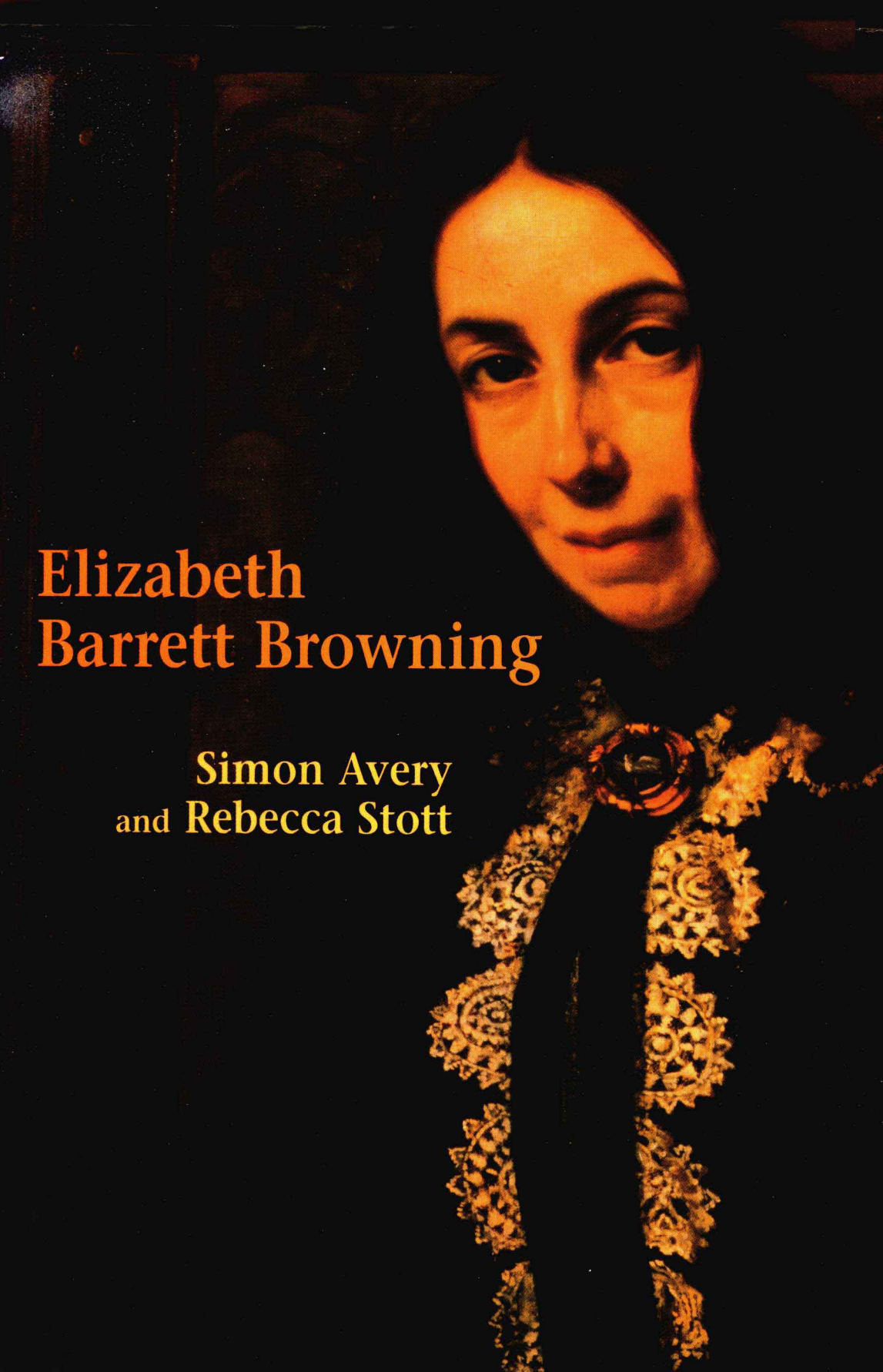

Elizabeth Barrett Browning

Simon Avery
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A NOTE ON NAMES

Any writer on Elizabeth Barrett Browning has to decide what name to use when referring to her. Christened Elizabeth Barrett Moulton-Barrett, the full name she never used in print, she published her first works under the initials E.B.B., expanded this to Elizabeth B. Barrett with the publication of *The Seraphim, and Other Poems* in 1838, and then, following her marriage to Robert in 1846, signed herself Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Some studies of the poet have chosen to refer to her as Elizabeth Barrett Browning regardless of whether or not she was married at the time, while at least one has referred to her predominantly as Mrs Browning throughout (Hayter, 1962). In this study, however, we have chosen to use Barrett when discussing her pre-1846 works and Barrett Browning when discussing her post-1846 works. Sometimes this leads to a slippage between the two names in a single chapter, as in the chapter on the 1840s when Elizabeth Barrett publishes *Poems* in 1844 and Elizabeth Barrett Browning publishes the expanded *Poems* of 1850, or in the wider-ranging chapters on the development of her poetics or her use of different genres. Nevertheless, we feel this is necessary in order to keep consistency. As Dorothy Mermin has argued, this is a poet who clearly recognises the importance of names and naming in her poetry and the imposed or self-elected identities which this signifies (Mermin, 1989: 37–8). It seems only right, therefore, to be exact when referring to the poet herself.

TEXTS USED

At the time of writing there is no complete edition of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's works in print except the Wordsworth *Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, edited by Karen Hill, which has no notes or scholarly apparatus and places the poems published in *The Seraphim, and Other Poems* (1838), *Poems* (1844) and *Poems* (1850) together so that it is difficult to trace the correct order of publication. *Aurora Leigh* is available in complete version in Cora Kaplan's 1978 Women's Press edition or, more recently and with extensive notes, annotations and background documents, in Margaret Reynolds' edition published by Norton. A number of selected editions of Barrett Browning's works edited by Malcolm Hicks (Carcanet, 1983), John Bolton and Julia Bolton Holloway (Penguin, 1995) and Colin Graham (Everyman, 1996) are currently available, as well as selections in recent anthologies of Victorian women's poetry edited by Angela Leighton and Margaret Reynolds (Blackwell, 1995), Isobel Armstrong and Joseph Bristow (Oxford, 1996) and Virginia Blain (Longman, 2001).

Throughout this study we have used as our base texts Reynolds' edition of *Aurora Leigh* and the comprehensive, although now out of print, *Complete Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, edited by Charlotte Porter and Helen A. Clarke (New York: Thomas Y. Cromwell, 1900, reprinted 1973). We have therefore followed the punctuation and layout of individual poems as they are established in these editions. However, for each quotation we have given line numbers so that the extracts can be easily traced in other editions.

Writers on Elizabeth Barrett Browning are extremely fortunate in having a huge number of letters to work from which are both insightful in themselves and important as contextual material for the study of the poetry. As Henry Chorley wrote of them in the nineteenth century:

> Her letters ought to be published. In power, in versatility, liveliness and finesse; in perfect originality of glance, and vigour of grasp at every topic of the hour; in their enthusiastic preferences, prejudices and inconsistencies, I have never

> met with any, written by man or woman, more brilliant, spontaneous and characteristic.
>
> (Quoted in Hayter, 1962: 205)

This mammoth publication project is currently being undertaken by Wedgestone Press under the editorship of Philip Kelley, Ronald Hudson and Scott Lewis. To date, fourteen volumes of *The Brownings' Correspondence* (covering both Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning's correspondence) have been published, totalling 2,716 separate letters – and this is only up until December 1847. Like all Barrett Browning scholars, we are greatly indebted to this ongoing work and have taken most of the quotations from Barrett's letters during this period from this edition. Citations within the text (e.g. *BC* 2:238) refer to volume and page number. Sources for the post-1847 letters include the letters to Mary Russell Mitford, edited by Meredith B. Raymond and Mary Rose, and the letters to Mrs David Ogilvy, edited by Peter N. Hayden and Philip Kelley. Abbreviations used for these editions, as well as for all other frequently cited source texts, are listed before the bibliography.

When quoting from Barrett's letters we have had to be extremely careful with punctuation. Overall, *The Brownings' Correspondence* replicates Barrett's spelling and punctuation as it appears in the manuscripts, even where words are incorrectly spelt or the punctuation seems rather erratic. We have followed *The Brownings' Correspondence* directly when quoting from it. The only difficulty arises through Barrett's tendency to use two dots as a punctuation mark which indicate a pause something akin to a dash, as in the following letter to Hugh Stuart Boyd:

> What a letter! The worst of me is, that whenever I begin, there is no getting to the end of me. Forgive me . . because it is the same for my friendship for you.
>
> (*BC* 8:85)

Again, following *The Brownings' Correspondence*, we have replicated this original piece of punctuation wherever it appears. However, as these dots might be confused with the dots used to mark where we omit part of a sentence when quoting, we have subsequently put our own ellipsis dots in square brackets [. . .].

Finally, a note about the publication of *Aurora Leigh*. Studies of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's work sometimes cite 1856 as the publication date of *Aurora Leigh* and sometimes 1857. The poem was originally published in November 1856, with 1857 on the title page, and a second impression appeared in January 1857 and a third in March. Throughout this study we have cited 1856 as the original publication date.

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There are many people who have helped with the writing of this book in one form or another and we would like to acknowledge them here.

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Rebecca Stott would like to thank Simon Avery for several years of on-going conversation about nineteenth-century intellectual history and about the wisdom, innovation and beauty of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poetry. The process of writing the book has been a mutual intellectual adventure. She also thanks him for his unflagging attention to detail in editing the various drafts and for not losing patience with the punctuation problems the poems present. She would also like to thank her colleagues at Anglia Polytechnic University for their support and to her family for tolerating her disappearance into Barrett Browning's poetry for most waking hours in the spring of 2002.

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INTRODUCTION: A POET LOST AND REGAINED

SIMON AVERY

SEARCHING FOR ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING

London, 29 June 2001. One hundred and forty years since the death of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, I am walking in the rain down Weymouth Street, N1, in an attempt to trace what remains of one of the nineteenth century's most famous poets in a city she called home for a significant period of her life. I reach what must be a contender for one of the most famous addresses in British literary history: Wimpole Street. Imposing five-storey houses stand on either side of the road, many with balconies or hanging baskets, giving an air of opulence in keeping with the area surrounding Harley Street and Portland Place. The original 50 Wimpole Street, the home of the Barretts from 1838, was taken down in 1912 but the building which is now in its place has a small brown circular plaque placed between the first- and second-floor windows. On it, barely large enough to read without straining, is recorded 'Elizabeth Barrett Browning/ Poetess/ Afterwards wife of Robert Browning/ Lived here 1838–1846', the phrasing almost suggesting that Barrett gave up poetry when she married. And carved into the wall, just below ground level, is a simpler wording: 'Elizabeth Barrett Browning/ 1806–1861/ Poet/ Lived in a house on this site.' Neither commemoration would attract the attention of casual passers-by, although perhaps a visitor to the heart hospital of which 50 Wimpole Street now forms a part might momentarily pause to consider the building's former use. An odd but somehow fitting conflation of ringlets and illness passes through my mind as I walk back down the road.

Getting off the underground at Charing Cross Station, I make my way across Trafalgar Square and through the revolving doors of the National Portrait Gallery. Up four flights of stairs, jostled by crowds of tourists, I reach the Victorian galleries on the second floor. Turning left past the forbidding collection of large black busts of great nineteenth-century politicians and

thinkers perched high up on the wall (Charles Darwin, John Henry Newman, Charles Stuart Parnell, T.H. Huxley, George Cruickshank even, but no woman of course), I find myself in an oddly quiet room of portraits of Victorian artists and writers – Jenny Lind, the Brontë sisters, Charles Dickens, Alfred Tennyson, Charles Kingsley, Thomas Macauley. And then, in two frames hung at angles so that they face one another, Michele Gordigiani's famous 1858 oil paintings of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Gordigiani's Barrett Browning is one of the most striking images of the poet, painted sitting in a high-backed chair, her dark eyes staring directly out of the canvas in a manner which is challenging, even confrontational. The accompanying gallery label, however, notes that while she was highly regarded in her own day, 'her reputation now rests chiefly on *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (1850), and the long narrative poem, *Aurora Leigh* (1857 [*sic*])'. Certainly, she seems from this to have nothing like the status of her husband who is defined by his label as 'one of the great poets of the nineteenth century, pre-eminent for his intellectuality'.

What these remnants of Barrett Browning's existence in London suggest is that she is now, at best, remembered for a fraction of her works or for her position in relation to her husband. Yet in her own day, Elizabeth Barrett Browning was one of the most highly regarded poets throughout Britain, Europe and America. So how did this change occur? What factors influenced and engendered her astonishing decline in literary stature? In the following sections I will explore how Barrett Browning has been consecutively applauded, marginalised, ousted from the literary canon, and then slowly recovered by modern critical theory, a narrative which starkly reveals not only the changing reception of this particular poet and her work, but the changing priorities and fashions of literary history and criticism more widely.

THE POET IN HER LIFETIME

Throughout much of her lifetime, Elizabeth Barrett Browning was considered a shocking poet, a risk-taker, an innovator, a rebel, an iconoclast even. Almost entirely self-educated, she committed herself to the task of becoming one of the most successful poets of her generation from an exceptionally early age. Subsequently pursuing her art with a vigour which is often startling for its intensity, her first major poem, *The Battle of Marathon*, was in print by the time she was just fourteen. Twenty-five years later, following the publication of four further volumes including the widely praised two-volume *Poems* of 1844, she possessed a growing international reputation throughout America and Europe and was considered one of the leading writers of the nineteenth

century. Working within a surprisingly wide range of established literary genres – epic, lyric, verse drama, religious meditation, sonnet, ballad and dramatic monologue – and often concurrently reconfiguring these for new purposes, she was always an experimenter, constantly pushing at the boundaries of received ideas concerning the purpose and form of poetic writing. As she was to maintain in the Preface to her 1844 collection, while there might be faults in her poems, she was nevertheless always completely dedicated to her art:

> Poetry has been as serious a thing to me as life itself; and life has been a very serious thing: there has been no playing at skittles for me in either. I never mistook pleasure for the final cause of poetry; nor leisure, for the hour of the poet. I have done my work, so far, as work [. . .] and as work I offer it to the public . . .
>
> (*CW* 2:148–9)

Fundamental to this work was Barrett's sense that she was something of a literary pioneer, carving a way forward through unmarked territory, particularly given her gender. For as she wrote to her friend Henry Chorley in a now famous letter of 1845, she clearly considered herself displaced from any female poetic tradition:

> England has had many learned women, not merely readers but writers of the learned languages, in Elizabeth's time and afterwards,—women of deeper acquirements than are common now in the greater diffusion of letters: and yet where were the poetesses? The divine breath which seemed to come and go, &, ere it went, filled the land with that crowd of true poets whom we call the old dramatists, . . why did it never pass even in the lyrical form over the lips of a woman? How strange! And can we deny that it was so? I look everywhere for Grandmothers & see none. It is not in the filial spirit I am deficient, I do assure you—witness my reverent love of the grandfathers!—
>
> (*BC* 10:14)

Of course today, with the tremendous amount of recent recovery work of women poets from Aphra Behn to Barrett's own late-Romantic and Victorian contemporaries, we clearly *can* 'deny that it was so' and from Barrett's other correspondence we can see that she was in fact very well aware of the work of a whole range of other women poets. Rather, in employing this genealogical model which effectively makes her into a literary orphan, Barrett seems to be attempting to clear a space for herself as a new type of woman poet and to be defining herself *against* the traditions of women's poetry established by her direct predecessors and contemporaries such as Felicia

Hemans (1793–1835), Letitia Elizabeth Landon (known as 'L.E.L.', 1802–38), and Eliza Cook (1817–89). Each of these poets was extremely popular in the nineteenth century, setting levels of sales for poetry which were rarely matched, and yet as critics such as Norma Clarke (1990), Angela Leighton (1992) and Glennis Stephenson (1995) have demonstrated, each of them also left a legacy of disabling and inhibiting assumptions about the role of the woman poet which was subsequently difficult to dislodge. In particular, this legacy related to the traditionally 'feminine' subjects on which they wrote and which the critical establishment quickly reinforced as the female poet's 'proper sphere': love (especially unrequited or lost love), death and grieving, domesticity and the importance of the family unit, nature and pious religion – that is, poetry principally of the emotions and affections which was considered to uphold essentialist gender stereotypes and the wider status quo. Much of Landon's poetry, for example, focuses on betrayed heroines and 'hearts forsaken' (*The Improvisatrice*, 1824, in Landon, 1997: 61), while Cook's verse plays into a model of excessively sentimental feminine poetry as in 'The Old Arm-Chair' (1837) which opens:

> I love it, I love it; and who shall dare
> To chide me for loving that old Arm-chair?
> I've treasured it long as a sainted prize;
> I've bedewed it with tears, and embalmed it with sighs.
>
> (ll.1–4)

And while critics such as Tricia Lootens (1996*b*) are beginning to show that Hemans' work might actually undercut dominant nineteenth-century ideologies in subtle ways, for many of her contemporaries Hemans embodied an overriding conservatism which is felt in poems such as 'Homes of England', 'Casabianca' (her most famous poem which opens 'The boy stood on the burning deck'), and even in the energetic 'Corinne at the Capitol' (1828). Hemans was inspired to write this particular poem after reading Madame Germaine de Staël's 1807 novel about Corinne the acclaimed woman poet and artist, a book which, she said, 'seem[s] to give me back my own thoughts and feelings, my whole inner being' (Moers, 1977: 177). And yet after detailing Corinne's wisdom, power and independence for five vigorously written stanzas, Hemans' agenda turns and she concludes the poem – seemingly without any irony – with a reassertion of the superior joys of housewifery:

> Radiant daughter of the sun!
> Now thy living wreath is won.

Crown'd of Rome!—Oh! art thou not
Happy in that glorious lot?—
Happier, happier, far than thou,
With the laurel on thy brow,
She that makes the humblest hearth
Lovely but to one on earth!

(ll.41–8)

Unlike Elizabeth Barrett, both Hemans and Landon had families to support by their writings and were therefore forced, at least partly, to try to accommodate popular tastes. Notwithstanding this, however, Barrett was often highly critical of their works both in her private correspondence with Mary Russell Mitford and in the two public poems she wrote to commemorate her predecessors: 'Felicia Hemans' and 'L.E.L.'s Last Question'. In her poem on the death of Hemans, for example, Barrett celebrates the life of the 'bay-crowned' poet as she ascends into heaven but also suggests that her work possesses an irredeemable thinness: '*softly* in our ears her silver song was ringing' (ll.1; 31, my italics). And in a letter to Mitford in November 1842, she argued that while Hemans certainly had 'genius' and a 'high moral tone', she nevertheless 'always does seem to me a lady rather than a woman [. . . .] She is polished all over to one smoothness & one level' (*BC* 6:165).

Barrett's condemnation of Landon, however, was often more extreme, for while she clearly admired Landon's 'vividness & [. . .] naturalness,' she repeatedly emphasised her lack of energy and variety. In the Mitford correspondence, therefore, she describes her as 'toujours *tourterelle*' ('always a turtle dove') and 'a bird of a few notes' (*BC* 3:159), a view which she then articulated publicly in 'L.E.L.'s Last Question'. Published in *The Athenaeum* in January 1839, Barrett expresses in this poem an unreserved criticism of Landon as the poet of one overriding emotion: 'Love learnèd she had sung of love and love,—/ . . . / All sounds of life assumed one tune of love' (ll.15; 21). As she would unequivocally write to Mitford, '[m]y idea in connection with her poetry is, that she is capable of something *above* it' (*BC* 3:194).

Barrett's view of herself as an innovative poet therefore developed in large part from a reaction to the seemingly narrow, undemanding, conservative and 'feminine' subjects which she saw in the work of her immediate female literary forebears. Landon might not be capable of producing 'something *above*' what she had already written, but Barrett was always sure that she herself would be. Indeed, while she might often take similar subject matters – for example, the trope of the betrayed heroine – she almost invariably develops them in new directions, giving them a new power and contemporary resonance (see Chapter Five). And as we will demonstrate throughout

this study, Barrett consistently moved uncompromisingly into subject areas which were traditionally associated with male poets, particularly in her debates around politics and power structures. This is not, of course, to say that she was the first woman poet to work in this area; indeed, as Anne K. Mellor has demonstrated, there was a strong tradition of women producing political poetry in the Romantic period, including Charlotte Smith, Hannah More, Lucy Aitken and Anna Letitia Barbauld (Mellor, 1999: 81–98). But Barrett was possibly the only woman poet to continue dealing *overtly* with the wider political sphere during the transition from the Romantic period to the Victorian period. Indeed, her political engagement was often the main factor which distinguished her poetry from that of her early to mid-Victorian contemporaries such as the Brontë sisters, Jean Ingelow and Christina Rossetti. As Rossetti would write in 1870, a few years after Barrett Browning's death and the publication of her own highly successful *Goblin Market and Other Poems*, 'It is not in me, and therefore it will never come out of me, to turn to politics or philanthropy with M^rs^ Browning: such many-sidedness I leave to a greater than I' (Rossetti, 1997: 348).

From her earliest writings onwards, Barrett spoke out assertively, refusing to be silenced by the dictates of the literary establishment and refusing to be confined to traditional models of feminine decorum. Often aligning herself with the second-generation male Romantics Byron and Shelley (see Stone, 1995: 49–93), she spent much of her career calling for liberty, both physical and psychological, from systems of oppression and violence, as well as championing the downtrodden and the marginalised, whether they were women, the working classes, children, slaves or whole countries such as Greece and Italy which were attempting to achieve independence. Seeking to represent contemporary life unflinchingly, as she put it in her magnum opus *Aurora Leigh* (1856, 5:213), she often sharply critiqued the ways in which society operates and thereby developed into a formidable literary presence. From the explorations of aspects of democracy and tyranny in *The Battle of Marathon* (1820) and *An Essay on Mind* (1826), through the exposé of the ills of capitalism, slavery and sexual oppression in *Poems* (1844; 1850) and *Aurora Leigh* (1856), to the repeated interrogations of European politics in *Casa Guidi Windows* (1851), *Poems Before Congress* (1860) and the posthumous *Last Poems* (1862), Barrett Browning was never worried about courting controversy and often seemed to relish in it. At the same time, she also produced some of the most accomplished and original religious, nature and love poetry of the nineteenth century, including *The Seraphim* (1838), a mediation on the crucifixion and the nature of grace, and the powerful, if often misread, *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (1850).

Given Barrett Browning's position as a woman poet breaking new ground, then, it is not surprising that her reception history during her lifetime was

often highly ambivalent. From the earliest reviews of her long philosophical *An Essay on Mind* onwards, she was repeatedly constructed as something of an over-reacher, a woman pushing into male terrain in ways which more conservative critics found somewhat unnerving. Consequently, a wide range of reviewers referred to Barrett Browning's works using metaphors of wildness, instability and uncontrollability, as in the following 1842 review of *The Seraphim, and Other Poems* in *The North American Review*:

> Flaunting and unprofitable weeds shoot up side by side with flowers. . . . The steadiness of her flight bears no proportion to the vigor of her wing. Her great defect is a certain lawless extravagance, which delights in the wild, the mystic, the wonderful; which blends into the same group the most discordant images, and hurries her into a dim cloud-land far remote from human sympathies, and where the eye aches in attempting to follow her. There is a profusion of dazzling and glittering phraseology, as if a multitude of brave words had been hurled into the air and fallen confusedly upon the page. The firm earth seems to roll away from under our feet, and we are tossed upon a restless sea of fantastic imagery till the brain reels. In her wish to avoid what is prosaic, tame, and commonplace, she passes into the opposite extreme, and mistaking reverse of wrong for right, accumulates image upon image, and lavishes with too profuse a hand her poetical vocabulary, gilding refined gold, and painting the lily.
>
> (*BC* 6:376)

Such condemnation was to continue throughout Barrett's lifetime and indeed beyond it, but it was always equally matched by a substantial body of criticism which insisted upon the vigour, power and energy of her work. This was particularly so following the publication of *Poems* in 1844 (expanded and reprinted in 1850), the collection which marked a major shift in her critical status. *The Monthly Review*, for example, found the poems full of 'independent effort' and 'original power' (in Donaldson, 1993: 24), while *Eclectic Review* spoke of them as possessing 'masculine vigour of intellect, and grave mastership of the language' (Donaldson, 1993: 48). Indeed, many felt Barrett Browning's stature to be so great by mid-century that when Wordsworth died in 1850, she was seriously proposed by *The Athenaeum* as a potential candidate for the newly vacated post of Poet Laureate. It would be, the reviewer argued,

> an honourable testimonial to the individual, a fitting recognition of the remarkable place which the women of England have taken in the literature of the day, and a graceful compliment to the Sovereign herself. . . . There is no living poet of either sex who can prefer a higher claim.
>
> (*Athenaeum*, April 1850)