

REVOLUTIONIZING ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING: A REVIEW OF *THE COMPLETE WORKS OF ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING*

By Alison Chapman

ANY ATTEMPT TO EDIT EBB'S works encounters immediate and overwhelming challenges.¹ The manuscripts, together with letters, books, drawings, and works of art, were more or less blown to the four corners of the globe with the 1913 Sotheby's sale of her son "Pen" Browning's estate. As Philip Kelley and Betty A. Coley put it, this has been considered "a disaster" by scholars (ix). Kelley and Coley's magnificent reconstruction of the contents of Pen's estate, *The Brownings Collections*, lists each item and whereabouts, if known (the reference aid is updated at *The Brownings: A Research Guide* <http://www.browningguide.org/>). It is a disheartening as well as essential reading for the researcher, for its catalogue includes academic and public libraries, private collection and associations, throughout North America and Europe. Although locating those Browning effects is now easier with *The Brownings Collections*, should the scholar have funds for travel, the manuscripts themselves are in a perilous state. Not only are they often fragile (especially the important tiny notebooks) but also often extremely challenging to read because of the spidery, faint, and often illegible handwriting. Barrett Browning often revised her poems and had false starts, and sometimes one poem in manuscript is entwined into another. They are, as EBB herself declared, a "chaos of illegibility" (*Works* 1: xxxiv). The poetry manuscripts do not readily welcome the editor. In addition to the geographical and paleographical challenges, EBB's corpus was huge, including the ballad, verse novel, narrative, dramatic lyric, sonnet and sonnet sequence, translation, hymn, dream vision, lyrical drama, ode, tribute poem, and elegy. Finally, much of the information about her poetry comes from the ongoing *Brownings' Correspondence*, which includes letters both sent and received, and is currently at volume 18 (up to March 1853) out of a projected 40. There is a wealth of material by the Brownings, and not all of it readily accessible. Editing the works of EBB is a daunting prospect.

A complete works has been, however, desperately needed. The standard work was the 6-volume 1900 edition edited by Charlotte Porter and Helen A. Clarke, two prominent members of the Boston Browning Society who also edited Robert Browning's poetry. Their edition is aesthetically handsome in its diminutive size and beautiful cover, aimed at the fan as well as

the scholar, but it also lacks a scholarly apparatus and is incomplete. There are other single-volume editions, such as Oxford University Press's *Poetical Works* of 1932 that has no line numbers and, again, no editorial framework. More recent critical editions of *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, *Casa Guidi Windows*, and *Aurora Leigh* have provided excellent material, especially with a welcome variorum approach. All these modern editions, however, pointed to the necessity of a complete edition. More recently still, two volume editors from the new *Works*, Marjorie Stone and Beverly Taylor, have published a teaching edition with Broadview Press, a lively and scrupulous contribution that includes contextual material, and that makes it much easier to teach EBB in depth. But it is really striking that EBB has not enjoyed until now a more comprehensive scholarly edition. With Christina Rossetti, she is considered the most important woman poet of her generation. Rossetti's *Complete Works* came out in 1980–1990, edited by Rebecca Crump, and her *Complete Letters* in 1997–2004, edited by Antony H. Harrison, and both publications consolidated and invigorated Rossetti's scholarly capital.²

A comparison with the editorial fortunes of Christina Rossetti is apt, because EBB is most often positioned in the tradition of Victorian women's poetry, with Christina Rossetti represented as her "sister poet" (see, for example, Stone 1994). While new scholarship is beginning to present EBB within different frameworks – in relation to men's poetry, to political movements, to transatlanticism and Europe, among others – her main claim to canonical importance has traditionally been her transformation of women's poetry from the affective hyper-feminine poetics of the annuals to a more active, muscular political poetics, something that is generally seen to be inaugurated with the success of her innovative novel-poem *Aurora Leigh* (1856). Such a narrative of EBB's centrality within the female poetic tradition is most powerfully outlined in Dorothy Mermin's *Elizabeth Barrett Browning: The Origins of a New Poetry*, a study still deservedly influential for its charting of EBB's refusal to acknowledge poetic "grandmothers" and for its turn, instead, to map EBB's ambition to author a new kind of public poetics. But narratives of EBB's transformative poetics have often lacked a sense of her larger literary, political and philosophical context and, most especially, her relation to male poets. As Isobel Armstrong writes in her provocative essay "The Long Nineteenth Century: Where Have the Women Poets Gone?":

I once believed that until the genres, languages, forms, poetics and politics of women poets had been established, it would be right to study them discretely without reference to their male peers, and not to yoke them precipitately to male figures. I was wrong. Most female poets have returned to the niche. Yet only by total immersion in both male and female poetry will we see a new historical landscape emerge – new formations, groups and relationships – that genuinely includes both genders.

Armstrong laments the perilous state of scholarship on and teaching of nineteenth-century women poets, whose immense variety and brilliance was so evident from the various anthologies of women's poetry published at the end of the last century, including her own. Now, she notes, women poets are poorly represented in general anthologies of poetry and, despite recent editions of the poetry of, for example, Amelia Opie and Michael Field, criticism of women's poetry has lost its momentum: "With the retreat of feminism publishing has changed."

The new edition of EBB's *Works* presents an interesting response to this problem. Although, taking Armstrong's view, it consolidates one woman poet's already central canonical position, nevertheless the *Works* does an immense service to the study of Victorian

women's poetry through the very type of edition and editing practice it represents. Not only is it the first modern scholarly edition of EBB, and thus typifies what happens when we treat the editing of a woman poet with the same seriousness and scrupulosity as, for example, Tennyson or Robert Browning, but it also signifies a deeply impressive feminist approach: its editorial principles recover and give priority to EBB's own editing choices, and the scholarly framework is exceptional for the detail it gives of EBB's intellectual networks. Quite simply, *The Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning* is a triumph: a heroic, feminist enterprise that finally gives us the edition EBB deserves. As Sandra Donaldson's Acknowledgments and General Introduction in volume 1 outline, this has been a collective, multinational enterprise and the editors' "collegial spirit" (xii) was pressed into the service of "presenting Elizabeth Barrett Browning and her work in as full and fair a light as our combined knowledge, skills and energies could produce" (xii). The team include: Sandra Donaldson (General Editor); Sandra Donaldson, Rita Patteson, Marjorie Stone, and Beverly Taylor (Volume Editors); and Simon Avery, Cynthia Burgess, Clara Drummond, and Barbara Neri (Associate Editors).

There is, however, a surprise right at the start of this edition. As part of the agenda to give priority to EBB's own editorial choices, the copy-text chosen for volumes 1 and 2 is the 1856 *Poems*, which EBB herself oversaw through the press, as she did with every volume except the posthumous *Last Poems* (1862), which Robert Browning edited from a list of contents drawn up by EBB before her death. To start with the 1856 *Poems* is at first glance an unusual choice, because of the material that edition leaves out is substantial: not only the volumes to come (*Aurora Leigh* [1859], *Poems before Congress* [1860], *Last Poems* [1862]), but also the material that EBB purposely left out of the 1856 collection. Donaldson argues that making EBB's 1856 *Poems* the copy-text for the start of *Works* "respects her own 'testamentary act' regarding presentation of her own poetical *oeuvre*. In doing so, we seek to honour her as an editor of her own work by printing editions which she oversaw" (xxxiii). As Marjorie Stone and Beverly Taylor argue in their introduction to the edition, the 1856 volume "reveal[s] her to be cosmopolitan and transnational in her theories and allegiances, outspoken in commenting on political and cultural issues such as slavery, and eclectic and capacious in her humanism" (1: ixiii). The 1856 *Poems* "remains EBB's largest and most finished collection of poems in the decade that consolidated her fame and extended her international influence" (1: lxiv). In addition, the editorial practice of *Works* includes recording substantive variants from earlier editions, some details of manuscript drafts of published works, and tables of contents from all versions of *Poems* and earlier collections to show how EBB revised the ordering as well as the content of poems. The edition is, in this way, extremely EBB-centric, giving emphasis on the last collected volume of poems that she assembled and revised, and representing EBB as an active agent in the managing of her poetic corpus as well as a public, politicized poet. This *Works* achieves something stunning: we now have a revolutionary new EBB.

The decision to start with the 1856 *Poems* does have a few drawbacks. Scholars used to, for example, R. W. Crump's 3-volume edition of Christina Rossetti's *Poems*, might balk at the lack of chronology in *The Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*. Crump's editorial arrangements are organized chronologically around Rossetti's volumes published in her lifetime (not, however, the date of composition), and end with a section of privately published and unpublished poems. Further, Crump provides a full variorum edition which lays startlingly bare Rossetti's (and her brothers') habits of revision in manuscript. In contrast, EBB's 1856 *Poems* is both a collation and a retrospective and, although showing off EBB's often substantial revisions of her published poems, is also a volume that was highly selective.

The *Works* presents an EBB in charge of her poetic corpus, but the cost of highlighting the 1856 *Poems* is the necessary displacement into later volumes of other major works, and of putting her poetry out of chronological sequence. The other major editorial decision, to record only selective manuscript variants, is entirely understandable given the “chaos” and dispersal of the manuscripts themselves, but also a little disappointing. Sandra Donaldson quite rightly suggests that a model for a variorum edition of EBB’s works is offered by Margaret Reynold’s edition of *Aurora Leigh*. However, she also indicates that this print edition of the *Works* will be supplemented by a digital edition that will give a large number of variants and illustrate the complexity of the revision process. Indeed, Donaldson’s illuminating selection of revised poems with variants is already online at <http://www.und.nodak.edu/instruct/sdonaldson/>, and includes the different versions of “To Flush My Dog,” “A Child Asleep,” “Loved Once,” and “To Bettine,” poems to which footnote explanation of variants in the print edition do not do justice. There is also a further digital project initiated by Marjorie Stone to add supporting materials (such as notes that EBB made towards poetry composition) and conjectural readings, and to allow interaction with readers and scholars, to which scholars will eagerly look forward.³ I hope that such initiatives, supplementary to the print *Works*, also digitize the poetry manuscripts and allow for variant readings where possible, as well as opening up EBB’s poetic works even more using the new technology of the “social edition” (see Timney, Leitch, and Siemens). The ongoing plans to digitize presents here a new kind of approach, an edition-in-progress in which the print version is not a “complete works” in itself, despite its monumental size (and, I must add, its exorbitant cost). Not only do we have a revolutionary new EBB, but the process of presenting her fragmented manuscript and print corpus is a visionary and ambitious approach to editing.

The edition is divided as follows. Volumes 1 and 2, as previously mentioned, use as their copy-text the 1856 *Poems*. Volume 3 gives the fourth edition of *Aurora Leigh* (1859), the last edition that EBB saw through the press. Volume 4 contains *The Battle of Marathon* (1820), *An Essay on Mind, with Other Poems* (1826), poems from both *Prometheus Bound, and Miscellaneous Poems* (1833) and *The Seraphim and Other Poems* (1838), together with *Poems before Congress* (1860) and other previously published prose and poetry. Volume 5 has *Last Poems* (1862) and works unpublished in EBB’s lifetime. The scholarly apparatus is exceptional. Each volume has a substantial essay written by a leading scholar on EBB, each poem a detailed headnote, scrupulous footnotes giving variants from other printed editions during EBB’s lifetime, plus generous endnotes with explanatory material. In the headnotes and endnotes, EBB comes across, as Stone and Taylor argue, “not the disembodied ‘shade’ conjured up by Horne [in *A New Spirit of the Age*], but an active and fully professional woman writer who built and functioned within intricate literary networks that extended from London to Boston and New York” (1: lxxii). These additions are a huge boon to the scholar and reader, and indeed as Donaldson notes give us an opportunity to “return to seeing her and her work as it was when she was published – edgy, new, visionary” (1: xxxi).

Reading the poems in *Works* certainly has the effect of revolutionizing EBB. Take *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, for example, whose headnote explains the gestation of the sequence (including its major manuscript variants), its publication history, critical reception, and especially its complex literary contexts (2: 425–42). Famous for containing “five of the best known words in the English language” – “How do I love thee,” if indeed you need reminding – the sequence here presented has rich literary references noted from ancient Greek, Italian, Portuguese, French, not to mention English literatures, and from

the medieval, Renaissance, Baroque, and contemporary periods as its dense allusiveness is unraveled, largely thanks to the editorial input of Barbara Neri. With under-rated poems, too, the critical scholarly apparatus gives them new life. This is especially true of *Poems before Congress*, published in volume 4, whose poems have deep and complex references to the contemporary politics of the Risorgimento and, in the case of the last poem “A Curse for a Nation,” to abolitionism (4: 599–604). The poems in this collection are usually bypassed in assessments of EBB’s career, following the conventional nineteenth and early twentieth-century assessment of the intensely political poetics as a “Pythian shriek” and the compensating hagiographical impulse to celebrate her idealized marital life and her love poetry, as Tricia Lootens so admirably explores. With the approach to editing in this *Works*, however, *Poems before Congress* becomes more integrated into EBB’s *oeuvre*, especially in the explanatory notes that demonstrate EBB’s deep engagement with contemporary European and transatlantic politics. The Risorgimento poems now look less like an aberration, and more like a further manifestation of EBB’s revolutionary poetics.

A further important service that *Works* gives to the scholar is the inclusion in volume 5 of unpublished material in EBB’s lifetime, under the editorship of Sandra Donaldson, Rita Patteson, Marjorie Stone and Beverly Taylor. The unpublished material available is, as the editors remark, “voluminous” (5: xix), and particularly challenging given the “dismemberment of many manuscripts and fair copies and their widespread dispersal into public and private collections,” which complicates “the provenance of manuscripts, obscuring connections among affiliated materials and creating impediments to accurate dating” (5: xix). Some unpublished material that is difficult to decipher, or that remains in private collections or is identified in *The Browning Collections* but currently unlocated, is not included. In addition, this volume generally does not include works published for the first time after EBB’s death by a third party, according to the overall editorial principle of following EBB’s editorial choices. The poems in this volume are not thus comprehensive, but the commitment to a companion digital archive includes the editorial promise to enhance and expand the print edition, and to digitize new poems that emerge in the future (something that does periodically happen, such as an important batch of manuscripts known as D1411 in *The Browning Collections* that includes a draft of sonnet 5 of *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, which the Armstrong Browning Library acquired as the print edition of *Works* was almost complete [5: xx]).

The volume editors attest that their transcriptions of EBB’s manuscript poems are in fact “translations,” given the often illegible handwriting and complexities of the poem’s composition history: the editors have “eliminated the ‘noise’ of indecipherable deletions – or indeed all deletions – along with variations in spacing that may or may not be significant” (5: xxvii; citing Stone [2007], 40). The unpublished poems in volume 5 are mostly from earlier in EBB’s career because, as the editors tell us, after the second edition on *Poems* in 1850, she was preoccupied with the narrative poems *Aurora Leigh* and *Casa Guidi Windows* and then with two further editions of *Poems*. In addition, she turned more to immediate periodical publication of her Risorgimento poems (especially in the New York *Independent*), which was largely reprinted in *Poems before Congress* and *Last Poems* (see Chapman for a further discussion). Volume 5 gives the chosen unpublished poems chronologically, and concludes with a section on undated poems and fragments. There is an embarrassment of riches here in all the new material, an exciting storehouse of poems and fragments that give a generous and complex sense of EBB’s development as a poet. In particular, the juvenilia, which forms the bulk of the unpublished poetry, charts the beginning of her sense of poetic identity forged

within her family circle and its interests (such as the important 1822 poem “The African” [391–408], about a Jamaican slave, and the dramatic poetry written for her siblings to perform such as “Regulus” [225–31], as well as occasional poetry such as birthday tributes) and her experiments with form, including the novel “Julia or Virtue” (216–23). Later unpublished poetry includes translations from Hesiod, Homer, Dante and Petrarch, and important poems that bear crucial relationships to her published works. For example, the playful and intimate 1846 poem “A Ring” (694–95) intriguingly relates to *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, and indeed exists in the same notebook as the sequence. The information given about the juxtaposition of poems in the manuscripts suggests other enticing relationships, such as another 1846 poem “I see the flowers, I see the sun” (695–96), which is “written on the same leaf as the final stanza of the draft of “The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point,”” along with some other poems. Later unpublished poems can be placed alongside her other Italian works, in particular “Italy – Italy – Is it but a name” from 1846–47, “Our Journey to Sinigaglia,” and “’Twas the feast day of St John” (c. 1855). This volume is a major achievement in its meticulous presentation of a wealth of previously unpublished poetry: a fitting ending to a stunning new revisionary and revolutionary edition of EBB.

It is easy for a reviewer of *The Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning* to feel like they have run out of superlatives. This is simply a tremendous undertaking, reversing the history of editorial intervention, neglect, and piracy. Finally we have an authoritative edition that firmly establishes EBB’s own editorial decisions at the center of her corpus, revealing a new EBB embedded within her complex intellectual, literary, and cultural networks: provocative, politicized, experimental, and modern. The result is not a *Complete Works*, but phase one of a *Works-in-progress* that heralds a new dawn for nineteenth-century scholarship and editing. How fitting that, echoing the words of Aurora Leigh, the *Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning* is a “living art” (Book 5, l. 221), that will marry the practice of scholarly editing in print with the new digital age.

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NOTES

1. Following the editors of this edition, I refer to Elizabeth Barrett Browning by her initials EBB, her signature before and after marriage.
2. The edition of letters is now online at <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/crossetti/>, and aggregated into NINES.
3. See the *Elizabeth Barrett Browning Archive* at <http://ebbarchive.org>, which is currently in initial its phase, presenting material omitted from the Broadview edition.

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