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Performing Sincerity in

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Abstract

Literary scholars question if Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese* should be read as a biographical map of the Browning's courtship, or as more recent scholarship suggests, as a literary performance. While biographical references can be traced throughout the sequence, scholars fail to notice the ways in which Barrett Browning highlight the artificial nature of the sonnets, reminding readers that the feelings expressed within the sequence depend on her skill and power as a poet. I suggest that over the course of the sequence, she increasingly incorporates the highly intimate, personal, spontaneous language of the love letter into her sonnets in order to achieve the illusion of absolute sincerity, an illusion that is so successful, subsequent readers interpreted the sequence as pure biography. She refers to two kinds of love letters in the sonnets and calls attention to the parts of the love letter that contrast and parallel with her sonnets. By comparing the poetry and love letters, Barrett Browning tells the readers she is about to put on a performance, and in the penultimate sonnet she *does* put on a performance, no longer self-reflexively commenting. She controls the degree of sincerity intended in the sonnets to show her skill at creating sincere poetry, but this often becomes overlooked by the critic's stories attached to the publication, which disrupt the intended author/speaker relationship and cause the sequence to lose the potency that should exemplify Barrett Browning's careful construction of sonnets.

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Performing Sincerity in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese*

Since the publication of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese* in 1850, readers have been preoccupied with the personal nature of the sonnet sequence's relationship to Barrett Browning's private life, particularly her marriage to Robert Browning. When studied alongside the love letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Robert Browning, noticeable and undeniable connections appear between *Sonnets from the Portuguese* and Barrett Browning's personal history. Is the sequence a veiled history of the Browning's courtship? And, as Amy Billone asks, "Do the sonnets ask us to read them side by side with biographical secrets that they expect us to know?" (68). Almost all readers agree that Barrett Browning's history is relevant to her sonnet sequence, yet, as more than one literary scholar has observed, spotlighting the biographical context for the work risks obscuring its thematic and formal complexity. Natalie Houston, for instance, argues that *Sonnets* is not just an account of Barrett Browning's life in sonnet form but an important negotiation with the form's ability to represent real life love. Barrett Browning "repeatedly demonstrat[es] that authenticity in a sonnet sequence is always constructed" (100), she remarks, noting that Barrett Browning revises the courtly love tradition to represent a more "modern" Victorian courtship, easily identified by its conversational intimacy and verisimilitude and seeming so real that later readers often took it as fact.

Although I agree with Houston's claim that Barrett Browning works to update the sonnet sequence so that it represents the contemporary nineteenth-century courtship with authenticity, at the same time I would also argue that she and other literary scholars often fail to notice the many ways in which Barrett Browning highlights the artificial nature of her sonnets. She reminds the readers that the feelings expressed within the love sequence are dependent on her skill and power as a poet.

In this essay, I explore the many references to writing contained within *Sonnets from the Portuguese* to suggest that Barrett Browning deliberately calls attention to the realistic moments within the sonnets even as she creates such moments using her real life relationship as an opportunity to complicate and explore the limits of the sonnet sequence for the mid-nineteenth century "poetess." The sequence masterfully conceals and reveals as Barrett Browning self-reflexively builds an overlapping public and private world. Although *Sonnets* strongly correlates with her love letters, she uses her sonnet sequence to highlight the ways in which her poetry actually differs from her love letters. She repeatedly brings up the genre of the love letter only to contrast that genre implicitly with the literary work she does as a poet, drawing a contrast between the private communication that occurs between lovers and the sonnets she writes as a professional poet to remind her readers that this sequence is a literary performance, not a spontaneous outburst of sentiment without aesthetic planning or merit. She repeatedly raises the image of letters within the sequence in order to build to the climax of the famous penultimate sonnet ("How do I love thee?"), when she drops all mention of the letters and simply performs sincerity. I suggest that over the course of the sequence, she increasingly incorporates the highly intimate, personal, spontaneous language of the love letter into

her sonnets in order to achieve the illusion of absolute sincerity, an illusion which is so successful that subsequent readers interpreted the sequence as pure biography.

Victorians readers valued sincerity, especially in poetry about romantic love. This posed a problem for the female writer, who was often credited with the ability to write her feelings spontaneously but at the same time condemned for writing "too sentimental [and] too conventionally feminine" (Prins 174). Women writers were expected to be sincere, in other words, but reviewers often used that sincerity to criticize their work, classifying it as less creative and sentimental. The term sincerity became a pejorative term since it meant both less accomplished (only repeating personal feelings instead of crafting them) and embarrassingly feminine (because of the apparent gush of emotions). Billone proposes that in response, women poets "needed to mask what they were articulating" to secure their place as poets (6). The real appeal of sincerity in verse for Victorian women might actually have opposed what the Victorian public valued, and instead was used as a way to disguise a discussion of public events considered improper for women. For example, Mary Moore notes how traditional tools, such as Petrarchan motifs, used to mask "subversive ideas," unbeknownst to the public, who read from a Victorian context and interpreted the outdated themes as only a sincere proclamation of love (11). Furthermore, some women poets knowingly exploited the idea of sincerity, using it to mask their political ideas and concerns.

Only in the 1980s did feminist scholars begin to wonder if the sincere feelings expressed in *Sonnets from the Portuguese* were part of a complex literary performance. When Barrett Browning performs sincerity, she conveys what feels like truth; however, performance closely associates with artistic expression, often as in a dramatization and

falsified reality. Yet, the element of performance makes the Brownings' real story of romance turn into verse; otherwise, the love letters would suffice as a biographic record of their courtship. Barrett Browning's ambitions as a poet clearly materialize as she successfully incorporates her real life relationship with Browning into the sonnet sequence. She aspired from an early age to become a great poet—the female Homer—but, as Dorothy Mermin observes, frequent sicknesses often kept her secluded from others, and writing letters became a replacement for life (125). If she could not experience life, she would perform it within her writing. These letters, argues Mermin, ultimately become the training ground for her romantic sonnets: "Letters like lyrics," she observes, "artfully enact sincerity, and rare lapses from candor can be detected only by juxtaposing correspondences that were not meant to be read by the same person" (125). Thus, even Barrett Browning's practiced, typical writing style, shows an element of performance; her letters are not merely outbursts of emotions but real and reflective thinking (124). That said, as I will momentarily show, Barrett Browning draws a deliberate contrast between the letters and the sonnets, showing that the sonnets are true works of art, not individual moments of personal and private expression.

The challenge in performing sincerity was doing so within the confined structure of the sonnet, whose restrictive form allows emotion and tradition to exist simultaneously. The rules of the sonnet cannot be spontaneously fashioned, and even the form advocates truthfulness, as it has done throughout its long existence which dates back to 1230 or 1240, as first written by Giacamo de Lentino (Fuller 1). Victorians turned to the sonnet for order and direction in a time when cultural belief systems seemed to be drastically shifting (Phelan 4), and many Victorian poets explored whether or not the

sonnet could be adapted to modern life. Like George Meredith, Christina Rossetti, and others, Barrett Browning takes up the sonnet to probe a traditional poetic form in a modern setting, and *Sonnets from the Portuguese* asks whether or not the traditional amatory form can accommodate the spontaneous, colloquial, and intimate language of a contemporary courtship between mature adults. I suggest that *Sonnets from the Portuguese* ultimately demonstrates that neither the amatory sonnet tradition nor the love letter alone will achieve Barrett Browning's vision of modern love for the contemporary poetess. She spotlights the limitations of both traditions through self-reflexive references to the love letter, a genre that clearly inspires *Sonnets from the Portuguese* but—she suggests—fails to yield poetry all on its own, a failure that must occur in order for Barrett Browning to reaffirm her skill as a poet. Thus, she writes forty-four sonnets that on one hand adapt her real love letters to poetry and, on the other hand, circumvent the comforting reassurances a lover may offer in a letter, eliminating the conversation that travels between both the letter writers, and replaces it with only her voice. This move to use a single voice while mimicking the language of the love letter self-consciously reminds the readers that the sequence is not a love letter, but poetry.

Throughout *Sonnets,* Barrett Browning refers to two kinds of love letters: those sent to her by her lover and those she sends to him. The first kind of letter—those sent to her from her lover—appears in sonnets XXIII and XXVIII, two sonnets that are midway through the sequence and therefore portray a speaker uncertain of her self-worth. Sonnet XXIII opens with a description of the speaker reading a letter she received from her love. She wonders in amazement at his claim that her loss would destroy his ability to take pleasure in the world—even the sun would shine "more coldly" if she died, he says in

line 2. Her absence from the world, he says, would affect him as deeply as she imagines it would her in the reverse situation. She states, “I marveled, my Belovëd, when I read / Thy thought so in the letter” (lines 5-6). She continues to explain that her thoughts turn to the desire to spend time with her love, replacing her desire for death. Her health also becomes a great concern, running the length of the sequence, and reaches outwardly towards the poet who also suffered weakened states that left her hands trembling. To include such a detail seems to be a genuine recount of real life and their real letters. However, unlike the love letters, the sonnet, which begins by mentioning the letters, turn inward and supplants the other letter writer with her own voice. She writes of her own reaction, representing her own feelings, and even shading into invocation to make demands on the lover: “love me Love! look on me—breathe on me!” (line 10). By redirecting the letter, she points the readers to her poetry and creates a specific stance for the poet. The questions she asks to her lover go unanswered by him. She instead decides to believe in his expression of love and answers her own questions so that by the sestet, she rejects her thoughts of death to prevent his grief over losing her.

Both Barrett Browning’s mention of the letters and her obvious reference to her illness, directs the reader to believe this sonnet represents a biographical account of the Browning’s courtship. However, the absence of the lover’s response, as well as the summation of this dilemma in fourteen brief lines and the sonnet form itself, reminds the readers that this is a performance ultimately draws a distinction between the sonnets and the love letters that really do exist. The trembling hands in Barrett Browning’s real life also direct attention to the Petrarchan male sonnet form she uses to revise the Victorian courtly love tradition into a modern form of love that better represents a woman’s love.

Images that seem typically feminine were also common in Petrarch's sonnets with a male speaker. As Marianne Van Remoortel points out, "each Petrarchan metaphor used by the female speaker to postulate her authority corresponds with an aspect of Victorian women's actual living conditions" ("(Re)gendering" 260). For example, sickness is frequently used to emphasize the feverish conditions of the lover and usually masculine speaker of a sonnet. Barrett Browning's speaker with weakened or trembling limbs (XI and XXIII) and pale cheeks (XI) models these traditional metaphors and offers an alternative reading to the biographical interpretation (255). In addition, the nineteenth-century culture encouraged middle-class women to remain in a state of physical weakness; thus writing about her illness can be interpreted as attractiveness (259). Barrett Browning's use of Petrarchan conventions to describe her illness moves the interpretation of the speaker's trembling hands away from the biographical, inviting readers to recognize her skill and authority as a poet capable of adapting poetic tradition to her own purposes. By rewriting her own biography with Petrarch, Barrett Browning creates a moment of sincerity that feels authentic yet is clearly planned and rooted in the sonnet's traditions.

The mix of the masculine sonnet tradition and modern Victorian life addressed by the female poet often forces a new way to understand these poems, but any way of reading (biographical, historical or cultural), layers images that reshape the traditional female and male lovers. The sincerity in the sonnet allows Barrett Browning to change the typically masculine sonnet and circumvent the ways a woman could fail to thrive as a serious lover and poet. Van Remoortel believes transferring the masculine Petrarchan themes to a Victorian setting causes the literal and metaphorical meanings to collide, with

the interpretation of illness, which changes over time (*Lives,* 92). The female voice takes on the speech of the traditional male suitor as well as the object of desire and often leads readers to claim the poems read as obtrusively masculine (Mermin 131). However, invoking the Petrarchan love sonnet and dismissing Death from the beginning of the sequence allows her to avoid objectification and explore the depth of her multifaceted woman's soul. The line "Not Death, but Love" (line 1) in the very first sonnet removes the temptation to place the speaker in the traditionally feminized and romanticized fallen woman role. The revision of the sonnet represents the construction and, therefore, artifice of the sonnets, which becomes increasingly clear as the sequence progresses.

In sonnet XXVIII, Barrett Browning similarly supplants the beloved's words from the love letter like she does in sonnet XXIII, where the male lover's voice is only heard through the speaker and allows her to remain the central focus of the sonnet. The words of both heard through one person emphasize a way in which these sonnets do not mimic the Browning's love letters that would allow two people their own voice. Instead, his words are not direct quotes, as if from real love letters, but summarized in her voice:

XXVIII

My letters! all dead paper, mute and white!
And yet they seem alive and quivering
Against my tremulous hands which loose the string
And let them drop down on my knee to-night.
This said,—he wished to have me in his sight
Once, as a friend: this fixed a day in spring
To come and touch my hand . . . a simple thing,

Yet I wept for it!—this, . . . the paper's light . . .
Said, Dear I love thee; and I sank and quailed
As if God's future thundered on my past.
This said, I am thine—and so its ink has paled
With lying at my heart that beat too fast.
And this . . . O Love, thy words have ill availed
If, what this said, I dared repeat at last!

The speaker's reaction demonstrates a performance in sincerity. She reacts to the words of her lover physically and emotionally as if not in the middle of composing, but reacting in the moment; they would appear to be spontaneous, except that the form and construction of the sonnet suggests the opposite. Filled with exclamatory sentences, the sonnet fulfills that spontaneous language even more so than the preceding poem (XXIII), which directly references the words written by her lover. In other words, within the space of six sonnets, the movement of expressive language drastically shifts. It becomes more obvious that she remains affected by his words as she again summarizes what leaves her responding so passionately. She also changes the dialogue by directing her speech to someone other than just her love. She says, "This said, he wished to have me in his sight" (5). Is she speaking to herself? To a public audience perhaps? The dramatic reaction that again leaves her trembling and sunken down, offers a performance and reflects the same layering of images as in sonnet XXIII. This time however, her reaction does not represent weakness or desire, but distress, and contrastingly, near exultation. Barrett Browning's dramatic language in this sonnet verges on Shakespearean, making it sound more like a performance than an authentic discovery of real love.

Dropping the letters and the paling ink symbolize the love letter fading from the dependency that the speaker uses to express her love as she adopts the more updated version of the sonnet. The letters that "seem alive and quivering" (line 2) interestingly do not encapsulate her ability to write the letter, but her lover's. She finds room to respond in verse, abandoning the letter form and adopting the sonnet instead. Her own letters are "dead paper, mute and white" (line 1). That is, they lack the vibrancy she seems to perceive from her lover's letters and consequently fail to reveal her voice. The whiteness of her letters, which at times correlates with purity and embraces a sexual interpretation, (especially when reading the trembling hands from the Petrarchan tradition) also intentionally emphasizes the blankness: a white letter is a piece of paper unstained by ink and is therefore, not a letter at all. She grasps the power of her lover's words in the letters, but for her own needs as a poet, they remain an inadequate form of expression.

Not only does sonnet XXVIII compare the genre of the love letter and the sonnet to differentiate between the two, but its form aptly shows how the sonnet can create the appearance of sincerity. For instance, the octave's uncertainty shifts as drastically as does a real person's mind can change, and the volta, which signifies a dramatic turn to repeat, resolves by accepting love and the speaker's worth to be loved. Traditionally, the sonnet's "first quatrain states a proposition and the second proves it . . . the first tercet confirms it and the second draws the conclusion" (Fuller 2). By this reasoning, the first quatrain of sonnet XXVIII reveals the speaker's distress. The second quatrain explains the source of dismay to be what her lover has mentioned in a letter. The first tercet then confirms this to be so as he has confessed his love to her. Finally, the second tercet achieves her acceptance. The formula rings true throughout the sequence, and its true

appeal is the ability to so quickly and intensely question, explain and resolve each miniature story in sixteen lines, while simultaneously working with the sequence's larger themes. The sestet's rapid conclusion often creates a sense of urgency, and indeed, Barrett Browning echoes this with grandiose images stating "God's future thundered on my past" (10) and the letters "lying at my heart that beat too fast" (12), which also produce an auditory reaction. The rhyme scheme, abba abba in the octave, and cdcdcd in the sestet, demonstrates one of the most popular forms of the sonnet. Unlike some of her other sonnets, the rhymes in XXVIII are true rhymes and, therefore, reflect a decisive and clean sound—not like a love letter, although in her usual fashion contains many breaks and pauses that interrupt the traditionally smooth auditory flow associated with amatory sonnets. The first line alone contains two exclamation marks, and the ellipses in lines seven and eight appear three times. "Readers expecting the gracefulness of a love sonnet will find these sonnets awkward," says Margaret Morlier (327). While somewhat awkward, these breaks and pauses are what make each sonnet appear genuine to readers, and the invoked realism causes them to override the sense of fiction that should keep the author and speaker apart, despite the obviously constructed sonnet form. Thus far in the sequence, Barrett Browning shows a construction of poetry through increasingly spontaneous language, dramatics, pauses and breaks, supplanting her lover's voice and layering images of author and speaker, all of which mimic sincerity.

Out of sight imagery runs throughout the sequences and constantly suggests the poet exists beneath the surface. This imagery compels readers to feel as if they may discover the real person behind the performance if only they keep reading. Indeed, the increasing hints at a performance in the references to writing do exactly what Billone

suggests, tempting readers to read the sonnets along with the letters. To invite readers to think that they can discover the "real" poet is a very risky literary venture. On one hand, if she succeeds, then she's achieved the ultimate modern sonnet sequence and triumph for the poetess, applying this older form to a modern courtship where the woman operates as both the speaking subject and object of desire. It is confirmation of her literary power. On the other hand, this sonnet might indicate where her literary authority could be undermined. Barrett Browning offers a way to read the sonnets as more than a love letter, asking the readers to look beyond a mere story of love and to see her as a poet skilled enough to make poems that mimic life. Barrett Browning did not intend for a model of joint poetry-biographical reading to actually happen, since at that point in time, her letters were still private. The Browning's son, Pen, did not release the love letters until 1899, forty-nine years after the sequence's publication, a clear indication Barrett Browning did not intend the sonnets to be dependent on biographical information to understand the sequence. For example, sonnet XXVIII refers to specific phrases, discussing what her love wrote in an incomplete context, thereby enticing the readers to try to glimpse more into a private correspondence to which she knows they do not have access. She refers to her lover's words, sometimes even summarizing them, but does not let her readers actually see them.

The layering images especially that of the author and speaker, increase the complexity of the sequence, but ultimately reminds us that the sonnets are not love letters. Still, the two forms overlap in many ways to maintain the sense of personal experience. For example, the layering of tradition and modernity or feminine and masculine allow for a richly complex textual understanding and room to maneuver

among multiple converging ideas. Angela Leighton, who discusses the overlap that can occur, says it best: “It might be preferable . . . to think not in terms of opposition between history and literature, context and text, literal and literary time, but in terms of various, playful syncopations among them. Rather than their difference, it is the stress point of their meeting which counts” (135). Taking a look at the way Petrarchan themes differ, and therefore, change the sonnets from their Victorian context, does not diminish either account but allows them to share a meeting point. Moore similarly focuses on the idea of liminal space; the area between two extremes or opposites allows for Barrett Browning’s sonnets to question the space between male and female. Moore addresses the use of the Petrarchan sonnet and how it permits women poets to express issues of gender. Barrett Browning’s first exclamation “My letters!” (1), in sonnet XXVIII, precede a contrasting description of dead yet alive. The two states make room for the liminal space, and similarly, a comparison of letters and sonnets and ultimately, a coexistence of the two forms as one. Therefore, Barrett Browning can perform sincerity by using two forms that border on different methods of truthful expression.

The sonnets that refer to her own letter writing are in sonnets XIII, XXXVIII and XLII. For example, sonnet XIII, again shows the uncertainty in herself as does XXIII, but compares and questions silence as another option of expression:

XIII

And wilt thou have me fashion into speech
The love I bear thee, finding words enough,
And hold the torch out, while the winds are rough,
Between our faces, to cast light on each?—

I drop it at thy feet. I cannot teach
My hand to hold my spirits so far off
From myself—me—that I should bring thee proof
In words, of love hid in me out of reach.
Nay, let the silence of my womanhood
Commend my woman-love to thy belief,—
Seeing that I stand unwon, however wooed,
And rend the garment of my life, in brief,
By a most dauntless, voiceless fortitude,
Lest one touch of this heart convey its grief.

Of course, the thematic silence in Victorian women's writing draws attention to the woman's station in society, and was recognized by Barrett Browning, who obviously disagreed with the cultural bias. The speaker oscillates between writing and silence, ultimately deciding on silence for the time. However, she continues to write the sonnets despite her inclination. The sonnets often portray a pushing and pulling movement, where the speaker changes her mind and expresses uncertainty in one sonnet and then absolute but opposite convictions in the next sonnet. This movement also explains another act of sincerity, as many real people find their beliefs changing throughout life. The sonnet form does this movement as well, and offers a dramatic turn, shifting the poem in a different direction. For example, in the first lines, she questions her lover, asking if words will be enough, which seems rhetorical since she answers for him to say they are indeed not enough. By the volta, she turns towards silence. However, as Billone reminds us, a poet cannot be silent (66). Sonnet XIII must manage the constant threats of silencing her

voice without entirely dismantling the performance, which requires her to continue to speak spontaneously.

Like in sonnet XXVIII, she refers to the frustrations that prevent her in writing to express her powerful emotions and even drops the torch, just as she dropped the letters, marking a dramatic performance and obscuring the illumination of the two faces. However, in this earlier poem, this time it is not his voice from the letters that she removes to remain in control, but her own voice. Twice she mentions this to be the case when she remarks, "let the silence of my womanhood / Commend my woman-love" (9-10) and the "voiceless fortitude" (13). Billone argues that her incapability to write suitably portrays how words cannot justly express thoughts. The evidence she cites from Sharon Smulders illustrates this through the poem's imperfect end-rhymes, such as "off" and "proof" on lines 6 and 7 (66). Thus, the speaker questions if words will fail her, although as the sequence continues, Barrett Browning's meta-commentary on her own writing shows that they do not fail her at all and eventually aid the illusion of sincerity. The near-rhymes reflect the language of the love letter, written in prose, not verse. The sonnet's imperfect attributes appear conversational, even as it remains confined within a defined structure. The criticism of this sonnet suggests the speaker is distressed with the ways words fail her. The frustration of the speaker shows how well Barrett Browning creates a realistic moment even as she reminds the readers of the sonnet's construction by following the sonnet's rules.

The visual image of two faces represents the two lovers, but the overlapping gendered voices call attention to the feminine themes that force a look at the faces of the poet and speaker and the dropped torch that prevents a definitive answer on their identity.

It gradually appears to be an identity crisis, and the repetitive "myself—me—" (7) seems uncertain, reflecting on the overlapping poet and speaker. Who is speaking? Does she even know the answer? Supplying the answers this early in the sequence diminishes the performance since she only reveals so much to say she is a woman. Her womanhood remains the focus in the sestet and becomes the reason for her choice of silence. Although her ultimate goal to deliberately call attention to the construction of the sonnet and contrast with the love letter does not reveal itself yet, undoubtedly, this sonnet calls attention to the many existing layers and causes the emerging questions on the speaker's identity to demand a resolution. For instance, in sonnet VI, she speaks of his heart in her hand "with pulses that beat double" (10) and her eyes that show "the tears of two" (14). Mermin rejects the idea of a role reversal and sees two voices. She dubs it "doubling." By sonnet XXII, the two souls that stand up "erect and strong / Face to face" (1-2) mirror the literal faces of the earlier poem, and although they do so silently, they represent a degree of clarity and equality and overall movement with the sequence.

The writing by her own hand in XXXVIII begins with her intimately counting the kisses he gives her: first her fingers, then her hair and finally her lips. The kiss on her lips, which "was folded down / In perfect, purple state" (12-13) suggests sexual imagery, while his kiss on her hand that causes it to grow "more clean and white," (3) insinuates a virginal or purity image. This sonnet lacks the grief that nearly ran the length of the sequence, and while deeply passionate and expressive, the poems also portray genuinely private scenes. The purification that takes place upon her hand cleanses her of any remaining doubt, and she proclaims what she would not repeat by the end of sonnet XXVIII, now saying, "My love, my own" (14).

Sonnet XLII portrays a move not earlier done in the sequence, and directly quotes from the love letters. Appropriately, she quotes herself from the first line: “My future will not copy fair my past.” This movement draws the sincere love letter and the constructed sonnet together, nearly merging; it is the closest she comes to explicitly speaking of the contrast between the two forms while simultaneously showing their congruency. A direct quote makes it impossible to ignore the connection between Barrett Browning’s letters, and therefore, to the real poet behind the speaker. This sonnet became the only one to be removed from the sequence when first published.

If the goal of the references to writing in the sonnets was to implant a reminder of Barrett Browning (or more accurately, the female poet) into the poems directing the degree of the sincerity, the publication stories dismantle the control she has over the author/speaker relationship, disproportionately affecting the degree of sincerity. The references to writing within the sonnets draws attention to the poet and the construction of the sonnets. Since the sequence’s publication, critics have caused the nearly impervious reaction that the sonnets accurately reflect the Browning’s courtship and spontaneous emotional outbursts. Critics have debated Barrett Browning’s intention in writing the sonnets. Were they intended for private use between her and her husband? Or was publication, and therefore public use, the ultimate goal? Houston argues, “Whether or not the poems were intended for publication, their rhetoric presents them as part of a private conversation” (109). I agree that the poems were indeed to be read as part of a private conversation and intent to publish is not wholly relevant, yet to consider a performance in sincerity without diving into the critical accounts of the publication would dismiss how deeply these criticisms have tainted the intention of the poet to separate the

author and speaker, thereby allowing the critics to invent their own personal tale of the Brownings life to coincide with the sequence. The theme to look beyond the surface runs the length of the sequence, but begins with the title of the sequence and the stories associated with the sequence's publication.

For instance, even the title, *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, purposely disguises the sequence's personal nature. Barbara Neri points out the double allusion of the title, which references Browning's personal love of Barrett Browning's *Catarina to Camöens* poem, while simultaneously distracting the readers, makes the poems appear to be Portuguese translations. Both the Browning's agreed the title would serve the purpose to distance themselves from the personal connections. The double meaning was meant to be understood by them alone. The private audience (the Brownings) understood two separate meanings: one inconceivable to the public audience, and the other, misleading. The public audience only saw the misleading meaning: Portuguese translations that were not translations at all. Barrett Browning said, "the public might take it as they pleased" (quoted in Neri 571). The doubly disguised title again creates that inimitable balance, teetering between sincerity and performance. Indeed, it provides the perfect prelude to the forty-four sonnets' superb mix of layered roles or meanings, beginning with the overlap of personal and public space, the poet and speaker.

By the penultimate sonnet, the illusion of sincerity has become a theme that runs the length of the sequence just as much as the movement towards marriage, or the movement from grief to love. Not only is this sonnet one of the most famously known love poems, but it also at first seems to do exactly the opposite of a performance in sincerity, appearing overly spontaneous and displaying feminine sentimentality. In fact, it

even alludes to the famously insincere speech the deceptive Goneril gives in Shakespeare's *King Lear*. Even despite the movement throughout the sequence to show how Barrett Browning adopts the language of the love letter to become more sincere, the publication stories tend to dismantle the differences between real life and construction, especially when it comes to sonnet XLIII. However, this sonnet achieves the illusion of perfect sincerity because it stops alluding to any outside references of the real poet. Throughout the sequence, she tells the readers she is about to put on a performance by contrasting the poetry and love letters. In this sonnet, she *does* put on a performance, no longer self-reflexively commenting. Because of the distinct differences between the love letters and sonnets that she shows throughout the sequence to prepare the reader, sonnet XLIII no longer has need to compare and instead simply performs:

XLIII

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.

The poem offers much to consider, but first, James Hirsh's research on Shakespeare and *King Lear* offers a way to circumvent the typically questioned allusion that says this poem proves insincerity and even deception. Hirsh believes Goneril's speech contains an eloquence often neglected by critics because of its insincerity and that Barrett Browning was very aware of this Shakespearean trope. He points out that Shakespeare "frequently dramatized the sad fact that liars can be eloquent" (48). The possibility of Barrett Browning lying does cause us to question why she took a speech about deception and reprogrammed it to be a sincere love sonnet. However, what Hirsh calls "artistic daring" was not unusual for her, especially not when it came to this particular sequence, which is new and experimental in many ways. And, as I have argued throughout this paper, this poem represents Barrett Browning's ultimate ability to perform and, appropriately, she chose to mirror the work of a play.

Hirsh also argues that Browning was aware and most likely amused at her ability to transform something blatantly insincere into a valued and overwhelmingly popular love poem (50). Moreover, Mermin claims Barrett Browning was particularly good at psychological analysis, which certainly influenced her works as well as the forms in which she chose to write (129). It seems very likely that she indeed used Goneril's speech to create something different, but most importantly, it speaks to the performance value of the sequence. If we must reach beyond speaker to poet, Barrett Browning was certainly not faking her love for Browning. The speaker did not intend deception, but seems to use

the sequence to move towards a greater depth of love and even explicitly points to this: “I love thee to the depth and breadth and height” (2), thus moving towards a sort of transcendental state reached through their love.

Sonnet XLIII uses all the elements that make a sincere performance mimic the love letter found throughout the references to writing. She of course is the only speaker, and although she does not directly quote her own words in this poem, she does borrow from the language of the letter and notably makes similar references to *King Lear* in past letters, giving her plenty of foresight to plan and experiment with ways to mimic sincerity within the sonnets. For example, in a letter to Mary Russell Mitford, she alludes to *King Lear* proclaiming, “How can I thank you enough? Let me be silent, & love you!” (qtd. in Hirsh 50-51) and parallels Goneril’s speech and the first line of sonnet XLIII: “How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.” And as in the earlier poems, (XIII and XXIII), she again answers her own question.

The language of the poem also reflects the language of the love letter, again, as done in the earlier poems, full of spontaneity, breaks, pauses and enjambment. The breaks correspond with the mention of her breath, and the lines take a breath with her: “With my lost saints,— I love thee with the breath / Smiles, tears, of all my life!—”(12-13). The poem creates urgency, and the repeating phrase “I love thee,” builds the critical exhalation that reads as an outburst of emotion. She uses an exclamatory sentence to proclaim life, not death. Even the word choices reach towards the ultimate dramatization through the mention of the otherworldly and boundless limits.

The sonnet form breaks down in sonnet XLIII, which in her other sonnets, works as a strong contrast to the love letters. For example, the octave, sestet and volta do not

play their traditional roles. As in sonnet XXVIII, the octave works to set up a problem or proposition and the sestet works to confirm the octave and then concludes. The volta offers the greatest signifier of the shift that should occur in the sonnet. In sonnet XLIII, however, where is the volta? What is the problem the speaker works to solve? There is no obvious turn in this sonnet and she clearly accepts her position as the lover and beloved. In fact, lines 8 and 9 (where the volta should exist) interrupts the repetitive "I love thee" phrases. Even these repeating phrases that count, break down the form insofar as counting and numbers are often used as shorthand for poetic meter. Barrett Browning drops all metaphors and references that remind us of her skill as a poet; she does not refer to her Greek studies as in sonnet I or her love letters. Instead of obviously biographical connections through allusions to the love letters, few or no signs exists that make the reader want to claim an overlapping association between poet and speaker. The sonnet form that helped prove the construction of the poems by a real poet drops away. She strips the allusions away and performs independent of the traditions of the sonnet and courtship.

Throughout this paper, I have mentioned the layer of images that unmask the soul of the speaker and not entirely the soul of the poet. Billone points out that death is just as easy to trace through the sequence as is love, and it appears that the speaker could have been speaking to a dead loved one almost as much as to one who is alive (64). Still, the movement of the sequence, from death to life, traces a commonly Victorian tradition, and more importantly, it demonstrates the possibility to express both love and grief at the same time, just as performance and sincerity can interact and coexist. The sequence's simultaneously expression of love and grief is only the most obvious layered image.

Victorian readers who interpreted this poem as the ultimate profession of love, yet failed to acknowledge the Shakespearean allusion, exemplify exactly what Barrett Browning risked in walking the line between spontaneous, artless poetry and creative experimentation. Yet, she proves the form of the sonnet that supports the authenticity of truth and reality must be constructions.

The final poem of the sequence mentions the letters one last time, but they now remain outside the poem—she does not quote, summarize or react to anything written by her love. Instead, as Mermin mentions, she presents the poems to the male lover or "metaphorical flowers in return for his real ones" (355). In other words, she gifts the poems to her love, just as he always gifted her with flowers. This final poem appropriately draws us back to the publication stories and the information we have about the sequence's title. Unlike the critical accounts, the speaker exudes pride in her work; enough so, that the poems are considered gifts. The poems as a gift discourages the publication story that said Barrett Browning told Browning to tear them up if he did not like them. In this last poem she says, "So, in like name of that love of ours / Take back these thoughts, which here, unfolded, too" (5-6). A fitting contrast then exists between this line and "Leave here the pages with long musing curled / And write me new my future's epigraph" (12-13) in sonnet XLII, which begins with a quote from her love letter.

The sequence's performance in sincerity is ultimately controlled by the poet. She shows a gradual change throughout the sequence that works to produce sincere feelings and also showcase her skills at doing so in a modern sonnet form as seen in sonnet XLIII. However, the publication stories circulating around the sequence disrupt the veil put in place by Barrett Browning who attempted to lessen, but not sever, the connection of poet

and speaker. By endeavoring to do so, she anticipated the reception that would undermine her work if thought of as typical feminine spontaneity. Curiously, for such a well-documented couple, Barrett Browning's own words on the publication of the sequence rarely are repeated. In fact, she seemed rather silent on the matter publically; however, this perception is false, and she did speak about the publication to friends and family and in the sonnets themselves. Instead of her own words, however, the critic Edmund Gosse created a story about her presentation of the sonnet that inspired other accounts of the sequence's publication that have come to be at least partially responsible for the public's belief that the poems were solely intended for a private and intimate reading between two lovers. Subsequent publication stories regarding Barrett Browning's sonnet sequence effectively obscure the poet's skill in performing sincerity, failing to recognize that these sonnets are public poems masquerading as private poems—not the other way around.

Gosse's famous story of *Sonnets from the Portuguese* is worth dwelling on, because it reveals just how fully Barrett Browning's readers misinterpreted her performance of sincerity for the real thing. According to Gosse, Barrett Browning's composition of the sonnets was done in secret and that she "shyly" presented them to her husband years later. It was he who "insisted" on their publication (502), not Barrett Browning; otherwise they never would have appeared in print. Gosse's story is so commonly cited that, even professional literary scholars, such as Christopher Ricks, accept it at face value, reprinting it in the notes to the Penguin edition of *Sonnets from the Portuguese*. In Gosse's original account, Barrett Browning came up behind Browning and "held him by the shoulder to prevent his turning to look at her, and . . . pushed a packet of papers into the pocket of his coat. She told him to read that, and to tear it up if

he did not like it; and then she fled again to her own room" (Gosse). As the Penguin editor and others have noted, this account makes particular note of Barrett Browning's position behind her husband to hide her face and flee the scene like a child to avoid his critical judgment as he read the poems. However, noting that while she corrected and commented on his work, he more often than not, conceded to her judgment, offering few recommendations for improvement and almost exclusively words of high praise (Mermin 117-18). Gosse's account influences the reception of the poems by suggesting her husband very nearly becomes her literal mask in which she hides her face in embarrassment—an extremely feminized position. He capitalizes on her femininity to illustrate a wife seeking the approval of her husband. It also destroys the veil intended by Barrett Browning to distance herself from the poems so that she may let her work's performance speak for itself.

The second story of publication is Robert Browning's. He refers to the poems as a "strange, heavy crown," and addresses the issues with veiling the poems (Curle 99). He recalls in a letter to Julia Wedgewood (who praised Barrett Browning's ability to capture absolute sincerity) three years after she wrote the poems she presented them to him as such:

> All this delay because I happened early to say something against putting one's love into verse: then again, I said something else on the other side... and next morning she said hesitatingly 'Do you know I once wrote some poems about *you*?'—and then—'There they are, if you care to see them.' . . . Afterward the publishing them was through me . . . there was a trial at covering it a little by leaving out one sonnet which had plainly a connexion

> with the former works: but it was put in afterwards when people chose to pull down the mask which, in old days, people used to respect at a masquerade. But I never cared. (qtd. in Curle 99-100)

What Julia Wedgewood may have gathered from this response highlights Browning's dislike of the public's overly intrusive attitude to draw connections between the sonnets and their private life. Browning's remark that Barrett Browning was "hesitating" most likely caused later critics to follow in Gosse's assessment that she was too shy and embarrassed to share the poems with her husband— an embarrassment Mermin believes is ultimately displaced onto the readers (141-42). Clearly, the poems reflect their relationship, yet Browning's comment offers insight to the intended poetics that reach past a simplistic story of the love between two people.

Browning's final comment on the publication of the poems holds a revealing piece of information unaccounted for in Gosse's initial description. Browning did seem to resent the public's actions to reveal even more than the Brownings may have wished. He remarks on the masquerade that requires the willing participation of everyone to keep the costume in place for it to succeed. His reference to the obvious sign of authorship in sonnet XLII reveals more. If the intent was to only display their true courtship, why distance the connection of author to speaker? There is a distinct and important difference between sincerity, performing sincerity and deception. Scholars may question whether or not sincerity means spontaneity, and should therefore be deemed artless, but a performance of sincerity allows nineteenth century approval to stay intact while proving creative capability. Browning's remark about the masquerade suggests that the connection of their personal story was not wholly intentional or necessary for the success

of the sequence. In other words, the mask at the masquerade was meant to stay in place, and the poems were meant to appear as a performance in sincerity, not to reflect a true account of the Brownings love life. According to Browning, the sequence should remain somewhat apart from their lives, just as the masquerade. Traditionally, the mask allowed for people of all social ranks to mix without concern for their positions or their gender (Castle 254). For a sequence concerned with mixing unlike roles, the masquerade is a perfect metaphor for a performance dependent on the distance between the costumed wearer and public self—or in other words, the poet and speaker.

Browning's commentary on the masquerade further enforces a theme of depth and seems to remind the readers that some part of the Brownings relationship is hidden from view. In lines 1 and 2 of sonnet XXV, "A heavy heart, beloved, have I bourne / From year to year until I saw thy face" the speaker literally unmasks her love, and his face removes the sorrow in layers that have built "year to year" (2) and were "each lifted in its turn" (5). Browning's comment manifests in both the mask that eventually is "drop[ped] adown" (10) and the ballroom setting: "by a beating heart at dance-time" (6). Repeatedly, the poems return to the idea of a self or soul out of sight, hidden by a literal mask or revealed only as the speaker explores the depth of her love. "Atheists are as dull / Who cannot guess God's presence out of sight—" (13-14) she says reiterating what is not seen (Sonnet XX). The literal mask changes throughout the sequence, but in sonnet XXXIX, notably near the end of the sequence, the speaker clearly addresses it saying, "To look through and beyond this mask of me . . . and behold my soul's true face" (2 & 4). The lines claim there is a difference between her appearance (her mask) and her "true face." Overall, this lends more to suggest again the depth and complexity of the woman beneath

her outward appearance to look beyond the surface of the sonnets that progress towards increasing transparency.

Mermin notes that while composing the sonnets in 1846, Barrett Browning comments to Browning, “You shall see some day at Pisa what I will not show you now. Does not Solomon say that 'there is a time to read what is written?' If he doesn't, he *ought*” (Kintner 892-93). This does not reflect the nervous, meek woman from Gosse’s account, but one of patience in her composition and the intention to one day present the poems to him. Still, when she did give him the poems, she wrote to her sister that she felt shy about presenting them and “shrank back” at his comment on personal poetry—a reaction of modesty perhaps, and not embarrassment. When they did decide to publish, they “agreed to slip them in under some sort of veil” (qtd. in Mermin 264-65). Her account nearly mirrors Browning’s in both her hesitation and the intentional veil. Gosse confuses hesitation and shyness for embarrassment and also mistakes her anxiety as something relevant to the story of publication, which certainly does not relate to the quality of the poetry. As many critics, such as Van Remoortel and Moore, have now investigated, her Petrarchan translations and use of Petrarchan imagery that unfold in *Sonnets* indicate much foresight, hard work and ingenuity. Both Brownings agree that their concern of publication related to crossing public and private spheres too closely, something Gosse’s famous story dissolves anyway. Browning, however, aligns with his wife in that they wished to remain apart from the poetry. In fact, at one time during their courtship, Barrett Browning feared that Browning’s profession of love had more to with loving her poetry and not her real self (Mermin 119). A degree of separation was obviously of some importance to her.

The publication stories told by the literary critics and the references to letters that Barrett Browning makes in the sonnets both influence the degree of sincerity in the sequence. However, the stories from the Brownings illuminate the intention to separate the author and speaker, unlike the story from Gosse, which only serves to mold the author and speaker into one for the sole purpose of creating the picture of the ideal Victorian wife. The references to writing that also seem to fuse the author and speaker by simply being a reminder of the poet's existence does not just refer to her own personal love, but her position as woman, poet, lover, griever, beloved, intellectual and so much more. The multitude of roles show a poet testing new ground, searching for a superior way to support the woman in all of her capacities—not the object, not the dependent wife and not the unintelligible overly sentimental "womanly" emotions.

Because Barrett Browning self-reflexively comments on her ability to construct sincerity by taking real life and turning it into poetry, and then drops all pretenses to really perform, the sequence navigates a way of showing sincerity without actually revealing true or factual information. Some would say this claim of sincerity just portrays deception, but most scholar can make room for the idea of a skillfully created performance. If the severely differing reactions to the sequence tells us anything, the value on truth and performance change the interpretation throughout time. However, in *Sonnets,* the effect of interpretation links directly back to the false critical stories. Without their tie to the sequence and without the well-documented love letters, connections to the Brownings' real life would wield less control over the direction criticism took. Houston points out that knowing how much Barrett Browning meant for the sonnets to mirror her own life will probably never be fully uncovered, but few

disagree that the sincerity of the poems cause readers to forget to separate speaker and search for the poet just out of sight, which may be especially because of “its form, imagery and rhetoric” (106). The sequence which begins with a poet staggering under the weight of grief and unworthy love, transforms into a fully emerged female speaker, capable of reaching a depth gained through carefully constructed language. The poet peeks in and out of the sonnets but maintains a distance that allows the sequence to move independent of biography. She uses the sonnet sequence as a genre in which she can stake her claim as a writer of significance—a poet capable of transforming real life love into art. Only by including the biographical allusions from the love letters is she able to eventually drop them to confirm her literary power and ultimately transform the traditions of the sonnet into an updated form for the modern woman.

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