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Victorian Poetry – Dr. King
Rare Item Analysis

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Provenance and Significance of Items Analyzed

The first item is a letter to Robert Browning from Ella Sophia Armitage, a historian and archeologist from the late 19th to the early 20th century. The Armstrong-Browning Library acquired this item in February of 1970 from Paul C. Richards, a private autograph and rare books dealer in Templeton Massachusetts, for 100.00 dollars. The item can be found Victorian Letters collection and may be accessed electronically through ABL's in-house database of letters from this period. The item is significant for two primary reasons: First, we see that Browning's "Christmas-Eve" is one of the poems listed in Armitage's proposed anthology for her 'Working-Man's Browning'. This tells us that the poem itself remains an important piece in Browning's oeuvre even some twenty years after its publication. Secondly, a comparison can be made between "Christmas-Eve's" theme of spiritual community and the 'cultural community' Armitage seeks to develop through the use of the anthology. The second item is a rare manuscript edition of "Christmas-Eve" once owned by the Irish poet William Allingham. The ABL was gifted this item in September of 1980 by James Borg, a collector who sold manuscripts and other Browning-related material to the ABL in the same period. The item be found in the ABL's Rare-Book collection. The significance of this particular item comes from the jingle that is penciled in at the end of the poem. The jingle itself is a playful jab at Browning's writing style and his tendency to produce long, overly-complex poetic lines and 'scenes' which even his group of close literary friends found difficult at times to decipher. It also points to the existence of such a group, composed of men like Allingham that would write to Browning often and visit him whenever the time and resources permitted him. We see from this jingle what must have been a very cordial friendship between the two men. The final item is another manuscript copy of "Christmas-Eve" once owned by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, a poet and painter who was another contemporary of Browning's. This manuscript was purchased for the ABL on June 25, 1982 by W. Thomas Taylor at a Sotheby's auction in New York. The copy was also once owned by composer Jerome Kern. As with the Allingham copy, this manuscript can be found in the ABL's Rare-Book collection. Also as with the Allingham copy, the significance of this manuscript lies in the addition in Rossetti's own hand at the poem's end. The verse appended to this manuscript is written in a satirical mock-style of Browning's own poetic voice. The rhyme scheme, which switches between alternating rhymes and couplets, is one Browning himself employed on several occasions. Dante also pokes fun at Browning's penchant for odd close rhymes ("gibe-ill" / "Bible", "Shakespeare" / "break spear") and the tendency to load his poetry with obscure references from 'Oriental' Literature or Scripture. Each of these items will now be examined in further detail.

Item 1: Letter from Ella Sophia Armitage to Robert Browning, December 6th. 1889

Ella Sophia Armitage is quite an unusual woman for her time. In an age when most women from a middle or upper-class background were expected to reside solely in the ‘domestic sphere’ of the home, Armitage vowed to “overcome ‘the accursed thralldom of womanhood’”¹, and enter the Academy, a place typically reserved for the male population. In so doing, Armitage was able to add an impressive list of ‘firsts’ to her accomplishments: she became the first of five students to attend Newnham College, Cambridge; she then became the first of this college’s research students, and eventually served as the first woman on the school board at Rotherham.² In addition to her work in mediaeval history and archeology, Armitage was a tireless champion for women’s rights who sought to expand opportunities for young women in secondary and post-secondary education.³

It is important to consider Armitage’s letter to Browning in the context of her status as a female academic and her work in women’s education reform. In the first instance, Armitage’s status as an academic protects her from the charge of lionizing⁴ Browning as her motivation behind the Browning Society which she conducts during “the winter months”⁵. Rather than fawning over a popular author of the period, Armitage views Browning’s poetry as “an admirable instrument of culture” which can be used for “the uplifting and enlarging”⁶ of her fellow men and women.

Even more important than Armitage’s status as an academic is to consider her letter in light of her work in women’s education reform. The primary purpose of the letter is to request permission from Browning to compile an anthology of poetry for the enjoyment of the laboring classes. Armitage hopes that this ‘Working Man’s Browning’ will enrich the lives of the laboring poor. As she states in the letter, “What do people most want, whose lives are filled up with hard and monotonous work, but great thoughts to uplift them out of the narrow circle in which they live, and at the same time to shed a nobler light upon their daily toil?”⁷ In a sense, Armitage sees Browning’s poetry as a vehicle by which laboring-class people can rise out of their lives which are circumscribed by poverty and “daily toil” and become a part of the larger, ‘public’ world. Essentially, Armitage is promoting the idea of social mobility (or intellectual mobility at least) through education – the very same idea that she is promoting in female education, whose lives are similarly ‘circumscribed’ by a daily ‘domestic toil’.

Finally, it is important to note that one of the primary themes of Browning’s “Christmas-Eve”, is the importance of communal worship. As a Dissenter,⁸ Browning saw the ‘Body of Christ’ – worshipping as part of a community of believers – as the primary way of knowing and experiencing God, rather than through the religious rituals and forms of the Anglican Church. In

¹ Online Dictionary of National Biography, Ella Sophia Armitage

² A large town in South Yorkshire, England. Online Dictionary of National Biography

³ Ibid.

⁴ The Victorian practice of making a celebrity out of an author, whose works would then simply be admired because of his or her popularity, rather than being seriously read and studied for their cultural and intellectual value.

⁵ Ella Sophia Armitage, letter to Robert Browning, 6th Dec. 1889.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Someone who attended a Non-Anglican Church or held theological or religious views that ‘dissented’ from the national religion of Anglicanism.

the same way, Armitage is seeking to bring together an intellectual community through the experience of poetry.

Item 2: 1850 Edition of “Christmas-Eve” owned by William Allingham with reader’s manuscript jingle

William Allingham was born in Ballyshannon county Donegal, Ireland, where he spent much of his life. At the age of twenty-two, Allingham entered the customs service which was to be his continual vocation for most of his life.⁹ Unfortunately, Allingham was not able to make a living for himself as an author alone, and the frustration he experienced working as a customs officer for over 20 years is apparent from his personal correspondence to the Brownings. In a letter of December 14th, 1865, he muses, “All things considered, might I not hope to prove myself better worth this sum to the country with my freedom than as a Coast Officer of Customs?”¹⁰. It is important to know about Allingham in the context of his frustrations as a struggling poet, as it helps readers to understand what high admiration he held for men like Browning who were able to gain national recognition for their work.

It is with this understanding that the ‘jingle’ Allingham has written at the end of his copy of “Christmas-Eve” must be approached. Knowing his admiration for Browning, Allingham’s question at the end of the poem, ‘Ay, who can say? – or guess indeed / What all this is I make you read?’ takes on a tone of playfulness from one poet to another and should not at all be read as a serious criticism of the work itself. In the literary circle in London of which Allingham was often a part (time and resources permitting due to his custom’s work), it was an almost habitual practice to puzzle over the latest work published by Browning. In a diary-entry by Allingham on June 24th of 1872, he writes that he made a visit to the Victorian moral philosopher Thomas Carlyle (another member of this literary circle) who “[had] been reading *Fifne at the Fair*¹¹ and saying every now and again to Browning (though not present), ‘What the *Devil* do you mean?’”¹². It is pleasant to know that even the great writers of the era struggled with poetic interpretation at times.

Yet, Allingham offers his own interpretation in a ‘Summary’ on the very next page: ‘Author, when other motives fail, is / By an Aurora Borealis / Converted’. This mention of the Borealis refers to a moment in “Christmas-Eve” when the narrator beholds the forming of a ‘moon-rainbow’ in the clouds above him just before he encounters a vision of the incarnate Christ. In the poem itself, Browning argues for the possibility of experiencing God in several ways. One of these ways, is through nature. This view seems to be something Allingham would empathize with, as praise *of* and references *to* nature proliferate his personal correspondence with Browning. One letter in particular suggests Allingham’s belief in the power of nature to impact earthly events: “The unannounced Comet which (in compensation) has lately been bright of evenings, now hid in sunshines, promises to support the family reputation by shaking horrible things down on us out of its hair. North, West, East,--cholera, Yellow Fever, War. But the milder

⁹ Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, William Allingham

¹⁰ William Allingham, letter to Robert Browning, 14th Dec. 1865.

¹¹ A poem by Browning published in 1871.

¹² Richard S. Kennedy and Donald S. Hair, *The Dramatic Imagination of Robert Browning: A Literary Life* (Columbia: U of Missouri press, 2007), 328.

stars shine many, & always.”¹³ In “Christmas-Eve” the rainbow serves as a similar ‘portent’ before the appearance of Christ himself.

Item 3: 1850 Edition of “Christmas-Eve” owned by Dante Gabriel Rossetti with reader’s manuscript response

Dante Gabriel Rossetti, a painter and poet who, like Allingham, was a contemporary of the Brownings, is perhaps the most colorful character of the three being discussed here. Rossetti is primarily known for being a founding-member of the ‘Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood’, a group of painters whose goal was to ‘revitalize’ English art by creating works that hearkened back to the Italian Masters of the early Renaissance.¹⁴ Despite being much more successful in his artistic pursuits than Allingham, Dante’s personality was marked by “moodiness and depression”, and he would often have periods marked by “impulsiveness, irascibility, and self-absorption”¹⁵. In addition to this, Dante would often have passionate infatuations with women, and it is widely believed that many of the models Dante used for his paintings were also his lovers. This is unquestionably true in the case of Elizabeth Siddal, a young woman who modeled for Dante for a number of years and who Dante eventually married in 1860.¹⁶

No one, it seems, was free from Rossetti’s emotional impulsivity. This includes Robert Browning himself. In 1847, Rossetti happened upon a copy of Browning’s “Pauline” at the British Museum. He was instantly enthused by it, so much so that he copied the poem out by hand, there not being an edition available to purchase. He then writes to Browning himself: “Sir, Being a most enthusiastic admirer of your works, I can no longer restrain myself from intruding upon you (though I feel that I do so at the risk of being considered presumptuous) with a question concerning them, which I have for some time been deliberating whether or not to venture on”¹⁷. Not many years later, Rossetti was a fixture in the literary circle of which Browning and Allingham were a part. To add to this, Rossetti even painted the Brownings portraits, which correspondence during this period communicates. Despite what at all events seems to be a strong association, Rossetti suddenly severs himself from Browning in 1872 after the publication by Browning of *Fifne at the Fair*. Rossetti believed that the title character of the poem was a satirical mock of himself, something for which he never forgave Browning.

However, the satirical verse written on the final pages of Rossetti’s copy of “Christmas-Eve” were done when the two still enjoyed a strong friendship. Like Allingham’s jingle, the satirical verse is a playful goading of “Christmas-Eve’s” author. As discussed above, the poem satirizes Browning by mimicking his often complex rhyme scheme and bizarre end-rhymes. He also seems to be satirizing Browning’s proclivity for overloading his poetry with at times obscure references. In the verse, Dante makes references to Catholic religious ritual (myrrh and sandal), Classical Greek and Roman poets (Virgil, Ovid, Hesiod, Melesigines [Homer]), Middle-Eastern peoples (Muslem, Ashantee), English authors (Shakespeare, Dickens, Tennyson, Thackery), Middle-Eastern folk-tales (Alnaschar), and Scriptural names and places (Ezra, Nahum, Japhet, Jared, Tophet). Dante also makes a reference to himself as a sort of ‘worshiper’

¹³ William Allingham, letter to Robert Browning, 24th Sep. 1853.

¹⁴ Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, Dante Gabriel Rossetti

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Dante Gabriel Rossetti, letter to Robert Browning, 17th Oct. 1847.

of Browning in a mock representation of his own hurt feelings: "Me also, prayer for the one candle / Burnt at thy shrine ... Me, swinger of the myrrh and sandal Before thee". Finally, these images may also reference Dante as a nominal Catholic, goading Browning, who was a life-long Dissenter.