

‘I’m an artist, sir, / and woman’: A Poetic Expression of Self, Subjectivity and Creativity in Elizabeth Barrett Browning

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Abstract

The paper attempts to deal with the works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning – distinguishable and illustrious enough to represent her age – in order to show how she dealt with the problem of the woman writer in her poetry, at a time when the force of feminist movements reverberated throughout the society within which she created, and also how the woman intellectual emerged as an identifiable cultural figure by writing resiliently about the power of female art and female sexuality and the struggles of intelligent women for cultural autonomy. The study shall show how Barrett Browning, as a woman writer, almost presumptuously, though often covertly, questioned the traditional ideals of femininity and expressed her creative anxiety through a poetic representation of self and subjectivity.

... England has had many learned women, not merely readers but writers of the learned languages, in Elizabeth’s time and afterwards – women of deeper acquirements than are common now in the greater diffusion of letters; and yet where were the poetesses? The divine breath ... why did it never pass, even in the lyrical form, over the lips of a woman? How strange! And can we deny that it was so? I look everywhere for grandmothers and see none. It is not in the filial spirit I am deficient, I do assure you – witness my reverent love of the grandfathers!¹

How to position one of the most prominent poetic ‘grandmothers’ of Victorian England, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, in a literary tradition, is the argument that constitutes the cardinal concern of the paper. The recognition and acknowledgement of more women poets and particularly the creation of a Romantic feminine tradition with significant representatives like Felicia Hemans and Letitia Landon, has given birth to a literary domicile for the Victorian women poets, an intellectual abode that was not made available to earlier critics. Consequentially, they positioned the women poets in relation to a male poetic tradition, or in affiliation with female novelists of the nineteenth century. In order to ensure the impeccability of these judgements, critics also attempt to examine and decipher the characteristic features of such a literary tradition. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar apply and reconsider the Freudian model of poetic practice propounded by Harold Bloom in his book, *The Anxiety of Influence*.² Bloom contemplates all male poets in possession of the mother, the poetic ‘muse’. Gilbert and Gubar interpose the woman writer into this archetypal male poetic tradition and conceive of her as being caught in the

¹ Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *The Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, 2 vols. ed. Frederic G. Kenyon (New York: Macmillan, 1897), Vol. I, pp. 231-2.

² Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973).

rupture of a two-fold creative angst, situated in a position so as to both encounter the resilient and domineering male precursors and their debasing and repressive representations of women on the one hand, and also to counter the insinuation that the act of writing is conspicuously and unrelentingly a male intellectual industry, on the other. If we look at what Gerard Manley Hopkins once wrote to his friend R. W. Dixon in 1886, we can clearly comprehend the cause of doubt and apprehension of 'literary women' having to confront this oppressively 'patriarchal theory of literature' and find out a locus of her own:

The artist's "most essential quality", he declared, is "masterly execution, which is a kind of male gift, and especially marks off men from women, the begetting of one's thought on paper, on verse, or whatever the matter is." In addition, he noted that "on better consideration it strikes me that the mastery I speak of is not so much in the mind as a puberty in the life of that quality. The male quality is the creative gift."³

Gilbert and Gubar postulate that women authors do not experience the 'anxiety of influence' in a similar manner, as their male counterparts do, only because of the fact that they have to contend with their predecessors who are 'almost exclusively male, and therefore significantly different from her.' What is more oppressive to the female writer is her portrayal by male writers as being completely dissonant with 'her own sense of her self':

Not only do these precursors incarnate patriarchal authority ..., they attempt to enclose her in definitions of her person and her potential which, by reducing her to extreme stereotypes (angel, monster) drastically conflict with her own sense of her self – that is, of her subjectivity, her autonomy, her creativity.⁴

It is such a demeaning and immuring portrayal of her potential that she has to battle against. Gilbert and Gubar depict the struggle of the woman writer comprehensively:

Her battle, however, is not against her (male) precursor's reading of the world but against his reading of *her*. In order to define herself as an author she must redefine the terms of her socialization. Her revisionary struggle, therefore, often becomes a struggle for what Adrienne Rich has called "Revision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction ... an act of survival." Frequently, moreover, she can begin such a struggle only by actively seeking a *female* precursor who, far from representing a threatening force to be denied or killed, proves by example that a revolt against patriarchal literary authority is possible.⁵

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* seeks to make this 'revisionary struggle' her theme and hence is more prone to critical inquiry than any of her other works. This exhaustive novel-poem ostensibly appears to be 'a gift to feminist criticism – the story of a woman's successful struggle to become an independent poet, full of "women's" imagery.'⁶ The poem immaculately accords with the *métier* of the woman writer and the mores and chores of the lives of women in early feminist critical scholarship. It is particularly worth-mentioning here what Elaine Showalter affirmed in an acclaimed

³ Gerard Manley Hopkins and Richard Watson Dixon, *The Correspondence of Gerard Manley Hopkins and Richard Watson Dixon* ed. C. C. Abbott (London: Oxford University Press, 1935), p. 133, quoted in Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 3.

⁴ Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, p. 48.

⁵ Adrienne Rich, 'When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-vision', in Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi and Albert J. Gelpi eds. *Adrienne Rich's Poetry* (New York: Norton, 1975), p. 90, quoted in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, p. 49.

⁶ Tess Cosslett ed. 'Introduction' to *Victorian Women Poets* (London: Longmans, 1997), p. 11.

essay that ‘gynocriticism’ or the study of women’s writing was the apposite concern of feminist literary research.⁷ However, since its genesis, there has been a perturbation and unease regarding the poem’s lack of political justifiability. The arguments pivot around two spheres: firstly, the relatively formalized representation of the working class as preposterously reprobate and iniquitous, with the exception of the righteous Marian Erle, and secondly, Aurora’s consequent acquiescence in marrying her cousin Romney Leigh, whose initial proposal of marriage she had repudiated vehemently in Book II owing to her poetic vocation.

Gilbert and Gubar’s segment concerning *Aurora Leigh* in *The Madwoman in the Attic* reckons the feminist perspective contained in the poem as being circumscribed not by its delineation of the working class, but by the denouement brought about by the actuality of marriage. They explicate Aurora as espousing ‘an ethic of service’,⁸ Marian Erle being ‘the particular agent of Aurora’s education’⁹:

The particular agent of Aurora’s education is Marian Erle, a “woman of the people” who functions as a sisterly double, showing her the way to act and suffer, first by loving and serving Romney, and then by (not quite intentionally) sacrificing her virginity for him.¹⁰

Consequently, Romney’s impaired vision does not depreciate his patriarchal ascendancy over Aurora at the close. Underlying this traditional finale to lend the relationship a marital shape, a concealed insubordination is traced in Aurora’s daunting ambition to pursue the noble end of art and give her womanhood an expression hitherto unconceived. Hence, the poem can be perceived to accord with the dual signification that is often ascribed to Victorian women’s writing: of an ostensible acquiescence on the one hand, and a covert ire and exasperation, on the other. The inaccuracy of the conventional texture of the culmination of the poem is elucidated as an imperative complaisance imposed on women authors by Victorian patriarchal standards. However, Barrett Browning’s ambitious ‘Künstlerroman in blank verse about the growth of a woman poet’¹¹ appears to demonstrate both the layers of import explicitly without taking recourse to any imagery or symbolic figuration.

Deirdre David’s book, *Intellectual Women and Victorian Patriarchy: Harriet Martineau, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, George Eliot*, reinstates the political chord of Barrett Browning’s poetry. David, in her chapter titled ‘Defiled Text and Political Poetry’,¹² emphasizes her political contemplation and her animus against socialism. Barrett Browning here emerges as a ‘traditional intellectual’,¹³ summoning up an apotheosized antiquity and discoursing from a transcendent pedestal shorn off all class consciousness. But a stifling Victorian sensibility of being a woman does not authorize her to speak but actually leads her to solicit a male prerogative. This explanation keeps a perfect concord with David’s contention that Victorian women intellectuals were jeopardized by the overt polarization of their social roles, as women and as intellectuals, and were endeavouring hard to assert sway and supremacy in a patriarchal milieu. Hence, through the verse, ‘Never flinch, / But still, unscrupulously epic, catch / Upon the burning lava of

⁷ Elaine Showalter, ‘Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness’, in Elizabeth Abel ed. *Writing and Sexual Difference* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1982), pp. 9-35.

⁸ Tess Cosslett ed. ‘Introduction’ to *Victorian Women Poets*, p. 17.

⁹ Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, p. 577.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 577.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 575.

¹² Deirdre David, ‘Defiled Text and Political Poetry’, in *Intellectual Women and Victorian Patriarchy: Harriet Martineau, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, George Eliot* (London: Macmillan, 1987), pp. 128-42; reprinted in Tess Cosslett ed. *Victorian Women Poets*, p. 101.

¹³ Tess Cosslett ed. ‘Introduction’ to *Victorian Women Poets*, p. 18.

a song / The full-veined, heaving, double-breasted Age',¹⁴ Barrett Browning 'catches upon' – with force and epic grandeur – the 'woman question' through a cogent, persuasive, overwhelming and unVictorian-like dominance of being a woman on the one hand, and a poet on the other. The poet alludes to the image of the matriarch to evoke the image of a 'nursing mother'¹⁵ – 'Behold, – behold the paps we all have sucked!¹⁶ – to reveal her art that reflects the throbbing life of her age:

... this is living art,

Which thus presents and thus records
true life.¹⁷

Aurora Leigh puts forward the consummate and most vehement exegesis of the 'woman question' in mid-Victorian literature. The poem mingles Romantic and Victorian themes to work out the poet's intent, 'my heart's life throbbing in my verse to show / It lived.'¹⁸ Several ideas converge in the poem and *Aurora Leigh* reveals itself as a confluence of intertwining motifs of gender disharmony, class belligerence, the correlative ideas of art and politics and themes debated by the English and other European savants. Cora Kaplan puts it brilliantly:

The longest poem of the decade, it is, to use another 'woman's figure', a vast quilt, made up of other garments, the pattern dazzling because, not in spite, of its irregularities.¹⁹

Aurora Leigh comes between two very unequivocally political books, *Casa Guidi Windows* (1851) and *Poems before Congress* (1860), that deal much more tactlessly than *Aurora Leigh* with the insurgent *avant-garde* questions of 1848 and post-1848. Barrett Browning was profoundly enthusiastic about social and political concerns of the day and was predominantly a poet in pursuit of issues like slavery, the distress of the poor, the anxiety of a repressed national identity and the predicament of the social condition of women. *Aurora Leigh* is the most comprehensive exposition of the last theme. The overwhelming success of her earlier poem, 'Lady Geraldine's Courtship', decidedly motivated her to continue to write. It is concerned with a theme that was pivotal to a majority of the women novelists of the day – the prowess of women in determining their own companions without the consent of kith and kin as well as of society. *Aurora Leigh* deploys this as a cognate issue and puts forward its thesis on the question of marriage and its appropriateness for women with a profession, especially with writing as their vocation. Her foremost commiseration was reserved for women who created art.

The proscription concerning women's involvement in intellectual pursuits as writers or speakers was in serious jeopardy of being conclusively contravened in the mid-nineteenth century as an increased number of erudite and cultured women were making their presence felt as creative artists, social reviewers and ameliorators. Cora Kaplan delineates the problem of the age in the following manner:

The oppression of women within the dominant class was in no way as materially brutal as the oppression of women of the working class, but it had its own rationale and articulation. The mid-century saw the development of a liberal 'separate but equal' argument which sometimes tangled with, sometimes included the definition of women's sphere and the development of the cult of true womanhood. The

¹⁴Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, Fifth Book, in *The Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning* introd. Karen Hill (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Ltd., 1994), p. 451. All Elizabeth Barrett Browning poems quoted subsequently in this chapter are taken from this book.

¹⁵ Cora Kaplan, 'Introduction to *Aurora Leigh*', in Tess Cosslett ed. *Victorian Women Poets*, p. 70.

¹⁶*Aurora Leigh*, Fifth Book, p. 451.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 451.

¹⁸*Aurora Leigh*, Third Book, p. 415.

¹⁹ Cora Kaplan, 'Introduction to *Aurora Leigh*', in Tess Cosslett ed. *Victorian Women Poets*, p. 70.

publicity given on the woman question hardly dented the continued elaboration of mores and manners which ensured that daughters were marriageable, i.e. virgins. Patriarchal dominance involved the suppression of women's speech outside the home and a rigorous censorship of what she could read or write.²⁰

That was precisely the reason why all the significant women writers were susceptible to, as well as perceptive about, accusations of 'coarseness'. Barrett Browning was considered as 'coarse' by her critics and other women. Sexual defilement was *the* reprehensible and unwarranted sacrilege, even in one's thought.

Writing, being an intellectual exercise, was specifically a domain where women were reprimanded from making any ambitious assertion. In Kaplan's expression, in 'an age characterized by the importance of the popular press as the place of ideological production and the spread of female literacy, it was of prime importance to warn women off questioning traditional sexual morality. Public writing and public speech, closely allied, were both real and symbolic acts of self-determination for women.'²¹ This has precisely engendered the woman writer's debilitating anxiety of creativity and Barrett Browning asseverates, through Aurora, the words 'I write', four times in the initial two stanzas in Book I of *Aurora Leigh* in order to proclaim, accentuate and narrate women's experience and achieve self-expression. The poet takes up such a faculty of expression as a form of professional endeavour and uses the first-person narrative to sound a clarion call to all printing women to voice the 'story' of their 'better self'²² through the act of writing in a resiliently foregrounded masculine literary authority.

Writing is an industry that calls for artistry and proficiency, requiring 'Long green days / Worn bare of grass and sunshine, – long calm nights / From which the silken sleeps were fretted out ... with no amateur's / Irreverent haste and busy idleness / I set myself to art!'²³ *Aurora Leigh* steps in, though inconclusively, as a dialectic on all inhibited ideas. The first-person narrative voice of a significant poet perceptibly contravenes a conspicuous reticence that women writers were expected to observe on such restricted themes by the connoisseurs of elevated art in Victorian England.

Barrett Browning discernibly identifies the predicament and lends a female voice to the protagonist, who eventually develops into a poet. Aurora's memoirs endorse a comprehensive explanation of the confraternity of women and the evolution of a poet. Her repudiation of Romney's proposal for marriage reveals her consciousness of commitment towards her calling as a poet. The third and the fourth books are replete with multiple trifling details of the would-be-poet's quotidian life. The Fifth Book is of central concern, consisting of an extensive demonstration of the poet's enterprise. Barrett Browning has ensconced Aurora as an artist in the first half of the poem and hence, within the rubric of the narrative, the poet could digress from the theme of the woman poet's attempt at self-definition to that of Marian Erle, a working-class maiden, and Lady Waldemar, Marian's conniving victimizer. Aurora carves out a niche for herself by virtue of possessing a vocation and hence can be recognized with more convenience and appropriateness than by way of the relationships, either consanguineous or emotional, that she shares with the other characters in the poem. It is a female poet who speaks authoritatively and Barrett Browning voices her opinions and convictions on political issues and on questions related to art and culture, a domain almost forbidden for women to participate in. In the confrontation between poetry as a

²⁰ Cora Kaplan, "Introduction to *Aurora Leigh*", in Tess Cosslett ed. *Victorian Women Poets*, p. 74.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 74-5.

²² *Aurora Leigh*, First Book, p. 374.

²³ *Aurora Leigh*, Fifth Book, p. 453.

higher form of art and social politics, it is to poetry that Romney's utopian socialism consequently yields. The theoretical implications of arcane dogmas remain unrealistic so far as social reform is concerned. It is poetry, an ideology represented by Aurora in the poem, that evolves as a positive instrument of social transformation through 'inspiration, Christian love, individual expression',²⁴ and that eventually outwits the preposterous socialistic ideals and political discourse, deceptively promising revolutionary reforms. The female authorial pen carving out a new egalitarian society constitutes the Barrett Browningsque thesis in *Aurora Leigh*, thus seeking to replace the staunchly masculine notions of social reformation. The entire project, since it is led by Aurora, may acquire a feminized overture, but it is this unavoidable feminine reconstruction of the society that Barrett Browning aims to achieve as the ultimate social good. The peripheralization of women authors and their restriction from social participation cause the anxiety and apprehension of creativity but once this stifled voice makes itself heard, it can usher in a reformatory benevolence. Indeed, Barrett Browning reformulates the traditional belief in male dominance on the socio-political stage by making the female voice the ultimate harbinger of social beneficence.

Through the encounter between the female ideal of poetics represented by Aurora and socialistic discourse upheld by Romney, reminiscences about the early Barrett and Browning missives, 'each vying for the position of humblest lover and weakest poet', come to mind. It was a 'competition', notes Helen Cooper,²⁵ 'as to who should sit at whose feet.' Equally noteworthy is the backdrop of such 'competition' set up in the poem, *Aurora Leigh*. Aurora unequivocally asserts, 'I'm an artist, sir, / And woman'²⁶ and pellucidly defines her poetic intention by emphasizing: 'I'm plain at speech, direct in purpose' and 'I use the woman's figures naturally.'²⁷ Despite the fact that she stands as 'Woman and artist',²⁸ her unique conception of a woman's understanding of love consists of the self-effacing experience brought about by her social and cultural masters. This experience of being a woman and the enterprise she undertakes of experiencing womanhood by being an artist, hence, in no way entail a disparagement of the significance of an artist, but rather an endeavour to reformulate the idea of artistry. Aurora strives assiduously to mature into a complete woman and artist. Standing on the brink of twenty years, she perceives herself to be incomplete, but is 'credulous of completion'.²⁹ Her pertinacity in being consummate in both her roles lead her to realize the fact, at thirty, that the artist's instinct can barely be assuaged by an 'imperfect woman':

Passioned to exalt
The artist's instinct in me at the cost
Of putting down the woman's, I forgot
No perfect artist is developed here
From any imperfect woman.³⁰

She realizes from her extensive experience of life, which has its inception in her mother's portrayal and its culmination in her affirmation of love for Romney, that in the process of defining herself as an artist

²⁴ Cora Kaplan, 'Introduction', in Tess Cosslett ed. *Victorian Women Poets*, p. 76.

²⁵ Helen Cooper, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning: Woman and Artist* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988), p. 183.

²⁶ *Aurora Leigh*, Eighth Book, p. 519.

²⁷ *Aurora Leigh*, Eighth Book, p. 523.

²⁸ *Aurora Leigh*, Second Book, p. 391.

²⁹ *Aurora Leigh*, First Book, p. 391.

³⁰ *Aurora Leigh*, Ninth Book, p. 535.

who comprehends ‘all the high necessities of Art’,³¹ she has actually ‘wronged’ her ‘own life’³² as a woman, which is her quintessential being. She feels ‘vilely proud’³³ and she dauntlessly asserts her commitment and fortitude as a woman who refuses to be like the rest:

I would not be a woman like the rest,
A simple woman who believes in love
And owns the right of love because she
loves,
And, hearing she’s beloved, is satisfied
With what contents God: I must analyse,
Confront, and question;³⁴

Aurora savours the taste of ultimate autonomy when she comes across the news of the burning down of Leigh Hall, her ancestral home, bequeathed to Romney who lived in it. The property was burned to ‘a great charred circle, where / The patient earth was singed an acre round’.³⁵ The blinding of Romney due to the shock and his being ‘out of nature’, ‘a man, upon the outside of the earth’,³⁶ indicate that Aurora ceases to be the object of Romney’s observation, a situation reminiscent of Barrett Browning’s perception of female subjectivity in Sonnet XLI in *Sonnets from the Portuguese*:

... thy divinest Art’s
Own instrument didst drop down at thy
foot,
To hearken what I said between my
tears, ..³⁷

The poet also evidently magnifies here the image of the female muse governing the male poet. The search into the hitherto unexplored possibilities for a proper representation of the poet and the muse, initiated at the conclusion of ‘A Vision of Poets’ and proceeding through *Casa Guidi Windows*, is accomplished in *Aurora Leigh*. The denouement in the book ostensibly leads to a predictable and customary culmination of the union of Aurora and Romney, entailing a matrimonial relationship between two intellectual equals. What is, however, less perceptible is that Romney apotheosizes Aurora as his muse and this act of embodiment causes a transfiguration of the stereotypical, somewhat even patterned and formulaic, epilogue of the poem into a subversive finale bearing far-reaching implications. A conventional male poetic tradition puts forward the discourse of a male poet struggling with his poetic predecessor for the approbation of the muse. Here, Aurora had to strive with the traditional conceptions of a woman, envisaged in the characters of the ghoulish Lady Waldemar and the virtuous Marian, for securing the grace and benevolence of this male muse. Romney, therefore, intensifies and problematizes the undeniably existent authorial predicament of the woman poet. Joanne Feit Diehl discerns this disquietude and perplexity of the woman poet as rudimentary to the position of the nineteenth-century woman poet:

³¹*Ibid.*, p. 535.

³²*Ibid.*, p. 535.

³³*Aurora Leigh*, Ninth Book, p. 534.

³⁴*Aurora Leigh*, Ninth Book, p. 535.

³⁵*Aurora Leigh*, Eighth Book, p. 522.

³⁶*Aurora Leigh*, Ninth Book, p. 534

³⁷*Sonnets from the Portuguese*, p. 327.

For Rossetti and Barrett Browning as well as for Dickinson, the precursor becomes a composite male figure; finding themselves heirs to a long succession of fathers, these women share the vision of a father/lover that surpasses individuals. And so for them the composite father is the main adversary.³⁸

The male poet constantly remains in conflict with his 'composite father' to win the favour of 'the image of the fecund if idealized or distant muse'. The woman poet's apprehension rests in the fact that for her both the muse and the precursor are the same male figure. This is quite evident in Barrett Browning's 'A Drama of Exile' where the grandeur of Miltonic verse looms large over the progenic verse. Diehl recognizes the dilemma of Barrett Browning in her interpretation of 'A Musical Instrument' (*Last Poems*, 1862), where the poet alludes to the 'great god Pan' who laughs 'as he sits by the river, / Making a poet out of a man: / The true gods sigh for the cost and pain, – / For the reed which grows nevermore again / As a reed with the reeds in the river.'³⁹ Diehl identifies this scepticism as appearing discrepantly in Barrett Browning, Rossetti and Dickinson. The idea of the 'composite male figure' is cynically demonstrated in the verse of Barrett Browning and is also a predominant theme in Dickinson's poetry.

Barrett Browning diverges from Emily Dickinson in conceiving of the muse as what Cooper identifies as 'one in the gender/power economy who bears a position analogous to the one the female muse holds in relation to the male poet.'⁴⁰ She departs from the individualistic father/lover categorization of the muse and envisages a puerile infant instead of a reticent paramour. In the poem 'Isobel's Child', the poet privileges the child over his mother, yet she presents the muse as being an object in confrontation with fatal consequences:

The lady with a grandeur spread
Like pathos o'er her face, –as one
God-satisfied and earth-undone.
The babe upon her arm was dead!⁴¹

In spite of the fact that the son of the serf desires to possess the authoritative supremacy of the master, the mother entombs him 'beneath the reedy ground'⁴² and thus gainsays all possibilities for the child to attain that position. Barrett Browning conceives of a little child as the muse in *Casa Guidi Windows* who goes on singing, 'O bella liberta, O bella!'⁴³ Surprisingly enough, the poet brings into context her 'blue-eyed prophet' whom she has, as a matter of fact, borne as her child:

Young children, lifted high on parent
souls,
Look round them with a smile upon
the mouth,
And take for music every bell that tolls;⁴⁴

Diehl contends that 'for the male poet, the birth of a poem fulfills his maieutic impulse; he becomes both midwife to and mother of his art'.⁴⁵ When the poet feels her 'own child's coming life before',⁴⁶ she

³⁸ Joanne Feit Diehl, ' "Come Slowly – Eden": The Woman Poet and Her Muse', in *Dickinson and the Romantic Imagination* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1981), p. 15.

³⁹ *Last Poems*, 'A Musical Instrument', p. 570.

⁴⁰ Helen Cooper, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, p. 186.

⁴¹ 'Isobel's Child', p. 190.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 186.

⁴³ *Casa Guidi Windows*, Part I, p. 340.

⁴⁴ *Casa Guidi Windows*, Part II, p. 373.

⁴⁵ Diehl, ' "Come Slowly-Eden": An Exploration of Women Poets and Their Muse', p. 19.

⁴⁶ *Casa Guidi Windows*, Part II, p. 362.

conceives both her son and her poetry and this sole act of conception demands ‘courage’ and ‘patience’⁴⁷ which are but ‘sacrifice’⁴⁸ and the poet affirms that ‘sacrifice is offered for and to / Something conceived of.’⁴⁹ We can thus say that it is this sacrificial act that here fulfils the poet’s ‘maieutic impulse’ and she mothers both her son and her poetry. The muse, in Barrett Browning, plays a significant role since her ‘two-months’ baby’⁵⁰ sleeps in peace far away from ‘the world’s baseness’,⁵¹ ‘not being yet defiled’.⁵² The undefiled and immaculate child breathes purity and innocence into the ‘bitter things’⁵³ the poet writes about, since her ‘soul is bitter for your sakes / O freedom! O my Florence!’⁵⁴

Paula Bennett postulates in her consideration of female creativity that Bloom’s proposition of the ‘anxiety of influence’ is ‘at best only indirectly relevant’ to the struggle of the woman poet:

The woman writer’s principal antagonists are not the strong male and female poets who may have preceded her within the tradition, but the inhibiting voices that live within herself – voices emanating out of a consternation that in fulfilling her destiny as a poet, she will be forced to hurt or fail those whom she loves ... Her struggles, in short, are not literary but part of life.⁵⁵

The way in which other Victorian poets – Emily Dickinson and Christina Rossetti – acknowledged and responded to Barrett Browning problematizes Bennett’s supposition that the anxiety and apprehension of the woman writer is not proportionate to the influence of overpowering forefathers. Moreover, Barrett Browning’s struggle seemed to be more associated with an unfamiliarizing and proscribing tradition of poetic ‘grandfathers’. Hence, this anxiety of the woman poet is convincingly ‘literary’. Gilbert and Gubar’s revisionistic approach towards the Bloomean model of the ‘anxiety of influence’ as the ‘anxiety of authorship’ is significantly pertinent here.

While examining multiple manifestations of Barrett Browning’s ‘anxiety of authorship’, emphasis also needs to be laid on the remarkable ‘audacity’ of authorship that her works between 1820 and 1844 unfold. Her audacity as a woman poet brings her in close proximity to the male Romantic ‘strong poets’, though it is a fact that some Romantic women writers too demonstrated an astounding ‘authorial self-confidence, even arrogance’⁵⁶:

Barrett Browning furthermore resembles the male Romantics, however, in being obsessed by poetic origins and a sense of belatedness; and like them, she begets herself as a poet through bold acts of creative ‘misprision’ or misreading. In keeping with Bloom’s model, her works upto 1844 also enact a ‘primal scene of instruction’ among the progenitors who both fostered and inhibited her own creativity.⁵⁷

It is perhaps this dual act of nurturance and inhibition that possibly impaired her creativity and led her to avow in *Casa Guidi Windows*:

For me who stand in Italy to-day
Where worthier poets stood and sang
before,

⁴⁷ *Casa Guidi Windows*, Part II, p. 363.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 363.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 363.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 365.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 365.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 365.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 363.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 363.

⁵⁵ Paula Bennett, *‘My Life, a Loaded Gun’: Female Creativity and Feminist Poetics* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), p. 66.

⁵⁶ Anne Mellor, *Romanticism and Gender* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 8.

⁵⁷ Harold Bloom, *A Map of Misreading* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), pp. 41-62, in Marjorie Stone, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995), p. 55.

I kiss their footsteps, yet their words
gainsay.⁵⁸

In Barrett Browning's deliberation of the 'various mind expressed in various forms'⁵⁹ in *An Essay on Mind*, we comprehend an elaborate exploration of a problem that discourses on mind where 'Morality's deep waters span / The shores of Genius and the paths of Man!'⁶⁰ Barrett Browning seems intrigued by the question of the way in which considerations of gender impinge on the maturation and subtleties of a genius. She opens the poem by contemplating that 'Since Spirit first inspired' and 'dust weighed Genius down', 'Th' ambitious soul her essence hath defined, / And Mind hath eulogized the powers of Mind.'⁶¹ But, if 'Genius' is weighed down by the 'dust' of the body of a female creator, then the stern patriarchal lineage of Victorian art and culture is somewhat impugned and, poetic identity being uncompromisingly male, the pursuit of self-definition is ineluctably contradicted. When she was only eleven, Barrett Browning had optimistically averred in the 'Preface' to *The Battle of Marathon*: 'Now, even the female may drive her Pegasus through the realms of Parnassus, without being saluted with the most equivocal of all appellations, a learned lady.'⁶² In course of time, when she published *An Essay on Mind*, she was twenty and betrayed less aplomb so that she could elude 'the most equivocal' critical acclaim and become more circumspect in camouflaging her sexuality, a fact that makes it difficult to identify the gender of the erudite young poet. Having defined the 'essence' of her 'ambitious soul', we perceptibly discern a grisly dereification of this essence in 'The Vision of Fame', with which Barrett Browning's 1826 volume culminated:

Alas, alas! I wended home,
With a sorrow and a shame –
Is Fame the rest of our poor hearts?
Woe's me! For THIS IS FAME⁶³

In her *Poems* of 1844, as well as in the succeeding editions, 'The Soul's Expression' was published as the most significant sonnet since it enunciated a cardinal attribute of the ideology that underpinned her artistic thought. She cogitates on 'that dread apocalypse of soul' in the manner she does in 'The Development of Genius'. She envisages the apocalyptic denouement to be characterized by 'the thunder-roll/ Breaks its own cloud',⁶⁴ and wishes to articulate the unfathomable chasms and kisses unhindered. Hence, it seems grotesquely ironical when the prefatory lines of the poem – 'With stammering lips and insufficient sound / I strive and struggle to deliver right' – are adduced by critics as Barrett Browning's imperfection in her own artistic craftsmanship.

Another of Barrett Browning's most zealous 1844 poems, 'A Drama of Exile', demonstrates her unconcealed association with two authoritative predecessors, Milton and Byron. Her emendatory endeavour to cast *Paradise Lost* in the shape of 'A Drama of Exile' is, to a large extent, conspicuous in her portrayal of Eve as well as of Lucifer. The ascendancy of this tradition is hence perceptible in Barrett Browning's self-explanatory handling of the Miltonic theme in her poem, from Adam's perceptual stance rather than from Eve's. Barrett Browning narrates Adam's experience that follows his

⁵⁸Casa Guidi Windows, Part I, p. 341.

⁵⁹*An Essay on Mind*, p. 32.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, p. 32.

⁶¹*Ibid.*, Book I, p. 31.

⁶²'Preface' to *The Battle of Marathon*, p. 1.

⁶³'The Vision of Fame', p. 60.

⁶⁴'The Soul's Expression', p. 328.

excommunication from Eden. In his despondency at being ostracized from the land of interminable bliss in his years of senility, Adam repeatedly speaks in terms of 'I' and 'we' in the 168-line verse on 'Adam's farewell', without any discernible allusion to Eve. Her revisionary approach to the poem makes Barrett Browning unwrap her verse in a manner resembling a dramatic monologue that positions itself in correlation to other Victorian dramatic monologues depicting languishing and reclusive individuals. The Barrett Browningsque effort of reappraisal of the Miltonic epic, however, to a certain extent, heightened the positioning of Adam as a pivotal point in the perhaps much-known-and-accepted conventional scheme of things.

At the very outset of the 'Preface to the Edition of 1844', Barrett Browning evidently makes her epic aspirations clear by obtrusively proclaiming a 'sense of trespass' that Bloom claims is present in all the poets (post-1740) who simulated *Paradise Lost* including Blake, Wordsworth and Byron. The poet substantiates this 'trespass' astutely in the 'Preface':

... with a peculiar reference to Eve's allotted grief, which, considering that self-sacrifice belonged to her womanhood, and the consciousness of originating the Fall to her offence, appeared to me imperfectly apprehended hitherto, and more expressible by a woman than a man.

Barrett Browning's 'anxiety of authorship' becomes conspicuous 'when the excitement of composition had subsided' and she 'felt afraid of my position', since the subject she was dealing with depicts 'the new and strange experience of the fallen humanity, as it went forth from Paradise into the wilderness'. She further enunciates her consternation by admitting:

I had promised my own prudence to shut close the gates of Eden between Milton and myself, so that none might say I dared to walk in his footsteps. He should be within, I thought, with his Adam and Eve unfallen or falling, – and I, without, with my EXILES, – I also an exile! It would not do. The subject, and his glory covering it, swept through the gates, and I stood full in it, against my will, and contrary to my vow, till I shrank back fearing, almost desponding.⁶⁵

The problem of anxiety of authorship emerging from gender becomes convoluted in the composition and the mode of narration in 'A Vision of Poets'. The poem is written by a narrator in the third person who bears a nebulous, unrecognizable and indeterminate existence and whose presence is distinguishable only towards the culmination of the poet-pilgrim's phantasmic experience of progressing towards the altar wondering 'if a listening life did run / Through the king-poets, one by one / Rejoicing in a worthy son.'⁶⁶ This anonymous narrator acquires a momentous significance in the 'Conclusion' which sculpts the denouement of the narrative. Here (s)he recognizes the footprints through a forest and confronts the poet's son, who being bequeathed with his father's artistic perspicacity, relates the tale of the latter's death along with his succeeding renown.

The dichotomous relationship that the woman poet shares with the pilgrim-poet becomes as significant as to lead us to consider the implicit nuances suggested by the poem's title. The connotation of the expression, 'a vision of poets', indicates both the vision and the devoted, unswerving and aspiring poets who experience such a vision. The woman poet's deliberate and apparent absence from the poem translates her position of subjugation to the male poetic line of descent into an agonizing reality for her. Though the visionary sojourn of the male pilgrim-poet is narrated, the apprehension of the poet herself becomes evident when she supplicates thus:

He fell before the angel's feet,

⁶⁵ 'Preface to the Edition of 1844', p. 102.

⁶⁶ 'A Vision of Poets', p. 171.

Saying – ‘If what is true is sweet,
In something I may compass it.
‘For, where my worthiness is poor,
My will stands richly at the door,
To pay shortcomings evermore.
‘Accept me therefore. Not for price,
And not for pride, my sacrifice
Is tendered!’⁶⁷

It appears as though the anxiety of the woman poet finds expression through the more traditionally acknowledged impersonation of a male poet. Hence, as a daughter, though she feels disinherited, being bereft of that poetic power which supposedly belongs to an array of formidable male poets, her creative angst requires utterance through her pilgrim-poet, thus making her peripheral position more pronounced and poignant:

So much of Mrs. Browning – her political ideas, her passion for reform, her scholarship – simply carries her into the sphere of the masculine poets, where she suffers by an unfair comparison.⁶⁸

The above study has thus attempted to show how Barrett Browning dealt with the problem of the woman writer in her poetry, at a time when the force of feminist movements reverberated throughout the society within which she created, and also how the woman intellectual emerged as an identifiable cultural figure by writing resiliently about the power of female art and female sexuality and the struggles of intelligent women for cultural autonomy. She, as a woman writer, almost presumptuously, though often covertly, questioned the traditional ideals of femininity and gave expression to her creative anxiety through a poetic representation of their self and subjectivity. Needless to mention, for a considerable amount of time in her life as well as thereafter, Barrett Browning occupied not only a significant position in the distinguished line of Victorian women poets, but she was considered to be the best among them.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*, p. 171.

⁶⁸ Paul Elmer More, *TorontoShelburne Essays*, Third Series, G. P. Putnam’s Sons (New York and London: Gbe Knickerbo