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Ann Swyerski

Dickinson and ‘that Foreign Lady – ’

‘I look everywhere for grandmothers and see none’¹ bemoaned Elizabeth Barrett Browning in a letter of 1845. She became such a precursor herself and her influence reached across the Atlantic where her work was read with avid interest by Emily Dickinson. This influence can be detected in the allusions, and treatment of themes, in many of Dickinson’s poems but she also wrote three memorial poems; ‘I went to thank Her’ #363, ‘I think I was enchanted’ #593, and ‘Her – “last Poems” – ’ #312.² Out of the 1775 poems written by Dickinson, only two other elegies have been identified as referring to subjects not known personally to Dickinson—one refers to Charlotte Bronte and another to George Eliot. Of these three women, it is Barrett Browning who shared Dickinson’s passion for poetry and who provided a role model for the younger poet.

News of Barrett Browning’s death, June 29th 1861, was recorded in the American newspapers and a nine page eulogy appeared in the September edition of *Atlantic Monthly*. In this tribute, Kate Field accentuates Mrs. Browning’s ‘well nigh perfect’ character. Dickinson, the Amherst recluse, would have been reminded that for a long period this ‘great woman’ had been ‘imprisoned within the four walls of her room, with books for her world and large humanity for her thought.’³ Such seclusion has since been dwelt on at great length in many of the biographies of Dickinson. Field emphasises that Barrett Browning ‘above all others *felt* the full value of life, the full value of death’ and it is perhaps this capacity for expressing feeling in her poetry which attracted Dickinson.

Although writing in the Victorian era—and exhibiting the age’s concern with social, political and moral problems in her poetry—the influence of the Romantics in Barrett Browning’s work is also evident. In 1830, Hallam had differentiated

¹ *The Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, ed. Frederick G. Kenyon, 4th ed. 2 vols (London: Smith Elder, 1898),1: 232.

² Emily Dickinson, *The Complete Poems*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (London: Faber & Faber, 1970). All poems cited from this edition.

³ Kate Field, *Atlantic Monthly* (Sept. 1861: 20), ‘Elizabeth Barrett Browning’ 368–76.