

“where angels fear to tread”:

Tracing the Journey of the Female Poet in *Aurora Leigh*

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Abstract

Through *Aurora Leigh*, Elizabeth Barrett Browning explores the role of female poets as agents of social change in the Victorian society. During the Victorian period, the role of women was largely confined to the domestic setting. While women were allowed to write, female writers were limited to the realm of novels, which was perceived by the Victorian society to be the less distinguished genre. In writing *Aurora Leigh*, Barrett Browning challenged this gender stereotype by producing a “novel-poem” that unites the feminine voice with masculine authority and superiority. Like Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, in her fictional role as a writer, also challenges the same stereotypes. She seeks to redefine poetry, which is the domain of man. In rejecting Romney’s initial marriage proposal, *Aurora Leigh* also rebels against the stereotypical gender roles. At the same time, in doing so, she inadvertently rejects Romney’s plan for social change that involves only the physical aspect. Instead, in pursuing her career as a poet, *Aurora Leigh* finds herself in a position to bring about social change on a level that transcends the physical. By telling the story of Marian Erle, *Aurora Leigh* has the power to change the plight of women in the Victorian society. Finally, being women themselves, both Barrett Browning and *Aurora Leigh* can speak up for the Victorian women even more effectively.

“where angels fear to tread”:

Tracing the Journey of the Female Poet in *Aurora Leigh*

Queen Victoria, whose sixty-five-year reign spanned from 1837 to her death in 1901, became the icon of an era in British history that was subsequently named after her. Under the shadow of the longest-reigning female monarch, the Victorian era seemed, on the surface, to be an exemplification of the ideals that the Queen herself embodied: female purity, moral propriety, and social stability. Yet, in reality, the Victorians stumbled in pursuit of these ideals. In *Aurora Leigh* (1856), Elizabeth Barrett Browning paints an unembellished picture of the Victorian society as seen through the eyes of a Victorian woman. Using Aurora’s voice to tell the story of three women—Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Aurora Leigh, and Marian Erle—Barrett Browning highlights the need for Victorian women to find and assert their own voice and identity in their contemporary society. Barrett Browning perceives that the duty of the female poet is to give a voice to her Victorian sisters by rendering an honest portrayal of reality and by humanizing the female gender.

Victorian Gender Roles and the Two Separate Spheres

Nineteenth-century England was governed by rigid social conventions. Clearly distinguishing between the private realm and the public realm, the Victorian society dictated strict gender roles. Deborah Gorham observes that “[t]hroughout the period, it was customary to refer to public and private life as two ‘separate spheres’” and “[e]ach of the two spheres was thought to be inextricably connected either with women or with men” (4). She proceeds to elaborate that “[t]he public sphere was the male’s exclusive domain, whereas the private sphere was seen as presided over by females for the express

purpose of providing a place of renewal for men, after their rigorous activities in the harsh, competitive public sphere” (4). Therefore, the social roles assigned to men and women of the Victorian society were completely exclusive. In fact, the distinction between the role of men and the role of women parallels the distinction between the private realm and the public realm in Victorian society.

The Victorians regarded women as personal and emotional beings whose place was in the domestic realm. Gorham comments that “[t]he creation of a sharp division between the private world of home and the public world of commerce, professional life and politics, had a profound impact on the way in which women were perceived in the Victorian period” (4). *Aurora Leigh* captures this stereotypical perception of the female gender when Romney accuses Aurora of being too “sympathetic to the personal pang” (2.185) and scorns her inability to generalize social circumstances, so much so that “[t]he human race / to [her] means, such a child, or such a man, / [she] saw one morning waiting in the cold” (2.189-91). As a result of this perception of the female gender, the Victorian society confined women to the domestic realm. In her book *Women in England 1760-1914: A Social History*, Susie Steinbach explains that women of the Victorian period, regardless of their social status, “were expected to spend their adult lives as wives, mothers, and housekeepers” (80). Likewise, Victorian poet Coventry Patmore also succinctly captures the domesticity, purity, and innocence that constitute the essence of Victorian femininity in his poem *The Angel in the House* (1586). Gorham writes that, to the Victorians, “[t]he ideal woman was willing to be dependent on men and submissive to them, and she would have a preference for a life restricted to the confines of home. She would be innocent, pure, gentle and self-sacrificing. Possessing no ambitious strivings,

she would be free of any trace of anger or hostility” (5). The idea of Victorian femininity is closely associated with domesticity: the two ideas are inseparable.

The masculine gender, on the other hand, was responsible to preside over the public sphere. Detached from the emotional and psychological restraints that confined women to the domestic realm, men were seen to possess the ability to look beyond the immediate in order to see the bigger picture. Gorham states that “[t]he public sphere of business, politics and professional life was defined as the male sphere” because men were lauded for their ability to generalize and to look beyond the personal and emotional (4). They were perceived to be neither bound by the limitations of the present nor driven by their emotions like women were. Hence, their influence during the Victorian period extended beyond the domestic realm to the social realm.

The mutual exclusivity of these two separate spheres had subsequently given birth to gender-specific writings during the Victorian period. Although female writers were not unheard of during the era, they were generally confined to the genre of the novel. Often dealing with private and intimate subject matter, the novel became the domain of women writers. Ian Watts writes in *The Rise of the Novel* that “the feminine sensibility was in some ways better equipped to reveal the intricacies of personal relationships and was therefore at a real advantage in the realm of the novel” (57). Nancy Armstrong likewise affirms Watts’s proposition in her work *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel*: “novels early on assumed the distinctive features of a specialized language for women. A novel might claim a female source for its words, concentrate on a woman’s experience, bear a woman’s name for its title, address an audience of young ladies, and even find itself criticized by female reviewers” (30). According to Marjorie Stone,

Victorian critics asserted that “[w]omen were successful as novelists . . . because this particular genre permitted them to capitalize upon such inherent female traits as the love of gossip, the taste for the trivial, sensitivity to human feelings, and the passion for sentiment and romance” (102). In other words, the novel was considered to be a feminine genre because it dealt with private, domestic, and trivial issues. In fact, the genre of the novel provided an avenue for women to explore their feminine identity and express themselves, albeit within the social boundaries determined by society.

Along with the creation of gender-specific forms of writing, a hierarchy of literary genres was also established. In the eyes of the Victorians, the novel was a common and unrefined form of writing and was thus inferior to poetry. Commenting on the history of the novel, Armstrong writes, “The novel had a reputation for displaying not only the seamy undersides of English political life, but also sexual behavior of a semi-pornographic nature. On both counts, it was considered a vulgar form of writing” (96). The inferiority of the novel was subsequently associated with the inferiority of the female gender, as Stone observes that some scholars “have considered the connection . . . between the novel as a status-deprived genre and women as a status-deprived gender” (102). Epic poetry, on the other hand, was recognized as a masculine genre that concerns itself, not merely with personal and trivial matters, but rather with subject matters of greater national significance. Although Victorian women were allowed to step beyond the genre of the novel and establish their footing on some “minor poetic modes” (Stone 102), they were excluded from the realm of epic poetry because that was solely the men’s domain. Such a perception reinforces the Victorian idea that the place of women is in the home, while that of the men is in society at large.

Consequently, in an era that has given birth to some of the most well-known English poets of all time, Barrett Browning ironically struggled to establish her identity as a poet. Deirdre David points out that Barrett Browning herself “declared that before the work of Joanna Baillie, the late eighteenth-century Scottish dramatist and poet, there was no such thing in Britain as a ‘poetess’” (484). Women of the Victorian period had limited liberty to assert their influence in the public sphere, thus explaining Barrett Browning’s struggle to establish her identity as a female poet because poets and social activists were the roles of men, not women.

Finding herself in a community dominated by men, Barrett Browning strove to establish her unique identity as a female poet. Kathleen Blake explains that “Elizabeth Barrett Browning was a poet highly aware of her literary heritage . . . but regretful to find no poetic grandmothers” (387). Having no predecessor from whom she could derive her distinct identity as a female poet, Barrett Browning looked with admiration to the Romantic poet William Wordsworth whom she resolved to emulate. Yet, in spite of her admiration for Wordsworth, Barrett Browning still had to deal with the underlying realization of her identity as a Victorian woman that distinguished her from her masculine predecessors. As Blake comments, Barrett Browning “could draw much from Wordsworth but was too self-consciously a woman poet to underestimate sexual difference” (387). Therefore, she perceived the need to detach herself from the “male poetic tradition” to which Wordsworth belonged and forge her independent identity as a female poet (Case 17).

Although her husband, Robert Browning, was the lesser-known poet during their lifetime, he played an important role in shaping Barrett Browning’s literary career and

encouraging her to find her identity as a poet. While Barrett Browning was still living at her father's house, Browning, "moved by his admiration of her poetry, wrote to tell her 'I do as I say, love these books with all my heart—and I love you too'" (Christ and Robson 1078). As a result of his encouragement, she continued fervently in pursuit of her literary career and sought for her identity as a female poet. All the while, Browning had faithfully supported his wife in her literary endeavors. In fact, upon receiving the publisher's comments and feedback on *Aurora Leigh*, Browning replied to Edward Chapman, the publisher, in defense of the unconventionality of Barrett Browning's work: "My wife made up her mind to it as it *is*, and for the present, as I say, cannot reconsider the subject. All the 'modern' passages, illustrations, are vitally necessary, she thinks,—and I think quite as strongly,—and could not be detached without capital injury to the rest of the poem" ("Letters" 337). He has played an active role in helping Barrett Browning discover her identity and role as a female poet in the Victorian society.

The Novel-Poem: Uniting the Separate Spheres through Form and Content

Through her writing of *Aurora Leigh*, Barrett Browning seeks to define her identity and her role as a female poet. On many levels, *Aurora Leigh* breaks away from traditional literary conventions, reflecting Barrett Browning's own breakaway from the gender stereotype of the Victorian period. By composing *Aurora Leigh*, a novel that deals with a personal subject matter, in the form of an epic poem, Barrett Browning challenges both social and literary conventions. Barrett Browning herself calls *Aurora Leigh* a "novel-poem" (Christ and Robson 1078). The ambiguous genre of *Aurora Leigh* constitutes a rebellion against literary convention. At the same time, writing in the form of an epic poem, Barrett Browning also intruded into a traditionally male-dominated

realm. Allison Case explains, “Barrett Browning used her cross-breeding of novel and verse to break out of the gendered restrictions imposed on her by a male poetic tradition” (17). Through her refusal to conform to conventional genre categories, Barrett Browning challenges the literary and social conventions of the Victorian period.

Indeed, by creating a hybrid between a novel and an epic poem, Barrett Browning asserts that the two separate spheres traditionally governed by the male and the female genders can actually converge in the office of the female poet, thus uniting the public and the private sphere in one person. Through *Aurora Leigh*, she substantiates the feminine voice with masculine authority and superiority by portraying private matters in the light of an epic:

Barrett Browning’s self-termed ‘novel-poem’ *Aurora Leigh* is a formal hybrid that attempts to fit the explosive material more often to be found in the social novels of the 1840s to the traditional, male form of the epic; Barrett Browning chooses as the subject of her epic poem matters more usually represented by the genre dominated by women writers in the nineteenth century, namely the novel. (David 485)

Using the plot and subject matter of a novel, *Aurora Leigh* portrays seemingly private relationships and domestic themes through the eyes of a Victorian woman; written in the form of an epic poem, it appeals to readers to consider these same issues, not simply as private matters, but as social issues of national significance. David comments that Barrett Browning “[wrote] a major poem tracing Aurora Leigh’s Odyssean quest for poetic identity and a home in the world and positing the proper political and social function for a poet in national life” (484). Indeed, by penning *Aurora Leigh* in the form of an epic

poem, Barrett Browning places Aurora's quest for self-identity on par with that of Beowulf and King Arthur.

Aurora's Quest for Her Poetic Identity

Barrett Browning's portrayal of the character of Aurora Leigh embodies the former's vision to revolutionize female participation in the poetic realm. Echoing the significance of her name, Aurora brings about the dawn of female poetics as conceived by Barrett Browning, and this charts the beginning of a new chapter in the Victorian society and in the literary realm. Like her creator, Aurora initially struggles to reconcile her feminine qualities with her desire to be a poet. The eponymous heroine of the work seems to be a projection of Barrett Browning herself, and the opening lines of *Aurora Leigh* can be read in the voices of both Barrett Browning and Aurora:

Of writing many books there is no end;
 And I who have written much in prose and verse
 For others' uses, will now write for mine,-
 Will write my story for my better self (1.1-4)

Hence, Aurora's story mirrors Barrett Browning's own experience as a poet. Susan Walsh observes that Aurora "feel[s] so troubled by womanhood, so tempted to define her creative gifts as male" (163), so much so that she even "fear[s] that [her] femaleness will prove an insuperable barrier to the male literary world" (164). Conditioned by the social norms of the Victorian period, Aurora is anxious to shed her garb of femininity:

This vile woman's way
 Of trailing garments, shall not trip me up:
 I'll have no traffic with the personal thought

In art's pure temple. (5.59-62)

Perceiving her femininity to be a stumbling block to her career as a poet, Aurora seeks to purge herself of the personal and emotional: "Love, you say? / My lord, I cannot love: I only find / The rhyme for love, - and that's not love, my lord" (5.894-96). Commenting on women's novels, Judith Lowder Newton writes that "marriage meant relinquishment of [the heroine's] power as surely as it meant the purchase of wedding clothes" (8). Therefore, Aurora rejects Romney's marriage proposal to prevent herself from being hindered by her femininity, thereby affirming Gorham's claim that "[t]he sphere of love, the emotions and domesticity was defined as the sphere of women" (4), the very sphere from which Aurora seeks to escape. To her, the role of a woman and that of a poet do not overlap.

The fact that Aurora gravitates towards books and writing instead of sewing and cross-stitching constitutes a refusal to conform to Victorian gender stereotypes. Although she obediently "read a score of books on womanhood" (1.427) and "learnt cross-stitch" (1.447) at the demand of her aunt, she was nevertheless frustrated by the domestic confinement to which society had subjected her. Not finding fulfillment in the domestic role that was her lot, Aurora sets out in search of her place in the contemporary society. While her aunt forces her to "[sit] in just the chair she placed, / With back against the window" (1.484-85), thereby preventing her from interacting with the outside world, her subsequent decision to "escape . . . out of doors, / Glide through the shrubberies, drop into the lane, / And wander on the hills an hour or two" (1.693-96) symbolizes her rebellion against the domestic role to which her gender has been assigned. This act of defiance marks the turning point in her life as she abandons the needlework that her aunt

has forced upon her and embraces her books instead.

Yet, like Barrett Browning, Aurora soon finds that she has no way of escaping her femininity. In fact, *Aurora Leigh* is a record of Aurora's quest for her unique identity as a woman and a poet of the Victorian period. Although she desires to separate the two, Aurora finds herself face-to-face with her femininity, and she must learn to embrace her femininity and reconcile it with her literary pursuits. Margot K. Louis observes that "In *Aurora Leigh* we see both the heroine and her creator grow from poets who attempt to prove themselves in traditionally masculine terms, into poets who engage with a feminine tradition of sentimental verse which they resist and criticize but nevertheless find of essential value" (1). Ultimately, Aurora realizes that she needs to challenge existing conventions in order to establish herself as a female poet in the Victorian society, and she does so by redefining poetics from a particularly feminine perspective.

Ultimately, having entered the male-dominated realm of poetry, Aurora attempts to reconcile her femininity to her poetic identity and to define her distinctive role as a female poet:

Passioned to exalt

The artist's instinct in me at the cost

Of putting down the woman's, I forgot

No perfect artist is developed here

From any imperfect woman. (9.645-49)

David observes that Aurora, like Barrett Browning, also "looked for female poetic ancestors . . . [and] found none" (484). Comparing herself to her male counterparts, she realizes that, as much as she wants to become one of them, the social expectations heaped

upon her set her apart from her male counterparts. David further explains, the epic poetry that dominates the poetic realm “is androcentric in its thematic concern with heroes and war, indeed with arms and the man, and with elucidating the ways of God (or gods) to man, rather than with those ways of God to that part of man which is woman” (484-85). From an egoistically male perspective, Romney says to Aurora that women, who tend to focus on personal matters, are suitable candidates for household roles, but are inadequate to carry out the role of a poet:

Women as you are,
 Mere women, personal and passionate,
 You give us doating mothers, and perfect wives,
 Sublime Madonnas, and enduring saints!
 We get no Christ from you, - and verily
 We shall not get a poet, in my mind. (2.220-25)

Therefore, in response to the scorn Romney demonstrates towards her literary endeavors, Aurora abandons traditionally patriarchal poetics and redefines poetry and the role of the female poet for herself.

In establishing her identity as a female poet, Aurora redefines the genre of epic poem because the subject matter that interests her male counterparts seems to be rather frivolous to her. Aurora’s contemporaries tend to exalt the glories of the past and find epics in the pages of history: “[t]he critics say that epics have died out / With Agamemnon and the goat-nursed gods” (5.139-40). As a result, they inevitably overlook the immediate concerns of the present age. Armed with the feminine ability to engage the present and the intimate, Aurora strongly disagrees with this conception of epic poetry.

She observes that “every age / Appears to souls who live in’t . . . / Most unheroic”

(5.155-57) only because those who are living in that age cannot clearly see the big picture as one does retrospectively: “Every age, / Through being beheld too close, is ill-discerned / By those who have not lived past it” (5.166-68). Aurora, however, believes that poets should be armed with the ability to look at their subject matter both close-up and from afar, and to evaluate both perspectives objectively:

But poets should

Exert a double vision; should have eyes

To see near things as comprehensively

As if afar they took their point of sight,

And distant things as intimately deep

As if they touched them. (5.183-88)

Therefore, Aurora arrives at the conclusion that a poet’s responsibility is neither to idealize nor idolize the past. Instead, she insists that a poet’s “sole work is to represent the age, / Their age, not Charlemagne’s – this live, throbbing age” because only the present can be shaped and altered (5.202-03). Moreover, the present is that with which one is personally and intimately acquainted. Thomas Carlyle writes in *Heroes and Hero-Worship* that “[t]he Poet who could merely sit on a chair, and compose stanzas, would never make a stanza worth much. He could not sing the Heroic warrior, unless he himself were at least a Heroic warrior too” (78-79), thus suggesting that the poet should not be one who is detached from his subject matter. Likewise, Aurora also insists that heroes are found among the common and the ordinary, that “[a]ll actual heroes are essential men, / And all men possible heroes” (5.151-52). Hence, as a Victorian woman, Aurora finds

herself in a unique and intimate position to write about and comment on the condition of women in Victorian society.

Aurora insists that art should not be disconnected from reality; it should instead be grounded in reality. Her insistence echoes Barrett Browning's own desire to "touch this real everyday life of [her] age, [and] hold it with [her] two hands" (329). By reflecting the shortcomings in society, Aurora's art inspires society to a higher ideal:

What is art

But life upon the larger scale, the higher,
 When, graduating up in a spiral line
 Of still expanding and ascending gyres,
 It pushes toward the intense significance
 Of all things, hungry for the infinite?

Art's life, - and where we lie, we suffer and toil. (4.1151-57)

To women as a subaltern sex, art is an instrument of power and a channel to assert their influence in society, just as Ellen Moers explains, "the pen and printing press were the first means widely available to women to make themselves heard, to change their world, or to live a life of heroic 'action'" (qtd. in Laird 275). Therefore, Aurora uses her pen and her poetry to speak up for the oppressed women in her society. Although decent Victorian society may be appalled by Marian's unglamorous tale like it was scandalized by Barrett Browning's unconventionality in discussing prostitution in her poetry, Aurora does not refrain from telling Marian's story. Just as Matthew Arnold proclaims that the function of literature is "to see the object as in itself it really is" (697), likewise, Aurora also argues that art is most glorified when it portrays reality, and she thus perceives that

her duty as a poet and an artist is to portray the truth, however ugly and detestable it may seem to her society:

Thus is Art

Self-magnified in magnifying a truth
Which, fully recognized, would change the world
And shift its morals. (7.854-57)

Indeed, that which gives Aurora's poetry force and authority is the truth that it contains:

How sure it is,
That, if we say a true word, instantly
We feel 'tis God's, not ours, and pass it on
Like bread at sacrament we taste and pass
Nor handle for a moment, as indeed
We dared to set up any such claim to such! (7.872-76)

Echoing Arnold's declaration that "the touch of truth is the touch of life" (697), Aurora gives life to her poetry by dealing truthfully with the condition of women in the Victorian society. Aurora's own words may not prevail, but because her writings capture the truth, her poetry comes to life and thus will prevail beyond her person. To Aurora, then, her poetry is more than just an artistic expression that is appreciated solely for its aesthetic value; her poetry constitutes the voice of Victorian women that has long been suppressed by her patriarchal society.

Aurora's ability to engage with current and personal matters may be credited to her femininity. While her male counterparts are preoccupied with the glory and majesty of kings and heroes, and thus become enamored with the epics of Achilles and King

Arthur, Aurora is more concerned about the reality of Victorian women and their plight, a topic generally considered unworthy for such an elevated genre as epic poetry. However, seen through the eyes of a woman, the oppression of the female gender by the contemporary society is not merely a personal matter. Instead, it is a social issue of national significance that needs to be addressed by the society as a whole. Aurora opts to tell the story of Victorian women in the form of an epic poem because she refuses to let her patriarchal society belittle the problems that women of her time face. Being a Victorian woman herself, she provides an honest portrayal of the lot of Victorian women, neither idealizing nor belittling the female gender. Using her poetry to tell the stories of the women in her life, Aurora strives to free herself and other women from the suffocating gender stereotype and discrimination imposed upon them by their patriarchal society. In fact, she considers it the duty of the female poet to speak up for the mute in her society and so becomes an agent of social reform.

Aurora's Poetic Social Reform

In this light, one can forge an understanding of Aurora's initial rejection of Romney's marriage proposal. Although in turning down Romney's marriage proposal Aurora may simply be rejecting her socially designated domicile role as a wife and a mother and all the patriarchal concepts that Romney embodies in order to embrace her vocation as a female poet, by doing so, she also indirectly rejects his plan for social reform that has no place for a female poet. Both Romney and Aurora perceive the need to address and to remedy the social ills in the Victorian society, but each embarks on a very different route to achieve this goal. When Romney makes his marriage proposal to Aurora, he also entreats her to a partnership with him in helping the needy: "Come,

human creature, love and work with me” (2.427). Romney sees that “[t]he world . . . is swollen hard / With perished generations and their sins” (2.263), and he desires to “right / The wrongs” (2.318-19) in society through “good works” (5.574). Eventually, he even “parted Leigh Hall into almshouses” (5.575) in pursuit of his charitable endeavors.

Aurora understands Romney’s dedication to his philanthropic efforts, thus prompting her to say to him:

What you love,
 Is not a woman, Romney, but a cause:
 You want a helpmate, not a mistress, sir,
 A wife to help your ends, - in her no end! (2.400-403)

Indeed, Romney’s plan for social reform is a solo effort on his part that only addresses the immediate physical needs of the people, and not the root of the social problems. His course of social reform cannot accommodate Aurora and her desire to bring about social change through her literary endeavors.

Aurora, on the other hand, holds on to a very different principle for social reform. Just as Barrett Browning intends to “[evoke] poetry as balm for the wounds inflicted upon society” in her writing of *Aurora Leigh* (David 486), Aurora also believes that, as a female poet, she shoulders the responsibility of initiating social change through her poetry by changing the mindset and perception of her contemporary society. Unlike Romney, Aurora emphasizes not just a healing of the physical condition of her society, but rather a rehabilitation of the spiritual and the internal:

Let me think
 Of forms less, and the external. Trust the spirit,

As sovran nature does, to make the form;
 For otherwise we only imprison spirit
 And not embody. Inward evermore
 To outward, - so in life, and so in art
 Which still is life. (5.223-39)

To Aurora, the inner being—the spiritual—is that which molds the form. Indeed, Aurora's own poetry embodies this very idea as it constitutes a microcosm of the change that she envisions for her society. Believing that the plight of Victorian women is a subject matter of significant gravity that deserves dignified treatment, Aurora allows the content of her poetry to justify the form that it has taken. Just as she insists that "[t]he artist's part is both to be and do" (5.367), the physical form of her poetry likewise becomes an outward manifestation of the message that she conveys. Therefore, seeking to change the hearts and minds of her society, Aurora hopes that this inner change will be the remedy that heals the social ills in her society. By portraying reality instead of the ideal in her poetry, Aurora embarks on a course of social reform that transcends the physical. Leslee Thorne-Murphy comments in his article that "[d]etails of how [Aurora] sees poetry inspiring humanity to ever higher realms of perfection abound in *Aurora Leigh* . . . Through these details Barrett Browning discusses the process of a poet-prophet inspiring her readers to individual and social perfection" (242). Unlike Romney, she realizes that social reform cannot be achieved via the philanthropic efforts of a single individual because an "individual right no general wrong" (2.462). More than merely employing a stopgap measure to meet the immediate needs of the needy, Aurora seeks to change the hearts and renew the minds of the Victorians, and to inspire them with her

poetry to pursue social ideals as she says to Romney, “Ah, your Fouriers failed, / Because not poets enough to understand / That life develops from within” (2.483-85). Therefore, she proposes a course of social reform that involves inspiring and convicting her contemporary society through her writing by portraying the Victorian society as it really is, thereby addressing the heart and soul of the people:

It takes a soul,
 To move a body: it takes a high-souled man,
 To move the masses, even to a cleaner sty:
 It takes the ideal, to blow a hair’s-breadth off
 The dust of the actual. (2.479-83)

Aurora believes that the mindset of her society as a whole has to be changed and that their eyes have to be opened to see the reality of the Victorian society.

Romney’s plan, on the other hand, has no place for Aurora’s course of social reform. In fact, he even questions the effectiveness and the ability of a female poet to achieve so great a feat as social reform:

You play beside a death-bed like a child,
 Yet measure to yourself a prophet’s place
 To teach the living. None of all these things,
 Can women understand. (2.180-83)

Yet, that which is most troubling to Aurora is the fact that, in order to accept Romney’s proposal, she has to deny her desires and her identity as a female poet because Romney invites her to be his helper in his social endeavor. As a woman, she is “the complement / Of his sex merely” (2.435-36), and is expected to lose her identity in him:

where we [women] yearn to lose ourselves

And melt like white pearls in another's wine,

-He seeks to double himself by what he loves,

And make his drinks more costly by our pearls. (5.1078-81)

Therefore, fiercely defending her vocation as a poet, Aurora disagrees and insists that hers is a “[m]ost serious work, most necessary work / As any of the economists” (2.459-60).

Marian Erle: The Extraordinary Heroine and Muse

Holding on to this principle, Aurora embraces her role and responsibility as a female poet to render an honest portrayal of the present age through her poetry by telling the story of Marian Erle. Like Aurora herself, Marian is an unusual hero. Carlyle opens his first lecture on *Heroes and Hero-Worship* by saying that it is a “discourse . . . on Great Men, their manner of appearance in our world's business, how they have shaped themselves in the world's history, what ideas men formed of them, what work they did . . . and on their reception and performance” (1). Carlyle's heroes are men, not women. Above all, they are extraordinary men found among the ranks of prophets, poets, priests, men of letters, kings, and the divine, certainly not among the common and vulgar fallen women. However, in spite of her gender, Marian is indeed a hero that fits into Carlyle's own definition. Carlyle explains that heroes are “the leaders of men . . . the modellers, patterns, and in a wide sense creators, of whatsoever the general mass of men contrived to do or to attain” (1). Leading by her example, Marian gives a voice to other Victorian women who suffer the same fate and challenges them to speak up for themselves, just as she did. By boldly recounting her experience, she breaks out of the prison of silence to

which fallen women of the Victorian society have been condemned. And by telling her story, she is also speaking up on behalf of other Victorian women who are silenced by societal pressure to maintain a façade of propriety.

Through Marian's story, Aurora exposes the social vulnerability of Victorian women, especially women of the lower class and calls for a reexamination of the idealized domestic stereotype of the female gender. Her account of a fallen woman who was raped and subsequently sold to the brothel appalls the Victorian society that idealizes the female gender and idolizes female purity and innocence. Aurora's bold act of bringing to light the ugly reality about Marian's predicament is like the opening of Pandora's Box that unveils the moral decay hidden beneath the Victorian façade of propriety. According to Steinbach, "[T]he long nineteenth century was characterized less by a refusal to talk about sex than by an obsessive debate over sex that was distinguished by dire warnings of its dangers, detailed discussions of its effects, and a powerful insistence of the necessity for discretion" (105). Yet ironically, Steinbach also observes that "one of the central figures in English culture was the prostitute" (126). In the nineteenth century, "fallen" women were blamed for the rampancy of prostitution and the spread of venereal diseases. They were considered to be the perpetrators and not the victims, as Steinbach explains, "Prostitutes were believed to be the main source of infection to 'decent' society" (126). Through Marian's story, however, Aurora appeals to her readers to consider these women not as culprits of social ills, but rather as victims of social oppression.

Therefore, the chief culprit ultimately responsible for Marian's downfall is the rigid social structure that governed the Victorian society. Marian is persuaded to break

her promise of matrimony to Romney because her contemporary society tells her, albeit via Lady Waldemar, that “[t]was plain a man like Romney Leigh / ‘Required a wife more level to himself’ in terms of social class (6.1026-27):

‘That Romney could not love [her], if he would,
 ‘As men call loving: there are bloods that flow
 ‘Together like some rivers and not mix,
 ‘Through contraries of nature. (6.1013-16)

Indeed, on the wedding day itself, Romney’s noble friends also exclaim that Romney’s decision to marry Marian is akin to having “[their] best blood running in the rut!” (4.685). They even scorn upon the union, saying:

here’s an inter-marriage reasoned out,
 A contract

 ’twixt the extremes
 Of martyriized society, - on the left
 The well-born, on the right the merest mob,
 To treat as equals! (4.690-91, 694-96)

Dealing with adverse societal pressure, Marian finally takes Lady Waldemar’s advice and decides to leave Romney, thus beginning the journey to her downfall.

Marian’s tragic downfall is a downward spiral from which she cannot escape because she is subjected to the stereotypical and judgmental perception of the Victorian society. In fact, even Aurora judges Marian from the perspective of her contemporary society upon discovering the illegitimate child and condemns the latter, accusing her of

“[leaving] / The pure place and the noble heart, to take / The hand of a seducer” (6.745-47). Marian herself also understands the social implication of having her purity being thus defiled, prompting her to say of her child, “I found him where / I found my curse, - in the gutter, with my shame!” (6.671-72). She realizes that, having lost her purity, she is as good as dead to the decent society. Hence she says, “death’s a change, / And she [Marian], I said, was murdered” (6.812-13). Having thus been branded as a “fallen woman” in the Victorian society, Marian knows that her fate is sealed in the eyes of her contemporary society.

In rendering a detailed description of Marian’s early life and tragic downfall, Aurora also dashes the idealistic perception of women as the symbol of domestic purity and refutes the Victorian notion that women are morally superior to men. In fact, far from being an “angel of the house” as Patmore suggests (1586), the women in Marian’s life are instead the perpetrators of her downfall. Over and over again, Marian experiences betrayal at the hands of the women whom she had trusted for protection. In her early years, not only has her mother failed to protect her from her abusive drunkard father, but she has instead sold Marian to another man in exchange for the comfort of the family. While Gorham writes that the role of the Victorian woman is to create a “refuge from the harsh public world” by establishing a home based on Christian values (4), Marian ironically exclaims, ““God, free me from my mother . . . These mothers are too dreadful”” (3.1063-64). Finally, she loses all hope in her mother and says to Romney, “My mother sold me to a man last month, / And so my mother’s lost, ’tis manifest” (3.1193-94). Instead of creating a haven for the protection of her family, Marian’s mother turns into the antagonist and perpetrator of Marian’s suffering who betrays her own daughter to the

harsh outside world.

Likewise, Marian is also later betrayed by Lady Waldemar in whom she has so wholly and innocently placed her trust. The Victorian society expects a woman of Lady Waldemar's position not only to uphold the standard of morality in her own home but also to establish the standard of morality in her society. As Steinbach points out, "While their wealth, social status, and political influence made them atypical, [aristocratic women] were afforded by their positions unique opportunities for political, social, and economic action" (78). However, instead of safeguarding Marian's welfare, Lady Waldemar takes advantage of her position to victimize Marian. Using her social authority over Marian, she makes Marian believe that her romantic attachment to Romney will bring about his ruin and thus persuades her to annul her promise of matrimony for Romney's sake and to leave England. Since Lady Waldemar's elevated social position lends credibility to her character and words, Marian accepts her advice and obeys her instructions without questioning her motives. Indeed, she remains unsuspecting of Lady Waldemar's devious plan:

The lady? – hush,
I never blame the lady. Ladies who
Sit high, however willing to look down,
Will scarce see lower than their dainty feet; (6.1170-73)

Yet, Lady Waldemar betrays Marian's trust as she arranges for her former waiting-maid to sell Marian into a brothel instead of taking her to Australia.

Therefore, through the telling of Marian's story, Aurora humanizes the female sex by tearing down the idealism constructed around the concept of femininity during the

Victorian period. Besides exposing Marian's helplessness and vulnerability to social oppression, Aurora also strips the garb of purity and innocence off the female gender by bringing to light the detestable deeds of the women in Marian's life. In fact, the very first person to raise Marian out of her lowly state is not a woman, but rather a man in the form of Romney Leigh:

he had raised and rescued her
 With reverent pity, as, in touching grief,
 He touched the wounds of Christ, - and made her feel
 More self-respecting. Hope, he called, belief
 In God, - work, worship, - therefore let us pray!
 And thus, to snatch her soul from atheism,
 And keep it stainless from her mother's faith, (3.1224-30)

Romney reaches out to Marian with love and care, and by his actions, restores her faith and hope in God—an act that should have been carried out by the women in Marian's life who were supposed to be the upholder of morality in the Victorian society.

However, to Aurora, Romney's act of benevolence towards Marian merely constitutes a part of his philanthropic efforts; it does not address the social oppression that muffles the voice of Victorian women. In fact, by taking Marian's hand in marriage, Romney is not liberating her from social oppression, but rather subjecting her to another form of authority—his authority. That which Aurora exclaims to Romney upon rejecting his marriage proposal still holds true with regards to his relationship with Marian:

What you love,
 Is not a woman, Romney, but a cause;

You want a helpmate, not a mistress, sir,
 A wife to help your ends, - in her no end! (2.400-403)

Just as he had expected of Aurora, likewise, Romney also expects Marian to lose herself in him and subject her will and voice to his. Marian, out of her gratefulness to Romney, does so willingly:

I know myself for what I am
 Much fitter for his handmaid than his wife,
 I'll prove the handmaid and the wife at once,
 Serve tenderly, and love obediently,
 And be a worthier mate, perhaps, than some
 Who are wooed in silk among their learned books; (4.226-231)

Indeed, she even defines her identity in him as she says, “[Romney] likes the poor things of the world the best; / I would not therefore, if I could, be rich” (4.210-11). Aurora highlights Marian’s subservient role in the relationship and notes her readiness to give without expecting anything in return:

This perhaps was love -
 To have its hands too full of gifts to give,
 For putting out a hand to take a gift;

Obviously

She had not thought about his love at all: (4.176-78, 182-3)

In spite of having been rescued out of her misery, Marian is deprived of a voice. She goes from being subordinated to her mother to being subordinated to Romney, and

subsequently to Lady Waldemar. Marian's dependence and lack of a voice of her own contribute indirectly to her victimization.

Aurora, on the other hand, perceives that her duty as a poet and a woman is to liberate Marian and give her a voice. As Angela Leighton writes, Aurora, like Barrett Browning, has come to understand that her "responsibility as a poet is towards those other women whom silence has victimized" (476). Instead of merely taking Marian under her wings as Romney did, Aurora uses Marian's story to ridicule the standard of propriety in the Victorian society. Leighton points out that Barrett Browning seeks "to expose the absurdity of a culture in which virtue is an affair of words, not deeds" (475). For Marian to endure her suffering in silence would have been an admission of her guilt; to bring her story to the attention of her contemporary society shows that, as a victim, Marian has nothing to hide and nothing to be ashamed of, although by doing so, she risks the judgmental glances of society. Indeed, as Barrett Browning wrote in her letter, "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" (qtd. in Leighton 475). Had Aurora and Barrett Browning decided to remain silent, their failure to speak up would have been as guilty an act as that of Marian's mother who sold her to a strange man, that of Lady Waldemar who contrived to sell Marian into a brothel, and that of Lady Waldemar's former waiting-maid who executed her malicious scheme. In boldly telling Marian's story, Aurora is also giving a voice to the many Victorian women who suffer the same fate and who are victimized by their inability to speak up for themselves.

By embedding Marian's story into her autobiographical account, Aurora seems to suggest that Marian's quest is parallel to her own. Laura Rotunno explains that "Victorian

Künstlerromane are noted for their attention to the artist's recognition of his/her muse, the artist's acknowledgement of his/her own unique nature and subsequent ability to understand and interact with others, and ultimately, his/her capacity to balance artistic vision with the business realities of the Victorian literary marketplace" (58). While this description can be clearly seen in Aurora's case, Marian also goes through the same epiphany, especially in the last book. Although Marian is not an artist, she undergoes the *Künstlerromane* experience with regards to her life: she finally recognizes her child as the muse that gives her a purpose to continue living; she comes to acknowledge her independent identity as a Victorian woman; and above all, she reconciles her perception of herself with the label of "fallen woman" with which her society has branded her.

In spite of the difference in their social status, Aurora and Marian are both muffled by their femininity. In one of her letters, Barrett Browning acknowledges that Victorian women of all classes are being suppressed in one way or another, and it is in breaking the silence that *Aurora Leigh* becomes so appalling to the Victorians: "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 to refer to, by any manner of means, says the conventional tradition" (qtd. in Leighton 475). Just as the Victorians tell Aurora that "as a woman, she does not have sufficient knowledge or sympathy to be a successful poet" (Rotunno 59), Marian has also been told that she should suffer in silence because speaking about her ordeal will only bring shame upon herself.

However, like Aurora who finds her voice through writing poetry that speaks the truth and reflects reality, Marian also finds hers when she finally establishes her identity

as an independent woman and a mother. Newton writes that the heroine often gains power not by exercising control over other men, but instead by having the ability to be her own master. She further elaborates that “[o]ne form of ability . . . is autonomy, the power of being one’s own person, and being one’s own person is multiply and often subtly defined” (6). In *Aurora Leigh*, Marian “[has] come to learn, - a woman, poor or rich, / Despised or honoured, is a human soul, / And what her soul is, that, she is herself” (9.328-30). Therefore, Marian’s newly discovered autonomy is a source of empowerment as Berenice A. Carroll defines power as having the ability to exercise authority over oneself:

Power, according to Carroll, has been defined not just as control but also as ‘ability,’ as the capacity to assert ‘one’s will over one’s body, one’s own organs and functions and over the physical environment—a power which is seen as inherently satisfying and not merely as an instrument to other ends, as neither requiring nor leading to the power to command obedience in other persons.’ (qtd. in Newton 7)

“Hav[ing] past the grave” (9.282), Marian has not only died to decent society, but she has also died to her old subservient feminine self; she has now become “[a]s one who had authority to speak, / And not as Marian” (9.250-51). As she admits her pride—“[D]o not think / I’m speaking from a false humility. / The truth is, I am grown so proud with grief” (9.319-21)—she is also asserting her innocence and purity, in defiance of the judgmental glances of her contemporary society. Marian is no longer the silent handmaid who lives on Romney’s charity and sympathy; she is a woman who realizes her self-worth and autonomy in spite of the condemnation that society hurls in her direction. Barbara

Charlesworth Gelpi rightly comments that *Aurora Leigh* is “the inner story of . . . a woman’s feelings about herself, particularly about her femininity. . . . [Barrett Browning] recognized very clearly the influence of a similar conditioning. That is, she saw women’s central problem as the antifeminine biases they had themselves internalized” (36). At the end of the novel, both Aurora and Marian have come to embrace their femininity and reconcile it with their circumstances: Aurora by redefining and embracing her role as a female poet and Marian by discovering her strength and value as a woman, even though a fallen one in the eyes of her contemporaries.

Conclusion

The three female voices in *Aurora Leigh*—Barrett Browning’s, Aurora Leigh’s, and Marian Erle’s—tell a similar story: that of the discrimination and oppression that each suffers at the hands of the patriarchal Victorian society, and their subsequent attempt to free themselves of that confinement. Joyce Zonana argues that “if she [Marian] is the muse, then she must be a new kind of muse, one who is fully integrated with the poet, a subject in her own right” because in writing about Marian’s predicament, Aurora identifies herself with Marian’s story (243). Leighton likewise echoes Zonana in suggesting that “although Aurora takes the philanthropist Romney’s place in her relation to Marian, it is really Marian who finally saves her” because for Aurora, “[t]he quest for Marian is a quest to go on living and writing” (482). For in telling Marian’s story, Aurora is also speaking up for the rest of the Victorian women who suffer the same fate in her patriarchal society, albeit in a different context. Indeed, Aurora herself is numbered among them. Likewise, in composing Aurora and Marian’s life story, Barrett Browning is also vicariously telling her own story.

In *Aurora Leigh*, Elizabeth Barrett Browning goes against established conventions to produce a work that portrays the reality in the Victorian society and defines the responsibility of women in the realm of poetics. Through the character of Aurora Leigh, she establishes a distinct position in the literary realm for the female poet. More than just an artist, the female poet also plays the role of a social activist who inspires and challenges her audience through an honest portrayal of reality. Barrett Browning also liberates the women in her society by using Aurora's voice to tell Marian's story. In doing so, not only does she highlight the oppression that Victorian women face, she also destroys the idealism that surrounds femininity by humanizing the women in the novel. Ultimately, the three female voices in *Aurora Leigh* unite as one to emphasize the duty of the female poet to speak up and bring about change in society.

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