

“OUR DEEP, DEAR SILENCE”: MARRIAGE AND LYRICISM IN THE *SONNETS FROM THE PORTUGUESE*

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Music does not start from the first note and goes onto the second note, etc., etc., but the first note already determines the music itself, because it comes out of the silence that precedes it.

—Daniel Barenboim

“Comment ne pas dire?” can mean, in a manner that is both transitive and intransitive, how to be silent, how not to speak in general, how to avoid speaking? But it can also mean: how, in speaking, not to say this or that, in this or that manner? In other words: how, in saying and speaking, to avoid this or that discursive, logical, rhetorical mode? How to avoid an inexact, erroneous, aberrant, improper form? How to avoid such a predicate, and even predication itself? For example: how to avoid a negative form, or how not to be negative? Finally, how to say something?

—Jacques Derrida

SONNET XLI OF ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING’S *Sonnets from the Portuguese* is candid about its ambition to write love poetry that will last:

— Oh, to shoot
My soul’s full meaning into future years, —
That *they* should lend it utterance, and salute
Love that endures, with Life that disappears! – (Barrett Browning 397)¹

This is a rare moment in the sequence of hope enunciated. Although littered with apparently unfettered exclamations of the newly loved and newly loving – “I seemed not one | For such man’s love!” (XXXII), “Beloved, I only *love thee!*” (IX) – the *rhetorical mode* of the *Sonnets from the Portuguese* also feels reticent, provisional, even transient: “This said, ‘*I am thine*’ – and so, its ink has paled | With lying at my heart that beats too fast” (XXVIII). Yet the sequence’s desire for endurance may be reconciled with its frequent return to moments of erasure – “My letters! – all dead paper, . . . mute and white! –” (XXVIII) – by attending to the generative effects of silence in this most ambivalent of

sonnet performances. Indeed, the sequence appears to fall in with Daniel Barenboim's logic, which would dictate that if ensuing years are to produce, as the sonnet anticipates, "utterance" – to form sound – the sonnet itself must provide the pre-silence. If silence is the pulse of "Love that endures" (passing over from life to love), then the *Sonnets from the Portuguese* become, perhaps, an exercise in learning, in Derrida's terms, "how to be silent." Despite such elevated investment, however, silence clearly troubles our reading of this sonnet sequence; not only does it threaten to undermine the efficacy of a sequence celebrated for the *enunciation* of love, but it also gestures at a broader Victorian discourse in which silence and "woman-love," as sonnet XIII names it, are more frequently brought together as an effect of systemized suppression. But, I suggest that these sonnets are, in fact, pushing us to reconsider how we read silence; perhaps surprisingly, this is revealed by paying attention to the sequence's careful anticipation of marriage. Indeed, establishing a conjugal perspective on these poems reveals a radical dynamic in which silencing, in fact, gives way to finding, as Derrida asks, "how to say something."

The *Sonnets from the Portuguese* were written during the courtship between Elizabeth Moulton-Barrett (as she then was named) and Robert Browning in 1845–46 and are signed off "50 Wimpole Street | 1846, Sept | Married – September 12th 1846" (Barrett Browning 398). To suggest that they are an exercise in becoming silent might then seem a crass reminder of a Victorian reality; written in anticipation of marriage, they anticipate its effect on women, for whom marriage vows were often vows of silence. John M. Picker's analysis of the cultural significance of sound in the Victorian era – a time when "science at first gave substance and form to sounds that had once seemed indefinite and immaterial" (83) – reveals how the sound/silence binary also meant that the legislatively unheard – a married woman – became sonically marked: "Mallinger, might as well be speaking about Gwendolen or any number of Victorian wives when he says of Deronda's birth mother the Alcharisi: 'Those great singers marry themselves into silence'" (94). In Xavière Gauthier's view, marrying thus will precipitate broader erasure since, "As long as women remain silent, they will be outside the historical process" (162). Tillie Olsen's study of silence, by linking lasting fame with singleness, finds that process becoming established in the nineteenth century: "In the last century, of the women whose achievements endure for us in one way or another, nearly all never married . . . or married late in their thirties (George Eliot, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Charlotte Brontë, Olive Schriener)" (16). In this Victorian setting, when marriage and domesticity became mobilised as a nationalistic virtue freighted with economic and moral significance, the very two-into-one action of the marriage bond seems a mark of consummate patriarchy issuing from a century preoccupied with the rolling out of English legislative power: the Victorian marriage functions as an image that holds together precisely the notions of dominance, erasure, and silencing that have been understood to inform the experience of female (and other disenfranchised groups') subjectivity (or, indeed, subjection). Marriage, then, is often considered to be synonymous with silence; an apparent problem rather than a solution for a female-authored sequence that anticipates conjugality.

And yet Eliot's juxtaposition of singing and silencing, noted by Picker – the sharpening of the soft "sing" into the harsh "silence" – releases a bitterness whose resonance defies the very action of which it speaks. Similarly, the *Sonnets from the Portuguese* are a disruptive anomaly that complicates the doleful triangulation of silence, woman, and marriage. This is a sequence in which the poet requests, "let the silence of my womanhood | *Commend*

my woman-love to thy belief” (XIII, my emphasis). Given the social reality of what Barrett Browning was, presumably, contemplating at the time of writing this sonnet, the terms are startling. In a commendation predicated on silence, Barrett Browning seems to absent herself in a way that pre-empts the inevitability of what is to come, laid out by the late eighteenth-century commentator, William Blackstone:

By marriage, the husband and wife are one person in law: that is, the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband: under whose wing, protection, and *cover*, she performs every thing; . . . and her condition during her marriage is called her *coverture*. (2: 433)

Suggestions that such abandon is welcome, or freely given, make it no wonder that readers such as Alethea Hayter find the *Sonnets* “wonderful of the lover to whom they were addressed, but in some way uncomfortable for the rest of us” (105). Indeed, by inviting silence, the *Sonnets from the Portuguese* trouble what has become a vital feminist *oeuvre*: the writings of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, which have figured as both the cause and the means of establishing a feminine literary tradition. This has not always been the case. The *Sonnets* – because they apparently upheld heterosexual normative values – were vital to Barrett Browning’s early canonisation, in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Yet, as Tricia Lootens demonstrates, such a process transpired to be as much of a curse as a blessing as the very means of their cultural preservation engendered their literary obfuscation: “commodified, metaphorically chastened and offered as antidotes to sexual anarchy, Barrett Browning’s love poems became sacred object; but in the process, in many cases, they may have ceased to be read as poems” (145–46). Significantly, it was *Aurora Leigh* (1856), and not the *Sonnets*, which heralded Barrett Browning’s re-admittance to a literary canon that her example helped to re-configure. But, need Barrett Browning’s self-silencing in the *Sonnets* be viewed as an affront to those readers who wish to hear from the feminine past? Might the *Sonnets*, in fact, negotiate the freight of repression more usually associated with silencing and re-position “woman-love” (XIII) in relation to silence? After all, Barrett Browning uses the “silence of [her] womanhood” (XIII) as a means of commending her love, to figure it as worthy of attention or notice, not as way of offering it for quietening sacrifice. As we now inhabit those “future years” (XLI) to which Barrett Browning’s sonnet appeals, to find that silence worthy of notice and attention might, I suggest, be a way of fruitfully rethinking not only silence, and not even just the Victorian marriage to which silence is wedded, but also the lyrical potentiality embedded in Barrett Browning’s most personal, yet troubling, work.

Barrett Browning’s relationship with silence has received distinguished notice: Angela Leighton draws attention to its significance as a mark of “namelessness” (81) in response to grief in Barrett Browning’s life; an experience apparently so radical as to rupture the very mechanics of linguistic efficacy for the bereaved.² Yet silence, perhaps having been thus forged as an emotional pitch, is later mobilised in the courtship correspondence to indicate moments of emotional profundity in loving terms, where its overwhelming of the correspondent operates both as a mystifying and exulting action:

If you did but know dear Mr. Browning how often I have written . . . not this letter I am about to write, but another better letter to you, . . . in the midst of my silence, . . . you wd. not think for a moment that

the east wind, with all the harm it does to me, is able to do the great harm of putting out the light of the thought of you to my mind, – for this, indeed, it has no power to do. I had the pen in my hand once to write, – & why it fell out, I cannot tell you. (Kelley and Lewis 10: 169)

In such moments, silence takes on the action of poetic inspiration, imbuing Barrett Browning's other mention of "silent promise" (Kelley and Lewis 11: 137–39) or even gratitude that is "beyond any power of mine to express my feelings. Let me be silent therefore, instead of trying" (13: 364) with a poetic significance that partakes of this inspiring action. It is a coding of emotion and expression that is passed to Browning too, who writes, "I look back, and in every one point, every word and gesture, every letter, every *silence* – you have been entirely perfect to me" (13: 356, emphasis in the original), making silence the seal between gesture and letter. If silence thus operates between Browning and Barrett Browning as a mark of devotion, promise, and mindfulness of the other (as Barrett Browning's unwritten-yet-written letter suggests and Browning's exclamation seals), it seems that the Brownings figure betrothed silence as nascent marriage. As such, the intensity of private emotion, which elides grief with love, meets the public discourse of attachment. By making their "betrothal silence" clearly accommodate – even grow out of – feminine expression, however, the formulation operates as a commentary (even in its reticence) on the marriage as female-silence model.³ Yet, when the setting changes to a sonnet-sequence, rather than a courtship correspondence, such radical alterations to traditional conjugal dynamics can too easily be overlooked in our eagerness to claim this sequence as a specifically *female* expression that overturns centuries-long literary silencing.

In Christina Rossetti's acute phrasing, the sonnet tradition produces unspeaking, "donnae innominata" (229), making Barrett Browning's silent womanhood appear at first not only socially but also aesthetically conservative in its apparent endorsement of such submission.⁴ Leighton, however, adds richness to a potentially discomfiting picture with her sense that Barrett Browning's "love explores a language of self-abasement that is paradoxically proud of its imaginative rights" (9).⁵ Yet the desire to invest in the *Sonnets from the Portuguese* as poems that work to "create a distinctly female tradition" (Phelan 55) also leads to triumphant assertions that it "shakes off the shadow of the silent, coy mistress of the traditional love sonnet replacing it with the forthright voice of a self-assured woman" (Avery and Stott 126). As well as overlooking the valency of silence in this sequence, such remedy is also still predicated on the sometimes-prohibitive lyrical ideology of one voice speaking (even if here it is female rather than male). This is understandable – even inevitable – in Barrett Browning's *oeuvre* since it is her own *Aurora Leigh* that has been "reread and taught in the academy for its delineation of a female poetic subject and a feminized poetic tradition" (Jackson and Prins 524) and that poem does characterise female poetic subjectivity as a process of consolidation aiming for independence and self-determination – essentially one voice speaking. Yet, need the terms we extrapolate from *Aurora Leigh* determine our reading of the *Sonnets from the Portuguese*? To find in these poems the "forthright voice of a . . . woman" (Avery and Stott 126) suggests they have tended to, but to follow that directive is to obscure a site of liberating radicalism that emerges, in fact, from their efforts to replace such singularity with doubleness. Rather than reacting to male traditions with ventriloquism, as, arguably, does *Aurora Leigh*, or even falling in with the broad assumption that women poets are "utter[ly] absor[bed] in their own particularly abstract selves" (Jackson and Prins 523),⁶ I suggest that the *Sonnets from the Portuguese* operate in thoughtful response to the *marriage*

they anticipate, and seek to establish expressive modes that are predicated on mediation and exchange – neither male or female, but vigorously conjugal. Not only do such efforts clearly anticipate marital transformation, but also they are intriguingly marked by moments of silence, thus disrupting our readings both of lyrical expression and of marriage itself. Indeed, the sequence’s response to the radical re-structuring of subjectivity brought about by the Victorian marriage suggests that, despite being consistently read as lyrical (and seeing their lyricism branded as cultural artefact), it is in the *Sonnets* that we see the poet “imagining the unbearable possibility of lyric outside the terms or *boundaries*, of subjectivity” (Jackson and Prins 523, my emphasis). Rather than entrenching boundaries (as the delineation of a female poetic subject in *Aurora Leigh* would suggest) the *Sonnets from the Portuguese* actually work hard to dissolve borders and replace them with interfaces of conjugal exchange.

To find conjugal exchange in this sequence is, however, perhaps as unusual as is finding the forthright voice of a woman in a sonnet sequence; marriage, as much as the feminine position, is an institution more usually found outside the sonnet tradition. Although a tradition that figures the feminine as silent muse – inviting comparison with the Victorian marriage – it is also one generally predicated on unconsummated love, distance, thwarted aims, and even despair.⁷ Indeed, it is this anomaly that forces the “silence of my womanhood” (XIII) since to “fashion into speech | The love I bear thee” (XIII) the poet would have to “teach | My hand to hold my spirit so far off | From myself” (XIII); such eloquence is eclipsed in a marital bond that holds two tightly together. It is, perhaps, therefore, not so much the feminised sonnet-form that disrupts our reading expectations as *marriage*-form made poetic. Indicating, as it does in the *Sonnets from the Portuguese* at least, the willing conjugation of two, its discourse of authenticity sits uncomfortably with the artifice that we associate with the sonnet (a highly wrought form that shapes an arcane tradition). Its indication of desire fulfilled, rather than anticipated, would seem to take the ground from beneath the sonnet, leaving only the endlessly repeated action of *satisfaction*.⁸ Finally, its figure of two (as two figures are drawn into one) is a direct problem for readings that are predicated on the lyrical logic of one voice speaking. Yet, it is precisely this fundamental reconfiguration of lyric logic that suggests a way of considering the sequence from Jackson and Prins’s “lyrical perspective” (which means “reading . . . lyrics for their cultural pattern rather than for their subjective expression” [529]), allowing not only for a return to the enigmatic in the *Sonnets*, but also a way into Victorian marriage that can outwit the expectation that reads silence all too quickly as repression or submission. To bring out this sequence’s conjugal dynamic I want to use Isobel Armstrong’s sense of the “radical aesthetic” to return to the figuration of marriage, and therefore to think again about silence in the *Sonnets from the Portuguese*.

Armstrong is, in fact, quite brief in her discussion of *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, but her terms are engagingly suggestive. Attributing the “hesitating affirmations of these poems” to “the terms of expressive theory,” images of breaking and crossing serve to secure the *Sonnets* within an ambitious female tradition. That ambition, however, goes beyond wresting authority from a male tradition and moves into an attempt at comprehensive restructuring of the terms of linguistic expressivity: “Language goes into a flux, as if enacting the dissolution of categories. . . . [The sonnets] struggle with their own dissolve as they try to break into new areas of being” (*Victorian Poetry* 356). Although Armstrong finds the experiment ultimately wanting, her sense that the sequence at least gestures at “chart[ing] the struggle of the feminine subject to take up a new position which is free of dependency” (*Victorian Poetry*

356) begins to re-set the terms by which we might read the *Sonnets from the Portuguese*. Given the social status of the married woman, outlined above, Armstrong's term "dependency" is inflected by the institution of marriage that serves as context for the poems. The struggle that the *Sonnets* engage in, therefore, might be seen not so much as that of the female seeking to enter sonneteering tradition, but as the betrothed female seeking thoughtfully to enter into marriage. However, rather than referring to the specific circumstances of the marriage between Browning and Barrett Browning (which would impose subjective restrictions on the poems's expressivity) I want to suggest that these poems may be read for their engagement with, and radicalisation of, the "cultural pattern" (to use Jackson and Prins's terms) of matrimony.

Marriage, of course, was and is a significant rite of passage: Chris R. Vanden Bossche identifies its salient effect in Victorian adolescence, noting that "marriage marked the point at which young adults began to define themselves primarily in relation to each other rather than to their birth families" (88). As Helena Michie has explored in her work on Victorian honeymoons, however, re-definition did not constitute consolidation and stability. Rather, often regardless of actual experience, marriage was "linked to a culturally powerful discourse of climactic transformation in which men, and especially women, were thought to become different people after the imagined sexual apotheosis accompanying marriage," causing "boundaries between husband and wife and between wife and children [to become] blurred" (420). Accordingly, "the female body, once so carefully constructed as a separate entity, became . . . a body whose borders were defined, not by a liberal notion of the self, but by a more diffuse but equally rigid notion of the family" (420). Taking up Michie's suggestion that it might be fruitful to linger on the rituals and locations of such transformation, it would seem that such a moment should, particularly, have a lyrical significance. In her examination of five Victorian marriages, Phyllis Rose insists on a useful – indeed vital – blurring between the literary and the material experience of marriage; claiming that the act of choosing a mate "make[s] sense, retroactively, of the past and project[s] a meaning on to the future," she suggests that marriage "knit[s] past and future together, and create[s], suspended between the two, the present" (5). Rose names this a "narrative appeal" (19), making marriage the preserve of the novel, which traverses the space between. However, I want to suggest that the vital somatic change that marks the Victorian marriage also makes marriage a site of lyrical debate. In its association with music – with the lyre – and, thus with voice, the lyric is etymologically linked with the body as a source of production. However, that body is also vitally understood as single, even solitary, promoting the unified, unmediated expression associated with the lyric form: writers such as John Stuart Mill confirmed its status as a private, singular utterance by claiming that "all poetry is of the nature of soliloquy" (1: 349), manifested especially in "moments of solitude" (1: 348). The notion of the lyric as the expression of a solitary speaking body was especially pertinent to women's writing in the first half of the nineteenth century; Yopie Prins's readings of Sapphic identification in Victorian poetry demonstrate the lyric's somatic inflection, and indicate its assimilation with a specifically female body culturally understood (in heterosexual terms) as single.⁹ Indeed, even Mrs Hemans (Felicia Hemans) was known to manage her household single-handedly and, as a recent introduction begins by noting Hemans's declaration, "I speak from feeling alone" (Mason 17), the inspiration for her poetry seems to slip between emotion and feminine solitariness. The *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, then, anticipate a change that not only has political and social implications (as well, of course, as loving ones) but lyrical ones, especially

for the poetess. If marriage is the preserve of novels, indeed an opportunity for novels, it is a problem of ideology for poetry as the poem must resolve the replacement of one with two, and the impact that will have on the lyrical corpus itself.

To install a figure of two in the lyric might seem to dictate a pattern of preclusion and domination: feeding into a model of either/or, it too easily settles into a question of male or female at the authoritative centre of the poem’s logic. However, I want to respond to Armstrong’s sense that “‘what thinks’ [i]s the artwork itself, not the individual subject, self, or consciousness” (*Radical Aesthetic* 65), by suggesting that the silence that troubles our readings of the *Sonnets*, but which is a vital dynamic of their text, proves the locus for radical aestheticising of a social and cultural figuration of doubleness: marriage. I point to silence, because at the mid-point of the nineteenth century, it holds within it the action of the singular giving way to the multiple in the specific circumstances of textual production. As such, what we might call “marital silence” may be re-mobilised, away from the model of marriage as prohibitive, to serve as a mark of “in-betweenness” (60) and, accordingly to function as a “transitive, interactive form [from which] new possibilities emerge” (59). Dorothy Mermin’s sensitivity to the way that, in the *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, “the predominance of heavy rhythms and slightly archaic, ‘poetical’ diction work to seal the poem against anything that might break the lyric spell” (145) demonstrates the potential that might be released by finding an aesthetic perspective that works *with* those rhythms, rather than breaking them, and allows us to feel the silences that punctuate “the whole | Of life in a new rhythm” (VII).

The sequence begins in alarm: its much-discussed action finds the poet unexpectedly accosted:

... 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 saidx [sic] = but, there,
 The silver answer rang ... ‘Not Death, but Love.’

The poet’s immediate presumption that this is a mortal calling sets the sequence’s tone of apprehensive caution; yet it is the poet’s response that interests me here. The sonnet’s final couplet (its rhyme scheme shapes it as Petrarchan rather than Shakespearean, but the final two lines can be marked off by content) stages a conversation between love and the mortal poet. This serves as a useful set-piece for identifying the establishment of voice for the sequence. The sonnet opens “I thought”; it continues “I mused”; it proceeds through “I saw,” “I was ’ware,” “I strove” before finally settling into “I said.” A speaker is implied by each of these movements, and yet the action of speaking itself is highlighted and marked on the page by quotation marks. The sonnet is disrupted in this moment as the voice breaks out, disrupting the visual impact of the conversational lines on the page, even as they keep within the iambic pentameter dictated by tradition. However, by marking the speech textually (seen rather than heard in the quotation marks), the rest of the sonnet is implicitly designated as silent. That silence, it seems, is a space for thought, musing, and visions of life. As such, the sense of the sequence as an inscription of female speaking is put into question, partly by the action of marking off speech from the body of the sonnet proper, and partly by replacing such direct expressivity with mediation as this occasion for speaking is one brought on by conversation, by musing in “antique tongue” and by projecting the poet into another self: “I thought once

how Theocritus had sung.” Further, this is carried out in silence, preceding the moment of speaking that comes at the end of the sonnet. The impression that the sonnet (which starts the sequence) gives, then, is of the displacement and deferral of voice, the overlapping of voices, and the convergence of subjectivities. The singular voice of the poet is only an occasional break of the spell.

The phenomenon continues through the sequence: the only other moments that, in fact, record the poet’s speaking are in sonnet XVIII and sonnet XXXVIII; and, again, these are explicitly punctuated. The first occurs when the poet hands over a lock of hair:

I never gave a lock of hair away
To a man, dearest, except this to thee,
Which now upon my fingers thoughtfully [sic.]
I ring out to the full brown length and say
‘Take it.’ –My day of youth went yesterday–

The second on receiving the third in a series of increasingly intimate kisses:

The third, upon my lips, – was folded down
In perfect, purple state! – since when, indeed,
I have been proud and said, ‘My Love, my own.’

These moments of marked speech, in fact, correspond to the actions of bonding, and act almost as the spoken vows of marriage. On handing over the lock of hair, the poet broods on how this represents the end of girlhood, intimating that the movement through the sequence is one towards the marital change. This seems confirmed by the final instance, in which, having received a kiss on the forehead that is described:

O beyond meed! –
That was the chrism of Love, which Love’s own crown,
With sanctifying sweetness, did precede! –

the poet takes this quasi-religious moment as one that marks a movement into possessing rather than retreating from love. Earlier in the sequence, at a moment when the poet marvels at being brought together with a lover so different from herself, she claims, “The chrism is on thine head, – on mine, the dew” (III). At this later moment, the chrism is apparently mingled with dew (as chrism itself is oil mingled with balm), indicating the coming together as a moment akin to religious consecration of the sacrament and thus to the marriage as a human bond officiated by God. That moments of speaking emerge from deep within instances of marital imagery indicates the breaking out of a new voice that explicitly emerges from the sonnet-silence that surrounds it, as Barenboim suggests is the action of music. The voice, then, is both produced by and indicative of the silence that precedes it, in which the sonnet dwells. Yet, the fact that these moments are so explicitly marked on the page indicates their writerly, as much as their spoken, quality, thus infusing the sonnet with the awareness of silent print as a dynamic and, indeed, populous mode. The *Sonnets*’ repeated action of explicitly marking off speech from their more regular rhetorical mode draws attention to the sonnet-as-lyric identification (where the lyric indicates subjective expression) in such a way that only heightens the ambivalence of such a connection: as Eric Griffiths notes, when he counters the suggestion that signs on the page convey the poet’s voice (an essential

physicality), with such signs “he may also convey the absence of his voice which it can be quite as important for us to hear as that individual physical timbre” (63). Indeed, the signs that apparently bracket off the speech from the rest of this sonnet serve only to highlight the provisionality of all speech-identification in written poetry. Yet, it is a provisionality from which textual permanence is derived. Matthew Rowlinson has identified the Victorian period as one especially (and newly) aware of mediating effects of printed poetry. This is understood both to suggest durability – “the literary lyric from the nineteenth century on is a printed form that understands itself variously as preserving, succeeding, incorporating or remaking earlier lyric forms with other modes of circulation and reception” (59) – but also to draw attention to voice as uncanny effect. As such, the mechanics of production surrounding lyric mark it both as silent (as it resides on the page, and is encountered in silent reading) and as dynamically mediated, rather than singularly expressive.

These moments of marked speech in the *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, then, indicate their engagement with contemporary negotiation of lyric as print as they make each poem’s logic hinge on a text-based mark. We might say, indeed, that the spoken instances’ connection with moments of extreme symbolism – the handing over of a lock of hair, the sacramental anointing with oil as markers of the marital bond – allegorise the very logic that underpins the sequence, whereby the establishment of a visible mark – here the quotation marks, but, more pervasively the sonnet-form-as-lyric – substitutes for a voice. The efficacy of the spoken is irrevocably drawn into the logic of the written, and vice versa, creating a chiasmic dynamic best indicated, in fact, by the silence of the page, semantically inflected as a carrier of disembodied voices in exchange. As such, the poems’ situational context of preparation for marriage draws out an implicit link in that action with the symbolic effects of printed voice.

The association between moments of ambivalence between the spoken and the written and moments of marital bonding pervades the sequence. Turning to Sonnet VI, the poem works through the contesting demands about to be made upon the betrothed poet. Indicating an awareness of the two-into-one action that is awaited, but seeking to outmanoeuvre the inevitability that such an action will result (as in Blackstone’s picture) with erasure, the sonnet works its way into a new lyrical dynamic in which one will always indicate two:

Go from me. Yet I feel that I shall stand
Henceforward in thy shadow nevermore
Alone upon the threshold of my door
Of individual life, I shall command
The uses of my soul, nor lift my hand
Serenely in the sunshine as before,
Without the sense of that which I forebore, . . .
Thy touch upon the palm – The widest land
Doom takes to part us, leaves thy heart in mine
With pulses that beat double. What I do
And what I dream include thee, as the wine
Must taste of its own grapes. And when I sue
God for myself, He hears that name of thine,
And sees within my eyes, the tears of two –

The enjambment creates profound instability as the lines work to narrate a course in which the addresser is overshadowed by the addressee, and nevermore individual; yet the line

breaks allow an independence to break out of this pattern of dependence: “Henceforward in thy shadow nevermore” heralds line 2. As the poem reaches into the speculative future – a future in which the addressee has left, yet is bound to remain in the abandoned present of the poet – there is the assertion that the past will remain within it, fixed in the press of the hand (as the hands are joined in the marriage ceremony), forever marking the other on the corpus of the poet and of the lyric in which their bonding is manifest. This oscillation continues as the actions on the part of the poet – “I do,” “I dream,” “I sue” – incorporate and implicate those of the addressee, thus obscuring the action’s subjective source. This effect is intricately tied into the rhythms of the poem in the action of the tenth line. Here, the sight/sound dyad highlights the poem’s written dynamism and its rhythmic gesture at the conjunction of two that it describes.

Line 10 reads, “With pulses that beat double. What I do,” making the centre of the line mark out the “life in a new rhythm” with which the sequence as a whole is concerned. Here, in the conjunction between the hard “t” at the end of “beat” and the sharp “d” at the start of “double” the line’s rhythmic consistency is disrupted. The difficulty of differentiating those two sounds in the mouth throws the stress equally between them, in the service of enunciation. As such, the line’s third foot becomes spondaic, which, in turn, renders the second foot (the second syllable of “pulses” and “that”) pyrrhic. Thus – as the silence precedes the sound – the pyrrhic quietness is rushed over in anticipation of the heavy spondee, which beats the softer pulses that are, nevertheless, its life-blood. Yet, this is a phenomenon of text, which preserves the necessary space between “beat” and “double” allowing this spondaic action. In speech, the words are elided as the “t” gives way to the “d,” producing a *gestalt* between “beat double” and “be double.” However, this is carried back even into the written form of the line as, according to Garrett Stewart, “reading is the displacing without forgetting of one word by the next in the syntactic chain” (7). When this “displacement operates a shade too quickly or too slowly – one word shadowed in passing by its neighbor, partly assimilated to it by recurring in it – the ‘will’ to morphophonemic structure is thus found exerting its full, indeed overflowing, pressure on the written sign” (7). So, the action finds the reader converging their reading and speaking experience of the words, meaning that particularly in silent reading, the “beat” recurs in the “double” (as its logic would support) just as the poet will, from now on, be shadowed and recurring in the other to whom they become conjoined: the poet and the addressee will henceforth “be double.” Held in the middle of this line, then, is the shift between iambic regularity (with a weak stress on “that”) and energetic disruption as steady iambs give way to the stutter of a pyrrhic and a spondee. Inscribed in such a line is the shifting between tradition and subjectivity – the effect of the sonnet as lyric and of the marriage as both public and private promise. It speaks to the heart of a sequence that will “beat double” throughout, finding ways of segueing between the lyrical and the marital. We see in the sonnet, then, an appeal not only to the addressee, but a direction to us as readers: each “I” – the lyrical figuration that most consistently marks one – must be stretched so that it might reverberate – as in the space between “beat” and “double” – to contain two.

By drawing attention to such a shift, the *Sonnets from the Portuguese* offer the experience of loving feeling for the other up for aesthetic consideration, as such bonding reconditions the interface between self and world that the lyrical plane is understood to effect. By moving into a position of two-ness, the self’s confrontation with the world is radically altered and, indeed, brings with it a creatively and politically effective dismantling of that self. As Sonnet VI’s reconditioning of the “I” demonstrates, the poem and the bond that it anticipates attempts

to prevent “the one-sided, privileged term, self or ‘I’ [from] dominat[ing] what is a process of relating, a constant negotiation of in-betweenness” (Armstrong, *Radical Aesthetic* 60). In order to do so, the lyric-as-speech is gradually relinquished, because the printed lyric, silently read, is the condition in which such *in-betweenness* can become immanent (where it would be threatened by individual enunciation).¹⁰ In this way, the sonnet can become a form for marriage (in a way that its tradition has generally overlooked) because its intricate rhyming and rhythmic significance is especially apparent visually (and many of Barrett Browning’s rhymes are, indeed, eye-rhymes in this sequence), meaning that it is a form that seals itself into the page, without holding itself out for other performative contexts, where the figure of two can reverberate without ever settling into a dominating one. Significant here is the way that this effect is seen centrally – in the middle of a line in Sonnet VI. This brings us back to Rose’s sense of marriage as a relationship that, by fixing the end and the beginning – the vow is taken from now until death – deflects attention away from where we are going and points toward where we are now. As such, it figures as a middle space of negotiation, which, in Armstrong’s reading, is a place of dynamic configuration between the particular and the universal. Indeed, some of the most important dynamics in the *Sonnets from the Portuguese* as a whole are found precisely in the sequence’s middle movement, indicating its marital sequencing.

The sequence contains 44 sonnets and it is in the middle four that the turn to two-ness is especially intensely meditated upon. Sonnet XXI revels in the reflective, iterative action of reciprocation. Its joyousness derives from its echoing play as the poem itself enacts that which it desires – the ringing out of repeated, loving phrasing:

Beloved, say again and yet again
That thou dost love – Though the word repeated
Should seem a cuckoo-song, as thou dost treat it,
Remember, never to the hill & plain,
Valley & wood, without her cuckoo-strain,
Comes the sweet Spring in all her green, completed!
Beloved! – I, amid the darkness greeted
By a doubtful spirit = voice, in the doubt’s pain
Cry . . . speak once more . . . thou lovest! Who can fear
Too many stars, though each in heaven should roll . . .
Say thou dost love me, love me, love me – toll
The silver iterance! – only minding, dear,
To love me also in silence, with thy soul.

This is a celebration of excess and an insistence on repetition as a strengthening, securing gesture – one of verdant growth – rather than stagnation and dulling. The repetition of “Beloved” is exclaimed in line 7, at the sonnet’s mid-point, and indicates the middle as itself a reflective line. Coming before it are six lines that align the loving phrases with the coming of the spring as the “cuckoo-song” becomes the zephyr-like “cuckoo-strain.” Dwelling at the mid-point, however, is the memory of past darkness; but this is, once more, enlightened by the stars, revealing the floribunda that the Spring has brought and, in the twelfth line the “cuckoo-song” anticipated in the third issues forth: “Say thou dost love me, love me, love me – toll | The silver iterance!”. This song is brought into iambic rhythm, but its central call

– “love me, love me, love me” – when considered in isolation is trochaic, throwing weight on the loving action:

/ x | / x | / x
love me, love me, love me

The eponymous cuckoo-song, however, tolls out in iambs (cuck-OO sings the bird in rising stresses) creating a rocking rhythm that, within the song, would throw weight on each “me” rather than “love.” The silence with which the sonnet ends, therefore, is pre-figured in the mapping of “love me” as a cuckoo-song that is written in iambs yet heard in trochaic pairs, bracketed by commas. This shifting of weight between “love” and “me” indicates the effort of giving way to a loving bond that asks for a dismantling of the individually subjective: the plea becomes one of loving, rather than loving “me.” Nevertheless, there is a slippage here as the marital bond – which allows for the reciprocated, iterative, reflective chiming that the sonnet celebrates – emerges as problematically generic, as is the cuckoo’s song, even as it gestures at being individually significant. The poem rocks between the generic and the expressive, apparently wondering at its own efficacy even as it asserts its defiance. Its rhythmic indeterminacy, held within the sonnet-structure, intimates the hesitancy of the newly-embraced trying out worn phrases for size, searching for a rhythm that will maintain effective sincerity while remaining recognisable beyond the two between whom they chime. To end on silence, then, perhaps indicates a closing inward into a private system of reference, retreating from the experiment, as translating private love into public form seems fraught with the threat of emptying gestures. Silence, then, can mark a dwelling in possibility, held in mutually enriching suspension, without dropping into speech and losing something by that. This closure is repeated at the other end of this middle movement in Sonnet XXIV, which meditates on the enclosing gesture of love reciprocated:

Let the world’s sharpness like a clasping knife
Shut in upon itself, and do no harm
In this close hand of Love now soft & warm, –
And let us hear no sound of human strife,
After the click of the shutting. Life to life –

The sonnet charts a sonic drawing in as the repetition of “clasping” and “close” finally settles in the “click,” shaped at the back of the mouth, that draws the two inward into retreat (one thinks of the lovers in Keats’s *The Eve of St Agnes* enclosed in the chamber, “The hall door shuts again, and all the noise is gone” 470). Immersed in the silence that has come to indicate their two-ness, the couple’s retreat seems a self-serving gesture, as their ears are stopped to the sounds of strife, yet it is one in which the threat of severance (in the cutting action of the knife) is brought inwards, allowing that this enclosed space between the two is one for transformation and strengthening. It becomes a place of preparation from which new strength may re-issue outwards, as – in a strange mixing of the pagan with the orthodox – the witches’ charm protects the growth of lilies that reach for the immortal:

Life to life –
I lean upon thee, dear, without alarm,
And feel as safe as witches by a charm,
Against the stabs of worldlings, who are rife

But weak to attain us. Very whitely, still,
 The lilies of our lives may reassure
 Their blossoms, from their roots = . . their cups, they fill,
 From Heaven’s amreeta fatal to the impure,
 And grow straight, out of man’s reach, on the hill! –
 God only, who made us rich, can make us poor.

The sonnet is clearly attempting to refashion a self that is strengtheningly double, rather than defiantly individual – it is a voice of marital bonding rather than of pleading or supplicating femininity: singular pronouns release into “us” and “they” as the sonnet becomes a hope for shared endeavour. This is the transcendent approached from within the frame of human relations.

Turning back into this middle phase of the sequence it is bonding and two-ness that is held within these two sonnets’ enclosing gestures and, as Sonnet XXIII marvels at the oddity of being both within and without the self, such two-ness constitutes a re-positioning of the self. Reiterating a preoccupation that pervades the sequence, the sense that marriage puts one in a place where one is both oneself and someone else, the poet is astonished by the profound interdependency of two:

Is it indeed so? – If I lay here dead,
 Would’st thou miss any life in losing mine, . .
 And would the sun for thee more coldly shine,
 Because of grave = damps falling round my head?
 I marvelled, my beloved, when I read
 Thy thought so in the letter. I am thine –
 But . . . *so* much to thee?

Although the words are framed in hesitancy – “Is it indeed so?”; “But . . . *so* much to thee” – between them emerges the awe-inspiring as the poet glimpses, from the safe world of the self, the possibility of conjunction with the other: “I marvelled.” This intimation of an apprehension of the divine develops across the sonnet as when, in line 10, the cuckoo-song echoes again – “Then, . . love me, love! – look on me . . breathe on me! –” – it feels incantatory, bringing forth the poet’s exchange of “My near sweet view of Heaven, . . for earth with *thee!*”. The five ellipses that pulse through the sonnet mark spatial silences as speaking is held off in first a musing, searching manner, then gasping, releasing, and finally in an audacious suspense that thrills through the final embrace. Each carry within them the oscillation between holding back and rushing forward that characterises the threshold position of the betrothed whilst each time reprising the silent (written) epistolary declaration that prompted these musings, as if unable to let it go, marvelling again and again at its possibility. Moments of human interrelation are thus figured as searchingly numinous, heralded and facilitated by hushed silence.

Such association is brought to a pitch in Sonnet XXII – at the centre of the sequence, and titled with a doubling of two (XX and II):

When our two souls stand up erect and strong,
 Face to face, silent, drawing nigh & nigher,
 Until their lengthening wings break into fire
 At either curvèd point, . . . what bitter wrong,

Can the earth do to us, that we should not long
 Be here contented? – Think, . . . in mounting higher,
 The angels would press on us, and aspire
 To drop some golden orb of perfect song
 Into our deep, dear silence. Let us stay
 Rather on earth, beloved, – . . . where the unfit
 Contrarious moods of men recoil away
 And isolate pure spirits, and permit
 A place to stand and love in, for a day,
 With darkness and the death-hour rounding it.

The sonnet gathers within it such intimations of promises and vows that we might feel in it the presence of the marriage ceremony itself, rendering the reader the official and the witness of its conjoining action. The initial quatrain styles this meeting of souls as a sacred event by charting the path from silent contemplation to the ignition of fiery passion. Explicitly, the quatrain's careful ordering of relation – two souls, placed facing each other, with wings outstretched, creating space between them – recalls the exacting prescription provided to Moses by God for the construction of the Ark of the Covenant (Exodus 25.18–22). As such, the prescriptive shape of the sonnet – adhered to here only by ironic elision of “lengthening” – becomes the holding vessel for a covenant between souls. This suggests that what is at stake here – what, indeed, is being staked out between the two figures – is a formal commitment in which both parties partake equally of the promises entered into. Implying that this is a covenant indicates a chiasmic-type relation – I will do X for you as you do Y for me – and, as such, indicates a meeting point or moment of traversal. This installs in the connection between the two souls an essential exchange, rather than submission, which radiates out (as the wings would) from this central point of the *Sonnets from the Portuguese's* sequence. Vitality, this moment of *in-betweenness* falls into silence; it resists the “golden orb of perfect song” that would be pressed onto it by divine or angelic intervention. As such, it retreats from the expressive but, in doing so, produces a heady eloquence. “Think” is the poem's imperative and, by forging a space of silence at its centre, that thinking is done in the sonnet itself, where the bond of marriage as covenant can outwit subjective exertion, pressure, or submission and become itself, “A place to stand and love in, for a day”; in Armstrong's terms, here “mediation creates a space for *coming to know and knowing about that coming to know*” (Armstrong, *Radical Aesthetic* 62), where knowing is a privilege of loving.

All of these moments of two-ness – which are lyrically as well as politically significant – add up to a recalibration of the “liberal notion of self” that Michie finds dismantled at the point of marriage. That this recalibration need end in servitude, erasure, or frustration is not inevitable, this sequence suggests, as its constituent poems work to identify two-ness with a strengthened re-distribution of the weight of the self on the world. As in Sonnet XXIX, in which the poet images her thinking of the other as a binding round of buds and vines – “my thoughts do twine & bud | About thee, as wild vines about a tree,” – only to reconsider that relation, the sonnet as lyric must radically alter when it is prompted by conjugality rather than distance. It submits, in the end, to a letting go of thinking, where thinking is figured as possessive or directive; rather, it gives way to nearness, a relation that can induce mediation and exchange. It is a replacement of the subjective self with a social act, even as the poem hesitates to acknowledge this because it is so radical:

Because, in this deep joy to see and hear thee
 And breathe within thy shadow a new air,
 I do not think of thee . . . I am too near thee.

In 1892, Katharine Bradley, one half of the pair who wrote as “Michael Field,” wrote of the Brownings, “those two poets, man and wife, wrote alone; each wrote, but did not bless or quicken one another at their work; *we are closer married*” (Sturge Moore 16). The analogy draws attention to the dynamic contained in the “Michael Field” signature, which radicalises lyrical expression by being the mark of two rather than one (that of Bradley and her writing partner, Edith Cooper). Although disinclined to read the Brownings’ poetry in “conjugal” terms, the exuberant esteem in which Bradley and Cooper held their friend, Robert Browning, may go some way to explaining their decision to compare their own bond favourably with this then-legendary romance. Yet, in claiming the superior nature of her relationship with Cooper, Bradley does not reject the means by which the Brownings were joined; rather she establishes her and Cooper’s tie more firmly within the marriage paradigm: they are “*closer married*.” Why would Bradley wish to import a relation associated with female oppression into the signature that marks her own, and her partner’s, energised creativity?

The ambition of this essay has been to think through the possibility that marriage – a bond between two, covered by a promise, and fixed by a vow – may be an enabling paradigm, a releasing paradigm that moves into a new space, rethinking the figure of one such that it may become two and, in doing so, become an image of fluid, interdependent strength. In such a perspective, silence – which seems to trope the *Sonnets from the Portuguese*’s anticipation of such a bond – is a dynamic mark, tracing an energetic rethinking of the terms of speaking lyrically. That the images of silence and marital bonding that I have traced in the sequence exploit their position of *in-betweenness* in order to gesture at their radical possibilities makes significant the fact that this sequence was, eventually, published in 1850, the mid-point of the nineteenth-century, which has so coloured our thinking of marital bonds more broadly. To uncover the ways in which this sequence, rather than charting the subjugation of the female in preparation for a secondary role in marriage, thinks its way into advocating reverberative silence as a space for thoughtful strengthening, predicated on the fixing potential of vowed marriage, suggests that, at this mid-point in the century, the publication of *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (in the same year that Tennyson described his “widow’d heart”’s desire to “beat in time with one | That warms another living breast” 2: 401–02) does not constitute the paradigmatic example of the Victorian marriage, but rather an energetic overhauling of its terms. To read the sequence for its enunciation of a singularly female voice is to impose on its mechanisms the “liberal notion of the self” (Michie 420) that dissolves at the touch of the marital bond it anticipates. Such reading promotes the economy of nostalgia (in which lyrical poetry is a preservation area for lost subjectivities), recalling the cultural economy that initially buried the poems in a market that valued the establishment of lyrical subjectivity most highly when it was handed over wholeheartedly to the other as dowry. As I hope to have demonstrated in considering this sequence’s sophisticated awareness of itself as printed product, however, a marital sequence issuing from the mid-nineteenth century is one that issues from a point at which the liberal notion of the self was becoming recalibrated in both private and public spheres. The action of marriage, therefore, could become a locus for the broader re-negotiation of the self as social and culturally mediated. There are questions here that also impact on our own changing times. In 1984 Rose predicted that “perhaps

someday . . . our descendants, looking back at us from a marriage-less, anarchic, free-form or post-modern future, will find our attempts to live parallel lives deliciously quaint” (19). But, in fact, this has not been the case. Marital (or quasi-marital) bonds have been extended to more and more constituents with the establishment of civil partnerships for same-sex couples, making this a time for re-thinking about marriage as a choice, or even an accommodation of human inclination. It might be fruitful to think about how much the choice to be bonded to another could be a choice about fixing the end in order to become free to dwell in the middle, a place of mediation, exchange, play, and socialisation. It may be that this is a productive perspective from which to read the *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, making these the “future years” that could “lend . . . utterance” to the poems’s “full meaning” (XLI). This might transform their hermetic quality even if, as I’ve hoped to demonstrate, those sonnets that speak most intimately to the marital bond are also those that seal themselves into the page as their rhythmic and rhyming logic defies translation into speech. In such cases a reading strategy seems most apposite: a silent mode that can fuse with the silence it encounters may sense how such moments are deeply private, yet are anticipating the readings they will receive.

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NOTES

1. All quotations are taken from Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh and Other Poems*. This edition is based on the British Library manuscript notebook and preserves its textual idiosyncrasies.
2. See also Billone.
3. It is worth noting that the Brownings’ marriage proceeded on an idiosyncratic footing in terms of its rearrangement of established legal practice. Browning insisted on fixing a marriage settlement that excepted Barrett Browning from the more usual (at least until the 1884 Married Women’s Property Act) arrangement whereby everything she owned would become Browning’s on marriage, thus outmanoeuvring the legal position outlined by Blackstone. Barrett Browning mentions the effects of the settlement in a letter written to her sister Arabella Moulton-Barrett in May 1847 (Kelley and Lewis 14: 218). See also Forster (210).
4. Rossetti objected to what she sensed as a failure on Barrett Browning’s part to use her sequence to establish a satisfactory and “tender” portrait of woman: “had the Great Poetess of our own day and nation only been unhappy instead of happy, her circumstances would have invited her to bequeath to us, in lieu of the ‘Portugese Sonnets’, an inimitable ‘donna innominata’ drawn not from fancy but from feeling, and worthy to occupy a niche beside Beatrice and Laura” (229). (Happiness is a euphemism for marriage.)
5. O’Gorman develops this perspective by tracing the translation of “lowness or inferiority” into self-possession as “the poet who cannot quite accept that she *is* loveable is also the one who sets the terms by which she should be loved” (29).
6. Phelan’s study of the nineteenth-century sonnet explores how “women writers continue[d] to find the form congenial for a number of reasons, . . . perhaps most importantly its association with an interior and often secret life of longing and desire” (6), and describes a tradition of secrecy that “dominates” women’s poetry in the early nineteenth century, allowing “the retention of a privileged site of encoded personal utterance in the sonnet” (47).
7. Charlotte Smith, one of Barrett Browning’s significant female sonneteering precursors, produced a series, beginning in 1784, of *Elegiac Sonnets*, notable for their establishment of a poetic subjectivity predicated on heightened sensitivity to emotional turmoil and despair.

8. Indeed, Mermin finds the poems stifling for these reasons: they are “awkward, mawkish, and indecently personal: in short embarrassing” because of an inherent mismatch between “amatory convention and Victorian courtship,” making readers “assume . . . that what is not conventional is autobiographical, merely personal, mawkishly ‘sincere’” (140).
9. See Prins.
10. Clearly, this sense of immanent *in-betweenness* is indebted to Griffiths’s contention that “the intonational ambiguity of a written text may create a mute polyphony through which we see rather than hear alternatively possible voicings, and are led by such vision to reflect on the inter-resonance of those voicings” (66).

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