

Elizabeth Barrett Browning



Elizabeth Barrett, an English poet of the Romantic Movement, was born in 1806 at Coxhoe Hall, Durham, England. The oldest of twelve children, Elizabeth was the first in her family born in England in over two hundred years. For centuries, the Barrett family, who were part Creole, had lived in Jamaica, where they owned sugar plantations and relied on slave labor. Elizabeth's father, Edward Barrett Moulton Barrett, chose to raise his family in England, while his fortune grew in Jamaica. Educated at home, Elizabeth apparently had read passages from *Paradise Lost* and a number of Shakespearean plays, among other great works, before the age of ten. By her twelfth year she had written her first "epic" poem, which consisted of four books of rhyming couplets. Two years later, Elizabeth developed a lung ailment that plagued her for the rest of her life. Doctors began treating her with morphine, which she would take until her death. While saddling a pony when she was fifteen, Elizabeth also suffered a spinal injury. Despite her ailments, her education continued to flourish. Throughout her teenage years, Elizabeth taught herself Hebrew so that she could read the Old Testament; her interests later turned to Greek studies. Accompanying her appetite for the classics was a passionate enthusiasm for her Christian faith. She became active in the Bible and Missionary Societies of her church.

In 1826 Elizabeth anonymously published her collection *An Essay on Mind and Other Poems*. Two years later, her mother passed away. The slow abolition of slavery in England and mismanagement of the plantations depleted the Barrett's income, and in 1832, Elizabeth's father sold his rural estate at a public auction. He moved his family to a coastal town and rented cottages for the next three years, before settling permanently in London. While living on the sea coast, Elizabeth published her translation of *Prometheus Bound* (1833), by the Greek dramatist Aeschylus.

Gaining notoriety for her work in the 1830's, Elizabeth continued to live in her father's London house under his tyrannical rule. He began sending Elizabeth's younger siblings to Jamaica to help with the family's estates. Elizabeth bitterly opposed slavery and did not want her siblings sent away. During this time, she wrote *The Seraphim and Other Poems* (1838), expressing Christian sentiments in the form of classical Greek tragedy. Due to her weakening disposition she was forced to spend a year at the sea of Torquay accompanied by her brother Edward, whom she referred to as "Bro." He drowned later that year while sailing at Torquay and Elizabeth returned home emotionally broken, becoming an invalid and a recluse. She spent the next five years in her bedroom at her father's home. She continued writing, however, and in 1844 produced a collection entitled simply *Poems*. This volume gained the attention of poet Robert Browning, whose work Elizabeth had praised in one of her poems, and he wrote her a letter.

Elizabeth and Robert, who was six years her junior, exchanged 574 letters over the next twenty months. Immortalized in 1930 in the play *The Barretts of Wimpole Street*, by Rudolf Besier (1878-1942), their romance was bitterly opposed by her father, who did not want any of his children to marry. In 1846, the couple eloped and settled in Florence, Italy, where Elizabeth's health improved and she bore a son, Robert Wideman Browning. Her father never spoke to her again. Elizabeth's *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, dedicated to her husband and written in secret before her marriage, was published in 1850. Critics generally consider the *Sonnets*—one of the most widely known collections of love lyrics in English—to be her best work. Admirers have compared her imagery to [Shakespeare](#) and her use of the Italian form to Petrarch.

Political and social themes embody Elizabeth's later work. She expressed her intense sympathy for the struggle for the unification of Italy in *Casa Guidi Windows* (1848-51) and *Poems Before Congress* (1860). In 1857 Browning published her verse novel *Aurora Leigh*, which portrays male domination of a woman. In her poetry she also addressed the oppression of the Italians by the Austrians, the child labor mines and mills of England, and slavery, among other social injustices. Although this decreased her popularity, Elizabeth was heard and recognized around Europe.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning died in Florence on June 29, 1861.

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