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Barrett Browning's Enduring Bees

Having been brought back from Italy to England as a child, Aurora Leigh tells the reader that, from the window of her room in England:

You could not push your head out and escape
A dash of dawn-dew from the honeysuckle,
But so you were baptised into the grace
And privilege of seeing...

First, the lime

(I had enough there, of the lime, be sure—

My morning-dream was often hummed away

By the bees in it); [...]

(I, 575-581)¹

Bees in Barrett Browning's domestic epic, *Aurora Leigh* (1856), appear on seven occasions and never as merely naturalistic detail. They include previously unnoticed instances of Barrett Browning's allusive sophistication and they help to figure the poet's (and Aurora's) claims to literary posterity. This is the first appearance of bees in *Aurora Leigh*, and it seems unassuming: these bees, after all, are not figurative but real bees, setting the scene parenthetically. Nevertheless, the bees create an accompaniment to Aurora's early thoughts – her 'morning-dream' – in lines in which the enjambment lightly links her nascent poetic process to the sound of the bees' hum. The hum could at first be Aurora's; the passive phrasing of 'My morning-dream was often hummed away' fleetingly implies the complete sense 'by me': the speaker hummed as her thoughts drifted through her mind. Appearing in a *Künstlerroman* in verse, that possibility touches on the nature of the poet's craft (her hum a nascent song). The reader finds

a different agent (or agents), though, in the following line ('By the bees') and so understands that Aurora's morning-dream was often hummed away, not by herself but by them. These bees could be a creative or distracting force – the hum companionable or irritating ('I had enough there, [...] be sure') – and that is apt too, since bees are long-time literary figures for the poet and have held a significant place in the epic tradition since Homer.² The bees in Book I may be real, but they gain salience from a literary past.

In a poem with which Barrett Browning sought to revise the epic tradition (in part by writing of a female poet who battles men's conventions), some ambivalence about the bees was worth maintaining. Bees have an unexpected allusiveness in Barrett Browning's poems, and they exhibit that powerful faith in posterity that allusiveness represents. The bees in *Aurora Leigh* make contact with epic and georgic traditions, and help to place her innovative novel-poem in an aesthetic-political tradition dating back to Virgil. Their ambivalent status becomes a correlative of the distinctive contact in her work between personal and wider social narratives.

Bees in Barrett Browning's earlier poems also carry such force. The two-volume *Poems* (1844) includes more bees than any other of her works, and the lead poem of volume II, 'A Vision of Poets', explicitly links bees with Virgil.³ The poem works deftly with the romance tradition; in it a sleepless poet is led through a forest by a lady (a Keatsian anti-Muse) on a horse. Following the lady, the poet seems 'to tread / Along the drowsy noise' of her 'palfrey's paces', a sound the narrator describes as 'a bee's hum' (103-7). The lady and poet eventually arrive at a shrine and a 'strange company' there of dead poets – 'poets true' – which includes Homer, Shakespeare, Aeschylus, Euripides, Pindar, Sappho, and Virgil (all poets who wrote about or were linked with bees). Virgil wears a crown of bay, the reader hears: 'For his gods wore less majesty / Than his brown bees hummed deathlessly' (332-3). The reason Virgil's bees seem greater than his gods – the bees' hum more enduring than his gods are majestic – is that Barrett is recalling a bee simile from *Aeneid* VI which is about reincarnation and itself had

a remarkable afterlife among the poets.⁴ Virgil compares to humming bees those human spirits in the Underworld who will be washed in the river Lethe and later reincarnated as Aeneas' descendants (VI, 703-9):

About it [the river Lethe] hovered peoples and tribes unnumbered [*innumerae*]; even as when, in the meadows, in cloudless summertime, bees light on many-hued blossoms and stream round lustrous lilies and all the fields murmur [*strepit*] with the humming [*murmure*]'.

They are lines that would be imitated and echoed by, among others, Dante, Milton, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Tennyson, and Christina Rossetti.⁵ (The Latin can be heard in the well-known, richly imitative last line of Tennyson's 'Come down, O maid' ('And murmuring of innumerable bees'), from section VII of *The Princess*; a poem with which *Aurora Leigh* is in dialogue.⁶) Virgil's 'bees' in Hades represent the future citizens of a great nation; and sustained through the imitative and allusive practices of later poets, they themselves might stand for literary inheritance and adaptation. Footsteps and humming bees, bees and posterity, are a part of Barrett's vision of poets.

Towards the end of the poem, the poet figure having died, the speaker reports from his son this description of the poet's last moments:

'A lily, a friend's hand had plucked,
Lay by his death-bed, which he looked
As deep down as a bee had sucked,

'Then, turning to the lattice, gazed

O'er hill and river, and upraised

His eyes illumined and amazed

'With the world's beauty, up to God, [...]

(886-892)

The figure of the poet, here between life and death, is like a bee before the lily, traditional symbols of the human spirit and its restoration after death (Virgil's bees in *Aeneid* VI 'stream round lustrous lilies'). There are notes of sustenance, belatedness, and desire in this image, and of another kind of revival too: both because this bee is a reminder of the poem's earlier bees, and also because Shakespeare is recalled by a trace in the word choice of Ariel's song ('Where the bee sucks, there suck I'), bringing with it the sense of (Ariel's) imminent liberation and new integration with the natural world.⁷ The bee is a figure for endurance in this poem; specifically one that links the poet's personal quest with literature's transgenerational politics.

The fact that bees in poems can readily seem to be mere passing details of the natural world has advantages and disadvantages for a poet and her readers. The first two stanzas of 'Hector in the Garden' (*Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* 1846; collected in *Poems* 1850), for instance, give this description of the poet-speaker as a girl:

Nine years old! The first of any

Seem the happiest years that come:

Yet when *I* was nine, I said

No such word!—I thought instead

That the Greeks had used as many

In besieging Ilium.

Nine green years had scarcely brought me
To my childhood's haunted spring:
I had life, like flowers and bees,
In betwixt the country trees,
And the sun the pleasure taught me
Which he teacheth every thing.

As poets have classical associations with bees, so poems are linked with flowers. In Hellenistic Greek, *ἀνθολόγιον* (anthologion) is a gathering of flowers, whence 'anthology' as a collection of poems or songs. That knowledge is integral to this poem's playful thinking. 'Hector in the Garden' does not announce its extended figurative workings; it simply presents a picture of the young poet cultivating flowers in which a spirit of classical heroism lives on. In stanzas viii to xiii, the poet-speaker explains that she created a floral Trojan – Hector – in her garden, and that she sometimes imagined his spirit to revive in the life of the flowers that mapped out his body. The poem works in a naturalistic register, and EBB really did this as a child; so the flowers here do not figure poems, they are actual flowers.⁸ Yet the full force of the central image (the floral Hector) is only evident when the reader notices that in fact both literal and figurative flowers *are* being cultivated. For while (for the world of the poem) Hector in the garden is really made of flowers, the 'Hector in the Garden' that the reader encounters is really made of poetry. There is a silent conceit at work: flowers and poems stand for one another; cultivating her floral Trojan, the poet both recalls the life of Homer's poem, and makes her own.

Describing the giant, supine Hector in a kind of blason (his cheeks, eyes, nose, helm, mouth, breastplate), the poet notes the flowers 'Drawn for belt about the waist; / While the brown bees, humming praises, / Shot their arrows round the chief' (xi). Barrett's bees in 'Hector in the Garden', 'humming praises' for the Trojan Hector, appear to be influenced more by

Virgil than by Homer. Homer figures the Greek armies as wild bees in Book II of the *Iliad*; but when Virgil adapted that simile in the *Aeneid*, using the bees to represent Aeneas' future descendants, he brought the bees of epic simile to the Trojan (and Roman) side of the battle. When, at the start of Barrett's poem, the speaker likens the 'life' of her nine-year-old self to that of 'flowers and bees', she subtly indicates the fertile union of reading, making, and renewal which flowers and bees have long figured in rhetoric and poetics. She both feeds upon and propagates 'Hector', and Homer, and Virgil. And she knows that she, too, is a propagator of 'poesy' with a legacy for the future.⁹ Such transplanting of classical epic to the English country garden, from a masculine domain to a feminine one, would be extended in *Aurora Leigh*.

One further bee caught between history and the present, between claims personal and socio-political, comes in *Sonnets from the Portuguese* XV. This bee again represents the poet-speaker, and makes an intimate claim to power under adversity:

Accuse me not, beseech thee, that I wear
Too calm and sad a face in front of thine;
For we two look two ways, and cannot shine
With the same sunlight on our brow and hair.
On me thou lookest, with no doubting care,
As on a bee shut in a crystalline,—
Since sorrow hath shut me safe in love's divine,
And to spread wing and fly in the outer air
Were most impossible failure, if I strove
To fail so. But I look on thee... on thee...
Beholding, besides love, the end of love,
Hearing oblivion beyond memory!

As one who sits and gazes from above,
Over the rivers to the bitter sea.

There is some clipping of wings in the use of adjectival nouns here ('crystalline', 'divine'), but the bee in this poem is already among the stars. Shut in a crystalline, this bee is both restricted and subject to observation (an image with uncomfortable connotations for EBB's own situation); but the word 'crystalline' takes EBB's condition to universal proportions, since it refers not to a jewel but the 'crystalline sphere': 'a transparent sphere of the heavens which lies between the fixed stars and the primum mobile'.¹⁰ As an image of the speaker's personal restriction, this warns the reader not to assume that restriction means too much.

Despite being 'shut in', the speaker's likeness to a bee is also a claim to ancient poetic identity and to posterity. The literary 'grandmothers' of a bee-poet would be Sappho and Erinna; and a bee in the heavens recalls classical links not only between bees and poets, but bees and the stars.¹¹ Taken together, the figure of the bee and its location are an instance of the *Sonnets*' exquisite balancing of private and poetical power: both because the bee image affirms EBB's own literary standing, and because the contortions of scale and perspective in this sonnet put the juxtaposition of 'bee' and 'crystalline' in touch with another literary bee – which Browning had mentioned in the couple's correspondence. In February 1845, during their courtship, Browning had written to 'dear Miss Barrett' recounting a humorous tale of Carlyle who, when Browning had last seen him, had declared, 'with an appealing look to Mrs. C., "I always say that some day in spite of *nature and my stars*, I shall burst into song"'. Browning explains: '(he is not mechanically "musical,"—he meant, and the music is the poetry, he holds, and should enwrap the thought as Donne says "an amber-drop enwraps a bee")'.¹² He refers to Donne's verse epistle 'To the Countess of Bedford' – object of Donne's praise, and (as EBB knew) also a literary patron:

You, for whose body God made better clay,
Or took souls' stuff such as shall late decay,
Or such as needs small change in the last day.

This, as an amber drop enwraps a bee,
Covering, discovers your quick soul, that we
May in your through-shine front our hearts' thoughts see.

You teach, though we learn not, a thing unknown
To our late times: the use of specular stone,
Through which all things within without were shown. (22-30)¹³

Donne's bee in amber is consonant with EBB's own acknowledgements and elisions of corporeality (in the *Sonnets* and elsewhere), and it represents the soul, encased in but seen through the body.¹⁴ Sonnet XV recalls Donne's image, but substantially adapts and extends its personal and social implications (her bee indicates not the soul alone, but a condition of divinity; the image reaches for a universe, not a jewel). The bees of *Aurora Leigh* advance each of these links in the earlier poems, to make equally subtle but more extended claims about poethood and the quiet nature of poetic achievement.

On the morning of her twentieth birthday, Aurora Leigh walks in the garden that provides the backdrop to her cousin Romney's clumsy proposal and Aurora's refusal. Before her aunt awakes or Romney appears, she walks happily in the garden alone, and, contemplating poethood, crowns herself with ivy. A bee simile introduces Aurora's thought:

Meanwhile I murmured on

As honeyed bees keep humming to themselves,
 ‘The worthiest poets have remained uncrowned
 Till death has bleached their foreheads to the bone;
 And so with me it must be unless I prove
 Unworthy of the grand adversity,
 And certainly I would not fail so much.
 What, therefore, if I crown myself today
 In sport, not pride, to learn the feel of it,
 Before my brows be numbed as Dante’s own
 To all the tender pricking of such leaves?
 Such leaves! what leaves?’

(II, 26-38)¹⁵

Bs and long Es recur (‘bees’, ‘bleached’, ‘bone’, ‘be’, ‘Before’, ‘brows’, ‘be numbed’, ‘leaves’); and the language of this passage glances off Milton (‘unless I prove / Unworthy of the grand adversity’). But Virgil is here too. Barrett Browning’s engagement with the *Aeneid* has been underestimated partly due to a sense that Virgil’s epic was less compatible with her ‘Romantic aesthetic’ than other classical sources.¹⁶ But the presence of Virgil’s epic (as opposed to georgic) bees makes good sense in this context. Placing herself as the subject of a bee simile (‘I murmured on / As honeyed bees’), Aurora’s thoughts turn to posterity, futurity, a sense of poetical succession. Her murmuring, specifically, is a small way to make a great claim. For by this literary touch, Aurora herself becomes as intimately connected to the reincarnation scene of *Aeneid* VI as she is to the bees that appear there.¹⁷ Virgil’s bees are in ‘meadows’ (*pratis*) and ‘the fields murmur with the humming’ (*strepit omnis murmure campus*); Aurora likens the bees’ ‘humming’ to her own ‘murmur[ing]’, and her name, Leigh,

is an Old English word for ‘meadow’: she herself is a kind of field (a poetical one, cultivated by a female poet) that murmurs with the sound of bees. This poet is both ‘Aurora’, figure of the dawn (a quotidian but vital reincarnation), and a ‘Leigh’ (a field or meadow). And by having her murmur with a sound like humming bees (as did the fields full of Virgil’s bee-spirits), Barrett Browning identifies this young poet as the literary, historical, and imaginative ground for a new creative and spiritual empire.¹⁸ If Dante’s claim to descent from ancient Rome is credited, then without the founding of Rome which Virgil’s bees foretell, there would have been no Dante to defend the use of vernacular language in literature.¹⁹ By following her apian allusion with Aurora’s thoughts of Dante, Barrett Browning implicitly makes such a claim for Aurora: to ancient descent and a democratising legacy.

There are, however, at least two kinds of poetical bee here: those from the history of epic; and another from *The Greek Anthology* and other early fragmentary sources, where the poets Sappho and Erinna are described as bee-like and ‘clear-humming’.²⁰ Barrett Browning’s simile connects Aurora to both these traditions. She murmurs *like* ‘bees [...] humming’: her likeness to her ancient lyric forebears (‘clear-humming’ bee women) is framed by her own involvement in an epic endeavour: her own contribution to the founding of a new society. That the bees in Aurora’s simile are ‘humming to themselves’, might tell us that Aurora pleases herself and, we may suppose, will please herself as a poet (the bees engaging in a kind of art for art’s sake, *avant la lettre*). That they ‘*keep* humming to themselves’ notes that this is what bees (and poets) persist in doing: it is by pleasing themselves that they achieve most (the bee, fulfilling its own instincts, works on behalf of its community; the poet does most for society by aesthetic indirection). And then, too, Aurora is not like *a* bee, but ‘bees’: the simile describes a poet both singular and plural, one who aims to write work both personal and political. By blending in this way culturally feminine and masculine elements of the poets’ long association with bees (lyric and epic), Barrett Browning incorporates both traditions in Aurora’s self-

perception. Aurora's status as bee-poet is inherently multiple and decidedly self-pleasing: in this, its political force is both ancient and modern.

Soon after this moment, Romney arrives in the garden and the two argue about their futures, the roles of the sexes, and about art. Romney, dismissing poets (and especially female poets), asks, in these belated and belaboured times,

Who has time,

An hour's time . . . think!—to sit upon a bank

And hear the cymbal tinkle in white hands?

When Egypt's slain, I say, let Miriam sing!—

Before—where's Moses?'

'Ah, exactly that.

Where's Moses?—is a Moses to be found?

You'll seek him vainly in the bulrushes,

While I in vain touch cymbals. Yet concede,

Such sounding brass has done some actual good

(The application in a woman's hand,

If that were credible, being scarcely spoilt)

In colonising beehives.'

'There it is!—

You play beside a death-bed like a child,

Yet measure to yourself a prophet's place

To teach the living. None of all these things,

Can women understand.

(II, 168-183)

Barrett Browning has Aurora meet Romney's biblical reference with both an extension of it and also an answering classical allusion. Romney muddles possible biblical allusions in this speech, appearing to do so accidentally, and only catches at 1 Corinthians subsequently, once Aurora has called it out. In the verse of Exodus to which Romney refers, Miriam takes up a 'timbrel in her hand' (not a cymbal) and dances to celebrate the deliverance of Israel from Egypt (Exodus 15:20-21). (Romney's point is that it is no good having poets, to be ornamental and celebratory, when the world still needs leaders: 'Where's Moses?'.) But his reference to the 'cymbal tinkle' recalls a quite different biblical passage: 1 Corinthians 13:1, which speaks of the 'worthlessness of a prophet whose qualities do not include charity' ('Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal').²¹ That is the passage Aurora picks up ('While I in vain touch cymbals. Yet concede / Such sounding brass [...]'). And having observed that Romney's search for a new Moses may be as vain as her own Miriam-like endeavour, she challenges him to acknowledge that poetry (figured by the 'sounding brass') 'has done some actual good / ... / In colonising beehives'. Romney appears to hear the allusion to hollow prophets in this speech ('Yet measure to yourself a prophet's place'), but not Aurora's allusion to *Georgics* IV.

In the first half of *Georgics* IV describing good bee-keeping, Virgil explains that to call bees into a hive, one should 'raise a tinkling sound, and shake the Mighty Mother's cymbals round about'.²² The Mighty Mother is Cybele, worship of whom 'was accompanied by the clash of cymbals'.²³ In *Georgics* IV, the bees, like one ideal model of human society, labour collectively and give their lives for their community. They have this in common with Romney's values, and they are also, in Virgil's description, notably male. But, according to Virgil, the hive also lacks the arts and love, and in the end the colony dies. Aurora thus counters Romney's biblical reference with an apian allusion that represents the death of society when art and love are lacking, pointing out that it takes art to establish a new hive (to build a new society), even

if that art seems (to the philistine) merely a hollow sound. Her jibe achieves a double purpose, working both with and against Romney's view. On the one hand, she invites Romney to recognise that her poor art (which he likens to the sound of brazen instruments) may do some good even on *his* terms: it may help to colonise beehives in the first place, or to establish well-managed workers' collectives (Romney's type of ideal society). (Charles Fourier, whose socialist theories inform Romney's arguments and to whom Aurora refers directly, used the example of bees to illustrate the kinds of functional harmony of which he believed human societies capable.²⁴) On the other hand, the allusion serves as a rebuttal to Romney's form of socialism, because it invokes a society that, without love and art, collapses. And so Barrett Browning 'measure[s] to' Aurora 'a prophet's place' after all; for Romney's projects, similarly lacking (like his proposal) both art and love, do indeed come to unfortunate ends.²⁵

In *Georgics* IV, Aristaeus (the beekeeper), finding that his bees have died, appeals to his mother, Cyrene, to advise him how to recolonise the hive. She tells him to ask Proteus. Proteus (eventually captured in spite of his shape-shifting) tells Aristaeus that he is responsible for the death of Eurydice, and has thereby angered the nymphs. The reader then hears the story of Orpheus and Eurydice, which constitutes much of the second half of *Georgics* IV. The Book ends with a brief epilogue, or *sphragis*, in which the poet explains that, while 'Caesar thundered in war [...] bestowed a victor's laws [...] and essayed the path to Heaven', 'I, Virgil, was nursed by sweet Parthenope, and rejoiced in the arts of inglorious ease—I who toyed with shepherds' songs, and, in youth's boldness, sang of you, Tityrus, under the canopy of a spreading beech'. With the reminder of epic potential already offered by the bee simile at the start of Book II, the allusion to *Georgics* IV reinforces the literary precedent for writing self-pleasing poetry which also has political force. The young Aurora aligns herself with the Virgil of *Georgics* IV, and (knowing Virgil would become author of the *Aeneid*) leaves Romney to dream of being Moses (or Caesar).

There is one further story of gathering bees which may help us to read Aurora here too. In Book III of the *Fasti*, Ovid attributes the discovery of honey to Bacchus and his followers, and recounts a time

when the cymbals in the hands of his companions clashed. Lo, drawn by the tinkle,
winged things, as yet unknown, assemble, and the bees follow the sounding brass.

Liber collected the stragglers and shut them up in a hollow tree; and he was rewarded
by the discovery of honey.²⁶

These cymbals also call forth bees. The same passage alerts readers to the women who accompany Bacchus and who use the honey to make offerings (sweet cakes) for the gods: ‘The reason why a woman presides at the festival is plain enough: Bacchus rouses bands of women by his thyrsus. [...] Why is she wreathed with ivy? Ivy is most dear to Bacchus’.²⁷ Aurora, still carrying her crown of ivy during her argument with Romney (which she notes might ‘twist about a thyrsus’ (II, 52)), also understands that for her purposes a colony of bees might represent neither Fourier’s nor Virgil’s social order, but instead carry associations with an ancient religious and mythical commitment to diverse social freedoms. Sounding brass may do some good in colonising this kind of wild hive, so providing Bacchus and his followers with honey.

Aurora’s allusion does not determine any of these readings alone. In Barrett Browning’s sophisticated handling, the bees are vital and complex figures in stories telling variously of: well-ordered society, or a sterile or deathly society; the audience of art, or a community lacking the arts; lovelessness, or diverse loves and sexual freedoms; revelry and plebeian disobedience; and skilful (if petty) warfare.²⁸ By leaving it unclear how much Romney does and does not understand of Aurora’s meaning in this exchange, Barrett Browning not only emphasises

Aurora's less confined, more active learning (which pits classical, biblical, and modern knowledge against Romney's Bible-bashing).²⁹ She also suggests that it is Romney's arrogance that blinds him the most, not necessarily his inability finally to comprehend – which proves to be his saving grace by the end of the story. Romney, in this way, serves as a figure for Barrett Browning's readers, for whom questions of classical learning, and assumptions about female authorship, could leave them dupes of the poet's wit. When Romney exclaims 'None of all these things, / Can women understand', the joke is on him.

The three remaining references to bees in *Aurora Leigh* are all connected with kinds of achievement. In Book V, Aurora reflects on the nature of poetry and what she hopes to attain. Here the bee appears again as a figure of the poet, and of the triumph of poetry. Aurora rejects drama, she says, because it 'Makes lower appeals, submits more menially, / Adopts the standard of the public taste / To chalk its height on' (269-71). Noting that dramatists' attempts to appeal to the public are flawed, while their attempts to explain themselves make bad worse, she concludes:

—Weep, my Aeschylus,

But low and far, upon the Sicilian shores!

For since 'twas Athens (so I read the myth)

Who gave commission to that fatal weight

The tortoise, cold and hard, to drop on thee

And crush thee—better cover thy bald head;

She'll hear the soft hum of the Hyblan bee

Before thy loudest protestation!

(V, 292-9)

Aurora may mean that the public, or people ('Athens'), will respect even the lesser poet above the dramatist.³⁰ She certainly means that they will hear the poet above the tragedian. And since her own work (poetry) is linked to that of the bee, when Aurora sets the Hyblan bee in contrast to Aeschylus (the father of tragedy), she also sets her work in opposition to (or at least apart from) tragedy. The tortoise (from which Hermes made the first lyre) may have been required to *kill* Aeschylus, but the 'soft hum' of any poet can drown him out. Or so Aurora might hope, in a work that in this way rejects not drama but 'tragedy' as an appropriate form for a woman's words.

In Book VII, Aurora (in Italy with Marian Erle) receives a letter from Vincent Carrington, who tells her he has read her book (the book printed from the manuscript she sold to fund her journey). She comments on the male prejudice (both external and internalised by women) that may govern perceptions of a woman's achievements (VII, 738-743); following which, she reflects on the nature of truth in art and offers the reader some clear hints on how to attend, how to read; and so returns the bee. '[M]an', says Aurora, 'the twofold creature apprehends / The twofold manner, in and outwardly, / And nothing in the world comes single to him' (802-804); and then she quotes a contemporary poet, and gives her own illustration of the creed:

'There's nothing great
Nor small,' has said a poet of our day,
Whose voice will ring beyond the curfew of eve
And not be thrown out by the matin's bell:
And truly, I reiterate, nothing's small!
No lily-muffled hum of a summer-bee,
But finds some coupling with the spinning stars;

No pebble at your foot, but proves a sphere;

No chaffinch, but implies the cherubim;

[...]

[...] Earth's crammed with heaven, (VII, 809-15, 821)

The quotation (not verbatim but in paraphrase) recalls the Introduction to Robert Browning's poem *Pippa Passes* (1841), ll. 154-7, when Pippa recounts lines from a hymn: 'Say not, a small event! Why small? / Costs it more pain this thing ye call / A great event should come to pass / Than that?' (in other words, a 'small event' may entail just as much effort as a so-called 'great' one, so on whose terms is it 'small?').³¹ The first stanza of the hymn that Pippa quotes refers to the equality of individuals in the sight of God; the second (from which these lines come) to the equal significance (spiritual or moral) of any given action a person commits. In Browning's poem, the sentiment speaks to the seemingly small actions of the girl Pippa (walking, and singing as she goes) and their larger social consequences (as, unbeknown to her, snippets of her song have a dramatic effect on those she passes). In Aurora's invocation of the lines, the sense has shifted. But the image of a female singer whose influence reaches farther than she knows catches at Aurora's own situation, even as she uses it to describe the workings of Art; for Aurora is unaware at this stage of the full reception of her book, certainly not of the book's effect on Romney.

Humming bees among lilies were Virgil's chosen image of the future citizens of Rome; and the hum of 'summer-bees' was the likeness that Aurora chose for her own 'humming' and 'murmuring' about her poetic prospects in Book II. Now, in Book VII, a 'summer-bee' and lily make poetical contact with something timeless in the spinning stars, something cross-temporal in Aurora's life, and (once again) with thoughts of literary endurance. And in this case, too, there are classical, and specifically Virgilian precedents for the connection; for setting bees

alongside stars recalls ancient associations of bees with divinity (which I noted in connection with sonnet XV earlier). Aurora makes this link immediately following her reference to Browning and the certainty of his literary afterlife. Barrett Browning, who has repeatedly linked Aurora with classical literary bees, tacitly points to Aurora's own literary legacy.

Shortly after this passage, pondering Romney's choices (especially his decision, she thinks, to marry Lady Waldemar) and her own situation (her rejection of Romney in favour of artistic independence), Aurora, tired, lonely, and a little baffled by life's thwarting contradictions, finds again that thoughts of men and women, and of how they represent themselves, lead her to the stars and the bee. She observes that

Men define a man,

The creature who stands front-ward to the stars

The creature who looks inward to himself,

The tool-wright, laughing creature. 'Tis enough:

We'll say instead, the inconsequent creature, man,—

For that's his specialty. What creature else

Conceives the circle, and then walks the square?

Loves things proved bad, and leaves a thing proved good?

You think the bee makes honey half a year,

To loathe the comb in winter and desire

The little ant's food rather? But a man—

Note men!—they are but women after all,

As women are but Auroras!

(VII, 1011-18)

The word ‘man’ is denied secure neuter status here (even as Aurora’s self-recognition, aligning ‘men’ with ‘women’ with ‘Auroras!’), effects a generous association). So, as Aurora contrasts ‘man’ to ‘the bee’, Barrett Browning quietly contrasts the ways of ‘man’ (or ‘men!’) to the ways of poethood, feminine community, and Aurora’s creativity.³² Aurora draws the distinction on the grounds that the bee’s practices of making and consuming are more sensible and admirable: where men define themselves by concepts they fail to practise, the bee, by contrast, does not reject the product of its labours, but, unlike ‘man’, sustains itself on what it has made. The bee represents another way of doing things, a better and more sustainable way of being.³³ Aurora is berating herself in this scene, but for the purposes of Barrett Browning’s poem this bee-image is another way of saying that Aurora has got it right: that her product, her poem, her self-definition (albeit she does not know it yet) will be sustaining for the future. (This proves true when Romney arrives soon after and, no longer asking Aurora to ‘come down’ (II, 385), says of her book: ‘It stands above my knowledge, draws me up; / ’Tis high to me’, ‘Young you were, / That birthday, poet, but you talked the right’ (VIII, 285-6; 379-80).) Having endured the labour required, she has made a work that will sustain herself and others. This is the last bee of *Aurora Leigh*, and, though framed by despondency, it represents sustenance for the future.

In Book II, Aurora identified herself with the bees, long-time figures of the poet, but (since Homer and Virgil) also of warfare, national endeavour, epic, and literary endurance. The bees in *Aurora Leigh* have a mixture of georgic, epic, lyric, and other ancient significances, and they help Barrett Browning to figure the poet’s craft. For, whatever additionally she aims to signify, when Barrett Browning mentions bees she demonstrates her alertness to the role bees have played in helping poets to think about the work they do – tasting, blending, humming, making, fertilising, surviving. She takes part in a tradition of apian poetics committed to the past as a test of the future. With a combination of learned obliqueness and post-Romantic

naturalism, her allusions to Virgil's bees, especially, offer readers, not the meadows and fields of Hades, the prospect of a great but violent empire, as earnest of a woman's future (as Tennyson had chosen to risk with his own allusion to that passage), but the young life of a woman who endures and succeeds: a living, humming, murmuring Leigh. This kind of apian poetic practice – complex transformations and trace allusions that infuse the whole – is faith in poetry, and in the future.

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NOTES

I am grateful to Samantha Matthews for reading an earlier version of this work. This essay is for my mother, Lizzie 'B'.

¹ Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, ed. Kerry McSweeney (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993, reissued 1998).

² See *Iliad*, II. 84-87. On bees in epic simile, see Jane Wright, 'Tennyson's Bees', *The Tennyson Research Bulletin*, 10:4 (2015), 321-339. Sappho, Erinna, and Pindar are among several classical poets linked to bees in early sources. See *Greek Anthology*, 2.69, 2.108, 7.13, 7.34, and 16.305; Pindar, Fragment 152. Classical connections, between the female singer and the bee, and the male singer and honeycomb, appear to have been extended by Barrett Browning and her husband; see Jane Wright, 'Browning's Honeycomb', *Essays in Criticism*, 53:3 (2013), 275-297.

³ Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Poems*, 2 vols. (London: Edward Moxon, 1844).

⁴ I disagree here with the editors of *The Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, Volume I: *Poems*, 4th edn (1856) (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2010). They link the lines to *Georgics* IV (which describes the life of bees) and observe: 'EBB's scant praise reflects her view that Homer and the Greeks were generally superior to Virgil and the Roman poets' (217, 29n.). I think Barrett's early statements of literary preference (for ancient Greek over Roman literature) have encouraged readers and editors to underestimate her responses to Virgil, and to *The Aeneid* in particular. The lines above are high praise of Virgil's bees, not scant praise of the poet.

⁵ See, respectively, *Il Paradiso*, XXXI, 1-12; *Paradise Lost*, Book I, 338 and 761-775; 'Inscription for a Fountain on a Heath'; *The Princess*, VII, 207; and 'All Saints'.

⁶ Marjorie Stone observes links between 'Come down, O maid' and *Aurora Leigh* in 'Genre Subversion and Gender Inversion: *The Princess* and *Aurora Leigh*', *Victorian Poetry*, 25:2 (1987), 101-127, 119

⁷ William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, V.i.88-94.

⁸ EBB describes the floral Hector she made in a letter to James Martin, 6 February 1843. *The Brownings' Correspondence*, ed. P. Kelley, R. Hudson, S. Lewis, and E. Hagan, 25 vols to date (Winfield, Kansas: Wedgestone Press, 1984-). Hereafter *Brownings' Correspondence*.

⁹ This reading complements Beverly Taylor's argument that 'Hector in the Garden' is a 'female challenge to the classical paradigm of the masculine hero'; 'Elizabeth Barrett Browning and the Politics of Childhood', *Victorian Poetry*, 46:4 (2008), 405-427, 414.

¹⁰ See *The Oxford Book of Phrase and Fable*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). Cf. EBB's use of 'crystalline' in 'A Drama of Exile' (l. 108). Editors of the Pickering & Chatto *Works* instead compare 'crystalline' to the 'amber' jewel in Donne's poem, which I discuss below.

¹¹ See footnote 2. Virgil begins *Georgics* IV: 'Next will I discourse on Heaven's gift, the honey from the skies' (1-2) and remarks that, blessed with 'divine intelligence', at the end of their lives bees 'fly unto the ranks of the stars' (220, 224-225). See also Pliny, *Natural History*, X.xi.30-31.

¹² RB to EB, 26 February 1845; *Brownings' Correspondence*, vol. 10. The next letter (27 February 1845) contains EBB's declaration of her 'chief intention' to write 'a sort of novel-poem'.

¹³ *The Complete Poems of John Donne*, ed. Robin Robbins (London: Longman, 2010).

¹⁴ For discussion of disembodiment in EBB's work, see Barbara Barrow, 'Gender, Language, and the Politics of Disembodiment in *Aurora Leigh*', *Victorian Poetry*, 53:3 (2015), 243-262.

¹⁵ Shortly after this, echoing the scene of baptism I quote earlier (I, 577), Aurora's head is again wet with dew: 'I drew a wreath / Drenched, blinding me with dew, across my brow' (II, 56-57).

¹⁶ See Isobel Hurst, *Victorian Women Writers and the Classics: The Feminine of Homer* (Oxford: OUP, 2006), 105 (hereafter 'Hurst'), who notes that, if the *Aeneid* was less useful to her, 'Barrett, like Mary Shelley and Sara Coleridge, seems to have enjoyed the *Georgics*' (105). Barrett was, however, as Hurst also observes, 'reading the *Iliad* and Virgil's *Aeneid* in the original languages by the age of 14' (113), and, in *Aurora Leigh*, Aurora (paralleling Aeneas) 'journeys by way of the Parisian underworld to Italy and founds a new community there' (124).

¹⁷ For evidence of EBB's engagement with *Aeneid* VI, see her amusing letter to Hugh Stuart Boyd, 3 March 1828, in *Elizabeth Barrett to Mr Boyd*, ed. Barbara P. McCarthy (London: John Murray, 1955), where she finds it inconceivable that any woman could be 'silent under Dido's circumstances' (22) (referring to *Aeneid* VI, 456-476).

¹⁸ Cf. Aurora's acknowledgement that at this time in her life 'I looked for empire and much tribute' (II, 537).

¹⁹ *Inferno*, XV. 76; Dante, *The Divine Comedy*, trans. and ed. Robin Kirkpatrick (London: Penguin, 2012).

²⁰ See *Greek Anthology*, 2.69, 2.108, and 7.13. Also in 7.13, Erinna's death is figured as a marriage: 'As Erinna, the maiden honey-bee, the new singer in the poet's quire, was gathering the flowers of the Muses, Hades carried her off to wed her'.

²¹ McSweeney, 333n.. I quote from *The Bible. Authorized King James Version with Apocrypha*, intro. and notes by Robert Carroll and Stephen Prickett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

²² The translation 'tinkling' (from 'tinnitus', 'tinnitisque'), which chimes with the King James text, was standard in the period; see, for example, William Smith, *A Latin-English Dictionary* (London, 1855).

²³ See Loeb, *Georgics* IV, 62-66 ('tinnitisque cie et Matris quate cymbala circum'). Worship of Cybele was also accompanied by male self-castration; see, e.g., Ovid, *Fasti*, 4, 183-186, and 4, 243-244. Multiple interpretations of Romney's story are available in this light: his misguided philanthropy and naïve style of woman-worship early on constitute one kind of self-castration; alternatively, some critics have argued that his final condition (physically blind and willingly led by Aurora) constitutes a kind of castration too. See, e.g., Cora Kaplan, 'Aurora Leigh', *Feminist Critique and Social Change*, ed. Deborah Rosenfelt and Judith Newton, 3rd edn (Oxford: Routledge, 2013), 134-164, 153; and Talia Schaffer, *Romance's Rival: Familiar Marriage in Victorian Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 161.

²⁴ See *Le Nouveau Monde industriel et sociétaire*; first published 1829 (Paris: Flammarion, 1973), pp. 288, 528. Aurora tells Romney: 'Ah, your Fouriers failed, / Because not poets enough to understand / That life develops from within' (II, 483-485).

²⁵ Virgil's reference, just a few lines later in the same passage, to 'harsh sounding brass' or 'broken trumpet blasts' (IV, 71) to describe the noise of bees at war ('Martius ille aeris rauci canor increpat et vox / auditur fractos sonitas imitata tubarum') is also apt in the context of Aurora's continued challenge to Romney: for these bees, encouraged by the tinkling cymbal to colonise the hive, now themselves make a brazen sound and 'with loud cries challenge the foe' ('magnisque vocant clamoribus hostem'). What 'art' the bees do possess, that is, is an art of war. Aurora claims for herself both art and political force.

²⁶ *Fasti* III, 740-744. Liber, Italian god of fertility and wine, is identified with the Roman Bacchus and Greek god Dionysus. See *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 3rd edn, ed. Simon Hornblower and Anthony Spawforth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

²⁷ *Fasti* III, 763-767.

²⁸ Of the bees' battle in *Georgics* IV, Virgil famously remarks: 'These storms of passion, these savage conflicts, by the tossing of a little dust will be quelled and laid to rest' (86-87). (Robert Browning later alluded to this in connection with sexual conflict, too, in Book VII of *The Ring and the Book*, ll. 976-979.)

²⁹ As Isobel Hurst explains (11-13), girls' classical education in the nineteenth century (where it was given) was more limited than that offered to boys yet often less confined by deadening rote learning and strict expectations about grammar. Girls in this way might find greater pleasure and freedom of engagement in classical texts.

³⁰ In the Oxford World Classics edition, Kerry McSweeney glosses 'Hyblan bee': 'poetaster'. In ancient sources, Hymettan and Hyblan honey are often mentioned together, and D. R. Shackleton Bailey (ed. and trans.), Martial, *Epigrams*, vol. II, XII, 104 and 105, notes that 'Sicilian [i.e. Hyblan] honey was inferior to Attic [i.e. Hymettan]'. For other passages linking the two see, e.g., Pliny, *Natural History*, XI.xiii.32, and Martial, *Epigrams* VII,88, IX.11, XI.42.

³¹ *The Poems of Robert Browning*, vol. 2: 1841-1846, ed. John Woolford and Daniel Karlin (Harlow: Longman, 1991). The thought also echoes that of EBB's 'Sounds', from *The Seraphim, and Other Poems* (London: Saunders & Otley, 1838), ll. 15-18.

³² For discussion of bees as figures of the 'other', see Christopher Hollingsworth, *Poetics of the Hive: The Insect Metaphor in Literature* (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 2001).

³³ Ants eat a great many things, but are known for consuming honeydew, a sweet liquid secreted by aphids and other insects that feed on plant sap. The 'ant's food' is not just different, but similar enough to be a pointedly poor substitute for the superior complexity and health benefit of the bee's. (See 'Ant', *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1842).)