

An extract from “Affecting authenticity: Sonnets from the Portuguese and Modern Love”

Studies in the Literary Imagination, Fall 2002 by Houston, Natalie M

Because the Sonnets from the Portuguese has been read since its first publication in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's 1850 Poems as a series of documents relating to her courtship and elopement with Robert Browning, its reception history is deeply intertwined with the changing reputation accorded the poet herself. By the early twentieth century, as Tricia Lootens has shown in her detailed reception study, the legend of the Browning romance had obscured the history of Barrett Browning as a powerful public poet (116-157). Because Victorian writers and readers assumed the sonnet form to be autobiographically truthful, Barrett Browning's choice of the sonnet sequence to explore her new love relationship would seem to reinforce the emotional authenticity of the Sonnets' content. Certain facts are undoubtedly true: that Barrett Browning drafted the poems during their secret courtship and only much later showed them to Robert, and that she first published the series in 1850 without Sonnet XLII, which explicitly refers to a sonnet she had published in 1844. But the interpretations of those facts that developed in the Victorian period (and after) add layers of sentimental romance-romance that, as Lootens suggests, necessarily colors our later readings of the sequence: "If the Sonnets are embarrassing, it may be because the experience of reading them reveals the extent to which we, and not they, rely upon dreams of simple, innocently sentimental Victorian love" (120). One crucial text in creating the sentimental version of the Browning love story was Edmund Gosse's famous anecdote in his introduction to an 1894 edition of the Sonnets, which was reprinted in other editions until the 1970s. Not only does Gosse portray Barrett Browning as coyly feminine, slipping the manuscript of the Sonnets into her husband's coat pocket, but he suggests that she resisted publishing "what had been the very notes and chronicle of her betrothal" (2). This undoubtedly fictionalized story succeeded not only because it relied on stereotypes of Victorian femininity, but because it assumed that the sonnet form operated as a kind of documentary record. We may never know the extent to which Barrett Browning wrote the sonnets as a way of recording or understanding her actual experience; what we can see, however, are the ways in which she created a sense of authenticity in her sonnet series, through its form, imagery, and rhetoric.

The external biographical narrative almost overwhelms our perception of narrative structure in the Sonnets, which is provided by an apparently consistent speaking subject. Some connections between specific sonnets are formed by the initial words "but," "yet," or "and" (sonnets II, X, XI, XVI), but the sonnets generally function as self-contained lyric expressions, in keeping with Victorian theories of the sonnet form. Very few contemporary reviews of the sonnets discuss them with any reference to the structure of the overall narrative. The narrative shape of the Sonnets that later readers trace—from reluctant shyness (I-IX) through emotional empowerment (X-XXII) to satisfied union (XXII-XLIII)—is not simply determined by the biographical context, but also shaped by Victorian narrative

conventions. The "marriage plot" of the Victorian novel responded to and helped create a cultural ideal of domestic romance radically different from the cultural context of the Renaissance sonneteers; closer examination of the Sonnets reveals how Barrett Browning used the sonnet sequence to negotiate between these two ideas of love.

Throughout the Sonnets, Barrett Browning deliberately invokes the Petrarchan sonnet tradition only to revise it according to her own historical moment. As recent critics have noted, in reworking this tradition Barrett Browning was simultaneously marking her filiation with earlier poets and clearing space in order to articulate the desiring female subject.' The speaker in these poems is both the desiring poet and the female object of desire. Traditionally, in amatory sonnet sequences, the roles of lover and beloved are quite distinct--the female beloved is usually silent, distant, adored. In Barrett Browning's sequence, she plays both roles: the adored object who speaks her refusal and the speaker of the sonnets who eventually comes to articulate her own desire. The literary roles Barrett Browning takes up in writing the sequence deliberately do not match her actual historical position as a well-known and respected woman poet:

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Unlike are we, unlike, O princely Heart!
Unlike our uses and our destinies.
Our ministering two angels look surprise
On one another, as they strike athwart
Their wings in passing. Thou, bethink thee, art
A guest for queens to social pageantries,
With gages from a hundred brighter eyes
Than tears even can make mine, to play thy part
Of chief musician. What hast *thou* to do
With looking from the lattice-lights at me,
A poor, tired, wandering singer, singing through
The dark, and leaning up a cypress tree?
The chrisam is on thine head,--on mine, the dew--
And Death must dig the level where these agree.

Here, and throughout the sequence, Barrett Browning uses images associated with the courtly love tradition to emphasize the differences between the two lovers--differences that have less to do with their actual poetic reputations than with Barrett Browning's performance of emotional reluctance. The exaggeration of social difference as a mark of emotional intensity is a key feature of the amatory sonnet tradition, which Barrett Browning uses here in naming herself the "wandering singer."

Victorian critics preferred the Italian rhyme scheme (abba-abba-cde-cde) as the ideal form of the sonnet, although most nineteenth-century poets used mixed forms like that popularized by William Bowles (abba-cddc-efef-- gg) or other variations requiring fewer repeated rhymes. Critics attacked the early English forms of the sonnet (Shakespeare's abab-cdcd-efef-gg or Spenser's abab-bcbc-cdcd-ee) as harsh to the ear and as violating the ideal correspondence of rhyme and sense: "Where the rules which govern the structure of

the Sonnet are strictly observed, the subject will be set forth in the first quatrain, illustrated in the second: confirmed by the first tercet, and concluded in the second" (Rev. of A Collection of English Sonnets). Although the Sonnets all use a Petrarchan variant (abba-abba-cd-cd-cd), Barrett Browning frequently uses enjambment and the visual divisions of her poems' syntax to create other rhythms than the expected two-part division between octave and sestet. Here, for example, although the rhymes follow the Petrarchan division, the syntax suggests the movement characteristic of the English sonnet form, three observations resolved by the final "couplet"-not a couplet in rhyme, but serving a similar function in summarizing and answering the previous observations of their differences. Thus in naming herself a poet of the amatory tradition, Barrett Browning acknowledges the complicated history of the sonnet form in order to legitimate the newly modern sonnet tradition she is crafting in her own sequence.

Other references to the sonnet tradition include the transformation of the speaker in sonnet X:

Yet, love, mere love, is beautiful indeed
And worthy of acceptance. Fire is bright,
Let temple burn, or flax; an equal light
Leaps in the flame from cedar-plank or weed:
And love is fire. And when I say at need
I love thee...mark!...I love thee--in thy sight
I stand transfigured, glorified aright,
With conscience of the new rays that proceed
Out of my face toward thine. (lines 1-9)

Not the silent object, like the adored Stella of Sidney's *Astrophel and Stella*, Barrett Browning's speaker acknowledges the worth of her love. By the sonnet's syllogistic logic, she thereby becomes a speaking star, disavowing the unworthiness proclaimed in the first nine sonnets of the series by combining the roles of speaker and object of desire. Sonnet XIV rejects the catalogue of beloved features so frequently itemized in Renaissance sequences:

If thou must love me, let it be for nought Except for love's sake only. Do not say "I love her for her smile ... her look ... her way of speaking gently... for a trick of thought That falls in well with mine." (1-5)

Here, as elsewhere in the series, Barrett Browning counters the idealizing tropes of the amatory tradition with plain reality: "For these things in themselves, Beloved, may / Be changed, or change for thee,-and love, so wrought, / May be unwrought so" (7-9). The Sonnets continually announce that they authentically represent real emotions and real people by borrowing and then rejecting the conventions of the sonnet tradition.

In a typical Victorian comment on the Sonnets, James Ashcroft Noble, in an essay first published in 1880, suggests that Barrett Browning's Sonnets are marked by an "apocalypse of soul" in the intensity of the feelings conveyed:

In the case of any human being such an apocalypse would have a strange and peculiar interest, but when the revelation is of such a soul as Mrs Browning's it becomes a thing of priceless value. As we read we know not whether we are most keenly touched by the poem or by the beating of the poet's heart behind it, by the throb of warm blood in its pulsating lines. (52)

What Noble describes as the poems' corporeal connection to Barrett Browning might also be thought of as the authenticity effect, an effect not simply produced by readers' romantic or biographical interest, but by features of the poems themselves: the rhetorical space of conversation, selfreferential textuality, and a focus on modern life.

Nearly all of the forty-four sonnets in Barrett Browning's sequence are addressed directly to her lover, either with the epithets "Dearest" and "Beloved" or indirectly through pronouns such as "thee" and "thy" Because the poems take up the question of closeness and distance, both emotional and physical, the close rhetorical space of the poems echoes the metaphors of the Brownings' relationship that recur throughout: the closed penknife, the enclosure of the dove's wings, the bee shut in glass, the vine twined round the tree. Barrett Browning makes no conventional claims about the relative longevity of her sonnets as compared to her love and no remarks at all about these sonnets as having any audience other than Robert Browning. Whether or not the poems were intended for publication, their rhetoric presents them as part of a private conversation. Several of the sonnets suggest precise referents outside the space of the text: "But only three in all God's universe / Have heard this word thou hast said" (11. 1-2); "I see thine image through my tears to-night, / And yet today I saw thee smiling. How / Refer the cause?" (XXX.1-3). Such references encourage us to read the Sonnets as documenting particular events. Sonnet XXVIII emphasizes the larger conversation of their courtship and also the poems' ground in external reality:

My letters! all dead paper, mute and white!
And yet they seem alive and quivering
Against my tremulous hands which loose the string
And let them drop down on my knee tonight.
This said---he wished to have me in his sight
Once, as a friend: this fixed a day in spring
To come and touch my hand. . . a simple thing,
Yes I wept for it---this . . . the paper's light. . .
Said, Dear, I love thee; and I sank and quailed
As if God's future thundered on my past.
This said, I am thine---and so its ink has paled
With lying at my heart that beat too fast.
And this . . . O Love, thy words have ill availed
If, what this said, I dared repeat at last!

By referring to the courtship letters (not published until 1899), sonnet XXVIII self-consciously invokes its own status as an apparently authentic text. The italicized words operate as if they were quoted speech, apparently more authentic than the paraphrase in lines 4-6, yet the mark of emotional truth is silence in the final lines. The sonnet constructs additional

layers of apparent documentation only to remind us that emotional experience can never be fully documented, whether in sonnet form or any other text. In summarizing the stages of this most famous Victorian courtship, Barrett Browning also updates her sonnet series by gesturing toward the narrative energy of modern romance-the progression toward marriage usually charted in the novel.

Sonnet XXIII also refers to a letter written by Robert:

Is it indeed so? If I lay here dead,
Wouldst thou miss any life in losing mine? (1-2)

I marvelled, my Beloved, when I read
Thy thought so in the letter. (5-6)

The close intensity of their conversation and correspondence is highlighted by Barrett Browning's frequent use of ellipses and rhetorical questions. Despite the many literary allusions in her series, the overall effect of her language is colloquial, another hallmark of authentic expression. Language and details from everyday life also contribute to the authenticity effect of the Sonnets: "Yes, call me by my pet-name! let me hear / The name I used to run at, when a child" (XXXIII.1-2). As readers of the Browning correspondence note, some of the Sonnets do refer to events that actually did happen, described in fairly simple language, compared with the elaborate metaphors used to describe the poet's love and her beloved:

I never gave a lock of hair away
To a man, Dearest, except this to thee,
Which now upon my fingers thoughtfully,
I ring out to the full brown length and say
'Take it.' (XVIII.1-5)

Such moments mark this sequence as explicitly and deliberately Victorian. Barrett Browning brings together the highly ritualized conventions of Victorian courtship-"First time he kissed me, he but only kissed / The fingers of this hand wherewith I write" (XXXVIII.1-2)-with the conventions of the amatory sonnet sequence and reworks the form into a narrative of modern courtship and satisfied romance. Not the plaintive or boastful lover typical in Renaissance sonnets, Barrett Browning's speaker in Sonnets from the Portuguese insists "Say over again, and yet once over again, / That thou dost love me" (XXI.1-2). This series of sonnets instantiates the physical nearness and reality of that satisfied love, rather than the distant longing of the courtly tradition. The Sonnets from the Portuguese satisfied the existing assumptions about the truthfulness and intensity of the sonnet form while at the same time historically framing the question of how to write about modern (Victorian) love.

For most critics, whether in the Victorian period or more recently, Barrett Browning's Sonnets from the Portuguese and George Meredith's *Modern Love* seem like polar opposites. If the Sonnets' reception was eventually overwhelming, *Modern Love's* was underwhelming: faulted for its obscurity, its formal innovations, and especially for its

subject matter, Meredith's sonnet sequence attracted significant critical appreciation only near the turn of the century. *Sonnets from the Portuguese* presents lyric moments of intensity belonging to a narrative of true-life domestic romance, and *Modern Love* tells the story of a marriage's dissolution. Barrett Browning's sonnets were read as documents of her own life; Meredith's sequence presents a narrative, sometimes in the third person, about four characters carefully separated from himself. If (to greatly condense 150 years of criticism) the *Sonnets from the Portuguese* can be read as a celebration of authentic love, then *Modern Love* can be read as a painfully authentic dissection of the end of love. Although their thematic material, formal structures, and tone are very different, reading these two works together can help us understand what was at stake in the Victorian construction of authenticity and its relation to the sonnet form.