

## **ABLibrary Rare-Item Analysis: Artifacts Related to EBB's *Aurora Leigh***

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### Introduction and Description of Holdings:

The Armstrong-Browning Library possesses several rare items related to Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*. These holdings include one page of an early manuscript, several pages of corrected proofs for the first and fourth editions, a rare fourth edition that Elizabeth gave to W.M. Rossetti, and a draft of an EBB engraving annotated by Dante Gabriel Rossetti. The undated manuscript draft of *Aurora Leigh* (Browning Guide D0051) covers Book I, lines 9-28 and 204-207, on a page numbered 7. The library also possesses corrected page proofs for pp. 151-154 of the poem's first edition (Browning Guide D0058) and a sheet of paper containing twelve of EBB's corrections postdating the fourth edition of 1859 (Browning Guide D0061). All three of these items—but especially the manuscript—reveal that the author made significant alterations to her work's tone and content. The items related to William and Dante Gabriel Rossetti further illuminate their relationship with the Brownings. Dante's detailed critiques and suggestions for touching up Elizabeth's portrait are especially interesting because they reveal EBB's struggle for control over her own likeness.

### Analysis of *Aurora Leigh* Manuscript Fragment:

This early, undated manuscript fragment of *Aurora Leigh* reveals that EBB made several important alterations to her work. The page is numbered 7 (presumably in EBB's own hand), yet it begins with lines that become 9-28 in the final edition. This is an indication that Elizabeth likely did some wholesale

re-ordering of her work—perhaps deleting or moving the lines she had written on pages 1-6 (now lost). I have divided EBB's alterations into two categories: those that substantially change the meaning and/or tone of the poem, and those that are stylistic.

The first substantive change occurs in the first line of the manuscript. She begins with a divine invocation that she later deletes in the final version: "God help me – I am still what men call young" becomes "I, writing thus, am still what men call young." There are several possible interpretations of this removal. The first is that she is consciously removing God from her writing—that she is instead seeking to tell a secular narrative. However, this interpretation seems unlikely to me because she decides to keep the manuscript's second reference to God, which becomes line 204 of the completed poem: "So, nine full years, our days were hid with God." An alternate interpretation would see the first version, "God help me," as an invocation of a divine muse, in the epic tradition of Milton. Its removal, then, would be Elizabeth's conscious attempt to appeal rather to the "better self" for whom she writes the final poem. "God help me" (especially juxtaposed next to the "men" who call her young) could also be read as feminine weakness, and EBB may have desired to present a stronger initial impression of herself as author. While plausible arguments could be made for all of these interpretations, I believe that the removal of "God help me" strengthens the verse-novel's narrative arc. *Aurora Leigh* narrates the title character's spiritual development, as she comes to see her writing as a divine vocation. Placing an appeal to God this early in the poem, I believe, lessens the contrast between Aurora at this point and spiritually mature Aurora at the end of the story.

The changes toward the end of the manuscript regarding the father's hand may be substantive and/or stylistic. The manuscript text reads:

Stroke the poor hair down, stroke it heavily,  
And drew the child's head closer to thy knees,

I'm still too young to ~~XXXXXX~~ be left here alone.

In the revised version, this becomes:

Stroke heavily, heavily the poor hair down,

Draw, press the child's head closer to thy knee!

I'm still too young, too young, to sit alone.

The rearrangement of the first quoted line and the placement of “down” at the end more strongly emphasize the suppressing quality of the father's hand. In the first version, Aurora has less agency—she is too young to “be left here”—while the revised version emphasizes her sitting alone. From a stylistic viewpoint, the repetition added in these three lines (heavily, heavily; draw, press; too young, too young) contributes to the rhythmic, lyrical quality of the poem.

Additionally, EBB adds several lines to slow down the action and make the implications of her father's death less explicit. She removes, “And suddenly these vague, unfeatured days / Grew clearer with death” and instead describes Aurora, at thirteen, “Still growing like the plants from unseen roots / In tongue-tied Springs.” Numerous other small changes occur between the manuscript and the revision (“heap of curls” become “ringlets”; the mother's actions are changed from past to present tense; and Aurora's age is changed from 12 to 13). For a full comparison of the manuscript with Margaret Reynolds' Norton Critical Edition text (changes highlighted), see Appendix A. This document could have useful applications in the undergraduate classroom, as instructors seek to illuminate EBB's writing process.

#### Analysis of *Aurora Leigh* First Edition and Fourth Edition Proof Corrections:

EBB's penciled proof corrections to the first edition cover Book 4, lines 434-545, the passage where Aurora has discovered Lady Waldemar's role in Marian's downfall. She takes the opportunity to make a

few minor stylistic corrections: for example, line 444, “Or roses, sleeping past the noon indeed,” becomes “Or roses, sleeping past the hour of noon.” However, at this stage of the writing process, most of her changes involve punctuation. She has removed many exclamation marks, dashes, and colons, in favor of semicolons and commas. Sometimes, these alterations substantially change the tone of the poem. For example, in the passage where Aurora is describing (self-justifying?) her actions toward Marian (“I had not been ungenerous on the whole. . . . I felt / Tired, overworked: this marriage somewhat jarred”), she deleted the exclamation mark to line 463, “Let them order it!” and replaced it with a semicolon. “Let them order it;” gives Aurora a less angry tone at this point in the poem and simply reinforces her frustrated apathy at Romney and Marian’s actions. Additionally, in the passage where Aurora scathingly rants about the term “good” being applied to human beings, the original text included dashes at the end of every line (Example: “Good critics who have stamped out poet’s hopes--”). In the proof corrections, she replaces the dashes with semicolons, and inserts a full stop at “damned the general world for standing up” instead of the original exclamation mark. EBB may have made these alterations to avoid over-writing Aurora’s bitterness, which comes through clearly without additional emphasis (Aurora even remarks in line 507, “How bitterly I speak”).

EBB’s twelve corrections to the fourth edition, which are handwritten and circled on a single, separate sheet of paper, also deal mostly with punctuation and minor printing errors. For example, in Book 1, line 573 (“Hung green about the window which let out / The out-door world”), she requests that the “let out” be changed to “let in”—clearly in response to a printing oversight. In the ninth book, line 737 (“This love just puts its hand out in a dream / And straight outstretches all things”), she changes “outstretches” to “outreaches,” which eliminates the repeated sound between “straight” and “stretches,” and perhaps simplifies the line.

Overall, especially in the punctuation changes, EBB seems to be transitioning from a more feminine hand (including numerous exclamations, colons, dashes, and italics) to a more masculine voice (a measured tone created by semicolons and commas, defined by understatement and subtlety rather than over-emphasis). If EBB is consciously adopting a more masculine voice, these proofs may be relevant to further scholarly study, especially juxtaposed with criticism that she received for being too feminine (see comments from D.G. Rossetti below for one example).

Analysis of W.M. Rossetti's Fourth-Edition *Aurora Leigh* and DGR's Annotated EBB Engraving:

Perhaps the most interesting item in this collection is Thomas Oldham Barlow's draft engraving of EBB, which Dante Gabriel Rossetti annotated. The engraving was based on a photograph of Elizabeth taken by Louis Cyrus Macaire and Jean Victor Macaire-Warnod at Le Havre on 18 September 1858. From the photograph to the engraving, a sofa is transformed into a writing desk, and Elizabeth's facial shape and clothing are subtly but significantly altered. Rossetti's notes offer Barlow further suggestions for improving Elizabeth's image: softening her mouth, making her look shorter and younger, and giving her a more feminine aspect. This annotated engraving, held alongside W.M. Rossetti's inscribed fourth edition of *Aurora Leigh*, illuminates the relationship between the Brownings and the Rossetti brothers.

William Michael and Dante Gabriel Rossetti were both prominent figures in artistic and poetic circles. On various occasions, Elizabeth gave literary editor W.M. Rossetti copies of her works, including the fourth edition of *Aurora Leigh*; the copy held in the Browning Library has no other annotations save "W.M. Rossetti, From the Authoress," in Rossetti's own hand. William's brother Dante, the founder of the Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood, first wrote Robert Browning in 1847, proclaiming himself a "most enthusiastic admirer of your works" (Letter 2706). In 1855, while EBB was writing *Aurora Leigh*, the Rossettis and Tennyson spent a particularly memorable evening at the Brownings's

London residence (Stone). In a letter to William Allingham, dated 18 December 1856, Dante Rossetti wrote that the Brownings provide “an evening resort where I never feel unhappy.”

While Dante may have begun as an enthusiastic admirer of Robert’s work, his relationship to Elizabeth was more tenuous. In a letter to Walter Howell Deverell on 30 August 1851, he is unimpressed: “I also saw Mrs. B. – who, I am sorry to say between ourselves, is as unattractive a person as can well be imagined. She looks quite worn out with illness, & speaks in the tone of an invalid—probably however one might manage to forget this if one got into animated conversation with her.” Dante also backhandedly criticizes her “feminine” voice in his 1853 comments on a poem by William Bell Scott: “My only objection... [to certain lines in your poem] would be that they immediately put me in mind of a thing by Mrs. Browning called ‘The Brown Rosary,’ ... I should take away the expression ‘loved ones’ as that is quite decidedly ‘Barrett-Browningian’ & I think feminine in the abstract.” Upon the publication of *Aurora Leigh*, however, Dante seems to change his tone; he tells Ellen Heaton that the verse-novel is “by far the greatest work of its author surely, and almost beyond anything for exhaustless poetic resource. It seems, as far as I have got, to promise much more fully, as the expression of social truths by a great poet, than Tennyson’s *Maud*.” Yet as he sets out to publish a review, he calls *AL*, “an astounding work surely... O the wonder of it! – and O the bore of writing about it!” (Freedman 145).

Whatever Dante’s opinion of Elizabeth as a writer and a woman, he seemed eager to paint her—and to decide how best to improve her image. Dante began a portrait of Robert during the Brownings’ 1855 stay in London, and he eagerly requested to paint Elizabeth as well. On October 10, 1855, she sent him a tactful letter, excusing herself as “so hampered with last things to do” before they departed London, and mentioning that she had refused a sitting to a female artist-friend named Miss Fox (Letter 3644). Yet she had revealed her true feelings a week earlier to her sister, Arabella Moulton-Barrett: “Robert is ‘sitting’ for Ros[s]etti, and I am likely to be made to sit after all, between my husband & his

artist. And there shall I be, perpetuated in sublime ugliness by the head of the Pre-Raphaelite school!—” (Letter 3638). It is telling that while Elizabeth eventually sat for Eliza Fox in 1858<sup>1</sup> ([image on Browning Correspondence](#)), she never sat for Dante.

However, Dante did get his hands on her image. The original photograph (the basis for the engraving), which Robert proclaimed a “very satisfactory one,” was sent off to EBB’s publisher in 1858 as a frontispiece for the American edition (Goewey 20). Robert later asked William Rossetti to find an engraver in London for the fourth edition reprint. William selected T.O. Barlow, and also asked Dante to suggest corrections to the proof.

Dante’s corrections are blunt. He argues that EBB’s hair should be “brought a little more down over the forehead, and the parting line not left quite so raw.” To correct the washed-out photo (which could possibly also have resulted from Elizabeth’s sickly pallor), he suggests “more tone on the forehead and indeed all over the face.” Elizabeth’s mouth was “considerably in need of correction,” and he suggests softening its corners to suggest “a smile not in the original.” He fills in more hair, subtly softens her ringlets into curls, makes her shorter, and adds a slight curve to her arm. All of these changes serve to soften Elizabeth’s image, feminizing her appearance and aligning her more closely with Victorian ideal of beauty.

Rossetti also changes several details to emphasize Elizabeth’s identity as a writer. In the background of the photograph is a couch, which suggests domesticity; Rossetti replaces it with a writing desk, and places Elizabeth’s left hand upon it. He also shades in her jacket, which Michele Martinez writes, “suggests respectability, but also professionalism, as female painters frequently chose dark

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<sup>1</sup> While the Browning Correspondence database lists the date for Eliza Fox’s drawing as 1859, a letter from EBB printed in the Goewey Collection catalogue dates the sitting December 27, 1858. The most logical way to reconcile these two dates is to assume that Fox was still working on the chalk portrait through the turn of the year.

clothing to signal their status as workers” (78). For my full transcription of Rossetti’s comments, see Appendix B.

The engraving, Dante’s comments, and the letters cited above reveal that Elizabeth had particular ideas about her own image, which may not have aligned with others’ depictions of her. This is interesting first because *Aurora Leigh* is consumed with vivid descriptions of faces and portraits, and also because (as her manuscript and proofs also have revealed), Elizabeth consciously attempted to control her image as a female author. To encourage students to engage with the idea of the female author’s image, they could be asked to compare the proof, the original photograph, and the final engraving to see the effects of Rossetti’s changes (See Appendix C for a side-by-side comparison of the photo and proof). For those interested in further reading on this topic, Michele Martinez’s 2011 article, “Elizabeth Barrett Browning and the Perils of Portraiture,” offers a helpful critical history of Elizabeth’s likeness and includes a short discussion of Rossetti’s comments on the engraving.



## Appendix A: Comparison of Manuscript to Norton Critical Edition Text

(Note: I have highlighted changes for ease of comparison)

Manuscript Draft of Book I, lines 9-28  
and 204-207, on a page numbered 7. [n.d.]

God help me – I am still what men call young.  
I have not so far left the coasts of life  
To travel inland, that I cannot hear  
That murmur of the outer Infinite  
Which unweaned ~~infants~~ babies smile at in their  
sleep  
When wondered at for smiling: not so far,  
But ~~I XXX~~ still I catch my mother at her post  
Beside the nursery-door, with finger up  
“Hush, hush—here’s too much noise!” while  
her sweet eyes  
Leapt forward taking part against her words  
With the child’s riot. ~~I XXX~~ Still I sit + feel  
My father’s slow hand when she had left us  
both,  
Stroke out my childish curls across his knee,  
And hear Assunta’s daily jest . . (she knew  
He liked it better than a better jest . . )  
Inquire how many golden scudi went  
To such a heap of curls. O father’s hand,  
Stroke the poor hair down, stroke it heavily,  
And drew the child’s head closer to thy knees,  
I’m still too young to ~~XXXXXX~~ be left here  
alone.

For nine whole years our lives were hid with  
God  
Among His mountains. I was twelve years old  
And suddenly these vague, unfeatured days  
Grew clearer with death. I suddenly woke up  
[end manuscript]

From page 5 of *Aurora Leigh*, Norton Critical  
Edition, ed. Margaret Reynolds

I, writing thus, am still what men call young;  
I have not so far left the coasts of life  
To travel inland, that I cannot hear  
That murmur of the outer Infinite  
Which unweaned babies smile at in their sleep  
  
When wondered at for smiling; not so far,  
But still I catch my mother at her post  
Beside the nursery-door, with finger up,  
‘Hush, hush – here’s too much noise!’ while her  
sweet eyes  
Leap forward, taking part against her word  
In the child’s riot. Still I sit and feel  
My father’s slow hand, when she had left us  
both,  
Stroke out my childish curls across his knee,  
And hear Assunta’s daily jest (she knew  
He liked it better than a better jest)  
Inquire how many golden scudi went  
To make such ringlets. O my father’s hand,  
Stroke heavily, heavily the poor hair down,  
Draw, press the child’s head closer to thy knee!  
I’m still too young, too young, to sit alone.  
*[Next lines return to describing her mother]*

From page 11:

So, nine full years, our days were hid with God  
Among his mountains: I was just thirteen,  
Still growing like the plants from unseen roots  
In tongue-tied Springs, - and suddenly awoke  
*[she goes on to talk about her father’s death]*

## **Appendix B: Full Transcript of D. G. Rossetti's Comments on the Proofs of Barlow's EBB Engraving**

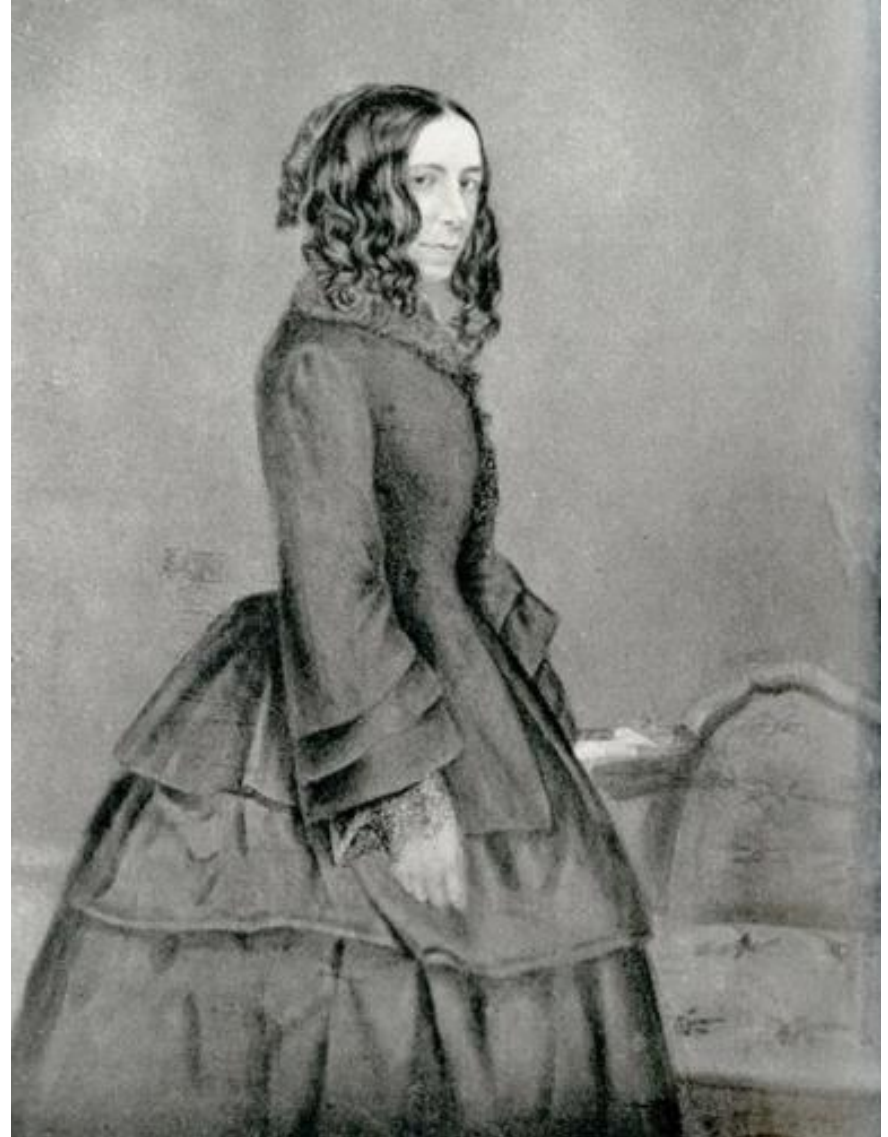
*(Note: I have indicated illegible portions of the document with brackets and ellipses)*

“The eyebrows made square as in photograph, and the further eyebrow continued to the outline next the hair instead of stopping short. The hair brought a little more down over the forehead, and the parting line not left quite so raw. More tone on the forehead and indeed all over the face. The mouth is considerably in need of correction. This may be done by adding a line of shadow all along the top of the upper lip, thus lessening the curve upward at the corners which gives a sort of smile not in the photograph and not the [...] of the original. A touch more [...] also be added (as I have done), beneath the corners of the mouth, to assist the [...] the author. The line of shadow added to the upper lip will also serve to lessen the space between nose & mouth, the cleft in the centre of which space requires also to be more strongly marked. The under lip more positively marked, which is done by slightly raising & darkening the shadow beneath it. The eyes to be made a trifle larger & up looking out of the corners, & the shadow of the nearer eye to be brought slightly closer to the nose. The nostril to be made rather larger & deeper. The hair is to be darkened all over. The shoulder & back to be slightly lowered as I have made them. The outer line of the arm to be considerably curved by adding to the sleeve. More tone on the hand & as lighter shadows on the [...] neath the jacket to [...] the [...] line. The [...] would gain greatly by [...] out smaller all round and most especially by the background being defined & its present tone & the [...] dress toned all over as I have done. The top line of the table also [reprints?] tone. Other slight modifications will be received.”

**Appendix C: Two Images of Elizabeth, Engraving and Photograph**



Proof copy with annotations by D.G. Rossetti (ABL)  
For the final version (which appeared in the fourth edition), see Norton  
Critical Edition frontpiece.



Original photograph by Louis Cyrus Macaire, 1858 (EBB is 52)  
Found on The Brownings' Correspondence Online.

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