



CRITICISM

VOLUME

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Poetry Criticism

*Criticism of the Works
of the Most Significant and Widely
Studied Poets of World Literature*

Volume 182

Lawrence J. Trudeau
Editor

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Poetry Criticism

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Preface

Poetry Criticism (PC) presents significant criticism of the world's greatest poets and provides supplementary biographical and bibliographical material to guide the interested reader to a greater understanding of the genre and its creators. This series was developed in response to suggestions from librarians serving high school, college, and public library patrons, who had noted a considerable number of requests for critical material on poems and poets. Although major poets and literary movements are covered in such Gale Literary Criticism series as *Contemporary Literary Criticism* (CLC), *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism* (TCLC), *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism* (NCLC), *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800* (LC), and *Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism* (CMLC), librarians perceived the need for a series devoted solely to poets and poetry.

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PC is designed to serve as an introduction to major poets of all eras and nationalities. Since these authors have inspired a great deal of relevant critical material, PC is necessarily selective, and the editors have chosen the most important published criticism to aid readers and students in their research.

Approximately three to six authors, works, or topics are included in each volume. An author's first entry in the series generally presents a historical survey of the critical response to the author's work; subsequent entries will focus upon contemporary criticism about the author or criticism of an important poem, group of poems, or book. The length of an entry is intended to reflect the amount of critical attention the author has received from critics writing in English and from critics who do not write in English whose criticism has been translated. Every attempt has been made to identify and include the most significant essays on each author's work. In order to provide these important critical pieces, the editors sometimes reprint essays that have appeared elsewhere in Gale's Literary Criticism Series. Such duplication, however, never exceeds twenty percent of a PC volume.

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- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author and the critical debates surrounding his or her work.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The first section comprises poetry collections, book-length poems, and theoretical works by the author about poetry. The second section gives information on other major works by the author. In the case of authors who do not write in English, an English translation of the title is provided as an aid to the reader; the translation is either a published translated title or a free translation provided by the compiler of the entry. In the case of such authors whose works have been translated into English, the **Principal English Translations** focuses primarily on twentieth-century translations, selecting those works most commonly considered the best by critics.
- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. All individual titles of poems, poetry collections, and theoretical works about poetry by the

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- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism. Citations conform to recommendations set forth in the Modern Language Association of America's *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, 7th ed. (2009).
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** describing each piece.
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

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Glen, Heather. "Blake's Criticism of Moral Thinking in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*." *Interpreting Blake*. Ed. Michael Phillips. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1978. 32-69. Rpt. in *Poetry Criticism*. Ed. Michelle Lee. Vol. 63. Detroit: Gale, 2005. 34-51. Print.

The examples below follow recommendations for preparing a bibliography set forth in *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 16th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010); the first example pertains to material drawn from periodicals, the second to material reprinted from books:

Linkin, Harriet Kramer. "The Language of Speakers in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*." *Romanticism Past and Present* 10, no. 2 (summer 1986): 5-24. Rpt. in *Poetry Criticism*. Edited by Michelle Lee. Vol. 63. Detroit: Gale, 2005. 79-88. Print.

Glen, Heather. "Blake's Criticism of Moral Thinking in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*." In *Interpreting Blake*, edited by Michael Phillips. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978. 32-69. Rpt. in *Poetry Criticism*. Edited by Michelle Lee. Vol. 63. Detroit: Gale, 2005. 34-51. Print.

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Robert Browning

1812-1889

English poet and playwright.

The following entry provides criticism of Browning's life and poetic works. For additional information about Browning, see *PC*, Volumes 2 and 97; for additional information about the poem *The Ring and the Book*, see *PC*, Volumes 61 and 182; for additional information about the poem *Sordello*, see *PC*, Volume 182.

INTRODUCTION

Robert Browning was a leading poet of the Victorian era. He is remembered for his mastery of dramatic monolog, a form in which the speaker's views and motivations are revealed gradually, creating a dramatic tension among poet, character, and reader. His works are admired for their skillful character development, particularly with regard to human psychology, and they cover diverse themes and settings. Formal aspects of his poetry, including diction, rhythm, and symbol, proved influential to modernist poets in the generation after his death. Though he toiled in relative obscurity for years, Browning eventually won recognition as a major poet and, near the end of his life, was revered by contemporaries for his optimism and ideas about the nature of poetry and humanity's imperfection.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Browning was born on 7 May 1812 in Camberwell, then a middle-class suburb southeast of London. His father, Robert Browning, Sr., was a well-read man of many interests who worked as a clerk for the Bank of England. The poet's mother, Sarah Anna Wiedemann, was a musician, nature lover, and devout Congregationalist who sought to pass her faith on to her son. Browning grew up in an intellectual environment and, encouraged by his father to read freely in the extensive home library, he began writing poetry at the age of six. When he was ten years old, he was sent to school in Peckham, and four years later, he entered university. Because he was not a member of the Church of England, Browning was barred from attending Oxford or Cambridge, and he enrolled in 1828 at London University, where he began studying Greek, Latin, and German. He ended his studies less than a year later, however, deter-

mined to pursue a career as a poet. Provided with an income by his parents, with whom he continued to live until 1846, Browning was able to devote himself to writing full-time.

Though his early poetry received generally negative reviews, it also attracted some admirers, among them the popular and successful poet Elizabeth Barrett. After she praised Browning's poetry in one of her works in 1844, he wrote her a letter of gratitude. The two met the following year and fell in love. Six years older than Browning, Elizabeth suffered from lifelong chronic pain and was dependent on laudanum. In 1846, ignoring the disapproval of her father, the couple eloped to Italy, where, except for brief intervals, they lived—first in Pisa and then in Florence—for the remainder of their married life. Their son, Robert Wiedemann Barrett Browning, called "Pen," was born in 1849. Elizabeth died in 1861, after which Browning and Pen returned to England and settled in London. Browning's sister, Sarianna, moved in with them to help raise Pen. Browning was given the opportunity in 1862 to succeed William Makepeace Thackeray as the editor of *Cornhill* magazine, but he declined for unknown reasons.

Browning finally achieved critical and popular acclaim with his collection of dramatic monologs *Dramatis Personae* (1864). His reputation was cemented by the success of the four-volume poem *The Ring and the Book* (1868-69), which is considered his finest work. Ranked among the greatest writers of his day in the last decades of his life, Browning remained highly productive, though scholars regard his earlier work as superior to most of his later output. The London Browning Society was established in 1880 for the sole purpose of studying his poems and paying tribute to him as a teacher. He received honorary degrees from Oxford University in 1882 and the University of Edinburgh in 1884, and he was invited to a private audience with Queen Victoria. Browning died on 12 December 1889 while visiting Pen and his wife, Fannie, in Venice. He was buried in the Poets' Corner of Westminster Abbey, in London.

MAJOR POETIC WORKS

Browning's early poetry incorporates biographical elements and demonstrates his admiration of Percy Bysshe Shelley. In *Pauline* (1833), the poet-narrator resolves an

emotional and professional crisis by affirming his allegiance to orthodox Christianity. *Paracelsus* (1835), about the sixteenth-century German philosopher and scientist of the same name, depicts its protagonist's struggle with his unattainable goal of perfect knowledge. Browning's next long poem, *Sordello* (1840), elicited such negative reviews that it became infamous as one of the great literary failures. Loosely based upon the thirteenth-century troubadour of the same name, *Sordello* focuses on the development of the poetic soul, but it also comments on war and explicates Shelley's liberal philosophy. In *Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day* (1850), Browning treated religious themes overtly, comparing the approaches of several contemporary Christian and philosophical movements.

In the 1840s, Browning published new works in a series of eight pamphlets titled *Bells and Pomegranates*. Two of them—*Bells and Pomegranates. No. III. Dramatic Lyrics* (1842) and *Bells and Pomegranates. No. VII. Dramatic Romances and Lyrics* (1845)—contain several of his most popular poems. "My Last Duchess," originally published as "Italy" in the 1842 collection, features the Duke of Ferrara as he calmly shows off a painting of his deceased young wife to an initially unidentified guest. During his monolog, it becomes clear that the Duke ordered the Duchess killed as punishment for disobedience and that his listener is an envoy of the nobleman whose daughter may become his next wife—and victim. In "Porphyria's Lover," the second part of the poem "Madhouse Cells," the speaker describes how he strangled the woman he loves with a lock of her own hair. The central figure in "The Bishop Orders His Tomb at St. Praxed's Church," from the 1845 compilation, is a dying bishop who addresses his sons about his wishes regarding his burial and memorial, reexamining his life and career in the process. Browning's handling of dramatic monolog in these poems enables him to reveal the speakers' thought patterns and psychologies subtly, through a blending of subject and form.

Browning's use of the dramatic monolog form reached its apex in *Men and Women* (1855) and *Dramatis Personae*. The former work is concerned chiefly with art, religion, and love, and it includes many of Browning's best-known poems. In "Fra Lippo Lippi" and "Andrea del Sarto," Christ appears as a symbol of optimism, wholeness, and the reconciliation of the real with the ideal, the human with the divine, and the flesh with the spirit. The monk and painter Fra Lippo Lippi celebrates the body, but he understands the connection between the physical and the spiritual. The artist Andrea del Sarto, by contrast, has sacrificed the spiritual dimension of his art in order to express the physical perfection of his chief model, his wife. *Dramatis Personae* includes such important poems as "Rabbi Ben Ezra," "Cal-

iban upon Setebos," and "Abt Vogler." Based upon a twelfth-century scholar, "Rabbi Ben Ezra" is an optimistic portrait of old age, in which the title character expresses gratitude to God for the wisdom that compensates for lost youth and the satisfactions of having actively pursued his goal. In "Caliban upon Setebos," Browning uses the monolog of Caliban, the villain from William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (c. 1611), to satirize what he regarded as the Victorians' propensity to remake God in their own image. The poem also mocks natural religion and the ideas of Charles Darwin. "Abt Vogler" portrays a famous musical composer and innovator coming to terms with the imperfection of his art and his diminished reputation.

The Ring and the Book comprises twelve dramatic monologs based on documents relating to a 1698 Italian murder case that Browning found in a Florence flea market. The poet shaped the legal briefs, pamphlets, and letters pertaining to the case—which involved a child bride, an evil nobleman, a disguised priest, a triple murder, four hangings, and a beheading—into an experimental forensic narrative with Gothic overtones. The narrator introduces himself at the beginning and explains his role in reshaping the murder trial. The monologs that follow present the facts of the case from the conflicting points of view of various characters.

After the sweeping success of *The Ring and the Book*, Browning became an object of public adulation. He continued to write prolifically and to experiment with form and technique, but his works became increasingly didactic. *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau, Saviour of Society* (1871) is a long, complex interior monolog spoken by a narrator modeled on Napoleon III, ruler of the Second French Empire. The poem reveals the statesman in a mood of self-examination as he weighs different possibilities before deciding on a course of political action. The prince presents an ideal version of himself before undercutting that image through nuance and suggestion. *Red Cotton Night-Cap Country* (1873), which is set in contemporary Paris and Normandy, incorporates religious obsession, sexual intrigue, and violent death. The poem is based on the true story of the death in 1870—allegedly by suicide—of Antoine Mellerio, the heir of a famous family of Parisian jewelers.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Critical and popular acceptance of Browning's poetry came slowly. The reception of *Sordello* hurt his career and earned Browning a reputation as a difficult and obscure poet. Some reviewers of his early poetry were repelled by dramatic monologs featuring characters perverted by jealousy,

lust, and avarice, and they found his style rough and baffling. Until the publication of *Men and Women* and *Dramatis Personae*, Browning was chiefly known as the husband of Elizabeth Barrett Browning. The success of his mature dramatic monologs, followed by the critical triumph of *The Ring and the Book*, brought him acclaim, as reviewers recognized his achievement in representing and exploring the mental states of his speakers. Although he was admired as a religious thinker and philosopher in the late nineteenth century, Browning is now remembered for his craftsmanship, innovation, versatility, and eclecticism, as well as his influence on such modernist poets as Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot.

Much of the criticism on Browning's poetry focuses on his dramatic monologs. Joseph E. Baker (1957) decried Browning's use of theological language to deal with unorthodox subject matter. He maintained that in "Two Camels" the poet "sanctifies self-indulgence and vulgarizes theology," offering his readers the appearance of religion without any of its rigors. Examining the form, style, and themes of "My Last Duchess," Joshua Adler (1977; see Further Reading) focused on how the Duke's manipulative qualities are reflected throughout the poem in his speech and gestures. Adler also proposed that conflicting views of the Duke—as an aesthete or as a monster—are resolvable in the context of the Victorian concern for the morality of art. He suggested that in the poem, Browning shows that "once an individual, a class, or a society has reached a certain point of over-refinement, the dark forces of human nature lurking underground threaten to wreak a terrible vengeance for their unnatural suppression." Richard D. Altick (1963) discussed a similar duality in "A Grammarian's Funeral," positing that Browning condones the adulation of the grammarian's students while at the same time subtly satirizing the scholar's academic seclusion. Carol T. Christ (1995) connected Browning's frequent use of dead bodies to Victorian preoccupations with bodily dissolution, mourning, and commemoration, citing this motif in such poems as "The Bishop Orders His Tomb," "Porphyria's Lover," and "Evelyn Hope." Moreover, Christ argued that Browning used imagery related to these ideas to comment on the purpose of literature, noting that "the grotesque pretense in which Browning involves his characters as well as the extravagant make-believe of the poetry itself suggests an understanding of art as just such extravagant pretense, exercised to secure the authority it reveals as hollow."

Scholars have also analyzed aspects of Browning's other works. Deeming *The Ring and the Book* "the last poem of epic length in English of indisputably high stature," Park Honan (1968) identified biographical parallels between the Brownings and the poem's characters. Honan also dis-

cussed the work in the context of the Victorian interest in documentary and historical materials and observed that its form and psychological portraits anticipate aspects of the modern novel. Charles LaPorte (2011; see Further Reading) concurred, emphasizing Browning's innovative use of stylistic disharmony, conflicting narrative testimonies, and lack of closure. He also assessed Browning's leveraging of interpretive approaches to the Gospels to validate the historical authority of his poem.

Jelena Krstovic

Academic Advisor: Jeremy Venema,
Mesa Community College

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Poetry

Pauline: A Fragment of a Confession. As Anonymous. London: Saunders and Otley, 1833. Print.

Paracelsus. London: Wilson, 1835. Print.

Strafford: An Historical Tragedy. London: Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown, Green and Longman, 1837. Print. (Verse drama)

Sordello. London: Moxon, 1840. Print.

Bells and Pomegranates. No. I. Pippa Passes. London: Moxon, 1841. Print. (Verse drama)

Bells and Pomegranates. No. II. King Victor and King Charles. London: Moxon, 1842. Print. (Verse drama)

**Bells and Pomegranates. No. III. Dramatic Lyrics*. London: Moxon, 1842. Print.

Bells and Pomegranates. No. IV. The Return of the Druses: A Tragedy in Five Acts. London: Moxon, 1843. Print. (Verse drama)

Bells and Pomegranates. No. V. A Blot in the 'Scutcheon: A Tragedy in Five Acts. London: Moxon, 1843. Print. (Verse drama)

Bells and Pomegranates. No. VI. Colombe's Birthday: A Play in Five Acts. London: Moxon, 1844. Print. (Verse drama)

†*Bells and Pomegranates. No. VII. Dramatic Romances and Lyrics*. London: Moxon, 1845. Print.

Bells and Pomegranates. No. VIII and Last. Luria; and A Soul's Tragedy. London: Moxon, 1846. Print. (Verse dramas)

Poems: A New Edition. 2 vols. London: Chapman and Hall, 1849. Print.

Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day. London: Chapman and Hall, 1850. Print.

Two Poems. With Elizabeth Barrett Browning. London: Chapman and Hall, 1854. Print.

‡*Men and Women.* 2 vols. London: Chapman and Hall, 1855. Print.

§*Dramatis Personae.* London: Chapman and Hall, 1864. Print.

The Poetical Works of Robert Browning. 6 vols. London: Smith, Elder, 1868. Print.

The Ring and the Book. 4 vols. London: Smith, Elder, 1868-69. Print.

Balaustion's Adventure, Including a Transcript from Euripides. London: Smith, Elder, 1871. Print.

Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau, Saviour of Society. London: Smith, Elder, 1871. Print.

Fifine at the Fair. London: Smith, Elder, 1872. Print.

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*Includes the poems "Italy," republished as "My Last Duchess," and "Madhouse Cells," the second part of which was republished as "Porphyria's Lover."

†Includes the poem "The Bishop Orders His Tomb at St. Praxed's Church."

‡Includes the poems "Andrea del Sarto," "Evelyn Hope," "Fra Lippo Lippi," "A Grammarian's Funeral," "Master Hugues of Saxe-Gotha," and "A Toccata of Galuppi's."

§Includes the poems "Abt Vogler," "Caliban upon Setebos," "Mr. Sludge," "The Medium," and "Rabbi Ben Ezra."

||Includes the poem "A Forgiveness."

#Includes the poem "Pheidippides."

**Includes the poem "Two Camels."

CRITICISM

John W. Cunliffe (essay date 1908)

SOURCE: Cunliffe, John W. "Elizabeth Barrett's Influence on Browning's Poetry." *PMLA* ns 26.2 (1908): 169-83. Print.

[In the following essay, Cunliffe suggests that Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "best work is to be found not in her own writings," but in those of her husband. Cunliffe examines this influence by comparing Robert Browning's Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day with his Men and Women, arguing that the former illustrates "the weaker side of his wife's influence," whereas their happy marriage "gave such wonderful fire and tenderness to the romantic passion" in the latter work.]

There are many well-established cases of the influence of an earlier on a later poet—of Marlowe on Shakspeare, of Spenser on Keats, of Keats on Tennyson, for instance; but it is not often that we have so clear an example of interaction between contemporaries as that of Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning. In these days of minute scholarship, it seems strange that so remarkable an instance should (so far as I am aware) have escaped detailed examination, in spite of the unwearying activity of graduate schools and Browning Societies. Both for its human and for its literary interest, the case seems worth presenting, at any rate in broad outline.

Browning's influence upon his wife is written large on the surface of all her later work, the best thing she ever did, the *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, being directly due to his inspiration. Her influence upon him is subtler, deeper—the influence of the weaker and finer upon the stronger nature. Richly as her ardent spirit developed under the emotional and intellectual stimulus she received from him, I am inclined to believe that her most enduring contributions to literature were not direct but indirect—through the influence she exerted on her poet-husband. Her best work is to be found not in her own writings, but in his.

Such a view would have been scouted during Mrs. Browning's lifetime; and in order to orient ourselves, it may be well to recall the circumstances of their first acquaintance.

Older by six years, Elizabeth Barrett was also more precocious, and had a wide circle of admirers on both sides of the Atlantic when he was known only to a little ring of select spirits in London. She had published her first volume of poems in 1826, when he was a boy of 14, and had risen to the dignity of a collected edition while he was still trying to force his poems on an unwilling public in sixpenny and shilling pamphlets. It was, indeed, a compliment she paid in her three volume edition to Browning's cheap series of "**Bells and Pomegranates**" that first brought the two poets together. Browning's approach in response was characteristically direct: "I love your verses with all my heart, dear Miss Barrett," he wrote on January 10, 1845, and later in the same letter he added, "and I love you too." So began the memorable courtship—the most remarkable, I think, in the history of literature—which I must not stay now to rehearse. In spite of the emotional tone of Browning's first letter to a lady he had never seen, there was at this time no suspicion on either side of what was so soon to come. It would be rash to say of any man over thirty, as Browning was, that he had never been in love; but he was heart-whole, and he had made his scheme of life, as he afterwards wrote to Miss Barrett, supposing the "finding such a one as you utterly impossible." She also had definitely renounced any thought of marriage, and she took his letter in the friendly spirit of appreciation in which it was meant. "I had a letter from Browning the poet last night which threw me into ecstasies,"—she writes to a friend, "Browning, the author of *Paracelsus*, and king of the mystics." In spite of many literary interests in common, they were strikingly different in character and tastes. He was already a man of the world and a bit of a dandy, with marked social abilities and inclinations, as Mr. Kenyon's recent book, *Robert Browning and Alfred Domett*, has shown. He had already developed that attitude of mind which made Lockhart say later that he liked Browning, because he was "not at all like a damned literary man." She, on the other hand, was a student and a recluse, an invalid who enjoyed the reputation of a blue-stocking in those early Victorian days. Miss Mitford describes her as "reading almost every book worth reading in almost every language," and having a Greek text of Plato bound like a novel so as to deceive the family physician. Yet there was nothing of the blue-stocking in her disposition. Miss Mitford's description may be further quoted: "Of a slight, delicate figure, with a shower of dark curls falling on either side of a most expressive face, large tender eyes richly fringed by dark eyelashes, a smile like a sun-beam, and such a look of youthfulness,"—this was in 1836, before the days of her suffering and bereavement. But twenty years later Nathaniel Hawthorne found her still "youthful and comely" as well as "very gentle and ladylike." His first impression is of "a small, delicate woman, with ringlets of

dark hair, a pleasant, intelligent, and sensitive face, and a low, agreeable voice." Two years later, on closer acquaintance, he describes her with greater fulness and enthusiasm—"a pale, small person, scarcely embodied at all; at any rate only substantial enough to put forth her slender fingers to be grasped, and to speak with a shrill yet sweet tenuity of voice. Really, I do not see how Mr. Browning can suppose that he has an earthly wife any more than an earthly child; both are of the elfin race, and will flit away from him some day when he least thinks of it. She is a good and kind fairy, however, and sweetly disposed towards the human race, although only remotely akin to it. It is wonderful to see how small she is, how pale her cheek, how bright and dark her eyes. There is not such another figure in the world; and her black ringlets cluster down into her neck, and make her face look the whiter by their sable profusion. I could not form any judgment about her age; it may range anywhere within the limits of human life or elfin life. . . . It is marvellous to me how so extraordinary, so acute, so sensitive a creature can impress us, as she does, with the certainty of her benevolence."

Mr. Chesterton in his study of Browning (*English Men of Letters*) has said that Browning's behaviour during the secret courtship which ended in so respectable an elopement is "more thoroughly to his credit than anything in his career." This is surely an exaggeration, for to tell a lie when occasion calls for it, and remain a gentleman is not, after all, a task of such super-human difficulty as Mr. Chesterton seems to think; and though Mr. Moulton Barrett's system of paternal theocracy amounted almost to religious monomania, it is a little absurd to regard him as an ogre, and Miss Barrett's invalid chamber as an enchanted castle. She was a woman of forty with an independent income, and all she had to do to escape from her dungeon was to summon the moral and physical courage to walk out of it. The obstacles she had to overcome are very well represented by her father's remark after the marriage. "I have no objection to the young man, but my daughter should have been thinking of another world." It was precisely from this other world—the world of depressing religiosity and domestic tyranny—that Browning rescued Elizabeth Barrett, and it required qualities which are not exactly heroic, but which are no less rare—single-minded devotion and infinite tact and patience. There was also some risk of social odium to be faced, for Browning had no means, and the secret marriage of the two poets, unsuspected even by their friends, of course made a sensation when it was publicly announced a few days later. It startled Wordsworth into his one recorded jest: "So Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett have gone off together! Well, I hope they may understand each other—nobody else could."

Fortunately they did understand each other: their marriage proved just what Milton says the poet's life should be—in itself "a true poem." To Elizabeth Barrett it meant fifteen years of the sublime happiness which the *Sonnets from the Portuguese* help us to measure. Browning's side of the picture is given in *By the Fireside*, which is simply a romantic presentation of their courtship and married life in Italy. The scenery described is that of the Baths of Lucca, where they spent some delightful summers, and there are many glances at their common life in Pisa and Florence.

I will speak now
No longer watch you as you sit
Reading by fire-light, that great brow
And the spirit-small hand propping it,
Mutely, my heart knows how—

When, if I think but deep enough,
You are wont to answer, prompt as rhyme;
And you, too, find without rebuff
Response your soul seeks many a time
Piercing its fine flesh-stuff.

This is but a poetical description of the Brownings in their Italian home. Mrs. Browning writes of her husband in a letter to his sister: "Nobody exactly understands him except me, who am in the inside of him and hear him breathe. For the peculiarity of our relation is that he thinks aloud with me and can't stop himself."

A few stanzas later Browning looks back to the courtship and gives us in poetry what we have in the love letters in prose.

Come back with me to the first of all,
Let us lean and love it over again,
Let us now forget and now recall,
Break the rosary in a pearly rain,
And gather what we let fall!

To him their union remains the supreme moment of his life:

I am named and known by that moment's feat;
There took my station and degree;
So grew my own small life complete,
As nature obtained her best of me—
One born to love you, sweet!

But this is the language of lyric poetry, not of sober criticism. The author of the *Dramatic Romances and Lyrics*, of *Pippa Passes* and *Sordello* would have been a great poet if he had never met Elizabeth Barrett; but he would not have been the same poet, or the same man. Professor Herford, who will not be suspected of exaggeration, says that Mrs. Browning "brought a new and potent influence to bear upon his poetry, the only one which after early manhood he ever experienced; and their union was by far the most

signal event in Browning's intellectual history, as it was in his life." Let us now address ourselves to examine this influence as particularly and dispassionately as we can.

"Being too happy doesn't agree with literary activity," writes Mrs. Browning three years after the marriage; the first and most obvious effect of Browning's wedded bliss was to greatly decrease the amount of his poetical production. Every year of the ten before his marriage saw some important work of his published; after his marriage there was a long silence till the publication of *Christmas Eve and Easter Day* in 1850; five more years elapsed before *Men and Women* appeared in 1855; and he published nothing else until after his wife's death. But in poetry it is quality, not quantity, that counts; if I were to select from Browning's works one volume for which, if necessity so demanded, all the rest should be sacrificed, it would be precisely this series of *Men and Women*, which, as Mr. Arthur Symonds says, "represents Browning's genius at its ripe maturity, its highest uniform level. In this central work of his career every element of his genius is equally developed, and the whole brought into a perfection of harmony never before or since attained. . . . In *Men and Women* Browning's special instrument, the monologue, is brought to perfection." Of *Christmas Eve and Easter Day* I hold a lower opinion than many admirers of the poet. It illustrates, to my mind, the weaker side of his wife's influence. There is some drawback even in happy marriages, between poets as among ordinary men and women, for poets are, after all, human, only more intensely so than the rest of us—a truism which critics are sometimes inclined to forget. Now the genius of these two poets, as we have noted, was essentially different. Browning in his essay on Shelley divided poets into two great classes—the objective or dramatic poets, and the subjective or lyric. He belonged very distinctly to the first order; she with equal distinctness to the second. It was a pardonable weakness in her to encourage her husband to be more subjective; she disliked the drama and the dramatic form. Before they were married she wrote to him: "Several times you have hinted to me that I made you careless for the drama, and it has puzzled me to fancy how it could be, when I understand myself so clearly both the difficulty and the glory of dramatic art. Yet I am conscious of wishing you to take the other crown besides—and after having made your own creatures speak in clear human voices, to speak yourself out of that personality which God made, and with the voice which He tuned into such power and sweetness of speech. I do not think that, with all that music in you, only your own personality should be dumb, nor that having thought so much and deeply on life and its ends, you should not teach what you have learnt, in the directest and most impressive way, the mask thrown off however

moist with the breath. And it is not, I believe, by the dramatic medium, that poets teach most impressively—I have seemed to observe *that!* . . . it is too difficult for the common reader to analyse, and to discern between the vivid and the earnest. Also he is apt to understand better always, when he sees the lips move. Now, here is yourself, with your wonderful faculty!—it is wondered at and recognized on all sides where there are eyes to see—it is called wonderful and admirable! Yet, with an inferior power, you might have taken yourself closer to the hearts and lives of men, and made yourself dearer, though being less great. Therefore I do want you to do this with your surpassing power—it will be so easy to you to speak, and so noble, when spoken."

Browning had himself ambitions in this direction. He had written early in their acquaintance: "What I have printed gives *no* knowledge of me—it evidences abilities of various kinds, if you will—and a dramatic sympathy with certain modifications of passion . . . *that* I think—But I never have begun, even, what I hope I was born to begin and end—'R. B. a poem.'" And again: "I always shiver involuntarily when I look—no, glance—at this First Poem of mine to be. '*Now*,' I call it, what, upon my soul,—for a solemn matter it is,—what is to be done now, believed now, so far as it has been revealed to me—solemn words, truly."

I imagine that *Christmas Eve and Easter Day* is the fulfilment of these early aspirations under his wife's encouragement. He tries to be subjective and does not wholly succeed, so that it is often difficult to say whether he is speaking dramatically or in his own person. This accounts for the very diverse interpretations put upon the poem by competent critics, not merely with respect to particular passages, but as to the general purpose and attitude of the poet. Professor Dowden takes it as not dramatic at all, but a declaration of the poet's own faith; he describes Browning as "a preacher," uttering his message in *Christmas Eve and Easter Day* "after the manner of earlier prophets," and suggests that "his doctrine may sometimes protrude gauntly through his poetry" (pp. 134-7). To this critic the representation of Roman Catholicism in *Christmas Eve* seems a crude misconception, and the picture of the Göttingen professor an amiable caricature (pp. 128-9). Miss Ethel M. Naish, on the other hand, in her recent study, *Browning and Dogma*, says: "The closer and more unprejudiced the study accorded it, the stronger becomes the conviction of the essentially dramatic character of the composition of both *Christmas Eve* and *Easter Day*" (p. 149). Professor Herford takes an intermediate position between these two extremes: "While he did not succeed . . . in evading his dramatic bias, he succeeded in making the dramatic form more eloquently expressive of his personal