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**VICTORIAN INTERROGATIONS:
ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING'S
SONNETS FROM THE PORTUGUESE
AND AURORA LEIGH**

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ABSTRACT

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's two major works, Sonnets from the Portuguese and Aurora Leigh, provide a commentary on the structure of Victorian society, particularly in relation to gender roles. This thesis argues that in both works there is a primary concern with the ways in which women are placed within binary structures which are established by patriarchal discourses. These two works examine different structures in androcentric culture: heterosexual (courtly) love in the Sonnets, and patriarchy (the Law of the Father) in Aurora Leigh.

Part One focusses on Sonnets from the Portuguese, with the first chapter describing the speaker's tension in responding to conventional love roles: will she submit or rebel? The chapter also notes the speaker's appropriation of the courtly love tradition as a metaphor for the marginalised position in Victorian society of the woman poet. Chapter Two discusses particular roles assumed by the players in this love relationship, particularly the male/ female roles of god and sinner, and the final chapter makes apparent the speaker's growing concern with metaphors as a means of re-presenting her experience.

Part Two moves from the personal context (of the Sonnets) to the social with a focus on Aurora Leigh and the laws of society as established by patriarchal systems. Chapter Four considers how the Father's authority dominates and orders female life and desire, and in Chapter Five the dualisms undergirding patriarchy are exposed. Aurora uses her writing to deconstruct the binarisms she is caught in: between woman and artist, personal and universal, material and spiritual. The final chapter of this thesis develops the concern with the Father's law further by offering a more psychoanalytical reading in terms of post-Freudian criticism. This chapter examines Aurora's creation as a gendered consciousness, particularly focussing on the woman as separated from female desire by the early loss of her mother, her induction into the realm of the Father, and her definition as an 'other', a (self)-alienated woman. Aurora's path beyond this ideological construction of her self involves the death of the Father and the rediscovery of feminine love, leading to a linguistically-constructed, alternative siting within her society that does not depend upon male definition.

Victorian Interrogations:

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's

Sonnets from the Portuguese and Aurora Leigh

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To Roger

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface and Acknowledgements	iv
Part One: <u>Sonnets from the Portuguese</u>	
A Note on the Title	2
Chapter One: The Battle: Love or Selfhood?	5
Chapter Two: The Roles we Play: God and Sinner	49
Chapter Three: Love and Language	89
Part Two: <u>Aurora Leigh</u>	
Chapter Four: Aurora in Patriarchy	134
Chapter Five: Rewriting Patriarchy's Dualisms	175
Chapter Six: Repositing the Female	225
Bibliography	273

PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Elizabeth Barrett Browning is a poet apparently inappropriate to the 20th century. When I mention her name as a subject for research I encounter reactions such as "That dreadful woman!", and "Don't you find her a bit sentimental?". Many feminist theoreticians have already pointed out at length how female artists have been, and still are, excised from history - expunged from "The Canon" or the "Great Tradition". Elaine Showalter focusses her great book A Literature Of Their Own on precisely this theme, and Joanna Russ, in a feisty and humorous account entitled How To Suppress Women's Writing, outlines the many effective methods by which such excision is performed.

The process is clearly evident in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's case. A poet of intellectual, emotional and poetic power has been reduced to the banal stereotypes apparent in my opening quotations. Her work has been redefined from complex, deeply layered, political poetry to sentimental verse, and her best-known poetry is usually Sonnets from the Portuguese - evidence of the emotional woman in love. This redefinition was already occurring in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's own lifetime, particularly as her lifestory became a convenient gloss on the poetry. But it moved into full swing in the early twentieth century, and a one-dimensional reading of very three-dimensional poetry became the standard way to read Elizabeth Barrett Browning.

An equivalent case perhaps makes this process clearer. Charles Dickens' reputation also suffered in the early twentieth century for his uneven writing style and his sentimentality. (Leavis had great trouble fitting him into the Canon.) But the last 40-50 years have seen massive interest in the rediscovery of a talented and profoundly complex author, generating a Dickens industry that fills many library shelves.

The same revival, however, is very slow in coming for Elizabeth Barrett Browning. While the circumstances and products of the two authors have

obvious differences, the similarities between the two are striking. Both were very popular with the Victorian reading public. Both were overtly political and emotional; both have been condemned at various times for those very qualities, as well as for a perceived failure in form and technique, in novelistic and poetic convention.¹ Yet the spectre of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's stereotype as weak, sentimental lady poet is taking much longer to lay to rest than the spectre of Dickens' stereotype as flawed, uncontrolled genius. This is partly due to the literary industry's need to use her to reinforce the related myth of the Robert Browning - Elizabeth Barrett Browning Love Story, in which Elizabeth's role as weak, sentimental lady poet is crucial.

Obviously I find this reading of Elizabeth Barrett Browning entirely inadequate. One purpose of this thesis is to correct the simplistic stereotypes of Elizabeth Barrett Browning that remain within literary circles. Rather, her work is characterised by multiple levels: she hides coherent subtexts in her narratives. In doing this, she makes a challenging and subversive comment on her society - which is perhaps why she has been "edited out" over time.

I have chosen Elizabeth Barrett Browning's two major works in which to explore this commentary on Victorian society: Sonnets from the Portuguese and Aurora Leigh. The studies that follow pay particular attention to the ideological themes generated by each work. In both works there is a primary concern with the ways in which women are placed within binary structures which are established by patriarchal discourses. These two works examine different structures in patriarchy: in the Sonnets the context is heterosexual love, with its strong courtly love overtones; in Aurora Leigh the structure critiqued is what Lacan calls the Law of the Father - patriarchy.

While dealing with similar themes (women in androcentric culture) each work presents a different literary form - the lyrical love sonnet and the narrative epic. These forms largely correspond with the subject matter of the works. The sonnet, focussing on an intimate moment in time, is appropriate for the domestic, personal nature of the subject matter: the speaker's articulation of love. The longer narrative poem, with its pseudo-epic and novelistic

associations, lends itself to the social and interpersonal themes of women's intersections with their culture.² In recognition of this change in form, the nature of my discussion will vary in relationship to each work. In the case of the Sonnets, the more intensive and highly wrought representation of lyrical feeling requires a more detailed discussion of each sonnet, in order to demonstrate the way each lyrical moment contributes to an overarching thematized dilemma. The more expanded, discursive narrative of Aurora Leigh lends itself more readily to discussion based upon defined thematic issues.

These two approaches are also in accord with the present state of criticism on Elizabeth Barrett Browning, in that Aurora Leigh has already received considerable attention, whereas the Sonnets have not always been given the close analysis they require. Traditionally, Sonnets from the Portuguese have been read in purely biographical terms, as the picture of Elizabeth Barrett's growing love for Robert Browning. The Sonnets were viewed as "the sincere and spontaneous expression of Barrett Browning's personal emotional experiences" (Stephenson, Poetry 69). Elizabeth's love, moreover, was generally perceived as romantically positive. Hence the Sonnets were remembered and praised for their lyrical expression and strong emotion, long after her other poetry had fallen into disfavour. They have since become over-sentimentalised to the point of ridicule, so that, in the recent rediscovery of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, many feminists have found Sonnets from the Portuguese something of an embarrassment amongst Elizabeth's other more 'politically correct' poetry.³ This embarrassment is largely because of the excessive self-deprecation and male adulation that occurs in the Sonnets. Such 'errors of judgement' are never made, for example, in Aurora Leigh. Angela Leighton's account of the Sonnets, emphasising the speaker's constant self-assertion, is the first reading to uncover the strength and power of the speaker's voice. Her reading is not without problems, but it provides a point of departure for my own argument.

The Sonnets are vastly more complex and ambivalent than a biographical, often naively positive reading allows. Firstly, the work transcends Elizabeth Barrett Browning's specific life, which is used as a site from which to explore

wider, more general issues. As Stephenson writes: "A knowledge of Barrett Browning's life and letters may illuminate the work, but our appreciation and understanding of Barrett Browning as a poet, rather than as a woman, will continue to be restricted as long as there is an insistence on viewing the Sonnets from the Portuguese as the documented story of an actual romance instead of a series of finely crafted poems" (Stephenson, Poetry 70). Secondly, while critics have been forced to note the constant background tone of sadness and negativity in the poem - what they often dismiss merely as 'morbidly' - these negative feelings actually form a major contribution to the poem. They depict a wide and subtle scope of feeling, ranging from sadness to depression, fear, anger, sarcasm and outright rebellion. Even a critic such as Marjory Bald, whose extraordinary account of Elizabeth Barrett Browning in Women Writers of the Nineteenth Century is a typical example of the misreading of the poet, must comment with surprise and regret:

Whatever may be the reason, the fact remains that The Sonnets from the Portuguese do not give the impression of firm and abiding joy. We hesitate to pass harsh judgements, but to the modern reader there is always the suggestion of hypochondria in Mrs. Browning's outlook.- What after all, were her sorrows, if we weigh them in comparison with those suffered by many other women of her generation? (Bald 229)

Bald clearly takes the speaker of the Sonnets to be Elizabeth Barrett Browning herself, and she then finds the negativity of the poem incompatible with her understanding of Elizabeth's 'happy marriage': "In the perfection of her married life she had more cause for happiness than any of these women" - the latter being the Brontes and Christina Rossetti (Bald 232). The comparisons are irrelevant if the speaker of the Sonnets is read as a persona: the sentiments of the Sonnets transcend simple "happiness" to examine the deeper, more complex matters of gender relations. Astonishingly, Bald goes on to criticise Elizabeth Barrett Browning for being too much the model of the subjected, docile, 'lacking' Victorian woman. Quite apart from the inconsistency here with her earlier assertion that Elizabeth Barrett Browning isn't happy enough in the Sonnets, this interpretation plainly disregards the rebellious anxiety that is in the poem.

The intention of the first three chapters of this thesis is to propose a reading that takes account of what is in the poem - the positive and negative.⁴ These chapters examine the assumptions behind the paradoxical situation of an apparently "feminine" form (the intimate, domestic love lyric) which has actually already been written and appropriated as a "masculine" form. The massive complications behind such gendering - how a woman can be a (courtly) love poet - expose the ideological assumptions inherent in the culture of the speaker. The Sonnets, moreover, do not fragment into forty-four isolated incidents, but build a narrative about a condition of subjectivity: what it means to be a woman and poet in love.

Nevertheless, any discussion of the Sonnets encounters a problem with their form: how to draw thematic threads from what are essentially discrete (though not fragmented) units, each developing its own intricate argument. I have chosen to draw three interrelated threads from the poem as foci for the chapters. Roughly the Sonnets are grouped in chronological order, with the first third discussed in terms of a central tension between submission and rebellion. The central sonnets are discussed with regard to particular roles assumed by the players in this love relationship, and the discussion of the final sonnets makes apparent the speaker's growing concern with tropes as a means of re-presenting her experience. However, the movement in the Sonnets themselves is never as neat as this: there is constant fluidity in the processes I am proposing. My chapters reflect this fluidity in that they necessarily overlap as each theme moves into the next, and some sonnets are pulled out of their (already arbitrary) chronological order and placed in a new order.

The last three chapters of the thesis demonstrate how Aurora Leigh moves on from the personal context to the social. This movement into the realm of the social, dramatised by the narrative method and structure of Aurora Leigh, leads naturally into a consideration of the laws of society as established by patriarchal systems. Chapter Four considers how the Father's authority dominates and orders female life and desire. Most Aurora Leigh commentators have made brief reference to various aspects of this authority; this fourth chapter offers a more comprehensive approach. The roles or positions made

available to the poem's women, and Aurora's response to them, become apparent in this chapter and lead, in Chapter Five, to a consideration of the dualisms central to patriarchy. Aurora uses her writing to deconstruct the binarisms she is caught in: between woman and artist, personal and universal, material and spiritual, and even failure and success. While a pseudo-Platonic Christian idealism always remains in Aurora's reckoning, distinct oppositions nevertheless are clearly breaking down by the close of the poem, as we see Aurora and Romney building heaven on earth, the new Jerusalem, through the mode of Aurora's poetry.

The final chapter of this thesis develops the concern with the Father's law further by offering a more psychoanalytical reading in terms of post-Freudian criticism.⁵ This chapter examines Aurora's creation as a gendered consciousness, particularly focussing on the woman as separated from female desire by the early loss of her mother, a loss required by Freud for a woman's 'normal' socialisation. Aurora's life clearly plays out the loss of the mother (relived in various forms throughout Aurora's life), her induction into the realm of the Father, her associated distrust and rejection of females (Freud's theory of rejection of the mother), and consequently Aurora's definition as an 'other', a (self)-alienated woman.

Aurora's path beyond this social creation of her as a female object involves the death of the Father and the rediscovery of feminine love, leading to an alternative siting within her society that does not depend upon male definition. The difference between the mercantile love of patriarchy and the mutuality of feminine love is constantly figured in the poem. Thus, through her writing and relocating herself in female terms, Aurora manages to dislocate the patriarchal world which has hitherto entrapped her.

Every writer on Elizabeth Barrett Browning encounters the same problem: how to refer to her? Her name changes from Elizabeth Barrett Barrett to Elizabeth Barrett Browning, but she publishes poetry both before and after marriage. Both the works under consideration here were published under the second name, and yet much of the Sonnets was written under the first. I have

chosen to follow Kathleen Blake's example and use Elizabeth's own method of signing correspondence, her initials "EBB". This is "one appellation that marks a symbolic continuity between the poet before and the poet after marriage" (Blake, Love 171).

Finally, I would like to acknowledge here my thanks to Warwick Slinn, my doctoral supervisor and friend. He has always given generously of his time to discuss this thesis and wider issues relating to it, and his subtle and incisive readings of this work have challenged me to clarify, refine and develop my ideas.

This thesis is also a product of a fascinating and deeply stimulating year during which I attended a graduate paper in feminist theory, run by Doreen D'Cruz. To Doreen and the members of that class, who let me 'sit in' on their seminars, and contribute to their discussions, my thanks.

NOTES

¹ See the editors' notes to the section on Elizabeth Barrett Browning in Victorian Poetry: "[Her poetry] combines with intensity of emotion, a constant reflection of clearly Christian morality and humanitarian and liberal sympathies, and a warm delight in nature. Here and there she offended against standards of subject... Her carelessness of form found then, as it finds now, strong objectors... The peculiarities of her style cannot be defended as can the oddities of Robert Browning's: her style, unlike his, is thin and monotonous" (Brown and Bailey 352).

² "Reflecting this thematic expansion of boundaries," Glennis Stephenson writes concerning the shift from the Sonnets to Aurora Leigh, "Barrett Browning moves from the restrictions of the sonnet... to the freedom offered by a novel in verse which, transgressing the limits of genre, encompasses both the narrative and the lyrical" (Poetry 91).

³ Dorothy Mermin refers to this response in the title of her article, "The Female Poet and the Embarrassed Reader: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Sonnets from the Portuguese" [ELH 48 (1981): 351-67].

⁴ Susan Zimmerman uses these words in the title of her article, "Sonnets from the Portuguese: A Negative and a Positive Context". This article alerted readers to the "chaotic feelings" in the Sonnets, and to the speaker's (EBB in Zimmerman's article) struggle in reaction to love. Zimmerman argues that the sequence works towards a resolution of love as both a sacrifice and a gain.

⁵ Angela Leighton, in a fine introduction to her ground-breaking book on EBB, rejects the use of French (psychoanalytical) feminism on the basis that such theories retain woman in the site of the silent beloved of courtly love: in both structures woman remains an absence. Leighton interprets such theories as a mythical narrative in which women are enclosed (Elizabeth 16-17). I support aspects of her reading, but I find that Leighton fails to take the full conclusions of such feminism into account. Under post-structuralist psychoanalysis, the rigid narrative is broken down and fluidity in subject positions enters. In other words, Leighton stops halfway with the theory: in doing so she preserves the dualisms, and so any possible deconstruction of them - and of the 'mythical narrative' under which we still exist - is lost.