

DECONSTRUCTING THE SAVIOR NARRATIVE:
THE BROWNING, AGENCY, AND THEIR CULTURAL AFTERLIFE

A Thesis

by

KRISTA DIANE SIFERS

BA, Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi, 2017

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

ENGLISH

Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi
Corpus Christi, Texas

December 2020

© Krista Diane Sifers

All Rights Reserved

December 2020

DECONSTRUCTING THE SAVIOR NARRATIVE:
THE BROWNING, AGENCY, AND THEIR CULTURAL AFTERLIFE

A Thesis

by

KRISTA DIANE SIFERS

This thesis meets the standards for scope and quality of
Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi and is hereby approved.

Dr. Lucy Sheehan, PhD
Chair

Dr. Jennifer Sorensen, PhD
Committee Member

Dr. Jarred Wiehe, PhD
Committee Member

December 2020

ABSTRACT

Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning's love story has quite the cultural afterlife. Articles describing their epic literary love often appear around Valentine's Day, and there have been many fictionalized narratives re-telling their story. However, this project's main goal is to show the problems with the Browning-as-savior narrative these narratives create. Whereas re-tellings might lead readers to believe that Browning or his love "saved" EBB from her life before him, close analysis of the Brownings' letters and poetry complicate this idea by showing the complexities of ideas behind gender, power, and disability. These analyses show we should not buy into these fictionalized salvific ableist heterosexual narratives that require re-writing the past and controlling the future. Rather, this project seeks to influence readers to consider three things: 1) EBB's disability and the numerous ways it affected her embodied experiences as a woman and a writer within her relationship to Browning, 2) the problems fictionalized narratives have created in terms of understanding disability, gender and power, and 3) the ways in which Browning and EBB slipped in and out of stereotypical gender roles over the course of their relationship.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CONTENTS	PAGE
ABSTRACT.....	v
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	vi
CHAPTER 1: THE HETERO COUPLE AND THE SOCIETY	1
CHAPTER II: A COLLABORATIVE AFFAIR--LETTERS OF LOVE.....	30
CHAPTER III: EXPRESSION OF POWER IN THE BROWNINGS' POETRY.....	53
CODA.....	83
WORKS CITED.....	89

CHAPTER I: THE HETERO COUPLE AND THE SOCIETY

Biographical Background

Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning's relationship is one that is still celebrated today, over 130 years after their deaths (EBB in 1861 and Browning in 1889). Whether the fascination lies within an appreciation for their bodies of literature, interest in reading their extensive collection of love letters, general curiosity for a couple whose love story has been repeatedly fictionalized and publicized, or a combination of these things, both literary and relationship enthusiasts alike still maintain The Brownings' cultural and literary afterlife to a level not achieved by many other couples.

Robert Browning was born on May 7, 1812 in London (Clark 2). The oldest of three children, Browning was studying music, art, English literature, and Latin from his parents before finally being able to attend school at the age of ten (Clark 3). By the time Browning left university, he was influenced by the works of Byron, Shelley, and Keats and was determined to make poetry his life's work, a desire that his parents did not object to even though a career as a writer might have seemed uncertain at the time (Clark 4). Though Browning saw some success with his earliest poems, he was also met with criticism. Browning's third long poem, a piece where he experimented with point-of-view and form, provided him hope that he would establish his promise within the literary world; *Sordello*, however did not garner the reception Browning had hoped for, causing him to turn to a successful stint in playwrighting for a time before returning to verses and persistently growing his reputation as a poet (Kennedy and Hair 67-68).

Elizabeth Barrett Browning (EBB), was born in 1806 and always showed an affinity for reading and writing; by ten years of age, she spoke of reading to inform her writing, and by eleven she had decided she wanted to be an authoress, with her parents playing a vital role in her

interests and helping to shape her perceptions of separate spheres (Mermin 10). According to Mermin, "...her mother represented a private, inward, hidden world of nurture...her father stood for...the public world which measured, judged, and awarded praise and blame" (16), where her mother served as source of inspiration for her poetry and her father served as its recipient and critic (Mermin 16). Both parents supported EBB's writing, and EBB dedicated many of her first musings to her father, Edward Moulton-Barrett. In regards to him, EBB even writes, "Always he has had the greatest power over my heart" (Mermin 15). Though EBB revered him, his affection from her childhood toughened "...before time and misfortune hardened him into the infamous domestic tyrant of Wimpole Street" (Mermin 15) after her mother's death in 1828 (Leighton 54). As EBB grew older, her father continued ruling his household as a dictatorship and determining what EBB could and could not do. Though dramatized depictions of EBB's life like Besier's play, *The Barretts of Wimpole Street*, "...[hint] at Mr. Barrett's repressed incestuous love for Elizabeth," (Leighton 7), it could be true that part of Mr. Barrett's oppressive nature was in response to her illness.

Though once a daring and sprightly child, the onset of her illness "...marked the first stage of the change from a lively, active, self-confident child to a shy, reclusive invalid which constituted in her life the outward form of growing up" (Mermin 29). Deemed a disease of the spine though doctors could find no signs of spinal ailment, her health never fully improved, and she lived with lifelong symptoms including, "...attacks of racking coughs, pain, struggle for breath, phlegm, and...loss of appetite" (Markus 17), which, according to biographers, rendered her a recluse in her father's house. However, EBB insisted that, "though both doctors and [herself] could see an emotional component to her physical decline..." (Markus 17), the suggestion that her prognosis could be modified with will-power was false (Mermin 29), and

though there were seasons where EBB felt better than others, there was never a full recovery from her condition. Susan Sontag's *Illness as Metaphor*, reveals the "the punitive or sentimental fantasies concocted about [illness]" showing that "...illness is not a metaphor, and that the most truthful way of regarding illness—and the healthiest way of being ill—is one most purified of, most resistant to, metaphoric thinking" (Sontag 3). However, many of the modern re-tellings of EBB's story that I have come across seem to, indeed, metaphorize EBB's condition, likening it to a mysterious obstacle that she needed to overcome. This feeds into the ableist narrative that an effort on her part to place mind over matter might miraculously improve her condition. Furthermore, Sontag's scholarship explains that as medical breakthroughs occurred and the reliance on medicine and its ability to cure ailments increased, mysterious diseases not yet understood seemed to be a "theft of life," (Sontag 5), which helps to explain why so many modern-day re-tellings of EBB's love story paint her as the lifeless damsel in distress figure, trapped in her home waiting for someone like Browning to save her. This problematic notion sets up not only an inaccurate savior-narrative but also a disturbing narrative in which heterosexuality provides a cure for disability.

So, the continuously re-told though extremely problematic savior narrative begins in 1845 when, much to her father's disapproval, Browning wrote to a then Elizabeth Barrett Moulton-Barrett, and the two exchanged praises over each other's poetry. Browning began, "I love your verses with all my heart, dear Miss Barrett...and I love you too" (Browning). She replied by admitting she was "a devout admirer and student of [his] works" (Kennedy and Hair 109), which began a correspondence of over 500 letters before they eloped and relocated to Italy in 1846, freeing her from her father's influence. During this time together, though they lived in several cities, they mainly resided in Florence in a palace called "Casa Guidi," in which EBB

composed her poem influenced by the place, “Casa Guidi Windows” (Clark 9). It was here that in 1849, they had a son together, Robert Weidemann (called Pen), who grew up to become a renowned painter and sculptor (Clark 12). Until EBB’s passing in June of 1861, Browning and EBB composed many new texts, including EBB’s *Sonnets from the Portuguese* a collection of love poems to Browning, and Browning’s *Poetical Works*, both serving as the other’s lover, reader, and reviewer, a relationship first established in their collection of letters.

Today, the love story of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning (EBB) is one that has garnered and sustained a following by both literary and romance enthusiasts and has been the foundation for several interpretations of their lives and courtship. These interpretations include the stage play-turned-movie, *The Barretts of Wimpole Street* (1930 & 1982), Virginia Woolf’s inventive blend of fiction and non-fiction, *Flush: A Biography* (1933), detailing life through the eyes of E.B.B.’s cocker spaniel, and several other biographical fiction novels about E.B.B. including Laura Fish’s *Strange Music* (2008). In fact, a quick internet search for either Browning or E.B.B. pulls up an extensive list of romantically-centered biographies detailing their love story. Furthermore, The Armstrong Browning Library and Museum at Baylor University in Waco, Texas, does not only serve as a research center and museum dedicating to the exploring the Brownings’ work and lives together, but also as a popular wedding venue. All of these examples show a strong, cultural afterlife committed to the preservation of the Brownings’ love story that creates an imagined past in which the Brownings’ relationship naturalizes Victorian ideas about gender complementarity, a hetero-normative savior narrative, and ableist attitudes.

Re-imagining the Relationship

In order to unpack the issues of this imagined past, the multi-faceted nature of their relationship must be explored because both parties served as the other's companion, lover, critic, and creative partner over the course of their written courtship and eventual marriage. What began with one letter from Browning proclaiming love for both the poet and her poetry not only grew to influence future views of love and marriage, but the complex relationships between writing, embodiment, and gender in the Victorian era. I argue that the Brownings' relationship is well-suited for analysis under a lens of gender ideology because of their different experiences as male and female and varying levels of expected constraint prompted them to utilize different methods of exploring and expressing desire and sexuality. For example, Browning is able to express desire utilizing more direct approaches (particularly through dramatic monologue in his poetry and directness in his letters, while EBB expresses desire through more indirect approaches (particularly through symbolism and other figurative language in her poetry and throughout the letters). However, the shape those expressions of desire take are drastically different, in part to show the relationships between power and subordination.

One of the goals of this thesis is to analyze these gendered moments of power-play throughout the Brownings' writing where readers are provided the unique opportunity to analyze gendered restrictions within a single union, a lens that would not be accessible between other writers not in a relationship with each other. Another is to synthesize the voices of prominent Victorian writers who seem to agree that men and women each have a distinct role within society and set of gendered expectations that accompany those roles with the voices of modern critics who have seemed to agree that EBB struggled against those expectations in order to become a literary feminist hero. I complicate this consensus, however, by noting the important work that

both EBB and Browning do to work within and around societal expectations, the reasons why this work was necessary, and the back and forth power dynamics and levels of performativity at play that allowed for the Brownings to find success both within their relationship and their bodies of writing. Because of the Brownings' highly celebrated, at times romanticized, cultural afterlife, our understanding of their work—EBB's writing, in particular—is colored by those hetero-romantic idealizations. Instead of arguing whether or not that tethering of romance and artistry is warranted, I propose that the complexities of their romantic relationship and their working partnership are important to keep in mind when analyzing their interpretations of themselves, each other, their writing, and the differences between them. In doing so, I assert that it is beneficial to analyze their relationship and writing from both separate and joint perspectives to better understand each writer's unique position and the influence they had upon each other throughout their union. The initial understanding of their unique backgrounds, such as the fact that EBB was already an established poetess and Browning was rising though virtually unknown, and expectations within society will further allow readers to recognize the differences in both their commentary and styles though events they verbalize are often shared between the two lovers over the course of their relationship.

On one hand, it does seem that Browning saved EBB from a certain patriarchal tyranny at the hands of her father, as multiple accounts of EBB's home life describe her father as a man with complete "...emotional and financial dominion of his family" (Leighton 23) with his ultimate stipulation for all of his children, whether male or female, being that they were never allowed to marry under the penalty of disinheritance (Markus 5). However, her relationship with Browning was still a back-and-forth balance of power constructed by their understanding of Victorian gender norms and expectations. Though Browning's presence offered EBB the

romantic love her father forbid her from having, power dynamics were still clearly at play. Though EBB gains more agency and freedom to speak out against what men dictate—at least, in terms of Browning and her father, she is forced to recognize the limitations of being a female writer in a male-dominated society in order to do so. For example, after the couple’s first in-person meeting, Browning sent a letter to EBB which was later destroyed due to EBB’s aversion toward it. In her response to the letter, she expresses the pain she feels due to his “wild” words and begins the letter by recognizing that her admittance of her opposite views might be seen as “disobedience,” but proceeds to write in the assurance that she does so in order to be deemed “worthy of his generosity” towards her, simultaneously acknowledging his perceived elevated power over her while challenging that power structure by way of referring to her expected deference and loyalty towards him. Browning responded by seeking to “undo the bad effect of [his] thoughtlessness, and at the same time exemplify the point [he had] all along been honestly earnest to set [EBB] right upon ... [his] real inferiority to [her]” (Browning). This early instance of Browning deliberately placing himself in an “inferior” position establishes a pattern of the couple’s acknowledgement of expected gender roles and power dynamics that are both mentioned and upheld in some instances and seemingly dismantled in others. Because Browning and EBB experience the exact same events from different perspectives, the interpretation of those moments and the feelings that result from them, described throughout their correspondence and poetry, offers a particularly fruitful space for discussing how desire and intentions are expressed differently by differently gendered writers during the time period. However, as previously mentioned, it is first important to note each writer’s background and experiences before examining their writing under a joint lens.

Though modern interpretations might make the Brownings' story feel timeless, it is important to remember the Victorian era from which it occurred—a period in which the idea of separate spheres was standard and a set of gendered expectations not only existed but was expected. For example, in 1865, in his lecture, "Lilies: Of Queens' Gardens," John Ruskin summarizes Victorian beliefs that men and women have separate, innate natures, different but dependent upon one another. He argues, "The man's power is active [...] He is eminently the doer, the creator, the discoverer, the defender. His intellect is for speculation and invention" (32), while women's intellect "...is not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement, and decision" (32). This Victorian ideal that a woman's place is not one for creation or invention complicates our understanding of EBB's relationship and marriage to Browning as she was already an established poet at the start of their courtship. As previously mentioned, her poetry is what drew Browning's attention and began their courtship. Therefore, because EBB was already an established artist, their relationship began as a union that already deviated from the idea of separate spheres (public, or the masculine space centered around business, politics, and social interactions, versus private/domestic, or the feminine space centered around the home), which "...underwrote an entire system of institutional practices and conventions...ranging from sexual division of labor to a sexual division of economic and political rights" (Poovey 8-9). So, from the relationship's inception, the Brownings were working both within social norms to explore their relationship outwardly and around social norms in order to explore their relationship both behind closed doors and through their written relationship. As Mary Poovey asserts, "...both men and women were subject at midcentury to the constraints imposed by the binary organization of difference and the foregrounding of sexual nature...however...men and women were subject to different kinds of ideological constraint" (Poovey 22-23). In other words, what was permissible

for men and women to say differed greatly based on which attributes and tasks within society were deemed appropriate for both genders. Here, I once again cite Ruskin's socially-accepted ideas that a woman's place is not one for creation or invention, though Browning still may have needed to filter what he chose to write about or dramatize it in order for it to be accepted within society, EBB seemed to have a more difficult task of framing the entire product of her writing, no doubt a task of "creation," in such a way that was also acceptable to society, which is an important distinction to keep in mind in later chapters when comparing their writing.

Both Ruskin's lecture and Sarah Stickney Ellis's *The Women of England, Their Social Duties, and Domestic Habits* (1838) are Victorian sources that describe gender complementariness, creating rules for how men and women should behave based on their innate natures and the idea of separate spheres that each depend upon the other. Ruskin describes this dependency and sexual difference, stating, "Each [sphere] has what the other has not: each completes the other, and is completed by the other: they are in nothing alike, and the happiness and perfection of both depends on each asking and receiving from the other what the other only can give" (31). Similarly, Ellis writes that neither sphere is more important than the other as they both support and depend upon one another as the sun and the earth do. She says:

As if the earth [feminine domain/private sphere] that fosters and nourishes in its lovely bosom the roots of all the plants and trees which ornament the garden of the world, feeding them from her secret storehouse with supplies that never fail, were less important, in the economy of vegetation, than the sun that brings to light their verdure and their flowers [masculine domain/public sphere], or the genial atmosphere that perfects their growth, and diffuses their perfume abroad upon the earth. (43-44)

In other words, Ellis is saying that the sun might be viewed as having a more important role in the creation of life because the action of giving light is more of an active duty than the earth that nurtures growth in a more understated way. In the same way, men and women both have pivotal roles within society, thereby using the idea of gender complementariness, or the idea that men have active power and primary function while women's power, though different, is designed only to supplement men, to create problematic hetero-normative fantasies. Both Ruskin and Ellis's descriptions of separate but equally important spheres work to disguise how limiting this framework is for Victorian women, highlighting the importance of domestic duties while folding in the implications for public constrictions. For a couple like the Brownings, this is a particularly complex issue due to the similarities of their professions as writers. Furthermore, Ruskin's ideas surrounding education complicate this matter more, as he claims men and women should be educated on the same concepts, but that men should be commanding and progressive with the knowledge while women should only use it for daily or helpful use in the service of men (Ruskin 45). However, since E.B.B.'s and Brownings' crafts were so similar, and since E.B.B. already had a fan following before Browning reached out to her, this notion was already moot before the couple ever met.

Gendered Ideals & Identity

In continuing to examine separate, though intertwined, spheres, Deborah Gorham explains how the cult of domesticity was constricting because it, "...assigned to women both a separate sphere and a distinct set of roles" (4). In terms of roles, the ideal Victorian woman, "...was willing to be dependent on men and submissive to them, and she would have a preference for a life restricted to the confines of home" (Gorham 5), but this ideal was conflicting because it required a woman to be both an agent in her own home while still

subservient to men. Though the home was characterized as the space belonging to women, women were only given this authority by their dis-empowered relationship to men. According to Karusseit, “Men owned and ruled domestic space, while women were confined to and maintained it. As a result, the home was re-invented as woman’s natural place. Her identity, status and being were powerfully determined by the concept of house and home” (Karusseit 43). In other words, the idea that women got dominion over the home is flawed because, even in the domestic space, women were still confined and only given the power that men allowed them to have; conversely, men were free agents, able to move inside and outside the walls of the home. As John Tosh explains, “Home was the place where, in theory, masculine and feminine were brought together in a proper relation of complementarity....It might mean a rigid assertion of patriarchal control, or an acceptance by the husband of his wife’s preeminence in the home” (7). Even though the woman’s place was considered to be within the cult of domesticity because that was the one place she was allowed to take up space, how much space and how much power within that space she garnered was ultimately still up to the man. Additionally, “Tosh contests the doctrine of separate spheres, in that it neglects the distinctively masculine privilege of enjoying access to both the public and the private sphere” (Karusseit 42). Browning provides a physical example of this male privilege during his courtship to EBB because of his ability to frequently enter and exit her domestic space. As can be seen from the letters, Browning actively comes and goes from EBB’s house during their visits because of his status as a man, while EBB does not enjoy such freedoms, doubly because of her status as a woman and her illness. Therefore, it seems that all domestic spheres, though described as womanly sanctuaries, are actually “integral to masculinity. To establish a home, to protect it, to provide for it, to control

it...have usually been essential to a man's good standing" (Tosh 4), perhaps even before one domestic sphere is shared by a heterosexual couple.

As briefly mentioned, viewing the home as an area of confinement for women carries a double meaning in terms of EBB, who was confined to her home not only due to the patriarchal rule of her father, but also because of paternalism's ability to confine chronically ill women to the walls of their sickrooms. On one hand, ideal Victorian women were expected to act as help-meets for their fathers before turning that domestic attention to their husband's households. Furthermore, Victorian women were expected to make amends for their father's flaws. Of the ideal Victorian girl, Gorham writes, "...it is her helplessness, innocence and immaturity that touch the heart of the selfish, dissolute or wayward father. She has an especial capacity to arouse the conscience if she is in sad circumstances - ill or half-orphaned" (Gorham 42). EBB met both sets of "sad circumstances" as she was half-orphaned by the death of her mother and rendered ill after the onset of her spinal ailment. Therefore, EBB would have been even more so expected to maintain a sense of innocence and softness in stark juxtaposition to her tyrannical father.

In the midst of these domestic obligations to her father, however, spinsterhood, though once considered unacceptable, emerged as a viable option for women of inheritance (a pathway her father had accepted). However, as it so happened, the ideal Victorian woman would still prefer marriage if the opportunity presented itself. According to Gorham, "A girl would now seek in a prospective husband a man who could be 'comrade, friend and lover,' but if she were an ideal modern girl, she would also want him to be her 'superior in attainments and talents' , and, in spite of the education she had received, or the work she had done, she would, when the time came, give it all up for love" (Gorham 57). This notion that EBB should give up her writing

career in favor of Browning's did not come to fruition. Rather, EBB entered a back-and-forth in which she upheld several feminine ideals and deviated from others.

On one hand, she did not "give up all the work she had done," in order to hand the spotlight over to Browning (Gorham 57). Instead, the two continued to write together and even influence and critique each other's work, pushing back against the expectations that a woman's place was solely in support of her man. Yet, the fact that EBB was also a home-bound woman in the eyes of society, bound to the private sphere not by her illness but society's restrictions for women with illnesses, offers insight into how EBB was able to break gendered expectations for authorship, even publishing under her own name unlike many other women writers during the period who used pseudonyms as to not be judged by their gender. Because EBB was a member of the public sphere only through her writing, but not actually through her body, her presence in her public sphere was not fully observed. Poovey writes, "Because they were positioned as nonexistent, women at midcentury did not have institutionally recognized power, no matter how much moral influence they could wield" (23). This is important for underscoring EBB's simultaneous existence versus nonexistence as she was home-bound and seemingly separate from the rest of society, though she still had to operate under socially expected norms in her public writing at least to a certain degree for her work to be accepted. At the same time, though, her letters to Browning which were only intended for a private audience of one did not have to operate under such heavy constraints. Julia Markus writes, "Elizabeth Barrett wished them to go past the formalities of etiquette between the sexes. She told him to write to her just as if she were a man; that she was an invalid gave her absolute freedom of expression" (7) because she was already expected to exist outside the bounds of "normalcy." Able-bodiedness and heteronormativity too often pose as non-identities, according to Robert McRuer's *Crip Theory* (1).

Here, it is evident that the presence of EBB's illness complicates the ideas that able-bodiedness and hetero-normativity are determiners of normalcy; while society's constraints impede EBB from fully-entering the public sphere, they are also able to offer her artistic freedom due to her bodily separation from the public sphere.

In examining EBB's work, I argue that it is important to consider all aspects of her identity in order to fully understand her writing. As Angela Leighton explains, there was a certain separation that took place around the beginning of the twentieth century that painted EBB not as the admirable poetess she had been considered when living and in the years immediately following her death, but as the "heroine of a love story" with Browning (Leighton 3-4), a "romantic idealization" that separated her joint identity as woman and poetess into separate entities, rendering "admiration for the one very often [entailing] an implicit depreciation of the other" (Leighton 4). Though I support Leighton's affirmation that it is important to view EBB in conjunction as both a woman and poetess in order to understand how her relationship with Browning both affected and influenced her work as a writer, I assert that it is also equally important to view EBB's identity in totality, including her unique influence as a woman writer in Victorian society who *also* had a disability that affected her presence both within the public and private spheres.

Normalcy and Identity

In order to understand EBB's deviation from Victorian understandings of normalcy, it is important to understand the concept of normalcy in general. "Introduction: Normality, Power, and Culture," Lennard Davis unmasks the construction of "normalcy" in terms of the disabled community to show, "...the 'problem' is not the person with disabilities; the problem is the way that normalcy is constructed to create the 'problem' of the disabled person" (1). Davis asserts,

“...the application of the idea of a norm to the human body creates the idea of deviance or a ‘deviant’ body” (5). In other words, because society has created guidelines for what is considered normal and what is considered deviant, people with disabilities are viewed as problematic because they diverge from society’s fabricated definition of normalcy. According to Rosemarie Garland-Thomson in her work “Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory,” normalcy, or “the normate” is “the corporeal incarnation of culture's collective, unmarked, normative characteristics” (10). In other words, what is considered normal is what is unmarked by identifiers of disability or deviance. Therefore, the ways in which Victorian society views her deviance is problematic and disqualifying, seeming to exclude her from personhood.

A Feminist-Disability Studies Approach

The connections between her gender and disability are either too often ignored or problematic in the way they are framed. First, as Christine Kenyon Jones summarizes, many scholars believe EBB’s letter correspondence to Browning deconstructs her distinctiveness as a disabled individual and develops her as a “practically non-disabled persona” (22). Second, as Leighton summarizes from the timeline of EBB’s perceived loss of agency, other scholars believe her authorship was successful in spite of her gender and disability, as if these two facets of her identity were obstacles needing to be overcome, such as Oliver Elton stating it would have been better to know EBB than to read her works or Osbert Burdett claiming that EBB’s writing was too womanly to ever be great (Leighton 2-5). Similarly, Dorothy Mermin summarizes how many reviewers always note EBB’s gender with their reviews of her work, with one journal even noting how profound her writing was particularly because they came from a woman’s mind (Mermin 114). Furthermore, Mermin’s scholarship shows the shifting of attitudes between reviewers during the Victorians who regarded EBB’s work with general praise, such as EBB

being “the most remarkable poetic genius of [the] day,” to reviews in the twentieth century referring to her as “the foremost of women poets” specifically (Mermin 113-114). In order to resolve the issues with that consensus, throughout this analysis, I argue it is better to acknowledge EBB’s gender and disability as embodied experiences that influenced both her writing and her relationship to Browning than to speculate whether or not such experiences were a concrete empowerment or impediment because doing so excludes certain aspects from both sides of the binary opposition. In other words, because embodiment functions as an intersection of disability, sexuality, and gender, and because everyone has a unique embodied experience, it is neither the case that her disability and/or gender is what defines her or enables her to be a great writer, but it is thinking about the complexities of her embodied relationship that is interesting.

Before a feminist-disability lens emerged, Gilbert and Gubar’s work describes how as a Victorian woman with a disability, EBB was faced with what could be described as a double impediment. Using the language of disability and frequently mentioned words such as “crippling, debilitating, and disabling” in order to describe the fictional versions of women that society and male writers, in particular, creates, Gilbert and Gubar assert, “It is debilitating to be any woman in a society where women are warned that if they do not behave like angels they must be monsters” (53), solidifying the binary opposition of ideal versus deviant in the male’s mind in regard for women. The perception that women should either be perfect or deemed monstrous preceded women’s writing, so a woman often struggled not against writing that revealed men’s perceptions of the world but men’s perceptions of women, a term Gilbert and Gubar coin “anxiety of authorship” (53). In EBB’s case, because the idea of normalcy is defined by society and society’s decisions belonged to males, she had to struggle not only against conceptions about her as a disabled figure, but also as a woman. As Mermin articulates, male writers who function

as their own speakers within poetry traditionally create female characters to serve as the “other” within a written work—an other crafted by the male fantasy lacking her own voice. Female poets, then, have a “doubled presence” within their writing because they are writing as both “self and other,” “subject and object,” (Mermin), which closely resembles Gilbert and Gubar’s argument that no matter which persona a female writers assumes (angel or monster), the female writer certainly feels the effects of the debilitating images her culture has of her as a result of male depictions of her (Gilbert and Gubar 57). Then, female writers have the doubled responsibility of both crafting a narrative and re-crafting and reclaiming previous narratives at the same time.

Yet, though Gilbert and Gubar’s work is helpful in showing how some of the challenges EBB faced intersect, it is too reductive to state that femininity *is* disability. Rather, Gilbert and Gubar provide a starting to place to examine the complex relationships between gender and disability. Because the femininity that Gilbert and Gubar describe here functions as a disabling symptom of the patriarchy, EBB’s writing is directly affected as a result. This impact is a critical component readers should keep in mind when analyzing her work and the reason I propose the most apt examinations of her work come from utilizing a lens of feminist disability theory, like that of Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, rather than feminist perspectives or disability theory alone. For example, as mentioned earlier in the chapter, EBB starts to experience a gradual loss of agency as a writer after her death. During her life, she often received high praise for her work. After her death, however, reappraisals of her work start to highlight the connections between her writing and gender. Instead of being hailed as a great writer, she is noted as a great poet for a woman. This loss, or, at least, fragmentation of agency is cemented with EBB regarded as a feminist hero in respects to her relationship with Browning rather than with respect to her writing

at the beginning of the twentieth century, resulting in an idealized image of her femaleness that supersedes her agency as a poet (Leighton 4). Noting this established issue with studying the woman in conjunction with the poet, it is important to also discuss her illness as an aspect needing to be at the forefront of consideration. Utilizing a feminist disability theory in the analysis of EBB's work allows for a full understanding of the intersectionality of her identity without excluding facets of her experience that have previously been overlooked or separated. A feminist disability theory asserts that, disability, like femaleness, is not an impediment but a socially prescribed narrative of the body (Rosemarie Garland-Thomson 5), meaning that a feminist disability theory recognizes that the impediment does not lie within the female or differently-abled body but rather within society's assumptions that both femaleness and disabilities somehow make a person lesser-than. This is a different, more current perspective that Gilbert and Gubar who began by asserting that femaleness is an impediment. Because of EBB's resistance to normalcy, we can see the complex relationships between her identity as a woman, an individual with a disability, and an author documenting those specific embodied experiences.

Female Authorship and Disability

In many ways, EBB's sickroom allows her the freedom and opportunity to write. Unlike Browning who first attributes reading and writing to the worsening of his condition in a letter postmarked June 23, 1845 and several times after that, EBB's writing flows from the sickroom, as she is "capable of a great deal of that sort of work," (EBB, June 24, 1845) or, writing under ailments, that Browning is not. Because women seemed to pose a threat to a man's upward mobility or the preservation of his current station, it was important women were careful about the ways in which they entered the public sphere—like through their writing (Poovey 5). For these reasons, women traditionally had two options for distributing their writing: either through private

circulation with a close group of friends or through anonymous publication, an option many female writers chose during the time period (Poovey 36). However, neither was the case for EBB due to her unique position within society. As Christine Kenyon Jones mentions, the addition of “invalid” made the conjunction of the words “woman” and “writer” more palatable (22). Because, at least in part, EBB’s words, a product of the physical process of her body, could enter the public sphere but her physical body could not, she was able to publish wide-spread writings under her gender. Though this seems like a body/mind split, her words are actually an extension of her body. To understand the complexities of this phenomenon, Margaret Price introduces the term singular term “bodymind,” in juxtaposition to the separate terms of body and mind “because mental and physical processes not only affect each other but also give rise to each other—that is, because they tend to act as one, even though they are conventionally understood as two” (2). So, an understanding of bodyminds allows readers to recognize a different form of mobility, allowing for her writing to be more wide-spread. Plus, though her letters to Browning were never meant to be seen by anyone other than him, it is interesting to analyze them in juxtaposition to her poetry as women were said to be especially suited for writing “polite letters” because of sentimentalism (Poovey 38). Sentimentalism, or the expression of emotions, allowed women the freedom to write and to have a voice within society because “...feeling was one significant theater of experience that could not be completely denied to women” (Poovey 37). Both EBB’s letters and poetry center a great deal around her feelings—feelings that reveal how she considers herself, others, and the world around her, which could be another reason why her poems were so highly regarded and more easily accepted. The outpouring of feelings led to “One of the most persistent dilemmas of the woman writer during this period...the problem of controlling her own attraction to ideal compensations, along with the difficulty of subordinating

to her aesthetic design the powerful things that generated this attraction” (Poovey 38). Mermin adds, “It has too easily been assumed that women’s pens are impelled by their emotions, their ink a kind of expressive fluid or involuntary secretion—men make works of art, women’s feelings ooze out onto the paper (4). This description of women’s writing places a heavy focus on the body, both sexualizing the act by using terms like “expressive fluid” and “involuntary secretion,” and disembodiment the process of writing by making it seem like an involuntary act, failing to recognize the conscious act of creation by the bodymind. This is one instance that shows how important it is to understand the bodymind as a single concept rather than assuming there is a body/mind split. In understanding the connections between the bodymind, readers can further become aware of EBB’s total embodied experience rather than viewing EBB’s brilliant mind as something trapped behind the prison of her ailing body as narrative accounts have done in the past.

A way in which women seemed to overcome the challenges of writing in a male-dominated field is through “...strategies of indirection, obliqueness, and doubling that were imaginative counterparts of the paradoxical behavior they were encouraged to cultivate in every day life” (Poovey 42) because they “characterized women’s learned or internalized responses to the objective female situation” (Poovey 43). In other words, women’s claims in writing were often implicit because of the learned behaviors that made the expression of thought more socially acceptable. In EBB’s case, she frequently employs these strategies through her use of elaborate figurative language, particularly metaphor, and her emphasis on emotion. Female writers who could strategically link their creations to emotion were not viewed as veering outside of their lane, whereas male writers though they agreed that “feelings” were “both necessary for virtue and art” worried those necessary tools would be deemed too womanly and would be considered

“relegated to a woman’s sphere” (Mermin 7). Yet, this fear is contradictory to society’s expectations based on Ruskin’s claim that women are not suited for creation or invention if “feminine” emotions are necessary for successful poetry. This is, perhaps, one of the reasons why Browning consistently praises EBB’s poetry throughout their letters, insisting his own inferiority to her verses, a pattern that will be further developed in Chapter 2.

Metaphor and Personification

Another figurative tactic surrounding EBB is the use of prevalent metaphors throughout her writing and the metaphors critics have used to create imagined re-tellings of her life. In terms of disability, metaphors often serve as constructive rhetorical devices used to create meaning. By writing, “The ability of disabled characters to allow authors the metaphorical ‘play’ between macro and micro registers of meaning-making establishes the role of body in literature” (Mitchell and Snyder 62). A term in disability studies that helps us understand the complexities of EBB’s situation is narrative prosthesis, which is “...the dependency of literary narratives upon disability as a means for representational power, disruptive personality, and analytical insight” (Mitchell and Snyder 46), and is used as a “a stock feature of characterization” (Mitchell and Snyder 42). Narrative prosthesis is especially relevant to EBB because though disability can serve as a unique interpretation of the world through individual embodiment instead of “posing a riddle in search of a narrative solution” (Mitchell and Snyder 61), both scholars and authors tend to frame their critical theory and creative renderings of EBB’s life within a traditional structure of narrative prosthesis (deviance is exposed, narrative calls to know the deviance’s origins and consequences, the deviance becomes the focal point, the story aims to fix the deviance, a cure is found, society becomes more accepting, the deviant body is exterminated, there is a reevaluation of a different mode of being) (Mitchell and Snyder 47). In several interpretations, EBB’s illness

is discussed, possible causes are discussed (most often regarded as a riding accident), symptoms are described but it is articulated that an exact diagnosis is unknown, the implications the illness has on EBB's life are revealed, EBB's relationship to Browning is described as "the cure," society praises EBB's resilience and ability to perform her duties as a wife and mother, EBB passes away (thereby exterminating the deviance), and, finally, there is a reevaluation of her life and work.

One of the most succinct examples of this narrative comes from the first few chapters of Julia Markus's biography on the Brownings' marriage, *Dared and Done*. In the beginning, Markus describes EBB as a lively child struck down by a mysterious illness when she was fourteen—an illness her two younger sisters also contracted but recovered from—possibly exacerbated by injuries sustained from a riding accident, though a spinal injury was never confirmed. Her ailments are described in some detail before she is, in effect, branded a recluse, until the "power of love" allowed her to open up to Browning (Markus 17-18). To further cement this point, Mermin asserts that "...a life is not just a set of circumstances imposed from without. It is also a story invented as it goes along...On the crudest level of plot, Barrett Browning's is an archetypal romance: a greatly gifted and talented maiden is imprisoned...until a bold poetical lover rescues her" (4). Here, Mermin further helps articulate the level of narrative liberties scholars and critics have taken over EBB's story, and this repeated, fictionalized narrative structure allows us to see what is troublesome about the retold savior narrative between Browning and EBB. A narrative that supports the idea that Browning is able to "cure" her from her disability, thereby reinforcing cultural stereotypes that view disabled women as "asexual, unfit to reproduce, overly dependent, [or] unattractive—as generally removed from the sphere of true womanhood and feminine beauty" (Rosemarie Garland-Thomson 17) plays right in to

society's need to eradicate deviant bodies because of their difference. It is possible that Browning helps to strengthen EBB, but viewing him as her "cure" as so many narratives do diminishes the work that EBB does on her own and casts her disability as a deviance to be fixed instead of recognizing her unique embodied experience.

Additionally, though disability is too often treated as a problem in need of solving, it seems that because of EBB's embodied experience, the metaphors she uses to describe disability in her own writing come from a different place. It is not the case here that an individual without experiences with disability is attempting to make sense of a disability; rather, an embodied experience from a woman with a disability is described so that able-bodied individuals can derive meaning from the words. So, while Mitchell and Snyder's criticism allow us to see the ways in which disability might exclude those with illnesses from the normalized human experience created by society's constructions of that normalcy, Garland-Thomson "suggests that disability gathers us into the everyday community of embodied humankind" (339). EBB also has a habit of personifying non-sentient objects with disability. In a letter postmarked March 21, 1846, she writes, "I do not understand how my letters limp so instead of flying as they ought with the feathers I give them" (EBB). She describes her letters as having a physical impairment despite the able-bodied characteristics she gives them, perhaps indicating the understanding that though she is a creator, some circumstances are beyond control. These instances of metaphor continue on and are prevalent throughout the letters and her poems, and more will be analyzed in chapters two and three as a way of understanding how EBB described her own experiences in juxtaposition to the prescriptive narratives others have attempted to describe for her.

The connection between women's writing and affliction is a tricky one in EBB's case. It is not clear whether EBB's own affliction afforded her the ability to be less affected by the fear

of writing due to her unique position as mentioned above, or whether the anxiety of authorship exacerbated her condition at times. Though this idea is unclear, it is important to consider all of the factors influencing EBB during the Victorian era as we move forward in analyzing her work, one of which relating to the idea of complex embodiment.

To fully understand the internal and external experiences of disability, it is important to understand complex embodiment. In “Disability and the Theory of Complex Embodiment—For Identity Politics in a New Register,” Tobin Siebers reveals the ways in which society views “constructed” identities in relation to ability and disability. He asserts bodies, in one light, are only a means in which humans “...contain or dress up the spirit, the soul, the mind, the self...[and] convey who [they] are from place to place” (Siebers 278). Siebers creates a complex understanding of ability—or able-bodiedness—because it places immense value on the body’s ability to grant or deny full “...human status to individual persons” based on what their bodies can and cannot do (Siebers 279). Thus, ability seemingly creates what society perceives to be deviant identities as a reflection of complex embodiment. The theory of complex embodiment shows that the medical model of disability is problematic because it assumes disability is encompassed solely in a physical or cognitive impairment and the social model of disability is problematic because though it acknowledges society’s organization and constructions of normalcy as disabling, it ignores the embodied experience.

The Sickroom and Performativity

One of the ways in which creative adaptations and biographies of EBB’s life focalize her illness is through the lens of the sickroom. Within the privacy of the sickroom, EBB and Browning are able to slip in and out of the constructed binaries of feminine/masculine and

caregiver/patient as their relationship to one another develops and understanding is built. We are reminded of Butler's theory that:

Gender is not passively scripted on the body, and neither is it determined by nature, language, the symbolic, or the overwhelming history of patriarchy. Gender is what is put on, invariably, under constraint, daily and incessantly, with anxiety and pleasure, but if this continuous act is mistaken for a natural or linguistic given, power is relinquished to expand the cultural field bodily through subversive performances of various kinds. (Butler 531).

The Brownings' roles are put on and performed as a result of a specific set of circumstances, when afforded the opportunity, beyond the public eye.

Additionally, the sickroom serves as a dominant connection between illness and authorship because it was a space of both confinement and creativity through that confinement. It is also largely reminiscent of separate spheres, as the sickroom offered the "sanctity, rectitude, and peace of home life versus the competitive struggles and ethical ambiguities of the public world" (Bailin 19). However, though sickrooms are certainly indicative of the domestic and linked by nature to the private sphere, sickrooms did get some public traffic, still, resulting in a kind of performance. For example, one creative interpretation of EBB and her illness, Woolf's *Flush*, "...shows how the Victorian sickroom functioned as a kind of stage in which the ill and well perform their identities. In company, Barrett becomes an actress—she 'laughed, expostulated, exclaimed, sighed too, and laughed again,' but she would sink 'back very white, very tired on her pillows' once her visitors left" (Xiaoxi 60). So, though the sickroom offered freedom from some obligation, performative duty to appear acceptable to society is not eliminated completely. For instance, after Browning's first visit, he sent a letter postmarked May 24, 1845 that was since

destroyed in which he spoke “wildly,” according to EBB, about their encounter, “like a misprint between [Browning] and the printer,” (EBB) even though the occurrence took place seemingly separate from societal roles and expectations. Though she admits to wanting to see him again, she reminds him, “that [she is] in the most exceptional of positions; and that, just *because of it*, [she is] able to receive [him] as [she] did on Tuesday; and that, for [her] to listen to ‘unconscious exaggerations,’ is as unbecoming to the humilities of [her] position, as unpropitious (which is of more consequence) to the prosperities of [his]” (EBB). In other words, whichever desires might be surfacing on both of their parts, her unique position through her disability allows for meeting that would otherwise not be possible, so it is imperative that they conduct themselves and perform their societal roles appropriately with respect for their positions.

Also, a great deal of caregiving between EBB and Browning was made possible by way of the sickroom, both within his scheduled visits to her home and through the letters she is able to create within its walls. In terms of gender, “Nursing the sick was, for both men and women, as sanctified an act as suffering itself [and] was repeatedly invoked to verify the genuineness of one’s affections” (Bailin 11), though “The disabled male under the care of a woman permits imaginative, if not actual, access to traits that were associated with femininity” (Bailin 40). In other words, though caregiving and nursing within sickrooms was expected of both men and women, it was associated most often with femininity. This did not stop Browning from constantly checking on EBB’s condition, though, it did afford him the opportunity to create a kind of “...benevolent competition between the lovers as to who could express the greater solitude for the others’ weakness” (Kenyon Jones 27) by detailing the suffering of his headaches to EBB who often assumed the role of caregiver though she was the one confined to her home. Though Browning consistently asks how she is feeling throughout the letters and bases their

timeline for eloping around the status of her health, EBB also inquires about his health and nervous condition by way of citing her personal experience with illness. In a letter postmarked June 24, 1845, she asks whether or not he has visited a medical professional who actually knows anything about his condition because there is no excuse for not seeking the greatest help for ailments or to continue suffering when pain can be alleviated. She questions, “Why not try the effect of a little change of air—or even of a great change of air—if it should be necessary, or even expedient? Anything is better, you know ... or if you don't know, I know—than to be ill” (EBB). By citing her own experience with illness as a sort of expertise, she is able to offer knowledge she has over Browning and to speak with him on a level that would not be possible if not for her unique circumstances, because it was not acceptable for women to be experts over men, creating one instance where she performs the stereotypically masculine act of advice-giving as a result of illness and the privacy of the sickroom.

The sickroom, and the idea of disability itself, might have afforded EBB certain privileges not granted to other middle/upper class Victorian women, as the sickroom provided the reconciliation of “contemporary social conflicts and formal disjunctions within the natural domain of bodily process and exigent circumstance” (Bailin 13) as a “...haven of comfort, order, and natural affection” (Bailin 6). Within sickrooms, “Illness authorized the relaxation of the rigidly conceived behavior codes with governed both work and play within the public realm” (Bailin 12). So, with the objectives of healing and restoration in an environment that granted a relaxed approach to gender codes, the sickroom not only allowed for the creation of poetry and prose, but for the creation and exploration of sexual desire. Within the confines of the sickroom, caregiving actions can blur and double as the actions of a lover as “...confidences are exchanged, clothes removed or readjusted, soothing caresses administered to aching limbs, and basic wants

given utterance—all of this within the bedroom turned sickroom, a site suggestive of these intimacies which these activities both disguise and express” (Bailin 23). Through the privacy the sickroom affords for embodied illness and embodied sexuality, EBB invites Browning into the explorative space, past the barriers of the letters. In a letter postmarked May 13, 1845, she writes, “I will tell you—I ask you *not* to see me so long as you are unwell, or mistrustful of—
No, no, that is being too grand! Do see me when you can, and let me not be only writing myself” (EBB). Though she hesitates at first to call him into her space at first, she ultimately admits her desire to see him, even in both of their “unwell” and his “mistrustful” states, in the openness of her sickroom. In a follow-up letter, she asks to see him again, writing:

Well!—but this is to prove that I am not mistrustful, and to say, that if you care to come to see me you can come; and that it is my gain (as I feel it to be) and not yours, whenever you do come. You will not talk of having come afterwards I know, because although I am 'fast bound' to see one or two persons this summer (besides yourself, whom I receive of choice and willingly) I *cannot* admit visitors in a general way—and putting the question of health quite aside, it would be unbecoming to lie here on the sofa and make a company-show of an infirmity.
(EBB)

EBB’s opening line, a request for a chance to prove she is not mistrustful of Browning, indicates a level of intimacy because mistrust can only be disproven with openness, assurance, and an elevated level of comfort between the two parties. Furthermore, EBB’s assertion that Browning will not discuss his visits to her further cement her desire for privacy, or shelter from a society where she is expected to be chaste and pure. This desire for freedom from expected Victorian repression is further asserted when she mentions how “unbecoming” it is for a woman to “lie on

the sofa,” an evocative position mirroring a bedroom, to receive company. This is reminiscent of Bailin’s description of the sickroom turned bedroom and helps to understand the sexual freedoms the sickroom afforded, as certain permissions were afforded to Browning and EBB differently based on their unique positions and perspectives.

In the coming chapters, I will use a feminist disability studies perspective under the larger umbrella of a gender ideological lens as discussed in this introductory chapter to analyze the letters between EBB and Browning in Chapter 2 and the Brownings’ poetry in Chapter 3 in order to examine the different ways in which the Brownings navigated their prescribed roles within society.

CHAPTER II: A COLLABORATIVE AFFAIR—LETTERS OF LOVE

A Joint Effort: Epistolary Works

Though Browning and EBB trade ideas about writing throughout their letters, offering praise and constructive criticism for each other's work-in-progress, an officially co-authored piece did not materialize until their son published their collection of letters in 1899 (Mermin 117), a large proof of courtship that not only sheds light on the couple as lovers but writers as well. The Brownings' letters offer a lens for interpreting the different ways in which they expressed desire because, although they were eventually published, originally they were private conversations between the lovers, each getting to spend time switching roles back and forth between writer and reader, unlike their poetry which was meant for larger audiences.

Janine Utell describes letters as "couple biographies" (3) in which couples, "engage in the act and practices of intimate life writing such that individually and together they undertake and narrativize a process of becoming as subjects in relation to, and with, and in recognition of a significant other (1). This collaboration creates a back-and-forth unified persona through partial biography and autobiography of the self and the other, made understood through the joint efforts of reader and responder. The personas that are created are "...always in process, always contingent, [and] always relational (Utell 3) because of the multi-faceted and malleable perceptions of both reader and writer. Therefore, I argue that in viewing the Brownings' letters as a form of dialogical discourse, we can see how the personas they create of themselves and each other change through the gender performances enclosed within the pages and can see a blending of the line between public and private spheres as their writing changes as a result of each other. Though elements of gender complementarity that lead to the naturalized subordination of EBB are evident in places, there are also ways in which the blurring of these

lines allow the Brownings to take on actions stereotypically accepted of those of the opposite sex, where a freedom in gender performativity can be seen. The Brownings' correspondence is particularly fruitful for mapping the development of their relationship because letters are their own literary form, creating opportunities for collaboration and dialogue not available in other genres. To me, the Browning letters are unique because of three distinct features.

First of all, letter writing is a collaborative event that unfolds over time, and no letter should be analyzed as a stand-alone document because it belongs to a specific place in time that needs context to make sense. Because letters are both so private and personal, it is important to note the danger of how easily they are to misinterpret when taken out of time and context. On the interpretation of letters, Hermione Lee asserts that unlike a singular poem or prose piece, "...it is a mistake to think of a letter as a solitary, independent, free-standing document. It must be seen as part of a relationship that moves through time. And the evidence provided by letters can never quite be trusted" (19). Furthermore, Janet Gurkin Altman asserts, "Caught up in the particularity of its writer-reader relationship, epistolary discourse is also governed by its moment of enunciation. The letter writer is highly conscious of writing in a specific present against which past and future are plotted" (122). Finally, Jonathan Ellis writes, "Most letters are written in the present tense as a way of appearing in one place when physically elsewhere" (2). The consensus amongst the scholars is that letters are written with time in mind, are time-bound, and have a specific context that cannot be removed without changing the meaning of the letter. Therefore, instead of analyzing each letter on its own, similar to the way I analyze the Brownings' poetry in the following chapters, I propose that it is important to analyze key pieces of evidence from the letters as a collection, carefully considering the gendered constraints of the time from which they

were composed, and to consider the implications of such a collection for their tripled relationship as a whole, both as lovers, readers, and writers.

Secondly, again because of their collaborative nature, letters contain multi-faceted depictions and assertions of identity, revealing both what the writer thinks of the reader and of themselves. Letter writing itself is an inherently collaborative venture containing both parties' perspectives, positions, biases, etc., that must be taken into account. Altman writes, "Perhaps the most distinctive aspect of epistolary language is the extent to which it is colored by not one but two persons and by the specific relationship existing between them" (118). Therefore, in the Brownings' case, we should analyze the letters not only in the context of lover to beloved but of mentor to mentee whose language shapes and influences distinct personas of the self and the other in relation to the collaboration, roles in which Browning and EBB switch between throughout the correspondence.

Finally, letters simultaneously function as disembodied forms that can move within Victorian society where physical, gendered bodies cannot, *and* function as forms deeply connected to embodied experiences (even just the physical act of writing itself) in that they are the medium in which those experiences are recorded; because of these functions, letters blur the line between separation versus unity, embodied work versus extension beyond the body, and public versus private dialogue. Ellis's theory reminds us that, "Letters bring people closer together without them ever actually touching. They are perhaps the closest literary form to physical flirtation, hence the popularity of letter writing as a means of courtship and seduction" (Ellis 2), but letters also can act as a self-portrait, providing the medium to record more direct reflections (Ellis 2). When acting as a tool of seduction or flirtation between sender and receiver, Altman explains:

As an instrument of communication between sender and receiver, the letter straddles the gulf between presence and absence; the two persons who "meet" through the letter are neither totally separated nor totally united. The letter lies halfway between the possibility of total communication and the risk of no communication at all. In seduction correspondence is an intermediate step between indifference and intimacy; on the other side of seduction it is an intermediate step between conquest and abandonment. The same seducer who uses the letter to engage his victim at the beginning of a relationship may substitute the letter for his actual presence when he wishes to disentangle himself.

(3)

Because letters are the result of the embodied experience of writing but fulfill their purpose when away from the physical body, the connection created between the writer and reader exists, but not in a physical sense unless functioning as a metonymy of the sender's body. Therefore, as Altman explains, the sender and receiver are in a liminal state between separate and united. Letters can be used to create distance or to bridge it, depending on the intention of the writer.

Additionally, it may seem that this private correspondence leaves less room for creative interpretation than the poetry because direct contact seems more likely to provide a medium for explicit communication regarding desire than a work meant for widespread publication.

However, it is important to consider the context, private allusions and references, and why the Brownings "...[chose] to write about an event in a particular way" (Lee 20) to each other, in particular, instead of treating every word as a literal expression. Furthermore, letters, for the time, were not infrequently published. Though the Brownings did not choose to publish their letters during either of their lifetimes, that does not mean it was never considered or that the

intention was not there. Because we know that one letter, the one in which Browning speaks “wildly” about his first interaction with EBB, was destroyed after their disagreement, they were obviously aware of the risk of interception. So, while the letters seemingly present more freedom of expression based on a private audience of one rather than a public audience of many, the risks associated with putting sentiment into writing were not lost on the Brownings. Therefore, it is important to analyze the letters with the mindset they were still very much operating under society’s restrictions, even if the medium feels private to a certain degree, not unlike the enclosed walls of EBB’s sickroom was still a space within society.

I propose that the Brownings’ letters can help analyze their relationship in two ways: 1) by acting as a record of their courtship, showing the development of their relationship and the differently gendered expressions of desire within Victorian society and 2) serving as literary criticism, documenting their own and each other’s views of their poetry and authorship through their vastly different perspectives on life due to gender, illness, and embodied experiences (such as Browning’s frequent headaches and EBB’s invalidism) and how those conditions affect their relationship and writing. Both of these tasks also contribute to the larger argument of showing how the viewing letter as a collaborative form allows us to analyze the differently gendered expression of desire in this period and see the highly performative roles the Brownings slip in and out of to influence each other’s work, change each other’s writing style, and create each other’s literary personas.

Development of the Relationship

The letters are helpful in showing the development of the Brownings’ relationship from timid pen pals to their elopement because the medium of communication offered a socially acceptable opportunity for it to grow from a safe distance, both because of Victorian

expectations for chastity and EBB's unique predicament. The letters are also vital in showing the conflation of stereotypically feminine and masculine, classed ideals that happens as the Brownings learn from each other's writing strengths and develop new writing habits because of each other's influence. Finally, the letters show the tug-of-war power dynamics of EBB's fight for agency as Browning conflates EBB's identities as a woman and a writer, as she pushes back in some instances and acquiesces in others. Waithe's theory shows that "written communication occurs at a 'safe distance' without incurring such risks of disappointed spectacle. Its ebbs and flows were not only predictable with the post, but susceptible to regulation and control. Love 'on the page' could be purified of the physical, and its development carefully regulated, at least until the beloved became a lover in turn" (133). However, the Brownings' letters began to push these boundaries from the beginning of the correspondence with Browning's admission of love for EBB through their written discussions about what "wild" fantasies could and could not be expressed. Through written communication, both Browning and EBB could control what and how much progression to reveal, creating a series of shifts in the power dynamics of their relationships tracked through the letters.

As previously mentioned above, critics such as Leighton, Markus, Mermin, and Kingma Wall have shown how people have found it difficult to weigh EBB's roles as woman and poet, as one's value has often become lost in the other's throughout time. In fact, Browning seems to conflate these two aspects of EBB's identity in this first letter to her. The letter, post-marked January 10, 1845, begins by expressing his love for E.B.B.'s poetry and ends by asserting his love for her. He writes, "...the fresh strange music, the affluent language, the exquisite pathos and true new brave thought; but in thus addressing myself to you—your own self, and for the first time, my feeling rises altogether. I do, as I say, love these books with all my heart—and I

love you too.” (Browning n.p.). This bluntness is not only reminiscent of Ruskin’s ideas of masculinity, with a man’s power being active in comparison to feminine passivity (Ruskin 32), but revealing of Browning’s inability to separate EBB’s worth as a poet from her gender. In referring to the “fresh strange music, affluent language, exquisite pathos, and new brave thought” as EBB’s “own self” directly instead of acknowledging them as creations extended outside of herself, he is limiting the separation of woman from poet by professing his love for her writing, and, in conjunction, her. Later in their correspondence, in a letter post-marked March 12, 1845, he does this again by telling EBB, “*through* what you have written, not properly *for* it, I love and wish you well!” (Browning). Though he is careful to make the distinction that her work is not the reason for his affection, he does insist that he loves her because her work is the avenue that allows him to do so, a blurry treatment between her and her work, common to the reception of Victorian women poets and their writing (Mermin 118). Because of the praise Browning associates with her work and the connection between that acclaim and his eagerness to meet her, she uses metaphor to explain the differences she feels between her work and herself. In a letter post-marked May 16, 1845, she writes, “If my poetry is worth anything to any eye, it is the flower of me... the rest of me is nothing but a root, fit for the ground and the dark...I feel ashamed of having made a fuss about what is not worth it; and because you are extravagant in caring so for a permission, which will be nothing to you afterwards” (EBB). EBB’s fear that Browning’s perception of her is falsely built up through her poetry shines through, as she admits she is worried he expects the “flower” when, aside from her poetry, she only sees herself as the “root,” fit for “darkness,” intended past the spotlight of the public sphere (where only her poetry goes, not herself). Though EBB says she views flower in terms of her poetry, or her written self/persona, as the flower, and deemphasizes “the rest of her,” or what seems to be her identity

as a woman, as a root, fit for nothing but “ground and dark,” she downplays the critical functions the root plays in budding of the flower. Her embodied experiences allow her give bloom to the self she expresses a poet.

This attention to gender and the distinctions between expectation versus reality continues throughout the correspondence, but it plays a special role in establishing the expectations for each other’s writing at the beginning. In the sixth letter, EBB writes to Browning, requesting to speak beyond the confines of what is expected of them because of their genders. In a letter post-marked February 3, 1845, she writes:

...And if you will only promise to treat me *en bon camarade*, without reference to the conventionalities of 'ladies and gentlemen,' taking no thought for your sentences (nor for mine)...why, *then*, I am ready to sign and seal the contract, and to rejoice in being 'articled' as your correspondent. Only *don't* let us have any constraint, any ceremony! *Don't* be civil to me when you feel rude,—nor loquacious when you incline to silence,—nor yielding in the manners when you are perverse in the mind. See how out of the world I am! Suffer me to profit by it in almost the only profitable circumstance, and let us rest from the bowing and the courtesying, you and I, on each side. You will find me an honest man on the whole. (EBB)

EBB’s comment about the “conventionalities” of gender show both an understanding of Victorian gender norms and a desire to move beyond them to speak frankly without the constraints of societal expectations. She refers to herself as “out of the world,” a phrase reminiscent of her earlier metaphor of the flower and the root, describing, perhaps, her unique position as a woman separate from traditional spheres because of her condition, urging him to

utilize their unique position to their advantage, “profiting” from an otherwise unprofitable circumstance. In her earlier metaphor, she downplays the connection between the root and the flower, treating them instead as separate entities bound by separate “worlds,” or spheres. The root is left “out of the public world,” trapped in the domestic sphere away from her creations that are allowed to exist in the public domain. Additionally, she wraps up the sentiment by calling herself an “honest man,” ascribing masculinity to herself as a form of praise, a notion Leighton notes as common for EBB, whose “...praise of women often re-allocates the virtues traditionally ascribed to the other sex” as a way of disconnecting with what she perceived to be her “feminine duties” (Leighton 60). According to Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, “...acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this on the surface of the body through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but can never reveal, the organizing principal of identity as a cause” (136). In describing herself as an “honest man,” she accepts the opportunity, in this instance, to behave in ways contradictory to Victorian feminine ideals by performing masculinity and adopting some of its freedoms.

However, though she expresses these societally-deviant desires in the beginning of the letters, she often returns to the expression of traditional feminine ideals in later letters as her relationship with Browning develops further. After their first meeting, for instance, her earlier fears that she will not live up to his expectations are not realized. As mentioned earlier, the letter he sent immediately following their first in-person encounter was not well received by EBB. After reminding Browning of the societal norms by which it seems like they must abide and chastising him for his “wild” speaking, in a letter post-marked May 24, 1845, Browning writes, “Will you not think me very brutal if I tell you I could almost smile at your misapprehension of

what I meant to write?—Yet I will tell you, because it will undo the bad effect of my thoughtlessness” (Browning). Browning, therefore, seizes the opportunity through his response to assure her that no moral code had been broken, an act meant to salvage her perception of his masculinity and “conceal hurt pride,” (Leighton 92), an act to which EBB assists by replying, “I owe you the most humble of apologies dear Mr. Browning, for having spent so much solemnity on so simple a matter, and I hasten to pay it” (EBB), in a letter post-marked May 25, 1845. Furthermore, In a letter post-marked October 22, 1845, she writes, “...if you came too often and it was observed, difficulties and vexations would follow as a matter of course, and it would be wise therefore to run no risk” (EBB). Therefore, as their relationship progressed and he started to request permission to see her more often, she continued to maintain stereotypical Victorian beliefs about femininity by reminding him of the scrutiny they would face if his frequent visits caused a negative perception of their relationship. By December 20, 1845, as she expresses her growing fondness more and more, the instances of EBB upholding traditional ideals of female Victorian gender expectations comes to an intense peak. She admits, “Talking of happiness—shall I tell you? Promise not to be angry and I will tell you. I have thought sometimes that, if I considered myself wholly, I should choose to die this winter—now—before I had disappointed you in anything. But because you are better and dearer and more to be considered than I” (EBB). This moment of submission emphasizes the problems with gender complementariness. Masked by the sweetness of the depth of her affection, this letter reveals the extent to which women are expected to submit to men and helps to establish the hetero-normative savior narrative forced on EBB’s story with Browning by those who fail to see the insidiousness of this moment.

Criticism, Praise, and Power

The power dynamics at play that can be seen from the growth of their relationship and their unique expressions of desire can also be seen throughout their professional relationship—a rapport in which they discuss writing in general and each other’s work and in which Browning clearly both dismantles and upholds conventions of masculinity throughout his praises for EBB’s writing . While EBB and Browning were developing a romantic relationship, they were also building on a relationship between writer and editor/writer and reader, roles in which they both adopted interchangeably. Browning began their correspondence with praising EBB’s poetry, and that praise and admiration continued throughout the letters, with EBB returning the sentiment. Any criticism, even when requested, was also cushioned with praise. According to Leighton, “Robert insisted on placing her above himself [so that] from her high place, she could give him sympathy and assistance,” which is why his praises often led back to conversations regarding his own work (93). For instance, in a letter post-marked February 19, 1845, Browning writes:

One thing vexed me in your letter—I will tell you, the praise of *my* letters. Now, one merit they have—in language mystical—that of having *no* merit. If I caught myself trying to write finely, graphically...nay, if I found myself conscious of having in my own opinion, so written, all would be over! yes, over! I should be respecting you inordinately, paying a proper tribute to your genius, summoning the necessary collectedness,—plenty of all that! (Browning)

Additionally, Leighton shows that in another letter, post-marked March 12, 1845, Browning responds to EBB’s intention to write a “long, contemporary poem” (94), by both praising her ability to do so and simultaneously mentioning that it was always his intention to do so, saying, “The poem you propose to make, for the times; the fearless fresh living work you describe, is

the *only* Poem to be undertaken now by you or anyone that *is* a Poet at all...it is what I have been all my life intending to do, and now shall be much, much nearer doing, since you will along with me” (Browning). Though it is possible Browning refers to his own writing and methods while praising her talents as a way of furthering their connection by demonstrating a common interest, it is also possible that it is an attempt to perform ideal Victorian masculinity, or to uphold the idea that men should be more skilled in trades than women. This is reminiscent of Ruskin mentioning that a woman should be:

...Wise, not that she may set herself above her husband, but that she may never fail from his side: wise, not with the narrowness of insolent and loveless pride, but with the passionate gentleness of an infinitely variable, because infinitely applicable, modesty of service—the true changefulness of woman.” (34)

Through one perspective, Browning seems to be praising her work above his own, opposite of what Ruskin believes acceptable. However, by directing the conversation back to him and his own work, he is maintaining that balance of power believed to be acceptable for a Victorian man in a heterosexual relationship. This is also another example of how the expected submission of women to men can feel romantic.

EBB’s initial reaction to Browning’s consistent praise is so overwhelming that it is perceived as an overreaction. Where she seems to desire to come across as meek, she mistakenly tells him his acclaim is coming across as flattery. When Browning does not respond as positively to this exchange as she had hoped, she corrects herself. In a letter post-marked June 20, 1845, she writes:

Perhaps I said something about your having vowed to make me vain by writing this or that of my liking your verses and so on—and perhaps I said it too lightly ... which

happened because when one doesn't know whether to laugh or to cry, it is far best, as a general rule, to laugh. But the serious truth is that it was all nonsense together what I wrote, and that, instead of talking of your making me vain, I should have talked (if it had been done sincerely) of your humbling me—inasmuch as nothing does humble anybody so much as being lifted up too high. (EBB)

By retracting her comment about Browning making her vain in the way he mentions loving her she chooses to, instead, employ a gentler phrase filled with more gratitude. In telling him that he “humbles her,” she is assuming less authority, and allowing the power to positively influence her mood be placed back on Browning after his reaction prompts her to change. This switch is more aligned with Victorian female/male power structures in which the female receives her power from the male’s permission.

EBB’s praise for Browning, conversely, is even more exaggerated. In instances where he downplays his writing (again, perhaps to seem humble and agreeable or perhaps to create a space for her to praise him), she consistently showers him in acclaim. Even when he requests her honest criticism, in a letter post-marked June 20, 1845, she writes, “If you persist in giving too much importance to what I may have courage to say of this or of that in them, you will make me a dumb critic and I shall have no help for my dumbness,” and continues by saying she will try to be critical if that is what he really wants of her, but only if he promises not to take too much stake in what she says (EBB). First of all, her use of the words “dumb” and “dumbness” continue to draw on metaphors of disability, hinting at an inability to speak and articulate what she aims to express. Secondly, her timidity in offering criticism shows both an attempt to uphold patriarchal power structures in her personal relationship along with “hero-worship” type admiration for

Browning's work (EBB). Her praise is not only represented in her lack of criticism, however. In a letter post-marked January 15, 1845, she writes:

Why should you deny the full measure of my delight and benefit from your writings? I could tell you why you should not. You have in your vision two worlds, or to use the language of the schools of the day, you are both subjective and objective in the habits of your mind. You can deal both with abstract thought and with human passion in the most passionate sense....Then you are 'masculine' to the height—and I, as a woman, have studied some of your gestures of language and intonation wistfully, as a thing beyond me far! and the more admirable for being beyond. (EBB)

By describing Browning's writing as a "benefit" to her because of his ability to deal with "two worlds" when she can only deal with one, she praises his ability to understand both "abstract thought," reminiscent of the public-sphere, or a male-dominated space, and "human passion," reminiscent of the domestic or private-sphere, a female-dominated space, by saying he is "masculine to the height." Whereas doubly because of her gender and her condition she is constrained to the domestic, Browning (with qualities of the ideal Victorian man, and, therefore, attributed as being masculine) is able to move between the spaces and provide a perspective she cannot. For these reasons shown by the obvious power imbalance between them, she "studies" his writing as something she aspires to create to rise to from her position below. The continually shifting power dynamics examined here work to show the ways in which the Brownings performed certain gender tasks in order to achieve specific purposes and maps out the ways in which their perspectives may have begun to bleed into each other's work, a process further described below.

Though it is clear that both EBB and Browning praise and criticize themselves and each other at times, Margaret Homans's work reminds readers why it is important to keep gender in mind when discussing the different intentions behind doing so. She writes, "Each writer gains an advantage over the other through adopting a pose of abject humility, but...this apparently gender-neutral strategy has differing resonances for a man's and for a woman writer's authority" (237). So, one question we should ask ourselves is how is it different for a woman to place themselves lower than for a man? As previously discussed, one reason Browning seems to take the self-abnegated position is to further express his dominance. He often praises EBB as a way to bring attention to his own thoughts in juxtaposition to hers. In EBB's case, however, it is different. In leaning into her submissive role, she performs her "duty" to him as a woman as a method of creating a closer bond to him, and, in effect, exacting a subtle form of power. This strategy will also be discussed more in depth when analyzing the Browning's poetry.

Differing Perspectives

Their vastly differing perspectives had an effect on their writing and how they viewed each other's writing, most likely because their own views of what writing is were so different. While EBB viewed the embodied act of writing as pleasurable, Browning considered it work, an argument I will unpack below. These differences in thinking about the purpose for writing are directly attributed Browning's inability to see disability as more than an impediment. EBB, on the other hand, sees the value in her uniquely embodied experiences as an individual with a disability, and she is able to use those experiences in her work. These differences in how they viewed disability affected the ways in which they were able to connect to their poetry as well, a claim I investigate throughout this chapter and the next. In terms of their varied thinking about writing, Dorothy Mermin asserts that what Browning so much admired in EBB, her ability to

self-reflect and write in ways that expressed her own thoughts, EBB was “tired of” (123).

Whereas Browning praised EBB for writing honestly, she praised his ability to write dramatically, a task she believed she could not accomplish because of her limited experiences. In a letter post-marked March 20, 1845, EBB explains this feeling by writing:

And what you say of society draws me on to many comparative thoughts of your life and mine. You seem to have drunken of the cup of life full, with the sun shining on it. I have lived only inwardly...Books and dreams were what I lived in—and domestic life only seemed to buzz gently around, like the bees about the grass...And do you also know what a disadvantage this ignorance is to my art?...I have had much of the inner life, and from the habit of self-consciousness and self-analysis, I make great guesses at Human nature in the main. But how willingly I would as a poet exchange some of this lumbering, ponderous, helpless knowledge of books, for some experience of life. (EBB)

Here, she favors Browning’s perspective of life who seems to have “drunken of the cup of life full,” an experience she feels robbed off from living “inwardly” in only “books and dreams.” Her insistence that she has only lived inwardly again mirrors her earlier metaphor regarding the flower and root. This is another instance in which she sees herself as inward, buried in the ground instead of in the public sphere, getting to see the success of her work. She considers the domestic sphere, a place that gave her the numerous opportunities to write because of her gender and invalidism, a “disadvantage to her art,” even though it allowed her the awareness of her self-conscious, a trait Browning envies in her. Because of her sheltered upbringing, she goes on to refer to herself as a “blind poet,” in an earlier letter a metaphor grounded in the language of disability that shows how much she perceives her lack of experience to affect her work.

Yet, where EBB feared that her life experiences and invalidism were too limiting to achieve what she desired in her work, Browning feared the opposite; he worried that his art was too separated from his life and that his own voice was not present enough in his poetry (Mermin 118). Even in the letters, a private, personal correspondence not intended to entertain a wide-spread public audience but to open up to a companion, Browning frequently admitted to writing “dramatically,” or creating a sort of character to give voice to rather than documenting his own. In a letter post-marked May 24, 1845, after EBB wonders about truly knowing him, he admits, “I am utterly unused, of these late years particularly, to dream of communicating anything about *that* to another person (all my writings are purely dramatic as I am always anxious to say) that when I make never so little an attempt, no wonder if I *bungle* notably—'language,' too is an organ that never studded this heavy heavy head of mine” (Browning). Browning discusses his prior insistence of keeping his personal information private until his desire to share it with EBB, again, mentioning his writing is purely dramatic and not personal; however, he also mentions his nuanced attempts to share that personal information with her now and how difficult it is because it is unfamiliar. The word “bungle,” with its negative connotation shows his opinion that his attempt is somehow lacking.

According to Browning, however, EBB did not have trouble opening up and expressing herself. In one of his first letters to her, post-marked January 13, 1845, he writes:

I report... that your poetry must be, cannot but be, infinitely more to me than mine to you—for you *do* what I always wanted, hoped to do, and only seem now likely to do for the first time. You speak out, *you*,—I only make men and women speak—give you truth broken into prismatic hues, and fear the pure white light, even if it is in me. (Browning)

Here, Browning verbalizes the self-awareness EBB's writing showcases, though lacking in his own work. In saying that EBB speaks out, he seems to be praising her for her ability to use her own voice and incorporate her own perspectives more directly in her writing, whereas he admits several times before his habit of "dramatizing" his writing or creating characters who speak for him. The metaphor of his words presenting truth in fragments, "prismatic hues" rather than "pure white light," helps to show the honesty and straight-forwardness he feels he is lacking, forcing readers to create meaning for themselves from pieces of truth he cannot verbalize. Even so, however, EBB does show a change in openness and vulnerability from her initial letters to the later ones. Though "Her earlier letters are sometimes marred by signs of effort and uncertainties of touch...she learned to seem more spontaneous" (Mermin 127). Unlike the retraction in her wording in the letter where she changes the idea of flattery to the idea of humbleness, characterized by dashes, commas, and ellipses meant to work through a rough idea and turn it into a polished sentiment, her later letters display a greater freedom of expression and less restraint. In a letter post-marked March 16, 1846, EBB writes to Browning in a familiar format, though repurposed to provide heightened expression. Where dashes and commas were once inhibiting punctuation marks urging censorship, dashes and commas turn into spaces of opportunity to express and reveal more. She writes, "How will the love my heart is full of for you, let me be silent? Insufficient speech is better than no speech, in one regard—the speaker had *tried* words, and if they fail, hereafter he needs not reflect that he did not even try—so with me now, that loving you, Ba, with all my heart and soul, all my senses being lost in one wide wondering gratitude and veneration, I press close to you to say so, in this imperfect way, my dear dearest beloved!" (EBB). Whereas she once chose words so carefully, she admits here that

“insufficient speech is better than no speech,” unbridled and unfiltered when describing her love for Browning, proof that her writing style developed as her affection for Browning developed.

However, as much as EBB’s reliance on writing seemed to fuel her passion for it, writing seemed to be less of a labor of love and more of just a labor for Browning. Where EBB tells Browning of a love for writing incepted at an early age in a letter post-marked February 27, 1845 by saying, “I remember, when I was a child and wrote poems in little clasped books, I used to kiss the books and put them away tenderly because I had been happy near them, and take them out by turns when I was going from home, to cheer them by the change of air and the pleasure of the new place” (EBB), Browning’s relationship with writing was more strained. In a letter post-marked March 12, 1845, he admits:

I have no pleasure in writing myself—none, in the mere act—though all pleasure in the sense of fulfilling a duty... But I think you like the operation of writing as I should like that of painting or making music, do you not? After all, there is a great delight in the heart of the thing...but—I don't know why—my heart sinks whenever I open this desk, and rises when I shut it. (Browning)

Though Browning acknowledges a certain kind of love for art, like “painting” or “making music,” he categorizes writing as “fulfilling a duty,” further evidence that writing, in Browning’s case, is associated with the masculine public-sphere associated with work and public duty while writing, in EBB’s case, is associated with emotion and the private sphere (though still successful in the public one). Conversely, EBB, further upholding Victorian feminine norms, offers to assist Browning’s work. In a letter post-marked June 24, 1845, EBB assures him, “I will promise to be ready afterwards to help you in anything I can do ... transcribing or anything ... to get the books through the press in the shortest of times—and I am capable of a great deal of that sort of work

without being tired, having the habit of writing in any sort of position,” despite her own illness (EBB). EBB’s willingness to step in and aid Browning through his impediment and her insistence that she is capable of the job provides the first insight into the exchange of “sympathy and concern” that the letters provide (Waithe 137). According to Waithe, “Browning’s complaints of a headache, and Barrett’s evident pleasure in returning sympathy and concern, indicate the extent to which such reports became a currency to be traded” (137). However, this currency was not equal. Though both parties make a point to open or close each letter with a wellness check for the other, the ways in which they discuss their own illnesses are quite different. Browning’s experience with male privilege results in his discussions of his headaches seeming as detrimental, while EBB, whose experience with illness drastically impacted her life experiences, often tries to downplay the seriousness of her ailments, showing readers how her illness is an accepted part of her life, unlike Browning.

EBB’s frequent “downplaying her condition as a temporary impediment” (Waithe 129) in favor of focusing her writing on writing itself or the development of their relationship is a common occurrence that sheds more light onto how their extremely different perspectives and embodied experiences shaped both their writing and their connection. In a letter post-marked March 20, 1845, EBB apologizes to Browning for the delay in her letters, saying:

It was kind of you to wish to know how I was, and not unkind of me to suspend my answer to your question—for indeed I have not been very well, nor have had much heart for saying so... Yet for me, I should not grumble. There has been nothing very bad the matter with me, as there used to be—I only grow weaker than usual, and learn my lesson of being mortal. (EBB)

Furthermore, in another letter post-marked November 15, 1845, she, again, glosses over her ailments by saying, "...I want to explain to you that although I don't make a profession of equable spirits, (as a matter of temperament, my spirits were always given to rock a little, up and down) yet that I did not mean to be so ungrateful and wicked as to complain of low spirits now and to you. It would not be true either: and I said 'low' to express a merely bodily state" (EBB). These are both examples of the numerous instances throughout the letters in which EBB admits to feeling ill, but immediately assures Browning that her situation is not so dire as to worry him. In the second example, she even mentions the distinction between bodily lows and spiritual lows, insisting that though her body struggles, she does not allow it to interfere with her spirits. In the first letter, even upon admitting that her condition makes her aware of her own mortality, she insists that she is not as unfortunate as she has been in prior situations. In doing so, EBB keeps the focus off of her illness, an action foreign to Browning.

As briefly mentioned, though EBB's illness is most referenced, the letters also show that Browning suffered from debilitating headaches, a condition he believes is exacerbated by reading and writing. Unlike EBB, who, in a letter post-marked August 8, 1845, reveals that she prefers writing to the few occasions she feels well enough to go for walks, Browning blames his headaches on reading and writing and often uses them as an excuse for not returning her letters. In a letter post-marked June 23, 1845, he writes, "For me, going out does me good—reading [and] writing do me the harm" (Browning). One explanation for their drastically opposite attitudes for discussing their ailments could be that Browning, a man with the power to take up space in both public and private spheres while moving freely between the two spaces, views any changes to those freedoms (like his headaches) as catastrophic, severely impacting his way of life. EBB, on the other hand, who has been confined to the domestic sphere and her

sickroom/writing room, accepts her ailment as a way of life, figuring ways to work around it through the act of what she loves doing most: writing. So, Browning, a figure of male privilege, is unable to see disability as anything more than a disruption to his upward mobility, but EBB, a woman with a disability, is able to see the value in her uniquely embodied experiences and utilize the concept of her bodymind to create nuanced work.

Another explanation for EBB's hesitancy to discuss her condition might be because she was fearful he only cared for her because he felt a chivalrous need *to take care* of her. In a letter post-marked October 25, 1845, she admits:

I have sometimes felt jealous of myself ... of my own infirmities, ... and thought that you cared for me only because your chivalry touched them with a silver sound—and that, without them, you would pass by on the other side...And the silent promise I would have you make is this—that if ever you should leave me, it shall be (though you are not 'selfish') for your sake—and not for mine: for your good, and not for mine. I ask it—not because I am disinterested; but because one class of motives would be valid, and the other void... (EBB)

In having Browning promise to never assume the best care for her, she works to abate the concern she feels that he might base relationship decisions on a well-being he discerns for her. In writing this, she reveals she does not want a savior from her impediments; rather, she only wants acceptance and her needs to be understood.

To further show the ways in which she has adapted her work ethic to her unique situation, EBB employs the language of imprisonment to describe the freedom she feels from writing and receiving letters. In a letter post-marked February 3, 1845, she writes, "...it would be strange and contradictory if I were not always delighted both to hear from *you* and to write to *you*, this

talking upon paper being as good a social pleasure as another, when our means are somewhat straitened. As for me, I have done most of my talking by post of late years—as people shut up in dungeons take up with scrawling mottoes on the walls” (EBB). In this excerpt, she not only recognizes letters as fulfilling a societal function for communal pleasure that she would otherwise be unable to fulfill, but compares her experiences of writing to those of people trapped in confinement, writing on the walls as their only means of expression. Where Browning relies on excuses, such as his headaches, to relieve him from his “duties” for writing, EBB finds any excuse to continue to write, accepting her invalidism as opportunity.

In summary, because letters are a product of the bodymind that can enter physical spaces that bodies at times cannot, the Brownings’ letters are an interesting way of showing how both gendered power and self-definitions of authorship are established over the course of their relationship. Through the Brownings’ constant praise and criticism of each other and themselves throughout the letters, readers can see the ways in which they each adopted and performed stereotypical aspects of masculinity and femininity in order to gain more access to each other, not only showing the differences in their embodied experiences, but tracking the ways in which they began to cement themselves in each other’s life and negotiate and define their identities and roles within that union. Yet, those differences in perspective that are uncovered, Browning’s outer perspective that EBB seems to lack and EBB’s inner perspective that Browning seems to lack, are important to keep in mind when analyzing the ways in which they continue to explore gender norms and power dynamics in their poetry, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER III: EXPRESSIONS OF POWER IN THE BROWINGS' POETRY

Browning, Domination, and Dramatic Monologue

In order to understand the strategies EBB had to employ to be able to write about her feelings of desire in a direct semi-autobiographical manner, it is important to compare those tactics to the strategy most utilized by her husband. Whereas EBB's sonnets are evidently autobiographical, Browning's dramatic monologues are much less so. Though they illustrate larger global situations associated with the masked, violent side of gender complementariness that situates the Browning's union, the specific events described in Browning's dramatic monologues are not directly representative of the couple. As referenced in the letters, Browning admits to writing "dramatically," or creating a character other than himself (and often male) to be the narrator behind many of his poems. This style later became known as dramatic monologue, a poetic form in direct contrast with the confessional poetry largely expected from women writers for the time. By taking the extra step to create a proxy that might express desire or deviance, Browning adds a layer of distance between his commentary that EBB does not, allowing him to write more indirectly about elements of heterosexual relationships. Browning's dramatic monologues, such as "Porphyria's Lover", "My Last Duchess," and "Evelyn Hope," are able to maintain a distinction between fact and fiction because of the dramatic monologue form. The ways in which Browning's speakers are able to turn the women of their desires into literal objects to be controlled, either in the form of corpses or artistic renderings, reveals the sinister repercussions of the idea of gender complementariness that overwrote Victorian gender ideals. In placing males in a seat of power and only allowing women to exhibit control in complementing that power, Browning comments on a system of naturalized subordination by creating situations that show how that abuse of power is physically lethal to female bodies. For the first section of

this chapter, I have chosen to focus on Browning's dramatic monologues, predominately because this style provides the best depiction of Browning expressing the patriarchal views that dictate so much of the Brownings' relationship—views that EBB constantly has to struggle for agency against, evident in my discussion of her sonnet sequence. My reading will show the ways in which she destabilizes the savior narrative by analyzing the ways in which EBB negotiates agency. Before doing so, however, I propose that it is most valuable to first spend time analyzing Browning's perspectives of gender and power through his most famous dramatic monologues, which most concretely show the most violent views of male domination. As we can see from the letters in the previous chapter, Browning takes on a number of roles and perspectives that solidify his recognition of male domination and privilege in some places but reconcile these views with expressions of collaboration and notions of romance and equality in others. To me, it makes sense to begin with poems like "Porphyria's Lover" and "My Last Duchess," dramatic monologues published before the beginning of the Browning letters, therefore lacking any influence from Browning's relationship with EBB. In analyzing these poems both chronologically and by style, we can see how the version of Browning as the patriarchal male dominant is connected to the version of Browning as lover and collaborator and track when his perspectives and experiences may have begun to change.

In "Porphyria's Lover," the reader sees an unbalanced power dynamic (where Porphyria seemingly begins with more power than the male speaker) that the male speaker must rectify by punishing her body. This punishment suggests that the poem is meant to act as a didactic resource, reinforcing restrictions for women by painting an ominous picture of what happens when they are ignored. In doing so, Browning enforces stereotypical masculinity throughout the poem. He explores the darker sides of heterosexual love by using dramatic monologue as an

avenue to explore madness and perverse sexual desires without directly appearing mad or perverse. Browning's speaker exhibits these characteristics while the dramatic monologue form of the poem distances Browning the poet from these qualities.

To begin this commentary, the poem begins by sketching out an image of what the ideal Victorian woman should be, but that image quickly disintegrates making way for the depiction of the type of woman that Victorian society warned young girls about becoming. As the image changes from ideal to aberrant, the poem begins to warn about how one alteration of stereotypical gender codes results in chaos. Since expectations were much more lenient on male behavior than female behavior, the poem lends itself to the interpretation that Browning upholds those ideals by creating a male character who gets away with bending gender expectations and a female character who is severely punished for the same thing throughout the poem. The poem opens with a very apt illustration of the cult of domesticity. The speaker states that Porphyria enters her lover's home and immediately begins to "shut out the cold and the storm / And kneeled and made the cheerless grate / Blaze up, and all the cottage warm" (7-9). This indicates, in the first few lines of the poem, that Porphyria embodies the idea that a woman should make a house feel like home, mirroring Ruskin's assertion that, "Wherever a true wife comes, [the] home is always round her" (78). Additionally, the act of making a fire could be viewed as a gift to her lover, and, in 1839, Sarah Ellis writes, "there is a principle of a woman's love, that renders it impossible for her to be satisfied without actually doing something for the object of her regard (n.p.)" The image of Porphyria coming in and creating a fire is an example of how women in Victorian England were supposed to behave. However, her behavior changes suddenly, and the effects of that sudden change manifest in ways that ultimately lead to Porphyria's demise further into the poem.

After making the fire, Porphyria “laid her soiled gloves by / [...] and, last, sat down by [the speaker’s] side / And called [him]” (12, 14-15). The use of the word “spoiled” indicates impurity, and the gloves function as an extension of her body as a way of letting the reader know the speaker considers her unchaste. Nevertheless, it is this “spoiled” female character who summons the male speaker at will, turning her attention to him when she chooses to enter back into the private sphere. Then, she reveals her bare shoulder and pulls her lover against her body, murmuring that she loves (presumably) him (10-20). The poem then reveals that Porphyria, “Too weak for all her heart’s endeavor / To set its struggling passion free / From pride, and vainer ties dissever, could not give herself to [her lover] forever” (21-23), presumably in holy matrimony. It seems that Porphyria, though she claims she loves the speaker, cannot bring herself to marry him. Yet, Deborah Gorham says that “in a real world...middle class females who did not marry were considered ‘redundant,’ or were said to have ‘failed in business’” (57). If a “good” Victorian woman is supposed to hope for marriage, then Porphyria is acting adversely to her prescribed gender expectations. Furthermore, the phrase “give herself” indicates a lack of will on the female’s part, a show of power the male speaker cannot allow. Additionally, line 26, “but passion would sometimes prevail” indicates that Porphyria had “given” her body to her lover before, though sexual purity was one of the strictest requirements for women in the gender codes. Gorham even writes that Victorian girls were expected to be sexually pure and ignorant as well. Anything less than ignorance put them at risk of being unchaste (54). Therefore, with those ideals securely in place, according to the speaker of the poem, the fact that Porphyria wanted to be sexually unified with him but not unified in marriage proves her love to be “all in vain” (Browning 29), aside from carrying out her own physical pleasures.

So, there is a clear divide between Porphyria's body and her consciousness. Though she is willing to "give" her body to the speaker, she is unwilling to be possessed in totality, which is unacceptable to the male speaker. Shrivastava's criticism shows that Browning is consistently interested in "the idea of union of the soul and flesh" in his dramatic monologues, especially in terms of his female characters, further cementing the idea from earlier chapters that the body and mind function as one bodymind instead of as separate entities body/mind. Furthermore, Shrivastava says:

In fact, Browning's justification for the claims of body's role on the canvass of broad picture of life, that too in married life, is very fresh and striking because it combines both opposites and unites the moral with sex or the soul with sex, whereas according to the Victorian beliefs, body and flesh and basic human instincts too were an obstacle to spiritual progress and emancipation. On the contrary, sailing against the Victorian current, he extolled in writing the due significance of the claims of sex and body. (101)

Because of Browning (and his male speaker's) insistence on the fusion between soul and body and Porphyria's willingness to surrender one and not the other, his speaker reaches the conclusion that the only way to exhibit full male control is through the preservation of the female body by a process of not just figurative, but literal objectification. In creating a corpse, the male speaker exhibits full control.

Furthermore, when the speaker reaches this decision, he decides to strangle her with her own hair, a part of the woman's body associated with femininity and given as a sign of affection to a lover. According to Carol Christ, hair is also commonly used as a synecdoche for the corpse (398), so this mode of killing connects to the ultimate goal of bodily preservation. John Henry

Newman writes, “Hence it is that is almost a definition of a gentleman to say he is one who never inflicts pain,” and that a Victorian gentleman is “tender, gentle, and merciful” (n.p.) Clearly, strangulation is inherently painful, but because the speaker seems to be so conscious of the gender expectations, he makes sure to state, and then reiterate, that Porphyria felt no pain (Browning 41-42). Because of these things, “Porphyria’s Lover,” is clearly a didactic warning meant to dissuade Victorian women from acting outside of traditional gender roles in a “submit or be punished” fashion. It is also true that because of the extreme nature of such a punishment, Browning projects it onto characters through dramatic monologue in order to express those opinions. However, the other lesson present is one that focuses on a progression meant to female subordination that continues throughout his other dramatic poems.

The creation of other characters as a method for commenting on heterosexual male sexual fantasy in Victorian society continues both in Browning’s “My Last Duchess” and “Evelyn Hope,” for example. Throughout both of these poems, Efrid shows that “...Browning employs sexually restrained male speakers in order to signal the pathology of patriarchal gender constructions and sexual desire defined by bourgeois limitations” (Efrid 152). In this way, the Duke in “My Last Duchess” mentions all of his late Duchess’s faults, including how she was “too easily impressed” and “liked whate’er / She looked on, and her looks went everywhere” (Browning 23-24). So, instead of looking only towards her husband as Victorian women are meant to, the Duchess looked towards other means for pleasure as many who “passed her” received the same smile the Duke did (Browning 44-45), as “...she ranked [the] gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name with anybody’s gift (33-34). For these outward dissents against his masculinity, the Duchess pays with her life when the Duke “...gave commands; / Then all smiles stopped together” (45-36), indicating that the Duke makes the Duchess pay in the same fashion

Porphyria's lover makes her pay as well. This connection cements the "...deanimation of a female by the speaker's narcissistic desire to control the world around him" (Efird 152), as Efird asserts. This deanimation of female sentience in favor of the animation of corpses creates a compelled relationship between the male speakers and the female objects that can be likened to the form of the dramatic monologue itself. For example, Valiska Gregory asserts:

The rhetorical dynamics of his monologues, which metaphorically force themselves on their readers, parallel the dynamics of sexual violence. Sexual conflict is, of course, largely about domination, and Browning's sustained preoccupation with how to force readers to listen to his highly personal lyric outpourings echoes the structures of one of the most intimate forms of violence.

In short, Browning's monologues create a dynamic of forced intimacy. (495-496)

As readers are forced to adopt the perspective of the speaker, so the female object is expected to succumb to the desires of the speaker or be subjected to bodily harm.

Likewise, though we begin with a female's corpse instead of ending with one in "Evelyn Hope," Christ's criticism shows that death can be interpreted as a punishment Browning's male characters are able to inflict upon their female counterparts as penance for disrupting their masculine ideals. Death can also be seen as "a denial of [male] possibilities" as the third stanza shifts from "...the unlived life of Evelyn Hope to the unlived life of the aging speaker" (Christ 397). For example, though the speaker admits that "It was not her time to love" (Browning 12), indicating that he knows she was too young to love him in this life, they still have the opportunity to love each other in the afterlife when she "...will wake, and remember, and understand" (Browning 56) his confessions of desire over her corpse. The speaker continues to admit he has loved Evelyn though he is three times her age and she lived her life, as far as he can

tell, in purity (Browning 18-48). So, unlike Porphyria and the Duchess, Evelyn is lamented as pure (the Victorian feminine ideal) by the male speaker, which is part of the reason why he desires her so much even after her death. Therefore, instead of enacting a form of female erasure in the hands of male dictation seen in “Porphyria’s Lover” and “My Last Duchess” as both male speakers craft creative renderings of female corpses (Porphyria as an almost puppet and the Duchess as a portrait), the speaker of “Evelyn Hope” acknowledges an afterlife in which Evelyn might choose to be with him, despite all earthly limitations. Yet, again, desire is understood strictly through a male lens, and though Evelyn is not punished by the speaker, she is denied a voice regarding desire as the reader is only permitted to see her as a corpse instead of a sentient being.

With those highly patriarchal, oppressive, and violent perspectives being expressed, however, it is also important to refer back to more of the gendered dynamics described in the letters. There, Browning accepts EBB as more of a lover and collaborator at times than as his subordinate. The restrictive form of dominant violent masculinity portrayed in his dramatic monologues seems quite different than Browning’s ideas of gender performativity we see in the letters during the Brownings’ courtship. One way in which to get a glimpse of this more flexible Browning is through his later poems published after the letters and his collaboration and relationship with EBB. Some of his poems from *Men and Women*, published during the same time as EBB’s *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, offer a slightly different view of Browning’s ideas than seen in the dramatic monologues. However, I assert that it is not an altogether different set of ideas, but rather a softer, more romanticized version of the same male privilege and domination. To explain this more, I will be turning to “Any Wife to Any Husband” and “By the Fireside.”

In both “Any Wife to any Husband,” and “By the Fireside,” there is one recurring theme of gender and power relations connected to images of assimilation. As described by the poems, any power granted to the woman is only done so through the merging of her body with the man. Furthermore, these moments of assimilation are seen through both the male and female perspective, though all attributed to Browning. In “Any Wife to any Husband,” the reader has the unique perspective of viewing Browning’s thoughts on gender roles and power from the perspective of a female speaker. So, the poem reveals Browning’s thoughts on a female’s role within a heterosexual marriage because he situates himself as the wife speaking to her husband. Throughout the poem, Browning establishes a hierarchy of power that excuses men from unfaithful behavior while painting women as willingly submissive and steadfast in their devotion. By having the female speaker say, “And yet thou art the nobler of us two / What dare I dream of, that thou canst not do, / Outstripping my ten small steps with one stride?” (19.1-3). Here, Browning notes the obvious imbalance of power between men and women, writing that men are “nobler” than women, or of higher quality, and admitting that men envelope women’s effort by the mobility they are able to achieve with less effort. However, though men are supposedly “nobler,” Browning shows the differences in men and women’s faithfulness by describing how if the husband were to die first, the wife would be “...free to take and light [her] lamp, and go / Into [his] tomb, and shut the door and sit, seeing [his] face...” (17. 3-5). Here, women are portrayed as faithful and steadfast through the end of life, while men are permitted to seek new company. Again from the wife’s perspective, Browning writes:

Love so, then, if thou wilt! Give all thou canst

Away to the new faces—disentranced,

(Say it and think it) obdurate no more:

Re-issue looks and words from the old mint,

Pass them afresh, no matter whose the print

Image and superscription once they bore (15.1-6)

Here, the “new faces” refers to new women or new love interests, and the recycled words from the “old mint” refers to pre-scripted affections once belonging to the wife. The woman, though she laments what is happening, knows she is powerless to stop it. The narrator also admits, “I have but to be by thee, and thy hand / Will never let mine go, nor heart withstand / The beating of my heart to reach its place” (2.7-9). The male’s presence is active and dominant here, controlling the woman’s hand and heart to be joined with his, but not equal to it. The only equality shown in the poem comes later, as the husband and wife’s “inmost beings met and mixed,” (9.2), providing agency and status to the woman through the man.

Yet, “By the Fireside” is written from Browning’s own, male perspective, it reveals the same opinion that a woman’s power and/or agency is only built through her assimilation with a man. Browning questions, “Oh heart, my own, oh eyes, mine too, / Whom else could I dare look backward for?” (21.2-3). Though he acknowledges a power gap due to the fact he must look “backward” to find her instead of looking beside him, the images of assimilation are already present as he refers to her heart and eyes as his own. He then goes on to describe the process of their souls meeting and mixing as he writes:

My own, see where the years conduct!

At first, ‘twas something our two souls

Should mix as mists do; each is sucked

In each now: on, the new stream rolls,

Whatever rocks obstruct. (26.1-5)

The process of fusion described in this stanza seems slightly different than the one in the previous poem. Where the man and woman's assimilation is actively caused by the man in the previous poem, the event described here seems more balanced as "each is sucked in each now," with the man and woman's essence dependent upon the other. Yet, this vision of equality is unsettled later in the poem when a version of equality is seemingly met. Browning writes:

Hither we walked then, side by side,
Arm in arm and cheek to cheek,
And still I questioned or replied,
While my heart, convulsed to really speak,
Lay choking in its pride. (33.1-5)

Though this might finally seem like a moment of balanced power by the initial phrases "arm in arm" and "cheek to cheek," I propose that the addition of the word "still" signals a turn that makes the bottom portion of the stanza more sinister. While this poem could be read as Browning taking pride in his proximity to EBB, "still," seems to refer back to Browning's prior feelings of superiority expressed in the beginning of the poem before EBB gained status through the meshing of their persons. Browning singles out his heart from the fusion, unable to "speak" because his heart "lay choking in its pride." In other words, in one of the last images of the poem where it seems that the man and woman have reached a balance of power, the man is left feeling prideful as if he is better than the situation he created for himself, though unable to admit it. Furthermore, the violent language used like "convulsed" and "choking" convey a real threat to the male's agency as he is rendered unable to speak. The image of unity we begin with in the beginning of the excerpt gradually creates a loss of control for the male speaker—a loss heart finds hard to accept.

So, while the images of fusion and equality present a stark contrast from the images of violent female subordination in the monologues, Browning still creates themes of male privilege and male domination. With this being said, it leaves the question of how to understand Browning's different expressions of male authority and collaboration across the letters and his poetry. It does seem that Browning's most extreme portrayals of male domination presented in the dramatic monologues published before his correspondence with EBB get softened and romanticized by the collaboration between the Brownings' and the growth of their relationship. However, there is still clearly more of a willingness to step out of roles of power on Browning's part in the letters during their courtship than in the poems that resulted from that courtship. This could, in part, be attributed to the tendency to fall back into more prescriptive roles of marriage for the Victorian era as the time of their courtship closes and their life together begins. Where the roles of courtship might be more fluid and open to the performativity seen in the letters, the demands of marriage seem to have caused the Brownings to slip back into more traditional gender roles, not only evident by Browning's poetry, but EBB's as well.

EBB and Active Agency

Unlike Browning's poetry which uses dramatic monologue to work within Victorian gendered ideals by attributing deviant desire to a fictional speaker, EBB's sonnet sequence *Sonnets from the Portuguese* can be read as challenging her gendered restrictions by allowing for the articulation of her sexual desires more symbolically, most often through the use of figurative language and metaphor, most often in reference to her body and Browning's body. While Browning uses dramatic monologue to explore the psychological nature of love, EBB relies heavily on metaphor to express both her sexual desire and perceptions of herself in relation to Browning. In this sense, EBB is an interesting figure in poetry because she was a female poet

writing heavily amatory sonnets during a time period in which women were highly scrutinized and judged for their romantic and sexual desires. Though the sonnets reveal her desires, they also provide commentary on women's constant struggle for power. So, desire proves to be a confusing component of love as the longing expressed within her poetry seems to both support and challenge those gender roles throughout the progression of the sonnet sequence.

Sonnets from the Portuguese, the sonnet sequence I have chosen to focus on, are semi-autobiographical in the sense that they document EBB's feelings toward Browning. Lois Untermeyer shows that these poems are not Portuguese originals, but, rather, embody a title given to them, in part, in order to distract from the "...unimpeded confessions of an impassioned heart" (Untermeyer xxiv). With how revealing the poems are in terms of desire and self-perception, however, it is easy to understand why EBB would be so hesitant to publish them during the Victorian era. According to Untermeyer, a Browning scholar who anthologized a collection of their love poems, EBB "...held [Browning] by the shoulder to prevent his turning to look at her, and at the same time pushed [the sonnets] into the pocket of his coat" (xxiii). As the myth continues, she then insisted that he tear them to pieces if they did not please him (Untermeyer xxiii). The poems, after all, were composed before their marriage, so, to the Victorian public, they show the desires of an un-wed, Victorian woman, and to Browning, they revealed her thoughts in the language of poetry that the two of them shared together. Writing in opposition to the ideal Victorian woman described in Deborah Gorham's *The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal*, EBB's erotic images "...sacrifice the maidenly modesty so essential to femininity" (Gorham 53) in the Victorian period. However, EBB clearly uses her writing, especially throughout *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, as a method of understanding newfound

desire, recognizing her restraints as a woman, and actively resisting male domination within her relationship.

I have chosen to focus my analysis on *Sonnets from the Portuguese* not only because they help to tell the story of the Brownings' relationship, but also because they show a natural progression in theme that maps how EBB is thinking through shifting power dynamics and societal expectations and the varied forms of agency women might stake out under Victorian ideals of gendered power. Because of the male-dominated system that naturalized female subordination in heterosexual relationships, EBB's journey to acquiring more active agency may not look like an exertion of power at first glance. Rather, it is important to see how EBB negotiated agency in a patriarchal system designed to render her powerless by actively choosing to perform her inferior position to negotiate more control in her relationship and over her body and pleasure, both sexually and romantically. I agree with Margaret Homans's essay "The Powers of Powerlessness: The Courtships of Elizabeth Barrett and Queen Victoria" (1994), claims that "Barrett [could] construct [her] own version of female [authority] only by means of the ideology of female submission (245)." This means she was forced to work within the system by performing her subjected position as a means of autonomy because that strategy was a possible way for women to create more agency for themselves within the confines of a structure stacked against them. Homans continues, "...Barrett [exerts] active agency in posing as inferior and [acts] out an ideological script prepared beyond [her] control (245). In choosing to perform her submissive role in the relationship (both by constantly referring to Browning's authority as a male writer as seen in the letters and through the development of her sexual identity as seen in the sonnets analyzed below), she is able to negotiate upward mobility in her relationship to a position that seems more equitable though it may never have been.

As I have previously discussed, the idea of gender complementariness that seemingly works to give women a place of “power” as a complement to men actually just creates hidden opportunities for subordination, naturalizing male dominance over women. I argue that EBB recognizes this subordination and chooses to address it directly throughout *Sonnets from the Portuguese*. However, her response to her blatant lack of power is not to try to take it by force. Instead, *Sonnets from the Portuguese* show a progression from a struggle for agency and questions of inadequacy to upward mobility through chosen subservience and performed femininity that produced a subtle rise in capacity made possible because of her social status. The beginning sonnets show EBB wrestling with questions of the self and the relationship between her and Browning’s bodies. Then, there is a shift. The middle sonnets I selected focus more on transformation (or, “transfiguration”, as she writes) that shows her beginning to close the gaps of power and to test the boundaries of what is moral/accepted in terms of societal expectations. She questions what embodied experiences and aspects of her body have changed/will still change, and what aspects remain the same as she enters into not only a romantic, but sexual partnership. Next, there is a shift in thinking as we get closer to the end of the sonnets where, through erotic metaphor and the language of sex and desire, her thinking seems to change from considering Browning as someone better to recognizing Browning’s naturalized power over her and the revelation of her choice to consciously allow for him to continue to exert that power in an act of willing subservience. Finally, the last couple of sonnets show her reaching that place of perceived equality and taking comfort in the give-and-take relationship she ends up sharing with Browning.

“Sonnet 3” established the clear divide between Browning and EBB—differences with EBB acknowledges. She writes, “Unlike are we, unlike, O princely Heart! / Unlike our uses and

our destinies” (1-2). This is one of the first instances of EBB referring to Browning as “princely,” or using other royal language to describe the gap in power between Browning and herself. Additionally, she refers to their “uses” and “destinies” being different, calling back Ruskin and Ellis’ references to both separate spheres and gender complementariness. She goes on to both acknowledge the watchful eyes of society and degrade her own image in relation to them, writing “With gages from a hundred brighter eyes / Than tear even can make mine, to play thy part / Of chief musician” (7-8). This sonnet is also one of the first instances in which EBB creates metaphors for herself conveying her body as lesser than in both relation to Browning and others as well. Writing that others still have brighter eyes than she does, even through the glistening of her tears, indicates the effort she puts forth into elevating her appearance for Browning, her “chief musician,” while she views herself as just “A poor, tired, wandering singer, singing through / The dark...” (9-10). This image of wandering in the dark as a poor singer, in juxtaposition to Browning’s position of “chief musician,” shows power she feels he has over her, only to be balanced in the afterlife when “...Death must dig the level where these agree” (14). In fact, this imagery of EBB shrouded in darkness calls back the flower metaphor from her letters in which she describes all aspects of herself, aside from her poetry, as a root, fit for the dark ground. These images of nature and darkness are prevalent throughout the sonnet sequence, indicating both the separation she feels from the world above ground (or into the public sphere) from the shut doors of her sickroom. This establishes a pattern of using the language of disability and blindness to describe feelings of isolation, further creating more noticeable gaps in the power balance between EBB and Browning through her self-abnegation and separation from him.

“Sonnet 6” continues to work through these themes of unbalanced power. EBB writes, “Yet I feel that I shall stand / Henceforward in thy shadow” (1-2) in reference to Browning,

again using language to create not only a visual of unbalanced power as Browning takes the lead position while EBB imagines herself behind, but also another image of EBB covered in darkness and “shadow.” However, though she acknowledges this difference is there, she goes on to recognize the pathway out of seclusion her relationship with Browning has afforded, writing, “...Nevermore / Alone upon the threshold of my door / Of individual life, I shall command / The uses of my soul, nor lift my hand” (2-5). In referring to the “door of individual life,” she recognizes the separation between not only the personal and public sphere, but also the individual separation she has endured between the enclosed space of her sickroom and the rest of the domestic space within the home. To further explain the function of the sickroom, Amanda Caleb writes that “the sickroom is a space that separates the invalid from the healthy space of the house and defines the invalid body as other” (1). So, if “the door of individual life,” she is referring to is the door of the sickroom in her father’s house, she recognizes her choice to blend her life and experiences with her illness with Browning.

This language of illness and separation is further expressed in the following lines where she refers to the “uses of her soul” in juxtaposition to the functions of her body. In creating a distinction between the “uses of her soul” and “the lifting of her hand,” she calls forth our understanding of bodyminds once more. I agree with Margaret Price’s assertion that, “In short, the claim that identity emerges interactionally is incomplete if one overlooks the fact that not everyone can access interactions equally” (4). So, in this instance, EBB articulates what she considers to be her new identity by considering the functions of her bodymind in relation to Browning. It is important to consider how her physical and mental interactions might differ, but ultimately work together to create an emerging power and control evident by the use of the verb “command.”

Finally, the language towards the end of the sonnet seeks to begin to close the gaps between herself and Browning established in previous sonnets and lines. Though she recognizes the separation of spheres once again by saying, “The widest land / Doom takes to part us” (8-9), referring to the distance between and limited access to Browning in the public sphere, she goes on to discuss a blending of power that is created between their two bodies as lovers. She continues from the last line, saying, “The widest land / Doom takes to part us, leaves thy heart in mine / With pulses that beat double” (8-10). Additionally, she discusses this doubling further by writing, “What I do / And what I dream include thee, as the wine / Must taste of its own grapes” (10-12) and “[God] hears that name of thine, / And sees within my eyes the tears of two” (13-14). This repeated discussion of fusion between herself and Browning make up the first instances in which the reader can see a bridge begin to form between the Brownings’ different worlds (public versus private sphere) and a lessening of the gap in power. The language of embodiment used (“pulses that beat double” and “within my eyes the tears of two”) also speak to the new embodied experiences EBB has begun to experience through Browning, either in terms of actual physical touch between the two or in terms of EBB’s experiences in seeing the world differently through Browning’s lived experiences he shares with her. However, this lessening in the gaps of power between EBB and Browning only provides EBB “power” through the assimilation of her bodymind with Browning’s, further revealing the depths of male privilege and naturalized female subordination. Within the patriarchal system in which EBB is trapped, the only way for women to rise is through men. So, by writing about the ways in which their bodies join in a heterosexual union, she does gain more agency, but only through her acceptance of her role in relation to Browning. To further explain this phenomenon, Claire Jarvis explains a term she coins

“exquisite masochism.” Where masochism is traditionally understood by its relationship to sadism, exquisite masochism, according to Jarvis, is

...entirely separate from sadism and...organized into scenes with carefully ordered roles and accouterments. [These] scenes feature sexual relationships that develop through ongoing negotiations that involve partners’ persistent reexamination of their sexual and romantic connections. (11)

As EBB evaluates and negotiates the role of her body in reference to Browning and his body, it is not the case that she suddenly gains power from her disempowered state. Rather, she uses sex and these descriptions of bodily assimilation as a platform to negotiate the bodily connections between herself and Browning, actively claiming more agency through those connections.

Then, from this concentration on separation, assimilation, and embodiment, there is a more dramatic shift than the subtle blending that appears in the last few lines of “Sonnet 6.” The middle sonnets I selected focus more on transformation—or, “transfiguration,” as EBB words it in “Sonnet 10”—that shows her beginning to close the gaps of power and start to test the boundaries of what is deemed moral or what is more widely accepted in terms of perceived normalcy and Victorian expectations. In the following sonnets, EBB questions what embodied experiences and aspects of her body have changed or will still change as well as which aspects have remained constant.

“Sonnet 7” opens with what seems to be a summary of the changes that have taken place thus far in EBB’s mind regarding new experiences with the outside world as she writes:

The face of all the world is changed, I think,
Since first I heard the footsteps of thy soul
Move still, oh, still beside me, as they stole

Betwixt me and the dreadful outer brink
Of obvious death, where I, who thought to sink
Was caught up into love, and taught the whole
Of life in a new rhythm. (1-7)

By writing “the face of all the world is changed,” she personifies the solely domestic space she has been accustomed to by noting a change in the expression of its visage, again reminding readers of her circumstances being a particular embodied experience unique to her position in society and in conjunction with her illness. As she discusses the boundary between life and death, the new realm of life she is “caught up into” creates an image of rising into a new sphere that mirrors a kind of new body “of life in a new rhythm.” Since previously her discussions of “rhythm” and “beating” have referred to the heartbeats of both herself and Browning, this new space of life situated higher than the “outer brink of death” evoke a feeling of learning a new space and new functions of the body within that space in which she has been able to access a portion of male privilege by choosing to perform her submissive role and gain more access through the fusion of their bodies.

She continues discussing the boundaries of space, by writing how Browning stands “Betwixt [her] and the dreadful outer brink of obvious death,” a reference to the isolation she experienced within the sickroom and the danger she faced of succumbing to death, both literally and figuratively, due to her illness and the obstacle it created between her and the liveliness of the public sphere, until Browning’s presence in her life “taught her the whole of life in new rhythm,” or prompted her take a new perspective. Here, the verb “taught” shows an important distinction between the prior understanding that Browning *saved* EBB, a completely dominant and active role on Browning’s part and what I propose should be the new understanding of their

relationship; though Browning may have taught EBB new things and exposed her to different perspectives, those new discoveries were not forced upon her throughout no action of her own. Instead, EBB chooses to learn and accept those new insights as a “new rhythm,” assuming an active role in the transformation that occurs.

The same theme of transformation is prevalent throughout “Sonnet 9” and “Sonnet 10” as well. For example, in “Sonnet 9,” the reader can see EBB struggling to weigh the way of life she had always known against her awakening desire. She begins by questioning:

Can it be right to give what I can give
To let thee sit beneath the fall of tears
As salt as mine, and hear the sighing years
Re-sighing on my lips renunciative
Through those infrequent smiles which fail to live
For all thy adjurations? (1-6)

Her questions of “Can it be right?” seem to be a question of Victorian notions of morality, and given this sonnet’s position before later erotic imagery, seems to specifically be a question about purity. Furthermore, she wrestles again with fears of inadequacy by emphasizing “tears as salt as mine,” as if salt is somehow a tainted substance that comprises her tears more than others. Later in the sonnet, she goes on to say, “Oh my fears, / That this can scarce be right! / We are not peers, / So to be lovers” (6-8). She again questions morality and hints back to the uneven balance of power between herself and Browning, questioning how they could be considered “lovers” when they aren’t even “peers,” or individuals from the same world on the same level. This helps readers to understand how any active expression of power on EBB’s part must be exacted through her relationship with Browning because the structure of gender complementariness

prevents real equity in heteronormative relationships because of the women's naturalized subordination.

However, she still makes reference to her lack of agency in comparison to him and the questions in morality that uneven balance presents, and she concludes, "I will not soil thy purple with my dust. / Nor breathe my poison on thy Venice-glass, / Nor give thee any love—which were unjust" (11-13). This is the first of several instances in the sonnet sequence that EBB refers to Browning's "purple," a color that calls images to the mind of wealth, royalty, and high status. Yet, she juxtaposes that image of Browning with her self-image of "dust," a metaphor that has several implications. First, "dust" can be seen as something that contaminates clean or pure spaces. This again refers to EBB's battle between the purity expected of Victorian women and the sexual awakening *Sonnets of the Portuguese* describes. Furthermore, the image of dust also calls back EBB's recurring metaphor from the letters that compares her poetry to the petals of a flower and the rest of her to the root. "Dust" is reminiscent of those underground images, part of the earth and the darkness. Yet, the theme of transformation this sonnet is a part of further suggests my earlier assertion that EBB's feelings of inadequacy described by the flower metaphor do not take into account the "earth's/ground's/root's/dust's" role as the foundation for the growth of new life, something that is taking place beyond the surface of what EBB is describing.

"Sonnet 10" continues these metaphors of transformation as EBB writes:

I stand transfigured, glorified aright,
With conscience of the new rays that proceed
Out of my face toward thine. There's nothing low
In love when love the lowest: meanest creatures

Who love God, God accepts while loving so.

And what I *feel*, across the inferior features

Of what I *am*, doth flash itself, and show

How that great work of Love enhances Nature's. (7-14)

First of all, in choosing the term “transfigured” instead of “transformed,” EBB describes a deeper change in which she feels not only altered into something *new*, but something *better*, or higher in beauty and spirituality than if she had chosen the latter term. This image of exaltation is further created by EBB’s mention of also feeling “glorified,” a complete shift from the language of inferiority she has been using to describe herself thus far. This shift continues as EBB describes “the new rays that proceed out of [her] face toward [Browning’s].” This brings to mind a new image regarding the shifting power balance between herself and Browning. Because EBB is so well-versed in using flowers, in particular, as metaphor, the idea of sunflowers is called to mind from this line. In nature, sunflowers naturally face the direction of the sun, and, when they are unable to find the sun, they face each other. So, in this metaphor as EBB describes her awareness of the “rays” coming from her face, she is, at the very least, finally level with Browning (as if they were sunflowers, facing each other), if not above him (with herself being situated as the sun). This shift is important because it is the first instance in which EBB has created an image of power between herself and Browning where she is not situated lower than him. To conclude this change in perspective, she describes the “inferior features of what she is” in comparison to the elevated features of what she is able to “feel,” showing “How that great work of love enhances Nature’s,” or how the idea of earned equality within a Victorian heterosexual union enhances the nature of what existed before in herself. In other words, in a situation that has continuously worked to disempower her and oppress her body, it is through the newfound agency that she

fought to claim over the course of ten sonnets (not simply through Browning's love) that she finds transfiguration.

Next, after this gradual shift from EBB considering herself lower than Browning to working through the revelation that she is not, EBB further develops her autonomy through the use of erotic metaphor and language of sex and desire. Because women's power in the Victorian era takes a different shape than what men's blatant power looks like, I argue that what might seem like sexual submission in the following sonnets is actually an expression of EBB's power to use her position to actively perform her expected roles a way of negotiating agency within her union. This commentary takes place first through the shift in how EBB discusses her body. Whereas before she refers to the perceived limitations of her body and the effects of the illness on it, the following sonnets show EBB begin to refer to her body in terms of sex and pleasure, which begins with her drawing the distinction between what she wants physically and mentally. This is a dangerous split because of the bodymind's innate connection.

For example, "Sonnet 14" begins with EBB expressing the desire for a union built on love itself and not love of the physical. In "Sonnet 14," EBB writes, "If thou must love me, let it be for nought / Except for love's sake only" (1-2). To begin, the Victorians were renowned for believing marriage and the creation of a family to be the true sign of success. Gorham writes, "While romantic love had ideological power, middle-class values also decreed that marriage be seen as an economic arrangement as well as an affair of the emotions...marriage was...their only acceptable destiny" (Gorham 53). Therefore, marrying for love's sake alone was a difficult task in a world where there was so much pressure to move up in the social ranks. Additionally, Tosh shows us that "sexual activity enhanced masculine status, but the complete transition to manhood depended on marriage" (Tosh 108). Though the idea of marrying someone for reasons other than

simply being in love was completely acceptable for men, even if only to complete that transition into a gentlemanly station, EBB works through her fears and desires in this sonnet regarding emotional intimacy by asking that Browning love her for a reason not dependent on what it could do for status nor dependent on the function or features of her body. In doing so, she works to create a foundation of emotional intimacy before plunging into the physical intimacy provided by the body in subsequent sonnets. For example, In “Sonnet 16,” she writes:

Because thou art more noble and like a king,
Thou canst prevail against my fears and fling
Thy purple round me, till my heart shall grow
Too close against thine heart henceforth to know
How it shook when alone. Why conquering
May prove as lordly and complete a thing
In lifting upward, as in crushing low!
And as a vanquished soldier yields his sword
To one who lifts him from the bloody earth,
Even so, Beloved, I at last record,
Here ends my strife. (2-12)

This is the third instance in which EBB refers to Browning’s “purple,” or his kingly or royal presence that creates a sense of service in the relationship. Also, by writing “till my heart shall grow / too close against thine heart henceforth to know / How it shook when alone” (4-5), she evokes the language of bodily entanglement present within the first sonnets, only now leading into more sexual language. Though it may seem projection to assume that her word choice is revealing her sensuality and tenderness, in Victorian society, subtle references could go a long

way. Yet, the erotic metaphors are not enough on their own to show EBB's claim to power. Instead, it is what the erotic images allow readers to see taking place, a sexual inversion that Mermin shows us can:

...arise from the clashing of apparently incompatible roles...Traditionally in English love poetry the man loves and speaks, the woman is beloved and silent. Insofar as we perceive her [EBB] the lover, we are made uneasy both by seeing a woman in that role and by the implications about the beloved: the man seems to be put in the woman's place. (352)

In a story like the Brownings' that has been so built on the idea of gender complementariness—that male and female must be different in order to complete the other, thereby naturalizing the subservience of the woman—seeing a female writer (a being doubly oppressed by male-dominated spaces) expressing not only sexual desire but power through sexual experiences, can be jarring. Yet, past this feeling of surprise are the moments we can really see EBB's unique shapes of agency emerge.

For instance, later in "Sonnet 16," the terms "conquering" and "vanquished," work together to indicate a sense of EBB being overcome or taken control of by Browning in a sexual nature, though the last three lines of the poem prove EBB's active role in this vanquishing. She writes, "If *thou* invite me forth, / I rise above abasement at the word. / Make thy love larger to enlarge my worth" (12-14). First of all, it is important to note Leighton's claim that EBB's work is some of the first in which Victorian readers hear about a woman's sexual desire from a female voice, an act considered immodest, and, therefore, unfeminine. Furthermore, Dorothy Mermin's criticism shows how this could be doubly troubling for a Victorian audience, because "Insofar as we perceive her as the lover, we are made uneasy both by seeing a woman in that role and by the

implications about the beloved” (Mermin 351). In saying that she rises above “abasement” or humiliation, EBB is acknowledging the discomfort readers might have from this admission of desire and strategically setting herself above it before the last line ultimately expresses the summary of her desire: “Make thy love larger to enlarge my worth” (14). This line, though also a literal plea of love continued from the hopes of “Sonnet 14” is also a precursor of the phallic imagery present in “Sonnet 22,” creating an image of erection by asking “Make thy love larger” (14). However, it is the second half of that line where EBB’s power really emerges. For example, Melissa Buron’s criticism shows that a woman’s place in Victorian society was completely dependent upon that of a man, as “Respectable women in Victorian England were either identified by marriage or by spinsterhood...their identity depended on the presence or absence of a man” (Buron). At first glance it might seem like EBB’s words, “Make they love larger to enlarge my worth” (14), demonstrates that in her desire to be with him, she fails to push against the notion that a man is “noble and like a king” (2), therefore admitting her worth comes from him. However, if this moment is interpreted as a sexual one, the “enlargement of her worth” can be seen as a new opportunity for her to execute her feminine power through sex, an opportunity only provided by the “enlargement” of his own love. Though she is able to exact more agency as a result of her submissive performance through sex, it is still evident that her only real power is coming from the ways in which she is gaining power through his presence. Yet, that choice is an active role on EBB’s part, not passive as the typical savior-narrative has led readers to believe.

She continues to foster this sense of performative submissiveness in “Sonnet 18” when she writes about *giving* him a piece of herself. She writes, “I never gave a lock of hair away / To a man, dearest, except this to thee” (1-2). While presenting a lock of hair to a lover can be seen as a sign of affection, it is also an act of submission that could be a synecdoche for sex, an act

which also requires her to “give” parts of her body to him. She urges Browning to “Take it” (5), as her “day of youth” (5) is over, and she assures him he will have the justification of finding it “pure” (12-13), all choices in wording that allude to chastity. This performance of feminine purity calls back strategies for performing one’s subjected position for more agency in the relationship as also described in Joan Riviere’s “Womanliness as Masquerade” (1929). Riviere writes that the aim of performed womanliness is “...not merely to secure reassurance by evoking friendly feelings towards her in the man; it [is] chiefly to make sure of safety by masquerading as guiltless and innocent” (306). Since chastity is considered a feminine ideal in Victorian society, EBB’s assurances of purity is another way in which she performs that ideal as a way to gain more agency with Browning.

However, if these examples of her desire have been more subtle, the examples in “Sonnet 22” are forthright. She writes:

When our two souls stand up erect and strong,
Face to face, silent, drawing nigh and nigher,
Until the lengthening wings break into fire
At either curved point, -- what bitter wrong
Can the earth do to us, that we should not long
Be here contented? (1-6)

In these lines, EBB seems to be yearning for the kind of love that is measured by equality, a love that she works toward throughout the sonnet sequence. She describes the kind of setting in which their souls are face-to-face, upright, and “strong,” desire that should be almost impossible to obtain in a society that places women’s values in terms of men. However, when we look at these lines in terms of sex and sexual desire, we are able to see how she is revising fantasies of

submissiveness by expressing desire for a more active role in sex. She chooses words such as “erect,” “lengthening,” and “curved” to describe a mutual longing, but the images erecting power and entangled in the images of sexual erection, indicating that we, as readers, cannot follow EBB to one place without venturing through the other. This plane of sex becomes the first space that does “permit / A place to stand and love in for a day, / With darkness and the death-hour rounding it” (13-14). So, though the familiar darkness EBB has written herself in numerous times before surrounds her, it finally isn’t permitted to enter the plane of sex that affords her freedom “to stand and love.”

Finally, the budding sexual imagery via metaphors of nature comes to a quite literal release in “Sonnet 29.” She invites Browning to “Rustle thy boughs and set thy trunk all bare, / And let these bands of greenery which insphere thee / Drop heavily down,--burst, shattered, everywhere!” (9-11). This language of orgasm (“burst, shattered, everywhere”) not only does its part to bring closure to the building sexual tension throughout the sonnets thus far, but also does its part to illustrate the power and freedom EBB has found. In a system of gender complementariness where male power is active and female power is meant to supplement male power, this ending image of EBB actively inviting Browning into orgasm is a reversal of power as EBB, as opposed to Browning, is in a more dominant role because of the relationship of her body to his and what it causes to occur. So, a sonnet that begins with “I think of thee” (1), ends with, “I do not think of thee—I am too near thee” (14). In other words, where there used to be a widening power gap, EBB now views herself so near to Browning, a feminine extension of his male privilege, that there seems to be a balance of power now where it used to be unbalanced. Therefore, while EBB does not gain power on her own because of a patriarchal system which makes that practically impossible, there is something to be said for how EBB realizes the

obvious imbalance of power between herself and Browning in the beginning of the sonnet sequence and seeks to close that gap. By making a conscious choice and actively exacting her bodymind to perform her submissive role as a woman, largely through sexual imagery, she is able to gain more agency and create more mobility for herself within their union.

Overall, while the Brownings' letters showed a relationship more willing to move in and out of stereotypical gender roles during the course of their courtship, the Brownings' poetry shows a settling back into those stereotypical roles for different reasons. Browning's poetry shows his perceptions of male privilege and domination made commonplace by gender complementariness and its effect on Victorian heterosexual marriages; EBB's poetry, on the other hand, shows her accepting stereotypical female roles within a heterosexual union for the purpose of more agency and mobility within that union. This analysis is quite different from the imagined pasts and savior narratives that have been adopted in regards to the Brownings, and a further analysis of the issues surrounding this aspect of the couple's cultural afterlife occurs in the following coda.

CODA

As I briefly mentioned in the opening and closing chapters of this thesis, the Brownings' love story has quite the cultural afterlife. A simple Google search for "The Brownings' Love Story" will pull up articles from various places such as *The Atlantic*, "ThoughtCo.com," and "History.com" detailing the romance of two Victorian poets who found love in each other. The article in *The Atlantic* refers to the Brownings as "one of literary history's most beloved power couples (Smith n.p.). In fact, according to Baylor's website, the Armstrong Browning library located at Baylor University in Waco, Texas, houses the world's largest collection of material on Browning and EBB, including their original letters and manuscripts, books from their library, music and portraits based off of their work, secondary criticism, and many editions of their poetry. Yet, the library does not only serve as a study hall, museum, or place for research and instruction. It is also a popular venue for weddings and bridal portraits, and reservations are usually needed several months in advance. The most popular site for weddings and portraits is the McLean Foyer of Meditation, a large foyer with "marble columns, black walnut paneling, and three cathedral windows. Its focal point is the Cloister of the Clasp'd Hands, an area that has become known as the most romantic spot on the Baylor campus," (Baylor n.p.) because of Harriet Hosmer's cast of the Brownings' hands kept there. Though decorations are permitted in the foyer, no decorations are permitted in the Cloister of the Clasp'd Hands in order to preserve it. While some couples choose the venue solely based on architecture, it is the Brownings' story that keeps many paying the \$2,500 booking fee for their big day.

However, as this thesis has shown, "power" within this "power couple" was not equal, and their highly romanticized union was rooted in Victorian patriarchal Victorian ideals that required ongoing negotiations of power to ultimately establish. One of the main goals of this

thesis has been to dismantle the problematic heterosexual savior narratives constructed around the Brownings' relationship and to show the active role EBB had in creating a different life for herself. In so many of the stories told about the Brownings, EBB is depicted as a helpless woman, limited by her disability, society's expectations for women, and the rules of her tyrannical father, creating the illusion that EBB was a type of "damsel in distress," lying in her bed waiting for Browning to come save her. One of the most concrete examples of this is Rudolf Besier's play-turned-movie *The Barretts of Wimpole Street*, that dramatizes EBB's experiences living with her illness inside a house in which she and her siblings were forbidden to fall in love. The very beginning of the play addresses her illness and the problematic, fictionalized perceptions of it when the doctor tells her, "Hm—yes. It's this increasingly low vitality of yours that worries me. No life in you—none" (Besier 18). This first image of EBB containing "no life" is juxtaposed by EBB's dialogue after meeting Browning. She says:

My life had reached its lowest ebb. I was worn out, and hope was dead. Then you came...Robert, do you know what you have done for me? I have laughed when Dr. Chambers said that I had healed myself by wanting to live. He was right! Oh, he was right! But he little knew what lay behind his words! I wanted to live—eagerly, desperately, passionately—and only because life meant you—you—and the sight of your face, and the sound of your voice, and the touch of your hand. Oh, and so much more than that! Because of you the air once more was sweet to breathe, and all the world was good and green again. (Besier)

In this interpretation, Browning is portrayed as not only EBB's savior, but her cure and the reason she "healed herself by wanting to live." However, these curative mindsets are extremely

problematic and are part of the reason why this savior narrative is able to persist. In discussing these curative temporalities, Alison Kafer writes:

Futurity has often been framed in curative terms, a time frame that casts disabled people as out of time, or as obstacles to the arc of progress. In [a] disabled state, [people] are not part of the dominant narratives of progress, but once rehabilitated, normalized, and hopefully cured, [they] play a starring role: the sign of progress, the proof of development, the triumph over the mind or body. (29)

In Besier's play, EBB is written as "an obstacle to her own arc of progress" (Kafer 29).

However, the audience is supposed to believe that, through Browning, she suddenly gains the ability to initiate her cure and step into her starring role as one half of this literary power couple, healed by sheer will and heterosexual love. Furthermore, this is another example in which she seems to gain agency only through association with Browning, which later turns into assimilation. Whereas the Brownings' poetry shows this fusion as metaphorical, Besier's play takes it to a literal extreme. As Browning takes EBB's hands in Act III, he says:

No listen. Give me your hands. I've more life than is good for one man—it seethes and races in me. Up to now I've spent a little of all that surplus energy in creating imaginary men and women. But there's still so much that I've no use for but to give! Mayn't I give it to you? Don't you feel new life tingling and prickling up your fingers and arms right into your heart and brain? (Besier)

Here, the audience is meant to believe in a literal transfer of power or energy that travels from Browning's body into EBB, curing her and providing her with enough strength to rise from her bed at the end of the scene, a feat only shown on stage as a result of Browning and his effects on EBB (Besier 68). This scene shows how in these fictionalized accounts of the Brownings,

disability enters as a magnifying principle that shows the believed functions of bodies under ideas of a one-flesh doctrine and gender complementariness. Kafer writes, “We need to imagine crip futures because disabled people are continually being written out of the future, rendered as the sign of the future no one wants” (42). Besier’s play, which I am referencing here as just one of many problematic imagined pasts, quite literally writes EBB out of the Brownings’ imagined future because he uses Browning to “cure” or eliminate her disability. This incredibly vital component of her identity that shaped so many of her embodied experiences as both a person and writer is erased in favor of an inaccurate “happily ever after” in which Browning’s male domination is excused because it is part of the way in which he offers her salvation.

With as troubling as the idea of this curative narrative is, these imagined narratives have the capacity to get even darker. In Besier’s play, EBB’s disability gets imagined as eliminated, but, if that particular future is not imagined, EBB herself is then eliminated. For example, in Anthony Burgess’s short story “1889 and the Devil’s Mode,” the narrator meets a guilt-ridden Browning in a bar where Browning confesses to murdering EBB as an act of mercy. Browning’s character asks the narrator to imagine a hypothetical situation in which, “A woman is dying in extreme distress. Her pain is considerable. Her husband is distraught by her agony and wishes that it be no further prolonged. He smothers her with a pillow. His motive is totally merciful” (Burgess 94). The narrator compares this act to the events of one of Browning’s earliest dramatic monologues, “Porphyria’s Lover.” Yet, Browning insists that the motives are different because Porphyria’s lover murdered her “to ensure that her declared love for him cannot change,” (Burgess 94) while killing EBB was an act “...performed in horror. But it had to be performed” (Burgess 95). Browning’s character’s insistence that EBB’s murder was an event that must have occurred is heavily rooted in his desire to control the outcomes of the future. In “The Case for

Conserving Disability,” Garland-Thomson shows how “people with disabilities and disability in general—present the difficult challenge for modern subjects not only to live in the moment but also to engage in a relationship not based on the promise of a future” (Garland-Thomson 353). These imagined narratives in which disability is eliminated not only dictate the type of future the writers deem appropriate, but also seek to re-write history to fit that dictation as well. In addressing the ideas behind “mercy killing,” Garland-Thomson writes:

Because empathy depends upon the experiences and imagination of the empathizer in regarding another person, prejudices, limited understandings, and narrow experience can lead one person to project oversimplified or inaccurate assessments of life quality or suffering onto another person...This is exactly the logic of so-called mercy killing; it is an inability to tolerate or even witness in others what we fear we cannot endure in our own lives. (350)

It is because of Browning’s character’s inability to truly empathize with EBB’s embodied experiences that he chooses to kill her; he can’t bear to see her condition and imagine a future in which her experience is his, so he eliminates it. Yet, Browning’s inability to understand EBB’s experience recognizes the flaws in the moments of claimed fusion or assimilation between Browning and EBB as one flesh. Since it is clear that Browning’s character cannot empathize with EBB or understand her experiences, this ignorance produces a fear of the unknown that causes him to create a future that he can control.

Having begun to dismantle the savior narratives and highly dramatized pasts of the Brownings, it is my hope that this project can teach us a couple of things. First of all, we should not buy into these fictionalized salvific ableist heterosexual narratives that require re-writing the past and controlling the future. Instead, the hope is that we can see the ways in which Garland-

Thomson shows that “rather than dictating a diminished future, disability opens a truly unpredictable, even unimaginable one (350) so that we can embrace the ways in which disability benefits society instead of thinking of disability as a deficit (341). It is not that EBB was a great poet in spite of her disability, that EBB’s unique experiences somehow canceled out her disability, or EBB was successful because of her disability. Rather, one of the goals of this project has been to influence readers to accept EBB’s disability and the numerous ways it affected her embodied experiences as a woman and a writer within her relationship to Browning. In conjunction to that, I hope this thesis exposed not only the problems these fictionalized narratives have created in terms of understanding disability, but gender and power as well. It is not the case that Browning rescued or saved EBB as the story is usually told; it is much more complicated than that. EBB’s poems clearly show an ongoing struggle against Browning’s male privilege, but they also show an active effort for agency and mobility. Finally, the last goal of this project was to analyze the ways in which Browning and EBB slipped in and out of stereotypical gender roles and to theorize why there seemed to be more flexibility within those roles during their courtship (as evidenced by the letters) in comparison to their marriage (as evidenced by EBB’s sonnets and Browning’s poetry from *Men and Women*). Though it does seem that Browning and EBB fell into more traditionally-accepted Victorian roles after their marriage, EBB orchestrated those moments of performing stereotypical femininity as a manner of gaining autonomy within a union and society that made that exceptionally hard to do. In conclusion, though the Brownings’ love story is still clearly impactful, we should take caution of the narratives that have been created around the Brownings’ love story and recognize the multifaceted ideas surrounding gender, power, and disability prevalent throughout.

Works Cited

- Altman, Janet Gurkin. *Epistolarity: Approaches to Form*. Ohio State University Press, 1982.
- Bailin, Miriam. *The Sickroom in Victorian Fiction*. Cambridge University Press, 1994.
- Baylor University. "Room Descriptions." *Armstrong Browning Library and Museum | Baylor University*, www.baylor.edu/browninglibrary/index.php?id=943062.
- Besier, Rudolf. *Barretts of Wimpole Street*. LITTLE, 1931.
- Browning, Robert, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning. *THE LETTERS OF ROBERT BROWNING AND ELIZABETH BARRETT BARRETT, 1845-1846*. vol. 1, Project Gutenberg, 1845, *The Project Gutenberg EBook of The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Barrett, Vol. 1 (of 2) 1845-1846, Edited by Robert B. Browning*.
- Browning, Elizabeth Barrett, and Robert Browning. *The Love Poems of Elizabeth and Robert Browning*. Edited by Lois Untermeyer, Barnes & Noble, 1994.
- Burgess, Anthony. "1889 And The Devil's Mode." *The Devil's Mode*, Hutchinson, 1989, pp. 79–109.
- Buron, Melissa E. "The Feminine Voice and the Feminine Presence in Nineteenth-Century Poetry." *The Victorian Web: Literature, History, & Culture in the Age of Victoria*. The Victorian Web, 18 Dec. 2003. Web. 6 Dec. 2015.
- Butler, Judith. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal*, vol. 40, no. 4, 1988, p. 519., doi:10.2307/3207893.
- Christ, Carol. "Browning's Corpses." *Victorian Poetry*, vol. 33, no. 3/4, 1995, pp. 391–401.
- Clark, Thomas Arkle. *Robert Browning*. Parker Publishing Company, 1932.
- Davis, Lennard. "Introduction: Normalcy, Power, and Culture." *The Disability Studies Reader*, by Lennard J. Davis and Rebecca Sanchez, Routledge, 2021, pp. 1–14.

- Efird, Tyler. "'Anamorphosizing' Male Sexual Fantasy in Browning's Monologue." *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature*, vol. 43, no. 3, Sept. 2010, pp. 151–166.
- Ellis, Jonathan. "Introduction: 'For What Is a Letter?'" *Letter Writing among Poets: from William Wordsworth to Elizabeth Bishop*, edited by Jonathan Ellis, Edinburgh University Press, 2016, pp. 1–16.
- Ellis, Sarah Stickney. "Characteristics of the Women of England." *The Women of England, Their Social Duties, and Domestic Habits*. London: Fisher, Son, 1839. 9-37. *Victorian Women Writers Project*. Indiana University. Web. 6 Dec. 2015.
- Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie. "Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory." *NWSA Journal*, vol. 14, no. 3, 2002, pp. 1–32.
- Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie. "The Case for Conserving Disability." *Journal of Bioethical Inquiry*, vol. 9, no. 3, 2012, pp. 339–355., doi:10.1007/s11673-012-9380-0.
- Gilbert, Sandra M., and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. 2nd ed., Yale University Press, 1979.
- Gorham, Deborah. "Sunbeams and Hoydens." *The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1982. 37-59. Print.
- Gregory, Melissa Valiska. "Robert Browning and the Lure of the Violent Lyric Voice: Domestic Violence and the Dramatic Monologue." *Victorian Poetry*, vol. 38, no. 4, 2000, pp. 491–510.
- Homans, Margaret. "The Powers of Powerlessness: The Courtships of Elizabeth Barrett and Queen Victoria." *Feminist Measures: Soundings in Poetry and Theory*, by Lynn Keller and Cristanne Miller, University of Michigan Press, 1994, pp. 237–259.

- Jarvis, Claire. *Exquisite Masochism: Marriage, Sex, and the Novel Form*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016.
- Kafer, Alison. "Time for Disability Studies and a Future for Crips." *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, EBSO Publishing, 2013, pp. 27–42.
- Karusseit, Catherine. "Victorian Respectability and Gendered Domestic Space." *Image and Text*, 38-52 pdfs.semanticscholar.org/4acd/ac491de64d523982bf4cb513d56a972e188f.pdf.
- Kennedy, Richard S., and Donald S. Hair. *The Dramatic Imagination of Robert Browning: A Literary Life*. University of Missouri Press, 2007.
- Kenyon Jones, Christine. "'Some World's Wonder in Chapel or Crypt': Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Disability." *Nineteenth Century Studies*, 2002, pp. 21–35.
- Lee, Hermione. "Dangerous Letters: A Biographer's Perspective." *Letter Writing among Poets: from William Wordsworth to Elizabeth Bishop*, edited by Jonathan Ellis, Edinburgh University Press, 2016, pp. 1–16.
- Leighton, Angela. *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*. Indiana University Press, 1986.
- Maenhout, Freya. "Gender Relations in Robert Browning's Dramatic Monologues." Diss. Ghent University, 2007. Web. 6 Dec. 2015.
- Markus, Julia. *Dared and Done: The Marriage of Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning*. Ohio University Press, 1998.
- Mermin, Dorothy. "The Female Poet and the Embarrassed Reader: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Sonnets From the Portuguese." *ELH* 48.2 (1981): 351-67. *JSTOR*. Web. 6 Dec. 2015.
- Mermin, Dorothy. *Elizabeth Barrett Browning; The Origins of a New Poetry*. Press, 1989.
- Mitchell, David T., and Sharon L. Snyder. *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*. The University of Michigan Press, 2011.

- McRuer, Robert. *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*. New York University Press, 2006.
- Newman, John Henry. *The Idea of a University*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996. Print.
- Poovey, Mary. *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England*. Univ. of Chicago Press, 1998.
- Price, Margaret. "The Bodymind Problem and the Possibilities of Pain." *Hypatia*, vol. 30, no. 1, 2015, pp. 268–284.
- Riviere, Joan. *Womanliess as Masquerade*. 1929.
- Ruskin, John. "Sesame and Lilies." *Of Queens' Gardens*. New York: Maynard, 1896. 76-83. Print.
- Shrivastava, Sanjay. "Integrated Elements of Sex and Sensuality in the Poetry of Robert Browning: A Critical Approach." *IUP Journal of English Studies*, 2014, pp. 101–109.
- Siebers, Tobin. "Disability and the Theory of Complex Embodiment—For Identity Politics in a New Register." *The Disability Studies Reader*, by Lennard J. Davis, Routledge, an Imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, 2017, pp. 272–291.
- Smith, Rosa Inocencio. "Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Immortal Literary Love Affair." *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media Company, 6 Mar. 2018, www.theatlantic.com/notes/2016/03/elizabeth-barrett-browning-birthday/472377/.
- Sontag, Susan. *Illness as Metaphor: AIDs and Its Metaphors*. Picador, 2006.
- Tosh, John. "Boys into Men." *A Man's Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999. 103-22. Print.
- Untermeyer, Lois, editor. "Foreward." *The Love Poems of Elizabeth and Robert Browning*, Barnes & Noble, 1994.

Utell, Janine. "View from the Sickroom: Virginia Woolf, Dorothy Wordsworth, and Writing Women's Lives of Illness." *Life Writing*, vol. 13, 14 Mar. 2014, pp. 27–45.

Waithe, Marcus. "Another sort of writing"? Invalidism and Poetic Labour in the Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning. *Letter Writing among Poets: from William Wordsworth to Elizabeth Bishop*, edited by Jonathan Ellis, Edinburgh University Press, 2016.

Xiaoxi, Eileen Yu. *Flush, the Sickroom, and the Heroine*. University of Otago. 59-61.