“Different Planes of Sensuous Form”: American Critical and Popular Responses to Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s Aurora Leigh and Last Poems: Annotated Bibliography, American Periodicals, 1856-1861

Cheryl Stiles, Kennesaw State University
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Victorian Periodicals Review, Volume 40, Number 3, Fall 2007, pp. 239-255 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: 10.1353/vpr.2007.0043

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“Different Planes of Sensuous Form”:
American Critical and Popular Responses to Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh* and *Last Poems*: Annotated Bibliography, American Periodicals, 1856-62

CHERYL STILES

Introduction

In her dedication of *Aurora Leigh* to John Kenyon, Elizabeth Barrett Browning described her book as “the most mature of my works, and the one into which my highest convictions upon Life and Art have entered.” Throughout her lifetime, from the publication of her first book in 1826, *An Essay on Mind*, through the publication of *Poems Before Congress*, the final volume of which was released before her death in 1861, she maintained her high poetic aspirations, often challenging poetic conventions with her diction, choice of subject matter, unconventional philosophies about women and their roles as poets and artists, and her stance on social, economic, and political issues of the day. The year 2006 marks the bicentennial of Browning’s birth, and it seems an opportune time to examine and to amplify, in some modest way, the bibliographical research done on Browning and her poetry. The purpose of this introductory essay and annotated bibliography is to examine previously undocumented reviews and essays of *Aurora Leigh* and *Last Poems* which appear in American periodicals during the years 1856-62. A second purpose is to record, through an explanation of the resources and methods utilized, how access to a new electronic database, the American Periodicals Series (APS) available from ProQuest, may augment the scholarship and bibliographic study of numerous nineteenth-century authors including Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Alfred Lord Tennyson, Robert Browning, Christina Rossetti, and Charles Dickens.

*Aurora Leigh*, Browning’s novel-length poem written in nine books, was first published in England and America in late 1856, although both the British and American editions carried an imprint of 1857. The American edition, published by C.S. Francis of New York, was
never revised, while the British edition, published by Chapman and Hall, appeared in three subsequent impressions which were revised by the author, the last of which appeared in 1859. Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s popularity in America was widespread, in part, because she often contributed poems to American journals such as Graham’s Magazine and The Literary World. In 1845 Langley of New York produced an American edition of her two-volume work, A Drama of Exile: and Other Poems. All of Browning’s book length works after 1845 appeared in both American and English imprints. Last Poems was published by James Miller of New York in 1862, the year following Browning’s death.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning and her work provide boundless, complex, and challenging opportunities for literary scholars. Her work has received increased interest from researchers, especially since the early 1970s, the decade of a renaissance in feminist literary theory and of theoretical and critical advances made by scholars such as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar. Another notable scholar, Sandra Donaldson, currently Chez Fritzer Distinguished Professor of English at the University of North Dakota, has spent more than 30 years studying and writing about Browning. In 1993 Donaldson published Elizabeth Barrett Browning: An Annotated Bibliography of the Commentary and Criticism, 1826-1990, the definitive bibliography about Browning published to date. Donaldson is also co-editor for The Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning: A Complete Edition, a five-volume set scheduled for publication in 2007 by Pickering and Chatto. The last editions of Browning’s complete poems appeared in 1900 and were published by Thomas Crowell of New York and Houghton Mifflin of Boston, respectively.

Several important doctoral studies also contribute significant bibliographical information to the scholarship. In her dissertation entitled Elizabeth Barrett Browning: The Poet as Heroine of Literary History, Tricia Lootens discusses the “secular sainthood” of Browning and the varying, often contradictory critical and popular responses such “sainthood” engendered. Borrowing the phrase “secular sainthood” from folklorists, Lootens claims that critics sanctified Browning as a woman—a heroine—while offering various critical responses to her works. After Browning’s death, Aurora Leigh was singled out for particular castigation, while earlier works such as Sonnets from the Portuguese and A Drama of Exile rose in critical stature. For these reasons, Lootens postulates that Aurora Leigh virtually disappeared from publication and from the critical radar screen until the 1970s. In his dissertation, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and America, 1840-1861, Robert W. Gladish examines critical and popular responses that
appeared in major American periodicals such as the Southern Literary Messenger, Broadway, and the New York Daily Tribune. In great detail he chronicles the critical praise offered to Browning by Edgar Allan Poe. Gladish documents Browning’s correspondence to and about Poe, and he credits Poe, perhaps above all other reviewers, with promoting Browning’s reputation to an even wider American audience. In her well-known dissertation, The Writing of Aurora Leigh, Mildred Wilsey chronicles the literary and human influences that inspired Browning to pen her verse novel and, by examining Browning’s diary entries and correspondence with others, documents the creation of Aurora Leigh as a text.

This annotated bibliography contains entries for items published in American periodicals during 1856-62. These entries do not appear in any of the existing print bibliographies examined to date, including the canonical work by Donaldson, and they represent a small but complementary addition to the bibliographical scholarship of Browning’s work. Both critical and popular articles are represented in the expectation that their inclusion might contribute to the fields of gender studies and cultural studies, in addition to literary and biographical studies. Advertisements and publishers’ catalogue information are excluded. Copies of the full text of the original journal articles were retrieved through a new electronic database, American Periodicals Series (APS), produced by ProQuest. Database access was provided by the Horace W. Sturgis Library of Kennesaw State University, one of the first university libraries in the United States to subscribe to this resource and to make it available to faculty and students.

ProQuest continues to be a pioneer in offering electronic access to a growing body of digital resources. The company produces a database of historical newspapers which includes The New York Times from 1851 to 1993, and Early English Books Online (EEBO), a new, and now indispensable, resource for scholars, historians, librarians, and researchers concerned with the history of the printed word. In 2006 ProQuest introduced C19: The Nineteenth Century Index. Combining selected print reference works with individual database indexes that had previously been available as separate products, C19 has records that are derived from diverse and multiple sources such as Poole’s Index to Periodical Literature, Nineteenth Century Short Title Catalogue, Wellesley Index to Victorian Periodicals, and Palmer’s Index to the Times. Although C19 functions solely as an indexing tool, a subscription to the database allows the library user to link seamlessly to full text content in any other ProQuest database to which the library subscribes. In 2006 ProQuest premiered the full text database, British
Periodicals Collection I, and in 2007 the company will release an additional product, British Periodicals Collection II. The two combined databases will contain more than 500 periodical titles published during the years 1681-1920. The full text databases provide facsimiles of each article, caption, and image, all of which may be viewed as PDF files.

The American Periodicals Series, a component of ProQuest’s “digital vault” endeavor to scan and digitize the world’s largest commercially held collection of microforms (University Microforms Inc.), includes over 1,000 periodical titles spanning the years 1740 to 1900.11 The database contains scientific, professional, and technical journals as well as popular magazines such as Harper’s and Ladies’ Home Journal. Images, advertisements, and full text of articles are available in high resolution PDF format. All ProQuest full text databases mentioned in this article are indexed, fully searchable by numerous options including keyword, subject, author, article title, date, periodical title, Boolean operator, and type of entry (review, photograph, illustration, poem). Articles may be downloaded, emailed, or printed; in addition, bibliographies can be generated and exported to most major citation management programs such as EndNote or ProCite. APS offers the user the relatively new option of converting the bibliography of selected articles into a web page with hyperlinks. Instructors who teach online courses, or who utilize electronic courseware packages like WebCT, can post the URL for the bibliography into their websites or courseware. The various microform collections reflected in APS have been previously available to researchers on a limited basis, and often only at large private universities or large state-run universities. The advent of APS, and of complementary databases such as C19 and British Periodicals Collections I and II, represents an exponential leap in electronic access, a democratization of access to a massive treasure of rare materials.

Each annotation summarizes the article or review, highlights major issues addressed, and includes any mention of works in addition to Aurora Leigh and Last Poems. Through the use of direct quotes, the annotations are meant to retain and render the original tone of the author. Entries are arranged chronologically by year and then by month. Most articles appearing during the years of coverage were published anonymously. Lack of authorial attribution was common in American periodicals of the period. In his seminal book, A History of American Periodicals, 1850-1865, Frank Luther Mott offers several explanations: “Under the system of anonymity, editors had plenary powers. It was a logical result of such a system that blue-penciling should be unrestrained.”12
Although APS has greatly enhanced access to materials, the database still presents challenges for the researcher, even the most seasoned one. To thoroughly examine the database, a user must look for multiple subjects such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning, “Mrs. Browning,” Elizabeth Barrett, *Aurora Leigh*, and *Last Poems*. To fully exhaust the subject holdings of the database, a user must also examine variant spellings of subject terms by employing more advanced search techniques like truncation, proximity searching, and wild card characters. In APS, pagination of primary source documents is another problematic area, one not necessarily related to the database but rather to the original appearance of the documents in print. Some periodicals lacked pagination entirely while others may have used it irregularly or inconsistently. Each bibliographic entry in APS includes a starting page number, but that page number does not often appear in the scanned version of the physical document, hence the starting page number is omitted from each bibliographic entry here.

The reader will quickly discern the diversity of tone and content reflected in the bibliography. The entries indeed represent, to use Browning’s phrase from Book Nine of *Aurora Leigh*, “different planes of sensuous form.” How appropriate that a multifaceted poet such as Browning, and the many works she authored, should provoke such varying responses from both the critic and the general reader!

Sandra Donaldson identified 68 articles and reviews published in American periodicals during 1856-62. This annotated bibliography supplements Donaldson’s with the addition of 23 new entries, all discovered as a direct result of the availability of APS. These new entries represent approximately a 32 percent increase of the total items for this time period. APS contains more than 1500 records for Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Theorizing from the results of this annotated bibliography, and estimating the coverage available in APS, approximately one third (up to 500) of the entries could prove to be new.

Searches for information in APS regarding the following authors of the Victorian period yielded these (approximate) results: 800 entries for Christina Rossetti, 1,100 entries for Alfred Lord Tennyson, 1,800 entries for Robert Browning, and almost 17,000 entries for Charles Dickens. These search results, based on the query for authors’ names only, do not reflect additional listings that might be found by looking for book titles and variant subject headings. If a modest five to ten percent of these entries prove to be new additions to bibliographic record, the potential benefit for future researchers and scholars is immeasurable. The terrain for new bibliographic scholarship based upon the holdings now available through American Periodicals Series remains virtually uncharted.
Annotated Bibliography, American Periodicals, 1856-1862

1856


   Comments that Aurora Leigh is the longest English poem published in years. The reviewer remarks that the early portions of the work have “faults in rhythm and diction,” but that the reader will cease to care about them because the story is so interesting. After comparing the poem to novels by “Miss Bronte and J.K.,” the writer claims it is a superior work because “poetry is finer than prose.”

   Aurora Leigh possesses the qualities of Browning’s previous poems: sincerity, strength of thought, splendor and energy of style, and “an embodied passionateness.” Of Browning’s latest work, the reviewer concludes, “It is the best thing that she has yet done.”


   Proclaims that the name Elizabeth Barrett Browning “is alone sufficient to stamp the quality of this book.” The reviewer refers to the extensive praise proffered to Browning by the late Edgar Allan Poe and concludes that Aurora Leigh “will be read with eager interest wherever the English tongue is spoken.”

1857


   Notes the “incongruity between a book-notice of a dozen lines, and one of the grandest works of human art.” [The length of the review is 37 lines on the page.] Aurora Leigh falls short of epic proportions due to “some defect of the majesty of proportions.” The reviewer classifies the book as a “metrical romance” and describes the work as one which “here sweeps, in robes of splendor, and with the solemn march of imperial purpose, before the reader’s soul!” The book is, however, not without faults: “a little mannerism here,” “a little involution and obscurity there,” and “occasionally a violation of the laws of gradation indisposing light and shade.” No author—man or woman—has “looked farther into the abysses of suffering and faith” and “reported the awful vision with holier fidelity” than Browning.

Heralds *Aurora Leigh* as the greatest poem written by a living female and states that it lacks the “stiffness and obscurity” which critics have often attributed to the poet’s previous works. The reviewer emphasizes that Browning’s “command of language is almost a marvel.” “*Aurora Leigh* should be the study of all who would know the flexibility and intensity of the English language. It must be a study to be appreciated.” Browning must “lead the van” among living female poets.


Questions whether to call *Aurora Leigh* a “novel of English society” in blank verse or a poetic epic. The reviewer notes that the few “incidents and persons” of the work seem secondary to the main subject of the poem, “the growth of a woman’s and a poet’s soul.” After briefly summarizing the artistic ideas of the poem, the reviewer continues:

There are many lines of concentrated force, many of quiet beauty, in the poem, but not many passages of matured power, except, perhaps the closing scene. Is it a scholarly piece of English iambic, half as long as the Iliad, and (may we say it?) at the very opposite pole of the heavens of poetry, for in the Iliad we have thought and feeling only as incarnate in word and deed, while with Mrs. Browning words and deeds are but the shadows, of which thought and feeling are the substance. *Aurora* is a woman’s Iliad, a true epic of the nineteenth century…. 


Identifies Elizabeth Barrett Browning as the most gifted of modern women, for “none carries a more original, a more powerful or more prophetic pen.” The author of this extensive and laudatory review identifies herself as a woman: “We, as one of the sex, are cheerfully willing to concede this [Browning’s stature].” Browning’s fame, in part, is due to her birth in England, a country where she is upheld as a genius. “Had she appeared in America, where the competition is greater, and the prestige of rank and genius less, where new opinions are so severely handled, Elizabeth Barrett Browning would have been hunted down by press and pulpit, even worse than the gifted Margaret Fuller was.”

The reviewer praises *Aurora Leigh* as the “most characteristic and most remarkable” of Browning’s works. The book is written in blank verse, “that greatest of all poetic measures,” which Browning has made
“particularly her own.” “It has not the measured cathedral flow of the Miltonic blank verse. On the contrary, it is more human, more familiar, with here and there the sweet cadences and deep passionate utterances of a Shakespeare.”

The reviewer mentions Browning’s association with Margaret Fuller and with other Americans whom she met when they traveled abroad. She claims that *Aurora Leigh* exhibits “traces of the American mind” and that the poem is “far more Young American than English, both in thought and expression.” The remainder of the article thoroughly summarizes the characters, events, themes, plot, and moral issues of *Aurora Leigh*. The work is the author’s greatest to date. “It has a manly force, combined with a womanly insight and tenderness.”


Indicates that *Aurora Leigh* is likely to be a “sensation” of the present season due to the “opinions as set forth by the author.” Browning is described as original, sensible, “practical in a scheming age, full of plans and projects of reform, both in church and state...for she belongs to the anti-social reform party, and maintains that *every one should mend one until the whole is mended*.” The essayist refers to Browning’s “conservatism” and indicates that she is more practical than some poets.

The characters and plot of *Aurora Leigh* are examined in great detail, with particular emphasis placed upon the social spheres and intellectual temperaments of the poem’s protagonist and Romney Leigh. The relationship between Romney and Marian is singled out for particular criticism.

While *Aurora Leigh* may be good in “many respects,” the author of the poem cannot be trusted as a “safe guide” for the reader due to “irreverent flights of bold thought” and she is likewise reprehended for her “violation of all poetic rules and accepted application of language.” The essayist continues:

The great effort at originality of expression, so evident in writers of this school, is painfully felt by the reader when toiling through her compositions. True, her thoughts are often grand and striking, but they are dimly developed by language sometimes silly and affected, and sometimes absurd and inappropriate. One must think in order to reach her meaning.

The essayist continues at length in this vein. In summary, while Browning may be admirable for her qualities as a woman, her poetics deserve condemnation and *Aurora Leigh* earns especially scathing censure.

This “novel in blank verse” establishes *Aurora Leigh* as the greatest poem written by Browning or by any other woman, and “it is a philosophy of life done in verse.” *Aurora Leigh* reflects its author’s ideas concerning “Human Life and Destiny,” “Religion, Science, Socialism, Love,” and “History, Biography, the Classics.” According to the reviewer, the book can be recapitulated in one line, “Humanity is great.” In commenting upon the plot, the reviewer states, “The plot is as good as we can expect of the English.”

The reviewer continues, “Mrs. Browning’s conception outruns as yet her execution. She thinks greater than she sings,” yet then says of *Aurora Leigh* that “Mrs. Browning has achieved a splendid success.” Multiple excerpts from *Aurora Leigh* conclude this review.


Summarizes a lecture, “Poetry and Poets,” delivered by Horace Greeley at Clinton Hall on 11 December 1857, and presented for the Young Men’s Philomathean Society. In this self-described “rambling and desultory” lecture, Greeley comments that English poets “were more appreciated in America than in England.” Numerous poets are mentioned in passing: Shakespeare, Byron, Whitman, Homer, Chaucer, Spenser, Milton, Burns, Keats, Tennyson, and Robert Browning. “Elizabeth Barrett Browning, the wife of Robert, received due praise from Mr. Greeley, especially for her poem of ‘Aurora Leigh.’”


Laments the subsequent issue of Browning’s *Poems*, published by C.S. Francis of New York, in a “pleasant little pocket-size edition,” a miniature volume that “compressed and painfully restricted” her expansive work into the narrow confines of small pages. The reviewer continues, “it is easier to associate the magnificent thought, and the affluent on-flowing verse of Aurora with the ample page, the copious margin, the broad uncurbed expanse of the letter-press.” Although the margins on this particular edition are reduced, the reviewer commends the book to readers. Of Browning’s work, this writer concludes, “It is to the credit of Americans that her writings, with all their marked peculiarities of idiom, have achieved here so prompt and so wide a popularity.”


Anna Hope praises Browning for her “great intellect” and “woman’s heart,” and she says that Browning “has become to me not only a writer
who has moved the hidden depths of my nature, but a friend whom I earnestly love.” Hope holds Robert Browning in high esteem as well, in part, because of his marriage. “Aurora Leigh is as full of thought, as a pomegranate of seeds, and is more interesting on the twentieth reading than the first.” The review concludes with a comparison of Browning’s work as a whole to the mighty Niagara Falls, “the mighty Niagara whose voice is heard in every land.”


Proclaims that Browning is the “greatest female poet” and that she is in “advance of all the poets of her time.” The reviewer asserts that Browning “has not so much artistic finish” but that she is “more earnest,” that “she is the most deeply spiritual in her connections, both of God and man.” The reviewer mentions works in addition to Aurora Leigh: “The Cry of the Children,” “Bertha in the Lane,” and “The Drama of Exile.”

1859


Opens his essay with a philosophical treatise on mortal man and his immortal Creator, on man and his desire to express his feelings and intellect through the “imperfect medium of language.” Upson writes, “Every true artist feels that there is something more in his soul than he can ever find a voice to utter forth.”

Upson then poses the question, “Why are not women great poets?” Although endowed with “poetic sense,” woman is “deficient in the power to give her emotions expression in artistic forms,” and she does not possess the “intellectual power” to the same extent as a man. “She has been so constituted by Our Creator.” Poetry is, in effect, “breathed forth in her every action.” “The life of a true woman is a noble poem; and while men write poems, women live them.”

Having thus argued that there are no “women great poets,” Upson proceeds to discuss works by Browning, a writer he views as “the greatest female poet” because she exemplifies the heights “which woman's poetry has reached within its own sphere.” Mrs. Browning is the “truest poet” and the “one who most perfectly represents her own sex.” Upson asserts that just as no woman could have written Paradise Lost, no man could have written Aurora Leigh. In one sense Aurora Leigh is a great poem but it is not great in the same sense as is Milton’s best-known work. In discussing the character of Romney Leigh, Upson
claims that Browning “fails when she attempts to construct characters,”
that “she has not analyzed men, but rather formed ideals of them.”
Although the character of Romney is a failure, the character of Aurora
Leigh is “well worthy of our study.”

Upson briefly mentions other poems by Browning: “The Drama
of Exile,” “Isobel’s Child,” and “The Rhyme of the Duchess May.”
He concludes his essay with the following comment, “And, in our own
age, with such a representative as Mrs. Browning, her sex surely may
claim that no inconsiderable, in the development of the higher faculties
or our race, is destined to be exerted by woman’s poetry.”

1860


Notes that Browning first became known to American readers as
a contributor to Graham’s Magazine, a popular journal where she
published a number of poems. Her fame increased and spread, in part,
due to Poe’s recognition of a “genius hitherto unknown.” Taylor asserts
that her reputation “was coelav [sic] with, if it did not precede, that
which she has won at home.” Taylor then writes at length about Robert
Browning and his work.

In the summer of 1851 Taylor met the Brownings at their residence in
Devonshire. Editor and publisher John Kenyon was also present. Taylor
describes the physical characteristics, mannerisms, and clothing of
Kenyon and Robert Browning. He then describes Mrs. Browning:

She was slight and fragile in appearance, with a pale, wasted face, shaded by
masses of soft chestnut curls which fell on her cheeks, and serious eyes of
bluish-gray. Her frame seemed to be altogether disproportionate to her soul.
This, at least, was the first impression: her personality, frail as it appeared, soon
exercised its power, and it seemed a natural thing that she should have written
the “Cry of the Children” or “Lady Geraldine’s Courtship.”

Taylor indicates that the Brownings “expressed great satisfaction with
their American reputation” and were pleased to have met so many
Americans who traveled through Italy. At this gathering in 1851 Taylor
also met the Brownings’ then two-year old son Robert, nicknamed
Penini or Pen, who exhibited his “inherited genius” through a love of
music and drawing.

Taylor met the Brownings again in London in 1856. “Mrs. Browning
was then reading the proofs of ‘Aurora Leigh.’”

Acknowledges the “universal lamentation over the death of this great and original poet,” then reprints the obituary from The Spectator (6 July 1861). Sandra Donaldson’s bibliography annotates this item (94).


Notes Browning as “first among the female poets of her day, combining in a wonderful measure the force of exalted genius with feminine delicacy and exquisite tenderness, thus securing the widest admiration and love.” She is remembered by her longtime friend and correspondent Mrs. [Mary Russell] Mitford.

The obituary attributes Browning’s “often eccentric character” to her life as a “long recluse,” and implies that this eccentricity permeates her work. “Like a plant that is reared in darkness, her imagination had grown into grotesque shapes in the absence of the healthy magnetism of the common sunlight, and when restored to the world it was not possible to restore at once the law of normal growth.” Robert Browning is credited with restoring her health. “His presence revived her as no physician had.”


Notes that during her lifetime Browning shied away from notoriety and “studiously avoided any publicity of her features.” A “medallion” [illustrated portrait] is “prefixed,” and readers will note “the head and outline of one of the noblest minds of the age.” The article recounts Browning’s biography, mentioning her birth date as 1812 [incorrect], her family life, her early and extensive education, and her first published volume, An Essay on Mind. Other works such as “The Seraphim” and “The Drama of Exile” are discussed, but the reviewer notes that no previous work of Browning has matched or exceeded the public popularity of Aurora Leigh.

In a somewhat contradictory assessment, the reviewer says of Aurora Leigh:

Autobiographic and didactic in its character, it yet has all the charm of romance, and every page glows with and irradiates the soul of the poet and pure-hearted defender of humanity. There are, it is true, passages of tedious tale, and some
expressions which, in a previous number, we have characterized as inexcusably careless and in bad taste; but what poem of equal length possesses fewer faults of commission? All writers are guilty of lapses and haste, to a greater or lesser degree; and it scarcely becomes the reader to call these blemishes to the neglect of the beauty which is the characteristic of the whole.

The phrenological evaluation of Browning mentions her “singularly sensitive temperament,” “tenderness and delicacy of female nature,” and a “most philosophical, scholarly and masculine intellect.”


Memorializes Browning and her work. Aldrich imagines Browning in the company of “our Heavenly Father.” She writes, “But the sweet poetess, whose songs have stirred the hearts of so many with deep delight… has gone where she can read the pages which Infinite Wisdom has veiled from earthly sight.”


Announces with “mournful tidings” the passing of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, “one whom all her sex should delight to honor.” The reviewer says that there are fewer hero worshippers now, and that every year more idols lose their grip on pedestals. Mrs. Browning is worthy of praise, renown, and “reverent homage” for she is “earth’s greatest poetess” and she is “consecrated by a living faith in the Son of God.” After discussing her isolated life as an invalid, the reviewer “rejoices” in the knowledge of the “new light which suddenly irradiated her [Browning’s] life.” After Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s marriage, “her last years were crowned with all that could satisfy the heart of a woman.”

1862


Describes Browning as possessing “one of the most ethereal spirits ever imprisoned in human form.” Throughout her life she was a “sufferer” who never lost her faith in God; she was “filled only with pure thoughts, airy fancies, and tender and noble emotions.” Though grief and pity are woven throughout her poetry, always there “is an element of boundless hope.” For the reader, “Last Poems brings a quickening to the moral sensibility.” The review concludes with an
expression of gratitude to Theodore Tilton, author of the memorial included in this book. Donaldson annotates the memorial by Tilton (107).


Concerns the pleasures associated with reading and with books. Books serve, to borrow Sidney’s phrase, to teach and to delight. From childhood onward readers develop “real affection” for books as “friends.” Owning books brings additional pleasures. Readers may mark them, dog-ear pages, leave fingerprints on favorite passages. One example of an often-owned book, the Bible, really contains two gospels, and “one of them is God’s gospel to your own heart.”

After speaking of the Bible, the essayist next mentions Aurora Leigh. To preserve its tone and reverence, the following passage is quoted in its entirety.

You own, perhaps, “Aurora Leigh.” The gold is tarnished, and the leaves turn noiselessly, because they have turned so often. Your eyes always rest on it fondly; you love to hold it in your hand. Why? Because it is one of the greatest poems in the language? No, not for that, nor because it seems like a legacy from that sweet woman, as good as she was great, who will write no more. Any other Aurora Leigh would be that to you; your own is more. You love to turn the silent leaves slowly, and read where the marks tell you of some dear one, “who, being dead, thus speaketh;” or of some times in your past experience, when your own words being too meagre for your soul, your pencil made these your own. There is many a living face you would rather miss than that volume.


Comments that Aurora Leigh is the greatest of Browning’s poems for its “original thoughts and illustrations of deep and holy truths, and lofty sentiments,” and that the work may be “the grandest poem of the Century.” At the same time the writers comment that the “story is unnatural” and “characters are exaggerated.” This article presents a summary of Aurora Leigh and quotes extensively from several of its books. Marian Erle’s engagement to Romney Leigh, and her subsequent desertion of him at the wedding, is the “blot of the book, and “we wish the poetess had invented a less terrible catastrophe.” Admirers of the late Browning are encouraged to read this poem “attentively” and are assured that the tale “ends happily, and in the usual way of romance.”
Browning’s works are compared to those of Tennyson, specifically *The Princess* and *Idylls of the King*. Browning “does not equal, much less imitate, the subtlety, delicacy, and exquisite grace of language which typifies the poetry of Mr. Tennyson; but in power, pith, and pathos she is the superior.” The editors point out “one great fault” and “vital mistake” of *Aurora Leigh* that runs counter to the “whole truth of Bible history and the sacredness of the Decalogue.” They are surprised that no other readers or critics have noticed this mistake and consider it strange that Mrs. Browning did not revise the text in subsequent editions. “Mrs. Browning has ignored the Sabbath by making the work of Creation continue through the seven days.”


Refers to the sketch of *Aurora Leigh* in the previous July issue of this same magazine and indicates that readers were promised further sketches from the poem. “On reflection we have thought it better to refer to her other and earlier poems.” The editors refer to the essay about Browning written by Peter Bayne and published in 1857 in his *Essays in Biography and Criticism*. An annotation of Bayne’s essay appears in Donaldson’s work (73). Bayne considers “The Drama of Exile” as “the greatest of Mrs. Browning’s productions.” An excerpt from this poem is included and then followed by “The Romance of the Swan’s Nest,” which is reprinted in its entirety.

Kennesaw State University

WORKS CONSULTED


NOTES

1 I am grateful to Dr. Paul H. Schmidt of Georgia State University for his helpful comments concerning this article.


3 Barnes, 51-6.

4 Taplin, 53.
Gilbert and Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic*, long considered a landmark in feminist literary criticism, continues to influence writers and critics today.

6 Taplin, 53.

7 Lootens, iv.

8 Gladish, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning and America, 1840-1861*.

9 Wilsey, *The Writing of Aurora Leigh*.

10 For detailed information about ProQuest databases and services consult the company website at http://www.proquest.com.


12 Mott, 26.
