

**NOT AN ELOPEMENT—JUST A PRIVATE  
MARRIAGE**  
**ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING**  
**(1806-1861)**



**L**ike the young Jane Welsh, the young Elizabeth Barrett is a woman of scholarly disposition who adores her father and is devoted to the study of a difficult language. She is also a poet with a steadily increasing reputation, and after she becomes an invalid she expects to spend the rest of her life with her family and has no thought of marriage.

When Jane Welsh receives a proposal from Thomas Carlyle, her difficulty in saying Yes is due to his poverty and lower social standing. When Elizabeth Barrett and her fellow poet Robert Browning, who have both planned to remain single, are overtaken by a mutual passion, Elizabeth for a time holds back, partly for fear of stifling Robert's genius by burdening him with a woman of fragile health six years his senior, and partly from her terror of defying her beloved father's extreme antipathy to the marriage of any of his nine surviving children: she knows that he will disown her.

Why Edward Barrett Moulton-Barrett (usually referred to as Mr. Barrett) tries to prevent his daughters and sons from marrying has been much discussed. Although he strictly governs their lives, he is not the monstrous tyrant of later legend. He is a loving father who plays cricket with his boys, is proud of his eldest daughter's poems, and sends three sons to Universities. The Reform Bill of 1832 wins his favour, and he discusses his liberal political views with his family. He is a devout Low Church Protestant but supports Catholic Emancipation. When his admired Edward Irving's invocation of the Holy Spirit draws from the mouths of some worshippers terrifying noises that send congregants rushing for the exit, he has the good sense to jump on a bench and warn them that their panic could

cause them to be crushed. In 1832, a decline in his fortunes compels him to sell his Herefordshire home, and his departure is a cause of great sorrow to the local cottagers. Why should such a man, who has himself married and fathered twelve children, so loathe the idea of the latter having their own families?

Before and after her marriage, Elizabeth refers to a certain “peculiar-ity” in her father. In a letter to Robert (all her letters to him precede their union), she asks him “to comprehend how there may be an eccentricity and obliquity in certain relations and on certain subjects, while the general character stands up worthily of esteem and regard—even of yours.” Their cousin John Kenyon, a man of Mr. Barrett’s own generation, asserts, she says, “that it is monomania—neither more nor less.” Her father insists that “the law and the gospel” inculcate “passive filial obedience,” and she tells how,

Only the other day, there was a setting forth of the whole doctrine, I hear, down stairs—‘passive obedience, and particularly in respect to marriage.’ One after the other, my brothers all walked out of the room.

In a later letter, she refers to the position of her sister Henrietta, the willing object of their cousin Surtees Cook’s courtship:

Yesterday Henrietta told me that Lady Carmichael, a cousin of ours, met her at the Royal Academy and took her aside to ‘speak seriously to her’ ... to observe that she looked thin and *worried*, and to urge her to act for herself..to say too, that Mrs. Bayford, an old hereditary friend of ours, respected by us all for her serene, clear-headed views of most things,—and ‘of the strictest sect,’ too, for all domestic duties,—‘did not like, as a mother, to give direct advice, but was of opinion that the case admitted certainly and plainly of the daughter’s acting for herself.’

Mr. Edward Moulton-Barrett, the great-grandson of Elizabeth’s brother Alfred, concludes that, in addition to his shrinking from any diminution of his family circle, “in his religious belief the doctrine of original sin had become equivalent to procreation.” There is evidence to support this view. Shortly before they marry, Elizabeth writes to Robert, “Once I heard of his saying of me that I was ‘the purest woman he ever knew,’ and she adds, “I understood perfectly what he meant by *that*—viz.—that I had not troubled him with the iniquity of love affairs, or any impropriety of seeming to think about being married.” After he has discovered his mistake, he tells

the pleading John Kenyon, "I have no objection to the young man, but my daughter should have been thinking of another world."

The course of Elizabeth's extraordinary life can be followed in her voluminous correspondence, which is as remarkable for the expression of emotions and convictions as for the evocation of scenes and portrayal of characters. Elizabeth Barrett Barrett, her parents' first child, is born in 1806 and nicknamed "Ba," short for "Baby," but pronounced to rhyme with "Papa." For the rest of her life, this remains her name in the family and with close friends, and it forms the signature of many of her letters. The Barretts' second child, Edward, is born in 1807 and is known as "Bro." In due course, his father engages a tutor to start him on the study of Latin and Greek, and Elizabeth decides to learn with him. When he goes away to school at Charterhouse, she continues her studies alone. She remains devoted to Bro, the only member of the household who shares her classical preoccupation, and apparently loves him at least as passionately as she loves her father.

Elizabeth is also a precocious poet, and, to celebrate her fourteenth birthday, her father proudly has fifty copies printed of her epic in heroic couplets, *The Battle of Marathon*. Six years later, this is followed by the publication of another long poem, *An Essay on Mind*, which draws the attention of two Greek scholars, the famous Uvedale (later Sir Uvedale) Price and the blind Hugh Stuart Boyd. With both of them, she enters into correspondence.

The first serious sign that Elizabeth suffers from fragile health comes in 1821, when she is the only one of the three Barrett sisters who fails to recover from a painful and rather mysterious indisposition. The shock of her mother's premature death in the succeeding year may have aggravated her condition. Henceforward, she is always liable to lapse into an invalid state and is especially vulnerable to winter cold and wet. It is possible that she suffers from tuberculosis, and there may well be a psychological dimension to her ill health. Her fragility, however, does not prevent her from making frequent neighbourhood excursions, and, on one of these, in March 1828, she overcomes her shyness sufficiently to take advantage of a lucky opportunity to meet the blind Mr. Boyd. He is a married man twenty-five years her senior, and he has a daughter who becomes a friend of her sister Arabella, whose name is usually shortened to Arabel. The acquaintance between the young woman and the older man develops into an ardent friendship as they read and discuss the Greek classics and the poetry of the Greek Church Fathers, so much so that for some years her meetings and correspondence with Mr. Boyd constitute one pole of her existence, while her happy home life with her father and siblings constitutes the other.

Mr. Barrett is a businessman whose fortune centres on the family's estate in Jamaica. In 1832, financial stress compels him to sell his palatial house, Hope End, and in August of that year he moves the family to Sidmouth on the south coast of Devonshire. Here Elizabeth delights in the "thatched cottages with verandas and shrubberies, and sounds from the harp or piano coming through the windows." She discovers that,

When you stand upon any of the hills which stand round Sidmouth, the whole valley seems to be thickly wooded down to the very verge of the sea, and these pretty villas to be springing from the ground almost as thickly and quite as naturally as the trees themselves.

Although she takes pleasure in the quiet charm of the countryside as well as the contrasting "grandeur" which "is concentrated upon the ocean," Elizabeth finds little congenial, intellectual company at Sidmouth. The only exception is that of the Congregationalist clergyman George Barrett Hunter, whose preaching appeals to both her and her father and who enriches his piety with literary interests. After three years on the coast, Mr. Barrett moves his family again, this time to London, where their cousin John Kenyon, a kind and wealthy man, who moves in the literary world, introduces the thirty-year-old Elizabeth, despite her nervousness, to the fifty-one-year-old authoress Mary Russell Mitford, who becomes a much loved friend.

In May 1838, the Barretts at last move into the large London house which is to be their permanent home and is consequently to become famous in literature as 50, Wimpole Street. In the same year, Elizabeth brings out *The Seraphim, and Other Poems*, the first volume which her father allows her to have published under her own name. It is widely reviewed and establishes her reputation as an important poet. Unfortunately, however, exchanging the mild climate of Sidmouth for the challenging weather of London, with its scorching summers and damp, freezing winters, has a corrosive effect on her lungs. When the spring and summer of 1838 bring no improvement, the eminent Dr. Chambers who attends her insists she needs a gentler winter than the capital's. After only three months in Wimpole Street, Elizabeth, accompanied by her siblings Bro and George, goes to sojourn in Torquay, which, like Sidmouth, is on the south coast of Devon. Also in attendance is her personal servant, Elizabeth Crow, whom she can engage because in 1830 she receives a legacy from her paternal grandmother, which allows her, unlike the rest of the Barrett children, to have the blessing of a private income. After the end of 1837, this income is

augmented by a further legacy, this time from her much cherished paternal uncle, Samuel.

On first arriving at Torquay, Elizabeth stays with her maternal aunt, Jane Hedley, and the latter's husband, Robert. Her health continues to be fragile enough for London winters to be a peril, and her father reluctantly gives in to her pleas to keep Bro with her. The unforeseeable result is that Bro is drowned and Elizabeth suffers the greatest sorrow of her life. Why Bro and his friends, who seem to have been sailing in perfectly safe conditions, should perish remains unknown, but it appears that the shock and the illusion of her own guilt (but for her pleading, Bro would not have stayed in Torquay) so prostrate Elizabeth that she nearly dies. As she slowly returns into life, a literary correspondence with the well-known poet Richard Hengist Horne and Miss Mitford's present of the six-month-old spaniel Flush help her recovery. By the end of August 1841, her physicians and her father decide she is just well enough to risk the journey back to London before the cold season. In the following March, she is able to write to Mr. Boyd, "Once I wished *not* to live, but the faculty of life seems to have sprung up in me again, from under the crushing foot of heavy grief."

For the next few years, Elizabeth has a reclusive existence in her upper floor room at 50 Wimpole Street, where she is attended by a new maid, Elizabeth Wilson. Throughout the winter, she remains in that room, guarding her lungs from the east wind. During the warm seasons, her brothers sometimes carry her up and down the stairs to join other members of the family in a sitting room, and when the temperature allows, her maid sometimes takes her outside in a wheelchair. In May 1843, she describes her own room in a letter to Mrs. Martin, who, along with her husband, has been a friend of the Barretts since their days at Hope End:

The bed, like a sofa and no bed; the large table placed out in the room, towards the wardrobe end of it; the sofa rolled where a sofa should be rolled — opposite the arm-chair: the drawers crowned with a coronal of shelves fashioned by Sette and Co. [*i.e.* her brothers] (of papered deal and crimson merino) to carry my books; the washing table opposite turned into a cabinet with another coronal of shelves; and Chaucer's and Homer's busts in guard over these two departments of English and Greek poetry.

Elizabeth continues her literary work, contributing verse to periodicals and annuals, writing a series of papers on the Greek Christian poets for the prestigious periodical the *Athenaeum*, and in 1844 publishing her *Poems* in two volumes. Each night her father visits her in her room and prays with her. As a now famous poet, she is much sought after, but she shuns

meeting with strangers. However, Anna Jameson, a refugee from a failed marriage who has found success writing on art, literature and her travels, by dint of persistence gains access to Elizabeth and becomes her friend. Another frequent caller is Mr. Kenyon, whom Elizabeth is soon to praise for his “tenderness and sensibility” while classifying him as “a Sybarite of letters” and a stranger to “mental labour” and “mental inspiration.” (He has published two books of verse and is to publish a third.)

In January 1845, Elizabeth is excited to receive a letter from a poet six years younger than herself, namely Robert Browning, who is a friend of Kenyon and whose genius she has long admired. She is quite unaware that this simple event will lead to the last fifteen years of her life being as different from what has gone before as a butterfly’s existence is from its cocoon’s.

As the two poets begin a regular correspondence, the brilliant composer of monologues explains the root of his admiration for the work of Elizabeth: “you *do* what I always wanted.... You speak out, *you*, – I only make men and women speak.” At first, they address each other as Mr. Browning and Miss Barrett and write of poetry, the poetic vocation, and their admiration for each other’s productions. After about two months, Elizabeth starts to disclose her discomfort with the restricted, sometimes grief-stricken life she has led even before the illness that now largely confines her to her room, and hints that she needs to escape from such narrow limits to fulfil her potential as a poet. Two months more pass before she tremblingly allows Browning to call on her. Their meeting is a success, and he becomes a regular visitor as well as correspondent; her father occasionally refers to him as “the poet.” In August, Elizabeth writes him a long letter that explains how Mr. Barrett controls his family and what her own place is in his domestic kingdom:

the word ‘literature’ has, with me, covered a good deal of liberty as you must see ... real liberty which is never enquired into – and it has happened throughout my life by an accident (as far as anything is an accident) that my own sense of right and happiness on any important point of overt action, has never run contrariwise to the way of obedience required of me.

Less happy is the position of her brothers,

constrained *bodily* into submission ... apparent submission at least..by that worst and most dishonouring of necessities, the necessity of *living*, everyone of them all, except myself, being dependent in money-matters on the inflexible will ... do you see?

She goes on to insist,

But what you do *not* see, what you *cannot* see, is the deep tender affection behind and below all those patriarchal ideas of governing grown up children 'in the way they *must* go!' and there never was (under the strata) a truer affection in a father's heart..no, nor a worthier heart in itself.... The evil is in the system – and he simply takes it to be his duty to rule, and to make happy according to his own views of the propriety of happiness.... But he loves us through and through it – and *I*, for one, love *him!*

The following September and October are marked by some friction between father and daughter. Dr. Chambers urges the necessity of a warm winter climate for Elizabeth and recommends that of Pisa. Mr. Kenyon counsels her to go there, and her brother George pleads on her behalf, but Mr. Barrett resists, and after a period of uncertainty she informs Robert there is no hope of his meeting her there: "What passed between George and Papa there is no need of telling: only the latter said that I 'might go if I pleased, but that going it would be under his heaviest displeasure.'" This she would endure but she cannot travel without siblings and she will not, she insists, "run the risk of exposing my sister and brother to that same displeasure." She laments that "The bitterest 'fact' of all is, that I had believed Papa to have loved me more than he obviously does."

Having fallen deeply in love, Elizabeth can hardly have presented a completely unchanged appearance to those about her. With some unconscious exaggeration, she thanks Robert for reviving her spirit, claiming, "I had done *living*, I thought, when you came and sought me out!" Alluding later to her drowned brother, she declares, "I, who had my warmest affections on the other side of the grave, feel that it is other wise with me now – quite otherwise."

In their letters, each expresses much anxiety about the other's health. Robert suffers from incapacitating headaches, and when he acknowledges his indebtedness to her comments on his manuscript poems, she becomes anxious that these are driving him back to work when he should be resting. They discuss books, Robert writes of his social life, and Elizabeth warns him that "from the moment of a suspicion entering *one* mind, we should be able to meet never again in this room" and "letters of yours, addressed to me here, would infallibly be stopped and destroyed." Her sister Henrietta is in a plight similar to her own. Henrietta's suitor, their military cousin Surtees Cook, is allowed to visit as a relative, but her father has no notion that he comes to woo.

Robert's weekly visits to Elizabeth have become an accepted feature of life at the house, but when these cease to satisfy the lovers, they must make their increased frequency inconspicuous. Robert receives letters warning that some friend or relative is about to visit and that he may be seen; readers have the pleasure of following the anxious manoeuvres of the two poets as they plot, like an illicit couple in a comedy, how to secure another meeting. Discussing, on 3 July 1846, the possible time of some relatives' arrival, Elizabeth calculates,

If at one ... Papa will be in the house and likely to stay in it all day after..which would be a complication of disadvantages for us, and if at three ... why even so, my aunt would 'admire' a little the reason of my not seeing her at once, and there would be questions and answers à faire frémir. So dearest dearest, I must try to live these two days more without seeing you.

At times she feels guilty for resenting visitors who keep them apart—even Mr. Kenyon, who peers at her through "his all-scrutinizing spectacles."

By great good luck, the London winter of 1845-1846 is exceptionally mild, and in January, when Elizabeth surprises the family by walking down the stairs instead of being carried, she agrees, in spite of her fears of burdening Robert and blocking his genius from coming to full fruition, that should she still be as well in the summer she will marry him and they will go to Italy. As the year advances, her strength increases, and she is able to undertake excursions. In June she brings Robert dog-roses from Hampstead Heath, and in August Mr. Kenyon takes her and her sister Arabel to observe the arrival of the Birmingham train drawn by its giant locomotive: a "great roaring, grinding Thing..a great blind mole, it looked for blackness."

As the return of the cold approaches, rising suspense pervades the letters. Preparations must be made for marriage and flight, and any fore-knowledge that could lay family or friends open to a charge of complicity must be avoided. Mr. Kenyon seems to suspect that there is more than friendship here, and Aunt Jane Hedley thinks her niece has some unrevealed plan, but contents herself with saying, "Only *don't be rash*—that is my only advice to you." Any meeting between Elizabeth and her future parents-in-law is too dangerous, but Robert assures her he has been open with his family: "I spoke the simple truth about your heart—of your mind they knew something already—I explained your position with respect to your father." Elizabeth later writes to her sisters, "His father considered him of age to judge, and never thought of interfering."

Elizabeth must continue to dissuade Robert, who is no lover of subterfuge, from approaching Mr. Barrett. His coming to know of their engagement is her greatest fear: "Remember that I shall be *killed*—it will be so infinitely worse than you can have an idea." She has already disclosed what happened "years ago" when the far robuster Henrietta admitted merely to a romantic attachment:

how she was made to suffer. Oh, the dreadful scenes! and only because she had seemed to feel a little.... I hear how her knees were made to ring upon the floor, now! she was carried out of the room in strong hysterics, and I, who rose up to follow her, though I was quite well at that time and suffered only by sympathy, fell flat down upon my face in a fainting-fit.

As the time for the execution of the plan nears, it is threatened by Mr. Barrett's sudden decision to move the family temporarily to the country, where they will be far from the needed railway, while the Wimpole Street house is cleaned and painted. This leaves a narrow window for escape. A year earlier, Wilson, Elizabeth's maid, seemed disappointed when the plan for travelling to Pisa was abandoned; consolation is now at hand. On the eve of her wedding, Elizabeth reveals what she is about to do, and next day, 12 September 1846, Wilson accompanies her to St. Marylebone Church and serves as one of the two witnesses at the ceremony. Robert brings his cousin James Silverthorne to serve as the other. After the service, the groom lets the bride go with Wilson to the home of the approving Mr. Boyd, the only friend she has confided in, to recover her self-possession. From there, she is collected by her unknowing sisters and brought back to spend a final week at Wimpole Street, during which she and Robert have some fear that a notice of their marriage may appear in a newspaper.

Happily, the newlywed couple have not transgressed against any rule of Victorian propriety, but Mrs. Jameson has recently joked that an elopement—that is, a flight together preceding marriage—would be her best means of escape, and this draws from Elizabeth the comment, "But, dearest, nobody will use such a word surely to the *event* ... surely nobody will use such a word." To her sisters, she points out, "There was no elopement in the case, but simply a private marriage."

On the day after her wedding, Elizabeth writes to her husband:

Beseech for me the indulgence of your father and mother, and ask your sister to love me. I feel so as if I had slipped down over the wall into somebody's garden—I feel ashamed. To be grateful and affectionate to them all, while I live, is all that I can do.

She adds, "I did hate so, to have to take off the ring!"

Exactly a week after the wedding day, having deposited letters to her family in the mail, Elizabeth slips out of the house unseen with Wilson and with her spaniel, Flush. They meet Robert, who takes them by train to Southampton, where they board a vessel that sets sail that evening for Le Havre.

From this point on, husband and wife are never apart for long enough for them to write to each other, but a portrait of Robert and a chronicle of their marriage is present in the letters Elizabeth sends to friends and relatives. Her nervous exaltation and excitement at having escaped from her father's rule flashes out in what she writes to Arabel from Paris. In the diligence, that carries them from Le Havre to Rouen, she says,

we had the coupé to ourselves..we three..and it was as comfortable and easy as any carriage I have been in for years — now five horses, now seven ... all looking wild and loosely harnessed ... some of them white, some brown, some black, with the manes leaping as they galloped, and the white reins dripping down over their heads..such a fantastic scene it was in the moonlight! and I who was a little feverish with the fatigue and the violence done to myself, in the self control of the last few days, began to see it all as in a vision and to doubt whether I was in or out of the body.

When they arrive at Paris, they have the good fortune to encounter Mrs. Jameson:

She came with her hands stretched out and eyes opened wide as Flush's ... 'Can it be possible? Is it possible? You wild dear creatures! You dear abominable poets! Why what a *ménage* you will make!... But he is a wise man in choosing so and you are a wise woman, let the world say as it pleases!'

As Mrs. Jameson is going to Italy, she undertakes to accompany them and help Robert and Wilson care for Elizabeth. The party diverges from its planned route so that Mrs. Jameson can visit the cathedral at Chartres, which she needs to examine for her current project, the book *Sacred and Legendary Art*. By the time they reach Pisa, this lady observes that Elizabeth is no longer the ghostly figure she was at Paris. Writing in November to the Barrett family's friend Mrs. Martin, the latter is able to report:

As to our domestic affairs. it is not to *my* honour and glory that the 'bills' are made up every week and paid more regularly 'than

bard beseems,' while dear Mrs. Jameson laughs outright at our miraculous prudence and economy, and declares that it is past belief and precedent that we should not burn the candles at both ends.

Mrs. Jameson has hinted at Paris that a bit of prose might be useful in the two poets' lives, but her caution has proved unnecessary. Before leaving Pisa, that true friend promises to come to Elizabeth from anywhere in Italy should she fall ill.

As the Brownings travel, the new wife has her first sight of her husband in a social setting. When the party reaches Roanne, in central France, she writes of him to her sisters, "he encases us from morning till night—thinks of everybody's feelings ... is witty and wise..(and foolish too in the right place) charms cross old women who cry out in the diligence 'mais, madame, mes jambes!' talks Latin to the priests." She observes that "He has won Wilson's heart."

Robert, who was "in a fit of terror" about his wife's condition at Paris and very thankful for Mrs. Jameson's help, does not falter in his care of his fragile bride. At Orleans, where she receives her father's letter accusing her of selling her soul for genius and announcing that in his eyes she is dead, he assures her, "Our Father who is in Heaven will judge us more gently." She finds herself, she says, "carried up and down stairs against my will," and when they disembark at Genoa, and she is too tired to visit the cathedral, he refuses to go without her. Despite her fatigue, however, she has proved on the voyage to be a better sailor than her husband, her maid, or Mrs. Jameson.

Her father's hateful denunciation is what Elizabeth has expected and dreaded, while the kindly letters from her sisters are what she has foreseen and longed for. What both astonishes and dismays her is the angry rejection by her six brothers, who rashly and wrongly assume that Robert has married her for her meagre income and roundly condemn her for acting secretly. They cannot see the vulnerability that she explains to Arabel: "Oh, in any position except my own peculiar one, I would have asked.. of course..but in my state of nervous weakness, I had not fortitude for the dreadful scenes and the resolute courage—I could not have held out, I am certain." Henrietta, who relishes visits and parties and takes advantage of Mr. Barrett's absence to polka, and Arabel, who is to dedicate her mature years to such good works as the education of pauper children in her Ragged School, now engage in loving correspondence with Elizabeth. But of her six brothers, not one fails to break off contact: not shy, awkward "Stormie" (Charles), who "naturally takes the part of every party or person attacked by others"; not staid George, who practises as a barrister and

who begged her father to let her winter in Pisa; not Alfred, who is capable of angering his father, or Henry, who can risk paternal wrath by an unannounced absence from home; not "Sette" (Septimus), who just before his sister's departure recovers Flush from dog-snatchers holding him for ransom; not "Occy" (Octavius), who has himself artistic leanings and practises architectural drawing under Sir Charles Barry.

Outside the Barrett household, some people are kinder. She transcribes for her sisters Mr. Kenyon's defence of her conduct: "the very peculiar circumstances of your case have transmuted what might otherwise have been called 'Imprudence' into 'Prudence,' and apparent wilfulness into real necessity." To Elizabeth's relief, her intimate friend Mary Russell Mitford, a middle-aged spinster, also takes her side, as does her beloved "Trippy" (Mary Trepsack), a woman of mixed race who was formerly her paternal grandmother's companion and now "has the privilege of scolding everybody in the house when she is out of humour." In the case of the highly critical "Bummy" (her maternal aunt Arabella Sarah Graham-Clarke), it is Elizabeth's turn to make allowances because "she has lived too long in a different mould." Mr. and Mrs. Martin, however, approve of the marriage and are rewarded with a long letter about the courtship, flight, and arrival in Italy.

Even on the Continent, where the Brownings live during the fifteen years remaining to Elizabeth, the cold season can bring hardship, and she is sometimes confined within doors for weeks at a time. Their first winter, which they spend in Pisa, brings unexpectedly low temperatures—the city has its first snow in five years. Next spring, the Brownings, taking Wilson, move to Florence, where they soon take a commodious apartment in the stately Palazzo Guidi, an apartment which, during all their travels, Elizabeth thinks of as home. It is the Casa Guidi of her 1851 collection *Casa Guidi Windows*. The winters of 1851-52 and 1855-56 the family spends in Paris; for those of 1853-54, 1858-59 and 1860-61, they seek warmth further south in Rome. Much as Elizabeth loves Florence, to which they always return, she cannot endure its summer heat, so they take refuge in cooler places. Three times, they make uneasy visits to England, where they see Elizabeth's sisters and her now reconciled brothers, and Robert's sister and father.

The fifteen Continental years yield the richest part of the correspondence. During this period, the couple have a son called Wiedeman or more often Penini, Wilson has a remarkable life of her own, and the Brownings, like Byron before them, side with the Italians in their struggle for freedom from the mixture of direct and indirect bondage to Austria imposed on their constituent states after the defeat of the Emperor Napoleon. Elizabeth is passionate, too, about the potential of that Emperor's nephew,

Louis-Napoleon (later Napoleon III), ruler of France and supporter of Italy. Less happily, she is swept up in the craze for spiritualism, which sweeps across the United States and Europe in the middle of the nineteenth century. Amongst all their other concerns, husband and wife continue to be productive poets. “We neither of us,” Elizabeth informs Henry Chorley, “show our work to one another till it is finished.” While he composes his masterly collection *Men and Women*, she enjoys the triumph of *Aurora Leigh*.

For a long time after their arrival in Italy, Elizabeth finds she has to “drive Robert out for his hour’s solitary exercise,” so diligent is he in his care of her. From Florence, she writes to Miss Mitford, “I can’t make Robert go out a single evening, not even to a concert, nor to hear a play of Alfieri’s, yet we fill up our days with books and music (and a little writing has its share), and wonder at the clock for galloping.” When their well-travelled Italian manservant Alessandro lectures Wilson on the immorality of the British, he

bids her ‘not to take her ideas of English domestic life from the Signor and the Signora – who were quite exceptions – he never saw anything like *their* way of living together certainly, though he had been to Paris, and been in London, and been in Germany ... for a Signor to be always sitting with his wife in that way, was most extraordinary.’

When the Brownings reside in Paris, which has a cultural life Italy cannot match, Robert does go into company and visitors call on Elizabeth, as they do later in Rome. In Paris, Elizabeth finds kinds of pleasure that differ from the comfortable calm that makes her happy in Florence. Coming back to the French capital from Venice during Louis-Napoleon’s presidency, she reflects:

Well, now we are in Paris and have to forget the ‘*belle chiese* [beautiful churches];’ we have beautiful shops instead, false teeth grinning at the corners of the streets, and disreputable prints, and fascinating hats and caps, and brilliant restaurants, and *M. le Président* in a cocked hat and with a train of cavalry, passing like a rocket along the boulevards to an occasional yell from the Red.

The city of canals she has left enraptures her as it has so many:

Venice is quite exquisite; it wrapt me round with a spell at first sight, and I longed to live and die there – never to go away. The gondolas, and the glory they swim through, and the silence of the population, drifted over one’s head across the bridges, and the

fantastic architecture and the coffee-drinking and music in the Piazza San Marco.

Florence, in contrast, has its limitations:

I love my Florence. I love that 'hole of a place,' as Father Prout called it lately – with all its dust, its cobwebs, its spiders even, I love it, and with somewhat of the kind of blind, stupid, respectable, obstinate love which people feel when they talk of 'beloved native lands.' I feel this for Italy, by mistake for England.

(Father Prout is the pseudonym of the Irish journalist Francis Mahoney.)

The Brownings' experience of Rome is marred at the outset. In November 1853, they arrive in high spirits ready to explore the centre of the Classical world only to find themselves called to the deathbed of a little boy, the son of their friend the American sculptor William Wetmore Story. Elizabeth admits to Miss Mitford,

I am horribly weak about such things. I can't look on the earth-side of death; I flinch from corpses and graves ... all this has blackened Rome to me. I can't think about the Caesars in the old strain of thought; the antique words get muddled and blurred with warm dashes of modern everyday tears and fresh grave-clay. Rome is spoiled to me.

With his characteristic eagerness to ease others' suffering, Robert helps the bereaved parents with the preparation of the body and the arrangement of the funeral.

Five years later the Brownings return to Rome but experience periods of exceptional cold. Elizabeth mentions "Fountains frozen" and the north wind but happily reports to Ruskin, "I was able to go out on Christmas morning (a wonderful event for me) and hear the silver trumpets in St. Peter's.... I enjoyed it both aesthetically and devotionally, putting my own words to the music."

The third visit coincides with the people's successful uprising against Austrian domination, and the romance of the city's past is overshadowed by the consequences of Pope Pius IX's fear of loss of papal power. The Brownings are able to get a forbidden newspaper through the diplomat Odo Russell, the unofficial British representative at the Vatican. Elizabeth writes to the expatriate novelist Isa Blagden mentioning their Florentine servant Ferdinando:

not only we ourselves, but half a dozen Tuscan exiles here in Rome who are not allowed to read a freely breathed word, come to us for that paper, friends of Ferdinando's living in Rome. First he lent them the paper, then they got frightened for fear of being convicted through some spy of reading such a thing, and prayed to come to this house to read it.

Elizabeth treats her correspondents to images of Italy's landscapes as well as its cities. Miss Mitford learns of

the exquisite, almost visionary scenery of the Appenines, the wonderful variety of shape and colour, the sudden transitions and vital individuality of those mountains, the chestnut forests dropping by their own weight into the deep ravines, the rocks cloven and clawed by the living torrents, and the hills, hill above hill, piling up their grand existences as if they did it themselves, changing colour in the effort.

Wherever Robert and Elizabeth travel, Wilson and Flush go with them; later they delight to take Penini, too. There are so many descriptions of Flush's behaviour and misbehaviour that in time to come Virginia Woolf, in her book *Flush*, is able to extract his biography from his mistress's letters. At Wimpole Street, when he decides Robert comes courting too often, he bites him out of jealousy and briefly falls out of favour with Elizabeth. By the time they reach Pisa, however, she accuses her husband of spoiling her dog and reports, "Robert declares that the said Flush considers him, my husband, to be created for the special purpose of doing him service, and really it looks rather like it." When they move to Florence, the position is that "Robert never goes anywhere except to take a walk with Flush." On the couple's first wedding anniversary, their dog spoils the day by absconding, and after he returns next morning, Elizabeth recalls, "As it grew darker and darker the tears could scarcely be kept out of my eyes, for Flush has a new collar and I feared that he might be stolen by one of the forty thousand visitors, and so farewell to poor Flush." When the family has crossed the Appenines, she tells how,

Never was there so good a dog in a carriage before his time!... He has a supreme contempt for trees and hills or anything of that kind, and, in the intervals of natural scenery, he drew in his head from the window and didn't consider it worth looking at; but when the population thickened, and when a village or a town was to be passed through, then his eyes were starting out of his head with eagerness.

In 1849, after her son is born, she writes to Miss Mitford:

Flush's jealousy of the baby would amuse you. For a whole fortnight he fell into deep melancholy and was proof against all attentions lavished on him. Now he begins to be consoled a little and even condescends to patronise the cradle.

As might be expected, the child and the dog soon become good friends. Flush lives on till 1854, when one day in June a scream is heard from Penini, who has just discovered the animal's body. Elizabeth informs Arabel:

He died quietly ... there was no pain ... our grief for him is the less that his infirmities had become so great that he lost no joy in losing life ... In spite of all however, it has been quite a shock to me and a sadness. A dear dog he was.

While Wilson seems not to play a major part in the care of Flush, she faithfully attends on Elizabeth in Italy as in London. About four months after the flight to the Continent, she falls ill and is unable to function. Elizabeth soon takes a certain satisfaction in managing to cope:

I have acquired a heap of practical philosophy, and have learnt how it is possible (in certain conditions of the human frame) to comb out and twist up one's own hair, and lace one's very own stays, and cause hooks and eyes to meet behind one's very own back, besides making toast and water for Wilson – which last miracle, it is only just to say, was considerably assisted by Robert's counsels 'not quite to set fire to the bread' while one was toasting it.

Although the Brownings buy their three cooked dinners daily from a trattoria, there is still some shopping to be done, and before they leave Pisa, Elizabeth learns a useful lesson:

They have cheated us in weights and measures, besides the prices of every single thing.... It was that kind Mrs. Turner who set us right in these things, and took Wilson round with her to some shops and showed her how to do some small marketings.

In Florence, domestic life becomes more elegant, with "real cups instead of the famous mugs of Pisa" and "decanters and champagne glasses," and Wilson exclaims, "*it is something like!*" She quickly acquires some Italian

and takes to the city but recoils from the nude statues and paintings and finds it difficult to visit the Uffizi Gallery. Elizabeth writes to Henrietta:

Wilson has at last ... ventured into the gallery: but she only went to the door of the Tribune, being struck back by the indecency of the Venus. I laughed—laughed when she told me. She thinks she shall try again, and the troublesome modesty may subside—who knows?

Some months later, Wilson is not too bashful to accept a proposal from a respectable, handsome, educated soldier of the Grand Duke's Guard named Righi. The Brownings are somewhat uneasy, but Righi promises not to interfere with her exercise of her religion—"for his part, he believed that a christian was a christian"—and Elizabeth reports to Henrietta that "even Robert, who began by disliking the whole matter on account of the difference in religion and country, confesses that he appears to be very good and superior." In February 1850, however, Righi has broken off the match, and Henrietta is told that Wilson "is *over it* completely, which does the greatest credit to her good sense and rectitude of character."

This is not the end of Wilson's marital prospects. In the summer of 1853, the Brownings engage a new manservant, Ferdinando Romagnoli, who is a fine cook and who is soon to become a great friend of their small son. About two years later, Wilson announces her engagement to him. Asking Arabel to reassure Wilson's sister about her prospects, Elizabeth writes, "Happy I believe she will be. A better man, more upright and of a more tender nature, it would be difficult to find than Ferdinando." The great problem is the religious obstacle and especially the Church's usual insistence that the children of a mixed marriage be raised as Catholics. On 10 July 1855, Wilson and Ferdinando are married at the British Embassy in Florence by an English clergyman. Penini, who loves and is loved by them both, joins his parents as a witness, and Elizabeth reflects on how she is doing for Wilson what Wilson did for her.

Ferdinando is very anticlerical and, contrary to Church law, possesses an Italian Bible he will later be afraid to take to Rome; he wants to seal the marriage bond by becoming a Protestant. Elizabeth insists, "He may turn Protestant when he pleases afterwards, but it's our duty *first* to make his marriage legal in his own country." In June the household stops over in Paris on the way to London, and with great difficulty involving an extension of their stay in the French capital, they find a Roman Catholic priest who only demands that Wilson comply with her husband's wishes as regards the children.

During the three months the Brownings remain in England, Elizabeth suffers the shock of discovering that Wilson was pregnant before her marriage. After her first recoil, she rightly thinks of her servant's loyalty and devotion as well as the frailty of human nature, and she hires a temporary maid to serve while the baby is delivered. When the Brownings are back on the Continent, Wilson's failure to write to her husband as diligently as he does to her leads him to claim that a woman's feelings are not as deep as a man's.

Next summer Robert, Elizabeth and Penini again visit England, and Wilson, leaving her son, Orestes, with her sister, goes back to Italy with them. In Florence, with the Brownings' encouragement and financial support, Wilson and Ferdinando take a lease on a house in order to let rooms. Near the end of 1857, Wilson bears a second son, who is named Pylades. Early in 1859, the Brownings are wintering in Rome and have taken Ferdinando with them together with a cheerful, hardworking maid named Annunziata, who is a great friend of Penini. Elizabeth receives an alarming letter from Wilson, who wants Ferdinando back in Florence: she has been told that Annunziata has a bad reputation and is likely to seduce her husband. On being questioned, Annunziata blames the gossip of a Parisian cook with a prejudice against Italian women. Wilson is apparently satisfied, but when the Brownings return to Florence at the end of May, they find that, though no longer jealous, she is a prey to delusions. She has been studying the Book of Revelation and thinks that the world is about to end, that her sons are the product of the First Resurrection, and that there is going to be another virgin birth. While Elizabeth struggles to persuade her she is deceived, Ferdinando is gentle with her. After a few weeks, the attacks of mania stop recurring.

On 2 April 1850, when Penini is almost a year old, Elizabeth writes to Mrs. Jameson, "Dear kind Wilson is doatingly fond of the child." To Mrs. Martin she has already passed on Wilson's report that the boy is "universally admired in various tongues" and expressed her wonder at the health of her offspring: "My child you never would believe to be *my child*, from the evidence of his immense cheeks and chins—for pray don't suppose that he has only one chin ... 'a robust' child I may tell you that he is with a sufficient modesty." When he begins to talk, he distorts his Christian name, Wiedeman (the maiden name of Robert's mother) into "Penini," and this becomes the name by which he is usually known.

Penini grows up bilingual in English and Italian, being "equally ungrammatical everywhere." Elizabeth peppers her letters to her sisters with his childish pronunciations. In his desire for a "brozer," the four-year-old pleads, "Dear papa—I want a baby velly mush" and seeing grownups dancing, he describes the spectacle as "velly funny! just lite playing!" Not

content with his English and Italian, Elizabeth teaches him French and when he is eight starts him on German, while admitting that he knows no arithmetic and observing, "At present, music swallows up most of his time. Not that I grudge it—the faculty is too obviously there to be cultivated. You can't think how the child's face lights up while he plays." Robert, who instructs him every day at the piano, insists he read the notes and not rely only on his extraordinary musical memory.

As Penini approaches the age of eleven, his parents decide it is time to start him on arithmetic and Latin, so he and fifteen-year-old Edith Story, the sister of the boy who died in Rome, take lessons together from the Abbé Venturi, a young and liberal priest who is eager for his country's freedom though sorry that the Pope is unhappy at the prospect. Elizabeth is glad that her boy has a teacher outside the family. She recognizes that she and Robert have closeted him and that, despite his gifts, he is young for his age. She confesses to Henrietta that he "wants more independence and self-reliance than he has attained to by our process—only we trust to the future for that."

While Elizabeth prizes Penini's linguistic and musical endowments and his gift for drawing, she also dotes on his outward beauty. She declares to the young novelist Dinah Mulock, "I shall like to show you my child, as you like children, and as I am vain—oh, past endurance vain, about him." In the autumn of 1858, the Scottish sculptor Alexander Munro is so captivated by Penini's appearance that he asks to be permitted to fashion a clay bust of him. Enchanted by the result, Elizabeth feels, "The likeness, the poetry, the ideal grace and infantile reality are all there." Since he "would not appear to have laid a trap for an order," he allows the Brownings to buy a marble version, after it has been exhibited, for half the usual price.

The attention paid to Penini outside the family greatly expands as he sheds his infant shyness and total dependence on his caregivers. In London, at the age of three and a half, he has to endure the absence of Wilson while she stays with her family for two weeks. Elizabeth reports to Miss Mitford, "I wash and dress him, and have him to sleep with me, and Robert is the only other helper he will allow of." By the time he is five, Elizabeth is able to write happily from Rome to her sister-in-law, Sarianna:

Penini is overwhelmed with attentions and gifts of all kinds, and generally acknowledged as the king of the children here.... You never saw a child so changed in point of shyness. He will go anywhere with anybody, and talk, and want none of us to back him.

In October 1852, witnessing Louis-Napoleon in a procession in Paris is an intoxicating experience for Penini:

Little Wiedeman was in a state of ecstasy, and has been recounting ever since how he called “Vive Napoleon!” *molto molto duro*, meaning *very loud* ... and how Napoleon took off his hat to him directly.

Sixteen months later, Elizabeth describes the boy’s pleasure in the Roman Carnival: “Penini has been several days in the best places throwing bonbons into carriages with great adroitness and having them thrown at him to his immense glory.” When he is ten, rural Siena proves an equally happy place for her son, who, Elizabeth relates, has

made friends with the contadini [peasants], has helped to keep the sheep, to run after stragglers cows ... and to pick the grapes at the vintage – driving in the grape-carts (exactly of the shape of the Greek chariots), with the grapes heaped up round him.

Here his father buys him a pony – and his mother protests, “Robert never spoils him; no, not he, it is only *I* who do that!” – and two years later he is riding the animal in Rome behind the carriage of the exiled young Queen of Naples, who smiles at him. “When charged with a love affair,” Robert’s sister learns, “Pen answered gravely, that he ‘did feel a kind of *interest*.’”

This tender-hearted boy has a love of animals and hates to hear of any being killed. Told that there is a rabbit for dinner, he is unwilling to eat it, and when the family embarks on a steamboat to sail to Lyons, he is terrified lest Flush fall from the gangway. He hankers for more close human companionship, too, and when Wilson has her second child, Pen looks on him as a brother. Elizabeth is not sure that Wilson is wise in letting him hold the baby.

As Penini grows older, his mother’s letters show how his awareness of reality increases. Even at the age of two and a half he astonishes his parents’ friend Madame Mohl, who presides over a Paris salon: when the conversation turns to revolution, he utters the ejaculation “Boum!” By the time he is seven, he realises that his mother’s father is alienated. Elizabeth relates how, during a London visit, “Once he came up to me earnestly and said, ‘Mama, if you’ve been very, very naughty – if you’ve *broken china!*’ (his idea of the heinous in crime) – ‘I advise you to go into the room and say, ‘*Papa, I’ll be dood.*’”

Late in October 1859, Elizabeth having been dangerously ill, her trusted physician, Dr. Grisanowsky, counsels her to spend the winter in Rome.

She agrees, but because a nationalist uprising is expected there, Penini pleads that “for mama to have cold air in her chest would be better than to have a cannon-ball in her stomach.”

Fortunately, Robert’s father adores Penini at first sight, and the affection between the boy and Elizabeth’s siblings is mutual. In the summer of 1855, learning that his eldest daughter is in London, Mr. Barrett moves his whole family temporarily to Eastbourne, and since Arabel is brave enough to slip back to the city to visit her, Elizabeth feels that she cannot refuse to let the unexpectedly willing Penini spend a few days with his aunt on the coast. She is sure the news will surprise her other sister, now herself married to Surtees Cook and disowned: “What will you say to me when I tell you, Henrietta, that I have let this precious child go away from me to Eastbourne with Arabel! Am I an unnatural mother?”

When the Brownings return next year, Mr. Barrett makes the mistake of banishing his family to the Isle of Wight, the very place where Robert and Elizabeth are about to visit the ailing Mr. Kenyon. Elizabeth is pleased her brothers have taken to their nephew but is not quite easy about everything they teach the seven-year-old, who has been, she informs Mrs. Martin,

carried on their backs up and down hills, and taught the ways of ‘English boys,’ with so much success that he makes pretensions to ‘pluck,’ and has left a good reputation behind him. On one occasion he went up to a boy of twelve who took liberties, and exclaimed, ‘Don’t be impertinent, sir’ (doubling his small fist), ‘or I will show you that *I’m a boy.*’

In 1850, Mr. Barrett has faced an open act of domestic defiance. Henrietta, still trapped at 50 Wimpole Street and fearful of marrying the man she loves, has asked her elder sister’s advice. Unperturbed by Surtees Cook’s High Church commitment, Elizabeth points out that his “tried and faithful attachment has a claim on you” and cautiously counsels against prolonging “this long dreary waiting and waiting.” Henrietta marries Surtees on 6 April, and Mr. Barrett announces he “will never again let her name be mentioned in his hearing.” In 1855, her brother Alfred follows the example of two of his sisters by committing the sin of matrimony, but Elizabeth is not quite so pleased this time because there is madness in the family of the cousin he marries, and because she fears that the lady’s looks may be the main attraction. She writes to Mrs. Martin, “Of course, he makes the third exile from Wimpole Street, the course of true love running remarkably rough in our house.”

As Mrs. Cook, Henrietta continues to indulge her taste for social life. Elizabeth teases her, "That's the way you live a retired life, is it? Giving sylvan routs, conciliatory routs between town and county, balls and supper parties!" After her sister gives birth to her son, Altham, Elizabeth is lavish with advice about his education. When she goes on to bear a girl, Mary, Elizabeth makes it clear how much she, too, wants a daughter.

Several incentives lie behind the Brownings' four emotionally difficult visits to England: the duty and desire to see Elizabeth's sisters and Robert's sister and father, the opportunity for Penini to meet his relatives, the chance for his parents to mix with other writers, and the need to see first Robert's *Men and Women* and later Elizabeth's *Aurora Leigh* through the press.

In Paris in 1851, on the way to England for the first of these visits, they meet Alfred Tennyson, whom Elizabeth has venerated from her youth. He invites the Brownings to tea, and soon they meet him and his wife again:

He had Robert's poems with him, and had been reading them aloud the previous evening. We were all friends at once; and really he was more than a friend, for he pressed on us the use of his house and two servants at Twickenham as long as we stayed in England, and even wrote a note (insisting that we should take it) to his servants.

Mrs. Tennyson kisses Elizabeth when they part, but the Brownings take lodgings in London.

Among other authors they meet are Samuel Rogers and the Carlyles. They find that the malice of the once esteemed banker-poet Rogers, which is highlighted in Byron's and Jane Carlyle's letters, has evaporated, and the eighty-eight-year-old man talks and talks, bringing the past to life. Jane Carlyle, Elizabeth describes a year later as "a great favourite of mine: full of thought, and feeling, and character." Thomas Carlyle, whom she long ago termed "the great teacher of the age," she finds she likes "as a man" more than she expected to; she decides, "his bitterness is only melancholy, and his scorn sensibility." He accompanies them back to Paris, where he is to visit Lord Ashburton, and he is glad to leave all the arrangements to Robert: "you should have heard him talk," Elizabeth writes to Arabel, "when Robert was doing our business at the Custom House, &c. — 'Ah, it's a triumph for these fellows to have a poet to do just their will and pleasure. That's the way in this world. The earth-born order about the heaven-born and think it's only as it should be.'"

Arabel's loss of female companionship at 50 Wimpole Street touches the heart and conscience of Elizabeth. Three and a half weeks after Henrietta's

marriage, she writes to Miss Mitford, "I earnestly hope for her [Arabel's] sake that we may be able to get to England this year." The financial exigencies which curb the Brownings' travel figure in the letters, and without the annuity of one hundred pounds that Mr. Kenyon gives them, it would be extremely hard for them to get by. Only after his death in December 1856 are they free from serious financial worry, thanks to his bequest of £11,000.

In October 1851, Elizabeth expresses her gratitude to her brother-in-law for allowing Henrietta and her son to come to London to see her, writing, "I think still gratefully of the vision I had of you (through the supernaturalism of Surtees' kindness.)" The freedom she has in her own marriage is enough to puzzle some of her relatives. Robert's respect for his wife's autonomy is neatly illustrated by her Aunt Jane Hedley's indignation when Elizabeth enjoys seeing in Paris the younger Dumas's play *La Dame aux camélias*, a play widely regarded in England as immoral. Her aunt wonders "'how Mr. Browning could allow such a thing,' not comprehending that Mr. Browning never, or scarcely ever, does think of restraining his wife from anything she much pleases to do."

Probably the most notable instance of Robert's tolerance is to be found in the couple's association with George Sand, as the writer Aurora Dudevant calls herself. This ostentatiously rebellious woman, who smokes in public and sometimes wears men's clothes, is separated from her husband and has taken a series of lovers. Elizabeth regrets that "the poor woman's private character stinks so in the nostrils of French and English accustomed to rose-water perfumed handkerchiefs." The Brownings, to the indignation of Uncle Robert Hedley, visit her more than once. Elizabeth describes the notorious authoress:

She sate, like a priestess, the other morning in a circle of eight or nine men, giving no oracles, except with her splendid eyes, sitting at the corner of the fire, and warming her feet quietly, in a general silence of the most profound deference. There was something in the calm disdain of it which pleased me, and struck me as characteristic. She was George Sand, that was enough: you wanted no proof of it. Robert observed that 'if any other mistress of a house had behaved so, he would have walked out of the room' — but, as it was, no sort of incivility was meant.

Both the Brownings, in their lives and writings, are strict moralists — Robert, his wife writes, "wouldn't sleep, I think, if an unpaid bill dragged itself by any chance into another week" — but they are ready to see, in Elizabeth's words, "A noble woman under the mud." On another subject, however, they are unable to reach agreement. A wave of enthusiasm over the supposed power of mediums to channel messages from the dead sweeps

across North America and Europe, and Elizabeth is fascinated by the proof it seems to offer of the soul's immortality, though she is unimpressed by the spirits' messages and insists: "I certainly wouldn't set about building a system of theology out of their oracles. God forbid. They seem abundantly foolish, one must admit." In true Protestant fashion, she relies on the Bible as the source of religious doctrine, but disappointingly dismisses as "insolent and arrogant" Faraday's shrewd suggestion that the medium's personality may be the source of the phenomena at séances and the movement of tables may be caused by bodily muscles operating unconsciously. Robert, for his part, is staunchly sceptical, and while "He would give much to find it true," he "promises never to believe till he has experience by his own senses." By the time the couple attend a séance in London in 1855, sufficient friction has developed for Elizabeth to warn Henrietta that when she writes she must not "say a word on the subject—because it's a *tabooed* subject in this house." Ten months later, she is able to reassure her sister that while Robert still abhors the notorious medium Daniel Home, "On the subject of spirits generally we are at peace."

When the Brownings are in Paris in December 1851, a different disagreement erupts. France is paralyzed by a parliamentary deadlock, and President Louis-Napoleon resolves the impasse by the shortcut of a *coup d'état* involving considerable loss of life. Because he holds a plebiscite to endorse his seizure of dictatorial power, Elizabeth claims he is acting democratically; Robert wisely holds a contrary view. Eleven months later, the President metamorphoses into the Emperor Napoleon III.

On the cause of Italian freedom, Elizabeth and Robert think and feel alike. In 1854, there is a prospect of Napoleon III's intervening on behalf of the Italians, and Elizabeth reports that "Robert and I clapped our hands yesterday when we heard this; we couldn't refrain." Five years further on, when the Emperor does intervene, the English press is violently hostile to him, and the British Government is no ally. Elizabeth deplors "the disgrace with which the English name has covered itself lately among thinkers of all nations" and adds, "Robert and I are of one mind on the subject." A letter to Arabel records how "a Priest came to our door to ask for contributions this morning. Robert told Ferdinando to tell him that we 'kept all our money for the War of Independence.'" While Elizabeth's belief that Napoleon III is acting purely altruistically is erroneous (France acquires Nice and Savoy as a reward), he probably has substantial sympathy with the Italians as he was associated with the Carbonari (fighters for independence) in his youth.

Robert and Elizabeth can have serious disagreements or tease each other playfully; she can find her choice of headdress rarely satisfies him and can demand he regrow the facial hair he has shaved off; but Robert

remains for Elizabeth, her “Husband, lover, nurse.” Once, however, the dynamic of their relationship is reversed, and for a few weeks Elizabeth has to be the stronger partner. Penini’s birth on 9 March 1849 is rapidly followed by the news that Robert’s mother has died. In spite of his joy at the successful delivery (Elizabeth has already suffered two miscarriages), the new father subsides into convulsive fits of weeping and even stops eating. Elizabeth laments to Miss Mitford:

My husband has been in the deepest anguish, and indeed, except for the courageous consideration of his sister, who wrote two letters of preparation saying that ‘she was not well,’ and she ‘was very ill,’ when in fact all was over, I am frightened to think what the result would have been to him. He has loved his mother as such passionate natures only can love, and I never saw a man so bowed down in an extremity of sorrow – never.

Eventually, Elizabeth persuades Robert to resort to a change of scene, as a result of which they discover the pleasures of the Baths of Lucca, and Robert recovers his self-possession.

At this period, both the Brownings are still writing, but Elizabeth has not yet begun her greatest work. In a very early letter to Robert, she refers to one of his own poems as she announces,

my chief *intention* just now is the writing of a sort of novel-poem—a poem as completely modern as ‘Geraldine’s Courtship,’ running into the midst of our conventions, and rushing into drawing-rooms and the like ‘where angels fear to tread;’ and so, meeting face to face and without mask the Humanity of the age, and speaking the truth as I conceive of it out plainly.

By 1853, Elizabeth is at work on the poem, and over the next three years her letters record the completion of *Aurora Leigh’s* nine books. By the time the volume is published in November 1856, the Brownings, having seen it through the press in London, have been back in Florence for about a fortnight. Elizabeth has been in some trepidation, primarily because the poem touches on prostitution in British cities and portrays a woman whose child is born of a rape. Even Robert, she fears as she is writing the poem, may disapprove, but he applauds it as her finest work. Some readers, on the other hand, are not as broad-minded as her husband: her friend Mrs. Ogilvy reports that English mothers keep *Aurora Leigh* from their daughters, and Elizabeth writes to Mrs. Jameson of “ladies of sixty, who had ‘never felt themselves pure since reading it.’” Mrs. Martin, however, reads and ap-

proves, and Elizabeth, who sees that evils are not mended by being hidden, is relieved that it pleases the devout Arabel, as it does Robert's sister, Sarianna, whom she has found to be "highly accomplished, with a heart to suit the head."

Although the literary and moral assessments are mixed, the book quickly becomes a bestseller. The publishers, Chapman and Hall, bring out four more editions, including one with revisions, in Elizabeth's lifetime. The poem, after being overrated in its own age, has been underrated since. While most of the author's shorter pieces have faded, *Aurora Leigh* is still a most enjoyable and interesting long poem of the second rank comparable in merit to *The Seasons* of James Thomson, *The Task* of William Cowper, and William Morris's *Sigurd the Volsung*. Professor Christopher Ricks regrets that he has not room to include the whole of Book I in *The New Oxford Book of Victorian Verse*.

During her years on the Continent, Mrs. Browning enjoys periods of health amazing to those who knew her as Miss Barrett. The high point comes in the summer of 1849, when she can climb a mountain path near the Baths of Lucca. Reports of her vigour reach Henrietta, to whom she observes:

I don't wonder at your dear visitors being astonished at my prowess. I assure you I astonish myself still more, when I wake suddenly and find myself on the peaks of mountains—or at least more than half way up to their peaks.

That autumn, Elizabeth becomes dangerously ill and suffers a miscarriage. On 1 December, she writes to Miss Mitford, "I am well again now, only obliged to keep quiet and give up my grand walking excursions, which poor Robert used to be so boastful of." In May 1852, "an attack after the ancient fashion" forces the family to delay a visit to England. Four years later, in Paris, she informs Mrs. Martin that the later part of the winter there is unusually mild "and for the last month there has been no return of the splitting of blood, and no extravagance of cough." In July 1859, her health relapses after a political shock: the French Emperor Napoleon III (formerly President Louis-Napoleon), who has intervened to help the Italians against Austria, after winning a victory at Salferino settles for a compromise, the Truce of Villafranca. Not yet knowing there were good reasons for this, Elizabeth succumbs to what she describes as "Violent palpitations and cough; in fact, the worst attack on the chest I ever had in Italy." Nursing her keeps Robert from his sleep for three weeks. In the autumn comes an even worse relapse that causes her to write to Robert's old friend Miss Haworth, "As for me, I have been nearly as ill as possible.... All the Italians who came

near me gave me up as a lost life." She still has nearly twenty months to live.

A little less than fifteen years of married life complete one of the world's great romances. About six weeks before their wedding, Elizabeth writes to her husband-to-be:

My programme is, to let you try me for one winter, and if you are tired (as I shall know without any confession on your side) why then I shall set the mule on a canter and leave you in La Cava, and go and live in Greece somewhere all alone, taking enough with me for bread and salt. Is it a jest, do you think? Indeed it is not.... We could not lead the abominable lives of 'married people' all round – you *know* we could not – I at least know that I could not, and just because I love you so entirely.

As a wife of three months, Elizabeth reminds Miss Mitford of her former "loathing dread of marriage as a loveless state, and absolute contentment with single life as the alternative to the great majorities of marriages." "To see the marriages which are made every day!" she exclaims in one of her courtship letters to Robert, "worse than solitudes and more desolate!" Fearful as she has been that Robert has really fallen in love with her poetry rather than her, she believes that both men and women are lamentably "apt to mistake their own feelings," and the result is often a wretched union in which the partners "virtually hate one another through the tyranny of the stronger and the hypocrisy of the weaker party."

As time passes, Elizabeth's view softens. In May 1847, she tells Mrs. Jameson, "Women generally *lose* by marriage, but I have gained the world by mine." Three months later, commenting to Miss Mitford on Richard Hengist Horne's engagement, she remarks:

Men risk a good deal in marriage, though not as much as women do; and on the other hand, the singleness of a man when his youth is over is a sadder thing than the saddest which an unmarried woman can suffer.

By July 1850, she rejoices to hear that Tennyson now has a wife, and declares, "I believe in the happiness of marriage, for men especially."

On the basis of her own experience, Elizabeth likes to testify that a substantial fortune is not necessary for a happy union (this opinion may owe something to her experience on the Continent, where English money goes a long way). She does, however, feel that before venturing on matrimony a woman needs to "find some one to hold in reverence as well as love." Perhaps she wavers a little on this point when an acquaintance she

is fond of, the radical American feminist writer Margaret Fuller, emerges in 1849 from the siege of Rome as Madame Ossoli. Elizabeth describes how in Florence “her American friends stood in mute astonishment before this apparition of them here” and goes on to say:

The husband is a Roman marquis, appearing amiable and gentlemanly, and having fought well, they say, at the siege, but with no pretention to cope with his wife on any ground appertaining to the intellect. She talks, and he listens. I always wonder at that species of marriage; but people are so different in their matrimonial ideals that it may answer sometimes.

At least this marriage is not open to the criticism which Elizabeth believes is widely applicable to unequal couples:

I cannot but think ... when women are chosen for wives, they are not chosen for companions.... Men like to come home and find a blazing fire and a smiling face and an hour of relaxation. Their serious thoughts, and earnest aims in life, they like to keep on one side. And this is the carrying out of love and marriage almost everywhere in the world – and this, the degrading of women by both.

Elizabeth Barrett feels insulted if not degraded when her Sidmouth friend the Rev. George Barrett Hunter considers it unbecoming for a young woman to publish poetry which receives public notice and charges her with being spoilt by critical praise. All her life, she feels that creative women are entitled to have their work assessed without regard to their gender. In 1841, when she is collaborating with Richard Hengist Horne on a poetic drama, she remarks that everyone will ascribe the weaker parts to the female partner.

It is in the arts, Elizabeth thinks, that women have been most prevented from achieving what it is in them to achieve. While she meets and honours Florence Nightingale, she asserts to Mrs. Jameson:

At the same time, I confess myself to be at a loss to see any new position for the sex, or the most imperfect solution of the ‘woman’s question,’ in this step of hers.... Since the siege of Troy and earlier, we have had princesses binding wounds with their hands.... Every man is on his knees before ladies carrying lint, calling them ‘angelic she’s,’ whereas, if they stir an inch as thinkers or artists from the beaten line (involving more good to general humanity than is involved in lint), the very same men

would curse the impudence of the very same women and stop there.

One creative woman who earns Elizabeth's admiration and affection is the American expatriate Hatty Hosmer, who, she says in 1854,

emancipates the eccentric life of a perfectly 'emancipated female' from all shadow of blame by the purity of hers. She lives here all alone (at twenty-two); dines and breakfasts at the *cafés* precisely as a young man would; works from six o'clock in the morning till night, as a great artist must, and this with an absence of pretension and simplicity of manners which accord rather with the childish dimples in her rosy cheeks than with her broad forehead and high aims.

It is a great leap from a sculptress to a woman who can write on political economy. Harriet Martineau, who is such a woman, is a feminist who holds that women should be in Parliament. Elizabeth disagrees. There are definite limits to her feminism. She believes that women and men have different strengths, that women's "apprehension is quicker than that of men, but their defect lies for the most part in the logical faculty and in the higher mental activities." Not so dogmatic as to deny there are exceptions, she describes Harriet Martineau as "the profoundest woman thinker in England" and as "the most manlike woman in the three kingdoms—in the best sense of man—a woman gifted with admirable fortitude, as well as exercised in high logic."

Regarding a woman like Martineau as a phenomenal exception, Elizabeth has no desire to emulate her. On the one hand, she is outraged when, at Vallombrosa in the summer of 1847, the Abbot of the monastery will not permit a woman to enter the precincts and is unmoved by the disclosure that she is a scholar who has published work on the poetry of the Greek Church Fathers. He "said or implied," she rages to Miss Mitford, "that Wilson and I stank in his nostrils, being women, and San Gualberto, the establisher of their order, had enjoined on them only the mortification of cleaning out pigsties without fork or shovel." On the other hand, she ranks herself among "those weak women who reverence strong men," and she complains to Robert between their marriage and their departure, "you have acted throughout too much 'the woman's part' .... You are to do everything I like, instead of my doing what *you* like..and to 'honour and obey' *me*, in spite of what was in the vows last Saturday."

In March 1856, Elizabeth is feminist enough to support a petition to the Westminster Parliament for a Married Women's Property Bill. She has taken an interest in the proceedings of Parliament from an early age, and

her political views probably germinate from the liberal seed planted by her father. Theoretically egalitarian and republican in her sympathies, she opposes hereditary titles, inherited estates, and Britain's empire in India, but insists on a polity which does not try to suppress the differences between persons. Distressed that Richard Hengist Horne seems to be turning too far leftwards, she refers to Charles Fourier, an advocate of communal living, as she protests:

I love liberty so intensely that I hate Socialism. I hold it to be the most desecrating and dishonouring to humanity of all creeds. I would rather (for *me*) live under the absolutism of Nicholas of Russia than in a Fourier machine, with my individuality sucked out of me by a social air-pump.

Her love of liberty is strong enough to make Elizabeth oppose slavery even when its abolition in 1833 seriously reduces her father's wealth. In 1855, she sharply scolds Ruskin, whom she otherwise greatly admires, for his defence of African servitude:

In regard to the slaves, no, no, no; I belong to a family of West Indian slaveholders, and if I believed in curses, I should be afraid. I can at least thank God that I am not an American. How you look serenely at slavery, I cannot understand, and I distrust your power to explain.

Elizabeth's egalitarianism is qualified by her conception of the free and equal citizen as a citizen who has been prepared for the role: "I would have the government educate the people absolutely, and *then* give room for the individual to develop himself into life freely." Unfortunately she does not apply this insight when she affirms the validity of the plebiscite Louis-Napoleon relies on to justify his *coup d'état* of December 1851. Declaring she is neither a Bonapartist nor a Socialist, she claims, "I am a Democrat," and she writes from Paris in May 1852, "The masses are satisfied and hopeful," and later observes that the President is unafraid to walk on the boulevard without a bodyguard and that in a procession he shows "his usual tact and courage by riding on horseback quite alone, at least ten paces between himself and his nearest escort." Though her claim that his Government is democratic cannot be sustained, there is some truth in her assertion that he is working to improve the lives of the poor and that he seeks "the liberation of Italy without the confusion of a general war."

Britain, too, is no model of democracy at this time, and over the years Elizabeth brings a formidable series of charges against its oligarchic mode

of functioning, its rigid class divisions, and its lack of *joie de vivre*. As early as 1838, she complains to Mr. Kenyon:

We, in this England here, are just social barbarians, to my mind — that is, we know how to read and write and think, and even talk on occasion; but we carry the old rings in our noses, and are proud of the flowers pricked into our cuticles. By so much are they better than we on the Continent, I always think. Life has a thinner rind, and so a livelier sap.

In Florence, especially, Elizabeth finds a happiness she never quite matches elsewhere:

For what helps to charm here is the innocent gaiety of the people, who, for ever at feast day and holiday celebrations, come and go along the streets, the women in elegant dresses and with glittering fans, shining away every thought of Northern cares and taxes, such as make people grave in England. No little orphan on a house step but seems to inherit naturally his slice of watermelon and bunch of purple grapes, and the rich fraternise with the poor as we are unaccustomed to see them, listening to the same music and walking in the same gardens, and looking at the same Raphaels even!

Praising the Carnival, she exudes:

Think of the refinement and gentleness — yes, I must call it *superiority* — of this people, when no excess, no quarrelling, no rudeness nor coarseness can be observed in the course of such wild masked liberty. Not a touch of licence anywhere. And perfect social equality! Ferdinando side by side in the same ballroom with the Grand Duke, and no class's delicacy offended against!

"The mixture of classes," which is "one of the most delicious features of the South," Elizabeth finds also in Paris, along with the high development of the "science of material life"; the latter covers everything "from cutlets to costumes." The codes of conduct are less stifling in this city than in London: "young and pretty women walk in the streets without any sort of chaperonage — while both men and women are more independent of conventions of every sort." Here, above all, one is nourished by "a brilliant civilization."

These countries, however, do have their limitations. After the *coup d'état* in France, "The clash of speculative opinions is dreadful." In Italy, when it comes to fighting for freedom,

One thing is certain—that the Italians won't spoil their best surtouts by venturing out in a shower of rain through whatever burst of revolutionary ardour, nor will they forget to take their ices through loading of their guns.

Moreover, the political and literary censorship in the various Italian states is extremely irksome, and the nation's contemporary literature has lost all vigour: "the roots of thought, here in Italy, seem dead in the ground. It is well that they have great memories—nothing else lives."

For all its faults, Britain still has its national glory, "a nobler, a fuller, a more abounding and various literature" than all but the Greek. Chaucer and Shakespeare, Elizabeth acclaims as "the great fathers" of English poetry. As Miss Barrett, however, she laments that "we have no such romance-writer as Victor Hugo" and later recalls that "When I was a prisoner, my other mania for imaginative literature used to be ministered to through the prison bars by Balzac, George Sand, and the like immortal improprieties." As the works of the great Victorian novelists begin to appear, she proves an enthusiastic reader. She rebukes Robert for disclosing the end of Dickens's *David Copperfield*, and when *Vanity Fair* is published she confesses, "I certainly had no idea that Mr. Thackeray had intellectual force for such a book." George Eliot's *Adam Bede* and *The Mill on the Floss* make her decide, that although the author has an adulterous union with George Henry Lewes, "There is a great good in that woman, I am certain—in spite of everything—great good besides great genius." She comes to admire Bulwer Lytton and, near the end of her life, Anthony Trollope.

As a young woman, she advances from her devotion to the eighteenth century heroic couplet to an appreciation of Wordsworth, whom she ardently defends against his disparagement by the Greek scholar Mr. Boyd, whose taste remains fixed in the older mould. In a letter of 1843 to the American writer Thomas Wentwood, she sums up her view of four of the major Romantic poets:

He [Wordsworth] took the initiative in a great poetic movement, and is not only to be praised for what he has done, but for what he has helped his age to do. For the rest, Byron has more passion and intensity, Shelley more fancy and music, Coleridge could see further into the unseen.

Among the American poets, Emerson interests her for his thought, and she writes of Edgar Allan Poe, "There is poetry in the man ... now and then, seen between the great gaps of bathos."

Elizabeth can be a sharp critic when she feels sharp criticism is called for. She warns Mary Russell Mitford, "that your generosity and excess of kindness may run the risk of lowering the ideal of poetry in England by lifting above the mark the names of some poetasters." To her, "all the Arts are mediators between the soul and the Infinite ... shifting always like a mist, between the Breath on this side, and the Light on that side." When Mr. Kenyon complains that her poetry leans too much towards religion, she replies, "poetry without religion will gradually lose its elevation."

During one period of her childhood, Elizabeth can pray, "O God, if there be a God, save my soul if I have a soul." Once such doubt is behind her, neither her father's perversion of religion nor the arguments of sceptics like Hume, Bolingbroke and Voltaire can undermine her Christian faith. Suffering she regards as necessary teaching ordained by God. The agony she endures after Bro is drowned may be due, she suspects, to her having been too reliant on human love. Tolerant of unbelief while regretting its existence, she writes to Robert of his friend Miss Bayley:

She told me with a frankness for which I did not like her less, that she was a materialist of the strictest order, and believed in no soul and no future state. In the face of those conclusions, she said, she was calm and resigned. It is more than *I* could be, as I confessed.

Elizabeth's faith in a spiritual world is independent of sectarian allegiance. Though she remains firmly Protestant, she views theological controversy as both distasteful and useless. "The command," she reminds Mr. Boyd, "is not 'argue with one another,' but 'love one another.'" She admires the simple worship she often finds among Nonconformists but sometimes recoils from "an arid, grey Puritanism in the clefts of their souls." She spurns any narrowness that excludes appreciation of God's external creation, that has no use for the arts, or that prefers gloom to joy, and she disbelieves in eternal punishment. Five-year-old Penini has never heard the word "Hell."

In Italy, Elizabeth responds to the beauty and devoutness of Roman Catholic services. In 1853, she reports to Henrietta:

I was at S. Peter's on Christmas morning, and having the 'costume de rigueur' — black gown, no bonnet, and a black veil on my head — was admitted to the reserve seats, and saw pope and cardinals and all. The music was sublime, which, with the influence of the place and the sight of the crowding multitudes,

carried me over everything I could otherwise have been schismatical upon.

Elizabeth rejects, on the one hand, Roman Catholic “Madonnaism” and, on the other, Calvinist Predestination, and Protestant opposition to praying for the dead.

The broad-minded eclecticism and spiritual questing of Elizabeth is as different from the High Church zeal of Surtees Cook as from the Puritan Protestantism of Arabel. The latter shares their father’s rejection of the theatre and needlessly fears that Penini may be converted if the Abbé who tutors him is allowed to be in a room with him alone. The two sisters conduct epistolary arguments about religion, but Elizabeth has great reverence for the self-sacrificing spirit in which Arabel devotes her life to serving those on society’s fringes. She writes of her to Henrietta, “Never was there diviner Christian self-abnegation than glorifies her inner and outward life!” but she cautions Arabel against joyless religion and a semi-monastic lifestyle, and tries to persuade her that there are indeed spirits who communicate through mediums.

Elizabeth becomes convinced that each church has some portion of the truth but none has put all the portions together to make a whole. Like Coleridge and Emerson, she is impressed by Emanuel Swedenborg, an eighteenth century scientist turned Christian teacher and biblical interpreter, who maintains that all the features of the natural world correspond to parallel features in two higher worlds, the outer and the inner heaven, and that God’s love and wisdom emanate through all three worlds and are accessible to humans. She urges Arabel and others to look favourably on this sage, asserting, “There are deep truths in him, I cannot doubt, though I can’t receive *everything*, which may be my fault.” She sees in his work a foreshadowing of the spiritualist movement, which, though disfigured by fraud and by failure to distinguish between different categories of spirit, is a manifestation of Divine Providence meant to counter unbelief and to point the way to an advance, through “a Reformation far more interior than Luther’s,” from the reign of the existing churches, which are burdened with fossilized theological formulae, to a new stage of Christianity.

In the Dedication of *Aurora Leigh*, Elizabeth describes it as “the most mature of my works, and the one into which my highest convictions upon Life and Art have entered.” In the four and a half years that remain to her after its publication, she suffers three grievous bereavements and experiences one deep if imperfect satisfaction. Mr. Kenyon lives just long enough to express his appreciation of her masterpiece, which is dedicated to him. He dies on 3 December 1856, and on Boxing Day Elizabeth writes to Mrs. Jameson:

It has been a sad, sad Christmas to me. A great gap is left among friends, and the void catches the eyes of the soul, whichever way it turns. He has been to me in much what my father might have been, and now the place is empty twice over.

If Mr. Kenyon's death brings Elizabeth grief, her father's death the following April brings her emotional desolation. Penini, like Robert, tries to comfort her, and by July she is able to write to Mrs. Martin:

Of the past I cannot speak.... There has been great bitterness – great bitterness, which is natural; and some recoil against myself, more, perhaps, than is quite rational. Now I am much better, calm, and not despondingly calm (as, off and on, I have been), able to read and talk, and keep from vexing my poor husband, who has been a good deal tried in all these things.

Almost as soul-searing as her father's death is her sister Henrietta's, following a prolonged and painful illness. At the end of November 1860, the news of that death reaches her in Rome. Elizabeth wonders that, with all her faith, strengthened by spiritualism, in the soul's immortality, she suffers so much when its material covering perishes. After a little, she again reassures Mrs. Martin of her emotional recovery.

For a time, Elizabeth has twin obsessions: Henrietta's affliction and the perils still facing Italy on its path to freedom. Of the three most prominent Italian leaders, she has very different opinions. Cavour she adores as a noble, far-seeing statesman. Mazzini, the prophet or propagandist, she begins by regarding as a "hero and patriot" who "has not wisdom," but by 1859 she is damning him as a fanatical republican "of a narrow-head and unscrupulous conscience." Garibaldi, the warrior on whom the fate of the South depends, she assesses as "heroic" but "not a man of much brain," and in May 1860 she watches in terror as he leads his "forlorn hope" – a thousand ill equipped volunteers – into Sicily and against the odds defeats the army of the Bourbon monarch Francis. Elizabeth informs Sarianna:

We are all talking and dreaming Garibaldi just now in great anxiety. Scarcely since the world was a world has there been such a feat of arms.... If it had not been success it would have been an evil beyond failure. The enterprise was forlorn than a forlorn hope.

On 19 August, Garibaldi crosses the Strait of Messina to Naples, where he soon puts King Francis to flight and finds himself master of South Italy. Elizabeth, fearing he may have been corrupted by followers of the repub-

lican Mazzini, is much relieved in October, when he hands over his conquests to King Victor Emmanuel, who is, thanks to the statesmanship of Cavour and the military help of Napoleon III, the sovereign of the rest of Italy, except for Venice and the city of Rome. The Pope retains the latter, but the other Papal States have risen and, with the seal of a plebiscite, have joined Victor Emmanuel's kingdom.

Elizabeth's esteem for Cavour is seen in her reaction when he dies on 6 June 1861. She seems to feel it almost as another personal bereavement and confesses to Sarianna:

I can scarcely command voice or hand to name *Cavour*. That great soul, which meditated and made Italy, has gone to the Divine country. If tears or blood could have saved him to us, he should have had mine. I feel yet as if I could scarcely comprehend the greatness of the vacancy. A hundred Garibaldis for such a man.

Twenty-three days after Cavour's passing, Elizabeth at last succumbs to her bodily weakness and herself dies.

In his compilation of 1906, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning in Her Letters*, Percy Lubbock makes an incomprehensible statement about the letters he is editing: "No one will read them for their literary merit." Elizabeth provides her posthumous readers with a rich smorgasbord of news, characters and opinions. They become acquainted with the Barrett and Browning families and many of their friends and servants. They are presented with contrasting pictures of life at 50 Wimpole Street and at Casa Guidi, of the societies of Paris and Venice, of mountain scenes and stormy seas. They see how the united Italy's birth pangs are contemporary with France's search for steady government, and how an ardent Christian faith co-exists with a liberal spirit of tolerance. Uniting and harmonizing all the strands in the letters, and in the life the letters portray, is the enduring love between Elizabeth and Robert that blesses their son and strengthens their creativity.