Poetry, Network, Nation: Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Expatriate Women’s Poetry

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In the nineteenth century, a group of British women poets who lived in Florence and who campaigned in their writing and in their salons for Italian unification left their traces on the very stones of the city. Having resided in Florence during the turbulent prelude to the formation of Italy as a modern nation in 1861, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Isa Blagden, and Theodosia Garrow Trollope are commemorated by civic plaques celebrating their homes and their work. A wall of Barrett Browning’s home in the Oltrarno, Casa Guidi, thanks her on behalf of “Firenze grata” (“grateful Florence”); a wall in the piazza, steps from Blagden’s hilltop community of Bellosguardo, has a tablet that names her; and Garrow Trollope’s home, on the other side of the Arno, has a posthumous tribute to her work for Italian libertà. Also living in Florence in this period were the Scottish poet Eliza Ogilvy and the Americans Elizabeth Stedman Kinney and Sophie May Eckley. These women poets placed themselves at the center of nation making, staked their careers on campaigning for Italy, and conceived their writing and professional selves as part of an explicitly female literary, political, and social community. They predicated their writing identities on a political poetics that was circulated by a complex European and transatlantic print and manuscript culture. Nevertheless, in the midst of asserting their legitimacy and authority through writing for an adopted homeland, these women also played with the rhetoric of displaced homelands. This doubling—asserting agency

ABSTRACT: This article examines the concept of “network” in relation to Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s Florentine circle of pro-Risorgimento women poets. Concentrating on *Aurora Leigh’s* relation to Theodosia Garrow Trollope’s Tuscan newspaper poetry, the essay argues that expatriate women poets represent an alternative history of Victorian poetry based on networks of print and sociability, and that their poetry forges a new model of public poetic agency as that network’s cultural effect.

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from a distance—structures the connectedness of the poetry culture, as the women's poetry shifts away from the conventional sphere of the English poetess.¹

The canonical history of Victorian poetry privileges individual authors outside of their original print contexts—think of the major Victorian poetry anthologies we currently use, arranged by separating each poet into his or her own subentry. This essay, by contrast, will argue that poetry must instead be conceived within its complex networks of print, politics, and sociability. We all know that Victorian print culture rendered poetry as inherently networked, with a diverse group of publishers, editors, copyeditors, reading boys, illustrators, engravers, reviewers, and readers involved in the circulation, reception, and consumption of a poem, whether published in a poetry volume, anthology, or periodical print. But this network of poetry’s print culture was also geographical, transnational, and social, as poems circulated in and through writing and reading communities. In the case of British and American expatriate Italy, the circulation of poems took place in Florentine salons (often run by the women poets themselves); in the Italian, British, and American annuals, newspapers, and periodicals that published much of the poetry; and in the volumes of original poetry published by a few of the women poets. The majority of the poems were published in popular serial titles like the Keepsake, the Metropolitan, the Athenaeum, the Tuscan Athenaeum, the English Woman’s Journal, the Cornhill, Once a Week, Household Words, All the Year Round, the New York Independent, and the Newark Daily Advertiser.

Without placing poetry in its rich cultures of print, sociability, and politics, we read both it and poetics anachronistically; our selection of poems to read as well as our way of reading them are foreign to Victorian culture. For the poetry networks of the period intermeshed popular ephemeral periodical print with often much poorer-selling but enduring single-authored volumes of poems.

What particularly interests me is the way in which the ecology of poetry reconceives notions of poetic agency. This is why the term “network” is especially important for poetry studies: as a noun it traces poets and poems and influences within an interconnected web; as a verb it connotes dynamism, change, agency, and performativity. The expatriate women’s poetry figures itself in these very terms, making iterative claims to do something: bless, curse, prophesy, baptize, reproduce, resurrect, rejuvenate, transform, mobilize, mediate, plead,
create, intervene, awaken, destroy, enervate, anoint, comfort, seduce, mock. The poetry pushes at the limits of the poem as a performative event, especially within the lyric form. Actor-network theory insists (in the words of Bruno Latour) that the network is "a fluid visible only when new associations are being made" (79)—in other words, that it is not a thing but "a string of actions" (128). But the idea of the network is also important for the way those individuals imagined their own sense of agency within the network (131). Supremely, these women writers invested in a newly performative poetics, ambitious as well as problematic; they shared the sense that their poetry could act in the world to influence readers, change international politics, and campaign for Italy. "Networking the nation" is my critical term for women's writing as a dynamic, fluid, and politicized agency; it answers Latour's call to map the traces left behind by the social agents.

The most famous poem to come out of the expatriate network in Italy gives a flavor of the interconnectedness of writers, politics, aesthetics, and poetics. It is common critical currency to argue that Barrett Browning's 1856 verse novel represents a decisive shift in women's poetry away from the English poetess and toward a more muscular, political, public, epic poetics. But what is less understood is the debt *Aurora Leigh* owes to the expatriate poetry culture from which it emerged. Barrett Browning's expatriate community in Florence immediately celebrated *Aurora Leigh* and claimed its success as its own achievement. Barrett Browning reported that admirers, such as those who "gossip in Florence," called her new book "a gospel" (S. Lewis 2: 275). Isa Blagden termed the verse novel a "Revelation" (Brooks 132) and structured her own literary identity partly around the poetics and the heroine, liberally referring to the poem in her own work. Poet, medium, and one-time close friend of Barrett Browning Sophia May Eckley kept a small, stubby pencil used to correct *Aurora Leigh* and memorialized it within her album of letters from Barrett Browning. *Aurora Leigh* was the standard by which Anglo-American expatriate women poets measured their poetics and their success.

The very title of Barrett Browning's verse novel was produced as part of the culture of poetry; indeed, the title figures the agency of the network. The symbolism of the heroine carries most of the political work of this troubled and triumphant conception of writing. As a transposition or remodeling of the English poetess into an expatriate, *Aurora Leigh* connotes Anglo-Italian relations. At Bel Losguardo, Romney
proclaims Aurora Leigh "My Italy of women," to whom he has traveled to restore his soul, just as the ill travel to Italy for its legendary restorative powers (8.358). The poem returns frequently to the question of liberty and resurrection, and with her metaphorical powers of rejuvenation, Aurora Leigh suggests that the new poetics can both herald and precipitate a new age and a new agency that, when combined with Romney Leigh's refashioned reforming zeal, will bring about a Swedenborgian kingdom of use that translates the spiritual world into the human (Lewis 199). As Aurora Leigh declares in her meditation on art in book 5, "the artist's part is both to be and do" (5.367), a twin function that is described as both active and passive. The artist is:

'Twixt two incessant fires,—his personal life's,
And that intense refraction which burns back
Perpetually against him from the round
Of crystal conscience he was born into
If artist-born? O sorrowful great gift
Conferred on poets, of a twofold life,
When one life has been found enough for pain! (5.376-82)

That startling image of the artist's "twofold life," the twin fires of the personal and the "intense refraction" of the "crystal conscience," suggests that the "transfixing" (5.368) of the spiritual in the material, in the process of creativity, is both active and passive. Reworked from the definition of artistic creativity in Browning's *Pauline* (1833), in which the "intensest life, / Of a most clear idea of consciousness" (268-69), distinct from self and yet "linked, in me, to self-supremacy, / Existing as a centre to all things" (273-74), Barrett Browning's passage adds an allusion to the developing mid-century interest in wave theory. In the process of refraction, light or another wave motion is deflected from one straight path to another, when passing from one medium (such as glass) to another (such as air). This compelling metaphor posits the artist as such a medium, able to refract intensely, and sing and feel in the process, thus combining a sense of activity and passivity. Aurora, whose mythologically charged name connotes the dawning of light, iconically represents the artistic process of creation, bringing material and spiritual together in "a twofold world" (7.762), and in a "double vision" that "comprehensively" sees near as well as far (5.183-88).

Aurora Leigh's name has attracted much commentary for its symbolic meanings, but in the context of Barrett Browning's expatriate
community in Italy, Aurora can be seen to figure a specifically Italian apocalypse. Aurora is the dawn goddess, as Romney heralds her, “The earliest of Auroras!” (2.66). When Barrett Browning was wondering whether to call her heroine Laura or Aurora, both Browning and Harriet Hosmer endorsed the latter for, in Harriet’s opinion, it sounded better: “Laura Leigh lacks backbone” (qtd. in Martinez 219). As Michele
Martinez comments, the name alludes to Michelangelo’s nude statue *Aurora* in the Medici tombs (219). The description of the joyous crowd scene in part 1 of *Casa Guidi Windows* (1851) refers to Michelangelo’s Medici tombs as allegorical figures for Night, Day, Dawn, and Twilight, who “wait in marble scorn” (1.74) for the downfall of the Medici and all such tyrannical power over the people, for “the final putting off of all such sway / By all such hands, and freeing of the unborn / In Florence and the great world outside Florence” (1.77-79). The speaker anticipates a time when the “marble film” (1.85) will fall from the statues and herald
the revolution. Meanwhile, *Aurora* "is haggard as the sleepless" (1.87), suggesting an affinity with the long tradition of the representation of Italy as a woman dead-in-life or a sleeping beauty figure, denounced as overly passive throughout part 1. Through the epic narrative of her own bildungsroman, her next major publication after *Casa Guidi Windows*, Barrett Browning embodies and refigures Michelangelo's allegorical *Aurora* in her own heroine, transforming her into an iconic woman poet who has the power to resurrect Italy's liberty. Aurora Leigh thus makes good Michelangelo's prophecy.

John Gibson sculpted his version of Michelangelo's *Aurora* in Rome after a commission from Henry and Margaret Sandbach in 1842 (see figs. 1 and 2). Margaret Sandbach, a novelist and poet, was the granddaughter of William Roscoe, the Liverpool collector, early patron of the sculptor, and author of the influential *Life of Lorenzo de' Medici* (1795). Roscoe was a key early figure in the Italianate disestablishment salon, an important early precursor of the mid-nineteenth-century expatriate networks in Florence. Thus, the Sandbachs commissioned a statue with a Medici heritage and a liberal political message. Gibson was controversial among his contemporaries for his devotion to colored statues, which Barrett Browning and Powers found distasteful (Gaja). Nevertheless, Gibson remained a valued member of the Italian expatriate community that circled around Florence and Rome, attracting homage poems and tribute essays, and Barrett Browning may have seen a copy of his *Aurora* when she visited Gibson's studio in Rome in December 1853 (Kenyon 2: 148). Barrett Browning, after seeing his *Clemency* in May 1854 (eventually installed, together with statues of *Queen Victoria and Justice*, in the House of Lords in 1856) and pronouncing it "fine & expressive," wrote to Blagden: "I think I too may end in falling in love with Gibson. I feel myself going" (Kelley and Donaldson 51).

Gibson's version of the Aurora myth portrays the goddess as a serene and graceful winged figure just risen from the ocean, posed in a dynamic forward movement on tiptoes with one foot on the waves, carrying two vases from which she scatters the dew, with the star of Lucifer on her brow. In the classical myth, Aurora's tears fall as dewdrops to mourn the death of her son (Ovid 301–02). Alluding to *Paradise Lost* (5.1–2), Gibson suggested that his Aurora "scatters the pearly drops over the earth, and all the flowers awake and expand in the morning sun" (qtd. in Eastlake 85), thus transforming her tears of grief into rejuvenation. Another expatriate woman poet working in this culture of poetry,
Theodosia Garrow (later Trollope), published a tribute poem to Gibson’s statue in the Tuscan Athenaeum—a prominent if short-lived patriotic newspaper—that similarly transforms the classical myth. Garrow’s “Aurora Rugiadosa: Lines on Gibson’s recently finished statue of Aurora” (1848) figures the dewy (rugiadosa) Aurora as the daily herald of rejuvenation at each daybreak. The poem plays on Gibson’s forward-moving statue to suggest the goddess is always in motion, with a “coy unceasing flight” (11) on which the flowers, as well as the earth’s serenity, depend. With her dew, Aurora will “bathe the jarring pulse with balm” (19) and “make the faint spirit bold” (23). Further, as the guardian of the border-line between night and day, all will be refined by her potent dew:

I am the bearer of the dew!
All who hope, or love, or pray,
Know mine urn of azure blue
And its tender sway,
Aspirations sweet and wild,
Blended dreams of Heaven and Earth,
All enwreathed and reconciled,
With its Evening drops go forth
Lethe hath not spell so mild
To refine the things that are,
To lift the mortal to the star,
And make, of man, a child. (24-35)

As with Garrow’s other poems for the Tuscan Athenaeum, such as the “Morning Song of Tuscany” (1847), the trope of the dawn signifies violent political revolution. Her ekphrastic poem on Gibson’s Aurora develops this symbol to figure the dawn as aspirational, as the blending of heavenly and earthly hopes, and as a consolation. In the context of its publication in a liberal pro-Risorgimento newspaper that published her poetry on the dawning of Italian political revolution, Garrow’s poem recasts the statue to figure Aurora as a gentle, feminized angel of the Second Coming, who can bring together heaven and earth, a figure for hope but also action.

Garrow’s “Aurora Rugiadosa” and Gibson’s Aurora are both prototypes of Aurora Leigh. The significance of the heroine’s name is frequently mentioned in the poem. For example, as an artist whose business is “intense refraction,” Aurora signifies light, dawn, and Lucifer, the morning star. For the blinded Romney, she is his symbolic and redemptive light: “shine, Aurora, on my dark, / Though high and
cold and only like a star, / And for this short night only" (8.317–19). Romney's play on her name continues in book 9, when, as his light (9.525), she resembles the depiction of Christ in Revelation, whose powers of redeeming mankind make good the fall of the original morning star, Lucifer, the brightest of angels (Isaiah 14.12). In saving mankind from the temptations of the fallen Lucifer, Christ himself becomes "the bright and morning star" (Revelation 22.16). By the end of book 9, this imagery takes a powerful turn, when Aurora's overdetermined name informs an ecstatic passage in which the starry night sky over Florence, as seen from the Bellosguardo terrace, has a transformative and redemptive power: "Shine on, Aurora, dearest light of souls, / Which rul'st for evermore both night and day!" (9.831–32). Romney proclaims Aurora his transcendent "morning-star," which radiates light over Florence and the world: "Come thou, my compensation, my dear sight, / My morning-star, my morning,—rise and shine, / And touch my hills with radiance not their own" (9.907–09).

The imagery from the book of Revelation is complex and sometimes contradictory, as Marjorie Stone has noted (134–88). Indeed, the metaphorical field of Aurora's freightings as the iconic woman poet is complicated by the sense of poetic and political agency as both active and passive. As a figure of light, revelation, dawning, and risorgimento itself, Aurora embodies complex meanings of refraction and mediumship. The ending of Aurora Leigh refigures the Risorgimento within a radically new sense of poetic writing as a resurgence, renaissance, and resurrection, whose transformative power is located in the body of the expatriate woman poet, the problematic yet exhilarating medium of spiritual, poetical, and political agency. The title of the novel-poem, promoting the overdetermined name of the character, symbolizes the agency of the expatriate network that produced the poem, a network that campaigned for change and that also believed that the network itself produced change. "The bearer of the dew," as the refrain in Garrow's newspaper poem reiterates, has a rhythmical, diurnal power to rejuvenate, transform, and resurrect. Aurora, "the bearer of the dew," might be an aestheticized mythological figure, but she also represents, for Garrow and Barrett Browning, the transformative power of the expatriate woman poet and of her networks.

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NOTES

While many critics have recently discussed the poetess in this period, for a
discussion of the specifically English poetess see Chapman. The women poets living in
Florence in the 1840s and 1850s formed a culture of poetry that, although generally
sustained by a pro-Risorgimento politics, was sometimes rife with ideological differ-
ences (Treves passim).

This album is now in the Berg Collection of the New York Public Library.

Isobel Armstrong’s essay on Casa Guidi Windows argues that Barrett Browning
incorporates wave theory into the very rhetorical structure of the narrative poem.

Dorothy Mermin also identifies the reference to Byron’s half-sister Augusta
Leigh and Aurora Raby in Don Juan (1819-24) (184).

Martinez traces the importance of the “sculptural conceits” in Aurora Leigh
and their debt to Harriet Hosmer (215).

Sandbach’s poem “The Appeal of the Wounded Amazon,” published in her
1840 Poems, was inspired by Gibson, and her 1850 Aurora and Other Poems was dedicated
to him (Blain). The volume’s frontispiece illustration is Gibson’s Aurora and the title
poem pays homage to the statue.

See, for example, Blagden’s “Gibson’s Studio” and “Recollections of Gibson
the Sculptor.”

Barrett Browning had known Garrow in England and had been uncompli-
mentary about her annual poetry. Their reacquaintance in Florence was not without its
social and political tensions, however much they shared the expatriate culture of
poetry. The network of poets in Florence was politically and ideologically uneven and
sometimes encoded failures of connection and interaction. The Tuscan Athenaeum,
edited by Thomas Trollope, ran between 30 October 1847 and 22 January 1848, and
was established in response to the newly granted (and very temporary) press freedoms
in Tuscany. Garrow published frequently in the weekly newspaper with the pseudonym
Ø. The Tuscan Athenaeum was widely read by the expatriate circle in Florence and was
intimately connected with (and promoted by) other patriotic newspapers, such as
L’Alba. Garrow married Trollope on 3 April 1848 and with her mother-in-law Fanny
established a prominent political and literary salon at the Villino Trollope.

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