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Florentine Friends: The Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Robert Browning to Isa Blagden, 1850–1861. Philip Kelley and Sandra Donaldson, eds. Scott Lewis, Edward Hagan, and Rita S. Patteson, associate eds. Winfield, KS, and Waco, TX: Wedgestone Press and Armstrong Browning Library, 2009. lii + 538 pp., \$145.00.

LIKE *THE BROWNING'S CORRESPONDENCE* (16 VOLUMES TO DATE) and other collections of letters by the Brownings produced by Wedgestone Press, *Florentine Friends* is fastidiously edited, richly annotated, and carefully documented. It makes available “the 232 extant letters that Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Robert Browning wrote to their intimate friend, Isa Blagden” from early 1850, soon after they first met her, until June 1861, when EBB died (ix). The collection publishes much valuable material for the first time. Although 154 of Robert’s letters to Isa have previously been published in full or in part in *Dearest Isa: Robert Browning’s Letters to Isabella Blagden* (Ed. Edward C. McAleer. Austin, TX: U of Texas P, 1951; rpt. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1970), only 39 of those letters date from the period preceding EBB’s death covered by this volume. In addition to including these 39, *Florentine Friends* publishes for the first time four additional letters from Robert to Isa. The real treasure trove of the collection is 146 previously unpublished letters from EBB to Isa, in addition to full versions of 22 others previously published only in part.

Although the activities and attitudes of both Brownings from 1850 to 1861 have been attested in previously available correspondence, most especially in Scott Lewis’s edition *The Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning to Her Sister Arabella* (2 vols. Waco, TX: Wedgestone, 2002), the letters from EBB to Isa are unusually revealing. Over time, the women’s intimacy

and their shared feelings about people, politics, and spiritualism made EBB's letters franker and less circumspect than even those to Arabella. Aware of her sister's greater conservatism in religion and politics and her more parochial interests, EBB in the correspondence with Arabella at points attempts, diplomatically, to justify her own more radical positions, and at other times lectures her younger sister from the position of the wiser, worldlier woman. With Isa, in contrast, EBB states her opinions baldly, assured of sympathy, community of interest, and agreement. At times, she directly underscores her own boldness against Arabella's caution, as she does while preparing *Poems before Congress* for publication:

My sister Arabel writes to me in consternation, that I shall destroy "all my usefulness" by spoiling my popularity. Let the poor wretched popularity go to its own place in God's name, if we cant have otherwise the whole truth in God's name. The falseness everywhere in men & women, seems to me the great plague now-a-days—the moral diphtheria in public & private life, at least within my own observation.— They say mediums cheat. Heavens! as if *that* were peculiar to mediumship. Of course they cheat, if they are men. And still more . . . if *they are women*, Isa!" (284)

This last remark alludes to EBB's bitter disillusionment with her erstwhile friend Sophia Eckley, whom EBB by this time—February 1860—had come to regard as thoroughly false, especially in matters of spiritualism. She disparages Eckley's show of "helping poor Mrs [Harriet Beecher] Stowe to commune with her dead son," for "*If she is a medium at all . . . she is not a strong or reliable one. . . . I doubt her ALL THROUGH NOW*" (285). EBB laces the letters to Isa with references to Eckley's betrayal, castigating herself for poor judgment, susceptibility to flattery, and an inability to judge women: "[I]t's *fate* with me to draw certain kinds of women,—women of straw, women of false lives & hearts." Aware of the irony that she is writing this to her dearest woman friend ("How I came to know & love *you* seems 'out of the text'"), she declares "I really mean to try to have no more female friends— It does'nt do for me." At the same time, she affirms that she prizes the young American Kate Field "for her truth & transparency" (273). If the recurring references to Eckley are

tinged with self-criticism, ironic self-mockery, and even comic hyperbole, EBB's running insinuations of disappointment and disgust with the poet and diplomat Robert Bulwer Lytton (who published as Owen Meredith) unabashedly express her solidarity with Isa. While tactfully not defining the transgressions of Lytton, whom Isa nursed through a serious illness only to have him abruptly relocate from her home, EBB and Robert both imply that he treated Isa shabbily and earned their scorn. Probably in relation to the rupture with Lytton, EBB advises Isa in December 1857 not to leave Florence, "putting half a world between you & certain vexations," because Robert believes her departure would cause gossip: "dreadful things will be said in Florence" (139). When Robert in 1859 confirms that Lytton is to be married to "a Dutch Baronness of some sort," he declares that although the younger man's poems grouped as "Cordelia" had some "merit"—"music, picturesqueness & facility," the work "made my gorge rise, you know why" (191).

Such directness with Isa on personal matters has its parallel in a notable freedom and even a lack of decorum in EBB's language on political and religious topics. These letters give the fullest and bluntest portrait of EBB's views on the Italian question in the late stages of the Risorgimento. For instance, after Anthony Ashley Cooper, Lord Shaftesbury (Palmerston's son-in-law), speaks in the House of Lords against France—at this point still regarded by EBB as Italy's only champion among European powers—she unabashedly judges him "an imbecile" (289). Elsewhere, discussing the sudden vogue in England for forming rifle-clubs as a sort of civilian militia to protect against feared French invasion, she comes very close to calling a member of Parliament an ass. Referring to Sir Archibald Alison speaking on "the National Defences," she declares, "Alison is Alison, & we know what a great A stands for" (258).

In many ways these letters show EBB metaphorically unlaced, uncorseted by Victorian propriety. She candidly describes the new wife of the American painter William Page:

The third Mrs Page is undeniably plain, of a coarse ungainly make & features, but very gentle & soft in manners & voice, & evidently on her knees before her husband in a chronic state of adoration. I think it is

this which has bewitched him. "Will you teach me so & so? *did* you teach me so & so? is it so & so that you mean to teach me?" . . . Her intelligence arrives, I suppose, at comprehending Page,—but otherwise it is not strikingly apparent. (177)

While mocking Mrs. Page's limitations and willing subordination, EBB also expresses genuine affection for Mr. Page and observes that "I shall respect her if she makes him happy" (177).

EBB's account of Page's art suggests her own struggle with the prevailing standards of feminine propriety. In Spring 1859 the Paris Salon rejected Page's *Venus Guiding Æneas and the Trojans to the Latin Shore* for "indecenty"; it was subsequently exhibited in the United States, where condemnations of its immorality in the press contributed to healthy admission receipts (see 179n11, 192n7). In EBB's report upon seeing a second version of "his Venus" in Page's studio, she praises the nude body but finds the figure's face unsettling: "The body is of exquisite & not unchaste beauty, the shadows on the limbs wonderful, but the face has an undeniably meretricious expression which interprets the whole picture to its disadvantage" (177). On a second visit, recorded in mid-February 1859, she finds it a "most gorgeous & wonderful picture," still somewhat marred by a face that needs "a more divine & less sensual beauty. . . . The nudity is absolute—but the only indecenty seems to me in the face" (189). Her distinction between the sensuality of the face and the gorgeous rendering of the limbs on canvas resonates with her own authorial boldness in representing such topics as sexuality, prostitution, rape, and illegitimacy in a range of poems, including "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point" (1848), *Aurora Leigh* (1857), "Void in Law" (1862), and "Bianca among the Nightingales" (1862). She recognized the tension between her personal standards and comfort zone in the context of her intellectual and artistic engagement with the full range of human experience. When in 1854 the Brownings visited the Roman studio of American sculptor Harriet Hosmer, for instance, they found "Hatty" working "tête à tête or rather corps à corps with a model." Though Robert responded well to the artist's welcome, EBB "felt rather shy, & preferred the company of" nude artwork to nude artists. She compares the experience with the work

of Welshman John Gibson, who shared a studio with Hosmer and often tinted his sculptures in natural colors, giving them a verisimilitude many found disturbing: “Gibson’s painted Venus, who is only *nearly* as bad . . . as any natural nudity.” Robert “was quite vexed at me for this piece of prudery,” she reported, “but not being ‘professional’ there was not much reason I thought, to struggle against my womanly instincts in the case.” Interestingly, she observed that she “would rather see a nude male model in the company of a man (though my husband) than a nude female model—and I would rather *not* see either. An artist like Hatty is justified by her art—but *I* should scarcely be justified. At least I had not motive enough to give me courage” (51).

Beyond mere professional understanding, EBB’s delight in Hosmer, who lived with a female partner, is evident in EBB’s letters to Arabella. The letters to Isa make it much clearer that EBB was aware of the nature of more than one gay relationship, and was non-judgmental: “A pure, simple, upright nature” like Hatty’s “is a thing to love & wonder over among the crawling social falsities one has to step carefully not to tread on—I shall take to wearing goloshes” (51). She conveys a similarly sympathetic and admiring view of other female couples, reporting, for example, that “Fanny Haworth is here in the honeymoon of her matrimonial alliance with Ellen Heaton.” EBB refers to Heaton jocularly as “monsieur le mari” and sketches a lively picture of her continuous motion and talk, which “sets everybody wondering in what age of antediluvian society ‘he’ was bred.” EBB harbors reservations about the union not because of its lesbian character, but because of its likely financial motivations—a “union of four hundred (or less) a year with eight hundred, presents certain advantages.” Though acknowledging the social disability faced by the women partners—“There’s a degree of social deconsideration in exchange for the pecuniary advantage”—she concludes, “Still the genuine good humor & real kindness . . . and besides, the genuine admiration for Fanny, will prevail, I do hope.” Not inclined to label this transgressive union “immoral,” she instead in her next paragraph declares Carlyle’s *History of Friedrich II. of Prussia, Called Frederick the Great* (vols. 1–2, 1858) “immoral . . . in the brutal sense” (190).

Her concern with the morality of governments and politics registers throughout this collection of letters, which fully express EBB's views of the people and events central to the Italian war for unification and independence. While her judgments and loyalties and her sharp criticism of English policy toward Italy are familiar from her correspondence with Arabella, her assessments shared with Isa make more apparent than ever the comprehensiveness of her acquaintance with current events and the complexity of her views, based upon her nuanced attention to episodes and personalities. Whereas in her letters to Arabella she repeatedly tries to assert that her proximity to events should privilege her views over those of people observing from England, she writes to Isa with the unquestioned authority of direct knowledge. The letters reveal that the Brownings had access through friends to information regarding attitudes and plans of those in British government; at points, EBB admonishes Isa repeatedly that she is sharing confidential information, fresh from diplomatic sources, which must not be repeated.

The degree of EBB's disgust with English policies becomes clear early on, as she writes from London, September 1855: "[A]ll this time my thoughts are not of pictures, nor statues, nor even poems—but of men & nationalities": given British policies, "I am 'done for' in the way of 'nationality'—since my present visit to England: my faint hearted patriotism has breathed out its remaining life in convulsive gasps" (79). Embracing a trans-national and cosmopolitan identity, adopting the character of a "Comprehensive Democrat" (a term taken from Kate Field, see 239), EBB distinguishes what she regards as her own uncompromising truthfulness from the strategies and attitudes employed by another Anglo-Florentine writing about the state of affairs in Italy: Theodosia Trollope, who wrote on Italy for the *Athenæum*. She "does not make the part of dignity to the Italians," EBB maintains, but instead patronizes them by suggesting they "only want a 'pat on the head' from England." In "a womanish way of talking," Theodosia simply flatters English readers (271). These letters to Isa give the fullest picture yet of EBB's grasp of the details of the politics and military campaigns, the personalities and policies of the late phase of the movement for Italian autonomy

and unification, conveying a vivid sense of the temper of the time and of the individual passions that inflected public events.

On the topic of spiritualism, the other major movement that preoccupied EBB, the letters reveal both the extent to which her interest set her apart from Robert and even her son Pen, and the humor and wit with which she managed domestic controversy. Although she openly shared with Isa a sense that “we are on the verge of great developments of the spiritual nature,” she also cautioned that the “we” engaged by spiritualist topics did not include Robert: “I am divorced on these questions.” She even registered young Penini’s complaint phrased as an admonition: “Go away naughty spillits, & let mama play wiz me” (49). Such wry touches provide a piquant sense of life in the Browning household, as does her reference to Robert’s characteristic social awkwardness in delivering a compliment, or the eagerness of Pen at nine and a half to read “Papa’s favorite book, *Madame Bovary*” (257, 182). On the subject of Pen, the compact accounts to Isa of her son’s doings and sayings refute the assertions of some biographers that EBB was hysterical in her doting. The spareness of her reports to Isa, who adored Pen, makes a marked contrast to the expansiveness of her detailed narratives about the boy addressed to her sisters, especially Henrietta (also the mother of a young son). The contrast suggests that the fuller accounts do not register a neurotic excess of maternal love so much as her effort to give distant family members a full sense of the nephew they would know almost entirely through her letters.

Like all the letters written when EBB is deeply engaged with her subject matter and her correspondent, these are lively, playful, witty, sometimes stirring, sometimes wise. Most present perceptive, sometimes eloquent nuggets. We learn much about her reading, writing, and thinking. She loves Paris for its “ease & liberty of the life here, & the fulness of resources. . . . It’s Italian freedom & northern civilization, the two together” (82). She dislikes Charlotte Brontë’s *The Professor* (1857) because of its “narrow prejudiced vein,” in which “all virtue is confined to England” (137). With Bessie Parkes and “the rest of us militant,” who “foam with rage,” she aligns herself “on the woman question, in opposition to Mr. Patmore,” who

“expounds infamous doctrines” (112). The letters give salient information and rich contexts for the period producing important works by both Brownings: Robert’s *Men and Women* (1855), for which Isa served as amanuensis, and EBB’s *Casa Guidi Windows* (1851), *Aurora Leigh*, and *Poems Before Congress* (1860).

Most of Robert’s letters—usually just notes—express affection, reiterate EBB’s hopes that Isa will join them in Siena or Rome, or ask Isa to do them the favor of sending books or acquiring periodicals for them. This easiness in asking for Isa’s help suggests the happy reciprocity that developed in the deepening friendship of the Brownings and Isa, beginning with EBB’s initial generosity to her. In the earliest messages they sent Isa, EBB warmly welcomed her to Florence with the sorts of information so helpful to a newcomer: EBB and her maid Wilson undertook many small commissions—buying tea, tracking down a shop where Isa might buy more fabric for a gown, sending a list of the values of Italian coins, measures, and prices. The last four notes in the volume, written 23–27 June 1861 by Robert, register the unexpectedness of the death that ends this chapter of the Brownings’ relationship with Isa. Robert describes EBB’s final illness in the last message (27 June), explaining that she “passed a much better night on the whole—and seems stronger this morning” (473). In two days, however, she was dead.

With this volume’s rich bounty to appreciate, it seems churlish to observe one limitation for the scholar using the edition; however, I note with regret that individuals and works cited in the footnotes—so densely packed with useful information—are not referenced in the volume’s index. One would, therefore, have difficulty finding the information that the planned meeting for which EBB entitled “Poems Before Congress” never actually took place, and in researching “The Dance,” one might not locate an explanatory note about the actual event that inspired the poem (237n7). But this is a minor quibble when so much is given. A major benefit of the editors’ extensive original research is much new information about Isa Blagden herself. They authoritatively identify Isa’s father, for the first time, and provide an extensive family tree, thereby establishing family connections among many figures

previously identified only as friends in the sparse accounts of Isa's life. The introduction and notes fill in many gaps in understanding Isa's social status, sources of income, and cultural background. In publishing this biographical information, the editors illuminate the life of a minor writer of increasing interest to Victorianists, as well as cultural attitudes regarding mixed-race individuals and complicated family networks, inheritance practices, and much more. In sum, the edition is a splendid research tool and a terrific read.

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