

EBB and J.S. Mill vs. The Separate Spheres

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“Each [sex] has what the other has not,” wrote John Ruskin in his 1865 essay “Of Queen’s Gardens”: each completes the other, and is completed by the other: they are in nothing alike, and the happiness and perfection of both depends on each asking and receiving from the other what the other only can give.” Many Victorians shared this view of men and women’s intrinsic and intractable differences, but as Allison Hill explores in this essay, others vehemently challenged it, including philosopher John Stuart Mill. In his *On the Subjection of Women*, Mill argued that it is impossible to know what is natural for either sex, given the power of education and socialization. Allison’s paper shows that another radical Victorian, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, shared Mill’s view of gender roles as constructions. In her epic verse-novel *Aurora Leigh*, EBB exposes traditional femininity in particular as imposed and artificial, giving us a heroine who resists its constraints and boldly defines her own identity, as both a woman and a poet.

—Dr. Rohan Maitzen

The “Woman Question” as explored in Victorian English writing covers many aspects of gender. One of the dominant ideologies that thinkers and authors had begun to challenge was the notion of separate spheres: that public spaces were “male” and private spaces “female,” and that allowing women to enter male spaces opened them up to moral or spiritual taint. This ideology relies heavily on the perception of a radical difference in temperament, strength and character between the sexes; it was understood that women’s weak natures made them easily corruptible. Thus, challenging femininity and the very basis of these gender differences undermines

the concept of separate spheres as a necessary social policy. Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* and John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women* do just that: both works radically question whether the differences between genders that were understood to be natural are inherent at all. EBB uses her title character, Aurora Leigh, as a narrative tool to test the same limits of gendered behavior and character that Mill questions in his own book. Through Aurora's interactions with both Romney and Marian, we see EBB exploring how femininity is based in interaction with men – an idea that Mill makes explicit in his treatise. These authors present ideas of gender, particularly femininity, as a set of characteristics created and enforced through male-female relationships, not as arising naturally. In both works, gender is a system of opposing traits not natural to either men or women, and traditional femininity is shown to be largely a limiting imposition, undermining the popular separate spheres ideology.

At no point in EBB's verse-novel does Aurora Leigh accept or demonstrate traditional expressions of femininity. As soon as she is "Cut off from the green reconciling earth" of Italy, Aurora expresses displeasure with the constraints she feels being applied to her (I 242). When she arrives in England she wonders, "Was this my father's England? [...] Did Shakespeare and his mates/Absorb the light here?" (I 261). By assigning a male-centered history to her new country, she shows that she understands it in distinctly male terms. In a clear contrast to the freedom encouraged in her homeland, and in a description that foreshadows her own

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impending intellectual limitations, Aurora finds her aunt with “Her somewhat narrow forehead braided tight/As if for taming accidental thoughts/From possible pulses” (I 273). As soon as she arrives, Aurora has already indicated that she will clash with the “cage-bird life” that her English aunt, her only surviving female relative, appears to lead (I 305). Aurora laments that she, “A wild bird scarcely fledged, was brought to her cage,” aware from the first moment that she is limited in this new environment (I 310). Both her understanding of England in male terms and her aunt’s repressed nature lead Aurora to question what her options will be.

Aurora’s incompatibility with English femininity brings her into conflict with her cousin Romney, and though the basis of their conflict is, on the surface, the nature of poetry, it is often a vehicle for discussions about what constitutes femininity, and thus what is proper behavior for Aurora to engage in. Their first meeting in Book II draws out this point of contention. Romney expresses his gratitude that, in their exchange, he has not seen Aurora play too much at being “Witch, scholar, poet, dreamer, and the rest,/To be a woman also,” presenting explicitly the limitations on Aurora’s gender that she felt upon her arrival to England (II 86). He contends that “Men and women make/The world, as head and heart make human life,” suggesting that intellect is a male quality, while love and tenderness are female traits (II 132). This line of thinking supports the separate spheres ideology that gendered public and private spaces in Victorian England, and often kept women from

pursuing activities like poetry that would put them in the public eye. Aurora responds, though, suggesting that “every creature, female as the male,/Stands single in responsible act and thought” (II 437). She denies both his proposal and his imposed limitations, thus denying his, and society’s, definition of femininity. Here, we see Aurora rejecting traditional notions of gender, which would limit her and define her in opposition to men; as she herself says, Romney “sees a woman as the complement/Of his sex merely” (II 435). Romney becomes the mouthpiece of separate spheres ideology, attempting to domesticate Aurora and remove her from the public spotlight of poetry.

This notion of gender as a set of limitations imposed by men is echoed in J.S. Mill’s *The Subjection of Women*. In a persuasive essay rather than a narrative, Mill makes the implicit arguments in EBB’s work explicit. Just as Aurora’s initial feelings of constraint upon arriving in England and Romney’s arguments suggest, Mill proposes that what we often call women’s nature has in fact been imposed by men, who have “turned the whole force of education to effect their purpose” of turning women into wives (486). Rather, Mill states, as Aurora’s resistance to this “education” suggests, that women have to be “strenuously taught to repress” their intellect, ambition and strength of character (Mill 485). Mill argues that “the opinion in favour of the present system, which entirely subordinates the weaker sex to the stronger, rests upon theory only” (475). There is no significant proof, for Mill, that women deserve the relegation to domestic spaces that the separate spheres

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ideology dictates. Not only is femininity potentially entirely artificial, as “the result of forced repression in some direction, unnatural stimulation in others,” the two sexes “have only been seen in their present relation to one another,” and have never been able to explore alternative expressions of self (493). Romney’s conception of gender is not, for Mill, a natural phenomenon, but a man-made relationship that defines women as men wish them to be.

EBB further questions femininity as a set of inherent traits in Aurora’s relationship with Marian. From Book I, Aurora resists separate-spheres-type feminine behavior. In her relationship with Marian, though, she takes on a distinctly masculine role, further demonstrating the tenuous link between assigned gender and character, and suggesting that masculinity and femininity exist and emerge in relation to one another. Aurora explicitly refers to herself on male terms in interactions with Marian. When she stumbles across Marian in the streets of Paris, she relates the encounter in visceral terms:

My blood swam, my eyes dazzled. Then I sprang ...
It was as if a meditative man
Were dreaming out a summer afternoon
And watching gnats a-prick upon a pond,
When something floats up suddenly, out there,
Turns over ... a dead face, known once alive ...
So old, so new! it would be dreadful now
To lose the sight and keep the doubt of this:
He plunges – ha! He has lost it in the splash.
I plunged – I tore the crowd up, either side,

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And rushed on, forward, forward, after her. (VI 234)

Aurora has a very immediate and physical reaction to Marian's presence, described in slightly violent terms, and she compares herself to a man in her pursuit of the other woman. Her expression of gender, both in her narrative and her behavior, becomes distinctly more masculine in her relationship with Marian.

Aurora often expresses her feelings for Marian in romantic terms, seeming to inhabit the role of Marian's suitor. Explicitly, Aurora often refers to Marian as friend and sister, but she complicates her own understanding of the distinction between platonic and romantic love in Book VII, when, in confronting her burgeoning feelings for Romney, she says she will not let Marian's secret out "To agonise the man I love - I mean/The friend I love ... as friends love" (173). Further, Aurora's behavior continues to emulate that of a man pursuing a romantic interest when, rather than let them part again, Aurora worries,

'Marian, Marian!' - face to face -
'Marian! I find you. Shall I let you go?'
I held her two slight wrists with both my hands;
'Ah Marian, Marian, can I let you go?' (VI 441)

She physically restrains Marian in her expression of love, an expression that would not surprise us coming from Romney. In Book VII, Aurora suggests that Marian accompany her to Italy, where they can live together and raise Marian's child - a proposal of sorts. Two pages later,

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she again compares herself to a man, and in contemplating men and women's relationships she insists on women's capability in male spaces:

The world's male chivalry has perished out,
But women are knights-errant to the last;
And if Cervantes has been Shakespeare too,
He had made his Don a Donna. (VII 224)

While Aurora never fits a perfect model of femininity, it is through her interactions with Marian that she takes on explicitly masculine traits, and narrates herself as a man. Perhaps the line that best sums up Aurora's interactions with Marian, and indeed the notion of gender as relationally constituted, is the parenthetical "(it is very good for strength/To know that someone needs you to be strong)" (VII 414). Aurora displays consistent strength of character, but her implicitly male-coded behavior becomes explicitly so as her relationship with Marian becomes more intimate, and Marian's more traditional femininity brings out masculine traits in Aurora.

What Aurora's relationship with Marian highlights is that not only is femininity imposed by men, as we can see in Aurora and Romney's early relationship, but masculinity is merely the other side of this coin. Masculinity is no more natural than femininity - "male" traits are neither exclusive to men, nor are they inherent in men. Male characteristics are generated the same way female characteristics are in women: through the male-female relationship. Mill takes a similar stance, suggesting that just as women are educated

into femininity, so are men educated into masculinity. In fact, he argues, "All the selfish propensities, the self-worship, the unjust self-preference, which exist among mankind, have their source and root in, and derive their principal nourishment from, the present constitution of the relation between men and women" (558). The same social condition that allows men to be "masters of women" (486) and educate women into subordinate femininity teaches men "to worship their own will as such a grand thing that it is actually the law for another rational being" (516). Mill argues that the context in which men are given privileged access to and control over public spaces, fame, material wealth, and even women's own lives shapes their masculinity just as it shapes femininity.

Throughout the narrative, we can see Aurora realizing Mill's arguments, and defying the ideology that would keep her from her art. Initially, we see her reject the repressive femininity represented by England - it is not inherent to her character, because "the nature of women" as it is commonly understood "is an eminently artificial thing" (Mill 493). Romney, most explicitly, attempts to impose traditional femininity onto Aurora and convince her of women's natural inferiority to, or at least fundamental difference from, men - a state that Mill argues men enforce because "the generality of the male sex cannot yet tolerate the idea of living with an equal" (524). However, Aurora resists the constraints of femininity that would prevent her from publishing poetry and allows her male traits to flourish - particularly in her interactions with Marian, demonstrating

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masculinity arising in relation to femininity as Mill too argues. Finally, at the end of the novel, Aurora says she “flung closer to his breast,/ As sword that, after battle, flings to sheath,” comparing herself to a weapon and reversing traditional associations with the sword and sheath metaphor (IX 833). She is uncompromising in her refusal of limited femininity through to the last, denying the feminine characterization that Mill suggests is unnatural.

Aurora, in her defiance of traditional femininity and her expression of traditionally male behaviors, can be read as a narrative version of the very principles that Mill puts forth in *The Subjection of Women*. Mill argues in his essay that social order is founded on an untested understanding of what actually constitutes male and female nature, and that notions of both masculinity and femininity have arisen out of an unnatural, undeserved subordination of women. EBB’s title character shows us just that: she refuses to shrink herself to fit within the private sphere, defying social conventions of femininity and explicitly placing herself within male spaces, effectively dramatizing Mill’s ideas and undermining the Victorian idea of separate spheres.

WORKS CITED

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