

## Love, Marriage and Violence in the Work of the Brownings

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If you go to 50 Wimpole Street today, one of the most famous addresses in literary London, what you'll find is not the original building that the Barrett family lived in – that was taken down in the early twentieth century – but a building which is now part of a heart hospital. This irony always seems to me to be highly significant, given that Elizabeth Barrett Browning (hereafter 'EBB') is often remembered in the popular imagination as being a poet of the heart and the love poet who was one half of Victorian Britain's celebrity literary couple. In 1931, Virginia Woolf humorously yet poignantly reflected upon what this romance narrative surrounding the Brownings had come to mean for their reputations. As she put it:

By one of those ironies of fashion that might have amused the Brownings themselves, it seems likely that they are now far better known in the flesh than they have ever been in the spirit. Passionate lovers, in curls and side whiskers, oppressed, defiant, eloping – in this guise thousands of people must know and love the Brownings who have never read a line of their poetry.[...] 'Lady Geraldine's Courtship' is glanced at perhaps by two professors in American universities once a year; but we all know how Miss Barrett lay on her sofa; how she escaped from the dark house in Wimpole Street one September morning; how she met health and happiness, freedom, and Robert Browning in the church round the corner.<sup>1</sup>

What this narrative – as attractive as it might be in some ways – has effectively done is obscure much of the complexity of the Brownings' own relationship as well as the complexity of the Brownings' thinking and writing about what love and marriage might mean. For as critics have increasingly emphasized, many of EBB's poems in particular are highly critical of love and heterosexual relationships, of the prescribed institution of marriage, and the idea of the domestic space - of the home - as a space of safety and

security. Indeed, Aurora's words to Romney on the subject of love in *Aurora Leigh* (1856) might equally serve to reveal EBB's own position:

I would not be a woman like the rest,  
A simple woman who believes in love  
And owns the right of love because she loves,  
And, hearing she's beloved, is satisfied [...]

I must analyse,  
Confront, and question...<sup>2</sup>

Both EBB and RB would spend much of their careers 'analysing', 'confronting' and 'questioning' what love might mean, how emotional connections function, and how a meaningful relationship might be established and maintained – through marriage and otherwise. And these representations are intriguingly frequently at odds with their own marriage as we usually understand it.

For EBB, this 'analysing' began early. Many of her first poems, written in her teens and early twenties, emphasize love in the family unit as supportive and nurturing. EBB's relationships with her parents and siblings at this time were extremely positive and found expression in poems such as 'To My Father on His Birth-Day' and 'Verses to My Brother', where she speaks of the 'days of pleasant mirth' at Hope End, the family's home ('To My Father', l. 1; both poems published in *An Essay on Mind, with Other Poems*, 1826). By the mid-1830s, however, EBB was starting to write poems which are more questioning and critical of love and emotional relationships, and the ways in which they are shaped by social and political expectations. She was particularly drawn in this period to writing ballads – poems with strong narrative lines, psychological complexity and scenes of conflict in often historical or exotic settings (a form which had been revived a few decades earlier by the Romantics, especially in the work of Burns, Wordsworth and Scott). EBB therefore had a model to follow in these male writers but she often reinvented the ballad form so she could speak specifically about women's experiences in relationships.<sup>3</sup> With medievalized titles like 'The Romaunt of Margret', 'The Romaunt of the Page' and 'A Romance of the Ganges', these poems (published in *The Seraphim, and Other Poems* [1838] and *Poems* [1844]) tend to

equate relationships with betrayal, rivalry, exploitation or desertion. The women in these poems are often looking for emotional security which they associate with the idea of home, but they rather discover physical, psychological or sexual violence and at the close they are usually left on their own or, as often as not, dead. 'I will love thee – half a year', says the male speaker of 'A Man's Requirements', 'As a man is able' (ll. 43-44; published 1844). EBB's treatment of love in her poetry sees her exploring all sides of relationships and all possibilities, and repeatedly she exposes what she described to RB as the 'evil' which is 'in the system'.<sup>4</sup>

At the same time, RB was developing his own body of poetry on love and relationships, particularly through his dramatic lyrics (the form that would become known as the dramatic monologue) where relationships, like those in EBB's poems, often become the site of tension, betrayal and, potentially, murder. The famous and much-discussed 'My Last Duchess' (published 1842), for example, sees the Renaissance Duke of Ferrara reflecting on his previous wife who, he asserts, was a little too dismissive of his grand title and power, and seemingly a little too familiar with everyone else. And so 'I gave commands;/ Then all smiles stopped together' (ll. 45-46). The meaning of this phrasing is, of course, left beautifully open, although the reduction of the living woman to a painting which is kept hidden away is telling about the Duchess' fate. Similarly, in the equally disturbing 'Porphyria's Lover' (published 1836/1842) the speaker (the lover of the title) receives Porphyria into his cottage and, as she undoes her hair and makes her shoulder bare, he decides that this is the perfect moment in their relationship and one he should preserve at all costs:

[...] surprise

Made my heart swell, and still it grew  
While I debated what to do.  
That moment she was mine, mine, fair,  
Perfectly pure and good: I found  
A thing to do, and all her hair  
In one long yellow string I wound  
Three times her little throat around

And strangled her. (ll. 33-41)

These poems are astonishing – startling, shocking, combative. Like EBB's at the time, they show a fascination with the dark undercurrents of relationships and an incisive exploration of love, emotion and sexuality in all their aspects.

But then, of course, the Brownings' own courtship begins. By now EBB had an international reputation and was far more famous than RB (a position that would be quickly reversed in the twentieth century due to all kinds of political reasons). Yet after seeing a reference to his work in EBB's poem 'Lady Geraldine's Courtship' (published 1844), Robert initiated that process of letter writing which would extend over the next nineteen months and consist of 573 letters. 'I love your verses with all heart, dear Miss Barrett', opens Robert's first letter in January 1845; and then, a few lines later, 'I do, as I say, love these books with all my heart – and I love you too.'<sup>5</sup> It's an incredible opening exclamation. Writing often at least a letter a day, EBB and RB created a body of correspondence which provides an amazing record of their growing intimacy and their plans for a new life together, as well as one which touches on all kinds of social and political issues. EBB's letters in particular are full of arresting imagery and range across all sorts of ideas, including much reflection on love and marriage. Certainly, she remains highly critical of what she perceives as the negative side of marriage at this time. Writing to RB on 12 August 1846, for example, significantly exactly a month before the day they themselves marry, EBB states her anxiety that:

when women are chosen for wives, they are not chosen for companions – that when they are selected to be loved, it is quite apart from life [...] A German professor selects a woman who can merely stew prunes – not because stewing prunes and reading Proclus [the Greek Neoplatonist philosopher, 412-85 CE] make a delightful harmony, but because he wants prunes stewed for him and he chooses to read Proclus by himself. A fulness of sympathy, a sharing of life, one with another, .. is scarcely ever looked for except in a narrow conventional sense. Men like to come home and find a blazing fire and a smiling face and an hour of relaxation. Their serious thoughts, and earnest aims in life, they like to keep on one side. And this is the

carrying out of love and marriage almost everywhere in the world – and this, the degrading of women by both.<sup>6</sup>

After two decades of writing and thinking about love, relationships and marriage, EBB clearly knew what she wanted – and what she definitely did not want. By all accounts, of course, her marriage to RB was pretty remarkable, a relationship between two devoted partners who developed together both personally and professionally – although not one without its points of tension with regard to their differing views on politics and spiritualism. Across the fifteen years of their marriage, both poets would continue to interrogate creatively what love and relationships mean – RB in his major collection, *Men and Women* (published 1855), and Elizabeth in particular in *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (published 1850) and *Aurora Leigh*, the poem where Aurora eventually achieves, as Dorothy Mermin argues, nothing less than ‘love *and* work *and* fame *and* independence *and* power.’<sup>7</sup> And it is this connection which I believe to be the key. These two partners, whose work across their careers demonstrates an incredibly subtle understanding of relationships – of love, marriage and sexuality, in their darker aspects as well as their positive – seemed to know, if anyone did, how to make a marriage work. How shall we love one another? Let me count the ways.

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<sup>1</sup> Virginia Woolf, *On Women and Writing*, ed. Michèle Barrett (London: Virago Press, 1979), pp. 133-34.

<sup>2</sup> *Aurora Leigh*, ed. Margaret Reynolds (New York and London: Norton, 1996), Book 9, ll. 660-65.

<sup>3</sup> For more on this, see in particular Marjorie Stone, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (Macmillan 1995), pp. 94-133 (Chapter 3: ‘A Cinderella Among the Muses: Barrett Browning and the Ballad Tradition’).

<sup>4</sup> *The Brownings’ Correspondence* Volume 11, ed. Philip Kelley and Scott Lewis (Winfield, KS: Wedgestone Press, 1993), p. 43.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in *Lives of Literary Figures: The Brownings*, ed. Simon Avery (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2004), pp. 43-44.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.

<sup>7</sup> Dorothy Mermin, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning: The Origins of a New Poetry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 215.