

A Woman Poet in Process: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*

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Abstract

This paper analyses Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* within the context of Victorian poetry and the attitudes towards women poets by examining contemporary debates regarding the position of women poets in the male-dominated literary tradition. In *Aurora Leigh*, Barrett Browning narrates the story of a young girl who aspires to be a poet and displays the obstacles Aurora faces and overcomes. In Aurora's journey of becoming a poet, Barrett Browning also reveals and comments on Victorian values, norms, ways of living, poetic discussions, and the woman question. In this regard, this paper analyses Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* by scrutinising Victorian attitudes towards the concept of a woman poet and also various contemporary debates on poetry and social changes.

Keywords: Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, woman poet, the woman question, Victorian Poetry

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Yetişmekte Olan Bir Kadın Şair: Elizabeth Barrett Browning'in *Aurora Leigh* Adlı Eseri

Öz

Bu makale Elizabeth Barrett Browning'in *Aurora Leigh* başlıklı eserini Viktoryen şiir geleneği ve kadın şairlere karşı tutumlar bağlamında kadın şairlerin erkek egemen edebi gelenekteki yerleriyle ilgili çağdaş tartışmaları çözümlenerek analiz etmektedir. Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*'de şair olmak isteyen genç bir kızın hikayesini anlatır ve *Aurora*'nın karşılaştığı ve üstesinden geldiği engelleri gösterir. *Aurora*'nın şair olma yolculuğunda, Barrett Browning aynı zamanda Viktoryen değerleri, normları, yaşam tarzlarını, şiir üzerine tartışmaları, ve kadın sorununu açığa çıkarır ve bunlar üzerine yorum yapar. Bu bağlamda, bu makale Elizabeth Barrett Browning'in *Aurora Leigh* başlıklı eserini Viktoryen kadın şair kavramına karşı tutumlar ve şiir ve sosyal değişimler üzerine yapılan çeşitli çağdaş tartışmaları irdeleyerek inceler.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, kadın şair, kadın sorunu, Viktoryen şiir.

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Victorian Age, generally defined as the age of conflicts, reflected its contradictory nature to its poetic tradition. In other words, there was an ongoing dispute among the poets, some of whom claimed poetry should reflect contemporary and thoroughly Victorian issues while others believed that poetry should turn to past traditions. Among these discussions, Victorian poetry grew up prominent women poets although the words "female" and "authorship" were still considered incompatible, and writing was regarded as a self-exposition of and a direct attack to woman's chastity.

One of the extraordinary women poets is Elizabeth Barrett Browning with her unusual education in the Classics and Neoclassical literature. Barrett Browning, despite not disguising herself with a pseudonym, "took the male poetic tradition as her starting point" (Sadun, 1998, p. iv). By employing themes and literary forms of this highly patriarchal tradition, Barrett Browning as a woman poet escapes from the pressures of Victorian society and forms an opportunity to manipulate the male-dominated tradition to her benefit. She speaks within and against Victorian societal norms and morals by making use of their own devices. Therefore, she steals from male poetic tradition, which condemns women as writers, and she transforms what she stole into a strong female voice. Thus, she can be defined as a "thie[f] of language" (Herrmann qtd. in Ostricker, 1982, p. 69), and *Aurora Leigh* (1856) has generally considered her most significant "theft" (emphasis mine).

Aurora Leigh, a novel in verse, is the story of a young girl born into an English father and a Tuscan mother, who aspires to be a poet. Although this plot outline seems familiar, it is actually original. Even before writing *Aurora Leigh*, Barrett Browning mentions her intention in a letter to her husband Robert Browning:

[M]y chief intention just now is the writing of a sort of novel-poem [. . .] running into the midst of our conventions, & rushing into drawing room & the like “where angels fear to tread”; & so, meeting face to face & without mask the Humanity of the age, & speaking the truth as I conceive of it, out plainly. That is my intention. It is not mature enough yet to be called a plan. I waiting for a story, & I won’t take one, because I want to make one, & I like to make my own stories, because then I can take liberties with them in the treatment (qtd. Cooper, 1988, p. 146).

As Barrett Browning clearly states in her letter, she will not take a story, but will create one herself. However, it is undeniable that she is influenced by certain writers among which there are George Sand, de Stael, Mrs. Gaskell, and Charlotte Bronte (Cooper, 1988, p. 146). Its originality lies, as Helen Cooper suggests, in its uniting woman and poet in a story essentially of her own (p. 146). Moreover, “this early letter identifies the crucial qualities of what came to be *Aurora Leigh*: its insistence on modernity, its defiance of conventions —the female poet questions the sex/gender economy and writes of rape, prostitution, illegitimacy, and the working class; and its location of heroic action in ‘drawing rooms’” (Cooper, 1988, p. 146).

Aurora Leigh, containing nine books, touches upon contemporary issues such as the woman question and elucidates Victorian concept of woman poet by recording and reflecting Victorian way of living. After the death of her mother and father, Aurora is sent to England to live with her aunt where “all things blurred/And dull and vague” (pp. 265-66), and “Shakespeare and his mates absorb the light” (*AL I*, pp. 266-67). Familiar with Shakespeare, Aurora depicts her aunt as a cold, serious, and over-controlled woman. She is characterised as an embodiment of Victorian propriety. Resembling her way of life to “a sort of cage-bird life” (*AL I*, p. 305), Aurora explains and criticises how women are imprisoned in domestic spheres. Her strict aunt’s Victorian manners attempt once to imprison Aurora to the same cage with the education of Victorian morals and womanly graces:

I read a score of books on womanhood
 To prove, if women do not think at all,
 They may teach thinking (to a maiden aunt
 Or else the author), - books that boldly assert
 Their right of comprehending husband’s talk
 When not too deep, and even of answering
 With pretty “may it please you,” or “so it is” (*AL I*, pp. 427-34).

Aurora is intended to be taught submission and obedience. Traditional gender roles are defined with representative woman figure, namely, angel in the house. Aurora’s aunt is characterised as the embodiment of this concept of woman. However, there is also an introduction of a new woman, “a wild bird” (*AL I*, p. 310), who goes far away from what her aunt wants her to be. She will achieve to be a woman and a poet in the end. She chooses to be a wild bird rather than an English lady who is submissive and obedient because

she has been shaped by her father's education since she was a little girl. She has been educated in isolation in the mountains, which provides freedom from societal norms. As a young girl, Aurora is aware of the fact that her mind and soul are different from her peers:

[. . .] Thus my father gave,
 And thus as did the women formerly
 By young Achilles, when they pinned a veil
 Across the boy's audacious front, and swept
 With tuneful laughs the silver-fretted rocks,
 He wrapped his little daughter in his large
 Man's doublet, careless did it fit or no (*AL I*, pp. 722-28).

Aurora resembles herself to Achilles, who was once disguised as a girl and lived among the daughters of Lycomedes and avoided joining the Greeks in their war against Troy (Sadun, 1998, p. 80). She believes that it is impossible to deny her true nature, which was formed in Italy by her father. Thus, she implies that it is her destiny to be a poet by accentuating the impossibility of rejecting her true self. However, Aurora assesses her true self as a masculine one because of her education given by her father and his books she read. Because she lacks a woman role model, she learned what woman is from these male-voiced works. Due to these representations of woman by male authors, Aurora comes to believe that "being a woman [. . .] becomes synonymous with frailty, weakness, and submission" (Sadun, 1998, p. 80). Thus, she associates femininity as a weak faculty that will prevent her from writing. Accordingly, she wants to denounce weakness brought about by her gender:

[. . .] Put away
 This weakness. If, as I have just now said,
 Ignoring the poor conscious trouble of blood
 That is called a woman merely (*AL VII*, pp. 228-32).

Recognising her gender as a troublesome obstacle, Aurora does not want to yield to such hindrances. Therefore, she tries to suppress the signs of femininity such as frailty as far as she learned from the books. Moreover, she also creates similar images of woman from what she read:

Ghost, fiend, and angel, fairy, witch, and sprite,
 A dauntless Muse who eyes a dreadful Fate,
 A loving Psyche who loses sight of Love,
 A still Medusa with mild milky brows
 All curdled and all clothed upon with snakes
 Whose slime fall fast as sweat will; or anon
 Our Lady of the Passion, stabbed with swords
 Where the Babe sucked; or Lamia in her first
 Moonlighted pallor, ere she shrunk and blinked
 And shuddering wriggled down to the unclean;
 Or my own mother (*AL I*, pp. 154-64).

Aurora designs images of woman similar to what she read before and realises that there is no representation of women as poets, but as Muse, Psyche, Medusa, Lamia, and Madonna. Acknowledging that woman's identity is culturally shaped, she comes to recognition of the fact that women are imprisoned by "such literary representations as object[s] of narratives formed from men's terror or adoration of her" (Cooper, 1988, p. 156). These women are depicted in art as "mere abstractions devoid of life" (Sadun, 1998, p. 84). Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar also define these stereotypical images as the "images of woman killed into art" (1979, p. 18). For instance, Aurora's mother

is described with colour imagery: white in face and red in dress (David, 1999, p. 172). This red/white imagery may be interpreted as the stereotypical woman imagery wicked/innocent or dangerous/safe. Combining these two colours in her mother's image, Aurora may want to put emphasis on the fact that "the apparently competing images of woman as heavenly and earthly cohere" (Zonana, 1989, p. 248).

To be able to be released from these rigid stereotypical images, Aurora is determined to be a poet, and her meditation upon the art of poetry is mostly dealt with in Book 5 in which Barrett Browning builds her own 'female *Ars Poetica*'. Aurora frequently makes use of the masculine in herself to find the strength to write in the masculine tradition:

[. . .] This vile woman's way
 Of trailing garments, shall not trip me up:
 I will have no traffic with personal thought
 In art's pure temple
 [. . .] Art for art,
 And good for God Himself, the essential Good!
 We'll keep our aims sublime, our eyes erect,
 Although our woman hands should shake and fail;
 And if we fail [. . .] But must we? (*AL V*, pp. 59-73).

Aurora is aware of the fact that women poets are systematically excluded from literary tradition, however, she does not resign from her dream and challenges the system. For her, this challenge requires self-sacrifice, which is denouncing her femininity. Nevertheless, she is courageous enough to make her voice heard. She takes a bold step by her wish to write an epic, which is considered the highest genre. However, the ongoing discussion in Victorian poetry tends to state that, "[. . .] epics have died out / With Agamemnon and

the goat-nursed gods" (*AL V*, pp. 139-40). Aurora rejects this idea and suggests that every age has its potential to be heroic. For Aurora, poetry should deal with the present age instead of following romantic and past legacies. She calls for realism and asserts that poets should write about their age:

Nay, if there's room for poets in this world
A little overgrown (I think there is),
Their sole work is to represent the age,
Their age, not Charlemagne's, - this live, throbbing age,
That brawls, cheats, maddens, calculates, aspires,
And spends more passion, more heroic heat,
Betwixt the mirrors of it drawing-rooms,
Than Roland with his knights at Roncesvalles (*AL V*, pp. 200-207).

Aurora's insistence on reflecting the present age rather than writing about past ages may result from that the past is always with her and haunts her, and it confuses her about her needs as a woman (Sadun, 1998, p. 94). Insisting on "the heroic in the ordinary" (Cooper, 1988, p. 167), Aurora is not satisfied with her works, and she feels the lack of something, which is not named. Although she does not voice the lack, she describes it:

I am sad.
I wonder if Pygmalion had these doubts
And, feeling the hard marble firs relent,
Grow supple to the straining of his arms,
And tingle through its cold to his burning lip,
Supposed his senses mocked, supposed the toil,
Of stretching past the known and seen to reach
The archetypal Beauty out of sight,
Had made his heart beat fast enough for two,
And with his own life dazed and blinded him!
Not so; Pygmalion loved,-- and whoso loves
Believes the impossible (*AL V*, pp. 399-410).

As a creator, Aurora identifies herself with Pygmalion, not with the object Galatea. It is quite ironic for Aurora to identify herself with Pygmalion, who creates woman according to his gaze. Yet, what Aurora seeks in this identification is not the female gaze, but the fact that “Pygmalion loved” which allowed him to “believe the impossible” (Cooper, 1988, p. 168). Although Galatea proves a sufficient muse, Aurora’s muse, Phoebus Apollo, “soul within my soul, / [. . .] Has struck down all [her] works before [her] face” (*AL V*, pp. 414-17). Her adoption of a male muse points out that she acknowledges herself as a female poet.

In conclusion, Elizabeth Barrett Browning as a prominent Victorian poet wrote *Aurora Leigh* in which she reflects and questions Victorian concept of woman and women poets and challenges these by making Aurora as the protagonist. The eponymous character Aurora Leigh, who is aware of the obstacles Victorian literary arena may offer, aspires to be a successful poet. Thus, she challenges the concept of woman as the object of male-voiced works and transforms it into a novel concept of woman as the poet and the subject in literary works. That is, she dares to demand “the Adamic privilege of naming the world” (Cooper, 1988, p. 146) in the patriarchal literary world.

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