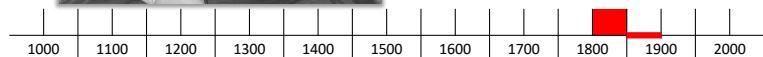


☞ Elizabeth Barrett-Browning (1806-1861)



- born to wealthy plantation owners who suffered financial blow following abolition in 1833
- availing herself of her brother's tutor, received an unusually full Classical education
- began writing and publishing poetry from her early teens
- eloped with fellow poet and admirer Robert Browning in 1846
- used poetry as a tool for social protest, reform (NAEL E167-69)

📖 Barrett Browning, *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (1850)

I happened early to say something against putting one's love into verse: then again, I said something else on the other side ... and next morning she said hesitatingly "Do you know I once wrote some poems about you?"—and then— "There they are, if you care to see them." Afterward, the publishing them was through me—in the interest of the poet, I chose that they should be added to the other works, not minding the undue glory to me, if the fact should become transparent: there was a trial at covering it a little by leaving out one sonnet which had plainly a connexion with the former works: but it was put in afterwards.... "The Portuguese"—purposely an ambiguous title—was that Caterina who left Camoens the riband from her hair.

Robert Browning. Letter to Julia Wedgwood, 4 Nov. 1864.

- sequence of 44 sonnets written ca. 1845-46 and published in Barrett Browning's *Poems* (1850)
- addressed to Barrett Browning's beloved husband, the poet Robert Browning (1812-1889)
- to preserve their privacy, Barrett Browning published them as if they were translations of foreign-language poems, but are her own
- the opening line of Sonnet 43 is perhaps the most famous line in all of English-language poetry (NAEL E168)

sonnet

Types of Sonnet

- Petrarchan/Italian
 - an octave and a sestet
 - usually **abba abba cde cde**
- Shakespearean/English
 - three quatrains and a couplet
 - **abab cdcd efef gg**
- Spenserian/Link
 - three quatrains and a couplet
 - **abab bcbc cdcd ee**

- a 14-line lyric poem, usually in iambic pentameter (**x/x/x/x/x/**), with varying rhyme schemes depending on type
- divided into two parts, bridged by a turn or *volta*
- established by the Italian Renaissance poet Petrarch in the fourteenth century
- traditionally used to express the torment of unrequited love, but later expanded to include other subject matter (Baldick 338-39)

📖 Barrett Browning, "Sonnet 21" (1850)

x / x / x / x / x /

a Say over again, and yet once over again,
b That thou dost love me. Though the word repeated
b Should seem "a cuckoo-song," as thou dost treat it,
a Remember never to the hill or plain,
a Valley and wood, without her cuckoo strain
b Comes the fresh Spring in all her green completed.
b Belovéd, I, amid the darkness greeted
a By a doubtful spirit voice, in that doubt's pain
c Cry, "Speak once more—thou lovest!" Who can fear
d Too many stars, though each in heaven shall roll,
c Too many flowers, though each shall crown the year?
d Say thou dost love me, love me, love me—toll
c The silver iterance!—only minding, Dear,
d To love me also in silence with thy soul.

📖 Barrett Browning, “Sonnet 22” (1850)

x / x / x / x / x / x /
 a When our two souls stand up erect and strong,
 b Face to face, silent, drawing nigh and nigher,
 b Until the lengthening wings break into fire
 a At either curved point—what bitter wrong
 a Can the earth do to us, that we should not long
 b Be here contented? Think. In mounting higher,
 b The angels would press on us and aspire
 a To drop some golden orb of perfect song
 c Into our deep, dear silence. Let us stay
 d Rather on earth, Belovéd,—where the unfit
 c Contrarious moods of men recoil away
 d And isolate pure spirits, and permit
 c A place to stand and love in for a day,
 d With darkness and the death-hour rounding it.



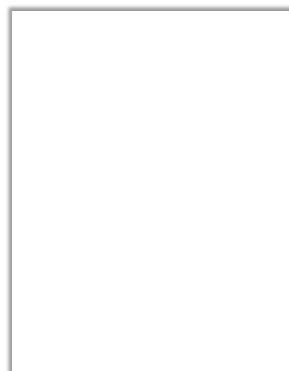
📖 Barrett Browning, “Sonnet 32” (1850)

x / x / x / x / x / x /
 a The first time that the sun rose on thine oath
 b To love me, I looked forward to the moon
 b To slacken all those bonds which seemed too soon
 a And quickly tied to make a lasting troth.
 a Quick-loving hearts, I thought, may quickly loathe;
 b And, looking on myself, I seemed not one
 b For such man's love!—more like an out-of-tune
 a Worn viol, a good singer would be writh
 c To spoil his song with, and which, snatched in haste,
 d Is laid down at the first ill-sounding note.
 c I did not wrong myself so, but I placed
 d A wrong on *thee*. For perfect strains may float
 c 'Neath master-hands, from instruments defaced—
 d And great souls, at one stroke, may do and dote.



📖 Barrett Browning, “Sonnet 43” (1850)

x / x / x / x / x /
 a How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.
 b I love thee to the depth and breadth and height
 b My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight
 a For the ends of Being and ideal Grace.
 a I love thee to the level of everyday's
 b Most quiet need, by sun and candlelight.
 b I love thee freely, as men strive for Right;
 a I love thee purely, as they turn from Praise.
 c I love thee with the passion put to use
 d In my old griefs, and with my childhood's faith.
 c I love thee with a love I seemed to lose
 d With my lost saints—I love thee with the breath,
 c Smiles, tears, of all my life!—and, if God choose,
 d I shall but love thee better after death.



📖 Barrett Browning, *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (1850)

Some Innovations in Barrett Browning's Sonnets

- **gender reversal:** a female subject with agency addresses a male object
- **enjambment:** running over of the sense and grammatical structure from one verse line to the next without a punctuated pause (Baldick 116)
- **direct viewpoint:** subject speaks directly to object, not about the object
- **metaphysical conceit:** far-fetched or metaphor presenting a surprisingly apt parallel between two apparently dissimilar things (Baldick 71)
- **imperatives:** the subject issues various instructions, orders to the object
- **realism:** beloved object not on pedestal but is accessible, mortal, fallible
- **anaphora:** the repetition of the same word or phrase, usually at the beginning of successive lines, clauses, or sentences (Baldick 14)
- **moving volta:** the Petrarchan volta often occurs in unexpected places

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