

## Elizabeth Barrett Browning: *Aurora Leigh*

### I. Background

- A. Elizabeth Barrett Browning was one of the most famous female poets of the nineteenth century
- B. She was the oldest of eleven children from a well-to-do family
- C. She was well educated and even studied Greek, which was rare for women
- D. At age fifteen, she began to suffer from a mysterious illness that was not diagnosed by modern medicine, though lung ailments ran in her family
- E. She was prescribed opium, which caused a number of physical problems
- F. As a semi-invalid, at age forty, Robert Browning wrote her a fan letter
  - 1. They began a love affair and eloped to Italy, where her health improved
  - 2. She had a son to Robert when she was 43
- G. Her cycle of sonnets is second only to Shakespeare's
- H. Robert suggested the title, *Sonnets from the Portuguese*

### II. *Aurora Leigh*

- A. Form and influences
  - 1. Combining the epic and the sensation novel genres, it is referred to as a novel in verse
  - 2. It features a female poetess as narrator
  - 3. It has been likened to a feminine version of Wordsworth's *Prelude*
  - 4. It owes much to two other nineteenth-century works:
    - a) Madame de Staël's 1807 novel, *Corinne, or Italy*, about a female poet in Italy, who is rejected in love
    - b) Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*
- B. Protagonist and situation
  - 1. Aurora Leigh is the child of an Italian mother and English father
  - 2. She returns to England after her parents' death, to live with her father's maiden sister in Dover
  - 3. Aurora sees herself as a wild bird brought to her cage
  - 4. Her aunt teaches her a smattering of various subjects, trivial facts, needle-work, and feminine submission
- C. Book II: Aurora's confrontation with her cousin, Romney
  - 1. On her twentieth birthday, Aurora crowns herself as a poet, with a wreath of ivy
  - 2. She and her cousin Romney debate gender roles and poetry
    - a) Romney considers poetry an inappropriate subject for women
    - b) This evolves into an argument about cognitive differences between men and women
      - (1) Romney argues that women are only capable of perceiving pain or grief in the people around them
      - (2) They are not able to comprehend the suffering of the world as a whole
      - (3) This is reminiscent of the argument of Hannah More, and relates to the ideology of separate spheres
      - (4) Romney concludes that women can be "doating mothers, and chaste wives /
      - (5) Sublime Madonnas, and enduring saints," but "We get no Christ from you."
      - (6) In other words, they cannot save the world
  - 3. Shortly after this, Romney proposes marriage to Aurora
    - a) He wants her to help *him* save the world

- b) This scene is almost identical to the scene between St. John Rivers and Jane Eyre in Charlotte Brontë's novel
  - c) She rejects his proposal
- D. Later books of *Aurora Leigh*
  - 1. Aurora learns of Romney's abortive wedding to a poor woman named Marian Erle
  - 2. Traveling through Paris, she meets Marian, now destitute, with a child
    - a) She had been kidnapped and taken to a brothel in Paris, where she was drugged, raped, and turned loose on the streets
    - b) She gave birth to a child, whom she sees as compensation for her degradation
    - c) Aurora is sympathetic to Marian's plight and tries to help her
  - 3. Romney is later blinded in a fire (again, reminiscent of *Jane Eyre*)
  - 4. Eventually, in Italy, Romney and Aurora meet and reassess their relationship
    - a) He admits he has been wrong about many things
    - b) She accepts him, and unlike the tragic Corinne, in Madame de Staël's novel, Aurora attains happiness
  - 5. She has her rebirth as a poet, achieving a compromise between life and art