

### **The Reception of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*: A Rare-Item Analysis of Four Letters**

In the study of any text, it can be quite illuminating to consider its reception. It not only helps to contextualize the text itself, but also lends greater understanding of the time period with its various political, social, and religious concerns. In addition, viewing the reception of a text through the perspective of its creator can lend a further level of insight pertaining to his or her intended purposes as well as anxieties regarding the text.

This rare-item analysis considers four letters written by and to Elizabeth Barrett Browning regarding the reception of her verse-novel, *Aurora Leigh*. Through these letters, we can better understand how Elizabeth herself, as well as different audiences, saw the poem in the years just prior and following its initial publication. Because of its focus on the reception of *Aurora Leigh*, Elizabeth's March 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1857 letter to her friend Jane Wills-Sandford, will comprise the majority of this analysis. However in addition to EBB's own recounting of her poem's reviews, we will also consider the reactions of writers John Ruskin and Robert Bulwer Lytton, as well as begin with a letter from Elizabeth to close friend John Kenyon prior to *Aurora Leigh*'s publication to set the frame.

#### **Letter Locations and Online Access**

Each of these four letters is available online in transcription form, and three of the four as scanned images of the original as well. See below for links and details about where to find the letters.

#### [Online Edition of The Brownings' Correspondence](#)

- Elizabeth Barrett Browning to John Kenyon, mid-March 1855  
Brownings' Correspondence Letter 3534  
Physical location: Harvard  
[Annotated Transcription](#)

#### [Baylor Libraries Digital Collection's The Browning Letters](#)

- Elizabeth Barrett Browning to Jane Wills-Sanford, 2 March, 1857  
Browning Letters Checklist Number 57017-00  
Physical location: Baylor University's Armstrong Browning Library  
[Transcription and Letter Images](#)
- Robert Bulwer Lytton to Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning, 26 December 1856  
Brownings' Correspondence Letter 3946  
Browning Letters Checklist Number 56196-00  
Physical location: Baylor University's Armstrong Browning Library C  
[Transcription and Letter Images](#)
- John Ruskin to Robert Browning, 27 November, 1856  
Brownings' Correspondence Letter 3928

Browning Letters Checklist Number 56185  
Physical location: Wellesley College  
[Transcription and Letter Images](#)

### **Elizabeth Barrett Browning to John Kenyon, mid-March 1855**

To begin this analysis of the reception of *Aurora Leigh*, we will start with a letter written prior to its completion (mid-March 1855) from Elizabeth to [John Kenyon](#), a close family friend. Eventually the verse-novel is dedicated to Kenyon, who was quite dear to the Brownings, having played a significant role in their courtship. Thus, given this close relationship, we ought to consider how this letter to Kenyon offers a valuable glimpse into Elizabeth's personal thoughts about *Aurora Leigh*. At one point in the letter, she admits as much to Kenyon: "Well—Never blame me again for being secret with you, seeing now that I have told you more than I have told to Robert...much less to any human soul else." In particular, Elizabeth reveals some of the weariness and anxieties she has faced in crafting her poem.

Writing to Kenyon in mid-March, 1855, she has "between five & six thousand lines written" but "still more to write." She jokes that next to her young son's poetry, "her own poem seems flat and unprofitable<sup>1</sup>," but the sentiment certainly is not without a seed of doubt. Following several impressionistic, general descriptions of the concerns of the poem—including a clarification that though it is the "autobiography of a poetess," it is not about her own life—she expresses her concern that *Aurora Leigh* might resemble Charles Dickens' *Hard Times*, published less than a year prior. As she tells Kenyon, neither she or Robert had read the book, but only heard that it dealt with the "Real & Ideal," concerns of her own poem. But despite her initial "fright," she asserts quite forcefully—it is underlined three times—that "it's impossible that Dickens & I could walk precisely the same ground." They would differ as a "badger's foot" to an "ourangoutang's." Thus, we can see in this letter written about a year and a half before *Aurora Leigh* would be published that Elizabeth is already concerned about how it will be received and understood among her contemporaries. Though it's unclear here whether she dislikes Dickens' writing or if she is worried that her poem will pale next to it, she ultimately assures Kenyon that she believes it will be "clear enough" and "alive enough" even if it lacks "rapidity." And in either case, we can clearly see some of her apprehension in crafting this lengthy work.

### **EBB to Jane Wills-Sanford**

However, it is after *Aurora Leigh* is published, that the letters give deeper insight into the overall reception of the poem. Though in writing her verse-novel, Elizabeth expressed concerns and anxieties, in the letters that follow, we can see her confidence fully boosted. Further, in this particular letter we can better understand the weight she lent to the opinions of different readers.

First, the letter illustrates that EBB clearly values the reception of *Aurora Leigh* by her friends. Jane Wills-Sanford is not a highly-proclaimed critic, but a friend and regular correspondent. Heading into the body of the letter, Elizabeth is effusive, referring to the "deep pleasure" that it gave her to read the notes Jane wrote on *Aurora Leigh*. Elizabeth skillfully affirms Jane's assessment of *Aurora Leigh*, highlighting her "unfailing instinct" in finding "the

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<sup>1</sup> This is glossed in *The Browning' Correspondence* as an allusion to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, 1.2.133.

best passages.” Without access to Jane’s original letter, we cannot know what these passages in *Aurora Leigh* were, but Elizabeth makes a point of aligning her friend with the expertise of critics such as John Ruskin and Leigh Hunt. “[F]or the most part” they all “point to the same things.” This rhetorical move again affirms the value Elizabeth places on the reception of *Aurora Leigh* by women she is close to.

This letter also reveals that the opinions of the general public—and women specifically—clearly matter to Elizabeth, which is worth noting given the focus in *Aurora Leigh* on the “Woman Question<sup>2</sup>.” Later in the letter, she remarks that she finds the reception of her poem “curious...in the violence on both sides about it.” She notes that both men and women have given “great” and “extravagant” praise, but on the other side, she “hears ladies of sixty who complain of ‘risk to their character and morals’ in reading it!” Elizabeth seems incredulous at this reaction, using an exclamation point and anticipating disbelief with her addendum, “Yes, seriously.” But it must be at least partially an affectation put on for a close friend because she surely would have known how the progressive ideas in her verse-novel would ruffle feathers.

As the letter continues, Elizabeth elaborates further on this negative reaction. People—whom Elizabeth labels as “conventional”—have been greatly offended by the verse-novel. Elizabeth’s diagnosis of this offence is that these people “hate plain speaking.” We can hear her clear disdain for this characteristic as she elaborates that such people “prefer to ignore a subject through what is called *delicacy*, rather than help to better the world by dealing with it.” In her letter, Elizabeth underlines *delicacy*, and this emphasis along with the introductory phrase “what is called,” betrays the disdainful tone. She discounts this form of negative reception wholeheartedly.

However, in these statements as well, we receive insight into what Elizabeth saw—at least in part—as the purpose of her work. The subjects that she addresses in *Aurora Leigh*—the role of the woman poet, social class tensions, prostitution, and the Woman Question as a whole—need to be addressed in order to better the world. The importance she gives this is amplified by a shift from the disdainful tone into more reflective and serious as she elaborates on this purpose. She does not intend to give offence—indeed she finds doing so contrary to her personal character—“But for the trick & for conscience sake, & for the hope of doing some good,” she was “quite ready to dare and bear a few hard & most unjust imputations.” Elizabeth reveals that “doing good” and the sake of her “conscience” are key motivations behind *Aurora Leigh’s* conception, and they outweigh this negative reception. In addition, she continues to hold Jane’s reaction in contrast, clearly valuing it above these reactions of offense to merely raising difficult subjects. Near the end of the letter, she repeats her thanks at hearing that “women like yourself (Jane) approve” of her.

However, she also is not immune to the reception of *Aurora Leigh* by noted critics and writers. And this letter gives insight into the critical atmosphere surrounding the poem. Elizabeth boasts over receiving letters about the verse-novel from [Leigh Hunt](#) (poet, critic, and journalist running in the same circles as Shelley, Byron, and Keats) and John Ruskin (art and social critic). She exclaims over the length of Hunt’s letter (twenty pages) and that Ruskin wrote two, revealing her clear esteem for the critics. She apparently holds Tennyson in a similar high regard, as she thinks it worth mentioning that she has not heard from him, but was “pleased” to hear that he read *Aurora Leigh* to his wife.

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<sup>2</sup> The “Woman Question” refers to the widespread questioning in nineteenth-century England of the nature and roles of women when it came to suffrage, marriage, labor, art, and other areas of culture and society.

Apart from these letters, Elizabeth also received official criticism for *Aurora Leigh* through various literary magazines and reviews, and this letter to Jane reveals her reactions to those various receptions. One she rejects out of hand, not refraining from complaint. In the “[North British \[Review\]](#)<sup>3</sup>” she characterizes the criticism as “depreciating & grudging.” This particular review, while ostensibly praising *Aurora Leigh* throughout, cannot give it full accolades. At one point, it says that though “the development of her (Aurora Leigh’s) powers as a poetess is elaborately depicted,” the story is “uninteresting in its very singularity” because EBB herself is “almost the only modern example of such development” (242). And then near the end of the review, it cannot refrain from saying, “a work upon such a scale, and with such a scope, had it been faultless, would have been the greatest work of the age; but unhappily there are faults, and very serious ones, over and above those which we have already hinted.” Elizabeth easily dismisses these, suggesting that they were likely written by the poet Coventry Patmore, and thus she is “sorry more for him than for [herself].” Author of the poem “The Angel in the House” (1854), which famously depicts the ideal domestic Victorian woman (quite in contrast to the independent poetess Aurora Leigh), Patmore does not receive Elizabeth’s respect.

She does give more weight to the review in [Blackwood’s](#), regarding it as “not ungenerous considering it came from the camp of the enemy,” meaning that the editor of the magazine, William Aytoun, came from “a different school in art, politics & social questions.” This particular review among other comments, suggests that the title character is uninteresting in her “extreme independence...detract[ing] the feminine charm” (33). Further, the poem as a whole is “fantastic, unnatural [and] exaggerated” rather than achieving its goal that it “professes to be a tale of our own times” (32). He argues that “[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). As Elizabeth suggested above, Aytoun is entirely situated in a different camp. He cannot see Aurora’s independence as positive and rejects her philosophy of art<sup>4</sup>. Not surprisingly, Elizabeth responds to the criticism, “I think the writer perfectly wrong.”

Thus, in this letter to Jane, we are privy to not only Elizabeth’s opinions on different issue relevant to her poem, but her opinions of its reception among various audiences. The remaining two letters offer an unmediated look at critics who viewed it positively.

### **John Ruskin to RB**

In EBB’s letter to Jane Wills-Sanford discussed above, [John Ruskin](#) comes up several times in the span of just a few pages. Specifically, Elizabeth mentions twice that Ruskin wrote two letters to the Brownings regarding *Aurora Leigh*. While it is impossible to guarantee that this next letter under analysis is one of the two she brags about to Jane, this letter from Ruskin to Robert Browning is dated just three months prior. And thus it seems quite fitting to consider what it was that Ruskin had to say that made such a lasting impression on Elizabeth.

In a word, Ruskin is simply effusive. He considers *Aurora Leigh* “the greatest poem in the English language” even “not surpassed by Shakespeare[’]s sonnets.” And lest Robert believe him to be exaggerating, Ruskin assures him that he is “taking pains [to write in such a way] that

<sup>3</sup> North British Review, February 1857, Vol. 26, American Volume 21 available online along with many other review of *Aurora Leigh* via the Elizabeth Barrett Browning Archive: [ebbarchive.org](http://ebbarchive.org)

<sup>4</sup> I will elaborate on the poem’s view of art when I consider how Ruskin and Lytton praise its accomplishment.

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.” It is no wonder that Elizabeth is so tickled by his letter. Apart from a few quibbles about particular words, he “like[s] it all.” Indeed, he feels as if he “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 [him] above present Beats and sweetests.” Of course, his silence (though he takes quite a few words to express it) is rather unhelpful for determining any specificities of *Aurora Leigh*’s reception. He does assert that he is not only “crushed” by the poem, but is the better for having read it, as “it is like “breathing the purest heavenly air; it makes one healthier...” And while this further confirms his high praise for the poem, his most interesting reaction is to name it “the first perfect poetical expression of the Age.” Ruskin echoes the text of Aurora herself, when she asserts that a poet’s role is to “represent the age” (5.202), a “live, throbbing age” (5.203). Thus, in Ruskin’s eyes, Elizabeth has achieved what her fictional poetess aspired to.

### Robert Bulwer Lytton to EBB and RB

In his letter, written a month later to both Elizabeth and Robert, friend, poet, and diplomat [Robert Bulwer Lytton](#) is similarly unreserved in his praise of *Aurora Leigh*. Throughout the letter, he agrees with the praise of other writers and friends of the Brownings such as [Isa Blagden](#) and [John Forester](#), unabashedly playing on the title and name of the eponymous poetess by saying he “was glowing with Aurora Leigh, and had the radiance & splendor of that high communion still upon the forehead of every thought when [her] letter reached [him].” His lofty praise continues in a similar vein to Ruskin’s when he suggests that he “can no more exercise judgment upon it than [he] can upon Homer.” And he echoes him yet again when he agrees with another poet’s observation that “Aurora Leigh is the Poem of the Age.” As discussed above, Aurora believed the poet’s aim to be to represent the age, that people who come after may look back on it and understand its legacy<sup>5</sup>. Lytton sees Elizabeth’s poem accomplishing this as “a true Aurora... that will leave lasting light with us,” again playing on the meaning of Aurora’s name. He sees her poem achieving Aurora’s goal in its “great knowledge of life” and “deep insight into the very heart of the Age.” Ultimately, both of these letters land on the highest praise Elizabeth could hope to achieve: the very poetic ideal she places in the mouth of her heroine poetess.

### Concluding Remarks

Thus, in these four letters we see a sampling of the reception Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh* received from critics and friends. Whether or not these reviews influence our own readings of the poem, they certainly elucidate the historical context

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<sup>5</sup> See *AL* 5.215-22:

The full-veined, heaving, double-breasted Age:  
That, when the next shall come, the men of that  
May touch the impress with reverent hand, and say  
‘Behold,—behold the paps we all have sucked!  
This bosom seems to beat still, or at least  
It sets ours beating: this is living art,  
Which thus presents and thus records true life

surrounding its criticism, illustrating the wide variety of opinions regarding the controversial ideas EBB raises about art, social problems, and the Woman Question. In addition, these letters give us insight into Elizabeth's reception of this criticism, thus helping us understand what she emphasized and cared most about in *Aurora Leigh*. In the classroom, you could pursue these ideas further by having students compare their own reactions to those of Elizabeth's contemporaries, looking in closer detail at the North British and Blackwood reviews, as well as the others she lists in her letter to Jane. And these letters also open up further scholarly research into correlations in similar reactions like Lytton's and Ruskin's. What is the full scope of the reception of *Aurora Leigh*? What factors cause different reviewers come to quite similar or vastly different conclusions, and what insight does that give us into the political, cultural, social, and so on, context of the nineteenth century? How ought a review in the form of a letter be regarded differently than one published in a literary magazine? In just these four letters, there are many avenues of study to pursue, and as I have endeavored to illustrate here, insight into a work's reception, and particularly that of *Aurora Leigh*, is worthwhile.