CHAPTER V
CONCLUSIONS

Mrs. Browning is of her time and speaks with an authentic Victorian voice. We have seen that Mrs. Browning feels that poetry has power to elevate and refine the mind because the vision of the Poet is penetrating and powerful.

Poetry is of such central importance for Mrs. Browning that she worked at it under pressures of illness, publishing deadlines and household responsibilities at various stages of her life. Yet she wrote, in all probability, for the reason given by the poet-speaker of In Memoriam: she wrote because she had to. She wrote not only out of joy, although that may have come after the work has finished, but also out of the necessity to share her vision of life. The vision contains not only love, loyalty, and the more positive emotions but pain and grief as well. In fact, grief and love are often juxtaposed in her poetry as Mrs. Browning found them to be in life. Her view of experience is therefore death-tinged and sad at times. It also has enough fantasy and didacticism to make it palatable. Her popularity attests to the fact that she struck a responsive chord in many Victorians. She is a figure in the arts who bridges the gap between the Romantic poets on the one hand and the triumvirate of male poets, Robert Browning,
Matthew Arnold, and Alfred Tennyson, who seem fully to represent the Victorian mind as defined in prose by Macaulay, Carlyle, and others.

Poetry, is the greatest pursuit of her life. To it she has given her strength, almost the whole force of her being, in order to create her poems. Like Philip Sidney before her, she dips into her heart to write, rather ingenuously saying, however, that this art of poetry is a difficult and arduous pursuit.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's choice of themes and ideas in her work not only appealed to her contemporary audience but was also similar in character to the work of her contemporaries. Like many of Tennyson's early poems, some of Elizabeth Barrett's were also romantic tales like "The Romaunt of the Page" or "The Romaunt of Margret." Another poem, "A Romance of the Ganges" has an Eastern setting like some of Byron's popular tales.

Many of the early poems reflect the poet's interest in the medieval and her love of Byron's poetry. We find this in "The Rhyme of Duchess May" and "The Romaunt of Margret."

In addition to the influences of Sir Walter Scott, other novelists and the Romantic poets, her own observations of nature in the English countryside are often found in her poems. The Poet frequently creates a natural scene wherein a man examines himself, measuring his being against Nature's
manifestations to find his place in the scheme of things. Man is a little lower than the angels, but is at the top of the Great Chain of Being. This belief is clearly seen in "A Drama of Exile" as Adam and Eve are shown in conflict with creatures and spirits of the earth. Many of her poems contain descriptions of Nature, relying upon two Wordsworthian motifs: emotion recollected in tranquility and pastoral landscapes.

In addition to these influences of friends, studies and environment, the Poet draws many themes of her early poetry from religious training within her family. She also reflects both her love of music and her religious devotion by writing the hymns of the 1838 volume.

Along with religious feelings, the Poet has strong moral convictions on the role of the Poet. The Poet's obligation to himself and to his public is explored along a spectrum extending from the Poet-reculse of "The Poet's Vow" to the other Poet-personas of "A Vision of Poets" and Aurora Leigh. Even in the love poems written for Robert Browning, there are many lines and references to the almost sacred role of the Poet. Part of this motif is the Poet's reference to herself as the Pythian, that is, the Delphic Oracle whose prophecies in ancient Greece helped to shape the destiny of nations. Mrs. Browning sometimes refers to herself as writhing in the throes of possession by the God Apollo, thereby emphasizing the sacredness of the Poet's task as well as his suffering. The
most fully developed presentation of the role of the Poet is found in the thoughts and characters of *Aurora Leigh* in the poetic novel of 1856.

Of all the subjects treated in her poetry, love is the major one. Virtually, all the lyric poems show heroines sorrowing, sickening, or dying for love. The love of God is another major aspect of this theme; by means of dramatic poems the Poet often admonishes man to love God more. She urges men to honour their fellowmen in this life and to prepare for immortal life. Many didactic poems serve as sermons, lecturing men on their evil ways, reminding them of primal sin, and encouraging them to live a righteous life, always in fear of God's judgement. She had always felt that union with God is the natural end of things.

Mrs. Browning's highest expression of romantic love is contained in the *Sonnets from the Portuguese*. These sonnets, written as a gift for Robert Browning, stand as a lofty expression of love. They represent the height of intense lyric expression for Mrs. Browning, they reflect the voluminous love letters of the pair of lovers and they provide an intimate look at the development of one of the most spectacular romances and elopements of the century.

The images and ideas in the *Sonnets* reflect the author's philosophy and emotions. The poems elevate love to a level that is almost rhapsodic at times, Mrs. Browning by
creating poems that reflect intense emotion, reveals both a particular individual in love and at the same time captures the sentiment of romantic love in lyrics that are universal.

Seen from a certain perspective, the Poet also dares to enter into poetic territory previously considered male. Moers feels that Mrs. Browning did so by creating "Caterina to Camoens" and Sonnets from the Portuguese. These works are Heroides, or "Verse letters of love that a woman writes to a man," an Ovidian definition.\(^1\) Therefore, one may note that Mrs. Browning on one level seems to be creating traditional or conventional heroines and on another level, she apparently is rebellious, usurping a former masculine prerogative. Moers calls this poetic idea "heroism" and sees Mrs. Browning as an influence upon Emily Dickinson and Christina Rossetti with respect to their poems that also seem to be written by a woman in love.\(^2\)

John Evangelist Walsh in his 1971 study The Hidden Life of Emily Dickinson\(^3\) devotes the last half of the book to demonstrating the American's borrowings from the English woman's Aurora Leigh. Moers cites his study, noting that the

---


\(^2\) Ibid., pp. 57, 165 ff.

\(^3\) John Evangelist, The Hidden Life of Emily Dickinson (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1971)
few other writers who know Mrs. Browning also discuss the critical association between the two women.⁴

Another American whose work seems to contain echoes of Mrs. Browning is Edgar Allan Poe. Poe's admiration of her poetry is reflected in his review of the 1844 Poems. He calls her genius "impetuous"⁵ and feels she can be an audacious writer because she is secluded. He extols "Lady Geraldine's Courtship".

Mrs. Browning also influenced Christina Rossetti's work. It is possible that the sonnet sequence of Christina Rossetti Monna Innominata was influenced not only by the classical Italian models but also by the Sonnets from the Portuguese and other love poems. Steven sees a correspondence between Rossetti's "A Pause" and Mrs. Browning's Sonnets dealing with an earthly lover.⁶ Similarly, D.A. Rossetti in letter to his sister complains of too strong an influence of Mrs. Browning in "The Lowest Room" and admonishes her for "Modern vicious style... and a falsetto muscularity."⁷

Not only Christina Rossetti but also her brother, Dante Gabriel may have been influenced to some extent by Mrs. Browning's poetry. G.B. Taplin states that the

---

⁴Ellen Moers, Literary women p.57.


⁷Ibid., p. 98.
Pre-Raphaelites studied and were spell-bound by the Poet's "A Drama of Exile," "The Rhyme of Duchess May," and "Lady Geraldine's Courtship" in particular.  

However, it was Elizabeth Barrett Browning, who dominated the men's sphere of love poetry, for the first time. Men personalized the emotion of love and always eulogized women's physical attributes and the effect her beauty had on them. Always the beloved was placed on a pedestal and the lover was shown as a man languishing for his love below. Elizabeth Barrett Browning places Robert Browning, her lover, on a pedestal at times but he is also shown as her equal and sometimes varied higher-lower, in her Sonnets. He is always her lover, who passes her at any level and finally they both are at equal levels, their souls identifying with each other.

Women's love poetry is addressed always directly to the man, it is not about him. He is always 'You' never 'He' or 'Him'. Men Poets extol the beauty of their beloved, the women Poet always speaks about the effect, her love for him—or his love for her, is having on her. Elizabeth Barrett always explains the effect her lover i.e. Robert Browning had on her. How love made her feel a complete person again.

---

She is responsive to her own emotions. Elizabeth never complains of the power of love, but rejoices in it. She is so happy in finally finding true love, which came to her at so late a stage in life, that she cannot help rejoicing in it. In the Sonnets, she documents a person's coming to life through love.

The truly radical change in her life, her marriage to Robert Browning, is easily misperceived as being a magic which he worked on her, an impression that is encouraged by some of the images in the Sonnets from the Portuguese. But she was not passively swept off her feet by a masterful Svengali; rather, the commitment and the risk depended on her willingness to trust the sincerity of her own, newly discovered love. Discovering in herself the strength of this capacity to love liberated her to live out her visions. That is why Aurora Leigh, although containing much theorizing characteristic of her in her unmarried state, could only be written several years after her marriage. She had been thinking of the subject generally throughout her life, but more intensely and specifically for ten years. Only after she tested her theories for herself and found them to be valid could she write about them as "a truth," which as we have seen is the Poet's role to convey.

Another facet of love, man's love for mankind is expressed in many poems. Mrs. Browning advocates an active
Christianity, one that shows concern and a willingness to attempt to change the lot of others. Mrs. Browning was appalled at the apathy shown by her country fellowmen towards the poor children of her country and towards the various other problems like prostitution etc. Her "The Cry of the Children" was a powerful attempt to make the public aware of abuses in child labour. As her career progressed and she gained an audience, Elizabeth Barrett Browning turned gradually from her early pre-occupation with romantic love to a broader concern with the affairs of men in society. As she pointed out the abuse of child labour in her famous poem, so she revealed moral injustice in the divorce laws in "Void in Law" which appeared in Last Poems. America's institution of slavery is attacked in two poems, "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point" and "A Curse for a Nation."

In looking over the poems of Elizabeth Barrett Browning and the subjects they touch, one is tempted to apply to her life the criteria for healthy emotional development noted by Eric Erikson in his eight stages of man. Early in her career she wrote of sensational brooding romanticism. The poems are characterized by dark atmosphere, gloomy castles and pre-occupation with the supernatural. As she entered her thirties, she wrote romantic poetry, still heavily influenced by religious feelings and the unhappiness of unrequited love. With the advent of her own romance with Robert Browning, one
that encompasses both intellect and spirit, she wrote some of her greatest lyric poems. Later, supported by a loving spouse, she regained her physical health and became increasingly concerned with the world around her, a circumstance easily noted in the many poems on politics and the problems of her adopted country. But more than politics, she voiced her concern over social problems like prostitution. Aware that her own novel’s reception and distribution shall suffer from it, she still dared to create the character of Marian Erle in *Aurora Leigh* (1856). We see, that Marian is nearly forced into prostitution yet she keeps her illegitimate child and refuses to marry a nobleman just for the sake of marrying. All these rather strong statements ran contrary to the placid surface morality many Victorians sought to preserve. In one of her letters, Mrs. Browning stated her views on this subject. A friend had written that ladies do not speak of or notice such dreadful things and Mrs. Browning’s reply was that ‘if we do not speak for other women, then who will?’ Plainly, her ideals and sensibilities had broadened to include concern and a feeling of moral responsibility for all men. Mrs. Browning’s strong feelings in social injustice show her kinship with Carlyle, Ruskin and Arnold. Yet, her voice is distinctive, it is, like Mrs. Gaskell’s very much a woman’s voice expressing concern over problems from a particular perspective. But the perspective is not narrow.
Mrs. Browning is a Victorian in her feelings of social concern and moral obligation; she is a child of both Wordsworth and Carlyle in her views on nature and mankind. She is acutely conscious of the plight of the poor and the working class in part, perhaps, because she is a woman. Like most Poets of the early-to-middle Victorian period, Mrs. Browning uses certain devices, such as medieval settings and devices, to create the illusion of earlier and perhaps less complicated times. As has been shown through the example of attempted reconciliation of negative and positive emotional tuggings, Mrs. Browning has experienced ambivalence. Betty Miller says that Mrs. Browning enters her own heart and battles with the self. To a certain degree this is true of all Poets, but, as E.D.H. Johnson states in *The Alien Vision of Victorian Poetry*, this is particularly true of the three major Poets of the time. Johnson believes that there is a conflict:

Between the public conscience of the man of letters who comes forward as the accredited literary spokesman of his world and the private conscience of the artist who conceives his highest allegiance must be to his own aesthetic sensibilities.

---


Mrs. Browning's conflict is expressed (because she is a woman) in terms differing from those of her male contemporaries. The clearest statement of this ambivalence is in the character of Aurora Leigh, who suffers isolation for art, works out her role as artist, and finally is able to accept her role as a mature woman, living not just for art but for love as well. She thus, lives within accepted social confines.

Although in some of the Poet's letters she writes of displeasure with the double standard and with male dominance; in the poems the heroes who desert or betray the heroines are never censured. In her suffering or loneliness the heroine never breathes a word of reproach against her lover. Usually, he is absolved of all blame and told to go, leaving her to suffer in silence. The heroes who are historic figures are extolled after Carlyle's fashion, for they are to make and mould the age. The characters seem to be trying to learn how to live. Mrs. Browning's efforts are practical: It is relationships that normally affect women more than their professions or money or power, the other traditionally masculine preoccupations.

Re-reading Barrett Browning's poetry and letters and reviewing the facts of her life from a feminist perspective which she would endorse, one can see that there is much of value about her mind and her work and it proves false the
impression of her work as exemplifying conventional female conduct. In two areas which are finally not separable, her seriousness, thoughtfulness, and a certain independence of mind can easily be demonstrated: her views on the Poet's role and on woman's roles. These conceptions are joined and find their best expression in Aurora Leigh.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's feminist perspective on women's issues is orthodox but not doctrinaire; that is, she insists that women must have personal independence and if a woman should choose marriage and motherhood as a means to self-fulfillment, she must do so freely. In Aurora Leigh, Barrett Browning herself exhibits independence of thought by envisioning a further stage in an independent woman's life, going beyond the first, necessary stages of the freedom to cultivate a separate identity and the possibility that one can find comfort in sisterhood. Barrett Browning recognized the importance of the lack of the two pressures, finances and maternity, for her own work, and her giving Aurora the strength to overcome or resist them indicates that Aurora is an idealized version of Barrett Browning herself. Aurora faces all the challenges and snare, an aspiring Poet who is a woman is likely to face. Thus, although Barrett Browning's path to becoming a successful Poet was facilitated by the absence of some of the traditional barriers to a woman's becoming a success, she did understand why her particular status was
almost exclusive. Because her material situation was almost unique and freed her to become a Poet, she had to show her generalized understanding of the woman Poet (and why these were so few who received true acclaim and whose works survived). Perhaps, too, she felt the need to provide for other aspiring women a model of a woman who overcame the typical obstacles, since in her life many of the major obstacles were put aside for her. One must conclude that the Poet's life is worthwhile. Like Aurora, Elizabeth Barrett had an active, creative mind, which, despite a lack of formal training, could not be appeased with needlework. Like every other true poet, she simply had to write poetry and to do so seriously.

Mrs. Browning has taken the conventional division of the sexes and made them complex: If men are the doers and women are the inspirers, her doers gain sensitivity and her inspirers become or are recognized as activists. Romney has practical plans to change the world but he also learns that changing the externals of people's lives is only part of the task; their spirit or inner being must also be improved. In the world of action the Poet is regarded as frivolous, luxurious, self-indulgent — everything the upper-middle class wife is expected to be. However, Elizabeth's Poet, Aurora, fits neither image: neither that of the stereotypical Poet nor that of the stereotypical wife. She does not dawdle in a comfortable study but instead contends with a cold and
lonely life, doing inartistic writing because it pays and worrying about the critics and the audience of her serious writings. Barrett Browning acknowledges the fact that there are the two sexes, that they have traditionally been raised differently, and that the world holds different attitudes regarding them. By twentieth century standards Elizabeth Barrett Browning would be considered a moderate feminist, but a feminist nonetheless -- and she was certainly a rather bold feminist for the nineteenth century in broaching the topics in poetry which she did.

One element of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's uniqueness among the recognized Poets of her day was that, in addition to writing about the traditionally-approved topics for poetry, she also felt a sense of urgency in writing about contemporary problems which concerned her. Thus, feminism is a natural subject for her attention because it was both a contemporary issue and an inevitable consideration for a self-educated women. Romney charges that women cannot generalize, but Barrett Browning's work proves her capable of being broadly philosophic as well as sympathetic to particular human needs. What Elizabeth Barrett Browning did in her own poetry was to prove that the personal and the passionate in a woman's life are indeed appropriate topics for Poets. Once again it is her authencity that gives power to her poems.
Like her attitudes on the Poet's role, Barrett Browning's view of conventional ideas about woman's roles, specifically marriage and motherhood, is seriously held and consistent throughout her life, changing only in depth and subtlety of expression. Furthermore, her treating this topic in poetry is concordant with her views on the Poet's involvement in the issues that concern her or his contemporaries. What is explicable but not inevitable, however, is her attitude concerning woman's roles. Instead of focusing on domestic themes, setting up the hearth-bound wife and mother as her exemplary woman, she takes the position that the sphere of a woman's interest is sometimes but not always or necessarily, different from that of man. To this extent, she is a feminist. In her treatment of women's topics - she flouts a few traditions, such as that of the submissive wife, in her early mature poetry; in her later poetry, however, she abandons many sentimental notions in favour of bolder articulation of the need for a woman to develop human depth and wholeness and she allows her women characters ambivalence and complexity with regard to their roles.

In *Aurora Leigh*, Elizabeth Barrett joins both issues of being a Poet and being a woman. In it, she expounds and exemplifies her theories about the Poet's role in society, which she had contemplated most of her life, and her beliefs about a woman's capacities for self-development, which she has
held since her childhood. Aurora Leigh is both Poet and woman. In satisfying the three criteria Barrett Browning has established for Poets, Aurora Leigh suffers when she isolates herself in order to pursue her career, loses her sense of proud isolation and sees her work put to use in bettering all of humankind. Aurora, is triumphantly alive because her story is essentially Elizabeth Barrett Browning's own intellectual and emotional history.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's philosophies about her work and her life must be taken seriously by readers and critics alike because she holds these principles deeply throughout her life. None of these principles, however, is held so rigidly that she does not allow them to be modified or expanded as they are tested by experience, particularly the experience of marriage and motherhood. In her life she proves her theories correct, thus, unifying her canon. Neither the poetic philosophy nor the feminist principles described in Barrett Browning's work is original; what is original is her joining them and expressing them vividly in Aurora Leigh. Barrett Browning is an orthodox Victorian Poet and an orthodox feminist, who sacrifices neither role for the other. Aurora Leigh may rightfully be criticized on other more formal grounds, but, as a poetic fulfillment of Barrett Browning's life and philosophy, it is a success.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning did not claim, that femaleness is mysterious and necessarily inaccessible to men.
Instead she writes to share these experiences in which not everyone is likely or able to partake. She was a person who wrote poetry that sometimes came out of her own experience, and some aspects of her experience were peculiar to women. Poetry is, to her, a way of sharing thoughts, emotions, experiences, beliefs. Poets must not belong to any exclusive clubs. Nevertheless, the work of women Poet is, relatively speaking, a terra-incognita, partly because so few women Poets were taken seriously by men before the twentieth century, and partly because people preferred to think of women as mysterious for whatever psychological reasons they may have had. Elizabeth Browning has broadened and enriched us because she speaks well and with authority about aspects of the half of humankind that previously had been regarded mainly from a male point of view, if at all.