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**Review: Donald S. Hair, Fresh Strange Music: Elizabeth Barrett
Browning's Language
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precisely by expanding the field by reading both alongside these stalwarts of queer theory, while imagining their work otherwise and more expansively. The result is a sophisticated and, in my opinion, successful attempt at reimagining the field of queer theory itself, one that pushes thought itself forward from the backside or from behind.

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Donald S. Hair. *Fresh Strange Music: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Language*. McGill-Queen's University Press 2015. ix, 302. \$100.00

Early in the career of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, an evident anxiety appeared in the reviews of her work regarding her seemingly irreverent experiments in metre and rhyme. Her use of half rhymes, double rhymes, feminine endings, dissonances, and irregular rhythms was repeatedly highlighted as “evidence” of her wilful bending of the rules of prosody and, in some reviewers’ opinions, her lack of control over her work. Hers is not an isolated example of such criticism – witness John Ruskin’s reaction to the metrics of Christina Rossetti’s “Goblin Market,” for instance – but it was arguably more constant across the course of her career than most other nineteenth-century poets.

While there have been notable forays into understanding and defending Barrett Browning’s choices in metre and rhyme over the last four decades, there has not been until now a sustained study of this topic. Donald S. Hair’s exciting and engaging volume, *Fresh Strange Music: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Language*, fills this gap and offers something genuinely new and insightful in Barrett Browning criticism. Taking its title from Robert Browning’s description of Barrett Browning’s poetry in his first letter to her (in 1845) – where Browning yokes the poetry’s “fresh strange music” to its “new brave thought” – Hair’s volume perceptively explores the centrality of music in Barrett Browning’s writings from her early verse to her late. As part of the ongoing neo-formalist drive in Victorian poetry studies, Hair identifies music – by which he means both the regular strong beat of Barrett Browning’s verse and what she herself termed her “rhymatology” – as not only essential to Barrett Browning’s prosody but also key to her exploration of those socio-political concerns to which she was repeatedly drawn.

Hair lays the groundwork for this analysis in his first two chapters, which examine John Locke and Francis Bacon as the foundations for Barrett Browning’s understanding of language and the notion of the “harmony of verse.” In an unusual take on Barrett Browning’s early writings, Hair insightfully reads the critically neglected volume, *An Essay*

on *Mind, with Other Poems*, as anticipating many of the issues in Barrett Browning's subsequent work. His sensitive analysis of the title poem's concern with the philosophy of language, and use of the shorter poems to reveal Barrett Browning's engagement with contemporary debates about the primacy of quantitative verse, effectively reveals the poet's commitment to a prosody that "posits social and political views that the affect of poetry makes actual" and that might enable nothing less than divine revelation. Indeed, this linking of music, poetry, and revelation is central to the following chapter on Barrett Browning's major religious poems, *The Seraphim* and *A Drama of Exile*. Particularly interesting here is Hair's consideration of how Barrett Browning imagines she can express "heavenly" language, and the "vestiges" or "resonances" of the music of the spheres, in a post-lapsarian world, readings that further reveal the complex ways in which Barrett Browning constantly scrutinized theological arguments.

Across chapters four to nine, Hair offers a chronological reading of Barrett Browning's works that is precise, challenging, and underpinned by vibrant close readings and metrical analyses. His exploration of the notion of "perplexed music" in *Poems* leads to a particularly fine reading of "The Cry of the Children," and the discussion of music and the concern with the heartbeat in *Casa Guidi Windows* further highlights the intricate relations between music and nation building in the later work. The increasing commitment to rhythmic "turbulence" that Hair identifies in *Aurora Leigh* and *Poems before Congress* – by which he means "greater energy and greater range of affect, even of confusion and chaos" – emerges from impressively detailed readings that range widely between ideas of song, silence, speech acts, and the language of prophecy.

A particular strength of Hair's study is his examination of less-considered texts such as *The Book of Poets*, which he reads through a romance plot of music and prosody, and some of the occasional verses and birthday poems that have only recently been published in the 2010 *Works*. (Attention to *The Battle of Marathon*, Barrett Browning's first long poem privately printed in 1820, might also have yielded some interesting readings given the poem's political import and often powerful verse.) Without doubt, *Fresh Strange Music* is an impressive and welcome study that will prove important to scholars not only of Barrett Browning's work but also of Victorian poetry and prosody more widely.

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