

**Sound of Silence: A Reading of
Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Sonnet XXXVIII**

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XXXVIII

First time he kissed me, he but only kissed
The fingers of this hand wherewith I write;
And ever since, it grew more clean and white,
Slow to world-greetings, quick with its "Oh, list",
When the angels speak. A ring of amethyst
I could not wear here, plainer to my sight,
Than that first kiss. The second passed in height
The first, and sought the forehead, and half missed,
Half falling on my hair. O beyond meed!
That was the chrism of love, which love's own crown,
With sanctifying sweetness, did precede.
The third upon my lips was folded down
In perfect, purple state; since when, indeed,
I have been proud and said, "My love, my own".

Elizabeth Barrett Browning,
Sonnets from the Portuguese

Very few stereotypes managed to survive our age of questioning and deconstruction. The Victorians, with their tidy sets of values and hierarchies, have proved an extremely valuable source for every kind of debunking, deconstructing, unmasking. The issue of desire and its representation during Queen Victoria's reign—with all its vile aberrations, such as crime-of-passion (crime-novels) or vampirism (Gothic novels)—has often been considered a focal point in the reconstructionist and deconstructionist crusade. Ever since 1966, when Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* was published, British literature has shown a keen interest in such an activity. John Fowles and *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), Peter Ackroyd and *Chatterton* (1987), A.S.Byatt and *Possession* (1990) are but the most obvious examples.

The one Victorian stereotype, however, that none of the above-mentioned

authors attempted at divulging is the stereotype of the “angel-woman”. Not only that the angel-woman has been left within the bounds of its Victorian representation, but has also been—almost as a rule—reduced to a minor character, playing no crucial role in the course of neohistoricist stories. The fact that this specific stereotype has been left at bay is even more intriguing if one bears in mind that the angel-woman can be defined primarily in terms of desire and “sexual charge” (Reynolds and Humble 2); while its opposite, the whore-stereotype, is marked by the presence of irrational desires, the angel-woman is marked by their absence. The absence of (explicit) desire and irrationality in the Victorian angel-woman seems to have attracted little interest; the whore-stereotype, on the other hand, has been thoroughly exploited, in all its manifestations.¹

Perhaps it is precisely this stereotypisation that has affected our reading of the love-poetry of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, the lawful and wedded wife of Robert Browning. It has prompted no radical postmodern re-reading (be it deconstructionist or feminist)² and provoked no spectacular literary discovery. One of the stereotypes commonly associated with her love-poetry is the victory of the spiritual and the celestial love over its mundane, physical, sexual aspects. Her ethereal and sophisticated love for Robert Browning, as expressed in her *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (1850),³ seems to be the perfect example of angelic love, marked exactly by the absence of unruly passions. In 44 sonnets she described the course of her love for the celebrated poet, beginning with the angelic epiphany of her mystic love and ending with promising to love him better after death.

Even the title of this collection suggests distancing from any crude desire, any erotic turmoil. Indeed, the sonnet is the lyrical form that ever since Petrarch implied the theme of love as its principal subject. Still, in the case of Petrarch and his followers, this love was highly conventionalized, transformed into a pattern of much broader social communication, becoming a sophisticated code in itself. Even Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s great national predecessor—William Shakespeare—abode by the fixity of the form, attaching to the sonnet a certain meditateness and complexity of thought rather than a wild and overwhelming eroticism, as was the case with some of his plays. In this sense it is worth noting that Elizabeth Barrett Browning chose the Petrarchan rhyming scheme rather than the one of the Elizabethan sonnet,⁴ thus openly opting for the love/convention model as offered by Petrarch, skilfully avoiding Shakespeare’s philosophical ambivalences. Accordingly, the highly complex and highly fixed sonnet-form that she used as a mould for her love poetry implies steadiness, consistency and regularity—the qualities bridling chaos, disorder and irrationality being induced by physical passion and erotic desire, but inevitably restraining the “automatic writing” or “inspirational speaking” that Gilbert and Gubar have emphasised as crucial for the nineteenth century’s nexus between spiritualism and feminism (473).

Apart from the formal limits and restrains of the sonnet-form, the title

implies one more distancing effect with regard to the erotic power of the lyrical "I" of the poems; it suggests that the poems were not originally written by Elizabeth Barrett Browning, but are her translation from the Portuguese. Thus, the lyrical "I" is twice removed from its original (erotic) expression: if its eros has first been translated from sensation into language (supposedly Portuguese), the second translation involves a rendering into yet another language (English). This stratagem was then consciously planned by the Brownings who wished to protect their privacy, but simultaneously managed to subdue the overt manifestation of the erotic side of their poetry, as well as of their biographies.

Sonnet XXXVIII, quoted above, is a perfect example of the love poetry by Elizabeth Barrett Browning. One might even add (quite ironically, too) that its only deviation from the rest of the collection is precisely its comparatively overt eroticism—compared to the rest of the sonnets this one indeed seems to be very much engaged in the portrayal of the erotic. However, it is easy to recognize that erotic features here are deftly and safely linked with (translated into) the language of theology and philosophy: the first kiss is connected with the angelic language, the second with the sanctifying chrism and the third with the perfection of the divine presence. Any desire, any open eroticism, any expressed sexuality of the lyrical subject is thus safely covered with the meditative and religious attributes that a proper Victorian angel-woman should manifest. Moreover, the theme of angels communicating with the lyrical "I" of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poetry is not a sole property of this specific sonnet; it is a stock-motif, dominating the entire collection.⁵ The conclusion to be reached seems to be simple and easy: the female voice in the Victorian era—in case it opted for the stereotype of the angel-woman—was sentenced to suppress its representation of desire, its erotic discourse, and encode it in socially and culturally consecrated language.

Nevertheless, a careful reading of the sonnet will show that such a conclusion is far from irrevocable. Moreover, it will show that Elizabeth Barrett Browning's understanding of love and eroticism transcends the stereotypes of the Victorians, constituting instead a striking and highly individual poetic discourse, unique in its questioning of the possible relations between language and poetry, on the one hand, and love/eros/desire, on the other.

The sonnet is divided into three parts, following the poet's description of the three kisses. The structure of the poem is defined by the logic of gradual growth and final culmination, along the lines provided by the thematic parallel of the kiss-motif. The structural backbone of the poem is thus clearly erotic, both in its support of the kiss-motif and in the line of evolution of the kiss as the central topic. Consequently, the erotic and the linguistic intensity that the reader witnesses at the beginning of the sonnet increases toward the end, while preserving the thematic and the metaphoric unity (the kiss-motif and its religious correlatives).

The first kiss functions as the nucleus of the opening section of the

sonnet. It is promptly associated with a part of the poetess's body as its receiver: in the first instance, it is her hand, "this hand wherewith I write". However, the writing hand, the part of the body that the poet associates with her art, is kissed "but" and "only" suggesting right away that the hand with which she writes does not belong to the main erotic catalogue of her body. Obviously, the function of her hands – which is poetry-writing, art-making – does not overlap with the higher domains of her eroticism, and is incompatible with them. Poetry and writing, it seems, are not fit enough instruments for grasping the full potential and the full meaning of love. Still, even the hand, as such a minor erotic agent, is transformed by the lover's kiss: it grows cleaner and whiter, preferring angelic speech to world-greetings. The imagery of angels is not used incidentally: angelology teaches us that angels are the first step in the communication between man and God, linking the realms of the mundane and the divine.

The second kiss, which "passed in height / The first", comes one step closer to total erotic consummation. Again, the poet hastens to associate it with the part of her body that received it: this time it "sought the forehead" but, missing it, half fell "on the hair". Moreover, respecting the structure of the first section, the second kiss is associated not only with a specific part of the poetess's body, but also with its specific function: while hands were meant for writing, the forehead and the hair serve to wear (love's) crown and receive (its) sanctifying chrism, and are thus one grade higher on the way to religious revelation, too. Needless to say, the crown-wearing function of the forehead and the hair implies their total separation from any worldly, commonplace communication.

The third kiss observes the pattern set by the previous two. Once more the poet links the lover's kiss with the part of her body to receive it – this time the kiss fell on her lips – and once more the part of the body in question is linked with its specific function. The function of the lips, however, is only implied, because lips seem to be too "perfect" to be shrouded by language: they are agents/recipients of the total erotic consummation, translated through theological terms into a phenomenon resembling an epiphany – "perfect, purple state". Only after such an epiphany, are lips to fulfil their second function, that of speech, uttering a consequent declaration of love. Of course, this new speech is now purified, extraordinary – it is the speech beyond any mortal grasp.

We have seen that the gradual growth of kisses, as the analogue of the erotic experience, parallels the unfolding of the poetess's mystic experience: the hand-kiss equals the speaker's communication with angels, the hair-kiss equals chrism and the lips-kiss equals epiphany. Such a design is additionally supported by a similar gradation of the accompanying colour-pattern. The hand that receives the first kiss is said to become cleaner and "more white". Whiteness in this case is obviously a symbol of purity, virginity, matching the angelic communication in the fifth line. Other sonnets from the collection only reaffirm such a conclusion: white colour is always used in its relation to the pure, the heavenly and the godly. In Sonnet XXIV, for instance, Elizabeth Barrett

Browning says that "Very whitely still / The lilies of our lives may reassure / Their blossoms from their roots, accessible / Alone to heavenly dews that drop not fewer: / Growing straight, out of man's reach, on the hill". Also, in Sonnet XLII, angels cast their appealing looks to "the white throne of God".

The hair that receives the second kiss is associated with the crown. Although the colour of the crown remains unspecified, the sole mention of such an object implies the colour of gold. Golden colour, compared to the whiteness of the first kiss, passes it in height/intensity, thus matching the overall gradation-scheme of the poem's structure. Golden colour, too, suggests the presence of love and eros as the celestial and the divine, but not in terms of purity and cleanliness—the colour of gold is associated with the overwhelming fullness and bounty of such an experience ("In mounting higher, / The angels would press on us and aspire / To drop some golden orb of perfect song / Into our deep, dear silence ..." [Sonnet XXII]). Also, golden is more closely associated with the beloved himself, as one of his stock-attributes. In Sonnet IV the poetess asks her male lover to "let thy music drop here unaware / In folds of golden fullness at my door". In Sonnet VIII she addresses him: "O liberal / And princely giver, who hast brought the gold / And purple of thine heart, unstained, untold, / And laid them on the outside of the wall / For such as I to take or leave withal, / In unexpected largesse?"

The lips to receive the third kiss are to receive it in "perfect, purple state". The colour of purple is the supreme colour, the climax of the gradation beginning with white and continuing with gold. It is the colour of perfection, of exultation, of total consummation. Even more than the colour of gold, purple is, as a rule, directly associated with the lover-figure ("Thou canst prevail against my fears and fling / Thy purple round me ..." [Sonnet XVI]).⁶ Moreover, it is frequently employed as a means to achieve a contrast between the poetess and the object of her love: while the obvious presence of eros, both in its relation to artistic process and as a life force, is through the colour purple attached to the addressee, the speaker is (in the sonnets opening the collection and describing the beginning of the love-affair) marked by the absence of eros, and such chromatic attributes as grey and pale. Thus, in Sonnet IX she says: "I will not soil thy purple with my dust".

The above-described thematic/structural scale (three kisses, three different parts of the poetess's body, three functions, three colours) is reinforced by yet another level: that of the very poetic expression, of the quantity and the quality of language that the lyrical "I" devotes to each of the kisses. Moreover, it is precisely this level that tells us most about Elizabeth Barrett Browning's attitude towards language *versus* love, poetry *versus* eros, proving that her stance towards love and the erotic does not stem from the Victorian angel-woman's erotic taboo, but from a deeply inherent philosophy of language and of eros.

In describing the manner in which Elizabeth Barrett Browning portrayed the first kiss, we have seen that the least absorbing kiss is associated with the fingers and the hand, the part of the poetess's body immediately associated with

writing, with describing – by means of language – the experience of the kiss. The most absorbing and the most erotic kiss – that falling on the lips – is, on the other hand, associated with the lips that are mute in the moment of kissing (they will return to their function as organs of speech only after the erotic epiphany induced by the third kiss, and even then they will do so only in terms of exaltedly announcing the possession of love). Language and the erotic, the sonnet shows, are incongruous, incompatible, mutually exclusive. The language that belongs to everyday exchange (“world-greetings”) must make way for the communication with the erotic/mystic/revelatory, the experience whose essence transcends the capacities of language.

The quantity of text devoted to each of the kisses will show that the increase of the erotic and mystic potential means the decline in the amount of words used for their description. In turn, the heightening of the erotic experience is paralleled to the quantitative shrinking yet qualitative saturation of language. In short, at the beginning of the sonnet – compared to the ending – the erotic is at the point of nadir, while the profusion of poetic expression is at the point of climax. At the end, the erotic has reached its climactic point (the experience of epiphany), whereas the textual expression has been reduced to only a few attributes extremely rich in meaning. Thus the description of the first kiss takes the initial 6.5 lines (out of the total 14), although this kiss carries the least erotic and revelatory weight. The second kiss, which “passed in height / The first”, takes 4.5 lines. The third kiss, credited with erotic perfection, however, takes only 1.5 lines (“The third upon my lips was folded down / In perfect, purple state ...”). The concluding 1.5 lines are the speaker’s final and definitive declaration of love.

Still, the reduction of the quantity of text is followed by the presence of words symbolizing the gist of the erotic experience (perfect, purple). Such a poetic stratagem then implies that the total and final erotic/mystic consummation must equal a total linguistic self-censorship, because language is not a fit enough means for the description of such a completion. The adjectives “purple” and “perfect” are obviously the ultimate linguistic compromise that Elizabeth Barrett Browning is ready to make. Hence her compulsive usage of religious, theological and spiritualist metaphors, as well as ecclesiastical colour symbolism, for the erotic fulfilment: only the minimalistic language inherited from medieval mystics and Swedenborg, saturated with basically unspeakable meaning, could help the lyrical “I” of Elizabeth Barrett Browning to come to terms with her experience of the erotic. Accordingly, one can only conclude that her discourse of love and eroticism leans little on the narrowly Victorian concealing/revealing/symbolizing strategies, as prescribed and imposed by the society of the time,⁷ reaching instead towards a much wider variety of sources (Greek classics,⁸ Petrarch, Dante, medieval mystics, Swedenborg,⁹ Shelley¹⁰) to help her overcome, however partially, the ageless gap dividing language and erotic fulfilment.

Other sonnets in the collection only reinforce such a reading of Sonnet XXXVIII, as well as my thesis about Elizabeth Barrett Browning's handling of the sensitive relation between eros and logos.

As early as Sonnet VIII, Elizabeth Barrett Browning links her lover's perfection and divine eros with the impossibility of translating these categories into language—moreover, it is implied that “telling” means staining, blemishing, degrading. As in Sonnet XXXVIII, this juxtaposition is mediated through three very specific words, gold/purple *versus* telling, making of colour an “untellable” property: “O liberal / And princely giver, who hast brought the *gold* / And *purple* of thine heart, *unstained, untold ...*” (my emphasis).

Sonnet XIII is, as a whole, devoted to the poetess's inability to translate her love into words (but leaving out the outright eroticism and the issue of its religious correlatives). As such, it is a useful appendix to a fuller understanding of Sonnet XXXVIII though it does not equal its structural and thematic complexity. Unlike Sonnet XXXVIII, however, Sonnet XIII is explicit about another aspect of the poetess's desire; it is specifically a woman's desire: “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 ...”. So, if her highly articulate lover plays the “part of chief musician” (Sonnet III), she, as a woman-poet, is there to teach him the skills of silence, untelling, the quality of “a most dauntless, voiceless fortitude” (Sonnet XIII). Of course, the deliberate female silence, both in erotic and poetic terms, necessarily contradicts Elizabeth Barrett Browning's iconoclastic and highly articulate attitude as expressed in those parts of *Aurora Leigh* praised and analyzed by feminist critics. Yet, the contradiction is obliterated as soon as one distinguishes between the two levels that interweave in her work: that of intellect, history, society and reason, on the one hand, and of the erotic, the individual and essentially female, on the other.¹¹

Consequently, while her lover's/husband's poetry is always praised, described as refined singing or even as “divinest Art” (Sonnet XLI) and as a rule related to its superior place in the society and literature of the time, hers is as a rule self-debased and self-degraded (“My cricket chirps against thy mandolin ...”, [Sonnet IV]). Still, this poetic self-abasement or lack of worldly articulation, as Sonnets XIII and XXXVIII clearly show, does not stem from (false) modesty, typically Victorian female self-abnegation or gender-suppression—even less from Elizabeth Barrett Browning's sharp intellectualism—but is connected with the poetess's most innate experience of the erotic, as that surmounting any possible linguistic or even artistic form.

The most authentic love-poetry is thus hidden in the moments of silence, secluded from the world and originating in total, absolute experience of love. Any textual/artistic representation of eros is necessarily relative, shifting, restricted. *Sonnets from the Portuguese*—especially Sonnet XXXVIII—seem to be Elizabeth Barrett Browning's attempt at bridging the gap dividing eros and logos and shaping her love-poetry in the flickering, wavering point in which

passion is about to vanish and poetry is about to materialize.

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Notes

1. In *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, for instance, Ernestina Freeman (Charles's fiancée and the model angel-woman) never breaks free from her Victorian boundaries, never succumbs to any passion or undergoes any change in the course of the story. The same is true of Ellen Ash (a wife and, again, an institutionalized angel-woman) in *Possession*. Sarah Woodruff and Christabel LaMotte, on the other hand, are main characters in their respective stories embodying the whore-stereotype: both are portrayed in terms of eroticism and sexuality; both are single (not married, not engaged, and thus not partaking in the socially legitimized sexuality) but are involved in extra-marital affairs; both give birth to illegitimate children. Even more interestingly, both Sarah and Christabel are primarily artists (Sarah ends up as a painter, and Christabel is a noted poet), which then—in postmodern eyes—suggests the vital link between art and eros.
2. Thus, although Gilbert and Gubar do devote much attention to the figure of Elizabeth Barrett Browning (yet never dedicating her a part or chapter, in its entirety, as is the case with Jane Austen, Mary Shelley, Emily Brontë, Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot or Emily Dickinson), they devote none to her most outspoken love-poems—her *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, the discourse of which is very different from that of the rest of her poetry. Moreover, *Sonnets from the Portuguese* are not mentioned once in their book about the woman writer and the nineteenth-century literary imagination. The work of Elizabeth Barrett Browning that they do mention and comment on is the one openly prone to a feminist reading: above all, her Aurora Leigh, a Bildungsroman in verse (1857). Even then, however, it is not the presence of desire and the erotic that they will mention, but her spiritualism:

Although such writers [Bayard Taylor, William Dean Hunter, Henry James] probably associate the feminist movement with mediumism, hypnotism, automatic writing and inspirational speaking in order to discredit the political movement by linking it to "irrational" psychic phenomena, there is also some historical basis for this connection. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Margaret Fuller, Lucy Stone, Harriet Martineau, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, the Fox sisters, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Victoria Woodhull and many Quaker and Shaker women illustrate the important nexus in the second half of the nineteenth century between feminism and spiritualism ... (Gilbert and Gubar 473)

Furthermore, although Gilbert and Gubar frequently stress the proto-feminist nature of (selected) Elizabeth Barrett Browning's writings, eventually they accuse her (as they accuse her fictive character, Aurora Leigh, too) precisely of the typical Victorian angel-woman's compromise/weakness of sacrificing her art for love/service. Thus,

Elizabeth Barrett Browning also made most of her finest poetry out of her reconciliation to that graceful and passionate self-abnegation which, for a nineteenth-century woman, was necessity's highest virtue. But because she had little natural taste for the drastic asceticism Rossetti's

temperament and background seem to have fostered, Barrett Browning ultimately substituted a more familiar Victorian aesthetic of service for the younger woman's somewhat idiosyncratic aesthetic of pain. (575)

Also, when speaking about Elizabeth Barrett Browning's influence on Emily Dickinson and her poetry, they will say the following:

Like Barrett Browning, whose poetry she much admired, she seems at first to have assuaged the guilt verse-writing aroused by transforming Romantic poetic self-assertion into an aesthetic of female service modeled on Victorian marriage. Certainly something like the relationship between a masterful husband and a self-abnegating wife appears to be at the heart of much of her poetry, where it is also pictured, variously, as the encounter of lover and mistress, king and queen. (587)

3. Many critics claim that the 1847 edition of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Sonnets* was a forgery, and that the year of the original publication of this collection is 1850 (Paljetak 103).
4. The Elizabethan sonnet is thus, thanks to its concluding couplet, always ambivalent and indeterminate, prone to meditative analyses and antitheses. Elizabeth Barrett Browning, however, in strictly observing the Italian rhyming scheme, manages to avoid the concluding couplet and its antithetical potential, although the final lines of her sonnet do enclose a certain (quite philosophical) contradiction: the speaking of the unspeakable.
5. It is very interesting to note that in her *Sonnets from the Portuguese* Elizabeth Barrett Browning uses the word "angel" nine times and the word "God" 22 times. Not even once, however, does she use words such as "passion" or "desire", despite the fact that the sonnets are her truest love-poetry. Her discourse in the not-so-personal and not-so-lyrical *Aurora Leigh*, however, is quite different, abounding in "passionate" words. The opening of Book V, for instance, describes the Victorian present as follows: "... this live, throbbing age / That brawls, cheats, maddens, calculates, aspires, / And spends more passion, more heroic heat / Betwixt the mirrors of its drawing-rooms, / Than Roland with his knights at Roncesvalles".
6. Elizabeth Barrett Browning uses the very word "purple" – always in connection with the lover – seven times. The reader encounters words such as "ruby", "fire", "bloody", "shining" less frequently.
7. One biographical fact might be considered to support such a hypothesis: *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, although composed in Britain, were at first not meant to be published at all, but were considered a kind of private writing. The Brownings eventually eloped to Italy precisely in order to escape any social reproach that their relationship might have provoked.
8. *Sonnets from the Portuguese* open with Elizabeth Barrett Browning's comparison contrasting Theocritus's poetry and her pre-Browning life. Thus it is specifically Theocritus's poetry that immediately precedes the powerful love-annunciation in Sonnet I.
9. According to A.S. Byatt,

Elizabeth Barrett Browning was a fervent believer in the mystical visions (very solid and carnal, moreover) of Swedenborg. Commentary on "Mr Sludge" has seen her belief as unusual, and Browning's robust rejection of the miracles wrought by the medium D.D. Home as a normal reaction to a distasteful eccentricity. But the desire to taste and see discarnate spirits was not

at all unusual at the time. It was part of a whole shift of religious feeling. Swedenborg, the mineralogist who saw a life in stones, and who conversed in the most matter-of-fact way both with the angelic world and with the damned, was the hope of a whole world of believers. (*Passions of the Mind* 62)

10. Armstrong, for instance (unlike Byatt), sees the influence of Shelley's poetry especially in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's usage of the figure of the love-announcing "mystic Shape" in her Sonnet I—the motif that in various forms perseveres throughout the collection ("These sonnets, with their rather bookish Shelleyan imagery ...", says Armstrong, 411). In the same essay she also remarks the following: "Elizabeth Barrett Browning understood what it was like to be a woman who made violent emotional demands on the world and yet despised the 'luxury of emotion', and she is particularly perceptive about the difficulties of mediating powerful emotion" (412).
11. In this sense, it is extremely useful to quote a passage from Gilbert and Gubar commenting on the sonnets that Elizabeth Barrett Browning addressed to George Sand:

In the first of these pieces ("To George Sand, A Desire") Barrett Browning describes the French writer, whom she passionately admired, as a self-created freak, a "large-brained woman and large-hearted man / Self-called George Sand", and she declares her hope that "to woman's claim / And man's" Sand might join an "angel's grace", the redeeming strength "of a pure genius sanctified from blame". The implication is that, since Sand has crossed into forbidden and anomalous sociosexual territory, she desperately needs "purification"—sexual, spiritual, and social. On the other hand, in the second sonnet ("To George Sand, A Recognition") Barrett Browning insists that no matter what Sand does she is still inalterably female, and thus inexorable agonized In fact, Barrett Browning declares, only in death will Sand be able to transcend the constrictions of her gender. Then *God* will "unsex" her "on the heavenly shore". But until then, she must acquiesce in her inescapable femaleness, manifested by her "woman-heart's" terrible beating "in a poet fire". (Gilbert and Gubar 66-67)

While Gilbert and Gubar are stressing that these sonnets concern primarily the female anxiety of authorship and the metaphorical transvestism involved (66), I would like to point both to the idiom and the lyrical mould that Elizabeth Barrett Browning herself uses while addressing George Sand (desire/recognition versus angel's grace/ sanctification/purification/God/heavenly shore). Both the idiom and the fact that the poetess is once more using the sonnet-form overlap, to an extent, with the idiom and the poetic mode of the *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, situating the George Sand sonnets (and their message) within the context set by Elizabeth Barrett Browning's most intimate (love, female, erotic) poetry.

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