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## Rising the Woman Question: Works of Leigh and Browning

The Victorian era was a period of great social and political upheaval, especially for women. Increasing opposition to the lack of women's political rights in relation to marriage and property laws, such as the fact that any income a woman earned automatically belonged to her husband, as well as debates on education, was termed "The Woman Question." However, there were also both men and women, such as Sarah Stickney Ellis and Coventry Patmore, who believed that allowing women more freedom was going against their "natural" temperament. The deeply embedded patriarchal values in Victorian society meant that instead of openly declaring women as the inferior sex, instead they were praised for the virtues women were supposed to possess naturally - selflessness, patience, ability to love, and maternal instincts. Although apparently praising women for their contributions to society, this ideology was instead used to justify women's inferior roles and was highly restrictive and patronising.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poem Aurora Leigh interested me as it seemed to reflect and highlight a lot of the issues that were surrounding the complex "Woman Question" in Victorian times, in particular the kind of education that was deemed appropriate for females, and their expected roles as wives and mothers, rather than the freedom to pursue their own career. The concept of the "Woman Question" in Victorian society appears to be full of many competing ideologies, both the dominant voices and the dissenting ones. The poem, written in the style of a modern epic,<sup>1</sup> concerns the education, upbringing and poetic aspirations of a young girl, who chooses not to comply with society's expectations and marry her cousin Romney but dedicate her life to pursuing a career as a poet. Aurora Leigh can be seen as an early feminist text, and therefore expresses ideas that were not supported by the patriarchal society of the times, however, it was also immensely popular in Victorian society.<sup>2</sup> I found it interesting that this could be so, and challenged my understanding of the Victorians, as I would have believed that as a voice of dissent, it would be unpopular or frowned upon. I was curious as to how poems such as these could be reconciled by the general public with the patriarchal ideology of the times.

However, as Antony Harrison discusses in his chapter "Discourse, Ideology, Poetry," poetic works were consumed by the Victorians more widely than other forms of art, and it was expected that poetic words on a page meant more than other writing; "embodied the voice of a being possessed of extraordinary epistemological capacities."<sup>3</sup> As poetry was such a popular form of entertainment in the Victorian period, the messages and ideologies poems portray are therefore more likely to influence the readers. I found that this confirmed itself in my mind upon reading an extract from Sarah Stickney Ellis' "The Women of England: Their Social Duties and Domestic Habits." Ellis' book represents the dominant ideology of the time, which believed that

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girls should be educated in manners of 'the heart' rather than intellectual pursuits, so they are better equipped to run a house, raise a family and be a loving, comforting wife, "the humble monitress who sat alone, guarding the fireside comforts of his distant home."<sup>4</sup> Despite the popularity of books such as this, it seemed to me that the nature of Browning's poem, as a more exciting and dramatic form, would have a wider appeal, and thus more effectively transmit a particular ideology, under the guise of eliciting pleasure.<sup>5</sup>

The primary subject in the book one extract of *Aurora Leigh* is that of her education. Aurora's education is administered by her aunt, and is listed in a repetitive and termed a 'liberal' education in a somewhat mocking fashion, in order to highlight the uselessness of the things Aurora is learning, "I danced the polka and the Cellarius/Spun glass, stuffed birds, and modeled flowers in wax/ Because she liked accomplishments in girls."<sup>6</sup> However, this is an effective technique in order to ensure the reader is made fully aware of the fact that the poet herself was not lacking in an education, and is knowledgeable about subjects such as literature and history, for example the famous French author Balzac - "I learnt my complement of classic French/kept pure of Balzac"<sup>7</sup>, such as which was not taught to Aurora in the poem because his work was considered inappropriate for females. At the time, Elizabeth Barrett Browning was one of Victorian England's most famous female poets, and it was known that she had an unusually 'masculine' education - she studied Latin and Greek, as well as philosophy and literature.<sup>8</sup> In this way, Barrett Browning appeared to me to embody the argument for women to have an education equal to that of men - she proved that it would not be 'wasted' on women, that they are just as capable of talent and successful careers.

*Aurora Leigh* was the first poem written by a female poet about a character who was also a poet, and so is often interpreted as semi-autobiographical. However, there are obvious discrepancies between the character of *Aurora Leigh* and Elizabeth Barrett Browning herself, particularly in relation to marriage. Whilst *Aurora Leigh* rejects her suitor Romney, choosing instead to concentrate on her poetry, Barrett Browning was deeply in love with her husband Robert Browning, with whom she eloped with to Italy. I have often thought that marriage, for a Victorian activist of women's rights, would be out of the question, as it would require her to compromise her political values, or somehow reconcile them with her decision. Whilst poetry was an influential form of art that could be used to mold the reader's values and opinions in reality, the poem also seems to demonstrate that it is much easier to discuss social issues through the fictional characters of *Aurora* and *Romney*, than through life itself. These contradictions seems to embody the many aspects and arguments of the "Woman Question" that was so widely discussed throughout the Victorian period.

The dominant ideology in Victorian times in relation to women was the idea that women were born with certain personality traits that made them fit to be wives, mothers and generally subservient to the male population. This was justified by the widely accepted belief that it was

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willed by God to be so, and hence, "a woman who tried to cultivate her intellect beyond drawing-room accomplishments was violating the order of nature and of religious traditions."<sup>9</sup> In *Aurora Leigh*, the character of Aurora's aunt is used as an example of this kind of woman, "She had lived, we'll say/A harmless life, she called a virtuous life/ A quiet life, which was not life at all."<sup>10</sup>

Whilst Aurora's aunt represents the 'natural' virtues of a Victorian woman - quiet, charitable and dutiful (for she is doing her duty by raising Aurora), there are also contradictory examples of nature in the poem. Aurora is educated within "the sight of the great lime-tree on the lawn," an allusion to Coleridge's poem *This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison*, in which the lime-tree, as in *Aurora Leigh*, becomes an inspirational and consoling vision of the beauty and creative force of nature.<sup>11</sup> However, this vision is blocked by Aurora's aunt - "sat just in the chair she placed/ with back against the window, to exclude..."<sup>12</sup> This symbolic contradiction between what is seen to be 'natural' and used to justify the patriarchal values in Victorian society, and the inspiring, non-judgmental view of nature itself, represented by the lime tree, can be seen as a comment on whether these values are in fact 'natural' at all.

Representations of gender and "The Woman Question" in Victorian society are often complex and full of opposing ideas and opinions, both in present times and in the past. At first reading, Barrett Browning's poem *Aurora Leigh* to me appeared to simply be a poem advocating women's equal rights, particularly in regards to career and education. However, upon learning more about how this patriarchal society justified the subjugation of women through religion and the idea of 'natural virtues,' and the extent of political and legal power, as well as marriage and property laws, I began to realise how deeply entrenched in every aspect of life these ideas were, and how difficult it must have been for anyone to fully oppose it without sacrificing the comforts of a normal life. In this way, the author uses fictional characters to communicate the belief in the right for equal gender roles, thus reinforcing the importance of poetry in Victorian society.

Resources:

Harrison, A. 'Introduction: Discourse, Ideology, Poetry' in *Victorian Poets and the Politics of Culture*. London: University Press of Virginia, 1998 p 11

Carol T Christ et al, ed. *The Norton Anthology of Victorian Literature: The Victorian Age*, 7th ed. (W.W Norton & Company: New York, 2000)

Bristow, J (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Poetry*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

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