LOVE ME NOT FOR LOVE'S SAKE

Barrett Browning's Romantic Poetry Reconsidered

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Love Me Not For Love's Sake:
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In her day one of the most important poets writing in the English language, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's appeal in the present is two-fold, but strongly fractured: to critics in Academia, she is of interest due to her sociopolitical writings on topics such as women's roles in Victorian England and the inhumanities of slavery; to the general public, she is the writer of love poetry frequently the subject of Hallmark cards – poetry that, we are lead to believe, has no depth and importance other than its status as an artifact of a sensational courtship popularly portrayed in both theatre and motion pictures. The aim of this essay is to dispel the myths surrounding Barrett Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, and demonstrate that more than "just" love poetry, the collection breaks new ground by claiming, transforming and feminizing a distinctly male form, while establishing the poetess from Wimpole Street as a complete master of the structural conventions of the genre.

Published in 1850, *Sonnets from the Portuguese* is a sequence of forty-four sonnets dedicated to her husband Robert Browning, and their much-heralded romantic escapades. The name, however, is misleading, for the southwest inhabitants of Iberia had no hand in its composition; it is merely an attempt to present the often sensuous collection as a translation, since Elizabeth was not comfortable directly acknowledging its authorship. While regular reference materials are hardly bastions of specialized critical thought, they are nonetheless useful as a means of gauging the general attitudes towards the poetess and her work in the present day. Without exception, they unanimously declare that Barrett Browning's "reputation rests chiefly upon her love poems, *Sonnets from the Portuguese*" (Britannica 564), while stressing that "today, interest in her life and personality overshadow her poetry" (Collier's 621) and as such, "only her *Sonnets from the Portuguese* are still widely read today" (World Book 646). Independent research, while cursory, confirms this. According to several pointed Google queries, for example, we find that the junction of the author's name with the term "love" yields 111,000

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results, while combination with "feminism" returns only 11,100 results and with "politics" only 29,900[1].

The reference materials also inform us that the sonnet blessed with the distinction of highest popularity, is, of course, No. 43, with its "How do I love thee?" firmly imprinted in contemporary Anglophone consciousness, even if most people would be hard pressed to identify by name the personage responsible for its generation. Consulting the most recent editions of the Norton and Longman anthologies of British literature as well, we find that they, too agree on this distinction of No. 43, while the intersection of their selections from *Sonnets* hint that in addition, Nos. 21, 22 and 32 are deserving of the most critical examination. This, curiously, is in contrast with the three sonnets getting the most hits on Google, being Nos. 43, 14 and 10. However, the reference materials also offer the potentially damning note that "in her best poems, (…) passionate feeling and sincerity override the intellectuality and undisciplined craftsmanship that weakens others" (Collier's 621), implying the common sentiment that "passionate" love poetry is the antithesis to intellectuality and craftsmanship; that the two cannot possibly coexist.

Indeed, while dubious, this assessment is certainly echoed by various approaches to presenting *Sonnets* as well: the three editions available in Snell Library frame the poems with hideous floral patterns, as well as needlessly ornate silhouettes of couples in period dresses in what were, one speculates, meant to be romantic poses and settings. Furthermore, two of the editions also feature some additional love poetry crudely affixed at the end, as if *Sonnets* were so devoid of any intellectually redeeming properties that it needed further poetic padding as an apology. Compared with more voluminous editions of *Aurora Leigh* nearby, it is immediately apparent that the editors felt that *Sonnets* did not require thorough critical explanation, it being "only" love poetry. In their defense, however, one must realize that those looking to read love poetry are probably not even remotely interested in Barrett Browning's possible contributions to the literary world, while studious readers of *Aurora* are probably more receptive to such addendums as an

[1] Queries performed March 2005.

audience. This is unfortunate, as her sonnet sequence *Sonnets from the Portuguese* is far more than just idle romanticizing: it claims a male poetic form, the sonnet, and reverses the conventions of the genre, casting as its sexual focus a man instead of a woman. Indeed, remarks the Literary Encyclopedia:

> *Until feminist critics revisited her work in the late twentieth century, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's reputation rested primarily on Sonnets from the Portuguese, the sonnet sequence she wrote secretly during the courtship and published first in 1850. The poems have appeared so often in greeting-card format, and the story surrounding them has been so sentimentalized, that Barrett Browning's achievement has been misunderstood and underestimated. These poems represent the first successful revision of the sonnet sequence, a "masculine" genre, for feminine and even feminist ends: unlike most sonnet sequences, Sonnets from the Portuguese ends happily, expresses female eroticism, and has in many ways a double subjective center, the poet as well as her lover, whose feelings and mode of self-expression receive considerable attention.*

Inspection of one of the sonnets from the sequence might aid us in reinforcing the above points with examples. Let us, then, examine No. 14, the second most popular sonnet online[2]. True to the sonnet form, it consists of fourteen lines in flawless iambic pentameter. Unlike the Modern poets beginning to sprout in the fertile literary soils just towards the end of her era, Barrett Browning does not experiment with modification of these aspects of structure, rather electing to demonstrate her complete mastery of the form in spite of being a woman – her competence in the field, of course, unsurprising to us in the 21st century, but certainly so to the more sexist realities of the 19th century. The rhyme scheme is ABBAABBA CDCDC[D/E], in other words the classic Petrarchan system, with a possible minor deviation towards the end, perhaps to add extra weight to "eternity". Of course, given the terminal similarities of "eternity" to "thereby" and "dry", it could be that the last word is supposed to be pronounced "eterni-tie", or actually was in fact done so during the period. However, the content of the sonnet does not adhere to the Petrarchan convention where the problem is traditionally depicted in the octave and resolved in the sestet; here, as in a heated lover's quarrel, the list of prob-

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[2] According to a Google query performed in March 2005, No. 14 ("If thou must love me") was the second most popular sonnet with 1330 hits; the most popular was No. 43 ("How do I love thee?") with 7250 hits.

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lems overflows from the octave into most of the sestet, the resolution only occurring in the last two lines. As such, this sonnet is a hybrid of both Petrarchan and Shakespearean conventions: in rhyme composed of an Italian octet and a sestet, the content employs the English structure of three quatrains and the final resolving couplet. The fusion of these two conventions demonstrates both Barrett Browning's familiarity with the variety of stylistic heritage, and her own talents in uniting the two. Uniting here being highly appropriate: in an abstract sense, the unity of these two systems of sonnet-writing into one inseparable whole seems to echo the unity of the loving couple featured in the sequence.

Additional critical observation yields the realization that the poem also makes sophisticated use of enjambment, starting with the very first line: "If thou must love me, let it be for nought / Except for love's sake only" (1-2). The reader immediately wants to continue reading, wondering why the love poem instructs to "love for nought", only to find the conditional conclusion – which, of course, is a densely packed philosophical sentence just waiting to explode and be clarified by the rest of the piece. Again at the end of the second line, we are left with "Do not say", another sharp use of enjambment for poetic effect, rendering onto the sonnet a sense of great urgency and anxiety at conflict with the shallow mellowness we are lead to believe all traditional love poetry is supposed to exhibit. In fact, the enjambment is used almost throughout, often to great effect, as seen in "Neither love me for / Thine own dear pity's wiping my cheeks dry" (9-10), where once again the line ends not only without a definitive conclusion but with a cliffhanger imploring the reader to go on to the next line, wondering restlessly what may come after that most unsatisfactory preposition.

Perhaps the most interesting innovation seen in this sonnet, however, is its direct use of dialogue. Instead of circuitously relating the importance of what a lover should not say, we are given a quotation, effectively making the poem a discussion, perhaps a lover's quarrel, poured into a mold of sonetto structure. This act, then, demonstrates a sense of egalitarianism in spite of the reversal of male author/female subject: it is a discourse where both parties in the relationship have their say. Also of note is the use of the quotation to relay the male's statements

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with which the female has issues, as this undistorted, authentic and direct representation ("this is what you said" versus "this is what I perceived") adds a dimension of soberness to the otherwise often sensuous domain of love; this temperament is also in harmony with the otherwise almost arid intellectual sphere the sonnet calls its own.

Especially fascinating from a feminist lens is Barrett Browning's particular dislike of her suitor loving "her way of speaking gently", as if protesting against the very idea that women are to speak gently, if at all. We know very well from her corpus of work that Barrett Browning did anything *but* speak gently: if she saw an injustice, whether it be child labor, slavery in the United States, or even the oppression of the Italian proto-nation by Austria, she spoke up, projecting her voice loudly and clearly through her writing. Not to mention her use of *Belovèd*, referring to her husband, Robert Browning: it is of immediate note as it casts as the romantic and sexual focus of the poem a man, addressed by a woman writer. This in clear contrast with the Petrarchan tradition, which stipulates that the love-struck gentleman be the author of love poetry; here, Petrarch's Laura lays claim to the phallic pen. Also, *what* the man seems to be saying is interesting as well: it sounds just like a stereotypical male sonnet, where he praises her "rosy lips", or here, her smile. Barrett Browning's reply is thus two-fold: she is both replying to the man *in* the sonnet, and also replying in general to the male-dominated literary tradition, actively protesting against the customary, overly physical male love sonnet with her very own interpretation of an alternative.

Yet in spite of its innovations, there are plenty of nods to the past. Take, for instance, the archaic diction itself: heavy in "thou" and "thee", it evokes an older style of speech that seems to paint the sonnet timeless, while also adding to it a sense of validation. Comparisons to the oft-mentioned hypothetical sister of Shakespeare are rightly invoked here as well – if not because of Robert Browning's own declaration that he dare not "reserve to myself the fines sonnets written in any language since Shakespeare's", then certainly because of both her mastery of the form and allusion to and adaptation of certain themes of the infamous resident of Stratford-upon-Avon. While the Bard himself was known to deviate from the

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conventions of the genre at times, as evident in his 130th, where he insults his Dark Lady's appearance rather than praise her as a means to parody the Petrarchan conventions of old, or the scandalous 20th, with its veiled implications of same-sex attraction and more, he nonetheless never (to my knowledge) reversed the gender roles in his sequence. Not so Barrett Browning, who does in fact reverse them, unafraid to challenge the traditions of the form. It must be stated that while women's preoccupation with the sensual and inclinations of limerance came as no surprise to the Victorian morality police, their ability to articulate these feelings in high art did, and Barrett Browning's exquisite translation of her own gemlike flame into poignant balladry, her fusion of the rigid, restrictive structure of sonnets with the sentimentality of the era and her own very personal love story is quite noteworthy.

Another note on content is warranted as well: while the sonnet makes use of the word "love" no less than ten times, it is crucial to observe that it is of a highly cerebral nature and not derivative of earlier love poetry merely praising the romantic subject. Barrett Browning eschews kitschy enumeration of Robert's "auburn hair" and "dashing looks", focusing rather on a highly intellectual debate about what the proper prime mover of love should be. As mentioned above, at times poems in the sequence reference works by Shakespeare; in this case, her No. 14 calls upon his No. 116, both heavily concerned with the everlasting nature of love (or, at least, its potential for such changelessness) and the transience of human physicality.

Although each sonnet is unique, we can clearly see from examining No. 14 of the sequence that *Sonnets from the Portuguese* employs themes, codes and ideas that make it anything but idle, shallow love poetry. Indeed, its relegation to gaudy cards sold next to such important literary publications as *The National Enquirer* in reputable nearby supermarkets is most lamentable. While hoping for a revolutionary overnight interest in Barrett Browning to manifest is naïve, one can only hope that the next time someone picks up a scandalously expensive Hallmark card decorated with the lines "How do I love thee?", they will actually read the poem and

think about it, and love Barrett Browning's poetry not for love's sake only, but also for her many other accomplishments as a woman writer in the Victorian era.

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