

## Victorian Poetry

Queen Victoria (1837–1901):

- “earnestness” in morality and all human relations vs. double standards in gender relations; hypocrisy;
- swift scientific progress (Darwinism, electricity, mechanics), industrialization, urbanization, disillusionment;
- in art: various tendencies to meet the new demands of the age:
  - escapism (medievalism, exoticism, Christianity and chivalry);
  - negativism, realism, naturalism, germs of existentialism;
  - experimental writing, holistic view of the arts;
- “Third Generation” of the Romantics (though not in a literal sense): all born in the 19th century.

### *Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809–1892)*

- descendant of an aristocratic family but father disinherited by grandfather (wealthy middle-class);
- precocious child, early compositions and publications (*Poems by Two Brothers*, 1828; with Charles);
- fine education; Trinity College, Cambridge (from 1828); member of Cambridge Apostles;
- friendship and homoerotic love with Arthur Henry Hallam;
- *Poems Chiefly Lyrical* (1830): sentimental style, influence of the Romantics;
- **1831**: father deceased, interruption of studies in Cambridge; summer spent with Hallam, engagement between Hallam and Tennyson’s sister Emilia;
- **1833**: second volume of poetry – disruptive criticism;
- Hallam dies in Vienna; Tennyson continues to write but no publications until 1842;
- *In Memoriam* begun (grief, coping, apology of Christianity, philosophical discussion of life and death);
- **1842**: *Poems* in two volumes (2nd volume consisting of new works); successful with critics and readers alike;
- **1850**: *In Memoriam* published; Tennyson appointed Poet Laureate after Wordsworth’s death; marriage to Emily Sellwood (2 children: Hallam, 1852 – Tennyson’s first biographer; Lionel, 1854);
- **1883**: elected to peerage; **1884**: created Baron – first poet to achieve such high status with his art;
- **1892**: death; buried in Westminster Abbey.

### Medievalism & escapism

- “The Lady of Shalott”: ballad form with extended rhymes; plot obscure and supernatural;
  - theme from King Arthur’s court and times, Italian sources (“La Donna di Scalotta”), Elaine of Astolat;
  - artist as passive onlooker, seeing the world through a mirror;
  - women’s gender roles in Middle Ages and in Victorian times (passivity, waiting, embroidery, gentleness);
  - symmetry and separation (river, road, crack; I–II vs. III–IV);
  - two versions (1832 and 1842) with a significantly different outlook on gender roles and control (cf. endings).
- “The Beggar Maid”:
  - traditional legend relating the story of an African king (Cophetua) in a medieval setting; idealization;
  - symmetry of stanzas;
  - eroticism (poverty and erotic power matched in description).

Both works treated by Pre-Raphaelite painters in symbolic representations.

- *Idylls of the King*:

- treatment of the legends of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table;
- dedicated to Queen Victoria mourning the death of Prince Albert (1861).

---

Break not, O woman’s heart, but still endure;  
Break not, for thou art Royal, but endure,  
Remembering all the beauty of that star  
Which shone so close beside Thee, that ye made  
One light together, but has past and leaves  
The Crown a lonely splendour. May all love,  
His love unseen but felt, o’ershadow Thee,  
The love of all Thy sons encompass Thee,  
The love of all Thy daughters cherish Thee,  
The love of all Thy people comfort Thee,  
Till God’s love set Thee at his side again!

(“Dedication”)

## Christianity

- *In Memoriam*:
  - triggered by the death of Hallam, this poem deals with the theological questions of Christianity;
  - “In Memoriam” stanza: iambic pentameters, four-line stanzas (abba).
- “Crossing the Bar” (1889):
  - “last poem” – though not written last, it was Tennyson’s request that this poem close all collections;
  - symmetry of phrasing and thought (stanzas 1–2 vs. 3–4);
  - simple imagery going back to Bible and earlier devotional poetry.

## Robert Browning (1812–1889)

- father clerk of the Bank of England; wealthy intellectual middle-class background;
- grandfather slave-owner in the West Indies ↔ father abolitionist;
- 6,000-volume library, easy access for Browning from his early childhood;
- interests in natural sciences and music (cf. “A Toccata of Galuppi’s”), arts, poetry, history, and drama;
- fluent in French, Italian, Latin, and Greek;
- 1845–6: meets and secretly marries Elizabeth Barrett; elopement to Pisa, Italy; move to Florence (Casa Guidi);
- 1855: *Men and Women* published (moderate success);
- 1868: *The Ring and the Book* – long epic-dramatic blank-verse composition that brought him wide acclaim.

## The Dramatic Monologue

- Speaker + Audience: usually “overheard” by the reader (peeking “over the shoulder”);
- enables author to distance themselves from the situation; detachment, irony, unstable ethical attitude, openness to a wide variety of interpretations;
- speaker is not identical with poetic persona (e.g. in “A Toccata of Galuppi’s”: Browning had been “out of England” as opposed to his speaker summoning the ghost of Baldassare Galuppi);
- difference from dramatic soliloquy: in a play, the speaker is alone on the stage, no immediate audience.
- “My Last Duchess”:
  - speaker (Duke of Ferrara) identified at the beginning of the poem;
  - addressee: the emissary of Ferdinand II, Count of Tyrol, negotiating the Duke’s second marriage;
  - multiple framing (in form and argument): poem parallels a nicely-framed painting;
  - “painted on the wall”: part of the castle, inalienable, fully possessed by the Duke (extreme control);
  - egotism in the extreme: dominant pronouns “I – me – my,” framing the poem;
  - heroic couplet subverted: casual, seemingly *ex tempore*, accidental ↔ highly elaborate;
  - irony: “Even had you skill / In speech – (which I have not) – to make your will / Quite clear to such an one”;
  - tempo, pacing, rhythm reflect psychological processes in the speaker’s mind.
- “A Toccata of Galuppi’s”:
  - speaker unidentified – cannot be equated with Browning, who *had* visited Italy;
  - 5+5+5 stanza structure; tour de force of formal invention;
  - musical references and musical language matching;
  - grave truths of life and death; universal message unfolding in a setting of literary (Shakespeare) and historical (Venetian Republic) field of references.

## Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806–1861)

- Partly Creole family of Jamaican plantation owners, slave holders;
- raised in England under father’s extremely strict control (daughters were meant never to marry);
- private tutorship, excellent education, well-versed in literature and culture;
- 1824: “Stanzas on the Death of Lord Byron” published;
- 1826: *An Essay on Mind and Other Poems*, her first volume of poetry published;
- 1838: *The Seraphim and Other Poems* published – first manifestation of mature style;
- 1840: brother Edward drowns near Elizabeth’s Torquay residence (Devonshire) – trauma, illness;
- 1844: *Poems* published – one of the poetic celebrities of the age;
- 1845: meets Robert Browning; marriage in 1846; son born in 1849;
- 1850: *Sonnets from the Portuguese* – dedicated to her husband (by his “little Portuguese”; as if translated);
- 1856: long narrative poem *Aurora Leigh*.