Subversive Ballads in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Poems* (1844)

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"At four and a half," Elizabeth Barrett Browning reminisced, "my great delight was poring over fairy phenomenons and the actions of necromancers…I supposed myself a heroine and in my dreams of bliss I constantly imaged to myself a forlorn damsel in distress rescued by some noble knight.[1] This quote, the earliest literary imaginings of a young poet, provides a point of entry into Browning's later work, a framework for understanding her incessant (and never fully resolved) struggle to find a distinctly female poetic voice. First, Browning's words suggest an early fascination with chivalric ballads, replete, as they were, with a durable set of motifs: "exile and return, love, quest and adventure, family, name and identity, the opposition between Pagan and Christian."[2] Furthermore, the chivalric narrative itself, as Corinne Saunders states, allows for "incisive social reflection and comment," including "the exploration of gender and relationships."[3] Second, Browning's words imply a sort of internal contradiction, as she yearns to be both "heroine" and "damsel." It is this basic contradiction – between active and passive, object and subject, male and female – which Barrett Browning subversively exposed and contested in her later writings. Barrett Browning, therefore, suggests both a conflict (the constraints women faced in life and art) and an appropriate location for exploring that conflict (the "extraordinarily fluid" chivalric ballad). Before directly examining these ballads, however, I will briefly discuss the literary historiography of and current critical debate on Elizabeth Barrett Browning and her ballads.

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[1] Mermin, Dorothy. Elizabeth Barrett Browning: The Origins of a New Poetry. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989, p. 12.
[2] Saunders, Corinne. A Companion to Romance from Classical to Contemporary. Oxford: Blackwell, 2004, p. 2.
[3] Saunders, Corinne. A Companion to Romance, p. 2.

Literary Historiography of Elizabeth Barrett Browning

Contemporary criticism of Elizabeth Barrett Browning was mixed, although generally laudatory.[4] One review praised Browning's work as "some of the best ballad-writing we have met with for many a day," and another admired her "rich and recondite harmonies" which "struck out many new tones in the rhythmical scale." Indeed, many critics rightly distinguished between Barrett's work and the sophomoric poems of her female contemporaries. "Between her and the slighter lyrics of most of the sisterhood,"[5] *Athenaeum* averred, "there is all the difference which exists between the putting on of 'singing-robes' for alter-service, and the taking up of lute or harp to enchant an indulgent circle of friends and kindred."[6] Nevertheless, these critics seem to have missed (or decided not to mention) Barrett Browning's subversive intent. As Helen Cooper suggests, Browning's poems "enticed but did not incite her readers."[7]

By the turn of the century, however, Barrett Browning had dropped from literary favor. Most critics agree the compelling story of Browning's elopement superseded any interest in her poetry. She became first a wife and only secondarily a writer. Often for critics this meant alternately exalting her womanhood or relegating her work in ways which stripped her poems of any meaning or merit. Two examples might help clarify the seemingly contradictory ways in which critics dismissed Browning's poems. On the one hand, Edmund Clarence Stedman praised Browning's innocence, patience, and

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[4] Alfred McKinley Terhune, for example, describes Browning's critical reception as "a bizarre mosaic of censure and adulation," and Tricia Lootens similarly finds "profuse expressions of reverence…[including] not only strange alliances but deeply conflicted responses, both among and within critics." For a less facile discussion of Barrett Browning's mixed critical reception see Marjorie Stone (1995:189-228) and Tricia Lootens (1996:116-157).

[5] Cited in Cooper, Helen. "Rebellion: Eve's Songs of Innocence," in Harold Bloom, ed. Elizabeth Barrett Browning. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 2002, p. 23.

[6] Cited in Cooper, Helen. "Rebellion: Eve's Songs of Innocence," p. 23.

[7] Cooper, Helen. "Rebellion: Eve's Songs of Innocence," p. 27.

submission, calling her the "apotheosis of womanhood" and the "priestess of the melody."[8] On the other hand, Hugh Walker disparaged Browning's "attempt to translate her feeling into thought," calling her a "woman-like" poet and "not really a thinker."[9] Yet neither critic regarded her poems as anything more than sentimental effusions. Stedman exalts Browning so far above worldly affairs that social commentary seems impossibly mundane, whereas Walker sees her so inappropriately embroiled in those same affairs that anything close to social commentary seems illogical, misguided, and even "dangerous." Whether esteemed or dismissed, Browning became just another "poetess," undeserving of serious scholastic attention.

Recent feminist scholarship, however, has rescued Browning from obscurity. These scholars see in Browning a "proto-feminist," who deftly negotiated patriarchal constraints despite an almost total lack of female predecessors: "I look everywhere for grandmothers," Browning wrote, "and see none."[10] Browning therefore, as Dorothy Mermin suggests, "became such a precursor herself" and "began to covertly inspect and dismantle the barriers set in her path by gender."[11] Mermin finds, especially in Browning's later work, a "thoroughgoing and radical" indictment of societal and sexual inequalities: "She wrote about slavery in America, oppressed poverty in England, prostitution, and the Italian struggle for national liberation…And she wrote about heroines who are, or want to be, grown up, independent, and free."[12] Other feminist scholars, to be sure, have since refined many of these arguments. Helen Cooper traces

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[8] Donaldson, Sandra, ed. Critical Essays on Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Boston: G.K. Hall, 1999, p. 6.
[9] Donaldson, Sandra, ed. Critical Essays on Elizabeth Barrett Browning, p. 7.
[10] Cited in Mermin, Dorothy. Elizabeth Barrett Browning, p. 1.
[11] Mermin, Dorothy. Elizabeth Barrett Browning, p. 2 & 3, respectively.
[12] Mermin, Dorothy. "Elizabeth Barrett Browning through 1844: Becoming a Woman Poet." *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, Vol. 26, No. 4, Nineteenth Century. (Autumn, 1986), p. 734.

Browning's tireless struggle to circumvent a "male poetic tradition, which privileged the male voice as subject of poetic discourse with women as object and other."[13] Angela Leighton makes a similar claim, although focusing on the influence of Browning's father, whose tyrannical rule taught Browning to work nimbly within the constraints of a strict patriarchy.[14] And, Marjorie Stone employs an intertextual analysis in order to situate Browning's poems within the context of her peers and precursors. These scholars have not only rescued Browning's legacy they have also found in her, as Sandra Donaldson suggests, "the foremother they had long been looking for."[15]

At least one scholar, however, is skeptical of recent feminist interpretations. Deirdre David contends Barrett Browning was "part of a large social group" which gave "'awareness' and 'homogeneity' to an increasingly powerful social class" and helped propagate "the influential ideologies of that class."[16] In an attempt to circumvent these discursive constraints, David continues, Barrett associated herself with a distant, idyllic, and largely imagined intellectual tradition.[17] Yet this effort to transcend male domination concomitantly implied conservative politics, since it meant Browning "mythologised herself as a member of a privileged elite."[18] Consequently, Barrett Browning found herself inexorably confined by a patriarchal discourse, which, despite her apparent resistance, she was never able to meaningfully subvert. As David emphatically states,

> Her entanglement in the ideological matrix of sex, gender, and intelligence that produces the Victorian woman intellectual seems to have determined a firm

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[13] Cooper, Helen. Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Woman and Artist. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988. p. 45.
[14] Leighton, Angela. Elizabeth Barrett Browning. (Key Women Writers) Brighton: Harvester, 1986.
[15] Donaldson, Sandra, ed. Critical Essays on Elizabeth Barrett Browning, p. 8.
[16] David, Deirdre. Intellectual Women and Victorian Patriarchy: Harriet Martineau, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, George Eliot. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987, p. 6.
[17] David asserts, "Barrett Browning…mythologised [herself] as a 'traditional' intellectual unfettered by the contingencies of history as a way of resisting the discipline of [her] male-dominated society." (1987: 6)
[18] David, Deirdre. Intellectual Women and Victorian Patriarchy, p. 97.

> identification with male models of political thought and aesthetic practice, and whatever feminist sympathies she may be said to possess are…thereby strongly compromised.[19]

Instead, David argues that Browning used her "mythologised" poetic genius to remedy the pernicious and increasingly prevalent materialism of Victorian society.[20] More interested in broader social concerns than specific female ones, Browning represents not a distinctly feminist voice but merely "a woman's voice speaking in patriarchal discourse."[21]

Current Scholarship on Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Ballads

Much of this debate circles around Elizabeth Barrett Browning's ballads. Often first printed *Findens' Tableaux*, Browning's ballads were (like her work generally) dismissed for their "suspicious fluency, verbal thinness, inept diction, mawkish sentimentality, and the most dreary and conventional female fantasies and repressions."[22] And, despite a more general reappraisal of Browning's work, some critics still hold to this view. Angela Leighton, for example, focuses on Browning's political poetry and especially *Aurora Leigh* instead of her ballads, which, Leighton contends, "Elizabeth Barrett wrote in response to a demand…for morally educative poems" intended for "a primarily female readership."[23] Nevertheless, the majority of scholars read these ballads

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[19] David, Deirdre. Intellectual Women and Victorian Patriarchy, p. 98

[20] David continues: "[Barrett Browning] participates in a well-documented Victorian endeavor that seeks to recover a lost social and cultural unity (which is, of course, mythical), and she adopts for her own career a governing model traditionally associated with male poets. Moreover, she implies, if the poet's visionary power, his special insight, could be enjoyed by all men, then society would transcend its degenerate, materialistic condition…" (1987: 111)

[21] David, Deirdre. Intellectual Women and Victorian Patriarchy, p. 157.

[22] Mermin, Dorothy. Elizabeth Barrett Browning, p. 90.

[23] Stone, Marjorie. "A Cinderella Among the Muses: Barrett Browning and the Ballad Tradition," in Harold Bloom, ed. Elizabeth Barrett Browning. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 2002, p.195.

a "cultural palimpsest," intending to question conventional ideas about woman's place in art and life.

Dorothy Mermin was the first scholar to reassess Elizabeth Barrett's ballads. She looks "beneath their apparent conventionality of plot and sentiment" and argues "these poems add up to a thoroughgoing reassessment – often a total repudiation – of the Victorian ideas about womanliness."[24] Because ballads were considered feminine, Browning could use them, Mermin contends, to subversively examine "the myths and fantasies of nineteenth-century womanhood."[25] The result, therefore, is a set of poems which deny the same virtues they ostensibly affirm: self-abnegation, deference, passivity, and devotion. Nevertheless, these ballads were not considered subversive by contemporary readers – including, Mermin argues, Barrett Browning herself. "Elizabeth Barrett told the old stories in a style and tone that gave no hint of revisionary intention," Mermin concludes, "and she discarded the ballad form without discovering how to use it effectively against itself."[26]

Helen Cooper agrees Elizabeth Barrett's ballads dressed "the present in the costumes of the past" and gave her space to "dramatize woman's challenge to "the ''system' of man."[27] Cooper also agrees that revived interest in all things medieval effectively disguised the "subversive nature of the poems' propositions."[28] However, Cooper disagrees in her assessment of the ballad form itself: "The ballads…contain a set

[24] Mermin, Dorothy. Elizabeth Barrett Browning, p. 90.
[25] Mermin, Dorothy. Elizabeth Barrett Browning, p. 91.
[26] Stone, Marjorie. "A Cinderella Among the Muses," p. 196.
[27] Cooper, Helen. "Rebellion: Eve's Songs of Innocence," pp. 23 & 24, respectively. The "'system' of man" refers to the economy of marriage and sex, which, Cooper argues, Browning thought unfair, if not inimical, to women. (2002: 24)
[28] Cooper, Helen. "Rebellion: Eve's Songs of Innocence," p. 27.

of conventions that imprison woman as silent object."[29] Within these restrictive conventions, Barrett Browning could wage only a partial rebellion: "The ballads are as assertive as Barrett's reading of Sand on her invalid couch, yet as confining as Barrett's imprisonment in her father's house."[30] Thus, Browning's subversive voice required other, less confining, forms, which she found, Cooper concludes, in *Sonnets from the Portuguese* and "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point."[31]

Marjorie Stone's analysis of Barrett Browning's ballads, however, questions many of these assumptions and their critical implications. Stone employs to interpretative strategies to show how even feminist scholars have "insufficiently appreciated" these ballads. First, Stone uses an intertextual reading to situate Browning's ballads within the context of similar works by both her peers and precursors. In doing so, Stone finds "many of Barrett Browning's ballads…involve 'self-consciously intertextual uses of precursors' to expose ideological values and presuppositions."[32] Second, Stone carefully traces the successive revisions Barrett Browning made to these ballads between various publications. Examining these revisions, Stone convincingly demonstrates how Browning "progressively complicated her 'female plots' by portraying their intersections with the social systems that create and encompass them."[33] More significantly, however, these revisions evidence Browning's own agency; they suggest, in other words, that Browning deliberately and self-consciously revised her ballads in order to make them more overtly subversive. As Stone asserts, "[Barrett Browning] clearly did sometimes consciously use the ballad form 'against itself' in complicating or subverting traditional

[29] Cooper, Helen. "Rebellion: Eve's Songs of Innocence," p. 25.
[30] Cooper, Helen. "Rebellion: Eve's Songs of Innocence," p. 48.
[31] Cooper, Helen. "Rebellion: Eve's Songs of Innocence," p. 48.
[32] Stone, Marjorie. "A Cinderella Among the Muses," p. 193.
[33] Stone, Marjorie. "A Cinderella Among the Muses," p. 194.

ballads…"[34] These interpretive strategies allow Stone to conclude with greater cogency that "[Elizabeth Barrett] both echoes and strategically revises traditional ballads in order to dramatize the crudely overt power structures of the society that produced the chivalric idealization of women."[35]

Assessing Interpretations of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Ballads

Within the context of this critical debate, we can now examine how these scholars have interpreted Elizabeth Barrett's ballads. Mermin, Cooper, and Stone all offer subtly different readings, employing different interpretative tactics and reaching different conclusions. Yet the relative strength or weakness of their analyses seems to align consistently from ballad to ballad, suggesting, if nothing else, that some ballads are more overtly subversive than others (or at least more amenable to a subversive interpretation). A comparative study of different interpretations, therefore, can simultaneously reveal two aspects of Browning's ballads. Where lines of interpretation diverge (i.e. where scholars disagree) we can see where space exists for contradictory or contestatory readings, and, conversely, where lines of interpretation consistently align (i.e. where scholars agree) we can establish a sort of critical consensus as way of determining the subversivity of a given ballad. In order to demonstrate both these aspects, I will examine each author's interpretation of two separate ballads. Interpretations of the first ballad – "The Lay of the Brown Rosary" – vary widely from author to author, suggesting both space for alternative readings and the possibility that the ballad lacks subversivity. In contrast, interpretations of the second ballad – "The Romaunt of the Page" – seem consistent from author to

[34] Stone, Marjorie. "A Cinderella Among the Muses," p. 197.
[35] Stone, Marjorie. "A Cinderella Among the Muses," p. 220.

author, indicating both the cogency of existing readings and the probability that the ballad is indeed subversive.

"The Lay of the Brown Rosary" was first published in the 1840 edition of *Findens' Tableaux* accompanied by a complex, almost nonsensically eclectic, picture: "in the margins around the central picture of two women and a little boy in a chapel…faint representation of a 'brown rosarie,' and 'old convent ruin,' a nun, an 'evil spirit,' the 'bridegroom' and 'Leonora' both on horseback, and 'the priest at the alter' with his 'grave young sacristans.'"[36] Given this motley image, Browning manages to piece together a remarkably coherent story. "Onora, Onora!" the girl's mother calls out to her daughter, who has not returned home. Growing worried, she asks her son, "Now where is Onora?" After some evasiveness, he answers, "Oh! She sits with the nun of the brown rosary, / At nights in the ruins." As the boy explains, the nun, whose spirit haunts the ruins, was buried alive after refusing to confess her sins. Onora then suddenly returns, easing the tension with news that her betrothed, who has been away at war, approaches. That night Onora is visited first by angels then by an evil spirit "in a nun's garb," who demands she repeat the vow she had pledged earlier at the ruins. In a drowsy mummer, Onora recites her vow. Unwilling to die, lest she see her betrothed love another, she made a pact with the nun, who promised life and love in exchange for her soul. Onora has bartered, as one angel said, "God's love for man's." The next day begins with an idyllic wedding celebration. Brides, grooms, and family gather with alacrity, but Onora's little brother, who alone suspects her transgression, dampens the proceedings. He begs the priest to stop the marriage, but the priest disregards the "wild, pretty boy." Once the ceremony is complete, Onora's husband kisses her cheek and instantly falls dead on the

[36] Cooper, Helen. "Rebellion: Eve's Songs of Innocence," p. 32.

church floor. Feeling betrayed, Onora revokes her vow, as she cries, "I am ready for dying!" Sometime later, Onora and her family visit the shrine of Saint Agnes, where Onora repents, then dies.

Mermin contends this is the "least successful" of Barrett Browning's ballads. She finds the plot "rather inchoate" and the accompanying picture "complicated and improbable." In keeping with conventions, Mermin argues, "female self-assertion alienates – here, kills – the lover." Yet Onora is left with few choices, none of which seem favorable. She can obey "God's decree" and die or don the brown rosary and exchange "God's love for man's." Her family too offers little guidance: "They all in their various ways combine to keep her from her own life."[37] Of all Browning's ballads, Mermin concludes, "this is the only ballad in which the heroine's behavior is assumed just to be wrong."[38] Mermin's reading, however, seems oddly incongruent (though not unconvincing). After explaining how these ballads constitute a "thoroughgoing reassessment" of womanhood, Mermin fails to prove this claim in her reading of "The Lay of the Brown Rosary." The reader, therefore, is left wondering why she even bothered to mention the ballad, especially considering the thoroughness and cogency with which she interprets Browning's other poems. "The Lay of the Brown Rosary" seems, in Mermin's assessment, aesthetically clumsy and politically effete.

In keeping with her interpretive strategies, Stone's analysis focuses on "intertextual allusions" and "extensive revisions." Stone contends "The Lay of the Brown Rosary" is "complex in its play of intertextual allusions," including most directly

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[37] Mermin describes how Onora's family allies against her: "her mother is pleasant but ineffectual, her good little brother watches and accuses her, and her father in effect demands that she join him in death." (1989:92)

[38] For Mermin's analysis "The Lay of the Brown Rosary" see Dorothy Mermin, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, p. 92.

Scott's *Marmion*, which popularized the figure of the buried nun. Stone argues that Barrett Browning focuses "on the conflicts of female desire with institutionalized repression that speak so powerfully in the interstices of [Scott's] narrative flashbacks and monastic interludes that link Constance with Clare." Yet this single sentence is all the reader receives, and so many interesting questions are left unanswered. For example: What meaningful connections exist between Constance (who is interred despite confessing her dealings with Marmion) and Browning's unnamed nun (who is interred for refusing to confess her sins), and, furthermore, what could these comparisons imply, for instance, about the futility or limitations of female agency? Stone also claims "The Lay of the Brown Rosary" underwent "extensive revisions" between 1840 and 1844. Yet Stone specifically lists only one revision: "the change of the heroine's name from Lenora (a direct link with Burger's ballad) to Onora." Here again, however, Stone offers no interpretation, makes no attempt to show how this revision contributes to a subversive reading of the poem. Certainly Stone is correct to acknowledge the similarities between Burger's "Lenora" and Browning's "Brown Rosary," but how would changing the heroine's name (and thereby disassociating the poem from Burger's) render the ballad more subversive?[39] Although Stone indicates interesting (and possibly meaningful) intertextual allusions, she fails to explain how intertextuality reinforces the ballad's

[39] There seems to be many similarities. Both heroines die essentially because they are unwilling to relinquish the love they feel for their betrothed, and both, at the poems' conclusion, are forgiven. Yet Burger's Lenora trades her life (when she mounts her dead lover's steed) in order to be with her betrothed in the afterlife, whereas Browning's Onora trades her afterlife (when she dons the brown rosary) in order to be with her betrothed in this life. While neither heroine receives exactly what she had expected (or had been promised), Browning's heroine seems less self-sacrificing, less obedient, less passive, and consequently more subversive of gender expectations. Assuming this contrast would make Browning's subversive intent clearer and more convincing, why would she disassociate Burger's ballad from her own? At least in my cursory reading, Stone's implied argument seems to work against its own conclusion.

subversivity.[40] Furthermore, a more obvious reading (something similar to Mermin's) would suggest the unusually complex – and consequently restrictive – accompanying picture dictated the ballad's narrative more than some recondite or oblique intertextual allusion. Indeed, Browning herself complained, "When you once begin a story you can't bring it to an end all in a moment – and what with nuns and devils and angels and marriages and death and little boys, I couldn't get out of the mud without a great deal of splashing."[41]

Cooper's interpretation is, at least comparatively, ambitious and direct. Cooper argues that both Onora and the spectral nun face (or have faced) a "choice between submission to male authority and rebellion," a choice which, Cooper contends, "unites women."[42] Conflating God, Onora's father, and the priest, Cooper then claims these choices reflect "strategies for survival against the destructive power of *male* authority."[43] By wearing the brown rosary, Onora effectively "allies herself with the woman who also refused patriarchal authority."[44] "When [Onora] finally dies," Cooper concludes, "it is not out of obedience to God's call, but because earth excludes a woman who defies male authority."[45] While Cooper's reading does imply a strongly subversive agenda, it seems to stretch credibility in places. For example, Cooper has no way of knowing the spectral nun "refused patriarchal authority;" the poem states only that she "mocked at the priest when he called her to shrive." Beyond this episode, Browning reveals nothing about the character or motivation of the nun's defiance. Indeed, the reader can only speculate what

[40] For Stone's discussion of "The Lay of the Brown Rosary" see Stone, Marjorie. "A Cinderella Among the Muses," p. 218.
[41] Cooper, Helen. "Rebellion: Eve's Songs of Innocence," p. 33.
[42] Cooper, Helen. "Rebellion: Eve's Songs of Innocence," p. 33.
[43] Cooper, Helen. "Rebellion: Eve's Songs of Innocence," p. 35.
[44] Cooper, Helen. "Rebellion: Eve's Songs of Innocence," p. 36.
[45] Cooper, Helen. "Rebellion: Eve's Songs of Innocence," p. 37.

sins – subversive or otherwise – could have provoked such a cruel punishment. Similarly, Cooper's interpretation of Onora's death seems tenuous. She argues Onora dies "because earth excludes a woman who defies male authority" and cites as proof the line from the final stanza in which Onora dies "mute for lack of root, earth's nourishment to reach." Yet this line could also suggest (in an intentionally polemical reading) that a woman without love is like a tree without roots, and so doomed to suffer and die.

"The Romaunt of the Page" was first published in the 1939 edition of *Findens' Tableaux* accompanied by an illustration of "a girl dressed as a squire or page but…obviously feminine in appearance…kneeling at the foot of a tree and looking with a wistful expression toward the back of a fully armed knight on a horse that is pawing the air and is about to charge away. On the ground in front of the page are a casque and a murderous looking instrument, which seems to be a combination of cross-bow and battle-axe."[46] Unlike "The Lay of the Brown Rosary," however, this picture gave Browning more interpretative space and, likewise, a place to construct a more deliberately subversive narrative. A gallant knight and his page return "slow and thoughtful" from the holy war. As their thoughts wonder, the knight suggests his "noble page" (who we later discover to be his wife in disguise) might be too much of a solider to please his wife's demure temperament: "Her bower," he fears, "may suit thee ill." As the page attempts to allay the knight's fears, their conversation (and the narrative) is interrupted by the distant chant – "*Beati, beati, mortui*" – of nuns morning the death of their "Lady Abbess." Not hearing these faint lamentations, the page precedes to ask his master if he "loved aright" his wife. The knight responds with some reluctance, relating the regrettable circumstances of his marriage. Chivalric code, he explains, obliged him to

[46] Cooper, Helen. "Rebellion: Eve's Songs of Innocence," p. 28.

marry an orphaned girl, whose father died avenging the murder of the knight's own father. He married the girl hastily before leaving for war and without, he confesses, even knowing "if the bride was fair." The page wept ostensibly because his sister, facing a similar situation, disguised herself and followed her husband to "the very battle-place." The knight responded with a "careless laugh," saying he could never love so "unwomaned" a wife. "I would…love her as my servitor," the knight elaborated, "But little as my wife." While overcome with bitterness and indignation, the page notices the distant approach of hostile Saracens. She urges the knight, who has not yet noticed the enemy, to ride ahead without her. Alone and facing certain death, she removes her helmet and resentfully wishes the knight (her husband) luck in finding a woman "half as true / as one thou leav'st behind." As she dies, wispy chants of "*Ingemisco, ingemisco!"* are heard in the distance, lamenting the death of both the abbess and the page.

Mermin's reading of this ballad is somewhat ambivalent. On the one hand, the page's incensed tone and effective suicide seem to clearly denounce "the knight's womanly ideal."[47] And Barrett Browning herself, Mermin contends, evidently approved of such defiance, seeing no contradiction between a "false page" and a "truthful woman."[48] On the other hand, the page's fate – "unrecognized, self-sacrificial death" – seems decidedly feminine.[49] She chooses to confront the chivalric ideal (with its inimical and ultimately destructive gendered expectations) by passively allowing herself to be killed rather than actively revealing her identity. Yet this ambivalence, Mermin argues, accurately reflects Elizabeth Barrett's own sentiments. As Mermin suggests, this is "the story of a woman who succumbs to an ideal of 'womanly virtues' that the poet both

[47] Mermin, Dorothy. Elizabeth Barrett Browning, p. 92.
[48] Mermin, Dorothy. Elizabeth Barrett Browning, p. 92.
[49] Mermin, Dorothy. "Elizabeth Barrett Browning through 1844," p. 720.

scorns and shares."[50] Unlike "The Lay of the Brown Rosary," however, this ballad substantiates, if not exemplifies, Mermin's thesis. Just as the poet works simultaneously "within and against" the aesthetic conventions of the ballad form, the page likewise seems to, at once, support and subvert the chivalric expectations of womanhood.

Stone reads this ballad as a subtle revision of "the conventional figure of the woman-page," made more explicit and subversive in each successive publication.[51] Through textual revisions, Stone contends, Browning "expanded the role and motivation of the poem's male protagonist" and revealed how conventional "female plots" could subversively intersect with "the social systems that create and encompass them."[52] Stone cites various revisions, which both substantiate and clarify her argument. The first set of revisions underscores the knight's "ideological system of 'true womanhood.'"[53] After hearing the page's contrived story, the knight laughs "loudly" in the manuscript, "gay" in the *Findens'* version, and "careless" in the 1844 *Poems*.[54] With each revision, the knight appears more hidebound, ideologically entrenched, and dismissively oblivious. A few lines later, Stone finds another telling revision. In the 1844 edition the knight explains that he could love "No woman…unwomaned if she be," whereas in the manuscript he says only that he could love "No woman…if she loved unwomanly."[55] The clumsy denominal verb "unwomaned" seems to draw attention to itself, while simultaneously implying, as Stone suggests, a female page lacks "the very core of womanhood."[56] The second set of revisions emphasizes the page's reaction to this restrictive "ideological

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[50] Mermin, Dorothy. Elizabeth Barrett Browning, p. 91.
[51] Stone, Marjorie. "A Cinderella Among the Muses," p. 210.
[52] Stone, Marjorie. "A Cinderella Among the Muses," p. 194.
[53] Stone, Marjorie. "A Cinderella Among the Muses," p. 212.
[54] Stone, Marjorie. "A Cinderella Among the Muses," p. 212.
[55] Stone, Marjorie. "A Cinderella Among the Muses," p. 212.
[56] Stone, Marjorie. "A Cinderella Among the Muses," p. 212.

system." After her husband rides ahead to safety, the page wishes he will find another woman "all as true" in the manuscript, "not faithfuller" in the *Findens'* version, and "half as true" in the 1844 *Poems*.[57] With each of these revisions, the page is made increasingly resentful of her husband and the ideological system he embodies. Taken together these contrapuntally related sets of revisions demonstrate a sort of ratcheting up of subversivity, a deliberate attempt to expose and question the contradictions inherent in the chivalric ideals which inform patriarchal discourse. Finally, Stone's reading neatly resolves the ballad's apparent ambivalence. According to her interpretation, the page's "self-sacrificial" death would not have, as Mermin suggests, remained unknown: the knight would eventually realize "the page who sacrificed himself for him was also the wife he so fiercely resented." This "quite probably narrative extrapolation," Stone contends, "is not considered in interpreting the page's sacrifice as 'unrecognized.'" In this reading the page's actions are consistently subversive, since the knight would return home only to discover his page – a woman – had proven the more gallant crusader.

Cooper similarly reads this ballad as an indictment of "the sex/gender economy" which defined "courtly behavior" and informed "Victorian ideology."[58] The young girl disguised herself, Cooper contends, in order to "test her lover before committing" and ensure he would approve of a "valiant, assertive wife."[59] When the page blushingly suggests "thy lady's bower to me / Is suited well," she demonstrates, Cooper argues, "relief that her mystery husband has passed her test."[60] But when the knight laughs at the page's "unwomaned" sister, she discovers that he has not only failed the test but also

[57] Stone, Marjorie. "A Cinderella Among the Muses," p. 215.
[58] Cooper, Helen. "Rebellion: Eve's Songs of Innocence," p. 40.
[59] Cooper, Helen. "Rebellion: Eve's Songs of Innocence," p. 28.
[60] Cooper, Helen. "Rebellion: Eve's Songs of Innocence," p. 28.

holds to an ideal of womanhood which is utterly irreconcilable with her own. She believes "a virtuous woman is one who takes creative initiative, involves herself in the public sphere, is physically strong and courageous, and expresses her love by cooperation not by dependency," whereas he values a woman, who, like a "small bright cloud," floats "Alone amid the skies! / So high, so pure, and so apart."[61] The page's effective suicide, therefore, only "appears to dramatize the extreme of womanly self-abnegation."[62] What it dramatizes instead is woman's ability to "usurp the male role by dying in battle to protect her family."[63] Her death, then, "proves her competence outside the home" and consequently subverts "the knight's system."[64] Although seemingly similar to Stone's interpretation, Cooper's analysis seems, as before, to stretch credibility. First, her assertion that the page aims "to test her lover before committing herself to him" raises unanswered questions. What would be the purpose of a "test" considering the pair has already been married? Chivalric code, as Cooper herself points out, has already and inexorably forced the pair into a mutually destructive union: "these ballads expose the destructiveness to both men and women of the sex/gender economy."[65] Furthermore, Cooper reads the page's blushing attempt to assuage her husband ("thy lady's bower to me / Is suited well") as evidence of her "relief that her mystery husband has passed her test," yet a more obvious interpretation would suggest irony, rather than excitement, made her blush. Second, Cooper's conclusion – that the paged "usurp[ed] the male role by dying in battle to protect her family" – seems equally questionable. What "family" is the page dying to protect considering the couple (who do not recognize each other) has

[61] Cooper, Helen. "Rebellion: Eve's Songs of Innocence," p. 31.
[62] Cooper, Helen. "Rebellion: Eve's Songs of Innocence," p. 32.
[63] Cooper, Helen. "Rebellion: Eve's Songs of Innocence," p. 32.
[64] Cooper, Helen. "Rebellion: Eve's Songs of Innocence," p. 32.
[65] Cooper, Helen. "Rebellion: Eve's Songs of Innocence," p. 40.

clearly never consummated their marriage? While certainly the ballad might implicitly equate the page's death with maternal sacrifice (subversively enacted within the male sphere), Cooper never explains why we should interpret her death more generally, as an effort to "protect her family."

Irrespective of their individual interpretations, these authors generally agree Barrett Browning was attempting to subvert or circumvent patriarchal discourse; she was, in other words, using these ballads (perhaps unconsciously) to explore and possibly resolve the conflicts she faced as an artist and as a woman. Browning's ballads, in short, questioned the gendered expectations embedded in both aesthetic norms and contemporary values. Nevertheless, these interpretations consistently underestimate the fluidity of the ballad form itself. They assume (as Mermin contends) that Browning "strained against" balladic conventions or (as Rebecca Stott metaphorically suggests) that she ingeniously put "new wine in old bottles."[66] Yet ballads are not old bottles useless until filled with new wine; they are not, as Stott's metaphor implies, an anachronistic genre made relevant only through the poet's acumen and ingenuity. Instead, as Corinne Saunders suggests, ballads are "timeless and universal," speaking to the "deep structures of human existence on a level we might call psychological."[67] Ballads are transhistorical and ever relevant precisely because they take place in an ideal setting apart from any historical reality. Consequently, the genre provides an apt location for testing or contesting ideal types: hyper-masculine knights, absurdly devoted maidens, ruthless tyrants, Gods or demons. As these ideal characters move through the narrative, the poet can contrast their apparent perfection with ordinary human foibles, their noble adventures

[66] Mermin, Dorothy. Elizabeth Barrett Browning, p. 74; Stott, Rebecca and Avery, Simon. Elizabeth Barrett Browning. New York: Longman, 2003, p. 115.
[67] Saunders, Corinne. A Companion to Romance, p. 2.

with tragedy or mishap, their devotion with betrayal, and their unflagging love with the inevitability of death. Ballads, consequently, test the extreme boundaries of discourse and, in doing so, expose the absurd, unattainable, and ultimately deleterious ideals which inform social and artistic conventions. Barrett Browning, therefore, did not use the ballad "against itself" but used it instead as an apt "psychic screen" where she could project, analyze, and subvert conventional ideas about woman's place in art and life.

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