

**‘... singing at a work apart ...’:
The Search for a Feminine Poetic Voice in
Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s
*Aurora Leigh***

Taryn Laing-Cox

Abstract

Aurora Leigh, Barrett Browning’s *kunstlerroman* written in the hybrid verse-novel form, is a brilliant and ground-breaking commentary on the Victorian literary tradition. Through the text’s protagonist, Aurora Leigh, Barrett Browning is able to challenge the Victorian social order—with all its implications for the working class and women, in particular. The character Aurora Leigh demonstrates the power of the poetic voice to challenge and even change the ‘birdcage’ of the Victorian woman’s life. As Aurora struggles to find her own authentic poetic voice, so she is able to expose the gendered literary tradition which so defined and limited Victorian women’s writing. Furthermore, through the characters of Romney and Aurora, Barrett Browning addresses the dialectic of the real versus the ideal which so concerned writers of the time. Aurora’s resolution of this dialectic as woman and artist inspires not only an original and authentic feminine poetic voice but also a vision for a new social order, a new world. Barrett Browning’s use of bird tropes, for example those of the eagle, lark, and particularly the nightingale, creates a subtle and intelligent commentary on this literary struggle. The myth of Philomela, implicit in the text, is re-written to show how the echo of the gendered literary tradition symbolised by the trope of the Classic, “masculine” eagle, and the melodious, lamenting song of the “feminine” nightingale, must be challenged (and ultimately silenced) to allow—in form and content—a powerful new poetic voice.

Keywords: *Aurora Leigh*; Elizabeth Barrett Browning; Bird imagery; Verse-novel; Feminine poetic voice; Victorian Literature; *Kunstlerroman*

Never nightingale so singeth:
Oh, she leans on thorny tree,
And her poet-song she flingeth
Over pain to victory!
Yet she never sings such music—or she sings it not to me
(Barrett Browning [1844]1974).

Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s groundbreaking verse-novel, *Aurora Leigh* (1857)¹, has long been hailed by feminist critics as a hallmark of women’s writing—a *Kunstlerroman* detailing the development of a successful Victorian poetess. However, in her poetry, and particularly in *Aurora Leigh*, Barrett Browning addresses and achieves far more than is immediately apparent. The nineteenth century was a period of clearly gendered literary traditions², and this naturally informed women’s writing. In this article I will show how in *Aurora Leigh* (AL) Barrett Browning creates not only a protagonist who breaks from the ‘birdcage’ of woman’s place in the Victorian social order, but also attempts to forge a new literary tradition, and leaves one, finally, with a vision of a new world. Barrett Browning achieves this by considering content *and* form. By working with a hybrid form, such as the verse-novel, Barrett Browning is able to challenge conventional

¹Although dated 1857, *Aurora Leigh* was published in London by Chapman and Hall on 15 November 1856 (McSweeney 2008: xxxvi).

²‘The literary space was increasingly contested in this period, reflecting, as many studies demonstrate, a fractured educational provision that allocated classical literature to upper-class men, and “English” (including medieval) literature to those excluded from the elite—as Brian Doyle points out, ‘English was considered a “woman’s subject” unsuited to the masculine intelligence’ (Doyle 1982. *The Hidden History of English Studies*. In Widdowson, Peter (ed): *Re-reading English*. London: Methuen, (cf. Williams 1997:147).

Victorian literary content. Also, she works with bird tropes in challenging ways—using the literary (and social) symbolism of the nightingale in particular, to create a new feminine poetic voice.

In the first two books of *AL*, one encounters a young Victorian heroine typically ‘caged’. This is described with particular reference to Aurora’s education, taken upon by her spinster aunt who, ‘[...] had lived a sort of caged bird life, born in a cage, / Accounting that to leap from perch to perch / Was act and joy enough for any bird’ (Barrett Browning 2008:13). Aunt Leigh’s life is defined by discipline and denial—an abstemious life which upholds denial of the self, of pleasure, of comfort; and the denial of the spirit, tethered always by self-deprecating service to men. Aurora describes this ‘education’, aimed to form her into such a lady as her aunt, in terms of torture and death:

[...]In looking down
Those years of education
I wonder if Brinvilliers³ suffered more
In the water-torture...flood succeeding flood
To drench the incapable throat and split the veins...
Than I did. Certain of your feebler souls
Go out in such a process; many pine
To a sick inodorous light; my own endured (18).

Significantly, tasks are completed in a chair that deliberately faces away from the window and a view of the great lime tree, which suggests a denial of nature; of life. Furthermore, this reference to the lime tree, especially visible from Aurora’s ‘[...] little chamber in the house, / As green as any privet-hedge a bird / Might choose to build in...’ (21), calls to mind Barrett Browning’s ‘The Lost Bower’. This poem, published in 1844, describes the enclosed space of the bower as creative. Aurora explains that she is only able to survive the suffocation of her mind through a retreat to her inner life filled

³The Marquise de Brinvilliers (1630-1676) plotted with her lover to poison her father and brothers. After her arrest, she was tortured by having gallons of water forced down her throat before being beheaded (McSweeney 2008:330).

with the echoes of her early childhood (and education) with her father in the Italian countryside:

I kept the life thrust on me, on the outside
Of the inner life with all its ample room
For heart and lungs, for will and intellect,
Inviolable by conventions... (18).

However, in *Interpreting Nightingales* (1997), Jeni Williams analyses ‘The Lost Bower’ in terms of the gendered literary tradition that defined the period. The hills surrounding the bower are defined as masculine in opposition to the enclosed bower, ‘the wood, all close and clenching’ (EBB 1974:150), which Williams associates with women and medieval poetry (Williams 1997:183-184). The poem is a complex study of poetry, and questions the nature of women’s poetry—the ‘music [...] rather felt than heard’ (EBB 1974:152). The reference to the lime tree in *AL*, standing before the English hills Aurora begins to roam, signals the beginning of her literary journey; her search for a truly feminine poetic voice, which, ironically, must begin in the masculine tradition.

It is Romney—Aurora’s masculine opposite—who intervenes when Aurora begins to weaken under her aunt’s influence. He introduces her to the English countryside, and it is this which begins to revive her,

But wholly, at last, I wakened, opened wide
The window and my soul, and let the airs
And outdoor sights sweep gradual gospels in,
Regenerating what I was (EBB 2008:24).

It is this natural and, ultimately, creative freedom that inspires Aurora’s later philosophy which eventually stands in opposition to Romney’s socialist philanthropy. There are echoes here of the Romantic ideas of Coleridge. His poem, *The Lime-Tree Bower my Prison*, is an expression of the power of nature to liberate the soul:

[...] nature ne’er deserts the wise and pure;
No plot so narrow, be but nature there,

No waste so vacant, but may well employ
Each faculty of sense, and keep the heart
Awake to Love and Beauty! And sometimes
'Tis well to be bereft of promis'd good,
That we may lift the soul, and contemplate
With lively joy the joys we cannot share (Coleridge 1963:120).

Revived by nature, Aurora returns to her father's books and what she can recall of his teaching—essentially an education in the classics. She encounters books her father had not shown her—the poets, which release Aurora from the 'cage' of a conventional life—

[...] thus, my soul,
At poetry's divine first finger-touch,
Let go conventions and sprang up surprised,
Convicted of the great eternities
Before two worlds (EBB 2008: 29).

Her meditations on poetry ('...poetry, my life / My eagle, with both grappling feet still hot / From Zeus's thunder...' (31)) and her own poems, discovered by Romney, written in 'lady's Greek'⁴ (40) all suggest a masculine poetic tradition in which Aurora, determined to become a poet, must find a place. The reference to the Greek myth of Ganymede (p. 31) suggests violence and power, and the disturbingly sexual undertone of, '[...] My eagle ... hast ravished me / Away ...' is strongly reinforced by the later reference to the rape of Marian Erle, 'What, "seduced" 's your word? ... Do eagles, who have pinched a lamb with claws, / Seduce it into carrion?' (207). This use of the trope of the eagle stands in contrast to 'the holy lark' (32) with which Aurora begins to identify herself once she begins writing her own poetry. Though at first this trope is used in terms of aspiration to write truly great poetry, the repeated image of the soaring lark becomes a symbol of the feminine poetic, for example:

⁴The reference to 'lady's Greek / Without the accents' is a comment (by Romney) of the inferiority of women's verse. Girls who learned Greek did so for the sake of reading, while boys had to pass examinations on the subject (McSweeney 2008: 333).

My soul was singing at a work apart
Behind the wall of sense, as safe from harm
As sings the lark when sucked up out of sight
In vortices of glory and blue air (35),

and,

The music soars within the little lark,
And the lark soars (79),

and finally, confident in her skill, and having fully embraced her own womanhood⁵, she writes in a letter to Romney, ‘My larks fly higher than some windows’ (296).

Of course the social and literary are intertwined—just as there is a defined place for the feminine poetic in the literary tradition as sentimental, lesser, and of little or no literary merit (emphasised by the contrast between the eagle and the lark), so there is no place for the poetess in the social order. This is no more apparent than in Book Two, when Romney proposes to Aurora in the garden on the morning of her birthday:

[...] Woman as you are,
Mere women, personal and passionate,
You give us doting mothers and perfect wives,
Sublime Madonnas, and enduring saints!
We get no Christ from you—and verily
We shall not get a poet, in my mind (44).

Romney is (typically for his time) searching for a junior partner in his life’s work. However, Aurora counters by arguing, ‘You’d scorn my help—as Nature’s self, you say, / Has scorned to put her music in my mouth / Because a woman’s....’ She questions further how she can be, ‘...incompetent to sing, as blackbirds can, / Yet competent to love, like HIM’ (48).

However, this moment in the garden has a greater significance than a mere dramatic twist in a sentimental romantic plot. The setting itself would

⁵This is discussed later in this essay.

seem to suggest that the climax of Book Two—the parting of ways of Romney and Aurora—mirrors ‘a fall’. Sarah Annes Brown suggests that, ‘...additional tensions and complexities may be identified if we place *Aurora Leigh* not simply within a biblical, but within a specifically Miltonic context’ (Brown 1997:724). Brown shows by a detailed reading of both texts, that, unlike the male-authored epics, *AL* is a poem about the search for a feminine poetic voice. ‘The fall’ marks the beginning of this journey for Aurora:

Both Eve and Aurora assert their wish for independence and for separation, whereas both Romney and Adam counsel caution and invoke feminine weakness to back up their case. In both works the argument is tossed back and forth, and in each case the woman has the final word and secures her desired independence. But whereas in the case of Eve the parting with Adam leads to her ruin, for Aurora it is the beginning of a successful career as a poet (Brown 1997: 730).

Where Brown’s otherwise excellent analysis of *AL* becomes problematic, however, is that she views this parting of Romney and Aurora as a mere ‘misunderstanding’ which eventually resolves and reaches ‘mutual comprehension and love’ (724). As a result, she also adopts the conventional interpretation of the conclusion of the poem—that Aurora and Romney are only able to marry because Romney, much like Rochester in *Jane Eyre*, has been ‘humbled’ (to the point of physical blindness), and therefore brought to a level of understanding that would make him a suitable partner for Aurora. I disagree with this interpretation of the relationship between the principal characters as well as the conclusion and resolution of the conflict in this relationship, because I feel critics ignore the very heart of the text. Such an interpretation essentially ignores the developments, the lessons, which *Aurora* undergoes to become the great poet she wishes to be. Furthermore, Barrett Browning’s profound vision of the feminine poetic and its social power, is consequently missed.

Romney and Aurora part, each to begin his or her work: Romney his Socialist, physical work with the poor; Aurora her artistic works. They thus come to symbolise the dialectic of the real versus the ideal; the material versus the spiritual. Dino Felluga, in his study of the verse novel, highlights

the ways this particular generic form creates an opportunity to question Victorian middle-class domestic ideologies in profound ways.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning brings to the fore this issue [of the ideologies that are inextricably connected to form] by superimposing a generic struggle onto the traditional domestic marriage plot. In so doing, Browning seeks to work out that most pervasive of Victorian dialectics, the real vs. the ideal, associating Romney with the real, the prosaic, the objective and the immanent while aligning Aurora Leigh with the ideal, the poetic, the subjective and the transcendent (Felluga 2002:177).

Felluga (like many literary analysts of *AL*) interprets the conclusion of the text in terms of *Romney's* development as a character—his new understanding and humility, symbolised by his blindness, and then his supposed ‘vision’ of a New Jerusalem interpreted by his sighted female partner. But such an interpretation fails to bring to any real resolution the dialectic symbolised by the two characters. In fact such an interpretation is problematic on many fronts. The text is entitled *Aurora Leigh*; this is *her* story, her *Kunstlerroman*. The text focuses predominantly on Aurora and her internal struggles—not Romney’s. To state the obvious, it is Aurora who actually sees in the concluding lines of the poem—it is *her* vision.

True, Romney is brought to a new wisdom and is indeed humbled. He learns the lesson he must, ‘[...] It takes a soul, / To move a body [...] / It takes the ideal, to blow an inch inside / The dust of the actual...’ (EBB 2008:274). But it is a lesson he learns by what he *sees* in Aurora’s poetry, which is a profound difference between himself and Rochester, of Bronte’s *Jane Eyre*, the hero to whom Romney is likened in terms of the conclusions of the texts.

[...] But in this last book,
You *showed* me something separate from yourself,
Beyond you, and I bore to take it in
And let it draw me. You have *shown* me truths,
O June-day friend, that help me now at night
When June is over! truths not yours, indeed,

But set within my reach by means of you,
Presented by your voice and verse the way
To take them clearest. Verily I was wrong;
And verily many thinkers of this age,
Ay, many Christian teachers, half in heaven,
Are wrong in just my sense who understood
Our natural world too insularly, as if
No spiritual counterpart completed it
Consummating its meaning, (EBB 2008: 279 emphasis
added).

And what then of Aurora's lessons, Aurora's humilities and wisdoms? In her insightful analysis of *AL*, entitled 'The Embodied Muse: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* and Feminine Poetics', Joyce Zonana points out that Aurora's chosen path of poetry is, ironically, a typically feminine choice. 'Aurora identifies herself as a disembodied, spiritual muse or Psyche, teaching truths to a world led astray by materialism. Though she rejects Romney's attempts to make her into an Angel in his House, she becomes an angel all the same—the Angel in the House of poetry' (Zonana 1996:61). In this sense Aurora does not defy the conventions of her times as absolutely as may be apparent. Her literary voice echoes the masculine tradition to which she has been exposed. However, there is no pattern for the feminine poetic voice, and Aurora's search for it is a surprising one. (Aurora's conclusion which captures Barrett Browning's vision for a greater literary tradition will be dealt with later in this essay.)

Aurora is dissatisfied with her poetry (including a descriptive poem significantly entitled 'The Hills'⁶): 'Even so my pastoral failed: was a book / Of surface pictures—pretty, cold, and false / With literal transcript—the worse done, I think, / For being not ill-done ...' (EBB 2008: 150). Aurora's journey of realisation begins when she turns her gaze from her classical heritage and looks to the world around her. This change is more profound than it may at first seem. In a letter to Mary Russell Mitford, Barrett Browning highlights her intention to create a 'novel-poem' that reflects the time: 'The poem I am about will fill a volume when done. It is ... written in blank verse, in the autobiographical form; the heroine an artist—not a

⁶Refer to the earlier discussion on 'The Lost Bower' on p. 2 of this essay.

painter, mind. It is intensely modern, crammed from the times ... as far as my strength will allow' (Raymond & Sullivan 1983: 112). As her protagonist searches for a *true* poetic voice, ('For the truth itself, / That's neither man's nor woman's, but just God's), she too begins to turn her pen to the world around her:

I do distrust the poet who discerns
No character or glory in his times,
And trundles back his soul five hundred years,
Past moat and drawbridge, into a castle-court,
To sing [...]
Never flinch
But still, unscrupulously epic, catch
Upon the burning lava of a song
The full-veined, heaving, double-breasted Age:
That, when the next shall come, the men of that
May touch the impress with reverent hand, and say
'Behold—behold the paps we all have sucked!
This bosom seems to beat still, or at least
It sets ours beating: this is living art,
Which thus presents and thus records true life (EBB
2008:152-153).

Beyond being Barrett Browning's contribution to the Victorian debate on suitable subject matter for poetry, notice that the imagery she (and Aurora) uses changes. The physical, natural, palpable, elemental, and—of course—feminine begin to surface. Aurora's true voice is a voice of the physical *and* spiritual.

[...] Natural things
And spiritual—who separates those two
In art, in morals, or the social drift,
Tears up the bond of nature and brings death,
Paints futile pictures, writes unreal verse,
Leads vulgar days, deals ignorantly with men,
Is wrong, in short, at all points. *We divide*

This apple of life, and cut it through the pips-
The perfect round which fitted Venus' hand
Has perished as utterly as if we ate
Both halves. Without the spiritual, observe,
The natural's impossible—no form,
No motion: without sensuous—spiritual
Is inappreciable—no beauty or power [...] (EBB 2008:
245 emphasis added)

This passage not only shows Aurora's burgeoning realisation of how to embrace a truer poetic expression, but also emphasises the dialectic between the physical and spiritual. Furthermore, it shows the split between Aurora and Romney in the garden scene as a version of 'the fall'. Barrett Browning's *artistic* philosophy offers powerful *social* commentary for her time. This is laid out even more clearly in one of the most stirring passages in the text:

[...] If a man could feel,
Not one day, in the artist's ecstasy,
But every day, feast, fast, or working-day,
The spiritual significance burn through
The hieroglyphic of material shows,
Henceforward he would paint the globe with wings,
And reverence fish and fowl, the bull, the tree,
And even his very body as a man -
Which now he counts so vile, that all the towns
Make offal of their daughters for its use [...] (247)

Is Marian Erle, a symbol of this; a victim of the material and physical in all its guises—be they base, self-serving or even philanthropic?

[...] No place for her,
By man's law! Born an outlaw was this babe;
Her first cry in our strange and strangling air,
When cast in spasms out by the shuddering womb,
Was wrong against the social code—forced wrong:-
What business had the baby to cry there? (EBB 2008: 99).

A victim of abuse and cruelty in both her childhood and later in her abduction and rape, Marian Erle's story provides Barrett Browning with dramatic instances in the narrative to comment on the ruthless debasement of the humanity of the lower class, 'The "social code" of wealth, class and, by implication, sex, makes Marian's life a kind of "wrong" from the beginning' (Leighton 1992:343). However, Romney's socialist and well-meaning philanthropy makes him equally complicit in the dehumanisation of Marian. His proposal of marriage is not founded on love, but is a political statement. The eagle metaphor surfaces again, and is a comment on the cruelty of this proposal, as well as a disturbing signal to the reader of what is to come, that is, the kidnapping and rape of Marian:

'[...] may she come to me,
Dear Romney, and be married from my house?
It is not part of your philosophy
To keep your bird upon the blackthorn?'
 'Ay,'
He answered, 'but it is. I take my wife
Directly from the people—and she comes,
As Austria's daughter to imperial France,
Betwixt her eagles,' (122)

Certainly, the poetic and social become powerfully linked in the text and Barrett Browning repeatedly points to the overwhelming fall from all that is good and true in humanity when this is ignored. However, to return to a passage quoted earlier, Barrett Browning, through her protagonist, Aurora, is describing a philosophy far more profound than merely social. Consider:

Without the spiritual, observe,
The natural's impossible—no form,
No motion: without sensuous—spiritual
Is inappreciable—no beauty or power [...] (EBB
2008:245).

Felluga interprets this central passage in terms of Barrett Browning's '...appreciation of the ideological nature of all formal choices,' and feels she finally '...acknowledges that the philosopher-poet and the prosaic philanthropist ultimately betray the fact they are both reliant on ideological mystification to proceed' (Felluga 2002:178). Although I appreciate the subtext of genre and ideology, I feel that Felluga misses in this interpretation of this central concept of the text, the human element of the story.

At this point in the text Aurora has returned to Italy to set up a home with Marian and Marian's child. But she has returned to an 'empty nest' (EBB 2008:254). She feels disconnected from her surroundings, painting the scene of the Italian countryside before her in the fleeting wings of moths and butterflies and the dark music of owls and nightingales:

[...] melodious owls
(If music had but one note and was sad,
'Twould sound just so); and all the silent swirl
Of bats that seem to follow in the air
Some grand circumference of a shadowy dome
To which we are blind; and then the nightingales,
Which pluck our heart across a garden-wall
(When walking in the town) and carry it
So high into the bowery almond-trees
We tremble and are afraid, and feel as if
The golden flood of moonlight unaware
Dissolved the pillars of the steady earth
And made it less substantial (EBB 2008:253).

She has found success as a poet, she is loved by Marian and Marian's child, yet she admits she cannot write, read or even think, but '[sits] absorbed amid the quickening glooms' (260). In the text it becomes evident that she has fallen in love with Romney whom she believes to have married Lady Waldemar and is pining for him. However, if one considers Barrett Browning's careful and deliberate use of genre and structure, one cannot

help but view this moment in terms of its greater contribution to *AL* as a whole, and to Barrett Browning's philosophy inscribed therein.

Aurora has returned to her 'motherland'—not only the country where she was born and spent her early years, but also literally the land from which her mother came. The home she has created is entirely feminine; furthermore, it is a refuge of sorts for Marian, the mother. As discussed earlier, Aurora's true poetic voice is one that embraces the spiritual and the physical. Hers must be a poetic voice that is not merely *feminine*, but *woman*. It is at this point in the text—through her love for Romney, and that most physical manifestation of womanhood, mothering—that Aurora must come to acknowledge and accept the physical in herself.

Zonana addresses this challenge in terms of the symbol of the 'Muse'—not the spiritual muse of the masculine poetic tradition, but a muse that embraces, and is rooted in, the physical. In the words of Aurora herself:

No perfect artist is developed here
From any imperfect woman. Flower from root,
And spiritual from natural, grade by grade
In all our life. A handful of the earth
To make God's image! (EBB 2008:316).

Thus, in the conclusion of *AL*, where Aurora describes to a blind Romney the view before them in words that constitute a vision of the New Jerusalem, Aurora becomes an embodiment of the new feminine poetic.

Aurora here takes her place as a triumphant goddess, embodying through her words the promise of her name, conclusively demonstrating that the woman artist can both see and sing, by her own eyes inspired (Zonana 1996:54).

Zonana's otherwise uniquely insightful analysis of the text does not, however, make the all-important connection between the resolution of the real-ideal dialectic in the plot of *AL* and the author's greater concern with defining the female poetic voice in a divided literary tradition. To suggest that a marriage of the 'spiritual' and 'natural' is the answer, is hardly as simple as a romantic plot may suggest. Certainly, this 'resolution' becomes

complicated for the woman poet if the physical and poetic have been defined by the male voice; are, thus, subjective, and subjected.

Barrett Browning's poetry illustrates her awareness of, and concern with, the complexities inherent in finding a feminine poetic voice (I name the following separately though of course they are linked): an inferior education, social powerlessness, and, from a particularly literary point of view, a sense that the woman is the subject of the text; never its author. In Barrett Browning's poetry she confronts these concerns—be they social, political or literary—in a myriad ways. In terms of this paper's focus on *AL* and the search for the feminine poetic voice, I will concentrate on her literary concerns. Interestingly, Barrett Browning refers to bird tropes to confront the masculine poetic tradition (grounded in the classics).

Literary history offers a range of bird metaphors, but none evoke more powerful meaning than the nightingale. The classical Greek myth of Philomela has been woven into poetic discourse. Certainly a study of gender and poetry is incomplete without a careful understanding of the myth, the power of the nightingale metaphor, and the interpretation thereof by the poet.

After resolving a border dispute with the help of Tereus, king of Thrace (and one of the sons of Ares), Pandion, king of Athens, rewards his ally by giving him his eldest daughter, Procne, in marriage. After several years and the birth of a son, Itys, Procne yearns to see her sister, Philomela, again and Tereus travels to Athens to bring her back. But on the homeward journey, he takes her to a wood, rapes her, cuts out her tongue to silence her and shuts her away in a forest dwelling. He then deceives his wife by telling her that her sister has died. However, Philomela weaves her story into a tapestry and sends it to Procne who frees her. Together they revenge themselves on Tereus by killing Itys and serving him up to his father in a cannibalistic banquet. When he realises what he has done, Tereus snatches up an axe to hack them to death but, out of pity for their agonies, Zeus turns them into birds: Tereus becomes a hoopoe,

Procne, a nightingale, Philomela, a swallow, and Itys, a goldfinch (Williams 1997:16)⁷.

Interpreting Nightingales: Gender, Class and Histories by Jeni Williams is an extensive study of the nightingale trope throughout literary history. The trope of the nightingale becomes problematic for the Victorian woman writer.

But the myth is not interested in the precise meanings of individual, separate figures within the structure of the myth, rather it investigates the *relations* between them. What is central is the definite association of the nightingale with betrayed women and poetry: the Greek word *aedon* is used for the bird, poet and poetry. In addition the link with Philomela and/ or Procne points to a general background of pain, loss and lamentation associated with the feminine [...] (Williams 1997:20).

The voice of the female poet becomes limited by the literary education she has received, and the 'song' she is expected to sing. Barrett Browning confronted these limitations in even her earliest works—challenging the limits of a feminine education and translating Greek drama. But it is in her later poetry that her most profound and exciting experimental challenges occur:

[Barrett Browning's] knowledge of languages (she commented particularly on Greek) attuned her to the *sound* of poetry and she could produce wonderfully modulated verse. That she chose instead to produce angular and choppy lines marked with uncomfortable if striking images is a choice that reflects her desire to write outside the affective and harmonious simplicity associated with the 'poetesses'

⁷ The *philomel moment* of English poetry is [...] the postprophetic moment, when the theme of loss merges with that of voice—when, in fact, a 'lost voice' becomes the subject or moving force of poetic song (Williams 1997: 16).

of her time [...]It is *not* the voice of the nightingale. These experiments with genre and rhyme seem part of a desire not just to *represent* women differently but to *speak* in a markedly different way. Her double traditions are drawn together in this search for a new voice which is unlike that of the nightingale (Williams 1997:191).

AL in particular is an example of a combination of genre which merges the double literary traditions in search of a new poetic voice: the classical (masculine) epic, and the medieval English (feminine) romantic genres. However, in *AL* itself, nightingales are very rarely mentioned⁸. Bird imagery is indeed used (some examples of these have already been quoted and discussed), but in connection with the poetic, and certainly with Aurora's poetic voice, the preferred image is the lark. How, then, is the nightingale trope and the myth of Philomela relevant to a study of *AL*?

Williams argues that the development of the female poet in *AL* is a re-writing of the Philomela myth. What is exciting about this interpretation of the text is that it elevates a *Kunstlerroman* to a level of philosophical commentary on a problem that deeply concerned Barrett Browning: the double literary tradition and the educational and social consequences thereof.

The degradation of the human spirit defined solely by a society of materialism and, in consequence, hierarchy, was something Barrett Browning addressed in much of her poetry. In *AL*, Barrett Browning offers a new vision; a resolution for a world divided. Consider the excessive descriptions of a grappling, debased mob (for which Barrett Browning has been criticised) bent, beyond reasonable understanding, on destruction of all that is good. Consider the frighteningly self-serving Lady Waldemar, supporting Romney in his various social projects in so far as her activities will catch his attention ('All things I did, / Except the impossible [...] such as wearing gowns /

⁸There are three instances in *AL* where nightingales are mentioned: Book 2:11, 'The June was in me, with its multitudes / Of nightingales all singing in the dark', Book 6:303, 'I must not linger here from Italy / Till the last nightingale is tired of song', and Book 7: 1070, quoted on p. 13 of this essay.

Provided by the Ten Hours' movement' (92)), and all the while plotting to turn Marian away from her commitment to Romney, even resorting (allegedly) to the kidnapping and rape of Marian, her rival for his affections. Consider, even, Romney, blind before he is blinded, and unable to see anything for what it really is. Contrast this with the home Aurora and Marian create, '...a matriarchal community rooted in mutual respect, in art and in the nurturing care of the next generation ...' (Williams 1997:202). As Williams aptly puts it, 'The violator in this poem is not a single Tereus figure but a materialistic (patriarchal) system' (203). The birth of the *feminine* poetic voice of Barrett Browning's epic is not, however, the lamenting (feminine) song of the classical Greek nightingale. Rather, Barrett Browning rearranges elements of the myth to accommodate her new vision:

Aurora challenges the values of that [materialistic (patriarchal) system] by stressing the central importance of love: Romney can be detached from his 'misguided' materialist beliefs. Where Tereus married one sister and raped the other, silencing her in the process, Romney was to have married Marian but marries her 'sister', Aurora, instead. In that Marian and her child had made their home with Aurora, this marriage associates all four in a new community based on love, respect and art (203).

Williams also points to the inter-textuality of *AL* as a statement on Barrett Browning's part regarding the need for a new voice. She draws from a historically more 'feminine' literary tradition, and creates a unique text and a unique (un-nightingale-like) voice. I have already commented on the hybrid nature of the form, and its ideological implications, but Williams also highlights the inclusion of medieval patterns.

The romance landscape and allegory of medieval literature colours the backcloth to the events of the poems as much in *Aurora Leighs* in earlier texts such as 'Hector in the Garden' or 'The Lost Bower'. As in those texts, indices of this influence lie in the pervasive use of both bird imagery and the enclosed space within *Aurora Leigh*: elements which continue to be associated with women and art (205).

In *AL Barrett Browning* shows through various means that it is the development of a feminine poetic voice which ultimately alters the hierarchies of dominance of class and gender. Her text, so unique in form—a ‘novel-poem’, epic and novel, poetry and narrative, captured in blank verse—challenged the ideologies inherent in the questions of form of its time. The subtle, extensive and varied literary references allow Barrett Browning to weave a tapestry of song bold and new. She challenges the real versus ideal dialectic and confronts the materialism of her time with a philosophy rooted in a feminine poetic voice.

References

- Barrett Browning, E 1974. *The Poetical Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Barrett Browning, E 2008. *Aurora Leigh*. McSweeney, Kerry (ed). New York: Oxford University Press. (Oxford World Series.)
- Brown, S 2000. The Victorian Poetess. In Bristow, Joseph (ed): *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Poetry*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Brown, SA 1997. Paradise Lost and Aurora Leigh. *Studies in English Literature* 37: 723-740.
- Felluga, D 2002. Verse Novel. In Cronin, R, Alison Chapman & Antony Harrison (eds): *A Companion to Victorian Poetry*. Malden: Blackwell.
- Hudson, GW 1973. *An Elizabeth Barrett Browning Concordance*. 4 Volumes. Detroit: Gale Research.
- Leighton, A 1992. Because men made the laws: The Fallen Woman and the Woman Poet. In Armstrong, Isobel (ed): *New Feminist Discourses: Critical Essays on Theories and Texts*. London: Routledge.
- McSweeney, Kerry (ed) 2008. *Aurora Leigh*. (By Barrett Browning) New York: Oxford University Press. (Oxford World Series.)
- Mermin, D 1995. The Damsel, the Knight, and the Victorian Woman Poet. In Bristow, Joseph (ed): *Victorian Women Poets: Emily Brontë, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Christina Rossetti*. Houndmills: Macmillan.
- Raymond, MB & MR Sullivan (eds) 1983. *Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning to Mary Russell Mitford 1836-1854*. 3 Volumes. Waco: Armstrong Browning Library of Baylor University.

Taryn Laing-Cox

Williams, J 1997. *Interpreting Nightingales*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.

Zonana, J 1996. The Embodied Muse: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* and Feminist Poetics. In Leighton, Angela (ed): *Victorian Women Poets: A Critical Reader*. Oxford: Blackwell.

English Department
University of Zululand
philcox@mweb.co.za