

‘A larger vision’: William Blake, Phoebe Anna Traquair, and the visual imagination in EBB's *Sonnets from the Portuguese*

Abstract

In 1892 Phoebe Anna Traquair (1852-1936) embarked upon an ambitious and intricate project to illustrate Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, eventually completing the work in January 1897. Throughout her long artistic career, Traquair's main creative purpose was to celebrate the potential of the human mind and spirit. It is therefore not surprising that she valued William Blake's poetry and art as inspirational, using his illustrations repeatedly as sources for her illuminations and murals. A respected contributor to the British Arts and Crafts movement, Traquair was inspired by the work of the Pre-Raphaelites, especially Dante Gabriel Rossetti, whose *The House of Life* she illustrated in the late 1890s, and whose portrait she painted, alongside William Holman Hunt's and G.F. Watts's, in her significant mural *O Ye Powers of the Lord* (1889) on the South wall of the Song School of St Mary's Episcopal Cathedral in Edinburgh. Using Traquair's illustrations for *Sonnets from the Portuguese* as a starting point, this article will explore the ways in which EBB develops and refines Blake's celebration of excessive visual and poetic imagination. Shaped by similar dissenting contexts, the two writers share many obvious connections, not least the ways in which EBB draws on Blake's social critique, in works like 'The Cry of the Children'. Both writers are skilful and politically-driven medievalists: like Blake's illustrations of Chaucer, EBB's adaptations of medieval texts and forms offer rich social commentary, as demonstrated in the boundary-bursting *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, which is so vividly illuminated in Traquair's innovative illustrations.

‘A larger vision’: EBB's *Sonnets from the Portuguese* and the visual imagination

In his 1888 essay “English Poetesses”, Oscar Wilde considers that the chief qualities of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's¹ work is its “sincerity and strength”, and hails EBB as “an imperishable glory to our literature.”² He praises particularly the socio-political and cultural function of her poetry, which, as Stone and Taylor suggest is “especially notable in an author known as an apostle of aestheticism.”³ However, Wilde also considers a poetic ideal, which he cannot find in work of “the very delightful artist in poetry” (81), Christina Rossetti. The poetics of force and energy he finds in EBB's work make her “unapproachable” by her peers:

Beyond it and above it are higher and more sunlit heights of song, a larger vision, and an ampler air, a music at once more passionate and more profound, a creative energy that is born of the spirit, a winged rapture that is born of the soul, a force and fervour of mere utterance that has all the wonder of the prophet, and not a little of the consecration of the priest. (81)

Four years later, when the Edinburgh-based artist Phoebe Anna Traquair (1852-1936) embarked upon an ambitious and intricate project to illustrate EBB's *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (1850), which she would eventually complete in January 1897, her focus is on this visual excess of EBB's poetic imagination, as demonstrated in the sonnet sequence.⁴ Born Phoebe Anna Moss in Dublin, Traquair was inspired by childhood visits to the medieval manuscripts housed at Trinity College, particularly to see the *Book of Kells*, to pursue a career in art. This led to her introduction to her future husband, the Scottish palaeontologist Dr Ramsay Heatley Traquair, who was seeking an illustrator for his research papers: the two married, moved to Edinburgh in 1874, and Traquair illustrated her husband's papers for the next thirty years.⁵ However, Traquair's main artistic inspiration came from literature:

fascinated by the interaction between the poetic and the visual imagination, she forged a career as an illustrator and an illuminator, grounded in her early experience of medieval manuscripts. In 1887, Traquair wrote to John Ruskin for advice on medieval illumination, sparking several months of correspondence during which Ruskin loaned her several thirteenth-century manuscripts from his library for studying and copying, which Traquair returned with copies, along with original works of her own, and discussions of poets like Walt Whitman.⁶

Traquair's long artistic career saw her move to work on large-scale murals, embroidery, and enamel jewellery as well as book illustration, and she became the first woman elected to the Royal Scottish Academy in 1920. Throughout all her work, her main creative purpose was to celebrate the potential of the human mind and spirit: she was drawn to authors such as Dante in whose work she saw the ideal synaesthetic combination of the visual, poetic, and musical. From the 1890s, Traquair was increasingly inspired by the work of D.G Rossetti, whose *The House of Life* was for her "a modern counterpart to Dante's *La Vita Nuova*."⁷ Like Rossetti, she valued William Blake's poetry and art as inspirational, using his illustrations repeatedly as sources for her illuminations and murals.⁸ Blake appears alongside John the Baptist, Tennyson, Lord Lister, and Pasteur in her final mural scheme which was commissioned for the Manners Chapel, All Saints Church, Thorney Hill in 1920: as Traquair wrote to her sister Amelia, the portraits she included were of those who she considered "all sing the Te Deum, tho' they don't often know it", the 'Te Deum' meaning to her "every beautiful and every fine thing."⁹

Traquair's illustrations for *Sonnets from the Portuguese* expose striking connections between Blake's work and EBB's sonnet sequence: Traquair recognises and elucidates the visionary and ground-breaking poetics of EBB's work, at a time when critics generally assessed *Sonnets* only as an outpouring of love for a poet-husband, ignoring the evidence of years of

research into the sonnet sequence which predate her first meeting with Robert Browning. In *Sonnets of Three Centuries* (1882), Hall Caine epitomises this: his notes to the four examples from *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, which he includes in his anthology presents EBB's work as hyper-feminized:

If Elizabeth Browning be adjudged worthy to ride in the very van of English sonnet-writers, with Shakspeare [*sic*], Milton, Wordsworth, and Keats, as an Amazon in noble alliance with these male warriors, her right of rank with the foremost is founded upon claims somewhat dissimilar from those advanced by her great fellows. She has written nothing which quite touches the summits of possibility in sonnet-excellence [...]. But the so-called sonnets from the Portuguese are among the most perfect series of love-poems in our language [...]. Indeed the world has read no love poetry like unto this, nor ever will until Nature repeats the phenomenon of a truly great poetess; for the "Sonnets from the Portuguese" are, in the highest sense, essentially woman's love-poetry — essentially feminine in their hyper-refinement, in their intense tremulous spirituality, and above all, in that absolute saturation by the one idea, which bears out Byron's familiar dictum that —

— love is in man's life a thing apart,
'Tis woman's whole existence.¹⁰

Hall Caine continues by drawing a comparison with Christina Rossetti, as Wilde was later to do.¹¹ The 1881 publication of "Monna Innominata: A Sonnet of Sonnets" meant that it was too late for Hall Caine to include in his anthology, but he does "append a word of warm tribute to an exposition of woman's love which appears to me in most respects on a level with the 'Sonnets from the Portuguese' in points of tenderness and resignation at the same time that it is above them in purity of lyric medium", which is how he describes Christina Rossetti's series of sonnets.¹² Christina Rossetti had made this comparison herself in the Preface to "Monna Innominata", famously suggesting that EBB's personal experience of

fulfilled married love had rendered her incapable of writing an accomplished sonnet sequence: “Or had the Great Poetess of our own day and nation only been unhappy instead of happy, her circumstances would have invited her to bequeath to us, in lieu of the ‘Portuguese Sonnets,’ an inimitable ‘*donna innominata*’ drawn not from fancy but from feeling, and worthy to occupy a niche beside Beatrice and Laura.”¹³

Continuing to focus on what they assumed was the autobiographical nature of the work, even in the early years of the twentieth century critics were praising the work as “the genuine utterance of a woman’s heart.”¹⁴ Some reviewers did not allow EBB even this much credit: writing in 1908, John Cunliffe states, “Browning’s influence upon his wife is written large on the surface of all her later work, the best thing she ever did, the *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, being directly due to his inspiration.”¹⁵

Although historically so much credit for the *Sonnets* has been given to Browning and his influence on his wife, Barrett’s fascination with the poetic construction of a sonnet sequence predates the 1845 start date of their correspondence. As Stone has noted, translations from Petrarch, and a minor Italian love sonneteer Felice Zappi, appear in one of the “Berg” notebooks dating from 1840, now in the Berg Collection of the New York Public Library (1995, 23).¹⁶ In a letter to Mary Russell Mitford, as early as 19 October 1842, Barrett discusses her recent exploration of the sonnet form: “The sonnet structure is a very fine one, however imperious, and I never *would* believe that our language is unqualified for the very strictest Italian form. I have been exercising myself in it not unfrequently of late.”¹⁷ As Amy Billone has noted, these exercises were extremely fruitful: EBB published her first three sonnets in 1838, but her 1844 collection presented 28 sonnets, and there were 50 in her 1850 volume.¹⁸

In publishing *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, EBB throws her work, and a poetic form

dominated from its medieval origins by men - Dante, Petrarch, Wyatt, Sidney, and Surrey - into a female focus and remoulds it to create a language of equality. Marianne Van Remoortel has situated *Sonnets from the Portuguese* convincingly in its mid-nineteenth century context and has problematized many of the gendered aspects of critical approaches to the work that have been apparent from its publication in 1850. She presents a lucid exploration of the ways in which reception of the work has changed and developed from its publication, through the twentieth and twenty-first centuries:

“Confronted with the isolated, humble and weak female speaker, Victorian critics were delighted with her refined, reticent femininity: twentieth-century readers turned away in disgust from her histrionic self-effacement; and recent feminist critics applauded her bold exploration of the sonnet genre’s long-established gendered boundaries.”¹⁹

Van Remoortel revises EBB’s sonnet sequence within the publication history of women’s sonnet sequences in the first half of the nineteenth century, noting that “By the nineteenth century, the sonnet had become a complex genre with mixed-gender affiliations, fit for ambitious male and female poets, modest poetesses and occasional versifiers, a genre that was fraught with masculine metaphors of power and control while simultaneously constituting a feminized space of sensibility and private utterance” (89). Further, she explores the way in which, “Even as she integrates early-Renaissance metaphors into her nineteenth-century poetry, Barrett Browning allows no doubt as to the temporal setting of the *Sonnets*. The sequence is steeped in Victorian courtship language and rituals” (94). What this assessment does not consider, however, is the extent of EBB’s medievalism and expertise in medieval literature: Karen Hodder has argued convincingly that EBB’s work “was not just brushed by the fringes of Romantic and Victorian medievalism, but that she was a serious medievalist, that is a scholar who applied her knowledge seriously; and that her familiarity

with primary medieval texts [...] was not temporary or superficial, but developed and woven into the fibre of her art.”²⁰ EBB is clearly far more interested in exploring the conventions of the medieval Renaissance erotic sonnet sequences than in situating herself alongside her fellow contemporary sonneteers, and “exercising” herself in the ways in which she can manipulate this structure to express a satisfying version of her poetic imaginings.

EBB’s deliberate intertextuality is obvious throughout, that she rejects the ‘English’, Early Modern sonnets of Sidney’s, Spenser’s, and Shakespeare’s sequences for the ‘strictest Italian’ Petrarchan form of which she had written. While the traditional sonnet sequence, as in the original medieval sonnets of Petrarch, employs the language and expectations of courtly love, EBB transforms “courtly love” into an expression of equality.²¹ EBB openly disdained the Victorian interpretation of chivalry as a code of conduct for an English gentleman, which relegated women to a rarefied passivity: her correspondence shows her writing scathingly of courtly admirers.²²

EBB subverts the set roles of a courtly-love sonnet sequence - the iconicized (female) beloved and active (male) lover - primarily through her very act of (female) composition. The role of chivalric icon was one that she abhorred herself and one to which she refused to degrade her poet-lover, so she refashions the traditional binary gender roles to suggest an equality and interdependence between the lovers, celebrating mutuality and dialogue. *Sonnets from the Portuguese* suggests the possibility, if not necessity, for equality of love and passion, and demands the woman’s right to expression. Traquair’s illustrations for *Sonnets from the Portuguese* expose and acclaim this revolutionary poetic vision.

Traquair also illuminates the ways in which EBB develops and refines Blake’s celebration of excess. There are many obvious connections between the two writers: they were influenced by similar Dissenting contexts, not least the ways in which EBB draws on Blake’s social

critique, in works like “The Cry of the Children”. EBB quotes from Blake widely in her correspondence, and records occasions when she had discussed Blake's work and philosophy with visitors. Both writers are skilful and politically-driven medievalists: like Blake's illustrations of Chaucer and Dante, EBB's adaptations of medieval texts and forms offer rich social commentary and glimpses of her own original artistic vision. Blake's *Canterbury Pilgrims*, an illustration of the Prologue to Chaucer's poem, was the centrepiece for the exhibition Blake organized in 1809 and was among the earliest paintings of a Chaucerian subject by a British artist. Blake admired Chaucer for the energy and penetration of his characterization, his originality, and his generous humanity: “for Blake, the rendering of universal truths about mankind was a visionary experience [...] To Blake, all the Pilgrims, however disparate in feature, in behaviour and social rank, are bound together by their common humanity, and ennobled by it.”²³ EBB made two contributions to Richard Hengist Horne's *The Poems of Geoffrey Chaucer, Modernized* (1841): “Queen Annelida and False Arcite” and “The Complaint of Annelida to False Arcite”. EBB writes to Hengist Horne of his introduction to the volume “your witness to his poetic divineness, is very beautiful—that passage for instance about the greenness of his green leaves & the whiteness of his daisies (so true that is!) & above all a noble paragraph nearer the end, close to the end, testifying to the devotional verity of every veritable poet. I have read it again & again.”²⁴ EBB considered Chaucer and Shakespeare as “the great fathers of our poetry”, and a bust of Chaucer, given to her by her father, was among the inspirational images with which she surrounded herself in her room at Wimpole Street. The influence of Blake's illustrations of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, commissioned by his friend John Linnell in 1824 and left in various stages of completion at his death, is seen vividly in Traquair's innovative illustrations for EBB's *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, which so self-consciously transforms the conventions of the traditional sonnet sequence that Dante's *Vita Nuova* exemplifies.

Dante is celebrated in EBB's “A Vision of Poets” (*Poems*, 1844), as is Chaucer, whose

“House of Fame” with its dream vision form seems a clear precursor for the work. While Blake does not feature as a poetic inspiration in the poem, unlike his contemporaries Burns, Shelley, Keats, Byron, and Coleridge, EBB demonstrates a knowledge of his work in her correspondence, quoting from *Jerusalem*, and *The Four Zoas*.²⁵ EBB writes of discussing Blake with Charles Augustus Tulk, who lent the Brownings copies of Blake's poetry: Tulk also shares the works of Emmanuel Swedenborg, whose ideas were influential to both EBB and Blake.²⁶ Writing to Mary Russell Mitford of her reading of *Songs of Innocence*, which she transcribed in 1842 and which would shape the way in which she presents the child's vision in “The Cry of the Children”²⁷, EBB notes the attraction of Blake's work:

Blake! Mr Kenyon had just lent me those curious “Songs of innocense” [*sic*] &c with their wild glances of the poetical faculty thro' the chasms of the singer's shattered intellect-& also his life by Cunningham.²⁸

While apparently sharing the contemporary belief in Blake's “shattered intellect”, EBB sees beyond that to the creativity which cannot be repressed. Algernon Swinburne, who like EBB, acknowledges in the vivacity of Blake's output, that “every shred of his work has some life, some blood, infused or woven into it”, speaks of the “vast tumbling chaos of relics as he left behind to get in time disentangled and cast into shape.”²⁹ However, the artistic excess and exuberance of Blake's work was always balanced: “The ethos of Blake’s work, then, is that meticulous technical control, through concentration on 'minutely organized Particulars', marks a 'sharp' mind inspired by 'Definite & Determinate' vision.”³⁰ Like Blake's, EBB's work combines both precision and visual excess.

Focusing on Blake's proverb from Plate 10 of “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell”, “Enough! Or Too much”, Lucy Kellett notes that “As a 'Proverb' itself, Blake's phrase more widely speculates on the desirability of 'Enough' and 'Too much' as the theoretical and practical states

of being and doing in art”, and, further, that “‘too muchness’ in Romantic literature manifested in its expansive and complex forms.”³¹ As Stone and Taylor note, “EBB responded passionately to the Romantic poets as members of her own generation,” and her “Romantic” experiments with form continue throughout her career, such as her use of the medieval ballad form to expose gender constraints and inequalities in “The Romaunt of the Page”, and “The Rhyme of the Duchess May”, later published in *Poems* (1844).³²

In the forty-four energetic, innovative sonnets that create the sequence, EBB revitalizes the sonnet form, reflecting the ways in which, as a female active speaker addressing a male, and equally active, beloved, she is transforming the erotic love sonnet sequence tradition. In EBB's Petrarchan sonnets, the octave and the sestet are frequently disturbed “often achieving complex effects by abbreviating and expanding these structural units, and making innovative use of slant rhymes, off rhymes, and near rhymes.”³³ EBB demonstrates that she is fully cognisant of her subversion of [male] tradition. In the tenth sonnet the speaker focuses on her right and demand for self-expression, and is transfigured by the power of direct speech: she consciously “plays at being both subject and object herself”,³⁴ or, as Natasha Distiller suggests, EBB “offers a poetic subject who only comes into being because her beloved is also a subject.”³⁵ Here, the transformation of the speaker through the power of direct speech, “*I love thee...mark!...I love thee*” [original emphasis], leaves her conscious of the “new rays” proceeding from her to the beloved, this outpouring reflected in the octave exceeding into the sestet.³⁶ There is also here clear evidence of EBB's conscious revisionism, these rays recalling “Stella's rays” striking Reason in Sir Philip Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* (Sonnet 10, line 12).

Such images of transformative overflow are central to *Sonnets*, and it is this aspect which is most clearly embodied in Traquair's illustrations. In an interview with Margaret Armour for *The Studio*, Traquair explains the differences she sees in decorative art and fine art:

all decorative art, of which illumination is but a department, being in its very nature an accompaniment, as an instrument is to the voice; and, in this, absolutely different from a picture, which stands alone on its own merits; the desired end being a whole, in which the sympathy between parts is perfect...If I meet with a book which stirs me, I am seized with the desire to help out the emotion with gold, blue, and crimson; or is it a wall, to make it sing.³⁷

Here Traquair refers to two of the decorative arts for which she was most celebrated: book illustration and mural painting, such as her cycle for the Song School of St Mary's Episcopalian Cathedral in Edinburgh. Traquair turned to illustration herself because of "a great desire to project feelings or emotions, and a consciousness that direct transcript from nature did not relieve me of the burden of feeling which for the moment was master" (51). Traquair wanted to communicate excess, that which exceeds a literal copy from nature, flowing from the words on the page. Her projects in book illustration show her choosing to work with writers who give space to this imaginative excess: alongside Dante, Blake, D.G. Rossetti, and EBB, Traquair also illustrated Tennyson's *In Memoriam* (1890-2), Robert Browning's *Saul* (1893-4), and William Morris's *Defence of Guenevere* (1897). Other notable illustrated works include her own narrative text *The Dream* (1886-7), and *Women's Voices* (1887), an anthology of poetry by women such as Christina Rossetti and Alice Meynell, edited by Elizabeth Sharp. Among her diverse arts and crafts projects, her embroidered panels collectively known as *The Progress of a Soul* (1893-1901) were inspired by Walter Pater's tale of "Denys l'Auxerrois" from *Imaginary Portraits* (1897), and Spenser's *Faerie Queene* was the source of *The Red Cross Knight* panels (1904-14) and many other decorative commissions.³⁸

Traquair's illustrations for *Sonnets from the Portuguese* revel in her idea of overflowing

excess. When, in Sonnet VI, the octave bursts its boundaries, and seeps into the sestet, emulating the image used to illustrate the lover's all-encompassing focus on the beloved - "What I do/ And what I dream include thee/ as the wine/ Must taste of its own grapes" - Traquair's illustration visually embodies the excess of EBB's poetics: the lover enfolding the beloved within a crimson flame, against a purple and blue background, alongside the expansive octave. In Traquair's illustration, EBB's lines literally flow and seep around the images, freed from an obvious sonnet structure.



[Figure 1]

Folio 7 from Phoebe Anna Traquair's illuminated copy of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, 1892-1897

Library reference: MS.8127, f.7

Date: Undated

This overflowing highlights the doubleness in the sonnet – the double pulses of the beloved's heart in the lover's; God seeing the tears of two within the lover's eyes. Traquair's central figures further this sense of fluidity: while the dominant figure of the lover with outstretched palm is arguably more feminized, both this figure and the embraced beloved seem androgynous.

In her interview for *The Studio*, Traquair further notes:

Purple and gold are delightful things to play with. Add to this a love of books, and a great desire to project feelings or emotions, and a consciousness that direct transcript from nature did not relieve me of the burden of feeling which for the moment was master. (51)

The “purple and gold” with which Traquair yearns to experiment are used imaginatively in *Sonnets* as visual poetic symbols of excess. In the fourth sonnet, the speaker demands “canst thou think and bear/ To let thy music drop here unaware/ In folds of golden fulness at my door.” Sonnet VIII opens with the demand,

What can I give thee back, O liberal
And princely giver, who has brought the gold
And purple of thine heart, unstained, untold,
And laid them on the outside of the wall
For such as I to take or leave withal,
In unexpected largesse?

Here the speaker emphasises the innovative reciprocity of their relationship, that both lover and beloved are actively giving: this giving on the beloved's part is equally excessive, “untold.” Purple is associated with the nobility of the beloved here, which continues into the next, ninth sonnet, and to Sonnet XVI, where he can “prevail against my fears and fling/ Thy purple round me” in a protective mantle. In sonnet XIX the speaker's hair has the “purply black” hue of the Muses' locks in the first Pythian ode of the Greek poet Pindar, highlighting EBB's disturbing of the usual roles of beloved and lover in the traditional sonnet sequence, so

that both figures are equally muse and poet.³⁹ Sonnet XXVI sees the “trailing purple” of the speaker’s visions trapped by “this world's dust” until the coming of the beloved liberates them. However, it is the speaker who remains the creative force of the exchange, as the visions are of her own making – “I lived with visions for my company”: the lover’s visual imagination is the central power here, but the inspiration for sharing these visions is embodied in the beloved.

Many of Traquair's illustrations for these “purple and gold” sonnets feature framed pictures among the medievalist illuminated letters, as if the artist is trying to capture and contain these ideas of excess in her art. Sonnet XXXVIII, where the speaker perceives the lover's first kiss on her hand more clearly than a purple amethyst ring (XXXVIII), and his third “upon my lips was folded down/ In perfect, purple state”, exemplifies this. The page is dominated by the illuminated letter 'F', in which the horizontal arms are joined along the right-hand side to create a frame for an image of this third, passionate kiss. The framed lovers embrace before the inky blue sea and sky, watched by a rainbow of heavenly observers, reminiscent of the frontispiece of Blake's *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (1793). Traquair’s extensive use of red in the lettering in this folio emphasises the eroticism and passion of the prolonged, full-mouthed kiss. The image is also suggestive of D.G. Rossetti’s *The Blessed Damozel* (1875-8), a painting that illustrates his much-revised poem of the same name: Traquair’s embracing pair echo the reunited heavenly lovers that form the background to the solitary, pining, lady leaning out of heaven towards her earthly lover.⁴⁰



[Figure 2]

Folio 39 from Phoebe Anna Traquair's illuminated copy of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, 1892-1897

Library reference: MS.8127, f.39

Date: 1892

In the twelfth sonnet, EBB most obviously subverts the usual Petrarchan roles of iconicized female beloved and active male lover. The speaker is the female lover, who can “boast” of her love: but this love is reciprocated, and interdependent with the beloved, who is equally active, taking the lover's soul and placing it upon a “golden throne”. In her illustration for this sonnet, Traquair focuses on the emotional excess, and the speaker's demand to express her love, showing the lover in the heart of a ring of fire, which leaps up the right-hand side of the illustration, and out of which spark musicians. However, the image of the lover's face is, again, strikingly androgynous, which highlights the interdependence of both lover and beloved in the expression of desire and the imagination.



[Figure 3]

Folio 13 from Phoebe Anna Traquair's illuminated copy of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, 1892-1897

Library reference: MS.8127, f.13

Date: Undated

Sonnet XIV shows the speaker demanding that love be its own creator and cause, that she should love and be loved “for love's sake only”. As Shaakeh Agajanian explains “This definition of human love as self-generated and self-sustained [...] is the fundamental assumption of the new metaphysics of love expressed in the *Portuguese* sequence, and has no counterpart in past or contemporary theories of love.”⁴¹ Traquair elucidates the innovation of EBB's ideas with a visionary Blakean dream illustration: the speaker, arising from, and surrounded by, the elemental flames of love, stands upright, arms outstretched, an image of the lovers erupting from the top of her head. An image of power, energy, and excess, this depiction of the lover draws influences from Blake's numerous fire images, most obviously *Albion rose*.⁴²

[Figure 4] William Blake, "Albion Rose", from *A Large Book of Designs*, Copy A, 1793-6

(Public domain)



[Figure 5] Folio 15 from Phoebe Anna Traquair's illuminated copy of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, 1892-1897

Library reference: MS.8127, f.15

Date: Undated

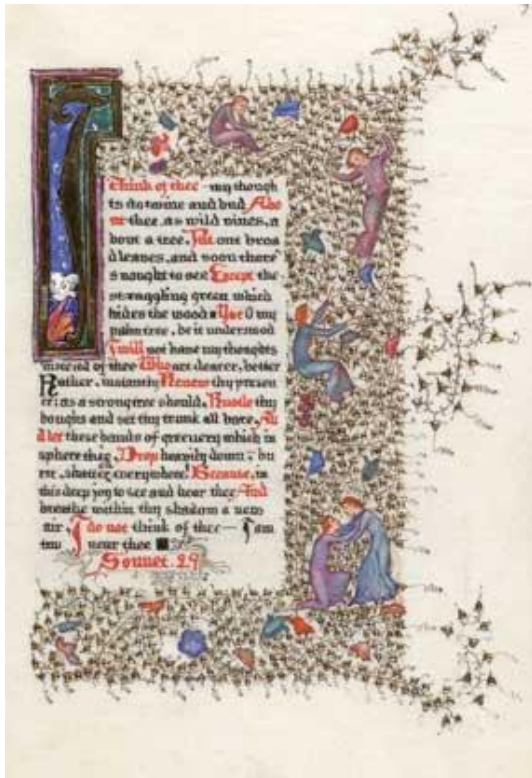
However, instead of the clear full frontal masculinity of Blake's figure, in Traquair's illustration the focus is an androgynous giant, born of earth, fire, and sea, who creates a new image of love, the haloed lovers emerging from the mind and imagination of the haloed creator. This is a new image of love - consciously original, consciously excessive, consciously exploding accepted norms of the expression of erotic love.

Similarly, Agajanian notes the “impressive innovation” of the simile in Sonnet XXIX that compares the lover to a palm tree, especially “for a genre in which for three or four hundred years all possible combinations of identification and parallelism with nature would seem to have been exhausted.”⁴³ This sonnet presents the extended metaphor of the speaker's thoughts twining and encircling the beloved, like wild vines strangling a palm tree, “an excess of budding and growth.”⁴⁴ The lover would prefer him to shake free of the suffocating fetters, emulated in the bursting of the octave into the sestet; “Rustle thy boughs and set thy trunk all bare”, and “Renew thy presence”, so that she can enjoy the reality of the beloved, rather than her thoughts of him. While the desire for the actual presence of the beloved rather than vicarious pleasures of imaginings is typical of the medieval sonnet sequence, the possibility of the actual, physical connections of the lovers is “untraditional.”⁴⁵ Love is again associated with metaphors of violence, explosion, bursting, and excess: through this excess, the speaker gains productivity and renewal. Traquair illustrates this metaphor with the lover and beloved seeking in the encircling and strangling vines of the illumination, eventually finding each other, and a way out of the golden illustrated maze, and of the page itself. Stott convincingly suggests a link between this sonnet and Sonnet 15, because in both “an alternative kind of sight is represented, a vision of love which exceeds the object of love and travels into future time and space and ultimately to oblivion.”⁴⁶ This image of an excessive love overcoming all obstacles is introduced from the second sonnet of the sequence:

Our hands would touch for all the mountain-bars,--
And, heaven being rolled between us at the end,
We should but vow the faster for the stars.

It develops and continues to the final sonnet, where the abundant eglantine and ivy, recalling and making positive the vines of Sonnet XXIX, thrive among the weeds of the garden, and

can be given to the beloved, while being rooted in the lover.



[Figure 6]

Folio 30 from Phoebe Anna Traquair's illuminated copy of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, 1892-1897

Library reference: MS.8127, f.30

Date: 1896

Of course, the most obvious sonnet of excess in the sequence is the now hackneyed penultimate Sonnet XLIII, “How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.” A long-time favourite of a particular type of Valentine card, Youtube now offers a deluge of versions, spoken in different voices, including one involving Lucy and Snoopy from the Peanuts cartoon.⁴⁷ Yet hidden beneath the surface quiet, this, now over familiar, sonnet is revolutionary, explosive, and excessive. The female speaker is demanding a right to love and express that love, and it is impossible to quantify or contain: “I love thee to the depth and breadth and height/ My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight/ For the ends of Being and ideal Grace.” It is an emotion that will even exceed life itself and increase after death, and is realisable and realised, unlike the traditional unrequited love of the medieval sonnet sequence. Traquair illustrates this with quiet intensity: the main image, the lovers framed in purple, has as a backdrop a Romantic sublime landscape, accomplished in purple and gold. Unlike many of the other sonnets, the lover and beloved in this central frame are clearly

gendered, in contrast to the two figures in its opening illuminated letter. The medieval gargoyle figures on the right-hand strip are straight out of the medieval manuscripts that the young Traquair so frequently visited at Trinity College, Dublin: but the excessive gold vines, which escape from the main frame and forge a way across the blank margins, are reminiscent of the imaginative innovations in EBB's work that Traquair highlighted in her illustration for Sonnet XXIX.



[Figure 7]

Folio 44 from Phoebe Anna Traquair's illuminated copy of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's 'Sonnets from the Portuguese', 1892-1897
 Library reference: MS.8127, f.44
 Date: 1897

Traquair's marked departure from the presentation of the usual sonnet line form is clear here, as it is elsewhere in her illustrations: the lines run on, the start of the lines highlighted with red letters, but in a constant flow to the final, solid black square that denotes the sonnet's end. Traquair's illustration highlights the ways in which EBB self-consciously adapts and develops the traditional medieval sonnet sequence to present an innovative female expression of fulfilled erotic desire, in a sonnet which "does not merely recall former phrases or images but sums up and resolves the several conflicting themes"⁴⁸ of the work.

The idea that EBB's poetic imagination is excessive and innovative has been the focus of

recovery work on her and other nineteenth-century women poets since the 1980s. What is remarkable about Traquair's illuminations is the stage at which she is illustrating this excess in EBB's work. By the 1890s, what Stone has termed "the appendage approach" to criticism of EBB was at its height: over thirty years after EBB's death, she was celebrated more as "Mrs Browning", and muse to a great husband, than in her own right.⁴⁹ That a woman illustrator working at this time could not only see this potent excess, but link it with the Romantic, visionary, excess of Blake, most obviously expressed in his exultation of active over passive, and excess over restraint, in the Proverbs of Hell (*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Plates 7-11), is well worth further critical interest and investigation. Indeed, the work of Traquair herself has long deserved critical re-evaluation: apart from the influential research of Elizabeth Cumming, to which this study is so indebted, she has received relatively scant critical attention, although Jan Marsh and Pamela Gerrish Nunn do include her as one of the key third generation Pre-Raphaelite women artists in *Women Artists and the Pre-Raphaelite Movement*, a work which sought to reinstate many of the women who were neglected in most accounts of the Pre-Raphaelite movement.⁵⁰ In the final years of the nineteenth century, Traquair offers EBB the critical reassessment that she herself is now due: Traquair's illustrations expose and celebrate EBB's imaginative vision and expression of female erotic desire, and illuminate the visual intensity and musical virtuosity of EBB's poetry, at the same time demonstrating her own innovative and proto-feminist aesthetics and visual imagination.

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¹ Hereafter called EBB, to avoid the confusion of using both her birth and married names, and to respect her own authorial self-designation.

² Oscar Wilde, "English Poetesses," *A Critic in Pall Mall: Being Extracts from Reviews and Miscellanies* (London: Prince Classics, 2019), 81-88; 83, 82. Further references are given in parenthesis in the text.

³ Marjorie Stone and Beverly Taylor, eds. *Elizabeth Barrett Browning: Selected Poems* (Ontario: Broadview editions, 2009), 2.

⁴The National Library of Scotland have digitised the manuscript pages of Traquair's illustrations for *Sonnets from the Portuguese*. See <https://digital.nls.uk/traquair/sonnets/index.html> to view the individual sonnets. I am extremely grateful to Dr Heidi Egginton, Curator, Archives and Manuscripts, National Library of Scotland, for her support and assistance, and to Mr David Traquair for permission to reproduce images in this article.

⁵ For further information about Traquair's biography, see Elizabeth Cumming, *Phoebe Anna Traquair 1852-1936* (Edinburgh: National Galleries of Scotland, 2005).

⁶ See Cumming 18-19.

⁷ Cumming 41.

⁸See Cumming 34. D.G. Rossetti famously acquired Blake's notebook, often called the Rossetti Manuscript, in 1847: see [The Notebook of William Blake - The British Library](#) (accessed 17th April 2021). Blake remained hugely influence on Rossetti's art and writing: Rossetti went on to help Alexander Gilchrist to prepare his ground-breaking 1863 biography of Blake, which instigated the reappraisals of the poet's life and work.

⁹ Cumming 90.

¹⁰ T. Hall Caine ed., *Sonnets of Three Centuries: a selection; including many examples hitherto unpublished*

(London: Elliot Stock, 1882), 310-11.

¹¹ Hall Caine had a close relationship with the Rossetti family: he had moved to London at his correspondent D.G. Rossetti's suggestion, and lived as Rossetti's acting secretary and companion, being at his side when he died on Easter Sunday 1882.

¹² Hall Caine, 311.

¹³ Christina Rossetti, "Monna Innominata: A Sonnet of Sonnets", *Poems and Prose*, ed. Simon Humphries (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 227.

¹⁴ Hugh Walker, *The Literature of the Victorian Era* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1910), 328.

¹⁵ John W. Cunliffe, "Elizabeth Barrett's Influence on Browning's Poetry." *PMLA*, 23 (1908): 169-183, 170.

¹⁶ Marjorie Stone, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1995), 23. EBB's translations of Petrarch and Zappi are now published in *The Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, Volume 5, ed. Sandra Donaldson, Rita Pateson, Marjorie Stone, Beverly Taylor et. al (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2010), 613-17.

¹⁷ 1028. EBB to Mary Russell Mitford, [London] 19 October 1842. All references to the Brownings' correspondence are taken from <https://www.browningscorrespondence.com/>.

¹⁸ Amy Billone, *Little Songs: women, silence, and the nineteenth century sonnet* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2007), 47. Billone suggests that EBB's interest in sonnets at this time is a response to her inability to verbalize her grief at her brother Edward's death by drowning in 1840 (47-9).

¹⁹ Marianne Van Remoortel, *Lives of the Sonnet, 1787-1895: Genre, Gender and Criticism* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 95. Further references are given in parenthesis in the text.

²⁰ Karen Hodder, "Elizabeth Barrett and the Middle Ages' Woeful Queens." *Studies in Medievalism* 7 (1995): 105-30, 107. Hodder offers a rare and thorough analysis of EBB's translation of Chaucer's *Annelida and Arcite*, the poet's contribution to the 1841 volume *The Poems of Geoffrey Chaucer, Modernized*, edited by Richard Hengist Horne.

²¹ The term "courtly love" is a useful means of defining the traditional values and gender roles found in troubadour poetry and the medieval sonnet sequences of Petrarch and others: since the term *amour courtois* was not rediscovered until 1883 by Gaston Paris, it is unlikely to have been recognized by women writing earlier in the century. The decades of ongoing debate about the actual realities of "courtly love" is not important here: what is significant is that in the nineteenth century there was an understanding of the traditions of this courtly-love poetry, as can clearly be seen in EBB's correspondence. See Clare Broome Saunders, *Women Writers and Nineteenth-Century Medievalism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 186-187.

²² See for example 1845. EBB to Mary Russell Mitford, [London] [19] February 1845.

²³ Claire Pace, "Blake and Chaucer: 'Infinite variety of character'", *Art History*, 3:4 (1980), 388-409, 397.

²⁴ See 780. EBB to Richard Hengist Horne, Torquay. December 17th 1840.

²⁵ See 555. EBB to Julia Martin, [London] [postmark: 23 January 1837]; and 693. EBB to Hugh Stuart Boyd, Torquay. May 21st 1839.

²⁶ See 2719. EBB to Henrietta Moulton-Barrett, Florence Feby 21-[2]2-[2]4th 1848.

²⁷ See Stone and Taylor, pp. 148-150.

²⁸ 941. EBB to Mary Russell Mitford, [London] April 6. 1842.

²⁹ See Jerome McGann, and Charles L. Sligh, eds. *Algernon Charles Swinburne: Major Poems and Selected Prose* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004), 376. Algernon Swinburne similarly wrote in 1868 that "People [...] excuse him still on the old plea of madness" (376).

³⁰ Lucy Kellett, "'Enough! Or Too much': Forms of Textual Excess in Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and De Quincey". Unpublished DPhil thesis. University of Oxford, 2016: 265-6.

³¹ Kellett, 1.

³² Stone and Taylor, 8.

³³ Stone and Taylor, 206.

³⁴ Angela Leighton, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (Brighton: Harvester, 1986), 102.

³⁵ Natasha Distiller, *Desire and Gender in the Sonnet Tradition* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 116.

³⁶ Edition of EBB's work used for quotation purposes is Stone and Taylor.

³⁷ Margaret Armour, "Beautiful Modern Manuscripts", *The Studio*: special winter number, 1896-7, 47-55; 52. Further references are given in parenthesis in the text.

³⁸ For details of Traquair's further use of Spenser, see Cumming 41-2.

³⁹ Stone and Taylor, 217 n. 7.

⁴⁰ Traquair herself illustrated "The Blessed Damozel" (1897-8): Christina Rossetti records in her diary for 1885 a visit from Traquair who was introduced by a mutual friend, who showed them a book of her illustrations for D.G. Rossetti's poems including this one. See Jan Marsh and Pamela Gerrish Nunn, *Women Artists and the Pre-Raphaelite Movement* (London: Virago, 1989), 133.

⁴¹ Shaakeh S. Agajanian, "*Sonnets from the Portuguese*" and the Love Sonnet Tradition (New York: Philosophical Library, 1985), 81.

⁴² Michael Phillips, *William Blake: Apprentice and Master* (Oxford: Ashmolean, 2014), 160.

⁴³ Agajanian, 98.

⁴⁴ Simon Avery and Rebecca Stott, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2003), 144.

⁴⁵ Agajanian, 99.

⁴⁶ Avery and Stott, 144.

⁴⁷For further examples see Stone 1-2.

⁴⁸ Agajanian, 113.

⁴⁹See Stone 206-209.

⁵⁰ Marsh and Gerrish Nunn, 132-6.