Elizabeth Barrett Browning

Sonnets From The Portuguese

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*Sonnets from the Portuguese*, written ca. 1845–1846 and first published in 1850, is a collection of 44 love sonnets written by Elizabeth Barrett Browning. The poems largely chronicle the period leading up to her 1846 marriage to Robert Browning. The collection was acclaimed and popular in the poet’s lifetime and it remains so today.
I

I thought once how Theocritus had sung
Of the sweet years, the dear and wished for years,
   Who each one in a gracious hand appears
   To bear a gift for mortals, old or young:
   And, as I mused it in his antique tongue
   I saw, in gradual vision through my tears,
The sweet, sad years, the melancholy years,...
Those of my own life, who by turns had flung
A shadow across me. Straightway I was ’ware,
   So weeping, how a mystic Shape did move
Behind me and drew me backward by the hair;
   And a voice said in mastery, while I strove,
   “Guess now who holds thee!”“Death,” I said: But, there,
The silver answer rang, “Not Death, but Love.”
And wilt thou have me fashion into speech
The love I bear thee, finding words enough,
And hold the torch out, while the winds are rough,
Between our faces, to cast light on each?..
I drop it at thy feet— I cannot teach
My hand to hold my spirit so far off
From myself .. me .. that I should bring thee proof
In words.. of love hid in me out of reach.
Nay, — let the silence of my womanhood
Commend my woman-love to thy belief,—
Seeing that I stand unwon, however wooed,
Rending the garment of my life, in brief,
By a most dauntless, voiceless fortitude,
Lest one touch of this heart, convey its grief.
If thou must love me, let it be for nought
Except for love’s sake only. Do not say
“I love her for her smile .. her look .. her way
Of speaking gently ..; for a trick of thought
That falls in well with mine, and certes brought
A sense of pleasant ease on such a day—“
For these things in themselves, beloved, may
Be changed, or change for thee, .. and love, so wrought,
May be unwrought so. Neither love me for
Thine own dear pity wiping my cheeks dry!—
For one might well forget to weep, who bore
Thy comfort long, and lose thy love thereby—
But love me for love’s sake, that evermore
Thou may’st love on through love’s eternity. —
Beloved, say again and yet 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 & plain,
Valley & wood, without her cuckoo-strain,
Comes the sweet Spring in all her green completed!
Beloved! — I, amid the darkness greeted
By a doubtful spirit-voice, in the 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 should 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.
When our two souls stand up erect and strong,
   Face to face, silent, drawing nigh & nigher,
   Until their lengthening wings break into fire
   At either curved point, .... what bitter wrong,
Can the earth do to us, that we should not long
Be here contented? — Think, .. in mounting higher,
   The angels would press on us, and aspire
   To drop some golden orb of perfect song
   Into our deep, dear silence. Let us stay
Rather on earth, beloved,— .. where the unfit
   Contrarious moods of men recoil away
   And isolate pure spirits, and permit
   A place to stand and love in, for a day,
With darkness and the death-hour rounding it.
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.
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 & quailed
As if God's future thundered on my past.
This said, 'I am thine'—and so, its ink has paled
With lying at my heart that beat too fast.
And this . . . O love, thy words have ill availed,
If, what this said, I dared repeat at last! —
XXXII

The first time that the sun rose on thine oath
To love me, I looked forward to the moon
To slacken all those bonds which seemed too soon
And quickly tied to make a lasting troth.
Quick-loving hearts, I thought, may quickly loathe —
And, looking on myself, I seemed not one
For such man’s love!—more like an out of tune
Worn viol, a good singer would be wroth
To spoil his song with; and which, snatched in haste,
Is laid down at the first ill-sounding note.
I did not wrong myself so, but I placed
A wrong on thee. For perfect strains may float,
’Neath master-hands, from instruments defaced,—
And great souls, at one stroke, may do and doat.
How do I love thee? Let me count the ways! —
I love thee to the depth & breadth & height
My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight
For the ends of Being and ideal Grace.

I love thee to the level of everyday’s
Most quiet need, by sun and candlelight —
I love thee freely, as men strive for Right, —
I love thee purely, as they turn from Praise;

I love thee with the passion, put to use
In my old griefs, .. and with my childhood’s faith:
I love thee with a love I seemed to lose
With my lost Saints,—I love thee with the breath,
Smiles, tears, of all my life!—and, if God choose,
I shall but love thee better after my death.