

## Irony and gender politics in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*

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The criticism devoted to Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* (1857) has been an ever-repeated, though ever-revised, focus on the gender politics of this text. Early reviewers were quick to detect, and condemn, its anti-patriarchal stance, as the cases of the *Blackwards'* conservative review and the Dublin University Review show,<sup>1</sup> and few later critics ceased to see the feminism pervading it, although this gradually came to be applauded rather than deprecated. Despite some dissenting voices, like that of Deirdre David, to whom Mrs Browning appears to have made her art "the servitor of male ideal" (1985: 113), most contemporary authors have seen in *Aurora Leigh* one of "the first consciously feminist novel[s]" (Armstrong 1993: 389) and elaborately expanded on how Mrs Browning has made her challenge of patriarchy manifest not only through her portrayal of the eponymous heroine but also through consciously adopted generic and narrative strategies and intertextual games.<sup>2</sup>

In the discussions of the relevance of formal categories to gender politics in Mrs Browning's poem, one aspect seems to have gone unnoticed: the author's use of laughter. Key texts about the social uses of laughter like Henri Bergson's *Le Rire* (Laughter) and Mikhaïl Bakhtin's

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, *Blackwards'* conservative review condemned "the extreme independence of Aurora [the eponymous heroine of Browning's verse-novel]" and the Dublin University Review saw "in the effort to stand . . . on a pedestal beside man" one of Barrett Browning's "grave errors" (Kaplan 1978: 13).

<sup>2</sup> For Barrett Browning's recourse to genre subversion to break the restrictions set on women by a patriarchal literary tradition, see (Stone 1987); for her parallel use of a reliable and an unreliable narrators to convey two independent plots (that of a determined artist and that of an emotionally confused young woman), see (Case 1991); see (Stone 1987) again for a comparison between gender politics in *Aurora Leigh* and Alfred Tennyson's *The Princess*, and (Turner 1948) for an analysis of Barrett Browning's allusions to Coventry Patmore's "Angel in the House".

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*Rabelais and His World* tell us not only that laughter can either subvert or reinforce the social order (of which gender hierarchy is part), but that the function it fulfils depends more often than not on the degree of subtlety/crudeness and intellectual effort involved in it. The subversive charge detected and analysed by Bakhtin in popular forms like the carnivalesque is less present in sophisticated categories like irony, sarcasm, and wit, seen as “genres of reduced laughter” (Bakhtin 1984: 120).

In approaching the question of gender in Mrs Browning’s poem by interrogating its laughter economy, as it were, I would like to question the anti-patriarchal stance traditionally saluted in it by feminist criticism. As I will illustrate, irony is the form of laughter that is the most frequently used in *Aurora Leigh*. The predominance of this essentially ambivalent category, I will argue, relates to the author’s no less ambivalent attitude regarding the Victorian gender politics she is often said to decry.<sup>3</sup> The broadly accepted definition of irony as a “statement in which the meaning that a speaker implies differs sharply from the meaning that is ostensibly expressed” (Abrams 1993: 100) is taken up in analyses by authors like Jean-Marc Defays, who associates irony with ambiguity (1996: 26) and Barry Sanders, who observes that the ironist “speak[s] out of both sides of his mouth” (1995: 93). In opting for a form which has a “capacity for saying two opposing things at once” (Sanders 1995: 95), Mrs Browning submits her text to constant emendation, presenting it as feminist only to replace this reading by the lingering trace of the patriarchal order it seems to subvert.

### *Victorians and laughter*

Nineteenth-century Britain was no exuberant place. The contempt for humour that some critics trace back to the Reformation (Sanders 1995:

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<sup>3</sup> Alison Case holds a resembling view in “Gender and Narration in ‘Aurora Leigh’”. However, besides centring her analysis on the author’s narrative strategy (rather than on her use of laughter), her final argument that “the plot of [the heroine’s] poetic “ambition,” could be kept relatively isolated from the undermining influence of the traditional love-story” (1991: 31) sounds unconvincing. As will come later in this essay, Barrett Browning’s heroine comes to reunite art and love in a hierarchical dichotomy: art is subordinated to love.

224-226) had found a support in the Enlightenment's rejection of some types of humour as incompatible with reason (Bakhtin 1984: 120) and was now further reinforced by the focus that Victorian morality placed on seriousness and sobriety. This is not to say, of course, that no funny passages are to be found in Victorian literary works – Dickens's and Thackeray's novels, among others, contain well-known hilarious passages – but these were expected “to suppress the traditional alliance between laughter and man's unelevated predilections” (Gray 1966: 155) by subscribing to the Victorian sense of propriety and, ideally, fulfilling a didactic role.

This demand for seriousness and restraint was still tighter on female writers. In an age which had as poor an opinion of women's morality as of their brains, the very choice of a writing-career was thought to be improper. In consequence, women writers often found themselves compelled to display an even greater amount of sobriety and moral rigour than their male counterparts if they wanted to invalidate the accusations of deviance and immorality which were levied at them. In choosing to be writers, the Brontë sisters and Elizabeth Gaskell, for example, protested against the limits set on the role of women, and many critics agree that this protest is also voiced in the novels they wrote; nevertheless, it seems that these women were cowed by the weight of the charges pressed by patriarchal discourse (Basch 1974: 106-109). On Victorian heroines Françoise Basch writes that they “were not only more anaemic than their contemporaries in France or Russia, but also paler than their literary ancestors at home” (1974: xiv); this is also true of the authoresses themselves. Victorian women writers were no Aphra Behns; they proved themselves to be more fervent advocates than men of female seriousness and virtue and carefully avoided inserting in their works any form of humour that might be thought improper.

Victorian feminist leaders themselves resembled women novelists in that while fighting for the recognition of women's rights as human beings and as citizens, they took particular care not to deviate too much from the patriarchal path which prepared women to be wives and mothers, and insisted on the natural domesticity of women as well as on their innate moral sense (Caine 1997: 112). The moral argument was thus as central to feminist discourse as it was to patriarchy. And because patriarchy associated morality with earnestness and grave manners, Victorian feminists also strove to display the greatest sobriety in their

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way of dressing and their overall behaviour and rebuked those among them who were naturally inclined to jesting and laughter, as shown by the following remonstrance, which Emily Davies, one of the leading champions of women's education, formulated against another feminist figure – high-spirited Elizabeth Garret: “It is true that your jokes are many and reckless. They do more harm to the cause of women than you know” (quoted in Ducroq 2000: 58).

The aim of this paper is to show that while, in such a priggish context, Mrs Browning's portrayal of a heroine with a sharp sense of derision was a bold departure, opting for irony – a “timid” and didactic form of humour in comparison with other types like nonsense or carnivalesque laughter – was certainly safer for any writer wishing to shield herself against possible charges of impudence. Although, as Barry Sanders notes, some writers, like Edward Lear, attempted to flee the stifling decorum of the Victorian age and disregarded the two fundamental criteria through which it assessed the value of a literary work – morality and seriousness (1995: 246-247) – these were usually dismissed as minor poets and their works as “light literature”. In 1838, James Spedding noted that “[i]n the nineteenth century in which every hour must have its end to attain . . . the foolishness of fools [was] only folly” (quoted in Gray 1966: 157). Far from being mere folly, irony is purposeful and, inasmuch as it denotes contempt for laughter for laughter's sake, it is the type of humour which is the least challenging to Victorian seriousness.

#### *Laughing at patriarchy*

The identification of *Aurora Leigh* as a feminist text owes much to its independent, strong-willed heroine. Aurora's rejection of her cousin's marriage proposal and her aspiration to be a woman-poet have predictably been read as subversive towards Victorian space-gendering, which sought to confine women to the domestic sphere. Indeed, one of the first strokes of irony in the novel is directed against the narrowness of the space mapped out for women by the patriarchal cultural code, a narrowness well-illustrated by the tedious life led by her aunt. A rigidly conventional woman, the latter never went beyond her county, where

The poor-club exercised her Christian gifts  
Of knitting stockings, stitching petticoats,  
Because we are of one flesh, after all,  
And need one flannel (with a proper sense  
Of difference in the quality) – and still  
The book-club, guarded from your modern trick  
Of shaking dangerous questions from the crease,  
Preserved her intellectual. She had lived  
A sort of cage-bird life, born in a cage,  
Accounting that to leap from perch to perch  
Was act and joy enough for any bird. (I, 297-306)

Sketched out by a woman who will soon turn her back on her aunt's provincial lifestyle and seek wider horizons in London, this seemingly laudatory portrayal of a healthy (if simple) life which enhances the heart's generosity and the mind's purity is, of course, meant to elicit mockery rather than approval. While ensuring an accurate comprehension of her description with an anterior, and more forward, observation that her relative's was "not life at all" (I, 289), Aurora also signals the irony underlying her words in the passage itself, through the obviously negative metaphor of the cage. Instead of weakening the ironic charge, however, this image reinforces it by drawing attention to the gap between the obviously detestable condition of living in a cage and the aunt's failure to see this. The life which is said to have "preserved her intellectual" is thus subtly shown to be the very opposite – mind-dulling – and narrowness of geographical space is paralleled with narrowness of mind, which Aurora's aunt indeed incarnates in Mrs Browning's text. The very Christian charity which is presented as the aunt's chief activity is mocked as a guardian of social inequality in disguise: the poor-club which takes pains to provide the poor with decent clothing also ensures that the "flannel" in which they dress is not of the same quality as that of their benefactors. Stripped of its claimed function as a disinterested corrector of social injustices, the poor-club where the narrator's relative spends most of her time thus becomes a mere metaphor for the poverty of this relative's life and mind.

As a "[v]ery kind" woman (I, 311) – another of Aurora's ironical statements – the aunt dutifully ensures that her niece receives the education that befits any respectable Victorian wife-to-be. Aurora explains that she had to learn

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[...] the royal genealogies  
Of Oviedo, the internal laws  
Of the Burmese Empire, – by how many feet  
Mount Chimborazo outsoars Teneriffe.  
What navigable river joins itself  
To Lara, and what census of the year five  
Was taken at Klagenfurt, – because she [her aunt] liked  
A general insight into useful facts. (I, 407-414)

The obviously useless character of a knowledge that Aurora ironically calls useful points out not only the inadequacy (and, once again, tediousness) of Victorian education but also the contradictions of a patriarchal cultural code which requires young females to learn the laws of the Burmese Empire or the height of Mount Chimborazo when such knowledge is the last thing they need in their predicaments of wifehood and motherhood.

The heroine's irony reaches a peak precisely when she comes to denounce the patriarchal background behind the education she received:

I read a score of books on womanhood  
To prove, if women do not think at all,  
They may teach thinking (to a maiden aunt  
Or else the author), – books that boldly assert  
Their right of comprehending husband's talk  
When not too deep, and even of answering  
With pretty “may it please you,” or “so it is,”  
Their rapid insight and fine aptitude,  
Particular worth and general missionariness,  
As long as they keep quiet by the fire  
And never say “no” when the world says “ay,”  
For that is fatal, – their angelic reach  
Of virtue, chiefly used to sit and darn,  
And fatten household sinners, – their, in brief,  
Potential faculty in everything  
Of abdicating power in it: (I, 427-442)

Aurora ridicules the Victorian image of women through the incongruous associations which assimilate comprehension to a right (and limit this right to understanding only what is not too deep) and juxtapose the verb “prove” to statements as contrary to logic as claiming the possibility, for one who is unable to think, to teach thinking. Simultaneously, in referring to men as “household sinners”, Aurora denounces the patriarchal focus on women's morality, in which domesticity is central,

as having not so moral motivations: in teaching women to be content with the sole tasks of mending and “fattening them”, male oppressors secure not only their comfort but also, and more importantly, their domination. As Aurora’s explicit sentence eventually puts it, the faculties they assign to women are conveniently also those by virtue of which the latter “abdicate power”.

Such attacks on patriarchal prejudices make it difficult to dismiss *Aurora Leigh* as no more than “a woman's voice speaking patriarchal discourse”, (David 1985: 135) as Deirdre David, despite her quoting from some of the passages discussed here, does.<sup>4</sup> The step away from patriarchal discourse in *Aurora Leigh* is, in fact, more determined than the discourse of some contemporary feminist figures. A case in point is Caroline Norton. Made famous by her fight against the laws which made it possible for a husband to sequester his children and keep them out of the reach of their mother in case of separation or divorce – a situation from which she herself suffered following her separation from her husband – Norton nevertheless always insisted on her firm belief in men’s superiority over women (Caine 1997: 66-70). In contrast to this strategy, which consisted in pointing out women’s suffering under the patriarchal yoke and appealing to men’s compassion without questioning the female sufferers’ status as a subaltern, Mrs Browning’s depiction of a heroine who represents herself as man’s equal in brains as well as independence betokens a refusal of self-victimisation; a refusal also conveyed through Mrs Browning’s intensive recourse to irony. Because they are directed at patriarchal discourse and its representatives, Aurora’s deliberately ironic sentences function as a discursive weapon that reverses the traditional gendered distribution of power by making women the laughing subject while turning their male oppressors into objects of mockery.

Rejecting the patriarchal ideal which tried “to flatten and bake [her] to a wholesome crust / For household uses and proprieties” (I, 1041-1042), the independent heroine is determined to be something other than a mere “angel in the house.” The phrase is of course a reference to Coventry Patmore’s poem – another verse-novel which was published in 1856 and to which *Aurora Leigh* is said by critics like Paul Turner to be

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<sup>4</sup> David quotes the lines where Aurora ridicules the kind of education dispensed on Victorian women only to dismiss them without further comment (1985: 128).

an answer.<sup>5</sup> Patmore's poem celebrates middle-class domesticity; as its very title suggests, there is no doubt for its author that the only suitable place for a woman is her husband's home. By contrast, Mrs Browning makes her heroine reject without hesitation the offer of her cousin Romney, who, in asking her to marry him, seems to see in her no more than a suitable helpmate in his project of assisting the poor and healing the world from its social flaws:

“Sir [her answer goes], you were married long ago.  
You have a wife already whom you love,  
Your social theory. Bless you both, I say.  
For my part, I am scarcely meek enough  
To be the handmaid of a lawful spouse.  
Do I look a Hagar, think you?” (II, 408-413)

Deirdre David reads this rejection of the cousin's proposal as the reaction of an “angry woman utter[ing] a sentimental attack on male insensitivity”, arguing that the dissatisfaction it voices has much more to do with the lack of feeling her suitor puts in his marriage offer than with his conception of gender roles (1985: 130). My own reading, however, is that it has to do with both. Although the ironical words and the sneering tone with which she meets her suitor's proposal are certainly the expression of a pride hurt by her being seen more as a collaborator than as a wife, Aurora also denounces, through her own example, the eternal second position to which patriarchy is often wont to subject women. The name of Hagar, Abraham's slave-wife, does more than epitomise this female subjection; inasmuch as it is unavoidably associated with one of the oldest and most famous patriarchs in the Judeo-Christian tradition, it can be read as a condemnation of patriarchy as such. In other words, Aurora's irony is directed not so much towards Romney Leigh as towards the long patriarchal tradition of which Romney acts as a representative.

This long patriarchal tradition also infests the world of letters in which Aurora hoped to find an alternative to the subordinate status

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<sup>5</sup> Turner's article “Aurora Versus the Angel” argues, among other things, that the “books on womanhood” mentioned by Aurora in the line 427 of the First Book is a hint to Patmore's “Angel in the House” and that the word “author” inserted two lines later refers to Patmore's character Felix Vaughan and, through him, to Coventry Patmore himself.



offered by Romney. Realising this, the heroine who has ridiculed the cultural code which confines women to domestic chores soon showers her irony on the traditional conventions defined and perpetuated by literary patriarchs. *Aurora Leigh* displays an irreverent attitude *vis-à-vis* literary predecessors unanimously held in high esteem, mocking the obsequious submission to the literary canon which makes young poets' writings read as pieces composed centuries earlier:

I count it strange and hard to understand,  
That nearly all young poets should write old,  
That Pope was sexagenary at sixteen,  
And beardless Byron academical,  
And so with others. (I, 1011-1015)

What grieves Aurora in this male imperviousness to novelty is that it manifests itself through a suspicion towards any woman's attempt to find a place in the male-dominated literary world. *Aurora Leigh* parodies the falsely encouraging discourse with which male readers welcome female literary productions:

"Oh, excellent,  
"What grace, what facile turns, what fluent sweeps,  
"What delicate discernment ... almost thought!  
"The book does honour to the sex, we hold.  
"Among our female authors we make room  
"For this fair writer, and congratulate  
"The country that produces in these times  
"Such women, competent to . . . spell." (II, 237-243)

Through this sort of "ironic pastiche" (Hutcheon 1989: 89), the heroine denounces the contempt in which women's intellectual faculties are held. In this regard, the irony which pervades Mrs Browning's text is a serious challenge to patriarchy not only because it is showered on its social and literary representatives, but also because by showing the ease with which the poet – a woman – handles a device long thought to be reserved to men, it overthrows the cliché which holds that a woman's mind is incapable of roundabout turns of phrases and that "the headache is too noble for [her] sex" (II, 111). In a culture where women were, at best, only thought able to write tear-jerking romances, the intensive resort to "irony's intellectualism" (Lang 1982: 276) reads as a wilful rejection of the widespread belittling representations of women. As such, it is in total

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accordance both with the subject and the form chosen for the novel. It echoes the decision of the young heroine who, by opting for an artistic career while rejecting the love and marriage proposal of her cousin Romney, prefers intellectual success to emotional fulfilment, in which the Victorians saw the only possible form of female happiness.

The form chosen for the narrative goes in the same direction. Indeed, the charge of conventionality Aurora levies at the guardians of the literary tradition can also be seen as a justification of Mrs Browning's own innovative thrust in writing her "unscrupulously epic" (V, 215) text – the blend of novelistic genre and traditional epic that *Aurora Leigh* is. As Marjorie Stone has argued, writing a verse-novel instead of a traditional prose narrative is a way of re-assessing the female mind, showing that women can write more than the domestic novels to which Victorian bias wanted to confine them, and voicing rejection of the traditional male/female dichotomy:

Barrett Browning does not merely mingle genres; she fuses them together to form a new whole . . . This fusion of genres entails a fusion of genders since Victorians viewed epic, philosophic, and racy satiric poetry as male domains, but thought the novel more suited to female writers. Beyond associating the skills of the novelist with the supposedly female virtues of the heart, Victorians found the writing of novels by women more acceptable than attempts in the major poetic genres because, as Gilbert and Gubar observe, novels did not require or display the knowledge of classical models barred to most women, novelists did not aspire to be priestly or prophetic figures interpreting God and the world to their fellows, and the novel was less subjective than the prevalent lyric and confessional poetic forms and therefore more congruent with the self-effacing role prescribed for Victorian women (pp. 545-549). Precisely these features of the major poetic modes – the imitation of classical models (above all, the epic), prophetic aspirations, and confessional subjectivity – are the most prominent in *Aurora Leigh*. (Stone 1987: 115)

The 8000-line verse, the figures of style with which it teems, and the impressive bulk of Biblical and classical references inserted in it all betoken a will to invade a literary sphere long thought to be exclusively male and subvert the gender categories shaped by her conservative culture. Like these, the irony which pervades the novel is meant to deconstruct the myth of feminine fragility, re-appraise the female mind, and assert women writers' intellectual abilities. As such, irony is, independently from the targets it aims at, itself an indication of the feminist stance of the writer.

*Laughing at unconventionality*

While, in reassessing women's brains, the intellectual character of irony challenges an important Victorian prejudice, this very sophistication makes this form of laughter only mildly subversive. As Candace D. Lang remarks,

In works on the comic which attempt to differentiate among its various manifestations, irony usually appears as a minor category, and frequently as only marginally funny (despite the difficulty of measuring "funniness"). Irony's intellectualism, its pointedness and its often harshly critical quality are evoked to distinguish it from the truly risible. (1982: 276)

Victorian times had precisely little patience with the "truly risible." Moreover, irony is accommodating for Victorianism because "it clothes itself in respectability" (Sanders 1995: 234) and avoids the shocking effect produced by more explicit forms of humour. Mrs Browning is indeed far from the bawdiness of predecessors like Aphra Behn; as an ironist, she "displays . . . her wit precisely by *not* eliciting gales of laughter and thus seems to avoid violating social decorum" (Sanders 1995: 235).

Mrs Browning's unconventional heroine is herself subjected to social decorum by the end of the verse-novel. She, who has hitherto shunned marriage and sung the praise of woman's emancipation, eventually gains recognition of the vanity of woman's aspiration to do without man's love and recognition. Despite the fame and success she has achieved as a poet, Aurora comes to understand

How dreary 'tis for women to sit still,  
On winter nights by solitary fires,  
And hear the nations praising them far off,  
Too far! ay, praising our quick sense of love,  
Our very heart of passionate womanhood,  
Which could not beat so in the verse without  
Being present also in the unknissed lips (V, 439-445)

Deirdre David relies on this passage to argue that Aurora sees sexual fulfilment as inseparable from artistic fulfilment (1985: 129-130), without lingering on the irony that underlies the expression of such a vision of art. Indeed, it is ironical that the woman who gives voice to it has hitherto always kept sex and art apart; that she has actually

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relinquished love to write poetry. The irony is all the more accentuated by the fact that she has made love the main content of this poetry, deluding her readers (who seem to share her art theory) to believe that she has been writing out of experience:

To sit alone  
And think for comfort, how, that very night,  
Affianced lovers, leaning face to face  
With sweet half-listenings for each other's breath,  
Are reading haply from a page of ours,  
To pause with a thrill (as if their cheeks had touched)  
When such a stanza, level to their mood,  
Seems floating their own thoughts out – “So I feel  
For thee,” – “And I, for thee: this poet knows  
What everlasting love is!” (V, 447-456)

Thus, instead of acting on her theory of art, Aurora, wearing a mask, as it were, contented herself with giving her readers the illusion of doing so. The mockery that Aurora showers on what she comes to see as her dishonest self – which gives the illusion of knowing “what everlasting love is” when love is what she is actually hankering for – is reminiscent of Henri Bergson’s claim that “a person in disguise is risible” (1947: 32).<sup>6</sup> Aurora laughs at herself as she comes to see her former uncompromising search for independence as that of a borrowed persona, a mere self-deception. Moreover, in convergence with Bergson’s analyses of the corrective role of laughter, her self-mockery heralds a change in her attitude towards patriarchy. Bergson argues that individual impertinence towards society – departure from its norms – is punished and corrected through the still greater impertinence of laughter, which aims both at humiliating (and thus punishing) and correcting the transgressor (1947: 148-150).<sup>7</sup> The Aurora of the end of the poem has indeed little resemblance with the arrogant girl who pokes fun at conventional women. She has now ceased to mock such patriarchal stereotypes as those which look down at women writers:

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<sup>6</sup> Bergson, “Un homme qui se déguise est comique”. Translation mine.

<sup>7</sup> Through her strokes of self-irony, however, Aurora acts out both as the transgressor of social norms and as the corrector.

"A good book," [...]
"And you a woman." I had laughed at that,
But long since. I'm a woman, it is true;
Alas, and woe to us, when we feel it most!
Then, least care have we for the crowns and goals
And compliments on writing our good books. (VII, 738-743)

This more subdued stance does not, however, indicate that its owner has reconciled herself to patriarchal prejudiced discourse. Although the assertion that she cares little for "crowns and goals" is in sharp contrast with their owner's former contempt for women's eagerness to "abdicate power in [everything]" (I, 442), it indicates only that Aurora places less value on the recognition of her talents, *not* that she has ceased to see herself as man's intellectual equal.<sup>8</sup> A similarly undecidable stance is illustrated in the comparison she draws between herself as an artist and two fellow male poets:

Well, well! they say we're envious, we who rhyme;
But I, because I am a woman perhaps
And so rhyme ill, am ill at envying.
I never envied Graham his breadth of style,
Which gives you, with a random smutch or two
(Near-sighted critics analyse to smutch),
Such delicate perspectives of full life:
Nor Belmore, for the unity of aim
To which he cuts his cedarn poems, fine
As sketchers do their pencils [...]
I envy you your mother [Belmore]!— and you, Graham,
Because you have a wife who loves you so,
She half forgets, at moments, to be proud
Of being Graham's wife, until a friend observes,
"The boy here, has his father's massive brow,
Done small in wax . . . if we push back the curls."
Who loves me? (V, 502-540)

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<sup>8</sup> Inasmuch as this recognition is usually bestowed or denied by male readers, it is even possible to read Aurora's ignorance of it as a liberation from male judgement. Such a reading would join Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi's view (1981) that Aurora's marriage with her cousin is less surrender to patriarchy than reconciliation with a femininity long stifled by male gaze, which measures woman's achievements against male criteria of success. Gelpi's argument, however, seems to me to submit too readily to the traditional definition which sees femininity as inseparable from romantic love.

Having, through her own roundabout turns of phrase, ironised on the view that women cannot be good poets and expressed the little admiration she feels for the art of Graham and Belmore, Aurora nonetheless admits that she envies them the love with which they are surrounded and their wives and mothers the joys of maternity and domesticity that she herself lacks. Thus, without ceasing to reject the patriarchal prejudices against her sex, Aurora is now more willing to accept the patriarchal assumption that love and family life are what matters most for a woman. In reconsidering her conception of the art/love hierarchy, Aurora aligns herself along Victorian female writers like Elizabeth Gaskell and Charlotte Brontë, who, while achieving success in their literary career, continued to rate this second to their status as wives and/or mothers (Basch 1974: 46). Mrs Browning might be “a non-conformist in more ways than one” (Basch 1974: 46-47), but her heroine’s revision of her own unconventionality cannot but mitigate such a qualification.

Presenting itself alternately as a patriarchal and a feminist text, *Aurora Leigh* constantly defers its own meaning. The heroine’s ironic attacks on patriarchy are inserted only to be erased and mocked in their turn. Eventually, irony itself is erased, and the end of the narrative is significantly rendered in the earnest tone that characterises traditional didactic literature. The solemn lesson Aurora learns as she achieves moral and emotional maturity is that “Art is much, but Love is more” (IX, 656). She now vows to be

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: (IX, 661-664)

That the narrator distances herself from her former uncompromisingly feminist stance is in fact explicitly stated at the very beginning of the novel. Aurora starts her narrative by warning us that she is not the woman she used to be and, what is more, that she *dislikes* the sort of woman she used to be:

And I who have written much in prose and verse  
 For others' uses, will write now for mine, –  
 Will write my story for my better self,  
 As when you paint your portrait for a friend,

Who keeps it in a drawer and looks at it  
Long after he has ceased to love you, just  
To hold together what he was and is. (I, 02-08)

The tacit opposition, all along the narrative, between the gender politics of the narrator – older Aurora – and her younger self,<sup>9</sup> gives Browning's novel the overall ironic structure that is characteristic of the *Bildungsroman*, where the object of irony is the proud but foolish protagonist retrospectively analysed either by an omniscient narrator or, as the case is here, by the very same protagonist once he/she has completed his/her process of growing up. The structure of *Aurora Leigh* is, in this regard, reminiscent of Jane Austen's *Emma*, where the narrator gently laughs at the eponymous heroine who, as proud as Aurora, tries to convince herself that she need not marry only to finally acknowledge her love for Mr. Knightley and become his wife. In both works, laughter serves as a pretext to denounce possible departures from the cultural and moral norm, thus fulfilling the conservative (because corrective) social role assigned to it (laughter) by Bergson. The unconventional heroines afford to laugh at conventions, but it is they who are actually mocked. Eventually, as they realise their foolishness and repent from their defiant attitudes, laughter ceases, and the novel ends on a solemn tone that announces the triumph of the traditional order.

#### *Lagging behind*

In his book on the history of laughter, Barry Sanders observes that although they subvert the *status quo*, ironists do not aim at overthrowing the reigning order (1995: 235). This paper has been an attempt to show not only that this is the case in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's verse-novel *Aurora Leigh*, but that privileging irony in the writer's laughter economy in turn matches her gender politics. As an ambiguous category, irony in

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<sup>9</sup> Although Alison Case proposes a similar reading of this passage, she also suggests that the friend "who has ceased to love" is male and that the passage can therefore be read as a hint to "a tale of thwarted or denied romantic love" (1991: 20). My own view is that both the "you" and "he" used in Aurora's simile are meant as impersonal pronouns, and that the male third person pronoun denotes more an unconscious subscription to male-governed writing conventions than an actual male category.

*Aurora Leigh* echoes the poem's undecidable stance towards patriarchy, whose definition of women's role and behaviour it endorses while also attempting to dismantle its association of femininity with weakness and inferiority. Inasmuch as it demonstrates that female writers are as capable as their male counterparts of subtle and clever turns of phrases, resorting to irony contributes in re-appraising the female mind and challenges the traditional patriarchal cliché according to which women are intellectually limited. However, opting for irony rather than for the roughness and sexual allusions that characterise bolder categories of laughter betrays a prudish submission to the Victorian patriarchal discourse which held female modesty in high esteem.

The hostile criticism showered on *Aurora Leigh* at the time of its publication was obviously the outcome of its departure from the ideal of femininity triumphing at that period, as the examples given at the outset of this paper show: despite its compromising attitude *vis-à-vis* the prevailing cultural and moral norm, Mrs Browning's verse-poem did go much further than many contemporary novels in its transgression of the Victorian patriarchal ethos and its oppressive seriousness. While *Aurora Leigh* is not the uncompromisingly feminist text enthusiastically applauded by critics like Isobel Armstrong and Marjorie Stone, it is therefore not the patriarchal pamphlet Deirdre David takes it to be either. Rather, it is caught in an evasive, undetermined position. In the discursive battle that opposed Victorian patriarchy to rising feminism, the former had the advantages of priority and hegemony; as a result, the patriarchal assumptions which shaped the moral and cultural outlook of the advocates of male authority also infiltrated the discourse of its feminist opponents – including Mrs Browning's text.

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