

A POETICS OF RECIPROCITY: ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING'S BALLADS  
AND SONNETS

BY

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## Abstract

This thesis considers the way in which a selection of the poetry of Elizabeth Barrett Browning (henceforth to be referred to as EBB) exhibits what I will refer to as a poetics of reciprocity. My focus is on EBB's ballads of the 1830s and 40s, her amatory sonnet sequence *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, and those ballads found in *Last Poems*. Lyric poetry is, traditionally, said to be defined by a monologic lyric speaker. Mikhail Bakhtin, for instance, pronounced that the mono-stylistic and cohesive nature of poetic language distinguished it from novelistic prose. However, it was, in part, Bakhtin's insistence that poetry was by definition monologic that triggered my dialogic investigation of EBB's poetry.

Despite the range of work, both formal and temporal, that I consider in these three chapters, the discussion is nevertheless united by a consideration of EBB's fascination with language, and her concomitant departure from the conventions of the monologic lyric speaker. In her early ballads, I explore EBB's presentation of unreliable speakers and protagonists. These figures prove elusive to read because of their use of duplicitous or untrustworthy language, or they falter in the act of interpretation themselves. In EBB's *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, I consider the way in which the poet opts for the language of conversation to evoke, in a fresh and powerful manner, the love between her speaker and her beloved. I suggest that this strategy, in part, compensated for the way in which clichéd literary language used to describe the experience of loving had been drained of vigour. Finally, in *Last Poems* I consider EBB's presentation of speech as a social act that is influenced by the speaker's status in society. In these late ballads, women's attempts to wield language in an effective way are demonstrated to be dependent upon various conditions that reduce or enhance the potency of their speech acts.

While Bakhtin's essay "Discourse in the Novel," in addition to the work of critics such as E. Warwick Slinn and Marjorie Stone, has been vital to the formulation of my thesis,

I have, largely, relied upon a formalist approach to EBB's poetry. In my close readings I examine EBB's interrogation of language in her ballads and sonnets in light of her conscientious use, in particular, of metre and rhyme.

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## Introduction

While the politics espoused by Elizabeth Barrett Browning (henceforth to be referred to as EBB), are often derided as bourgeois and conventionally liberal, her scrutiny of language and her recourse to a poetics of reciprocity constituted a subversive act in relation to her society and the literary establishment – whether or not her contemporaries recognised it as such. In much of EBB’s poetry the convention of a monologic lyric speaker is dismantled. The poet persistently erects, instead, speakers who are engaged in dialogue and who respond actively to an interlocutor, although the interlocutor’s speech may remain beyond the realm of the poem. Speech, in other words, is rarely treated as an isolated act. One detects a fascination on EBB’s part with language, its efficacy, and how this is influenced by a variety of factors relating to the social context of language, especially the presence of an interlocutor or addressee. The consideration of this fascination, with particular reference to EBB’s ballads of the 1830s and 40s, her *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, and those ballads in *Last Poems*, unites the three chapters of my Master’s thesis.

I will consider the relevant, existing criticism and scholarship on EBB’s ballads and sonnets, relying especially on the work of Glennis Byron, E. Warwick Slinn, and Marjorie Stone. And here I would like to acknowledge two regrets. First of all, I am very sorry not to have been able to use *The Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, recently published by Pickering & Chatto, in the course of my research. My university library did not order a copy, and I was unable to obtain one from elsewhere in New Zealand, but I look forward to studying these volumes one day. I also regret not having read Simon Avery’s latest monograph *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, which I came across in Marjorie Stone’s “Guide to the Year’s Work” on the poet published in *Victorian Poetry* this year. I was unaware of this publication until I read Stone’s article and was unable, at that late point in my research, to obtain, read, and consider Avery’s work.

In EBB's early ballads, I explore, among other elements, the speech of duplicitous, or untrustworthy, figures whose language is frequently unreliable. Often female and powerless, these characters' speech is deployed to manipulate the sympathies of their interlocutor, and those of the reader. Bertram, in "Lady Geraldine's Courtship," is – to some extent – an exception. However, it is through his speech that he wins Geraldine's love, and there is an interesting contrast established between the effect that his language has on her friends and on herself.

The *Sonnets from the Portuguese* are, in part, about the corruption of literary commonplaces denoting the experience of love. Because such language has been drained of its vigour, and, perhaps, because it is of little relevance for a woman in EBB's position, the poet opts for more realistic and reciprocated language – the evocation of a dialogue – to conjure a fresh and powerful love between her speaker and her beloved.

Finally, "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point" and many of EBB's *Last Poems* present the reader with poignant monologues spoken by women whose ability to manipulate language depends upon their particular social and political circumstances. Language loses potency when your addressee is a baby, or absent; language is most effective when you wield it against someone whose response may have material consequences.

Parallel to this focus on language is a particular concentration on EBB's investment in the ballad genre. The decision to focus on the poet's ballads was motivated, in the first place, by a curiosity regarding the offence they seemed to cause modern critics (and the way this contrasted with EBB's own affection for ballads), and then by my own growing fascination for these deceptively simple pieces. In the following pages, I investigate EBB's persistent admiration for ballads, and the indisputable significance and sophistication of those literary ballads that she composed until the very end of her career.

## EBB's Early "delight in minstrelsy"

I gang like a ghaist, and I carena to spin;  
 I daurna think on Jamie, for that wad be a sin;  
 But I'll do my best a gude wife aye to be,  
 For auld Robin Gray he is kind unto me. (Lady Anne Barnard, "Auld Robin Gray" 33-36)

## The turf is green

Beneath the rain's fast-dropping sheen,  
 Yet asks not why that deeper hue  
 Doth all its tender leaves renew; –  
 And I, like-minded, am content,  
 While music to my soul is sent,  
 To question not the reason why  
 I have delight in minstrelsy. (Elizabeth Barrett Browning, "Minstrelsy" 33-40)

My childish love of a story never wore out with my love of plumb cake. (Barrett Browning and Browning, *Courtship Correspondence* 35)

My ballads prospered; but the ballad's race  
 Is rapid for a poet who bears weights  
 Of thought and golden image. (Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh* V:84-86)

It is tempting to read Aurora's debunking of the ballad in EBB's verse novel as demonstrative of the poet's own ambivalence towards ballad composition – and there is a tradition of critics that testifies to the allure of this interpretation. Alethea Hayter was the



first to succumb, in 1962. She reviled EBB's ballads for tasting "of custard and crystallized violets," and asserted that the poet herself "never really took them seriously," aware that they did not exhibit "her authentic voice" (Hayter, *Mrs. Browning* 80-81). Since then, many critics have followed suit, assuming that the fictional Aurora's contempt for ballads reflects EBB's own.<sup>1</sup> However, a critical reading of EBB's ballad writing as an unsuccessful "phase" fails to accommodate the niggling fact that EBB never did abandon the ballad – as critics such as Dorothy Mermin have supposed, and as Aurora herself did.<sup>2</sup> Many of the poems in her final, posthumously published, collection – *Last Poems* (1862) – retain strong links with the ballad tradition, and these will be the subject of the final chapter of my thesis.

There is much evidence to contradict the assumption that EBB shared her poetess-protagonist's opinion of ballads. To begin with, in her correspondence EBB repudiated a simple identification of Aurora with herself.<sup>3</sup> In a letter sent to Anna Jameson – a renowned art critic of the day – in February 1856, she wrote "I have put much of myself in it [*Aurora Leigh*] – I mean to say, of my soul, my thoughts, emotions, opinions; in other respects, there is not a personal line, of course. It's a sort of poetic art-novel" (Barrett Browning, *Letters* 2: 228). And indications that Aurora's estimation of ballads is lower than EBB's own abound in her letters and criticism, in which she expresses affection and admiration for the genre.

For EBB, balladry was a vital tradition within English poetry. In her survey of English literature, "The Book of the Poets," she warns against being drawn too far into a discussion of this tradition: "we must not be thrown back upon the 'Ballads,' lest we wish to live with them for ever. Our literature is rich in ballads, a form epitomical of the epic and

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<sup>1</sup> Virginia Radley, who wrote that EBB "herself did not like" her ballads (57); Helen Cooper (96); Mermin who commented that EBB, like Aurora, did not find the success of her ballads "particularly creditable" (*Origins* 89); and Patricia Gillikin (39).

<sup>2</sup> "After leaving the empty seclusion of Wimpole Street for a wider world and committing herself to modern subjects, she wrote no more ballads" (Mermin, "Barrett Browning's Stories" 100).

<sup>3</sup> Something that Rebecca Stott has warned against much more recently. In her chapter on EBB's poetics in *Elizabeth Barrett Browning* she wrote: "it is important not to conflate Aurora and her author, for Aurora is made up of autobiographical fragments of Barrett Browning's life and opinions but also much more" (Avery and Stott 66).

dramatic, and often vocal when no other music is astir: and to give a particular account of which would take us far across our borders” (Barrett Browning, *Complete Works* 6: 296). One detects a note of gratitude in this passage. Because the ballads do not fit within the ambit of the series of articles commissioned, EBB is precluded from providing “a particular account” of them, which would be a vast undertaking. But one also detects a clear admiration for a form that typifies both epic and dramatic poetry, and which has its own particular music. Furthermore, later in this same series of articles EBB attributed – in part – what she termed the “revival of poetry” during the Romantic period to the fact that “everywhere Dr. Percy’s collected ballads were sowing the great hearts of some still living for praise with impulses of greatness” (*Complete Works* 6: 298).

There are also numerous references to ballads throughout EBB’s correspondence. In a letter to Richard Horne, she famously described them as a “slight vehicle”: “[y]ou know how I care for ballads – they *carry* so much... slight vehicles as they seem to be. All the passion of the heart will go into a ballad, & feel at home” (qtd. in Mermin, *Origins* 90). This comment elegantly delineates EBB’s early ballads, encapsulating the way in which she manipulates their apparent “slightness” to her advantage in order to convey a more subversive message than they seem capable of carrying. Writing to her old friend, Hugh Stuart Boyd, in January, 1842, she compared traditional ballads very favourably with those purportedly composed by the bard Ossian, expressing admiration for the passionate nature of the former: “[t]ake away a few poetical phrases from these poems and they are colourless and bare. Compare them with the old burning ballads, with a wild heart beating in each. How could they grow in comparison!” (Barrett Browning, *Letters* 1: 119). In a letter to Mary Russell Mitford dated November 13, 1850, EBB referred to a quarrel that she had with Henry Chorley, an editor with the *Athenaeum*, about the “poetesses of the united empire.” EBB claimed, rather sarcastically, not to be able to find “a poet” among these women “though

there are extant two volumes of them” (Barrett Browning, *Letters* 1: 465). However, she held “that the writer of the ballad of ‘Robin Gray’ [a stanza of which is excerpted above] was our first poetess rightly so called, before Joanna Baillie” (Barrett Browning, *Letters* 1: 465). EBB’s praise for “Auld Robin Gray” provides a useful insight into her own work. Like many of EBB’s own ballads, this one incorporates two voices: an individual who mourns a lost lover, and a lament for the fate of women who lack self-determination. Finally, in another letter dated around the summer of 1852 (shortly before she began composing *Aurora Leigh*), EBB sent Jameson a transcribed version of an “old ballad,” which she discovered “among [her] papers from one of the Percy or other antiquarian Society books,” because the “original poem impressed [her] deeply with its pathos” (Barrett Browning, *Letters* 2: 80). She continued: “I wish I could send you the antique literal poem, but I haven’t it, nor know where to find it; still, I don’t think I quite spoilt it with the very slight changes ventured by me in the transcription” (Barrett Browning, *Letters* 2: 80). This comment exhibits EBB’s susceptibility to the moving stories told in ballads and a distinct respect for their art, which prevents EBB from making anything but “very slight” alterations in her transcription of this ballad specimen.

The tendency to dismiss EBB’s own ballads, therefore, has more to do with modern critical sensibilities and a reductive reading of the generic definition of the ballad – one that does not account for the developments of the Romantic ballad revival – than a professed adherence to the poet’s own view. Mermin acutely diagnosed the anathematization of EBB’s ballads thus: “Modern readers,” tend to “find only suspicious fluency, verbal thinness, inept diction, mawkish sentimentality, and the most dreary and conventional Victorian female fantasies and repressions” (“Barrett Browning’s Stories” 99).

Despite this prevailing attitude, some critics have acknowledged the inventive and sophisticated way in which EBB experimented with ballads. Kathleen Hickok observed that

EBB attempted to present in them “radical ideas within a familiar context” in order to bypass the “disapprobation” of a conservative reading public (181). Helen Cooper described, similarly, how the ballads published in *Poems* (1844) both appeal to the popularity of “medieval settings” while interrogating “the courtly ideology such settings endorse” (10). Mermin herself wrote that EBB’s ballads “offer a covert but thoroughgoing reassessment, often a total repudiation of the Victorian ideas about womanliness to which they ostensibly appeal” (*Origins* 71).<sup>4</sup> Glennis Byron (the critic formerly known as Glennis Stephenson) has illuminated EBB’s subversion of Victorian notions of ideal womanhood and her attempt to destabilise traditional gender roles in some of the mid-career ballads (although she doesn’t consider these to be ballads). Marjorie Stone has investigated, among other things, their revisionary interactions with the ballads of the folk tradition and of the Romantic ballad revival. Patricia Gillikin has argued that the very medievalism of the ballads is “inherently subversive” in that the presentation of an alien milieu facilitates the questioning of a contemporary one<sup>5</sup> (37), and Robin Inboden has examined the androgynous and divided nature of many of EBB’s ballad heroines. However, the resurrection of these poems remains incomplete.

Stone has been the most consistently laudatory of EBB’s ballads. According to her, EBB was attracted to the genre for its “energy, its frank physicality, its elemental passions, its strong heroines, and its sinewy narrative conflicts,” which, “allowed her to circumvent the passionless purity” that characterised model Victorian womanhood (*Elizabeth Barrett Browning* 95).<sup>6</sup> Similarly, Mermin has suggested that EBB was drawn to the ballad genre because she “found...that inadmissible feelings and strange ideas could pass unchallenged

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<sup>4</sup> Although Mermin also claimed that their subversion “went unnoticed...one occasionally suspects, at times by the poet herself” (*Origins* 90).

<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, the Middle Ages were “often envisioned by female poets as a time in which at least some women had control over their property and destiny and the courage to venture into the “male” arenas of politics and war” (Byrd 33).

<sup>6</sup> This has, since, been echoed by Rebecca Stott, who has claimed that EBB “was drawn to the ballad for its expressive qualities” (quoting the famous letter to Horne – 128).

under a narrative disguise” (*Origins* 71), both critics echoing Hickok’s earlier suggestion.<sup>7</sup> Elaborating upon this idea, Mermin argued that “narrative” allowed EBB to “examine, modify, and criticize conventional ideas about women’s place in life and art” and that her ballads constituted her first attempt at such critique (*Origins* 89).<sup>8</sup> However, although she recognised their potential for subversion, Mermin objected to the apparent silliness of some of EBB’s stories. In response, Stone pointed out that they are “no more absurd” than their predecessors in traditional ballads (“Cinderella” 235) and that the narrative absurdities – or “the convolutions and excesses that disrupt the narrative propulsion of Barrett Browning’s ballads” – attacked the constrictions imposed upon women represented in the earlier ballads (*Elizabeth Barrett Browning* 108).

As well as employing narrative as social critique, several critics have suggested that EBB used “the starker power structures of medieval society” to foreground women’s commoditisation in patriarchal society, and to highlight how women’s subordination persists in her own cultural moment (“Cinderella” 244). Although some critics, such as Cooper, thought that EBB’s progressive politics were obfuscated by the “medieval costume” of her “defiant heroes” (73), I would concur with Hickok that such obfuscation was deliberate on EBB’s part. Along with Gillikin’s analysis of EBB’s medievalism as “inherently subversive” (37), these assertions contradict the idea that EBB’s presentation of medieval settings was “superficial,” exemplified by Radley (51), or “retrogressive,” exemplified by Mermin (“Barrett Browning’s Stories” 106).

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<sup>7</sup> And Davies and Stone in “Singing Song for Song.” According to these critics, EBB was “drawn to the ballad-romance” due to the fact “that it provided [her] with a conventional literary site, ripe for revision, on which to play out [her] notions of social and sexual politics” (161).

<sup>8</sup> A few pages later in the same book, Mermin is much more dismissive about EBB’s impulse to write ballads, stating that she “wrote ballads partly because occasions required them, partly because they came easily to her, and partly because she was looking for suitable subjects and genres” (*Origins* 91). However, this vein of inconsistency runs throughout Mermin’s evaluation of EBB’s ballads – as it does through Hayter, who seems to have liked “The Romaunt of Margret” very much despite her vehement denunciation of the ballads in general.

As well as presenting an ideological challenge to readers, EBB probably thought of her ballads as constituting a formal test for herself. Stone's analysis of EBB's purposes suggests that she "probably thought of ballad writing as a natural preparation for the writing of an epic" – a point that is supported by EBB's description of ballads as "a form epitomical of the epic and dramatic" (*Complete Works* 6: 296). Further evidence can be deduced from the increasing complexity of EBB's ballads that, according to Stone, "culminat[e] in 'Lady Geraldine's Courtship', which she clearly saw as the germ of her novel-epic *Aurora Leigh*" (*Elizabeth Barrett Browning* 103). For EBB, at least, writing ballads was a worthwhile enterprise.

In order to fully appreciate the significance of the ballad genre in EBB's oeuvre, we must allow the term some breadth – as the poet did herself. In her seminal discussion of EBB's balladry, Stone recognised the inclusive definition of "ballad" prevalent during the Victorian era and decided to employ the term much as EBB and her contemporaries would have, that is:

to refer to all of her narrative poems with clear affinities either with the characteristic features of the ballad form (the ballad stanza, the use of dialogue and the refrain, tragic and/or topical subject matter, narrative compression and intensity) or with the larger tradition of 'minstrelsy' and Romantic narrative verse. (*Elizabeth Barrett Browning* 102)

For the purposes of this thesis, I also avoid a narrow genre definition of the ballad, such as Gordon Hall Gerould's assertion that, "[s]trictly speaking, the ballad as it exists is not a ballad save when it is in oral circulation, and certainly not until it has been in oral circulation" (3). I am not speaking strictly, but include those poems of EBB that reveal vital traits of the "ballad of tradition" and that would have been recognised by the Victorians as ballads. Gerould's canonical description of such traits is useful to consider at this point – and

retains much in common with Stone's list above. He observed that ballads contain narrative action that "is focused on a single episode" and that they have a "marked tendency to tell the story dramatically" (4-5). This relates to the famous criterion that ballads should begin in the fifth act: the "series of events is seized at its culminating point and is envisaged in terms of the action which then takes place" (Gerould 6). Another element that is "[l]ess completely typical" – but which relates well to EBB's ballads – is an "impersonal attitude to the events of the story" (Gerould 8). In Alan Bold's excellent introduction to the genre, he included a chapter on traditional ballad style. Here, he noted that the vast majority of ballads use either the "traditional ballad metre of alternating four and three-stress lines," or the four-stress line, and that it was "immaterial" whether the traditional form is the quatrain or the couplet of seven (or eight) stresses (21). In analysing "Earl Brand" Bold remarked, like Gerould, that the action should "take off with the speed of the finest milk-white ballad steed" and that it is often hyperbolic (27), occasioning "some of the more extreme images" (34). Bold proposed that great ballads are distinguished by "counterpoint" (57): "[t]errible dark shadows alternate with brilliant highlights" (34), although he wrote that incremental repetition "is probably the most readily identifiable of ballad characteristics" (29). Finally, in terms of content, he observed that the significance of magic and superstition in folk balladry has been "grossly overestimated" and that the "ballad folk were, in their appetite for fiction, much like us" (Bold 44).

Leslie Shepard provided a useful – if reductive – description of the relationship between the broadside and the traditional ballad in his introduction to the former (*The Broadside Ballad*). He argued that the focus in broadside ballads "shifted from a mystical background to material affairs" (48). However, he also acknowledged that while broadside ballads tended to be concerned with ordinary, quotidian affairs, they "never completely lost

concern with the impulse to understand the meaning of life and the human situation,” which was such a strong feature of the traditional ballad (Shepard 48).

EBB’s own ballads exhibit an interesting transition that mirrors a wider trend in her work: while her earlier ballads, generally, resemble more closely those of the folk tradition, the later ones are often more closely akin to broadside ballads. “Lady Geraldine’s Courtship” seems to embrace the transition from one tradition to another in its combination of courtly and modern subject matter. The broadside ballad flourished in the nineteenth century (Shepard 76) and, while a respectable, upper-middle class English woman would not be expected to write broadsides, EBB managed to incorporate elements of them, such as contemporary social and cultural subject matter, into her *Last Poems*.

This shift reflects, more generally, EBB’s desire to write more socially and culturally engaged work in distinctly contemporary settings. In the full-length study that she co-authored with Simon Avery, Rebecca Stott wrote that the poetics of EBB’s later life were “formed through a resituating in the present moment and in the commonplace, thereby forming a new vantage point” (81). She compared this approach, EBB’s insistence “on a poetry of the here and now,” against Tennyson (as author of *The Idylls of the King*) and the popular enthusiasm for “all things medieval as a kind of nostalgic yearning for a pre-industrial past” (Avery and Stott 85). In a letter addressed to Robert Browning dated March 20, 1845, EBB’s thought clearly supports Stott’s observation: “I am inclined to think that we want new *forms* . . . as well as thoughts – The old gods are dethroned. Why should we go back to the antique moulds . . . Let us all aspire rather to *Life* – & let the dead bury their dead” (Barrett and Browning, *Courtship Correspondence* 36).

EBB’s use of the ballad form, therefore, constitutes one of her most interesting poetic experiments. Many of her early ballads are illustrative of Isobel Armstrong’s concept of the “double poem” (12). During the Victorian period, the “act of representation” became “a



focus of anxiety,” according to Armstrong (6-7). For this reason, she called upon readers of Victorian literature to “see a text as a complex entity defining and participating in an area of struggle and contention” and to recognise “intentionality” as a “much wider and more complex affair” (Armstrong 10). Armstrong proposed that Victorian poets pre-empt ambiguity of language, and its susceptibility to various interpretations in the age of print, and that “coalescing syntax and semantic openness is the norm” in Victorian poetry (12). Thus, she arrived at the idea of the “double poem”: “[w]hat the Victorian poet often achieved was quite literally two concurrent poems in the same words” (Armstrong 12). Whereas Schopenhauer described lyric poets as “uttering between two poles of feeling”: that of the “unified selfhood,” and that of the “interrogating consciousness,” Armstrong saw the Victorian poet as “dramatising” and “objectifying” modes of expression simultaneously, rather than vacillating between them (12). Pauline Simonsen summarised Armstrong’s argument by indicating that the “double poem” “is both the expressive lyric of a subject voice and an objective analysis of that lyric” (528).

With specific reference to women’s poetry, Armstrong wrote that the “doubleness of women’s poetry comes from its ostensible adoption of an affective mode” the conventions of which are often investigated, or subverted. “The simpler the surface of the poem,” she proposed “the more likely it is that a second and more difficult poem will exist beneath it” (Armstrong 324). However, Armstrong cast EBB as one of the “unmasked poets” – implying that she failed to exploit such “doubleness” – and this assertion persists amongst some critics (368).<sup>9</sup> Without fully subscribing to Armstrong’s thesis, I use the notion of “doubleness” in

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<sup>9</sup> Mermin wrote that EBB’s attempt to cast herself as “both halves of a balanced but asymmetrical pair” opened up “rich possibilities for irony.” However, she noted such possibilities did not seem to occur to EBB, and that she failed to “call our attention to the persistent anomalies and contradictions even without irony” (“Female Poet” 364). In a later article, Mermin claimed that EBB (and Christina Rossetti) “seem usually to sympathize with their protagonists,” and that neither poet used irony (or the objectification of their characters) as distancing functions (“The Damsel” 75).

my own readings of EBB's early ballads. One of the striking features of these poems is their frequent inclusion of duplicitous, or simply unreliable, narrators and protagonists. These figures contribute significantly to the slipperiness of the ballads' meanings and to the creation of a space for "struggle" and "contention."

Finally, and most importantly, I will examine EBB's scrutiny of language and her recourse to a poetics of reciprocity with reference, specifically, to "The Romaunt of Margret," "A Romance of the Ganges," "The Romaunt of the Page," "Lady Geraldine's Courtship," and "Bertha in the Lane."<sup>10</sup> In these early ballads, I explore, among other elements, the distinctly slippery speech of duplicitous, or unreliable, figures who are, frequently, female and powerless. In "Lady Geraldine's Courtship" Bertram is – to some extent – an exception to this, but here there is an interesting contrast established between the effect that his language has on her friends, on readers of the poem, and on Geraldine herself.

One of the earliest ballads in which EBB presents the reader with an untrustworthy protagonist is "The Romaunt of Margret." Despite her generally disparaging approach to the ballads in her pioneering monograph, Hayter described "The Romaunt of Margret" as exhibiting "the true sadness of the old ballads" and "genuine cold grue" (*Mrs. Browning* 32).<sup>11</sup> The "grue" is evoked through unsettling instances of supernatural activity, and intensified through surprisingly violent imagery, which is clearly reminiscent of traditional folk ballads. In the poem, the young woman of the title is confronted by an enigmatic shade, which emerges from her own shadow, as she sits by a river. This ghostly apparition may be Margret's double, perhaps her spirit about to depart, but its identity is never made explicit.

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<sup>10</sup> The chronology of the ballads goes like this: "The Romaunt of Margret" was published in the *New Monthly Magazine* in 1836, "A Romance of the Ganges" was the first to be published in *Findens' Tableaux* in 1838, followed by "The Romaunt of the Page" in 1839 (Stone, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning* 98). "Bertha in the Lane" and "Lady Geraldine's Courtship" were both published in *Poems* (1844) for the first time.

<sup>11</sup> In contradiction to her more general remarks on EBB's ballads, Hayter commented on how EBB's "authentic voice" is present in "The Romaunt of Margret" (*Mrs. Browning* 32).

The shade challenges Margret to evade death by nominating one person on earth who truly loves her – a task at which, initially, Margret scoffs. As their dialogue unfolds, the shade contends that those whom Margret suggests do not genuinely love her, but that they prefer the services and gifts that she renders them. Her brother, for instance, prefers the wine that Margret serves him to his own sister, as the shade tells her: “better loveth he / Thy chaliced wine than thy chaunted song, / And better both than thee” (124-26). It seems that the only person who truly loves Margret is her knight-lover, but he has been killed in battle and, on discovering this from her interlocutor, Margret drowns herself.

It should be noted that Margret’s mother is never mentioned. Leighton claimed that this is because, in comparison to Margret’s other family members, her love “is constant” (*Elizabeth Barrett Browning* 62), but it may also be because she is dead, raising the possibility that the shade is the mother’s ghost. In fact, Leighton posited that the shade is Margret’s mother who “tempts her daughter with the knowledge that all human love is faithless by comparison with hers” and who desires that her daughter should inherit her own “deathly fate” (*Elizabeth Barrett Browning* 62-63).

Most often, “The Romaunt of Margret” is read as an indictment of the protagonist’s misguided dependence upon the love of mortals and as a condemnation of the Victorian ideal of womanhood, which restricts women’s sphere to the domestic realm.<sup>12</sup> Byron’s reading of the ballad is subtly different. She has argued that the poem presents Margret’s “psychic fragmentation,” which results from her own foundering belief in love: “the doubting side...forces a confrontation to resolve the split” (*Poetry of Love* 19). However, the revelation that this forces – the emptiness of the love that she depends upon – kills her (*Poetry of Love* 20). Thus, for Byron, the lack of faith in familial relationships originates in

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<sup>12</sup> Critics that have concluded this include: Radley (49), Cooper (33-34), Mermin (*Origins* 72), and Simonsen (514).

Margret herself with the shade acting solely as a conduit for its expression.<sup>13</sup> The point I would like to make is that these divergent readings arise as a consequence of the ambiguities that EBB embedded in the poem, which are embodied in the shade, and of the slipperiness of the authors of speech in the poem, and of speech itself.

The ballad is riddled with sinister ambiguities: whether the shade is Margret's double, or her mother's ghost, or something else; whether Margret's doubts regarding the love of her family were justified; whether she suffered from her family's inconstancy in love or her own lack of faith in their love. Simonsen attributed these uncertainties to the indeterminate nature of the "lady's shadow." It is "depicted as her literal shadow" and yet it is both dependent on her, and independent from her; it seems to share her knowledge, while exceeding it (Simonsen 512). The shade emerges from Margret's own shadow (49-54), it physically resembles her (65), and it leeches her life's essence (71-72; 74-77). Furthermore, the narrator suggests that it represents Margret herself in death:

Look in its face, ladye,

.....

And hear its voice's sound:

For so will sound thy voice

When thy face is to the wall,

And such will be thy face, ladye,

When the maidens work thy pall. (56-63)

On the other hand, the shade appears to be a separate entity in terms of her (apparently) superior knowledge regarding the motives of Margret's immediate relations, and of the fate of her lover. It might seem more plausible, therefore, that the shade represents Margret's absent mother, which would account for the physical resemblance, and, perhaps, for her fuller

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<sup>13</sup> Mermin made a similar suggestion, writing that the shade's knowledge could be imputed to Margret herself and that the story is one of self-revelation (*Origins* 72).

knowledge. However, the credibility of the shade as an authority on Margret's family is never properly established – she remains an enigma, and her claims remain equivocal.

One's interpretation of the shade's identity is fundamental to any reading of the ballad. If it is a separate entity – such as Margret's mother – and its account of her family's self-interestedness is accurate, then Margret's doubts are justified. How the shade should have acquired this knowledge is unclear, however, unless she has a supernatural, omniscient, perspective. On the other hand, if the shade is the embodiment of Margret's own doubts, then there are two further possibilities: either her tremulous faith in others' love is warranted and her sub-conscious forces a recognition of this, which destroys her; or, Margret's lack of conviction is owed to her own inability to trust in the love of others, and she drowns herself in despair. The latter interpretation is lent some credence by Margret's own assertion that: “Who doubteth love, can know not love: / He is already dead” (98-99), and her subsequent suicide.

Another point to consider is that Margret appears to be unmoved by the revelation that neither her brother, nor her sister, nor her father loves her; “The lady did not heed” describes her response each time (128; 155; 182). This is juxtaposed with Margret's reaction to the death of her knight-lover: “Her face was on the ground – / None saw the agony” (218-19) and the distinction between her responses illustrates her exclusive reliance upon romantic love. Once this is removed, she quite literally collapses.

These interpretive ambiguities of the ballad persist until the ending, in which, according to Stone, the “minstrel's final series of laments can be read either as a reflection of her keen identification with Margret's anguish...or as her condemnation of Margret's own failing love” (“Cinderella” 251):

O failing human love!

O light, by darkness known!

Oh false, the while thou treadest earth!

Oh deaf beneath the stone!

Margret, Margret. (240-44)

While the “failing human love” initially appears to correspond to that of Margret’s family, the second half of the stanza and the refrain describe Margret herself. The singular address “thou,” the fact that Margret no longer “treadest earth” and that she is now “deaf beneath the stone” all point to such an identification. This impression is reinforced by the refrain, which seems to reveal the subject, the false “thou” of the previous two lines, although it could, perhaps, be read as a final, eerie wail for Margret.

The little-discussed penultimate stanza, which describes Margret’s family’s response to her death, contains uncertainties of its own:

A knight’s bloodhound and he

The funeral watch did keep;

With a thought o’ the chase, he stroked its face

As it howled to see him weep.

A fair child kissed the dead,

But shrank before its cold.

And alone yet proudly in his hall

Did stand a baron old. (227-35)

This stanza does not prove or disprove, conclusively, the shade’s assertions. Although the brother’s thoughts stray to the hunt, he does “weep” for Margret and maintains her “funeral watch.” Margret’s very young sister has the courage to kiss her corpse, while naturally shrinking from doing so. And the isolation of the baron may indicate a desire to mourn alone.

However one resolves these ambiguities, ultimately, the refrain's incessant repetition of "Margret, Margret" drains the protagonist's name of meaning, emphasising her lack of a substantial identity. As Simonsen concluded, at the close of the poem, Margret "is no one, without definition, and without life. Her identity, chanted mournfully like an irrelevant outrider throughout the poem, is finally meaningless" (514). As is often the case with EBB's early use of refrains, this one becomes repetitive and awkward over the course of the poem (twenty-seven stanzas). By exhausting the referential capacity of Margret's name in relentless iteration, her lack of an independent identity and the system that produced her are criticised. Hayter claimed that this ballad, and those of the 1838 and 1844 collections are "haunted by a figure of sickening boredom – Mrs. Browning's Ideal Woman, noble, constant, self-sacrificing, and all blushes, tears and hair down to the ground" (*Mrs. Browning* 82). But she failed to realise that EBB herself distrusts this creature.

The poem is, therefore, deceptively complex; depending upon how one interprets the figure of the shade, and the minstrel's final lines, in conjunction with the refrain and the penultimate stanza, distinct interpretations emerge. The poem accommodates a reading that condemns human love, in which case, Margret, the devoted sister, daughter, and lover, is a pathetic victim of its insubstantiality. Or, the ballad can be read as portraying Margret's lack of faith in love (especially romantic love), if one thinks the shade expresses concerns already registered, though not acknowledged, in Margret's psyche. In that way the poem becomes a more subversive indictment of the way in which women delude themselves into fulfilling a dependant role, and one which cannot be truly satisfying. Either way, EBB critiques the exclusive reliance on domestic relationships, given the transience of human love, and the way her contemporary society restricted women's opportunities for self-fulfilment. This poem, the earliest of EBB's ballads, is a good example of the poet using a palatable form to convey a radical challenge to her culture, but it is also the first poem in which the "doubleness" of its

poem's intentions is interwoven with characters whose identities and intentions cannot be, implicitly, trusted.

In "A Romance of the Ganges," published two years later, the subtle and unsettling ambiguities of the earlier ballad are replaced by a starker duplicity on the part of the protagonist. As Mermin wrote, while the ballad "elaborates on Margret's discovery," it also introduces the fierce heroine that is a feature of most of EBB's other (early) ballads (*Origins* 72). The "Romance" narrates a ceremony during which two young women, Luti and Nuleeni, set afloat a "little boat" that carries a "little lamp" (23-24) on the sacred river to determine the fate of their respective loves. The extinguishing or perpetuation of the flame is supposed to foretell, respectively, the extinction or continuance of their love:

And when the boat hath carried the lamp  
 Unquenched, till out of sight,  
 The maiden is sure that love will endure, –  
 But love will fail with light. (32-35)

Nuleeni's lover is proved "true" by the ceremony, but Luti reveals that he had already abandoned herself to be with Nuleeni. Luti contrasts the inconstancy of her ex-lover with the fidelity of her father and, like Margret, drowns herself in the river beside which her sorrow is revealed.

Several critics have discussed the way EBB constructed the ballad upon "the fatuity" of the engraving, which it was written to accompany. According to Mermin, for instance, EBB "frames the story in terms of the inadequacy of natural symbols to express human feeling and the even greater inadequacy of humanly constructed symbols" (*Origins* 73).<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Like Mermin, Byron held that EBB appears to find the superstition represented in "A Romance of the Ganges" "faintly ridiculous" (*Poetry of Love* 42). Stone analysed the "absurdity" of plots such as that of this poem in terms of a subversive comment on the nature of women's existence (as mentioned above): "[i]n many cases," she wrote, "the convolutions and excesses that disrupt the narrative propulsion of Barrett Browning's ballads embody her critique of the 'plausible' plots encoding woman's lives in earlier ballads" (*Elizabeth Barrett Browning* 108).



This interpretation is supported by the narratorial interjections that pontificate on precisely this. Immediately after the initial description of the ceremony, the narrator lectures on the feebleness of human symbols:

Why, all the stars are ready  
 To symbolize the soul  
 .....  
 And yet the soul by instinct sad  
 Reverts to symbols low –  
 To that small flame, whose very name  
 Breathed o'er it, shakes it so! (37-44)<sup>15</sup>

And at the end of the poem, when it becomes clear that Nuleeni's love, which was validated by the ritual on the Ganges, has been ruined, the narrator again intervenes:

Frail symbols? None are frail enow  
 For mortal joys to borrow! –  
 While bright doth float Nuleeni's boat,  
 She weepeth, dark with sorrow. (209-12)

What I will concentrate on is the centrality of Luti, the duplicitous character who overturns this ritual, to a reading that focuses on the flimsiness of the symbols upon which humans rely. Despite allowing a smile to “Creep silent through her prayers” (62) while the flame aboard her boat remains lit (59), Luti knows that her lover has abandoned her: “My heart foretold his falsehood / Ere my little boat grew dim” (91-92). She even acknowledges having discovered the transfer of his affections to Nuleeni before having arrived at the

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<sup>15</sup> Simonsen has commented on the way in which the symbols in the poem are presented as being chosen “by instinct” (41), suggesting that the assumptions underlying this poem (and “The Romaunt of Margret”) are so “deeply ingrained” that they appear natural and inevitable, that they successfully achieve the “appearance of absolute immutability that a social hegemony tries to preserve” (516). In response, I would say that EBB’s attempt to question their significance, by treating them as silly, is an attempt to undermine their hegemonic position.

riverside. Addressing Nuleeni in stanza xiii, Luti informs her that she “can guess” who her lover is: “I heard thee sob his name in sleep, / It was a name I knew” (113-14). Luti does not, therefore, place implicit hope in the persistence of her symbol flame – she makes a mockery of the ritual in which she fraudulently participates. While Luti is – as Mermin observed – one of EBB’s earliest and fiercest heroines, she is also one of her first treacherous protagonists.

When Luti’s lamp flickers out (67), she angrily, tauntingly insists on Nuleeni launching her boat, whilst painfully drawing attention to the “wreck” of her own, Luti’s, love:

She cries a quick and bitter cry –

“Nuleeni, launch me thine!

We must have light abroad to-night,

For all the wreck of mine.” (68-71)

This demand is repeated a second time (“Thy boat, Nuleeni! look not sad – / Light up the waters rather!” – 86-87), before her contempt for this feminine superstition erupts. It discharges itself in harassment of Nuleeni, whom she bullies into hurrying with the ritual:

‘Why, maiden, dost thou loiter?

What secret wouldst thou cover?

.....

Come little maid, be not afraid,

But let us prove him true!” (109-116).

Luti’s irony here is stained with malignant intent: she has no intention of “proving” Nuleeni’s lover true, rather she is painfully aware that he is not. When Nuleeni’s boat successfully carries the flame out of sight, Luti’s anger floods her previously cool, detached façade:

Then Luti spake behind her,

Out-spake she bitterly.

“By the symbol light that lasts to-night,  
Wilt vow a vow to me?” (145-48)

Mercilessly and duplicitously, Luti proceeds to abuse the ritual as an opportunity to expose Nuleeni and to extract cruel promises from her, revenging herself by despoiling the lovers' future happiness. Nuleeni, drunk on happiness, is coerced into promising Luti to accuse her bridegroom of betrayal (158-62) and to communicate the wrong done by him, with regard to Luti, to their future son (164-72). Stone makes an excellent point regarding stanza xx, in which Luti explains the purpose of Nuleeni's vows (““That the fair new love may her bridegroom prove, / And the father shame the child”” –184-85):

Luti's cry for revenge registers an unrepentant excess that is formal as well as emotional, for her fierce declaration appears in four extra lines that spill over the limits of the eight-line ballad stanza employed throughout...[it] is as if the river flowing in insistent monotone through the poem's constant refrain, 'The river floweth on'...has suddenly risen in angry overflow. (*Elizabeth Barrett Browning* 116)

Finally, Nuleeni sinks into despair: “While bright doth float Nuleeni's boat, / She weepeth dark with sorrow” (211-212).

Beverly Taylor has argued that “A Romance of the Ganges” challenged the gender ideology implicit in the pieces alongside which it was published, by introducing what Taylor perceives as a “motif” in EBB's later work: the “fortunate woman's responsibility to memorialize the wrongs of her less happy sister” (67-68). Similarly, Stone wrote that EBB “transforms the two women...from rivals into accomplices in revenge” (“Cinderella” 249). However, Nuleeni undertakes to fulfil the promises that Luti extorts from her before she knows what they entail, and when this is revealed to her, along with the implications of the promises (that her fiancé is fickle), she is devastated. Luti is, in her determined securing of revenge, the ancestor of later female protagonists in “The Romaunt of the Page” and “Bertha

in the Lane.” As Byron wrote in her consideration of the poem, “Luti’s frustrated desires emerge in anger and violence” (*Poetry of Love* 43). However, I will contest her subsequent claim that Luti’s “vindictiveness” is an anomaly in EBB’s poetry, and that “none of her later heroines is ever allowed to exact such tragic vengeance” (*Poetry of Love* 43).

Luti and Nuleeni appear to be divided by their faith, or lack of faith, in symbolic customs. The former fraudulently accompanies Nuleeni to the banks of the Ganges, makes a farcical attempt to participate in the ceremony, and forces Nuleeni’s participation as a prelude to wrest those promises from her that secure Luti’s revenge on the lovers. Nuleeni, on the other hand, floats her lamp in an ingenuous manner, and is sincerely excited when this yields optimistic results. However, while the reader may instinctively sympathise with Nuleeni, the poem is as much a critique of her as it is of Luti, refuting Kathleen Hickok’s claim that EBB’s early work “generally responded to the expectations of Victorian readers” regarding the conventions of womanhood (172). Whereas the traitorous Luti controls her own fate and ensures that her unfaithful lover will be punished, the younger maiden relies on “frail symbols” that are impotent to secure her prosperity, and her chances of happiness are decimated. Nuleeni, thus, is punished for her naivety and her passive acceptance of fate.

On the other hand, Nuleeni’s credence may be weaker than the reader first imagines: she only participates in the ritual in response to Luti’s bullying, and her faith in her lover does not appear to be dependent upon the fate of her flame. Having launched her boat, her eyes are blinded by tears veiling the view of her vessel’s flame (136-37). Despite this, her faith is unshaken:

‘I do not hear his voice! the tears  
Have dimmed my light away!  
But the symbol light will last to-night,  
The love will last for aye.’ (140-43)

Nuleeni's constancy here suggests that she is *not* reliant on the "frail" rituals that the narrator (and EBB) derides, along with women who trust them. Instead, the reader is, perhaps, supposed to interpret the poem as an indictment, like "The Romaunt of Margret," of both Luti's and Nuleeni's reliance on romantic love for self-fulfilment.

What is most pertinent to the purposes of this thesis, however, is EBB's presentation of a character, Luti, whose deceitful behaviour confuses the reader's interpretation of the ballad, lending it a "doubleness." It is possible to identify a female confederacy in the ballad, as critics have done, but Luti's treatment of Nuleeni severely undermines this. While the reader sympathises with Luti's plight, the revenge that she enacts upon Nuleeni seems disproportionate and unfair – sympathies are restlessly displaced from one character to the other. The poem thus establishes key features of EBB's ballad-writing that are further explored in those published subsequent to "A Romance of the Ganges."

In "The Romaunt of the Page" a Luti-like character behaves in a similarly deceitful manner, and her lack of integrity in speech bifurcates the reader's interpretation of the narrative. The ballad's plot is somewhat implausible: a young woman marries a knight and follows him on a crusade to Palestine disguised as his page. She remains unrecognised by her husband, the knight, who has only encountered her under cover of darkness. Her true identity is only explicitly revealed to the reader at the conclusion of the poem – when she martyrs herself to protect her husband – and, within the poem itself, never to the knight.

Here, Stone wrote, EBB developed "an ironic series of narrative conflicts" that dramatise the victimisation of both knight and lady within a "system of gender relations" that treats women as commodities ("Cinderella" 253). Interestingly, it is not solely the "page" who suffers, as it clearly is in a traditional ballad that might be seen to be a precursor to this one, "Child Waters" (a ballad with which EBB was clearly familiar and one that she quoted

in her correspondence on “The Romaunt of the Page”<sup>16</sup>). In the latter, a heavily pregnant woman is coerced into disguising herself as a page to accompany the father of her child on his return home. During the journey Child Waters abuses her in a despicable manner: he forces her to run at his horse’s side, he has her swim across rivers, and he sends her into a village to find him an attractive bed fellow.

But in EBB’s ballad the reader empathises with the knight, when he describes the circumstances surrounding his marriage, and feels some uneasiness with regard to the “page” who, in a sense, eavesdrops on his private thoughts from behind her disguise. When asked by the “page” to describe the knight’s “ladye” (in other words, to describe herself – 99-101), the knight complains that he does not know whether her face is “dark or bright” (106-08).

Having married her in darkness, he cannot describe her complexion. The knight explains that his bride’s mother requested that he should marry her after her husband, the young woman’s father, died in a duel to revenge the knight’s father.<sup>17</sup> The knight wishes that his “hand had fought that fight, / And justified [his] father” (141-42), reasoning that death were preferable to a “murthered friend and marriage-ring / Forced on [his] life together” (146-47). It is difficult to dispute his conclusion, and the knight’s attitude towards their marriage taints our estimation of the “page’s” actions. It seems right that he should regret such an arrangement and, in retrospect, it causes the reader to interrogate the “page’s” devotion to someone whom she does not know and cannot, properly, love. When she accuses herself, in the end, of having “loved [her] kind” “too well” (285-86), one is reminded of “The Romaunt of Margret” and “The Romance of the Ganges.” However, the “page’s” love is not entirely credible, and her bold action, one may conclude, is inspired more by self-interest, the desire for adventure,

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<sup>16</sup> In a letter to Mitford dated June 1, 1838, EBB commented on the engraving that her ballad was supposed to accompany: “[b]y the way, the pictured one, pretty as she is, has a good deal exaggerated the ballad-receipt for making a ladye page – Do you remember? – “And you must cut your gown of green / An INCH above the knee”!” (*Brownings’ Correspondence* 4: 38).

<sup>17</sup> This is, to an extent, comparable to the story of “Auld Robin Gray” in which ballad (a favourite of EBB’s) the good of the family is prioritised over the individual woman’s happiness.

than anything else. Finally, the reader may feel retrospective pity for the knight who has, unwittingly, revealed his true feelings to the woman whom he wishes he had not married.

The disjunction between the knight's knowledge of the situation and the "page's" facilitates a plot device shared by "The Romaunt of the Page" and "Lady Geraldine's Courtship." This is a "doubleness" in which the subordinated plot is revealed on illuminating occasions through the surface plot (this is distinct from, though not entirely unrelated to, the "doubleness" of struggling intentions that will be discussed below). The first of these occasions is at the beginning of the poem, when the knight praises the "page" for fearing "not to steep in blood / The curls upon [his] brow" (9-10). The image of a mass of curls peeping out from below the "page's" helmet is a feminised, cherubic one, but even more so is the notion of a "page" fastidiously keeping those curls free from the taint of blood in battle. One more clue is the "page's" reluctance to discuss the "bloody battle-game" (16) on their return from it.

The feminised descriptions of the "page" are reprised in stanza xi when, having been told that "he" would be an incongruous presence in the knight's lady's bower (where, of course, "he" belongs), the "page" is described thus:

His large eyes seemed to muse a smile,  
 Until he blushed instead;  
 And no lady in her bower, pardie,  
 Could blush more sudden red. (65-68)

The hint that the "page" is not whom "he" pretends to be is stretched when "he" replies in an inappropriately coquettish fashion: "'Sir knight, thy lady's bower to me / Is suited well'" (69-70). Here, EBB winks at her reader, encouraging him or her to grasp the joke, the punch line

of which will be further delayed.<sup>18</sup> The reader wonders what the “page” might mean by this response – does “he” intend to seduce the knight’s wife? – and what the knight himself must make of the “page’s” intentions. However, before the confusion is addressed, their awkward exchange is intruded upon by a funeral dirge, which the knight alone hears: “*Beati, beati, mortui!* / From the convent on the sea” (71-72).

The “page’s” tears, which interrupt the knight’s account of his marriage, provide more evidence that “he” is more involved in these events than the reader may realise. “His” grief is unmanly in its excess, interrupting the knight’s tale, and unusual in the intense empathy that it indicates. Moreover, the “page’s” strong feeling is aroused by the plight of the newly-wed and abandoned wife, rather than by the knight’s, as evidenced by the association that the “page” makes between the knight’s bride and his “own sister” (184-85). The “page’s” tale of “his sister’s” bravery so strongly resembles those stories that we recount about an anonymous “friend” that the reader probably comprehends, at this point, that the “page” is dissembling. Similarly, when the knight treats the “page’s” story with disdain – “And wept the page, but laughed the knight, – / A careless laugh laughed he” (190-91) – the latter responds with quick and violent anger, contrasting sharply with “his” previous tone of devotion, near servility. His reaction suggests something more than pride for a reckless, if brave, sibling:

The page stopped weeping, and smiled cold:

“Your wisdom may declare

That womanhood is proved the best

By golden brooch and glossy vest

The mincing ladies wear;

Yet is it proved, and was of old,

A near as well, I dare to hold,

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<sup>18</sup> Although if we do “get” the joke earlier, there are lovely instances of ironic humour, for example when the knight tells the “page” that his hand is “fitter” for “my knightly spear / Than thy tongue for my lady’s will” (61-62), at which we must laugh if we realise that the “page” is actually the knight’s “lady”.



By truth, or by despair.” (198-204)

Our suspicions are, thus, roused regarding the “page’s” identity. This is definitively revealed in the thirty-sixth stanza when she asks whether she has “renounced [her] womanhood / For wifehood unto” the knight (276-77). In the subsequent stanza, she prepares to meet the Saracens alone, allowing her husband time to flee, and wishing that the knight should find “[a] lady to [his] mind, / More woman-proud and half as true / As one [he] leav’st behind” (281-83).

The funeral dirge, which recurs at the poem’s close (330-49), encapsulates the shift in the poem where the “page’s” narrative gains precedence over the knight’s. Leighton contended that the dirge functions to establish an “alternative life of communal womanhood as opposed to male warfare” and to accommodate the “fates of all women” in its lament (*Victorian Women Poets* 83-84). But, as Stone suggested, it is not the fate of the female protagonist alone that is mourned, but that of both men and women who live in servitude to restrictive notions of gender identity. (Moreover, the idea of a dirge, with its associations of death, accommodating a positive “alternative life” is suspicious in itself.) EBB wrote to John Kenyon in June, 1838, to explain that the funeral first

comes when the page is happiest, & so absorbed in happy thought that he is unconscious even of the sound. And the reference to HIM, to the destiny reserved for him...I would rather that the reader remembered at the close of the poem than felt at the time, according to the natural process of reading our omens by the light of our actual griefs. (*Brownings’ Correspondence* 4: 43-44)

The funeral dirge resembles the refrains of EBB’s earlier ballads – albeit it only occurs twice – and, as with other refrains, it records the evolving implications of the ballad. The “page” does not hear the dirge at first because she is happily absorbed in conversation with her husband and, at this point, the reader is unaware of the “page’s” deceit and its

eventual, tragic consequences. When the chant recurs, immediately subsequent to her death, it is transformed into a funeral rite for the “page” – once the full implications of her deception are revealed. Thus, its signification develops and reflects the shift that occurs in the reader’s comprehension of the poem.

With reference to the “page’s” death, Stone has remarked that the motives behind her sacrifice are “mixed rather than “pure”” (257). Like “so many ballad-women,” she is, ultimately, motivated as much by revenge as she is by love (Stone, “Cinderella” 257).<sup>19</sup> When she forces her separation from the knight, catalysing her own death, the “knight’s ladye” promises to return to him:

“Ere night, as parted spirits cleave  
To mortals too beloved to leave,  
I shall be at thy side.” (257-59)

Her words, as Stone has pointed out, beg the question: “[d]oes the outraged wife plan to bless her husband from above...or to haunt him?” (“Cinderella” 257). Perhaps she intends to do a little of both. Although EBB does not depict the knight’s discovery of her fate, it seems probable that the revelation of her empty “bower” would leave him desolate and full of regret.

In this way, the “Romaunt of the Page” strongly resembles “Bertha in the Lane.” In both poems women make compromised sacrifices for the sake of a loved one (in the former for her husband, and in the latter for her sister); in both the sacrifice is tainted because the female protagonist seeks revenge or acknowledgement; and in both cases she corrupts the future happiness of her loved one. Both poems also resemble “A Romance of the Ganges” in that all three present a woman who is motivated, at least partially, by the desire for

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<sup>19</sup> Stott has also remarked, in passing, that the “page’s” death may have constituted an act of revenge (128).

vengeance, and who decisively (and duplicitously) undermines the future happiness of someone close to them.

Both Cooper and Avery have read the “page’s” sacrifice as a “defiant act” that usurps the male’s prerogative to act as protector (Cooper 78) and to “play an active role in the public world” (Avery and Stott 92). Mermin, on the other hand, wrote that the “page” ultimately “chooses a woman’s fate – unrecognized, self-sacrificing death,” despite her heroic “denunciation of the knight’s womanly ideal” (*Origins* 92).<sup>20</sup> Both of these interpretations are, to an extent, convincing. The “page” chooses to die anonymously to save her husband, but she also revenges herself upon him by demonstrating the destructive nature of his constrictive definition of womanhood, while simultaneously proving that she is capable of undertaking the heroic, male role denied to her.

One would be justified, to some extent, in interpreting the story as one of a courageous young woman and her fatalistic self-sacrifice, which both rescues the knight from imminent death, and liberates him from the woman whom he could never have accepted as his wife. However, as feminist critics have done, it is also possible to read the ballad as an indictment of sexual relations that stifle both characters: the knight is obliged (by the chivalric code) to marry someone whom he does not love, and the “page” falters in revealing her identity to him when confronted with his reductive conception of womanhood, choosing death instead. Further complicating this reading is the duplicitous behaviour of the deceitful “page.” She insinuates herself into the knight’s mission, acquires his intimate trust, and then has him betray his true feelings regarding herself. Finally, she commits suicide while swearing to return to her husband as a disembodied spirit. Here is another ballad that uses the guise of a more conventional narrative in order to submerge one that is more challenging, and in which the two contend for prominence. It is also another example of a ballad in which

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<sup>20</sup> As does David G. Riede in *Allegories of One’s Own Mind: Melancholy in Victorian poetry* (99).

EBB constructs its “doubleness” upon an unreliable or treacherous character whose identity and intentions are not transparent.

In “Bertha in the Lane” the reader encounters another member of this female dynasty of unreliable ballad heroines, elder sister – the descendant who embodies their rhetorical zenith. This ballad comprises the testimony of a young woman who is preparing to fade away and die in stereotypical Victorian fashion.<sup>21</sup> Elder sister relates to her younger sister, Bertha, the events that have led to her self-induced death, specifically her betrothed’s, Robert’s, cruel machinations in abandoning her for her younger sister, and Bertha’s complicity in these. Elder sister intends to join their mother in heaven, sacrificing her own life on earth for the happiness of Bertha, however fraught this is by the end of the poem.

While Mermin did detect a note of “resentment” in the speaker’s voice, she wrote that the poem’s “mawkish and mealy-mouthed tone” caused the reader to suspect whether EBB “was fully aware of the conflicting impulses it evidently embodies” – a doubt that is reinforced for her by the absence of “denigratory remarks” about the poem by the poet (92). According to Mermin, “Bertha in the Lane” “does not overtly criticize the speaker’s self-sacrifice” (*Origins* 92), and she questioned Browning’s high regard for the poem: “he refers to it often, but whether he was attracted by its sentiment, or by the skill with which it exploits the ability of the dramatic monologue to reveal more than the speaker intends, is hard to say” (*Origins* 92). However, Byron’s astute analysis of the poem’s clear “sub-text” should put any such doubts to rest; it seems evident that Browning must have recognised in the poem a powerful instance of the dramatic monologue, a form with which he is now so closely associated.

In “Rethinking the Dramatic Monologue” Byron acknowledged Mermin’s argument that EBB often appears to sympathise with her speakers, but wished to qualify it: “this does

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<sup>21</sup> Cooper has remarked upon the significance of the fact that the speaker of the poem “is the only female protagonist in the 1844 poems who narrates her own tale” (70).

not necessarily mean that they [women poets like EBB] do not objectify them or frame them with irony.” “Rather,” Byron continued, “what it means is that their target is more usually the systems that produce the speakers than the speakers themselves” (“Rethinking” 87). One of the ways that female poets criticise social systems is to “inhabit” conventional ideology, in order to undermine it (“Rethinking” 88). Thus, the “doubleness or discursive splitting” that is associated with the dramatic monologue is produced in a twofold manner: via the split between the poet and the speaker, and via the “speaker’s internalisation of the ideology that defines her” and her innate self or potential (“Rethinking” 88).

“Bertha in the Lane” is an intriguing example of such “doubleness” – and on this point I concur wholeheartedly with Byron: “[w]hile the surface text may glorify the dying sister’s sacrifice, the sub-text reveals the persistence of passion, a strong undercurrent of resentment and a deep-rooted unwillingness to assume the disagreeable role of martyr” (*Poetry of Love* 45). In support of this thesis, Byron highlighted elder sister’s resistance to the “cold, hard, comfortless ideal” of the sisters’ mother (*Poetry of Love* 45), the way that elder sister clings to the “desperate hope that he [Robert] will return” to see her (*Poetry of Love* 46), and her preparation for his arrival after her death. Elder sister persists in wearing Robert’s ring and requests that Bertha bedeck her with rosemary, signifying remembrance (*Poetry of Love* 46). While elder sister makes these arrangements, she insists on recognition of her generosity and acknowledgement of love from Bertha, who “remains provokingly silent” (Byron, *Poetry of Love* 47). But her piquant “bitterness and self-pity” are most clearly evident in elder sister’s account of the day that she discovered Robert’s clandestine love for her younger sister. Here, her resentment is palpable as she describes the wrenching transformation from “promising bud to withered bloom” that undermines her flimsy attempt to comfort Bertha on her own deathbed (Byron, ““Bertha in the Lane”” 7-8).<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Simonsen (524-25) and Lewis (82) have provided further support for this argument.

Byron's acute analysis of "Bertha in the Lane" demonstrated that EBB very purposefully constructed a more sinister narrative underneath the surface story of a Victorian "angel in the house," and that it was this element of "doubleness" that her husband-to-be recognised and admired. However, Byron interpreted these gestures as ambiguous, reflecting "the rejected woman's conflicting emotions" (*Poetry of Love* 46) – a suggestion that I would dispute. What strikes me most about the speaker, Bertha's nameless elder sister, is the rhetorical sophistication of her manipulative account of her martyrdom. Byron has highlighted the resemblance between elder sister and Luti in that both spoil a younger woman's future happiness, in securing vengeance upon those who have deprived them of love. However, I have attempted to demonstrate that this feature, along with a lack of integrity in speech, is more widely shared in EBB's early ballads.

At the outset of this poem, there is little sense of elder sister's bitterness or self-pity. She does, at first, appear to be an "angel of the house," preparing herself to wither and die. Elder sister speaks gently to her little sister, telling her: "By God's love, I go to meet, / Love I thee with love complete" (13-14). However, there are several intimations of an uneasy element in their relationship, for instance elder sister's emphasis on Bertha's comparative youth (22) and superior beauty: "Larger eyes and redder mouth, / Than mine were in my first youth" (20-21). Both of these observations signal a rivalry between the siblings, and the superior desirability of the younger one. Finally, Bertha's extreme "bashfulness," which prevents her from looking at her own sister (23-25), signals an intense and incongruous discomfort on her part.

The appearance of the ghost of their mother before elder sister triggers an abrupt shift in tone. She is being beckoned to ascend to heaven, but the mother's "bright and bleak"

smile (47) paralyses elder sister and she begs “[o]ne hour longer” on earth (51).<sup>23</sup> At this point, desperation asserts itself. Elder sister turns to Bertha, and the reader detects a fresh, sinister note in her speech:

Lean down closer, closer still:  
I have words thine ear to fill,  
And would kiss thee at my will. (61-63)

Her desire to “kiss” Bertha “at [her] will” is troubling – as Byron has already noted, and the idea of filling her younger sister’s ears with “words” purposefully recalls, for instance, the murder of Hamlet’s father, especially since the words that reach Bertha’s ears prove to be toxic.<sup>24</sup>

It is thus that elder sister introduces her retelling of the day that instigated her sacrifice:

Dear, I heard thee in the spring,  
Thee and Robert – through the trees, –  
When we all went gathering  
Boughs of May-bloom for the bees.  
Do not start so! think instead  
How the sunshine over head  
Seemed to trickle through the shade. (64-70)

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<sup>23</sup> Leighton compared “Margret” to “Bertha,” which, she claimed, is another ballad in which the mother “is the rival for the daughter’s life” (*Elizabeth Barrett Browning* 63). For Leighton, the poem’s “dramatic conflict” plays out “between the elder sister and the ghostly presence of the mother” – rather than between the two sisters – and that it is not “sisterly generosity which provides the moral of the tale, but motherly duty” (*Elizabeth Barrett Browning* 63-64). However, I think that this distorts the content of the poem and its form. The ballad is distinguished by its resemblance to the dramatic monologue and that it is addressed by one sister to another. Because of this, and because of the poignant implications that the content of elder sister’s rhetoric has for Bertha herself, I think that the sisters’ relationship should be read as the defining one of the poem.

<sup>24</sup> Elder sister’s “demonstration of affection becomes uncomfortably similar to an assertion of power” (*Poetry of Love* 47).

Two things stand out here. First, elder sister immediately communicates to Bertha her knowledge of the latter's affair with Robert. This declaration primes our attention (and Bertha's) to the narrative, while refraining from providing a glut of information that would deaden our curiosity. The second element of note is elder sister's use of sensual images, the "Boughs of May-bloom" that they gathered and the abundant sunshine that "trickle[d] through the shade." These arouse a potent memory, in Bertha's case, or sense impression, in the reader's case, of the spring day during which the events transpired, inviting us to experience the day as elder sister did. Such visceral description is also further evidence of elder sister's reluctance to abandon sensual, earthly experience.

Elder sister continues to evoke the scene with similar images in stanza xi before shifting to a more intimate register, directly involving Bertha in her rhetoric:

Hills and vales did openly

Seem to heave, and throb away

At the sight of the great sky. (72-74)

She describes a pastoral scene of "winding hedgerows," "bowery tops," and farm gates, reminiscing on their togetherness that day: "How we wandered, I and you" (79); "How we talked there" (82); "thrushes soft / Sang our praises" (82-83), as sheep bleated them in a neighbouring pasture (83-84). Amidst the beauty of this scene, elder sister is overcome with love for Bertha, blessing her "full and free" (96). But their idyllic union is established only to be exploded when elder sister describes overhearing Robert making advances on Bertha. Elder sister apologises, seemingly disingenuously (since she overheard their conversation by accident): "Sweet, forgive me that I heard / What you wished me not to hear" (101-02), and Bertha responds with tears and shudders to this exposure.

Elder sister proceeds to reel off a series of feigned rhetorical questions that actually have patently obvious answers. She asks: "Could he help it, if my hand / He had claimed



with hasty claim?” (108-09); “Could we blame him with grave words, / Thou and I, Dear, if we might?” (120-21); “Had he seen thee, when he swore / He would love but me alone?” (113-14) – each question entrenching Robert’s guilt. In order to exacerbate Bertha’s sense of guilt, elder sister dissembles a confederacy with her based on an empty and insincere assertion that Robert is free of blame and that “women cannot judge for men” (112). But her ex-fiancé has clearly acted caddishly and elder sister is keenly aware of this. Her suggestion that Robert is not culpable is belied by an earlier observation that Bertha had made “Good true answers for [her] sake” to him (105), obliquely implying that the younger sister was obliged to defend the elder one’s rights as Robert’s legitimate fiancée. For Byron, such instances – in which elder sister refuses “to speculate about Bertha’s possible role in the affair” – are evidence of her “desire to ingratiate herself with Bertha”: “[s]he sees Bertha and herself forming a cosy confederation of women, linked by their common inability to understand man” (*Poetry of Love* 48). However, I would suggest that these rhetorical questions serve to reinforce Robert’s disreputable behaviour and to cast suspicion on Bertha’s participation in encouraging him, which is suggested by the title that places emphasis on Bertha’s betrayal.

Byron acknowledged that “[u]nderlying bitterness and persistent desire continually emerge to shatter the veneer of calm acceptance” (*Poetry of Love* 49), but she did not fully explore the implications of this “bitterness” – that the speaker wishes to punish both Robert and Bertha. The description of the violent way in which elder sister reacts to Robert’s “deep speech” (addressed to Bertha) is further evidence of her attempt to arouse guilt in Bertha’s conscience. Elder sister remembers the shock of her discovery and tells Bertha that she fainted and arose “cold and stark” (136) afterwards, as though she were already dead:

Each word swam in on my brain

With a dim, dilating pain,

Till it burst with that last strain. (131-33)

Elder sister's experience of detachment from herself at this point relates well to Byron's description of the way "discursive splitting" occurs as the speaker internalises gender ideology that denies a woman's independent worth, thus severing her from her innate self and dormant potential. Feeling as though she is simply an obstacle to the union of the two people most dear to her, elder sister experiences a sense of alienation from herself. Her identity loses solidity, the "stars" and the "May-blooms" "Seemed to wonder what [she] was" (138-40):

And I walked as if apart  
 From myself, when I could stand –  
 And I pitied my own heart,  
 As if I held it in my hand. (141-44)

Although the reader cannot help but pity elder sister, he or she also recognises that the dramatic change evoked here is intended to maximise Bertha's suffering. As Byron has remarked, while elder sister "wallows in self-pity, [she] always seems to have one eye on Bertha, carefully gauging the responses to each pathetic pronouncement" (*Poetry of Love* 50). Elder sister vividly reconstructs her psychic fragmentation at this point, purposefully dispensing with the fluid rhetoric her speech elsewhere. Her recitation of events, in stanzas xix through xxii, is marred by a repetitive use of "and" as a conjunction – it is the first word in ten out of 49 lines.

The following five stanzas transcribe elder sister's attempt to comfort Bertha. However, her various assertions that "all was best as it befell" (156), and that she brought about her own demise (184-86), are belied by the rhetorical sophistication she deploys to vividly communicate the disastrous effect that Robert's, and Bertha's, actions have had on her. Finally, her request that Bertha should either forget her or think "of [her] in the sun"

(216) seems to be a curious exhortation to remember her on the May day that precipitated her decline.

EBB's use of metre in this ballad significantly influences our perception of elder sister, and interpretation of her rhetoric. Each line is composed of seven syllables, four of which are stressed so that there is an accent at the beginning and ending of almost every line. Whether the governing metre is iambic or trochaic tetrameter is ambiguous, until we reach stanza v. Here, the first and third lines of the stanza end in an eighth, unaccented syllable, which suggests that the principal foot is the trochee. While this is a relatively insignificant speculation, it is important to note the way in which these short lines, ending and beginning (most often) on accented syllables, impress the reader with a sense of elder sister's insistence and urgency and convey, in their weight, the overbearing way in which she tyrannises Bertha. The habitual lack of one syllable, combined with the choice of short, four-beat lines, aurally mimics elder sister's agitated rush to complete her recitation of events before her mother reclaims her. In addition, an uncomfortable feeling of monotony is evoked by the lack of variation in the metre. Very rarely does EBB deviate from the governing foot, and this sameness has the effect of stultifying our response, constituting a purposeful attempt to instil us with a feeling of boredom and weariness towards elder sister (in a similar way to the refrain in "Margret").

This is not to suggest that our response to elder sister is uncomplicated; as in most of these ballads our response to the speaker is contradictory. Elder sister inspires repulsion for her emotional manipulation, as well as pity, both for the betrayal she has suffered and for the way in which society's attitude towards unmarried women causes her to feel redundant.<sup>25</sup> I concur with Byron who wrote that our response to elder sister is "ambivalent" because while "[h]er self-sacrifice may be admirable" and "[h]er need for proof of affection and gratitude is

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<sup>25</sup> An interesting discussion of the concept of the "redundant woman" can be found in Pauline Simonsen's article: "Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Redundant Women."

understandable,” “she exacts a terrible price for her own suffering and loss” that is, her younger sister’s peace and contentment (*Poetry of Love* 48). Thus, “Bertha in the Lane,” like each of the other poems considered so far, incorporates two competing narratives that exist in tension, struggling for pre-eminence. The ballad can be read as a story of the ultimate sacrifice that elder sister made for Bertha in the name of “love complete,” but it is difficult to ignore the way in which she spoils the gesture, by enacting a pitiful revenge upon Bertha and Robert. Elder sister’s martyrdom is tinged with the vengeance of vividly communicating the disastrous effects of Robert’s and Bertha’s actions; as in “A Romance of the Ganges” and “The Romaunt of the Page” women are both victims and perpetrators of a destructive gender ideology and, unable to conform to its expectations, they seek revenge on those whom the system favours.

“Lady Geraldine’s Courtship” (“Geraldine”) does not conform as closely to the pattern of EBB’s ballad-writing established in the earlier poems. However, a key feature that it retains is the prominence of an untrustworthy protagonist, the narrator Bertram, who multiplies, and confuses, the reader’s interpretation of the poem and of its author’s intentions. In this ballad, the protagonist-poet Bertram writes to a friend about his invitation to and experiences at Lady Geraldine’s country estate. He recounts falling in love with her as they converse and read poetry together, and his realisation that his love for her is not idealised and Platonic – as he had convinced himself. Because his account is retrospective, much of it is coloured by his acute disappointment at the slight he perceives himself to have suffered: Geraldine’s rejection of the possibility of loving a peasant like himself. However, appended to his letter is a conclusion in which Geraldine visits his bed chamber and reveals her reciprocal love.

Avery has argued for a reassessment of the poem, based upon its pivotal role in EBB’s oeuvre. The poem can, Avery has argued, “almost be read as a summary of Barrett’s

changing ideas about poetry and poetics,” and he drew attention to the poem’s subtitle, which clearly indicates the poet’s intentions: “A Romance of the Age” (105). I include this “Romance” with EBB’s earlier ballads, despite some critics, asserting that the poem is “not actually a ballad” (Byron, *Poetry of Love* 53),<sup>26</sup> because refusing “Geraldine’s” roots in the folk ballad tradition amounts to an untenable denial both of EBB’s intentions and of the primacy of certain, balladic features. EBB clearly considered “Geraldine” to belong to that genre herself, referring to it as a “long modern ballad” in a letter to Angela Owen dated July 21, 1844 (*Brownings’ Correspondence* 9: 58). But the ballad’s narrative: an eternal story of love overcoming obstacles,<sup>27</sup> the lively momentum of the lines, which resemble a traditional balladic metre (trochaic octametre, as opposed to iambic), and the brutal nature of some of EBB’s visceral images, which are indicative of the ballad’s treatment of primitive human experiences and hyperbolic action, all testify to the strong resemblance between this poem and its folk ballad kin.

Despite disagreeing with her generic designation, I largely concur with Byron’s highly sympathetic reading of the poem. Her comment that the poem has more emphasis on the “inner lives” of its characters than EBB’s earlier ballads is correct (*Poetry of Love* 54). We are presented with three distinct points of view within the poem: that of the embittered Bertram in the present who believes that he has been rejected by Lady Geraldine on the grounds of his inferior social status; that of the “idealistic romantic” Bertram prior to this discovery; and that of Lady Geraldine herself, whose true intentions are filtered through Bertram’s obtuseness (*Poetry of Love* 55). Although we receive Geraldine’s point of view mediated by Bertram, we nonetheless glean a more lucid understanding of her feelings for Bertram, and her democratic views, than he does – something that Byron has thoroughly

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<sup>26</sup> Byron wrote that “Geraldine” has “little in common” with those poems published in *Poems* (1844) that do fit that category (*Poetry of Love* 53). She insisted that the poem could more accurately be described as a dramatic monologue because “Bertram’s perceptions and in particular his responses to Geraldine become of far greater significance than the actual events he describes” (Byron, *Poetry of Love* 55).

<sup>27</sup> Professor Child’s seminal anthology of balladry included a category for “love ballads not tragic” (Laws 23).

investigated (*Poetry of Love* 57-58), and which I have compared to EBB's approach in "The Romaunt of the Page." However, EBB's playfully ironic depiction of the poet-protagonist has been less thoroughly explored. Bertram's persistent misunderstanding of his circumstances is linked to his puritanical self-righteousness, both qualities leading him to respond to Geraldine in ways that are irritating and amusing. EBB undermines Bertram – his obnoxious character traits, and his dullness in relation to Geraldine – while simultaneously criticising the inegalitarian, stratified society which stokes his obsession.

The first instance of EBB's ironic humour is Bertram's response to Geraldine's personal interpretation of the statue of "Silence." When Geraldine asserts the subordinate position of the symbol to "essential meaning" (121), Bertram retorts peremptorily: "Let the poets dream such dreaming! madam, in these British islands / 'Tis the substance that wanes ever, 'tis the symbol that exceeds" (129-30). His obtuse reply is both irksome in its unsubtle social critique and amusing in Bertram's failure to recognise Geraldine's flattering gesture. A similar episode occurs in the idyllic pastoral setting to which they retreat alone:

...down in the gowans,  
 With the forest green behind [them], and its shadow cast before,  
 And the river running under, and across it, from the rowans,  
 A brown partridge whirring near [them] till [they] felt the air it bore.  
 (153-56)

Here, it is Geraldine's custom to serenade Bertram: "She would break out, on a sudden, in a gush of woodland singing, / Like a child's emotion in a god – a naiad tired of rest" (171-72). But this charming scene is rudely interrupted by Bertram's rhetorical outburst (strongly reminiscent of the priggish young Romney Leigh) on the nature of progress:

For we throw out acclamations of self-thanking, self-admiring,  
 With, at every mile run faster, – 'O the wondrous wondrous age,'

Little thinking if we work our SOULS as nobly as our iron. (201-03)

The reader intuits that Geraldine would sympathise with Bertram's speech, and he asserts that she does praise it (197), but his disquisition is, nonetheless, inappropriate. Bertram himself acknowledges this when he more modestly asserts that Geraldine was "*patient* with [his] talking" (my emphasis – 213). The beauty, peace, and poetry of their situation brims with romantic potential, and, possibly because of Bertram's nervousness, he resorts to the role in which he is most comfortable: outraged pedant.

But perhaps the best example of EBB's ironic sense of humorous incongruity is Bertram's impassioned tirade in which he admonishes Geraldine for (what he believes) is her submission to cultural conventions regarding the marriage of social equals. In another instance of Bertram's narrow and simple reading of her, he misunderstands Geraldine when she tells a persistent suitor: "Whom I marry, shall be noble, / Ay, and wealthy. I shall never blush to think how he was born" (263-64). What Geraldine intends, of course, is that her husband will be innately dignified and rich in virtue as well as intellect, but Bertram recognises only the surface meaning. He lambasts her for failing to honour the noble human being: "Learn more reverence, madam, not for wealth, *that* needs no learning... But for Adam's seed, MAN!" (297-99). His arrogant assumption that Geraldine "trembled" before him because "a worldly man or woman" can do nothing but "quail" in "the presence of true spirits" (279-80) is disenchanting, to say the least. The reader recognises that Bertram has severely misjudged Geraldine, and that she only "trembles" because the unfortunate lady has incurred the displeasure and wrath of her beloved. Therein lies the humour of the situation: Bertram's invective is based upon a misinterpretation of Geraldine's words, at which the reader cringes – it is a classic case of crossed wires. Shortly afterwards, Bertram himself is the one who, literally, faints at the close of his diatribe, thus proving himself to be the "quailing" spirit, according to his logic, and Geraldine the "true spirit."

Bertram's wrongheadedness is amusing, but his self-admonition is even more so. He refuses to "write [his lecture] fuller" to the friend whom he addresses in his letter, recognising that it was a shameful piece of "mere madness" (321). When Geraldine's only answer is to speak his name, Bertram describes how he was "struck backward" and "exhausted" by the:

... passion  
 which had rushed on, sparing nothing, into forms of abstract truth  
 By a logic agonizing through unseemly demonstration,  
 And by youth's own anguish turning grimly gray the hairs of youth.  
 (337-40)

In other words, Bertram remembers his speech with the same excruciating embarrassment that the reader endured on his behalf.

Although these episodes satirise Bertram's inability to interpret Geraldine, there are instances of self-awareness, like the above one, that encourage the reader to sympathise with him. Another example, already described, is Bertram's recognition that it required patience on Geraldine's part to listen to his speech "down in the gowans" (153), and one more occurs subsequent to Geraldine's and Bertram's discussion of symbols in response to the statute of Silence. Here, Bertram recognises that Geraldine's speech is intentionally provocative: "Half in playfulness she spoke, I thought, and half in indignation; / Friends who listened, laughed her words off, while her lovers deemed her fair" (137-38), intimating that he realises that he responded with more seriousness and vigour than the occasion required.

Also inspiring the reader with sympathy for Bertram is the use of imagery that evokes his loss of self-possession. Byron argued that, in contrast to the sensually barren early ballads, "Geraldine" contains "an abundance of sensuous description," which "brings the love of the poet and the lady alive for the reader" and reinforces the fact that Bertram loves "an actual woman" (*Poetry of Love* 63). The poet-protagonist, she commented, relies upon visual



and aural images to register the effect that Geraldine has upon him. He thus eliminates “the traditional sense of separation and emphasizes instead a sense of intimacy and the unmistakable proximity of flesh and blood woman” (*Poetry of Love* 64), in a way that is akin to the tactic of the speaker in *Sonnets from the Portuguese*. I wish to add to Byron’s point by highlighting the use of other instances of highly visceral imagery that, in this case, cause us to sympathise with the suffering poet, and which are reminiscent of EBB’s earlier ballads, and of traditional folk ballads.

Bertram uses brutal images of the maiming of noble animals to underscore the severity of the wounds with which he has been inflicted. He suitably compares his haranguing of Geraldine to a beast’s futile roar on two separate occasions: “I was mad – inspired – say either! (anguish worketh inspiration) / Was a man, or beast – perhaps so, for the tiger roars, when speared” (273-74); “a beast had scarce been duller / Than roar bestial loud complaints against the shining of the spheres” (323-24). These lines persuade us that Bertram does, at least partially, recognise his own folly.

Two further powerful images encapsulate Bertram’s action, testifying to the fact that he lost self-control because of the pain of his suffering. He reflects that he had thought that his love for Geraldine was pure, unspoilt by self-interested concerns for reciprocity: it was a “Love content with writing his own name on desert sands” (216). However, in light of his reaction to Geraldine’s (supposed) rejection of the possibility of marrying someone of his social status, Bertram realises that he had loved her in a more mundane manner. He compares himself to a wounded stag who persists in eating, despite his fatal blow: “the stag is like me, – he that tries to go on grazing / With the great deep gun-wound in his neck, then reels with sudden moan” (219-20). The comparison of love to an injury inflicted by an arrow is, of course, ancient, but here the stag is shot, rendering the trope more violent and aggressive – especially within the context of the sensuously delightful images ascribed to

Geraldine, the expectations associated with a “Romance,” and the poem’s jaunty rhythms. Later, after we have read Bertram’s upbraiding of Geraldine, he uses a similar image to represent his wilful self-destruction. He compares himself to a “wild horse” that

... through a city runs with lightning in his eyes,  
And then dashing at a church’s cold and passive wall, impassioned,  
Strikes the death into his burning brain, and blindly drops and dies. (346-48)

The comparisons between himself and a fatally wounded stag, on the one hand, and a maddened horse, on the other, suggest Bertram’s utter helplessness in moderating his behaviour: love has robbed him of his composure.

Striking images of intense cold and heat, respectively, demonstrate a change in Bertram’s attitude between the beginning and the end of the poem. Initially, Bertram feels a disdain for Geraldine’s acquaintances, which he experiences as an intense sensation of cold: “I grew scornfuller, grew colder... Till as frost intense will burn you, the cold scorning scorched my brow” (45-46). But, near the end of the poem, he is scalded by the proposal of one of them to Geraldine: “In the room I stood up blindly, and my burning heart within... scorched, weighed like melted metal round my feet that stood therein” (250-52). While, initially, he was able to assume a consoling sense of disdain towards Geraldine’s friends, by the end he has been rendered vulnerable to them because of his love for her.

This potent, sensory portrayal of the acuteness of Bertram’s distress, incite the reader’s sympathy for him. Rather than regarding him, simply, as an irritating prig, the reader recognises that he has been subjected to harrowing circumstances, and is given access to the emotional torment of his situation. The reader should also acknowledge that Bertram’s low social status is a significant obstacle to his acknowledgement of the aristocratic Geraldine’s love. His general social exclusion is evidenced by the way Geraldine’s friends permit themselves to talk about him openly in his presence (““You may speak, he does not

hear you! and besides, he writes no satire, – / All these serpents kept by charmers, leave the natural sting behind” – 43-44), and the way he is frequently left alone on Geraldine’s estate (87; 225).

Radley criticised “Geraldine” for its “long lines” that “rollick and jog along, scarcely connoting the state of mind of the young peasant-poet” (61), but the metre is appropriate to Bertram’s mood. The “young peasant poet” feels a pressing desire to recount the events of the poem: partly due to his embarrassment (both for his passion for Geraldine and his behaviour), and, partly, due to the urgency of the moment. This haste is viscerally evoked by the hurrying lines; it may have been this poem that Hayter had in mind when she conjured EBB’s distinctive voice: “the breathless, over-compressed thought hurrying out in hypermetric and equivalence lines with a richly varying caesura, a broken and impetuous rhythm like the mind behind it” (*Mrs. Browning* 24).

Traditionally, Bertram has aroused distaste in critics. Radley, for instance, wrote that, without a doubt, “the character of Bertram, so pallid, weak, and one-dimensional, is irritating” and that it is “difficult, if not impossible, to see how the imperious Lady Geraldine... could possibly love such a puny character” (62). But describing Bertram as “one-dimensional” demonstrates a lack of sensitivity to the contradictory responses he arouses. His self-righteousness is distasteful (and amusing), but it is tempered by pity for his circumstances and, perhaps, some admiration for the courage he has in expressing his convictions. Not only does EBB revel in her playful portrait of a polemic and socially rebellious, democratic poet (not wholly unlike, it should be said, herself), but she also highlights the ignoble situation in which the poor find themselves in highly stratified societies. Bertram feels deeply the wrong of inherited position and wealth, but EBB demonstrates here how any attempt to enlighten his more fortunate companions, those wealthy and privileged friends of Geraldine who comprise her entourage at Wycombe Hall,

comes off, as petty didacticism and unpleasantness. Even Bertram realises this after his ill-considered attack on the truly noble Geraldine. In this way, EBB not only celebrates Geraldine's and Bertram's ascendancy over the prevailing cultural norms that dictate the union of social "equals," she also illuminates the rotten structures that support these conventions and the effect that they have on those balanced precariously on top. Reading the ballad involves engaging in a struggle between the disagreeable, even obnoxious, elements of Bertram's character, and the real social evil that his plight illuminates, and appreciating both dimensions of this "double poem."

According to Linda Lewis, the latter two ballads, "Bertha in the Lane" and "Lady Geraldine's Courtship," are less didactic and "more detached" than EBB's earlier poems, "allowing the *reader* to react with resentment or approval" (79). However, I do not believe that the ballads that EBB wrote prior to these two are as "didactic" as Lewis's comment implies. Each ballad discussed in this chapter accommodates, to some extent, competing interpretations. The "slipperiness" of the ballads' intentions, and their capacity to convey multiple narratives, is frequently attributable to the ambiguous nature of the characters and narrators, to whom our responses are complicated, often ambivalent. The unreliable nature of their speech, their purposeful duplicity or plain untrustworthiness, makes reading the ballads in which they speak a complicated affair. It allows for the accommodation of diverse readings, which exist in tension one alongside the other. This openness of meaning is related not only to a "doubleness" of construction, in which the surface narrative frequently masks a subversive agenda, but to the poems' roots in popular traditional ballads, which also tend to exhibit an "impersonal attitude," as Gerould noted (8), and an "amoral earthiness," as Bold noted (46).

Unlike Mermin, I believe that EBB's "rebellion against social and literary convention" (*Origins* 94) in these ballads is evident when the rhetoric of the speakers, the use

of refrains, the metre, and imagery are scrutinised. I must also diverge from her suggestion that EBB's adoption of medieval settings failed: "Elizabeth Barrett's ballad[s] investigate the resources of medievalism...and reject it as nostalgic folly" (*Origins* 94). This "resource" enhanced the appeal of EBB's early ballads for a conservative reading public, while allowing for the development of tensions between the readers' expectations of ballads and the subversive content contained in EBB's.

The ballads discussed in this chapter, especially "Lady Geraldine's Courtship," and their folk ancestors seem to have facilitated EBB's composition of the *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (the *Sonnets*), the subject of the next chapter. Two of the most important elements that they share are the presentation of strong female characters, and the unashamed expression of female desire. As Bold observed, "the popular ballads display a frank sensuality" and are "uninhibited, totally free of the literary tradition of courtly love where the woman is an untouchable goddess and the man a willing supplicant before her virginal majesty. In the ballad the lovers are lusty and sexually active" (48-49). These qualities, which are also found in EBB's literary ballads, are strongly evident in the *Sonnets* and it would, therefore, seem plausible to assert that they had a significant influence on EBB's depiction of a desiring female speaker in this work. Here, as we will see in the next chapter, EBB quite freely represents female sexual passion – much like that of a ballad woman.

Furthermore, Byron has made the interesting observation that "Lady Geraldine's Courtship" was the first poem in which "Barrett Browning confounds the traditional roles of lover and beloved...and the speaker alternately appears as both active speaking subject and silent passive object" (Byron, *Poetry of Love* 73). According to Byron, this tactic foregrounded later poems "by suggesting an interchangeability of roles in the lovers' relationship and showing a hero and heroine who are equally suited to the roles of both lover and beloved" (*Poetry of Love* 58). Thus, "Lady Geraldine's Courtship," in particular,

presages the amatory sonnet sequence in terms of its female speaker (although in the ballad the speaker is male). Several critics have discussed the way that EBB disturbs the traditional roles of lover and beloved in this poem,<sup>28</sup> and Dolores Deluise and Michael Timko have described how Bertram resembles the female speaker of the *Sonnets* (94-95).<sup>29</sup>

But there are other elements that link EBB's early ballads and the *Sonnets*: the unusual and violent images,<sup>30</sup> the conversational quality of both works – both in the dialogue that they incorporate and in the nature of the speakers' voices, and the modern subject matter. The modern nature of "Bertha in the Lane" and "Lady Geraldine's Courtship," in particular, espoused in vignettes of contemporary Victorian life is reflected in the *Sonnets*' "unabashed depiction of a contemporary setting and small events of ordinary life" (Mermin, *Origins* 129). As Mermin asserted, after "Lady Geraldine's Courtship," the *Sonnets* are EBB's second attempt at a "novelistic poem of modern life" (*Origins* 129).

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<sup>28</sup> Cooper (90-95), Byron (*Poetry of Love* 54-62), Williams (193), and Mermin who wrote that they are "interchangeable" because they are avatars of the same person (*Origins* 110). Mermin stated that EBB "attempts to split her identification between a male poet and a female object, to equalize the two figures and participate equally in both" (*Origins* 110).

<sup>29</sup> They both exhibit "loneliness and separateness," excruciatingly self-deprecatory self-descriptions, and they both appear to have weak nerves, fainting in reaction to an "intimidating emotion" (Deluise and Timko 94-95).

<sup>30</sup> According to Bold, the two most common subjects of folk ballads are "sex and violence" (46).

*Sonnets from the Portuguese*

In EBB's sonnet "The Soul's Expression" (*Poems*, 1844) the speaker confronts the torturous challenge of profound self-expression:

This song of soul I struggle to outbear  
 Through portals of the sense, sublime and whole,  
 And utter all myself into the air.  
 But if I did it, – as the thunder-roll  
 Breaks its own cloud, my flesh would perish there,  
 Before that dread apocalypse of soul. (9-14)

Alison Chapman detected a wariness of the sonnet form on EBB's part in this vivid description of "struggle." According to Chapman, "The Soul's Expression" articulates the poet's caution regarding the "cost of the sonnet epiphany," which she likens to "a self-immolation" (102). Certainly, EBB's description of her successful self-utterance as "that dread apocalypse of soul" (14) contains a pungent note of fear, but it seems that EBB resolved – to an extent – the anxieties that Chapman identified here with the *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (the *Sonnets*). In this chapter, I suggest that the recession of this fear was due to a concomitant shift in her use of and expectations for the genre. Instead of employing it as a complete and definitive expression of her soul, in the conventional mode of the subjective lyric voice, she harnessed the sonnet form to record a dialogue that reflects a reciprocal love.

In the *Sonnets*, EBB re-visioned both the conception of the amatory sonnet sequence and the poetic form itself. She extinguished the conventional trope of distance that, in the work of Petrarch and others, helped to perpetuate the sonnet cycle, developing a distinctive "conversational" mode of lyric composition, which celebrates reciprocity over subjective outpouring. I should be clear at this early point that when I refer to the concept of "conversation" in EBB's *Sonnets* I intend an exchange, the definition of which exceeds that

of two or more people speaking to each other and responding. Instead, I mean to refer to dialogue in a broad sense, whether conducted in person, via written correspondence, or through the sort of lyric exchange that EBB creates here.

Leighton stated that on writing an amatory sonnet sequence EBB “trespass[ed] on a male domain,” entering “into a tradition in which the roles are sexually delineated: there is the man who speaks, and there is the woman who is admired, described, cajoled and pleaded with from a distance” (*Elizabeth Barrett Browning* 98). Typically, the desired woman remains impervious to the poet’s ardour and, as a consequence, she guarantees the prolongation of the work (*Elizabeth Barrett Browning* 98). However, in EBB’s case, Leighton rightly asserted that the sonneteer had to respect Robert’s disinclination “to be cast in the role of the superior muse” (*Elizabeth Barrett Browning* 98-99). In her analysis, EBB combated the impulse to establish him as such “by interchanging her images of Robert, or else by protectively excluding him altogether from the strong and self-sufficient atmosphere of her love” (*Elizabeth Barrett Browning* 99). While I agree with Leighton’s premise, I wish to expand on her rather limited conclusions. She claimed that a declaration of love, such as that found in Sonnet X: “*I love thee .. mark! .. I love thee!*” (6), has “no need of an answer,” that it “confirms its meaning independently” (Leighton, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning* 100-01).<sup>31</sup> By presenting herself as “both poet and muse,” Leighton wrote, EBB creates the impression “of verbal self-sufficiency and self-confidence. The beloved is there, but he is not exactly needed” (*Elizabeth Barrett Browning* 102). But this reading fails to account for the fact that the entire sequence presents the speaker’s beloved as an interlocutor and that it is predicated on his participation in a dialogue with the speaker.

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<sup>31</sup> Byron concurred with Leighton with reference to Sonnet X: the “speaker brings about her own transformation simply by allowing herself to love” (*Poetry of Love* 84). However, Byron also recognised that it is the beloved who “provides her with the strength and vitality necessary to effect her own transformation” (*Poetry of Love* 85).



In contrast to Leighton, Mermin described EBB as doubling the conventional roles within the amatory sonnet sequence: “[t]here are *two* poets in the poem, and *two* poets’ beloveds, and its project is the utopian one of replacing hierarchy by equality” (*Origins* 130). Thus, the speaker adopts the role of both lover and, reluctantly, beloved (Mermin, *Origins* 130). However, Mermin famously suggested that there is a “problem” inherent to this situation: because the female speaker adopts the guise of the “traditionally humble lover” she must undermine her own beauty and, therefore, the “necessary premise of the sonnet sequence” (*Origins* 131).<sup>32</sup> Mermin acutely observed how, when the attributes of the “traditional poet-wooer,” who is “pale and weary from unsatisfied desire,” are transferred to a female speaker, the reader experiences discomfort at her adoption of these signifiers of male desire (*Origins* 131). In the end, readers “turn from a sight that violates both literary and social decorum: an unmistakably Victorian woman in the humble posture of a courtly lover” (Mermin, *Origins* 131).

This critique appears to have its origins in Hayter’s earlier monograph in which she criticised EBB’s *Sonnets* for being “written by a mature invalid woman” – not a young man – and, therefore, for expressing a too particular, too individual experience of love (*Mrs. Browning* 105).<sup>33</sup> As Mermin did after her, Hayter described the *Sonnets* as creating a feeling of discomfort in the reader because of the unlikely marriage of content and form. Hayter claimed that on those occasions when the speaker “turns over his letters in her lap or describes how he kissed her hair,” the reader “has Peeping Tom sensations” – although she acknowledged that she did not experience this when reading the courtship correspondence (Hayter, *Mrs. Browning* 105). Hayter attributed this anomalous circumstance to the fact that

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<sup>32</sup> Mermin first published these ideas in “The Female Poet and the Embarrassed Reader” in which she argued that the awkwardness critics and readers have felt in reading EBB’s *Sonnets* is produced by the fact that the sequence’s “female speaker produces painful dislocations in the conventions of amatory poetry” by filling “roles that earlier love poetry had kept separate and opposite: speaker and listener, subject and object of desire, male and female” (352).

<sup>33</sup> In sharp contrast to Radley who, while acknowledging their highly personal nature, argued that “their universality makes them appeal to almost every man and woman” (91).

the letter is the “proper” medium for the intimate communication of loving details, whereas “so much informality and immediacy are incongruous” to the sonnet (*Mrs. Browning* 105-06).

Sarah Paul addressed Mermin’s construction of the “problem” inherent to the *Sonnets* by suggesting that “the overweening self-effacement of the speaker...derives from a conviction shared by Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning that the ostensibly subservient role in a love relationship, that of the adoring but unworthy lover, is preferable at almost any cost to the role of adored angel” (77). This is, presumably, because the “adored angel” is traditionally silent and passive. Leighton mooted this argument earlier when she wrote that EBB’s “love explores a language of self-abasement that is paradoxically proud of its imaginative rights” (*Elizabeth Barrett Browning* 94). Like so many courtly lovers and sonneteers before her she “will not yield her right to be the less worthy, but therefore stronger, lover” (Leighton, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning* 94). And it has, since, been reiterated by Byron and Mermin.<sup>34</sup>

The above critics acknowledged the concerted nature of EBB’s undertaking to establish a female lyric voice of desire. However, both Paul’s and Leighton’s conception of the negotiation required by EBB’s enterprise foregrounds conclusions from which my analysis departs. Paul suggested that EBB simply reverses gender roles (79-80) – a gesture that would have proved insensitive towards Browning – and Leighton, as discussed above, while sensitive to the imperative *not* to erect Browning as muse, denies the beloved’s active role in the poetry.

I propose, instead, that the beloved’s participation is fundamental to the *Sonnets*, and in this I concur with Mermin, Stone and Stott. Mermin argued that, while the speaker

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<sup>34</sup> Mermin recognised that the “speaker’s humility and self-denigration should not be taken quite at face value” because they are conventional qualities of a “desiring subject” (*Origins* 133); Byron asserted that the poems shouldn’t be criticised for being too self-deprecating since this stance allows her “to claim the stronger role of the lover and – by inference – to claim the voice of the poet” (*Poetry of Love* 72).

composes the poems, her beloved “draws them forth, both arousing her desire by his own in an endless circle, a seamless reciprocity, and validating her as desire’s object” (*Origins* 135). Stone also described the love depicted in EBB’s *Sonnets* as “reciprocal,” suggesting that the strategies by which EBB achieves equality between lover and beloved include “the representation of debate or exchange...striking gender reversals in imagery; rhetorical doublings linking speaker and beloved...and an emphasis on their shared identity as poets” ( “*Monna Innominata*” 65). Similarly, Stott wrote that EBB didn’t simply “reverse or invert” the traditional gender roles, but that she “level[led]” them (126). At the forefront of EBB’s *Sonnets*, which present – either explicitly or by inference – both the beloved’s and the speaker’s views on love, and which present both as poets, there is a “poetic-give-and-take.” As Shakkeh Agajanian has put it, “Robert Browning’s notion of love is also part of the dialogue” in the sequence (22).

Linked to this idea is Byron’s thesis regarding the traversing of distance in the sequence: “[i]n the traditional male lyric the roles of lover and beloved and the desire of the speaker for the object of his love are primarily dramatized by the trope of distance” (*Poetry of Love* 73-74). However, while EBB adheres to this convention, in suggesting the metaphorical separation of the lovers, “there is the sense of distance being overcome, space being eliminated, and of the sensuous touching and joining of lovers” (Byron, *Poetry of Love* 73-74). According to Byron, this impression is achieved using images of “breadth” and of “heights and depths” (*Poetry of Love* 74); I argue that it is, equally, a result of EBB’s poetics of reciprocity.

Because of this, I would like to focus on the dialogic poetics exhibited by EBB’s *Sonnets*.<sup>35</sup> By insisting upon the participation of the speaker’s lover, the *Sonnets* appear to be

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<sup>35</sup> I have purposefully borrowed this term from Bakhtin’s “dialogic imagination” – although Bakhtin, of course, believed that dialogism was characteristic of the novel, not of poetry. However, at the core of my thesis is the idea that poetry too can be distinguished by the “dialogic imagination” and that is why I have adopted the term

less solipsistic than those of her male predecessors. Other sonneteers, such as Sidney, have suggested dialogue in and around their sequences, but I argue that EBB's *Sonnets* are more thoroughly permeated by dialogue. In a negative vein, Hayter observed how many of the poems exhibit the "tone of speech," noting the intimate addresses, the imperatives, the use of questions and exclamations at the opening of the sonnets, the "broken sentences," her "frequent italicized words" (which "give the insistent emphasis of spoken language"), her "bracketed phrases," and her inconsistent use of images (*Mrs. Browning* 106). Stott has remarked upon these same qualities in a more positive light, suggesting that the courtship correspondence influenced EBB's "use of the sonnet" in terms of its "conversational" quality and its "unique overlap between written and spoken discourse" (121-22). Stott identified some of the features of the *Sonnets* that evoke "an intimate and intense ongoing conversation" between speaker and beloved: rhetorical questions in the opening lines of the sonnets; direct address; "the interjections and metrical freedoms and deliberate elisions"; "the claims and counterclaims"; "the pairing of paradoxes"; and punning (122-23).

Natalie Houston also considered EBB's construction of a "rhetorical space of conversation" in the *Sonnets* (8), although she analysed this in the context of the sonnet's reputation as "a vehicle for truthful revelations" among Victorians (3-4). Houston argued that EBB's *Sonnets* achieve the impression of "sincerity and spontaneity" that her contemporaries attributed to the sonnet (3-4) via a rhetoric that "presents them [the poems] as part of a conversation," and she examined EBB's strategies: her use of direct address, her reference to particular events that ground the *Sonnets* in a lived reality, references to the courtship letters, and her use of colloquial language (8-9).

However, what troubles me with Houston's commentary is the reductive implication that EBB's conversational poetics were deliberately fashioned in order to "affect

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"poetics of reciprocity" for EBB's work. I explain more about the usefulness of Bakhtin in the introduction to my third and final chapter.

authenticity,” and, therefore, to conform to prevailing Victorian notions regarding the sonnet. Not only does the private nature of the *Sonnets*’ rhetoric appear to negate the imperative to feign “authenticity” within the text, but such a conformist objective does not provide a sufficient explanation for EBB’s radical project – especially given the poet’s eagerness to flout convention. Furthermore, EBB’s sonnet sequence was the first of the Victorian amatory sonnet cycles and was, therefore, an innovation, that possibly (quite probably) contributed to fostering Victorian sensibilities with reference to the sonnet and sonnet sequence. I would suggest, instead, that EBB’s conversational poetics are a well-considered repudiation of the Petrarchan trope of distance, as Houston suggested elsewhere (10), as well as a tactic for overcoming the reliance upon commonplace literary representations of love. According to this account, it is the conversational thrust of the poems that motivates them, replacing the perpetuating function of distance. The exchange inherent to dialogue propels the speaker forward.

Rhian Williams put it well when she wrote that the *Sonnets* avoid the “lyrical ideology of one speaking voice,” seeking instead “to establish expressive modes that are predicated on mediation and exchange” (4). However, Williams has focused on “silence” in the sequence, proposing that silence signalled “moments of emotional profundity in loving terms” in the courtship correspondence (4). Admittedly, there is a conflict between the way EBB establishes the *Sonnets* as a conversation and the fact that she seems to have believed that passionate emotions – whether love or hopeless grief – were best expressed through silence.<sup>36</sup> However, perhaps because of this, EBB found a dialogic approach particularly useful in exploring her love for Browning, since it entailed relying on a mutual act rather than on a “self-immolating” attempt at self-expression.

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<sup>36</sup> C.f. for example, the sonnet “Grief”: “Deep-hearted man, express / Grief for thy Dead in silence like to death” (8-9) and “Sonnet XII”: “let the silence of my womanhood / Commend my woman-love to thy belief” (9-10). Also, consider the way in which EBB was never able to discuss the deaths of loved ones with the living.

Williams, on the other hand, denied the conversational quality of the sequence. She observed that, when speech does occur, it is identified by quotation marks, signifying that “the rest of the sonnet is implicitly designated as silent” (7). I contend, more simply, that quotation marks indicate directly reported speech – a possibility that Williams does not address – as opposed to the “talk” of their letters and remembered (or imagined) conversation. Williams also suggested that “the fact that these moments are so explicitly marked on the page indicates their writerly, as much as their spoken quality” and that the difference between “the spoken” and “the written” is, thus, effaced (8). Perhaps this is a result of the nature of EBB’s habitual communication with friends – the fact that she engaged in written dialogue with them, via letters, more frequently than in spoken dialogue. But Williams’ point obfuscates the significance of *dialogue* in the *Sonnets* – whether it is spoken, written, silent, remembered, or imagined.

Williams and I arrive at similar conclusions regarding the lyric speaker; she stated that the “sonnet as lyric must radically alter when it is prompted by conjugality rather than distance... [i]t is a replacement of the subjective self with a social act” (14). However, while Williams defined this “social act,” rather vaguely, as their “nearness” (14), I interpret it, more specifically, as the dialogue between the speaker and her beloved. Whereas Williams concluded that “silence... is a dynamic mark, tracing an energetic rethinking of the terms of speaking lyrically” (15), I conclude that it is the reciprocal poetics of the *Sonnets* that characterises the radical departure from a conventional lyric speaker. And whereas Williams claimed that “those sonnets that speak most intimately to the marital bond are also those that seal themselves into the page as their rhythmic and rhyming logic defies translation into speech” (16), I would argue that the inherently *oral* effects conveyed by the rhythm and rhyme are essential to the poetry.

A dialogic poetics may have provided EBB with a useful way of bypassing the literary clichés associated with the representation of romantic love. In the sequence, EBB “persistently draws our attention to the way in which speech and writing...not only fashions experience, but also traps it in tropes, conceits, and metaphors” (Stott 145). In Sonnet XIII, for example, “the speaker addresses her lover as a *writer*, commanding him to find new ways of expressing his love” in order to avoid its calcification (147). With reference to the intertextuality of the poems, David Riede commented that EBB “was well aware that her language, coming so late in the tradition, would inevitably refer not to her unique feeling but to other texts” (125) – thus concurring with Leighton’s thesis in “Stirring a dust of figures.” Riede wrote that instead of abandoning “the solipsistic security of her isolated inner world,” the speaker “draws the lover into her inner world as a phantasmal image of herself” (126). However, by the end of the sequence, this “phantasmal lover” is superseded by “an external and autonomous individual” when the speaker exchanges a “melancholy eros” for a “physical one” (Riede 129). Byron and Mermin have made similar observations. Byron wrote that in the first five sonnets EBB moves from “a solipsistic fascination with grief, isolation, and prospective death towards an eager acceptance, then a subsequent celebration, of the more vigorous and physical attraction of life, love, and the beloved” (*Poetry of Love* 77). And Mermin posited that the sonnet sequence “subsumes a life-denying attachment to death into a new, living love, a gradual reconnection with the natural cycles of regeneration and the human community” (*Origins* 129-30). I will focus on the way EBB forged a new mode of expressing love in a literary, and more literal, fashion that reflects this renunciation of a solipsistic lyric voice in favour of a more interpersonal, engaged approach.

While Loy Martin has suggested that the sequence should be considered a dramatic monologue, and while I agree with many of the points he made in support of this thesis, I do not believe that this is the single most helpful way to think of them, at least not without

qualification.<sup>37</sup> Martin reasoned that “each poem is an open-ended continuation of multiple contexts of speech”: the speech that is typical of sonnets, and the speech that is typical of “calling and answering” (173). Thus, in the *Sonnets* “[l]iterary language and ordinary language have been made one, and the age-old separation in dramatic literature between actor and auditor has been suspended” (Martin 173).

While what I have proposed above (and will examine below) closely accords with these statements, I think that Martin ignored the multiple ways in which EBB’s sonnets conform to, or remind us of, the traditional conventions of the amatory sonnet sequence and, therefore, indicate that they are intended to be read in light of this context. EBB does, after all, use Petrarch’s second most-favoured rhyme scheme throughout, some of the sonnets conform perfectly to the structural requirements of the Petrarchan sonnet, while many others display a *volta* (even if it does not occur in the correct place), the metre is easily recognisable as iambic pentametre (that most commonly used for English language sonnets), and there are – as Moore and Neri have pointed out<sup>38</sup> – many allusions to, and revisions of, Petrarchan conceits. In the end, one artificially narrows EBB’s intentions by disavowing the significance of this literary-historical context, and, therefore, fails to recognise the complexity and daring of her project.

In “Singing Song for Song” Corinne Davies and Marjorie Stone provided a key to my approach. Here, the critics referred to Browning’s preface to *Paracelsus* in which he “empowers his readers to don the poet’s ‘Crown’ while their ‘intelligence,’ ‘sympathy,’ and ‘co-operating fancy’ involves them in the co-production of the poem” (Davies and Stone

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<sup>37</sup> In *Browning’s Dramatic Monologues and the Post-Romantic Subject*.

<sup>38</sup> In her book *Desiring Voices: Women Sonneteers and Petrarchism*, Moore noted that EBB “evokes Petrarch through her use of the sonnet sequence, her allusions to Petrarchan themes, and her titular allusion to a Renaissance sequence” and that she “chooses this ideology as her frame, and for good reason: Petrarchism contains, and even may have created, some of the constructs of female worth that Barrett Browning’s sonnets name and transcend” (164). Neri considered EBB’s Petrarchism in “A Lineage of Love: The Literary Bloodlines of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Sonnets from the Portuguese*.”



160). Browning's preface is then used to interpret his reference to his wife's *Sonnets* as a "strange, heavy crown":

The idea of a "co-operating fancy" that RB describes here is very interesting, since it breaks down the distinction between poet and reader...in complex ways. As a result, it makes the realization of the poetic text a collaborative enterprise – with the "crown" serving as a metaphor for the successful bridging of the perceptual "chasms" between poet and reader – and not (as one might normally expect) a metaphor for the achievement of the "solitary genius." To return to RB's comment on EBB's *Sonnets*, I think he finds this crown "heavy" not because of gender anxiety but because all poetry is demanding. He recognizes his own role in poetic production as both EBB's audience and her collaborative partner. (161)

Knowing that Browning may have considered himself as a participant in the *Sonnets* further justifies my focus on the sequence's conversational poetics. This chapter contains a discussion of two principal features of these poems: first, EBB's re-visioning of the sonnet form itself and the distinctive female lyric voice that she constructed, and, secondly, her conception of the sonnet sequence itself.

The impression of a conversation between two poets is conjured, in the first place, by the speaker's distinctive lyrical voice – a voice that negates many of the formal conventions of sonnet-writing. Hayter, who was otherwise a highly sympathetic critic of EBB's, was dismissive of this aspect of the *Sonnets*, writing that "the straining muscles and suffused countenance of the prisoner in the strait-jacket are a little apparent" (*Mrs. Browning* 107). However, while she did not admire the unconventional voice of the *Sonnets*, Hayter recognised the way in which many of the poems exhibit the "tone of speech," commence with a "question or an exclamation," and are composed of run-on, "broken sentences" (*Mrs.*

*Browning* 106). Furthermore, she wrote that EBB's "frequent italicized words give the insistent emphasis of spoken language" and that her use of parenthesis "indicate[d] a change of intonation" (Hayter, *Mrs. Browning* 106). These observations are crucial, penetrating EBB's intentions in writing her amatory sonnet sequence. I would, therefore, like to explore four ways in which EBB imitates "spoken language" in the *Sonnets*: her blurring of the distinct structural elements of the sonnet form and her heavy use of enjambment, her construction of convoluted syntax, her experiment with rhyme, and her use of metre to convey the speaker's emotion.

The speaker of the *Sonnets* usually fails to contain her thoughts within the spaces delineated by the Petrarchan sonnet: the two quatrains that comprise the octave, and the two tercets that comprise the sestet. Instead, she effaces the boundaries between the distinct sections of the sonnet – not only between quatrain and tercet, but also between octave and sestet. Hayter accused EBB of being unaware of her lack of conformation to these strictures. She observed that EBB "failed" to adhere to the strict structure dictated by the Petrarchan form, claiming that "her thought, like her actual lines, overran from the first quatrain to the second, and very often from the octave into the sestet as well" (*Mrs. Browning* 107). However, other critics have acknowledged this to be a purposeful element of EBB's composition. Jerome Mazzaro, for instance, interpreted EBB's "violations to form" as indicating that her "emotions or thoughts are in excess of or different from what convention allows" (167-68). But EBB's disregard for the sonnet's divisions may also be interpreted as an attempt to align the pattern of the form more closely with that of natural speech, reflecting the more amorphous nature of the language typical of ordinary conversation.

While Petrarch, as Michael Spiller noted, frequently disregards the minor divisions between quatrain and tercet, he "almost always respects the major break between octave and sestet" (50). But EBB dismantled even this partition. In fact, of the 44 sonnets, only seven

conform to the requirement that there be a clear division between octave and sestet. Often the sestet will begin halfway through line 9 (half a line too late); sometimes, as in Sonnets IX, XIX, and XLI, the order of octave and sestet appears to be reversed; at other times, as in Sonnets XXIII, XXVIII, and XXXIX, EBB seems to have grafted a Shakespearian sonnet (although not a very “correct” one) onto the Petrarchan rhyme scheme; and, at other times, there is no volta, only one continuous, fluidly expressed thought. Petrarch, Spiller wrote, recognised a strong duality in his sonnets, insisting “both on the ephemeral immediacy of his speech” and the “permanence of the documents that carry that speech” (60). EBB appears to have enhanced the former quality – the sonnet’s “immediacy” – while obviously unable to completely obfuscate the latter. This “immediacy” contributes to the representation of spontaneous conversation that defines the *Sonnets*.

Closely related to this element of EBB’s composition is another – her heavily enjambed verse: around half of the lines per sonnet, on average, overflow into the next one. Spiller discussed Herbert’s (and Donne’s) composition of enjambed verse as “the dramatising of the pressure of speech in a new way” (179). He remarked that “the Romantic sense of the pressure of energy against form” was initially cultivated by those sonneteers who experimented in “run[ning] syntax against metrics” (Spiller 183). This analysis applies well to EBB’s own considered use of enjambment. In the *Sonnets*, “the sense of pressure against form,” which is reminiscent of Hayter’s strait-jacketed prisoner, relates to EBB’s evocation of natural speech, which does not restrict units of sense to a pre-determined number of syllables.

EBB’s refusal to compartmentalise the thoughts that comprise her verse is linked to a purposeful construction of convoluted syntax. This includes her use of brackets, dashes, and ellipsis to insert sub-clauses and digressions common in speech. Spiller identified this as a feature common to Milton’s sonnet-writing. However, Milton’s use of suspension was,

according to Spiller, designed to slow the reader and to instil the verse with a sense of gravitas (193), whereas EBB appears to have been attempting the opposite impression. Her serpentine sentences imitate natural speech patterns, and the organic, rather than linear, propulsion of thoughts that these represent.

Describing the impression produced by lines in the *Sonnets*, Stott wrote that they “mimic the cut and thrust of internal monologue or spoken conversation with all its fragmentary, elliptical qualities and questions and answers turning in and back upon themselves” (124), and Sonnet II is a good example of this. Here, Mazzaro observed how the poem “displays confusion and incoherence. Phrase is piled upon phrase, and orderly progressions of thought are twice interrupted by qualifying parenthetical matter” (although he associated this with an attempt to conjure a sense of the sublime, not with a dialogic lyric condition – 172). The octave comprises a single sentence:

But only three in all God’s universe  
 Have heard this word thou has said, – Himself, beside  
 Thee speaking, and me listening! and replied  
 One of us .. *that* was God .. and laid the curse  
 So darkly on my eyelids, as to amerce  
 My sight from seeing thee, – that if I had died,  
 The death-weights, placed there, would have signified  
 Less absolute exclusion. (1-8)

God, aware of the budding love between the speaker and her suitor, has “punished” the former by removing her beloved from her sight; the speaker notes that God’s curse is more powerful in preventing their union than even Death could be. However, the interjections at l. 2: “Himself, beside / Thee speaking, and me listening,” and at l. 4: “*that* was God,” disrupt the sentence, and our fluid understanding of it. Furthermore, the final conditional clause,

“that if I had died...” (6), arrives once the speaker has reached her conclusion and introduces a further qualification to the previous six lines. It exacerbates the complicated nature of this tortuous explanation of why the lovers must be parted (divine intervention), suggesting that the speaker’s death would exclude her from her lover less finally than God’s ‘nay.’

In Sonnet XX the octave is, again, comprised of a single sentence that encroaches half a line into the sestet:

Beloved, my Beloved, when I think  
 That thou wast in the world a year ago,  
 What time I sate alone here in the snow  
 And saw no footprint, heard the silence sink  
 No moment at thy voice, .. but, link by link,  
 Went counting all my chains, as if that so  
 They never could fall off at any blow  
 Struck by thy possible hand, ... . why, thus I drink  
 Of life’s great cup of wonder! (1-9)

This long sentence commences with the thought that the speaker’s beloved was “in the world a year ago” (2) and then, at this temporal indication, shifts abruptly to a description of her situation the preceding year. For six lines she digresses, as often happens in speech when someone is distracted by a subordinate idea, the need for further clarification, or the provision of context. The speaker remembers her isolation and obliviousness until she is, abruptly, brought back to her original premise (at the dash in l. 8) and finishes that train of thought – it fills her with wonder that she was unable to recognise the signs of his existence “a year ago.”

In Sonnet XXVIII, the speaker’s expression is interrupted by remarks separated by ellipsis that interrupt the principal clause, while vividly evoking her presence:

This said, .. he wished to have me in his sight  
 Once, as a friend: this fixed a day in spring  
 To come and touch my hand . . . a simple thing,  
 Yet I wept for it! – this, .. the paper’s light ..  
 Said, *Dear, I love thee*; and I sank and quailed  
 As if God’s future thundered on my past. (5-10)

Here is another long sentence that, in this case, takes the form of a list delineating what several different letters from the beloved communicated. Interestingly, the disruptive phrases – “a simple thing” and “the paper’s light” (inserted via ellipsis) – seem to function as asides to a friend (or perhaps the reader), thus emulating a monologue delivered to an interlocutor or a theatrical soliloquy. Although this one sentence has been carefully composed, it mimics the artless construction that characterises speech. EBB’s sprawling syntax, here and elsewhere, is another way in which the poet imitates one half of a dialogue with her verse.

In “*Sonnets from the Portuguese and the Politics of Rhyme*” Margaret Morlier wrote that the “structure and rhyme scheme” of the *Sonnets* “recall the Petrarchan tradition, suggesting the idealized love that accompanies it,” while also observing that EBB “continued her use of odd rhymes” (97). In other words, EBB does not adhere to the Petrarchan rhyme scheme dogmatically, but, as she did throughout her career, she forces the incongruent rhymes that her contemporaries frequently regarded as heretical. Her object in doing so, in using discordant or otherwise odd rhymes, was, Morlier suggested, to develop a “poetic voice with rougher, more realistic contours than expected of a woman poet” (103). This accords well with what EBB herself wrote about her rhyming in correspondence. In a letter to Boyd, she insisted that ““imperfect rhymes relieve the ear from a monotonous impression. They are sanctioned by the practice of the most uniformly correct poets – by the *frequent* practice of Pope himself”” (qtd in Hayter, *Mrs. Browning* 45). In addition, writing to Mitford on

February 18, 1850, she jokingly asserted that her “incorrect rhymes” were intentional: “you must consider that the irregularity of these [rhymes] in a certain degree rather falls in with my system than falls out through my carelessness. So much the worse, you will say, when a person is *systematically* bad” (*Letters* 2: 436).

In the sestet of Sonnet X, for example, EBB disrupts the Petrarchan rhyme scheme by placing the triple assonant rhymes “nothing low” (9) and “loving so” (11) against “and show” (13). In the same section, she rhymes “creatures” (10) with “features” (12), before undermining the sequence by attempting to rhyme the previous two with “Nature’s” (14). In this passage, the speaker argues that “There’s nothing low / In love, when love the lowest: meanest creatures / Who love God, God accepts while loving so” (9-11), and the effect verges on mawkishness. However, this is combated by the rhyme, which, Morlier has argued, injects “an ironic twist” that “adds wit to the sentimental voice” (104).

EBB also defeats our expectations of the rhyme scheme in Sonnet IX. In this poem, she constructs the “a” rhyme of the octave around “what I can give” (1) and rhymes this with “renunciative” (4), “fail to live” (5), and “grieve” (8). The noticeable disjunction, heightened by the very regular nature of the first three rhymes, highlights the speaker’s act of mourning, jolting us by verbal dissonance into an engagement with this action. In the octave of Sonnet III we are similarly jarred by EBB’s attempt to rhyme “destinies” (2) with “look surprise” (3). Because these are the end rhymes of consecutive lines, the effect is particularly jangling, but it also reinforces the sense here:

Unlike are we, unlike, O princely Heart!  
 Unlike our uses and our destinies.  
 Our ministering two angels look surprise  
 On one another, as they strike athwart  
 Their wings in passing. (1-5)

Thus, the crudeness of the rhyme between “destinies” and “look surprise” aurally mimics the angels’ astonishment regarding the lovers’ incongruity, but also the dissimilarity between the speaker’s “uses” and “destinies,” compared to those of her beloved.

In Sonnet XXVIII the “c” rhymes in the sestet are feminine: “quailed” (9), “paled” (11), and “availed” (13). These rhymes display hypercatalexis, lending the end of each line a “dying fall” and the impression of frailty. The quavering that they elicit in the voice conjures the speaker’s weak knees on reading her beloved’s declaration of love in his letter to her: “this, .. the paper’s light .. / Said, *Dear, I love thee*; and I sank and quailed” (8-9).<sup>39</sup>

One final example of EBB’s inventive use of rhyme is contained in Sonnet XXIX. Here, EBB employs identical rhymes to comic effect, and as an echo of her demand. The speaker describes how her own thoughts threaten to suffocate the presence of her beloved: “...my thoughts do twine and bud / About thee, as wild vines, about a tree, / Put out broad leaves, and soon there’s nought to see” (1-3). EBB rhymes “thee” four times at the end of her lines – l. 6 in the octave, and all of the “d” rhymes in the sestet. While reinforcing the idea that her beloved needs to “Renew [his] presence” (8), by attempting to conjure him through the incantatory repetition of a personal pronoun that references him, it also sounds amusing in its excess and clumsiness of rhyme. Identical rhymes are, of course, considered to be “incorrect” in English language poetry. However, EBB’s very insistence on them here is amusing in its stubbornness, and it provides further support for Morlier’s thesis that her rhymes recover the *Sonnets* from sentimentality with an element of humour (104).

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<sup>39</sup> It is interesting to note how the speaker’s voice, with reference to rhyme, contrasts with those passages of speech imitating her beloved’s more “correct” music. For example in Sonnet XXXII, Morlier has observed how the end rhymes of the octave “alternate the near assonance (o) and near consonance (th) of ‘oath,’ ‘troth,’ ‘loathe,’ and ‘wroth’” and the “sonnet’s b-rhymes interrupt Petrarchan expectations by ‘moon,’ ‘too soon,’ ‘not one,’ and ‘out of tune.’” In contrast, the sestet, which describes the mastery of the speaker’s beloved’s music “modulates to correct rhymes”: “haste,” “placed,” and “defaced”; and “note,” “float,” and “dote” (104).



Disruptions to the expectations of Petrarchan rhyme, which occur frequently throughout the sonnet sequence, retrieve the speaker's voice from a flawless music, by insisting on a more natural, spoken aesthetic. Sharon Smulders wrote that the "ill" rhymes are intended to register the speaker's "struggle against a form that invalidates feminine subjectivity and, consequently, the expression of feminine desire" ("Medicated Music" 200). In a similar vein, Morlier argued, that "[t]hroughout the sequence, experiments like these ... reinforce the subversive project of representing a realistic feminine voice" (105). However, I would suggest that they insist upon the essentially conversational nature of the *Sonnets* by reinforcing meaning using an essentially oral tactic. Furthermore, although people are unlikely to rhyme their speech, EBB frequently and significantly departs from perfect rhymes so that the Petrarchan scheme is, relatively, unobtrusive.

EBB's lines are often densely packed, requiring elision and contraction in order to conform to the iambic pentameter scheme. Some suggestive examples include: "And what I *feel*, across the inferior features" (Sonnet X, 12) in which line EBB runs the final syllable of one word into the first of another (beginning with a vowel) twice: "**feel across**" and "**the inferior.**" Similarly, in this line: "Since sorrow hath shut me safe in love's divine" (Sonnet XV, 7) the last syllable of "sorrow" is linked with "hath." Sonnet XXI includes a third example: "To love me also in silence, with thy soul" (14) where the second syllable of "also" is blurred with the initial vowel sound of "in." In Sonnet XXX there are several examples, including the eighth line: "Perplexed, uncertain, since thou art out of sight," in which the vowel syllables of "thou" and "art" merge. And, in the penultimate sonnet, we read: "I love thee to the level of every day's" where the final syllable of "level" coalesces with the initial syllable of the monosyllabic "of".

This approach is reminiscent of Italian prosody according to which consecutive vowel sounds, irrespective of the division between separate words, are described as a single syllable.

In a letter to Boyd of August, 1844, EBB quoted a line (of her own poetry) to which she knew he objected: “It is tawny as Rhea’s lion” and commented: “I know (although you don’t say so) you object to that line. Yet consider its structure. Does not the final ‘y’ of ‘tawny’ suppose an apostrophe and apocope? Do you not run ‘tawny as’ into two syllables naturally? I want you to see my principle” (*Letters* 1:184).<sup>40</sup> This comment illustrates EBB’s prosodic principle and explains why her lines are denser, and contain more variation, than strict English iambic pentametre.

Hayter described EBB’s use of metre in the *Sonnets* as “lively but not lawless.” She supported this statement with the observations that most of the trisyllabic feet “can be better accounted for by elision” and that EBB “disciplined her fondness for anapaests and trochees into a smoothness appropriate to the sonnet” (*Mrs. Browning* 108). Other critics have noticed the way in which variations in the metre – especially the frequent pauses suggested by EBB’s idiosyncratic use of brackets, ellipsis, and dashes to interrupt sentences – mimic the spoken voice. Mermin wrote that the “variations of tone and rhythm...can shift in a flash from formal intensity to broken phrases of the speaking voice” (*Origins* 140), and Stott commented that EBB disrupts the rhythms of the verse, “showing for a moment the struggle with words, the catch of the imagined voice, pausing before it begins again” (124).

Byron has observed that the sonnets in the latter part of the sequence, in particular, are marked by a “faster and more vigorous rhythm which reflects her [the speaker’s] growing animation: the pounding of pulses, of the heart beat, of the blood” (*Poetry of Love* 85-86). However, my own examination of the metrical variations between sonnets in the sequence did not bear out the same conclusion. In fact, the concluding poems, which exhibit a sense of

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<sup>40</sup> In another letter, to Boyd, she shows a second aspect of her sympathy with Italian prosody over strict Italian prosody: “Certainly, if you count the syllables on your fingers, there are ten syllables in each line: of *that* I am perfectly aware; but the lines are none the less belonging to the species of versification called octosyllabic” because “the final accent and rhyme fall on the eighth syllable instead of the tenth,” concluding “*that* single circumstance determines the class of verse” (*Letters* 1:139-40) – as it does in Italian prosody.

secure, satisfying love, generally display a relatively smooth, regular metre compared with poems in the rest of the sequence. Apart from this observation, it seems to me that the rhythm of individual poems shifts back and forth throughout the sequence: sometimes it is a more regular, pedestrian, contemplative beat and, at other times, a more jagged, anxious measure, depending upon the thought or emotion that the speaker wishes to convey.

In Sonnet IV, for example, the metre is very regular, requiring no substitution of feet, nor contraction, nor elision of syllables. In order to conform to the iambic pentametre scheme so carefully, EBB has restricted her vocabulary and relied, principally, on monosyllabic (and disyllabic) words. The effect is one of restraint and of coolness, reflecting the speaker's intention of distancing herself from the "gracious singer of high poems" (2) whom she addresses:

Look up and see the casement broken in,  
The bats and owlets builders in the roof!  
My cricket chirps against thy mandolin.

Hush, call no echo up in further proof

Of desolation! there's a voice within

That weeps .. as thou must sing .. alone, aloof. (9-14)

In comparison to this example, the verse in Sonnet XV is metrically jagged, mimicking the unsettled state of the speaker's mind. The atmosphere of the poem, in which the speaker describes her sense of entrapment and her troubled acceptance of love, is claustrophobic. In the second half of the sonnet, especially, extra syllables necessitate the contraction and elision of words, and the increased density of the lines, their heaviness, effectively invokes the speaker's sense of enclosure, and lack of liberty:

Since sorrow hath shut me safe in love's divine,  
And to spread wing and fly in the outer air

Were most impossible failure, if I strove  
 To fail so. But I look on thee .. on thee ..  
 Beholding, besides love, the end of love,  
 Hearing oblivion beyond memory! (7-12)

In contrast to each of the previous examples, the variegated rhythm of Sonnet XXI reflects the excitement that the speaker feels in her increasingly happy acceptance of her role as both lover and beloved. It is worth quoting the sonnet in full because it displays, perhaps, the most interesting prosodic effects of the entire sequence:

Say over again, and yet once over again,  
 That thou dost love me. Though the word repeated  
 Should seem “a cuckoo-song,” as thou dost treat it,  
 Remember never to the hill or plain,  
 Valley and wood, without her cuckoo-strain,  
 Comes the fresh Spring in all her green completed.  
 Beloved, I, amid the darkness greeted  
 By a doubtful spirit-voice, in that doubt’s pain  
 Cry .. “Speak once more .. thou lovest!” Who can fear  
 Too many stars, though each in heaven shall roll –  
 Too many flowers, though each shall crown the year?  
 Say thou dost love me, love me, love me – toll  
 The silver iterance! – only minding, Dear,  
 To love me also in silence, with thy soul. (1-14)

In the first line the substitution of two anapaests (in the second and fifth foot) – although they could be elided away – reflects the speaker’s springing joy. The feminine endings, in lines 2, 3, 6, and 7 also seem to trip along, rather than lending a melancholic, “dying fall” (as

hypercatalectic endings are often considered to do). Similarly, the extra syllables in lines 8, 13, and 14 conjure an excited rush of spontaneous feeling that refuses to flatten itself into smooth iambs. Finally, in line 12, the emphatic fall of the beat causes the voice to mimic the exquisite tenderness and ardency of the speaker's feeling: "Say thou dost love me, love me, love me – toll".

In Sonnet XXX several of the lines require some thought regarding their proper scansion, those beginning "Beloved" and "Too vehement" being good examples. The confusion of the metrics here mirrors the disturbed state of the speaker's mind as she wonders whether the love she feels is an unrequited illusion. Interestingly, the first six lines of this poem are quite regular and only in the last eight is the rhythm disturbed:

...I hear thy voice and vow,  
 Perplexed, uncertain, since thou art out of sight,  
 As he, in his swooning ears, the choir's amen.  
 Belovèd, dost thou love? or did I see all  
 The glory as I dreamed, and fainted when  
 Too vehement light dilated my ideal,  
 For my soul's eyes? (6-14)

Ultimately however, especially in the final four sonnets, the rhythm becomes smoother as the speaker is reconciled to her new roles – as both lover and beloved – and is able to accept the attendant duties and responsibilities in tranquillity. In Sonnet XLII for instance, the speaker's unruffled mental state seems to be matched by an equally flawless rhythm:

I seek no copy now of life's first half:  
 Leave here the pages with long musing curled,  
 And write me new my future's epigraph, –

New angel mine, unhopd for in the world. (11-14)

In summary, EBB's conscientious evocation of diverse moods through her manipulation of rhythm aurally conjures the emotion of the speaker and causes this feeling to infiltrate the reader's voice, much as we allow our own emotion to modulate our speech.

At the level of the sequence, there are two aspects of EBB's conversational poetics that I will examine: the speaker's adoption of an addressee, and her construction of conversational threads, both externally and internally in relation to the sequence.

In his book-length study of the sonnet, Spiller noted that "Petrarch had established the principle of 'overview' in a sequence; in his first sonnet of the *Rime* and periodically throughout, he allows the narrating /I/" to evaluate its own "performance," concluding that the poetry was not as successful as he, Petrarch, had wished (146). This is most evident, perhaps, in Petrarch's prefatory sonnet, in which he addresses "You listening to the sound in scattered rhymes / of those sighs I sighed so to nourish my heart" (1-2). Here, he clearly implies a wide readership, and expresses his hope that he will find some "pity" and "pardon" for his uneven style "from those who've felt the pangs of love firsthand" (7-8). Thus, the speaker addresses itself to a literary public in a mode more rhetorical than conversational. In comparison, EBB addresses her concluding sonnet, which fulfils a parallel, reflective function, to her suitor. EBB's speaker personally invites her "Beloved" (1) to take, in exchange, "these thoughts which here unfolded" (6). Thus she implies that the reciprocal nature of these poems plays out between the two poets, and that these sonnets – unlike Petrarch's – are primarily destined for a single reader.

The private nature of the sonnet sequence envisaged by EBB's speaker is reinforced by her frequent and explicit reference to an addressee. In Daniel Karlin's book on the Brownings' courtship, he pointed out that forty-one of EBB's forty-four sonnets are addressed to the speaker's suitor (269) – a proportion that simply is not compatible with the

traditional idea of the inaccessible beloved as muse of the amatory sonnet sequence. The address “Beloved” appears to be the most common, occurring 16 times in 44 sonnets, and his – the beloved’s – role as interlocutor is reinforced by the abundance of possessive pronouns relating to him. Byron has remarked upon the way a proliferation of possessives, such as “My love, my own” (Sonnet XXXVIII), “serves to draw them [the speaker and her beloved] together linguistically” (*Poetry of Love* 78). Other examples include: “Thou hast thy calling to some palace-floor” (Sonnet IV, 1); “fling / Thy purple round me” (Sonnet XVI, 3-4); “when I read / Thy thought so in the letter” (Sonnet XXIII, 5-6); “that strong divineness, which I know / For thine and thee” (Sonnet XXXVII, 2-3); “thy divinest Art’s / Own instrument didst drop down at thy foot” (Sonnet XLI, 8-9). These direct appeals to an absent party suggest that the speaker is determinedly imagining herself in conversation with him, in other words, that the *Sonnets* are characterised by an exchange between two poets, rather than by an isolated, monologic lyric speaker.

In addition, the speaker’s frequent use of imperatives conjures an immediate bond between her and the man to whom she addresses her commands. Personal or possessive pronouns, or favourite epithets, may go unanswered, but these instructions, or requests, strongly suggest that the speaker envisages an intimate relationship with her audience (her beloved). She anticipates being able to elicit action from him because he is near enough, and willing, to respond. Often, in those sonnets that proceed her tentative acceptance of their relationship, for example, the speaker prompts him to behaviour that she believes is fitting of a lover: “If thou must love me, let it be for nought / Except for love’s sake only” (Sonnet XIV, 1-2); “Make thy love larger to enlarge my worth” (Sonnet XVI, 14); “Say over again, and yet once over again, / That thou dost love me”; (Sonnet XXI, 1-2) – although he must remember to “love [her] also in silence, with [his] soul” (Sonnet XXI, 14). In Sonnet XXXI, the speaker begs,

Ah, keep near and close,  
 Thou dovelike help! and, when my fears would rise,  
 With thy broad heart serenely interpose.

Brood down with thy divine sufficiencies. (9-12)

And in Sonnet XLII, she modestly requests that her beloved “write [her] new [her] future’s epigraph” (13). By addressing him thus, the speaker suggests that she and her beloved are holding an ongoing conversation in which there is a protracted negotiation regarding their duties towards one another as lovers, and this is the principal subject of the *Sonnets*.

The speaker constructs a dialogue both with her “Beloved,” by beginning a sonnet as though it were a response to words that he had spoken, and between sonnets, by allowing them to spill over into each other. Spiller observed that Sidney frequently “writes the sonnet...so that it appears to be one side of a conversation actually taking place, the reader, reduced to the status of eavesdropper, obligingly supplying the other” (110). However, in EBB’s *Sonnets*, it is the speaker’s suitor who “supplies the other,” and he is almost always “present.” Often, he is presented as having just spoken, in other words, as being an active participant in the conversation that produces this poetry.

In Sonnet XIII, for example, the speaker begins “And wilt thou have me fashion into speech / The love I bear thee” (1-2), suggesting that her lover has requested precisely this – that she articulate her love for him. The opening lines of the following sonnet: “If thou must love me, let it be for nought / Except for love’s sake only” (Sonnet XIV, 1-2), indicate that the speaker’s suitor has been expressing his love for her in ways that she finds unsatisfactory. The lines opening Sonnet XV: “Accuse me not, beseech thee, that I wear / Too calm and sad a face in front of thine” (1-2), tell us that the speaker’s suitor has been lamenting her gloomy looks. In Sonnet XVIII, she begins “I never gave a lock of hair away / To a man, Dearest, except this to thee” (1-2), responding to her beloved’s request for such in a way that implies



that she finds it disconcerting. And in Sonnet XXIII, the question – “Is it indeed so? If I lay here dead, / Would’st thou miss any life in losing mine?” (1-2) – rejoins, evidently, her beloved’s claim that life would lose its value without her presence. Finally, in Sonnet XXXIII, the speaker affirms: “Yes, call me by my pet-name! let me hear / The name I used to run at, when a child” (1-2), presumably answering her lover’s request to use this intimate address, or reacting to his having done so. There are many more examples, but this selection suggests how the speaker’s addressee, her beloved, is ever-present – not inaccessible to the speaker, even if inaccessible to us. Although his words are never transcribed, the speaker responds closely to what the beloved has said, or written to her, in a way that allows the reader to imagine what they were. Thus, the reader is lent a glimpse of a player who may be off-stage for most of this drama, but who, nonetheless, plays a central role in the evocation of an intimate and active dynamic between speaker and addressee.

Another way in which EBB emulates conversation in her sequence (and another way in which she plays with the conventions of the sonnet structure) is – as Stott has written – by “allowing some of the sonnets to spill over into others, beginning some as if they were the unfinished conversations of others or answers, just as spoken conversation constantly spills over the grammatical structures of sentences” (124). While the conventions of the sonnet sequence dictate that each poem is, generally, discontinuous, EBB tightly weaves them together. Each sonnet is an inextricable and integral part of a whole, more closely resembling a section of a poem, than a distinct poem in and of itself.

For example, Sonnet V links closely to Sonnet VI by the reiteration of an imperative, which affirms the dynamic between the two participants. The speaker ends the first of these companion poems by ordering her beloved to “Stand further off then! go” (14) and begins the successive one thus: “Go from me” (1). Sonnet X proceeds from Sonnet IX with a self-correction. The concluding line of Sonnet IX: “Beloved, I only love thee! let it pass” (14) is

countered by the statement “Yet, love, mere love, is beautiful indeed” (1) in Sonnet X. (Furthermore, Sonnet XI follows on from both of these by beginning with a conjunction – as EBB’s *Sonnets* so frequently do – that explicitly indicates their unity: “And therefore if to love can be desert, / I am not all unworthy” – 1-2). Sonnet XXIV could be read as though it were a continuation of Sonnet XXIII. In the former poem, the speaker promises to give up her “dreams of death” (9) in order to remain on earth with her beloved. The last two lines of the poem summarise this sacrifice: “I yield the grave for thy sake, and exchange / My near sweet view of Heaven, for earth with thee!” The first two lines of Sonnet XXIV resume, without interruption, the same theme – the speaker expresses her wish to isolate herself with her lover on earth: “Let the world’s sharpness like a clasping knife / Shut in upon itself” (1-2). Sonnets XXX and XXXI are similarly inextricable. In the first of the two, the speaker loses faith in her beloved in his absence and she asks “Will that light come again, / As now these tears come .. falling hot and real” (13-14). This question is happily (and immediately) answered in the proceeding sonnet, “Thou comest! all is said without a word” (1). Finally, the last line of Sonnet XXXIII is repeated – almost verbatim – as the first line of the following poem. The first of these companions concludes: “Yes, call me by that name, – and I, in truth, / With the same heart, will answer, and not wait” (14), and Sonnet XXXIV opens with almost precisely the same words: “With the same heart, I said, I’ll answer thee” (1).

These examples demonstrate the close interlocking of the *Sonnets*: EBB seems not to have envisaged them as entirely separate poems, but – as within the structure of individual sonnets – she has blurred their intervening boundaries. This approach could be interpreted as the result of her conception of the sequence as a record of dialogue, which comprises no separate components, but rather an organic intermingling of thoughts, questions, responses, and silences.

Another element that EBB's sequence shares with conversation is the internal cross-referencing of thoughts, arguments, and situations across sonnets. EBB achieves this impression by suggesting a train of thought, neglecting it for several (or more) sonnets, and retrieving it after an (apparently arbitrary) interval – as often happens in actual, conversation. While there is a gap of more than ten poems between them, both Sonnets XI and XXV treat the speaker's weary state (before her miraculous transformation) and they share a key image – that of the “heavy heart.” In the earlier poem, the speaker catalogues her unappealing features: “Cheeks as pale / As these you see, and trembling knees that fail / To bear the burden of a heavy heart” (2-4), and in the later sonnet, she begins with the final item here: “A heavy heart, Belovèd, have I borne / From year to year” (1-2). Thus, the speaker suggests that her “heavy heart” is one of the principal obstacles to union with her beloved – an idea supported by those sonnets in which she describes her “grief” as an insurmountable challenge to their love.

In Sonnet XVII, the speaker describes the superior power of her lover's music to transform:

#### Antidotes

Of medicated music, answering for  
Mankind's forlornest uses, thou canst pour  
From thence into their ears. (5-8)

Here she speaks of her beloved's music restoring mankind, but in Sonnet XXXII his music is presented as her personal “antidote.” Whereas, the speaker seemed “like an out of tune / Worn viol, a good singer would be wroth / To spoil his song with” (7-9), she realises that “...perfect strains may float / 'Neath master-hands, from instruments defaced” (12-13). In both poems the speaker describes her suitor's music as a powerful restorative, but, whereas

earlier in the sequence she envisaged him applying it to others, she eventually claims its invigorating power for herself.

Another good example from the latter half of the sequence is the way Sonnet XXXV picks up on a doubt originally expressed in Sonnet V. In the latter poem, the speaker presents her grief to the suitor in an almost defiant manner:

I lift my heavy heart up solemnly,  
As once Electra her sepulchral urn,  
And, looking in thine eyes, I overturn  
The ashes at thy feet. Behold and see  
What a great heap of grief lay hid in me. (1-5)

Because of the danger that the few “red wild sparkles” (6) present to the suitor, the speaker orders him away, “Stand further off then! go” (14), but as we approach the end of the sequence, the speaker has overcome her fear of endangering him. In Sonnet XXXIII, she pleads:

So let thy mouth  
Be heir to those who are now exanimate.  
Gather the north flowers to complete the south,  
And catch the early love up in the late. (9-12)

However, in Sonnet XXXV, the speaker is already reconsidering whether it is conceivable that her lover should be able to replace those loved ones no longer living, “Nay, wilt thou fill that place by me which is / Filled by dead eyes too tender to know change? / That’s hardest” (7-9). Instead of developing a coherent argument throughout the sequence, EBB chose to create a more organic exchange between poet and beloved in which elements such as the speaker’s doubt, which one might have expected had been expunged earlier in the sequence, re-emerges as late as Sonnet XXXV. This scattering of subject matter, which is introduced,

casually forgotten, and recuperated once more without pattern, is reminiscent of the eclectic and unstructured nature of actual dialogue.

One of the most obvious rebuttals to the above arguments would be that this sequence is littered with literary allusions, from Shakespeare, to Theocritus, to St. Paul, to EBB herself. Leighton's thesis is that EBB's *Sonnets* are distinguished by their self-conscious insertion into the tradition of amatory poetry: "[t]his is not a spontaneous, but a remembered and remote poetry of love haunted by figures stirring from another time, another literature" ("Stirring a Dust" 17). However, while a close reader of the *Sonnets* cannot fail to imbibe this heady atmosphere, Leighton's arguments do not fully account for the formal elements of the poetry. These allusions are prominent, but they represent, simply, another aspect of the rich tapestry of these sonnets – and one that does not contradict the pervasiveness of the dialogic poetics I have described. While I agree with Leighton that EBB's *Sonnets* constitute "a literary performance, rather than an autobiographical statement" ("Stirring a Dust" 13), I believe that the "literary performance" is the dramatic evocation of a conversation between speaker and beloved. Given the erudition of both the poet who wrote them and that of her interlocutor, it is not surprising that these images and allusions abound – as they do in the courtship correspondence.

I have argued that EBB's amatory sonnet sequence – the first of the Victorian era – displays a dialogic poetics that is based upon the speaker imagining herself in conversation with her lover. In her *Sonnets*, EBB revised the Petrarchan sonnet tradition by rejecting the "imperative" of distancing one's "beloved" in order to perpetuate the narration of unrequited love. Here, instead, she created an engaged lyric speaker that imagined herself in conversation with the object of her affection, thus developing a less solipsistic mode of sonnet-writing, and one which contained its own means of propulsion – the exchange inherent to conversation. In this conclusion, I echo Stott who wrote that EBB "turned the

sonnet sequence into something of a duet, as voice counterpoints voice inside and outside,” while maintaining “the individuality of the two speakers” (126).

Sonnet XXIX is, I believe, at the heart of the sequence and central to our understanding of the dialogic poetics fundamental to its conception:

I think of thee! – my thoughts do twine & bud  
 About thee, as wild vines about a tree, –  
 Put out broad leaves, . . . and soon there’s nought to see,  
 Except the straggling green which hides the wood.  
 Yet, O my palm-tree, be it understood  
 I will not have my thoughts instead of thee  
 Who are dearer, better! – Rather instantly  
 Renew thy presence! – As a strong tree should,  
 Rustle thy boughs, and set thy trunk all bare,  
 And let these bands of greenery which insphere thee,  
 Drop heavily down, . . . burst, shattered, everywhere! –  
 Because, in this deep joy to see and hear thee  
 And breathe within thy shadow a new air,  
 I do not think of thee . . . I am too near thee. (1-14)

Quoting this sonnet, Mermin claimed that “the poem never forgets that it is about two poets,” and that EBB “works out terms of reciprocity between poet lovers, starting with the assumption that lovers must be peers” (*Origins* 135). As Smulders put it, the female speaker of the poems is “a subject who elicits her lover’s cooperation to transform the conceptual structures that confine them both” (“Medicated Music” 206). Her objective, as described in this poem, is to achieve a symbiotic relationship in which both have space in which to speak

and write, and here the speaker explicitly disavows a desire to usurp this space entirely for herself.

Erik Gray has demonstrated how one of the universal features of the amatory sonnet sequence – its eternal frustration or sense of incompleteness – closely resembles the kiss. In a sonnet sequence, “no single sonnet can ever be conclusive, because words can never satisfactorily convey the beloved’s perfections or the poet’s love” and, thus, each sonnet gives birth to another attempt at a more complete communication, and the denial of its success (130). A kiss resembles the sonnet in that it “is both the result and the initiator of desire” – in other words, kissing is something, but it is “always a prologue to something more” (130). In EBB’s *Sonnets*, the desire for perpetuation might be seen to be mitigated by the passionate desire for exchange. The speaker engages in dialogue with her beloved and thus overcomes the distance, both physical and figurative, that does, initially, separate the two of them.

Unlike other amatory sonnet sequences, the *Sonnets* do conclude neatly with Sonnet XLIV in which the speaker offers her preceding poems as a gift to her beloved in celebration of their love. The finality of this concluding sonnet is pre-empted, in part, by the penultimate sonnet – Sonnet XLIII, “How do I love thee? Let me count the ways” (1). Here, the speaker “toll[s] / The silver iterance” (12-13) of her declaration of love, which she asked her lover to do in Sonnet XXI (Mermin, *Origins* 145). She also, finally, accedes to her beloved’s request, contained in Sonnet XII, to “fashion into speech” her love (Smulders 201). Thus, the penultimate sonnet neatly brings to a close the conversation between lover and beloved by attempting a definitive description of “How” the speaker loves. All that remains to be done, in Sonnet XLIV, is to present the blooms cultivated during the exchange between these two poets.

“Do I speak / And you not hear?”:

Addresses in “The Runaway Slave” and *Last Poems*

There is scant analysis of EBB’s *Last Poems* (1862) in full-length studies of the poet, with the exception of Byron’s *Elizabeth Barrett Browning and the Poetry of Love*. Byron was the first critic to ascribe a “measure” of thematic consistency to EBB’s posthumous collection, observing that in these poems the “primary motivation for speech is frustrated desire” (*Poetry of Love* 117-18). Love, Byron elaborated, is depicted as being distinguished by the “desire to possess and control,” and “the thwarting of this desire repeatedly results in bitterness, rage, and resentment” (*Poetry of Love* 135).

While this is certainly a key thematic link, the “desire to possess and control” may be symptomatic of a broader issue. The female speakers of many of EBB’s *Last Poems*, as well as the speaker of “The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point” (“The Runaway Slave”), struggle against the demand imposed upon them to fulfil diverse roles, which they are reluctant to assume. Linda Shires posited that EBB’s poetic identity was characterised by “cross-dwelling” – a concept that was defined by Charles Spinosa and Hubert Dreyfus (331). According to these theorists, “cross-dwelling” means being able “to dwell in more than one world” and to “see why the distinctions of each world make or made sense to the people living in them” (qtd. in Shires 331). Shires has argued that this notion is essential to the understanding of EBB, who successfully managed to negotiate her roles as “literary author and domestic priestess” (331). It may also be useful to reading many of the female speakers in EBB’s later ballads, which record the speakers’ varying degrees of success in occupying “incommensurate identities” (Shires 331).

While Margret, Luti, the “page,” and Bertha fail, miserably, to assume a satisfactory position in society, each resorting to suicide and, frequently, revenge, the women of “The Runaway Slave” and *Last Poems* are more potent speakers, and more existentially conscious



individuals. The female speakers in EBB's later ballads identify and articulate the difficulties inherent to their position, and the pressures exerted upon them, to an interlocutor who assumes a particular importance in being the recipient of the speaker's address.

Despite its limited and tangential application, Mikhail Bakhtin's essay "Discourse in the Novel" has been vital in suggesting my approach to EBB's later ballads. His suggestion that poetry was defined by the "unity of [its] language system," by its monologism (264), and the fact that a poem constitutes "a self-sufficient and closed authorial monologue, one that presumes only passive listeners beyond its own boundaries" (274), led me to consider the vital significance of addressees and interlocutors in EBB's poetry. As in "living conversation," in many of EBB's poems "every word is directed toward an *answer* and cannot escape the profound influence of the answering word it anticipates" (280). Whether or not the reader is privy to their response, the auditor or interlocutor acquires an especial significance.

These ideas, along with Slinn's discussion of a poetic theory based upon the idea of performativity, provide the theoretical platform for this discussion of EBB's "The Runaway Slave" and *Last Poems*. In *Victorian Poetry as Cultural Critique* Slinn asserted the imperative to discover a "model for poetry that would account for the interrelationship between intrinsic and extrinsic referentiality" – in other words, between formalist and socio-historical facets of poetry – as well as the role of the reader (14). He proposed a model based upon the concept of performativity, noting that the term "performative" has become rather general in application: "a language act that does something with words" (*Victorian Poetry* 15). In defining a more useful, more specific concept, Slinn identified four "interlocking strands": the idea of the performative act; its "enabling conditions" such as discursive continuity, iterability, and subject construction; its performance of and reference to itself; and the nature of language as a "constitutive process that is continuously and dynamically

formative” (*Victorian Poetry* 16-20). Through consideration of this concept, Slinn hoped to forge a “middle way” between the New Historical and New Critical approaches, in order to “attend to the material particularity of the poem, to its specifically textual as well as contextual requirements” (*Victorian Poetry* 24). What interests me most about Slinn’s definition of a performative act, with relation to EBB’s later ballads, is the “enabling conditions”: the way the circumstances of an utterance considerably influence the potency of that utterance.

My work also runs parallel to Stone’s article “Cursing As One of the Fine Arts,” in which she discussed the “range and ingenuity of Barrett Browning’s cursing” (cursing being an excellent example of one sort of performative – 155). Stone argued that EBB allied herself progressively closer with her cursing speakers, expressing “her increasingly interconnected political and feminist views with more radical directness and rhetorical sophistication in her later poems” (“Cursing” 157). Although in “The Runaway Slave” EBB distanced herself from the slave-speaker, framing the poem as a dramatic monologue, there is, as Stone pointed out, a clear sympathetic identification with her (“Cursing” 164). And, while those *Last Poems* that I examine are firmly situated in the private sphere, the rhetoric of the female speakers has considerable social implications as the women, in Slinn’s terms, frequently stage an “intervention...within the assumptions of male conventions about female sexuality” (“Elizabeth Barrett Browning” 52).

The investigation of contemporary, social issues contained within these poems leads me to a point on their form. Byron commented that, while many of the pieces in *Last Poems* are reminiscent of EBB’s early ballads, “none of them can correctly be identified as a ballad” (*Poetry of Love* 118). Poems such as “The Romance of the Ganges” have, according to Byron, been supplanted here by works that descend from “Bertha in the Lane.” In support of this statement, she noted that “six are monologues and two are dialogues” and argued that the

importance of narrative is superseded by a fuller psychological focus in *Last Poems*: “we are not presented with a series of tales, but with a collection of portraits” (*Poetry of Love* 118).

However, the distinction between portraiture and plot is not as stark as Byron suggested here: it is difficult to isolate a character from the stories within which it is embedded in order to paint its portrait. Furthermore, Stone has highlighted the features that EBB’s later ballads *did* share with those published in *The Seraphim* (1838) and *Poems* (1844): “the ironic manipulation of traditional ballad plots and motifs...the focus on female subjectivity and the conflicts of female desire, and the exploration of ideological links between the “female plots” shaping women’s lives and the gender plots of encompassing ideologies” (“Cinderella” 263).

It is important to consider these links, in conjunction with an observation that Stott made that has much relevance to the way in which EBB’s ballad-writing evolved. Stott proposed that the poetics of EBB’s later life were “formed through a resituating in the present moment and in the commonplace, thereby forming a new vantage point” (81), and that she persisted in her mission to accomplish “a poetry of the here and now,” despite the way it conflicted with the tastes of her contemporaries (84-85). While Mary Pollock focused on the literary realism of EBB’s later ballads, her observations resonate with Stott’s (44). She described EBB’s *Last Poems* as “subjective but clear-eyed perceptions of contemporary social problems,” and asserted that they insert themselves into “the generous theoretical space” of *Aurora Leigh* (49). This bold confrontation with contemporary social and political issues is still clearly evident in those ballads published in *Poems* (1850) and afterwards.

Instead of negating the importance of ballads at this point in EBB’s career, it is possible to interpret the shift evident in “The Runaway Slave” and *Last Poems* – to a poetics of the “here and now” – as a shift away from the use of the folk ballad as model towards that of the broadside ballad, many elements of which these final poems share. Broadside pieces

originated in urban centres, and remained very popular in the nineteenth century, although they have been routinely disparaged by subsequent ballad scholars.<sup>41</sup> Malcolm Laws commented that the “printed broadside style has so few distinctive verbal qualities that at times it seems to be no style at all” (13). All he could conclude is that it was, in many ways, the opposite of the folk ballad:

[i]t is realistic rather than romantic, contemporary rather than remote or timeless; it deals with the common man rather than with people of high rank; it is moralistic and subjective rather than detached; its clichés are used to fill out the stanza rather than to advance the story; it is likely to be too detailed, and yet it tends to summarize rather than dramatize...its language is often flat and nonpoetic. (13)

The first four of these characteristics are shared by EBB’s later ballads, while the final three seem to be indicative of the widespread scholarly contempt for this sub-genre of balladry.

As mentioned in the first chapter, Shepard noted that “the general trend of broadside balladry was towards everyday topics and trivia” so that the focus shifted in popular ballads “from a mystical background [in folk ballads] to material affairs” in broadside ballads (48). Similarly, for Gerould, the fascination of broadside ballads was invested “almost wholly in the picture they give of the way ordinary men looked at life and the events taking place about them” (247). Such comments represent, to a significant extent, the differences between EBB’s earlier ballads and her later ones. With this in mind, I would like to focus on “The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point” (“The Runaway Slave”), “Amy’s Cruelty,” “Void in Law,” “Lord Walter’s Wife,” and “Bianca among the Nightingales” (“Bianca”).

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<sup>41</sup> Paula McDowell noted that “[d]espite the “studious avoidance” of early ballad scholars...political broadside ballads remained a key vehicle of popular expression well into the nineteenth century” (15-16), and Leslie Shepard noted that there was a “phenomenal output” of broadside ballads in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (76).

“The Runaway Slave,” presents a female slave who recounts the traumatic events that precipitated her dramatic escape: the murder of her lover, her rape, her impregnation, and the murder of her infant child. I will consider the way in which the poem sets a trend for those ballads in *Last Poems* in its presentation of a female speaker who attempts a reassessment of social relations, and whose speech can be regarded as a performative act the potency of which is dependent upon the circumstances from within which it issues.

In one of her later articles on this poem, Stone wryly noted that a “bitter anti-slavery poem about rape, infanticide and racial strife is an odd work to issue from a courtship and newly-wed period of legendary happiness” (“Garrisonians” 35). And, in fact, in EBB’s correspondence, she often expressed anxiety regarding the publication of this poem. Writing to Boyd shortly before Christmas in 1846, she told her old friend: “I am just sending off an anti-slavery poem for America . . . too ferocious, perhaps, for the Americans to publish: but they asked me for a poem & they shall have it” (*BC* 14: 86). In another letter, this time to Cornelius Matthews, dated around mid-January, 1847, EBB again expressed doubt as to whether her contribution to *The Liberty Bell* would be published: “[w]hat I have sent at last, my belief is, will never be printed in America, or will, if it should be, bring the writer into a scrape of disfavour” (*BC* 14: 99). And, writing to Mitford on February 8 of the same year, she remarked, in a offhand manner, that she was certain no one would print the poem in America, but added “[i]f they *do* print it, I shall think them more boldly in earnest, than I fancy now” (*BC* 14: 117).

But “The Runaway Slave” is not a radical departure for EBB – it reflects her determination to write about the most challenging subjects (*Letters* 1:111), and her conviction that catering to the multitude of readers was reckless for a poet:

the longer I live in this writing and reading world, the more convinced I am  
that the mass of readers *never* receive a poet...The few understand, appreciate,

and distribute to the multitude below. Therefore to say a thing faintly, because saying it strongly sounds odd or obscure or unattractive for some reason, to ‘careless readers,’ does appear to me bad policy as well as bad art. (*Letters* 2:200)

The form of the poem – a hybrid ballad-dramatic monologue – harks back to earlier ballads like “Bertha in the Lane” and “Lady Geraldine’s Courtship.” Langbaum famously identified the “genius” of the dramatic monologue “the effect created by the tension between sympathy and moral judgment” (85). In it, he elaborated, “passion, power, strength of will and intellect” reign supreme – in other words, those qualities that are “independent of logical and moral correctness and are therefore best made out through sympathy” rather than through conventional moral judgment (86). Langbaum also observed the presence of a “consciousness” in the dramatic monologue that extends “beyond” the speaker’s own (94). This “consciousness” represents the “poet’s projection into the poem” and the “counterpart of our own consciousness” (94). Langbaum concluded that the simultaneous elicitation of sympathy and judgment within the dramatic monologue made it “suitable for expressing all kinds of extraordinary points of view, whether moral, emotional or historical” (96).

However, our sympathy for the speaker in “The Runaway Slave” is not, entirely, dependent upon a concomitant suspension of “logical and moral correctness” of judgement. The slave asserts that she is not “mad,” but simply “black” (218) and, in Langbaum’s terms, the “extraordinary point of view” expressed in the ballad is not her own, but that of her society. The slave may not be “mad,” but the society that enslaves her is. Critics are fairly unanimous in agreeing with the slave-speaker and attributing the blame for the infanticide to her authorities, rather than to her. Perhaps Stone put it best when she observed that the slave’s “period of postpartum madness, like her religious questioning and her act of

infanticide, is culturally configured...[s]he is not a “savage mother”; it is the culture of slavery, not nature, that is savage” (“Between Ethics and Anguish” 145-46).<sup>42</sup>

As mentioned in the discussion of “Bertha in the Lane” (32), Byron proposed that women poets, primarily, rethought “the use of the monologue for the purposes of social critique,” although she acknowledged Mermin’s observation that EBB herself did *not* make much use of the form (84-85). While major poems such as “The Runaway Slave” and “Bertha in the Lane” contradict this assertion, Byron’s comments about the way in which other female poets did use the form are relevant here: their “target is more usually the systems that produce the speakers than the speakers themselves” (“Rethinking” 87). In my own reading, the slave-speaker attacks the “system” that produced her by highlighting her society’s perversion of religious doctrine, and the impossibility of reconciling her roles of slave and mother to a child of the race that enslaves her.

The first quatrain of the poem establishes its context:

I stand on the mark beside the shore  
 Of the first white pilgrim’s bended knee,  
 Where exile turned to ancestor,  
 And God was thanked for liberty. (1-4)

The slave-speaker “stands” on a site symbolic of America’s foundation – the landing place of the Pilgrim Fathers. The irony of her situation against this context is suggested by the title of the poem: “A Runaway Slave,” and the fifth line of this stanza: “I have run through the night, my skin is as dark” (5), both of which indicate that the speaker does not enjoy the “liberty” that the Pilgrim Fathers sought in the New World.

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<sup>42</sup> This is a point that has also been made by Sandra Donaldson (55), Leighton (*Elizabeth Barrett Browning* 41), Cooper (*Elizabeth Barrett Browning* 114), Elizabeth Battles (100), Susan Brown (130), and Avery (*Elizabeth Barrett Browning* 110).

With reference to this stanza, Slinn commented on the stark difference between the slave bending her knee in “bitter accusation” and the Pilgrim Fathers’ gesture of “gratitude to God” (*Victorian Poetry* 56-57). The speaker replicates their physical gesture, but with a very different intent, thus parodying “her forebears...and producing thereby a sign that mocks itself” (*Victorian Poetry* 57). According to Slinn, the speaker’s subjectivity is “mediated by the external structures that define her life,” so it is highly appropriate that she uses the “mark that unfolds the matrix of these conditions” – the mythological birthplace of the conditions of her ethnic oppression – as a platform from which to speak (*Victorian Poetry* 59-60).

The speaker subsequently addresses the ghosts of the pilgrims who gather around her: “O pilgrim-souls, I speak to you! / I see you come out proud and slow” (8-9). She desires, apparently, to establish some sort of confederacy with these spirits by appealing to their shared passion for America’s founding principle – freedom – and by demonstrating to them how their descendants have thwarted their noble intentions. The slave-speaker acknowledges having purposefully fled to this site: “And thus I thought that I would come / And kneel here where ye knelt before” (15-16), in order to “curse this land” in the name of the Pilgrim Fathers (20). Thus, she expresses her intention to harness the site’s historical significance in her fulmination against the society that is responsible for her enslavement.

Having identified her intentions, the speaker utters the first part of her slave theodicy, addressing the fallacy that her oppressors propagate to reinforce their superior status. Although the slave has been told that “God made [her]” (23), if this is true, He has strangely “cast his work away / Under the feet of his white creatures” (25-26). However, God has invested other dark creatures with joy, making them “glad and merry as light” (30): “There’s a little dark bird, sits and sings; / There’s a dark stream ripples out of sight; / And the dark frogs chant in the safe morass” (31-33). The slave-speaker refuses to believe that she is not human – as her white compatriots would have her believe – because she experiences “God’s



sunshine and His frost” (50) like all human beings, and because non-human creatures are afraid of her as they are afraid of all men and women: “the beasts and birds, in wood and fold, / Do fear and take us for very men” (53-54). In other words, the slave demonstrates that the alignment of “black” with a sub-human state of wretchedness is not natural or inherent to God’s creation. Avery observed that “The Runaway Slave” is based on a dichotomy of “black and white images” (108), which the slave undermines by highlighting “the fact that systems of racial power difference are little more than social fabrications” (108).

Despite being black and dehumanised, and despite her own incredulity, the speaker fell in love with a fellow slave: “...tender and full was the look he [her lover] gave – / Could a slave look *so* at another slave?” (61-62). The experience temporarily instilled them both with a belief in their own freedom, but, we are led to understand, the speaker’s lover was taken from her and killed: “They wrung my cold hands out of his, – / They dragged him ... where? .. I crawled to touch / His blood’s mark in the dust” (95-97). This initial “wrong” was “followed by a deeper wrong” (99), according to the speaker: she was raped by “the white men [who] brought the shame ere long” (101), impregnating her. The speaker was refused the indulgence of grief for her lover and, instead, was burdened with “a child upon [her] breast ... / An amulet that hung too slack” (107-08), reminding us of the albatross that the mariner was forced to wear around his neck in Coleridge’s *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*.

The slave explicitly addresses the pilgrims at l.113 and explains that mother and child could only “moan” to each other because of their ethnic division: “the babe who lay on [her] bosom so, / Was far too white .. too white for [her]” (115-16). The infant belonged to a race of people that “scorned” black women like his mother (117-18), and this prevented their union: “My own, own child! I could not bear / To look in his face, it was so white” (120-21).

This complaint proves to be a preamble to a graphic description of the speaker’s murder of her child. She tells the pilgrims that she suffocated him: “I covered him up with a

kerchief there; / I covered his face in close and tight” (122-23). The most disturbing element in this episode is the speaker’s morbidity – a symptom, it seems, of her temporary derangement. She jokes that the child struggled as she strangled it because it wanted to assert its right to freedom: “...he moaned and struggled, as well might be, / For the white child wanted his liberty – / Ha, ha! he wanted the master-right” (124-26). There is both a detachment from the suffering of the child here, perhaps a result of her own acute mental distress and inability to empathise, and an element of hysteria in the forced “Ha, ha!”

This suggestion of mental breakdown is reinforced subsequent to the infant’s murder in a bizarre exchange, during which we witness a fracturing of the slave’s consciousness. She asks herself where the child is buried, and she responds, to herself: “I know where. Close” (138). Perhaps the slave-speaker is imagining having been asked this question by the Pilgrim Fathers, but the exchange seems to represent her internalisation of the ethnic division that she perceived between herself and her child. The pair should comprise an intimate unit, but her inability to bond with her infant, whose conception is associated with her rape, seems to have split herself both from him and from the mother whom she wishes she could be. With the burial of her child she has, in a way, buried part of herself. The slave-speaker’s presentation, or re-enactment, of her “madness” provides a powerful indictment of the social system in which she is embedded and the pressures and tensions of which have caused her mental breakdown. Although, as she later asserts, she is “not mad” but “black” (218), she does suffer severe mental torment, the symptoms of which resemble insanity.

On this point, I concur with Brown’s thesis,<sup>43</sup> that while the “domestic ideal of motherhood...provides the ideological underpinnings of the critique of slavery,” here motherhood is shown to be “inescapably infected by the racist ‘political’ system” (“Black and White Slave” 129). Because the slave mother cannot acknowledge her child, whom she

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<sup>43</sup> I believe, along with Marjorie Stone, that Brown’s analysis of the poem is “the most theoretically sophisticated and historically sensitive interpretation to date” (“Between Ethics and Anguish” 138).

finds alien, she “enacts a socially contradicted subject position by destroying what is both self and other” – that same child (Brown, “Black and White Slave” 129). Thus, the poem “constructs a sweeping critique of racism in terms of divisiveness” (Brown, “Black and White Slave” 129). A racist political system divides ethnicities and, as a consequence, divides mother and child when they are of different ethnicities, as well as splintering the mother herself.

In an article published in 2005, Stone described “The Runaway Slave” as a religious poem. As in “The Virgin Mary to the Child Jesus,” Stone wrote, the female speaker “seeks to understand the ways of God” and “wrestles with inner conflicts in confronting a son who is born of her flesh, yet alien to her” (“Heretic Believer” 28). This remark ties in well with Brown’s, and my own, analysis, although Stone focused on the religious, rather than social implications, of the poem.<sup>44</sup>

“The Runaway Slave” appears to be an archetype of the female dramatic monologue that Byron described, in which the “doubleness or discursive splitting” that distinguishes the form is a product of “the speaker’s internalisation of the [divisive] ideology that defines her” (“Rethinking” 88). This leads to “a demonstration and a critique of the cultural conditions that have produced the speaker” (“Rethinking” 88), rather than a critique of the individual. Byron herself described how this relates to “The Runaway Slave” in which there is a clear separation between the poet and the speaker, whom EBB presents as having “clearly internalised much of the racist ideology even as she speaks against it” (“Rethinking” 91). This internalisation contributes considerably to the psychic disintegration and fragmentation by causing the slave-speaker to feel alienated from her own offspring. It is the presentation

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<sup>44</sup> She suggested that “The Runaway Slave” is “centrally concerned with the question of how to justify the ways of God to a slave woman who has suffered almost every conceivable form of violation” (Stone, “Heretic Believer” 31).

of this mental torment that is so potent, that elicits the reader's sympathy for the suffering slave, rather than condemnation for the infanticide she has committed.

Having strangled her child, the slave-speaker lifts the shawl to reveal the fruits of her actions – as a slave “lift[s] a leaf of the mango-fruit” to reveal the harvest (154). Here, she exclaims again “ha, ha!” (155) on observing that the “white angels” had already “plucked [her] fruit to make them wine, / And sucked the soul of that child of [hers]” (159-60). Tricia Lootens questioned the significance of the slave's laughter: whether it represents her “delight” at her son's soul being liberated from slavery; whether she is pleased that the curse of slavery is being visited upon a white child; or whether she laughs “in bitter belief that even heaven is stacked in favour of a “white” soul” (9). Whatever the specific trigger, the slave-speaker's decidedly mirthless laughter expresses her derangement under intense anguish and her inability to empathise with the child from whom she feels detached. This detachment is evident in her description of the angels as having gathered her child like a piece of fruit, or sucked its soul like the humming-bird does a flower's nectar. The slave-speaker appears to absolve herself of the crime, in fact, she disavows the very performance of a crime, suggesting that the event was natural, inevitable.

Further evidence for the speaker's temporary madness is her reluctance to surrender the child's body, which she carries with her for an entire month, and the effect that this has on her: “The sun may shine out as much as he will: / I am cold, though it happened a month ago” (167-68). Although the speaker earlier based her claim to humanity on her experience of “sunshine” and “frost” (50), here she seems to have lost that natural relationship with the elements. The slave experiences cold, irrespective of the weather, as though she were already dead.

A further dislocation from nature occurs when the speaker buries her child. She perceives the natural environment, specifically the “forest's arms” (171), as being indifferent

to her and, again, the angels as mocking her: “Through the forest-tops the angels far, / With a white sharp finger from every star, / Did point and mock at what was done” (180-82). As Stone put it, in the aftermath of her brutal rape, pregnancy, and infanticide, “God with his ‘fine white angels’ ... becomes an even more sinister figure for the slave woman” (“Heretic Believer” 29). Similarly, Avery has observed that God is “depicted as aloof and uncommunicative” (and his angels as treacherous and mocking), and that this reinforces EBB’s “belief that the fault is in the system” (110).

However, once the child is buried and “changed to black earth” – “A dark child in the dark” (185-86) – the mother is able to feel some kinship with her child. She sits next to the grave and sings to him “The song [she] learnt in [her] maidenhood” (189) – the name of her lover, which she used to sing to herself “instead of a song” (78). The speaker is reconciled with her child, and their union is reinforced by the fact that he sings back to her “The same song, more melodious” (193). Battles has suggested that here the “joy” of the mother’s (and son’s) song is expressive of their “happy reunion,” which “becomes possible only after their tragic separation” (98). Ann Parry, on the other hand, interpreted this episode as the slave’s acquisition of power. She has argued that the slave’s rape ultimately transforms her so that “she herself attains mastery and radically inverts the existing racist and gender structure” (Parry 124). The slave’s triumph arrives once the child, the product of her rape by white masters, has been buried and turned her own colour – the colour of black earth (Parry 125). However, the slave’s statement that “nothing white” (185) remained of the child reads more like an expression of relief than of triumph, especially in conjunction with the statement that she and her child were “reconciled” (190). The idea of reconciliation, the joining of their souls (196), seems to exclude any notion of such a triumph.

Reunited with her child, the speaker regains some perspective. The line “I look on the sea and sky” (197) is repeated for a third time, as though the slave can no longer dwell on the

memories that she has been recalling, and, instead, exerts herself to return to the desperate present. She observes that the pilgrim ghosts have departed – unable, in the sunshine, to look upon the slave who has illuminated their hypocrisy: “My face is black, but it glares with a scorn / Which they dare not meet by day” (202-03). Thus, the speaker, is presented as having assumed a degree of power with her rhetoric, but enjoyment of such is brief. The appearance of the Pilgrim Fathers’ descendants – those white slave-owners who are chasing her – tips her into hysteria: “Ah! – in their ‘stead, their hunter sons! / Ah, ah! they are on me – they hunt in a ring” (204-05). The “Ah”s remind us of her previous, crazed tone and her maniacal hysteria re-emerges in her cursing of the “hunter sons”:

I wish you who stand there five a-breast,  
 Each, for his own wife’s joy and gift,  
 A little corpse as safely at rest  
 As mine in the mangos! (212-215)

It is near this point in the poem, according to Slinn, that the slave escapes the dominion of her white masters and achieves her own subjectivity. In *The Discourse of Self in Poetry*, Slinn analysed “The Runaway Slave” in terms of a Hegelian poetics: “[t]he self...is not a free or self-sufficient being, since it is...dependent on the other for recognition and self-consciousness (29). This approach is more fully developed in *Victorian Poetry as Cultural Critique*.<sup>45</sup> In a chapter dedicated to the ballad, Slinn wrote that the speaker achieves self-recognition first through the loving gaze of another slave and, secondly, through the punishment she receives for having loved: “its aftermath of repression, death, and humiliation, represent the construction of a subjectivity that is denied to those deemed to be without humanity” (*Victorian Poetry* 75). This can be related to Hegel’s “dialectical

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<sup>45</sup> At times Slinn’s argument sounds very close to Armstrong, for example when he asks “whether or not it is possible for poetic forms to enact a cultural critique *at the same time* as they reproduce cultural ideologies and dynamics” (*Victorian Poetry* 11) or when he writes “[i]n order for poetry itself to provide a political critique, its linguistic coding needs to enact in terms of social context, an ongoing interplay or unresolved dialectic of reciprocation and alienation” (*Victorian Poetry* 30).

paradox” in which the slave depends upon the master for recognition (and vice versa), so that here “the black slave’s claim to honor must be sought through the dominant system” (Slinn, *Victorian Poetry* 75). Paradoxically, in attempting to crush the slave’s subjectivity, the “hunter sons” provide the occasion for the slave’s acquisition of self-consciousness. She reacts by “symbolically” killing “the master who dominates her” – as represented by her child – and stepping towards “Hegel’s free consciousness” (Slinn, *Victorian Poetry* 75).

By inverting “the master’s gaze” – by glaring at the Pilgrim Fathers, refusing that of the “hunter sons,” and risking death – the speaker attempts to divest herself of the “thrall of the master” (Slinn, *Victorian Poetry* 77-78). For Slinn, this attempt culminates in a “moment of mutual recognition” when the slave watches her white masters watching her (*Victorian Poetry* 78): “I see you staring in my face – / I know you staring, shrinking back” (219-20). At this point, she recognises her innate “dignity” and “human value that exists separately from their ideological judgment” (Slinn, *Victorian Poetry* 78). The slave-speaker enacts, thus, what Slinn has described as a “cultural performative” – speaking directly to the pilgrim-fathers and their heirs she achieves the recognition of her innate dignity in her very utterance (“Elizabeth Barrett Browning” 45).

However, I would argue that this moment of empowerment is delayed until the final three stanzas of the poem, which constitute the second part of the slave’s theodicy. In the first of these stanzas, the speaker observes that “whips” and “curses” are the natural state of things in the New World because the founding fathers established a nation on a divisive, reciprocal hatred: they “...set / Two kinds of men in adverse rows, / Each loathing each” (233-35). The sacrifice Christ made to absolve men of their sins has been forgotten, while His wounds have been transferred to the bodies of slaves (235-37). However, their “countless wounds...pay no debt” (238) – as Christ’s wounds were supposed to have done. Slaves, for their part, cannot bear the cross with which they have been burdened and they will

only harm white men if they continue to be treated thus: “*We* are too heavy for our cross, / And fall and crush you and your seed” (244-45).

Despite initially wishing them “a little corpse” (214) and delineating the fallacy on which their society rests, the slave-speaker ultimately refuses to curse her pursuers:

In the name of the white child waiting for me  
 In the death-dark where we may kiss and agree,  
 White men, I leave you all curse-free  
 In my broken heart’s disdain! (250-53)

This supposedly benevolent gesture is presented as a step towards reconciliation with her murdered son. However, Battles described the gesture as ambiguous, observing that the phrase “curse-free” could mean either that the white men are below her anger or that “she truly forgives them” (99), whereas Brophy considered the slave’s refusal to curse the white men as a submissive one indicative of their accepted authority (279). Brophy argued that the slave’s language is “thoroughly sentimental” (giving but one example – 279) and that her “melodrama” “devolves into acquiescence and silence” as she refuses to punish her white masters before submitting to death (279). Stone, on the other hand, suggested that “the very act of revoking a curse can have all the force of pronouncing it” (“Cursing” 155). She interpreted these lines, the slave’s final ones, as simultaneously “reiterating her curse and absolving herself of it” – especially in light of her reference to her “broken heart’s disdain,” which occurs in the sole instance of an extra line appended to the stanza (“Cursing” 163). The slave-speaker “is the one who curses and who, serene in the authority of her righteousness, revokes her curse at her will” (“Cursing” 163-64).

I would argue for an interpretation of these lines that neither suggests that the slave-speaker’s final gesture is a benevolent one, nor negates the slave’s retraction of cursing. The speaker refuses the curse in her “broken heart’s disdain” (253), suggesting that she scorns



white men for their construction of a destructive cycle of “whips” and “curses” in which they have trapped themselves and their fellow, black Americans.<sup>46</sup> As the slave feels herself dying, she desires to escape from the system that has defined, and destroyed, her own life – an act that leads, inevitably, to her death. Similarly, Jeni Williams suggested that the slave-speaker retracts her curses and dies as an “act that marks her freedom from the cycle of violation-revenge-violation” (201). This, I believe, constitutes the climactic moment of self-empowerment for the slave-speaker. Knowing that it is the white man’s system that has destroyed her, her son, and countless others, she removes herself from the exchange of hatred that defines it – although this means certain death, it also means moral and spiritual liberty.

While Slinn may be right that the slave’s speech is a performative and that she acquires a degree of subjectivity in her dying moments, she is denied the fruition of this progress. The “hunter sons,” in attacking her, truncate her act of self-realisation and self-assertion. Thus, I would argue that the slave-speaker’s performative is denied any traction as a result of the imbalance of power between herself and her interlocutor, and that it is in this poem that the significance of the addressee in EBB’s later ballads can, first, be identified.

The investigation of this dynamic recurs in many of EBB’s *Last Poems*, for example, in the oft-denigrated “Amy’s Cruelty.” In important ways this poem is a riposte to the traditional folk ballad, “Barbara’s Allen’s Cruelty” – as the name implies. In the folk ballad, Barbara Allen is accused – like Amy – of mistreating her lover (whom she rejects as such). He dies, as does she, shortly afterwards, of grief. In EBB’s “Amy’s Cruelty,” on the other hand, we read precisely why a woman such as Barbara Allen would be hostile to her lover, and the title acquires a degree of irony.

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<sup>46</sup> Brown also thought that the retraction was a “scornful retraction” (“Black and White Slave” 128).

The poem begins with the traditional folk ballad device in which a speaker asks a question of his or her interlocutor whose response then comprises the body of the poem.<sup>47</sup>

The address, in this case, is pompous and formal:

Fair Amy of the terraced house,  
 Assist me to discover  
 Why you who would not hurt a mouse  
 Can torture so your lover. (1-4)

The assumption on the part of the speaker is that Amy maliciously hurts the man who would be her lover. The speaker lists the kind gestures that Amy bestows upon her animal companions: she “give[s] [her] coffee to the cat” (5), she “stroke[s] the dog for coming” (6), and her “face grows kinder at / The little brown bee’s humming” (7-8), in order to compare this with her treatment of her lover. When her lover “haunts [her] door” (9), Amy seems “to have stitched [her] eyelids down” upon her sewing (11-12). However, the speaker unconsciously hints at the disagreeable nature of the attention Amy receives. The idea that her lover “haunts” Amy’s home suggests that his presence is persistent, a nuisance, and somewhat disconcerting.

The accusatory tone of Amy’s interrogator persists through stanza four: “You never give a look, not you, / Nor drop him a ‘Good morning’” (13-14). The speaker is intent on bullying and undermining Amy, but after four stanzas of such charges, she is allowed to respond. Amy counters that those animals who receive her kindnesses require very little of her in return (17-20), whereas the young man will want to possess her entirely: ““He wants my world, my sun, my heaven, / Soul, body, whole existence”” (23-24). A small gesture

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<sup>47</sup> The verse form is also very typical of traditional ballads: each stanza comprises a quatrain of lines of iambic tetrametre alternating with lines of iambic trimetre and exhibiting alternate rhyme. It is very regular and smooth.

bestowed upon him now will mean “great things at a distance” (22). The love of this young man, which would, ultimately, subsume her, “sets the groove / Too much the way of loathing” (31-32). Unless her lover reciprocates – giving her everything – then she will be bereft (33-34), and she is unsure whether she trusts him: “The risk is terrible and strange – / I tremble, doubt, . . . deny him” (35-36). Amy’s intelligent analysis of her situation, and of the nature of romantic love, reaches an emotional climax when she declares that there can be no middle way in a romantic relationship: “I either hate or . . . love him so, / I can’t be merely civil!” (39-40). Thus, she displays impressive foresight with regard to the young man’s desires and intentions, rather than excessive unkindness.

Amy’s final defence is that one cannot trust a woman who readily loves, and encourages love, because her casualness belies the fact that she does know what love actually demands of one. For such a woman – a woman “who puts forth / Her blossoms thick as summer’s” (41-42) – love is a novelty: “a cowslip-ball to fling, / A moment’s pretty pastime” (45-46). Whereas the love of these shallow women is a paltry toy, Amy’s love, once bestowed, will entail an enormous sacrifice: “I give . . . all me, if anything, / The first time and the last time” (47-48).

In the end, Amy responds somewhat disdainfully to her “neighbour of the trellised house” (49): “A man should murmur never, / Though treated worse than dog and mouse, / Till doated on for ever!” (50-52). The absence of a reply from her interlocutor signals the incontrovertible nature of Amy’s arguments. As Slinn has described the action of the speaker in “Lord Walter’s Wife,” here Amy intervenes in “the assumptions of male conventions about female sexuality” (“Elizabeth Barrett Browning” 52), which are expressed by her neighbour. He presumes that Amy’s reluctance to accept a lover is “cruel,” whereas she forthrightly asserts her right to refuse the young man, while undermining the pathetic complaint of her male interlocutor.

As in the other *Last Poems* to be discussed, the speaker's interlocutor is fundamental to the poem. Interestingly, the aggression of Amy's neighbour, her self-appointed moral interrogator, infects Amy's own language with a confrontational vigour, which renders her reply especially convincing. I do not agree with Byron's claim, therefore, that Amy displays only fear (*Poetry of Love* 119). According to Byron, the other female speakers of the eight *Last Poems* treating frustrated desire are "to some degree dissatisfied, frustrated, or enraged," but not Amy (119). However, Amy's parting retort that "'A man should murmur never'" (50) does betray her frustration at having to justify her refusal to accept a lover either to the young man concerned, or to her neighbour. I would argue that "Amy's Cruelty" resembles Byron's description of "May's Love" and "A False Step" as poems that are deceptively "simple, lively, and gay," while "the feelings which emerge from beneath this deceptively graceful surface...are bitter, even brutal" (*Poetry of Love* 121).

Amy is one of the female speakers in *Last Poems* who, as Byron wrote, "cannot be possessed and controlled," against her will, and who, as a consequence, "provoke the fury of their would-be lovers" (*Poetry of Love* 121), as well as that of sanctimonious male observers. These elements, the contemporary treatment of romantic relationships, the significance of the speaker's interlocutor, and the resemblance to a "cultural performative" that confronts the masculine hegemony over female desire, are in a distilled, balladic state in "Amy's Cruelty." Elsewhere in *Last Poems*, EBB experiments with and complicates this potent formula.

One example of this is "Void in Law," in which an abandoned mother speaks to her child in an effort to understand her own situation and to reconcile herself to it. Images in the first stanza establish an atmosphere of foreboding: "the midnight is chill" (2), the speaker says, and "the moon has died out in the tree" (3). Addressing the "babe" resting on her knee, she tells him: "Sleep, for the wicked agree: / Sleep, let them do as they will" (5-6). At the outset of the poem the meaning of these lines eludes us, although their melancholy does not.

The second stanza sustains the sense of chill and despair established in the first. The mother has been drained of nourishing milk, and warns her child off what remains “lest” it “should trouble [his] blood” (11). This is symbolic of her inability to nurture the child, both materially and emotionally, and there are worrying repercussions for the infant who is utterly dependent on its mother. According to Byron, “[r]age and resentment have combined with love to produce a metaphorical bitter milk, and the poem, the lullaby, becomes [its] receptacle” (*Poetry of Love* 129). The speaker counsels her child: “...in a dream, suck the rest” (10); “Suck, little lips dispossessed, / As we kiss in the air whom we would” (12-13). This sad association – between drinking mother’s milk and kissing an absent lover or loved one – hints at the woman’s circumstances: the child is to suckle an imaginary breast as she, apparently, kisses her departed, lover. Each, mother and child, is to draw sustenance from a figment of their imagination.

The resemblance between the infant’s lips and its father’s (15-16) reminds the mother of the promises that issued from the latter, making explicit the earlier hint that her lover, and the father of her child, had abandoned her: “Very deeply they swore / When he gave me his ring and his name, / To take back, I imagined, no more!” (16-18). The reader learns, subsequently, that the speaker’s marriage to the father of the child has been annulled, that she is not quite sure why, and that she remains convinced of its validity. The speaker repeats the finding at trial: “‘Void in law,’ said the Courts. Something wrong / In the forms?” (22-23), and the lurching phrasing reflects her uncertainty regarding what, precisely, was awry with the documentation. But for her, the court’s ruling is irrelevant: “‘Till death part us two, / I, James, take thee, Jessie,’ was strong, / And ONE witness competent” (23-25). The speaker, now revealed to be Jessie, believes that her marriage to James is binding because it was performed before God. Her approach to the matter is ingenuous and naive, and the principal source of the poem’s pathos (one of the features that EBB admired so much in ballads).

Although James has disregarded their marriage vows, for Jessie their child – “the divine / Seal of right upon loves that deserve” (33-34) – entrenches them.

Despite her unworldly protestations, the speaker is not ignorant regarding the motives of the man who was once her husband, nor regarding society’s justification of his actions. However, she cannot accept their reasoning:

My child! though the world take her part,  
 Saying ‘She was the woman to choose;  
 He had eyes, was a man in his heart,’ –  
 We twain the decision refuse. (36-39)

Her marriage to James is divinely sanctioned and Jessie asserts that she will continue to love him stubbornly, and relentlessly. She wills that James should discover this, and the premature deaths of those he has abandoned: “Let him learn we are waiting before / The grave’s mouth, the heaven’s gate, God’s face, / With implacable love evermore” (46-48).

Perhaps, given the weakened state of her health, Jessie is being pragmatic about their chances for survival, or perhaps she is contemplating suicide. At any rate, she anticipates that she and her child will reach the afterlife before her husband does, and her desire for him to discover this is threatening – she appears to want to punish him with the knowledge.

Thus, Jessie reminds us of those earlier ballad heroines, such as Luti, the “page,” and Bertha who harbour the desire to revenge themselves upon the men by whom they have been abandoned or otherwise ill-treated. However, here there is no one to register Jessie’s (possible) intentions, apart from her infant, and her isolation in this situation is exemplified by her reliance upon the baby boy whom she implicates in the decision to “refuse” James’ abandonment. In other words, Jessie’s dependence upon this child for moral support is devastating for what it implies about her loneliness, the way in which she leans upon such a young, vulnerable, and impotent being.

The speaker's expression of her desire for revenge, and her sense of possession over James, escalates in stanza eight, in which she maintains:

He's ours, though he kissed her but now,  
           He's ours, though she kissed in reply:  
 He's ours, though himself disavow,  
 .....  
 Ours to claim, ours to clasp, ours below,  
       Ours above, . . . if we live, if we die. (50-55)

The repetition of the first person plural possessive pronoun impresses Jessie's sense of ownership over James upon the reader, and the last clause is especially sinister in its repeated intimation of death. "The woman's love," Byron wrote, "has mixed with her jealousy, rage, and bitterness to produce a monstrous, grim possessiveness," and the lullaby becomes "a fierce placation of her own needs" (*Poetry of Love* 129-30). Byron also made the pertinent observation that, as the poem progresses, the "smooth flowing lines of the opening stanza give way to agitation and short, jerking clauses," as in the lines above, the speaker expressing anger at her fate (*Poetry of Love* 129). Each stanza is, generally, composed of six lines of anapaestic trimetre, followed by one accented syllable: the refrain, "Sleep." However, the substitution of an iamb for an anapaest, or the omission of two unaccented syllables, occurs frequently at the beginning of each line with the effect of rendering the lines harsher and more abrupt than they would be were they comprised solely of anapaests. The refrain has a similar effect in assertively marking the end of each stanza and presenting the argument contained within as incontestable.

Having reached this torrid, emotional climax, the speaker attempts to retreat from her anger and to soothe the child whom she has disturbed: "Ah baby, my baby, too rough / Is my lullaby? What have I said? / Sleep!" (57-59). As Byron put it "the release of pent-up

emotion results in rage and bitterness being vented upon the child” (*Poetry of Love* 130) and, realising this, the speaker brings herself to a halt. Having remembered her duty to lull her child to sleep, she expresses a more resigned attitude to her situation: “When I’ve wept long enough / I shall learn to weep softly instead” (59-60), and she promises to nurture the child by “piec[ing] with some alien stuff / [Her] heart to lie smooth for [his] head” (61-62).

In the final two stanzas, Jessie resolves herself to her future. She observes that her son was, after all, a product of love (64-65) and insists that she should not inflict her own suffering, bitterness, and anger on an innocent child:

If the one who remains (only one)  
Set her grief at thee, turned in a heat  
To thine enemy, – were it well done? (67-69)

Finally, she bids Christ, who was also “rejected” by the world (73), to take charge of her son. Whereas Christ was brought gifts by the Magi, the speaker bestows only “griefs” upon her child and she hastens his martyrdom: “I hurry the cross on my Dear! / My gifts are the griefs I declaim!” (75-76). These last two lines are slightly ambiguous: had they appeared immediately after Jessie’s possessive tirade (50-55), they would have acquired a more foreboding tone. But, partly because they follow a stanza in which the speaker undertakes to nurture her child, the tone becomes one of sorrowful resignation.

Having been legally dismissed by her husband, Jessie has been burdened with the roles of both provider and nurturer. Her demonstration of the will to take care of her child and her articulate utterance of the wrong done to her represent a certain degree of power attained over her oppressors: Jessie does not passively submit to their version of events, but vocalises her complaint regarding the way she has been treated, and asserts an attempt to overcome her circumstances. Ultimately, however, the mere fact that her interlocutor is an infant boy is representative of the impotence of her speech. He is, apparently, the sole being



who hears her give utterance to her complaint and this is sadly indicative of her dearth of power and influence in her community, the actions of which she condemns. Not only can her child do nothing with her expression of sorrow and anger, but Jessie has to curtail it in order not to disturb his sleep.

The poem records Jessie processing a sequence of emotions: bitterness, anger, desire for revenge, before resigning herself to her fate. One can imagine that, alone, Jessie will endlessly summon this procession of feelings, although it seems probable that she will reach the same conclusion each time. Thus, her circumstances leech her language of any power, denying her the ability to “intervene” in any meaningful way in the system of patriarchal power that has robbed her of her security. With no one to hear her, or to react to her speech, she will, it seems, perpetually rehearse her feelings of bitterness, anger, desire for revenge, and resignation.

“Lord Walter’s Wife” is spoken by a woman invested with more power than Jessie, or any previous female speaker, to intervene in and overturn social relations with speech. She provides, perhaps, the clearest example of a “cultural performative” of any of these poems. In fact, Hayter thought that the poem in which she speaks had irritated Thackeray – the magazine editor to whom it was sent – “not because it was improper but because it showed a clever woman convicting a man of hypocrisy and putting him in his place” (“These Men Over-Nice” 7). Months after having submitted the manuscript of this poem to the *Cornhill* magazine, Thackeray sent a letter to EBB rejecting the poem for publication. While seemingly embarrassed to find himself in the position of refusing “the poems of Elizabeth Browning” (*Letters* 2:444), he claimed doing so as his duty. The magazine, he wrote to her, was intended for “boys, girls, infants, sucklings almost” and her verses would be “objected to by many of our [adult] readers” (*Letters* 2:444). This was not because they weren’t “pure, chaste, and right” in themselves, but because they include things – specifically

an “account of an unlawful passion” – that his “squeamish public will not hear on Monday, though on Sundays they listen to them without scruple” (*Letters* 2:444).

Shires read Thackeray’s rejection of EBB’s contribution as an exhortation for her to “recall who she is in private, real life and to model it in her poetry for the public” (329). As an author, he implies, she is “an object of identification and idealization” (Shires 329). However, EBB “firmly,” and wittily, “resists Thackeray’s rhetoric and constructions” (Shires 330). In her reply, she joked that “never was anyone turned out of a room for indecent behaviour in a more gracious and conciliatory manner” (*Letters* 2:445). But her light humour fails to mask her conviction “that the corruption of our society requires not shut doors and windows, but light and air: and that it is exactly because pure and prosperous women choose to *ignore* vice, that miserable women suffer wrong by it everywhere” (*Letters* 2:445).

At the outset of the poem, Lord Walter’s Wife appears to breach the boundaries of her relationship with her husband’s friend: “‘But why do you go?’ said the lady, while both sate under the yew” (1). Although this could be read as a friendly dissuasion from leaving, the more sordid implications are underscored in the following line in which the woman’s eyes are described as being “alive in their depth, as the kraken beneath the sea-blue” (2). The comparison between her eyes and a sea-monster, is plain, but the metaphor is also intended to invoke the deceptive nature of Tennyson’s beast, which cannot be detected on the surface of the sea, and to suggest that Lord Walter’s Wife’s eyes also mask something. As Byron observed, there is “the suggestion of hidden, lurking danger” in the comparison, but that “it is not the illusory type of danger typically associated with the femme fatale – it is a very real warning” (*Poetry of Love* 126), although this is only made clear later.

Lord Walter’s Wife’s guest replies that he must leave because he fears her, “‘because [she is] far too fair, / And able to strangle [his] soul in a mesh of [her] gold-colored hair’” (3-4). Thus, he overtly initiates the flirtation. She rebuts that “‘Such knots are quickly undone’”

(5), that he can easily escape once entangled in her loveliness, and that it is nonsensical to attribute too much beauty to someone since beauty is desirable in an infinite quantity (6). Her response to him is startling in its unashamed reciprocation of his attentions.

Lord Walter's friend persists in attempting to depart, offering three more reasons why he should, but each time his friend's wife swiftly undermines his logic. When he tells her that sunstroke is "fatal at times" (7), and that he does not want to dishonour her husband (8), Lord Walter's wife retorts that her beauty will not be diminished if twice as many men should appreciate it: "You smell a rose through a fence: / If two should smell it, what matter?" (9-10). Lord Walter's friend then refers to his engagement and his promise to love his fiancée "alone, alone" (12), continuing to acknowledge his duty towards others, but not to his interlocutor. She responds that love is "always free" (13) and, that we cannot be obliged to commit to something that is, inherently, unpredictable: "Will you vow to be safe from the headache on Tuesday, and think it will hold?" (14). Lord Walter's friend's final concern is for the woman's daughter, for whom her mother should set a "pure" example (15-16), but even this appeal to Lord Walter's wife's maternal instincts is dismissed by the observation that the daughter is too young to observe anything (18). Thus, Lord Walter's Wife challenges her husband's friend to consummate his flirtation, but, never having intended to engage in an affair, he refuses to do so.

At the close of their frisky exchange, Lord Walter's friend loses his temper. He tells the woman who was once the object of his lust that she has lost her attractiveness due to her (apparent) lack of honour and decency: "Why, now, you no longer are fair! / Why, now, you no longer are fatal, but ugly and hateful, I swear" (19-20). At this point, Byron observed, "the young man has begun to sound less like an ardent lover than a petulant little boy, frustrated in his desire to play a favorite game" (*Poetry of Love* 127). However, Lord Walter's Wife – secure in her moral superiority – is not perturbed. She responds with a

scornful laugh (21) and intimates that her coy behaviour was a ruse to highlight that men, such as her husband's friend, are duplicitous in their interactions with women: "These men! Oh, these men overnice, / Who are shocked if a color not virtuous, is frankly put on by a vice" (21-22).

The rest of the poem consists of a sort of dramatic monologue in which Lord Walter's Wife challenges the double-standard inherent to man's expression and pursuit of their own sexual desire. She is furious at her husband's friend for having thrust his own immorality upon her: "You bring us your vices so near / That we smell them!" (23-24), and she insists that she is "pure, and a wife" (26). Her commitment to her husband should have placed her beyond the reach of other men, but Lord Walter's friend's amorous advances implied that she had reduced herself to encourage them, which she had not (27-28). Calling a woman too fair, she comments, is a particularly male fallacy meaning that, from a man's perspective, she is "adapted too much / To uses unlawful and fatal" (29-30) – to being fetishised and exploited. This is no praise (30). If men succeed in seducing a woman, they subsequently round on their victim and label her ugly and "vile" (31-32). Thus, the hypocrisy of men like Lord Walter's friend is that they expect to be permitted to act on their own lust, without having their overtures reciprocated, and demanding that women remain unmoved and "pure."

Withdrawing from her polemic, Lord Walter's Wife remarks that her husband's friend is too noble to betray his betrothed (43-44). This is precisely why, the woman claims, she coerced him into confronting the repercussions of his advances, which she knew he would find unpalatable. Finally, by abandoning Lord Walter's friendship, he "insult[s] him" (49), and by avoiding women such as herself, her interlocutor treats them as though they were "harlots" (49-50), unfairly assigning them culpability for men's lascivious responses. Because of the insult this would imply, and because she does not want her husband to lose a friend, she will not send him away. Having brought her lecture to a close, Lord Walter's

Wife wishes to be her interlocutor's friend and to be treated as such: "Have I hurt you indeed? We are quits then. Nay, friend of my Walter, be mine!" (53).

Byron described the male character in "Lord Walter's Wife" as a "straw man" who embodies "particular principles that she sets up for the express purpose of knocking down" (*Poetry of Love* 125). Those "principles" are men's propensity to exploit "women as vehicles for male sexual fantasies" and "to divide women into the clichéd roles of pure woman and dangerous temptress" (*Poetry of Love* 126). However, this account unfairly denies the narrative coherence of the piece, and the credibility of its premise. Leighton compared this ballad to an earlier one, "The Romaunt of the Page," because here the female protagonist achieves what the "page" in the earlier one is unable to do. Lord Walter's wife "brings into the open ground of straight speaking the double standard which is the very condition of the man's desire" (*Victorian Women Poets* 86). Leighton's fine summary conveys what several of the female protagonists in *Last Poems* achieve – an articulation of their situation that highlights a hypocritical or otherwise pernicious aspect of social ideology.

Slinn has treated the poem in a similar way. In "Elizabeth Barrett Browning and the Problem of Female Agency," Slinn loosely defined "poetry" as "a form of cultural performative" (45) in which "the actual object or event...and its representation...coalesce" (46). In "Lord Walter's Wife," he argued, "the poem dramatizes the intervention of a female speaker within the assumptions of male conventions about female sexuality" when Lord Walter's wife confronts her male interlocutor and would-be dashing, but evasive seducer "with the hypocrisy of their [men's] courtly love fantasies and double standards" ("Elizabeth Barrett Browning" 52). However, Slinn hinted that her "intervention" in male hypocrisy, "the actual object or event," is undermined by its predication on her maintenance of "the patriarchal role" of wife ("Elizabeth Barrett Browning" 55).

But I think that Shires' is the most subtle analysis. She wrote that while Lord Walter's friend "experiences his own duality as a seamless continuum requiring no discussion, he imposes a similar duality onto her [Lord Walter's wife] as a binary of angel/whore," implying that she harbours the same "unacceptable" desires that he does (328). "The wife flirts back," Shires continued, "in order to expose and destroy the institution of flirtation" (328), and to release herself from the double role that her interlocutor attempts to impose upon her.

One common theme in the criticism is Lord Walter's wife's potent self-articulation – her "straight speaking." Her "intervention" in patriarchal discourse is more impressive than that of the speaker in "Void in Law" both because of the status of her interlocutor and her apparent success in exposing to him the error of his ways (although we never hear his response). While Jessie's ingenuousness and moral reasoning instil her representation of events with a moving pathos, she is impotent to alter her circumstances – the helplessness and vulnerability of her situation being embodied in her addressee, an infant child. Lord Walter's wife, on the other hand, protests against her husband's friend's attempt to treat her as a seductress. She denies him the opportunity to achieve his desire and simultaneously pointing out to him the hypocrisy of its expression. The female protagonist's adult (and presumably well-educated) auditor requires a more forceful utterance than Jessie's infant child, and her success in lambasting him represents a more genuine "cultural performative."

The verse form of the poem – rhymed couplets of (mainly) anapaestic hexametre – is quite strange, but it reflects the force of Lord Walter's wife's speech. Each line has a strong caesura that aurally divides the line in two so that it resembles, rhythmically, two lines of trimetre. The anapaests, which are so well controlled, seem to be designed to emphasise the woman's articulateness, while the strong caesura disrupts the line and renders it more stately and considered.

To end with “Bianca Among the Nightingales” is to return somewhere near where we began, with “The Runaway Slave.” Both poems are hybrid ballad-dramatic monologues and both present the mental deterioration of a female speaker under the pressure of her circumstances. Both, also, ultimately attempt to emancipate themselves from the system in which they are trapped.

The first line of “Bianca” states that the “cypress stood up like a church” the evening that the speaker shared with her lover. While this image signals the speaker’s belief that her love was sacred, and that their natural surroundings were akin to a religious sanctuary, it is also a portentous signal, since the cypress tree is a symbol of death and sorrow.<sup>48</sup>

Contributing to the gloomy atmosphere is the second line, which contains a hint that the love that is to be the subject of the poem has already failed: “That night *we felt* our love would hold” (my emphasis).

In comparison, the other images in the stanza are quite beautiful and vivid, reflecting the speaker’s intense memory of this glorious evening:

...saintly moonlight seemed to search  
 And wash the whole world clean as gold;  
 The olives crystallized the vales’  
 Broad slopes until the hills grew strong:  
 The fireflies and the nightingales  
 Throbbled each to either, flame and song. (3-8)

Lines three and four suggest that Bianca considers her love to be divinely sanctioned, pure; the evening that she shared with her lover was flooded with “saintly moonlight” that cleansed the world until it shone. Williams noted, with reference to these lines, how the moon’s mythical “associations with erotic love” are, surprisingly, “translated into religious terms”

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<sup>48</sup> As Williams has already noted (217), as well as Byron (*Poetry of Love* 132).

(217). This stanza also introduces the refrain, which is appended to the end of every subsequent stanza, although often modified: “The nightingales, the nightingales.”

In stanza two, the speaker develops the image of the cypress from the poem’s first line, describing the tree as being part-heavenly and part-earthly: “Half up, half down, as double-made, / Along the ground, against the sky” (12-13). Its dual nature is reflected in their love, which is fervent in both spiritual and earthly terms: “And *we*, too! from such soul-height went / Such leaps of blood so blindly driven” (14-15). These lines acknowledge both their physical passion – “Such leaps of blood” – as well as the quasi-religious experience that it entails, raising the pair to their “soul-height.” However, as Williams remarked, the “desperately italicized ‘*we*,’” which “tries to catch an already doomed moment of mingled ‘soul’ and ‘blood’” (217), taints the description of this love affair with the speaker’s knowledge of its conclusion. In the following stanza the speaker names her lover when she relays Giulio’s promise that the intensity of their passion is indicative of an enduring love: “...Giulio whispered, ‘Sweet, above / God’s Ever guarantees this Now’” (21-22). But the fact that they “kissed so close [they] could not vow” (20), that no actual promises were exchanged, is another foreboding hint that further undermines the certainty of Giulio’s words.

The second half of this stanza contains an interesting image pertaining to the call of the nightingales:

And through his words the nightingales  
 Drove straight and full their long clear call,  
 Like arrows through heroic mails,  
 And love was awful in it all. (23-26)

The voice of the nightingales penetrates Giulio’s voice and the vow it carries, and their song is described, threateningly, as having the force to pierce armour – and Bianca’s and Giulio’s love. Byron wrote that “Giulio’s vow of eternal love” is married to the nightingales’ song for



Bianca, and that “the song may be a sinister portent of Bianca’s fate” given the association between the nightingale and Philomela (*Poetry of Love* 132-33). But no association with this myth is necessary to register the potency of the image. As Williams observed, Giulio’s “words vitalize the nightingales into something aggressive,” and the birds’ song and his voice are conflated (218). The presentation of love here – as awful (presumably in the sense of inspiring awe) – also reminds one of “Lord Walter’s Wife” in which the protagonist claims that love is a “virtue for heroes” (39). Here too, love seems to require abnormal strength and fortitude to resist the nightingales’ “arrows.”

The first indication that the speaker is no longer in Tuscany, which was suggested by Bianca’s lover’s name and that region’s ubiquitous cypresses and olive groves, occurs in stanza four: “O cold white moonlight of the north, / Refresh these pulses, quench this hell” (28-29). The moonlight has changed significantly since the first stanza, in which it was described as golden, as opposed to cool and bleak.<sup>49</sup> Bianca wonders why the nightingales continue to sing under its influence, in “gloomy England” where one is but “free to die” (33-34). The modification of the refrain of this stanza reinforces her incredulity: “And still they sing, the nightingales!” (36). At this point, the nightingales’ singing begins to torture Bianca. Her “confidence” in Giulio’s love is, as Byron wrote, “undermined when she hears the nightingales sing in the English garden” (*Poetry of Love* 133), because while their call is associated with his assertion that their love will last forever (22), Giulio’s flight has disproved that vow. Now, instead of pleasantly recalling Giulio’s promise, the nightingales’ song has become “simultaneously a memory of purity and a mockery of that memory” (219).

According to Williams, the nightingales also carry “the pressures encoded in literary forms that silence and repress feminine desire” so that Bianca can only speak her desire through “semi-hysterical incomprehension” (219):

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<sup>49</sup> Williams commented that the moonlight at this point in the poem “separates” and “makes alien” (218).

O coverture of death drawn forth  
 Across this garden-chamber .. well!  
 But what have nightingales to do  
 In gloomy England, called the free ..  
 (Yes, free to die in! ..) when the two  
 Are sundered, singing still to me? (31-35)

In these lines: “three sentences tail off inconclusively, the syntax is strained with exclamations, a bracketed, half-finished comment, and an abortive attempt at logic” (Williams 219). The deterioration of Bianca’s speech mirrors that of her world in which “language has only relative value – and which threatens to fall apart” (Williams 220). This is a consequence of the corruption of Giulio’s vow, which has come to mean nothing, breaking the connection between an utterance and its performance. In Williams’ words, Giulio’s betrayal has “undermined” Bianca’s faith in “the solidity and referentiality of language itself” (173). Despite this breakdown in language, Bianca tries to assert that Giulio cannot repeat the vow he gave her to another woman: “Though his throat’s / On fire with passion now, to *her* / He can’t say what to me he said” (40-42). This is because “Each man has but one soul supplied” (39) and, presumably, cannot bestow this soul more than once in the act of loving.

In the same stanza, Bianca tells us that the nightingales have infiltrated her mind: “The nightingales sing through my head, / The nightingales, the nightingales!” (44-45). In this heightened state of emotional anguish, Bianca launches a scathing attack on Giulio’s new lover, who, according to her, is only moved by praises that appeal to her vanity:

He says to *her* what moves her most.  
 He would not name his soul within  
 Her hearing, – rather pays her cost  
 With praises to her lips and chin. (46-49)

Unlike her love for Giulio, which the speaker described as spiritual, Bianca derides Giulio's new relationship as wholly superficial. Again, she observes that Giulio cannot truly love this woman because: "Man has but one soul, 'tis ordained, / And each soul but one love" (50-51). But Giulio has broken this divine decree, the consequences of which are that: "souls are damned and love's profaned" (52). Thus, the poem "depicts the necessity for clarity of language and the bitter confusions that result from betrayal" when these profound notions are corrupted (Williams 216). Echoing and modifying the refrain, Bianca expostulates that the nightingales are deranging her: "These nightingales will sing me mad! / The nightingales, the nightingales! (53-54), and this is due to the bitter disjunction between what they once represented and the present reality in which she and Giulio are sundered.

In stanza eight Bianca initiates a linear narrative of the events that precipitated her separation from Giulio. She recalls a specific evening in Florence, her native town: "the last feast-day of Saint John" (66). That night, the city was "luminous," lit with fireworks which produced reflections of the buildings in the river over which boats glided: "many a boat with lamp and choir / Skimmed birdlike over glittering towers" (70-71). The refrain at the close of this stanza: "I will not hear these nightingales" (72), is a refusal to listen to the song that reminds her of her lost love, and to recall those memories that have been tarnished because of this loss. However, Bianca cannot help but be absorbed by their potency as she revives them: "I seem to float, *we* seem to float / Down Arno's stream in festive guise" (73-74) – although she can distinguish between memories and the present: "up that lady seems to rise / As then she rose" (76-77). Bianca retells Giulio's first encounter with this woman in which the shock of the collision of their two boats renders her beauty magnificent: "What a head, / What leaping eyeballs! – beauty dashed / To splendor by a sudden dread" (78-80) – although there is, perhaps, a touch of derision in the phrase "leaping eyeballs."

In stanza eleven Bianca considers what would have happened had she and Giulio not met the Englishwoman: “She had not reached him at my heart / With her fine tongue, as snakes indeed / Kill flies” (91-93). Bianca’s postulation here is interesting because of the way in which she describes the Englishwoman as having stolen Giulio from Bianca’s heart, where he had been lodged, and the vicious comparison of the Englishwoman to a venomous snake that preys on pathetic insects. Shortly afterwards, in the two and a half most savage lines in the poem, Bianca makes a second comparison between the Englishwoman and a poisonous creature: “She lied and stole, / And spat into my love’s pure pyx / The rank saliva of her soul” (105-07). As she does throughout the poem, the speaker uses these images to present her love for Giulio as sacred, sanctioned by her (Catholic) God, and to condemn and vilify the Englishwoman as a corrupting, malevolent influence.

According to Byron, Bianca “dehumanizes her rival, transforming her into a predator and Giulio into her prey” (*Poetry of Love* 134), in order to present herself and Giulio as having been forcibly separated by the other woman, and to absolve Giulio of responsibility (*Poetry of Love* 130-31). Similarly, Williams noted how, desperately seeking to displace the blame for the affair onto the Englishwoman, Bianca presents her “rival as a temptress, a Siren-like nightingale” (221). By treating Giulio as a victim – one who has been “captivated against his will” – Bianca is able to maintain her faith in their love and to “maintain the purity and intensity of her own love for him” (*Poetry of Love* 131). As Bianca’s “frustration increases,” Byron wrote, “her attacks upon the other woman grow more vicious” (*Poetry of Love* 134). Simonsen has connected this strategy to Bianca’s “absolutist Roman Catholic rhetoric,” which allows her “to cast her rival in terms of evil and corruption” (527). This strategy entails Bianca’s concomitant emphasis on her own moral superiority: she claims that she would not emulate the Englishwoman’s “larcenous tricks” (104) in exchange for her lovely face (13-15).

However, having concluded that the Englishwoman is evil and having attributed sole culpability to her, Bianca attempts to dismiss her, seemingly tired of her own obsession with the other woman:

Let her pass.

I think of her by night and day.

Must *I* too join her .. out, alas! ..

With Giulio, in each word I say?" (131-34)

She expresses frustration at incessantly thinking about Giulio's new lover (as Giulio does) – a point that is reinforced by the slightly altered refrain: “And *evermore* the nightingales!” (135 – my emphasis). According to Byron, Bianca's very “preoccupation with the woman” is distasteful to her; she decides to abandon all thought of the Englishwoman and “achieves some measure of calm” (*Poetry of Love* 134). The above lines are strongly reminiscent of those spoken by the runaway slave: “White men, I leave you all curse-free / In my broken heart's disdain” (252-53). Both women reach the conclusion that, despite their emotional torment, they cannot expect reparation for their suffering and that the only way to escape such torture is to release themselves from whatever it is that engenders it. Both, similarly, conclude with an utterance of their attempt to escape – the slave from the cycle of “whips” and “curses” and Bianca from her own sexual jealousy.

Bianca, subsequently, turns her rage on the nightingales. Giulio's voice has been severed from the birds' song, as Bianca has been cruelly divided from him:

Giulio, my Giulio! – sing they so,

And you be silent? Do I speak,

And you not hear? An arm you throw

Round some one, and I feel so weak? (136-39)

By the end of the poem, the nightingales have become a maddening presence. Byron described the chanting repetition of “the nightingales” as “an integral part of the poem,” suggesting that EBB “exploits the very tendency of refrains to grow intolerable, to infuriate and madden the listener” (*Poetry of Love* 134).<sup>50</sup> The sameness of their song paradoxically highlights the incongruity of their context (gloomy England); and their persistent singing reminds Bianca of the concomitant cessation of Giulio’s promises. At the end of the poem, Bianca shrieks at them:

– Oh, owl-like birds! They sing for spite,  
                   They sing for hate, they sing for doom!  
 They’ll sing through death who sing through night,  
                   They’ll sing and stun me in the tomb –  
 The nightingales, the nightingales! (140-44)

Williams and Simonsen have discussed “Bianca” in terms of the female speaker’s self-imposed limbo. In this ballad, Williams wrote, the speaker’s identity disintegrates “under the pressure of vivid memories which erupt uncontrollably into a vague, lost present” (173). Because Bianca’s “lost present” is overshadowed by her memories, “she can have no future” and nor can she recover the past (Williams 221). For Simonsen, Bianca’s “apparent inaudibility” means that her “words only torment herself” (526). In a similar way to the speaker of “Void in Law,” her “discourse re-enacts and re-creates her feelings of bitterness, redundancy, and death” (Simonsen 526). Similarly, throughout the poem, “Bianca is continually returned to the birds’ multiple signification,” which includes the eternity of hers and Giulio’s passion (and its sacredness) and the “eternal torment in the present with his new passion” (Simonsen 527). Bianca will never escape their song because “they signify her own

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<sup>50</sup> A point with which both Radley (116) and Mermin (*Elizabeth Barrett Browning* 241) concurred.

bitter, self-renewing consciousness from which she cannot escape” (Simonsen 527).<sup>51</sup> Thus, the domination of her present by her past and her “inaudibility” – the fact that there is no one to whom she can communicate her suffering – establish a painful, emotional stasis.

Both Bianca and Bertha (of “Bertha in the Lane”), Simonsen argued, think of themselves as inaudible and their speech, therefore, as “ineffective.” As a consequence of this, “their own language reproduces their self-perceived entrapment” (528). Simonsen implied that the “entrapment” of the speakers is self-imposed and that the “futility and self-destructive nature” of these poems should “be read ironically” – they dramatise “the need for psychological, as well as political, female freedom” (528). Bianca, in other words, unbalances herself through “her own thought processes” (529) – her inability to cease obsessing over an unfaithful lover and the seductress who “stole” him from her. However, I would emphasise, as I did with reference to “Void in Law,” the fact that the female speaker’s lack of an auditor renders her vulnerable to destructive, cyclical thought patterns.<sup>52</sup> Because no one intervenes in Bianca’s, or Jessie’s, monologue, nor confronts her ideas, she repeats herself, reinforcing her obsession and jealousy. Thus, she remains vulnerable to the deranging influence of the nightingales’ song, which reminds her of her abandonment. She has no release, as other characters in “The Runaway Slave” and *Last Poems* do, in the form of speaking to an auditor or participating in reciprocal dialogue and, while she remains articulate in her passionate attack, her language falters in that speech has no real efficacy when no one hears it. The nightingales, therefore, to which she continuously returns and whose call concludes each one of her statements, represent the echo chamber in which she finds herself.

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<sup>51</sup> Both critics also placed emphasis on the two female characters’ respective nationalities. In Williams’ words, the Italian Bianca “refuses the role of the conventional female victim... while the unnamed English lady typifies the sensual corruption of the aristocracy” (215). And, according to Simonsen, “[t]he “heightening” and “distancing” that EBB uses in deploying an Italian female protagonist here is “an attempt to bring the deeper psychological ironies to the reader’s attention more readily” (525).

<sup>52</sup> Although Bianca does, at times, use the first person plural (“That night we felt our love would hold” – 2), or directly address Giulio (“Giulio, my Giulio!” – 136).

Mermin detected in EBB's later career a "turn to modern themes, settings, and problems," describing it as a "turn to a world in which she could imagine more scope for women and about which she could speak more directly" ("Stories" 106). I have linked this "turn" to a shift towards a form of ballad that more closely resembles the broadside, rather than a dispensing with the ballad form altogether. Thus, it can be acknowledged that ballads – as I attempted to argue in the first chapter – remained important to EBB throughout her career as a means of investigating, in a deceptively radical way, the plight of women (and men) in a contemporary society in which gender roles were strictly circumscribed.

More importantly, however, I have tried to show how a poetics of reciprocity, in which the interlocutor participates in an active or passive manner (but always in an important way), defines "The Runaway Slave" and these *Last Poems*, and connects them with the *Sonnets*, and with EBB's earlier ballads. In these final pieces, the speaker's addressee, their identity, status, and relationship with the speaker, is fundamental to the poem, determining the efficacy of the speaker's language and whether or not it can, truly, be defined as a "cultural performative" in Slinn's terms.



## Conclusion

Up until “Lady Geraldine’s Courtship,” EBB’s early ballads are distinguished by a stifling pessimism. The female speakers, or protagonists, in these poems – often betrayed or abandoned women – frequently speak and behave in a duplicitous or untrustworthy manner, and speech is shown to be “slippery” (as it is in “Lady Geraldine’s Courtship,” albeit because of the obtuseness of the male speaker). The atmosphere of these poems is often chill and foreboding, borrowing the “genuine cold grue” of traditional folk ballads, which Hayter identified in “The Romaunt of Margret” (*Mrs. Browning* 32). In these poems, EBB’s subversive intent was often shrouded from the reader by the trappings of the palatable and popular genre in which they were framed. But EBB’s intentions were, clearly, more complicated than those that were originally attributed to her – and Armstrong’s concept of the “double poem” assists in elucidating these.

Speech is similarly important to *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, in which EBB’s female speaker persistently addresses her lover. Not only does she express her own experience of their love, but she also addresses his, rebutting his conception of love and loving, concurring with him, or playfully teasing and flirting with him. The result is a sequence of poems permeated by a dialogic condition. Many formal elements of the poem appear to reinforce the evocation of this conversation and to remind us that, although we are only directly privy to the words of one speaker, these are inextricably linked with those of the other party to the dialogue.

Similarly, while “The Runaway Slave” and many of EBB’s *Last Poems* are hybrid ballad-dramatic monologues, the dynamic between speaker and addressee remains integral to the conception of these poems, rendering the term “monologue” somewhat redundant. Here, EBB’s fascination with language plays out in an exploration of the varying degrees of potency of speech acts, and how this is affected by the “enabling conditions” that Slinn

deemed essential to the definition of a “performative.” In these poems, EBB presents a series of dramatic portraits of attempts at “cultural performatives” on behalf of women. Women attempt to participate in and alter social conventions regarding marriage, love, desire, and the success of each attempt is heavily influenced by the social and political conditions that comprise the speaker’s niche.

Thus, EBB’s poetics of reciprocity highlights the importance of a dynamic relationship between speaker and interlocutor, rather than a static echo chamber from which an isolated monologic speaker speaks. This poetics distinguishes and links EBB’s ballads with her sonnets, while creating diverse effects in each separate body of work. I believe that it was the concrete act of writing, reading, and replying, which characterised EBB’s principally correspondence-based friendships before her marriage to Browning, that impressed the importance of dialogue on the poet and led to its incorporation into her work – although such speculation is beyond the ambit of this thesis. My objective was, rather, to highlight the original and compelling effects that EBB’s dialogic approach produced in her poetry. However, I do hope to have presented some thoughts that may lead to the further exploration of a wide range of issues, including the dynamic between EBB and Browning, and the role of correspondence in the forging of a poetic.

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