ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING AND CHRISTINA GEORGINA ROSSETTI: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF POPULARITY AND APPEAL

by

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PREFACE

During the lifetime of Elizabeth Browning and Christina Rossetti the former was ranked by critics as England's greatest poetess. Today Miss Rossetti enjoys this distinction. The purpose of this paper is to trace, first of all, the popular and literary acceptance of these two women, and then to attempt to determine, through examination of their most important poems and criticisms of them, what characteristics in the works of each have led to the present loss of appeal of the one in contrast to the continued appeal of the other.
CHAPTER I

The reputation of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, unlike that of Christina Rossetti, has undergone striking vicissitudes. Fame came to her early in ever-increasing measure, reaching its peak with the publication of *Aurora Leigh* in 1856. Several years later, however, her popularity started a decline which has continued until recent years when some of the harshest, earlier criticisms have been replaced by a more balanced judgment.1

Although Miss Barrett’s first poems attracted little attention, *The Seraphim and Other Poems*, published in 1838, won its author immediate recognition as a poet.2 Six years later, upon the printing of *A Drama of Exile* with its accompanying poems, her position as the leading English poetess was established.3 Letters from important people started coming to the young writer; reviews of her poems appeared on both sides of the Atlantic. With characteristic reluctance to commit themselves too far, critics all found something to object to, admiring what one disliked, and condemning what another praised. On one point they were nevertheless almost all agreed: a great poet had arisen.4


2See Dorothy Barlett’s *Elizabeth Barrett Browning: A Life* (New York, 1952) for details concerning the general reception of the following: *An Essay on Mind*, p. 41; *Prometheus Bound*, p. 55; *The Seraphim*, pp. 68–70.

3Ibid., p. 123ff.

Miss Barrett's own reaction to the reception of her poems is interesting to note. In a letter written on September 1, 1844, to her friend, Miss Mitford, she expresses encouragement over the "very gratifying letters" she has received, particularly from other authors. She writes:

I have had kind letters from Carlyle who . . . singled out "Geraldine's Courtship" as his favorite so far. . . . Wordsworth only "looked forward with great pleasure to having leisure to read. . . ." The same with Landor. . . . Could you like to see Carlyle's letters?1

Commenting on the periodicals which had just reviewed her latest work she confides that the Athenaeum left her "satisfied and grateful," but the review in the John Bull cut her "into gashes, on the ground of the vicious ambition of excuting Milton."2 Elsewhere we are told that Blackwood's gave her a whole article while the Examiner and Atlas both reviewed and praised her poems.3 The complimentary or derogatory tone of these early reviews is, of course, not so significant as the fact that she was obviously making an impact on the literary world.

America by no means lagged behind in its recognition of the poet. Miss Barrett herself expressed gratitude at its warm response to her.4 When her poems were made available to the public in October of that same

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2Miss Miller quotes the passages alluded to (Letters, p. 222), and gives the dates of the reviews as Athenaeum, Aug. 24, 1844, and John Bull, Aug. 31, 1844.

3Harlott, p. 123.

4Miller, Letters, p. 217.
year, Edgar Allan Poe added his voice to the chorus of appreciation of her work.\(^1\) Despite his criticisms of her choice of subject for *A Drama of Exile*, her method of treatment, her versification in it as well as in the other accompanying poems,\(^2\) he acknowledges her merit in this statement:

That Miss Barrett has done more, in poetry, than any woman, living or dead, will scarcely be questioned:—that she has surpassed all her poetical contemporaries of either sex (with a single exception) is our deliberate opinion. . . . Her poetic inspiration is the highest—we can conceive nothing more august.\(^3\)

Although *Sonnets from the Portuguese* and *Casa Guidi Windows* served to increase the poet's popularity,\(^4\) we are told by all her biographers that it was the publication of *Aurora Leigh* that brought her to the peak of her fame.\(^5\) Prior to the printing of this work, Wordsworth had died. As compliments both to the youthful queen and England's greatest poetess (now Mrs. Browning), the *Athenaeum* had suggested that the vacant poet's laureateship be given to Elizabeth Browning.\(^6\) The sug-

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3. Ibid., pp. 390, 393-394.

4. The sonnets were understandably more popular than the political poems. Although the merits of the latter were recognized, the book sold comparatively slowly. See Hewlett, p. 306.

5. Ingram, p. 217. See also Hewlett, pp. 323-324.

gestion was not followed, but to the public, at least, it indicated the
poet's rising popularity. However, according to Miss Miller, no one,
not even the author herself, expected the astonishing reception of
Aurora Leigh when it came off the press.¹ Within a fortnight of publi-
cation the first edition was exhausted; a second was called for, and
then a third. (Miss Hewlett states that nineteen editions had appeared
by 1885, the last one to her knowledge, appearing in 1898.)² The demand
for the book was so great that the lending libraries were obliged to
place a limit of two days on it.³ Various reactions are reported by
Miss Miller: the American publisher who "shed tears over the proofs";
Landor, who saw in it "the wild imagination of Shakespeare"; John Ruskin,
who spoke of it as "the greatest poem in the English language, unsur-
passed by anything but Shakespeare."⁴ The book was immediately reviewed
by numerous periodicals.⁵ One critic, admitting faults of careless
versification, confusion in point of view, and diffusion in style,
nevertheless gives expression to a feeling for Mrs. Browning which was

²Hewlett, pp. 323-324.
³Miller, Robert Browning, p. 209.
⁴Ibid., p. 209.

Complimentary and condemnatory extracts from reviews, printed
when Aurora Leigh was published, are included in the appendix of Char-
lotte Porter and Helen A. Clarke's edition of Aurora Leigh, vols. IV and
apparently becoming widespread. "Her place," it states, "is not merely in the front rank of our female poets; but of our poets."\(^1\)

It is common for literary figures of importance to evoke adverse criticism as well as commendation for their works. The significant point is not so much perhaps what the reaction is as whether or not there is a reaction at all. While critics were busy lauding and denouncing Mrs. Browning's poems, Robert Browning was being completely ignored.\(^2\)

Somewhat bitterly he referred to himself as the "church-organ-bellow" blower," although there can be no doubt of the sincere happiness he felt in his wife's triumph.\(^3\)

An examination of some of the criticisms offered during this period and shortly after Mrs. Browning's death is pertinent at this point because it attests to the influence she was evidently exerting on the literary as well as the popular world. Few, it would appear, remained indifferent to her efforts. Amidst the praise for The Seraphim and A Drama of Exile is an article which calls the poems "little more than hysterical spasms." The poetess is accused of pouring herself forth in improvisations which in one stanza stir every heart, and in the next move to incontestable laughter because of the strange mixture of "grand thought and deep feeling with nonsense, affectation, and


\(^3\)Ibid.
wilful pu{uility.\textsuperscript{1} Finding fault with the much-admired, originally conceived Eve is the critic who denotes her as "needlessly garrulous, opinionated, and cunning" in her long harangues—a wife who silences Adam, the supreme example of a properly disciplined husband, by her own self-importance.\textsuperscript{2}

\textit{Aurora Leigh}, so sought after by the public, is termed by one reviewer a "rank unweeded garden of the most intolerable conceits."\textsuperscript{3} It is characterised by baldness of narrative, distorted ingenuity, harsh, grotesque dialogue, and an impossible plot; and because the author attempted in it to deal with intricate problems about which she knew nothing, the work as a whole is unsuccessful.\textsuperscript{4} Corroborating this general criticism is the writer who pronounces it a failure as a "novel in verse" because of its disunity, and a failure as a social treatise since "nothing definite is arrived at.\textsuperscript{5} A third critic condemns even more emphatically this book of riddles which, he claims, "only zealous admirers are industrious enough to investigate and solve."\textsuperscript{6} Despite its vigor, the "story is impossible, the characters are monstrous, and the

\textsuperscript{1}"Mrs. Browning's \textit{Aurora Leigh}," The \textit{Living Age}, LII (Feb. 1857), 427.

\textsuperscript{2}"Elisabeth Barrett Browning," The \textit{North American Review}, XCVI (April 1862), 348-349.

\textsuperscript{3}The \textit{Works of Elisabeth Barrett Browning}," The \textit{Edinburgh Review}, CXXV (Oct. 1861), 524.

\textsuperscript{4}Ibid., pp. 521, 530.

\textsuperscript{5}Edmund Clarence Stedman, "Elisabeth Barrett Browning," Scribner's \textit{Monthly}, VII (Nov. 1873), 111.
opinions . . . are utterly absurd and unreal. ¹

About twenty years after Mrs. Browning's death, criticism of her poetry begins to be less abundant and seems less extreme than it was earlier. Some of the old accusations are made, and a number of new considerations of her poems are presented; but in the main, much of what is written is offered as an explanation for her declining popularity—a fact which must be deduced from the criticism of this period and from the decreased editions of her books. The *Nation*, commenting on her earlier appeal, states that it "seems now almost inexplicable" that Mrs. Browning's first poems should have given her as great a reputation as she enjoyed. The reason must be attributed to the dearth of poetry at that time, and the fact that the poet was a woman—a sensation in those days.² Edmund Gosse, recognizing this same decline in interest, blames it on the poet's "turbidity."³ Other explanations which are discussed later in this paper in greater detail are her adherence to current issues no longer of interest,⁴ her emphasis on women's rights,⁵ her choice of subjects,⁶ her intellectual and sentimental

¹"Mrs. Browning," *The Living Age*, LX (Aug. 1861), 492.
⁴"Elizabeth Barrett Browning," *The Living Age*, CCXLIX (April 1906), 171.
⁵"Elizabeth Barrett Browning," *The Living Age*, CCXLI (April 1904), 314.
appeal, and the irresistible romance of her life.\(^1\)

It should not be concluded that Elizabeth Browning has completely lost her appeal for poetry lovers of the past six or seven decades. Despite the fewer references in the periodical and essay indexes and the limited space assigned to her in anthologies, it is perhaps extreme to state, as Virginia Woolf did in 1931, that nobody "reads her, nobody writes about her, nobody troubles to put her in her place."\(^3\) Vigorous agreement and disagreement can still be found in articles which discuss the merits and fallacies of old charges made against her works.

In one of his essays, for example, G. K. Chesterton rejects an earlier judgment of Casa Guidi Windows that calls them strained, shrill, and rhetorical,\(^4\) by expressing admiration for their strength of phrase. He concedes that they have rather an impatient air, but adds that they are "too little read today," being, in his estimation, "amongst the most sincere documents on the history of the times."\(^5\) In another article he answers charges of writing absurdities made against Mrs. Browning by averring that all great art "involves the element of risk, and the

\(^1\)"Mrs. Browning," The Living Age, CLXXIX (Dec. 1888), 805.

\(^2\)Ibid., p. 807.

\(^3\)"Aurora Leigh," The Yale Review, XX (June 1931), 678.


\(^5\)The Victorian Age in Literature, in Home University Library of Modern Knowledge, ed. Herbert Fisher et al. (New York, 1913), no. 61, p. 177.
greatest literary artists have commonly been those who have run the
greatest risk of talking nonsense.\(^1\)

Before the turn of the century critics had commented on Mrs.
Browning's eccentric rhymes, her technical laxity, the practical jokes
she plays on the parts of speech.\(^2\) Unlike Tennyson's stately expres-
sions, one writer had complained, her thoughts charge untamed, prancing
or halting at will.\(^3\) Despite the fact that the poetess defended the
wildest of her licenses, attributing her deviations to originality
rather than carelessness, a third critic had still insisted that she
was either defective in her ear or just plain willful; otherwise she
would not have injured some of her sweetest poems.\(^4\) In defense of Mrs.
Browning's practices a more recent reviewer raises the question as to
whether some of her feminine rhymes and assonances really "hurt the ear
any more than in the old ballads it is hurt by the imperfection of the
end-line music."\(^5\) Any recognized poet, says another, who seeks to
broaden the basis of English prosody by experimentation in versification
should be given credit.\(^6\) A third points out that her efforts, upon

\(^{1}\)"Elizabeth Barrett Browning," in Varied Types (New York, 1905),
p. 263.

\(^{2}\)Geosse, pp. 6, 9.

\(^{3}\)Stedman, p. 166.

\(^{4}\)John Dennis, "Elizabeth Barrett Browning," The Living Age,
CLXX (March 1889), 614.

\(^{5}\)Emily Hickox, "Elizabeth Barrett Browning: Woman and Poet,"
The Nineteenth Century, LXXIV (July 1913), 176.

\(^{6}\)Bean, p. 160.
analysis, differ very little from those of Archibald MacLeish, W. H. Auden, and Cecil Day Lewis, admired so much by contemporary critics.¹

Although Mrs. Browning is now no longer the popular poet she was at one time, present-day critics are unwilling to predict that she will eventually be forgotten. Some of the more recent reviews and books written about her would seem to indicate continued interest. For this reason the statement made in The Victorian Poets is perhaps the only safe one: namely, that the "balance [which] will finally be struck in the evaluation of her poetry remains an open question."²

¹See Fred Manning Smith's "Mrs. Browning's Rhymes," MLA, Sept., 1939, pp. 810-815, for a detailed comparison of specific rhymes.

CHAPTER II

Christina Rossetti is "generally considered the poetess par excellence of the nineteenth [sic] century," Mrs. Browning not having stood the test of time. Surprising as this statement would have been to the critics of the Victorian era, it nevertheless represents the most recent judgments which time has passed on these two women.

Unlike Mrs. Browning's meteoric popularity, Miss Rossetti's rise to fame has been gradual, not very dazzling, but of an enduring incandescence. Her first poems, printed privately by her grandfather, enjoyed the appreciation of only her family and a few friends. Her next poems, published under the pseudonym of Ellen Alleyn in her brother's Pre-Raphaelite magazine, The Germ, likewise evoked response from a limited few. When Macmillan's Magazine accepted "Up-Hill," "A Birthday," and "An Apple Gathering," however, her work began to attract attention. Her brother Gabriel urged her to prepare a volume of poems which she had already written. In 1862 she did this, her work Goblin Market and Other Poems was published, and she was acclaimed a poet. For the next twenty years other books of verse

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2 Eleanor Walter Thomas, Christina Georgina Rossetti (New York 1931), pp. 22-23.
4 Thomas, Christina Georgina Rossetti, p. 59.
fellowed; The Prince's Progress and Other Poems, Sing-Song, and A Pageant and Other Poems, including the "Home Immemorial" sonnets.  

During Miss Rossetti's lifetime, her poems evoked neither the adulation nor the severe criticism that Mrs. Browning's did. Although John Ruskin did not think any publisher would take her poems because of their irregular measure, most of her critics commented favorably, albeit somewhat mildly, on her efforts. As early as 1862 her verses were acknowledged to be "true poetry" with "decided character and originality, both in theme and treatment . . . fresh and free," without indication of discipleship or imitation. She was praised for her simplicity, her pictorial vividness, and her preference for specific, concrete writing. "Goblin Market" was compared favorably with Coleridge's "Ancient Mariner" because of its power to make unreal things seem real by the use of common, everyday images and events. Mr. Stubbs, by no means a religious person, expressed enthusiasm over her poetry, even her religious verse. Of "Passing Away" he said that it was one of the finest

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1Virginia Woolf claims that for years Miss Rossetti's book sales were rather modest, averaging her about ten pounds a year. See "I Am Christina Rossetti," in The Second Common Reader (New York, 1932), p. 262.

2Thomas, Christina Georgina Rossetti, pp. 133-134.

3"Miss Rossetti's 'Goblin Market,'" The Living Age, LXIV (July 1862), 147.

4"Miss Rossetti's Poems," The Nation, XXX (July 1866), 477.

things ever written. 1 A few critics objected to the unhealthy, melancholy tone of her writing, 2 to her lack of self criticism, 3 to her metrical irregularities; 4 but these were the harshest criticisms. On the whole she was termed "a poet of rare lyrical gifts . . . not wide in her range, but singularly fine and strong." 5

Sometime before her death someone suggested to Robert Browning that Miss Rossetti's verse was becoming a rival of his wife's poetry. The aged poet was indignant. 6 And he had reason to be, for judging from popular opinion, few then challenged Mrs. Browning's right as the "first great poetess" whom England had produced. 7 According to Miss Zaturenska, however, to Browning's grief, indignation, and surprise, by about 1886 not just a few, but a number of people were stating a preference for Christina Rossetti's poetry. 8 Says the Living Age:

1Paul Elmer More, "Christina Rossetti," Atlantic Monthly, XCIV (Dec. 1904), 615; also Justine Fredrikka Da Unda, Christina Rossetti, Poet and Woman (Nijmegen, 1923), pp. 147-150.

2"The Death of Christina Rossetti," Public Opinion, XVIII (Jan. 1895), 43.


4See above, p. 12, note 2.

5Public Opinion, XVIII, 43.


7Living Age, CLV, 416.

8Zaturenska, p. 259.
As an artist Miss Rossetti must rank above Mrs. Browning, and only
comes second to her in general position, because her range is
so much more limited.\footnote{Sharp, "The Rossettis," p. 170.}

Between the years 1890 and 1920 opinion concerning the two lead-
ing poetesses differs radically. The \textit{Chautauquan} (1890) pronounces Mrs.
Browning the \textit{greatest poet among women.}\footnote{"Casa Guidi Windows," \textit{The Chautauquan}, II (June 1890), 282.} Two other articles written a
decade and a half later state that among women poets (the one adds \textit{"of all ages"})\footnote{Public Opinion, XVIII, 43.} she easily stands supreme.\footnote{Lilian Unittig, "Elisabeth Barrett Browning," \textit{The Bookman}, III (March 1896), 35.} In a 1913 and 1914 essay one
critic ranks her with the greatest poets, beside Tennyson and Browning,\footnote{Hickey, p. 164.} while another claims for her a very high place in the English anthology

Miss Rossetti, on the other hand, although given reluctant
recognition by some, is ranked higher by others. An 1895 reviewer
questions how long her fame will last outside the anthologies, where, he
feels certain, she must always have a place.\footnote{Public Opinion, XVIII, 43.} Another critic of the
same year says that she is not often on the heights, but concedes to her

\footnote{\textit{\ldots}}
the name of poet.\(^1\) A third calls her "the finest woman poet since Mrs. Browning;"\(^2\) Edmund Gosse, intimating that Mrs. Browning’s success "grows every day more dubious" because she is hysterical instead of passionate, says this of Christina Rossetti:

[She is] one of the most perfect poets of the age—not one of the most powerful, of course, nor one of the most epoch-making, but . . . one of the most perfect . . . a writer toward whom we may not unreasonably expect that students of English literature in the twenty-fourth century may look back as the critics of Alexandria did toward Sappho and toward Erinna.\(^3\)

In his article in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* the same writer ranks her "among the foremost poets of her time," in spite of the limitations of sympathy and experience.\(^4\)

A number of writers during this period are noncommittal in their evaluations of Mrs. Browning and Miss Rossetti. One magazine refers to the latter as "one of the greatest of living poets."\(^5\) Another, praising the merits of the former, intimates that no other poetess’s name can be mentioned with hers except, perhaps, that of Christina Rossetti.\(^6\)

\(^1\) Alice Meynell, "Christina Rossetti," *The Living Age*, CCIV (Feb. 1895), 569.


\(^3\) P. 138.


\(^6\) *Living Age*, CCXIX, 176.
A third calls then both the "greatest of English poetsesses."¹ George Saintsbury, recognising "those who seriously maintain Miss Rossetti's claim to the highest rank among English poetsesses," urges that she excels Mrs. Browning, her only possible competitor, in "freedom from blemishes of form," and "maudlin gush." However, without "attempting a too rigid classification," he feels that it is safe to say that Miss Rossetti "has no superior among Englishwomen who have had the gift of poetry."² William Horton Payne assigns to both women seats in the temple of fame "not far below those in which the greatest English poets of the Victorian period are enthroned." It is idle to enquire, he insists, which of the two has done the more enduring work. To use his words:

Mrs. Browning has undoubtedly won a wider acceptance than Miss Rossetti, and enjoyed a greater popularity; on the other hand, the acceptance won by the latter poet has probably included the more distinguished suffrages, while her popularity has of recent years grown space, and may in time outstrip that of the older singer.³

A. Hamilton Thompson compares the two poetesses in this way:

If she [Christina Rossetti] had less intellectual force and a more confined range of subject than Elizabeth Barrett Browning, who certainly, by virtue of her more liberal sympathies, makes an appeal to a wider audience, Christina Rossetti unquestionably

¹Arthur Christopher Benson, "Christina Rossetti," The Living Age CCIV (March 9, 1895), 620.
had the advantage in melodiousness... If this aloofness from the world precludes her from an uncontested claim to the position sometimes given to her as the greatest of English poets, as religious poet of the nineteenth century... can be said to challenge comparison with her whose "shrine of holiest-hearted song" Swinburne approached with reverent admiration.

In the 1920's and 1930's there are various indications of Miss Rossetti's increased acclaim as England's leading poetess. First of all, numerous comparisons appear between her poetry and Mrs. Browning's works, with attempts to explain, in many cases, the reasons for their change in rank.\(^2\) Next, the many books written about Christina Rossetti—there are at least six—point to a growing interest in the poet. Last but certainly not least, statements from recognized critics attest to Miss Rossetti's present superior rating as a poet. The Dictionary of National Biography, it is true, because of the comparative narrowness of her sympathies sets her "below Mrs. Browning, to whom she has been sometimes preferred," although it admits she excels "that very careless writer in artistic construction and purity of diction."\(^3\) On the other hand, Louis Untermeyer considers her the better poet.\(^4\) Virginia Woolf

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2. Besides the standard encyclopaedias like Chambers's and the history of English literature books, comparisons are made in biographies of both women and in works like Harjorie Bald's Women Writers of the Nineteenth Century (Cambridge, 1923).

3. DNB, XVII, 263.

testifies to her mounting "irresistibly to the first place among English
women poets," adding that Mrs. Browning, "so much more loudly applauded
during her lifetime, falls further and further behind."¹ Virginia Moore
insists that from Sappho to Christina Rossetti no woman wrote poetry "of
the first water."² She continues: "I do not except Elizabeth Browning,
whose sonnets are often inflated. Yet no first-class poet has been read
so superficially as Christina Rossetti."² And John U. Carllffe states
that of all the women poets of the nineteenth century, Christina Rossetti's
reputation "now stands the highest."³

Of the various books and articles written about Christina Rorsetti
since 1930, few, if any, challenge her position as the leading
English poetess. Anthologies of English literature restrict her to a
brief biography and a few poems; for by and large she is not considered
a major poet; nevertheless, the fact that her works appear to have out-
lived Jean Ingelow's, Augusta Webster's, Felicia Hemans's, and even many
of Mrs. Browning's, would seem to indicate that there is something of the
enduring and permanently appealing in at least some of her best poetry.

¹P. 676.
²"Christina Rossetti's Centennial," The Yale Review, XX (Dec.
1930), 226.
³"Mid-Victorian Poets," in Leaders of the Victorian Revolution
(New York, 1934), 239.
CHAPTER III

It is not always easy to determine what characteristics in poetry make it lose or retain its appeal, for sometimes a poet is rejected for years and then suddenly rediscovered by an admiring public, his so-called faults no longer an issue. Judging from the extent and general agreement of criticism on Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poetry, however, it would seem at present unlikely that she will ever overcome all these criticisms and be considered once again a major poet.

In the first place, in the expression of some of her ideas, Mrs. Browning is too much of an age rather than for all time. The best illustration of this is perhaps found in Aurora Leigh, the poem which, we are told by Mr. Ingman (p. 217), evoked a widespread chorus of praise. Men admired it for its daring intellectual power, its moral and social convictions voiced in what they termed, splendid, sweeping eloquence. 1 Women saw in it their own aspirations expanded and glorified. 2 With Aurora they fought vicariously for women's rights, for women's vocations, echoing ardently her sentiments:

How dreary 'tis for women to sit still,
On weary nights by solitary fires,
And hear the nations praising them far off. 3

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1Living Age, CLXXXI, 651.
2Living Age, CCLII, 318.
And with Aurora they despised injustices to the poor and suffering because of negligence. Notwithstanding the tremendous impact the work made on the public then, it seems overly intense and out of place today. Mr. Beas points out, and rightly so, that problems of sex and class have so shifted values since that time that the arguments presented have for us the effect of beating the air.1 The same is true of two of the poet's other popular poems. Of vital interest to Victorian England was both its general movement toward a broader democracy2 and a humanitarian concern for factory workers, children especially.3 Bertram's condemnation of Lady Geraldine's social position in "Lady Geraldine's Courtship" and the intense indictment against child labor in "The Cry of the Children" therefore struck very responsive chords. Passionate as these poems are, they do not quite evoke the same sympathy for us that they did during the author's lifetime.4

It should be kept in mind, however, that Mrs. Browning's ideas, extended as they seem now, were radical and novel in her day. Unconventionality has now become conventional so that many of her innovations

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1 P. 167.


4 Mr. McCormick says (p. 214) that "Lady Geraldine's Courtship" was one of the most popular poems in the edition of 1844; the Living Age claims that "The Cry of the Children" hastened, by its first appearance in Blackwood, the passing of the initial act to restrain the practices denounced (CLXXXIII, 648).
are no longer new; but it took courage during the Victorian age to express herself on moral, social, and political issues. More than one critic found her rather startling, a little too frank, even vulgar. When she submitted "Lord Walter's Wife" to Thackeray for publication he rejected it because the language was too strong: the word harlot appears near the end of the poem.

Fairly early in Elizabeth Browning's career her close friend and critic, Miss Mitford, cautioned her to avoid psychological and mystical subjects. She would do better, intimated her friend, to choose subjects with "human thought and human action." The poetess, however, refused to be guided in her inspirations; she was determined to attempt the sublime. According to one critic, some of her most ambitious efforts suffered because she did not recognize her own incapabilities. In 1861 she summed up rather succinctly what she thought was her problem.

With the conviction that ethical poetry was the loftiest flight of the muse, she endeavoured in her teens to instruct the world in the most subject which the mind is capable of imagining next to God, namely, itself. In her next great endeavour, the "Seraphia," she attempted to view the stupendous agony of the Crucifixion, as it would appear, to use her own expression, "dilated through a seraph's eyes." In her third attempt, the "Drama of Exile," she tried in the steps of Milton; and although in her preface she endeavours to excuse herself by saying that the Gate of Paradise is shut between herself and England's greatest epic poet, a truer judgment would have told her that

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1*Living Age, CCXLI, 178-175.*

2*Danae, p. 633.*

3*Living Age, CCXLI, 175.*

4*Living Age, CCLXXI, 648.*
the task she was attempting required at least equal powers to those displayed in the "Paradise Lost."1

It is this same effort to utter the unutterable that makes Aurora Leigh, to quote the same critic, a "splendid failure in an impossible attempt."2 Despite its power, the "essential fault of the book is that the plan is too large and complex for the mental power brought to bear on it."3 Furthermore, the author's contempt for the limitations of her subject makes the poem vast, vague, and chaotic. Its elements heave and boil with life, but these elements are confused rather than integrated because they have not been sufficiently reconciled.4 How could anyone hope to combine ideas on art, the regeneration of society, the proper relationship between man and woman within the confines of one poem?5 The criticism seems pertinent, for in spite of its excellent passages, the work as a whole appears incomplete and uncohesives.6

Mrs. Browning's political poems also, according to one biographer, were never very popular because of their subject matter.6 Few of her English contemporaries had the knowledge of Italian politics that she had, and few had quite her interest or concern.7 Little wonder it is,

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1Edinburgh Review, CXIV, 520-521.
2Tbid., p. 530.
3Living Age, LII, 429.
4Tbid., p. 427.
5Tbid., pp. 427-428.
6Ingram, pp. 193, 255. See also Nation, XLVIII, 7-8.
7Nation, XLVIII, 8.
then, that these poems, not overly appreciated in her time, have lost their appeal today. The accusation made against them as early as 1861 would appear to be a just one now, namely, that *Casa Guidi Windows* as well as *Poems before Congress* is too special, too full of local allusions, too lavish in its adoration of Italy and of Napoleon to interest anyone but the specialized student.¹

So far as popularity goes, if Mrs. Browning was unfortunate in her choice of subjects for some of her longer poems, she proved more fortunate in her shorter romances and lyrics. Themes on constancy and inconsistency in love, medieval superstitions, appreciation of nature, when expressed in appropriate verse, are always appealing. Time has not therefore detracted from the delicate fancy of "*The Lay of the Brown Rosary*," "*The Romance of the Swan's Nest*," or "*The Romance of Margaret*."² Nor has it robbed of their intensity such poems as "*Romance of the Page*," and "*Rhyme of the Duchess May*."³ The delicate, tender sympathy in "*Cowper's Grave*" and the gentle pathos in "*Bertha in the Lane*" must always strike a responsive note. By far the most enduring poems written by Mrs. Browning are, of course, her *Sonnets from the Portuguese*.⁴ These

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¹*Edinburgh Review*, CXIV, 531.

²In selecting Mrs. Browning's best lyrics, these and the ones following are listed fairly consistently by critics.

³In the *Living Age*, CLXXIX, 806, the author praises the poem but objects to the "species of pious churchyard meditation" at the end. One critic (Stedman, p. 113) praises the "melodious, effective" *Toll slowly refraining*; another (*Edinburgh Review*, CXIV, 527) calls it "unnecessary and absurd."

⁴Agreement is virtually unanimous on this point.
verses, called "that monologue of a strong soul rescued by love from all its doubts and misgivings" earned their author for many years the title of "Shakespeare's daughter." Since publication one critic at least placed these poems beside Wordsworth's and most of Milton's sonnets. Another ranked them higher than Rossetti's "House of Life" sequence because his do not have the same unity of aim and "ascending scale of feeling." Two others, in comparing them with Shakespeare's sonnets, hinted that their "music is showered from a higher and purer atmosphere" than his and that his are "less perfect in form, and not so readily comprehensible as a series." The Encyclopaedia Britannica says they are "beyond praise." The fact that they are usually selected to be included in anthologies of English literature attests to their superior ranking by critics. Certainly Mrs. Browning's sonnets merit the laudation that has been given to them, for through them she has given expression in beautiful and appropriate form to sentiments enduring as time itself.

As early as 1851 one reviewer of Elizabeth Browning's works

1Stedman, p. 113. See also Edith M. Thomas's "Elizabeth Barrett Browning," The Critic, XXXVII (Dec. 1900), 516.

2"Elizabeth Barrett Browning," The Cornhill Magazine, XXIX (April 1874), 486.

3"The Poetry of Mrs. E. B. Browning," The Living Age, CLV (Nov. 1882), 423.

4Stedman, p. 109.

5Living Age, CLV, 423.

objected to the lack of compression in many of her poems. Since then critics have consistently found fault with her "tendency to lengthiness," her "redundant, unconcentrated" lines, her "prolixity." 6 A Drama of Exile, with all its dramatic force, has been termed too long and drawn out; 5 and it has been said of Casa Guidi Windows that if the poetess had written "a direct indictment she might have produced a document of greater poetic value than 'The Cry of the Children.'" 6 Aurora Leigh likewise has been accused of possessing many pages that are "unnecessary, trifling, and wearisome." 7 Its ten thousand lines of blank verse are forbidding enough, but coupled with an intricate plot and lengthy digressions, little wonder it is that the poem is no longer read. 8 Aurora Leigh made this observation about her own work of art, an observation which has been offered as perhaps the best criticism of Aurora Leigh: 9

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1 Living Age. XXVII, 552.


3 Living Age, CCLXX, 176.


5 Beaz, p. 156.

6 McConnell, p. 164.


8 Living Age, CCLXX, 507.

9 Ibid.
The prospects were too far and indistinct.  
"Tis true my critics said, "A fine view that."  
The public scarcely cared to climb my book.  
For even the finest—and the public's right.

If Mrs. Browning had written with greater compression she might have avoided some of the criticisms for lack of clarity which have been made of her works. Mr. Gosse says this of her:

Critics are beginning to see now, and sorrowfully to admit, that that is causing the noble figure of Elizabeth Barrett to recede gradually from that front place in which Tennyson, for instance, and Keats held their pre-eminence, is her turbidity.1

Some of this want of lucidity exists because, as one writer put it, "she was a Pythianess struggling for utterance ... her speech was inarticulate, often because she meant so much."2 Some of the confusion arises from her occasional far-fetched metaphors. She "invests immaterial objects and abstractions with human features which make pure nonsense."3

C. K. Chesterton, deploiring the "trite and smoky-panky elegance" characteristic of so many lady writers, says this of Mrs. Browning:

Whenever her verse is bad it is bad from some extravagance of imagery, some violence of comparison, some kind of debauch of cleverness. Her nonsense never arises from weakness, but from a confusion of powers.4

He goes on to point out that because Mrs. Browning had enormous vitality in her writing, taking the risks that great artists take, her failures were all the more catastrophic. Some of the figures of speech he terms

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1 Gosse, p. 8.
2 Living Age, LIII, 427.
3 Edinburgh Review, CIX, 525.
4 Chesterton, Varied Types, pp. 261-262.
outrageous; but "when she fell," he states, "it was always because she missed the foothold, never because she fumbled the leap."\(^1\) A few of the worst conceits which he and which another writer points out are the "eyes of the peacock fans" winking, "at the alien glory," said of the Papal fans in the presence of the Italian tricolor; the rose which lifts up her white hands; eternity which smiles with dim grand lips; a mystery that has a knee.\(^2\) In *Aurora Leigh* there is this comparison:

> Earth (shut up)<br>By Adam, like a fairy in a box<br>Left too long buried, remained stiff and dry,<br>A mere dumb corpse, till Christ the Lord came down,<br>Unlocked the doors, forced open the blank eyes,<br>And used his skillingly charmed to straighten out<br>The leathery tongue turned back into the throat.\(^3\)

Like *Aurora Leigh*, *A Drama of Exile* has its obscure passages. The purpose of the exhortations and songs of the angels and spirits seems to be to teach Adam and Eve that they were "only exiled, and not lost."\(^4\) Yet it is difficult to see any relevancy or purport in the song of the Morning Star:

> Around, around the firmamental ocean<br>I saw expanding with delirious fire!<br>Around, around, around, in blind desire<br>To be drawn upward to the Infinite—<br>Ha, ha!<br>Until, the motion flinging out the motion<br>To a keen whirr of passion and avidity,<br>To a dim whirl of languer and delight,<br>I wound in gyrant orbits smooth and white<

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With that intense rapidity.
    Around, around,
    I wound and interwound,
While all the cyclic heavens around me spun.
Stars, planets, suns, and moons dilated and
Then flashed together into a single sun,
And wound, and wound in one;
And as they wound I wound, — around, around,
In a great fire I almost took for God.
    Hark, hark, Aeolus! 1

It is perhaps unfair to say, as one reviewer did, that in writing this poem the poetess tempted one to think that she was "describing her own
somnations under a dose of opium. 2 Certainly it is too harsh to accuse
her in this verse and others of being whirled about perpetually in a
great fire which she almost took for God. 3 Many of the passages in both
A Drama of Exile and Aurora Leigh are beautiful in their clarity and
power. An example from the former is the chant of the spirits of Para-
dise to Adam and Eve as they commence their flight into a world of sin
and sorrow:

    Harken, oh harken! ye shall harken surely
    For years and years,
The noise beside you, dripping coldly, purely
    Of spirits' tears.
The yearning to a beautiful denied you
    Shall strain your powers;
Ideal sweethearts shall overglide you,
    Resumed from ours.
In all your music, our pathetic minor
    Your ears shall cross;
And all good gifts shall mind you of diviner,

1Poetical Works, p. 167.
2Edinburgh Review, CXIV, 522.
3Ibid.
Another example from the same work is the vivid description of the effect of the curse on the crouched lion. Lucifer is speaking to Adam.

When the crouched curse
Left silence in the world, right suddenly
He sprang up rampant and stood straight and stiff,
As if the new reality of death
Were dashed against his eyes, and reared so fierce,
(Such thick carnivorous passion in his throat
Tearing a passage through the wrath and fear)
And reared so wild, and snate from all the hills
Such fast keen echoes crumbling down the vales
Precipitately,—that the forest breasts,
One after one, did matter a response
Of savage and of sorrowful complaint
Which trailed along the gorges. Then, at once,
He fell back, and rolled crashing from the height
Into the desk of pines: 2

In Aurora Leigh there is this touching observation of a little girl who has lost her mother:

The woman knew
The way to rear up children (to be just),
They knew a simple, merry, tender knack
Of tying sashes, fitting baby-shoes,
And stringing pretty words that make no sense,
And missing full sense into empty words,
Which things are caraly to cut life upon,
Although such trifles. 3

And in Mrs. Browning's shorter lyrical efforts what could be more tenderly natural than "Corpo's Grave" and "Earth in the Lane," or what expression could be a clearer "self-revelation of a woman redeemed by the inter-

1 Poetical Works, pp. 154-155.
2 Ibid., p. 170.
3 Ibid., p. 353.
sity of her feeling from death to life" than these lines from the "Sonnets from the Portuguese?"

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."

Elizabeth Browning has been accused of irreverence, indecency, unnecessary moralizing, and sentimental self-consciousness in her poetry. The first two indictments are easily dismissed as inadequate judgments because they are confined to the ephemeral mores of their age. The third accusation concerns so few of her poems that it deserves little comment. Definite hindrances to the effectiveness of some of her

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1Boas, p. 174.

2Living Age, CLXXX, 632.

Dorothy Hewlett states that the bold feminism of Aurora Leigh caused the Catholic Tablet to denounce the heroine as a "brazen-faced woman." See p. 323.

1Ingram, p. 128.

5Living Age, CLV, 417.

6The poetess answered her accusations of irreverence by arguing that Christ by stooping to live man's life, made it sacramental; to avoid the mention of divine persons or things in everyday living is to sunder the daily life from the spiritual creed. The word God is everywhere in his creation; what offence is there in uttering the name if it is uttered devoutly? (Living Age, CLXXXI, 651). Many of the passages of so-called indecency are so mild compared with present-day standards that the accusations seem incredible.

7The criticism is made by Living Age, CLXIX, 805, as well as by Ingram, p. 132.
poetry, however, in the estimate of a few critics, is a self-consciousness of her sex, her art, and her own sufferings. Allusion has already been made to the position of women during the Victorian era and the poetess's indignation over those who are praised only

As long as they keep quiet by the fires, And never say "me" when the world says "pay."

It is not her views, of course, but her self-conscious treatment of them which some readers find objectionable. And this treatment characterizes her references to her vocation as a poet as well as her allusions to her personal sufferings. One questions the frequent insistence upon the superiority of her craft expressed in lines like these:

We, staggering 'neath our burden as mere men Being called to stand up straight as demi-gods, Support the intolerable strain and stress Of the universal.

Although she is fond of telling us in her poetry that she is a sorrowful creature, "made heavy with accumulated tears," her very insistence on the fact and the vitality with which she relates her sufferings make one wonder sometimes if she really is dying.

Mrs. Browning cannot be called trite or unoriginal in her writing. Her situations and even her characters are imaginatively conceived. Yet

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1The North American Review, LXXIX, 343-345, goes to some length to show that Mrs. Browning, though the queen of poets, is only a woman and no reasoner in her works, and therefore cannot be compared with men. A Drama of Exile and Aurora Leigh are used as examples, not of logical argumentation, but of impulsive, inconsistent, illogical, impudent, womanly harangues.

something in the narrating of some of her stories, the longer ones particu-
larly, leaves the reader sometimes only partly convinced. When she is
telling a simple tale and not striving for effect her presentations are
natural and persuasive: few would question the Duchess May's fidelity,
or Bertha's self-sacrifice. But in her more ambitious efforts her nar-
ratives are often unconvincing. In some cases the plot is to blame; in
some cases the characterisation. Sometimes the combination of the two
is at fault.

The worst offenders in this respect are perhaps "Lady Geraldine's
Courtship" and Aurora Leigh.¹ Despite the glowing passion in both, they
remain fantastic and impossible to many readers, and for them the author
never quite manages to create that willing suspension of disbelief that
is so important in successful poetry. In the first story, to use the
expressions of one writer, Bertrand is an ignorant prig totally unversed
in the ways of the world.² His presence in Lady Geraldine's household
is obviously contrived. In Aurora Leigh many of the characterisations
are equally dissatisfying. Marian Erle, that "daughter of the people-
soft flower from rough root," is too much the pure-as-driven-snow type.³
Brought up amidst foul surroundings, she remains spotless, notwithstand-

¹With a very few exceptions, every article read which discussed
this aspect of Mrs. Browning's poetry agreed on this point.

²Stedman, p. 107. See also Living Age, CXXII, 806-907.

³A limited number of articles term her attractively and beauti-
fully drawn; otherwise she is generally agreed to be untrue to nature.
ing her betrayal to a life of shame. That she should allow the artifi-
cial, transparent Lady Waldemar to cheat her out of a perfectly good hus-
band by the slim argument of incompatibility seems incredible. That her
approaching motherhood—told to her a month before the event by an indig-
ment mistress—should come to her with such surprise and innocent conster-
nation is monstrous. She is Mrs. Browning's puppet, speaking like a
classical heroine in spite of her rude upbringing, and acting like a
saft. Romney and Aurora likewise seem unnatural and exaggerated with
very little true continuity or development. Why the author copied Jane
Eyre in making Romney get blinded in a fire at the end of the book is
difficult to explain.

It is possible that Mrs. Browning's earlier confinement to a
sick chamber prevented her from attaining such real knowledge of the
world. She had a genuine concern for poor people and even accompanied
her father, Miss Hardett tell us, to visit the slums when she was a
child. But her descriptions of the poor appear often bockish and
unreal. It is highly improbable that a London crowd, invited to a wed-
ding, would arrive "with hideous interlusion," miserably clogging the
streets and coming into the pews, and then would demonstrate the rabid
ill temper that hers did in Aurea Leigh. Her depiction of the English

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1 For an example see her eloquent vindication of her "crime" in Poetical Works, pp. 446-447.
2 Living Age, LIII, 429.
3 P. 13.
aristocracy, moreover, seems unnecessarily calloused and trivial. It should be pointed out, however, that not all Mrs. Browning's individual and collective depictions are unreal. Both The Seraphim and A Drama of Exile are powerfully and persuasively executed with characters convincing to many readers, if not to all.¹ Aurora's maiden aunt, sedate, correct, with her "grey-steel naked-bladed eyes" is likewise a plausible depiction.

One of the most serious criticisms of Elizabeth Browning's poetry has involved her choice of words,² her rhymes,³ her rhythms, and some of her verse forms.⁴ In discussing her choice of words Edgar Allan Poe terms her affectionate in her occasional use of such expressions as chryse, nympholeptic, chrysopras. Her coinages, oftly for often and aselon for long ago, and her repetitions he likewise condemns. Some of her favorite words like throb, ware, and down appear too frequently, he insists, in her works.⁵

In her rhymes she has been denounced for her so-called inadmissible choices. Some of these are perfectly effective feminine rhymes; some are assonances;⁶ some, in the estimation of not a few critics, are

¹ Critics differ somewhat on this point. Edinburgh Review, CXIV, 521, finds the first incoherent. Poe finds Eve and her part in the drama unintelligible. See pp. 357–361.
² Poe, pp. 376–378.
³ Smith, p. 829.
very questionable combinations. A few examples of these given by Poe are Eden and exceeding, desert and unmeasured, oot and sun-proof.

"The Cry of the Children" is generally praised, not only because of its humanitarian passion, but because the rhythms vibrating through it echo so expressively the endless whirr of machinery. "A Musical Instrument" and "Sonnets from the Portuguese" demonstrate also the author's ability to write verses whose metres are consistent with the tone of the poem. In some of Mrs. Browning's works, however, the effectiveness of the poem is marred, in the estimation of some, because the verse form does not contribute to or suit the mood of the composition. Aurora Leigh illustrates best this point. According to Virginia Woolf, by choosing blank verse for this novel Mrs. Browning placed herself at a decided disadvantage. Dialogue plays an important part in this work, but there prose could subordinate and suggest, the verse expands and expresses. To use Miss Woolf's own words:

Blank verse has proved itself the most remorseless enemy of modern speech. Talk tossed up on the surge and swing of the verse becomes high, rhetorical, impassioned; and since the talk, for there is no action to stop it, goes on, the reader's mind stiffens and glazes under the monotony of the rhythm. Following the lilt of her rhythm rather than the emotions of her characters, Mrs. Browning is swept on into generalisation and declamation. Forced by the nature of her medium she ignores the slights, the subtler, the more hidden shades of emotion, by which a novelist

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1See Ingram, pp. 138-141, for Mr. Horne's objections to her rhymes and her letter to him justifying her use of them.

2P. 385.

3Bsns, p. 169.
builds up, touch by touch, a character in prose. Change and development, the effect of one character upon another—all this is abandoned. The poem becomes one long soliloquy, and the only character that is known to us, and the only story that is told us, are the character and story of Aurora Leigh herself.1

Various suggestions have been offered as explanations for Mrs. Browning's popular and literary acceptance during her lifetime. One of them—the fact that she wrote about the vital issues of her day—has been alluded to in this chapter. No doubt this, coupled with the romance of her life, influenced the public sentiment: storybook-like she was secluded and ill until her Prince Charming came and carried her off to Italy where she lived a transformed, completely romantic life. Perhaps the loss of interest in problems so vital to the Victorians has contributed to her loss of appeal today. Possibly it is so, as one writer intimated after her death, that she was an intellectual sentimentalist; and because these characteristics usually exclude each other and are therefore rarely united, her appeal is now limited.2 It is impossible to attribute her present reception to any one factor, for doubtless a combination of factors is responsible. However, judging from the critics' evaluations of her poems it would seem that some of the criticisms discussed in this chapter have at least something to do with her present lowered status as a poet.

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1"Aurora Leigh," pp. 687-688.

2Living Age, CLXXIX, 805.
CHAPTER IV

Books and periodicals which discuss Christina Rossetti's present position as England's leading woman poet fail to offer any suggestions as to what characteristics in her works have caused her to be remembered while so many of her contemporaries have long since been forgotten. It is impossible ever to state specifically, of course, what qualities in poetry make it endure the test of time. However, it might be possible, through some comparisons made between her poems and those of Mrs. Browning's, to suggest some elements in her poems which have contributed, at least, to a continued appreciation of her works.

Like Mrs. Browning, Miss Rossetti seems to have taken an interest in humanitarian efforts and some social affairs. Unlike Mrs. Browning, because her interests appear to have sprung primarily from a stern sense of Christian duty, she made scrapbooks for children in hospitals, expressed sympathy for work with factory girls, and dutifully visited the sick, but she never wrote about these subjects in her poems. Her works are strangely aloof from the problems of the day and, as one writer stated, do not evoke national enthusiasms, strive to redress wrongs for children in factories, or stimulate concern for social abuses. She herself spoke of her limited range, her "one-stringed

1 Thomas, Christina Georgina Rossetti, pp. 95-97.

2 Ibid.

lyre," adding:

It is not in me, and therefore it will never come out of me, to turn to politics or philanthropy with Mrs. Browning: such many-sidedness I leave to a greater than I, and, having said my say, may well sit silent.¹

It is perhaps true, as Miss Bald states, that this limitation excludes from Christina Rossetti's writing the rich compassion and fervent idealism found in Mrs. Browning's works.² Nevertheless, it is also true that this same narrowness doubtless kept the former writer from dissipating her emotions on the crowd and from writing about subjects that she did not understand. She is possibly the better poet because the confines of her experience made the stream of her poetry run deep rather than broad, giving it an intensity and force which it might otherwise not have had.³

If, as Ruskin says, true art must have truth as well as feeling, Christina Rossetti's poetry has the elements of true art. She may not have known much about the events of the day or of human life in general, but she did seem to understand her own emotions; and because she mirrored these emotions with unswerving fidelity, her poems have, as Miss Bald so aptly implies, the convincing quality that Mrs. Browning's so often lack.⁴ "I am, in a manner, as a blind poet," wrote Mrs. Browning

²Bald, p. 249.
⁴Bald, p. 213.
case. "I make great guesses at Human nature in the main,"¹ Christina Rossetti never made guesses. Rather she plumbed the depths of her own experience, brought to the surface what Arnold calls the buried river of her inner life, and in indestructable mists poured the essence of her emotions.

Several themes recur constantly in Christina Rossetti's poetry. Some of these have to do with nature or the joy of love and are light in tone. By far the majority of her poems, however, are the more somber ones—the ones that have to do with lost opportunities, with the fragility of life and what it has to offer, and with the contemplation of death.

Despite the fact that the poetess rarely left London, her observations of nature are surprisingly keen. She could write poems like "Twilight Calm" and "Golden Glories"; and she could picture a meadow full of life in these lines from "From House to Home:"²

> My heath lay farther off, where lizards lived
> In strange metallic mail, just spied and gone;
> Like darted lightenings here and there perceived
> But nowhere drest upon.
> Frogs and fat toads were there to hop or plod
> And propagate in peace, an uncouth crew,
> Where velvet-headed rushes rustling nod
> And spill the morning dew.

Her descriptions in "Goblin Market," particularly the passages about the goblin fruit, literally make the mouth water.

Come buy, come buy:

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¹Bald, pp. 212-213.

Apples and quinces,
Lemons and oranges,
Plump unpecked cherries,
Melons and raspberries,
Bloom-dows-checkered peaches,
Scarlet-headed mulberries,
Wild free-born cranberries,
Crab-apples, dewberries,
Pine-apples, blackberries,
Apricots, strawberries—
All ripe together
In summer weather.

Notwithstanding the quaint, light touch in these poems, and notwithstanding the joyous expression of love in "In the Lane," "A Bride-Song," "Hidden-Song," and especially in "A Birthday" where her heart "is like a singing bird," her poems for the most part throb with a melancholy and longing which come from her awareness of the transience of time, of the passage of youth with its neglected opportunities, and the dissatisfaction of earthly love. In "Spring" she says:

There is no time like Spring,
Like Spring that passes by;
There is no life like Spring-life born to die—

And again:

There is no time like Spring that passes by,
Now newly born, and now
Hastening to die.

"The Prince's Progress," vibrating with the refrain, "Too late, too late," is a sad warning to the young who linger and loiter, taking for granted the priceless privileges of life and love. In "Trice" the poetess emphasizes her distrust of human affection. Speaking of her heart which she

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1 Poetical Works, p. 1.
2 Ibid., p. 346.
entrusted to her lover and which he scanned "with a critical eye,"
deeming it still unripe, she says:

As you set it down it broke---
Broke, but I did not wince;
I smiled at the speech you spoke,
At your judgment that I heard;
But I have not often smiled
Since then, nor questioned since
Nor cared for cornflowers wild,
Nor sung with the singing bird. ¹

Whether Christina Rossetti's heart was ever really broken or not
is irrelevant. The fact is, much of her poetry expresses a yearning for
an ideal, much like Shelley's "Epipsychidion," which it does not find in
mortal man.² Because of this dissatisfaction, and because of her belief
in God and immortality, the poetess turns, in much of her verse, to her
only hope of enduring happiness: union with God. In "The Heart Knoweth
Its Own Bitterness" she speaks of this union:

Here means: the separating sea;
Here harvests fail, here breaks the heart;
There God shall join and no man part,
I full of Christ and Christ of me."³

It has been suggested that this religious element, this prevail-
ing seriousness, has kept Miss Rossetti's poems from popularity.⁴ On
the other hand, this same religious element has been offered as a reason

¹ Poetical Works, p. 366.
³ Poetical Works, p. 193.
⁴ Larther, p. 686.
for the poet's continued appeal today.\footnote{Leather, p. 681.} Impossible as it might seem, both statements no doubt have an element of truth. To the unsympathetic reader, Christina Rossetti is morbid, seeing all life "through the worm-holes in a shroud.\footnote{Lucas, p. 132.} Her religious resignation and renunciation become monotonous, her verse turning a continual wheel, "with dream, desire, and vanity for the refrain."\footnote{"Christina Rossetti," TLS, Dec. 4, 1930, p. 1022.} To the sympathetic reader, however, her words are the impressions "of a living soul making fresh spiritual discoveries."\footnote{Evelyn Underhill, Review of The Life of Christina Rossetti by Mary F. Sandars, The Spectator, Lit. Sup., Oct. 16, 1930, p. 539.} Her references to death are not morbid, for death is the eternal home-coming, the quiet relief following the restlessness of the world, the deep, ultimate reality, the majestic portal to which the weary road finally winds.\footnote{Berson, p. 695.} In short, to summarize it as one critic did, it means "Thine arms at last."\footnote{Moore, p. 430.} This idea of rest the poet expresses in two verses of "Uphill."

But is there for the night a resting-place?  
A roof for when the slow dark hours begin.  
May not the darkness hide it from my face?  
You cannot miss that inn.  

Shall I find comfort, travel-cure and weak?  
Of labor you shall find the sun.
Will there be beds for me and all who seek?
Yes, beds for all who come. 1

Again she emphasizes the soul's tranquility in "Rest."

O Earth, lie heavily upon her eyes;
Seal her sweet eyes weary of watching, Earth;
Lie close around her; leave no room for birth
With its harsh laughter, nor for sound of sighs.
She hath no questions, she hath no replies,
Hurled in and curtained with a blessed sheath
Of all that linked her from the hour of birth;
With stillness that is almost Paradise,
Darkness more clear than noonday holdeth her,
Silence more musical than any song;
Even her very heart has ceased to stir:
Until the morning of Eternity
Her rest shall not begin nor end, but be;
And when she wakes she will not think it long. 2

Much of Christina Rossetti's poetry is concerned with sacred and
devotional themes. In this religious verse, though some of it is infe-
rior, the Dictionary of National Biography gives credit for a wide cir-
culation and much of the writer's popularity. 3 Although Gosse feels that
the poetess successfully avoided the Scylla of doctrine on the one hand,
and the Charybdis of commonplace dullness on the other, 4 the Athenæum
claims that too much subjective religiosity overpowered the instinct of
art in many of her poems. It is regrettable, states the same article,
how few people retain their inspiration when they dedicate themselves to
religious themes. 5 Notwithstanding the inferiority of some of the

1 Poetical Works, p. 339.
2 Ibid., p. 273.
3 DNB, XVII, 283.
4 Gosse, p. 156.
5 Review of The Poetical Works of C. G. Rossetti, ed. U. Rossetti,
The Athenæum, April 2, 1903, p. 423.
religious verse, as the same article later admits, there is much that

| 1Muriel Kent, "Christina Rossetti: A Reconsideration," The
| Contemporary Review, CXXXVIII (Dec. 1930), 759.
| 2Bald, p. 217.
| 3Ibid.
None of this lack of self-control is evident in Christina Rossetti's writing. She does not engulf the reader, as it were, in a flood of turbulent verbosity or extravagant metaphors. Always there is restraint. And because each expression is released with such careful discrimination, the effect is all the more clear and intense.

Some of Miss Rossetti's verses seem disarmingly simple at first. She can choose words which are plain "almost to baldness." On the other hand she can paint rich, sensuous pictures. Her figurative expressions are unique and her use of words is so original that she is never dull. Beside such a homely comparison as "The old voice whistled as through a leak," is the seductive one: "Her swift feet seemed to float on / The air like soft twin pigeons, too sportive to alight." Sometimes her figures of speech suggest coolness and peace: "Angels like rushes stand / About the wells of light." And sometimes they reflect the Pre-Raphaelite love of color and of life: with her lilies and pale maidens are golden poppies, blue cornflowers, translucent green leaves, yellow corn, and birds with bodies like a flame. In "The Convent Threshold" she describes men and women in the exuberance of youth.

You looking earthward, what see you?
Milk white, wine-flushed among the vines,
Up and down leaping, to and fro,
Most glad, most full, made strong with wines,
Blooming as peaches pearled with dew,
Their golden windy hair afloat,
Love-music warbling in their throat,

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2 Lowther, p. 684.
Young men and women come and go.\(^1\)

Although Miss Rossetti has not entirely escaped criticism for some of her metrical irregularities,\(^2\) her daring innovations have for the most part been so successful that they have been widely praised. "She is incomparably our greatest craftsman," states the Times Literary Supplement: "the mingling truth and freedom of her melodies, the unwavering purity of her speech, place her certainly in the first twenty, probably in the first twelve, of the masters of the technique of English verse."\(^3\) Another writer, commenting on the spontaneity of her rhythms, points out that the exquisite cadences of her verse are not obvious at first; her art is so artless that one is not aware of brilliant or cunning metrical devices.\(^4\) In "Goblin Market," when Laura sees the goblins coming, the note is home, ships, and jumpro with surprising alacrity.

One had a cat's face,
One whisked a tail,
One trooped at a rat's pace,
One crawled like a snail,
One like a weasel prowled stealthy and sly,
One like a ratel tumbled hurry sharry.\(^5\)

More often than not, because her tones are somber, Miss Rossetti

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\(^1\) Festical Works, p. 340.

\(^2\) Sasse, p. 153.

\(^3\) TLS, Dec. 4, 1930, p. 1021.

\(^4\) Leecher, p. 684.

\(^5\) Festical Works, p. 1.
chooses a less lively, though sometimes more complex, metre. "Passing Away," written in irregular dactylic metre with its five beats varying with two or three, would seem to invite failure, especially since the poet used only one rhyme. Yet the monotonous repetition of this rhyming vowel, coupled with the rhythm, somehow heightens the note of subdued fervor, emphasizing very effectively the mood of the poem.\(^1\) Of the three stanzas the last is quoted:

Passing away, saith my God, passing away;  
Winter passeth after the long delay;  
New grapes on the vine, new figs on the tender spray;  
Turtle calleth turtle in heaven's May.  
Though I tarry, wait for me, trust me, watch and pray;  
Arise, come away, night is past and lo it is day;  
My love, my sister, my spouse, thou shalt hear me say.  
Then I answered: Yea.\(^2\)

"In order to succeed in poetry," states Gosse in his comparison of Elizabeth Browning and Christina Rossetti, "women must be brief, personal, and concentrated."\(^3\) One might question the judgment of one who allows his evaluation of poetry to be influenced by sex; nevertheless he, together with several other writers, seems to see elements in the poems of these two poetesses which add or detract because they were written by women. Allusion has already been made to criticism of Mrs. Browning's garrulity. Like her own Seraphim who talked unceasingly throughout the agony of Christ's Passion, she did not realize, according to one writer, that there are things which are not lawful to utter, and times when

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\(^1\) More, p. 816.  
\(^2\) Poetical Works, p. 191.  
\(^3\) P. 136.
silence is more eloquent than sound.\(^1\) Miss Rossetti, on the other hand, does not seem to be guilty of this verbosity. Within the confines of three comparatively short stanzas in "The Three Enemies," she manages to communicate not only the intensity of her reaction to Christ's sufferings and substitutionary death, but also the violence of her own struggle against the deceitfulness of this world.\(^2\) In "After Death" the poetess says very little about her lover who did not love her living, but pitied her in death. Because of this very reticence and because of its power to suggest, the poem is vibrant with emotion. Perhaps if Mrs. Browning's Marian Erle had exercised some of this restraint instead of opening the floodgates of sentiment to Aurora Leigh, her anguish of heart might be more convincing to the reader.

It should be noted in passing that critics have not all commended Christina Rossetti for compression and restraint. More than one writer has said that she wrote too much;\(^3\) that she "never drew to the shutters of her soul, but lay open to every wandering breath of heaven";\(^4\) that her reputation would be higher if she had produced less and burned more.\(^5\) Perhaps her brother is to blame for some of this

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1Bald, p. 218.

2Poetical Works, pp. 116-147.

3Dorothy Margaret Stuart, Christina Rossetti (London, 1930), p. 176; also Athenaeum, April 2, 1904, p. 423.

4More, p. 815.

5DNB, XVII, p. 283.
criticism, since he published, we are told, everything she wrote. Perhaps her sense of religious duty overpowered her sense of artistry; in later years particularly she increased her religious output as a means of service to God and the church. \(^1\) Perhaps she simply wrote mediocre verse, like Wordsworth and a host of other poets, and should be excused as they have been excused. \(^2\)

In more recent years Christina Rossetti's reputation as "one of the finest lyricists and one of the supreme sonneteers" of English has been established. Her genius has been recognized "irrespective of sex." \(^3\) A few critics in times past have tried to credit some of her appeal to femininity. \(^4\) They have intimated that Mrs. Browning, because of her masculine aggression, has created confusion and therefore marred some of her works. \(^5\) The quiet ease and appropriate submission to love in the _Monna Inominata_ sonnets have been given as examples of ideal womanly expressions. \(^6\)

It is doubtful if femininity or its absence has had much to do with Christina Rossetti and Elizabeth Browning's appeal as poets. And

\(^1\) Zaturenska, p. 217.

\(^2\) Athenaeum, April 2, 1904, p. 423.


\(^4\) Athenaeum, April 2, 1904, pp. 423-424.

\(^5\) More, p. 618.

\(^6\) Ibid.
it is doubtful, also, if too much intellectualism or too little of it has in any way influenced their positions as artists. The two women are different: the one charming with subtle cadences, the other overwhelming with loud organ peals; the one a cool and satisfying drink for the spirit, the other a rich and stimulating draught for the mind. Time has judged their art strangely. Perhaps no final statement can yet be made as to why their works have lost or retained their appeal or whether in the future they will retain their present positions in the English anthologies. But at the present time, because many of Mrs. Browning's subjects are confined to the interests of her age, and because her poetry does not always measure up to contemporary standards of literary craftsmanship, she is rated below Miss Rossetti, whose subjects still seem to have appeal and whose literary form is still respected.
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