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ENG 4362: Victorian Poetry

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Do the thoughts expressed in EBB's letter to Jane Willis Sandford reveal a connection between Aurora Leigh's thoughts about the work of an artist and EBB's own convictions about her work?

Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote to her friend, Jane Willis Sandford, on March 2, 1857, around six months after *Aurora Leigh* had been published. She mentions her surprise at the popularity of the poem, proclaiming that they “had to go to press for the second edition a fortnight after publication, so unusual was the sale.” She discusses both the praise and criticism of her “poor Aurora Leigh,” remarking that although she hated to offend anyone on or off the pages, “but for the truth and for conscience’ sake, and for the hope of doing some good, I was quite ready to dare and bear a few hard and most unjust imputations.” The protagonist of her epic poem, Aurora Leigh, is a female artist who struggles to discover what type of work she ought to write, how to address topics of social import that may cause offense while still focusing on the particular struggles of a woman as artist. The letter EBB wrote to Ms. Sandford shows that EBB herself dealt with the same issues that Aurora confronts.

EBB writes to her friend concerning the varying criticism of *Aurora Leigh*'s content. “What is curious in the reception of this poem is the violence on both sides about it. I couldn't repeat the great things, the extravagant things, said in its praise by men & women,—while, on the other hand, I hear of ladies of sixty who complain of the “risk to their character & morals” in reading it!” In *Aurora Leigh*, Aurora also receives a variety of responses to her artistic work.

Romney is infatuated with the book she has written, but Aurora realizes that what the public at large wants to hear is not always what she wants to write. In fact, she writes that “What the poet writes, he writes: mankind accepts it if it suits, / and that’s success, if not, the poem’s passed / From hand to hand...and that’s success too” (V 261-4, 267). Aurora and EBB both understand that when a poet who writes on subjects she is interested in, without thought for pleasing others, will encounter both favor and opposition.

EBB fleshes out the specific criticisms of *Aurora Leigh* for her friend, writing that, “In fact, it has given great offence to conventional persons who hate plain speaking, & prefer to ignore a subject through what is called delicacy [EBB underlined this word vigorously], rather than help to better the world by dealing with it.” Aurora notes that if we shrink back from nature’s “warts and blains” (VI 179) we will be unable to grasp the larger sense of her beauty. She states that a poet should contemplate contemporary heroes, people who are “in the rough” (VI 202). If a poet could help reader understand the spiritual value of every human being, the weak and unfortunate might not be so abused. Aurora believed that by drawing attention to those who could not speak for themselves, art “could change the world / and shift its morals” (VII 855-6). Because of the subjects that EBB choose to write on (prostitution and slavery), it seems fair to conclude that she too believed art could enact social change. By the end of *Aurora Leigh*, Aurora and Romney have agreed that social change can come through poetry, and EBB also feels that difficult issues can be effectively addressed through poetry.

In the letter, EBB responds to the criticism she received concerning the unwomanly “indecentcy” of the subjects addressed in *Aurora Leigh* without bitterness or concern. She writes, “When I remember [the criticism] is probably written by another poet, Patmore, (the Angel in the house) I am sorry more for him than for me” (EBB). In EBB’s poem, Aurora’s aunt adhered to

the Patmore's mentality of woman as the "upholder of the family virtue"; Romney speaks along the same lines, stating, "Women as you are...you give us doting mothers, and perfect wives...We get no Christ from you—and verily / We shall not get a poet, in my mind" (II 220, 222-26). Aurora, however, rejects this view. "This vile woman's way / Of trailing garments, shall not trip me up" (V 59- 60). She goes on to ask, "Must I work in vain, / Without the approbation of a man? / It cannot be; it shall not be" (V 62-4). Aurora was pursuing art because it is where her desires and talents lay, even if such a pursuit was not in line with the typical woman's calling. EBB surely drew on her own passion for artistic work in creating a fictional woman who was also committed to poetic art, although it was not the societal norm.

EBB identified with the fictional issues Aurora faces as a woman poet. Although EBB had great technical skill as an artist, her primary concern was the content of her poetry. She would soundly agree with Aurora's discussion of poetic form: "What form is best for poems? Let me think / Of forms less, and the external. Trust the spirit, / As Sovran nature does, to make the form" (V 223-5). EBB was not troubled by the criticism she received for *Aurora Leigh*; she felt confident in upsetting the normal social role for women and writing about unsavory subjects if she could effectively address a social ill by doing so.