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"the praise which men give women": Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* and the Critics

The past decade has seen a remarkable resurgence of interest in the poetry of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, a phenomenon that would have not surprised EBB's contemporary readers, but would have greatly puzzled even her most sympathetic critics only a few decades ago.[1] Virginia Woolf, we recall, sadly observed in 1932 that "fate has not been kind to Mrs. Browning as a writer. Nobody reads her, nobody discusses her, nobody troubles to put her in her place. . . . In short, the only place in the mansion of literature that is assigned her is downstairs in the servants' quarters, ... where ... she bangs the crockery about and eats vast handfuls of peas on the point of her knife."[2] Woolf's essay, with all its ambivalence towards the poem (of which more later), was nonetheless on a rescue mission; and rescue EBB from the servants' quarters it did, or at least for a certain public.[3] Yet as late as 1972, Virginia Radley, although herself engaged in a full-scale study of EBB's work, could foresee no brighter future for the poet or the poetry.[4] Today, EBB's poetry is studied by Women's Studies Scholars and Victorianists alike, while her magnum opus *Aurora Leigh* (1856) is justly celebrated as the paradigm for a new mode of criticism concerned with the woman writer, a mode of criticism for which Elaine Showalter has coined the term gynocritics.[5] It is perhaps time, then, that we looked back, and in scrutinizing a century of critical neglect (in mainstream criticism), asked ourselves: why did it take *Aurora Leigh* over a hundred years to be recognized as a true literary breakthrough, a latter-day epic with a difference, the first full-fledged attempt in English letters to articulate a female aesthetics?

A wholly satisfactory answer to this question, which could not be attempted here, would have to deal not only with prejudices (against women poets, against female selfhood) which die hard, but also with new conditions which render old oppressions obsolete. Now that the deconstructive prophets of absence have gained a firm hold over the

critical imagination, a cynic might observe, a naively reconstructive feminist epic can do but little harm.[6] Yet the story of a century of critical abuse has to be told, lest we all inadvertently sink into abysmal historical forgetfulness. And the story has a moral, too, for it clearly illustrates a major tenet of recent hermeneutic thought, namely that interpretation always arises out of the convergence of "effect"—which is associated with the aesthetic object itself—and reception—which is historically determined. In the case of EBB's *Aurora Leigh*, an investigation of the poem's contemporary critical reception (to be distinguished from its *popular* reception[7])—a very favorable one to all appearances—is particularly revealing with regard to the work's subsequent faltering fortunes. As I will attempt to demonstrate here through selective examples, it was by the praise lavished on it by nineteenth century male critics that *Aurora Leigh* was undone, its "effect" obscured and muted, its radical and subversive force dissipated.[8] Their vision of human potential and achievement disfigured by insidious gender stereotyping, EBB's contemporary reviewers could only offer that peculiar "praise which men give women"[9]: a paradoxical tribute, a praise that diminishes and degrades.

The meaning of a poem or a novel, hermeneutic critics tell us, is not an unchanging atemporal given, which once comprehended can be fixed for all times. Rather, interpretation is a never-ending, never-completed process born out of the dynamic interplay of text and context, a process determined by the ever-shifting nature of the interaction between the "textually immanent potential for meaning" in a work and the changing "horizons of historical life-worlds" of its readers.[10] From an hermeneutic perspective, then, the task of uncovering the "prejudices" that govern any given critical understanding proves to be an essential step in the interpretive process.[11] Reflecting on literary history, Hans Robert Jauss has suggested that texts "do not 'always already' signify what they are interpreted or made out as being, but rather arrive at this out of the configurations into which they enter or into which they are brought."[12] The present essay is part of a larger project in which I attempt to unravel the different "configurations" which have given rise to the many interpretive acts which constitute the reception history of EBB's *Aurora Leigh*. Here I will focus on the lapses and displacements which characterize the critical response to the poem in the nineteenth century, more specifically as these are already manifest in reviews of the poem published in the two years immediately following its publication.

I

Every actual reader of *Aurora Leigh* has at some point to contend with the poem's first virtual reader, the explicit addressee of Aurora's tale. Throughout the poem, Aurora's mode of address creates a curiously split reading subject, as her rhetoric alternately projects a female reader—embraced in the feminine "we" and "us"—and a male reader, often antagonistic, often an extension of a male character in the story. Half way through the poem Aurora, exulting in her poetic vocation yet tormented by inner doubt, pleads on behalf of herself and her female reader, as she implores her male reader: "Deal with us nobly, women though we be, / And honour us with truth if not with praise" (V, 11.82-3). As readers of EBB's life, as well as of her art, we then know we have been doubly forewarned. For Aurora's plea to be judged fairly on her merits as a poet rather than be flattered as a woman clearly echoes her creator's own distress at that pernicious Victorian practice which Elaine Showalter has characterized, in *A Literature of Their Own* (1977), as a double critical standard. EBB's correspondence with Richard Hengist Horne, a fellow-poet and a reviewer of her own poetry, testifies to this concern lest her art be trivialized as mere woman's work, deserving of polite praise but unworthy of true critical judgment. Writing to Horne in 1843, in anticipation of his biographical sketch of her for their jointly edited *A New Spirit of the Age* (1844), EBB implores him to write of her as a poet—"a writer of rhymes"—and not as a "heroine of a biography," openly enjoining Horne to refrain from a prevalent critical practice she finds offensive and injurious: "your best compliment to me is the truth at all times, without reference to sex."[13] EBB's forewarning, however, could do little to change an ingrained critical habit which Horne unfortunately shared with many of his contemporaries. One can only marvel at EBB's exceptional self-restraint as she later remarks to Horne, on reading his brief biographical account of her, that it "can be called 'inadequate' only in one way—that you enter on no analysis of my poetical claims in it."[14] In *Aurora Leigh*, her epic of the woman poet,[15] EBB went on to demonstrate, with great poetic power, the damaging effects of this critical practice which Virginia Woolf was to describe, almost a hundred years later (and still from first hand experience), as dragging "into the criticism of poetry criticism of sex."[16] And still her critics refused to listen.

A brief overview of the poem will help highlight the issue at hand. *Aurora Leigh* is the story of Aurora, the poet-narrator of this epic, whose aspirations for an integrated and harmonious feminine-poetic identity are at odds with her society's view of "woman" and "poet" as

denoting opposite and contradictory qualities and roles. Aurora's attempts to articulate a female transcendentalist poetics prove highly problematic, for in pursuing the Carlylean ideal of the poet as prophet and leader Aurora finds herself caught in a debilitating double bind. Her predicament, which is the predicament of the nineteenth century woman writer, is that while her gender is seen to exclude her from access to transcendentalist knowledge, her aspirations to this knowledge are simultaneously understood to jeopardize her femininity.[17] Romney, who seeks Aurora's hand in marriage, reiterates the Victorian view of "femininity" and "high art" as mutually exclusive. He chastises Aurora for her artistic ambitions, 'reminding' her: "Women as you are / Mere women, personal and passionate / ... / We get no Christ from you, —and verily / We shall not get a poet, in my mind" (II, 11.220-225). While Romney grants Aurora a womanly nature but refuses her the poet's comprehensive vision, Lady Waldemar, the embodiment of feminine desire in the poem, grants Aurora the artist's share but only at the dear cost of the woman's. "You stand outside / You artist women, of the common sex," she reminds Aurora of yet another exclusion, "You share not with us, and exceed us so / Perhaps by what you're mulcted in, your hearts, / Being starved to make your heads" (III, 11.406-410).

As *Aurora Leigh* nears it climactic ending, however, opposites are made to merge and conflicts are reconciled. In the poem's conclusion an enlightened (but physically blinded) Romney not only hails Aurora's poetry as expressive of the highest truths, but, perhaps more significantly, confesses a love for her which no longer divorces the woman from the poet. Indeed it is through the poet Aurora that Romney comes to love the woman Aurora, acknowledging them to be one (VIII, 11.292-297).

Aurora Leigh opens with Aurora's resolution to write her story for her "better self," the resolution of one who conceives of herself as "Woman and artist,—both incomplete, / Both credulous of completion" (I, 11.4-5). The ensuing narrative is the story of such growth into "completion," the chronicle of a woman poet's struggle with enemies from within and from without. And yet, as even a cursory look at the critical tradition will reveal, the critical literature on the poem up until the first decades of this century is shockingly silent on the poem's central theme: the dilemma of the woman poet. More alarmingly yet, we will see this silence to be accompanied by a critical *displacement*, as the critics' own ambivalance towards EBB as a woman poet and towards the autobiographical subject of her poem take centre stage, ruling out any serious assessment of the poem on its own terms. Finally, in the nineteenth century critics' stories of reading we recog-

nize an uncanny 'acting out' of a crucial moment dramatized in EBB's text, an inadvertent repetition of a moment in the poem itself.[18] Early on in the poem Romney, who seeks to discourage Aurora from her poetic pursuits, parodies the typical review Aurora, as a woman poet, could expect. He forewarns her:

> 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.")
> (II, 11.232-243).

Although EBB's contemporary reviewers could have hardly missed EBB's point here, they did, on the whole, choose to ignore it, together with much else in the poem. Averting their gaze away from the poem's charged engagement with the predicament of the woman poet, nineteenth century reviewers of *Aurora Leigh* kept obsessively returning to the scene of crime, as it were, re-enacting in their own biased pronouncements on women writers in general and EBB in particular the very conditions which in EBB's poem provoke Aurora's malaise in the first place.[19]

II

By the time *Aurora Leigh* was published EBB had already attained a very solid critical reputation, best demonstrated by the fact that she was proposed as a candidate for the laureateship after Wordsworth's death.[20] This on the whole laudatory critical consensus seems to have played an important role in the subsequent reception of *Aurora Leigh*, compelling reluctant reviewers to search out the poem's merits in spite of their overall dissatisfaction with it. An early review of EBB's 1844 *Poems* by H.T. Tuckerman both illustrates this favourable critical disposition and betrays its inherently paradoxical nature, clearly demonstrating the nineteenth-century literary reviewers' obsessive preoccupation with what they considered to be the anomalous nature of the woman poet. Tuckerman's review, moreover, is particularly pertinent here for it articulates a view of EBB's poetry which was later to underlie much of the criticism of *Aurora Leigh*. The review, as we

shall see, introduces the arguments *pro* and *con* in terms which, in retrospect, we realize to have become the commonplaces of EBB criticism.

Tuckerman's reading of EBB's poetry is firmly rooted in gender-related categories, as he believes that

> authorship, as a career, is undesirable for a woman. Only when duty lends her sanction, or preeminent gifts seem almost to anticipte destiny, can the most brilliant exhibition of talent add to the intrinsic graces or true influences of the sex.[21]

Having from the outset of his review asserted the conflict between "intrinsic [feminine] graces" and "authorship," Tuckerman then proceeds with an extended attempt to reconcile EBB's "masculine" achievement with a desirable feminine character. In the case of EBB the task proves all the more difficult, for here the reviewer has to do with a *learned* woman poet, whose poetry he finds remarkable for a "predominance of thought and learning." Examining the evidence, Tuckerman uneasily concludes: "the scholar is everywhere co-evident with the poet." Tuckerman's uneasiness stems from his perception of a threatening gender-related conflict, for while he perceives the blending of scholarly learning with inartificial spontaneity to be an asset in a male poet, he believes that in a woman poet it constitutes a basic flaw. Consequently, Tuckerman feels that he cannot wholly approve of what would have otherwise qualified as a hight poetic "labor"—the poet's attempt to reconcile himself "to life through wisdom and ... religious creed" — for here it is a *woman* poet laboring to "reconcile *herself* to life through wisdom."[22] The reason for the disapproval is clearly stated: "This is a rather masculine process."

Thus, the critic constantly bestows praise only to withdraw it on grounds of gender incompatibility. He admits to appreciating "Mrs. Browning's lofty spirit and brave scholarship," but promptly qualifies the praise by adding

> we incline to and have faith in less systematic phases of woman's character. There is a native tenderness and grace, a child-like play of emotion, a simple utterance, that brings more genial refreshment.[23]

Forced by the nature of his preconceptions about gender and writing to repudiate that which he has found most valuable, Tuckerman is ultimately ill-at-ease with the poetry (and the poet). Regarding EBB as a *woman poet*, he places her primarily in the context of other women poets. The comparison, uncritically established since taken for granted, proves EBB deficient because different. Different from other women poets, EBB is also, inevitably in Tuckerman's understanding,

different from the male poets because a woman. Ultimately, Tuckerman's project is self-defeating, and one which denies the poetry any possibility of being understood on its own terms. Rejecting what he himself finds the poetry to excel in on the grounds of it being "masculine," while also condemning the poetry for failing to embrace the properly feminine, Tuckerman ends on a paradoxical note. Discarding that which he himself has praised as most remarkable in the poetry—"the predominance of thought and learning"—he finally suggests that what is "most interesting" in EBB's poetry is exactly that which he has found it most deficient in: the properly feminine qualities of "tenderness ... that divine reality of the heart."[24] In limiting the critical endeavor to an attempt to "*trace the woman beneath the attainment,*"[25] Tuckerman condemns his own critical judgment to a self-willed blindness.

The review of *Aurora Leigh* in the *Athenaeum* of Saturday, November 22 1856—appearing only a week after the poem's publication—crystallizes for us the preconceptions and preoccupations, the judgments and evasions which characterize the poem's contemporary reception. "We dwell on the sex of the author of 'Aurora Leigh' in no disrespectful spirit of comparison," is the telling disclaimer which opens the second paragraph of the review, immediately following the reviewer's clearly comparative (relative) praise in the first paragraph:

> The medium in which the story floats is that impassioned language ... which has given the verse of Mrs. Browning a more fiery acceptance from the young and spiritual, and her name a higher renown *than any woman has heretofore gained.*[26]

The reviewer justifies this dwelling "on the sex of the author" by referring his readers to the "convictions upon Life and Art" which the poet herself professes to have pursued in the poem (*AL*, Dedication). These views the reviewer identifies as EBB's own contribution to the "chorus of protest and mutual exhortation, which Woman is now raising, in hope of gaining the due place and sympathy which, it is held, have been denied to her since the days when Man was created, the first of the pair in Eden."[27] The reviewer's own sympathies do not remain a secret for long, although the casual 'innocence' affected by some of his rhetorical turns can, at times, be misleading; he declares:

> Who would silence any struggle made by those who fancy themselves desolate, oppressedly undervalued, - to unlock the prison-doors, - to melt the heart of justice?[28]

Indeed who? evidently none other than the reviewer himself, who seems confident that he knows better than those misguided creatures who "fancy themselves" desolate and oppressed.

From start—where he praises EBB for being "never unwomanly"—to finish—where he crowns EBB supreme "Prophetess," "muse," "queen"—the reviewer's project is a sustained effort to silence EBB's (and Aurora's) defiant gesture of protest. The reviewer's strategy is twofold. In the first instance, he launches an extensive attack on EBB's bold violation of generic conventions in *Aurora Leigh*, accusing her of mingling "what is precious with what is mean." This denuniciation is then used strategically to support a sweeping dismissal of the bulk of the poem—which is concerned with Aurora's quest, the aforementioned struggle to "unlock the prison-doors"—as "unnatural" in its argument and "strained beyond permissible freedom."[29] In a second moment, the reviewer's re-telling of the story of *Aurora Leigh* not only erases all traces of this struggle, but also radically revises the thrust of the poem's powerful conclusion. In one such move to obliterate the signs of feminist "protest," for example, the reviewer chastises EBB for her unsympathetic portrayal of Aurora's maiden-aunt, a totally inappropriate response given that the aunt exemplifies those very same "prison-doors." Moreover, while EBB grants Aurora a true apotheosis at the end of Book IX—in a deeply evocative and startlingly revisionary scene which celebrates "woman" and "artist" as mutually enhancing aspects of Aurora's being—the *Athenaeum* reviewer revels in what he judges to be the "Truth" which closes this otherwise "unnatural" tale:

> The Poetess confesses that her life has been a failure, and lays her love in the arms of him who has been hungering and thirsting for it so many a weary day.[30]

Erased, suppressed, forgotten is the dual affirmation, at the poem's conclusion, of a new conception of womanhood enhanced by and enhancing a visionary poetics. In sharp contrast to the poem's climactic ending—in which a feminized Carlylean Hero(ine) pronounces "The first foundations of that new, near Day / Which should be builded out of heaven to God" (*AL*, IX, 11.956-7)—the reviewer's own story of reading attributes to the poem an altogether different finality. In his version, the "Truth [which] closes the tale" is a further confirmation of EBB's "womanly" nature, being a renunciation of poetic ambition for the sake of love. Reminders of this comforting "moral" of the poem are woven into the review in a way that effectively reduces the poem to a mere re-iteration of the traditional equation of femininity with what Tuckerman has called "the divine reality of the heart." The

reviewer insists: "the moral is insufficiency of Fame and Ambition, be either ever so generous, to make up for the absence of Love"; "[Aurora soon discovers that] she had made a mistake in rejecting her cousin, and in fancying that fame could supply the place of love"; "[Aurora realizes] the hollowness of Art to fill and to satisfy."[31]

The *Athenaeum* reviewer 'revises' the story of *Aurora Leigh* to make it conform to his view of women's poetry in general (exemplified, for him, by Felicia Hemans), and of EBB's early poetry in particular (he cites 'A Drama of Exile'), as confessional gestures "freely poured out from their full hearts."[32] Interestingly, in having Aurora renounce her artistic aspirations to become a 'womanly' woman, the reviewer uncannily repeats a moment dramatized in the poem, a moment of profound dejection from which Aurora, however, re-emerges a triumphant woman and artist. Aurora experiences the "Everlasting No" as an internalized double bind (whose terms are articulated by Romney and Lady Waldemar), believing the poet's gain in vision to be the woman's loss in love. In her pain, Aurora laments her solitary state: "How dreary 'tis for women to sit still, / On winter nights by solitary fires" (V, 11.439-440). It is this moment of surrender to her society's merciless persecution of the woman poet that the reviewer re-enacts in his reading, freezing the action, refusing to move along with the evolving drama. In her final triumph, however, Aurora defies her persecutors, and, far from rejecting Art, confidently declares a new vision of work and love: "No perfect Artist is developed here / From an imperfect woman" (IX, 11.648-9).

Ultimately, the *Athenaeum* reviewer's project is to drain *Aurora Leigh* of its ideologically subversive force, thus indirectly silencing that "chorus of protest and mutual exhortation, which Woman is now raising." He achieves this by dismissing those parts of the poem which engage with larger aesthetic and political issues—describing them as Aurora's "mistake"—and by re-telling the story of *Aurora Leigh* so as to make EBB and Aurora conform to the dominant Victorian view of woman as a creature of the affections, a being ruled by sentiment and the dictates of the heart. As we extend the scope of investigation, it becomes clear that this convergence of aesthetic judgment and ideological predisposition in the criticism is not only pervasive but also of a more general chracter. In the *Blackwood's Magazine* review of *Aurora Leigh* of January 1857 we encounter another telling disclaimer, as the reviewer vows to "refrain from mingling the political with the poetical element."[33] The political is, however, everywhere mingled with the poetical in the reviewer's assessment of the poem, providing us with a particularly clear illustration of the hermeneutic principle of the mutual articulation of the "textually immanent potential for meaning" in a

work and the "horizons of historical life-worlds" of its readers. In trying to articulate this point of intersection, moreover, we find ourselves at the center of what Myra Jehlen has called the "feminist fulcrum" which is "not just any point in the culture where misogyny is manifested but one where misogyny is pivotal or crucial to the whole." What we will be looking for, then, is "the connection, the meshing of a definition of woman and a definition of the world."[34]

The *Blackwood's* reviewer finds *Aurora Leigh* to be a "remarkable poem; strong in energy, rich in thought, abundant in beauty,"[35] and EBB to be "a lady whose rare genius has already won her an exalted place among the poets of the age," and who is "endowed with a powerful intellect."[36] These words of praise notwithstanding, the reviewer disagrees with much in the poem. Like the *Athenaeum* reviewer, the *Blackwood's* critic regards the "story" of the poem—which he reconstructs at some length—to be "fantastic, unnatural, exaggerated."[37] As the reviewer's further comments demonstrate, he takes issue with the poem not on grounds of unrealistic portrayal but rather on unattractive (i.e., ideologically unwelcome) characterization. Here again, as so often in the criticism, there is the condescending reference to Aurora's plea for fair criticism—"she challenges truthful opinion, and that opiinon she shall have"[38]—while the spirit of Aurora's statements is totally disregarded. The reviewer not only fails to recognize the predicament at the core of the poem, but in his own discussion unwittingly or deliberately perpetuates the very terms of the dilemma exposed in the poem. Thus the reviewer disapproves of the character of Aurora for "she is not a genuine woman; ... what we miss in her is instinctiveness, which is the greatest charm of woman."[39] In a manner characteristic of nineteenth century reviews of the poem, an ideological difference of opinion is paraded as pertinent and objective criticism of the work discussed. The real point of contention surfaces as the reviewer openly condemns Aurora for her (in his view) unfeminine traits and aspirations:

> With all deference to Mrs. Browning, ... we must maintain that woman was created to be dependent on the man, and not in the primary sense his lady and his mistress. The extreme independence of Aurora detracts from the feminine charm, and mars the interest which we otherwise might have felt in so intellectual a heroine.[40]

This denunciation of Aurora's unfeminine character is followed by the charge that the poem inappropriately deals with "mean" subjects; the reviewer proclaims: "to dignify the mean, is not the province of poetry—let us rather say that there are atmospheres so tainted that in them poetry cannot live."[41] The reviewer's failure to grasp EBB's

concern with problems of class—a concern he dismisses as treatment of "mean" subjects—parallels his unwillingness to pursue the poem's exploration of contemporary aspects of the 'woman question'. Here, a traditionalist ideology and a leaning towards a conservative aesthetics prevent the reviewer from meaningfully reading the poem. Provoked by the poem's call for a less formalist aesthetics and for an engagement with contemporary issues, the reviewer dismisses them by labelling the one "carelessness ... of construction" and the other "a symptom of literary decadence."[42] Averting his gaze away from the concerns of the poem, the reviewer silences them by claiming them inappropriate to the genre: "it is not the province of the poet to depict things as they are, but so to refine and purify as to purge out the grosser matter; and this he cannot do if he attempts to give a faithful picture of his own times."[43]

As the *Blackwood's* reviewer's own turn of phrase unwittingly betrays—he charges EBB with making no distinction "between her first and her third class passengers"[44]—underlying his rejection of what he calls EBB's "tendency to experiment" is a rejection of the challenge (and the threat) to conservative ideology posed by the poetry. This is his telling testimonial:

> For ourselves, we are free to confess that we have not much faith in new theories of art; we are rather inclined to class them in the same category with schemes for the regeneration of society.[45]

When all is said and done, the reviewer has appreciation for only a miniscule part of the poem, anticipating many other reviewers to come with his high praise for "the passages which refer to Marian and her babe."[46] Although the reviewer nowhere explicitly associates EBB's work with *women's* poetry, an underlying assumption concerning the particular values to be found in women's poetry is evident throughout the review. Indeed, the only passages in *Aurora Leigh* of which the reviewer wholeheartedly approves involve valorized images of motherhood as exemplified by Marian. The reviewer, who elsewhere praises the poem for being "rich in thought," betrays a deep-rooted bias when he enthusiastically declares: "whenever she [EBB] deserts her theories, and touches a natural cord, we acknowledge her as a mistress of song."[47]

The review in the *Westminister Review* of January 1857—identified by G.S. Haight as coming from the pen of George Eliot[48]—crystalizes for us this critical procedure of collapsing EBB's poetry into a preconceived prototype of feminine expression. Eliot's failure to recognize (or openly acknowledge) the radicalism of Aurora Leigh is particularly striking, not only because we would have expected differently

from her, but also in view of the periodical's strong radical allegiances. The *Westminister Review,* being the organ of the young Benthamites, was openly advocating female emancipation; J.S. Mill started contributing feminist articles to the journal as early as 1824, and for many years afterwards the journal kept the topic before the public eye.

Eliot, who in her letters speaks of *Aurora Leigh* as one of "the great blessings of life,"[49] has the highest praise for the poem, pronouncing that

> its melody, fancy, and imagination — what we may call its poetical *body* —is everywhere informed by a *soul*, namely, by genuine thought and feeling.[50]

The review is very brief, devoting a page and a half to a critical assessment of the poem and three pages to direct quotations. Eliot introduces the citations in the form of independent short pieces of verse, and entitles them 'Mother Love' (*AL*, I, 11.47-63), 'A Portrait' (of Aurora's aunt; I, 11.270-308), 'Seriousness of Art' (II, 11.227-259), and 'Italy from the Sea' (VII, 11.453-489). Although the excerpts bring out the poem's central preoccupation with the definition of 'woman' (in the excerpt entitled 'A Portrait') and 'woman poet' (in 'Seriousness of Art'), Eliot is totally silent on these issues in her critical assessment. One wonders, however, whether in selecting passages such as 'Mother Love' and an excerpt in which Aurora agonizes in self-doubt "I might have been a common woman now, / And happier, less known and less left alone," Eliot does not implicitly address this preoccupation by suggesting that the poem resolves the dilemma of the woman poet by ultimately advocating a return to the traditional feminine virtues.

What is most striking in Eliot's critical assessment, however, is that while it nowhere mentions the central theme of *Aurora Leigh*— Aurora's struggle to reconcile what her society views as the conflicting demands of "woman" and "poet"—Eliot's *own* project seems to be an attempt to reconcile these opposing terms. Eliot praises the poem for embracing "so wide a range of thought and emotion," but immediately adds "Mrs. Browning is, perhaps, the first woman who has produced a work which exhibits all the *peculiar powers* without the *negations of her sex.*"[51] The statement is fraught with internal contradictions which underlie both Eliot's unquestioning acceptance here of the woman poet's condition as *anomalous,* and her desire to argue 'normalcy' for EBB.

Eliot, who clearly reads *Aurora Leigh* in the context of *women's poetry,* simultaneously asserts and negates this very association by taking the poem to be *exceptional* in terms of the class to which she nonetheless claims it belongs. Eliot thus paradoxically chooses to

praise the poem by associating it with a literary class she views as essentially *defective*; *Aurora Leigh's* singularity lies in its excellence ("peculiar powers") and its avoidance of the "negations" characteristic of women's poetry. The paradox, as Eliot's further comments reveal, is in effect a double bind. Eager to make EBB conform to an ideal of femininity, yet driven to recognize EBB's 'masculine' achievement, Eliot declares *Aurora Leigh* exceptional in that it "superadds to masculine vigour, breadth, and culture, feminine subtlety of perception, feminine quickness of sensibility, and feminine tenderness." This vision of harmonious co-existence notwithstanding, one hears a distinct echo of Aurora's own agonized self-awareness in Eliot's observation that "it is difficult to point to a woman of genius who is not either too little feminine or too exclusively so."[52] The comment shows Eliot's characterization of women's poetry (as marked by "peculiar powers" and "negations") to be a double-edged sword, for while it implies that excellence is *threatened* by the feminine character (of the poet and the poetry alike), it also suggests that excellence *threatens* femininity, being masculine in nature. While this view of "Genius" as either incapacitated by or injurious to femininity is fiercely attacked by Aurora in the poem, it remains unchallenged by Eliot in her review. Wishing to erase all traces of conflict, Eliot merely succeeds in reiterating the terms of the double bind when she declares EBB to be "the greater poet because she is intensely a poetess."[53]

The argument put forth by Eliot in the *Westminister Review* article will prove to be a stock one with sympathetic reviewers of EBB's generation. While Aurora is often disliked by these reviewers—who use this dislike to justify an unwillingness to deal with the issues raised by her character and by the poem—EBB is loudly hailed as a supreme *poetess*. By regarding her canon as maintaining a perfect *balance* between feminine characteristics and artistic exigencies, these reviewers covered up or silenced the poem's disturbing questioning of both terms of the opposition.

III

Clearly, then, a major preoccupation of EBB's contemporary reviewers was with her position within what to them was a recognizable tradition of women's poetry. Here, again, we witness in the criticism a dramatization of a conflict articulated by EBB in her poetry and elsewhere. In an oft-quoted letter to Chorley, EBB writes "Where is our poetess before Joanna Baillie—poetess in the true sense? ...I look everywhere for grandmothers and find none."[54] In *Aurora Leigh*, Aurora often speaks in the feminine plural "we," but when she speaks

of the poets it is in the masculine; in Book V, for example, she contemplates the fortunes of her fellow-poets: "Graham," "Belmore," and "Mark Gage" (11.505-511). Reviewing *Aurora Leigh* for the *North British Review* in 1857, Coventry Patmore unwittingly dramatizes this ambivalence when he writes:

> [in *Aurora Leigh*] the development of her [Aurora's] powers as a poetess is elaborately depicted; but as Mrs. Browning is herself almost the only modern example of such development, the story is uninteresting from its very singularity.[55]

Patmore's pronouncement is intriguing. Given his active involvement in periodical reviewing, it is highly unlikely that he was unaware of the women poets publishing in the first decades of the century.[56] He was certainly familiar with the most eminent contemporary poets included in Jane Williams' *The Literary Women of England* (1861): Felicia Hemans and Laetitia Elizabeth Landon.[57] Indeed, Patmore's statement will not bear close scrutiny and seems to conceal more than it discloses. Firstly, Patmore's verdict of singularity here is clearly tautological, for it is his initial description of the story of *Aurora Leigh* as one concerning the development of a *poetess* that enables him to make the charge of singularity. Since, however, Patmore is at no point in the review either concerned with EBB's exploration of the dilemma of the woman poet in *Aurora Leigh* or with the way in which Aurora's story deviates from the male poetic pattern, we have to conclude that his classification does not relate directly to the poem's thematics. Rather, Patmore's perception of singularity has its roots in a bias extrinsic to the work itself—a bias that is, however, dramatized in the poem—by which the sex of the author *a priori* colours the reading of the work itself. For Patmore this singularity is doubly magnified in *Aurora Leigh*, for both the actual author and the fictional poet-narrator are women.

The presuppositions (the 'unsaid') underlying Patmore's argument become all the more evident as we re-read the review's expository paragraph. Patmore's initial statement already indicates that his concern is not with the "development of her [EBB's or Aurora's] powers as a poetess," but rather with EBB's (and by implication Aurora's) *singularity* relative to the very class the existence of which he in effect denies: that of *women poets.* As it clearly transpires from this opening paragraph, the singularity lies with EBB rather than with the story, bearing not so much on the *poem* as on the *poet*. I quote this first paragraph in full:

> The poetical reputation of Mrs. Browning, late Miss Barrett, has been growing slowly, until it has reached a height which has never before

> been attained by any modern poetess though several others have had wider circles of readers. An *intellect* of a very *unusual* order has been ripened by an *education* scarcely less *unusual for a woman*, and Mrs. Browning now honourably enjoys the title of a poetess in her own right, and not merely by courtesy.[58]

It is of prime importance that although in the body of the article Patmore finds some of EBB's poetry deserving to rank with the very best of Milton and Wordsworth, in these very opening lines EBB is chiefly introduced as a "poetess," and in the context of women's literary achievements. The contrast set up in these lines is clear-cut: a female tradition lacking in "intellect" and "education," to which the title of poetry is affixed "merely by courtesy," is set against this particular woman poet (EBB) whose "intellect" and "education," as well as "poetical reputation" honourably gained, thus render her an "unusual" woman: singular, different. The scheme is but another reiteration of the double bind: while the "usual" woman can only be a fake poet—enjoying "the title of poetess ... merely by courtesy"—to "honourably enjoy the title" is "unusual for a *woman*" (emphasis added). While Patmore's review thus perpetuates the terms of the double bind, it remains totally oblivious to the poem's own articulation of the woman poet's predicament. A recognition of Aurora's agonizing quest for an harmonious selfhood in which "poet" and "woman" will be reconciled is totally missing from Patmore's rather extensive plot-summary.

Significantly, Patmore raves about *Casa Guidi Windows* (1851) which he believes "the happiest of Mrs. Browning's performances, because it makes no pretensions to high artistic character, and is really 'a *simple* story of *personal* impression'."[59] Conveniently echoing EBB's own words, Patmore twists them to support the dominant view of women's literature as expressive of the feminine character: simple (unsophisticated, 'natural') and personal (lacking in intellectual breadth and generalization). Accordingly, he finds it to be the chief misfortune of *Aurora Leigh* that it is "written chiefly for the advocacy of distinct 'convictions upon Life and Art'." As it soon becomes clear, however, this objection owes more to Patmore's self-avowed "*dissent* ... from certain of the views advocated,"[60] than from any coherent theory of poetic excellence. That Patmore dotes on these points of contention even before embarking on what he calls a "simple analysis" of the poem, and that these objections constitute the sole properly critical venture in the whole review, further confirm us in attributing his ambivalence (towards the poem) to an ideological conflict. Patmore charges: "We think that 'conventions,' which are society's unwritten laws, are condemned in too sweeping and unexamining a

style."[61] His indignation at the condemnation of one such "unwritten law" is evident in his comment on the passage in *Aurora Leigh* (Bk. I, 11.396-413) which describes what Patmore inaccurately calls "Aurora's English school program" (Aurora is, in fact, educated at home by her aunt); these lines, announces Patmore, together "with many hundreds of lines like them, have certainly no right to be called verse."[62] We will do well here to remember that the passage alluded to culminates in one of the most poignant criticisms levelled by Aurora at the accepted view of the 'womanly' woman.[63] In a hardly veiled attack on Patmore's own ecstatic portrayal of the ideal of Victorian womanhood in *The Angel in the House* (1854-6)—an ideal affirming female subservience to male power and desire—EBB has Aurora revolt against (and parody) the teachings of "a score of books on womanhood," books that preach women's

> ... angelic reach
> Of virtue, chiefly used to sit and darn,
> And fatten household sinners, — their, in brief,
> Potential faculty in everything
> Of abdicating power in it.
> (I, 11.438-442)

Patmore's choice of this passage as an example of flawed *form* is strategic, for it serves the double purpose of disguising an ideological conflict as an aesthetic judgment, while also silencing the opponent by displacing the focus of critical attention. Ultimately, Patmore's irritation at *Aurora Leigh* stems from his profound disapproval of EBB's critique of the traditionalist discourse on woman, and is aggravated by his recognition that this critique indeed involves, directly or indirectly, the social order at large, social "conventions."

A common note in contemporary assessments of *Aurora Leigh* is one of irritation with the *difference* of EBB's tale, a rejection of what are perceived to be the poem's peculiarities which are "not mere deviations from conventional practice."[64] These deviations—from gender conventions as well as genre conventions—the critics found unsettling and offensive. We glimpse an explanation of this hostile critical disposition in William Caldwell Roscoe's 1857 essay on EBB. In a lengthy theoretical preamble to his discussion of *Aurora Leigh*, Roscoe writes:

> The greatest poets have been these whose spirits are set in such fine harmony with the world of things outside themselves, that you can scarcely say whether they breath their own music, or it is breathed out of them by the influences which surround them.[65]

For Roscoe, as for the other critics reviewed here, great art speaks with the voice of the many (not the actual many, but the voice of accepted truth), while the display of "discord," and "conscious irreverence"[66] is a mark of personal eccentricity. Since, for Roscoe, EBB fails in the poet's missions to use "himself to express other *men*," since she fails to articulate "those deeper realities which underlie all the ages of men," she is, irremediably (by his logic), an eccentric who can sing only of herself: "she gives no voice to the world around her. It is herself she is pressed to utter. And this is not only the unconscious, but the direct and conscious aim of her striving .... Mrs. Browning uses all things to express herself."[67] What is occluded in this reading is precisely the difference of EBB's project. For in *Aurora Leigh* EBB's direct and conscious aim is indeed *not* to express other *men*, but rather to speak of women, creativity, desire, motherhood. Hers is indeed a tale of discord, of protest and struggle; hers is a tale irreverently critical of those oppressive "deeper realities which underlie all the ages of men." It is a refusal to recognize the import, the value and consequence of this difference which marks nineteenth-century readings of *Aurora Leigh*.

Reading through the critical literature on *Aurora Leigh*, one is overwhelmed by the persistence of various strategies by which the critical tradition has bypassed, remained silent on (or silenced) the poem's exploration of the position of woman in Victorian society in general, and the predicament of the woman writer in particular. Critics have refused to grant the poem due critical attention, claiming the "impossibility that women can ever attain to the first rank in imaginative composition."[68] They have justified a reluctance to engage with the poem's political program by announcing; "We are strongly of opinion that, for the peace and welfare of society, it is a good and wholesome rule that women should not interfere with politics."[69] They have excused their unwillingness to seriously consider Aurora's challenge to accepted notions of 'woman' and 'poet' by declaring her "an essentially defective character" who lacks in "real warmth of heart, true womanly tenderness."[70] Another reviewer protests: "Aurora's self-consciousness repels—her speculations do not much interest us."[71] Finally, these critics have managed to condemn and silence EBB's daring program without provoking much opposition, by praising EBB for her moving portrayal of 'true' womanhood in characters such as Marian, whom the reviewers invariably find "especially attractive." In their effusive tributes to Marian the critics celebrate the woman they would have liked EBB and Aurora to be, the woman Aurora's aunt wants her to be (the woman who is not EBB's Marian): a woman whose "shrinking, clinging, half-reverence, half love she feels for Romney, combine to exhibit a winning beauty and grace."[72]

IV

A peculiar anxiety is evident in nineteenth-century studies of *Aurora Leigh*—yet another re-enactment of a conflict dramatized in the poem—as the critics, who are compelled to acknowledge EBB's excellence, remain reluctant to accept the implications of this judgment for their theory of an inferior women's poetry. The spectre of a deep-rooted prejudice—that which holds that "a woman cannot be a great poet"[73]—haunts all nineteenth-century readings of EBB's poetry. Thus, Eric Robertson prefaces his *English Poetesses: A Series of Critical Biographies* (1883) with a meditation on the "distinction between the poetical capabilities of the sexes," claiming that his "psychological analysis" has revealed "a sexual distinction lying in the very soul."[74] It is in this difference of psychological make-up that Robertson finds the reason for male superiority in art. This 'analytical finding', however, is continuously challenged in the course of Robertson's discussions by the strengths of the poetic material under consideration, giving rise to a peculiar anxiety in the critic who obsessively re-iterates the Ur-question of his study both in the introduction—"have women been clearly excelled by men in poetry?"[75]—and in the opening of his essay on EBB. On broaching the subject of EBB's poetry he reflects:

> Critically to approach the work of EBB is to test once for all the question whether, throughout the literature of the whole world, there is any evidence to show that woman can equal man in the sustained expression of poetical ideas.[76]

Early on in *Aurora Leigh*, Aurora undertakes such a challenge to prove "if indeed / A woman's soul, like man's, be wide enough / To carry the whole octave" (II, 11.1184-6). And, as Dorothy Mermin has recently argued, "before the poem ends she has done so."[77] For Robertson, however, the predetermined answer to his questions can only be in the negative: "women have always been inferior to men as writers of poetry; and they always will be if the explanation here attempted is the correct one." The "explanation" involves Robertson's affirmation of "a very old-fashioned doctrine ... that children are the best poems Providence meant women to produce."[78] Not surprisingly, the highest praise that Robertson can bestow on EBB's poetry is that it is expressive of feminine attributes, chief among which is the maternal sentiment. Rather than regard EBB's poetry (with its intellectual thrust) as evidence of the changing nature of women's poetry, the critic is willing to sacrifice its excellence by condemning its presumption, so that his view of the inferiority of women's poetry can remain intact.

Exceptional among nineteenth-century appreciations of the poem, George Barnett Smith's essay of 1876 offers an altogether different perspective on the issue of EBB's singularity within the female tradition. Unlike his predecessors, Smith believes that "one grand result of Mrs. Browning's literary career has been to disprove the assertion that women canot write true poetry."[79] Smith shares EBB's view regarding the absence of literary "grandmothers," and indeed echoes her own conviction that "the divine spirit ... never pass[ed] ... over the lips of a woman,"[80] in his claim that "no woman, as yet, has written a great epic, or dramatic poetry of the highest order; ... genius, the dower of the gods, in its most transcendent manifestation, has, up to the present, been bestowed [only] upon man."[81] Unlike Patmore and numerous other reviewers, however, Smith does *not* attribute woman's failure to produce great art to a *feminine presence* — to an inherent deficiency peculiarly feminine—but rather to an *absence*: to a constricting "personal sphere" and the absence of "experience — which, in its greatest depths and most extended scope, has hitherto largely pertained to man."[82] Since Smith's valorization of a "wider personal sphere" and "experience" is not gender-bound, his praise of EBB's poetry—in which he detects both—remains unqualified. Interestingly, Smith's concluding statement becomes a re-enactment of yet another moment in *Aurora Leigh,* but this time it is the poem's climactic resolution that is dramatized in the critic's interpretive act. The poem's conclusion celebrates a fusion of self and text, of eros and poetic telos, as Romney, echoing Robert Browning's words in the first of his love letters to the poet, speaks of his love for Aurora and of Aurora's book:

> A man may love a woman perfectly,
> And yet by no means ignorantly maintain
> A thousand women have not larger eyes:
> Enough that she alone has looked at him
> With eyes that, large or small, have won his soul.
> And so, this book, Aurora, — so, your book.
> (VIII, 11.292-297)

In his concluding remarks, Smith assumes Romney's role in pronouncing the literary women's apotheosis: "Her [EBB's] apotheosis follows of Divine right with that of all the leaders of mankind: God endowed her, and we exalt her."[83]

V

Although not exactly exalting EBB, Virginia Woolf's reading of *Aurora Leigh* exemplifies that change in the critical climate which would eventually lead to the renaissance in EBB scholarship that we

are experiencing today. Woolf's 1932 essay on *Aurora Leigh* is marked by profound ambivalence, an ambivalence perhaps best understood in the context of Woolf's own anxiety over gender and writing. In *A Room of One's Own* Woolf declares that the first sentence that has to be written about the subject of women and writing is that "it is fatal for anyone who writes to think of their sex,"[84] since she regards all manifestations of this peculiarly female anxiety of authorship to be the flaw in the center which has spoiled women's artistic expressions. And yet the book itself is a powerful, empowering attempt to think the difference of women's writing, a motivated search for an artistic language that would be suited "for a woman's use."[85] Similarly, in her essay on *Aurora Leigh* Woolf balks at EBB's "pervasive ... [female, personal] presence" in the poem, but immediately retracts this charge, reminding her readers (but indeed herself) that at the time of the poem's conception "the connection between a woman's art and a woman's life was unnaturally close."[86] The essay abounds with such contradictory messages; while Woolf, for example, first goes into considerable length to argue that EBB's mind was "not the mind to profit by solitude," and that consequently "the long years of seclusion had done her irreparable damage as an artist," she finally concludes by hailing EBB as the creator of Aurora, "the true daughter of her age."[87]

It soon becomes clear that Woolf's ambivalence arises out of her particularly *acute* perception of the poem, for it is where her insights are most penetrating that her ambivalence is most pronounced. Declaring *Aurora Leigh* a failed *novel,* Woolf recognized its unique form as "one long soliloquy" in which "the only character that is known and the only story that is told us are the character and story of Aurora Leigh herself." This story Woolf further sees to involve Aurora's "conflict as artist and woman, her longing for knowledge and freedom."[88] It is this very story, the story of her own literary mother, as it were, which unsettles Woolf. Shifting to a metaphorical register, Woolf gives away her sense of experiencing, through her reading of *Aurora Leigh*, her own birth as a literary woman. For Woolf, the work's "genius ... floats diffused and fluctuating in some pre-natal state waiting the final stroke of creative power to bring it into being." The poem thus becomes for her a locus of conception as well as the birth-place of the woman artist. Reading *Aurora Leigh* she witnesses the woman poet giving birth to herself—and her daugher—in a true union of "art" and "life," of "flesh" and "page."[89]

It is Woolf's perception of *Aurora Leigh* as a metaphorical account of the conception and birth of the woman artist which ultimately triggers her ambivalence. She writes of *Aurora Leigh*: "Stimulating and boring, ungainly and eloquent, monstrous and exquisite, all by

turns, it overwhelms and bewilders."[90] Woolf's text here—laden with oxymoronic epithets—conceals more than it discloses, sharing its secret with EBB's text (which it echoes) and with the reader who can hear the 'mother' (EBB) through the 'daughter' (Woolf). In *Aurora Leigh* young Aurora stares at her dead mother's portrait there to behold with anguish and fascination the many (oxymoronic) figures of feminity:

> In years, I mixed, confused, unconscious,
> Whatever I last read or heard or dreamed,
> Abhorrent, admirable, beautiful,
> ...
> 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.
> (I, 11.147-154)

Woolf's ambivalence is thus also Aurora's and EBB's. Theirs is the literary woman's ambivalence at inspecting her own uncertain origin, an origin both hated and beloved, by turns feared and desired. Woolf's anxiety, moreover, is as much retrospective as it is prospective. While the essay opens with an image of herself (in the editorial plural) as a reader musing over *Aurora Leigh* "with kindly condescension," as "we toy with the fringes of *our grandmother's* mantles,"[91] it ends on a note of maternal concern as Woolf wonders "why it [*Aurora Leigh*] has left no successors."[92]

Woolf's own succession as an engaged reader of EBB's poetry was immediately secured, although as late at 1969 we still encounter such intellectual atrocities as Raymond Chapman's summary of the poem in *The Victorian Debate: English Literature and Society;* Chapman tells the story of *Aurora Leigh* thus:

> The hero passes from one disaster to another, including the loss of his house in a fire and of his own sight like Charlotte Brontë's Rochester, until he finds happiness with his cousin who had originally refused him.[93]

Barbara Gelpi's recent account of the poem in a mainstream journal like *Victoria poetry* further highlights the profound change which the critical discourse on *Aurora Leigh* has undergone:

> the poem is a bildungsroman as well as a novel/poem of social concern ... Although no personal line comes through the plot, the *images* of the poem tell a separate story: not the public story of a woman poet living in Victorian society but the inner story of such a woman's feeling about herself, particularly about her femininity.[94]

In writing Aurora out of discursive existence, Chapman was merely carrying to an extreme the nineteenth-century reviewers' project of collapsing the poem and its poet-protagonist into pre-conceived notions of femininity and feminine expression. The virtual absence of the heroine from Chapman's absurd plot-summary, moreover, underscores the absence (until very recently) of any serious critical appreciation of EBB's canon within mainstream Victorian criticism. Gelpi's account, on the other hand, demonstrates a more responsible (less evasive) reading of the poem made possible, in part, by an already established tradition of women readers of the poem, from Emily Dickinson and Virginia Woolf to J.M.S. Tompkins and Adrienne Rich.[95] With these readers we find a new and different hermeneutic "configuration," a radically different horizon of historical life-world, a radically different scene of reading. For these readers *Aurora Leigh*—recognizably Victorian yet strikingly modern—has assumed the double function of a cultural event seen both as a significant episode in an ongoing struggle which is as much theirs as it was EBB's (or Aurora's), and an important lesson about future survival.[96] In a direct challenge to the nineteenth-century reviewers who sought to "trace the woman beneath the attainment," feminist readers of the poem have been engaged in the immense project of recording and illuminating EBB's own daring investigations of both poetic and artistic identities.

NOTES

1. In his important 1957 *The Life of Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (London: John Murray), Gardner Taplin offered this less-than-enthusiastic assessment of EBB's poetic achievement: "Except for a handful of her short poems, her ability to create failed to keep pace with her abundant thoughts and turbulent feelings. and so it is not altogether as a poet (although she did have many poetical qualities) that she is attractive, but as one of the greatest personalities of an age which included among other English women of unusual abilities Charlotte and Emily Bronte, George Eliot, Mrs. Gaskell, Christina Rossetti, and Florence Nightingale.... It is the quality of her life even more than her artistic achievements which will live" (p. 424). Taplin's own biography both reflected and further enhanced this critical preference for the woman over the poet, thus contributing to a climate unfavourable to a serious treatment of the poetry.
2. *"Aurora Leigh,"* *The Second Common Reader* (N.Y.: Harcourt, 1932), p. 203.
3. Even before Woolf's essay, but in a more pronounced way for decades after its publication, there existed an 'undercurrent' of serious and constructive EBB scholarship, markedly different in its approach from the popular biographies of EBB, and quite apart from mainstream Victorian criticism which, until very recently, has been virtually blind to EBB's significant contribution. Of the pre-1970 essays I find particularly illuminating the following: Martha H. Shackford, "Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*," in her *Elizabeth Barrett Browning: R.H. Horne: Two Studies* (The Wellesley Press, 1935): 5-27; Mildred Wilsey, "Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Heroine," *College English* 6, 1 (October 1944): 75-81; J.M.S. Tompkins, "*Aurora Leigh*," *The Fawcett Lecture* (University of London, Bedford College, 1961-2).
4. *Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (N.Y.: Twayne, 1972), pp. 120-125.

5. "Towards a Feminist Poetics," *Women Writing and Writing about Women*, ed. Mary Jacobus (London: Croom Helm, 1979), pp. 25-29. The discussions of *Aurora Leigh* in Ellen Moers's seminal *Literary Women* (1976), in Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's groundbreaking *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), and Cora Kaplan's excellent introduction to the 1978 edition of the poem (the first in this century!), have all contributed significantly to this critical revival. Although there are still very few book-length studies of EBB's work—the most recent ones being Rosalie Mander's *Mrs. Browning: The Story of Elizabeth Barrett* (1980) and Angela Leighton's *Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (1986)—in the past few years the presence of EBB criticism in essay collections and scholarly journals has become quite pronounced. Recent important articles include: Marxist-Feminist Literature Collective, "Women Writing: *Jane Eyre, Shirley, Villette, Aurora Leigh*," in *1848: The Sociology of Literature*, eds. F. Barker, J. Coombes, P. Hulme, C. Mercer, A. Musselwhite (University of Essex, 1978): 185-206; Helen Cooper, "Working into Light: Elizabeth Barrett Browning," in *Shakespeare's Sisters: Feminist Essays on Women Writers*, eds. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979); Kathleen Hickok, "New Yet Orthodox': The Female Characters in *Aurora Leigh*," *International Journal of Women's Studies* 3 (Sept/Oct 1980): 479-490; Barbara Gelpi, "*Aurora Leigh*: The Vocation of the Woman Poet," *Victorian Poetry* 19 (Spring 1981): 35-48; Virginia Steinmetz, "Beyond the Sun: Patriarchal Images in *Aurora Leigh*," *Studies in Browning and his Circle* 9 (Spring 1981): 18-41; Dorothy Mermin, "Genre and Gender in *Aurora Leigh*," *The Victorian Newsletter* (Spring 1986): 7-11.
6. The relationship between feminist theory and deconstructive criticism has been perceived, at least by some feminist critics, to be a problematic one; see, for example, the instructive "Dialogie" between Peggy Kamuf and Nancy K. Miller in the Summer 1982 issue of *Diacritics*. One can hardly fail to notice a familiar historical irony in the present configuration: just as women are finally coming into their own as self-conscious, self-motivated subjects, a new critical idiom pronounces the death of the subject, declaring selfhood to be a fantastic creation of a now bankrupt nineteenth century humanism (on this both Foucault and Derrida seem to agree).
7. *Aurora Leigh*, which was released simultaneously in England and the United States, enjoyed immediate popular success in both countries. In England, the poem went through three editions in the first year (1857), into its tenth edition by 1870, and into the twentieth by 1887. In New York, there was a new edition from James Miller almost every year from 1857 to 1877 (Warner Barnes, *A Bibliography of Elizabeth Barrett Browning* [University of Texas and Baylor University, 1967]).
8. In her book *Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1986)—which I saw subsequent to the completion of this essay—Angela Leighton sketches a misleading picture of the poem's reception history, uncritically accepting nineteenth-century appraisals of the poem as "unstintingly enthusiastic" (p. 3). Leighton sees EBB's reputation starting to fall only at the beginning of the twentieth century, and fails to make any connections between the nineteenth-century critics' "high acclaim" and the subsequent critical decline of *Aurora Leigh*. Leighton does, however, make a convincing argument for the importance of a number of factors influencing critical attitude in the twentieth century, namely, "the general Modernist reaction against the eminent Victorians in the 1920s and 1930s," the intellectual reaction against the sentimental interest in EBB's life which characterized turn-of-the-century biographies of her, the rise in Robert Browning's reputation, and a preoccupation (which Leighton misleadingly identifies as a *new* phenomenon) with the criterion of womanliness. Many of Leighton's observations about this last factor coincide with my own findings about nineteenth century criticism of *Aurora Leigh*, most notably regarding the damaging effects of a "prejudice in favor of the woman at the expense of the poet" (p. 4).
9. Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh, With Other Poems*, intro. by Cora Kaplan (London: The Women's Press, 1978), Book II, l. 232. All subsequent references to *Aurora Leigh* are to this edition.
10. Hans Robert Jauss, "The Alterity and Modernity of Medieval Literature," *New Literary History*, 10 (Winter 1979), p. 183.
11. H.G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, (N.Y.: The Seabury Press, 1975), p. 258.
12. Jauss, p. 222.
13. Townshend Mayer, ed. *The Letters of Elizabeth Browning to Richard Hengist Horne* (London: Richard Bentley and Son, 1877), Vol. I, pp. 157-8 and Vol. II, p. 21.
14. Mayer, Vol. II, p. 21.
15. In *Literary Women* (New York: Doubleday, 1977) Ellen Moers identifies a period in women's literary history which she calls "the epic age" (p. 21), and cites Charlotte Brontë, George Sand, and Harriet Beecher Stowe, among others, as writers of the epic age. She then

redefines *Aurora Leigh* as the *epic of the epic age,* arguing that it is an epic by virtue of its form, for the social causes that it takes up, but, most significantly, "in another sense: it is the epic of the literary woman herself" (pp. 59-60).

16. *A Room of One's Own* (New York: Granada, 1977), p. 72.
17. Noting the peculiar position of the woman poet within the literary tradition, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have suggested that the critical response to women's poetry in the nineteenth century served to inflict on the woman poet a double or even triple bind: "on the one hand, the woman poet who learns a 'just esteem' for Homer is ignored or even mocked.... On the other hand, the woman poet who does not (because she is not allowed to) study Homer is held in contempt. On the third hand, however, whatever alternative tradition the woman poet attempts to substitute for 'ancient rules' is subtly devalued" ("Introduction: Gender, Creativity, and the Woman Poet," in Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, eds., *Shakespeare's Sisters: Feminist Essays on Women Poets* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979], pp. xxi-xxii).
18. My articulation of this aspect of the critical reception of *Aurora Leigh* is indebted to Shoshana Felman's "Turning the Screw of Interpretation," *Yale French Studies* 55/6 (1977), pp. 94-207. Felman writes in her breathtaking account of the critical reception of James' "The Turn of the Screw":

> the critical interpretation, in other words, not only elucidates the text but also reproduces it dramatically, unwittingly *participates in it.* Through its very reading, the text, so to speak, acts itself out. As a reading effect, this inadvertent 'acting out' is indeed uncanny; whichever way the reader turns, he can but be turned by the text, he can but *perform* it by *repeating* it. (p. 101; emphasis hers)

I had initially thought of the early reviews as following a pattern similar to that observed by Carol Ohmann in relation to the critical reception of Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights.* Ohman notes that in the critical accounts "the novel has indeed become stereotypical. But ... the stereotypes are imposed from without rather than dramatized within the novel itself" ("Emily Bronte in the Hands of the Male Critics," *College English,* 32 [May 1971], pp. 906-913). I have now come to recognize the crucial links between the stereotypes imposed on the poem by the critics and scenes dramatized in the poem itself.

19. This critical blindness on the part EBB's nineteenth century critics has as its correlate a glaring oversight in mainstream Victorian scholarship up until very recently. Isobel Armstrong's 1972 *Victorian Scrutinies: Reviews of Poetry 1830-1870* (London: Athlone Press, 1972) is a case in point. Following in the footsteps of her 1969 *The Major Victorian Poets: Reconsiderations, Victorian Scrutinies* is aimed at examining critical reviews of Victorian poetry in order to suggest "what kinds of demands were made on the poet during this period ... and to give a coherent indication of attitudes to poetry at this time [1830 to 1870]" (p. 1). Not surprisingly, given the state of Victorian criticism in the seventies, no mention is made of the preoccupations which so explicitly mark Victorian reviews of poetry by *women.* The gap in Armstrong's formulation of the chief Victorian critical concerns is twofold. It involves both a failure to articulate the different critical standards by which Victorian women poets were evaluated, and a failure to grasp the women poets' own preoccupation with a poetics of the female subject.
20. Chorley wrote in the *Athenaeum* for June 1, 1850: "there is no living poet of either sex who can prefer a higher claim than Mrs. Elizabeth Barrett Browning" (p. 585).
21. "The Poetry of Elizabeth Barrett Browning," in *The Poems of Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (N.Y.: C.S. Francis and Co., 1854), p. x.
22. Ibid., p. xii, emphasis added.
23. Ibid., p. xiii.
24. Ibid., p. xvi.
25. Ibid., p. xvi.
26. *The Athenaeum* (Saturday, November 22, 1856), p. 1425.
27. Ibid., p. 1425.
28. Ibid., p. 1425.
29. Ibid., p. 1425.
30. Ibid., p. 1427.
31. Ibid., p. 1425.
32. Ibid., p. 1425.
33. "Mrs. Barrett Browning: *Aurora Leigh," Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* (January 1857), p. 41.

34. "Archimedes and the Paradox of Feminist Criticism," *Signs*, 6, No. 4, (Summer 1981), p. 586.
35. *Blackwood's*, p. 41.
36. Ibid., p. 25.
37. Ibid., p. 32.
38. Ibid., p. 25.
39. Ibid., pp. 32-3.
40. Ibid., p. 33.
41. Ibid., p. 36.
42. Ibid., p. 40.
43. Ibid., p. 34.
44. Ibid., p. 37.
45. Ibid., p. 39.
46. Ibid., p. 36.
47. Ibid., p. 41; p. 39.
48. In Gordon S. Haight, ed., *The George Eliot Letters* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954), p. 278.
49. Ibid., p. 282 (letter of December 1856). In another letter (June 1857) to the same correspondent, Sara Sophia Hennell, Eliot writes: "We [herself and Lewes] are reading 'Aurora Leigh' for the third time with more enjoyment than ever. I know no book that gives me a deeper sense of communion with a large as well as beautiful mind" (p. 342).
50. "Belles Lettres," *Westminster Review* (January 1857), p. 307; emphasis hers.
51. Ibid., p. 306, emphasis added.
52. Ibid., p. 306.
53. Ibid., p. 306.
54. F.G. Kenyon, ed., *The Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, (N.Y.: Macmillan Company, 1896), pp. 230-2.
55. "Mrs. Browning's Poems," *North British Review*, 52 (February 1857), p. 242.
56. Patmore's involvement in literary journalism is discussed by Sister Mary A. Weinig in her chapter "Literary Journalist and Poet Librarian" (*Coventry Patmore* [Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1981]), and J.C. Reid in *The Mind and Art of Coventry Patmore* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957).
57. It should be noted here that both poets were particularly important to EBB, as is perhaps best demonstrated by her 1835 poem "Felicia Hemans—dedicated to L.E.L. ([Laetitia Elizabeth Landon], referring to her monody on the poetess." The poem originally appeared in the *New Monthly Magazine*, XLV (September 1835), and was later published in EBB's 1838 *Poems*. Appropriately, the poem concerns the predicament of the woman poet, and in it EBB argues, against Landon, that however great the woman's suffering (loss in love), it is justified by the "poet's fire" and a privileged "vision."
58. Patmore, *North British Review*, p. 237; emphasis added.
59. Ibid., p. 240.
60. Ibid., pp. 240-41, emphasis added.
61. Ibid., p. 241.
62. Ibid., p. 242.
63. I am indebted here to Paul Turner who has suggested, in "Aurora Versus the Angel," *R.E.S.* 24, 95 (July 1984): 227-235, that the violence of Patmore's reaction to *Aurora Leigh* may be explained by Patmore's realization that Aurora's reference to "a score of books on womanhood" is a direct attack on his own recently published (and far less popular) *The Angel in the House*.
64. "*Aurora Leigh*," *Westminster Review*, (October 1857), p. 101.
65. *Poems and Essays*, ed. Richard Holt Hutton (London: Chapman and Hall, 1860), Vol. II, p. 85. The essay originally appeared in the *National Review* (April 1857).
66. Ibid., pp. 91-2.
67. Ibid., p. 86; p. 99.
68. "The Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning," *Edinburgh Review* (October 1861), p. 533.
69. "Poetic Aberrations," *Blackwood's Magazine* (April 1860), p. 490.
70. Peter Bayne, "Mrs. Barrett Browning," in *Essays in Biography and Criticism* (N.Y.: John W. Lovell, 1857), p. 195.
71. *Westminster Review*, October 1857, p. 409.
72. Ibid., p. 409.
73. *Saturday Review* (December 27, 1856), quoted in Taplin, p. 338.
74. E. Robertson, *English Poetesses* (London: Cassel, 1883), p. xiii.
75. Ibid., p. xv.

76. Ibid., p. 255.
77. "Genre and Gender in *Aurora Leigh*," p. 9.
78. Robertson, pp. xiv-xv.
79. *Poets and Novelists* (N.Y.: D. Appleton, 1876), p. 106.
80. Kenyon, *The Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, (N.Y.: Macmillan Company, 1898), Vol. I, pp. 229-232.
81. Smith, p. 106.
82. Ibid., p. 107.
83. Ibid., p. 109.
84. *A Room of One's Own* (N.Y.: Granada, 1977), p. 99.
85. Ibid., p. 73.
86. "Aurora Leigh" *The Second Common Reader*, p. 206.
87. Ibid., pp. 207-212.
88. Ibid., p. 212.
89. Ibid., p. 208.
90. Ibid., p. 208.
91. Ibid., p. 203; emphasis added.
92. Ibid., p. 213.
93. *The Victorian Debate* (New York: Basic Books, 1968), p. 179.
94. "The Vocation of the Woman Poet," p. 36.
95. On the profound impact of EBB's poetry on Dickinson see Jack L. Capps, *Emily Dickinson Reading 1836-1886*. As a woman and a poet, Adrienne Rich knows to appreciate *Aurora Leigh* and Dickinson's poetry as unique nineteenth century examples of the kind of poetry "which pierces so far beyond the ideology of the 'feminine' and the conventions of womanly feeling" ("Versuvius at Home: The Power of Emily Dickinson," *Parnassus*, 5 [Fall-Winter 1976], p. 66). J. M. S. Tompkins, "Aurora Leigh" (The Fawcett Lecture, 1961-2) is remarkable for its analysis of what Tompkins regards as the poem's "master-theme: the woman with a vocation."
96. Feminist critics like Cora Kaplan, Elaine Showalter, and the writers of the Marxist-Feminist Literary Collective (MFLC) have suggested that *Aurora Leigh* should be seen as a major achievement in a project that is as much the critic's as it was the poet's. Indeed, already for Porter and Clarke in 1900, *Aurora Leigh* represented a major step forward in a "struggle"—which was also their struggle—for "an enlightened egotism of women" (*The Complete Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning* [N.Y.: T.Y. Crowell Company, 1900], Vol. IV, pp. xi-xii). Similarly, the MFLC writers consider *Aurora Leigh* to partake of women's struggle everywhere to gain "access to full subjectively in culture" (p. 201).