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Exploration of female relationships in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Aurora Leigh

Amy Suzanne Ross
Iowa State University

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Exploration of female relationships in
Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*

by

Amy Suzanne Ross

A Thesis Submitted to the
Graduate Faculty in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

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Signatures have been redacted for privacy

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 2: MOTHER</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 3: AUNT LEIGH</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 4: LADY WALDEMAR</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 5: MARIAN ERLE</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NOTES</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WORKS CITED</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude to my major advisor Dr. Kathleen Hickok for introducing me to *Aurora Leigh* and for encouraging my work. In addition, I would like to thank Dr. Brenda Daly and Dr. Marie Lathers for willingly serving on my committee and reading my work. I extend my appreciation to all of you for your help and support.
Today many may read Elizabeth Barrett Browning's 1856 verse novel *Aurora Leigh* and value it for its social critique of Victorian society or its outspoken feminist rhetoric. Indeed, Gardner Taplin finds "no other work in nineteenth-century English fiction gives more hope to the aspirations of women" (22), Nina Auerbach refers to it as a "feminist hymn" (151), and Cora Kaplan in her introductory comments to *Aurora Leigh* agrees with Ellen Moers in terming it "the feminist poem' radical in its celebration of the centrality of the female experience" (11). Additionally, George Eliot claimed that Barrett Browning was the first woman to produce a written work that exhibited all the "peculiar powers" of her female sex (qtd. in Cooper 150). For Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *Aurora Leigh* expresses Barrett Browning's "protofeminist philosophy" (*Norton Anthology* 259). Similar praise can be found in much of the literary criticism concerned with *Aurora Leigh*, and many of these same critics believe that *Aurora Leigh* is an accurate recording of Barrett Browning's progressive ideas about women, art, and love.

While it is fair to call attention to the feminist ideas conveyed in the poem, it is also important to celebrate it as one that, through female interrelationships, presents a revised image of female subject formation. Maturation in Victorian society meant, for women, a complete loss of freedom. Women were seen as inferior to men, and therefore were expected to subsume their personal interests and
satisfy themselves with a married life of dependence. Those who ignored these restrictions were greeted with coldness. Aurora Leigh initially experiences this castigation in her decision to pursue a writing career over life as Romney Leigh's wife. Contrary to patriarchal dictates, she boldly asserts her independence and ultimately finds a way to maintain a voice within marriage. I would argue that through the character of Aurora, Barrett Browning constructs a more satisfying model of feminine identity formation—one that extends the possibilities for women. With this study, I hope to explore how the relationships Aurora has with the other women in the text (her mother, Aunt Leigh, Lady Waldemar, and Marian Erle) shape her female subjectivity. I feel these interrelationships are an important part of Aurora's maturation process: through them Aurora is allowed to explore womanhood and to situate herself and her feminine identity.

Feminist Theory of Identity Formation

Given the fact that this thesis will be focusing on Aurora's identity process, contemporary feminist theories of identity formation become especially pertinent. Nancy Chodorow and other object-relations theorists revise Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic account of development to present a theory that, they believe, explains more accurately how both male and female individuals construct a sense of self within the context of social relationships. Chodorow's use of object-relations theory in The Reproduction of Mothering and Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory describes
Freud's theory of development as misogynistic and inadequate in its attempt to explain feminine identity formation. She does not subscribe to his biologically based belief that the presence or absence of the phallus determines gender identity; nor does she accept as fact his "unsupported assertions" (*Reproduction* 142) that sexual and instinctual drives are the primary factors motivating infants to acquire a gendered identity.

Rather she makes a concentrated effort to explain how female subject formation takes place "in relation to" (*Reproduction* 78) the primary caregiver--usually the mother. Instead of focusing on the Oedipal conflict, Chodorow privileges the pre-Oedipal time period, finding that the mother is a critical influence in the child's identity process. In her words, the "character of the infant's early relation to its mother profoundly affects its sense of self, its later object-relationships and its feelings about its mother and about women in general" (*Reproduction* 77). Because daughters are the same sex as their mothers, she theorizes, the mother-daughter bond is one of greater intensity and exclusivity than the mother-son bond; this asymmetry accounts for differences in identity formation. Chodorow argues that mothers come to see daughters as extensions of themselves, thereby creating a more intimate relationship with daughters than with their sons, and that the intensity of the mother-daughter bond ensures that "separation and individuation remain particularly female developmental issues" (*Reproduction* 110).
According to her, women will have to constantly struggle to achieve autonomy, independence, and heterosexuality.

In feminist psychoanalytic theories of development the erotic mother-daughter bond becomes fraught with ambivalence; simultaneously, the daughter will desire relatedness to and separation from the mother. Chodorow posits that the double impulse to experience both relatedness and separateness, dependence and independence, is an ongoing issue for women, and that in fact women never do completely separate from their mothers as men do. The end result: women, because they have difficulty forsaking their mothers, will experience a "bisexual oscillation" (129) between men and women. Therefore, Chodorow concludes that a heterosexual orientation is secondarily established. Sons, because they are a different sex from their mothers, will not have the intimate bond and will not continually struggle to separate; hence they will naturally develop a heterosexual orientation. Chodorow concludes that "the basic feminine sense of self is connected to the world; the basic masculine sense of self is separate" (Reproduction 169). For her, women by virtue of being mothered will grow up wishing to mother; thus the reproduction of motherhood ensures a never ending circle of patriarchy.

Some theorists have pointed out flaws or shortcomings in Chodorow's theory of feminine identity construction.3 While there may be unanswered questions or holes in her theory, importantly, her theory does emphasize the centrality of relationships in female
identity formation; she shows how subject formation occurs through changing relationships. Furthermore, Chodorow insightfully presents the conflicts women will experience in acquiring a feminine identity, and specifically, she explains why women are more concerned than men with issues of boundary negotiation, separation, and connection. For this particular study, her theory becomes useful in accounting for the various complex relationships Aurora has with other women. In short, Chodorow's hypotheses elucidate Aurora's relationships.

In fact, Aurora's pattern of growth closely resembles the theory of feminine identity construction forwarded by Nancy Chodorow and other feminist psychoanalytic theorists. Indeed, Aurora experiences a close attachment to her mother, struggles with issues of separateness and relatedness, and wrestles with her sexuality. Yet, contrary to Chodorow, who unfortunately finds that the institution of motherhood destines women to follow in their mothers' footsteps, Barrett Browning creates a way for Aurora to alter the mothers' story; she finds a way to break the circle of patriarchy. Barrett Browning may be said to have modified Chodorow's theory of identity formation, and her alternate model of feminine identity allows Aurora to express capacities for both separateness and relatedness. Her life combines intimacy and independence.

Aurora's Identity Formation

There can be no doubt that Barrett Browning meant for *Aurora Leigh* to be read as a text emphasizing Aurora's female identity
formation. In fact, the poem's opening lines prepare the reader to expect a tale that traces the narrator's growth. At the beginning of book one, Aurora forthrightly presents her motives for writing her story. She says:

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. (1.1-8)

First, this complex passage informs the reader that our narrator intends to alter her writing purposes; rather than continuing to write on a more professional level for the "uses" or benefit of her readers, Aurora now intends to write to critique her own "self." Secondly, Aurora acknowledges that through this autobiographical writing she plans to unite past and present or what "was" and what "is." In effect, Aurora will use her writing to analyze her life and the mixture of influences that helped shape her identity. These introductory lines call attention to the fact that Aurora's story will depict her identity construction.

To further set the scene for this developmental journey, Barrett Browning begins book two with Aurora at age twenty-seven retrospectively brooding over her younger years. She recalls:
I stood upon the brink of twenty years,
And I looked before and after, as I stood
Woman and artist, - either incomplete,
Both credulous of completion. (2.2-5)

With honesty, our narrator describes herself as an "incomplete" woman and artist. There are many other places where Aurora calls attention to her ignorance and immaturity. In book one she describes herself as "still what men call young" (9), later she relates that she has "not stood long on the strand of life" (2.325), and shortly thereafter she defines herself as "young" and "weak" (2.250, 251). Clearly, Aurora looks back on her adolescence with dissatisfaction—finding these to be years marked with innocence and naivety. Conversely, these statements also indicate that Aurora does not now perceive herself as this same immature being. In book nine, Aurora proudly announces in a speech that she is "changed since then, changed wholly" (9.671-68). We get the sense that over the years, our narrator believes she has undergone a process of change and maturation whereby she has now accomplished her earlier goal of being a complete woman and artist. In fact, at the end, she reasons, "No perfect artist is developed here / From any imperfect woman" (9.648-49).

In *Aurora Leigh*, Barrett Browning chronicles the growth of a young woman into adult maturity. Through Aurora's retrospective lens, we see her change from a Florentine child into a mature English woman confident in her writing ability and ready to accept her
cousin Romney Leigh's hand in marriage at the age of thirty. Along the way she discusses her orphaned childhood, education, surrounding environment, and opinions about love and art. Moreover, Aurora's desire to write becomes a matter of great interest. At age twenty, she is so enamored with the act of writing that she proudly fashions herself a mock poet laureate crown and boldly claims that poets are life's real "truth-tellers" (1.859). She expresses her great love of poetry by crying out:

   O life, O poetry,
   - Which means life in life! cognisant of life
   Beyond this blood-beat, passionate for truth
   Beyond these senses! - poetry, my life. (1.915-18)

Writing, for Aurora, is life, and she hopes to find success someday as an author.

Eventually, Aurora's love for writing dwindles, and she begins to view her texts as "weak" (7.880) and "uneven" (7.81) pieces of writing, "counterfeiting epics" (1.990), and "False poems" (1.1023) that are "Weak for art only" (1.998). She finds that the "truth" she seeks in her poetry "hounds" her "through the wastes of life / As Jove did Io" (7.828-30). This dissatisfaction with her writing could represent the uncertainty Aurora feels about the decision she made earlier to forego love and relationship and Romney's wedding proposal in favor of writing and independence.

The art-love, independence-dependence, struggle emerges as a real dilemma for Aurora; certainly Victorian society would have
dictated that she could have either one or the other, with a distinct preference given to love and marriage. In a self-reflective moment, Aurora recognizes that she has wrongly privileged art over love and acknowledges that "Love strikes higher with his lambent flame / Than art can pile the faggots" (7.893-94). She confesses her love for Romney, stating, "art is much, but love is more" (9.656). At the end of the verse novel, Aurora strikes a balance between the two and does not have to sacrifice her artistic vocation for love.

It may be shown that the whole point of the unfolding narrative is to reveal Aurora's identity formation and the accompanying conflicts. It may also be demonstrated that the female characters play a critical role in Aurora's identity formation. Aurora's relationships with the female characters (her mother, Aunt Leigh, Lady Waldemar, Marian Erle) are all characterized by intense and complicated feelings ranging from fascination, to anger, to pity, to repulsion. Even Assunta, the female family servant, was an important and comforting figure in Aurora's early life. Vividly Aurora remembers being forced to leave "old Assunta's neck" (1.226) to go with her aunt, a "stranger with authority" (1.224), upon her father's death. Etched in her memory are Assunta's shrieks and moans upon their sad good-bye (1.226-31).

Some argue that the female characters are not purposeful to the story as they are basically lifeless individuals exhibiting no character development. In her biography of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Alethea Hayter calls the characterizations of Marian Erle
and Lady Waldemar "Keepsake lithographs of the Poor but Virtuous Maiden and the Wicked Lady of Quality" (105). Stephenson and other critics believe that these women represent "unbelievable stereotypes" (98) of life for Victorian women; however, I would like to correct this oversight and show how these women, though they may be stereotyped, become an important shaping force in Aurora's feminine identity and her vision of womanhood.

Granted, other literary critics, too, have been concerned with studying Aurora's growth process, but, by and large, they have not focused their studies towards analyzing the dynamics of these female relationships; instead a primary focus for many studies has been the effect maternal absence has on Aurora's development. Virginia Steinmetz believes "mother want" plagues all the characters of *Aurora Leigh* and actually serves to motivate their concomitant actions. She hypothesizes that Aurora's "mother want" compels her to search for mother substitutes (353). Similarly, Dolores Rosenblum concludes that Aurora's mother want causes her to find a mother substitute in the face of Marian (325). Sandra Gilbert believes that after her mother's early death, Aurora substitutes nature for the maternal presence and ultimately rediscovers her mother in herself.

Other critics (e.g. Cooper, Gelpi, Gilbert, Leighton, Mermin, Rosenblum, Stone, Sutphin, Taylor, and Zonana) conjecture that, partially due to motherlessness, Aurora develops a hostile attitude towards her own femininity and must work to accept her true sexual being. According to some, Marian becomes a key figure in the story
as she becomes a mirror or catalyst in Aurora's self-discovery process allowing her the chance to recognize her femininity. Generally, these critics assert that the mother's absence is a formative influence in Aurora's life. I, too, believe that the maternal loss profoundly impacts Aurora's life. I think the loss actually prods her to develop other female relationships capable of fulfilling her unmet relational needs and capable of helping her in the process of female subject formation. Thus the stage is set for analyzing how the female bonds in *Aurora Leigh* help Aurora in her struggle to find a coherent self.
CHAPTER 2: MOTHER

The first woman Aurora mentions in the story is her mother, whom she fondly remembers standing beside the nursery door cautioning her to "hush, hush - here's too much noise" (1.17). A few short lines later, Aurora sadly relates that her Florentine mother's "rare blue eyes were shut from seeing me / When scarcely I was four years old" (1.291-31) as she was too "weak and frail" (1.33) to "bear the joy of giving life" (1.34). Subsequently, Aurora's life becomes one of "mother-want" (1.40); she confesses that frequently she envisioned herself as a "nest-deserted bird" (1.43) and a "bleating lamb / Left out at night in shutting up the fold" (1.41-42). Loneliness and loss permeate Aurora's childhood memories.

The many textual allusions to her mother's life and death indicate her importance and the influence she wielded over Aurora, even in death. Warmly, Aurora remembers her mother as one with "sweet eyes" (1.17) who lived a "swan-like supernatural white life" (1.139). When Romney makes reference to her mother in his wedding proposal, Aurora says,

You do well to name
My mother's face. Though far too early, alas,
God's hand did interpose 'twixt it and me,
I know so much of love as used to shine
In that face and another. Just so much;
No more indeed at all. I have not seen
So much love since. (2.392-98)

Indeed, Aurora's words communicate a great love and respect for her mother. In fact, she believes that had her mother lived longer, her kiss might have steadied Aurora's "uneasy breath" (1.37) and "reconciled and fraternised" her soul (1.38).

Not only does Aurora express strong feelings about her mother, she also romanticizes the role of mother. Mothers in general, she says, are those who have the ability "to rear up children, (to be just)" (1.48), have the "tender knack / Of tying sashes, fitting baby-shoes" (1.49-50), and have the ability to string together "pretty words that make no sense" (1.51). Because mothers possess such nurturing skills, Aurora concludes they "have God's licence to be missed" (1.60-64).

When defending her ability to write, Aurora again makes reference to the maternal image. In this instance, Aurora honestly admits that she envies painter Mark Gage, not for his "caressing colours and trancing tone" (5.512), but because he has a "mother's knee" (5.526) upon which he can lay his work and expect to hear her praise and adoration. Aurora concedes "and so, Mark Gage, / I envy you your mother" (5.533-34). Aurora misses the intimacy of the mother-child bond, and wishes she had a living mother interested in her life and vocation.
This loneliness and dejection is echoed in the very fact that Aurora spends hours scrutinizing the portrait of her mother that was painted shortly after her death. First, she tells us "I, as a little child, would crouch / For hours upon the floor with knees drawn up, / And gaze . . . at the portrait" (1.135-137). A few lines later she reiterates this point: "For hours I sate and stared" (1.143) at the portrait. This preoccupation with her dead mother's portrait, and with mothers in general, depicts Aurora's deep longing for a mothering relationship.

Surprisingly, however, after all of the rosy remarks Aurora makes about mothers, particularly her own, she then proceeds to portray a darker, more threatening side to her mother when remembering what she looked like in the portrait. Aurora recollects that she stared "half in terror, half / In adoration" (1.137-38) at the portrait of her mother in which she saw:

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 . . . . (1.154-64)
Quite unexpectedly, the positive reflections of her mother as "angel," "Muse," and "loving Psyche" bump up against negative associations in which her mother is also depicted as "ghost," "witch," "fiend," Medusa," and "Lamia." These negative images are inconsistent with Aurora's earlier feelings towards her mother and reveal a puzzling ambivalence.

One of Barrett Browning's 1857 critics wrote in the Westminster Review that this portrait was a "perfect shoal of mangled and pompous similes" (qtd. in Cooper 156). More recently, critics have taken it to be an important symbol in the text. Barbara Gelpi argues that the shifting images of Aurora's mother in the portrait represent Victorian identities of womanhood towards which Aurora felt a deep-seated ambivalence (40-41). In other words, Aurora's depiction of her mother is emblematic of her divided attitude towards being a woman. Rosenblum thinks the varying representations of Aurora's mother signify the "multiplicity of female masks" (328) Aurora must encounter and reject in her quest to find a mother face that doesn't repudiate female subjectivity. Similarly, Gilbert and Gubar in The Madwoman in the Attic demonstrate that Aurora's confusion about the portrait reveals her anxiety about having to don "male-defined masks" (19) in her attempt to be a writer. Cooper, like Gilbert and Gubar, assumes that the images in the portrait are imprisoning literary representations of what life held for Victorian women. The belief underlying all of these explanations
is that this enigmatic passage depicts Aurora's desire to escape her society's patriarchal myths of women.

These critics are right in asserting that the odd assortment of images presents the narrow and limiting roles available for women in the nineteenth century, but it is also important to hear Aurora's own rationale as to why her mother in this portrait is simultaneously threatening and comforting, demonic and loving. Aurora admits that over the years her mother became to her a mingling of "incoherencies" (1.171). In her words:

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 that face . . . . (1.147-51)

Aurora's own words testify that over time her life experiences and feelings somehow influenced or transformed her vision of her mother. With this confession in mind, it seems possible to conclude that Aurora's mixed-up representation of her mother in the portrait exemplifies her conflicted developmental journey complete with anxieties and ambivalences. The portrait typifies the tensions surrounding female development, such as the tensions women encounter in their wish to feel alternately close to and distant from their mother and other females.
Aurora's envisioning of her mother in the portrait exposes her present struggle to define herself both in relation to and separate from her mother. At times, Aurora idealizes her mother as a gentle "loving Psyche" in an attempt to feel connected or attached to her, and at other times, she depicts a contrasting "Lamia" side to her mother in an attempt to separate herself from her and assert autonomy. The portrait becomes evidence of the anxiety Aurora experiences in constructing her feminine identity.

Object-relation theorists Chodorow, Hans Loewald, and Margaret Mahler accentuate the fact that separation and attachment are life-long issues, especially for women. Mahler contends:

The entire life cycle constitutes a more or less successful process of distancing from and introjection of the lost . . . mother. (qtd. in Chodorow, *Feminism* 11)

Loewald concurs, finding that "concerns with boundaries, separation (and) connection . . . continue throughout life" (qtd. in Chodorow, *Feminism* 11). Chodorow concludes that this preoccupation with separation and attachment will lead adults to "unconsciously look to recreate . . . aspects of their early relationships, especially to the extent that these relationships were unresolved, ambivalent, and repressed" (*Reproduction* 51). Women and men, she believes, fulfill relational needs in their relationships with other individuals.

These object-relationist hypotheses become immediately applicable to Aurora's situation. Upon losing her mother, it is plausible, and likely, that Aurora looks towards other women (Aunt Leigh, Lady Waldemar, and Marian Erle) to help her come to terms
with her unresolved need for attachment and separation. Thus, even though the maternal figure, Mrs. Leigh, is absent from most of the story, she still greatly impacts Aurora's future female relationships and her identity construction. In fact, Aurora assigns aspects of her mother onto Aunt Leigh, Lady Waldemar, and Marian Erle; these women become life-like characterizations of the images in the mother's portrait. Thus her aunt becomes the "witch"-like "Medusa" who wants to control Aurora's life, Lady Waldemar becomes the demon-like "Lamia" who brazenly flaunts her sexuality, and Marian becomes the "angelic . . . Lady of Passion" who wants to live a chaste and virtuous life. These female relationships become a way for Aurora to recreate aspects of her mother and confront dependency conflicts. From a feminist viewpoint, this would appear to be a positive move as it still enables her to identify with her mother or aspects of her mother in other women and to eventually, through relationships, define herself.
CHAPTER 3: AUNT LEIGH

Aunt Leigh becomes the next prominent mothering figure in Aurora's life after her father dies when she is thirteen years old. In Aurora's mind, Aunt Leigh becomes the real-life embodiment of the witch figure in her mother's portrait who, she thinks, wants "to prick" her into a rigid "pattern" (1.381) of passivity and subordination. Consequently, Aurora represents her aunt as a sour, malevolent person who upholds outdated ideas and conventional attitudes. Aurora's depiction of her aunt throughout Aurora Leigh continually emphasizes Aunt Leigh's repressed nature.

Under her aunt's care and supervision, Aurora disparagingly relates that she felt compelled to change her habits and lifestyle in order to meet her approval. All of a sudden, upon moving in with her aunt, it became necessary for Aurora to tame her once "copious curls" (1.385) into more respectable braids as her aunt preferred "smooth-ordered hair" (1.386). Contrariwise, Aurora reports that her Aunt's hair was "pricked with grey / By frigid use of life" (1.275-76). Also she writes that she was forced to exchange her "sweet Tuscan words" (1.387) for English as her aunt felt it important that she speak her father's tongue.

As for education, Aurora recalls that her aunt's primary goal was to make sure she knew the sorts of things all women needed to know; therefore, she learned the "collects and the catechism" (1.392), classic French / (Kept pure of Balzac and neologism)" (1.399-400), "a
little algebra, [and] a little / Of the mathematics" (1.403-04), and "the royal genealogies / of Oviedo" (1.407-08). Music, cross-stitch, and drawing were the leisure activities deemed appropriate by her aunt. Moreover, Aurora indignantly reports that her aunt had her read books on womanhood that explained for women the art of understanding a husband's talk and the art of replying to his requests subordinately with "pretty 'may it please you so' or 'so it is'" (1.433). Quite evident is Aurora's displeasure with the prescriptive woman's curriculum forced upon her by her aunt, and she makes it clear that she prefers her father's books and her Italian studies.

Constantly, Aurora presents the many differences between herself and her aunt. She further widens the gap between herself and her aunt when she relates that she, a "wild bird" (1.310), would not be satisfied with a life of leaping solely from "perch to perch" (1.306) as would her aunt, a "cage[d]-bird" (1.305). She calls her aunt's life "a virtuous life, / A quiet life" (1.288-89), which she further defines as not really life at all--but more of a frigid existence. She views her aunt as a repressed individual possessing "cold lips" (1.322) that speak "unrequited loves" (1.280) and "half-truths" (1.281). Aurora certainly does not have anything favorable to say about her aunt.

It is important to remember that we get our look at these female characters only through the one-sided lens of Aurora. She completely monopolizes the storytelling and provides us with a subjective and biased account of the women in the story. Given the
first-person narration, Alison Case, C. Castan, and Margaret Reynolds all admonish the reader to expect to find "error, misapprehension, modification, and revision" (Reynolds 28). All astutely point out that Aurora is an unreliable narrator who misrepresents herself, others, and her true feelings in the course of the story. With this in mind, it seems important to question, or maybe even doubt, the picture Aurora paints of others.

Specifically in the case of her aunt, a strong possibility exists that Aurora is exaggerating her malevolence. Upon Aurora's first meeting with her Aunt, she derogatorily describes her as her "mother's hater" (1.360) who possesses "two grey-steel naked-bladed eyes" (1.327) which she thinks, in retrospect, "stabbed" (1.328) her face in an attempt to see how closely she resembled her mother—a woman she detested. In Aurora's rendering of the first look she received from her aunt, she assumes the very worst of her and represents her as a harsh and uncaring person. Aurora reasons that her aunt asks her if she is done with her chores, reading and crocheting with the underlying intent of determining whether or not she has "ground" her "down enough" (1.1040). Elsewhere she infers that her aunt's forehead is "braided" (1.273) and tight" for "taming accidental thoughts" (1.274) and that her eyes probably "never, never have forgot themselves / In smiling" (1.283-84). At one point Aurora suspiciously assumes that if her aunt says "'thank you,' or an 'if it please you, dear,' / She meant a commination, or at best, / An exorcism against the devildom" (2.869-71). All of these instances
show Aurora's penchant for always seeing the darker side of her aunt and her actions.

After turning down Romney's wedding proposal, Aurora asserts that she felt her aunt's looks (2.863) and the "burden of those eyes" (2.950) burning into her. In a paranoid delusion, she begins to think that everyone is watching her and acting differently around her; she thinks that visiting neighbors "sate uneasily" (2.882) and spoke with "emphasised reserve" (2.883). She even goes so far as to indicate that the dog watched her every move (2.886). Certainly, the average Victorian woman wasn't expected to turn down a marriage possibility, and Aurora may have some basis to assume that others would look upon her suspiciously for such an action. However, Aurora's far-fetched belief that the dog was watching her is simply her imagination working overtime and again reveals her habit for exaggerating situations and misrepresenting the truth.

Aurora writes that she was by and large a "good" (1.372), "meek" (1.373), and "manageable" (1.373) child. She expresses some thankfulness towards her aunt for taking her in, but undermines this appreciation by automatically assuming that her aunt provided for her strictly in concurrence with her familial duty; Aurora notes that her aunt was certain to "measure"(1.363) out exactly what her obligation entailed. Furthermore, she believes her Aunt took her in solely as a good deed to please God and, she hopes, to reserve herself a heavenly reward upon her death. Aurora points out that Aunt Leigh
. . . gave me still

The first place, - as if fearful that God's saints
Would look down suddenly and say, 'Herein
You missed a point.' (1.365-368)

Aurora never thinks that her aunt may have acted out of charity and
good will--or even love--towards her brother's daughter, her own
niece.

While Aurora may have exaggerated the cold side of her aunt,
there is probably some merit in her negative depiction. At one point
Aurora offers us a supposedly accurate paraphrase of her aunt in
which Aunt Leigh implies that she will love Aurora only
conditionally. Aurora remembers her aunt's words: "'She loved my
father and would love me too / As long as I deserve it'" (1.335-36).
To which Aurora sarcastically replies "Very kind" (1.336). Aunt
Leigh also appears to harbor grudges as, years after the fact, she still
blames Aurora's mother for making her once good brother a "man . . .
/ Unchary of the duties to his house" (2.621-22). Granted, these
instances do not represent Aunt Leigh's most admirable side, nor
does she come across as being a warm and nurturing individual, but
by the end of book two the excessively negative charges made by
Aurora against her aunt seem to lack concrete proof, and to question
the validity of Aurora's representation of her is a necessity.

After all, we do indirectly learn that Aunt Leigh does try, to
some extent, to act in Aurora's best interest. She does not want
Aurora to marry Romney solely for economic necessity; redeemingly,
she does think the marriage will work as love exists. Aunt Leigh says to Aurora:

You love this man. I've watched you when he came,
And when he went, and when we've talked of him:
I am not old for nothing; I can tell

The weather-signs of love: you love this man. (2.686-91)

We also see Aunt Leigh legitimate Aurora's reasons for declining the marriage proposal. She, too, finds fault with Romney's philanthropic lifestyle in noting that

... the sun of youth

Has shone too straight upon his brain, I know,
And fevered him with dreams of doing good
To good-for-nothing people. (2.643-647)

Also, Aunt Leigh seems at least somewhat concerned that upon her death Aurora will be "unhoused" and "unfed" (2.597), and therefore bequeaths her some money (300 pounds)--which is enough money to allow Aurora to move to London to pursue her writing. Even greater seem Aunt Leigh's charitable actions given the fact that she performed them with the knowledge that Aurora didn't love her (2.594).

Aurora's relationship with her aunt is often ignored in the critical work about *Aurora Leigh*. However, this relationship becomes an important way for Aurora to exact a measure of independence. Aurora zealously portrays Aunt Leigh as an uncaring and repressed individual, and in so doing presents herself as
different from her and a sympathetic figure. In effect, Aurora successfully distances herself from her aunt and makes herself out to be the opposite of Aunt Leigh in order to gain independence. Clearly, Aurora does not want her life to replicate her aunt's, and, at one point, she forthrightly asserts her independence by declaring, "I was born . . . / To walk another way" (2.580-81).

Aurora engages in activities not sanctioned by her aunt as a means to achieve autonomy. For instance, instead of being content with the women's education her aunt endorses, Aurora sneaks outside in the early mornings to read her own books "Without considering whether they were fit / To do [her] good" (1.701-02). As well she continues to write even though her aunt frowns upon that activity. Moreover, Aurora boldly declines Romney's marriage proposal despite her aunt's insistence that the union would be in her best financial and social interest. These incidents are unmistakable attempts by Aurora to separate herself from her aunt and a lifetime of subordinance. She does not want to follow in her aunt's footsteps and inscribe herself into a patriarchal system that works to deny women opportunity.

In short, Aunt Leigh's life becomes a model of what Aurora doesn't want her existence to be like. Using the language of feminist psychoanalytic theory, Aurora defines herself by negative identification—meaning she defines herself by what she is not (Chodorow, Reproduction 137 and Feminism 105-107, Flax 115, and Benjamin 80). Marianne Hirsch in her historical overview of mother-
daughter relations persuasively argues that Victorian female authors frequently imagined lives for their heroines that differed from their mothers'. The mothers' lives in these stories become examples not to be emulated. In these stories, Hirsch believes the daughters must break from the mothers "so as not to be identified with maternal silence" (45) and so as to avoid ending up repeating the mother's life.

In line with Hirsch's theory, Barrett Browning presents Aurora, our heroine, as an individual obsessed with pointing out that she is not like her aunt. Aurora breaks away from Aunt Leigh, a maternal-like influence, by highlighting their differences, and in so doing actually claims independence. Her excessive need to point out their differences and separateness represents Aurora's internal gripping fear that she, too, could wind up like her aunt content with "abdicating [her] power" (1.442) in marriage and giving up her personal ambitions. She wants to do more than that with her life. She wants to be a writer in a world that values only male writers. She wants to be a writer in a world that assumes when Romney states, "We want the best in poetry these days," women are precluded.

Upon her aunt's death, Aurora senses she has gained the independence she has been seeking: she somewhat triumphantly notes that "Henceforth noone could disapprove me / Vex me, hamper me" (2.958-59). Obvious in this statement is Aurora's ever-present desire to experience autonomy and separateness; in her construction of her aunt as the negative maternal face, she is able to facilitate
separation. Aurora disidentifies with her spinster-like Aunt Leigh to make for herself a life not fated to maternity and patriarchal rule; she enacts her wish to "consent to dissent from femininity" (de Lauretis qtd in Hirsch 11).
CHAPTER 4: LADY WALDEMAR

Aurora's relationship with Lady Waldemar also helps her gain an understanding of herself and her emerging feminine identity. Aurora has intense feelings for Lady Waldemar who, interestingly enough, she at times feels an attraction for and at other times despises. These ambivalent feelings express Aurora's longing for connection and continued need for disconnection. With Lady Waldemar, just as with Aunt Leigh, Aurora rediscovers aspects of her mother and struggles to define herself through relationship.

Initially, Aurora views Lady Waldemar with both disgust and distrust envisioning her as the "Lamia-woman" (7.152) and the "woman serpent" (6.1102). She believes that Romney in his betrothal to Lady Waldemar has sold himself to the "Lamia" (7.147). Lady Waldemar, in Aurora's mind, personifies a sort of female demon who she describes as "slippery as spilt oil" (5.1110). Negatively, she describes her as one who possesses "unclean white hands" (8.1041) and whose words are like "stinging snakes" (9.175). As with Aunt Leigh, Aurora distances herself from Lady Waldemar by portraying her as a villainous individual.

Aurora is particularly offended by Lady Waldemar's forthrightness on the topic of love and sexuality. Lady Waldemar first introduces herself to Aurora hoping she can persuade Aurora to play a part in her scheme to seduce Romney. In this meeting, Lady Waldemar openly discusses her feelings for Romney, and without
reserve, confesses I am "near as mad as he, / In loving such a one" (3.442-43). In sexually charged language Lady Waldemar admits "I am frivolous, / I dare say; I have played at wild-beast shows / . . . I meet my lion simply as Androcles" (3.388-391). Additionally, she discloses that she would resort to "vulgar way[s]" (3.466), if necessary, "to catch the indifferent eye of a . . . man" (3.416). Lady Waldemar presents herself as she is, without cloaking her desires, and Aurora finds these "confessions" (3.498) far too intimate for her to hear.

Aurora does not present herself in this forthright manner and is repulsed by Lady Waldemar's lustiness. Lady Waldemar senses her disgust and in her defense asks:

Am I coarse?

Well, love's coarse, nature's coarse - ah, there's the rub.
We fine ladies who park out our lives
From common sheep-paths, cannot help the crows
From flying over, - we're as natural still
As Blowsalinda . . . .

. . . we have hearts within,
warm, live, improvident, indecent hearts
As ready for outrageous ends and acts . . . .

(3.454-59, 461-63)
Lady Waldemar attempts to speak for all women, and her words communicate the belief that common to all women are these feelings of love and desire.

On the contrary, Aurora is appalled by these words and informs the reader that she does not share the same feelings as Lady Waldemar. Aurora responds "coldly" (3.476) to this speech calling her love "unworthy love" (3.483). In additional criticism, Aurora says, "her love's a readjustment of self-love / No more, - a need felt of another's use / To her own advantage" (3.521-23); later she insultingly calls Lady Waldemar's love "so fiery hot / It burns its natural veil of august shame, / And stands sublimely in the nude" (3.703-05). This crude, lusty sort of love, Aurora believes, is "curable" (3.709). Basically, Aurora considers Lady Waldemar a whimsical "woman of the world" possessing "isolated self-love and self-will (4.516) who "loves [Romney] like her diamonds . . . almost" (4.534).

Again it is important to remember that the narrator's bias also taints this picture of Lady Waldemar. Some critics (Cooper, Hickok, and Stone) argue that there may be room to see her in a more positive light. After all, it is eventually discovered, contrary to Aurora's initial belief, that Lady Waldemar is not the culprit behind Marian's rape. She had no intention of deceiving Marian, and it was her servant's negligence which prompted the rape to occur. Upon being accused of foul play, Lady Waldemar proudly speaks in her own defense stating "there are things / I would not do - not for my
life, nor him" (9.19-20). Aurora describes Lady Waldemar as a vile, untrustworthy individual, but even her own actions weaken this portrayal. Never does she view Lady Waldemar as a serious enough threat to merit telling Romney what she truly thinks of her. At one point Aurora asks herself "what drew me back / From telling Romney plainly the designs / Of Lady Waldemar" (4.473-75). When the name of Lady Waldemar comes up in Romney and Aurora's discussion in Italy, Romney says, "'Lady Waldemar is good'" (4.279) to which Aurora responds by touching Marian's head and saying "'Here's one, at least, who is good'" (4.280). Aurora is given the opportunity to express her true sentiments about Lady Waldemar, but opts for muteness in turning the conversation to Marian. Because Aurora doesn't warn Romney that she thinks the woman he plans to marry is calculating and superficial, the reader begins to wonder if Lady Waldemar has been unfairly maligned.

Certainly, Lady Waldemar is not the most admirable person, but she may not be as sinister as Aurora would have us believe. For instance, Aurora presents Lady Waldemar's love as completely self-involved, but, contrary to our narrator's depiction, Lady Waldemar does act to please Romney. For instance, she reads socialist and philanthropic propaganda to better understand Romney's interests (3.584-90), she donates money to his projects, and she even reads Aurora's book aloud to him after he has been blinded. Lady Waldemar loves Romney (3.421) and therefore hopes to marry him. She, like Aurora, nobly believes marriage should be based on love.
and is able to recognize the mistake Romney would make by
senselessly marrying Marian when he does not actually love her.

Lady Waldemar does have some redeeming traits. Interestingly, Aurora even confesses that she knows she speaks too
"bitterly" (4.507) of Lady Waldemar and concedes that Lady
Waldemar is "better haply, of her kind, / Than Romney Leigh, who
lives by diagrams" (3.743-44). Seemingly, Aurora senses that she
may have overstated Lady Waldemar's monstrosity.

While one side of Aurora strongly asserts contempt for Lady
Waldemar, another side entertains an uncomfortable physical
attraction for her. On the one hand, she is repulsed by this woman of
the world who speaks her desires openly, and on the other hand we
see her fascinated by her. When the two first meet, Aurora pays
particular attention to Lady Waldemar's seductive physical presence.
She notices her swinging "heavy ringlets" (3.444) of hair, her melting
(5.362) and "urgent eyes" (3.400), her manipulating smile (5.361-
62), and her hand clasping habit--she "took my hands" (3.360 3.528)
and "she touched my hand" (3.735). In contrast to her aunt's grey
hair, which to Aurora symbolizes Aunt Leigh's "frigid use of life"
(1.275-76), Aurora notes that Lady Waldemar has only a single
strand of grey in her bronze locks. Lady Waldemar, unlike the
repressed Aunt Leigh, exudes sensuality.

Aurora appears entranced by Lady Waldemar's appearance.
In great detail she describes her physical appearance at Lord Howe's
party, paying particular attention to her "glorious" (4.257) breasts.
The woman looked immortal. How they told, 
Those alabaster shoulders and bare breasts, 
On which the pearls, drowned out of sight in milk 
Were lost, excepting for the ruby clasp! 
They split the amaranth velvet-bodice down 
To the waist or nearly, with the audacious press 
Of full-breathed beauty. If the heart within 
Were half as white! - but, if it were, perhaps 
The breast were closer covered and the sight 
Less aspectable by half, too. (5.618-27)

In this depiction of Lady Waldemar we get more than a mere reporting of what she wore to the party; rather we get specific details and almost a voyeristic dwelling on her appearance and the bareness of her shoulders and breasts. Shortly thereafter, we are told that Lady Waldemar alluringly "takes no thought / Of her garments . . . falling off" (5. 664-65). Undeniably, Aurora is captivated by Lady Waldemar's physical appearance.

The breast becomes a prominent image in the above description of Lady Waldemar and is used to depict her sexual nature. However, when images of the female breast appear elsewhere in Barrett Browning's verse novel, they generally suggest maternity. In book five, Aurora wonders if she can make her verse speak for women "with mother's breasts / Which, round the new-made creatures hanging there, / Throb luminous and harmonious like pure spheres" (5.16-18). Lady Waldemar connects herself to
Aurora saying "we both had mothers, -- lay in their bosoms once" (9.17), and at one point, Aurora metaphorically alludes to breastfeeding when she compares her "yearning" (5.1269) for her Tuscan homeland to the "urgency" (5.1269) "sucking babe[s]" (5.1270) must feel for their mothers. Lastly, images of maternity are included in Aurora's argument that poets should write of their own times and strive to "catch" (5.214)

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 . . . . " (5.216-21)

While most of the breast imagery used in the poem calls to mind maternity, when it is used in regards to Lady Waldemar it portrays her as a lusty and erotic woman.

Obviously, Aurora feels Lady Waldemar's seductive presence and is enticed by this woman's beauty and sexuality. Aurora descriptively writes that Lady Waldemar was "lovely" (5.612), "very pretty" (5.613), and "brilliant stuff" (3.356). At the party Aurora is bothered by Lady Waldemar's overwhelming presence and spends her evening trying to avoid her, while in turn Lady Waldemar spends her time straining after Aurora "As babes at baubles held up out of reach / By spiteful nurses" (5.991-92). It is only in the safety of her own home, after the party, that Aurora feels comfortable.
enough to relax her guard. At this time she lets down her hair, loosens her girdle, and finds that she can again "breathe large" (5.1037). Upon reviewing the evening in her head, Aurora admits to herself that she was "affect[ed]" (5.1043) by Lady Waldemar's attendance at the party.

What seems to most "affect" Aurora is the fact that this monstrous woman can read her like a book. She asserts:

What vexes, after all,
Is just that such as she, with such as I,
Knows how to vex. 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. (5.1051-56)

Lady Waldemar knows Aurora's "turns" and "feeble points" because she, as a woman, experiences them too. Very disturbing, for Aurora, is the knowledge that she and the lusty Lady Waldemar possess the same feelings, desires, and attitudes. The main difference is that Lady Waldemar presents her desires overtly, and Aurora spends her life covertly denying that she possesses them. Aurora uncharacteristically exhibits her repressed desires when writing a passage about a woman eating ice cream. In this case, the simple act of eating ice cream takes on an erotic overtone:

Each lovely lady close to a cavalier
Who holds her dear fan while she feels her smile
On meditative spoonfuls of vanille
And listens to his hot-breathed vows of love
Enough to thaw her cream and scorch his beard.

(7.1182-86).

Also, at the end of the poem, Aurora suddenly includes in her description of nightfall a picture of a passionate sea-king. She writes:

Gradually
The purple and transparent shadows slow
Had filled up the whole valley to the brim,
And flooded the city, which you saw
As some drowned city in some enchanted sea,
Cut off from nature, -- drawing you who gaze,
With passionate desire, to leap and plunge,
And find a sea-king with a voice of waves,
And treacherous soft eyes, and slippery locks
You cannot kiss but you shall bring away
Their salt upon your lips. (8.34-44)

It is clear that Aurora, while she may not want to admit it, feels the desire to "leap and plunge" to find a passionate sea-king. With Stephenson, I agree, that Lady Waldemar becomes a constant reminder to Aurora of what she is unsuccessfully trying to repress (101).

It is an understatement to say that Aurora's relationship with Lady Waldemar is complicated. Ambivalences and dependency conflicts influence Aurora's relationship to Lady Waldemar just as they had characterized her relationship with Aunt Leigh. Aurora's
attraction for Lady Waldemar recaptures the erotic seductivity of maternal oneness and relatedness, and Aurora's demonization of Lady Waldemar and her lusty nature expresses her need to differentiate and separate herself from her. Aurora is able to hold at bay the power of the mother by setting up Lady Waldemar as the Lamia. By figuring Lady Waldemar as a villain, Aurora presents herself as different from Lady Waldemar and denies that she may possess the same desires Lady Waldemar possesses. The characterization of Lady Waldemar parallels Aurora's double impulse to experience both connection and disconnection.
CHAPTER 5: MARIAN ERLE

The final important female character in Aurora's life is the orphaned Marian Erle. Aurora first meets Marian at Lady Waldemar's request; but instead of urging Romney to see the foolishness of marrying Marian, as Lady Waldemar had hoped, Aurora happily blesses the relationship. Following this meeting, Aurora develops intense feelings for Marian, and again as with Aunt Leigh and Lady Waldemar, their relationship enacts the relational ambivalences Aurora, and women in general, experience in feminine identity formation as outlined by Chodorow.

Unlike her relationships with Aunt Leigh and Lady Waldemar, Aurora arduously works to establish an intimate, even familial, connection with Marian. Many are the instances where Aurora refers to or defines Marian as "My sister" (6.788, 6.793, 5.1095). At one point she calls her "My woodland sister, sweet maid Marian" (5.1096), and upon being reunited with Marian in Paris, Aurora clasps her hands and calls her "my sister" (6.459). Soon thereafter, Aurora warmly invites Marian to live with her saying "Come with me, sweetest sister" (7.117). For Aurora, it is not enough simply to see Marian as a friend; instead she constantly stresses the fact that her affections for her are as deep as those one would have for a sister.

Aurora is enchanted with Marian, her pseudo-sister, and continually idealizes her as an angelic and virtuous individual. In
contrast to Aunt Leigh and Lady Waldemar who at every turn are the manifestation of vileness, Marian becomes the gentle "Psyche" (1.156) and the loving "Lady of Passion" (1.160). Aurora calls Marian her "sweet holy Marian" (6.782) and "my saint" (7.127). And indeed, Marian nobly leaves her seamstress job, even though she needs the money, to nurse her friend Lucy Gresham "back to life" (4.31). Charitably, Marian says she "could not leave a solitary soul / To founder in the dark, while she sate still / And lavished stitches on a lady's hem" (4.37-39). Aurora also highlights the fact that despite growing up in an abusive family lacking moral convictions, Marian "learnt God" (3.895) on her own--even when this action resulted in beatings from her parents. All of these images serve to portray Marian as a Madonna-like figure capable only of doing good.

Aurora informs the reader that Marian took it upon herself to gain an education, even when that meant she had to resort to reading ripped up book pages in her quest for knowledge. Two additional acts of sacrifice lift Marian in Aurora's eyes: in book three, the "gentle and loving" (7.930-31) Marian confesses that she would "pour out half [her] blood" (3.928) to save her old friend Rose from a life of prostitution; in book four she explains that she deserted Romney to make certain that England would not "thrust" (4.931) him out of doors. Marian acts with other people's interests at heart, and the dramatization of Marian and her many generous acts explains Aurora's unending reverence of her.
Cooper rightly points out, however, that Marian is not as angelic as Aurora fictionalizes her (157). Recall that Aurora doesn't let Marian tell her life story but instead insists on "retell[ing]" (3.828) it, and in so doing amplifies Marian's goodness and the reader's sympathy for her. Of Marian's narrative, Aurora recollects that she . . . told the tale with simple, rustic turns,-
Strong leaps of meaning in her sudden eyes
That took the gaps of an imperfect phrase
Of the unschooled speaker: I have rather writ
The thing I understood so, than the thing
I heard so. (4.151-56)

Honestly, Aurora claims her narrative rendition of Marian's life was "coloured . . . in after times" (3.829) and that she simply interpreted what she had heard. The reader is at the mercy of Aurora's presentation, and there is no guarantee that it will be accurate.

The fact that Aurora doesn't appear willing or able to acknowledge any faults in Marian skews the account we get of her. Only briefly, upon seeing Marian with a child in Paris, does Aurora assume the worst--that Marian stole the child or that she is a damned (6.344-46) woman with an illegitimate child. Even then, she has to force herself to "confront the truth" (6.342). Shortlived, however, are these negative thoughts about Marian. Aurora recognizes her too hasty judgment: "Stop there: I go too fast; / I'm cruel like the rest" (6.366-67), and quickly reasons that most likely Marian is caring for the child as a favor to a neighbor. Only this once,
and only for a moment, does Aurora view Marian as less than angelic.

The majority of the narrative prejudicially reports Marian's behavior. With Marian's acceptance of Romney's wedding proposal, it is all too apparent that she is willing to subsume her desires and interests to those of Romney. Marian proves herself to be a passive individual content with waiting patiently for Romney and claims that she would far rather "be trodden by his foot / Than lie in a great queen's bosom" (4.217-18). When Aurora asks, "He loves you, Marian?" (4.169), the surprise registered by Marian indicates that she hadn't even pondered this question (4.170-75). In fact, she is grateful that he asked for her hand in marriage as she doesn't consider herself truly "worthy" (4.208) of being his wife.

Marian will be her husband's handmaid and plans to "serve tenderly, and love obediently" (4.227-29); she "will work with him for ever and be his wife" (4.175). Marian, unlike Aurora, will accept a married life of subjugation, and, oddly enough, Aurora never criticizes Marian for her self-effacing actions, nor does she ever castigate Marian for humiliating Romney by leaving him at the altar. Aurora is ready to find the best in Marian, but with Aunt Leigh and Lady Waldemar always looked for the worst. Aurora is charmed with Marian's goodness and feels such a kinship and closeness with her that she overlooks faults in Marian.

At times, their close relationship even begins to assume what we would see today as an erotic or sensuous element. Many are the
places in the text depicting demonstrative behavior between the two. Aurora reports that out of discontent with Romney she had kissed and "flung" (4.347) herself upon Marian. After hearing Marian's story, Aurora reports that she kissed those lips (4.168) and later confides that she "with woman's passion [had] clung about her waist / and kissed her hair and eyes" (6.779-80). In Paris, after catching a glimpse of Marian's face Aurora confesses the "face persists, / It floats up, it turns over in my mind (6.308-09) and that she "hungered" (6.454) to be reunited with her. Once finding her, Aurora anxiously grabs Marian's "two slight wrists" (6.443) with a vow not to let go. Obviously Aurora prizes this relationship and the feelings of intimacy the two share.

The scene in book six when Marian leads Aurora to her place resonates with a homoerotic undercurrent. Aurora recounts:

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. (6.500-06)

An intimate bonding exists where no verbal communication is necessary; the same situation is again depicted in book four when Aurora infers Marian's meaning from her eyes (4.151-56). Yet again,
when Marian hands her baby over to Aurora there is no need for words.

She looked me in the face and answered not, 
Nor signed she was unworthy, nor gave thanks, 
But took the sleeping child and held it out 
To meet my kiss, as if requiting me 
And trusting me at once. (7.133-37)

This wordless communication reveals the intimacy and passion in this relationship.

So powerful and penetrating are Aurora's feelings for Marian that she even entwines their interests and their lives. For example, Aurora remembers how upon hearing Marian's story she sensed that their lives were somehow merged. She writes:

It is strange, 
To-day while Marian told her story like 
To absorb most listeners, how I listened chief 
to a voice not hers, . . .

. . . but one that mixed with mine. (7.174-80)

When Aurora catches a glimpse of the long-lost Marian in a Parisian market place, she is conscious of the fact that they are strikingly similar in appearance.

What face is that? 
What a face, what a look, what a likeness! Full on mine 
The sudden blow of it came down, till all 
My blood swam, my eyes dazzled. (6.231-33)
Thereafter, Aurora invites Marian to live with her in Italy and intimately connects herself with Marian in suggesting that she can be a second mother to Marian's son (7.120-25).

While today we may characterize this relationship as slightly sexualized given the fact that Barrett Browning often depicts Aurora and Marian hand holding, kissing, and exchanging amorous gazes, Lillian Faderman argues that romantic attachments between women in the nineteenth century were expected. She explains that the "shield of passionlessness that a woman was trained to raise before a man could be lowered with another woman without fear of losing her chastity and reputation and health" (159). Alger claims that same-sex love was accepted as it gave women the opportunity to find "freshness, stimula[tion], charm, noble truths, and aspirations" (qtd. in Faderman 162). The intensity of the bond between Aurora and Marian, while perhaps not necessarily representing a sexual interest, does recapture Aurora's unmet relational need for connection and attachment; whereas her relationships with Aunt Leigh and Lady Waldemar always found her seeking disconnection and separateness.

In Marian, Aurora finds her need for nurturance and relationship; they nurture each other. Their close friendship enacts Aurora's desire for continued attachment. Aurora admits to being "lonely" (7.120) and hopes to lessen her loneliness by offering a home to Marian. She says, "I've a home for you / And me and no one else" (6.458-59). Aurora loves Marian and believes that the two of them "may live on toward the truer life" (7.132). The relationship
allows Aurora to grow and accept her female heritage. Aurora finds support and happiness in her relationship with Marian. Even more radical is the fact that Aurora found this happiness with a fallen woman. Barrett Browning felt that this action might evoke criticism from her contemporaries and said she expected to be put in the stocks for such an action (Donaldson 58).

In her alliance with Marian, Aurora is exposed to maternity; firsthand, she witnesses the intense feelings Marian has for her son. In fact, Marian admits to Aurora that after the rape, she sustained herself by living for her child (9.389-90). Aurora describes Marian's son as "the yearling creature, warm and moist with life" (5.667) who happily smiles upon seeing his mother's face (5.580-95). Aurora reports that frequently Marian "leaned above him (drinking him as wine)" (5.599) and that "slowly as he smiled / She smiled too, slowly smiling unaware, / And drawing from his countenance to hers / A fainter red" (5.607-10). In Italy, Aurora is constantly exposed to the powerful mother-child union. Though Aurora doesn't become an actual mother herself (maybe in a way she does given the fact that she becomes a secondary mother to Marian's son), she is allowed via her relationship with Marian to explore maternity and incorporate it into her vision of womanhood. In other words, her friendship with Marian encourages her to accept her feminine identity.

Though some may hope for a continued female community at the conclusion of *Aurora Leigh*, we cannot forget that she has strong feelings for Romney. Aurora does own up to her feelings for Romney
and plans to marry him. However, it is not fair to assume as does Dierdre David, that with this marriage Aurora will sacrifice her vocation. David finds that Aurora succumbs to patriarchal values and will give up her independence in the union. Yet, it is important to recognize that in the end both admit they had made earlier mistakes and pledge themselves to love each other and to work together. Romney says, "Beloved, let us love so well, / Our work shall still be better for our love / And still our love be sweeter for our work" (9.924-26). Commonplace in critical literature about *Aurora Leigh* is the notion that this speech, as well as the fact that Romney is blinded at the end, signal that he is less patriarchal and authoritarian—and less likely to view Aurora solely as his subordinate. There is no hint that he plans to have Aurora serve as his "helpmate" (2.402) or work partner as had been his earlier intention with his marriage proposal. Instead, it sounds as if their marriage will be based on equality.

The book ends happily with Romney declaring that their love will be so grand as to encompass a

> 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.

(9.884-90)

Barrett Browning, by virtue of the fact that she ends the verse novel with Aurora having both art and love, rejects Victorian societal beliefs about women and makes room for women to exist beyond their relations to men.
An exploration of the female relationships in Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh* reveals the enormous influence the mother-daughter relationship has on Aurora's later female bonds. The norm in our culture, female rule over infancy, Chodorow believes, promotes for females ambivalent feelings towards all women. Her theory emphasizes the importance relationships play in identity construction, and she argues that women must separate from and identify with their mothers—a process characterized by conflicts of sexuality, attachment, and autonomy.

Aurora's narrative of subject formation closely follows feminine identity construction as explained in Chodorow's feminist psychoanalytic theory. Because of losing her mother at the age of four, Aurora does, as Chodorow proposes, experience ambivalences in her later relationships with Aunt Leigh, Lady Waldemar, and Marian Erle. These affiliative patterns express Aurora's simultaneous desire to experience both separateness and relatedness, differentiation and similarity. At the beginning of the poem, Aurora constantly distances herself from Aunt Leigh and Lady Waldemar revealing her need to make certain her life was different from theirs; she demonizes Aunt Leigh and Lady Waldemar in order to gain independence and separateness. Yet, she establishes a close, even sisterly bond, with Marian Erle as a way to find connectedness and intimacy. The overall movement of *Aurora Leigh* can be viewed as
one that captures Aurora's need to define herself both separate from and in relation to the mother and representations of her. Aurora matures by acknowledging both differences and similarities to other women.

At the end of the poem, Aurora is finally able to admit that Aunt Leigh, Lady Waldemar, and Marian Erle knew her feelings better than she did at times. When she accepts this fact, she also shows an acknowledgement of her true feelings and an acceptance of her feminine identity. She asserts:

Now I know
I loved you always, Romney. She who died
Knew that, and said so; Lady Waldemar
Knows that; . . . and Marian. I had known the same,
Except that I was prouder than I knew,
And not so honest. (9.684-89)

Aurora, contrary to Chodorow's argument, is not compelled to follow the road taken by her mother and mothers prior to her. Instead of hush hushing as her mother recommended, Aurora seeks the independence granted by a writing career, and then she successfully seeks to reconcile this career with a life of marriage. Barrett Browning extends roles for Aurora, and women, by providing Aurora a way to find an identity that balances her need for separateness and her need for connectedness.

Certainly, Barrett Browning knew what she was up to in proposing this alternate model of identity that allows for both
intimacy and independence. Before writing the book, she confided in a letter to her friend Mary Russell Mitford that she wanted to write a novel-poem "comprehending the aspect and manners of modern life, and flinching at nothing of the conventional" (qtd. in Mermin 186). She envisioned it as running into the midst of our conventions, & rushing into drawing-rooms & the like 'where angels fear to tread'; & so, meeting face to face & without mask the Humanity of the age, & speaking the truth as I conceive of it, out plainly (qtd in Mermin 186).

Clearly, Barrett Browning felt she was doing something extraordinary, and indeed she did. She allowed Aurora the opportunity, through female relationships, to define for herself a feminine identity.

Marianne Hirsch in her study of mother-daughter relationships argues that Victorian authors wrote heroines into their stories who made it a point to live their lives differently than their mothers. However, she contends that modernist authors allow their heroines the chance to know the mother's story and then "transform" the stories; these heroines are given the chance to both "repeat and not repeat" (116) their mothers' stories. A similar plot line could be seen to exist in *Aurora Leigh*. With Aunt Leigh and Lady Waldemar, Aurora distances herself and affirms that she is different from these women; yet through Marian, she gets a chance to experience the maternal story. In the end, Barrett Browning provides Aurora the
chance through her female relationships to "repeat and not repeat" the mother's story. In effect, Barrett Browning's alternate model of identity allows Aurora the opportunity for both separatenss and relatedness, independence and relationship. Aurora doesn't have to content herself with an autonomous identity that excludes all dependency; instead she finds room to be "both with and distinct from" in her relationship with Romney (Benjamin 98).
NOTES


5 With few exceptions, Aurora's relationships to the women in the text elicit stronger emotions than those she has for the men. For instance, Aurora seems a bit detached from her father and doesn't seem to have the same sort of fondness for him that she has for her mother. Instead, Aurora somewhat derogatorily describes her father as an "austere Englishman" (1.65) who lived a "dry life-time (1.66) filled with "college-learning, law, and parish talk" (1.67). She views him as prone to engage in dull activities like discussing taxes and social issues. Upon his death, she simply says, "There ended childhood" (1.215). Elsewhere, she makes even more generalized claims about fathers asserting that fathers love with "heavier brains, / And wills more consciously responsible" (1.62-63). That Aurora loves her father is not debatable, but it is interesting that her relationship with him doesn't contain the intense feelings we see displayed in her relations with the women in the story. In fact, this action parallels Chodorow's belief that men represent a secondary place to women and mothers in feminine identity construction.

6 Margaret Reynolds in her explanatory notes to Aurora Leigh explains that a commination was the threat of "divine punishment or vengeance" (606). She states that in the Book of Common Prayer, the "'Commination Service,' read at the beginning of Lent, consists of a proclamation of God's anger and his judgment against sinners" (606).

7 Some critics argue that Aurora's erotic attraction to the breast partly reveals the mother want she experiences upon being deprived of a mother. See, for example, Virginia Steinmetz "Images of 'Mother-Want' in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Aurora Leigh" Victorian Poetry 21 (1983): 351-67.

8 According to Lillian Faderman, Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love between Women from the Renaissance to the Present (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1981), it was generally believed that Victorian women were asexual. Accordingly, she reports that women were taught to deny their sexual desires and encouraged to establish close female friendships to serve as an emotional outlet.
I am not alone in believing that through Marian, Aurora accepts her womanhood. Many critics view Marian as an agent of transformation. Cooper claims that Marian spoke of female experience in a new way and therefore forced Aurora to acknowledge her "woman's passion," and Friedman argues that Marian is the agent by which Aurora makes her journey back to the maternal and acknowledges her womanhood.


---. "Genre and Gender Anxiety in *Aurora Leigh.*" *Victorian Newsletter* (Spring 1986): 7-11.


