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## Aurora Leigh And Elizabeth Barrett-Browning's Most Convenient Cousin

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Title of Paper: ***AURORA LEIGH AND ELIZABETH BARRETT-BROWNING'S MOST CONVENIENT COUSIN***

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Abstract:

The article examines the possibility that the fictional cousin marriage in *Aurora Leigh* was either a token of gratitude by Elizabeth Barrett-Browning for her real-life philanthropic cousin's generosity to her or was a masked promise of immortality to him as he lay dying.

Keywords: cousin marriage, consanguinity, philanthropy, patron, Swedenborgian, realism, verse novel, *Bildungsroman*, *Künstlerroman*, autobiographical.

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There are some curious links between the fictional cousin marriage in *Aurora Leigh* (1856) and Elizabeth Barrett-Browning's (1806-61) life, indicating the possibility that the work conveys personal messages. Was this work conceivably a token reward by the author to her real-life cousin for his past generosity, or a ploy for his estate in the future in the guise of a veiled promise of immortality as he lay dying?

In the verse novel, despite their declarations of love, the cousins eventually enter into what seems to be a marriage of convenience, even though at first the marriage looks unlikely. The fictional hero Romney has been thought to have been modelled on 'the Christian socialist Charles Kingsley' (Stone, 2008: 358), or at least, to correspond, as 'a philanthropic social activist', through 'intertextual dialogue with a range of "condition of England" narratives (by Elizabeth Gaskell and Charles Kingsley) from the 1840s and 1850s' (Amigoni, 2011: 133). Alternatively, he is thought possibly to have been based on the blind John Milton or the blind prophet Tiresias, or even on the blind Oedipus; Barrett Browning categorically denied, however, that she was influenced by Charlotte Brontë's blind fictional Rochester (Machann, 2010: 71, 70). But the model for Romney may well have been much closer to home. In her own life, Elizabeth Barrett-Browning's father, Edward Moulton-Barrett (1785-1857), was far too possessive to allow his children to marry, whether they were cousins or not. He did not just disinherit both his son Alfred, after he had married a cousin who, 'as the father's ward, had lived with the family for many years', and his daughter Henrietta for marrying a cousin, 'who had been able to visit the home under the guise of family relationship', but he also disinherited his daughter Elizabeth, who married Robert Browning (1812-89), not a member of her family (Anderson, 1986: 289). It is more than feasible that her father, who died in the year following its publication, would have viewed the fictional cousin marriage in *Aurora Leigh* as a manifestation of rebellion against his paternal authority.

Cousin marriage itself had been permitted in England since 1540, when Henry VIII removed one of the Church's prohibitions by the Marriage Act banning cousin marriage in order for him to be able to marry Catherine Howard, the first cousin of his second wife, Anne Boleyn (Child, 1863: 89). At that time, as far as the Church was concerned, 'man and wife were considered one flesh' (Ottenheimer, 1996: 77-78). If they were 'one flesh', it meant that the blood relatives of each of them were regarded as blood relatives shared by both of them. The Church of England, with its genesis due to Henry VIII's marital desires, continued to condone consanguinity in the form of cousin marriage. In fact by the time at which Elizabeth Barrett-Browning was writing, it had become common practice for cousins to marry in order to consolidate a family dynasty and retain family property (Gottlieb, 1993: 57).

Ostensibly, the cousin marriage in *Aurora Leigh* not only represents a marriage of tradition, but also a traditional marriage, in which the wife will play helpmeet to her paternalistic husband, however much the hero and heroine might 'reconcile their differences in a passionate declaration of the three central Swedenborgian ideas of love, wisdom and use' (Stott in Avery and Stott, 2003,



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137). A month after its publication, life did not at all imitate art, it surpassed it. The invalid Barrett-Browning had a distant cousin, John Kenyon (1784-1856), 22 years her senior and widowed for the second time in 1835 (Raymond, 2008), having already been made wealthy 'under the will of his brother-in-law, Mr Curteis' (Crosse, 1892: 165). John Kenyon, reputed for his extensive philanthropy (Crosse 1892: 166), had been so devoted to his cousin Elizabeth that he had managed the business affairs of her rather impecunious marriage to Robert Browning, and had given the couple £100 a year on the birth of their only son. Although not strictly paternalistic, John Kenyon was effectively Barrett-Browning's patron, having introduced her to many literary figures (Avery, 2011: 8; 18), and encouraged her writing. *Aurora Leigh* was completed at his London home after a long gestation period; it was dedicated to him 'in grateful remembrance of a friendship 'far beyond the common uses of mere relationship and sympathy of mind' and, a month after its publication, his death-bed legacy to her made her and her husband financially secure for the first time (*AL Notes*, 327; Machann, 2010, 59).

The question is, had the events in her novel been a way on Barrett-Browning's part of signifying some kind of fictional recompense to her real-life cousin? *Aurora Leigh* has already been identified as a "polyphonic work" which "weaves" together autobiographical narrative, reported and spoken life stories' (Sanders Pollock in Avery, 2011: 74). It is recognised as 'a white-hot piece of writing', expressed 'as dialogue or conversation' so that 'it expands and breathes when it is read aloud' in a novel-poem that comprises 'characteristics from both the realist novel and the epic poem'; in addition, it belongs to the sub-genres of both *Bildungsroman*, 'the story of a child's development into adulthood' and *Künstlerroman*, 'a story plotting the maturation of an *artist/writer*' (Stott in Avery and Stott, 2003: 181-182), with obvious autobiographical referents. *Aurora Leigh* is also insightfully interpreted as a 'quest' by the heroine 'for a secure and meaningful home', which 'is bound up with her negotiation of the dominant nineteenth-century family unit' as she seeks 'the reconfiguration of traditional feminine roles' (Avery, 2011: 74-75). Aurora Leigh initially rejects Cousin Romney Leigh's proposal of marriage so that each could pursue personal goals: Aurora to write poetry; Romney to practise philanthropy. The heroine's equivocations, vacillations and hesitations as well as the narrator's use of the pause, in addition to the work's appearance of 'living art' in its 'immersion in a dramatic present' already observed (Billington, 2012 in Stone, 2013: 348), do seem to indicate an extra touch of discomfiting realism difficult for the author to express. Each character eventually acknowledges need of the other; they vow to combine her artistic talents with his practical ones, in a marriage of equal partners to make a better world, in which their 'work shall still be better for [their] love' (324). Thus the couple will 'outline a new political partnership for a potential new world' that resists the 'traditional systems of thought and gender expectations' (Avery, 2011: 96). At the same time, the conventional declarations of love are not omitted. Just prior to their vow, Romney confesses to Aurora that he had loved her through the years even after 'that June morning' when she had



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rejected him, and Aurora tells him that she had loved him ‘first and last’ and ‘on for ever’ (312, 317). She later adds that Romney ‘had loved [her], watched [her], watched his soul in mine, /Which in me grew and heightened into love,’ even when he had been but a boy and she ‘[a]n orphan even of my father’s grave’ (319).

These fictional declarations of love might just have been expressions of gratitude by the author to John Kenyon, since Elizabeth Barrett-Browning’s fractured relationship with her family, especially with her father, meant that her homecomings to England were always tinged with sadness and her cousin John substituted for her entire family. So estranged was she from her father that it may well have seemed to her that her father was deceased. Some twenty-five years earlier, while her father ‘was away pursuing the sale of the [family] estate’ of Hope End, believed to be ‘the imagined ancestral home’ in *Aurora Leigh*, Barrett-Browning, before her own marriage had taken place, had had ‘an emotionally and intellectually complicated relationship with her friend and neighbour, the [married] blind scholar Hugh Stuart Boyd’, which has been described as having ‘an erotic paternal quality’ (Wiener Katz, 2010: 465; 460; 477). It has also been noticed that *Aurora Leigh* contains ‘[m]emories of her long-lost beloved father’ which ‘sustain Aurora’, and that Romney eventually ‘becomes an appropriate mate and work partner for Aurora, in line with the values passed on by Aurora’s father’ (Machann, 2010: 64; 67). But did the fictional romance in *Aurora Leigh* between two cousins, albeit lacking in passion, act as a spur to Barrett-Browning’s real-life cousin, whose role may well have been as substitute father, to bank-roll what was to be the final five years of her delicate existence? Did he hope for immortal unity with her, and had she nourished that hope?

The letters of Elizabeth Barrett-Browning to her cousin between 1851 and his death are tantalisingly decorous, full of gratitude for his generosity, yet acknowledging that he has ‘a right more than anybody almost to hear all about us’, while they are travelling through Europe, and wanting to ‘just see [him] and that’s all’ (in Kenyon ed, [1851] 2005: July 7), when they do travel back to London. Nor can she not understand why he will not join them in Rome in the autumn of 1853, adding that he ‘would probably have an additional ten years fastened on to’ his life ‘by coming to the Continent’ (in Kenyon ed, [1853] 2005: May 16).

In the summer of 1856, John Kenyon gives the Barrett-Brownings the run of his London house, while he stays on the Isle of Wight, only to fall fatally ill, so the author completes the writing of *Aurora Leigh*, knowing that her cousin is dying. The Barrett-Brownings even visit him on the Isle of Wight and a letter to a friend in the September of that year describes their visit and actually refers to the proofs of the early part of her verse novel in the very sentence in which she mentions that his health is ‘in a very precarious state’ (in Kenyon ed, [1856] 2005: September 9).

John Kenyon died less than three months later, and Elizabeth Barrett-Browning finished her novel in the October of the same year—just as her



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cousin's life was ebbing away. She later tells Anna Jameson (1794-1860) that the success of her novel is overshadowed by 'the beloved friend associated with the poor book' (in Kenyon ed, [1856] 2005: December 26), but her cousin's legacy of £11,000 to her and her husband was by far the largest in his very generous will and made her final years of life very comfortable indeed (Raymond, 2008). John Kenyon may not have married Elizabeth Barrett-Browning, but he had been a very convenient cousin to her.

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