

Considering Texts in Time (from Pamela S. Loy)

Unmarried women. During the nineteenth century, marriage was, for the most part, regarded as a woman's natural destiny, a highly probable if not inevitable milestone in her life. While such factors as social class and level of affluence still influenced courtship and marriage practices, women in general had more personal freedom in choosing whom to wed than their mothers and grandmothers had. Historians Estelle B. Freedman and Erna Olafson Hellerstein contend,

The weakening of external controls on courtship was in fact a mixed blessing for women. To the extent that it lessened the surveillance over their romantic and sexual behaviour, it brought greater personal autonomy; but at the same time it left them unprotected as they ventured into a larger world . . . Women's sexual and economic vulnerability, their desire for respectability and security, and their longing (in many cases) for children combined with the growing ordeal of romantic love to place great pressure on them to marry. Spinsterhood was, in fact, rare in the nineteenth century—by the end of the century, more than 90 percent of all American women married, as did 85-88 percent of the women in England and France. (Freedman and Hellerstein in Hellerstein et al, p. 121)

Spinsters did exist, however, from all walks of life. Historian Sally Mitchell notes that, in Victorian England,

[t]here were more women in their twenties and thirties than men to marry them (largely because of male emigration and colonial service), but not all single women were unhappy old maids. In the working classes, women in well-paid trades were more apt to remain single than those whose earnings were too low to provide adequate support. Among the middle and upper classes, too, it was quite possible for women to earn decent incomes and live contented, independent lives (Mitchell, p. 269).

Financial independence made a huge difference in an unmarried woman's quality of life, as did race, class, and nationality. White middleclass women with independent means could create comfortable existences for themselves and, if necessary, become teachers, writers, lecturers, or social reformers. For much of the period, however, it was considered socially unacceptable for middle-class women to do paid work; in general, a middle-aged, middle-class spinster with no money of her own was expected to stay with her parents until their deaths. After that, she could keep house for an unmarried brother or move in with a married sibling who had a large family and serve as an unpaid companion or nurse to her nieces and nephews.

The situation of Barrett and her siblings was at once typical and atypical of the preceding scenario. Mr. Barrett opposed marriage for all his children, apparently desiring to keep every one of them under his control. Barrett herself had an independent income from legacies bequeathed to her by her grandmother and uncle; so she did not need to write for her living. She furthermore chose to remain in the family home because of her poor health, her love for her siblings, and her love for her father. Even in her youth, before illness took

such a firm hold on her, Barrett apparently had no inclination to marry. In a diary she kept as a child, Barrett declared, “My mind is naturally independent and spurns that subserviency of opinion which is generally considered necessary to feminine softness!” (Barrett Browning in Forster, p. 29). As an adolescent, Barrett read Mary Wollstonecraft’s **Vindication of the Rights of Woman** (in WLAIT 3: British and Irish Literature and Its Times) and came to sympathize with many of its views. She also observed in her parents’ marriage an example of women’s subservience to men, which she evidently deplored. Years later, she described to Browning her late mother—who had died suddenly when Barrett was 22:

A sweet gentle nature, which the thunder a little turned from its sweetness—as when it turns milk—One of those women who never can resist,—but in submitting & bowing on themselves, make a mark, a plait, within, . . . a sign of suffering. Too womanly she was—it was her only fault—Good, good, & dear—& refined too! (Barrett Browning in Karlin, p. 293)

Intriguingly, Barrett alludes several times to her lost mother in Sonnets from the Portuguese—specifically, in Sonnets 18 and 33—but never once refers in these poems to the father who dominated much of her adult life.

Women and writing. While many middle-class Victorian women who did not marry eventually became housekeepers, companions, and nurses in the households of married relatives, a significant number turned to yet another means to support themselves and became writers. Some even found lasting fame as authors, including George Eliot (see **Middlemarch**, in WLAIT 3: British and Irish Literature and Its Times), the journalist Harriet Martineau, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning herself. Historians Leslie Parker Hume and Karen M. Offen contend:

During the first half of the nineteenth century the best English writing was nourished in rural parsonages or country cottages, as the careers of the Brontë sisters and Jane Austen attest; . . . there were many women who turned to writing to supplement their incomes; this was one of the few types of work in which a needy middle-class woman could engage without losing social status (Hume and Offen in Hellerstein et al, p. 280).

Nonetheless, women who wrote professionally faced their share of difficulties. Although most of them worked in the home (considered women’s proper sphere), “their vocation brought them into direct conflict with the cultural bias that defined writing as intellectual and therefore unwomanly” (Hume and Offen in Hellerstein et al, p. 280). Female would-be authors were not supposed to aspire to the same lofty literary goals as their male counterparts. Some women writers of the nineteenth century chose male pseudonyms, either to help them find publishers or to ensure that their work was given a fair hearing by critics and the public: Marian Evans became George Eliot, while Charlotte, Emily, and Anne Brontë took the names, respectively, of Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell. Other writers, including Elizabeth Gaskell and Dinah Maria Mulock, emphasized the elements of domesticity or morality in their work to offset charges of being “unwomanly.”

Unlike many of her contemporaries, Elizabeth Barrett did not have to write for her living for

financial reasons. Not only did she have the bequests from her uncle and grandmother, but also she belonged to an upper-middle-class family of considerable means, even though financial reverses in the 1830s had led to Mr. Barrett's selling their country property—Hope End in Herefordshire—and eventually moving the family to London. Nor did Barrett need to resort to a male pseudonym—by the 1840s, she had become a literary celebrity in her own right. Nonetheless, Barrett herself often regretted the dearth of women poets whom she could emulate and by whom she could be inspired, once writing wistfully, "I look everywhere for grandmothers and see none" (Barrett Browning in Bristow, p. 1). Literary analyst Dorothy Mermin explains,

Women had written good poetry in English, had even been published and read, before [Barrett] . . . but in the nineteenth century their works were almost invisible. The popular "poetesses" who adorned the literary scene when she began to write—Joanna Baillie, Felicia Hemans, Letitia Landon, and others of smaller merit and renown, inspired her as both positive and negative examples, but theirs was not the noble lineage with which she wished to claim affiliation. . . . Lacking female precursors (or grandmothers), she became such a precursor herself. (Mermin, pp. 1-2)

Throughout *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, Barrett Browning exhibits a distinct awareness of her own role as a poet. While the speaker often presents herself as inferior to her lover in health, vigor, and talents, she never forgets that she too is a professional and it is as a poetic peer that she most often addresses him. Moreover, when earthly differences are stripped away and their "two souls stand up erect and strong, / Face to face, silent, drawing nigh and nigher," the lovers are revealed as true spiritual equals (*Sonnets*, 22:1-2).

Women, love, and modernity. For much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the prevailing image of Elizabeth Barrett Browning has been that of the ailing, fragile maiden lying on her couch, rescued by a dashing poet from the domestic tyranny of her overbearing father. While those elements certainly formed a part of the famous romance between Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning, Barrett's own role in the proceedings was by no means passive, nor was *Sonnets from the Portuguese* a conventionally sentimental tribute from the poet to her new husband. Death, morbidity, loneliness, and self-doubt resonate through the poems as much as love, joy, and awakening passion. And for a woman to express these emotions as nakedly as Barrett does through her female speaker was in itself an innovation, during a period when purity, modesty, and reticence were expected of the "womanly" (middle-class) woman. Her female speaker was, moreover innovative in terms of Barrett Browning's own poetry to date, as scholar Margaret Reynolds argues:

'The Sonnets from the Portuguese' mark a radical change in the character of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poetry, or rather in the character of Barrett Browning's poet. In the earlier work, her first-person poetic persona is either male, as in 'Lady Geraldine's Courtship', or is sexless, as in 'A Vision of Poets', so that she does not contravene the law of silence for women. In the Sonnets, however, a woman speaks and she speaks as a poet, the equal of a man poet, fit to barter and compete with him. (Reynolds, p. 60)

The genre of poetry in which Barrett Browning chose to express these radical changes is also

significant, as noted by literary scholar Angela Leighton:

To write a sonnet sequence is to trespass on a male domain. Dante, Petrarch, Sidney and Shakespeare are the eminent 'grandfathers' of this predominantly male line, and Barrett Browning is one of the first granddaughters. She thus enters into a tradition in which the roles are sexually delineated: there is the man who speaks, and there is the woman who is admired, described, cajoled and pleaded with from a distance. . . . Barrett Browning must not only reverse the roles, but she must also be sensitive to the fact that Robert was a lover and a poet in his own right, and disinclined to be cast in the role of the superior muse. (Leighton, pp. 98-99)

Barrett Browning's version of the sonnet sequence thus does not cast the woman solely as the lover who entreats a distant male beloved to return her affections. Instead, the woman speaker is both subject and object in the poems. She is the speaker and sonneteer but, at the same time, she is also the one who inspires love in her poet suitor, love that she is, if not unwilling, then, reluctant to accept: "O my fears, / That this can scarce be right! We are not peers, / So to be lovers; and I own, and grieve, / That givers of such gifts as mine are, must / Be counted with the ungenerous!" (Sonnets, 9:6-10).

Yet for all her apparent self-abnegation, the speaker knows herself to be capable of passion and power, despite the sorrows that have blighted her life. Comparing her "heavy heart" to Electra's sepulchral urn that supposedly held the ashes of her dead brother, she reveals both those sorrows and the potential for passion to her lover: "Behold and see / What a great heap of grief lay hid in me, / And how the red wild sparkles dimly burn / Through the ashen greyness" (Sonnets, 5:1, 6-10). The "red wild sparkles" of passion could be stamped out by her suitor's foot if he scorns them, but if blown to new life, she warns, those few embers could ignite a powerful and dangerous blaze and "those laurels on thine head, / O my Beloved, will not shield thee so, / That none of all the fires shall scorch and shred / The hair beneath" (Sonnets, 5:11-14).

The turning point of the sequence, Sonnet 10, also represents a marked departure from poetic tradition. Despite her qualms, the speaker acknowledges the beauty of love and accepts it in this pivotal sonnet: Her love, she says, "is fire" (Sonnets, 10:5). The speaker's revelation in this sonnet alone distinguishes Sonnets from the Portuguese from its poetic predecessors, in which declarations of mutual love are eternally deferred. Moreover, as the lovers' relationship matures and approaches romantic fulfilment, Barrett's sonnet sequence becomes, increasingly, the product not only of her sex but of her particular time.

Like almost all Victorian amatory sequences, and unlike most Renaissance ones, ['Sonnets from the Portuguese'] assumes that marriage—the social affirmation of love, the affective bond holding society together—is love's proper end . . . By surrendering to love, the speaker is repudiating (as many Victorian poets felt it necessary to do) art bred in isolation. . . . And as in most Victorian sequence poems, lyric utterance is set in a context of humdrum, unromantic, unheroic, everyday life. (Mermin, p. 130)

This celebration of the ordinary harks back not to Petrarch or to Shakespeare but to far

more recent poets, to William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge at the turn of the nineteenth century).

Given her familiarity with classical and English literature, Barrett Browning was likely aware of the ways in which her sonnet sequence differed from those of her literary “grandfathers.” Indeed, if a letter composed early in her correspondence with Browning is any indication, she may have deliberately reinvented the genre to create a new poetry more suited to her day:

I am inclined to think that we want new forms . . . as well as thoughts—The old gods are dethroned. Why should we go back to the antique moulds . . . classical moulds, as they are so improperly called. . . . Let us all aspire to Life—& let the dead bury their dead. If we have but courage to face these conventions, to touch this love ground we shall take strength from it instead of losing it. . . . For there is poetry everywhere . . . the ‘treasure’ (see the old fable) lies all over the field. (Barrett Browning in Karlin, p. 36)

Sources and literary context. The autobiographical nature of *Sonnets from the Portuguese* was no secret to the Brownings themselves. In 1849, while the couple were living in Pisa, Elizabeth informed her husband, depressed over the recent death of his mother, that she had once written some poems about him, and she showed them to him. She described Browning’s reaction to the poems as “touched and pleased” and before long, he was encouraging her to have them published (Barrett Browning in Forster, p. 237). Because Elizabeth felt the poems were too personal to be published under her own name, the Brownings decided to disguise the sonnet sequence as a translation. They chose the title *Sonnets from the Portuguese* for two reasons: Browning’s nickname for Elizabeth—because of her olive complexion—was “my little Portuguese,” and he was intrigued by her earlier poem, “Catarina to Camoëns,” which dealt with a Portuguese poet and his beloved.

Sonnets from the Portuguese helped to revive the sonnet sequence, a literary genre that had flourished during the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries. The Italian poet, Petrarch, is usually credited with originating the genre through a series of sonnets that explored his undying and unrequited love for the beautiful but married Laura. Many Elizabethan poets emulated Petrarch by writing linked sonnets that depicted the various aspects of a relationship between lovers; the most famous of these Elizabethan sonnet sequences include Sir Philip Sidney’s ‘*Astrophel and Stella*’ (1580), Edmund Spenser’s ‘*Amoretti*’ (1595), and William Shakespeare’s untitled sonnets, which appear to be addressed, alternately, to a handsome young man and a beguiling dark woman. After several centuries in eclipse, the sonnet form and sequence became popular again during the nineteenth century. William Wordsworth’s ‘*The River Duddon*’, Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s ‘*The House of Life*’, Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s ‘*Sonnets from the Portuguese*’, and Christina Rossetti’s ‘*Monna Innominata*’ are all examples of this revived poetic genre. ‘*Sonnets from the Portuguese*’, however, was the first sonnet sequence, written by a woman, to give the woman’s perspective on the relationship between lovers. Moreover, ‘*Sonnets from the Portuguese*’ was one of the few sonnet sequences that ended happily, with the lovers achieving fulfilment rather than disappointment.

Reviews. ‘Sonnets from the Portuguese’ was published in Barrett Browning’s Poems in 1850. At the time, the volume attracted little critical notice, perhaps because it contained much reprinted material. Most of the reviews that it did inspire were positive, with the lone exception of the one from the *Spectator*, which complained, “Mrs Browning has given no single instance of her ability to compose finished works. Diffuseness, obscurity, and exaggeration, mar even the happiest efforts of her genius” (*Spectator* in Taplin, pp. 238-239). Other reviewers were more enthusiastic. H. F. Chorley, writing for the *Athenaeum*, declared, “Mrs. Browning is probably, of her sex, the first imaginative writer England has produced in any age:—she is, beyond comparison, the first poetess of her own” (Chorley in Taplin, p. 237). Elizabeth scoffed at the “of her sex”—faint praise indeed. The *English Review* similarly asserted that Barrett Browning held “high rank among the bards of England” and noted “her especial beauties—in the combination of romantic wildness with deep, true tenderness and most singular power” (*English Review* in Taplin, p. 237).

More specifically, the reviewer for the *Examiner* wrote that ‘Sonnets from the Portuguese’ comprised a “remarkable series,” though, as the Brownings had intended, he seemed unaware of the autobiographical significance. The critic for *Fraser’s Magazine* was similarly misled by the title but nonetheless appreciated the unique quality of the sonnets, remarking, “From the Portuguese they may be: but their life and earnestness must prove Mrs. Browning either to be the most perfect of all known translators, or to have quickened with her own spirit the framework of another’s thoughts, and then modestly declined the honour which was really her own” (*Fraser’s Magazine* in Taplin, p. 238). Full-fledged acknowledgement of the poems’ prowess came from a knowing audience, though, to whom they were originally directed. Robert Browning proclaimed them “the finest sonnets written in any language since Shakespeare’s” (*Browning* in Radley, p. 90).

The sequence became better known and more widely praised after Barrett Browning’s death in 1861. The following year, a critic for the *Christian Examiner* wrote of ‘Sonnets from the Portuguese’, “Such purity, sweet humility, lofty self-abnegation, and impassioned tenderness have never before found utterance in verse. Shakespeare’s sonnets, beautiful as they are, cannot be compared with them, and Petrarch’s seem commonplace beside them” (*Christian Examiner* in Taplin, pp. 408-409). By the end of the nineteenth century, ‘Sonnets from the Portuguese’ had secured a place in the affection of late-Victorian readers and critics. In his *Victorian Poets* (1895), Edmund Clarence Stedman ranked *Sonnets from the Portuguese*

[among] *the finest subjective poetry in our literature . . . it is no sacrilege to say that their music is showered from a higher and purer atmosphere than that of the Swan of Avon. . . . Mrs. Browning’s Love Sonnets are the outpourings of a woman’s tenderest emotions, at an epoch when her art was most mature and her whole nature exalted by a passion that to such a being comes but once and for all. Here, indeed, the singer rose to her height. Here she is absorbed in rapturous utterance, radiant and triumphant with her own joy.* (Stedman, p. 137)