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Robert Browning
A Literary Life

Sarah Wood
For Rose and Miranda
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Preface

All readers of Robert Browning sooner or later find Elizabeth Barrett ahead of them.¹ The courtship correspondence that passed between the poets in 1845–6 testifies to the power of reading and writing to seduce and enthral, but it does more. The letters make that rather indeterminate experience of reading into the motivating force in an unforgettable story, its uncertain sensations and intensities secured as a kind of historical drama. Elizabeth Barrett’s critical reputation is currently re-ascending partly as a result of deliberate decisions to look at her work apart from her marriage and her popularly mythologized biography. Margaret Reynolds’s 1992 Ohio edition of *Aurora Leigh* has been a landmark in this process, as has Marjorie Stone’s 1995 critical study, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*.² New thinking about sexual difference and closer reading of the poems themselves suggest that Elizabeth Barrett’s poetry cannot be exclusively claimed by either a female or a male ‘line’ of poets.³ When a John Woolford or a Catherine Maxwell argue that the male Romantic poets who influence both Browning and Elizabeth Barrett themselves undergo feminization in their writing, the discussion has come a long way from its initial biographical frame. Yet the rhetorical link between reading and seduction, manifested so powerfully in the collected and preserved love letters, always makes a short-circuit possible.

It was the poets’ son Pen who chose to publish the little archive of letters which told the story of his own origins. Reading them puts every reader both within and outside a family romance in which the two authors always will have been parents. And if reading poetry can feel like reading a letter, addressed to us alone, then Elizabeth Barrett, Browning’s most beloved correspondent, remains in the offing for any subsequent lover of his work. Elizabeth Barrett, and no other, won Browning by reading and responding to what she read.⁴ She may not ever have been his ideal reader but she is his most exactly imagined and demonstrably transformed one.⁵ How could any latecomer rival what these two managed to effect between them?

And so the celebrations continue, starting with Joseph Arnould’s breathless letter to Alfred Domett in 1846:

> This lady so gifted, so secluded, so tyrannised over, fell in love with Browning in the spirit, before she ever saw him in the flesh – in
plain English loved the writer before she saw the man. Imagine ... the effect which his graceful bearing, high demeanour, and noble speech must have had on such a mind when she first saw the man of her visions in the twilight of her darkened room. She was at once in love as a poet-soul only can be: and Browning, as if by contagion or electricity, was no less from the first interview wholly in love with her.6

Imagine. Elizabeth Barrett touchingly identified the genre of her relationship with Browning as the fairy tale. Gossip reverberated among friends on either side: Arnould’s letter suggests that Barrett had responded to poetic gifts plus his old pal’s evident manly charms whereas Browning fell in love because of his poet’s capacity to catch her passion by contagion. On the other side, Elizabeth Barrett’s old friend Miss Mitford was really unable to see that Elizabeth Barrett had done at all well for herself. Acquaintances and visitors to the poets’ homes in Italy and France continued to peer at the couple and their household and write up their impressions, until Pen published the love letters in 1899. This elicited some bad-tempered justification of the fairy tale’s ogre – Elizabeth Barrett’s father – by his family. Charles J. Moulton Barrett huffed in a letter to the Standard that ‘few sons, either for gain or for love of notoriety would make public the confidential letters of their mother’.7 In the twentieth century there were popular biographies that drew on the confidences: Dorothy Baynes’s Andromeda in Wimpole Street: the Romance of Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1929), Dallas Kenmare’s The Browning Love-Story (1957) and Julia Markus’s Dared and Done: the Marriage of Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Robert Browning (1993). The story has also inspired fiction – the incomparable laughter of Virginia Woolf’s Flush: a Biography (1933) and Margaret Forster’s gripping slantwise presentation via Elizabeth Barrett’s servant Wilson, Lady’s Maid (1990). Still the great example, the most widely disseminated, is Sydney Franklin’s 1934 film of Rudolf Besier’s 1930 play The Barretts of Wimpole Street.

Franklin remade the film in 1957; both versions are available on video and regularly appear on television. ‘The famed romance between nineteenth-century poets Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning is recounted in this historical drama. Barrett, an invalid confined to her bed, is wooed into happiness and recovery by a fellow poet Robert Browning.’8 This book does not reproduce that narrative. The film is a wonderfully camp, richly costumed Hollywood psychodrama, with star casting for Elizabeth Barrett’s weirdly possessive father.
Browning’s poetry is played for laughs (it’s incomprehensible but Elizabeth spends ages reading it anyway), while the poets are figures of supremely straight-faced ardour and susceptibility. Besier’s script gives a good impression of the heated atmosphere as Browning grabs Elizabeth Barrett’s hands in Act II:

\[\text{Browning: } \ldots \text{I’ve more life than is good for one man – it seethes and races in me. [...] Mayn’t I give it to you? Don’t you feel new life tingling and prickling up your fingers and arms right into your heart and brain?} \]

\[\text{Elizabeth (rather frightened and shaken): Oh please ... Mr Browning, please let go my hands ...} \]

\[\text{[He opens his hands; but she still leaves hers lying on his palms for a moment. Then she withdraws them, and clasping her cheeks, looks at him with wide, disturbed eyes.]}^{9} \]

The male Victorian readers who fill my pages are by no means ‘wooed into happiness and recovery’ by reading Browning: they are far more likely to complain of feeling irritated, led on and confused. But they can’t stop. And this is what they have in common with Elizabeth Barrett. She wrote to Browning:

\[\text{You influenced me, in a way in which no one else did. For instance, by two or three half-words you made me see you, & other people had delivered orations on the same subject quite without effect. I surprised everyone in this house by consenting to see you – Then, when you came, .. you never went away – I mean, I had a sense of your presence constantly.}^{10} \]

Fifteen years after marrying Browning she wrote to his sister Sarianna that ‘women adore him everywhere far too much for decency’\(^{11}\) and this raw impression of Browning’s personal impact and power also speaks to those – men and women, then and now – who cannot have done with reading him. He’s not the kind of poet that it’s easy to resist.

In actuality, happiness and recovery were not the end of the Barrett-Browning story. Like other literary marriage plots, \textit{The Barretts of Wimpole Street} breaks off before the length of Pen’s hair, Louis Napoleon and spiritualism began to play their slightly divisive parts in the home epic that followed the poets’ great beginning.\(^{12}\) The romance has its fabulous obelisk: many who have never knowingly read a word of Browning know about the letters, the visits, the secret
love and the sudden departure thanks to Rudolf Besier and Sydney Franklin. Robert Browning’s name does not appear in the film’s title and Wimpole Street was never his address. He was a visitor to the Barrett house and what mark does a visit leave?

S. W.
At moments like this authors know they are at their least original. Where do they begin? Danny Karlin read the penultimate draft in a deeply learned, characteristically generous way. He also taught me how to read *Sordello*. Tim Clark’s supportive reading was a great help with the critical framing of the book; he also invited me to give Chapter 5 as a paper to his colleagues at Durham, where his and their comments were invaluable. Thanks also to Andy Thompson at Cherwell College for the lucky chance to discuss Ruskin and Browning with ‘A’ level students and colleagues. Catherine Maxwell, Forbes Morlock and Marcus Wood responded creatively to draft chapters at various stages. Without Ann Wordsworth’s unforgettable teaching I might not have been unable to stop reading Browning in the first place. Ken Newton kindly asked me to give an early version of Chapter 3 as a paper at Dundee where the subsequent discussion introduced several new ideas. Part of Chapter 7 appeared in *Browning Society Notes* 24 (May 1997). Jane Moody gave useful initial advice on early Victorian drama. I also wish to thank the Armstrong Baylor Library for permission to reproduce the cover photograph. Emma Smith and Linda Squire gave me a computer to finish writing the book on and made work possible in a hundred other ways. Thanks also to F. E. Brown, Delia da Sousa Correa, Doris Cossette, Charlotte Hoare, Kate Macfarlane, Nicholas Royle, Roy Sellars, Lottie Stephenson and Beatrice Wood for their incalculable contributions.
Abbreviations

Arnold  

Arnold, Letters  

Arnold, Poems  

Bloom and Munich  

DLB  
*The Dictionary of Literary Biography*

DNB  
*The Dictionary of National Biography*

Carlyle  

Kelley  
*The Browning’s Correspondence*, eds Philip Kelley et al. (Winfield, KS, 1984–).

Litzinger and Smalley  

Longman  
*The Poems of Browning*, eds John Woolford and Daniel Karlin (London, 1991–).

Mill  

Ohio  

Orr, Life  

Penguin  

Ruskin  

Woolford and Karlin  
Note on texts

For general purposes I refer to the two-volume Penguin edition, which takes the 1888 Poetical Works as its copy text, and therefore includes all the authorial revisions Browning busied himself with throughout his career. Penguin is complete but for the plays and The Ring and the Book and has the advantage of being widely available in libraries. Unfortunately, the second volume of poems and The Ring and the Book are currently out of print. As this is a study of Browning’s creative development it is essential to cite the earliest published versions of his work. Therefore, in my discussion of Pauline (1833), Sordello (1840) and ‘The Laboratory’ I refer to the Longman edition, which takes its copy texts from the first editions. I also refer to Longman for the ‘Essay on Chatterton’ (1842) which reprints the first edition in II, pp. 478–503. I cite the first edition of the ‘Essay on Shelley’ (1852), reprinted in Peacock’s Four Ages of Poetry, Shelley’s Defence of Poetry, Browning’s Essay on Shelley, ed. H. F. B. Brett-Smith (Oxford, 1921) and in Penguin I, pp. 1001–13. I cite Strafford and The Return of the Druses from The Complete Works of Robert Browning, ed. Roma A. King et al. (Athens, OH, 1969–). In quoting from Browning correspondence I retain Browning’s and Elizabeth Barrett’s use of the two-point ellipsis (..), which carries the force of a dash.