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"Troubling Passion": Negotiating the Body in

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's

Aurora Leigh

by

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### Abstract

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Aurora Leigh narrates a Victorian woman poet's trajectory from her culture's interdiction against women's articulation of their sexuality. In consonance with her development as a career poet--in itself a transgression against Victorian hegemonic dictates--Aurora arrives at a radical feminine subjectivity which allows for "all that strain/Of sexual passion" (V.14-5). This study explores Barrett Browning's subversive treatment of feminine sexuality in Aurora Leigh. The poem participates in the Victorian literary and political discourses surrounding women's sexuality; in accordance with the Victorian debate regarding feminine sexuality, Aurora Leigh continually raises questions of desire yet does so circuitously and metaphorically. Although the text struggles to represent feminine desire and the female body it describes sexuality in a coded and oblique manner. The poem deploys the trope of the mirror as a means of enabling the development of Aurora's sexualized subjectivity. This trope allows for the indirect--or mirrored--presentation of feminine sexuality within a dominant discourse which seeks to police and silence women's sexuality.

## Table of Contents

Approval Page.....	ii
Abstract.....	iii
Table of Contents.....	iv
Introduction.....	1
Chapter One.....	15
Chapter Two.....	52
Chapter Three.....	81
Conclusion.....	112
Endnotes.....	119
Works Cited.....	120

### Introduction

The frightful prison of love will finally be forced open when all those who know how to talk of love, how to want it and live it, will join together and merge lovingly ... branding every place and every text with their subversive love.... Only then will we know what pleasure, knowledge, activity, language, really mean.

(Annie Leclerc, "The Love Letter")

Beloved, let us love so well,  
Our work shall still be better 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.

(Aurora Leigh IX:924-8)

A discussion of Elizabeth Barrett Browning is necessarily vexed by the notion of love. Reading Aurora Leigh necessitates confronting the mythologized life of its author, and the Victorian romance of which she is the heroine.<sup>1</sup> Although Barrett Browning's work offers sophisticated feminist argument, it seems to be underwritten--if not occluded--by the question "How do I love thee? Let me count the ways" (Sonnet XLIII). Angela Leighton describes the Sonnets from the Portuguese as "ideologically unfashionable poems ... which lack the larger sexual politics of Aurora Leigh [and] strike contemporary critics as naked and naive" (13). She suggests that the "eminently satisfying" and "popular romance" of Barrett Browning's life threatens

to overdetermine readings of the sonnets. Leighton attempts to resist the tendency to approach the sonnets as a direct translation of Barrett Browning's personal "emotional drama"; she reads them "as a literary performance, rather than an autobiographical statement" (13). Drawing upon Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes, Leighton reclaims both the sonnets and the Brownings' correspondence as "highly constructed and self-referential" (13) discursive acts. The texts do not so much articulate love--Leighton explains--as negotiate the production of love-texts; they are concerned with the "intricately answering and over-wrought writing of love" (13).

Leighton's readings deploy a recuperative strategy which helps to disentangle Barrett Browning's writing (both poetic and epistolary, if this distinction is possible) from the surrounding romantic myth. Although Leighton claims that Aurora Leigh is less problematized by the myth, less of a "lover's discourse" (Barthes) than the sonnets, it is nonetheless a sustained narrative of romantic negotiations. To a possibly greater extent than the sonnets, Aurora Leigh struggles to "talk of love ... want it and live it" (Leclerc 237). As an intellectual, independent and creative mid-Victorian woman, Aurora is compelled not only to reconcile love and vocation, but to arrive at a theoretical understanding of love. The orphaned child Aurora inherits the question of love from her father, with his cryptic final request to her:

His last word was, 'Love--'

'Love, my child, love, love!' (then he had done with grief)

'Love, my child.' Ere I answered he was gone,

And none was left to love in all the world. (I:211-4)

Aurora spends her youth wrestling with this disrupted dialogue. Through a series of interpersonal negotiations, and considerable intellectual interrogation, she arrives at a meaning, and more crucially a purpose for love. Like her father, "who through love had suddenly/Thrown off the old conventions, broken loose/From chin-bands of the soul" (I:186-8) Aurora finds a subversive energy in love. She rejects the socially sanctioned--actually dynastic--marriage which her conventional aunt prescribes for her. Although Aurora ultimately marries Romney, the man of her aunt's choice, she re-approaches this relationship considerably altered by her intervening loves, particularly her love for Marian Erle, a young sempstress whom Romney attempts to marry (as an exercise in narrowing the gap between classes) and who bears a child resulting from a rape. Many readers of Aurora Leigh find its ending disappointingly orthodox; Aurora's eminently appropriate marriage to her cousin may be seen to signal her integration into the Victorian gender and class discourses which she seemed to reject. However, I argue that Aurora's marriage may be read as a radical project which seeks to re-chart the boundaries of Victorian heterosexuality. Aurora enters into marriage as a desiring feminine subject. She demands a marriage which allows for the body, and which celebrates "all that strain/Of sexual passion, which devours the flesh/In a sacrament of souls" (V:14-6). Aurora valorizes sexuality as a means of bridging the body and the spirit. Her marriage does not cast her as the Victorian "angel in the house"; rather, it creates a space in which to practise her radicalized theory of love.

In her critical introduction to Aurora Leigh, Margaret Reynolds summarizes the history of response to the poem:

Few works can have suffered the extreme range of reaction which characterizes the criticism devoted to Aurora Leigh: from enthusiasm and exaltation typified by the assessment of the author's friends and acquaintances, to the grudging acknowledgment of contemporary reviewers, through a period of dismissal and exasperation in the first half of the twentieth century, to a regeneration initiated by feminist criticism in which Aurora Leigh becomes "the feminist poem" radical in its celebration of the centrality of female experience.(2)<sup>2</sup>

The feminist interest in Aurora Leigh has evolved since the late nineteen seventies. Cora Kaplan's liberal feminist reading centres upon Aurora's vocational and romantic independence. Critics such as Kaplan must be given full credit for initiating political readings which see the poem as a struggle between dominant, patriarchal culture and a resistant feminine subject.<sup>3</sup> Feminist response to the poem has recently diverged from the liberal feminist perspective to readings which draw upon poststructuralist theory to explicate the feminist qualities of Aurora Leigh.<sup>4</sup> Joyce Zonana, Margaret Reynolds and Patricia Srebrnik have recently published articles which apply the writings of poststructuralist theorists such as Luce Irigaray and Helene Cixous to the poem. Following these critics, I intend to use postructuralist theory as a framework for reading the poem which allows me to chart and interrogate the often subversive and coded presence of the (especially female) body in Aurora Leigh. I hope to position my argument within this vein of theoretically informed critical work on the poem; I will particularly draw upon Zonana's reading which is premised on the assertion that Aurora Leigh is a feminist text, both in



terms of its Victorian context and in the manner in which it speaks to contemporary (especially poststructuralist) theory.

The established body of feminist critical readings of Aurora Leigh have met with opposition from readers who insist that the poem should not be seen as feminist. Kerry McSweeney insists that "the essential context in which Aurora Leigh must be placed if it is to be understood and fully savoured is not feminist; it is high Victorian" (xxxii). McSweeney further condemns the "feminist rereading (xxxi)" of the poem:

[B]ecause of its exclusive concentration on one feature of the poem, this revisionary [feminist] enterprise begins to yield diminishing returns.... One crucial point that can be lost sight of is that (like George Eliot) the author of Aurora Leigh did not espouse a feminist ideology and was not feminist by either Victorian or present-day criteria. (xxxi)

McSweeney's backlash against feminist readings of Aurora Leigh points to a knot in the current debate surrounding the poem. Following Virginia V. Steinmetz and Deirdre David, McSweeney challenges the body of critical material (from Kaplan to Zonana) which finds feminist content in Aurora Leigh. I argue that the poem expresses a Victorian feminist perspective which speaks to current feminist theory. Although Barrett Browning may not have publicly supported feminist campaigns, Aurora Leigh engages in Victorian debates around women's sexuality which may suggest that the author chose an indirect means of participating in feminist concerns. The poem's attention to issues of women's sexuality aligns it with the larger Victorian debates surrounding sexuality. Although Aurora Leigh does not explicitly or

consistently promote a Victorian feminist perspective (as Barrett Browning chose not to publicly endorse feminism), it nonetheless addresses issues which occupied Victorian feminists.

The feminism of Aurora Leigh is subtly and inconsistently deployed. Aurora does not join a feminist political group. Instead, she struggles--often internally--with feminist issues such as desire, the body and feminine creativity. The centrality of these issues connects the poem with contemporary public feminist debates. These same issues resonate with the theoretical work of post-structuralist feminist theorists. The feminism of Aurora Leigh is two-fold: the poem is a feminist text because of its consonance with Victorian feminist concerns and also due to the parallels which may be established between the poem and poststructuralist feminist theory. Theorists such as Irigaray and Cixous contribute to feminist discourse through their focus on feminine desire and the body. Similarly, Aurora Leigh offers an addition to feminist discourse through a comparable treatment of feminine desire.

As Aurora comes to terms with herself as a desiring, embodied feminine subject, she realizes that love is essential to the production of poetry. She arrives at Helene Cixous' position: "I write out of love. Writing, loving: inseparable. Writing is a gesture of love. The Gesture" (Coming to Writing 42). Aurora and Romney engage in a love which sacralizes the erotic. Romney eventually recognizes the inseparability of writing and loving when he addresses Aurora "O poet, O my love" (IX:900). Aurora rejects Romney's initial proposal on her twenty-first birthday because he fails to conceive of her in these

terms. She accuses him of holding a narrow and pragmatic view of love, which fails to accommodate her poetic vocation or respect her autonomy:

'...What you love,  
Is not a woman, Romney, but a cause:  
You want a helpmate, not a mistress, sir,  
A wife to help your ends--in her no end!  
Your cause is noble, your ends excellent,  
But I, being most unworthy of these and that,  
Do otherwise conceive of love. Farewell.'

(II:400-6)

At this point, Aurora is unable to fully articulate her idea of love; her alternate or "otherwise" conception remains undefined. In contrast, the second--and successful--proposal scene (Book IX) includes a complex charting and negotiating of the meaning of love. The love which Romney and Aurora agree to share encompasses "God's love" (IX:880), "the love of wedded souls" (IX:881), "Loves filial, loves fraternal, neighbour-loves/And civic" (IX:888-9). The cousins implicitly reject a privatized, insular marriage by embracing a politically enabling manifestation of marital love. Love is not a rarefied domestic event, but a site of proliferating social discourses. I believe that Aurora Leigh successfully translates love from its conventional, hegemonic Victorian meaning to a pluralized interplay of meanings. Not only does Aurora Leigh seek to deconstruct the Victorian marriage, it takes up Foucault's strategies of analysis:

Was the nineteenth-century family really a monogamic and  
conjugal cell? Perhaps to a certain extent. But it was also  
a network of pleasures and powers linked together at multiple

points according to transformable relationships. (The History of Sexuality 46)

Aurora rejects the "conjugal cell" which Romney's first proposal (Book II) seems to promise. Her later acceptance (Book IX) reflects her recognition of the complexity and heterogeneity which marriage may be reinscribed to accommodate. The marriage marks the culmination of Aurora's struggle to disrupt and reconfigure Victorian heterosexuality--to rewrite and pluralize the seemingly disabling institution of marriage. Aurora Leigh proves Foucault's thesis by demonstrating that middle-class, nineteenth-century marital love may well accommodate "a network of pleasures and powers."

I would like to investigate the unexpected "network of pleasures and powers" encoded in Aurora's marriage and in the development of her sexuality which enables this marriage. Aurora's ability to redefine heterosexuality stems from her various efforts to identify and accept her body and its desire. Aurora's strategies for embodiment are necessarily somewhat covert, furtive, even deceptive. As a Victorian text, Aurora Leigh does not explicitly display its concern with female sexuality. Instead, Aurora approaches her sexuality through a series of mirrors and doubles; she recognizes her sexual body by seeing it represented and reflected in others. The poem speaks continuously--yet evasively--about sexuality. Barrett Browning's verbose, often "overwrought"(Leighton) blank verse functions as a conspicuously Victorian garment which corsets and crinolines female desire. The elaborately allusive/elusive, densely tangled language tends to bypass the body. The text presents the body obliquely and metaphorically. Desire speaks in code. Aurora Leigh sometimes tempts me to read ahistorically, to

take, for example, its uncanny echoes with Helene Cixous at face value.<sup>5</sup> Yet, Aurora Leigh must be allowed its historical framework. The text's desiring bodies strain against a precisely Victorian hegemony. Desire is necessarily "troubling" and disruptive when it seeks to articulate itself within a discourse which polices--if not silences--desire.

I do not wish to suggest that Aurora Leigh is a historically anomalous product. On the contrary, I believe that what renders it "precisely Victorian" is the fact of the struggle for the body. The Victorian garment, of course, is at cross purposes: it is designed both to conceal and to expose.<sup>6</sup> In a parallel sense, a Victorian narrative such as Aurora Leigh may appear to codify, regulate and sanitize desire. At the same time, desire surfaces in the interstices of regulations and undercuts authority. Barrett Browning's poem speaks from the centre of conflict between desire and its prohibition or inhibition. The poem's exploration and articulation of the body and sexuality is rarely directly presented; instead, desire is metaphorized, deferred and deflected. Although Aurora refers to the "strain/Of sexual passion" (V.14-5), she does not claim such desire as her own but displaces it onto the abstract idea of "the human heart's large seasons" (V.13). Nonetheless, the reader associates Aurora's language of "sexual passion" with its speaker despite her attempts to disassociate herself from it. Aurora Leigh frames desire within a context of struggle between the impetus to police and silence (especially women's) sexuality and oppositional directives seeking to articulate desire. This debate around sexuality is central to Aurora Leigh and aligns the poem with its historical context. As Kimberley

Reynolds and Nicola Humble claim, the later half of the nineteenth-century witnessed an explosion of political and legal discourses surrounding sexuality:

Mobilizing, from the middle of the century, around various single-issue campaigns (against slavery, for women's education, for the foundation of hostels for fallen women, for the reform of divorce law and laws dealing with married women's property), the feminist impulse had become clearly recognized as such by the 1880's. The galvanic force that allowed overt feminism to become speakable--and successful--during this period was the intense shock and anger produced among women by the Contagious Diseases Acts.... Notably, therefore, the focus for overt feminist campaigning during the last forty years of the century was a specifically sexual issue. (Victorian Heroines 38-9)

Aurora Leigh's dualistic and contentious treatment of sexuality--its sustained tension between direct expression and oblique deflection--situates the text at the forefront of the larger Victorian public negotiation of sexuality. Aurora Leigh's publication date (1857) falls into the earlier stages of the Victorian feminist movement; the text may be said to anticipate the "feminist impulse" which Reynolds and Humble identify.

As a text which takes up the Victorian debates focused on women's sexuality, Aurora Leigh necessarily incorporates the oppositional cross-currents which form these debates. Although the poem is centrally concerned with articulating feminine sexuality--making it a fictional and theoretical counterpart to Victorian feminist political

directives in the area of sexuality--it inevitably demonstrates the effects of the hegemonic forces involved in questions of sexuality. As a text committed to its political moment, Aurora Leigh is energized by the burgeoning feminist interest in women's sexuality and simultaneously restrained by the forces attempting to contain or oppose the growth of feminism. The poem takes up the feminist side of the debate but does so indirectly.

Aurora Leigh participates in what could be called the Victorian feminist struggle for the body. The poem explicates this struggle through Aurora's personal trajectory from her culture's rigid constraints upon the feminine (administered by her aunt) to the full acceptance and expression of her desire for Romney. Aurora's progress towards the actualization of her own desire is indirect and circuitous; her romantic union with Romney is possible only after she has engaged in reciprocal intersubjectivity with other women. These women include Marian, Aurora's mother (or more accurately, the painted representation of her) and the archetypal feminine figure of Danae (made available to Aurora through paintings of Danae by her friend Vincent Carrington). These feminine subjects--both living and represented--function as mirrors in which Aurora catches glimpses of herself and which help to produce Aurora's feminine subjectivity. Before she is able to negotiate a satisfying relationship with Romney--and in turn, demand a renegotiation of conventional heterosexuality and marriage--Aurora must establish her feminine identity through interchange with other feminine subjects. Although Aurora's relationships with her mirror partners are not--by strict definition--lesbian, they partake of a broader understanding of female homosexuality articulated by Luce Irigaray in

Speculum of the Other Woman. In her discussion of Freud and psychoanalysis, Irigaray explains that "female sameness" has been "obliterated ... and withdrawn from interpretation" (101):

That a woman might desire a woman "like" herself, someone of the "same" sex, that she might also have auto- and homosexual appetites, is simply incomprehensible to Freud, and indeed inadmissible. Such an idea is rarely encountered in this phallogentric history.... (101)

Despite its inadmissibility, Irigaray sees "female sameness" as a possible avenue of resistance to the "dominant specular economy" (102) in which the masculine subject--in a continual re-assertion of the self/Other relationship established during the mirror phase--recognizes the feminine as a (phallically lacking) reflection of himself. Irigaray insists that "woman's desire for herself, for the self-same--a female self, a female same" (102) must be recognized and is necessary to "balance the desire of the other" (102). Aurora's intimate and reciprocal relationships with the feminine ("real" women and realist portraits) demonstrate Irigaray's idea of "female sameness" which is both a woman's desire for another woman and her desire for her feminine self--for the "self-same." Although Irigaray suggests the potential subversive force of "female sameness," she does not define the logistical or overtly political tactics which might effectively deploy "female sameness" against masculine specularity. Aurora Leigh anticipates and resonates with Irigaray's theorization of "female sameness." Aurora's relationships with women offer specific examples of how "female sameness" may operate in opposition to a dominant culture of masculine specularity.



Aurora's relationships with women involve doubling and mirroring which substantiates feminine subjectivity. I intend to demonstrate that Aurora's reflective relationships--her experiences of "female sameness"--enable the radical subjectivity which she brings to her relationship with Romney. I draw upon writers such as Griselda Pollock and Catherine Belsey not for critical material directly concerned with Aurora Leigh but for their exemplary integration of poststructuralist theory with nineteenth-century texts. I follow their deployment of theory as a strategy for analyzing Aurora Leigh. Like both Belsey and Pollock, I read theory (particularly the self-consciously poetic writings of Cixous and Irigaray) as texts which exhibit all of the gaps and indeterminacies present in writing which is labelled fiction or poetry. As Catherine Belsey explains in her introduction to a discussion of Freud, Lacan and Derrida,

As so often in Freud's work, the scientific clarity of the text is an illusion. The writing doubles back on itself, never reaching the promised goal, but offering another in its place. The process of displacement and substitution mimics, we might argue, the ways of desire, and makes of the text itself an object of desire for the reader. (54)

Belsey reads Freud's clinical/theoretical writings as texts which present many of the qualities of a literary work. In doing so, Belsey challenges the distinctions between theory and literature; Helene Cixous (who writes in almost every genre) seems to be deliberately avoiding generic classification by overlapping and merging theory with poetry. I believe that reading (especially poststructuralist feminist) theory as literature and in conjunction with a literary work such as

Aurora Leigh retains the integrity of texts (such as Cixous') which deliberately subvert the boundary between theory and literature. I use theory as an intertextual source for dealing with some of the most complex and ambiguous elements of Aurora Leigh.

The first chapter of my discussion centres on the friendship between Aurora and Marian; this emotionally intense and intimate relationship successfully crosses class boundaries by detailing the mirrored reciprocity shared between the two women. Aurora arrives at a richer sense of her feminine identity--particularly her bodily identity--by finding elements of herself reflected in Marian. The trope of mirroring continues into the second chapter which considers the deployment of portraiture as a type of reflective surface. Finally, I investigate the conclusion of Aurora Leigh which brings Romney and Aurora together in a romantic union which subversively challenges the seemingly inflexible conventions of Victorian marriage. Again, mirroring serves as the strategy which facilitates this subversion; mirroring between Aurora and Romney erodes seemingly fixed Victorian gender roles. My work concludes with a brief consideration of some theoretical contexts for mirroring intended to reflect back on my textual analysis of Aurora Leigh.

## I

The narrator of Aurora Leigh trespasses upon some dangerous and inappropriate territory. Among the many Victorian conventions which she chooses to flout, Aurora transgresses the interdiction against women's mobility. At the time of her aunt's death, she sets up both home and business on her own--refusing the pecuniary aid proffered by her cousin Romney--and establishes herself as a self-supporting poet. Later, she re-locates to her birthplace in Italy. Again, she performs the gesture alone, seemingly oblivious of potential criticism. Although she embarks alone for Italy, she arrives there in the company of Marian Erle, Romney's intended bride who has survived a rape and is living in Paris with her child--the result of the rape--when she is reunited with Aurora. Hence, the upper-class and scrupulously chaste Aurora is joined with the "fallen" sempstress in an intimate and reciprocal domestic relationship. Despite the economic and class barriers which divide Aurora and Marian, the poem emphasizes the points of commonality between the women such as their adolescent experiences with literature and religion--parallel events which in the lives of these seemingly very different women cause them to draw similar conclusions concerning the gendered exclusivity of literature and the over-institutionalization of the Church. Aurora Leigh constructs an unlikely--and socially transgressive--sisterly pair of Aurora and Marian by demonstrating their unexpected similarities which lead to a twinning or doubling of the two women. Marian and Aurora become mirrors of and for each other. This mirroring allows Aurora to envision her own sexuality by seeing herself reflected in Marian.

The radicality of the friendship between Aurora and Marian-- particularly their intimate domestic arrangement--has impressed many readers of Aurora Leigh (Gelpi, Reynolds and Humble, Anderson). Deirdre David, who is otherwise skeptical of the feminist value and content of the text, cites the Marian Erle narrative as the "one place where Aurora Leigh takes an unequivocal feminist stand" ("Art's a Service" 120). The relationship between Aurora and Marian successfully undermines values central to the deployment of Victorian patriarchy. Bringing the two women together violates the binary division placed between "pure" and "fallen" examples of Victorian femininity. The love shared by Marian and Aurora--I believe it is accurate and relevant to describe this as a love relationship--disproves and subverts the idea that female virtue is irretrievable if lost. Concurrently, it challenges the sanctity of the Victorian middle-class home.

As an angel with a house of her own, Aurora reveals the artificiality and injustice of the division imposed between herself and Marian. In her study of the "literary staging of fallenness" in Victorian writing, Amanda Anderson applauds Aurora Leigh as the foremost example of resistance to the Victorian pure/evil femininity dichotomy: "If one imagines David Copperfield marrying Emily or taking her into his household after she is 'found,' or imagines Jane Eyre setting up house with Bertha Rochester, one gets a sense of the highly unorthodox nature of the Marian Erle story" (168). Anderson observes that Marian is "prominently woven into the story of Aurora's development" (168). Marian is not simply utilized as a mechanical means of disrupting class and gender boundaries, although the daring

and significance of this gesture cannot be underestimated. Rather, she is integral to the pattern which Barrett Browning weaves for the development of a specifically feminine poetic career. Loving and being loved by Marian allows Aurora to gradually come to terms with her desire and to inhabit the body; in turn Aurora's embodiment helps her to achieve greater poetic creativity.

For Aurora, calling Marian "my sister" (V.1095) entails sharing--as far as she is able--in Marian's motherhood. Aurora's connection with the child is intimate, physical and desiring, although it is safe and permissible because motherly. Aurora describes the pleasure of the child crawling into bed with her in the morning: "While I, with shut eyes, smile and motion for/The dewy kiss that's very sure to come/From mouth and cheeks, the whole child's face at once/Dissolved on mine" (VII.947-50). The presence of Marian and the child allows Aurora to practise love which is not necessarily sexual, but which is nonetheless passionate and bodily. As Anderson has noted, the time spent with Marian seems to facilitate Aurora's reconciliation--and sexual union--with Romney (169). Marian and her child help bring Aurora to an awareness of the body which she has attempted to deny and render absent.

The text strategically balances the credits and debits incurred between Aurora and Marian to prioritize reciprocity. While Aurora gains the fullest embodiment of her femininity through Marian, help is returned through the material and emotional protection and support which Aurora offers Marian. Apprehending Aurora's distress and restlessness, Marian's sympathy proves uniquely effective:

...'I have crept up thrice,

And seen you sitting, standing, still at watch.  
 I thought it did you good till now, but now'...  
 'But now,' I said, 'you leave the child alone.'  
 'And you're alone,' she answered--and she looked  
 As if I too were something. Sweet the help  
 Of one we have helped! Thanks, Marian, for such  
 help. (VII.508-14)

Aurora articulates her awareness not only of the reciprocity between herself and Marian, but also of how this interplay "sweetens" the help. The continual reverberation of support blurs the distinction between the recipient and the benefactor. In a pragmatic sense, this indiscriminate reciprocity serves to equalize the socio-economic differences between the women. Yet the equalization goes deeper. Marian and Aurora become much like the two sisters, Lizzie and Laura, in Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market."<sup>7</sup> They reflect and double each other to the extent that the division between discrete subjects becomes blurred. Aurora and Marian align not only their material, economic status, they defiantly share things that are considered exclusive and personal. Private property and ownership dissolve as Marian and Aurora share home, baby, even lover. The fact that Romney makes second proposals to both Marian and Aurora, within a close frame of time (Book IX) incites neither awkwardness nor jealousy.

Despite the emphasis on mutuality, some critics are suspicious of Aurora's motives and find her concern for an economically and sexually victimized woman both condescending and exploitative. Joyce Zonana claims that only "to some extent" does Aurora "identify with Marian" ("Embodied Muse" 251). Instead, Aurora distances and objectifies

Marian "by making of her a Madonna" (251). Helen Cooper recognizes that Barrett Browning is "unusual among high Victorian poets in her concern for slavery and the working-class" (Woman and Artist 179) yet adds a disclaimer by observing that "there are ideological ramifications in such a gesture" (179). Cooper reads Aurora's love for Marian as self-serving and rather predatory: "In 'using' under-class women--such as the runaway slave and Marian Erle--to effect her own transformation into subjectivity, Barrett Browning exploits as well as dramatizes such women, who then disappear from the poems" (178). Cooper's cautious reading draws attention to the politically relevant possibility of exploitation of "under-class" subjects, yet it fails to credit what I see as an integral element of Barrett Browning's radical project. Although it is necessary and valuable to interrogate examples of hegemonic discourse--such as the exploitation of marginal subjects--it is equally crucial to tease out fragments of subversive success. In contrast to Cooper, Angela Leighton reads Aurora Leigh in connection with Anglican sisterhoods and women's charity groups of the nineteenth-century which sought to help "fallen" women. From this perspective, Aurora's union with Marian is politically engaged. The close textual identification between the women exceeds the limitations of Victorian upper-class women's philanthropic work. Leighton suggests that

the meeting between Aurora and Marian ... has all the emotional urgency and narrative doubling of a recognition scene ... their uncanny doubling movements suggest a twinning of purpose beyond all the charities of social aid ... This is not rescue work. It is self recognition. (119)

Leighton is sensitive to the politically subversive value of Marian and Aurora's relationship. Aurora Leigh's textual rendering of the bridging between "fallen" and "pure" succeeds in challenging the dyadic model of Victorian femininity.

Without denying Barrett Browning's relapses or partial reabsorption into the Victorian middle-class discourse from which she speaks, it is both possible and productive to cite/site and applaud her bold egalitarian gestures. However imperfectly, Aurora Leigh struggles to bring the middle-class--especially women--to terms with the suffering of socially marginal women. The text does this most conspicuously by pairing Marian and Aurora--and by extension, the social disparities which they represent--to the point where they echo and reflect one another. Leighton's ideas of "doubling" and "twinning" may be understood to include the social and material parity which Marian and Aurora achieve: sharing a home and betrothal to the same (upper-class) man narrows the class gap between them. Additionally, Leighton calls attention to the physical "doubling" of Aurora and Marian. Aurora comes to identify herself with Marian, or to figuratively "see" herself in her friend. Yet she is also--quite literally--mirrored by Marian.<sup>8</sup> When Aurora unexpectedly finds Marian in Paris she both recognizes her lost friend and sees herself reflected by Marian:

What face is that?

What a face, what a look, what a likeness! Full on mine

The sudden blow of it came down, till all

My blood swam, my eyes dazzled. Then I sprang...



It was as if a meditative man  
 Were dreaming out a summer afternoon  
 And watching gnats a-prick upon a pond,  
 When something floats up suddenly, out there,  
 Turns over ... a dead face, known once alive...  
 So old, so new! it would be dreadful now  
 To lose the sight and keep the doubt of this:  
 He plunges--ha! he has lost it in the splash.

I plunged--I tore the crowd up, either side,  
 And rushed in, forward, forward, after her.

Her? whom? (VI.236-45)

The "likeness" may be between Aurora's memory of Marian and the fleeting glimpse of a Marian-like woman in the Paris flower market, yet it may also refer to a face reflected "Full on mine". The following metaphor reinforces the ambiguity: the "meditative man" sees a face floating in a pond. Like Narcissus, he plunges after it, only to dispel what must have been a reflection. Aurora is uncertain if she has seen Marian who is possibly "dead ... known once alive", or has caught her own reflected image. Although there is not a literal resemblance between the women, something about Marian's physical presence mirrors Aurora back to herself. Aurora's sense of receiving a "sudden blow" generates both from the shock and excitement of recovering Marian and from the surprise of catching a view of herself in the face of Marian.

When Aurora finally secures Marian she is desperate to keep her. She literally prevents Marian's escape: "I held her two slight wrists

with both my hands" (VI.440). Aurora pleadingly offers Marian a home and companionship stressing both her need for Marian, "Whom I've hungered after more than bread" (VI.454) and the comfort she in turn can give Marian: "Come with me rather where we'll talk and live/And none shall vex us" (VI.457-8). Aurora expresses the intensity and urgency of her love for Marian, yet the encounter reminds the reader of the unstable boundary between love and exploitation identified by Cooper. The image of Aurora forcibly restraining Marian is undeniably disturbing and seems to unsettle a reading which seeks to argue for the interconnected and egalitarian nature of the friendship. The encounter seems to attest to self-serving, aggressive, class-based exploitation. Yet it is also possible to read the scene as one of difficult yet necessary class negotiation. Barrett Browning articulates the problematics and frustrations of breaking down very real class barriers. Aurora's passion--even anger--may be a crucial component in the process of shaking both women out of their over-determined class subjectivities. I am hesitant to endorse Aurora's use of violence--particularly against a disadvantaged woman who has been repeatedly and literally beaten down. However, I believe it may be understood--though not excused--as a desperate strategy deployed only when Aurora fears that she will lose Marian. The text allows for this violence only when the project of class subversion is at the brink of failure--at the point when the two women seem closest to complete reabsorption into their respective social contexts. And it works. The encounter marks a watershed and the ensuing narrative plays out and builds up the cross-class friendship. Aurora's hopes for a reciprocal intimacy with

Marian are staged and elaborated upon as they walk through Paris.

Initially, Aurora leads:

'Therefore come,'

I answered with authority....

...Not a word

She said, but in a gentle humbled way

(As one who had forgot herself in grief)

Turned round and followed closely where I went,

As if I led her by a narrow plank

Across devouring waters, step by step:

And so in silence we walked on a mile. (VI.476-84)

Aurora appears dangerously close to exploiting her "authority" as a middle-class woman to silence and humble the "fallen" and morally compromised Marian. The "devouring waters" seem to be the iniquities from which she must literally be led away and rescued. Yet the text doubles back on itself by recasting and replaying the scene. Marian recalls that she must return to her child. Aurora offers to "go with you [Marian]" (VI.492) and retraces her steps. She recants the position of authority which she had seized by literally retreading the same ground while exchanging positions with Marian:

Then she led

The way, and I, as by a narrow plank

Across devouring waters, followed her,

Stepping by her footsteps, breathing by her breath,

And holding her with eyes that would not slip;

And so, without a word, we walked a mile,

And so, another mile, without a word. (VI.500-6)

The change of direction is both a verbatim repetition and an inversion. The roles of leader and follower, "pure" and "fallen" become confused and elided.

Marian and Aurora work through a game of "follow the leader" which enacts their reciprocity and stages or performs the mirroring between them. The "twinning" of the women occurs when Aurora patterns herself on Marian by "Stepping by her footsteps, breathing by her breath" (VI.503). The text operates in a parallel sense on the level of narrative by intertwining Aurora's voice with Marian's. When Marian first appears in Book III, Aurora mediates--maybe even manipulates--the story of Marian's early life. Aurora seems to want to fit Marian's narrative into a limited and appropriate place within her own: "We talked. She told me all her story out,/Which I'll re-tell with fuller utterance,/As coloured and confirmed in aftertimes/By others and herself too" (III.827-30). Aurora tries to make Marian's text conform stylistically with her telling of her own story by transcribing Marian's language into the "fuller utterance" characteristic of Aurora's narrative style. This re-telling may be seen as an appropriation of voice which valorizes the privileged speaker and silences the marginal subject. It may also be read as a remarkably self-conscious comment upon the inevitable re-writing, and subtle changes in meaning which accompany any translation. Furthermore, Aurora presents the narrative as a collaborative interweaving of voices. While admitting her hand in reshaping it, she credits Marian with further directing and "colour[ing]" it. Aurora allows herself to become intimately involved in the telling of Marian's tale: "I tell her story and grow passionate./She, Marian, did not tell it so, but

used/Meek words that made no wonder of herself" (III.847-9). The final product is a narrative which weaves together Marian's self-effacing language and Aurora's intense compassion for Marian and anger at her victimization.

Aurora foregrounds the dangers of speaking for another--particularly a socially disadvantaged Other--by continually reminding the reader of her presence in the narrative. She negotiates the fine line between promoting justice by speaking for those who cannot speak for themselves and avoiding a full-scale colonization of Marian's experience. In a very real sense, Marian cannot tell her story to the upper-class reader who possesses the power to bring about social change. As Marian observes:

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.  
 Let pass the rest, then; only leave my oath  
 Upon this sleeping child--man's violence,  
 Not man's seduction, made me what I am. (VI.1220-7)

Aurora is able to perform the translation which adds the necessary "delicate reserves" to Marian's experience. Although Aurora's narrative does not forcibly confront the reader with Marian's rape, it at least presents it--however obliquely--as central to both the thematic unity and plot structure of the text. Marian's rape places her in a vulnerable and marginal social position which strengthens Aurora's concern for her and draws the two women together. Aurora

tells a story which would be unspeakable and incomprehensible in its untranslated form. Aurora and Marian co-create a narrative which is palatable because "scrupulously" rendered by Aurora while maintaining at least some of the hard edges of Marian's experience of "man's violence."

Marian and Aurora's voices echo one another to produce a densely interwoven narrative in which the individuality of the speakers gives way to symphonic blending. Despite the obvious and politically meaningful differences between the women's histories they articulate consonant positions on ideas which are central to the text. Both women express a similarly unconventional approach to religion. Marian and Aurora contribute thoughts and experiences which serve to produce the overarching Christian ideology which underwrites Aurora Leigh. Both women offer evidence of devout Christianity, yet they insist upon resituating and rethinking the Church. Together they build a theology which locates divinity in the natural world, "for Nature comes sometimes/And says, 'I am ambassador for God.'" (VII.465-6). Aurora resists the complacent, rigidly institutionalized Christianity which her aunt attempts to impose upon her. Instead, she finds God in the beauty of the natural world and the pleasure and sustenance which humanity draws from it:

... 'See,' I said,

'And see! is God not with us on the earth?

And shall we put Him down by aught we do?

Who says there's nothing for the poor and vile

Save poverty and wickedness? behold!'

And ankle-deep in English grass I leaped

And clapped my hands, and called all very fair. (I.1134-40)

Aurora's early ideas are admittedly naive and simplistic, yet they supply a framework for her later theories of a Christian social justice empowered by poetry and love. Her adolescent rebellion against formal Christianity demonstrates some very sophisticated religious thinking. She identifies the grace of God as a private--almost secret--source of creative energy:

I had relations in the Unseen, and drew  
The elemental nutriment and heat  
From nature, as earth feels the sun at nights,  
Or as a babe sucks surely in the dark.  
I kept the life thrust on me, on the outside  
Of the inner life with all its ample room  
For heart and lungs, for will and intellect,  
Inviolable by conventions. God,

I thank thee for that grace of thine! (BookI:474-81)

The "Unseen" suggests a sort of pre-symbolic order or Imaginary which operates in resistance to the dominant, Symbolic order "thrust on" Aurora by the "conventions" of institutional Christianity.<sup>9</sup> Aurora exploits the maternal and natural images which will underpin much of the following narrative, yet this early passage succinctly outlines Aurora's belief in a Christianity which integrates the body--particularly the feminine and maternal body--and the natural world. The "inner" or spiritual life demands room for "heart and lungs", that is, the body and its creative (artistic) and procreative (maternal) energies. Throughout the poem, and over the years which it narrates, Aurora cultivates these early ideas for a radicalized Christianity

which culminate in the New Jerusalem which she envisions in the closing lines of the poem.

Aurora Leigh arrives at a religious ideology which combines Aurora's progression of thought with Marian's. Much like Aurora, Marian finds God in the pleasures of nature and the body. God provides a refuge from the hostility of Marian's environment:

This babe would steal off from the mother's chair,  
Would find some keyhole toward the secrecy  
Of Heaven's high blue...

...She liked, she said,  
To dazzle black her sight against the sky,  
For then, it seemed, some grand blind Love came down,  
And groped her out, and clasped her with a kiss;  
She learnt God that way, and was beat for it  
Whenever she went home...

...This grand blind Love, she said,  
Instructed her and civilised her more  
Than even Sunday school did afterward. (III.883-901)

Marian's conception of God as "grand blind Love" recalls Aurora's inarticulate, pre-symbolic God of the "Unseen". As with Aurora, Marian is drawn to God through the natural world; the sky, "Heaven's high blue" is a site of intersection between earth and divinity. Although Marian's childhood domestic situation is clearly materially worse than Aurora's, both young women experience their environments as sources of oppression and inhibition. And in consequence, both turn to a similarly reconfigured God as a source of solace and escape. Aurora's image of the "babe [who] sucks surely in the dark" resonates with



Marian's similarly bodily--and pleasurable--image of the divine "clasp[ing] her with a kiss". Both women promote a Christianity which celebrates the body and nature; Aurora and Marian deploy both the natural world as the human body as metaphors for divinity. God is manifest within the body of the subject and throughout the natural world, and not narrowly restricted to the austere and pedestrian Church represented by Marian's Sunday school. Marian's description of her early religious enlightenment may sound childish and lacking in intellectual development. God lends a "civilis[ing]" influence, which--rather condescendingly--suggests that Marian was somehow in need of civilization. Yet it is important to see the connections between Marian and Aurora's religious thinking; Marian's "[un]civilised" ideas not only precisely mirror Aurora's, they are essential to the production of a reworked Christianity which is central to Aurora Leigh. The doubling of Aurora and Marian includes an important intellectual and spiritual resemblance.

The intellectual doubling of Marian and Aurora demonstrates the poem's commitment to solidarity between women. The almost dichotomous class difference is worked through in order to emphasize the commonalities of feminine experience. Despite the discrepancy between Aurora's middle-class, formal education and Marian's self-directed, casual grabs at learning, both women share a similar discontent with the social--and gendered--limitations placed on their intellectual development. As a child, Marian cultivates a mental and spiritual space for herself. Her "inner life" is comprised of wonder and joy at the splendor of God and the natural world and also from literary sources. She cobbles together a groundwork of literary knowledge from

the scraps of books which are randomly dropped in her path by the "peddler" (III.969) who "would toss her down/Some stray odd volume from his heavy pack ... half a play of Shakespeare's, torn across ... Or else a sheaf of leaves ... torn out from the heart of books" (III.973-80). As a lower-class girl, Marian gladly accepts these bits and pieces, yet she does not uncritically swallow everything that falls in her path. She exerts her critical discretion by editing and reconfiguring her library:

'Twas somewhat hard to keep the things distinct,  
And oft the influence jarred the child...

...But she weeded out

Her book-leaves, threw away the leaves that hurt  
(First tore them small, that none should find a word),  
And made a nosegay of the sweet and good  
To fold within her breast; and pore upon  
At broken moments of the noontide glare  
When leave was given her....(III.983-93)

Although Marian's efforts to discriminate between "hurt[full]" and "sweet" texts seems naive, they attest to her precocious intellectual originality. Instead of digesting the written word as immutable truth, she quite literally deconstructs texts--"tore them small"--and renders them into a uniquely and privately satisfying textual product. As with Marian's (and Aurora's) religious faith, the poem constructs literature as something illicit that must be stolen and concealed: Marian keeps her texts "fold[ed] within her breast". Marian defies the class and gender rules which separate her from literature, and the privileged, masculine culture which it stands for simply by struggling to acquire

and read books. She takes her defiance a step further by presuming to act upon her own critical ideas; she employs her own selective reading process to manufacture her own text. Marian's bricolage is both an act of reading and of writing. She draws directly upon literary history to set the foundations for her own "nosegay of the sweet and good".

Marian's creative literary act (which combines reading and writing) signals her powers of articulation. Although she is certainly not the central poet in the poem, her early proof of bold creativity renders her long monologues (later in the text) both consistent and plausible. It is tempting to ascribe Marian's more eloquent speeches to Aurora (who claims to give "fuller utterance" to Marian's narrative) yet the poem specifically grounds Marian's poetic voice--which gains full dimension in Book IX--in her early skill at reinventing the writings of others.

Marian's reading represents a fairly broad cross-section of secular and religious literature, including travel-journals, Milton and the popular fiction of Fielding. Although these texts come to her fragmented and incomplete, they are uniformly of male authorship. Aurora's early reading takes the form of a similar ramble through men's books, that is, both books authored by men and the property of men. Marian picks up a library from a peddler and Aurora sneaks, and later inherits hers from her father. Both young women must subvert the interdiction which excludes them from literature on the basis of gender. Admittedly, Marian suffers double exclusion for reasons of class and gender, yet Aurora Leigh calls attention to the gendered similarities between Aurora's and Marian's underhand tactics for acquiring a literary education. Aurora's literary inclinations set her

in opposition to the conventional, domestic, feminine education which her aunt attempts to force upon her. Although she practises external compliance, Aurora favours a self-directed literary curriculum drawn from her dead father's otherwise neglected books:

Books, books, books!

I had found the secret of a garret-room  
 Piled high with cases in my father's name,  
 Piled high, packed large--where, creeping in and out  
 Among the giant fossils of my past,  
 Like some small nimble mouse between the ribs  
 Of a mastodon, I nibbled here and there  
 At this or that box, pulling through the gap,  
 In heats of terror, haste, victorious joy. (I.833-40)

As Marian keeps texts "fold[ed] within her breast," Aurora approaches her father's books as something "secret," hidden and transgressive. Her reading is furtive, mouselike and without rational direction.

Like Marian, Aurora reads "here and there," "this or that"; she educates herself without a formal academic plan and with great pleasure. Reading is a "joy" all the more "victorious" because it is subversive. Aurora's description of her early reading may be understood as an encounter with a pre-existent symbolic order, or what Lacan calls *le Nom-du-Pere*. In her discussion of Lacan, Catherine Belsey explains : "...it is the Name-of-the-Father which authorizes meaning, the paternal-signifying Law which holds in place the ordering mechanism of the symbolic" (59 *Desire*). By nibbling at her father's books--inscribed with "my father's name"--Aurora moves through the architecture of the symbolic aptly invoked by the "ribs of a mastodon".

On the one hand, Aurora is struggling to decode and insert herself into this masculine symbolic order; she claims her right to explore "the giant fossils of my past", that is, to engage in the symbolic which precedes her. Yet she does this with a self-consciousness of herself as Other. She sees herself as outside of the "paternal-signifying Law"; she must "nibble" and "creep" in "terror" and "haste" through the masculine structure of language. Aurora knows that her trips to the garret constitute trespasses. As a young woman with "relations in the Unseen," that is, a strong connection to the feminine, pre-symbolic order she is encroaching upon a system which attempts to subsume her.

Although Aurora recognizes the massive, daunting structure of the symbolic order, she likens it to an extinct beast (a mastodon) and transcriptions or imprints of a distant, pre-historic time (giant fossils). In doing so, she recognizes that the symbolic always precedes the subject who joins it, yet she also suggests that the order may be too distant and decrepit to control or "authorize meaning." Aurora likens herself to a mouse--dwarfed by the giant edifice of masculine language--yet also vibrant, "nimble" and dynamic. The mastodon's skeleton is formidable and intimidating, yet it is also porous and fallible. Aurora recognizes that the masculine symbolic order is not monolithic and impenetrable; she is able to move "through the gap[s]" in the structure, rather than be excluded or imprisoned by it. Like Marian, Aurora cobbles together a textual framework from masculine sources and uses it to challenge le Nom-du-Pere, which for Lacan is both the Name and the No of the Father. The two women assume a similar position in relation to the symbolic order, and the men's texts which represent it. Marian pulls apart books in order to reform

them according to her creative desire; she appropriates masculine discourse and rewrites it as her own. Similarly, Aurora takes "this and that" from the collection marked with the "father's name" and claims them as "My books!" (I.844). Both women refuse to acquiesce to the No-of-the-Father.

Aurora Leigh offers complex and innovative ideas about the status of the feminine subject within masculine discourse. How do women write and speak when their discursive history is composed of stolen fragments of men's language? The proposed strategy involves subversion, appropriation and rewriting. When Aurora sells her father's books to fund her move to Italy, she identifies herself with an archetypal figure of illicit feminine power: "But even a witch today/Must melt down golden pieces in the nard/Wherewith to anoint her broomstick ere she rides" (V.1196-8). This process of inverted alchemy suggests that writing women must transform the "golden pieces" (the intellectual property of men) into something original and meaningful in feminine contexts. Aurora is far too canny even to attempt to reject the symbolic order and the masculine textuality which articulates it. Instead, she chooses to appropriate and reconfigure male texts. Both Aurora and Marian contribute to the poem's suggested solution. Although Aurora's voice emerges as the most introspective and intellectually sophisticated one in the poem, Marian's ideas intermesh with Aurora's to produce some of the underpinning themes of the poem.

Aurora and Marian cultivate a close friendship which works to dissolve the class distinctions which divide them. The two women come to mirror and echo each other. The text interweaves their ideas and experiences--repeatedly prioritizing the similarities--such that

individual voice is displaced in favour of blended narrative. Aurora's identification with Marian allows her to come to terms with her body and to recognize and enact her desire for Romney. Marian is the only person (excepting Romney, at the end of the text) with whom Aurora is physically affectionate. Aurora describes her father's attempts at such affection as unwelcome and oppressive: "O my father's hand,/Stroke heavily, heavily the poor hair down,/Draw, press the child's head closer to thy knee!" (I.25-7). The image of the father pressing the young girl's head into his lap carries a disturbing hint of incest. Aurora begs the reader's sympathy when she describes herself--actually her body, represented by her hair--as "poor". Her father's physical demands seem to meet resistance; it is necessary for him to "stroke heavily" and "press" her head to his knee. Romney repeats this action: "He dropped a sudden hand upon my head" (I.544). The fact that Aurora aligns her father's touch with her lover's seems to point to a sexualized relationship with the father--who dies just as she is approaching puberty. Associations with unwelcome and inappropriate sexual attention underwrite Aurora's response to Romney's advances. She is similarly disconcerted by his touch and "[shakes] it off as fire" (I.546).

It is only with Marian that Aurora is instantly, physically comfortable. Within moments of their first meeting, Aurora "looked in her eyes, and held her hands" (III.802); Marian spontaneously reciprocates by touching Aurora "with her face and with her voice" (III.805). Throughout their friendship, Aurora physically expresses her love for Marian. She seems to gain strength and pleasure from a relationship which includes and satisfies her growing need for bodily

affection. After experiencing frustration with Romney's pragmatic and sterile conversation, Aurora turns (her body) to Marian:

There I turned

And kissed poor Marian, out of discontent.

The man had baffled, chafed me, till I flung

For refuge to the woman--as, sometimes,

Impatient for some crowded room's close smell,

You throw a window open and lean out...

...She, at least,

Was not built up as walls are, brick by brick...

And into which you cannot see an inch

Although you beat your head against it...(IV.346-59)

Aurora speaks in strong feminist terms. She condemns what Helene Cixous calls the "masculine economy ... governed by a rule ... an order" ("Castration" 480). Romney constructs rigidly ordered discursive "walls" which attempt to deflect "feminine disorder, [and] its laughter" (480). Aurora experiences masculinity as oppressive and stifling, while Marian--"the woman"--signals freshness and freedom. Aurora draws a gendered contrast between the tightly structured and impassable "wall" of Romney's typically masculine discourse and the spontaneous physical affection which she shares with Marian.

The union of Aurora and Marian fulfills the worst fears of the Victorian middle-class male who insists upon the absolute heterosexuality (and heterosociality) of women and strives to segregate women into the categories of pure and fallen, wife and mistress. The intellectual and emotional connection between the women poses a serious threat to the law of segregation. Additionally, Aurora's physical



intimacy with Marian gestures against the middle-class Victorian paranoia about contamination by prostitutes. The Contagious Diseases Acts (which Josephine Butler campaigned against from 1864 to 1884) marked the height of an hysterical and visceral fear of moral corruption--physically, literally--sneaking across the border between classes of women. Although Aurora is sometimes quite squeamish when it comes to bodily contact with the lower classes, the physical warmth she shows Marian attests to her rejection of middle-class values and anxieties. When Aurora kisses Marian it means more than friendship, love or sisterhood; it is an act of bodily rebellion against the dominant discourse. Aurora invites what is culturally constructed as physical defilement and contamination. Although she does not exactly contract a social disease from Marian, she is nonetheless "corrupted" by her. Marian supplies Aurora with knowledge from which she is supposed to be kept in ignorance. Through close contact with Marian, Aurora finds out what a woman of her class is not supposed to know. Aurora is more than a sympathetic listener to Marian's life story of suffering. The voices of the two women alternate and interact to create the larger narrative of the poem. Through this interweaving of voice, Aurora becomes implicated and enmeshed in Marian's story. Aurora is able to speak of rape because she has shared--on a vicarious, discursive level--Marian's rape.

Aurora's close discursive proximity to rape and consequent fallenness may strike some readers as only a cautious, removed charitable interest. Even worse, it may seem prurient. Yet the simple fact that Aurora knows Marian's story should be credited as subversive. Aurora Leigh's treatment of fallenness appears both sensitive and

radical when considered in contrast to contemporary treatments of the themes. D.G. Rossetti approaches the topic in "Jenny" (1870) which presents a male speaker (who is a "user" of prostitutes) who attempts to theorize the social problem of prostitution through contemplation of the individual prostitute he has patronized. Aurora Leigh differs from the contemplative, masculine perspective of "Jenny" by offering a radical, feminist solution which demonstrates a genuine concern for the female victims of the economic and cultural values which encourage prostitution. The speaker of D.G. Rossetti's poem muses abstractedly that lack of knowledge sustains the division imposed between pure and fallen women:

Like a rose shut in a book  
 In which pure women may not look,  
 For its base pages claim control  
 To crush the flower within the soul;  
 Where through each dead rose-leaf that clings,  
 Pale as transparent Psyche-wings,  
 To the vile text, are traced such  
 As might make lady's cheek indeed  
 More than a living rose to read. (253-60)

The fallen woman is "the vile text" (259) containing "shameful knowledge" (265) which must be kept from pure women if they are to remain pure. Despite its many relapses into conventional male attitudes towards prostitutes, Rossetti's text takes up the "problem" of prostitution and offers solutions which cut to the heart of the issue. These solutions are tenuously offered by a speaker who is fully cognizant of his complicity in a system which asserts divisions between

pure and fallen women. He accepts a generalized responsibility--and a moderate degree of guilt--for Jenny's fallen state, yet exploits her vulnerability while expending his lust. At any rate, he calls attention to the very social condition which Aurora Leigh seeks to address: the conventional sexual morality which places a seemingly impenetrable barrier between pure and fallen women. Rossetti's speaker concedes that the two classes of women are "two sister vessels" (205); the poem suggests that the division between them is artificial and socially imposed. Furthermore, he proposes that the division might be transgressed. Pure women might flout the interdiction and allow themselves to know and understand women like Jenny:

If but a woman's heart might see  
Such erring heart unerringly  
For once! But that can never be.

Like a rose shut in a book  
In which pure women may not look,  
For its base pages claim control  
To crush the flower within the soul. (250-6)

The estrangement between women is predicated on lack of knowledge. The pure women are denied the texts of the fallen women. This system aims to prevent the corruption of the pure and to keep the fallen marginal, unknown and vulnerable. Rossetti's poem is cautiously critical of this practice. Although it articulates conventional wisdom about the moral coding of women, it also plants an idea of dissent by hinting--if only "For once!"--that pure and fallen women should work together and in doing so, upset the system.

Aurora Leigh takes the hint embedded in "Jenny". It allows the virtuous woman not only to look into the "vile text" but to explicate and weave it into her own narrative. Rossetti's poem uses textuality and reading as metaphors for cross-class contact. In Aurora Leigh the same metaphor becomes complicated and elaborated. For Aurora, poetry is the means of personal fulfillment and of social justice. Reading shapes her subjectivity. Aurora's contact with the fallen may be a discursive one, but this by no means implies that it is insincere or artificial. Within the densely literary context of Aurora Leigh, textuality is real, meaningful, immanent. One of the closest details of resemblance between Aurora and Marian is their similar histories of literary development. Textuality is an important link between the women. Aurora's act of listening to--or reading--Marian's story and incorporating it into her own narrative is in itself an example of the subversive reading strategies which both Aurora and Marian began to participate in as adolescents. Marian's tale is indeed the "vile text" of Rossetti's poem and Aurora not only reads it, she embraces it. Aurora brings Marian's experience to bear upon the central ideas which she develops as the poem progresses. For Aurora, reading is the paramount, crucial gesture; as soon as she has read Marian's text, Aurora opens her heart and her home to Marian. It is the story that matters and everything else falls into place around it. To accept Marian discursively--and all that this fallen figure represents--is to accept her completely.

Marian's story supplies Aurora with the (forbidden) knowledge of the precisely gendered injustice and violence which underpin her society. As Dorothy Mermin observes, "Prostitution is the social evil

that the poem cares most to cure" (203 EBB). And the debate surrounding prostitution is necessarily a forum concerning the body: how it is inscribed (and judged) by the dominant discourse, how it is mapped as a commodity and the violence which this treatment entails. Aurora's ideas about prostitution bring together and help crystallize many threads of her thinking. Her hopes for healing the "social evil" of prostitution--or more accurately, the women who are victimized by it--stem from her belief in the political importance of poetry and her call to reverence the body. Aurora argues that art is the agent which will bring the physical and the spiritual together in balanced reciprocity. Aurora's anger at the wrongful sufferings of fallen women incites some of her most concise yet complex and suggestive analyses:

Thus is Art

Self-magnified in magnifying a truth  
Which, fully recognized, would change the world  
And shift its morals. If a man could feel,  
Not one day, in the artist's ecstasy,  
But every day, feast, fast, or working-day,  
The spiritual significance burn through  
The hieroglyphic of material shows,  
Henceforward he would paint the globe with wings,  
And reverence fish and fowl, the bull, the tree,  
And even his very body as a man--  
Which now he counts so vile, that all the towns  
Make offal of their daughters for its use. (VII. 855-66)

Aurora finds the potential social energies of art in its ability to inspire the body. The desire or "ecstasy" of the artist drives the

subject to an elevated position of reverence for the body. The body is not intrinsically shameful or degraded; instead, it must be valorized and respected. Aurora recasts the old binary between pure and fallen. In the first place, she redirects the attention from female bodies to male ones: "his very body as a man." Women's bodies need not be the targets for categorical moral signposts. Women are not the exclusive curators of public morality. Aurora demands that men take responsibility for defiling themselves and women by "making offal of their daughters." Furthermore, Aurora complicates the relationship between pure and fallen. She rejects the simple all-or-nothing binary in favour of an ideal which celebrates the body's place in the scheme of nature ("fish and fowl, the bull, the tree"). The body must be continuously illuminated and glorified by spiritual energy. Joyce Zonana notes that "for Aurora, it is the division of spirit and flesh ...that constitutes the Fall, bringing death into this world ... the world is two-fold, spirit and flesh inextricably intermingled" (246). Both The Fall and the fall of women like Marian are the result of man's profanation of the body. It may be wise to remember that Marian is not a prostitute, although she is socially constructed as the equivalent as a consequence of her rape. She is cast as fallen and the facts of her story serve to reveal the injustice and inaccuracy of this uncompromising label. Aurora's ethic of reverence for the body--her insistence that "without sensuous, spiritual is inappreciable" (VII.775-6)--derives in part from her connection with Marian. The treatment of Marian's body attests to what Aurora condemns as an unhealthy, corrupted understanding of the body. To neglect or abuse the body is to "divide/This apple of life" (VII.769-70). As a body

victimized by rape, Marian's body demonstrates the destructive results of this division which "brings death" (VII.766). The disrespect and violence which Marian experiences through the body illustrates the social urgency and necessity of Aurora's call to reverence the body. Additionally, she is socially inscribed by the aftermath of the rape; her body becomes a target of derision when she mothers a child out of wedlock--that is, when she is socially seen to be fallen. It is Marian's texts (both the story which she tells Aurora and the social meanings written on her damaged body) which allow for and inform Aurora's position on the body. Marian's narratives force Aurora to theorize the body. Although her theory challenges conventional morality, Aurora does not seek to eliminate the distinction between pure and impure. Instead, she tries to re-draw the lines by establishing a new criterion for purity which demands the integration of and balance between spirit and flesh.

Aurora Leigh reads as though it were spoken by a single voice. It seems--on one level--to be the product of a discrete subjectivity rendering her experience and developing her ideas. However, the impression of a unified, individual voice is deceptive. Aurora's narrative is echoed by Marian's narrative. Structurally, the poem alternates Aurora's voice with Marian's. Sometimes the voices are intertwined so tightly that they lose their distinctness, as when Aurora claims to tell Marian's story. Large segments of narrative are spoken by Marian unmediated by Aurora. Yet the overall effect of twinning between the women and the reverberant echo which their voices create serves to confuse or conflate the origin of the voice(s). Aurora's narrative relies heavily upon the trace supplied by Marian's

narrative. Aurora's original and often radical ideas stem not only from the use she makes of her personal experience, but also from the knowledge and experience she gains from Marian. The poem puts forth a poetics of the body which is only available to Aurora through her intimacy with Marian. Marian supplies Aurora with the body which she is denied by her social position. That is, Aurora gains access to the body through Marian. Marian's experience includes both the pleasures and the sufferings of the female body, both of which are socially constructed as off-limits to a woman in Aurora's position. Aurora and Marian's experiment in co-motherhood (significantly without a man) allows Aurora some of the physical pleasures of a child while escaping public criticism. In turn, Aurora also comes close enough to the personal violence and social scrutiny endured by Marian to at least be able to think and write about it. It seems to me that this is more than most Victorian middle-class women were able to do. Aurora handles herself deftly and cautiously; her intimacy with Marian allows her to inhabit Marian's practised body discursively without the actual physical experiences and the stigma and punitive measures attached to them. The central voice of Aurora Leigh speaks of what she can only know from Marian. The knowledge of the body secured from Marian informs Aurora's theoretical stance--her poetics of the body. Yet, it also brings about her personal embodiment. As the intimacy between Marian and Aurora increases, Aurora transforms herself from a policed, corseted, Victorian middle-class body to a sexually desiring and confident body. She moves from the subjectivity of a docile body, in Foucault's terms, to that of a resistant body.



Aurora is at the height of her bodily docility at the end of Book V; this mid-way point in the text marks Aurora's departure from England and her new life in Italy with Marian. She has been living independently in London and working carefully and respectably towards a literary career. In the first half of the poem, Aurora seems to be fighting against her body and denying her desire. She falls short of her ideal of "a twofold world" which unites "Natural things/And spiritual" (VII.762-3). She prioritizes the spiritual at the expense of the physical; her intellectual, literary pursuits take precedence over her body. The evening before she leaves for Italy, Aurora sits down to write and expresses an uncomfortable satisfaction with the bodily discipline she successfully imposes upon herself:

My loose long hair began to burn and creep,  
 Alive to the very ends, about my knees:  
 I swept it backward as the wind sweeps flame,  
 With the passion of my hands. Ah, Romney laughed  
 One day (how full the memories come up!)  
 '--Your Florence fire-flies live on in your hair,'  
 He said, 'it gleams so.' Well, I wrung them out,  
 My fire-flies; made a knot as hard as life  
 Of those loose, soft, impracticable curls,  
 And sat down and thought...

...and drew my desk and wrote. (V.1126-36)

Aurora draws a sharp distinction between the uncontrolled, desiring body--which must be bound, "wrung", "swept ... backward" and policed--and the ordered, pristine workings of the mind--the tidy, restricted motion of drawing the desk and writing. At this point, Aurora sees the

body as a hindrance to her writing; her desire for Romney is a complication which she beats down. Aurora seems proud of and resigned to her bodily repression. The "burn and creep" of her hair around her knees may be read as a suggestion of masturbation. Aurora kills off this desire; the "flame" of caressing hair--"alive to the very ends"--is swept away. The desire enacted by the hair is transferred to "the passion of my hands"--the energy of the body is rechannelled to the hands which service the mind by writing. Aurora's hair poses the threat of (auto-)eroticism and also contains her desire for Romney and for the Italy. Although she successfully resists the auto-erotic desire, she concedes to the larger desire for Italy. Although she binds her hair, her move towards Italy signals a need for the "Florence fire-flies" and a recognition that they are not entirely wrung out of her.

Joyce Zonana suggests that in the first half of the poem Aurora "sees herself as disembodied, spiritual woman--the 'heavenly' female" (249). She argues against Helen Cooper who believes that "Aurora imagines herself as male [and]...reads Aurora's quest in the second half of her poem as the reclaiming of her female identity" (Zonana 249). Zonana maintains that Aurora "never abandons her female identity; she simply focuses on one half of the ... self--the spiritual.... Her quest is to reclaim the material" (249). This process of reclamation begins when Aurora breaks with her fatherland and heads for both Marian and Italy, the motherland. As Sandra M. Gilbert has observed, Italy is associated with the feminine in Aurora Leigh; Barrett Browning "struggle[s] to revive both the dead land of Italy and the dead metaphor of 'her' femaleness" (Gilbert 196). Like

Cooper, Gilbert sees Aurora's transformation as a development from male to female. Undoubtedly, Aurora struggles with her femininity in the second half of the poem. However--in agreement with Zonana--I believe that the struggle is not between gendered subjectivities but between the two elements of Aurora's twofold world--between the flesh and the spirit. Aurora's Italy is not strictly speaking feminine; after all, it is in Italy that her love and desire for Romney reaches its height and its fulfillment. Although not exclusively feminine, Aurora charts Italy as a land of desire. She imagines it as a landscape of the body:

And now I come, My Italy,  
 My own hills! Are you 'ware of me, my hills,  
 How I burn toward you? do you feel tonight  
 The urgency and yearning of my soul,  
 As sleeping mothers feel the sucking babe  
 And smile? (V.1266-71)

Indeed, the landscape of Italy is specifically female here. Yet, it will later become the terrain of her desire for the masculine. Just before Romney's unexpected arrival in Italy, Aurora sees the view from her tower as "some drowned city in some enchanted sea ... drawing you who gaze/With passionate desire, to leap and plunge/And find a sea-king with a voice of waves" (VIII.38-41). The move from England to Italy is a shift from disembodiment to the "twofold sphere" (VII.777) in which the spiritual and the physical are balanced and interconnected.

Aurora's move to Italy is also a move to Marian. Aurora comes to know and inhabit her body outside of the constraints of English Victorian society and under the influence of Marian. Although Marian has survived the violence of an individual man and the condemnation of

an entire society, she attains and exemplifies Aurora's twofold ideal. She radiates a powerful spiritual energy which many readers of the poem explain as the effect of her status as Madonna. Yet she is firmly grounded in the material; her body records both the trauma of rape and the pleasures of motherhood. The time spent with Marian--from the meeting in Paris to the evening in Italy when the two are joined by Romney--follows Aurora's growing discontentment with her disembodiment. She develops her poetics of the body and comes to recognize her personal need to live within her body and to balance the spirit and the flesh. Marian's influence causes Aurora to recognize her neglected body. Aurora sees that she has divided the "twofold sphere"; she has "grown foreign to myself/As surely as to others" (VII.1215-6). Aurora realizes that she has allowed her body to atrophy; this internal sundering estranges her from others. The loss of the body constitutes death:

I was past,  
It seemed, like others--only not in heaven.  
And many a Tuscan eve I wandered down  
The cypress alley like a restless ghost  
That tries its feeble ineffectual breath  
Upon its charred funeral-brands put on  
Too soon .... (VII.1160-5)

Aurora conceives of herself as living a ghostly, reduced existence. This is the result of her internal division: the body is dead but the spirit lives on dissatisfied and incomplete. Aurora articulates her need to reclaim her desire; she rejects the death of her body which came "too soon". In an effort to correct the imbalance between body

and spirit, Aurora prostrates herself in a Catholic church and finally gives some rei(g)n to her body:

Then I knelt,  
And dropped my head upon the pavement too,  
And prayed, since I was foolish in desire  
Like other creatures, craving offal-food,  
That he would stop his ears to what I said,  
And only listen to the run and beat

Of this poor, passionate, helpless blood.... (VII.1265-71)

Aurora's "foolish[ness] in desire" is her denial of the body in favour of the purely spiritual and intellectual. She rebalances herself by "allowing her blood to speak" (Zonana 252). Zonana observes that "the poetics of the body is a poetics of silence...but in its context, this is an expressive silence" (252). Aurora's collapse at the church demonstrates her willingness to allow the body to assume its rightful place in balance with the spirit. Her intellectual voice is temporarily silenced to permit the language of the body.

Aurora Leigh presents Aurora's transformation from disciplined body and exaggerated mind to the harmonious subjectivity which interweaves the material and the spiritual. The pattern of the text links this transformation to the development of Aurora's friendship with Marian. Aurora's transformation--and her eventual union with Romney--is enabled by the love she shares with Marian. Marian's experience of the body supplies Aurora with the knowledge necessary to realize her ideal of the "twofold sphere." Yet, Aurora's relationship with Marian is not parasitic or prurient. Instead, Aurora and Marian become doubles of one another. Their stories repeat and echo each--

blending together to form the larger narrative of Aurora Leigh. In the final Book, Marian demonstrates that she has achieved the twofold ideal which Aurora and Romney are in the final stages of attaining. Despite the joy which Aurora and Romney find in their hard-won union, both concede that Marian has beaten them to the "twofold sphere." Both seem in awe of Marian. Aurora states that Marian "'sees clearly for herself:/Her instinct's holy'" (IX.455-6) to which Romney adds "'I only marvel how she sees so sure'" (IX.457). The final scene between Romney, Marian and Aurora involves a final doubling of the two women which emphasizes the reciprocity between them. First Aurora offers Romney to Marian: "'Accept the gift, I say,/My sister Marian, and be satisfied ... I'll witness to the world/That Romney Leigh is honoured in his choice/Who chooses Marian for his honoured wife'" (IX.256-74). Marian repeats and inverts the gesture of her "sister." In turn, she firmly but gently refuses Romney and offers him to Aurora: "'Most noble Romney, wed a noble wife,/And open on each other your great souls--/I need not farther bless you...'" (IX.440-2). With this final reciprocal twinning, Aurora gains her "twofold sphere" and Marian--the brutalized, "fallen" woman on the margins of Victorian society--is allowed "her thrilling, solemn voice" (IX.248). She speaks "as one who had authority to speak" (IX.250).

By allowing Marian an authoritative voice, the poem positions her as Aurora's double. The women's voices echo each other causing a reverberation which elides the distinction between the "original" voice and the answering one. Echo acts as the spoken and heard counterpart to the visual process of mirroring. Marian and Aurora supply each other with a mirror-sister--a feminine subject who reflects the self

back not as a perfect mirror image but with subtle elaborations and distortions. These varied refractions expand and diversify the subjectivities of both women. Aurora and Marian establish a model of looking at others--particularly at other women--which invites the return gaze and sets up a continual interplay of mirrored looking. Aurora engages in this practice of shared gaze with other subjects in the poem--many of whom are represented in paintings. The next chapter will discuss Aurora's exchange of gaze with archetypal images (interpreted and represented in paintings) which help her to identify and reconfigure various potential female subject positions. I also hope to place Aurora Leigh within what I identify as a uniquely Victorian interest in the literary treatment of painting and especially portraiture--the textual representation of visual representation.

## II

Early in M.E. Braddon's Lady Audley's Secret (1862), George Talboys, Lady Audley's first husband, discovers her portrait in the home of her new husband and his friend Robert Audley's uncle, Lord Audley. It is at this moment in the text when George (and the reader) realize that George's wife, Helen Maldon, whom he had believed to be dead, has made an advantageous, yet bigamous marriage and has deceived everyone. Not only does the portrait explode the secret of Lady Audley's bigamy, it reveals much of her previously occluded subtle intelligence and wilfulness. The Pre-Raphaelite portrait is "so like and yet so unlike; it was as if you had burned strange-coloured fires before my lady's face, and by their influence brought out new lines and new expressions never seen in it before" (71). The painter represented Lady Audley with "something of the aspect of a beautiful fiend" (71):

Her crimson dress, exaggerated like all the rest in this strange picture, hung about her in folds that looked like flames, her fair head peeping out of the lurid mass of colour, as if out of a raging furnace. Indeed, the crimson dress, the sunshine on the face, the red gold gleaming in the yellow hair, the ripe scarlet of the pouting lips, the glowing colours of each accessory of the minutely-painted background, all combined to render the first effect of the painting by no means an agreeable one. (71)

The narrator's presentation of the portrait is more of a reading than a description. Despite commentary on use of colour and technique--and some digression into the merits and faults of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood--the narrator is primarily concerned with how the picture



signifies and what it means to the subjects confronted by it. Alicia (Lord Audley's daughter from his first marriage and Robert's cousin) offers commentary on the process and function of portraiture:

"I think that sometimes a painter is in a manner inspired, and is able to see, through the normal expression of the face, another expression that is equally a part of it, through not to be perceived by common eyes. We have never seen my lady look as she does in that picture; but I think that she could look so." (71)

Alicia's observation signals to the reader that the painting must be considered as a clue to Braddon's mystery text. Alicia urges viewers of the painting to scrutinize it for a meaningful subtext; the portrait is an "inspired" interpretation which offers its viewers privileged access to Lady Audley's personality. More significantly, it articulates a Victorian textual strategy of framing paintings within literary texts. Among others, Lady Audley's Secret, Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess", Christina Rossetti's "In An Artist's Studio" and particularly Aurora Leigh question the process of portraiture. These texts share suspicions and anxieties about the accuracy and integrity of the portrait. The portrait is never a literal transcription of its subject; instead, it is a rendering which reflects and manages the interests of its creator and viewers. As Oscar Wilde comments in his preface to The Picture of Dorian Gray--possibly the culminating and most self-conscious example of Victorian literary treatments of the portrait--"it is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors" (xxiv).

Within some Victorian texts, the portrait functions as a screen which mediates between the subject of a picture and its audience. A screen may be either a semi-transparent barrier which filters the activities occurring behind it or a film screen upon which continuously shifting images are projected. Alicia Audley recognizes that portraiture does not involve a discrete, dispassionate contemplator and a fixed, neutral image of a "real" person; instead, it is an act of negotiation between gazing subjects. Her remarks attest to a skepticism toward Realism which is surprising considering that Braddon's characters speak from within the period during which Realism was the dominant artistic mode. The photo-realistic quality of the portrait and its technical accuracy do not create its truth. That is, the painting does not signify or mean what it visually shows. Although the portrait of Lady Audley precisely details her physical beauty, it simultaneously projects invisible nuances of character which contradict the image of seamless good nature which Lady Audley otherwise maintains. There is an awkward double irony in the suggestion that a portrait which exists exclusively in a text may convey what cannot be seen. The relationship of the reader to the textual portrait is necessarily an abstract one which allows the picture to signify in ways which a "real" portrait may not be able to. Victorian literary discussions of portraiture suggest that nineteenth-century Realist art may not have been produced and consumed under the assumption that visual accuracy could truthfully convey "real life." Many Victorian texts present viewers--particularly of contemporary portraits--as cautious of the surface Realism of pictures and actively, often self-

consciously engaged in the complex negotiations which occur between a portrait and its viewers.

Aurora Leigh participates in the nineteenth-century literary concern with portraiture. As a woman struggling to create (or write) an anomalous identity for herself--that of a serious creative professional woman with a satisfying romantic life--Aurora turns to works of art to interpret and reflect her personal and vocational development. From the densely symbolic portrait of her mother (Book I. 128-73) to her friend Vincent Carrington's paintings of Danae (Book III.100-50), Aurora reads and constructs herself by studying pictures. The pictures in the poem are largely of women and Aurora's dealings with them dramatize the process of becoming culturally and sexually feminine. Dorothy Mermin credits the presence of visual art in the poem to Barrett Browning's personal exposure to Italian art:

The endlessly reiterated, narrowly defined images of women in Italian art deeply impressed themselves on Barrett Browning when in Italy, for the first time in her life, painting and sculpture assaulted her senses. The multitudinous depictions of the Virgin seem to have issued in her picture of Marian, and portraits of more worldly women ... in that of Lady Waldemar. (211)

There is no reason to doubt Mermin's suggestion that Barrett Browning became uniquely sensitive to art--and particularly to representations of women--while free to enjoy the abundant and spectacular art of Italy. Mermin draws a precise and uncomplicated connection between what Barrett Browning saw and the characters she produced in Aurora Leigh; Italian paintings served as models for the poem's women. Yet

the function of portraits in the poem seems richer and more elaborate than Mermin would have it. In addition to supplying some historical background to the poem, portraits inhabit Aurora Leigh--as they do so many other works of the period--both as characters in themselves (the mother's portrait), as mirrors (Carrington's Danaes), as lineage (the family portraits which go up in smoke in the Leigh Hall fire) and even as a metaphor for the very project of the poem itself (I.1-8). For Mermin, Italian portraits are source materials which creep into Barrett Browning's poem lending it a painterly quality. Furthermore, Aurora's need to engage with portraits of women is a stage which she transcends. Mermin explains that the Italian paintings which served as prototypes for the women in Aurora Leigh

merge in the phantasmagoric portrait of Aurora's mother. But eventually her relationship to all these women, who encompass the normal female population of poetry as well as of Renaissance painting, fades away. She learns that she is not one of them and that she does not, after all, have to define herself in relation to them. (211-2)

Mermin argues that Aurora's attempts to read portraits--to find in them possible subject positions which she may or may not take up--are juvenile and temporary. Mermin's analysis rests on the assumption that the Renaissance paintings which inspired Barrett Browning presented only "narrowly defined images of women" (211) which offer only limited and patriarchally imposed models for femininity. Yet the portraits in Barrett Browning's poem are not narrow. As pictures which exist only textually, the portraits are mobile, diverse and demanding. They are more filmic than static. Although Mermin is generally correct in her

claim that Aurora "does not ... have to define herself in relation" (212) to the available images of women, she does not entirely repudiate the discourses of femininity present in them. Instead, portraits of women intercede between these discourses and the identity which Aurora writes for herself.

Aurora's engagement with portraits of women allows her to occupy what Mary Wilson Carpenter describes as a "radical female subjectivity"(418). Carpenter argues that Christina Rossetti's Goblin Market presents "a female speaker or subject of discourse which does not take up the conventional phallogentric position, in which the female body is the object of a male gaze" (418). Aurora Leigh offers its female speaker a similar subject position to that described by Carpenter; in Goblin Market as in Aurora Leigh, "the female body is represented as the object of a female gaze" (Carpenter 418). In Rossetti's poem, the interchange of female gaze occurs between the sisters Lizzie and Laura. Barrett Browning deploys a similar strategy with the pairing of Aurora and Marian. Both sets of "sisters" engage in similar acts of gazing, mirroring and twinning. In Aurora Leigh, the male gaze is continually deflected and deferred in favour of allowing women to gaze at each other. The text's primary example of female gaze is the relationship between Aurora and Marian. Unlike conventional male gaze, exemplified by Romney's voyeuristic observation of Aurora crowning herself a poet on the morning of her twentieth birthday (II.54-65), the gaze shared between the two women is reciprocal as opposed to contemplative. While Romney's male gaze casts the female object as Other, the exchanged female gaze combines appreciation for the female body with an element of self-recognition.

Gazing between women does not allow the viewer to remain discrete; she is always implicated because the object of her gaze mirrors aspects of herself back to her.

Aurora assumes Carpenter's "radical female subjectivity" through the exchange of gaze with Marian, in which she acts as both the object of gaze and the gazing subject. The poem's representations of portraits create additional sites for the reciprocal female gaze. In a sense, Aurora's exchange of gaze with her mother's portrait enacts the drama of looking on a more self-conscious level. Aurora challenges her culture's practice of looking at women as if they were pictures by looking at pictures of women as if they were real people. She engages with portraits which acquire the status of characters within her narrative. Aurora confuses the gendered power dynamics of the gaze by investing the gaze with reciprocity which comes to resemble dialogue--by refusing to allow the feminine objects of her gaze to be objectified.

Aurora Leigh uses women's portraits to create a discursive area in which women can look at women in the interest of exploring feminine subjectivity. Aurora reads and exchanges gaze with a range of portraits. She tries herself against them, not simply for likeness, but for possible options or glimpses of a woman she might be. In contrast, the narrating heroine of Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre (1847) draws her own portrait to prove to herself--quite simply--that she is unattractive in every possible way and hence not in the running for Mr. Rochester's affections. Jane uses portraiture to represent herself to herself in what she conceives of as the most accurate--and realistic--terms:

'Listen, then, Jane Eyre, to your sentence: to-morrow, place the glass before you, and draw in chalk your own picture, faithfully; without softening one defect: omit no harsh line, smooth away no displeasing irregularity; write under it, "Portrait of a Governess, disconnected, poor, and plain."

(169)

As in so many Victorian narratives of portraiture, Jane's painstaking realism is inaccurate: swarthy and rodent-like she may be, but she is certainly desirable in the (blind) eyes of Rochester. Jane uses her self-rendered portrait to ruthlessly punish herself; Aurora takes a more active approach giving and taking from multiple portraits to weave together her feminine subjectivity. Evidently, Jane Eyre and Aurora Leigh share a similar concern for the hostile and prurient male gaze; both texts find at least part of the solution to the male gaze in the blinding of heroes. In both texts portraiture functions as a means of negotiating femininity, sexuality and image. Jane's self-portraiture forces her to confront her society's rigid standards for female beauty and accept that she is unable to conform to them. However, Jane Eyre circumvents the problem of Jane's ugliness by removing her from the male gaze and the values and criteria which inform this gaze. Charlotte Bronte writes Jane an escape from patriarchal scrutiny which does not compromise romantic resolution. Bronte's solution is radical in its way. It flouts the judgmental male gaze by allowing Jane to resist the imperative of female beauty by defiantly prioritizing her mind over her appearance. She intellectually and artistically cultivates herself and becomes just the kind of cranky, witty companion Rochester needs. Rochester's blindness ensures that Jane can find

romantic fulfillment despite the social expectation that poor, bookish, unattractive women are doomed to impoverished, obscure spinsterhood. The fact that Rochester cannot see Jane effectively erases all of her disadvantages; in a scopophilic society, invisibility can be a refuge which shelters one from the prejudices of classism, sexism and behaviour conventions.

Jane Eyre deals with the male gaze through tactics of avoidance. Jane does not beat against her society's practice of judging and controlling women by male gaze. Instead, she makes a place for herself apart from this system. Jane removes herself--as far as she is able--from Victorian Realism and the nineteenth-century interest in ostensibly accurate portraits. It is a terrible moment for Jane when she applies conventional standards of beauty to her self-portrait executed in the technically precise manner of nineteenth-century realism. The only means of subverting the tyranny of this merciless realism is to escape from the discourse of portraiture. Jane Eyre's feminist triumph against the male gaze is one of evasion. In contrast, Aurora Leigh is not content to accept escape as the only viable means of preservation from the oppressive male gaze. Instead, the poem deals directly and self-consciously with the gendered issue of representation. The opening lines introduce portraiture as a metaphor for Aurora's project:

Of writing many books there is no end;  
And I who have written much in prose and verse  
For others' uses, will write now for mine--  
Will write my story for my better self  
As when you paint your portrait for a friend,



Who keeps it in a drawer and looks at it  
 Long after he has ceased to love you, just  
 To hold together what he was and is. (I.1-8)

The complicated deployment of the portraiture metaphor renders these lines easily misread. Aurora states that her intention is to write her own story for her own benefit. The reader anticipates that the following metaphor will describe a straightforward relationship between author/painter and text/portrait. Yet the subject becomes fragmented: the painter of the self-portrait is the writer, the friend is the "better self" and the portrait is the "story" or text. Aurora splits her subjectivity between the painter/writer and the friend/"better-self." Interestingly, the friend who looks at the portrait is male and we can assume that the painter of the portrait is female. The fact that this element of subjectivity is aligned with Aurora's narrative voice and that she has once been the object of male love suggests femininity. Aurora's gendered self-division supports Helen Cooper's argument that Aurora envisions herself as male for much of the poem and that she struggles to identify herself as female. Yet, it also points to Aurora's concern with the gendered direction of gaze.

The interaction between portrait and viewer is regulated by gendered conventions in which the woman is the object of a male gaze. In her discussion of D.G. Rossetti's paintings, Griselda Pollock describes this process of fixing and constructing women through male gaze:

'Woman' was central to mid-nineteenth-century visual representations in a puzzling and new formation. So powerful has this regime been ... that we no longer recognize it as

representation at all. The ideological construction of an absolute category of woman has been effaced and this regime of representation has naturalized woman as image, beautiful to look at, defined by her 'looks.' (Vision and Difference 121)

Nineteenth-century notions of gender and conventions of Realism conspire to produce the effect of "woman as image." The apparently credible and transparent Realist image promises to accurately reproduce its subject: Victorian portraits tell the truth about women. The Victorian discourse of women's "natural" frailty and dependence ensures the alignment between feminine subservience and visual objectification. In the first lines of Aurora Leigh, it seems that Aurora is subscribing to the conventional gendering of gaze: the female subject gives the male her portrait--an accurate document of herself which metonymically is herself--and it/she becomes his private property. Yet, the text departs radically from the anticipated convention by repositioning gendered subjects: the male "friend" uses the portrait not to objectify and contain the woman he once loved, but to "hold together" his own image. Aurora's projected masculine subject does not take up the expected position of the Victorian male viewer "who is protectively placed as privileged voyeur" (Pollock 124). This viewer implicates himself in the act of looking at portraits; he recognizes that the discourse of portraiture necessitates an interplay of gazes. Although Barrett Browning sets up the opening metaphor using conventional gender positions, the text resists the expected resolution of the metaphor by allowing the male viewer to participate in the type of gaze-relationship which Aurora Leigh codes as feminine. As with gazes

exchanged between women in the text, the male friend confronts a female portrait which demands his involvement. Rather than objectifying and overdetermining the feminine, the portrait serves to call the masculine subject into questions of identity.

From its opening lines, Aurora Leigh announces its concern with visual representation and gendered identity. Aurora's earliest memories--in fact, her only memories--of her mother are made up more of gaze than language. The memory is sketched as an image:

But still I catch my 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. (I.15-19)

Aurora presents her mother as a picture framed by the doorway of the nursery and immobilized in the act of a specific gesture. But Aurora's portrait of her mother is an interactive one which creates a context for the exchange of gaze between feminine subjects. The one phrase that Aurora recalls her mother speaking to her is an appeal for silence which implicitly privileges the visual over the oral: the mother's statement does not so much stifle Aurora into silence as it enjoins her to participate in the visual. Silence invites the meaningful yet coded exchange of gaze between Aurora and her mother. By rejecting spoken language the mother and daughter engage in a sort of pre-symbolic discourse: the unconscious or the imaginary "tak[es] part against [the] word", that is, the symbolic. This instant of non-linguistic understanding between the daughter and the mother is a small triumph against the phallogentric symbolic order. The text enables this

triumph by allowing feminine subjects to exchange looks. Although Aurora Leigh does not allow for a sustained, developed mother-daughter relationship, this brief interchange between Aurora and her mother demonstrates that Aurora benefited from her mother's influence. Simply, Aurora's mother teaches her that it is possible to say one thing and mean another--and that the discourse of gazes may provide an avenue for subversive communication and a chance to participate in pleasurable and disruptive behaviour--"the child's riot"--which is inappropriate within the hegemonic symbolic order. When Aurora's mother dies, she interprets the loss as a breakdown of gaze in which her mother's "rare blue eyes were shut from seeing me" (I.30). Although Aurora has lost (sight of) her mother, she has established a discourse of feminine gaze which is re-opened when Aurora looks at her mother's portrait.

The death of Aurora's mother leaves her "[a]s restless as a nest-deserted bird/Grown chill through something being away" (I.43-4). Despite her mother's early death, Aurora both states and demonstrates that the brief term of the mother-daughter relationship left lasting inscriptions upon Aurora. Despite her sense of "a mother-want about the world" (I.40) Aurora is never completely motherless. Connecting her life's vocation with her maternal, Italian lineage, Aurora asserts "I write. My mother was a Florentine" (I.29). To Aurora's mind, the second statement seems to be a logical, implicit explanation for the first. Aurora credits her mother with some share of responsibility for her decision to dedicate her life to writing poetry. Although she gains a disjointed literary education from her father's library, Aurora's mother teaches her a feminine, pre-symbolic discourse by

"stringing pretty words that make no sense,/And kissing full sense into empty words"(I.51-2). The mother-tongue takes liberties with the symbolic order and plays with meaning in a way that resembles the artistry of poetry. Investing language with new meanings--giving original and "full sense" to old words--becomes Aurora's business. This pre-symbolic, maternal language suggests both the poetic and the sensuous: the idea of kissing language into poetry credits the desiring body as a source of creativity.

Although Aurora is literally motherless for most of her life, she inherits a feminine discourse from her mother which provides a source for her poetic voice. Aurora's lifelong connection to her mother surfaces in her persistent, sometimes deliberate marginality. From the time of her childhood, Aurora prides herself on being "'The Italian child'" (I.495). Aurora cultivates an identity of ethnic otherness. She sees herself as an Italian expatriate unwillingly exiled from her homeland. Her love of England is learned (I.1068) while Italy is her natural home:

And now I come, my Italy,  
My own hills! Are you 'ware of me, my hills,  
How I burn toward you? do you feel tonight  
The urgency and yearning of my soul,  
As sleeping mothers feel the sucking babe  
And smile? (V.1266-71)

Aurora articulates her association of Italy with her mother by drawing the Italian landscape as the maternal body. The Italian identity which Aurora gains from her mother renders her foreign in the English context: her ethnic alienation allows Aurora to position herself

outside society and its conventions. It gives her license to engage in socially inappropriate behaviours such as living independently or worse yet, living with Marian the "fallen woman" and her illegitimate son. Aurora's maternal lineage aligns her with otherness and serves her in the pursuit of her eccentric goals. Aurora sees her mother as a source of valuable disruptive energy. Even her physical appearance reveals the subversive influence of the mother: although she has her father's features, Aurora states "my mother's smile breaks up the whole,/And makes it better sometimes than itself" (I.202-3). Aurora's mother is a sustained force of disruption in the poem. She inspires a passionate love in Aurora's father and speaks to him in the pre-symbolic, feminine discourse which "transfigur[ed] him to music" (I.89). As an agent of unbound desire, Aurora's mother inspires the "austere Englishman" (I.65) to make a daring and socially unsanctioned marriage predicated on a strong physical attraction (I.70-92). She shares this exuberant, desiring energy with Aurora when she illicitly joins in "the child's riot" (I.19). From her childhood, Aurora's mother exerts a continuous influence of otherness on Aurora and gives her an inherited right to the position of resistance which she adopts.

Aurora claims ethnic otherness, poetic voice and impetuous desire as her maternal birthright. Yet, the literal absence of Aurora's mother strikes some readers as a significant deprivation which leaves her utterly bereft of maternal influence. Helen Cooper sees Aurora as completely orphaned from the maternal; her only access to the feminine is through the mother's portrait which supplies Aurora with apparently negative, male-generated conceptions of women:

The young child lacked a mother's love, but also a role model; she grew to define being female for herself. Aurora recalls her mother's portrait, a macabre picture painted from the corpse, which was dressed not in the customary funeral shroud, but in her red evening gown...[Aurora's] gaze transformed the picture on the canvas into different representations of woman that later haunt her narrative .... She recognizes that woman's identity is created by the cultural economy: as a child she read and heard not about woman as artist, but as Muse, Psyche, Medusa, Lamia, and the suffering Madonna. Imprisoned by such literary representations of woman as object of narratives formed from men's terror or adoration of her, part of Aurora's task as a poet is to test these representations against her own experience. (156)

Like Dorothy Mermin, Cooper sees Aurora as an unmothered child with only a tenuous, superficial bond to the feminine supplied by a hideous portrait. A picture is a paltry excuse for a mother. Mermin and Cooper read Aurora's experience of her mother's portrait as a dark phase in her deprived childhood when she is dangerously under the influence of unequivocally negative and useless constructions of the feminine.

Aurora does not view the portrait of her mother as Mermin and Cooper do; nor does she fail to find a subject position for herself in its range of signification. Cooper claims that the portrait--and the mother which it represents--fails to offer Aurora the option and example of becoming an artist. As I have argued, Aurora inherits her

feminine poetic voice from her mother. By extension, Aurora's interaction with the portrait continues this coded yet powerful mother-daughter discourse. Aurora is profoundly and consistently her mother's daughter. To trace the links of communication between Aurora and her mother (and the feminine lineage which she offers) a reader of Aurora Leigh must engage with the portrait as Aurora does--with interactive energy and imagination. To Aurora, the portrait is not exclusively "macabre" (Cooper 156) and "phantasmagoric" (Mermin 212); although Aurora describes it as "ghastly [and] grotesque" (I.150) she also sees it as "admirable [and] beautiful" (I.149).

While Mermin and Cooper, among others, seem to want Aurora to escape from and outgrow the sinister maternal influence exerted by the portrait, Aurora insists--with the height of Barrett Browning's intensity and complex eloquence--that the portrait frames and charts the breadth of "Life" (I.173): "Concentrated on the picture" (I.169) Aurora finds "[t]he incoherencies of change and death/Are represented fully, mixed and merged,/In the smooth fair mystery of perpetual Life" (I.171-3). Aurora Leigh does not intend the portrait to function as an aesthetically satisfying, stable, accurate representation of Aurora's dead and inaccessible mother. Instead, it provides a discursive space within which Aurora will practise and negotiate her feminine subjectivity and it also becomes an animated and mobile character unto itself. Even the family maid respects the vital, dynamic energy of the portrait years after its model has died:

And old Assunta to make up the fire,  
Crossing herself whene'er a sudden flame  
Which lightened from the firewood, made alive



That picture of my mother on the wall. (I.124-7)

Barrett Browning fully exploits the possibilities of introducing a visual text into a written one. The reader of Aurora Leigh necessarily arrives at an unstable idea of the mother's portrait: the reader's view of the picture is filtered through Aurora's vision and includes her elaborate analysis and emotive response to the portrait. It is impossible to discriminate between the "objective" appearance of the picture and the "subjective" interpretation supplied by Aurora because the portrait is an exclusively textual artifact. Aurora Leigh asks the reader to envision what cannot be seen and takes advantage of the uniquely contradictory and ambiguous position in which it places its reader. The description of the portrait does not even sustain the pretence of narrating an actual picture; there is not even a surface realism which the description tries to record. The portrait is a strictly textual field of signification to both Aurora and the reader:

That swan-like supernatural white life  
 Just sailing upward from the red stiff silk  
 Which seemed to have no part in it nor power  
 To keep it from quite breaking out of bounds,  
 For hours I sat and stared. Assunta's awe  
 And my father's melancholy eyes  
 Still pointed that way. That way went my thoughts  
 When wandering beyond sight. (I.139-46)

The reader gains no clear impression of what the portrait or the mother look like. The effect is "supernatural," recalling once again the imaginary or creative, feminine discourse which precedes and continuously disrupts the symbolic order. The single visual detail--

the "red stiff silk" of the dress--functions symbolically as an agent of restriction which unsuccessfully attempts to keep its wearer--and all of her desiring, pre-symbolic energy--within bounds. But of course, the trappings of Victorian society's regulation of the feminine are insufficient to contain Aurora's Italian mother. The portrait breaks and transcends its frame and encourages its viewers to do the same--to move "beyond sight" and follow the complex signification pattern which the portrait generates.

The portrait becomes both a screen and a mirror for Aurora. She projects her experience onto the mother's portrait which returns that experience in a meaningful visual form. Aurora's unstable, developing thoughts are translated and reflected back to her by the portrait:

And as I grew

In years, I mixed, confused, unconsciously,  
 Whatever I last read or heard or dreamed,  
 Abhorrent, admirable, beautiful,  
 Pathetical, or ghastly, or grotesque,  
 With still that face ... which did not therefore change,  
 But kept the mystic level of all forms,  
 Hates, fears, and admirations, was by turns  
 Ghost, fiend, and angel, fairy, witch, and sprite,  
 A dauntless Muse who eyes a dreadful Fate,  
 A loving Psyche who loses sight of Love,  
 A still Medusa with mild milky brows  
 All curdled and all clothed upon with snakes  
 Whose slime falls fast as sweat will; or anon  
 Our Lady of the Passion, stabbed with swords

Where the Babe sucked; or Lamia in her first  
 Moonlighted pallor, ere she shrunk and blinked  
 And wriggled down to the unclean;  
 Or my own mother, leaving her last smile  
 In her last kiss upon the baby-mouth. (I.146-65)

The image of the mother serves as an underlying palimpsest which gives shape and meaning to Aurora's continuous projections. Aurora's unregulated ideas--that she has "read or heard or dreamed"--are directed through the portrait into socially agreed upon categories of femininity. The portrait teaches Aurora to recognize the archetypal feminine subject positions and to negotiate the potentially narrow range of roles which her society presents to women. The portrait exerts an important maternal influence over Aurora by teaching her to mediate between the externally imposed expectations for women and her private, unconventional goals. Like any good mother, the portrait of Aurora's mother helps establish the daughter's developing feminine identity. The portrait presents various subjectivities which Aurora can test herself against as her identity becomes more fixed. In Griselda Pollock's Lacanian psychoanalytic terms, the developing child requires an external image of the self to secure identity. In this sense, the portrait helps Aurora through the mirror stage:

The child has an incomplete and unstable sense of what it is--preliminary moves toward the formation of an ego depend upon an image of the body perceived from outside, for instance in a mirror. The image of the body imagined as a complete, coherent, self-sufficient unity is the precondition for the formation of subjectivity. (Pollock 138)

While looking at the portrait, Aurora sees her feminine self--and the culturally inscribed feminine roles--mirrored back to her. Aurora gains the critical view of "an image of the body perceived from outside": her mother's portrait mirrors her female body back to Aurora while teaching her the social meanings and constructions of femininity. The knowledge of socially coded femininity which Aurora gains from the portrait prepares her to reject or reconfigure the roles presented by her culture. For example, she will not become a "loving Psyche who loses sight of love"; instead, she learns to act on her desire and establish her ideal of a love relationship. Yet, Aurora does not entirely disclaim all of the archetypes screened across the portrait. The portrait's image of the Medusa is necessarily a reworked and subversive one. It is not a strictly negative or menacing figure--as it is in patriarchal lore--but a contradictory and ambiguous one. Although she bears the requisite "snakes/Whose slime falls fast as sweat," she is also "still" with "mild milky brows"--an image of comforting maternity. As Aurora gazes at her mother in the guise of the Medusa she breaks the interdiction against doing just that. The exchanged gaze between Aurora and her Medusa-mother should turn Aurora to stone. But it doesn't. Instead, it is one facet of an ongoing dialogue of shared gaze. Barrett Browning seems to know what Helene Cixous tells us: "You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing" (New French Feminisms 255). When the Medusa looks back at Aurora, she gazes with the "mild milky brows" of a beautiful mother (like Cixous' Medusa) who is neither dead nor deadly.

The portrait of Aurora's mother creates a context in which Aurora can practise her developing femininity. Aurora and her pictured mother establish a relationship of reciprocal gaze which helps Aurora to a sense of her poetic and feminine identity. Although the identities reflected by the mother's portrait extend throughout Aurora's narrative, the poem introduces other pictures which help her to frame her own subject position. Vincent Carrington, Aurora and Romney's painter friend, sends Aurora a letter in which he describes his two sketches of Danae and asks her particular advice on which is superior, presumably to be developed into a larger work. He describes his first sketch as "A tiptoe Danae, overbold and hot" (III.122) and the other as "flat upon her prison-floor ... blotted out of nature by a love/As heavy as fate" (III.128-33). He suggests that poetic ability is a guarantee of critical skill in the visual arts when he insists that a "poet's only born to turn to use" (III.104). Carrington may also be aware of a more significant connection between his subject of Danae and Aurora's continuing struggle to fully interpret and inhabit her identity as a woman poet. Indeed, Carrington's choice of phrase aligns Aurora with Danae: to describe the poet Aurora as "'only born to turn to use'" (III.104) pairs her with the sexually used Danae. Aurora is compelled to engage deeply with the sketches Carrington describes; as might be expected, Aurora is not content to gaze from a secure distance but chooses to inhabit the subjectivity of the pictured Danae. Not only does Aurora identify with Carrington's chosen subject--particularly the selfless, passive Danae--she credits the artist with the ability to visually explicate the condition of the poet:

Self is put away,

And calm with abdication. She is Jove,  
 And no more Danae--greater thus. Perhaps  
 The painter symbolises unaware  
 Two states of the recipient artist-soul,  
 One, forward, personal, wanting reverence,  
 Because aspiring only. We'll be calm,  
 And know that, when indeed our Joves come down,  
 We all turn stiller than we have ever been. (III.137-43)

Aurora seems to endorse her society's demand for feminine subservience by applauding the image of Danae losing herself in Jove's masculine desire. In turn, the vocation of the poet or the "artist-soul" becomes feminized and improved by "abdication" to a powerful Muse suggested by Danae's sexual submission to Jove. Joyce Zonana points out that "Aurora's preference for the second sketch is unsettling, suggesting a passivity that ill accords with the determined activity we know to be necessary for the fulfillment of her 'vocation'" (254). Dorothy Mermin expresses a similar unease with Aurora's apparent identification with women who passively endure sexual assault. Mermin interprets Carrington's Danaes and other images of female sexual acquiescence in the poem as indicative of Aurora's sense that "poetic inspiration [requires] sexual subjugation by a male muse" (210). Mermin continues:

The gender of the poet, and also the fact that the plot is impelled by sexual passion and has at its center an actual rape, foreground the literal meaning of these metaphors in a very disturbing way ... Aurora apparently accepts the implication of these images, which stand outside the plot to

suggest that for women, writing is a kind of sexual submission. (211)

Mermin points out a difficult knot of inconsistency in the poem's morality. It seems almost duplicitous for Aurora to champion the sexually victimized Marian and attempt to deal plainly and harshly with the reality of rape while deploying rape as a metaphor for poetic inspiration. If "prostitution is the social evil that the poem cares most to cure" (203), as Mermin claims, it seems contradictory and insensitive on Aurora's part to valorize the idea of the female poet sexually selling herself to the male muse for the remuneration of artistic inspiration.

Aurora's identification with Danae recalls her interaction with the mythic and often classical figures which are screened across the portrait of Aurora's mother. Just as the poem attempts to reclaim the Medusa as a positive feminine figure, Danae may also be recuperated for the feminist purposes of the poem. At the very least, Aurora does not persist in seeing herself as the submissive Danae; she inverts the gendered power dynamic of the Jove-Danae example by assuming the Jove role in relation to Romney. As Mermin explains, the text ends with "the images ... reversed, Aurora descending in imagination, like Jove to Danae, to the sea king with 'slippery locks' (8:42)" (211). Although it may be subversive to ascribe the role of sexual tyrant to a female figure, the simple reversal of roles which Mermin sees does little to genuinely challenge and rethink sexuality in the way that Aurora Leigh conditions its reader to expect.

The poem expresses resistance to any form of sexual tyranny regardless of the gender of the tyrant. For example, the poem holds a

broad range of both men and women responsible for Marian's rape: Marian's mother (who attempts to sell her), the Squire (who attempts to buy her), Lady Waldemar's maid (who sells Marian into a brothel), the man who rapes her in the brothel and the entire society which tacitly endorses prostitution are condemned as accountable in some sense for the injustice Marian suffers. It seems necessary that the poem would attempt to rework the figure of Danae--to confront this archetypal image and redirect its energies to feminist ends. Joyce Zonana finds an empowering explanation for Aurora's identification with Carrington's picture by seeing both Jove and Danae as internal to Aurora. Aurora's submission is not to an external sexual oppressor, but to her own previously denied desire:

Of course, the most dramatic echo of Danae "flat upon her prison floor" is the moment ... when Aurora flattens herself on the pavement of the Italian church, no longer striving, no longer reaching up to God, but submitting in silence to the "run and beat" of her own blood ... this is a passive Aurora, who has finally given in to the impulses of her own body, the impulses of desire and love. She does not give in to Romney's desire, for at this point she believes him to be married to Lady Waldemar. Rather, she accepts and acknowledges her own passion, taking it to be, finally, divine. Her "blood," then, becomes the equivalent of Danae's "Jove." This is the divinity to which she submits, not to any male within or without. And it is a divinity that has been "in" her all along. (255)



Zonana's reading frees Aurora's narrative from charges of moral hypocrisy and presents the poem's Danae as a reconceived figure which encourages women to accept their own desire as a powerful (and empowering) expression of the divine. It is possible to read visual representations of Danae as feminist challenges to the interdiction against the expression of women's sexuality, although the many nineteenth-century painters who took on the theme may not have had this in mind. In his discussion of nineteenth-century Danae paintings, Bram Dijkstra offers a skeptical--if not paranoid--explanation for the popularity of the theme:

The story [of Jove and Danae] gave the painters of the 1890's a chance to make a moral statement about women's predatory nature, while also establishing a fashionable equation between woman's hunger for gold and her hunger for seed. Moreover, it gave them a fine excuse to exploit the visual theme of a woman in the throes of physical ecstasy. (369)

Dijkstra's reading of these paintings demands that the viewer bring a Victorian belief in feminine economic and sexual rapacity to bear on the images. Aurora Leigh suggests that a Victorian subject might not approach images of Danae with this "fashionable" prejudice overdetermining his or her understanding of the picture. If we follow Zonana's reading, Aurora imagines Danae as a symbol for her own empowering and divinely inspired sexuality. Dijkstra admits that the theme of Danae allows for the presentation of women's sexuality. Although much nineteenth-century painting does this, the theme of Danae is particularly interesting in that it shows this sexuality as apparently self-contained--as residing in and generating from the

feminine subject herself. The male subject is disembodied, depersonalized--because Jove is translated into the shower of gold--and practically invisible. Feminine sexual pleasure exists in the absence of a male subject. Not only does the image of Danae allow women's desire to be visually explicated, but it suggests that feminine sexuality is a powerful energy in its own right, even in the absence of a male. Aurora's sense of her own sexuality allows her to enter into her relationship with Romney without submitting selflessly to his sexuality. As a self-consciously desiring feminine subject, Aurora is able to demand reciprocity and justice in a heterosexual relationship.

Aurora's contact with Carrington's pictures recalls her visual exchanges with her mother's portrait; both images allow Aurora to interface her developing subjectivity with mythic feminine figures. In the case of Carrington's pictures, Aurora does not directly confront or interact with a reciprocally gazing portrait. Instead, she deals with a textual abstraction of an image. Aurora does not actually view Carrington's pictures. He describes his two Danaes in a letter to Aurora in which he asks to bring the pictures by for her opinion. Based solely on his reading of his own pictures, Aurora articulates her impression of the pictures and deploys them as metaphors for her reconciliation to her sexuality. After working over her identification with the figure of Danae, Aurora remarks, "Kind Vincent Carrington. I'll let him come" (III.145). The narrative does not allow Aurora to view Carrington's pictures. Aurora accesses the sketches only through Carrington's letter. The pictures become increasingly abstract and remote as they are filtered through successive layers of narrative. Although Aurora gains appreciably from her direct contact with works of

art, she is able to bypass the actual visual texts and interact directly with their signification. Aurora negotiates with a conceived impression of a pictured image of an archetypal figure. Her judgment of the pictures may seem precipitate and dismissive. But it attests to the poem's sophisticated integration of the visual and the textual. Aurora's sensitivity to pictures allows her to conceive a visual image from a written description. Carrington's description intersects with the cultural meanings of the Danae-Jove myth to produce Aurora's conception of Danae--an image suggestive of feminine sexual and literary power.

Aurora's consideration of Carrington's pictures--or more accurately, the idea of these pictures--suggests that mirroring has become an implicit strategy for Aurora. She does not necessarily require a concrete image such as a painting or a flesh and blood person such as Marian to enable her to perform the dynamics of mirroring. Aurora amends and diversifies her feminine identity by seeing herself reflected in (the idea of) the images of Danae and Medusa. These archetypally feminine images (like the character of Marian who is definitively feminized by her maternal role) offer clear points of mirror contact to Aurora--her own developing femininity presents obvious parallels between herself and these feminine subjects. Aurora seems to break from these contexts of feminine gaze when she devotes herself to an intimate relationship with a masculine subject. Marriage to Romney seems to pose a counterpoint--even a threat--to the feminist gesture of mirroring between women or what Irigaray calls "female sameness." Instead of submitting to the specular masculine gaze,

Aurora's relationship with Romney attempts to extend the feminist dynamics of mirroring to encompass heterosexuality.

### III

Aurora Leigh runs its greatest risk of relapsing into conventionalities as it draws to a close. Book VII ends with Aurora successfully established in the career of her choice supporting herself, Marian and Marian's son. This edenic feminist scenario challenges Victorian gender and class conventions. Aurora defies her culture's segregation of women into the binary moral categories of "pure" and "fallen" by engaging in an intimate, reciprocal relationship with Marian. The poem brings Aurora to radical heights of economic, moral and creative independence and originality only to have her reabsorbed into an orthodox romantic narrative. Romney comes to Aurora's home in Italy--the (m)otherland--and threatens to permanently unsettle the little separatist feminine community which Aurora has struggled to create. He arrives armed with a seemingly indiscriminate marriage proposal--offering himself first to Marian and then turning immediately to Aurora with the same offer; whomever takes up Romney's offer, it is sure to break the precisely balanced relationship between Marian and Aurora. The possibility of marriage necessarily disrupts the harmonious doubling of the two women. In a sense, Romney seems to recognize that Marian and Aurora have grown to mirror each other: he adapts easily to the idea of marrying Aurora, although he arrived intending to marry the other member of the pair. Regardless of whom he marries, Barrett Browning's conclusion allows Romney to sunder a friendship between women which boldly cuts across class lines and flouts the hegemony of the Victorian nuclear family. Marrying Romney seems to draw Aurora back from the margins by fulfilling the dynastic intention of the Leigh patriarchs and placing Aurora firmly within her

class. It excises the threat of lesbianism which inevitably lurks around Aurora's intense and intimate friendship with Marian. The definitive heterosexuality guaranteed by Aurora's marriage to Romney brackets and manages the pervasive femininity of the poem up to this point. Although the first seven books of the poem are inhabited primarily by female voices and concerns, the concluding two books concede to the masculine by heterosexually settling Aurora. The marriage breaks the reciprocity and silences the echo which sounded between Marian and Aurora. It also removes Aurora from the discourse of shared gaze between Aurora and the poem's many visual representations of women. By marrying a blind man, Aurora may be said to escape the male gaze (as Jane Eyre does in Charlotte Bronte's novel), but she sacrifices the interplay of looks which was so crucial to her feminine identity. Having argued that Aurora depends upon mirroring--a continual and dynamic process of seeing and being seen--for her sense of self, the fact that she literally drops out of sight is troubling indeed.

The union between Aurora and Romney threatens to exile Aurora from the feminine contexts and discourses which enabled her subversion of the Victorian class and gender codes. The poem's strategy of doubling and reflection--deployed in the unlikely twinning of Aurora and Marian and in the interplay of gazes shared between Aurora and the poem's gallery of female portraits--produces Aurora's radical female subjectivity. Aurora establishes this subject position through the recognition and interrogation of likeness and reflected similarity. It is sameness--the unanticipated sameness between Aurora and Marian and between Aurora and the portraits--and not difference which allows

Aurora to disrupt and resist what she finds narrow and oppressive in her culture. Doubling back--to her Italian birthplace, to her mother's portrait and to Marian--makes it possible for her to move forward to a satisfying vocation, a transgressive domestic arrangement and a culturally dissident awareness of her feminine desire. At the end of Book VII--before the re-introduction of Romney and masculine difference--Aurora describes her visit to a Catholic church "where a few,/Those chiefly women, sprinkled round in blots/Upon the dusky pavement, knelt and prayed" (VII.12230-5). Aurora enters the scene as a spectator. She assumes a position of distance and otherness from the Italian Catholic women:

Oft a ray  
 (I liked to sit and watch) would tremble out,  
 Just touch some face more lifted, more in need,  
 (Of course a woman's)--while I dreamed a tale  
 To fit its fortunes. (VII.1226-30)

Aurora proceeds to speculate on and inscribe the lives of these women. She does this with sympathy and sensitivity but from a reserved and remote position; she is a remote observer who "liked to ... watch." Yet, as she concludes her descriptions, Aurora aligns herself with this community of women who share a gendered spirituality apart from "the sinful world which goes its rounds/In marrying and being married" (VII.1243-4)--the world of heterosexual difference. Within this feminine sanctuary, Aurora recognizes sameness. Her identification with the Catholic women brings her to an awareness of her body and the desire which she had previously sublimated:

Then I knelt,

And dropped my head upon the pavement too,  
 And prayed, since I was foolish in desire  
 Like other creatures, craving offal-food,  
 That He would stop his ears to what I said,  
 And only listen to the run and beat  
 Of this poor, passionate, helpless blood--

And then

I lay, and spoke not: but He heard in heaven. (VII:1264-73)

Aurora unexpectedly sees herself in these women and is unable to maintain her distance and difference from them. The church allows her to double back to her Italian origins and turn inward to her body--the "run and beat" of "helpless blood". This gesture of backtracking allows Aurora to progress to the knowledge that she has been "foolish in desire", not (as may be expected) in the excessive indulgence of desire but in her denial of it. Aurora's celebration of desire in a Catholic church may seem incongruous; rejection of and departure from the constraints which Christianity demands of the body might be the more obvious direction for a Victorian woman seeking to actualize her sexuality. Instead, Aurora reflects upon her Christianity and arrives at a solution which satisfies the body and also harmonizes with her religious background and principles. Revisiting the church and maintaining a degree of religious continuity permits Aurora's progressive conception of sanctified desire.

If return journeys and reflected unity make up the radicality of Aurora Leigh, the movement towards marriage and the exchange of sameness for (sexual) difference seems to be a retrograde step. The



romantic resolution to the poem is its most conventional element and the point at which the underpinning biographical elements of Aurora Leigh come closest to the surface. Barrett Browning's own marriage--her own integration of poetic career with heterosexual union--surfaces most strongly at the end of the poem. The romantic conclusion places the reader in danger of allowing Barrett Browning to be "almost entirely swallowed by the dragon of her personal myth--a myth sown by herself, nurtured by Browning after her death, and promoted by later hagiographers"(M.Reynolds 1). The ending may be read as a substitution of extensive, fully conceived feminist politics for personal, authorial specificity. Responding to some readers' dissatisfaction with "Aurora Leigh's eventual dedication to a life governed by traditionally male directives" ("Art's a Service'" 113), Deirdre David reads the poem's ending as the appropriate resolution to a work which is "neither revolutionary nor compromised [by Aurora's marriage]: rather, it is a coherent expression of Barrett Browning's conservative sexual politics" ("Art's a Service 113). For David, the ending posits Barrett Browning's personal ideal of a resolving union between the gendered directives of art and politics:

The poem ends as the dawn signals a new beginning and chastened lovers dedicate themselves to clearing the wilderness and to liberating man (and woman) from materialistic values. As Aurora is married to Romney and female art wedded to male socialist politics, the novel-poem Aurora Leigh becomes a form-giving epithalamium for Barrett Browning's essentialist sexual politics. In this poem we

hear a woman's voice speaking patriarchal discourse--boldly,  
passionately, and without rancor. (134)

Aurora does seem to speak patriarchal discourse and to have internalized masculine desires for feminine masochistic subservience when she entreats Romney to "stoop so low to take my love/And use it roughly, without stint or spare" (IX.674-5). This disturbing plea forms part of the romantic interchange between Aurora and Romney which echoes both the Barrett Browning-Robert Browning correspondence and the Sonnets from the Portuguese in which the lovers textually compete for the lowest position. But this resonance and consistency with Barrett Browning's other work does not make Aurora's self-punishing demand less distressing. Yet Aurora manages to speak like this and get away with it. Aurora's turn towards heterosexual difference does not entirely undercut her feminism which is predicated on the reflected sameness of feminine subjects. Aurora's masochistic claims do not disturb me (as a feminist reader) as much as they would in a different context. Aurora can beg Romney to "use" her because we know--and the text carefully constructs this knowledge--that Romney will not "use" her "roughly." Romney has clearly identified and repudiated (in his own words) his "male ferocious impudence" (VIII.328). Marian observes that Romney is no longer conventionally masculine when she says "I know you'll not be angry like a man/(For you are none)" (IX.351-2). Aurora can speak to Romney--and only to him--in this way because she is finally entirely sure of him. Her demand to be roughly used is both a game and a test. It is a bluff, spoken dramatically and playfully. This servile posturing allows Aurora to test Romney for a sensitivity and gentleness she already knows he possesses toward her. She presents Romney's

mistreatment of her to assure both of the lovers and the reader that it is impossible.

Aurora's marriage is possible within the feminist politics of the poem because Romney himself is contented with and supportive of feminist ideology. While Aurora Leigh works primarily to envision counterhegemonic feminine subjectivity, it makes a parallel effort to rethink masculinity. The poem suggests that both ends of the gender equation must interface and negotiate if the problems of a sexist society are to be permanently resolved. This is consonant with Aurora's idea of the "twofold world" (VII.762) in which the material and the spiritual are interdependently connected. The poem addresses the contemporary social shortcomings in both these areas: both the spiritual and the material needs of society have been neglected. As young adults, both Aurora and Romney identify the need for social change and commit themselves to redress the problem in separate and gendered ways. Romney dedicates his energy and his inheritance to the physical and practical needs of the poor while Aurora hopes to elevate people by reaching their souls with poetry. Both struggle through the years and experience considerable disappointment; neither Aurora nor Romney is able to effect the political and social ends they desire through the narrow and exclusive means each deploys. The poem's conclusion involves both Romney's and Aurora's acceptance of the necessary interconnection of the material and the spiritual. Shortly before Romney reappears, Aurora observes:

We divide

This apple of life, and cut it through the pips--

The perfect round which fit Venus' hand

Has perished as utterly as if we ate

Both halves. (VII.769-73)

Both Aurora and Romney have been misguided in their discrete and gendered ventures which deny the need for reciprocity and connection. The image of Venus' apple serves to criticize the violent and unnatural severance between the material and the spiritual, between masculine and feminine and ultimately, between Romney and Aurora. Aurora's choice of images--her allusion to Venus--indicates that she is moving out of the rarefied, spiritual realm and toward an acceptance of the sexuality inherent in the material world.

Aurora's marriage to Romney and her uncharacteristic self-deprecation is less of a disappointing recapitulation than it may seem. Despite the surface conformity and conventionality of the marriage, it is essential to the attainment of Aurora's (and eventually Romney's) ideal of the twofold sphere. The ideal emphasizes the interplay and reflexivity between balanced principles. Aurora's exemplary "twofold world" locates the potential for insurgency not in difference and opposition, but in reflected and integrated sameness. Aurora's marriage--although seemingly symbolic of integration into Victorian patriarchal culture--is consistent with the text's radical gender politics--its attempt to deregulate gender codes and valorize sexuality. By the time they marry, Aurora and Romney have rejected the rigid gender proscriptions which kept them in their isolated spheres; the Victorian gender ideals of pure, ethereal, domestic femininity and worldly, productive masculinity have been tried and ultimately abandoned. Romney admits that masculine socialism and his strictly material strategies for social reform are ineffective. He recognizes

that "The body's satisfaction and no more/Is used for argument against the soul's"(VIII.416-7). Aurora concedes that she has been wrong in her denial of the material needs of society and her own physical, desiring subjectivity. She insists that "I am changed ... changed wholly" (VIII.673) and now believes in the value of the material and physical: "Flower from root,/And spiritual from natural, grade by grade/In all our life"(VIII.659-61). Although Aurora maintains her spiritual and artistic ideals, she has learned to accept and integrate her sexual desire. In turn, Romney has realized the futility of his strictly materialistic strategies for social justice. Neither party is compromised by these changes. Although Aurora seems to gain most substantially from these gender revisions, Romney is also improved, strengthened and certainly made happier.

The poem's renegotiation of gender roles requires that Romney relinquish much of the power which Victorian gender and class systems have handed him as a birthright: his blindness eliminates the power of the male gaze and the fire at Leigh Hall destroys his patrimonial home. Romney is disinherited and contrite at end of the poem, while Aurora has made gains in terms of economic independence and career development. Although Romney may seem humbled and symbolically castrated by these transformations, he has only been sufficiently reduced (and Aurora sufficiently raised) to level social gender inequity. Dorothy Mermin writes of the "impotence of men in general" (208) in Aurora Leigh and sees an "unusual distribution of strength and weakness between women and men [which] does not, however, point toward an androgynous ideal" (208). However, the gendered distribution of power is only unusual when placed in contrast to generalized social

gender imbalance; in terms of the poem's Victorian context, Aurora's gains in power may seem extraordinary. Aurora and Romney reach a balance which offsets the advantages of education, mobility and money which Romney began with. However the poem frees up and reworks gendered subject positions, Mermin is right to conclude that Aurora Leigh does not idealize androgyny. The ideal of the "twofold world" is manifest in the marriage of Aurora and Romney; this ideal demands balance and reciprocity but does not necessitate the complete obliteration of gender. Instead, gendered subjects de-emphasize contrariety and exploit the subtle refractions of mirrored similarity. A certain degree of difference is necessary to the type of mirroring deployed in Aurora Leigh: like an actual mirror, the reflections between subjects in the poem give back slightly distorted representations to the viewer. Mermin insists that Romney represents "the paternal line, patriarchal culture, and patriarchal power, and he represents them at their best" (208). I would like to suggest that by the end of the poem Romney has rejected the patriarchal discourses which Mermin claims he embodies and ennobles. Romney signals the possibility of counter-patriarchal masculinity. Just as Aurora breaks the conventions of femininity, Romney occupies a radical masculine subjectivity. By the end of the poem, Romney is an altogether attractive and agreeable model for feminist masculinity; as Mermin observes, "we like him for his fits of discouragement and self-doubt, his tart, sad wit, his generous affection, and his indefatigable altruism" (208). It is these very qualities which set him apart from the emotional sterility and uncompromising material ambition associated with archetypal masculinity. Although he is not effeminate or

feminized, Romney is able--without anxiety or a morbid fear of castration--to see himself reflected in the feminine.

Although Aurora Leigh experiments with the possibility of separatist feminism, it ultimately endorses heterosexuality, albeit a heterosexuality qualified and mitigated by the reworked gendering of its participants. While the marriage articulates Aurora's theoretical ideal of the "twofold world," it also allows her--in a very basic sense--to express physical desire. Both sexually and emotionally, Romney is what Aurora wants. Aurora makes it very clear that her desire for Romney is not primarily altruistic "Love born of pity" (IX.621) but the goal of her desire "According to my pleasure and my choice" (IX.633). She demands an attentive audience from Romney:

'But I love you, sir;

And when a woman says she loves a man,

The man must hear her, though he love her not,

Which ... hush! ... he has leave to answer in his turn;

She will not surely blame him.' (IX.612-6)

Aurora breaks with the interdiction against women speaking of their desire; she explicitly claims the authority to speak as a desiring woman and cites a mysterious and novel--but seemingly universal and binding--code which grants her the right to speak and be heard. The simple fact that she is finally able to speak her desire and claim its object demonstrates the passionate integrity which makes Aurora remarkable and unconventional. As Catherine Belsey explains, "Desire, even when it is profoundly conventional, is at the same time the location of a resistance to convention. It demonstrates that people want something more" (7).

Although the poem ends in conventional heterosexual union, the text emphasizes desire as the central motivation for the marriage. The social appropriateness and the practical benefits of the marriage of Romney and Aurora are not discussed between them. The fulfillment of desire--the exquisite pleasure in each other's bodies--is paramount. Their desire exceeds its social parameters--it is shamelessly explicit and wildly optimistic. Caught up in the energy of "want[ing] something more", neither Romney nor Aurora stoop to even mention marriage--it is too pedestrian and conventional. Belsey asserts that even heterosexual desire can overrun the borders of social order:

[D]esire in all its forms, including heterosexual desire, commonly repudiates legality; at the level of the unconscious its imperatives are absolute; and in consequence it readily overflows, in a whole range of ways, the institutions designed to contain it. The heterosexuality that oppressively 'founds society,' as Monique Wittig puts it, has its own tendency to repudiate the social arrangements in which it passes for nature. Desire in Western culture thus demonstrates the inability of the cultural order to fulfill its own ordering project, and reveals the difficulty with which societies control the energies desire liberates. (7)

The primacy of desire in Aurora Leigh demonstrates Belsey's point. The seemingly fundamental and absolute quality of the desire between Romney and Aurora demands and motivates a thorough reworking of the institution socially established to contain and legitimate desire. As the poem concludes, we understand--as we have already suspected--that Aurora's and Romney's love pre-dates its fulfillment. The lovers



perceive their desire as essential and inescapable and proceed to tinker with all of the surrounding social reality to make it accommodate this desire. Aurora admits to Romney that "I loved you first and last,/And love you on for ever" (IX.683-4). Aurora implies that love lacks a logical, linear beginning or ending when she states "Now I know/I loved you always" (IX.684-5). It seems counterintuitive for Aurora to claim that she has just now discovered what she always, already knew. Yet, the poem bends to the imperative of desire.

The poem ends with a putative beginning to the cousins' shared love which is only the explicit recognition and articulation of what was always tacitly and subconsciously understood. Changes had to be made in both of the cousins' gendered subjectivities before Aurora could enact her desire and cease "Ignoring ever to my soul and you [Romney]" (IX.692) the love which demands accommodation. Romney and Aurora initiate a comprehensive remodelling of gendered subjectivity so that they can create a discursive space which will concur with desire's imperious necessity. The lovers must transgress and destabilize the systemic gender conventions which disallow or compromise their desire: Aurora must overthrow the Victorian ideal of feminine asexuality and in turn Romney must relinquish the absolute authority accorded to the masculine. In order to tell the typical Victorian tale of consanguine, bourgeois marriage, the text must dissect and then reconceive the social "ordering projects" erected to regulate desire.

For readers of Victorian texts, heterosexuality is not necessarily interpreted as a site of radical gender revision. Although we know that Victorian sexuality--both textual and social--was not exclusively heterosexual, the marriage plot has become expected and

prosaic. As readers become naturalized to the nineteenth-century marriage trope, this standardized expression of desire may become critically uninteresting. As Catherine Belsey explains:

Heterosexuality, as we know, was produced as a norm, with all a norm's attendant constraints and coercions: it was not so by nature. This project of denaturalizing heterosexuality is indispensable, but as the work becomes ever more precise, more attentive to detail, there is a danger of leaving unproblematicized our account of the erotic relation between men and women, and thus inadvertently reaffirming its naturalness by another route. (134)

While the interrogation of Victorian sexual dissidence supplies a compelling critique of nineteenth-century gender discourses, subversive desire is not located exclusively within texts which deal with alternative sexualities. Aurora and Romney's marriage--although it functions within Victorian legal and moral sexual regulation--needs to be understood as an act of serious gender renegotiation.

Romney and Aurora's desire necessitates the redrawing of proscribed gender boundaries. While it forces the lovers to challenge their gendered subjectivities, the imperative of desire demands unexpected turns from the poem's narrative. Aurora Leigh achieves a fairly consistent Realism through minute and seemingly accurate descriptions of different aspects of contemporary Victorian society and commentary on the practical, everyday aspects of Aurora's life, such as money matters and the pragmatic elements of her career. Yet, desire disrupts the narrative coherence of the poem. Book VII ends

with Aurora acutely aware of her unfulfilled sexual desire. She imagines herself becoming disembodied:

I did not write, nor read, nor even think,  
But sat absorbed amid the quickening glooms,  
Most like some passive broken lump of salt  
Dropped in by chance to a bowl of oenomei,  
To spoil the drink a little and lose itself,  
Dissolving slowly, slowly, until lost. (VII.1307-11)

Aurora articulates her fear of losing the body which she has previously neglected and constrained. She seems newly aware of the value of her physical being; while the body is "passive" and "broken" she is depleted and unable to work creatively.

Book VIII opens with Aurora recovering from this despair just enough to conceptualize the restorative potential of sexuality. Aurora superimposes a landscape of desire over the familiar view from her terrace. She envisions it

As some drowned city in some enchanted sea,  
Cut off from nature--drawing you who gaze  
With passionate desire, to leap and plunge  
And find a sea-king with a voice of waves,  
And treacherous soft eyes, and slippery locks  
You cannot kiss but you shall bring away  
Their salt upon your lips. (VIII.38-44)

Dorothy Mermin describes this vision as "strange and sexy" (190). It announces a narrative break with the largely realist structure of the text. When Romney arrives in Florence in the guise of Aurora's "sea-king", the linear Symbolic order is put aside in favour of the

Imaginary--the inchoate discourse of desire. More accurately, the irrational, bodily energy of the Imaginary surfaces to the level of the symbolic. In an explanatory discussion of Lacan, Rosemarie Tong describes the symbolic order as "a series of interrelated signs, roles, and rituals" (220) which each subject must conform to:

For a child to function adequately within society, he or she must internalize the Symbolic Order through language ... the Symbolic Order regulates society through the regulation of individuals; so long as individuals speak the language of the Symbolic Order--internalizing its gender roles and class roles--society will reproduce itself in fairly consistent form. (220)

In Tong's discussion of Lacan, the Imaginary is "the antithesis of the Symbolic Order" (220). The Imaginary--as a stage in Lacan's theory of psychodevelopment--is divided into three phases, the pre-Oedipal phase, the mirror phase and the Oedipal phase. At the pre-Oedipal phase "a child is completely unaware of his own ego boundaries. He has no sense of where his body begins and that of his mother ends" (220).

Aurora and Romney inhabit the pre-Oedipal phase of the Imaginary at this early point in the negotiation of their sexual relationship and in doing so reject the rules and constraints of the symbolic order. As their discussion progresses and comes to rely on the sensual, Aurora and Romney lose their sense of individual physical boundaries and come to resemble the pre-Oedipal subject. Their relationship occurs within the Imaginary and does not quite resolve the issues which Lacan identifies as occurring at the mirror phase in which "the child

recognizes himself as a self" (Tong 220). When held in front of a mirror,

the child initially confuses his image both with his real self and with the image of the adult holding him. Gradually the child figures out that the image in the mirror is not a real person but an image of himself. For Lacan, the mirror stage is very significant, for it instructs us that the child must become two in order to become one. The self comes to see itself as a real self only by first appearing to itself as a mirror image of its real self. (Tong 221)

As with Aurora's other encounters with a mirror-like subject (Marian) and mirror-like portraits (Aurora's mother's portrait and Carrington's Danaes), her relationship with Romney involves reciprocity and reflection. Aurora and Romney reject the symbolic order in favour of the less individuated and more reciprocal potential of the symbolic. Although this may seem to be--in strictly Lacanian psychoanalytic terms--a case of arrested development, it may also be seen as subversive choice. Aurora and Romney double back to the mirror stage; they make a backwards development from individuated selfhood (which defines itself in opposition to the Other) to indeterminate subjectivity (which blends the distinction between self and Other). This seemingly counter-developmental movement permits a progressive and egalitarian intersubjectivity.

Aurora's demand for a "sea-king" demonstrates that she is able to articulate her desire, although she fears that the object of her "passionate desire" is "slippery", "treacherous" and unattainable. The practical symbolic order insists that Aurora cannot have Romney (she

believes him married to Lady Waldemar), but the Imaginary teases her. Aurora's expression of desire dictates the direction of the narrative; hence, Romney appears because Aurora's desire demands that he does. Desire exceeds the bounds of Realism by allowing Aurora's appeal to immediately produce its object. The narrative accommodates the exigency of desire with the almost miraculous appearance of Romney:

And, O my heart ... the sea-king!

In my ears

The sound of waters. There he stood, my king!

I felt him, rather than beheld him. Up

I rose, as if were my king indeed. (VIII.59-63)

The Imaginary and the symbolic intersect: vestiges of Aurora's dream of desire (the "sound of waters") underscore Romney's physical presence. The desire which summoned Romney almost convinces Aurora that he is "my king indeed"; although she should rationally know better, the fact of his arrival--seemingly in response to her desire--seduces her to trust the promise of sexual fulfillment suggested by her vision. Even within this seemingly conventional union, desire exerts a radical energy which successfully redirects narrative and confuses the distinction between the Imaginary and the Symbolic.

Romney and Aurora's final encounter takes place in a liminal space between the Imaginary and the Symbolic. The lovers pursue a rational discussion which utilizes their rhetorical skills, but which often lapses into the poetic language of the body. Their senses become disordered and confused. When Romney arrives, Aurora remarks "I see it all so clear" (VIII.58) and contradictorily adds "I felt him, rather than beheld him" (VIII.62). This privileging of the sensual sets the

final encounter apart from the first lengthy interchange between Romney and Aurora which takes place on her twenty-first birthday and which occurs within the discourse of the Symbolic order. The earlier conversation is highly intellectual and competitive and both parties demonstrate unwavering resolve and confidence in their positions. At this point, Aurora exerts her full cerebral energy and attempts to regulate her body. When Romney sees her self-crowned with ivy in a dramatic pose, she is ashamed of her body (II.60-4). Aurora's refusal to express herself through the body may contribute to her inability to impress upon Romney the necessity and the value of her creative work. Her personal restraint of the spontaneous and the physical makes her argument for the spiritual and poetic somewhat abstract and insincere. But the later interview--which also eventually comes around to the topic of marriage--brings the body into play and enables the tacit understanding and unmitigated union between Aurora and Romney. When Romney arrives in Italy, the energy of the body interrupts the progression of intellectual, rational conversation. Romney and Aurora begin to communicate through their bodies, though Aurora is hesitant and uncertain about the meaning of this newly apparent discourse:

Did he touch my hand,

Or but my sleeve? I trembled, hand and foot--

He must have touched me. (VIII.78-80)

Aurora is beginning to inhabit her body and become accustomed to her desire--she is able to articulate physical passion. Although she can recognize and declare that she "trembled" at Romney's touch, she is unable to demarcate the boundaries of a desiring body which is new to her; she is unsure where her body begins and its clothing ends. The

encounter is surprising and unsettling to Aurora because desire insists upon subverting the rational, disembodied level of discourse which Aurora and Romney previously tried to uphold. Misconceptions compound because Aurora is unaware of Romney's blindness and cannot account for the way he "sat/A little slowly, as a man in doubt" (VIII.81-2). His unsteady body movement is symptomatic of his recent blindness, but it also symbolizes the indeterminate discursive space marking the intersection of the Imaginary and the symbolic. Aurora and Romney both exhibit an unease with their bodies which attests to their sensitivity to the uncompromising force of desire. Romney's blindness both destabilizes and defamiliarizes his body both to himself and to Aurora. The elimination of visual reference and knowledge forces Romney to re-map his environment and re-learn the people around him; his sense of his own connection to the world and other people has become far more reliant on touch. To Aurora, Romney seems strange both in his physical movements and because he speaks "in a voice which was not his" (VIII.72). Despite the familiarity between the cousins, they have become new to each other.

Romney's blindness demands that he and Aurora establish a new relationship dependent on the sensual. Although Romney loses the culturally determined power of the male gaze, he gains access to a tactile and non-symbolic discourse which is more amenable to the expression of desire than the bantering, intellectual exchange which characterized his earlier relationship with Aurora. Dorothy Mermin insists that at the end of the poem Romney is "helpless, dispossessed, [and] a failure in everything he tried to do" (190). Yet the poem compensates Romney for the loss of the visual by granting him the



sensual. Romney admits that "The man here, once so arrogant/And restless, so ambitious, for his part.... Is now contented" (VIII.586-90) and that "The spirit, from behind this dethroned sense, Sees" (VIII.582-3). In addition to a new consciousness of his body, Romney's ability to express desire, his sensitivity to Aurora's poetry (and his admission of the social value of art in general) arrive with his blindness. And the timing could not be better: Aurora is quite delirious with desire--her sexy fantasy of the sea-king attests to this--and finally accepting of the urgency and necessity of physical passion when Romney arrives recently blinded and reliant on touch. Aurora wants to be reached through the flesh, and touch is the means of communication which a blind man must rely upon. Romney and Aurora gain a language of physical intimacy and desire. They engage a different set of signifiers which generate from the body. Aurora communicates her sympathy with Romney through her "tears upon [his] hand" (VIII.575). This physical connection impresses Romney as a gain: "Through bitter experience, compensation sweet,/Like that tear, sweetest" (VIII.593-4). Romney's blindness seems to enlarge and diversify his contact with the world and to redefine his relationship with Aurora.

Although Romney is blind, he is able to use sight and gaze as metaphors; vision becomes for him more of a symbolic act than a literal one. He describes his new appreciation for Aurora's writing in terms of a sexualized interplay of gaze:

'...A man may love a woman perfectly,  
And yet by no means ignorantly maintain  
A thousand women have not larger eyes:

Enough that she has looked at him

With eyes that, large or small, have won his soul.

And so, this book, Aurora--so, your book.' (VIII.291-6)

Romney uses this metaphor to describe a book which he has never read as a textual document (it was read to him repeatedly at his request by Lady Waldemar). Aurora's book has never been visually available to Romney; instead, it is perceived and ingested through the body: "'for the book is in my heart,/Lives in me, wakes in me, and dreams in me:/My daily bread tastes of it" (VIII.266-8). Romney has developed a regard for the theoretical meanings of gaze which he did not possess when he was able to see. He imagines his esteem for Aurora's book as an exchange of looks between lovers. Vision is theorized to represent desire and reading. Although Romney loses his sight, he cultivates an understanding of the meaning and symbolic potential of gaze.

Romney's appreciation for Aurora's poetry and his acceptance of the spiritual component of both politics and intimacy is essential to the text's resolution. Romney must be able to read Aurora if he is to love her. He seems to recognize--as Aurora has--that poetry can be an act of desire:

Poet, doubt yourself,

But never doubt that you're a poet to me

From henceforward. You have written poems, sweet,

Which moved me in secret, as the sap is moved

In still March branches, signless as a stone:

But this last book o'ercame me like a soft rain

Which falls at midnight, when the tightened bark

Breaks out into unhesitating buds

And sudden protestations of the Spring (VIII.590-8).

Romney describes his sensitivity to Aurora's poems in terms which suggest sexual arousal. The poem functions as a repressed, arcane desire which Romney claims "moved me in secret." Romney is bodily, viscerally effected by the poems which move through him and animate him like sap through a tree. And he understands that poetry is a language of the body and of the Imaginary: it is "signless" rather than symbolic. The image of rain relieving the "tightened bark" and allowing the tree to blossom suggests sexual release. It also mirrors Aurora's earlier deployment of the Jove and Danae myth, except with the gender roles reflected and reversed. Aurora saw herself as Danae overcome by the sexual and creative energy of Jove. Romney is now Danae similarly released to the fulfillment of his own desire by a shower of gold--the "soft rain" of Aurora's poetry. This is not simply a reversal of roles or a redistribution of power. Romney's embodiment of Danae mirrors and doubles Aurora's identification with the figure of Danae. Aurora develops the Danae myth to accommodate her need for an archetypal feminine figure expressive of feminine creativity and sexuality. Vincent Carrington's descriptions of his pictures of Danae (III.100-43) supply Aurora with a model which she can elaborate upon and reconfigure to represent her own subjectivity. Yet the figure of Danae is not Aurora's exclusive imaginative territory. Romney's identification with a Danae-like subjectivity allows him to find a voice and metaphor for his own desire. Both Romney and Aurora use Danae as a means of translating their desire--of rendering desire meaningful to themselves; Danae functions as a mirror which explicates

and reflects desire back to the original subject, regardless of that subject's gender.

Romney's indirect reference to Danae and his implicit sympathy with the Jove/Danae myth is concordant with the poem's strategy of mirroring. The poem's structure is arranged to exhibit mirroring between narrative elements. The concluding Books of the poem mirror back earlier passages, revealing both contiguity and shades or refractions of difference. In an act of complicated, plural mirroring, Romney sees himself in the sexually embodied figure of Danae which has already been reworked to accommodate Aurora's need to see herself reflected in an archetypal image of desire. When Romney sees himself reflected in the image of Danae, he is also catching a reflection of himself through Aurora who also identifies herself with Danae. This double mirroring allows Romney to construct his own subjectivity by seeing himself mirroring in the split image of Aurora and Danae.

Aurora Leigh uses doubling (and doubling back) as a means of establishing unlikely--even transgressive or radical--likeness. The text substantiates similarities between Aurora and Marian which bring the two women together despite their respective class positions. Comparably, the mirroring of Aurora and Romney works against Victorian gender convention by extricating both feminine and masculine subjects from the extreme polarities which have been culturally inscribed for them. As Margaret Reynolds observes, "Marian Erle as natural woman functions as a mirror of possibilities for Aurora. But it is the figure of Romney Leigh which functions in the major part of the narrative as her most significant mirror"(Introduction, Aurora Leigh 46). Reynolds argues that Aurora uses Romney as a mirror "in an effort

to justify herself and construct her own sense of a valued identity" (47). Reynolds suggests that the poem presents a straightforward gender reversal in which Aurora exploits Romney as a means of ensuring her own subjectivity. Reynolds insists that Aurora assumes a masculine position and silences Romney in the interest of cultivating her own voice and subjectivity:

Aurora thus reverses the tradition of the silent woman used by the male poet and lover to define himself: like the male sonneteer, Aurora does not recognize her lover's individual or independent life but reduces him to a cipher used as a mirror for her personal purpose of self-construction. (47)

Reynolds' analysis relies upon the notion of selfhood constructed in opposition to otherness. This argument presupposes a binary tension between self and other, masculine and feminine. Identity and voice are only gained and legitimated through the silencing and rendering absent of the other. Reynolds seems convinced that Aurora is only able to escape Victorian gender conventions by abdicating femininity in favour of masculinity. Aurora must become culturally male to avoid the restrictions of being culturally female.

There may be alternate strategies for understanding the mirroring between Aurora and Romney. It is important to recall Aurora's ideal of the "two-fold sphere"---the need for balance and reciprocity in all things---which reasserts itself throughout the poem. Mirroring need not be seen as a means of self-serving objectification, but as an intersubjective process. As an extension of the integrated, reflexive "two-fold sphere", mirroring can allow for continual revision and growth for the subjects on both sides of the equation. The gesture of

mirroring benefits both Romney and Aurora. The recognition of likeness between the lovers serves to erode the conventionally gendered positions which have been culturally imposed on them. The final discussion shows Aurora and Romney that their social values are much closer than they would have admitted previously. During the first marriage proposal scene (on Aurora's twenty-first birthday) Romney and Aurora emphasize the differences between their views on improving social conditions; they maintain gendered extremes (Romney arguing for the material and Aurora opting for the spiritual) which prohibit the recognition of a common or shared goal. By the end of the poem, Romney and Aurora understand that their seemingly different projects are actually interdependent reflections of each other. Aurora recounts how Romney's "voice rose, as some chief musician's song" (IX.844) emphasizing harmony and reciprocity

And bade me mark how we two met at last  
 Upon this moon-bathed promontory of earth,  
 To give up much on each side, then take all.  
 'Beloved,' it sang, 'we must be here to work;  
 And men who work can only work for men,  
 And, not to work in vain, must comprehend  
 Humanity and so work humanly,  
 And raise men's bodies still by raising souls,  
 As God did first.' (IX.845-51)

Both Aurora and Romney "give up" the oppositional gendered positions which prevented them from seeing the commonality of their ideas. The material and the spiritual are subtly varied facets reflecting each other in the shared project of serving humanity.

The final conversation between the lovers uses mirroring as a symbol for their anticipated life of reciprocity. Mirroring also serves as a discursive strategy; the conversation doubles back upon itself with imprecise repetitions and slightly varied echoes. When Aurora answers Romney she mirrors his words but adds the inevitable distortions and refractions supplied by her own voice:

I echoed thoughtfully--'The man, most man,  
Works best for men, and, if most man indeed,  
He gets his manhood plainest from his soul:  
While obviously this stringent soul itself  
Obeys the old law of development,  
The spirit ever witnessing in ours,  
And Love, the soul of soul, within the soul,  
Evolving it sublimely. First, God's love.' (IX.874-81)

These words reverberate with Romney's and reinforce the ideal of the "two-fold sphere"--the necessary balance between soul and body.

Aurora's verbal echo of Romney serves as the auditory counterpart to visual mirroring. Gerhard Joseph, in "The Echo and the Mirror in abime in Victorian Poetry" considers nineteenth-century examples of *mise en abime*--a term introduced in the late nineteenth-century and adopted by post-structuralist theory which describes an "internal mirror effect in painting and literature" (403). The term indicates "the idea of multiple replication" (403) or "a frame within a frame in endless replication" (403). Despite its prominence in post-structuralist theory, Joseph insists that "the device [of *mise en abime*]...accentuated itself in English Victorian poetry in the auditory guise of the echo and the visual one of the mirror, sometimes in

tandem" (404). Joseph links the literary tropes of echoing and mirroring together as manifestations of *mise en abyme* by demonstrating how they are interconnected in Victorian poem's such as Tennyson's "The Lady of Shalott." He also provides a classical justification for aligning the echo with the mirror: "The Greeks, to be sure, also combined the story of Echo and Narcissus into a single myth" (412). In Aurora Leigh, the mirror and the echo are connected through the shared quality of distorted replication. Mirrors (and portraits) in Aurora Leigh do not precisely reproduce a subject. Instead, they function like an echo which continually reverberates producing endless, slightly varied repetitions. The language of mirroring becomes increasingly complex as Aurora attempts to explain the reflexivity of "Spirit" and "Love". The repetition of "soul" sets up an echo which complicates Aurora's meaning. This echo parallels the endless process of mirroring producing continual, slightly varied reproductions. Romney chooses language which is similarly reliant upon reflection and doubling:

I do but stand and think,  
 Across the waters of a troubled life  
 This Flower of Heaven so vainly overhangs,  
 What perfect counterpart would be in sight  
 If tanks were clearer. Let us clean the tubes,  
 And wait for rains. (IX.894-900)

The relationship between Heaven and earth is one of mirroring and the lovers' shared purpose will be the cleaning and improvement of the mirror. The "rains" function as a mirror which reproduces the original of Heaven with shades of difference: the world must become a mirrored representation--a "perfect counterpart"--to Heaven. Mirroring is a



process which does not produce direct duplication, but which allows for continually reverberating, interconnected elements of difference.

Romney's suggestion that he and Aurora will "wait for rains" describes the creation of the perfect mirror between Heaven and earth; it also refers back to Romney's claim that Aurora's "book o'ercame me like soft rain" (VIII.595) and recalls the sexual desire contained in his implicit identification with Danae.

Although the lovers insist that their union will serve the needs of society through the perfection of the mirror between Heaven and earth--again, the image of "two-fold sphere"--the conversation returns to the "rains" which suggest desire. Mirroring operates as a political strategy which integrates masculine material work with feminine spirituality; gendered directives give way to symmetrical, affiliated projects. While mirroring gives a theoretical framework to the poem's ethics and politics, it also serves as an image of desire between two subjects. The love between Romney and Aurora is predicated on sameness: they share a family name and much of their childhood experience. Observers call attention to their physical similarities. Lady Waldemar tells Aurora "'You put up your lip,/So like a Leigh! so like [Romney]!'" (III.437-8). Lady Waldemar repeats the observation in her final letter to Aurora and credits the physical resemblance between the cousins as contributing to the union between them which frustrated Lady Waldemar's own designs on Romney: "'Observe, Aurora Leigh,/Your droop of eyelid is the same as his,/And, but for you, I might have won his love'" (IX.162-4). The organic semblance between Aurora and Romney allows for the mirroring and mingling of bodies at the end of the poem. The cousin-lovers participate in desire which relies upon their

physical likeness; Aurora is unable to distinguish between her own body and Romney's body which reflects and resembles her own:

Could I see his face,  
 I wept so? Did I drop against his breast,  
 Or did his arms constrain me? were my cheeks  
 Hot, overflowed, with my tears or his?  
 And which of our two large explosive hearts  
 So shook me? That, I know not. There were words  
 That broke in utterance ... melted, in the fire--  
 Embrace, that was convulsion ... then a kiss  
 As long and silent as the ecstatic night,  
 And deep, deep, shuddering breaths, which meant beyond  
 Whatever could be told by word or kiss. (IX.714-24)

Desire is realized through the mirroring of bodies. Aurora and Romney move beyond the theoretical and political mirroring (which produces the idea of earth mirroring Heaven) and beyond the doubling of language. Ultimately, the reverberation between bodies and the recognition of sameness allows for the fullest expression of desire and sexual pleasure.

Mirroring between Aurora and Romney creates a context in which Aurora can perceive her body and its desire. Because of their physical similarity, Aurora can see herself reflected in Romney and also see his desire as a reinforcing and legitimating reflection of her own desire. Like an echo which continuously reverberates, the mirrored similarities between Aurora and Romney allows their mirrored desire to endlessly reverberate between them with infinite subtle distortions. Desire is multiplied and diversified by the process of mirroring. Although

mirroring generates from sameness (between Aurora and Marion, between Aurora and the poem's paintings and between Aurora and Romney) it produces facets of difference and shades of diversity. Mirroring supplies the poem with a trope which seems to work at dual and contradictory purposes. Mirroring--in its most straightforward and uncritical sense--suggests a perfect reproduction of the gazing subject and hence an endless and static repetition of sameness. Yet in its more subtle and less rigid sense the mirror can produce endless and reverberating difference. To conclude this investigation of Aurora Leigh I will consider Irigaray's theorization of the mirror as a duplicitous instrument which both facilitates the specular masculine gaze and invites the subversive distortion and reverberation apparent in the mirroring tactics used in Aurora Leigh.

### Conclusion

Mirroring relies upon gaze to facilitate identity--to allow the subject to recognize his or her own existence by confronting a reflection or a representation of the self. For Lacan, the child establishes himself as an individual--a self--when he can identify his image in a mirror as a reflection, that is, when he can distinguish between his self and the reflection of self. For Aurora, the resolution of the mirror stage is continually deferred. Instead of drawing the boundaries between herself and the portrait of her mother (which functions as a mirror), Aurora exploits the liminal, unstable demarcations between herself and her mother. The portrait of the mother is a referential mirror which signs back to Aurora the feminine archetypes which she is then able to locate within herself and which she can in turn remodel. In addition to portraits, Aurora develops a socially unlikely relationship of mirroring with Marian in which the two women come to echo and repeat each other. If the twinning of Marian and Aurora challenges class barriers, Aurora's final gestures of mirroring--the reciprocal and doubled relationship she ultimately shares with Romney--undercut gender categorization. Aurora is able to develop her subjectivity and see herself reflected in a series of mirrors which are not perfect or exact mirrors but unexpected reflective surfaces. The difference which Aurora is (culturally) expected to see between herself and Marian and between herself and Romney is replaced by reflection and sameness. Yet this sameness is not singular or consistent but multifaceted and plural: Aurora finds sameness between herself and an expansive range of characters, representations and archetypes--from Marian to Medusa.

I will conclude my work on Aurora Leigh by examining the deployment of the mirror trope in Barrett Browning's poem and in the work of Irigaray. As outlined in my Introduction, I read the theoretical writings of Irigaray as literary texts which respond to the strategy of close reading used in the investigation of literature. In an article which examines Aurora Leigh in the context of Irigaray, Patricia Srebrnik observes that the poem

is full of gratifying surprises for the theoretically inclined reader: passage after passage suggests an intuitive awareness of insights eventually to be articulated by such late-twentieth-century thinkers as Derrida, Lacan, Irigaray, Cixous and Kristeva. (9)

Srebrnik calls attention to the parallels between Aurora Leigh and poststructuralist theory. She establishes a cross-generic connection between texts which sets a precedent and offers a framework for my concluding discussion. Srebrnik "invokes poststructuralist theory to explain why Aurora Leigh, although an innovative text in its own time, cannot ultimately accomplish the 'radical' project it sets for itself" (9). Although I arrive at a different assessment of the success of the poems' "'radical' project," I follow Srebrnik's strategy of reading Aurora Leigh in concert with Irigaray.

Mirroring gains its subversive edge in Aurora Leigh by freeing up the transaction between the gazing subject and the accurate reproduction of that subject. The poem exploits the distortions and imprecisions of mirroring. The gaze into the mirror does not simply reaffirm and concretize the identity of the gazing subject. Instead, the poem describes what Irigaray calls the "articulations" (Speculum

144) of the mirror--the "impossible reflected images, maddening reflections, parodic transformations" (144). Aurora sees herself in multiple and (culturally) "impossible reflected images" which allow her to endlessly defer the resolution of the mirror stage. By refusing to recognize a single and fixed reflection of herself as herself, Aurora puts off the moment of complete integration into the symbolic order. Instead, the mirror stage becomes a forum for continually renegotiating subjectivity.

The poem deploys the mirror as an imperfect instrument which offers the gazing subject a series of varied reflections. Such a mirror does not invite the formation of an immobile and inflexible identity but encourages a shifting subjectivity. This plastic sense of identity serves the poem's political ends by rendering Aurora as a flexible and dynamic character capable of seeing herself mirrored by unlikely subjects and hence bending class and gender conventions. Unlike the masculine specular gaze (in Irigaray's terms) Aurora's feminine "looks" do not cast the object of gaze as Other, but involve a recognition of feminine sameness. Mirroring becomes implicit in Aurora's "look." The image offered back by the object of gaze bears shades of the looking subject back to herself.

The gesture of the feminine "look" implicitly contains the act of mirroring. The poem offers this model of looking as a counterpoint to male gaze. Romney's blindness suggests that the male gaze is defeated by the end of Aurora Leigh. Romney encourages Aurora to practise this feminine model of looking when he urges her to "Gaze on, with inscient vision toward the sun,/And, from his visceral heat, pluck out the roots/Of light beyond him" (IX.913-5). Romney's suggestion directs

Aurora to gaze upon an object which cannot be viewed directly but must be regarded with "inscient vision" or more precisely, with the aid of a mirror. Aurora is asked to exploit the "heat" and "light" of the sun while preserving her own vision; she must somehow look directly "toward" the sun while keeping her gaze "inscient" and protected from the potential damage perpetrated by solar brilliance. This tricky negotiation requires the use of a mirror. As Irigaray explains:

Every effort will have been made, however, to keep the eye, at least the eye, from being destroyed by the fires of desire. Wisdom, at its very beginnings, warns against looking directly at the sun, for fear of burning up the membrane at the back of the eye.... Finding an economy of light in all its dazzling brilliance, without risk of combustion and death, marks humanity's first steps into philosophy ... just as the sun, even in eclipse, must be observed only indirectly, in a mirror on pain of blindness.

(147)

Irigaray argues that the mirror works as an exploitative, specular instrument which allows the subject to gain the "dazzling brilliance" of the sun without compromise or risk. But the mirror does not deliver absolute gain without danger; it creates a distance between the subject and the sun which detracts from the subject's experience of solar brilliance and intensity which is associated (as it seems to be for Aurora and Romney) with "the fires of desire." Irigaray explains:

Vision protects itself from the risk of blindness ... through an optical apparatus that stands between man and light and prevents light from touching him at all ... systems of

mirrors that ensure a steady illumination, admittedly, but one without heat or brilliance. The everlasting correctness of things seen clearly, perceived rightly, has banished not only the darkness of night but also the fires of noon". (148)

Aurora's gaze at the sun (prompted by Romney) seems to allow her to look upon the sun with the safety guaranteed by the mirror (which produces "inscient vision") without losing the "heat or brilliance" which Irigaray claims is effaced by the intrusion of the mirror. Aurora is able to extract the very essence of the sun's "visceral heat" while maintaining her vision. Irigaray claims that it is the "everlasting correctness" of mirrors which causes the clinical distance between the gazing subject and the sun. But in Aurora Leigh mirrors do not ensure that things are "seen clearly [or] perceived rightly." Instead, mirroring acts as the interplay of gaze which continually resituates the subjects on both sides of the mirror by casting slightly varied refractions back and forth. This deliberately imperfect mirroring allows Aurora Leigh to use mirrors as a tool for gazing at the un beholdable--the "visceral heat"(AL) or the "fires of desire"(Speculum) generated by the sun--without losing vision and without compromising the full benefit of solar brilliance.

Throughout Speculum of the Other Woman Irigaray uses the mirror to symbolize both the oppressive instrument of masculine specularity and the means of producing diverse and endless refractions. The mirror may take the form of a speculum--that prurient (medical) instrument which invades and attempts to analyze the (internal, biological) feminine. While warning of the effects of specularization--the male gaze which casts the feminine as Other as which sees woman only as a



reflection of the masculine subject--Irigaray recalls that the speculum is a concave mirror which produces inversion. The speculum does not simply provide the male subject with the reflected image of himself which he requires for his identity. It throws a distorted image back to him because of "the concave mirror's potential for setting things afire" (149). Irigaray suggests that masculine specularization is best defeated by mirroring the mirror image back to its source with all of the confusing distortions of which the concave mirror is capable. Feminine resistance to specularization occurs when the feminine subject redeflects the mirror to baffle the hegemony of the gaze-initiating masculine subject and to "trouble his vision to the point of incurable diplopia at least" (142). As with the endlessly answering mirroring between Aurora and her mirror-partners, Irigaray calls for a feminine disruption and reversal of specularization which will "disperse, diffract, deflect endlessly, making energy explode sometimes, with no possibility of returning to one single origin" (142). Aurora Leigh uses the strategy of eliminating the origin through mirroring by detailing the twinning of Aurora and Marian. The women's resemblance defies the naming of an origin and a response; the similarities between the women are reflected back and forth at a frequency and a complexity which resists citing an origin.

Aurora Leigh deploys the mirror--often subtly or implicitly--as a symbol or a model for reciprocal communicative or "answering" intersubjectivity. Like Irigaray's "concave mirror", the mirrors in Barrett Browning's poem offer a rich and diverse reflection back to the gazing subject. This reflection and all subsequent reflections,

distortions and refractions are endlessly reinvested in the interchange of gaze between subjects.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>In her critical introduction to Aurora Leigh, Margaret Reynolds claims that Barrett Browning "first began the process of turning her own life into an archetypal narrative where poetry and love (and Browning as poet/lover) were to effect her rescue"(1). Barrett Browning's dramatic life story (tyrannical father, years of secluded invalidism, romance and elopement with Robert Browning) have inspired a considerable body of work. See Daniel Karlin, The Courtship and Margaret Forster's biography of EBB.

<sup>2</sup>Reynolds is quoting from Cora Kaplan's 1978 introduction to Aurora Leigh. Other critics who maintain that the poem demonstrates feminist ideology are Deborah Byrd and Christine Sutphin.

<sup>3</sup>For examples of critical responses which follow Kaplan's assertion that Aurora Leigh is a feminist text which responds to feminist criticism see Deborah Byrd and Christine Sutphin.

<sup>4</sup>For a general discussion of the differences between liberal and poststructuralist feminisms see Tong. For a more detailed and literary theory based analysis of the differences see Moi, Jardine and Marks and deCourtrivron.

<sup>5</sup>Cixous' "The Laugh of the Medusa" opens with "I shall speak about women's writing: about what it will do. Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing ... Woman must put herself into the text"(245). This resonates with Aurora's opening explanation of her discursive project: "And I who have written much in prose and verse/For others' uses, will write my story for my better self"(1.2-4).

<sup>6</sup>I am referring to a Victorian garment both in the literal, fashion sense and also as a metaphor which operates in Aurora Leigh.

<sup>7</sup>Mary Wilson Carpenter's "'Eat me, drink me, love me'" considers the intersection between the sisterhood portrayed in Goblin Market and the rise of Anglican sisterhoods and women's charitable organizations; much of her argument works well with the sisterhood between Marian and Aurora in Aurora Leigh.

<sup>8</sup>For a discussion of the importance of face to face contact in AL see Dolores Rosenblum "Face to Face: EBB's AL and 19th C. Poetry." Victorian Studies 26.3 (1983): 321-28.

<sup>9</sup>Throughout my thesis I use the terms Imaginary and Symbolic to identify levels of discourse which I find in the text. I follow Irigaray's use of the terms (Irigaray follows and reworks Lacan's usage) while allowing some flexibility of interpretation. I use this terminology primarily as a tool for literary analysis and I allow the terms to evolve and become implicitly redefined throughout my work. I claim the license to deploy this terminology in this manner (in part) from the deliberate gaps, imprecisions and double meanings present in the works of both Lacan and Irigaray. For example, in "The Mirror Stage," Lacan avoids pinning down a final definition of the mirror stage. I find Irigaray similarly resistant to absolute definitions. For a discussion of Irigaray's use of the terms "Imaginary" and "Symbolic" see Whitford.

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