Sonnet XXIX Study Guide

Sonnet XXIX by Elizabeth Barrett Browning

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Introduction

Many poems have been written about love: its nature, its causes, its effects, its beginnings, its endings but Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese* is unique in the history of English literature for the means by which the sonnets were eventually published for all the world to read. According to Margaret Foster's biography *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, three years after her 1846 marriage to fellow poet Robert Browning, Barrett Browning was listening to her husband rail against "personal" poetry which, presumably, could not handle the greater and more complex themes that he felt poetry should. She then surprised her husband with the question, "Do you know I once wrote some sonnets about *you*?" and then showed him the forty-four sonnets she had composed during their courtship. Astounded by their beauty and power, Browning insisted that they be published, and in 1850, Barrett Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese* was read by countless more people than the sonnets' originally intended audience of one.

While the most famous line of all Barrett Browning's poetry is found in "Sonnet XLIII" ("How do I love thee? Let me count the ways"), all of the poems in *Sonnets from the Portuguese* reveal her agile mind that explores the nature of love and its effects on her. "Sonnet XXIX," like several of its companions, offers Browning a glimpse of his beloved when she is not in his presence: beginning with the statement "I think of thee," the poem depicts the workings of Barret Browning's mind as she anticipates her husband's arrival. Although modern readers were not, of course, considered by Barrett Browning as she wrote her poems to Browning, they can still appreciate the skill and force of her verse over 150 years later.

Author Biography

Elizabeth Barrett Browning was born in Durham, England, on March 6, 1806, the oldest of her parents' twelve children. Her father, Edward Boulton Barrett, was a sharp businessman who made a fortune from a number of sugar plantations in Jamaica. Barrett was very stern, and he ruled his home with absolute authority; his household law forbidding any of his children to marry caused a great deal of strife. Barrett Browning grew up in Hope End, her family's country home near the Malvern Hills. As a child, she wrote a number of poems: her earliest known poem was written when she was eight, as a birthday gift for her mother. For her fifteenth birthday, her father had one of her poems (*The Battle of Marathon*) privately printed. Her first brush with sorrow, however, occurred in 1828 when her mother, Mary, suddenly died. After the abolition of slavery in Jamaica, the Barretts' fortunes declined, and they relocated to London in 1837.

By the time she had moved to London, Barrett Browning's health was poor. As a child, she had suffered a spinal injury and shown signs of a lung condition that was never fully diagnosed; the damp climate of London only exacerbated her illnesses. Many remedies were proposed, and in 1838, she was moved to Torquay, where the sea air would, presumably, soothe her lungs. However, the trip proved a tragic one when her favorite brother, Edward (who had accompanied her at her insistence), drowned in a boating accident on his way back to London from her new residence. Feeling responsible for his death, Barrett Browning became a recluse and practically an invalid. She returned to London in 1841, where she rarely left her room and became dependent on morphine□a dependency that would continue for the rest of her life.

In 1844, her two-volume collection *Poems* was published; while her verses brought her favorable critical attention, her work also brought her the man who would eventually woo, win, and marry her: Robert Browning. Browning (who had yet to make his reputation as a poet) was so impressed by her work that he wrote to her. Over the course of the next few months, he and Barrett Browning wrote to each other almost every day until they finally met on May 20, 1845, and discovered that they were already in love. More letters (over 500 in all) and visits continued until the two were secretly married on September 12, 1846. Fearing the wrath of Barrett Browning's father, the newlyweds fled to Florence. Though the Italian climate greatly improved Barrett Browning's health, her father never forgave her, and she found herself disinherited. She and her father were never reconciled. Apart from a few short visits, Barrett Browning remained in Italy for the rest of her life; in 1849, she gave birth to her only child: her son, Penini.

In 1850, Barrett Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese* were published. Although they had been written earlier as a private gift to Browning (who called her his "little Portuguese" due to her olive complexion), her husband was so moved by the forty-four sonnets that he felt they should not be denied to the world. Barrett Browning acquiresed, and this collection stands as her greatest and most well-known achievement. Other significant works include *Casa Guidi Windows* (1856), a political poem in which she expressed her support for the Florentine nationalist movement, and

Aurora Leigh (1859), an experimental verse narrative. She died on June 29, 1861, and was buried in Florence. Browning published a collection of his wife's poetry in 1866, just as his own poetic career was at its height.

Plot Summary

Lines 1-4

Barrett Browning's first statement ("I think of thee!") is, in part, the subject of the poem, for the entire sonnet attempts to imitate, through its imagery and sound, the dynamics of her mind dwelling on Browning, her fond yet absent lover. (Though readers customarily use the term "speaker" to note the difference between a poet and the voice behind his or her work, in the case of "Sonnet XXIX" one can speak of Barrett Browning as the speaker, since the poems are deliberate and undisguised addresses to her husband.) Barrett Browning compares her thoughts of Browning to "wild vines" that "twine and bud" about a tree here, the "tree" is Browning. Like vines, Barrett Browning's thoughts of Browning grow more profuse with the passing of time; eventually, they grow to such length and density (as they "Put out broad leaves") that they cover the tree that gives them a place to flourish. "Soon there's naught to see," she explains, except for the "straggling green" of the vines; in a metaphorical sense, Barrett Browning is suggesting that her thoughts eventually seem to overpower in intensity the thing that allows them to grow in the first place. Her longing for Browning seems to overshadow Browning himself, as eventually the "straggling green" on a tree "hides the wood."

Lines 5-7

Lest her words her be mistaken for an expression of romantic delight with her current situation, Barrett Browning immediately qualifies her previous idea. Calling Browning "my palm tree" as a sign of playful affection, Barrett Browning insists that she could never regard her thoughts (however "wild" and "broad") as a substitute for Browning himself. He is "dearer, better" than any thoughts about him, regardless of how beautifully expressed in verse those thoughts may be.

Lines 7-11

Barrett Browning's thinking about Browning has (naturally) increased her desire to see him, so she asks him to "Renew thy presence" and face her. Extending the metaphor offered in lines 1-4, she commands Browning to act like a "strong tree" and "Rustle" his "boughs." Doing so will "set thy trunk all bare" and cause her thoughts of him (the "bands of greenery") to "Drop heavily down." The image of a tree shaking its own boughs in an effort to free itself of the vines that "insphere" it reflects Barrett Browning's opinion of Browning as a strong, masculine figure who, when "all bare," is beautiful in his simplicity and freedom from her encumbering thoughts. Indeed, Barrett Browning seems to hold little regard for her own thoughts, since she wishes these to be "burst, shattered, everywhere" once Browning appears before her.

Lines 12-14

Barrett Browning concludes the poem expressing the hope that she will soon be in the "deep joy" of Browning's presence and find herself under his "shadow"; as the shade of a tree provides comfort to those who sit under it, so will Browning's overpowering self provide comfort for Barrett Browning, who even describes the "air" under her "palm tree" as "new." Her world is a better place when Browning is in it, and she is willing to remain overshadowed by the force and power of her beloved. Finally, she tells Browning that she is willing to sit in his shadow because doing so will free her from constantly thinking of him; she longs for the time when she will be "too near" him and where thoughts *of* him will be unnecessary.

Themes

Barrett Browning's artistic challenge in "Sonnet XXIX" is to depict the feelings that come upon her when she is separated from Browning; by extension, the poem applies to anyone who thinks about his or her absent beloved with longing and anticipation of his or her return. Barrett Browning's method is to describe the workings of her mind in organic terms: thoughts are like "wild vines" that wind about the image of Browning, here likened to a tree.

Barrett Browning's comparing her thoughts of Browning to vines that "twine and bud" about him suggests the degree to which his absence (regardless of length) has affected her: "twine" implies that her thoughts continually move in steady ways, while "bud" suggests that they continually grow. One thought of Browning leads to a second, which leads to a third; thoughts engender more thoughts, just as vines keep winding and budding with the progression of time. These vines also "Put out broad leaves," and the size of these leaves suggests the intensity of Barrett Browning's thoughts—an intensity so great that "soon there's naught to see / Except the straggling green which hides the wood." Vines can, of course, kill a tree by wrapping themselves around the branches and effectively cutting off the tree's means of survival, but Barrett Browning does not want to commit "botanical suffocation." Instead, Barrett Browning wishes that she could see Browning in the flesh rather than in her mind's eye. Just as "straggling" vines are no match for the power and beauty of a "strong tree," thoughts of a person are a weak substitute for the person himself. Barrett Browning states, "I will not have my thoughts instead of thee" for this very reason.

Her recognizing that her thoughts of Browning cannot compensate for his absence prompts Barrett Browning to beg him, "Renew thy presence." To continue the botanical metaphor, Browning's return will be like a tree shaking off the vines that cover it: "Rustle thy boughs and set thy trunk all bare," she asks, wishing to see him in all the glory of his strength. ("Set thy trunk all bare" also slyly and playfully suggests Barrett Browning's sexual desire.) As the poem continues, Barrett Browning's wish to see Browning grows more powerful, to the point where she denies the value of her own longing: she hopes that the "bands of greenery which insphere" him will "Drop heavily down" and lie "burst, shattered, everywhere!" The reader gets the sense of Barrett Browning's growing impatience with her own thoughts and their feeble attempts to "insphere" the essence of Browning. Once her "strong tree" has returned to her, she can peacefully dwell in his "shadow" and breathe a "new air," an air made "dearer" and "better" by Browning's presence. Then, she will not *need* to think of him because she will be "too near" him. The physical presence of the beloved precludes any longing thoughts of him because this presence is too overpowering. As Angela Leighton remarks in her 1986 study *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, "For as long as the speaker thinks her poem, she must miss the presence which supports it." Thus, the poem begins with "I think of thee" and ends with "I am too near thee," to indicate how Barrett Browning moves from wishes of seeing Browning to an imaginary fulfillment of that wish.

Style

The word "sonnet" comes from the Italian *sonnetto*, a word that means "little sound." The first master sonneteer was Petrarch, who gave his name to the Petrarchan (also called Italian) sonnet: a poem of fourteen lines in which a situation or problem is presented in the opening eight lines (the octave) and then resolved or complicated in the remaining six (the sestet). The rhyme scheme of the octave is *abba*, *abba*; that of the sestet is *cde*, *cde* or (in the case of "Sonnet XXIX") *cdc*, *dcd*. The meter is iambic pentameter (ten syllables per line of alternating unstressed and stressed syllables). Sonnets became popular in England in the sixteenth century, when poets such as Sir Thomas Wyatt, Samuel Daniel, and Edmund Spenser began to employ (and toy with) the form. English interest in the sonnet eventually led to the creation of different sonnet types, the Spenserian and the Shakespearean, both of which still feature fourteen lines but alter the Petrarchan rhyme scheme. The form fell out of favor during the eighteenth century but was resurrected in the nineteenth by William Wordsworth, John Keats, Percy Bysshe Shelly, and, of course, Elizabeth Barrett Browning herself. The sonnet is still widely found in the work of modern poets such as W. H. Auden, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Edwin Arlington Robinson, and Richard Wilbur.

The reasons for the form's broad appeal can be easily understood: it offers readers a compact and intense examination of a specific issue and challenges poets to write about their subjects in a rigidly prescribed form. While the themes explored in sonnets are limited only by their creators' imaginations, the most commonly explored theme in sonnets is love and its effects on the speaker□as is obviously the case with Barrett Browning's "Sonnet XXIX."

"Sonnet XXIX" follows, to an extent, the metrical pattern of the Petrarchan sonnet: the poem's iambic pentameter is mostly regular, except for moments when Barrett Browning toys with the meter to emphasize an idea. For example, when she states that her "vines" of thought "Put out broad leaves," the words "out," "broad," and "leaves" are all stressed to suggest the weight of her thoughts. Similarly, consider the line describing Browning's shaking her thoughts off his "palm tree" self:

Drop heavily down□burst, shattered, everywhere!

This line begins with a spondee (a foot with two stressed syllables), followed by an iamb, another spondee, an iamb, and then a pyrrhic (two unstressed syllables):

Drop heavily down burst, shattered, everywhere!

The sound of this line reflects its sense as the reader's voice reflects the weight of these "heavy" thoughts crashing to the earth.

Rhetorically, the poem also generally follows the Petrarchan pattern, although the poem's "turn" (as the change between the octave and sestet is commonly called) occurs

not in the eighth line but in the seventh, when Barrett Browning tells Browning, "Rather, instantly / Renew thy presence."

While "Sonnet XXIX" can be read and enjoyed on its own, it is part of a collection of sonnets titled *Sonnets from the Portuguese*. These forty-four sonnets make up what is commonly called a sonnet sequence, in which each poem serves as one step in a narrative, emotional, or psychological progression. Petrarch's sonnets, for example, explore the poet's feelings for Laura, his beloved, as the poems in Barrett Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese* depict her intense love and longing for Browning. Other notable sonnet sequences in English include Sir Philip Sydney's *Astrophel and Stella* (1591), Michael Drayton's *Idea's Mirror* (1594), Shakespeare's *Sonnets* (1609), and John Donne's *Holy Sonnets* (1639).

Historical Context

The Victorian Era

The adjective "Victorian" historically refers to the long reign of Queen Victoria (1837-1901). The first half of her reign was a period of incredible growth and prosperity, the most important example of which was the rise of the middle class as an economic and political power. A specific highlight (and example of English pride) of this half of Victoria's reign was the Great Exhibition (1851), in which hundreds of people from around the world visited London's Crystal Palace to view the fruits of technology and science. The nation enjoyed perhaps its period of greatest optimism and enthusiasm. As Barrett Browning's husband Browning wrote in *Pippa Passes* (1841):

The year's at the spring
And day's at the morn;
Morning's at seven;
The hill-side's dew-pearled;
The lark's on the wing;
The snail's on the thorn:
God's in his heaven□
All's right with the world!

This unbridled enthusiasm, however, was rocked in a number of ways as Victoria's reign continued. In 1859, Charles Darwin published *The Origin of Species* and caused an international uproar from those who viewed his ideas of "natural selection" as heresy. In addition, while the rise of the middle class via the Industrial Revolution marked an achievement of earlier decades, more and more authors and politicians began examining the human cost of so great an economic boom. Writers such as Charles Dickens, John Stuart Mill, and John Ruskin attacked Victorian values in their work while politicians such as Benjamin Disraeli (who twice served as prime minister) attempted to uphold conservative attitudes. Though the term "Victorian" was first synonymous with English patriotism and a belief that England had a sovereign duty to influence the affairs of the world, the term eventually came to connote an attitude of priggishness, old-fashioned values, out-of-touch conservatism, and a jingoistic nationalism that many English people viewed with scorn, rather than nostalgia. Writers such as Oscar Wilde, George Bernard Shaw, and Joseph Conrad sounded the final death blows of the era in their scathing (and popular) works.

Victorian Verse

While the Victorian age is best known for its explosion in the number of novelists and the refining of that form, the era also saw its share of poets who eventually became giants in the history of English literature. Foremost of these was Alfred Lord Tennyson (1809-1892), whose verse was wildly popular, very refined, and perfectly Victorian in

manner and sentiment. (He became poet laureate in 1850.) Though her husband has since eclipsed her in terms of critical reputation, Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806-1861) was also a well-known poet, despite her reclusiveness; indeed, it was her 1844 collection *Poems* that secured her fame as well as her future husband's heart. Her *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (1850) still stands as one of the finest sonnet sequences in the language. The early work of Robert Browning (1812-1889) received scant attention from critics or readers; it was not until the publication of his *Dramatis Personae* in 1864 that he became a household name; his mammoth series of interconnected monologues, *The Ring and the Book* (1869), cemented his fame.

As the century progressed, two other popular poets reflected the struggle between Victorian values and those of the new (and frightening) twentieth century. Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936) composed several volumes of poems that extolled what he saw as the virtues and inherent rightness of English imperialism; today, many readers view his work as representative of Victorian arrogance. Conversely, Thomas Hardy (1840-1928) wrote a number of verses in which he expressed his pessimism and uncertainty about his seemingly perfect Victorian world. While Kipling saw England as a force for the will of God, Hardy's verse is marked by a skepticism and anxiety that readers have come to recognize as the first sounds in verse of twentiethcentury man.

Critical Overview

Since her death in 1861, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's work has received increased critical attention and approbation. As Julia Markus notes in her 1995 study of the Brownings' marriage *Dared and Done*, Barrett Browning's first critical rave came from her future husband, who began his first letter to her with the statement "I love your verses with all my heart, dear Miss Barrett" and who later prompted her to have the *Sonnets from the Portuguese* published because its poems constituted (in his opinion) the greatest sonnet sequence since Shakespeare's. Many critics agree with the assessment of Dorothy Mermin, who (in her 1989 study *Elizabeth Barrett Browning: The Origins of a New Poetry*) calls Barrett Browning "the first woman poet in English literature."

As Margaret Foster points out in her 1988 biography *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, however, many of the poet's contemporary critics attacked Barrett Browning's poems for their "obscurity, strange images, faulty rhymes and affectation." Some modern critics have concurred with these reviews. In her 1988 work, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Woman and Artist*, Helen Cooper quotes Althea Hayter's *Mrs. Browning: A Poet's Work and Its Setting* (1962), in which Hayter argues that the poems in *Sonnets* "are not enough removed from personal relationship to be universal communication." Similarly, Cooper also quotes Lorraine Gray's 1978 essay, "The Texts of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese*: A Structural Reading," in which Gray faults the poems for failing to "express the universal wisdom expressed in the love sequences of Dante, Petrarch, Sidney, Spenser, Shakespeare and Meredith." Finally, in her 1986 book *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, Angela Leighton refers to Feit Deihl's 1978 essay, "'Come Slowly□Eden': An Exploration of Women Poets and Their Muse," in which Deihl dismisses the poems as "often sentimental" and "overly self-deprecating."

Such opinions, however, are those of the minority, for *Sonnets from the Portuguese* is widely admired. The aforementioned Dorothy Mermin argues (again in her *Elizabeth Barrett Browning: The Origins of a New Poetry*) that the power of the *Sonnets* lies in Barrett Browning's taking up "the male poet's place": she is both the "object of a poet's courtship" *and* "the sonneteer." Mermin specifically praises "Sonnet XXIX" for its portrayal of how "desire can conceal the object it transforms" and how the sonnet urges Browning to "break free of her entwining imagination." (She also applauds the poem's "joyously erotic" tone.) In her feminist study, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (1972), Mary Jane Lupton argues that the poems "capture those insecurities and selfdoubts common to many women as they prepare for marriage." In the same vein, the aforementioned Helen Cooper (also in her *Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Woman and Artist*) argues that the fact that Barrett Browning did not write the poems for publication "empowered her voice" and allowed her to use the poems as a "process of discovery." According to Virginia L. Radley (author of the 1972 study *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*), the poems treat the challenge Barrett Browning faced of "how to cope with love" after she had resigned herself to an early death. Ultimately, for both aesthetic and biographical reasons, most critics concur with Julia Markus, who (in her *Dared and Done*) calls *Sonnets* "the deepest and at times the darkest thoughts of a woman of genius, in grave

health, who finds in middle life not the death she waits for but the love she never expected."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Moran is an instructor of English and American literature. In this essay, Moran explores the ways in which "Sonnet XXIX" dramatizes the workings of Elizabeth's mind as she thinks of her absent lover.

In his 1755 *Preface to the English Dictionary*, the lexicographer Samuel Johnson defends his decision not to alter the spellings of the words in his book to suit changes in use or pronunciation. "There is in constancy and stability a general and lasting advantage," he explains, "which will always overbalance the slow improvements of gradual correction." However, Johnson also acknowledges that all debates about spelling and pronunciation are, in a greater sense, almost trivial:

> This recommendation of steadiness and uniformity does not proceed from an opinion, that particular combinations of letters have much influence on human happiness; or that truth may not be successfully taught by modes of spelling fanciful and erroneous: I am not yet so lost in lexicography, as to forget that *words are the daughters of earth, and that things are the sons of heaven*. Language is only the instrument of science, and words are but the signs of ideas: I wish, however, that the instrument might be less apt to decay, and that signs might be permanent, like the things which they denote.

Johnson's admission that words are mere "earthly" tools, used by mortals as "signs" for "heavenly" things may be a defense of his lexicographic methods, but it is also a profound statement about the inadequacies and limitations of language. Only God can give birth to "things"□ all mortals can do is invent words that (in many cases feebly) try to capture these things' essences. As Joyce Kilmer famously observed two centuries later, "Only God can make a tree"; all we, as mortals, can do is write about them. Spelling and pronunciation are important, but in the long run, the spelling of a word (whether correct or incorrect, ancient or modern, phonetic or otherwise) does very little service in terms of how well a word captures the essence of the thing it connotes. One can, for example, spell "death" as "death" or "deth," but this will not ease any of our fears about what Hamlet calls "the undiscovered country." For all the time and effort humans put into the use, study, and celebration of language, it remains a tool of limited effectiveness. Language may be the dress of thought, but it is a dressing that is greatly limited in its ability to make human thoughts (and the very process of thinking) understandable to other people. Anyone who has ever tried to compose a resume, love letter, or poem knows this to be the case.

Such is the issue explored in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "Sonnet XXIX," in which the poet examines the limitations of poetic language (which is presumably richer than other kinds) when faced with a seemingly simple task: how does one put into words the

thoughts and emotions that naturally occur when the lover is away from her beloved? Can words ever get close to the complex workings of a lover's mind and then replicate the workings of such a mind on paper? Elizabeth's sonnet ultimately becomes a poem about the inadequacy of poems, a sonnet that becomes obsolete once its subject appears in the flesh, for then a sonnet□and indeed language itself□becomes unnecessary.

The poem begins with Elizabeth stating the occasion for her poetic premise, much as she does in her renowned "Sonnet XLIII," which begins, "How do I love thee? Let me count the ways." "I think of thee!" she exclaims, expressing both her longing for Robert and challenge as an artist: how to make readable and intelligible what actually happens when the action described in these first four words takes place. The rest of the sonnet, therefore, is Elizabeth's attempt to dramatize her thinking of Robert (a "son of heaven") using mere "daughters of earth."

But using the words "I think of thee" to describe the process of thinking does not tackle the task at hand, so Elizabeth turns to figurative language to better replicate her manner of thought, comparing her thoughts to "wild vines" that "do twine and bud" about Robert as vines do "about a tree." As any conscious person knows, one thought leads to another, so her simile makes perfect poetic sense. And as any person who has thought about an absent lover knows, thoughts of the beloved only lead to more intense thoughts of the same. Elizabeth's statement that her "wild vines" of thought "Put out broad leaves" is appropriate in the sense that the vines grow and even flourish as they wind about the image of Robert. Her thoughts, in fact, grow so intense (and the vines, therefore, become so dense) that "soon there's naught to see / Except the straggling green which hides the wood." This image of a tree covered in vines again suggests the intensity of Elizabeth's thoughts, thoughts so numerous that they threaten to smother the tree itself. Calling her thoughts a "straggling green" is Elizabeth's first hint that her thoughts are weak substitutions for the "strong tree" of Robert that prompts them. Still, the only way she can hope to replicate her thoughts is to resort to toying with the "daughters of earth."

Thus, as soon as Elizabeth establishes her simile for depicting her longing thoughts, she undermines it by insisting to Robert that no thoughts (however poetically expressed) can come close to the thing they represent or that she attempts to dramatize in words: "Yet O my palm tree," she explains, "be it understood / I will not have my thoughts instead of thee / Who art dearer, better!" Robert should not take her "wild vines" as ones that Elizabeth pleasantly cultivates; a man is "dearer" (more valuable) and "better" than any thoughts that dwell on him or words that lamely try to describe him. Should Robert knock on her door and appear to her at this instant, the poem would collapse because it would no longer be necessary.

This knocking on the door is what Elizabeth craves, and she presents this craving in the same botanical terms she used earlier to depict her longing: "Rather, instantly, / Renew thy presence," she begs, asking Robert to act "as a strong tree should" by beginning to "Rustle thy boughs and set thy trunk all bare" of the "wild vines" that had encircled it. Though the sexual connotation of these lines is undeniable, the very act of recognizing

such a connotation (that is, a toying with words) is what Elizabeth seeks to avoid: she wants Robert, the "son of heaven," perhaps unencumbered by clothes, but definitely unencumbered by her thoughts of him. She wants the man, not the memory□the willful Robert, not these wistful words. Robert's rustling his boughs will make the "bands of greenery" that "ensphere" him "Drop heavily down□burst, shattered, everywhere!" The very sound of "Drop heavily down" suggests the figurative weight of her thoughts and her desire to be freed of their burden. She wants to move to a place beyond thought and beyond the words she must use to describe thought□and the only place where this can happen is at Robert's side. Only then, in the "deep joy" of his presence, where she will be in his "shadow" yet still breathe a "new air," the air of a place in which language is superfluous, since lovers can understand each other's thoughts and moods without their having to write them down. As she explains, "I do not think of thee□I am too near thee" when he is by her side.

The sonnet thus begins with an announcement of Elizabeth thinking and ends with her fantasy of not thinking; it begins with her using figurative language to replicate her thoughts and ends with her wish that such language were unnecessary. Whereas William Wordsworth (in his Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*) may have defined poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings recollected in tranquility," Elizabeth would gladly trade those hours in which she tranquilly composes poems for a few moments with these same poems' inspiration. However, as Johnson points out in his preface, definitions are, like the language out of which they are fashioned, inadequate means by which to convey essential truths. The irony of all these ideas about thoughts and language being found in something created from thoughts and language is of course obvious□but what is a poet to do? Almost two centuries after the publication of Johnson's *Dictionary* and one century after Elizabeth composed "Sonnet XXIX," the narrator of Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, Humber Humbert, complained, "Oh my Lolita! I have only words to play with!" Lolita, like Robert, was of heaven, although, unlike Robert, obviously not a son.

Source: Daniel Moran, Critical Essay on "Sonnet XXIX," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Mermin examines the critical response to Barrett Browning's works with regard to the content of the work and the sex (and gender) of the author.

"I love your verses with all my heart, dear Miss Barrett"—so began Robert Browning's first letter to the poet he was soon to meet, court, and marry. He went on to praise her poems' "fresh strange music, the affluent language, the exquisite pathos and true new brave thought." Such enthusiasm was not unusual then or later in the nineteenth century, for Elizabeth Barrett was a famous and respected writer whose work was considered learned, innovative, obscure, and difficult as well as expressive and moving. Rossetti, Morris, and Swinburne admired her intensely when they were young and impressionable and much Pre-Raphaelite poetry shows her influence. Her poems offered a vital energy, a new and compelling music, a bold engagement with controversial social issues, and a combination of tough wit with passionate intensity that was more like Donne than anything yet published in the nineteenth century. Coventry Patmore found *Sonnets from the Portuguese* "lofty, simple, and passionate—not at all the less passionate in being highly intellectual, and even metaphysical." Her use of the ballad tradition bore fruit in the work of Morris, Rossetti, and others, her poems on social themes were popular and influential, and *Aurora Leigh*, her feminist novel in verse, had a huge success (partly *de scandale*) and still charms readers with its wit, psychological acuteness, social comedy, and exuberant energy. But even with the current interest in female writers most of her poetry is neglected, while from *Sonnets from the Portuguese*—her most lastingly popular work and, next to *Aurora Leigh*, her most considerable poetic achievement—critics avert their eyes in embarrassment.

The poem deserves much more attention from literary historians, however, both because of Barrett Browning's influence on later women poets and because it is the first of the semi-autobiographical, amatory, lyrical or partly lyrical sequences in modern settings that comprise one of the major innovations of Victorian literature. The poetry is much more subtle, rich, and varied than one would guess from "How do I love thee"—the only one of the sonnets that most of us know. The poem's enormous popularity with unliterary (presumably female) readers, along with the even more popular legend of the fair poetess, the dashing poet-lover, and the mad tyrant of Wimpole Street partly account for the repugnance—often expressed as ridicule—that *Sonnets from the Portuguese* is apt to inspire. But the real problem is that the female speaker produces painful dislocations in the conventions of amatory poetry and thus in the response of the sophisticated twentieth-century reader, whose first overwhelming though inaccurate impression of the poems is that they are awkward, mawkish, and indecently personal—in short, embarrassing.

The speaker fills roles that earlier love poetry had kept separate and opposite: speaker and listener, subject and object of desire, male and female. While this produces a rich poetic complexity, it also produces embarrassment, which as Erving Goffman says can arise from the clashing of apparently incompatible roles. Traditionally in English love poetry the man loves and speaks, the woman is beloved and silent. In *Sonnets from the*

Portuguese, however, the speaker casts herself not only as the poet who loves, speaks, and is traditionally male, but also as the silent, traditionally female beloved. Insofar as we perceive her as the lover, we are made uneasy both by seeing a woman in that role and by the implications about the beloved: the man seems to be put in the woman's place, and□especially if we recall the origins of the female lyric tradition in Sappho□we may seem to hear overtones of sexual inversion. Insofar as the speaker presents herself as the beloved, however, she transfers the verbal selfassertion and many of the attributes which in poems traditionally belong to the subject of desire, to desire's normally silent and mysterious object. The result is a devaluation of the erotic object that casts the whole amorous and poetical enterprise in doubt. For the object is both the speaker and the text, an identity like that which Browning asserted in his first letter to Elizabeth Barrett: "I do, as I say, love these books with all my heart□and I love you too." The identification troubled her, though she could not entirely disavow it: "There is nothing to see in me," she told him; "my poetry □ is the flower of me □ the rest of me is nothing but a root, fit for the ground & the dark." She assumed at first that his love was "a mere poet's fancy □ a confusion between the woman and the poetry." Many of the sonnets say, in effect: "*Look at me, and you will cease to desire me*." So solicited, many readers turn away.

They turn from a sight that violates both literary and social decorum: a distinctly nineteenthcentury woman in the humble posture of a courtly lover. This blurring of sexual roles is established in the third sonnet, which imagines the beloved as a glorious court musician "looking from the latticelights" at the speaker, who is just a "poor, tired, wandering singer, singing through / The dark, and leaning up a cypress tree." Later the speaker compares her bewilderment after seeing her lover to that of a rather Keatsian "acolyte" who "fall[s] flat, with pale insensate brow, / On the altar-stair" (xxx). The traditional poet-wooer, insofar as he describes himself at all, is pale, wan, and weary from unsatisfied desire. Barrett Browning in her essay on English poetry quotes with affection a passage by Hawes that includes these typical lines: "With your swete eyes behold you me, and see / How thought and woe by great extremitíe, / Hath changed my colour into pale and wan." In *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, pallor and weariness belong to the woman both as signs of passion, as in the images of minstrel and acolyte, and□more disturbingly still□as the self-portraiture of an aging woman.

The self-portrait, furthermore, is detailed, unflattering, and accurate. In one of the poem's most vivid scenes from a recognizably nineteenth-century courtship, the speaker gives her lover a lock of hair and reminds him that her hair is no longer dressed with rose or myrtle like a girl's:

it only may
Now shade on two pale cheeks the mark of tears,
Taught drooping from the head that hangs aside
Through sorrow's trick. (xviii)

She has "trembling knees" (xi), "tremulous hands", (xxviii), and "languid ringlets" (xxvii). This is a literally faithful picture of the poet (whereas Shakespeare's description of himself in the *Sonnets* as marked by extreme old age presumably is not). The

unfashionable ringlets and the characteristic droop of the head can be seen in her pictures. Elizabeth Barrett was forty years old when she married (Browning was six years younger) and had been an invalid, grieving and blaming herself for the death of her favorite brother, addicted to opium, and mostly shut up in one dark airless room, for years. The extraordinary biographical accuracy with which the poem depicts its female speaker violates the decorum of the sonnet sequence almost as much as the sex of the speaker does.

As is usual in love poetry, there is much less physical description of the man than of the woman. And his appearance, in significant contrast to her own, is always imaginatively transformed when it is described at all. *Her* hair is just "brown" (xviii), but *his* seems fit for verse: "As purply-black, as erst to Pindar's eyes / The dim purpureal tresses gloomed athwart / The nine white Muse-brows" (xix). We can usually accept her exaltation of her beloved□who is characteristically described as royal, whose color is purple, whose merit knows no bounds□because the terms and images are familiarly literary. She gives no sketch of him to match her cruel self-portrait and apologizes for her ineptitude in portraying him:

As if a shipwrecked Pagan, safe in port,
His guardian sea-god to commemorate,
Should set a sculptured porpoise, gills a-snort
And vibrant tail, within the temple-gate. (xxxvii)

No apology is really necessary, however, for this flattering comparison of the lover to a sexy seagod or for the disarmingly erotic porpoise.

Sometimes she is herself transformed by her own imagination, but into an object unworthy of desire. Her house is desolate and broken (iv), like that of Tennyson's Mariana. She praises him at her own expense: she is "an out-of-tune / Worn viol," but "perfect strains may flat / 'Neath master-hands, from instruments defaced". (xxxii). His imagination, that is, might be able to transform her even if her own cannot. Earlier she had offered herself as the object of his poems (rather than the subject of her own):

How, Dearest, wilt thou have me for most use?
A hope, to sing by gladly? or a fine
Sad memory, with thy songs to interfuse?
A shade, in which to sing of plam or pine?
A grave, on which to rest from singing? Choose.

This extreme self-abnegation is also an incisive commentary on male love poems, however, since the alternatives require not only the woman's passivity and silence but her absence and finally her death. Christina Rossetti makes a similar indirect comment in the lyric that begins "When I am dead, my dearest, / Sing no sad songs for me"□in the dreamy twilight of the grave, she won't hear them. Rossetti's speaker in *Monna Innominata* does define herself within the terms set by male poets, each sonnet in the sequence being preceded by epigraphs from Dante and Petrarch; but her lover goes away and in the last sonnet she is left with "Youth gone, and beauty gone" and "A silent

heart," "Silence of love that cannot sing again." Similarly, Barrett Browning's "Catarina to Camoens" presents Catarina on her death-bed musing over Camoens' poetical praise of her eyes, which she recalls at the end of each of the twentynine stanzas; Camoens is abroad and she imagines what he might say about her death and how he might come to praise another woman. This poem was one of the Brownings' favorites, and they called her sonnets "from the Portuguese" in a cryptic allusion to the fancy that Catarina might have spoken them. But the speaker in *Sonnets from the Portuguese* initiates and writes her own poems. She does not choose merely to respond to her lover's words, to be silent, to be abandoned, or to die.

And so the sequence works out terms of reciprocity between two lovers who are both poets. His love calls forth her poems, but she writes them. He is the prince whose magic kiss restores her beauty, which in turn increases her peotical power (in love poems as in fairy tales, women draw power from their beauty). He "kissed / The fingers of this hand wherewith I write; / And ever since, it grew more clean and white / □ quick □ When the angels speak" (xxxviii). He has the "power" and "grace" to see beyond appearances to her true worth; through her outer self□"this mask of me"□he sees her "soul's true face" and "all which makes [her] tired of all, self-viewed," and still "Nothing repels" him (xxxix). His attention encourages her to speak, although in an early sonnet she had briefly adopted the conventional female role: "let the silence of my womanhood / Commend my woman-love to thy belief" (xiii). She says that his poems are better than hers, but we never hear them, and throughout the sequence his role as poet seems to be in abeyance. He let drop his "divinest Art's / Own instrument" to listen to her sad music□"To hearken what I said between my tears"□and although she asks him to show her how to express her gratitude (xLi), we don't see him do so. In the final sonnet she offers him the poems, metaphorical flowers in return for his real ones.

The ultimate source of both her attraction and her power in these poems, however, is simply her own desire. What, after all, does a lyric lover traditionally offer as an inducement to love except his love itself? And if desire confers erotic value, then she herself, being poet-lover, must be an object worthy of desire. Her poem can work if she is humble, but not if she is cold.

Yet love, mere love, is beautiful indeed
And worthy of acceptation. 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. There's nothing low
In love, when love the lowest: meanest creatures
Who love God, God accepts while loving so.
And what I *feel*, across the inferior features
Of what I am, doth flash itself, and show
How that great work of Love enhances Nature's. (x)

In the quick and subtle reasoning conducted largely through a series of brief analogies, in the flexibility and control with which the verse bends to the argument and to the rhythms of thought and speech, and in the final sonorous generalizations, the poem is more proleptic of Meredith's *Modern Love* than it is reminiscent of Renaissance sonneteers or even of Donne. Like a character in a Victorian novel, she sees herself through another's eyes, but it is the fire of her own love that glorifies her. Later poems in the series develop this re- alization of the primacy of desire, his and her own. Love me, she says, "for love's sake only" (xiv); and, reciprocally, "Make thy lover larger to enlarge my worth" (xvi).

When the speaker looks at herself in the mirror that traditional love poetry holds up to either men or women, she is apologetic and we are embarrassed. But when she expresses desire, she finds strong new images and a new poetic voice, sensuous, witty, and tender.

What I do
And what I dream include thee, as the wine
Must taste of its own grapes □ (vi)

Let the world's sharpness, like a clasping knife,
Shut in upon itself and do no harm□ (xxiv)

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 curved point□ (xxii)

She compares her thoughts of her lover to entwined vine-leaves that hide a palm tree, asking him to "renew" his "presence" in terms that suggest a Bacchic rite.

Rustle thy boughs and set thy trunk all bare,
And let these bands of greenery which insphere thee
Drop heavily down,□burst, shattered, everywhere!
Because, in this deep joy to see and hear thee
And breathe within thy shadow a new air,
I do not think of thee□I am too near thee. (xxix)

Readers don't seem to be bothered by erotic passages like these, which use images□knives, grapes, androgynous angels, palm trees, dolphins□ that evoke no inappropriate reminders of either courtly love or Victorian manners. What does embarrass us is the feeling aroused by less erotic sonnets that we are eavesdropping on the lovers' private affairs. This feeling has several sources. One is that the disparity between the female role and the traditional poetic lover's, between this speaker and the remembered voices we dimly hear behind her, makes us aware of much that is unconventional, and we assume that what is not conventional is autobiographical, merely personal, mawkishly "sincere." And of course, Barrett Browning herself, like most Victorian readers and writers, valued the appearance of sincerity in poems very highly,

and generally achieved it—which is one reason why Victorian readers like the *Sonnets* better than later generations have. Thus Christina Rossetti takes for granted that if "the Great Poetess" had been unhappy in her love she might have written a different set of sonnets, with a "'donna innominata' drawn not from fancy but from feeling" (interestingly enough, Rossetti says this in a head note implicitly disavowing any autobiographical element in *Monna Innominata*). But women's writing is all too easily read not just as sincere but, more damagingly, as artless and spontaneous. When women's poetry (especially love poetry) is powerful, it is assumed to be autobiographical, and when evidence for this is unavailable, as with Rossetti and Dickinson, critics have deduced it from the poems. And so Barrett Browning's experiments with meter and rhyme were taken as carelessness or ineptitude; even G. K. Chesterton, who found her writing astonishingly "'manly'" and remarked that she is often "witty after the old fashion of the conceit," could not forbear adding that such wit "came quite freshly and spontaneously" to her.

Finally, of course, we know that the story the *Sonnets* tells is true. Elizabeth Barrett was a legendary public figure even before her marriage, by virtue of her poems, her learning, her seclusion, and her sex, and for most readers the personal element has been inseparable from the sonnets since their first publication. We know the story of her courtship, which was largely epistolary and has been available in print since 1899, and the many parallels between the letters and the poems tempt us to assume that the poems were spontaneously produced at the moments they appear to describe.

It is worth noting, however, that the letters themselves don't embarrass us; only the poems do. We are more disturbed by the incongruity we feel between the sentiments and the genre than by the sentiments themselves. Little scenes from Victorian life and characteristically Victorian modes of feeling and turns of phrase give a strange context to the sonnets' erotic intensities and traditional form. They seem to belong in prose fiction instead.

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.
(xxviii)

The speaker recalls her dead mother's kiss (xviii) and her own childish play among the cowslips (xxxiii). When she addresses her lover as "Dear" or "Dearest" or "Beloved" she sounds more like a Victorian wife than a courtly lover: "I lean upon thee, Dear, without alarm" (xxiv). She likes him to call her by the "pet-name" of her childhood (xxxiii). They exchange locks of hair (xviii, xix). She wonders if she will miss, when she marries, "Home-talk and blessing and the common kiss," the "walls and floors" even, of home (xxxv). Barrett Browning's most sympathetic and discriminating critic, Alethea Hayter, says that *Sonnets from the Portuguese* is too intimate, "emotionally □ naked"—and yet all Hayter's well-chosen examples of unduly intimate passages refer to self-descriptions or incidents, not feelings: her pale cheeks, the lock of hair, the pet name, his letters and kisses. The events of courtship as a Victorian woman experienced them don't seem to

belong in sonnets□we haven't seen them there before, have we?□so they must be personal, particular, trivial. We are offended by the publication, implicit in the act of writing poems, of what we feel should be kept private.

The legend that has grown up about the *Sonnets* exploits, distorts, and exaggerates the personal element. Barrett Browning herself worried about the question of privacy, particularly no doubt because the poems concerned her husband, whose aversion to literary self-exposure was extremely strong. In 1864 he explained how and why she showed him the *Sonnets* for the first time three years after their marriage:

all this delay, because I happened early to say something
against putting one's loves into verse: then
again, I said something else on the other side □ and
next morning she said hesitatingly "Do you know I
once wrote some poems about *you*?"□and then□
"There they are, if you care to see them." □ How I
see the gesture, and hear the tones□ Afterward the
publishing them was through me □ there was a trial
at covering it a little by leaving out one sonnet which
had plainly a connexion with the former works: but
it was put in afterwards when people chose to pull
down the mask which, in old days, people used to respect
at a masquerade. But I never cared.

This is simple and straightforward enough. But Edmund Gosse's silly, apochryphal version of this episode has followed the *Sonnets* through many printings and still appears in the reprinted Cambridge Edition of 1974. Gosse's tale transfers the reader's embarrassment to the poet herself. She came up behind her husband, Gosse reports, "held him by the shoulder to prevent his turning to look at her, and □ pushed a packet of papers into the pocket of his coat. She told him to read that, and to tear it up if he did not like it; and then she fled again to her own room." Afterwards, says Gosse, she "was very loth indeed to consent to the publication of what had been the very notes and chronicle of her betrothal." But Browning makes it clear that his wife's reticence had been mostly the deferential reflex of his own. In 1846 she had answered his question about what she had been writing recently (almost certainly these sonnets) with a wit and self-possession absolutely antithetical to Gosse's emblematic tale of coyness, self-dramatization, and shame. "You shall see some day at Pisa what I will not show you now. Does not Solomon say that 'there is a time to read what is written.' If he doesn't, he *ought*."

Insofar as the *Sonnets* are autobiographical (and not just spontaneous), however, they inaugurated a new Victorian convention to which almost every significant poet except Robert Browning contributed: the use of autobiographical material in long poems that play specifically "modern" experience against some of the traditions of amatory poetry. Arnold's *Switzerland*, Patmore's *The Angel in the House*, Tennyson's *Maud*, and Clough's *Amours de Voyage* were published in the 1850's, Meredith's *Modern Love* in 1862. Of all of these, only *Sonnets from the Portuguese* does not, so far as we can tell,

fictionalize the story or attempt to disguise the personal references. The male poets presented their own experiences and feelings as exemplifying those of modern man, or at any rate the modern sensitive intellectual or poet, but the modern woman's personal experience could not easily be made to carry so heavy a contextual burden. There were no ancestral female voices to validate her own and define by contrast its particular quality. Nor, as Barrett Browning knew, were readers disposed to hear women as speaking for anything more than themselves. Women can't generalize, Romney smugly explains to Aurora Leigh, and therefore can't be poets, and Lady Waldemar repeats the common assumption that "artist women" are "outside □ the common sex."

The unusual situation of a female poet in love with a male one was not easy to show as representative, but Barrett Browning worked in many ways to generalize and distance her experience. The use of the sonnet sequence, first of all, seems an obvious choice now, but in fact *Sonnets from the Portuguese* inaugurated the Victorian use of the old genre. Although she noted the absence of female Elizabeth poets□"I look everywhere for grandmothers and see none"□the sonnet sequence offered a way to subsume her own experience into a wider tradition. Within the sonnet form itself she curbed the liberties with rhyme and meter for which she was notorious, although she did not keep to the usual structure of the Petrarchan sonnet, allowed herself great variety of tone, and broke up lines in fresh and surprising ways. She reminds us, too, that she is writing poems, not love letters, when a poem represents what she does not say to the lover (xiii) or suppresses words of his letters that are too private to repeat (xxviii).

She generalizes her situation most clearly and deliberately through literary allusions, particularly in the first two sonnets, which draw on Theocritus, Homer, Milton, and Shakespeare. *Sonnets from the Portuguese* begins: "I though once how Theocritus had sung / Of the sweet years□" This refers to the song in the fifteenth idyll which anticipates Adonis' return from death to the arms of Aphrodite and is proleptic both of the speaker's movement from death to love and of the coming of her lover. The speaker "mused" Theocritus' story "in his antique tongue," she says, thus establishing her credentials as a reader of Greek, a serious, educated person. And as she mused: "a mystic Shape did move / Behind me, and drew me backward by the hair"□a typically female image of passivity, no doubt, but taken from the episode in *The Iliad* when Achilles in his wrath is similarly pulled back by Athena. The allusions are deft and easy, the voice that of one who lives familiarly with Greek texts. The second sonnet draws with the same casual confidence on Milton and Shakespeare. Only she, her lover, and God, she says, heard the word "Love"□and God "laid the curse / So darkly on my eyelids, as to amerce / My sight from seeing thee"□a more "absolute exclusion" than death itself. The word "amerce" recalls Satan's description of himself as by his fault "amerced / Of heaven" (*Paradise Lost* I, 609-10), a highly relevant allusion in the sonnet's context of "all God's universe," "absolute exclusion," and a blinded poet. Then in the background of the sestet we hear "Let us not to be marriage of true minds": if God himself were not opposed, "Men could not part us □/ Nor the seas change us, nor the tempests bend." The rebirth of Adonis, Achilles' injured love and pride, Satan's exclusion from heaven, Shakespeare's celebration of human love□these and not the stuffy room in Wimpole Street are the context in which *Sonnets from the Portuguese* initially establishes itself.

The poem does seem increasingly to take place within a particular domestic interior, but the space it occupies is symbolical and highly schematic. It is sharply constricted on the horizontal plane but open to heaven above and the grave below. At worst, the speaker is like "a bee shut in a crystalline" (xv), in a "close room" (xliv). In her childhood she ran from one place to another (xxxiii, xxxiv), but the movements she imagines for the future are almost always vertical. Typical repeated words are *down*, *fall*, *deep*, *rise*, *beneath*, and especially *drop*, used eleven times in the forty-four poems, and *up*, used twelve times. Even marriage, leaving one home for another, means that her eyes would "drop on a new range / Of walls and floors" (xxxv). The reader may feel a bit claustrophobic, but the speaker usually imagines enclosure as protection rather than imprisonment. "Open thine heart wide," she says, "And fold within the wet wings of thy dove" (xxxv). The last sonnet sees "this close room" as the place of fruitful seclusion where the lover's flowers throve and her poems unfolded in her heart's garden (like her "great living poetry" of which Browning said that "not a flower but took root and grew" within him.

For the space, which becomes at the end a garden of art, belongs like the story enacted within it as much to Victorian artistic convention as to the setting of Elizabeth Barrett's life. There is a close pictorial equivalent in Dante Gabriel Rossetti's painting *Ecce Ancilla Domini* (1849-50), an Annunciation scene nearly twice as high as it is wide in which the Virgin sits on the bed pressed against the wall, as if cowering away from the tall upright angel who reaches almost from the top to the bottom of the picture and takes up a full third of its horizontal space. In Tennyson's early poems, which often echo through Barrett Browning's, a woman shut up in a house or tower is a recurrent figure for the poet. The speaker of the *Sonnets* is like the Lady of Shalott: people heard her music from outside the "prison-wall," paused, and went on their way (xli). Like the soul in "The Palace of Art," she has "lived with visions Instead of men and women" (xxvi). She inhabits a figurative dwelling like Mariana's moated grange rather than a solid house in Wimpole Street: "the casement broken in, / The bats and owlets builders in the roof" (iv). (Elizabeth Barrett twice compared herself in letters to Mariana.) In addition, love offers to her as to Tennyson's sensitive, bookish, imaginative, isolated heroes and heroines an escape from selfimprisonment in a world of shadows. "I will bury myself in myself," says the hero of *Maud* (in an early version he plans to bury himself in his books, which is equally relevant), and Maud's love restores him to life. Like the heroes of *Switzerland* or *Amours de Voyages*, the woman in the *Sonnets* finds her lover more passionate and alive than she is herself. He is not imprisoned; her draws her back to life. (In fact, Browning drew Elizabeth Barrett into marriage, motherhood, society, travel, political engagement the ordinary social, human world that women often represent to their lovers in Victorian poems: but the poem is less proleptically literary than life was and does not anticipate this outcome.) The speaker has the qualities, then, both of the male Victorian poet as introverted self- doubting lover and of the female figures in which Tennyson embodies passive, withdrawn, and isolated aspects of the poetic character.

The unspecified sufferings and griefs that have marked the speaker's face and almost killed her are also signs not only of Petrachan love, feminine weakness, and biographical fact (Barrett Browning's long illness and her brother's death) but of the poetical character too, as many Romantic and Victorian poets conceived it. Matthew Arnold's Empedocles, for instance, renounced poetry because isolation and empathy

make poets suffer too much. In the 1844 preface to her poems Barrett Browning discusses the volume's two longest works in terms of the woman poet's vocation and special qualifications. "*A Drama of Exile*," she says, represents the expulsion from the Garden "with a peculiar reference to Eve's allotted grief, which considering that self-sacrifice belonged to her womanhood □ appeared to me □ more expressible by a woman than a man." And in "*The Vision of Poets*," she says, she has "endeavoured to indicate the necessary relations of genius to suffering and self-sacrifice"; for "if knowledge is power, suffering should be acceptable as a part of knowledge." Thus by an implicit syllogism, suffering is power: women can be poets precisely by virtue of their womanhood.

Another major point of intersection between conventional and personal, male and female, poet and beloved, occurs in the general area in which *Sonnets from the Portuguese* anticipates the Pre- Raphaelites. Here as elsewhere, Barrett Browning is the precursor, though we are likely to read her through expectations formed by those who followed. Sometimes her accents have a Meredithian wit, quickness, cleverness, and variety, as in the tenth sonnet, "Yet love, mere love." Sometimes the poems resemble Dante Rossetti's *House of Life* in their personifications, marmoreal cadences, archaisms, and heated slow simplicities ("Very whitely still, / The lilies of our lives," xxiv or "What time I sat alone here in the snow," xx), and, more pleasingly, in their striking use of Latinate words ("lips renunciative," ix; "Antidotes / Of medicated music," xvii). The speaker is like the tortured husband of *Modern Love* in her subtlety of psychological analysis, intricate arguments and images, and variations of tone and rhythm that can shift in a flash from formal intensity to broken phrases of the speaking voice. She somewhat resembles the speaker in *The House of Life*, too, with her dark allusions to untellable sins and sorrows. But if she speaks like a Pre-Raphaelite poet, she also resembles such poets' favorite subject, the fatal woman: enclosed, passive, pale, deathly. Like Morris' Guenevere or Rossetti's Lilith, she often seems to be looking at herself in a mirror (x, xviii, xxxii). Like the wife in *Modern Love*, she breathes poison (ix). From the lover's point of view, she is silent and unresponsive in the earlier sonnets, hiding her feelings from him and speaking to be heard only by the reader. But she lacks the fatal woman's guile, mystery, and beauty. As speaker she must let the reader hear her, while her bent for self-analysis and formal commitment to lyric self-expression preclude duplicity.

Such persistent doubling of roles accounts for most of the disconcerting strangeness of *Sonnets from the Portuguese*. The speaker is cast as both halves of a balanced but asymmetrical pair, speaking with two voices in a dialogue where we are accustomed to hearing only one. Obviously there are rich possibilities for irony here, but Barrett Browning does not take them□does not appear even to notice them. Nor does she call our attention to the persistent anomalies and contradictions even without irony. This above all distinguishes her from her male contemporaries. The juxtaposition of traditional amatory poetry and the Victorian idea that love should be fulfilled in marriage, combined with the desire of almost every important Victorian poet to write within the context of contemporary social life, inevitably opened up the disjunction between the passionate certainties of literature, and the flawed complexities of life, between the amatory intensity of poetic lovers and the confusion and distractedness of modern ones.

Sometimes modern settings produce unintended comedy, as in much of Patmore or the description of Maud's dresses ("the habit, hat, and feather" and "the frock and gipsy bonnet"—"nothing can be sweeter / Than maiden Maud in either") more often, though, Tennyson, Clough, and Meredith exploit the disjunction between literature and contemporary life through selfdenigrating irony. *Sonnets from the Portuguese* might well have become the same sort of poem; at any rate, the love letters, kisses, pet-names, childishness, and ringlets rest uneasily with Maud's dresses on the dangerous edge of bathos. Elizabeth Barrett had planned as early as 1844 to write a long poem about "this real everyday life of our age," which she thought as interesting and potentially poetical as past times had been. While her plan was for a novel-poem and in due course issued in *Aurora Leigh*, *Sonnets from the Portuguese* appears to be an earlier fruit of her growing desire to cast off fictional trappings and write from her own time, place, and social class. But neither *Aurora Leigh* nor the *Sonnets* works ironically.

For Barrett Browning does not want to show up disparities: she wants to find a place within the tradition for modern poems, and especially for female poets—not to mark how far outside it she is. Nor can she mock the sonnet tradition from within as Shakespeare and Sidney could, since she wants to assert her right to use it at all. *Sonnets from the Portuguese* is organized around the double discovery that love's seeming illusions are realities, still accessible, and that one can be both subject and object of love, both poet and poet's beloved. Because she does not use irony to mark the points at which the old and the new come together—she wants to create fusion, not show disjunction—she runs the risk of leaving us disoriented and uneasy instead of releasing us, as Clough and Meredith do, into the ironical recognition of a familiar failure. And since success for the poet in this poem involves a happy ending for the lovers, or at least not an unhappy one, there is no release such as Tennyson and Arnold would give us into the lyrical pain of loss.

Barrett Browning knew that embarrassment always threatens to engulf the woman poet, particularly in an amatory context. In a remarkable emblematic incident, Aurora Leigh celebrates her twentieth birthday by crowning herself with ivy leaves, a playful anticipation of the posthumous glory she covets. Recognizing the potentially ambiguous symbolism that a wreath could bear, she had chosen neither the poet's bay nor the lover's myrtle; but when her cousin Romney comes suddenly upon her he sees the wreath simply as a sign of female vanity, flattering to his sense of male superiority, his contempt for mere artists, his love, and his hopes of marrying her. She is memorably embarrased:

I stood there fixed,—
My arms up, like the caryatid, sole
Of some abolished temple, helplessly
Persistent in a gesture which derides
A former purpose. Yet my blush was flame —

Romney thinks that women cannot be poets. Seen through his eyes, Aurora becomes a work of art instead of an artist, and an archaic, useless one at that. Her aspirations to poetic fame dwindle under his amused, admiring gaze into girlish narcissism. The

absolute conflict between her intention and his interpretation immobilizes her: she does indeed become object rather than subject, self-assertive only in the blush that is inherent in her name and the mark of internalized conflict. She marries Romney, years and books later, but by then he has not only changed his mind about women poets; he is blind and cannot see her.

The extreme paucity of good lyric poetry by Victorian women, which is in such striking contrast to their success in narrative, is largely due to the felt pressure of forms, convention, and above all readers' responses that could not accommodate female utterance without distorting it. This is a problem of the female speaker, not just of the woman writer, as we see in *Bleak House*. Dickens wants to give Esther Summerson narrative authority as well as attractiveness and self-effacing modesty, and the incongruity that results suggests to some readers either intentional irony or authorial failure. Women novelists appear more alert to the problem and usually get round it by avoiding first-person female narrators; only Charlotte Bronte faces it squarely, as part of her battle against conventional notions about female attractiveness, passion, and will. (It is significant that Aurora Leigh's rejected lover's character and fate strikingly recall *Jane Eyre*.) One reason that *Aurora Leigh* seems to many readers fresher and more alive than *Sonnets from the Portuguese* is that the novelistic form of the later poem enabled the poet to speak freely, and without arousing significant conflict in the reader, in her own distinctive, distinctively female voice.

Source: Dorothy Mermin, "Female Poet and the Embarrsassed Reader: E. B. B.'s *Sonnets from the Portuguese*," in *ELH*, Vol. 48, No. 2, Summer 1981, pp. 351-66.

Adaptations

Barrett Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese* is included in the 1997 audio collection *Robert and Elizabeth Browning: How Do I Love Thee*? These cassettes feature a history of the Brownings' courtship, interspersed with performances of both poets' work read by Steven Pacey and Joanna David. The collection is available from the Audio Partners Publishing Corporation.

Topics for Further Study

Research the critical receptions of Elizabeth Barrett Browning and her husband, Robert. To what extent do biographers and critics use the Brownings' marriage to better understand the poetry produced by this famous couple? To what degree do modern readers think one poet influenced the work of the other?

"Sonnet XXIX" is one of the forty-four sonnets that comprise the *Sonnets from the Portuguese*. Compose a sonnet sequence of four or five poems in which you trace a speaker's emotional or mental activity as Elizabeth does in her sonnet sequence.

Research the Victorian era to learn about the book-buying public: Who bought books? Specifically, who bought books of verse? Was reading verse strictly for the upper classes, or did the new middle class discover this pleasure as well? Then, see if you can draw any conclusions about Victorian readers and how they responded to women poets: were such poets received with enthusiasm, skepticism, or both?

Read Rudolph Besier's 1930 play *The Barretts of Wimpole Street*, which dramatizes the romance between Elizabeth and Robert Browning. What liberties, if any, does Besier take with the known biographical facts? Is the Elizabeth of Besier's play seem like the kind of person who could compose "Sonnet XXIX?"

Compare and Contrast

1800s: The 1842 Treaty of Nanking ends the Opium War between Great Britain and China and confirms the cession of Hong King to Great Britain.

Today: In 1997, Hong Kong is relinquished by the British and returned to Chinese rule.

1800s: Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels publish their *Communist Manifesto* in 1848; their work influences a number of world leaders who adopt several of its economic and social ideas.

Today: With the collapse of the Soviet Union, China remains the world's dominant communist power.

1800s: In 1844, George Williams organizes the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) of London, a service organization.

Today: The YMCA has expanded to include people of both sexes, all ages, and all religions as members. The World Alliance of YMCAs, headquartered in Geneva, Switzerland, has 30 million members in 110 countries.

1800s: In 1849, Elizabeth Blackwell becomes the first woman to earn a medical degree in the United States.

Today: Women routinely enter the field of medicine, although they are still underrepresented in the upper ranks of many medical schools.

What Do I Read Next?

Barrett Browning's "Sonnet I" from her *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (1850) is notable for its depiction of her surprise at having found love when she thought she would find only death.

Barrett Browning's sonnet "Grief" (1850) provides an interesting biographical glimpse into the mind of the author; in the poem, Barrett Browning treats the death of her brother.

Like "Sonnet XXIX," Robert Frost's poem "Bereft" explores the effects of a beloved's absence on a vulnerable speaker.

A work that contrasts Barrett Browning's "Sonnet XXIX" is Shakespeare's "Sonnet 30," which depicts a speaker who believes that his thoughts of another person provide ample comfort.

Robert Browning's poem "Meeting at Night" depicts the frantic thoughts of a lover about to meet his beloved; the poem explores the ways in which one's thoughts affect one's perceptions.

Further Study

Bender, Robert M., and Charles L. Squier, eds., *The Sonnet: A Comprehensive Anthology of British and American Sonnets from the Renaissance to the Present*, Washington Square Press, 1965.

This extensive anthology features headnotes describing the lives and careers of the poets as well as an essay about the history of the sonnet form.

Fuller, John, *The Oxford Book of Sonnets*, Oxford University Press, 2001.

This collection features the work of over one hundred poets, arranged in chronological order so a reader can trace the development of the sonnet form. The collection begins with Sir Thomas Wyatt and ends with Alice Oswald.

Leighton, Angela, and Margaret Reynolds, *Victorian Women Poets: An Anthology*, Blackwell Publishers, 1995.

This collection arranges the work of fifty poets in chronological order, beginning with Felicia Hemans and ending with Charlotte Mew. The work of wellknown poets is featured along with work by their lesser-known colleagues; in addition, the collection contains long biographical headnotes and bibliographical information for each poet.

Stone, Marjorie, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, St. Martin's Press, 1995.

This critical study examines Barrett Browning's poetic career in light of its Victorian context and contemporary critical opinion.

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Poetry for Students (PfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, PfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of PfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of PfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in PfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by PfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

PfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Poetry for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Poetry for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Poetry for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from PfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from PfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Poetry for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Poetry for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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