

“SONNETS FROM THE PORTUGUESE”: UNDERSTANDING THE CHANGES IN THE SEQUENCING

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Abstract

Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s “Sonnets from the Portuguese” were reprinted three times during her lifetime. Although minor changes were made in the first two reprints, the third reprint in 1856 saw major alterations, the most important being the addition of Sonnet XVII as Sonnet XLII. Using a new historicist approach, this essay seeks to closely study the effects of these alterations by examining the critical reception of the poems as well the letters exchanged between Barrett Browning and Robert Browning during the time the sonnets were written. The poems are also considered in the context of the other poems in this volume with a view to understanding the reasons for the alterations in the sonnet sequence and what effects, if any, there were on the overall interpretation of the poems.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s “Sonnets from the Portuguese” were reprinted three times during her lifetime. Although a story about a privately printed edition of the sonnets in 1847 was in popular circulation, there was, in fact, no such edition. As Richard Altick narrates in his “The Scholar Adventurers,” the bibliographers John Carter and Graham Pollard proved beyond doubt that the so-called privately printed edition was a forgery and had actually been printed long after the date on the pamphlet. The sonnets had, in fact, first appeared in the 1850 reprint of Barrett Browning’s *Poems* 1844 as a series of forty-three sonnets. The sonnet beginning “My future will not copy fair my past’—,” Sonnet XVII in the British Library manuscript, one of the three extant manuscripts, was removed apparently because it could identify the sonnets as autobiographical. This is also the reason for the misleading title as, obviously, they were not written by a Portuguese. The sonnets in the 1853 edition of *Poems* were not much altered but Barrett Browning made substantial changes in the 1856 edition, the most significant being the addition of the original Sonnet XVII, renamed in this edition as Sonnet XLII.

Using a new historicist approach, this paper seeks to closely analyze these changes in “Sonnets from the Portuguese” as a group of poems by examining the textual history and critical reception of the poems as well as the letters written by Barrett Browning and Robert Browning regarding them. The connection between the changes and the textual implications are also evaluated to see whether the change in the order of the sequence of the sonnets produced any alteration in their meaning as a whole and how the sonnets relate to the other poems in the volume. This approach in analyzing “Sonnets from the Portuguese” seems quite fitting, too, since, as Simon Avery notes, Barrett Browning herself, in her *An Essay on Mind*, had pointed out the need to examine historical contexts when considering a work of art:

... in th’ historian’s bosom look,
And weigh his feelings ere you trust his book;
His private friendships, private wrongs, descry,
Where tend his passions, where his interests lie –
And while his proper faults your mind engage,
Discern the ruling foibles of his age.

(qtd. in Avery and Stott, 24)

Textual History and Critical Reception

Although Barrett Browning was a great letter writer – her letters fill up many volumes – it is not possible to glean much information about the sonnets from her letters as she does not talk much about them or their publication there. The references that she did make to the sonnets were often insignificant. For instance, to Miss Mitford, she writes on February 18, 1850 that “some new verses” (437) had been added to the new edition of her *Poems* and again refers to them in the letter of September 24, 1850. In her letter to Mrs. Jameson on April 12, 1853, Barrett Browning mentions making careful revisions for the new edition of her poems although she did not make too many significant alterations to the “Sonnets” then. Although the 1856 edition had substantial changes, Barrett Browning is again silent about them, being more excited about the success of “Aurora Leigh,” which appeared at that time. Barrett Browning did not keep a diary either, except for about a year, long before she met Browning. Therefore, whatever information could be gathered about the sonnets had to come from other sources.

The first proper account of how the sonnets came to light and how they came to be published is to be found, not, as mentioned above, among Barrett Browning’s letters, but in the correspondence between Robert Browning and Julia Wedgwood three years after the poet’s death. In the reply written to Mrs. Wedgwood on the Friday morning following the latter’s letter of November 1, 1864, Browning describes how his wife had suddenly presented him with the sonnets three years after their marriage (which certainly suggests that no 1847 private edition of the sonnets had been published) because he had changed his negative opinion about “putting one’s loves into verse” (Curle, 114). This, as he explains, is why she had not shown them to him previously.

Browning also goes on in the same letter to give some details of the publication history of the sonnets, along with the reason for first leaving out Sonnet XVII and later including it:

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 when people chose to pull down the mask which, in old days, people used to respect at a masquerade. But I never cared. “The Portuguese” – purposely an ambiguous title – was that Caterina who left Camoens the riband from her hair (Curle, 114-115).

From Browning’s words, it appears that the wish to disguise the sonnets was Barrett Browning’s, since it is obvious that he would not have minded being identified with the sonnets as they would have brought him to the attention of the reading public. In a letter to Leigh Hunt on October 6, 1857, from Bagni di Lucca, Browning had also given a short account of the date on which the sonnets were revealed to him. In this letter, though, he says that it was he who “thought up the subterfuge of a name.” The use of the word “Portuguese” in the sonnets’ title was meant to lead the reader to see them as utterances of the persona Caterina, as mentioned in the letter to Mrs. Wedgwood quoted above, rather than of the person, Barrett Browning. However, Browning does not give any indication in either the letter to Hunt or to Mrs. Wedgwood as to why the order was changed. His account also belies the popular romantic story circulated by Edmund Gosse about how Elizabeth had thrust the sonnets into Browning’s pocket from behind him and run upstairs, telling him to tear the papers if he did not like what he read. Isabel C. Clarke, in her 1929 book on Barrett Browning, confidently narrates this account, even showing triumphantly that Pen Browning’s version of the story to a Miss Whiteing (much closer to that given by Browning himself) could not be right if the sonnets had been printed already in 1847. Clarke, however,

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was not to know Browning's account since the correspondence between Leigh Hunt and himself was not published before 1933 nor that with Julia Wedgwood till 1937.

An examination of Blackwood's Magazine, one of the leading literary journals of the time, published between 1850 and 1858 did not yield any reviews of or comments on the "Sonnets" in particular, showing that the poems did not cause much reaction among their critical audience in that period. Blackwood's did, however, publish an extremely laudatory review of the "Sonnets" in 1862 after Barrett Browning's death (449-451). In this short review, the reviewer calls the sonnets "exquisite love-poems." He says that the story told there is "veiled with intelligible modesty under the title of 'Sonnets from the Portuguese,' though no poet in Portugal ever sounded such passionate and thoughtful notes. How instinct with life, and real, not feigned, emotion they are!" (450). He goes on to quote three sonnets in full to show his appreciation. This review is what elicited Julia Wedgwood's grieved remark to Browning in her letter on November 1, 1864: "there is a marvellous readiness to praise as soon as the object is beyond the reach of whatever faint pleasure reviews may give!" (Curle, 114-115). Her letter also implies that a not-so-pleasant review had been published by the Edinburgh Review. Indeed, the Edinburgh Review, even while stating that its review had been elicited by Barrett Browning's death, takes a denunciatory look at her poems. Also, even though it mentions some of Barrett Browning's lesser known poems from Poems, it makes no reference to "Sonnets from the Portuguese." Strangely enough, this is an especially long review (twenty-two pages) with quotations from several of her poems!

Though Barrett Browning's English readers did not appear to appreciate her "Sonnets," her American readers certainly did. Barrett Browning's "Sonnets from the Portuguese" received many laudatory reviews in America soon after their publication. The International Magazine quotes four sonnets in full after commenting that they have been taken "from a series scarcely inferior to those in which Shakespeare has given the history of his heart-life: ..." (180). Graham's Magazine writes a review for the sole purpose of highlighting their appreciation of the "Sonnets." Although the review ends by regretting that "she is not popular, and we cannot hope that she ever will be popular until the purity, elevation and essential greatness of her nature are expressed with more uniform clearness and melody than now characterize her style" (278), it does call her sonnets "the most striking and peculiar poems in the literature of affection" (277) and "magical little pieces" (278) while quoting from several of them. The United States Magazine, and Democratic Review comments that "we were most pleased with the fifth and sixth, though, indeed, the poorest of the entire number is far above the generally so-called sonnets" (96).

Apart from the magazines listed above, Sandra Donaldson's annotated bibliography shows that magazines such as the English Review, The Examiner, Fraser's Magazine, and The North British Review also featured reviews of the sonnets soon after their publication, though these were sometimes merely comments in passing. Several laudatory reviews did, however, appear in The North American Review, The North British Review, The Methodist Quarterly Review, and The Christian Examiner after Barrett Browning's death. None of the reviewers, however, seem to have commented on the inclusion of the forty-second sonnet, which, incidentally, had appeared elsewhere in Poems 1850 as a separate poem.

In contrast to the small number of reviews that the "Sonnets" received during Barrett Browning's lifetime, the total number of reprints that Colin Franklin records, taking his source from Warner Barnes, bibliographer of Barrett Browning, was one hundred and seventy by 1962. In other words, the "Sonnets" soared to great heights of popularity in the hundred years following Barrett Browning's death. There have been more reprints since. Franklin also discusses the sonnets as they were published accompanied by color illustrations. This marked the poems as "sentimental" (Franklin, 19). Other copies were heavily ornamented and served as good Christmas presents. In presenting the sonnets in the format of coffee

table books, publishers succeeded in lowering the actual literary value of the poems themselves from the “greatest sonnets since Shakespeare,” as Robert Browning called them, to sentimental pieces by an ill and lonely woman who had suddenly discovered love.

The Textual Implications

As mentioned earlier in this paper, “Sonnets from the Portuguese” first appeared as a sequence of forty-three sonnets in *Poems 1850*. In the 1853 edition, they reappeared with only a few changes in punctuation. The 1856 edition, however, showed substantial changes, as mentioned in the introduction to this paper, the major one being the inclusion of Sonnet XLII. This sonnet was in the manuscript¹, as Sonnet XVII. The sonnet did, however, appear in the 1850 edition although it had been, as Browning had said in his letter to Mrs. Wedgwood, removed from the original sequence. It appeared instead as the last sonnet in Volume I as “Future and Past” under the section entitled “Sonnets.” Here too was the sonnet “Past and Future,” which is the poem that the first line of “Future and Past” refers to, though they were separated by several other sonnets. If read side by side, the two sonnets relate to each other significantly: “Past and Future” is a sonnet without hope for a better life on earth; “Future and Past” about the coming of a new hope into the poet’s life. However, as the two sonnets are separated by other poems, their meaning and relationship do not become immediately clear. In fact, with “Future and Past” appearing as the last sonnet in Volume I, preceded by three sonnets to Hugh S. Boyd, it is not possible to apply the supplement of personal feelings to it as a way of explaining its meaning, although, it should be noted, reading them simply as autobiographical tends to take away the literary value of the poem and of the poet herself.

The forty-three sonnet sequence, “Sonnets from the Portuguese,” appears at the very end of Volume II of *Poems 1850*. It is immediately preceded by “Catarina to Camoens.” This appears to have been a strategic move since the name of the sonnet sequence was adopted in relation to this poem, and the sonnets were intended to be seen as if they were indeed spoken by Catarina, and had no autobiographical reference. The first sonnet in the sequence, however, contradicts the tone of “Catarina to Camoens” where Catarina was dying. It is possible, though, to use one’s imagination and believe that Catarina did write the sonnets, and think that she had found someone to replace Camoens in her affections. The speaker in Sonnet I does say that she had been dying when she was rescued by the arrival of love in her life, and since the sonnet shows a juxtaposition of love and death, that speaker may just as well have been Catarina as Elizabeth.

According to the collation at the back of the Grosset and Dunlap reprint of the “Sonnets from the Portuguese,” the manuscript version and the 1856 edition of the poems show a number of changes in some words. However, apart from a few of the changes, the rest are not very significant. One of the interesting changes appears in line 11 of Sonnet XIV in the 1850 edition which reads “Since one might well forget to weep, who bore” while the same line in the 1856 edition reads “A creature might forget to weep, who bore.” This change certainly affected the sonnet for the better since in the first instance, the speaker sounds at a distance from the situation at hand. Where the tone of the whole sonnet is very personal and refers directly to the speaker’s sense of unworthiness, the use of the word “one” seems to impersonalize the whole effect. With the substitution of “A creature” for “one,” the poet has the effect of further accentuating her unworthiness by making herself sound less than a human being, so that the love

¹ This researcher discovered this in the reprint of the British Library Manuscript in William S. Peterson’s edition of *Sonnets from the Portuguese: A Facsimile Edition of the British Library Manuscript*.

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she asks for is better understood as required to come from deep within the heart; that the beloved should, in fact, “love me for love’s sake.”

The most significant change occurs in Sonnet XVI, lines 8-12, of which the 1850 edition reads “...In lifting upward as in crashing low!/And as a soldier, struck down by a sword,/May cry ‘My strife ends here’, and sink to earth,.../Even so, beloved, I at last record,.../Here ends my doubt!...”. This, Barrett Browning revises in the 1856 edition to read “...In lifting upward, as in crushing low!/And as a vanquished soldier yields his sword/To one who lifts him from the bloody earth,--/Even so, Beloved, I at last record,/Here ends my strife.” The 1850 version reveals a much more pessimistic attitude than the later revision. The change from ‘doubt’ to ‘strife’ shows more strongly the fight the speaker had had with herself to convince her to accept her beloved’s attentions. With this change, the laying down by the poet of herself for her beloved to choose how to use her in Sonnet XVII of the 1856 edition is a more natural turn for the sequence to take as it shows more clearly, by contrast, the end of “strife.”

Line 10 of Sonnet XXXVIII in the 1850 edition (Sonnet XXXVII in the 1856 edition) reads “distort/Thy worthiest love with worthless counterfeit!” while the 1856 version changes this to “distort/Thy worthiest love to a worthless counterfeit.” Though the later change increases the syllables from an already incorrect number, it does correct a possible grammatical error. The speaker clearly wishes to express her confusion, which has led her to consider that her beloved’s love may be false. In other words, she has distorted his “worthiest love to worthless counterfeit.” In Sonnet XXXIX of the 1850 edition, the third line contains the word “blenchingly” which is replaced by “blanchingly” in 1856 (William Peterson’s transcription of the manuscript is a mistake where this word is concerned as the manuscript on the facing page clearly shows an “e” in the word, and not “a” as he had transcribed it). “Blanchingly,” however, was a more appropriate word to use in this line since its meaning, “retreat,” relates to the mask that the speaker refers to in the previous line. The change from “and salute/Love that endures, with Life that disappears!” to “...from Life that disappears!” in Sonnet XLI of the 1856 edition implies more strongly a receding into the past of, and a distancing of the self from, a life where no one had stopped to “harken what I said between my tears.” In the original version, the sentence seems to imply simultaneity of the speaker’s present with the past, and the effect of the sentence is weakened.

The change in the order of the sonnets, that is, the transference of the original Sonnet XVII to Sonnet XLII, also has an effect on the meaning of the poem as a whole. This change creates the impression that Sonnet XLII is rather out of place when read in conjunction with its preceding and succeeding sonnets. In Sonnet XLI (1856), the poet appears to have reached her final moment of decision to “salute/Love that endures, from Life that disappears!” and her effusive declaration of love in Sonnet XLIII would seem to follow on this. With the inclusion of Sonnet XLII in between these two, the natural flow of strong emotion jars, as here, the poet says, “Then I, long tried/By natural ills, received the comfort fast,/While budding, at thy sight, my pilgrim’s staff/Gave out green leaves with morning dews imperled” (my emphasis). “Received,” “budding,” and “green leaves” all imply a beginning while the word “new,” used twice in the last two sentences, suggests the very recent changes that have been taking place in the poet’s life – a sharp contrast to her life so far. Such statements would have been more appropriate near the beginning of the sequence as it had originally been placed.

With Sonnet XVI ending with the poet’s end of “doubt” (1850), Sonnet XVII (“My future will not copy fair my past...”) with its acceptance of the new hope and the request to “write me new my future’s epigraph,” sounds the bell of a new beginning. This is further strengthened by the poet’s offering of herself to her beloved in Sonnet XVIII to choose how he will possess her. Removal of Sonnet XVII from the sequence in the 1850 edition does not harm the continuity of the story told there but its

inclusion as Sonnet XLII certainly causes the reader to experience a jolt when he/she has already been prepared in Sonnet XLI to expect a culmination of the speaker's joys in fulfillment.

An examination of the other poems in the 1850 edition of *Poems*, especially those in Volume II, revealed poems that seem to anticipate or refer to the "Sonnets from the Portuguese." The poem "Life and Love", which appears on page 357, almost a hundred pages prior to the sonnets, is an echo of Barrett Browning's new found love and how it brought life to her when she felt she was dying. The 1850 edition does not give any date of previous publication, nor does the 1900 edition of "The Complete Poetical Works of Mrs. Browning" edited by Harriet Preston, but two other poems, "Life" and "Love," appeared in *Blackwood's Magazine* in May 1847 (significantly, the titles of these two poems are combined to form the title of the poem referred to above). "Life" refers to the speaker as "some soul newly loosened from earth's tombs" while "Love" speaks entirely of living a life of love with the beloved. It is possible that the latter poem could have been written after the Brownings' marriage and so would not refer to the sonnets at all, but with their occurrence in the same issue of *Blackwood's*, the likelihood, especially with the evidence of the "newly loosened" soul, of their having been written at the same time as the Sonnets, is great. This would mean that Barrett Browning was writing of her relationship even apart from the Sonnets, and also that she meant to publicize her love for Browning in smaller sections, in a way that would prevent the discovery of a personal connection, while keeping the "Sonnets" private, exclusively for his eyes.

The poem "The Pet-Name," on page 383 of Volume II of *Poems* 1850, talks about how her pet-name was given by her beloved brother who is now dead. This name causes her tears now because of the memories it evokes. When in Sonnet XXXIII, the poet urges her beloved to call her by her pet-name, there is an obvious reference to this poem in its reference to her brother: she says she misses the "Fond voices, which, being drawn and reconciled/Into the music of Heaven's undefiled./Call me no longer." In the sonnet, the poet wishes to hear her pet-name again from her beloved, now indicating that the arrival of this new love in her life has helped her overcome her grief for her dead brother.

Barrett Browning's sonnets are written in conventional Renaissance mode. In Sonnets I through XVI, the poet's uncertainty comes through very clearly as she wishes to acknowledge and accept the love offered to her, but is afraid to do so because of her own shortcomings. But though she uses a popular Renaissance convention in the "Sonnets," where the beloved is known to be inaccessible and the poets indulge their poetic talents knowing this, Barrett Browning's poems differ in the sense that she writes to a lover who is within her reach but of whom she feels unworthy. With all the odds against her – her illness, her age, her father's disapproval of marriage for his children – it is not surprising that she was hesitant about uniting with Browning. This hesitation comes through quite clearly in the "Sonnets." For Barrett Browning, the feelings were much more real and closer to home than those expressed by the Renaissance sonneteers. Her sonnets are an expression of her doubts and fears, fears of her unworthiness, while they simultaneously acknowledge her gratitude for being loved.

Barrett Browning's sonnets are also different from her literary predecessors as she, a woman, takes on the role of the male lover, who is the conventional speaker in such poems. Apparently, the speaker in the "Sonnets" is too conscious of her role as a woman and sounds submissive at all times, but she has taken on an active voice by actually addressing her beloved. Dorothy Mermin explains the adoption of a double role by the speaker who plays both the lover and the beloved: "This is not a reversal of roles, but a doubling of them. There are two poets in the poem, [the writer herself, and Robert Browning to whom she is addressing the poems] and two poets' beloveds, and its project is the utopian one of replacing

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hierarchy by equality” (130). Angela Leighton² agrees with Mermin and says that Barrett Browning’s ploy was not only to give herself a voice, but to simultaneously retain her lover’s masculinity by always speaking of herself as unworthy of him: “Unwilling to portray Robert as a desirable object, Elizabeth Barrett Browning plays at being both subject and object herself, and thus in a cunning way protects him by exclusion. She is herself the subject who loves and who says so, and she is herself the object who is ‘transfigured’ by her own desire” (Leighton, 102).

Helen Cooper, in line with both Leighton and Mermin, describes how Barrett Browning’s sonnets have been judged “not by the standards of poetry, but of maleness” (101). She goes on to explain that

Instead of a young man’s conventional lament, the mature woman starts from a known world and uses the sonnets as a process of discovery in transforming that world into one hitherto unimagined, a world created in art that she can inhabit. The *Sonnets* enact the process whereby the speaker resolves the tensions inherent in being both poet and also the object of another’s narrative into at last being the subject of her own story, able to speak in the first person of her passion” (Cooper, 101-102).

It is important to note Cooper’s mention of the “world created in art that she can inhabit” as this emphasizes Barrett Browning as a poet rather than simply as a woman, because there is a general tendency to equate her poetic identity with her femaleness. This poetic identity and agency on Barrett Browning’s part become clear as her voice becomes more confident as the narrative goes on through the sonnets to culminate in the powerful and assertive Sonnet XLIII.

Isobel Armstrong, however, thinks Barrett Browning portrays too submissive an attitude in her adulation of her lover. Though she agrees that Barrett Browning finds a voice for herself in the “Sonnets,” they are nevertheless an ambitious attempt to “discover a language to represent and go beyond the structure of an unwilling master-slave relationship” (Armstrong, 356). In other words, the relationship between the poet and her beloved, to Armstrong, was similar to that between master and slave. This is too strong a stand to take against the “Sonnets.” Because we like to think of the deep personal nature of the poems, they should be considered in the light of Barrett Browning’s personal circumstances. Her relationship with her father before she eloped was not as congenial as it had once been, and, at that point in her life when Robert Browning made his entrance, she was ready to escape. The master-slave relationship may have been true of that between father and daughter to a certain extent but it is not a relationship that characterizes that between Robert and Elizabeth. The relationship with her father does, however, account for the hesitation that comes through in the “Sonnets.” Her timidity or submissive attitude stems from there. In a letter to Browning, Barrett Browning talks about her father’s conception of parental rights: “...after using one’s own children as one’s chattels for a time, the children drop lower & lower toward the level of the chattels, and the duties of human sympathy to them become difficult in proportion. And, ...love, he does not conceive of at all” (Karlin, Letter of March 3, 1846). Robert’s letters, too, show as equal a submissive attitude towards Elizabeth as he was conscious of her better status as a poet. Armstrong’s thesis, thus, of Barrett Browning displaying too adulatory, and therefore, a slave-like quality in her poems, is not, in my opinion, entirely appropriate. The “Sonnets” are an expression of the path she traveled in those two years of courtship.

² Leighton’s book appears in 1986 and Mermin’s in 1989, but from the notes in the book, it is seen that she had read about Mermin’s ideas in the latter’s essay “The Female Poet and the Embarrassed Reader: Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Sonnets from the Portuguese*” which appeared in *English Literary History* in 1981. From the title of the essay, it can be inferred that Mermin’s book was an outgrowth of this essay.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "Sonnets from the Portuguese" certainly arouse a great deal of curiosity, especially considering their autobiographical nature and the numerous changes they have gone through. But what is fascinating about them is that, in spite of their autobiographical content, the sonnets have literary value and conform to an old male tradition into which Barrett Browning not only made her way but found a permanent home. What is even more interesting is that "(n)o other sequence was cherished for its conservatism in its own time and for its progressiveness in later days, with both camps quoting exactly the same passages to support their argument" (Remoortel, 260). This accounts for the enduring value of the poems. Regardless though, the changes in the ordering of the sonnets have had the effect of changing the pattern of thought in the poems. Though the meaning of the poem as a whole has not been changed, the later reordering of the sonnets served to create a sense of discontinuity in them. This sense of discontinuity tends to mar the smooth flow of the beauty of the growth of love. ■

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