COMBATING AN ALIEN TYRANNY:
ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING’S
EVOLUTION AS A FEMINIST POET

By Deborah Byrd

The drama of woman lies in this conflict between the fundamen-
tal aspirations of every subject (ego) – who always regards the
self as the essential – and the compulsions of a situation in which
she is the inessential. (Simone de Beauvoir xxxiv)

The name [of poet]
Is royal, and to sign it like a queen
Is what I dare not, – though some royal blood
Would seem to tingle in me now and then,
With sense of power and ache.
(Aurora Leigh 1. 934–38)

' Tis Antidote to turn –
To Tomes of solid Witchcraft –
(Emily Dickinson, #593)

"SPEED AND ENERGY, forthrightness and complete self-confidence
– these are the qualities that hold us enthralled” as we read Elizabeth
Barrett Browning’s Aurora Leigh, wrote Virginia Woolf in 1932
(I.212). As Woolf points out, these qualities emanate not so much
from Aurora as from her creator, whose strong and lively presence
so pervades the poem that “Again and again . . . Aurora the ficti-
tious seems to be throwing light upon Elizabeth the actual. . . .
[making it] impossible for the most austere of critics not sometimes
to touch the flesh when his [sic] eyes should be fixed upon the page”
(212). And as Woolf observes, the “flesh” the critic touches is that
of a woman who knows that the royal blood of poets flows through
her veins. “Elizabeth the actual” is a subject, speaking boldly of the world as she perceives and experiences it.

Wit and verve, directness and energy, an authorial voice radiating a firm sense of self and a firm sense of purpose—these are the salient characteristics not only of *Aurora Leigh* but of most of the poems that Barrett Browning wrote after 1845. In such works the poet “use[s] the woman’s figures naturally” and often is “plain at speech, direct in purpose” when critiquing patriarchy (*AL* 8.1127–31); in some instances, she even transforms poetic forms that her contemporaries considered the exclusive province of men into vehicles for the expression of female and feminist concerns. Since Barrett Browning’s reputation as a major Victorian poet rests primarily on these late woman-centered poems, it is important to identify the experiences that furthered her development of a feminist consciousness and aesthetic. Foremost among these experiences were the poet’s encounters with literary texts.  

Aware of Barrett Browning’s erudition, numerous scholars have drawn attention to specific ways in which the poet draws upon or swerves from male writers, especially the acknowledged “masters” of European verse. But with the exception of a few studies of Barrett Browning’s debts to Sand, DeStaël, Gaskell, and Charlotte Brontë, surprisingly little has been written about the poet’s artistic interaction with women authors, particularly women poets.

It is quite true that Barrett Browning’s favorite poets were men. She believed that England had produced no “poetess before Joanna Baillie [1762–1851]—poetess in the true sense,” and she regarded no nineteenth-century woman poet as highly as she did Wordsworth, Byron, Browning, and Tennyson; (*Kenyon* 1:30). Barrett Browning’s dissatisfaction with English women poets does not mean, however, that she did not participate in a female poetic tradition. As numerous scholars have shown, the nineteenth-century woman writer generally searched for and was empowered by her discovery of literary foremothers and sisters. Even when she chose to modify or depart from the practices of her female predecessors and contemporaries, she often defined herself in relation to other literary women—attempting to avoid making their mistakes, trying to accomplish where they had failed.

Barrett Browning was no exception. She was an avid reader of poems, essays, and fiction by women and took a keen interest in the lives of other professional women writers. Moreover, as a poet she
frequently imitated or responded critically to literary texts by other women, regarding such "Tomes of solid Witchcraft" as sources of sustenance as well as instruction. The women poets of her own century and country played a particularly crucial role in Barrett Browning's development, for when she began emulating these poets in the late 1830s she took the first step towards transforming herself into a woman-identified poet.\(^7\)

Throughout her career Barrett Browning engaged in conversations with writers of both sexes, particularly other poets. Identifying the texts she read and chose to respond to is important, for it can help account for the marked changes in style and vision that characterize each distinctive stage of her career. I cannot in short compass describe all the ways in which this self-proclaimed "book-ferret" was influenced by other writers (Raymond and Sullivan 1:117). But I will provide an overview of Barrett Browning's poetic evolution, drawing attention to the ways in which her aesthetic principles and practices change as her reading habits and literary tastes alter.

Initially imitating women novelists, then treading closely in the footsteps of her poetic forefathers, in the late 1830s Barrett Browning turned her attention once again to women writers, this time to women poets. In this transitional stage of her career, she sometimes modeled her poetic efforts on those of other women; at other times she attempted, not always successfully, to synthesize aspects of the two distinct (though of course related) poetic traditions to which she was heir. At the height of her powers, Barrett Browning came to view her task as that of writing as "a woman & man in one," a feat she believed her friend Mary Russell Mitford and her idol George Sand had accomplished. She brings into harmony the potentially discordant elements of her dual literary heritage, writing authentically of her own and other women's experiences with the "forthrightness and self-confidence" she considered to be more characteristic of male than of female writers.\(^8\)

Surprising as it may seem, the first stage of this precocious poet's literary career spans the brief period from 1814 to 1817, ending when the eleven-year-old became the pupil of Daniel McSwiney. In 1814, at the age of eight, Barrett Browning was designated by her father "Poet-Laureat [sic] of Hope End" (Kelley and Hudson 1:10), a position she took seriously for years, considering it her duty to compose poems on birthdays and other important family
occasions. Yet it was not until the age of eleven that the Poet Laureate exhibited a decided preference for composing in verse. The longest and most ambitious works of her childhood are written in prose, not surprisingly, for once she had outgrown her taste for fairy tales, reading and “studying” novels became Elizabeth’s “most delightful” pastime (Kelley and Hudson 1:349–50). Significantly, the novels that she knew and liked best (novels generally selected by her mother) were by women authors such as Maria Edgeworth, Charlotte Smith, and Amelia Opie. Barrett Browning particularly admired the fiction of Edgeworth, in which the woman who gives free rein to her passions and “forgets womanly duties in the personality of a man” is criticized, and the young woman who exhibits “too much sense” to be considered a “heroine” is presented as a character worthy of emulation (Kelley and Hudson 1:33–34).

As long as she sought to emulate women novelists, and as long as she wrote for as well as about women (most of these early works were directed to Elizabeth’s mother or other female relatives), Barrett Browning could write with both authenticity and confidence. Without anxiety she could imagine the kind of woman she would like to become, could attempt to write her own story, to chart the course her future would take. But in 1817 she suddenly began to regard novels as a form of light entertainment and decided to seek her fame as a writer of poems and essays (Kelley and Hudson 1:33, 350).

Had she begun to read and imitate poems and non-fiction prose by women, Barrett Browning might have continued to assert her subjectivity and might not have suffered – or suffered as intensely – from that female malady that Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar term “the anxiety of authorship” (Madwoman 48–49). But internalizing the patriarchal standards of literary excellence espoused by McSwiney, she began to study and imitate her poetic forefathers – only to feel “the whole extent of my own immense & mortifying inferiority” (Kelley and Hudson 1:351). Essentially, Barrett Browning began to undergo the process that Judith Fetterley calls “immasculation,” began to experience not simply the powerlessness which derives from not seeing one’s experience articulated, clarified, and legitimized in art, but more significantly, the powerlessness which results from the endless division of self against self, the consequence of the invocation to identify as male while being reminded that to be male – to be universal – . . . is to be not female (xiii).
Thus during the second stage of her literary career, which roughly spans the years 1818 to 1838, Barrett Browning writes as a divided self. The fragmentary "Essay on Woman" (ca. 1822) shows that she was quite capable of identifying and criticizing writers who espoused patriarchal values. Writing as a disciple of Mary Wollstonecraft, she openly reproaches poets who depict women as timid and subservient creatures, poets who "Paint . . . The trembling, melting voice of tenderness, / And all that Mother, Sister, Wife impart / To nurture, solace and subdue the heart" of man. Proclaiming that her goal is "To bend to nobler thoughts the British fair" by "Found[ing] the proud path, where . . . [Woman] stands the equal of her Master Man," Barrett Browning leads us to expect that henceforth she will present women as resourceful and self-reliant beings.

Yet it was not until the late 1830s that Barrett Browning began to compose poems in which female characters act assertively and independently. Indeed, most of the poems she wrote before 1838 center on the experiences of men. When the poet does write about real or imaginary women, she generally depicts them as relative creatures, as associates of men of courage and nobility of character. For example, she praises Riego's widow for behaving in a way that enhances our appreciation of her patriot husband's integrity and valor, urges a young girl to heed the advice her father gives her as she sits meekly at his feet, and tells Bettine, "The Child-Friend of Goethe," that having her existence acknowledged by a man of genius should adequately compensate her for any suffering she has experienced or any sacrifices she has made as the poet's worshiper. Moreover, in the few poems in which men are criticized for treating women like chattel or for being fickle or self-serving, women tend to die of grief or passively bemoan their fate; the poet regards such characters sympathetically, but she presents them as helpless victims rather than as active combatants of patriarchy.

Most of these poems about women are sentimental, lacking the emotional power that comes from writing authentically out of one's own experience of the world. Barrett Browning had written elsewhere that she spurned "that subserviency of opinion which is generally considered necessary to feminine softness" and regarded as the most "odious" of creatures "a damsel famed in story for a superabundance of sensibility" (Kelley and Hudson 1:354–55). Moreover, she did not sit humbly at the feet of her own father, nor
was she content to achieve fame as the adoring child-friend of the classical scholars Boyd and Price.\textsuperscript{14}

To understand why it took Barrett Browning over three decades to write poems that reflect the reality of her own and other women’s lives, one must turn once more to “Essay on Woman.” Despite its overtly feminist themes, the poem suggests that henceforth Barrett Browning often will write as a male-identified poet. Indeed, she does so to a certain extent in this poem, for although she refutes Pope’s belief in woman’s inferiority, she feels compelled to demonstrate that she has mastered “Pope’s” verse form, the heroic couplet. In other words, Barrett Browning seems to assume that to be a great poet she must compete with male predecessors on their terms, must excel in the poetic modes that men have considered most valuable. Accepting the patriarchal notion that some verse forms are inherently more noble than others, she apparently does not realize that the idea of a hierarchy of literary forms historically has been used to disparage and to exclude from the literary canon much of the verse written by women.

Or perhaps Barrett Browning did realize that women poets do not fare well when judged by patriarchal standards of literary excellence. Perhaps she failed to finish “Essay on Woman” because as a teenager, she was incapable of positing critical standards that would allow her to argue persuasively that the accomplishments of her poetic foremothers were as significant as those of her forefathers. After all, of the four women authors cited in the poem only Anne Dacier and Hannah More wrote in verse, and evidence suggests that Barrett Browning considered both to be second-rate authors.\textsuperscript{15} Moreover, if the poet truly believed More and Dacier to be women of genius (as the final stanza of the poem implies), why does she describe her own task as that of \textit{founding} – rather than treading in or enlarging – the poetic path in which woman stands the equal of man? And why did she not complete the poem, giving her predecessors the opportunity to reply to the charge that women, including women poets, are doomed to sigh in obscurity?

I believe that Barrett Browning failed to finish “Essay on Woman” because in the process of writing the poem, she came to the dismal and frightening conclusion that none of her literary foremothers had been a poet of major stature and that therefore the burden of proving that women could excel in poetic composition rested squarely on her own shoulders. Convinced that poets could