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**VICTORIAN INTERROGATIONS:  
ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING'S  
SONNETS FROM THE PORTUGUESE  
AND AURORA LEIGH**

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## ABSTRACT

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's two major works, Sonnets from the Portuguese and Aurora Leigh, provide a commentary on the structure of Victorian society, particularly in relation to gender roles. This thesis argues that in both works there is a primary concern with the ways in which women are placed within binary structures which are established by patriarchal discourses. These two works examine different structures in androcentric culture: heterosexual (courtly) love in the Sonnets, and patriarchy (the Law of the Father) in Aurora Leigh.

Part One focusses on Sonnets from the Portuguese, with the first chapter describing the speaker's tension in responding to conventional love roles: will she submit or rebel? The chapter also notes the speaker's appropriation of the courtly love tradition as a metaphor for the marginalised position in Victorian society of the woman poet. Chapter Two discusses particular roles assumed by the players in this love relationship, particularly the male/ female roles of god and sinner, and the final chapter makes apparent the speaker's growing concern with metaphors as a means of re-presenting her experience.

Part Two moves from the personal context (of the Sonnets) to the social with a focus on Aurora Leigh and the laws of society as established by patriarchal systems. Chapter Four considers how the Father's authority dominates and orders female life and desire, and in Chapter Five the dualisms undergirding patriarchy are exposed. Aurora uses her writing to deconstruct the binarisms she is caught in: between woman and artist, personal and universal, material and spiritual. The final chapter of this thesis develops the concern with the Father's law further by offering a more psychoanalytical reading in terms of post-Freudian criticism. This chapter examines Aurora's creation as a gendered consciousness, particularly focussing on the woman as separated from female desire by the early loss of her mother, her induction into the realm of the Father, and her definition as an 'other', a (self)-alienated woman. Aurora's path beyond this ideological construction of her self involves the death of the Father and the rediscovery of feminine love, leading to a linguistically-constructed, alternative siting within her society that does not depend upon male definition.

Victorian Interrogations:

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's

Sonnets from the Portuguese and Aurora Leigh

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To Roger

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## PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Elizabeth Barrett Browning is a poet apparently inappropriate to the 20th century. When I mention her name as a subject for research I encounter reactions such as "That dreadful woman!", and "Don't you find her a bit sentimental?". Many feminist theoreticians have already pointed out at length how female artists have been, and still are, excised from history - expunged from "The Canon" or the "Great Tradition". Elaine Showalter focusses her great book A Literature Of Their Own on precisely this theme, and Joanna Russ, in a feisty and humorous account entitled How To Suppress Women's Writing, outlines the many effective methods by which such excision is performed.

The process is clearly evident in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's case. A poet of intellectual, emotional and poetic power has been reduced to the banal stereotypes apparent in my opening quotations. Her work has been redefined from complex, deeply layered, political poetry to sentimental verse, and her best-known poetry is usually Sonnets from the Portuguese - evidence of the emotional woman in love. This redefinition was already occurring in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's own lifetime, particularly as her lifestory became a convenient gloss on the poetry. But it moved into full swing in the early twentieth century, and a one-dimensional reading of very three-dimensional poetry became the standard way to read Elizabeth Barrett Browning.

An equivalent case perhaps makes this process clearer. Charles Dickens' reputation also suffered in the early twentieth century for his uneven writing style and his sentimentality. (Leavis had great trouble fitting him into the Canon.) But the last 40-50 years have seen massive interest in the rediscovery of a talented and profoundly complex author, generating a Dickens industry that fills many library shelves.

The same revival, however, is very slow in coming for Elizabeth Barrett Browning. While the circumstances and products of the two authors have

obvious differences, the similarities between the two are striking. Both were very popular with the Victorian reading public. Both were overtly political and emotional; both have been condemned at various times for those very qualities, as well as for a perceived failure in form and technique, in novelistic and poetic convention.<sup>1</sup> Yet the spectre of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's stereotype as weak, sentimental lady poet is taking much longer to lay to rest than the spectre of Dickens' stereotype as flawed, uncontrolled genius. This is partly due to the literary industry's need to use her to reinforce the related myth of the Robert Browning - Elizabeth Barrett Browning Love Story, in which Elizabeth's role as weak, sentimental lady poet is crucial.

Obviously I find this reading of Elizabeth Barrett Browning entirely inadequate. One purpose of this thesis is to correct the simplistic stereotypes of Elizabeth Barrett Browning that remain within literary circles. Rather, her work is characterised by multiple levels: she hides coherent subtexts in her narratives. In doing this, she makes a challenging and subversive comment on her society - which is perhaps why she has been "edited out" over time.

I have chosen Elizabeth Barrett Browning's two major works in which to explore this commentary on Victorian society: Sonnets from the Portuguese and Aurora Leigh. The studies that follow pay particular attention to the ideological themes generated by each work. In both works there is a primary concern with the ways in which women are placed within binary structures which are established by patriarchal discourses. These two works examine different structures in patriarchy: in the Sonnets the context is heterosexual love, with its strong courtly love overtones; in Aurora Leigh the structure critiqued is what Lacan calls the Law of the Father - patriarchy.

While dealing with similar themes (women in androcentric culture) each work presents a different literary form - the lyrical love sonnet and the narrative epic. These forms largely correspond with the subject matter of the works. The sonnet, focussing on an intimate moment in time, is appropriate for the domestic, personal nature of the subject matter: the speaker's articulation of love. The longer narrative poem, with its pseudo-epic and novelistic



associations, lends itself to the social and interpersonal themes of women's intersections with their culture.<sup>2</sup> In recognition of this change in form, the nature of my discussion will vary in relationship to each work. In the case of the Sonnets, the more intensive and highly wrought representation of lyrical feeling requires a more detailed discussion of each sonnet, in order to demonstrate the way each lyrical moment contributes to an overarching thematized dilemma. The more expanded, discursive narrative of Aurora Leigh lends itself more readily to discussion based upon defined thematic issues.

These two approaches are also in accord with the present state of criticism on Elizabeth Barrett Browning, in that Aurora Leigh has already received considerable attention, whereas the Sonnets have not always been given the close analysis they require. Traditionally, Sonnets from the Portuguese have been read in purely biographical terms, as the picture of Elizabeth Barrett's growing love for Robert Browning. The Sonnets were viewed as "the sincere and spontaneous expression of Barrett Browning's personal emotional experiences" (Stephenson, Poetry 69). Elizabeth's love, moreover, was generally perceived as romantically positive. Hence the Sonnets were remembered and praised for their lyrical expression and strong emotion, long after her other poetry had fallen into disfavour. They have since become over-sentimentalised to the point of ridicule, so that, in the recent rediscovery of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, many feminists have found Sonnets from the Portuguese something of an embarrassment amongst Elizabeth's other more 'politically correct' poetry.<sup>3</sup> This embarrassment is largely because of the excessive self-deprecation and male adulation that occurs in the Sonnets. Such 'errors of judgement' are never made, for example, in Aurora Leigh. Angela Leighton's account of the Sonnets, emphasising the speaker's constant self-assertion, is the first reading to uncover the strength and power of the speaker's voice. Her reading is not without problems, but it provides a point of departure for my own argument.

The Sonnets are vastly more complex and ambivalent than a biographical, often naively positive reading allows. Firstly, the work transcends Elizabeth Barrett Browning's specific life, which is used as a site from which to explore

wider, more general issues. As Stephenson writes: "A knowledge of Barrett Browning's life and letters may illuminate the work, but our appreciation and understanding of Barrett Browning as a poet, rather than as a woman, will continue to be restricted as long as there is an insistence on viewing the Sonnets from the Portuguese as the documented story of an actual romance instead of a series of finely crafted poems" (Stephenson, Poetry 70). Secondly, while critics have been forced to note the constant background tone of sadness and negativity in the poem - what they often dismiss merely as 'morbidly' - these negative feelings actually form a major contribution to the poem. They depict a wide and subtle scope of feeling, ranging from sadness to depression, fear, anger, sarcasm and outright rebellion. Even a critic such as Marjory Bald, whose extraordinary account of Elizabeth Barrett Browning in Women Writers of the Nineteenth Century is a typical example of the misreading of the poet, must comment with surprise and regret:

Whatever may be the reason, the fact remains that The Sonnets from the Portuguese do not give the impression of firm and abiding joy. We hesitate to pass harsh judgements, but to the modern reader there is always the suggestion of hypochondria in Mrs. Browning's outlook.- What after all, were her sorrows, if we weigh them in comparison with those suffered by many other women of her generation? (Bald 229)

Bald clearly takes the speaker of the Sonnets to be Elizabeth Barrett Browning herself, and she then finds the negativity of the poem incompatible with her understanding of Elizabeth's 'happy marriage': "In the perfection of her married life she had more cause for happiness than any of these women" - the latter being the Brontes and Christina Rossetti (Bald 232). The comparisons are irrelevant if the speaker of the Sonnets is read as a persona: the sentiments of the Sonnets transcend simple "happiness" to examine the deeper, more complex matters of gender relations. Astonishingly, Bald goes on to criticise Elizabeth Barrett Browning for being too much the model of the subjected, docile, 'lacking' Victorian woman. Quite apart from the inconsistency here with her earlier assertion that Elizabeth Barrett Browning isn't happy enough in the Sonnets, this interpretation plainly disregards the rebellious anxiety that is in the poem.

The intention of the first three chapters of this thesis is to propose a reading that takes account of what is in the poem - the positive and negative.<sup>4</sup> These chapters examine the assumptions behind the paradoxical situation of an apparently "feminine" form (the intimate, domestic love lyric) which has actually already been written and appropriated as a "masculine" form. The massive complications behind such gendering - how a woman can be a (courtly) love poet - expose the ideological assumptions inherent in the culture of the speaker. The Sonnets, moreover, do not fragment into forty-four isolated incidents, but build a narrative about a condition of subjectivity: what it means to be a woman and poet in love.

Nevertheless, any discussion of the Sonnets encounters a problem with their form: how to draw thematic threads from what are essentially discrete (though not fragmented) units, each developing its own intricate argument. I have chosen to draw three interrelated threads from the poem as foci for the chapters. Roughly the Sonnets are grouped in chronological order, with the first third discussed in terms of a central tension between submission and rebellion. The central sonnets are discussed with regard to particular roles assumed by the players in this love relationship, and the discussion of the final sonnets makes apparent the speaker's growing concern with tropes as a means of re-presenting her experience. However, the movement in the Sonnets themselves is never as neat as this: there is constant fluidity in the processes I am proposing. My chapters reflect this fluidity in that they necessarily overlap as each theme moves into the next, and some sonnets are pulled out of their (already arbitrary) chronological order and placed in a new order.

The last three chapters of the thesis demonstrate how Aurora Leigh moves on from the personal context to the social. This movement into the realm of the social, dramatised by the narrative method and structure of Aurora Leigh, leads naturally into a consideration of the laws of society as established by patriarchal systems. Chapter Four considers how the Father's authority dominates and orders female life and desire. Most Aurora Leigh commentators have made brief reference to various aspects of this authority; this fourth chapter offers a more comprehensive approach. The roles or positions made

available to the poem's women, and Aurora's response to them, become apparent in this chapter and lead, in Chapter Five, to a consideration of the dualisms central to patriarchy. Aurora uses her writing to deconstruct the binarisms she is caught in: between woman and artist, personal and universal, material and spiritual, and even failure and success. While a pseudo-Platonic Christian idealism always remains in Aurora's reckoning, distinct oppositions nevertheless are clearly breaking down by the close of the poem, as we see Aurora and Romney building heaven on earth, the new Jerusalem, through the mode of Aurora's poetry.

The final chapter of this thesis develops the concern with the Father's law further by offering a more psychoanalytical reading in terms of post-Freudian criticism.<sup>5</sup> This chapter examines Aurora's creation as a gendered consciousness, particularly focussing on the woman as separated from female desire by the early loss of her mother, a loss required by Freud for a woman's 'normal' socialisation. Aurora's life clearly plays out the loss of the mother (relived in various forms throughout Aurora's life), her induction into the realm of the Father, her associated distrust and rejection of females (Freud's theory of rejection of the mother), and consequently Aurora's definition as an 'other', a (self)-alienated woman.

Aurora's path beyond this social creation of her as a female object involves the death of the Father and the rediscovery of feminine love, leading to an alternative siting within her society that does not depend upon male definition. The difference between the mercantile love of patriarchy and the mutuality of feminine love is constantly figured in the poem. Thus, through her writing and relocating herself in female terms, Aurora manages to dislocate the patriarchal world which has hitherto entrapped her.

Every writer on Elizabeth Barrett Browning encounters the same problem: how to refer to her? Her name changes from Elizabeth Barrett Barrett to Elizabeth Barrett Browning, but she publishes poetry both before and after marriage. Both the works under consideration here were published under the second name, and yet much of the Sonnets was written under the first. I have

chosen to follow Kathleen Blake's example and use Elizabeth's own method of signing correspondence, her initials "EBB". This is "one appellation that marks a symbolic continuity between the poet before and the poet after marriage" (Blake, Love 171).

Finally, I would like to acknowledge here my thanks to Warwick Slinn, my doctoral supervisor and friend. He has always given generously of his time to discuss this thesis and wider issues relating to it, and his subtle and incisive readings of this work have challenged me to clarify, refine and develop my ideas.

This thesis is also a product of a fascinating and deeply stimulating year during which I attended a graduate paper in feminist theory, run by Doreen D'Cruz. To Doreen and the members of that class, who let me 'sit in' on their seminars, and contribute to their discussions, my thanks.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See the editors' notes to the section on Elizabeth Barrett Browning in Victorian Poetry: "[Her poetry] combines with intensity of emotion, a constant reflection of clearly Christian morality and humanitarian and liberal sympathies, and a warm delight in nature. Here and there she offended against standards of subject... Her carelessness of form found then, as it finds now, strong objectors... The peculiarities of her style cannot be defended as can the oddities of Robert Browning's: her style, unlike his, is thin and monotonous" (Brown and Bailey 352).

<sup>2</sup> "Reflecting this thematic expansion of boundaries," Glennis Stephenson writes concerning the shift from the Sonnets to Aurora Leigh, "Barrett Browning moves from the restrictions of the sonnet... to the freedom offered by a novel in verse which, transgressing the limits of genre, encompasses both the narrative and the lyrical" (Poetry 91).

<sup>3</sup> Dorothy Mermin refers to this response in the title of her article, "The Female Poet and the Embarrassed Reader: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Sonnets from the Portuguese" [ELH 48 (1981): 351-67].

<sup>4</sup> Susan Zimmerman uses these words in the title of her article, "Sonnets from the Portuguese: A Negative and a Positive Context". This article alerted readers to the "chaotic feelings" in the Sonnets, and to the speaker's (EBB in Zimmerman's article) struggle in reaction to love. Zimmerman argues that the sequence works towards a resolution of love as both a sacrifice and a gain.

<sup>5</sup> Angela Leighton, in a fine introduction to her ground-breaking book on EBB, rejects the use of French (psychoanalytical) feminism on the basis that such theories retain woman in the site of the silent beloved of courtly love: in both structures woman remains an absence. Leighton interprets such theories as a mythical narrative in which women are enclosed (Elizabeth 16-17). I support aspects of her reading, but I find that Leighton fails to take the full conclusions of such feminism into account. Under post-structuralist psychoanalysis, the rigid narrative is broken down and fluidity in subject positions enters. In other words, Leighton stops halfway with the theory: in doing so she preserves the dualisms, and so any possible deconstruction of them - and of the 'mythical narrative' under which we still exist - is lost.

PART ONE:

SONNETS FROM THE PORTUGUESE

### A note on the title: Sonnets from the Portuguese

Margaret Forster writes: "Sonnets from the Portuguese were so called in an attempt to make people believe they were translations: both Brownings thought these poems too personal to be published under the name of Elizabeth Barrett Browning". (Selected Poems xxi). According to the editors of Victorian Poetry, the sonnets were first titled "Sonnets Translated from the Bosnian", but Robert suggested the final title, having admired an earlier poem of EBB's "Catarina to Camoens". "Vas de Camoens (1524-1580) was the greatest epic and lyric poet of Portugal" (Brown and Bailey 807). Robert Browning intended the title to link with Catarina, as he wrote to Julia Wedgwood:

... the publishing them [the Sonnets] was through me - in the interest of the poet. I chose that they should be added to the other works, not minding the undue glory to me, if the fact should become transparent: there was a trial at covering it a little by leaving out one sonnet which had plainly a connexion with the former works [Sonnet XLII]: but it was put in afterwards when people chose to pull down the mask which, in old days, people used to respect at a masquerade. But I never cared. "The Portuguese" - purposely an ambiguous title - was that Caterina who left Camoens the riband from her hair. (Curle 100)

Thus the title appeared to shift authorization to the courtly beloved of a long-dead Portuguese male writer, the woman who replies to the sonneteer's love poetry with some of her own.<sup>1</sup> Robert thus shows his understanding of EBB's project in the Sonnets, to upset the courtly love roles by giving the silent woman speech. He pushes the publication of them in a collected edition of EBB's previous works and new poetry, Poems (1850), emphasising that he did not really mind the failure of his and EBB's conceit of anonymity. Nevertheless, the Sonnets remained for him "a strange, heavy crown ... put on me one morning unawares" (Curle 99). This response suggests perhaps some discomfort for Robert in his awareness of the tensions within the Sonnets. In describing the sonnet sequence as a wreath, he recognises that EBB has crowned him, both with her love and with the title of official poet. Her questioning and challenging



of both those aspects (discussed in the following chapters) must be therefore a disconcerting experience for him.

And what of EBB herself? Did she acquiesce to the title ruse because she was nervous about publishing under her female name, due to the potentially subversive nature of the love lyrics? She was appropriating a bastion of male tradition, the love sonnet, in order to expose its assumptions. Love from a woman's perspective, articulated through her voice and selfhood, is a revolutionary concept in Victorian society.<sup>2</sup> Is she as yet unable to make female desire overt, as she is later able to do in Aurora Leigh?

Or is the attempt at disguise an attempt at generalisation, at moving interpretation of the Sonnets away from her biographical story to a generalised account of the female in love? She and Robert saw them as too personal, too autobiographical. Dorothy Mermin notes this desire by EBB to "generalize and distance the situation". She writes: "Male poets ... could present their experiences (fictionalized or not) as exemplifying those of modern man.... But the modern woman's personal experience could not easily be made to carry so heavy a contextual burden, and Elizabeth Barrett was not yet quite ready to try.... Nor, as she knew ... were readers disposed to see a woman as representative of the human race, or a poet as a representative woman" (Origins 143). EBB knew her audience, knew the tactic of marginalisation and dismissal via the label of autobiography.<sup>3</sup> And indeed, her fears were realised in that this is how the Sonnets have primarily been read: they are the romantic story of a specific woman's love (often trivialised in comparison with a man's love). Any political or philosophical concerns could therefore be ignored.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> In "Catarina to Camoens", the dying woman writes to the now-absent male poet who once told her she had "the sweetest eyes ever seen", imploring him to hear her and return to her side to return her love. He does not come, and she leaves the riband from her hair for him. Angela Leighton also notes the way the Sonnets' title links its speaker with the "generic ... unknown lady of the courtly tradition", the "woman who waited, to no avail" ("Stirring" 20). Leighton sees the link between such a figure and the Victorian gentlewoman: "To be the maiden in the tower, the woman at the window, the dreamer in the prison, is to inhabit a literary tableau which is very close to the facts of life" ("Stirring" 16). However as this thesis will demonstrate, EBB uses this position only as a starting point from which to appropriate the other position - that of courtly poet.

<sup>2</sup> Glennis Stephenson notes this revolutionary aspect in her distinction between writing about love, which was the dominant mode of early Victorian female poets, and writing poetry of love, the "lyrical expression of the emotion and the type of verse which traditionally excluded women from the role of speaking subject" (Poetry 4). Very few Victorian female poets attempted this type of poetry.

<sup>3</sup> Joanna Russ comments on the label often applied to women's literature, that a work is 'confessional'. Russ notes the assumptions behind the label, that the writing is somehow "too personal", and concludes that "In short, 'the label is simply handy for dismissing art that the critic wishes to trivialize.'" Quoting Erica Jong: "'it's become a put-down term for women, a sexist label for women's poetry'" (Russ 29).

## CHAPTER ONE

## THE BATTLE: LOVE OR SELFHOOD?

## I

The first word of Sonnets from the Portuguese is "I". From the very beginning EBB announces her intention to place the woman speaker at the centre of this poetry: to be the subject, not the object. Moreover, she consolidates that central position for this female voice by indirectly asserting her "cultural credentials" with appropriate classical references (Mermin, Origins 138). Poetry (particularly for Victorians) was primarily the sphere of Oxbridge-educated men whose classical background thus prepared them for their "high calling".<sup>1</sup> The knowledge displayed in references to Theocritus and a "mystic Shape" in this first sonnet suggests EBB's legitimacy in appropriating the [traditionally male] speaking voice of the poet.<sup>2</sup> Mermin identifies the wide-ranging literary allusions in the first half-dozen sonnets, showing how EBB displays "casual confidence" whilst working in these impressive "vast literary spaces" (Origins 138-139).

In this opening sonnet, the speaker summarises her life and so introduces the primary theme for this sonnet sequence, the recovery of her life through love. She accordingly begins by playing the role of submissive victim. The years have not brought a gift "in a gracious hand" for her, as the male poet Theocritus sung, but rather have "flung/ A shadow" across her. She must passively receive these "melancholy years", only weeping in memory of them. Then, when Love finally discovers her, it arrests her:

a mystic Shape did move  
Behind me, and drew me backward by the hair,  
And a voice said in mastery while I strove,..  
'Guess now who holds thee?'<sup>3</sup>

Yet the victim, the object of these actions, is not passive: she "strove". Thus, in this very first sonnet, a tension within the poet's self is created between the role

of passive, female, love object, and the active, female, speaking subject who asserts herself. "I thought", "I mused", "I saw", "I was 'ware", "I strove", "I said". This consecutive list of "I" statements from the sonnet enacts the progression that is depicted, though more fluidly, in the entire sonnet sequence. We watch the female other - the conventionally silent object - think, perceive, struggle and break out of silence into speech that asserts her centrality.

The tone of the Shape's question to the female speaker has a flippant, almost arrogant edge as it teases the struggling woman. "'Guess now who holds thee?'" it asks, and despite the "silver answer" it gives to the speaker's reply, its mastery is nevertheless evident. Again, simultaneous with the hope that this Love offers - an alternative to Death - is the sense of sacrifice implicit in the Love: it requires submission to a stronger force, to a master. This tension, like that within the speaker herself, suggests the central issues of the sonnet sequence.

## II

These issues of struggle, tension and sacrifice are clearly delineated in the second sonnet, which reveals the nature of the authorised love relationship in the world of the Sonnets, and also shows the consequences of that relationship for the woman.

In a conventional love conceit recalling John Donne's "the world's contracted thus", the lovers' experience is located at the centre of the world, as the second sonnet begins:

But only three in all God's universe  
Have heard this word thou hast said, - Himself,  
beside  
Thee speaking, and me listening!

What is the word that the lover has said? Presumably an avowal of love. "Thou" in this sonnet implies the male lover, although the word "Love" has already been spoken - in Sonnet I by the "mystic Shape". Does this make the male lover consonant with the mystic Shape? If so, then the tensions between mastery and

love are moved from allusive metaphors to their specific and personal relationship.

The privacy of the exchange in lines 1-3 strikes the speaker - yet it is not private enough, it appears, as God's involvement becomes intrusive: "and replied/ One of us .. that was God". EBB graphically sums up the power relations of patriarchal discourse in her description of the audience to this speech. God owns and controls; man speaks; woman listens. This representation of phallogocentric discourse reveals the frustration and fear of the silent woman, who is answered for.<sup>4</sup> That answering 'kills' the woman, as EBB's ensuing imagery clearly portrays. Furthermore, God answers that she must not love in return. The "ethic of unworthiness" that interplays between both EBB and Robert Browning emerges here and becomes a major motif in the Sonnets, reflecting the speaker's internalisation of the patriarchal code.

This prohibition is a "curse" to blind her from seeing her lover. The use of the archaic "amerce" in line 5 (which the OED defines as "to fine arbitrarily ... to punish") conveys the injustice that the speaker's morality and God inflict upon her. This prohibition to love is more physically heavy, isolating and final, than the death-weights that keep a corpse's eyes closed. Beneath the surface obedience, the woman's anger and fear at this 'murder' seethes.

Images of seeing as power are an important motif that runs through the Sonnets. In feminist theory, the patriarchal gaze is an act of appropriation: the (male) gazer sees and captures the woman as an object that reflects himself.<sup>5</sup> Here the speaker's concern is that she is being denied vision. She is to be punished for attempting the power of sight: "as to amerce/ My sight from seeing thee". By placing "My sight" at the beginning of the line, the active, seeing woman is emphasised.<sup>6</sup> Not only is the woman silenced; she is also blinded.

A negative from this God - not a loving New Testament God - is apparently absolute and designed to exclude the woman. And yet, from this frustrated position of defeat, the speaker moves to a position of tentative defiance. The final five lines of the sonnet employ the traditional rhetoric of love. Neither humanity's spite, nor the vicissitudes of nature and existence, can part

the indomitable lovers, whose "hands would touch for all the mountain-bars".<sup>7</sup> Not even heaven rolled between them "at the end" would break their vows of love; rather they would vow "the faster". "'Nay' is worse/ From God" though, and so this final, almost reckless assertion of their earthly love seems to challenge God himself - their defiant vow of love is greater than His negative Judgement.

The woman's rhetoric has created a (fictive) alternative to the suppression and silence she inherits in the authorised relationship. This power of words introduces the speaker's identity or office as poet: Sonnet III then explores this identity and how it fits in (or fails to fit in) to the authorised love relationship.

### III

Sonnet III declares the fundamental difference that the speaker perceives between herself and her lover. As such, it is tempting to read it as a paradigm of the concept of sexual difference, which is at the heart of feminist theories. Woman is not a mirror for man, nor can she be 'read' in terms of male definitions: because she lacks the phallus, she is an absence, Irigaray's "nothing to be seen" (Marks and de Courtivron 101). This sonnet ostensibly speaks of the social differences between the lovers, but the depth and emphasis given to the argument suggests a more fundamental difference.

The triple repetition of "unlike" in the opening two lines hammers home the assertion of dissimilarity. The image of the lovers' personal "ministering two angels" bumping into each other in surprise like strangers, emphasises the radical nature of their interaction, and continues the idea of supernatural disapprobation of such interaction that was suggested in Sonnet II. Even in the physical world of "social pageantries" the divergence in the lovers' "uses" and "destinies" is profound: one is "A guest for queens", within the lighted hall of society, whilst the other (Other) is outside in the dark, under the cypress tree of death, tired and alone. The echoes from EBB's own sequestered life, and her perception of Robert Browning's life, are obvious.<sup>8</sup>

Less obvious, though, is the strong undertone of integrity, as the speaker refuses to join with the "hundred brighter eyes/ Than tears even can make [hers]". The shining mirror-like eyes of these ardent women are committed ("gages") to reflecting the centrality of the male lover's role of chief musician. The women thus willingly become passive instruments for his creative pleasure and power. In separating herself from such a role the speaker asserts that she is not defined by masculinity, but that she is different: a valid, speaking consciousness in her own right:

What hast thou to do  
 With looking from the lattice-lights at me,  
 A poor, tired, wandering singer,.. singing through  
 The dark, and leaning up a cypress tree?

This valid different consciousness, though excluded from society and with no home or support, is nevertheless, singing. She has her own voice; she is not a silent, passive, disembodied pair of mirror eyes. The motif of seeing, raised in Sonnet II, recurs here. The disembodied eyes of the socially-located women pose no threat, in contrast to the searching eyes of the male lover, looking out the window into the dark to see his love. Certainly the speaker feels that gaze: "What hast thou to do/ With looking[...] at me[?]" she asks. The effrontery of that gaze is an incentive for the woman to stay in the dark, unseen and unappropriated into the world of social pageantries, where roles are clearly arbitrated.

The final couplet recognises the consequence of the difference between the lovers. His role is ordained and approved by their culture; the "chrism" or unguent that anoints him is divine approbation. On her head falls the dew of exclusion - she is outside, the other.<sup>9</sup> The only common denominator between them is death.<sup>10</sup>

Also central to this sonnet (and the whole sequence) is the evocation of the courtly lover and poet. As most commentators have pointed out, EBB here appropriates the role traditionally played by the male in medieval courtly love.<sup>11</sup> In this construct, the woman is the distant, aloof, beautiful but unattainable idol,

adored and revered from afar by the poor, struggling poet. This tradition ensures that the woman never speaks; only the longing male's plaintive voice is heard. Here in the third sonnet the speaker overtly manipulates the tradition: she becomes the singer-poet and the male lover is the unattainable beloved. The woman's voice is thus made central, and her desire and consciousness are the focus. She is the poet, speaker, lover, the subject; he is the muse, the loved one, the object of her discourse.<sup>12</sup>

Some commentators see this inversion of the conventional courtly roles as a tension that never quite succeeds in being resolved. Dorothy Mermin, one of the first to elucidate the revolutionary nature of the inversion, also believes that it exemplifies the fundamental problem that Victorian women poets had. Because the Victorian love poet was traditionally male and his subject was woman, the woman became the poem - leaving the Victorian female poet with no place to site herself. The woman poet therefore had to attempt to conflate both subject and object positions, to "play two opposing roles at one time". Sonnets from the Portuguese clearly reveals this tension: "the woman speaker plays both roles ...: the self-asserting speaker and the silent object of his desire" - as does the male lover ("Damsel" 65; 72). Thus there "are two poets in the poem, and two poets' beloveds" (Origins 130). Mermin believes that this attempt at conflation "disturbs and embarrasses" the reader.

I prefer to read the conflation as a positive exploration. EBB was aware of the potential subversions available in the courtly conventions - conventions she had already begun to play with in her earlier ballads, especially "Lady Geraldine's Courtship" (where it is unclear just who is doing the courting). She drew comparisons between the excluded courtly sonneteer and the excluded woman poet, thus inverting the subject-object expectations of the reader, and so enacting a dialectical exchange between speaking positions.<sup>13</sup> The mode of this exchange is the primary thesis of these chapters: the sonnet sequence follows a route from a position of hierarchical dualistic roles (subject/object) to a linguistically-induced interchange of roles.

The extended metaphor of this third sonnet works on two levels then: the speaker is both forlorn courtly sonneteer and excluded woman poet. In both she



is on the periphery of her world.<sup>14</sup> As a woman she is expected to be the passive silent object, yet this woman will not conform - she uses the metaphor or convention of the sonneteer to give herself a place to speak from. In doing so she also reveals the double denial behind the conventions of her culture. Women were excluded from 'real art', which was the province of males. If she did insist upon writing, she was allowed the culturally trivial and marginal subjects of (feminine) love and familial sentiments. And yet even these subjects came under prohibitions: epic (masculine) love was the property of males, and was supported by a daunting tradition of sonneteers writing in courtly love form, in which women assumed the role of silent objects once again. Thus the apparently intimate, domestic and therefore 'feminine' genre of love sonnets was in reality also denied the woman writer, who by virtue of her gender could never belong to the tradition of male sonneteers.

This double denial - denied all topics except love, and then denied that topic - is tackled by EBB in Sonnets from the Portuguese. By inverting the conventional gender roles of courtly love, then by appropriating the sonneteer's voice, she begins to upset the assumptions of her culture. Indeed, she shows how the courtly love poet is far more suggestive of the woman poet's position in a patriarchy. Eventually, from this subversion, EBB is able to challenge the initial prohibition from poetry. In Aurora Leigh the woman protagonist is an epic poet of politics and social concerns as well as love and things personal. But here in the Sonnets, the tensions in making the initial conflation of woman and poet are evident in the entire sonnet sequence.

#### IV

Sonnet IV continues themes from the previous sonnet, as the male poet-lover's greatness and fame are contrasted with the speaker's position. Here, though, the tone is one of sadness rather than implicit defiance: the speaker has internalised definitions of weakness and inability.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, she retains the identity of singer-poet that she gave herself in the previous sonnet, and the truly radical nature of that appropriation is seen here when she calls the male poet-lover by the same label. His vocation is as a "Most gracious singer of high poems"; continuing the scenario of Sonnet III, he is called to "some palace-floor"

where the dancers watch avidly for the latest pearl to drop from his "pregnant" (creative) lips.

That a woman might consider the same calling/vocation is both disruptive and threatening. The power of words belongs to the male, and the female's role is to reflect that power, through silence, back to the thereby affirmed male. To suggest that a woman may also feel legitimately called to this male province disrupts the norm.

In employing the extended metaphor of a dwelling-place for herself, the woman speaker conveys the clear message to her lover that she is uninhabitable: his desire to 'occupy' her is rejected. This is conveyed in self-deprecating language - "this house's latch [is] too poor/ For hand of thine". How can he "bear" to "drop" his music without a thought "In folds of golden fulness at [her] door?". Beneath the humility of this line, however, a note of urgent self-regard can be heard. His unthinking prodigality of riches, left accidentally - almost carelessly - before her, only serves to emphasise her own poverty. "Look up", she must direct him, to see the dilapidation of her dwelling: windows broken in, roof invaded by bats and owls. The external world has broken her house down, and his singer's riches ("thy mandolin") only emphasises that dilapidation, when compared to her small weak cricket's voice in this ruin.

Hush, call no echo up in further proof  
Of desolation! there's a voice within  
That weeps .. as thou must sing .. alone, aloof.

The unthinking cruelty of his action - the poet displaying both his talent and the world's recognition and adulation of it, to one whose talent is denied and who is instead cast off for asserting it - is indicated clearly in these final lines.<sup>16</sup> But also important is the speaker's response, as she tells him to be silent, to cease asserting his power of words. When he is quiet, and the echoes cease, a voice can be heard in this hollow ruin: the voice that weeps alone, another courtly poet. Despite her song of isolation and enervation, the woman poet's voice remains.

The speaker's sadness and apparent acceptance of failure in this sonnet does not subvert the constant assertion of voice, nor the constant rejection of appropriation. The speaker will not be 'occupied', nor have her voice drowned out. Though her voice weeps now in loneliness and desolation, whilst his voice sings, her autonomy remains - as does the potential for her to sing (see Sonnet II - a "wandering singer").

## V

The tension between submission and rebellion that emerges in the opening sonnets is exemplified in Sonnet V, which offers ambivalent simultaneous readings of submission to love, and rebellion and challenge. In a rivetting opening image, the woman solemnly presents her heart full of ashes, like Electra and her urn, ostensibly acknowledging the male lover's ability to extinguish her grief. And yet the way she stands before him, challenging him by looking into his eyes, and calmly depositing her "grief" at his feet, seems to implicate him in her situation.

Why Electra? Mermin argues that this is a reference to Sophocles' Electra, who is handed an urn she believes to contain her brother's ashes, by none other than her brother in disguise. Electra's speech on receiving her brother's ashes must have had deep significance for EBB, who lost her beloved younger brother "Bro" at sea. But, as Mermin says, "While we cannot help reading in this the poet's sorrow for Bro, it functions without biographical reference" - for Mermin, as an allusion to the relations between "new love and old grief" (Origins 139). The implications of this reference go much deeper, though. The male lover is assigned the role of Orestes, pretending to be dead, deceiving his faithful, waiting and now grieving sister. She has hoped for her brother's return to right the wrongs of the house of Agamemnon; news of his apparent death sinks her into utter hopelessness and despair. So "Orestes" the brother/ lover/ saviour reveals himself, but now he must deal with the grief his deception engendered in her. She perceives how this grief has been unnecessarily and cruelly imposed upon her: in pouring out its ashes at his feet, she implicitly makes him responsible.

EBB's use of the Electra character therefore carries profound significance. Even as the male lover arrives to save the woman from the grief of her past life (as alluded to in Sonnet I), "Electra" covertly implicates him in that grief. Her challenge to him is clear in the opening five lines: "solemnly [...] looking in [his] eyes", she deposits the ashes at his feet, and invites/ commands him to "Behold and see". Moreover, she points out that her grief is not dead, but sparks of emotion remain, potentially "wild" and dangerous. Again, his involvement is stressed: he might in "scorn [...] tread" those sparks "out to darkness utterly", thus obliterating her grief entirely, presumably with joy at his presence. But again, an obverse reading is possible from the violent language used to describe that action of obliteration, with its emphasis on arrogance and brutal finality. This suppressing of the woman's emotions clearly recalls Sophocles' play, and the scene immediately following Orestes' disclosure of himself. There, he attempts to restrain and suppress Electra's understandable joy, constantly adjuring her to be silent. Her emotions must be censored there, and in Sonnet V the same sense of repression is evident. If he stands aside, and allows the wind to blow the sparks to flame, the woman's emotions, unrestrained, could be enormously powerful. The speaker links this potential flame with the male lover's vocation of poetry: his "laurels" will not protect him from her passion or grief. His words, his poetry, will not "shield" him from her fire.

In the context provided by previous sonnets, the woman's sorrows are tied up with her role as poet. The previous sonnet ends with the woman's grief being voiced in weeping. Now, in Sonnet V, that expression of grief is far more powerful. The climaxing energy of the sonnet is conveyed in the fire imagery, which recurs as a motif throughout the Sonnets. Fire is symbolic of passion, of warmth, of human emotion. It is beneficial, giving both light and heat. Yet it is also dangerous and potentially destructive. It is formless and impossible to fix; its nature is that of constant movement and flux. The speaker uses this image in the following sonnets to describe firstly grief, then her creativity, and finally their love.

The strength of the final sestet, beginning with "But if instead", lies in the assurance that the alternative to crushing the woman into silence (the scornful male's usual response to woman's emotion) is to allow her to express

her emotion in creative energy. For this to happen, though, the man must wait beside the woman; his action, initiative, leadership or guidance is not required nor wanted - it is the wind that inspires the woman. And the results will challenge and scorch even the famous poet, whose reputation ("laurels") cannot protect him from her light- and heat-giving words. Leighton writes: "It is a witty and assured logic which leads from the memory of grief to this imagined threat that comes from her creativity ... The fire of her poetic heart will have designs not only on his hair, but also on his 'laurels'" (Leighton 106).

It is notable that the speaker uses a strong, proprietary love epithet for the first time at this point. "Oh my beloved" makes the speaker the initiator and giver, not the passive receiver, the love object. Her emotions are validated as she confirms her role as speaking subject.

This demand for legitimate expression of powerful feelings remains problematic for the speaker, however. Her poetry is still clearly tied to grief and negative emotion, and its expression is potentially destructive. The final line exemplifies these problems. "Stand further off then! go" continues to assert herself and challenge him, and yet, when coupled with the love epithet, her conflicting desires become evident. The male lover must go, both to allow her legitimate self-expression, and to defend his own role as master-poet - and yet he is the speaker's beloved. The warning occurs, then, at the expense of her own love and desire.

## VI

The emotional dilemma that ends Sonnet V is developed in Sonnet VI, and indeed enacted in the split opening line: "Go from me. Yet I feel that I shall stand/ Henceforward in thy shadow." Even if the lover does leave, the speaker feels that she will always miss his influence. Yet this loss begins to carry new overtones - the robbery of independence that love brings. His growing significance in her life creates a dependence upon him, about which she is deeply ambivalent. Resuming the metaphor of her life as a dwelling place, as depicted in Sonnet IV, she now realises that she has relinquished sole possession.

Nevermore  
 Alone upon the threshold of my door  
 Of individual life, I shall command  
 The uses of my soul[.]

The sense of finality is inescapable in the structural emphasis of "Nevermore/ Alone", and in the nostalgic proprietorial language ("my door", "I shall command") which only shows what she has lost. The physical sense of oppression that accompanies his influence in her life is felt in his touch upon her hand, which she used to be able to lift freely and effortlessly into the sun; it is even felt in his shadow upon her.

Ironies abound in these sentiments, however. It is love that is creating her feelings of loss; the expected positive emotions or rhetoric are notably absent. She has ordered him away; yet she loves him and wishes him near; and yet that love means her loss of independent spirit. Her hesitancy is depicted in an image of his physical touch: she says she forbore his handtouch but now misses it, and yet that sense of loss reminds her that she has given up the "individual life" to one of influence. This process fills her with ambivalence, reinforced by the sun/shadow imagery itself. Independence meant she could enjoy the full sun unmediated; dependence introduces shadow into her life - shadow that eclipses her as poet and speaker.

When she does employ the rhetoric of love, again it is not the pure, unalloyed adoration expected of the woman poetess. Ambiguity remains: what is usually a circumstance for rejoicing (that nothing can separate the lovers) is more like a reason for mourning. Her mind and actions now include him "as the wine/ Must taste of its own grapes." That "must" is an indictment of inevitability. Moreover the image implies the speaker is a product of the constitutive lover (the grape) - the woman lover responds to the male's love. This androcentric conception of love, in which the man makes the woman, emerges more fully in the following sonnets. Later it appears that the speaker internalises it and believes it; at her first use of it here, it is evident that her feelings toward his influence of love are more ambivalent.<sup>17</sup>

The point of this ambivalence is that the woman speaker questions the whole concept, or edifice, of love. Their exchange of affection occurs within a patriarchal structure that privileges his love as the active, initiating, constitutive agent. She must watch herself give up her major defence - her non-participation in the marriage-market, her "individual life". By entering the discourse of love, she has threatened the integrity of both her individuality and her poet's voice.

This threat is clear in the closing lines. Even when she prays, that most intimate and personal exercise, the speaker is aware that the love relationship has subsumed her into the male lover:

And when I sue  
God for myself, He hears that name of thine,  
And sees within my eyes, the tears of two.

When she speaks, and prays for herself, God hears the male lover's name. Her needs are effaced behind the male's identity, her voice is corrupted. Moreover, he occupies her: his tears are intermingled with her own. The ardent wish of lovers - absolute union - is shown to be invasion for the woman. Their tears, then - his, presumably because she is sending him away like all traditional courtly ladies; hers because she has lost both self and lover - are products of ideological constructions. Moreover, the God of these opening sonnets countenances these constructions, inscribing and endorsing the male right. The speaker clearly distrusts this deity.

## VII

The growing influence that the male lover exercises over the woman is further depicted in Sonnet VII, where the power of the lover is able to reorganise the speaker's existence. He has saved her from "obvious" death and redefined her outlook on life.

The lover's soul is described as acting in stealth, interposing itself as the future prospect for the woman, instead of death. The speaker had dreaded the "outer brink", as she describes death: it was the final limit, the periphery of existence. She, as woman and poet, is already on the periphery of life, alienated

and excluded by society not only as Other, but as unnatural (as in sonnet III and IV) for rejecting that peripheral status. The biographical significance of these lines is obvious in the picture of EBB secluded as an invalid in her room at Wimpole Street, expecting death. The metaphor of the "brink" recurs in her courtship letters to Robert, in which she pictures herself "on the edge of the world with all done, no prospect" (Kintner vol.I 41). Yet the wider psychological validity of the description as that of the woman poet is similarly accurate. The only possible future is to "sink" into oblivion, as is evident from the lack of women poets in the canon, and from EBB's own descent into obscurity (until rescued by recent feminists).

Instead of this inevitable future of psychological and physical death, the lover has presented himself as the future. The implication of the lines is that he has rescued her by chivalrously placing himself as a buffer between her and the danger, like a true courtly lover. But more is happening in these lines. A basic substitution has occurred: the male lover instead of death.

The speaker remains on the periphery, but instead of sinking over that brink, however, she is rather "caught up into love", and this appears to reorient her away from the brink, instead confronting life. Suddenly the "face" or appearance of "all the world is changed", and she learns "the whole/ Of life in a new rhythm."

The long, climactic and emotional sentence that describes this reorientation at his initiative, conveys a deep sense of gratitude and wonder, appropriate for one who has been reintroduced to life. This new perspective is crucially flawed however, as the speaker herself immediately makes clear:

The cup of dole  
God gave for baptism, I am fain to drink,  
And praise its sweetness, Sweet, with thee anear.

As stated above, the speaker's position has not changed: she is still on the periphery of life, an other. This "cup of dole", her apparently God-ordained lot from birth as a female, has not been taken away. All that has changed is her perspective, her attitude. Now she is "fain" to drink of this cup, and even praise



its sweetness, because the one who has made the cup palatable and sweet is ever close by her.

The indictment in these words is profound. The lover's presence has caused the speaker to accept and even appreciate the hitherto offensive and bitter role that had been imposed upon her. As the Sonnets continue this internalisation becomes more evident.

The fundamental nature of the change that the lover, through his quiet 'saving' action, has wrought is conveyed in the remainder of the sonnet. The speaker's language and referents have been upset, disturbed:

The names of country, heaven, are changed away  
For where thou art or shalt be, there or here;  
And this .. this lute and song .. loved yesterday,  
(The singing angels know) are only dear,  
Because thy name moves right in what they say.

The disjunction of the syntax and meaning of the lines enacts the disruption in the speaker's values and outlook. She can no longer distinguish earth from heaven: he has become her point of orientation. But more sinister is the import of the final lines. Her lute and song of independence, her voice as speaking subject rather than mute object, her much-loved and defended integrity as depicted in III, IV and V, are now only dear to her inasmuch as they speak of him. When his name is 'rightly' proclaimed in them, they are of value to her. Her poetry has been appropriated by the structures of romantic love: she reflects him as the powerful initiator and chivalric hero of their love.

Sonnet VII thus displays the deep tensions within the woman speaker: she is both grateful to and desirous of the male lover, willing to submit to him as the chivalric hero, and yet simultaneously aware of the deeper implications for her personal identity of such a relationship.

## VIII

The theme of Sonnet IV is reiterated here, as the princely giving of the lover only serves to make the speaker feel a deep sense of poverty and inability

to respond in kind. Here the male lover brings riches of regal gold and purple, his gifts of love and talent. The motif of royalty applied to the male lover is telling: he rules her heart, and indeed has dominion over her very existence, as we saw in Sonnet VII. His gifts are pure and unsullied, unlike her own "stuff" (fabric), which bears the tears (weeping) and tears (rips) of the battles of her fight for voice and selfhood.

As in Sonnet IV, the lover gives his words and love with abandon and almost careless disregard. Here he leaves them outside the wall of her dwelling in "unexpected [and embarrassing] largesse", "For such as I to take or leave withal".<sup>18</sup> There is impersonality in his action: the gifts are for "such" as her to take or leave. His offhanded approach seems to suggest to the speaker a carelessness about his love that calls into question its depth and sincerity - it implies that the male lover is more concerned with the act of giving than with the recipient. "O liberal/ And princely giver" (emphasis mine - the Morgan manuscript originally had "giver" with a capital "G" [Ratchford 50]).

The gifts, with the repeated descriptions of their richness and abundance, evoke the same nagging response in the speaker: "What can I give thee back[?]" She denies being cold and ungrateful, or remaining unmoved by his largesse. Her slowness to return the compliment devolves on the fact of her poverty. In a repetition of the structure of Sonnet IV, the octave description of his riches and generosity is followed by a sestet description of her embarrassment and poverty. For the fabric of her life is faded from tears, leaving "so dead/ And pale a stuff, it were not fitly done/ To give the same as pillow to thy head." The colour is gone from her life; she has little of talent or love to give to her lover. She is not able to fulfil the womanly role and be a pillow for his comfort or pleasure.

Her reaction to this grinding feeling of inadequacy? "Go farther! let it serve to trample on." The tone of the sonnet changes abruptly here: till now the primary feeling has been one of regret and self-deprecation, but here impatience and self-disgust seem to emerge. His presence defines her as unworthy and poor, a definition she believes and yet chafes beneath. Then let her cloth of love be a rag/rug for him to 'walk all over' - and the harshness and violence of "trample on" betrays her anger at this whole situation. The richness of his life,

his power, his right to rule - these are the things the male lover gives her when he showers her with attention. The obverse to these things - poverty of life, 'impotence', subservience - are hammered home as being her lot. Hence the repeated (from V and VI) directive to the lover to leave her.

## IX

Elaine Showalter, in describing the stages whereby one dominant social group in any given society contains and controls sub-groups into subordination, describes the necessity of internalisation of the dominant group's definitions by the subordinate group. In the hegemony of patriarchy, the subordinate "muted" group called "women" internalise their imposed definitions and believe them ("Feminist Criticism" 199).<sup>19</sup> This process has become evident in the Sonnets, as the speaker absorbs and reflects her culture's definition of her. The resulting feelings of valuelessness and marginalisation emerge in Sonnet IX. Here too, though, a vein of rebellion is evident beneath the skin of self-deprecation: does the irony of the final line undermine the attitude adopted in the sonnet?

The speaker's argument is the same as previously: her gifts of love, in response to his, are unworthy gifts. It is, moreover, morally wrong for her to give them, as she believes her gifts are positively poisonous ("Can it be right to give what I can give?"). Can she let him sit beneath her salt tears, listening to her sighs reliving the "sweet sad years" of her past (first mentioned in Sonnet I)? Those years brought gifts, but the gifts her life proffers are sad and "renunciative" - negative offerings.

Also emerging in these first six lines is the awareness that her will is opposed to his. The speaker is allowing her lover to sit, implying she has control here. Her smiles do not last, despite his "adjurations" to let them live. And perhaps most tellingly, she speaks her will of renunciation against his. The speaker is caught within the structures and assumptions of the Victorian love process, which require her self-denial and self-devaluing, and yet here (and elsewhere in the Sonnets) she appropriates the rhetoric of courtly love to transform her position of weakness. In this rhetoric, she is unworthy of her lover, as the sonneteer is unworthy of the noble beloved. As both poisonous

woman and courtly sonneteer, then, she cannot approach the lover, and so chooses to renounce him. She thus exposes the courtly roles, showing how the sonneteer is really more concerned with his own voice than with consummation with the beloved. In courtly conventions, the sonneteer must be rejected by his beloved so that he can continue to make lamenting sonnets. Similarly, the woman poet-lover will renounce love to preserve her own (disallowed) voice.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, the very speech by which she conveys this renunciation itself asserts her voice and will against his. Beneath the conventional self-deprecation is a strong will which refuses to be absorbed into the male's love.

The flaw in this stratagem is obvious, though, and torments the speaker: she must deny her love, and in so doing deny her sexual desire. It is indicative of this whole sonnet sequence, in which consummation of love (which is also the dissolving loss of self into the colonizing male) is endlessly postponed by the rhetoric of desire. Leighton comments that romantic love, based in medieval courtly traditions, "is a sentiment, satisfied in the indefinite postponement of its final gratification. In that postponement, the lover finds time to speak ... it is a passion for expression which characterises romantic love. In this tradition, 'the sentimental' does not aim to become 'the sexual', but rather to postpone it" ("Stirring" 12). The speaker talks for forty-four sonnets about her love, perpetuating her self-creations at the cost of delaying consummation of that love. In these sonnets she receives definition through the self-other split of her excluded poet/ woman persona and society.<sup>21</sup> Once in the love relationship, the opposition is between the self and the other of the male lover. The resulting sense of separate consciousness can only be preserved if full consummation and incorporation into the male lover is avoided. Hence the words of the Sonnets are the stalling tactic, preserving her voice until she can achieve a love relationship in which two equal selves preserve difference, but can interact freely. Like the courtly sonneteer, she is as much in love with her own words (as the preservation of self) as she is with the lover.

Finally, though, it is the speaker's self-disgust that emerges in this sonnet ("We are not peers,/ So to be lovers"), and inequity is not the only fear in her mind. Taking up the images of previous sonnets, she refuses to be an

instrument that conveys poison or disfigurement to her lover; she would rather order him away from her.

I will not soil thy purple with my dust,  
Nor breathe my poison on thy Venice-glass,  
Nor give thee any love ... which were unjust.  
Beloved, I only love thee! let it pass.

She is a repository of death and corruption: her flesh is dust already, and her soul is poison (the Morgan manuscript has 'soul' instead of 'poison' [Ratchford 52]). She could not bear to see the lover's rich, precious and fine qualities, symbolised by the purple stuff and Venice-glass,<sup>22</sup> corrupted by her self. That would be "unjust".

The ambiguity released in the final line turns this superficially conventional self-deprecating (courtly) love sonnet into something far more complex. On the surface, the line seems to downplay her love, to indicate that it is secondary to his precious fineness: she only loves him, and she ends by adjuring him (and herself) to let it pass and lapse.

And yet the line also calls that self-suppression into question. As in the first six lines this is an assertion of her love for him - an active love, moreover, of which she is the subject. In earlier Sonnets manuscripts, the words "love thee" are underlined - twice in the Morgan (Ratchford 52). The effect is retained with the exclamation mark foregrounding "love thee", emphasising that this love is important, vital and costly. Her conventional attitude of self-deprecation requires suppression of love, not an overt declaration. Thus her dismissal here, as above, reiterates a covert claim, as the surface text of effacement cracks open to reveal a contrary intention that demands recognition and validation of her love.

## X

The subtexts of Sonnet IX emerge overtly in Sonnet X.

Yet, love, mere love, is beautiful indeed  
And worthy of acceptance.

'Even my blighted love, my "mere" love, is valid,' the speaker affirms, and she illustrates this with the example of fire, which burns as brightly whether temple or flax, cedar-plank or weed, are ignited. In the context of the previous sonnets, where the speaker continually compares herself unfavourably with the male lover, contrasting their "uses and destinies" (III), their voices (IV), their "gifts" (VII and IX), the implied correlations of the images for their love in Sonnet X convey much. The lover is the temple: man-made, a site for worship and adoration, repository of divine presence. Or a cedar-plank, a fine precious wood, already fashioned and smoothed by man. She, by contrast, is flax: the natural, homely but useful plant, though only valuable when changed and refined by human hands. Or the weed: natural, ubiquitous; threatening cultivated growth and so a dangerous enemy. The reader's speculative associations with masculine and feminine positions within a patriarchy are enlightening.

But the speaker's primary focus in this sonnet is the power of her love. And so she paints it as fire, resuming that potent image of Sonnet V, in which the embers in her grief flame into scorching, leaping creativity. In Sonnet X her love is the fire, blown into flame by her statement "I love thee".

and when I say at need  
I love thee .. mark! .. I love thee! .. in thy sight  
 I stand transfigured, glorified aright,  
 With conscience of the new rays that proceed  
 Out of my face toward thine.

She must speak her love "at need", as we saw in sonnet IX, and she anticipates that the power of that self-assertion has a potent effect on the listening male. Suddenly he must perceive her as a subject, a self apart from him, a will and voice. She is transfigured - deliberately using the word associated with Christ and divine endorsement - and as such "glorified aright".<sup>23</sup> He watches the rays that proceed "Out of [her] face" to his, initiated and propelled by the fire of love, but she adds that this observation of her transfiguration occurs consciously ("With conscience"). For her or him? The attribution is uncertain here. Perhaps rather for both: this "transfiguration" is a shared transaction involving and indeed defining both as subject and observer, a structuring that both are conscious of. "Conscience" in this context may mean simply self-awareness, or consciousness - both watch with awareness of the significance of this process

for both of their selves. But the word also carries moral overtones, implying that this recognition of her subjectivity is a moral act. The corollary is that his non-recognition of her subjectivity is an immoral act.

There is a darker potential to this transfiguration. He is watching her, employing that proprietary gaze of earlier sonnets that captures her. The end emphasis on "in thy sight" reminds us of that. And her expectations of his response to her moment of self-assertion are only expectations. Her proclamation of love may for him be a reaffirmation of his potency as male, initiating love in the other who therefore reflects that potency back to him. Indeed, all the grammatical attributions of pronouns and verbs in this sonnet are ambiguous: is the woman's assertion of voice a product of the fire of love which transfigures her, or does it initiate that fire? Does the man's gaze cause the transfiguration - "in thy sight/ I stand transfigured"?<sup>24</sup> These uncertainties unsettle neat role correlations in the sonnet as to initiator and receptor, prefiguring the process of interchange that the speaker works toward in the sonnet sequence.<sup>25</sup>

This moment of glorified love does not cancel out the self-deprecation that has gone before. The speaker still refers to herself as a mean creature; her point is that love ennobles such creatures. Or more crucially, the expression of that love does: the repetition and foregrounding ("mark!") of her spoken assertion, "I love thee!", remains the pivot of this experience. Nevertheless, the sonnet concludes with an internalisation of anti-woman definitions, and the saving grace of "Love".

And what I feel, across the inferior features  
Of what I am, doth flash itself, and show  
How that great work of Love enhances Nature's.

Nature's work, what "I am", is her inferiority, her weakness, her corruption. What she feels - power, strength, moral right, as expounded in the transfiguration experience - is the product of Love. That the first is a definition that has been placed upon her seems to have been forgotten. That the second is a product of her own language - her consciousness and mouth forming the words "I love thee" - is similarly effaced (although temporarily). It is the

speaker's own love, formulated through language, that has empowered and ennobled her, yet this attribution is as yet submerged.

The final line also raises the question about the status or meaning of the concept of "Love" (with a capital "L"), which the speaker uses here. Is this Love distinct from the (lower-case) love which she more generally uses? This sonnet marks her second use of the word: it first occurred in Sonnet I, where the grieving woman is held by Love instead of Death, and it is used again infrequently throughout the sequence. Does the uppercase distinguish a universal feeling, an idealist force that can transform? Is love (lowercase) the shared, personal experience between herself and her lover? To what extent does the speaker see both as culturally constructed experiences, each defining the other in an interchange of public and private? Sonnets like this tenth one seem to begin with an idealist assumption of an absolute force called "Love" that can save a pathetic woman, but end up moving toward a reworking of that Love as a linguistic edifice both structuring and constructed by a subject consciousness. This process of reworking will emerge more fully in the later sonnets of the sequence.<sup>26</sup>

## XI

The speaker's compounding tensions between unworthiness, deservedness and suppression are evident again in Sonnet XI. She is weak and unworthy for the male lover, yet she is made worthy by her love, and yet both positions demand her suppression of that love: "And therefore if to love can be desert, I am not all unworthy." Having explained at the close of Sonnet X the ennobling power of Love, the speaker here claims it for herself. She deserves his love, is made worthy of it by her own. Yet that "desert" deconstructs the line with its alternative meanings: while the primary meaning has to do with deservedness, love for her also means a desert of desertion, a "desolate and barren region" (OED), forsaken of people, or in this case, lover. As this sonnet goes on to say, she must renounce his love, and so resign herself to sadness and desolation.



The speaker continues to reiterate her frailty, but then concludes with the line "- why advert/ To these things?" Why indeed? This rehearsal of her weakness is surely torture to her, emphasising as it does the inequity in their relationship and her inevitable sacrifice of her lover. She describes her weakness in physical bodily terms - pale cheeks and trembling knees - and yet the weakness of which she speaks is in fact non-physical, or rather, more than physical. She fails in her "heavy heart", in her fading "minstrel-life that once was girt/ To climb Aornus" and is now scarcely able to compete in song with a nightingale. This is the real crux for her: she is apparently unequal in voice.

Her reiterations of unworthiness are thus explained, as she emphasises that weakness is not her natural state, but a received condition. Previously she was vigorous in her voice and song, "girt" implying a strong surrounding and gathering force that prepared her to climb Aornus, the mountain home of the Muses. Again (as in Sonnet III) the woman's enfeeblement is brought back to her enervation as a poet, singer or subject voice. In her culture, the woman is deprived of voice and broken down to a position of inferiority and 'unworthiness'. "O Beloved, it is plain/ I am not of thy worth nor for thy place!"

But she loves, and so her anger at being absorbed into her culture's roles for lovers, further fixing her as other, has moved to an acceptance of love as a means by which she is granted worthiness again: by appropriating love's rhetoric, she retains a voice. As she is constructed by her culture, she manipulates that construction to retain some personal power. The role of courtly sonneteer is peculiarly suited to her position, and validates her voice. Moreover, that voice is able to exert will, by renouncing the lover and so resisting total absorption into the male love fantasy.

And yet, because I love thee, I obtain  
From that same love this vindicating grace,  
To live on still in love, and yet in vain,..  
To bless thee, yet renounce thee to thy face.

Her active love ("I love thee") gives her vindication, approves her self and desires as valid, so she can attempt to "live on" as a self.

But the price of her subversive use of love to regain a sense of selfhood is inescapable, as always. Her love is in vain as love: it can never be fulfilled. The final phrase exemplifies this impasse. Whilst her love will endure beneath the surface, publicly - to him - she must give it up: "renounce thee to thy face". The last three words suggest a declaration of her will, as she stands face-to-face opposing and challenging him in the manner of Sonnet V's "looking in thine eyes". Yet in the very act of asserting selfhood, she must sacrifice and suppress her desire. The cost of her subversion is cruel.

#### XIV

In the sonnets we have been examining, the speaker evinces a strong internal tension between asserting a sense of self-worth, and denying any self-worth because of the demands of both patriarchy and the conventions of the courtly lover (whose traditional self-abnegation before the adulated loved object is the role she is required to play in appropriating the genre). In Sonnet XIV, the tension emerges in an appeal against traditional masculine love for traditional feminine traits. The speaker decides to rewrite the conventions of the courtly love lyric: praising the loved one as object with particular parts, such as eyes, hair, skin. "If thou must love me," she pleads, "let it be for nought/ Except for love's sake only." She goes on to mimic the man's voice in a parody of the patronising, objectifying attitude of this masculine love:

'I love her for her smile .. her look .. her way  
Of speaking gently,.. for a trick of thought  
That falls in well with mine, and certes brought  
A sense of pleasant ease on such a day' [...]

Masculine love is conditional upon superficial physical qualities - a smile, a look - qualities that enact the feminine role of submissive, compliant, beautiful man-pleaser. She speaks gently; she has a "trick" (suggesting it is an acquired feat, not usual) of thought that "falls in well with" his - his thought being superior, the norm that she should comply with. Her prime value is to bring ease, and the casual unimportance of "such a day" is dismissive of even that value. These qualities are all changeable, and love "wrought" on their basis may be as easily "unwrought".<sup>27</sup> Moreover, these things "may/ Be changed, or change for

thee". The male lover plays the role of creator, moulding the woman to his fancy, which may then shift. In the whole scenario, love depends upon bodily presence, and a bodily presence of certain criteria.

The speaker also rejects pity-induced love:

Neither love me for  
Thine own dear pity's wiping my cheeks dry,-  
A creature might forget to weep, who bore  
Thy comfort long, and lose thy love thereby!

Pity is as transient as physical qualities, because it entails keeping the object of pity in a permanent state of pitiability. She must continue to weep to preserve his love, and can never be comforted. The manipulative selfishness of such a lover (note that this comfort must be borne) is suggested here. This comfortless weeping, however, is also the usual lot of the ever-bereft courtly lover: this courtly lover/woman poet does not want to weep endlessly for a male lover's benefit. In thus exposing the essentially static nature of courtly love (which is also the danger in her own appropriation of the role), she opens the way for refigurings of love, based on more pragmatic roles.

But love me for love's sake, that evermore  
Thou may'st love on, through love's eternity.

Love here is apparently presented as an ideal absolute, separate from the structures that pass for love in her culture. This desire for a transcendent value, something permanent beyond the material realm (and beyond androcentric love demands for bodily presence), places the speaker in the Victorian zeitgeist. In a generation that yearned for a transcendent absolute in the world they were coming to see as evolutionary and God-forsaken, the speaker's desire for a love beyond the common and limiting delineations of her time is understandable. But, as in Sonnets X and XI, this conception is almost simultaneously undercut by the speaker's own configurations and reformulations of the experience of love, which show that "love" is not a transcendent absolute. These final lines, repeated from the opening line, demonstrate this undercutting, as the mortal male lover is tied in to eternity by love. Yet that love has just been defined by the equally mortal woman in the negative prescription of the preceding lines.

Love is therefore exposed as socially-constructed (as in her definition in Sonnet X, where love is the shared experience of transformation, dependent upon the interrelations of lover and lover) even as the speaker tries to assert its transcendence.

### XV

The possibility/ hope of a transcendent love does not last long. Immediately, in Sonnet XV, the speaker returns to pessimism and doubt about their relationship. She begins by answering an accusation of her lover's, that she "wear[s]/ Too calm and sad a face" before him. "Accuse me not", she beseeches him,

For we two look two ways, and cannot shine  
With the same sunlight on our brow and hair.

That he accuses - with connotations of antagonism and judgement - is very bitter: she is only too aware of both her dilemma of suppressed love, and the circumstances that make it. Their two different positions and roles within their culture make their outlooks entirely opposed: they "look two ways". He can enjoy the sunshine of his world, whereas she is driven into despair by that same sunlight. His accusation is unfair, she believes, and his desire to have her reflect happiness back to him again suggests the selfish egotism of a sun-king who must be affirmed in his role.

She takes up the notion of two different ways of looking:

On me thou lookest, with no doubting care,  
As on a bee shut in a crystalline,-  
Since sorrow hath shut me safe in love's divine,  
And to spread wing and fly in the outer air  
Were most impossible failure, if I strove  
To fail so.

The earlier manuscripts of the poem have the first line of this extract as "Thou lookest, sweet, on me, without a care" and this hints as to the undermining nature of those words "no doubting" in the final version (Ratchford 64). She hopes and assumes that he looks on her with care, but the manner in which he

looks belies this assumption: he observes her with the scientific, detached air of one who examines an insect specimen caught forever under glass. She is the object, and he is the detached subject observer, sure and safe in his freedom and superiority.

The description of herself as the bee in the crystalline is chillingly apt in the circumstances. The insect of industry and purpose, gathering the ingredients to make sweet honey, yet evincing a dangerous potential in its sting, offers a suggestive representation of the woman poet, full of purpose and ability to make her song of poetry, and with the linguistic power to defend herself and inflict pain when attacked. But this bee is suffocated and dead, caught in cold, hard crystal and forever denied freedom, speech or self-defence again.

How does she gloss her own image? She has been shut in her trap by the "sorrow" that is her situation: she must choose between fulfilled love and selfhood. The crystal she glosses as "love's divine": this is the tomb in which she is trapped. The phrase plays on the very rhetoric she employs in Sonnet XIV, that 'love is divine', but here love's divinity is seen as an appalling cultural imposition. The phrase also suggests that she is trapped by a love structure that is modelled on the divine, on God's grace and condescension to humankind. It is this perception of love between the sexes as a granting of grace and favour that precisely places her as silent object and so smothers her selfhood.

Continuing her image, she admits that it is of course impossible to escape and fly - to even move within the crystal and attempt to spread her wings is "most impossible failure". The double negative of the phrase makes the absoluteness of her position unavoidably obvious: not only will this be a failure, it is impossible. Nevertheless, that subject voice will persist in asserting its selfhood, even if in acknowledged futility: "if I strove/ To fail so". The placement of "I strove" at the close of the line emphasises its assertive voice. Even within impossible parameters, a strong will is trying to operate.

The critical point behind this trope of the crystallined bee, though, is that this vision is what the male lover sees. This is manifestly an indictment of the

patriarchal gaze. According to the speaker, he sees her as the trapped bee, kept "safe" by being shut away, which means of course that the watcher is safe.

If this metaphor characterises her lover's objectifying and detached gaze, according to the speaker, then how does she herself see?

But I look on thee .. on thee ..  
Beholding, besides love, the end of love,  
Hearing oblivion beyond memory!  
As one who sits and gazes from above,  
Over the rivers to the bitter sea.

His gaze - particular, imprisoning, objectifying - contrasts with her gaze, which is inclusive, vast, almost non-specific. When she looks at her lover she sees not only love, but its companion, the end of love; she paradoxically 'hears' oblivion beyond memory. The idea of the feminine outlook in (French post-structuralist) feminism equates with precisely these abilities, to see beyond the structures of dualism to the way in which the opposites interplay and incorporate each other. The différance that occurs within and around language to create meaning, also posits the vast endless sea of alternative meanings - the oblivion out of which memory occurs and gains meaning.<sup>28</sup> The rivers are kept rigidly within their defined banks until they reach the boundless formless sea. The rhetoric of such feminism cannot be seamlessly fitted to EBB's poetry, but the echoes are significant. Here we see the speaker describing a female way that is different from the male way, that breaks down the artificial boundaries of patriarchy.<sup>29</sup>

Crucially, of course, the speaker's vision here is tragic; it entails the apprehension of the end of her lover's love for her, and the loss of even memories of that love. The oblivion, whilst deconstructing the masculinist structures that imprison her, also appears to dismantle their specific love.<sup>30</sup>

## XVI

Sonnet XVI marks a moment of capitulation, when the speaker finally 'gives in' to the male lover's 'offensive'. The entire sonnet adopts this language of battle with and surrender to a lordly king, in a deeply ambivalent manner.

The sonnet begins: "And yet". Despite the concerns she has expressed in the previous sonnets, he still overcomes her. The Morgan manuscript specifies the literality of perspective in "overcomes" ('comes over'): it reads "And yet because thou art above me so" (Ratchford 66). But, she continues, because he overcomes in such a noble manner, she finds she can surrender.

Thou canst prevail against my fears and fling  
Thy purple round me, till my heart shall grow  
Too close against thine heart, henceforth to know  
How it shook when alone.

Against all her personal feelings and intuition, and against those fears that have been elaborated throughout the sonnets thus far, he can prevail. Definitions of 'prevail' are: "To be superior in strength or influence; to have or gain the superiority or advantage; to gain the mastery or ascendancy" (OED). The speaker re-uses her image of his garment of royal purple: here he flings it about her, enfolding her within himself and his clothing, and so symbolising the appropriation into himself that she feared. Her selfhood is lost as it is incorporated into his (the Morgan manuscript has the final phrase of line 6 as "Its separate trembling pulse" [Ratchford 66, emphasis mine]).

No wonder she makes the cryptic comment:

Why, conquering  
May prove as lordly and complete a thing  
In lifting upward, as in crushing low!

Conquering is still conquering, still an absolute, final "complete" act, whether it lifts the conquered up or crushes her down. Ironically, almost sarcastically, she tells him not to deceive himself: this is still as bitter a vanquishment as if he crushed her down, because in effect the same result occurs. Her separate self ceases to be:

And as a vanquished soldier yields his sword  
To one who lifts him from the bloody earth,-  
Even so, Beloved, I at last record,  
Here ends my strife.

The extended metaphor of battle, defeat and surrender is here taken to its logical conclusion. She has fought him (or the ideology he represents) hard and long, until the earth around is bloody with her defeat. Now, however, she must relinquish her weapon and defence (her individual will? her voice?) to the victor, the male lover. The term "Beloved" falls with huge contrast into the context, juxtaposing with the word "strife" which describes their courtship thus far. The strife of contention and battle has been between them, but there has also been a personal strife of split desires warring within herself.

The action of the lover here is noble and fair as he lifts her from her position of debasement, takes her weight and carries her. The earlier manuscripts have nothing of this. The Morgan manuscript gives lines 9-10 as:

And as a soldier, struck down by a sword,  
Cries 'Here my (battle) strife ends', & sinks  
dead to earth[...]

(Ratchford 66)

The violence inflicted upon the speaker is quite plain; she has been struck down by the other's sword, and she is dead. The image of the death of separate selfhood is thus clear, perhaps too much so, hence the obscuring and rewriting of it in the final version. The 'Beloved' must be worthy of her surrender; there must be some nobility about him.

The need to justify surrender to such a man becomes overt in the final three lines of the sonnet:

If thou invite me forth,  
I rise above abasement at the word.  
Make thy love larger to enlarge my worth.

The word of the king (God-like) is all that will motivate her, and only at his invitation can the lowly subject rise. His word and power give her worth. Here the theme of the male's initiating love giving love and value to the female emerges, as she asks him to enlarge his love and so to give her greater worth.

Sonnet XVI, with its conflicting impulses of gratitude and outrage, exemplifies the central ambivalences and tensions in both the speaker and her



sonnet sequence. On one side is her obedience to established roles within patriarchy, roles she has internalised. Within this structure she plays the passive woman: resuscitated, ennobled and inspired by male love. Submission to this structure means relinquishing her own will and personal responsibility, and the temptation to give up the battle is overwhelming. This tension is not peculiar to EBB's personae; many Victorian heroines experience similar conflicts.<sup>31</sup> Jane Eyre has exactly the same struggle as she battles both Rochester and St. John Rivers, and she uses the imagery of a flood that threatens to drown her in an almost pleasurable end to resistance.

I was tempted to cease struggling with him - to rush down the torrent of his own will into the gulf of his existence, and there lose my own. I was almost as hard beset by him now as I had been once before, in a different way, by another. I was a fool both times (Brontë 443).<sup>32</sup>

On the other side of this internal conflict is the Victorian heroine's reaction against these roles and her commitment to her own will, voice and desire. The conflict between these states of mind forms the central tension of Sonnets from the Portuguese, a tension that the sonnets themselves rhetorically attempt to resolve. Even as the woman describes her absorption into the male lover, her poetic words continue to attempt separate selfhood in their descriptions of personal, different experience.

## XVII

The same tension between submission and rebellion continues in Sonnet XVII, notably in the sonnet's highly ambiguous tone. What begins as lyrical praise of the male lover's poetic ability ends in extreme irony as the speaker speculates as to her role in his art.

The sonnet begins by attributing virtually divine power to the lover.

My poet, thou canst touch on all the notes  
God set between His After and Before,  
And strike up and strike off the general roar  
Of the rushing worlds, a melody that floats  
In the serene air purely.

This poet can almost touch eternity as he ranges in his poetry from the beginning of creation to the projected end of the world (divinely speaking). Moreover he can wrest order from the chaos and cacophony of the "rushing worlds" (implying he can range in space as well as time) and create a "pure" melody that "floats" in "serene air". Both his abilities and his creation of pure spirit-like poetry suggest he is almost divine. Certainly the speaker reveres him as god-like, just as he himself looks up to God for his inspiration.

This reverence for the poet emerges from Romantic theories that poetry is a moral and religious influence for good and that "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world".<sup>33</sup> The male lover's poetry is "medicated music" that can combat mankind's worst "uses", acting as an antidote to the chaos and sadness of existence. From his position floating in the serene air he can pour this antidote into the ears of fallen humanity.

The apparently sincere tone of this adoration, as the speaker shows appreciation for her lover's role as soother and minister to a troubled humanity, becomes highly problematic in the context of the bitter resignation of the previous sonnet and the challenges presented at the close of this sonnet. The massive presumption and superiority of the male's status tends to undermine her apparently ingenuous description of it. Certainly that status is in sharp contrast with the speaker's role in life, as his muse. The possible positions she might occupy for him throw his position and purpose into a highly suspicious light.

God's will devotes  
Thine to such ends, and mine to wait on thine.  
How, Dearest, wilt thou have me for most use?  
A hope, to sing by gladly? .. or a fine  
Sad memory, with thy songs to interfuse?  
A shade, in which to sing ... of palm or pine?  
A grave, on which to rest from singing? .. Choose.

The first lines of the extract baldly state the chain of reverence mentioned above, upon which this patriarchy structures love and gender relations: woman is to man as man is to God. According to such religious structuring, just as God's will for the male lover-poet is to administer the antidote of his poetry to society, so His will for her is to devote her will to the male poet. Hence the

honeyed question of line 10. She is the passive instrument waiting to fulfil her purpose, to be useful to him.

The last four lines are brilliantly structured around the speaker's declining state of existence as potential muse. This structuring exposes the masculine project for women as destructive. In none of the four stages she delineates is the speaker a person, let alone a woman: her subjectivity is utterly denied. Rather she is a form of representation, a sign or trace of a human self. Is this how she is most useful to him?

In the first state she acts as a stimulus for hope, that enables him to sing glad songs. Presumably she is a hope for love, of love returned, of desire fulfilled. Certainly she focusses him towards the future. The second state rather looks to the past, as she becomes a "fine/ Sad memory". The love has ended and the woman as other has been transmuted into an exquisitely sad but beautiful memory, as the man's life as poet goes on. Of course, his songs are "interfuse[d]" with her memory.

The next step in the woman's representation is as a shade, a ghost of a dead person. Will she have received the palm of heaven or will she perhaps be in the torment of 'the other place'?<sup>34</sup> A 'shade' is also "something that has only a fleeting existence, or that has become reduced almost to nothing" (OED). In the final stage of the disintegration of the woman as muse, she is reduced to dust, a grave that simply marks that someone once was. The person is entirely effaced and all that is left is dirt.

The Muse epitomises the concept of the other. She does not exist as a subject person because her entire function is to be a site for another's subjectivity and creativity. In this seventeenth sonnet, the speaker places this role before her lover and shows him its paucity in comparison with his role as the marvellous creating poet (of the octave). She satirizes her role as lover-muse, asking which of the deathly roles in his representation of her will be most valuable to him.

The real bite of the sonnet, however, comes in that final peremptory command: "Choose." It bitterly submits to the dehumanisation of being a muse, to the phallogocentric imperative that the male poet is the centre, and she a 'relative creature'. And yet in the very act of submission she asserts her own subjectivity - she commands him. Her imperative to him to proclaim his imperative, undermines his power to do so.

### XVIII

The next stage in a patriarchal courtship, when a woman has surrendered to a suitor's applications with an avowal of love (and all that means for a Victorian woman), requires some kind of material exchange to occur, as a sign for the lovers' physical betrothal. Masculinist love, as was evident in Sonnet XIV, is tied to bodily presence - hence the courtly sonneteer's concern for details of the beloved's beauty. For Victorian lovers the exchange of a lock of hair effected the symbolic transaction that denotes this dependency upon the physical, and sonnets XVIII and XIX discuss this step in the relationship between the speaker and her poet lover.

The woman's action here reveals the gendered imbalance in this symbolic transaction. She gives first; a piece of her self is given; and she gives hair, the symbol of erotic beauty in a man's eyes. Certainly the speaker recognises the significance of her action:

I never gave a lock of hair away  
To a man, Dearest, except this to thee,  
Which now upon my fingers thoughtfully  
I ring out to the full brown length and say  
'Take it.'

Ostensibly the speaker's superficial meaning here is that this man is her first 'true' love: he is the first to be afforded this honour. Bearing in mind the anxiety that has suffused earlier sonnets concerning the necessity for her to give up her selfhood for and to her lover, this action is, however, inescapably dangerous for the speaker. The hair-gift (and at this point it is only she who gives - he responds in kind later) symbolises too much the act of appropriation she has feared: owning her hair means the man owns her self. Specifically, he owns her

erotic self, which her hair symbolises. The trope of women's hair is highly significant in Victorian society, as Elizabeth Gitter has shown in her article, "The Power of Women's Hair in the Victorian Imagination". Hair symbolises a woman's sexuality, and the more abundant it is, the more potent the sexual invitation. Similarly, cutting a woman's hair is a sexual surrender, and Gitter cites the male lover's request in this sonnet as "next to a request for sexual surrender" (943). Such a consummation has already been equated with loss of personal freedom and will in previous sonnets.

And yet the woman speaker still gives her hair. She has ended "her strife", and she now submits to the rules of patriarchal love. The speech that accompanies her gift to her lover, however, indicates by its solemnity and deliberation her awareness of the circumstances. The plain opening statement declares bluntly the depth of the sacrifice she now makes for him; the 'thoughtful' straightening-out of the long lock to its full length, impresses upon him just how much she is giving. And, as in XVII, she commands him: "Take it." Overt submission simultaneously carries covert self-assertion.

The force of a symbol is in its interpretation. A masculinist reading of this symbol of her hair as a sign for her youthful beauty and eroticism can only be disappointed by the actual referent, she argues, because she is no longer a young woman. Rather, for the speaker, her hair is a symbol of something very different:

It only may  
Now shade on two pale cheeks, the mark of tears,  
Taught drooping from the head that hangs aside  
Through sorrow's trick.

Perhaps the reason she gives her hair so calmly is that she has changed the signification of the symbol. To her the lock stands for her grief and her loss; the sorrow at both her suppressed situation and her resulting enervation. This is what she bequeaths to him, and gladly: a symbol of her oppression under a woman-denying structure.

I thought the funeral-shears  
 Would take this first, but Love is justified,-  
 Take it thou,.. finding pure, from all those years,  
 The kiss my mother left here when she died.

She had thought that she would die before a man made this request. Love, however, is "justified" in taking the lock prematurely: it is proved right, vindicated, absolved. Love, transcendent and powerful in Victorian sentiments, is here portrayed as a usurping rival to death. It must justify its action of preempting death for this woman, and the speaker effects this justification by linking Love to the male lover: "Love is justified/ Take it thou". Is it Love or the male lover who takes the lock of hair - or are both the same? In conflating the two, the speaker implies that the public, apparently transcendent power she has previously envisioned (though problematically) is apprehended or experienced only in the private, personal relationship. To all intents and purposes, her idealistic "Love" is located in, or represented by, the male lover. Later references support this conflation: Sonnet XXIII cries "Then, love me, Love!" to the man; Sonnet XXIV links the "close hand of Love" with the safe male lover; XXVII extols the lover as her saviour and concludes that "Love, as strong as Death, retrieves as well". Love becomes the shared experience which defines two lovers.<sup>35</sup>

The final phrase of this sonnet with its passing reference to the speaker's mother is perhaps its most cryptic, as the shifting nature of her metaphors of hair and Love also becomes evident in this image. The speaker's last experience of Love was her mother's kiss, kept pure (i.e. virginal - not erased by a man's kiss) over the passing of years. This kiss reiterates the idea that Love is only articulated or defined within specific experiences of it. A transcendent, absolute power is thus unknowable (and irrelevant) beside the love of her mother or the male lover. The subversive potential this point carries for Victorian prescriptions about gender roles within an apparently divinely-ordained love structure is enormous. The shifting interpretations in this sonnet act as a commentary on the possibilities for women and men within this patriarchal structure. As she redefines the symbol of her hair and the signification of Love, the speaker foregrounds the power of tropes in exposing apparently monolithic structures.

## XIX

The companion to Sonnet XVIII, Sonnet XIX sees the return gift of a lock of hair from the male lover to the speaker. In the opening two lines, she employs an image of the marketplace, the great Exchange of the Venetian Rialto. The soul, she sees, has its marketplace and its merchandise: the two lovers' souls barter in curls of hair. Once again the importance of that exchange is evident: it is souls that are trading. The curls of hair obviously signify much:

And from my poet's forehead to my heart,  
Receive this lock which outweighs argosies,-  
As purple black, as erst, to Pindar's eyes  
The dim purpleal tresses gloomed athwart  
The nine white Muse-brows.

The commercial nature of these transactions is unsettling: love traded like this enacts a masculine libidinal economy, in which experience of love and gender relations occur within a system of property and exchange. In this masculine economy, giving is dangerous because it "is perceived as establishing an inequality - a difference - that is threatening in that it seems to open up an imbalance of power" (Moi 112). According to Hélène Cixous, giving within this economy is really about returns, about getting returns on investments. Feminine giving is, on the other hand, apparently limitless and generous, without a thought for returns (Castration 48-50; 53-54).<sup>36</sup>

The transactions of the two lovers here can be read in the light of such theories. The woman has had to enter the economy of love exchanges, and rather than allowing an imbalance of obligation to exist between them, the male lover quickly returns the gift in kind. He thus has invested, but has a return on his investment: the woman's symbolic submission to him. No wonder the exchanged tresses outweigh "argosies", the biggest merchant ships of Venice. These curls - particularly hers - 'carry' or convey far more.<sup>37</sup>

What is most interesting in these lines is the major role displacement that occurs. The phrase "my poet's head" seems to indicate the male lover, as in XVII. Thus the lock comes from his forehead to her heart; she receives the invaluable gift. If this is so, however, the remainder of the extract is highly

suggestive. She receives the lock of purple-black hair - his hair - as Pindar saw the dark tresses on the brows of the nine classical Muses. The simile clearly associates herself with the poet figure Pindar, whilst the male lover is associated with the Muses. The surprise in this major role reversal is prefigured in the ambiguity of "my poet's forehead"; the reader's initial impression is that the speaker refers to her own forehead, that she is the poet. In both cases, the speaker's self-characterisation as courtly poet and lover is emphasised. Yet, as has become evident, she is dissatisfied with the traditional conventions of that courtly love relationship, even with gender inversions. Her resulting rewriting (begun in Sonnet XIV), continues here.

For this counterpart,..  
 Thy bay-crown's shade, Beloved, I surmise,  
 Still lingers on thy curl, it is so black!  
 Thus, with a fillet of smooth-kissing breath,  
 I tie the shadow safe from gliding back[...]

The bay or laurel leaves are traditionally used as a wreath for a conqueror or a poet; the conquering (see Sonnet XVI) male poet's crown casts shadows on his head. As if this were a danger or a trial to him, she will blow them away - or rather, as the image is more specific than this, she will make a headband of breath that will restrain the shadows. The echoes of his poetic role are thus removed from the curl of hair. And all this is accomplished with "smooth-kissing breath" - her gentle, enjoyable, soft words?

In the same way that she has reread the signification her own lock of hair in the prior sonnet, so the speaker now redefines the man's curl. She removes from it the contamination of the artificial role of society's poet (elaborated in Sonnet III). Exemplified by the metaphor of the laurel wreath, this masculinist role of poet and conqueror is cold and deathly. It deprives him, as well as her, of real warmth and love, by locking both into an imprisoning hierarchical dualism of Poet and Muse, male and female, subject and object. This is why she would, with her own initiative and gentle but determined words, remove the crown that endorses such roles, and instead install his lock of hair and his love where nothing will hinder them: on her warm, alive heart. There it receives her "natural", good heat as long as she lives.



How does this releasing from the role fit in with the sonnet's earlier reversal of poet-muse roles? The exchange of the curls in Sonnets XVIII and XIX had taken on a commercial, value-competing or proprietorial meaning. To expose the structure that made it so, the speaker inverted its roles and so foregrounded the structure and its danger to them as potentially equal fulfilled lovers. (The lovers are, after all, "counterparts" - two corresponding parts to a whole.) Her rescue of him frees him (and by extension, her) from the 'artificial' structures of their culture, incidentally showing that strength of purpose and ability is non-gender specific. Finally, the exchange of hair is rewritten to mean what she rather intended: a commitment to a "natural" love is unhindered by social constraints. The Romantic emphasis on the natural returns to a position of exchange, in which love feeds and is fed by each participant.

### Conclusion

In this first chapter, several themes have emerged from the opening sonnets. The speaker's tension between submitting to or rejecting a love relationship which she believes will silence her voice and remove her separate selfhood, has emerged. So has her strategy of appropriating the courtly love structure of sonneteer and beloved, using the position of the sonneteer as a metaphor for her position as isolated female poet, which also then gives her a valid site from which to speak and so retain her voice. Also evident is her questioning of the nature of love: is it a transcendent, ideal force or is it an experience constructed and defined locally, between two subject beings who are then transformed by the experience? The following chapters develop these and related issues.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See also Elaine Showalter's discussion of this perceived need for a classical education in order to write (A Literature 42).

<sup>2</sup> The "mystic Shape", according to Helen Cooper, refers to The Iliad Book I:204, in which Athene as the Shape holds Achilles back from fighting Agamemnon. The picture may also suggest the medieval image of Fortune as a woman with a top-knot, which the clever individual siezes as Fortune passes by. Here the poet-speaker plays the role of passive Fortune, grasped by opportunistic Love.

<sup>3</sup> Fanny Ratchford, Sonnets from the Portuguese Variorum Edition (New York: Philip C. Duschnes, 1950). This edition is used throughout this thesis. Punctuation in square brackets is my own.

<sup>4</sup> According to Toril Moi, "Phallogocentrism denotes a system that privileges the phallus as the symbol or source of power. The conjuncture of logocentrism and phallogocentrism is often called, after Derrida, phallogocentrism" (179, endnote).

<sup>5</sup> This process is what Luce Irigaray foregrounds in her use of the word "specularization", and the pun in her title Spéculum - which conflates the idea of gazing with a focus on female genitalia (which is the basis of psychoanalytical models of female development). See, for example, Spéculum 47-49.

<sup>6</sup> The Morgan Library manuscript contains the following development of this line: "The sight of thee from me" is replaced by "My sight from thy sight", which in turn is replaced by "My sight from seeing thee". The line moves from the male lover's centrality ("thee", "thy sight") to making the woman's sight central and active ("My sight ... seeing") (Ratchford 40).

<sup>7</sup> The touch symbolism occurs in contradistinction to the sight imagery mentioned above. In Irigaray's thesis, touch is inclusive and non-objectifying - the feminine mode to the masculine gaze. Already, though in a primitive form, the speaker-poet is moving towards proposing an alternative to the phallogocentric world in which she exists. The conscious construction of such a world occurs later. (See Stephenson 73, for a similar discussion of Irigarayan specularity and touch in the Sonnets.)

<sup>8</sup> See Forster, Biography 146; Karlin 270.

<sup>9</sup> Cooper cites Elizabeth Barrett Browning's introduction to A Drama of Exile, in which she re-writes Milton's Paradise Lost from Eve's point of view: "'I had promised my own prudence to shut close the gates of Eden between Milton and myself, so that none might say I dared to walk in his footsteps. He should be within, I thought, with his Adam and Eve unfalling or falling, - and I without, with my EXILES, - I also an exile!'" (Woman 58).

<sup>10</sup> The speaker-poet leans against a cypress tree, the tree traditionally associated with mourning and death (OED).

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Stephenson's elucidation of the positions in courtly love (Poetry 4) and the Sonnets' adaption of them (73-74).

<sup>12</sup> Leighton argues differently and suggestively that the speaker rather excludes the male lover altogether from her formulation: she plays both the subject and the object - the lover poet and the silent muse - at different times. In this way she protects her lover from being drawn into the dualism; he never becomes the object. Such is the confidence of her "verbal self-sufficiency" that he is not needed in her poetry, as she fills all the roles herself, with her own love (Elizabeth 102-03).

<sup>13</sup> Mermin's insightful elaboration of the problems of interplaying subject and object positions, whilst showing the "utopian" project of attempting two subjects and two objects, seems to accept the Victorian judgement that such a depiction "violate[s] decorum" (Origins 130-31). Mermin reads the Sonnets as a conflation of the figure of EBB as weak woman object, and the male courtly poet. She sees little irony or subversion in the Sonnets. Thus, "we assume ... that what is not conventional is autobiographical, merely personal, mawkishly 'sincere'" (141). EBB's poetry challenges precisely that limiting assumption, by simultaneously subverting the conventional roles, even as they are being posited.

<sup>14</sup> Cooper notes in passing how the early sonnets fuse "the traditional self-abnegation of the courtly lover with the conventional humility attributed to nineteenth-century woman" (Cooper 107). This thesis obviously takes this fusion further.

<sup>15</sup> Mermin points out that this self-denigration traditionally belongs to the male lover-speaker of the courtly tradition ("The Damsel" 72). Here again, though, the courtly conventions are used as a metaphor to reflect the female poet's position.

<sup>16</sup> In historical terms, this picture is inaccurate: Elizabeth enjoyed far more success in this earlier stage of their careers than Robert did. This divergence is another indication of EBB's project in the Sonnets. The sequence is less about her and Robert's life, and more about a woman appropriating the sonneteer's voice. The picture of a woman poet (placed beside an authorised male sonneteer) reiterates the lonely minstrel figure of courtly love.

<sup>17</sup> Both Leighton and Stephenson read these images as purely positive: Stephenson reads a sensuous interchange between lovers occurring here (77-78).

<sup>18</sup> Both earlier manuscripts read "unentreated" for "unexpected" - she did not ask for these gifts.

<sup>19</sup> See also Showalter, A Literature 13.

<sup>20</sup> The difference between the two positions of male sonneteer and female poet are that the male sonneteer has the approbation and validation of his society. The female poet does not: her struggle to maintain power and subjectivity is a matter of survival.

<sup>21</sup> Lacanian theory proposes that a child's consciousness emerges from the apprehension of self as separate from others, particularly from the mother.

<sup>22</sup> Many of the images the speaker-poet uses for the male lover are images of man-made objects, artworks or productions, reflecting how his privileged position is less a divine absolute and more a product of a patriarchal society. This apprehension by the speaker-poet allows her to develop an ontology of linguistic construction in later sonnets, that liberates both her and her lover from reified roles.

<sup>23</sup> At Christ's transfiguration, God the Father pronounces His divine endorsement of His Son: "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased; listen to Him" (Matthew 17:5). The speaker-poet's adoption and adaption of the occasion asserts the importance and validity of her own experience, to the male lover.

<sup>24</sup> The Morgan manuscript gives line 9 as "From out thy face to mine", written over with the present form (Ratchford 54). Again pronoun attributions are confused.

<sup>25</sup> Angela Leighton does not see this indeterminacy, preferring to read the sonnet as paramountly asserting the woman's right to speak her feelings (Stephenson adopts the same reading: 84-85). Leighton writes that the speaker remains firmly the subject here: "[she] brings about her own transformation in her lover's 'sight'. She has no need of his eyes to be 'transfigured': the change comes from within." And later: "she is, grammatically, still the subject" (Elizabeth 101). Leighton's reading effaces the tensions that lie in the Sonnets, and the often quite overt struggle between self-assertion and self-abnegation in favour of the lover. Here the reading of "in thy sight" is the critical point of interpretation: I believe that the final lines of the sonnet show a clear need to attribute her transfiguration to a mutual experience of Love, not her "inferior" self.

On a wider scale, however, Leighton's account of the Sonnets is groundbreaking in its constant challenge to traditional sentimental readings, and its assertion of "The Woman's Right to Say" (91).

<sup>26</sup> In "Caterina to Camoens", the dying female speaker describes an exchange of looks with her male lover that would restore the faded "sweetness" of her eyes through shared love:

And if you looked down upon them,  
 And if they looked up to you,  
 All the light which has foregone them  
 Would be gathered back anew.  
       They would truly  
       Be as duly  
 Love-transformed to beauty's sheen, -  
 "Sweetest eyes, were ever seen."

Thus, love becomes a shared experience that both defines love in each other, and transforms each other. This process is precisely repeated through the sonnet sequence.

<sup>27</sup> A definition of "wrought" is 'manufactured': the word carries the overtones of a 'man-made', self-consciously constructed emotion that continues the links already made between love, patriarchy and social manufacturing.

<sup>28</sup> Alterity, as defined by the OED, is "the being different; otherness". It is a word that implies not only the subject position, but also the object position that allows the subject to be subject. Alterity, then, includes both the specific and its obverse, the general; both memory and oblivion.

<sup>29</sup> See also Sonnet XXII below.

<sup>30</sup> It also foregrounds another tension in the sonnets, discussed more fully in Chapter II. The vast open space of the "bitter sea" contrasts with the enclosed captivity of the crystal, suggesting terrible danger and sadness in the former, but also freedom. Conversely there is suppression and indeed death in the latter, and yet there is also a perverse safety. The tension between rebellion and submission rises out of the conflicting desires for freedom and safety.

<sup>31</sup> Kathleen Hickok discusses the nineteenth-century female writer's technique of clandestine challenge to the conventions of her day. Wide reading of such authors "reveals a curious state of tension between conventional ideas about women and reaction against those ideas", and a varying degree of covert protest in their writing (Representations 8). Hickok offers several cogent reasons for the conservative element in such writing, such as the internalisation of conventions. However, she primarily focusses on audience expectations of women writers as the main cause for their self-editing (see 11-13).

<sup>32</sup> This drowning imagery is also used by EBB in Sonnet XXV, in a precisely similar emotional context.

<sup>33</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, A Defence of Poetry (Reiman and Powers 508).

<sup>34</sup> The OED defines "pine" as "Punishment; torment, torture; spec the penal sufferings of hell or purgatory".

<sup>35</sup> Dorothy Mermin comes closest to articulating this process when she writes (in a different context): "She writes the poems, but he draws them forth, both arousing her desire by his own in an endless circle, a seamless reciprocity" (Origins 135).

<sup>36</sup> It should be noted that in this thesis the terms 'masculine' and 'feminine' are distinct from 'male' and 'female', which refer to the physical distinctions of men and women. 'Masculine' and 'feminine' are rather ideological constructs, and so feminine giving, for example, is available to both men and women. Feminists inevitably use these terms in different ways, and one of the criticisms levelled at French psychoanalytical feminists is a tendency to essentialise the ideological: to move feminine into female.

<sup>37</sup> Gitter also links women's hair with money in Victorian mythology. In the capitalist Victorian economy, both materially and sexually, trade in and ownership

of wealth - whether gold or women - was a source of great power and fascination for the man of business. (See Gitter 943ff.)

## CHAPTER TWO

## THE ROLES WE PLAY: GOD AND SINNER

Chapter One has already introduced the ideas to be explored in this chapter. Within the structure that was Victorian heterosexual love, male and female had specific roles assigned to them. One example of role models is the courtly love tradition of silent female and speaking male poet, a model that the speaker has very clearly inverted and then subverted in the opening sonnets. In this chapter, we will examine other such models, particularly the potent love roles of saviour and sinner.<sup>1</sup>

EBB views such model relationships with well-documented antipathy. Daniel Karlin quotes her comments to Robert Browning: "I have not a high appreciation of what passes in the world ... under the name of love' ... 'that word which rhymes with glove & comes as easily off and on'" (Karlin 28). Marriage was a "'growth of power on one side .. & the struggle against it, by means legal and illegal, on the other'" (29).<sup>2</sup> Men in love were too often vain despots in EBB's eyes, and her readiness and verve to describe them as such to her lover Robert says much about her bold sense of humour and their relationship.

Such humour, though evident, is less apparent in Sonnets from the Portuguese, where the woman speaker rather appears at times to delight in the hierarchical roles of her society, roles which place her firmly at a disadvantage. Her excessive self-deprecation and corresponding adulation of her lover creates problems for the modern (feminist) reader, who finds them offensively anachronistic. Glennis Stephenson discusses this problem at some length, summing up the consensus of critical opinion when she decides that EBB assumes "the stance [of self-deprecation] for specific dramatic effects", the primary one being the "subversion of what might superficially appear as the dominant ideology of the Sonnets: the woman who speaks actually emerges as a strong and active lover" (Poetry 70). The stance of self-deprecation, she argues, feeds both the myth of EBB as romantic solitary "Sleeping Beauty" (70)

- a myth that EBB, for all her protestations about it, nevertheless encouraged - and the "subtle competition" between Elizabeth and Robert as to who was the lesser being, and therefore the courtly poet, not the beloved. Stephenson concludes: "As both Leighton and Mermin convincingly show, Barrett Browning exploits her 'personal' situation, her 'unworthiness,' to claim the stronger role of the lover and - by inference - to claim the voice of the poet" (72). Moreover, Stephenson's discussion of the Sonnets revolves around the trope of distance, much used in the sequence as a difficulty to be overcome, a courtly love separation that is dissolved into a very non-courtly touch of erotic passion: "Distance, as usual, intensifies desire" (80). The self-deprecation, then, is part of this trope, a distancing of worth and self-image that is joyfully overcome.<sup>3</sup>

These are cogent and extremely useful readings, tying the attitudes of the speaker into the subtle play with courtly conventions and emerging feminist assertion in the poetry. However, even these readings find the self-rejection - what I have called self-disgust - of the speaker excessive at times: Stephenson notes when discussing Sonnet VIII that the "excessive self-abasement in these lines may be disturbing, but it does, in its angry rejection of her faded, sterile life, suggest the potential vigour and strength within her waiting to be released" (Poetry 84). That suggestion is tenuous, to say the least: any such "potential" is surely outweighed by that attitude of self-disgust. In Stephenson's account of the Sonnets, as in Leighton's account, there appears to be an effacing of the sustained posture of self-deprecation by the speaker, an effacing that only serves to highlight the very embarrassment that began the discussion.

An alternative, or perhaps coexistent reading, is that this attitude of self-condemnation is part of the tension within the speaker between submission and rebellion. If we view the Sonnets as an interrogation of a female's place in Victorian heterosexual love (as Chapter One has shown), then these two responses to that cultural structure become paramount, and any discussion of self-deprecation fits into those responses.



## XII

A prime example of the speaker's apparent glorification of the roles of patriarchal love occurs in Sonnet XII, a sonnet that may exasperate the modern reader in its anxiety to attribute all source of value to the male. In the previous Sonnet XI, discussed in Chapter One, the speaker asserts her vindicating love as the means whereby she retains voice and selfhood (provided her love remains unfulfilled). Here in Sonnet XII, however, this life-saving love is, she argues, given to her by the male lover. The speaker appears to be submitting to the rules of the assigned romantic role.

On the other hand, this submission is not unproblematic. Rather, the tensions discussed in Chapter One emerge here, too: the language of the sonnet - ostensibly creating a surface of feminine self-effacement, attributing power and initiative to the man - carries a strong undercurrent of reaction against this social myth.

The first four lines of Sonnet XII build up the value of the love which the speaker has been extolling. It is her only worth, literally her pride and joy. She uses biblical language to convey this: her love is her "boast", echoing the apostle Paul's use of the word, notably in the famous statement "May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ".<sup>4</sup> In the same way that Paul's only cause for boasting is God's grace that covers his own weakness, the speaker's only cause for boasting is "this vindicating grace" (Sonnet XI) of love that covers her own weakness. The male is placed in the position of the all-powerful and gracious God; the woman is the unworthy sinner.

As if this patriarchal reading of her situation were not sufficiently obvious, she uses another biblical image of the ruby to recall the picture of the ideal woman as depicted in Proverbs 31: "A wife of noble character who can find? She is worth far more than rubies" (31:10). The ensuing depiction of the self-denying, hard-working wife and mother, constantly increasing the material wealth of the household, is a patriarch's dream: "her husband has full confidence in her and lacks nothing of value" (31:11). Or, as the speaker expresses it: she will "draw men's eyes and prove the inner cost". The commercial

motif in both descriptions reveals the basic position of the female as valuable object or commodity (and note again that proprietary gaze in the latter verse). Both biblical echoes superficially endorse the patriarchal interpretation, and yet their very use here exposes the anti-female assumptions of that interpretation. The purpose of the speaker's love is to draw men's eyes and so prove her inner value (as efficient man-reflector?).<sup>5</sup>

The sonnet continues by stating that her "ruby", this love, only exists in response to his antecedent love. He has set her an example, shown her how, recalling the words of Christ, "I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you" (John 13:15). Now the lover is a Christ-figure.

The conclusion? "And thus, I cannot speak/ Of love even, as a good thing of my own." The undertone of loss, of regretfully relinquishing the last vestige of individual will or worth ("love even" - emphasis mine), is unmistakable. The earlier Morgan manuscript has the phrase "as something worthy of my own!", further underlining this feeling (Ratchford 58). The ambivalence from the earlier sonnets returns in the lines:

Thy soul hath snatched up mine all faint and weak,  
And placed it by thee on a golden throne,-  
And that I love (O soul, we must be meek!)  
Is by thee only, whom I love alone.

The favour of his love bestowed upon her is not entirely appreciated, as "snatched" indicates. And the 'fact' of his having initiated love is equally unpalatable, as is evident in the injunction of meekness to her soul. She must assume the appropriate pose here, another imposed role. The tone of the parenthesis is as mocking as it is bitter, as she instructs her soul to submit to convention. Finally there is a suspicious hint of egotism in the male lover's motives as she describes the situation in the final lines. He engenders love in her, that she might love him alone: the female as mirror to the male's phallic power!

## XX

The roles of lover-god and woman-sinner are developed more fully in the central section of the Sonnets. In Sonnet XX, for example, the speaker muses on the sterile life of her past in images that seem to contradict her previous rebellions:

Beloved, my Beloved, when I think  
That thou wast in the world a year ago,  
What time I sate alone here in the snow  
And saw no footprint, heard the silence sink  
No moment at thy voice,..

The picture here is evocative. Before his arrival and love, her life was a winter leading to death by exposure. Re-using earlier imagery, the speaker pictures herself as outside, exposed to the rigours of unprotected existence. She is excluded from society's pageants (Sonnet III); her hovel is broken down (Sonnet IV) and she stands figuratively bare before the "dreadful outer brink/ Of obvious death" (Sonnet VII). Or as she describes it here, she sits in the snow alone, with no human contact and therefore no possibility of salvation from the death that will inevitably and rapidly occur.

The image is interesting for other reasons, though: she sat in an undifferentiated sphere - in unbroken white snow, surrounded by unbroken silence. In modern linguistic terms, where consciousness is differentiation through language, she was virtually in a state outside consciousness. Such a condition approaches death (that dreadful "brink"). This scene is an interesting re-presentation of her earlier situation. In those earlier sonnets, while the speaker was on the outside of society, rejected and broken down, the reason for her isolation was her clinging preservation of her individual voice, her determination to maintain herself as a poet, even if that meant rejection and premature death in a society whose structures had no place for a renegade. Earlier, she had a voice, but in Sonnet XX she represents that time as voiceless and silent. Why?

An obvious answer is that her position allows her to cast her male lover in the role of God. He is the silence-breaker, the One who awakens her from this semi-dead, unconscious state into new life. The whole emphasis in the sonnet is

how unaware she was, during this time, of his presence in the world. She had no idea that he had the power to break the undifferentiated silence into discrete words.

This power, of course, is the divinely-ordained power of naming. God was the first to break the silence of undifferentiated chaos at creation; His Word brought life (including human) into existence. The speaker credits her lover with this now-masculine power of naming. He has created her by loosening her from her chains of repressive non-existence. His voice can "sink" the silence for a moment; his "possible" hand can strike those chains away. He can "thrill the day or night/ With personal act or speech", and the creation echoes in that line are clear: God's personal act via speech brought the day and night - differentiation - into being.

The comparison is made overt, of course, in the final lines: "Atheists are as dull,/ Who cannot guess God's presence out of sight". She was like an atheist, who because s/he cannot see God, assumes He does not exist. God's absent presence is like her lover's absent presence: he was there "in the world" during that winter of unconsciousness.<sup>6</sup> In the rhetoric of post-conversion, the speaker is amazed at her own blind ignorance: she finds it "wonderful" that she could not even "cull/ Some prescience" of her lover's ability to reawaken the world, in the white blossoms that herald the arrival of spring - blossoms he also saw growing.

Why is the speaker imaging herself and her lover in this way? Surely this language reinforces and celebrates the pseudo-divine gender relations of patriarchal society (discussed in Sonnet XII above), an ideology which has been exposed and rejected in Sonnets II, VI, VII, X, XII, XVI, XVII, XIX...?

I would suggest that in this central section of the Sonnets, the speaker (and EBB) begins to formulate her theory of ideal Love. For the speaker, the entrance into language celebrated in this sonnet becomes an ambiguous and finally threatening movement; she realises that language, and the power of naming that it seems to endorse, is at the very centre of the ideology that she has taken great pains to expose. Instead, she comes to view the perfect, equal

love between her and her lover as outside such language, and so outside the structures: it is a love in silence. They are outside differentiation, outside representation - indeed, outside human existence, as we cannot exist in consciousness outside differentiation. This love is impossible from the start, but it becomes the speaker's sustaining fiction during these middle sonnets to enable her (rhetorically) to have her love without the repressive structures within which it occurs.

At this point, though, Sonnet XX clearly appears to be rejoicing in the lover's saving actions in bringing language and life to the speaker. And yet, this adulation simultaneously exposes the very structures in which these roles are played out. Whether or not the speaker is aware of this is debatable: in other sonnets her subversions of her situation have been more immediately evident. Here, though, there are fewer clues to a subversive subtext. Nevertheless, irony does seem present:

[I] Went counting all my chains, as if that so  
 They never could fall off at any blow  
 Struck by thy possible hand.... why, thus I drink  
 Of life's great cup of wonder!

The clumsiness of "as if that so" and "They never could fall off" seems deliberately to fudge the exact meaning; the negative expression creates a possible opposite reading, that the chains will not fall off, no matter what blow he strikes. And that word "possible" raises the whole question of his existence in this role of Namer and Actor: possibly he exists; possibly he will act; possibly for me; possibly he will succeed...

The expression of wonder in line 9, reiterated for emphasis, seems excessive and almost parodic. Given the sorrow which characterises previous sonnets, this tone of great delight, compounded as the sonnet continues in the exclamation that his personal words "thrill" the basic revolutions of the universe, and climaxing in indirectly naming him God, becomes excessive.

The images the speaker uses to describe her joy at finding this love are in themselves political: the very language she uses to speak her love is "shaded" (like her lover's brow in XIX) or coloured by societal structures. In effect, she is

enacting the central problem of their relationship: how their very consciousnesses are already structured within and by phallogocentric ideology.

### XXIII

Sonnet XXIII moves the roles of saviour and saved into a much wider context. It follows the pivotal twenty-second sonnet, in which the speaker fantasises about an ideal love relationship, but concludes by confronting death as the only possible end to such a relationship.<sup>7</sup> These thoughts of death have obviously been conveyed to the male lover, whose protesting response leads to Sonnet XXIII. His protests amaze the speaker: her self-denigration has disallowed the possibility of his need of her.

Is it indeed so? If I lay here dead,  
 Would'st thou miss any life in losing mine?  
 And would the sun for thee more coldly shine,  
 Because of grave damps falling around my head?  
 I marvelled, my Beloved, when I read  
 Thy thought so in the letter.

What has struck the speaker is her power in their relationship. She has the ability to wound him, to reduce his quality of life. The tone of wonderment covers a simultaneous sense of delight in her ability to affect him: "I am thine - / But .. so much to thee?" The syntactical arrangement of this sentence conveys the subtleties of their relationship. The blunt endline statement - "I am thine" - reiterates what has been the subject of bitter debate for the speaker thus far throughout the Sonnets: in love, she is his conquest. However, the new line opens a new thought with "But": the possibility that such a relationship is reciprocal. He needs her; she matters to him, and the emphasis given to "so" underscores just how much.

The realisation of this interdependence affirms the speaker. What is being exposed here is a dialectic, a variation on the traditional master/slave interaction.<sup>8</sup> What is perceived to be a dualism by the dominant partner is shown to be an interdependence: each role requires the other, in order to affirm themselves. Whilst it appears that the master has all the power over the slave, the fact is that the master needs the slave in order to be a master. In the same

way, the male lover/ saviour/ ennobler cannot play this role unless he has someone to love/ save/ ennoble. The lover's definition lies in the position of the loved one. This becomes evident to the speaker in that her lover grieves at the thought of her death. The basically selfish motivation of grief is thus exposed - we grieve because we lose.

The sense of power and value that the realisation of this interdependence gives to the speaker is nevertheless limited. The crucial point here is the nature of that power, and the sonnet clearly and subversively exposes why the woman is so needed. "Can I pour thy wine/ While my hands tremble?" The servant woman finds the thought of her power so intoxicating that she cannot pour her lord's wine properly! The irony of this picture shows the real nature of the woman's position: the power that she has in defining the male is a hollow power, as it entails her subordination. Politically and practically she has no power.<sup>9</sup> Further, the sonnet describes how this 'power' would be enacted in her death, and the prospective moment of her absolute and final abdication of power is what so affects the male lover. In lines 3 and 4 the speaker envisages the effects of her death. For the male lover, the sun simply shines "more coldly", but it does not stop shining. The speaker's circumstances are somewhat different: in her projected moment of 'power' over him, she has "grave damps" falling about her head instead of sunshine. Thus her power is of a negative nature, in that it has its greatest effect in her absence. Her lover will miss her when she is gone. In these eight lines, EBB exposes dualist relationships as a means of showing the practical realities for the subordinate party. (The possibility of a dialectical relationship, in which roles are interchangeable, emerges during the sequence.)

The speaker returns to the thoughts of death that opened the sonnet, and 'sacrificially' gives them up for her lover's sake. Her wishful "dreams of death" are debatable: we saw in Sonnet VII how death was "a dreadful outer brink" for her, and so her description here of her "near sweet view of Heaven" is somewhat undermined. The point she emphasises, though, is her sacrifice. For him she will relinquish even her wish to die.

Then, love me, Love! look on me .. breathe on me!  
 As brighter ladies do not count it strange,  
 For love, to give up acres and degree,  
 I yield the grave for thy sake, and exchange  
 My near sweet view of Heaven, for earth with thee!

She uses her newly-realised power to do the only thing it can do at this point: reinstate him in his role of lover/ saviour/ ennobler. She invites his gaze of appropriation, his breath that, like God's, breathes life into inanimate creatures. And in a final overt reference to the woman's role in this Victorian society, she compares herself to women of wealth and degree who are willing to give up both in marriage to one they love.<sup>10</sup>

In Sonnet XXIII the speaker explores the political consequences of the roles that men and women were required to assume in the Victorian love relationship. This relationship, structured as it was on a simple hierarchical dualism copied from the God-humanity dualism of Christian theology, locked both parties into fixed and destructive positions. Moreover, at this stage it appears that the only alternative to these roles is rebellion against them, so that the woman is either the angel in the house (submitting passively to the role) or the witch outside it (rebellious against society). In either case the woman's lot is one of suppression and eventual suffocation.

## XXV

The male lover begins to assume greater and greater significance for the speaker, as in this central section of the Sonnets she rhetorically reconstructs her former life of excluded misery, prior to his irruption into it.

A heavy heart, Beloved, have I borne  
 From year to year until I saw thy face,  
 And sorrow after sorrow took the place  
 Of all those natural joys as lightly worn  
 As the stringed pearls .. each lifted in its turn  
 By a beating heart at dance-time.

Images of circularity emphasise the repetitions of life which characterised her existence before his arrival, creating restriction and oppression. She carried her "beating heart" - alive and hopeful - through these inevitabilities, until it became



a "heavy heart" - despairing and hopeless. This loss of hope and joy recalls the woman poet of the opening sonnets: excluded, denied voice and legitimacy, and so emotionally and creatively dying. She even questions God's saving grace, which is "scarcely" able to lift her heavy heart out of the grinding downward spiral of existence.

Then thou didst bid me bring  
 And let it drop adown thy calmly great  
 Deep being! Fast it sinketh, as a thing  
 Which its own nature doth precipitate,  
 While thine doth close above it, mediating  
 Betwixt the stars and the unaccomplished fate.

The male lover, however, has none of God's difficulty. In an idolatrous movement the woman replaces God with the lover: the man supersedes God. His power is greater than God's, and the speaker's description of him as a "calmly great/ Deep being" suggests divinity. The speaker unquestioningly obeys his bidding, like a true disciple. The emphasis on "thou" clearly places the lover as the superior alternative to God.

This deification of the male lover is not unproblematic, however. The sestet of the sonnet raises the now almost inevitable ambiguities and ambivalences that question previous sentiments. At his bidding the woman brings her burdensome heart to him, and drops it into the well of his "deep being". His assumption of Christ's identity here ("Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" [Matthew 11:28]) continues the theme of lover as God. In the Christian model, such a surrender of self to God is paradoxically freeing; a fulfilment of personal identity. The male lover, however, is not an omniscient and loving God, and according to that same Christian theology, cannot save himself, let alone a woman. But the speaker's heart sinks rapidly into the well of this man's being, and his nature closes over it. This action is a repetition of the same action that the speaker so feared in the early sonnets: her selfhood is subsumed into his. She is, in terms of the extended metaphor used here, drowned in his being and selfhood.

Her heart sinks so heavily because "its own nature doth precipitate" it: it is by nature heavy and so is propelled rapidly. A more subtle reading might

suggest that her heart sinks so quickly because it has a desire to submerge itself in this way, as the tension between struggle for selfhood and relinquishing selfhood into another's is abandoned to the latter. Whatever reading prevails, the problem remains, and is clearly suggested in the language the speaker uses: is the safety and relief that the god-like male lover offers worth the concomitant loss/ drowning of separate identity?

The ambiguity of the final line underscores this dilemma. The male lover's heart/ nature closes over the sinking woman's heart, and in thus covering her, places himself between her and the sky above. He mediates (and the word again recalls Christ, the mediator) between the stars above and the "unaccomplished fate" beneath. That latter phrase may be a simple (if obscure) reference to death, the dreadful brink that the male lover has saved the speaker from. In Sonnet VII he places himself between her and that brink, in the same way that he mediates here. Alternatively, the phrase could refer to the woman's future, as yet unaccomplished, which will now never be played out because she is submerged in his fate and future. Her life, in either case, is no longer in her own hands: initiative now lies with the male lover.

## XXVI

In this twenty-sixth sonnet the speaker examines the influence of the male lover upon her creativity, and she negates her earlier fear that her entry into love necessitated the loss of her poetic voice. Instead, adopting her grateful, submissive persona, she locates a rediscovered voice in him. The implications of her rhetoric in this sonnet are, however, fascinating.

I lived with visions for my company,  
 Instead of men and women, years ago,  
 And found them gentle mates, nor thought to know  
 A sweeter music than they played to me.

In this description of the loss of youthful creativity, the beautiful though isolated world of the young speaker's imagination eventually fades to leave her "faint and blind". This imagination was powerfully creative and satisfying; she desired nothing more than her visions which made sweet music.

The world, however, impinges upon this beautiful and isolated existence, contaminating and corrupting it. Her glorious and beautiful creativity ("trailing purple") is stained, entrapped ("not free") and eventually silenced as her voice ("lutes") ceases. As her visions disappear, so does her own psychic health. She grows "faint and blind"; figurative visions are replaced with literal sightlessness.<sup>11</sup>

The speaker includes accounts of her strong youthful creativity periodically throughout the Sonnets to remind us of the potency and beauty of her 'natural' poetic ability. It is a crucial reminder, because it is precisely this gift that her society denies her and attempts to suppress.<sup>12</sup> Further, these 'reminders' conflict with the androcentric sentiments espoused on the surface of the Sonnets: that the speaker's ability arises from her ennobling love for the man. This is patently not so: "I lived with visions for my company [...] years ago".

Nevertheless, such a sentiment follows here:

Then THOU didst come .. to be,  
Beloved, what they seemed. Their shining fronts,  
Their songs, their splendours, (better, yet the  
                  same,  
As river-water hallowed into fonts)  
Met in thee, and from out thee overcame  
My soul with satisfaction of all wants -  
Because God's gifts put man's best dreams to shame.

Into her declining life and lost creativity comes the male lover, whose importance warrants capital letters. He supersedes her visions - he is what they seemed to be. A subtle shift has occurred here: the visions, previously deemed valid and sufficient, are now no longer so - they only seemed to be so. Certainly, the male lover is a real person, whereas the visions were not real, but what has nevertheless occurred is an invalidation or exposure of the woman's creativity as somehow lacking. Her poetic creations are not good enough anymore.

Instead, the male lover becomes the locus in which the speaker's creativity fuses and resurges. All her visions meet in him, and are "hallowed" into productions better and more satisfying. The word "hallowed" is deliberately

strong: the male lover's omnipotence sanctifies the woman's creativity, as the baptismal image indicates. The visions are the same, but are made more holy by the lover's influence, in the same way that common river water is hallowed for the baptismal font. The woman's creativity is now transformed and consecrated.

Because of this process her soul is overcome with "satisfaction of all wants", and the language suggests a religious experience of fulfilment. Her depiction of the male lover as a sanctifying god fulfils the requirements of her role as adoring receiving woman, and yet juxtaposed with the opening description of her self-sufficient creativity, it provokes questions. Is a woman's creativity only truly realised in a man? Is her work somehow deficient until 'sanctified' by a man?<sup>13</sup> The ironies of this position are shown in the final line, where the lover/ god's "gifts" apparently expose the woman's "best dreams" as lacking. What was clearly valuable and beautiful in the first quatrain is now put "to shame". The hierarchical religious structure upon which patriarchal gender relations are built is quite clearly reproduced here. The male lover is cast in the role of God and the speaker plays the role of man ("man's best dreams"). Milton's precept "He for God, and she for God in him" is the model for the image in the final line: the lower half of the hierarchy imitates the upper half.<sup>14</sup>

## XXVII

The speaker continues to reconstruct her past in Sonnet XXVII, and so reiterates her contradictory need to see man as god.

My own beloved, who hast lifted me  
From this drear flat of earth where I was thrown,  
And, in betwixt the languid ringlets, blown  
A life-breath, till the forehead hopefully  
Shines out again, as all the angels see,  
Before thy saving kiss!

Several commentators speak of the height/depth perspective that often features in the Sonnets. Mermin writes: "The space [in the Sonnets] is symbolical and highly schematic, tightly constricted on the horizontal plane but open to heaven above and the grave below ... Typical repeated words are down, fall, deep, rise,

beneath, and especially drop, used eleven times in the forty-four poems, and up, used fifteen times" (Origins 139). Although Mermin makes little comment on this preponderance of vertical imagery, both Leighton and Stephenson tie it into the courtly distances between the lovers (see note 3, p.86). It clearly also has significance in terms of the hierarchical schema of roles within the Sonnets - God saves man; man saves woman.

In Sonnet XXVII the "beloved" has lifted the victim woman from the "drear flat" that is earth. She is absolutely passive: having been thrown here she remains here, prepared to die, until the male raises and revives her. He, of course, plays the role of the Creator-God, breathing life into the human form to make it live.<sup>15</sup> His "saving kiss" on her "languid ringlets" (or, to be specific, between them onto her forehead, in true paternal fashion) transfigures her, and the angels bear witness as, no doubt, they did at creation.

My own, my own,  
Who camest to me when the world was gone,  
And I who looked for only God, found thee!  
I find thee; I am safe, and strong, and glad.

As in the previous two sonnets, the lover not only competes with God, but he finally replaces God. The speaker expected death, and looked only for God and heaven. That "only" is highly provocative, particularly in conjunction with the emphasised "thee". She was expecting merely God; instead she got her lover! Moreover, the shift from "found" to "find" moves the action from the past to the present: God-like, his saving presence remains with her, and she continues to find him.

The woman's activity in these lines, and the positive self-assertions of the final phrase quoted above, indicate that the passive woman of the beginning of the sonnet is now acting - the male lover's presence so invigorates her. As the line progresses, she is firstly assured of safety (presumably from death); safety in turn strengthens her; strength in turn gladdens her.

As one who stands in dewless asphodel,  
Looks backward on the tedious time he had  
In the upper life, - so I, with bosom-swell,

Make witness, here, between the good and bad,  
That Love, as strong as Death, retrieves as well.

These final lines offer a potentially disruptive image. The speaker identifies with a person in the blessed underworld of Elysium, the latter denoted by the "dewless asphodel", which is poetically "an immortal flower, ...said to cover the Elysian meads" (OED). Just as such a person reflects upon the tedium of life in the "upper" mortal world, so the speaker reflects on her previous life, before her rescue and blessing by the male lover. She proudly bears witness to the difference between the past "bad" and the present "good", and the fact that Love is as powerful as Death to effect the change from one state to the other. As Death "retrieves" the mortal into blessed immortality, so Love "retrieves" the isolated woman into a blessed relationship.

There are two points to make here. Firstly, to "retrieve" means to recover something that was originally present, but became absent. OED states: "To restore, revive; to bring back to the original state...". This is highly suggestive in the context of Sonnet XXVII: it implies what has been established in earlier sonnets (see particularly XXV and XXVI), that the woman was once in a position of activity, strength, joy and animation. Moreover, the speaker continues that same motif by identifying with one who is dead. Once again her engagement with love has required her psychic death. If this is an emotional figuration of the spiritual experience of 'dying' (whether literally or spiritually) to God, the difficulty with this transposition of the Christian model to gender relations remains. In the former, the dualism remains: only God saves; humanity "dies to the world". Does this limit the woman to only ever playing the role of dying into 'life', under the aegis of a permanently saving man?

Sonnet XXVII's reiteration of this central problem contains seeds for its solution, though. The repeated appellation of "my own" within this sonnet appears to indicate the speaker's delight that this male lover is for her and no other - he has chosen her (cf. "My Lord and God"). Yet the phrase is clearly proprietorial, and rather suggests that the saviour belongs to the saved. Even within an apparently adulatory sonnet such as this, with its acquiescence to dualist roles, the interdependence of the relationship is implicit. The sonnet

begins by attributing to the lover the power to transform her, but it ends by affirming Love as the agent. This Love (articulated in the opening sonnets), is the transforming experience with another subject (here the male lover) that redefines both subjects. The empowering of both parties that occurs in this process necessitates the disruption and potential breaking of the original dualist relationship between subject and object, saviour and victim, God and sinner.

### XXXI

The speaker's superficial determination to depict the male lover as a divine hero continues to be challenged by her own subversive tendencies and language. In Sonnet XXX, the speaker expressed doubts and fears as to the reality of the man's love - anxieties that are suddenly and apparently magically dismissed in Sonnet XXXI by the interposition of the male lover.<sup>16</sup> Yet the effect of his presence on the woman poet is still problematic.

Thou comest! all is said without a word.  
I sit beneath thy looks, as children do  
In the noon-sun, with souls that tremble through  
Their happy eyelids from an unaverred  
Yet prodigal inward joy.

The rapturous brevity of the opening statement implies that all is resolved by this simple yet transforming action: the lover has arrived. Doubts dissolve in his presence and words are now unnecessary as his love is tacitly incarnate. It would appear that a relationship of silent equality and mutual presence is achieved.

And yet, the extended simile that follows shows that such equality is not in evidence. Rather, hierarchical dualisms remain intact, as the woman plays the naive, vulnerable child, joyfully soaking up the warmth of the noon-day sun, played by the male lover. That sun is at the zenith of its path and its power and the woman sits "beneath" its/his looks. Once again, the male lover plays the role of potent, beneficent, higher being, whilst the woman is the weak, receiving, grateful lesser being.

Behold, I erred  
 In that last doubt! and yet I cannot rue  
 The sin most, but the occasion ... that we two  
 Should for a moment stand unministered  
 By a mutual presence.

Recalling the doubts and anxieties of the previous sonnet, the speaker adopts the language of the penitent sinner. She was wrong to question the reality of his love and the nature of their relationship; indeed, the doubt was a "sin". The dualism has now moved into the moral realm as the male lover bestows forgiving mercy on the confessing sinner.<sup>17</sup>

At the same time, the speaker does not fully acquiesce in the role she depicts here. She comments that she does not regret the "sin" of doubt as much as the occasion that precipitated that doubt. That occasion, suggested in the rather ambiguous lines 7-9, was an inability to 'read' him or to communicate effectively, as they now are. Now they "stand Unministered/ By a mutual presence", and can achieve the tacit understanding of the opening lines. In Sonnet XXX, such an understanding was restrained by something or someone in their presence, and this failure precipitated the climate of anxiety in that sonnet. That failure suggests the 'external' social forces that are constantly acting upon this relationship.

Ah, keep near and close,  
 Thou dovelike help! and, when my fears would rise,  
 With thy broad heart serenely interpose.  
 Brood down with thy divine sufficiencies  
 These thoughts which tremble when bereft of those,  
 Like callow birds left desert to the skies.

The terrible irony of these lovers' position (already suggested in Sonnet XX) is here foregrounded: the apprehension of repressive social influences does not however free the lovers from those influences. Even as the speaker "rues" the "occasion", she remains part of the structures that caused the occasion - here she uses another metaphor based on paternalistic roles to describe her perception of her lover's presence. The woman depicts him now as the Holy Spirit, using the biblical dove simile.<sup>18</sup> All the qualities she mentions are biblical descriptions of the Spirit's presence: Genesis 1:2 speaks of "the Spirit of God hovering over the waters" at creation; the Psalms speak of finding refuge in the



shadow of His wings; the Spirit is the "Counsellor" or "comforter". These lines become a prayer to this spiritual power for divine comfort, to protect the vulnerable woman from her own fears and thoughts with his "divine sufficiencies" (cf. "My grace is sufficient for thee" [II Cor. 12:9]). Again vertical movement is in play here: as her thoughts "rise", his "broad heart" broods down to calm the frightened thoughts. The speaker's own language and metaphors recreate the very roles she elsewhere exposes.

### XXXII

The first time that the sun rose on thine oath  
 To love me, I looked forward to the moon  
 To slacken all those bonds which seemed too soon  
 And quickly tied to make a lasting troth.  
 Quick-loving hearts, I thought, may quickly loathe;  
 And, looking on myself, I seemed not one  
 For such man's love!

Here in Sonnet XXXII the speaker reappraises her early fears in this relationship, in an attempt to show their groundlessness. Yet, in doing so, she proceeds through the medium of metaphors - her weapon as poet, but a two-edged sword of construction and deconstruction, as seen in the previous sonnet.

The sonnet opens with the speaker recalling her early pessimism concerning their relationship, for reasons eloquently suggested in Sonnet XIV. In Sonnet XXXII, though, she locates her pessimism in her own unworthiness: she was hardly able to maintain a man's love, especially a man such as this one! Her self-disparagement covers an insurrectionary attitude, however, particularly in the images used to describe their vows of commitment to each other. His "oath" of "troth" she describes as a bond tying them together, while she "looked forward" to that bond's "slacken[ing]". A feeling of imprisonment is conveyed here, resurfacing from the sonnets of the first half of the sequence, where the woman's primary reaction to the male lover's declarations was a foreboding that incorporation and loss of independent self could only ensue. Related to this fear is an implied criticism of the male lover: he is portrayed as rash and unreliable in his emotional attachments - quick to love and therefore quite likely quick to loathe. Thus the woman's past response was one of self-defence, as she

endeavoured to protect herself from both colonisation and pain from the male lover.

Such responses, though, lie beneath the immediate surface of the poem. The surface itself is busily reconstructing the hierarchical roles of androcentric culture, using a metaphor from very early in the sonnet sequence. The speaker, decrying herself as unworthy of the lover, sees herself rather as

more like an out of tune  
Worn viol, a good singer would be wroth  
To spoil his song with, and which, snatched in  
haste,  
Is laid down at the first ill-sounding note.  
I did not wrong myself so, but I placed  
A wrong on thee. For perfect strains may float  
'Neath master-hands, from instruments defaced,-  
And great souls, at one stroke, may do and doat.

In Sonnet III, the speaker paints the famous picture of the male lover as the "chief musician" within the lattice, playing his part in the social pageantry for queens and "a hundred" bright eyes. Conversely, the speaker is the poor, excluded and wasting courtly minstrel/ woman poet, who refuses to be part of the conventional setting where women are instruments for the master male musician to play upon. In a profound alteration of both perspective and position, the speaker now employs the same image to show that she has been incorporated into the conventions of love, and has become the instrument for the master musician to play upon. She is not, however, a perfect instrument providing pleasure and satisfaction to the musician: she is instead wayward, emitting "ill-sounding" notes. It is tempting to read this as a reference to the speaker's protestations throughout this love relationship, and her refusal to 'go down without a fight'. Her suspicion of, and reluctance to engage in traditional love roles mark her as out of step with her society, and promoting disharmony, to continue the metaphor. Hence her statement, "I did not wrong myself so": beyond the surface of self-deprecation is a clear appreciation of her unsuitability for the role of instrument to the male musician.

Nevertheless, she is now playing this very role. The sonnet, despite these subversive undertones, still depicts an essential inequality. The male lover is the

master musician, with power to make the instrument speak in the way he chooses. Conversely, the woman is the silent object, only ever capable of giving beauty and value when touched by the male. Here, the woman responds to her account of her initial reluctance in the relationship, with the 'confession' that she underestimated the man: "I placed/ A wrong on thee". She failed to appreciate that under great hands, any instrument may make perfect sounds. This claim is, of course, extravagant: an untuned instrument remains untuned no matter who plays, and as such "perfect strains" are impossible. But the male lover is superhuman, godlike - a "great" soul. In the same way that God uses sinful creatures to effect His perfect will, so the master musician can make perfect music from "defaced" instruments. "Defaced" is how the woman describes herself: to deface is to mar or disfigure. The word emphasises again that she is the victim of externally-inflicted damage. Moreover, it literally suggests that her face has been removed, denoting the erasure of her separate identity.

The final line of the poem is a marvellously subtle (and cynical) description of the traditional process of love as it has been delineated in the sonnet sequence. Love and creation of the other are simultaneous for a masculinist lover. He acts/ creates (playing the instrument: "do") and at the same time ("at one stroke") loves ("doat"). This love inevitably entails constructing the beloved, and so the woman's value lies in the masculine construction of her. The narcissism of such love - the woman reflects the man's creative power and virility back to him - is thus described.

The reuse of a prior image signals another element in the speaker's exploration of the experience of love. In Sonnet III, the metaphor of instrument/ musician is used to depict the speaker's position of relative autonomy; here it depicts the woman's position of incorporation and dependency. In the earlier instance, the woman stood outside love; here she is well and truly in love. This reworking of images, allowing her tropes to shift and slide, indicates a growing awareness of the power of metaphor to change meaning. The full implication of this power is explored in Chapter Three: for the present the speaker has yet to find a non-patriarchally defined role in this relationship, and her language explorations and metaphors convey the difficulty of this search.

## XXXIII

In Sonnet XXXIII the speaker continues to rework her figures, this time reemploying the image from Sonnet XXXI in which she plays the child to the male parent/ god figure. Sonnets XXXIII and XXXIV are companion pieces, correlating this parent-child interaction with the conventional love relationship.

Yes, call me by my pet-name! let me hear  
 The name I used to run at, when a child,  
 From innocent play, and leave the cowslips piled,  
 To glance up in some face that proved me dear  
 With the look of its eyes.

The first lines of this sonnet reveal a nostalgic desire for the carefree security and assured love of the parent-child relationship, a relationship that is now lost to the adult. She hears her lover use a "pet-name" that recalls the innocent, trusting child of the past, certain of love. The romanticising of childhood is evident in the "innocent play" and the piled "cowslips", the wild-growing plant of pastures and banks. The child of this natural, euphoric scenario is named, called, and loved, each aspect giving integral value and identity to the child. The speaker describes parental love as "some face that proved me dear/ With the look of its eyes". The child has her worth proved to her, in the look of love in the parent's eyes.

All this makes an interesting comment on the position of the speaker in adult life. Now the woman's identity is also dependent upon another, in this case the stronger figure of the man. As the previous sonnets have shown, the woman is named, called and loved by the man. It is his action that gives her value in society, and hence the correlation of the two relationships. The adult, mature and potentially self-assured woman is not a dependent, immature child, however, and so the differences between the two relationships become obvious. Such parental 'naming' is too often imprisoning and stultifying, denying the woman self-constructed identity. She assumes the negative position of silent object; she is the muse; she is the site for male exercise of identity.

Yet the speaker clearly finds some satisfaction in this role, as she invokes the happier parent-child relationship. "Yes, call me by my pet-name!" she invites him.

I miss the clear  
Fond voices, which, being drawn and reconciled  
Into the music of Heaven's undefiled,  
Call me no longer. Silence on the bier,  
While I call God .. call God!

For EBB, the deprivation in these lines was very real, grieving as she did the loss of close and dearly loved and loving family members, particularly her mother and her favourite brother Bro. With this account of loved ones' withdrawal, a shocking sense of loss interrupts the sonnet's idyllic childhood remembrances. The speaker has been left forlorn of unconditional love and affirmation of identity. Instead there is "silence on the bier" - silence not only from the now-absent loved ones, but also apparently from God, her only resource now. When she petitions Him, all she hears is the silence of the bier. The profundity of this isolation apparently excludes all non-mortal recourse. Accordingly, the speaker's syntax is disrupted, as she lapses herself into silence (in the ellipses).

The tone of the repeated phrase "call God!" is ambiguous: does this express impatience and contempt, both with self and God at absence of relief, or is this said in a tone of surprise and growing enlightenment, as the speaker realises that "God" has in fact answered? "So let thy mouth/ Be heir to those who are now exanimate." In typical fashion, the speaker supplants the divine person with the mortal male. When she calls for God in her desolation, it is the male lover who answers; his voice will replace the voices that are now lost to her. He will become 'family' for her, and in so doing he inherits their right to name and call the child/ woman - and she promises to respond with the same child-like readiness. In the image of flowers in lines 11-12 she instructs the lover to finish gathering the flowers (cowslips) she began to gather in her childhood, thus linking the pleasures and loves of those times with their love now. Their "late" love so continues the early love.

The emotional narrative in this sonnet reveals the woman's fear of isolation and loss of filial love and definition. Her appeal to the male lover

therefore is an appeal for security and safety within familial relationships. His apparent willingness to fill this need in her gratifies her; hence her final promise to exhibit the obedience and trust of a child. However, the danger evident from the whole context of the Sonnets is that this potentially fulfilling relationship for the woman is imagined within the fixed, hierarchical and repressive structures of her cultural traditions. When the woman invites the safety (and dependency) of the parent-child structure into their love, she invites a potential replaying of those repressive roles. The sonnet exemplifies how her constructions both arise out of, and are caught within, the psychology of her society.

### XXXIV

In a microcosmic replay of the central tension of Sonnets from the Portuguese, Sonnet XXXIV answers the fantasies dreamt in Sonnet XXXIII.

With the same heart, I said, I'll answer thee  
As those, when thou shalt call me by my name -  
Lo, the vain promise! is the same, the same,  
Perplexed and ruffled by life's strategy?

The danger that closed the previous sonnet is overtly discussed here, as the speaker questions the possibility of unproblematically recreating the filial roles within a romantic context. How can she answer the male lover's call with the same heart with which she answered her parents' call as a child? Her heart is not "the same", but has been "perplexed and ruffled" by the strategy of life. The language here contrasts with the simple romanticism of the last sonnet. The woman's adult experience has bewildered and troubled her: life's strategy, as it has affected her, seems to be the silencing and objectifying of women for men's pleasure/ satisfaction/ protection.<sup>19</sup> Line 4 of the British Museum manuscript reads: "If vexed by years and worn by memory" (Ratchford 102). The woman of these sonnets constantly reminds both lover and reader that she has been worn down by this strategy to a state approaching death. She can never be the innocent trusting child of the past again. Compare what emotions the adult woman brings when her lover calls:

When I answer now,  
I drop a grave thought, - break from solitude; -

Yet still my heart goes to thee ... ponder how ..  
 Not as to a single good, but all my good!  
 Lay thy hand on it, best one, and allow  
 That no child's foot could run fast as this  
 blood.

The context in which the woman lives is very different to that of the child. Innocent happy play has become gravity and solitude; filial assurance has become female sadness. And yet the speaker is fascinated to see that she still answers the lover when he calls. Despite her context - living in a society whose strategy is to deny women such as herself - she still obeys because her need of him outweighs her fear of the relationship. He is "all" her good.

The tone of this sonnet is much darker and quieter than that of its companion sonnet. The adult woman acknowledges her fantasies and reviews the actual nature of her love: caught within androcentric boundaries which her own language reproduces, and yet nevertheless choosing to work within those boundaries because of her love and need. She still describes herself as having no value without him, even though such description is part of the "strategy" of life. Hence the sadness that exudes from this sonnet: there appears to be no outside existence to ideological structures, nowhere to site their love without its being already structured.

### XXXV

The speaker continues to explore the ramifications of this most recent idea - the replacement of parental, familial love with the male lover's commitment. In Sonnet XXXV, she is painfully aware of the sacrifices involved in this substitution, and in true feminist fashion expresses concern that such sacrifices should be equally shared between the lovers:

If I leave all for thee, wilt thou exchange  
 And be all to me? Shall I never miss  
 Home-talk and blessing and the common kiss  
 That comes to each in turn, nor count it strange,  
 When I look up, to drop on a new range  
 Of walls and floors .. another home than this?

In the language of the market-place, recalling Sonnets XVIII and XIX and the exchange of the locks of hair, the speaker suggests a bargain with her lover.<sup>20</sup> The concise, immediate force of the opening sentence states the woman's case clearly and simply, and demands appropriate recompense from the male in equally clear terms. She proposes to leave "all" for him, and the correlation with EBB's life is obvious, in the planned exodus to the continent, leaving behind family and a father of enormous significance in her life.

"[A]ll" the speaker's sacrifices have been witnessed throughout the sequence: the relinquishing of personal initiative and voice in poetry to become the Muse or the product of the male poet; the concomitant loss of separate selfhood and identity; subjection to societally-defined hierarchical roles in the Victorian love structure. Now, she invites her lover to supplant the most meaningful relationships of her life hitherto: those with her family. This desire is still a sacrifice, as he must conquer both her grief and love for those people. Such alterations can only be made upon the assurance of something to take the place of their loss: the lover's committed, abiding, fulfilling presence.<sup>21</sup>

That the woman is doubtful, or at least uncertain, that such substitutions will be made, is evident in the fact that her proposals all take the form of questions. "If I [...], wilt thou?" "Shall I? [...] Wilt thou?" Indeed, there is a very real sense in which these statements are conditional ones, that the woman can only acquiesce to the situation if she is assured of the stipulations mentioned. Again, the context is mercantile, as the sonnet speaks in contractual terms.

The speaker's desire for safety and certainty in secure surroundings is clear from lines 2-6. The equality and non-threatening atmosphere described here evokes happy family life, and her realisation that she will lose these positive experiences in going with him indicates a change in perspective from that of the adoring woman for whom the lover is a saviour from a life near death. Will the male lover be able to create this positive atmosphere in their relationship? The security of home surroundings is unwillingly relinquished: she trusts that she will not find the new home "strange". The recreation here of an enclosed interior indicates the speaker's desire for security. Similarly, the height imagery continues in "look up" and "drop": the speaker works in a small horizontal



space, and yet the vertical possibilities are endless.<sup>22</sup> The woman poet/ lover may only be allowed a tiny part of social space, yet within that small sphere she explores alternatives of great depth and soaring heights.

The substitutions that the male lover must make are more than living ones - he is also to fill the place left by dead family members. This responsibility is indeed hardest, the woman acknowledges in lines 7-11, because her loving memories are inextricably mixed with the sense of loss for the loved ones. The male lover has tried to conquer her love, she knows, but to conquer her grief will be more 'trying' for him, because "grief indeed is love and grief beside". Such emotions are more profound than simple love, she asserts.

The responsibilities incumbent upon the male in this sonnet are thus clearly delineated. The speaker wants to make her needs absolutely apparent to the man, because conventionally her needs have no bearing on the relationship. And yet the tension between such self-assertion and submission to safe and yet imprisoning roles emerges in the final lines.

Alas, I have grieved so I am hard to love.  
 Yet love me - wilt thou? Open thine heart wide,  
 And fold within, the wet wings of thy dove.

Line 12 is more than the importunity and self-disparagement of the courtly lover. The speaker is aware that her marketable value in this love economy is extremely limited: she is excluded and marginalised by society, and the resulting efforts and griefs have aged and enervated her. Her sense of losses - both familial and personal - have all but destroyed her. Having made sincere but blunt calls for equality of giving in their relationship, she recognises the fact that such calls carry no weight in her society; she is pricing herself out of the market, as it were. Always behind her requests to him is uncertainty, the knowledge that her self-assertions in this relationship have little influence, and that the male lover may refuse to play the game. And so she returns to the metaphor of Sonnet XXXI, that of the parent bird brooding and gathering the fledgling. She appeals to the male as her protector and great resource, with heart large enough to encompass her. This enfolding satisfies all her desires for security and enclosure, displaced from the removed family into the parent/ god/ lover.

And yet in continuing the image from Sonnet XXXI, where she plays the fledgling bird, the speaker's image of herself as a dove here stresses that she too can fly (and potentially appropriate the higher position of the vertical imagery). Her subjectivity as poet and lover is thus implied here, and yet her vulnerability is foremost: she requires the shelter and comfort of the greater male.

This sonnet is a particularly clear example of the problematic conflict that the speaker has with her desire for independent selfhood and her sense of need for love and security. The latter leads her to seek refuge in potentially paternalistic roles which she questions. Her exploration thus becomes a circular, self-denying process of which she is painfully aware.

### XXXVI

Anxiety and uncertainty also characterise the thirty-sixth sonnet.

When we met first and loved, I did not build  
 Upon the event with marble. Could it mean  
 To last, a love set pendulous between  
 Sorrow and sorrow? Nay, I rather thrilled,  
 Distrusting every light that seemed to gild  
 The onward path, and feared to overlean  
 A finger even.

The speaker's continuing attitude to their relationship is that it must be transitory. Their initial attraction was too shaky a foundation for a relationship, and so she refuses to believe in any apparently positive developments in their friendship - the lights that "seemed to gild" their future path together. Instead, she "thrilled", and the word successfully conveys the mixture of fear, excitement and tremulous nervousness that epitomised her response to the relationship in the first half of the Sonnets. The word itself implies an internal conflict between fear and attraction - the central tension within the speaker.

As the speaker piles image upon image in these lines, she builds up a definition of the nature of their love. Again, that definition is located in the intimate, personal experience of the lovers, not in an external force. The building

metaphor of foundations and marble is followed by the image of their love as a suspended pendulum, set hanging between two sorrows - her past life and future hopelessness?<sup>23</sup> Their love is then quickly reimagined as a path lying ahead of them, gilded with hopeful but untrustworthy light. The path moves between the two sorrows: to follow it, the woman must exercise extreme caution, not to "overlean/ A finger even" and so upset the balance.

Each of these concrete images evokes an atmosphere of physical danger, of a world of uncertain foothold and constantly threatening collapse. There is no safe place in these images; hence the woman's emotional responses in the words "thrilled", "Distrusting", "feared". The images both reflect and also create her uncertainty.

And, though I have grown serene  
 And strong since then, I think that God has willed  
 A still renewable fear .. O love, O troth ..  
 Lest these enclasped hands should never hold,  
 This mutual kiss drop down between us both  
 As an unowned thing, once the lips being cold.

This uncertainty, according to these lines, is both permanent and God-ordained - the "still renewable fear" enjoins caution upon the woman. She must be watchful concerning the very source of her serenity and strength, their love and commitment to each other. "O love, O troth .." Love, throughout the Sonnets, has been the cause of her fear and anxiety, and the subject of her exploration. It has also, paradoxically, been the source of her happiness and a site upon which to exercise her poetic voice. But the latter is dependent upon the nature of their love: whether it can eschew the roles of patriarchal love. Hence her constant refiguring of their love experience, as she struggles to depict mutuality in their relationship. Lines 10-12 describe the way such mutuality should be. The speaker fears, though, that "these enclasped hands" will not hold together, that their "mutual kiss" may be disowned and "drop down" between the lovers, if the lips grow cold to such kissing. This kiss recalls Sonnet XXII, "When our two souls stand up erect and strong", in which their "lengthening wings" meet and catch fire in a mutual act.<sup>24</sup> Here, the danger is that such a love will be lost, and the thought immediately invokes the vertical imagery of hierarchy in "drop down". Her reimagined love could so easily be lost.

And Love, be false! if he, to keep one oath,  
Must lose one joy, by his life's star foretold.

What seems like a cryptic after-thought to the main sentiments of the sonnet nevertheless supports the speaker's theme of their love's fragility. "Love" will prove false if at any stage the male lover must sacrifice a future joy of his own to their mutual love. In the context of this particular sonnet, the lines seem to suggest that if he must sacrifice personal fulfillment ("by his life's star foretold" implies an ambition to be fulfilled) to "keep one oath" (note the emphasis on his obligation, not his love), the relationship would be in jeopardy. Under such conditions the male would resent the oaths of mutuality; he will have had to forgo a personal joy for the mutual joy, and the speaker has no illusions as to the outcome of such a sacrifice. The entire sonnet has stressed the precarious, vulnerable nature of woman-defined love.

### XXXVIII

The dilemma that has been elaborated in the final sonnets of this chapter has shown how the roles that the lovers play and that the speaker reconstructs in her discourse, are limiting for both, and potentially destructive for the woman, if they remain within the strictly dualist structure that is androcentric love. The physical relationship between the lovers is also absorbed into this structure. In one of the few sonnets that speaks of a physical exchange between the lovers, Sonnet XXXVIII mythologises the kisses that the male lover has bestowed upon the woman, using the same model of divinity that preserves hierarchical distinctions.

First time he kissed me, he but only kissed  
The fingers of this hand wherewith I write;  
And, ever since, it grew more clean and white,..  
Slow to world-greetings .. quick with its "Oh,  
list,"  
When the angels speak. A ring of amethyst  
I could not wear here, plainer to my sight,  
Than that first kiss.

The lover's kisses are here interpreted as a process of purification. His first kiss deferentially "but only" kissed her fingers, but this action is highly significant for

the speaker, who considers the kiss to have cleansed her from the grossness of mortal existence. She now shuns earthly contacts ("world-greetings") for heavenly ones ("angels"). His bestowal of love has idealised her; their love is very 'spiritual'.

This purification is visually obvious to the speaker, in that her hand has grown "clean and white". The preciousness of that kiss is as plain as a jewelled ring would be upon her finger. The latter reference suggests an engagement ring: the lover has not given her one, but she implies that the kiss is effectively such a token of betrothal.

There are disquieting features to this process, though. The speaker reads this token action as the male lover claiming and purifying her; she gains value as a result of his merciful actions. Specifically he has kissed her fingers "wherewith I write", indicating that his purifying influence acts firstly upon her writing capabilities, her voice as a poet. The implication is deadly: does her desire for autonomy of voice and expression require purging?<sup>25</sup> Certainly his action appears to have affected her writing muse, as she responds readily to heavenly prompts, and less to worldly ones.

The second kiss that the male lover bestows is almost casual in its proprietorial sensuality:

The second passed in height  
The first, and sought the forehead, and half missed,  
Half falling on the hair. O beyond meed!  
That was the chrism of love, which love's own crown  
With sanctifying sweetness, did precede.

Cooper writes that this kiss is "suggestive of an increasing sexuality in the carelessness of its being 'half missed/ Half falling on the hair'" (Cooper 106). It recalls Sonnet XVIII in which the woman relinquishes a lock of hair, the latter being representative of her beauty and eroticism which the lover now 'owns'. Here the man's casually paternal kiss on the forehead also includes the hair, with its erotic elements. Indeed, this kiss "passes in height" the first, not only physically, but also symbolically. His purifying colonisation is moving from the spiritual to the physical.

The speaker is once more depicting her lover in the role of God. His love cleansed the unworthy woman with "sanctifying sweetness", crowned her with love, and so made her worthy. Then followed this kiss on her head, a "chrism" or baptism of love, a seal of the cleansing and purifying act of the lover. Her response, "O beyond meed!", reiterates her unworthiness and his grace and mercy: his gifts to her are undeserved. The echo of the word "chrism" recalls Sonnet III, where the excluded courtly lover/ woman comments to the included, feted male poet that "The chrism is on thine head, - on mine, the dew". It would seem that the only way the woman receives that chrism is via love.

The regality and sense of pride that the woman can now claim as a result of the man's gifts shine out in the final three lines. His kiss is like a royal robe, "folded down/ In perfect, purple state". The image from Sonnets VIII (the "purple of thine heart") and XVI ("fling/ Thy purple round me") is used to describe the saving/ conquering generosity of the male lover. Similarly here: since the pressure of his lips and love on hers, she has "been proud", and her words have been "My Love, my own." She gains self-worth and self-respect through his love and her words are now about him and his love for her. His "perfect" love makes her likewise perfect.

In this epitome of the theme of lover as god, the speaker describes his action upon her life as a process of purification: firstly her fingers - her action and writing; secondly her forehead/hair - paternally subduing her beneath his kiss; finally her lips - enfolding and sealing her erotic and speaking life. Cooper writes: "The attempt to spiritualise physical love collapses with this kiss 'upon my lips'. ...The speaker's response to this kiss is no longer to deny it by purifying it, but to enjoy it - 'I have been proud' - and to claim it - 'My love, my own'" (106-107). I concur with Cooper's apprehension of the movement from spiritual to physical, but the context of religious purification by the lover/ god makes that movement problematic. In the speaker's depiction, the male is claiming all aspects of her existence. This rare account of physical tenderness between the lovers reveals the woman's tensions within the relationship. By portraying his kisses as divine graces, she shows conventional gratitude as both lowly woman and courtly lover, but the dualist image inevitably raises questions for her position both as a separate identity and as a poet.

Yet the speaker's invocation of love in these final lines also brings to the surface the implicit exploration of the nature of love, which has been continuing through the sequence. That exploration has seen the speaker's depiction of love move from positing an ideal external force that acts upon the lovers, to positing rather a mutual experience that defines both the lovers and love itself, and that can transform the participants. Thus, "Love" is less external, and comes instead to be related to the lover, and the mutual experience. In Sonnet XXXVIII, the speaker invokes this Love in a manner that potentially shifts the focus from the portrayal of male lover as god.

The male lover's kisses are the baptism or crown of love, culminating in the "perfect" kiss on the woman's lips. In this kiss, the woman has for the first time opportunity to respond simultaneously to his action: previously her hand and forehead could only passively receive the gift. Since that mutual kiss the speaker has "been proud", and asserted both her participation in, and ownership of, the experience. "My Love, my own" can refer both to the male lover and to the transforming, self-defining and self-affirming (being "proud") experience of love that both have created and enjoyed.

Thus, within the dilemma of these sonnets, the speaker's discourse sows the seeds for a prospective solution to her dilemma. By redefining the nature of love, her words offer a way to allow mutual involvement and affirmation for both lovers. The overt development of this strategy is the subject of the following chapter.

### XXXIX

In the final sonnet of this section, the speaker engages in an extraordinary linguistic dance, as the effort of attempting to juggle the fundamental opposition between conventional roles and feminist self-assertion becomes extreme. Here she rewrites a biblical text in an attempt to describe the nature of their love - an attempt that is nevertheless based in prevailing (religious) conventions.

Because thou hast the power and own'st the grace  
 To look through and behind this mask of me,  
 (Against which years have beat thus blanchingly  
 With their rains,) and behold my soul's true face,  
 The dim and weary witness of life's race! [...]

Two paramount points are evident from this excerpt. Firstly, the characterisation of the male lover obviously repeats the now-familiar role of lover as god. This is particularly apposite after Sonnet XXXVIII, in which the male's kisses enact his mercy and grace bestowed upon the sinner-woman. Now this sonnet opens by testifying to his "power" and "grace", the attributes of God, able to see into the heart/ mind/ soul of the woman.

Secondly, these lines focus on the nature of that heart/ mind/ soul. The speaker wants to describe a disjunction between her appearance and her internal 'reality', a distinction which suggests a belief in an absolute self, a fixed 'real' entity. She refers to her external appearance and existence as "this mask of me" which has been blanched and drawn by the "rains" or sorrows of the years. The male lover is able to see past or "through" this pale mask to the "soul's true face" behind, a "dim and weary" face that bears witness to the hard "race" that life has been. The immediate irony here is that there is no difference: the external and the internal are the same. The mask, with all its connotations of illusion, acting and false images, is basically the same as the 'reality'.

The ensuing lines go on to try and make a clearer distinction:

Because thou hast the faith and love to see,  
 Through that same soul's distracting lethargy,  
 The patient angel waiting for a place  
 In the new Heavens!

Now the male lover is required to 'see' even further, "through" the false mask of the soul, and its "distracting lethargy" - distracting because it diverts attention from the 'real' person beneath it. That 'real' person is the "patient angel" who waits to be taken to a new heaven. Some extraordinary sleight of hand is occurring here. The speaker appears to be mooting a series of receding selves, each new one apparently superseding the 'reality' of the previous self - or alternatively, the illusion and mask of the previous self. Furthermore, the male



lover must have the religious qualities of "faith and love to see" her, qualities required to accept and believe the unseeable and unprovable (which is, after all, what angels are).

All this argument tends in the same direction: the woman's assertions of a true self are shown to be her own linguistic constructions. The distinctions of "mask", "true face" and "patient angel" are her own creations, pictures she draws of herself. Why? The main thrust of the sonnets in this chapter is that the weak, worthless woman has been saved by the stronger, greater man. The speaker's contention here is that her worthlessness is a social imposition, and beneath it she instead posits an angel, a pure, valuable spiritual being. In other words, the complicated repositioning that she engages in here is primarily to assert her own worth, whilst appearing not to.

Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, the speaker is here moving toward an alternative to the strict dualism of conventional Victorian love. As we saw in Sonnet XXXVIII, this alternative suggests that concepts - like love, or male and female - can be redefined metaphorically to suggest new structures. The implications of this alternative are explored in the following chapter.

Now, however, the sonnet moves into its biblical mode:

- because nor sin nor woe,  
Nor God's infliction, nor death's neighbourhood,  
Nor all which others viewing, turn to go,..  
Nor all which makes me tired of all, self-viewed,..  
Nothing repels thee,.. Dearest, teach me so  
To pour out gratitude, as thou dost, good.

Compare Romans 8:38-39:

For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Import and structure in both are strikingly similar, emphasising that the lover will not be separated from the loved one. Nothing, the speaker rejoices, will repel the

male lover, and she lists all the past prohibitions to their love. Sin and woe appear to be the regulation description of her position prior to the man's arrival: woe is certainly evident in the opening sonnets; sin is society's characterisation of her life before the irruption of the male lover. "God's infliction" - punishment, pain or annoyance from God - recalls the early sonnets as well, particularly Sonnet II: "'Nay' is worse/ From God than from all others, O my friend!". Lines 11 and 12 keenly delineate the speaker's sense of isolation and rejection, and the resulting self-disparagement. Everything about her repels others, and indeed repels herself: when she views herself she is "tired of all". The list she has given encompasses her whole world, for on all sides she believes she faces negative judgement. And yet, Christ-like, the male lover cuts through such judgement with his "power" and "grace". Accordingly the poem ends with the appropriate response from the grateful sinner: a prayer to be taught how to pour out gratitude, in the same way and measure that the male lover pours out good.

The whole structure of the sonnet reflects this basic movement. It is one long sentence on the simple framework of "Because you... then I...". Because you have persisted and perceived the worthy person behind the surface, I will respond with appropriate gratitude. The sonnet would appear to be the culmination of the entire sequence's preoccupation with the ostensible theological basis of romantic love.

The crucial subversion that emerges from this sonnet's restatement of theological romanticism is the difference between the usual Christian scenario and the scenario here. In (EBB's) Protestant Christian theology, humankind is absolutely fallen and Christ's love is sheer grace on the unworthy. The latter half of this sonnet would seem to adopt the same picture, and yet it is undermined by the preceding octave, which departs significantly from the accepted doctrine. In this sonnet the woman responds to the dilemma of representation within repressive structures. She will not remain in the role of penitent sinner, acknowledging absolute unworthiness. Instead she asserts her value, which has been covered over and effaced by the pains and degradations of life. That "patient angel" is one of those subversive flashes that both foregrounds the prevailing structures and finds them wanting. Clearly, the Christian theological

metaphor, because it remains dualist, is inappropriate as a structure for gender relations.

### Conclusion

In Chapter One I argued that the speaker articulated her tension between submitting to prevailing social codes about love, and rejecting them to assert her separate identity. She appropriated and transformed the courtly love tradition both to depict that tension, and to provide a speaking site for herself. Finally she began to question the nature of love, and to redefine it in terms of her own experience.

In this second chapter, I have shown that the speaker explores the gender roles involved in patriarchal love, particularly through the metaphor of God and sinner. Her discourse shows how the Christian dualist model, when used as a basis for romantic love, leads to repressive hierarchical roles. Her legitimate desires, for security and transformation or simply to praise her lover (all of which precipitate her use of the divine metaphor), become mutually exclusive with her similarly legitimate desire for personal determination and a personal speaking voice. As in the courtly love structure, the roles have been reified into exclusive opposites.

Secondly, this chapter has revealed the dilemma posed by a female voice attempting to speak through such 'tainting' dualistic models. The speaker's own formulations and constructions themselves reenact the destructive hierarchies discussed in Chapter One.

Finally, this chapter has begun to show the speaker's strategy of re-using metaphors to re-define situations and concepts. In the same way that she manipulated the courtly love metaphor, the speaker (commencing in <sup>the sonnets discussed in</sup> Chapter One) reworks the concept of Love. Finally, by Sonnet XXXIX, she has begun to rework the divine metaphor to allow herself dignity and worth within it. This strategy of manipulating tropes (the focus of Chapter Three) becomes the means whereby she challenges the dualisms of Victorian gender relations.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The lover's role as God is also discussed by Stephenson (Poetry 83), Karlin (271) and Zimmerman (69).

<sup>2</sup> Karlin's source is Kintner. The above quotations come from letters dated 21 December, 1845 (Kintner 340-1), and 4 July, 1846 (844).

<sup>3</sup> Leighton also raises this point of spatial distance, this time in the height and depth imagery. She reads this imagery as further evidence of the "subtle competition between them to be the lover, not the beloved" (Elizabeth 94). Leighton's reasons for the Sonnets' self-deprecation are more tenuous: the speaker's humility makes up for her appropriation of the role of poet, and also reflects the grief that EBB still felt over Bro's death (104-05).

<sup>4</sup> II Corinthians 10-12 is particularly concerned with Paul boasting in his weakness.

<sup>5</sup> Stephenson reads this ruby image as completely positive: "The ruby, symbol of love, passion, and beauty, and reputed to give health, courage, and happiness, is a most appropriate choice. It becomes a visible sign not only of her love, but also of her new strength and joy" (Poetry 87). There is no discussion of the following lines of the sonnet.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. John 1:10, discussing the creating Word, Christ: "He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him."

<sup>7</sup> EBB lived with the constant expectation that her life would be short: the conviction that she would not survive another winter in England was a catalyst for her marrying Robert. Many commentators have tied such biographical reasons into the speaker's morbidity: Leighton, for example, points to EBB's continuing grief over Bro as the reason for the speaker's preoccupations with dying (Elizabeth 105).

<sup>8</sup> The master-slave example originated with Hegel and was picked up by early Marxist criticism.

<sup>9</sup> This practical inequity also impacts upon the master/slave relationship. As long as that relationship remains a dualism, in which the master can fix the subordinate position of the slave (physically, economically or psychologically), the latter's power is negligible.

<sup>10</sup> This female abdication of material power was, of course, enshrined in English law until 1866, when J.S. Mill presented his petition to Parliament on the rights of women. Women (including EBB) had been signing and presenting petitions concerning the rights of married women for at least ten years previous, but it took a man's voice to validate the appeals.

<sup>11</sup> Dorothy Mermin's brief comment on this sonnet overlooks its overt sense of loss. She reads the speaker as "repudiating (as many Victorian poets felt it necessary to do) art bred in isolation" (Origins 130). The "repudiation" in this sonnet does not, however, erase the prior value given to that art "bred in isolation".

<sup>12</sup> There is an interesting shift in the use of imagery in lines 5-6, as compared with Sonnet IX, where the speaker-poet avows that she "will not soil thy [the male lover-poet's] purple with my dust". Self-deprecation there has become self-assertion here: in Sonnet XXVI it is the world's dust that sullies her purple.

<sup>13</sup> An interesting variation on this idea is suggested by Mermin in a discussion of Emily Bronte's poetry. A continuing theme in Bronte's work is the effect of the male rescuer on woman's creativity: "the woman's visionary power disappears under the gaze of an intruder-rescuer - is it rescue or rape? - that objectifies and transforms her" ("The Damsel" 77).

<sup>14</sup> Zimmerman also notes in passing the transference of the God-humanity relationship onto gender relations. The woman "must relinquish her direct relationship with God, standing henceforward in relation to her husband as he does to God and as the church does to Christ. Her sovereignty must give way" (69). Zimmerman importantly indicates the speaker's sacrifice in her article, but she concludes that in the context of a marriage poem, which is how she reads the Sonnets, this hierarchical relationship becomes acceptable.

<sup>15</sup> "And the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being" (Genesis 2:7).

<sup>16</sup> See discussion below p.106ff.

<sup>17</sup> The use of "prodigal" in the prior line evokes reminders of the biblical prodigal son, who required forgiveness and assurance of love from the merciful father. The child imagery that the speaker-poet has used further elaborates this echo.

<sup>18</sup> "[H]e saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him" (Matthew 3:16).

<sup>19</sup> The OED's definition of 'perplexed' reads: "in doubt and anxiety about a matter on account of its intricate nature". The speaker-poet used the same word in Sonnet XXX; she clearly sees it as aptly describing her situation. Words such as these, that provide linguistic touchstones for Sonnets from the Portuguese, are striking evidence of the fundamentally troubled nature of the sonnets. They have obviously been overlooked for many years by critics who chose to read the sonnets as unalloyed romantic effusions, exalting the lover and the relationship.

<sup>20</sup> Mary Rose Sullivan emphasises the "keynote of 'exchange'" which is struck in the letters between EBB and Robert Browning: "each poet has something to offer the other, both will benefit and neither will be debtors" (Sullivan 56). Sullivan draws interesting comparisons with the poetry that each wrote during and after the courtship period, notably the Sonnets and "Saul", and she finds much interchange between the two works and writers. She does not, however, question the anxieties of hierarchy that she notes in EBB's letters and poetry, and she

unproblematically comments that "Later re-readings of their courtship letters must have made it clear to EBB ... that, in their infinitely complex *Ars Poetica* 'giving and taking by turns,' much of what he gratefully 'took' from her was essentially a re-working of ideas that had originated with him" (65, emphasis mine).

<sup>21</sup> The British Museum manuscript has "thee" and "be" in the first sentence underlined, thereby emphasizing the obligatory nature of the request.

<sup>22</sup> See earlier discussion of this metaphor of distance. Both Mermin and Stephenson expand the metaphor to include the opposition of "bleak wide-open spaces" with enclosed domestic interiors (Stephenson 79). Mermin comments that "The reader may feel uncomfortably hemmed in, but the speaker usually imagines enclosure as protective, openness as allowing separation" (*Origins* 139). Mermin briefly discusses this trope as enacting some of the main themes from Victorian art, such as women shut up in confined spaces; the image also reiterates the speaker as the introverted, isolated, self-doubting Victorian poet. Stephenson is also brief: the metaphor of enclosure is an expression of the speaker's "desire for a place where love becomes intensely concentrated" (79).

<sup>23</sup> Before the lover's entrance into her life, the speaker envisaged only death for herself. See Sonnet VII.

<sup>24</sup> See discussion below, p.95ff.

<sup>25</sup> This recalls Sonnet VII, in which "the face of all the world is changed" for the speaker-poet by the advent of her lover. The final lines of that sonnet relate how her "lute and song" are now "only dear/ Because thy name moves right in what they say". Her song, previously loved for itself, is now only valuable inasmuch as it extols the male lover.

## CHAPTER THREE

## LOVE AND LANGUAGE

The previous chapters have shown how the woman speaker of the Sonnets confronts and linguistically grapples with her society's construction of gender relationships. It has become clear that she reproduces that structure within herself and her language, and yet she also exposes the restrictive binarisms of that structure. Her conflicting and apparently irreconcilable responses to desire lead her to seek an alternative to the roles and rules of love as mooted by Victorian society. The pervasive depth and breadth of hegemonic values require her to examine the most basic philosophical assumptions of gender relations. Specifically, she attempts to redefine love, refuting the ideology that equates love with a hierarchical masculinist narcissism.

This third chapter shows how the speaker comes to an awareness of the transformative power of her own metaphors, enabling her to redefine "love" in terms of mutuality and self-affirmation.

## XIII

There are several early speculations in the sequence as to the role that language has in gender relationships. Sonnet II speaks of the power of language, traditionally held by the God of Victorian society and his proxy, man. Woman, the third element in this triangle of power relations, has no language and hence no power: she is intended to be the silent, listening and excluded object. This view of language as power, as the key and mode to action within the hegemony, is attested to in Sonnet X, where the woman revels in the power of her words "I love thee" to transfigure herself, glorifying and vindicating her to the male lover.

Yet in the central sonnets the woman comes to modify this perception of language and its involvement in love relations as an instrument of power. She

views it as an instrument of the hegemony; using it involves her in the androcentric structure that is so problematic for her.

Sonnet XIII is a crucial enunciation of this fear, and so launches the speaker's developing concept of an alternative love which is related rather to a new concept of 'woman-self'. In Sonnet XIII, the male lover has obviously requested that the woman speak her love, but she refuses the request, seeing it as a threat to her love and therefore to her subject self as woman.

And wilt thou have me fashion into speech  
The love I bear thee, finding words enough,  
And hold the torch out, while the winds are rough,  
Between our faces, to cast light on each? -  
I drop it at thy feet.

The thought of having to wrestle with her fiery emotions and desires, moulding and 'fashioning' to give them verbal form, is repugnant to her. Her love is fire, formless, or rather having a constantly changing form. He would have her contain it, bring it to him as a "proof".

Her repugnance arises from several motives. Firstly, how can she find words "enough" to contain in words the flux of her "woman-love"? Clearly the woman considers language here as an enemy, fixing and imprisoning.

Secondly, the lines contain an implicit questioning of the male lover's motives for this request. The words she fashions must be placed between them as a torch, to cast light on their faces, to expose their positions. What will that light show? Inevitably the situation already described: his male-designated power to create love and worship in a lesser female, this endorsement of his phallicism. She believes that she is required to reiterate their respective positions in this love relationship by a verbal expression of love. He demands "proof/ In words, of love hid in me out of reach", but the early sonnets show why she hides this love: "To live on still in love, and yet in vain,.. / To bless thee, yet renounce thee to thy face" (Sonnet XI). Her sense of self will be annihilated when she surrenders entirely, and the division between her self and his other which perpetuates her sense of a separate consciousness, will collapse into incorporation.<sup>1</sup> Language is here a static light of exposure, used to reproduce



the patriarchal structure. So she hides her love within herself, "out of reach" of him, which is why he now asks for proof of it.

A third reason for her repugnance is her fear at what might happen when she holds the torch of her love out. The winds (of cultural requirements?) are rough between their faces - might they not extinguish her torch of love? Demands for her acquiescence to masculinist love structures that efface and crush her subjectivity, endanger the love she has for him.

I cannot teach  
My hand to hold my spirit so far off  
From myself .. me ..

The torch of love she holds is now also her spirit. Both her love and her spirit are described in terms of fire throughout the sonnets, and both are used almost interchangeably. "Spirit" is an elusive term, defined variously as "the animating or vital principle in man ... the soul of a person ... the sentient part of a person ... the emotional part of man ... courage; disposition to assert oneself" (OED). The definitions suggest the assertive soul and consciousness of the speaker, which she sees as inextricably mixed with her love. The latter arose out of the fiercely maintained selfhood of the opening sonnets, and that love has allowed a new voice and rhetoric to her endangered selfhood. The danger of exposing that selfhood-in-love is, however, frightening. She cannot divorce her love from her subject self ("From myself .. me ..") - qualities must remain together, mixed.

Nay, let the silence of my woman-hood  
Commend my woman-love to thy belief ...

This classically feminist phrase conveys the situation of the speaker in all its ambivalence: silence is the heritage of the other - effectively non-existence - and yet is paradoxically what this woman wants in order to maintain her integrity of selfhood. The dilemma that this desire for silence proposes, refusing incorporation into the symbolic order but necessarily remaining outside it in silence, is an impossible position for the speaker.

This latter perspective has modern echoes in the work of many recent post-structuralist French feminists. They argue for a feminine language that is

outside the language of patriarchy. To use language is to enter phallogentric discourse, because patriarchy has appropriated language and established the structures of syntax, grammar, logic, naming - all dualistically restricting and defining (confining) language's natural play. How can a subject find a language use that reflects an unconfined, non-dualistic, open perspective?

At this point any unanimity in psychoanalytical French feminist theory fragments, as some theorists argue that such a subversive language can be achieved within society, while others, such as Julia Kristeva, hold that we can only work within the existing structures, constantly deconstructing and subverting them to reveal the basic dualistic, logocentric assumptions mentioned above. Discussion on the nature of such a feminine language, and whether or not it can enter consciousness, has close analogy with EBB's description here. Such a language is effectively silent in patriarchy, because it explodes the boundaries of 'commonsense'; it is a language of totality, not based on specificity and hierarchical dualisms, as is phallogentric language.<sup>2</sup>

I do not wish to make too many claims for EBB's feminism, but it does seem that the speaker's concepts of woman's love and selfhood prefigure the descriptions of the French feminists. Certainly she describes her love as different from his; it is "woman-love".<sup>3</sup>

Seeing that I stand unwon, however wooed,  
And rend the garment of my life, in brief,  
By a most dauntless, voiceless fortitude,  
Lest one touch of this heart conveys its grief.

She is "unwon", however he tries to woo her like a prize, and these phrases all suggest the proprietorial nature of the struggle here. Chapter One showed that this stance of rejection entails a huge cost. Her refusal to allow her passion by surrendering creates a self-inflicted rip in the garment of her life. But she is "dauntless" (intrepid, not crushed into submission) in order to retain a "voiceless fortitude", staying outside his words and his control. Rather than speak, and (she believes) be appropriated, she will remain silent in her love, and deliver herself up to grief.

The final line leaves us with this miserable dilemma. Her attitude of defensive silence masks emotions of thwarted love and grief, which she would readily express. The speaker has moved from her difficulties in speech in the opening lines to a point where she now feels how easily she could betray her position and self to his importuning touch.<sup>4</sup> This early sonnet already shows the woman speaker wanting to redefine her conception of love, to emphasise a different love to that her culture proposes. Yet her definition here leaves her in an impasse, maintaining a silent desire that necessitates its endless non-fulfillment.

## XXI

Sonnet XXI contrasts dramatically with Sonnet XIII, and yet the same philosophical assumption underpins both. On the one hand is the language of phallogentric culture and presumably the male lover; on the other is the woman poet's province, the silent world of feminine love. In the earlier sonnet, the speaker refused to enter this patriarchal language; here she seems to rejoice in the male lover's use of that language. Her joy is problematic and short-lived, though, and soon her fears and philosophical difficulties assert themselves.

The previous sonnet, Sonnet XX, has described the male lover as the god of language, who burst through the speaker's winter of isolation and silence, to bring spring and release to the frozen, psychically dead woman. His "personal act or speech" "thrill[s]" her. The same rejoicing attitude sparkles on the surface of Sonnet XXI. The male lover has spoken words of love, which appear to have effected the loosening of chains and arrival of spring mentioned in Sonnet XX. The speaker wishes to celebrate the effect by repeating it: she demands a constant reiteration of his words, a multitude of words.

Say over again, and yet once over again,  
That thou dost love me. Though the word repeated  
Should seem a 'cuckoo-song,' as thou dost treat it,  
Remember never to the hill or plain,  
Valley and wood, without her cuckoo-strain,  
Comes the fresh Spring in all her green completed.

The repetition seems unnecessary to him, and he "treat[s] it" as a repetitive, almost mindless utterance. She, however, attributes deep significance to the words, because they denote her rescue and awakening by him. This significance seems to be lost on him.<sup>5</sup> Her celebration is further undermined by her romantic idea that the Spring will never come complete without the cuckoo's call. The symbolic implication is that her spring - her rebirth - is similarly incomplete without this avowal of love from him. But Spring is not dependent upon a cuckoo; if anything the cuckoo is dependent upon spring. Does his statement of love depend upon her 'awakening', upon her joining his androcentric world of differentiation and language?

She continues:

Beloved, I, amid the darkness greeted  
By a doubtful spirit-voice, in that doubt's pain  
Cry,.. 'Speak once more.. thou lovest!'

Here she imagines herself back in undifferentiated darkness (like the snow of XX), but the lover's words dispel the fear and loneliness by bringing light and distinction. The earlier Morgan manuscript replaces "in that doubt's pain" with "in mortal pain", making the distinction between his spirit-voice of almost divine nature and her mortal, dying nature (Ratchford 76). But it is a doubtful voice: she is not sure of it, which is why she asks it to repeat itself. Very close beneath the surface of her jubilation lies the fear that his words are not absolute nor reliable, but may betray her. Her language slips and reveals this fear:

Who can fear  
Too many stars, though each in heaven shall roll -  
Too many flowers, though each shall crown the year?  
Say thou dost love me, love me, love me - toll  
The silver iterance!                    (emphasis mine)

As if to block the fearful undercurrent in the sonnet, she lapses into child-like sing-song repetition of the crucial words "love me". Ironically, the reiteration has an opposite effect to reassurance, and the line turns into a plea, as if the woman begs the man to continue loving her. This "silver iterance" is a bell's peal that "toll[s]" the good news, but that word also carries the negative connotation of a death knell.

The accumulating reservations emerge fully in the last lines of the sonnet: "only minding, Dear,/ To love me also in silence, with thy soul." This love in and of words - many, many words - is finally not trustworthy: only the ideal love of silence she believes can be untainted by their culture. And so the apparently rapturous, but more accurately desperate, pleas of the sonnet end in an awareness of their futility. The undercurrent of anxiety slowly surfaces, and moves the speaker into further redefinitions of love, as she considers the way she would have their love really be.

## XXII

When our two souls stand up erect and strong,  
 Face to face, silent, drawing nigh and nigher,  
 Until the lengthening wings break into fire  
 At either curved point, - what bitter wrong  
 Can the earth do to us, that we should not long  
 Be here contented?

Words fail finally. The ideal love that the speaker envisions between herself and her lover transcends the structures of society, and even of theology. In this relationship, they two are equal in power, voice, subjectivity. The speaker refers to themselves as souls to indicate the transcendence of the relationship, and this also continues the link she has made in Sonnet XIII between love and spirit. Here, their souls are upright and strong, confronting and accepting each other as they stand face to face.

Their relationship grows in mutuality; they merge into each other in a sharing that does not deny the other's subjectivity. These lines closely approximate the interchange described in Hélène Cixous' The Laugh of the Medusa. She writes:

I want all. I want all of me with all of him. Why should I deprive myself of a part of us? I want all of us. Woman of course has a desire for a "loving desire" and not a jealous one. But not because she is gelded; not because she's deprived and needs to be filled out, like some wounded person who wants to console herself or seek vengeance. I don't want a penis to decorate my body with. But I do desire the other for the other, whole and entire, male or female...

Other love.- In the beginning are our differences. The new love dares for the other, wants the other ... [The woman is] without the fear of ever reaching a limit; she thrills in our becoming. And we'll keep on becoming! She cuts through defensive loves, motherages, and devourations ... she scorns at an Eros dynamic that would be fed by hatred. Hatred: a heritage, again, a reminder, a duping subservience to the phallus. To love, to watch-think-see the other in the other, to despecularize, to unhoard. Does this seem difficult? It's not impossible, and this is what nourishes life - ... a love that rejoices in the exchange that multiplies (Marks and de Courtivron 262; 263-264).

More might be cited here, but these extracts suffice to show the similarity in both writers' vision of a love that is outside phallocentrism. Both women assert female desire that is not defined by male desire or needs; both women assert the difference of each lover and yet the possibility of a giving, interplaying, explorative love. Both women deny the traditional hierarchical love 'economy', based on male power and misogyny. Both women emphasise touch over sight. And perhaps most tellingly, both women believe such an alternative love is possible.

The speaker describes the interplay of souls as they "draw nigh and nigher", until their wings meet at the points and "break into fire". This fire symbolises both the soul and its creative power, and yet there is also great physicality as this erotic interplay of spirits sparks off immense creative energy. Two interplaying subjects - particularly poets - create more power together than apart. The image also suggests the speaker's redefined concept of love (fire also means love in the woman's language constructions - see Sonnet XIII above) as a process of sharing and defining between two subjects, a process that has power to transform.

The major part of this sonnet, though, is more concerned with the external world's reaction to this union than the union itself. That reaction is indicative of the highly unusual nature of the relationship, which attempts to pose an alternative to patriarchal gender relations. In this equality of subjectivity, the lovers are content: what can the world of patriarchy do to us, the speaker asks, that could remove this contentment? The lovers would necessarily operate outside, and therefore largely unaffected by, that world. Nevertheless, their

unique relationship of equality stands in direct opposition to the society of their day.

But the relationship's uniqueness goes even further.

Think. In mounting higher,  
The angels would press on us, and aspire  
To drop some golden orb of perfect song  
Into our deep, dear silence. Let us stay  
Rather on earth, Beloved, - where the unfit  
Contrarious moods of men recoil away  
And isolate pure spirits, and permit  
A place to stand and love in for a day,  
With darkness and the death-hour rounding it.

Because the lovers' communion will be silent, refusing to participate in language that differentiates, names and fixes, any language use is abhorrent to them.

"Think", she urges him, and the peremptory tone of the command again reinforces her selfhood, 'in heaven we would be forced to join language'. Even the "golden orb of perfect [angels'] song" is unacceptable to the lovers because it is oppressive ("press[ed] on us") in their "deep, dear silence".

Such aesthetic oppression makes earth a better bet for the lovers. There "men" tend to recoil from and isolate "pure spirits". The overt declarations of superiority assert the moral right of this relationship in that the "moods of men" are "unfit" and contrary in comparison with the lovers' purity of spirit.

Despite the (literally) high-flown fantasy that the speaker engages in here, the sonnet ends in a tone of sombre realism. The isolation that the lovers are permitted in this world is only temporary: the final two lines show that their lifetimes are but "a day" in which to love, and that death ends the relationship. The 'd' alliteration of these lines hammers home the truth of their love: its transience is closed into darkness.

The emotional trajectory of this sonnet - soaring from a stance of equality to the heights of angels, then returning to earth, and finally dropping to darkness and death - plays out the speaker's response to her ideal of silent love. Her distrust of words leads her to making a myth of transcendent silence. But her

own need to speak of that silence, not least in these sonnets, shows her the impossibility of existing outside language, and further, of escaping its consciousness-structuring. Her ideal love, then, is impossible from the start, and this fantasy, like Hélène Cixous', remains utopian.

#### XXIV

Despite the impossibility that closed Sonnet XXII, the speaker still desires at this point to represent their love as unique and almost transcendent. And so in Sonnet XXIV she returns to the theme of the world's enmity towards their morally valid love. In one of the most memorable images of the sequence, the speaker describes the world as a pocket knife whose blade closes into itself.

Let the world's sharpness like a clasping knife  
Shut in upon itself and do no harm  
In this close hand of Love, now soft and warm,  
And let us hear no sound of human strife  
After the click of the shutting.

Love is like a closed hand, "soft and warm" - another image of safe enclosure. The danger of the knife's sharpness is turned upon itself, but the hand that holds it is safe. The world's "sharpness" to the lovers' ideal relationship of equality is thus nullified: indeed, the superiority of the hand of love is implicit in that it holds and surrounds the knife, the world of human strife. These two points - the moral superiority of their love over the world's pettiness, and the safety within that love - are developed in the remainder of the sonnet.

The speaker's close proximity to the male lover in lines 5-6 recalls the surrender of Sonnet XVI (the "vanquished soldier" sonnet), where she also physically leans on him. Whereas the earlier sonnet sees this "life to life" movement as subsuming her self into his, in this later sonnet her reliance upon the male lover is a positive thing, because it is safe. The change in attitude denotes the speaker's constant conflict between rebellion and surrender. Here, the woman's pleasure in the safety the male lover offers is obvious, and she describes her guardian as a charm - a supernatural force. The male lover is once more assuming extra-human resources in the speaker's mind.



The world's resources, by comparison, are feeble. The "stab" they offer (extending the knife image) occasions her no alarm. Indeed, the lover's enemies are but "worldlings", and the suffix on this contemptuous word itself suggests diminution. They are, after all, "weak to injure".<sup>6</sup>

Very whitely still

The lilies of our lives may reassure  
 Their blossoms from their roots, accessible  
 Alone to heavenly dews that drop not fewer;  
 Growing straight, out of man's reach, on the hill.  
 God only, who made us rich, can make us poor.

In contrast to the moral weakness of the world, the lovers are compared to lilies, the flowers of purity. The rather tortuous syntax emphasises "very whitely still", to indicate the continuing moral purity and righteousness of the 'flower' of their lives, their love. The pivotal point of this rather obscure image, though, is that these "lilies" of love continue to be reassured of God's endorsement: He sends the "heavenly dews" that feed the roots, and through them, the flowers. There is no decrease in these dews: their continuous abundance affirms God's protection.<sup>7</sup> The speaker goes further, to imply that this divine aid is exclusively theirs: their roots "alone" are accessible to His beneficence, and their flowers of love grow (morally) straight, "out of man's reach" on the hill above mankind. The lovers' relationship is right, good, divinely inspired and endorsed, and superior to common humanity. This superiority protects their relationship from mortal attack, because only God can take away what He Himself gave.

The speaker thus celebrates their love of equality, which her emerging philosophy has defined as pure and good, greater than their tainted world. In now presenting God as on the side of the lovers, she revises her first impressions in the opening sonnets of the sequence, that God was representative of her oppressive society. Now, God is seen as transcending that culture, and becomes in this sonnet, an advocate of the speaker's redefined love of equality.

## XXVIII

In Sonnet XXVIII the speaker reviews the course of her relationship with her lover via the letters she has received from him:

My letters! all dead paper,.. mute and white! -  
 And yet they seem alive and quivering  
 Against my tremulous hands which loose the string  
 And let them drop down on my knee to-night.

The woman has seen the letters as dead (white and silent), past history. Now, however, the letters appear ("seem") to be alive, fluttering and quivering against her hand like creatures imprisoned within the string, struggling to be freed, which occurs when the speaker "looses" that string and "let[s]" or allows them to flutter into her lap. In this personification the speaker's presence or action seems to revive the letters. The words can be read again, to do their work of communication again:

This said,.. he wished to have me in his sight  
 Once, as a friend: this fixed a day in spring  
 To come and touch my hand ... a simple thing,  
 Yet I wept for it! - this,.. the paper's light ..  
 Said, Dear, I love thee; and I sank and quailed  
 As if God's future thundered on my past.  
 This said, I am thine - and so its ink has paled  
 With lying at my heart that beat too fast.

The letters - or, more specifically, the words - speak again, apparently recreating the voice of the male lover in the woman's mind. His will, authority and naming power are what the speaker reads: "he wished", he "fixed a day", he "said" his love. The words revisit the speaker's apprehension of the male lover's physical and sensory power in the earlier sonnets, recalling his wish to have her "in his sight" like the proprietary gaze first encountered in Sonnet III. In another letter he fixes a day "in spring" to come and "touch" her hand: the God-like touch of power and reanimation that awakens the woman from her 'winter'.

The speaker's reading of these revived words seems to create the same response in her that she had at the time of the letters' first receipt. That response is not simple pleasure or anticipation: her hands are tremulous - and

this means more than "trembling", which was the word originally used in the Morgan manuscript (Ratchford 90). "Tremulous" carries overtones of misgiving, suggesting that the speaker fears what the letters say. A "simple thing" such as a touch on the hand causes her to weep, perhaps in joy, and yet the overwhelming tone of the sonnet is one of apprehension and trepidation. The speaker fears language as a means of asserting power over her, the receiver.

This fear is apparent in lines eight to ten, where words from the letters are actually quoted for the first time. It amazes the speaker that the "light", unimportant paper can carry such heavy communications as "Dear, I love thee". This avowal overwhelms the woman. She "sinks", again using vertical imagery of dropping and submerging. She "quail[s]": "to lose heart, be cowed; ...to bring into subjection by fear" (OED). It is as if God has spoken, she says in line ten, and earlier readings expand this thought. The Morgan manuscript begins with "As if God's future gathered on my past!", but "gathered on" is replaced with "straight absorbed", which is finally replaced with the present reading of "thundered on". The speaker envisions her life and its past as being absorbed into the will and ordaining future of the lover-god. The avowal of love by the man is read by her as indicating his readiness to move upon her life and take it over, and so she quails before such thunder. She fears the implicit threat (thunder is a threat of storm) that the words "I love you" can mean from a (Victorian) man.

These lines compare closely with the earlier fears of the sonnets. Overshadowing; subjection; erasure of personal past; submersion into the male's future: these are the repeated concerns of the sonnet sequence.

The final two lines of the above extract move the emphasis back again to the words in the letters. The lines suggest that her heartbeats have faded the ink on the page, specifically his words "I am thine". She fears that his declaration will fade with the words on the page; that his love only has reality in those written words.

The sonnet's emphasis is thus on the words in the letters. These words at first seem to be lifeless and transparent, the inanimate tool of communication.

But they are not: the speaker perceives that language remains 'alive': the words have life and meaning for her when she reads them again. Indeed, her rereading of those words constructs her experience of love, and her apprehension of her male lover. Her "loos[ing]" of the living words, and entering into negotiation with them by rereading them, describes the process of post-structuralist reading (and writing). As she reads, she is read: the process of interaction between text and consciousness shapes her feelings about, and response to, the relationship suggested in the letters. And as she writes, she is written: her own metaphors (of sinking and quailing, or of God-like thunder) both reflect and shape her response.

This process is evident even in the final two lines of the sonnet, which formulate one of the most ambiguous statements of the entire sequence. The speaker refrains from quoting words from a particular letter, lest their purpose - and possibly all the lover's words - be exposed as failing. (Perhaps this is a specific biographical reference concerning RB's plans to take EB out of England - a plan that could never be revealed to the 'tyrant', Mr. Barrett.) Whatever the referent, the speaker's fear is that repetition of the living words may well demonstrate their negative result.

The power of words thus strikes the speaker negatively in this sonnet. Those words recreate her early fears, but she is unaware of her own involvement in constructing this response. Her reading of those living words, and writing living words of her own, is a process whose power she has yet to appreciate.

## XXIX

The speaker's growing awareness of the role language plays in their relationship prompts the subject of the next sonnet. Here, she deplores the almost inevitable imaginative construction that constitutes her love and her perception of her lover. "I think of thee!", she begins. The cry is joyous and yet exasperated, because

my thoughts do twine and bud  
 About thee, as wild vines, about a tree,  
 Put out broad leaves, and soon there's nought to see  
 Except the straggling green which hides the wood.

Her complaint is that her thoughts - her words, her image-making, particularly in these sonnets - slowly efface the 'real' man. His real presence is lost behind her constructions of him. The implication of the metaphor is that her thoughts and constructions are parasitic like the vine, depending but also preying upon the actual person. But the metaphor also makes other interesting associations. The man, in his physical reality, is the tree, a powerful, superior phallic presence of rigid strength and permanence. In contrast, the woman is the "wild vine", flowing and sprawling, natural and untamed, uncontrolled by the man. The action of the vine in obscuring the mighty tree, while ostensibly deplored, is nevertheless described in positive, energetic terms. The woman's creative thoughts that obscure the 'real' male "twine and bud" in fertile, productive activity. She puts out broad, healthy leaves. The male has become the site, or muse, for the female poet.

The speaker's tension between submission and self-assertion is still evident, however, because the metaphor is profoundly ambivalent, both rejoicing in and yet regretting the woman's linguistic power as artist, representing her lover in metaphors like these. Moreover, a parasitic vine begins by depending upon the tree for its sustenance, and yet ends by controlling and smothering the tree. The metaphor thus applied to the lovers' position remains dualistic, offering only competing positions of power and sup<sup>p</sup>ression.

Yet, O my palm-tree, be it understood  
 I will not have my thoughts instead of thee  
 Who art dearer, better! rather instantly  
 Renew thy presence!

In biographical terms, Elizabeth believes she has been too long separated from Robert and has had to rely on memory and imagination for recollection of him; here she pleads for him to come to her and so supersede her thoughts. But again the wider context of the nature of the love relationship for Victorian women moves her demand onto a deeper plane. The phrase "instantly/ Renew thy presence!" attributes a miraculous supernatural ability of instantaneous

appearance to the lover, like that of the risen Christ.<sup>8</sup> Further, her demand here is for absolute presence, bypassing the language that appears to be obtruding in their relationship. In a cry that echoes the plea for a silent, idealistic love (in Sonnet XXII), the speaker reiterates her call for her male lover's renewed presence.

As a strong tree should,  
Rustle thy boughs and set thy trunk all bare,  
And let these bands of greenery which insphere thee,  
Drop heavily down,.. burst, shattered, everywhere!

She wants the referent, not the sign; the presence, not the absence; desire fulfilled, not desire. In Lacanian terms, she wants what is finally outside this consciousness, because desire is the condition of human consciousness: always split, consciousness desires a unity that would denote the end of consciousness and differentiation. Like the call for the silent interplaying love that escapes the structuring processes of language, this absolute presence indicates absolute unity.

Because, in this deep joy to see and hear thee  
And breathe within thy shadow a new air,  
I do not think of thee - I am too near thee.

In his absolute presence, distinctions dissolve and unity is achieved. She sees, hears and breathes with him, becomes part of him, "within" his shadow. Vivaly, her thoughts are subsumed by his presence, she is "too near" him to think. Her consciousness has effectively ceased. In this projected, anticipated unity, her joy is deep and complete, satisfied desire. The Lacanian model of fulfilled desire in unity and loss of differentiating consciousness is thus suggested, and yet the speaker imagines it as occurring within heterosexual distinctions. As a result, the process described remains a replay of the loss of female self into androcentric love. Finally, this whole fantasy is purely a product of the speaker's imagination, and is itself an unfulfilled desire.

That fact is implicit in the sonnet. It lies beneath the speaker's rapturous fantasies, and emerges deconstructively in her metaphor. In lines 8-11, she tells her lover what he "should" do, as "a strong tree". In her fantasy of the phallic male restoring his absolute presence to the delighted woman, she imagines a

tree shaking itself free of the vigorous parasitic vine that "insphere[s]" it. "Strong tree(s) should" be able to do this. The image, of course, is fantastic: rigid trees cannot suddenly and decisively shake off a vine in this manner. And her demand for her lover to act in this way is similarly fantastic and impossible, because she is asking him to short-circuit the whole process of consciousness, specifically our structuring of experience in language. She would have him silence her thoughts, and so her constructions of him. The only means by which he can do this, of course, is by removing her consciousness altogether, and killing her. Like the greenery of the vine, which falls heavily from the now-bare tree, she would be "burst, shattered, everywhere!", diffused and broken down.

Angela Leighton comments perceptively on this sonnet when she writes:

This sense of the beloved's absence is what makes the poem both strong and false ... For as long as the speaker thinks her poem, she must miss the presence which supports it. Yet the alternative is that the object renews its 'presence' by depriving her of the power of her poetic art. 'I do not think of thee - I am too near thee' would be the end of the poems if she were truly content to be in Robert's 'shadow'. Instead, the exchange of her thoughts for thoughtlessness is one she can afford to make, having written the poem. The self-renouncing modesty of her intention is undermined by the self-conscious evidence of all the poem's 'straggling green' ([Elizabeth](#) 109-110).

Sonnet XXIX shows the speaker's continuing suspicion of language, now turned onto her own metaphors. As she remains within the dualist models of gender relations, language is still related to power struggles. She recognises that in appropriating the role of poet she has also appropriated the power of naming. In her own experience, this can be a destructive power, defining and restricting individuals into repressive roles. It is destructive here because it intrudes upon the Romantic idealism of their silent love of absolute presence.

Yet, as Leighton indicates, the sonnet also enjoys the very process of metaphorising that it ostensibly decries. The metaphor of her images as healthy, budding vines celebrates the process of image-making, and her demand for her lover's image-shattering presence is nevertheless couched in the same vivid images. Her representation of the lover as phallic tree is precisely that - her representation. The tension in the speaker's discourse between submission to

conventional structures of love, and self-assertive rejection of those structures, has moved onto the different plane of language. Now the woman is caught between her conception of an idealist, Romantic love of silent presence, and her own, self-assertive delight in tropes, and their potentially transforming power.

## XXX

The tensions within language and love continue to concern the speaker in this thirtieth sonnet.

I see thine image through my tears tonight,  
 And yet to-day I saw thee smiling. How  
 Refer the cause? - Beloved, is it thou  
 Or I? who makes me sad?

Contrary to the expectations of the previous sonnet, here the lover's presence does not effect the wonderful union that the speaker so desired.<sup>9</sup> Rather, the lover's presence is overtaken by the woman's thoughts: though he smiled today, her image of him is a tearful one. How can this be? she asks. The answer is apparent in her next question: the start-line emphasis given to "Or I?" together with the break in the sentence effected by the extra question-mark, points to her own perspective as creating her sadness. The vocabulary of representation - "thine image" - foregrounds this constructive perspective. Which is more real, "thee" or "thine image"? The sonnet continues:

The acolyte  
 Amid the chanted joy and thankful rite,  
 May so fall flat, with pale insensate brow,  
 On the altar-stair. I hear thy voice and vow  
 Perplexed, uncertain, since thou art out of sight,  
 As he, in his swooning ears, the choir's amen.

Like the attendant at the altar, who in the midst of the joy of the Eucharist (notably celebrating Christ's presence) unexpectedly faints, so she, in the midst of love, weeps with sadness. In both cases the emotion and experience are self-produced, but are nevertheless real. That experience is perplexity and uncertainty, rather than the trust and faith that should mark lovers. The metaphor is again deliberate: the woman is the devoted follower and servant of the god-like lover. She, like the young acolyte, is overcome in the divine



presence (before the altar) of the lover's smile. And yet that apparently divine presence does not create joy and trust: the apprehension (in both senses of the word) of the acolyte woman is more powerful than even that divine presence. The male lover's voice and promise (his words) are as distant and confused as the choir's amen in the ears of the fainting altar-boy.

Beloved, dost thou love? or did I see all  
The glory as I dreamed, and fainted when  
Too vehement light dilated my ideal,  
For my soul's eyes? Will that light come again,  
As now these tears come ... falling hot and real?

The overwhelming feeling of these lines is uncertainty, anxiety and implicit fear. She doubts the apparent actuality of her experience: was her 'sight' of him in smiling glory and full of loving words simply a dreaming vision, as the altar boy sees in the height of spiritual engagement? The resulting question is crucial, for it addresses the substantiality of his love. "Beloved, dost thou love?"

The lines quoted above again push the emphasis onto the confusion arising from the inescapability of her thoughts and images. Her apprehension of him and his love now seems to be simply her dream, and the vocabulary of these lines supports the insubstantiality of her fond hopes. Her dreaming imagination has "dilated" his "ideal", glorious love to a point where it overwhelms her "soul's eyes" in a self-initiated spiritual overload.

The confusion and fear that underlie this sonnet - is the man's love real or is it a figment of a wish-filled imagination? - are summed up strikingly in the last question of the sonnet. The speaker asks if the hope-filled light of her imaginative construction of her lover will return, to suggest his love and fidelity to her. Further, if it returns, will it be real, as real as the tears she now cries? The complexities behind this question expose the speaker's growing realisation that her visions and thoughts of her lover are her reality, her experience of him. But this becomes problematic: which of her thoughts is more real? Is her vision of his masterful ideal presence, overwhelming and full of glory, as real as her feelings of perplexity and uncertainty? Or is her doubt about his love and the nature of their relationship the stronger perception? Certainly the whole mood of

the sonnet suggests the latter, and it is strongly represented by the final physical actuality of hot, real tears.

### XXXVII

Sonnet XXXVII returns to the now-central discussion of the speaker's fictive creations of the male lover. In this sonnet (one of the highlights of the sequence), she apologises to him for this fictive process in which she must engage, a process whereby his 'real', 'divine' strength is effaced or elided in her linguistic descriptions of him.

Pardon, oh, pardon, that my soul should make  
Of all that strong divineness which I know  
For thine and thee, an image only so  
Formed of the sand, and fit to shift and break.

These lines reiterate clearly the tension described at the close of Sonnet XXIX, a tension between a Romantic ideal of silent presence and a self-asserting power for making tropes. The speaker preserves the notion of her lover's essential character over and above the personae she invests him with. His "strong divineness" seems to be unquestioned on the surface of the poem; indeed, like God, that divinity is absolute despite the anthropomorphising depictions of mere mortals such as herself.

What is significant, however, is the speaker's act of 'creating' him. Her soul "make[s]" of him an image of sand: in other words, she reconstructs him. Biblical creation echoes are evident here as she plays the part of God the Creator, forming man out of the dust of the earth. God created man in "his own image"; the speaker also creates "an image", but hers is less a copy than an artform - she is the potter moulding the clay, to use another biblical echo. This, of course, reverses the patriarchal roles of man as creator and woman as created.

Furthermore, her image is made of sand, which is "fit to shift and break". His reified presence as divine being is recreated as a shifting, moving, never-fixed image: from an absolute, centred being he has become a deconstructed,

decentred image. That word "image" foregrounds the primary action in this sonnet: making metaphors. He has been recreated through metaphors, and as a word entity he is open to the endless shifting and unfixity of language. Thus, the metaphor that the speaker uses to portray her descriptive process successfully undermines her apparent apology for that process: in trying to affirm his absoluteness, she replaces it with her deconstructive sand image, and in so doing demonstrates the power of the trope to transform characterisation.

This inversion of the creation act, and the subsequent emphasis on the metaphoric construction of personae, has far-reaching implications for the man and woman of this sonnet sequence. It offers the abandonment of the patriarchal hierarchy that has hitherto structured their relationship. Instead, creator and created are shown to be roles defined through metaphor: whoever makes the images has the power to define the other. These roles are not gender-based: if a woman has access to the language, she, like the man, can create images of her lover, of their love, and of her experience, in endlessly reworked constructions. In other words, this is their 'level playing field', the site whereon they can be equal and mutual - in the metaphors of creative language.

These positive implications are not fully explored by the speaker yet. Returning to Sonnet XXXVII, we see her making excuse for the process of metaphoric construction that she has just demonstrated:

It is that distant years which did not take  
 Thy sovranly, recoiling with a blow,  
 Have forced my swimming brain to undergo  
 Their doubt and dread, and blindly to forsake  
 Thy purity of likeness, and distort  
 Thy worthiest love to a worthless counterfeit.

Her reason is that her past impinges upon her present, bringing her earlier fears and doubts (remembering the opening sonnets) into the lovers' relationship now. This incursion from the past makes her forsake his 'pure likeness' to reconstruct counterfeit images, presumably based on her fears.

There are ambiguities in these lines, however, that require attention. First is the description of the male lover's "sovranly", which implies that he has

absolute rule over her, as depicted in previous sonnets (particularly the capitulation of Sonnet XVI). And yet the nature of that sovereignty is surely questionable: not only was it unable to influence her memories and fears from the past, but its control of her creative mind (as depicted in Sonnet XXVI, for example) is proven here to be illusory. Her creative image-making of him and their love is so assertive that she must apologise for it! Secondly, "likeness" is defined in the OED as a "form, shape ... figure", a fairly clear interpretation for its use in this sonnet. But the far readier definition of the word is "resemblance, similarity", and even "a copy, counterpart, image". The speaker's words again potentially suggest an opposite subtext: that his 'pure', absolute self is also a copy or image. The "strong divineness" is simply another linguistic persona or trope.

To conclude her exposition of the process of construction and deconstruction, the woman offers another metaphor. And here too, it deconstructs:

As if a shipwrecked Pagan, safe in port,  
His guardian sea-god to commemorate,  
Should set a sculptured porpoise, gills a-snort,  
And vibrant tail, within the temple-gate.

On the surface this simile reiterates the old roles of rescuing lover-god and saved woman-victim. The speaker is the pagan, preserved despite shipwreck, deeply thankful and in awe of the great sea-god that effected the rescue. To commemorate both the wreck and the rescue, the pagan makes and displays his image of the sea-god - a sculpted porpoise - which he places as a focus for his worship of the god ("within the temple-gate"). Similarly, the woman, remembering both the sorrows of her past and the rescue by her lover, commemorates by creating an image of him, which then assumes the focus of her worship. This depiction of the great god in a woman-made, 'lesser' image, and her worship of the image, not the god, she must then apologise for.

There is more to this simile, however. Many commentators have noted the powerful sexual imagery in the speaker's description of the porpoise. Dorothy Mermin refutes the need for the woman's apology in this sonnet,

commenting that "No apology is necessary, however, for this witty comparison to a sexy sea-god, or for the delightfully erotic porpoise" (Origins 132). The porpoise is sinuous and lithe: with "gills a-snort/ And vibrant tail", it is the picture of aroused masculinity. The point is, though, that the image is more attractive and sexy than the god. Stephenson writes: "It is as a man, with all the erotic attractions suggested by the porpoise's gills and vibrant tail, not as some divine spiritual being, that the beloved comes alive for the reader in these poems - and it is clearly the man, not the divine essence, who holds the primary appeal for the speaker" (Poetry 83). Stephenson rather misses the vital point of the sonnet, however, that this image is stronger than the abstract mythic figure. The woman's erotic desire is thus central and is far more earthy and 'real' than (Victorian) love convention allows. The speaker's own "counterfeit" image of her lover depicts him as virile, sexy and desirable; the "strong divineness" of the lover's "purity of likeness" carries no such earthy appeal!<sup>10</sup>

The cheeky self-assertiveness of the speaker's image here takes the further step of dismantling the 'myth' of the male lover's essence. The lover's essential "divineness" is depicted as a sea-god - one of the pagan deities - a mythic figure and another product of human invention. The same is true, by extension, of the male lover's "divine" essence. It is simply a conventional trope, a language construction. His divinity and "sovranty" are only as real as Poseidon/ Neptune.

EBB's project in these latter sonnets is not only to represent woman's desire in woman's voice, but also to represent the representation of desire. In other words, she wishes to show how we construct our experience - in this case, the profound experience of love - in language. These lovers' roles (of courtly lover and beloved, or of god-like redeeming male and worthless female) are already constructed for them by their culture. But the woman's experience of those roles and her own exploration of them occurs within language. The very sonnets themselves foreground that fact: their written words formulate the woman lover's experience.

The speaker's perception of the power of refiguring, then, is truly subversive. All those depictions of the two lovers in varying patriarchal roles can

be seen as constructions. The saviour/saved relationship, for example, is not a priori a divine decree, or a natural and right truth, but is simply a language construction. Here, in Sonnet XXXVII, she enjoys what she has previously feared - her own image-making and re-making. This ability gives her the power to re-present herself, her lover and her world, in new, less repressive images. The tension between an ideal, removed but silent love, and her desire for her own power of naming, is thus defused. By writing new definitions for love, she can love and speak.

## XL

In Sonnet XL the speaker foregrounds her redefinition of love, by opposing it to conventional uses of the word. The sonnet continually repeats the word "love" as a citation: "they love", "called love", "heard love". Her argument here thus emphasises "love" as a label whose referent shifts, and so allows her to celebrate the different love that she and her lover now share. For he is now included in her redefinition: the theory of mutuality is at last in practice.

Oh, yes! they love through all this world of ours!  
I will not gainsay love, called love forsooth.  
I have heard love talked in my early youth,  
And since, not so long back but that the flowers  
Then gathered, smell still.

The derisory tone of the opening line indicates the speaker's continuing distrust and scepticism about avowals of "love". She will not "gainsay", or oppose or deny, what is honestly and truly ("forsooth") called love. In lines 5-7 she refers to the shallow, trivial love of the wider world<sup>11</sup> that can only ever countenance smiles, never sorrow or weeping, because the pleasure in such relationships is purely self-gratifying and self-centred. Such self-gratification is evident in the example of Polyphemus, the Cyclops of Homer's Odyssey, who devoured many of Odysseus' men in bestial cruelty. "Polypheme's white tooth/ Slips on the nut, if, after frequent showers,/ The shell is over-smooth," the speaker comments, and that "white tooth" stresses the carnivorous, devouring nature of shallow self-centred love. The Cyclops will grow tired of attempting to crack open the nut whose shell has been smoothed by too many showers of rain, making his crushing and devouring tooth slip. Similarly, the consumers of shallow false love

will soon tire of the woman who refuses easy and ready conquest, the proverbial 'tough nut to crack'. This woman's external manner has been 'finished' through trials and sorrows to repel invaders and defend the kernel. She is the woman poet of the opening sonnets, refusing colonisation and rejecting any truck with the fearful prospect of Victorian love-making. Her eventual conquest is a reluctant one, and much of her ensuing poetry attempts to refigure the relationship differently to conventional love terms.

In lines 9-11 she fears the end result of consumption: satiety or boredom.

and not so much  
Will turn the thing called love, aside to hate,  
Or else to oblivion.

Such surface emotion as this false love will not last: it will turn to hate or indifference (see Sonnets XIV, XV, XXXII, XXXVI). In XV specifically, the speaker describes the possible outlook of love between herself and the man. She concludes:

But I look on thee .. on thee ..  
Beholding, besides love, the end of love,  
Hearing oblivion beyond memory!  
As one who sits and gazes from above,  
Over the rivers to the bitter sea.

This oblivion in both sonnets is an erasure of her and her love from the man's mind, and it is the fearful future of the "love" she derides here.

Contrasting with this prolonged fear, however, is the speaker's recent discovery that this man gives worthy love:

But thou art not such  
A lover, my Beloved! thou canst wait  
Through sorrow and sickness, to bring souls to touch  
And think it soon when others cry 'Too late.'

This man apparently refuses to silence her. He waits through the fears and doubts of the suspicious speaker, and "brings souls to touch". This phrase recalls her prescription for ideal 'true' love, given in Sonnet XXII ("When our two

souls stand up erect and strong"). The strength of this ideal relationship is its equality and mutuality: the moment when the angel-souls of that sonnet touch and fuse is a transformative and powerfully erotic creation. Her invocation of that moment here, and her suggestion that the male lover allows and in fact encourages it to happen ("to bring souls") is a break-through. The male lover has apparently proved himself. His is not the self-interested, consuming and ultimately finite love of convention. In their relationship, he waits for the woman to commit herself, and allows her equal existence. Thus, "love" is neither patriarchal love, nor an external universal force, nor indeed an internal, silent idealism. Love is instead defined as the personal, mutual experience of two people, whose experience redefines (and potentially transforms) themselves. The lovers appear to have disrupted the structure enough to clear a small space for their own interaction.

#### XLI

The positive hope of the last sonnet is amplified in Sonnet XLI:

I thank all who have loved me in their hearts,  
 With thanks and love from mine. Deep thanks to all  
 Who paused a little near the prison-wall,  
 To hear my music in its louder parts,  
 Ere they went onward, each one to the mart's  
 Or temple's occupation, beyond call.

Suspicion and distrust are minimised. Now she acknowledges the listeners to her voice who have loved her "in their hearts", and to whom she offers thanks and love from her own heart. These heart references intend to convey the sincerity of 'heartfelt' emotions, but they also rework an earlier motif. The image of the woman's heart being absorbed into the man's heart has recurred throughout the sequence. In Sonnet VI, a poem of enormous ambivalence, the speaker rues the loss of separate self-hood, saying that "thy heart [is left] in mine/ With pulses that beat double". Sonnet XVI uses the lines: "till my heart shall grow/ Too close against thine heart, henceforth to know/ How it shook when alone". And Sonnet XXV speaks of dropping her heavy heart "adown thy calmly great/ Deep being", which "doth close above it". The image in each is of the resulting loss of



personal selfhood or individuality to that of the lover's, whose individuality dictates for both of them.

In the first two lines of Sonnet XLI, however, the hearts of both speaker and listeners are separate. Of course, these listeners are not necessarily potential lovers, demanding the fusion of souls which Victorian romance structures seemed to require. Nevertheless, the emphasis on distinctly separate people remains, and it is as much for the preservation of this separateness, as for what follows, that the speaker is thankful.

What does follow? "Deep thanks", to all who have paused in their daily occupations and responsibilities to hear the speaker's "music" issuing forth from her "prison". The correlation with Elizabeth Barrett's personal circumstances in the (largely self-imposed) prison of Wimpole Street is obvious, but the same is true, in a wider sense, for the speaker. Her life, as depicted in Sonnet III and throughout the sequence, has been on the periphery of society, marginalised and shunned as the unnatural woman poet and courtly lover. The prison-wall has been society itself, and its refusal to countenance the woman poet's voice, selfhood, power and love. Like many prisoners she has languished and come close to death in her prison, yet she has still made music. And so her "deep thanks" carry her extreme gratitude to those who have in some ways defied society's prison to listen to the woman's voice. Yet even here, the speaker is aware of her isolation: these listeners pause only for a moment, "a little", before rejoining the society of which they are necessarily a part. Too soon they continue on to the marketplace or to the "temple."<sup>12</sup> And there, they are "beyond call".

By contrast, her lover, has proved his constancy:

But thou, who, in my voice's sink and fall,  
When the sob took it, thy divinest Art's  
Own instrument didst drop down at thy foot,  
To harken what I said between my tears,..  
Instruct me how to thank thee!

He, unlike the above listeners, does not leave the captive, crying woman for his own life of action and words in society. Instead he demonstrates self-sacrificing

love that acknowledges and encourages the independent voice of the woman poet/ lover. He hears the woman's sorrow and enervation (the "sink and fall" of her voice reiterating the depth imagery that she is subject to within patriarchy), and understands what is required. And that is simply his silence; the readiness to still his own poetic voice (that is otherwise permitted to overwhelm and incorporate hers) in order to let her speak. He drops his own "instrument", not simply to allow hers - a very paternalistic move - but to listen to hers.<sup>13</sup> This is no token gesture, but a validation of her existence and outlook.

This evidence of "Love" from the man overwhelms the speaker: "Instruct me how to thank thee!", she cries. Even as she asserts herself and her separate voice, the speaker seems to reuse hierarchical images - here of teacher and pupil. Yet in the context of this new, mutual love that she has defined, such a request need not be hierarchical. Instead her request emphasises mutuality, and the seeking of the other's desires and needs. This is not self-abnegation, as the final lines of the sonnet clearly show.

Oh, to shoot  
My soul's full meaning into future years,  
That they should lend it utterance, and salute  
Love that endures, from Life that disappears!

This cry is nothing less than a desire to be immortalised through her poetry (another conventional trope). But the desire is not simply personal ambition, though this is surely present, and is itself an astonishing eventuality bearing in mind the self-deprecation that has characterised the speaker's references to herself hitherto. The speaker is anxious to preserve her "soul's full meaning" - that is, the preservation and validation of the woman as poet and as subject. This has been the context both of the previous lines and indeed the whole sonnet sequence. It is the truth that she would have preserved and repeated in the future.

The speaker describes this preservation in terms of words: her "meaning" will be lent "utterance" by the future years. The words she has written and spoken here will be written and spoken then as the years continue to keep the words alive. Human existence is transitory, but Love - and words - endure. The

two are intimately related in the speaker's conceptions: without the love that enables mutual validity, words obtain neither voice nor immortality. But with the love that the speaker promulgates here, women's words are revered and repeated, and outlive the individual author. So she "salute[s]/ Love that endures", because it allows her "soul's full meaning" to endure also.

Of course, the "Love" that allows this whole process is itself a product of words. The speaker, though, has come to appreciate how her images define and transform her experience. Here, the lovers' words shape the love which then allows more words.

## XLII

The hope that the speaker now entertains is here placed in context with her past and her lover's role in her life.

"My future will not copy fair my past" -  
 I wrote that once; and thinking at my side  
 My ministering life-angel justified  
 The word by his appealing look upcast  
 To the white throne of God, I turned at last,  
 And there, instead, was thee, not unallied  
 To angels in thy soul!

In the opening line we are shown that coexistent with the speaker's hopelessness and fatalism in the earlier sonnets has been a determination to change this despondent outlook. This coexistence is simply another facet to the submission/ rebellion conflict that bubbles beneath the surface of the sonnets. Resisting past and present inequities in her society goes hand-in-hand with resisting a hopeless future. So the speaker has written her determination that her future will not be a replay of her past: a fair copy of a rough draft; a perfected repetition of what has gone before.

The writing metaphor<sup>14</sup> suggests that existence is a written piece, in which themes and images are reiterated and reworked as time passes. The speaker emphasises this writing process in her own recollection: "I wrote that once," she tells us, recalling the line and its metaphor. The line has survived the

immediate context, as words do, and now relives in the new context that the speaker creates here. The entire metaphor stresses fictive construction of experience: how we write our experience in metaphors and images, which themselves are open to play and reworking. It is this apprehension that has allowed the woman to refigure her life and outlook, to anticipate and indeed write a new experience.

The speaker then uses a favourite image of the male lover as saving celestial being, as she continues her recollection of the opening phrase. And yet there are crucial differences from earlier uses of the image. She tells us that when she first wrote the line, she assumed that her "ministering life-angel", standing by her side, both approved and justified her words by referring them to God as a prayer for the woman. The angel's action validated the woman's rejection of her oppressed past, and her desire to escape its influence in her future. (The religious vocabulary of these lines implicitly underlines divine approbation: the angel is given by God to minister to the woman, and he justifies the woman's statement, the Protestant word indicating a process of perfecting and vindication, appropriate and acceptable to the "white [and therefore perfect] throne of God". Even the unusual phrase "life-angel" indicates that this woman's life matters, that there is divine concern for her existence.)

At issue, however, is the substitution of her lover for this "life-angel". Crucially, the speaker indicates that she herself has made the substitution, casting him, a man, in the role of her ministering angel. Her light, gently bantering tone in the phrase "not unallied/ To angels in thy soul!" reflects this distinction: he is not in essence divine; she just imagines him as such. Thus, the speaker reworks the images that she is used to - images that have traditionally borne patriarchal meanings - but her conscious manipulation of the images foregrounds the fact that they are only images, not a priori facts. The male lover remains simply a man: the value he has for her is the value she gives him.

The remainder of the sonnet powerfully portrays exactly what that value is.

Then I, long tried  
 By natural ills, received the comfort fast,  
 While budding, at thy sight, my pilgrim's staff  
 Gave out green leaves with morning dews impearled.  
 I seek no copy now of life's first half:  
 Leave here the pages with long musing curled,  
 And write me new my future's epigraph,  
 New angel mine, unhop'd for in the world!

Upon placing her lover in this role as ministering angel, the "long tried" woman receives comfort that simultaneously stimulates her poetry. In an image suggestive of the spring that occurs in Sonnets XX, XXI and even XXIX, the speaker's "pilgrim staff" issues forth new green leaves. The apparently dead piece of wood is alive and productive. The metaphor of the pilgrim's staff is extremely suggestive. It conveys the status of writing in the woman's life: poetry is her staff ('the staff of life' - her daily bread?) and aid through her life of wandering as the minstrel poet/woman. But the phallic nature of the staff also suggests the 'pen' of voice. Susan Gubar elucidates this metaphor in her article "The Blank Page and Woman's Creativity", describing how woman is the site for male creativity, the blank page on which the phallic pen writes. Feminists have continually urged women to therefore 'seize the pen': to take the creative power for their own use. The danger in the metaphor is that creativity is seen to be exclusively a male property, as only owners of the phallus have power. This is not, however, where most feminists would leave the metaphor; the point is that it must be reworked to move creativity from a biological basis to a linguistic basis.<sup>15</sup>

That shift is what occurs here. The phallic staff is turned into a living thing, resembling the vine that grows so prolifically in Sonnet XXIX. The pen of creativity that the speaker has held, despite her society's accusations of unnaturalness in a woman's appropriation of a man's instrument, has been transformed into her own instrument of creativity, through her own words. Moreover, her resulting poetry is crowned (or "impearled") with the 'chrism of heaven', the "heavenly dews" of Sonnet XXIV. She has received divine approbation and validation; her 'pen' is strong and right.

Hence her confident reiteration of her opening statement: "I seek no copy now of life's first half". The silencing and objectifying of the woman under Victorian patriarchy is rejected; the speaker will write herself a new future. Returning to the writing metaphor, she ponders the "curled" pages of "long musing" poetry that record the history of her subjection to her society - the previous sonnets? The lethargic, contemplative nature of these musings is reflected in the pages curled with time and inactivity.<sup>16</sup> Contrastingly, the following lines exude energy and vigour, as the speaker apparently states her intention to "write me new my future's epigraph". An epigraph is the inscription or motto at the beginning of a written work: the new book which is the rest of her life will carry the epigraph of the male lover as her created angel, "unhoped for in the world!" This is not a reinstatement of hierarchical structures with the man as a divine being, because the emphasis now is on the woman's creative imagination that writes her male lover into this role.<sup>17</sup> With their mutual love that encourages her (and his) voice and images, her future as woman, lover and especially poet is transformed from the past.

An alternative reading of these final lines is also possible, however. Lines 12-14 might be read as an instruction to the male lover to leave her past musings, and to write her epigraph for her. If so, it would seem that the woman has placed the pen back in the man's hands. Yet, in terms of their redefined love of mutuality, this possibility is also appropriate. The allocation of action here is unclear, and actually seems to involve both. This lack of distinction can become another evocation of a love which is a mutual experience of exchange, with the potential to transform lives - as here it will transform hers. The ambiguity in reading these lines thus can be a creative one.

#### XLIII

The penultimate and most famous sonnet of the sequence celebrates the joy and confidence that the speaker has achieved in this last section of sonnets. It is memorable, not because of the sentimentality with which the sonnet has been imbued over the last century, but because it culminates all that has gone before. The woman who speaks these lines is calmly fearless in stating her love; there is no shrinking from self-expression, no self-deprecation, no prostration

before the male lover. The speaker is unashamedly the focus of this sonnet: she is the subject voice; she is the lover. Within this love relationship, the woman has moved from silent object to sharing the speaking voice of the subject poet.

Dorothy Mermin summarises the essence of the sonnet as the culmination of themes that have run through the sequence, such as definition of space or the relations of new love to the past. She notes that the speaker is at long last answering the male lover's question by speaking her love. Mermin concludes: "the repetitive structure (six lines begin, 'I love thee,' and the phrase appears three more times as well) forms a striking contrast to the other sonnets, while thematically it echoes with triumphant elaboration the 'silver iterance' of 'I love thee' that she had asked of him earlier" (*Origins* 145).<sup>18</sup>

How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.  
I love thee to the depth and breadth and height  
My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight  
For the ends of Being and ideal Grace.

The speaker has claimed the conventional mode of the courtly lover, listing the ways in which she loves her partner. The focus is crucial, though, and too often overlooked. This is not a list of the male lover's gifts and graces to her: she is the active, initiating giver.<sup>19</sup> She is not the simple one-dimensional figure, of much male literature; rather she must count the ways by which she loves. The whole sonnet enumerates the myriad levels at which the complex woman feels and acts.

The second line indicates her appreciation of the way the patriarchal structure has been disrupted in their relationship. The line uses the description that Paul uses to convey the vastness of Christ's love: "that you ... may have power to comprehend ... what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge" (Ephesians 3:18-19).<sup>20</sup> Instead of the usual portrayal of the male lover as Christ, the speaker uses the description as a metaphor for herself. She now has the love to bestow in virtually limitless abundance. Mermin adds that these lines conclude the speaker's thematic redefinition of space in the sonnets (*Origin* 145). Moreover, the second phrase of the biblical text is also echoed in the sonnet in lines 3-4.

The speaker loves as far as her soul will go, and this extent far surpasses that of conventional patriarchal love of sight and knowledge. The Irigarayan motif of the gaze, used within patriarchy to fix and appropriate the woman object, is here overturned: this woman's love goes beyond sight, instead feeling to the limits of existence. That "feeling" is both emotional and tactile, touching instead of watching. As Stephenson writes:

The male lyric typically relies upon distance to impose a space between lover and unattainable beloved which is never actually traversed; the lover views his beloved across this space, and frustrated desire is expressed primarily with the use of the visual metaphor. A number of recent critics have suggested that women's love poetry, in contrast, depends more upon the tactual [sic] than the visual (Poetry 73).

She then goes on to quote from Luce Irigaray's This sex which is not one, particularly the sentence: "Woman takes pleasure more from touching than looking, and her entry into the dominant scopic economy signifies, again, her consignment to passivity: she is to be the beautiful object of contemplation" (Marks and de Courtivron 101). Both quotations point to the fact that the lovers' relationship in the sonnets has apparently disrupted the "dominant scopic economy" enough to allow mutual acknowledgement and interchange to occur. Such interchange is suggested in Sonnet XXII, where the face-to-face angel-souls of the lovers touch at their wingtips in another example of this motif.

Sonnet XXII is appropriately recalled here, as line 4 of this forty-third sonnet makes gestures towards transcendent realms, just as Sonnet XXII attempted to do. The woman feels out of sight for "the ends of Being and ideal Grace": presumably this denotes the end of human existence and the entrance into a pseudo-Platonic ideal realm which is also a heaven of Christian grace. But here the woman only reaches; she does not attain. The impossibility - and silence - of that earlier fantasy love of transcendence is suggested here as an ideal, but the woman does not remove herself from the human relationship that she has now. That relationship is clearly rooted in the mortal present.

I love thee to the level of everyday's  
Most quiet need, by sun and candlelight.



I love thee freely, as men strive for Right;  
I love thee purely, as they turn from Praise.

Her love is also as basic as the needs of daily life, specifically the most basic human need for light that dispels darkness.

The rather sanctimonious sentiments of lines 7 and 8 are nevertheless important in claiming the high moral ground for their love. In them, the speaker shows the fundamentally pure basis to their relationship. This has been a continuing theme in the sonnets, the need to show that this relationship that disrupts society's conventions is both valid and morally right.

I love thee with the passion put to use  
In my old griefs, and with my childhood's faith.  
I love thee with a love I seemed to lose  
With my lost saints, - I love thee with the breath,  
Smiles, tears, of all my life!

The deepest aspect of the woman's love is, as Sonnets XXXIII-XXXV showed, her past. And so she recalls it here, noting that the "passion" that she used to expend upon grief is now redirected. "[O]ld griefs" are the sorrows that have been well-aired throughout the sonnets - both societal and familial. Hand-in-hand with these, however, must go the breaking of childhood "faith": the sureness and expectations of youth that have been crushed by societal pressures and structures (see Sonnet XXV). The reference to "lost saints" suggests her dead family loved ones, now translated into sainthood in heaven (see Sonnet XXXIII).

The wider significance of the lines focusses on the process of crushing disillusionment and suppression that turns the child of abilities and (relative) voice into the silent Victorian woman. This was a very real process for EBB, who saw her domestic walls closing in around her as she reached womanhood. Helen Cooper is perceptive in interpreting EBB's illness as one way she managed to evade the crushing domestic duties of Victorian women, and to retain her voice and opportunity as a writer. The denial of the faith of the growing woman/poet, who believed that she would be able to employ her talents and voice in a fair and just world, is regretted here.

But with this new love relationship comes a return of the voice and opportunity, and so a commensurate love. The past is vindicated and answered by the present. So the speaker concludes this section by summarising all that she has described: she loves with every aspect of her being - her tears and her smiles, and even the life within her, her breath. The sonnet has shown us the whole woman, "all of my life!", and now it concludes with an even stronger hope: "and, if God choose,/ I shall but love thee better after death." Because this relationship is so right and has divine blessing, the speaker can express the hope that it will last even beyond the grave, as she implied in the fourth line of the sonnet. This hope strikes away her earlier uncertainty and suspicion. Sonnet XXII concluded the celebration of their ideal mutual love with an expression of transience and mutability. Their relationship was but "A place to stand and love in for a day,/ With darkness and the death-hour rounding it." Then heaven and God were potential threats to their love, as the speaker believed they endorsed patriarchy. But by Sonnet XLIII the speaker has rewritten the script: God and heaven are now on her side, supporters of this pure, real love. In this, the most triumphant sonnet of the sequence, the woman seizes victory: God-ordained, woman-written victory.

#### XLIV

It seems highly appropriate that the final poem in this sonnet sequence should express the conditional and tenuous basis of the lovers' relationship. The speaker has enunciated a history in the sonnets that reveals her internal tension and conflict in response to her world. The poise in the lovers' relationship, celebrated in these final sonnets, is a result of her transforming through tropes that love relationship. And yet for that poise to be maintained, the second party to this relationship must also accept the new conditions. The male lover must be equally ready to share roles, to encourage and explore an alternative subjectivity, to be lover and beloved, poet and muse.

It is this final tension that the speaker exposes in Sonnet XLIV.

Beloved, thou hast brought me many flowers  
 Plucked in the garden, all the summer through  
 And winter, and it seemed as if they grew  
 In this close room, nor missed the sun and showers.

The image of the classical token of lovers - flowers - here employed by the speaker is discussed brilliantly by Angela Leighton, who draws together the "wealth of playful variations on the theme of flowers" that have been used by EBB and Robert Browning in their letters and poems. "The play on flowers throughout the courtship offers a continual, delightful, metaphorical substitution of one thing for another: poems, flowers, life, love, memories, flowers and poems, again" ("Stirring" 14). Leighton thus offers an example of the Sonnets' process of re-metaphorising.

The first quatrain of this sonnet focusses on the male lover as the giver: he has brought gifts to the altar of his beloved, the objectified woman. The flowers have been "plucked" from the garden, taken from their life-source to be presented and preserved artificially in the "close room" that is the woman's sphere. There, the flowers "seemed" to survive rather than die, apparently not missing their vital food of sun and showers. (Of course, this is an illusion: the reality is that the lover has brought flowers so often that there are never any dead ones to be seen.) The image draws attention to the way the flowers have been "plucked", deprived of their natural habitat. In reality such flowers should die, missing the conditions of their growth.

The geography of this quatrain is also noteworthy. The garden, the place of lush growth and creativity, is apart from the woman, who is instead shut away in the "close room" - EBB's position in the sealed-up back bedroom of Wimpole Street. This "close room" also describes the psychological position of the speaker, denied access to the garden of creativity in her society; allowed to share in the delights of that garden only through the mediation of the male lover/ giver/ poet. The spaces "which so long imprisoned her" have been "transformed to a place of imaginative freedom" (Cooper 109).

So, in the like name of that love of ours,  
Take back these thoughts which here unfolded too,  
And which on warm and cold days I withdrew  
From my heart's ground.

But the woman has learnt to rewrite the tropes of love. And so she turns this one on its head: she too has a garden of creativity that has been prolific in

flowers of various kinds. Her own "heart's ground" is the site for this garden, and her thoughts are the sonnets, plucked with the same sense of amputation from their life-source. Like him, she has produced such flowers throughout summer and winter; through the warm times of happiness and the cold times of sorrow.<sup>21</sup>

The crucial point, however, is that she gives them to him. She has become the lover/ giver/ poet offering her 'flowers'. She can only do so, though, by prefacing her offer with an invocation of their redefined love: "So, in the like name of that love of ours,/ Take back these". In the same way that you give to me, I also give to you. "That love" eschews the hierarchical structure of patriarchy for this mutual interaction which allows separate subjectivity. Her thoughts are as valid and as valuable as his.

Indeed, those beds and bowers  
 Be overgrown with bitter weeds and rue,  
 And wait thy weeding; yet, here's eglantine,  
 Here's ivy! - take them, as I used to do  
 Thy flowers, and keep them where they shall not  
 pine.  
 Instruct thine eyes to keep their colours true,  
 And tell thy soul, their roots are left in mine.

The beds and bowers of her heart are, she feels, overgrown with the bitter weeds of sorrow and anger, natural occupiers of a garden uncared-for and left to the elements. In a gesture of self-deprecation reminiscent of the speaker's earlier characterisation as humble woman, she 'confesses' to the man that her garden waits for "weeding" at his hand - and yet this statement is undermined by the assertiveness that follows. She has claimed a garden of her own; she has offered her own creations as equally valid to those of the male; now her humble request for the male's help to tend her garden is exploded by the delighted phrase: "yet here's eglantine,/ Here's ivy!" The implication is clear: even without the man's "weeding" she can produce her own flowers, and have pride in them. Eglantine (honeysuckle) and ivy are both strong, semi-wild vines - the "wild vines" of Sonnet XXIX, whose "broad leaves" threaten to overwhelm the male tree?

The sonnet (and the sequence) ends with a deeply serious injunction to the male lover. As she encourages him to take her wild and beautiful flowers, reminding him yet again how often he has given to her, she enforces upon him the vital need to preserve these flowers, as she preserved his. By investing the flowers with human characteristics ("where they shall not pine") she emphasises the importance and value of her gifts. These thoughts of her heart, these words of hers, must not be allowed to miss the sun and showers of their home garden, her heart. They must be provided with the same conditions in which they were grown, with equal love and attribution of value. To explain the reason for this she manipulates the symbol, as she has now learned to do. These flowers have roots still left in the woman's soul: unlike the real flowers that the man brought, cut off and dying, these flowers are still part of the vine. They will grow and flourish if kept in conditions that are suitable. The significance of this point cannot be overstated. The thoughts and words of the woman will only remain alive if the man undertakes to provide them with the conditions for being heard. If he will listen and value these words - in other words, if he will continue to enact the love relationship that they have established - the poetic creations of the woman's can survive and flourish.

And so she tells him to "Instruct thine eyes to keep their [her flowers'] colours true". The only way her thoughts can be preserved in their 'true colours' (denoting her equal subjectivity) is through his eyes: his perceptions must be kept 'pure'. The male lover must continue to see the woman as equal subject, not as unequal object: the latter mode of perception will kill both the flowers and their relationship. Thus the trope of seeing is also reworked, overturning the patriarchal gaze which objectifies and appropriates, and replacing it with a new mode of perception that keeps the woman's creativity intact.

This final condition to their relationship leaves the responsibility for its preservation squarely in the hands (or eyes!) of the male lover. He can crush it by simply reverting to the old conventional modes of existence. Yet, in typically subtle fashion, the final lines of the poem suggest that it is not just the relationship and the woman's subjectivity that lie in his hands. Consider the pronoun "their" in lines 13 and 14. Ostensibly it refers to the woman's "flowers", yet it can also refer to the male's eyes and soul. In this case, the

danger also includes him: he is threatened with dissolution if he fails to preserve the atmosphere of mutual love. This is surely true for their relationship, in which both parties are accepted and affirmed in their individuality. The denial of such a relationship would therefore cut off both woman and man from this strengthening and creative atmosphere.

Sonnet XLIV, then, ends with a note of warning, characteristic of the wary nature of the speaker throughout the sequence. Her caution is another reason for employing the flower imagery to conclude her exploration of love. Flowers symbolise beauty and transience, aspects representative of their relationship. It, too, is beautiful, for very different reasons than those usually given for conventional love relationships. But it is also potentially transient, constantly threatened by the oppressive structures of the society around it. Thus the speaker's sense<sup>of</sup> doubt and vulnerability underlies this final sonnet, and asks the inevitable and unanswerable question: how can a disruptive, alternative relationship like this survive in the all-pervasive structure that is patriarchal society?

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Ironically, of course, the speaker is speaking her love in the sonnet, even as she makes this protestation in defence of silence. These poetic words are instrumental in maintaining the distinction between the lovers, avoiding the absorption into the male that is otherwise required under this culture's structures. This need for language to assert her separate selfhood eventually overcomes the strategy of silence adopted by the speaker in this and other sonnets.

<sup>2</sup> Both Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray, like Kristeva, similarly argue that the feminine language is formless, crossing boundaries, eternally changing, never fixed. The image of water is often used, though fire is equally, if not more apposite. The Other ceases to be a fixed polar opposite, outside the subject's (central) consciousness; rather the woman "constantly trades herself for the other without any possible identification of either one of them" (Luce Irigaray in "This sex which is not one", Marks and Courtivron 105). Or, as Hélène Cixous writes in her utopian "The Laugh of the Medusa", feminine writing is "the ensemble of the one and the other" (Marks and de Courtivron 254). One of the main criticisms levelled against these feminists is a tendency to essentialise the feminine position in their arguments. Irigaray's "This sex...", for example is read by most feminists as making female anatomy the source of an *écriture féminine*, and yet a more subtle reading sees Irigaray using the female anatomy as a metaphor for a non-dualist, 'not-one' mode of thinking. (See below, Chapter Six.)

<sup>3</sup> It may be argued that the word "woman-love" suggests an essentialism in EBB of the type argued in the previous note. It becomes clear, however, reading EBB's letters and poems, that the terms 'female' and 'male' become almost metaphoric, equivalent to 'feminine' and 'masculine' as described above (p.47, note 36). That EBB endorsed a kind of psychic androgyny, without the negative connotations now applied to the latter word, has been argued by Virginia Steinmetz: "The androgynous 'soul' or 'heart' is able to transcend the sex-role behaviour society prescribes" ("Beyond" 18, note). EBB's two sonnets to George Sand explore precisely such a notion (see Kaplan, *Aurora Leigh* 391).

<sup>4</sup> Angela Leighton offers a different reading of this sonnet: she sees the "rough winds" as potentially fanning the flames of her desire into uncontrollable and dangerous passion. Her silence therefore protects the beloved from the threatening power of "woman-words", though the self-restraint involved nearly breaks her (*Elizabeth* 112). The reading fails to take into account the self-defensiveness in lines 5-7, 11 or 13.

<sup>5</sup> Associating the male lover with a cuckoo also suggests covert anxieties in the female speaker. The cuckoo is a migratory bird which does not hatch its own eggs but leaves them in the nests of other birds. Having deposited this 'egg' of love in the speaker-poet's nest, will he stay?

<sup>6</sup> The Morgan manuscript reads "But weak to attaint me" (Ratchford 82, emphasis mine). This earlier manuscript thus makes overt the world's corruption and propensity to stain, in comparison with the lovers' goodness: the line immediately moves into discussing the white purity and cleanliness of their love.

<sup>7</sup> The lilies also recall the biblical 'lilies of the field', who "neither toil nor spin; yet ... even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these" (Matthew 6:28-9). The context discusses God's loving care for His creation, and so reiterates the speaker-poet's point that the lovers have divine endorsement and protection.

<sup>8</sup> Dorothy Mermin writes that the "imagery suggests a Bacchic invocation of divine presence" (Origins 134).

<sup>9</sup> The following sonnet, XXXI, seems to celebrate the moment of union in the lover's presence. As the discussion of that sonnet in Chapter Two reveals (see above p.65ff), the apparent idealism of that union is undermined, because it is represented within the potentially repressive and hierarchical divine model.

<sup>10</sup> Angela Leighton also notes the speaker's "playful politics" here. "For all her acknowledgement of Robert's 'strong divineness', it is the shipwrecked Pagan's humble liveliness of imagination that inspires the poem" (Leighton 109). Leighton sees the sonnet as retaining Robert's ideal divinity, however, so as to protectively exclude him from her "verbal travesty".

<sup>11</sup> "Mussulmans" of line 5 denotes Muslims and "Giaours" is a Turkish term for non-Muslims, particularly Christians. Presumably EBB's point is that the whole world, not just Christian Victorian England, engages in hollow love relationships.

<sup>12</sup> In capitalist, utilitarian Victorian society, the middleclass woman was allowed no active role in marketplace or temple, in business or church/ law courts. Even as a mother her primary purpose was to reproduce the units for these spheres.

<sup>13</sup> In Sonnet V, the speaker challenges the man: "But if instead/ Thou wait beside me for the wind to blow/ The grey dust up". The result of this restraint is that the woman's creativity flames into powerful fire. Presumably his restraint does not require unnatural self-suppression on the man's part: he must only give up dominance, to allow equality of existence.

<sup>14</sup> The "fair copy" figure might also be read graphically, as for example in a painting metaphor. However, the context of the final lines of the sonnet place the opening line into a specifically written mode.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Cixous, who sees writing as the way to break down logocentric definitions, and to free the woman up to speak. "[The woman] must write her self, because this is the invention of a new insurgent writing, which, when the moment of her liberation has come, will enable her to carry out the indispensable ruptures and transformations in her history" (Marks and Courtivron 250).



<sup>16</sup> These writings are not rejected; they are rather reflections on the feelings of being caught within a patriarchy. The British Museum manuscript gives line 12 as "The blots will be there on the pages curled!". EBB presumably alters this because it implies that the earlier writings are mistakes or "blots", rather than a process of release via writing.

<sup>17</sup> Helen Cooper reads the angel reference as placing the man in the position of muse for the writing woman (Cooper 108).

<sup>18</sup> Glennis Stephenson is one of the few critics who find this sonnet disappointing, commenting that "its insistent listing of abstractions" is "certainly not representative of the sequence as a whole" (Poetry 88).

<sup>19</sup> See Leighton: "This is a love so confident of its object that it no longer needs it" (Elizabeth 102). Helen Cooper comments that the sonnet is "less sentimental than authoritative about its speaker's desire" (Woman 108).

<sup>20</sup> John Phillipson also notes how the sonnet echoes "Paul's thought and phraseology" in "spirit and expression" (22).

<sup>21</sup> Mermin comments on the poetical use of flowers, which traditionally represent "female objects of male desire" - as indeed the male lover appears to be using them here. Mermin comments: "Women poets tend to identify with the flower", in a collapsing of subject and object ("The Damsel" 69-70). Certainly EBB does that here, but her identification is only to move the discussion into a dismantling of subject-object reifications.





PART TWO:

AURORA LEIGH

## CHAPTER FOUR

## AURORA IN PATRIARCHY

One of the pleasures in reading Aurora Leigh is that Aurora tells a great story. The same plot that makes Charlotte Brontë's novels so readable is at work here in EBB's novel-poem: the young, strong, idealistic woman determined to survive, and more, succeed in life and love in an antagonistic or indifferent world. This favourite ideal of women accounts in part for the phenomenal success of the modern romance genre. EBB though, like Brontë, adds depth and analysis to her account of this archetypal plot, and it is this analysis that makes Aurora Leigh the extraordinary work that it is. Barrett Browning not only tells the story, but she also asks why the story exists, and why it has to follow apparently inevitable courses. In other words, she analyses the structures behind her society, and so questions every aspect of the traditional romance plot.

## i. The Patriarch

Paternity

"Patriarch ... 1. The father and ruler of a family or tribe" (OED). This succinct definition carries great significance in EBB's world. The patriarch, and by extension the system that is built upon patriarchs, has two crucial and related facets: paternity and authority. The father's seed is the important perpetuator of the society, and the father's word is the law of that society.

Victorian England was without doubt a patriarchy. The male seed held a man's vitality and definition: to be impotent or sterile was to be less than a man. And the father's word was law as he ruled the home, the business and academic worlds, the government.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the law was needed to protect the sanctity of the male seed, because in physical reality paternity was

impossible to prove. Laws maintaining the power of paternity kept at bay the threatening possibility of maternal power, whose ascendancy would inevitably denote the breakdown of patriarchy.

In Chapter Six the deeper significance of the father figure will be considered more closely, but certain points can be made here. The father becomes a symbolic figure or force in the patriarchal society, metonymically carrying the laws and regulations of that society. Physical, specific fathers need not be present: they are symbolically represented by other individuals, institutions or even abstract attitudes. In Aurora Leigh the father figures are numerous and clearly central. They represent Victorian English patriarchy, and in the case of the poem (and most patriarchies) they often also represent the suppression and abuse of women.

Aurora opens her novel-poem with a disquisition on fathers, as she recalls her own. Reflecting how different paternal love is to maternal, she writes:

Fathers love as well [as mothers]  
 - Mine did, I know, - but still with heavier brains,  
 And wills more consciously responsible,  
 And not as wisely, since less foolishly;  
 So mothers have God's license to be missed. (l:60-64)<sup>2</sup>

The father carries the burden of his office: to be the law-maker, the ruler. Immediately the sense of difference is here: the father's role is weighty but right, important because responsible, and is a matter of will and conscious effort. This sense of self-importance is in contrast to the mother's role, which is seen as foolish and light, a matter of "kissing full sense into empty words" (l:52). Yet this very phrase reveals the paradoxical wisdom of the mother, whose very "foolishness" is the means by which children are nurtured. The oppositions here are thus hierarchical - the father is more important/ responsible/ intelligent than the trivial/ light/ foolish mother. The fact that the poem constantly depicts the mother's way being effaced by this paternal assumption shows that 'different' in patriarchy means 'wrong'. However, the poem simultaneously shows how that value judgement is erroneous: "Women know/ The way to rear up children" (l:47-48). Thus maternal "foolishness" becomes

"wisdom" in a subversion of traditionally oppositional definitions that prefigures the whole action of the poem.<sup>3</sup>

Aurora's sense of her own father is fascinatingly ambivalent. Her description of his life which follows the above extract on fathers reveals another opposition, this time between England and Italy. This somewhat simplistic but highly symbolic opposition gathers momentum throughout the poem, coming to represent the central battle between masculine and feminine worlds in Aurora Leigh.<sup>4</sup> Aurora's father is born and bred English, and in Aurora's terms this means aridity:

My father was an austere Englishman,  
Who, after a dry lifetime spent at home  
In college-learning, law, and parish talk,  
Was flooded with a passion unaware,  
His whole provisioned and complacent past  
Drowned out from him that moment.

(l:65-70)

In opposition to this dry world of order and law is the flooding, drowning, passionate world of Italy, to which he succumbs. Aurora tells with her typically ironic sense of humour, how he had come to Italy to note "the secret of Da Vinci's drains" (l:72; 74) - the orderly removal of excess waters. Instead other flood waters overwhelm him: Aurora tells us that he "received his sacramental gift/ With eucharistic meanings; for he loved" (l:90-91). Witnessing a religious procession, he has seen and fallen in love with Aurora's mother. Aurora clearly identifies this wonderful liberating love as a Godly gift, a cleansing, transfiguring experience from his previous existence and value system.

Aurora describes how the religious procession "drifted past [her father] (scarcely marked enough/ To move his comfortable island scorn)" (l:78-79). This image of an island mentality, around which drift and flow different and marginal elements, reflects Aurora's apprehension of England as a hegemony: it is the centre of consciousness, with Italy as an outside other, a dangerous yet inviting foreignness. The island believes it is the centre of existence, but can only maintain that belief by rejecting foreign elements. Rod Edmond writes: "any dominant culture must select from, and hence exclude, the full range of human practice" (Edmonds 10). Rejection occurs through devaluation and scorn of the

properties of those elements. It is precisely this process that occurs in Aurora Leigh.

In the case of Aurora's father, his island mentality has been "Drowned out from him" (l:70). But he is not able to move fully from his previous life into a new life, particularly because Aurora's mother dies only four years after giving birth to Aurora, an experience both father and daughter never recover from:

My father, who through love had suddenly  
 Thrown off the old conventions, broken loose  
 From chin-bands of the soul, like Lazarus,  
 Yet had no time to learn to talk and walk  
 Or grow anew familiar with the sun, -  
 [...] Whom love had unmade from a common man  
 But not completed to an uncommon man[...] (l:176-84)

Aurora's father rejects his "common" English insularity, and yet Aurora comments that he remains caught in it. Aurora tells how he teaches her "all the ignorance of men", and how God laughs when men profess knowledge: "'Here I'm learned; this, I understand;/ In that, I am never caught at fault or doubt'" (l:190-93). He instructs his young daughter in scepticism and analysis, and most importantly in what to reject:

He sent the schools to school, demonstrating  
 A fool will pass for such through one mistake,  
 While a philosopher will pass for such,  
 Through said mistakes being ventured in the gross  
 And heaped up to a system. (l:194-98)

Aurora learns to examine the underpinning structures of any system, and to identify "mistakes". It is this training, along with "her father's disregard of gender roles" (Edmond 143), that leads to her rejection of Romney's chauvinistic philosophy of women and poets.<sup>5</sup>

Yet Aurora's father, despite his late 'rebirth' and his obvious love for his daughter, remains a problematic figure for Aurora. Very early in the poem she describes her father's hand stroking her hair:



O my father's hand,  
Stroke heavily, heavily the poor hair down,  
Draw, press the child's head closer to thy knee!

(l:25-27)

There is a strange ambivalence in these lines. The older Aurora, writing this description of the young Aurora's childhood in retrospect, brings the past into present tense, reliving it and inviting - even commanding - her father's touch once again. Her terrible regret at the impossibility of fulfilling her desire emerges in the next line, which confesses that "I'm still too young, too young, to sit alone". There is safety and order in this paternal touch, a relinquishing of self-determination and responsibility to the father.

Yet the lines also suggest a simultaneous feeling of repression in the repeated adverb "heavily", and in those mounting verbs: "stroke", "draw", "press". The child Aurora here incurs the older woman's sympathy: she is a victim, her "poor" hair imprisoned within the space formed by the father's hand and knee. This is a clear recurrence of a theme from the Sonnets: the tension between desire for submissive safety and rebellion against a paternal authority. Angela Leighton writes: "The image of the father's hand in [EBB's] poetry is one which, as Virginia Steinmetz points out, often links strong human love and hard, God-like authority" (Leighton 119).<sup>6</sup> But must male love necessarily entail patriarchal power? Certainly Aurora appears to reject this association when Romney, during his attempted courtship, tries to appropriate her as beloved:

Once, he stood so near  
He dropped a sudden hand upon my head  
Bent down on woman's work, as soft as rain -  
But then I rose and shook it off as fire,  
The stranger's touch that took my father's place  
Yet dared seem soft.

(l:543-48)

Romney, Aurora tells us, wants to save her: he is eager to play the role of paternal lover. Aurora rejects it as effrontery to usurp her father's place - yet the final line suggests again a covert attraction to the touch.<sup>7</sup>

The father's silence

The "stranger" mentioned in I:547 is a representative of the patriarchal system that would take over Aurora's life and <sup>make it</sup> conform to a sense of English order. One such stranger is the nameless, faceless operative who intervenes after the sudden death of Aurora's father. Into her grief

there came  
A stranger with authority, not right,  
(I thought not) who commanded, caught me up  
From old Assunta's neck; how, with a shriek,  
She let me go, - while I, with ears too full  
Of my father's silence, to shriek back a word[...]  
(I:223-28, underlining mine)

This stranger carries the law and command of the hegemony, but Aurora cannot accept that authority as synonymous with moral right. Under this law she must undergo another maternal separation like that from her mother, this time from Assunta, her housekeeper/ friend. During this separation Aurora is appalled and silenced by the absence of her father's voice. She is clearly grieving his loss, but the lines also suggest that the child considers his absence a tacit betrayal. Despite the fact that his absence is caused by death, she seems to read it as a failure that has exposed her to a cruel world.<sup>8</sup> She later bitterly comments on the final wishes of her father concerning her:

There seemed more true life in my father's grave  
Than in all England. Since that threw me off  
Who fain would cleave, (his latest will, they say,  
Consigned me to his land)[...] (I:375-78)

In death, he has apparently abandoned her to a hostile land and society. Angela Leighton notes that it is "not [Aurora's] father's last word to 'love' which rings in her ears, but his last 'silence'" (Elizabeth 123-24). Leighton's entire thesis argues that Aurora's life - and the life of the woman poet - is a quest of the "estranged and bewildered child" for the lost father, whose silence becomes the mark of his absence. In the second book, a distraught Aurora appeals to her father in heaven for comfort, and is appalled by the "deaf blue sky" that leaves her "alone, alone" (II:734-49). She emphasises how the previously loving, attentive father is silent to her "cries". The extension here to the loving Father

God is implicit: "Oh, how far,/ How far and safe, God, dost thou keep thy saints/ When once gone from us!" (II:735-37). At this point Aurora also feels abandoned by the Father of fathers, the Patriarch of Heaven.

Aurora's ideas of abandonment and betrayal reiterate the ambivalence she locates in the figure of her father. He is loved, grieved and desired, and yet both his presence and his absence denote feelings of oppression or cruelty. Reasons for her contradictory responses can again be located in masculinist definitions of "father". When men are defined as women's saviours, protectors or owners, their withdrawal from those women becomes an act of cruel abandonment. Romney is silent and inattentive when Marian tries to tell him of Lady Waldemar's false solicitude. "I once began to tell you how she came,/ The woman ... and you stared upon the floor/ In one of your fixed thoughts ... which put me out/ For that day" (IV:911-14). In the world of Aurora Leigh where 'fathers' own and protect, women will be left bereft - "orphaned", in Leighton's terms - when those fathers leave (literally or metaphorically).

#### Regulating the daughter

Men, however, are not the only representatives of patriarchy. Women can also fill that role, and Aurora's aunt is an obvious example. She is the sister of Aurora's father, a paternal aunt in blood and attitude. She is imbued with the English attributes that Aurora has already contrasted in her father:

She stood straight and calm,  
Her somewhat narrow forehead braided tight  
As if for taming accidental thoughts  
From possible pulses; brown hair pricked with grey  
By frigid use of life[...]

(I:272-76)

Order, repression of emotion and unacceptable or disruptive thoughts, aridity and coldness: these are the aspects of both the woman and the land. Aurora is initially horrified by England, a land of "frosty cliffs", divided fields "as man from man", low skies and "indifferent air" (I:251-69). England has no welcome for the Italian Aurora, and her aunt none either. Rather her aunt plays the patriarch, seeking to control and regulate Aurora's thoughts, emotions and life.

Aurora's account of her aunt's cold greeting is strikingly intense:

she wrung loose my hands  
Imperiously, and held me at arm's length,  
And with two grey-steel naked-bladed eyes  
Searched through my face, - ay, stabbed it through  
and through[...]

(I:326-28)

Aurora perceives that her aunt seeks to associate the child with her mother, and so to marginalise and condemn her. The child's mother, representative of treacherous Italy, "fooled away/ A wise man from wise courses, a good man/ From obvious duties" (I:342-44). This is more than a clash of cultures: this is the hierarchical opposition of sanity and madness, wisdom and foolishness already seen in the distinctions between fathers and mothers. Thus Italy becomes further distinguished as the feminine world of mothering, contrasting with England as the masculine world of fathers.

Naturally Aurora's aunt makes it her duty to rescue her niece from as much of her unfortunate past as possible, with a good "English" education. But she never loves or trusts the child because of the dangerous "otherness" in her. Later, after Aurora has refused Romney's proposal and appalled her aunt with an impassioned outburst, we see this distrust and repugnance surface: she drops Aurora's hands "in sedate disgust" as if she had touched a dead snake,<sup>9</sup> and advises her niece to "'leave Italian manners, if you please'" (II:724-27). She is determined to uphold the masculinist values of her society by repressing any challenge or expression of difference.

The life that Aurora's aunt establishes for her exemplifies how paternal authority is exercised for Victorian women.<sup>10</sup> Aurora describes it in ironic detail in Book I. Firstly, her appearance is ordered by confining her Tuscan curls in braids - a symbolic gesture that attempts to contain Aurora's sensuality in the same way the aunt has already repressed her own hair and sensuality. (Aurora herself tries the same thing much later in Book V:1126-34, when she suppresses her passion for Romney and forces herself to renounce him.) Next, her language is regulated: she must speak English rather than her instinctive Tuscan words, because her aunt "liked my father's child to speak his tongue"

(I:391). Thirdly Aurora's religious faith must conform to hegemonic standards, which Aurora notes preclude any teaching on love!

Crucially, of course, the "father" must regulate the daughter's education. In Aurora's case her father had been remarkably liberal, so a more conventional feminine education is belatedly required. This involves a smattering of safe subjects and a good grounding in the feminine accomplishments of watercolours, bravura piano playing and modelling wax flowers. A wide berth is taken of most books except those on "womanhood" which Aurora sums up as advising young women to "keep quiet by the fire/ And never say 'no' when the world says 'ay,'/ For that is fatal" (I:437-38). The lines describing Aurora's instruction are a delight to read: they are wittily parodic at the expense of the Victorian education of women. But there is serious challenge behind the humour. Aurora clearly recognises what this life means for women: "their, in brief,/ Potential faculty in everything/ Of abdicating power in it" (I:440-42).

She completes her education by learning to sew, an occupation to keep women useful by sewing trivial articles for their inattentive menfolk who dream of "something we are not/ But would be for your sake". Aurora concludes:

Alas, alas!  
This hurts most, this - that, after all, we are paid  
The worth of our work, perhaps. (I:463-65)

Women are only allowed valueless tasks and so inevitably are not valued themselves. But to be the valued "thing" of men's dreams - mistresses? prostitutes? - would immediately remove their position as gentlewomen, which is apparently their main attribute of value within society. And in either case, women remain male-defined objects of desire.

### The commerce of patriarchal love

The ordering of Aurora's life by the edict of patriarchal authority is to a purpose, that of perpetuating that authority through marriage. It is no coincidence that Romney is introduced following Aurora's account of her

constrained life with her aunt. It becomes clear that Aurora is being groomed for marriage to Romney, and this is later confirmed by her aunt who tells how Aurora was requested by Romney's father at her birth:<sup>11</sup>

"I ask your baby daughter for my son  
In whom the entail now merges by the law.  
Betroth her to us out of love, instead  
Of colder reasons, and she shall not lose  
By love or law from henceforth[...]" (I:626-71)

This quotation, comingling love with commercial value and law, gives an insight into the nature of marriage in Aurora's world. As in the Sonnets, patriarchal love relations occur in an atmosphere of transaction. In that work, the Rialto of the Victorian marriage market can be seen as a crude example of the Irigarayan sexual economy, Cixous' masculinist giving-to-get. Certainly commercial considerations are uppermost in the mind of Aurora's aunt, whose immediate response to her niece's refusal of Romney is an impassioned speech about their (both her own and Aurora's) poverty in the world and their dependence on Romney Leigh's money and benevolence. Aurora's marriage is thus the obvious solution to their precarious state.

Romney also thinks in terms of commerce, but in a more subtle way. Throughout the long argument of Book II, his chauvinism is apparent, and it makes his eventual proposal simply that: a proposal, a contractual offer. He asks for what he believes to be the only thing of value a woman can give: love (see II:350). He later defines love: "if your sex is weak for art/ ... it is strong/ For life and duty" (II:372-75). Aurora perceives that Romney reads "helpmate" for "wife", and that his marriage vows will take second place to his social theory. She mimics Romney's offer:

"I have some worthy work for thee below.  
Come, sweep my barns and keep my hospitals,  
And I will pay thee with a current coin  
Which men give women." (II:538-41)

That is, marriage and (relative) security.

Later Aurora charitably attributes Romney's bartering attitudes to his impotence in the face of the apparent fait accompli of their betrothal: he was "self-tied/ By a contract". She reinterprets his opinions in the light of this:

Love, to him, was made  
 A simple law-clause. If I married him,  
 I should not dare to call my soul my own  
 Which so he had bought and paid for: every thought  
 And every heart-beat down there in the bill;  
 Not one found honestly deductible  
 From any use that pleased him! He might cut  
 My body into coins to give away  
 Among his other paupers[...]

(II:784-92)

Romney's sense of honour and duty to the betrothal contract is even more abhorrent than his sexism, because it removes the mitigation of love. Aurora believes that Romney has proposed out of duty, not desire, and that her acquiescence would complete a purely mercenary contract. The implications are appalling: every aspect of her being would be signed over to his ownership. Soul, mind, emotion and body would become his property, while Aurora would be left worse than poverty-stricken: her woman's body become the very currency bestowed on the "other paupers" by his philanthropy.

It is mindful to note that at this early point in their relationship both Romney and Aurora misconstrue each other. Certainly the reader is expected to see the ironic self-deception in Aurora's protestations that she does not love Romney. Nevertheless, Aurora's distressful perceptions of Romney's attitudes here cannot be dismissed as fancy, or over-reaction. This is, after all, the woman trained in detecting errors in systems of thought. Moreover, Romney apparently confirms her interpretation of him. After her aunt's funeral he makes a very generous offer to a stubbornly resistant Aurora. She can see that he continues to want to play the role of provider and benefactor to a defenceless and poor woman. When she farewells him, he responds: "'Ah, poor child,/ Who fight against the mother's 'tiring hand,/ And choose the headsman's!'" (II:1188-90). Romney is casting himself in the role of mother, whom Aurora has chosen to reject for the harsher hand of the the world. The word "headsman" is an interesting choice, meaning chief or head man - another patriarch. Ironically, Romney cannot see that he is in fact playing the father role in attempting to buy

this woman's marital commitment (as Aurora sees it). His self-delusion extends to casting himself as a loving maternal figure.<sup>12</sup>

This idea of gender relations as a marketplace of men/fathers with marriage as the desired contract and women the exchangeable goods emerges further in the wonderfully dramatic account of Romney and Marian's aborted wedding. When Marian fails to show, Romney begins his public apology appropriately ("My brothers!") and then confesses (with the language of the business place) that he has lost his bride. The public ceremony will not occur; the audience is "dismissed". The response of the poor gathered to witness this unique transaction is violent, and they demand their "rights": "We'll have the girl, the girl!" (IV:841-42). Marian becomes a symbolic battleground, a dehumanised piece of property, the control of which is now disputed between Romney and the under-classes. After this long and extraordinary account, Aurora then by contrast gives us the woman herself - Marian's intimate letter of explanation to Romney.<sup>13</sup> All the fears and thoughts that he had no conception of, nor inclination for, are here. Marian the woman has chosen to refuse marriage to Romney, though admittedly under the malign influence of Lady Waldemar.

#### Female competition

Mention of Lady Waldemar raises another facet of women's lives that a patriarchal culture controls: female relations. Because any sense of female alliance is a potential threat to paternal control, such alliances are negated early. Aurora is thwarted in almost every attempt to establish a lasting and deep relationship with another woman: her mother; Assunta; her aunt; Lady Waldemar; even Marian, with whom she tries to establish a female community. The final chapter discusses how the reasons for these failures are implemented from earliest childhood, and how almost all are related to the patriarchal arrangement of women's society. The results for women are loss of permanent female friendship and the establishment instead of a divisive female competition. Within this culture women are prepared only for marriage (as Aurora's education reveals); their career therefore becomes a search for the best husband. The



rivalry that results is exemplified by Lady Waldemar, who covertly battles both Aurora and Marian in her need to win Romney.

Similarly, Aurora perceives that her aunt has nourished hatred for her mother (and by extension herself) because the Italian woman supplanted the English woman, "depriving her,/ His sister, of the household precedence" (I:344-45) and relegating her to a "pittance" (II:638) thereafter. Her aunt's only honourable alternative to marriage was housekeeper to her brother - both careers located in a male. Deprived of either she becomes disaffected, and Aurora is amazed at the fund of hate that can focus on a woman she has never even met:

She had pored for years  
 What sort of woman could be suitable  
 To her sort of hate, to entertain it with,  
 And so, her very curiosity  
 Became hate too, and all the idealism  
 She ever used in life, was used for hate,  
 Till hate, so nourished, did exceed at last  
 The love from which it grew[...]

(I:348-55)

When a woman's life is limited to living through a man, and then a man is denied her, all that woman's energies, talents and desires become focussed on the apparent cause for that denial - inevitably, another woman. The initial love for her brother is thus eclipsed by growing bitterness for his wife. Aurora concludes: "And thus my father's sister was to me/ My mother's hater" (I:359-60).

Lady Waldemar's disastrous machinations to win Romney leave her in a similar state. Her final words to Aurora, by letter, are extraordinarily similar to those above:

"Observe, Aurora Leigh,  
 Your droop of eyelid is the same as his,  
 And, but for you, I might have won his love,  
 And, to you, I have shown my naked heart;  
 For which three things, I hate, hate, hate you[...]  
                                 so I hate you from this gulf  
 And hollow of my soul, which opens out  
 To what, except for you, had been my heaven,  
 And is, instead, a place to curse by! LOVE."

(IX:162-72)

Lady Waldemar's happiness is located in Romney; without him, she can only turn her hollow desire, intelligence and energies - her personality - onto Aurora, her rival. What is so awful about this result, though, is the destruction of a potential relationship: Aurora is the only person who has seen Lady Waldemar's deepest feelings, who has heard her speak honestly (in Book III). Aurora, however, is unable to accept this woman's openness because she is repressing her own rival love for Romney. Lady Waldemar is without doubt selfish and manipulative, but she is not the evil schemer of Aurora's imagination, as Helen Cooper also notes (157). These two intelligent and perceptive women cannot be allies within the situation they are placed in.

### Female voice marginalised

Another effect of patriarchal control of women is the romanticisation, trivialisation and marginalisation of the female voice. Romney is of course the prime promulgator of this process. In his argument with Aurora in Book II about the worth of poets - particularly female ones - he makes his position clear from the outset: "'men, and still less women, happily,/ Scarce need be poets.'" Dreaming of such "defiles" Aurora's clean white (i.e. virginal) dress, he adds (II:92-96). Romney's reasoning is that the world is in such a desperate state that it requires only the "Best" in Art, the Best being gritty realism. Women are unable to do this because they cannot generalise or see past the particular to the universal. This in turn is because of women's nature: they are too feeling, too loving, too sympathetic for the individual.

"does one woman of you all  
 (You who weep easily)[...]  
- does one of you  
 Stand still from dancing, stop from stringing pearls,  
 And pine and die because of the great sum  
 Of universal anguish?[...]  
Therefore, this same world  
 Uncomprehended by you, must remain  
 Uninfluenced by you. - Women as you are,  
 Mere women, personal and passionate[...]"

(II:204-21)

Romney's language and images here betray his conception of feminine activity as effete and unconcerned with public action (he here establishes an opposition between the male universal view and the female particular view). Women dance or string pearls - and if one unusual woman could perceive the anguish of the world, she would not act but would weep, "pine and die". Romney clearly understands his world that will judge women's writing on a lesser scale than men's, because for women "true action is impossible" (II:231). Men, on the other hand, are capable of action, and so Romney's ambition is to find "some great cure" (II:282) for the world's ills. With all the arrogance of patriarchal power, which sees itself as the centre and source of knowledge, Romney will find the solution. This, of course, is precisely the attitude that Aurora's father pilloried in his teaching: the masculine desire for control, the belief in absolute knowledge. Hierarchical oppositions are reiterated again here as Romney contrasts his work with hers. He will be "elbow-deep/ In social problems", attempting to "bring the uneven world back to its round" (II:1216-19). She, he says, will "Write woman's verses and dream woman's dreams" (II:831) - making Aurora's poetry effete, romantic, trivial, and marginal to manly work. Aurora's real task in life, Romney concludes, is attending on him, aiding and supporting him in his life's work. Like the other women of the poem, she is only really valued when defined by a man.

Romney's attitude remains consistent for much of the poem. After Aurora nurses him through the debacle of his failed wedding and Marian's apparent fall, he muses self-pityingly to her:

"You, at least,  
 Have ruined no one through your dreams. Instead,  
 You've helped the facile youth to live youth's day  
 With innocent distraction, still perhaps  
 Suggestive of things better than your rhymes.  
 The little shepherd maiden, eight years old,  
 I've seen upon the mountains of Vaucluse,  
 Asleep i' the sun, her head upon her knees,  
 The flocks all scattered, - is more laudable  
 Than any sheep-dog trained imperfectly,  
 Who bites the kids through too much zeal."

(IV:1114-24)

EBB's astute reproduction of this patronizing and deeply offensive tone perhaps reveals her own personal experience of it. Certainly Romney's words here are probably recognised by most women writers: the casual, arrogant assumption that women's writing is emasculated and feeble, suitable for "facile" young people who desire naive "distraction" from the rigours of adult responsibilities - although that distraction may prove useful in suggesting better, greater things "than your rhymes". His final simile contrasts the irresponsible, self-indulgent and useless (i.e. feminine) shepherdess with the zealous, active, faithful (male?) sheep-dog. Romney's insult is apparently meant as a compliment. Aurora's flabbergasted reaction challenges all his assumptions that her work is merely play: "I look/ As if I had slept, then?" (IV:1124-25). Romney eventually sees some of the reality of Aurora's committed, hard-working existence in her tired face. But Aurora is left with the impression that she and her work are a minor irritation on the surface of Romney's life: "a thing too small, to deign to know [...] /Not worth the pains of his analysis/ Absorbed on nobler subjects" (IV:1215-19).

Related to this point is the assumption of Aurora's culture that women, if they must write poetry, will write about love. This fits with Romney's definition of them as romantic and emotional, concerned with the individual. Aurora in Book V imagines the pastoral scene of a father returning to his hearth and home, tossing into the lap of his oldest daughter Aurora's book, exclaiming, "'Ah you, you care for rhymes;/ So here be rhymes to pore on under trees,/ When April comes to let you!'" (V:465-67). The father sets his daughter in the fitting scene of classical romance, appropriately accompanied by some poetess' "rhymes". Poetry is thus reduced to mere "rhymes", a linguistic and attitudinal diminution. Margaret Reynolds discusses the Victorian utilitarian attitude that saw poetry as effeminate: like middle-class women it was domestic, personal, spiritual, small. This was doubly so when the poet was a woman.<sup>14</sup>

The father's actions in this little story though, uncover assumptions about paternity and the daughter that shadow his expression of love for her:

"'Tis yours, the book; I'll write your name in it,  
So that you may not lose, however lost  
In poet's lore and charming reverie,

The thought of how your father thought of you  
In riding from the town."

(V:470-74)

Beneath this conventional scene of love, apparently epitomised by a book of "rhymes", remains a patriarch's definitions of women and love. Despite the daughter's temporarily "losing" herself in romantic love rhymes, she will not lose her naming and fixing by her father - the marking of the woman as paternal property. He knows, and more crucially, she must know, that the father is in control here, and any feminine preoccupation with feminine things will not displace his centrality.

### Woman as object

Finally, of course, women under patriarchy lose definition as persons in their own right. They become dehumanised objects, ciphers for masculine needs, desires and purposes. This has been the implicit result of all the above discussed aspects of patriarchal regulation.

Women are presented as objects at various points in the poem. Vincent Carrington's letter in Book III describes sketches he is working on - descriptions unnecessary for the plot and character developments elsewhere in the letter. The two sketches depict Danae waiting for her lover Zeus.<sup>15</sup> One shows a woman in the throes of desire, actively and lustily waiting, "overbold and hot". The other shows a passive woman, lying "flat upon her prison-floor", "Half-blotted out" both visually and emotionally by Zeus' rain of love, "heavy as fate". Interestingly, Carrington the male artist prefers the second: it "indicates/ More passion" (III:120-35). The woman's passion is thus represented in a manner more desirable to the male artist. She is the cipher or object that can be refashioned to suit his Zeus-like desire (which presumably needs reflected power and initiative): her own self is correspondingly "blotted out".

Aurora's response to Carrington's choice is heavily ironic:

Surely. Self is put away,  
And calm with abdication. She is Jove,  
And no more Danae - greater thus. (III:136-38)

Danae is no longer simply Danae, but is effaced by Jove's presence. She abdicates her self calmly to receive the great god. Glennis Stephenson notes how Aurora aestheticises the pictures, by reading them as a metaphor for the "artist-soul". Stephenson believes that by doing this Aurora can "move away from the painful identification with the woman as object", by instead assuming the role of artist (Poetry 97).<sup>16</sup> This is true, but Aurora is also clearly satirising the masculine placement of woman as object here. As she concludes, "when indeed our Joves come down,/ We all turn stiller than we have ever been" (III:142-43). For "still" read dead: the arrival of the obliterating god effectively kills the woman. She becomes the site for the male god's (or artist's) creative power.

The coda to this account of Vincent's sketches occurs in Book VII, where he writes to Aurora in Italy about his marriage to Kate Ward. This time he speaks of painting Kate, not a mythical Danae:

"Such eyes! I could not paint or think of eyes  
But those, - and so I flung them into paint  
And turned them to the wall's care. Ay, but now  
I've let them out, my Kate's: I've painted her,  
(I change my style and leave mythologies)  
The whole sweet face[...]" (VII:588-93)

Vincent's desire to "have" Kate - that is, to control her for his desire - is exemplified in his painting of her eyes so as to banish them to look at the wall. Now he has released them from that figurative imprisonment to look at the world (and him) again. The freedom is illusory though, for he tells Aurora in the concluding lines that he has completed his control of the woman by painting her whole face - indeed, half her body ("A half-length portrait" [VII:595]). Presumably the full portrait will follow after the marriage is consummated.

The assumption that woman is an object for man's appraisal, and indeed a cipher for his desire, is also evidenced later in Book V at Lord Howe's party, where Aurora listens to two men discussing Lady Waldemar's beauty. The two

men speak of her as a flower, an identification that disallows her human personality, and that enables them to interpret and judge her by her physical appearance. She becomes the static object upon which they build their own opinions and pronouncements about her and women in general. When Lord Howe interrupts them to draw attention to the silent listening Aurora, the two men, to whom Aurora has been invisible, remove themselves, presumably in some embarrassment. Lord Howe's opening words exemplify the objectification of women that has underpinned this whole episode:

"What, talking poetry  
So near the image of the unfavoring Muse?  
That's you, Miss Leigh: I've watched you half an  
hour,  
Precisely as I watched the statue called  
A Pallas in the Vatican[...]"

(V:795-99)

Lord Howe, who knows Aurora better than most, nevertheless still considers her the Muse, not the poet who presumably must be male. His gaze defines Aurora as the passive art object. The effect of Romney's gaze at the young Aurora, described by Mermin, is precisely the same: "Instead of an artist she becomes a work of art, and an archaic, useless one at that" (*Origins* 189).<sup>17</sup> By comparing her to a statue of the goddess of chastity, Lord Howe may well be satirising Aurora here, showing her how she is perceived as the stern, powerful but passionless Athena. But Aurora's clever response reveals the essential impasse in her position: because her culture places woman as object or muse, she cannot be the poet. Therefore Aurora as poet cannot be a woman but must play the role of passionless, chaste - and masculinist - Athena.

"Ah,"  
Said I, "my dear Lord Howe, you shall not speak  
To a printing woman who has lost her place,  
(The sweet safe corner of the household fire  
Behind the heads of children) compliments,  
As if she were a woman. We who have clipt  
The curls before our eyes, may see at least  
As plain as men do. Speak out, man to man[...]"

(V:804-09)

Aurora is very clear-sighted about her options: the safe effacement of identity and career into conventional wife- and mother-hood, or the pseudo-masculine but desexed and marginalised role of poet.

Marian's story

It is apparent that much of Aurora Leigh is concerned with describing in human terms the nature of male and female relations within Aurora's culture. Marian's story becomes the archetypal example of a woman who is victim to total patriarchal control. It is worth taking a moment to consider Marian's account of her early life as Aurora retells it in Book III, as a summary of the discussion so far.

Marian is born to itinerant workers in an illegal hovel on Malvern Hill. Her father, when not working, drinks and abuses his wife, who in turn vents her misery on her baby daughter. Aurora's editorial recounting of this situation clearly apportions blame to her society: "God sent [Marian] to His world, commissioned right" (III:837), but human evil intervenes from Marian's first breath.

No place for her,  
By man's law! born an outlaw, was this babe;  
Her first cry in our strange and strangling air,  
When cast in spasms out by the shuddering womb,  
Was wrong against the social code, - forced wrong:-  
What business had the baby to cry there? (III:841-46)

Marian's existence begins and continues with rejection. As Aurora's extreme vocabulary makes clear, Marian's birth is a traumatic expulsion from her mother's womb, and her very existence is a transgression of her culture's codes. Her mother's lack of maternal love is disparaged by Aurora only lightly: again, the real blame lies at a deeper level. The woman's "broken heart" from her husband's violence and her hopeless life causes "the worm" to turn on an equally helpless daughter (III:869-70). Thus, concludes Aurora,

There's not a crime  
But takes its proper change out still in crime  
If once rung on the counter of this world:  
Let sinners look to it. (III:870-73)

The capitalist economy of patriarchy is once more suggested in the imagery here, an economy that demands equal exchange and commerce in human lives.



Crimes against human freedom and dignity must inevitably be met with equivalences to maintain the balances of power.

Marian the child nevertheless discovers some intuitive knowledge of a "grand blind Love" (III:893) - God, Aurora calls it - by escaping her immediate situation and communing with nature. This God, we are told, is a "skyey father and mother both in one" (III:899): a loving parent as distinct from the unloving authorities of her life. The Sunday school she attends is one such authority, where she meets merry little Rose Bell, whose "pelting glee" and "mirth" (III:914-15) cannot be restrained by the schoolmaster (but which is soon constrained by a life of prostitution). Here Marian learns of the more formal Christian God, and her knowledge leads to a further alienation from her parents, whose sin before God she now apprehends. Aurora appreciates Marian's torment:

Oh, 'tis hard  
 To learn you have a father up in heaven  
 By a gathering certain sense of being, on earth, Still worse than  
 orphaned: 'tis too heavy a grief,  
 The having to thank God for such a joy! (III:942-46)

Aurora finds problematic the God of righteousness, who has come to assume the qualities of her world - demanding quid quo pro. By the end of the poem Aurora has chosen to shift her focus to a more New Testament-style God of love as her deity.

Marian's childhood is spent following her parents in their wanderings around Britain, during which she gathers hard knowledge from experience, and scraps of literature from obliging pedlars.<sup>18</sup> Her childhood is dramatically ended when her mother - again after the provocation of a severe beating from her husband - attempts to sell her daughter into prostitution. Aurora's narrative here is graphic and powerful, describing the buyer's "beast's eyes" that threaten to "swallow [Marian] alive/ Complete in body and spirit, hair and all" (III:1050-52). We recall Aurora's description of Romney's proposal, in which she "should not dare to call [her] soul [her] own/ Which he had so bought and paid for" (II:786-87). The sale of both women entails soul and body: Marian's hair, that potent Victorian symbol of female sensuality, will be devoured. This imagery of

consuming continues as Marian breaks free from her mother and the man and flees, pursued by their calls as "famished hounds at a hare". Her name is thrown hissing after her like "shot from guns". She is prey to the predatory transactions of this culture's economy.

Marian's story continues with her rescue and deliverance to a hospital by a caring waggoner. Here she is astonished and "half tranced" by the "simple dues of fellowship/ And social comfort" she experiences. (Aurora exclaims in indignation, "Oh my God,/ How sick we must be, ere we make men just!" [III:1119-20].) But her first experience of ministrations is undermined when "some one who had nursed her as a friend/ Said coldly to her, as an enemy," that she must leave the hospital. The hospital must function within a world of utilitarianism and profit, just as its women patients exist in a society where females are defined by their relations to husbands and children. Marian overhears other convalescents discussing the lives they are about to return to, and each is anxious for her position either as wife/lover or mother. Marian, never having had any such definition except the negative ones of rejection and alienation, envies the women these limited roles: "Marian felt the worse/ For having missed the worst of all their wrongs" (III:1167-68). She is thus highly susceptible to Romney Leigh's gentle concern for her as an individual. His intervention in finding her work and purpose raises him to hero status in her eyes. Aurora describes her and her mother as "worm[s]" (III:869; 1181) discovered beneath stones - the worms with whom Romney is continually concerned in the poem, as Aurora first points out in Book I.

Always Romney Leigh  
Was looking for the worms, I for the gods.  
[...] I was a worm too, and he looked on me.

(I:551-52; 556)

These worms feed and writhe through the dirt of society, vulnerable, trivial - and yet necessary. Aurora, Marian, Marian's mother, the working classes - these are all the fodder for Romney's great social action. In Book VIII he confesses his misplaced zeal to Aurora:

I beheld the world  
 As one great famishing carnivorous mouth, -  
 A huge, deserted, callow, blind bird Thing,  
 With piteous open beak that hurt my heart,  
 Till down upon the filthy ground I dropped,  
 And tore the violets up to get the worms.  
 Worms, worms, was all my cry: an open mouth,  
 A gross want, bread to fill it to the lips,  
 No more.

(VIII:395-403)

In his painful anxiety to deal with the universal problem, Romney forgets that worms make the earth, and so he makes victims of the most helpless of individuals. His earlier dismissal of concern for the personal as a female fault is thus revised, as he belatedly understands the need for such a concern in both sexes.

Marian's early story concludes in Book IV. Romney finds Marian attending to the dying Lucy Gresham, a fellow sempstress. Marian's decision to do this flies in the face of accepted wisdom: she forfeits her job and her chance to return to that job because she believes that assisting a "solitary soul" (IV:37) foundering in the dark is of more value than sewing dresses for Lady Waldemar. This is foolishness within the economy of returns that Marian's society dictates. She will gain nothing from aiding Lucy - indeed she loses more. When Romney turns up, as he does throughout the poem with an almost divine preknowledge, he is impressed with Marian's "woman's heart" (IV:143) and eventually proposes marriage to her with much talk about drawing the "two extremes/ Of social classes" together (IV:138-39). There is little love in his language, though some respect. But what is primarily obvious in Romney's proposal is his concern with his project of "mercy and ministration" (IV:141) for which Marian has proved herself admirably suited. There is no mention of Marian's desire or feelings; she is the helpmeet without personal identity. Romney uses a striking image to describe their prospective union:

"Let us lean  
 And strain together rather, each to each,  
 Compress the red lips of this gaping wound  
 As far as two souls can, - ay, lean and league,  
 I from my superabundance, - from your want  
 You[...]"

(IV:125-30)

The wound of which Romney speaks is in the crucified Christ's heart, derived from the sword which simultaneously "cleft" the world in twain, particularly class from class.<sup>19</sup> But the image suggests far more. It invokes the masculine interpretation of female genitalia as two red lips disclosing a gaping wound. This is the rhetoric of masculine fear of female desire, particularly evident in medieval texts and still carrying overtones into discussions of female sexuality today.<sup>20</sup>

The woman's sexuality is based on the lack of the penis: her "nothing-to-be-seen" is thus a terrible gap indicative of castration - a "gaping wound".

Romney's words here can thus be read as a deep-seated fear and evasion of female sexuality, as is more clearly evident in his philosophies about women. His attempts to romanticise women and to deny them any desire or initiative except an effete propensity to "love" can be described as an attempt to compress the red lips of female sexuality together, to close off the wound, to remove it from view, to "heal" women of their own "terrible" sexuality. His proposal to Marian is thus for a passionless marriage, in which Marian's female sexuality is closed off, her initiative and selfhood denied. Moreover, he asks her to assist in this process of her self-erasure, she from her position of lack and he from his "superabundance".

Marian's lifestory thus can be read as a case-study in Victorian patriarchal regulation. As she moves from a position of oppression to a new position of suppression, she has little awareness of a possibility of otherness, of legitimate alternatives to this existence. Thus this culture effectively erases any possibility of critique.

## ii. Female roles within patriarchy

After such a comprehensive account of women's position within the world of Aurora Leigh, what roles are open to individual women within the poem?<sup>21</sup>

The spinster aunt

Aurora's aunt is the "odd" or "redundant" woman of Victorian society, the spinster. Taking the position of the pseudo-father, she upholds the values of her English world and enforces repression of herself and Aurora as women. Aurora describes what this entails:

She had lived, we'll say,  
A harmless life, she called a virtuous life,  
A quiet life, which was not life at all,  
(But that, she had not lived enough to know)  
Between the vicar and the county squires,  
The lord-lieutenant looking down sometimes  
From the empyrean to assure their souls  
Against chance vulgarisms[...]

(I:287-94)

The aunt's life is lived via others: she receives self-definition from her associations with the carefully ranked men of quality and standing around her. Her definition is built upon apparently Christian virtues; the sure mark of the Victorian gentlewoman. This dictate of pseudo-Christianity kept intact the restrictive structures of society: virtuous middleclass women only remained so by keeping a strong distinction between themselves and non-virtuous women. Thus their own sense of value and worth depended upon preserving the non-value of others "less fortunate", and the whole circular system was rarely dissected to expose either the erroneous nature of the distinctions or the hollowness of the values. Leighton makes a strong argument that the feminism of Aurora Leigh lies in the way Aurora comes to speak for - and give voice to - her 'sister', the silenced, outcast fallen woman (Marian). Such a feminism breaks down the code of silence and evasion with which Victorian society treated the issue of prostitution.

The fathers' way of dealing with these things is to keep the ['pure'] women hushed and veiled, and thus, from enforced sexual modesty, impotent to change the system in which they too are trapped ... [Barrett Browning] does not range Madonnas against Magdalens, pure women against fallen women; [she] ranges them all against men, against 'paterfamilias' ... Both the exaggerated modesty of the 'pure and prosperous' and the exploited immodesty of the 'miserable' serve to perpetuate the sexual rule of men" (Elizabeth 147).

Aurora's aunt represents a woman caught in this vicious circle.

Aurora describes her aunt's "quiet", "virtuous" life - which demands a woman conform to narrow dictates and values that deny her intelligence, power and abilities - in a favourite metaphor:

She had lived  
 A sort of cage-bird life, born in a cage,  
 Accounting that to leap from perch to perch  
 Was act and joy enough for any bird.  
 Dear heaven, how silly are the things that live  
 In thickets, and eat berries!

I, alas,  
 A wild bird scarcely fledged, was brought to her cage,  
 And she was there to meet me. Very kind.  
 Bring the clean water, give out fresh seed. (l:304-12)

The woman born into these assumptions can rarely see her imprisonment: the world outside the cage is beyond her experience and her desire. But the wild bird, who knows freedom, can never be happy inside the cage of this role. Aurora's ironic and foreboding tone warns us that she can never play this "virtuous" role. Instead, Aurora tells us, she plays the closet renegade, balancing all her aunt's instruction in the "quiet" life with her own instincts for something else.

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! (l:477-81)

Aurora makes a Romantic distinction between the imposed constricting life of false convention and a spacious, natural, holistic existence, which receives divine approbation. This distinction also applies to Aurora's Christianity and conventional religion, and prefigures her reinterpretation of Christianity in her later experiences:

[I] lived my life, and thought my thoughts, and  
 prayed  
 My prayers without the vicar; read my books,  
 Without considering whether they were fit  
 To do me good. (l:699-702)

Aurora will not, and does not, accept the role of the quiet life; she will not be the image of her unmarried aunt, playing the virtuous spinster woman.

### Wife and helpmeet

Without the clear, 'safe' definition of wife, Aurora's aunt needs to maintain positive definitions from the men in her wider society. A wife, however, must also be "virtuous" - and Aurora is to be Romney's wife. Romney's attitudes in Book II seem fairly representative of his culture's view of a wife.<sup>22</sup> She is to be virginal, pure, undefiled, and must act as the comforter and helpmeet to her husband. This view is later developed by the devout Sir Blaise Delorme, who wittily advises young Smith against choosing the physically alluring Lady Waldemar as wife, and gives the correct criteria for such a decision:

[3-4]  
 "Otherwise  
 Our father chose, - and therefore, when they had hung  
 Their household keys about a lady's waist,  
 The sense of duty gave her dignity;  
 She kept her bosom holy to her babes,  
 And, if a moralist reproved her dress,  
 'Twas, 'Too much starch!' - and not, 'Too little lawn!'"

(V:686-92)

Sir Blaise takes a virtuous young virgin and makes her a virtuous housekeeper and mother. Her identity (bestowed by her husband) gives "dignity", preserves her reputation, but again ties her into a pseudo-Christian morality from which she cannot escape.<sup>23</sup>

Aurora vehemently rejects this role when offered it by Romney. She responds acerbically to his call to keep her clean white<sup>24</sup> morning dress undefiled by the world of poetry:

"I would rather take my part  
 With God's Dead, who afford to walk in white  
 Yet spread His glory, than keep quiet here  
 And gather up my feet from even a step  
 For fear to soil my gown in so much dust.  
 I choose to walk at all risks."

(II:101-06)

She would rather be dead than locked into Romney's idea of her as wife - remaining unsoiled and "quiet". That latter word recalls Aurora's description of her aunt's life, but also refers to Aurora's poetic voice. Marriage to Romney now would render her silent. Rather she desires to take "risks" - another word emphasising what is at stake. In rejecting the limited role of marriage, she breaks the self-preserving cycle of virtuous womanhood upon which this chauvinistic society depends. She risks her identity as a virtuous gentlewoman; yet if she can maintain herself within a higher morality she becomes a subversive challenge to the hegemonic structure. Aurora is very aware of the price of such her decision:

If he had loved,  
 [...] I might have been a common woman now  
 And happier, less known and less left alone,  
 Perhaps a better woman after all,  
 With chubby children hanging on my neck  
 To keep me low and wise. Ah me, the vines  
 That bear such fruit, are proud to stoop with it.  
 The palm stands upright in a realm of sand. (II:511-19)

In the remainder of the nine books Aurora "proves" that she was right to make her choice as she did, but this early regret points to her sense of loss. She remonstrates with that regret by decrying marriage: "O woman's vile remorse,/ To hanker after a mere name, a show" (II:523-24). Her desire for love and children cannot be met in Romney's offer; it would entail a devaluing of herself and her sense of purpose to submit to his marital transaction, so she must assume a different role - the lonely palm in the desert. Similarly, after overhearing Sir Blaise's advice (see above), she finds she must reject a marriage offer from a rich gentleman, delivered to her by her friend Lord Howe (see V:863ff). He impresses upon her the need for compromise, to marry so as to support herself. He emphasises the reputation and deserving nature of the prospective lover who is both morally and financially a good catch. Aurora is deeply hurt that a friend should so misunderstand her own morality and values: again she rejects the mercenary proposition for a lonely and poor existence.



The Madonna

Marian, on the other hand, takes the role of the virtuous wife to an extreme: she becomes the virginal angel who will sacrifice everything to her idol of a husband. Her relationship with Romney, Aurora suggests, is less contractual and more religious: "a simple fealty" (IV:193). Aurora compares Marian's total self-surrender with the Indian practice of suttee - only here in England, she adds drily, the husband is still alive. Marian reveals how she made Romney her life in a letter to him after the failed wedding:

O, my star,  
My saint, my soul! for surely you're my soul,  
Through whom God touched me!

(IV:970-72)

Marian has located her moral and spiritual identity in Romney. After finding Marian in Paris, Aurora recounts Marian's admission of this total submission:

She felt his  
For just his uses, not her own at all,  
His stool, to sit on or put up his foot,  
His cup, to fill with wine or vinegar,  
Whichever drink might please him at the chance  
For that should please her always: let him write  
His name upon her ... it seemed natural[...]

(VI:906-12)

In these lines Marian is Romney's object, Susan Gubar's "blank page" bearing the male author's autograph. Moreover Marian offered to play this role, and Romney felt no qualms in accepting. Even when Marian renounces Romney, it is out of consideration for him. Lady Waldemar convinces her that she will be a bane and burden to her idol, who did not love her but would marry her out of loyalty.

Appropriately, Aurora associates Marian with religious iconography: she is the martyred Christ-figure whom Romney anoints with "the rich medicative nard" of his voice (in an ironic and subversive inversion of the account of the prostitute Mary anointing Christ's feet); he also touches the "wounds of Christ" when he aids her in the hospital. Her love for Romney is a Christ-like love of endless giving, and Aurora's unhappy implication is that Marian too will be abused and martyred.

She is frequently described as "blind", for example. Ostensibly this term refers to Marian's hair which voluminously shades her face, but it also denotes her naive blindness in her relationship with Romney, which is dominated by her trademark, passivity. Trained into the victim's role from birth, described as being "dog-like" in her patience (IV:281), she takes on passivity as her dominant mode. One extraordinary example of this mode is when Aurora first visits Marian in her garret at the suggestion of the jealous Lady Waldemar. Marian tells her story, and then Romney arrives to find his long-lost beloved (Aurora) speaking with his fiancée. A long conversation ensues, exclusively between Aurora and Romney. Although the conversation is predominantly about Marian, she never speaks during it, and at its close, Aurora leaves accompanied by Romney, with barely a word to Marian. Even given the difference in class between her and them, this is extraordinary behaviour on both sides. Marian becomes invisible, crucially believing this to be appropriate. It is this blindness - to her own value and strength, and to her world's abusiveness - that she must clear.

The name "Marian" is a clear reference to the Madonna, the mother of Christ, and thus delineates both her role as "virgin" mother and her relationship with her son, also "fatherless" and rejected by his society. Marian's position is fascinating: she begins as the innocent virgin, turns into the fallen woman, and ends as a saint-like Madonna. Under the terms of Victorian society these are all mutually exclusive roles, except where they meet in the highly ambivalent figure of Mary, the mother of Christ. It becomes clear that the narrow distinctions made by this patriarchal culture - fitting women into one-dimensional roles - cannot contain real women. Someone like Marian will inevitably transgress boundaries.<sup>25</sup>

Crucially, Marian herself rejects the role of the Madonna. She tells Aurora when they remeet in Paris how some charitable peasants cared for her during her wanderings after the rape:

"and twice they tied,  
At parting, Mary's image round my neck -  
How heavy it seemed! as heavy as stone;  
A woman has been strangled with less weight:  
I threw it in a ditch to keep it clean  
And ease my breath a little, when none looked[...]" (VI:1255-60)

The Madonna role is deathly heavy to a normal woman, whose three-dimensionality will never keep it pure and intact. Marian rejects this identification; it cannot be filled by any mortal woman.

### The courtly lady

Lady Waldemar is the other female character of note in Aurora Leigh. Because she is a member of the upper classes, the spaces allotted to her in her culture are limited in a different way. In Book III Aurora introduces her as the archetypal society woman - that is, a product of society.<sup>26</sup> "You know the sort of woman," she tells us, "brilliant stuff,/ And out of nature" (III:357-58). That is, immensely gracious and regal, immensely self-possessed and proud. Her words and actions in the poem always feel like a superb performance, as indeed Lady Waldemar's life is. In her interview with Aurora she opens herself up to immense risk by confessing love for Romney. Like the beautiful lady of courtly traditions, she should remain aloof and cool, adored from afar by young men like the anonymous Smith. Yet she quickly disabuses the reader and Aurora of this image of her, choosing to demonstrate the three-dimensional woman beneath the role:

Drape us perfectly  
 In Lyons' velvet, - we are not, for that,  
 Lay-figures, look you: we have hearts within,  
 Warm, live, improvident, indecent hearts,  
 As ready for outrageous ends and acts  
 As any distressed sempstress of them all  
 That Romney groans and toils for. We catch love  
 And other fevers, in the vulgar way. (III:459-66)

Like Lady Dedlock in Dickens' Bleak House, Lady Waldemar must keep her improvident desiring heart under lock and key, or as she puts it elsewhere, under the "iron rule of womanly reserve/ In lip and life" (III:695-96). Aurora soon sees this, and as usual describes it with her own apposite image:

This palfrey pranced in harness, arched her neck,  
 And, only by the foam upon the bit,  
 You saw she champed against it. (III:699-701)

Lady Waldemar's only means of winning her desire, given her constricted situation, is to dissemble. Firstly she tries unsuccessfully to win Romney's attention and love by playing the role of devoted disciple to his social mission. Her shallow performance will never succeed with a man who sets so much store by the ardent honesty and sense of purpose of an Aurora Leigh. Secondly she attempts to enlist Aurora to advise Romney against his prospective marriage. With her perspicacity, she has noted already both Romney's deep regard for Aurora, and her returned "cousinly" love (III:403). When this scheme fails she must finally resort to undermining and removing Marian. Aurora readily casts her in the role of the evil temptress: she is a "woman of the world",

centre to herself,  
 Who has wheeled on her own pivot half a life  
 In isolated self-love and self-will,  
 As a windmill seen at a distance radiating  
 Its delicate white vans against the sky,  
 So soft and soundless, simply beautiful,  
 Seen nearer, - what a roar and tear it makes,  
 How it grinds and bruises!

(IV:513-21)

Aurora believes that Lady Waldemar's love is simply "a re-adjustment of self-love" (IV:522). Certainly Lady Waldemar is cruel and selfish, and must take personal responsibility for those qualities, as her bitterness and isolation at the close of the poem attest. Yet Aurora does not ask who built the windmill, or what wind propels its vanes. What Aurora finally discovers is that simplistic judgements are futile. This "Lady" is a "woman of the world" - a product of her own society's repressive assumptions. She is as much a victim of her society's ideology as Marian.

#### Aurora the poet

The role that Aurora chooses, in contradistinction to those depicted above, is that of the poet. Yet her perceptions of that career and the assumptions of her world are very different. Romney's dismissive and patronising response to Aurora's ambitions have already been cited, and he is not alone in these sentiments. Her friends - Vincent Carrington, Lord Howe - offer their admiration and support to a certain point but there is always the

problem of Aurora's sex. She is, finally, a woman, and her gender presupposes passivity and muse-status in both men's minds at different, unguarded moments. At worst, if Aurora is making some impact in her poetry, she can be depicted as unnatural and therefore marginalised. Lord Howe makes an amazingly insulting comparison when he describes Aurora as "my" Delphic "prophetess":

Think, - the god comes down as fierce  
As twenty bloodhounds, shakes you, strangles you,  
Until the oracular shriek shall ooze in froth! (V:943-45)

His ostensible point is that her job is hard work and she should marry well to make it easier, but his chosen metaphor also betrays his presumption of her unnaturalness and of her intrinsic inability. Aurora is rendered a manic, possessed cipher for a masculine god-voice, and his comment on her material poverty (she is "poor, except in what [she] richly give[s]") also ironically conveys his underlying assumption of her poetic 'emptiness'.

Even other women choose to read Aurora's career in these terms. Lady Waldemar (who on arriving in Aurora's studio the first time asks Aurora, "Is this [...] the Muse?" [III:363]) makes frequent (catty) reference to Aurora's extraordinary status: "You stand outside,/ You artist women, of the common sex;/ You share not with us," she tells Aurora (III:406-08). Apparently Aurora's heart is starved to feed her head; she does not love as other women do. Moreover her poetry is judged as both effete and redundant in Lady Waldemar's guerrilla attack on Aurora at Lord Howe's society party:

"You'll like to hear  
Your last book lies at the phalanstery,  
As judged innocuous for the elder girls  
And younger women who still care for books.  
We must all read, you see, before we live[...]" (V:1002-06)

Lady Waldemar, desperately pursuing her plan of insinuating herself into Romney's phalanstery and life, and so usurping Aurora's unconscious influence there, knows precisely the means by which to wound her rival: she reproduces all the conventional 'wisdom' concerning women and poetry.

Clearly the options are limited for a woman in Aurora's world. In each example observed by her, women are defined and given value by men, as befits a patriarchy. They are prescribed limited roles that deny their complex humanity and their personal autonomy. Throughout the poem Aurora constantly canvasses this problem, writing and rewriting her reactions to it. After first leaving Romney, following her aunt's death, Aurora works for three years in a not-so-romantic garret, from which she views the great city of London arise and "perish" each day into the mist of fog "Like Pharoah's armaments in the deep Red Sea" (III:197). When she is moved by "a sudden sense of vision and of tune" to write about this vast scene, she feels like a conqueror herself, even though she "did not fight". She is like Miriam and the other singing women of Israel: you "sing the song you choose", she tells us.<sup>27</sup>

Her metaphors here reflect precisely her perception of her role as a poet in this culture. She is a spectator on the battle of life - a singing "girl". Despite the reductiveness of her position, she revels in the autonomy of her song, knowing at the same time that her world will not acknowledge that autonomy. She continues:

I worked with patience, which means almost power:  
I did some excellent things indifferently,  
Some bad things excellently. Both were praised,  
The latter the loudest. (III:204-07)

She is learning her craft, and yet her world prefers the lesser achievements in her poetry as they confirm her as the feeble or emasculated female poetess.

At the opening of Book V, her disquisition on poetry, genres, and society, Aurora is rankling under Romney's dismissal of her career at the close of Book IV. What really galls her, however, is that she is rankled.

There it is,  
We women are too apt to look to One,  
Which proves a certain impotence in art.  
[...] We must have mediators  
Betwixt our highest conscience and the judge[...]

(V:42-50)

Aurora recalls Romney's early indictment of women as being too personal, not able to abstract: she agrees here that women write for men, or a particular man (the "One" - a Christ figure?) for male approval. The male must mediate between the woman's highest endeavour and "the judge" - God? the reading public? All of which makes women "impotent" in their art, literally requiring the masculine phallus to endorse their work. The word "impotent" is ironic: women cannot write with male power precisely because they are women and therefore denied the power of autonomy and individual validity.<sup>28</sup> In Book V, however, Aurora defies her depressed "confession" with a rejection of "impotence":

This vile woman's way  
Of trailing garments, shall not trip me up:  
I'll have no traffic with the personal thought  
In Art's pure temple. Must I work in vain,  
Without the approbation of a man?  
It cannot be; it shall not.

(V:59-64)

Aurora will avoid feminine impotence by denying her femininity, rejecting "womanly" ways. She will therefore not need a man's mediation. Her decision, however, cannot erase her femaleness:

We'll keep our aims sublime, our eyes erect,  
Although our woman-hands should shake and fail;  
And if we fail ... But must we? -

Shall I fail? (V:71-73)

The shift in her verbs here ("if" - "must" - "shall") and the staggered line reveal her anxiety and move her oration onto a very personal level. Aurora is only too aware that her choice is by no means unproblematic.

However, the process she begins here, to give women a place to speak from within patriarchy, is finally worthwhile. It is no coincidence that Aurora's greatest and most powerful work finally is written out of an impassioned belief in her own ability to perceive truth as a woman. In Book VIII she can make the strong assertion to Romney that her work validates her: "The universe shall henceforth speak for [me]," she declares, "And witness, 'She who did this thing, was born/ To do it, - claims her license in her work'" (VIII:839-41). As the work validates the woman, the woman also validates the work: she was born this gender to do just this work.

In the first five books of the poem, though, the problem for women raised within a patriarchal system is made abundantly clear. Aurora is constructed by its definitions: like all the other women in the poem she too needs masculine approbation and validation for her work (and existence), despite her unusual decision to eschew traditional roles. She mourns: "I cannot thoroughly love a work of mine [...] He has shot them down,/ My Phoebus Apollo, soul within my soul" (V:411-14). Aurora cannot separate her or her poetry's value from the definitions of that archetypal patriarch, Romney.



## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> EBB's own father gives an apposite example of the father's power: he even attempted to legislate lifelong celibacy for his children.

<sup>2</sup> The edition used throughout this thesis is Margaret Reynolds ed., Aurora Leigh (Athens: Ohio UP, 1992). Line numbers are cited in the text (i.e. [Book] I: [lines] 60-64). I have placed my ellipses in square brackets in order to distinguish them from EBB's use of ellipses in the poem.

<sup>3</sup> The final line of this extract puns the word "missed", suggesting that it is acceptable both to rue the loss of mothers, but also to overlook them, because they are not principally important in a patriarchy.

<sup>4</sup> Most critics have noted this opposition. See Dorothy Mermin, Origins 209, who argues that EBB's childhood dichotomy of classical Greece and Rome emerge in another dichotomy: Romney, male culture and England are aligned with Roman virtues and Aurora, female culture and Italy are aligned with Greek virtues. In "From Patria to Matria..." 194-211, Sandra Gilbert discusses how Italy is the lost mother figure for Aurora, while England is the land of patriarchy.

<sup>5</sup> Throughout Book I the binarism of ignorance ("foolishness") and knowledge is implicitly discussed. When Aurora's father teaches a logical way of disputing knowledge, he is both sharing in and challenging logocentric assumptions about knowledge. Jane Moore's argument that ignorance is "an integral part of the production of meaning and the process of knowing" can be read in Aurora Leigh, where this binarism, like so many others, is broken down (Moore 73).

<sup>6</sup> Virginia Steinmetz argues that EBB's early poetry uses images of the hand and the sun to depict patriarchal interpolations in the daughter's life. These images culminate in Aurora Leigh, where hand images "represent the earthly counterpart to the solar images" ("Beyond" 28).

<sup>7</sup> Edmond also reads Romney's touch as an affront to Aurora, but, by contrast, reads Aurora's father to be an entirely benign figure (see Edmonds 143-44; 148). Such a reading takes no account of the ambivalence in Aurora's descriptions of her father.

<sup>8</sup> Dorothy Mermin believes, somewhat unfairly, that Aurora's father is "ineffectual and incomplete", impotent and absent like the other fathers in the poem (Origins 208).

<sup>9</sup> Aurora's behaviour is treacherous and dangerous (snake-like) in her aunt's eyes.

<sup>10</sup> Other brief accounts of this 'education' can be found in Kathleen Hickok 185; Helen Cooper 158; Mermin, Origins 192.

<sup>11</sup> Aurora is excluded from inheriting the Leigh fortune by a codicil in an ancestor's will, which disinherits any offspring from a Leigh's marriage with a foreign wife. Thus this betrothal request by Aurora's uncle is intended to reconcile both family and fortune (see II:606-16).

<sup>12</sup> Other commentators have pointed out how Romney attempts to 'mother' his world. Steinmetz sees him as acting out the role of the idealised mother to the poor: "a super-mother" ("Images" 360). Gilbert describes him as "yearning to heal in his own person the wounds of the body politic" (202). Mermin reads Romney's philanthropic efforts as a "grim determination to be a rescuing knight", and his failure to succeed suggests EBB's "decisive revisions of the chivalric quest and rescue story which had structured Barrett Browning's imagination since childhood" (Origins 187).

<sup>13</sup> Considering Marian's selfless adoration for Romney, Aurora comments that women of her own (capitalist middle-) class:

haggle for the small change of our gold,  
And so much love accord for so much love,  
Rialto-prices. Are we therefore wrong?  
If marriage be a contract, look to it then,  
Contracting parties should be equal, just... (IV:188-92)

If we must operate love relationships within a marketplace, Aurora declares, such contracts should at least be equal. Unfortunately they are not.

<sup>14</sup> See Reynolds ed., Aurora 2-3. Quite why this effeminization of poetry during the nineteenth century occurred is a matter for speculation. One possible theory is that as women, previously excluded from literary pursuits, especially poetry, nevertheless began to write in larger numbers, a second denial came into play, in which poetry itself was marginalised and denied a place in the 'objective' social world. By effeminising it, the masculinist Victorian thus attempted to remove it. Such double denials have been evident throughout this discussion (see, for example, p.11 above).

<sup>15</sup> Danae, daughter of Acrisius, was imprisoned by her father, but her lover Zeus visited her in a shower of golden rain, and Perseus was conceived. (See Aeschylus' Suppliants.)

<sup>16</sup> Mermin also reads Aurora's response without irony. "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", although Mermin believes that Aurora comes to reverse this subject/ object relationship to play Jove to Romney's "Danae" (Origins 211). Reynolds supports this reading of the female artist possessed by a male god-like muse: "it is the second [picture] which she [Aurora] considers to be a picture of the more efficacious poet - though, paradoxically, that power is derived from the Danae's surrender of individual identity" ("Writing" 7). Steinmetz, however, detects the "rueful" tone of Aurora's comments which reflects her "despair that she is prisoner to a patriarchal tradition" ("Beyond" 33).

<sup>17</sup> Athena's statue is anachronistic in the Christian setting of the Vatican, suggesting Aurora's redundancy except as a work of art.

<sup>18</sup> The improbability of Marian's middle-class speech is faulted by C. Castan, who says that Marian's words (not in this early book, but in the later Book VIII) are actually Aurora's language, and a fault of EBB's writing. Cooper answers this charge, showing that Aurora's retelling of Marian's story in this third book "appropriates Marian to Aurora's own likeness", objectifying and interpreting her and so alienating herself from the poorer woman (Woman 165). By Book VI, however, Marian "refuses to be defined by Aurora's middle-class ideology and language" and tells her own story, although her diction is still "suspiciously middle-class", because Marian's function is to be absorbed and "exploited by Aurora's middle-class story" (172-73).

<sup>19</sup> This extract exemplifies, for Diedre David, the central image of wounding and healing in the poem. In David's potent reading, the body politic of Aurora's world is an Hogarthian hell, a festering wound that the woman poet must minister to and heal (Intellectual 123-27).

<sup>20</sup> Compare the graphic image of the female vampire, and the origin of the vagina dentata.

<sup>21</sup> Commentators have made brief reference to the way in which the female characters of Aurora Leigh act as potential models for its heroine. Hickok considers the various women characters "in terms of their social role" (though with little analysis), concluding that "Aurora Leigh rejects the conventional wisdom about women at virtually every point" (Representations 182). Reynolds concurs, simply noting that the "sexual stereotypes" which are the "models of orthodox feminine potential" do not fit Aurora the professional woman ("Writing" 6). Mermin goes further: "Barrett Browning works out the question of a woman poet's place within poems, however - as informing intelligence and speaking subject rather than object and other - mostly in terms of Aurora's relations with the kinds of female figures who normally appear in nineteenth-century poems by men but could not themselves be poets or epic protagonists" ("Genre" 10). David takes the most extreme position (typically) concerning the characters in the poem: she argues (from humanist assumptions, as does Virginia Woolf) that the characters are merely "emblematic sketches", indeed "hardly characters at all" (Intellectual 115). It is precisely this type of reading that Hickok takes pains to challenge.

<sup>22</sup> John Woolford comments that Romney is "an abstract of Victorian Man, and his words the articulation of a whole way of thought" ("Woman and Poet" 3).

<sup>23</sup> Note the way Aurora describes her aunt's response to her rejection of Romney: "If she said a word [...] She meant a commination, or, at best,/ An exorcism against the devildom/ Which plainly held me" (II:868-72). Aurora's action in defying the cultural norms immediately places her outside society's religion and morality.

<sup>24</sup> David elucidates the colour imagery surrounding the female characters in Aurora Leigh. Green signifies the serenity and vibrancy of free womanhood, whereas red and white signify the "prevailing nineteenth-century fragmentation of woman" into oppositions such as sexuality and purity (Intellectual 119).

<sup>25</sup> Marian's example raises speculation about the Madonna: is Mary's canonisation in order to efface her humanity which dangerously mixes female types? Mary the Mother of God is thus greater and somehow apart from common humanity; Mary the Jewess from Nazareth is not. The Madonna's experiences can therefore be separated from normal female experiences; they are the stuff of myth. It is tempting to suggest that this superhuman role is created in order to efface that female human experience which will not fit the masculine-defined 'normal' roles.

<sup>26</sup> Gilbert reads Lady Waldemar as the "(false) wife/mother whose love the (false) father [Romney] must reject if he is to convert himself into a (true) brother" (203). Mermin concurs: the "wicked Lady Waldemar" is the mythic "bad" mother (Origins 192). This highly emblematic interpretation of her character, while useful, does not sufficiently take into account the tragic woman who writes the final letter to Aurora. That letter shows that Aurora has been wrong about Lady Waldemar, at least on some points, and that the "Lady", like Marian, is a complex woman.

<sup>27</sup> Interestingly, EBB's working manuscripts offer insights into this very issue of female writing. Line 200 originally reads "The poet sings like Moses", in which the poet's gender is irrelevant and can be affiliated with the great patriarch Moses. This phrase changes to "There's (vision?) to stretch hands & to sing indeed/ Like Moses & like Miriam", in which both genders are now catered for, in Moses and his sister Miriam. The final version, however, removes any affiliation with the male voice, and fixes the roles very clearly, with the women (or "girls") watching and singing. (See Reynolds 269, footnotes.)

<sup>28</sup> The elision of penis and power is discussed in a psychoanalytical context in Chapter Six.

## CHAPTER FIVE

## REWRITING PATRIARCHY'S DUALISMS

The roles and identities of Victorian women which were explained in Chapter Four all emerge from a series of dualistic oppositions which sustain the social hegemony. These dualisms, with their separate and hierarchical poles, were also described in the chapters on the Sonnets, but a summary, in the manner of Hélène Cixous,<sup>1</sup> is perhaps sufficient here:

MALE - FEMALE  
 Father - Daughter  
 active - passive  
 free - imprisoned  
 law - transgressor  
 author - blank page

In Aurora Leigh, the roles that are so clearly delineated for women depend for their definition upon the preservation of these dualisms. As feminist theorists have observed, women are effectively imprisoned within these structures, usually associated with the less privileged term in each opposition. Eventually, however, Aurora's story is about the apprehension and deconstruction of these binary forms.

#### i. The language of the prisoner

In a poem that has been much feted for its bold "female" imagery, the reader is soon aware of its extraordinary language. "I'm a woman, sir," says Aurora, "I use the woman's figures naturally" (VIII:1130-31). These "figures" dramatise the complexity of both Aurora's perceptions, and the conditions within which women exist. What emerges from a study of them is the preponderance of images of drowning, imprisonment and death.

Drowned emotions

When the child Aurora leaves Italy for England, the sea is used to depict the harsh world that demands the separation of child from the mother figures (of Italy and Assunta):

Then the bitter sea  
Inexorably pushed between us both,  
And sweeping up the ship of my despair  
Threw us out as a pasture to the stars. (I:235-38)

This voyage continues for ten days under a sky of "blind ferocity", that drops "its bell-net down upon the sea/ As if no human heart should 'scape alive" (I:243-46). Aurora journeys in a malignant universe which imprisons her, but particularly notable is the correlation of this world with a harsh sea, in which victims are drowned. EBB's manuscript workings show this correlation clearly in lines 36-37, which, in an earlier version, read: "And then the little ship in the great seas!/ And then the lonely heart in the great world" (Reynolds, Aurora 173, footnote). Similarly, in Book II, Aurora is mortified when Romney discovers her crowning herself as poet, and she recounts her embarrassment using the same images:

Hand stretched out  
I clasped, as shipwrecked men will clasp a hand,  
Indifferent to the sort of palm. The tide  
Had caught me at my pastime, writing down  
My foolish name too near upon the sea  
Which drowned me with a blush as foolish. (II:66-71)

Aurora has played dangerously close to the water's edge; she presumed the right to write her own name, a right which, as we have seen, is the man's province solely. So the tide of her emotion - precipitated by Romney's scorn - swamps her, and her apprehension of transgression drowns her. She appeals to Romney's cousinly love as her saviour, but as line 68 suggests, this is a treacherous sort of saving.<sup>2</sup>

Aurora continues to correlate the sea with a harsh world by extending the metaphoric reading of her journey to England. Concerning her arrival at her aunt's house, she writes:

I only thought  
 Of lying quiet there where I was thrown  
 Like sea-weed on the rocks, and suffering her  
 To prick me to a pattern with her pin  
 Fibre from fibre, delicate leaf from leaf,  
 And dry out from my drowned anatomy  
 The last sea-salt left in me.

(I:378-84)

Instead of being a ship on the "bitter sea", she is now a weed in it, "drowned" and flung aside on the rocks. In each of the three above examples, the sea involves Aurora's emotions in its action. In the first, it deals harshly with Aurora's "despair" and in the second, it works upon her sense of exposure. In the last, however, Aurora describes herself as passive and unresisting - her emotions have been "drowned" by the sea. The world that the sea represents thus plays upon female emotion, the conventional 'essence' of femininity. The end result of the sea is drowning, and so - like Vincent Carrington's preferred Danae, passive, "Half blotted out" like "wet sea-weed" but indicating "More passion" (III:134-35) - woman's emotion is used against herself, to induce passivity.<sup>3</sup>

However, passivity brings another, related sort of death. In the seaweed simile Aurora is baked, dried out and disintegrated by the sun of her aunt's "regard", and her probing, dissecting eyes (see I:327-28). Virginia Steinmetz has uncovered the deep seam of solar imagery in EBB's poetry, issuing from her relationship with her father. From her earliest writing, EBB "Associated her father with the sun especially in the benignant/ destructive glance of his eye-ray" ("Beyond" 23). The child's fear and vulnerability at this power is evident in the young Aurora's apprehension of a similar destructive "eye-ray" in her paternal aunt. It is also evident in her description of the sun that shines on the "bitter sea" conveying Aurora to England, a sun that "starve[d] into a blind ferocity/ And glare unnatural" (I:243-44). In both the images of drowning and parching, Aurora conveys a sense of vulnerability, through emotion, to massive and malevolent forces.

Marian also comes to understand the sea image. She and Aurora walk through the streets of Paris in Book VI, Aurora recalls, "As if I led her by a narrow plank/ Across devouring waters, step by step" (VI:482-83). The same

words are used twenty lines later when Marian leads Aurora, giving the impression of two allies leading each other along a treacherous and highly precarious path, with hostile forces threatening to overwhelm them at every point.<sup>4</sup> And later in the same book Marian develops the image:

"that little stone, called Marian Earle  
[...] Was ground and tortured by the incessant sea  
And bruised from what she was, - changed! death's a  
change,  
And she, I said, was murdered; Marian's dead." (VI: 809-13)

The world of these women tortures, distorts and eventually kills its victims, according to Marian. The final, and most extraordinary example of this image of the world of the poem as a drowning sea occurs in Book VIII, when the lonely Aurora experiences a form of dream-vision as she watches the sun set over Florence. She watches as the city is flooded with shadows, until it becomes like a "drowned city in some enchanted sea" (VIII:38). Aurora muses how such a vision draws "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[...]  
Methinks I have plunged, I see it all so clear ...  
And, O my heart,... the sea-king!  
In my ears  
The sound of waters. There he stood, my king! (VIII:39-61)

(Romney makes one of his miraculous appearances at this moment.) This vision superbly explores the wretchedness of Aurora's situation. The 'sea world' again plays upon her emotions, particularly her loneliness and her (also physical) desire for Romney. She fantasises about leaping into the treacherous waters of this world to find her sea-king. But, like the protean gods of the sea, that sea-king is elusive and "slippery": he is not all that he seems. Romney the lover is also Romney the patriarch, one who devalues and denies Aurora. To kiss him is to come away with the salt of tears on your lips, if you do not drown first. As her dream-vision melts back into her present situation, it seems as if her "sea-king" has come. But as the ensuing Books reveal, Romney is a much changed and chastened man.<sup>5</sup>



The life of repression

Like these images of drowning in a hostile sea,<sup>6</sup> images of repression and imprisonment also mark Aurora's narration: the cage-bird existence of her aunt, which Aurora is required to join; the bell-net of a forbidding sky that imprisons the child Aurora's passage; the heavy weight of both her father's and Romney's hands and personalities "dropping" on Aurora. Such imagery is particularly evident in the earlier books, where Aurora suffers under the imposition of a foreign and threatening order. Even the English landscape is perceived in terms of Aurora's feelings of repression:

All the fields  
Are tied up fast with hedges, nosegay-like;  
[...] The trees, round, woolly, ready to be clipped,  
And if you seek for any wilderness  
You find, at best, a park. A nature tamed[...] (I:629-34)

Even the view from Aurora's window in her aunt's home confirms this impression of imprisonment. The large garden is finally restrained by a line of elms, which "stopped the grounds and dammed the overflow/ Of arbutus and laurel". The teenage Aurora makes nightly "escape[s]" from this prison, "As a soul from the body, out of doors" (I:587-88; 694). Using an image later repeated in Marian's story, Aurora sees such escapes as critical in evading her predators: she speaks of her determination to survive this imposed repression, saying "'We'll live, Aurora! we'll be strong./ The dogs are on us - but we will not die'". Instead, she tells us, "I threw my hunters off" and like "a hunted stag" put ground between herself and "the enemy's house" (I:1065-76).

This language conveys the sense Aurora has of being embattled, under siege. Subscribing to the binary oppositions of her culture, in which woman is 'nature', she depicts herself as the natural, untamed, free animal which the forces of "civilisation" wish to entrap and tame. Such taming, of course, entails submission to the hegemony, with its disastrous implications for women. "[W]here the middle-class Aurora is inducted into conventional social order by her father's education and her aunt's function as 'patriarchy's paradigmatic housekeeper,' Marian, partly as a result of her class, remains altogether

unsocialized, naturally female - a nettle and not an artificially selected pink" (Reynolds, *Aurora* 41). Here, though, the young Aurora resists her socialisation to enact the roles of the Romantic poet and natural woman. Aurora's choice of images, then, becomes a tacit justification for her rebellion against the hegemony.<sup>7</sup>

Her rebellion, like any rebellion, inevitably meets with retribution and closer imprisonment. Hence, after Aurora's "mad" refusal of Romney's marriage offer, her aunt and her society surround Aurora with a tighter mental repression, this time through the subtler means of observation and silence. "She seems to be surrounded by curious, hostile eyes," Mermin writes (*Origins* 189). The patriarch's sun-like 'gaze' is recalled here, and Aurora feels its pressure like a torture:

A Roman died so; smeared with honey, teased  
By insects, stared to torture by the noon[...] (II:890-91)

Even the household dog watches her from "his sun-patch on the floor,/ In alternation with the large black fly/ Not yet in reach of snapping" (II:887-89). She is prey again, under a slow, teasing sentence of death.

Aurora's representations of repression shift as she moves out into the world, becoming more universal. She speaks of her time working in her London garrett with mixed emotions. God's "curse" (to Adam) of work is, she feels, a better gift than the "crowns" that men put on each other, "tormenting circle[s] of steel" (III:165-66, recalling Christ's crown of thorns).<sup>8</sup> She sees the sun on the city,

(Like some Druidic idol's fiery brass  
With fixed unflickering outline of dead heat,  
From which the blood of wretches pent inside  
Seems oozing forth to incarnadine the air)[...] (III:172-75)

Alternatively the fog plays on the "passive city, strangl[ing] it/ Alive" (III:180-81). Aurora's attention has turned from her individual feeling of oppression to that of the city, the teeming mass of individuals all caught in the vast machine of (Victorian) society.<sup>9</sup> Like the legendary "dark Satanic mills", Aurora's London

is a hell that squeezes the human blood from its victims who all, as she puts it elsewhere, sit quietly:

tired, patient as a fool,  
While others gird [them] with the violent bands  
Of social figments, feints, and formalisms[...]

(III:16-18)

Aurora, noting this passive acceptance of "violent" subjugation, thus finds a focus for her own life, for the lives of those around her (notably Marian's) and for her poetry. She will resist the repression of the individual - particularly women - by the laws of her culture. EBB's Romanticism, as Reynolds has shown (Aurora 16-17), demanded the exercise of individual will. However, cultural laws, ever-present, oppressive and making no distinctions, fed upon and eventually destroyed their subjects.

That destruction is death, whether of physical or psychical nature. And Aurora's text is littered with images of death, thus displaying both her conscious apprehension of this result in the lives of those around her, and her anxiety about her own "death" as a discrete, valid human being in her world.

#### Death in custody

Aurora's first main exploration of the trope of death comes during the repressive period of her life with her aunt, which Aurora herself summarises with the lines:

And I, I was a good child on the whole,  
A meek and manageable child. Why not?  
I did not live, to have the faults of life [...]

(I:372-74)

The description of herself as drowned seaweed being dried out and disintegrated by her aunt's attention immediately follows. Torture symbolism is rife throughout these books: later Aurora compares her education with the water-torture that the Marquise de Brinvilliers endured: "flood succeeding flood/ To drench the incapable throat and split the veins..." (I:468-69) - another drowning.

Imprisonment and enforced subjection to autocratic rule involves torture that eventually renders the subject "incapable" and overwhelmed - dead.

Moreover, the subject wants to die, to escape the torture. When Romney rebukes the young Aurora for pining away, she responds:

I looked into his face defyingly;  
He might have known that, being what I was,  
'Twas natural to like to get away  
As far as dead folk can: and then indeed  
Some people make no trouble when they die. (I:504-08)

"Being what I was": that is, a subject being, a prisoner, who therefore wishes to "get away" as far as possible - the farthest being death. Then she ceases to be a trouble to her world; there is no further need for imprisonment. To Aurora at this point, this appears to be her best option. She will defy the living death she is enduring by escaping to a real, physical death. Thus defeat resembles victory to the prisoner.

Aurora quickly perceives the fallacy in this reasoning. Within fifty lines of these she is asserting herself against her own desire to die: the "visionary chariots" (I:563) must retreat as Aurora encounters nature and her own strength of character. "Life calls to us/ In some transformed, apocalyptic voice", she says, so "Regenerating what I was" (I:673-74; 666). Thus Aurora's first encounter with her own potential death passes. Even the oppression she feels later, after refusing Romney and enduring her society's condemnation, does not bring her to this point again. Instead, Aurora describes her aunt's death. She is wakened by "a single ghastly shriek", and she imagines the house itself as "one who wakens in a grave and shrieks" (II:911-13). With the aunt's death the house has wakened to that woman's life-in-death, to the paradox that she is freer now than she was in her life. Rather than remaining buried alive in that fearful existence, the "still house", Aurora tells us, "seemed to shriek itself alive" (I:914). The image, of course, underlines Aurora's political point that condemns the buried life of her aunt, and so many other Victorian women. Such images also tacitly vindicate Aurora's refusal to accede to that "life", and her rebellion against it.

Death by self-suppression

Aurora's second exploration of death imagery occurs later in the poem, with the discovery of Marian and her son. Firstly, it is Marian who is dead, but as time wears on Aurora too feels as though she is dying, though for different immediate reasons.

Marian is dead, she continually tells Aurora, because the hard sea has tortured and drowned her:

"I'm dead, I say,  
And if, to save the child from death as well,  
The mother in me has survived the rest,  
Why, that's God's miracle you must not tax,  
I'm not less dead for that[...]"

(VI:819-23)

Thereafter she refers to herself in variations on this metaphor: as a dying man (VI:1136-39), a soul interred with a corpse (VI:1194-03), a buried Christ (VI:1273-74). A victim of subterfuge, betrayal and rape, and now an outcast by the society that inflicted those wrongs, Marian has died emotionally and socially to her world. She only remains alive to be mother to her bastard son - the sole reason she knows for continuing her existence.

In Book VII, following Marian's story of her corruption, Aurora confronts what she believes to be the fact of Romney's marriage to Lady Waldemar. For the first time she admits openly to herself her love for Romney, but hand-in-hand with that confession comes a related belief in her own guilt for failing to keep Romney from his present predicament by marrying him. Despite the vast holes in her logic here, Aurora is convinced that she has lost Romney forever, and, moreover, has allowed Romney to lose himself to a vicious woman. The "knowledge" completely defeats her: she writes the appropriate letters (but crucially not to Romney) and resigns her love to the grave. But it seems to take her self with it: she imagines constantly hearing Romney's marriage bells

As some child's go-cart in the street beneath  
To a dying man who will not pass the day,  
And knows it[...]

(VII:460-61)

She, too, is "satisfied with death" (VII:463). Later she distinguishes just what it is that has died.

I'm not too much  
A woman, not to be man for once  
And bury all my Dead like Alaric,  
Depositing the treasures of my soul  
In this drained watercourse, then letting flow  
The river of life again[...]

(VII:984-89)

Aurora has buried "the treasures" of her soul: the vital, life-giving and female aspects of her being - her desire, her love, her self-respect. The flood of life washes over them, veiling the burial, rendering it invisible.<sup>10</sup> For Aurora, the emotional death involved here is too much to bear; she desires physical death:

how I covet here  
The Dead's provision on the river-couch  
[...] Or else their rest in quiet crypts[...]

(VII:994-97)

During this terrible time, Aurora confronts again the deaths of her parents and her isolation in this hostile world. In returning to Italy with Marian and the child, Aurora has sought to recapture Italy as mother. This motherhood proves illusory, though, as she realises that the restrictive structures of her world also apply on Italian soil.<sup>11</sup> Book VII ends with Aurora at a nadir; even her creative self has ground to a halt:

I did not write, nor read, nor even think,  
But sate absorbed amid the quickening glooms,  
Most like some passive broken lump of salt  
Dropt in by chance to a bowl of oenomele,  
To spoil the drink a little and lose itself,  
Dissolving slowly, slowly, until lost.

(VII:1306-11)

Lot's wife (abandoned for looking back, as Aurora is doing) is immersed into a cup of wine and honey, drink of the ancient Greeks (OED), and dissolved - another drowning of emotion into passivity. It may spoil the drink "a little", but primarily the damage is all one-sided, as she loses herself slowly but inevitably into the fluid, leaving only the salt taste of tears.

Why does this second "death" occur? Aurora's first confrontation with death occurs when she is threatened by externally imposed limits to her psyche;

far more dangerous are the internally imposed limits. At this second point, Aurora confronts the inevitable result of a splitting of herself. Hitherto she has only coped with the hierarchical dualisms of her culture by acting within another dualism, between woman and artist.

In Aurora's world, a woman seems to have two options: to submit to the hegemony and suffer in the roles assigned - a suffering graphically depicted both in the lives of the female characters of the poem and in Aurora's metaphors - or to rebel against the hegemony. But the second option would place her outside the norms of existence. Aurora chooses this option and opens herself up to a different kind of suffering. As Aurora herself has described it earlier, woman must either be the fruitful, low vine, or the lonely, upright palm tree in the desert (II:512-19). She can either be the virtuous spinster/ wife/ mother or the defeminised, marginalised and dying artist. Here, then, in what Rod Edmond calls a "tension between the pen and the hearth, between vocation and family" (154), is another dualism to add to the list:

MALE - FEMALE  
artist - woman

Apparently artist and woman are mutually exclusive: in order to be the one, Aurora has had to resign all claim on the other.<sup>12</sup> She must suppress her desire and love, her pain and emotional responses, so as to be able to write. Hence Aurora's continuing need to regret and punish the "female" in herself, and to grasp male images and attributes instead. (Mermin's long list of Aurora's derogation of women and self-contempt stresses her deep need to divide off her own gender in order to be the artist [Origins 201]). For example:

Why what a pettish, petty thing I grow, -  
A mere, mere woman, a mere flaccid nerve,  
A kerchief left out all night in the rain,  
Turned soft so, - overtasked and overstrained  
And overlived in this close London life!  
And yet I should be stronger. (III:36-41)

This is the hardworking, lonely Aurora of the London garret. Her language betrays her emotional frustration: the continual repetition of "mere", emphasising her triviality as a woman; the stress on emotional instability -

"pettish", "petty", "nerve" - thus reinforcing societal gender expectations of women as entirely emotional; the implied spinelessness and weakness of the "flaccid nerve" and the "soft" handkerchief. That latter image itself summarises all these attributes in that she compares herself to an inanimate object: the pretty, delicate handkerchief, somewhat useful until overused, finally more a decorative accessory than a vital necessity, and certainly inadequate for the rigours of the city. And concluding this damning indictment of her sex, the frustrated struggle against it - "And yet I should be stronger".

Some two hundred lines after this outburst, Aurora apparently finds the answer to her struggle. When visitors, concerned for her health, chastise her for overwork, she remains unconcerned. Physical function is of no consequence to Aurora; what matters is spirit.

Observe - "I," means in youth  
 Just I, the conscious and eternal soul  
 With all its ends, and not the outside life,  
 The parcel-man, the doublet of the flesh,  
 The so much liver, lung, integument,  
 Which make the sum of "I" hereafter when  
 World-talkers talk of doing well or ill.  
 I prosper if I gain a step, although  
 A nail then pierced my foot: although my brain  
 Embracing any truth froze paralysed,  
 I prosper[...]

(III:283-93)

Aurora has separated body and soul in the most ancient of dualisms, and so has separated her sexualised body - her femaleness - from what 'really matters', her asexual spirit. In the style and language of medieval hermits who "subdued" the body to enhance and purify the soul, Aurora denies her physical existence in pursuit of the pure spirit of her poetry. That denial involves not only extreme physical exertion but also denial of human emotional and sexual needs. Romney is now clearly 'off the menu'.

Aurora's reaction to the complex and restrictive structuring of her world that demands adherence to various hierarchical dualisms inevitably returns her to the same position of suppression and deathliness - whether the death of the young Aurora faced with "English" existence, or the death of the older Aurora faced with punishing her own 'illegal' desire.



Aurora's narrative demonstrates the futility and cruelty in trying to adhere to these dualisms. As time passes, this demonstration becomes apparent to the story-teller herself, with her growing awareness of the inability of her society to offer women any positive choices within this structure. The separation of her spirit from her body becomes ever more problematic, as she begins to see their inevitable involvement with each other.

When Aurora returns from Lord Howe's party in Book V, where she has encountered a spiteful Lady Waldemar who gives a convincing account of her and Romney's partnership, the complex interrelation of body and soul is particularly evident. Aurora is frustrated and disturbed:

And I breathe large at home. I drop my cloak  
Unclasp my girdle, loose the band that ties  
My hair ... now could I but unloose my soul!  
We are sepulchred alive in this close world,  
And want more room. (V:1037-41)

Aurora frees herself briefly from physical restriction, and the action temporarily frees her from both social and emotional restraint. It allows her to think of Romney and Lady Waldemar, with much venom and jealousy. But the freedom is only superficial: Aurora's desire and anger remain suppressed, and the images of torturous death, being "sepulchred alive", return.

Moreover, Aurora's response as she considers whether Romney and Lady Waldemar can love each other, and indeed whether Romney is capable of love, is interesting:

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. (V:1126-34)

Aurora's body enacts her repressed passion, in her hands and her hair. She plays with its potential danger for a moment - the wind sweeps the flame, fanning

fire. There is the reference to Italy, the place of freedom and apparently valid passion, but Aurora chooses then to crush forcibly this living passion. She ties her soft, impracticable hair (recalling the handkerchief image earlier) up in a constricting hard knot, and in so doing once more attempts to deny and obliterate her femaleness, and its "sublimation into masculinity" (Cooper, Woman 171). Hair, that potent image to Victorians of female sexuality, is constrained and repressed in order to accord with "life".

The futility of the action is apparent even in its performance: her female passion clearly remains very much alive and active. Aurora's attempts at self-suppression simply reiterate the strength of the elements she tries to suppress.

#### Female excess

Finally, all of the women characters in Aurora Leigh fail, in their society's terms, to deal successfully with their roles. From a different perspective, however, this 'failure' rather demonstrates women exploding those imposed and inadequate roles. Lady Waldemar bursts out from behind her cool courtly lady performance with an "improvident, indecent heart". Yet she cannot be the devoted servant to an inattentive Romney (as Marian would be), either; her pride will not endure servitude to one whose love is elsewhere. She must settle back into playing the courtly lady, but in bitterness and hate.

"I have been too coarse,  
Too human. Have we business, in our rank,  
With blood i' the veins? I will have henceforth  
none[...]"

(IX:126-28)

Once more a death is the consequence of a woman's life within this culture. Lady Waldemar has no blood in her veins; she is emotionally dead. She concludes her final letter to Aurora with a curse from "this gulf/ And hollow of my soul" (IX:169-70).

Similarly, Marian has exploded every convention assigned to working class women. The dog-like adoration of the servant wife, transmuted into Christ-

like sacrifice and martyrdom, leaves her also in a state of death. Marian's story does not end there, however. She finally assumes the status of another "virgin" Mary, somehow uncorrupted and bestowing blessing from a position of elevated purity and wisdom. This position - in which she has the first real autonomy of her life - still places her outside her cultural community, signifying super-nature: Marian is a loose end, something that the world of the poem cannot accommodate. Hence she is cast as a Madonna, although she finally exceeds even that image, too. In describing the exchanges between Aurora and Marian in Book VI, Helen Cooper comments that "Earlier Marian refused to allow Aurora's patriarchal rhetoric to describe her as 'fallen woman'; now she resists its cult of true womanhood" - that is, as "sweet holy Marian", the Madonna (Woman 177).

Aurora marvels in Book IX at Marian's voice, "thrilling, solemn, proud, pathetic": the voice of one who "had authority to speak,/ And not as Marian" (IX:196; 250-51). No-one in the poem - not even Aurora - allows that Marian may be other than her culture legislates. She is "outside the linguistic, social, and political systems typified by middle-class white men" (Cooper, Woman 178). The Marian of this Book makes no sacrifice in refusing to marry Romney. Indeed, she dominates the poem in these lines, as she interrogates both Romney and Aurora concerning their responses to her and her child. Although she still considers Romney godlike, and kisses his feet in thanks, she refuses to be drawn into a relationship with him. Rather she escapes from his embrace, Aurora tells us, "As any leaping fawn from a huntsman's grasp", and stands before him "with a stag-like majesty/ Of soft, serene defiance" (IX:288-91). Marian will not be caught again, and yet neither does she flee from her huntsman, as she did when confronted by the malevolent world in her childhood. Now she stands in defiance of that world, a feminine ("soft") defiance, and repeats several times "you and I/ Must never, never, never join hands so" (IX:311-12). This refusal is not out of any sense of humility or unworthiness, but, Marian announces, out of pride: a belief in her own validity and purity. She knows she does not love Romney, and so will not sully herself with false ties. Moreover, she rejects patriarchy's label of illegitimacy on her and her child: he may be fatherless in her culture, but he has God as his other parent. Marian never explicitly calls God "father": fathers belong to the world, and God is rather with mothers. As Marian repeatedly states, here to Romney:

"angels are less tender-wise/ Than God and mothers: even you would think/ What we think never. He is ours, the child"; and "We only, never call him fatherless/ Who has God and his mother". "We" here are God and mother. A "fathered child, with father's love and race" is resolutely rejected (IX:407-19).<sup>13</sup>

Marian thus linguistically removes herself and her child (at least for the present) from the world of patriarchy. Her son "when he's asked his name/ [...] has no answer" (IX:421-22). Her society deletes her from itself, and she also chooses to remove herself from it (in her self-professed death), in order to attempt a maternal world outside the confines of her culture. She thus attempts to place herself beyond that culture's roles and representations, in control of her own signification. How real or effective this attempt at separation is will be discussed more fully in the following chapter, but the paramount point here is that Marian still must figure herself as dead. She is excess, unrepresentable in the world of the poem.

Aurora also exceeds all attempts to fix her in the poem. We have seen her reactions against the roles represented by other women characters, but Aurora also finds she cannot fill the narrow role of defeminised poet that she has assigned herself:

Books succeed,  
And lives fail. Do I feel it so, at last?  
[...] I live self-despised for being myself[...] (VII:704-07)

And later she confesses to Romney that she has failed, like him, in her life's work, because it has not brought her the joy and fulfillment she believed it would. "I've surely failed, I know, if failure means/ To look back sadly on work gladly done" (VIII:478-79). Both the fruitful, low vine that is the virtuous wife, and the lonely, upright palm that is the defeminised poet, are unsatisfactory.

Perhaps the most incisive symbol of the process which attempts to contain women within roles is found in the picture of Aurora's mother, a picture that remains a pivotal influence on Aurora. She tells us in Book I how the

picture of the dead woman ("The painter drew it after she was dead" [l:126]) is "made alive" by sudden light from the fire:

I, a little child, would crouch  
 For hours upon the floor with knees drawn up,  
 And gaze across them, half in terror, half  
 In adoration, at the picture there, -  
 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. (l:135-42)

This is the mother whom Aurora barely knew. She has few attributes of human reality for Aurora, who views her as a supernatural thing. Aurora likens the white life of the paradoxically dead woman to a swan, the strange, beautiful, dying creature of fairytale metamorphoses. The confusion of the life and death dualism is rife in the child Aurora's mind, as her imagination revivifies the dead woman into - what?

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[...] (l:146-53)

As Aurora grows she brings to her interpretation of her mother's portrait all she learns and absorbs: all the discourses that are constructing her. The portrait thus becomes the text for her reading - a paradoxically unchanging and yet polysemic text. The text she is attempting to read, of course, is that of her own sexuality and self. The portrait reflects both her origins, from which she has been cut off (a dead mother), and her development as a gendered psyche since that amputation (her socialisation within patriarchy). Her reading of the portrait thus is simultaneously a reading of herself, of the creation of the self known as Aurora Leigh.<sup>14</sup>

Aurora's response to the portrait is therefore her response to herself as a female: "abhorrent, admirable, beautiful,/ Pathetical, or ghastly, or grotesque[...]". All are present in Aurora Leigh as responses to various women,

written by Aurora herself. Her definitions are even more exact, though, as she brings to bear in her interpretation of her mother's portrait all the great female myths of (male) literature. Once more we are "reading femininity":

[that face] 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 shuddering wriggled down to the unclean;  
 Or my own mother, leaving her last smile  
 In her last kiss upon the baby-mouth  
 My father pushed down on the bed for that, -  
 Or my dead mother, without smile or kiss,  
 Buried at Florence.

(I: 153-68)

In these lines Aurora formulates her gender both generically and individually. Woman is created as any number of human-denying roles. The mother is perceived as both fiend and angel, another "impossible" dualism. The truly striking element of this fantastic list, however, is how its items become prefiguring images of female characters in the poem, including Aurora herself.<sup>15</sup> She is the dauntless Muse with a portentous future (Lord Howe, V:795-96). Similarly she is the loving spirit who loses her love, Romney. The Lady of the Passion clearly suggests Marian, who is constantly reminded of her "death" at her society's hands by her child's presence. The figure also suggests Aurora herself in a more metaphorical way: in Book V she feels Lady Waldemar's talk as being stabbed by "the delicatest needle" in her most vulnerable part, her passion-filled heart. Lady Waldemar, of course, fills the roles of the Lamia or Medusa: Aurora brands Lady Waldemar as Lamia throughout Book VII (VII:147ff). But Aurora herself is also a Medusa figure in the eyes of her aunt, who recoils from Aurora's passion as if "she had touched a snake" (II:725). The Lamia figure particularly plays upon the physical nature of the female: the Lamia had the body of the woman but was in reality a monster who preyed upon human beings. The female body's danger and treachery is thus established in Aurora's consciousness.

Finally, though, Aurora reads her mother's picture as "mother", a concept of which she has but the barest memory. For Aurora, "mother" is the female who bequeathed to her the inheritance of femininity within a patriarchal culture. The image of the father "pushing" the baby child down to be kissed by the dying mother is disturbing to Aurora. This benediction, presided over by the father, involves the child in the world of the mother, the deathly world of femininity. It is little wonder that her mother never recovers from childbirth: symbolically the "mother's rapture" is to die.<sup>16</sup> That death, most prosaically, is the most real picture Aurora has of her mother: a grave in Florence.

The final point in this extraordinary account of the picture of the mother is that, despite the readings and constraining interpretations that her world, and then her daughter, place upon the woman in the portrait, she is nevertheless portrayed as exceeding or escaping final fixing. In the painting, the "white life" sails upward from the stiff red silk brocade which seeks to contain it. This brocade evening gown (in which she has been dressed after death by her Italian "cameriera" or maid) can be read as representing, in this context, the social constraints on her life as woman. Significantly the red silk is described by Aurora as separate from her mother. It seems to have "no part" in her "white life", nor is it able to keep that life "from quite breaking out of bounds" (l:140-41). As with the living female characters of the poem, here too Aurora prefers to portray the woman transcending the roles assigned her.

## ii. Reading and writing the world

Aurora's experience indicates that the oppositional structure of her society, defining human beings simplistically by division and exclusion, allows no alternative to itself. The fixing of individuals into categories that deny complexity or change relies upon the preservation of the apparently intrinsic hierarchical dualisms of gender, race, class. The one affirms the other: individuals performing certain roles 'prove' the 'validity' and 'essentiality' of the

underlying dualist assumptions. But, as Aurora herself illustrates, any attempt to escape or deny these roles is simply an (impossible?) attempt to place oneself outside the structure, which is in itself an oppositional response. A change of position in regard to the structure still leaves that structure intact.<sup>17</sup>

Finally, in order to change the way a culture views women and other 'different' beings, the structure itself has to be challenged. The means by which this oppositional binarism became the one way must be uncovered. Ironically, though not fortuitously, Aurora's career choice brings her to that means. Language - writing - depends upon difference;<sup>18</sup> Aurora decides to be a dealer in language, a writer. This is not simply fortuitous, because Aurora's experience has already shown her the power of language to demarcate and label, to identify and interpret, as the account of her reading her mother's portrait evinces. Similarly, her father's teaching "out of books [...] all the ignorance of men" (I:190), and her own later reading of "a score of books on womanhood" (I:427) show the importance of language to teach thinking. Language and writing creates as it is created, it reads as it is read. Aurora Leigh is as much a story of a woman's apprehension of the power of language to transform as it is (in traditional readings) a story of a woman's apprehension of the transformative power of love.

### The texts of life

Before considering how Aurora deconstructs the many binary oppositions of her world, both her reading and her writing of that world - her role as poet - must be examined. Certainly Aurora conceives the world as a text or a volume to be read or interpreted.<sup>19</sup> In describing Marian's journeys as a child, she depicts England as "a wicked book" (III:952), the text that Marian has read to her cost. The past is another sort of text to be read:

The days went by. I took up the old days,  
 With all their Tuscan pleasures worn and spoiled,  
 Like some lost book we dropped in the long grass  
 On such a happy summer-afternoon  
 When we last read it with a loving friend[...] (VII:1040-44)



People are also texts: Aurora comments with frustration at the beginning of Book V that Romney considers her "Too light a book for a grave man's reading!" (V:41). And at the conclusion of the same book she uses the same simile, this time with Lady Waldemar as reader:

Sweet heaven, she takes me up  
 As if she had fingered me and dog-eared me  
 And spelled me by the fireside half a life!  
 She knows my turns, my feeble points [...]  
 Of course, she found that in me, she saw that,  
 Her pencil underscored this for a fault,  
 And I, still ignorant. Shut the book up, - close! (V:1053-1060)

Being read in this way - in which text is dissected, meaning discovered and fixed - is reductive and disempowering. Aurora is exposed and apparently known; any alternative reading is implicitly effaced, and her self-ignorance condemns her. Yet Aurora does precisely the same to Lady Waldemar in her interpretation of the events around Marian's rape. Her letter to Lady Waldemar is a reading and writing of that lady's life which is just as reductive and imprisoning as those inflicted upon Aurora herself.

Readings and writings are simultaneous, and it is clear from her poem's opening that writing is the source of life for Aurora:

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)

This extraordinary opening image demonstrates Aurora's purpose: she will write her story for her "better self", in order to "hold together" that self. Aurora, writing this some years on, is as yet unreconciled with Romney; she apparently writes this story at the point of her misery in Italy, aware she has failed to be happy in the role she has chosen.<sup>20</sup> She has ceased to love the painter, the writer of the story - herself.<sup>21</sup> Thus Aurora's commencement of her story here is an act of self-preservation. The images in these opening lines indicate a

splitting of selves, as Aurora the writer constructs Aurora the text in order to preserve Aurora the "better self", the latter a "friend" to the former two. In other words, Aurora will write her life in an effort to make it coherent and meaningful for her split and decentred self.

Margaret Reynolds is the only critic to discuss fully the significance of Aurora's split narration.<sup>22</sup> She cites the opening lines of the poem as positing a conception of the split self as artist and viewer (in the painting analogy), or actor and poet. The "very act of writing, will enable Aurora to construct and analyze herself", a construction that replaces the "preordained story and the plotted self written for her by others" (*Aurora* 33). Reynolds locates the poem's strength in its extraordinary temporal structure and genre, and its unreliable and often indirect narrative. It is self-consciously "a text-in-process and Aurora's "very act of writing up her journal entries ... becomes the instrument of that process" (37; 34). Finally, by "'publishing herself'", Aurora writes herself into her culture, and finally can be accurately 'read' by her lover Romney ("Writing" 9-10). Reynolds believes that the resolution of Aurora's story is dangerous in that it silences her self-creation. EBB's internalised nineteenth-century ideology required Aurora to achieve romantic love for complete fulfillment: such an end, though, endangers Aurora's "self-determination which [was] the incentive to narrative in the first place" (*Aurora* 38).

Reynolds' fascinating account offers a teleological end to Aurora's self-creation: the "heroine's quest [is] for the whole self", and will end "once she is complete as a woman - and resolved as a story" (*Aurora* 37-38). Aurora's narration, however, constantly foregrounds writing as a fluid and unending process - as Reynolds herself brilliantly reveals (the poem's strengths "lie in its process rather than its resolution" [11]). Aurora never will achieve synthesis under such a process, specifically because human consciousness is enacted on split perception. Angela Leighton, in her most recent article, also mentions how the speech of the poem is dispersed amongst women, a "shared and relativized speech" ("Because" 347). She locates the Victorian female writer's split voice in the image of the fallen woman, who becomes the woman poet's double. In imaginatively identifying with her moral opposite, the 'pure' writer crosses a social boundary, "an act of social protest which is also an act of daring self-

recovery" (357). Leighton's argument, like Reynolds, presupposes a final position of integration for the self, a position dear to feminists attempting to discover an identity apart from phallogocentric constructions. Yet Alicia Ostriker, in an article that discusses (modern) women poets as "thieves of language", revising ancient myths to enact "feminist antiauthoritarianism", notes that the most significant aspect of this technique is the use of multiple intertwined voices: "these poems challenge the validity of the 'I', of any 'I'" (87-88). A similar challenge is issued in Aurora Leigh, where the poem's whole process resists final closure. New positions for female and male are written, but their genesis in flux emphasises their fluidity.

The plural personality evident in the opening lines remains throughout the poem. Aurora exhorts herself at the close of Book I, when she feels the unnatural oppression of life with her aunt, with the brave words, "'We'll live, Aurora! we'll be strong./ The dogs are on us - but we will not die'" (I:1065-66). With that plural personal pronoun Aurora describes herself as a disparate being, a self-reflective body of selves of competing claims and powers. Her attempts to be a coherent singular self coincide with her attempts to live the one-dimensional role of non-woman poet which she later assigns to herself. Both require the inevitable suppression of alternative or different elements of her psyche.<sup>23</sup>

Notwithstanding this point concerning Aurora's perception of her divided self, the Christian idealism which remains at the heart of her morality cannot be disregarded. In Book I, where she relates the required reading under her aunt's educative system, Aurora expands upon the critical theme of reading and its relation to individual consciousness. She begins (lines 792ff) by recounting her struggles in the world of books, "swimming" hard "through/ The deeps", trusting only to occasional instinctive glimpses of "the central truth". That central truth is highly problematic, however:

Let who says  
 "The soul's a clean white paper," rather say,  
 A palimpsest, a prophet's holograph  
 Defiled, erased and covered by a monk's, -  
 The apocalypse, by a Longus! poring on  
 Which obscene text, we may discern perhaps

Some fair, fine trace of what was written once,  
 Some upstroke of an alpha and omega  
 Expressing the old scripture.

(I:824-32)

The soul is less a Lockean tabula rasa and more a corrupted overwritten text to be read. Beneath the rewriting can be barely discerned the original text, the human soul made in God's image of perfection. EBB's Protestant Christianity is clearly evident here, as Diedre David affirms. David, however, reads this complex image as Aurora (and David reads Aurora as EBB) "proclaiming herself as God's new interpreter and inscriber of the ideal world", which is evident in the "original text". The image is read as a simple matter of rediscovery.<sup>24</sup>

Yet these lines also continue the theme of self-writing, and this theme overlays (rewrites?) Aurora's idealism. A holograph is "a ... document written wholly by the person in whose name it appears" (OED 975). Here the prophet writes her/ himself, only to be overwritten by the monk's holograph, thus defiling the original text with lesser writing - as if Longus, a pagan Greek writer of light romances, should write on the profound Christian subject of the apocalypse.<sup>25</sup> Whilst Aurora's context implies that the original writer was God (see lines 820-24), what she depicts is human beings rewriting selves that have already been written. Longus writes St. John's apocalypse, but St. John has presumably rewritten God's words. The image of the holographs foregrounds the human self as a text always in production. This rewriting of the self is further suggested in the reference to the palimpsest, which also denoted a writing surface which could be erased and prepared for rewriting, like a slate. The images thus offered here by Aurora continually reiterate human consciousness as Reynold's "text-in-process", a concept that Reynolds herself then loses.

#### Poetry as the text of life

How does Aurora write herself? In poetry, because poetry, as she expatiates in Book I, is "elemental freedom": her soul, when first reading it, "Let go conventions and sprang up surprised" (I:850; 852). Poets are vital in Aurora's opinion because they deal in eternal verities, not "relative,

comparative,/ And temporal truths" (I:861-62). They have clearer perception, in the midst of confused and corrupt human existence, of priorities - they take Plato's shadows on the cave (here a charnel) wall and construct "the measure of a man" for humanity's instruction. Poets re-speak the world to bring it back to life, to strike the common hearer with "a special revelation" (I:905-10).

Aurora concludes this rapturous description of poetry in Book I with the statement "O life! O poetry,/ - Which means life in life!" (I:914-15). This is why Aurora considers poetry to be the mode for writing herself: because poetry is life. Poets' words are recreations of humanity and human consciousness that strike the reader afresh and so recreate the reader's perceptions of self and world. If human existence is a process of continually rewriting the self, poetry becomes the epitome of that human process - the "eternal verity" of human existence.

It is little wonder that Aurora, when caught crowning herself a poet in Book II, describes the act as "writing down/ My foolish name" (II:69-70). She has been creating herself as a creator, writing her name (figuratively) as a writer of selves, of life.

Aurora refers to poetry's ability to "let go conventions" (I:852). Yet Aurora's first attempts at poetry are unconsciously restricted to convention, as she writes according to previous poets' styles:

And so, like most young poets, in a flush  
Of individual life I poured myself  
Along the veins of others, and achieved  
Mere lifeless imitations of live verse,  
And made the living answer for the dead,  
Profaning nature.

(I:971-76)

To follow convention, Aurora reproduces the work of the fathers in a Bloomian crisis of heritage. As Gilbert and Gubar and feminist critics since have demonstrated, however, for the woman poet the Bloomian 'anxiety of influence' is more an 'anxiety of authorship': how can the daughter 'play at being the father'?<sup>26</sup> During this period of imitation, and beyond, Aurora 'plays at being

the father' by denying her femaleness. The result, she tells us, is "False poems" (I:1023).

Aurora's career as poet fluctuates and develops through the poem, from her joy in singing the "song you choose", like "Israel's other singing girls" (III:202-03), to her simultaneous self-revulsion at her womanly inability to create, despite feeling the "hot fire-seeds of creation" with which her "whole life burnt" (III:252; 261). She rips up verses, finding that

The heart in them was just an embryo's heart  
Which never yet had beat, that it should die;  
Just gasps of make-believe galvanic life[...] (III:247-49)

Her (conventional) images of poetic impulse as conception and pregnancy (and in the latter quotation, abortion) contradict her conviction that femaleness precludes poetic authorship.<sup>27</sup> Yet it is precisely her use of those images that eventually offers her - enacts for her - a rewriting of cultural norms. She finally decides that a woman is only too qualified for poetry. In Book III, though, the female gestation image clashes with her constricted beliefs, insisting that life is in her poetry: "But I felt/ My heart's life throbbing in my verse to show/ It lived". Incomplete, disordered perhaps, but "Still organised by and implying life" (III:338-43).<sup>28</sup>

The self-distrust and gender-hatred that characterises Aurora's feelings towards her career at this time come to a head in Book V, where she discourses on the role of poetry in her world. She discusses each of the genres: ballad, pastoral, epic, courtly romance, drama - rejecting conventional wisdom on the appropriateness or otherwise of these various forms:

What form is best for poems? Let me think  
Of forms less, and the external. Trust the spirit,  
As sovran nature does, to make the form[...] (V:223-25)

This defence of the freedom of the poet's imagination places Aurora squarely in the Romantic tradition: "What the poet writes,/ He writes: mankind accepts it if it suits" (V:261-62). The liberating effect of this poetic independence is

tempered in Aurora's case, as she cannot escape the gender value judgements she herself places on her newly completed book:

But I am sad:  
 I cannot thoroughly love a work of mine,  
 Since none seems worthy of my thought and hope  
 More highly mated. He has shot them down,  
 My Phoebus Apollo, soul within my soul,  
 [...] While I said nothing. Is there aught to say? (V:410-18)

Aurora cannot love her work because she cannot love herself as a woman. She is, she tells us, alone - bereft of either filial or marital love. She has chosen against these roles so that she can have the role of creating poet, and yet she is consigned to inevitable failure in that role by her most vital critic, Romney. In shooting down her poetry he shoots down herself, because that poetry is, she says, a writing of her own life. Whether Romney actually makes such a judgement is uncertain: Aurora has also created this response. Her sense of failure is thus also a product of her own writing, as she ties herself into needing his approval, an approval which she also designates he will never give.

Finally Aurora must leave England to gain some perspective on the society which has so conditioned her outlook. In Book VI, as she wanders in Paris, she muses on "life and art". She comes to the conclusion that art's greatest subject is humankind itself, with all its inconsistencies and irregularities:

Let us pray  
 God's grace to keep God's image in repute,  
 That so, the poet and philanthropist  
 (Even I and Romney) may stand side by side,  
 Because we both stand face to face with men,  
 Contemplating the people in the rough,  
 Yet each so follow a vocation, his  
 And mine. (VI:197-204)

Aurora does not accept the utilitarian argument that art is peripheral, and here she rejects the hierarchical judgements on science/ art, male/ female, active/ passive and so on, for an ethic of difference without competition. Both parties are engaged in the paramount activity of the representation of human experience, and therefore both are valid.

I walked on, musing with myself  
 On life and art, and whether after all  
 A larger metaphysics might not help  
 Our physics, a completer poetry  
 Adjust our daily life and vulgar wants[...]

(VI:204-08)

Poetry, in its ability to rewrite life, becomes the means to liberate human existence from the injustices of daily life, because it suggests a larger metaphysics to the restrictive structures presently operating on human experience.

Aurora ends her musing on the prophetic nature of poetry with a fine oration:

we thunder down  
 We prophets, poets, - Virtue's in the word!  
 The maker burnt the darkness up with His,  
 To inaugurate the use of vocal life[...]

(VI:217-20)

Plant a poet's word in a man's heart, she concludes, and you have done more for him than any physical charity: you have shown him himself, as he could be. The power (and moral force) of the creating word is fascinating to Aurora, not the least because it is the means for her own salvation.

Books VI and VII bring Aurora to the present tense of the poem, in Italy with Marian and her child, yet alone, unhappy and full of self-disgust. It is apparently at this point that she has written the previous three books, articulating the superficial success of her radical career choice, but also its terrible sacrifice of female desire. The dark night of the soul that Aurora experiences in Books VI and VII gives her opportunity to examine and detect the failure of the oppositional system she has been implicated in, even despite her choice of rejection. She begins to understand how the strict dualisms that she has followed have been instrumental in her unhappiness.



## iii. Dualisms deconstructed

Book VII's despairing statement, "Books succeed,/ And lives fail. Do I feel it so, at last?" (VII:704-05), is eventually arrested when Aurora begins to perceive herself more clearly:

And I, too,... God has made me, - I've a heart  
That's capable of worship, love, and loss;  
We say the same of Shakespeare's. I'll be meek  
And learn to reverence, even this poor myself. (VII:734-37)

These first words of self-approbation that Aurora has uttered since leaving her aunt's home are vital in that they allow Aurora her own desire and passion. Passion is not the enfeebling attribute of despised femaleness, but a God-given and therefore good human dignity. The de-gendering of these feelings, and her not-so-covert identification with Shakespeare, allow her a perception of herself that no longer entails self-hatred. That changing perception also leads to a different evaluation of her work, as is evident from the reference to Shakespeare. She begins to rethink the relationships between various socially-structured terms and oppositions.

Physical/ spiritual

Aurora's first subversion is of the physical/ spiritual opposition, a dualism which has denied her part of her own being:

Natural things  
And spiritual, - who separates those two  
In art, in morals, or the social drift,  
Tears up the bond of nature and brings death,  
Paints futile pictures, writes unreal verse,  
Leads vulgar days, deals ignorantly with men,  
Is wrong, in short, at all points. (VII:763-69)

Of course, this separation is what Aurora herself has done hitherto: denied her sexualised body so as to appropriate the asexual, "spiritual" existence of (defeminised) poet. Such a separation has precipitated the death she represents

in her metaphors. In her own words, then, this action is indicted - her poetry, her morality and her social existence have been "wrong, in short, at all points". Why? She explains:

We divide  
 This apple of life, and cut it through the pips, -  
 The perfect round which fitted Venus' hand  
 Has perished as utterly as if we ate  
 Both halves. Without the spiritual, observe,  
 The natural's impossible - no form,  
 No motion: without sensuous, spiritual  
 Is inappreciable, - no beauty or power[...]

(VII:769-76)

Here Aurora demonstrates the relatedness and interdependence of apparent opposites. Nature/ sensuality/ physicality are implicitly part of the spiritual: one cannot be without the other. To divide either from the other is to destroy the living process which incorporates both. Ironically, the Aurora who previously chose to deny female passion uses as her image here the apple of Venus, the goddess of sexual love.

#### Woman/ artist

Her perception that the physical is not to be separated from the spiritual provides Aurora with the ground to reassess one of the oppositions which has been most crippling for her - the separation of the artist (or poet) from the woman. When she comments in Book VII that she has "written truth", and "the truth itself,/ That's neither man's nor woman's, but just God's" (VII:749-53), she opens up the possibility that human gendering does not dictate poetic 'truth-telling'. This possibility, and her subversion of the physical/ spiritual opposition, finally challenge the spectre of the woman/ artist binarism. That binarism underlies all the others in the poem - physical and spiritual; male and female; public and private; personal and universal - and naturally becomes a focus for many issues related to dualist readings of Aurora Leigh.

In "Woman and Poet", for example, John Woolford discusses EBB's poetry in terms of J.S. Mill's distinctions between public and private, which relegated poetry to the realm of the private, which was also the realm of

women. (Later critics, notably Mermin and Reynolds, develop this issue.) Both realms are "retracted from immediate social involvement; both occupied with higher things; both mysteriously but imperatively incapacitated from any direct effect upon the world; both concerned with passion, intuition, inspiration, rather than reason and order, the One rather than the Many, the self rather than the world" ("Woman and Poet" 4). But Woolford finds the resolution of Aurora Leigh disappointing in that it simply reinforces the societal attitude of effete divine woman/ poet. Because Aurora insists upon being a woman and a poet, Woolford argues, she commits herself to non-commerce with the world and continued self-indulgence as an emotional (and inferior) woman, as the passages of "hysterical maternalism" in the poem show. Thus, he concludes, EBB's nerve fails: she links poetry with woman in order to recoup the latter, but as she doesn't really believe in woman's equality, she only succeeds in dragging down poetry.

Woolford's argument exemplifies the cul-de-sac that Aurora also finds herself in. Having brilliantly exposed the dualist definitions of Victorian society concerning women and poetry, Woolford proceeds to argue on the basis of their a priori validity. He asserts that Aurora fails because she restricts herself to writing as a "woman" and a "poet"; yet much of the poem shows Aurora renegotiating what it means to be a woman and a poet, so that it is possible and in fact valuable to be both.<sup>29</sup> Much of this renegotiation, as Chapter Six discusses, is located in that "hysterical maternalism" that Woolford dismisses.

This same acceptance of the dualism central to his argument exists in Woolford's other article on EBB, "The Natural and the Spiritual", where he argues that Aurora fails because she remains locked in her own transforming poet's mind. The poet becomes the source of "vitalising power" in true Romantic fashion, and any outward excursion into the world or nature is "simply a secret self-extension" (17). He sees Aurora as the epitome of solipsism in which all externals are drawn into her self, an "exalted heterocosm" of self and God. Even if we read the whole poem as an extended dramatic monologue, Woolford's judgement here obscures Aurora's apprehension of her own ironic positions. Rather, he fails to see the restrictive structure that creates such a philosophy, a structure that Aurora breaks down precisely with her poetic

"vitalising power" - that is, her language. In short, Woolford's perception of Aurora's failure is based on the structures we have been analysing, structures that mean Aurora will always "fail", unless she changes them. This she attempts to do, by exposing and reworking them in her poetry.

Book VII also sees Aurora revising her association between her self or life, and her work. Where before she elided the woman and her text, now she prefers to distinguish between them.

The end of woman (or of man, I think)  
Is not a book. Alas, the best of books  
Is but a word in Art, which soon grows cramped[.] (VII:883-85)

In true idealist manner, Aurora asserts the supremacy of the soul over the written word, even as that written word delineates the soul. She wishes to raise the status of her text above the autobiographical (and therefore limited), and also to lift the status of her life and self above being passive text. But her text is not passive, as we have seen: even as Aurora wishes to preserve her soul as something precious and immortal, her own textual practice is revealing that soul to be a product of her own words.

Romney refers to this issue of the self and text in Book VIII, when he describes his response to Aurora's latest work.

In all your other books, I saw but you:  
[...] But, in this last book,  
You showed me something separate from yourself,  
Beyond you, and I bore to take it in  
And let it draw me. (VIII:599; 605-08)

In these words, which EBB courageously puts into the mouth of a man, Romney debunks the Victorian idea that women writers could only reproduce themselves. "Because women were traditionally the raw material for poetry, when they themselves came to write they were supposed to be capable only of producing autobiography" (Reynolds, *Aurora* 3). On a deeper level, though, in this passage Romney also debunks dualistic restrictions. He retains the language of separation, removing Aurora from her text as he attempts to show

that he now considers her a true poet, but then the language of opposition moves into a form of dialectical thinking:

Verily I was wrong;  
 And verily many thinkers of this age,  
 Ay, many Christian teachers, half in heaven,  
 Are wrong in just my sense who understood  
 Our natural world too insularly, as if  
 No spiritual counterpart completed it,  
 Consummating its meaning, rounding all  
 To justice and perfection, line by line,  
 Form by form, nothing single nor alone,  
 The great below clenched by the great above,  
 Shade here authenticating substance there,  
 The body proving spirit, as the effect  
 The cause[...]

(VIII:613-25)

Romney perceives that the other is necessary for the existence and definition of the one - a critical revelation if he is to enjoy a fruitful relationship with Aurora. Although he talks more in terms of halves balancing each other, he nevertheless appreciates that those halves are implicated in each other: the one clenches or holds the other, and fulfils or completes its meaning. One "form" refers to another in a network of signification in which nothing is "single or alone". Rather, "shade[...] authenticat[es] substance" and effect "prove[s]" cause, and no position remains a fixed, separate, a priori absolute.

#### Personal/ universal

Romney's apprehension of dialectical exchanges between differences leads him to a revision of his long-held theories about the personal and the universal which were the basis of his argument with Aurora in Book II. Then Romney maintained that females were concerned only with personal or individual experience, and could not conceive the wider, universal "truths" of humanity, let alone correct them. This was his primary argument against Aurora's becoming a poet.

By Book VII, however, Romney feels differently.

Genuine government  
 Is but the expression of a nation, good  
 Or less good, - even as all society,  
 Howe'er unequal, monstrous, crazed and cursed,  
 Is but the expression of men's single lives,  
 The loud sum of the silent units. (VIII:873-78)

The personal comprises the universal: any analysis of the one entails analysis of the other. Or, as he says earlier, "each individual man/ Remains an Adam to the general race" (VIII:854-55): like the biblical Adam, the individual human being defines the nature of the wider race. In this way private becomes public (a process that Romney himself enacted in his private engagement to Marian which functioned simultaneously as a public signal or act). The disruption of this dualism also crucially undermines Victorian society's marginalisation of women and poetry as essentially 'private' spheres, allowing the domestic to become the social, and vice-versa.

#### Female/ male

A major dualism that is deconstructed by the close of the poem is that of male and female, and the alteration in Aurora's outlook on this structure becomes evident as the poem progresses. In Book VII, as she despises herself for the feminine weakness of tears, she remarks:

It seems as if I had a man in me,  
 Despising such a woman.  
 Yet indeed,  
 To see a wrong or suffering moves us all  
 To undo it though we should undo ourselves,  
 Ay, all the more, that we undo ourselves, -  
 That's womanly, past doubt, and not ill-moved. (VII:213-18)

What is womanly, Aurora says, is the compulsion to sacrifice self for another's comfort, to be "knights-errant to the last" (VII:225). Yet the gender allocations in this extract indicate confusion as to what is intrinsic and what is socially-defined. Apparently to be manly is to despise the weakness of sympathy; to be womanly is to sympathise and sacrifice. Yet Aurora, a woman, experiences both feelings, and her simile of the male knight-errant implies a man acting in

womanly ways. Gender roles are being confused here. The "undoing" that Aurora describes - presumably succumbing to sympathetic emotion - also suggests the undoing of definitions. To undo, or fix the wrong, in order "that we undo ourselves" (underlining mine) implies that the fixing allows the associated pleasure or purpose of this "womanly" activity, which is the undoing of self. While she goes on to refer to the apparent masochistic desire of women to suffer, the idea of undoing selves remains a suggestive image for the dismantling of gendered roles here.

The image of the knight-errant suggests other metaphors of masculinity that Aurora uses to describe herself - and not in an attempt to suppress her femininity, as she did in earlier books. In Book VIII (line 509) she compares herself to Ulysses the Greek hero, returning from Troy. This readiness to play the warrior stands in sharp contrast with the Aurora of Book III, who was instead one of Israel's singing girls, watching the warriors conquer Pharaoh's chariots (III:201). And in the ecstatic reunion scene between Aurora and Romney that occurs in Book IX, Aurora relates how she "flung closer to his breast,/ As sword that, after battle, flings to sheath" (IX:833-34). In an inversion of traditional imagery that posits the woman as the sheath or passive recipient of the man's active, powerful phallus, Aurora takes upon herself the role of the active phallus. She is, after all, the wielder of the sword/pen in this relationship.

What emerges in Aurora's writing is a sense that masculinity and femininity are cultural attributions, arbitrary and often limiting. Rod Edmond relates how Aurora's "metaphors ... confuse the masculine and the feminine", and he argues against the simplistic reading by certain commentators who uncritically see this metaphor slippage as Aurora's gender confusion (157). Rather, Aurora deliberately figures herself and her lover as complex formations of both masculine and feminine, thus liberating both individuals to play both roles (as in the Sonnets). Aurora makes explicit the equality that this refiguring implies in her comments on the necessity of honest work:

The honest earnest man must stand and work,  
The woman also, - otherwise she drops

At once below the dignity of man,  
Accepting serfdom. Free men freely work. (VIII:712-15)

This extract also shows how the deconstruction of male/ female oppositions inevitably deconstructs related dualisms, such as those between passivity and activity, or between instrument and initiator. Aurora's masculine metaphors exemplify how assumptions about female passivity and male activity have broken down. Marian understands this finally in her second refusal to marry Romney: she distinguishes love from the abject self-sacrifice which was her previous response to Romney's offer, and chooses to remain single and "clean" - "As Marian Leigh, I know, I were not clean" (IX:399). To be morally pure and right is to exert the human faculty of choice, to be the active decider of one's life, not the passive instrument. Aurora also makes this point: "What we choose may not be good,/ But, that we choose it, proves it good for us" (VIII:232-33).

#### Feminist love/ masculinist love

Marian, in rejecting Romney again, does so after considering what is valid love, which she defines as active giving:

To be your love ... I never thought of that:  
To give you love ... still less. I gave you love?  
I think I did not give you anything;  
I was but only yours[...] (IX:371-74)

A relationship in which one element resigns all active participation or choice to the other, in a total abnegation of power, is no love relationship, according to Marian. Where there was previously acceptance and adherence to fixed dualistic roles, now there is a liberating apprehension of personal freedom.

Marian's new view of love as active giving is also the opinion of Aurora, who has struggled throughout the poem to redefine love, particularly to Romney. Such love contrasts with the commercial transaction which patriarchy calls "love", delineated in the opening books of the poem. Romney's early view of love offers a variation on this patriarchal mode when he describes his and



Marian's "love" to Aurora when she visits Marian in her garret prior to the abortive wedding.

"We're fallen on days,  
 We two who are not poets, when to wed  
 Requires less mutual love than common love  
 [...] But love  
 (You poets are benighted in this age,  
 The hour's too late for catching even moths,  
 You've gnats instead,) love! - love's fool-paradise  
 Is out of date, like Adam's." (IV:329-40)

Romney rejects mutual love as an anachronistic Paradise in his post-Edenic world. His relationship with Marian is apparently based upon a fellow feeling for the hapless humanity around them, not on any sense of mutual respect or regard. His penchant to answer for Marian ("I accept for her/ Your favourable thoughts" he tells Aurora at IV:328-29) exposes his lack of regard for Marian as an equal - she is the handmaid who will help in his project. Aurora privately gives her opinion of Romney's conception of "love", and the feminine contrast:

where we [women] yearn to lose ourselves  
 And melt like white pearls in another's wine,  
 He seeks to double himself by what he loves,  
 And make his drink more costly by our pearls. (V:1078-81)

Women lose their identities in their husband's pleasure, drowning and dissolving like the lump of salt Aurora envisions later. The husband, conversely, is concerned with "doubling" himself by this investment. In Luce Irigaray's words, the woman is the "mirror entrusted by the (masculine) 'subject' with the task of reflecting and redoubling himself" (Marks and de Courtivron 104).

Aurora's conception of love is very different. Her father's dying injunction, to "'Love, my child, love, love!'" (I:212) has been ringing in her ears since she was a child. Initially, however, Aurora's ideas of love founder upon her dualistic thinking. In Book V she exposes her confusion as she considers her place as a female artist, still within the dualism that separates femininity and artistry. After making the decisive statement ("I'll have no traffic with the personal thought/ In art's pure temple" [V:61-62]) in which she subscribes to

Romney's assumptions about feminine art being personal, she considers again and decides:

But poets should  
Exert a double vision; should have eyes  
To see near things as comprehensively  
As if afar they took their point of sight,  
And distant things as intimately deep  
As if they touched them. (V:183-88)

Now she believes that poets must see both the individual and the universal. Indeed, the two vantage points - near and afar - move into each other in her description, as closeness requires comprehensiveness and distance requires intimacy. But this interplay of the intimate and the universal inevitably calls into question her own life:

How dreary 'tis for women to sit still  
On winter nights by solitary fires  
And hear the nations praising them far off,  
Too far! ay, praising our quick sense of love,  
Our very heart of passionate womanhood,  
Which could not beat so in the verse without  
Being present also in the unkissed lips  
And eyes undried because there's none to ask  
The reason they grew moist. (V:439-47)

Or, as she writes further on, "To have our books/ Appraised by love, associated with love,/ While we sit loveless!" (V:474-76). As her (female) work is confined to love both as subject matter and yardstick of worth, Aurora necessarily sees the interrelatedness of the personal and the public in her own misery and lack of love. The metaphor of vantage points continues from lines 183-88 above, as Aurora reflects that women poets' immediate experience (of solitary deprivation) is not commensurate with the distant, wider, and less specific public praise. The two experiences exist apart: the latter fails to see the former experience. Aurora recognises that the interrelatedness has been effaced, and the result of this separation of her private experience from her public experience is the elision of the former: her real grief must be edited out.

And yet, the next event in Book V is Lord Howe's party, where he recommends that Aurora marry an admirer for her material well-being. Aurora

rejects the proposal out-of-hand: "Love, you say?/ My lord, I cannot love: I only find/ The rhyme for love, - and that's not love, my lord'" (V:894-96). Despite her recognition of her own misery (and threatened poetic failure) because of her lack of romantic companionship, she nevertheless refuses to undermine or betray the love her father urged upon her, or as she described it to Lady Waldemar in Book III:

"I love love: truth's no cleaner thing than love.  
I comprehend a love so fiery hot,  
It burns its natural veil of August shame,  
And stands sublimely in the nude, as chaste  
As Medicean Venus. But I know,  
A love that burns through veils will burn through  
                  masks  
And shrivel up treachery."

(III:702-08)

Aurora's conception of love is of a "clean" passion without deceit or counterfeit emotion. She cannot make poor substitutes to bring together public and private experience - nor indeed spiritual and physical experience. The fire imagery here recalls Aurora's "burning" hair after Lord Howe's party, betraying her physical passion. This fiery passion is only finally achieved and enjoyed in Book IX, when all the disparate references to love and rewritten dualisms come together as Aurora and Romney come together:

"I love you Romney -"  
                                  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  
What ever could be told by word or kiss.

(IX:714-24)

The passionate, ecstatic language describes a climax that suggests sexual consummation. Significantly, Aurora wants to emphasise the interchange between the two of them as a dialectical activity that cannot be separated into opposites. There is difference - "two [...] hearts" - but not opposition: "there is no sense of Aurora, as an individual, being overwhelmed or subsumed by love"

(Stephenson, Poetry 114). Words are (metaphorically) made fluid as they are spoken, "melt[ing] in the fire" that this passionate exchange ignites. Personal pronouns eventually cease as each response becomes a shared activity: "embrace", "kiss", "breaths". The extreme language conveys the revolutionary nature of this dynamic. Physicality seems to be breaking down, or rather, reconstituting itself in a kind of rebirth: "explosive", "broke", "melted", "convulsion", "deep, shuddering". All the separations of masculine and feminine, active and passive, universal and personal, natural and spiritual, are refigured in the final hundred lines of the poem as shared processes or exchanges.

All this occurs within the new philosophy of love which Romney and Aurora together delineate. "First, God's love", Aurora asserts;

"And next," he smiled, "the love of wedded souls,  
Which still presents that mystery's counterpart.  
Sweet shadow-rose, upon the water of life,  
Of such a mystic substance, Sharon gave  
A name to! human, vital, fructuous rose,  
Whose calyx holds the multitude of leaves,  
Loves filial, loves fraternal, neighbour-loves  
And civic - all fair petals, all good scents,  
All reddened, sweetened from one central Heart!" (IX:881-90)

Romney's Rose of Sharon here represents the ideal love of wedded souls,<sup>30</sup> which indicates not only marriage but the process of committed exchange Aurora has been promoting. It is both spiritual and physical - a "shadow" and yet vital and fruitful. Such love is intensely personal, and yet contains a "multitude" of other relationships, public and private. And it is both "human" and divine, the "counterpart" of God's love; its description as the "one central Heart" clearly ties it back to the Heart, the original lover, God.

Thus, under the new order that Aurora and Romney construct in Book IX, God's love commingles with human love, which commingles in human souls. From that soul, "man" gets his "manhood", which is to work, "with tenderest human hands" - "as God in Nazareth" (IX:858-81). Thus the new order comes full circle, returning to divinity. Aurora takes up Romney's gendered language here:

I echoed thoughtfully - "The man, most man,  
Works best for men, and, if most man indeed,  
He gets his manhood plainest from his soul[...]" (IX:874-76)

That soul, as we have seen, is moved by the non-gendered, but not asexual, love of interchange. So Aurora glosses manhood here as humanhood: our humanity is most "human" when working for humanity, in a playing-out of the active, giving love here described. Ironically, of course, it is Aurora who will play the generic "man" in this relationship, just as Romney will play the loving attendant. He encourages Aurora: "work for two,/ As I, though thus restrained, for two, shall love!" (IX:911-12). Thus gendered dualisms are shown to be dismantled in their relationship. The Protestant work-ethic is also transformed (but not erased!) into a self-affirming, unfixed process of exchange.<sup>31</sup> As in the Sonnets, where the same love is delineated, there is a strong resemblance here to the ideal love of French feminism, Cixous' outflowing, commingling love which endlessly recreates the lovers. Mermin describes the experience in Aurora Leigh as a "sacramental notion of sexuality", and comments on "The fusion of matter and spirit into which their conflicting philosophies resolve themselves, like the belief that God is immanent in nature and souls perceptible through flesh". She notes how the "conflict between love and work fades away when Aurora's work is redefined as including... Romney's" (Origins 213),<sup>32</sup> but any apprehension of dissolving boundaries in Mermin's reading is limited, since she goes on to state that the "price of female triumph ... is male abasement" in which "Romney's punishment seems excessive" (214). Certainly Aurora is victorious in the poem, but finally so too is Romney: both arrive at this point of renegotiation and equality after mutual admission of failure. Again, Mermin seems to remain within the very dualisms that Aurora is at such pains to dismantle.

#### Temporal mortality/ Timeless immortality

The final dualism that is challenged in the poem is that of the immanent mortal and the transcendent immortal.



"A silver key is given to thy clasp,  
 And thou shalt stand unwearied, night and day,  
 And fix it in the hard, slow-turning wards,  
 To open, so, that intermediate door  
 Betwixt the different planes of sensuous form  
 And form insensuous, that inferior men  
 May learn to feel on still through these to those,  
 And bless thy ministration."

(IX:916-23)

Aurora's task is to break down the barriers, to open the "hard" doors<sup>33</sup> between different planes, and through her words to release the ability to exchange and move between "form[s]" of body and spirit. Aurora, as both woman and poet, is supremely and uniquely able to effect this "expansion of boundaries" (Stephenson, Poetry 91). As Mermin concludes: "Barrett Browning's urge to dissolve boundaries and reconcile opposites here receives its fullest play, and the multifarious transgressiveness was not only essential to the poem's meaning but meant to be provocative" (Origins 224). The strictures and mental impositions of Aurora's past dissolve in Book IX: this truly is the "new woman" of Victorian society.

#### The cautionary coda

Perhaps the final, and demoralising comment on the glorious conclusion of Aurora Leigh is given by Aurora herself, when she contemplates the idealism of France in Book VI.

And so I am strong to love this noble France,  
 This poet of the nations, who dreams on  
 And wails on (while the household goes to wreck)  
 Forever, after some ideal good, -  
 Some equal poise of sex, some unvowed love  
 Inviolable, some spontaneous brotherhood,  
 Some wealth that leaves none poor and finds none tired,  
 Some freedom of the many that respects  
 The wisdom of the few. Heroic dreams!  
 Sublime, to dream so; natural, to wake:  
 And sad, to use such lofty scaffoldings,  
 Erected for the building of a church,  
 To build instead a brothel or a prison -  
 May God save France!

(VI:53-66)

Even down to the building metaphor, this is a commentary on Aurora and Romney's visions of the final Book. What to conclude? Does the later optimism prove the earlier scepticism wrong, simply a reflection of the jaded, sad and hopeless Aurora of the central section of the poem? Or does this extract show the final glorious vision to be impossibly idealistic?

Or is it perhaps a monitory comment - the warning, similar to that in Sonnet XLIV, of what will happen if the new philosophy is not adhered to with "the will and love", as Romney insists? The difficulty for any person challenging the structures of her society is that it is apparently impossible to exist socially outside those structures, as they are indeed the discourses that give individual meaning and definition. Any rewriting of cultural identities is therefore always a revolutionary and yet dependent activity, responding to existing discourses.<sup>34</sup> And it is also necessarily vulnerable to overwriting or erasure by those "louder" discourses. As Aurora herself describes the situation early in the poem:

And, in between us, rushed the torrent-world  
 To blanch our faces like divided rocks,  
 And bar for ever mutual sight and touch  
 Except through swirl of spray and all that roar. (II:1245-48)

Mutuality of the type celebrated in Book IX must always only occur through the "swirl and spray" and "roar" of the "torrent-world" - a cultural sea of mediation that always threatens to overwhelm individual experience and definition.



## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Marks and de Courtivron 90.

<sup>2</sup> Cooper and Mermin treat this account of Romney's discovery of Aurora crowning herself as an example of his objectifying gaze, which reads her as a work of art, rather than an artist. Both quote lines 60-64, showing that "Under his amused, admiring gaze her aspirations dwindle into girlish narcissism" (Mermin, Origins 189). Moreover, Cooper adds, Aurora acquiesces to this transformation from subject to object (Woman 156). Neither critic goes on to consider Aurora's depiction of her response, and the significance of her similes.

<sup>3</sup> Stephenson also notes in passing that the images of "water, flooding, and drowning [that] are used throughout Aurora Leigh ... suggest passion or the abandonment of the self to passion" (Poetry 110). Aurora's sea images are more complex in that human emotion, not simply passion, is involved. Moreover, in the (sole?) example of a man's emotion subject to the same force (Aurora's father "Drowned" with an Italian passion in l:65-70), the emphasis falls on the feminine nature of his experience. This 'sea' is clearly related to female/ feminine emotion, but the power of that emotion on its female subjects is, in the context of their culture, disastrous. Aurora's images clearly betray a deep distrust and fear of the effects of feminine emotion for women in her world. This use of the sea image shifts from its usage in the Sonnets, where it denoted a wider world of unfixedness. Even there, though, ambivalence remains around the image (see above p.32).

<sup>4</sup> Cooper suggests that this reiterated but reversed action signifies Marian's leading Aurora across the class gulf separating them. Aurora now gives up her fiercely guarded autonomy to be led by a "common woman", and so is introduced to female experience and sisterhood (Woman 173-74). See also Leighton, Elizabeth 155, and Mermin, Origins 193. This reading is developed in Chapter Six.

<sup>5</sup> Gilbert reads this dream vision differently: in the first association of Romney with the ocean, Gilbert perceives EBB's fantasy reconstruction of Bro, her drowned younger brother, returning from the deep. Bro, like Robert Browning, is the "brother-reader who can at last comprehend the revisionary mother tongue in which the woman poet speaks and writes" (Gilbert 206-07). Romney, coming from the deep like this, demonstrates his transformation from a patriarch into another brother-reader. Mermin simply reads this vision as consolidating Aurora as "speaking subject whose desire elicits its object": Romney the sexy sea-god appears (Origins 189-90). Both useful readings do not take into sufficient account the treacherous nature of the sea-king figure, nor Aurora's anxiety in the image. Christine Sutphin does note that anxiety in this image of sexuality: "Heterosexual love is still very much a power struggle in Aurora's view" (51).

<sup>6</sup> See also l:65-70; 465-70; VI:390-94; 863-65; 1110-18.

<sup>7</sup> John Woolford demonstrates Aurora's Romantic belief, reflected in these lines, that repudiates past learning and holds that truth is an inner experience, occurring within "the locus of personal cognition, and outside the networks of history" ("Natural and Spiritual" 15). He also points to the use of nature as the "symbolology of God", the means by which the Romantic poet ostensibly reaches the spiritual. Aurora's story in Book I, and her account of Marian's childhood, reflects this use of nature as the path to the spiritual. The apprehension that such a philosophy rests on a dualistic division of the personal and public, self and other, transcendent and immanent, is suggested in Woolford's analysis with his reference to the Victorian anxiety about Romantic individualism, and a movement towards collectivism and recognition of other subjectivities. But Woolford does not see that these dualisms are precisely Aurora's problem, locking her into a mode of thinking that demands rejection of one or the other (see below p.205ff). The same problem arises out of Reynolds' discussion of the effeminisation of Victorian poetry (see above p.150; 172, note 14)).

<sup>8</sup> The same image is later used for Marian, when Aurora searches for her in Paris. Giving her description of Marian to the police, Aurora depicts Marian's hair worn low on the brow, "As if it were an iron crown and pressed" (VI:401). Christ wore thorns, Marian an iron crown: both are the martyred victims of their cultures.

<sup>9</sup> "Caesar gives an account of the ritual human sacrifice supervised by the Druids, but he describes the huge idol in which the victims were burnt as being made of woven twigs, not of brass" (Reynolds 609; endnote to III:172-74). Steinmetz also notes these lines with a similar reading ("Beyond" 34-35). David's exposition of an imagery of social wounding clearly relates to the imagery of death described in this section (Intellectual 122).

<sup>10</sup> Leighton reads these lines as Aurora's continuing attempt to bury her "Dead", specifically her lost father figure and Muse, whose absence is a silent echo of lost childhood definition.

<sup>11</sup> Such a reading diverges from Gilbert's apprehension of Italy as the land of the matria, where the "redeemed beings" Aurora, Romney and Marian find their "Easter", their "new day" (Gilbert 207). While new perspectives are clearly possible in Italy for these "English-bred" victims, Italy itself is no promised land, as Gilbert acknowledges in her final comments (209). Even Aurora, Italian-born, realises this when she finds her old home occupied by Italian peasants. In a memorable little vignette, Aurora describes the peasant girl sitting in the doorway plaiting straw, her black hair "strained away" and "too heavy" eyes "dropped and lifted" to where the "lads were busy with their staves/ In shout and laughter, stripping every bough" of the mulberry tree "bare as winter" (VII:1130-37). Aurora is horrified by the ravaging and consuming of the tree, but also - as her weighted description indicates - by the roles that are being played in this action: the passive, restricted girl and the cheerful, active males. As Leighton also remarks, "To interpret the episode as an ideological statement about the patriarchal house being taken over by 'female fertility symbols', as Sandra Gilbert does, is to miss the emotional point. Aurora is appalled and stunned by what she sees ... the total failure of an old, idyllic world of childhood ... and in their place ... the crudely utilitarian rule of trade and wealth" (Elizabeth 137). Leighton herself, though, misses Aurora's continuing unhappiness. Her assertion that "Aurora is changed[,] no longer nostalgic, lonely and haunted" (139) after this visit does not tally with the closing lines of Book VII.

<sup>12</sup> Most commentators have also noted this central conflict in Aurora's narration, but very few consider the structure sustaining her problem, or the possibility of reworking that structure. Cooper describes Aurora assuming "the identity of subject and (male) poet, rather than of object and woman" (Woman 158), and Mermin writes in similar terms of male watcher and female art object (Origins 188-90). Both decide that the poem closes with a simple inversion of the dualism: Aurora recovers her femaleness but remains the subject speaker, and Romney the muse-object. Edmond uses Aurora's imagery to show how she "confuses" definitions of femininity and masculinity (154-57), but Reynolds comes closest to describing the construction of female self as negative opposition, however without offering any substantial elaboration or explanation (Aurora 47-48).

<sup>13</sup> Nina Auerbach states: "Even the best of men are excluded from this God-endowed authority of true womanhood: God obligingly abdicates his conventional fatherhood to legitimize a mother's self-completeness. As Marian is to her child, so is Aurora to her poem. Both women are the only begetters, the sole, self-consecrating authorities" (Romantic 102).

<sup>14</sup> See Chapter Six for a fuller exposition of this gendering. Most other commentators also point to the mother's portrait as representing Aurora's fears about femininity and particularly maternity. Barbara Gelpi sees it as a "strange piling-up of ambivalent and paradoxical images" of womanhood (Gelpi 38), and Dolores Rosenblum ("Face" 321-28), Leighton (Elizabeth 121), Cooper (Woman 156), Mermin (Origins 151), and Reynolds (Aurora 38) concur. There is less discussion on the way Aurora's reading of the portrait is also a self-reading. Stephenson writes that "Aurora begins to view women as a bunch of moral and sexual splinters ... - not as something she identifies with, but as something to be viewed and analyzed from a distance" (Poetry 96). Stephenson's reading fails to note the effect this viewpoint has on Aurora, who is also reading herself as a female in the portrait: she experiences self-disconnection and alienation.

<sup>15</sup> Cooper also lists some of these connections, and makes an interesting comparison between the mother's depiction in the portrait, and Lady Waldemar's appearance at Lord Howe's party. Presumably the latter comparison accentuates treacherous maternity (Woman 157).

<sup>16</sup> Cf. "Bertha in the Lane" (Forster, Selected Poems 151), where a feminine inheritance is passed on from mother to daughter. The inheritance entails self-denial and self-sacrifice: a giving-up of hope, love and eventually life. The final gift to the daughter is therefore death. Chapter Six examines the maternal death in Aurora Leigh more fully.

<sup>17</sup> The construction of the subject, and of meaning, depends upon the suppression of the object, or of other meanings. In Irigarayan terms, this is the law of the one in operation: all that is not of the one (i.e. the other) is excluded as being "not one". Hence her famous work punningly entitled This Sex Which Is Not One, which moves from the woman's apparent "lack" (of the phallus) to the woman's multiplicity of sexuality - not either/ or but many.

<sup>18</sup> Describing the Saussurean account of language, Antony Easthope outlines the function of the syntagmatic and paradigmatic axes which enable chains of words to have meaning. This meaning is based on the exclusion of other possible meanings: "a signifier ... is there, present for the subject ... only as a result of the absence of others against which it is differentially defined (because, in other words, in order to say /big/ we positively don't say /pig/, /dig/ or /gig/ etc.)". And later: "All of these absences and dependencies which have to be barred in order for meaning to take place constitute what Lacan designates as the Other. The presence of meaning along the syntagmatic chain necessarily depends upon the absence of the Other, the rest of language" (Easthope 36-37). The repression of these other potential meanings "produces" the unconscious: Lacan's fusion of the Freudian repressed other and the Saussurean "outside discourse". Differentiation is quickly made political: Freud includes woman in his "other", and so Hélène Cixous brings all these ideas together to point out how "Thought has always worked by opposition ... By dual, hierarchized [sic] oppositions" (Marks and de Courtivron 91).

<sup>19</sup> Edmond lists some uses of the writing metaphor in Aurora Leigh (150).

<sup>20</sup> For discussions concerning the complex time frames of Aurora Leigh, see C. Castan's article, "Structural Problems and the Poetry of Aurora Leigh", and more recently Reynold (Aurora 28-32).

<sup>21</sup> See line 707 of Book VII: "While I live self-despised for being myself". Or l.513, where Marian looks at her as if, Aurora says, "I too were something". Aurora to herself is nothing.

<sup>22</sup> Reynolds' edition of Aurora Leigh, with its superb critical introduction, became available only after much of this thesis had been written. Many of the arguments are consistent with my own reading, although there are significant differences in overall focus, as will become evident.

<sup>23</sup> Travelling in the train with Marian and the child to Italy, Aurora describes her feelings of near madness (she believes that Romney has married Lady Waldemar), and the struggle to remain in control for Marian's sake. She remarks: "[I] recovered what I called myself" (VII:416).

<sup>24</sup> Much of David's thesis about EBB rests on such absolutist readings. David asserts that EBB was not a proto-feminist but a conservative, elitist intellectual whose anti-middleclass, anti-socialist, traditionalist idealism rendered her a willing "Servant of Patriarchy" (Intellectual 143). She bases this reading upon unquestioned claims, for example that EBB modelled her career and poetics upon traditionally male lines. This may initially have been so, but such a claim ignores a wealth of readings that demonstrate how EBB's reworking of 'male' genres effected real challenges to both genre and gender boundaries. Similarly, David consistently reads EBB's poetry at face value, ignoring any possibility of irony, subtexts, or even at times employment of personae. Such set and summary modes of approaching EBB's poetry (in what is otherwise often a fascinating and highly original interpretation) refuse to allow the subversive elements which I am arguing for in EBB's works.

<sup>25</sup> Reynolds, Aurora 598; footnote to l:828.

<sup>26</sup> See Gilbert and Gubar, Madwoman. Helen Cooper's discussion of this issue in her introduction is particularly apposite (Woman 1-11).

<sup>27</sup> Mermin believes that Aurora reworks the conventional image of poets 'giving birth' to poems to express her doubts about maternity: she becomes "the murderous poet-mother of stillborn children". Mermin concludes that this reworked image reflects Aurora's "realization" that "the satisfactions of art do not suffice for life" (Origins 196). I would argue that the image is more a reflection of the stultifying dualisms of Aurora's culture.

<sup>28</sup> In these lines Aurora assumes a connection between personal life and writing - the woman is the poem. She thus reiterates the conventional structures that place woman as art object, even if of her own creation (see Reynolds, Aurora 2; Mermin, Origins 188-89; 210-11; also Mermin, "Genre" 10: "[Aurora] both speaks and is the poem whose name is also her own, and she spends a lot of time trying to distinguish between her poems and herself"). Aurora comes to realise that as the woman exceeds the poem, so the poem exceeds the woman; it is grounded in her experience but exceeds that experience. See Romney's role in revealing this point at VIII:599ff.

<sup>29</sup> The same acceptance of dualisms, although in a different context, occurs in David's reading of EBB, which preserves ideas of what constitutes 'male' and 'female' poetic forms and images, without seeing that Aurora effectively dissolves such distinctions, and uses 'male' for 'female' (see Intellectual 116).

<sup>30</sup> The Rose of Sharon, from the Bible's Song of Songs, is the name the main lover-speaker of that book gives her/himself. The genders of the speakers are never clear in the Song of Songs, and delineating the interchanges between them is the focus of much debate. It is precisely this point that makes the Rose of Sharon, and indeed the whole biblical book, such a potent image for the interchanging, passionate love that is described in Book IX of Aurora Leigh. The male and female speakers cross over and merge in the Song of Songs; moreover, this most intimate and personal of songs also involves a public chorus, which also merges into the discourse. (Susan Zimmerman cites the Song of Songs as the model for the Sonnets, which she reads as a marriage poem, and she convincingly shows the similarity in language between the two works [76ff].)

<sup>31</sup> Mermin also discusses the celebration of work (Origins 213), but David, working from a position that assumes dualist distinctions, sees this work ethic as sinister, placing the woman "in service to God, mankind, and man" (Intellectual 155).

<sup>32</sup> Christine Sutphin reads Aurora Leigh as a fusion of "two different moral perspectives, one based on an ethic of care [for others] and one based on an ethic of individual rights" (44). According to her theoretical source, whereas women are more likely to base their morality on the former ethic, men operate on the latter; and they discount women's morality as immature. Sutphin argues that Aurora's story is revolutionary because it dares to combine the two moralities: "Aurora does not give up her self when she marries, but creates a self in which artistic achievement and care for another can be fused" (44).

<sup>33</sup> "Wards" of line 918 is glossed variously in the OED as defences, or places needing guards, such as a prison. These definitions are highly suggestive: they imply that the areas that Aurora is going to liberate or open out are guarded areas, but also prisons. As a description of the rigid, petrifying institutions and structures of Aurora's world, these definitions are entirely apt.

<sup>34</sup> Toril Moi takes the same point from Derrida: "But if, as Derrida has argued, we are still living under the reign of metaphysics, it is impossible to produce new concepts untainted by the metaphysics of presence. This is why he sees deconstruction as an activity rather than as a new 'theory'. Deconstruction is in other words self-confessedly parasitic upon the metaphysical discourses it is out to subvert" (139).

## CHAPTER SIX

## REPOSITING THE FEMALE

The dilemma that closed both Chapter Five on Aurora Leigh and the Sonnets is relocated in the fusion of post-structuralist and psychoanalytical feminist theories. Is it possible to posit an existence or discourse outside the hegemonic structures of our culture? If my language-constructed consciousness is already written by patriarchal discourses, will any other discourse or existence be representable?<sup>1</sup>

Certainly feminists such as Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous would challenge the supremacy of a (Lacanian) patriarchal Symbolic Order.<sup>2</sup> For Irigaray, the Lacanian reading of human development enacts patriarchal suppression of alternative readings which may allow another "order". Lacan assumes that there is only one language system, from which women are excluded under the phallogocentric distinction that man is language and woman is body. She is therefore outside language, the other. Cixous writes that a woman does not recognise her so-called "lack" until the male informs her of it: "Without him she'd remain in a state of distressing and distressed undifferentiation, unbordered, unorganized, 'unpoliced' by the phallus ... incoherent, chaotic and embedded in the Imaginary in her ignorance of the Law of the Signifier" - which is the Father's law of the primacy of the phallus ("Castration" 46). The contradictions inherent in the phallogocentric argument are rarely acknowledged by patriarchy, let alone canvassed. The woman must be brought out of the Imaginary as part of her female development, schooled into the Symbolic. But in masculine terms she forever remains in the Imaginary, despite this socialisation: she is consigned to the place of mystery (compare Freud's comments in his essay "On Femininity": "women ... you yourselves are the problem"; "the riddle of femininity"; "insufficiently understood" etc. [Freud 113ff, my emphasis]). Her location is epitomised by her silence: though she talks ("chatter") she does not speak, as women have nothing to say within masculine discourse. Women "always inhabit the place of silence, or at most

make it echo with their singing. And neither is to their benefit, for they remain outside knowledge" - knowledge being the sign of the patriarchal Symbolic (Cixous, Castration 49).

Such a process of exclusion recalls the double denial that EBB faces in the Sonnets, where women poets are first denied all discourse except love, and then denied that discourse as well, being relegated to the place of the poetess, outside the discourse of 'real' poetry. In the more profound psychoanalytical process, though, the critical contradiction remains: if there is no outside textuality, outside language, how can women be placed out "there"? The process is thus revealed as being less about socialising women and more about attempting to erase them altogether by losing them in an untheorizable place, dropping them down a linguistic black hole. (Toril Moi describes this definition of femininity as "non-Being" [166].) Finally, though, women do exist, and their presence and continuing survival despite these attempts to dis-locate them suggests that there are different texts of existence.<sup>3</sup>

Psychoanalytical theory has traditionally read the recently-theorised dialectical relationship between the self/ one and the other as a hierarchical dualism. Freud's conscious or Lacan and Kristeva's symbolic are shown to be underpinned by, and interfused with, the repressed unconscious: the Lacanian Imaginary or Kristeva's semiotic. Yet any dialectic is potentially a dualism, insofar as the semiotic is repressed and denied by the privileged symbolic. The (Kristevan) symbolic is sense, meaning, order: the semiotic non-sense, polysemic, disordered. Can the semiotic be allowed a position so that existence is no longer divided between semiotic babble and symbolic meaning, but located among different discourses? Kristevan theory comes closest to such a possibility, in its emphasis on positionality. While Kristeva's chora - the pre-Oedipal, semiotic 'space' of heterogenous articulation - is repressed under the Symbolic Order, when its "semiotic continuum" is split to allow signification, nevertheless its "pulsions" [sic] remain to "pressure" symbolic language (Moi 162). Moreover, Kristeva insists that the locating of woman as excess 'other' to the symbolic order is less a matter of essence than of positionality: femininity, like the semiotic, is seen as marginal and disruptive to patriarchy. In other



words, all positions are signs, not essences, and women can use their allocated definition of marginality to emphasise difference. Women become dissidents.<sup>4</sup>

Quite how such dissidence operates in practice is always the stumbling block, working as women do within symbolic assumptions of fixed meaning and syntactic order. The French feminists turn to the avant garde writers - Joyce, Mallarmé - to find these other discourses existing. But as long as we work within the hierarchical, dualist modes of a phallogentric symbolic, such discourses will always be read as 'other', and therefore as foreign, not the 'one'. And they will be repressed.

EBB's two great poems are located within this dilemma. Within the Sonnets, the speaker constantly tries to figure an 'other' love, but is constantly stymied by her own inclusion, both psychically and linguistically, within the structures of her culture. As she uses the destabilising nature of language<sup>5</sup> to show the arbitrary privileging of the hegemony, she finds she cannot remove that hegemony, remaining part of it. Similarly, Aurora Leigh cannot remove herself from the Law of the Father in her society, even though she and Romney attempt a linguistic construction of the 'other' at the close of the poem. It becomes clear, through considering the poems in these terms, that they demand an examination of origins: where and how the Symbolic and Imaginary achieve their articulations and status.<sup>6</sup>

This final chapter, then, considers Aurora Leigh as a woman's inauguration into the Symbolic Order:<sup>7</sup> her creation as (gendered) consciousness. A brief look at Freudian and Lacanian structures will show how (Western) individuals are written into these same structures from birth. Such a writing requires certain actions and prohibitions that inevitably disadvantage and entrap females. Aurora's life can be read as exemplifying this narrative, and yet moving beyond it by attempting to create a different narrative that allows her broader definitions of femaleness.

### i. An overview of Freudian/ Lacanian theory

Toril Moi writes:

The Oedipal crisis represents the [child's] entry into the Symbolic Order. This entry is also linked to the acquisition of language. In the Oedipal crisis the father splits up the dyadic unity between the mother and child and forbids the child further access to the mother and the mother's body. The phallus, representing the Law of the Father (or the threat of castration), thus comes to signify separation and loss to the child. The loss or lack suffered is the loss of the maternal body, and from now on the desire for the mother or the imaginary unity with her must be repressed. This first repression is what Lacan calls the primary repression and it is this primary repression that opens up the unconscious. (Moi 99)

Freud, of course, was thinking primarily about the male child when he elaborated these theories. For the male child, this prohibition of the mother's body was acceptable, because the male then moved into full "normal" heterosexuality, in which he could fraudulently "regain" his mother's body by marrying, thus perpetuating the human race and fulfilling primal desire. But the position of the female child was more problematic: her movement from desiring unity with the mother to rejecting the mother and desiring the father was necessary for the smooth running of the heterosexual contract. But this meant that the woman was forever cut off from that primal relationship, that "dyadic unity" between mother and child. Instead, she was required to hate her mother (and by extension other females) so as to make the male the object of her desire. An elaboration of these issues follows.

The apprehension of separation and the objectification of the self, both of which occur as the infant perceives the mother as lost or apart, are predicated upon desire. The child desires to be united with the mother (a position which would be paradoxically a death of self, a dissolution of difference). The phallus becomes the sign for this desire: as Juliet Mitchell writes, "The phallus is the very mark of human desire; it is the expression of the wish for what is absent, for reunion (initially with the mother)" (Mitchell 395). It is the sign for the object of desire - which is not necessarily the penis. That elision (between phallus and penis) is Freud's invention (and is pursued by Lacan): in an androcentric culture

the phallus - the symbol for the (lost) object of desire upon which consciousness is predicated - is given male symbolism.

The desire to return to the mother is the Oedipal crisis. In the male child, the boy desires the mother and wants to kill the father, but he is fearful of and so restrained by the father who has the power, both to possess the mother and to castrate the boy. The father thus represents to the child the law of society: the law of the (symbolic) father (Freud's superego).<sup>8</sup> The Oedipal crisis is thus resolved by the castration complex: "In submitting to the completely unreal possibility of castration the little boy acknowledges the situation and learns that one day he, too, will accede to the father's function" (Mitchell 397). He is pacified and socialised.

But what of the female child? She will never accede to that function; she does not possess the now penile phallus. The pre-Oedipal desire for - and identification with - her mother must be overcome by an Oedipal desire to get rid of the mother and have the father. How to precipitate the female child into this Oedipal phase (from which she must never recover)? Freud decides that the child develops hate for her mother based on the child's apprehension of her own castration, and her blaming of the equally castrated mother for this unfortunate state of lack.<sup>9</sup> The child then moves her desire to the father who does possess the phallus, because she believes that she will gain the phallus through husband and (male) baby. Thus the female's development is directly opposite to the male's: for her the "castration complex prepares for the Oedipus complex instead of destroying it" (Freud 129), and her indefinite stay in the Oedipal stage renders her superego (her sense of the law of the father) weak.

Luce Irigaray's interrogation of Freud's theories in Speculum of the Other Woman, a tour de force of analytical exposure, is based on her analysis of the assumption at the heart of Freudian (and Lacanian) theory: the logic of the one. If the male organ is the phallus, the logocentric object of desire, then anything else, such as female genitalia, is the not-one, the other - or, as Irigaray titles it, "The Blind Spot of an Old Dream of Symmetry". Freud "defines sexual differences as a function of the a priori of the same, having recourse ... to the age-old processes: analogy, comparison, symmetry, dichotomic oppositions, and

so on" (Irigaray, Speculum 28). Within this function, one and plural are mutually exclusive: if there is plurality, there cannot be a distinct, privileged one. So plurality must be denied in order to maintain that privileged position for the male phallus. Thus Freud's conclusions about female development emerge from his interpretation that the female lacks the penis, the currency of value. And this interpretation means that he must conceive a development for female children that entails a wrenching away from original relationships - a wrenching not required for male children.

Irigaray (and Nancy Chodorow, and other feminist theorists) have exposed this argument from the logic of the one, in order to posit alternatives to that law, and to refocus attention on that pre-Oedipal relationship between mother and daughter, which even Freud admits is vital and complex. Is a recapturing of that relationship possible? Can we explore new ways of maternal-daughter relations within consciousness? And if so, will these relationships offer new definitions and roles for women, previously defined by masculine currencies?

Aurora Leigh offers an attempt at this very project. The poem reworks Aurora's socialisation into traditional female development, a socialisation which is found wanting. Consequently Aurora pursues new relationships with an almost pre-Oedipal mother figure (Italy), and finally revises masculine and feminine roles and definitions. "Woman", in these new terms, becomes a new culture of plurality.

## ii. The death of the mother

'Normal' female development requires a female child's movement into heterosexuality, away from the love of the mother figure. Thus, the daughter must be cut off from the mother: a loss or death of her origins. Freud depicts this as a 'naturally-developing' hatred; rather it is a prohibition placed upon the little girl in order to perpetuate the system. Instead she must become another place of origin - a mother - for the boy/man, who searches for union with a

wife/mother. But she herself loses her origins. Aurora suggests the profundity of such loss in Book V:

Who loves me? Dearest father, - mother sweet, -  
 I speak the names out sometimes by myself,  
 And make the silence shiver. They sound strange,  
 As Hindostanee to an Ind-born man  
 Accustomed many years to English speech;  
 Or lovely poet-words grown obsolete,  
 Which will not leave off singing. Up in heaven  
 I have my father, - with my mother's face  
 Beside him in a blotch of heavenly light;  
 No more for earth's familiar, household use,  
 No more.

(V:540-50)

Aurora's origins are lost to her, like a forgotten language whose echoes haunt. This is like the language of Kristeva's semiotic, pulsations which stir basic memories of pre-Oedipal existence, incapable of recovery. Aurora refers to both parents as lost here, and yet the real absence is the mother: she cannot even be imagined. Her face is a "blotch" of heavenly light: she is anonymous and unrepresentable. Aurora's whole life is spent trying to recapture the absent maternal relationship.<sup>10</sup>

Aurora's early life replays the initial trauma of loss. Book I begins with a reference to the pre-Oedipal, as Aurora attempts to recall its "murmurs".

I have not so far left the coasts of life  
 To travel inland, that I cannot hear  
 That murmur of the outer Infinite  
 Which unweaned babies smile at in their sleep  
 When wondered at for smiling; not so far,  
 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:10-19)

While this passage is traditionally read as a Wordsworthian reference to the pre-conscious infinite of the Immortality Ode,<sup>11</sup> the overt maternal imagery raises the far more suggestive possibility that it may be read as a reference to the pre-Oedipal union between mother and child. Aurora as an adult stills feels the echoes of that relationship, hinted at by babies on their mothers' breasts:

unseparated, satisfied, at peace. That maternal context continues in that even when separation is required, the mother is still close, the bond still primary. The child has been separated from the mother by the conventions of nursery and the demands for (female) silence, yet the mother's "post" is as near as practicable - by the nursery door - and her will supports the child in its noise, even as she is required to enforce cultural inhibitions.

The adult Aurora also remembers the next phase of the daughter's experience: coming under the power of the Father. Chapter Four has already examined Aurora's memory of her father's heavy hand upon her head, stroking the "poor hair down". The introduction of this heavy note into the mother-daughter relationship symbolises the intervention of the third term of Lacanian analysis, particularly as it is recalled in relation to the loss of the mother: "Still I sit and feel/ My father's slow hand, when she had left us both" (I:19-20). Aurora becomes a mother-deprived daughter.

My mother was a Florentine,  
Whose rare blue eyes were shut from seeing me  
When scarcely I was four years old, my life  
A poor spark snatched up from a failing lamp  
Which went out therefore. She was weak and frail;  
She could not bear the joy of giving life,  
The mother's rapture slew her. (I:29-35)

Aurora's interpretations and inferences are crucial here, as the mother's literal and presumably natural death comes to represent a deeper, more sinister process for the daughter. Firstly she implies an enforced separation, as her mother's eyes were "shut from seeing" her. The mother is somehow prohibited from observing her four-year-old daughter (at the time of her emergence from the pre-oedipal into the gendered symbolic order).<sup>12</sup> Secondly, this separation is portrayed as a natural or inevitable part of mothering: the mother's "rapture" actually precipitates that separation. Both Mermin and Leighton note this connection. The mother's death "seems to have been somehow (not in any obvious way) a consequence of love" and Aurora fears that "motherhood costs a woman, figuratively or literally, her life" (Mermin, *Origins* 190; 194). Leighton adds, concerning line 35, "It is not a literal death in childbirth which is referred to here, but some vague excess of motherly experience" (*Elizabeth* 120). Aurora

clearly believes that the role required of maternity (under the culture of her time) is self-excision from the child's life, and self-erasure.<sup>13</sup> The disturbing corollary of this second point, as Rod Edmonds note (146), is Aurora's implication that her mother's death is the daughter's fault. As the "poor spark snatched up from the failing lamp" who "therefore" went out, Aurora portrays herself as parasitic upon her mother, eventually (unintentionally) killing her.<sup>14</sup> These lines, then, are Aurora's conscious articulation of the normally unconscious trauma of the daughter's Oedipal movement in Lacanian psychoanalysis. Aurora's separation from her mother, and her ensuing sense of mother-want, is fraught with feelings of maternal distrust and blame, fear of intervening forces and, most deeply, guilt. The maternal death marks Aurora's painful socialisation into phallogocentric codes.

If her kiss  
 Had left a longer weight upon my lips  
 It might have steadied the uneasy breath,  
 And reconciled and fraternised my soul  
 With the new order. As it was, indeed,  
 I felt a mother-want about the world,  
 And still went seeking, like a bleating lamb  
 Left out at night in shutting up the fold, -  
 As restless as a nest-deserted bird  
 Grown chill through something being away, though what  
 It knows not. (I:35-45)

The corollary of this separation from the mother is the female child's entry into the Symbolic Order and the Father's Law. Aurora feels she is now subject to a "new order" (39) which is intimidating and strange to the child. Her mother's kiss might have steadied those fears; the maternal kiss that Aurora remembers most is the last kiss her father insisted the dying woman bestow upon the child, symbolising her bequest of femininity (I:164-66). Such a kiss would indeed have "reconciled and fraternised" the daughter to the regulations and requirements of that culture. But Aurora is, like all women under Western patriarchy, a disenfranchised daughter, lacking self-definition and assurance because of the mandatory "mother-want". She does not have a place within the "fold" of patriarchy, as she is not of the flock. Moreover, she has not even the language to articulate what is lost. This inarticulacy is the final torture in the development of women, Irigaray argues. Commodities cannot speak in the marketplace and have no language. And even if they are emancipated enough to

acquire language, how can something be represented that is outside the scope of representation? Under the law of the self-same, any "other" is a blind spot - impossible to see and so assumed not to exist. It cannot be represented because it does not officially exist (Speculum 118-19). Aurora's feeling of loss cannot therefore be articulated beyond the vague sense of a "mother-want".

With the death of the mother and the movement into the realm of the Father, the "mother" is reduced to a picture, a lifeless cipher carrying the interpretations and rewritings of patriarchy. Now the mother is fearful and fascinating, a threat to the terrified female child. Aurora crouches in front of her mother's portrait for hours, "half in terror, half/ In adoration" (I:137-38), reading into the picture all the discourses she is learning in this "new order". As suggested in Chapter Five, Aurora searches the picture for clues about herself as much as for clues about her mother. This primal relationship is where the female child defines herself as woman. Aurora writes:

All which images,  
Concentred on the picture, glassed themselves  
Before my meditative childhood, as  
The incoherencies of change and death  
Are represented fully, mixed and merged,  
In the smooth fair mystery of perpetual Life. (I:168-73)

The images of her own creation glass or reflect Aurora back to herself: she does not see her mother, only patriarchy's representations of femininity. And those representations reiterate the twin contingencies of female development: change and death. The move from mother love and identification to mother distrust, and the resulting death of the mother (and the woman), is mixed into the "mystery" of Life. The daughter's experience is both incoherent and mysterious to her.

Significantly, the only family portrait that Romney Leigh saves from his burning ancestral home is of another mother figure for Aurora:

Not one was rescued, save the Lady Maud,  
Who threw you down, that morning you were born,  
The undeniable lineal mouth and chin  
To wear for ever for her gracious sake,  
For which good deed I saved her[...] (VIII:955-59)



Aurora is once more offered the mirror to see herself as society defines her: one of the beautiful and "proud ancestral Leighs" (VIII:950), appropriate wife for Romney. Aurora never knows the woman whose blood she shares, only her culture's appropriation and representation of "the Lady Maud". Ironically, this is the only picture saved: Romney lets the rest of the paternal inheritance go up in smoke. Sandra Gilbert infers that "his saving of the picture suggests also that the power of the Leighs has not been destroyed but instead transferred to 'a fairy bride from Italy' (IX:766), who has now become the true heir and 'head' of the family" (206). This reading assumes the recovery of the maternal, but the sad irony here is that the portrait is only a representation, a socialised cipher for the mother that was. Aurora may be inheriting the new world, but her mother and prehistory are still lost.

Aurora's account of her lost mother in Book I moves almost immediately into an account of her father, as the new order succeeds the old. And fathers have "wills more consciously responsible", or as an earlier manuscript had it, "more predictive will... [& will more consciously administrative]" (Reynolds, Aurora 166). The human father must represent the Law of the symbolic Father; it is his responsibility to be the third term breaking the dyadic unity of mother and daughter. Although in strict terms this disruption occurs at the infant stage, Aurora's life constantly replays the exertion of will by father representatives (see Chapter Four). They must administer laws, to use the verb of the earlier manuscript. Or be "predictive": having the power to foretell, to prophesy - in this case, to ordain a daughter's life and role.

The critical result of the father's intervention is that the daughter's cathexis now theoretically shifts from mother to father, who becomes the centre and locus of desire for her. And this is surely true of Aurora, whose love for her father succeeds her love for her mother. In Book VII, when she returns to her beloved Italy, she speaks with longing and sadness about her father:

How I heard  
 My father's step on that deserted ground,  
 His voice along that silence, as he told  
 The names of bird and insect, tree and flower,  
 And all the presentations of the stars  
 Across Valdarno, interposing still

"My child," "my child." When fathers say "my child,"  
 'Tis easier to conceive the universe,  
 And life's transitions down the steps of law. (VII:1110-18)

The father's word is like God's word: creating and naming the universe. He makes order and meaning for the child, both of surroundings and of the child's self. He places his ownership on the child, and all these paternal abilities enable the child to negotiate life's transitions as preordained by the Law of the Father. The simultaneous sense of security and yet domination in these lines underscores the daughter's position under the power of the father - "safe" as a "bee shut in a crystalline", to quote the Sonnets (XV).

Just as paternal influences are continually replayed in Aurora Leigh, so are maternal losses. Throughout Aurora's life separations from mothers are being refigured. The second time is Aurora's removal from Assunta and Italy:

I do remember clearly, how there came  
 A stranger with authority, not right,  
 (I thought not) who commanded, caught me up  
 From old Assunta's neck; how, with a shriek,  
 She let me go,- while I, with ears too full  
 Of my father's silence, to shriek back a word,  
 In all a child's astonishment at grief  
 Stared at the wharf-edge where she stood and moaned,  
 My poor Assunta, where she stood and moaned!  
 The white walls, the blue hills, my Italy,  
 Drawn backward from the shuddering steamer-deck,  
 Like one in anger drawing back her skirts  
 Which suppliants catch at. Then the bitter sea  
 Inexorably pushed between us both,  
 And sweeping up the ship of my despair  
 Threw us out as a pasture to the stars. (I:223-38)

Again the Law of the Father, in this case the "stranger" (and, to a certain extent, the sea), has intervened in the mother-daughter bond to enforce what Aurora sees as a morally wrong separation. Assunta's pain in these lines is like the pain of childbirth, the first separation of mother and child. She shrieks and moans, but the child cannot respond as she is too overwhelmed at the Father's power in doing this terrible thing. Aurora never sees Assunta again: we are told in Book VII that "My old Assunta, too, was dead, was dead -/ O land of all men's past! for me alone,/ It would not mix its tenses" (VII:1156-58). Italy, the

repository of so much Western history, cannot give Aurora her history back: this mother is dead too, like her biological mother, and cannot be recouped.

Even more poignantly, Italy herself, Aurora's psychic mother, is "drawn back" from her child in the above lines, as the "bitter sea" "inexorably" interposes. So effective is the separation, that the child reads this drawing back as anger directed toward herself: the mother now is seen as proud, heartless and aloof. The mother's real feelings at this separation are plain to see in Assunta's grief and pain, but, as in Aurora's account of her biological mother's death, the female child takes upon herself the guilt for her mother's anger - anger rather directed at the bitter sea and authoritative stranger.

The rewriting of maternity in this example (loving mother becomes cruel mother) is a consequence of the required separation of the mother and daughter under Lacanian psychoanalysis. Maternity is culturally defined in simplistic, oppositional terms of good and bad.<sup>15</sup> The good mother is pure and Madonna-like, passively sacrificing herself to her children and master/ husband (as in Aurora's image of the fruitful vine that describes mothers with "chubby children hanging" round their necks; such women are thus kept "low and wise" [II:516-18]). This culturally-defined mother is effaced and redundant when children grow up, and is eventually lost. She becomes invisible.<sup>16</sup>

Alternatively, because under a phallogentric culture females become rivals for the male phallus, mothers must compete with their daughters for supremacy within this economy. So dramatically has the maternal relationship been rewritten to fit into patriarchal terms, that the strong motherly bond is replaced with a deep distrust of false mothers. Aurora Leigh is full of such mothers, who betray and mislead their daughters into abuse. Dorothy Mermin comprehensively lists "the large company of rejecting mothers who crowd the pages of the poem" (Origins 193-94). Marian's life offers one such example. Her mother takes "revenge" for her own "broken heart" on the daughter, and Aurora's account of Marian's early childhood (III:865-925) constantly returns to Marian's lack of a right mother. The relationship has been warped and perverted under the aegis of this culture: Marian feels none of the "mother's special patience" or "irrepressible instinct". We learn that Marian is a "poor weaned kid",

emphasising the inevitable physical separation that signifies the daughter's psychic separation from the maternal. And when Marian envies merry Rose Bell for a mother who lets her laugh, she is told by Rose: "'She lets me. She was dug into the ground/ Six years since, I being but a yearling wean./ [...] Don't you wish/ You had one like that?'" (III:921-26). Rose has been deprived ("weaned") of her mother from her first year; Rose's "merriness" abandons her to prostitution and misery.

Marian's mother tries to prostitute Marian, too, presumably because her daughter will fetch more than herself. Marian's response (and Aurora's) indicts this definition of "mother":

The child [Marian] turned round  
 And looked up piteous in the mother's face,  
 (Be sure that mother's death-bed will not want  
 Another devil to damn, than such a look)  
 "Oh, mother!" then, with desperate glance to heaven,  
 "God, free me from my mother," she shrieked out,  
 "These mothers are too dreadful." (III:1058-64)

The repetition of "mother" in these few lines focusses on Aurora's obsession with the role. What is a mother? From her readings of her own mother's portrait to her interpretations of this scene, her confusion between her own "mother-want" and her horror at cultural maternity is apparent. Her bereft instincts cannot be equated with the way maternity operates in her society. She has lost her origins, but now must deal with foreign phallogocentric inscriptions of maternity. The good/ bad mother opposition, like the other dualisms in the poem, will eventually be broken down, but at this point Aurora perceives only the two roles, and rejects both for arid non-maternity.

'Wicked' mothers are not confined to working-class examples. The poem presents us with another false mother in Lady Waldemar, in whom motherless Marian perceives maternal wisdom. "'She wrapt me in her generous arms at once,/ And let me dream a moment how it feels/ To have a real mother, like some girls,'" says Marian (VI:1001-04). Lady Waldemar perceptively obliges Marian with her "counsel", and then with her "waiting-maid" when Marian "realises" she must leave England and not marry Romney. The waiting-maid is to

offer pseudo-maternal solicitude to Marian, but she becomes, in Marian's terms, a "Devil's daughter" (another motherless figure, with only a father - Satan):

"A woman ... hear me, let me make it plain,...  
 A woman ... not a monster ... both her breasts  
 Made right to suckle babes ... she took me off  
 A woman also, young and ignorant  
 And heavy with my grief[...]" (VI:1182-86)

Marian is appalled that a woman can so pervert the maternal role to use her maternity to corrupt and ruin a daughter. Like Aurora, Marian feels the mother-want, the loss central to feminine definition, but like Aurora she is horrified by what her culture offers in place of the mother. Such "mothers" enact patriarchal values: the waiting-maid, we later learn, has absconded with the money intended to convey Marian to Australia (VII:1-10; IX:84-90). Under such definitions, the woman's actions are not surprising: she did only what Marian's own mother would have done - "A motherly, right damnable good turn" (VII:10). Like Aurora's aunt, another pseudo-mother, maternal relations are obliterated in the face of patriarchal mercantile values. Marian concludes: "'When mothers fail us, can we help ourselves?/ That's fatal!'" (VI:1229-30).

Little wonder that under such rewritings of maternity, women (notably Aurora) distrust and denigrate each other. Romney notes how Aurora "sweep[s]" her sex "With somewhat bitter gusts" from her height far above them, recognising her (proud) denial of her own gender (VIII:202-03). When Aurora wanders Florence in Book VII, she happens upon Florentine women praying in the cathedral. At first she dismisses them, imagining trivial "womanly" petitions for the individuals she watches. One will be praying that her lover Gigi might turn from her rival and look again at herself; another is so old she has only the Madonna to gossip with, and to bribe with candles so as to win the lottery. Yet another is so hump-backed a "thing" that the black kerchief around her neck is, Aurora remarks, "Sole proof she had had a mother" (VII:1234). For each, Aurora assumes an existence where mothers and daughters are remote, where women are rivals and where even the mother of all, "Our Lady" Mary, must be cajoled and blackmailed for attention ("'Would sweetest Mary cheat her so[?]" [VII:1252]). At this point, Aurora simply reiterates what the death of the mother means for women in this culture: loss of

an apparently deep, instinctive and secure relationship, the related loss of self-identity as a woman, and an associated disintegration of other female relationships.

### iii. The Freudian mother

Within Freudian interpretations, of course, these losses are normal for heterosexual reasons. Yet Freud also recognises the importance of the maternal relationship for daughters: "the phase of the affectionate pre-Oedipus attachment [to the mother] is the decisive one for a woman's future: during it preparations are made for the acquisition of the characteristics with which she will later fulfil her role in the sexual function and perform her invaluable social tasks. It is in this identification too that she acquires her attractiveness to a man, whose Oedipus attachment to his mother it kindles into passion" (Freud 134). Thus even the unknown pre-Oedipal relationship is reinscribed within phallogocentric ideology, as a school in which to learn femininity, Freudian-style. In this hermeneutical circle, where the only integer is the male organ, no other way of being is acknowledged. Females seeking to find other definitions of femaleness from other mothers are stymied from the start: a mother under Freud is a pattern of heterosexual humiliation and penis-envy.

Consider the few mother-son relationships mentioned in Aurora Leigh. Aurora describes one with sarcasm in Book V, when Lord Howe offers a nobleman suitor to Aurora. He describes this would-be husband to Aurora as a "good son", a description Aurora seizes upon with scorn.

"To a most obedient mother. Born to wear  
His father's shoes, he wears her husband's too:  
Indeed I've heard it's touching." (V:884-86)

The Freudian analysis is here fulfilled: the son succeeds to the father's place in law and in power over the mother/woman. Whether the sexual innuendo is justified is irrelevant. The son has succeeded the father, and the mother/woman is confirmed as the token of exchange and possession and a grateful recipient of the desired phallic treasure.

The other, more central mother-son relationship is that between Marian and her illegitimate son. Here, too, we see a playing-out of Freudian theories, yet in ways that expose the fallacies of those theories. That Marian dotes on her son with almost desperate attachment is obvious:

"Mine, mine," she said. "I have as sure a right  
As any glad proud mother in the world,  
  [...] If she talks of law,  
I talk of law! I claim my mother-dues  
By law, - the law which now is paramount, -  
The common law, by which the poor and weak  
Are trodden underfoot by vicious men,  
And loathed for ever after by the good." (VI:661-69)

Marian's maternity is established, as she only too clearly knows, via her corrupt, woman-abusing society. She is a mother under "common law", whereby woman is turned against woman out of desire for the man; where the weak become dupes for the powerful and greedy and objects of self-righteous scorn for the "good". Under this law, which Leighton describes as "a social commodity affordable by the rich" ("Because" 346), Marian's body, sexuality and maternity are currency to be used. Yet even so, Marian still delights in her maternity, in her son as her own.

Compare Freud: "A mother is only brought unlimited satisfaction by her relation to a son; this is altogether the most perfect, the most free from ambivalence of all human relationships. A mother can transfer to her son the ambition which she has been obliged to suppress in herself, and she can expect from him the satisfaction of all that has been left over in her of her masculinity complex" (Freud 133). Marian's son, then, gives Marian the phallus that she herself does not have. This is no disappointing daughter (because 'lacking'); this is a future father, and Marian possesses him.

But who possesses whom? The boy's control over his mother already suggests his masculine power as a father to order the woman's existence. Marian tells Aurora in Book VI how she must woo her baby son, wearing "'A sort of smile to please him'", because he may not like her if he sees her fretting. As she demonstrates this for Aurora, the child laughs, and Marian cries: "'Ah, ah! he laughs! he likes me'". Turning to Aurora she exults that no matter how

pure and great Aurora is, "the child would keep to me,/ Would choose his poor lost Marian, like me best'" (VI:700-23). Aurora is seen as a rival for the male child's affection: his choice bestows worth and honour.

Similarly, Aurora later describes the male child making demands of his mother:

[Marian] peeled a new fig from that purple heap  
 In the grass beside her, turning out the red  
 To feed her eager child (who sucked at it  
 With vehement lips across a gap of air  
 As he stood opposite, face and curls a-flame  
 With that last sun-ray, crying "give me, give,"  
 And stamping with imperious baby-feet,  
 We're all born princes)[...] (VIII:8-15)

The scene is beautifully evoked, and yet it has disturbing overtones. The mother peels and exposes the heart of the luscious figs for the consuming male child, who demands satisfaction. He is "eager", "vehement", "imperious", portrayed as a flaming sun-king. His mother, by contrast, is effaced in the scene: she is the sacrificing, anonymous functionary. Moreover, the image of the peeled, turned-out fig is suggestive of the female body: a plump morsel that must be exposed and sacrificed to the sucking lips of the male.

Marian's relationship with her son, whilst initially affirming her, now effaces her. The mother has become the handmaid of the patriarch, even though he is yet a child. We are not all born princes: one has to be male to inherit that particular title. Even as she delights in being everything to her son, Marian comes to see how mothers under patriarchy are eventually written out of existence. In rejecting Romney's proposal at the start of Book IX, she cites her relationship with her son, a relationship which negates marriage for her.

"I've room for no more children in my arms,  
 My kisses are all melted on one mouth,  
 I would not push my darling to a stool  
 To dandle babies. Here's a hand shall keep  
 For ever clean without a marriage-ring,  
 To tend my boy until he cease to need  
 One steadying finger of it, and desert  
 (Not miss) his mother's lap, to sit with men.  
 And when I miss him (not he me), I'll come



And say, 'Now give me some of Romney's work,  
To help your outcast orphans of the world  
And comfort grief with grief.'

(IX:428-39)

Though, in true Freudian style, she is mother and pseudo-wife to her son - loving both maternally and erotically (melted kisses) - she also knows that she is losing that relationship. As the boy inherits the Father's law, the 'good mother' disappears. She will miss him but, as she repeats, he will not miss her. For the same reason, we never hear of Romney's mother. She has ceased to exist. Romney's (dead) father remains a potent figure in the poem, but she, whoever she is or was, is nowhere. To repeat Aurora's double-edged remark from the start of the poem, "So mothers have God's license to be missed" (I:64).

As observed in Chapter Four, Marian insists that she is dead psychologically and socially in the latter half of the poem. All she is, she tells Aurora, is a mother: "'The mother in me has survived the rest'" (VI:821). With these words Marian attempts to escape or remove herself from patriarchy; she is no longer an element within her society, nor is her 'unfathered' (except for God) child. She linguistically creates a maternal world for both her and her child, where the paternal world cannot reach. Yet in the same speech we see the failure of that creation against the apparent totality of the symbolic. Her maternal world is constructed within the Symbolic Order, even though she attempts to site it beyond or apart from it. As a mother, and only a mother (the rest of her psyche being dead), she will eventually become redundant within the symbolic - killed off, or erased. In the lines quoted above, she recognises this, and so plans an alternative future as a pseudo-mother to motherless children. She thus maintains a de facto position in society, but more to the point, she has expression for the grief she feels at losing her final human definition, as her child's mother. The motherless mother is now not even that.

And again, Marian still must figure herself as dead. Whether she is the redundant, self-erased mother that patriarchy defines, or a recouped maternal figure of pre-Oedipal relationships, she is in either case the "blind spot" within her culture. In the first case her invisibility is required; in the second case her invisibility is inevitable because she is excess, unrepresentable in the world of the poem.

#### iv. The death of the Father

Clearly, in order for women to find alternatives to the constricting structures of female development outlined in post-Freudian psychoanalytical theories, new conceptions of woman must be negotiated. Moreover, such conceptions may be usefully derived from a dismantling of Freud's assumptions - using the theory against itself, as it were. Certainly in Aurora Leigh there is a clear method of attack that breaks down Aurora's limiting conceptions of herself and her gender. Much of this method has been elaborated in Chapter Five, but there are significant psychoanalytical aspects to Aurora's progress that can be explored here, notably the concept of the death of the Father and the rediscovery of female love and tradition.

Is it possible to 'kill' or remove the Father figure of patriarchal law? Can the power of the Father and his law be deconstructed, significance removed from the male organ as phallus? As always, such agendas come up against the central dilemma with which this chapter began. In Aurora Leigh, though, there are real attempts to undo the power of the Father in Aurora's life. These smaller attempts perhaps suggest a way: if the symbolic is perceived less as a monolithic reified structure, than as a fluid, changing entity in constant negotiation with its constituents, then the renegotiations made by those constituents redefine the symbolic. Such redefinitions, of course, depend upon collective agreement, whereas patriarchy rather demands reified structures based on apparent absolutes, with power and authority the primary modes of operation.<sup>17</sup>

In Aurora's life a pattern emerges of fathers being removed or killed off. While the dead representative of the law is almost always replaced with a new representative, the pattern is significant for Aurora's development. First to die is her own biological father. This is a cause of deep sadness for Aurora, for although he inevitably brought her into the culture of their patriarchal world, he was also sufficiently emancipated from its assumptions to see its injustices. He is like Lazarus raised from death, "unmade from a common man/ But not completed to an uncommon man" (l:183-184).<sup>18</sup> Leighton's unique account of

Aurora Leigh is particularly striking in its account of Aurora's relationship with her father. She uses several references (notably I:205-11) to argue that "the daughter's growth into womanhood, with all its wider physical and emotional needs ... signifies the loss of the father to her; she has ceased to be to him 'as if ... a child'". Moreover, the daughter's awakening "to womanhood and self-expression" seems inevitably to involve the father's death. "So sharp is the clash between daughter and father that it seems like life won at the cost of death; like speech won from some profound subconscious crime against the father" (Leighton, Elizabeth 122-23). Leighton immediately goes on to describe Aurora's enormous sense of loss, but she has significantly established the poem's subtle suggestion that the daughter's volition to art kills the father (52). That she loves him, and grieves his loss is clear, yet Aurora's father also has the power to name Aurora's world and to order her existence, and it is this power that seems to place him in an antithetical, and indeed dangerous, relation to her. He "wrapt his little daughter in his large/ Man's doublet, careless did it fit or no" (I:727-28). Whilst this education in masculine pursuits and learning stands Aurora in good stead for her poetic career and undermines traditional distinctions between masculinity and femininity, this is also an education into the Father's law. This education is made clear in the manuscript workings of these lines (I:727-28): the "large doublet" is a "<grave> [dark]" doublet of "Dead <learning> <tongues> [lore]" (Reynolds, Aurora 192, footnote). She learns the language of phallogocentrism.

Significantly, Aurora's best and most loved mementoes of her father are his books, carried with her to England and rediscovered by her there. Most commentators note Aurora's self-education into the "masculine principle".<sup>19</sup> Gilbert describes it as Aurora's absorption into the masculine world and its discourses: "Creeping through the patriarchal attic 'Like some small nimble mouse between the ribs/ Of a mastodon' (I:838-39), she finds a room 'Piled high with cases in my father's name' (I:835) and 'nibbles' fiercely but randomly at what amounts to a paradigmatic library of Western culture". These "texts that incarnate patriarchal history" inevitably corrupt her own poetry and her attempts to find a female voice (201-02).

At the same time, though, her father's books are also her passport to freedom, as she discovers poetry and her vocation for rewriting life. Thus the father's books are not simply synonymous with the Father's law: they may be used to represent that law but they may also be used to disrupt that law.

The books are also a passport to another sort of freedom. In Book V Aurora takes the difficult step of selling some of her father's texts. Why this abandonment of the Father's words? To finance her journey back to mother Italy. Aurora's recognition of the futility of life for daughters under the Law of the Father has precipitated this step; she has just heard Marian's terrible story of destruction and death under the aegis of the Father.

The section begins with Aurora musing whether the manuscript of her long poem will fetch enough to make the journey. She decides not, and so turns to her father's books: typically, the daughter's words are insignificant and undervalued beside the words of the Father. And these texts really do carry the words of her father. The fly-leaves are

overwritten by his hand  
 In faded notes as thick and fine and brown  
 As cobwebs on a tawny monument  
 Of the old Greeks - conferenda haec cum his -  
Corrupte citat - lege potius,  
 And so on, in the scholar's regal way  
 Of giving judgement on the parts of speech,  
 As if he sate on all twelve thrones up-piled,  
 Arraigning Israel.

(V:1219-27)

The scholar is lord of meaning and value, deciding right and wrong: he overwrites the original text with his reading, arbitrating interpretations. He has the authority to judge fellow humanity, as was promised by Christ to the disciples in Matthew 19:28 (Reynolds, Aurora 642). He is thus the epitomic representative of the Father's law. Yet the image that Aurora chooses to describe his role also undercuts it. His words are faded like cobwebs on an ancient monument - archaic commentary on a declining institution. Neither patriarchy's laws, nor her father's legislation of them, matter as much to Aurora. These values are no longer enough.

Her description of these books continues with the discovery of a Proclus edition, complete with blue stain where the child Aurora pressed a Florentine iris in it. Aurora remembers her father's peevish chiding: "Silly girls,/ Who plant their flowers in our philosophy/ To make it fine, and only spoil the book!/ No more of it, Aurora'" (V:1238-41). The clash of the girl child's values and desires with those of the father is emblematic of the central clash of maternal and paternal values in this poem. Under the latter, Aurora's insertion of the beautiful flower - Iris was the messenger of the gods - into masculinist philosophy only "spoil[s]" the book for them. The text is disrupted with the "blood" (l.1237) of living things - a message too disturbing for patriarchy to countenance. Yet it is this insertion of female values into phallogocentric culture that offers the greatest hope for the world of the poem. As mentioned above, the symbolic must be seen as negotiable, not a reified structure of misogynist theories of female development and definition. If women are able to plant their messages into existing philosophies to modify, disrupt and redefine those philosophies, then the restrictive Law of the Father will be broken down.

Significantly, the book, with its female stain intact, is not spoilt for Aurora. Indeed, it is even more precious, both because it carries memories of her loving father, but also because of these deeper feelings of asserted value. She keeps this book, preferring to sell off her gorgeous edition of Homer, whose editor, Wolf, argues that Homer was not a single poet but that the Iliad and Odyssey were a collection of ballads by multiple authors (Reynolds, Aurora 642-43). Aurora's comments on this text and on Wolf's thesis are suggestive. He compiles a "royal book" to honour a "chief-poet", says Aurora, only to make it fatherless. There is no chief-poet; the book comes from "The house of Nobody!":

[Wolf] floats in cream, as rich as any sucked  
 From Juno's breasts, the broad Homeric lines,  
 And, while with their spondaic prodigious mouths  
 They lap the lucent margins as babe-gods,  
 Proclaims them bastards. (V:1250-54)

In this memorable image Aurora portrays the lines of Homer's poetry floating in the rich cream of the pages, their strong spondaic start-words lapping the margins like baby Mercury or Hercules sucked at Juno's breast (Reynolds,

Aurora 643). Yet these babies have no father; Wolf has removed the father. This death of the father is shocking for Aurora, who concludes that "Wolf's an atheist", arguing (pro-)creation from random chance. Though Aurora wants to loose the shackle-hold of the Father's law so as to find the mother, she cannot imagine life without a father. Like life without a God, such total fatherlessness is clearly threatening to her.

Yet the mother's love is much, too, and Aurora's images here of Juno's creamy milk and luminous breasts convey yet again her deep yearning for that lost maternal relationship. This account of her choosing books to sell concludes with the reason for the choosing:

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)

In an inversion of the image which opened the poem - the smiling baby on the mother's breast - Aurora envisions the smiling, sleeping mother feeling the suck of the feeding baby. This symbiosis of the pre-Oedipal relationship is mysterious to symbolic representation, and yet deeply fulfilling for both mother and child. And Aurora's desperate language here conveys her profound desire for this relationship, a spiritual ("my soul") and erotic ("I burn") desire for union with the mother. Yet her exclamations of desire are tempered with a knowledge of the impossibility of attaining that desire. Aurora answers her own question posed in the above lines:

- Nay, not so much as when in heat  
Vain lightnings catch at your inviolate tops  
And tremble while ye are stedfast. Still ye go  
Your own determined, calm, indifferent way  
Toward sunrise, shade by shade, and light by light,  
Of all the grand progression nought left out,  
As if God verily made you for yourselves  
And would not interrupt your life with ours.

(V:1271-78)

EBB loved to make such comments on Italy's political history, and yet these lines can also be read in terms of the psychoanalytical model explored here. As a symbol for the lost maternal relationship, Italy is impervious and inaccessible to the divorced child. The pre-Oedipal, semiotic space is outside consciousness; its life cannot be interrupted with ours. Attempts to engage with the lost mother are futile, "Vain lightnings" whose heat of desire makes no connection with the "inviolable" hills/breasts of the lost mother. Even before she leaves, Aurora knows that she cannot escape her position in the symbolic to find that forgotten relationship - such an escape would mean death (a desire for which emerges overtly in Book VII). In Italy she can only hope to find solace and as yet unarticulated possibilities for other maternal replacements.

Other father figures meet their deaths in the poem, deaths that have significant influences on Aurora. Her aunt's death (see Chapter Five) impresses upon Aurora the sense of terrible release from the strait-jacket of patriarchal roles. The aunt, who has been a female representative of the Law of the Father, dies with her eyes open, staring:

What last sight  
Had left them blank and flat so, - drawing out  
The faculty of vision from the roots,  
As nothing more, worth seeing, remained behind?

(II:942-45)

The motif of sight and blindness in Aurora Leigh takes on deeper relevance when considered in the light of Irigaray's thesis of the appropriating masculine gaze, already discussed elsewhere. The gaze is not necessarily exclusively male; it is predicated upon parasitic power relations that prey upon the object in order to sustain self-conception. This predation is reflected in Aurora's comments on her aunt, in the lines following the above:

Were those the eyes that watched me, worried me?  
That dogged me up and down the hours and days,  
A beaten, breathless, miserable soul?  
And did I pray, a half-hour back, but so,  
To escape the burden of those eyes ... those eyes?  
"Sleep late!" I said? -  
Why now, indeed, they sleep.

(II:946-51)

The aunt has hunted Aurora with her eyes, seeking to break down the young woman's resistance to marriage with Romney. In her desire to establish absolute control over Aurora, her predation threatens Aurora's (psychical) life: "I felt her looks/ Still cleaving to me, like the sucking asp/ To Cleopatra's breast" (II:863-65). In another image of the maternal breast, now under threat,<sup>20</sup> the aunt is the viper in Aurora's bosom, killing her. If the Father requires the daughter's psychical death, the daughter's self-defence is the 'death' of the Father. Aurora's response to the threat of the Father's law is a prayer for the cessation of that power, if metaphorically and temporarily. The prayer receives an "answer" however; her aunt "sleep[s]" very late. Now her predatory eyes can hunt no longer, as the faculty of vision has been dragged out of them by death. Divine retribution? Aurora implies as much.

"If your eye offend you, pluck it out" (Matthew 5:29). The same retributive stance ("An eye for an eye") is often read into Romney's blinding, a replaying of Rochester's maiming in Jane Eyre. Certainly Romney's gaze on both Aurora and Marian exemplified Irigaray's description, in that both women were seen as ciphers for his project as self-appointed messiah. It seems therefore to be fitting that Romney is blinded at the height of his project, when his phalanstery burns down. And yet such a reading is simplistic, ignoring as it does the whole context of the poem. Romney is blinded by Marian's father in what seems to be a deliberate, malicious act. Marian's father considers 'his' women to be objects for his exploitation. (As Romney puts it, such men "call their wives their own/ To kick like Britons" [VIII:920-21].) Within this economy Romney is seen to have deprived the man of his daughter, and so the father takes his payment in violence. Even though Romney's methods themselves enact the corrupt assumptions that make the world he is trying to change, his phalanstery is a threat to his culture. His account of his neighbours' responses to the phalanstery in Book VIII reinforces the threat his attempts are to the prevailing ideology.

Finally, though, Romney's blinding taps into the whole Oedipal process that is being explored in the poem. The patriarchal gaze that is so overtly indicted by Aurora must be removed before any conciliation can take place between man and woman. As Stephenson also points out, Aurora only admits



her love to Romney after the final revelation that he is blind.<sup>21</sup> It has already been established that there is no impediment to their union: Lady Waldemar's ghost has been laid, and Marian has removed herself from the equation. Yet Aurora waits until confirming Romney's blindness before revealing her feelings. It is not pity that motivates her admission: Romney immediately jumps to this conclusion, but Aurora is adamant in disabusing him. She begins her explanation by recalling her refusal of his marriage offer in Book II; she refused him then because she begrudged his power to give and his "power to judge/ For me, Aurora". She would have no gifts but God's, which she would use for her choice. Yet she 'confesses' she went wrong in her thinking:

"[I] Betrayed the thing I saw, and wronged my own  
 life  
 For which I pleaded. Passioned to exalt  
 The artist's instinct in me at the cost  
 Of putting down the woman's, I forgot  
 No perfect artist is developed here  
 From any imperfect woman. Flower from root,  
 And spiritual from natural[...]" (IX:644-51)

Aurora reiterates the dualisms that so distorted her life, and traces her movement through them to a position where woman could be artist. This passage concludes in the notorious (for many feminist critics)<sup>22</sup> lines where Aurora extols Love over Art, and berates herself for not being satisfied with that same Love that satisfies God. However, as explained in Chapter Four, Aurora's conception of Love is of a dialectical relationship of equality. Romney did not offer this love until now, and despite Aurora's condemning herself for being fussy about "the kind of proffered love" that "sought a wife/ To use", she only now feels able to accept Romney's love, precisely because he has proved that love to be consistent with her own values. Even as she confesses her shortcomings to Romney (as he has to her) she tacitly demonstrates the value of equal love.

Romney's blindness is the final mark of his re-education. Like Oedipus, who 'saw' most clearly after his (self) blinding, Romney has come to a position of self-knowledge which he was incapable of whilst looking with the patriarch's gaze. Only now is he acceptable to Aurora, and indeed able to understand

Aurora: the "Father" is dead. That death occurred in the fire that burned the Leigh patriarchy to the ground, the day "'The House went out'" (VIII:1014).

"If you pushed one day  
Through all the green hills to our fathers' house,  
You'd come upon a great charred circle, where  
The patient earth was singed an acre round;  
With one stone stair, symbolic of my life,  
Ascending, winding, leading up to nought!  
'Tis worth a poet's seeing. Will you go?"

(VIII:1030-35)

The fathers' house is destroyed, but not without cost: the "patient earth" is singed and burned an acre around. All that is left is the useless stone stair, climbing to nowhere, a monument to a futile edifice. Aurora often uses images of stone monuments for her patriarchal culture, as with her father's books of philosophy: reified (converted into materiality), dead, cold and apparently immovable. That stone imagery suggests that the symbolic cannot be redefined, yet Aurora's story and poem prove otherwise. The symbolic can be renegotiated; what is always already written (here with phallogocentric inscriptions) can be - is continually being - rewritten. This hopeful task, as Romney so clearly understands from the final line of the above extract, is the poet's role. As Margaret Reynolds concludes:

Romney has to be blind to the material world in order to learn to see the spiritual truths of Aurora's argument - and Aurora herself. But once Romney is blind, Aurora loses the gaze which created her difference of opposition and resistance - a difference which constructed herself, certainly, but constructed that self as a negative term. With Romney's gaze removed, Aurora can start with new terms, new forms of language. Having accepted a valuing of her female identity, Aurora needs to shed ideas of hierarchy and value in male and female - and one way that reeducation takes place is through the abolition of the systems of difference and measurement which Aurora had used to "make" a self (Aurora 47-8).

How far the masculinist ideology of Aurora's world can be 'abolished' is arguable, but Aurora the poet is in prime position for its rewriting.

## v. Rediscovering female love

Aurora's "mothers" all die to her in one way or another. And yet the alliances they offer while they are still in her reach present Aurora with other modes of conducting female relationships than those offered by her society's ideology. Moreover, the complex female bonds that Aurora forms throughout the poem enable her to understand her own female desire, and to define it in terms other than those prescribed around the (male) phallus. As Aurora rediscovers herself as a loving sister/ mother/ daughter to other women, they and she are revalued in her eyes, because to find and love a woman is to find and love one's self - both "others" on the edge of a hostile world. Here is Aurora, having discovered her "sister" 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:500-06)

Their separation from the hostile world around them; the intimate sharing of experience and space ("breathing by her breath"); the tactility of female looking ("holding her with eyes"); all enunciated through a strangely ritualised or dream-like language - these lines suggest the status of otherness in female relationships.

Aurora's mother and Assunta provide early but distant clues to female love. The joyful, sharing nature of their maternity, participating in the child's enthusiasm, is wistfully described by Aurora early in the poem:

[...] children learn by such,  
Love's holy earnest in a pretty play  
And get not over-early solemnised,  
But seeing, as in a rose-bush, Love's Divine  
Which burns and hurts not, - not a single bloom, -  
Become aware and unafraid of Love. (I:54-59)

Solemnity she goes on to ascribe to the father - the solemnity of conscious "responsibility". But, according to Aurora, the mother gives the child a happy,

safe and fearless experience of love. This "Love" prefigures the Love that reaches its climax in Book IX, symbolized in both places by the rose. Romney's Rose of Sharon, like this rose of maternal love, burns with fiery passion but neither consumes nor scorches. It does not demand restricting, hierarchical roles that suffocate the participants. Aurora thus rewrites love's definitions, as the speaker of the Sonnets also did, and similarly symbolises the new definition in a flower image (see Sonnet XLIV). Here, though, Love is specifically linked to mother-child relationships, relationships hitherto suppressed and de-legitimised.

Other women offer different sorts of relationships to Aurora. Kate Ward is only a distant character in the poem, and yet her love and reverence for Aurora help to move Aurora beyond self-hatred. Vincent <sup>Carrington</sup> writes to tell her of his marriage to Kate:

"Ah, my friend,  
 You'll write and say she shall not miss your love  
 Through meeting mine? in faith, she would not  
 change.  
 She has your books by heart more than my words,  
 And quotes you up against me till I'm pushed  
 Where, three months since, her eyes were[...]  
   'Tis pretty, to remark  
 How women can love women of your sort,  
 And tie their hearts with love-knots to your feet,  
 Grow insolent about you against men  
 And put us down by putting up the lip[...]" (VII:600-16)

Kate is a fan of Aurora, wearing her old cloak like a prized possession, defending her reputation and poetry against all comers. In her letters to Aurora she signs herself "'Elisha to you'" (III:54). She considers Aurora her maternal mentor, and yet has no female model for such a mentor; she must use a biblical male relationship, that between Elijah and Elisha, as her analogy. This very analogy indicates her view of Aurora as a prophet, one who speaks God's words to humanity. Yet Vincent portrays this female relationship condescendingly, as a rather amusing crush of Kate's. The slighting and trivialising tone of lines 612-13 ("'Tis pretty[...]'") indicates Vincent's inability to understand the importance of this relationship to both women. Note Kate's first request: that Aurora would not withhold her love now that Kate has married Aurora's friend Vincent. Kate is immediately aware that under their culture this realignment of relationships

around a male puts the two women in positions of rivalry. She does not want to lose the female friendship because of the male interpolation. Clearly the relationship is important to her, and yet Vincent portrays it as an extravagant hero-worship: "there'll be women who believe of you/ (Besides my Kate) that if you walked on sand/ You would not leave a footprint'" (VII:620-22).

Vincent, though, trivialises this female relationship of mentor and devotee, because Kate has located value in a source other than her husband. She quotes Aurora's poetry "'more than my words'", Vincent only half-jokingly complains, and insists upon being painted with Aurora's volume in her hand, rather than his palette. Kate is locating herself and her values beyond those prescribed by and around her husband; she asserts female value. Accordingly her verbal defences of Aurora are labelled insolence. The message is clear: for a woman to love and revere another woman as heroine and ideal is at first laughable and simplistic, and then repugnant. Vincent's barbed comment that Kate's quotations of Aurora's words 'push' him to the wall, which Kate's eyes used to face, expresses his exasperation at being controlled by the woman he usually controls. But the line also carries an implicit threat: he may choose to reassert control again, and re-'turn' Kate to the wall. Masculinity must remain both the object of value, and the locus of power.

That Kate's love for Aurora is significant beyond hero-worship is evident from its effect on Aurora. Eventually, after considering Vincent's more immediately momentous news concerning Romney, Aurora falls to musing on his comments about his marriage to Kate. Initially she regards Kate with the same trivialising attitude as Vincent, diminishing her to "little Kate!". She reflects what a good wife she will be for Vincent, but she then concludes:

I will not scorn her, after all, too much,  
That so much she should love me: a wise man  
Can pluck a leaf, and find a lecture in't;  
And I, too,... God has made me, - I've a heart  
That's capable of worship, love, and loss;  
We say the same of Shakespeare's. I'll be meek  
And learn to reverence, even this poor myself.

(VII:731-37)

Because Aurora at this stage sees little worth in herself as a woman, she scorns those who value her. And yet Kate loves her precisely because she is a woman; this is what Kate perceives to be so valuable in her. The clash of two value systems here becomes overt, even to Aurora. Aurora cannot scorn Kate because she, like Kate, is capable of "worship, love, and loss". These are not the attributes of an enfeebled femininity, as suggested by her masculinist culture; they are the marks of a feeling humanity, either male or female. It takes the alternative love of an other, a woman, to show Aurora her own value as a feeling woman, and to teach reverence for herself.

Primarily it is Aurora's relationship with Marian that is so pivotal to her growth in feminine love. As the quotation at the beginning of this section suggested (VI:500-06), the experience these two women share is critical in showing both the inevitable failures of and restrictions on female relationships within the Symbolic Order, and yet also the potential for these relationships:

Poor Marian Erle, my sister Marian Erle,  
 My woodland sister, sweet maid Marian,  
 Whose memory moans on in me like the wind  
 Through ill-shut casements, making me more sad  
 Than ever I find reasons for. (V:1095-99)

This is Aurora in Book V, before she meets with Marian again in Paris. The loss that Aurora feels in Marian's absence is more than can be rationally explained. Marian was to be her cousin-in-law, not a particularly close relation. Their friendship was not deep and they spent very little time together. Yet Aurora's sense of loss is profound: she mourns a sister. Marian's memory haunts her, probably partly out of guilt at Aurora's inaction over Lady Waldemar's influence on Marian, but more because of the relationship that is forgone. Aurora has in these lines elevated Marian from potential cousin to sister: a "sweet" sister, moreover "my sister". What Aurora has lost is a female relationship, a "sororal bond" (Mermin, *Origins* 208) of real worth and vitality, one that evokes memories that do not exist in their brief relations. These memories stretch back to the pre-Oedipal maternal relationship, and the mother-daughter bond of sharing and exchange. This is the communion that Aurora desires; Marian is the locus for this potential communion. Angela Leighton writes perceptively about Aurora's strange and desperate need for Marian, locating it in the psychological

narrative she has detailed in her reading of the poem. In Aurora's quest for the dead father, which spreads wider to a desire for the lost presences of childhood (father, mother, EBB's brother Bro), Marian becomes "a substitute for the old forsaking muses", and her "tantalising evasion of Aurora in Paris finds its meaning in the sub-text of Aurora's repeatedly 'orphaned' consciousness" (Elizabeth 153). Where Leighton argues for a paternal orphaning, the maternal orphaning that occurs under psychoanalytical theory also explains Aurora's behaviour here.

Hence Aurora's strange, obsessive need to find Marian in Book VI. After seeing her face fleetingly whilst deep in thought, Aurora frantically searches Paris for her lost sister:

No Marian; nowhere Marian. Almost, now,  
I could call Marian, Marian, with the shriek  
Of desperate creatures calling for the Dead.  
Where is she, was she? was she anywhere? (VI:255-58)

The despairing confusion of place and time evident in Aurora's panic at losing Marian reflects the loss of the pre-Oedipal place and time. The mother is dead to the desperate daughter: she is present neither in the present nor in the past. Even memory has been erased. Leighton also notes the "sudden and persistent association of Marian with 'the Dead'" (153) and relates it to EBB's imaginative need to find the lost relationships of childhood. The association also suggests the maternal separation. Aurora uses the same word repeatedly at these moments that relive the crisis of maternal separation: "shriek". The OED defines the word as a shrill, high-pitched cry that expresses terror or pain, and perhaps because of that shrillness it carries feminine overtones. Assunta shrieks when Aurora is torn from her; a shriek awakens the house and Aurora to her aunt's death; Marian shrieks "God, free me from my mother,[...]/ These mothers are too dreadful" (III:1063-64). Similarly, Aurora here imagines herself shrieking for the dead. In each case, the shriek, a female cry of agony, centres on a corruption of the maternal relationship. Daughters are wrenched from mothers or would-be mothers by a variation of circumstances played out within a chauvinistic culture.

After much searching in Paris, Aurora eventually finds Marian buying flowers. Seizing her by the wrists, Aurora holds her firmly, despite Marian's plea (she distrusts women by now) to be allowed to go. Aurora refuses:

"I lost my sister Marian many days,  
And sought her ever in my walks and prayers,  
And, now I find her ... do we throw away  
The bread we worked and prayed for, - crumble it  
And drop it,... to do even so by thee  
Whom still I've hungered after more than bread,  
My sister Marian?" (VI:449-54)

Marian is more necessary to Aurora than her daily bread. She has sought this sister relationship mentally, emotionally and physically; she cannot now devalue and discard it.<sup>23</sup> Even when she realises the nature of Marian's circumstances, as single mother of an illegitimate child, Aurora cannot lose this treasure now found. Her ignorant cruelty in Book VI (see, for example lines 617-23) is very quickly melted by Marian's sincerity and misery, and Aurora makes an extraordinary admission:

But I, convicted, broken utterly,  
With woman's passion clung about her waist  
And kissed her hair and eyes, - "I have been wrong,  
Sweet Marian" ... (weeping in a tender rage)  
"Sweet holy Marian!" (VI:778-82)

What is "broken utterly" here? Aurora has been reprimanding Marian with the morality of her society which damns a seduced woman and her offspring. According to such laws, Marian has stolen the child "'Through God's own barrier-hedges of true love,/ Which fence out license"; he is an orphan and she "'no mother, but a kidnapper'" (VI:634-37). This is the oppressive Law of the Father, protecting the male (seducer/ rapist) and locating blame for this corruption of the patriarchy in the mother, who is then erased. But, Cooper writes, "Marian speaks of female experience in a way quite new to Aurora. Her narrative disrupts Aurora's patriarchal discourse and transforms woman from scorned object to angry subject" (*Woman* 176). Leighton elaborates: Marian does not retire "into a self-effacing and thus conventionally innocent silence" but rather "accuses the world around her, which is vociferous to condemn but not to cure". In speaking in her own defence, Marian challenges the "sexual



slur" that falls on women who dare to speak or write. Thus Aurora's "quest to tell", as a poet, finds its object in Marian, the sister who speaks across ideologies (Leighton, Elizabeth 148-151).<sup>24</sup> Finally Aurora realises that the judgements of her culture on Marian are wrong according to a higher morality, and she at last begins to appreciate female values. Her adherence to the Law of the Father is broken; she is convicted by "woman's passion" and surrounds Marian with examples of rational, moral, spiritual and physical love that differ from traditional understandings of those attributes. Her ensuing speech appeals to the "dark facts", her own conscience and God's approval, and her actions pour a very physical expression of her "woman's passion" out on Marian.

Aurora's need of, and desire for, Marian culminates in the very beautiful invitation she offers to Marian to join her in Italy:

"Come with me, sweetest sister," I returned,  
 "And sit within my house and do me good  
 From henceforth, thou and thine! ye are my own  
 From henceforth. I am lonely in the world,  
 And thou art lonely, and the child is half  
 An orphan. Come, - and henceforth thou and I  
 Being still together will not miss a friend,  
 Nor he a father, since two mothers shall  
 Make that up to him."

(VII:117-25)

The intimate, informal "thou" is used in these lines, as Aurora addresses Marian like a lover. Aurora needs Marian for emotional reasons as much as Marian needs Aurora for practical reasons. Moreover, the father is rendered redundant in their attempt at a sisterly household. Marian's answer is eloquent: wordlessly she offers her child to Aurora to kiss, thus drawing her into motherhood and the maternal relationship.

#### vi. Female relationships surviving in patriarchy

Insofar as the female relationships that Aurora enjoys at different times all occur within the Symbolic Order, they are not the idealistic relationships of French feminism, the Cixousian "vatic bisexuality" which is "infinitely dynamized by an incessant process of exchange from one subject to another" (Marks and

de Courtivron 254). Such a relationship reaches back into pre-symbolic spaces, and to human connections unstructured by phallogentric culture. All Aurora's female friendships are interfused with the assumptions of her society and are written within the symbolic. Hence her relationship with Marian never reaches the heights that she has imagined it would. As in Lacanian theory, where the lost object of desire can never be found or replaced, so the lost mother-daughter dyadic cannot be recouped into the symbolic. Aurora cannot meet the essential need of her displaced personality, and its place is filled by temporal substitutes.<sup>25</sup>

Even as she takes in Marian and her baby, playing sister and mother to both of them, she continues to pine after Romney. He is her primary object of desire as a socialised woman; her desire for the mother is an illegitimate and covert one within her culture. She is like the Freudian woman who must move the cathexis of her desire from lost mother to father/husband, and yet always feels the dislocation from the first loss. Romney remains the main substitute for her sense of loss. Of course, her involvement in this ordained psychical process reiterates the values of that process. Despite the lessons she has apparently learnt from Marian, she continues to operate under the assumptions of phallogentrism. Her first significant action after the reunion with Marian is to write a venomous and threatening letter to her (subconscious) rival, Lady Waldemar, warning her to be a faithful and true wife to her cousin or else she and Marian will come and "stir [...] dangerous embers" for "The Lamia-woman" (VII:364; 152). For Aurora, Lady Waldemar represents threatening female desire, her rival for the phallus. Aurora's primal desire remains, and her method of dealing with it continues to be prescribed by patriarchal ideology.

Marian, representing the desired sister/ mother, rarely penetrates Aurora's sadness. Aurora nearly breaks down during the journey to Italy, driven near to madness by the thought of Romney's marriage. Her personal loss to a threatening female plays upon her fears of herself and female desire, and her sense of loss and isolation. Marian cannot solve these crises in Aurora; their relationship is punctuated by missed communion.

I leaned and looked,  
Then, turning back to Marian, smiled to mark  
That she looked only on her child, who slept[...]

(VII:426-28)

As Aurora keeps vigil on the boat to Italy, waiting for the first glimpse of her beloved motherland, Marian keeps vigil on Aurora. And when Aurora's face betrays her renewed awareness of loss, Marian offers sympathy:

"'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:512-14)

Yet this sympathy is all the help that Marian can offer Aurora, and it does not solve her problems. Ensuing references to Marian always involve the male child as he becomes not only a link but also an interpolation between the two women. "Marian's good," Aurora comments at one point, "Gentle and loving, - lets me hold the child" (VII:930-31, underlining mine). Marian tries to share her maternity with Aurora, to satisfy the need she perceives in the other woman, and yet such sharing is impossible: ownership and rivalry are implicit in their exchanges (compare VI:661; 710-23). In the account discussed earlier where Aurora describes Marian feeding peeled figs to a demanding, imperious child, Aurora's separation from the pair is painfully evident. When Marian laughs, Aurora notes:

I saw her glance above  
In sudden shame that I should hear her laugh,  
And straightway dropped my eyes upon my book[...]

(VIII:18-20)

Aurora does not begrudge Marian her laughter, but both women know that Aurora cannot join it. This maternal relationship cannot be shared; it is by definition dyadic. And the male child's presence, already taking over Fatherly distinctions, reimpresses upon the women their roles within patriarchy, and so constrains the growth of their female relationship.

Similarly, Aurora cannot find in mother-Italy the fulfillment she so craves. As the ship on which she keeps watch approaches the coast of Italy, Aurora

describes the "old miraculous mountains" as they "heaved in sight,/ One straining past another along the shore" (VII:468-69). These are the 'breasts' she longs to 'suck', the hills she "burn[s] toward" (V:1268). Yet her description continues:

Peak pushing peak  
They stood: I watched, beyond that Tyrian belt  
Of intense sea betwixt them and the ship[...] (VII:472-74)

Always something stands between Aurora and her lost "mother". Here it is the intense sea, the same "bitter" sea that first separated her from Italy and Assunta (I:235). Similarly, when she finds a house, it is on slopes opposite the mountains, from which she is separated by the valley of Arno and the city of Florence. Her descriptions of the mountains and valley evoke the maternal body: even the river suggests an umbilical cord,

trailing like a silver cord  
Through all, and curling loosely, both before  
And after, over the whole stretch of land  
Sown whitely up and down its opposite slopes[...] (VII:537-40)

Yet Aurora is apart from it, watching the sun "die [... and] be born" each day through this maternal body, uninvolved. Even as Aurora rewrites Italy as the mother in her images, she can only approach that maternity through an imagination already constructed within the symbolic. Her images and indeed her desires are already overwritten with cultural assumptions. As the ship returning her to Italy approaches the coast and dawn breaks, she confesses:

And then I did not think, "my Italy,"  
I thought, "My father!" O my father's house,  
Without his presence! (VII:490-92)

Italy is now the land of her dead father. Its status as mother is doubly lost, as it is now reinscribed as the site of the lost father. In the lines following these, Aurora makes the analogy of having a dream "on such a stone",

but, once being wholly waked  
And come back to the stone without the dream,  
We trip upon't, - alas, and hurt ourselves;  
Or else it falls on us and grinds us flat,  
The heaviest gravestone on this burying earth. (VII:499-503)

Mother-Italy is now a crushing, killing gravestone, replaying Aurora's loss of her father. The attributions of her metaphors here are telling: Italy, the lost maternal experience, is the stone; the paternal relationship is the dream, from which Aurora has wakened. But any positive experience on the site of the former is lost in the memories of the latter; instead the stone becomes a terrible mark for the lost dream. Its initial value is erased and it now marks the (ephemeral) value of the dream. But that mark, a "gravestone", crushes the woman. In this extreme example of the image of stones memorialising the reified systems of her world (see above p.252), Aurora in her disappointment sees maternal Italy rewritten as a memorial stone to the father's absent power.<sup>26</sup>

The implication of these complex images is that maternity and paternity, under a patriarchal hegemony, are mutually exclusive. Inclusion into the Symbolic Order necessitates the loss of the mother and the gain of a Father; attempts by a woman to find maternal definition necessarily entail the loss of the F/father. Finally women lose their parent either way. Aurora's mother-want precipitates a father-want as well, but not for the Father of patriarchal inscription and the law. What she desires is a different father, in the same way that she desires a mother who is different from patriarchally defined mothers. Aurora Leigh suggests that new definitions are necessary for mother and father as the symbolic is rewritten. Rod Edmond remarks that "Fathering in Aurora's history is not synonymous with patriarchy" (Edmond 148), and both her 'resurrected' father and the changed Romney testify to this. They gesture towards a fatherhood that is not a Fatherhood.

Later in the Book Aurora reiterates her terrible sense of double separation from the maternal, through its rewriting as father-loss. Trying to recall the creatures of her childhood, she notes sadly:

But now the creatures all seemed farther off,  
 No longer mine, nor like me, only there,  
 A gulph between us. I could yearn indeed,  
 Like other rich men, for a drop of dew  
 To cool this heat, - a drop of the early dew,  
 The irrecoverable child-innocence  
 (Before the heart took fire and withered life)  
 [...] And I, I had come back to an empty nest[...]

(VII:1099-09)

The time of childhood innocence, like the time of maternal unity, is irrevocably gone, and in its place is a hell of sorts, like the hell of the rich man in Jesus' parable of Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31). Aurora has lost her past, and with it her sense of identity and peace. She has come home to an empty nest, with neither mother nor father. The significance of the nest (Italy) is changed, and it is now a mark for loss and dis-location.

Despite this terrible awareness that Aurora's past, either with mother or with father, is forever lost to her, the poem does not end on this elegaic note. Instead she moves beyond grieving for the past and writes a future for herself that posits new roles for both male and female, mother and father. Central to those roles is a respect and love for women, underlining the vital function played by Aurora's female relationships. Despite their limited, even compromised nature within the symbolic, these relationships offer Aurora an understanding of herself as a woman within patriarchy, and also a glimpse of her potential value beyond patriarchy - the value of the other. This self-acceptance and self-potential is taught to Aurora primarily by women, both through negative and positive examples. The options taken by her aunt and Lady Waldemar impress upon her the impossibility of female growth or fulfillment whilst playing culturally-restricting roles. Conversely, Assunta, Kate, Marian and even the Florentine women praying in the cathedral show Aurora the possibility for alternative modes of existence and self-definition, modes that do not rely on the erasure of female desire, values or definitions.

The women in the cathedral are at first mocked by Aurora, but after a while she begins to see through the corrupted female relations to the fact that there are female relationships here. The "little humpback thing" had a mother; the "So solitary" old woman, effectively erased from her culture, has no one for company now except the Queen of Heaven. These women, all defined by and operating within the phallogentric culture that renders them rivals, nevertheless all come here to express their shared anxieties. This is a place where women's desires and values can be spoken - even validated - before God. Aurora perceives balm in such shared experience; she makes "the important transition from observer to participant" (Stephenson, Poetry 110) and relinquishes her (masculinist) position of superiority over these "poor blind souls":<sup>27</sup>

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:1265-72)

Her woman's desire is "foolish" (like mothers' love at I:63); she craves "offal-food". So 'wrong' are her words and desires that she must simultaneously devalue and erase them even as she expresses them. This exemplifies female experience in the world of the poem: feelings of female desire are accompanied by simultaneous and contradictory disgust and rejection of that female desire. (Cf. Lady Waldemar's "Am I coarse?/ Well, love's coarse", and "I have been too coarse,/ Too human" [III:454-55; IX:125-26].) Aurora, praying in the cathedral, is eventually silenced by this internal dilemma, beaten by her culture. The final line, however, indicates her belief that her dilemma is heard, ironically by the God who has been inscribed as the Patriarch of patriarchs. As the women all pray to Him in the cathedral, Aurora wonders whether this apparently archetypal representative of the masculine world, a silent Father aloof and deaf to female cries (see II:734-49), will respond to female need. Aurora the poet, however, also rewrites definitions of God. Under her inscription, God is not bound by her culture, and this God later presides over her and Romney's sublime marriage of equality. By depicting Him as listening to her, Aurora establishes divine endorsement, both for her desire and for her expression of that desire.

#### vii. A conclusion

Aurora's passage through the poem is guided by two critical processes: her poetry, and her female relationships. Her poetry shows her that life can be rewritten, that the apparently rigid culture that entraps her and the women around her is a text waiting to be reinscribed. Her female relationships provide her with the potentially new inscription, in which the mother and father are redefined and new feminist values of equal, interacting love and roles are

offered. These two complementary processes dislocate her patriarchal world, revealing its essentially destructive assumptions and structures. In envisioning the death of that old order, Aurora re-visions the birth of a utopian New Jerusalem. This new order is in itself a rewriting of the "new order" that she was inducted into as a child (I:39), which required the loss of her mother and the imposition of Fatherly law. Whether Aurora's new order can supersede a phallogocentric Symbolic Order remains a tension in the poem. But Aurora's images constantly yearn toward an order that would embrace, not repress, otherness. The narrative of a masculinist psychoanalysis ensures that individuals are already written into a prescribed ontology; Aurora Leigh insists that we must be able to write and read ourselves anew.

In her great disquisition in Book V, when she reflects on the structure of her culture, Aurora makes the famous and memorable image that epitomises her desires in the poem. As she extols the poet's art and responsibility to "represent the age" that they live in, she draws together the two threads that we have seen emerge as the poem's central ideas: poetic rewriting and maternal revaluing:

Never flinch,  
 But still, unscrupulously epic, catch  
 Upon the burning lava of a song  
 The full-veined, heaving, double-breasted Age:  
 That, when the next shall come, the men of that  
 May touch the impress with reverent hand, and say  
 "Behold, - behold the paps we all have sucked!  
 This bosom seems to beat still, or at least  
 It sets ours beating: this is living art,  
 Which thus presents and thus records true life."

(V:213-22)

In this call to relevant writing, Aurora raises the battle cry for "unscrupulously epic" writing, unscrupulous because it engenders and nurtures the "living art" of "true life". Marjorie Stone notes how Aurora's unscrupulous - not scrupulous - epic combines many genres to form a new hybrid form. This experiment plays with and parodies epic, and so subverts its rigid assumptions - specifically that epic, with its satiric and philosophic concerns, was exclusively a male domain. Thus, Aurora's genre subversions become gender subversions (Stone 101-28).<sup>28</sup>



Certainly the strong (offensive to many Victorian and later critics) imagery in the above lines effects this subversion, making a mother figure (not a Miltonic father) the parent and influence for following writers. Here, too, the confluence of Italy's mountains and the mother's body is suggested, as the milk of those "full-veined, heaving breasts" is "burning lava". The volcanic image suggests the power and potential danger of this mother's milk, for that lava/milk is song - writing, poetry. The poetry of the mother age feeds the poets of a later age, who reverence the mother that fed them. Her milk feeds them; her heart sets theirs beating. She gives life, not a father or lover/saviour. And the life she gives is the ability to rewrite, to present "living art", as opposed to dead, fixed forms, like the monolithic texts of patriarchy.

This extraordinary conflation of maternal strength and value, living poetry and progressive ages, demonstrates the project at the heart of the whole poem. Aurora wants to rewrite her culture's consciousness (the Symbolic Order), to enable the many to exist, rather than simply the one. In this plurality, the maternal role is not effaced but revered, thus acknowledging the pre-Oedipal and semiotic spaces of otherness. Interchange with such spaces is effected, instead of a dominating hierarchy of symbolic over semiotic, conscious over unconscious, male over female. All this occurs through the endless rewriting which is poetry. Finally, then, the "new order" or new Jerusalem is really a return to the old, as the oldest of ages, the mother-child dyad, is reinscribed in new terms.<sup>29</sup> In these few lines (V:213-22) Aurora attempts such a reinscription, interweaving her images and modes and meanings to rewrite her culture - a project that will eventually enable her to reclaim herself as woman, mother/ daughter and poet.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> David opens her final chapter on EBB asking precisely the same questions: "If women writers have worked within the context of male-dominated systems of discourse, then how is women's discourse to be defined?" David goes on to argue cogently against an "essentialist integrity of something labelled 'women's language'" (145), but her discussion comes to very different conclusions from mine. This difference relates to David's view that "language is in some sense 'made' by culture and society, and if culture and society have been controlled by patriarchy, then any language 'suppressed' by these patriarchal formations must ... also be controlled by the hegemonic structures of patriarchy" (144). My thesis argues precisely this problem of working within cultural hegemonies, but offers a view of language not as "made by culture", but as making culture, or more properly a dialectic of the two. Such a theory of language shifts from the monolithic, reified interpretations David tends to make, to possibilities of rewriting culture. Aurora Leigh, which is actually discussed very little in David's four chapters on EBB, demonstrates these possibilities.

<sup>2</sup> For a fuller account of Freudian/ Lacanian theory see below p.228ff.

<sup>3</sup> Elaine Millard comments: "Because women are both inside and outside a discourse that gives no space to the feminine, the primary task is to disrupt the settled order rather than to define what an other might in fact be(come)" (Mills, et al. 160). This comment sums up the debate at the centre of post-structuralist feminism (and this reading of Barrett Browning's poetry): must we only deconstruct, or can we (re)construct as well?

<sup>4</sup> I am indebted to Toril Moi's account of Kristevan theory here (see Moi 161-67). Kristevan analysis does remain problematic, however (as Moi herself points out, 164-73), not the least because of Kristeva's fusion of Derridean semiotics and Lacanian psychoanalysis. Freud and Lacan place women 'outside' language, and yet Derrida asserts that there is no outside textuality. Kristeva thus relocates women as marginal, on the borders between the symbolic and the semiotic. The metaphor of location remains cryptic because, as Moi says, "We have to accept our position as already inserted into an order that precedes us and from which there is no escape. There is no other space from which we can speak: if we are to speak at all, it will have to be within the framework of symbolic language" (Moi 170). Kristeva's commitment (especially in her later writings) to a Lacanian form of psychoanalysis, seems to take women from Derridean textuality back into psychoanalytical exclusion.

<sup>5</sup> Language's semiotic qualities, in Kristevan terms: disruptive, polysemic, contradictory.

<sup>6</sup> Steinmetz considers the Victorian mythologizing of maternity as consonant

with Victorian anxiety about origins. Such an obsession with inscriptions of maternity reveals the sense of "insatiability, strain and loss" ("Images" 353).

<sup>7</sup> Lacan capitalises Symbolic Order; Kristeva does not capitalise symbolic (presumably in keeping with her emphasis on non-essentiality).

<sup>8</sup> "The father, in the context of the Oedipal complex, is not part of a dyadic relationship of mother and child, but a third term. The self and the other of the mother-and-child has its duality broken by the intervention of this third term, one who here represents all that is essential to society - its laws" (Mitchell 392).

<sup>9</sup> Cixous writes: "Men have committed the greatest crime against women. Insidiously, violently, they have led them to hate women, to be their own enemies, to mobilize their immense strength against themselves, to be the executants of their virile needs. They have made for women an antinarcissism!" (Marks and de Courtivron 248).

<sup>10</sup> Several critics have noticed a potential psychoanalytical reading in the poem, but few have developed it. Mermin makes the summary statement: "Aurora is looking for a mother in relation to whom she might find her place and her identity: in the tradition of women's bildungsromanen, the poem traces the heroine's attempt to return to the pre-Oedipal maternal world figured by nature" ("Genre" 10). Mermin does not develop this reference to the pre-Oedipal in this article or in her subsequent book (Origins). Cooper gives an unconvincing and sketchy argument that attempts to draw Romney as both 'father' muse and 'infant son' muse - the latter "maintaining the privileged preoedipal affectional bond of mother and infant" (Aurora 186-87). Her last paragraph on Aurora Leigh raises the possibility that feminist theory in the area of maternal relations might be "brought to bear" on EBB's poetry, particularly in the construction of poet and muse (188), but the issue is left there. A more useful work on a psychoanalytical reading of the poem is from an early article by Steinmetz ("Images"), in which Aurora's "mother-want" is explored. The article relates her search for the lost mother, and concludes that for Aurora, there is no simple fulfillment: "the truth of love lies beyond what can be told 'by a word or kiss', in non-verbal, undifferentiated union with a love object fused in fantasy with her first object, her mother" (367). Leighton offers a fascinating psychoanalytical account, but it is located in a search for the father-muse, not the pre-Oedipal mother (Elizabeth). (See also Rosenblum and Marxist-Feminist Literature Collective.)

<sup>11</sup> "Aurora's mother, associated with an other prearticulate world (a Wordsworthian 'outer Infinite' where the only word she speaks is 'Hush') and a foreign and sensuous land, is ... the embodiment of Aurora's 'anxiety of womanliness'" - an injunction to femininity (Reynolds, Aurora 38). Mermin also notes the word "'Hush'" as an "ominous legacy to a poet-daughter" (Origins 190).

<sup>12</sup> "Aurora loses her mother at the Oedipal moment - age four" (Marxist Feminist Literature Collective 203).

<sup>13</sup> Irigaray writes: "The wife, the mother, in different ways of course, will aid and abet this tyranny. Women's instincts are inhibited, turned back into their opposites.... Such as the forms of "sublimation" that man, that society, demands

of woman.... Patient labor at instinctual self-destruction. Ceaseless "activity" of mortification. In this way, both by her and for her, the invisible work of death goes on" (Speculum 127).

<sup>14</sup> "Bertha in the Lane" summarises a similar process of maternal excision, self-erasure and sacrifice to the daughter.

<sup>15</sup> Steinmetz describes the "split mother image" as between a sexually devouring mother and a chaste virgin mother, represented respectively in the poem by Lady Waldemar and Marian ("Images" 360). Mermin concurs in this reading, commenting that the two characters "retain traces of mythic doubleness" (Origins 192). See also Alethea Hayter (Mrs. Browning 105, 171), Stephenson (Poetry 98), and Leighton's discussion of the "types" of vice and virtue ("Because" 342-344).

<sup>16</sup> See below, "The Freudian Mother", p.240.

<sup>17</sup> Rod Edmond, in a fascinating introduction to his book on the nineteenth-century literary construction of the family, discusses a similar theory of hegemony. "Hegemony is neither static nor uniform, but active, formative, and transformational. It must be alert and responsive to anything which questions its dominance; it must be continually renewed, recreated, and defended, thereby sustaining and extending its power. No hegemony, however, can be total or exclusive. It is never organic; it is always full of contradictions and unresolved conflicts" (9). Although there is a crucial difference between the theory of a hegemony and the psychoanalytical theory of a symbolic - notably the apparent psychic totality of the latter - the process described by Edmond offers a powerful challenge to the construction of a symbolic, a challenge that Aurora Leigh also issues.

<sup>18</sup> The word "common" here recalls the "common law" that decides Marian's fate.

<sup>19</sup> Reynolds, Aurora 38. For other reference to this education, see Cooper (Woman 158) and Mermin (Origins 210).

<sup>20</sup> The image echoes the mother's portrait in l:160, where "Our Lady of the Passion" is "stabbed ... / Where the Babe sucked".

<sup>21</sup> Stephenson argues (from Elaine Showalter) that Romney's blinding gives him a taste of womanhood - that is, "dependency, frustration, and powerlessness". This experience is paradoxically his new strength, as he understands and assumes female qualities which "allow him to become whole". Stephenson concludes sensibly, "Conjecture about the possibility of hostility or castration wishes being present in Barrett Browning's decision to blind her hero seems relatively futile"; its real importance is in the significance the blinding has for Aurora (Poetry 112-13). Other critical reactions to Romney's blinding include Mermin, who sees Romney's excessive "subjugation" as representing the "thoroughgoing destruction of all the forms of male power" in the poem (Origins 214); Cooper, who argues that the blinded Romney is now no longer the Father muse for the woman poet, but a dependent child-muse to the mother-poet (Woman 186-87); Gelpi, who sees Romney as a projection of Aurora's self-criticism, a judge-like figure whose blinding then changes him to an affirming muse figure for Aurora (48). Sutphin sees him as

"morally stronger" than before (52); Edmond sees the blinding as "the equivalent of the feminization of Aurora's father" (164) and Steinmetz concludes her account of the patriarchal images of a glaring sun in the poem with the figure of Romney, a now-darkened sun, who "neither asserts his masculine prerogatives of sexual and economic dominance". Steinmetz also footnotes the Oedipal connection ("Beyond" 38).

<sup>22</sup> Notably Gilbert and Gubar, who decide that Aurora's "Art is much, but Love is more" comment resigns her to a compromise between traditional womanly roles and a revolutionary poetic role (Madwoman 575-80). Their very brief reading of Aurora Leigh does not really begin to grapple with the poem, a fact that Sandra Gilbert later remedied ("Patria").

<sup>23</sup> Leighton's recent article, "'Because men made the laws'", discusses Marian as Aurora's double, her self that has been split off by "moral law" into her moral opposite. Finding Marian is therefore an act of transgression but also of self-liberation for Aurora: "The political other is the poetic self" (358).

<sup>24</sup> David asserts precisely the opposite: that "the one thing that Barrett Browning could not, or would not, give Marian [was] a cursing, authentic voice empowered by rage" (Intellectual 140). Her argument offers no examination of Marian's words or behaviour in the latter half of the poem.

<sup>25</sup> There is some difference of opinion as to the success or otherwise of Aurora's attempt to fill her 'mother-want' in her relationship with Marian. Leighton climaxes her discussion of Aurora Leigh with the triumphant coalition of Aurora and Marian, and has almost nothing to say about the final two books of the poem. Reynolds also reads the two women's relationship unproblematically, regarding the "feminized environment" in the second half of the poem as allowing "a 'correct' balance between womanly and manly attributes" (Aurora 44-45). Both Mermin and Stephenson offer more realistic readings, noting that the women's relationship is hardly idyllic. Mermin writes that Aurora "remains outside the charmed circle of mother and child into which she had hoped 'to creep'" (Origins 193), and Stephenson challenges the idyllic reading offered by Nina Auerbach, concluding that "While we might like to think Barrett Browning capable of envisioning a relationship between two women as completely satisfying, the text cannot support such a supposition" (Poetry 102). Stephenson's comment, whilst correct in its reading of the text, is fascinating for its assumptions about EBB's capability. It ignores the poem's troubled pursuit of female alliance, a pursuit that explores as it exemplifies the constraints against such an alliance.

<sup>26</sup> Leighton offers another, though related, reading of these lines, in Elizabeth 133-34.

<sup>27</sup> Gelpi sees this moment of identification as crucial in Aurora's recognition of her own femaleness (Gelpi 47).

<sup>28</sup> Reynolds also explores this area of genre subversion and literary allusiveness, and comments: "this magpie form, which steals fragments of a tradition or language from which women have been alienated, to rewrite or invert them, can be defined in itself (though practiced in modernist and post-modernist works by both women and men) as culturally feminine" (Aurora 50).

<sup>29</sup> Linda R. Williams challenges the pre-Oedipal configurations of a female tradition, arguing that feminist reverence of the mother-daughter relationship locks women into potentially hierarchical familial relationships. She disputes the premise that "women have access to purity of sublime or semiotic communication", and that "authentic female communication takes place through matriarchal or matrilineal networks", rather pointing out how transmission of information (even from mother to daughter) inevitably places the transmitter into a position of power over the receiver (52). Williams' argument is important in that it challenges absolutist and essentialist claims about female relationships, but it is also reductive. Her language - "women have access", "purity", "authentic" - indicates a readiness to read the psychoanalytical narrative literally. I have already suggested that a metaphoric approach to psychoanalytical feminism offers more productive insights, and I would argue that, as the post-Freudian narrative continues to inscribe western women's psychic life, inevitably into self-destructive roles, we cannot simply disregard it. By focussing on its gaps and contradictions (as, for example, concerning the pre-Oedipal mother-daughter relationship), women (and men) can rewrite the narrative and themselves, until a different, better narrative is found. Finally, this latter phrase is commensurate with Williams' concluding question: "How ... is one to 'think differently' powerful relationships of intellectual giving and creativity which don't involve one having power over another?" (61). Aurora Leigh demonstrates that constant rewriting prevents the reification of such relationships.

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