‘A fondness for being sad’: Some Portuguese Sources for Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s Poetics of Melancholy in *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (1850)

‘O gosto de ser triste’: Algumas Fontes Portuguesas para a Poética da Melancolia de Elizabeth Barrett Browning em *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (1850)

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In seeing melancholy as the antithesis of poetic creativity, the Victorians often broke with the traditional Renaissance and Romantic attitudes of equating melancholy moods with artistic or poetic genius. This article proposes to explore how, initially viewed as an emotional and ‘depressed’ woman poet, Elizabeth Barrett Browning tried to resist and escape the sickening disempowerment or abandonment which had affected poets as Felicia Hemans and Letitia Landon, and engage in a new poetics of melancholy in *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (1850). It demonstrates how the poet plays this poetics out in most of her later sonnets, where she indeed attempts to prove that good poetry can be written *without* melancholy, even if she herself does not always succeed in this deliberate rejection of ‘dejection’. The article thus intends to suggest, through a brief comparative analysis, that her apparently contradictory poetics of melancholy very probably derived from a specifically Portuguese poetic tradition, namely the ‘fondness for being sad’ of Luís de Camões’, as well as the sorrowful love of Mariana Alcoforado’s epistles (1669) and of Soror Maria do Céu’s mannerist poems, an influence that is supported in the great similarity of motives and language that can be found in the respective texts.[2]

Keywords: Melancholy; Elizabeth Barrett Browning; gender; Portuguese poetic tradition

Ao encararem a melancolia como a antítese da criatividade poética, os vitorianos romperam com as atitudes tradicionais, sobretudo renascentistas e românticas, que equiparavam o humor melancólico ao génio artístico ou poético. Este artigo propõe-se explorar a forma como Elizabeth Barrett Browning, inicialmente vista como uma poeta emocional e ‘deprimida’, tentou resistir e até escapar ao desempoderamento e ao abandono doentios que tinham afetado poetisas como Felicia Hemans e Letitia Landon, e empenhar-se na formulação de uma nova poética da melancolia na sua obra *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (1850). Procura ainda analisar a forma como EBB desenvolveu essa poética nos seus sonetos mais tardios, onde demonstra que a boa poesia pode ser escrita sem o recurso à melancolia, mesmo não sendo sempre bem-sucedida nessa rejeição deliberada da depressão. O artigo pretende assim sugerir, através de uma breve análise comparativa, que esta sua aparentemente contraditória ‘poética da melancolia’ deriva muito provavelmente de uma tradição especificamente portuguesa; isto é, do ‘gosto de estar triste’ de Luís de Camões, bem como do amor doloroso presente quer nas epístolas de Mariana Alcoforado (1669) quer ainda nos poemas maneiristas de Soror Maria do Céu – influência que se sustenta na grande semelhança de motivos e de linguagem que pode ser encontrada nos respetivos textos.

Palavras-chave: Melancolia; Elizabeth Barrett Browning; género; tradição poética portuguesa

Este curso contino de tristeza,
estes passos tão vamente espalhados,

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me foram apagando o ardente gosto
[…]
em que eu criei a tenra natureza,
que do longo costume da aspereza,
contra quem força humana não resiste,
se converteu no gosto de ser triste.
(Canção X, Luís Vaz de Camões)

But when the melancholy fit shall fall
Sudden from heaven like a weeping cloud,
[…]
His soul shalt taste the sadness of her might,
And be among her cloudy trophies hung.
(*Ode to Melancholy*, John Keats)

In *The Gendering of Melancholia* (1992), Juliana Schiesari analyses, from a feminist perspective, the longstanding association of melancholy with artistic genius as a privileged male domain. Melancholia supposedly centres on a sense of 'imagined loss' and involves a 'narcissistic introspection and brooding', leading to a hyperconscious and pensive state which presses the melancholic beyond despair and into philosophical and artistic creativity (6).[3] To this artistic elevation, she argues, corresponds the consequent devaluation of traditionally feminine collective and vocal practises of mourning, as well as the emergence of the dark icon of modern domesticity – the unpoetic 'depressed' woman (3).[4] Schiesari formulates, thus, two major inquiries in her work: What role do women play in the culture of melancholy? And what are the implications of their apparent exclusion from its celebrated company? I will attempt to address both these questions in relation to a well-known Victorian woman poet, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, by analysing some Portuguese sources for a 'poetics of melancholy' in her work.

This choice is grounded both on the very specific circumstances of this poet's life, which today could constitute the cause of a depressive condition, and how they affected her writing negatively, as well as on the relevant role that she assumed in the rewriting of major poetic traditions to incorporate the woman's voice and experience, often linked with loss, abandonment and consequent grieving. This essay's major purpose is to argue that, with that idea in her mind, the poet researched and combined various sources, namely more obscure poetic conventions and moods. The term 'Portuguese', in the title of this essay and her sonnet sequence, might suggest a type of melancholy – nostalgia or yearning – that is specific of the people of Portugal. Yet, the kind of *fond sadness* to be addressed here concerns the elements that the English poet derived from certain Portuguese women,[5] such as they came to her from an interposed written culture and its myths;[6] namely those of the 'dying Catarina' and the 'abandoned Mariana', in which the prolonged indulgence or enjoyment of that suffering or passion is a major component. As these particular feminine 'voices' belong to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, that sophisticated culture of melancholy is necessarily located in the later Renaissance, with its compositional style of elaborate conceits and artificial diction.[7]

[3] According to Schiesari, "The discourse of melancholia legitimates that neurosis as culturally acceptable for particular men"; thus "the 'homo melancholicus' has a privileged position within literary, philosophical and artistic canons" (1992: 11-12).

[4] For Schiesari, "Women who fall into the depths of sorrow are all too easily dismissed with the banal and unprestigious term 'depression'" (1992: 3). On the other hand, women's association with loss or grief is expressed by less flattering allusions, often related to ritualistic forms of mourning (11).

[5] Apparently, Robert Browning called the woman poet his 'little Portuguese' because of her darker complexion and slight build, which resembled that of stereotypical Portuguese women. Besides the coincidence of also wearing black as these women did, there is no evidence that the poet ever travelled to Portugal or that she met any Portuguese women in person, from whom she might have taken or emulated a particular style or mood.

[6] It is important to mention here that she was not the first English woman poet to excavate Portuguese literary history in the search for suggestive female narratives. Felicia Hemans, before her, made effective use of the medieval episode of Inês de Castro's *post-mortem* coronation in a poem inserted in her volume *Songs of the Affections* (1830). See my article "Felicia Hemans's 'The Coronation of Inez de Castro' (1830): Feminine Romanticism and the Memorialisation of Woman" (in Bastos da Silva, 2013).

[7] This, in turn, suggests that Elizabeth Barrett Browning was trying to place herself next to the consecrated English Renaissance poets like Shakespeare and Sidney (who had written genial sonnet sequences), thus showing that she possessed a comparable ambition as a female writer and that she could appropriate and adapt their higher style.

Since this aesthetics is essentially opposed to the central Romantic notions of sincerity, spontaneity of feeling and simplicity of language (originally proposed by Wordsworth), we may infer that Elizabeth Barrett Browning was trying to distance her work from the direct subjectivity of her immediate predecessors and, perhaps, come closer to Browning's dramatic strategy of using 'speakers other than the poet' and from a time and place *other* than Victorian England. This is partly why her speaker in the sonnets (herself) is 'disguised' as 'the Portuguese' – a woman sonneteer whose chosen auditors are Browning and Camões.

After a spell of interventionist writings, Elizabeth Barrett Browning did not seem to be interested in the Victorian issues of the present, other than the details of her relationship with Browning. But other poets of the period were quite alert to, and interested in, the same depressive symptoms that she had experienced before she met her future husband, and that were not really dispelled until she died. The Victorians, as David Riede observes, "often saw melancholy as we now see depression, as a mute or incoherent mood that imprisons the sufferer within himself, and the precise antithesis of poetic creativity" (2005: 2).[8] Although major poets of the period, such as Tennyson, Browning and Arnold, attempted to analyse the "unhappy consciousness at the base of the modern subject", through the 'dialogue of the mind with itself', they were indeed pioneers in breaking with the traditional Renaissance and Romantic attitudes of equating melancholy moods with artistic or poetic genius, as those of Shakespeare, Byron or Keats (6).[9] As I demonstrate in a recent study,[10] they wrote about the human mind and its processes in their poetry, analysing different states of hysteria, mania and alienation in both male and female speakers, thus anticipating modern scientific research in the fields of psychology and psychoanalysis. Tennyson and Browning were already aware that certain moods or mental states that had been seen before as traits of 'genius' were in reality symptoms of a diseased mind or, as Arnold would critically describe, of 'a sick individual in a sick society' (Guimarães, 2014: 172). Thus, like other mental disorders, melancholy is connected in the period with (or seen as resulting from) the mostly negative environmental and social conditions faced by the individual. Christine Ross, in her work on *Contemporary Art and Depression*, pertinently refers to an important evolution of the concept, "the nineteenth-century decline of melancholy (the temperament) and its gradual replacement by melancholia (the clinical disease) and then depression" (2006: 69).[11] But she also emphasises the clearly gendered dimension of the 'slippage', from an essentially masculine form of suffering to womanly-related disorders like hysteria, fitly symbolised by Tennyson's early poem "Mariana" (69).[12] Indeed, depression became more and more perceived as feminine and women as especially prone to erotic and religious melancholia. Coincidentally, the Victorian Age's characteristic nostalgia (present in the need to either look back into the past or to take refuge in nature) and especially its prevalent cult of mourning (a proliferation of death-bed descriptions) were also closely associated to the feminine.[13]

Elizabeth Barrett Browning was thus initially, and unsurprisingly, assessed as an emotional and 'depressed' woman poet, and her very confined life in Wimpole Street frequently compared to that of Tennyson's 'Mariana' or, at best, his 'Lady of Shallot' in her 'lofty melancholy'.[14] Steve Dillon, for example, refers that throughout her career Barrett Browning's poetry is often centred on the image and problematic of the 'cry' (2001: 16), but

[8] Riede's *Allegories of One's Own Mind: Melancholy in Victorian Poetry* is one of the first critical works to address the topic of melancholy in Victorian literature.

[9] William Shakespeare's dramatic characters of Hamlet, Macbeth and Caliban have constituted major contributions to this tradition. Likewise, Byron's verse dramas are full of dark melancholic speakers (Harold, Manfred, Cain, etc), not to mention the poet's own voice. John Keats wrote a major ode on the topic which became the paradigmatic Romantic text – *Ode to Melancholy.*

[10] "'And do accept my madness': Os Poetas e a Psicologia na Inglaterra de Oitocentos" (Proceedings of the *15th Colóquio de Outono*, 2014).

[11] If the classic study of Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), originally associates this affection to a specific temperament or personality trait, Ross states that later approaches tended to focus rather on the difference between melancholia and depression. While the first was supported in feelings of abandonment and betrayal, as well as the need to not let go of loss, it was also connected with intellectual brilliance as the prerogative of male genius. In contrast, the second was described not just as a major mental disorder, creating a sense of inability, but as one affecting women mostly, and thus seen as a flaw of adaptation and creativity (Ross, 2).

[12] Tennyson's poem is one of the first poetic representations of female melancholy in Victorian literature and also one which has influenced many later poets. Mariana's psychological state, as she hopelessly waits in her 'moated grange', is indeed symbolic of the Victorian woman's lack of agency.

[13] Sigmund Freud's influential essay of 1917, "Mourning and Melancholia", would differentiate between 'mourning' as the more or less conscious working through of a concrete loss, and 'melancholia' as a pathological fixation on an imaginary sense of loss, something repressed deep in the subject's consciousness.

[14] Namely, the lady's cursed isolation in her virginal tower and the famous pronouncement of her psychological state 'I am half sick of shadows' (2.71) have indeed supported this major comparison.

that its mournful or elegiac nature may also contain an important element of artifice or creation, thus seeming to confirm her personal taste for a mannerist style.[15] Being very recently bereaved, she was certainly a mourning woman (exhibiting her black outfit as a veritable second skin), and one eventually apt to be transformed into a poetic icon.[16] Nevertheless, she made a brave attempt to resist and even escape the sickening disempowerment which had affected female predecessors as Felicia Hemans and Letitia Landon;[17] her later poetry (including the verse novel *Aurora Leigh*) is well known to formulate a strong social position for the woman poet. Initial difficulties in reconciling religious faith with inherited High Romanticism (derived mostly from Byron) may have created her "melancholy dialectic of ego and conscience", but it was her escape from patriarchal authority that enabled her to develop "a genuine dialectic with her conscience" and truly "engage in a poetics of melancholy" (Riede, 2005: 94-97), most notably in *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (1850). I furthermore suggest that this poetics was not so much derived from a genial masculine tradition, like that of Petrarch and her own male predecessors, but rather from a more obscure one (in the sense of being not just foreign but also feminine), namely that of a supposed 'Catarina' (in Camões), and the seventeenth-century ones of Mariana Alcoforado's *Portuguese Letters* (1669) and Soror Maria do Céu's mannerist poems. As it will be seen, EBB[18] indeed plays this foreign, and often artificial, poetics out in most of her sonnets, whose very elaborate form allows the rational discussion of sentimental and aesthetic values on the part of the woman poet. I believe that, like other Victorians (namely, her husband and fellow-poet Robert Browning), she attempts to prove that good poetry can be written *without* melancholy, partly in the sense that the use of this convention is not considered to be an exclusive requirement of poetic quality and partly also because it may not correspond at all to the reality of the poet's situation or mood.[19] But although she deliberately tries this rejection of 'dejection' in her own life and works, she does not always succeed in this attempt. In order to explain this process himself, Riede mentions a paradox or an irony which is present in EBB: "the rejection of melancholy actually intensifies melancholy ... and ... turns out to be poetically productive rather than disabling" (2005: 2).[20]

It is indeed in the varied set of sonnets that are not included in EBB's more famous amatory sequence (but which also seem to share a thematic link and very revealing or explanatory titles) that we can find not only some evidence of this seeming paradox but eventually also her own attempted 'resolution' of this latent contradiction. And it is also with these that I will begin my analysis of her 'poetics of melancholy' because the selections that I offer bear witness to how EBB, an expert artist at this point, was able to combine and confront different and even contradictory currents or traditions of elegiac writing. They suggest, and eventually prove, that the woman poet's most prevalent mood is undoubtedly a negative one. But if the very first passages reveal more of a Romantic emphasis on the very dejected state of the speaker, the following ones focus already either on practical Victorian concerns such as mourning the beloved dead or on objectively analysing and eventually discarding grief; the last excerpts seem to focus mostly on issues of artistic expression of sorrow, suggesting perhaps a later Victorian form of aestheticism. In the sonnet entitled "The Soul's Expression", she painfully strives to express "That music of my nature" in mystic

[15] Dillon provides the following evidence: "We hear this 'ai! ai!' crying out in many different forms and contexts from *The Seraphim* to *Casa Guidi Windows* to *Aurora Leigh*. The melancholy, elegiac nature of Barrett Browning's poetry has been well noted. But we can do more to emphasize the creative element in those cries; as in Ovid, these are often scenes of 'poetic composition' and creation as much as they are mournful elegies" (Dillon, 2001: 17).

[16] The redoubled grief occasioned by the recent deaths of her supportive mother and her closest brother (by drowning), associated to her father's tyrannical control over all his grown-up children, had certainly contributed in a first instance to this image of Elizabeth Barrett Browning.

[17] The late Romantic or early Victorian poetesses, Felicia Hemans and Letitia Elizabeth Landon (L.E.L.), seem in their respective lives and works to construct their poetics on precisely this disempowering feminine grief. Yet, as Brandy Ryan shows in his article, 'Echo and Reply', "these three women developed an elegiac dialogue that set in place a poetic economy of shared and negotiated values that flourished throughout the nineteenth century. Hemans' "The Grave of a Poetess" (1828), Landon's "Stanzas on the Death of Mrs. Hemans" (1835), and Barrett's "Stanzas Addressed to Miss Landon and Suggested by Her 'Stanzas on the Death of Mrs. Hemans'" (1835) use the elegiac genre as a space to evaluate women poets and their poetry: sorrow, sympathy, and suffering open up a dialogue of mourning for these poets that extends beyond the recent death of a poetic peer." (249).

[18] For practical purposes, we will be using the well-known abbreviation of the author's name (EBB) in all subsequent references to her.

[19] The latter reason is, I believe, particularly pertinent if we consider how happy EBB must have been at the time when she wrote her sonnet sequence, which is about how Browning's unexpected love literally rescued her from her previous existence.

[20] Riede seems to suggest that this apparent contradiction could be interpreted either as a total paradox (a device whose usage is not unusual in mannerist poetry) or simply as a case of situational irony having to do with EBB's peculiar circumstances.

heights, avoiding the material world of the senses that she characterises as "that *dread apocalypse* of soul" (3, 14);[21] another sonnet with the title of "The Seraph and Poet" clearly features the poet before "the naughty world" as the singer of sorrow "upon the earth *grave-riven*" (6-7); in "Bereavement", EBB visibly refers to the death of her "beloveds" and how she "astonished fell and could not pray", being left "*dark* before the natural sun" (3-4); in "Consolation", whose title is deceptive, she sees herself as "some forsaken lamb ... bleating up the moors in *weary dearth*" (10-11); "Irreparableness" associates despondency to death through a flower metaphor; in the sonnet entitled "Grief", EBB emphasises what other poets have also realized – that "*hopeless grief* is passionless" (1), and also that "Full *desertness* / In souls, as countries, lieth *silent-bare* / Under the blanching, vertical eye-glare / Of the absolute Heavens" (5-8); in "Perplexed Music", she gloomily examines the unfolding of human experience as "*Deathly colds* / Fall on us" (5-6); and, finally, in the paradoxical sonnet entitled "Pain in Pleasure", glad thoughts entertained long enough "will all prove *sad enough to sting*" (14) in the end. But, and somewhat unexpectedly, in her poem "Discontent", EBB would sharply criticise "light human nature" for being "ruffled without cause", "as if the world were lost" (1-2, 8), and in the one interestingly entitled "Exaggeration", she would very sensibly declare that "we overstate the ills of life" (1), significantly adding that sorrow or grief is inherently harmful for the poet's art: "We *sigh so loud,* the nightingale within / Refuses to sing loud" (9-10); finally, in another poem she asks God to grant her "so much patience as a blade of grass / Grows by, *contented* through the heat and cold"(11-12), suggesting that she may have adhered to an Arcadian acceptance of life. But EBB's rational, if also obviously Christian, refusal of indulging the dejected state of the poet becomes annulled in a sonnet named "Insufficiency", which again handles the issue of the poet's (in)capacity for poetic utterance: "what we best conceive, we *fail to speak*" (11); and the reason behind this insufficiency seems to be connected with the drama itself of human existence, which she describes through a natural simile: "... like a *wind-exposed, distorted tree*, / we are blown against for ever by the curse / Which breathes through nature" (7-9).

The very first *Sonnets from the Portuguese* seem to celebrate the great miracle of the subject's – EBB's – improbable and unnatural transformation from a certain Death to a reviving Love; but, like the Portuguese poet Luís de Camões, EBB is paradoxically more concerned with emphasising that 'first dark stage' that she had grown so accustomed to (and fond of), and that comprised "The sweet, sad years, the *melancholy years*, / Those of my own life, who by turns had flung // A *shadow* across me" (I, 7-9). In sonnets III and IV, in apparent full compliance with this poetic convention (which may include statements of unworthiness), she openly renounces her beloved Robert Browning to the living world of social pageantry, in turn accepting her own likely dying, and defining herself famously as "A poor, tired, wandering singer, – *singing through // The dark*, and leaning up a cypress tree" (11-12); her sounds (poems) are necessarily sad and plaintive whilst his (Browning's) are bound to be cheerful and positive, in accordance with his younger age and disposition: "there's a voice within / That *weeps* – as thou must sing – *alone, aloof*" (13-14).[22] She thus defines and *fashions* herself not only as a lonely but also as an alienated poet (one that is intrinsically melancholic), and her poetry as intrinsically sad and subjective, in direct contrast with Browning's hearty worldliness and allegedly more optimistic and objective writing, seeming thus to reveal her implicit identification with the High Romantic melancholy models.[23]

Nevertheless, EBB was undoubtedly conscious that the long accumulation of sorrow (seldom or hardly palliated by the opiates that she consumed), and her own indulgence of that sorrow, would inevitably condition not only her life but her writing as well.

[21] All the quotations of EBB's poems that are cited in this article are taken from volume 2 of Sandra Donaldson's complete edition of *The Works* (Pickering and Chatto, 2010). The italicised emphases are my own and, in this instance, serve to highlight the poet's very specific word choice – with a focus on words possessing a strong negative connotation.

[22] Like her own family (and her father particularly), EBB was firmly convinced that she would not live a long life due to her frail physical condition and constant health problems, which indeed prevented her from leaving her room. There was, furthermore, an implicit understanding that this condition of hers would preclude any unreasonable thoughts of a future marriage.

[23] EBB was well aware of this major difference between herself and her husband as poets, which they often commented and discussed between themselves and in their writings. Robert Browning was opposed to purely subjective or confessional poetry, and he valued instead more indirect or dramatic forms of poetic representation (using a speaker/character other than the poet), as namely his famous collections of dramatic monologues prove.

I lift my heavy heart up solemnly,
As once Electra her *sepulchral urn*,
And, looking in thine eyes, I overturn
The ashes at thy feet. Behold and see
What *great heap of grief* lay hid in me,
(V, 1-5).

She thus suggests that the 'offerings' that she makes to the male poet, supposedly the sonnets included in the sequence or cycle, are nothing more than a great 'heap of ashes', the burnt vestiges of a past life – and their offer symbolises a truly disburdening ritual for her. And indeed, though mostly suppressed or contained in its emotive language and content, the sonnet cycle would in fact work its own healing and, indirectly we might say, EBB's freedom or escape from the 'death-in-life' of melancholy.

The fact that EBB's *Sonnets from the Portuguese* are frequently, and inevitably, associated with the courtship letters that she and Browning addressed to each other before their elopement, will also be of relevance in terms of our major argument.[24] The two genres or forms of writing, the poetic and the epistolary, seem to cross over, being secretly simultaneous and even mutually illuminating. She alludes to the latter in her sonnet XXVIII, exclaiming: "My letters all dead paper, mute and white! / And yet they seem alive and quivering" (1-2). Robert Browning's own critical attitude towards women's sentimental writing, and love poetry in general, was mostly from fear of compromising letters, which he saw as an unacceptable exposure of a person's privacy. But, interestingly, Browning apparently appreciated her longer poem entitled "Catarina to Camoëns", published in *Graham's Magazine* in 1843; it bore the following explanatory sub-title regarding that Portuguese lady's particular context: "Dying in his absence abroad, and referring to the poem in which he recorded the sweetness of her eyes" (*The Works,* 308);[25] indeed, Browning had once declared that EBB's condition resembled that of the Portuguese Catarina: So close had he fancied the relationship between the invalid poet and the dying Catarina that, in his letters to her during their courtship in 1845-1847, he could not help sprinkling about allusions to, and echoes of, his favourite poem (Monteiro, 1996: 28).[26] His fear for the loss of Elizabeth caused him to eventually understand the exact meaning of Catarina's closed door – a reference to the lady's opening lines in the poem: "On *the door you will not enter*, / I have gazed too long – adieu! / ... Death is near me, and not you!" (1-4). Browning had, thus, discovered that "Catarina to Camoëns" dramatised a mourning voice with meaning deeply private to EBB, and decided that in her sickroom she need not think about an exiled lover as Catarina on her deathbed most probably had (Monteiro, 29).

Ironically, three years after their marriage, EBB would boldly show her husband the sheaf of sonnets she had written about him as a suitor and lover; she had withheld the poems then because she had heard from him some word against 'putting one's loves into verses'. Eventually, they would jointly decide upon publishing them under the ambiguous title of *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, hoping that the reading public would take it to mean either 'from the Portuguese language' or 'from the Portuguese bard' and *not* from the real enunciator – 'the Portuguese Catarina', whose own melancholic voice had originally been repressed or silenced. But their title also echoes Lord Strangford's translations – *Poems, from the Portuguese of Luis de Camoens*, published early in 1803.[27] This was the time in which English readers, and EBB no less, were introduced in proper fashion to the Portuguese poet's famous courtly lyrics and songs of exile.[28] But quite as important as these, and perhaps more so, was also Strangford's long introductory "Remarks on the Life and Writings of Camoens",

[24] Consult, for example, Daniel Karlin's edition of *Robert Browning & Elizabeth Barrett. The Courtship Correspondence 1845-1846* (Oxford University Press,1990).
[25] EBB made her first draft of "Catarina to Camoens" in November 1831, during the time she was writing her diary, thus revealing that she knew more about the Portuguese poet's life and work. In addition, she mentions Camões and his *Lusiads* in her later poem "A Vision of Poets" (*Poems,* 1844).
[26] See George Monteiro, "Elizabeth Barrett's Central Poem", in *The Presence of Camões. Influences on the Literature of England, America and Southern Africa* (1996).
[27] Strangford, Lord Viscount, *Poems from the Portuguese / of Luis de Camoens; with remarks on his life and writings* (London: J. Carpenter).
[28] As I write elsewhere, "Elizabeth Barrett was dedicated to a rigorous study of the ancient authors – with the purpose of emulating those great poets that had come before her. Part II of her Diary (1831-32) contains, for example, a seven-page list with fifty-eight names of Medieval, Renaissance and Baroque Portuguese and Spanish poets." See "Intimamente na Sombra do Bardo" (Guimarães, 2010: 164).

which told the tragic story of the great but unappreciated poet, exiled from his native country because of his unfortunate love for Dona Catarina de Ataíde. Likewise, it was those lyrics chosen primarily for their supposedly autobiographical and melancholy content that significantly most attracted readers of the nineteenth century.

Letter writing, and the epistolary genre in particular because of its associations with the feminine, will be seen as being equally relevant in this context. I thus argue that another Portuguese text that might have influenced EBB and her elaborate poetics of melancholy, both directly and by way of its impact on Strangford, was *Letters of a Portuguese Nun*, first published in French in 1669 as *Lettres d'une Religieuse Portugaise* and widely re-published in several languages throughout Europe.[29] Composed originally of five epistles supposedly written by a woman, this little book was translated into English as early as 1678. The letters themselves are the record of an ill-starred affair of love, seduction, and abandonment between a real Portuguese nun at Beja – Mariana Alcoforado – and a French army officer, Noël de Chamilly.[30] Together, or taken as a whole, they form a long monologue beginning in amorous passion and slowly evolving, through successive stages of faith, doubt, and despair, toward a tragic end. As probably EBB was also well aware, the *Letters* had an immediate and immense effect in Western sentimental literature, giving origin to fictitious replies and counter replies, and English letter-writing a whole new direction.[31] Besides being recognised as "the true voice of feeling", the *Letters* have provided even a generic name ['Portuguese'] for "that kind of literature which unmasks the naked emotions of the human heart in love" (Monteiro, 1996: 34). Therefore, in the case of EBB, 'from the Portuguese' might also signify that she was deliberately writing in the tradition of this emotional genre.[32]

Furthermore, Mariana's *Letters* seem to have their own relationship to EBB's epistolary poem "Catarina to Camoens"; EBB knew that any love letters Dona Catarina herself could have written to Luís de Camões did no longer exist, and that she would thus be free to invent and tell the narrative of Catarina's last days in her own voice, here and there eventually gathering useful hints that she found in the nun's letters. A comparison suggests that these were mostly rhetorical, tonal and stylistic suggestions, such as the following despondent ones found in her sonnet XXV:

> A heavy heart, Beloved, have I borne
> From year to year until I saw thy face,
> And sorrow after sorrow took the place
> Of all those natural joys as lightly worn
> ... Hopes apace
> Were changed to long despairs, till God's own grace
> Could scarcely lift above the world forlorn
> My heavy heart.
> (1-4, 6-9)

One notices, in this respect, that the love which is portrayed in both her poem and the nun's *Letters* is markedly courtly and full of devotion. Another great similarity resides in the respective stories, in particular the harrowing confession of a long-concealed affection on the part of the woman: Mariana's for the departed officer and Catarina's for the banished poet. The only differences reside in the fact that Camões eventually returned to his country to find

[29] *The Letters of a Portuguese Nun* (*Les Lettres Portugaises*), first published anonymously by Claude Barbin in Paris in 1669, is a work believed by some scholars to be epistolary fiction written by Gabriel-Joseph de La Vergne, comte de Guilleragues (1628–1685), a diplomat and friend of the poet Boileau and the dramatist Jean Racine. Also in 1669, Barbin published a sequel, again said to have been written by a "Portuguese lady of society", with the addition of seven new letters to the original five.

[30] Until the 20th century, the letters were often ascribed to a 17th century Franciscan nun in a convent in Beja, Portugal, named in 1810 as Mariana Alcoforado (1640–1723), though no Portuguese original has ever been found. The letters were said to have been written to her French lover, Noel Bouton, Marquis de Chamilly (1635–1715), who came to Portugal to fight on behalf of the Portuguese in the Portuguese Restoration War from 1663-1668.

[31] While the authoress's name and identity remained undivulged, the passionate letters were a European publishing sensation. Five editions in the collection's first year were followed by more than forty editions throughout the 17th century. The original letters were translated in several languages, including the German, *Portugiesischen Briefen* (Rainer Maria Rilke).

[32] As an erudite woman poet, EBB must also have been well aware of the fact that *The Letters of a Portuguese Nun* were written in the same style as *The Heroides*, a collection of fifteen epistolary poems composed by the Roman poet Ovid, and *Lettres d'Héloise à Abélard*, a medieval story of passion and Christian renunciation.

that his beloved had long been dead and that Chamilly never did return, thus neglecting his duty towards the seduced nun. But this feeling of abandonment, in both cases, originated highly lyrical and also exquisitely melancholy outpourings, both on the part of the Portuguese poet and of the Portuguese nun. And, through EBB, on the part of Catarina as well, who is finally given a 'voice' of her own.

It is interesting to note that one of EBB's favourite Romantic poets, Byron himself, had been very conscious of the influence of this Portuguese tradition of melancholy love in English, as his poem entitled "Stanzas to a Lady, with the Poems of Camoens", of 1807, seems to testify:

> […]
> Then read, dear girl! with feeling read,
> For thou wilt ne'er be one of those;
> To thee in vain I shall not plead
> In *pity for the poet's woes*.
>
> He was in sooth a genuine bard;
> His was no faint, fictitious flame.
> Like his, may love be thy reward,
> But *not thy hapless fate the same*.
>
> (from *Hours of Idleness*, ll. 9-16)

In EBB's critical survey, *The Book of the Poets* (1842), she indeed suggests not only that Lord Byron's poetry is melancholy – for which feature he is duly attacked in the critical press – but that *all* great poetry that has been written tends to be sad, elegiac: "… the morbidness of the sorrows of poets – because Lord Byron was morbidly sorrowful […] vocally sad in the prevailing majority of poetical compositions" (*Works,* 635). Another possible connection can be established with Felicia Hemans who, in 1818, published a collection of *Translations from Camoens and other Poets* and whose own poetry was well known for its sentimental and melancholy tone, in which the topic of female abandonment was also a recurrent one, as well as those of solitude, exile, unconsummated love, and early death.[33] In spite of not being a translator from the Portuguese, Elizabeth Barrett expanded on Camões and the Portuguese Nun by inventing a 'chapter' which had been missing from the biographical accounts of both and the tradition of the courtly lyric as such – the voice of the Other.

At the root of melancholy, then, is the loss of a beloved object, the loss of the *Thing* (to use the term employed by Julia Kristeva) – the 'principle and pulse of life' (1992: 11); "For narcissistic depressed persons, sadness is really the sole object, […] a substitute object they become attached to … for lack of another" (Kristeva, 1992).[34] The Portuguese scholar Aguiar e Silva has stated that "This sense of dissipation and loss of a good, of a beloved object, of the beloved *thing*, is obsessively expressed in Camões's ninth and tenth 'canções' [songs]" (1999: 33); according to him, Camões would have derived it, in turn, from Marsilio Ficino's sense of primordial loss or the desire to return to an original unity (36).[35] The following excerpt from his Tenth Song is quite clear about this constitutional trait in the poet:

> [...]
> My childhood tears already flowed
> With an impassioned nostalgia;
> The cries I made in my crib
> Already sounded to me like sighs,

[33] See *Translations from Camoens and other Poets* (1818), in Gary Kelly (ed), *Selected Poems, Prose and Letters* (2002).
[34] Kristeva adds that "Knowingly disinherited of the Thing, the depressed person wanders in pursuit of continuously disappointing adventures and loves; or else retreats, disconsolate and aphasic, alone with the unnamed Thing", *Black Sun* (1992: 13).
[35] See Aguiar e Silva, "The Songs of Melancholy: Aspects of Mannerism in Camões", in *A Revisionary History of Portuguese Literature*, Vol.18.

I was in harmony with my age and Fate;
For whenever they rocked me,
If they sang sad verses of love,
I naturally fell right to sleep,
So resigned was I to sadness.[36]

Like the Portuguese poet, and his beloved Catarina, EBB could also declare at the beginning of her relationship with Robert Browning, and her own sonnet sequence, that "so resigned was I to sadness", and that her love was indeed 'shrouded by a tragic shadow', like that of other Mannerist poets.[37] That particular state or condition is described in both poets' sonnets as 'a living death and a dying life', inevitably resulting in melancholy, and the attendant inability of the victim to lead a normal life. The melancholic being, whether man or woman, turns inwards, transforming his/her misfortune into, in Camões's reiterated words, a 'fondness for being sad' ('um gosto de ser triste').

The *Portuguese Letters,* in their turn, had such a phenomenal impact on both sides of the English Channel that to write 'à la portugaise' became a veritable code for a certain style – written at the height of passion in a moment of disorder and distress. The following excerpts from the *Letters,* in particular, may attest for this style:

> I, with a passion the most delicate that ever was felt ... can only be accused of an excess of tenderness, ... I am continually reproaching my own soul that it does not sufficiently discover to you the ardour of its emotions, ... (Alcoforado, Letter I, 1-2)
>
> The most expressive actions seem to me inadequate to speak my fondness, yet you can be reserved with me, ... (Letter I, 4)
>
> Why do I wish to search into the recesses of your soul where I should find but indifference, and perhaps infidelity? ... it was not till you found that I loved with so much ardour that you resolved to love with so little. (Letter I, 6)
>
> ... such is the delicacy of my love, that it would be more grievous to me to be suspected of a crime than to see it committed by you. (Letter I, 7)
>
> You well know that only once seeing you pass by, the repose of my life was lost, and that, without any consideration either of my sex or birth, I was the first to seek opportunities of seeing you again. (Alcoforado, Letter II, 11)
>
> Tell her that I love you even to madness; ... Yes, I love you a thousand times better than myself. (Letter II, 12) [38]

The scores of sequels to the letters, as well as imitations and translations of them, also attest to their enduring appeal and continuing popularity.[39] Certain cultural assumptions underlay the code of the Portuguese style: not only was Portugal viewed as the land of passion but also the nun's sensuality and sensibility were attributed to the extremes of heat, intensity, and mystery in her environment. Due to the transports, the emotional abandon, the irrationality and the anguish present in the letters, many critics have defined them not only as quintessential feminine writing but also as the product of natural genius and, therefore, as great art.[40] Nevertheless, there were also those who sustained that these letters could not have been written by a woman because they are too carefully constructed, with too many allusions

[36] Camões's poem (6-14) quoted in Aguiar e Silva, 37-8, my emphasis.
[37] "In the agitated, labyrinthine, ambiguous, dilemmatic and cruel world of Mannerism, ... narcissistic melancholy – by introducing into the ego a mental fixation on the lost 'cousa amada', the lost object of desire – tragically incorporates Eros and Thanatos" (Aguiar e Silva, 1999: 51).
[38] See *Letters from a Portuguese Nun to an Officer in the French Army*, trans. from the French by W. R. Bowles (London, 1817).
[39] The letters set a precedent for sentimentalism in European culture at large, and for the literary genres of the sentimental and the epistolary novels, into the 18th century. Early women writers such as Aphra Behn, Mary Davys and Eliza Haywood are known to have written very popular versions, imitations or even sequels to the letters.
[40] Linda Kauffman mentions the examples of Sainte-Beuve, Rilke and Goethe as those writers who have interpreted the *Letters* as superior feminine art. See *Discourses of Desire. Gender, Genre, and Epistolary Fictions* (New York, 1986).

to classical texts and Racinian tragedy to be the work of an unworldly and wholly uneducated nun.[41]

In his now classic study on 'abandoned women' and poetic tradition, Lawrence Lipking pertinently traces the feminine pattern of what he calls "competitive suffering", or the will to 'seem more unhappy than anyone else', to certain paradigmatic works: namely, Ovid's *Heroides* and *The Letters of a Portuguese Nun* (1988: 196).[42] He claims to find this symptom particularly among ambitious women who, seeing all roads to glory closed to them, "struggle to gain celebrity by a show of inconsolable grief" (197-8).

> Her consciousness of pain becomes *a mark of superiority*, as if to have loved and lost were itself a virtue. Men as well women bow down before it. ... Hence the best women poets are often objects of worship. ... prized ... her *extraordinary capacity for suffering*. Enduring such loss, the sensibility of the poet seems refined almost out of existence (198).

Lipking obviously mentions the specific case of EBB in his study but he believes that Alcoforado was the first, in the past three centuries, to teach us "what literary men have learned about women in love and women who write" (199). For him, the nun "commands a peerless rhetoric" that "draws us out of the exterior world into an inner recess of language" because "We observe no conversation with the lover but only *a dialogue of the self with the self*" (200). Her words convey a sort of masochistic pleasure in the pain that convulses her and it becomes unclear "whether she is boasting or complaining, ready to die from sorrow or luxuriate in it" (200). As all Europe would eventually know of her grievance, the nun has arguably passed her consciousness on to others and thus she becomes a *resource* for other women.

Furthermore, the *Portuguese Letters* would inclusively become the centre of a generalised discussion over the difference between masculine and feminine ways of writing and between literary artifice and natural creativity. Given the personal interest of the Brownings in both issues and their own artistic tendency to oscillate between High Romantic and Mannerist styles, it is not surprising that in their conception of *Sonnets from the Portuguese* they should have taken all of these aspects in consideration. This because EBB's sonnet cycle appears to be a deliberate combination of opposite features: both feminine and masculine modes, both emotionally spontaneous and carefully restrained and constructed poetic language, both Romantic in mood and Mannerist in rhetorical style.

EBB also absorbed the characteristic 'doubleness' of amorous discourse which is present in the nun's *Portuguese Letters*, for they are addressed both to the chevalier and to herself (Kauffman, 1986: 100); that ambiguity is maintained throughout the letters and the sonnets, oscillating between the pathos of direct statement and that of interior monologue. As the nun does with the chevalier, who becomes her idol, EBB also humbles herself before her beloved, considering herself inferior to him.[43] The apparent masochism of their many confessions can be puzzling or artificial because it creates a contrast with the often masculine vigour of their tone. We can compare the following excerpts:

> I am more jealous of what is due to my affection than to yours, ... Yes, it is with myself I wish to be satisfied rather than with you. (Alcoforado, Letter II, 13)

> And wilt thou have me fashion into speech
> The love I bear thee, finding words enough,
> And hold the torch out, while the winds are rough,
> Between our faces, to cast light on each? —
> (EBB, Sonnet XIII, 1-4)

[41] Among the earliest detractors of the supposed feminine authorship of the *Letters*, we can find famous names such as that of Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

[42] See his *Abandoned Women and Poetic Tradition* (The University of Chicago Press, 1988).

[43] This act of humbleness before the beloved is indeed one of the most pervasive conventions of medieval and renaissance literatures, in particular of the epistolary and sonnet traditions in terms of specific literary genres.

As Kauffman emphasises, both women authors seem to efface the male beloved (who becomes a mere pretext) by focusing on their motives for writing, as if 'writing for themselves'; both seem to sustain their melancholy passion by writing, and their amorous discourse becomes iterative through recurrent repetition (Kauffman, 101). Although the sequence of letters and of sonnets share the storyline effect, establishing a beginning, a middle and an end to or a resolution of the affair, they are always in the process of becoming. Kauffman even detects in both works a certain fictiveness in this process, as from the outset the beloved is "the object of a desire that thrives on imagination, roles, scenes, theatre" (102).

Given the widely erudite nature of EBB's readings and her interest in finding obscure female voices that could prove women's ability for elaborate poetic expression, it is important to mention still another possible Portuguese source that might further illuminate a feminine poetics of melancholy. This one was, perhaps, less known to the English-speaking reader. But, in EBB's sonnets, there are subtle allusions to or appropriations of another Portuguese poet, Sister Maria do Céu, an eighteenth-century Carmelite nun, who between 1736 and 1741 published a long narrative in verse about love from the perspective of a female 'pilgrim' ('*Enganos no Bosque, Desenganos no Rio'*, Lisbon).[44] As in the above-mentioned case of Mariana Alcoforado, this early literary production is not really surprising because the convents seemed to offer intellectual women greater opportunities for learning and creativity.

Regarding its particular style, Barbara Neri has pointed out that Maria's work "seems to be in keeping with Baroque poetry's ornamental sensual devices (illusions) laid as traps to snare the reader and reveal sober, moral lessons (disillusion)" (Neri, 2006: 12-13).[45] As to their theme, Maria's poems creatively explore the troubled inner lives and personal experiences of women in writing. It is thus significant that, as Neri has mentioned, unpublished journal notes in Part II of EBB's diary of 1832[46] contain a long list of Spanish and Portuguese poets, including Soror Maria do Céu and her lyric from that collection entitled "Cover me with flowers".[47]

Cobridme de flores,
Que muero de amores.
Por que de mi aliento el ayre
No lleve el olor sublime,
Cobridme.
Sea, porque todo es uno,
Alientos de amor y olores
De flores
De azucenas y jasmines
Aqui la mortaja espero,
Que muero.
Si me perguntais de que
Respondo, en dulces rigores:
De amores.

(*Enganos no Bosque*, 2nd part, 159)

As Neri further emphasises, "Baroque poets were absorbed with the transience and mutability of life and the forces and desires that pull in opposition" and this might explain

[44] Sister Maria do Céu (1658-1723) was a Portuguese Baroque writer, poet and playwright. Born in Lisbon, she entered the cloistered Convent of Hope in 1676 and held the posts of master of novices and abbess. Very cultured and intelligent, she was of the few women at the time to have access to a vast knowledge, and one of the best poets that Portugal has ever known. Her writing, under the pseudonym of Mary Mercy, stood out because of the wealth of images and musical and theatrical aspirations.

[45] See "Cobridme de flores: (un)covering flowers of Portuguese and Spanish poets in Sonnets from the Portuguese", in *Victorian Poetry*.

[46] These are unpublished journal notes from EBB's holograph in the Berg Collection, New York Public Library. Here, EBB mentions fifty-eight poets from John Bowring's *Ancient Poetry and Romances of Spain* (London, 1824).

[47] See *Enganos no Bosque, Desenganos no Rio,* in *História e Antologia da Literatura Portuguesa, Século XVII* (Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, 2004).

why their poems appeal simultaneously to the senses and the intellect (2006: 13).[48] One may also find Maria do Céu's special appeal for EBB easy to understand in this context: women poets like herself re-write our understanding of the Baroque by presenting their interests, pleasures and discontents from a feminine viewpoint. The complex layering of metaphors that can be found in her poem enhances the fact that "her flower cover seems to be *both* a protection from death and the inevitable death robe she awaits" (2006: 16).

This dual reference to 'flowers of love and of death' is particularly appropriated by EBB in her sonnets XXIII and XXIV. For example, her lines "grave-damps falling round my head" and "dreams of death" assume another meaning – a more personal and symbolic one - in the context of Maria's mournful poem.

> Is it indeed so? If I lay here dead,
> Wouldst thou miss any life in losing mine?
> And would the sun for thee more coldly shine
> Because of *grave-damps falling round my head*?
> [...]
> Then my soul, instead
> Of *dreams of death*, resumes life's lower range.
> Then, love me, Love! Look on me — breathe on me!
> As brighter ladies do not count it strange,
> For love, to give up acres and degree,
> *I yield the grave for thy sake*, and exchange
> My near sweet view of Heaven, for earth with thee!
>
> (Sonnet XXIII, 1-4, 8-14, my emphasis)

While other happier women willingly 'yield' title and property for Love, EBB states that she reluctantly 'yields' an earlier death, and a consequent heavenly peace, for a life with her beloved.[49] Thus, in contrast with Maria's speaker, who is breathing her last breath because of thwarted love, and whose flowers are all scattered and faded ("De azucenas y jasmines / Aqui la mortaja espero"), EBB's speaker is, against all expectation, resuming her breath of life and, therefore, her 'lilies' are all blossoming.

> ... Very whitely still
> *The lilies of our lives may reassure*
> *Their blossoms from their roots*, accessible
> Alone to heavenly dews that drop not fewer,
> *Growing straight, out of man's reach*, on the hill.
> God only, who made us rich, can make us poor.
>
> (Sonnet XXIV, 9-14, my emphasis)

EBB's concluding sonnet in the sequence, XLIV, again mentions 'ivy' and 'flowers', but in this occasion *as* metaphors for her personal creations, or poems "withdrawn from heart's ground". This conclusion to her sequence thus suggests a successful transformation from incapacitating melancholy into artistic creativity brought about by love. Through an extended conceit, her complete sonnet sequence is finally offered to her beloved, both as a proof of this creative victory of hers and in exchange for his love tokens (the flowers); EBB

[48] The sonnet was specifically chosen as the vehicle to study the ideas and concerns of literate, seventeenth-century women. As a difficult form of poetry requiring wit, artistry and education, sonnets enable a display of intellectual capabilities and offer women opportunities for veiled criticism of contemporary systems of control.

[49] Regarding the issue of cohabitation (room sharing) between lovers and how it seems to break Petrarchan conventions of the sonnet, see Gazzaniga's article 'This Close Room' (2016). As its author states, "This article focuses on how Sonnets from the Portuguese builds, and builds upon, a multi-dimensional language of space: the space between a female speaker and her beloved, the enclosed space of the sonnet room, and the real space in which those sonnets were written. […] traditional amatory verse depends upon maintaining a breach between subject and object because such unfulfilled desires generate the necessary tension for poetic production. In contrast, the tension in Barrett's sonnet sequence arises precisely from the fact that the distance between subject and object cannot be sustained and, indeed, has already collapsed." (68)

expects him, as undoubted poetic expert, to 'weed' or perfect her poems, and to keep them in his heart.

> [...]
> So, in the like name of that love of ours,
> Take back *these thoughts which here unfolded too,*
> *And which on warm and cold days I withdrew*
> *From my heart's ground*. Indeed, those beds and bowers
> Be overgrown with bitter weeds and rue,
> And wait thy weeding; yet here's eglantine,
> Here's ivy! —take them, as I used to do
> Thy flowers, and keep them where they shall not pine.
> Instruct thine eyes to keep their colours true,
> And tell thy soul *their roots are left in mine*.
>
> (Sonnet XLIV, 5-14, my emphasis)

Although female melancholia, or depression, can be interpreted (as is the particular stand of critics such as Juliana Schiesari) in terms of a 'perpetual mourning' for the barred status imposed on intellectual or artistic women, especially during the Victorian period, EBB's refined poetic work seems to point not only to a subtle resistance to patriarchy but also to suggest the possibility of rethinking a symbolics and an aesthetics of loss, namely through the more remote or exotic medium of Portuguese female voices, such as those of 'Catarina', 'Mariana' and 'Maria do Céu'. Furthermore, in expertly researching and combining different poetic traditions from several historical periods and locations and appropriating the literary voice of the melancholic female Other, the poet seems to be searching for a common ground of experience for artistic women and, at the same time, to claim a specific feminine poetics of melancholy – a tradition which is intrinsically different from the masculine one.

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