

The Feminine Education of Aurora Leigh: Footnoted

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by Nick Franklin



The Feminine Education of Aurora Leigh

The Orphan Meets her English Aunt

- (251) Then, land!—then, England! oh, **the frosty cliffs**¹
(252) Looked cold upon me. Could I find a home
(253) Among those **mean**² red houses through the **fog**³?
(254) And when I heard my father's language first
(255) From **alien lips**⁴ which had no kiss for mine
(256) I **wept**⁵ **aloud**⁶, then laughed, then wept, then wept,
(257) And some one near me said the child was mad
(258) **Through**⁷ much **sea-sickness**⁸. The train **swept** us **on**⁹.
(259) Was this my father's England? the great **isle**¹⁰?
(260) The **ground**¹¹ seemed cut up from the **fellowship**¹²
(261) Of **verdure**¹³, **field from field**¹⁴, as man from man;
(262) The skies themselves looked low and positive¹⁵,
(263) **As**¹⁶ almost you could touch them with a hand,
(264) And dared to do it they were so **far off**¹⁷
(265) From **God's celestial crystals**¹⁸; all things **blurred**¹⁹
(266) And **dull**²⁰ and **vague**²¹. Did Shakespeare and his **mates**²²
(267) Absorb the light here?—not a hill or stone
(268) With **heart**²³ to strike a radiant colour up
(269) Or **active outline**²⁴ on the indifferent air.
- (270) I think I see my father's sister stand
(271) Upon the hall-step of her country-house
(272) To give me welcome. She stood straight and calm,
(273) **Her somewhat narrow forehead braided tight**²⁵

¹ **the frosty cliffs** – the white (chalk) cliffs of Dover

² **mean** – insalubrious, *opposite of* 'luxurious'

³ **fog** – thick mist typically near the sea, low cloud

⁴ **alien lips** – strangers' mouths

⁵ **to weep** (weep-wept-wept) – cry, shed tears

⁶ **aloud** – audibly

⁷ **through** – because of, due to

⁸ **sea-sickness** – nausea caused by travelling in a ship

⁹ **to sweep sb. on** (sweep-swept-swept) – carry sb. forward

¹⁰ **isle** – (*poetic*) poetic

¹¹ **ground** – terrain

¹² **fellowship** – communion

¹³ **verdure** – lush green vegetation, green foliage

¹⁴ **field from field** – English fields were typically separated from each other by hedgerows

¹⁵ **the Italian mountains were made spiritual; but the English sky is solidified. 'Positive' hints at Positivism: the materialist religion developed by Auguste Comte.**

¹⁶ **as** – (*elision*) as if

¹⁷ **far off** – distant

¹⁸ **God's celestial crystals** – in the Ptolemaic system, picturing the earth at the centre of the cosmos, the ninth crystalline sphere lies beyond the seven planetary spheres and the fixed stars; cf. Milton's reference to the 'crystalline sphere' (*Paradise Lost* 3:482).

¹⁹ **blurred** – unfocused, not delineated

²⁰ **dull** – grey, colourless

²¹ **vague** – imprecise

²² **mates** – companions

²³ **heart** – (*in this case*) vitality

²⁴ **active outline** – distinctive silhouette

- (274) As if for **taming**²⁶ accidental thoughts
 (275) From possible **pulses**²⁷; brown hair **pricked**²⁸ with **grey**²⁹
 (276) By **frigid use of life**³⁰, (she was not old
 (277) Although **my father's elder by a year**³¹)
 (278) A nose **drawn sharply**³², yet in delicate lines;
 (279) A close mild mouth, a little **soured**³³ about
 (280) The ends³⁴, through speaking **unrequited**³⁵ loves
 (281) Or **peradventure**³⁶ **niggardly**³⁷ half-truths;
 (282) Eyes of no colour,—once they might have **smiled**³⁸,
 (283) But never, never **have forgot themselves**
 (284) **In smiling**³⁹; cheeks, in which was yet a rose
 (285) Of **perished**⁴⁰ summers, like a **rose in a book**⁴¹,
 (286) Kept more for **ruth**⁴² than pleasure,—**if past bloom**,
 (287) **Past fading also**⁴³.
 (287) She had lived, we'll say,
 (288) A harmless life, she called a virtuous life,
 (289) A quiet life, which was not life at all,
 (290) (But that, **she had not lived enough to know**⁴⁴)
 (291) Between **the vicar and the county squires**,
 (292) **The lord-lieutenant**⁴⁵ looking down sometimes
 (293) From the **empyrean**⁴⁶ to assure their souls
 (294) Against **chance**⁴⁷-vulgarisms, and, in **the abyss**⁴⁸
 (295) The **apothecary**⁴⁹, looked on once a year
 (296) To prove their **soundness**⁵⁰ of humility.
 (297) The **poor-club**⁵¹ exercised her Christian gifts
 (298) Of knitting stockings, stitching petticoats,

²⁵ **Her somewhat narrow forehead braided tight** – her hair was pulled back from her brow in braids (= plaits), her hair was tightly plaited and/or her forehead was furrowed in a frown

²⁶ **to tame** – control

²⁷ **pulses** – (*in this case*) pulsation in her temples from excitement

²⁸ **pricked** – (*in this case*) flecked

²⁹ **grey** – English euphemistically calls white hair ‘grey hair’

³⁰ **frigid use of life** – life had not treated her warmly, or she has held back from getting involved in life. **This suggests she had not loved – or been loved – very much**

³¹ **my father's elder by a year** – a year older than my father

³² **drawn sharply** – with an angular silhouette

³³ **soured** – embittered, frustrated

³⁴ **about the ends** – at the corners of her mouth (giving her a disapproving look)

³⁵ **unrequited** – unreciprocated

³⁶ **peradventure** – (*archaic*) perhaps, possibly, maybe, by chance

³⁷ **niggardly** – mean, opposite of ‘generous’

³⁸ **to smile** – (*in this case*) express happiness

³⁹ **have forgot themselves in smiling** – expressed happiness in a carefree way

⁴⁰ **perished** – dead

⁴¹ **rose in a book** – flowers were often pressed and dried between the pages of a book

⁴² **ruth** – remorse, pity, regret

⁴³ **if past bloom / Past fading also** – although its prime was long gone, at least it could not lose any more vitality

⁴⁴ **she had not lived enough to know** – inexperience meant that she was ignorant of this

⁴⁵ **the vicar and the county squires, / The lord-lieutenant** – figures of authority in middle-class provincial English life; the lord-lieutenant was officially governor of a county, though with primarily ceremonial functions

⁴⁶ **empyrean** – the highest heaven, the abode of God and the angels; the skies

⁴⁷ **chance** (adj.) – accidental

⁴⁸ **the abyss** – hell, the lowest depths

⁴⁹ **apothecary** – medical practitioner, dispensers of drugs, at the lower end of the middle-class social scale; pharmacist who, in England at the time, could prescribe as well as sell medicine

⁵⁰ **soundness** – stability, dependability

⁵¹ **poor-club** – club devoted to making, collecting and mending clothes for the poor

(299) Because we are of one flesh⁵² after all
(300) And need one **flannel**⁵³ (with a proper sense
(301) Of difference in the quality)—and still
(302) The book-club, guarded from your modern trick
(303) Of shaking dangerous questions from the **crease**⁵⁴,
(304) **Preserved her intellectual**.⁵⁵ She had lived
(305) A sort of cage-bird life⁵⁶, born in a cage,
(306) **Accounting**⁵⁷ that to **leap**⁵⁸ from **perch**⁵⁹ to perch
(307) Was act and joy enough for any bird.
(308) Dear heaven, how silly are the things that live
(309) In **thickets**⁶⁰, and eat berries!
(309) I, **alas**⁶¹,
(310) A wild bird **scarcely fledged**⁶², was brought to her cage,
(311) And she was there to meet me. Very kind.
(312) Bring the clean water, give out the fresh **seed**⁶³.
(313) She stood upon the steps to welcome me,
(314) Calm, in black **garb**⁶⁴. **I clung about her neck**⁶⁵,—
(315) **Young babes**⁶⁶, who **catch at**⁶⁷ every shred of wool
(316) To **draw** the new light **closer**⁶⁸, catch and **cling**⁶⁹
(317) Less **blindly**⁷⁰. In my ears, my father's word
(318) **Hummed ignorantly**⁷¹, as the sea in shells,
(319) "Love, love, my child". She, black there with my grief,
(320) Might feel my love—she was his sister once,
(321) I **clung to**⁷² her. **A moment she seemed moved**⁷³,
(322) Kissed me with cold lips, **suffered me to cling**⁷⁴,
(323) And **drew**⁷⁵ me feebly through the hall into
(324) The room she **sate**⁷⁶ in.

⁵² see **Ephesians 5:29-30**.

⁵³ **flannel** – (in this case) flannel petticoat

⁵⁴ **crease** – the fold between two pages of a book, which had to be cut to open the pages. Presumably, more modern books revealed more dangerous material when the crease was cut.

⁵⁵ in other words at the bookclub controversy was avoided – but goign there permits her to feel knowledgeable. Cf. Byron's satire of 'Bluestocking' women, a term applied pejoratively to women with intellectual aspirations in *Don Juan* (1819-24), Canto 1, XXII. *Don Juan* is one of the texts EBB engages with in *Aurora Leigh*

⁵⁶ cf. Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) on women, "confined, then, in cages like the feathered race (= birds)" (ch. 4)

⁵⁷ **accounting** – believing, considering

⁵⁸ **to leap** (leap-leapt-leapt) – jump, hop

⁵⁹ **perch** – wooden bar on which a caged bird sits

⁶⁰ **thickets** – bushes, undergrowth

⁶¹ **alas** – unfortunately

⁶² **scarcely fledged** – (literally) that had only recently learned to fly, (in this case) immature

⁶³ **seed** – (in this case) grains eaten by caged birds

⁶⁴ **garb** – (poetic) garments, clothing, clothes

⁶⁵ **I clung around her neck** – I hugged (= embraced) her enthusiastically

⁶⁶ **young babes** – newborn infants

⁶⁷ **to catch at** – grab, seize

⁶⁸ **to draw sth. closer** (draw-drew-drawn) – pull sth. towards one

⁶⁹ **to cling** (cling-clung-clung) – hold on, grasp

⁷⁰ **blindly** – without understanding or using one's judgement; unthinkingly

⁷¹ **hummed ignorantly** – murmured/mumbled uncomprehendingly

⁷² **to cling to** – hug (= embrace) desperately

⁷³ **a moment she seemed moved** – for a moment she appeared to be affected by compassion

⁷⁴ **suffered me to cling** – reluctantly accepted my embrace

⁷⁵ **to draw** (draw-drew-drawn) – (in this case) lead, guide

⁷⁶ **sate** – (archaic) sat

- (324) There, with some strange spasm
 (325) Of pain and passion, she **wrung loose**⁷⁷ my hands
 (326) Imperiously, and held me at arm's length,
 (327) And with two **grey-steel naked-bladed**⁷⁸ eyes
 (328) **Searched through**⁷⁹ my face,—**ay**⁸⁰, **stabbed it through and through**⁸¹,
 (329) Through brows and cheeks and chin, as if to find
 (330) A **wicked**⁸² murderer in my innocent face,
 (331) If not here, there perhaps. Then, **drawing breath**⁸³,
 (332) She **struggled for her ordinary calm**⁸⁴
 (333) And **missed it rather**⁸⁵,—told me **not to shrink**⁸⁶,
 (334) As if she had told me not to lie or swear,—
 (335) “She loved my father and would love me too
 (336) As long as I **deserved**⁸⁷ it.” Very kind.
 (337) I understood **her meaning**⁸⁸ afterward;
 (338) She **thought to**⁸⁹ find my mother in my face,
 (339) And **questioned**⁹⁰ it for that. **For**⁹¹ she, my aunt,
 (340) Had loved my father truly, as she could,
 (341) And hated, with the **gall**⁹² of **gentle souls**⁹³,
 (342) My **Tuscan**⁹⁴ mother who had **fooled away**⁹⁵
 (343) A **wise**⁹⁶ man from wise courses, a good man
 (344) From obvious **duties**⁹⁷, and, depriving her,
 (345) His sister, of the **household precedence**⁹⁸,
 (346) Had **wronged**⁹⁹ his tenants, robbed his native land,
 (347) And made him mad, **alike by**¹⁰⁰ life and death,
 (348) In love and **sorrow**¹⁰¹. She had **pored**¹⁰² for years
 (349) What sort of woman could be **suitable**
 (350) **To**¹⁰³ her sort of hate, to entertain it with,
 (351) And so, her very curiosity
 (352) Became hate too, and all the idealism

⁷⁷ **wrung loose** – managed to free herself from

⁷⁸ **grey-steel naked-blade** – menacing

⁷⁹ **searched through** – examined

⁸⁰ **ay** – (*dialect*) yes

⁸¹ **stabbed it through and through** – examined it with a penetrating glare

⁸² **wicked** – evil, malevolent

⁸³ **to draw breath** (draw-drew-drawn) – breathe in, inhale

⁸⁴ **struggled for her ordinary calm** – tried to find her usual composure

⁸⁵ **missed it rather** – couldn't really find it

⁸⁶ **to shrink** (shrink-shrank-shrunk) – (*in this case*) recoil in fear

⁸⁷ **to deserve** – merit

⁸⁸ **her meaning** – her intention

⁸⁹ **to think to** (think-thought-thought) – expect to

⁹⁰ **to question** – (*in this case*) examine

⁹¹ **for** – (*in this case*) because, since

⁹² **gall** – rancour, bitterness

⁹³ **gentle souls** – (*sarcastic*) ‘respectable’ sanctimonious people

⁹⁴ **Tuscan** – (*in this case*) Florentine

⁹⁵ **to fool away** – bamboozle

⁹⁶ **wise** – sensible, responsible

⁹⁷ **duties** – obligations, responsibilities

⁹⁸ **household precedence** – seniority in the family hierarchy

⁹⁹ **to wrong sb.** – offend sb., insult sb.

¹⁰⁰ **alike by** – both in

¹⁰¹ **sorrow** – sadness

¹⁰² **pored** – pored over, pondered, thought intently upon

¹⁰³ **suitable to** – appropriate for, deserving of

(353) She ever used in life, was used for hate,
 (354) Till hate, so nourished, did exceed at last
 (355) The love from which it grew, in strength and heat,
 (356) And wrinkled her smooth conscience with a sense
 (357) Of disputable virtue (say not, sin)
 (358) When Christian doctrine was enforced at church.
 (359) And thus my father's sister was to me
 (360) My mother's hater. From that day, **she did**
 (361) **Her duty to me**¹⁰⁴, (I appreciate it
 (362) In her own word as spoken to herself)
 (363) **Her duty**, in large measure, **well-pressed out**¹⁰⁵,
 (364) **But measured always**¹⁰⁶. She was generous, **bland**¹⁰⁷,
 (365) More courteous than was **tender**¹⁰⁸, gave me still
 (366) The first place,—as if fearful that God's saints
 (367) Would look down suddenly and say, "**Herein**¹⁰⁹
 (368) You missed a point, I think, through **lack of**¹¹⁰ love."
 (369) Alas, a mother never is afraid
 (370) Of speaking **angrily**¹¹¹ to any child,
 (371) **Since**¹¹² love, she knows, is justified of love.
 (372) And I, I was a good child **on the whole**¹¹³,
 (373) A **meek**¹¹⁴ and **manageable**¹¹⁵ child. Why not?
 (374) I did not live, to have the faults of life:
 (375) There seemed more true life in my father's grave
 (376) Than in all England. Since that threw me off
 (377) Who **fain**¹¹⁶ would **cleave**¹¹⁷, (his **latest will**¹¹⁸, they say,
 (378) Consigned me to his land) I only thought
 (379) Of lying quiet there where I was thrown
 (380) Like **sea-weed**¹¹⁹ on the rocks, and suffering her
 (381) To prick me to a pattern **with her pin**¹²⁰
 (382) Fibre from fibre, delicate leaf from leaf,
 (383) And dry out from my drowned anatomy
 (384) The last sea-salt left in me.

¹⁰⁴ **she did her duty to me** – treated me in a formally appropriate way as required by society

¹⁰⁵ **well-pressed out** – made perfunctory

¹⁰⁶ **duty ... measured always** – see Luke 6:38: “with the same measure that ye mete withal it shall be measured to you again.”

¹⁰⁷ **bland** – (*false friend*) emotionless

¹⁰⁸ **tender** – loving, kind

¹⁰⁹ **herein** – in this

¹¹⁰ **lack of** – deficient

¹¹¹ **angrily** – (*archaic*) angrily

¹¹² **since** – because, given that

¹¹³ **on the whole** – in general

¹¹⁴ **meek** – submissive

¹¹⁵ **manageable** – easy to control

¹¹⁶ **fain** – gladly, willingly

¹¹⁷ **to cleave** – (*in this case*) adhere strongly

¹¹⁸ **latest will** – final testament

¹¹⁹ **seaweed** – algae

¹²⁰ **with her pin** – as in embroidery

A Woman's Education

- (384) So it was.
(385) I broke the copious curls upon my head
(386) In **braids**¹²¹, because she liked smooth-ordered hair.
(387) I left off saying my **sweet Tuscan words**
(388) Which still at any stirring of the heart
(389) Came up to float across the English phrase
(390) As **lilies**¹²², (**Bene**¹²³ or **Che che**¹²⁴), because
(391) She liked my father's child to speak his tongue.
(392) I learnt **the collects**¹²⁵ and **the catechism**¹²⁶,
(393) **The creeds, from Athanasius back to Nice**¹²⁷,
(394) **The Articles**¹²⁸, **the Tracts against the times**¹²⁹,
(395) (By no means **Buonaventure's 'Prick of Love'**),¹³⁰
(396) And various **popular synopses of**
(397) **Inhuman doctrines**¹³¹ never taught by **John**¹³²,
(398) Because she liked instructed piety.
(399) I learnt my complement of classic French
(400) (**Kept pure of Balzac**¹³³ and neologism)
(401) And German also, **since**¹³⁴ she liked a range
(402) Of **liberal**¹³⁵ education,—**tongues**¹³⁶, not books.
(403) I learnt a little algebra, a little
(404) Of the mathematics,—**brushed**¹³⁷ **with extreme flounce**¹³⁸

¹²¹ **braids** – plaits

¹²² **lilies** – the comparison of Aurora's Tuscan words floating across "the English phrase / As lilies" may allude to the lily as the symbol of Florence

¹²³ **bene** – (*Italian*) OK

¹²⁴ **che che** – (*Italian*) pardon?, come again

¹²⁵ **collects** – short prayers in the Christian liturgy, such as the Morning and Evening prayer in the Anglican service

¹²⁶ **catechism** – an elementary treatise of Christian doctrine in the form of question and answer, meant for children and other learners or issued as an authoritative exposition of a Church's teaching

¹²⁷ **The creeds, from Athanasius back to Nice** – the Athanasian, the Apostles' and the Nicene creeds formulate the basic principles of Christian faith. The Council of Nice (Nicea) affirmed the divinity of Jesus Christ in AD 325. The Athanasian creed (c. AD 500), asserts belief in the Trinity (three gods in one substance). In 1854 EBB said of the Athanasian creed, "the Athanasian way of stating opinions, between a scholastic paradox and a curse, is particularly distasteful to me".

¹²⁸ **The Articles** the thirty-nine articles, established in 1563 during the Reformation, that define the doctrine of the Church of England and are incorporated into the Book of Common Prayer

¹²⁹ **the Tracts against the times** Tracts for the Times (1833-41) published by members of the Oxford or Tractarian Movement opposed secularization of the Anglican Church, arguing for the restoration of liturgical practices associated with its Catholic roots. The movement's leaders included John Henry Newman (1801-90), who converted to Roman Catholicism in 1845; John Keble (1792-1866); and Edward Pusey (1800-1882). In 1843, EBB found the controversial "Tracts" disappointing "even in the degree of intellectual power displayed in them"

¹³⁰ **Buonaventure's 'Prick of Love'**: No longer believed to be by Saint Bonaventure (1221-74), *Stimulus Divini Amoris* (1542) is a devotional work including meditations on the Passion of Christ and prayers and a treatise on the spiritual life. St. Bonaventure's doctrine that the power of the heart to love leads to higher illumination than the power of the mind to reason.

¹³¹ **popular synopses of inhuman doctrines** – summaries of popular but cruel religious teachings that had nothing to do with what Jesus taught (for example in the Gospel of John)

¹³² **John** – that is, the author of the Gospel

¹³³ **Balzac Kept pure of Balzac and neologism** – EBB was an avid reader of novels by Honoré de Balzac (1799-1850) as well as George Sand (1804-76) and other French authors considered too risqué for respectable English women to read. M. Reynolds notes that in 1844, G. H. Lewes objected to the incorrectness of Balzac's 'neologisms', whereas EBB, in contrast, admired the "new metals" of Balzac's language. Some critics considered Balzac's work immoral.

¹³⁴ **since** – given that, because

¹³⁵ **liberal** – (*ironic*) open-minded

¹³⁶ **tongues** – languages

- (405) The circle of the sciences, because
 (406) She misliked women who are frivolous.
 (407) I learnt the royal genealogies
 (408) Of **Oviedo**¹³⁹, **the internal laws**
 (409) **Of the Burmese empire**¹⁴⁰, – by how many feet
 (410) **Mount Chimborazo outsoars Teneriffe**¹⁴¹,
 (411) What navigable river joins itself
 (412) To **Lara**¹⁴², and what census of the year five
 (413) Was taken at **Klagenfurt**¹⁴³, —because she liked
 (414) A general insight into useful facts.
 (415) I learnt much music¹⁴⁴, —such as would have been
 (416) **As quite impossible in Johnson's day**¹⁴⁵
 (417) As still it might be wished—fine **sleights**¹⁴⁶ of hand
 (418) And unimagined fingering, **shuffling off**¹⁴⁷
 (419) The hearer's soul through hurricanes of notes
 (420) To a **noisy Tophet**¹⁴⁸; and I drew . . . costumes
 (421) From French engravings, **nerheids**¹⁴⁹ neatly draped,
 (422) (With **smirks**¹⁵⁰ of **simmering**¹⁵¹ **godship**¹⁵²)—I **washed in**¹⁵³
 (423) Landscapes from nature (**rather say**¹⁵⁴, **washed out**¹⁵⁵).
 (424) **I danced the polka and Cellarius**¹⁵⁶,
 (425) Spun glass, **stuffed**¹⁵⁷ birds, and modelled flowers in wax,¹⁵⁸
 (426) Because she liked accomplishments in girls.

¹³⁷ **to brush** – (*in this case*) encounter

¹³⁸ **with extreme flounce** – hurriedly, with a quick movement

¹³⁹ **Oviedo** – Gonzalo Fernandez de Oviedo y Valdes (1478-1557), a Spanish historian who wrote a minutely detailed account of the principal persons of Spain, not published until 1880, but described in an 1838 publication as "a mass of gossip . . . of very little value"

¹⁴⁰ **the internal laws / Of the Burmese Empire** – English interest in Burma was aroused by the Anglo-Burmese wars of 1824-26 and 1852

¹⁴¹ **Mount Chimborazo outsoars Teneriffe** – Mount Chimborazo in the Andes of Ecuador is 20,565 feet; Mount Teide in Tenerife, Canary Islands, is 12,198 feet

¹⁴² **Lara** – a state in central Venezuela

¹⁴³ **Klagenfurt** – a town in southern Austria, named in historic records for the first time in the twelfth century

¹⁴⁴ **music was considered a vital 'accomplishment' for ladies**

¹⁴⁵ **music ... quite impossible in Johnson's day** – the famous author and lexicographer Samuel Johnson (1709-84) was reported to have commented after hearing a celebrated performer go through a very difficult composition, "I would it had been impossible"

¹⁴⁶ **sleights** – impressive movements that are difficult to imitate

¹⁴⁷ **to shuffle sth. off** – (*in this case*) condemn, damn

¹⁴⁸ **a noisy Tophet** – a cacophonous Hell, (*literally*) an area associated with human sacrifice and Moloch worship mentioned in the Old Testament (see II Kings 23:10, Isaiah 30:33 and Jeremiah 7:31-2); in Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1:404) it is described as symbolical of Hell

¹⁴⁹ **nerheids** – sea nymphs

¹⁵⁰ **smirk** – self-satisfied smile

¹⁵¹ **simmering** – latent

¹⁵² **godship** – divinity

¹⁵³ **washed in** – as in painting with watercolours

¹⁵⁴ **rather say** – to be more precise/honest

¹⁵⁵ **washed out** – obliterated

¹⁵⁶ **I danced the polka and Cellarius** – dances that were highly popular in the 1840s, the former introduced to England by the French dancing-master Henri Cellarius, the latter a slow waltz-mazurka named after him. Robert Browning wrote to EBB on 15 April 1845, "I heard of you [...] between a Polka and a Cellarius the other evening"

¹⁵⁷ **to stuff** – perform taxidermy on

¹⁵⁸ **more impractical pastimes**

- (427) **I read a score of books on womanhood**¹⁵⁹
 (428) To prove, if women do not think at all,
 (429) They may teach thinking, (to a maiden-aunt
 (430) Or else the author)—books that boldly assert
 (431) Their right of comprehending husband's talk
 (432) When not too deep, and even of answering
 (433) With pretty "may it please you", or "so it is",—
 (434) Their rapid **insight**¹⁶⁰ and fine aptitude,
 (435) **Particular**¹⁶¹ worth and general **missionariness**¹⁶²,
 (436) As long as they keep quiet by the fire
 (437) And never say "no" when the world says "**ay**¹⁶³",
 (438) For that is fatal,—their angelic¹⁶⁴ reach
 (439) Of virtue, chiefly used to sit and **darn**¹⁶⁵,
 (440) And fatten **household sinners**¹⁶⁶,—their, in brief,
 (441) **Potential faculty in everything**
 (442) **Of abdicating power in it**¹⁶⁷: she **owned**¹⁶⁸
 (443) She liked a woman to be womanly,
 (444) And English women, she thanked God and sighed,
 (445) (Some people always sigh in thanking God)
 (446) Were models to the universe.

¹⁵⁹ **I read a score** (= 20) **of books on womanhood** (= how to be a lady) – among the many conduct books for women published in the 1830s and 1840s, EBB probably had most in mind works by Sarah Stickney Ellis such as *The Women of England, their Social Duties and Domestic Habits* (1839); *The Daughters of England, their Position in Society, Character and Responsibilities* (1842); *The Wives of England, their Relative Duties, Domestic Influence, and Social Obligations* (1843); and *The Mothers of England, their Influence and Responsibility* (1843). EBB observed that "the race of Mrs. Ellis's disciples run the risk of being model-women of the most abominable virtue"

¹⁶⁰ **insight** – perspicacity

¹⁶¹ **particular** – (*false friend*) special, specific

¹⁶² **missionariness** – charity, aptitude for good deeds

¹⁶³ **ay** – yes

¹⁶⁴ **possible allusion to *The Angle of the House* (1854) written two years previously**

¹⁶⁵ **to darn** – mend/repair socks

¹⁶⁶ **household sinners** – pets

¹⁶⁷ **potential faculty in everything of abdicating power in it** – women can do anything as long as it doesn't involve having any real power

¹⁶⁸ **to own** – (*in this case*) admit

- (446) And last
 (447) I learnt **cross-stitch**¹⁶⁹, because she did not like
 (448) To see me **wear the night**¹⁷⁰ with empty hands
 (449) A-doing nothing. So, **my shepherdess**¹⁷¹
 (450) Was something after all, (the pastoral saints
 (451) Be praised for't) **leaning**¹⁷² **lovelorn**¹⁷³ with pink eyes
 (452) To match her shoes, **when I mistook the silks**¹⁷⁴;
 (453) Her head uncrushed by that round weight of hat
 (454) So strangely similar to **the tortoise-shell**
 (455) **Which slew the tragic poet**^{175 176}.
 (455) By the way,
 (456) The works of women are symbolical.
 (457) We sew, sew, prick our fingers, **dull our sight**¹⁷⁷,
 (458) Producing what? A pair of **slippers**¹⁷⁸, sir,
 (459) To put on when you're **weary**¹⁷⁹—or a stool
 (460) To **stumble over**¹⁸⁰ and **vex**¹⁸¹ you . . . “curse that stool!”
 (461) Or else at best, a cushion, where you **lean**¹⁸²
 (462) And sleep, and dream of **something we are not**¹⁸³
 (463) But **would be**¹⁸⁴ for your sake. Alas, alas!
 (464) This hurts most, this—that, after all, **we are paid**
 (465) **The worth of our work**¹⁸⁵, perhaps.
 (465) In looking down
 (466) Those years of education (to return)
 (467) I wonder **if Brinvilliers suffered more**
 (468) **In the water-torture**¹⁸⁶, . . . flood succeeding flood
 (469) To drench the incapable throat and split the veins

¹⁶⁹ **cross-stitch** – embroidery

¹⁷⁰ **to wear the night** (wear-wore-worn) – **spend** the evening

¹⁷¹ **my shepherdess** – the **shepherdess** that she **embroidered**

¹⁷² **leaning** – **reclining**

¹⁷³ **lovelorn** – **unhappy** because of **unrequited love**

¹⁷⁴ **when I mistook the silks** – **tried** to **do** embroidery; **got** the **threads muddled up**

¹⁷⁵ **the tortoise-shell / Which slew the tragic poet** – the 5th-century BC dramatic poet Æschylus, reported to have died when an eagle dropped a tortoise on his bald head, mistaking it for a stone, fulfilling a prophecy that his death would come from a falling house or blow from heaven. EBB's manuscript poem “[Æschylus' Monodrama]” (c. 1845), for decades misattributed to her husband RB on the basis of a fair copy in his hand and described as one of the best dramatic monologues he left unpublished, portrays the aged tragic poet's meditating just before his death sitting in exile on the plains of Sicily, seeking to avert the prophecy. EBB regarded Æschylus (c.525-456 BC) as “the sublimest of the sublime Greeks”; she also defended him as “the obscurest poet in the world, .. with the exception of ... we will say .. Mr Browning!”

¹⁷⁶ **the implication is that cross-stitching killed the tragic poet**

¹⁷⁷ **dull our sight** – **ruin** our **eyesight** (and **ability** to **read**)

¹⁷⁸ **slippers** – **soft shoes worn** at **home**

¹⁷⁹ **weary** – **tired**

¹⁸⁰ **to stumble over** – **trip over**, **cause** you to **fall over**

¹⁸¹ **to vex** – **infuriate**, **irritate**, **annoy**

¹⁸² **to lean** – **recline**

¹⁸³ **something we are not** – the ‘**ideal**’ **woman**

¹⁸⁴ **would be** – **want** to be

¹⁸⁵ **we are paid the worth of our work** – we **receive** what we **deserve**. In other words women put so much effort into adopting the conventional role but what they produce is useless, so it's not surprising that men don't value it.

¹⁸⁶ **if Brinvilliers suffered more / In the water-torture** – Marie Marguerite d'Aubray, marquise de Brinvilliers (1630-76), accused of poisoning several family members, underwent simulated drowning, a form of torture akin to waterboarding, prior to her decapitation. It was described in Mme de Sévigné's Letters (1726), which EBB read in 1818, and became the subject of a play *The Marchioness of Brinvilliers* written for performance at the Victoria Theatre on 02/02/1846 as well as *The Marchioness of Brinvilliers, the Poisoner of the 17th Century, A Romance of Old Paris* (1846) by Albert Smith

(470) Than I did. Certain of your feebler souls
 (471) **Go out**¹⁸⁷ in such a process; many **pine**
 (472) **To a sick, inodorous light**¹⁸⁸; **my own**¹⁸⁹ endured:
 (473) I had relations in the Unseen, and **drew**¹⁹⁰
 (474) The elemental nutriment and heat
 (475) From nature, as earth feels the sun at nights¹⁹¹,
 (476) Or as a babe **sucks**¹⁹² **surely**¹⁹³ in the dark.
 (477) I kept the life **thrust on**¹⁹⁴ me, on the outside
 (478) Of the inner life with all its ample room
 (479) For heart and **lungs**¹⁹⁵, for will and intellect,
 (480) Inviolable by conventions. God,
 (481) thank thee for that grace of **thine**¹⁹⁶!

(481) At first
 (482) I felt no life which was not patience,—did
 (483) The thing she **bade**¹⁹⁷ me, **without heed to**¹⁹⁸ a thing
 (484) Beyond it, **sate**¹⁹⁹ in **just**²⁰⁰ the chair she placed,
 (485) With back against the window, to exclude
 (486) The sight of the great **lime-tree**²⁰¹ on the lawn,
 (487) Which seemed to have come **on purpose**²⁰² from **the woods**²⁰³
 (488) To bring the house a message,—ay, and walked
 (489) **Demurely**²⁰⁴ in her carpeted low rooms,
 (490) As if I should not, **harkening**²⁰⁵ my own steps,
 (491) **Misdoubt**²⁰⁶ I was alive. I read her books,
 (492) Was civil to her cousin, Romney Leigh,
 (493) **Gave ear to**²⁰⁷ her vicar, tea to her visitors,
 (494) And heard them whisper, when I changed a cup,
 (495) (I blushed for joy at that)—“The Italian child,
 (496) For all her blue eyes and her quiet ways,
 (497) **Thrives ill**²⁰⁸ in England: she is **paler yet**²⁰⁹
 (498) Than when we came the last time; she will die.”

zeugma!

¹⁸⁷ **to go out** – be extinguished

¹⁸⁸ **to pine to a sick, inodorous light** – long for and languish under a weakly illuminating influence

¹⁸⁹ **my own** – (*emphatic*) my soul

¹⁹⁰ **to draw** (draw-drew-drawn) – (*in this case*) derive, extract

¹⁹¹ **EBB subverts the tradition symbolism of the feminized moon that has no light of its own with a stronger feminine view of nature that extracts the sun’s warmth and stores it as her own.**

¹⁹² **to suck** – (*in this case*) suckle, breastfeed

¹⁹³ **surely** – securely, confidently

¹⁹⁴ **thrust on** – imposed on

¹⁹⁵ **lungs** – pulmonary organs

¹⁹⁶ **of thine** – of yours

¹⁹⁷ **to bid** (bid-bade-bidden) – ask

¹⁹⁸ **without heed to** – regardless of

¹⁹⁹ **sate** – (*archaic*) sat

²⁰⁰ **just** – (*in this case*) precisely, exactly

²⁰¹ **lime-tree** – cf. Coleridge’s “this lime-tree bough, my prison”, in which the lime-tree becomes the vehicle of a realization that nature never deserts the wise and pure even when they seem isolated from her most beautiful vistas.

²⁰² **on purpose** – intentionally

²⁰³ **the woods** – the forest

²⁰⁴ **demurely** – timidly

²⁰⁵ **to harken** – listen to

²⁰⁶ **to misdoubt** – have doubts about the reality that

²⁰⁷ **to give ear to** (give-gave-given) – listen to

²⁰⁸ **thrives ill** – does not prosper

²⁰⁹ **paler yet** – even more pallid