my little boy," and even "my lovyer." Despite an occasional humorous overtone, she seems to be pushing him into the roles of lover and son as well as parent. She declares her aversion to dancing and dislike of balls, and asserts several times that she will not marry. "I must never marry, that is certain," she writes to her mother, "for I never should be able to support

an absence of three months from my beloved parents"; six years later she informs her penfriend Sir William Elford, "I intend to die an old maid." In one letter, she comments on the folly of a young woman who throws away the happiness she is blessed with by marrying "one of the most disagreeable men in the world, apparently from no other motive than to be called Mrs. instead of Miss."

George Mitford, supposedly a physician, who excites such devotion in his daughter, is a wastrel, a reckless gambler, and an easy target for purveyors of speculative investments. His young daughter, who is level-headed and his often unheeded adviser, is so distraught when they have to leave their fine residence named Bertram House that she declares to a friend that, had he not had a wife already, she would have married their evictor, Mr. Elliott, "a little mean-looking Bond Street shopkeeper of sixty-five, with a methodist face, all bile, and wrinkles, and sadness," to remain in her home. However, leave she must, and when the family has settled in its new cottage, she finds herself near enough to her former dwelling to take her old walks and still be within easy reach of the city of Reading. She soon develops a strong attachment to her new, humbler residence and its garden, and she takes great pleasure in exchanging seeds and roots of flowering plants with some of her correspondents. In September 1835, she informs a friend, "I have above seventy sorts of seed done up in little packets."

As a young woman, Mary Mitford publishes her poems with some success. When her father reduces the family to serious straits, she turns to her pen to support it and develops into a versatile woman of letters. Contributing articles to magazines, editing the annual *Finden's Tableaux*, compiling an anthology of American literature, and writing an opera libretto and blank verse tragedies for the stage, she discovers she is trapped in a desperate attempt to keep her parents and herself solvent. Her correspondence tells of sometimes heartbreaking but occasionally triumphant negotiations with the actor-managers John and Charles Kemble and William Charles Macready. In the spring of 1823, a new note of despair enters her letters as she protests that she is being forced into the male role of breadwinner and wearing down her modest stock of health. At the same time, she is becoming a celebrity and is more and more fêted during her visits to London. After her mother dies in 1830, she still has to support the improvident father who is now her only relative and whom she is terrified of losing. During his decline, she nurses him and caters to his every wish at formidable cost to her own wellbeing and earning power. In December 1842, he dies.

By this time, Mitford is a woman famous not only as a dramatist but as the author of the spirited sketches collected in *Our Village*, and her admirers raise a subscription which enables her to clear the heavy debts her

father has left. Queen Victoria herself contributes, stipulating that the fact be kept private lest she be swamped with appeals.

After such a drawn-out ordeal, Mitford finds her own health is gravely undermined. Her letters describe the lameness and rheumatism that make a pony and chaise a near necessity. Fortunately, Lord Melbourne, the Prime Minister, is persuaded to grant her a small pension. For some years, she is able to stop writing professionally, but about 1849, in spite of her ailments, her friend Henry Chorley, a versatile man of letters, persuades her to contribute to his *Ladies' Companion*, and in 1852 she publishes her widely read *Recollections of a Literary Life*, which combines personal reminiscences with selections from some of her favourite old and current authors. The spinal injury that cripples her in December 1852, when her chaise overturns, and the agonising pains that follow do not prevent her from completing her novel *Atherton*, from collecting her plays and furnishing them with a long Preface, and from sustaining a very extensive correspondence. She dies on 10 January 1855 in the presence of her friend and neighbour Lady Russell.

Many of the places in which Mitford finds herself evoke her powers of description. She loves to picture rural landscapes for Sir William Elford, a distinguished amateur artist:

a long string of meadows, irregularly divided by a shallow winding stream, swollen by the late rains to unusual beauty, and bounded on the one side by a ragged copse, of which the outline is perpetually broken by sheep walks and more beaten paths, which here and there admit a glimpse of low white cottages, and on the other by tall hedgerows, abounding in timber, and strewn like a carpet with white violets, primroses, and oxlips. Except that occasionally over the simple gates you catch a view of the soft and woody valleys, the village churches and the fine seats which distinguish this part of Berkshire, excepting this short and unfrequent peep at the world, you seem quite shut into these smiling meads.

Flowers, of which Mitford has much knowledge, excite her raptures. One evening in the summer of 1841, she follows the example of some neighbours by climbing on a ladder to look at her cottage garden from above, and describes the view to Elizabeth Barrett:

Masses of the Siberian larkspur, and sweet Williams, mostly double, the still brighter new larkspur (*Delphinium Chinensis*), rich as an oriental butterfly – such a size and such a blue! amongst roses in millions, with the blue and white Canterbury

bells (also double), and the white foxglove, and the variegated monkshood, the carmine pea, in its stalwart beauty, the nemophila, like the sky above its head, the new erysimum, with its gay orange tufts, hundreds of lesser annuals, and fuchsias, zinnias, salvias, geraniums past compt; so bright are the flowers that the green really does not predominate amongst them!

Justifying her claim that her reputation for gentleness is undeserved, Mitford can give a severe touch to her pen. Of Colonel Beaumont's renovated home in Northumberland, she writes to her mother:

It was a fine specimen of the Saxon Gothic architecture; but he has built upon the same foundation, retained all the inconveniences of the ancient style, and lost all its grandeur. It has on the outside an appearance of a manufactory, and the inside conveys the exact idea of an inn. I should have thought it absolutely impossible to construct so bad a house with so many rooms.

The social scene also can engage her attention. Is Sir William Elford, Mitford wonders, acquainted with "the almost inconceivable *mélange* of a true female gossip; where dress and music, dancing and preaching, pelisses and beaux, flowers and scandal, all meet together, like the oil and vinegar of a salad?" To her Irish friend Emily Jephson, an intimate of the novelist Maria Edgeworth, she explains what she enjoys and what she endures when she visits London in the summer of 1834 for the production of her play *Charles the First*:

For the first ten days I spent on an average from four to six hours every morning in the Victoria Theatre, at hard scolding, for the play has been entirely got up by me; then I dined out amongst twenty or thirty eminent strangers every evening. Since that, I have been to operas and pictures, and held a sort of drawing-room every morning; so that I am so worn out, as to have, for three days out of the last four, fainted dead away between four and five o'clock, a fine-lady trick which I never played before.

London, where she mixes with fellow writers, is the only city other than historic Bristol that gives Mitford any pleasure. Reading, which is within easy reach of her home, she somewhat haughtily denounces to Elford as having "no trees — no flowers — no green fields — no wit — no literature — no elegance! Neither the society of London nor the freedom of the country";

Bath she finds “cold, monotonous, bald, poor, and dead”; but she can write to Elford from the capital:

How splendidly beautiful London is! I had been there two or three times lately in the winter, but not for some years in the height of the season—when the bright sun throws those magnificent streets into strong light and shadow, and when there are brilliant crowds of gay carriages and well-dressed people to animate the scene.

In 1810, she confesses to him that it was only during the later part of her recent stay in the city, when she was deeply moved by the sight of flowers and trees, that she was sure her “fondness for rural scenery” was real and not part of “the prevailing cant.” Nevertheless, she can admit to her friend Mrs. Hofland, a children’s writer, “I do sometimes envy that delightful sunning water of London society, where you have all the drops bright and sparkling from the spring head. The stream gets muddy before it reaches us.” Later, on hearing of the success of Coleridge’s play *Remorse*, she feels, “It would be quite refreshing to have a little of his conversation, after being condemned to keep company with the people hereabouts.”

On her earlier excursions to London, Mitford is usually in the company of her father, the foremost among the many characters who stand out in her correspondence. Clearly, a pleasant companion, he has estimable and noteworthy friends ranging from Sir William Elford, a Conservative Member of Parliament and supporter of Pitt, to Coleridge’s *bête noire* William Cobbett, the radical author and journalist. As a popular magistrate, he chairs the bench at Reading. His daughter constantly expresses her devotion to her disastrously unthrifty parent, whose liberal politics, love of dogs, and passion for coursing she shares. Once the much-loved dog Dash pursues a rabbit and gets stuck in a burrow. Guided by his cries, her father, with the help of two men and a boy, find him and dig for more than two hours in heavy rain to complete the rescue. “My father,” Mitford tells Emily Jephson, “was wet to the skin; but I am sure he would have dug till this time rather than any living creature, much less his own favourite dog, should have perished so miserably.” Though her cherished animal companions figure frequently in her letters, she has no qualms about the suffering of the hares their dogs run down, but takes great pride in their hunting prowess.

In spite of her devotion to her father, scattered through the letters Mitford sends him when he is away from home—often enough in London negotiating on her behalf—are warnings about his behaviour with money and, much less often, outbursts at his callous disregard of her welfare.

When she is eighteen, he is taking her on a tour to see relations and family connections in the north of England, when she suddenly finds he has abandoned her without even a farewell, leaving her in the hands of a cousin: he has allowed her to feel betrayed, and also offended an old friend, in order to rush home and help a recent acquaintance campaign in an election in which the man is already a certain winner. "It is surely a very odd thing," she protests to her mother, "for a young woman to be left in this strange manner. I hope you will be able to prevail upon papa to return immediately, or he will lose a very excellent and very attached *old friend*, and do no material service to the *new one*, for whose sake he seems to forget all other things and persons." Four months later, she warns him against gambling with strangers:

my advice has always been, that you should stick to Graham's, where, if you have not an equal advantage, you have at least no trouble, and know your society. You have always gained more there, on an average, than with chance players like the Baron, or at inferior clubs, like the one you now frequent.

Her warnings about paying bills, compounding for taxes, recovering money from an investment, and even not buying her an unnecessary fur cap fail to save her "beloved darling" from being steadily sucked into a maelstrom of debt from which he can never escape, no matter how hard his daughter toils. In May 1823, she writes to Elford, "My father has at last resolved – partly, I believe, instigated by the effect which the terrible feeling of responsibility and want of power has had on my health and spirits – to try if he can himself obtain any employment that may lighten the burthen." He does not keep his resolve.

The literary labour he imposes on his daughter is the principal but not the only blight that George Mitford casts on her life. She feels that she must decline an invitation to stay with Mrs. Hofland because he has far-flung engagements – one is to a christening – which he will not keep unless she is with him. While he takes pride in her fame, his snobbery causes her to complain to her lifelong friend William Harness:

My father – very kind to me in many respects, very attentive if I'm ill, very solicitous that my garden should be nicely kept, that I should go out with him, and be amused – is yet, so far as art, literature, and the drama are concerned, of a temper infinitely difficult to deal with. He hates and despises them, and all their professors – looks on them with hatred and scorn; and is constantly taunting me with my 'friends' and my 'people' (as he calls them), reproaching me if I hold the slightest intercourse

with author, editor, artist, or actor, and treating with frank contempt every one not of a certain station in the county.

After her mother's death, her father's health deteriorates and he demands more and more of her time. This makes it impossible for her to write enough to prevent his sinking deeper and deeper into debt. She describes her plight to Harness:

His eyesight fails him now so completely that he cannot even read the leading articles in the newspaper. Accordingly, I have not only every day gone through the daily paper, debates and all, which forms a sort of necessity to one who has so long taken an interest in everything that passes, but, after that, I have read to him from dark till bedtime, and then have often (generally) sat at his bedside almost till morning, sometimes reading, sometimes answering letters as he slept, expecting the terrible attacks of cramp, three or four of a night, during which he gets out of bed to walk the room, unable to get in again without my assistance.

George Mitford's extravagance continues. His daughter refers, in a letter to Emily Jephson, to "this poor cottage, where, to say a truth which I tell to few, I stay principally, because it is only the fewness and smallness of our closets here which could restrain my dear, dear father from the exercise of that too large and liberal hospitality, which, added to other causes, drove him through *three* good fortunes." When he is eighty years old, she reports to another friend, the aspiring writer Henrietta Harrison:

the things that weigh upon me are not an occasional bottle or two of port or claret or champagne, but the keeping two horses instead of one, the turning half a dozen people for months into the garden, which ought to be cultivated by one person, and even the building—as I see he is now meditating—a new carriage, when we have already two, but too expensive ... in short, I have to provide for expenses over which I have no more control than my own dog, Flush.

As oblivious to the damage he is inflicting on his daughter as to the ruin he brings on his own finances, he attributes her failing health to her walks and drives in the countryside and urges her not to go beyond the garden. "Is not this," she protests to Elizabeth Barrett, "the perfection of self-deception? And yet I would not awaken him from this dream." Like a bird paralyzed by the sight of a rearing snake, she submits to his "excessive irritability" and his prolonged moaning—more a habit than anything else, his physi-

cian says – while she reads to him or they play at cribbage. In one of her moments of clear sightedness, Mitford writes to Harness of “a destiny that is wearing down my health and mind and spirits and strength – a life spent in efforts above my powers, and which will end in the workhouse or in a Bedlam, as the body or the mind shall sink first.” Referring to her father, she adds, “He ought to feel this; but he does not.”

A friend of Mitford as hapless as her father is Benjamin Haydon, an artist probably remembered more for his autobiography and diary than his paintings. At first, she has high hopes he is a genius whose history paintings of biblical subjects will bring him great renown. “Is he likely,” she asks Elford, “to obtain employment in his own high sphere, or will he – like Sir Joshua [Reynolds] – sink into portrait-painting?” His personality, as a later letter to Elford shows, dazzles her:

He is a most admirable person, whose very faults spring from that excess of brilliancy and life with which, more than any creature that ever lived, he is gifted. I never see him without thinking of the description of the Dauphin’s horse in *Henry the Fifth* – all air and fire – the duller elements have no share in his composition.

From the beginning, she does see tell-tale signs of his limitations – his King Solomon, she admits, “is Queen Anne with beauty, with intellect, with majesty, with penetration; but still it is Queen Anne.” Even when she is in a fury at his landing himself in debtors’ prison in 1823, she can hail him as an “admirable character” and a “great artist,” but she warns him about this time that his “peculiar talent” is for portraits and “humorous pictures.” However, his ambition is too strong; he spends too much time on heroic subjects and cannot support his family. On 20 June 1846, without warning signs, he fatally shoots himself. Mitford’s final verdict on him is found in a letter of 1852 referring to Peel’s grant of a pension to his widow and explaining why she declines to edit his autobiography:

He was a most brilliant talker – racy, bold, original, and vigorous; and his early pictures were full of promise; but a vanity, that amounted to self-idolatry, and a terrible carelessness, unjustifiable in many matters, degraded his mind, and even impaired his talent in art. I was always certain that his suicide proceeded from a desire to provide for his family. And, thanks to Sir Robert Peel’s benevolence, it succeeded.

As distressed as Mitford by Haydon's suicide is the female friend she most admires. In May 1836, John Kenyon, a wealthy habitué of the literary world, takes her to see giraffes and a diorama, and she reports to her father:

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 her desire to see me got her out at all.

Only what she sees as an indulgence in obscurity and a preference for "mysticism" as opposed to the activities of lifelike people cause her to have any reservations about this scholarly prodigy who lives the life of a hermitess, and whose health is so fragile that the terrible prospect of her imminent death hovers before Mitford's eyes. The older woman goes so far as to deem her new friend "the most remarkable person now alive" and meets her father, which, as she tells her, she is eager to do "to be better authorized to love you and to take a pride in your successes." After her favourite brother accompanies her to Torquay so that she can escape the London winter and in 1840 is drowned there, the shock reduces Miss Barrett to an invalid. This heightens the fears of Mitford, so that, on the death of another of her friends, Lady Sidmouth, in 1841, she writes to the ailing young poet, "Everybody that loves me does die! Oh! take care of yourself, my very dearest!" In February 1842, she happily reports that "Miss Barrett says that she is quite well (for her), and walks to the sofa," but in the early autumn of 1846, when the astonishing news arrives that Miss Barrett is now Mrs. Browning and is on her way across France to take up residence in Italy, she believes doom has struck. "I felt just exactly," she confesses to the translator Charles Boner, "as if I had heard that Dr. Chambers had given her over when I got the letter announcing her marriage, and found that she was about to cross to France. I never had an idea of her reaching Pisa alive." After the Brownings revisit London, she observes to Boner, "A strange thing it seemed to see her walking about like other people." Her admiration of the younger woman continues, though she criticises her belief in homeopathy, the medical use of hypnotism, and spiritualism: discussing the rappings in séances, she declares, "Mrs. Browning believes in them. She would have believed in the Cock Lane ghost."

An author Mitford adores almost as much as she adores Miss Barrett is a writer on art and society, the young John Ruskin. She is equally enchanted by the nobility of his prose and the charm of his personality. To Mrs. Partridge, the daughter of an art collector, she asserts that "there are

passages in *The Modern Painters*, that Hooker or Jeremy Taylor might be glad to have written," and when she warns her Irish correspondent Digby Starkey, "You would soon get tired of authors if you saw much of them," she allows that Ruskin is an exception.

Another famous Victorian who becomes a friend of Mitford is Charles Kingsley – novelist, clergyman, and Christian Socialist. Ambivalent about his books, she comments several times that though he lives not far from her, they have not met. When they do, she informs her Tory friend Mrs. Jennings:

I have never seen a man of letters the least like him. . . . Mr. Kingsley is not only a high-bred gentleman, but has the most charming admixture of softness and gentleness, with spirit, manliness, and frankness – a frankness quite transparent – and a cordiality and courtesy that would win any heart. He did win his own sweet wife entirely by this charm of character. She was a girl of family, fortune, fashion, and beauty; he a young curate, without distinction of any sort . . . they lived down and loved down a pretty strong family opposition and were married.

Mrs. Kingsley, she later observes to Boner, is "the only realization of my idea of a poet's wife that I have ever seen."

Also a clergyman is William Harness, a childhood friend of Mitford, who remains her friend till she dies, and then begins the task of editing a selection of her letters. Despite his literary inclinations – he edits Shakespeare and has a play of his own printed – he does not achieve great literary distinction. In a late letter, Mitford tells Boner how Harness, sharing a house in happy bachelorhood with his sister and hosting much appreciated dinners, "has lived more than forty years with all that was best and highest in art and literature in London"; she admits, however, that "William Harness, incurably indolent, has never by any great work vindicated his own high talents but is accepted . . . purely on the ground of delightful conversation and high personal character."

A clergyman who makes a late entry into Mitford's life is Hugh Pearson, Rector of Sonning, who assiduously attends her during her last months. She declares to her wealthy friend Francis Bennoch that Pearson "has been to me, spiritually, a comfort such as none can conceive," and to Mrs. Tindal (the former Miss Harrison) she writes more expansively, "He is a most admirable young man – not an author, but the chosen friend of many of the greatest, and the man of the finest taste that I have ever known. As a clergyman, he is unrivalled for largeness, tenderness, and charity – just exactly a younger Dr. Arnold." Contrasting him with other much loved visitors, she confides to him, "Mr. Harness will demand all my

strength. He is a most charming person, but requires a great deal from his companion; so does that other most delightful person, Mr. Ruskin.... Your conversation is a spring that never fails, never overflows. You've never tired me mind or body."

Eight weeks before she dies, Mitford informs Pearson that Mr. Bennoch will meet him in Reading and bring him to her house. This man, she adds, is excellent company and a useful man for a clergyman concerned about the future of school leavers to know, for "few persons in England have so much the will and the power to push merit forward." Bennoch is a prominent businessman, a friend of many writers, and the author of *The Storm and Other Poems*, published in 1841. Mitford enthuses about him to Emily Jephson:

He is the head of a great Manchester house, a man with a very large fortune, with a sweet wife, and no children. He is a leading man in the Common Council, intending, I suppose, one day or other to represent the city, being, I am told, a very fine speaker. But his residence is at Blackheath, where he exercises an almost boundless hospitality, and does more good than anybody I know. His conversation is most brilliant. He has travelled over the greater part of Europe and America, and I need hardly tell you that, as a poet, he is equalled by very few.

Reading about evidence that Bennoch has given to the London Corporation, Mitford feels, "The life that he has put into those figures is something wonderful," and she marvels at the way "life may be put into an apparently dry subject by the mind and the earnestness of the writer." His pamphlet on the currency she finds remarkable for its clarity and happily writes, "It got nearer to making me understand the question than anything has ever done yet." He even finds time to design a chair that will allow her, despite her crippled condition, to sit and write in her garden. At the beginning of 1853, she prophesies that Bennoch will be "a great poet soon," but seven months later concedes that he "has 'the faculty divine,' but not time to put it on paper."

When Mitford is near death, she writes in a letter to Bennoch, "Pray for me, my dear friends! We are of different forms, but surely of one religion—that which is found between the two covers of the Gospel." One of the friends of her last years is of a 'form' further removed from hers than that of the Scottish Bennoch. Anna Maria Goldsmid, whose father, Sir Isaac Goldsmid, is a Jewish baronet and financier, seems to enrapture her almost in the manner of Elizabeth Barrett and John Ruskin. "The most splendid woman that I have known," she informs Mrs. Partridge, "Sir Isaac Goldsmid's daughter, never dreams of writing; but she is one of those en-

lightened readers to whose appropriation [?appreciation] all writers look.” To Miss Jephson, she declares:

I wish you knew Miss Goldsmid. She is by far the greatest woman that I have ever known. Even her appearance is a complete triumph of mind over body, for she would be absolutely plain in face if it were not for the fine intellectual expression and the sweetness of the eyes; and clumsy in figure but for the noble and dignified carriage, which would beseem a queen.... I wish I could show you her only literary effort—a translation of ... Jewish sermons from the German of Dr. Solomons—worthy to be Christian discourses in their spirit of charity and brotherly love.

Two of the most engaging characters who feature in the letters are the servants Ms. Kerrenhappuk—usually referred to as K. or her “little maid”—and Sam Sweetman. In 1844, she counsels Mrs. Partridge, who is having difficulties with her domestic staff:

Above all, disregard tittle-tattle and interference. I should have escaped infinite torment and loss if I had not been driven, by the tongues of the neighbourhood, into parting with K., of whom Mr. May [the family physician] says that she is the most judicious and intelligent attendant that he ever met in a sick room, and whose affectionate attention to me at all times makes one of the chief comforts of my life.

K. has a small son who lives in the house and who may have been born out of wedlock. Happily, by the time of the letter of advice to Mrs. Partridge, she has left “a better place” to return to her former mistress. When Mitford needs a pony and chaise, if she is not to be housebound, a young man named Sam Sweetman, the son of Sir John Cope’s highly respected dog-keeper, comes to act as driver for three weeks. He takes to his new employer and at least as much to her “little maid,” marries the latter, and helps her to care for the mistress they both love.

The letters provide much detail about this happy pair. Being very strong and very gentle, Sam is an ideal person to lift the pain-racked Mitford. Unlike K., who has “a certain contempt for books,” with which the cottage is crammed, he is a great reader of both books and newspapers. On newspaper matters, Mitford notes, “He and I often ask questions of what the one is ignorant of, and he is far more frequently able to answer me than I to answer him.” When Bennoch sends his design for a garden chair, Mitford tells him what will happen if it is presented to the young man:

Sam is objector-general in this house; he never assents to any proposition. If one gives him his choice of half-a-dozen ways of doing a thing, which he himself has declared must be done, he finds fault with them all.... K. treats his objections with sublime contempt, and takes her own way in spite of them. *She* has a great turn for carpentry, and is never so happy as when walking about the house with a hammer in her hand. If she had but a proper tool-chest, and strength of arm equal to her constructive faculty, I make no doubt but she would set her husband at defiance, and work out your diagram this very day.

In November 1852, Mitford informs Hugh Pearson, "I am this winter paying the penalty annexed to married servants, and my good little K. is in no state to travel; and even if I could go to London without her, would not let me." The child is born on 2 January 1853, and her presence in the house brightens Mitford's last days. To Emily Jephson, she describes how,

She comes to my door knocking with her little clenched fist every time she can escape from her father and mother and the maid, and in imitation, we suppose, of her brother, folds her little hands every night and says, "Bless papa and mamma and poor *Ba*," the hideous name (nobody can guess why) she will call me. She knows all my things for use or wearing, and is furiously angry if anything she has been accustomed to see in my room meets her eye out of it.

The letters record several occasions when Mitford is in serious danger. Once, in the winter of 1847 to 1848, the vehicle she is sitting in is kicked to pieces by its pony; K., she afterwards recalls, "got off (we neither of us knew how) and flew to the head of the furious animal, holding on to the bit and bridle, at the peril of life and limb for many minutes." Having saved her mistress's life, K. goes on to cosset her in her last illness much as she herself had cosseted her father. "K. and Sam," she acknowledges to Mrs. Tindal, "nurse me just as if I were their mother." They are ably guided by George May of Reading, who had been Mitford's father's physician. In October 1854, she extols his devotion:

My death was expected from week to week, from day to day, from hour to hour. Mr. May, however, in spite of his immense practice, of my distance from Reading, and of his bad opinion of the case, did not abandon the stranded ship, but continued to watch the symptoms, and to exhaust every resource of diet and medicine, as if his fame and fortune depended on the result. This

union of friendship and skill has prolonged my life, and I am certainly better than a month ago.

Mr. May reluctantly allows his patient to write letters, but nothing else, and sometimes, enduring great pain, she produces as many as ten in a single day. Those that survive chronicle her prolonged ordeal in great detail as well as its ameliorating factors, of which her constitutional high spirits are the most remarkable. Shortly before she is thrown out of her chaise in December 1852, she explains to Emily Jephson:

It is next to impossible for me to be visible before two o'clock, and by eight I am wholly exhausted. I can hardly crawl from room to room, and never expect to walk the length of my little garden again—am lifted in and out of a very low pony-carriage, and from step to step upstairs to bed. Then, in bed, I cannot stir, and have all the length of the spinal column, all round the loins, and across the shoulders, a soreness which renders every position painful. It is just as if I had been soundly beaten, so that, after a little interrupted sleep, I am more fatigued in the morning than when I went to bed at night.

Even after the accident, her high spirits persist, as she tells Digby Starkey:

Mr. May complains that he never can tell how I am, because my conversation is so deceiving. My maid K. orders people away, because, so long as I have company, I wear myself out with my good spirits. High animal spirits, that great gift of God, have sustained me through a life of anxiety and labor, hardly perhaps to be paralleled in the long list of poor authors.

She goes on to make clear the result of the damage to “the principal nerves of the principal joints”:

For about a month my left arm was tied up in one shawl slingwise, and bound lightly to my body with another, to prevent the terrible pain which the slightest motion sent upward and downward through the limb and the whole side.

While she does not conceal her sufferings, Mitford constantly reverts to her thankfulness for what has been left to her. In addition to appreciating the ministrations of Hugh Pearson, George May, K., and Sam and the daily visits of her widowed neighbour Lady Russell, she observes:

It has pleased God to spare not only such faculties as were originally vouchsafed to me, but my affections, my sympathies, and my cheerfulness—nay, even the interest in daily trifles, which adds so much to the healthy joy of life. I still love books and flowers, and look with pleasure on the tall elms waving across the calm blue sky.

In another of the letters written after her last injury, she describes how she is sitting at an open window “looking on blue sky and green waving trees, with a bit of road and some cottages in the distance, and K.’s little girl’s merry voice calling [the dog] Fanchon in the court.”

Mitford is convinced that her sufferings have a divine origin. To Harness, she declares:

I fully believe that this long visitation has been the greatest mercy of the gracious God, who has been very good to me all through life. I firmly believe that it was sent to draw me to Him. May He give me grace not to throw away the opportunity.

The keynotes of her religious outlook are a call for broadminded tolerance of all churches, opposition to anything she regards as extremism, and faith in redemption through Christ. She is as critical of Methodism as Horace Walpole and of Puseyites as Sydney Smith. Overhearing Methodist preaching in 1812, she describes it to Elford as “a sermon, which, if I had not known it must be a sermon, I should undoubtedly have taken for the violent swearing of a man in a passion”; the puritanical Jansenists of the Roman Church she denounces as “Catholic Methodists.” Puseyism she defines as “nothing more nor less than popery in black and white—without the poetry, without the painting, without the music, without the architecture—without the exquisite beauty which wins the imagination in the ancient faith”; she adds, “For my own part, I hold too firmly to the true Protestant doctrine (which so many Protestants forget) of freedom of thought—complete liberty of conscience—for others as well as myself—ever to become a Roman Catholic.” Though she finds the Catholic Bishop Baines “the very incarnation of taste, combined with an intelligence, a liberality, a gracious indulgence most rare among Protestant clergymen,” K.’s fear that her mistress will be converted is needless.

Mitford has a strong dislike of religious conversions. She believes that a soul torn from its moorings is likely to remain adrift, and that “There is enough for salvation in the Gospels, under whatever form of Christianity we may worship.” She deplores “the unchristian intolerance against Unitarianism” and favours Jewish emancipation, insisting, “I, for my part, think that every one has a claim to the enjoyment of civil rights, were he

Hindoo or Mahomedan." In a letter to Mrs. Ouvry, an Anglican clergyman's wife, she alludes to the outrage caused by Pope Pius IX's establishment of a Catholic ecclesiastical hierarchy in England and protests, "All that Protestant bigotry last year was enough – not quite enough (I like freedom of thought too well), but almost enough – to make one turn Catholic."

That Mitford holds to freedom of thought is evident in her letter of thanks when Harness, her lifelong friend, sends her a book of his sermons. One of them, she judges, "would have done honour to Shakespeare"; she also feels that in all honesty she should admit something she never talks about:

I do not, or rather cannot, believe all that the Church requires. I humbly hope that it is not necessary to do so, and that a devout sense of the mercy of God, and an endeavour, however imperfectly and feebly, to obey the great precepts of justice and kindness, may be accepted in lieu of that entire faith which, in me, *will not* be commanded.

Harness's own sectarian fervour may be gauged from his publishing in 1851, the year after the re-establishment of a Catholic hierarchy in England, *The Errors of the Roman Creed Considered in Six Sermons*.

When her father is dying, Mitford finds comfort in St. John's Gospel, and as she feels her own death approaching, she reads the whole of the New Testament once, but the Gospels several times. She has always been, she tells Mrs. Ouvry, "a firm believer in the great redemption," but she used to worry "about reconciling this and that"; now, as an unlearned woman, she no longer questions the "Divine history." However, she finds that her intellectual submission to "the whole of the holy mystery" does not bring "the lively and vivifying illumination" others talk of, and she has to be content with Pearson's being untroubled by her misgivings and Harness's assurance that "rapturous assurance of acceptance" is not necessary.

Whatever her theological reservations may be, Mitford believes in the social and moral value of the Anglican Church, "the most large and liberal of the many English sects," but she opposes rigid puritanism and self-righteous judgments. She considers that Sunday should be marked by communion with nature as well as by worship, and that Sunday evening cricket is acceptable. Education, she holds, "should be based upon religion," but not restricted to it, and overdosing schoolchildren with too many visits to church will set them against religion or make them hypocrites. Beer-houses she regards as "the bane of England." When she joins a party at the performance of her friend Thomas Telfourd's *Ion*, she observes without censure, "All the naughty ladies were at our play," but she repre-

hends a plan to train an immoral woman as an actress: "Now *can* such a person as that think and feel as a high tragic actress ought to do? Honour, virtue, fidelity, love must be worse than words to her; she must have been used to consider them as things to spurn and laugh at." When people are taking sides in George IV's quarrel with his consort, she deems that the turbulence excited by the Queen's conduct "threatens to injure the taste, the purity, the moral character of the nation" and that the King's libertinism sets a deplorable example "to his court and country." Commenting on the death of Lady Blessington, widely believed to be Count D'Orsay's mistress, she declares, "I would not have been one of those strict ladies who drove the poor woman in her poverty and old age to die." As an enthusiast for the novels of George Sand, some of which, along with the authoress's lifestyle, she cannot approve of, she has to deal with her own conflicted feelings. In 1852, she is glad to know that Sand

has reformed her bad ways, lives quietly with her children ... and puts her genius (for it is more than talent) to its proper use. Her later stories, and, above all, her rustic dramas, give token of a greatly altered moral sense. In short, she is now a person whom I should not object to meet, although I should not go in search of her.

In her position on one moral issue, Mitford disappoints. As a young woman, she applauds the speeches at a meeting to oppose the slave trade, and she honours Sir William Elford for his contribution to the cause, but her zeal is not proof against her admiration for the American lawyer and statesman Daniel Webster, who visits her home and argues against emancipation as fatal to the unity of his country. Moral indignation against slavery can bring conservatives like Dr. Johnson and William Cowper, centrists like Horace Walpole and Sydney Smith, and radicals like William Blake and Thomas Paine onto the same side, but Mary Mitford goes over to the opposition. When Harriet Beecher Stowe raises international anger with *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Mitford denounces the book as "one-sided, exaggerated, false" and refuses to read beyond the first hundred pages. At best, she shows a little more perceptiveness when she admits, "That slavery is the great difficulty of a great nation," but the second half of her sentence — "and it must not be treated by appeals to the passions" — is not accompanied by any suggestion that the least disruptive method of abolition needs to be sought.

Mitford's defence of Webster's position is out of keeping with most of her political views. Raised in the era of repression that follows the French Revolution, she inherits her Whig father's liberal outlook. Her early political heroes are Charles James Fox and the radical Sir Francis Burdett.

William Cobbett appeals to her, too, until she finds his temper and heart corrupted by his imprisonment and “his head blown up like an air-balloon by the vanity which has so completely carried him off his feet.” Despising both the Government and its Whig opponents, she declares, “One thing is certain, if not a Reformer I am nothing.” When Peel introduces progressive measures with Conservative caution, she praises him as “in his heart the greatest reformer in the country.” With admirable self-knowledge, she recognizes, “I am an inconsistent politician ... with my aristocratic prejudices and my radical opinions.” She is proud of the ancient pedigree of the Mitford family and, in one letter, refers to “that best class in the whole world ... the affluent and cultivated gentry of England.” In 1831, faced with Harness’s opposition to the extension of the franchise, she urges that it is preferable to the alternative, which is revolution. Seventeen years later, when a further extension threatens, she reports to Charles Boner, who lives in Germany, “I myself should like an educational test, but it will probably end in household suffrage and the ballot.” Late in life, she describes herself to her Irish penfriend Mrs. Hoare as “midway between dear Mrs. Browning, who is a furious Radical, and dear Mrs. Jennings, who is an equally furious Tory.”

Sir William Elford, a staunch Conservative and a supporter of Pitt’s repressive measures, likes to tease Mitford about her liberal opinions calling her (in spite of her plainness, of which she is fully conscious) “Belle Démocrate” and accusing her of being no friend to monarchy. To this charge, she replies:

What made you think me a Republican? Much as I adore the arts of Greece, I see nothing to admire in their governments.... Rome always seemed to me the most disagreeable subject, and the Romans the most outrageous, strutting, boasting barbarians on the face of the earth.... Venice, too, was nothing very charming.... England’s trial of a republic ended in a very wise and very glorious king called Oliver; and France’s bloody experiment had the same conclusion. You will hardly venture again to doubt my being a very orthodox lover of a limited monarchy – the best and the freest mode of government that ever was devised by human wisdom.

The strangest of Mitford’s political passions is her lifelong adoration of Napoleon. Blinded by his sunlike genius, she is too often oblivious to the way in which that genius scorched the earth and devoured vast numbers of lives. She proclaims to Haydon, “Everything about that great man has for me a charm absolutely inexpressible” and utters to her correspondent Lucy Anderdon the wish that Miss Barrett would compose a narrative

poem “doing justice to that great man, Napoleon, to whom no justice has yet been done in any English work.” To Charles Boner, she exclaims, “Oh how I should have liked to see that mask of Napoleon! His face is the very ideal of beauty in all the prints and paintings: the upper part all power, the lower all sweetness. The greatest sin ever committed by a nation was ours in letting that great man perish at St. Helena.”

In her last years, when she has extended her idolatry to the original object’s nephew, Mitford asserts to Mrs. Ouvry:

My admiration of the antique Napoleon did not spring from his being a great warrior, but a great restorer, a great legislator, and a great man ... moreover, in four or five hundred volumes of Memoirs about him that I read once I found all, from the prince to the valet, agreeing in loving him for his *bonhomie* and kindness.

The nephew, Louis Napoleon, having been elected President of France in December 1848, stages a *coup d’état* on 2 December 1851 to break a political deadlock and makes himself sole ruler. Admitting, “He has not, of course, the genius of his uncle,” Mitford praises his freedom from “the instability and trickery of the French character,” and assails the attacks against him in the English press. When Mrs. Ouvry questions her judgment, she exclaims, “Ah, my dear friend! do not lecture me for loving and admiring! It is the last green branch on the old tree, the lingering touch of life and youth.” Disturbingly, misled by the irritation that nearly all feel at times with their government and probably by Daniel Webster’s loss of an election for opposing the abolition of slavery, she suggests that that elusive phenomenon “a mild despotism” is preferable to almost endless debate and “miserable compromise.” In 1852, when the French despotism becomes less mild, she writes:

Truly, of all the fine things that Louis Napoleon is doing for France, none, to my mind, is so valuable as the putting down of journalism!!! That vile engine, the press, is to genius of modern times what the rack was of old. I abhor it, not on my own account – for to me it is civil enough – but on the score of my betters.

In the politics of her own country, Mitford takes the liberal side, but she is no feminist. She announces to Mrs. Ouvry, “I have no faith in women’s colleges or woman’s rights. We have our own duties in our own sphere.” “A woman who could paint history,” she argues, “must first have renounced her sex,” and the “old Quakeress, a sort of combination of Mary Wollstonecraft and Harriet Martineau, who made a harangue from a wag-

on on the rights, or rather wrongs, of women" is a speaker from whom she would have fled. She accuses Hannah More of writing "like a man in petticoats, or a woman in breeches" and objects, "All her books have a loud voice, and a stern frown, and a long stride with them." She is indignant at Florence Nightingale's intrusion into the treatment of the wounded in the Crimean War: "I have no faith in the lady nurses.... Men are required.... But those ladies wanted excitement and notoriety, and they have got them." The collapse of her own health she attributes to her having been thrust into a male role. In 1829, she protests to Haydon, "Women were not meant to earn the bread of a family—I am sure of that—there is a want of strength"; twenty-four years later, she laments to Mrs. Browning, "for above thirty years I had perpetual anxieties to encounter—my parents to support and for a long time to nurse—and generally an amount of labour and of worry and of care of every sort, such as has seldom fallen to the lot of woman."

In spite of her antifeminism, Mitford does not like shallow women obsessed with their appearance. She regales Elford with an account of the conduct of a young girl who was listening to her reading one of her long poems: this "*gentille demoiselle* ... suddenly inquired, in the very middle of my first pathetic harangue, where I got the pattern of that sweet morning cap." In old age, she applauds the way in which Lady Russell's daughters have been "brought up by a most accomplished father, in the midst of the best books, and the best society" so that "they have nothing of the young lady about them." Her great complaint is that "in this educating age everything is taught to women except that which is perhaps worth all the rest—the power and the habit of thinking."

In 1847, Mitford works with a Reading bookseller named Lovejoy to compile a much needed list of secular books to be stocked in lending libraries for the poor. Sending the list to Mrs. Ouvry, who had suggested the project, she mentions that "Mr. Lovejoy smuggled in *Our Village*" and comments, "I think this selection a little too didactic, and yet many of the dry-sounding books are very amusing." Soon the Inspector of Education and the Poor Law Commissioners (one of the latter is Mrs. Ouvry's father) adopt the list, and Mitford rejoices that "we shall have more than common chance of being useful."

As a critic, Mitford can be rigorous. When she takes on the editorship of *Finden's Tableaux*, she is proud of obtaining poems much superior to "the most vague and purposeless description" that characterises the verse in most other annuals. She claims that "the very great nobility, the real leaders of fashion, always delight in the simple and the true, and leave the trash called fashionable novels to their would-be imitators." Counselling her friend Henrietta Harrison, who is to publish poetry and novels, she

recalls, "I remember being struck, two years ago, with your corrections, they were all such essential improvements; whereas the various readings of nine-tenths of your young lady versifiers are mere alterations, neither better nor worse." She draws Elizabeth Barrett's attention to the novelist G. P. R. James's mistake about a body hanging in chains, remarking, "an author like Mr. James ought to take care to be right. Scott did always. It is a part of *truth*, which in art as in everything, is a grace above all graces." She gives scrupulous advice to several friends. She counsels Charles Boner, who has lived in Germany so long that his English is no longer quite idiomatic, that he should not have written a chapter "that talks about nothing," a task that demands a command of the language that comes from its constant use, and that he should try to give all his prose the pace and variety she finds in the last fifty pages of his *Chamois Hunting in the Mountains of Bavaria*.

The publication of Boner's book in 1853 gives Mitford great pleasure. Her preference is for literature, which deals with the concrete as opposed to the abstract and with human life as opposed to the supernatural. She relishes biography, narrative history, the ballad, realistic fiction, and especially the drama. In the Old Testament, she finds "more of variety, of splendour, of human feeling and passion" than in the New. Discussing Milton in her exchanges with Elizabeth Barrett, she asserts that "the want of distinctive character causes much of the heaviness, of character, individuality, the power of identification, which is the salt of all literature from Horace to Scott. It is the one great merit of your own Chaucer, the glory of Shakespeare."

To Mitford, the Elizabethan age is "the real Augustan age of English poetry." Enquiring of Miss Barrett, "Are you a great reader of the old English drama?" she states, "I am—preferring it to every other sort of reading." Outside Shakespeare, she has a special liking for Beaumont and Fletcher, whose female characters she delights in even more than in Shakespeare's. Among British novelists, her favourites are Jane Austen and Sir Walter Scott. In 1852, she writes to Harness:

Look at the great novelists of the day, Dickens and Thackeray (although it is some injustice to Thackeray to class them together, for he can write good English when he chooses, and produce a striking and consistent character); but look at their books, so thoroughly false and unhealthy in different ways; Thackeray's so world-stained and so cynical, Dickens's so meretricious in sentiment and so full of caricature. Compare them with Scott and Miss Austen, and then say if they can live.

She sees the merit in Mrs. Gaskell's first novel, *Mary Barton*, but is ambivalent about Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, remarking, "There is cleverness in the manner in which she makes both her heroine and her readers prefer the sinner to the saint."

A similar uneasiness marks the ways in which Mitford responds to contemporary fiction and to contemporary poetry. Wordsworth's early work has a lasting appeal for her, but when his great autobiographical epic is issued posthumously, she protests, "I have seen *The Prelude*, and should be sorry that anything so wordy and so disappointing had been published, only that, by a most just law, the bad dies, and the good remains"; she is satisfied that "quite enough of very fine will be left to maintain the fame of William Wordsworth." Having disliked the wild emotions of *Childe Harold* and relished the narrative of *The Corsair*, she recognizes Byron's happy discovery of *ottava rima* when she recommends his *Beppo* to Elford as "not at all Byronish, but light and gay, and graceful and short." (*Ottava rima* is the eight-line stanza that will make possible Byron's masterpiece, *Don Juan*.) At the time of her father's death, she tells Miss Barrett, "even in all my affliction, Tennyson has had a power over my imagination which I could not have believed possible. You love the great and the deep—I, the bright and the beautiful, and therefore, each loving those delicious poems, we prefer the different ones, according to our several fancies." Reverting to the subject three days later, she asks, "What do we not owe to such a poet?"

Not surprisingly, Mitford hails the historical work of Lord Macaulay, and at one point is ready to enthrone him as "our greatest living writer," though later she charges him with modelling his prose on that of a superior writer—Lord Bolingbroke. The attraction Carlyle has for a woman with her own inclination for hero-worship subsides when she finds the English in his *Oliver Cromwell's Letters and Speeches* stranger than Cromwell's own. To Mrs. Hoare, she confesses:

I am, for my sins, so fidgety respecting style, that I have the bad habit of expecting a book which pretends to be written in our language to be English; therefore I cannot read Miss Strickland, or the Howitts, or Thomas Carlyle, or Emerson, or the serious part of Dickens, although liking very heartily the fun of *Pickwick*.

The publication of her books and the production of her plays in the United States bring Mitford into contact with some of that country's writers. Her enthusiasm extends to Longfellow, Whittier, Poe, Hawthorne and Holmes, but she has an even greater passion for French literature. French history, biography and memoirs—especially if they concern either Napoleon—are her delight. Among living novelists, she far prefers the French to

the British, Balzac being her favourite and George Sand a close second. Praising Hawthorne, she maintains, "Nothing can exceed the beauty of his style. It reminds me of the French of that greatest of novelists, Balzac, the same power of subtle analysis and of minute description."

When Elizabeth Barrett publishes "The Romaunt of the Page," Mitford beseeches her, "write more ballads or tragedies ... that is to say, poems of human feelings and human actions." Describing her own practice to Elford, she professes, "I never say one word more than appears to me to be true. To be sure, there is an atmosphere of love—a sunshine of fancy—in which objects appear clearer and brighter; and from such I may sometimes paint." This is an admirable description of her achievement in her most lasting book, *Our Village*.

A major strand in the correspondence concerns the creation and marketing of articles, books and plays, and the terrible burden authorship imposes on Mitford. In 1823, she laments to Elford, "I am now chained to a desk, eight, ten, twelve hours a day, at mere drudgery. All my thoughts of writing are for hard money." Yet it is difficult to believe that once she overcomes the initial inertia and settles down to work, she does not find pleasure in composing the delightful sketches of nature and people in *Our Village*. She must find enjoyment, too, in drawing attention to then neglected writers ranging from the seventeenth century Andrew Marvell and Robert Herrick to her own contemporary John Clare when she includes selections from them in her *Recollections of a Literary Life*. She records that a number of older books are being reprinted as a result of her efforts, and that she is extending the readership of American literature. To Boner, she reports, "Whittier and Hawthorne both say that I have done more for their reputation than all the rest of the critics put together—and that not only in England but in America."

As her health deteriorates, writing becomes for Mitford a harder task. While working on her tragedy *Inez de Castro*, she also has to produce articles for annuals, "of which," she grieves, "a new one seems to start every week for my torment." After she must agree to deliver a novel to the publisher Henry Colburn in order to obtain from him the only copies of three of her plays for a collected edition, her literary conscience makes her fight severe pain to make the new book, *Atherton*, as perfect as she can.

Many of the letters deal with the difficulties Mitford and her father confront in negotiating contracts with publishers and in collecting money owing, but their worst ordeals in this area are connected with the theatre. In 1852, she warns Digby Starkey:

I would never recommend any friend to write for the stage, because it nearly killed me with its unspeakable worries and

anxieties, and I am certainly ten years older for having so written; but of all forms of poetry it is the one I prefer, and I would always advise the writing with a view to the production of the piece upon the boards, because it avoids the danger of interminable dialogues of coldness and of languor.... Write for the stage, but don't bring the play out—that is my advice. If you wish to know my reasons, you may find some of them in the fact that one of my tragedies had seven last acts, and that two others fought each other during a whole season at Covent Garden Theatre; Mr. Macready insisting upon producing one, Charles Kemble equally bent upon the other.... Both were read in the green-room, both advertised—and just think of the poor author in the country all the time, while the money was earnestly wanted, and the non-production fell upon her like a sin.

In mid-career, when the first volume of *Our Village* has unexpected success, she confides to Elford, "I believe that if I could conquer my own predilection for the drama I should do wisely to adhere to the booksellers." Nevertheless, she persists in asking her well-read friends if they can suggest subjects for tragedies.

Introduced to theatregoing early in life, Mitford has her own idea of what gives plays a tight grip on an audience. Rating those of Emily Jephson's father higher than Harness does, she suggests to him that it is

perhaps because I prefer *eloquence* in the drama to poetry, and because I set a higher value on situation and effect. Just look at the effects of Shakespeare, the great master of dramatic situation, and tell me if they be not the finest parts of the plays in which they occur; the play scene in *Hamlet*—the banquet scene in *Macbeth*—the quarrel in *Julius Caesar*—the trial in the *Merchant of Venice*; what are these but effects?

At the end of her life, writing to Boner about her newly published *Dramatic Works*, Mitford observes, "The fact was that, by the terrible uncertainty of the acted drama, and other circumstances, I was driven to a *trade* when I longed to devote myself to an *art*. Read those plays attentively and study their construction, and you will, I think, see that *that* was my vocation." However, her plays have not returned to the stage, although their blank verse is competently written, the plots are dramatic, and the passions find effective expression. Unfortunately, the men and women who express those passions lack the individuality of the less exalted characters to be found in *Our Village* and in her letters.