

Elizabeth Barrett, "wonderful invention of the day," 7 December 1843

(keywords: Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Mary Russell Mitford, history of the daguerreotype, history of photography)

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Selected text from:

Manuscript letter by Elizabeth Barrett (Browning) to Mary Russell Mitford, dated 7 December 1843. (Original line breaks preserved. Used with the kind permission of Wellesley College Library, Special Collections.)

Dec. 7, 1843

My dearest Miss Mitford, do you know anything about that wonderful invention of the day, called the Daguerrotype? — that is, have you seen any portraits produced by means of it? Think of a man sitting down in the sun and leaving his fac simile in all its full completion of outline and shadow, stedfast on a plate, at the end of a minute and a half! — The Mesmeric disembodiment of spirits strikes one as a degree less marvellous. And several of these wonderful portraits . . . like engravings only exquisite and delicate beyond the work of graver — have I seen lately — longing to have such a memorial of every Being dear to me in the world. It is not merely the likeness which is precious in such cases — but the association, and the sense of nearness involved in the thing . . . the fact of the very shadow of the person lying there fixed for ever! It is the very sanctification of portraits I think — and it is not at all monstrous in me to say what my brothers cry out against so vehemently . . . that I would rather have such a memorial of one I dearly loved, than the noblest Artist's work every produced. I do not say so in respect (of disrespect) to Art, but for Love's sake. Will you understand? — even if you will not agree? —

Ever your affectionate B B

[End of text.]

EDITOR'S NOTES:

This letter is indicative of the public's fascination with the new art of daguerreian portraiture. Barrett remarks about the fineness of the portrait, its near-magical qualities, and especially ascribes a full sentimental value to the possession of such images.

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URL: http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/S8430001_BARRETT_LETTER_1843-12-07.pdf

Document author: Gary W. Ewer

Creation date: 2009-02-10 / Last revision: 2010-12-16

Citation information: *manuscript letter by Elizabeth Barrett (Browning) dated 11 April 1843.*

Prepared from: photocopy of manuscript letter. Used with the kind permission of Wellesley College Library, Special Collections. The letter (with some editing) is also transcribed in Betty Miller, edit., *Elizabeth Barrett to Miss Mitford: The Unpublished letters of Elizabeth Barrett Barrett [sic] to Mary Russell Mitford* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954): 207-9.

Original spelling/punctuation/grammar generally maintained without correction. Any in-text corrections are bracketed.

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