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## Fulfillment of Woman and Poet in Elizabeth Barrett Brown's Aurora Leigh

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Dr. Bridgham and Dr. Graver

Senior Thesis

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Fulfillment of Woman and Poet in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*

Introduction

In her 1856 novel in verse *Aurora Leigh*, Elizabeth Barrett Browning grapples with the struggles of the work's namesake, a young woman of the Victorian Age who aspires to poetic greatness. Intelligent, passionate, well read, and determined, Aurora has within her the utmost potential to realize her dream. She is, however, deeply troubled by that the fact that such an endeavor is considered by her society to be frivolous at best, and a sinfully self-indulgent rejection of social duty at worst. While Aurora hopes that society is wrong, and that she can fulfill her roles as both woman and artist, the insistence of her aunt and her cousin Romney lead Aurora to grudgingly accept the incompatibility of these roles. She thus chooses for years to pursue her poetic vocation to the exclusion of her physical and emotional health. But, as Aurora matures as both woman and artist, it becomes increasingly apparent that the soul can only take flight in art if it is well grounded in a healthy, happy body. As Joyce Zonana articulates, "while the world is twofold, spirit and flesh inextricably intermingled, epistemologically and developmentally the material is primary. One cannot apprehend the spirit except through the flesh" (246). Aurora's development is thus evidenced as she first insists that "it takes a soul,/ to move a body," but finally "holds firmly by the natural, to reach/ the spiritual beyond it" (2.479-80, 7.779-80). Augmenting Aurora's steady progress towards an understanding of woman and poet as compatible roles are the impoverished Marian and Romney's own development. Marian

offers Aurora an alternative way of understanding the relationship between body and soul, treasuring the domestic labors which Aurora finds oppressive as opportunities to uphold her morality and cultivate her imagination. Romney also learns to reconcile the relationship between body and soul. By the end of the poem he is eager to love and support Aurora as both woman and poet, and cannot imagine continuing his philanthropic works without her poetic inspiration. With the union of Romney and Aurora in Book Nine, body and soul are united, and Aurora accepts herself as both woman and poet. She and Romney finally understand that these roles are not only compatible, but also, and more importantly, mutually fulfilling. That is, it is only in eagerly pursuing her poetic vocation that Aurora can be the best wife, mother, and woman she can be. And it is only in fully embracing herself as a woman that Aurora can best realize her artistic desires.

In addition to her careful rendering of plot, Browning underscores the reciprocally enhancing vocations of woman and poet in the very genre of her work: the verse novel. The novel has a “long tradition of female authors and heroines,” and is thereby a perfect genre in which to unfold to romantic love story of Aurora Leigh and Romney (Case 17). Browning both complicates and enriches this tradition by writing it in blank verse, which of course belongs to “the unrelentingly masculine tradition of epic poetry” (Case 17). This epic tone emphasizes that Aurora is more than a typical Victorian heroine; she is also on a quest to uncover her artistic talent. That is, *Aurora Leigh* is not only a romance, but also a *ku□nstlerroman*, or artistic coming-of-age-story. Thus, at every level, Browning makes evident the deep conflict within Aurora to unite her dual roles as woman and poet. Though, traditionally, these genres of novel and epic poetry are at odds with each other, representing feminine and masculine tradition respectively, Browning is able to unite them in such a way that they enrich and enhance one

another. So too, Aurora as woman and Aurora as poet are ultimately united into the one Aurora. Some critics have argued that, in utilizing both feminine and masculine traditions, Barrett Browning implicitly suggests that the poetic vocation which Aurora pursues is a masculine labor. As Anne D. Wallace writes, “Barrett Browning’s poem sets up a deliberate opposition between the female/domestic labor of sewing and the masculine/ artistic ‘labors’ of walking and writing” (226). But, while writing is set up in opposition to the feminine labor of sewing, it is unnecessary to understand Aurora’s poetry as strictly masculine. On the contrary, by placing Aurora’s art in the masculine context of epic poetry, Barrett Browning challenges Victorian ideas of feminine poetry as trivial. Aurora’s poetry is not meant to be understood as masculine. Rather, by juxtaposing a woman’s poetry with that of the epic genre, Barrett Browning imbues Aurora’s work with a gravity and importance which Victorian society had not yet come to expect from its female counterparts.

Of course, such a unique layering of genre’s was not universally embraced by contemporary critiques. The *Dublin University Magazine* accused Browning of being “occasionally coarse in expression and unfeminine in thought” and of creating “a book which is almost a closed volume for her own sex” (Cooper 150). This review did not see the melding of traditions as successful, instead objecting to the idea of a woman describing her experiences through the same medium as an epic hero. The magazine actually “grieved” that Barrett Browning would dare to describe such unseemly content within an epic context (Cooper 150). Other reviewers rejected the speaker’s self consciousness which, as the *Westminster Review* argues, detracts from the image of Marian Erle as a “picture of innocence and maternal fondness such as perhaps has never before been realized in verse” (Cooper 152). Ironically, such criticism epitomizes the very societal pressures which Aurora herself struggles against. The critics

“admire Barrett Browning’s poem, yet want to see Aurora under man’s dominion as Romney’s helpmate; they are touched by Marian’s story but dislike the coarseness with which it is expressed” (Cooper 152). Such criticism then, though it seeks to point out the failure of writing a verse novel, inadvertently upholds the hybrid genre’s success. Browning achieves a story which brings opposing traditions into contact with one another, and then melds them into a commentary on the futility of trying to keep these genres apart. Just as Aurora cannot deny either her womanhood or her poetry without denying a part of herself, so both the feminine tradition of the novel and the masculine tradition of the epic poem are necessary for a complete and honest description of Aurora Leigh.

While the union of masculine and feminine genres is certainly bold, and while the language which Browning uses to describe women’s plight (especially that of rape, prostitution etc.) is undoubtedly daring for a Victorian woman, Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s main project is not a particularly feminist one according to some modern understandings of the word. During the Victorian Age, feminism was not the “single-minded, systematic campaigning for women’s rights,” but rather a “particular sensitivity to their needs, awareness of their problems, and concern for their situation” (Rogers 8). That is, Browning is feminist in her unabashed accusations of society’s gravely hypocritical treatment of critical problems which women face.

As she articulates through the dejected Marian Erle:

We wretches cannot tell out all our wrong  
Without offence 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. (V. 1220-24)

With this bitter accusation, Barrett Browning shows herself poignantly aware of the difficulties which economically and sexually vulnerable women faced during the Victorian age. So long as

women were suffering the indignities of poverty and the traumas of rape, Barrett Browning will not hesitate to acknowledge their plight openly, no matter how offensive the public finds it. This is not to say, however, that Browning is a staunch supporter of women's rights, or that she campaigns for recognition of women's equality to men. On the contrary, Browning's letters make it quite clear that she understood women, including herself, to be intellectually inferior to men. In a letter to her fiancé Robert Browning Aurora writes, "with my high respect for your power in your Art & your experience as an artist, it would be quite impossible for me to hear a general observation of yours on what appear to you my master-faults, without being the better for it," clearly indicating her acceptance of him as the greater poet (Mermin 379). She also shows herself most willing to be submissive to Robert whenever it comes to making important decisions. For example, while trying to establish a time for their wedding, Robert implores Barrett Browning to make a decision, and she responds "your decision shall be duty and desire to me" (Taplin 165). It is, of course, important to note that Barrett Browning chooses to humble herself so completely before a man who repeatedly assures her: "I hate being master," and "My own will has all along been annihilated before you" (172). Thus she is by no means enslaving herself to the will of a domineering man, and is rather showing deference to a fiancé who clearly adores her. For these reasons, those critics who find the romantic union of Romney and Aurora Leigh to be a step backwards from the feminist progress which Browning seems to be making throughout the book fail to understand the story as Browning intends it. Aurora is not meant to unsex herself like the infamous Lady Macbeth in order to accomplish her poetic endeavor. Nor does she need to prove her poetic talent and creative independence by isolating herself from men altogether. Barrett Browning's intent is rather for Aurora to bridge the gap between the

Victorian woman and the artist; Aurora is not meant to overcome either her womanhood or her poetry, but rather to unite the two and so flourish.

Another important tactic which Barrett Browning uses to further her argument is the way in which she incorporates central themes from Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre*. A popular novel of the Victorian Age with which every Victorian academic would have been familiar, *Jane Eyre* stood as a model story of a young woman who overcame economic and romantic vulnerability and was thus able to achieve love on her own terms, as an independent woman. Jane Eyre, like Aurora Leigh, refuses to accept a romantic proposal which does not live up to her standards of mutual respect and admiration. She, like Aurora, understands that the role of "woman" is not necessarily synonymous with the roles of "wife and mother," and thus chooses to be single rather than enter into a marriage strictly out of obligation to society's demands. But, unlike Aurora, Jane never goes so far as to assert her own unique vocation. Bold enough to reject an undesirable marriage, she nevertheless lacks any notion of having a calling which she is meant to share with the world. Aurora Leigh, on the other hand, is not only confident that she has a unique vocation which it is her right to pursue, but also that posterity also has a right to the fruits of her talents. By alluding to this familiar plot line, but pushing the envelope even further, Barrett Browning underscores the groundbreaking determination of Aurora to pursue a vocation of her choosing, and so makes the synthesis of Aurora's roles all the more powerful.

### **Book 1- Aurora's Youth**

Considering that Aurora's essential struggle is to achieve synthesis of her womanhood and poetic vocation, it is little wonder that she begins her story with her earliest memory of her mother. Aurora recalls, lying in her crib as an unweaned baby, with her mother:

at her post  
 Beside the nursery-door, with finger up,  
 'Hush hush- here's too much noise!' while her sweet eyes  
 Leap forward, taking part against her word  
 In the child's riot (1.15-19).

Although Aurora's mother lived until Aurora was four years old, this is the only instance in which the poem describes direct interaction between Aurora and her living mother. In these few lines, the image drawn is of a woman who has, according to all evidence, happily embraced the position of wife and mother. The nursery door which she stands beside is referred to as her "post," i.e. the station to which society has assigned her, and she dutifully hushes her daughter who will one day refuse to be silenced. But, though she outwardly performs the duties of a quiet "angel in the house,"<sup>1</sup> "her sweet eyes" betray a conspiratorial encouragement of her daughter's utterances. Thus, the minimal connection which Aurora has with her mother already embodies a complex relationship between outward conformity and inner individuality. Should her mother have lived, it is likely that Aurora's development as woman and poet would have been smoother. Though Aurora's mother is Italian, and therefore could never give Aurora a perfect representation of an ideal Victorian woman, she is nevertheless married to an Englishman, and so, to an extent, takes on the roles which Victorian society expects. An essential question Aurora grapples with is whether it is at all possible to cultivate a rich individuality while at the same time conforming outwardly to societal norms which seem cold and somewhat foreign to her. Aurora's mother, even in this brief moment at her maternal post, demonstrates that a

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<sup>1</sup> \*"The Angel in the House," the title of a poem written by Coventry Patmore between 1854-56, epitomizes typical expectations for Victorian housewives. A married woman "would be her husband's friend and companion, but never his rival... would make his house his true home and place of rest... [and be] a tender mother, an industrious housekeeper, a judicious mistress." She was at all times to be composed of "tender little ways and pretty bashful modesties" (Linton 91-93).



woman can indeed perform these societal roles without compromising the integrity of her individuality. In addition to her maternal responsibilities, Aurora's mother also embraces her other essential social role as wife. The intense love shared by the Leighs is made evident as Aurora describes the toll which her mother's death took upon her father, "whom love had unmade from a common man," (1.183). Love for his wife inspired Aurora's father to cast aside "the old conventions," suggesting that he was not so exacting in his expectations of an "angel in the house" as to stifle his wife's individuality and vigor for life. So, although the only words which Aurora's mother speaks to her daughter are "hush, hush," the vivacious "leap" of her eyes speaks volumes about her ability to balance wifely and maternal duties with an iridescent inner life.

Sadly, Aurora loses this example of a woman who is able to balance a loving marriage and motherhood with some semblance of individuality when she is only four years old. In place of a living woman, Aurora is left with a mere portrait of her mother to inform her of her place in the world. As a young girl, Aurora approaches this painting "half in terror, half/ In adoration," eagerly searching for clues regarding her identity as a woman (i.137-38). Drawing from myriad sources, Aurora admits she associated with this picture "Whatever [she] last read or heard or dreamed,/Abhorrent, admirable, beautiful,/ Pathetical, or ghastly, or grotesque" (1.148-150). As Aurora goes on to describe women ranging in character from the Virgin Mary to the mythical Lamia, such a bizarre compilation of images reveals an acuity of Barrett Browning about the psychology of children. Aurora's childish mind attempts to digest myriad narratives of what it means to be a woman, and she struggles futilely to reconcile these ideas with vague remembrances of her own mother. As Helen Cooper notes, though the *Westminster Review* criticized this passage as "a perfect shoal of mangled and pompous similes," such a remark "is

unwittingly ironic: the very muddle that the critic identifies replicates the muddled images of woman available to Aurora” (156). That is, these images are even more than an artistic delving into the mind of a child grieving the loss of her mother; they also represent the absurd categories into which women were relegated in literary and cultural society. The Virgin Mary stands as a pillar of perfect, unblemished virtue, essentially the epitome of the “angel in the house”. Lamia, on the other hand, is a mythical serpent woman which devoured her own child, and thus represents the antithesis of the ideal Victorian woman. Nor are these extremities of character an exaggeration on the part of young Aurora. In her commentary “The Girl of the Period,” Eliza Lynn Linton compares those girls who fail to conform in every way to the extremes of modest manner to *demi-monde*, or women of ill repute (92). Linton laments, “It is the envy of the pleasures, and indifference to the sins, of these women of the *demi-monde* which is doing such infinite mischief to the modern girl” (92). Thus, lacking a mother and consequently viable role model, Aurora’s confused juxtaposition of this plethora of womanly representations is the culmination of thirteen years of observation.

When, at the age of thirteen, Aurora is orphaned by her father as well and so sent to live with her aunt in England, this befuddled understanding is brusquely replaced by an all too concrete image of a Victorian woman. Aurora’s immediate impression of her aunt is that her hair is “braided tight/ As if for taming accidental thoughts,” and indeed the strict rigidity with which this aunt “lives” her life is the epitome of this perception (1. 273-74). This aunt subjects Aurora to the “cage-bird life” which she herself has lived for so many decades, and so embarks upon her project “to flatten and bake [Aurora] to a wholesome crust/ For household uses and proprieties” (1.305, 1041-42). The education with which she provides Aurora is typical for a young Victorian woman, imparting “a general insight into useful facts,” but never delving deeply

into any one subject (1.414). Young women of the time were encouraged to embrace such an education, which requires her not “to calculate, to compete, to struggle, but rather to occupy a sphere in which the elements of discord cannot with propriety be admitted” (Ellis 98). They were to consider it a mercy that their intellects were not burdened with scholarly strivings of men, and they were to embrace their role as “the Christian warrior against a hostile world” (Ledbetter 20). Rather than overstraining their mental capacities with such masculine subjects as politics and mathematics, women were to embrace their emotional and spiritual faculties, promoting Christian benevolence within their husband’s home. Aurora condemns the image of womanhood with which this education provides her. With a biting sarcasm she disdains those “books that boldly assert/ Their [women’s] right of comprehending husband’s talk/ when not too deep,” as well as that instruction which glorifies “their angelic reach/ Of virtue, chiefly used to sit and darn” (1.430-32, 438-39). Sewing is, in fact, of primary importance in Aurora’s education, and her Aunt’s specific emphasis on this domestic duty plays an important role in Aurora’s developing conception of the role of the Victorian woman.

The sewing which Aurora’s aunt insists upon is both materialistic and restrictive, and so compels Aurora to view domestic duties as worldly and confining. Performing her duty as a “Christian warrior,” Aurora’s aunt insists upon gifts of charity, knitting stockings and petticoats for the poor, “Because we are of one flesh after all/ And need one flannel (with a proper sense of difference in the quality” (1. 299-301). This labor, notably performed from the safety of her domestic comfort zone is, as Aurora implies, completed out of a sense of societal obligation more than sincere empathy. Indeed, Aurora’s specific image of her aunt leading a “cage-bird life” implies that her aunt performs such tasks with an acute awareness that her behavior is on display; at least some of her aunt’s motivation in completing her “women’s work” is a

compulsion to preserve appearances. In addition to preserving appearances, Aurora's aunt even desires to preserve the real class distinctions which Aurora's cousin Romney will later work so hard to erase. Aurora's aunt believes that the division in classes, like "difference in the [flannel's] quality," is "proper," and she seeks to reinforce such differences even as she claims to act charitably. A primary task of the ideal Victorian woman, according to Catherine Hall, was her "struggle to reform and revive the nation" (Ledbetter 21). As Leonore Davidoff elaborates, "Women, putatively placed in the private sphere and commanding a central role in representing the family in face-to-face relationships, were often the controlling force in local status systems which relied on moral regulation" (Ledbetter 21). Thus, as the heads of their families, women were responsible for the spiritual development of their children, but they were also leading examples within society of morality. In her aunt, however, Aurora sees this mission carried out with little sincerity and great emphasis upon material division. Her aunt's preoccupation with the material is compounded by the fact that she is a motherless, single woman. Though she gives material support to charities, she has not intimately invested herself in society's moral development. Without husband or children whom she might influence to live virtuous moral lives, and refusing to condescend to help the lower classes on a personal level, Aurora's aunt therefore seeks to reform society strictly by material means.

The instruction on sewing is further reduced to an empty fulfillment of men's material comfort. As Aurora breaks "the copious curls upon [her] head/ In braids" and submits herself to the domestic training which she finds so suffocating, she makes explicit the triviality of women's work, as she thus far understands it:

We sew, sew, prick our fingers, dull our sight,  
 Producing what? A pair of slippers, sir,  
 To put on when you're weary...  
 Or else at best, a cushion, where you lean

And sleep, and dream of something we are not  
But would be for your sake. (1.457-63)

Sewing, then, is presented to Aurora chiefly as a service which women provide for the physical comfort of ungrateful men. Furthermore, not only is the women's work of sewing unnecessary and unappreciated, it is also physically detrimental to the women. The women injure their fingers and diminish their quality of vision in order to produce a trivial product in which they take as little pride as their husbands show appreciation. The plight of the women sewing is rendered even more pathetic in that, as the men dream of something "we are not," the women still aspire to meet that further expectation. In her conduct book *The Women of England*, Sarah Stickney Ellis instructs that a woman, though seeing a fault in her husband, must perform tasks which "would otherwise be degrading," in order to prove that "she still esteems herself his inferior" (85). In this passage however, Aurora suggests that men in fact dream of being married, not to a perpetually self effacing inferior, but rather to an equal: a friend and partner. The women's education, of course, by focusing strictly on domestic duties, has rendered them incapable of realizing such aspirations, and so both husbands and wives are left dissatisfied.

Sensing this perpetual frustration as the bitter fruit of domestic instruction, Aurora thus understands sewing as both an outward conforming to societal standards, and an inner suppression of any desire which does not also submit to domestic humility. Anne Wallace argues that "Aurora's indictment of sewing as constraining, superficial, trivial, spiritually retrograde, fatal to poetic arts, and economically worthless, constitutes an indictment of women's work in every sense" (233). It is, however, more accurate to say that Aurora indicts women's work *in so far as* it is "constraining, superficial" etc. Had her aunt exposed her to sewing as the fruit of genuine Christian charity, Aurora may not have been so opposed to it. Or, had her work been appreciated by a man as a labor of love and devotion, she might have considered her work

an outward sign of inward affection. But, when her aunt insists on the importance of sewing for underprivileged people “with a proper sense/ Of difference in the quality,” women’s work is stripped of any shred of sincerity or value (1.300-01). So, exposed strictly to women’s work as an arduous labor, (the value of which lies in the submissiveness with which one performs the task, rather than in the product created,) it is no wonder that Aurora eagerly seeks escape in the world of poetry.

Not merely a childish hobby, reading becomes “the only activity that gives Aurora comparable relief from the constraints of domesticity” (Wallace 234). Notably, reading provides an escape for Aurora’s mind, so that even while physically submitting to domestic tasks, her spirit can fly elsewhere. Reading her father’s old books, Aurora discovers that no matter how tightly her hair is braided, her thoughts are still her own. Juxtaposing the images of walking with the freedom encountered through reading, Aurora records how she would “escape/ as a soul from the body, out of doors” (1.693,94). In her mind, the constraints of domestic women’s work are physical, and they can only be escaped by allowing the soul to take flight. She therefore sees poetry, which allows her imagination to take flight, as the antithesis of domestic labor, and she believes that, in order to succeed at poetry, she must dissociate from the conventional understanding of women’s proper work. Walking outside of the home signifies for Aurora “the power to work and succeed at poetry,” as well as the necessary break she must make from the physical constraints of domesticity in order to utilize this power (Wallace 235). Due to the extremely confining nature of women’s work as represented by her aunt, Aurora feels compelled to walk in an entirely new direction.

## **Book II- Aurora Pursues Her Poetic Vocation**

Aurora takes her first aggressive steps away from her aunt's materialistic, disingenuous, rendition of the Victorian woman in the opening of Book II. Aurora greets her twentieth birthday standing "woman and artist- either incomplete,/ Both credulous of completion" (2.4-5). No longer the "meek and manageable child" of seven years ago, who thought only of "suffering her [aunt]/ to prick [her] to a pattern with her pin," Aurora stands on the brink of mature womanhood, but she recognizes her naïveté of what this means (1.373,80-81). Though, since the days when she gazed upon her mother's portrait, her understanding of womanhood has matured, her lack of experience and her aunt's austere example have drastically hindered her progress in forming a new, more cohesive understanding. Similarly, her writing has progressed beyond the "mere lifeless imitations of live verse" which she achieved in youth, but the vibrant verse of her full potential will only come with practice and with life experience (1.974). And yet, Aurora remains unsure of how these roles of woman and poet will come to completion. Though both are "credulous of completion," it is possible that one will assume prominence over the other. The crucial moment of Aurora's standing as "woman and artist" is that she sees these as two separate roles within her. She does not stand "womanly artist" or "artistic woman." Nor does she take either role for granted and simply stand "woman" or "artist." Aurora stands on the brink of her twentieth birthday both woman and artist, unsure how, or if, these two roles will achieve completion together.

Leaving the stifling domestic sphere and "bounding forth" into the June morning, Aurora allows herself to dream of fulfilling her poetic vocation and decides to crown herself with leaves, anticipating the honor which she hopes will one day be awarded to her poetry (2.18). After

careful thought, Aurora chooses to weave her crown with ivy leaves, commenting to herself that ivy is:

Bold to leap a height  
 'Twas strong to climb; as good to grow on graves  
 As twist about a thyrus; pretty too  
 (And that's not ill), when twisted round a comb. (2.50-53)

True to her poetic nature, Aurora's decision is rich with symbolism, revealing the complexity of her struggle to bring both woman and artist to completion. She admires the ivy's bold strength as it climbs to great heights on sheer vertical walls, for she knows she will need to be audacious if she is to achieve any greatness in her poetry. She will have to be bold like the ivy, not only in the sense that she must take artistic risks, but also in that she must leap over conventional attitudes to women's art as trite and simplistic at best (2.149-50). She also appreciates how the ivy flourishes whether it is in a cemetery or entwined upon a thyrus, the staff of the god of wine and revelry. Orphaned at the age of thirteen, Aurora is hopeful that her painful past will provide fruitful soil for the seeds of her poetry, but also that her talent will continue to grow in happier times as well. Finally, Aurora delights in the aesthetic pleasure which the ivy offers "when twisted round a comb." Although Aurora mentions it parenthetically, this observation is important; the ivy, crowning her poetic achievement, also complements her feminine beauty, and thus crowns the completion of herself as both woman and artist. Aurora has by no means definitively established that the completions of herself as woman and poet are dependent upon each other. Her careful choice of ivy, however, reveals that, even in spite of her fears that the roles of woman and artist are in opposition to one another (hence the comb is referenced only parenthetically), she nevertheless has an inkling of the possibility that they might one day coincide.



At the very moment in which Aurora reveals this idea, however, her cousin Romney approaches her and emphatically disparages her hope. From his very first mention of her writing, Romney instantly trivializes her work. Returning to Aurora a book of hers which he found, Romney qualifies her writing as “lady’s Greek” in which he jestingly perceives “witchcraft” (2.75,77). Bolstering the Victorian conception of woman as either “angel in the house” or Lamia, Romney cautions Aurora that her artistic endeavors will only bring headaches and defile “the clean white morning dresses” (2.94,95). That is, not only are the roles of poet and woman incompatible, but even worse, any attempt at art will sully the role of housewife which she is meant to fulfill. As Helen Cooper notes, with this assertion Romney insists “that Aurora accept the incompatibility between being a woman and a poet,” presenting these two roles “as irreconcilable opposites” (160). Aurora’s aunt made every attempt to quell Aurora’s inner life with a barrage of domestic duties, and now Romney expects her to sacrifice her poetry for wifely domestic duties. Aurora is thus surrounded on all sides by the cultural insistence that her hopes of an ivy crown are foolish and unrealistic. Resisting this perspective, Aurora brazenly declares “I choose to walk at all risks” (2.106). With this statement, Aurora determines to pursue her poetic vocation at the risk of soiling her domestic dress, but she has also unwittingly backs herself into a corner. Moments before Romney’s arrival, Aurora was yet hopeful of being both woman and artist. But, hearing him reiterate all of her aunt’s preconceptions about the limitations of women, she feels compelled to reject the dress of domesticity altogether. Joyce Zonana argues that, “though [Aurora] rejects Romney’s attempts to make her into the angel in his house, she becomes an angel all the same...[and] aligns herself with a purely spiritual principle, the Victorian poets’ ‘feminine ideal’” (249). That is, even as she rejects the typical roles of wife and mother, she determines to “revive the nation” with her

poetry, and so embraces the “womanly” role of “moral regenerator” (Ledbetter 22). While Aurora has the potential to understand the concepts of woman and poet as mutually inclusive, the views which her aunt and Romney insist upon drive Aurora to embrace a narrower, more radical understanding of her poetic vocation.

As a necessary part of fulfilling her poetic vocation as she thus construes it, Aurora refuses Romney’s marriage proposal. In the first place, Aurora cannot marry a man who sneers at her art. Romney insists that the greatest praise Aurora can hope for as a woman artist is “comparative respect/ which means the absolute scorn” (2.235-36). And, in addition to criticizing her work on the basis of her sex, Romney also belittles the artistic vocation in general. He implores Aurora to “come down” from her spiritual principle and join him so that “hand in hand we’ll go where yours shall touch/ These victims, one by one” (2.385-87). He is adamant that the best way to effect social change is by meeting the material needs of society, and so dismisses Aurora’s challenge that “it takes a soul/ to move a body” (2.479,80). Aurora therefore denies Romney on the grounds that he wants “a wife to help [his] ends- in her no end” and that he is already married to his “social history” (2.393,410). But, Aurora notes, this is not the only reason why she denies Romney his request. Even though Romney denies both that Aurora is capable of true art and that art has significant value outside of aesthetics, Aurora says that, “if he had loved,/ Ay loved me.../I might have been a common woman now” (2.511-13). There is, therefore, a second reason why Aurora must refuse Romney; not only does he deny her poetic vocation, he also has a distorted view of how she would fulfill her wifely vocation to him. Romney describes “mere women” as “doting mothers, and perfect wives,/ Sublime Madonnas, and enduring saints,” thus revealing a completely unrealistic expectation of women. Should Aurora agree to marry Romney, she would have to forsake her poetic vocation, but also any part

of herself which was less than saintly. Romney considers love a heroic duty. Aurora, however, does “otherwise conceive of love” (2.406). It is thus evident that, while Aurora aligns herself with the spiritual nature of poetry in order to escape the restraints of the domestic realm, she does not entirely renounce the roles of wife and mother. On the contrary, she simply refuses to reduce these roles to means to an end. While Romney sees the role of wife as a means to fulfilling his philanthropic agenda, Aurora maintains that if she ever takes on the role of wife, her husband will desire her for herself more so than for her utility. Thus, although Aurora seems to, at least temporarily, internalize the idea that she cannot simultaneously bring to completion her roles as woman and poet, her rejection of Romney asserts her refusal to compromise both. She will aspire always to greatness, and so she refuses to sacrifice her poetic vocation for a love which is not best for her (2.451).

Significantly, the scene in which Aurora rejects Romney echoes strongly of Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre*, in which the novel’s namesake refuses the proposal of St. John Rivers. St. John, like Romney, grounds his proposal in the desire “to procure a fitting fellow-laborer” for his missionary work. Jane, like Aurora, refuses the proposal, saying “I scorn your idea of love” (348). Thus, like Aurora, Jane ultimately refuses to settle for a life of domestic slavery. Though willing to serve with St. John in India, she concludes that she cannot add to that self-sacrifice the weight of a loveless bridal ring, as “such a martyrdom would be monstrous” (345). Barrett Browning’s Aurora, however, takes this step of womanly independence even further. Jane’s rejection of St. John is entirely wrapped up in his lack of love for her, and so she is admirable in her insistence upon true love from her husband. But, in almost every other way, Jane conforms to the Victorian ideal which Aurora’s aunt and Romney hold so dear. Jane insists that she herself has no vocation and that, provided she does not have to marry him, she will follow St. John to

India (347). She is naturally submissive to men, and is entirely willing to sacrifice her physical well-being for their aims, so long as she can keep her heart free. Aurora, on the other hand, takes an even stronger stand for her own rights. While the extent of St. John's affection for Jane is described as the way a soldier prizes a good weapon, Romney truly loves Aurora in his own confused way (Bronte 345). After Aurora rejects him, he pleadingly writes to her,

Write woman's verses and dream woman's dreams;  
 But let me feel you perfume in my home  
 To make my Sabbath after working-days.  
 Bloom out your youth beside me- be my wife. (2. 831-34)

With this note, it becomes evident that Romney bears Aurora true affection. Though he considers her poetry to be women's frivolity, he is willing to support it in his own way, so long as she becomes the angel in his house. Such a concession is, however, patronizing at best. He cannot set his ideals far enough aside to love and support Aurora as she is, both poet and mortal woman, and so Aurora refuses him a second time. Aurora demands not only that her husband love her, but also that he support her in her vocation. Unlike Jane, Aurora declares to Romney "I too have my vocation," and she is not willing to cast it aside in pursuit of someone else's (2.455). Aurora not only rejects Romney's ill-conceived notion of love, but also audaciously declares that her mission in life is of equal, if not greater, importance to Romney's. Jane, is not so bold; she never asserts a personal vocation, but only rejects the one which St. John offers her. In fact, were it not for St. John's insistence upon marriage, Jane would follow him to India, though to do so would be to "abandon half [her]self" and to guarantee "premature death" (344). Jane lacks any notion that her own life is meant for a specific vocation, unique from St. John's holy philanthropy, and so is willingly to sacrifice herself, platonically, for his cause. From this comparison, which Barrett Browning's careful allusion to *Jane Eyre* encourages the reader to

make, Aurora's action seems all the more bold, and her refusal to renounce her artistic vocation for domestic responsibilities seems all the more ambitious.

### **Books 3 & 4- Aurora Meets Marian**

Having thus chosen to pursue her artistic vocation, Aurora enters wholeheartedly into the project of writing, but she finds herself frustrated on several fronts. In the first place, Aurora is deeply critical of her writing; she summarizes her efforts by saying, "I did some excellent things indifferently,/ Some bad things excellently. Both were praised" (3.206,07). Far from basking in others' approval, Aurora demands excellence from herself, and will not sully her vocation with anything less than utmost zeal and determination. It becomes apparent, however, that Aurora feels at every moment the derision with which Romney considered her poetry. Even though, as a published author, she is making great strides toward fulfilling her poetic vocation, Romney's words still haunt her. Recalling his condemnation of her work, Aurora affirms that Romney was correct: "I played at art, made thrusts with a toy sword,/ Amused the lads and maidens" (3.240,41). Playing is, however, perhaps the least accurate word to describe Aurora's labors. She becomes utterly engrossed in her work, devoting herself so entirely to writing that she neglects her physical health. She admits that "the rose fell/ From either cheek, [her] eyes globed luminous/ Through orbits of blue shadow" (3. 274-76). Though Aurora earns enough money through her writing to support herself, she resents having to dedicate a portion of her writing to the maintenance of what she deems her "vulgar needs" (3.300). Thus, Aurora dedicates herself so exclusively to the intellectual nature of her vocation that she neglects her physical welfare. This may seem ironic, as it was initially the drudgery of domestic labor which made teenage Aurora pale and provoked her aunt's visitors to predict that she would die (1.497-98). But it is not dedication to poetry which makes Aurora ill, just as it was not domestic labor which stifled

her vibrancy. Rather, it is lack of balance in her life which prevents her from flourishing in her dedication to her poetic vocation. Just as domestic labor without any attention to inner life was draining, so too absolute immersion in poetry without attention to the body leads to poor health. Furthermore, Aurora's acute awareness of Romney's failure to write any letters of friendship or commendation for her literary achievements betrays the sincere affection which she continues to bear towards him, but which she refuses to openly admit. Denying her emotional pain, as well as her body's need for sleep and other material comforts, Aurora unwittingly hinders her artistic endeavor.

Struggling to stay afloat in the waters of self-doubt, Aurora is called upon by Lady Waldemar, who confirms all of Aurora's worst fears about the dangers of embracing the material. Lady Waldemar accosts Aurora with a request for assistance in breaking up the impending marriage of Romney to a lower-class woman named Marian. Beautiful but self-centered, Lady Waldemar is the epitome of what Aurora's aunt tries to cultivate with all her domestic training. Aurora points out that Lady Waldemar, with "the low voice of your English dames," would be wary of causing injury, not because she believed others worthy of her respect, but rather because she "would not touch you with [her] foot/ To push you to your place" (3.351-54). Like Aurora's aunt, Lady Waldemar is all too eager to maintain class distinctions, and though she feigns concern for the plight of the poor to gain Romney's attention, she is unwilling to sacrifice even her sumptuous style of dress for the cause (3.603). Lady Waldemar also reiterates the belief of Aurora's aunt and Romney, that Aurora's decision to pursue art necessarily means a rejection of her role as woman. With a backhanded compliment to Aurora's choice of vocation, Lady Waldemar declares Aurora outside "the common sex" (3.407). She further surmises that Aurora must starve her heart in order to pursue this intellectual endeavor.

Here she proves herself almost frightfully perceptive, as Aurora has indeed chosen to deny her love for Romney when he proved unwillingly to love both her and her vocation. In fact, it is Aurora's very love for Romney which prompts Aurora to heed Lady Waldemar, despite her obvious manipulation and insincerity, and to meet Marian, his betrothed.

As Marian tells her story, albeit through the more eloquent lines of Aurora, she unveils an alternative way of looking at domestic labor, and both Romney and Aurora begin to take subtle steps towards reconciling spiritual and material vocations. Born to an alcoholic father and an abusive mother, Marian's childhood is fraught with violence and suffering. She is, however, often given fragments of literature and poetry by a traveling peddler, and she treasures these works much as Aurora did her father's books. Also like Aurora, Marian is forced to sit and sew for hours, though Marian's family requires this labor out of economic necessity. Marian's experience of sewing is also markedly different from Aurora's in that she does not find that the work imposes stifling limitations upon her creativity. On the contrary, as she sews, "With no one to break up her crystal thoughts...rhymes from lovely poems pan around/ Their ringing circles of ecstatic tune" (3.1016-19). For her, then, sewing is actually the one time where she can cultivate an inner life and ponder art. Whereas Aurora's aunt had instilled within Aurora the idea of domestic responsibilities as the antithesis of intellectual and artistic growth, Marian passes her hours of domesticity by mentally indulging in her intellectual and artistic interests, however underdeveloped they might be.

Even more importantly than allowing for mental development, sewing, for Marian, also becomes a means of moral preservation. As a young girl, Marian is sold into marriage by her mother in order to compensate for the financial hardship brought upon the family by Marian's drunken father. Horrified, Marian runs from home, and lives on the streets until she is

discovered by Romney as she lies recovering from illness in a hospital bed. Ever concerned with providing for the material needs of others, Romney establishes Marian with work as a seamstress, “to snatch her soul from atheism,/ And keep it stainless” (3.1229,30). In this moment, by providing Marian a means by which to honestly support herself, he is actually saving her from moral degradation and spiritual damnation. Without Romney’s help she would almost certainly be forced into prostitution. Aurora is thus confronted with a version of domestic labor far unlike her aunt’s. Romney’s sincere intent to help, and Marian’s virtuous use of this opportunity, reveal how domestic labor and inward cultivation need not be held in opposition to one another.

In Book 4, Aurora learns how Marian’s pious humility and sincere compassion for the suffering of others inspired Romney to propose. With his proposal and her acceptance, the scene of St. John’s proposal to Jane Eyre is again evoked. Romney does not love Marian, except in that he loves all; his motivation is rather to establish a new standard, by which divisions between social classes will be rendered a thing of the past (4.173). His request for Marian’s hand is honest about intentions, as he says, “Let us lean/ And strain together rather, each to each,/ Compress the red lips of this gaping wound/ As far as two souls can” (4.125-28). Like St. John, Romney desires his wife not for personal satisfaction, but rather for the general good of having a helpmate in his philanthropic work. Marian, unlike Jane and Aurora, is entirely satisfied with assuming this role, until Lady Waldemar convinces her she is unworthy.

Desperate to have Romney for herself, Lady Waldemar persuades Marian to abandon Romney on the very day of their wedding. Romney is made aware of Marian’s desertion when the letter which she leaves him is delivered to the church in which rich and poor alike have gathered to witness this socially radical union. Upon hearing that Marian will not be married, the



poor in the audience believe that it is Romney who has changed his mind. Enraged, they shout, “Your ladies there/ Are married safely and smoothly every day,/ And *she* shall not drop through into a trap/ Because she’s poor and of the people: shame!” (4.842-45). Their anger is well founded, for the fate of a young woman alone and economically dependent was almost certainly ruin. As Kathleen Hickok notes, “it was understood- among the middle classes, at least- that society did not forgive, forget, and reclaim its fallen women” (92). What was worse, society’s refusal to pick up its fallen women was grotesquely hypocritical, as it was often the ultimate cause of their fall. Hickok summarizes the conclusion an 1870 study of England’s rampant problem of prostitution: “the late marriages imposed on middle-class men by considerations of money and status, coming into conflict with their natural sexual energies, created the demand for prostitutes. Female poverty and lack of alternatives created the supply” (95). Both Aurora and Romney are painfully aware of the awful consequences which Marian is all too likely to face for her self sacrifice, and Romney feels directly responsible. He laments that, in focusing so intently upon his social agenda, he allowed Marian’s soul to slip “straight down the pit of hell” (4.1081). He is thus confronted with a serious flaw in his vocation; though he provided for Marian’s material needs, he ignored the obvious gaps between her emotional and intellectual understanding of the relationship and his. Forced to rely upon Lady Waldemar’s assessment of the situation, Marian decides to trust in the one person who acknowledges these gaps, and so places herself in an extremely vulnerable position. Romney mistakenly believes that providing for Marian’s material needs is sufficient for preserving her spiritual needs. Had he set this preconception aside, he might have been able to perceive Marian’s doubts and, even if he agreed to cancel the wedding, he would have been able to provide for her much more adequately than did Lady Waldemar.

Unfortunately, Romney does not see his failure as a result of his neglect for things spiritual. Though his view changes slightly and he now asserts that Aurora's vocation at least does no harm, he still considers her work tantamount to "innocent distraction" (4.1117). Though he now sees the dangers in which misguided philanthropy can result, he persists in his understanding of art as a primarily frivolous vocation. Even as his eyes are opened to the limitations of his argument for material philanthropy which he made to Aurora in Book Two, he is nevertheless unable to see further merit in Aurora's artistic approach. With his continued depreciation of art, Romney is still far removed from the supportive man whom Aurora desires in a husband, but Aurora, too, still has a great deal of growing to do. The heavy toll which her dedication to the spiritual has taken upon her health is evident to Romney, and he cautions her:

Sing your songs,  
 If that's your way! But sometimes slumber too,  
 ...  
 Reflect, if Art be in truth the higher life,  
 You need the lower life to stand upon  
 In order to reach up unto that higher. (4.1202-08)

Romney is right in encouraging Aurora to care for her "lower life," as she conceives of it, for he sees that she cannot flourish as an artist if she is withering as a woman. Though she gives her vocation her utmost, denying an essential part of herself means she has less to offer her vocation, and so she would be wise to heed Romney's words. Ironically, though he advocates balance in Aurora's life, Romney remains ignorant of the lack of balance in his own. He fails to see that, just as Aurora must not pursue art to the exclusion of physical necessity, so too he must not pursue the materialism of philanthropy to the exclusion of Art's spiritual value. Though he cannot yet see it, Art does indeed play a critical role in effecting social change, and ignoring this truth is a grave disservice to his efforts.

### **Books 5 & 6-Aurora Associates Love with Metaphysical Motherhood**

Immediately following Romney's counsel to tend to her physical health, if only "for Art's sake," Aurora delves into a discussion about art which reveals the progress she is making in synthesizing her roles as woman and artist. Book 5 opens with the question of whether or not Aurora can "speak [her] poems in mysterious tune/ With man and nature" (5.3-2). Aurora gives serious thought to the possibility that the music of her poetry and the music of her life can in fact harmonize. Referring specifically to her "sexual passion," and "mother's breasts," Aurora wonders if the very characteristics which make her womanhood explicit might be able to coincide with her poetry after all. As Joyce Zonana points out, the connection which Aurora makes here "offers a compelling alternative to the centuries-long tradition of cosmic harmony associated with disembodied and ethereal muses" (252). Previously operating under the assumption that the only legitimate pursuit of art is one which forsakes the earthly in pursuit of the ethereal, Aurora now opens herself up to the idea that these two realms need not be in opposition. But, even as she considers this possibility, she concludes that she "must fail," at bringing her art and her nature in tune, just as she was unable "to hold and move" her cousin Romney (5.30-31). In direct contradiction to an embrace of synthesis, Aurora emphatically states that she will not be ensnared by the "vile woman's way," and so will have "no traffic with the personal thought/ In art's pure temple" (5.61-62). Reminiscing about Romney inevitably recalls the doubts he expressed about her poetry, and so "trips up" her own confidence (5.60). Aurora thus relegates her memories of Romney to a "vile woman's way" which she will continue to disregard, so long as it impedes her poetry. Such an eloquent pondering of the synthesis of woman and artist, followed by a refusal to sully art's purity with personal, womanly thoughts, would seem perplexing, were it not for the question which she then asks: "Must I work in vain,/"

Without the approbation of a man?" (5.62-63). Especially in light of the rest of Book 5, it becomes apparent that Aurora, though she denies it to herself, still longs for the approval and support of Romney. Believing, however, that Romney remains aloof from both herself and her poetic endeavors, Aurora ignores her feelings and resolves to focus all of her attentions on poetry.

Alison Case argues that Aurora's "alternating suggestion and denial of romantic interest" causes the reader to "focus on the gap between narrator and implied author, and trust the author to make the narrator betray herself" (29). Thus, although Aurora hesitates to make the connection herself, Barrett Browning's careful construction reveals that the true stain upon "art's pure temple" is Aurora's repression of her feelings for Romney. One example of how Barrett Browning makes evident Aurora's longing for romance is when Aurora admits her jealousy of other poets' support systems. Aurora declares that she is jealous of Mark Gage for his loving and approving mother, and of Graham for his loving and proud wife (5.30-40). Of course, her admission is not entirely transparent, as she follows her declaration of jealousy with a digression into her parents, now dead and unable to read her verse. Aurora would perhaps have her reader think that loving and supportive parents would be enough to quell her jealousy, and so suffuse her poetic efforts with new life. As Case rightly observes, however, the myriad references to Romney and the exorbitant amount of time which Aurora dedicates to him, whom she has not seen in two years, clearly demonstrate that it is his particular approbation which she seeks (5.573).

Though a successful and mature poet, at least compared to the morning of her twentieth birthday, Aurora is yet unsatisfied, because she is not honest with herself about her attraction to Romney. She laments: "I still see something to be done,/ And what I do, falls short of what I

see, / Though I waste myself on doing” (5.344-45). Aurora’s solution for dealing with her feelings for Romney is not to contact him and either win his love or give herself some kind of closure. Nor does she send him her latest writings and ask him to evaluate her work with honesty, if not with praise (5.83). She simply denies the importance of such an individual to her art. She tells herself that earthly praise is vulgar, and holds herself to the purest ideal of “art for art[‘s sake]” (5.69). And yet she exhausts herself in striving for this ideal; pursuing her poetic vocation, as it turns out, is not sufficient for complete satisfaction. What is worse, Aurora’s dissatisfaction hinders the very vocation to which she has dedicated her heart and soul. Aurora is thus faced with a double edged sword: the further she pursues her poetic vocation to the exclusion of her womanly needs and desires, the more difficult it is for her to satisfy that vocation.

Keeping this tension in mind, one must not, however, deny the artistic progress which Aurora has made. With the confidence of an established poet, Aurora speaks authoritatively in Book 5 of the duty of the poet. The poet must, first and foremost, strive towards a view of her own age which is both comprehensive and intimate. Censuring those poets who seek to write about a time other than their own, Aurora writes, “I do distrust the poet who discerns/ No character or glory in his times,/ And trundles back his soul five hundred years” (5.188-92). The importance of this assertion is twofold. First, the mere fact that she articulates such a pointed and firm opinion of the artist’s responsibility reveals her confidence that she herself is not only an artist, but also an artist to be reckoned with. She considers other artists her peers, and has no problem exhorting them to pursue their artistic vocation in the way which she deems most valuable. Secondly, Aurora’s urgent appeal to her fellow poets to address the present moment stands out as proof that Romney, and later Lady Waldemar, are wrong to reduce her writing to

innocuous distraction (4.1118). Far from flitting off into a flight of fancy, Aurora seeks to grapple with the real world, using her poetry as a medium in which to address issues relevant to the present moment. Like Romney, she is invested in making a difference. When she declared in Book 2 that “it takes a soul to move a body,” she was not simply being quarrelsome; the *telos* of her poetry is to make a meaningful difference in people’s lives. Aurora insists that “there’s no room for poets in this world” who dabble with the fancies of other ages and fail to reckon with the issues of here and now (5.200).

Aurora is confident that only that poetry which takes the present moment seriously will have a significant impact, not only on the present, but also on future generations. Significantly, in order to entice her artistic peers to join her in addressing the present moment, Aurora uses imagery which explicitly connects the artist with a nursing mother. The future generations, in reading her work, will declare:

Behold- behold the paps we all have sucked!  
 This bosom seems to beat still, or at least  
 It sets ours beating: this is living art,  
 Which thus presents and thus records true life. (5.219-22)

With this image of poet as nursing mother, Aurora unites the societal role of women with the responsibilities of artists. This reveals immense progress in her ability to reconcile her two vocations, for she sees the ways in which motherhood and poetry are beautifully complementary. Just as a mother offers her breasts to her child and so provides the necessities for life, so the poet, in offering up true art, provides nourishment for the souls of future generations. In Book 2 Aurora’s speculation on motherhood consisted of “chubby children hanging on [her] neck/ To keep [her] low and wise” (2.516,17). Though, on the one hand, this image represented for Aurora a way in which children might keep her humble and grounded, it also distinctly suggested

a taxing relationship, in which the children took their life source from their mother, growing chubby while she grew low with the weight of them upon her. Here, motherhood is not stooped down, drained of its own strength in a half regretted self-sacrifice. On the contrary, the breasts of this passage freely offer their milk, and even as they nourish others a steady heartbeat bears witness to the life within. The image of motherhood thus transcends an idea of simple domestic labor and wifely devotion, and takes on an agency which strengthens the creative initiative.

Aurora's ultimate reconciliation of woman and poet is, however, still incomplete. Though the image of motherhood here provides a tender means of understanding the importance of poetry, Aurora has abstracted motherhood to an almost entirely metaphorical level. Still fearful of becoming too concerned with earthly pleasures, Aurora continues to favor "art's pure temple," and there is the suggestion that she chose this image with deliberate intent to elucidate the superiority of the symbolic motherhood of the poet over actual motherhood. A biological mother can give birth to a finite number of children, nurse them for a limited number of years, influence them throughout their life, and perhaps even affect her grandchildren. The "paps" of a poet, on the other hand, offer a limitless supply of nourishment to innumerable persons for untold generations. Thus, while Aurora's use of breast imagery is undeniably a pivotal moment in her synthesis of woman and poet, she has chosen an idealized image of motherhood, isolated from the myriad other responsibilities which necessarily accompany it, i.e. the domestic labors of running a household. Aurora has nonetheless matured enough to see that, at least in the ideal, abstract realm of poetry, the vocation of woman and poet can be one.

Aurora's ability to move from the abstract to the real, to move from the poetic to the practical unification of her vocation as woman and poet, is hindered by the presence of Lady Waldemar, whom she has the unpleasant occasion to meet at the house of a mutual friend, Lord

Howe. Juxtaposing the artistic rendering of breasts as nourishment for future generations with the audaciously over-sexualized breasts of Lady Waldemar, Aurora lets slip a central obstacle to her acceptance of woman and poet as compatible roles on a concrete level. Aurora paints the picture of “those alabaster shoulders and bare breasts” thus: “If the heart within/ Were half as white!- but if it were, perhaps/ The breast were closer covered and the sight/ Less aspectable, by half, too” (5.619,624-27). While the ideal breasts which Aurora esteems as a worthy symbol of poetry are alive with the desire to nourish and sustain others, Lady Waldemar’s breasts are merely a decorative asset which she uses to secure the sexual attentions of men. As Deirdre David comments, Lady Waldemar’s “is a cold sexuality manifest in those marble breasts designed for display, not warm nurturance” (130). In spite of her breathtaking beauty, Lady Waldemar’s selfish immodesty and callous unconcern for others mars the image of Victorian womanhood which she represents. Aurora, eager to distance herself from such an idea of womanhood, draws a line between the physical breasts of women and the intangible paps of poets.

Even more than her physical aspect, Lady Waldemar’s open derision of Aurora’s poetry forces Aurora to confront once again the painful misgivings she previously overcame when conversing with her aunt and Romney. It is little wonder, then, that Aurora silently accuses Lady Waldemar of being “a woman who takes a housewife<sup>2</sup> from her breast/ And plucks the delicatest needle out/ As ‘twere a rose, and pricks you carefully” (5.1045-47). Momentarily forgetting the image of domesticity which “Marian’s reiterated reliance on sewing [offered] as a saving labor,” Lady Waldemar’s deliberate echoing of past doubts causes Aurora to revert to an image of domesticity as restrictive, painful, and entirely averse to the artist (Wallace 250). Thus, at the

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<sup>2</sup> The term “housewife,” in Victorian England, meant a case for needles (McSweeney 350).



end of Book 5, Aurora has finally begun to merge the vocations of woman and poet, if only at the metaphoric level. But, eager to distance herself from Lady Waldemar's interpretation of womanhood, and refusing to admit to a love of Romney which she believes to be unrequited, Aurora thus persists a little longer in her failure to see the vocations of woman and poet as mutually inclusive and enriching.

In Book 6, Aurora progresses ever closer to this perception of woman and artist, discussing the possibility of "A larger metaphysics[which] might not help/ Our physics" (6.206-07). As at the opening of the fifth book, Aurora returns to the prospect of art and life working together, but again her query falls short of truly unifying these dual aspects of her nature. She writes:

The poet and philanthropist  
 (Even I and Romney) may stand side by side,  
 Because we both stand face to face with men,  
 Contemplating the people in the rough,  
 Yet each so follow a vocation, his  
 And mine. (6.199-204)

Here, Aurora, the poet, and Romney, the philanthropist, stand together in their concern for the poor and those in general need of assistance. This is indeed progress from the either/or mentality of Book 2. Whereas in youth Romney and Aurora each claimed his or her own approach to social change superior to the other's, Aurora now envisions the two working "side by side" to achieve their mutual goal of social improvement. Their united efforts will address the totality of the problem, and progress will be accomplished. And yet, she continues to draw a sharp divide between them. She explicitly states that they will each follow their own vocation, Romney addressing the body and she the soul. In some ways, this is actually a step back from Aurora's earlier understanding that "it takes a soul to move a body" (2.479-80). With that image, Aurora

saw how an inspired soul might influence and invigorate a body to effect change from within, and how a healthy, strengthened body might prove an ideal medium by which a soul might actualize its passions. The image of Aurora and Romney standing side by side, in contrast, is a far less intimate, and so far less powerful image of effecting social change. The move is ultimately, however, closer to the unification of body and soul, because Aurora's initial claim in Book 2 was not so self-aware and deliberate as Aurora's more mature ponderings. While Aurora's first claim was spoken with as much intent to diminish Romney's materialistic philanthropy as to uphold her spiritual art, her thoughts in Book 6 spring from a sincere desire for unification and mutual respect.

Spurred ever onward in her journey towards self-completion, Aurora discovers the lost Marian Erle while wandering about the streets of France early one morning. Aurora's initial joy at recovering Marian is quickly turned to indignation when she discovers that Marian is now mother to a bastard son. But this reaction, too, is turned on its head, as Marian reluctantly pours forth the story of her rape, imprisonment within a brothel, and mad wanderings through the countryside when she is finally released. Interestingly, before Marian confides in Aurora, she demands that Aurora never repeat her words to Romney. Marian reasons that the horror which has befallen her "Would fasten [her] for ever in his sight,/ Like some poor curious bird, through each spread wing/ Nailed high up over a fierce hunter's fire" (6.890-92). Accurately perceiving the depths of Romney's selfless devotion to what is right, Marian shudders at the inevitable concern he would show if made aware of her fate. Marian's desire to avoid such pity is monumental in understanding how societal change is far more complicated than attending to material needs. Marian is in an extremely vulnerable position: already an unwed mother, she has clearly lost her virginity and is no longer a prospect for marriage, even to a lower class man. She

is thus cut off from one of the central means of survival and of respectability available to Victorian woman. In addition to lacking this opportunity, Marian must concern herself not only with her own survival, but also that of her son. Her need for material security is therefore increased, while her means of self-sufficiency are minimal at best. Having the help of a wealthy philanthropist such as Romney would not only ensure her livelihood and that of her son, but would also restore her to a place of at least minimal respect in the community. Marian is well aware that the slightest word to Romney would provide her with all her material needs, but she vehemently rejects his attentions. Her rejection is rooted in her knowledge that Romney's actions, though truly sincere and well meaning, would ultimately reduce Marian from a woman to a cause. Every time he helped her, he would be helping a fallen woman. Viewed forever as a powerless victim, rather than as a woman who has been victimized, Marian would feel pinned down, unable to move beyond the painful defilement which attracted Romney's sympathies. For Marian, all the material and social protection which Romney has to offer is not enough. She cannot suffer to have Romney reduce her to a defiled woman in need of pity, for she is now a mother and, as such, must move past her trauma and onward with her life.

Further supporting the idea that material support is not enough unless accompanied by spiritual and intellectual companionship is Marian's explanation for why Lady Waldemar was right in encouraging her to leave Romney. Marian explains to Aurora how, in the days leading up to her wedding, Lady Waldemar's continual presence and carefully chosen advice brought about the realization that "Romney Leigh/ required a wife more level to himself" (6.1026-27). Though herself a paradigm of the Victorian woman which Aurora's aunt sought to raise, Lady Waldemar's advice to Marian flies in the face of Victorian conduct book gospel. Desperately in love with Romney, but unwilling to marry him if truly undeserving, Marian asked Lady

Waldemar, “If earnest will, devoted love, employed/ In youth like [hers,] would fail to raise [her] up” (6.1040,41). Such a humble hope is directly in line with Sarah Stickney Ellis’s paradigm of a Victorian woman. As she writes, “let [the husband’s] peculiarities of habit and temper be studiously consulted...and, unless he is ungrateful beyond the common average of mankind, he will be sure to guard the source from whence his comforts flow with extreme complacency” (84). Lady Waldemar, however, is far too preoccupied by her own affections for Romney to indulge Marian’s hope that devotion will eventually bring about affection. She therefore explains to Marian that Romney requires an equal, not a subservient subordinate, to make him truly happy. She argues, “Who buys a staff/ To fit the hand, that reaches but the knee?” (6.1032-33). To be sure, Lady Waldemar’s primary concern is not intellectual or spiritual equality so much as it is a preservation of class distinction. Nevertheless, Marian’s words of genuine love and earnest devotion reflect so closely the archetypal meekness of the “angel in the house,” that their thorough negation cannot be an accident on the part of Barrett Browning. Ironically, Lady Waldemar’s rejection of Marian’s aspirations to become an angel in Romney’s house is ultimately a negation of Romney’s desire for a wife as simple helpmate in his philanthropic cause. Even as she sends Marian away and pursues Romney for herself, Lady Waldemar is rejecting the same aspect of Romney’s vision which Aurora rejected when he once proposed to her. Though Lady Waldemar has marked Aurora as an unwitting rival for Romney’s affection, she unconsciously supports Aurora’s belief that marital bliss must involve more than philanthropic good will.

Returning to her plight after she left Romney in a haste of painful self-sacrifice, Marian describes to Aurora unabashedly the injuries she suffered. She bitterly comments, “I know that we must scrupulously hint/ With half words, delicate reserves, the thing/ Which no one scrupled

we should feel in full” (6.1222-24). She affirms that her son is the product of rape, not seduction, and so that it was a man’s violence which made her a fallen woman (6.1226-27). Zonana notes that, in other areas of the narration, Aurora takes up this language of rape when describing the source of her poetic inspiration. Zonana argues, “Aurora’s comparisons of herself to these ravished maidens may lead us to see the female body itself-not the male divinity- as the ultimate source of poetic truth and power” (253). Such an interpretation is, however, too extreme. Aurora’s project is to synthesize her roles as a Victorian woman and artist, and so she must learn that body and soul, material and poetic, can not only complement, but also enrich one another. But this is not to say that men cannot also benefit from such synthesis, or that they have less claim on truth and inspiration. On the contrary, Aurora respects and admires Romney’s philanthropic devotions; what she rejects is his exclusion of art, which she knows would be beneficial to his already noble vocation. Thus, Aurora is not arguing that the female body is the ultimate source of “poetic truth and power.” She is, instead, discovering that the female body has a claim to truth and power which is equally legitimate to that of men, and furthermore that this poetic truth has a claim on social improvement which is at least equally legitimate to material philanthropy.

### **Book 7- Aurora Despairs in her Art**

Further evidence that Aurora does not consider the female body the exclusive source of truth and power lies in her deservedly harsh assessment of the women who allow Marian’s suffering to happen. Lady Waldemar may have been negligent in choosing a trustworthy woman with whom to leave Marian, but she is not the only woman to fail Marian. The maidservant heartlessly sells Marian to a whorehouse, which Marian escapes only because such an immoral life begins to make her mad. Wandering the streets a hopeless, fallen woman, Marian is able to

find shelter, but only for a brief time. When the mistress of the house discovers Marian is pregnant, she makes no effort to inquire about Marian's desperate circumstances, and simply kicks her out into the cold. Incensed by such a lack of womanly solidarity, Aurora disdains that "these light women... keep/ Their own so darned and patched with perfidy,/ That, though a rag itself, it looks as well...As any perfect stuff might" (7.94-100). Recalling the generosity of her aunt, which was in reality a preservation of social distinctions, Aurora curses the hypocrisy of women who judge Marian so harshly. Aurora considers their metaphorical "patching" and "darning" treacherous, a complicit participation in men's ideal of an "angel in the house." Since all women fall short of this impossible standard, their grievous condemnation of Marian as a fallen woman is a duplicitous judgment which only underscores their own inability to measure up to the image of womanly perfection of which men dream. But, immediately after Aurora's use of domestic labor as an image for society's hypocrisy, Marian expounds upon the benefits of sewing as a source of bodily and spiritual preservation. She gratefully recalls, "I found a mistress-sempstress who was kind/ And let me sew in peace among her girls./ And what was better than to draw the threads/ All day and half the night for him," her son (7. 109-11). Marian thus shows Aurora that sewing can be a joyful means for supporting motherhood. Whereas men had used Marian's body as a sexual object, the opportunity to sew renews her, allowing her to reclaim ownership of her body and nurture it into a healthy motherly vessel. In Book 5, Aurora had progressed from an image of motherhood as a draining dedication to self-sacrifice to an image of motherhood as a prime metaphor for the poet's spiritual nourishment of posterity. With the example of Marian in Book 7, Aurora progresses even further, and now sees that physical motherhood can be just as ennobling as metaphorical poetic motherhood. Seeing a domestic role

as liberating and empowering, rather than confining and discouraging, Aurora is thus moved to embrace an adoptive motherhood, and brings Marian and the boy to live with her in Italy.

From this moment on, Aurora is able to fully appreciate Romney's concern for the material needs of the people. In her youthful stubbornness, she proclaimed Romney's work inferior to hers: "your Fouriers<sup>3</sup> failed,/ Because not poets enough to understand/ That life develops from within" (1.483-85). Now Aurora sees that, while it does indeed take a soul to move a body, the body's movement is equally important. For, as Zonana summarizes, "to exalt pure spirit (as Aurora had in her disembodied pursuit of poetry's "spiritual truth) or to embrace the material to the exclusion of spirit (as Romney had in his utilitarian attempt to improve society) is to create the conditions that caused Marian's rape" (256). Aurora's poetic narration of Marian's fate will undoubtedly move many of her readers to reexamine the problems inherent within Victorian society, but Marian's fate would have been far better if someone had provided for her material needs in the first place. Similarly, Romney's concern for Marian's material well-being was a valid attempt at preserving her soul, but it also stripped her of humanity and left her an object of pity. This mentality of objectification is what leads to Marian's rape: she is reduced from woman to vulnerable sexual object. Recognizing this ugly truth, Aurora thus utilizes her poetry to its full potential, assisting Marian on two separate levels with this one vocation. First, in giving voice to Marian's story, she moves countless souls to consider the awful plight of disadvantaged women, and to look with compassion upon those whom society has allowed to slip through the cracks, or rather gaping holes, of Victorian society. The importance of this project cannot be overestimated. Though the plight of the fallen woman was

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<sup>3</sup> Charles Fourier (1772-1837) was a French socialist writer. Aurora thus declares with this statement that the socialist movement is rendered useless in so far as it focuses on addressing the material needs of society, to the exclusion of spiritual concerns (McSweeney 334).

no secret to Victorian England, addressing Marian's fate as explicitly as Aurora does was a radical move. Indeed, because Barrett Browning allowed Aurora to speak so unambiguously of Marian's fate, she was accused by contemporary critiques such as the *Dublin University Magazine* of being "occasionally coarse in expression and unfeminine in thought" (150). Such criticism, if not so tragic, would be comically ironic, in that it considered the problem of rape a topic too unpleasant for contemplation by women, even as women were the victims of it. By pushing against society's hypocritical scruples, Aurora's poetic rendition of Marian's story thus gives voice to a class of women suffering in the silence of choking poverty and vulnerability. Epitomizing the aim of poetry expressed in Book 5, Aurora "exert[s] a double vision" on the issue of the fallen woman, describing Marian's cause with a sympathy that is "intimately deep," and so enabling her readership to see the larger problem of feminine vulnerability "as comprehensively/ As if afar they took their point of sight" (5.184-88).

Secondly, and more practically, Aurora uses the monetary benefits of her poetry to meet Marian's physical needs. In addition to offering her readers a glimpse of the awful reality which inevitably befalls women who are sexually and economically vulnerable, Aurora also supports a family of three with the proceeds of her art (Wallace 241). Assuming this financial responsibility is just as unorthodox as her poignant description of Marian's rape, as the breadwinner of Victorian households was almost exclusively male. Taking on this typically masculine role and labeling it a kind of motherhood, Aurora further proves that women can undertake a labor which is both domestic and fulfilling. Thus, through Marian, Aurora at long last achieves a synthesis between the material and the spiritual: "Aurora's linked poetic and material achievements are, by definition, 'women's work,' and yet are public, cultivating, artistic, self-sustaining" (Wallace 241). This fusion is a critical step towards Aurora



synthesizing her roles as woman and artist. If the material and the spiritual can work together in rich, meaningful ways, so too can her physical desires and intellectual pursuits unite to form a single, complete Aurora, both woman and poet.

Her development is affirmed in the letter of her dear friend Vincent Carrington; he writes “You have written a good book,/ And you, a woman!” (7.563-64). Though he could have ignored her sex altogether, Carrington’s caring and congratulatory tone suggests that, though others may have doubted her ability, as a woman, to write, he never did. Carrington thus proves Romney’s previous predictions wrong. Aurora has written a book which is not “mere woman’s work,” but which rather stands out as deserving merit regardless of the sex of the author. And, in addition to Carrington’s unqualified approval, there is the emulation of Aurora by his wife, Kate Ward. Vincent describes how Kate so admires Aurora that “she has your books by heart more than my words” (7.603). Considering that Aurora is a famous writer, it may at first seem that Kate’s is just an arbitrary sample of the fan base which Aurora has established. Her mention, however, is specifically important because she is a happily married woman. Kate fully embraces her role as woman, having willingly taken on the role of Vincent’s wife, and she is simultaneously able, as an avid reader, to cultivate a rich inner life which deeply appreciates Aurora’s poetry. Furthermore, her husband loves and supports her interest in Aurora’s intellectual and spiritual pursuits. Kate thus stands as confirmation that, with the right husband, a woman can delight in both her womanly role and her artistic curiosity. So, Aurora’s realization that she can be both mother and poet, is supplemented by Kate’s implicit assertion that the roles of wife and poet are also compatible.

Sadly, these epiphanies leave Aurora despondent. She bitterly remarks, “Kate loves a worn-out cloak for being like mine,/ While I live self-despised for being myself,/ And yearn for

someone else” (7.706-08). Aurora sees that woman and poet can, in fact, be one, but this knowledge does not change that fact that Marian has her son, Kate has Carrington, and Aurora is alone. She understands now that “the artist is intensely a man,” meaning that even the most idealistic poetry stems from the brain of fallible human being (7.778). Far from being a “vile” stain upon “art’s pure temple,” Aurora’s humanity, expressed by her womanhood, is the root and stem from which her poetry flowers (5. 59-61). Unfortunately, her realization comes (she believes) after her true love Romney has already married the Lamia, Lady Waldemar. It is, then, with utmost frustration that, after contemplating the great value which the material has to offer, she concludes “The end of woman (or of man, I think)/ Is not a book” (7.883-84). This is not a recantation of her life’s work, but rather an understanding that she must somehow find balance between art and life. Her book is certainly important, as the Carrington’s wholehearted approval and Marian’s drastically improved condition attest. But, Aurora has pursued this book to the exclusion of her physical health and her romantic interest, and so finds herself lacking the love and support of the one person whom she desires above all others. Thus despairing, she ends the seventh book with the ominous words: “ended seemed my trade of verse...I did not write, nor read, nor even think” (7.1302,06). In a dramatic swing from her girlish abandonment of the material in pursuit of the poetic spiritual, Aurora is here nearly consumed by passionate melancholy. Marian’s example and Kate Ward’s admiration have thrust before Aurora the pregnant possibility of a synthesis between mother and poet, and wife and poet, respectively. But the possibility of this synthesis can only stand to mock her, so long as the one man with whom she desires to unite body and soul is married to another. Finally aware that nourishing the body is an essential part of preserving the soul, Aurora thus stands upon the very cusp of

unification, and has only to learn that Romney is single and finally prepared to love her as both woman and poet.

**Books 8&9- The Return of Romney and the Synthesis of Aurora as Woman and Poet**

Happily, as Aurora teeters between the triumph of self-knowledge and the despair of isolation, Romney arrives, a far different man than the boy of Aurora's twentieth birthday. The poetry which he once dismissed as "innocent distraction" is now his very sustenance (4.117). He confesses to Aurora:

The book is in my heart,  
Lives in me, wakes me, and dreams in me:  
My daily bread tastes of it (8.265-69).

Far from considering her poetry "mere woman's work," or even admirable work for an artist of either sex, Romney savors the intellectual and spiritual nourishment of Aurora's work as nourishment for his physical life. He unequivocally confirms Aurora's assertion that "it takes a soul to move a body," and even presses her words further. Not only is the inspiration of her poetry necessary for his social causes, it is also the means by which he carries out functions as fundamental as dreaming and waking. Romney's declarations might even evoke suspicion that he is mocking her, so radically different are they from his earlier beliefs, were it not for his continued effort to "honour [her]/ by using truth" (2.374-75). Knowing that Aurora would balk at false praise, Romney refuses to patronize her. Using the metaphor of a man who loves a woman and prefers her eyes above all others, not because they are larger or more beautiful, but because "large or small, [they] have won his soul," Romney declares that, regardless of where Aurora's poetry ranks among the works of humanity, her words have won him, body and soul (8.92-97). This distinction is of great importance; if Romney's admiration of Aurora's work

stemmed first and foremost from a belief that it was the greatest piece of art ever written, such approbation would primarily be a recognition of poetic skill. By conceding that, though better technical execution or prettier diction might exist in other works, it is only Aurora's which moves him, Romney thus affirms Aurora as woman and poet. It is not merely her artistic talent, but also the nuances of her personal touch, which he finds so gripping.

In addition to affirming poetry's fundamental importance in life, Romney also recants his earlier "stupidity" in pursuing social change strictly by means of providing for material needs (8.385). He laments that seeing the poor as "an open mouth" desirous of a "gross need, food to fill [it], and no more," is "so far from virtue [that] only vice/ can find excuse for it" (8.409-11). With this admission, Romney agrees with Aurora that his socialist endeavors failed because he viewed those whom he was helping, not as full persons, but as poor bodies with physical needs. What is more, he considers his neglect of the spiritual not only detrimental to his cause, but also sinful. He understands now that, as well intentioned as he was, true compassion and love cannot be shown to a cause or a victim: it must be given to and accepted by a full human being. Romney even quotes Aurora's words from that long ago birthday morning, reiterating with utmost agreement the summation of her argument: "it takes a high-souled man,/ To move the masses.../It takes the ideal, to blow an inch inside/ The dust of the actual" (8.431-34). With this image, initially offered by the youthful Aurora, of a "high souled man," Romney solidifies the importance of a unified body and soul. Just as his philanthropy was rendered immobile by a lack of poetic inspiration, so the soul's noble aspirations can only be actualized by an active human body.

When Aurora originally spoke these words, she was young and naïve, and the truth within them sprang largely from intuition. A decade later, Aurora has now taken ownership of

these ideals, and so agrees with Romney, “I was right upon the whole/ That birthday morning. ‘Tis impossible/ to get at men excepting through their souls” (8.536-38). And yet, Aurora confesses, she feels that she has failed (8.571). Though she was right in insisting on the primacy of the soul, and therefore poetry, the soul’s primary source of nourishment, she has done so at the expense of her own earthly happiness. Others may see her book as a success, but she can no longer shut her eyes to the fact that she is alone without Romney. She fears that her knowledge that spirit and flesh must work together to achieve greatness mocks her, for she now knows that, unless she satisfies her passion for Romney, it will consume her, and she will be unable to continue progressing in her poetry. Romney’s response answers Aurora’s fear perfectly; “Poet, doubt yourself,/ But never doubt that you’re a poet to me” (8.590-91). By allowing Aurora to doubt herself, Romney encourages Aurora to always aspire towards greater poetic achievement. By assuring Aurora that she is and always will be a poet to him, Romney pledges the support and affirmation of her work which she desired so sharply in Book 7. Romney thus proves himself sufficiently changed from the man whom she once rejected; he is now a man who can support and delight in Aurora’s assertion, “I’m an artist, sir,/ And woman” (8.826-27).

Considering the great strides which both Romney and Aurora have taken, many critics take issue with the seeming lack of resolution in Book 9. After it is made clear that Romney is not married to Lady Waldemar, and that Marian desires the love of no man other than her son, Romney and Aurora each declare passionate love for the other, and Aurora proclaims, “Art is much, but love is more” (9.657). Having struggled for eight books to achieve a mutually enriching balance between art and love, a declaration of “love is more” does indeed seem largely anticlimactic. Does Aurora, in a single breath, renounce the synthesis for which she striven over the last decade? Does she ultimately conclude that the domestic sphere is where she does in fact

belong, and that her poetry has simply been a noble pursuit to pass the time until she could finally be with Romney? By no means. But how, then, can this conflict be resolved?

Wallace suggests that, “rather than settling into any of our proposed positions, feminist or patriarchal, *Aurora Leigh*’s representation of the relations among women, work and writing refuse complete resolution” (251). That is, Barrett Browning constructs the ninth book of *Aurora Leigh*, not to assert a patriarchal idea of Aurora being ultimately dependent upon a man, but rather to bring the novel poem to a precarious irresolution which will leave critics forever immersed in debate. Such an analysis, however, provides little more satisfaction than one in which Aurora revokes her poetic dream for a romantic happily ever-after with Romney. Furthermore, to argue that Barrett Browning ultimately leaves *Aurora Leigh* without resolution is to minimize the progress which both Aurora and Romney have made; to build characters up to such a pregnant potential and then leave them in a state which negates such potential would be nothing short of negligent. Nevertheless, Aurora’s declaration is made, and the tension which Wallace highlights between the final book and the rest of the text is important. As Case articulates the crux of the matter, “While Barrett Browning’s plot balances, against Aurora’s unconditional self-abasement to Romney, Romney’s own change of heart, her artist/narrator cannot reaffirm, in the face of romantic fulfillment, her right to have held out for the balance” (30). Case is mistaken, however, in concluding that Aurora fails to affirm “her right to have held out for balance” because she now sees romantic fulfillment as the greater end. On the contrary, Aurora states:

But I who saw the human nature broad  
At both sides, comprehending too the soul’s,  
And all the high necessities of Art,  
Betrayed the thing I saw, and wronged my own life  
For which I pleaded

...I forgot  
 No perfect artist is developed here  
 From any imperfect woman. Flower from root,  
 And spiritual from natural, grade by grade  
 In all our life. (9. 641-51)

Aurora saw from the first that the soul was an integral part of human nature, and so that Art was an essential means by which to effect change in the world. She saw from the first that people, like flowers, must be understood and appreciated in their entirety. Whereas Romney focused solely on the mud in which the flower grew, Aurora intuited that the sun must first shine, and so coax the flower to overcome the dirt and blossom forth. She betrayed this intuition, however, by allowing society to convince her that she must choose between tending to earth or sky. Believing art the greater thing, Aurora thrust herself wholeheartedly into her poetic vocation, neglecting her own physical wants and desires. What she learns by the ninth book is that, just as beautiful petals cannot blossom from seeds cast into desert sand, so true art cannot be cultivated within a woman who has neglected her physical and emotional needs. Aurora realizes now that, just as the petals and roots of a flower draw nutrients from the sun and earth respectively, and so each contribute to the blossoming of the flower, so too artist and woman are one, and pursuing each vocation diligently will only support and enhance Aurora. Thus, Aurora does not resent or regret her earlier rejection of Romney's proposal. Instead, she regrets the extreme difficulty which both she and Romney had in understanding the unity of poet and woman. Yes, she declares that love is more, but she is merely asserting her understanding that love, a love which is both physically and spiritually satisfying, is necessary for her sustenance, and so also for her poetry. Just as the petals are the *telos* of a flower though they cannot exist without their roots, so man must strive to be "high-souled," but can only do so if he also maintains his physical wellbeing.

Another argument made against the idea that Aurora ultimately prefers love to art is that Romney is blind in the final book, and so Aurora is empowered, and not merely slipping into a submissive role as his wife. As Zonana articulates the argument, “Modern critics...persist in reading Romney’s blinding as analogous to (and perhaps even modeled on) Rochester’s blinding in *Jane Eyre*, a ‘punative equalizer’ insuring that this powerful Victorian man cannot ‘reassert’ his ‘dominant functions’” (258). Zonana disagrees with this argument, asserting that a more accurate analysis would understand *Aurora Leigh* as a reflection of the classical muses of antiquity. In this light, “Romney’s blinding is his punishment, not for being a Victorian man, but for his presumption in challenging a goddess” (259). Aurora, as this goddess, “unlike her precursors in the poetry of men, is made of earth and committed both to living upon it and transforming it (259). While Zonana’s conclusion beautifully articulates Aurora’s embrace of herself as both woman and poet, I would argue that her assessment of Romney’s punishment is faulty. Despite the protestations which Barrett Browning made against being influenced by Charlotte Brontë, she was not writing in a vacuum, and the undeniable parallels between the two texts betray at least a subconscious reference to *Jane Eyre*. It is therefore far more likely that Romney’s blindness is a reflection of Rochester’s fate than that of presumptuous Thamyras. I do, however, agree with Zonana that Romney’s blinding differs from Rochester’s significantly. A notably darker and more mysterious character than Romney, Rochester’s loss of sight and hand is necessary to reassure the reader that he and Jane have, in fact, reached a level of irrevocable equality. Furthermore, Jane earns this equality by persevering in a rigid adherence to morals and hard work, despite great sufferings and the adversities of economic vulnerability. Rochester, on the other hand, would have continued deceiving Jane and deliberately allowed her to unwittingly



enter into a sinful marriage, were it not for Mason's intervention. Thus, in addition to a symbolic reassurance of equality, there is also certainly a punitive element to his injuries.

I do not believe, however, that Barrett Browning meant for Romney's blindness to be punitive. Any sins which Romney commits in emphasizing the material over the spiritual are made in ignorance, and in a sincere attempt towards helping others. He clearly states, for example, that finding Marian a job was an attempt "to snatch her soul from atheism" (3.1229). Though he criticized Aurora harshly, his words were largely the product of being raised in the upper class of Victorian society, and his aim to win her as helpmate for his philanthropy was always honest. Thus, to strike Romney with blindness as punishment for ignorance, when Aurora had made the equivalent mistake of pursuing spirit over matter, would be unfair, if not spiteful. Romney's blinding, then, rather than suggesting his deserving punishment, emphasizes the incredible progress he has made from the beginning of the novel poem. One bright June morning in Book Two, Romney was so consumed by the material that he saw only with his eyes, and so "tore the violets up to get the worms" (8.400). Dismissing everything beyond the physical as frivolous fancy, he failed to notice the violet among the worms, and so neglected the spiritual needs of the people whom he was trying to help. Now, blinded on a dark night in Book 9, Romney sees more clearly than ever before. Having truly grasped the importance of the spirit, he rejoices, "thank God, who made me blind, to make me see!" (9.830). Though physically blinded, Romney's clear perception of the importance of the soul is unhindered. This ability to see truth with his whole person, and not merely with his physical eye, underscores the progress which both he and Aurora have made. It is all the more poignant then, when Romney articulates the ultimate resolution of the novel poem:

...let us love so well  
Our work shall still be sweeter for our love,

And still our love be sweeter for our work,  
And both commended, for the sake of each,  
By all true workers and true lovers born. (9. 924-928)

The argument might be made that Aurora's progress is ultimately compromised because Romney, and not Aurora, expresses finally that work and love, body and soul, woman and artist, are not irreconcilably opposite, but rather mutually enriching. However, such an argument would fail to see that it is Aurora who has brought Romney to this enlightened understanding. Had she accepted his proposal, subverting her poetic vocation for a stunted expression of vocation as woman, it is highly unlikely that Romney would have progressed from his materialistic philanthropy. By choosing instead to pursue her poetic vocation to the fullest, and by holding out for a lover who could appreciate her as both woman and poet, Aurora comes to a richer understanding of each of her roles, and the ways in which they build upon each other, and helps Romney do the same.

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