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The Woman Question: nineteenth century women's rights in the works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Augusta Webster and Mona Caird

Supervisor
Ch. Prof. Emma Sdegno

Assistant supervisor
Ch. Prof. Flavio Gregori

Graduand
Beatrice Scarpa
Matriculation Number 868491

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ABSTRACT

Amidst a period characterised by major societal changes and considerable economic and social processes, nineteenth century women have been confronted by a disheartening reality where their lives were objectified by men, but most importantly they were deprived of the rights that were entitled to the men of their own social class. Despite being under the reign of the female monarch, Victoria the Queen still expressed mixed opinions on this issue. This thesis aims to explore the influence of patriarchy on women's rights throughout the ages. It will do so by focusing on the history of women's role in society and especially on the so-called "Woman's Question" during the Victorian era. It will explore the themes of education, careers, and marriage rights in three different literary works by three women writers. In the first chapter, the gendered education customs are introduced and how they deeply affected women's lives and job opportunities through Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*. The second chapter concentrates on the theme of the few working opportunities that were open to women, but especially how insufficient education of the lower classes would often lead to prostitution, through an analysis of the poem *A Castaway* by Augusta Webster. Lastly, the third and last chapter examines the change in marriage rights through the essay by Mona Caird, titled *The Morality of Marriage*, and how women continued to be disadvantaged because of their sex.

Introduction

The problem of "the Woman Question" began to become crucial in the 1840s, a phenomenon that started challenging the traditional idea of the woman's roles in the Victorian patriarchal society in order to give the female sex more freedom.[1] The most important themes that were being disputed were especially the institution of marriage, women's lack of rights, women's education, the limited choice of jobs for women, the rigid system of separate spheres and the restrictions of domesticity for the wives and mothers; these were topics that were being questioned by liberalism supporters of the time but also by many Victorian writers.[2] The most influential conservative writers, such as Coventry Patmore and Sarah Stickney Ellis, tried to reiterate the importance of the ideal of the pure woman and wife, namely "the angel in the house", which incorporated the domestic woman characteristics that were typical of the Victorians.[3] These writers and thinkers affirmed in their works that a woman's only purposes in life were to marry, birth and nurture children but especially to transform the house into a sanctuary for the husband.[4]

> In the 1840s and 1850s this view of gender roles began to come under fire by liberal thinkers, in part because demographic realities prevented many women from living out a myth which by mid-century had ideologically subjugated the middle classes and in part because the widespread acceptance of that myth continued to deprive women of legal, economic, and political rights. Middle-class woman had little choice but to aspire to marry, since work outside the domestic arena was generally considered unrespectable. The 1851 census lists only 7 percent of middle-class women as working, most of these as governesses, writers, or artists, and only 3 percent owning businesses or managing farms. But because women outnumbered men in the population at large and because older men tended to marry younger women […] nearly half had no spouse to support them and were considered "redundant," […][5]

[1] S. Greenblatt, C. T. Christ, D. S. Lynch, et al., *The Norton Anthology of English Literature, Vol 2 The romantic Period through the Twentieth Century,* New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006, p. 1607
[2] H. F. Tucker (ed.), *A New Companion to Victorian Literature and Culture,* New Jersey: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014, p. 30
[3] Ibid., p. 30
[4] Ibid., p. 30
[5] Ibid., p. 31

Thus, this thesis aims to explore the main issues posed by the patriarchy in Victorian society and how the feminists condemned the legalisation of women's ill-treatment.[6] The first chapter will focus on the theme of education, with the purpose of showing the gendered bias that permeated the nineteenth century, revealing how essential it was for women to fight for equality in education. After a brief overview of the limitations that were imposed on Victorian women regarding their schooling opportunities, how this disadvantage penalised girls' lives and their career choices, this theme will be thoroughly explored through Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*. Elizabeth Barrett Browning is one of the most renowned poets of the time and *Aurora Leigh* was an influential poem, which helped feminists advocate for equal education for the sexes. The second chapter will focus on the theme of work for women, which will explain the change in job opportunities because of the industrial progress in the nineteenth century and the detrimental economic inequality that compelled women into prostitution. After a thorough summary of the causes of prostitution, the figure of the prostitute will be examined in the dramatic monologue written by Augusta Webster, titled *A Castaway,* where Eulalie will vindicate her status and will defend her occupation. Lastly, the third chapter will focus on the Victorian marriage, especially the laws that put women in a state of incapacity and which caused women to legally become objects owned by their husbands. This theme will be further questioned by Mona Caird in her collection of essays *The Morality of Marriage*, which is a meticulous overview of the history of how society became a patriarchy and how this detrimentally affected the treatment of women in this sacred institution.

[6] Ibid., p. 31

1. Education

Victorians perceived education as a tool of personal advancement as well as societal regulation, both were indispensable for the middle classes to maintain their position and prestige. As Joan N. Burstyn points out,

> For most of the century social control was the predominant theme of Victorian education for women of all classes. The thrust towards control was expressed through the ideal of womanhood, which cast woman as an entity and left little room for variations among individuals. […] women of the middle classes, unlike their brothers, were subject to as right a programme of control as their lower-class sisters, although it was different in kind.[7]

Since the Victorian society adhered to a clear hierarchical structure, the upper middle classes established the societal behavioural norms that the lower classes had to follow closely. In fact, in the 19th century different classes were determined by distinctive factors like livelihood, work and moral values. These were linked to the males of the family, while the females were designated to a class depending on the father's status and once married the females would be associated to the husband's.[8] In the Victorian society it was also custom to have at least a live-in maid who would take care of the infants and the house, this meant that the family members did not have any chores to do during the day resulting in the majority of women and children of the upper middle classes to develop a sense of ennui.[9] In order to find a more active occupation, it became common for middle-class families to enrol sons in schools while daughters stayed at home. The only accepted type of education for girls was to be home-schooled to refine their social etiquette.[10] Since education for men was seen as a means to improve and consolidate their status, it is important to notice that

> When the Victorian middle classes began to use education as a means of upward mobility they did not expect girls to participate in schooling for the same purpose as boys, because they believed that women acquired their status through men, not through their own efforts.[11]

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[7] J.N. Burstyn, *Victorian Education and the Ideal of Womanhood*, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1980, p. 11
[8] Ibid., p. 12
[9] Ibid., p. 14
[10] Ibid., p. 15
[11] Ibid., p. 18

In fact, since childbearing was the only labour expected from the Victorian women the idea of separate spheres for the different genders was enforced further still: women could only find jobs that were fitting for the domestic sphere while it was not required for women of the middle classes to work.[12] This difference was quite relevant in Victorian society, since it thoroughly reinforced men's control and influence in public life. Despite this, women still endeavoured to better educate themselves in order to match their men's level.[13] It is important to specify that during the 19th century, the only education that was granted to women of the middle classes was focused on teaching girls social skills to enter as soon as possible the marriage market and to become social hostesses.[14] This is why it was acceptable for families to send their sons off to expensive schools and only allow their daughters to attend local church schools, where they only learned some basic notions of literacy.[15] Especially since, during this time, an ideal of womanhood was created based on the general ideas of society: it encapsulated a woman who would devote her day to the household chores, supervise childcare, purchase supplies and other extravagances, but the most important part was visiting other ladies' houses with the purpose of cultivating friendships and maintaining their middle-class status.[16] Following this,

> Faced with an increase in leisure and the need to behave with elegance in order to make the best possible marriage, many young women in the early nineteenth century sought an education in accomplishments not household skills. They learned to dance, to play the piano and they mastered the fine details of drawing-room etiquette. […] They strove, therefore, for an education that would develop women's spiritual nature, teach them how to run a house and how to bring up their children.[17]

Another crucial part of this was to censor the books that women could read, seeing as constraint was a major characteristic of women's education, in order not to let women develop a sense of discontent after becoming aware of their subservient position towards men.[18] This is why, the

[12] Ibid., p. 19
[13] Ibid., p. 20
[14] Ibid., p. 22
[15] Ibid., p. 24
[16] Ibid., p. 30
[17] Ibid., p. 36
[18] Ibid., p. 37

only permitted intellectual advancement for the ideal woman was one that did not broach the accepted level of femininity of the time. Hence, women's education was only supposed to prepare girls to be submissive wives to their husbands and not rebels.[19] The majority of the population obviously supported the "Ideal of Womanhood", since it reflected all of their standards and morals, but many women and some literati men[20] started to advocate for their need for a higher education. Opponents to women's higher education were afraid that a higher education would make women forsake their duties as housewives as well as make them realise that marriage was actually unappealing and detrimental to their already non-existent rights.[21] Another fact that the opponents were employed to their advantage was that,

> Since it was believed that women were inferior to men both in mental ability and in bodily strength, they would enhance their nobility by being simple and compliant, retiring and subservient. In contrast, an adventurous spirit, rebelliousness, and a love of competition were signs of masculinity.[22]

Opponents were thus afraid that if women were to get access to higher education, this would jeopardize the stability of the social and economic order. A major conviction was that, since women and men had separate and divergent life objectives, the sexes' education should be different too.[23] Moreover, it would become a problem if women could apply for jobs that had been designed for educated men, especially since women were expected to marry and then bear children for their husbands, which was an inevitability that would force women to leave their jobs and end their careers abruptly.[24] Burstyn thus states that

> Those who opposed higher education for women in the years after 1850 believed that higher education would encourage women to press for entry into the professions and skilled occupations. Their presence there could lead only to employers driving down salaries, men being ousted from jobs, and women neglecting their homes, husbands and children. Opponents of higher education wanted to prevent further disintegration of society, which they felt was being caused by the break up of the family. […][25]

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[19] Ibid., p. 40
[20] See for example John Stuart Mill, *The Subjection of Women*, South Carolina: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015
[21] Burstyn, *op. cit.,* pp. 41-42
[22] Ibid., p. 43
[23] Ibid., p. 48
[24] Ibid., pp. 49-50
[25] Ibid., p. 58

In the Victorian era a shared belief was that the two sexes had dissimilar cognitive abilities: while men had more of an analytic mind, women had a definitely more intuitive mind. This also meant that men were the only ones who could engage in consistent and reflective thought, permitting them to be ideally suited for statecraft and politics. It was a widespread conviction in those years, and many male and female writers too shared. Even Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote to her husband that,

> […] there *is* a natural inferiority of mind in women – of the intellect… not by any means, of the moral nature – and that the history of Art and of genius testifies to this fact openly. […] I believe women…all of us in a mass… to have minds of quicker movement, but less power and depth… and that we are under your feet, because we can't stand upon our own.[26]

Therefore, after confirming that women were both physically and mentally inferior to men, it was clearly evident that aspiring to make any altercation to this customary belief would only bring social discontent and chaos. Especially since there were different studies by anthropologists that showed that women, because of their less developed brain, would never be on the same intellectual level as men.[27] One of the most important thinkers of the time was against the general consensus, John Stuart Mill had very contrasting opinions on the inferiority of women. In fact, he claimed that

> […] the principle which regulates the existing social relations between the two sexes – the legal subordination of one sex to the other – is wrong in itself, and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement; and that it ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality, admitting no power of privilege on the one side, nor disability on the other. […] the opinion in favour of the present system, which entirely subordinates the weaker sex to the stronger, rests upon theory only: for there never has been trial made of any other […] the adoption of this system of inequality never was the result of deliberation, or forethought, or any social ideas, or any notion whatever of what conduced to the benefit of humanity or the good order of society. It arose simply from the fact that from the very earliest twilight of human society, every woman (owning to the value attached to her by men, combined with her inferiority in muscular strength) was found in a state of bondage to some man.[28]

While, on the other side of the debate, Sarah Ellis wrote some books about the correct behaviour and conduct that women had to adopt in society for the "happiness of others". Ellis's conduct

[26] Ibid., p. 71
[27] Ibid., pp. 76-80
[28] J. Stuart Mill, *The Subjection of Women,* South Carolina: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015, pp. 5-8-9

books on women's home duties provided her with the opportunity of opening a girls' school, founded on the shared belief that women's education should only focus on nurturing feminine qualities instead of intellectual abilities, which were attributed to men.[29]

> I still cling fondly to the hope, that, ere long, some system of female instruction will be discovered, by which the young women of England may be sent home from school […] to their homes and their parents, habituated to be on the watch for every opportunity of doing good to others; making it the first and the last inquiry of every day, "What can I do to make my parents, my brothers, or my sisters, more happy? I am but a feeble instrument in the hands of Providence […] but as he will give me strength, I hope to pursue the plan to which I have been accustomed, of seeking my own happiness only in the happiness of others.[30]

Ellis was a big supporter of the separate spheres ideology that was created during the Victorian era, which separated men and women's lives: women were restricted to the house, while men were permitted to wander between the private sphere and the public sphere.[31] When in the late 1830s women were protesting to have access to higher education, Ellis noted the sense of discontent in her contemporaries but her opinion remained unchanged: she advocated for the repression of the women's wish of individual improvement in order to focus solely on others' benefits.[32] It is interesting to notice that, Elizabeth Barrett Browning represents these two contrasting ideas in her long poem *Aurora Leigh* (1856). As Martinez points out:

> EBB [Elizabeth Barrett Browning] suggests that the haughty demeanour and angry gaze of Aurora's English aunt is the result of a limited education and bitter selflessness. Aurora is ostensibly the antitype of Ellis's angel in the house, as she speaks her mind openly, lives alone (and then with a woman of a different class) and makes a living by her pen.[33]

1.1 Elizabeth Barrett Browning

Elizabeth Moulton-Barrett was born on the sixth of March 1806 in County Durham, England and was the first daughter of Edward Barrett Moulton-Barrett and Mary Graham Clarke. Despite being the eldest sister of 12 siblings, Elizabeth was able to enjoy an exuberant childhood in Hope End, an expansive mansion

[29] Greenblatt et al., *op. cit.,* p. 1581
[30] S. Stickney Ellis, *The Women of England: Their Social Duties, and Domestic Habits,* London: Fisher, Son, and Co., 1839, pp. 90-91
[31] M. C. Martinez, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Aurora Leigh: A Reading Guide,* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012, p. 122
[32] Ibid., p. 122
[33] Ibid., p. 122

located in the vicinity of the Malvern Hills in Ledbury, Herefordshire.[34] Mary Graham Clarke often described this opulent estate as bearing a resemblance to the Arabian Nights Tales,[35] a fact that ironically highlights how Elizabeth Moulton-Barrett decided to focus on the underprivileged of society while growing up in a wealthy enough environment. Her father was said to be a "parody of Victorian patriarchal authoritarianism",[36] but Barrett often acknowledges how he would support the new poet's endeavours from a young age. Her mother also considered their children's education very important and helped her daughter develop her literary tastes by providing the young girl with different kinds of novels, but most importantly allowed Elizabeth and her eldest brother, nicknamed Bro, to share a tutor for their home-education. Notwithstanding the numerous demonstrations of the parents being in favour of giving equal educational opportunities to both female and male children, adolescent Elizabeth soon realised how gender difference worked in the school environment. Especially in the 1820s, the few schools for girls that existed taught pupils to sew, to sing, to draw and play the piano, but not the kind of knowledge Elizabeth was eager to acquire. This awareness contributed to Barrett's major shift in mood – from a careless and cheerful child to a despondent and discontented young woman. During this period, Elizabeth also started having a turbulent relationship with her mother Mary, who embodied the ideals of middle-class femininity, devoting a substantial portion of her life to nearly constant pregnancies and the responsibilities of family care. This was a source of great criticism for Elizabeth, who disapproved of her mother's surrendering to this typically feminine Victorian submission and slowly sank into psychophysical state which was not rare in 19th century women. In one of her letters to Robert Browning sent on 27 August 1846, Elizabeth writers about her mother:

> […] dearest as she was, & very tender (as yours even could be,—) but of a nature harrowed up into some furrows by the pressure of circumstances; for we lost more in Her than She lost in life, my dear dearest mother– A sweet, gentle nature, which the thunder a little turned from its sweetness—as when it turns milk– One of those women who never can resist,—but, in submitting & bowing on themselves, make a mark, a plait, within, .. a sign of suffering. Too womanly she was—it was her only fault– Good, good, & dear—& refined too! […][37]

[34] M. Forster, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning: a biography*, London: Vintage Publishing, (1988), 2004, pp. 8-10
[35] Ibid., p. 11
[36] S. Avery and R. Stott, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (Studies in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Literature Series), London: Routledge, 2004, pp. 25-26
[37] P. Kelley et al., *The Browning's Correspondence,* Winfield: Wedgestone Press, 2007, pp. 305-6

Thanks to her mother's example, Barrett abstained from embracing anything connected with the traditional attributes of middle-class femininity and was deeply critical of it. In addition to this, Barrett also commenced her proto-feminist journey thanks to the influence of Mary Wollstonecraft's most famous work *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, a foundational piece of feminist philosophy which highlights the need to improve the disadvantageous education of women to elevate it to the same standard as education for men.[38] Another factor that contributed to Elizabeth's growing discontent was the debilitating sickness that befell her at only 15, which led her to take opium, also known as laudanum at the time, in order to sleep comfortably and bear the numerous fits of pain throughout the day.[39] Despite the unfortunate circumstances posed by this ailment, Barrett saw the long mandatory periods of rest as a saving grace, especially when "[her illness] gave her an excellent, if rarely acknowledged, justification for her reluctance to take part in the obligations of Victorian women in the upper-middle classes: she appears to have had no household responsibilities, even after her mother's death, other than to teach the little boys Latin."[40] This circumstance was clearly ironic since Barrett managed to transcend the prevailing stereotype of weak femininity, despite being placed in such conditions, thanks to her intellectual pursuits. Thus, being able to read, study and write as much as possible enabled the young girl to choose the path she wanted to undertake from quite a young age: Elizabeth Barrett Browning aspired to be a successful poet.[41] After a few years of poor health, Mary Graham-Clarke suddenly died on October 7th 1828 and left the children to their own devices. This event thoroughly shook the whole family, but Elizabeth especially since, as her brother Bro had noticed, Barrett became extremely apathetic and sought solace in literature and books. [42] If before she considered herself to be inherently positive, her demeanour underwent a complete transformation for the worse. From that day on, Barrett continued to live with the anxiety of another misfortune striking her family. Besides her brother, Hugh Stuart Boyd helped Barrett immensely in this period. She started her friendly relationship with Boyd, a blind Greek married scholar, when she was 21.[43] The two had a very frequent exchange of letters concerning education matters, but even

[38] Avery and Stott, *op. cit.*, pp. 26-29
[39] Forster, *op. cit.,* p. 21-24
[40] B. Dennis, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning: The Hope End Years*, Bridgend: Seren Books, 1996, p. 41
[41] Forster, *op.cit.,* pp. 27-8
[42] Ibid., pp. 48-49-50
[43] Ibid., p. 40

met a few times in person, despite the displeasure of Edward Barrett and Elizabeth's difficulty in meeting new people. Even if their correspondence had started in a completely platonic way and Boyd was a married man, after a while Elizabeth started developing some very confusing feelings towards her friend and tutor.[44] Despite these ambiguous emotions, Elizabeth could not see herself getting married even if the respectable society rules required her to do so. This refusal was highlighted in her journal, where she wrote that, at 25 years old, she really enjoyed two books which shared the theme of the intelligent woman who did not want to marry: *Self-Control* (1810) by Mary Brunton and *Destiny* (1831) by Susan Ferrier.[45] While his wife was on her death bed, Edward was away from home trying to save his family's business, consisting in the slave plantations in Jamaica that he had inherited from his forefathers. From the mid-1820s Edward encountered quite a few adversities and financial difficulties thus he was forced to sell Hope End.[46] The Moulton-Barrett family decided to move to Sidmouth, Devon, but after a few years father Edward reunited all of his children and relocated to London in 1835. This relocation impacted Elizabeth in an exceedingly positive manner, as she finally had the opportunity to meet her cousin and future patron John Kenyon.[47]

> […] There could have been no one more useful to have as a friend – Kenyon knew every literary and artistic person in London worth knowing – and also no one more respectable. […] Kenyon knew his function. It was one of the types he relished. Realising immediately the extreme shyness of his new friend he exerted all his tact and charm to draw her into the society which he could clearly see she needed and wanted.[48]

Elizabeth was fortunate enough to meet some of her favorite writers and idols thanks to her newfound cousin, such as William Wordsworth and Mary Russell Mitford. Russell Mitford became both an important correspondent and a friend of Elizabeth, but also introduced her to Robert Browning's literary works, starting with the epic-poem *Paracelsus*.[49] Sadly, after moving to different residences that never became too permanent, Elizabeth fell severely ill again in 1837. Despite spending the following winter in the warm weather on the doctor's advice, Elizabeth's

[44] Ibid., pp. 45-51-56-59
[45] Ibid., p. 60
[46] Ibid., p. 57
[47] Ibid., pp. 77-79
[48] Ibid., pp. 79-80
[49] Ibid., pp. 82-83

health did not improve and the whole family spent more than 3 years in Torquay.[50] An interesting fact to notice is that, even if most of his children were in their mid-20s and early-30s, Mr. Barrett still did not feel compelled to coerce the sons to keep the family legacy alive by marrying soon. On the contrary, as Forster confirms:

> […] Mr. Barrett's own marriage had been happy but, when it ended with his wife's death, his ideas on the institution of marriage became greatly affected by his fervently religious outlook. He found in the bible the evidence he wanted – in this case, to confirm that a father had authority over his children in all respects – and ignored any that conflicted with his opinion.[51]

Another problem is that, at this time, the sons could not marry anybody since Mr. Barrett could not sponsor them financially, following the Victorian customs of the time. However, this soon became inconsequential, since the eldest son Edward, "Bro", died in a freak accident in 1840.[52] Subsequently, Elizabeth plunged into a state of depression and stopped exchanging letters with her correspondents. What aided Elizabeth to return to a normal life was the proposal of Richard Henry Horne, a critic and a poet, to cooperate on a drama.[53] After returning to London, Elizabeth started participating in other forms of literary work (ex. reviewing) and slowly started to reengage in this type of lifestyle. Two years after Bro's death, Elizabeth's mood and health had vastly improved, and she

> […] might not dare to build castles in the air but nevertheless her horizons were once more lifting. She felt this subtle change and was afraid: it was much easier to bow her head and suffer. All the time she repeated to herself, as though reciting a refrain in one of her own poems, that she must not be "too happy". There were warnings everywhere that this would be fatal and she heeded them.[54]

1.2 Works

During the romantic period, many intellectuals started wondering about the poet's role and its definition and this is exactly when Barrett started her career as a poet. It is important to highlight the fact that

[50] Ibid., pp. 90-95
[51] Ibid., pp. 98-99
[52] Ibid., p. 99
[53] Ibid., pp. 101-102
[54] Ibid., p. 111

> […] the romantic conceptions and models of the poet, quarrelled over in these very public debates, were almost premised upon a *male* model of the poet. Women wrote poetry, but it was assumed by many that for them it was an 'accomplishment' rather than a vocation.[55]

One of the first poetic works Barrett published when she was only 14 was titled *The Battle of Marathon* (1820), a long epic narrative poem that aimed to imitate Alexander Pope's translation of the *Iliad*. As already mentioned, Barrett had started studying the classics from an early age with her brother Bro and she was keenly interested in Homer, proclaiming in the preface that she chose the Greek poet as a model for her epic poems,

> He who writes an epic poem must transport himself to the scene of action; he must imagine himself possessed of the same opinions, manners, prejudices, and beliefs; he must suppose himself to be the hero he delineates, […] I confess that I have chosen Homer for a model, and perhaps I have attempted to imitate his style too often and too closely […][56]

The Battle of Marathon is an epic poem that narrates the events of the invasion of Greece by the Persians, who were later defeated by the Athenian state. Barrett's father decided to print 50 copies in order to encourage his daughter's passion.[57] After a few years, she published another very important work called *An Essay on Mind, With Other Poems* (1826), another attempt at imitating the style of two authors she greatly esteemed, i.e. the already mentioned Alexander Pope and John Milton. It could described as a poetic essay that, as the title suggests, deals with the components and qualities of the mind. In addition to that, Barrett also published a series of poems that showed her individual voice to the public.[58] After the Barrett family moved to Sidmouth and meeting Hugh Stuart Boyd, the only volume Elizabeth managed to publish while curing her illness was *Prometheus Bound, Translated from the Greek of Aeschylus; and Miscellaneous Poems* (1833), which was published anonymously like her previous works. This was a translation from the Greek of Aeschylus's tragedy, a translation that did not satisfy her and which was translated for a second

[55] Avery and Stott, *op. cit*., p. 65
[56] H. Frowde, *The Poetical Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning,* London: Oxford University Press, 1908, pp. 3-4
[57] E. Barrett Browning, *Complete Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning,* East Sussex: Delphi Classics, 2013, p. 10
[58] Forster, *op. cit.,* p. 32

time many years later in 1850.[59] In 1835 the family moved to London, where Elizabeth could finally enter the literary circles, this change was important as it enabled her to start publishing her works as "Elizabeth B. Barrett".[60] The first work that Barrett published as a recognised author was *The Seraphim and Other Poems* in June 1838, which marked a milestone in her career:

> If having money of one's own brought status, especially for a woman, having work published under one's own name brought even more. This was the position Elizabeth was striving to reach in the spring of 1838. She wanted to come out of the shadows and publish a collection of poetry without remaining anonymous. She was tired, at the age of thirty-two, of having no clear literary identity. Fortunately, her father, who had before forbidden her ever to put her name to her work, was so proud of "The Seraphim" that he agreed to let Elizabeth B. Barrett appear on the title page.[61]

This work officially started the mature era of this poet and finally launched her literary career, it also aroused critical interest in her in a very short time, as critics started labelling her as one of the most promising poets of the time, thus her latest work finally launched her literary career. *The Seraphim* tells the story of two angels discussing and recounting the Old and New Testament, annexed to this there are some poems and ballads like *The Romaunt of Margret, Isobel's Child and A Romance of the Ganges*, which were more appreciated.[62]

> The opinions of readers varied widely – some thought her style irritating and affected, others found it refreshing – but it was not individual reaction so much as critical notice which she welcomed. She received enough this time to be gratified. *The Athenaeum, The Examiner, The Atlas, Blackwood's, The Quarterly Review* and *The Metropolitan Magazine* all, in due course, paid her considerable attention. Generally, the critics found plenty to dislike but always something favourable, too.[63]

Unfortunately, during the same year Barrett was overwhelmed by the already mentioned debilitating illness and the death of her favorite brother. This is why, Barrett had to wait for 5 years before returning to writing and publishing poems. During these 5 years, Elizabeth did devote some of her time to being a critic for the literary magazine *The Athenaeum*.[64]

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[59] C. Drummond, "A 'Grand Possible': Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Translations of Aeschylus's 'Prometheus Bound'" International Journal of the Classical Tradition, vol. 12, no. 4, 2006, pp. 507–62. JSTOR, http://www.jstor.org/stable/30222078. Accessed 20 Nov. 2023.
[60] Forster, *op. cit.,* p. 87
[61] Ibid., p. 87
[62] Ibid., p.88
[63] Ibid., p. 88
[64] Ibid., p. 109

After publishing the most important two-volume collection in 1844 titled *Poems*, critics noticed a change in the writer's optimistic attitude:

> The past no longer dominated the present and the future was not excluded from her thoughts. […] she had acknowledged to herself that his future could not be denied, that hopes, dreams, ambitions and aspirations had all risen once more to the surface. This change was reflected in her poetry. There was still an overwhelming pre-occupation [sic] with death in most of the poems she was writing, but the timid optimism pervading them was new, as was the recognition, uncertain and hesitating, that the world was not necessarily a dark and dismal place best left as soon as possible. There was, too, an interest in the present and its concerns.[65]

This collection includes poems such as *A Vision of Poets, A Drama of Exile,* and the most important *Lady Geraldine's Courtship*, where Barrett encompassed more mundane themes. As Forster points out

> She was beginning to find these interests creeping into her poetry – current events, particularly broad social questions like the employment of children in factories, stirred her to write, to take up a position. She had always thoughts there was *no* subject a poet should not touch and now she began to test her conviction. To write about what was happening in the world made her feel more alive than she had done for years – she could not help looking ahead to 1844 as a year of promise.[66]

Critics happily reviewed Barrett's work, especially the ballads, while the sonnets and the lyrics received inadequate attention despite being labelled as having superior quality. All her early reviewers agree that Barrett's unconventional rhyming scheme ruined her poems.[67] Not long after having published the two new sets of poems in 1844, Elizabeth felt a sense of restlessness and deflation, but she did not have to wait long before a life-altering event impacted her life.[68]

1.3 Meeting Robert Browning

Elizabeth's most successful work until 1844 was *Lady Geraldine's Courtship*, a ballad which narrated the love story of a woman and a man from two different social classes and shows a woman falling in love with a poet. It is a very meaningful piece since the male lover reads some

[65] Ibid., p. 120
[66] Ibid., p. 122
[67] Ibid., p. 130
[68] Ibid., p. 138

lines of three modern poets to Lady Geraldine, that is Tennyson, Wordsworth, and Browning. The first two names belonged to two renowned contemporary poets while the third was notably less known, but not to Barrett.[69] Elizabeth had never been too interested in young men, but always felt a kind of intellectual attraction towards older men, especially Hugh Boyd, but at this stage of her life, she had started feeling another kind of emotion:

> […] Passion was not an emotion with only a sexual connotation, but one embracing a spiritual feeling. She felt its existence within herself often and had no outlet for it but in her poetry. Passion was the name she gave to that stirring of ambition within her, to that restlessness that made her hunger for change, to that overpowering frustration of spirit which made her want to burst out of the confines of her life. Passion was a life force she recognised. She did not dream of falling in love and exploring sexual passion, but of finding a true poet whose *poetic* passion could match her own. She suspected from the moment she read *Paracelsus* that Robert Browning was this poet.[70]

Barrett had not met Browning in person at this stage, and asked Kenyon and her other correspondents about his background. In fact, Robert and Elizabeth were very alike: from poetry to the preference for older partners even if neither of them had had a serious relationship until now.[71] The first exchange was a letter written by Browning, not in order to thank the poetess for citing his lines in *Lady Geraldine's Courtship* but to simply showcase his admiration for her poetry. After this, Barrett and Browning started exchanging letters commenting on each other's poems and Elizabeth started to feel more comfortable meeting him in person, a bond she had not managed to share with Boyd. The two started a beneficial friendship in which they often debated about literature and other authors, but soon the nature of the relationship started to evolve: Elizabeth was falling in love with the mysterious poet and as was Robert with her.[72] This budding feeling between the two poets also brought a new type of confusion in Elizabeth's mind, especially regarding her father, since Barrett had always been accustomed to a certain type of love:

[69] Ibid., pp. 138–139
[70] Ibid., p. 141
[71] Ibid., p. 142
[72] Ibid., p. 158

> The more she loved Robert the more she questioned the nature of love. Robert was giving her a vision of love which contrasted sharply with her father's. To love and be loved by Robert was to feel free, happy, at easy with the world; to love and be loved by her father was suddenly to feel anxious, constrained and afraid of offending.[73]

Their loving correspondence and courtship were accomplished covertly, in order to conceal their acquaintance from Mr. Barrett. Barrett and Browning married in secret before quickly moving to Italy to spend their married days together and away from Mr. Barrett's judging eye.[74] Elizabeth encountered her father's wrath in response of her letters to the Barrett family: Edward Barrett had officially disinherited his favorite daughter and expressed his disappointment in his letter. The Barrett men all followed this logic, while the sisters and Elizabeth's friends reacted differently: both Henrietta and Arabel, Miss Mitford and Kenyon supported Elizabeth.[75] Despite the bitterness,

> The break with her old life was now complete. Like many a nineteenth-century woman she had to fight for her freedom, freedom from being regarded as having no will or rights of her own. Her biggest triumph had been over herself. She did not intend to waste her new liberty and happiness: she knew it was up to her to make of it all she could.[76]

1.4 Works after marriage

Elizabeth, who became Barrett Browning during these years, published some of the most important and recognized works of her life after the year 1850. Barrett and Browning's marriage gave birth to different works, more than 500 letters and a collection of love poems, *Sonnets from the Portuguese* published in 1850, which were written from the moment Barrett met her husband. There are 43 sonnets in the collection, which recounts the whole courtship of the couple, and Barrett kept them hidden from Browning at first, only revealing them after arriving in Italy.[77] Therefore in the second edition of *Poems*, which was published in 1850, Barrett Browning included *Sonnets from the Portuguese* as well as the revised translation of *Prometheus Bound.* The year after, one of her most known poems was published, *Casa Guidi Windows* (1851), which described the fight for Italian nationalism in Florence where the couple

[73] Ibid., p. 161
[74] Ibid., pp. 185–187
[75] Ibid., pp. 189–190
[76] Ibid., pp. 190-191
[77] Ibid., p.184

used to live and Barrett Browning used to look at the political strife through the window of their house, as the title suggests.[78] After this, *Aurora Leigh* (1856) is definitely the best known verse-poem by this author.

1.5 *Aurora Leigh*

Barrett Browning's best known works were written after she met and married Robert Browning, they are *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (1850), a collection of 44 love sonnets written for her husband, and her masterpiece *Aurora Leigh* (1855). *Aurora Leigh* is a verse-poem consisting of 9 books comprising more than 10,000 lines, John Ruskin declared, "Mrs. Browning's "Aurora Leigh" is, as far as I know, the greatest poem which the century has produced in any language."[79] The plot describes and analyses the endeavor of a young woman who strives to become a poetess in the Victorian society, but it transcends that to a considerable degree. Cora Kaplan describes the poem as follows:

> *Aurora Leigh (1857)* produces the fullest and most violent exposition of the 'woman question' in mid-Victorian literature. […] *Aurora Leigh* is a collage of Romantic and Victorian texts reworked from a woman's perspective. Gender difference, class warfare, the relation of art to politics: these three subjects […] are all engaged as intersecting issues in the poem. 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 sprite, of its irregularities.[80]

Barrett Browning started thinking about this poem in the mid 1840s and, at first, the poet did not mean to link this novel-poem with the woman question, this idea was developed after realizing how a thematically similar poem, *Lady Geraldine's Courtship,* had become so successful. Both poems explore the theme of the woman who succeeds in freely choosing a partner without having to rely on her father's preference or the rules of society, but *Aurora Leigh* especially focuses on the advantages and disadvantages of marriage for a woman with

[78] Ibid., p. 245
[79] D. David, *Intellectual Women and Victorian Patriarchy: Harriet Martineau, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, George Eliot,* London: Macmillan, 1987, p. 95
[80] E. Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh and Other Poems*, ed. Cora Kaplan, London: Women's Press, 1977, p. 5

a calling in the arts.[81] Barrett Browning also made the daring decision to choose the epic, a form of literature that was mostly considered masculine. As Cora Kaplan explains,

> EBB takes care to demonstrate the capacity of her feminine subject, the Victorian woman artist, not only to engage with these purportedly masculine disciplines but also to incorporate the domestic and social spheres, which were typically the subject of novels by women and other reform-minded writers.[82]

Barrett Browning chose to write *Aurora Leigh* in blank form, adding the philosophical reflections which are typical of the verse essay and the talkativeness which is characteristic of the familiar epistle. It is important to point out that the story of *Aurora Leigh* is heavily influenced by the author's own life, since Aurora and Elizabeth share an education in the classics, political ideologies, and aesthetic perspective as well as a fervent disposition.[83] To summarize,

> During its composition, EBB adopted the term 'novel-poem' to encompass its variety of literary modes and subgenres, as well as its range of subject matter. While primarily an autobiographical memoir, or *Künstlerroman* ('artist-novel'), it also contains elements of epistolary fiction, epic quest, reform essay, *ars poetica*, topographical poem, amatory verse and devotional lyric.[84]

In fact, *AL* shares similarities with 19th century *Künstlerroman* and *Bildungsroman* such as *Jane Eyre (1847)* by Charlotte Brontë, *Corinne, or Italy (1807)* by Germaine de Staël and *Ruth (1853)* by Elizabeth Gaskell.

1.6 The Plot

Barrett's reading of Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* made the poet even more conscious about the need to focus on the limits of middle-class feminine education. This is why Barrett straightforwardly mocked this institution in Book One of *Aurora Leigh*.[85] Aurora recounts the story of her struggles of becoming a woman poet and, although the story resembles the author's life, critics remind us that readers should not confuse the two.[86] Book One

[81] Ibid., p. 6
[82] Martinez, *op. cit.,* p. 13
[83] Ibid., pp. 11-17
[84] Ibid., pp. 1-2
[85] Avery and Stott, *op. cit.*, p. 29
[86] Martinez, *op. cit.*, p. 17

describes the protagonist's childhood in Italy, describing how the loss of her Florentine mother at four years old impacted her and left the English widowed father to teach Aurora all his knowledge as an intellectual. Sadly, Aurora's father also passed away a few years later and she was forced to live with her paternal aunt in the fatherland at Leigh Hall. Aurora's father imparted both his sense of melancholy and his strong belief in love to the child before dying.[87] The young adult suffered this big change greatly, especially because of the severe and austere aunt who forced her to conform to the English ideals of femininity and domesticity in order to prepare Aurora for marriage and maternity. While continuing stubbornly to learn from her late father's books, the narrator accepts her poet soul and her calling as a woman poet while starting to write. In the first book, Aurora also meets her cousin Romney Leigh and his friend, the emerging painter Vincent Carrington, and the trio often went on walks.[88] In Book Two Aurora is suddenly twenty years old and it is one of the most important moments of her life, since the young girl crowns herself as an official poet with an ivy wreath after having written a book of poems. Romney catches her in the act of doing so and says that he had come to propose marriage.[89] Romney criticizes her for wanting to be a poet, emphasizing the fact that work should ameliorate society and help people in need, something that literature cannot do. Romney also makes Aurora understand that he would not need her as a conventional wife, but only as a helper in his duty as a humanitarian.[90] Aurora rightfully declines, explaining the importance of poets and also explains that her vocation is legitimate in order to feed the soul, which is as important as the body. Her aunt is enraged at the niece's refusal of the marriage proposal, explaining that their union was already decided before her birth and chastises Aurora on realizing that the young girl did have feelings for her cousin despite the bitter rejection. A few weeks later, her aunt dies and Aurora is left with the late woman's income but also a foreign inheritance, which later would be revealed to be Romney's

[87] Ibid., p. 17
[88] Ibid., pp. 17-18
[89] Ibid., p. 18
[90] Ibid., p. 18

doing.[91] At the end of the second book, Romney and Aurora part ways for the time being, while Romney continues his philanthropic work Aurora heads to London in order to continue her literary career.[92] Book Three takes place three years after the ending of Book Two, Aurora manages to start writing professionally and works nonstop to finish her manuscript in time but also to earn a living. Suddenly, an English lady called Lady Waldemar visits Aurora in order to meet her and ask for help since she is in love with Romney Leigh and wants Aurora to help her end Romney's engagement with a lower-class woman called Marian Erle.[93] Aurora immediately dislikes Lady Waldemar, mainly owing to some of her snide remarks towards her about her vocation and refuses to help the stranger. Aurora then decides to go meet Marian Erle, who tells her the story of her difficult past: how she was scantily educated to become a seamstress in order to earn a living and how her abusive parents tried to sell her into prostitution in order to live a comfortable life despite their vices.[94] Marian managed to run away from the evil man and spent a few weeks in the hospital, exactly where Romney met her and decided to put her under his protection: he managed to find her work and lodgings in London.[95] Book Four finds Marian and Romney meeting again a year later, which led to their engagement. Talking about her relationship with Romney, Marian makes Aurora understand that Romney's proposal was moved by his pity and love for his social motives. Romney's proposal has the same conditions as his old proposal to Aurora, Marian would be treated as a helpmate and would need to serve Romney if they married.[96] When Romney arrives, the two start arguing about the meaning of love and Romney rejects Aurora's idea of love saying that it is not credible in this era. After a month, the couple is supposed to tie the knot and Aurora describes the marriage ceremony as a nightmare owing to the mingling of different social classes. After meeting Lord Howe, a patron of the arts, the reader

[91] Ibid., p. 19
[92] Ibid., p.19
[93] Ibid., p. 19
[94] Ibid., p. 19-20
[95] Ibid., p. 20
[96] Ibid., p. 21

realizes that Marian has finally escaped.[97] Thanks to her new acquaintance, Aurora manages to read the apology letter Marian left and realizes that Lady Waldemar had succeeded in distancing the poor girl. At the end, the defeated cousins part ways once again.[98] Book Five is the most important book of this collection and the focus of Aurora's poetical reflections and artistic principles, Aurora starts reflecting more deeply about her poetry and that she seeks to avoid being confined by gender norms in her literary career and choice of genre.[99] When Aurora confirms that she wants to write a long poem that resembles true life, it is ironically implied that the narrator does not consider *Aurora Leigh* as the embodiment of this at this point of the narration since Aurora still has more to attain in order to fulfill her literary goals. Aurora also openly acknowledges her desire to write about love but is incapacitated because of her status as an orphan, thus being loveless in a way.[100] The second part of this book returns to the plot where Book Four had been interrupted: Aurora listens to three men's conversations and discovers Romney's new engagement to Lady Waldemar, and after having to defend her art again she flees the party. Aurora decides to finally leave England and move back to Italy, dedicating the last lines of the book to her motherland.[101] Book Six starts with Aurora's stay in Paris and her appreciation of the French objective of social justice. While Aurora ponders about poetry again, she luckily recognizes Marian in the middle of the crowd and, after a few weeks, she succeeds in talking to the frightened seamstress.[102] After a lot of confusion and anger when Aurora sees Marian's son for the first time, the latter tells the poet about her troubled past and how she was raped. A very interesting aspect is how Marian deeply suffered because of this, but also was able to be reborn again thanks to her new status as a mother. Marian confirms that Lady Waldemar convinced her to flee but she was also starting to feel out of place at Romney's side, and decided to leave.[103] More importantly Lady

[97] Ibid., p. 21
[98] Ibid., p. 21
[99] Ibid., p. 22
[100] Ibid., p. 22
[101] Ibid., p. 22-23
[102] Ibid., p. 23
[103] Ibid., p. 24

Waldemar affirmed that Romney would be shunned by his class for marrying down and that he should marry somebody from his own class, like herself. After following Lady Waldemar's advice and accepting her help, Marian was drugged and raped on a ship to Australia. After being traumatized, the poor victim was abandoned and left to fend for herself, so Marian ends up in France at the end of this book.[104] In the following book, Book Seven, Marian continues her story and tells about the way she managed to find work as a seamstress in Paris, and the way she was mistreated because of her condition in different houses.[105] Aurora decides to take Marian and her child with her to Italy and live together since she feels responsible for her unhappy destiny. Before departing, Aurora decides to send two letters: namely to Lord Howe, explaining her plan, and to Lady Waldemar, to warn her not to hurt Romney.[106] Aurora and Marian manage to find a house in Florence, where Aurora receives news from her friend and agent Vincent Carrington: her long poem was successful and it was not reviewed negatively because of her gender, also Lady Waldemar has nursed Romney back to health and Aurora presumes they got married.[107] In Book Eight, Aurora watches Marian from above and meditates about different lofty themes, before being interrupted by Romney Leigh's appearance in her house. The two cousins start to argue, both trying to be vague about their situations but suddenly Romney astonishes Aurora by telling her that he read her book.[108] Aurora tries to readily change the subject but Romney wants her to understand that her poem managed to change him and his rigid ideas about poetry, especially regretting what he said to her during that heated conversation back in June.[109] Romney explains what had happened to him lately, describing how his socialist endeavors failed miserably and how everything he worked for betrayed him in the end. Aurora also acknowledges her failure but Romney reassures her by confessing that her poem had healed him.[110] Romney reveals that the

[104] Ibid., p. 24
[105] Ibid., p. 24
[106] Ibid., p. 25
[107] Ibid., p. 25
[108] Ibid., p. 26
[109] Ibid., p. 26
[110] Ibid., p. 27

phalanstery experiment at Leigh Hall deteriorated and the inhabitants also incinerated the building in protest, showing that he was hurt in the process trying to save the memorabilia as well.[111] Despite all the pain, Aurora declares that the cousins cannot reconnect, but Romney stops her speech with a letter from Lady Waldemar. Book Nine starts with Lady Waldemar's letter to Aurora, in which she explains that she was unsuccessful in winning Romney's love, denies her involvement in Marian's disgrace and bitterly acknowledges Aurora's success as a poetess.[112] Aurora wrongfully assumes that Romney is about to propose, but her cousin immediately tells her that he wants to marry Marian and father his illegitimate child. Marian enters the room and, despite being very grateful, chooses to refuse the second proposal with the purpose of continuing raising her child alone.[113] A very important fact to highlight is that Marian also tells Romney for the first time that she never really loved him, she had only idolized him.[114] After her refusal, which shows a saint-like and almost holy Marian, despite her tarnished past, Romney realizes his faults and professes his love to Aurora. Romney also reveals that he lost his sight after the riot at Leigh Hall and Aurora, after seeing his pitiful state, declares him her love.[115] The two finally kiss and, while Aurora reflects on their love story, also erotically embrace each other.[116] In her love confession, Aurora announces that "Art is much, but love is more".[117] The rigid organization of the plot provides the poem with enough flexibility of themes in order to discuss gender and class disputes, how beneficial marriage is and also prostitution, illegitimacy and the conditions of the lower classes.[118] This long poem definitely offers an unembellished depiction of the Victorian era, from the lower classes to the upper classes, Barrett Browning wanted this work to be conspicuous and avoid conventionality like any other novel of the same age.[119]

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[111] Ibid., p. 27
[112] Ibid., p. 27
[113] Ibid., p. 28
[114] E. Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh and Other Poems*, London: Penguin Classics, 1996, lines 353-381
[115] Martinez, *op.cit*., p. 28
[116] Ibid., p. 28
[117] E. Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh and Other Poems*, London: Penguin Classics, 1996, line 656
[118] Avery and Stott, *op. cit*., p. 184
[119] Ibid., p.185

1.7 The Poem

In *Aurora Leigh* Elizabeth Barrett Browning aimed to showcase that men are not the only perpetrators of the injustice that affects women.[120] One of the first examples is when Aurora is compelled to live in England with her aunt, who forced the young woman to limit her education into the cage of the Victorian ideals of womanhood, a process which Aurora described as "I, alas, a wild bird, scarcely fledged, was brought to her cage, and she was there to meet me".[121] The aunt treated her poorly and most importantly tried to model Aurora after herself, teaching her all the misogynistic propaganda of the time, namely how a wife should bow down to her husband:

[…]
Because she liked accomplishment in girls.
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 demonstrating
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,'—
[…]
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: she owned,
She liked a woman to be womanly,
And English women, […]
Were models to the universe.

[Book One, lines 426-46]

Under the aunt's control, Aurora still manages to continue reading her father's books and educates herself on the classics. It is also important to highlight that, while her aunt teaches her the arts of domesticity, Aurora starts writing her poems under the roof of this English house.[122]

[120] Ibid., p. 186
[121] E. Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh and Other Poems*, London: Penguin Classics, 1996, lines 309-311
[122] Martinez, *op. cit.*, p. 44

And so, like most young poets, in a flush
Of individual life, I poured myself
Along the veins of others, and achieved
Mere lifeless imitations of live verse,
And made the living answer for the dead,
Profaning nature.

[Book One, lines 971-76]

In Book Two, one of the most important passages is when Aurora crowns herself as a poet and is interrupted by Romney, her cousin, who had also found her book lying around. Romney is the first character who criticizes Aurora for her vocation, and openly tells her that women are incapable of being poets and that poetry does not provide society with the help it needs.[123]

[…] Therefore, this same world,
Uncomprehended by you, must remain
Uninfluenced by you. – Women as you are,
Mere women, personal and passionate,
You give us doating mothers, and chaste wives,
Sublime Madonnas, and enduring saints!
We get no Christ from you, -- and verily
We shall not get a poet, in my mind.

[Book Two, lines 218-25]

Romney thus tries for the whole discussion of Book Two to make Aurora recognize that, being a woman, she cannot be a serious poetess as well; especially when the male critics of the time will assess her work as just a woman's play.[124] Romney finally asks Aurora to be his wife, but the poetess rightfully rejects his advances because she realizes that her cousin needs her to be a mere object in his life.[125]

I have not seen
So much love since, I pray you pardon me,
As answers even to make a marriage with,
In this cold land of England. What you love,
Is not a woman, Romney, but a cause:
You want a helpmate, not a mistress, sir, --

[123] Ibid., p. 48
[124] H. Cooper, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning, woman and artist,* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988, p. 160
[125] Ibid., p. 161

A wife to help your ends.. in her no end.
Your cause is noble, your ends excellent,
But I, being most unworthy of these and that,
Do otherwise conceive of love.

[Book Two, lines 396-405]

Aurora prefers to concentrate on her own poetic vocation, instead of limiting her true self, reiterating Carlyle's words on the importance of work, and showing that women should have a job of primary value like men.[126] This is also important since in Book Three, Aurora finally lives on her own in London and writes to make a livelihood, always maintaining the goal of becoming an accomplished poetess in her mind.[127] In this book, the reader meets Marian Erle and Lady Waldemar, who are the most important women in this long poem. As Cora Kaplan confirms, "Aurora, Marian and Lady Waldemar form the triptych through which Barrett Browning speaks her views on the woman question."[128] Marian Erle is a prime example of the Victorian lower-class woman, which is most often than not characterized by abusive parents that exploit their female children and an insufficient education that forces the girls to do menial work to live.[129] It is also interesting to note that Aurora, despite being a middle-class woman, is able to relate to Marian's sewing story, showing how both were victims of the ideals of femininity but while Aurora overcame these expectations by following her higher vocation, Marian had to succumb like every other Victorian woman.[130] Aurora definitely feels a connection with Marian, especially related to their relationship with Romney to the fact that he proposed to both. While Aurora justifiably refused to be dominated by her male cousin, Marian reacts differently:

[…] since I know myself for what I am,
Much fitter for his handmaid than his wife,
I'll prove the handmaid and the wife at once,
Serve tenderly, and love obediently,
And be a worthier mate, perhaps, than some
Who are wooed in silk among their learned books;
While *I* shall set myself to read his eyes,

[126] Ibid., p. 162
[127] Martinez, *op. cit.*, p. 61
[128] E. Barrett Browning, *op. cit.*, p. 8
[129] Martinez, *op. cit.,* p. 61
[130] Ibid., p. 61

Till such grow plainer to me than the French
To wisest ladies.

[Book Four, lines 226-34]

Marian Erle accepts the fact that, because of her status and education, the only possible outcome for her is to be married and become a typical wife. Also, despite feeling pity for the seamstress, Aurora still ridicules her class during the marriage scene in the fourth book.[131]

They clogged the streets, they oozed into the church
In a dark slow stream, like blood. To see that sight,
The noble ladies stood up in their pews,
Some pale for fear, a few as red for hate,
Some simply curious, some just insolent […]
While all the aisles, alive and black with heads,
Crawled slowly toward the altar from the street,
As bruised snakes crawl and hiss out of a hole
With shuddering involution, swaying slow
From right to left, and then from left to right,
In pants and pauses. What an ugly crest
Of faces rose upon you everywhere
From the crammed mess! You did not usually
See faces like them in the open day:
They hide in cellars, not to make you mad […]

[Book Four, lines 553-73]

As Avery and Stott claim, Barrett Browning echoes the apocalyptic imagery of Carlyle in this grotesque marriage and also the riot that takes place when the reader realizes that Marian had fled.[132] This imagery of violence is pervasive in *Aurora Leigh*, as stated by Avery and Stott

> The world of women, so often sentimentalized and idealized by male nineteenth-century poets and writers such as John Ruskin and Coventry Patmore, is shown by this poet to be at least latently violent. When Barrett Browning uses epic to describe the dramas that take place 'betwixt the mirrors of [our] drawing-rooms' (*AL* 5:206), she reveals the passions and angers and physical and psychological violence which take place behind closed doors at the heart of the family, by adults to children, by men to women, and between women in particular.[133]

In fact, Aurora describes the education issued by her aunt as a torture and makes sure to include other women in her speech about women's suffering because of the same old-fashioned education

[131] Cooper, *op. cit*., p. 165
[132] Avery and Stott, *op. cit.,* p. 194
[133] Ibid., p. 197

they had to endure. Aurora, namely, highlights every feminine feature that girls were subjugated to because of the typical nineteenth-century society.[134] Book Five is the most important and central part of the poem: it mostly revolves around Aurora's poetic ideals and aesthetics, dealing with in particular the genre and form of the epic. Martinez shows that Aurora believes that, despite being a genre that is usually used to talk about demi-gods and other heroes, the modern epic can narrate women's lives and distinctive experiences.[135] This demonstrates how, according to both Aurora and Barrett Browning, poetry is the right means to convey modern and contemporary beliefs about the arts and society.[136] While thinking about her vocation and her poetry, Aurora also comes to the conclusion that, in order to become a true artist, she has to renounce both passion and love.

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 unkissed lips,
And eyes undried because there's none to ask
The reason they grew moist. […]
To have our books
Appraised by love, associated with love,
While *we* sit loveless! Is it hard, you think?
At least 'tis mournful. Fame, indeed, 'twas said,
Means simply love. It was a man said that.
And then, there's love and love: the love of all
(To risk, in turn, a woman's paradox,)
Is but a small thing to the love of one.

[Book Five, lines 438-480]

Aurora also goes on affirming that she does not envy other men poets for their work, but envies that they can feel a kinship with the women that support them in their endeavors. Aurora slowly realizes that love is actually vital for art and poetry.[137] In the sixth book, Aurora manages to

[134] Ibid., p. 197-198
[135] Martinez, *op. cit.,* p. 77-78
[136] Ibid., p. 81
[137] Cooper, *op. cit.,* pp. 169-170

reunite with Marian in Paris, who had previously fled from her marriage with Romney. Marian is especially important because she challenges the Victorian stereotypes of lower-class women: despite being a mother who has to work, she is neither a prostitute nor a neglectful mother.[138] At first sight Aurora judges Marian according to the traditional patriarchal principles: Aurora sees Marian as a typical "fallen woman", before discovering the whole story. Thanks to this representation of the "fallen woman" and together with other social reforms, Barrett Browning denounces the condition of women that were raped and impregnated before marriage.[139] As Cooper points out

> Aurora's growth into a harmonious selfhood is achieved through love as well as art, and through a compassionate sympathy for Marian's situation on Marian's terms, not according to convention. Marian is the instrument of this transformation. When Marian told her story to Aurora in London, it was unthreatening; indeed it reinforced middle-class ideology about the working-class and evoked middle-class charity. But Marian's story in Paris, unlike her earlier London tale, directly assaults Aurora's values: she refuses to be defined by Aurora's middle-class ideology and language.[140]

Talking about her horrible experience, Marian condemns primarily men and their violence against innocent women notwithstanding the obvious betrayal posed by Lady Waldemar, the vile behavior of the procuress who presented her to the slave traders and her first lady employee who sent her away after learning she was unwed and with child.[141] This is significant, especially since

> Aurora imagines Marian as a Madonna figure, but by including Marian's version of her experience in her autobiography, Aurora demonstrates the fallacy of such fictions, even while not fully able to reject them. Most important, she demonstrates that the reality of women's lives should be the subject matter of poetry. Barrett Browning effects the transformation of woman as object into woman as subject via the stories of women who, like the runaway slave and Marian Erle, are outside the linguistic, social, and political systems typified by middle-class white men. Whereas Aurora, a middle-class woman, could assume a male identity as a poet, the slave and Marian are bound by their biological destiny.[142]

[138] Martinez, *op. cit.,* pp. 87-88
[139] Ibid., *op. cit.,* p. 87
[140] Cooper, *op. cit.,* p. 172
[141] Martinez, *op. cit.,* p. 88
[142] Cooper, *op.cit.,* p. 178

Finally, in the eighth and ninth books Romney and Aurora are reunited. Romney has matured thanks to Aurora's poetry, realizing that poetry is unquestionably important for society in ways that were ignored by him before.[143]

> […] – *I* should push
> Aside, with male ferocious impudence,
> The world's Aurora who had conned her part
> On the other side of the leaf! Ignore her so,
> Because she was a woman and a queen,
> And had no beard to bristle through her song,--
> My teacher, who has taught me with a book,
> My Miriam, whose sweet mouth, when nearly drowned
> I still heard singing on the shore! Deserved,
> That here I should look up into the stars
> And miss the glory.
>
> [Book Eight, lines 327-37]

The last few lines of Book Nine, where the two cousins profess their love to each other, hold a resemblance to the autobiographical *Sonnets from the Portuguese,* which follows the courtship and the love story of Barrett Browning and Robert Browning.[144] Also, despite the critics' negative reviews of the ending,

> Aurora's union with Romney, on a literal level a man with whom she can live as a sexual and intellectual equal, provides the book with its conventional happy ending. However, he [Romney] functions symbolically as Aurora's muse, which transforms the conventional ending into a radical one. A male poet competes with the precursor father for the muse's favor; Aurora competed with the cultural definitions of woman, dramatized in the monstrous Lady Waldemar and the angelic Marian, for the favors of this male muse.[145]

Aurora manages to find her female subjectivity thanks to the figure and story of Marian Erle primarily,[146] since before she was forced to associate herself to male poets predecessors. This means that:

> This necessitates imagining herself as male, with woman as object of her vision. Eventually this "frustration" yields to a crisis in which she begins to identify herself as female, as she must in order truly to mature. Having no models for such a yoking of woman and poet, she

[143] Martinez, *op. cit.,* p. 95
[144] Cooper, *op.cit.,* p. 183
[145] Ibid., p. 185
[146] Ibid., p. 187

> responds by following the cultural models of woman that as a young poet she had rejected; she transforms herself into the object she has been delineating in her work. Saved from such total passivity by writing of self-abnegation even while fully imagining herself enacting it, she realizes her poetic maturity by embracing and recording her own subjectivity with man as object of her gaze.[147]

> In sum, the reviewers reveal the very patriarchal ideologies that Barrett Browning was addressing: they admire the poem, but dislike Aurora's independence and exalt Marian as mother with child; they sympathize with Barrett Browning's indictment of women's "social wrongs," yet accuse her thereby of "prov[ing] her manhood"; they admire Barrett Browning's poem, yet want to see Aurora under man's dominion as Romney's helpmate; they are touched by Marian's story but dislike the coarseness with which it is expressed. In short, they reflect the age's turmoil over the representation of woman.[148]

2. Work

During the 19th century the technological progress finally transformed women's socio-economic conditions, thus dividing them into two distinct groups: the lower-class women who had to work alongside men and the middle-class women who enjoyed unending leisure time at home.[149] By the 1850s, lower-class women would spend their entire day working in factories, mills or at the house of their richer employers, so as to secure livelihood for the family. This type of industrial development created a clean split between the two classes, women of the working class were forced to work lengthy hours in factories and especially textile factories.[150] It was also standard for daughters to prioritize the domestic financial needs instead of education, thus showing how children had to work alongside their parents to survive and rural girls often found employment as domestics in middle class houses.[151] In fact,

> Parents' interest in their daughters' jobs came not only from concern for their safety, but from economic motives as well. In the context of rural impoverishment, of tiny holdings inadequate for the support even of a couple, or of landlessness, children became increasingly vital resources. A daughter's departure served not only to relieve the family of the burden of supporting her, but it might help support the family as well. A daughter working as a servant,

[147] Ibid., p. 191
[148] Ibid., pp. 152-153
[149] Burstyn, *op. cit.*, p. 30
[150] Ibid., p. 55
[151] L. Tilly and J. W. Scott, *Women, Work, and Family,* London: Routledge, 1989, pp. 107-8

> seamstress, or factory operative became an arm of the family economy, and arrangements were made to ensure her contribution even though she did not live at home.[152]

These conditions forced women to stay away from home for such a long period of time that they could not pay attention to domestic duties and families, thus the draining factory exigencies started eroding the esteemed domesticity of the lower classes.[153] In fact, despite this new development, women were still considered unsuitable for most fields of industry by the employers, resulting in an unreasonable high unemployment rate but also a surfeit in other areas as well.[154] At the same time, middle-class women were advocating for higher education in order to be able to have careers alongside men and succeeded in doing so thanks to the help of different supporters and scholars.[155] Also,

> […] some middle-class women were being persuaded that it was in some way ignoble to accept money earned by a male relative. The movement encouraging women to work, prompted by such writings as those in the *Englishwoman's Journal,* had far wider aims than its promoters claimed. It threatened to create a disastrous independence of spirit in young women. […] The idea is that women will ennoble themselves by making themselves independent, by working for their own bread instead of eating bread earned by men. Such an attitude was considered not only dangerous socially, but economically nonsensical, since large numbers of women thrown into the labour market would glut it.[156]

Despite this craving to be thoroughly educated and to be able to start working professionally, Sarah Ellis stated that women did not have many occasions to do so since uneducated women were already struggling to find good employment and it would be even more complicated to compete with men.[157] Furthermore in the nineteenth century, according to widespread belief, society could only stay balanced thanks to distinct class hierarchy, therefore women should not try to disrupt the natural order and remain safely confined in their own sphere.[158] In fact, many girls and women were not able to find employment and, mostly because of the lowering of wages

[152] Ibid., p. 109
[153] Burstyn, *op. cit.,* pp. 55-56
[154] E. Jordan, *The Women's Movement and Women's Employment in Nineteenth Century Britai*n, London: Routledge, 2014, p. 6
[155] Ibid., p. 6
[156] Burstyn, *op. cit.,* p. 65
[157] S. Stickney Ellis, *Education of the Heart: Woman's Best Work*, Charleston: Bibliolife, 2008, pp. 14-15
[158] Burstyn, *op. cit.,* p. 50

that followed the surplus of needlework and other menial works, they were forced to adopt drastic measures in order to survive, in other words they would become prostitutes.[159] It was common for many women of the lower classes to get into prostitution because of economic difficulties and to avoid starvation,

> In many cities and ports, impoverished women chose prostitution in order to make up the shortfall in their income. Prostitution held an enduring fascination in the Victorian public imagination, capturing as it did the very antithesis of cultural proscriptions of refined and pure womanhood. Feminists frequently conveyed prostitutes as victims, seeing them as the epitome of society's patriarchal sexual hierarchy; and rescue workers and campaigners tended to dwell upon the heart-breaking misery and sense of sin which wracked many they sought to help. Prostitutes could be more pragmatic about their situation, however, presenting the sex trade as a rational decision they had made in the context of their economic options.[160]

2.1 Prostitution

This further shows that women of that period and social class would undertake this wretched profession mostly after moving away from their home in the countryside, they would find low-employment jobs to economically support themselves and their far-away family but then would succumb to the sad reality of poverty and the injustice of socially acceptable women's jobs.[161] Many intellectuals and scholars sought to study this phenomenon and discover the most probably causes of prostitution in young girls, one of them is the Scottish surgeon William Tait who wrote a book called "*Magdalenism; an Inquiry Into the Extent, Causes, and Consequences, of Prostitution in Edinburgh*".[162]

> In his investigation of prostitution in Edinburgh, the surgeon William Tait defined the two categories as: 'one *natural* to the human mind and the other *accidental* or arising out of circumstances'. The two groups worked to differentiate moral and environmental causes; vanity, indolence and lust were played off against poverty, lack of education and poor housing with the emphasis on either category constantly shifting. […] Tait devoted an entire chapter of *Magdalenism* to the 'Causes of Prostitution' in which he acknowledged that poverty and unemployment were two primary factors, referring to the conditions of employment for women in Edinburgh, he stated: "The most distressing causes of prostitution are those which

[159] K. Gleadle, *British Women in the Nineteenth Century,* London: Red Globe Press, 2001, p. 99
[160] Ibid., pp. 99-100
[161] J.R. Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class, and the State,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980, p. 16
[162] L. Nead, *Myths of Sexuality: Representations of Women in Victorian Britain,* Oxford: Blackwell Pub, 1990, p. 102

> arise from poverty – want of employment – and insufficient remuneration for needle and other kinds of work in which females are employed.'[163]

It is important to highlight the fact that Tait's study was heavily influenced by class stereotypes, seeing how the doctor always described the fall of the middle-class governess as caused by the seduction and temptation by men while the damnation of the lower-class seamstress was simply triggered by their own natural corrupt morality and licentious behavior.[164] Thus, Tait's "accidental causes" can be perceived as a more objective study of the causes of prostitution, which include: seduction, inconsiderate and ill-assorted marriages, inadequate remuneration for needle and other kinds of work in which females are employed, want of employment, poverty, ignorance or defective education and religious instruction, and many others.[165] The third cause, "inadequate remuneration for needle and other works in which females are employed", is a further confirmation of the previously mentioned need for women to find a supplementary job, such as prostitution, to get paid enough to survive,

> The whole of the young women, with the exception of those who are bred for house-servants, are consequently trained up as sewers, dress-makers, milliners, bonnet-makers, stay-makers, colourers, book-stitchers, shoe-binders, hat-binders, &c. &c. The market for the employment of these different classes is thus completely overstocked, and the price of labour reduced to the lowest rate. […] The inferior workers, again, may be considered as supernumeraries, and are only occasionally occupied at their calling, the best qualified being always preferred. […] In this manner every thing appears to conspire to depress the poor; the consequence of which is, that, unless their minds are highly imbued with sound moral and religious principles, they will have recourse to some unlawful or immoral means to make up the deficiency for the supply of their wants.[166]

Tait also asserts that women who would pursue this practice could never return to a life of pureness and conventionality. Despite the miserable life these women were enrolling for, it was impossible for these poor seamstresses to survive on a few shillings.[167] The following cause,

[163] Ibid., p. 102
[164] Ibid., p. 103
[165] Walkowitz, *op. cit.,* p. 38
[166] W. Tait, *Magdalenism; an Inquiry Into the Extent, Causes, and Consequences, of Prostitution in Edinburgh,* Edinburgh: P. Rickard, 1840, pp. 107-9
[167] Ibid., p. 109

"want of employment" is just as pressing for women of that time and is linked to the previous reason: apart from the already mentioned surplus of girls working as sewers and other similar common jobs, many families decided to not teach their daughters these menial works thus leaving them in ignorance.[168] Tait also adds that these girls can only survive because of marriage, but it is clear that,

> […] they must make very inactive and unprofitable wives to those who are foolish enough to connect themselves with them. The utmost misery generally attends them through life: the wages of their husbands are recklessly spent without benefiting their families; and the want of comfort at home soon drives him to seek it elsewhere, and not unfrequently makes him desert his wife and family altogether. However this may be, it very often happens that such handless and mismanaging women are in the end led to embrace a life of prostitution. It is almost impossible that a woman can be both idle and virtuous; and when she is trained to idleness, she is, for the most part, at the same time initiating herself in vice.[169]

To this category also belong widows and orphans that are clearly not able to sustain themselves. Widows that lived in the countryside could usually work in the fields, but it was impossible for city widows to find such sustenance even with the help of charity and other avaricious funds.[170] Thus, many must resort to prostitution in order to procure food for their children since the only other solution would be suicide. It is also important to emphasise the fact that society thought it more crucial for mothers to take care of their children and impart to the younglings the morality of the time, showing that

> […] the want of parental, and especially maternal, vigilance and care, is one of the greatest misfortunes that befall young persons, and is also a common cause of prostitution. Let the children be left alone to the guidance of their own inclination, and they will soon prefer the path that leadeth to destruction. The natural disposition of every human being is to do evil; and it requires the utmost care and circumspection on the part of those who are actuated by a different spirit to counteract such a tendency.[171]

[168] Ibid., p. 110-1
[169] Ibid., p. 111
[170] Ibid., p. 112
[171] Ibid., p. 115

Another reason from the list mentioned above is "poverty", despite the meaning of the word being ambiguous, it is still clear that many women were once again obliged to sell their bodies to outlive their conditions. Mothers are not the only ones who became prostitutes, but daughters, aunts, sisters, and others as well.[172] The last cause that will be taken into consideration is named "ignorance, or defective education and religious instruction", since it was also common for illiterate and uneducated parents to bequeath the same way of living to their children which would in turn follow their untrained instincts and licentiousness.[173]

> Without the counteracting influence of religious instruction, young people follow the bias of their natural inclination, and are prone to indulge their animal propensities. Ignorant of the fearful consequences of sensual indulgence, they throw aside the fetters of restraint, and readily embrace every course of wickedness – the young men live openly with harlots in the houses of their fathers, and the young women pursue a life of prostitution with the knowledge and consent of their parents. The effects of ignorance and irreligion are manifested in every part of the conduct of such individuals. They lie, steal, swear, and commit every sort of iniquity in the presence of those who gave them existence, without feeling in the least ashamed, or ever receiving an angry look or a word of rebuke.[174]

Finally, Tait condemns the male gender but still using a misogynistic approach:

> The male sex are in most instances more deserving of blame than the poor females themselves. Nothing is more disgraceful to the honour or character of any person having the least pretensions to knowledge and morality, than to be daily exercising his mental powers and ingenuity to discover the best means of seducing some young and unsuspecting female. A moment's gratification of his ungovernable lusts may to him be an object of little importance; but let him reflect on the consequences that may befall his partner in guilt. Men are, in general, possessed of greater mental power and activity than females; but that is an excellent reason why they ought to extend towards the latter that sympathy and protection to which they are entitled in virtue of their weak and unprotected condition.[175]

This shows that the phenomenon of prostitution was increasingly developing during the Victorian period, and this structure started to undermine society's foundations like class's morals, rank but

[172] Ibid., p. 119-121
[173] Ibid., p. 124-25
[174] Ibid., p. 126
[175] Ibid., p. 152

especially the health care service.[176] Nead describes two different but not conflicting types of prostitutes, which prove the divergent perceptions of the Victorian era in regards of this figure:

> The first representation defined the prostitute as a figure of contagion, disease and death; a sign of social disorder and ruin to be feared and controlled. This construction shifted the focus away from the question of the effects of prostitution on the woman herself and emphasized its effects on respectable society; the prostitute stood as a symbol of the dangerous forces which could bring about anarchy and social disintegration. The second representation displaced these connotations of power and destruction and defined the prostitute as a suffering tragic figure – the passive victim of a cruel and relentless society. A hopeless outcast, the prostitute was believed to follow a steady, downward progress ending in a premature and tragic death.[177]

Both representations delineated this individual as an aberration and dangerous to the carefully constructed society led by the upper classes, evaluating this way of living and demeanour as abnormal.[178] Nead furthermore claims that prostitution was seen as a public hazard in terms of

> […] the visibility of the vice, its association with the city and its magnitude. Anxieties concerning prostitution were organized around its *public* forms. Although the existence of clandestine forms of prostitution was acknowledged they were not identified as a social threat. It was prostitution in public areas, in the streets, which was identified as a threat to property and decency and which was the focus of official concern. […] The fear was not only of the prostitutes themselves but of the mixing of respectable and non-respectable classes and the ensuing breakdown of the carefully-constructed boundaries between the pure and the fallen.[179]

2.2 The Contagious Diseases Act

Because of this fear, the Parliament of England adopted a resolution to minimise the dangers of prostitution and especially the spread of sexually transmitted diseases among the masses in barracks and city ports. The Contagious Diseases Act was first passed in 1864 and it enabled the police to stop and conduct a rather invasive and humiliating medical check-up on the alleged prostitutes, if said woman was found to be infected then she would be confined in a hospital for a long period of time.[180] This Act was then lengthened and modified first in 1866 and then in 1869,

[176] Nead, *op. cit*., p. 105
[177] Ibid., p. 106
[178] Ibid., p. 106
[179] Ibid., pp. 114-5
[180] Walkowitz, *op. cit.,* pp. 1-2

it was still a highly dehumanising operation conducted against prostitutes since these women were the only individuals who were forced to be subjected to the examination while the male customers, especially the soldiers, were not. In fact,

> […] regulationists reinforced a double standard of sexual morality, which justified male sexual access to a class of "fallen" women and penalized women for engaging in the same vice as men. Indeed, an earlier attempt to institute periodic examination among soldiers had failed because enlisted men violently objected and officers feared that compulsory examination would lead to the demoralization of their men. It was contended that such objections could not apply to prostitutes, who were presumably bereft of "self-respect" and more powerless to protest this intrusion. […] Through the control of sexuality, the acts reinforced existing patterns of class and gender domination.[181]

In fact, many feminists of the time, such as Florence Nightingale, tried to oppose this legislation but the government still undauntedly passed the three Acts.[182] Therefore, the famous feminist and social reformer Josephine Butler formed an opposition in alliance with other feminists and other nonconformists to repeal these degrading Acts in the 1870s.[183] Thanks to the opposition, the Acts were successfully repealed after a few years and Butler retaliated against politicians and others, like the jurist Frederic Harrison, who advocated for a counterfeit and engendered humanism that only harmed women.[184]

2.3 The Great Social Evil

Before the first Contagious Diseases Act was passed, a mysterious letter was printed in the famous London Times magazine in 1858. This letter was signed with the name "Another Unfortunate" and, from the contents of the missive, the author seemed to be a prostitute who wanted to both illustrate her story into prostitution but also reprimand society for its fault in her fall from grace.[185] The author of the letter started by admitting the fact that she was not educated and especially that her working class parents were not the best role models in her life, thus letting the reader know

[181] Ibid., pp. 3-4
[182] Ibid., p. 1
[183] Ibid., p. 1
[184] Burstyn, *op.cit.*, p. 129
[185] Greenblatt & al., *op. cit.,* p. 1620

her unfavourable situation.[186] The most important fact is that, because of the insufficient education on good morality of the era, the girl followed her baser instincts and lost her virginity when she was young.[187] The author then goes on berating society,

> Now, what if I am a prostitute, what business has society to abuse me? Have I received any favours at the hands of society? If I am a hideous cancer in society, are not the causes of the disease to be sought in the rottenness of the carcass? […] what has society ever done for me, that I should do anything for it, and what have I ever done against society that it should drive me into a corner and crush me to earth? I have neither stolen (at least not since I was a child), nor murdered, nor defrauded. I earn my money and pay my way, and try to do good with it, according to my ideas of good.[188]

The author becomes the prostitutes' spokesperson and tries to especially emphasize how society has been mistreating these women and vilified this occupation, attempting to eliminate the problem while avoiding acknowledging the primary causes,

> I speak for others as well as for myself, for the very great majority, nearly all of the real undisguised prostitutes in London, spring from my class, and are made by and under pretty much such conditions of life as I have narrated, and particularly by untutored and unrestrained intercourse of the sexes in early life. We come from the dregs of society, as our so-called betters term it. What business has society to have dregs – such dregs are we? You railers of the Society for the Suppression of Vice, you the pious, the moral, the respectable, as you call yourselves, who stand on your smooth and pleasant side of the great gulf you have dug and keep between yourselves and the dregs, why don't you bridge it over, or fill it up, and by some humane and generous process absorb us into your leavened mass, until we become interpenetrated with goodness like yourselves? Why stand on your eminence shouting that we should be ashamed of ourselves? What have we to be ashamed of, we who do not know what shame is—the shame you mean? I conduct myself prudently, and defy you and your policemen too. Why stand you there mouthing with sleek face about morality? What is morality? Will you make us responsible for what we never knew? Teach us what is right and tutor us in good before you punish us for doing wrong. We who are the real prostitutes of the true natural growth of society, […][189]

The narrator continues to criticize the system but also gives a final advice to the readers of the *Time,* in order to stop the unnecessary cruelty they were subjected to,

> Would it not be truer and more charitable to call these poor souls "victims?"—some gentler, some more humane name than prostitute—to soften by some Christian expression, if you

[186] Ibid., p. 1620
[187] Ibid., p. 1621
[188] Ibid., p. 1622
[189] Ibid., p. 1622-3

> cannot better the unchristian system, the opprobrium of a fate to which society has itself driven them by the direst straits? What business has society to point its finger in scorn, and to raise its voice in reprobation of them? Are they not its children, born of its cold indifference, of its callous selfishness, of its cruel pride? […] The difficulty of dealing with the evil is not so great as society considers it. Setting aside "the sin," we are not so bad as we are thought to be. The difficulty is for society to set itself, with the necessary earnestness, self-humiliation, and self-denial to the work. But of this hereafter. To deprive us of proper and harmless amusements, to subject us in mass to the pressure of force—of force wielded, for the most part, by ignorant, and often by brutal men—is only to add the cruelty of active persecution to the cruelty of the passive indifference which made us as we are.[190]

Despite this letter and other works that strove to change the opinion of society on the matter of prostitution and its causes, the common belief was still heavily based on William Acton's idea in his book *Prostitution*: prostitution could never be fully eradicated, but the situation had to be ameliorated somehow, even with barbarous methods.[191] Prostitution was also seen as a necessary evil by other intellectuals, since prostitutes were essential to abate male sexuality for the married couple:

> […] responsibility was placed on *both* the husband *and* the wife to keep out any threatening or disruptive elements and to maintain domestic security; […] But in spite of this sense of shared accountability, marital infidelity was defined and regulated differently for men and for women. Broadly speaking, for a man unchastity was defined as the indulgence of natural urges and sexual lapses were regarded as regrettable but unavoidable; for a woman, however, it was the betrayal of her father, her husband, her home and her family. […] Many Victorians argued that it was the prostitute who kept middle-class women pure by satisfying the excessive sexual needs of men. […] male passion is unavoidable; these passions have to be satisfied outside of the middle classes and the prostitute is thus constituted as guardian of both the middle-class woman and the middle-class home.[192]

In the nineteenth century, many writers started to develop an interest in the figure of the prostitute. Despite this new fascination, these characters are often only marginal in these literary works and usually narrated from a male perspective. The other important element to highlight is that the women who are represented in these written works are fallen women instead of prostitutes, which are often erroneously misconstrued to share the same definition[193]:

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[190] Ibid., pp. 1623-4
[191] W. Acton, *Prostitution,* ed. Peter Fryer, London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1968, pp. 163-5
[192] Nead, *op. cit.,* pp. 49-51
[193] C. Sutphin, "Human Tigresses, Fractious Angels, and Nursery Saints: Augusta Webster's 'A Castaway' and Victorian Discourses on Prostitution and Women's Sexuality." *Victorian Poetry,* vol. 38, no. 4, 2000, p. 512

> The term 'prostitute' connoted a public practice, the regular exchange of sex for money. The combined associations of cash and the public sphere rendered the prostitute powerful and independent […]. Distinct from the respectable classes, she belonged to the 'residuum', that displaced and disinterested mass at the very bottom of the social hierarchy. The term 'fallen woman' activated significantly different associations. To begin with, of 'fall' implied that she *had been* respectable but had dropped out of respectable society. […] A woman's 'fall' from virtue was frequently attributed to seduction and betrayal which set the scene for her representation as victim.[194]

A few examples of the "fallen woman" being more prevalent than the prostitute in novels and other compositions are Esther in the novel *Mary Barton* (1848) by Elizabeth Gaskell, Tess in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891) by Thomas Hardy, but also Marian in *Aurora Leigh* by Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1856).[195] In poems, protagonists who are prostitutes are also very uncommon but two of the most famous examples are the poem *Jenny* (1858-59) by Dante Gabriel Rossetti and *A Castaway* (1870) by Augusta Webster.[196]

2.4 Augusta Webster

Despite being a remarkable writer who was esteemed in the Victorian era, Webster did not leave many biographical sources but only several letters written to Oliver Wendell Holmes.[197] Augusta was the daughter of Vice-Admiral George Davies and his wife Julia Hume Davies, she was born in Poole, Dorset, in 1837 and allegedly had a brother.[198] Augusta spent her childhood offshore on the Vice Admiral's ship named *Griper* until her 14th birthday when, after moving to different cities, the whole family finally settled in Cambridge where George Davis was appointed as chief constable and Augusta attended the Cambridge School of Art.[199] After a fleeting journey to both Paris and Geneva, Augusta started learning a number of languages fluently including Greek, since she had to help her brother learn it, then French, Spanish and also Italian.[200] Augusta started to

[194] Nead, *op. cit*., p. 95
[195] Sutphin, *op. cit.,* pp. 512-13
[196] Ibid., p. 513-14
[197] A. Webster, *Portraits and Other Poems,* ed. Christine Sutphin, Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2000, p. 9
[198] Ibid., p. 10
[199] Ibid., p. 10
[200] S. Lee, *Dictionary of National Biography, vol. LX,* London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1899, p. 115

publish books with the pseudonym Cecil Home, the first book was published in 1860 with the title *Blanche Lisle, and Other Poems* and then in 1864 the poem *Lilian Gray* and her only novel in three volumes entitled *Lesley's Guardians.*[201] Augusta then married a co-worker, a Cambridge teacher named Thomas Webster, and they had a daughter presumably named Margaret, from the different letters Augusta had sent to her friends.[202] After 1970, the Webster family moved to London where Augusta could engage in literary circles and better her literary career. In fact, Augusta started to be more involved in both social and political activism and in these years, she also started to publish literary works with her name as the author.[203] From 1866, Webster released a few Greek translations, such as *The Prometheus Bound* of Aeschylus and the *Medea* by Euripides despite not being a Greek student.[204] In 1866 and 1870 Webster published two collections of dramatic monologues, the first titled *Dramatic Studies* and the second, which was the most outstanding of her works, entitled *Portraits.* One of the most famous dramatic monologues of the latter is the previously mentioned *A Castaway*, which was recognized by the poet Robert Browning and is often compared and studied with the poem *Jenny* by Dante Gabriel Rossetti.[205] In London, Webster resumed the acquaintanceship with the renown literary critic Theodore Watts-Dunton, the two writers had met thanks to Thomas Webster's job back in Cambridge as a partner of a solicitors firm.[206] Webster, in 1884, had started writing anonymously for the *Athenaeum* as a poetry critic and columnist and, as Hake and Compton-Rickett have affirmed,

> Watts-Dunton showed himself the "nurse of genius" in her case with unremitting zeal; for he felt an exceptional desire to do the utmost in his power to aid her in gaining recognition among the writers of her time. He attended her receptions with great regularity, and from time to time he expressed his genuine esteem of her work in the *Athenaeum.* Between the years 1881 and 1888 he seldom failed to review in that journal the various books of poems that she published. Watts-Dunton has described her as "one of the noble band, represented by George

[201] Webster, *op. cit.,* p. 10
[202] Ibid., p. 10
[203] Ibid., pp. 10-11
[204] Lee, *op. cit.,* p. 115
[205] Ibid., p. 115
[206] T. Hake and A. Compton-Rickett, *The life and letters of Theodore Watts-Dunton Volume II*, Edinburgh: T. C. & E. C. Jack, 1917, pp. 16-17

> Eliot and Miss Cobbe among others, who, in virtue of lofty purpose, purity of soul, and deep sympathy with suffering humanity, bend their genius, like the rainbow, as a covenant of love over all flesh that is upon the earth."[207]

Webster had also published some essays for the weekly paper the *Examiner*, which were later gathered in a single publication called *A Housewife's Opinions* (1878) and dealt with various social themes such as women's education and vote, marriage and many others.[208] This only reinforces the fact that Webster was an active advocate for women's rights during her time, not only through the disputatious essays but also through her poetry as well.[209] Other literary works from Webster that are worthy of attention are the long narrative poem titled *Yu-Pe-Ya's Lute: A Chinese tale in English Verse* (1874), which discusses camaraderie between two friends belonging to opposite classes in Chinese context, and *Selections from the Verse of Augusta Webster* (1893), which is a collection of the writer's best works published a year before her death on September 1894.[210]

2.5 The Dramatic Monologue

Webster wrote two collections of dramatic monologues, *Dramatic Studies* and *Portraits,* but many critics and researchers have claimed that it would be incorrect to call all of the poems so.[211] In fact,

> Dramatic monologues are spoken by a persona in a particular situation to a listener who remains silent or whose reactions and speeches can be inferred from what the speaker says. Since Webster's dramatic poems often do not include a listener, they could perhaps be classified as interior monologues. However, the speakers do seem to be speaking aloud, as if to an audience.[212]

[207] Ibid., p. 17-18
[208] M. Demoor, "Power in Petticoats: Augusta Webster's Poetry, Political Pamphlets, and Poetry Reviews", BELL. BELGIAN ESSAYS ON LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE, 1997, p. 137
[209] Ibid., p. 137-8
[210] Webster, *op. cit.*, pp. 14-15
[211] Ibid., p. 15
[212] Ibid., p. 15

The dramatic monologue represents a cultural criticism which helps the speaker share different thoughts relating to the situation the speaker is living.[213] As M. H. Abrams claimed, the dramatic monologue had to have these three characteristics:

1. A single person, who is patently *not* the poet, utters the entire poem in a specific situation at a critical moment […]
2. This person addresses and interacts with one or more other people; but we know of the auditors' presence and what they say and do only from clues in the discourse of the single speaker.
3. The principle controlling the poet's selection and organization of what the lyric speaker says is the speaker's unintentional revelation of his or her temperament and character.[214]

This genre was mainly used and created by male poets, such as Robert Browning and Alfred Tennyson, but women poets also commenced using this literary form following the broadening of the canon.[215] Despite this, Dorothy Mermim asserted that

> Where men's poems have two sharply differentiated figures – in dramatic monologues, the poet and the dramatized speaker – in women's poems the two blur together […] the women's dramatic monologues were expected to be, and were almost always perceived as being, univocal.[216]

Thus, confirming that the Victorian female poets had a different poetic canon than the common and prevailing one, following the fact that the dominant poetical culture was still ruled by the male poets of the time.[217] This also shows that there was a female tradition that was emerging alongside the main canon, one which would defeat any stereotype regarding Victorian poetry and the dramatic monologue especially.[218] This can be seen in the dramatic monologues written by

[213] S. Kim, "The Dynamics of Oscillation between the Self and the Representation: The Construction of Female Subjectivity in Augusta Websters Dramatic Monologue Form*"*, 2020. Available: https://s-space.snu.ac.kr/handle/10371/168958, Accessed 2024, January.
[214] M.H. Abrams, A *Glossary of Literary terms,* 5th edition, Austin: Holt, Rinehart and Winston Inc., 1988*,* p. 46
[215] Kim, *op. cit.*, p. 85
[216] D. Mermin, "The Damsel, The Knight, and the Victorian Woman Poet"*, Critical Inquiry*, vol. 13, n. 1 (1986), 64-80, p. 76
[217] Kim, *op. cit.,* p. 85
[218] Ibid., p. 86

Augusta Webster, which many scholars cannot define as such since most of them do not adhere to the set characteristics of this genre.[219] Pertaining to Webster's peculiarity,

> Reviewers of Webster's poetry noted the influence of Tennyson and Elizabeth Barrett Browning and typically invoked Robert Browning in discussing her monologues. However, as Angela Leighton and Susan Brown point out, Browning concentrates on the individual psychology of his subjects while Webster depicts the speaker struggling with social circumstances. This is the case for both male and female personae, although their circumstances are often shown to be shaped by gender constructions. The few twentieth-century critics who have written about Webster emphasize the powerful voice many of her monologues give to women.[220]

2.6 Portraits

Portraits is one of the collections of dramatic monologues that Webster wrote and published in 1870, which consists of eleven monologues: Medea in Athens, Circe, The Happiest Girl in the World, A Castaway, A Soul in Prison, Tired, Coming Home, In an Almshouse, An Inventor, A Dilettante, The Manuscript of S. Alexius.[221] As seen from the titles of some of the monologues,

> Webster, a passionate advocate for women's education and social activist in women's suffragist movement, wrote dramatic monologues with speakers both from mythical backgrounds and contemporary Victoria society. In tellingly named *Portraits*, she portrays monologues of female speakers who are inextricably related to, and keenly engages in, the contemporary Victorian discourse on women.[222]

In fact, the first four are considered as the most important monologues and the author cleverly uses the literary strategy of using classical protagonists in order to explore themes that would be reviewed too negatively in Victorian contexts.[223] "Medea in Athens" analyses the role of women in society and their predicament, Medea shows the difficulties that women encounter because of the patriarchy and the masculine privilege.[224] Meanwhile, Circe is unabashed in asserting her concupiscence but also criticises the men that share the same feeling. Still, Webster decides to not

[219] Webster, *op. cit.,* p. 15
[220] Ibid., p. 16
[221] Ibid., p. 17
[222] Kim, *op. cit.,* p. 87
[223] Webster, *op. cit.,* p. 17
[224] Ibid., p. 17

penalize Circe's sexual freedom, despite still being regarded as a cautionary tale against trusting men's nature and especially idolising the male species too much.[225] "The Happiest Girl in The World" explores the theme of the anxiety of marriage and the Victorian gender norms, primarily focusing on the contrasting feelings the girl is feeling and what is usually expected from society.[226] The fourth monologue, "A Castaway", is the most relevant poem and has been moderately criticised by 19th century and 20th century critics.

2.7 A Castaway

"A Castaway" is the fourth dramatic monologue in the collection and it is the poem that elicited the most interest in critics. After "Jenny", "A Castaway" is the most noteworthy poem about a Victorian prostitute, especially because the speaker is the harlot herself but also for her analysis of the socio-economic factors that contribute to the formation of the prostitution market.[227] This monologue is also quite significant because it was published during the years of the Contagious Diseases Acts in the 1860s against prostitutes and its repeal movement led by Josephine Butler, highlighting Webster's constant activism in her life but also her writing.[228] In fact,

> A sharp exposer of 'misty purposelessness, whether in life or art, Webster is, even more than Barrett Browning, a determined literalist of the imagination. Her concern is not with the myth of the woman poet, but with real, live women; not with 'genius', in all its prized and paraded sensitivity, but with ordinary, unheroic men and women, whose lives are determined by the solid facts and prejudices of contemporary society.[…] An outspoken feminist and social critic, her verse finds its distance from the 'artificial melancholy' of the heart by turning altogether away from self, and dramatically adopting the voices of others.[229]

This dramatic monologue depicts a prostitute who is pondering on her life and profession, but especially condemns the Victorian women's inadequate education but also Victorian society's

[225] Ibid., p. 17
[226] Kim, *op. cit.,* pp. 90-91
[227] Webster, *op. cit.,* p. 18
[228] S. Brown, "Economical representations: Dante Gabriel Rossetti's "Jenny", Augusta Webster's "A Castaway", and the campaign against the contagious diseases acts", *Victorian Review,* vol. 17, n. 1 (1991), 78-95, p. 80
[229] A. Leighton, *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart,* Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1992, p. 164

negligence and hatred towards her profession.[230] The protagonist, Eulalie, is a middle-class woman who had to resort to prostitution in order to stop living in poverty and, while she does still decry the way society is indifferent to the problem of destitution and its condemnation of prostitution, Eulalie is still self-condemning and aware of her wrong-doings.[231] The dramatic monologue starts with Eulalie reminiscing about her untarnished past child self, when she used to write in her diary about her achievements:[232]

Poor little diary, with its simple thoughts,
Its good resolves, its "Studied French an hour."
"Read Modern History," "Trimmed up my grey hat,"
"Darned stockings," "Tatted," "Practiced my new song,"
"Went to the daily service," "Took Bess soup,"
"Went out to tea." Poor simple diary!
And did *I* write it? Was I this good girl,
This budding colourless young rose of home?

[A Castaway, lines 1-8]

The speaker seems to be unable to recognize her younger self, reading how the child was so content in simple accomplishments while the adult version of herself feels disillusioned.[233] Eulalie continues to muse on this dissociation she feels from her innocent old self:

No wishes and no cares, almost no hopes,
Only the young girl's hazed and golden dreams
That veil the Future from her.
So long since:
And now it seems a jest to talk of me
As if I could be one with her, of me
Who am… me.
And what is this? My looking-glass
Answers it passably; a woman sure,
[…]
A woman none dare call not beautiful,
Not womanly in every woman's grace.

[A Castaway, lines 21-33]

[230] Webster, *op. cit.,* p. 18
[231] Demoor, *op. cit.,* pp. 135-6
[232] Ibid., p. 136
[233] Ibid., p. 136

Webster manages to, once again, advocate for women's rights, especially girls' education in this passage, and as Brown asserts:

> In giving her voice to the prostitute's cause, Webster promotes aesthetically what she desires politically. The larger political implications of Webster's artistic practice are apparent in its similarity to the strategy of the repeal feminists who also self-consciously identified themselves with prostitutes. Webster was deeply involved in campaigns for suffrage and female education; it is thus unsurprising that the approach to prostitution in "A Castaway" should resemble that of repeal feminists.[234]

This passage is also essential to highlight that Eulalie seems to be looking at a mirror: the reflection shows herself in the past when she was still a child and innocent. There seems to be a dichotomy in the speaker's perception of herself, both in time but also in society's opinion, since child Eulalie is still blameless and naively complacent of the moral standards of the time, but adult Eulalie is not virtuous anymore and depraved.[235]

> She [Webster] uses the monologue, not to divulge the moral and emotional inconsistencies of the inner self, but to probe the borderlands between its social construction and its unknown potentiality, between its past and its present, between 'me' and 'me'. The inconsistencies are not tragic inner flaws, which therefore open up the profundities of psychology, but small, almost reductive contradictions, between the woman's desires and the world's opinions, between, as it were, the soul and the face. The mirror – that most female of Victorian images – gives Webster a figure for the social and ideological, frames which trap women in conventional, incompatible pictures, but from which she also refuses to offer any introspective escape. The identities of her speakers 'surface' in their interpreted, external appearances; the 'woman sure' is reflected in 'the pools' of men's imaginations, although the gap between them also remains visible. The self is thus presented as essentially a creature mirrored in the looking-glass of society, and Webster's poems do not try to break that glass; they only set it at different angles.[236]

Eulalie then continues describing her situation, how despite being a prostitute, "this beauty, my own curse at once and tool/ to snare men's souls, (I know what the good say/Of beauty in such creatures) is it not this/ That makes me feel myself a woman still," (lines 40-43).[237] Eulalie also continues defending her occupation, even if she is an affluent prostitute and does not wander the

[234] Brown, *op. cit.,* p. 90
[235] Leighton, *op. cit.,* pp. 200-1
[236] Ibid., p. 186
[237] Webster, *op. cit.,* p. 194

streets like her other colleagues, she still feels a kinship with any other lower-class prostitute.[238] Eulalie proceeds to first accuse other respected male jobs, which might seem more honourable than prostitution but they are actually not:[239]

Our lawyers, who with noble eloquence
And virtuous outbursts lie to hang a man,
Or lie to save him, which way goes the fee:
Our preachers, gloating on your future hell
For not believing what they doubt themselves:
Our doctors, who sort poisons out by chance
And wonder how they'll answer, and grow rich:
Our journalists, whose business is to fib
And juggle truths and falsehoods to and fro:
Our tradesmen, who must keep unspotted names
And cheat the least like stealing that they can:

[*A Castaway,* lines 81-91]

Then surprisingly Eulalie does not spare her reticent married clients, but also their wives, who have to accepts their partners' infidelity:[240]

Our – all of them, the virtuous worthy men
Who feed on the world's follies, vices, wants,
And do their businesses of lies and shams
Honestly, reputably, while the world
Claps hands and cries "good luck", which of their trades,
Their honourable trades, barefaced like mine,
All secrets brazened out, would shew more white?

And whom do I hurt more than they? As much?
The wives? Poor fools, what do I take from them
Worth crying for or keeping? If they knew
What their fine husbands look like seen by eyes
That may perceive there are more men than one!
But, if they can, let them just take the pains
To keep them: 'tis not such a mighty task
To pin an idiot to your apron-string;
And wives have an advantage over us,
(The good and blind ones have) the smile or pout
Leaves them no secret nausea at odd times.
Oh, they could keep their husbands if they cared,

[238] Ibid., p. 195
[239] Ibid., p. 195
[240] Leighton, *op. cit.,* p. 197

But ‘tis an easier life to let them go,
And whimper at it for morality.

[A Castaway, lines 92-112]

Eulalie confidently and brazenly shows the reality behind the moral façade that the men wanted to keep secret and, doing this, Webster distances herself from the literary legacy:[241]

> Most of the fallen women in Victorian literature are only variations of the real theme. Seduced, raped, betrayed or fickle, they tend to be either innocent girls led astray or sensational adulteresses. Their actions thus remained connected, however negatively, to romance and love. By contrast, Webster writes about the professional. The Castaway’s lovers are not the heroes of literary romance, dark seducers or reckless rakes, but, quite simply, other women’s husbands for whom the illicit is routine. Meanwhile, her sheer, straight-talking intelligence is a welcome change from the ostentatiously fastidious manner in which the subject was often treated.[242]

Eulalie mutinously still affirms that the wives actually begrudge the prostitutes, experiencing a sexual frustration that is dictated by the moral standards of the time.[243] The speaker does not stop defending her profession in the following lines, thus admitting that she could never seek refuge in the Magdalen Hospitals since she would not be able to have the same type of wage, Eulalie did try but the experience made her contemplate suicide.[244] These establishments were quite common in Victorian England even before the Contagious Diseases Acts,

> The Magdalen Hospitals – specialized institutions for the treatment and reclamation of prostitutes – maintained special wards for women who had entered into public prostitution but had been seduced by false promises of marriage and deserted. In this way, the common prostitute was segregated from other forms of female deviancy, […].[245]

Eulalie also shows her hatred for men, asserting vehemently the fact that she could have not chosen another occupation even if she wanted to:[246]

[…] Choice! What choice
Of living well or ill? Could I have that?
And who would give it me? I think indeed
If some kind hand, a woman’s – I hate men –

[241] Ibid., p. 197
[242] Ibid., p. 197
[243] Ibid., p. 198
[244] Webster, p. 200-1
[245] Nead, *op. cit.,* p. 96
[246] Webster, *op. cit.,* p. 201

Had stretched itself to help me to firm ground,
Taken a change and risked my falling back,
I could have gone my way not falling back:
But, let her be all brave, all charitable,
How could she do it?
[…]
But where's the work? More sempstresses than shirts;
And defter hands at white work than are mine
Drop starved at last: dressmakers, milliners,
Too many too they say; […]
What would they do with us? What could they do?
Just think! With were't but half of us on hand
To find work for … or husbands. Would they try
To ship us to the colonies for wives?
[A Castaway, lines 255-263, 266-269, 285-288]

Webster here reinforces the idea that prostitution was not caused by a deliberate and ethical choice, but a decision that was forced by gendered handicaps such as a surplus of women looking for jobs, severe poverty but also inadequate education; this means that the only market that can erase the imbalance of supply and demand is the one presented by prostitution.[247] Eulalie also condemns two men in her life: first an ex-lover who left her with a unborn baby but also her brother, who had coldly discarder her after she became a prostitute, without keeping in mind the hardships she had to endure because of the preferential treatment towards boys.[248]

Yet the baby thing that woke
And wailed an hour or two, and then was dead,
Was mine, […]
His father would not then have let me go:
[…]
None but him
To claim a bit of bread of if I went,
Child or no child: would he have given it me?
He! No; he had not done with me. No help,
No help, no help. […]
Only, I think my brother – I forgot;
He stopped his brotherhood some years ago –
But if he had been just so much less good
As to remember mercy.
[…]

[247] Leighton, *op. cit.,* pp. 198-9
[248] Demoor, *op. cit.,* p. 136

Teaching myself out of my borrowed books,
While he for some one pastime […]
Spent in a month what could have given me
My teachers for a year.
[A Castaway, lines 423-5, 433, 435-39, 481-84, 499-503]

Eulalie bitterly mentions her brother, who will thrive and have a very different life from that of prostitution like his sister.[249] Despite attacking different people and institutions for her sorrowful fate, Eulalie still maintains a certain self-awareness and the prostitute feels remorse about her past.[250]

Oh, I blame no one – scarcely even myself.
It was to be: the very good in me
Has always turned to hurt; all I thought right
At the hot moment, judged of afterwards,
Shows reckless.
[A Castaway, lines 573-577]

At the end of the dramatic monologue, Eulalie addresses another person directly and for the first time. This friend or acquaintance entered her chambers and saves her from her lonely ranting:[251]

Oh, is it you?
Most welcome, dear: one gets so moped alone.
[A Castaway, lines 629-30]

A Castaway is thus, as described by different critics, a very incisive attack against gendered unfairness that bolstered prostitution.[252] Sutphin continues affirming that,

> It is also an indictment of a powerful male-dominated ideology that saw prostitution as analogous to sewers: necessary (because men had to work off their excess sexual energy) but dangerous if uncontrolled. […] *A Castaway* is particularly threatening to Victorian middle-class constructions of prostitutes, not only because it blurs distinctions between middle and lower-class women and between "good" and "bad" women, but because it calls into question even progressive attempts to resolve problems associated with prostitution, particularly the rhetoric of sisterhood and redemption through maternity created by sympathetic women reformers and writers.[253]

[249] Ibid., p. 136
[250] Ibid., p. 135
[251] Leighton, *op. cit.,* p. 201
[252] Sutphin, *op. cit.,* p. 516
[253] Ibid., p. 515-6

This dramatic monologue furthermore distances itself from other poems about prostitution, such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* and Elizabeth Gaskell's *Ruth*.[254] Eulalie, differently from Marian and Ruth, is not a minor character but the narrator and she was not raped or seduced by men before becoming a prostitute.[255] Moreover, Eulalie does not belong to the working class but she is a middle-class girl, which Webster deliberately chose to denounce once more the inadequacy of middle class women's education.[256] An additional difference between Eulalie, Marian and Ruth is that:

> In her decision not to use motherhood as a redeeming strategy Webster departs from both the literary works and the social activism of her female contemporaries. Both Elizabeth Gaskell's *Ruth* (1853) and Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* (1856) present sympathetic pictures of "fallen women," and each uses motherhood to "save" her heroine. […] Liberal women reformers also used the ideology of motherhood in their efforts to reform prostitutes. Even reformers who believed that the causes of prostitution were primarily economic and who fought for women's education and employment subscribed to ideologies of women's mission and the sanctity of the home. […] That motherhood is inadequate as a solution to any of the problems the poem raises is perhaps Webster's most perceptive departure from even the more enlightened discourses of her contemporaries.[257]

Accordingly, Webster puts Eulalie at the center of the dramatic monologue, allowing the prostitute to be straightforward with her opinions and evaluate her choices and past.[258] As above, the last lines are the only time Eulalie directly speaks to another person and this shows Webster's way of not being completely coherent with the characteristics of the traditional dramatic monologue.[259]

> When Webster chose a prostitute persona and went beyond the "take warning by my fall" narrative, she created a teacher of an unusual kind. For some readers, such as the *Nonconformist* reviewer, Eulalie did not fit within constructions of women as pure, or fallen but repentant, or irretrievably fallen, and so she must be dismissed as unconvincing. But the construction of the fallen woman offered by the reviewer is no less a construction than the one offered by the monologue. The monologue's construction is more convincing to those readers, both nineteenth- and twentieth-century, willing to believe that a "castaway," an outsider, could reflect on both individual responsibility and on the society that both ostracizes

[254] Ibid., p. 522
[255] Ibid., p. 523
[256] Webster, *op. cit.,* p. 18
[257] Ibid., p. 19-20
[258] Ibid., p. 20
[259] Sutphin, *op. cit.,* p. 527

> and depends on her. Powerfully, ironically, equivocally, Eulalie 's monologue does teach, not only about the laissez-faire attitude that made women into sexual commodities, but about spurious constructions of female sexuality and morality: "human tigresses," "fractious angels," and that most cherished icon of middle-class Victorians, in all her sexual ambiguity, the "nursery saint."[260]

3. Marriage

Following women's rights for equal education and job opportunities, feminists of the nineteenth century's main apprehension was to advocate for different reforms of marriage laws.[261] The main themes of these reforms concerned divorce, married women's property, and the lawful custody of children by the mother.[262] Feminists of the time were prepared to dismantle the institution of marriage as it was known in the Victorian era, especially to prove the suffocating and restrictive effects these types of marriage and domesticity had on women.[263] In order to do so, it is important to reiterate how important the home is for the Victorian family but especially the husband, who considered this place as sacred and most importantly a sanctuary away from the chaotic public life the stress of the workplace.[264] As said above,

> Everyone in the Victorian family was thought to have his or her special place in the family circle as well as in the larger society. Husband and wife occupied "separate spheres," and each had distinct, but complementary, functions to perform. In addition to bearing children, middle-class women directed, and working-class women performed, the work involved in maintaining the household—care of children, sewing, cooking, and cleaning. Men earned the money to purchase the goods needed by their households and debated and decided matters of public concern. Women sustained the families, which produced healthy and loyal citizens; men took care of the business of the state (including fighting its wars), which protected the families within its borders.[265]

This division of spheres was further reinforced because of the advancement of industrial capitalism on the Victorian society, putting more pressure on women and domesticity since

[260] Ibid., p. 527
[261] M. Lyndon Shanley, *Feminism, Marriage, and the Law in Victorian England, 1850-1895*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989, p. 3
[262] Ibid, p. 3
[263] Ibid., p. 4
[264] Ibid., p. 4
[265] Ibid., p. 5-6

married women could not obtain the best remunerative jobs as the men did.[266] Victorian feminists, after witnessing this downward spiral, determined it necessary to intervene and change the laws of marriage.[267] In the second part of the nineteenth century,

> […] the feminists insisted that such happiness was fragile and vulnerable, existing as it did despite the legal rules that gave any husband who cared to invoke them virtually despotic powers over his wife. Feminists pointed out that marriage law was based on the premise that a wife owed obedience to her husband, and where she did not voluntarily follow his will the law would leave her no other option. Against Ruskin's idealization of the home as a place of light and love, "a sacred place, a vestal temple, a temple of the hearth watched over by Household Gods," feminists insisted with John Stuart Mill that despite all the supposed advances of Christian civilization "the wife is the actual bond-servant of her husband: no less so, as far as legal obligation goes, than slaves commonly so-called." For feminists, one of the most striking manifestations of this marital "slavery" was the fact that under the common law a wife was in many ways regarded as the property of her husband.[268]

Because of this idealization, the legal practice of "coverture" became widespread in England, which meant that the husband absorbed the legal persona of the wife into his own, thus making the wife surrender all her legal rights and independence.[269] This meant that the woman's property was legally transferred to the husband once married, as well as any money that the wife owned before and the husband was also legally allowed to discipline his wife as he preferred.[270] Because of this, it was almost impossible for women to end their marriages before 1857 and thus,

> Social and economic pressures as well as the law made it very difficult for Victorian women to leave their husbands or to choose a single life in the first place. The pressures on women to marry were enormous in nineteenth-century England, and in 1871 nearly 90 percent of English women between the ages of forty-five and forty-nine were or had been married. The plight of a woman who did not marry, who in the parlance of the age was "left on the shelf," could be economically as well as socially disastrous. The average wage that working-class women could command was below subsistence level. Occupations for middle-class women, primarily those of governess, teacher, shop assistant, nurse, office clerk, and civil servant, were few and poorly paid. A few fortunate middle-class women might be supported by a father, brother, or other relative, but for most middle-class as well as working-class women marriage was an economic necessity. Legal rules, social practices, and economic structures all worked together to induce a woman to marry, and then insured that once married she would be dependent upon and obedient to her husband.[271]

[266] Ibid., 6-7
[267] Ibid., p. 7
[268] Ibid., p. 8
[269] Ibid., p. 8
[270] Ibid., p. 8-9
[271] Ibid., p. 9-10

This meant that marriage laws breached the legal freedom of women, counteracting and negating the idea of equality and personal independence that was promoted by liberalism and thinkers such as John Locke and John Stuart Mill.[272] In fact, following this practice, married women and children had the same legal rights,[273]

> That liberal theory in the nineteenth century was blind to this point was due to its assumption, as old as liberalism itself, that family relationships lay outside the general principle that all legitimate authority must be based upon consent. The authority of parent over child was dictated by the facts of birth and by the child's inability to live without the care and nurture of an adult. The "natural" subordination of a wife to her husband seemed no more problematic to most liberal theorists than that of offspring to parents. […] On the one hand, Locke said, marriage did not require absolute sovereignty of husband over wife, because "the ends of Matrimony requiring no such Power in the Husband, the Condition of Conjugal Society put it not in him, it being not at all necessary to that State." On the other hand, marriage could not be an egalitarian relationship, because if husband and wife disagreed, their dispute could not be settled by majority rule. But "the last Determination, i.e., the Rule," must be placed somewhere, or disputes will be endless, and such rule "naturally falls to the Man's share, as the abler and the stronger." Natural strength, rather than rational agreement, allocated domestic authority.[274]

Feminists were intent on challenging this continuous female disfranchisement, proposing law reforms that would eventually transform the power balance between wife and husband.[275] These legal alterations were vital premises for women's emancipation which would only be possible in the 20th and 21st century.[276] The most important reforms of the time were: the Divorce Act of 1857, the Married Women's Property Act of 1870 and 1882 and finally the Infant Custody Acts of 1873 and 1886.[277] Since women were not allowed to vote nor be represented in Parliament,

> […] feminists were correct in asserting that men were reluctant to relinquish domestic as well as political authority: any marriage law reform bill that proposed to "introduce into every house in England the principle of separate rights, separate interests, and a separate legal existence between man and wife" threatened, in Mr. Chambers's words, "to nullify and destroy the law of marriage altogether." […] making husband and wife equal before the law could profoundly alter the structure and conduct of familial and political life alike. Parliament had no interest in encouraging such a revolution. Parliament did *enlarge* the rights of married

[272] Ibid., p. 10
[273] Ibid., p. 11
[274] Ibid., p. 10
[275] Ibid., p. 11-14
[276] Ibid., p. 14
[277] Ibid., p. 14

> women significantly in the course of the nineteenth century, but it repeatedly rejected the invitation held out by feminists to *equalize* the rights and obligations of husbands and wives. Parliament's persistent rejection of the feminists' most fundamental tenet lent substance to the latter group's charge that men constituted a "sex class," as jealous of their power and privilege as any economic class.[278]

Feminists adhered to different beliefs as well, for example Caroline Norton and Eliza Lynn Linton were quite conservative in their feminism since they accepted the fact that women were inferior to men, Frances Power Cobbe shared some of the patriarchal beliefs as well since she believed that women's nature was instinctively maternal but still strongly supported the feminist fight for equality and freedom.[279] The most famous and important married couple that advocated for women's rights in the nineteenth century were John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor, who wrote *On the Subjection of Women* (1869) and *The Enfranchisement of Women* (1851) in which they both expressed their solidarity towards the women's rights.[280]

3.1 The Divorce Act (1857)

> Divorce as a civil procedure to cope with the failure of marriage did not exist in England prior to 1857. The Matrimonial Causes Act passed into law that year created a court with the power to dissolve marriages under certain carefully defined circumstances. Before that ecclesiastical courts had the sole jurisdiction over marital disputes. Under the canon law used by these courts a couple might obtain an annulment, in which case they could remarry, or a separation, in which case they could not.[281]

The only condition to which the court granted divorce was if the wife committed adultery, since the wife was only allowed to obtain a divorce if the husband, in addition to adultery, also committed other crimes such as being physically abusive, committing incestuous or bestial acts.[282] Against this unfairness, Caroline Norton had written *A Letter to the Queen on Lord Chancellor Cranworth's Marriage and Divorce Bill* in 1855 to denounce this unjust treatment

[278] Ibid., p. 15-17
[279] Ibid., p. 18
[280] Ibid., p. 18
[281] G.L. Savage, "The Operation of the 1857 Divorce Act, 1860-1910, a Research Note", *Journal of Social History,* vol. 16, n. 4 (summer 1983), 103-110, p. 103
[282] Shanley, *op. cit.,* p. 9

towards wives, since Norton was divorcing from her husband as well at the time.[283] Men of the Victorian period were reluctant to change these laws in order to equate the divorce law conditions for both sexes, since

> The had come to regard sexual indulgence outside of marriage as their right. Further, the sexual double standard did not simply dictate what kinds of sexual behavior would be tolerated in men and women, but also reflected and reinforced power relationships between the sexes. Even while thoughtful men admitted that the laws were "a disgrace to England," each individual man "seems to dread that he is surrendering some portion of his own rights over women, in allowing these laws to be revised." In 1851 Harriet Taylor Mill had asked why women were kept legally subordinate to men, and concluded that "the only reason which can be given is, that men like it. It is agreeable to them that men should live for their own sake, women for the sake of men."[284]

In fact, after the Divorce Act of 1857, divorced women could not claim their own property or keep custody of their children, only separated wives were allowed the status of *feme sole* and could reclaim property as their own.[285] Feminists managed to amend this law two years later and the Matrimonial Causes Act allowed all women to have the same legal rights regarding owning property even if divorced from their husbands, this also moved these type of court proceedings to civil courts, causing divorce to be more accessible to less affluent Victorian people.[286]

3.2 Married Women's Property Act of 1870 and 1882

Feminists thought that, apart from being able to divorce their husbands on the grounds of abuse and other cruelty acts, women should be able to claim their own property and money even after marriage.[287]

> Coming as they did from work for women's employment, higher education, and suffrage rights, it is not surprising that those who advocated reform of property law relied extensively on arguments about the equal right of men and women to control their own property regardless of marital status. Their program for legal reform involved substituting laws based on a strict gender neutrality for the different rights and obligations of men and women under existing marriage laws. The reformers argued that the automatic expropriation of an adult

[283] Ibid., p. 27
[284] Ibid., p. 28
[285] Ibid., p. 39
[286] Ibid., p. 138
[287] Ibid., p. 57

> woman's property upon marriage violated the individual right to own property, particularly the fruits of one's own labour.[288]

This was a vital law for women since, after they married, women had to relinquish any type of claim on their own possessions and assets: they could not own any type of property, could not claim any money as theirs, etc.[289] When a woman married her husband, everything she owned became his:

> […] the wife is the actual bond-servant of her husband: no less so, as far as legal obligation goes, than slaves commonly so called. She vows a lifelong obedience to him at the altar, and is held to it all throughout her life by law. […] She can do no act whatever but by his permission, at least tacit. She can acquire no property but for him; the instant it becomes hers, even if by inheritance, it becomes *ipso facto* his. In this respect the wife's position under the common law of England is worse than that of slaves in the laws of many countries […] The two are called "one person in law," for the purpose of inferring that whatever is hers is his, but the parallel inference is never drawn that whatever is his is hers;[290]

It is important to highlight the fact that the Married Women's Property Act of 1870 only managed to permit married women to claim only some type of property that could be treated as legally hers, but only the property that was inherited.[291] This act also allowed women to retain their wages earned from their job, which especially concerned women of the working class.[292] With the amendment of the 1882 Act, this new alteration allowed women to have the rights of the *feme sole*:[293]

> A married woman shall be capable of entering into and rendering herself liable *in respect of and to the extent of her separate property* on any contract, and of suing and being sued, either in contract or in tort, or otherwise, in all respects as if she were *feme sole*, and her husband need not be joined with her as plaintiff or defendant, or be made a party to any action or other legal proceeding brought by or taken against her; and any damages or costs recovered by her in any such action or proceeding *shall be her separate property*; and any damages or costs recovered against her in any such action or proceeding *shall be payable out of her separate property* and not otherwise.[294]

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[288] Ibid., p. 57
[289] Mill, *op. cit*., p. 33
[290] Ibid., p. 33-34
[291] Shanley, *op. cit.,* p. 68
[292] Ibid., p. 69
[293] Ibid., p. 124
[294] Ibid., p. 126

This was a great success for feminists and married women, who started to also worry about custody of their children which was spurred by Caroline Norton's divorce and writings.[295]

3.3 Custody of Infants Act of 1873 and 1886

This law finally allowed mothers to get custody of their children,

> The preamble declares the expediency of further amending the law on this point, and section 1 empowers the Court of Chancery to order that a mother may have access to, or, if the Court deem proper, the custody of any infant or infants under sixteen years of age, or that such infants, if already in her custody, shall so continue up to that age, subject to such regulations for the access of the father or guardians as the Court may deem proper. The second section provides that no agreement contained in any separation deed made between the father and mother to an infant or infants shal [sic] be held to be invalid by reason only if its providing that the father of such infant or infants shall give up the custody or control thereof to the mother: Provided always, that no Court shall enforce any such agreement if the Court shall be of opinion that it will not be for the benefit of the infant or infants to give effect thereto.[296]

These Acts still did not mean equal parental rights for the Victorian family, but all these Acts promoted by feminists were spurring society and the Parliament into recognising the unfairness of the treatment of women, especially while under the institution of marriage.[297] This institution was strongly criticised by a feminist writer that belonged to the radical movement of the New Woman of the late nineteenth century: Mona Caird denounced the legal inequality of marriage in her collection of essays titled *The Morality of Marriage and Other Essays on the Status and Destiny of Women* published in 1897.[298]

3.4 Mona Caird: biography, and most important works

[295] Ibid., p. 14
[296] Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge, *British Almanac and Companion 1873,* London: Cassell & Co., 1873, pp. 229-230
[297] Shanley, *op. cit.,* pp. 142-143
[298] A. Heilmann, "Mona Caird (1854-1932): wild woman, new woman, and early radical feminist critic of marriage and motherhood[1]", *Women's History Review,* vol. 5, n. 1 (2006), 67-95, p. 73

Alice Mona Alison, better known as Mona Caird, was a British novelist, essayist, polemical activist, and New Woman feminist who was born on the Isle of Wight on 24th May 1854.[299] Caird was renowned for her essays and novels against vivisection and in support of women's rights, especially about the inequality in the Victoria marriage.[300] Caird, the only daughter of 19-year-old Ann Jane Alison and 40-year-old John Alison, was part of quite a wealthy family that moved to London after a few years.[301] Caird obtained a standard middle-class education, which she further developed as an autodidact, studying different languages such as German and French but also gaining knowledge from different scholars and thinkers of her time, for instance John Stuart Mill.[302] As Dr Diniejko said,

> She was widely read in ethnology, economics, social philosophy and history. […] Her extensive readings and growing interest in the then much-discussed Woman Question led her, as she said, to grow up rebellious against traditional attitudes to gender inequality, marriage and motherhood.[303]

When she was 23, she married a Scottish farmer called James Alexander Henryson Caird, whose family was quite established and well off thanks to his father being a member of parliament but also because James was a scion of the famous Renaissance poet Robert Henryson.[304] The couple only had one son called Alister in 1884 and he was educated at home before going to college in Cambridge.[305] Caird and her husband, because of their amicable relationship following conflicting passions and diverging points of view on quite a few matters, decided to live separately: while James preferred to live in his Scottish manor with Alister for most of the year, Mona Caird usually travelled abroad or stayed in London, where she could join literary circles and continue

[299] A. Richardson, "Caird, Mona", in Dino Franco Felluga (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Victoria Literature, First Edition,* New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2015, p. 1
[300] A. Diniejko, "Mona Caird – the Priestess of the Late Victorian New Woman's Revolt", 2019. Available: https://victorianweb.org/authors/caird/bio.html, Accessed 2024, January.
[301] Ibid.
[302] Ibid.
[303] Ibid.
[304] Ibid.
[305] Ibid.

writing but also participating in various social movements.[306] In fact, Caird belongs to the literary movement called "The New Woman", which started in the at the end of the 19th century:

> The final two decades of the Victorian era witnessed the beginning of a shift in social attitudes regarding gender relations, which is marked by a steady move away from the pattern of patriarchal male supremacy and female dependence towards the modern pattern of gender equality. One of the manifestations of this movement is the emergence of the New Woman fiction. […] The New Woman, a significant cultural icon of the fin de siècle, departed from the stereotypical Victorian woman. She was intelligent, educated, emancipated, independent and self-supporting. The New Women were not only middle-class female radicals, but also factory and office workers.[307]

Caird's first two novels were published under the gender-neutral pseudonym of G. Noel Hatton, the books were *Whom Nature Leadeth* (1884) and *One That Win: The Story of a Holiday in Italy* (1887).[308] The first novel investigates the topic of female autonomy and restraints posed by domesticity, which are issues that Caird will explore more in detail in her more famous essays; the second novel shares the same topics but also transcends the English strict social norms thanks to its Italian setting.[309] Caird only became notorious in 1888 after the *Westminster Review* published her controversial article "Marriage", through which Caird expressed her contentious opinion on the matter of marriage and fearlessly uncovered the adverse facets of this institution during the Victorian era, stressing the importance of personal independence and equality to terminate women's oppression.[310] This article aroused a very heated discussion on this subject, the *Daily Telegraph* even invited its readers to reply to the provocative question, "is Marriage a Failure?" and received more than 25,000 letters which were later published in the journal.[311] Her following novels and short stories, *Wing of Azrael* (1889), *A Romance of the Moors* (1891), *The Yellow Drawing Room* (1892), and *The Daughters of Danaus* (1894) explored the theme of abusive marriages and women striving for independence.[312] In 1897, Caird finally opted to gather

[306] Ibid.
[307] A. Diniejko, "The New Woman Fiction.", 2020. Available: https://www.victorianweb.org/gender/diniejko1.html, Accessed 2024, January.
[308] Diniejko, "Mona Caird – the Priestess of the Late Victorian New Woman's Revolt", cit.
[309] Richardson, *op. cit.,* p. 1
[310] Ibid., p. 1
[311] Ibid., p. 1
[312] Ibid., p. 1

all her prominent essays from the various journals in a single book titled *The Morality of Marriage and Other Essays on the Status and Destiny of Women.*[313]

> The collection prioritized equality between the sexes, calling for legal reforms in childcare and divorce and exposing women's status as property. It also interrogated the pressure to maintain women's nature as static, existing outside currents of social and natural change. Caird increasingly engaged with new biologistic discourses, arguing, in opposition to a number of New Woman writers, notably Sarah Grand and George Egerton, against biological determinism in respect both of gender and class and emphasizing society as historically constructed. In this way, she explored the antiessentialist implications underpinning Darwin's theory of evolution, just as she exposed along Millian lines ways in which concepts of woman's nature were themselves artificial.[314]

At the end of the century Caird, apart from writing extensively about the Woman Question, also published a few tracts on anti-vivisection and thus became a campaigner for animal rights, considering the fact that this writer saw a similarity between the ill-treatment of women and animals.[315] In fact, in the 1890s, Caird started to advocate for animal rights and joined several movements in support of animal protection, thus briefly becoming President of the Independent Anti-Vivisection League.[316] The most important pamphlets she published on this topic include *A Sentimental View of Vivisection* (1894), *Some Truths about Vivisection* (1894) and *The Sanctuary of Mercy* (1895).[317] Mona Caird also spoke against the new practice of eugenics in the twentieth century, fully objecting to the misuse of science theories, in two novels: *The Stones of Sacrifice* (1915) and *The Great Wave* (1931).[318]

3.5 The Morality of Marriage

The Morality of Marriage and Other Essays on the Status and Destiny of Women (1897) is Caird's selection of most important feminist and influential essays written for different magazines of the time, a collection which only reinforces Caird's position as a Victorian feminist.[319]

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[313] Ibid., p. 2
[314] Ibid., p. 2
[315] Diniejko, *op. cit.*
[316] Ibid.
[317] Richardson, *op. cit.,* p. 2
[318] Ibid., p. 2
[319] Heilmann, *op. cit.,* p. 73

> Mary Maynard lists four key issues which determine nineteenth-century feminist thought: equal rights; employment and the need for women's economic independence; women's position in the family; and sexuality. Focusing on precisely these issues, Caird's work explores the themes most characteristic of the time: rights (of citizenship) versus duties (morality, rationality); the nature of womanhood (equal or different?); the sexual division of labour; and independence versus protection (e.g. relating to employment laws). Writing from within a tradition of Enlightenment thought, Caird asserted women's right to full citizenship and their duty to respect others', but especially their own, freedom. Although equal by nature, women and men had been made different through nurture. Women's artificial and debilitating difference resulted from the separation of spheres and women's enforced dependency on and subordination to men: in other words, from their slave-status under patriarchy.[320]

In fact, Caird had a major role in spreading the disputed issues at the base of the New Woman movement: "undesired marital sex, birth control, unwanted pregnancy, single motherhood, wages for housework, public child care, free relationships and the right to adultery after marital breakdown."[321] High-profile writers had criticised the institution of marriage and its unfair regulations, such as Mary Wollstonecraft in *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), Harriet Taylor's *Enfranchisement of Women* (1851), and John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women* (1869).[322] Caird had been influenced and had taken inspiration from these works, but it is also important to highlight that, unlike her predecessors, she published this collection when the woman question was central in the social and political debates of the time.[323] Caird starts *The Morality of Marriage* explaining the aim of her essays, which is

> […] to prove that the greatest evils of modern society had their origin, thousands of years ago, in the dominant abuse of patriarchal life: the custom of woman-purchase. The essays show that this system still persists in the present form of marriage and its traditions, and that these traditions are holding back the race from its best development. It is proved, moreover, that it is a mere popular fallacy to suppose that our present sex-relationship is a natural and immutable ordinance, there having been a long period during which the family was ruled by the mother, and its name and property handed down through her.[324]

[320] Ibid., p. 73
[321] Ibid., p. 67
[322] Ibid., p. 70
[323] Ibid., p. 70
[324] M. Caird, *The Morality of Marriage and Other Essays on the Status and Destiny of Woman,* London: George Redway, 1897, p. 1-2

Caird goes on to explain that what she proposes is a legal amendment, in order to equalize the marriage and divorce laws for both sexes but also to concede to both parents equal custody rights of their children.[325] Caird also scathingly criticises

> patriarchy and its history by locating marriage and prostitution at the heart of a religious, economic and political system based on maintaining male power through exploiting women as either private or public property. Slaves dispossessed of their own bodies and souls, women could not become wives or mothers without infecting others, particularly their daughters, with their physical and mental deficiencies, a direct result of their colonisation. The two functions allocated to women were therefore both meaningless and harmful to society as a whole. Until the world acknowledged women's right to the exclusive ownership of their bodies, in terms of both sex and reproduction, marriage meant "united degeneration" at its best and "the degradation of womanhood" at its worst.[326]

The Morality of Marriage is mostly a historical examination of the societal changes during the centuries in order to explain the causes of the contemporary state of society, most importantly to illustrate the elements that forced matriarchal societies to develop into societies determined by patriarchy.[327] One the main causes of this change was the general supposition that women, in contrast to men, were physically weaker thus confining women to a subservient role for every societal aspect.[328]

> Physical strength depends on the mode of life and training rather than on the sex, as history has abundantly proved. Women have been found, in different eras and centuries, performing tasks requiring great strength, such as dragging cannon, carrying heavy weights (savage women do all the work of the tribe except hunting), tilling the soil, wrestling, fighting and so forth. Women have, alas! Figured as gladiators under Domitian. But for the cares involved in motherhood – cares to which man owes his survival to adult life – there is absolutely no reason to suppose that woman would have been at any physical disadvantage with man […]. It is certainly among Life's Little Ironies, that men who have been able to enslave women, only because of their maternal solicitude, should now, at the end of the Nineteenth Century accept the sphere to which man consigns her, on the ground that he might have consigned her to the cold grave![329]

[325] Ibid., 5
[326] Heilmann, *op. cit.,* p. 70
[327] Ibid., p. 73
[328] Caird, *op. cit.,* p. 9
[329] Ibid., p. 12

Caird then proceeds to affirm that society constantly changes throughout the centuries, a fact that is confirmed by history, and human conceptions are also not determined since this would mean that progress could not be possible.[330] This also means that, the bonds between the sexes were not rigidly inflexible, in fact

> […] an increasing body of evidence points to the original organisation of the family *through the mother and not through the father.* Thus we find, at the very outset, that something other than mere force was the director of the earliest human relations. Modern research has made it more and more evident that the idea of kinship in primitive communities attached itself exclusively to the mother and her relatives, and that the father, at first, had no dominant position in the family […].[331]

Caird explains the positive characteristics of the matriarchy, affirming that this type of familial structure promotes equality between the members, which stops any kind of jealousy and animosity but mostly provides a very tranquil environment; on the other hand, patriarchy creates a very hostile environment for every member of the family.[332] After extensively talking about different tribe customs, Caird most importantly clarifies that, in matriarchal tribes, women were presented with personal and independent property when getting married that helped the bride to sustain herself, while in a contemporary patriarchal society this transformed into the tradition of the dowry.[333]

> What was originally the safeguard of her independence thus becomes a tribute which she has to pay to her lord and master. As was to be expected, the growth of patriarchal rule meant the gradual degradation of the position of women. It is not very easy to trace the transition from the matriarchal to the patriarchal rule, but we see, here and there, signs of the two systems working side by side. No doubt the custom of capturing women of other tribes, and the later purchase which grew out of this, were the first steps in the patriarchal direction. […] Slowly at first, but surely, this new practice of buying a wife led to a totally new mode of regarding the marital relationship, and, above all, it affected the idea of parenthood. […] For many centuries after the father had become head of the family […] and had become, at the same time, the owner of his wife, by right of purchase, he rested his claims upon the children solely on *the fact that the mother was his property,* not upon the fact of his fatherhood.[334]

[330] Ibid., p. 23
[331] Ibid., p. 24
[332] Ibid., p. 27
[333] Ibid., p. 29-30
[334] Ibid., p. 30-31

This shows that all these practices were significant for the establishment of the supremacy of men over society, slowly transforming women into slaves and property of men. It is safe to say then that, once the woman stopped being regarded as the head of the household, her life started to deteriorate: "we find, there, that women have been subjected to cruel ill-treatment, not only among savages, but among civilised people. Our modern forms of cruelty are direct descendants of the customs of patriarchal ancestors."[335] Caird reiterates that,

> The children belong absolutely *either to the mother, or to the owner of the mother*, whoever he may be, and quite irrespective of whether or not he happens also to be their father. The right to the children has always been *enjoyed by* or *derived from* their mother. […] Whenever we find the father enjoying legal rights over his children superior to those of the mother, we may know, without further proving, that his wife is his property, legally considered, and that he derives his parental privileges from her, exactly in the same way as the owner of a walnut tree derives his ownership of the walnuts from his rights in the tree. […] Society moving forward in certain directions, whilst its development is held back in others by immovable family relations.[336]

Caird also makes a comparison with the woman of the 19th century, who is forced to observe her male relatives succeed easily in life thanks to opportunities that are naturally owed to them and seen as commonplace but are prohibited to every woman: an excellent education, being the sole inheritor of the father's property, being able to vote, etc.[337] The only duty women are pushed to honour is to marry, in order to relieve the father of her burden and produce heirs, entering an institution that is unfairly unbalanced towards the woman.[338]

> […] If she does achieve this end, or, rather, "sphere", she is still under a modified form of old tutelage, as far as restraint goes, but she is now treated as an individual as regards responsibility. If she sins, she is punished; […] She must pay taxes, but she may not vote; she may be divorced for unfaithfulness, but she may not divorce. In entering the marriage relation (ironically called a contract), she takes upon herself a tie infinitely more stringent, infinitely more imperious and extensive in its action than the bond into which the man enters.[339]

[335] Ibid., p. 38
[336] Ibid., p. 50
[337] Ibid., p. 52
[338] Ibid., p. 52
[339] Ibid., p. 53

Caird thus ventures into the topic of marriage and how its current existence depends on the subjection of women, a status that is validated by the various laws that regarded married women, such as the Custody of Infants Act (1886): the father was the sole legal parent of the legitimate child.[340] Despite not having any legal rights towards the child, the wife had to relinquish her whole life to take care, educate and nurture the offspring, since "father and mother are to share pleasantly between them the rights and duties of parenthood – the father having the rights, the mother the duties."[341] Caird affirms that,

> Marriage, with its one-sided obligations, is not a thought-out rational system of sex relationship, but a lineal descendant of barbarian usages, cruel and absurd, even when the warlike condition of society gave them some colour of reason, revolting now to all ideas of human justice and of dignity. While the community in other directions has been moving and changing, in this matter it has remained inert.[342]

Thus, the author demands three reforms to be made in order to challenge the patriarchy: women's financial independence, equality of rights for both men and women, and also to allow women more freedom at home.[343] Unlike the medieval age, where marriage was dominated by sentiment and romance, the current bourgeois marriage was ruled by a more materialistic attitude.[344] It is also curious to note the status of 16th century women, who preferred to become prostitutes than wives:

> […] the woman's position, as established at this epoch, was one of great degradation. She could scarcely claim the status of a separate human being. She was without influence, from the dawn of life to its close, […]. The old chivalrous feeling for woman seems to have faded out with the romance of the Middle Ages. She figured as the legal property of man, the "safeguard against sin," the bearer of children *ad infinitum.* Whether or not there was less real corruption that in earlier times, much real corruption now flourished under the cloak of respectability. Married life offered grand opportunities for tyrannical men; for the general sentiment supported them in their tyranny, and sternly demanded absolute submission on the part of their wives. […] The outcast class was formed into a strictly regulated band, subject to special laws, while the "honest" women were gathered into another fold and dedicated equally to the service of man, but under different conditions.[345]

[340] Ibid., p. 55
[341] Ibid., p. 57
[342] Ibid., p. 58
[343] Ibid., p. 59
[344] Ibid., p. 77
[345] Ibid., pp. 81-82

Confirming the fact that, wifehood and prostitution shared the same level of degradation, but prostitutes still had different and better lives.[346] This furthermore shows that men's treatment of their wives was comparable to how slaves were treated by their masters, since the wife is maintained by the husband without earning money herself despite her work as a housewife.[347] Caird describes the modern marriage, showing how the wife must be shackled by her husband by the Victorian laws and social conventions:

> The man who marries finds that his liberty has gone, and the woman exchanges one set of restrictions for another. She thinks herself neglected if the husband does not always return to her in the evenings, and the husband and society think her undutiful, frivolous, and so forth, if she does not stay at home alone, trying to sigh him back again. The luckless man finds his wife so *very* much confined to her "proper sphere," that she is, perchance, more exemplary than entertaining. Still, she may look injured and resigned, but she must not seek society and occupation on her own account, bringing new interest and knowledge into the joint existence, and becoming thus a contended, cultivated, and agreeable human being. […] the chain of marriage frets and chafes, if it does not make a serious wound. […] For husband and wife are then apt to forget everything in the narrow interests of their home, to depend entirely upon one another, to steep themselves in the same ideas, till they become mere echoes, half-creatures, useless to their kind, because they have let individuality die.[348]

Caird assertively affirms that "the present form of marriage […] is a failure",[349] especially since

> The two essential attributes of marriage as it now stands, are the wife's dependence, economic and social, and the supposed duty to produce as many children as Fate may decide. Take away from it these two solid props, and marriage, as we have hitherto understood it, ceases to exists. It is not recognised that what makes the "holy estate" so firm and inflexible is its atrocious injustice.[350]

She then explains that her idea is to reform the existing marriage contract in order to better this institution for women, mostly implementing two conditions: legal and individual freedom for wives, which would then mean granting legal and social equal rights to both women and men.[351]

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[346] Ibid., p. 82-97
[347] Ibid., p. 133
[348] Ibid., p. 104-5
[349] Ibid., p. 108
[350] Ibid., p. 138
[351] Ibid., p. 126-7

> Caird suggested a dual system of modern state intervention (childcare facilities, wages for housework) and private negotiation (marriage contract, family size). Marriage, she argued, should be an "entirely private" matter, with the two partners setting up their own contract suited to their individual needs. Once moral coercion, "duty" and self-sacrifice were dispensed with, partnership would become friendship between equals, based on mutual respect of each other's individuality. Caird's idea of a private marriage contract did not so much reflect her lack of awareness with regard to the dangers that the privacy of the home held out for women, than her belief that state-governed marriage was an even unsafer option for them because it was predicated upon their willingness to surrender their personhood. A private contract would at least ensure that every woman had a voice in shaping her destiny.[352]

Caird additionally claimed that, since the mother's role to morally educate her children was indispensable, then she should be able to claim them legally.[353] It would also be really[354] beneficial for the married couple to share the duty of childcare, in order to improve the child's welfare and the level of education,[355] since:

> They [the children] have been doomed to grow up under the influence of tired-out, half-educated women who can scarcely manage their own weary lives, much less guide the growth of young souls and bodies during the critical and fate-deciding years of childhood and early youth. It may seem paradoxical, but it none the less true, that we shall never have really good mothers, until women cease to make motherhood the central idea of their existence. The woman who has no interest larger than the affairs of her children is not a fit person to train them. For the sake of men, women, and children, it is to be hoped that women will come to regard motherhood with new eyes; […]

Regarding the theme of divorce, Caird believes that wives and mothers should be able to escape a miserable marriage if they wanted to. In order to do so, the author recommends a remuneration for any household-related labour.[356] This would lead to women's financial independence, which would allow them to exercise free will in their occupation choices as well, apart from domesticity.[357]

> If all women were to rush into the labour market and begin to compete with men and with one another, the result would be evil; but it is *not* true that if they were to be placed on an equality with men in the eye of the law, if in marriage they were free from all artificial disability, if in society they had no special prejudices to contend with – it is not true in *that*

[352] Heilmann, *op. cit.,* p. 74
[353] Caird, *op. cit.,* p. 152
[354] Ibid., p. 173
[355] Ibid., p. 155
[356] Heilmann, *op. cit.,* p. 74
[357] Ibid., p. 74

> case that the consequence of this change in their position would be detrimental to the real interests of the commonwealth. On the contrary, its influence would be for good, and for more good than perhaps anyone now dares to believe.[358]

Conclusions

The nineteenth century was a breakthrough for feminists that fought for women's rights, especially in regard to education, job opportunities and marriage.

> […] feminists concentrated most of their energies on increasing women's opportunities for education and employment. They judged that they would make greater headway in gaining a foothold for women in the public realm by focusing on women's education and employment (which were far from universally accepted) than by suggesting that all was not well with women's position in the home. During the next decade there was a rapid proliferation of organizations promoting the expansion of women's opportunities outside the home, including the Society for Promoting the Employment of Women, the Female Middle Class Emigration Society, the Workhouse Visiting Society, and the Ladies' Sanitary Association. In addition, publications such as the English Woman's Journal (1858-1864), the Englishwoman's Review of Social and Industrial Questions (1866—1906), and the Victoria Magazine (1863-1880) were essential to the development of feminist ideas and their communication to readers throughout Britain. These organizations and publications were sustained by a small but energetic network of friends and fellow workers, which included letter writers, circulators of petitions, essayists, financial donors, and persons who had access to Members of Parliament. Frequently scholars chronicle the activities of the Victorian feminists as individual triumphs: Sophia Jex-Blake storming the medical schools, Emily Davies founding Girton College, Emily Faithfull creating the Victoria Press, and so forth.[359]

At the beginning of the 19th century, education for women was fairly limited since it only permitted men to obtain higher education but, as the century progressed, women were able to be admitted to universities such as Girton College, which was the first women's college founded by Emily Davies and Barbara Bodichon in 1869. Regarding work, women were having economic difficulties because of underpayment and could not support their families anymore, which resulted in an increase of prostitutes in England. This exploitation was then thwarted by women achieving their college education and being able to work as nurses and teachers. Despite not being

[358] Caird, *op. cit.*, p. 167-8
[359] Shanley, *op. cit.,* p. 49

able to escape discrimination, this was still crucial progress for their professions. Lastly, married women had gained some important rights: the Divorce Act of 1857, which permitted wives to obtain a divorce more easily under specific circumstances, the Married Women's Property Act of 1870 and 1882 which authorised wives to maintain ownership of their property and money even after marriage, and finally the Infant Custody Acts of 1873 and 1886, which allowed women to petition for custody of their children. Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Augusta Webster and Mona Caird were only a few of the authors who wrote about the Woman Question but their works were still pivotal for the campaign for women's rights that characterised the nineteenth century and laid the foundation for further progress and the emancipation of women in the next century.

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