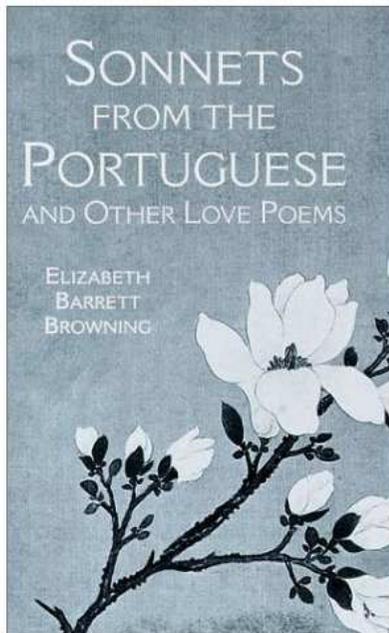


Sonnets from the Portuguese



Elizabeth Barrett Browning

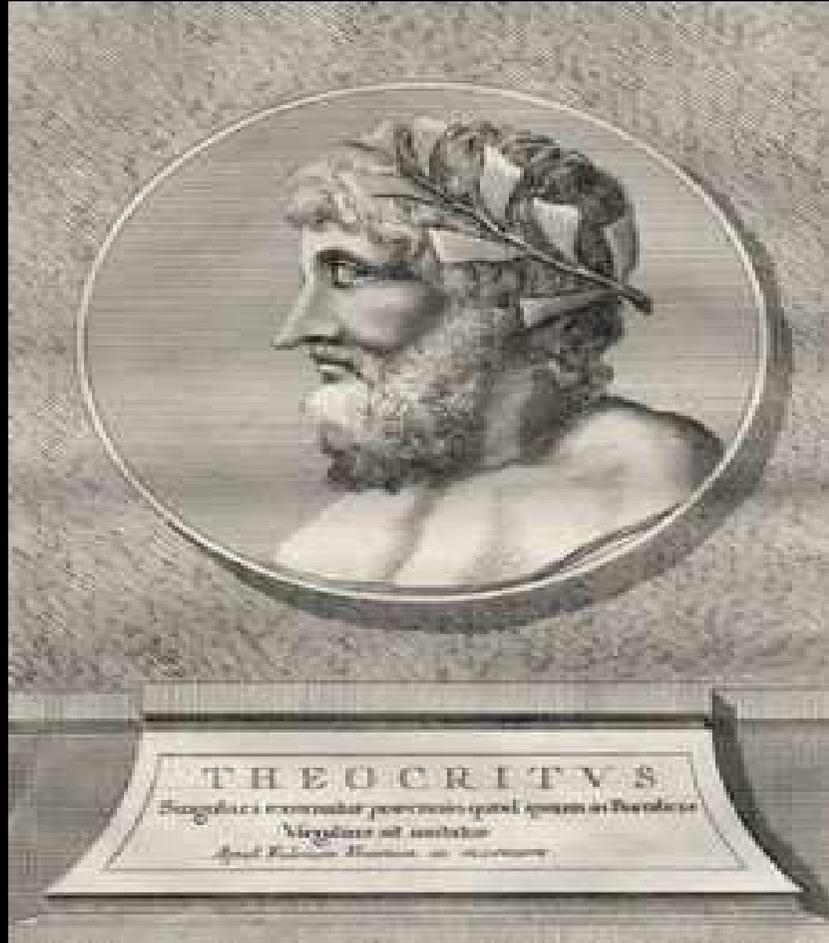
INTRODUCTION

- *Sonnets from the Portuguese* was written by Elizabeth Barrett Browning between 1845 and 1846 and was published in 1850.
- It is a collection of forty-four love sonnets written for her, then, future husband Robert Browning.
- The content and tone of the sonnets change as her relationship with Browning relationship progressed.

- expresses her doubt and fear about beginning a relationship with Browning. As the relationship progressed Barrett Browning was able to overcome her anxieties, and eventually, they took a more accepting and passionate tone.
- Originally, she did not plan to publish the collection due to their extremely personal content, but changed her mind after Robert Browning insisted, saying they were perhaps the best sequence of English-written sonnets since Shakespeare's time.
- In order to maintain some privacy, Browning disguised the title in hopes people would believe they were translations from foreign sonnets.

- The collection was originally called *Sonnets from the Bosnian*, but was changed to Portuguese after Robert's suggestion, perhaps stemming from his nick-name for Elizabeth: "my little Portuguese."

SONNET I



- Theocritus, the creator of pastoral poetry, flourished in the 3rd century BC. Little is known of him beyond what can be inferred from his writings. He created a style of poetry known as “Bucolic”
- In the most famous of the *Bucolics* Thyrsis sings to a goat-herd how Daphnis, the mythical herdsman, having defied the power of Aphrodite, dies rather than yield to a passion with which the goddess had inspired him.
- The typical sonnet themes of love and unrequited love are introduced here through the use of intertextuality.

- Pastoral Poetry is a literary work dealing with the lives of shepherds or rural life in general and typically drawing a contrast between the innocence and serenity of a simple life and the misery and corruption of city and especially court life.
- The speaker reflects on the idyllic nature of Theocritus' work: "sweet years, the dear and wished for years" (l. 2). Note the use of diction to suggest the idyllic qualities of the world described in the poetry: "gracious" (l. 3) and "gift" (l. 4).
- The speaker read Theocritus in Greek ("his antique tongue" in l. 5)

- ll. 6 – 9^a express the depression and sadness that she had felt for most of her life, due to her extreme illness and isolation. This is captured through such phrases as “sweet, sad years” and “melancholy years”.
- Note the repetition of “years” – emphasising lost time.
- This period is described as being a “shadow”, a dark time. Also, the shadow is “flung” – “to throw, cast, or hurl with force or violence” (*Random House Dictionary*)

- The sestet introduces the change. The speaker is still upset and “weeping” from the insight that she has had in the octave.
- The personification of “Shape” is intended to suggest death looming.
- However, the “Shape” mentioned was not the impending feeling of death as she thought, but the surprising sensation of falling in love with Robert Browning.

Sonnet XIII

- The speaker inquires of her beloved whether she should “fashion into speech” how she feels about him. She is not yet ready to commit to language the feelings that are motivating her. In the first two lines of "Sonnet 13", Elizabeth Barrett Browning asks Robert if he wants her to write how she feels about him.
- Quite likely, she feels that too much outward verbal expression may dampen those exquisite feelings.
- If she committed her words to paper, they would be like a “torch” that would “cast light on each” of their faces, but only if the wind did not first blow out that fire. She feels she needs to protect her growing emotion from outside forces; thus, she begins with her question, for she is not certain that her remaining quiet is truly the correct procedure.

- With a dramatic flourish, she claims that she “drop[s] at [his] feet,” because she cannot steady herself sometimes before his presence. She is still too excited by the prospects of love that she cannot calm herself enough to write anything coherent about how she feels.
- This sonnet seems to imply that he has asked her for a poem regarding how she feels about him, but she feels that her love is too deep within her heart that she cannot express its shape and importance; she cannot give it any imagery at this point for it is “hid in me out of reach.” She will have to wait until she can find some measure of tranquillity, before she attempts to “fashion into speech” her feelings.
- The octave is loaded with self doubt – she does not believe that she can convey (through her writing her feelings for Robert).
- Rather, in the sestet, she tells Robert that she cannot wholly describe her feelings for him because she is still unsure of what those feelings are:

First Tercet: “Nay, let the silence of my womanhood”

- Thus, she concludes that “the silence of [her] womanhood” will have to convince him of her deep love for him.
- She reveals that she still remains somewhat aloof from the suitor, stating that she remains “unwon.” And even though she has been “wooed,” she still has to keep a part of the self hidden for her own personal safety. She must remain anchored in her own self.

Second Tercet: “And rend the garment of my life, in brief”

- Earlier sonnets have revealed the level of pain and sorrow the speaker has suffered in her life, and she still suffers. Therefore, she again discloses that if she prematurely attempts to put all of her emotion into a poem, she might only “convey [her heart’s] grief.”
- She fears the prospect that “a most dauntless, voiceless fortitude” might destroy the momentum with which she is moving toward her complete acceptance of the new relationship with her beloved.

Sonnet XIV

*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, and certes brought
A sense of pleasant ease on such a day'—
For these things in themselves, Beloved, may
Be changed, or change for thee,—and love, so wrought, May be
unwrought so. Neither love me for
Thine own dear pity's wiping my cheeks dry,—
A creature might forget to weep, who bore
Thy comfort long, and lose thy love thereby!
But love me for love's sake, that evermore
Thou mayst love on, through love's eternity.*

First Quatrain: “If thou must love me, let it be for nought”

- In ll. 1 - 2 Elizabeth Barrett Browning says she wants only to be loved for "love's sake".
- The next four lines describe all the things she does not want to be loved for.
- The speaker still sounds a bit tentative as she states, “If thou must love me”; she continues to feel that she needs to remain somewhat uncertain as she contemplates their relationship.
- Her tentativeness is to some extent offset by using “must.”
 - At least she does not insult the man by saying, “if you really love me.” She accepts that his love is true but yet suffers the possibility that it might change.
- Thus, she asks that the reason he love her must be for no other “[e]xcept for love's sake only.” She does not want him to love her for any physical characteristic such as “her smile.” Nor can she accept it if he merely loves “her look” or “her way / Of speaking gently.”

Second Quatrain: “That falls in well with mine, and certes brought”

- She then reveals the reason this kind of attention is unwelcome: by focusing on a look, a smile, or way of speaking, the suitor might fall victim to “a trick of thought.”
- Such things change from day to day with the mood of each partner: if her smile pleases him one day—what happens on the day she has no smile for him?
- If she looks at him with kindness one day but appears only melancholy the next—what then happens to the love that was heralded by her kind look? So it is also with her speech. She knows that she will not always say gentle, pleasing things that delight the ear of her beloved.
- She therefore plainly states, “these things in themselves, Belovèd, may / Be changed, or change for thee.” Even if she does not intend the change, his appreciation of those things could change, and she is aware that the love that is based on changeable things cannot endure.

First Tercet: “May be unwrought so. Neither love me for”

- The speaker adds another caveat that is most important to her: she has repeatedly emphasized that she has lived a melancholy life, weeping streams of tears, and she is now asking her beloved not to love her out of pity.
- She asserts that at some point she “might forget to weep.” And again if his love is strengthened by her tears, that love would not hold up if her tears dried up.

Second Tercet: “Thy comfort long, and lose thy love thereby!”

- She then avers that because of him she sees herself losing her melancholy; she is enjoying now and hopes to continue to enjoy “[his] comfort long.” But if he loved her as he pitied her, she would “lose [his] love thereby!”
- But if he merely loves her “for love’s sake,” he will continue to love “through love’s eternity.” As long as love exists, so will his love for her.
- *Browning uses this sonnet to describe the details of what she believes constitutes real love and her expectations regarding Robert.*

Sonnet XXI

Say over again, and yet once over again,
That thou dost love me. Though the word repeated
Should seem "a cuckoo-song," as thou dost treat it,
Remember, never to the hill or plain,
Valley and wood, without her cuckoo-strain
Comes the fresh Spring in all her green completed,
Belovèd, I, amid the darkness greeted
By a doubtful spirit-voice, in that doubt's pain
Cry, *Speak once more--thou lovest!* Who can fear
Too many stars, though each in heaven shall roll,
Too many flowers, though each shall crown the year?
Say thou dost love me, love me, love me--toll
The silver iterance!--only minding, Dear,
To love me also in silence with thy soul.

First Quatrain: “Say over again, and yet once over again”

- The speaker commands her lover to tell her “over again, and yet once over again / That thou dost love me.”
- She admits that repeating the same phrase over and over might sound silly and repetitive as the cuckoo bird’s call. But then she admits that nature is full of beloved repetition.
- She reminds her lover and herself that spring never comes without the hills and plains being greeted with the same greens as the valley and wood that resound with the crazy cuckoo’s repetition.
- In Britain the Cuckoo song is said to be a first sign of Spring. The Cuckoo Song – a traditional folk song has lyrics that usually include the line (or a slight variation): *The cuckoo is a pretty bird, she sings as she flies; she brings us glad tidings, and she tells us no lies.*
- Consider how season’s suggest Barrett Browning’s life thus far.

Second Quatrain: “Valley and wood, without her cuckoo-strain”

- The speaker likens the human world to the world of nature to justify or correct human nature’s sometimes fastidiousness, or, at least, her own.
- She simply has grown in delight, hearing her lover tell her he loves her, and she has finally accepted it as truth. She thus cannot stop her giddiness as she commands him to repeat the love declaration.
- But she then apprises him that during the night, her old demons caused her again to begin to doubt, and “in that doubt’s pain,” she felt compelled to command him to speak those words of love to her once more. Thus, she emphatically calls, “*Speak once more--thou lovest!*”

- The octave focused on the arrival of spring:
 - What has been her winter?
 - Consider Barrett Browning's life and her previous sonnets;
 - How can this link to the Victorian context?
 - What is the “doubtful spirit voice”?
- The sestet represents the jubilation/ecstasy she feels: where she previously was circumspect about Robert's declaration of love, here she embraces it.
 - She cannot be told enough that he loves her.
 - There is a condition though, his love should be “Silent” too. There should be a deeper spiritual component. This links with Sonnet XIV: love, “for love's sake”.

First Tercet: “Cry, *Speak once more-- thou lovest! Who can fear*”

- The speaker, after this confession, asks a question that also allows her to feel justified in her command. Through the question, she is emphasizing that no one would fear “too many stars” nor “too many flowers”; therefore, she insists that there is nothing to fear from repeating the love declaration so she may hear it again and again.
- As the stars must “roll” “in heaven” and the flowers must “crown the year,” hearing her beloved repeat his love for her is even less intrusion on the cosmos.

Second Tercet: “Say thou dost love me, love me, love me--toll”

- In the final tercet, she dramatizes the repetition by repeating it herself: “Say thou dost love me, love me, love me,” and she calls the repetition a “silver iterance,” suggesting that it has the quality of a bell sound; she craves hearing the “toll” of the “silver iterance!”
- But she offers an addition to the command for the audible reiteration of the love proclamation; she also commands her lover “To love me also in silence with thy soul.” She knows that her final command is even more vital than hearing the words, for words without soul force are like husks without grain.