

Elizabeth Barrett Browning

1806–1861

Elizabeth Barrett Browning was the most celebrated woman poet of the Victorian era. She was admired by contemporaries as varied as William Wordsworth, Queen Victoria, Edgar Allan Poe (who introduced an American edition of her work), Christina Rossetti, and John Ruskin (who proclaimed *Aurora Leigh* the greatest poem in English). Her popularity was especially remarkable because she interspersed her ardent love lyrics with hard-hitting poems on radical political causes and feminist themes. In the United States, she influenced not only sequestered writers like Emily Dickinson, but also political activists like Susan B. Anthony.

The eldest of eleven children, Elizabeth Barrett grew up in a country manorhouse called Hope End in Hertfordshire. The Barretts were a wealthy family whose fortune derived from a slave plantation in Jamaica. While her submissive mother, Mary Clark, encouraged her to write, it was her protective but authoritarian father, Edward Moulton-Barrett, who dominated her affections and received laudatory poems on his birthdays. From an early age Barrett envisioned herself combining male and female attributes to become “the feminine of Homer.” As the critic Dorothy Mermin has pointed out, the ambitious child-poet was already imaginatively inhabiting two gender roles, the imprisoned female muse and the active male quester: “At five I supposed myself a heroine and in my day dreams of bliss I constantly imaged to myself a forlorn damsel in distress rescued by some noble knight.”

Barrett took advantage of her family’s resources to give herself an exceptional education, unusual for a woman of her day. Her passion for Greek poetry led her to translate Aeschylus’s *Prometheus Bound* (1833). Two earlier works also reflected her wide reading: at twelve she wrote a four-book epic, *The Battle of Marathon*, which her father had privately printed, and at twenty she anonymously published a long philosophical poem, *An Essay on Mind, with Other Poems* (1826). But her intellectual development was offset by an illness that broke her health at the age of fifteen. Thereafter, her bold aspirations and mental energy were at odds with her semi-invalid state. Her sense of isolation increased in 1828 when her mother died, and again

when declining family fortunes led her father to move the family from the home she loved, first to Sidmouth, Devon, in 1832 and then to London in 1835, where they eventually settled at 50 Wimpole Street.

It was here that Barrett became almost a recluse. Disliking the dirty, foggy city, she hardly left the house, but she corresponded avidly with a circle of literary and public figures. In 1838 chronic lung disease weakened her further; she already had developed what would be a lifelong dependence on morphine as a painkiller. Her doctors insisted that she go to Mediterranean climes, but the farthest her father would allow was Torquay, on the south coast of England. She lived there for three years, returning prostrate with grief after her brother Edward died in a boating accident. For the next several years, her spirits sustained only by her poetry, she worked, slept, and received visitors on a couch in a room sealed against the London air. Often exhausted, she was unable to see the aged Wordsworth when he came to pay his respects.

As she and her small circle of friends were quick to realize, Elizabeth Barrett had become like Tennyson’s Lady of Shalott, having no other life but to weave her poetic web in solitude. *The Seraphim and Other Poems* (1838) established her reputation, and the two volumes of *Poems* (1844) consolidated her position as the era’s finest “poetess.” The latter book included *A Drama of Exile*, a sequel to Milton’s *Paradise Lost* in which Eve emerges as a heroine, and also *The Cry of the Children*, condemning child labor in factories. Despite her oppositional politics, the suppleness of her thought and her passionate voice were so highly regarded by critics and public alike that she was mentioned as a candidate for Poet Laureate when Wordsworth died in 1850.

But by then she had utterly transformed her life. In 1845 she began corresponding with Robert Browning—she was nearly forty, and famous; he was thirty-three and his only reputation was for obscurity. Their literary friendship rapidly blossomed into romance, which they had to hide from her father, who had tacitly forbidden his children to marry. After a secret marriage in London in 1846, the couple eloped to Italy, where they settled in Florence at Casa Guidi. There, the fairy tale continued: happily married and living in a warm climate, she recovered much of her health, wrote her best work, gained the love of the Italians with her nationalistic verse, and gave birth to a son, Robert Weidemann Browning (“Pen”), in 1849. She had prophetically written to Browning, in the last letter before their elopement: “I begin to think that none are so bold as the timid, when they are fairly roused.”

Her union with Robert Browning was responsible for two works that have since formed the cornerstone of her reputation. The first is their justly famous correspondence. The story of their courtship was widely known, but its intimate details were not revealed until the publication of their letters in 1899. Second, as their relationship developed she wrote a series of love poems to Browning. She finished the last poem two days before their wedding, and the collection was published in 1850, under the deliberately misleading title *Sonnets from the Portuguese*. Among the most significant sonnet sequences since those of Shakespeare and Sidney, these poems revived the form in Victorian England and revised in brilliant new ways what had hitherto been a primarily masculine poetic tradition. Casting the male recipient of her sonnets in the role of sexual object, yet also allowing for his reciprocal passion and poetic drive, Barrett Browning records the interplay of gifted lovers whose desire is inseparable from their quest for verbal mastery.

In her final years Barrett Browning’s career continued to flourish. She and her husband enjoyed a wide circle of friends, including Tennyson, Ruskin, Carlyle, Rossetti, and Margaret Fuller. They traveled a great deal, to Rome, Paris, and several times back to London where they were warmly received by both their families—with the exception of her father, who refused to forgive or even see her again. In 1851 she published *Casa Guidi Windows*, which



controversy in England over its volatile and “unwomanly” political views, particularly its scathing attack on American slavery. But her health was failing, and after recurrent illnesses, she died in Florence in her husband’s arms. *Last Poems* appeared posthumously in 1862.

Her greatest achievement, however, lies in her verse novel, *Aurora Leigh* (1856), a daring combination of epic, romance, and *bildungsroman*. The first major poem in English in which the heroine, like the author, is a woman writer, *Aurora Leigh* rewrites Wordsworth’s *The Prelude* from a female point of view. With its Miltonic echoes, the blank-verse format claims epic importance not only for the growth of the woman poet, but also for a woman’s struggle to achieve artistic and economic independence in modern society. The poem blends these themes, moreover, with a witty, Byronic treatment of Victorian manners and social issues, and an emotionally charged love plot that recalls Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*. The story of how the aspiring poet Aurora Leigh overcomes the prejudices of both a masculine audience and the man she loves, in order to find fame and happiness in Italy, closely mirrors Barrett Browning’s own. The poem was an overwhelming success, even though many contemporary readers were scandalized by its radical revision of Victorian ideals of femininity, and its picture of how the two sexes might work together so that each could achieve its fullest human potential. Scorning to measure herself against any but the greatest male authors, Elizabeth Barrett Browning was the first to show English readers the enormous possibilities of a poetic tradition in which women participated on equal terms.

To George Sand¹

A Desire

Thou large-brained woman and large-hearted man,
Self-called George Sand! whose soul, amid the lions
Of thy tumultuous senses, moans defiance
And answers roar for roar, as spirits can:
5 I would some mild miraculous thunder ran
Above the applauded circus,² in appliance
Of thine own nobler nature’s strength and science,
Drawing two pinions,^o white as wings of swan, wings
From thy strong shoulders, to amaze the place
10 With holier light! that thou to woman’s claim
And man’s, mightst join beside the angel’s grace
Of a pure genius sanctified from blame,
Till child and maiden pressed to thine embrace
To kiss upon thy lips a stainless fame.

1844

To George Sand

A Recognition

True genius, but true woman! dost deny
The woman’s nature with a manly scorn,
And break away the gauds^o and armlets worn jewelry
By weaker women in captivity?

1. George Sand was the pseudonym of Aurore Dudevant (1804–1876), a French Romantic novelist noted for her free and unconventional ways, including the adoption of male dress. Barrett Browning admired

Sand’s genius, and defended her against those critical of her morality.

2. Roman arena where Christians were thrown to the lions.

5 Ah, vain denial! that revolted cry
Is sobbed in by a woman’s voice forlorn,—
Thy woman’s hair, my sister, all unshorn
Floats back dishevelled strength in agony,
Disproving thy man’s name: and while before
10 The world thou burnest in a poet-fire,
We see thy woman-heart beat evermore
Through the large flame. Beat purer, heart, and higher,
Till God unsex thee on the heavenly shore
Where unincarnate spirits purely aspire!

1844

A Year’s Spinning

1
He listened at the porch that day,
To hear the wheel go on, and on;
And then it stopped, ran back away,
While through the door he brought the sun:
5 But now my spinning is all done.

2
He sat beside me, with an oath
That love ne’er ended, once begun;
I smiled—believing for us both,
What was the truth for only one:
10 And now my spinning is all done.

3
My mother cursed me that I heard
A young man’s wooing as I spun:
Thanks, cruel mother, for that word,—
For I have, since, a harder known!
15 And now my spinning is all done.

4
I thought—O God!—my first-born’s cry
Both voices to mine ear would drown:
I listened in mine agony—
It was the *silence* made me groan!
20 And now my spinning is all done.

5
Bury me ’twixt my mother’s grave,
(Who cursed me on her death-bed lone)
And my dead baby’s (God it save!)
Who, not to bless me, would not moan.
25 And now my spinning is all done.

6
A stone upon my heart and head,
But no name written on the stone!
Sweet neighbours, whisper low instead,
“This sinner was a loving one—
30 And now her spinning is all done.”

7
And let the door ajar remain,
In case he should pass by anon:

And leave the wheel out very plain,—
That HE, when passing in the sun,
May see the spinning is all done.

35

1850

from *Sonnets from the Portuguese*¹

1

I thought once how Theocritus had sung
Of the sweet years, the dear and wished-for years,
Who each one in a gracious hand appears
To bear a gift for mortals, old or young:²
5 And, as I mused it in his antique tongue,³
I saw, in gradual vision through my tears,
The sweet, sad years, the melancholy years,
Those of my own life, who by turns had flung
A shadow across me. Straightway I was 'ware,
10 So weeping, how a mystic Shape did move
Behind me, and drew me backward by the hair;
And a voice said in mastery, while I strove,—
“Guess now who holds thee?”—“Death,” I said. But, there,
The silver answer rang,—“Not Death, but Love.”

13

And wilt thou have me fashion into speech
The love I bear thee, finding words enough,
And hold the torch out, while the winds are rough,
Between our faces, to cast light on each?—
5 I drop it at thy feet. I cannot teach
My hand to hold my spirit so far off
From myself—me—that I should bring thee proof
In words, of love hid in me out of reach.
Nay, let the silence of my womanhood
10 Commend my woman-love to thy belief,—
Seeing that I stand unwon, however wooed,
And rend the garment of my life, in brief,
By a most dauntless, voiceless fortitude,
Lest one touch of this heart convey its grief.

14

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

1. These very personal poems chronicle Elizabeth Barrett's courtship with Robert Browning. She did not show them to him until after they were married, when he pronounced them “the finest sonnets written in any language since Shakespeare's.” He overcame her reluctance to publish them by proposing the somewhat cryptic title

2. In *Idylls* 15, Theocritus, a Greek pastoral poet of the 3rd century B.C., tells how “the dainty-footed Hours” brought Adonis to Aphrodite. The song celebrates the return of spring, the season when Elizabeth Barrett first met Robert Browning.

3. I.e., Greek.

That falls in well with mine, and certes brought
A sense of pleasant ease on such a day”—
For these things in themselves, Belovèd, may
Be changed, or change for thee,—and love, so wrought,
May be unwrought so. Neither love me for
10 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.

21

Say over again, and yet once over again,
That thou dost love me. Though the word repeated
Should seem “a cuckoo-song,”⁴ as thou dost treat it,
Remember, never to the hill or plain,
5 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
10 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!^o—only minding, Dear,
To love me also in silence with thy soul.

repetition

22

When our two souls stand up erect and strong,
Face to face, silent, drawing nigh and nigher,
Until the lengthening wings break into fire
At either curvèd point,—what bitter wrong
5 Can the earth do to us, that we should not long
Be here contented? Think. In mounting higher,
The angels would press on us and aspire
To drop some golden orb of perfect song
Into our deep, dear silence. Let us stay
10 Rather on earth, Belovèd,—where the unfit
Contrarious moods of men recoil away
And isolate pure spirits, and permit
A place to stand and love in for a day,
With darkness and the death-hour rounding it.

24

Let the world's sharpness, like a clasp knife,
Shut in upon itself and do no harm
In this close hand of Love, now soft and warm,
And let us hear no sound of human strife

4. Repetitious, like the cuckoo's song.

After the click of the shutting. Life to life—
 I lean upon thee, Dear, without alarm,
 And feel as safe as guarded by a charm
 Against the stab of worldlings, who if rife
 Are weak to injure.⁵ Very whitely still
 The lilies of our lives may reassure
 Their blossoms from their roots, accessible
 Alone to heavenly dews that drop not fewer,
 Growing straight, out of man's reach, on the hill.
 God only, who made us rich, can make us poor.

28

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 to-night.
 This said,—he wished to have me in his sight
 Once, as a friend: this fixed a day in spring⁶
 To come and touch my hand . . . a simple thing,
 Yet 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!

32

The first time that the sun rose on thine oath
 To love me, I looked forward to the moon
 To slacken all those bonds which seemed too soon
 And quickly tied to make a lasting troth.
 Quick-loving hearts, I thought, may quickly loathe;
 And, looking on myself, I seemed not one
 For such man's love!—more like an out-of-tune
 Worn viol, a good singer would be wroth
 To spoil his song with, and which, snatched in haste,
 Is laid down at the first ill-sounding note.
 I did not wrong myself so, but I placed
 A wrong on *thee*. For perfect strains may float
 'Neath master-hands, from instruments defaced,—
 And great souls, at one stroke, may do and doat.

38

First time he kissed me, he but only kissed
 The fingers of this hand wherewith I write;
 And ever since, it grew more clean and white,

Slow to world-greetings, quick with its "Oh, list,"^o
 When the angels speak. A ring of amethyst
 I could not wear here, plainer to my sight,
 Than that first kiss. The second passed in height
 The first, and sought the forehead, and half missed,
 Half falling on the hair. O beyond meed!^o
 That was the chrism⁷ of love, which love's own crown,
 With sanctifying sweetness, did precede.
 The third upon my lips was folded down
 In perfect, purple state; since when, indeed,
 I have been proud and said, "My love, my own."

listen

deserving

43

How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.
 I love thee to the depth and breadth and height
 My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight
 For the ends of Being and ideal Grace.
 I love thee to the level of everyday's
 Most quiet need, by sun and candle-light.
 I love thee freely, as men strive for Right;
 I love thee purely, as they turn from Praise.
 I love thee with the passion put to use
 In my old griefs, and with my childhood's faith.
 I love thee with a love I seemed to lose
 With my lost saints,—I love with the breath,
 Smiles, tears, of all my life!—and, if God choose,
 I shall but love thee better after death.

1845–1847

1850

5. I.e., against the stabs of worldly people, who may be

6. On May 17, 1845, Robert Browning wrote to arrar