

# Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Pathways through the PPA

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Teaching my students how to read Victorian poetry is a challenge in itself. Now add teaching them how to read *how Victorians read* Victorian poetry. What's more, there's the challenge of teaching them how to read how the information about Victorian poets and poetry that has been distilled and interpreted over the course of the twentieth century might be built on, reacting to, or completely unaware of those Victorian discourses.

And, of course, there's the challenge of teaching them all this amid a new information ecosystem that many of them find difficult to navigate, even within the sophisticated infrastructure of the Princeton University Library. What I present here are several paths through the Princeton Prosody Archive that can be used as pedagogic tools to help students make discoveries about how poetry was read in the nineteenth century and how it is read today.

## “Database Race”

In teaching students to use the PPA, the first lesson is about incompleteness and choices, or, in other words, archives and databases. Princeton Ph.D. Candidate Miranda Marraccini and I developed a lesson about Elizabeth Barrett Browning that worked in concert with our discussion of what it means to use online databases for research. We paired up our students and asked them to find out the date of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's first published book--using *only* their assigned online database. The students searched Google Books, WorldCat, the Princeton University Library Catalog, and the HathiTrust Library, but *not* the PPA. We called it “database race” and, artificially, they weren't allowed to supplement their searching with any other resources that were literally at their fingertips (because there is a ton of information online about EBB, obviously).

Did we distinguish first book of poetry and first book? We did not. The students working with HathiTrust and Google Books had text excerpts that could lead them to other scholarly work--not really cheating--but it didn't surprise us that it was these databases that helped lead the students first to the *Seraphim and Other Poems* in 1838 and then to her translation *Prometheus Bound* in 1833. We pulled up each site one by one and discussed how the students performed their search, what kind of information each database made available, whether they used “advanced search” or not, whether they encountered any problems with library metadata, whether they understood what we mean when we talked about library metadata.

It was no surprise to me that Google Books made available

the full-text of *The Seraphim* and that the ability to view the front page then led that group of students back toward the translation of *Prometheus Bound*, since the title page says “by the author of,” etc. This discovery then led us to think about what kind of information we get from title pages. So, the first lesson introduces students to the idea of incompleteness and choices. All archives and databases make arguments and have points of view, sometimes without stating those arguments or points of view directly.

The second lesson that the database race teaches us is what we lose when we search only the metadata. For prosody, being able to search full-text and see the page image are crucial research tools, which is why the search results in the PPA include text snippets and page thumbnails.

### **Contemporary Reviews of EBB’s Rhymes**

The new availability of online archives shows us more, and more quickly, about how Victorian poets were read in the nineteenth century. Requiring that students find and read contemporary reviews of a poet’s work is a simple pedagogical practice that often supplies more information about Victorian contexts than our lectures. Newspapers, in particular, are fantastic resources for showing students the distaste many critics felt for Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s rhymes. George Saintsbury wrote, “Her ear for rhyme was probably the worst on record in the case of a person having any poetic power whatever.” And students love to come across the introductions to women poets in George Bethune’s 1848 *The British Female Poets*. Here, Bethune writes that Elizabeth Barrett Browning has a “disdain of carefulness” and continues:

"Her lines are often rude, her rhymes forced, from impatience rather than affectation; and for the same reason, she falls into the kindred fault of verbosity, which is always obscure ... Her Greek studies should have taught her more sculptor-like finish and dignity; but the glowing, generous impulses of her woman's heart are too much for the discipline of the classics."

I might then have them compare this with [Charles Richardson's admiration for her rhymes in his 1909 \*A Study of English Rhyme\*](#)--and of course this leads one to wonder--were they all that bad? How would we know? (I might point students toward [Natalie Houston's exciting scholarly research](#), which is trying to look through Walker's Rhyming Dictionaries to determine how experimental EBB's rhymes really were!) One path through the Archive could show a student the arc of critical discourse and the way a poetic form can be seen as entirely interpretive. For instance, after searching for EBB and rhyme one might conclude that EBB's rhymes were hated and then admired, but I remind them that, after all, Saintsbury's assessment was concurrent with Richardson's, while Bethune and others wrote their critiques several decades earlier.

### **Critical Discourses about the Poetess**

Searching for EBB and "Poetess" yields results that show how from 1850 to 1880 she slowly replaced Hemans as "the greatest of all English poetesses," a title she kept until the early twentieth century. A broad analysis of critical trends in published books about nineteenth-century poetry that include Elizabeth Barrett Browning (or a poet of the student's choosing) is just one use of the materials in the Prosody

Archive. A student would see how, in 1851, D. M. Moir would lament in his essay “Elizabeth Barrett Browning: Her Genius and Imperfect Development” that “She seems to satisfy herself with mere hasty sketches; and even in them we have want of an outline, haziness, or exaggeration. We have occasionally the germ of fine things; but her blossoms, nipped by the canker-worm, seldom ripen into fruit.” And they could contrast this with Thomas Arnold’s assessment in 1871: “She has beautified and ennobled all human relationships, and future generations can never fail to be the better for her breadth and nobility of thought and pure idealism, and, above all, for her ardent enthusiasm for all good work as the heaven-sent purifier of men’s lives and the necessary outcome of all high thought.” Reading these critics closely, the students can hear how Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s poetry – like all women’s poetry--was read through the lens of nature, of nature perverted, in Moir’s case--and through self-improvement. Through reading these critics, we soon learn that poetesses are figures of unmediated natural emotion and can think through what that might mean for male poets writing poetess poems. Expanding this out, students can assemble in either the PPA or HathiTrust reviews of women’s poetry and quantify the natural metaphors that accompany the description of their poems.

### **EBB Reprints in the Schoolbooks**

But can the Prosody Archive tell us how Elizabeth Barrett Browning was taught in the Victorian period? Looking through the assembled materials in the PPA shows us when and how textbook editors used Elizabeth Barrett Browning--though of course I am careful to distinguish between what is printed in

grammar books, introductions to poetry, and studies of English poetry, and how poetry was actually taught in the classroom. Despite the difficulty of knowing how these school books were used, we can see which ones were popular enough to be reprinted. From there, we might think through which of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poems seemed to have had the strongest hold on the pedagogical imagination and, crucially, how her poetry was used, quite irrespective of the controversies over her rhymes, to teach students how to speak.

Setting students to the task of gathering information about a poem's popularity feels to them like real discovery. For instance, we can imagine that Elizabeth Barrett Browning would have been popular in recitation and elocution anthologies: "The Swan's Nest" or "The Romance of the Swan's Nest" appeared in Philander Claxton's *Effective English* (1862), *Handbook of Calisthenics and Gymnastics, A Complete Drill-Book for Schools* (1864), Madison Watson's *Independent Fifth Reader: Containing a Practical Treatise on Elocution: illustrated with diagrams, select and classified reading and recitations, with copious notes* (1876), *My Recitations* (1887), *The Elements of English Composition* (1891), *Golden Numbers: A Book of Verse for Youth* (1902), A. C. McClurg's *Choice Readings for Public and Private Entertainments, and for the use of schools, colleges, and public readers, with elocutionary advice* (1922). But it does not appear in *The Norton Anthology of Victorian Poetry*, or *The Broadview*. Students can track a path of reprinting through the Archive to tally what poem may have been most familiar to American young readers. The *Independent Fifth Reader* was the most reprinted, and identified the poem so closely with recitation that its frontispiece illustrates a stanza, while the

poem itself illustrates pronunciation according to its system of symbols. Allowing the student to discover the poem in this way and then read through it, asking themselves what they think of these symbols and whether they can understand the system is a useful way to get them thinking about the confusion between meter and pronunciation in the period.



J. Madison Watson, *Independent Fifth Reader*

*Oral English for Secondary Schools* and *The Home Book of English Verse* selects "A Court Lady" and, in a later edition, "Grief." "A Court Lady" is also the selection for Harris Cassell's 1897 *Three Minute Readings for College Girls*. Mitchell's *Manual of Elocution founded on the philosophy of the Human voice*, reprinted at least five times between 1869-1889, chooses "Adam to Eve" and "The Cry of the Children," which also appears in *The Home Book of English Verse* and several popular anthologies like Humphrey Ward's widely reprinted *English*

*Poets, The Cambridge History of English Literature* and *Poems of the English Race*. But “the Cry of the Children” doesn’t appear as often in books intended for schools--we know it is the adults who are the intended audience for that poem, which is also a nice way to teach students about the various audiences for these anthologies. Young readers should memorize the rollicking meters of “A Court Lady,” following the noble woman through the court hospital recognizing the dying men before they expire; this poem matches the aims of *Three Minute Readings for College Girls*, stated in the preface: committing to memory and publicly reciting patriotic thoughts are valuable aids in keeping the sacred fire of patriotism burning on our altars. Setting students to look at the prefaces, the tables of contents, the paratextual materials, the poems in circulation as part of the reading of the poem deepens their understanding of the period.

### **Unexpected Discoveries**

There are more paths here, but perhaps one of the most enjoyable is to set the students toward discovering unexpected places they might find Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s poetry. Her work was drawn into tracts about phonetic spelling reform--an ironic fate, I point out, for a poet who was faulted so often and so viciously for her “untrustworthy ear.” Nevertheless, her poems appear both in *Werner’s Voice Magazine* (“A Musical Instrument” in 1891 and “Napoleon’s Exile” in 1895) and, my favorite, *Fonetic Techer*. Students discover for themselves how EBB--or any poet in the archive--has been read by way of poetic criticism and by way of educational texts, but also how her poems would have been taught as an example of *right reading* that will release English children from the plague of elocution manuals and



# confusing grammar books.

## FONETIC TEACHER.

"THE BEST EDUCATION FOR ICH AND OL WITHOUT WUST OF TIM, MUN, OR ENERJ!"

NUMBER 8. ST. LUIS, AUGUST, 1880. VOL. NUMBER, 13.

### SELECT POETRY.

(Phonetic spelling will stop the wail of the children, which, like the beat of the British drum, greets the sun as he ensirclez the earth.—F. A. Hanson.)

#### THE CRY OF THE CHILDREN.

BY ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING.

Do ye hear the children weeping, O my brothers,  
Ere the sun comes with yea?  
They are jessing that yung he-it aginst their mothers,  
And thence outcries their tears.  
The yung lams ar bleating in the mead,  
The yung birds ar chirping in the nest,  
The yung fawns ar playing with the shadow,  
The yung swans ar bling toward the West—  
But the yung, yung children, O my brothers,  
They ar weeping bitter!  
They ar weeping in the playtime of the others,  
In the court of the free.

Do ye cawden the yung children in the snow,  
Why their tears ar falling?  
The old man may weep for his lo-ones,  
Which is loo in long age!  
The old tree is leafless in the forest,  
The old year is ending in the frost,  
The old sound, if spoken, is the sorrow,  
The old hope is hadder to be lost!  
But the yung, yung children, O my brothers,  
Do ye ask them why they stand  
Weeping afore the hearth or their mothers,  
In our hap! Fatherland?

#### THE DUTY OF OUR COLLEGES TOWARD THE SPELLING REFORM.

BY W. G. BALLANTYNE, A. M.,  
Professor of History, Oberlin College.

Civilization is ever advancing. The human race is to-day physically, mentally and morally better than it ever was before. But progress means constant reform. If progress is to continue, every new year must "ring out a slowly dying year," and "ring in the nobler modes of life, with sweeter manners, purer laws." No people can go forward toward the things that are before, which does not forget the things that are behind.  
To the student of history, the origin, struggle and victory of reform are familiar. He expects and desires the frequent rise of new reforms. He perceives that English and American history is but the record of an unintermitted succession of reforms, nobly fought for and gloriously established. But to the unthinking each reform is a wholly unforeseen and most unpleasant annoyance, ridic-

ulous at its inception, vulgar and venations in its progress, and understood only when victorious. From the nature of the case every reform must meet and overcome a certain amount of opposition. But we who are engaged in the effort to reform the spelling of the English language may derive satisfaction from the reflection that no reform of such magnitude ever had so few obstacles to meet. It may be unsubstantially affirmed that effort in this direction will yield a vaster result in ameliorating the condition of mankind than the same amount of energy expended in any other manner.

No one who will reflect can doubt that millions of years of human labor are wasted annually in the unsuccessful effort to learn our hieroglyphic spelling; and these years are wasted mostly by bright boys and girls whose minds are at awake, ready to be interested in birds, and flowers, and stones, and stars, anxious to listen to history, glad to commit poetry—ready, in short, to learn all the fairy tales of science and the long result of time, while we can think of no better way of occupying them than to keep them in after school because they don't remember that receipt has a p in it, while deaf hasn't, and that best spells his in pastures. We look with horror at the racks and thim-screens which are still preserved in the museums of Europe, but the merciful generations of the future, "When human statistics shall have purged the giant world," will feel just so about Webster's Spelling Book.

Happily for us, this monstrous evil is remarkably open to attack. It is not intractable in any vicious tendency of human nature. It is not occasionally involved with great pecuniary interests. No particular class or citizens are identified with it. Compare for a moment spelling reform with other great cotemporary reforms. Take the revision of our English version of the Holy Scriptures. Here is a book venerated by millions as divine, whose every phrase is hallowed by a thousand sacred associations. Pure faith and sentiment shrink from any change; narrowness and dogmatism fear for their support. Yet a revision is in progress, the books of the S. T. are promised for publication in October, and without doubt the use of the new revision will become rapidly general.

Take the abolition of slavery. A vast pecuniary interest and a social organization stood in the way. Take the temperance reform. Human

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### Fonetic Teacher

As the *Fonetic Teacher* announces, "phonetic spelling will stop the wail of the children, which, like the beat of the British drum, greets the sun as he ensirclez the earth." For students who don't feel iambic pentameter naturally in their bodies, or for whom the British drum has not been ideologically inscribed as heartbeat, or who do not know Greek or Latin, introducing Victorian prosody alongside the controversies about Victorian prosody--both versification and pronunciation--takes a bit of pressure off and reminds them that scanning a poem is a fundamentally historical--and yet also always subjective--enterprise. Elizabeth Barrett Browning is a great starting point for that understanding. These lessons should at once compel students to think about the past and future of organizing, navigating, conceptualizing, and

historicizing large amounts of data but also about how we might come to understand something new about a single poem or about the evolving and contradictory thinking about the technology of poetic language.

A version of this paper titled "Teaching EBB Then and Now" was originally presented at NAVSA 2018.