

**THE BATTLE OF
MARATHON : A POEM
WRITTEN IN EARLY YOUTH**

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The Battle of Marathon : a poem written in early youth by Elizabeth Barrett Browning & H. Buxton Forman

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INTRODUCTION.

ACCORDING to the register of baptisms of the Parish of Kelloe, Elizabeth Barrett Moulton Barrett was born at Coxhoe Hall in the County of Durham, on the 6th of March 1806. Mr. Browning's assertion of this date has given rise to unseemly bickering, rash counter-statement, and disingenuous retraction on the part of self-constituted authorities; but with the discovery of the entry in the register, found through information given by a brother of the poetess, the controversy, if such it can be called, comes to an end.

The dedication of the following poem is dated "1819": the only clue given as to the time in that year at which the dedication was written is the date "1820" on the title-page. It is natural to suppose that the young authoress had completed her work not much before the close of the year 1819; but this is more or less a matter of conjecture; and it is even possible, though not altogether probable, that the poem had been finished a year or two before it was dedicated and put to press. The point is of some consequence, because the interest of *The Battle of Marathon* is

extrinsic rather than intrinsic. If written after the 6th of March 1819, the authoress had completed her thirteenth year when she wrote it: even so, it is a most remarkable production; but, if there were any ground for the reckless assertions which have been made that it was completed before she was eleven years old, the biographical interest of the work would be far greater still. There is no ground for such assertions. Even though the poetess may herself have been under a vaguely erroneous impression as to the age at which she wrote it, her statement made in writing to the late Richard Henry Horne in 1843 cannot be interpreted as meaning that she was between ten and eleven. This is what she wrote:

“The Greeks were my demi-gods, and haunted me out of Pope’s Homer until I dreamt oftener of Agamemnon than of Moses the black poney. And thus my ‘great epic’ of eleven or twelve years old, in four books and called the ‘Battle of Marathon,’ and of which fifty copies were printed because Papa was bent upon spoiling me; is a Pope’s Homer done over again . . . or rather undone; for although a curious production for a child, it gives evidence only of an imitative faculty and an ear, and a good deal of reading in a peculiar direction. The love of Pope’s Homer threw me into Pope on one side, and into Greek on the other and into Latin as a help to Greek—and the influence of all these tendencies is manifest so long afterwards as in my essay on mind,—a didactic poem written when I was seventeen

or eighteen, and long repented of as worthy of all repentance."

This extract is taken, not from the printed book¹ in which an edited version of it appears, but from the original autograph letter with the writer's portrait of her dog Flush done with pen and ink on the first of its twenty pages. Now the point of this authoritative statement is that the writer uses indefinite and not definite terms to denote the age at which she wrote *The Battle of Marathon* and *An Essay on Mind*. The title-page of the later book is dated 1826. Even in January 1826 Miss Barrett was nearly twenty; if therefore her impression was correct, and the *Essay* was written when she was seventeen or eighteen, it must have remained a year or two in manuscript. Similarly, if "eleven or twelve" rightly describes the approximate age of the authoress of *The Battle of Marathon*, it also must have remained a year or two in manuscript.

This coincidence suggests the probability that, in 1843 at all events, Miss Barrett was under a wrong impression as to the date of her birth. Of Mr. Barrett's "bent" towards "spoiling" his child it is difficult to think otherwise than that the publication of *The Battle of Marathon* was the result of his fresh wonder at the prodigious intelligence of his little girl, and the extra-

¹ Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning addressed to Richard Heuglist Horne, Author of "Orion," "Gregory VII.," "Cosmo de Medici," &c. With Comments on Contemporaries. Edited by S. R. Towshend Mayer. [Two volumes.] London: Richard Bentley and Son, 1877.

ordinary sustained effort of childish will which produced not only the poem but the preface. Had he put the whole thing away for a year or two, the wonder might have been eclipsed by other wonders; and at all events discretion might have got the better of paternal pride. Moreover, when Miss Barrett wrote to Horne in 1843, she was still under her father's roof, and would be likely to have referred to the title-pages of the books for dates, as to the poems themselves for critical estimate, since she was giving a somewhat circumstantial account of her doings in literature, to enable Horne to put a criticism of her works in *A New Spirit of the Age*. On the whole I incline to think that for "eleven or twelve" we should read "thirteen," and that for "seventeen or eighteen" we should read "nineteen," and that circumstances, perhaps connected with the extreme youth of her father when she was born, had misled the poetess as to her age.

Whatever may have been the date at which *The Battle of Marathon* was actually composed, its omission from the collected works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning is intelligible enough; but, if there was no indiscretion on the part of her father in printing fifty copies of the composition in 1820, when it could only be of interest to the child's family and immediate circle, still less can there be any indiscretion in printing a like number of copies in 1891, to supply the needs of a few students, now that a world-wide fame has conferred an indirect interest on the childish "epic." Its excessive rarity is

not the sole reason for this limited revival. Although I cannot affect to think that any but students will wish to read the book, still I do find in it more of promise than the gifted poet herself found. It is not purely a precocious effort of the intellect and will: there are touches of that better enthusiasm which is the main factor in poetic impulse properly so called; and the little girl must have flushed and tingled to her fingertips when she wrote that stilted account of the sacrifice to Minerva, and of the answering apparition of the goddess, at page 51. For, stilted and imitative as it is, the little poet had felt the epithets through and through her delicate frame, as she must again have done when she wrote the couplet at page 53—

The God propitious heard, and from the skies
Descends the Goddess of the azure eyes.

As regards the rarity of this literary and bibliographical curiosity, it is scarcely too much to say that not one of those who have set up as authorities concerning Mrs. Browning appears to have really seen the book. Shortly before Mr. Robert Browning's death a copy of this work of his wife's childhood came into the hands of a bookseller. When Mr. Wise appealed to Mr. Browning as to the genuineness of the book, the poet expressed a doubt whether it might not be a fabrication, adding, "I never have seen a copy." Up to the present time it has remained scarcer by far than Mr. Browning's own first book, *Pauline*, of which eight copies are known to be extant without counting the lost or mislaid copy

annotated by John Stuart Mill, and formerly in the possession of John Forster, or the copy recorded in Dr. Furnivall's Browning Bibliography as having contained a note in the autograph of the author. *The Battle of Marathon* is scarcer than the little pamphlet *Two Poems by Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning* was a few years ago, before a lucky bookseller came suddenly upon a small parcel of copies in an auction room. It is probably even rarer than the separate issue of *The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point*,¹ which was also unknown to Mr. Browning until a year or two before he died—a circumstance, however, which he readily explained.

¹ This noble poem was, wrote Mr. Browning, "given by its author to the Boston 'Liberty Bell.'" The separate issue bears the imprint of Moxon and the date 1849. It opens with an "Advertisement" subscribed "Florence, 1849":—"The following verses were the contribution of the Authoress to a volume entitled 'The Liberty Bell, by Friends of Freedom,' printed in America last year for sale at the Boston National Anti-Slavery Bazaar. It is for the use of a few 'friends of freedom' and of the writer on this side of the Atlantic that the verses are now reprinted." Of this brochure Mr. Browning wrote—"As the poem was first printed in America, no copyright could be claimed for it in England. It is possible some of the 'friends of Freedom' may have used a certain 'freedom' in reprinting the poem, for the sake of the good cause." He added—"I daresay the fact has been that, on the publication of the poem in America, the American friends (in London) who had been instrumental in obtaining it, wrote to the Authoress (in Florence) for leave to republish it in England; and that she of course gave her consent—probably wrote the little advertisement. The respectability of the Publisher and Printer is a guarantee that nothing surreptitious has been done. You may observe that no price is affixed, and no advertisements are to be found on the cover; the pamphlet was clearly a private issue for 'friends.' I however have no memory of such a circumstance: the appearance of the pamphlet convinces me, notwithstanding, that things were as I say."

Of the three copies of *The Bottle of Marathon* which have been unearthed, one is in the collection of Mr. Locker-Lampson, one in that of Mr. B. B. Macgeorge of Glasgow, and one, the latest which has come to the surface, in the hands of Mr. Thomas J. Wise. It is from the last-named copy that the present page-for-page reprint has been made; and it was at Mr. Wise's request that I undertook to write these few pages of introduction. Any editing of the text would have been misplaced; the reproduction is as literal as printers can be got to make it; but for those who may be concerned as to the inaccuracy of the text, a list of *errata* is appended, such as a careful printer's reader might have supplied, or, still better, rendered unnecessary, if any serious intention to have the original book properly printed had prevailed.

H. BUXTON FORMAN.