



LIBRARY
of CLASSIC
POETS

Elizabeth Barrett Browning

Selected Poems



LIBRARY of CLASSIC POETS

Elizabeth
Barrett Browning

江苏工业学院图书馆
藏书章

Selected Poems

Elizabeth Barrett Browning: Selected Poems

Emily Dickinson: Selected Poems

Robert Frost: Selected Poems

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow: Selected Poems

Edgar Allan Poe: Complete Poems

Carl Sandburg: Selected Poems

Walt Whitman: Selected Poems

William Butler Yeats: Selected Poems

Elizabeth
Barrett Browning



Selected Poems

Gramercy Books
New York

Introduction and compilation

Copyright © 1995 by Random House Value Publishing, Inc.

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions.

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means electronic or mechanical including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

This 2001 edition is published by Gramercy Books™,
an imprint of Random House Value Publishing, Inc.,
280 Park Avenue, New York, New York 10017.

Gramercy Books™ and design are trademarks of Random House Value Publishing, Inc.

Random House
New York • Toronto • London • Sydney • Auckland
<http://www.randomhouse.com/>

Printed and bound in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Browning, Elizabeth Barrett, 1806-1861.

[Poems. Selections]

Elizabeth Barrett Browning: selected poems

p. cm.

ISBN 0-517-12366-5

I. Title

PR4182 1995

821'.8—dc20 94-40658 CIP

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3

CONTENTS

| | |
|--------------|---|
| Introduction | 9 |
|--------------|---|

Early Poems

| | |
|----------------|----|
| SONG | 15 |
| THE SEA-MEW | 16 |
| A SEASIDE WALK | 18 |
| COWPER'S GRAVE | 20 |

From Poems of 1844

| | |
|--------------------------------|----|
| THE SOUL'S EXPRESSION | 27 |
| LADY GERALDINE'S COURTSHIP | 28 |
| THE LADY'S YES | 54 |
| THE LOST BOWER | 56 |
| THE CRY OF THE CHILDREN | 72 |
| TO FLUSH, MY DOG | 78 |
| THAT DAY | 83 |
| LOVED ONCE | 84 |
| CATARINA TO CAMOENS | 87 |
| THE ROMANCE OF THE SWAN'S NEST | 93 |
| THE DEAD PAN | 97 |

From Poems of 1850

| | |
|---------------------------|-----|
| HECTOR IN THE GARDEN | 105 |
| FLUSH OR FAUNUS | 110 |
| MOUNTAINEER AND POET | 111 |
| HIRAM POWERS' GREEK SLAVE | 112 |
| LIFE | 113 |

| | |
|--------------------------|-----|
| A SABBATH MORNING AT SEA | 114 |
| A WOMAN'S SHORTCOMINGS | 117 |
| A MAN'S REQUIREMENTS | 119 |
| CHANGE UPON CHANGE | 121 |
| A DENIAL | 122 |
| QUESTION AND ANSWER | 124 |

Sonnets from the Portuguese

| | |
|--|-----|
| "I THOUGHT ONCE HOW THEOCRITUS HAD SUNG" | 127 |
| "BUT ONLY THREE IN ALL GOD'S UNIVERSE" | 127 |
| "UNLIKE ARE WE, UNLIKE, O PRINCELY HEART!" | 128 |
| "THOU HAST THY CALLING TO SOME PALACE FLOOR" | 128 |
| "I LIFT MY HEAVY HEART UP SOLEMNLY" | 129 |
| "GO FROM ME. YET I FEEL THAT I SHALL STAND" | 129 |
| "THE FACE OF ALL THE WORLD IS CHANGED, I THINK" | 130 |
| "WHAT CAN I GIVE THEE BACK, O LIBERAL" | 130 |
| "CAN IT BE RIGHT TO GIVE WHAT I CAN GIVE?" | 131 |
| "YET, LOVE, MERE LOVE, IS BEAUTIFUL INDEED" | 131 |
| "AND THEREFORE IF TO LOVE CAN BE DESERT" | 132 |
| "INDEED THIS VERY LOVE WHICH IS MY BOAST" | 132 |
| "AND WILT THOU HAVE ME FASTEN INTO SPEECH" | 133 |
| "IF THOU MUST LOVE ME, LET IT BE FOR NAUGHT" | 133 |
| "ACCUSE ME NOT, BESEECH THEE, THAT I WEAR" | 134 |
| "AND YET, BECAUSE THOU OVERCOMEST SO" | 134 |
| "MY POET, THOU CANST TOUCH ON ALL THE NOTES" | 135 |
| "I NEVER GAVE A LOCK OF HAIR AWAY" | 135 |
| "THE SOUL'S RIALTO HATH ITS MERCHANDISE" | 136 |
| "BELOVÈD, MY BELOVÈD, WHEN I THINK" | 136 |
| "SAY OVER AGAIN, AND YET ONCE OVER AGAIN" | 137 |
| "WHEN OUR TWO SOULS STAND UP ERECT AND STRONG" | 137 |

| | |
|---|-----|
| "IS IT INDEED SO? IF I LAY HERE DEAD" | 138 |
| "LET THE WORLD'S SHARPNESS, LIKE A CLASPING KNIFE" | 138 |
| "A HEAVY HEART, BELOVÈD, HAVE I BORNE" | 139 |
| "I LIVED WITH VISIONS FOR MY COMPANY" | 139 |
| "MY OWN BELOVÈD, WHO HAS LIFTED ME" | 140 |
| "MY LETTERS! ALL DEAD PAPER, MUTE AND WHITE!" | 140 |
| "I THINK OF THEE!—MY THOUGHTS DO TWINE AND BUD" | 141 |
| "I SEE THINE IMAGE THROUGH MY TEARS TONIGHT" | 141 |
| "THOU COMEST! ALL IS SAID WITHOUT A WORD." | 142 |
| "THE FIRST TIME THAT THE SUN ROSE ON THINE OATH" | 142 |
| "YES, CALL ME BY MY PET-NAME! LET ME HEAR" | 143 |
| "WITH THE SAME HEART, I SAID, I'LL ANSWER THEE" | 143 |
| "IF I LEAVE ALL FOR THEE, WILT THOU EXCHANGE" | 144 |
| "WHEN WE MET FIRST AND LOVED, I DID NOT BUILD" | 144 |
| "PARDON, OH, PARDON, THAT MY SOUL SHOULD MAKE" | 145 |
| "FIRST TIME HE KISSED ME, HE BUT ONLY KISSED" | 145 |
| "BECAUSE THOU HAST THE POWER AND OWN'ST THE GRACE" | 146 |
| "OH, YES! THEY LOVE THROUGH ALL THIS WORLD OF OURS!" | 146 |
| "I THANK ALL WHO HAVE LOVED ME IN THEIR HEARTS" | 147 |
| "MY FUTURE WILL NOT COPY FAIR MY PAST—" | 147 |
| "HOW DO I LOVE THEE? LET ME COUNT THE WAYS." | 148 |
| "BELOVÈD, THOU HAST BROUGHT ME MANY FLOWERS" | 148 |

From Casa Guidi Windows

| | |
|--------------|-----|
| FROM PART I | 151 |
| FROM PART II | 154 |

From Aurora Leigh

| | |
|---------------|-----|
| FROM BOOK II | 159 |
| FROM BOOK VII | 162 |
| FROM BOOK IX | 163 |

From Last Poems

| | |
|---------------------------------|-----|
| A FALSE STEP | 167 |
| LORD WALTER'S WIFE | 169 |
| BIANCA AMONG THE NIGHTINGALES | 174 |
| AMY'S CRUELTY | 179 |
| DE PROFUNDIS | 182 |
| Index of Titles and First Lines | 187 |

INTRODUCTION

Elizabeth Barrett Browning was born near Durham, England, on March 6, 1806, the eldest of Mary and Edward Boulton Barrett's twelve children. She grew up in Hope End, the magnificent family home built in the Turkish style by her father near Ledbury in Herefordshire. The family was well-to-do, owning sugar plantations in Jamaica, and Elizabeth had a comfortable and happy childhood. She began to write verse at an early age; her earliest known poem was written when she was eight for her mother's birthday. Her father paid to have *The Battle of Marathon*, Elizabeth's homage to epic Greek poetry, privately printed as a present for her fifteenth birthday. Her poems also began to appear in such prominent literary periodicals of the day as the *New Monthly Magazine*. But at this time her health began to decline. During her recovery from measles she developed a "nervous disorder" that her doctors were never able to diagnose. In addition, her lungs weakened considerably. (Because of her illness, she became reclusive, concentrating on her studies and her poetry.)

Elizabeth's seclusion intensified with the sudden death of her mother in 1828. Bad luck continued to plague the family when four years later a reversal in the family's fortune—the abolition of slavery caused a decrease in revenues from the sugar plantations—forced her father to sell Hope End. After several years at Sidmouth, Devonshire, the family settled in 1837 in a house at 50 Wimpole Street in London, where the damp climate caused Elizabeth's lungs to hemorrhage. For treatment her doctors sent her to Torquay, where, it was hoped, the sea air would improve her health. But in 1840 came the worst blow of all when her

beloved younger brother Edward—nicknamed “Bro”—drowned in a boating accident while visiting her. Elizabeth plunged into immeasurable grief and guilt, since it was she who had persuaded her father to allow her brother to visit (the poem “De Profundis” details her emotional turmoil at this tragic moment in her life). She spent the next three months in shocked seclusion in her room. She began to rely on heavy doses of the laudanum—an opium derivative—and morphine prescribed by her doctors to ease her physical and emotional distress—drugs upon which she became dependent for the rest of her life. The laudanum induced in her morbid musings that prompted her to wish for death: “Death has such a pleading tongue in what is called its silence.” She did not die, however, and in 1841 she returned to London. There she confined herself to her room, which she called her “hermitage” or “prison,” and where she single-mindedly labored on her poems, essays, and letters to friends.

A major turning point in Elizabeth’s poetic career came in 1844 with the publication of *Poems*, a two-volume collection of her verse. It won her critical praise and established her reputation, as well as the ardent notice of a little-known young poet, six years her junior. In “Lady Geraldine’s Courtship,” one of the poems in the collection, Lady Geraldine is reading a poem by Robert Browning. In a letter to Elizabeth the young poet wrote: “I love your verse with all my heart, dear Miss Barrett . . . and I love you too.” Thus began one of the most famous courtships and romances in English literature, the essence of which Elizabeth captured in *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, which remain among the most popular love poems in the English language.

Robert and Elizabeth corresponded for five months before they finally met on May 20, 1845. Although they immediately fell in love, they did not marry for sixteen months. The chief obstacle was Elizabeth’s father, a pious and strong-willed man, who tried to block the marriage of each of his children. On September 12, 1846, while her family was away, Elizabeth married Robert at Saint Marylebone Parish Church. One week later

she left for Italy with her new husband. Her father wrote her a vicious and condemning letter in which he disinherited her. Although she tried several times to reconcile with him, she never saw him again.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's life in Italy contrasted remarkably with her years in England, where she had led the reclusive existence of an invalid sheltered by her domineering father. The move to the warm and sunny climate of Italy symbolized a rebirth where she began to know life from experience rather than from books. Although the Brownings traveled extensively, they resided primarily in the Casa Guidi in Florence. She recovered her health sufficiently to give birth to a son—Pen, her only child—on March 9, 1849. The new climate was also conducive to poetic inspiration. She wrote *Casa Guidi Windows*, which was published in 1856, an overtly political poem in support of the Italian nationalist movement and the events she witnessed while living in Florence. That same year also saw the publication of *Aurora Leigh*, her greatest popular success and the work that made her a true celebrity. One of her most experimental works, a “novel-poem” whose heroine was a female poet like herself, *Aurora Leigh* created a controversy in Victorian England with its depiction of out-of-wedlock motherhood.

The fifteen years the Brownings spent in Italy were rich and full, and the marriage was a happy one. Although Elizabeth's health had improved for a while, after a fourth miscarriage she began a decline from which she never recovered. The slightest bad weather caused severe infections in her lungs, and she grew weaker and weaker. On June 29, 1861, at the age of fifty-five, she died in her husband's arms. Her last word to him was: “Beautiful.”

Today, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poetic accomplishment and reputation lie in the shadow of her husband, Robert Browning, who is considered one of the greatest poets of the nineteenth century. When they met, however, it was Elizabeth who was the more famous. She was England's first truly notable women poet. In 1850, after the death of William Wordsworth, it was she who was considered to replace him as England's Poet

Laureate. At the time, Robert was an obscure avant-garde poet. That same year, the editors of *The Athenaeum* wrote that she was “probably, of her sex, the first imaginative writer England has produced in any age—she is, beyond comparison, the first poetess of her own.” This was high praise, even with the sexist qualifier.

This collection brings together Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s finest poetry, much of which has been unjustly neglected. She was a versatile poet who experimented with many different forms of verse—lyrics, blank verse, ballads and sonnets—and whose subjects show that she was deeply concerned with the liberal and humanitarian causes of her day. In response to the exploitation of children employed in coal mines and factories, she wrote one of her most famous poems, *The Cry of the Children*. In addition to excerpts from *Casa Guidi* and *Aurora Leigh*, her *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, the sonnet sequence tracing her love affair with Robert Browning, is included here in its entirety. Her husband regarded these as the finest sonnets written after Shakespeare’s. The psychological realism and subtlety mastered by Elizabeth Barrett Browning in her sonnets are also evident in such lesser-known late works as “Lord Walter’s Wife” and “Bianca among the Nightingales,” in which she further explores, quite candidly, the tensions in relationships between men and women.

The poems in this volume reveal Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s breadth and intellectual originality. In the 1970s, the Feminist Movement spurred a revival of interest in works like *Aurora Leigh*, and Browning’s reputation has since been on the rise. As one of the few nineteenth-century women poets to achieve fame and recognition in her lifetime, (she is again being recognized for the importance of her literary accomplishments and the example she set for women who came after her. Her impassioned idealism, her professionalism, and her determination continue to inspire.)

CHRISTOPHER MOORE

New York
1995

Early Poems



SONG

Weep, as if you thought of laughter!
Smile, as tears were coming after!
Marry your pleasures to your woes;
And think life's green well worth its rose!

No sorrow will your heart betide,
Without a comfort by its side;
The sun may sleep in his seabed,
But you have starlight overhead.

Trust not to Joy! the rose of June,
When opened wide, will wither soon;
Italian days without twilight
Will turn them suddenly to night.

Joy, most changeful of all things,
Flits away on rainbow wings;
And when they look the gayest, know,
It is that they are spread to go!

THE SEA-MEW

I

How joyously the young sea-mew
Lay dreaming on the waters blue
Whereon our little bark had thrown
A little shade, the only one,
But shadows ever man pursue.

II

Familiar with the waves and free
As if their own white foam were he,
His heart upon the heart of ocean
Lay learning all its mystic motion,
And throbbing to the throbbing sea.

III

And such a brightness in his eye
As if the ocean and the sky
Within him had lit up and nursed
A soul God gave him not at first,
To comprehend their majesty.

IV

We were not cruel, yet did sunder
His white wing from the blue waves under,
And bound it, while his fearless eyes
Shone up to ours in calm surprise,
As deeming us some ocean wonder.

V

We bore our ocean bird unto
A grassy place where he might view