

# AURORA LEIGH

ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING



EDITED BY MARGARET REYNOLDS

A NORTON CRITICAL EDITION

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Elizabeth Barrett Browning  
AURORA LEIGH



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AUTHORITATIVE TEXT  
BACKGROUNDS AND CONTEXTS  
CRITICISM

*Edited by*

MARGARET REYNOLDS  
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON



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# Preface

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At the heart of *Aurora Leigh* there is a book. It's the book that Aurora sits down to write when she begins her story (1.1–9). It's the new and brave book that she attempts in the center of the poem (5.351–357). It's the manuscript book that she leaves with her publisher before setting out for Italy (5.1212–1213 and 5.1261–1266). It's the book that Romney reads and that makes him realize, ten years too late, that Aurora really is a poet (8.261–262 and 8.278–297).

This imagined book is the pattern for *Aurora Leigh* itself. The real verse-novel published by Elizabeth Barrett Browning at the end of 1856 mirrors the made-up poem written by the fictional Aurora. Both books tell the story of a woman poet that is, and is not, her own story. Both books aspire to a new poetic form, both deal with the topical questions of the day, both appear in England while the author travels to Italy. So much is true of both Aurora's book and Barrett Browning's. The part that Barrett Browning had to make up, because it hadn't yet happened, is the story of what became of the book that is and is not *Aurora Leigh*.

Fantasizing about the reception of her own book, Barrett Browning tells us how the critics admired Aurora's book, how they exclaimed over this unlooked-for triumph from a woman, how they accorded Aurora respect and fame (7.551–571). In the event, it didn't work out quite like this for *Aurora Leigh*. Some reviewers were amazed because the work was so big and bold; some deemed it cumbersome and excessive. But they all agreed that it was important for two reasons. First, it tackled with enthusiasm the pressing contemporary issues of socialism and the position of women. Second, it outlined the model for the successful working woman poet. Readers from Queen Victoria to the art critic John Ruskin, from the historian Thomas Carlyle, to the poet Christina Rossetti found *Aurora Leigh* riveting because of its politics; because of its passionate defense of individual, as opposed to collective, enterprise; because of its eager championing of the "fallen" woman and the single mother. The book had a huge success with a wide general public. The first edition sold out in a fortnight, and it was reprinted five times before Elizabeth Barrett Browning's death in 1861. By the end of the nineteenth century it had been reprinted more than twenty times in Britain and nearly as often in the United States. It became one of the books that everyone knew and read. Oscar Wilde loved it, the poet Algernon

Charles Swinburne wrote a gushing preface for it, the novelist Rudyard Kipling borrowed the plot for *The Light That Failed* (1890), and, in America, the feminist activist Susan B. Anthony presented her treasured copy to the Library of Congress in 1902 and wrote on the flyleaf:

This book was carried in my satchel for years and read & re-read. The noble words of Elizabeth Barrett . . . sink deep into my heart. I have always cherished it above all other books. I now present it to the Congressional Library Washington D.C. With the hope that Women may more & more be like “Aurora Leigh”.

This one aspect of Barrett Browning’s feminist politics remained urgent and relevant throughout the nineteenth century: how was the writing woman to make her life? and where could she look for a role-model? This, too, Barrett Browning wrote into her imagined version of what happened to Aurora’s book. When Vincent Carrington writes to tell Aurora of the book’s success he also tells her how she has acquired a disciple in the person of his young fiancée, Kate Ward. Vincent paints Kate’s portrait, but she insists on appearing in an old cloak just like one that Aurora herself had worn. Kate insists too upon being represented holding a copy of Aurora’s book, and in using Aurora’s arguments to quarrel with her future husband:

She has your books by heart more than my words  
And quotes you up against me. . . . (7.603–604)

Barrett Browning’s imagined Kate Ward was only the first of any number of real writing and thinking women who made Aurora, and Barrett Browning herself, their special heroines. George Eliot was one of these. She reviewed *Aurora Leigh* when it was first published and admired it deeply. She borrowed images from the novel-poem for *The Mill on the Floss* and *Middlemarch*, and in her verse-drama about an artist/opera singer, *Armgarth* (1871), she too quoted arguments derived from Barrett Browning. But it was the women poets of the latter nineteenth century who formed Aurora’s most dedicated band of acolytes. Dora Greenwell wrote two love sonnets to the older poet; the activist Bessie Rayner Parkes wrote her a hesitant dedication (“Indeed I should not dare—but that this love,/Long nursed, demands expression, and alone/Speaks by love’s dear strength—to approach near you/In words so weak and poor beside your own”; the Irish poet Emily Hickey adapted the verse-novel form in her poem *Michael Villiers: Idealist* (1891) to mix public questions about colonial domination and personal questions of individual development; Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper, who together wrote the extraordinary poems published under the name Michael Field, used pseudonyms—“Isla” and “Arran Leigh”—that reflected their admiration, and they traveled to Italy to stay with Elizabeth’s son, Pen Browning, and to commune with the spirit of their pre-

decessor; and the Modernist poet Charlotte Mew, whose taut controlled work is so different from Barrett Browning's extravagance, nevertheless reworked many of her subjects and managed, to some extent, to live the independent working life imagined for the woman poet in *Aurora Leigh*.

The verse-novel form of Barrett Browning's work had many poetic successors, but it was the model of Aurora's independent life that made the fictional heroine so precious to the writers and scholars that came afterwards. One young disciple, Kate Field, really did have a picture of herself painted, in the manner of Kate Ward, as an homage to *Aurora Leigh*. In the portrait, which she commissioned from Elihu Vedder, she is shown in half profile, wearing classical drapery and posed against the skyline of Florence. Field donated the picture to the Boston Art Gallery, and though the original is now lost, a version of the portrait appears on the cover of this Norton Critical Edition of *Aurora Leigh*. The icon once would have been recognized by thousands of young intellectual women. At Wellesley College in Massachusetts, for instance, at the end of the nineteenth century, stained glass windows representing scenes from Barrett Browning's work were installed for the edification of the women educated there. These windows too have gone, destroyed by fire.

And for a time in the twentieth century *Aurora Leigh* itself also disappeared. It's a curious critical history. After nearly half a century of being read, discussed, and revered, *Aurora Leigh* came off the bookshelves, and Barrett Browning, that stalwart of women's independence, dwindled into the sofa-dwelling invalid portrayed in Rudolph Besier's well-known play *The Barretts of Wimpole Street* (1930). It's hard to say why it happened, but happen it certainly did. Perhaps the lush hagiography coming from Browning critics such as Lilian Whiting was too much for the new and lean Modernist sensibility. Certainly, as the extract included in this Norton Critical Edition from Marjory Bald makes plain, Barrett Browning seemed too strident, too self-conscious, too angry, to appear sympathetic to the cooler, more refined, version of early-twentieth-century feminism. Even Virginia Woolf—who, after all, was born a Victorian and knew the ubiquitous influence of Barrett Browning in her own youth—found *Aurora Leigh*, with all its many good points, too long, too heavy, too dated, too roundly upholstered with facts and dates and times and arguments. So that was that. Elizabeth Barrett Browning became an odd little aside in the life of her much-greater-poet-husband, and there was no more *Aurora Leigh*.

And then. And then in the 1960s . . . feminism happened. It took a while, of course, to percolate into literary studies, but when it did, it was *Aurora Leigh* that became the heroine-text. First Ellen Moers took it up in her astonishingly forward-thinking book *Literary Women* (1977). In *Aurora Leigh* she found all the metaphors (the caged bird, the need to stride out, the improvisatrice, Italy as mother-country) that were

important to women writers of the nineteenth century and that have become topics for numerous theses since. Then Cora Kaplan reprinted *Aurora Leigh* with the radical Women's Press in Britain. And in the States, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar restored this neglected text to the canon of nineteenth century women's writing by including it in their monumental book *The Madwoman in the Attic*. In the 1980s and 1990s *Aurora Leigh* has become the central text of nineteenth-century women's writing in academic circles; it competes with Christina Rossetti's ever-popular *Goblin Market* for first place as the most written-on text of Victorian women's poetry. In Britain it has even found its way out to a more general audience. In the early 1980s a stage version by Michelene Wandor appeared at the National Theatre and was broadcast by the BBC's Radio 3. More recently, an audiotape of the poem has been published, with the well-known actress Diana Quick reading the part of Aurora. I see no plans yet for a Hollywood movie, but who knows?

The reasons for Aurora's current popularity are clear, and curiously they are exactly the same reasons that made her popular in the nineteenth century. She is bold, she is brave, she is independent and liberated and, above all, she gets everything she wants in the end. In the nineteenth century *Aurora Leigh* told contemporary readers a great deal about their own time. Today the poem can still tell us a great deal about that time. In that sense *Aurora Leigh* is a historical document more than a poem. But it's also a significant literary document and, as such, it works both for then and for now. In the nineteenth century, women writers were only just beginning to come to terms with the exclusions and prohibitions that hedged about their aspirations. *Aurora Leigh* spoke to those anxieties and said things would be all right. In the late twentieth century, when we are only just beginning to understand the subtle history of women's invisibility in literature, *Aurora Leigh* helps to explain how it happened in a particular place and time.

At the heart of *Aurora Leigh* there is a book. When Aurora starts to write that book she knows that her work is necessary for herself, and for others—writing women into a literary history that had left them out:

Of writing many books there is no end;  
And I who have written much in prose and verse  
For others' uses will write now for mine . . .  
(1.1–3)

This is why Aurora's book is important. And because Aurora's book and Barrett Browning's book are one and the same thing, *Aurora Leigh* is important. *Aurora Leigh* may not figure in Harold Bloom's canon, for he privileges the aesthetic, and charts only the cultures and the texts that have made Western civilization the way it is. But *Aurora Leigh* makes

the canon for a new culture. For women are a civilization still in the making. A country without history, without art. A country making its laws, its myths, its histories. *Aurora Leigh* is one of those myths. When its uses are no longer so urgent, it will fade into history. But until then *Aurora Leigh* speaks to us, because it is empowering, because it is encouraging and cheerful, because it is necessary.



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# The Text of AURORA LEIGH



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# AURORA LEIGH.

BY

ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING.

FOURTH EDITION.

*REVISED.*

LONDON:

CHAPMAN AND HALL, 193 PICCADILLY.

1859.

*Title page for the revised edition published by Chapman and Hall, 1859.*

To  
John Kenyon, Esq.

The words 'cousin' and 'friend' are constantly re-  
curring in this poem, the last pages of which have been  
finished under the hospitality of your roof, my own  
dearest cousin and friend;—cousin and friend, in a  
sense of less equality and greater disinterestedness than  
'Romney' 's

5

Ending, therefore, and preparing once more to quit  
England, I venture to leave in your hands this book,  
the most mature of my works, and the one into which  
my highest convictions upon Life and Art have entered;  
that as, through my various efforts in literature and  
steps in life, you have believed in me, borne with me,  
and been generous to me, far beyond the common uses  
of mere relationship or sympathy of mind, so you may  
kindly accept, in sight of the public, this poor sign of  
esteem, gratitude, and affection from

10

15

your unforgetting  
E. B. B.

39, Devonshire Place,  
October 17, 1856.

---

# Aurora Leigh

---

## First Book

Of writing many books there is no end;<sup>1</sup>  
And I who have written much in prose and verse<sup>2</sup>  
For others' uses, will write now for mine, -  
Will write my story for my better self<sup>3</sup>  
As when you paint your portrait for a friend, 5  
Who keeps it in a drawer and looks at it  
Long after he has ceased to love you, just  
To hold together what he was and is.

I, writing thus, am still what men call young;  
I have not so far left the coasts of life 10  
To travel inland, that I cannot hear  
That murmur of the outer Infinite<sup>4</sup>  
Which unweaned babies smile at in their sleep  
When wondered at for smiling; not so far,  
But still I catch my mother at her post 15  
Beside the nursery-door, with finger up,  
'Hush, hush - here's too much noise!' while her sweet eyes  
Leap forward, taking part against her word  
In the child's riot. Still I sit and feel  
My father's slow hand, when she had left us both, 20  
Stroke out my childish curls across his knee,  
And hear Assunta's<sup>5</sup> daily jest (she knew  
He liked it better than a better jest)  
Inquire how many golden scudi<sup>6</sup> went

1. See Ecclesiastes 12.12.

2. This applies as much to Elizabeth Barrett Browning (hereafter referred to as EBB) as to Aurora herself.

3. Aurora is writing her life story retrospectively at the age of 26 or 27. Her past catches up with her present (briefly) at the beginning of book 3 and again in book 5. Thereafter the poem takes on the form of journal entries and is, in effect, written while it is being lived.

4. Cf. Wordsworth, "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood" (1807), lines 71-74 and 165-71.

5. A common name in nineteenth-century Italy. It suggests an homage to the Virgin Mary and means, literally, "Our Lady, received into Heaven."

6. The scudo was no longer current in mid-nineteenth-century Florence, but the word continued in popular use as a general term for any large amount of money. The association of golden hair and gold coin is a familiar one in the world of fairytale and was often exploited for its

To make such ringlets. O my father's hand, 25  
 Stroke heavily, heavily the poor hair down,  
 Draw, press the child's head closer to thy knee!  
 I'm still too young, too young, to sit alone.

I write. My mother was a Florentine,<sup>7</sup>  
 Whose rare blue eyes were shut from seeing me 30  
 When scarcely I was four years old, my life  
 A poor spark snatched up from a failing lamp  
 Which went out therefore. She was weak and frail;  
 She could not bear the joy of giving life,  
 The mother's rapture slew her.<sup>8</sup> If her kiss 35  
 Had left a longer weight upon my lips<sup>9</sup>  
 It might have steadied the uneasy breath,  
 And reconciled and fraternised my soul  
 With the new order. As it was, indeed,  
 I felt a mother-want about the world, 40  
 And still went seeking, like a bleating lamb  
 Left out at night in shutting up the fold,-  
 As restless as a nest-deserted bird  
 Grown chill through something being away, though what  
 It knows not. I, Aurora Leigh, was born 45  
 To make my father sadder, and myself  
 Not overjoyous, truly. Women know  
 The way to rear up children, (to be just)  
 They know a simple, merry, tender knack  
 Of tying sashes, fitting baby-shoes, 50  
 And stringing pretty words that make no sense,  
 And kissing full sense into empty words,  
 Which things are corals<sup>1</sup> to cut life upon,  
 Although such trifles: children learn by such,  
 Love's holy earnest in a pretty play 55  
 And get not over-early solemnised,  
 But seeing, as in a rose-bush, Love's Divine

---

criticism of public versus private value by nineteenth-century women writers; see especially George Eliot's *Silas Marner* (1861), ch. 12, and Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market* (1862). The fairytale context of Aurora's childhood is further emphasized in manuscript by the reference to "my uncle captain, fresh from Spain" who speaks not of scudi, but *moidores*, a gold coin of Portugal that was current in England in the first half of the eighteenth century. See textual note.

7. A native of Florence, where the Brownings lived from 1847. Her mother's blue eyes were "rare," because one would expect them to be dark, as they were in the drafts for the poem. See textual note.

8. The tensions surrounding EBB's conceit on labor and childbirth are based as much on her own mixed experience of miscarriage and birth as on her memory of her mother's long years of childbearing.

9. Cf. EBB, *Sonnets from the Portuguese* 18 (1850), lines 13–14, wherein the speaker (EBB) gives her beloved, Robert Browning (hereafter referred to as RB), a lock of hair, saying, "Take it thou, finding pure from all those years,/The kiss my mother left here when she died."

1. A toy made of polished coral, given to infants to assist teething (OED).



Which burns and hurts not,<sup>2</sup> - not a single bloom, -  
 Become aware and unafraid of Love.  
 Such good do mothers. Fathers love as well  
 - Mine did, I know, - but still with heavier brains,<sup>3</sup>  
 And wills more consciously responsible,  
 And not as wisely, since less foolishly;  
 So mothers have God's licence to be missed.

60

My father was an austere Englishman,  
 Who, after a dry life-time spent at home  
 In college-learning, law, and parish talk,  
 Was flooded with a passion unaware,  
 His whole provisioned and complacent past  
 Drowned out from him that moment.<sup>4</sup> As he stood  
 In Florence, where he had come to spend a month  
 And note the secret of Da Vinci's drains,<sup>5</sup>  
 He musing somewhat absently perhaps  
 Some English question . . . whether men should pay  
 The unpopular but necessary tax  
 With left or right hand<sup>6</sup> - in the alien sun  
 In that great square of the Santissima<sup>7</sup>  
 There drifted past him (scarcely marked enough  
 To move his comfortable island scorn)  
 A train of priestly banners, cross and psalm,  
 The white-veiled rose-crowned maidens holding up  
 Tall tapers, weighty for such wrists, aslant  
 To the blue luminous tremor of the air,  
 And letting drop the white wax as they went  
 To eat the bishop's wafer at the church;<sup>8</sup>

65

70

75

80

85

2. See Exodus 3.2. The rose is the traditional symbol of love.

3. Nineteenth-century students of anatomy noticed that men tend to have brains that weigh more than women's—not surprising, given the relative difference in average body weight. Unfortunately, this evidence was cited by some psychologists in support of their theory that the male possessed a higher intellect than the female. Similarly, responsibility was taken to be a masculine characteristic, and spontaneity a feminine trait (see lines 62–63).

4. Cf. *Aurora Leigh* 8.34–61.

5. Vasari makes scant reference to Leonardo's engineering skills, but he does mention his suggestion for “the formation of a canal from Pisa to Florence, by means of certain changes to be effected on the river Arno.” EBB's allusion to Da Vinci's drains, when he is much better known for more noble artistic activity, is a joke about the prosaic character of Leigh's imagination.

6. An ironic allusion to Matthew 6.3, “But when thou doest alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth.”

7. The church of the Santissima Annunziata in Florence stands on the north side of the square called the Piazza Santissima Annunziata.

8. The procession described here is probably that held to celebrate the nativity of the Virgin on September 8. Events for that occasion, and particularly the youth of the participants, are noted in *Murray's Handbook for Travellers in Northern Italy* (London, 1847). As the Santissima Annunziata is a church of the Servite order, and the special symbol of that order is the image of the Virgin stabbed with seven swords (see lines 160–61), it is fairly certain that this is the same as the Servite procession described by RB in “Up at a Villa, Down in the City” (1855) 9.59–62: “Look, two and two go the priests, then the monks with cowls and sandals,/And the penitents dressed in white shirts a-holding the yellow candles;/One, he carries a flag up straight, and another a cross with handles.”