The Romaunt of the Page

One of EBB's most popular ballads in the nineteenth century, this first appeared as the lead poem in the annual, Finden's Tableaux of The Affections; A Series of Picturesque Illustrations of The Womanly Virtues, From Paintings by W. Perring (1839), edited by her friend Mary Mitford. EBB observed of the engraved painting it illustrated (see Figure 2), "the pictured one pretty as she is, has a good deal exaggerated the ballad-receipt for making a ladye page—Do you remember?

'And you must cut your gowne of green
An INCH above the knee!'——

She comes within the fi fa fum of the prudes, in consequence——" (BC 4:38). The quotation from "Child Waters," a traditional ballad in Reliques of Ancient English Poetry (1765), compiled by Thomas Percy (1729-1811), points to one of the works at play—often ironically—in the poem's intertextual echoes. Although EBB said the subject was "not of [her] choosing" in her "very long barbarous ballad" (BC 4:33), it clearly chimed with her girlhood "indignation" at being a woman (inspired by reading Mary Wollstonecraft) and her consequent longing to be "Lord Byron's PAGE," recollected in her letters in 1842 and playfully described in her semi-autobiographical essay about a girl named Beth (BC 6:42, 1:360-62). Byron's Lara (1814) is one of the many influences on the poem. With its archaic diction and chivalric setting, the poem reflects the medievalism associated with the ballad revival inspired by Percy's Reliques, Sir Walter Scott's Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border (1802-03), and the Lyrical Ballads (1798) of William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Mitford told EBB that

---

1 A "romaunt" (archaic) is a romantic tale or poem; a "page" is a boy or youth employed as a personal attendant, a male servant, or an apprentice to knighthood. All three senses of page are relevant here.
2 Finden's Tableaux: Other issues are titled Finden's Tableaux, but the title page of this issue uses the singular possessive. On Mitford and EBB's contributions to these gift books, see the headnote to "A Romance of the Ganges."
3 ballad-receipt: ballad recipe, i.e., ballad convention.

ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING 103
“The Romaut of the Page” was “the finest thing” she had written and entreated her to write more such poems “of human feelings and human actions” (BC 5:135). Victorian reviewers of the 1839 Finden’s also singled it out as “full of fancy and originality,” “distinguished by poetical qualities of the highest order,” and marked by “true and original genius,” finding it filled “with the spirit of the elder and better day of poetry in every line” and “dipped in the hues of ballad minstrelsy” (BC 4:405-06). In reviews of Poems (1844), it was praised for its “subjective” handling of the ballad form and described as “foremost among Records of Woman” (BC 9:342, 320; see also BC 9:339, 347, 365, 370)—an allusion connecting it to one of the most popular collections by Felicia Hemans (1793-1835). EBB heavily revised the ballad for Poems (1844), adding entire stanzas and substantially rewriting many passages. Most notably, the Finden’s text lacks Stanza V and narrates the story told in Stanzas XV to XIX below in only two stanzas, without many of the details added in 1844 (see l. 147n). In 1839 and 1844, the poem was preceded by an epigraph from Beaumont and Fletcher deleted from the later collections. Criticism: Hickock 1984, Leighton 1986, Mermin 1989, Stephenson 1989, Stone 1993, and Shires 2001.

I
A knight of gallant deeds
And a young page at his side,
From the holy war in Palestine
Did slow and thoughtful ride,
As each were a palmer and told for beads
The dews of the eventide.

II
“O young page,” said the knight,
“A noble page art thou!
Thou fearest not to steep in blood
The curls upon thy brow;
And once in the tent, and twice in the fight,
Didst ward’ me a mortal blow.”

III
“O brave knight,” said the page,
“Or ere we hither came,
We talked in tent, we talked in field,
Of the bloody battle-game;
But here, below this greenwood bough,
I cannot speak the same.

IV
“Our troop is far behind,
The woodland calm is new;
Our steeds, with slow grass-muffled hoofs,
Tread deep the shadows through;
And in my mind, some blessing kind
Is dropping with the dew.

V
“The woodland calm is pure—
I cannot choose but have
A thought from these, o’ the beechen-trees
Which in our England wave,
And of the little finches fine
Which sang there, while in Palestine
The warrior-hilt we drave.”

1 Records of Woman: With Other Poems (1828). On Hemans, see “Felicia Hemans: To L.E.L.,” pp. 73–76.
3 “The trustiest, lovingest, and the gentlest boy; / That ever master had.—Beaumont and Fletcher.” Francis Beaumont (1584-1616) and John Fletcher (1579-1625), dramatists and collaborators; the quotation comes from Philaster (produced 1611; printed 1630), Act 1, scene 2, ll. 139-60.
4 holy war in Palestine alluding to the Crusades.
5 As if, palmer ... beads] a pilgrim or itinerant monk, counting beads on a rosary.

ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING

1 ward] fend off.
2 Or ere] before.
3 warrior-hilt we drave] we drove the warrior sword into the enemy.
VI
"Methinks, a moment gone,
I heard my mother pray!
I heard, sir knight, the prayer for me
Wherein she passed away;
And I know the Heavens are leaning down
To hear what I shall say."

VII
The page spake calm and high,
As of no mean degree.
Perhaps he felt in nature’s broad
Full heart, his own was free.
And the knight looked up to his lifted eye,
Then answered smilingly:—

VIII
'Sir page, I pray your grace!
Certes,' I meant not so
To cross your pastoral mood, sir page,
With the crook of the battle-bow;
But a knight may speak of a lady's face,
I ween, in any mood or place,
If the grasses die or grow.

IX
"And this I meant to say,—
My lady's face shall shine
As ladies' faces use, to greet
My page from Palestine;
Or, speak she fair or prank she gay,
She is no lady of mine.

X
"And this I meant to fear,—
Her bower may suit thee ill!
For, sooth, in that same field and tent,
Thy talk was somewhat still;
And fitter thy hand for my knightly spear,
Than thy tongue for my lady's will."

XI
Slowly and thankfully
The young page bowed his head:
His large eyes seemed to muse a smile,
Until he blushed instead,
And no lady in her bower pardiè,2
Could blush more sudden red.
"Sir Knight,—thy lady's bower to me
Is suited well," he said.

XII
Beati, beati, mortui!3
From the convent on the sea,
One mile off, or scarce as nigh,
Swells the dirge4 as clear and high
As if that, over brake and lea,5
Bodily the wind did carry
The great altar of St. Mary,
And the fifty tapers burning o'er it,
And the lady Abbess dead before it,
And the chanting nuns whom yester week

---

1 certes] certainly.
2 pardiè] by God (from French pardieu).
3 Beati, beati, mortui! Blessed be the dead! A parallel use of convent music to create narrative counterpoint appears in Scott's _Marmion_ (1808).
4 dirge] generally, a funeral song; here referring to the first part of the antiphonal song or chant sung in the Service of the Dead. EBB commented that convent music is heard "when the page is happiest, & so absorbed in happy thought that he is unconscious even of the sound" (BC 4:43).
5 brake and lea] bush and grass land.
XV
"Yet ill it suits my knightly tongue
   To grudge that granted boon!
That heavy price from heart and life
   I paid in silence down.
The hand that claimed it, cleared in fine
   My father's fame: I swear by mine,
That price was nobly won.
   115

XVI
"Earl Walter was a brave old earl,—
   He was my father's friend;
And while I rode the lists at court
   And little guessed the end,
My noble father in his shroud,
   Against a slanderer lying loud,
He rose up to defend.
   120

XVII
"Oh, calm, below the marble grey
   My father's dust was sown!
Oh, meek, above the marble grey
   His image prayed alone!
The slanderer lied—the wretch was brave,—
   For, looking up the minster-nave, 3
He saw my father's knightly glaive 4
   Was changed from steel to stone.
   130

XVIII
"Earl Walter's glaive was steel,
   With a brave old hand to wear it,
And dashed the lie back in the mouth
Which lied against the godly truth

---
1 in fine: conclusively, with connotations here of its original sense of fine, medieval Latin for the sum paid on concluding a lawsuit.
2 lists: an enclosed space or arena for tournaments.
3 minster-nave: the central space of a cathedral leading up to the altar.
4 glaive: a lance or spear; more loosely, a sword.
And against the knightly merit!
The slanderer, 'neath the avenger's heel,
Struck up the dagger in appeal
From stealthy lie to brutal force—
And out upon the traitor's corse'
Was yielded the true spirit.

XIX
"I would mine hand had fought that fight
And justified my father!
I would mine heart had caught that wound
And slept beside him rather!
I think it were a better thing
Than murthred friend and marriage-ring
Forced on my life together."

XX
"Wail shook Earl Walter's house;
His true wife shed no tear;
She lay upon her bed as mute
As the earl did on his bier;
Till—'Ride, ride fast,' she said at last,
'And bring the avenged's son anear!
Ride fast—ride free, as a dart can flee,
For white of blee1 with waiting for me
Is the corse in the next chambère.'

XXI
"I came—I knelt beside her bed—
Her calm was worse than strife;
'My husband, for thy father dear,
Gave freely when thou wert not here

His own and eke2 my life.
A boon! Of that sweet child we make
An orphan for thy father's sake,
Make thou, for ours, a wife.'

XXII
"I said, 'My steed neighs in the court,
My bark rocks on the brine,
And the warrior's vow I am under now
To free the pilgrim's shrine;
But fetch the ring and fetch the priest
And call that daughter of thine,
And rule she wide from my castle on Nyde3
While I am in Palestine.'

XXIII
"In the dark chambère, if the bride was fair,
Ye wis,1 I could not see,
But the steed thrice neighed, and the priest fast prayed,
And wedded fast were we.
Her mother smiled upon her bed
As at its side we knelt to wed,
And the bride rose from her knee
And kissed the smile of her mother dead,
Or ever she kissed me.

XXIV
"My page, my page, what grieves thee so,
That the tears run down thy face?"—
"Alas, alas! mine own sister4
Was in thy lady's case!
But she laid down the silks she wore

1 corse] corpse.
2 Stanza XV-XIX] In place of these five stanzas detailing the story of the enemy knight and Earl Walter, 1839 presents a much shorter account featuring a nameless Baron (rather than Earl Walter) who championed the dead father of the knight here speaking to his page.
3 blee] complexion.
4 "Alas, alas! mine own sister] the 1839 text presents only a hypothetical parallel with the page's sister here] "Alas! What if my own sister."
And followed him she wed before, 1
Disguised as his true servitor,
To the very battle-place.”

XXV
And wept the page, but laughed the knight,—
A careless laugh laughed he:
“Well done it were for thy sistèr,
But not for my ladye!
My love, so please you, shall requite
No woman, whether dark or bright,
Unwomâned if she be.”  

XXVI
The page stopped weeping and smiled cold—
“Your wisdom may declare
That womanhood is proved the best
By golden brooch and glossy vest
The mincing ladies wear;
Yet is it proved, and was of old,
A near as well, I dare to hold,
By truth, or by despair.”

XXVII
He smiled no more, he wept no more,
But passionate he spake,—
“Oh, womanly she prayed in tent,
When none beside did wake!
Oh, womanly she paled in fight,
For one beloved’s sake!—
And her little hand defiled with blood,
Her tender tears of womanhood
Most womanly did make!”

XXVIII
—“Well done it were for thy sistèr,
Thou tellst well her tale!
But for my lady, she shall pray
I’ the kirk of Nydesdale.
Not dread for me but love for me
Shall make my lady pale;
No casque shall hide her woman’s tear—
It shall have room to trickle clear
Behind her woman’s veil.”

XXIX
—“But what if she mistook thy mind
And followed thee to strife,
Then kneeling, did entreat thy love,
As Paynims! ask for life?”
—“I would forgive, and evermore
Would love her as my servitor,
But little as my wife.” 2

XXX
“Look up—there is a small bright cloud
Alone amid the skies!
So high, so pure, and so apart,
A woman’s honor lies.”
The page looked up—the cloud was sheen—
A sadder cloud did rush, I ween,
Betwixt it and his eyes:

---

1 Paynims] pagans or heathens; in the Christian, medieval context here, especially Molesins or Arabs.
2 as my servitor/But little as my wife] Cf. Marlowe's treatment of his unwed lover Constance as a horse boy in Scott’s Marmion; and the treatment of Ellen, the unmarried companion of Child Waters, who runs pregnant and bare-foot by his horse's side as his foot-page in “Child Waters” (Stone 1995, 126–27).
3 sheen] shining, bright, or resplendent.

---

112 FROM POEMS (1844)

ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING 113
XXXI
Then dimly dropped his eyes away
From welkin's unto hill—
Ha! who rides there?—the page is 'ware,
Though the cry at his heart is still!
And the page seeth all and the knight seeth none,
Though banner and spear do fleck the sun,
And the Saracens' ride at will.

XXXII
He speaketh calm, he speaketh low,—
"Ride fast, my master, ride,
Or ere within the broadening dark
The narrow shadows hide."
"Yea, fast, my page, I will do so,
And keep thou at my side."

XXXIII
"Now nay, now nay, ride on thy way,
Thy faithful page precede.
For I must loose on saddle-bow
My battle-casque that galls, I trow, ¹
The shoulder of my steed;
And I must pray, as I did vow,
For one in bitter need.

XXXIV
"Ere night I shall be near to thee,—
Now ride, my master, ride!
Ere night, as parted spirits cleave⁴
To mortals too beloved to leave,
I shall be at thy side."
The knight smiled free at the fantasy,⁵
And adown the dell did ride.

XXXV
Had the knight looked up to the page's face,
   No smile the word had won:
Had the knight looked up to the page's face,
   I ween he had never gone:
Had the knight looked back to the page's geste,¹
   I ween he had turned anon!²
For dread was the woe in the face so young,³
And wild was the silent geste that flung
Casque, sword to earth—as the boy down-sprung,
And stood-alone, alone.

XXXVI
He clenched his hands as if to hold
His soul's great agony—
"Have I renounced my womanhood,
For wifehood unto thee,
And is this the last, last look of thine
That ever I shall see?

XXXVII
"Yet God thee save, and mayst thou have
A lady to thy mind,
More woman-proud and half as true
As one thou leav'st behind!
And God me take with Him to dwell—
For Him I cannot love too well,
As I have loved my kind."

¹ welkin] sky or firmament.
² Saracens] Arabs or Moslems, especially in the context of the Crusades.
³ galls] chafes, opens a wound or sore by rubbing; trow] believe.
⁴ cleave] cling fast to.
⁵ fantasy] here, fanciful or whimsical idea.
¹ geste] gesture.
² anon] at once.
XXXVIII
SHE looketh up, in earth's despair,
   The hopeful Heavens to seek.
That little cloud still floateth there,
   Whereof her Loved did speak.
How bright the little cloud appears!
Her eyelids fall upon the tears,
   And the tears down either check.

XXXIX
The tramp of hoof, the flash of steel—
   The Paynims round her coming!
The sound and sight have made her calm,—
   False page, but truthful woman!
She stands amid them all unmoved.
A heart once broken by the loved
   Is strong to meet the foeman.

XL
"Ho, Christian page! art' keeping sheep,
   From pouring wine-cups resting?"—
"I keep my master's noble name,
   For warring, not for feasting;
And if that here Sir Hubert were,
My master brave, my master dear,
   Ye would not stay to question."

XLI
"Where is thy master, scornful page,
   That we may slay or bind him?"—
"Now search the lea and search the wood,
   And see if ye can find him!
Nathless, as hath been often tried,
Your Paynim heroes faster ride
   Before him than behind him."

XLII
"Give smoother answers, lying page,
   Or perish in the lying."—
"I trow that if the warrior brand'
Beside my foot, were in my hand,
   'Twere better at replying."
They cursed her deep, they smote her low,
They cleft her golden ringlets through;
   The Loving is the Dying.

XLIII
She felt the scimitar gleam down,
   And met it from beneath
With smile more bright in victory
   Than any sword from sheath,—
Which flashed across her lip serene,
Most like the spirit-light between
   The darks of life and death.

XLIV
Ingemisco, ingemisco!²
From the convent on the sea,
Now it sweepest solemnly!
As over wood and over lea
Bodily the wind did carry
The great altar of St. Mary,
And the fifty tapers paling o'er it,
And the Lady Abbess stark before it,
And the weary nuns with hearts that faintly
Beat along their voices saintly—
   Ingemisco, ingemisco!
Dirge for Abbess laid in shroud,
Sweepeth o'er the shroudless Dead,
Page or lady, as we said,

1 brand] here, the blade of a sword.
2 Ingemisco, ingemisco! I lament (i.e., my sins), Latin; from the Requiem or the Mass for the Dead.

ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING
With the dews upon her head,  
All as sad if not as loud.  

In nemisico, ingemisco!  
Is ever a lament begun  
By any mourner under sun,  
Which, ere it endeth, suits but one?  

Lady Geraldine’s Courtship  
A Romance of the Age  

EBB completed the last one hundred and forty lines of this “long modern ballad,” as she first referred to it, in a single day in July 1844, to balance the length of the two volumes of her Poems (1844) (BC 9: 65, 73). Critical legend held that the entire poem had been composed in a day or twelve hours. EBB described the poem as “treating of railroads, routes, & all manner of ‘temporalities’” in a deliberately “radical” temper, with the aim of throwing “conventionalities (turned asbestos for the nonce) into the fire of poetry, to make them glow & glitter” (BC 9:65, 105). The poem reflected the urging of her friend and correspondent Mary Mitford that she write poems of “Humanity,” not “Mysticism”—though EBB maintained it had “more mysticism ... hid in the story .. than all the other ballad—poems” in her 1844 collection (BC 6:219–20; 9:293, 304). Integrating the traditional with the modern, EBB combines courtly love conventions with allusions to railroads and the telegraph. The contemporary cast of characters and narrative led one reviewer to call the poem a “capital magazine story” (BC 10:387). Generically, the work is a hybrid, as a ballad or “romaunt” incorporated in an epistolary dramatic monologue framed with a “Conclusion.” One Blackwood’s writer, who read it “at least six times aloud,” called the work a “beautiful sui generis drama” (BC 9:171). The “apparent roughness” of the meter and rhyme—to a degree deliberate, given that EBB was “playing at ball” with the placement of the caesura or “the pause” (BC 9:177)—was smoothed out by the many revisions she made in the poem in subsequent collections of her poetry, some addressing the “rhymes left unrhymed” (LEBB 2:111). The poem is filled with echoes (including the meter) of “Locksley Hall,” a work in Tennyson’s Poems (1842) that became a kind of anthem for the age, and that EBB much admired but also here challenges (BC 6:219–20). Critics repeatedly connected the two works, as Edgar Allan Poe (1809–49) did (see Appendix A.2 and BC 10:352). Victorians found the poem’s class politics relatively radical. EBB’s own brother George Barrett (1816–93) considered it “very immoral” for a man to accept “a fortune from a wife” (BC 6:86), while the Blackwood’s reviewer asked “how the match between the peasant’s son and the peer’s daughter was found to answer” (BC 9:362). “Lady Geraldine’s Courtship” rapidly became a “popular favorite,” which EBB attributed to “the fact of there being a story” in the poem; it was praised by Thomas Carlyle (1795–1881) and Harriet Martineau (1802–76), among many others (BC 9:213, 219, 165). R.B.’s echoes of it suggest that it was a favorite of his as well (BC 11:21, 29)—understandably, given its sensuous compliment to his own poetry (see I. 165). “Lady Geraldine’s Courtship” is especially important in EBB’s poetic development as the prototype for her novel-poem Aurora Leigh (1856). The earlier poem’s success stimulated her aspiration to write “some day a longer poem of a like class,” a work treating “this real everyday life of our age”—a “sort of novel-poem ... running into the midst of our conventions, & rushing into drawingrooms ... & so, meeting face to face & without mask, the Humanity of the age” (BC 9:177, 304; 10:102–03). Criticism: Mermin 1989, Homans 1998, Stephenson 1989, and Avery and Stott 2003.

A poet writes to his friend. PLACE—A room in Wycombe Hall.  
TIME—Late in the evening.

Dear my friend and fellow-student, I would lean my spirit o’er you!  
Down the purple of this chamber, tears should scarcely run at will.  
I am humbled who was humble. Friend,—I bow my head before you.  
You should lead me to my peasants,—but their faces are too still.

1 Dirge ... head] in the Berg ms. II. 341–44 differ substantially, and include an echo of “Woman on the Field of Battle” by Hemans (Stone 1995, 120).
2 See obituary in The Edinburgh Review 114 (1861): 318; Mary Mitford may have contributed to the myth (BC 10:350).  

James Thomson (1834–82) complimented the work by writing a “prequel,” “Bertram to the Most Noble and Beautiful Lady Geraldine” (1857); see The Poetical Works of James Thomson (London: Reeves & Turner, 1895), 2: 337–50.