Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806-61)

Life and character.-
Elizabeth Barrett was born at Coxhoe Hall, near Durham, on March 6, 1806. Her health was poor, and for many years she lived the secluded life of an invalid, devoting herself to study and composition. Her marriage with Robert Browning, in defiance of the wishes of her father, took place in 1846, and she died in Florence in 1861. The severe discipline of suffering and sorrow served only to enoble her character and enlarge her sympathies, she was sweetly disposed towards the human race, though only remotely akin to it.

Works.-
Her principal publications are:
- *The Battle of Marathon* (1820)
- *An Essay on Mind* (1826)
- *The Seraphim, and other Poems* (1838)
- *Poems* (1844 and 1850)
- *Casa Guidi* (1851)
- *Aurora Leigh* (1856)
- *Poems before Congress* (1860)
- *Last Poems* (1862).

Views.-
In religion Mrs. Browning was a devout Christian; in politics, a strong Liberal, though, like her husband, she had a horror of Socialism. The essence of art for her was its power of perceiving the ideal in the real, the divine in the natural:

Earth’s crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God,
But only he who sees takes off his shoes (*Aurora Leigh*, VII.)

Of the true art she wrote:

Art’s the witness of what Is,
Behind this show. (*Aurora Leigh*, VII.)
If in any age men fail to realize the heroic quality of the life about them, the fault is with them and not with their time. In diametrical opposition to Arnold she held, therefore, that it is part of the poet’s mission to deal freely with contemporary facts and problems. (Aurora Leigh, V.)

Poems.-

Narrative Poems.-
Aurora Leigh, Mrs Browning’s most ambitious effort, is virtually a modern sociological novel in nine books of fluent blank verse. It sets forth her “highest conceptions upon Life and Art.” (Dedication) Lady Geraldine’s Courtship, another romance of the age, tells of the love of a high-born lady for a humble poet. Its sentiment, though much in the taste of the time, now seems a little cheap. The romantic poems, Rhyme of the Duchess May, Lay of the Brown Rosary, Romaunt of Margaret, etc., are vigorous and picturesque, but gushing and overwrought.

Social and Political Poems.-
The Cry of the Children is the finest expression of Mrs. Browning’s humanitarianism, and has its place beside Hood’s Song of the Shirt. Casa Guidi Windows and Poems before Congress show her passionate sympathy with the cause of Italian independence.

Religious Poems.-
The Seraphim, a diffuse, mystical passion play, and A Drama of Exile, describing the new and strange experiences of the fallen humanity, with a peculiar reference to Eve’s allotted grief, are of little value. Many of the minor religious poems, on the other hand (e.g. He Giveth His Beloved Sleep, Cowper’s Grave), have great tenderness and beauty.

Personal Poems.-
The chief of these are the Sonnets from the Portuguese, which take rank among the finest Love-poems in English literature.

Characteristics.-
Mrs. Browning’s faults are numerous and glaring. Wholly wanting in self-restraint, she allows her feminine emotion to run away with her, and is often extravagant and at times hysterical. Her unchecked fluency degenerates into volubility, and there are very few of her poems which do not suffer from prolixity and dilution. Her poetic vocabulary is full of affectations, and in her metre and rhymes she is both careless and perverse. But against these defects many sterling qualities have to be set down. She was a woman of real genius; her work is pervaded by a noble sincerity and a large and generous human feeling; she has passion, imagination, and power; and the melody of her verse at its best is new and beautiful.