

The (Very) Critical Reception of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's
Re-presentation of the Christian Prophetess-Poet
in her "Novelized" Epic, Aurora Leigh

by

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Title of Thesis/Project/Extended Essay

The (Very) Critical Reception of Elizabeth
Barrett Browning's Re-presentation of the
Christian Prophetess - Poet in her "Novelized"
Epic, Aurora Leigh

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Abstract

Unlike many Victorian women writers, Elizabeth Barrett Browning appreciated the power of literary reviewers--and literary reviewers, at least initially, appreciated her poetry. Using reviews published in British daily newspapers and weekly, monthly, and quarterly periodicals between 1838 and 1869, this study will reconstruct the conservative literary climate Barrett Browning wrote in and assess Barrett Browning's unusual and evolving relationship with Victorian critics.

By substituting the Christian God for the Nature of Romantic writers and defining herself as a Christian prophetess-poet, Barrett Browning satisfied critics' expectations for both male and female writers. As a result, Barrett Browning's devotional Seraphim, and Other Poems (1838) and sentimental Poems (1844) were well-received. Although the Romantic and biblical model of the Christian prophetess-poet enabled Barrett Browning to corner an essentially masculinist poetic market, it subverted and thereby compromised her criticism of social inequities.

Once she was safely established as England's favourite poetess, however, Barrett Browning wrote more explicitly political poetry. To redefine the female poet, reform "feminine" poetry, and earn serious criticism, Barrett Browning re-presented the Christian prophetess-poet as a well-educated, hard-working, modern, political, and powerful

woman in Aurora Leigh (1856). So that she might "blow all class-walls as level as Jericho's," Barrett Browning "formed" her theme and "novelized" this epic to further challenge literary assumptions about gender and genre.

As Barrett Browning had hoped, Aurora Leigh was seriously criticized; however, it was too radical for most reviewers and consequently poorly received. An examination of the mixed and negative reviews that immediately followed Aurora Leigh's publication shows that most Victorian critics defended the status quo by upholding the gender and genre hierarchies that Barrett Browning tried to undermine. When Barrett Browning continued to defy her reviewers by publishing the highly politicized Poems Before Congress (1860), critics turned against their former "queen of harmonious thought." By posthumously separating Barrett Browning from her poetry and transforming her into a romantic heroine, Victorian critics tried to erase Barrett Browning's political poetry and reduce its radical author to a conventional and hence manageable literary paragon.

For Peter and for Baby Emma,
born April 8, 1995
"To keep me low and wise"

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Approval	ii
Abstract	iii
Dedication	v
Preface	vii
Introduction: Victorian Literary Reviewers, Romantic Poets, and the Problems of Women Writers	1
1. Entering the Poetic Market as a Christian Prophetess-Poet	10
2. Re-presenting the Christian Prophetess-Poet in <u>Aurora Leigh</u>	22
3. <u>Aurora Leigh</u> as a "Novelized" Epic	43
4. The (Very) Critical Reception of <u>Aurora Leigh</u>	55
5. Conclusion: The Erasure of Barrett Browning's Political Poems	71
Notes	82
Works Cited	86
Works Consulted	92

Preface

Unlike the prefaces Barrett Browning wrote early in her career, this one will not humbly excuse what follows it. Rather, I have prepared a short, straightforward preface to clarify a few matters.

First of all, I have decided to exclude American literary reviews of Barrett Browning's poetry from my study. While a comparison of British and American criticism on Barrett Browning would make for an interesting discussion, the short length of this text has forced me to limit my investigation to British reviews published between 1838 and 1869.

Furthermore, I have included a short introduction to provide some background on literary criticism and the problems women faced as poets in the nineteenth-century. While my introduction is rather basic, it presents a crucial historical context.

Finally, I have provided more literary context. Although this study focuses on Aurora Leigh (1856), it also refers to several works of Barrett Browning that precede and follow it: An Essay on Mind (1826), The Seraphim, and Other Poems (1838), Poems (1844), and Poems Before Congress (1860). To better assess Barrett Browning's changing relationship with reviewers, the first and fifth chapters examine Victorian critics' reaction to both the author's earlier personal poems and later political ones. While

these "secondary" works may somewhat complicate my discussion of Aurora Leigh's construction and reception in the second, third, and fourth chapters, to truly appreciate what Barrett Browning is doing and undoing in Aurora Leigh, such chronological context is necessary.

Introduction: Victorian Literary Reviewers,
Romantic Poets, and the Problems of Women Writers

The extension of literacy, a prospering middle class, new publishing technology, and advancements in transportation made British daily newspapers and weekly, monthly, and quarterly periodicals affordable and thus popular reading material in the mid-nineteenth-century. As popular literature, Victorian newspapers and periodicals do not simply reflect Victorian culture. Rather, they are "a central component of that culture . . ." (Pykett "Reading" 102). Therefore, the Victorian newspaper and periodical are, in a Barthesian sense, methodological fields that contain valuable economic, historical, sociological, and of course literary information about Victorian writers, readers, and reviewers.

While the British press exerted considerable political pressure at the beginning of the nineteenth-century, the reduction of the Stamp Tax in 1836 drove the more radical unstamped press out of business (Boyce, Curran, and Wingate 245). By the middle of the century, most critics wrote for the ruling class they worked for and consequently expected literary works to conform to "a ruling standard of taste" (Jauss 25). Even as early as 1824, James Mill determined that

Periodical literature depends upon immediate success. It must, therefore, patronise the opinions which are now in vogue, the opinions of those who are now in power. It will obtain applause, and will receive reward, in proportion

as it is successful in finding plausible reasons for the maintenance of the favourite opinions of the powerful classes and plausible reasons for the discountenance and rejection of the opinions which tend to rescue the interests of the greater number from the subjection under which they must lie to the interests of the smaller number. ("Periodical Literature" The Westminster Review 209)

Mill persuasively argues that critics depend on those in power; therefore, they reject the political concerns of the middle and lower classes and rationalize "the favourite opinions of the powerful classes." In other words, most literary reviewers tried to maintain the status quo or the existing state of affairs in England. As a result, mid-nineteenth-century literary criticism was inherently conservative.

To uphold the status quo, most Victorian reviewers praised conventional works that celebrated the way things were. Terry Eagleton ironically points out,

Since literature, as we know, deals in universal human values rather than in such historical trivia as civil wars, the oppression of women or the dispossession of the English peasantry, it could serve to place in cosmic perspective the petty demands of working people for decent living conditions or greater control over their own lives, and might even with luck come to render them oblivious of such issues in their high-minded contemplation of eternal truths and beauties. (25)

Eagleton maintains that conventional nineteenth-century English literature could distract the working class (as well as women), causing them to accept or even forget that they are oppressed. While most Victorian reviewers tolerated the subversive social criticism of Charles Dickens and Mrs. Gaskell, they favoured texts that glorified and justified

traditional values.

Even though Victorian critics reviewed women's writing, they distrusted and often discounted women's literary works--especially those that addressed the controversial Woman question.¹ Cora Kaplan suggests that reviewers were increasingly threatened by an organizing proletariat: "Caught between this and the need to accommodate a limited demand for equity from informed women of their own class, they [critics] were equally committed to the absolute necessity of maintaining social control of females, and its corollary, the sexual division of labour" (138). To protect the interests of a patriarchal ruling class, many Victorian critics upheld the sexual division of labour and tried to silence women by relegating them to the private sphere of the home.

For example, in 1755 The Monthly Review professes to "embrace every opportunity of paying a due regard to the literary productions of the fair sex" ("Poems on Several Occasions" 13). Forty years later, however, this periodical discourages the publication of women's writing:

Among the modern female accomplishments, that of writing verse is become almost as common as music and drawing. We do not mean to censure an innocent and elegant exertion of the talents which may contribute, in no small degree, to the formation of good taste: but, as the fair artist of a flower-piece or landscape is content with having it framed and hung up in the parlour, and does not think of the honour of an exhibition, so we are inclined to wish that our poetesses would in general be satisfied with the approbation of a circle of private friends, without being induced by their partial applause to show off before that formidable body called the Public. ("Poems and Fugitive Pieces" 224)

According to The Monthly Review, a male poet is a professional poet whereas a female poet or "poetess" is an accomplished young lady. Thus, a poetess' art is not serious art. Like a "flower-piece or landscape," it is pretty and therefore better off displayed in a private parlour than in the public press.

In such an anti-feminist climate, it is not surprising that most periodicals that espoused the women's cause were short-lived. Even the few women who reviewed literary works for periodicals ultimately internalized the patriarchal voice of the authorial "we" and reinforced literary and social double-standards (Thompson 26, 35). In Godiva's Ride, Dorothy Mermin argues that both male and female reviewers assumed that women could not write as well as men because their "brains were too weak, their emotions too uncontrolled, their reproductive systems inimical to and easily damaged by mental exertion, and their experience of life and the world necessarily, given the social constraints that bound them, inadequate" (50). Because most Victorian reviewers considered women to be weak, uncontrolled, and inexperienced writers, they discriminated against those who dared to publish their second-class works.

To maintain the sexual division of labour and hence the status quo, critics formulated gender-based and biased literary criteria. Women's texts were expected to be domestic, moral, pathetic, and pretty; they were not supposed to be political, passionate, profound, or original

like men's. Nevertheless, those women who met the literary standard for their sex were considered inferior writers. In general, they were condescended to and their "feminine" texts were either sympathetically reviewed or delicately dismissed as "a lady's production" ("Jemima and Louisa" The Monthly Review 82). On the other hand, those women who did not conform to reviewers' expectations were considered a threat. Thus, unconventional women writers were severely criticized and sometimes even slandered for writing "masculine" works.²

Nineteenth-century women poets were especially in a double-bind. To successfully enter the poetic market, female poets had to reconcile their poetry to pervasive Romantic theories of art. Because the Romantic movement revolved around a male poet's relationship with an implicitly female nature, however, it was difficult for women to write Romantic poetry. Margaret Homans proposes that

Where the masculine self dominates and internalizes otherness, that other is frequently identified as feminine, whether she is nature, the representation of a human woman, or some phantom of desire. . . . To be for so long the other and the object made it difficult for nineteenth-century women to have their own subjectivity. (12)

Although women are present in Romantic poetry, they often exist as the voiceless and selfless objects of male poets--and not as subjective speaking subjects.

Thus, for a woman "[t]o become a poet, given these conditions, required nothing less than battling a valued and

loved [masculinist] literary tradition to forge a self out of the materials of otherness" (Homans 12). Of course, it was not easy for women poets to "forge a self out of the materials of otherness." Marlon Ross points out that "romanticism is historically a masculine phenomenon" which defines the poet as a quester and ruler of sublime and visionary empires (quoted in Leighton Victorian 20). As the property of their fathers or husbands, female poets were not allowed to distinguish themselves from men, "own" their "otherness," and redefine the poet.

It was, therefore, unfair to judge female poets according to the "'problematic standard' of originality, which is still strongly associated with a masculine-Romantic drive for 'individuality' and 'self-ownership'" (Ross quoted in Leighton Victorian 20). Nevertheless, women could not circumvent the problematic standard of originality either. Because critics feared that women's writing would feminize and hence degrade the profession of literature, they upheld masculinist Romantic criteria. Unless women wrote in a Romantic idiom, their work was not taken seriously by critics who valued originality, individuality, and self-ownership in poetry. Even though these Romantic properties offered nineteenth-century women an opportunity to express their subjectivity, female poets had to struggle to take advantage of them. Because of rigid gender expectations, women poets could not overtly incorporate the more positive elements of Romantic poetry into their own.

Even more so than female novelists (who briefly dominated their supposedly inferior genre), female poets were in a precarious position: to be appreciated and truly respected, women poets had to be Romantic and "masculine"; yet, in order to be sympathetically received, they had to be non-Romantic and "feminine."

Given this double-standard, very few Romantic women poets were successful. In 1819, The Monthly Review writes, "[w]hen we consider the cultivation of the female mind in the present day, and the great taste and relish which exist among the ladies of our country for the finest and highest department of literature, it is certainly strange that we find so few poetesses of celebrity." Although this critic considers Felicia Hemans an exceptional poetess, he³ complains that her "verses do not possess that uniform deep colour of poetic feeling, by which the touch of a master-poet is so easily distinguished: they contain little of the 'breathing and burning,' or of that powerful strength of expression which stamps itself on our imagination . . ." ("Tales and Historic Scenes in Verse" 408: my emphasis). Even though The Monthly Review acknowledges Hemans as a poetess of celebrity, it suggests that she cannot be a poet of "the highest order" because she lacks the "powerful strength" of a "master-poet." In short, Hemans is a weak poet because she is a female poet. Not surprisingly, this critic determines that Hemans is at her best when she is more masculine. After describing Heman's classically

embellished scenes as "masterly," however, he wonders in a footnote whether it is appropriate to use a masculine adjective with regards to a woman's writing (412).

Evidently, Victorian reviewers did not know how to deal with women writers--and most women writers did not know how to deal with them. Barrett Browning, on the other hand, appreciated the power of literary reviewers and initially wrote to please her critics. For example, as a teenager Barrett Browning submitted several poems to Thomas Campbell, the general editor of The New Monthly Magazine, and asked what he thought of them. Although Campbell wrote Barrett Browning that he was "heartily sorry . . . to damp your poetical hopes and ambition," he said that her poems were "the work of an inexperienced imagination" and obscured by "lyrical intermixtures." Barrett Browning did not give up her poetic aspirations. On the contrary, she considered Campbell's honest criticism and immediately wrote him another poem (Forster 31). This incident illustrates that Barrett Browning took criticism seriously rather than personally, and at least early in her career, wrote for her reviewers to earn critical acclaim.

In the following chapters I will reconstruct the conservative literary climate Barrett Browning wrote in and analyse her changing relationship with reviewers. In doing so, this study will show that Barrett Browning addressed the problems that Victorian women writers faced and slowly negotiated her literary position with critics over

successive works. By substituting the Christian God for the Nature of Romantic writers and presenting herself as a Christian prophetess-poet, Barrett Browning met reviewers' expectations for both male and female writers. As a result, Barrett Browning's devotional Seraphim, and Other Poems (1838) and sentimental Poems (1844) were well-received. Once she was established as England's most distinguished "queen of harmonious thought" (Grant 323), however, Barrett Browning wrote more explicitly political poetry in hopes of being taken as seriously as a man. To undermine the gender and genre hierarchies of literary criticism, Barrett Browning re-presented the Christian prophetess-poet as a well-educated, hard-working, modern, political, and powerful woman in her "novelized" epic, Aurora Leigh (1856). Although Barrett Browning was taken seriously and Aurora Leigh was fairly criticized, it was too radical for most critics and consequently both its content and form were resisted. When Barrett Browning defied her critics and published the highly politicized Poems Before Congress (1860), reviewers turned against their former favourite poetess and subjected both her and her poem to traditional gender-based and biased standards. In fact, Victorian critics tried to silence the late poet in their posthumous reviews by overlooking or discounting Barrett Browning's later political poems and focusing on her life rather than on her poetry.

Entering the Poetic Market as a Christian Prophetess-Poet

In this chapter I will demonstrate that Barrett Browning manipulated critics' gender-based literary standards to successfully enter England's masculinist poetic market. By substituting the Christian God for a Romantic Nature and defining herself as a Christian prophetess-poet, Barrett Browning met Victorian reviewers' expectations for both male and female writers. As a result, Barrett Browning's devotional Seraphim, and Other Poems (1838) and sentimental Poems (1844) were well-received. Although the poetic model of the Christian prophetess-poet subverted and hence compromised Barrett Browning's critique of social inequities, it enabled her to corner an essentially Romantic and hence masculinist literary market, thereby becoming England's favourite poetess.

To enter the Victorian poetic market, Barrett Browning manipulated the Romantic criteria of literary criticism. Although Barrett Browning could not represent herself as a quester or ruler, she could and did depict herself as a visionary poet. Unlike the male poet-prophets of Romanticism who paganized God,⁴ however, Barrett Browning distrusted animism. Therefore, she aligned herself with female mystics like Julian of Norwich, Teresa of Avila, and Anna Trapnel, and professed to see, listen to, and speak for the Christian God.

In "Elizabeth Barrett: The Poet as Angel," David Riede

argues that Barrett Browning considered Romantic poetry blasphemous:

The Christian poet, like the romantic, mediates between the transcendent Truth and fallen human society. But for Barrett, at least in the 1830s, the romantic idealization of human genius as quasi-divine could only be seen as blasphemous, and she was able to see transcendence of ordinary mortal limitations as possible only in death, or in the guise of an angel. (136)

Although I agree with Riede that Barrett Browning tried to mediate between "the transcendent Truth and fallen human society," I think that she did so as a Christian prophetess-poet rather than as an "angel." By entering the poetic market as an inspired post-Romantic Christian prophetess-poet, Barrett Browning satisfied critics' expectations for both male and female writers. As a seer, Barrett Browning could attribute her original and individual poetic visions to God. Furthermore, as "one of God's singers" (Forster 34), it was appropriate for Barrett Browning to sound, like God, sublime and powerful, as well as beautiful and pathetic like a woman.⁵ Thus, in an article for Tait's Edinburgh Magazine, George Gilfillan considers Barrett Browning "the most masculine of our female writers" ("Female Authors.--no.II. Mrs. Elizabeth Barrett Browning" 14), but shares The Eclectic Review's opinion that "the great distinguishing attribute of Mrs. Browning as a poet is the fulness of her Christianity" ("Elizabeth Barrett Browning" 206). As a Christian prophetess-poet, Barrett Browning was able to express herself and her version of the truth like a man--without appearing unfeminine.

In An Essay on Mind (1826), a twenty year old Barrett Browning struggles to reconcile Romantic nature and Christian devotional poetry:

Poesy's whole essence, when defined,
Is elevation of the reasoning mind,
When inward sense from Fancy's page is taught,
And moral feeling ministers to Thought.
And hence, the natural passions all agree
In seeking Nature's language--poetry. (2.944-9)

Although Barrett Browning celebrates poetry in the Romantic vein as "Nature's language," she insists that poetry has a moral responsibility to temper the passions and transcend a fallen world. Therefore, Barrett Browning cites Edward Irving, a preacher who claimed to be an oracle of God, as a visionary poet in her Essay. Like Irving, Barrett Browning uses her so-called "prophetic" gift to empower herself as a Christian prophetess-poet. In The Reader's Repentance, Christine L. Krueger persuasively argues that "the voice of the prophet manifested the divine origin of its inspiration in profoundly powerful oracular, exhortative rhetoric, releasing women from the confines of decorous feminine speech" and defending their freedom of expression (61). As a Christian prophetess-poet who serves God and speaks for him, Barrett Browning could confidently contradict Romantic prophet-poets and write that the truth is only known in heaven where "voiceless intercourse may pass between, / All pure--all free! as light, which does appear / In its own essence, incorrupt and clear!" (2.664-6).

Barrett Browning's next major publication, The Seraphim, and Other Poems (1838), further examines a female

poet's relation to nature. Dorothy Mermin maintains that "[t]he 1838 volume is suffused with the consciousness that . . . women can't be nature poets, the poems repeatedly choosing between nature and God, regret for Eden and hope of heaven" (Elizabeth 67). Since women are associated with Nature in Romantic poetry and therefore cannot be nature poets, Barrett Browning wrestles with Romanticism in The Seraphim. In her preface, Barrett Browning uses unconventional natural symbolism to defend her Christian poem and undermine the pagan ones of her predecessors:

"An irreligious poet," says Burns, meaning an undevotional one, "is a monster." An irreligious poet, he might have said, is no poet at all. The gravitation of poetry is upwards. The poetic wing, if it move, ascends. What did even the heathen Greeks--Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Pindar? Sublimely, because born poets; darkly, because born of Adam, and unrenewed in Christ, their spirits wandered like the rushing chariots and winged horses, black and white, of their brother poet Plato, through the universe of Deity, seeking if haply they might find him: and as that universe closed around the seekers, not with the transparency in which it flowed first from his hand, but opaquely, as double-dyed with the transgression of its sons; they felt, though they could not discern, the God beyond, and used the gesture, though ignorant of the language of worshipping. The blind eagle missed the sun, but soared towards its sphere. Shall the blind eagle soar, and the seeing eagle peck chaff? Surely it should be the gladness and the gratitude of such as are poets among us, that in turning towards the beautiful, they may behold the true face of God. ("The Seraphim, and other Poems" The Metropolitan Magazine 98)

Although Barrett Browning demonstrates classical knowledge in her preface, she distinguishes herself from classical poets who never knew Christ, and therefore blindly "missed the sun" or son of God in their poetic flight. Furthermore,

the Christian prophetess-poet dissociates herself from female birds who could not sing in their cages⁶ as well as from Romantic nightingales who would only sing at night, and unconventionally compares herself to a free "seeing eagle." As a "seeing eagle," Barrett Browning has acute intellectual vision and hence every right to climb to heavenly heights. Unlike the classical pagans she cites and the Romantic ones she refers to indirectly, the Christian prophetess-poet claims that she can truly see and thus show "the true face of God."

Although The Seraphim's preface lacks the poems's angelic vision and rendition of the heavenly choir's "most sweet music's miracle" (1 1046), The Metropolitan Magazine considers it "poetry of the highest order without its rhythm" (98).⁷ However, this reviewer is not convinced that "the awful mysteries of the [C]hristian faith are suited to mortal verse," and therefore prefers sentimental ballads like "Isobel's Child" and "The Romaunt of Margret" to Barrett Browning's religious poetry. Nevertheless, he admires Barrett Brownings' "intentions . . . and the all-absorbing enthusiasm with which she advocates the cause of devotional poetry" (98). Above all, The Metropolitan Magazine respects Barrett Browning's poetic and prophetic aspirations: "we were singularly struck with the originality, ideality, earnestness, and masterly power of expression and execution; and a more careful examination has deepened this first impression, and awakened in us a great

respect for the fair author's uncommon learning" (97: my emphasis). Although this critic is not overly hard on Barrett Browning, he does not condescend to her either and refer to her as an authoress. As a Christian prophetess-poet, Barrett Browning earns this critic's respect and thereby protects her "masterly" poetry.

Once more, Barrett Browning uses the critically approved poetic model of the Christian prophetess-poet in Poems (1844); however, she redefines her role and revises her writing strategy. In her most popular publication, Barrett Browning emphasizes the female face of the Christian prophetess-poet and writes less devotional and more sentimental poetry. Like her preface to The Seraphim, Barrett Browning's preface to Poems defends her writing, but it does so much more conventionally. Instead of appealing to God's authority and assuming his protection, Barrett Browning evokes sympathy in her audience:

If it were not presumptuous language on the lips of one to whom life is more than usually uncertain, my favourite wish for this work would be, that it be received by the public as a step in the right track, towards a future indication of more value and acceptability. I would fain do better,-- and I feel as if I might do better: I aspire to do better. It is no new form of the nympholepsy of poetry, that my ideal should fly before me; and if I cry out too hopefully at sight of the white vesture receding between the cypresses, let me be blamed gently if justly.

This time, Barrett Browning does not compare her poetic aspirations to the visionary flight of an eagle. Rather, she admits that her poetic ideal flies before her and acknowledges that her "poems are full of faults." Like most

women writers, the Christian prophetess-poet meekly aspires to improve her writing and hopes that her critics will treat her poetry gently. Disarmed by her humble preface, The Monthly Review does just this and praises Poems' "abundant tokens of advancement beyond her preceding triumphs, evincing more matured confidence in her own peculiar genius, a more resolute avoidance of the obscurities both of thought and construction, and a nearer approach to the simplicities of all sorts, than was her wont" ("Poems" 301). By writing what critics wanted to hear in her preface, Barrett Browning "naturally" improved as a poet.

To further soften her reviewers, Barrett Browning discusses the intimate relationship she has with her poems:

they [her poems] have my heart and life in them,-- they are not empty shelled. If it must be said of me, that I have contributed immemorable verses to the many rejected by the age, it cannot at least be said that I have done so in a light and irresponsible spirit. Poetry has been as serious a thing to me as life itself; and life has been a very serious thing: there has been no playing at skittles for me in either.

Here, Barrett Browning foregrounds her physical weakness and strategically associates herself with the physically frail but spiritually strong women of sentimental fiction.⁸

Thus, The Eclectic Review determines that Barrett Browning's poems were "wrought through a mental strength somewhat borne down by bodily weariness," and that "there are times when illness repays for long exhaustion, by intervals of power; when it seems to loosen instead of tightening the bonds of the flesh, and through the attenuation of the tenement, the

spirit takes a wider range beyond it" ("Poems" 575). Having grown up, no doubt, on classic sentimental novels like Samuel Richardson's Pamela (1740) and Clarissa (1747-8), this critic is convinced that suffering makes Barrett Browning a stronger woman and hence a better writer.

Barrett Browning also subdues her critics by invoking Thomas Carlyle's influential gospel of work⁹ and justifying her latest literary production by the effort she put into it:

I never mistook pleasure for the final cause of poetry; nor leisure, for the hour of the poet. I have done my work, so far, as work--not as mere hand and head work, apart from the personal being, but as the completest expression of that being, to which I could attain,--and as work I offer it to the public,--feeling its short-comings more deeply than any of my readers, because measured from the height of my aspiration,--but feeling also that the reverence and sincerity with which the work was done, should give it some protection with the reverent and sincere. ("Miss Barrett's Poems" The Eclectic Review 573-4)

By appealing to the hearts as well as to the strong work ethic of her Victorian readers and reviewers, Barrett Browning's "feeling" for her work compels The Eclectic Review to "feel that this preface spreads an Aegis over its writer; criticism, at least, may not touch her" (574).

Shielded by her pathetic preface, the Christian prophetess-poet safely submitted her subversive sentimental Poems to the public.

Yet again, as with The Seraphim, Barrett Browning's sentimental ballads were popular. In his review for Tait's Edinburgh Magazine, Christian Johnstone writes that "The most attractive poems in these volumes are the Ballads. . .

. She has struck out many new tones in the rhythmical scale; rich and recondite harmonies, full of originality, as they are of beauty" ("Recent Poetry" 722). With its story of a common poet's love for a noblewoman, poems like "Lady Geraldine's Courtship" combine feminine "gentleness" with "masculine energy and grasp of passion" to satisfy both of Johnstone's gender-based expectations (724).

Furthermore, I agree with Mermin that Barrett Browning's "ballads gave what early Victorian critics of poetry wanted: an apparently simple appeal to common human emotions" (Elizabeth 90). Barrett Browning writes H. S. Boyd that "[i]t is the story that has power with people" (Kenyon 1:247); thus, it would appear that Barrett Browning wrote pathetic narrative poems or ballads to overpower her audience. Although the power of pathos is difficult for a modern audience to appreciate, Lyn Pykett points out that "[f]or most Victorian critics sympathy was the moral and imaginative basis of all art. It was the power of imaginative projection, the power of entering imaginatively into the experience of others" ("The Real" 70). In other words, "the power of imaginative projection" or pathos enabled Victorian readers and reviewers to sympathize with a character's experience and to suffer with him or her.

As a Christian prophetess-poet in the humanist sense, Barrett Browning took advantage of the ballad's pathetic power and tried to arouse public sympathy for oppressed woman, abused children, and the poor in Poems. Krueger

maintains that many nineteenth-century women appropriated political power by using Christian rhetoric to simultaneously problematize social conditions and protect themselves from the scandal that tarnished Mary Wollstonecraft's reputation (85-6). To safely inspire social reform, the Christian prophetess-poet implied her own feminist¹⁰ and socialist agendas in the "apparently most innocent, retrogressive, and sentimental of feminine genres, the ballad" (Mermin Elizabeth 91). For instance, "The Romaunt of the Page" tells the story of a woman who disguises herself as a page to follow her husband on a Crusade. When the wife begins to hint at her identity, the knight declares that women belong at home and that he could not love a wife who was also his page. Thus, the wife sacrifices her life in battle to prove her womanhood and maintain her husband's respect. Although she does not say so, Barrett Browning uses structural irony to imply that the knight's womanly ideal is outdated and moreover deadly.

While Victorian reviewers believed that they were responsible for "the diffusion of knowledge and the progress of mental improvement" ("To the Literary World" The Monthly Review 1), they were in fact very conservative. To uphold the status quo, most literary critics ignored Barrett Browning's subversive political agenda and thereby rendered it ineffective. For example, Victorian reviewers overlooked Barrett Browning's social critique of child abuse in "The Cry of the Children." Instead of analysing the content of

this popular ballad and addressing the working conditions of factory children, Tait's Edinburgh Magazine focuses on its pathetic form: "It is a poem not to be read without a choking voice. The cadence, lingering, broken, and full of wail, is one of the most perfect adaptations of sound to sense in literature. It is like the struggle and booming of an organ requiem" ("Recent Poetry" 721). Johnstone, who reviewed this poem, does not see and thus understand Barrett Browning's criticism of inequity. Rather, he hears a pathetic ballad that pleases but does not provoke him, and consequently is moved to tears but not to action.

Although Barrett Browning's subversive sentimental ballads failed to arouse enough public sympathy to inspire social reform, they enabled her to corner a Romantic and masculinist poetic market. With poetry reminiscent of both Felicia Hemans' "etherial music" and Joanna Baillie's "strong clear portraitures," The Metropolitan Magazine considers Barrett Browning a well-rounded and yet "eminently individual" poet. Thus, this reviewer, Charles Grant, decides to claim for Barrett Browning "the highest place mid the queens of harmonious thought who have ruled among us" ("Miss Barrett's Poems" 323-4).

To enter a post-Romantic masculinist poetic market, Barrett Browning substituted the Christian God for Nature and defined herself as a Christian prophetess-poet. Because this poetic model satisfied both critics' masculine and feminine literary expectations, The Seraphim, and Other

Poems and Poems were well-received. Although the poetic model of the Christian prophetess-poet enabled Barrett Browning to safely publish mildly political poems that masqueraded as sentimental ones, it did not permit her to forward her feminist and socialist agendas. Once she was established as England's "queen of harmonious thought," Barrett Browning tried to initiate social reform by re-presenting the Christian prophetess-poet in her "novelized" epic, Aurora Leigh.

Re-presenting the Christian Prophetess-Poet in Aurora Leigh

In my first chapter I argued that Barrett Browning successfully published the devotional poetry of The Seraphim, and Other Poems and the sentimental ballads of Poems under the acceptable guise of the Christian prophetess-poet. In meeting the masculine and feminine expectations of Victorian critics, however, the Romantic and biblical model of the Christian prophetess-poet compromised Barrett Browning's political position. To earn serious criticism as a political poet, Barrett Browning tried to change her image and thus the image of the female poet. "With no adequate metaphorical traditions for describing the woman writer" though (Turley Houston 227), Barrett Browning reworked the poetic model she had. Once she was protected by literary success and her marriage to Robert Browning,¹¹ Barrett Browning re-constructed the Christian prophetess-poet in Aurora Leigh (1856).

In this chapter, I will concentrate on the content of Aurora Leigh and consider how Barrett Browning dealt with sexist criticism as well as with the lack of strong female poetic role models in the mid-nineteenth-century. This discussion will show that like Barrett Browning, Aurora Leigh dissociates herself from her mother to redefine herself and hence the woman poet. I go on to argue that Barrett Browning's "better self" (1:4) tries to fulfill her poetic "mother-want" (1:40) and forward her feminist agenda

by de-romanticizing Madame de Staël's Corinne, or Italy (1807), re-visioning the Bible, and adopting Corinne, a Romantic improvisatrice, and Miriam, an Old Testament prophetess-poet, as her poetic grandmothers. In comparing and contrasting Aurora to her mother, Corinne, and Miriam, I will demonstrate that Barrett Browning undermines her sentimental heritage, resurrects a submerged female intellectual literary tradition, and re-presents the Christian prophetess-poet as a well-educated, hard-working, modern, political, and powerful woman--Aurora Leigh.

I

In Aurora Leigh, Barrett Browning expresses her dislike of gender-based criticism. Romney tells Aurora,

You never can be satisfied with praise
 Which men give women when they judge a book
 Not as mere work but as mere woman's work,
 Expressing the comparative respect
 Which means the absolute scorn. "Oh, excellent!
 What grace, what facile turns, what fluent sweeps,
 What delicate discernment...almost thought!
 The book does honour to the sex, we hold.
 Among our female authors we make room
 For this fair writer, and congratulate
 The country that produces in these times
 Such women, competent to"...spell. (2:232-43)

Whether or not Aurora is an intentionally autobiographical figure, she reflects Barrett Browning's poetic aspirations and frustrations. Like Aurora, Barrett Browning could not be satisfied with anything less than the serious criticism male writers received. To combat literary double-standards, Barrett Browning parodies reviewers who condescend to women

writers and praise their ability to gracefully turn, delicately discern, almost think, and even spell.

Barrett Browning also shows her low opinion of gender-biased criticism by no longer writing the sentimental ballads that made her so popular with her reviewers and general readers alike. As Kay Moser writes, Barrett Browning now "refused to limit herself to the superficial, emotional lyrics that were considered women's poetical sphere and instead tackled serious intellectual, social, political, and philosophical issues of the day forthrightly, not as a Lady Poet but as an intelligent, human thinker who asked to be judged as such" (65). To earn serious criticism as a woman, the "new" Barrett Browning wrote original, political, profound, and hence more "masculine" poetry.

Frances Power Cobbe, a Victorian feminist, points out that "[f]emale artists hitherto always started on a wrong track; being persuaded beforehand that they ought only to compose sweet verses and soft pictures" (92). Many Victorian female poets agreed with Power Cobbe and consequently rejected the sensibility¹² of eighteenth and early nineteenth-century women writers and redirected themselves. Angela Leighton persuasively argues that

Victorian women's poetry . . . grows out of a struggle with and against a highly moralized celebration of women's sensibility. . . . The exclusion of money, sex, power and, as it were, imaginative insensibility from the poetic consciousness of women then becomes part of a more general, moral protection campaign of Victorian womanhood. This dissociation of sensibility from the affairs of the world - a dissociation already decried in the latter works of Mary Wollstonecraft - is one of the

woman poet's most disabling inheritances.

(Victorian 3)

According to Leighton, Victorian women poets like Barrett Browning tried to overcome the dissociation of sensibility from the affairs of the world "by writing not from, but against the heart" (3). Like Charlotte Mew, Christina Rossetti, and Augusta Webster, Barrett Browning refused her "disabling" sentimental inheritance, rejected her "Romantic" feelings, and wrote against her heart to establish credibility and forward her political agenda.

Thus, Barrett Browning did not model herself after Felicia Hemans and L.E.L. (Letitia Elizabeth Landon), her Romantic foremothers. In fact, Barrett Browning attempted to distinguish her Victorian poetry from the sentimental works of Hemans and L.E.L. by denying their existence. Barrett Browning wonders, "[w]here were the poetesses? The divine breath . . . why did it never pass, even in lyrical form, over the lips of a woman? how strange! I look everywhere for grandmothers and see none" (Kenyon 1:232). By disowning the poetic grandmothers who had "started on a wrong track" (Power Cobbe 92), Barrett Browning effectively liberates herself from the sentimentalism of women's poetry.

Having divorced herself from Hemans and L.E.L., however, Barrett Browning needed other women--strong women--to imitate. Elaine Showalter suggests that women who began their literary careers in the 1840s sought "heroines--both professional role-models and fictional ideals--who could combine strength and intelligence with feminine tenderness,

tact, and domestic expertise" (100). Because such heroines were hard to find at home, Barrett Browning looked beyond England. Cora Kaplan maintains that "Barrett Browning saw herself as part of a submerged literary tradition of female writers. She compared herself physically to Sappho, 'little and black', intellectually to Mme de Staël her romantic precursor, and among her contemporaries an intuitive sympathy bound her to George Sand" (140). Barrett Browning may have resembled Sappho and named her heroine after the "woman" in George Sand, Aurore Dudevant, but de Staël had the greatest influence on her and Aurora Leigh. By expanding on Kaplan's "Aurora Leigh" and Alicia E. Holmes' discussion of Barrett Browning and the biblical Miriam, I will demonstrate that Aurora Leigh's unusual development as a poet mirrors her author's. To redirect her "better self," Barrett Browning disconnects Aurora from her natural mother and adopts de Staël's Corinne and Miriam of Exodus as her heroine's poetic grandmothers. Through Aurora Leigh, Barrett Browning undermines her sentimental heritage, resurrects a "submerged" female intellectual literary tradition, and re-presents the Christian prophetess-poet as a well-educated, hard-working, modern, political, and powerful woman.

II

Barrett Browning's troubled relationship with her

sentimental poetic grandmothers is evident in Aurora Leigh. Despite her feminist agenda, Barrett Browning is very critical of women in general and mothers in particular. In "Aurora Leigh: The Vocation of the Woman Poet," Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi points out that "[n]o matter what their social class, mothers are presented as cold, self-centred, and destructive" (39). For instance, Marian Erle explains how her mother, when beaten by her husband, "turned / (The worm), and beat her baby in revenge" (3:868-9). Even though Marian's father beats his wife and initiates a cycle of abuse, Marian blames her mother for perpetuating it. Indeed, Marian perceives women as the immediate oppressors of other women and holds her mother, who tried to prostitute her, responsible for her rape:

. . . man's violence,
Not man's seduction, made me what I am,
As lost as...I told him I should be lost.
When mothers fail us, can we help ourselves?
That's fatal! (6:1226-30)

Marian implies that by not challenging patriarchal authority, her mother condoned "male violence" and thereby failed her.

While Aurora's mother was not abusive, she died and left Aurora without a positive female role model. Aurora looks to her mother's portrait for guidance, but like Marian's mother, Aurora's mother is unreliable. Aurora explains how she

. . . mixed, confused, unconsciously,
Whatever I last read or heard or dreamed,
Abhorrent, admirable, beautiful,
Pathetical, or ghastly, or grotesque,
With still that face...which did not therefore change,

But kept the mystic level of all forms,
 Hates, fears, and admirations, was by turns
 Ghost, fiend, and angel, fairy, witch, and sprite,
 A dauntless Muse who eyes a dreadful Fate,
 A loving Psyche who loses sight of Love,
 A still Medusa with mild milky brows
 All curdled and clothed upon with snakes
 Whose slime falls fast as sweat will; or anon
 Our Lady of the Passion, stabbed with swords
 Where the Babe sucked; or Lamia in her first
 Moonlighted pallor, ere she shrunk and blinked
 And shuddering wriggled down to the unclean;
 In her last kiss upon the baby-mouth
 My father pushed down on the bed for that--
 or my dead mother, without smile or kiss,
 Buried at Florence. (1:147-168)

While the portrait of Aurora's mother does not change,
 Aurora cannot help but confuse her mother with images of
 women she has "read or heard or dreamed." Because the male
 artist--who would have painted this portrait--tends to
 operate "within a system of iconography and an aesthetic
 that perpetuates the conception of woman as sign and other"
 (Rosenblum 324), Aurora's mother embodies "all [mystic]
 forms" of femininity that men have constructed. As ghost,
 fiend, angel, fairy, witch, sprite, Muse, Psyche, Medusa,
 Our Lady of the Passion, Lamia, and Aurora's loving as well
 as dead mother, the woman in the portrait is more of an art
 object than a real mother.

I disagree with Dorothy Mermin who maintains that "in
 the tradition of women's bildungsromanen, the poem traces
 the heroine's attempt to return to the pre-Oedipal maternal
 world figured by nature" (10). Although Aurora Leigh may be
 defined as a Bildungsroman¹³ and its protagonist does
 return to her mother country, Italy, Aurora does not try to
 recover her natural mother. On the contrary, Aurora begins

her story with her mother's death--as if her real life depends on her "artificial" mother's demise. Instead of internalizing male desire, Aurora distances herself from her objectified mother and becomes an artist to redefine herself.

Like Wordsworth's Prelude, Tennyson's In Memoriam, Thackeray's Pendennis, and Dickens' David Copperfield, Barrett Browning's Kunstlerroman "represents the growth of a novelist or other artist into the stage of maturity that signalizes the recognition of artistic destiny and mastery of artistic craft" (Abrams 120). By appropriating this Romantic and masculinist genre, Barrett Browning denies the selflessness of women and makes the female self the subject of Aurora Leigh:

OF writing many books there is no end;
And I who have written much in prose and verse
For others' uses, will write now for mine--
Will write my story for my better self
As when you paint your portrait for a friend,
Who keeps it in a drawer and looks at it
Long after he has ceased to love you, just
To hold together what he was and is. (1:1-8)

In writing her life story, Aurora disobeys the only words of her mother she remembers: "Hush, hush--here's too much noise" (1:17). In fact, Aurora compares her autobiography to a self-portrait that one paints for a friend to contrast her "full-veined" book (5:216) with the posthumous portrait of her mother painted by a man.

According to Jacques Lacan, the human self is formed when it sees and hears itself reflected back to it by its mother's gaze and verbal responses or imagos (503, 505).

Dissatisfied with the woman that her mother made, Aurora writes and thereby makes her own visual and verbal reflections. As Tilottama Rajan suggests, "the eye is not just a window through which one sees into eternity but also a mirror that reflects itself" (212). If the eye is a mirror, then Aurora's self-reflexive Kunstlerroman is a kind of mirror writing. Because "the mirror is intimately connected with self-realization and self-creation" (La Belle 72), Aurora substitutes her eye/I for her mother to identify and reconstruct herself and hence the female poet in her writing.

III

Of course, Barrett Browning's "better self" needs somebody to imitate. As Joanna Russ says, in discussing Virginia Woolf's criticism of Aurora Leigh, "[w]ithout [female] models it's hard to work; without context, difficult to evaluate; without peers, nearly impossible to speak" (95). Without a mother to emulate, evaluate, and speak to, the orphaned poet, just like Barrett Browning herself, suffers a poetic "mother-want" (1:40). To fulfill this want, Barrett Browning traces Aurora's ancestry back to de Staël's Corinne, or Italy (1807) and adopts its Romantic improvisatrice as Aurora's poetic grandmother.

Barrett Browning considered Corinne, or Italy "an immortal book" that "deserves to be read three score and ten

times--that is, once every year in the age of man" (quoted in Gilbert 197). As both a novel and a travelogue, Corinne, or Italy introduced Barrett Browning to a foreign country that, in theory, nurtures and reveres female artists. In effect, this Romantic novel maps out a motherland and records a maternal tongue to "discover" a female literary tradition. To align herself with de Staël and situate herself within a "submerged literary tradition of [intellectual] female writers" (Kaplan 140), Barrett Browning rewrites Corinne, or Italy as Aurora Leigh. However, as Showalter points out, "[t]hat the feminine novelists learned to make use of the past and draw confidence from the example of their predecessors does not mean that they simply became adoring disciples" (101)--and this holds true for female poets too. Although Barrett Browning makes use of her Romantic past and draws confidence from de Staël, she de-romanticizes de Staël's novel to realistically re-present the Christian prophetess-poet in the person of Aurora Leigh.

As its title suggests, Corinne, or Italy closely associates the female artist, Corinne, with her mother country, Italy. Five years after the death of her Italian mother, a teenaged Corinne is sent to live with her English father, Lord Edgermond, who discourages her artistic endeavors. When her father dies, Corinne returns to Italy where her painting, music, drama, dance, and above all her improvised poetry are enthusiastically received. Corinne's

successful career, however, is interrupted when she falls in love with the English man she was once supposed to marry, Oswald, Lord Nelville. When Oswald discovers that his late father disapproved of Corinne's artistic achievements, he returns to England and honours his father's wishes by marrying Corinne's proper English step-sister, Lucile. Upon witnessing Oswald's infidelity, Corinne becomes ill, and (presumably) dies of a broken heart. Oswald regrets his decision and Italy mourns the loss of its favourite improvisatrice.

Like Corinne, Aurora loses her Italian mother as a child, her English father as a teenager, and lives in England for a while before she returns to Italy. Unlike the naturally brilliant and talented Corinne, however, Aurora receives both a feminine "liberal education" (1:402) and a masculine classical one. Besides learning female accomplishments like painting, dancing, spinning glass, stuffing birds, modelling flowers in wax, and cross-stitch from her aunt, Aurora was taught "The trick of Greek and Latin" by her father (1:714-5). Kaplan argues that "De Staël was interested in describing the evolution of natural genius in women," while "Barrett Browning adds to that point a whole psychological dimension about the making of a woman, rejecting a romantic view of the evolution of genius and emphasizing instead through a negative example, the role of family and early education in woman's development" (149). Although I think that Aurora's liberal and classical

education empowers her as a woman as well as a poet, and therefore has a positive rather than negative impact on her life, I essentially agree with Kaplan. In Aurora Leigh, Barrett Browning de-romanticizes de Staël's theory of evolution and suggests that unlike Italian improvisatrices, Christian prophetess-poets are educated not born.

As a Romantic novelist, de Staël also naturalizes woman's artistic expression and portrays Corinne as an improvisatrice who is literally inspired to sing. Corinne describes the nature of her improvisation or song-making to Oswald:

Sometimes when people have spoken of the great and novel questions of man's moral life, his destiny, his goal, his duties, his affections-- the conversations inspire my passionate interest. At times the interest lifts me beyond my own powers, brings me to discover in nature and in my heart bold truths and language full of life that solitary thought would not have brought into being. At such times it seems to me that I am experiencing a supernatural enthusiasm, and I sense full well that what is speaking within me has a value beyond myself. (44-5)

Like the Romantic poets, Corinne privileges feeling over thought and insists that she is simply inspired to express the "bold truths" she discovers in nature and in her heart.

As a more realistic Victorian, Barrett Browning resists de Staël's Romantic theory of creativity, and like Mary Shelley, "rewrites abstract creation as material production" (Michie 15). Barrett Browning maintains that Victorian poetry, even when it is inspired, is difficult to write. Whereas Corinne emphasizes the ease which she improvises, Aurora insists that writing is very hard work:

. . . I worked on, on.
 Through all the bristling fence of nights and days
 Which hedges time in from the eternities,
 I struggled--never stopped to note the stakes
 Which hurt me in my course. The midnight oil
 Would stink sometimes; there came some vulgar needs:
 I had to live that therefore I might work,
 And, being but poor, I was constrained, for life,
 To work with one hand for the booksellers
 While working with the other for myself
 And art: you swim with feet as well as hands,
 Or make small way. I apprehended this--
 In England no one lives by verse that lives;
 And, apprehending, I resolved by prose
 To make a space to sphere my living verse. (3:295-309)

Aurora would like to pursue her poetic career; however, unlike the financially independent Corinne, Aurora rejects a sizable inheritance and consequently must write prose for "cyclopaedias, magazines, / And weekly papers" to pay for such "vulgar needs" as food and shelter (3:300, 310-11).

Whereas Aurora must prostitute her poetic talents and "Sweat / For . . . crowns . . ." just to survive day by day (3:64-5), Corinne is detached from such reality. As an aristocrat, Corinne lives for and writes about the past. Rather than celebrating Romantic Italy and Romantic Italian poets, Corinne honours the Medieval writers, Petrarch and Dante, and the Renaissance painters, Michelangelo and Raphael, for restoring Italy's former (Classical) glory. She sings, "It is they alone who are honored, they alone who are famous still. The obscurity of our [Italian] fate heightens the splendor of our ancestors. . . . All our masterpieces are the work of those who are no more, and genius itself is numbered among the illustrious dead" (30-1). Because the pitiful "present existence [of Italy]

leaves only the past standing" (30), Corinne romanticizes the past and determines that only dead Italian artists are worthy of veneration.

Barrett Browning completely rejects de Staël's "dead" poetics. Her "better self" logically argues that "every age / Appears to souls who live in't (ask Carlyle) / Most unheroic" (5:155-7). Aurora believes that the Victorian age is an interesting one and she therefore distrusts "the poet who discerns / No character or glory in his times, / And trundles back his soul five hundred years" to write "of some black chief, half knight, half sheep-lifter" or "some beauteous dame, half chattel and half queen" (5:189-191, 195-6). Because "death inherits death," Aurora insists that Victorian poems written on Medieval "chivalric bones," like Tennyson's The Princess (1847), are without life and therefore not worth writing or imitating (5:198-9).¹⁴

Unlike Corinne and other writers who resign their countries, its citizens, and ultimately themselves to the past and hence to death, the "new" Christian prophetess-poet formulates a "living poetics" (Rosenblum 327). Aurora determines that poets should

. . . represent the age,
 Their age, not Charlemagne's--this live, throbbing age,
 That brawls, cheats, maddens, calculates, aspires,
 And spends more passion, more heroic heat,
 Betwixt the mirrors of its drawing-rooms,
 Than Roland with his knights at Roncesvalles.
 To flinch from modern varnish, coat or flounce,
 Cry out for togas and the picturesque,
 Is fatal--foolish too. (5:202-210)

Whereas Corinne romanticizes the Italian past, Aurora

"records true [English] life" (5:222) and represents the Victorian age "That brawls, cheats, maddens, calculates, aspires."

Aurora's "living" poetics leads her to conclude that "Humanity is great" and "if I would not rather pore upon / An ounce of common, ugly, human dust" than write about about a mythological past, "set it down / As weakness--strength by no means" (6:161-3, 170-1). Aurora insists that strong poets confront the vulgarity of human nature and address the "common" present rather than a glorified past or an anticipated future. Thus, Barrett Browning's modern heroine addresses current problems like poverty, child abuse, and rape. For example, Aurora describes how lower class babies hang like rags "Forgotten on their mother's neck" and are "wiped clean of mother's milk by mother's blow" (4:577-8). Having publicized poverty, abuse, and rape in Victorian society, Barrett Browning politicizes these issues. In doing so, Barrett Browning's "better self" magnifies "a truth" / Which, fully recognised, would change the world / And shift its morals" (7:855-7). By writing about present reality instead of past romance, the "new" Christian prophetess-poet hopes that her poetry will reform the world.

IV

I have suggested how Aurora Leigh is both like and unlike her poetic grandmother, Corinne, and now will

consider Aurora's close relationship with a far earlier foremother, the biblical Miriam. Barrett Browning makes it clear that, like herself, Aurora is a Christian. Aurora claims that she has "written truth," but that the truth she has written is "neither man's nor woman's, but just God's" (7:749, 753). I disagree with Patricia Thomas Srebrnik who suggests that "it is in fact Aurora's uncritical belief in a traditional God--the ultimate phallic signifier--which prevents her from persisting in her preliminary, tentative attempts to revise the Symbolic and structure the Imaginary" (10). While Aurora does not deny the existence of God and hence "the ultimate phallic signifier," Barrett Browning anticipates Adrienne Rich's advice and re-visions or looks back at the Bible "from a new critical direction . . . not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us [women]" (537). To re-vision the Bible, subvert the symbolic law of the father, and authorize the poetry as well as the presence of the modern-day Christian prophetess-poet, Barrett Browning feminizes Christ and resurrects Miriam from the Old Testament.

Romney tells Aurora that women make good mothers, wives, Madonnas, and saints, but "We get no Christ from you [women]" (2:224). Having set Romney up as a narrow-minded Christian socialist, Barrett Browning uses Aurora Leigh to disprove him and thereby undermine the Christian patriarchy he embodies. Because "sacrifice [the murder of the soma or self] sets up the symbol and the symbolic order at the same

time" (Kristeva 75), Barrett Browning reconstructs the soma or self of Christ as Marian. By feminizing Christ, Barrett Browning undermines the patriarchal symbolic order that Christ, as God's symbolic son, upholds. Marian describes to Aurora how Romney "raised and rescued her / With reverent pity, as, in touching grief, / He touched the wounds of Christ--and made me feel / More self-respecting" (3:1224-7). Marian does not metaphorically compare her wounds to Christ's. Rather, she insists that her wounds are literally the wounds of Christ. As the actual soma or self of Christ, Marian is a disruptive semiotic presence in Aurora Leigh.

As a living and indeed resurrected female Christ who undermines the symbolic order, Marian acquires literary authority and tells her side of the story:

I, Marian Erle, myself, alone, undone,
Facing a sunset low upon the flats
As if it were the finish of all time,
The great red stone upon my sepulchre,
Which angels were too weak to roll away. (6:1270-4)

The apostle Matthew writes that "the angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone from the door" of Jesus Christ's sepulchre (28:2).

According to Barrett Browning, however, the contemporary Christian prophetess-poet saves Marian. After listening to Marian's sufferings, Aurora says, "Come with me, sweetest sister . . . / And sit within my house and do me good" (7:117-8). Resurrected in the poetic house of Aurora--and not the paradisaal one of God--Marian now sounds like "one who had authority to speak, / And not as Marian" (9:250-1).

By feminizing Christ and thereby appropriating the most authoritative text in the nineteenth-century, the Bible, Barrett Browning legitimizes women's literary authority. In fact, Barrett Browning resurrects one of its oldest and most powerful women, Miriam of Exodus. As Holmes proposes, Barrett Browning liberates Miriam from the Old Testament and makes Aurora her empowered New Testament counterpart (604-5). After safely crossing the Red Sea and defeating the Egyptians, "Miriam, the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a timbrel in her hand" and led the Israelite women in song and dance: "Sing ye to the LORD, for he hath triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider hath he thrown into the sea" (Exodus 15:20-1). Aurora imagines that, like Miriam, her mother's "face flashed like a cymbal on his [Aurora father's] face / And shook with silent clangour brain and heart, / Transfiguring him to music" (1:87-9). By comparing her mother to Miriam, Aurora figuratively adopts the triumphant Old Testament prophetess-poet as her biblical foremother.

As a Christian socialist and male chauvinist, Romney disapproves of Aurora's poetic grandmother. He asks his cousin, "Who has time, / An hour's time...think!--to sit upon a bank / And hear the cymbal tinkle in white hands?" (2:168-70). According to Romney, there is no time to write frivolous poems in the nineteenth-century; there is too much social work to do. Thus, Romney states, "When Egypt's slain, I say, let Miriam sing!-- / Before--where's Moses?"

(2:171-2). Romney insists that England does not want a prophetess-poet like Miriam. Instead, it desperately needs a leader like Moses, and Romney wrongly believes that he is "some other Christ" who will lead the citizens of London to the promised land (8:675).

To Romney's dissatisfaction, Aurora does not follow him and become his "helpmate" (2:402). On the contrary, Aurora mocks him: "Where's Moses?--is a Moses to be found?"

(2:173). Like Miriam who challenges Moses when he breaks the Levite code and marries an Ethiopian woman (Numbers 12:1-15), Aurora refuses to recognize Romney's patriarchal authority. Unlike Miriam who is reprimanded by God for undermining Moses' power and exiled for seven days, however, Aurora is not subordinated to Romney's will and silenced. Having re-visioned the Bible and thereby appropriated biblical authority, the empowered Christian prophetess-poet rejects Romney's marriage proposal as well as his money and voluntarily leaves Leigh Hall to write in London.

Whereas the "old" Christian prophetess-poet of The Seraphim and to some extent Poems focused on God, the "new" Christian prophetess-poet of Aurora Leigh emphasizes herself and the role of her political poetry in social reform. From her room in London, Aurora sees London "perish in the mist [or dense fog] / Like Pharaoh's armaments in the deep Red Sea" (3:196-7). Although Aurora is not responsible for the disappearance of London, she writes,

. . . surprised

By a sudden sense of vision and of tune,
You feel as conquerors though you did not fight,

And you and Israel's other singing girls,
 Ay, Miriam with them, sing the song you choose.
 (3:199-203)

Even though she does not, like Romney, physically fight London and the social evils and inequities it epitomizes, I think that Aurora implies that she conquers the city with her Christian poetics of love. Thus, Aurora insists that she has every right to "sing the song [she] choose[s]" as she, like Miriam, triumphantly celebrates the Christian victories she inspires.

Ten years after Aurora's and Romney's disagreement over the value of poetry, Romney acknowledges that while his Christian labour was in vain, Aurora's poetic work was not. Sandra M. Gilbert argues that by "[d]eciphering the texts of Aurora's desire, Romney has accomplished his own transformation into an ex-patriarch who entrusts himself and his sister-bride to the 'one central Heart' (9:890) of love that may ultimately unify all humanity by eradicating the hierarchies and inequities of patriarchy" (207). Inspired by the Christian "truths" of Aurora's last book (8:608), Romney stops fighting poverty and loves the poor instead.

Now that Romney realises that "Art's a service" that changes the way people think and therefore how they act (9:915), he urges the modern Christian prophetess-poet to

. . . press the clarion on thy woman's lip
 (Love's holy kiss shall still keep consecrate)
 And breathe thy fine keen breath along the brass,
 And blow all class-walls level as Jericho's
 Past Jordan--crying from the top of souls
 To souls, that, here assembled on earth's flats,
 They get them to some purer eminence
 Than any hitherto beheld for clouds! (9:929-36)

Romney compares Aurora to the priests who blew the trumpets that cause the Israelites to shout so loudly that the walls surrounding the city of Jericho fell down (Joshua 6:20).¹⁵ At last, Romney apprehends that only Aurora's Christian poetics of love will inspire people to "blow all class-walls level as Jericho's." As an enlightened ex-patriarch, Romney encourages the female poet to do what he, as a male reformer, could not: lead the people of London against "the hierarchies and inequities of patriarchy" (Gilbert 207) and to the holy city of New Jerusalem.¹⁶

This chapter has considered how Barrett Browning's "better self," Aurora Leigh, rejects her mother and adopts Corinne, an Italian improvisatrice, and Miriam, an Israelite prophetess-poet, as her poetic grandmothers to redefine the female poet and combat gender-based criticism. By emphasizing both the similarities and differences between Aurora and her mother, Corinne, and Miriam, I have shown that Barrett Browning undermines her sentimental heritage, resurrects a submerged female intellectual literary tradition, and re-presents the Christian prophetess-poet as an educated, hardworking, modern, political, and powerful woman. Not surprisingly, Barrett Browning's re-construction of the female poet threatened conservative critics, and as I will demonstrate later, led to an undervaluing of Aurora Leigh.

Aurora Leigh as a "Novelized" Epic

Discussing radical feminist theory, Chris Weedon suggests that "[i]n rewriting the meaning of the feminine or of 'femaleness,' feminists make language the site of a struggle over meaning which is a prerequisite for political change" (9). Of course, Barrett Browning was not a radical feminist in the late twentieth-century sense; nevertheless, she was aware that linguistic and hence literary changes must precede political ones, and as I have shown, re-presented the Christian prophetess-poet in the person of Aurora Leigh.

In this chapter, I will concentrate on the structure of Aurora Leigh and argue that Barrett Browning challenges literary assumptions about gender and genre to reform "feminine" poetry. Since the "spirit" or content of Aurora Leigh determines its shape (5:224-5), plot and form are intricately related in it. Thus, Romney and Aurora may be seen to embody "masculine" and "feminine" genres as well as genders. With this premise in mind, I will demonstrate that Aurora Leigh "forms" its romantic theme and realises Aurora's Christian poetics of love by "marrying" Romney and Aurora and the "masculine" epic and the "feminine" novel they respectively represent. In a way, Barrett Browning does what M.M. Bakhtin theorizes about: she "novelizes" the epic and privileges the present over the past, personal experience over national history, and familiar language over

official discourse to elevate the "feminine" novel and demote the "masculine" epic. Having equalized the literary forms she symbolically unites, the Christian prophetess-poet attempts to "blow all class-walls as level as Jericho's" (9:932) and collapse the gender and genre hierarchies of literary criticism.

Although Aurora learned Greek and Latin from her father, she insists that more importantly he taught her how to love: "His last word was, 'Love--' / 'Love, my child, love, love!' . . ." (1:211-12). At first, Aurora ignores her father's advice and denies her feelings for Romney; however, when Romney admits that his physical labour was in vain while Aurora's poetic work was worthwhile, Aurora confesses that she loves her cousin and devalues her poetry:

. . . Art is much, but love is more.
O Art, my Art, thou'rt much, but Love is more!
Art symbolises heaven, but Love is God
And makes heaven. . . . (9:656-9)

Aurora concludes that art only symbolizes the heaven that love literally makes; therefore, she privileges love over art. As a result, Aurora appears to sacrifice her poetic career, compromise her political agenda, and reinforce patriarchal institutions.

However, the romantic ending of Aurora Leigh is not as anti-feminist as it may seem. In Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature, Janice A. Radway convincingly argues that

all popular romantic fiction originates in the failure of patriarchal culture to satisfy its female members. Consequently, the romance functions always as a utopian wish-fulfillment fantasy through

which women try to imagine themselves as they often are not in day-to-day existence, that is, as happy and content. (151)

In other words, the romance responds to the disempowered situation of women in a patriarchal society by vicariously satisfying their desires. Although Aurora Leigh is not a conventional romance, it fulfills women's supra-romantic expectations. Holly A. Laird writes, "what is most striking about this ending [of Aurora Leigh]-when read in the context of Aurora's ideas--is her triumph in having it all: she has fame and Romney, Romney's love and respect, a new reason for working and a companion for her work" (365). Unlike Victorian female novelists such as Emily Brontë and George Eliot, Barrett Browning features a heroine who, like herself, has both love and a career. In doing so, Barrett Browning meets the utopian expectations of her female audience and fulfills her readers' feminine and even feminist fantasies of marital bliss and literary success.

For this reason, the romantic ending of Aurora Leigh is actually quite radical. Susanna Egan suggests that

the happy-ever-after conclusion is itself subverted and radical, . . . it involves not capitulation to male-defined conventions, far less to the notion of the male liberator, but, rather, resolves the tensions inherent in radical issues such as woman's work and woman's power to break away from her helpless (or passive) role as victim. (287)

Although Aurora eventually agrees to marry Romney, she does not capitulate to the male-defined conventions outlined by him in Book 2. On the contrary, Aurora only agrees to marry Romney after he confesses, "I was wrong, / I've sorely

failed, I've slipped the ends of life, / I yield, you have conquered" (8:467-9). In effect, Barrett Browning "plots" Aurora's Christian poetics of love and shifts power from a man to a woman to equalize the sexes.

As Alison Case, Egan, Dorothy Mermin, and Marjorie Stone have all argued, Barrett Browning's gender transgressions go hand in hand with generic ones.¹⁷ Whereas the "old" Barrett Browning of The Seraphim and Poems wrote traditional ballads and sonnets, the "new" Barrett Browning challenges such rigid forms in Aurora Leigh. In Book 5, Aurora outlines her philosophy of art and questions conventional genres: "What form is best for poems? Let me think / Of forms less, and the external. Trust the spirit, / As sovran nature does, to make the form" (5:223-5). Aurora insists that literary form, like physical form or gender, is only an "external" construction. Therefore, she believes that a work's "spirit" or content should determine the form it takes. Aurora speculates, "Five acts to make a play. / And why not fifteen? why not ten? or seven?" (5:229-30). Because she assumes that form will follow function, Aurora rejects generic rules and refuses to write conventional poetry.

While most critics agree that Barrett Browning's masterpiece is hybrid in genre, they disagree about its composition. Aurora Leigh has been adequately described as a Bildungsroman, epic, Kunstlerroman, lyrical drama, novel, philosophic verse essay, prophetic dream vision, romance,

and satire. Even Barrett Browning could not define Aurora Leigh's literary form in a word. In a letter to Mrs. Martin, Barrett Browning writes of the unfinished product, "who could produce an epic in the pauses of a sunset [over the summer of 1855]? Not that my poem is an epic I flatter myself that it's a novel, rather, a sort of novel in verse" (Kenyon 2:208). According to Barrett Browning, Aurora Leigh is a "novel in verse" that somewhat resembles an epic. As neither a typical novel nor a traditional epic but both, Aurora Leigh may be considered a generic compromise.

In "Genre Subversion and Gender Inversion: The Princess and Aurora Leigh," Marjorie Stone convincingly argues that "Barrett Browning deliberately unsettle[s] genre distinctions in order to facilitate and reinforce [her] questioning of gender distinctions" (103). Stone suggests that Barrett Browning fuses traditionally "male" and "female" literary forms to fuse the men and women who write them (115). I would like to revise Stone's argument and propose that Barrett Browning "Trust[s] the spirit" to "form" the theme of Aurora Leigh and realises her Christian poetics of love by "marrying" (rather than fusing) Romney and Aurora and hence the "masculine" epic and "feminine" novel they respectively represent. Whereas "fusion" denotes a physical merging of the atomic or basic particles of the epic and novel (which never happens in Aurora Leigh), "marriage" more accurately signifies a symbolic union of

what Sir Philip Sidney describes as "the best and most accomplished kind of poetry," "masculine" heroic or epic poetry (47), and what some critics considered the most inferior of genres, the "feminine" novel. Expanding on Stone's consideration of Aurora Leigh as a "novelized" epic, I will show that Barrett Browning modernizes, personalizes, and familiarizes the epic to elevate the "feminine" novel and demote the "masculine" epic, thereby equalizing these genres.

o M.M. Bakhtin's discussion of genre in "Epic and Novel" is directly relevant to my argument. Bakhtin writes that the epic features "a national epic past," a "national tradition," and "an absolute epic distance [that] separates the epic world from contemporary reality . . ." (13). On the other hand, the novel is based on the present, personal experience, and familiarity (11). Bakhtin argues that "[i]n the process of becoming the dominant genre, the novel sparks the renovation of all other genres, and infects them with its spirit of process and inconclusiveness" (7). Because the novel was still evolving in the nineteenth-century, its indeterminacy infiltrated conventional or "dead" genres like the epic and revived them. As a "novelized" and hence "feminized" epic, Aurora Leigh challenges conventional heroic poetry by privileging the present over the past, personal experience over national tradition, and familiar language over formal discourse.

As I have already mentioned in contrasting Aurora Leigh

with Corinne, Aurora rejects traditional heroic poetry and insists that "every age / Appears to souls who live in't (ask Carlyle) / Most unheroic" (5:155-7). According to Aurora, the Victorian age is not "A pewter age" as other poets suggest (5:160), but rather a

. . . live, throbbing age,
That brawls, cheats, maddens, calculates, aspires,
And spends more passion, more heroic heat,
Betwixt the mirrors of its drawing-rooms,
Than Roland with his knights at Roncesvalles.
To flinch from modern varnish, coat or flounce,
Cry out for togas and the picturesque,
Is fatal--foolish too. King Arthur's self
Was commonplace to Lady Guinevere;
And Camelot to minstrels seemed as flat
As Fleet street to our poets. (5:203-13)

By situating the modern heroic age in the feminine realm of the drawing-room, Aurora appropriates the epic and argues that the national epic past is a myth. Citing Arthurian legend, Aurora maintains that the magical medieval world was once upon a time a contemporary one and that the heroic King Arthur was "commonplace" to those who actually knew him.

Having re-visioned and thereby de-mystified epic history, Barrett Browning writes about the universal problems of poverty, child abuse, and rape in Victorian England. Aurora describes how the poor "clogged the streets, they oozed into the church / In a dark slow stream, like blood" to witness Romney's and Marian's marriage (4:553-4). Aurora considers London's poor a "peccant social wound" and compares them to those who are "dead of plague" and to lowly "bruised snakes" (4:544, 548, 566). By using images of festering, Barrett Browning forces the Victorian

reader to look at the lower class and confront their desperate situation. Then, Aurora relates how lower class babies are "Forgotten on their mother's neck--poor mouths, / Wiped clean of mother's milk by mother's blow / Before they are taught her cursing" (4:577-9). While emotional, physical, and sexual abuse are not necessarily symptomatic of poverty, Barrett Browning traces child abuse and Marian's rape to poor economic conditions, "man's violence," and mothers who fail their daughters (6:1226, 1229). Whereas the loftiness of the traditional epic awes readers, the baseness of Barrett Browning's "novelized" epic reviews a fundamental lesson taught in novels like Mrs. Gaskell's Mary Barton (1848), Ruth (1853), and Charles Dickens' Hard Times (1854): poverty has to be eradicated, men must become more tender, and mothers need to assume responsibility for their children if social evils and inequities are to be eliminated.

Unlike the traditional epic which relies on "impersonal and sacrosanct tradition, on a commonly held evaluation and point of view--which excludes any possibility of another approach," the "novelized" epic rejects "the language of tradition" and affirms personal experience (Bakhtin 16-17). Thus, Aurora decides to "write my story for my better self" and subjectively describe her growth as an artist and a woman (1:4). Using the first-person pronoun, "I," Aurora simultaneously announces, as I mentioned in my second chapter, her text and the death of her primary role model:

I write. My mother was a Florentine,

Whose rare blue eyes were shut from seeing me
 When scarcely I was four years old, my life
 A poor spark snatched up from a failing lamp
 Which went out therefore. She was weak and frail;
 She could not bear the joy of giving life,
 The mother's rapture slew her. (1:29-35)

Unlike the authorial voice, the personal voice "does not carry the superhuman privileges that attach to authorial voice . . ." (Lanser 19). By employing the personal voice, Barrett Browning humanizes and thus feminizes her epic. While the conventional epic features a "heroic or quasi-divine [male] figure on whose actions depends the fate of a tribe, a nation, or the human race" (Abrams 51), Barrett Browning's "novelized" epic describes the growth of Aurora Leigh as a woman and a writer. Even though the societal importance of women's personal and literary development is considered, Barrett Browning's "personalized" epic primarily focuses on an orphaned girl's "mother-want," intimate relationships, and literary aspirations.

Since the Victorian age, according to Barrett Browning, is a feminine one, it is not surprising that Aurora determines that women are what Victorian epics are made out of. Aurora reflects,

. . . 'tis our woman's trade
 To suffer torment for another's ease.
 The world's male chivalry has perished out,
 But women are knights-errant to the last;
 And if Cervantes had been Shakespeare too,
 He had made his Don a Donna. (7:222-7)

Although women may be physically weaker than men, Aurora suggests that women are emotionally superior to them, and therefore "knights-errant" in their own right. For

instance, Aurora risks scandal, invites Marian into her home, and generously cares for her and her illegitimate son when nobody else would. Furthermore, Aurora heroically acknowledges and admits her romantic feelings for Romney:

. . . And if I came and said...
 What all this weeping scarce will let me say,
 And yet what women cannot say at all
 But weeping bitterly...(the pride keeps up,
 Until the heart breaks under it)...I love--
 I love you, Romney... (9:603-8)

Aurora does not perform superhuman deeds in battle to save a nation; however, she does say the three words that women cannot say in her "novelized" epic, and in doing so sets a revolutionary example.¹⁸

While the traditional epic is narrated in an ornate ceremonial style, "[t]he novel . . . is associated with the eternally living element of unofficial language and unofficial thought (holiday forms, familiar speech, profanation)" (Bakhtin 20). Because the "novelized" epic is a contemporary and personal epic, its language is "unofficial" or informal. Thus, Aurora colloquially represents the hideous faces of the poor: "Faces?...pew, / We'll call them vices, festering to despairs, / Or sorrows, petrifying to vices" (5:579-81). By using prosaic slang like "pew" Aurora eliminates epic distance and invites the reader to share her unsavory sensual experience of poverty.

In addition, Aurora uses vulgar sexual imagery to further debase her epic. She urges her book to

Never flinch,
 But still, unscrupulously epic, catch
 Upon the burning lava of a song
 The full-veined, heaving, double-breasted Age:

That, when the next shall come, the men of that
 May touch the impress with reverent hand, and say
 'Behold--behold the paps we all have sucked!
 This bosom seems to beat still, or at least
 It sets ours beating: this is living art,
 Which thus presents and thus records true life.'
 (5:213-222)

Rather than using conventional phallic symbolism, Aurora employs novel breast imagery to represent "The full-veined, heaving, double-breasted Age" that she lives in and writes about. In fact, Aurora celebrates "the [common] paps we all have sucked" as she "presents and thus records [her] true life" in her Victorian, personal, and prosaic epic.

By privileging the present over the past, personal experience over national history, and informal language over official discourse, Barrett Browning "novelizes" and thereby modernizes, personalizes, and familiarizes the epic. In doing so, Barrett Browning elevates the "feminine" novel and demotes the "masculine" epic to literally realise her Christian poetics of love and blow the gender and genre hierarchies of literary criticism "as level as Jericho's" walls (9:932). Dorothy Mermin believes that "[b]y transgressing the boundaries of genre . . . Aurora Leigh goes farther than any other poem or novel of the Victorian period towards transgressing the limits imposed on literature by gender" ("Genre" 11). Indeed, Barrett Browning appropriates the epic for women and acquires its superior albeit compromised status for them. However, Barrett Browning's romantic fantasy of social and literary equality is never fully realised. Although the "new"

Christian prophetess-poet was judged like a man and her "novelized" epic was seriously criticized, I will show that Aurora Leigh was too radical for most Victorian reviewers and consequently poorly received.

The (Very) Critical Reception of Aurora Leigh

I have argued that Barrett Browning's hopes for serious criticism were based on her commitment to the re-presentation of the Christian prophetess-poet in her "novelized" epic, Aurora Leigh. As Barrett Browning had wished, Aurora Leigh was taken seriously and fairly criticized; however, it was not well-received. Although most literary reviewers had something nice to say about Aurora Leigh, they found much more to criticize and ultimately dismissed Barrett Browning's self-proclaimed masterpiece as a "poetic aberration" (Lootens 272).

In this chapter I will examine the mixed and negative British reviews that immediately followed the publication of Aurora Leigh in 1856, and demonstrate that most Victorian reviewers upheld the gender and genre hierarchies that Barrett Browning tried to undermine. Using Hans Robert Jauss' aesthetic of reception, I will measure the distance between critics' expectations of Aurora Leigh and the text itself and argue that Barrett Browning's radical "masterwork" dissatisfied and therefore displeased conservative critics (Jauss 25). By reconstructing the critical reception of Aurora Leigh's hybrid form, unrealistic and unheroic characters, coarse language, Victorian and artistic subject matter, and Christian poetics of love, this discussion will show that reviewers attempted to deconstruct or take apart Aurora Leigh's political agenda and defend the status quo.

In Toward an Aesthetic of Reception, Hans Robert Jauss argues that readers, though often overlooked and underestimated, play an important role in literary history:

In the triangle of author, work, and public the last is no passive part, no chain of mere reactions, but rather itself an energy formative of history. . . . For it is only through the process of its mediation that a work enters into the changing horizon-of-experience of a continuity in which the perpetual inversion occurs from simple reception to critical understanding, from passive to active reception, from recognized aesthetic norms to a new production that surpasses them. (19)

Jauss insists that readers decide what kind of literature is acceptable and what kind is not; therefore, readers--especially critical readers or literary reviewers--define and redefine literary standards and in effect write literary history.

Jauss persuasively argues that the aesthetic reception of a literary work is determined by whether it "satisfies, surpasses, disappoints, or refutes the expectations of its first audience . . ." (25). When the distance between what Jauss calls readers' "horizon of expectations" and the work is minimal or non-existent, the text easily fulfills "the expectations prescribed by a ruling standard of taste" (25). By reproducing what is familiar and thereby affirming what is acceptable, the "culinary" text is generally well-received. On the other hand, when the distance between readers' "horizon of expectations" and the work is substantial, Jauss argues that the text fails to satisfy most of its audience. Because the revolutionary "masterwork" rejects what is familiar and acceptable, it, at

least initially, is almost always poorly received (25).

Barrett Browning's changing relationship with Victorian critics may be seen in this context. Having established herself as a successful, married, and hence respectable poet, Barrett Browning's personal reputation was, in 1856, no longer at stake. Thus, Barrett Browning decided not to make the traditional excuses for Aurora Leigh. Unlike the "culinary" Seraphim, and Other Poems and Poems, Aurora Leigh was not preceded by a humble and disarming preface. In a short dedication to her cousin and friend, John Kenyon, Barrett Browning describes Aurora Leigh as "the most mature of my works, and the one into which my highest convictions upon Life and Art have entered" (3); therefore, she let her "masterwork" speak for itself. While Aurora Leigh's sales were phenomenal at first,¹⁹ its reviews were not as encouraging.

Although John Ruskin considered Aurora Leigh "the greatest poem which the century has produced in any language" (351), most Victorian reviewers did not share his enthusiasm. The distance between critics' conservative "culinary" expectations and Barrett Browning's radical "masterwork" was considerable after all. Because Barrett Browning's "sort of novel in verse" (Kenyon 2:208) collapsed gender and genre hierarchies, and thereby challenged familiar and acceptable literary standards, it dissatisfied most Victorian reviewers.

However, Barrett Browning's Aurora Leigh could not be

simply dismissed as "mere woman's work" (Barrett Browning Aurora 2:234). Kay Moser suggests that Victorian critics were faced with a dilemma: "what is one to do with a talented female poet who refused to be judged as a woman in an age which so clearly relegated women and their creative work to a lesser position on the aesthetic scale of value?" (60). An examination of Aurora Leigh's literary reviews suggests that critics indulged Barrett Browning and judged her like a man. In his review for Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine, William Edmondstone Aytoun compares Barrett Browning to a belligerent Joan of Arc because "she will not accept courtesy or forbearance from the critics on account of her sex." Aytoun reasons that Barrett Browning "challenges a truthful opinion, and that opinion she shall have" ("Mrs. Barrett Browning--Aurora Leigh" 25). Since Aurora Leigh was too provocative to be judged according to a feminine standard, it was generally subjected to a masculine one, and as Barrett Browning hoped, seriously criticized.

Even though The Westminster Review acknowledges that "[t]he age is past when critics presumed to lay down rules for poetry," it nevertheless does so ("Aurora Leigh" 400). This periodical, which was strongly associated with liberalism for many years, professes to favour "an artist who has ventured on a new method, or sought to evolve a new design"; however, it insists that the writer must "keep within the bounds of reason" to be praised for (the "masculine" feature of) originality (400). According to

John Nichol who wrote this article, Aurora Leigh exceeds "the bounds of reason." In fact, Nichol intimates that Barrett Browning's "novelized" epic "is a work written with an evident purpose, and it openly challenges criticism ethically." As a result, Nichol decides that "[w]e cannot give it a favourable verdict" (411-12). Although Nichol does not elaborate on how Aurora Leigh "challenges criticism ethically," he takes offence and disapproves of Barrett Browning's "unreasonable" "masterwork." He argues that "[t]he work--full of beauty, large-heartedness, and valour, though it be,--has artistic defects sufficient to render it unworthy the place assigned to it by a great critic [Ruskin]; as the greatest poem of the century" (415).

Nichol admits that Barrett Browning's "novelized" epic has its merits, but he tempers his approval and insists that the many minor faults of Aurora Leigh are a major problem (400).

Because the "original negativity of the work . . . has entered into the horizon of future aesthetic experience" (Jauss 25), Aurora Leigh now seems much less radical and hence problematic than it originally was. To appreciate the magnitude of Aurora Leigh's minor faults to Nichol and other mid-nineteenth-century reviewers, one has to look at Barrett Browning's "masterwork" from a Victorian perspective. Jauss proposes that the reconstruction of "the horizon of expectations" of a work that "was created and received in the past, enables one . . . to pose questions that the text gave an answer to, and therefore discover how the

contemporary reader could have viewed and understood the work" (28). To discover how Victorian critics viewed and understood Barrett Browning's "novelized" epic, I will reconstruct reviewers' conservative expectations and unfavourable reception of Aurora Leigh's hybrid form, unrealistic and unheroic characters, coarse language, Victorian and artistic content, and Christian poetics of love. This reconstruction of the critical reception of Aurora Leigh will demonstrate that literary reviewers upheld the gender and genre hierarchies that Barrett Browning tried to undermine to maintain the status quo or the existing state of affairs.

If literary form is quite literally an order (delivered by men), Barrett Browning disobeys it and challenges the status quo. The influential Athenaeum suggests that Aurora Leigh's "blend of epic and didactic novel" is Barrett Browning's "contribution to the chorus of protest and mutual exhortation, which Woman is now raising" ("Aurora Leigh" 1425-7). This periodical correctly perceives Aurora Leigh's transgression of genres as a form of "feminist" protest. Even though the more liberal Westminster Review admits that Barrett Browning's "attempt to write a novel,--which shall be also a poem,--is a daring one," it determines "that it may be a story, it sometimes ceases to be a poem" ("Aurora Leigh" 399-400). Because its reviewer, Nichol, considers the expansive novel and concentrated poem incompatible genres, he resists Aurora Leigh's hybrid form and defends generic distinctions.

In his review for Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine, Aytoun agrees with Nichol and argues that poetry and prose cannot be mixed because

[a]ll poetical characters, all poetical situations, must be idealised. The language is not of common life, which belongs essentially to the domain of prose. Therein lies the distinction between a novel and a poem. In the first, we expect that the language employed by the characters shall be strictly natural, not excluding even imperfections, and that their sentiments shall not be too elevated or extravagant for the occasion. In the second, we expect idealisation--language more refined, more adorned, and more forcible than that which is ordinarily employed; and sentiments purer and loftier than find utterance in our daily speech. (34-5)

Aytoun insists that the language and sentiments of novelistic characters should be natural whereas those of poetic characters should be idealized--simply because readers expect poetry and prose to be differentiated in this way. To prove his point, Aytoun transcribes some blank verse from Book 5 into prose and asks, "[i]s that poetry? Assuredly not. Is it prose? If so, it is as poor and faulty a specimen as ever was presented to our notice" (35). Above all, Aytoun is upset that Barrett Browning "makes no distinction between her first and third class passengers, but rattles them along at the same speed upon her rhythmical railway" (37). Aytoun astutely associates Barrett Browning's disregard for formal distinctions with her desire to "blow all class-walls level as Jericho's" (9:932). To uphold class, gender, and genre hierarchies and hence the status quo, he insists that Barrett Browning follow Shakespeare's example and reserve poetry for upper class characters alone (37).

As a "novelized" epic, Aurora Leigh is neither a novel nor a poem; therefore, it cannot meet both novelistic and poetic criteria. When judged according to either a novelistic standard of realism or an epic standard of heroism, it is not surprising that Aurora Leigh's characters dissatisfied critics. The quite popular and rather conservative Saturday Review argues that "[t]he story is fantastical, the conduct of the personages in the narrative is whimsically absurd, and their language is as euphuistic as that of 'Don Armado' or of 'Sir Pierre Shafton' ('Aurora Leigh' 777). Compared to characters in novels, Marian, Romney, and Aurora are unrealistic and hence unbelievable; compared to those in epics, Marian, Romney, and Aurora are unheroic and therefore unimpressive figures. To reinforce traditional gender roles and genre distinctions, Victorian reviewers harshly criticized Barrett Browning's gender and genre-bending characters.

Although Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine admits that "[t]he character of Marian is very beautifully drawn and well sustained," its reviewer, Aytoun, points out that "her thoughts and language are not those of a girl reared in the midst of sordid poverty, vice, and ignorance." (33). Aytoun suggests that the incongruity between Marian's lower class character and her noble expressions could be overcome by making Marian's "prosaic" origin somewhat more respectable and therefore worthy of such heroic poetry. On the other hand, The Spectator considers Marian heroic but not

realistic enough. It writes that "Marian Erle is a statue of heroic goodness . . . but can scarcely be said to change, to learn anything, to develop powers or virtues though she manifests them" ("Mrs. Browning's Aurora Leigh" 1240).

Despite the attractiveness of her person and the appeal of her pathetic story, this critic finds Marian too much of an abstraction to feel for.

Victorian critics cared even less for Romney. Aytoun declares that Romney is honourable and generous, but "he is such a very decided noodle that we grudge him his prominence in the poem, do not feel much sympathy for his misfortunes, and cannot help wondering that Aurora should have entertained one spark of affection for so deplorable a milksop" (33). By calling Romney a "noodle" and a "milksop," Aytoun indicates that he disapproves of Romney's altruistic, utopian, and hence "feminine" qualities. Judged according to novelistic standards, Romney is too soft to be a "real" man; according to epic standards, he is a mock-hero who is of no national or cosmic importance. Because he can neither identify with nor respect such an effeminate and hence unrealistic and unheroic "walking hyperbole," Aytoun is unable to relate to Romney and sympathize with his misfortunes (33).

Above all, literary reviewers disapproved of Aurora's character. Aytoun complains that "one half of her heart seems bounding with the beat of humanity, while the other half is ossified" (32-3). Because Barrett Browning's

protagonist is both a novelistic heroine and a Christian prophetess-poet, she is neither realistic nor heroic enough to please him. Furthermore, Aytoun determines that "[t]he extreme independence of Aurora detracts from the feminine charm, and mars the interest which we otherwise might have felt in so intellectual a heroine" (33). Aytoun dislikes Aurora's unfeminine independence and fears that Aurora is made to resemble the masculine George Sand (33).²⁰ The Westminster Review agrees that Aurora is an unattractive character: "Aurora's self-consciousness repels--her speculations do not much interest us; her genuine human feeling is reserved for the closing scene" ("Aurora Leigh" 409). According to this critic, Nichol, Aurora is only interesting in the final scene when at last she plays a woman's "part" and acknowledges her love for Romney. For most of the novel-poem, Aurora is too independent, unfeminine, self-conscious, uninteresting, and aloof to be either a "genuine" or an heroic woman.

Unlike its characters, Aurora Leigh's descriptive poetry was very well-received. In The British Quarterly Review, Robert Alfred Vaughan writes, "[t]he poem contains many descriptive passages of great power or beauty" ("Aurora Leigh" 266). The Westminster Review concurs that "[t]hose pictures of England and of Italy which so adorn the first and seventh books . . . will take a permanent rank among our best specimens of descriptive poetry" ("Aurora Leigh" 404). Because of its poetic expectations, however, The Westminster

Review dislikes Barrett Browning's prosaic and "masculine" coarseness. In a letter to Mrs. Martin, Barrett Browning explains that she "used plain words--words which look like blots, . . . words which, if blurred or softened, would imperil perhaps the force and righteousness of the moral influence" (Kenyon 2:254). The Westminster Review, however, misses her point. In his review, Nichol determines that Barrett Browning "protests, not unjustly, against the practice of judging artists by their sex; but she takes the wrong means to prove her manhood. In recoil from mincing fastidiousness, she now and then becomes coarse. . . . To escape the imputation of over-refinement she swears without provocation" (401). Nichol appreciates Barrett Browning's desire to be criticized like a man; however, he considers references to women's anatomy and expressions like "phew" and "nicked" unpoetic as well as unfeminine, and therefore inappropriate language for a female poet (401-2).

Moreover, Nichol disapproves of Aurora Leigh's coarse figures of speech: "Mrs. Browning's greatest failure is in her metaphors: some of them are excellent, but when they are bad--and they are often bad,--they are very bad" (400-1). For example, Nichol objects to Barrett Browning's comparison of Florence to a "Medaeian boil-pot of the sun" and description of how Romney's face "tossed a sudden horror like a sponge / Into all eyes" (402). According to Nichol, "bad metaphors" are prosaic ones that mar "the harmony of a whole page of [poetic] beauty" (401). Thus, he concludes

that by "straining after strength" Barrett Browning writes coarsely, and according to poetic standards, very poorly (403).

Although The Spectator maintains that Barrett Browning "touched social problems with the light of her penetrating intellect and the warmth of her passionate heart" ("Mrs. Browning's Aurora Leigh" 1239), most critics disapproved of the Victorian and prosaic subject matter of Aurora Leigh. Like many women of the period, Barrett Browning felt very strongly about the issue of prostitution. She writes Mrs. Martin,

What has given most offence in the book, more than the story of Marian!--far more!--has been the reference to the condition of women in our cities, which a woman oughtn't 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 woman as a sex continue to suffer them; there is no help for any of us--let us be dumb and die. (Kenyon 2:254)

Barrett Browning claims that she broke with tradition and wrote about "the condition of women in our cities" to liberate them from poverty, prostitution, and oppression in general. However, Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine defends "conventional tradition" and insists that the "use of a subject illustrative of the times in which we live" is unsuitable for poetry and particularly for epic poetry (41). In his article, Aytoun contradicts what Barrett Browning writes in Book 5 and insists that the Victorian period is unworthy of poetic representation. Aytoun maintains, "[w]e select our demigods from the dead, not from the living. We

cannot allow fancy to be trammelled in its work by perpetual reference to realities" (41). Because he is unable or unwilling to appreciate the Victorian realism of Barrett Browning's "sort of poetic art-novel" (Kenyon 2:228), Aytoun defends the idealized historical content of traditional epics, and thus the status quo.

Furthermore, The Saturday Review dislikes Victorian art that is about Victorian art. It believes that "the heroine and autobiographer, as a professed poetess, has tastes and occupations which are, beyond all others, incapable of poetical treatment. With all nature and life at its command, Art is only precluded from selecting its own mechanism as its subject" (776). In this review, G.S. Venables defends Aristotle's Poetics and insists that art should mimetically represent nature rather than itself. Even though self-reflexive writing by men like Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, Shelley, Tennyson, and Dickens was acceptable, The Saturday Review decides that a poetess is "incapable of poetic treatment." Thus, this notoriously misogynist periodical concludes that Aurora Leigh only confirms its theory that "a woman cannot be a great poet" (776).

Like The Saturday Review, The Westminster Review objects to Aurora Leigh's self-reflexivity because "[p]oetry about poetry is the last thing to descend to the people" ("Aurora Leigh" 413). Thus, this periodical rejects Aurora's Christian poetics of love and refuses to recognize the

redemptive power of art. In his article, Nichol suggests that Aurora Leigh makes "the mistake of exaggerating the effect of Art--whether as exhibited through Music, Painting, or Poetry--in ameliorating or elevating the condition of the masses of the people in any age or country" (412). Nichol does not believe that art can change the world; therefore, he refuses to participate in popular "Art-worship" and insists that "[a]rtistic culture, far from standing in the place of philanthropic effort, depends upon the success of that effort for its own permanence. Men must be fed, clothed, and washed, ere ever 'the essential prophet's word comes in power' to awaken, elevate, and sustain their nobler energies" (412). According to the liberal Westminster Review, art thrives when average citizens can afford it. Because Victorian prophetess-poets like Aurora depend on public support for their livelihood, they need philanthropists like Romney to improve the living and working conditions of the poor.

Since The Westminster Review is addressed to England's socialists, it is not surprising that Nichol is upset that Romney is treated as unfairly as the noble cause he represents:

Romney Leigh for being a philanthropist,--to be rejected and lectured by his mistress--to have his intended wife stolen from him--to try everything, to succeed in nothing--to be laughed at by everybody--to lose his money--to have his house burned about his ears--to get both his eyes knocked out--to beg pardon of his old mistress at last, and confess that she was all right and he was all wrong--to have her to take charge of him afterwards in his mutilated state!!! (414).

In Nichol's opinion, Romney is "too good and too great a man" to deserve such a fate (415). Although Nichol resents Barrett Browning's disrespectful depiction of a philanthropist, he appears to be more disturbed by her excessive mistreatment of a man. After all, Barrett Browning humiliates Romney (and hence all men) by undermining his authority, ridiculing his (social) work, and disabling as well as disempowering his person. In another article for The Westminster Review, George Eliot agrees with Nichol that Barrett Browning went too far. Eliot writes, "we think the lavish mutilation of heroes' bodies, which has become the habit of novelists . . . weakens instead of strengthening tragic effect" ("Belles Lettres" 307). Although Barrett Browning denied copying the ending of Jane Eyre,²¹ Eliot believes otherwise and finds Aurora Leigh's gender-biased denouement derivative, melodramatic, and therefore unsatisfactory.

If "[i]nsofar as the poem is effective, it will necessarily produce a certain kind of effect" (Burke 15), Aurora Leigh was a defective poem. With its hard rhythm, social criticism, sharp characterizations, and passionate ending, Frances Power Cobbe observes in 1862 that Aurora Leigh "takes us miles away from the received notion of a woman's poetry" ("What Shall We Do with our Old Maids?" Fraser's Magazine 88-9). Because most critics were not ready to expand their "horizon of expectations," Barrett Browning's unconventional poem was resisted. As a result,

Aurora Leigh did not defeat the gender and genre hierarchies it challenged--and Barrett Browning did not really expect it to. In fact, Barrett Browning was surprised when she heard exaggerated accounts of Aurora Leigh's success.²² Like those "masterworks" that "break through the familiar horizon of literary expectations so completely that an audience can only gradually develop for them" (Jauss 25-6), Aurora Leigh was ahead of its time, and not surprisingly, difficult for Victorian critics to appreciate.

Unlike the "culinary" literary work, Aurora Leigh did not "rehearse the masses in the habits of pluralistic thought and feeling, persuading them to acknowledge that more than one viewpoint than theirs existed - namely that of their masters" (Eagleton 25). On the contrary, Barrett Browning's "novelized" epic threatened to incite collective political action. Because Barrett Browning's feminist and hybrid Aurora Leigh challenged the status quo and might have contributed to a feminist and/or socialist revolution, its transgressive form, characters, language, content, and poetics were resisted in an effort to contain them. By subjecting Barrett Browning's "masterwork" to masculine literary standards and seriously criticizing it, Victorian reviewers tried to deconstruct Aurora Leigh's political agenda and silence its popular and provocative author.

Conclusion: The Erasure of Barrett Browning's Political Poems

I have argued that Barrett Browning fulfilled literary reviewers' expectations for both male and female writers by entering the poetic market as a Christian prophetess-poet; however, once she had established herself as a successful and respected writer, she re-presented the Christian prophetess-poet as a well-educated, hard-working, modern, political, and powerful woman in her "novelized" epic, Aurora Leigh. In doing so, Barrett Browning redefined the female poet and reformed "feminine" poetry. Because Aurora Leigh collapsed gender and genre hierarchies and thereby challenged the conservative art of criticism, Victorian reviewers were displeased with their former "queen of harmonious thought" ("Miss Barrett's Poems" The Metropolitan Magazine 323).

In fact, the relationship between Barrett Browning and Victorian critics further deteriorated after Aurora Leigh. When Barrett Browning ignored reviewers' advice and published the highly politicized Poems Before Congress in 1860, critics became defensive and interpreted this work as an attack on England and therefore on them. After Barrett Browning's death the following year, literary reviewers retaliated with traditional gender-based criticism and ignored or discounted her later political works, argued that her earlier personal poems best represented her, and re-constructed the political poet as a conventional romantic

heroine. By posthumously separating the poet from her poetry and transforming the female artist into the subject of biography and hence an object of art, Victorian reviewers tried to erase Barrett Browning's political poetry and reduce its radical author to a literary paragon.

Although Aurora Leigh was taken seriously and judged according to masculine literary standards, Barrett Browning ignored most of what she read (Forster 317). Despite the mostly mixed and negative reviews that her "novelized" epic provoked, Barrett Browning concentrated on the positive ones. In a letter to Mrs. Jameson, Barrett Browning writes, "the [favourable] kind of reception given to the book has much surprised me, as I was prepared for an outcry of quite of another kind" (Kenyon 2:245). Perhaps because most reviews of Aurora Leigh were mixed, Barrett Browning heard the praise that she wanted to hear and disregarded everything else. At any rate, Barrett Browning no longer seemed to care about pleasing her critics at this late stage in her poetic career. Instead of writing for literary reviewers to win their praise as she did in the past, Barrett Browning rejected their advice and made few changes to later editions of Aurora Leigh (Hewlett quoted in Lootens 291).²³

In "Elizabeth Barrett Browning: The Poet as Heroine of Literary History," Tricia Lootens persuasively argues that "[d]uring the years between Aurora Leigh's publication in 1856 and Barrett Browning's death in 1861, the implicit

struggle between reviewers' romanticized vision of the poet as heroine and Barrett Browning's own increasingly militant stance as a political poet became increasingly evident" (209). Having redefined the Christian prophetess-poet and reformed "feminine" poetry, the "new" Barrett Browning was unable and unwilling to fulfill "reviewers' romanticized vision of the poet as heroine." Thus, Barrett Browning defied those reviewers who believed that "for the peace and welfare of society, it is a good and wholesome rule that women should not interfere with politics" and continued to write political poetry ("Poetic Aberrations" Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine 490).

In 1860, Barrett Browning published the highly politicized Poems Before Congress. Barrett Browning writes Mrs. Jameson that Poems Before Congress is a wicked book that everyone will hate her for. "Say it's mad, and bad, and sad; but add that somebody did it who meant it, thought it, felt it, throbbled it out with heart and brain, and that she holds it for truth in conscience and not in partisanship" (Kenyon 2:361-2). Even though Barrett Browning does not expect Poems Before Congress to be well-received, she hopes that reviewers will take her thoughts on Italy's struggle for independence as seriously as they did Aurora Leigh.

To ensure that critics would not ignore or misconstrue Poems Before Congress' political agenda, Barrett Browning included a straightforward preface:

if the verses should appear to English readers too

pungently rendered to admit of a patriotic respect to the English sense of things, I will not excuse myself on such grounds, nor on the ground of my attachment to the Italian people, and my admiration for their heroic constancy and union. What I have written has simply been written, because I love truth and justice, quand même, 'more than Plato and Plato's country, more than Dante and Dante's country,' more even than Shakespeare, and Shakespeare's country. (Poetical Works 410).

Unlike the disarming prefaces that precede The Seraphim, and Other Poems and Poems, this preface does not prettily excuse Poems Before Congress. On the contrary, Barrett Browning announces in it that she does not care if "the verses should appear to English readers too pungently rendered." Whereas the "old" Barrett Browning of Seraphim and Poems tried to please her critics by partially conforming to their expectations, the "new" Barrett Browning challenges reviewers of Poems Before Congress to address the Italian question and justify England's irresponsiveness.²⁴

As Barrett Browning anticipated, the critical reception of Poems Before Congress was very negative. What was worse, however, was that her work was misunderstood. Despite her preface (or perhaps because of it), English critics became defensive and took one of its poems, "A Curse for a Nation," personally. Even though "A Curse for a Nation" was written years before this publication, The Examiner suspects that this poem denouncing American slavery is in fact a "friendly malediction" against "[s]elfish England" for not intervening in Italian affairs ("Poems before Congress" 181). Evidently, Poems Before Congress backfired. The Spectator concludes that Poems Before Congress is inspired by "some

species of insanity" better known as "woman's mania" (309). Rather than seriously criticizing Poems Before Congress as it did Aurora Leigh, The Spectator defensively resurrects the gender-based criticism it was accustomed to using. Having attributed Poems Before Congress to a "woman's mania," this critic determines that Barrett Browning's latest work "defeats its own purpose,--as all false art must. The intention, if we can guess it, is to shame England, and to exalt the Emperor Napoleon [III]; but it will make England laugh, and will scarcely gratify the illustrious object of the eulogy" ("Mrs. Browning's Songs before Congress" 310). By questioning Barrett Browning's sanity, using gender-biased criticism, and misinterpreting "A Curse for a Nation" as a curse against England, The Spectator effectively de-politicizes and thereby undermines Poems Before Congress.

When England's favourite poetess died on June 29, 1861, critics further retaliated by re-visioning Barrett Browning's poetic career. In fact, Barrett Browning's reviewers followed "the steady drift of nineteenth-century critical attention . . . away from the work and toward the writer" (Altick quoted in Lootens 323), and separated the poet from her poetry. In an attempt to silence Barrett Browning once and for all, Victorian critics ignored or discounted her political works, expressed their preference for her personal poetry, and re-presented this political poet as a romantic heroine in their posthumous reviews.

Although The Eclectic Review admits that Barrett Browning "has suffered something from editors and reviewers," it insists that "[t]his simple, blithe woman, has, against all the hostility of critics, shattered away the prejudices of thousands who did not hear her gladly, but were compelled to hear--universally now crowned chief woman-poet of any age of time" ("Elizabeth Barrett Browning" 190, 195). The Eclectic Review maintains that England's "chief woman-poet" forced critics to overcome their prejudice against women's writing. However, this critic is unable to overcome his bias against Aurora Leigh. After writing twenty-three pages on the art of criticism, the definition of poetry, and Barrett Browning's more obscure works, The Eclectic Review conveniently forgets to discuss Aurora Leigh: "We have left no space to refer to 'Aurora Leigh' that marvellous mosaic of so much that is highest in poetry, with so much most improbable in fact, and even doubtful in the development of a social system" (212). While this critic claims that Aurora Leigh exemplifies what "is highest in poetry," because it is improbable, political, and obviously to his disliking, he ignores it. By refusing to represent and analyse Aurora Leigh, The Eclectic Review essentially erases Barrett Browning's radical "masterwork" from its account of literary history.

Like The Eclectic Review, Edward Y. Hincks disapproves of Barrett Browning's later political poetry. He argues that Barrett Browning "wrote very crudely when past thirty,"

and consequently "never attained her full maturity" (223). In Hincks' opinion, Casa Guidi Windows (1851), Aurora Leigh (1856), and Poems Before Congress (1860) are crude and disappointing works. In fact, The Eclectic Review tries to protect England's "chief woman-poet" from these political poems. After quoting "The Regeneration of Italy" from Poems Before Congress, it declares, "[w]e do not admire this order of her [political] poems in an equal degree with those more truly hers" (197). This reviewer suggests that Barrett Browning's later works are not "truly hers," thereby dissociating the poet from her political output.

Although The British Quarterly Review acknowledges Aurora Leigh "as the greatest effort of her genius," its reviewer, William Henry Smith, likes Barrett Browning's Poems and Sonnets from the Portuguese (1850) better. Since pathos was the basis of "feminine" writing in the nineteenth-century, Smith maintains that "[t]he poems which made the name of Elizabeth Barrett dear to all her countrymen, were those which appealed directly to the sympathies of her contemporaries--poems of the affections, full of tenderness, pity, sadness, and love" (360, 366). Of the "two well-defined epochs in the literary life" of Barrett Browning (356), Smith suggests that like him, readers prefer the personal, sentimental, and hence "feminine" ballads and sonnets of the "old" Christian-prophetess-poet over the political, original, and thus "masculine" poems of the "new" one.

Literary critics even went so far as to separate Barrett Browning from all of her poetry. Angela Leighton points out that "[a]n idealised image of the woman gradually supplants the figure of the poet in the critics' imagination, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning comes to be known, not so much as one of 'the chief English poets of this century', but as the heroine of a love story" (Elizabeth 4). Like Hincks who believed that "the poet was greater than her poems" (222), many Victorian reviewers wrote biographical criticism and focused on Barrett Browning's physical features, poor health, and famous husband at length. For example, The Spectator quotes Miss Mitford's description "[o]f a slight delicate figure, with a shower of dark curls falling on either side of a most expressive face, large tender eyes richly fringed by dark eyelashes, a smile like a sunbeam, and such a look of youthfulness . . ." ("The Late Elizabeth Barrett Browning" 725). Rather than realistically representing Barrett Browning as the well-educated, hard-working, modern, political, and powerful woman that she was when she died, The Spectator undoes the damage of time and idealizes her as a romantic teenage heroine.

In addition, most reviewers exaggerated Barrett Browning's poor health to make her life and death appear all the more tragic to their sentimental readers. After discussing Barrett Browning's confinement and the traumatic loss of her brother in a boating accident,²⁵ The Eclectic

Review writes that "many of her writings look to us like the tortuous expressions of unrevealed sorrow. Affliction was certainly henceforth to be the angel of her verse" (200). This critic attributes Barrett Browning's words to a romantic heroine who suffered tremendously--not to a powerful poet who single-handedly challenged the status quo.

As a romantic heroine, Barrett Browning's love life was of obvious interest to biographical critics. In his article for Dublin University Magazine, Mortimer Collins asks his readers to "imagine the glorious intellectual communion that must have existed between Mr. Robert Browning and his wife, the divine interchange of wondrous schemes, of noble ideas, of fresh conceptions" ("Elizabeth Barrett Browning" 158). Because of her ideal writing environment, Collins determines that Barrett Browning "would never have reached so high a point if she had not married a great poet" (158). In effect, Collins attributes Barrett Browning's exceptional verse to Robert Browning, and thereby divorces the female poet from her poetry. Indeed, Collins appears to agree with Aurora Leigh's Lady Waldemar that "A woman who does better than to love, / I hate; she will do nothing very well," and therefore "Male poets are preferable, straining less / And teaching more" (9:63-6). By concluding that "[t]he function of woman is--not to write, not to act, not to be famous--but to love," Collins upholds the sexual division of labour and reinforces traditional gender roles (162).

By separating the poet from her work and re-visioning

the female artist as a romantic heroine, Victorian reviewers tried to erase Barrett Browning's political works and reduce her to a conventional and thus manageable literary paragon. Lootens points out that "[o]nce crowned for poetic achievement, she [Barrett Browning] thereby implicitly became a figurehead for the drive to maintain 'harmonious' hierarchies of sex, class, race, and nationality" (173). As the subject of biography and hence an object of art (just like Aurora Leigh's mother), Barrett Browning became, ironically, a figurehead for the gender, class, race, and national hierarchies that she tried to collapse in the last few years of her life. While Victorian critics may or may not have conspired against Barrett Browning after her death, it is interesting that the poet's posthumous status as a romantic heroine corresponds with the professionalization of literary studies that occurred between 1861 and 1887. As Lootens suggests, it would appear that literary reviewers canonized Barrett Browning as a "saint of romance" to de-canonize her poems--especially her later political ones (323).

Even though Barrett Browning was partially silenced by the gender-biased posthumous reviews that ignored or discounted her political poetry, concentrated on her pathetic lyrics, and reduced her to a romantic heroine, she remained somewhat popular and survived her critics. Following the publication and negative reception of Poems Before Congress, Barrett Browning writes Mrs. Jameson and

compares herself to a headless prophet who continues to speak: "we [women] die hard, you know". Despite the poor relationship she had with Victorian critics at the end of her poetic career, the Christian prophetess-poet predicts, "I shall be forgiven in time"--and she was (Kenyon 2:365).

Notes

1. The Woman question was the name of a feminist debate concerning the position of women in Victorian society. The Woman question, which was particularly important to later female reformers, addressed such issues as education, working conditions, employment opportunities, and inequalities in marriage and matrimonial law.

2. Mary Wollstonecraft is an example of an unconventional woman writer who was slandered by her critics. At first, Wollstonecraft's A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792) was well-received by reviewers. The Monthly Review writes, "[i]n the class of philosophers, the author of this treatise--whom will not offend by styling, authoress--has a right to a distinguished place" ("A Vindication of the Rights of Woman" 198). Nevertheless, this periodical does not "so zealously adopt Miss W.'s plan for a REVOLUTION in female education and manners" (208-9). Many critics feared that the French Revolution (1789-99) would inspire a feminist one; therefore, they increasingly slandered the woman they once respected. Partly because of political circumstances and partly because of William Godwin's publication of Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman in 1798, Wollstonecraft's reputation was ruined and hence her motion for a "REVOLUTION in female education and manners" defeated.

3. Although some women (George Eliot for instance) reviewed literary works, most critics were men. For this reason, I assume that anonymous critics are male in my paper.

4. In The Prelude (1805), William Wordsworth writes that he has lived "with God and Nature communing" (2:430). For Wordsworth and many Romantic poets, God and Nature were one; thus, Wordsworth maintains that "Visionary power / Attends the motions of the viewless winds, / Embodied in the mystery of words" (6:595-7).

5. In his famous Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful (1757), a psychological treatment of aesthetics based upon human nature, Edmund Burke differentiates between the sublime and the beautiful. Burke maintains that "whatever is in any sort terrible . . . is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling" (39). On the other hand, what is beautiful gives people "a sense of joy and pleasure in beholding them," and thereby inspires "sentiments of tenderness and affection towards their persons" (43). Since the sublime is powerful and the beautiful is pathetic, Burke associates the former with men and masculinity and the latter with women and femininity.

6. Whereas birds conventionally symbolize poets and bird song, poetic verse, caged birds are associated with women who are denied poetic freedom and therefore silent. For example, Christina Rossetti writes in "Three Nuns":

My heart is as a freeborn bird
Caged in my breast,
That flutters, flutters evermore,
Nor sings, nor is at rest. (124-7)

Images of birds can be found throughout Aurora Leigh and particularly in Book 1 where Aurora compares herself to "A wild bird scarcely fledged" who was brought to her aunt's "cage" in England (310).

7. In fact, The Eclectic Review preferred Barrett Browning's prose to her poetry. Ironically, this periodical encourages Barrett Browning to treat "some thrilling incidents of our History . . . in the form of prose" ("Miss Barrett's Poems" 585).

8. M.H. Abrams writes that "[t]he novel of sensibility, or sentimental novel, of the later eighteenth century . . . emphasized the tearful distresses of the virtuous, either at their own sorrows or at those of their friends, and sometimes an intensity of response to beauty or sublimity which also expressed itself in tears" (170). While some sentimental novels featured male protagonists, most were about young women. Samuel Richardson's Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded (1740) and Clarissa, or the History of a Young Lady (1747-8) are among the first and most popular sentimental novels. Like Pamela and Clarissa, the young Barrett Browning was weak (she suffered from respiratory problems and possibly tuberculosis) and virtuous.

9. In Sartor Resartus (1833-4), Thomas Carlyle delivers his gospel of work: "Produce! Produce! Were it but the pitifullest infinitesimal fraction of a Product, produce it, in God's name! 'Tis the utmost thou hast in thee: out with it, then. Up, up! Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy whole might. Work while it is called Today; for the Night cometh, wherein no man can work" (985).

10. In Intellectual Women and Victorian Patriarchy: Harriet Martineau, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, George Eliot (1987), Deirdre David argues that Barrett Browning reinforced the very patriarchy she resisted and thus was not a feminist. I disagree with David. The fact that Barrett Browning sought literary and social equality makes her a feminist in my opinion.

11. While Barrett Browning's Poems made her a successful poet, her marriage to Robert Browning on September 12, 1846 made her a respectable one.

12. Sensibility may be defined as sensitiveness or fineness

of feeling. Please refer to my eighth note on the novel of sensibility.

13. M.H. Abrams defines the Bildungsroman as a "novel of formation" or "novel of education" in which the development of the protagonist's mind and character is traced "from childhood through varied experiences--and usually through a spiritual crisis--into maturity" whereby his or her identity and role in the world" is recognized (119-20).

14. Barrett Browning disapproved of Tennyson's medieval medley, The Princess. She writes Miss Mitford, "[a]t last we [Robert Browning and she] have caught sight of Tennyson's 'Princess,' and I may or must profess to be a good deal disappointed" (Kenyon 1:367). In "Genre Subversion and Gender Inversion: The Princess and Aurora Leigh," Marjorie Stone suggests that Barrett Browning satirizes, often through inversion, many of The Princess' actions, situations, and speeches in Aurora Leigh (116).

15. Joshua 6:20 describes the leveling of the wall that surrounded Jericho: "when the [Israelite] people heard the sound of the trumpet, and the people shouted with a great shout, . . . the wall fell down flat, so that the people went up into the city . . . and they took the city [of Jericho]."

16. In Revelation, John describes his vision of "the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband" (21:2).

17. For the relationship between gender and genre in Aurora Leigh, see Alison Case's "Gender and Narration in Aurora Leigh" (1991), 17-32; Susanna Egan's "Glad Rags for Lady Godiva: Woman's Story as Womanstance in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Aurora Leigh" (1994), 283-300; Dorothy Mermin's "Genre and Gender in Aurora Leigh" (1986), 7-11; and Marjorie Stone's "Genre Subversion and Gender Inversion: The Princess and Aurora Leigh" (1987), 101-27.

18. In "Gender and Narration in Aurora Leigh," Alison Case points out that well-bred young female narrators (especially those in epistolary novels) "are not supposed to acknowledge, or even be fully conscious of, romantic feelings which are not (yet) reciprocated or approved" (29). At twenty years of age, Aurora conventionally denies her feelings for Romney; however, ten years later, she inappropriately states her love for her cousin before he reiterates his for her.

19. The first edition of Aurora Leigh sold out in a week and its second in a month (Forster 316).

20. In "Aurora Leigh," Cora Kaplan convincingly argues that

Aurora was named after the "woman" in George Sand, *Aurore Dudevant*, and that "Aurora's garret in London is modelled on Sand's attic in the quai St Michel" (152).

21. Most critics agree that there is a strong resemblance between Jane Eyre's and Aurora Leigh's endings. However, Barrett Browning denied copying Charlotte Brontë. Rather defensively, Barrett Browning informs Mrs. Jameson that as far as she can recall, the hero of Jane Eyre was "monstrously disfigured and blinded in a fire the particulars of which escape me." On the other hand, "the only injury received by Romney in the fire was from a blow and from the emotion produced from the circumstances of the fire" (Kenyon 2:246).

22. In a letter to her sister-in-law, Sarianna Browning, Barrett Browning says that she is surprised by Aurora Leigh's initial (albeit inflated) success and expects that "the whips will fall fast after the nosegays" (Kenyon 2:242).

23. Several minor alterations were made to the fourth edition of Aurora Leigh. Robert Browning believed that this corrected edition was a better one (Kenyon 2:302).

24. Although England sympathized with Italy, it distrusted Napoleon III and refused to support Italy's struggle for independence. The Independent Kingdom of Italy was proclaimed under Sardinian King Victor Emmanuel II in 1861.

25. On July 11, 1840, Barrett Browning's favourite brother, Edward or "Bro," died in a boating accident. Already suffering from respiratory problems, Barrett Browning's physical and mental health temporarily deteriorated after her brother's tragic death (Forster 99-100).

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