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### From the Classroom

# Pedagogy

Critical Approaches  
to Teaching  
Literature, Language,  
Composition, and Culture

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*Pedagogy* seeks to create a new discourse surrounding teaching in English studies by fusing theoretical approaches and practical realities. As a journal devoted exclusively to pedagogical issues, it is intended as a forum for critical reflection as well as a site for spirited and informed debate from a multiplicity of positions and perspectives. The journal strives to reverse the long-standing marginalization of teaching and the scholarship produced around it and instead to assert the centrality of teaching to our work as scholars and professionals.

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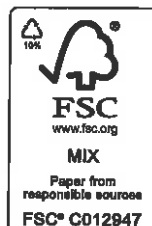
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individual portrait be seen as a larger statement about the position of women?

2. How do references to light and dawn structure the poem?
3. What difference does it make to your reading of the poem to know that "Give me more light" was reputed to be the dying statement of Johann Wolfgang Goethe, the famous German poet and scientist?
4. What advantage did Levy gain from setting this poem at Xantippe's deathbed?
5. What is the role of Aspasia, who is credited in the historical record with inspiring (and probably writing) some of the key speeches by Pericles? (Here is an excerpt on her from an older edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*: "the most famous of the Ionian courtesans. . . . She became Pericles' mistress, for by his own law . . . she could not, as a foreigner, be his legal wife, and her charm and talents seem to have won her an important place in the intellectual society of the time").
6. What are Xantippe's dreams and aspirations as a young girl?
7. Why does Xantippe initially recoil from the thought of marriage to Sokrates? By what intellectual and emotional process does she alter her first response and come to admire him? In what ways does this process reflect on her later experiences in life?
8. What difference does it make to your reading and understanding of this poem to have read Wordsworth's blank-verse poems and prior dramatic monologues?

#### Notes

1. Since Levy is not represented in the *Norton Anthology* that I used as a course text (Abrams et al. 2012), I taught "Xantippe" using a scan from Melvyn New's *The Complete Novels and Selected Writings of Amy Levy, 1861–1889* (Levy [1880] 1993).
2. I have obtained formal permission to quote from all students whose remarks are reproduced in this article. My thanks to them all.

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## "Let Me Count the Ways"

### Teaching the Many-Faceted *Aurora Leigh*

Florence S. Boos

Hopeful undergraduate students in their first session of a Victorian poetry course have sometimes approached me after class: "I'm so happy to be taking your course," they say. "I love Jane Austen movies, and I'm looking forward to learning more about the Victorian period!" As I smile in response, my heart sinks as I inwardly contrast the lyricism and oblique iconoclasm of Victorian poetry with the template of fulfilled romance such students may desire. But a reliable antidote for these quandaries awaits us: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*, a verse novel originally written in 1856 that I have taught perhaps two dozen times at the undergraduate as well as graduate levels. In my teaching experience *Aurora Leigh* has provided the subject for two graduate dissertation chapters and two published articles, and perhaps more important, whenever taught it has evoked lively reflections and debate.<sup>1</sup>

*Aurora Leigh* fills 10,938 lines in its nine "books," and despite its digressive narrative reflections, complicated syntax, elevated diction, and allusive imagery, it retains an immediate appeal. The graduate students find in it a long meditation on poetic development, in the tradition of Wordsworth's *Prelude*, and a literary critical disquisition on the qualities needed for poetry to be relevant to the conflicts of "modern" life, then and now. For the undergraduates, its pages turn for many of them, I think, as for many of Browning's contemporary readers, as a verse-novel indebted to the romantic, melodramatic, and autobiographical fiction of its period. I would argue, however, that *Aurora Leigh*'s rapidity of pace and tone owe much to its adoption of qualities associated with a variety of formal genres—autobiography, diary, fiction, drama, travel narrative, essay, and of course, poetry; and that this generic diversity renders it an especially valuable text for teaching nineteenth-century literature.

#### Autobiography

Throughout the poem Aurora narrates events in her own voice, and her initial situation as a young woman without financial resources evokes immediate

with Charlotte Brontë's Blanche Ingram and Ginevra Fanshawe), and Aurora's pained response to artist Vincent Carrington's rhapsodic representation of the rape of Danaë with Lucy's exasperation at Paul Emmanuel's strictures against her viewing of Reubens's naked women in *Villette*. Like Lucy also, as we have seen, Aurora seems a *partly* unreliable narrator, leaving the reader guessing the extent to which important emotions or insights may have been concealed.

Of direct concern to young people are *Aurora Leigh's* many representations of gender in general and sexuality in particular. Students expect some variant of *Aurora Leigh's* marriage plot, but not its unexpected departures: the heroine's initial refusal to marry a principled suitor of higher economic status; her contempt for sentimental poetry of the sort her readers might have associated with, say, Letitia Landon or Felicia Hemans; and Aurora's establishment of a temporary household with another woman and the latter's illegitimate offspring.

The contemporary resonances of Browning's poem provide occasions for explaining the many legal and educational disabilities faced by Victorian women, especially their limited access to education and inheritance, the former the subject of a brilliant parodic rant in book 2 on the maddeningly superficial instruction offered Victorian middle- and upper-class women. Aurora's pennilessness also prompts the question, by what "right" could a loving father's only surviving child be disinherited on his death, entirely against his will, and by what laws? Would Aurora have been barred from certain forms of work or inheritance of property in her own name in 1857? And is Aurora deluded when, presumably as her author's mouthpiece, she maintains that

Whoso cures the plague,  
Though twice a woman shall be called a leech:  
Who rights a land's finances is excused  
For touching coppers, though her hands be white (390)?

Here the author clearly softens reality: women were denied access to English medical schools until 1876, and the first woman British cabinet minister was appointed in 1929.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, Aurora broods repeatedly throughout books 3–8 on her loneliness in the midst of authorial success and expresses still-familiar desires for a balance of work and family, an ideal eloquently expressed by Romney after their reunion in Italy:

Beloved, let us love so well,  
Our work shall still be better for our love,  
And still our love be sweeter for our work. (409)

In the end, the plot grants Aurora and Romney a companionate marriage anchored in their commitments to writing and social reform, but only Marian, a single mother, raises a child. Are companionate marriage and devoted motherhood still bifurcated goals? Modern students also question whether Marian's fixation on her son may be excessive or even harmful:

She leaned above him (drinking him as wine)  
In that extremity of love, 't will pass  
For agony or rapture, . . .  
Self-forgot, cast out of self,  
And drowning in the transport of the sight.  
Her whole pale passionate face, mouth, forehead, eyes,  
One gaze, she stood . . .  
"How Beautiful,"  
Said she. (350–51)

As for sex, the poem's antipode to *Aurora Leigh* is *Lady Waldemar*, a particularly insidious temptress who contemns Romney's principles as she schemes to attract him:

Am I coarse?  
Well, love's coarse, nature's coarse . . .  
We fair fine ladies . . .  
we're as natural still  
As Blowsalinda . . .  
As ready for outrageous ends and acts  
As any distressed sempstress of them all. (295).

Waldemar later arranges for the seamstress Marian to be drugged, abducted, and raped, a not uncommon crime in mid-Victorian Britain hitherto entirely absent from its "polite" literature. Unfortunately, students do not need to be persuaded of the relevance of this topic—as it happens, this past fall one of my students was raped not long after we read *Aurora Leigh* and left her classes until the last week of the semester.

Nevertheless, Marian boldly protests her silencing, and she fur-

identification in students. From the onset, however, her claims to transparent narration also stir in readers trained to question truth claims a measure of skepticism, or at least awareness that she may mean many things simultaneously, some of which may be unknown even to her. I often open discussion by citing the passage in the first book in which Aurora reveals her aims in writing:

As when you paint your portrait for a friend,  
Who keeps it in a drawer and looks at it  
Long after he has ceased to love you, just  
To hold together what he was and is. (254)

Students are led to question what painful events may have caused Aurora to experience herself as irrevocably divided. Will the retelling that follows suture the wound? And how reliable may this putatively autobiographical narrator be—should we be alert to signs that she may have distorted or repressed aspects of the tale she narrates?

The extended story as told from several temporal perspectives provides quite different accounts of Aurora's judgments of others (herself as well as Marian and Romney). To what extent can these be reconciled? Was she a reliable narrator when she withheld from us in books 1–4 the self-doubts and desires for her cousin's approval that later beset her in books 5–9? How are we to judge the credibility of her interpretation of Romney's behavior in book 4, when they meet after she has established herself in London—

Ay, but he  
Supposed me a thing too small, to deign to know:  
He blew me plainly, from the crucible  
As some intruding, interrupting fly,  
Not worth the pains of his analysis  
Absorbed on nobler subjects. (324)

—despite his marked courtesy to her on this occasion and other indications that the intervening months have deepened his respect for her choices?

Aurora also writes at times in a white heat of emotion, in medias res. In a breathless passage in book 6, in which she has just glimpsed Marian in the streets of Paris but not yet spoken with her, she texts, "I'll write more about her, presently. My hand's a-tremble, as I had just caught up / My heart to write with, in the place of it" (348)—a Twitter posting, so to speak, which

proclaims the importance of the next report. This prompts the question of the extent to which this autobiographical narrative has switched to diary mode. Do its jumps and uncertainties provide the poetic counterpart of the fictional journals embedded in *Wuthering Heights* or *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, breaking up the retrospective structure and omniscient perspective expected of autobiography?

When my students encounter *Aurora Leigh*, they will already have read and viewed a video performance of "A Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point" and pondered Browning's remarkable choice to cut her ties with her slavery-enriched family and seek an independent life in Italy with an as-yet unsuccessful poet. Thus, the autobiographical parallels between the poem's author and narrator will be immediately clear to them: the woman who left behind her patrimony and composed "A Runaway Slave" on her honeymoon, for example, was at least as eager to seek a new path as was the aspiring poet Aurora Leigh when she firmly rejected Romney's generous financial offer and set out to brave the Victorian literary marketplace's trial by fire of anonymous reviews.

#### Gender, Sexuality, and the Novel in Verse

As is well known, Browning had read with care the work of the Brontës, especially the 1847 *Jane Eyre* and the 1855 *Villette*, published the year before *Aurora Leigh*.<sup>2</sup> Students who have read Brontë's novels are quick to note the parallel burnings of an ancestral hall and the blindings of Rochester and Romney in their respective conflagrations. This prompts a discussion of the authors' contrasting purposes: unlike Brontë, Browning employed this melodramatic plot incident for symbolic ends, to valorize Romney's visionary role in the couple's social/poetic endeavors and foretell the demolition of a repressive social order.

I also cite other parallels between Brontë's prose narrative and Browning's verse novel; for instance, *Jane Eyre* rejects St. John Rivers's insistence that she become his missionary "helpmate," a refusal echoed in Aurora's charge that Romney wanted "a helpmate, not a mistress, sir, / A wife to help your ends—in her no end" (276). A slight contrast, however, occurs in the treatment of religion: Brontë's narrator expresses qualified respect for St. John's evangelistic fervor, concluding the novel with his words from the mission field; on the other hand, although *Aurora Leigh* is replete with religious imagery, its characters avoid dogmatic fervor. Other comparisons arise in the use of female foils for dramatic contrast (Browning's Lady Waldemar

with Charlotte Brontë's Blanche Ingram and Ginevra Fanshawe), and Aurora's pained response to artist Vincent Carrington's rhapsodic representation of the rape of Danaë with Lucy's exasperation at Paul Emmanuel's strictures against her viewing of Reubens's naked women in *Villette*. Like Lucy also, as we have seen, Aurora seems a *partly* unreliable narrator, leaving the reader guessing the extent to which important emotions or insights may have been concealed.

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Nevertheless, Marian boldly protests her silencing, and she fur-

ther offends Victorian decorum by describing its effects: "Next day's noon caught me there, / Half-gibbering and half-raving on the floor" (360). Nonetheless

We wretches cannot tell out all our wrong  
Without offense to decent, happy folk.  
I know that we must scrupulously hint  
With half-words, delicate reserves, the thing  
Which no one scrupled we should feel in full.  
... man's violence,  
Not man's seduction, made me what I am. (359-60)

Not only was Browning's epic the first major nineteenth-century poem to describe such crimes explicitly, but to my knowledge it was also the first to suggest that one of its victims might recover from her trauma to live a happy life.

Even the poem's descriptions of Aurora Leigh's and Romney's premarital lovemaking were scandalous enough to defy the canons of nineteenth-century romantic fiction. As the lovers cling to one another on the balcony of Aurora's Italian villa,

There were words  
That broke in utterance . . . melted, in the fire,—  
Embrace, that was convulsion, . . . then a kiss . . .  
As long and silent as the ecstatic night,—  
And deep, deep, shuddering breaths, which meant beyond  
What could be told by word or kiss. (406)

Aurora and Romney then spend the poem's final night together, remaining alert to celebrate the poem's concluding vision of the lights over Florence, a holy city seen afar. Alfred Tennyson's *In Memoriam* and later works such as William Morris's *Earthly Paradise* (1868-70) and D. G. Rossetti's "House of Life" (1870) alluded to erotic encounters, but *Aurora Leigh* was the first work of "high" poetry to describe such unions in a contemporary setting, without prudery and as a matter of course.

Browning also addresses social barriers and injustice in ways unexpected in traditional epic. Romney, for example, a character likely based on Charlotte Yonge's Guy Morville of the 1853 *Heir of Redclyffe*, is unstinting in his devotion to healing the class divide. Aurora at first finds this endeavor irrelevant, but by book 9 she has come to internalize it as the purpose of her own writing. When Romney first meets the lower-class Marian, destitute

after she has fled from her parents to escape being "sold" to a local squire, he admires her humble idealism and willingness to help her fellow workers, as evinced when she forfeits her job in order to nurse a dying fellow seamstress.

The encounter between Romney and Marian enabled Browning to craft her complementary upper- and lower-class plots, interwoven after the fashion of eighteenth-century novels such as Mary Wollstonecraft's *Maria; or, The Wrongs of Woman*, in which the lower-class asylum attendant Jemima and incarcerated middle-class Maria recount their respective past tribulations. In Browning's parallel narrative of Aurora and Marian, Aurora attempts to help Marian prepare for her wedding to Romney, consoles Romney when Lady Waldemar's kidnapping of Marian shatters his well-intended plans, thereafter seeks "sister Marian Earle / My woodland sister, sweet maid Marian" in England and France (339), and when she finds Marian working as a seamstress in Paris to support her son, invites her to form a shared "holy family," avowing that

thou and I  
Being still together will not miss a friend,  
Nor he a father, since two mothers shall  
Make that up to him. (362)

Yet as students are quick to note, Aurora's narration of Marian's past begins with a form of middle-class censorship—

She told me all her story out,  
Which I'll re-tell with fuller utterance,  
As colored and confirmed in after times  
By others and herself too. (300)

Such mediation evokes comparisons with that of similarly filtered accounts by working-class women of the period, and discussion of why Browning's audience might require that a lower-class woman's story be "confirmed . . . by others."

At this point, in a plot turn toward what might be called *dea ex machina*, Marian asserts that she cannot marry *any* man, not even Romney, on the grounds that his presence might weaken her tie to her child, and Aurora and Romney begin to make plans to marry. Student opinions divide at this point over whether her stance represents noble independence, the scars of a trauma victim, a retreat from earlier suggestions of an alternate family structure, a convenient plot device, or all of the above.

### Closet Drama(s)

Many of *Aurora Leigh's* scenes could be staged. Scenes suitable for performance or oral class reading might include the initial courtship/debate between Aurora and Romney (the subject of *Aurora Leigh's Dismissal of Romney*, an 1860 painting by Arthur Hughes); the visit of the scheming Lady Waldemar to Aurora's attic apartment in book 3; the chaotic and aborted marriage scene in book 4; the overt hostilities at Lord Howe's party in book 5; and the scene in Florence in book 7 in which Aurora slips behind a pillar to avoid being seen by the harmless Sir Blaise Delorme (thus depriving herself of the sad news that Leigh Hall has burned to the ground in a fire that has blinded its owner, as well as the welcome news that Romney has repudiated Lady Waldemar). Most intensely dialogic, of course, is the final tête-à-tête between Aurora and Romney in books 8 and 9, replete with cross-purposes and recriminations before ending in rhapsodic reconciliation.

The poem's language is also dramatic, in ways that are quickened by its deft shifts in narrative voice and ebullient sarcasm. Lady Waldemar's tours de force of rhetorical venom poison and enliven every scene she enters, by physical presence or epistolary proxy, as acknowledged by Aurora's remark that

What vexes, after all,  
Is just that such as she, with such as I,  
Knows how to vex. (339)

### Poetry as Travel Narrative

An enjoyable feature of Browning's poem for students is its participation in the popular Victorian genre of fictionalized travel writing, as Aurora and Romney visit European sights attractive to British travelers. Many contemporary readers of Browning's poem would never stroll as had Aurora down the boulevards of Paris (book 6), travel by riverboat down the Rhine, or experience with her the oppressive heat of an Italian countryside villa (book 7). The poem provides up-to-date responses to Victorian modes of travel and communication, as in Aurora's fear and discomfort as a train enters a new-model railroad tunnel beneath the Alps:

the train swept in  
Athrob with effort, trembling with resolve,  
the fierce denouncing whistle wailing on  
And dying off smothered in the shuddering dark,

While we, self-awed, drew troubled breath, oppressed  
As other Titans underneath the pile  
And nightmare of the mountains. Out, at last,  
To catch the dawn afloat upon the land! (440)

The blend of old and new in a poetic epic/contemporary travel narrative thus offered Victorian and later readers familiar reading pleasures blended with the exoticism of the remote.

### A Literary-Critical Treatise

At its most serious level, Browning's epic is an exemplar of her considered views on poetry, a self-conscious embodiment of its proclaimed literary intentions. An important and difficult question for students, therefore, is how to identify these ideals. Interspersed throughout Browning's narrative in readable, brief increments is a poetic manifesto, marking stages of Aurora's growing knowledge of the craft of poetry. Aurora had always valued "truth to nature" blended with interpretation—the alloy and gold of the ring, as it were—and successive books trace her poetic evolution from an early imitative phase in which

Life's violent flood  
Abolished bounds,—and, which my neighbor's field,  
Which mine, what mattered? (267)

and in which she declares to Romney in book 2 that her poetic mission is to celebrate the spiritual ideals within nature:

what then,  
Unless the artist keep up open roads  
Betwixt the seen and unseen,—bursting through  
The best of our conventions with his best,  
The speakable, imaginable best  
God bids him speak. (277)

Over time, as Aurora struggles with her craft, earlier literary verities come to seem pedantic. In book 5 she exclaims, "Let me think / Of forms less, and the external . . . Five acts to make a play. / And why not fifteen? Why not ten? or seven?" (327). Likewise may Browning herself have asked, "Why cannot an epic poem contain features of memoir, fiction, and drama?" Similarly, the poem's most quoted lines offer an anti-neo-medievalist insight that poets



should "exert a double vision, . . . to see near things as comprehensively / As if afar they took their point of sight" (326):

Their sole work is to represent the age,  
Their age, not Charlemagne's,—this live, throbbing age,  
That brawls, cheats, maddens, calculates, aspires,  
And spends more passion, more heroic heart,  
Betwixt the mirrors of its drawing-rooms,  
Than Roland with his knights at Roncevalles. . . .

King Arthur's self

Was commonplace to Lady Guenever;  
And Camelot to minstrels seemed as flat  
As Fleet Street to our poets. (327)

In the end, as Aurora comes to understand that "nature" must include human society in its entirety, she develops a concomitant aesthetic of agon, wholeness and comprehensive understanding in a Ruskinian ideal of moral truth. This fuller vision is expressed by Aurora after her arrival in Italy:

Thus is Art

Self-magnified in magnifying a truth  
Which, fully recognized, would change the world  
And shift its morals. (372-73)

And complementarily in book 9 by Romney the blind seer:

Now press the clarion on thy woman's lip  
And breathe thy fine keen breath along the brass,  
And blow all class-walls level as Jericho's  
Past Jordan,—crying . . .  
What height we know not,—but the way we know,  
And how by mounting ever we attain,  
And so climb on. (409)

### Poetry Itself

Finally, not least, there is the poetry itself. As we have seen, many of Browning's eleven thousand lines of blank verse have a highly oral, rhetorical, and argumentative cast and are characterized by vivid, blunt, far-ranging, and sometimes quite unexpected metaphors. These force students to ponder the aptness of each comparison, as in book 1 when the young Aurora chafes at an education devoted to trivia:

I learnt cross-stitch, because [my aunt] did not like  
To see me wear the night with empty hands  
A-doing nothing. So, my shepherdess  
Was something after all (the pastoral saints  
Be praised for't), leaning lovelorn with pink eyes  
To match her shoes, when I mistook the silks;  
Her head uncrushed by that round weight of hat  
So strangely similar to the tortoise shell  
Which slew the tragic poet. (260)

Similarly biting is a passage in book 3 in which Aurora compares her life in London—with a touch of self-pity—to the death of the apostle Peter, "When crucified head downwards" (288, book 3, line 6), a characteristic Browningsque refashioning of a religious allusion for secular uses. And as book 7 ends the narrator evokes her depressed state with near clinical precision:

Most like some passive broken lump of salt  
Dropped in by chance to a bowl of oenomele,  
To spoil the drink a little and lose itself,  
Dissolving slowly, slowly, until lost. (379)

Attention to such tiny vignettes can inspire inventive and perceptive student readings.

Evocative at a different level is Romney's bleak description of an ancestral home he would in more than one sense never see again:

You'd come upon a great charred circle, where  
The patient earth was singed an acre round;  
With one stone stair, symbolic of my life,  
Ascending, winding, leading up to nought!  
'T is worth a poet's seeing. Will you go? (393)

—an emblem of the death, both of an old aristocratic order, and of his hopes for immediate reform.

But a countervailing image might be found in the poem's concluding metaphor of the lovers' vision of a partly secularized New Jerusalem:

where faint and fair,  
Along the tingling desert of the sky,

Beyond the circle of the conscious hills,  
Were laid in jasper-stone as clear as glass  
The first foundations of that new, near Day  
Which should be builded out of heaven to God. (410)

I have often asked students whether this passage provides a satisfying ending, and to my surprise, the answer is often “No!” In vain have I cited the vision of John of Patmos, reminded them of William Blake’s hopes to “build / a new Jerusalem in England’s green and pleasant land,” evoked the African-American folk song “Twelve Gates to the City,” or suggested that although forms of utopian aspirations may change, the ideals themselves will remain. They have almost always demurred—the metaphor of a New Jerusalem fails to resonate—but I console myself with their collective answer to another, subtler question: “Should *Aurora Leigh* have been written in prose rather than poetry?” “Oh no!” they reply, “It’s much better as it is. Without the poetry, so much would be lost!”

#### Notes

1. Page numbers cited are to the 1900 edition. For a fully annotated text, see the variorum *Aurora Leigh*, edited by Margaret Reynolds (Browning [1856] 1992), which forms the basis for a Norton Critical Edition, *Aurora Leigh: Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Contexts, Criticism* (Reynolds 1995). A further excellent source of background material for teaching *Aurora Leigh* is the Elizabeth Barrett Browning Archive ([www.ebbarchive.org](http://www.ebbarchive.org)), prepared by Marjorie Stone, Keith Lawson, Sandra Donaldson, and others. For recent criticism, see the reviews by Marjorie Stone in “The Year’s Work in Victorian Poetry: Elizabeth Barrett Browning” published annually in *Victorian Poetry* since 2001.
2. See Holloway 1977 and the Elizabeth Barrett Browning Archive ([www.ebbarchive.org](http://www.ebbarchive.org)).
3. Sophia Jex-Blake was the first woman admitted to a British medical school (the University of Edinburgh), although with restrictions. In 1858, the year after the publication of *Aurora Leigh*, Elizabeth Blackwell had been accepted into the UK medical register after obtaining a degree in the United States. In 1911, however, only 495 women were listed in the UK medical register (see [www.bbc.co.uk/schools/gcsebitesize/history/shp/modern/indrevdoctorsrev2.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/gcsebitesize/history/shp/modern/indrevdoctorsrev2.shtml)). Margaret Bondfield was appointed by Ramsay MacDonald as the first female British cabinet member, serving as minister of labor from 1929 to 1931.

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