ELIZABETH BARRETT AND ROBERT BROWNING

A Creative Partnership

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Volume 4

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Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published in 2003 by Ashgate Publishing Limited

This edition first published in 2016
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-138-67471-4 (Set)
ISBN: 978-1-315-56115-8 (Set) (ebk)
ISBN: 978-1-138-67413-4 (Volume 4) (hbk)
ISBN: 978-1-138-67414-1 (Volume 4) (pbk)
ISBN: 978-1-315-56148-6 (Volume 4) (ebk)

Publisher's Note
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Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning

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MARY SANDERS POLLOCK

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Published by
Ashgate Publishing Limited
Gower House
Croft Road
Aldershot
Hampshire GU11 3HR
England

Ashgate Publishing Company
Suite 420
101 Cherry Street
Burlington, VT 05401-4405
USA

Ashgate website: http//www.ashgate.com

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Pollock, Mary Sanders
Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning : a creative partnership. - (The nineteenth century series)
1.Browning, Elizabeth Barrett, 1806-1861 - Influence
2. Browning, Robert, 1812-1889 - Influence 3.English poetry - 19th century - History and criticism
I.Title
821.8'09

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Pollock, Mary Sanders, 1948-
Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning : a creative partnership / Mary Sanders Pollock.
p. cm. -- (The nineteenth century series)
Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.
ISBN 0-7546-3328-4 (alk. paper)
1. Browning, Elizabeth Barrett, 1806-1861--Criticism and interpretation. 2. Browning, Robert, 1812-1889--Criticism and interpretation. 3. Authorship--Collaboration--History--19th century. 4. Browning, Elizabeth Barrett, 1806-1861--Marriage. 5. Browning, Robert, 1812-1889--Marriage. 6. Married people--Great Britain--Biography. 7. Poets, English--19th century--Biography. I. Title. II. Nineteenth century (Aldershot, England)

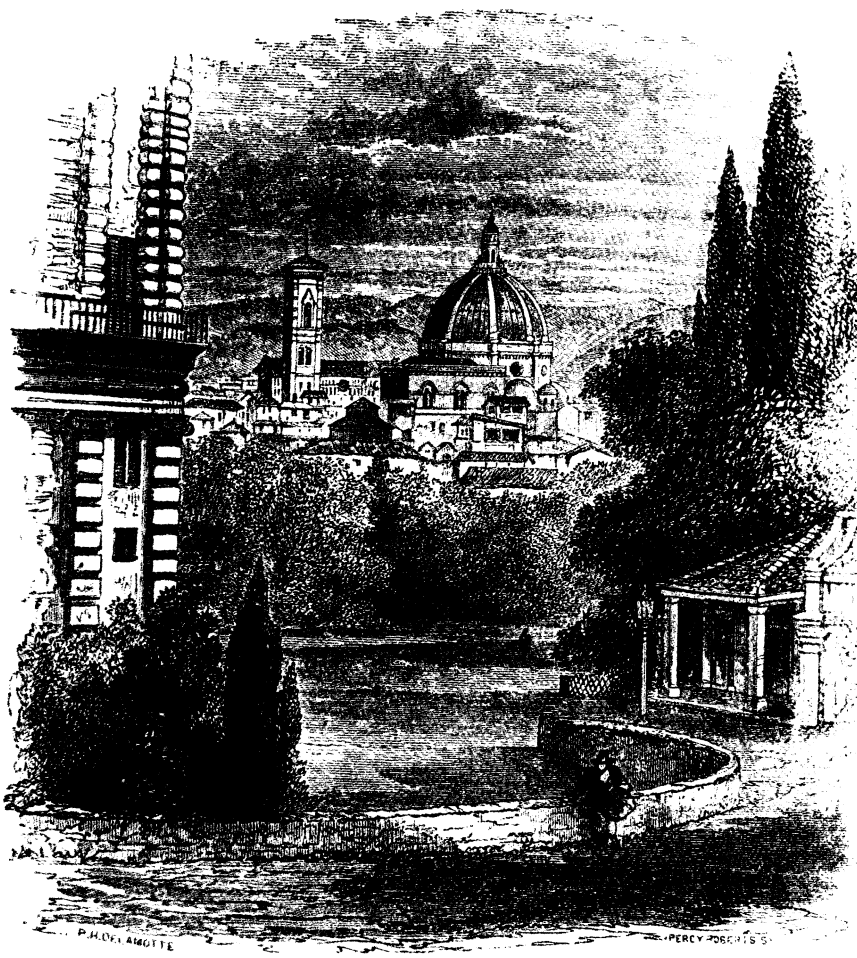
PR4194.P654 2003
821'.809--dc21 2002043899

ISBN 0 7546 3328 4

Reprinted 2005

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Biddles Ltd, King's Lynn, Norfolk

This book is for my parents,
Charles and Vivian Sanders



Cathedral and Campanile from the Palazzo Pitti.

Cathedral and Campanile from the Palazzo Pitti, engraving from a drawing by P.H. Delamotte, *The Makers of Florence* (1885) by Mrs. [Margaret] Oliphant, Frontispiece

People say of you and me. . . that we love the darkness
and use a sphinxine idiom in our talk. . . .

(EBB, 1845)

***

"Ah, but if you knew how time has dragged, days, nights!
  All the neighbor-talk with man and maid—such men!
All the fuss and trouble of street sounds, window-sights:
  All the worry of flapping door and echoing roof; and then,
All the fancies. . . Who were they had leave, dared try
  Darker arts than that almost struck despair in me?
If you knew but how I dwelt down here!" quoth I:
  "And was I so much better off up there?" quoth She.

(RB, 1872)

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Acknowledgments

Books result from creative partnerships among authors and communities. The staff of the Armstrong Browning Library at Baylor University have created for me, along with many other scholars, a sense of community; this library has also helped fund my research. I am especially grateful to Rita Patteson, Cynthia Burgess, and Mairi Rennie. I am also grateful for the assistance of Ruth R. Rogers and Mariana S. Oller at the Margaret Clapp Library of Wellesley College, and to the Southern Regional Education Board for funding my research there. At the DuPont-Ball Library of Stetson University, Jane Bradford has been consistently generous with her time and help since I began working on this book, and Sims Klein has been most helpful during the final stages.

I am no less indebted to other colleagues at Stetson, especially John Pearson, Terri Witek, Bryan Gillespie, Thomas J. Farrell, Karen Kaivola, Gary Bolding, and Lou Brakeman. Dialogue with them has strengthened my research in a variety of ways. Without Cathy Burke's commitment, generosity, and editing skills, my task at one point would have seemed impossible. Roberta Favis and Ann Burlin have given me indispensable aid in preparing the illustrations. Over the years, Stetson University has supported this project with sabbatical leaves and research grants. I am grateful for this institutional support, and in particular I thank the Deans of the College of Arts and Sciences for promoting my work.

This book has also benefitted from the criticism of colleagues elsewhere, including Sandra Donaldson, Adrienne Auslander Munich, Beverly Taylor, and the expert staff and readers at Ashgate Publishing. From them, I have received much needed encouragement and correction. Other friends and colleagues read entire early drafts: Lynn Moss Sanders, Amy Johns, and the late H. Patsy Boyer, whose marginal notes enabled me to have one more conversation with her after her death in 2000. I am grateful to David Latané, the editor of *Victorians Institute Journal*, for permission to reprint portions of an article which appeared in Vol. 27.

My debt to Nancy Vosburg is greatest of all: she has inspired me, argued with me, and read every word of this book several times. I also thank the rest of my family for offering me several models of collaborative relationship. And finally, I thank Rory, who studiously reminded me to look up and play.

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Introduction

A matched pair, the Gordigiani portraits of the Brownings, seated in their heavy gold frames, dominate the walls of the National Portrait Gallery, where they reside with the portraits of other Victorian writers.[1] The Brownings' position in this room is emblematic: together, they have dominated the twentieth-century imaginative view of the Victorian period. Their story fascinates us: it has been scrutinized in realistic fiction, celebrated on stage, spun out into sentimental biographies, deconstructed in postmodern love stories.[2] Ironically, ever since the publication of their love letters in 1899, the Brownings have inspired the popular imagination not as poets working on a life-long project, but as a sentimental diptych - even though the work of writing was at the core of their relationship.[3]

More obviously, the work of writing was always at the core of the Brownings' separate lives. Fifteen-year-old Elizabeth Barrett noted in an autobiographical essay that, when she was ten, her "poetry was entirely formed by the style of written authors and I read that I might write" (*Correspondence* 1.350). Thus ensued decades of struggle with literary tradition: how to become part of it, how to distinguish herself from it. In an essay about Thomas Chatterton which is at least as revealing about himself as his subject, Robert Browning writes that "Genius almost invariably begins to develop itself by imitation [. . .] and its object is to compete with, or prove superior to, the world's already recognized idols [. . .]". The next

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[1] Arrangements of the portraits in the National Portrait Gallery change, of course, but the size and frame design of the Browning portraits call attention to them wherever they are placed.

[2] Fictional treatments of the Brownings are, of course, legion. Probably the most influential in terms of the popular imagination has been Rudolph Besier's 1930 psychological (and sentimental) play, *The Barretts of Wimpole Street*, which was made into a film. Henry James' "The Private Life," in which Browning appears as a personality split between everyday ordinariness and poetic intensity, has an obvious appeal for academic readers. Most recently, A. S. Byatt has moved from Browning criticism to fictional treatments of the poets, especially in *Possession* (1990).

[3] Although she does not argue that the courtship correspondence should not have been published, Patricia O'Neil suggests in *Robert Browning and Twentieth-Century Criticism* that the availability of the letters has harmed the literary reputations of both Brownings--damage which began with the earliest reviews.

stage in the development of a literary gift is to "create, and imitate no longer" (*Essay on Chatterton* 111). From childhood, both these poets were profoundly aware of literary influence as contemporary and historical context, both nurturing and stifling. In this sense of influence, they did not influence each other. Instead, I believe, their working relationship was a continuous conversation about balancing the demands of their craft, the requirements of their readers, the debts they owed because of their respective gifts, and the practicalities of working. Perhaps because she was a woman in the masculine world of literature, Barrett Browning was particularly responsive when Browning encouraged her to create her own new literary forms. Through his faith in her work, he granted her permission to experiment, and her great mature work, *Aurora Leigh*, testifies to his support. In contrast, Browning always consciously asserted himself against tradition, but the confusing polyvocality of his early work and the strangeness of his literary forms alienated readers. Elizabeth Barrett enabled him to reconsider the transaction between author and audience which is essential if the written conversation is to continue. She read his work with minute attention, helped him revise it without betraying his own voice or his vision of the world, and urged him to be accessible. To her Browning owed the popularity which finally became his after her death. When the Brownings actually appear in each other's work, they do so as "the audience in the poem."[4]

The Brownings' life together from 1845 to 1861 was a collaboration. During their courtship and marriage, Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote the most mature and original poetry of her career; at the same time, Robert Browning persisted in developing his vigorous and demanding experimental poems, in spite of the critics who had not yet learned how to read them. The Brownings' life was an ongoing dialogue of mutual influence, agreement and disagreement, love and rivalry. In studying the poetry they wrote during their years together, I try to show how their working relationship enabled each to develop assurance and a greater range of expression. My comparison of these two closely-linked careers shows, too, that literary men and women in the nineteenth century had similarly vexed, if distinctly different, relationships to tradition. The Brownings benefited enormously - but differently - from their relationship. Elizabeth Barrett Browning found that her own voice emerged most clearly in works more dialogic in form and language, more engaged with the contemporary world, than the language of her early poems. Given the strictures of her life before she met him, such language and such engagement could only have

[4] The term comes from the title of Dorothy Mermin's 1983 study.

come about in Robert Browning's presence. And through Elizabeth, Robert Browning was able to relax the adversarial stance toward his models and his readers, establishing a more cooperative, though still never easy, relationship with his audience.

Before they encountered each other, Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning had worked in what amounted to separate social vacuums, which diffused and defused their creative power. Both were petted and precocious - and artistically isolated. Hope End, the extravagant home Elizabeth Barrett's father built with the family wealth accumulated by generations of Jamaican planters, was geographically isolated in the Malvern Hills. Browning's childhood home in the London suburb of Camberwell, though not isolated in the same way, was made so comfortable for him by his indulgent parents that he never formed the kinds of social ties that most children do. Unrestrained by their parents, both poets learned voraciously. When she was a child, Elizabeth tried to pattern herself after Byron and, in her desire for genius and fame, "went out one day with my pinafore full of little sticks, (& a match from the housemaids cupboard) to sacrifice to the blue-eyed Minerva" (*Correspondence* 11.319). With his father, six-year-old Robert played Homeric games under the furniture (the cat was Helen of Troy) and a few years later eschewed meat and God in imitation of Shelley. "Development," a poetic retrospective in *Asolando* (1889), recounts the way Browning's father first taught him Homer's stories through games, then read with him Pope's translations, and finally oversaw the young poet's study of the original Greek - more satisfying to the poet, ultimately, than any dry lesson from the pages of the *Nicomachean Ethics* or Friedrich Wolf's analysis of the *Iliad* as a product of oral tradition. But there were limits to the pedagogical effectiveness and the cultural riches offered in the homes of both children - and both were still hungry for teachers when they met.

As teenagers, Barrett and Browning moved tentatively out of their social isolation into similar precocious, almost enmeshed friendships with older adults of the opposite sex - in Barrett's case, with the blind classical scholar Hugh Boyd, in Browning's, with Eliza and Sarah Flower, the talented daughters of the radical journalist Benjamin Flower. After these friendships faded, and well into their thirties, both Barrett and Browning remained domestically dependent on their parents, highly aware of but uninitiated into the complexities of adult sexuality, still unsure about how their work would relate to literary tradition and to their readers, and still, despite their productivity as poets, attempting to gain more control over poetic language and form. Both were so committed to their work that they would certainly have continued to grow as artists - but they would not have developed in

the same way. Apart, they would not have become the writers we know now as "Robert Browning" and "Elizabeth Barrett Browning."

The pattern of changes in their poetry after 1845, when they began their famous correspondence, suggests that for each of them development as a human being and a poet depended on contact with the creativity and intellectual power of the other. The early twentieth-century Russian theorist Lev Vygotsky's work on educational development suggests that children develop as they are pulled forward by their teachers into ever greater intellectual, creative, and psychic depths, "zones of proximal development," which define abilities "that have not yet matured but are in the process of maturing, functions that will mature tomorrow but are currently in an embryonic state," functions that "could be termed the 'buds' or 'flowers' of development rather than the fruit" (*Mind in Society* 87). The teacher pulls the child through these zones in dialogue. Thus the educational process is always social, whether its content is algebra or etiquette. Mental growth is not simply a function of age; it does not ascend a fixed set of developmental rungs, but expands in an open-ended process through which the subject learns and develops in continual dialogue with her social surroundings.

If the young J. S. Mill suffered an excess of such pulling, the young Barrett and Browning suffered a dearth of it. As a result, each lacked the confidence of being understood. Similar as Barrett and Browning were in ability, bourgeois background, and poetic interests, each also needed to be pulled forward by the different strengths of the other and taught by the other's complementary magisterial qualities. Clyde de L. Ryals remarks that, until their flight to Italy forced them into worldly maturity, both Barrett and Browning had lived in a state of "prolonged childhood" (*The Life of Robert Browning* 90).[5] Thus, their chronological maturity did not make this dialogic process any less necessary, and each eagerly cast the other in the role of teacher.

Anyone reading these poets together confronts the fact that their critical history is unequal. This disparity is most apparent in the condition of the *oeuvres* themselves: three modern editions of Browning's collected works are available; for Barrett Browning, only *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, *Casa Guidi Windows* and *Aurora Leigh* are available in editions published according to contemporary scholarly standards. Furthermore, there are long silences with regard to Barrett Browning, who was popular during her

[5] Several other biographers, particularly Betty Miller (*Robert Browning: A Portrait*, 1952) and Daniel Karlin (*The Courtship of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett*, 1987), have also made the argument that the Brownings' psychic development depended upon each other.

lifetime, revived in the 1970s by the project of feminist criticism, and read since then primarily (though not solely) in terms of the intellectual and creative work of women. Although modern criticism has seldom explored other aspects of Barrett Browning's work,[6] Browning's poetic language has always been scrutinized - since Mill reacted with dismay to the twenty-year old poet's *Pauline* in 1833 - from a variety of perspectives. Whereas Browning's contemporary Tennyson strove for transparency, Browning's meaning always floats between possibilities. If his contemporaries usually balked at the effort his poetry required, and the next generation of Browning readers undertook to smooth out the language and extract a unitary meaning, then later critics have embraced Browning's polyvocality, his irony, his indeterminacy. There are many ways to describe Browning's poetic language. Some of the most productive since the mid-twentieth century have been W. David Shaw's dialectical readings of the poetry; Herbert Tucker's deconstructionist approach; and most recently Donald S. Hair's research into Browning's own linguistic and philosophical studies, which suggests that what Browning termed late in life "parleyings" - open-ended conversations among author, subject/s, and audiences inside or outside the poem - may be a kind of metagenre which explains Browning's poetic language from the beginning.

Within the last twenty years, a number of critics have also read individual works by both Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning from the theoretical perspective of Mikhail Bakhtin, a contemporary of Vygotsky whose dialogic theory posits, like Vygotsky's, the social construction of all linguistic activity. Bakhtin's work explores how writers exploit these properties of language to enrich the aesthetic experience, represent metaphorically the way language really works, and involve the reader. Because Bakhtin has so much to say about dialogue in both literature and extra-literary speech acts, his theory provides a useful lens through which to examine the work of *both* poets, together, in historical context. Bakhtin's work also addresses the central tropes shared by both poets, particularly that of translation. One of the basic assumptions of Vygotsky's and

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[6] Although it focuses on gender, Tricia Lootens' *Lost Saints: Silence, Gender, and Victorian Literary Canonization* (1996) begins by noting a shift in Barrett Browning's critical history which allows her to examine Barrett Browning's reception within mainstream trends, as well as with respect to other women writers. Other recent critical work which focuses on issues other than gender issues include Antony H. Harrison's work on Barrett Browning's epic as a response to imperialism in *Victorian Poets and the Politics of Culture: Discourse and Ideology* (1998).

Bakhtin's milieu - and an increasingly compelling idea in the postmodern age - is that the individual's mind and language are the products of interactions with other people and with history; since we constantly experience new things, our minds continue to develop and our language continues to change.[7] For them, dialogue is the essential fact of human identity because it is the essential force in language: as long as it remains alive, language - even literary language on the printed page - can never be completely fixed, but must instead be fluid, inhabited by various voices and meanings in agreement or in conflict. For Bakhtin, the literary genre which most successfully captures this aspect of living language is the novel, which happened to be, in England as well as Russia, what he calls the "dominant" of the Victorian age. The poetry of the Brownings tends toward this dominant in different ways. The critical tradition of attention to Browning's language is important for a reader who wishes to come to terms with Robert Browning alone, but Bakhtin's more flexible theory provides the principle frame of reference for this book, explicitly or implicitly. Because Bakhtin's work comprehends writing and speech, the word and the work, literary and extraliterary speech acts, and the constitution of human relationships through language, the poems of both Brownings are highly responsive to it.

From the beginning of their acquaintance, the two poets were attracted by the possibility of mutual exchange, and after they met and moved to Italy, their poetry mirrored even more clearly the intensified personal and erotic dialogue between them. If, through their private dialogue, the Brownings contributed to each other's emotional and intellectual growth, the concern of this study is how that growth is reflected in their writing. After the poets began to work together in early 1845, Elizabeth Barrett, especially, began to write a more confident and fluid language. In Bakhtin's terminology, her work started to become more "novelistic" - more flexible and open to the potential of language for change and renewal in the presence of a reader, a listener, a partner in dialogue. At least on the surface, Barrett's earlier work fitted nicely within the lyric tradition she

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[7] Vygotsky and Bakhtin consciously follow Marx, of course. Their line of psychological and linguistic inquiry breaks away from Kantian metaphysics in minimizing the importance of inherent psychological structures and also breaks away from the behaviorists and Freud by socializing, rather than privatizing, psychological phenomena and by focusing on the conscious rather than the unconscious. In his experiments in pedagogy, Vygotsky's immediate antagonist was Piaget. Vygotsky and Bakhtin also break away from Saussure's conceptions about the internal structures of language, which are fundamental to so much twentieth-century thinking about language.

inherited, but she was not content with the position relegated to women poets. Novel reading had been a passion since her childhood, and with her husband's encouragement, the novel would provide a way out of the poetic place she had been assigned. For Browning, on the other hand, the reader became more real as a result of Barrett's mediation; and Browning's increased awareness of the reader's needs is also an issue addressed in the works of Bakhtin, for whom the conscious (and conscientious) reader has the last word about meaning. Robert Browning's early work had already represented a radical departure from the lyric self-centeredness of his Romantic predecessors: in his early non-dramatic poems, he often mimicked the narrative complexity of the novel. But, unable to convey the breadth of his new conceptions, he stalled, isolated as a poet, until he found in Elizabeth Barrett the aware, sympathetic and communicative reader he needed. In the great poems of his middle years with Elizabeth, he learned to make his poetry accessible to readers, thus extending the dialogue from its location within the poem to a pragmatic position outside its borders as well.

Cross-generational literary influence studies have long been a staple of literary scholarship, although such influence is difficult to prove. Feminist scholarship, on the other hand, has emphasized the work of women writers, whose lives have usually been lived most fully within domestic settings, and whose works therefore lend themselves to a different kind of comparatism, to lateral comparisons among artists living together in the same domestic environment, for instance. The domestic environment, as distinguished from the cultural or historical environment foregrounded in traditional comparative studies, suggests a different kind of influence, which has been the subject of several important biographical studies in the last decade, including an important article on the Brownings, "The Domestic Economy of Art: Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning" by Mermin, and Julia Markus's fine 1995 biography of the Brownings.[8] My work builds on theirs, focusing on the major works the Brownings wrote during their years together.

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[8] Markus's title is *Dared and Done: The Marriage of Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning*. Family biographies, such as the classic joint biography of the Brontës by Fanny Ratchford, *The Brontës' Web of Childhood* (1941), and a recent one by Juliet Barker, *The Brontës* (1994), have been popular for a long time. Lately, biographers have also begun to study the intimate relationships of artist and writer couples. Among the best works of this kind is *Significant Others: Creativity & Intimate Partnership* (1993), a collection of biographical essays edited by Whitney Chadwick and Isabelle de Courtivron.

Examining the ways in which two intimately connected artists affect each other's work is of the utmost importance in understanding creative process and in fully appreciating the work of the individual artists themselves. As Myra Jehlen pointed out two decades ago in a *Signs* article, "Archimedes and the Paradox of Feminist Criticism" (1981), if feminist scholars would adopt "a radical comparatism," studying the works of women writers within the masculinist literary tradition, then the influence of tradition on female *and* male writers would become more understandable (79). Jehlen's suggestion applies as well to scholars who study male authors, for they, too, live and work within a gendered literary tradition and a gendered social environment. Indeed, this was an early trend in Browning studies, exemplified by an essay written on the "Married Poets" by Elizabeth's friend Mary Russell Mitford in 1852. Early in the twentieth century, Lillian Whiting published *The Brownings: Their Life and Art.* In 1929, a joint biography by Osbert Burdett helped to perpetuate the sentimental Browning myth by characterizing the two poets as types of the masculine and feminine. More recently, Mary Rose Sullivan has written convincingly about episodes of mutual literary influence between the Brownings.[9] In general, however, comparative critical studies of literary productions by men and women are still lacking, and my own work will, I hope, help to fill this gap in Browning studies.

This book is a comparative study of the Brownings' poetry written between 1845 and 1861. The influence they had on each other was powerful but not dominating. Although his respect for Elizabeth Barrett Browning's work was enormous, Robert Browning did not copy or borrow from it, nor did Elizabeth borrow from Robert's work, despite her admiration for it, and despite her consciousness that she owed her mature power to the freedom she experienced in her life with him. Instead, the two poets supported and criticized each other, urged each other forward, and drew inspiration from common interests. A parallel examination of their works, written in the different keys of their histories and personalities, allows us to hear differences, but also allows us to hear how the work of each resonated with the poetry of the other.

The literary relationship between these two began before they met in 1844, when Browning read Barrett's description in "Lady Geraldine's Courtship" of his own poetry, as a

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[9] Sullivan's articles are "Some Interchange of Grace" (1987), about *Saul* and the *Sonnets*, and "Elizabeth Barrett Browning and the Art of Collaboration" (1991), which explains that the Brownings never collaborated in the usual sense because Barrett Browning's earlier attempts to do so had been problematic.

'Pomegranate,' which, if cut deep down the middle,
Shows a heart within blood-tinctured, of a veined humanity [. . .].

The attraction resulted partly from their mutual scholarly interests. Barrett and Browning were impressively self-educated, and both were particularly interested in classical and modern languages. In the poetry of both, English is continually infiltrated by other languages and the realities these other languages represent. Before they met, the poetry of Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning already sounded alike. Both habitually stretched meter to its limits; both experimented with rhyme, favoring various incomplete rhymes. Both brought the sounds of poetry closer to the sounds of speech. Although they deployed different poetic forms, there was considerable overlap in their choices. Both experimented with masks and impersonations, and they wrote dramatic monologues, probably even before they read each other's poetry. Both meditated on the relationship between the art of their time and the traditions which gave rise to it, and both were interested in marginal or grotesque characters and situations. A parallel study of these two poets increases our understanding of how each was circumscribed by the limitations of gender - and how they helped each other to renegotiate their gendered roles as poets and lovers. Barrett Browning's readers have typically noticed how her work reflected and affected gender ideologies; our understanding of Browning's work will become more profound as more scholars also consider his work in this context.[10]

It is not surprising that, even before they met, the two poets were conscious of being in a dialogue with each other. After they met, the Brownings created an environment which fostered the poetic impulses they had in common. And during their years together, their poetry became, in different ways, increasingly dialogic. Engaged in daily intimate dialogue, they became more aware of the productive frictions within language and between languages, the productive conflicts within and among artistic forms, the energy released by challenging literary tradition, and the nature of the "interindividual word."[11] This was the "flower" of their mutual development: they confirmed in each other the impulse toward poetic

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[10] Indeed, John Woolford's *Robert Browning in Contexts* (1998) suggests a new trend, of which my own study is a part.

[11] Bakhtin uses the term "inter-individual word" in "The Problem of the Text" (121) to emphasize that the meaning of a word is not simply the idea invested in it by the speaker and not simply the way it is understood by the listener, but that the meaning of the word is suspended in the space among sender, receiver, and past meanings of the word.