



Elizabeth Barrett Browning: The Origins of a New Poetry (Women in Culture and Society)

Dorothy Mermin

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Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806-61) was the first major woman poet in the English literary tradition. Her significance has been obscured in this century by her erasure from most literary histories and her exclusion from academic anthologies. Dorothy Mermin's critical and biographical study argues for Barrett Browning's originaive role in both the Victorian poetic tradition and the development of women's literature.

Barrett Browning's place at the wellhead of a new female tradition remains the single most important fact about her in terms of literary history, and it was central to her self-consciousness as a poet. Mermin's study shows that Barrett Browning's anomalous situation was constantly present to her imagination and that questions of gender shaped almost everything she wrote. Mermin argues that Barrett Browning's poetry covertly inspects and dismantles the barriers set in her path by gender and that in her major works—*Sonnets from the Portuguese*, *Aurora Leigh*, her best political poems, "A Musical Instrument"—difficulty is turned into triumph, incorporating the author's femininity, her situation as a woman poet, and her increasingly substantial fame.

Mermin skillfully interweaves biography and close readings of the poems to show precisely how Barrett Browning's life as a woman writer is a part of the essential meaning of her art. Both her personal and her literary achievements are exceptionally well documented, especially for her formative years. Mermin makes extensive use of the poet's early essays, a diary covering most of her twenty-sixth year, and the enormous number of letters that have survived. Ranging from her earliest ambitions through her long periods of discouragement and illness to her happy married life with Robert Browning, this comprehensive study of Elizabeth Barrett Browning is essential reading for students of the Victorian period, English literature, and women's studies.

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