

Criticism on *Aurora Leigh*: An Overview **Marjorie Stone**

Aurora Leigh, published in 1856 by Chapman and Hall, just two weeks after Elizabeth Barrett Browning published the most comprehensive collection of her earlier poetry up to that time – *Poems* (1856) -- unquestionably expanded her reputation and her reading public in a period when the novel was establishing the dominance it still enjoys among literary genres, in part because, besides being a poem, it was ‘quite a novel’ in her husband and fellow poet’s words (*LTA* 2:211). Margaret Reynolds points out that the first edition ‘sold out in a fortnight, and it was reprinted five times’ before its author’s death in 1861:

By the end of the nineteenth century it had been reprinted more than twenty times in Britain and nearly as often in the United States. It became one of the books everyone knew and read. Oscar Wilde loved it, the poet Algernon Charles Swinburne wrote a gushing preface for it, the novelist Rudyard Kipling borrowed the plot for *The Light That Failed* (1890), and, in America, the feminist activist Susan B. Anthony presented her treasured copy to the Library of Congress in 1902 and wrote on the flyleaf: ‘This book was carried in my satchel for years and read & re-read. ... With the hope that Women may more & more be like ‘Aurora Leigh’.¹ (*AL* Norton, p. x)

John Ruskin, whose views on women diametrically opposed Anthony’s, responded similarly (another paradox), describing it as ‘the greatest poem the century has produced in any language’ (*Works* 15:227). Elizabeth Gaskell took her epigraph for *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857) from *Aurora Leigh*, much as she had taken several chapter epigraphs in *North and South* from EBB’s 1844 and 1850 collections of *Poems*. And George Eliot read it three times because no other book gave her ‘a deeper sense of communion with a large as well as a beautiful mind’ (*Letters* 2:342), describing its author as ‘the first woman who has produced a work which exhibits

¹ Anthony’s comments in her copy of *Aurora Leigh* appear in full in *Reconstruction*, M23.

all the peculiar powers without the negations of her sex' (*Westminster*, 306). Along with such admirers, though, it also had animated detractors, the conflict between them feeding into the continuing debates that generated edition after edition up to 1900. As the poet commented in February 1857, she had heard '(indirectly from various quarters) that "never did a book so divide opinions in London". Some persons cant bear it,—& others . . . Monkton Milnes, for instance, & Fox of Oldham, besides Ruskin & the Pre-Raffaelites, crying it up as what I am too modest to write' (*LTA* 2:287).

Despite such differences in opinion in the nineteenth century, few readers in the twenty-first century would dispute the status of *Aurora Leigh* as Elizabeth Barrett Browning's preeminent achievement, or her own description of it in the Dedication as the 'most mature' of her works, expressing her 'highest convictions upon Life and Art'. Between 1900 and 1978, however, when the first modern reprint of *Aurora Leigh* appeared, the profile of her achievement was dramatically different. In this period, the work that appeared in edition after edition and in many different languages was *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, not *Aurora Leigh*. In 1977, Julia Markus sought to draw attention to 'another major though lesser known poem' by Barrett Browning in producing 'the first modern critical edition of any of the poet's work' (xi). But the work she recovered was *Casa Guidi Windows*. *Aurora Leigh* is not even mentioned in her explanatory preface. Innovative though it was, Markus's work in editing *Casa Guidi Windows* was quickly overshadowed by the appearance of Cora Kaplan's Women's Press edition of *Aurora Leigh* one year later. In this case, the ground was already prepared by Ellen Moers's attention to the poem in *Literary Women* (1976), and the work Kaplan recovered – the first extended portrait of a woman writer in English literature – was much more in tune with the second wave feminism of the times than EBB's lyrical epic about the Italian *Risorgimento* in *Casa Guidi Windows*.

Critical Fallacies, and Reviews, Debates and Reverberations

Between 1900 and 1978, the received critical opinion was that *Aurora Leigh* was almost universally condemned by Victorian reviewers. For example, in his 1957 biography, Taplin stated

that ‘the notices in the more influential periodicals were unanimous in their opinion that the defects in the poem far outweighed its merits’ (p. 338).² In her 1962 extended study of EBB’s poetry – the most comprehensive to appear before Dorothy Mermin’s in 1989 – Alethea Hayter similarly observed that all Victorian reviewers ‘thought poorly of the characterization of the adults’ in *Aurora Leigh* (p. 169), in essential agreement with the opinions expressed in the *Blackwood’s* review of the poem. This view persisted in some quarters into the 1980s, as in Deirdre David’s claim that *Aurora Leigh* provoked an ‘avalanche of negative criticism’ in the serious reviews (*Intellectual Women*, p. 114). Even Reynolds speaks of ‘grudging acknowledgement’ of the work by ‘contemporary reviewers’ (*AL*, p. 2). As Mermin’s balanced overview suggests (1989, pp. 222-4), however, critical responses to EBB’s most ambitious and politically engaged work were as diverse as the conflicting ideological perspectives and agendas that reviewers (and their respective periodicals) brought to the poem. Sandra Donaldson’s 1993 annotated bibliography of reviews and criticism confirms this diversity of views, and the striking variations in response that her annotations chart is a feature as well in the twenty-three new American entries Cheryl Stiles has added to those catalogued by Donaldson.³

While there were some largely negative reviews of *Aurora Leigh* in more conservative journals such as *Blackwood’s*, the *Saturday Review* and the *Dublin University Magazine*, there were also very positive ones in the *British Quarterly Review*, *The Literary Gazette*, the *Monthly Review* and the *Edinburgh Weekly Review*. On the one hand, in one of the most uniformly

² *The Life of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, 338. Taplin goes on to say of Victorian reviewers’ response to the poem, ‘They asserted it was too hastily and carelessly written, that it was far too long, that it was lacking in dramatic appeal, that the characters were poorly conceived, that the incidents in the story were hackneyed, implausible, and many of them unnecessarily coarse and revolting to good taste’, etc. Many of these generalizations relate most closely to the review in the ultra-conservative *Saturday Review*, with which Taplin begins his survey. For an analysis of the biases informing Taplin’s biography, see Stone, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (1995), pp. 218-20.

³ Using a chronologically limited search with ‘a new electronic database, the American Periodicals Series (APS), available from ProQuest’ (239), Stiles uncovers and summarizes ‘23 new entries’ to supplement the ‘68 articles and reviews published in American periodicals during 1856-62’ (243) cited in Donaldson’s EBB bibliography. Stiles notes that the APS contains ‘more than 1500 records’ for EBB (in comparison to 800 for Christina Rossetti, 1,100 for Tennyson, 1,800 for RB, and 17,000 for Dickens, the hands-down winner). Extrapolating from her search, she speculates that one third of those for EBB ‘could prove to be new’ (243).

negative reviews, G. S. Venables in the *Saturday Review* (27 December 1856) attacked the length of *Aurora Leigh*, its ‘few and unreal’ characters, its ‘scanty ... almost inconceivable’ incidents and its ‘unbroken series of far-fetched metaphors’ as an example of ‘feminine misadventures in art’; Venables also employs the metaphor of ‘Pythonesses’ that would recur in late nineteenth-century allusions to EBB’s ‘Pythian shriek’ (pp. 776-7).⁴ On the other hand, Robert Alfred Vaughan in the *British Quarterly Review* (January 1857) observed, ‘Our generation scarcely numbers more than one or two among its master minds from whom we could have looked for a production at all to rival this in comprehensiveness – a poem with so much genuine depth and so free from obscurity. The results of abstract thinking are here, and yet there is no heavy philosophising of set purpose. A warm human life meets us everywhere’ (p. 265). A century later, in 1957, Taplin would take Venables’s review as ‘typical’ (p. 338) and overlook reviews such as Vaughan’s altogether. Yet Vaughan was far from alone in his opinion of *Aurora Leigh*. The *Literary Gazette* reviewer observed, ‘All the powers which were indicated in her former works seem to us to be displayed in the present poem in perfection. She wields the lightning of her genius with Jove-like freedom. ... Everywhere there is power, everywhere variety’. The reviewer goes on to compare specific passages to the ‘richness of colouring’ in Tennyson and the ‘fulness of life’ in Titian, while the description of the railway journey from Paris to Marseilles is compared to Turner in its ‘power’ of turning to ‘beauty the funnel and smoke’ of apparently unpoetical, modern subjects (22 November 1856, pp. 917-8). In the *Westminster Review* George Eliot similarly paid anonymous tribute in January 1857 to the ‘profound impression’ left by *Aurora Leigh* as a ‘poetical body ... everywhere informed by a soul, namely, by genuine thought and feeling’, even though she objected to what she saw as the imitation of *Jane Eyre* in Romney’s

⁴ Objecting to ‘far-fetched metaphors’ in the dialogue between Aurora and Romney in Book II, Venables comments, ‘Minds in a state of imaginative exaltation will never run in couples. Two Pythonesses singing their responses in parts, and keeping time in their contortions, would have destroyed the popular faith in Delphic inspiration’ (776). He did acknowledge that if one eliminated ‘the story, the eccentricities of the actors, and a great part of the dialogue’ in *Aurora Leigh*, there remained ‘an abundant store of poetical thought, of musical language, and of deep and true reflection’ (777). On late nineteenth-century references to EBB’s ‘Pythian shriek’, see the treatment of Edmund Gosse, below.

being struck by blindness (p. 307) – an imitation that EBB disputed in her letters when Anna Jameson also noted the parallel.⁵ Eliot’s generally laudatory review was followed in the same periodical by John Nichol’s more critical assessment of *Aurora Leigh* in October 1857 as a work breaking the ‘laws’ of art ‘fixed by Nature herself’ (p. 400) and exaggerating the effects of Art on ‘elevating the condition of the masses’ (p. 412). Nichol was explicitly taking issue with Ruskin’s description of *Aurora Leigh* as the greatest poem of the century (see paragraph two, above), as well as implicitly with Eliot’s review. Eliot and Nichol epitomize the divergent views of EBB’s novel-poem on its appearance – but her review, like Vaughan’s and the review in the *Literary Gazette*, was forgotten by early and mid-twentieth-century literary critics, while his was frequently cited.

The perception that the reviews were uniformly negative or at best ‘grudging’ also overlooks the notices of *Aurora Leigh* in the daily and weekly press, which help to explain the media buzz the novel-poem provoked and the wide audience of readers it attracted, going into a ‘second edition, a fortnight after publication’ (*LTA* 2:273). Some of these notices were harshly condemnatory: the *Press* (20 November 1856) dismissed the work’s critique of ‘conventionalism of all kinds’ and its ‘rank unmitigated rant’ (pp. 1120-2); the *Guardian* (31 December 1856) objected to its ‘coarse and disagreeable, and by no means original’ story (pp. 999-1000). The Catholic Dublin *Tablet* denounced it as reading ‘like a translation into blank verse of a French novel by Frederic Soulié’ and introducing ‘characters and transactions such as have long ceased to figure in our literature’ – noting the ‘brazenfaced’ Byronic character of Lady Waldemar in particular – although the reviewer also acknowledged that the author’s ‘powers’ were ‘evinced ... by the very pages’ condemned (29 November 1856, p. 762). Yet the majority of weekly papers took an opposing and highly favourable view of *Aurora Leigh*. For instance, the London *Daily News* (26 November 1856) termed it one of ‘the master works of the highest order of genius’ (p.

⁵ EBB emphasized that in *Jane Eyre* as she recalled the novel Rochester was ‘monstrously disfigured’ and ‘hideously scarred’, whereas ‘the only injury received by Romney in the fire was from a blow’, while his actual blindness was caused by a fever he experienced afterwards (*LEBB* 2:246).

2); the *Examiner* (29 November 1856) set out its ‘philosophical love story’ and said readers would want to enjoy the ‘great truth living and expanding in the verse’ (p. 736); and the *New-York Daily Times* (9 December 1856) praised its ‘highly felicitous’ female characters and its Wordsworthian portrayal of a humble character (n.p.). The *Leader* and the *Globe* published similarly enthusiastic tributes (see below). Such responses indicate that EBB was not deluded in her comments on the response to *Aurora Leigh*. She had braced herself for harsh reviews because of its bold sexual content and candour regarding economic and sexual politics, expecting ‘furious abuse’. But she found that ‘the daily and weekly press’ was ‘for the most part, furious the other way’, though she did note exceptions like the *Tablet* (*LEBB* 2:249).

Although EBB’s plan of writing a philosophical poem dealing with ‘the practical & the ideal’ that was also ‘against the socialists’ (*AL* Norton, p. 331) was central to her conception of *Aurora Leigh* in 1853 (see the “Critical Introduction” to the poem in the Pickering and Chatto edition), neither the poem’s treatment of the ‘social question’ nor its philosophy formed a primary focus in the reviews and press notices. By 1856, when her novel-poem appeared, the social question remained urgent in England, but most of the socialist enterprises underway in England, France and America had collapsed. W.H. Smith in the *British Quarterly Review* (October, 1861) did note in retrospect that she had ‘struck a blow, and struck it ably, on one of the most flagrant errors of Socialism’ (p. 367). But most criticism on the social question tended to focus on the portrayal of Romney, with numerous reviewers finding it unrealistic or unfair. Nichol’s *Westminster Review* article most cogently advances the argument that Romney and the cause he represents are treated ‘unfairly’(p. 414) – even offensively, through his ‘mutilation’ (p. 411) – as Nichols critiques Ruskin, along with EBB, for exaggerating the effects of art on social improvement. Other reviewers, however, were more sympathetic to the depiction of Romney. For example, the *Globe* critic commented that while ‘[n]o one ... would contend that Romney Leigh’s intended marriage in St. James’s Church with a tramper’s daughter is like what takes place in real life’, the poet was ‘justified, in such a daring symbolic lesson’. This critic also

suggests how resonant a figure Romney may have been for EBB's contemporaries, in noting that 'Maurice and Kingsley, Lord Shaftesbury, Mr. Sidney Herbert, and the Duke of Bedford, combine to form Romney Leigh – Fourierier [*sic*], Comte, and Owen also help to fill out his personality' (20 November 1856, n.p.). As for the philosophical dimensions of EBB's treatment of Romney the social reformer and Aurora the artist, these were noted in some reviews but not generally approached as a central dimension. Noting that 'the poem touches upon the chief figures in modern society', as well as the 'varied social problems' of the age, the *National Magazine* reviewer commented that, 'The aspiring and scornful idealist finds the noblest use of her gifts in their practical application. The material worker learns that man's social progress is blindly aimed at unless pursued in light of his immortality' (March 1857, p. 314. However, others, like Henry Chorley in the *Athenæum* (see below), ignored what EBB described as 'the double action of the metaphysical intention' (*AL Norton*, p. 340).

If many socialist initiatives had fizzled out by 1856, the Victorian women's movement had gathered steam through the decade, a circumstance which may help to explain why the 'woman question', which EBB had thought of as 'collateral' to her purposes in *Aurora Leigh*, emerged front and center in the reviews. Mermin notes that the work transgressed 'two boundaries ... of genre and of gender': the boundaries between 'poetry and fiction' and between 'masculine and feminine' (p. 223). This transgressiveness, moreover, was also an element of stylistic features such as EBB's employment of graphic, startling, gynocentric metaphors like the 'double-breasted age'. In many of the reviews, these various dimensions run together as critics hostile to the work's gender politics filter their responses through objections to its generic and stylistic hybridity. Thus Chorley's unexpectedly negative review in the *Athenæum* (22 November 1856) begins by noting that *Aurora Leigh* is a 'contribution to the chorus of protest and mutual exhortation, which Woman is now raising, in hope of gaining the due place and sympathy which, it is held, have been denied to her'. He then proceeds to attack the work for being not 'a poem, but a novel, belonging to the period which has produced "Ruth," and "Villette," and "The

Blithedale Romance”’. Along with this mixing of genres, Chorley is especially critical of the associated stylistic ‘mingling of what is precious with what is mean ... the grandeur of passion and the pettiness of modes and manners ... Milton’s organ is put by Mrs. Browning to play polkas in May-Fair drawing-rooms’ (p. 1425). Venables begins his even harsher attack on *Aurora Leigh* in the *Saturday Review* (27 December 1856) with the words, ‘The negative experience of centuries seems to prove that a woman cannot be a great poet’. He then uses his denunciation of the ‘fable, manners, and diction’ in *Aurora Leigh* (and its ‘philosophy’, the ‘least valuable part’) to drive home his thesis. So objectionable does he find Aurora that he observes the poem is at its best ‘[w]hen Aurora forgets that she is a poetess – or, still better, when she is herself forgotten’ (pp. 776-8).

There is a similar correlation in W. E. Aytoun’s *Blackwood’s* review (January 1857) between his resistance to the gender (and also the class politics) of *Aurora Leigh* and his objections to its experimental form and style, as EBB recognized in describing his review as ‘generous’ -- considering that it was ‘coming from the camp of the enemy (artistically and socially)’ (*LEBB* 2:255). Aytoun, who asserts ‘we must maintain that woman was created to be dependent on the man’, finds that the ‘extreme independence of Aurora detracts from the feminine charm’ (p. 33); and just as he insists upon a hierarchical separation of the sexes, so he insists upon ‘the distinction between a novel and a poem’ (pp. 34-5), as well as the use of a suitably dignified form of diction and blank verse to separate the higher from the lower social classes. He thus deplores the fact that ‘Mrs. Browning follows the march of modern improvement. She makes no distinction between her first and her third class passengers, but rattles them along at the same speed upon her rhythmical railway’ (p. 37). The link between Aytoun’s class prejudices and his aesthetic principles is made clear when he confesses that he has ‘not much faith in new theories of art’, because he classes ‘them in the same category with schemes for the regeneration of society’ (p. 39). Patmore, by comparison, was more mixed in his response to EBB’s ‘present-day epic’ (p. 237) in the *North British Review* (February 1857),

despite EBB's apprehensions. Instead of directly dogmatizing on the woman question, he acknowledged the 'command of imagery' and 'vital continuity' of the work (p. 246), although he also criticized its stylistic mixture of poetry with passages that 'ought unquestionably to have been in prose' or 'in a review' rather than in 'an epic' (pp. 240, 242). As for the 'elaborately depicted' portrayal of Aurora's 'development of her powers as a poetess', he found this 'uninteresting' because 'Mrs. Browning is herself almost the only modern example of such development' (p. 242).

Just as those hostile to the relatively progressive gender and class politics of *Aurora Leigh* tended to also object to its generic and stylistic hybridity, those more sympathetic to its politics tended to approve of the author's artistic experimentation. Vaughan, for example, in his positive assessment in the *British Quarterly Review* (January 1857) commends not only the 'sound philosophy' of *Aurora Leigh* but also the 'originality' of its hybrid form, and the 'free and varied' rhythm of the blank verse in which the poet 'has endeavoured to approach as nearly to the language of daily life as was possible without becoming prosaic or colloquial' (pp. 265, 263). The critic in the *Leader* – a periodical with a very different perspective on 'the regeneration of society' than the relatively conservative *Blackwood's* – similarly notes the innovative form of *Aurora Leigh*:

It is a three-volume novel in verse. This of itself is something new. Scott and Byron told stories in verse; Tennyson in *The Princess* and *Maud* has also tried his hand at story-telling, with very indifferent success as a story-teller; but no poet – at least we know of none – has represented modern life in such forms as it assumes in modern fiction, no one has *sung* the novel instead of *writing* it'. (29 November 1856)

A similar acceptance of the form of EBB's novel-epic and one key Romantic precedent for it is reflected in George William Curtis's editorial observation in *Harper's Monthly Magazine* (September 1861): 'It is a curious juxtaposition, that of "Don Juan" and "Aurora Leigh", and yet

they are related in this that they are the two great poems of modern English social life, as felt by a man of the world and a religious woman, who were both poets' (p. 556).

Curtis's view of *Aurora Leigh* reflects one side of the debates over *Aurora Leigh* that were replayed in the obituary and retrospective essays that followed EBB's death in June 1861. In this period, political and aesthetic differences in opinion are linked to a broader debate over 'Woman's Powers',⁶ to use the first running title of an essay by the Chartist poet and essayist Gerald Massey in the *North British Review* (May 1862, p. 515). Opening his essay with an allusion to Thomas DeQuincey's prophecy that there would never be a great woman poet (or composer, or artist, or 'great philosopher' or a 'great scholar'), Massey notes that in 'more than one department of literature', woman had 'run almost abreast of her brother' and that 'Mrs. Browning' is 'the greatest woman-poet of whom we have any record' (pp. 514-6). Defending the charges of 'coarse' language and irreverent 'boldness' made against her, he compares EBB's 'free and lofty spirit' to Charlotte Brontë's (p. 518). He also cites the 'double-breasted age' passage together with Roscoe's earlier critique of it in the *National Review* (see above), suggesting that the 'apparent incongruities' in EBB's much criticized metaphors arise from readers failing to detect underlying 'connection[s]' (pp. 517-8). Where Roscoe had cried out against the 'savage contrast of burning lava and a woman's breast', Massey invokes instead 'the lava mould of that beautiful bosom found ... amongst the ruins of Pompeii' (pp. 517-8).⁷ Hannah Lawrance in the *British Quarterly Review* (October 1865), expressed views similar to Massey's in observing that in *Aurora Leigh* 'Mrs. Browning has ... spoken for her sex as the satirist of their wrongs' (p. 360), describing it as the work on which her 'fame will chiefly rest', with its 'energetic and condensed' style, 'vast compass and sudden changes', 'rapid spirited narration' and mixture of 'brilliant and telling sarcasms' with 'the sublimest heights of passion and poetry'

⁶ For a more extended treatment of this issue in the obituary essays, see the 'General Introduction' to this edition, vol. I.

⁷ In the introduction to *Aurora Leigh* (1978), Kaplan cites Roscoe's denunciation of the 'double-breasted age' passage (13) but not Massey's defence of it.

(pp. 379-80).⁸ In contrast, conservative reviewers writing after EBB's death were only too happy to acknowledge that she was England's greatest woman poet in order to use her both as a yardstick to measure other women writers and as an example to curb female aspirations. William Stigand observes in the *Edinburgh Review* (October 1861) that in *Aurora Leigh*, her 'most successful production she deals with very intricate and vexed questions of society, of which she knew literally nothing' (p. 521), because, as he later points out, '[m]en, whether they will it or no, get their minds disciplined in the world; but women ... are entirely cut off from this kind of experience' (p. 533). Upon 'the first appearance' of *Aurora Leigh*, he remarks, 'the daring novelty and vehemence of particular passages veiled its many deformities and faults of construction, the prosaic baldness of much of the narrative, its distorted ingenuity, the harsh discordances, transitions, elaborate conceits and grotesqueness of much of the dialogue', along with 'the utter impossibility of the story, and the unreality of all its actors. But a return to its pages dispels the reader's illusions, and he is compelled to regard it as a splendid failure' (p. 530). This ambivalent concession sets up Stigand's conclusion, in which he observes of 'Mrs. Browning' that, '[c]onsidering the great capabilities she possessed, her career may be accepted as some proof of the impossibility that women can ever attain to the first rank in imaginative composition' (p. 533). More bluntly, in its obituary essay, the *Saturday Review* (13 July 1861) critiqued the 'partiality and personal bias which affect the ordinary judgments of women', together with the 'riddles' of EBB's 'most elaborate work, *Aurora Leigh*', with its 'impossible' story, 'monstrous' characters and 'utterly absurd and unreal' opinions. Conceding that the work also displayed 'vigour', 'fertility', and 'musical skill', the reviewer held it up as 'the most conclusive proof' that 'no woman can hope to achieve what Mrs. Browning failed to accomplish' (p. 42).

⁸ Likewise, for I. M. Luyster in the *Christian Examiner* (January 1862): *Aurora Leigh*, although not one without faults, ranked with Tennyson's *In Memoriam* as 'the two great poems of the age' (73). For J. Challen in the *National Quarterly Review* (June 1857), there is 'no modern poem more full of thought'. Like 'God's cosmos' it has 'its riddles, mysteries, morasses, deserts, fogs and fens' but it is a 'great poem', 'a wonder of art' (135-6).

The very insistence of such pronouncements, however, speaks to the transformations in views held by and about women that the *Saturday Review* was futilely resisting. With the development of mass reading audiences in the nineteenth century, the reception of literary works was less strictly regulated by professional critics. As Eric Eisner has pointed out, *Aurora Leigh* reflects a ‘developing culture of literary fandom’ that its own author participated in ‘both as an object of passionate interest’ (as Aurora is to Kate Ward in EBB’s poem) and ‘as a fan herself’ (p. 85). Among the thousands of ‘fans’ of EBB’s novel-in-verse, women figured prominently, while events like the reading of ‘Aurora’ given in Rome in 1857 by the American actress Charlotte Cushman were a further stimulus for the poem’s popularity (*LTA* 2:282). The *Dublin University Magazine* (April 1857) reviewer criticized the author of *Aurora Leigh* for writing ‘a book which is almost a closed volume to her own sex’ and assuming ‘the gait and the garb of a man’ (p. 470), even though he found that the story of Marian’s abduction and rape was ‘told with terrible power’ (p. 465). However, what gave ‘most offence in the book, more than the story of Marian’, according to the poet was

the reference to the condition of women in our cities, which a woman oughtn’t to refer to, by any manner of means, says the conventional tradition. Now I have thought deeply otherwise. If a woman ignores these wrongs, then may women as a sex continue to suffer them; there is no help for any of us—let us be dumb and die. (*LEBB* 2:254)

Aurora Leigh did not remain a ‘closed volume’ to women, nor did they remain ‘dumb’ in their response to it or the condition of women that it represented so polemically. EBB, who expected ‘to be put in the stocks and pelted with’ eggs as ‘a disorderly woman and freethinking poet’, was surprised to find ‘quite decent women taking the part of the book in a sort of *effervescence*’ (*LEBB* 2:252). She had been ‘assured’ by ‘a friend [...] that the “mamas of England” in a body refuse to let their daughters read it. Still the daughters emancipate themselves and *do*, that is certain’. She noted especially ‘the number of *young* women, not merely “the strong-minded” as a sect, who covered the work with ‘extravagant praises’ (*LEBB* 2:255).

The diverse range of women who took ‘the part’ of *Aurora Leigh* belonged both to EBB’s own generation and the next in England and North America. Some eight years after its publication, Countess Blücher read the poem to Queen Victoria, who found it ‘most beautiful’, ‘most extraordinary’, ‘interesting’ but ‘very strange for a woman to have written’.⁹ Among the ‘strong-minded’, the impact was more immediate. Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon (connected to EBB through Anna Jameson among others) used one passage from *Aurora Leigh* as an epigraph in her 1857 pamphlet *Women and Work*, and wove another into the body of her argument.¹⁰ Bodichon’s allusions, like Frances Power Cobbe’s references to *Aurora Leigh* and its ‘sturdy wrestlings and grapplings ... with all the sternest problems of our social life’, speak to EBB’s importance for the Langham Place group of mid-Victorian feminists.¹¹ The obituary in the *English Woman’s Journal* established by Bodichon and Bessie Rayner Parkes in 1858 both acknowledges that EBB was not directly involved in the political struggle for women’s rights and comments on the ‘added force’ her name gave to the petition regarding married women’s property given her ‘retired life’, as well as the ‘courageous words’ about women ‘[w]ho speak and claim their portion’ in *Aurora Leigh* (August 1861, p. 374). As Lana L. Dalley has shown, Bodichon, Cobbe and Parkes, along with Millicent Garrett Fawcett and Clara Collet ‘directly cite *Aurora Leigh* as a key literary expression of their economic vision’ (p. 525) as they adapt the frameworks of classical liberal political economy to their arguments for ‘women’s rights to possess property and earn wages’ (p. 528). Dalley points out that Collet’s essay ‘The Economic Position of Educated Working Women’ (1890) is framed with a ‘long passage from *Aurora*

⁹ Extracts from Queen Victoria’s journal in ‘Catalogue of the Centenary Exhibition’, St. Marylebone Library (1961); qtd by J. M. S. Tompkins, p 3.

¹⁰ On passages from *Aurora Leigh* in *Women and Work*, see Stone (1995), pp. 174-5; on Bodichon’s connections to EBB through Jameson and Mary and William Howitt, see Hirsch, pp. 22-3, 174. Alice Woods, who went on to become a ‘distinguished educator’, encountered *Aurora Leigh* in 1873 and found that the poem gave ‘living expression’ to her ‘longing’ to work for her own living; one of the passages on work that she cites from the poem was also used by Bodichon (qtd in Hewlett, 291).

¹¹ See Cobbe’s treatment of *Aurora Leigh* as the ‘least “Angelical” poem in the language’, ‘miles away from the received notion of a woman’s poetry’ in ‘What Shall We Do With Our Old Maids?’, in Lacey (366).

Leigh – VIII.826-47 (p. 537); in a 1912 essay, Fawcett argued that ‘the whole “woman question” could be found in *Aurora Leigh*’ (qtd in Dalley, p. 539).

While we have less historical evidence concerning the ‘young women’ EBB speaks of, many of whom were not involved directly in the struggle for women’s rights, the examples of Emily Dickinson and the American novelist Elizabeth Stuart Phelps open a window on the transformations in consciousness wrought by *Aurora Leigh* in a period when, as Margaret Reynolds notes, a ‘new American edition’ of the work ‘could sell ten thousand copies’ (*AL*, p. 149). Looking back over many years, Phelps recalled the impact of *Aurora Leigh* on her when she was sixteen in 1860 (the year that also marked Arthur Hughes’s painting of Aurora dismissing Romney, ‘The Tryst’).

There may be greater poems in our language than ‘Aurora Leigh’, but it was many years before it was possible for me to suppose it; and none that ever saw the hospitality of fame could have done for that girl what that poem did at that time. I had never had a good memory – but I think I could have repeated a large portion of it; and know that I often stood the test of haphazard examinations on the poem from half-scoffing friends, sometimes of the masculine persuasion. ... [W]hat Shakespeare or the Latin Fathers might have done for some other impressionable girl, Mrs. Browning ... did for me. (qtd in St Armand, p. 120)

Phelps became famous in her time for her Civil War novel, *The Gates Ajar* (1868), but it is the reclusive Dickinson who is better known today, along with her three poetic tributes to her most influential female precursor.¹² In the most often cited of these, ‘I think I was enchanted’, Dickinson evokes the ‘Conversion of the Mind’ she experienced as a ‘sombre Girl’ upon reading the ‘Tomes of solid witchcraft’ written by that ‘Foreign Lady’. Just as the speaker in EBB’s poem ‘Bertha in the Lane’ (1844) falls ‘flooded with a Dark’ (l. 134), so for the young Dickinson, ‘[t]he Dark – felt beautiful –’:

¹² See Poems 593, 312 and 363 in *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. T. H. Johnson, 3 vols (Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 1955).

And whether it was noon or night –
 Or only Heaven – at Noon –
 For very Lunacy of Light
 I had not power to tell –

The Bees – became as Butterflies –
 The Butterflies – as Swans –
 Approached – and spurned the narrow Grass –
 And just the meanest Tunes

That Nature murmured to herself
 To keep herself in Cheer --
 I took for Giants – practicing
 Titanic Opera – (lines 4-15)

‘Titanic Opera’ is an apt metaphor for *Aurora Leigh*, an epic portrait of the woman poet on an unprecedented scale. Dickinson was deeply influenced by EBB’s poetry before *Aurora Leigh* (works such as the 1844 ‘A Vision of Poets’, for instance). However, Betsy Erkkila points out that the period when the American poet read *Aurora Leigh* – ‘between 1857 and 1861’ – was also the period in which ‘her poetic output increased from about fifty poems written in 1858 to over 300 written in 1862’ (pp. 72-3). Ann Swyerski has argued that Dickinson’s three ‘overt’ elegies for EBB also shaped the structure and sequencing of three of the fascicles or manuscript booklets in which she copied her poems (p. 78).

In England, *Aurora Leigh* had reverberating effects on writers, male as well as female, up to the end of the century. As Angela Leighton and Margaret Reynolds’s anthology *Victorian Women Poets* (1995) reveals, it figures in Adelaide Anne Proctor’s ‘A Woman’s Answer’ as the one work identified among ‘Poets’ read aloud ‘summer twilight faded in the sky’ (lines 41-3) (p.

318): a tribute that did not escape EBB's notice, although she did not think highly of Proctor's poetry.¹³ Leighton and Reynolds also note that Katherine Bradley, who with her niece Edith Cooper would become 'Michael Field', published 'her first volume of poems in 1875 under the pseudonym "Arran Leigh"' (p. 487), while the following year, the free-thinking poet Louisa Sarah Bevington similarly used the pseudonym of 'Arbor Leigh' for her first volume (p. 477). In the 1870s, the influence of *Aurora Leigh* on the writings of a more prominent writer is registered through the echoes of its proposal scene and other details in Eliot's verse drama on the dilemma of the woman artist, *Armgart* (1874).¹⁴ The young Oscar Wilde was another writer who registered his general enthusiasm in an 1888 essay, in part by quoting a tribute poem by his mother 'Speranza' (Jane Francesca Wilde) addressed to EBB, in part by comparing EBB to Sappho, as well as to Byron in 'sincerity' and 'strength'. Wilde furthermore emphasized the crucial role EBB's works had played in advancing women writers in terms that suggest he had *Aurora Leigh* in mind: 'To her influence, almost as much as to the higher education of women, I would be inclined to attribute the really remarkable awakening of women's song that characterizes the latter half of our century in England' ('English Poetesses', *Queen* 8 December 1888, pp. 742-3). Whether Wilde's claim is supportable or not, *Aurora Leigh* was still exercising an influence on other writers in the 1890s, as Leighton and Reynolds indicate in pointing to the parallels between it and the title poem in Emily Hickey's *Michael Villiers, Idealist, and Other Poems* (1891), which tells 'the story of the philanthropist and radical, Michael Villiers' and his 'fellow philanthropist, Lucy Vere' (p. 482). These multiple examples of the impact of *Aurora Leigh* form the context for Algernon Charles Swinburne's prefatory remarks to the 1898 edition of *Aurora Leigh*:

¹³ In an unpublished letter to Isa Blagden in 1861, EBB commented on Proctor's latest volume, expressing 'surprise' that poetry 'with so little form & originality, should have had so favorable reception [...]. This is all between you & me – I admire her personally – & there's goodness & grace in what she writes— Moreover isn't there something kindly rhymed about *Aurora Leigh* in this volume. It would, in fact, be *horrible* for me to be heard nibbling at another woman's poems. I would as soon that people said I dyed my hair' (qtd in *Victorian Women Poets*, ed Leighton and Reynolds, p. 305).

¹⁴ L. Lewis notes some of these echoes in *Germaine de Staël*, p. 195; see also L. Hudd, 'The Politics of a Feminist Poetics: "Armgart" and George Eliot's Critical Response to *Aurora Leigh*', *Essays and Studies* 49 (1996), 62-83.

The advent of *Aurora Leigh* can never be forgotten by any lover of poetry who was old enough at the time to read it. Of one thing they may all be sure – they were right in the impression that they never had read, and never would read, anything in any way comparable with that unique work of audaciously feminine and ambitiously impulsive genius. It is one of the longest poems in the world, and there is not a dead line in it. (ix)

While literary critics continued to discuss *Aurora Leigh* up to the turn of the century in similarly laudatory, if less rhapsodic, terms, the clash of opposing opinions evident in the 1856-7 reviews and in the obituary essays of the 1860s also persisted. For the French critic Joseph Texte in 1898, *Aurora Leigh* was still a work of great relevance to ‘contemporary idealism’ – indeed, still ‘the poem of a century’ written by the figure whom he saw as the most philosophical poet of the age (p. 240); nor was he alone in such critical opinions.¹⁵ In Italy, the feminist critic and lecturer on the condition of women, Fanny Zampini-Salazar, saw *Aurora Leigh* as articulating ‘the gospel of woman’ and rivaling ‘Balzac and Zola’ in its realism.¹⁶ However, in 1889 the English-speaking public was exposed to a very different view when the letters and literary remains of Edward Fitzgerald were published, including a letter to a friend written in 1861 in which he observed, ‘Mrs. Browning’s death is rather a relief to me’ because it meant

no more Aurora Leighs, thank God! A Woman of real Genius, I know: but what is the upshot of it all? She and her Sex had better mind the Kitchen and their Children; and perhaps the

¹⁵ J. Texte, *Etudes de littérature européenne* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1898), (my translation). See also L. E. Gates’s analysis of *Aurora Leigh* as ‘really an interpretation and criticism of the entire age in which it was written’ in *Studies and Appreciations* (New York: Macmillan, 1900), p. 39; and E. C. Stedman’s description of the novel-in-verse as a ‘versatile kaleidoscopic presentment of modern life and issues’, entering into ‘the spirit of each experiment’ in the ‘social and intellectual phases’ of its era, in *Victorian Poets*, rev. ed (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1903), p. 141.

¹⁶ Zampini-Salazar’s 1896 study *Roberto ed Elisabetta Browning* (Naples) and her 1898 article on *Aurora Leigh* in *Rassegna nazionale* (Florence) are later drawn on for fuller treatment in *La vita e le opere de Roberto Browning ed Elisabetta Barrett-Browning con prefazione di Antonio Fogazzaro* (Torino, 1907); cited by D. Bisignano, pp. 201-2.

Poor: except in such things as little Novels, they only devote themselves to what Men do much better, leaving that which Men do worse or not at all. (I:407)¹⁷

Although this was simply a blunter expression of the opinions about women and *Aurora Leigh* publicly presented in journals such as the *Saturday Review*, it reveals the underlying misogyny that intensified with the growing backlash against the Victorian women's rights movements documented by scholars such as Elaine Showalter and Bram Dijkstra.¹⁸

The critic Edmund Gosse is a key index of this development in the case of EBB. In 1875, he described her death in 1861 as a great loss, coming just as 'her stupendous epic-satire of *Aurora Leigh*' was inaugurating 'a broader and robuster spirit' in poetry (qtd in Thwaite, p. 116). In 1897, however, he publicly expressed views similar to Fitzgerald's in identifying her later work as 'formless' and 'spasmodic' and suggesting that her 'premature death' was probably not 'a real deprivation for English literature'. Citing these later comments by Gosse, Tricia Lootens shows how central a role he played in the late nineteenth-century demotion of *Aurora Leigh* to a work exemplifying what Gosse described as 'the hysterical violence, the Pythian vagueness and the Pythian shriek' of its author. Meanwhile, through the sentimental story of EBB presenting the *Sonnets from the Portuguese* to her husband (given in a much-cited and inaccurate introduction to an 1894 edition of the sequence), Gosse advanced the *Sonnets* as her most accomplished, though still imperfect, work (qtd in Lootens, pp. 156, 155, 143). His essays in *Critical Kit-Kats* (1896) reinforced his argument that Mrs. Browning had reached the 'summit or peak' of her genius under the influence of her love for Browning, advanced as part of the larger thesis that '[w]oman ... has never taken a very prominent position in the history of poetry' (pp. 5, 135). This was a thesis he propounded in 'the very stronghold of the sex', Cambridge University's Newnham

¹⁷ *The Letters of Edward Fitzgerald*, ed A. McK. Terhune and A. B. Terhune, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980). When the letter was published in Fitzgerald's *Letters and Literary Remains* in 1889 and came to Browning's attention, he was outraged, and it was deleted from subsequent editions of the *Remains*.

¹⁸ E. Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1990); B. Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

College for women, in an 1893 lecture in which he asserted that ‘in the great solid branches of poetry – in epic, in tragedy, in didactic and philosophic verse – woman [had] hitherto really done nothing’ (‘Mr Gosse’, p. 39).¹⁹

Yet it would be an over-simplification to attribute the dramatic decline in the reputation of *Aurora Leigh* at the turn of the century solely to gender politics or to influential male critics holding views on women’s poetry like Gosse’s. The displacement of *Aurora Leigh* by the *Sonnets from the Portuguese* was further reinforced by the publication of the widely reviewed courtship correspondence in 1899, as readers were entranced by the intimate revelation of the unfolding romance of one of the century’s most celebrated literary couples. Moreover, similarly dismissive views of *Aurora Leigh* to Gosse’s are expressed by Harriet Waters Preston, the editor of the 1900 Cambridge edition of EBB’s complete works, who repeatedly describes the work with evident distaste as ‘distinctly socialistic’ or ‘frankly socialistic’ (pp. xvi, 536). Her terms imply a resistance inspired by class politics, not gender politics, to the work Thomas Bradfield describes from a very different political perspective in the *Westminster Review* (August 1896) as ‘unique in its ... burning, outspoken sympathy with whatever conduces to social reforms, individual or national; in its daring unconventionality of treatment of honoured, in some instances even sacred subjects’, a work with the aim of establishing ‘a harmony between the thoughts and aspirations of the poet and the practical exertions of the worker’ (pp. 183-4).²⁰ Preston’s 1897 *Atlantic Monthly* essay is even more denunciatory than her Cambridge edition. Once again terming *Aurora Leigh* ‘socialistic’, as well as ‘sensational’ and ‘ineffective’, she echoes Fitzgerald’s notorious comment, saying, ‘More Aurora Leighs would have been a heavy misfortune to letters’ (qtd in Lootens, pp. 156-7). With an editor such as Preston, what author would need enemies? It was

¹⁹ In this lecture, Gosse also argued that ‘Mrs. Browning was a force in literature ... but she was not an artist’, and like other turn-of-the-century critics, he turned to Christina Rossetti ‘as apparently the solitary woman-poet of the Anglo-Saxon race who cultivates poetry as one of the fine arts’ (38).

²⁰ In strong contrast is L. Whiting, who in 1899 saw the work as uniting ‘great natural powers and classic culture’ with a vision of art as ‘service’ that resisted the ‘pernicious doctrine of “Art for art’s sake”’ (*AL* Norton, 431-2).

fortunate that EBB would have much more attentive, respectful and scholarly editors in Charlotte Porter and Helen A. Clarke, whose carefully annotated *Complete Works* in six volumes also appeared in 1900. For many decades, however, the currents of social, political and aesthetic opinion would run against *Aurora Leigh*, as well as the larger achievement of Elizabeth Barrett Browning that Porter and Clarke sought to preserve.

Twentieth and Twenty-First Century Criticism

Amy Lowell's representation of Sappho, EBB and Emily Dickinson in 'The Sisters' (1925) speaks to the virtual erasure in the modernist period of EBB's work described up to the turn of the century as 'daring' in its 'unconventionality'. 'Mrs. Browning's heart / Was squeezed in stiff conventions', Lowell writes, picturing the Victorian poet 'tied down to the sofa' until Robert freed her and 'fertilized' her poems – resulting in the *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, the only work mentioned (lines 41-2, 83, 89). As Adrienne Munich points out, Lowell not only possessed a copy of *Aurora Leigh*, she also had extensively used a 'blank verse that resembles in many points' what EBB uses in her novel-poem. Yet, for complicated reasons, Lowell 'chose to exaggerate' the Victorian poet's 'conventionality', even as she acknowledged her as a 'sister' ('Family Matters', pp. 17-18).²¹ 'The Sisters' belongs to a period in which the modernist reaction against many Victorian poets was combined with the consolidation of a cadre of largely male academic critics and the establishment of the study of literature as a discipline. Amidst the increasingly vocal campaign for women's suffrage, professional critics such as Hugh Walker in his comprehensive and influential tome, *The Literature of the Victorian Era* (1910), constructed literary histories that marginalized works by nineteenth-century women writers. Constructing a male line of king poets in which Tennyson and Browning figure as the 'New Kings' of Victorian

²¹ Ironically, Lowell herself, who won a Pulitzer prize for *What's O'Clock* and who was central to the development of imagism and modernist poetry, would suffer an erasure similar to the one 'The Sisters' reflects. A. Munich and M. Bradshaw note in their introduction that she was 'reduced to a footnote, sometimes a derisory one, in the history of modern poetry' (*Amy Lowell*, p. xiii).

poetry, Walker practiced a kind of gender quarantine by treating EBB and other women poets of the first half of the nineteenth century in the seventh and last subsection of a chapter on ‘The Minor Poets: Earlier Period’. Here he describes *Aurora Leigh* as ‘an ambitious metrical romance’ with tedious ‘flats of commonplaces’, saved from ‘complete oblivion’ only by its greatest defect, its length, despite its ‘telling sarcasms’, ‘beautiful oases of poetry’ and many memorable phrases (pp. 289, 360, 366, 370-1). The ideological underpinnings of this assessment are implied in Walker’s blunter 1897 condemnation of *Aurora Leigh* as a work in which ‘always the thought, the social discussions ... are wrong’ (p. 235).²² Walker does not indicate precisely why these ‘social discussions’ are ‘wrong’, any more than Preston does in her dismissal of *Aurora Leigh* in the same year as ‘socialistic’ and ‘ineffective’.

Preston’s 1900 edition and Walker’s 1910 literary history – both issued by Cambridge University Press – contributed to what would become the prevailing view of *Aurora Leigh* for decades. There were, however, some notable exceptions. One is Martha Foote Crow’s 1911 analysis of the reaction against the ‘endeavors of woman’ evident in the ‘inherited streams’ of criticism on EBB (‘They are the merest gossips, those critics’) (pp. 84, 87). Another is G. K. Chesterton in 1913 who, in sharp contrast to Walker, includes EBB in his chapter on ‘The Great Victorian Poets’ along with Tennyson and Browning, rejecting a ‘false sex philosophy’ and asserting, ‘we remember all the lines in her work which were weak enough to be called “womanly”, we forget the multitude of strong lines that are strong enough to be called “manly”’ (pp. 179-81). Chesterton, however, does not specifically address *Aurora Leigh*. And his comments are seldom cited by subsequent critics, even though his study of Victorian literature was reprinted twelve times between 1913 and 1931. By 1928, Irene Cooper Willis reflects the more typical view of EBB and *Aurora Leigh* in her book on the Victorian poet in a ‘Representative Women’ series, a book that exemplifies the Edwardian and modernist reaction against literary works associated with Victorian parents and grandparents. Describing the

²² For an analysis of Walker’s treatment of EBB’s poetry generally, see Stone (1995), pp. 209-11.

Victorians as ‘hideously’ moral, and EBB as a ‘true mid-Victorian’ who was ‘inspired by piety, as well as ruled by it’, she paints *Aurora Leigh* as an ‘absurd’ picture of ‘English social life’ because Mrs. Browning ‘did not know what she was writing about’. She adds that the work once so alarming to the ‘Mammas of England’ is ‘nowadays ... starred as suitable reading, in the syllabuses of “Literature” classes in Young Ladies’ finishing schools’ (pp. 10-11, 13, 80, 92-3).

In the context of such studies, Virginia Woolf’s reevaluation of *Aurora Leigh* three years later emerges as strikingly iconoclastic: a point that critics today tend to pass over in repeatedly citing Woolf’s memorably sardonic description of EBB’s assignment ‘downstairs in the servants’ quarters’ in the ‘mansion of literature’ (p. 219). Whereas Willis asserted that the portrait of Victorian social life in *Aurora Leigh* is ‘absurd’, Woolf writes:

Aurora Leigh, with her passionate interest in social questions, her conflict as artist and woman, her longing for knowledge and freedom, is the true daughter of her age. ... The aunt, the antimacassars, and the country house from which Aurora escapes are real enough to fetch high prices in the Tottenham Court Road at this moment. The broader aspects of what it felt like to be a Victorian are seized as surely and stamped as vividly upon us as in any novel by Trollope or Mrs. Gaskell. (p. 229)

Where Walker had found ‘flats of commonplaces’ in a work that ‘after times are content to talk about and not read’ (p. 370), Woolf found a narrative with ‘[s]peed and energy, forthrightness and complete self-confidence’, as well as an apt satire of women’s education and a portrait of a woman writer with a ‘little room’ of her own in which to practice her art (pp. 220-1). For thirty years, academic critics felt safe in praising only *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, yet Woolf asserts that *Aurora Leigh* is a work that ‘still commands our interest and inspires our respect’ (p. 225). Moreover, she advanced this assertion in the face of a spate of books (at least eight between 1928 and 1931 – *The Barretts of Wimpole Street* among them) that enshrined EBB as the sentimental heroine of a romance, not the author of one of the most influential English poems of the mid-nineteenth century. Woolf remained a voice crying in the critical wilderness, however. In 1949,

John D. Cooke and Lionel Stevenson dispatched EBB's major work in eight words: 'the diffuse *Aurora Leigh* is no longer read'.²³

Notwithstanding such assertions, *Aurora Leigh* was still read and discussed by a handful of critics between the 1930s and the 1970s. In 1935, Martha Hale Shackford argued that 'despite any and all faults', the poem '[s]urely' holds 'a secure place among nineteenth-century poems', given the 'perennial appeal of its theme', its 'scope', its 'realistic' drama', its 'liberal' tone, and its 'wisdom' (p. 6), while in 1953, Hewlett observed in her biography that, if it was a 'period piece', it nevertheless had 'much in it to interest and delight ... a changed world', noting its 'bold and ardent feminism' (pp. 290, 295). The centenary of EBB's death in 1861 brought an extended analysis of the poem by Joyce M. S. Tompkins, in the 1961-2 Fawcett Lecture at Bedford College, University of London. Although Tompkins argued that 'Mrs Browning did not approve of propaganda for women's rights', she also felt that 'the plight of the woman writer' was much in the poet's mind, and further observed that the poem's 'questions', especially the 'rival claims of vocation and marriage', were 'still the central ones' that women had to deal with in the 1960s, when many were again choosing 'early marriage' and the 'proportion of women employed, especially in senior [academic] posts' had 'gone down' (pp. 9, 7, 20-1).²⁴ In the same period, Alethea Hayter was more critical of *Aurora Leigh*, contending that its author 'intended it as a novel, and as a novel it must be judged': on those grounds, we 'must recognize it as a failure' (p. 163). However, she also spoke to the work's strengths, noting how it was shaped by the French fiction of Balzac, Stendhal, Victor Hugo and George Sand (pp. 159-62) and commenting on its many 'humorous and satirical passages' in the Byronic vein as the 'liveliest and best in the work' (p. 162).²⁵

²³ See *English Literature of the Victorian Period* (New York: Appleton-Century Crofts, 1949), p. 149.

²⁴ On the conflict between vocation and marriage, Tompkins draws a parallel between Aurora and Woolf's Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse* (20).

²⁵ In 1967, *Aurora Leigh* was included in B. Brophy's *Fifty Works of Literature We Could Do Without* (New York: Stein & Day), pp. 53-5, as a work with an 'incredible' plot, a 'disordered' narrative technique, 'barely credible' characterization, 'gruesome' writing about children, and 'unreadable' verse (54).

It is instructive to compare the relatively low prominence granted to *Aurora Leigh* in Hayter's 1962 book with the flood of attention accorded to it in the 1970s and '80s, when second wave feminism transformed the academy as well as the contours of traditional literary histories. Donaldson notes in her introduction to *Critical Essays on Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (1999) that many of the critics who wrote on *Aurora Leigh* in this period were 'instrumental' in shaping the field of feminist criticism 'from a wider theoretical perspective', among them 'Ellen Moers, Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi, Cora Kaplan, Michèle Barrett, Rachel Blau DuPlessis, and Sandra Gilbert' (p. 8). Mary Jane Lupton was the first to publish an analysis of *Aurora Leigh* (in 1970 for the Feminist Press), but Moers's description of it as 'the feminist poem' in *Literary Women* (1976) had a broader impact (qtd in Donaldson, *Critical Essays*, p. 8). Nevertheless, it is Kaplan, more than any other critic in this period, who precipitated the critical recovery of EBB's epic portrait of a woman writer, both through the introduction to her 1978 Women's Press edition and through her collaborative contributions in the same year to a pivotal essay on Victorian women's writing by the Marxist-Feminist Literature Collective. In the introduction, Kaplan presents *Aurora Leigh* as 'a collage of Romantic and Victorian texts reworked from a woman's perspective', treating of '[g]ender difference, class warfare, the relation of art to politics': a 'vast quilt, made up of other garments, the pattern dazzling because, not in spite, of its irregularities' (p. 5). Some of the more obvious textual echoes and connections she finds in this 'quilt' had been noted before: by Victorian reviewers, for instance, or by Hayter who regards them as instances of imitative 'plagiarism' (p. 162). However, Kaplan approaches these echoes as surface manifestations of complex debates, as she investigates, with unprecedented depth and originality, the poem's intertextual connections with de Staël's *Corinne*, George Sand's many novels (especially *Consuelo*), Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, Gaskell's *Ruth*, Tennyson's *The Princess*, Clough's *The Bothie of Tober-Na-Vuolich* and Kingsley's *Alton Locke*. Celebrating *Aurora Leigh*'s use of these debates to address the condition of women, Kaplan sees it as prefiguring 'modern radical feminism' in its gender politics and its 'rope of female imagery' (pp. 11, 15). At the same time,

she critiques the poem that Preston in 1900 had found ‘socialistic’ instead for its ‘vicious picture of the rural and urban poor’, calling it the most ‘glaring’ ‘bourgeois rejection of working-class consciousness’ in mid-Victorian literature (pp. 11, 35).

Since Kaplan’s recovery of *Aurora Leigh* in 1978, many of the themes and topics that she dealt with have emerged as keynotes in scholarship on the work. To begin with, critics have expanded the intertextual dimensions that her introduction emphasized, either by extending her analysis of particular textual connections (especially in the case of de Staël, Sand and Tennyson)²⁶ or by pointing to revisionary echoes of a wide range of other works in EBB’s novel-epic. These additional works include Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, Wordsworth’s *Prelude*, Byron’s *Don Juan*, Letitia Landon’s *The Improvisatrice*, poems by Felicia Hemans and Caroline Bowles Southey,²⁷ as well as Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication*, Carlyle’s writings, R. H. Horne’s penny epic *Orion*, Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette*, Dickens’s *David Copperfield* and Kingsley’s *Westward Ho!* (in which the hero also has the surname ‘Leigh’).²⁸ Margaret Reynolds aptly compares the

²⁶ See L. Lewis, *Germaine de Staël*. On intertextual debates with Tennyson, see B. Taylor and Stone, ‘Genre Subversion’.

²⁷ On Milton, see S. A. Brown, ‘*Paradise Lost* and *Aurora Leigh*’, *Studies in English Literature* 37 (1997), 723-40. On *The Prelude*, see K. Blake, ‘Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Wordsworth: The Romantic Poet as a Woman’, *Victorian Poetry* 24.4 (1986), 387-98, and C. R. Vanden Bossche and L. E. Haigwood, ‘Revising *The Prelude*: Aurora Leigh as Laureate’, *SBHC* 22 (1999), 29-42. Connections with Byron’s *Don Juan* are treated by Gilbert, p. 206; by Mermin, p. 184; and by Stone, ‘Byron and Wollstonecraft’. M. K. Louis explores EBB’s conflicted relations with a female sentimental tradition in ‘Enlarging the Heart: L.E.L.’s “The Improvisatrice,” Hemans’s “Properzia Rossi,” and Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh*’, *Victorian Literature and Culture* 26.1 (1998), 1-17. L. Peterson argues that in *Aurora Leigh* EBB acknowledges Landon as a precursor, while rejecting her self-construction as a Sapphic poetess, in ‘Re-Writing *A History of the Lyre*: Letitia Landon, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and the (Re) Construction of the Nineteenth-century Woman Poet’, in *Women’s Poetry, late Romantics to late Victorians*, ed I. Armstrong and V. Blain (London: Macmillan, 1998), 115-32. V. Blain treats EBB’s similarly conflicted response to Caroline Bowles Southey in “‘Be these his daughters?’ Caroline Bowles Southey, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Disruption in a Patriarchal Poetics of Women’s Autobiography’, in B. Garlick, pp. 1-21.

²⁸ On the pervasive connections with Carlyle, see especially B. Freiwald, also Stott in Avery and Stott, pp. 192-7, who argues against Kaplan’s view that EBB uncritically accepted Carlyle’s class views. Stone notes the parallels with Wollstonecraft, *David Copperfield*, Horne’s *Orion*, Brontë’s *Villette* and Hawthorne’s *The Blithedale Romance*, in *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, pp. 158-61 and 179-81. On *The Blithedale Romance*, see also S. Walsh, “‘Doing the Aphra Behn’: Barrett Browning’s Portrait of the Artist’, *Victorian Poetry* 36.2 (1998), 171, 174. On *Villette*, see M. LaMonaca, *Masked Atheism: Catholicism and the Secular Victorian Home* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2008), pp. 147-8. On the echoes of Kingsley’s *Westward Ho!*, in which the hero named Leigh is blinded as Romney is, see M. W. Carpenter, ‘Blinding the Hero’, *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 17 (2006), 52-68.

allusive intertextuality of *Aurora Leigh* to the ‘art of *bricolage*’ employed by twentieth-century writers like Woolf and Angela Carter, a kind of ‘magpie form, which steals fragments of a tradition or language from which women have been alienated, to rewrite or invert them’ (*AL*, p. 50). Critics have also followed Kaplan in analyzing the complex running patterns of female metaphors or ‘woman’s figures’ (VIII.1131) that constitute the textual body of *Aurora Leigh*, exploring the images of ‘mother-want’ and both positive and negative metaphors of mothering, motherhood and childbirth, as well as the reiterated images of breasts and suckling, rape, sewing and walking, the last used to express Aurora’s mobility and poetic creativity.²⁹ Regarding Kaplan’s critique of *Aurora Leigh* for its ‘vicious’ portrayal of the working classes, scholars have been more divided, some essentially agreeing with her, others emphasizing that Aurora’s views are dramatically portrayed and subject to transformation, not fixed or identical with her author’s.³⁰

Generically, feminist critics initially tended to approach *Aurora Leigh* as a portrait of the woman writer closely paralleling EBB’s own development, variously terming it a ‘bildungsroman’ depicting the ‘anti-feminine biases’ she had internalized as a woman poet

²⁹ For treatments of ‘mother-want’, absent mothers and motherhood, see S. Donaldson “‘Motherhood’s Advent in Power’: Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s Poems about Motherhood”, *Victorian Poetry* 18.1 (1980), 51-60; V. Steinmetz, ‘Images of “Mother-Want” in Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh*’, *Victorian Poetry* 21.4 (1983), 351-67; Gilbert, ‘From *Patria* to *Matria*’, and Mermin, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, pp. 190-6. In contrast, A. Leighton in *Elizabeth Barrett Browning* focuses on the daughter’s relation to the father (114-40). Most of the studies on motherhood and mother figures also note the metaphors of breasts and suckling; an extended analysis of the ‘double-breasted Age’ passage and related images appears in Stone’s ‘The Female Breast’ (751-4 and 763-8), while its connections to the sublime are treated by J. Woolford in ‘The Romantic Brownings’, *SBHC* 24 (2001), 7-30. O. G. Taylor, in ‘Written in Blood: The Art of Mothering Epic in the Poetry of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’ (*Victorian Poetry* 44.2 (2006), 153-64, considers the literal and metaphoric relations between childbirth and artistic creation, while J. Zonana analyses the metaphors and myths of rape. On the metaphors of sewing and walking, see A. D. Wallace, “‘Nor in Fading Silks Compose’”: Sewing, Walking, and Poetic Labor in *Aurora Leigh*’, *ELH* 64 (1997), 223-56.

³⁰ For views that chime with Kaplan’s critique, see, for example, B. C. Gelpi, p. 35, and David (‘Art’s a Service’), who contends that EBB is a conservative in relation to gender as well as class politics. See also, D. Karlin, who doubts that EBB ‘knew how priggish, condescending, and self-serving Aurora sounds’ in blessing the prostitute she encounters in *St. Margaret’s Court* (123). For critics who argue, contrary to Kaplan and others, that Aurora is an unreliable narrator whose middle-class assumptions about the poor and prostitution are portrayed with irony in the earlier books and altered through contact with Marian in the later books, see Cooper, pp. 152-88, and Stone, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, pp. 162-71. Stott in Avery and Stott, pp. 190-7, counters Kaplan by arguing that EBB transformed Carlyle’s apocalyptic representations of the working classes into a ‘social wound’ that can be healed and redeemed (194).

(Gelpi, p. 36), a ‘*Künstlerroman*’ recording the writer’s ‘own personal and artistic struggle for identity’ (Gilbert, p. 194), indeed the first ‘properly female *Künstlerroman*’ in ‘English letters’ (Freiwald, p. 414). DuPlessis’s influential distinction between ‘the love plot and the *Bildungs* plot’ in *Aurora Leigh*, like Alison Case’s parallel observation, accommodates the conflict between vocation and marriage that has formed a perennial focus of discussion.³¹ While this approach emphasizes the work’s novelistic dimensions, other critics have stressed its philosophic elements, treating it as exemplifying characteristics of Victorian ‘sage discourse’: the presentation of a prophetic speaker, polemical sermonizing on the times, typological patterning, argumentative intertextuality and the quest for a sustaining life philosophy.³² Even more frequently, it has been approached as an innovative hybridized form of the epic. Critics have disagreed on precisely what type of epic it is, categorizing it, as does Holly Laird, as a female epic, combining a masculine poetical tradition with a woman’s novel, with more than one critic comparing it to modernist work in the epic form by H.D.³³ Indeed, in the introduction to a 2006 collection of essays on the ‘Anglo and American Female Epic’ from 1621 to 1982, Bernard Schweizer identifies *Aurora Leigh* as the ‘most celebrated’ work in the tradition, a ‘touchstone’ for the ‘female epic to this day’, and EBB as the ‘founding mother for later poems with epic aspirations’ (pp. 12, 15, 6).³⁴ In her contribution on *Aurora Leigh* to the Schweizer collection, Peggy Dunn Bailey approaches *Aurora Leigh* as a ‘Romantic female epic’, emphasizing its affinities with epics by Wordsworth,

³¹ See DuPlessis, p. 84; A. Case, pp. 17-32; as well as G. Stephenson, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning and the Poetry of Love* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1989), pp. 96-116, and C. Sutphin, ‘Revising Old Scripts: The Fusion of Independence and Intimacy in *Aurora Leigh*,’ *Browning Institute Studies* 15 (1987), 43-54.

³² Stone asserts that *Aurora Leigh* transforms the conventions of Carlylean phallogocentric sage discourse into ‘emancipatory strategies’ for the woman writer (*Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, p. 158); Stott argues that the work is, more specifically, an example of ‘Victorian non-conformist sage discourse’ (Avery and Stott, p. 206).

³³ H. Laird, ‘*Aurora Leigh*: An Epical *Ars Poetica*’ in *Writing the Woman Artist*, ed S. W. Jones (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), pp. 353-70. For discussions of EBB and H.D. as epic poets feminizing the conventions of a genre seen as the bastion of male poetic power, see S. S. Friedman ‘Gender and Genre Anxiety: Elizabeth Barrett Browning and H.D. as Epic Poets’, *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature* 5.2 (1986), 203-28, and J. M. Downes, *Recursive Desire: Rereading Epic Tradition* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1997).

³⁴ Schweizer’s collection also suggests that the generic hybridity of *Aurora Leigh* is typical of the female epic, in which there is a ‘heightened tension between adherence to and rejection of traditional epic requirements’ (4).

Blake and others as much as its gynocentric adaptation of epic conventions (p. 117). Herbert Tucker, who describes *Aurora Leigh* as a ‘compendium of epic modes’, categorizes it primarily as a work that appropriates and harnesses the ‘authentic power’ of mid-Victorian ‘spasmodic epics’ as a ‘platform’ for women’s poetry (*Epic: Britain’s Heroic Muse*, pp. 377-8).³⁵ Other critics have employed the theory of Mikhail Bakhtin to analyse *Aurora Leigh* as an example of the ‘novelized’ epic, one that ‘dialogizes’ the epic by bringing it into the present and subjecting its stylized formal elements (such as the epic simile) to parody and familiarization.³⁶

While gender issues have remained central to the scholarship on *Aurora Leigh*, criticism since the mid-1990s has broadened to consider the politics of nation, religious discourses of various kinds and a range of other topics, such as copyright laws, the culture of fandom and Victorian representations of the city.³⁷ In relation to gender, the portrayal of Marian as a fallen woman and Madonna figure, as well as the rape and enforced prostitution she experiences have remained recurrent subjects from 1978 up to 2008.³⁸ So too have the issues of women’s work and

³⁵ See also Tucker’s 1993 essay ‘*Aurora Leigh*: Epic Solutions to Novel Ends’ in *Famous Last Words: Changes in Gender and Narrative Closure*, ed A. Booth (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia), pp. 62-85, and his essay on ‘Epic’ in Cronin, where he treats *Aurora Leigh* as paradigmatic of the Victorian national epic’s ‘flight abroad’ (30).

³⁶ See Stone, ‘Genre Subversion’, pp. 104, 126-7, noting parallels with other instances of the Victorian novelized epic, including George Eliot’s ‘home epic’ *Middlemarch* and Browning’s *The Ring and the Book* (125); and D. Felluga, who draws on Bakhtinian theory to analyse EBB’s use of a hybrid form to critique the ‘domestic ideology’ of the Victorian novel (‘Verse Novel’, in Cronin, pp. 174-5). See also M. Tasker, ‘*Aurora Leigh*: Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s Novel Approach to the Woman Poet’, in B. Garlick, pp. 23-41, and M. S. Pollock, *Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning, A Creative Partnership* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), pp. 178-9, who analyses *Aurora Leigh* as an example of the novelized epic influenced by Browning’s dramatic monologues. And see S. Dentith’s “‘As Flat as Fleet Street’: Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Matthew Arnold and George Eliot on Epic and Modernity’ (ch. 5 in his *Epic and Empire in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006)) considers epic conventions in *Aurora Leigh* in the context of ‘nineteenth-century debates about modernity’ (85), as well as debates over F. A. Wolf’s interpretation of the Homeric epics as composite, collaborative texts (alluded to by EBB in V.1254-6).

³⁷ On copyright and married women’s property laws, see C. Larsen Hoeckley, ‘Anomalous Ownership: Copyright, Coverture, and *Aurora Leigh*’, *Victorian Poetry* 36.2 (1998), 135-61; on the developing mass culture of fandom and *Aurora Leigh*, see Eisner. D. Karlin treats the urban landscapes in EBB’s novel-in-verse in relation to discourses of the sublime in ‘Victorian Poetry of the City’.

³⁸ Marian figures prominently in a multitude of studies of *Aurora Leigh*. For more extended analyses of the figure of the fallen woman, and representations of Marian and prostitution in *Aurora Leigh*, see A. Leighton, “‘Because men made the laws’: The Fallen Woman and the Woman Poet’, *Victorian Poetry* 27.2 (1989), 109-27; J. Zonana; A. Anderson, *Tainted Souls and Painted Faces: The Rhetoric of Fallenness in Victorian Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), pp. 167-97; P. Murphy, ‘Reconceiving the

the vocation of the woman writer. For instance, EBB's representations of seamstresses and of a writing woman feature prominently in Patricia Zakreski's 2006 study of mid- and late Victorian representations of female labour.³⁹ Dalley's analysis of *Aurora Leigh* in relation to Victorian women's adaptations of political economy (see above, under reviews and nineteenth-century reception) also turns centrally on issues of work and argues that the critique of socialism that Kaplan objects to in the text may be rooted in a feminist individualism with more radical aspects than is often assumed.⁴⁰ Critics who have considered *Aurora Leigh* in relation to nationalist visions and discourses in the nineteenth century usually treat these themes as intertwined with gender politics, whether they focus on constructions of Italy and England, as Gilbert, Matthew Reynolds, Chapman and others do, or whether they focus on EBB's increasingly cosmopolitan vision, as Christopher Keirstead does.⁴¹ Much the same is true of many of the treatments of religious, spiritual and/or philosophical dimensions in *Aurora Leigh*, a subject that has attracted a great deal of attention in the last decade. Thus Linda Lewis's exploration of the motifs of death and resurrection in the poem includes a consideration of 'woman as Wisdom (the

Mother: Deconstructing the Madonna in *Aurora Leigh*', *Victorian Newsletter* 91 (1997), 21-7; L. Lewis, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, pp. 155-66; and L. Thorne-Murphy, 'Prostitute Rescue, Rape, and Poetic Inspiration in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*', *Women's Writing* 12.2 (2005), 241-7, which places the poem in the wider context of Victorian paradigms of prostitute rescue.

³⁹ Zakreski, *Representing Female Artistic Labour, 1848-1890* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006). See also S. A. Schatz's analysis of *Aurora Leigh* as 'the most prominent, if not the first, example of nineteenth-century domestic-professional fiction' (110) in 'Aurora Leigh as a Paradigm of Domestic-Professional Fiction', *Philological Quarterly* 79.1 (2000), 91-117, and Stone, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, pp. 170-5, on the representation of women's work in *Aurora Leigh* in conjunction with the political struggle for women's rights.

⁴⁰ Responding to Kaplan on the issue of EBB's critique of the Christian socialism depicted by Kingsley in *Alton Locke*, Dalley does not deny that EBB endorses a liberal philosophy of individualism; however, she brings out the radical aspects of the economic theory that underlies *Aurora Leigh*, viewed from the perspective of women and work.

⁴¹ On constructions of Italy and England in *Aurora Leigh* (influenced, as most critics note, by DeStaël's *Corinne*), see Gilbert's exploration of Italy as a multivalent 'lost fragmented woman-country' in 'From *Patria* to *Matria*' (196); Matthew Reynolds's consideration of the 'linguistic Italianness' of *Aurora Leigh* and of Aurora and Romney as 'figures of their respective nations', pp. 120-1, 110. See also A. Chapman's treatment of EBB's 'dream of Italy', 'Risorgimento: Spiritualism, Politics and Elizabeth Barrett Browning' in *Unfolding the South*, eds A. Chapman and J. Stabler (2003), pp. 70-89, and Stone, 'Constructing the Archive and the Nation in "Italy! world's Italy!"', which publishes a 90-line ms poem on Italy later echoed in *Aurora Leigh* that illustrates EBB's shift away from the Anglocentric perspective of her earlier works (42-4). C. M. Keirstead argues that *Aurora Leigh* makes 'the poet cosmopolitan in flesh as well as spirit' (79), "'A Bad Patriot?': Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Cosmopolitanism', *Victorians Institute Journal* 33 (2005), 69-95.

Sophia/Minerva/Diotama paradigm)'; Cynthia Scheinberg's treatment of Hebraic and Jewish traditions drawn on by EBB similarly focuses on the female figure of Miriam; and Maria LaMonaca's analysis of contemporary debates about the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation in relation to both *Aurora Leigh* and Christina Rossetti's 'Goblin Market' emphasizes how women's bodies are central to the eucharistic images of each work.⁴² Several critics have also explored the Swedenborgian elements that enter into the transcendentalist philosophy of *Aurora Leigh* and play a particularly important role in the vision of the ending.⁴³

As for the apocalyptic imagery that is central to the ending of *Aurora Leigh*, it has been discussed at length, more especially because no aspect of the work has been more widely debated than its conclusion. Jude Nixon has argued that for EBB 'the apocalypse is as much political as it is religious', intimately connected with issues of 'power and authority', and therefore of gender; moreover, it is represented in the poem 'not as some far off divine event to which the whole creation moves', but as 'something far more deeply interfused' because EBB invokes not only Revelation but 'the eschatology of British socialism' (pp. 75, 79, 87). Corinne Davies reads the presentation of a female 'Christ-poet' in the conclusion of *Aurora Leigh* positively, as Nixon does, although she applies the lens of 'modern feminist and liberation theologies', while he focuses on Victorian contexts for the text's intricate biblical allusions (p. 55). But for Mary Wilson Carpenter, who reads *Aurora Leigh* in the context of widely read nineteenth- and twentieth-century Protestant projections of the apocalypse, the vision structuring the poem's ending is problematic because it transfers the violence in the Book of Revelation against the body of the Whore of Babylon to the male body through the blinding of Romney (pp. 143-7). Romney's mutilation, as some call it, is an aspect of *Aurora Leigh* that has troubled numerous modern critics, much as it troubled George Eliot (see above, under reviews and nineteenth-

⁴² L. Lewis, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, pp. 14, 150-70, 194-211; C. Scheinberg, pp. 85-105; M. LaMonaca, pp. 126-50.

⁴³ See L. Lewis, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, pp. 199-201; K. Renk, 'Resurrecting the Living Dead: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Poetic Vision in *Aurora Leigh*', *SBHC* 23 (2000), 40-9; R. Lines, pp. 23-43; and N. Camp, 'The Christian Poetics of *Aurora Leigh*', *SBHC* 26 (2005), 62-72.

century reception). Nevertheless, the main feature that has troubled feminist interpreters of the poem's ending is not Romney's blinding. Instead, as Bailey notes, critics in the 1970s and '80s such as Showalter, Gilbert and David objected to what they saw as Aurora's (and EBB's) capitulation to the imperatives of a traditional courtship plot, in which Aurora's dedication to her vocation is co-opted by love (and for David, by a conservative patriarchal discourse).⁴⁴ Bailey, however, like Davies and others, interprets the ending in quite a different way, arguing that *Aurora Leigh* ends with 'a vision of New Jerusalem, in the form of a new kind of marriage', one in which love and art are revealed to be no longer 'mutually exclusive' (p. 128). As Eisner observes, influenced in part by Tucker's earlier reading of EBB's 'epic solutions' to the conventional novelistic conclusion, 'that Aurora writes what we read' is 'evidence' that she 'survives the marriage plot and goes on writing' (p. 96).

So too, we might say, *Aurora Leigh* has, for a space of time at least, survived the traditional narratives of literary history that either wrote it out of existence from 1900 to the 1970s, or dismissed it as a text no longer worth the reading. Several reception histories have now traced this cultural forgetting from different angles, unpacking the ideologies and institutions at work in it.⁴⁵ Whereas criticism even on Robert Browning before 1970 seldom considered the complex writerly relationships between his works and EBB's, there are now numerous studies of this subject, including analyses of the connections between *Aurora Leigh* and *The Ring and the Book*.⁴⁶ As indicated above, a growing body of scholarship has also explored the influence of

⁴⁴ David, Showalter and Gilbert are cited by Bailey (126-7). DuPlessis similarly sees EBB as succumbing to traditional narrative patterns in making Aurora's 'work facilitate the romance to be achieved' and in aligning it with a 'feminine ideology' of self-sacrifice (87).

⁴⁵ K. Manarin has analysed the role of prominent scholars of Robert Browning's works in sidelining EBB's works within the American and Canadian school curriculum, 'Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Canon Formation, and the North American Literary Curriculum', *Victorian Review* 33.2 (2007), 119-31. See also S. Avery's survey of 'A Poet Lost and Regained' (ch. 1 in Avery and Stott); T. Lootens's analysis of the late Victorian culture that led to the displacement of *Aurora Leigh* by *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (ch. 4 in *Lost Saints*); Stone's survey of the reception of EBB from the 1860s to the 1970s in 'The Handmaid's Tale' (ch. 5 in *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*); and Donaldson's *Elizabeth Barrett Browning: An Annotated Bibliography*.

⁴⁶ N. Auerbach, 'Robert Browning's Last Word', *Victorian Poetry* 22.2 (1984), 161-73, and A. A. Munich, 'Robert Browning's Poetics of Appropriation', *Browning Institute Studies* 15 (1987), 69-77, stress the ways

Aurora Leigh on subsequent writers and their works, ranging from Emily Dickinson and George Eliot (especially *Armstrong*) to H.D. The international reputation that *Aurora Leigh* enjoyed in the nineteenth century is once again apparent, with the appearance in 2002 of a new Italian translation in poetic form by Bruno Dell-Agnese.⁴⁷ In fact, with articles on *Aurora Leigh* now appearing in Korean and Turkish, scholarship on EBB's most ambitious work increasingly reflects the globalization of literary studies.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, in the scores of articles and book chapters in recent decades, there has been a persistent tendency to consider *Aurora Leigh* in relative isolation from EBB's other works, a pattern that has contributed to critical omissions and oversights. Fortunately, more and more studies now situate *Aurora Leigh* within its author's large and variegated canon, a trend that this edition aims both to stimulate and facilitate.

'Behold! – the world of books is still the world' (I.748), Aurora comments of the books both 'bad and good', and 'some bad and good / At once' (I.779-80) she finds in a 'garret-room / Piled high with cases in [her] father's name' (I.833-4). Since *Aurora Leigh* remains so vitally connected to the world of its own 'live' and 'throbbing age' (V.203), as well as to the worlds of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, it is not surprising that it continues to provoke debates about the kind of book it is. Margaret Reynolds observes that 'the swings in the critical fortunes of *Aurora Leigh* are attributable not to any immutable fact relating to the poem or to the poet but rather to changes in the currency of theoretical perspectives on the nature of poetry and the nature of woman' (*AL* 2). While these issues are undoubtedly integral to the work in which Elizabeth Barrett Browning expressed her 'highest convictions upon Life and Art', so too are

in which *The Ring and the Book* appropriates elements from *Aurora Leigh* and conflicts with its philosophy. G. M. Ridenour sees a more generative and harmonious relationship between the two texts and poets in 'Robert Browning and *Aurora Leigh*', *Victorian Newsletter* 67 (1985), 26-31, as does J. McNally in 'Touches of *Aurora Leigh* in *The Ring and the Book*', *SBHC* 14 (1986), 85-90.

⁴⁷ Published by the Casa Editrice Le Lettere in Florence. The introduction to the edition indicates that a prose translation into Italian appeared in 1908, but this is the first Italian version to appear in the form of poetry.

⁴⁸ Hongsang Yeo is the author of two articles on *Aurora Leigh* in Korean in *Nineteenth Century Literature in English*: 'Problems of Different National Cultures and Women's Education in *Aurora Leigh*' 9.2 (2005), 53-73, and 'Ecofeminist Poetics in *Aurora Leigh*', 10.1 (2006), 85-115. Fahri Öz's 'Auro Leigh'de Türsel Birlesim ve Melezlik', appears in a journal published at Ankara University in Turkish: *Dil ve Tarih-Cografya Fakültesi Dergisi* 44.2 (2004), 111-30.

many others shaping the diverse ways in which it has been read: class structures and social reform, the politics of nations, modernity and its relationship to the past, the connection between the body and the spirit, religious beliefs and the philosophical question of ‘the central truth’ (I.800), to name only some. The reflections on poetry pervading her letters suggest that she would have been no more surprised by the ‘swings’ in the ‘critical fortunes of *Aurora Leigh*’ than she was by the polarized opinions that greeted its publication in 1856 in London. ‘And have not *true* poets who have also become popular poets at once, been so for reasons independent of their poetry . . . & even of their powers?’ she asked Mary Mitford in 1843, pointing to the example of Byron (*BC* 6:292). As Aurora comments, a poem may be successful or not in its own time. If not,

the poem’s passed

From hand to hand, and yet from hand to hand,

Until the unborn snatch it, crying out

In pity on their fathers’ being so dull,

And that’s success too. (V.263-7)

The key question for Aurora’s creator was whether or not the ‘office of the poet’ is fulfilled ‘by analyzing humanity back into its elements, to the destruction of the conventions of the hour’ (*BC* 10:101). As she elsewhere observed on the same point, ‘poetry is divine’ because it ‘resembles grief in rending assunder our conventionalities, . . . but does so singing instead of sighing. It transfigures the great humanity into the sense of its *To-come*’ (*BC* 6:219).

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