

Elizabeth Barrett Browning

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[In the following excerpt, Burlinson examines many of Browning's works and addresses her concern for political and social issues.]

Elizabeth Barrett Browning was the most respected woman poet of the Victorian age, seriously considered for the laureateship that eventually was awarded to Tennyson in 1850. She was popular with her reading public, admired by notable writers of her day, and recognised as an eminent scholar. Yet her poetic reputation, at its zenith in the 1850's, was already in decline at her death in 1861 and continued to dwindle throughout the latter half of the 19th century. By 1900, she was better known as the heroine of a turbulent love story than as a prolific and successful writer. Her literary status was further undermined as the modernist reaction against the Victorians gained force in the early 20th century, so that by 1932, Virginia Woolf observed in *The Common Reader* that Browning had been assigned a place in the "servants' quarters", of the "mansion of literature." Although Alethea Hayter argued persuasively the case for a reassessment in 1962, it is only since the mid-1970's, with the advent of feminist literary criticism, that she has been reconsidered as a major voice in Victorian poetry. Most recent feminist studies, however, have emphasised the problems faced by Browning in relation to a masculine poetic tradition, underplaying the extent to which she was above all an experimental writer who felt sufficiently comfortable working within poetic convention to disrupt and revise it to her own ends.

Browning wrote sonnets, allegories, ballads, political odes, love poems, occasional verses, poetic dramas, and an epic, as well as essays in literary criticism and a translation of Aeschylus. *The Seraphim and Other Poems* is generally considered her first mature collection and the first to bring Browning substantial critical response. Her "solid and genuine" scholarship, was recognised and the collection was widely praised, although she was cautioned against her "lawless extravagance" in the *North American Review*. In fact the formal iconoclasm and impetuosity of the 1838 poems signify an authentic mode of writing that Browning was to develop during the next six years—years marked simultaneously by invalidism and by intense poetic experiment.

Hayter has commented that there is "no prevailing character in the 1844 poems.... Browning seems to write like several different people." Indeed, the range of voices that surfaces in the 1844 *Poems* resists all attempts to cohere them into a unified whole. There is a mystical voice in poems such as "The Lost Bower," "The House of Clouds," and "A Vision of Poets," where Browning's imagination appears to have been opium-inspired. There is a sentimental voice, found in "To Flush, My Dog" and in the popular ballads "The Romaunt of the Page," "The Lay of the Brown Rosary," and "The Romance of the Swan's Nest." A concern with social class is evident in "Lady Geraldine's Courtship" and there is a self-consciousness about gender that surfaces on several occasions. "A Drama of Exile" is a flawed but interrogatory text that re-views the Fall "with a peculiar reference to Eve's allotted grief ... more expressible by a woman than a man," as Browning explained in the 1844 preface. The collection also contains tributes to other women writers—to Letitia Landon in "L.E.L.'s Last Question" and to George Sand in two sonnets.

If *Poems* of 1844 indicate Browning's multiple voices, it also demonstrates her commitment to formal experimentation. Particularly innovative is her use of rhyme, stemming from her belief that "imperfect rhymes relieve the ear from a monotonous impression." "[D]isgusting, atrocious, cacophonous, hideous" was how George Saintsbury preferred to view Browning's eccentricities, a perspective more mildly echoed in Tennyson's comment that there is a "want of harmony" in her verse. Yet the half-rhymes, as well as the metrical irregularities, neologisms, compound-words, and lacunae that infuriated or disturbed her contemporaries now appear among the most interesting aspects of her work. Woolf's claim that Browning had "some complicity in the

development of modern poetry" is an acute reminder that she influenced many later poets, not only the Pre-Raphaelites but 20th-century authors such as Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon. The boldness with which she upset formal conventions is matched by her outspokenness in relation to social issues. One of her best-known poems from 1850 is "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point," an impassioned protest against slavery in which a black woman, the rape victim of her white master, murders her child. The rage and grief of the woman is chillingly conveyed in the first-person narrative. It is one of Browning's most assured poems. She held a deep belief that poetry could change attitudes towards the world, and indeed "The Cry of the Children" caused a sensational reaction and fuelled public desire for reform in a protest against the appalling working conditions of children which strategically exploits sentiment. Browning, however, was not a revolutionary. Like many of her bourgeois contemporaries, she feared the "mob." *Aurora Leigh*, her epic poem, reveals a conservative political stance where poetry is seen to make a greater impact on society than philanthropic activities.

Political concern is the explicit subject of *Casa Guidi Windows*, although here it is Browning's beloved Italy that is the focus of attention. The confidence of *Casa Guidi Windows* is noteworthy, for 19th-century women poets rarely ventured into the masculine terrain of political discussion. If they did reaction often turned hostile. Browning's final sequence of political verse, *Poems Before Congress*, provoked such virulent reviews that her reputation was sorely damaged. They were seen as "hysterical," "shrieking," and melodramatic, lacking either discipline or humour. It is true that the collection is far from Browning's best, but in its violent outbursts exemplifies a tendency present in much of her work.

"The *personality* of my wife was ... strong and peculiar," wrote Robert Browning after Elizabeth's death. The same might be said of her writing, so often does it convey urgency and idiosyncrasy. No single comment can summarise Browning's work for she was as capable of writing the subtle love poetry of *Sonnets from the Portuguese* as she was of wailing against injustice. Hugh Walker was right in 1910 to call her "one of the most irregular of writers," yet it is precisely her irregularity, her range of subject matter, voices, and forms that merit attention.

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