

## Examining the Reception of *Aurora Leigh*

### EBB to Jane Wills-Sandford

#### *Main ideas:*

- EBB values Jane's opinion—it is important to her that women like Jane approve.
- She has received letters from John Ruskin (mentions him twice) and Leigh Hunt looking at same things as Jane
- Reception so positive that a second printing was quickly needed
- EBB is struck by the strong reactions on both sides of the spectrum:
  - Extravagant praise
  - Older ladies complaining of the plain speaking that poses a “risk to their character & morals”
- Her reaction:
  - avoidance and “delicacy” should be ousted in favor of confronting issues and thus helping society deal with them
  - for the sake of her conscience and the chance of doing good, she'll risk offence
- John Kenyon's death (to whom *AL* is dedicated) casts a sadness on “all things connected with the book”

#### *Contextual information:*

Jane Wills-Sanford: friend of EBB; devoted letter writer

John Ruskin: art and social critic

Leigh Hunt: poet, critic, and journalist; in same circles as Shelley, Byron, and Keats; greatly admired by EBB

Coventry Patmore: Poet; author of “The Angel in the House” (1854), a poem famously depicting the ideal domestic Victorian woman

John Kenyon: close friend of EBB and RB—instrumental in their courtship; died in December 1856, just after *AL*'s publication

#### Selections from Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine review of *AL* (Vol. LXXXI, 1857):

“...Such is the story, which no admirer of Mrs. Browning's genius ought in prudence to defend. In our opinion it is fantastic, unnatural, exaggerated; and all the worse, because it professes to be a tale of our own times...Mrs. Browning has been perpetuating, in essentials, an extravaganza or caricature, instead of giving to the public a real lifelike picture...” (32)

“...Aurora Leigh is not an attractive character. After making the most liberal allowance for pride, and fanaticism for art, and inflexible independence, she is incongruous and contradictory both in her sentiments and in her actions. She is not a genuine woman; one half of her heart seems bounding with the beat of humanity, while the other half is ossified...The extreme independence of Aurora detracts from the feminine charm, and mars the interest which we otherwise might have felt in so intellectual a heroine...” (32-33)

“[Mrs. Browning's] opinion that the chief aim of a poet should be to illustrate the age in which he lives...would lead to a total sacrifice of the ideal. It is not the province of the poet to depict things as they are, but so to refine and purify as to purge out the grosser matter; and this he cannot do if he attempts to give a faithful picture of his own times...”(34) (courtesy of ebbarchive.org)

### Robert Bulwer Lytton to EBB and RB

#### *Main ideas:*

- Also mentions Kenyon's death and the money he leaves to the Brownings
- Glowing admiration of *Aurora Leigh*; it continually occupies his thoughts
- Likens Marian to a character written by Goethe (early Romantic German poet and novelist); “sublime episode”
- Believes it to be a Revelation that cannot be criticized
- He has read *AL* “as a child, not as a critic” for his “soul's lasting good”
- An author acquaintance has named *AL* “the Poem of the Age”
- Sees “great knowledge of life” and “deep insight into the very heart of the Age” in *AL*
- Sees her good character coming through the book: mark of a good artist
- Forester (journalist, critic, historian, and friend of RB) thinks *AL* a success, particularly its sustained, lengthy poetry

*Contextual information:* Robert Bulwer Lytton is a friend and admirer of the Brownings; he is a poet and diplomat (they met in Florence)

### John Ruskin to RB

#### *Main ideas:*

- Quite effusive: proclaims *AL* the greatest poetry in English apart from Shakespeare
- Read the poem through before responding and likes it as a whole, with only small things to nitpick
- Does not praise it further, because the words would not be adequate
- Feels better having read it: it crushes him but also refreshes him “like breathing the purest heavenly air”
- *AL* is “the first poetical expression of the Age” according to EBB's “own principles”

## EBB's Social Reform & Religious Views

### **Excerpt from EBB to John Kenyon (Letter 3534)**

#### *Main ideas:*

- EBB is feeling discouraged about writing *AL* when she is 5-6 thousand lines in (It will be published in about a year and a half)
- EBB describes *AL*:
  - an autobiography of a female poet, but not herself
  - examines the practical (real) life as an “external evolution” of the ideal (spiritual) life; a movement from “inner to outer”
- EBB is concerned at first at any comparison between *AL* and the real/ideal dichotomy Charles Dickens's *Hard Times* addresses in “Fact” and “Fancy,” but she insists they could never write the same material.

#### *Contextual information:*

- The phrase “hot and hot” is presumably drawn from line 228 Tennyson's “Will Waterproof's Lyrical Monologue,” which describes the food served by the waiter at Cock Tavern on Fleet Street. The reference seems to be to the daily nitty-gritty of working class, stuck in the “sphere [their] fate allots” (218).

### **Excerpt from EBB to Fanny Dowglass (Letter 2698)**

#### *Main ideas:*

- EBB is surprised her failure to be impressed by the Roman Catholic services at the Duomo in Florence.
- She sees more “poetical effect” in Methodist congregations singing “the rugged rhymes of the old psalm”
- But, she emphasizes, God sees through the trappings of both, finding unity where people find division

#### *Contextual information:*

- Fanny Dowglass: Close friend of EBB who spent a lot of time in Italy; no letters from her to EBB are known to remain
- Duomo: Roman Catholic Cathedral in Florence
- Mesquin: (Fr) shabby, small, pitiful, trifling