ROBERT BROWNING
(1812–1889)

Robert Browning spent his marriage in his wife's shadow. Elizabeth Barrett Browning was more famous than her husband, whose poetry was considered obscure and obtuse. It was not until his wife's death in 1861 that Robert Browning was acknowledged as a poet in his own right. A century after his death, his reputation has superseded hers. Both husband and wife thrived in Italy, and Browning's volume of poetry Men and Women reflected his enchantment with its landscapes, cities, and history.

Browning's Italian idyll ended with his wife's death. He and their son returned to England, where he lived for his last twenty-eight years. He led a gregarious social life and a productive literary one. Browning died in Italy at the Palazzo Rezzonico in Venice, his painter son's home. Although he wished to be buried next to his wife in the Protestant Cemetery in Florence, Browning was interred in Westminster Abbey.

"Up at a Villa—Down in the City" is an example of Browning's characteristic use of dramatic monologue. One critic wrote that although Browning did not invent the dramatic monologue, he established it as a norm.

Up at a Villa—Down in the City
(As Distinguished By an Italian Person of Quality)

1
Had I but plenty of money, money enough and to spare,
The house for me, no doubt, were a house in the city square;
Ah, such a life, such a life, as one leads at the window there!

2
Something to see, by Bacchus, something to hear, at least!
There, the whole day long, one's life is a perfect feast;
While up at a villa one lives, I maintain it, no more than a beast.

3
Well now, look at our villa! stuck like the horn of a bull
Just on a mountain edge as bare as the creature's skull,
Save a mere shag of a bush with hardly a leaf to pull!
—I scratch my own, sometimes, to see if the hair's turned wool.

4
But the city, oh the city—the square with the houses! Why?
They are stone-faced, white as a curd, there's something to take the eye!
Houses in four straight lines, not a single front awry;
You watch who crosses and gossips, who saunters, who hurries by;
Green blinds, as a matter of course, to draw when the sun gets high; 
And the shops with fanciful signs which are painted properly.

5

What of a villa? Though winter be over in March by rights, 
'Tis May perhaps ere the snow shall have withered well off the heights: 
You've the brown plowed land before, where the oxen steam 
and wheeze, 
And the hills over-smoked behind by the faint gray olive trees.

6

Is it better in May, I ask you? You've summer all at once; 
In a day he leaps complete with a few strong April suns. 
'Mid the sharp short emerald wheat, scarce risen three fingers well, 
The wild tulip, at end of its tube, blows out its great red bell 
Like a thin clear bubble of blood, for the children to pick and sell.

7

Is it ever hot in the square? There's a fountain to spout and splash! 
In the shade it sings and springs; in the shine such foam-bows flash 
On the horses with curling fish-tails, that prance and paddle and pash 
Round the lady atop in her conch—fifty gazers do not abash, 
Though all that she wears is some weeds round her waist in a sort of sash.

8

All the year long at the villa, nothing to see though you linger, 
Except yon cypress that points like death's lean lifted forefinger.

9

Some think fireflies pretty, when they mix i' the corn and mingle, 
Or thrid the stinking hemp till the stalks of it seem a-tingle. 
Late August or early September, the stunning cicala is shrill, 
And the bees keep their tiresome whine round the resinous firs on the hill. 
Enough of the seasons—I spare you the months of the fever and chill.

Ere you open your eyes in the city, the blessed church bells begin: 
No sooner the bells leave off than the diligence rattles in: 
You get the pick of the news, and it costs you never a pin. 
By-and-by there's the traveling doctor gives pills, lets blood, draws teeth; 
Or the Pulcinello-trumpet breaks up the market beneath. 
At the post office such a scene-picture—the new play, piping hot! 
And a notice how, only this morning, three liberal thieves were shot. 

Above it, behold the Archbishop's most fatherly of rebukes, 
And beneath, with his crown and his lion, some little new law of the Duke's! 
Or a sonnet with flowery marge, to the Reverend Don So-and-so 
Who is Dante, Boccaccio, Petrarcha, Saint Jerome, and Cicero, 
"And moreover," (the sonnet goes rhyming) "the skirts of Saint Paul has reached, 
Having preached us those six Lent-lectures more unctuous than ever he preached." 
Noon strikes—here sweeps the procession; our Lady borne smiling and smart 
With a pink gauze gown all spangles, and seven swords stuck in her heart! 
Bang-whang-whang goes the drum, tootle-te-tootle the fife; 
No keeping one's haunches still: it's the greatest pleasure in life.
But bless you, it's dear—it's dear! fowls, wine, at double the rate. They have clapped a new tax upon salt, and what oil pays passing the gate. It's a horror to think of. And so, the villa for me, not the city! Beggars can scarcely be choosers: but still—ah, the pity, the pity! Look, two and two go the priests, then the monks with cowls and sandals, And the penitents dressed in white shirts, a-holding the yellow candles; One, he carries a flag up straight, and another a cross with handles. And the Duke's guard brings up the rear, for the better prevention of scandals: Bang-whang-whang goes the drum, tootle-tootle the fife. Oh, a day in the city square, there is no such pleasure in life!

GEORGE GORDON, LORD BYRON
(1788–1824)

George Gordon, Lord Byron, was another of England's exiles who found a haven in Italy. From 1816 to 1822 Byron lived in Italy, championed Italian nationalism, and often took part in its crusades. In 1819 he won the affections of a twenty-year-old married countess, Teresa Guiccioli of Ravenna. Teresa and the radical Italian separatist movement, the Carbonari, inspired Byron's passions and poetry. During this period he wrote the dramatic poems "Marino Faliero," "Scandalopulus," and "The Two Foscari." While there, Byron often lived with Percy Bysshe Shelley, his wife Mary Shelley, and her half-sister Claire, who became Byron's lover. Shelley and Byron spent many afternoons together sailing off the Ligurian coast, until Shelley's death in 1822.

Byron's enthusiasm for Italy waned with the end of the Carbonari movement. He took up a new cause, Greek liberation from Turkey, armed a brig, The Hercules, and set sail for Greece in 1823. Less than a year later he died of rheumatic fever. His heart was buried in Greece and his body was returned to England and buried in the family vault.

The following four stanzas are from Byron's poem "Childe Harold's Pilgrimage," published in 1811. The quotations in the opening lines of the third stanza are from Gibbon's history The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire.