

Reception of Aurora Leigh:

EBB to Jane Wills-Sandford (57017-00)

2 March 1857 (date from postmark)

Do you indeed “miss” me, dearest Jane? Yet the thoughts and loves have been faithful. It is only this pen, these fingers, against which we may both rail—

I mean to write today—and if what is written will be brief, you may rely for the future on more frequent letters at least. Indeed, I reproach this silence bitterly. Not only is it an unkind silence, but it is a *false* one, --*lying* against my heart & my gratitude.

Dearest Jane, let me say *now*, how deep a pleasure it gave me that you should like my poor Aurora so much. The pleasure was deep both to me and to the second me called Robert, and we read your notes together, & agreed that you had fixed on the best passages with an unfailing instinct. We have had letters from such critics as Ruskin & Leigh Hunt,--& you & they, for the most part, point to the same things—There were two letters from Ruskin, and one of twenty pages from Leigh Hunt. From Alfred Tennyson I have not heard, but I hear that he read the poem to his wife...which pleased me. The reviews have been very numerous, & generally most favorable—and we had to go to press for the second edition a fortnight after publication, so unusual was the sale. I wish I could give you the dates of reviews, --but really I cant. Some were lent to me & I returned them; & some I only heard of. There was one in the Daily News, in the Globe, in the Leader, in the Literary Gazette,...oh I forget. The Westminster Review &c &c—In Blackwood, there’s a review not ungenerous considering that it came from the camp of the enemy...(M.^r Aytoun) from a different school in art, politics & social questions. I think the writer perfectly wrong, but certainly I dont complain of him. In the North British, it is otherwise. The criticism there is depreciating & grudging, it seems to me, & when I remember it is probably written by another poet, Patmore, (the Angel in the house) I am sorry more for him than for me. What is curious in the reception of this poem is the violence on both sides about it. I couldnt repeat the great things, the extravagant things, said in its praise by men & women, --while, on the other hand, I hear of ladies of sixty who complain of the “risk to their character & morals” in reading it! Yes, seriously. In fact, it has given great offence to conventional persons who hate plain speaking, & prefer to ignore a subject through what is called *delicacy*, rather than help to better the world by dealing with it. For me, I hate giving offence—you know me that I am not, in life or word, fond of [word obliterated] thing. But for the trick & for conscience sake, & for the hope of doing some good, I was quite ready to dare and bear a few hard & most unjust imputations. After all, too, I hear women like yourself approve me—Thank you: it is very pleasant. Thank you too, for the words from your friends. Say how much I think the sayers of such. In America, the success is great, they say. Ruskin wrote me two letters, enough to have lived for.

Oh, but all things connected with the book were saddened as you may suppose, by the loss of our beloved friend—He just read it, read the dedication—I just had a few words from that hand, & it dropped. Such a sad, sad Christmas we lived through. It disinclined me to all sorts of writing. Otherwise your first letter would never have waited so long unanswered, in spite of the corruption of my human nature, especially as to letter-writing.

We have had a very quiet winter, & I have been doing idleness, just as I threatened, with novels & things as light. I have no remorse through—It was, & perhaps is still, necessary to me. Have you seen, ‘Never too late to men’—Mind, you wont like it,--& I think I don’t, much. The style is as bad and bald as possible, but there’s great power—Then I have read some books of M.^{rs} Marsh, who, except in passion sometimes, wants power altogether. In French, About’s ‘Mariages de Paris’—good. You read ‘Tolla’ of course. George Sand’s last books, do not please me.

So glad I am that your desires may fly forward to Brighton & find a home, --& that in April I may think of you as happy or happier. Do write to me,--I will behave (**she begins writing on the envelope flap!**) better. Penini has been running wild this carnival in a blue domino & blue satin mask (his own choice) poor Wilson out of breath with trying to keep up with him, & losing sight of him at moments in the masked crowd. Robert is well, full of his drawing—I take his love & give it to you. The sun shines gloriously & I see it against the old brown wall. Dearest Jane’s

Ever affect.^{te} friend

EBB—

(One envelope edge): My kindest regards to your sisters, & your father, if I may say so.

(Second envelope edge): I am very well & have had a good unsuffering winter, as far as health goes.

(Up the margin of the first page of the letter): The letter was not overweight. Use an envelope of course—‘Counterparts’ her beautiful things, thoughts...as a book its all confusion to me & scarcely readable.

Robert Bulwer Lytton to EBB and RB (Letter 3946)

Hague 26 Dec/56.

My two very dear and ever dear Friends. Tho' this letter will not reach you till after Christmas, The many warm wishes for your happiness now and ever, of which I wish it to bear you the assurance, will not cool by the delay. I saw notice of the **death of your friend, Mr Kenyon** in the Paper, while his name was yet fresh in my mind, from the perusal of that affectionate **Dedication of Aurora Leigh**, and I know that it must have been a consolation & comfort to you, as it must have been grateful and touching to him, that the words of that noble record of affection should have reached him, ere his eyes were closed. **You have everlastingly and with costliest care, dear Mrs Browning, embalmed your Friend.** Ah Milton's sonnet makes no idle Boast! The true Poet is never so poor, but what his affection has gifts to give beyond all price. I do trust that this is also true which I heard from Ld Maidstone last night, .. that Mr Kenyon's will contains a bequest to you both of 10,000£. Let me have that pleasant assurance from yourselves, when you write, that I may with the more confidence tell you how glad I am to hear it.

I did not read your too-kind criticism of the 2 first Books of "the Abbess" without a pang of shame in thinking that you should have so minutely occupied yourselves with its consideration. **For I was yet glowing with Aurora Leigh, and had the radiance & splendour of that high communion still upon the forehead of every thought when your letter reached me. Ah, that letter, how it touched, how it gladdened me!** "If a flower were flung you out of heaven now & then" says Marian Earle (.. she is a Creation worthy of Goethë) "You wd soon get the trick of looking up." And I think I shd walk all the more erectly & firmly over the ploughshares of life, if there oftener fell there in my way, such flowers as these letters of yours—these dear letters! **I have finished Aurora Leigh but I can no more exercise judgement upon it than I can upon Homer. Dear Isa Blagden says "it is a Revelation," and I think so too. I have read it as a child, not as a critic, and it has passed into my soul,.....for my soul's lasting good, as I hope. I dont see what you are to write, henceforth. You have achieved the top of art. Will you care to know that Mr Aidé, who sends me "The Cagot", observes on that occasion "Aurora Leigh is the Poem of the Age" ..? It is a true Aurora, and will leave lasting light with us ἑόρφεος!**

[...]

Not the least thing which astonished me in Aurora Leigh was **the great knowledge of life, and the deep insight into the very heart of the Age, which you from your little fire side sofa have so silently acquired, .. and therein so eloquently developed. The History of Marian Earle, is a sublime episode .. I know not its equal in Art. I feel at every page, as I read your Book, the deep truth of that assertion of Strabo's οὐχ οἷόν τε ἀγαθού γενέσθαι ποιητήν, μὴ πρότερον γενηθέντα ἄνδρα ἀγαθού. To be a good Poet one must be first a good man.**

How often, in reading 'Aurora' did I recall the many times when I found you, on that same little sofa, book in hand, & you let me (so quietly & kindly) interrupt you, .. (perhaps in the break of a six line cadence!) & put away the book to talk to me, instead of sending me away, as—had you been less great an Artist you would have done—and now, if your book were not perfect, I should have all its flaws on my conscience—but it is perfect & I have nothing wherewith to reproach myself, tho' much whereof to be grateful to you.

Do you know, I have been putting your blank verse to a severe test .. I have been translating large portions of it into French Prose, for a Friend who cant read English, & who, despite my bad translation, is enchanted with it. So you see, Sibyl as you are, that you are perfectly "intel[[ligible]" ... in the teeth of all the Aytoun's in the world's Dunciad!

[...]

I have much to talk about when ever we meet, and in the trust that I may not be defrauded of that hope, I beg you my very dear Browning & Mrs Browning, to bear me yet in your mind, as your devoted Friend

Robert Lytton

I open this to enclose you this copy of a few lines wh close a letter from Forster just recd

... He says ...

"Mrs Browning's Aurora Leigh is a great success—and deservedly so. There has not been such a gush of real poetry—such a continuous, sustained, flight I mean,—for a long long time!"

Oh how masterly is that biography of Marian Earle! You are at the very top of Art now .. a perilous eminence[.] May you long keep there, for the benefit of all who know & love true art Vale et sis memor mei RBL

John Ruskin to RB (Letter 3928)

Denmark Hill,
27th November, 1856.

My dear Browning

I think **Aurora Leigh** the greatest poem in the English language: unsurpassed by anything but Shakespeare—not surpassed by Shakespeare[']s sonnets—& therefore the greatest poem in the language. I write this, you see, very deliberately, straight, or nearly so, which is not common with me, for **I am taking pains that you may not think—(nor anybody else) that I am writing in a state of excitement, though there is enough in the poem to put one into such a state. I have not written immediately either,** partly because I did not know if you were at Florence yet, partly because **I wished to read the poem quite through. I like it all—familiar parts and unfamiliar—passionate and satirical, evil telling and good telling—philosophical and dramatic—all.** It has one or two sharp blemishes I think, in words, here & there—chiefly Greek. I think the “Hat aside” a great discord in the opening—it tells on me like a crack in the midst of the sweetest fresco colour. Phalanstery I can’t find in Johnson’s dictionary, and don’t know what it means. Dynastick hurts me like a stick—one or two passages in the art discussion I haven’t made out yet. **For the rest, I am entirely subdued—or raised—to be Mrs Browning[']s very humble votary & servant; I feel, for the time, as if I could do nothing more in describing—or in saying anything—as if indeed, nobody could say anything more now—without appearing to be saying something weak in thought—and unmelodious in English: so far does her Saying seem to me above present Bests and sweetests. I am better in every way for reading the poem—perhaps not the least because I feel so crushed by it: but also because it is like breathing the purest heavenly air; it makes one healthier through every nerve, & purer through every purpose.**

It is also the first perfect poetical expression of the Age, according to her own principles.— But poor Scott! and the sellers of old armour in Wardour St! I see Mrs Browning herself has sometimes no compassion.

I have heard from Miss Heaton that Mrs Browning and you are both well—and happy in your Florence home. God grant you, both, long life, and peace—you happy—good—great people that you are.

I will write you again to tell you anything that may interest you of what is doing here: I do not feel inclined to talk of anything but the poem just now, and for that—I **should only weaken the true sense I would give you of my admiration of it, if I tried to put it any more into words.**

Only believe me affectionately Yours & Hers,

J Ruskin.

My Father and mother beg their sincerest regards, I never saw my father so taken with a poem in my life. He doesn't usually care for that kind of poetry (likes Pope, & Crabbe)—but he sat at it till one in the morning and never let the book out of his hand when he was in the house, till he had finished it—and said it quite did him good—made him better from a little ailing that he was. To my mother I am reading it out aloud every day.

Discussion Questions:

1. What are we to make of this widespread critical reception? Do some of the “reviews” resonate with your experience more than others? Do these reactions align with your expectations for the mid-nineteenth century?
2. What insight can we gain into EBB’s attitude toward the reception of *AL* from her letter to Jane? How does her reaction differ between the different readers of *AL*?