Robert Browning (1812-1889) a brief biography
Beginnings

- supportive parents
- an odd education
- playwriting difficulties
- poetry: *Dramatic Lyrics* (1842)
- the *monodram*
A Meeting of Minds: Love & Elizabeth Barrett
Obstacles to Intimacy

- Elizabeth’s health
- Elizabeth’s personal losses & fear of risk
- a loving but controlling father
- Robert’s finances
The Courtship Correspondence: Jan. 10, 1845 thru Sept. 18, 1846

Poetry & Person
“I do, as I say, love these books with all my heart — and I love you too; do you know I was once not very far from seeing — really seeing you? Mr. Kenyon said to me one morning ‘would you like to see Miss Barrett?’—then he went to announce me,--then he returned .. you were too unwell— and now it is years ago . . .” (1).
“Is it true, as you say, that I ‘know so little’ of you? And is it true as others say, that the productions of an artist do not partake of his real nature, ... It is not true, to my mind--& therefore it is not true that I know little of you, except in as far as it is true (which I believe) that your greatest works are to come. Need I assure you that I shall always hear with the deepest interest every word you will say to me of what you are doing or about to do . . .” (11).

letter: Elizabeth to Robert / Feb. 3, 1845
“First then,--what I have printed gives no knowledge of me—it evidences abilities of various kinds, if you will—and a dramatic sympathy with certain modifications of passion.. that I think: but I never have begun, even, what I hope I was born to begin and end,--‘R.B. a poem’” (15).

letter: Robert to Elizabeth / Feb. 11, 1845
An Invitation to Transparency & Mutual Advice
“Only don’t let us have any constraint, any ceremony! Don’t be civil to me when you feel rude,--nor loquacious, when you incline to silence,--nor yielding in the manners, when you are perverse in the mind. See how out of the world I am! Suffer me to profit by it in almost the only profitable circumstance, .. & let us rest from the bowing & the courtesying, you & I, on each side” (11).

letter: Elizabeth to Robert / Feb. 3, 1845
“if ever you emerge without inconvenient effort from your ‘passive state,’ & will tell me of such faults as rise to the surface & strike you as important in my poems, (for of course, I do not think of troubling you with criticism in detail)—you will confer a lasting obligation on me, and one which I shall value so much, that I covet it at a distance” (2).

letter: Elizabeth to Robert / Jan. 11, 1845
“Your influence & help in poetry will be full of good & gladness to me—for with many to love me in this house, there is no one to judge me .. now. Your friendship & sympathy will be dear and precious to me all my life, if you indeed leave them with me so long or so little” (58).
“I know, I have always been jealous of my own musical faculty (I can write music).—Now that I see the uselessness of such jealousy, and am for loosing & letting it go, it may be cramped possibly. Your music is more various & exquisite than any modern writer’s to my ear” (71).
Robert’s Style:
Prismatic Hues & the Grotesque
“your poetry must be, cannot but be, infinitely more to me than mine to you—for you do what I always wanted, hoped to do, and only seem now likely to do for the first time. You speak out, you,--I only make men & women speak—give you truth broken into prismatic hues, and fear the pure white light, even if it is in me: but I am going to try. . . . yet I don’t think I shall let you hear, after all, the savage things about Popes and imaginative religions that I must say” (5).
“Rather learn and love / Each facet-flash of the revolving year! / Red, green and blue that whirl into a white, / The variance now, the eventual unity, / Which makes the miracle” (1.1360-64).

Robert Browning’s *The Ring and the Book* (1868-69)
“You have in your vision two worlds—or to use the language of the schools of the day, you are both subjective & objective in the habits of your mind. You can deal both with abstract thought, & with human passion in the most passionate sense. Thus, you have an immense grasp in Art; and no one at all accustomed to consider the usual forms of it, could help regarding with reverence & gladness the gradual expansion of your powers” (7).

letter: Elizabeth to Robert / Jan. 15, 1845
“See it for yourselves, / This man’s act, changeable cause alive! / Action now shrouds, now shows the informing thought; / Man, like a glass ball with a spark a-top, / Out of the magic fire that lurks inside, / Shows one tint at a time to take the eye: / Which, let a finger touch the silent sleep, / Shifted a hair’s breadth shoots you dark for bright, / Suffuses bright with dark, and baffles so / Your sentence absolute for shine or shade. / Once set such orbs,—white styled, black stigmatized,— / A-rolling, see them once on the other side / Your good men and your bad men every one [. . .]” (1.1364-76).

Robert Browning’s The Ring and the Book (1868-69)
“You do not understand what a new feeling it is for me to have someone who is to like my verses or I shall not ever like them after! So far differently was I circumstanced of old, that I used rather to go about for a subject of offence to people; writing ugly things in order to warn the ungenial & timorous off my grounds at once. I shall never do so again, at least!” (71).
Elizabeth’s Suggestions Concerning Robert’s Poetry
“And also, I have a fancy that your great dramatic power would work more clearly & audibly in the less definite mould—but you ride your own faculty as Oceanus did his seahorse, ‘directing it by your will’; and woe to the impertinence which wd dare to say ‘turn this way’—or ‘turn from that way’—it should not be MY impertinence. Do not think I blaspheme the Drama” (27).

letter: Elizabeth to Robert / Feb. 27, 1845
“inasmuch as I have observed before in my own mind, that a good deal of what is called obscurity in you, arises from a habit of very subtle association,--so subtle, that you are probably unconscious of it, .. and the effect of which is to throw together on the same level & in the same light, things of likeness & unlikeness—till the reader grows confused as I did, & takes one for another” (63).
“And the Laboratory is hideous as you meant to make it:--only I object a little to your tendency .. which is almost a habit .. of making lines difficult for the reader to read .. see the opening lines of this poem. Not that music is required everywhere, nor in *them* certainly, but that the uncertainty of rhythm throws the reader’s mind off the *rail* .. & interrupts his progress with you & your influence with him. Where we have not direct pleasure from rhythm, & where no peculiar impression is to be produced by the changes in it, we shd be encouraged by the poet to forget it altogether; should we not?” (90-91).

letter: Elizabeth to Robert / July 21, 1845
Life Together in Italy

- health benefits for both
- writing poetry side by side
- ideological differences
- unequal successes
- son “Pen” (1849-1912)
- 1861-89: life w/o EBB