

# MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT



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A SOURCE FOR THE RIMES OF POE'S "THE RAVEN": ELIZABETH  
BARRETT BROWNING'S "A DRAMA OF EXILE"

FLORENCE BOOS AND WILLIAM BOOS

A passage from Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poem "A Drama of Exile" may have suggested to Edgar Allan Poe the famous "nevermore" rimes of "The Raven". In January 1845 Poe published a two part critical review of Elizabeth Barret Browning's 1844 *A Drama of Exile, and Other Poems*; in it he praises her as superior to all her poetical contemporaries except Tennyson, then documents in minute detail his objections to her theology, use of allegory, choice of subjects, rhythm, sonnet constructions, diction, and rimes. In a tone often patronizing and occasionally sexist (cf. his allusion to "creatures neither precisely men, women, nor Mary Wollstonecrafts"), he alternates praise and censure:

"The Lady Geraldine" is, we think, the only poem of its author which is not deficient, considered as an artistical whole. Her constructive ability, as we have already suggested, is either not very remarkable, or has never been properly brought into play:--in truth, her genius is too impetuous for the minuter technicalities of that elaborate *Art* so needful in the building up of pyramids for immortality. This deficiency, then--if there be any such--is her chief weakness. Her other foibles, although some of them are, in fact, glaring, glare, nevertheless, to no very material ill purpose. There are none which she will not readily dismiss in her future works. (*The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. James A. Harrison, New York, 1902, vol. 12, p. 19).

As part of his critique he assembles a list of "apologies for rimes", which ranged in rough descending order of merit from burning/morning to mortal/turtle. Later in the year he dedicated his 1845 *Poems* "To the Noblest of her Sex--/ To the Author of/ 'The Drama of Exile'--/ To Miss Elizabeth Barrett/ Of England--I Dedicate This Volume/ With the most Enthusiastic Admiration/ And with the most Sincere Esteem." Elizabeth Barrett Browning seems to have accepted his devout effusion with some wryness; in early 1846 she wrote to John Kenyon, "What is to be said, I wonder, when a man calls you 'the noblest of your sex'? 'Sir, you are the most discerning of yours."

Despite disparagement of her lines for their "misusage" and "impropriety" (at one point rewriting "with profound deference" four passable lines of hers into five impassable ones of his), Poe may have rendered some of them the compliment of imitation.

Fare ye well, farewell!  
The sylvan sounds, no longer audible,  
Expire at Eden's door.  
Each footstep of your treading  
Treads out some murmur which ye heard before.  
Farewell! the trees of Eden  
Ye shall hear nevermore.

(repeated with minor variants *four times*  
in a long chorus, "A Drama of Exile")

And the Raven, never flitting, still is sitting,  
*still* is sitting  
On the pallid bust of Pallas just above my chamber  
door;  
And his eyes have all the seeming of a demon's  
that is dreaming,  
And the lamp-light o'er him streaming throws his  
shadow on the floor;  
And my soul from out that shadow that lies float-  
ing on the floor  
Shall be lifted--nevermore!  
(*"The Raven, last stanza"*)

"The Raven" was one of the last-composed poems of Poe's 1845 volume and was not published in any form until the first months of 1845, when earlier versions appeared in several newspapers. Thomas Olive Mabbot, editor of vol. I, *Poems, of The Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe* (Harvard, 1969), assigns its composition to 1844, and mentions "Lady Geraldine's Courtship", also in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's 1844 volume, as a probable source for the poem's stanzaic form. If Elizabeth Barrett Browning's recent poems were echoing in Poe's mind during this period, it is not improbable that "A Drama in Exile"'s before/door/ nevermore rimes became the pattern for those of "The Raven."