SONNETS FROM THE PORTUGUESE AND THE POLITICS OF RHYME

By Margaret M. Morlier

ALTHOUGH VICTORIAN REVIEWERS uniformly praised Elizabeth Barrett Browning for the "sincere" poetic voice of *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, they often blamed her for faulty craft. In structure and rhyme scheme the poems in the sequence recall the Petrarchan tradition, suggesting the idealized love that accompanies it, yet their varied syntax and diction seem more conversational than ideal. Enjambment usually destroys the integrity of octave and sestet. Then in the *Sonnets* Barrett Browning continued her use of odd rhymes, which had been raising critical eyebrows since earlier poems. For example, in the most famous sonnet — XLIII, "How do I love thee?" — Barrett Browning rhymed the noun phrase "put to use" (9) with the infinitive "to lose" (11) and rhymed "faith" (10) with "breath" (12). Victorian reviewers, somewhat disoriented, offered a variety of explanations for these apparent technical lapses. Some attributed them to a defective ear for music ("Review of Poems" 278; [Massey] 517).[1] George Saintsbury — taking the lead from the controversy over the "cockney school" of poetry — reproved Barrett Browning, born to the educated classes, for relying out of laziness on vulgar pronunciation to force rhymes instead of taking the time to discover correct ones (280–81). Even her poet-friend and correspondent, Mary Russell Mitford, wondered if isolation at Wimpole Street had led to an overly narrow experience with proper pronunciation of English (reported in Horne 458; see also Hayter 38–39). Victorian reproofs and anecdotes like these followed Barrett Browning's work into the formalist twentieth century.

Within this dominant tradition of fault-finding, any appreciation for the craft of her rhymes has been sparse and slow in coming. In 1860 George Marsh welcomed her experiments with "assonance as a license" (566), but it was 1939 before Fred Manning Smith called for a reevaluation of her experiments in the context of modernist poetics, after documenting numerous negative adjectives typically used between 1845 and 1930 to describe her rhymes (like "slovenly false" or "vicious"). Smith's call for a reappraisal of the rhymes was not answered until 1962 when Alethea Hayter carefully analyzed the technical experiments of Barrett Browning's earlier poetry, concluding that the poet introduced, in particular, the "assonantal double-rhyme" like "benches/influences," and in general, a "freedom which has been of the greatest service to her successors — to Rossetti, to Hopkins, to half the poets of the twentieth century" (46–47). Yet Hayter concluded that Barrett Browning's experiments were not always successful, and she faulted *Sonnets from*

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the Portuguese for a lack of technical control. In the 1990s Sharon Smulders has included some insightful analyses of isolated rhymes as part of her discussions of themes in the *Sonnets*.

My analysis foregrounds the rhymes of the *Sonnets* and reassesses them in line with some recent feminist work that questions the seemingly artless "sincerity" that Victorian reviewers so praised. Scholars now consider the *Sonnets* as "literary performance" (Leighton 13), a "dramatization of desire" (Stephenson 69), or poems crafted to convey the sublime, partly through disruptive form (Mazzaro). In this context, the rhymes give an edge to the sequence's sentimentality; they create the kind of textured, realistic feminine voice that was part of Barrett Browning's agenda throughout her poetic career. I have two additional points that relate her technique more directly to the politics of rhyme. One is that she derived her formal strategies from Victorian political poetry, her structure from the political sonnet and her near rhymes from the poetry of social reform. My second point considers "politics" in a different sense: in Barrett Browning's *Sonnets* the rhyming experiments indicate subversive and elitist poetic strategies that are at ideological cross-purposes. Isobel Armstrong has written that, although we look for a literary text to provide a stable poetic vision, it is often a site of ideological "struggle and contention" (10) that is not necessarily resolved. The rhyming strategies of Barrett Browning's *Sonnets* are just such a site. They serve, on the one hand, to protest the traditions of beauty and of literature from which the feminine voice had been excluded and, on the other, to distinguish a more cognitively complex poetic form than popular verse. These cross-purposes reflect the tension in Barrett Browning's own identity between being simultaneously a member of an underprivileged gender and a privileged class.

Any historical study of rhyme presents several practical problems. One involves terminology, which can be inconsistent as well as overwhelming for the uninitiated. Scholars, however, consistently agree that "correct" rhyme results from the identity of an accented vowel sound and all the consonants and vowels after it, with a difference in consonant sound before it — like cat/rat or slumbers/numbers. Just about any other type of rhyme might be considered clever and innovative, but in some sense incorrect. Although Barrett Browning referred to her experiments as "imperfect rhyme," I shall follow *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* and use the term "near rhyme" (as distinguished from "correct rhyme" [see Brogan]) to describe her verse, and I shall only introduce other terminology in order to clarify her strategies. To address a second problem in discussing Barrett Browning's rhymes, changes in pronunciation over time and between regions, I have consulted several British rhyming dictionaries current in the nineteenth century, whose prefaces I discuss below.

DISTINCTIONS BETWEEN FORMS OF THE SONNET usually involve a rhyme scheme. Although the poems in *Sonnets from the Portuguese* recall the Petrarchan tradition, they also recall the heroic/political sonnet, introduced into English by Milton and revived by Wordsworth, which modified the Italian model with features like enjambment of octave and sestet, irregular pauses, and lofty diction.[2] Wordsworth described the form in Milton's sonnets as "manly and dignified" because unified in thought and purpose (Wordsworth 379); his revival of the form can be read as a critique of the feminine sonnets of sensibility which had turned overly sentimental since coming into vogue at the end of the eighteenth century (see Curran 39–41 and Wagner 13, 27). Elizabeth Barrett expressed similar

dissatisfaction with the feminine tradition. She complained about the limited "*ladyhood*" in the art of both Jane Austen and Felicia Hemans (*Brownings' Correspondence* 7: 214), and she disapproved of the "ordinary impotencies and prettinesses of female poets" (*Letters* 2: 170). She used the unified Italian model for some of her devotional and political sonnets of the 1830s and 1840s, including two heroic sonnets celebrating George Sand's break with conventions of gender, especially the French author's seeming androgyny ("Thou large-brained woman and large-hearted man, / Self-called George Sand!" [1–2, "To George Sand: A Desire"]).[3] The form of her *Sonnets from the Portuguese* recalls both the masculine and feminine traditions by using the heroic sonnet to explore themes of sensibility.

This integration of traditions is evident in the opening poem of her *Sonnets*, which announces the theme of the sequence, that love is stronger than grieving and death. Like almost half of the sonnets in the sequence, this first sonnet creates a dramatic effect by using enjambment to set off a phrase at the beginning of the sestet. The octave describes a life of stasis and depression. As Glennis Stephenson points out, there is a "dangerous seductive attraction" to melancholy since it allows a life of inactivity without risks; Stephenson suggests that form and theme complement each other in the almost "hypnotic repetition" of the second line ("the sweet years, the dear and wished for years") and seventh line ("The sweet, sad years, the melancholy years") (76). The repeated, almost tedious alteration of *th* and *o* sounds in the opening line adds to this formal effect:

> I thought once how Theocritus had sung
> Of the sweet years, the dear and wished for years,
> Who each one in a gracious hand appears
> To bear a gift for mortals, old or young:
> And, as I mused it in his antique tongue,
> I saw, in gradual vision through my tears,
> The sweet, sad years, the melancholy years,
> Those of my own life, who by turns had flung
> A shadow across me.

The end-rhymes of the octave seem predictable and correct within the Petrarchan convention of *abbaabba*. Yet when the completed rhyme scheme of the octave signals a pause, reinforced by the startlingly prosaic word "flung," the syntax carries the sentence over into the next line, emphasizing the final phrase of the sentence, "A shadow across me." In the sestet, the static shadow becomes replaced by an uncanny, animated "mystic Shape":

> 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.'

The alternating near rhymes of the sestet modulate from "move" to "strove" to "Love," reflecting the gradual emotional and spiritual movement described by the sestet, opposing the stasis of the octave.

This sonnet's allusion to Homer's *Iliad*, an epic that begins with Athena pulling Achilles backward by the hair, further underscores the heroic mode. The gender dynamic of this allusion should not be overlooked. At the opening of the *Iliad* Achilles and Agamemnon are contending over who will get to keep a captive female in his tent — an odd and interesting allusion for the beginning of feminine love sonnets. In Barrett Browning's revision of this scene, the desiring female speaker assumes the position of epic hero. Pulled away from destructive, seductive thoughts of death, she engages with the emotional risks of love when the conditions seem to glorify her as much as the beloved; thus, as Dorothy Mermin points out, the speaker is both subject and object of love, revising without entirely reversing the Petrarchan tradition in which the woman is a silent object of admiration (144). This allusion to Homer's epic, as well as the heroic sonnet form, subtly suggests that there is something brave and heroic about this romantic engagement. Given the enormous popularity of sonnets at mid-century, Barrett Browning might have assumed that her readers would recognize the heroic/political structure, but Victorian reviewers tended to read the poems as emotional effusions — "life-throbs of sonnets," as one 1862 review put it (Conant 353). She might also have assumed her readers would be familiar enough with an Italian rhyme scheme to recognize her variations, but, until recently, readers have tended either to overlook any rhyming irregularities or to consider them faults.

RHYME, OF COURSE, HAS A HISTORY separate from the sonnet structure, with its own political implications. Scholars have historically debated the unknown origins of "correct" rhyming, with the main contenders being classical Greek and Roman languages, medieval Middle-Eastern languages, and European Gothic languages (including Saxon, Irish, Welsh, Scottish). The values attributed to these cultures, as well as to the classes that might use the language, get ascribed to rhyme: Milton, for example, defending the "heroic" blank verse of *Paradise Lost*, rejected end-rhyme as "the invention of a barbarous age" (presumably Gothic) rather than of the more valued "learned ancients"; absence of the "jingling sound of like endings" would only be considered a "defect" by "vulgar readers" (456–57). Part of his objection reflects Puritan distrust of anything that might appeal to the senses and be considered idolatrous, even ornamentation of language. His words also differentiate between educated and "vulgar" readers, a distinction that would be maintained in the nineteenth century, when literacy rose even further. In the nineteenth century these values also explicitly involved gender because ornamentation was considered sensual or effeminate, and the lack of ornamentation rational or masculine. However, despite Milton's authority, the term "heroic" came to name the rigidly rhymed, closed couplet that was developed with sophistication in the eighteenth century — the heroic couplet.

Barrett Browning inherited both traditions of "heroic" verse. A dissenting Protestant, she distrusted idolatry and praised Milton for being an "iconoclast" of "idol rhyme" (*Complete Works* 6: 288). Indeed idolatry is an explicit theme of Sonnet XXXVII:

> Pardon, oh, pardon, that my soul should make
> Of all that strong divineness which I know
> For thine and thee, an image only so
> Formed of the sand, and fit to shift and break. (1–4)

Smulders suggests that the near rhymes in the sestet of this sonnet ("counterfeit" [10], "commemorate" [12], and "temple-gate" [14]) "reflect the distortion attending on the effort to eternize love in art" ("Sincere Doubt" 21). The poet also frequently protested the idolatry of women and called for more realistic representation in art. She had composed some juvenile poems in imitation of Pope; one, "Essay on Woman," proposes to "[f]ound the proud path" on which a woman poet "stands the equal of her Master Man" (Browning "Fragment" 11). But by the 1840s she rejected these neoclassical imitations as a "girl's exercise" that illustrate mere "intelligence" in favor of the "old master-poets," the dramatists of the English Renaissance (*Brownings' Correspondence* 9: 81 and 7: 332). Part of the subversive impulse in her poetry resulted in a search for a more realistic feminine voice, an impulse encouraged by a Victorian aesthetic climate that celebrated imperfection, later evidenced by John Ruskin's discussion of Gothicism in *The Stones of Venice* of 1853 and Robert Browning's "Andrea del Sarto" of 1855.

In the 1840s she might have gotten some alternative rhymes from *Walker's Rhyming Dictionary*. The prefaces of nineteenth-century rhyming dictionaries reveal how poetics continued to be shaped by values of race, class, and gender. Before *Walker's* an early eighteenth-century rhyming dictionary by Edward Bysshe did not allow near rhymes and, in fact, classified in different categories of sound the words from the sestet of Sonnet I, "move," "strove," and "love" (20 and 31). John Walker had been an actor for a while with the Dublin Theatre before establishing his authority as an etymologist and teacher of elocution. *Walker's*, published in numerous editions since the late eighteenth century, included as an appendix an "Index" of "allowable" rhymes of different sounds, which put "move," "strove," and "love" in the same rhyming group (Walker 710).[4] In a "Preface to the Index," Walker argued that the "same masculine force that supports our poetry without the assistance of any rhyme at all, seems to exempt it from that servile attention to perfectly similar rhymes" (669); he continued by allowing rhyme between long and short sounds of the same vowel as well as some different vowels in a tonal range because "*i, e, a, o, u*, slide into each other by an easy gradation, each of which is sufficiently related to the preceding and succeeding sound" (670).

Walker's authority on rhyming was considerable, but his authority on near rhyme was relatively short-lived. In 1865 (four years after Barrett Browning's death) John Longmuir, the Victorian editor of the influential *Walker's*, included both the "Index" and its "Preface" but introduced the whole edition with the disclaimer that "allowable" rhymes are really "intolerable" (Walker xli).[5] Longmuir was a Scottish minister, known like Walker for his oratory, as well as an etymologist. He speculated that "assonants," like "stand"/"man," entered English from oral ballads in which the final consonants would not be heard; when literary ballads came into vogue, he thought, the near rhymes came with them and then spread to "poems of higher pretensions" where the imperfections would be more apparent when read silently (Walker xli-xlii). He also complained that Walker had derived many of his "allowable" rhymes from Irish mispronunciation of English and had illustrated too many of them with poetry by Thomas Parnell (Walker vi). In 1877 Tom Hood published his own dictionary of correct rhymes and protested that Walker's poetic allowances should be made by the poet and not the lexicographer (20).

As a result of these differences of opinion, the political implications of rhyme in the nineteenth century were somewhat complicated. Near rhyme, in particular, could reflect different ideological stances: it might be associated either with a privileged, "masculine,"

less ornamented voice or with the underprivileged, subversive forces of rising literacy that changed the shape of authoritative literature to include imitations of folk forms like ballads as well as a greater variety of regional and class dialects. With so many ideological currents, it is no wonder that Victorian reviewers were at a loss to recognize or to interpret Barrett Browning's rhyming experiments. In the *Sonnets*, along with the subdued theme of heroic engagement with life and her consistent interest in developing a realistic voice, near rhymes provided a strategy for developing more contours than the monotone sweetness expected of women poets.

The Victorian editor of Barrett Browning's letters, Frederic G. Kenyon, was probably correct when he surmised that her rhyming experiments began with an interest in disyllabic rhymes, which are difficult to form without some allowance for one of the syllables being slightly off in rhyme, and he suggested a source in her study of Italian literature (*Letters* 1: 182). Barrett Browning mentioned English Renaissance dramatists as an influence on her realist poetics. Moreover, she would have found some scattered experiments with near rhyme in her Romantic predecessors, especially Percy Shelley and John Keats (see Keach). But she found disyllabic rhymes, in particular, in English satirical poetry like Samuel Butler's *Hudibras* and Lord Byron's *Don Juan*. In fact, when later defending her rhymes she described her project in terms of extending the rhymes of comic verse to serious poetry (*Brownings' Correspondence* 9: 26 and 96).

In addition to Butler and Byron, a more immediate influence on Barrett Browning's rhymes was the father of the dictionary-compiler, Thomas Hood (1799–1845), who used multi-syllabic rhymes in his poetic satire. Rich in puns and word-play, Hood's work totters between reform poetry and nonsense verse to imply political absurdities. The opening stanza of "Faithless Nelly Gray: A Pathetic Ballad" (1826) is typical of his style:

> BEN BATTLE was a soldier bold,
>   And used to war's alarms:
> But a cannon-ball took off his legs,
>   So he laid down his arms! (1–4)

Hood also used mosaic rhyme ("absorb us"/ "[Choler]a Morbus") to combine anger and wit in his 1832 "Ode to Mr. Malthus," which protested the callous economic theory of overpopulation:

> Why should we let precautions so absorb us,
> Or trouble shipping with a quarantine —
> When if I understand the thing you mean,
> We ought to *import* the Cholera Morbus! (119–122)

Throughout the 1830s and in 1842 Hood edited and published his poetry in a *Comic Annual*, initiated as a parody of the sentimental annuals and gift books, which were an important outlet for editing and poetry by women. Elizabeth Barrett had published some poetic romance-narratives in the annual *Findens' Tableaux* when it was edited by her friend Mary Russell Mitford in the late 1830s. Yet she also admired Hood's skill in moving the conscience of readers with ironic wit. In 1842 she read the *Comic Annual* from cover

to cover, chuckling all the way, and wrote to an unimpressed Mitford that his "gaieties" also affected her as social "gravities" (*Brownings' Correspondence* 6: 26).

In August 1843, she published "The Cry of the Children" to protest factory working conditions, especially child labor, using a loose odic stanza form as Hood had done for several of his poems. Although the comic voice was not for her, she composed the poem with an intentional "roughness" (*Brownings' Correspondence* 7: 331) in the verse form, including monosyllabic near rhymes like "have"/"grave" (54, 56) as well as disyllabic near rhymes like "seeking"/"breaking" (53, 55). In December of the same year, Hood added his own voice to the protest with a serious poem, "The Song of the Shirt"; in May of 1844 his "The Bridge of Sighs," another poem pathetic rather than comic in tone, used disyllabic and dactylic rhymes in portraying a homeless woman who commits suicide. These experiments with reform poetry, in which Barrett Browning and Hood seem to have influenced each other, helped her in developing a poetic voice with rougher, more realistic contours than expected of a woman poet.[6] Then she took this voice beyond explicitly political poetry.

In "The Dead Pan" (1844) her speaker calls for a new realist poetics. Although the poem includes disyllabic rhymes like "sunken"/"drunken" (8, 10) and "slumber"/"number" (15, 17), some of her rhymes are not so neat. She defended one of the more notorious, "silence"/"islands" (2, 4), writing to Richard Hengist Horne that it was not as "objectionable" to her as "'*fellow' & 'prunella'* of Pope the infallible" or "'tendons' & 'attendence'" of Tennyson (*Brownings' Correspondence* 9: 26). Throughout "The Dead Pan" there are near rhymes like "altars"/"welters" (26, 27) or "iron"/"inspiring" (85, 87), even multi-assonances like "of the oak-wood"/"thunderstroke, would" (43, 45) or "Time enthralleth"/ "blindly crawleth" (120, 122).

Even though reviewers and readers were a bit disoriented, these experiments received encouragement from a particularly important source — Robert Browning. He had been shown a draft of "The Dead Pan" in 1843 by a mutual friend, John Kenyon. Without prompting, Browning remarked the rhymes in a poem that he called "*[m]ost* noble":

> And what famous versification! The grand rhymes *pair* in virtue of their essential characteristics only, and the *accidents* (of a mute or a liquid) go for nothing: just as tree matches with tree in a great avenue, elm-bole with elm-bole, let the boughs lie how they may . . . (*Brownings' Correspondence* 7: 137).

This note was Barrett Browning's first contact with Browning, albeit an indirect one. She asked to keep the note, even though it was not addressed to her, explaining that she was pleased by "the beauty of the figure used to illustrate my *rhymatology*" (*Brownings' Correspondence* 9: 26). Throughout her letters in this period, she insisted (protesting the image of the trifling "poetess") that she "*worked* at poetry . . . [a]s the physician & lawyer work at their several professions"; that she wanted to make her poetry more "vigorous"; and that her formal experiments were risky but "speculative for freedom's sake" (*Brownings' Correspondence* 9: 25 and 96–97).

WHEN BARRETT BROWNING COMPOSED THE *SONNETS*, she extended rhyming experiments to amatory poetry. The *Sonnets* have a few assonances and even mosaic rhymes, like the sestet of Sonnet IV ("broken in"/"mandolin"/"voice within" [9, 11, and 13]) and

the octave of Sonnet XXI ("repeated"/"treat it" [2, 3]). But she also used the expectations of the Petrarchan rhyme-scheme to craft variations as in the sestet of Sonnet X:

> There's nothing low
> In love, when love the lowest: meanest creatures
> Who love God, God accepts while loving so.
> And what *I feel*, across the inferior features
> Of what I *am*, doth flash itself, and show
> How that great work of Love enhances Nature's.

The content of this sestet illustrates Mermin's point that the speaker makes herself both subject and object of love; the rhymes allow Barrett Browning to represent a multi-dimensional feminine speaking-subject. The triple assonant-rhymes "nothing low" and "loving so" suddenly stop with "and show." The sound expectations created by alternating rhymes "creatures" and "features" are undercut by "Nature's." The effect is like an ironic twist at the end of the poem that adds wit to the sentimental voice.

Several sonnets include vowel shifts in monosyllabic rhymes, like "burn"/"scorn" (Sonnet V, 6, 7), which might have been suggested by Walker's discussion of allowable rhymes in a tonal range. In the twentieth century, Louis Untermeyer analyzes these kinds of rhymes in terms of music, using the phrase "suspended rhyme" because the expected vowel sound "hangs above" the signified vowel sound; the effect, he continues, "is that of a slight but unmistakable tension, a psychological suspense" (461). Tonal dissonance in the *Sonnets* lends a tension to the music of the poems that parallels the erotic tension in the developing courtship/friendship. Taking strategies like these further, the octave of Sonnet XXXII, specifically with the motif of music, varies long and short *o* sounds, partly to reveal the sense of being out of tune that the poem describes:

> The first time that the sun rose on thine oath
> To love me, I looked forward to the moon
> To slacken all those bonds which seemed too soon
> And quickly tied to make a lasting troth.
> Quick-loving hearts, I thought, may quickly loathe;
> And, looking on myself, I seemed not one
> For such man's love! — more like an out of tune
> Worn viol, a good singer would be wroth
> To spoil his song with, and which, snatched in haste,
> Is laid down at the first ill-sounding note.

The end-rhymes of the octave, which extends in syntax for two lines into the sestet, alternate the near assonance (*o*) and near consonance (*th*) of "oath," "troth," "loathe," and "wroth." Even Walker did not "allow" a rhyme between what he called the "sharp" and "flat" *th* of "oath" and "loathe" (707 and 710). Then the sonnet's b-rhymes interrupt Petrarchan expectations by "moon," "too soon," "not one," and "out of tune." The sestet, in contrast, modulates to correct rhymes to accord with its theme of music played from the "master-hands":

> . . . and which, snatched in haste,
> Is laid down at the first ill-sounding note.
> I did not wrong myself so, but I placed
> A wrong on *thee*. For perfect strains may float
> 'Neath master-hands, from instruments defaced, —
> And great souls, at one stroke, may do and doat.

A mild tension also occurs in the rhymes of Sonnet XII which describes a "ruby large" (3) blush that rises "from breast to brow" (2); the octave rhymes "boast"/"cost"/"uttermost"/"crossed" (1, 4, 5, and 8). Similarly, the sestet of Sonnet XXXVIII ("First time he kissed me") has alternating rhymes "crown"/"down"/"own" (10, 12, and 14). These tonal tensions complement particular erotic themes.

In addition, tonal tensions can lend a sense of uncanniness to language. Julia Kristeva has pointed out that sound patterns can release traces of the psychologically unstructured "semiotic *chora*" in the structures of language (34); Henri Meschonnic has also proposed that formal elements like rhythm, rhyme, and the rhythms created by rhyming patterns can imbue poetic language with personal vitality. Tonal dissonances in the *Sonnets* complement the "mystic Shape," the angels, and the visions that appear in the sequence. For example, the sestet of Sonnet XXVI ("I lived with visions for my company") has alternating, suspended rhymes "fronts"/"fonts"/"wants" to describe the speaker's shadowy visions:

> Their shining fronts,
> Their songs, their splendours, (better, yet the same,
> As river-water hallowed into fonts)
> Met in thee, and from out thee overcame
> My soul with satisfaction of all wants —
> Because God's gifts put man's best dreams to shame.

Throughout the sequence, experiments like these develop tonal contours to parallel the wit, doubt, active desire, and spiritual growth in the themes. In a broader sense they reinforce the subversive project of representing a realistic feminine voice.

EVEN SO, THE RHYMING STRATEGIES in *Sonnets from the Portuguese* developed beyond the roughness of Barrett Browning's earlier reform poetry. The modulation of "move"/ "strove"/"Love" supplies a music that corresponds to the emotional movement and growth described in Sonnet I. The alternating *o* and *th* sounds of "oath"/"troth"/"loathe"/"wroth" begin to sound like someone sawing at the "[w]orn viol" named in Sonnet XXXII. In her *Sonnets* Barrett Browning began to develop a new music, one that looks forward to twentieth-century theories that identify an elite poetic language or poetic function of language, and thus a strategy at ideological cross-purposes with the more subversive aspect of her disruptive poetics. Although Barrett Browning claimed to be democratically "speculative for freedom's sake," she also complained in 1844 that poetry was being "desecrated among the educated classes" by a "plague of . . . bad rhymers" and that she had heard of someone advocating "Poetry for the Million" by reducing art to "an English grammar & a rhyming dictionary & some instruction about counting on the fingers" (*Brownings' Corre-*

spondence 8: 160). In the 1850s, when Robert was accused of obscurity, she answered that the "mass of readers" tend to be "careless readers" (*Letters* 2: 200). Like other nineteenth-century poets she found the issue of rhyme complicated by several ideological currents involved with rising literacy. Poets sought a more democratic poetry (common persons, common feelings); at the same time, they sought to distinguish poetry from the many modes of language (i.e., advertising, journalism) now available to masses of readers. The usual response to this dilemma was to discount the value of mere versifiers (of rhythm and rhyme) in favor of real poets (of vision). Barrett Browning often maintained this distinction herself. Yet because of her interest in craft, she also responded by developing a more cognitively complex form than popular poetry.

Her poetry includes "vigorous" rhymes, defined and identified in Pope's poetry by William K. Wimsatt, in which the words differ conceptually (by grammatical function or cultural association) even though they sound alike. Although Barrett Browning rejected neoclassical couplets for her own poetry, she conceded that "there is, indeed, something charming even to an enemy's ear" in Pope's "exquisite balancing of sounds and phrases" and his "catching, in the rebound, of emphasis upon rhyme and rhyme" (*Complete Works* 6: 293; and see Hoag). She also read political implications into his rhyming strategies:

> To be correct, therefore, to be great through correctness, was the end of his ambition, an inspiration scarcely more calculated for the production of noble poems than the philosophy of utilitarianism is for that of lofty virtues (*Complete Works* 6: 291).

Even though Barrett Browning moved away from neoclassicism for aesthetic and political reasons, she took with her some lessons in a poetics of cognitive complexity, and she took these strategies further by adding near rhymes.

The octave of Sonnet VII, for example, explains that the speaker's "world is changed" (1) with the coming of the beloved so that she experiences "the whole / Of life in a new rhythm" (6–7). The sentence of the sestet begins at line 7, before the expected pause, and the rhyme scheme supports the sense of disorientation. The octave pattern (*abbaabba)* ends by linking the b-rhymes "whole"/"dole" (6, 7) before the final a-rhyme "drink" (8). But "dole" and "drink" are a partial-couplet by initial alliteration. Then the end-rhymes of the sestet link "anear" with "away" (9, 10) by initial assonance, "anear"/"here" (9, 11) by alternating rhyme, and "away"/"yesterday" (10, 12) by alternating rhyme:

> The face of all the world is changed, I think,
> Since first I heard the footsteps of thy soul
> Move still, oh, still, beside me, as they stole
> Betwixt me and the dreadful outer brink
> Of obvious death, where I, who thought to sink,
> Was caught up into love, and taught the whole
> Of life in a new rhythm. The cup of dole
> God gave for baptism, I am fain to drink,
> And praise its sweetness, Sweet, with thee anear.
> The names of country, heaven, are changed away
> For where thou art or shalt be, there or here;
> And this . . this lute and song . . loved yesterday,

> (The singing angels know) are only dear,
> Because thy name moves right in what they say.

Are the lines "dole"/"drink" (7, 8) and "anear"/"away" (9,10) couplets? Are they part of a larger Petrarchan pattern? The answer to both questions, of course, is partially yes. The unstable rhyming patterns, along with shifting concepts of time and place ("anear," "away," "here," "yesterday" [9, 10, 11, and 12]), create a pleasant confusion in the sonnet form that complements the confusion described in the speaker's identity. This sestet also illustrates a variation of linked rhyme, when part of a word rhymes with the next line ("anear" and "away" [9, 10]) and part with the line after the next ("anear"/"here" [9, 11]).

Building on this strategy, Barrett Browning pushed rhyming technique even further by exploiting the difference between sound and sight rhyme, adding to what Richard Bradford has called the "visual texture" of a poem read silently from a page in an age of increasing literacy (43–45). In Sonnet XVI, for example, the octave describes the beloved as a conquering king. The sestet rhymes "earth" (10) and "worth" (14) in sound but "forth" (12) and "worth" (14) in sight rhyme only:

> And as a vanquished soldier yields his sword
> To one who lifts him from the bloody earth, —
> Even so, Belovèd, I at last record,
> Here ends my strife. If *thou* invite me forth,
> I rise above abasement at the word.
> Make thy love larger to enlarge my worth.

The sestet ends with the partial-couplet "word" and "worth." As in Sonnet VII the unstable rhyming patterns as well as the play of sight and sound make the sestet more cognitively sophisticated — more "vigorous" — than if it had the predictable, correct rhymes of popular, sentimental poetry.

In the nineteenth century, rhyme became politically significant in other ways too. In a revolutionary climate, the harmonies of rhyme might clothe new ideas with a music that makes them seem acceptable because pleasing and easily repeatable, whether or not the ideas are ethically sound. But there is even a subtler, epistemological issue at work in rhymes. A sound equivalence of rhyme might encourage a reader, even if subliminally, to seek a metaphorical relationship between two words. If "cat" is rhymed with "aristocrat," a reader might begin to interpret feline behavior as snobbish, depending on one's attitude to aristocrats, and might begin to interpret aristocratic behavior as catlike. These associations influence social action. Although poetic language can clarify and liberate understanding, it can also distort and prejudice. Postmodern theorists tend to celebrate the liberating function: Kristeva points out that a sound group can enhance the polysemantic potential of language (34); for Ricoeur rhyme allows one word to be "charmed" by another semantically, to suggest new shades of meaning on a non-rational level as a charm or a spell would (66). In a poem read silently the reader's eye can move up and down the space of the page, prompted toward certain word-pairings because of end-rhyme. For reasons like these — new potentials for meaning in the grammar of the page – Bradford, in fact, suggests that nineteenth-century writers might find rhyme to be a "threat" (147), so that such strategies as blank verse and enjambment, widely used in nineteenth-century

poetry, as well as early experiments with near rhyme could partly serve to "neutralize" (149) the possible threat of a seemingly random proliferation of meaning that is unwarranted and uncontrolled by the context of the poem.

Bradford's ideas provide a helpful context for interpreting the rhyming experiments in Barrett Browning's poetry, given her politics. There is a parallel between the anxieties about rhyme that he identifies and the anxieties of the educated classes — from which most writers came — about the chaos of revolution rather than controlled liberal reform. Barrett Browning's navigation between the absolutists and "blood colours of Socialistic views" (*Letters* 1: 460; see also 428) corresponds with the contending ideological functions of her rhyming strategy. The near rhymes disrupt the authority of traditional harmonies and extend the range of the feminine poetic voice with the kind of psychological and vital nuances that Kristeva and Meschonnic describe. Yet the tonal dissonances curb the polysemantic potential of rhyming equivalences by discouraging any association between easily rhymed words. The shifting distortions of language also draw attention to its imperfection as a medium of meaning, a function that has parallels with Barrett Browning's later political poems like *Aurora Leigh* and *Casa Guidi Windows* that foreground the artist's historically contingent subjectivity even though both poems are written in blank verse.

In light of these considerations, it is perhaps telling that only one poem, in fact only one line, of the *Sonnets* has been remembered for so long. Most of the poems are not pleasing and memorable in the popular sense. Sonnet XLIII ("How do I love thee?") seems the least experimental in style. The phrase "I love thee" that begins six lines to "count the ways" of love makes the poem a list that is easy enough to read, with only one variation, a seventh "I love thee" in the middle of line 12. The anaphora of lines 7–9 also unifies the poem even though there is a traditional syntactical period at the end of the octave.

> How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.
> I love thee to the depth and breadth and height
> My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight
> For the ends of Being and ideal Grace.
> I love thee to the level of everyday's
> Most quiet need, by sun and candlelight.
> I love thee freely, as men strive for Right;
> I love thee purely, as they turn from Praise.
> I love thee with the passion put to use
> In my old griefs, and with my childhood's faith.
> I love thee with a love I seemed to lose
> With my lost saints, — I love thee with the breath,
> Smiles, tears, of all my life! — and, if God choose,
> I shall but love thee better after death.

Such emotional idealism hardly seems political. The language of "depth and breadth and height" comes from Ephesians 3: 17–19 (see Phillipson). Yet in another context, that of the political sonnets and Victorian social reform poetry where Barrett Browning began to find a satisfactory poetic voice, this sonnet is almost a parody of utilitarian discourse and its attempt to count and measure human happiness. The elements of human happiness —

"love," "Being," "Grace" — cannot really be measured in terms of dimensions like "depth and breadth and height" (2) or against a "level" (5). In short, the tone of the poem ironically includes both emotional idealism and subdued social satire.

When Robert Browning first corresponded directly with Elizabeth Barrett, he complimented the "fresh strange music" of her poetry (*Brownings' Correspondence* 10: 17). In the love sonnets that he inspired, the strange, disruptive rhymes also became a music to complement emotional and spiritual themes. The near rhymes of the most well-known sonnet illustrate the ideological cross-purposes that I have been tracing. The phrases "to use"/"to lose" (9, 11) parallel each other and would rhyme if they were both infinitives, but since "put to use" in context is a noun phrase, the pair results in a near rhyme. In the subversive sense, this near rhyme adds wit to the passion of the feminine voice; it also indicates what Smulders describes as the "distortion" that language makes of human experience. In the formal sense, play of sight, sound, and grammatical function makes the rhymes "vigorous." The cross-purposes are shown also in the rhyme patterns of the sonnet, noticeable if the reader's eye moves up and down the page: even though near rhymes disrupt expected harmonies, they are carefully chosen to foreground "Grace" and "faith" as the odd rhymes in the octave ("ways"/"Grace"/"everyday's"/"Praise" [1, 4, 5, and 8]) and the sestet ("faith"/"breath"/"death" [10, 12, and 14]), putting a subtle emphasis on these concepts.

Although Barrett Browning skillfully advanced rhyming technique, she was remembered for a long time as careless with craft. Her influence on those poets who are remembered for skill is usually discussed without reference to *Sonnets from the Portuguese*. For example, in an impressive study of Emily Dickinson's rhymes, Judy Jo Small cites "The Cry of the Children" and "The Dead Pan," concluding that Barrett Browning used disyllabic near rhymes whereas Dickinson experimented more with suspended rhymes (40–41).[7] In her *Sonnets*, however, Barrett Browning used several monosyllabic suspended rhymes like "live"/"grieve" (Sonnet IX 5, 8), "heart"/"girt" (Sonnet XI 4, 5) and "worn"/"turn" (Sonnet XXV 4, 5). A similar misunderstanding appears in discussions of Barrett Browning's influence on Wilfred Owen. Sven Bäckman cites the experiments in *Poems* (1844) as an influence but concludes that, unlike Owen, Barrett Browning seemed to be trying to extend the range of acceptable rhyme rather than attempting "to achieve new sound effects involving disharmony or some kind of muted music" (41). In a refutation of Bäckman's argument, Dominic Hibberd maintains that Owen's innovation was the extended use of pararhyme ("laugh"/"life"/"leaf") throughout a poem, and he contends that Owen's direct connection with Barrett Browning's poetry was with her *Sonnets from the Portuguese* but that "Mrs. Browning's sonnets, and all of Owen's, are written in conventional rhyme" (208).[8]

Assessments like these should be modified by acknowledging Barrett Browning's experiments in her *Sonnets*. Bäckman and Hibberd are each partly right. Barrett Browning began extending acceptable rhymes in her reform poetry, perhaps following John Walker. In her *Sonnets*, however, near rhyme became a formal strategy for a new music of literary complexity. Although Barrett Browning is not a direct source for Owen's pararhymes, the near rhymes of her *Sonnets* were a likely inspiration for Dickinson, Owen, and other poets who recognized her technical skill. Yet even more important than her influence on specific strategies or poets, or an increasing license with verse, Barrett Browning broadened the ideological scope of rhyme, especially in *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, so that her influence continues to be found in those poets who use near rhymes

in serious poetry as a subversive strategy, an elitist strategy, or, like Barrett Browning, paradoxically both.

New Orleans

NOTES

1. I want to acknowledge the valuable source, Donaldson, that I used for locating and identifying authors of reviews. My inclusion of a reviewer's name in brackets, like [Massey], indicates an unsigned review for which Donaldson's research provides a name.
2. See Prince 14–33 and 89–107. Prince traces the Miltonic political sonnet back to the sixteenth-century Italian poet Della Casa, who developed a "heroic style" — irregular pauses, enjambment of octave and sestet — in his love sonnets, as well as Tasso, who praised Della Casa and developed his own series, *Heroic Sonnets*. Studies of nineteenth-century sonnets report that by mid-century the heroic model tended to be used for devotional and political sonnets; amatory sonnets tended to use the English structure (three quatrains of alternating rhyme and a couplet) or the Petrarchan structure (maintaining the syntactical break between octave and sestet). See Sanderlin 247–48 (although on 250–52, he remarks that Barrett Browning's *Sonnets* were a distinctive shift away from the Miltonic/Wordsworthian sonnet — a conclusion with which I disagree) and Going 11–18.
3. Other than the *Sonnets*, for which I have used the *Variorum Edition* (ed. Dow), all poetry by Barrett Browning comes from the *Complete Works* (ed. Porter and Clark).
4. John Walker (1732–1807) began publishing a dictionary with a rhyming component in 1775; the third edition became a separate rhyming dictionary in 1819 (see Cooper). Although the title of the published work is *A Rhyming Dictionary*, it was commonly referred to as *Walker's Rhyming Dictionary* in the nineteenth century and, greatly reorganized since modernism, is still in print today in Britain.
5. Longmuir published a revised and enlarged edition of *Walker's* with his own "Editor's Preface" in 1865, which went through several printings and publishers, several before he died in 1883 (see Hadden). Some of Longmuir's other speculations about the origins of alliteration were questioned immediately in an otherwise favorable review in *The Spectator* (see "Review of *A Rhyming Dictionary*"). A comparison of the essays of Walker, Longmuir, and the reviewer indicates how much theory of rhyming was contested and value-laden.
6. Hood scholars note a shift in tone from comic to pathetic in his reform poetry near the end of 1843, a change attributed to his declining health and finances (Jeffrey 126–28 and Clubbe 145–48). He would die of consumption in 1845. But "The Song of the Shirt" also appeared four months after "The Cry of the Children," and it has some strategic affinity with Barrett Browning's poem in that both attempt to give a voice ("Cry" and "Song") to the oppressed. I suspect mutual poetic influence.
7. Small uses the term "consonant rhyme" for what I have been calling "suspended rhyme" (see 14).
8. Hibberd emphasizes the point with italics that Owen's innovation was "*to use pararhyme at the ends of lines throughout a poem*" (208–09).

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