Title of Paper: **Love in Sonnets/Letters: Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s Courtship in Sonnets from the Portuguese**

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Section: Articles
Issue: Volume 2, Number 1

Abstract:

In the sonnet tradition, it might be argued that this genre is often perceived by the male-dominated culture as a means of expressing courtly love to a female desiring object and expressing the secret emotions of the poet-lover, such as Sidney’s *Astrophel and Stella*, Shakespeare’s sonnets, etc. This sonnet writing tradition is not simply adopted by Elizabeth Barrett Browning to express her love for Robert Browning in a subversive way, but points to a changeability, shifting between desiring subject and the object desired or the speaking subject and the recipient. Furthermore, written in the disguise of translation, *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, as exemplified by its title, not only echoes one of the possible literary connotations from *Letters Portugaises* but also refers to a sense of distance and mysteriousness behind autobiographical writing. Rather than reiterate the traditional paradigm that understands *Sonnets* within the framework of Barrett Browning’s autobiographical, religious, feminist writing, this paper attempts to put together *Sonnets* and love letters exchanged between Elizabeth Browning and Robert Browning and to situate this seemingly monologic lyric poetry within the context of Bakhtin’s dialogism in order to highlight its communicative potential between lovers, between selves or between unidentified readers.

Keywords: Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Bakhtin, *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, sonnet writing, letters

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Sonnet writing, it might be argued, is always perceived by the male-dominated culture as a means of expressing courtly love to a female desiring object and the secret emotions of male poets, such as Sidney’s *Astrophel and Stella*, Shakespeare’s sonnets, and so forth. This particular poetic form originated in Italy and flourished in the English Renaissance period; it is noteworthy that women are often regarded as the object of desire for the male poet and always maintain silence in love sonnets. It is because of this very fact that sonnets, like most poetic forms, have long been treated as masculine activity and present a sort of sexual politics. As Angela Leighton asserts in her study, “the politics of subject and object . . . is traditionally a sexual politics, by which the woman is desirable and inspiring for being, herself, without desire and without language” (qtd. in Paul 78).

In Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, however, it is obvious that she adopts this masculine genre to express her love and attempts to take advantage of it. As regards this sonnet tradition, Yuan-guey Chiou says that “for Elizabeth Barrett Browning to adopt the male-dominated sonnet form to express her deep-felt love toward a male poet is at once a subversive act of convention-appropriation and an embarrassing exposure of female intensive passion” (45-46). In a sense, this sonnet writing tradition is not simply adopted by Elizabeth Barrett Browning to express love for Robert Browning in a subversive way but further points to a changeability that makes her oscillate between desiring subject and the object desired or the speaking subject and the recipient. Since its publication in 1850, *Sonnets* has received lots of attention for its semi-autobiographical writing: not only because of Barrett Browning’s self-centering narrator but for the private life built out of “all dead paper” (XXVIII 1). As Natalie M. Houston notes in “Affecting Authenticity,” Barrett Browning’s *Sonnets* is frequently “read as more or less directly revealing . . . author’s life stories” so that both authentic experiences and the heart’s true feelings in poems have “a powerful emotional effect on readers” (99-100). Of the forty-four poems in the *Sonnets*, Daniel Karlin also indicates that there are forty-three that more or less “refer directly to Robert Browning” and one is addressed to her sorrowful retrospection to the past (The Courtship 269).

Houston and Karlin’s observations do help us to understand Barrett Browning from a biographical perspective and to touch her deepest heart as the poet lover, writing love sonnets to Robert Browning during their courtship period. In the same vein, Margaret Forster and Angela Leighton also tackle Barrett Browning’s autobiographical writing, but their discussion is not based upon love legend of Brownings but from an act of translation. Written in the disguise of translation, *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, as exemplified by its title, not only echoes literary connotations from *Letters Portugaises* but also refers to a sense of distance behind the autobiographical writing.

In order to advance my argument and understand Barrett Browning’s *Sonnets from the Portuguese* in a proper way, my study will build on existing scholarship of Barrett Browning and seek to move beyond the research scope of these existing works. In other words, rather than to reiterate the traditional paradigm that understands *Sonnets* within the framework of Barrett Browning’s autobiographical, religious, feminine writing, my paper attempts to put together *Sonnets* and love letters exchanged between the Brownings and to situate this seemingly monologic lyric
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poetry within the context of Mikhail Bakhtin’s dialogism in order to highlight its communicative potential between lovers, between selves or between unidentified readers. In this regard, to reexamine Bakhtin’s thoughts on dialogism in his famous essay, “Discourse in the Novel,” is thereby an inescapable process before read the Sonnets.

According to Bakhtin, prose forms in one way or another are superior to the poetic genre on the basis of which the novelist “confronts a multitude of routes, roads and paths,” and “witnesses the unfolding of social heteroglossia surrounding the object, the Tower-of-Babel mixing of languages that goes on around any object” (278; emphasis in original). Poetry, on the contrary, presents “a unitary of all the author’s sematic and expressive intentions” (285). Bakhtin espouses the view that poetic language is unitary and singular and “often becomes authoritarian, dogmatic and conservative, sealing itself off from the influence of extraliterary social dialects” (286-87). In other words, the prose forms constituted by dialogue and for its effects of heteroglossia are dialogic, but poetry is, on the contrary, monologic. Moreover, the poets are those who privilege a unitary and authoritarian discourse that serves to form an individual, personal language in lyric poetry in terms of Bakhtin’s division between the poet and the novelist. And this individual or personal utterance is the one that excludes external social speeches without which the negotiation and dialogue between speaker/writer and listener/reader no longer exist. At this point, one may go further and question Bakhtin’s self-conflicted arguments since he claims that “the dialogic orientation of discourse is a phenomenon that is . . . a property of any discourse” (279; emphasis in original).

It is true that Bakhtin considers poetic work monologic, but his rule does not include those exceptions—“‘low’ poetic genres—in the satire and comic genres and others [the speeches of characters in the purely poetic genres]” (287). Apart from satire and comics, the romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge has provided us a perfect example of heteroglossia and diverse speeches of characters in his lyrical ballads. In Christabel, for example, a polyphonic effect and a different-speech-ness are created by its heterogeneous voices of characters in and out of the narrated world. It is same with Barrett Browning’s Sonnets if we put it in the context of letter writing and intertextual reading with the love letters exchanged between Brownings.

Since the publication of letters became more popular and visible in the Victorian period, the privacy the letter claims has disappeared and the secrecy within letter writing also no longer limited itself to a particular listener/reader. Though in most cases privacy is an issue of secrecy shared within a specific I-thou relationship, such as sender/receiver or addressor/ addressee, the publication of a letter collection somehow breaks this distinct uniqueness. Like letters, love sonnets also share the same features for they “explore the consciousness of the writer, probe emotional states, and examine the conscience” (Benstock 92). In the case of the Sonnets and letters of the Brownings, we notice that the privacy between lovers and personal feelings is exposed in public and shared by readers without secrecy. Between privacy and publicity, the Sonnets, as its title shows—“from the Portuguese,” is obviously in the disguise of translation. Here the Portuguese is not merely used by Barrett Browning as camouflage but also manipulated by her to make a certain distance between private and public spheres. While the title points to a long-dead Portuguese
lyric poet, Vaz de Camoes for the purpose of “a distraction from the autobiographical origins of the Sonnets,” both Brownings consider these poems too personal to be published under the name of Elizabeth Barrett Browning (Leighton 144; Simonsen 2). Nevertheless, we readers are not simply present to passively interpret those poetic and intimate words between lovers and in the manuscripts, but as participants to touch the heart of the poet and witness Brownings’ love story. Even though the poet is concerned much about personal privacy for the publication of the Sonnets, the readers at this point are definitely people whom Barrett Browning invites to witness her unacknowledged love and marriage,¹ and, on the other hand, to enrich the plurality of the text. It is said that in the process of the reading, the text not only denies its isolation of fixed meanings or a closed system within textual society, but is put in the course of becoming so that it represents all the possible values and polyphonic effects it can ever produce. Viewed in the light of this perspective, then, the dialogism in the Sonnets is not based upon the relationship between works or between characters but precisely between the poet and the reader. As such, the Sonnets keep no possibility of its unitary feature and serves to impose Barrett Browning’s authoritarian meaning-making on it.

However, writing to the absent correspondent/ lover, Barrett Browning provides an interior monologue in the Sonnets and addresses the idea of distance while she waits for the letters from Browning. Although we are not informed of this fact in the poems, we know that both of them received letters from each other. From the Portuguese not only presents an idea of “writing at a distance from the original,” but further denotes the concept of “what is remote and foreign” (Leighton 145). Because of this remoteness, the courtly tradition of waiting is often viewed either as a sense of hopelessness or of expectation. Through the following lines, the poet’s two opposite feelings (the passion of expectation and the anxiety of waiting for letters) somehow are revealed:

My letters! all dead paper, mute and white!
And yet they seem alive and quivering
Against my tremulous hands which loose the string
And let them drop down on my knee tonight. (XXVII, 1-4)

Here, the letters not merely present the poet’s paradoxical sensations, but also show the sense of complaining. Between “dead” and “alive,” the opening lines of the sonnet, as we may readily see, exactly project the poet’s contradictory feelings in the letter and her desires toward the correspondent: on the one hand, the letters (“My letters”) serve to elaborate the poet’s passions and courtly love, and, on the other hand, they help to bridge the gap between time and space in order to create the possibility of communication for love in distance. Only through these alive letters, the poet lover can express her love toward the beloved, and await for his answer and his returned

¹ Even though Brownings’ love affair is like a love legend between the knight and the damsel, yet their marriage is in secret and without any support from parents, Barrett Browning’s father in particular. As Karlin notes, their marriage and elopement make Barrett Browning’s father “renounce[s] his daughter—to the extent of returning her letters unopened, and of forbidding her name to be mentioned for the rest of his life” (“Introduction” xiii).
love in the future. However, the passion of these letters are written in arbitrary words that may not be precise to convey the discursive ideas of the poetess and her feelings. In addition, her deep-felt love expressed in letters may not get any satisfactory return since courtly love is, in its tradition, rooted in the discourse of an unrequited love.

A delightful rapture comes from the lines that follow:

This said—he wished to have me in his sight

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. . . this—the paper’s light

Said, Dear, I love thee . . . (XXVII, 5, 8-9)

As borne out by the above passage, the missive both brings hope and expectation for the poet, and his message (“This said—”), as Lee Anne Gallaway-Mitchell argues, “sets the terms of future physical contact” (2). Even though by those letters the condition of absence is emphasized, yet this absence does not disappoint lovers’ passions but further makes the heart grow fonder. In another sense, the letter seems to stress a prolonged absence and love from a distance by an act of reading and rereading. However, the story told by the letters are not shown to readers; but Barrett Browning’s love sonnet that represents the events and the fact of their letter exchanging.

In a similar way, Barrett Browning’s Sonnets at this point seems also to echo its literary exemplar—Letters Portugaises. Like Mariane, a Portuguese nun, Barrett Browning shares a feature of self-satisfied achievement when reading letters. Both as a sonnet poet and a letter reader, she shares with readers her thoughts, feelings, and passions in the love sonnets. On the one hand, the speaker of the Sonnets is the desiring subject expressing a dedication of love toward the beloved. Likewise, it is also not hard for readers to recognize that the speaker is an object of desire for her correspondent on the other. Between desiring subject and object desired, there is only one speaker and one voice in the Sonnets, that is, the poetess herself. Although we all know that the Brownings exchanged letters during the period of courtship, those letters did not reveal themselves in the Sonnets but are retold by the poetess herself. The speaker of the Sonnets, as Sarah Paul states, is “a profoundly self-centered one” whose voice serves “to focus attention on her presence in the Sonnets as an autonomous entity with distinct feelings and experiences” (77).

In a form of monologue, Barrett Browning, as Pauline Margaret Simonsen argues and attempts to “place the woman speaker at the centre of this poetry: to be subject, not the object” (5). Besides this, the speaker of the Sonnets also plays roles between two opposite sites that has been separated in the earlier love poetry: “speaker and listener, subject and object of desire, male and female” (Mermin 352). In so doing, the speaker’s monologue or soliloquy not merely reveals Barrett Browning’s emotional loneliness and self-satisfaction through writing sonnets but further points out the fact of the absence of the lover. In one way or another, the failure of communication is highlighted by the absence of the lover, and this failure, on the other hand, seems also to prove the impossibility of a dialogue with others (not me) or

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For speaker’s autonomous entity with experiences and voices without correspondence, her feeling expression is in some ways for “feelings of unworthiness and self-pity” (Paul 77).
an epistolary relationship. This impossibility I shall argue here does not mean the impossibility of heteroglossia because the selves of the subject (me) or under the name of I in the sonnets are the ones constructing polyphonic effects. In other words, the present I is not me in the future, nor the one in the past. In the three-dimensional space where we live, it is not possible to go backward to the past, only forward to the future. The self, as indicated by Michael Holquist in Dialogism, is “far from having what Bakhtin calls an alibi in existence” and “answerable for the response that is generated from the unique place I occupy in existence (30; emphasis in original). As such, the diverse selves in the past, the present, and the future become unique and communicable to each other.

Regarding its epistolary style, the Sonnets are, of course, not composed through letters, nor cannot be letters according to its generic style. As Leighton observes, Barrett Browning writes these sonnets both as a return to thank Browning for his flowers and for expressing her anxiety about his love and feelings when waiting for his letters during the period of courtship (142-43). Under the pressure of waiting for letters to come, writing as meant by Shari Benstock “opens the possibility of fulfillment and consummation, and, even when it mourns a love lost, writing is inaugural: it rekindle desire” (qtd. in Hu 4). Like Mariane in Letters Portugaises, writing for Barrett Browning is also “an attempt to fill” the absence of the lover and to seek “a sense of eternal joy of becoming” (Hu 4-5). As we shall see, the sonnet XXXVIII begins: “First time he kissed me, he but only kissed/ The fingers of this hand wherewith I write” (1-2). Even though the speaker’s loneliness is because of absent lover correspondence, yet writing sonnets does help her to link the memory of happiness and fills the empty void of the moment. Furthermore, in the sonnet XLIII, the speaker’s soliloquy also reflects her love toward the beloved is in the process of becoming and may change at any time—“How do I love thee? Let me count the ways” (1). Unlike Mariane, the speaker’s link with the male lover does not rely on recounting past memories. Nor does the absence of a lover in the Sonnets refer to the unacceptable departure of the lover because the absence is caused by distance. It is said that through counting ways of love the speaker is to recalculate and reaffirm her love toward the male lover.

In fact, along with letters exchanged between the Brownings, we find that the letter written by Robert Browning on 10 January 1845, praises Barrett Browning’s poetry and at the same time expresses his love toward Barrett Browning:

I love your verses with all my heart, dear Miss Barrett,—and this is no off-hand complimentary letter that I shall write,—whatever else, no prompt matter-of-course recognition of your genius and there a graceful and natural end of the thing: since the day last week when I first read your poems. . . .

In conjunction with letters, the communication of an epistolary relationship is, therefore, built, and this connection between lovers, I argue, is not exactly outside the text (the sonnet). As aforementioned, a dialogue either within the sonnets or the letters is certainly based upon the relationship between I and you. One might say that this relationship is between subject and object, between speaker and listener, between addresor and addressee, etc. Indeed, this relationship, on the one hand, means a
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hierarchical priority, and it also denotes an intersubjective reliance without which the dialogue cannot exist.

In a hierarchical relationship, I of these love sonnets, as we may readily see, deprives you of voices and silences the object. Love, as Renata Salecl claims, “does not call for an answer,” and this muteness of lover in turn makes possible the duration of enjoyment (191-92). And Salecl even goes further to point out the fact that “any possible answer from the beloved object would undermine this narcissistic relationship” (192).

We find, however, that Robert Browning writes to Barrett Browning on December 1845: “now, my heart’s love, I am waiting to hear from you—my heart is full of you . . . only that makes me bear with the memory” (165). With this interdependency, I (Robert Browning) expect to hear answer from you (Barrett Browning) and rely on you for the memory, and you then depend upon this reliance to build a connection with I and to occupy the heart of I. It is the same in the love sonnets where the relationship is characterized by the effect of interpellation. Because the subject is always already interpellated, I at all times call for an answer from you with expectation, and you in turn answer I in any time. At this point, however, who is exactly interpellated is no longer important because “whosoever finds himself [or herself] at this place is the addressee since the addressee is not defined by his positive qualities but by the very contingent fact of finding himself [or herself] at this place” (11).

Unlike as in novels, the dialogism of Barrett Browning’s Sonnets is not rooted in the network of characters but fashioned within the context of the absence of the lover, the interpellation of unidentified reader, and the poet’s monologue. Because of these very facts, the linguistic dialogue or polyphonic effect is thus created in Barrett Browning’s Sonnets.


