The Feminine Education of Aurora Leigh

The Orphan Meets her English Aunt

(251) Then, land!—then, England! oh, the frosty cliffs
(252) Looked cold upon me. Could I find a home
(253) Among those mean red houses through the fog?
(254) And when I heard my father’s language first
(255) From alien lips which had no kiss for mine
(256) I wept aloud, then laughed, then wept, then wept,
(257) And some one near me said the child was mad
(258) Through much seasickness. The train swept us on.
(259) Was this my father’s England? the great isle?
(260) The ground seemed cut up from the fellowship
(261) Of verdure, field from field, as man from man;
(262) The skies themselves looked low and positive,
(263) As almost you could touch them with a hand,
(264) And dared to do it they were so far off from God’s celestial crystals; all things blurred and dull and vague.
(265) Did Shakespeare and his mates absorb the light here?
(266) With heart to strike a radiant colour up
(267) Or active outline on the indifferent air.

(270) I think I see my father’s sister stand
(271) Upon the hall-step of her country-house
(272) To give me welcome. She stood straight and calm,
(273) Her somewhat narrow forehead braided tight.

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1 the frosty cliffs – the white (chalk) cliffs of Dover
2 mean – insalubrious, opposite of ‘luxurious’
3 fog – thick mist typically near the sea, low cloud
4 alien lips – strangers’ mouths
5 to weep (weep-weeped) – cry, shed tears
6 aloud – audibly
7 through – because of, due to
8 seasickness – nausea caused by travelling in a ship
9 to sweep sb. on (sweep-swept-swept) – carry sb. forward
10 isle – (poetic) poetic
11 ground – terrain
12 fellowship – communion
13 verdure – lush green vegetation, green foliage
14 field from field – English fields were typically separated from each other by hedgerows
15 the Italian mountains were made spiritual; but the English sky is solidified. ‘Positive’ hints at Positivism: the materialist religion developed by Auguste Comte.
16 as – (elision) as if
17 far off – distant
18 God’s celestial crystals – in the Ptolemaic system, picturing the earth at the centre of the cosmos, the ninth crystalline sphere lies beyond the seven planetary spheres and the fixed stars; cf. Milton’s reference to the ‘crystalline sphere’ (Paradise Lost 3:482).
19 blurred – unfocused, not delineated
20 dull – grey, colourless
21 vague – imprecise
22 mates – companions
23 heart – (in this case) vitality
24 active outline – distinctive silhouette
(274) As if for taming\textsuperscript{26} accidental thoughts
(275) From possible pulses\textsuperscript{27}; brown hair pricked\textsuperscript{28} with grey\textsuperscript{29}
(276) By frigid use of life\textsuperscript{30}, (she was not old
(277) Although my father’s elder by a year\textsuperscript{31}
(278) A nose drawn sharply\textsuperscript{32}, yet in delicate lines;
(279) A close mild mouth, a little soured\textsuperscript{33} about
(280) The ends\textsuperscript{34}, through speaking unrequited\textsuperscript{35} loves
(281) Or peradventure\textsuperscript{36} niggardly\textsuperscript{37} half-truths;
(282) Eyes of no colour,—once they might have smiled\textsuperscript{38}
(283) But never, never have forgot themselves
(284) In smiling\textsuperscript{39}; cheeks, in which was yet a rose
(285) Of perished\textsuperscript{40} summers, like a rose in a book\textsuperscript{41}
(286) Kept more for ruth\textsuperscript{42} than pleasure,—if past bloom,
(287) Past fading also\textsuperscript{43}.

(287) She had lived, we’ll say,
(288) A harmless life, she called a virtuous life,
(289) A quiet life, which was not life at all,
(290) (But that, she had not lived enough to know\textsuperscript{44})
(291) Between the vicar and the county squires,
(292) The lord-lieutenant\textsuperscript{45} looking down sometimes
(293) From the empyrean\textsuperscript{46} to assure their souls
(294) Against chance\textsuperscript{47}-vulgarisms, and, in the abyss\textsuperscript{48}
(295) The apothecary\textsuperscript{49}, looked on once a year
(296) To prove their soundness\textsuperscript{50} of humility.
(297) The poor-club\textsuperscript{51} exercised her Christian gifts
(298) Of knitting stockings, stitching petticoats,

\textsuperscript{26} Her somewhat narrow forehead braided tight — her hair was pulled back from her brow in braids (= plaits), her hair was tightly plaited and/or her forehead was furrowed in a brow
\textsuperscript{27} to tame — control
\textsuperscript{28} – (in this case) pulsation in her temples from excitement
\textsuperscript{29} grey — English euphemistically calls white hair ‘grey hair’
\textsuperscript{30} frigid use of life — life had not treated her warmly, or she has held back from getting involved in life. This suggests she had not loved — or been loved — very much
\textsuperscript{31} my father’s elder by a year — a year older than my father
\textsuperscript{32} drawn sharply — with an angular silhouette
\textsuperscript{33} soured — embittered, frustrated
\textsuperscript{34} about the ends — at the corners of her mouth (giving her a disapproving look)
\textsuperscript{35} unrequited — unreciprocated
\textsuperscript{36} peradventure — (archaic) perhaps, possibly, maybe, by chance
\textsuperscript{37} niggardly — mean, opposite of ‘generous’
\textsuperscript{38} to smile — (in this case) express happiness
\textsuperscript{39} have forgot themselves in smiling — expressed happiness in a carefree way
\textsuperscript{40} perished — dead
\textsuperscript{41} rose in a book — flowers were often pressed and dried between the pages of a book
\textsuperscript{42} ruth — remorse, pity, regret
\textsuperscript{43} if past bloom / Past fading also — although its prime was long gone, at least it could not lose any more vitality
\textsuperscript{44} she had not lived enough to know — inexperience meant that she was ignorant of this
\textsuperscript{45} the vicar and the county squires, / The lord-lieutenant — figures of authority in middle-class provincial English life; the lord-lieutenant was officially governor of a county, though with primarily ceremonial functions
\textsuperscript{46} empyrean — the highest heaven, the abode of God and the angels; the skies
\textsuperscript{47} chance (adj.) — accidental
\textsuperscript{48} the abyss — hell, the lowest depths
\textsuperscript{49} apothecary — medical practitioner, dispensers of drugs, at the lower end of the middle-class social scale; pharmacist who, in England at the time, could prescribe as well as sell medicine
\textsuperscript{50} soundness — stability, dependability
\textsuperscript{51} poor-club — club devoted to making, collecting and mending clothes for the poor
(299) Because we are of one flesh52 after all
(300) And need one flannel53 with a proper sense
(301) Of difference in the quality)—and still
(302) The book-club, guarded from your modern trick
(303) Of shaking dangerous questions from the crease54,
(304) Preserved her intellectual.55 She had lived
(305) A sort of cage-bird life,56 born in a cage,
(306) Accounting57 that to leap58 from perch59 to perch
(307) Was act and joy enough for any bird.
(308) Dear heaven, how silly are the things that live
(309) In thickets,60 and eat berries!
(309) I, alas61,
(310) A wild bird scarcely fledged62, was brought to her cage,
(311) And she was there to meet me. Very kind.
(312) Bring the clean water, give out the fresh seed63.
(313) She stood upon the steps to welcome me,
(314) Calm, in black garb64. I clung about her neck,—
(315) Young babes66, who catch at67 every shred of wool
(316) To draw the new light closer68, catch and cling69
(317) Less blindly. In my ears, my father’s word
(318) Hummed ignorantly,61 as the sea in shells,
(319) “Love, love, my child”. She, black there with my grief,
(320) Might feel my love—she was his sister once,
(321) I clung to her. A moment she seemed moved,63
(322) Kissed me with cold lips, suffered me to cling,64
(323) And drew me feebly through the hall into
(324) The room she sate in.

52 see Ephesians 5:29-30.
53 flannel — (in this case) flannel petticoat
54 crease — the fold between two pages of a book, which had to be cut to open the pages. Presumably, more modern books revealed more dangerous material when the crease was cut.
55 in other words at the bookclub controversy was avoided — but going there permits her to feel knowledgeable.
56 Cf. Byron’s satire of ‘Bluestocking’ women, a term applied pejoratively to women with intellectual aspirations in Don Juan (1819-24), Canto I, XXII. Don Juan is one of the texts EBB engages with in Aurora Leigh
57 cf. Mary Wollstonecraft’s A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792) on women, “confined, then, in cages like the feathered race (= birds)” (ch. 4)
58 accounting — believing, considering
59 to leap (leap-leapt-leapt) — jump, hop
60 thickets — bushes, undergrowth
61 alas — unfortunately
62 scarcely fledged — (literally) that had only recently learned to fly, (in this case) immature
63 seed — (in this case) grains eaten by caged birds
64 garb — (poetic) garments, clothing, clothes
65 I clung around her neck — I hugged (= embraced) her enthusiastically
66 young babes — newborn infants
67 to catch at — grab, seize
68 to draw sth. closer (draw-drew-drawn) — pull sth. towards one
69 to cling (cling-clung-clung) — hold on, grasp
70 blindly — without understanding or using one’s judgement; unthinkingly
71 hummed ignorantly — mumbled/mumbled uncomprehendingly
72 to cling to — hug (= embrace) desperately
73 a moment she seemed moved — for a moment she appeared to be affected by compassion
74 suffered me to cling — reluctantly accepted my embrace
75 to draw (draw-drew-drawn) — (in this case) lead, guide
76 sate — (archaic) sat
(324) There, with some strange spasm
(325) Of pain and passion, she wrung loose\textsuperscript{77} my hands
(326) Imperiously, and held me at arm’s length,
(327) And with two grey-steel naked-bladed\textsuperscript{78} eyes
(328) Searched through\textsuperscript{79} my face,—\textit{ay}\textsuperscript{80}, stabbed it through and through\textsuperscript{81},
(329) Through brows and cheeks and chin, as if to find
(330) A wicked\textsuperscript{82} murderer in my innocent face,
(331) If not here, there perhaps. Then, drawing breath\textsuperscript{83},
(332) She struggled for her ordinary calm\textsuperscript{84}
(333) And missed it rather\textsuperscript{85},—told me not to shrink\textsuperscript{86},
(334) As if she had told me not to lie or swear,—
(335) “She loved my father and would love me too
(336) As long as I deserved\textsuperscript{87} it.” Very kind.
(337) I understood her meaning\textsuperscript{88} afterward;
(338) She thought to\textsuperscript{89} find my mother in my face,
(339) And questioned\textsuperscript{90} it for that. For\textsuperscript{91} she, my aunt,
(340) Had loved my father truly, as she could,
(341) And hated, with the gall\textsuperscript{92} of gentle souls\textsuperscript{93},
(342) My Tuscan\textsuperscript{94} mother who had fooled away\textsuperscript{95}
(343) A wise\textsuperscript{96} man from wise courses, a good man
(344) From obvious duties\textsuperscript{97}, and, depriving her,
(345) His sister, of the household precedence\textsuperscript{98},
(346) Had wronged\textsuperscript{99} his tenants, robbed his native land,
(347) And made him mad, alike by\textsuperscript{100} life and death,
(348) In love and sorrow\textsuperscript{101}. She had pored\textsuperscript{102} for years
(349) What sort of woman could be suitable
(350) To\textsuperscript{103} her sort of hate, to entertain it with,
(351) And so, her very curiosity
(352) Became hate too, and all the idealism

\textsuperscript{77} wrung loose — managed to free herself from
\textsuperscript{78} grey-steel naked-blade — menacing
\textsuperscript{79} searched through — examined
\textsuperscript{80} ay — (dialect) yes
\textsuperscript{81} stabbed it through and through — examined it with a penetrating glare
\textsuperscript{82} wicked — evil, malvolent
\textsuperscript{83} to draw breath (draw-drew-drawn) — breathe in, inhale
\textsuperscript{84} struggled for her ordinary calm — tried to find her usual composure
\textsuperscript{85} missed it rather — couldn’t really find it
\textsuperscript{86} to shrink (shrink-shrank-shrunk) — (in this case) recoil in fear
\textsuperscript{87} to deserve — merit
\textsuperscript{88} her meaning — her intention
\textsuperscript{89} to think to (think-thought-thought) — expect to
\textsuperscript{90} to question — (in this case) examine
\textsuperscript{91} for — (in this case) because, since
\textsuperscript{92} gall — rancour, bitterness
\textsuperscript{93} gentle souls — (sarcastic) ‘respectable’ sanctimonious people
\textsuperscript{94} Tuscan — (in this case) Florentine
\textsuperscript{95} to fool away — bamboogle
\textsuperscript{96} wise — sensible, responsible
\textsuperscript{97} duties — obligations, responsibilities
\textsuperscript{98} household precedence — seniority in the family hierarchy
\textsuperscript{99} to wrong sb. — offend sb., insult sb.
\textsuperscript{100} alike by — both in
\textsuperscript{101} sorrow — sadness
\textsuperscript{102} pored — pored over, pondered, thought intently upon
\textsuperscript{103} suitable to — appropriate for, deserving of
She ever used in life, was used for hate,
Till hate, so nourished, did exceed at last
The love from which it grew, in strength and heat,
And wrinkled her smooth conscience with a sense
Of disputable virtue (say not, sin)
When Christian doctrine was enforced at church.
And thus my father’s sister was to me
My mother’s hater. From that day, she did
Her duty to me. (I appreciate it
In her own word as spoken to herself)
Her duty, in large measure, well-pressed out,
But measured always. She was generous, bland,
More courteous than was tender, gave me still
The first place,—as if fearful that God’s saints
Would look down suddenly and say, “Herein
You missed a point, I think, through lack of love.”
Alas, a mother never is afraid
Of speaking angrily to any child,
Since love, she knows, is justified of love.
And I, I was a good child on the whole,
A meek and manageable child. Why not?
I did not live, to have the faults of life:
There seemed more true life in my father’s grave
Than in all England. Since that threw me off
Who would cleave, (his latest will, they say,
Consigned me to his land) I only thought
Of lying quiet there where I was thrown
Like seaweed on the rocks, and suffering her
To prick me to a pattern with her pin
Fibre from fibre, delicate leaf from leaf,
And dry out from my drowned anatomy
The last sea-salt left in me.

104 she did her duty to me – treated me in a formally appropriate way as required by society
105 well-pressed out – made perfunctory
106 duty ... measured always – see Luke 6:38: “with the same measure that ye mete withal it shall be measured to you again.”
107 bland – (false friend) emotionless
108 tender – loving, kind
109 herein – in this
110 lack of – deficient
111 angrily – (archaic) angrily
112 since – because, given that
113 on the whole – in general
114 meek – submissive
115 manageable – easy to control
116 fain – gladly, willingly
117 to cleave – (in this case) adhere strongly
118 latest will – final testament
119 seaweed – algae
120 with her pin – as in embroidery
A Woman’s Education

(384) So it was.

(385) I broke the copious curls upon my head.

(386) In braids[^121], because she liked smooth-ordered hair.

(387) I left off saying my sweet Tuscan words.

(388) Which still at any stirring of the heart.

(389) Came up to float across the English phrase.

(390) As lilies[^122], Bene[^123] or Che che[^124] because she liked my father’s child to speak his tongue.

(391) She liked my father’s child to speak his tongue.

(392) I learnt the collects[^125] and the catechism[^126] because she liked instructed piety.

(393) The creeds, from Athanasius back to Nice[^127].

(394) The Articles[^128], the Tracts against the times[^129].

(395) (By no means Buonaventure’s ‘Prick of Love’,[^130] And various popular synopses of.

(396) Inhuman doctrines[^131] never taught by John[^132],

(397) Because she liked instructed piety.

(398) I learnt my complement of classic French.

(399) (Kept pure of Balzac[^133] and neologism).

(400) And German also, since[^134] she liked a range.

(401) Of liberal[^135] education,—tongues[^136], not books.

(402) I learnt a little algebra, a little.

(403) Of the mathematics,—brushed[^137] with extreme flounce[^138].

[^121]: braids – plaits.
[^122]: lilies – the comparison of Aurora’s Tuscan words floating across “the English phrase / As lilies” may allude to the lily as the symbol of Florence.
[^123]: bene – (Italian) OK.
[^124]: che che – (Italian) pardon?, come again.
[^125]: collects – short prayers in the Christian liturgy, such as the Morning and Evening prayer in the Anglican service.
[^126]: catechism – an elementary treatise of Christian doctrine in the form of question and answer, meant for children and other learners or issued as an authoritative exposition of a Church’s teaching.
[^127]: The creeds, from Athanasius back to Nice – the Athanasian, the Apostles’ and the Nicene creeds formulate the basic principles of Christian faith. The Council of Nice (Nicaea) affirmed the divinity of Jesus Christ in AD 325. The Athanasian creed (c. AD 500), asserts belief in the Trinity (three gods in one substance). In 1854 EBB said of the Athanasian creed, “the Athanasian way of stating opinions, between a scholastic paradox and a curse, is particularly distasteful to me.”
[^128]: The Articles the thirty-nine articles, established in 1563 during the Reformation, that define the doctrine of the Church of England and are incorporated into the Book of Common Prayer.
[^129]: the Tracts against the times Tracts for the Times (1833–41) published by members of the Oxford or Tractarian Movement opposed secularization of the Anglican Church, arguing for the restoration of liturgical practices associated with its Catholic roots. The movement’s leaders included John Henry Newman (1801–90), who converted to Roman Catholicism in 1845; John Keble (1792–1866); and Edward Pusey (1800–1882). In 1843, EBB found the controversial “Tracts” disappointing “even in the degree of intellectual power displayed in them”.
[^130]: Buonaventure’s ‘Prick of Love’: No longer believed to be by Saint Bonaventure (1221–74), Stimulus Divini Amoris (1542) is a devotional work including meditations on the Passion of Christ and prayers and a treatise on the spiritual life. St. Buonaventure’s doctrine that the power of the heart to love leads to higher illumination than the power of the mind to reason.
[^131]: popular synopses of inhuman doctrines – summaries of popular but cruel religious teachings that had nothing to do with what Jesus taught (for example in the Gospel of John).
[^132]: John – that is, the author of the Gospel.
[^133]: Balzac kept pure of Balzac and neologism – EBB was an avid reader of novels by Honoré de Balzac (1799–1850) as well as George Sand (1804–76) and other French authors considered too risqué for respectable Englishwomen to read. M. Reynolds notes that in 1844, G. H. Lewes objected to the incorrectness of Balzac’s ‘neologisms’, whereas EBB, in contrast, admired the “new metals” of Balzac’s language. Some critics considered Balzac’s work immoral.
[^134]: since – given that, because.
[^135]: liberal – (ironic) open-minded.
[^136]: tongues – languages.
(405) The circle of the sciences, because
(406) She misliked women who are frivolous.
(407) I learnt the royal genealogies
(408) Of Oviedo\textsuperscript{139}, the internal laws
(409) Of the Burmese empire\textsuperscript{140}, – by how many feet
(410) Mount Chimborazo outsoars Teneriffe\textsuperscript{141},
(411) What navigable river joins itself to Lara\textsuperscript{142}, and what census of the year five
(412) Was taken at Klagenfurt\textsuperscript{143}, —because she liked
(413) A general insight into useful facts.
(414) I learnt much music, —such as would have been as quite impossible in Johnson’s day\textsuperscript{145}
(415) As still it might be wished—fine sleights of hand
(416) And unimagined fingering, shuffling off the hearer’s soul through hurricanes of notes
(417) I danced the polka and Cellarius\textsuperscript{156}, Spun glass, stuffed birds, and modelled flowers in wax,
(418) Because she liked accomplishments in girls.

\textsuperscript{137} to brush – (in this case) encounter
\textsuperscript{138} with extreme flounce – hurriedly, with a quick movement
\textsuperscript{139} Oviedo – Gonzalo Fernandez de Oviedo y Valdes (1478-1557), a Spanish historian who wrote a minutely detailed account of the principal persons of Spain, not published until 1880, but described in an 1838 publication as “a mass of gossip … of very little value”
\textsuperscript{140} the internal laws / Of the Burmese Empire – English interest in Burma was aroused by the Anglo-Burmese wars of 1824-26 and 1852
\textsuperscript{141} Mount Chimborazo outsoars Teneriffe – Mount Chimborazo in the Andes of Ecuador is 20,565 feet; Mount Teide in Tenerife, Canary Islands, is 12,198 feet
\textsuperscript{142} Lara – a state in central Venezuela
\textsuperscript{143} Klagenfurt – a town in southern Austria, named in historic records for the first time in the twelfth century
\textsuperscript{144} music was considered a vital ‘accomplishment’ for ladies
\textsuperscript{145} music … quite impossible in Johnson’s day – the famous author and lexicographer Samuel Johnson (1709-84) was reported to have commented after hearing a celebrated performer go through a very difficult composition, “I would it had been impossible”
\textsuperscript{146} sleights – impressive movements that are difficult to imitate
\textsuperscript{147} to shuffle sth. off – (in this case) condemn, damn
\textsuperscript{148} a noisy Tophet – a cacophonic Hell, (literally) an area associated with human sacrifice and Moloch worship mentioned in the Old Testament (see II Kings 23:10, Isaiah 30:33 and Jeremiah 7:31-2); in Milton’s Paradise Lost (1:404) it is described as symbolical of Hell
\textsuperscript{149} nereids – sea nymphs
\textsuperscript{150} smirk – self-satisfied smile
\textsuperscript{151} simmering – latent
\textsuperscript{152} godship – divinity
\textsuperscript{153} I washed in — as in painting with watercolours
\textsuperscript{154} rather say – to be more precise/honest
\textsuperscript{155} washed out – obliterated
\textsuperscript{156} I danced the polka and Cellarius – dances that were highly popular in the 1840s, the former introduced to England by the French dancing-master Henri Cellarius, the latter a slow waltz-mazurka named after him. Robert Browning wrote to EBB on 15 April 1845, “I heard of you […] between a Polka and a Cellarius the other evening”
\textsuperscript{157} to stuff – perform taxidermy on
\textsuperscript{158} more impractical pastimes
I read a score of books on womanhood
To prove, if women do not think at all,
They may teach thinking, (to a maiden-aunt
Or else the author)—books that boldly assert
Their right of comprehending husband’s talk
When not too deep, and even of answering
With pretty “may it please you”, or “so it is”,—
Their rapid insight and fine aptitude,
Particular worth and general missionariness,
As long as they keep quiet by the fire
And never say “no” when the world says “ay”,
For that is fatal,—their angelic reach
Of virtue, chiefly used to sit and darn,
And fatten household sinners,—their, in brief,
Potential faculty in everything
Of abdicating power in it: she owned
She liked a woman to be womanly,
And English women, she thanked God and sighed,
(Some people always sigh in thanking God)
Were models to the universe.

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

160 insight – perspicacity
161 particular – (false friend) special, specific
162 missionariness – charity, aptitude for good deeds
163 ay – yes
164 possible allusion to The Angle of the House (1854) written two years previously
165 to darn – mend/repair socks
166 household sinners – pets
167 potential faculty in everything of abdicating power in it – women can do anything as long as it doesn’t involve having any real power
168 to own – (in this case) admit
(446) And last
(447) I learnt cross-stitch, because she did not like
(448) To see me wear the night with empty hands
(449) A-doing nothing. So, my shepherdess
(450) Was something after all, (the pastoral saints
(451) Be praised for) leaning with pink eyes
(452) To match her shoes, when I mistook the silks;
(453) Her head uncrushed by that round weight of hat
(454) So strangely similar to the tortoise-shell
(455) Which slew the tragic poet
(456) By the way,
(457) The works of women are symbolical.
(458) We sew, sew, prick our fingers, dull our sight,
(459) To put on when you’re weary—or a stool
(460) To stumble over and vex you. “curse that stool!”
(461) Or else at best, a cushion, where you lean
(462) And sleep, and dream of something we are not
(463) But would be for your sake. Alas, alas!
(464) This hurts most, this—that, after all, we are paid
(465) The worth of our work, perhaps.
(466) In looking down
(467) Those years of education (to return)
(468) I wonder if Brinvilliers suffered more
(469) In the water-torture . . . flood succeeding flood
(470) To drench the incapable throat and split the veins

169 cross-stitch – embroidery
170 to wear the night (wear-wore-worn) – spend the evening
171 my shepherdess – the shepherdess that she embroidered
172 leaning – reclining
173 lovelorn – unhappy because of unrequited love
174 when I mistook the silks – tried to do embroidery; got the threads muddled up
175 the tortoise-shell / Which slew the tragic poet – the 6th-century BC dramatic poet Aeschylus, reported to have died when an eagle dropped a tortoise on his bald head, mistaking it for a stone, fulfilling a prophecy that his death would come from a falling house or blow from heaven. EBB's manuscript poem “[Aeschylus' Monodrama]” (c. 1845), for decades misattributed to her husband RB on the basis of a fair copy in his hand and described as one of the best dramatic monologues he left unpublished, portrays a character who sits in exile on the plains of Sicily, seeking to avert the prophecy. EBB regarded Aeschylus (c.525-456 BC) as “the sublimest of the sublime Greeks”; she also defended him as “the obscurest poet in the world, . . with the exception of . . we will say . . Mr Browning!”
176 the implication is that cross-stitching killed the tragic poet
177 dull our sight – ruin our eyesight (and ability to read)
178 slippers – soft shoes worn at home
179 weary – tired
180 to stumble over – trip over, cause you to fall over
181 to vex – infuriate, irritate, annoy
182 to lean – recline
183 something we are not – the ‘ideal’ woman
184 would be – want to be
185 we are paid the worth of our work – we receive what we deserve. In other words women put so much effort into adopting the conventional role but what they produce is useless, so it’s not surprising that men don’t value it.
186 if Brinvilliers suffered more / In the water-torture – Marie Marguerite d’Aubray, marquise de Brinvilliers (1630–76), accused of poisoning several family members, underwent simulated drowning, a form of torture akin to waterboarding, prior to her decapitation. It was described in Mme de Sévigné’s Letters (1726), which EBB read in 1818, and became the subject of a play The Marchioness of Brinvilliers written for performance at the Victoria Theatre on 02/02/1846 as well as The Marchioness of Brinvilliers, the Poisoner of the 17th Century, A Romance of Old Paris (1846) by Albert Smith
Than I did. Certain of your feeble souls
go out in such a process; many pine
To a sick, inodorous light; my own endured:
I had relations in the Unseen, and drew
The elemental nutriment and heat
From nature, as earth feels the sun at nights,
Or as a babe sucks surely in the dark.
I kept the life thrust on me, on the outside
Of the inner life with all its ample room
For heart and lungs, for will and intellect,
Inviolable by conventions. God,
thank thee for that grace of thine!

At first I felt no life which was not patience,—did
The thing she bade me, without heed to a thing
Beyond it, sate in just the chair she placed,
With back against the window, to exclude
The sight of the great lime-tree on the lawn,
Which seemed to have come on purpose from the woods
To bring the house a message,—ay, and walked
Demurely in her carpeted low rooms,
As if I should not, harkening my own steps,
Misdoubt I was alive. I read her books,
Was civil to her cousin, Romney Leigh,
Gave ear to her vicar, tea to her visitors,
And heard them whisper, when I changed a cup,
(I blushed for joy at that)—“The Italian child,
For all her blue eyes and her quiet ways,
Thrives ill in England: she is paler yet Than when we came the last time; she will die.”

187 to go out — be extinguished
188 to pine to a sick, inodorous light — long for and languish under a weakly illuminating influence
189 my own — (emphatic) my soul
190 to draw (draw-drew-drawn) — (in this case) derive, extract
191 EBB subverts the tradition symbolism of the feminized moon that has no light of its own with a stronger feminine view of nature that extracts the sun’s warmth and stores it as her own.
192 to suck — (in this case) suckle, breastfeed
193 surely — securely, confidently
194 thrust on — imposed on
195 lungs — pulmonary organs
196 of thine — of yours
197 to bid (bid-bade-bidden) — ask
198 without heed to — regardless of
199 sate — (archaic) sat
200 just — (in this case) precisely, exactly
201 lime-tree — cf. Coleridge’s “this lime-tree bough, my prison”, in which the lime-tree becomes the vehicle of a realization that nature never deserts the wise and pure even when they seem isolated from her most beautiful vistas.
202 on purpose — intentionally
203 the woods — the forest
204 demurely — timidly
205 to harken — listen to
206 to misdoubt — have doubts about the reality that
207 to give ear to (give-gave-given) — listen to
208 thrives ill — does not prosper
209 paler yet — even more pallid