Breaking Through

Metaphor, Education, Art, & Propriety in
Books 1-2 of Aurora Leigh
Avian & Mammalian Metaphor
“If her kiss / Had left a longer weight upon my lips / It might have steadied the uneasy breath, / And reconciled and fraternized my soul / With the new order. As it was, indeed, / I felt a mother-want about the world, / And still went seeking, like a bleating lamb / Left out at night in shutting up the fold, - / As restless as a nest-deserted bird / Grown chill through something being away, though what / It knows not” (1.35-45).
excerpts from “Jane Air: The Heroine as Caged Bird in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* and Alfred Hitchcock’s *Rebecca*” (2006)

by Paul Marchbanks
The association of women with birds has an extended, often degrading history. As Carol J. Adams and Josephine Donovan argue in *Animals and Women* (1995), the notion of feminine inferiority has long been shrewdly reinforced by repeated pairings of females with animals, especially domesticated and farm animals (Introduction: 1, 6). In "Sexist Words, Speciesist Roots" (1995), Joan Dunayer writes that “applying images of denigrated nonhuman species to women labels women inferior and available for abuse; attaching images of the aggrandized human species to men designates them superior and entitled to exploit” (11).
Satire in *Punch*

*Punch, or the London Charivari.*

- **Jan. 24, 1857**
- **Jan. 18, 1879**
- **Feb. 23, 1856**
Linguist Alleen Pace Nilsen recalls, in “Sexism as Shown through the English Vocabulary” (1977), the many exploitative and diminutive feminine tags informed by the chicken alone, one of our less auspicious fowl:

A young girl is a *chick*. When she gets old enough she marries and soon begins feeling *cooped up*. To relieve the boredom she goes to *hen parties* and *cackles* with her friends. Eventually she has her *brood*, begins to *henpeck* her husband, and finally turns into an *old biddy*. (29)

This penchant for debasing avian appellations reflects a well-established tradition of differentiating gender roles by deploying discrete bestial identities to either sex.
Dunayer’s words about the gender divide accurately describe the Victorian era in which Charlotte Brontë herself lived. Victorian writers more readily associated the masculine with powerful birds like the eagle or hawk, linking women to weaker and less imposing birds, those known more for their attractive appearance and delicate music than their strength.

Walter H. Deverell’s
_A Pet_ (1853)
Women & Birds

Elizabeth Gaskell’s heroines in *Wives and Daughters* (1866), for instance, construct one another as hen-sparrows (67) or little birds (313, 490), while Lucy Snowe of Charlotte Brontë’s own *Villette* (1853) draws similes between females and humming-birds or doves (212, 265). Avian metaphor empowers the male hero, as when Lucy likens Paul Emanuel to a hawk exerting control over all within his reach (289) and later, more benevolently, to a bird large and capable enough to shelter three old and feeble people under “one kind wing” (499).
Notably, the kinds of songbirds linked with women prove more likely, due to their size and temperament, to make apt indoor pets.

As Elaine Shefer illustrates in *Birds, Cages and Women in Victorian and Pre-Raphaelite Art* (1990), constructing specifically avian identifications proved the easier given the omnipresence of birds throughout Victorian culture, especially in the home. Mid-century England had witnessed an exponential increase in sales of exotic cages and aviaries, and birds were now everywhere—in the domestic as well as the social space (17).
Some Victorians employed birds for didactic purposes in ways that delivered neatly packaged prescriptions for appropriate female behavior. Anthropomorphically interpreted, the caged bird's apparently patient and loving child-rearing practices modeled cardinal virtues for those in the home at leisure to observe and learn, while a domestic aviary full of species-specific dispositions provided practical case studies of a wide range of personality traits (Shefer 18-22).
“She had lived, we’ll say, / A harmless life, she called a virtuous life, / A quiet life, which was not life at all, / (But that, she had not lived enough to know) / Between the vicar and the county squires, / The Lord-lieutenant looking down sometimes / From the empyrean to assure their souls / Against chance-vulgarisms, and, in the abyss / The apothecary, looked on once a year / To prove their soundness of humility, / The poor-club exercised her Christian gifts / Of knitting stockings, stitching petticoats [...] and still / The book-club, guarded from your modern trick / OF shaking dangerous questions from the crease, / Preserved her intellectual” (1.287-304).
“She had lived / A sort of cage-bird life, born in a cage, / Accounting that to leap from perch to perch / Was act and joy enough for any bird. / Dear heaven, how silly are the things that live / In thickets, and eat berries! I, alas, / A wild bird scarcely fledged, was brought to her cage, / And she was there to meet me. Very kind. / Bring the clean water, give out the fresh seed” (1.304-12).
Parenting & Nature
“Women know / The way to rear up children, (to be just) / They know a simple, merry, tender knack / Of tying sashes, fitting baby-shoes, / And stringing pretty words that make no sense, / And kissing full sense into empty words, / Which things are corals to cut life upon, / Although such trifles: children learn by such, / Love’s holy earnest in a pretty play / And get not over-early solemnised, / But seeing, as in a rose-bush, Love’s Divine / Which burns and hurts not, - not a single bloom, - / Become aware and unafraid of Love. / Such good do mothers” (1.47-60).
"Fathers love as well / - Mine did, I know, -
but still with heavier brains, / And wills
more consciously responsible, / And not as
wisely, since less foolishly; / So mothers
have God’s license to be missed” (1.60-64).

“My father taught me what he had learnt the
best / Before he died and left me, - grief and
love. / And, seeing we had books among the
hills, / Strong words of counseling souls
confederate / With vocal pines and waters, -
out of books / He taught me all the
ignorance of men, / And how God laughs in
heaven when any man / Says ‘Here I’m
learned; this, I understand; / In that, I am
never caught at fault or doubt.’ / He sent the
schools to school [...]” (1.185-94).

James Jacques Joseph Tissot’s
The Widow (1877)
“He left our Florence and made haste to hide / Himself, his prattling child, and silent grief, / Among the mountains above Pelago; / Because unmothered babes, he thought, had need / Of Mother nature more than others use [...]” (1.109-13).

“My father taught me what he had learnt the best / Before he died and left me, - grief and love. / And, seeing we had books among the hills, / Strong words of counseling souls confederate / With vocal pines and waters, - out of books / He taught me all the ignorance of men [...]” (1.185-90).
Nature as Teacher

how oft—
In darkness and amid the many shapes
Of joyless daylight; when the fretful stir
Unprofitable, and the fever of the world,
Have hung upon the beatings of my heart—
How oft, in spirit, have I turned to thee,
O sylvan Wye! thou wanderer thro' the woods,
How often has my spirit turned to thee!

Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey” (1798), ll.50-57

Edward Dayes Tintern Abbey
& the River Wye (1794)
Nature as Teacher

For I was reared
In the great city, pent 'mid cloisters dim,
And saw nought lovely but the sky and stars.
But *thou*, my babe! shalt wander like breeze
By lakes and sandy shores, beneath the crags
Of ancient mountain, and beneath the clouds,
Which image in their bulk both lakes and shores
And mountain crags: so shalt thou see and hear
The lovely shapes and sounds intelligible
Of that eternal language, which thy God
Utters, who from eternity doth teach
Himself in all, and all things in himself.
Great universal Teacher! he shall mould
Thy spirit, and by giving make it ask.

Coleridge’s “Frost at Midnight” (1798), ll.52-65

Frederick Edwin Church’s
*Aurora Borealis* (1865), detail
Aurora Responds to Nature

Italy: So, nine full years, our days were hid with God / Among his mountains: I was just thirteen, / Still growing like the plants from unseen roots / In tongue-tied Springs [. . .]” (1.204-207).

England: “The ground seemed cut up from the fellowship / Of verdure, field from field, as man from man; / The skies themselves looked low and positive [. . .] all things blurred / And dull and vague” (1.260-66).

Thomas James Lloyd’s An Evening I Remember (1897), detail
POR: why does Aurora Leigh rebel so strongly against Nature as manifest in England, and why does she later grow to love it—what does it do for her?
Education & The Position of Women
Women, Education, & Mobility

- 1841: Governess Benevolence fund
- 1848: Queen’s “College” funded (trains governesses)
- 1866: J. S. Mill’s petition for female suffrage
- 1869: College for Women opens (in ’72, now Girton C.)
- 1870: 1st Married women’s Property Bill passed (’82, 2nd such bill passes)
- 1918: women 30+ can vote

Otto Scholderer’s Young Girl
Reading (1883)
A Few Points of Reflection

- does the education Aurora Leigh receives under her aunt’s guidance enable or suppress her individuality?
- what does Aurora recommend as the appropriate way to read a book?
- does the teenage Aurora read with much discrimination? Does she distinguish between “good” and “bad” literature?
A Few Points of Reflection

Aurora claims poetry accomplishes what which no other profession can?

Aurora argues that instinct and “pure reason” can come to one’s aid when reading widely, helping one scale heavenly, absolute Truth in the midst of wrangling with both good and bad literature. Poetry, she claims, not only puts one in touch with the pulse of life itself, but can help one reach “Beyond this blood-beat, passionate for truth / Beyond these senses!” (1.917-18, emphasis added). What elements of poetry might allow it to effect such transcendence better than, say, a novel or a play?

reading poetry inspires Aurora to try her hand at creating her own, and she writes passionately from a life she is actually living—unlike some others (1.948-51), never analyzing her own work and disregarding any established rules of poetics (1.954-62). Does this help her create truly original poetry?