

## ABSTRACT

LEE, ELIZABETH ANNE. For Better or for Worse: The Subversion of Victorian Marital Ideals in the Poetry of Elizabeth Barrett Browning. (Under the direction of Antony Harrison.)

Elizabeth Barrett Browning is well-known for her tender poems about love, but one aspect of her poetry that has remained largely ignored is her specific depiction of marriage. In fact, from the time she was a teenager until the day she died, Barrett Browning consistently demonstrates through her poetry that she was largely skeptical, if not cynical, about the idea of marriage as it was commonly practiced in Victorian-era England. In a majority of her poems, Barrett Browning depicts wives or brides-to-be as plighted victims or doomed slaves, and harshly characterizes husbands and grooms as dull, unsympathetic philanderers. In poems such as “A Romance of the Ganges” and “The Romaunt of the Page,” the balance of power within marriage is consistent with Victorian ideals, since the wives are subservient to their husbands. These husbands are tyrannical figures, and the unreasonable demands they place on their wives ultimately lead to tragic consequences. When Barrett Browning does portray a “successful marriage” in her poetry, such as that between Aurora and Romney at the end of *Aurora Leigh*, or between Queen Victoria and Prince Albert in “Crowned and Wedded,” the traditional gender roles of the time have been reversed: the woman is in a position of uncontested authority over the man. This inversion of what constitutes a happy union was fairly radical for the time, but it remains a consistent theme throughout Barrett Browning’s work, challenging Victorian society to reconsider the merits of the popular marital ideal.

**FOR BETTER OR FOR WORSE:  
THE SUBVERSION OF VICTORIAN MARITAL IDEALS IN THE POETRY OF  
ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING**

by  
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Chair of Advisory Committee

## **DEDICATION**

To Ben, who will be my wonderful husband by the time this is printed. You never seemed to mind that I was researching divorce law, spousal abuse, and adultery even as we were addressing wedding invitations. Thank you for appreciating the irony and hanging in there—let's have the best subversive marriage ever.

## **BIOGRAPHY**

Elizabeth Lee earned her Bachelor of Arts in English from Wake Forest University, having spent terms at the University of East Anglia in England and University College Cork in Ireland for studies in English and Irish literature, respectively. Elizabeth next earned a Master of Education in Middle Grades Language Arts from North Carolina State University and taught honors-level English at Enloe High School. She then returned to North Carolina State University, where she earned a Master of Arts in English literature.

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## Introduction

Upon Elizabeth Barrett Browning's death, her friend Kate Field eulogized the poet by calling her "wife, mother, and poet, three in one, and such an earthly trinity as God has never before blessed the world with" (Field 368). By filling all three of these roles, Barrett Browning was something of an oddity in Victorian England; women were expected to be wives and mothers, but certainly not poets, and her contemporaries had experienced difficulty in reconciling these disparate roles. The poet Edward FitzGerald may have echoed the sentiments of many of Barrett Browning's contemporary critics when he wrote in a letter upon her death:

Mrs. Browning's death is rather a relief to me, I must say: no more Aurora Leighs, thank God! A woman of real genius, I know: but what is the upshot of it all? She and her Sex had better mind the Kitchen and their Children; and perhaps the Poor: except in such things as little Novels, they only devote themselves to what Men do much better. (FitzGerald 280-81 qtd, in Lootens 146)

As FitzGerald demonstrates, one of the characteristic aspects of Victorian ideology was the separation of men and women into unique "spheres" of influence; women were meant to stay at home as virtuous wives and mothers, while only men were encouraged to seek a profession and earn money. For the few women who did succeed in a profession, like Elizabeth Barrett Browning, their role as wives precluded even their ability to keep the wages they earned. Victorian coverture laws gave a woman's husband the exclusive

legal rights to her own earnings, inheritances, and personal property (Helsing *Social Issues* 5). Despite these obstacles, since they had little voice in society, one of the only ways women could be heard was to take up their pens and write.

The social divisions between men and women as enforced by marital law also extended to the cultural norms of the Victorian era. Women were rarely afforded an education as good as their male counterparts, and their artistic efforts were seldom considered equal to men's in merit. In Victorian England, the significant philosophers, intellectuals, and artists were presumed to be male, since women were trusted to remain passive housewives without influential ideas of their own. Thus, at the time in which Elizabeth Barrett wrote, female writers were not only oddities but were often considered traitors to their sex. Writing was considered a "masculine" occupation and an inappropriate activity for a woman, and female writers were forced to struggle against a number of stereotypes to have their work taken seriously. Many female authors chose to write under male pseudonyms to combat this problem, but courageous writers such as Elizabeth Barrett chose to write under their own names, forcing critics to reconcile the skill demonstrated on the page with the popular preconceptions about women and femininity<sup>1</sup>. One magazine critic, Mrs. C. M. Kirkland, defended the efforts of women who were brazen enough to write poetry:

Poetry, provided it be of the sigh-away, die-away cast, does not injure a lady's reputation; acrostic-making is considered quite an accomplishment, and so are watch-paper verses; but poetry which some unthinking, out-of-the-world critics praise as "masculine" for vigour and freshness, is

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Barrett Browning did publish some of her early work anonymously, but thereafter used her own name.

insufferable. If we could show to some objectors the delicate Elizabeth Barrett Browning—the minutest, most fragile, most ethereal creature the sun ever shone upon, with a voice like a ring-dove’s, we might swear in vain to her identity as the author of some of the strongest and bravest poetry that has appeared in our day; so obstinate a conviction exists in some minds of the close connexion between mental power and masculine coarseness. (Kirkland 152)

As Kirkland notes, contemporary critics often were stymied by the poetry of Elizabeth Barrett Browning; she was not the average “poetess” of the time. Her verses demonstrated a power and depth of thought that was more often associated with the writings of men, and literary critics frequently found themselves caught between considering her art as that of a “woman” or as that of a “true poet.” Most critics who found merit in Barrett Browning’s work would often justify their praise by only allowing that she was “probably the most impassioned and imaginative of English *female* authors” (Putnam’s 379, emphasis added). Others went so far as to proclaim that “of all the women who have ever written verses,” Elizabeth Barrett Browning is

the ablest to fulfill the poet’s mission. She has been called the Milton of her sex, and altogether justly; for her intellectual strength towers as much above that of other female poets, as does the genius of the majestic epic bard over all other masters of song. (Hillard 177)

This grudging acceptance of Barrett Browning as a talented female writer was far from universal, however. In her assessment of the era’s “literary women,” Kirkland allowed that “some men openly profess to like intelligent women, and there are doubtless others

who in secret do not altogether reprobate the use of the pen in female hands,” but a majority of men at the time were vehemently opposed to the very concept of a female writer (Kirkland 152). “Poetesses” such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning embodied a “dim horror” for the Victorian male, since their perceived encroachment upon a traditionally male-dominated profession challenged foundational gender roles (Kirkland 154).

Many literary critics fought the increasing popularity of female authors by dismissing the writing of women entirely, typifying it as laughable, trivial tripe. One 1851 critic began a review of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s body of work by denouncing disgustedly, “Female poetry! this scarcely seems to us, ungallant as we are, a delightful theme, or a glorious memory; for is it not, generally speaking, mawkish, lackadaisical, and tedious? To us, at least, it is” (*Eclectic* 337). Female poetry was considered best suited for a female audience, since the writing was presumed to be sub-par and simple enough for mere housewives to comprehend. The *Eclectic* critic extols the virtues of men’s poetry, but characterizes feminine efforts thus:

It is only *female poetry* which is thus deficient in healthfulness, cheerfulness, and sound sense. With regard to the latter quality, it is our mature opinion that women are usually more sensible than men; but you certainly would not guess it from their poetry, where they seem to think it necessary to be weak and foolish. (*Eclectic* 338)

Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s poetry therefore presented a dilemma, since it was not restricted to typical, acceptably feminine topics and themes. Some reviewers resolved this dichotomy by emphasizing the feminine aspects of the author herself in an effort to personify Barrett Browning as an ideal Victorian housewife who was herself surprised by

the strong words that flowed out of her pen. One review of *Aurora Leigh* described the author as an embodiment of ideal femininity, stating, “Mrs. Browning has the most charming or divine beauty—beauty of the soul—and is personally as beautiful as a lady need to be truly loved; and that is the best beauty in woman which is neither dangerous to herself nor others” (Simonds 611). Reviewers such as Simonds seek to reassure their audiences that Barrett Browning’s works, though atypical of a woman, are not entirely subversive.

However, Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s poetry was still extremely unusual for a time when it was assumed that very few women had enough education and talent to attempt serious poetry, and it was widely believed that “no women but those who are ugly and unattractive should or do write” (Kirkland 153). There was also great debate at the time about whether or not women were even capable of the same type of intellectual reasoning as a man. In a biographical article about Elizabeth Barrett Browning, one writer states:

let us never forget that woman, as to intellectual progress, is in a state of infancy. Changed as by malignant magic, now into an article of furniture, and now into a toy of pleasure, she is only as yet undergoing a better transmigration, and ‘timidly expanding into life.’ Almost all that is valuable in female authorship has been produced within the last half-century, that is, since the female was generally recognized to be an intellectual creature. (Gilfillan 240)

As evidenced by Gilfillan’s “analysis” of female intellectual progress, many critics were unable even to conceive of women creating literary works that could rival those of men.

Because of this prevalent belief in the limitations of the female mind, critics were often forced to re-examine the impressive accomplishments of Elizabeth Barrett Browning and “reclassify” her sex. Barrett Browning was such an anomaly that some critics gave up on attempts to reconcile her “feminine” persona with her “masculine” body of work, so they endeavored instead to “unsex” the author entirely. One magazine carefully stated, “It must not be assumed...that we consider Mrs. Browning to be unfeminine in her mental organism....We do not see what call we have to grant to intellect a sex. Mrs. Browning’s has none, we think” (*Southern Literary* 146). Another popular stance for critics to adopt was to claim that “Mrs. Browning...is, or at least is said by many to be, the most masculine of our female writers” (Gilfillan 239). One “admirer” of the poet similarly asserted that she demonstrated “a masculine energy, attempered and sublimated by womanly affection” (Gems 168). Another reviewer described Elizabeth Barrett as possessing a “divine soul of poetry that glows within her, generated of the sweetest union of womanly tenderness of heart and masculine loftiness and power of intellect” (*Democratic Review* 72). By emphasizing her femininity, these critics depict Barrett Browning as a non-threatening figure, but since the wit and intelligence she demonstrated on the page was assumed to be a “masculine” trait, they describe her as a perfect “marriage” of female and male energies inhabiting the same body.

Modern critics have also written extensively about the balance of gender roles within Barrett Browning’s poetry. In her poems, Barrett Browning demonstrates a great awareness of the expectations and obstacles she faced as a female poet; she believed that “serious women writers did not see themselves as running the same race as men. They were seeking their own track, their own pace, their own language, and it was precisely

here that their difficulties were greatest” (Edmond 123). One of Barrett Browning’s most memorable works in which she employs distinctly female language is her sonnet sequence *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, first published in 1850. Modern critics have noted how, in this work, Barrett Browning “invokes the Petrarchan sonnet tradition only to revise it according to her own historical moment” (Houston 106). In Barrett Browning’s revision of Petrarch, the speaker of the poems is both the desirous poet and the female object of desire; she subverts and fluidly alternates between the traditionally masculine and feminine roles within the sonnets. This “blurring of sexual roles” within the poems was subversive because at times it painted a woman in the aggressive, dominant role that a man was expected to play” (Mermin *Reader* 353). Dorothy Mermin believes that the *Sonnets from the Portuguese* made the Victorian reader “uneasy both by seeing a woman in [the traditionally male] role and by the implications about the beloved: the man seems to be put in the woman’s place, and... may seem to hear overtones of sexual inversion” (Mermin *Reader* 352). Barrett Browning wrote the *Sonnets* during her courtship with Robert Browning, but prior to their relationship, many of Barrett Browning’s earlier poems explored the repercussions of the more traditional gender roles advocated in the Victorian era. When the female characters within these poems are dominated by an “ideally” masculine Victorian man, they suffer terribly. In the *Sonnets*, however, “the lines which traditionally divide poet from lady, subject from object, lover from beloved, and sensuous from spiritual gradually dissolve and, as they do, the barriers which left Barrett Browning’s earlier heroines frustrated... are overcome” (Stephenson *Vision* 257). Prior to her marriage in 1846, Barrett Browning had also written a number of other poems that blurred the lines between the roles of men and women.

In 1844, Barrett Browning published an unusual pair of sonnets titled “To George Sand: A Desire” and “To George Sand: A Recognition.” George Sand was the male pseudonym of French writer Aurore Dupin, a woman like Barrett Browning who challenged the gender conventions of the time. In Barrett Browning’s two poems dedicated to Sand, the poet perceives that Sand “combines traditionally masculine and feminine qualities and becomes for Barrett the ideal person” (Donaldson 40). In these sonnets, Barrett Browning uses Sand to redefine a woman’s voice as “the voice of strength” (Morlier 328). Barrett Browning utilized this concept of a capable, strong woman in another poem from that same year, “Lady Geraldine’s Courtship.” In this poem, the eponymous heroine is a woman determined to choose a husband based on her own terms and principles, no matter how society may advise otherwise. The poet Coventry Patmore read “Lady Geraldine” and objected to the fact that Barrett Browning “continually undercuts the importance of social position” by allowing an aristocratic woman to pursue the lover of her choice, who is a man of lower class (Stephenson *Vision* 252). Glennis Stephenson argues that Patmore’s objections likely stemmed from “his uneasy recognition that Barrett Browning is quite clearly showing how unimportant social standing can become once a woman is permitted to feel normal sexual desire” (Stephenson *Vision* 253). As a predecessor to *Sonnets From the Portuguese*, “Lady Geraldine” demonstrates how women can defy society’s expectations and be the aggressors in a relationship but still retain their femininity. Like the *Sonnets*, the poem also lauds mutual, romantic love as the best foundation for a lasting, happy marriage. Stephenson notes that:

The experience of romantic love, Barrett Browning suggests, precludes any possibility of a conviction of equality in a relationship. It is the lover's belief in the infinite superiority of the beloved that, when love is discovered to be returned, results in that elevating sense of wonder which later pervades the *Sonnets from the Portuguese* and "Lady Geraldine's Courtship" (Stephenson *Vision* 250-51).

Thus, Stephenson argues that Barrett Browning does not attempt to portray many marriages of "equals," since in an ideal marital relationship, each spouse would consider the other partner to be his or her superior. However, Barrett Browning frequently depicts marriage scenarios in which the balance of power favors men, and these uniformly end in tragedy and despair. When Barrett Browning portrays a marriage in which the wife is allowed sovereignty and a measure of power, the marriage is more often a success. The poet had a great belief in the potential benefits of marriage, but she witnessed how marriages that subscribed to the patriarchal ideals of the time were often loveless and miserable. As the critic Cora Kaplan writes:

"Lady Geraldine" touched on a subject central to most women novelists of the time: the ability of women to choose their own partners without the approval of kin or society. [Barrett Browning's 1856 poem] *Aurora Leigh* includes this as a sub-theme only; its more modern preoccupation is whether marriage itself is a good thing, especially for women with a vocation" (Kaplan 72)

In its subversive depiction of gender roles and its scathing critique of contemporary marital practices, *Aurora Leigh* has been hailed as one of Barrett Browning's most provocative works.

Critic Wendell Stacy Johnson acknowledges that while many of Barrett Browning's poems demonstrate "an awareness of how immoral the marriage contract can be.... *Aurora Leigh*, in particular, has some clear insights into the brutality and suffering that could and can pass as normal married life" (Johnson 54). In 1962, critic Alethea Hayter also suggested that *Aurora Leigh*, more than Barrett Browning's earlier poetry, offers the most scathing indictment of Victorian marital practice, but places the blame equally upon both men and women. Hayter believes that Barrett Browning condemns

men for duplicity, for trying to make women commit themselves by acknowledging their love first, for tyrannizing the moment such a confession had been made, for ungenerously regretting the loss of their freedom; women for boasting of their conquests, for fickleness and calculation, for marrying for convenience without love. (Hayter 188 qtd. in Johnson 54)

The poem not only denounces many aspects of contemporary marital practices, attitudes and laws, but it also offers an optimistic glimpse of what Barrett Browning suggests could be a radical re-envisioning of marriage. By ending with the unconventional union of the poem's two main characters, *Aurora Leigh* "seems to make a final hopeful comment on the possibility of a fruitful relationship between the sexes, a marriage of feminine intuition and masculine intellect" (Johnson 56). However, at the same time, Johnson believes that just as Aurora and Romney's marriage could not redeem the

terrible marital experiences of other characters in the poem, Barrett Browning surely knew that her own depiction of such a radical union could not immediately alter “the nature of marriage in a world where it is considered right and proper for the ordinary husband to kick and beat his submissive wife” (Johnson 56). Still, Barrett Browning must have hoped that some of her forward-thinking contemporaries would learn from her poetry to create marriages based on mutual love, respect, and the rejection of limiting gender roles. These are themes Barrett Browning consistently explored in her poetry from a very early age until the last years of her life. For example, while Barrett Browning’s sonnets do not speak of marriage specifically, they do “anticipate the aesthetics Aurora comes to advocate: an art that emerges out of...a fully lived life, not imitation; out of a union of body and soul” (Friedman 209). While in Victorian England, love and marriage were often very separate ideas, for Barrett Browning, a marriage without love as its catalyst was a marriage doomed to failure.

Barrett Browning believed strongly in the importance of love to a marriage, as evidenced by the *Sonnets* and also her own romantic, if unconventional, union with Robert Browning. After her death, some late nineteenth-century critics even implied that although “marriage might be in crisis...the Brownings’ love could still symbolize the endangered yet eternal values of that institution at its best” (Lootens 142). In poems such as the *Sonnets From the Portuguese*, Barrett Browning redefines love from the female perspective and “romanticizes the feminine plot of desire” (Stephenson *Vision* 253). Dorothy Mermin reiterates, “the ultimate source of both her attraction and her power in these poems, however, is simply her own desire. What, after all, does a lyric lover traditionally offer as an inducement to love except his love itself?” (Mermin 355).

Barrett Browning thus encourages women to take an active role in their love relationships, and not to conform to the Victorian ideals of feminine passivity and submission. The poet demonstrates hope that a woman who is assertive in love will not capitulate to the restrictive role of a wife sanctioned by the era's predominant ideals, but might instead create a more equitable marriage. As Stephenson observes, "Barrett Browning explores two major issues in her poems of and about love: the question of woman's role in love relationships and the question of woman's voice in love poetry. In both areas, she accepts and also resists the prevailing patriarchal traditions" (Stephenson *Love* 3). Barrett Browning's depiction of relationships in which women are enthusiastic, desirous partners reverses the way romantic love was more commonly depicted at the time. Barrett Browning believes strongly "in the importance of romantic love. She does, however, insist that the traditional form of male-female relationships must be modified in order to allow women to assume an active, functional, and fulfilling role" (Stephenson *Love* 3). Barrett Browning's earlier poems focus on the consequences of inequitable love, which inevitably leads to failed marriages. In many of these poems

the heroines are repeatedly frustrated in their attempts to establish lasting and satisfying relationships by the intervention of death, the inconstancy of lovers, or—most importantly—the passive roles imposed upon them by conventional notions concerning the proper behavior for women in love.

(Stephenson *Vision* 244)

Thus, Barrett Browning subverts the marital ideal by concentrating primarily on the discrimination inherent in the gender roles within marriage. Barrett Browning argues that an unequal balance of power is not conducive to the purest form of love.

According to Angela Leighton, love, in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poetry, "is not a sacred ideal, removed from the contingencies of the world, but is dragged in the dust of that reality which was itself so hard-won an experience and a theme for her" (Leighton 91). Barrett Browning does not wish overly to romanticize love, but instead to present it as an attainable, desirable component in every marriage. While a number of critics have analyzed this depiction of romantic love, few have extensively analyzed how Barrett Browning depicts love and gender roles in the particular context of marriage. Barrett Browning was as effective a social critic as she was a poet, and her poetry reveals her acute desire to motivate change and reconsideration of the social norms and values of her time. In her poetry throughout her lifetime, Barrett Browning offers an analysis of the flaws inherent to the Victorian marital ideal and presents her readers with an alternate view of marriage as a partnership of equals. Barrett Browning condemns the hypocrisy of Victorian marital laws, which allowed a husband nearly complete control over his wife and her property. She criticizes marriages that follow the design of these laws and allow husbands to subjugate their wives, and depicts such relationships as not only unhealthy and undesirable but abominable. In many of her poems, Barrett Browning reconsiders and reverses Victorian gender roles, depicting strong-willed, self-confident wives who enjoy a position of dominance or equality in relation to their husbands, thus leading to a happily married state. Barrett Browning seeks to depict marriage in radical new ways in order to defamiliarize it as an institution and force her readers to reconsider the domestic ideal in order to create a new marital ideal of gender equality and love.

## Chapter One: Marriage in Mid-Victorian England

The poets Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning enjoyed one of the most celebrated courtships and marriages of the nineteenth century. Since their marriage in 1846, they have become “an emblem of Victorian romantic love” (Pollock 13). Although they married late in life against the wishes of Barrett’s father, the two shared a happy relationship, a circumstance that may be attributed to the high degree of mutual respect they shared. Barrett Browning once wrote that she and Robert never fought, for the simple reason that “Robert knew *she* was always right” (Forster 200). In contrast, most English marriages during the Victorian era were marked by radically different roles: the husband was supposed to reign “as lord and master at table and fireside” while his wife was presumed to be “subservient to him, a devoted (and submissive) wife and mother” (Altick 53). As is well known, during this time, under the laws of coverture, a woman lost many of her rights once she became married; she did not have ownership rights over her own property, legal rights over her own children, and could not even secure a divorce under the same criteria as a man (Kern 357-58). Despite this, all young women were supposed to aspire to wifedom and, upon being wed, were “harnessed to the ‘moral enterprise’ of building status reputation for the family” (Davidoff 254). Wives were expected to serve as “moral compasses” for their families despite the fact that men, including their own husbands, rarely took them seriously or allowed them to exert any influence except over the most trivial decisions (Davidoff 254).

The cornerstone of Victorian society was the family unit, and the traditional Victorian family was built on the assumption that husband and wife had particular roles

to fill specific to their gender. This division of labor within the home was generally accepted willingly even by many feminist thinkers, who often did not protest their domestic duties or ask for more assistance from their husbands, but instead simply requested that more opportunities be allowed for women in the traditionally male spheres outside the home (Shanley 13). Some women such as Sarah Lewis praised the social practice of maintaining separate spheres of influence for men and women, reasoning that it was a system ordained by God. Lewis writes:

The principle of divided labor seems to be a maxim of the divine government, as regards the creature....Why should we wish to set aside this salutary law, and disturb the beautiful simplicity of arrangement which has given to man the power, and to women the influence, to second the plans of the Almighty goodness? They are formed to be cooperators, not rivals, in this great work; and rivals they would undoubtedly become if the same career of public ambition, and the same rewards of success were open to both (Lewis 44)

To many Victorian minds, wives had to be subordinate to their husbands because otherwise, men and women would compete with each other and create disorder in the home and society. In order to prevent such rivalry, wives were supposed to stay at home and their husbands were allowed to venture out into the wider world. Like Lewis, many women embraced these separate spheres and did not automatically protest them as an unfair social structure. Another famous female essayist, Sarah Stickney Ellis, defends the Victorian wife's limited sphere of influence, stating her belief that "the sphere of woman's happiest and most beneficial influence is a domestic one" and "It is a widely

mistaken notion to suppose that the sphere of usefulness recommended here, is a humiliating and degraded one” (Ellis 40, 43). Ellis feels that a woman moving in such a sphere “is not necessarily confined to a limited number of ideas, but can often expatiate upon subjects of mere local interest with a vigour of intellect, a freshness of feeling, and a liveliness of fancy” (Ellis 31). Ellis believes that a woman’s highest duty is to preside over her home wisely in her husband’s absence during the day, and then to be his comfort and companion when he returns home at night. She advises wives to listen to their husbands attentively, and to serve as his moral guide for his travels outside of the comfortable sphere of the home. Like Ellis, many Victorians believed that separate spheres of influence were necessary within the home primarily since “marriage could not be an egalitarian relationship, because if husband and wife disagreed, their dispute could not be settled by majority rule” (Shanley 11). Thus, in the Victorian household, the husband was expected to be the definitive authority, a one-man majority.

Relationships between men and women at this time were also marked by the strict division of gender roles and expectations. Men and women were regarded as two distinct, unequal sexes, each of which had its own unique set of abilities and limitations. In his essay “Of Queen’s Gardens,” John Ruskin outlines the very “separate characters” of men and women as they were popularly perceived in the Victorian era. The sexes were often depicted as polar opposites of each other; the man is described as having a power that is “active, progressive, defensive. He is eminently the doer, the creator, the discoverer, the defender. His intellect is for speculation and invention: his energy for adventure, for war” (Ruskin 58). Women, on the other hand, were said to possess an intellect “not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement, and

decision” (Ruskin 58). Ruskin reasons that it is the very different nature of men and women that necessitates their separate spheres of influence. He believes that by remaining in the home and sheltered from the outside world, a woman

is protected from all danger and temptation. The man, in his rough work in the open world, must encounter all peril and trial...But he guards the woman from all this; within his house, as ruled by her, unless she herself has sought it, need enter no danger, no temptation, no cause of error or offence. (Ruskin 59)

Ruskin, like many Victorian men, idealizes the role of the wife as a passive, loving, helpmeet and companion for her husband. The model wife is secluded at home so her husband can shield her from the outside world, and he will make decisions for her, rather than with her. Ruskin emphasizes that a wife’s first and foremost duties are to her home and to her husband, “and wherever a true wife comes, this home is always round her” (Ruskin 60). Since a wife’s function is thus limited in scope, Ruskin believes she does not require an extensive education, but instead, “All such knowledge should be given her as may enable her to understand, and even to aid, the work of men” (Ruskin 63). He argues that in order to be an ideal wife, a woman will not need to think for herself, so she should devote her time to developing good moral character rather than learning things of little importance such as “positions of cities,” “dates of events,” or “names of celebrated persons” (Ruskin 63). Ruskin states that

A woman, in any rank of life, ought to know whatever her husband is likely to know, but in a different way. His command of it should be foundational and progressive, hers, general and accomplished for daily use....A man

ought to know any language or science he learns, thoroughly, while a woman ought to know the same language, or science, only so far as may enable her to sympathize in her husband's pleasures, and in those of his best friends. (Ruskin 67)

In the ideal Victorian marital relationship, a wife should accept her subordinate position willingly, never question her husband's authority or natural superiority, or even attempt to think for herself. She is subsumed by her husband, not only within the home but also legally, under the coverture laws of the era.

By entering into a marriage pact in the Victorian era, "husband and wife became one person in law—and that one person was he" (Perkin 73). A husband's power was not limited to the home, either; legally, a married woman was denied even the most basic civil rights and was forced to submit to her husband's will. In 1855, the historian J. W. Kaye wrote that the effect of coverture laws was "to limit the aspirations, to paralyze the energies, and to demoralize the characters of women.... We make women what they are—we reduce them to dependence, and then taunt them with being incapable of independent action" (Kaye "Women" 558, qtd. in Helsing *Social Issues* 5). Many social critics noted that the extreme imbalance of power between men and women had demoralizing effects both in society and in the home. One feminist thinker of the time, Frances Power Cobbe, perceived the popular view of women to be that

a woman's whole life and being, her soul, body, time, property, thought, and care, ought to be given to her husband; that nothing short of such absorption in him and his interests makes her a true wife... when she is thus absorbed even a very mediocre character and inferior intellect can

make a man happy in a sense no splendour of endowments can otherwise do. (Cobbe qtd. in Helsinger *Social Issues* 20)

Cobbe believes that this “absorption” of a wife by her husband is unconscionable. She likens this effect of coverture laws to the practice of the Tarantula spider, which will eat and therefore “absorb” any weaker, smaller member of its own species (Cobbe qtd. in Helsinger *Social Issues* 21). She argues that although through such a “union” the Tarantula might have rendered the weaker spider “bone of his bone” and “flesh of his flesh,” it cannot fully “represent the family” in much the same manner that a husband is supposed to do (Cobbe qtd. in Helsinger *Social Issues* 21). Cobbe argues that one member of a pair can never completely speak for both, and therefore husbands should not be allowed such extensive, absolute power over their wives. Even Queen Victoria herself expressed similar feelings about the extreme power dynamics within marriage. In a letter to her daughter, she writes, “All marriage is such a lottery...though it may be a very happy one—still the poor woman is bodily and morally the husband’s slave. That always sticks in my throat” (*Dearest* 254 qtd. in Helsinger *Defining Voices* 74). Although she is the ruling monarch of England, Victoria resents the subservient status she must endure in her role as a wife. Even though Victoria still enjoyed a great degree of power, the marital laws of the time rendered most wives completely dependent and powerless.

Under Victorian law, since a woman could not legally manage her own finances, any inheritance or income she might receive legally became her husband’s. Although he was presumed to manage these finances wisely and maintain his wife well, these responsibilities could not easily be enforced (Helsinger *Social Issues* 14). Some women who protested the property laws believed that while women should not be considered

equal to men, they should still be allowed certain individual rights under the law.

Caroline Norton sought to change the contemporary laws in the interest of justice for both husbands and wives. Norton wrote, in her *Letter to the Queen*:

The natural position of woman is inferiority to man. Amen! That is a thing of God's appointing, not of man's devising. I believe it sincerely, as part of my religion: and I accept it as a matter proved to my reason. I have never pretended to the wild and ridiculous doctrine of equality. (98)

In an 1868 article she wrote for *Fraser's* magazine, Frances Power Cobbe makes skillful use of rhetoric to reveal the unjust nature of women's property laws. Cobbe demonstrates that lawmakers' presumptions and rationale for the property laws are reflected in the syllogism, "A man who supports his wife ought to have all her property; Most men support their wives; Therefore, all men ought to have all the property of their wives" (Cobbe qtd. in Helsinger *Social Issues* 18). However, as Cobbe points out, many men are unable or unwilling to properly support their wives especially among the lower classes, and without access to their own finances, their wives may be unable to obtain necessary items for daily living, such as food or clothing. Cobbe notes that if women really are the "physically, mentally, and morally inferior" sex, then men should not therefore pass law to push women further down in society, but instead should work to support and protect them (Cobbe qtd. in Helsinger *Social Issues* 19).

A woman's financial dependence on her husband meant that she was limited by the class status of her husband. Many working-class women who were victims of domestic violence were reluctant to prosecute their husbands, a fact that could "stem

from wives' fear of further violence after a prosecution and conviction [or] from anxieties about jeopardizing an already marginal family income" (Hammerton 40).

Women who did prosecute their husbands for abuse would often not be taken seriously by the courts, which would sometimes let the most brutal husbands go with a mere warning and a fine (Hammerton 47). Since domestic violence was so prevalent in working-class marriages, there was a degree of "community tolerance" for it. Officers of the court "frequently used the term 'rough usage' to describe what they felt women virtually took for granted in married life" (Hammerton 43). Domestic violence existed in the middle- and upper-class home as well, but the upper classes were less apt to acknowledge it. In 1856, J. W. Kaye argued that husbands of the wealthier classes do hurt their wives, but in more subtle ways:

They may utter words more cutting than sharp knives; they may do things more stunning in their effects on the victim than the blows of pokers or hammers; they may half kill their wives by process of slow torture—unkindness, infidelity, whatever shape is may assume—society will forgive them. (Kaye "Outrages" 235, qtd. in Hammerton 74)

Since the law favored husbands over wives no matter what their class, marital violence was often the result of a struggle for power within the relationship. Phyllis Rose suggests that the idea of "love" within a Victorian marriage might simply be "an ideological bone thrown to women to distract their attentions from the powerlessness of their lives" (Rose 8). Whether working- or upper-class, a woman was robbed of her power once she entered into marriage.

However, some men did make attempts to equalize marital law on behalf of their wives. In May of 1867, John Stuart Mill proposed a bill in the House of Commons to create laws that were gender-blind, substituting the word “person” for “man” (Tosh 53). Inspired by his close relationship with his wife Harriet Taylor, Mill voiced his belief that in the mid-Victorian era, wives could now be considered their husbands’ “chief associate, his most confidential friend, and often his most trusted advisor” (Mill 821-23, qtd. in Tosh 53). Mill himself had consented to marry his wife only after he had publicly renounced the unavoidable, unequal rights the law granted him over her through marriage (Jackson 10). Feminist thinkers of the era like Mill argued that much of marital law “was based on the premise that a wife owed obedience to her husband, and where she did not voluntarily follow his will the law would leave her no other option” (Shanley 8). These feminists pointed out that

the only other persons who suffered anything like the ‘civil death’ of married women were children, whose legal dependency ended when they reached their majority, idiots, who were incapable of fully rational activity, and criminals, who forfeited their rights through their own actions. (Shanley 10)

Evidence for the extreme sexist slant of the law could be found not only in the laws regarding property rights, but also those concerning adultery and divorce.

The act of adultery was a strict social taboo for both sexes, but it was considered especially heinous when committed by a wife against her husband. Numerous laws existed to punish “unfaithful” wives, but these could not be applied to husbands, even if there existed greater evidence against him. Charges of a wife’s “criminal conversation” with another man could be brought against a woman solely on the claim of her husband,

but the law would not usually allow her to make any similar allegations. Powerless to prevent, deny, or defend herself against the charges against her, a wife in such a situation faced a damning catch-22, since “even if a defendant was declared ‘not guilty,’ no wife was considered ‘innocent’ after such a proceeding” (Shanley 24). Such legal proceedings were symptomatic of the skewed ideas of the husband-wife relationship that were prevalent during the Victorian era. These laws directly implied that “a husband in some manner owned his wife’s affection and sexual services, that she was his property” and that compensation was required for the “alleged damage to a husband’s ‘property’” (Shanley 24). Men, on the other hand, were not legally “owned” by their wives in any comparable manner, so they were allowed to indulge in sexual relationships outside of marriage with little fear of legal ramifications. Many similar laws demonstrated the belief that marital infidelity is natural for a man but was both unnatural and unacceptable behavior for a woman (Jackson 9). In 1857, the Bishop of Oxford even proposed a bill that would prohibit adulterous women from the legal right to marry again, although the same bill would have allowed adulterous men legal impunity (Shanley 42). Such legalized sexual double standards reinforced the government’s sanctioning of the oppression and subjection of women by their husbands.

The Victorian feminist Caroline Norton postulated that men did not make adultery and divorce laws equal because “men fear to curb the license of their own pleasures” (Norton Letter 57-59, qtd. in Shanley 28). Evidence supporting this belief can be found in the “Contagious Diseases Acts” that were passed in 1864 and 1866, forcing women suspected of prostitution to submit to mandatory medical exams in an effort to reduce the spread of venereal disease (Jackson 25). The exams were degrading and could be forced

upon a woman on the mere suspicion of lascivious behavior. These Acts were made law at a time that many women, unable to enter into a more “legitimate” profession due to the constraints of the law, were forced into prostitution with no other recourse. The Acts also carried the assumption that “male sexual access to women was both legitimate and necessary; since the military did not allow its enlisted men to marry, it had to facilitate their access to prostitutes” (Shanley 83). Married men who were unhappy with their wives’ sexual performance could visit prostitutes as they desired, but they could divorce their wives if they suspected infidelity. In regard to divorce law, members of Parliament were said to have turned to the words of Jesus, “but I say to you, that whosoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, causes her to commit adultery,” as evidence that God condoned the divorcing of wives by husbands, but not vice-versa (Shanley 43; Matt 5:32). Even women who firmly believed that men and women should inhabit separate social spheres still felt that the divorce laws of the time were profoundly unjust. One such figure, Eliza Lynn Linton, proclaimed that women were entitled to “simple justice: The recognition of their individuality as wives, the recognition of their natural rights as mothers, the permission to them to live by their own honourable industry” (Linton 260, qtd. in Shanley 29). In 1857, when debating a “progressive” bill that would allow the possibility of granting a wife the right to divorce her husband, rather than only vice versa, the House of Lords had a heated argument about

the possible aggravations that would, when combined with adultery, justify a woman in seeking release from her marriage vows. From a list that included rape, sodomy, desertion, transportation, penal servitude, incest, bigamy, and cruelty, they accepted only the last three, indicating that they did not regard crimes of

sexual violence or prolonged absence by the husband as fatal to the marriage bond. (Shanley 42)

Such laws made it nearly impossible for wives to seek divorces except in extraordinary circumstances or cases of extreme cruelty, although their husbands could divorce them by bringing charges of adultery for which there was little or no evidence. Women were alternately ignored or oppressed by the law once they entered into marriage, but if they were divorced, the few rights they still possessed were revoked as well.

During the period in which Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote, women were faced with the unfortunate fact that they would in effect become legal nonentities the moment they married. Compounding these problems, a wife would be unable to initiate a divorce from her husband except by a private Act of Parliament, although her husband possessed the ability to divorce or desert her, and she would be unable to legally defend herself against these circumstances (Shanley 8-9). To avoid initiating an Act of Parliament, couples could be granted a judicial separation by the Church of England called *divorce a mensa et thoro*, but this would not result in a true divorce, since neither partner could remarry and the husband preserved rights to his wife's property (Helsing *Social Issues* 23). Women who fled from their husbands without being divorced could be forced by law to return to their spouses, since they were considered to possess "rights" over her body. A woman abandoned by her husband, such as the narrator of Barrett Browning's "Void in Law," was deprived of even the most basic civil rights, since she could not sign contracts, own property or take any legal action without the assistance of her husband. In the eighteenth century, William Blackstone had explained why a woman must give up her legal rights upon marriage by reasoning that "if husband and wife were 'one body' before

God, they were ‘one person’ in the law, and that person was represented by the husband” (Blackstone 430, qtd. in Shanley 8). Caroline Norton complained that the Victorian coverture laws essentially made a woman a non-person from the moment she signed a marriage license. She explains, “I propose to take a lease, and am told, that being ‘non-existent’ in law, *my* signature is worthless.... I am informed that, being ‘non-existent’ in law, it would be a mere farce *my* attempting to make a will” (Norton Laws 160-61, qtd. in Shanley 26). The 1857 debates over married women’s rights to property revealed the British Parliament’s belief that in a marriage, the husband should enjoy full control in the relationship, make all pertinent decisions, and have sole ownership of all property. “A married woman’s property law...would have recognized the existence of two separate wills within an *ongoing* marriage...[but] very few Members of Parliament believed that two independent wills could exist in one household without inviting disaster” (Shanley 46). The bill was ultimately passed in a much weaker version, and it was not until 1870 that a stronger bill allowing for women to own property under certain conditions was finally passed into law (Yalom 188).

In Elizabeth Barrett’s own marriage to Robert Browning, the two writers negotiated gender roles and marital responsibilities in numerous ways that were unconventional for the time. From the time she was a young girl, Barrett was disdainful of marriage as it was practiced in Victorian England, but she had very idealistic notions of what a marriage could be like if reimagined as a more equitable partnership. However, Barrett was convinced that her radical rethinking of gender, combined with her love of romance, would intimidate any potential mates and render her unfit for marriage. During her courtship with Robert, she explained to him,

People used to say to me, ‘You expect too much—you are too romantic—’  
And my answer always was that ‘I could not expect too much when I have  
expected nothing at all’..which was the truth—for I never thought...that  
anyone whom *I* could love, would stoop to love ME..<sup>2</sup> the two things  
seemed clearly incompatible to my understanding. (*Browning Courtship*  
175)

Elizabeth Barrett’s previous negative experiences with “romantic love” had fueled her skepticism of courtship and marriage. She admitted to Browning, “It is true..that I have not a high appreciation of what passes in the world...under the name of love.... It has appeared to me...that in nothing, men...& women too!..were so apt to mistake their own feelings, as in this one thing” (*Browning Courtship* 175). Barrett found that even men and women who appeared to be happily married were often miserable and felt “ruined” by the manacles of matrimony. In one of her early letters to Browning during their courtship, Barrett fiercely outlined the hypocrisies she saw in the marriages around her:

To see the marriages which are made every day!—worse than solitudes &  
more desolate! In the case of the two happiest I ever knew, one of the  
husbands said in confidence, to a brother of mine...that he had ‘ruined his  
prospects by marrying’; & the other said to myself at the very moment of  
professing an extraordinary happiness,.. ‘But I should have done as well if  
I had not married *her*.’ Then for the falseness—the first time I ever, in my  
own experience, heard that word which rhymes to glove & comes as easily

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<sup>2</sup> In both her personal correspondence and her poetry, Barrett Browning preferred to use only two dots in her ellipses instead of the more conventional three dots. Her punctuation is quoted as she rendered it throughout.

off and on, (on some hands!).. it was from a man of whose attentions to another woman I was at that time *her confidante*. (*Browning Courtship* 175-76)

Elizabeth Barrett's abhorrence of deceit, lovelessness, and deception in marriage are also key themes of her poetry. Many of her poems portray the tragedies couples must endure due to a philandering husband or a faithless fiancé. Barrett may have inherited some of this innate distrust of marriage as an institution from her father, who was adamant that his daughter should never marry. Despite her own doubts about her prospects of marrying and about the institution of marriage, Barrett was disheartened by her father's refusal even to consider the benefits of marriage. She told a friend, "Once I heard of his saying of me that I was 'the purest woman he ever knew,' ... I understood perfectly what he meant by *that*—viz—that I had not troubled him with the iniquity of love-affairs, or any impropriety of seeming to think about being married" (*Browning Courtship* 327). When Barrett finally decided to marry Browning, she faced difficult decisions about how to sidestep her father's wishes. As she later explained to a friend, although Browning would have liked to keep to tradition and ask Barrett's father for her hand in marriage, this was not possible:

an application to my father was certainly the obvious course, if it had not been for his peculiar nature and my peculiar position. But there is no speculation in this case; it is a matter of *knowledge* that if Robert had applied to him in the first instance he would have been forbidden the house without a moment's scruple; and...I should have been incapacitated

from any after-exertion by the horrible scenes to which, as a thing of course, I should have been exposed. (*Browning Courtship* 292)

Because of her own questions and the influence of her father's beliefs, Barrett was extremely nervous about her impending marriage. She admitted, "I am paralysed when I think of having to write such words as.. 'Papa, I am married, --I hope you will not be too displeased'" (*Browning Courtship* 327). Elizabeth Barrett initially demurred when Robert asked her to marry him and travel with him to Italy, although she acknowledged that her health would undoubtedly suffer from another English winter. As she explained in a letter to an acquaintance, Robert replied to her, "If you are ill and keep your resolution of not marrying me under those circumstances, I will keep mine and love you till God shall take us both" (*Browning Courtship* 292). Thus, despite her doubts, Elizabeth Barrett married Robert Browning in secret on September 12, 1846.

In a letter to a friend only one month after their marriage, Barrett Browning describes her wedding using very unusual terms, saying she met Browning "clandestinely...in the parish church, where we were married before two witnesses... I looked, he says, more dead than alive, and can well believe it, for I all but fainted on the way" (*Browning Courtship* 295). This unusual wedding is fitting for what Barrett Browning hoped would prove to be a very unusual marriage. Although she loved Browning dearly, she did not want to become a typical Victorian housewife, nor did she wish to be trapped in one of the loveless marriages common at the time. She perceived her union with Browning to be the beginning of a new type of marriage for an age that bred so much distrust between husband and wife. The day after their wedding, Barrett Browning voiced her feelings for Browning:

Dearest, in the emotion & confusion of yesterday morning, there was yet room in me for one thought which was not a feeling—for I thought that, of the many, many women who have stood where I stood, & to the same end, not one of them all perhaps, since that building was a church, has had reasons strong as mine, for an absolute trust & devotion towards the man she married, -- not one! And then I both thought & felt, that it was only just, for them,.. those women who were less happy,.. to have that affectionate sympathy & support & presence of their nearest relations, parent or sister,.. which failed to *me*,..needing it less thro' being happier!  
*(Browning Courtship 322)*

It is impossible to deny that Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning feel a deep mutual affection for one another when she writes, “The only wonder is how such a man, whom any woman could have loved, should have loved *me*,” but she still demonstrates some self-doubt when in the same breath she concedes, “but men of genius, you know, are apt to love with their imagination” (*Browning Courtship 295*). She also defines their relationship in a manner very unusual for the time, claiming, “I know my place better than he does, who is too humble” (*Browning Courtship 295*). From the time she married in 1846 until her death in 1861, Elizabeth Barrett Browning enjoyed a successful marriage to Robert Browning. Only a few days into their marriage, Barrett Browning was able to pinpoint the “secret” of what would lead to their long-lasting, happy marriage when she observed to Robert:

In your ways towards me, you have acted throughout too much ‘the woman’s part’, as that is considered—You loved me because I was lower

than others, that you might be generous & raise me up: --very characteristic for a woman (in her ideal standard) but quite wrong for a man, as again & again I used to signify to you, Robert—but you went on & did it all the same. And now, you still go on—you persist—you will be the woman of the play, to the last; let the prompter prompt ever so against you. You are to do everything I like, instead of doing what *you* like, and to ‘honour & obey’ *me*, in spite of what was in the vows last Saturday [sic]. (*Browning Courtship* 327-28)

The Brownings’ relationship as described in this letter is an inversion of the popular marital ideal promoted at the time. Browning, who in the ideal Victorian role of husband would be the assertive decision-maker, chooses instead to adopt a more typically “feminine” role by demonstrating obedience and passivity. His wife, therefore, becomes the more powerful and dominant of the two, a role-reversal that reflects the example provided by the reigning monarch Victoria and her husband, Prince Albert. Barrett Browning drew on such unique marital relationships as prototypes for the successful marriages she depicted in her poetry, such as the coupling of the strong-willed Aurora with her blind cousin Romney in *Aurora Leigh*.

Since Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning both had enjoyed a degree of fame prior to their union, the public was intensely curious about their relationship. One literary notice on Elizabeth Barrett Browning proclaimed enthusiastically:

We are reminded by the new name in which we have now to write of her, of an alliance with a partner whose genius is as singular, as varied, as deeply-grounded and as far-reaching as that of any writer of our times; a

union to which, we believe, there is no equal parallel in history. (*Literary World* 86)

This “unparalleled” marriage piqued the interest of both literary critics and the public alike. Not only were the secretive circumstances under which the couple was married unusual, but Elizabeth Barrett was also already forty years old when she wed, an incredible occurrence during an era in which the average bride was in her twenties (Perkin 237). She was also six years older than her husband, when the conventional Victorian bridegroom would have aspired to marry a younger woman. However unorthodox her marriage may have been, for many critics, Elizabeth Barrett’s union with Robert Browning was interpreted as revealing a heretofore “hidden” femininity in the famous poet. When depicting Barrett Browning as a bride, critics described her in highly feminine terms, often portraying her as a damsel in distress whom Browning “saved” by marrying her. In one such article focusing on the “happy marriages of noted persons,” the author outlines the “sweet story of their wedded happiness” and notes the “pitying love” of Browning, a “vigorous, society-loving man” for Barrett, a “secluded invalid” (Doughty 590). Another American critic spoke of Robert Browning’s wife as “she of whom we know little, but that she is wise and good, --that she was for years the invalid inmate of a darkened chamber, when she plumed herself for a flight, that for a time at least, drew England’s eyes from Browning to herself” (C. W. H. D. 568). However, at the time that Robert Browning married Elizabeth Barrett, she was the more famous poet, and it was said that “Robert looked to her as his Muse, yet in Italy his career languished while hers continues to flourish” (Neville-Singleton 3). Many contemporary critics agreed with the assessment that, “great as Robert Browning is in the world of poetry, his wife is literally

‘the better half’” (Allibone 266). To acknowledge that a wife’s fame, influence, and skill outdistanced that of her own husband was contrary to the very foundation of Victorian society. Critics of the time were very careful to negotiate this dilemma by describing the Brownings in very gendered terms: he as the masculine thinker, and she as the feminine dreamer. An 1851 critic described the Brownings as an ideal Victorian couple, noting as one difference between them that Robert Browning “thinks, perhaps, most deeply, yet she is a thinker too....Upon the whole, we think Browning’s the higher and the master spirit; hers the more tender, and the more musical also” (*Eclectic* 358). Many critics assessed the Brownings’ marital relationship and perceived it as a “happy” and “perfect union” because of their flawless balance of masculine and feminine identities:

Browning’s...countenance is so full of vigour, freshness, and refined power....Mrs. Browning is, in many respects, the correlative of her husband. As he is full of manly power, so she is a type of the most sensitive and delicate womanhood.... Her figure is slight, her countenance expressive of genius and sensibility, shaded by a veil of long brown locks; and her tremulous voice often flutters over her words, like the flame of a dying candle over the wick. (Hillard 178)

This critic’s perception of the Brownings’ division of power and gender roles is in direct contrast to Barrett Browning’s own insights into the framework of their relationship. Far from being “the woman of the play,” as Barrett Browning describes her husband, Robert is portrayed as the masculine protector of his delicate wife (*Browning Courtship* 327-28). Elizabeth Barrett Browning was aware that the mores concerning gender roles and marriage were so firmly ingrained in Victorian society that her poetic depictions of

marriage, which were so radically different from the norm, might shock or perplex her audience. Her contemporary critics' and readers' varied reactions to her marriage demonstrated how subversive Barrett Browning's ideas of marriage were at the time.

Drawing on the public's fascination with the Browning marriage, many aspiring female poets sought to "honor" the event of Elizabeth Barrett's wedding by penning celebratory poems. However, many of these poems congratulate Barrett while at the same time attempting to silence her voice as a poet. While Barrett's "masculine" desire to write poetry was tolerated when she was a single woman, the public expected more "feminine" behavior from Barrett Browning in her new role as a wife. Many of these commemorative poems presume her new marriage to signal the end of her life as a poet. One aspiring poet heralds the news of Barrett's wedding with a strange poem likening Barrett to a holy, virginal figure such as a nun or priestess and implies that the poet is now transformed into a new being by marriage. She claims:

For Priestess, Sybil, Nun, we look in vain;  
The spirit passeth in another guise,  
The happy bride no longer may remain  
Within that shrine, sheltered from human eyes  
By wreaths aerial, smoke of sacrifice! (*Harbinger* 395)

This ambitious poet next insinuates that it was the solitude and virginity of Elizabeth Barrett that afforded her the power and skill she demonstrated in her poetry. Now, the aspirant suggests, Barrett will be forced to submit to the traditional feminine roles necessitated by wifehood and must relinquish her pen and pass her laurels to another young poet. The author of the commemorative piece suggests,

Nor will we grieve to hear thy voice no more,  
Hushed into happiness thy song, and lost,  
Like stream of silver, fused in golden ore,  
Or fainting twilight, by fall moonbeams crost,  
Or river, lapsed into Earth's flowery breast,—  
All things are silent, when most deeply blest! (Harbinger 396)

However, Elizabeth Barrett did not lay down her pen once she was married; instead, she and Robert inspired one another and each continued to produce even greater works as a part of a married couple. One of the most remarkable aspects of Elizabeth Barrett Browning is that, even after she became a married woman, she continued to write radical, thought-provoking poems on marriage and its practices in her time. She questions the merits of the “ideal” Victorian wife and her role in the household and in her marital relationship, and Barrett Browning provides a scathing critique of the ill treatment many Victorian wives received from their husbands. Her own successful marriage may have given her hope and optimism for the success of her concept of marriage, one in which the wife is allowed significant authority and influence over her husband. In many of her poems written prior to her wedding date, Barrett Browning criticizes arranged marriages, condemns tyrannical husbands, and illustrates the tragic circumstances that wives suffer when they are too passive to stand up for their own rights. After her marriage to Robert Browning, Elizabeth Barrett Browning perfected her radical new concept of the “marital ideal” and exhibited it in her shorter poems before finally perfecting the idea of a wife exercising “creative control” in her novel-poem, *Aurora Leigh*. Through these works, Barrett Browning created her own responses to the problems associated with marriage in

Victorian England.

## Chapter Two: Marriage in EBB's Shorter Poems

From the time she was a teenager, Barrett Browning consistently demonstrates through her poetry that she was largely skeptical, if not cynical, about the idea of marriage as it was commonly practiced in Victorian-era England. In most poems that deal with this topic, Barrett Browning depicts wives or brides-to-be as plighted victims or doomed slaves, and harshly characterizes husbands and grooms as dull, unsympathetic philanderers. In many of her shorter poems, such as “A Romance of the Ganges” and “Bertha in the Lane,” the balance of power within marriage is consistent with Victorian ideals, since the wives are veritable “Angels in the House” and remain subservient to their husbands. These husbands are tyrannical figures, and the unreasonable demands they place on their wives ultimately lead to tragic consequences. When, however, Barrett Browning does portray a “successful marriage” in her poetry, such as that between Aurora and Romney at the end of *Aurora Leigh*, or between Queen Victoria and Prince Albert in “Crowned and Wedded,” the traditional gender roles of the time are reversed: the woman is in a position of uncontested authority over the man. This inversion of what constitutes a happy union was fairly radical for the time, but it remains a consistent theme throughout Barrett Browning’s work, challenging Victorian society to reconsider the merits of the popular marital ideal.

As Barrett Browning ages and enters into her own marriage, her ideas on the institution of marriage change, but certain elements remain constant. Barrett Browning writes almost exclusively from a female point of view, so when marriage is the subject of

her work, she delves primarily into the thoughts and feelings of wives and young brides. Contrary to the norms of Victorian society, in many of Barrett Browning's poems, men may have little influence over the lives of women, and husbands may be mentioned but are seldom seen. Though they would have been largely powerless in her contemporary society, Barrett Browning's women are powerful in her poetry, and it is only the women who are powerful in their own spheres who create successful marriages. Barrett Browning is initially skeptical of the institution of marriage itself, as is evidenced in poems such as "To Victoire, On Her Marriage," in which she describes a wedding as a grievous "farewell" to her friend (32). However, in later poems, such as "Crowned and Wedded" and "Lady Geraldine's Courtship," as well as her "novel-poem," *Aurora Leigh*, Barrett Browning posits that if a wife is allowed independence and control, the marriage has a chance to thrive; if not, the husband will ultimately betray his wife, and the marriage is doomed.

One of the earliest poems in which Barrett Browning alludes to marriage is "On a Picture of Riego's Widow, Placed in the Exhibition" written in 1823, after Rafael del Nuñez Riego, a leader of the Spanish Revolution, was executed (Garrett 9). The poet is so moved by a portrait of Theresa del Riego, the revolutionary's widow, that she wrote this poem to celebrate a wife whose love for her husband is so strong that it transcends even death. Barrett Browning depicts Theresa del Riego as appearing stoic and strong for the public eye, declaring, "We look upon the Widow's face,/ And only read the Patriot's woe!" (7-8). Browning claims, however, that inwardly, the widow is utterly broken, though she is capable of exercising remarkable self-control. The only reason she shows no such emotion is that, as Barrett Browning discerns, "Thou wouldst not give to vulgar

eyne/ The sacred tear which fell for HIM” (11-12). Barrett Browning portrays Rafael del Nunez Riego as a patriot and a martyr, but she nearly sanctifies his widow, who is depicted as the embodiment of a true and loving wife. Although Theresa del Riego is the only living partner in their marriage, she will still never be able to eclipse the success he enjoyed during their life together, since “No word, no look, no sigh of thine,/ Would make *his* glory seem more dim” (9-10). The widow is left with “ruined joys” and a “broken heart,” but feels that her profound love for her late husband is so personal that it should not be displayed for public view. Her only option is to feel her pain in private, as Barrett Browning conjectures:

Yet haply in the midnight air,  
When none might part thy God and thee,  
The lengthened sob, the passionate prayer,  
Have spoken thy soul’s agony! (29-32)

In one of her first poems focused on marriage, Barrett Browning thus depicts a loving, passionate relationship between Rafael and Theresa del Riego, which is particularly remarkable since Theresa’s husband is already dead. Barrett Browning chooses not to write of the del Riegos’ presumably happy partnership prior to his execution, or even to conjecture about Rafael’s feelings of loss once he was condemned and knew they would no longer be together. Since Barrett Browning chooses not to do so, it remains unknown whether the del Riegos’ living marriage was a satisfactory one, but Barrett Browning expresses hope that Theresa, as the surviving spouse, may have found a kind of power in widowhood that allows her to love her husband purely and on her own terms.

A year later, in 1824, Theresa del Riego herself died, and Barrett Browning penned another poem dedicated to her. In “From the Death-bed of Theresa del Riego,” Theresa’s profound, undying love for her spouse makes her a martyr, much like her late husband. Theresa is depicted as an icon, the quintessential widow dying of a broken heart; she becomes defined by the black clothes she wears and is nameless in the poem’s text beyond the title. In learning of her husband’s death, she is depicted as a passive, feminine, grief-stricken woman:

She heard that he was dead!—she asked not how—  
For *he* was dead! She wailed not o’er his urn,  
For *he* was dead—and in her hands, should burn,  
His vestal flame of honour radiantly:  
Sighing would dim its light—she did not sigh.  
She only died. (29-34)

Barrett Browning suggests that the emotional trauma of becoming a widow was what killed Theresa del Riego, and that she essentially died “of a broken heart.” Together, she and her husband may have once been a capable, powerful team, but without her husband, her identity is destroyed and she can no longer exist in this world as she did before. Her repetition of the line “*he* was dead!” with an italicized “he” suggests the great esteem in which Riego’s widow held her husband and her intense dependence on him. However, never mentioned is whether or not Riego possessed equally strong feelings for her. Instead, the poem focuses solely on Theresa and the unrequited love she feels for a man who has already gone to his grave. It is interesting to note that although one spouse is dead and the other soon to join him, the Riego marriage is depicted as a strong and loving

one. Ironically, the Theresa del Riego poems are some of the only works that depict marriage positively in Barrett Browning's very early poetry. It seems that only in the context of death or unrequited love will Barrett Browning entertain the concept of a fulfilling marriage. Perhaps this attitude can be attributed in part to lack of maturity, since Barrett Browning was only seventeen years old at the time she wrote the Riego poems, but it is also indicative of her early attitudes toward matrimony.

Further evidence of Barrett Browning's intellectual and emotional state at a relatively young age can be found in a poem she wrote to a young French friend in 1833, "To Victoire, on her Marriage" (Porter 279). Instead of offering a joyous blessing to celebrate her friend's wedding as might be expected, the young Barrett Browning pens an unenthusiastic poem that demonstrates worry over the future state of their friendship and her qualms about the institution of marriage. After speaking of her abiding love for her friend, Barrett Browning laments,

And now a change hath come to us,

A sea doth rush between!

I do not know if we can be

Again as we have been. (9-12)

Barrett Browning's choice of language implies that Victoire has committed a kind of "adultery" against her, and she is struggling to come to terms of forgiveness. She treats Victoire's engagement as if her friend were doomed to be killed, not wedded, bemoaning, "thou, to one I never knew,/ Art plighted for a bride" (15-16). Not having met Victoire's bridegroom, Barrett Browning is unable to gauge how the two may divide or share their spousal roles, and she seems skeptical already of his suitability for her beloved friend.

The use of the word “plight” is also noteworthy, since it might not only be a reference to her impending marriage vows, but also to the unfortunate, potentially dangerous situation to which Victoire may be committing herself (OED). Barrett Browning calls on Victoire to remember their friendship and their own past together, and cautions her against forgetting these important aspects of her previous life after she is married.

Concentrating primarily on rekindling old feelings of friendship and feminine love, Barrett Browning seems uninterested, if not disappointed, in the actual wedding event. She pays mere lip service to blessing the union, writing a few short, unspectacular lines:

Bind, bind the wreath! the slender ring

Thy wedded finger press!

May he who calls thy love his own,

Call so thine happiness! (20-24)

Ultimately, however, Barrett Browning appears more concerned about her own relationship with Victoire than with that of Victoire and her new husband. She warns that while he may string together “new melodies” with her, they must “never mar the old” (28). Although ostensibly a marriage poem, the love central to this piece is the love between Barrett Browning and Victoire, not between Victoire and her fiancé. Barrett Browning expresses a romantic devotion to Victoire that seems to usurp a fiancé’s role, as she wishes she could clasp Victoire’s hand (29) and asks to be kept in Victoire’s heart (34). Barrett Browning then bids “farewell” to her friend, citing that she may see her face “no more” now that she is married (32). She admits that hers is a “selfish prayer” for Victoire’s happiness, perhaps because Barrett Browning wishes to believe in the

possibility of a happy union for her own sake, but has her doubts about the possibility of experiencing a good marriage in her future (35). Selfishly, the poet regards the marital bond as a separation of friends rather than a union of lovers, and she holds her own longing for female companionship in higher esteem than the desires of either Victoire or her new husband. By putting emphasis on feminine friendship over marriage in the poem, Barrett Browning reveals her early distrust of Victorian marriage practices.

Although in her poetry Barrett Browning most frequently writes from a female perspective, in 1836, she chose to write a poem with a focus on the male point of view. Her poem “The Poet’s Vow” bears a title that refers both to a poet’s vow to live a life of asceticism and his broken vow to his fiancée, whom he ultimately refuses to marry. It is an especially interesting poem because, as one critic has pointed out, although Barrett Browning chooses to write in the voice of a male poet, she then takes “the side of the passive female object against the ostensible protagonist” (Mermin *Origins* 71). Although the female love interest of the poem, Rosalind, speaks only a few short lines to the poet, she achieves even greater power than the supposed man of letters by taking up the pen and writing for herself. The battle of words that the formerly engaged couple wages against each other shows the tragedy that can result when men presume to have uncontested authority over the women who love them. The poem opens with a deceptively rural, domestic idyll as “The peasant’s wife hath looked without/ Her cottage door and smiled,/ for there the peasant drops his spade/ to clasp his youngest child” (13-16). However, soon this comfortable description of marriage is replaced when the titular poet urges his best friend, Roland, to marry his “plighted bride” Rosalind, for his own sake, offering his ancestral lands as a dowry (136-40). This announcement takes his

betrothed by surprise, and she denounces her fiancé as “cruel” (172) and “cold” (178) and entreats him to remember their engagement, pleading with him as a “friend” and “lover” (189). She then declares:

“I will not live Sir Roland’s bride,  
That dower I will not hold;  
I tread below my feet that go,  
These parchments bought and sold:  
The tears I weep are mine to keep,  
And worthier than thy gold.” (191-96)

Rosalind refuses to be considered the “property” of any man, and is furious that she is presumed to have no choice in whom she would marry. Although this poem may be set in an earlier century, the practice of arranged marriages and the de facto existence of women as properties to be bought and sold were still visible during Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s own time. Through the character of Rosalind, Barrett Browning voices her detestation and derision for these outdated, barbaric practices and beliefs. The poet makes a tragic error by underestimating the power that his former beloved may wield over him.

As the poet rejects his betrothed, he also rejects the world and opts instead only to watch life as it passes him by. From his lattice he sees a “bridal pomp” on its journey, and witnesses how the groom “speaketh low for happiness,” but his bride in contrast “blusheth red for shame” (293-94). It is not made explicit whether this couple is Roland and Rosalind, but the “shame” the bride feels on her wedding day could be explained by her unwilling participation in a marriage ceremony that she is powerless to prevent. The

tragedy is further complicated as Rosalind is next depicted lying on her deathbed, plotting her revenge for the wrongs her former fiancé has done her. She asks the nurse who attends her to carry her dead body along with a scroll she has written to the poet's door, vowing that this time, she will "not be turned away" by him (375). The poet reads her damning words and is so touched by them that he collapses upon her corpse in tears:

Bow lower down before the throne,  
Triumphant Rosalind!  
He boweth on thy corpse his face,  
And weepeth as the blind (457-60)

Rosalind at last has accomplished her revenge against the poet and has turned the tables by asserting her mastery over him, even from beyond the grave. In death, she at last is treated to the sound of victory over her erstwhile love: "That weeping wild of a reckless child/ From a proud man's broken heart" (474-75). Rosalind then has her ultimate triumph over the poet as retribution for her unrequited love; the poet is found dead the next morning lying on the bier with Rosalind. His masculine arrogance and presumption of authority over his bride-to-be directly leads to a tragic end for them both.

As exemplified in "The Poet's Vow," Barrett Browning often used the technique of displacement in her poetry to make her most scathing indictments of contemporary English practices, creating pointed fables set in a very distant time or place. In her 1838 poem, "The Romaunt of the Page," Barrett Browning employed a medieval setting in order to highlight many of the outdated ideas about marriage still perpetuated in Victorian society that claim their roots in the code of chivalry (Stephenson *Love* 29). Its outlandish plot and melodramatic pathos reflect the knight's ridiculous beliefs about the

role of women and wives in particular. In this work, a knight marries a woman not for love, but as an obligation to an earl with whom he had previously fought. The knight was unable to see the face of his bride, who kissed the mouth of her dead mother before kissing her new husband (XXIII. 8-9). Only moments after their wedding, the knight deserts his bride to fight in Palestine, leaving her wedded and abandoned. Although this is hardly an arrangement for a strong or lasting marriage, the knight's bride is determined to protect her husband, so she follows him, dressed as a page. The knight later describes his hurried wedding as he journeys with this young "page":

In the dark chambere, if the bride was fair,  
Ye wis, I could not see,  
But the steed thrice neighed, and the priest fast prayed,  
And wedded fast were we. (XXIII. 1-4)

In order to gauge her husband's reaction to what she has done, the "page" then relates her story to the knight, pretending instead that his/her "own sister"... "followed him she wed before,/ Disguised as his true servitor,/ To the very battle-place" (XXIV.6-8) The knight laughs at the tale, saying that were he in the same situation, he could love "no woman, whether dark or bright,/ Unwomaned if she be" (XXV.6-7). He instead imagines his bride performing socially acceptable, more "womanly" actions, such as praying for his welfare, growing pale with love, and shedding tears of worry "behind her woman's veil" (XXVIII.9). The knight likens a woman's honor to a high, untouchable cloud, and vows that if his wife were to pose as a man, he could "love her as [his] servitor,/ But little as [his] wife" (XXIX.6-7). He cannot comprehend the value of a woman taking charge of her own life and demonstrating a reserve of inner strength equal to that of a man. He

wishes for a predictable, submissive wife for whom he would be unquestionable lord and master.

The knight's narrow-minded attitude about the role of his wife frustrates and disheartens the disguised page, and she asks herself with clenched fists, "Have I renounced my womanhood,/ For wifehood unto *thee*...?" (XXXVI.3-4). Realizing that her husband would hold her in contempt for her act of loving devotion, she decides to sacrifice herself, but kindly wishes to God that the knight may ultimately find a new bride, "more woman-proud and half as true" as herself (XXXVII.3). Although the wife depicted in this poem engages in gender-bending behavior and defies her husband's wishes, she also demonstrates the devout spousal love that was so highly valued in Victorian women. However, Barrett Browning here cleverly shows the dark side of underappreciated wifely love, since it is the woman's very devotion to the knight that leads to her bloody death. In the last few stanzas of the poem, Barrett Browning makes her stance clear: "The Loving is the Dying" (XLII.8). Although the poem's title suggests an experience of romantic love, the page/wife's romantic attachment and bond to her husband leads to her ruin and loss of identity. The "Romaunt" becomes an extended metaphor for the condition of the Victorian housewife; she is relegated to servitude under her husband, and by joining with him in marriage, she must succumb to the death of rights, liberties, and sense of self.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote some of her most scathing works on the problems endemic to Victorian marriage, such as "The Romaunt of the Page," while she was in her thirties. The topic of marital infidelity is a theme that recurs frequently in Barrett Browning's work during this time. One of the first poems Barrett Browning

wrote exploring the subject was “A Romance of the Ganges,” written in 1838. In this poem, an Indian maiden, Nuleeni, crosses the Ganges river to meet her bridegroom for their marriage ceremony. As they sail, Nuleeni’s companion, Luti, reveals her own affair with the bridegroom, admitting that her heart “foretold his falsehood” even before he announced his engagement to her friend (XI.1). However, Luti resigns herself to shedding no tears for her situation, proclaiming, “I weep no faithless lover where/ I wept a loving father” (X.7-8). The bonds of paternal affection trump those of romantic attachment in Luti’s heart. Just as in “The Romaunt of the Page,” for this young maiden, a direct connection exists between love and death. She asks herself, “What doth it prove when Death and Love/ Choose out the self-same place?” (IX.7-8). Echoing Barrett Browning’s own earlier sentiments in “To Victoire, On Her Marriage,” her character Luti emphasizes the bond shared between the two women, and shows no joy over the wedding to come. Luti laments her lot and the betrayal of her lover, prompting Nuleeni to ask her, “why glads it thee that a bride-day be/ By a word of *wrong* defiled?” (XX.5-6). Nuleeni perceives that Luti takes delight in revealing her beloved’s infidelity in order to be revenged and to dampen the joy of others on the wedding day. Luti offers Nuleeni advice, eventually reducing the young bride to tears:

‘But when *he* comes, his marriage-band  
Around thy neck to throw,  
Thy bride-smile raise to meet his gaze,  
And whisper,—*There is one betrays,*  
*While Luti suffers woe.*’ (XVIII.5-9)

For this bride, jealousy, backstabbing, and infidelity have already doomed the imminent marriage. Because a foolish man has broken his promise and is choosing another bride, Luti resorts to words, the only power she has left, in order to curse her friend's wedding.

Barrett Browning's apparent cynicism toward the institution of marriage manifests itself throughout much of her poetry during the thirties and forties. In these works, as demonstrated in "A Romance of the Ganges," Barrett Browning often glosses over the failings of women, instead highlighting the shortcomings of men in a marital relationship. Her female characters, like Luti, are not always paragons of purity, but these women often chastise men for their foolish behavior and failure to perform as ideal husbands. One 1843 poem, "The Lady's Yes," is a dramatic monologue by a woman who addresses a man with whom she presumably spent the night, but admits in the morning that she does not love him. She pre-empts any attempt he might make to rebuke her for her "loose" behavior, saying:

Yet the sin is on us both;  
Time to dance is not to woo;  
Wooing light makes fickle troth,  
Scorn of *me* recoils on *you*. (IV.1-4)

This poem is the predecessor of Barrett Browning's more polished, later work, "Lord Walter's Wife," which was published in the last year of her life. The woman in this poem, however, is unashamed of her sexuality, and does not require marriage as a criterion for engaging in flirtatious or sexual behavior. She is an independent woman, and plays the game of love much as a man might, an action which would have been considered ludicrous, "unwomanly" behavior at the time. She challenges her would-be

suitor to avoid the empty flatteries of courtship and instead to win a lady over “nobly,” “bravely,” and with “truthful words” (V.1-2, VI.3). Only then, she predicts, could he have the chance of experiencing true love and a happy marriage. Promoting equality, trust, and partnership in marriage, the narrator advises:

By your truth she shall be true,  
Ever true, as wives of yore;  
And her *yes*, once said to you,  
SHALL be Yes for evermore. (VII.1-4)

Barrett Browning demonstrates in her poetry, however, that the ideal man described above was rarely to be found.

Much like her earlier poem, “The Poet’s Vow,” Barrett Browning’s 1844 poem “Rhyme of the Duchess May” demonstrates the folly of arranged marriages and the act of marrying for wealth or social status instead of love. She introduces the eponymous duchess as a bride “blind to doom,” but “one who proudly trod the floors and softly whispered in the doors,/ ‘May good angels bless our home’” (45-48). May initially appears as an ideal Victorian bride, “a bride of queenly eyes, with a front of constancies.... Oh, a bride of cordial mouth where the untried smile of youth/ Did light outward its own sighs!” (49-52). She is also a sympathetic figure, an orphan who was betrothed by her uncle, an earl, at only “twelve years old, for the sake of dowry gold,/ To his son Lord Leigh the churl” (55-56). However, May quickly also demonstrates that, like many of Barrett Browning’s heroines, she possesses a strong will of her own and refuses to bow to the whims of men, especially when marriage is concerned. May refuses the Earl’s order to marry Lord Leigh, and instead rejoins, “’Tis my will, as lady free, not

to wed a lord of Leigh,/ But Sir Guy of Linteged” (63-4) The Earl then patronizingly smiles at her and remarks at how one so small might have “so large a will” (68). He is determined that marital custom must be obeyed as he dictates, despite the feelings of the bride, that his son “would wed his own betrothed, an she loved him an she loathed,/ Let the life come or the death” (75-6). May rebukes the Earl, swearing, “a woman’s will dies hard, in the hall or on the sward.../ By that grave, my lords, which made me orphaned girl and dowered lady,/ I deny you wife and ward!” (81-4). May wishes to marry for love, but more importantly, she desires to marry on her own terms and make her own choices.

That night, the high-spirited May defies the Earl’s wishes and elopes with her beloved Sir Guy. As the couple flees to Guy’s castle in the night, May tells her new husband that she does not fear death, but “only life with one behind”—her hellish vision of life as Lord Leigh’s unwilling wife (103). She assures Sir Guy that she would have “happier died by thee than lived on, a Lady Leigh” (115). When given power over her own life, May is content as a wife, but for her, to relinquish control is tantamount to death. However, after “three months’ joyaunce,” with her chosen husband, May finds Sir Guy’s castle surrounded by “five hundred archers” at Lord Leigh’s command (119). Lord Leigh then reveals himself to be a monstrous, almost cartoonishly evil figure. He cruelly jeers May:

“Ha! Thy will is brave to dare, and thy new love past compare”—

*Toll slowly.*

“Yet thine old love’s falchion brave is as strong a thing to have,  
as the will of lady fair.

Peck on blindly, netted dove! If a wife's name thee behove"—

*Toll slowly*—

“Thou shalt wear the same to-morrow, ere the grave has hid the sorrow

Of thy last ill-mated love.” (137-44)

Lord Leigh, seeking to possess May for himself and to take her as his bride by force, leads his men in a charge against Liteged castle. Sir Guy quickly realizes that his own forces are no match for Lord Leigh's, and he decides to sacrifice himself for the “widowed bride” he must leave behind “whose sole sin was love of me” (219-20). May, however, refuses to be left alone without her beloved husband. She takes control of the situation, informing Sir Guy that since she gave herself freely in marriage, she must be free to stay with him, even to death. She asks him, “Would you men should reckon that I dared more for love's sake/ As a bride than as a spouse?” (347-48). True to her beliefs, May spares herself the prospect of an arranged marriage and stays by her husband's side as the two plummet from the castle's wall to their deaths. The poem's haunting refrain, “*Toll slowly*,” then becomes a grim reminder of the cause-and-effect relationship between the ringing of the young couple's wedding bells at the beginning of the ballad, and their death knell at the poem's end. Although the heroic May is killed, the poem conjectures that angels themselves might have watched over her and implies that, for her, the quiet of the grave is far preferable to a life with a man she could never love.

In 1844, the same year Barrett Browning published “The Rhyme of the Duchess May,” she also wrote “The Romance of the Swan's Nest,” a heartbreaking poem about amatory ideals destroyed by reality. In this poem, a young girl dreams of a future lover who will one day come riding on his steed and fall in love with her. He will be humble,

noble, honest, and she imagines that she will show him her treasured discovery, a wild swan's nest. She entertains a dream similar to the life that the Duchess May briefly realizes, to be whisked away by a knight who may have "a thousand serfs" at his command, but who realizes that she alone is "master" of his heart (77-78). By the end of the poem, however, her dreams are crushed when she finds that "the wild swan had deserted,/ And a rat had gnawed the reeds" (XVI.5-6). This discovery leads her to the realization that no real man will ever be as noble or good as she has imagined. She, like many other young Victorian women, finds herself betrayed by the ideals and values of her culture when they do not correspond to reality.

Another poem from that same year, "Bertha in the Lane," demonstrates the problems incurred when a woman continues to idealize her husband, even after he has proved himself to have very human failings. The poem, a dramatic monologue, is framed as the deathbed speech of a woman who has discovered that her husband has betrayed her for her own sister, Bertha. Instead of indulging in righteous anger, the dying woman is depicted as the ideal Victorian wife: selfless, loving, forgiving, and caring for her husband above all else. Even as she is dying, the speaker summons the strength to sew a wedding gown for her "sweet" sister to marry her philandering husband in (7), as well as a shroud for herself to be buried in (198). She advises Bertha to be kind to her husband after she is gone, saying:

...let him stand  
In thy thoughts, untouched by blame.  
Could he help it, if my hand  
He had claimed with hasty claim?

That was wrong perhaps—but then  
Such things be—and will again.

Women cannot judge for men. (XVI.1-7)

The speaker of this poem is unusually passive and meek for a Barrett Browning heroine. The women of her poetry more frequently challenge society's norms and fight for what they believe in, but this woman is better viewed through the lens of Coventry Patmore's "Angel in the House," a prototype of the charitable, Christian Victorian wife. The reader does not sympathize or identify with this character, however; she appears too unrealistically kind and generous, even though her husband has committed the ultimate betrayal. She resolutely clings to her ideals of romance like the young girl of "The Swan's Nest," and even when faced with the appalling truth of reality, she will not abandon her idealistic beliefs.

Before the poem's narrator dies, she pathetically pleads to be allowed to wear the symbol of her husband's broken fidelity, her wedding ring, to the grave. She seems to believe that despite her marriage's obvious flaws, what the ring symbolized may be enough to render it pure, so that even in her coffin, it may "light/ All the dark up, day and night" (XXX.6-7). She finds solace in its symbolism even though she knows the truth of her husband's faithlessness, and she turns a blind eye to his character flaws, and asks her sister to do the same. Her charitable, self-effacing nature seems even more ridiculous when she absolves her husband and Bertha for their indiscretion by placing the blame on herself for not being as beautiful as her sister. She notes that Bertha was absent on her wedding day, and once her husband finally did lay eyes on his sister-in-law, "he saw thee, who art best/ Past compare, and loveliest,/ He but judged thee as the rest" (117-19). The

wronged narrator only feels the full impact of her husband's actions when he confesses to her and allows that "he owed [her] all *esteem*," and she collapses from the shock (130). She later apologizes profusely for any self-pity or coldness she may have indulged in afterward, and convinces herself that "all his words were kind and good--/ *He esteemed me*" (160-61). His wife admits that it is the knowledge of her husband's infidelity that will kill her since "life's long, joyous, jostling game/ Is too loud for my meek shame" (167-88). Although she has committed no wrong and has played the part of the ideal Victorian housewife throughout her married life, the narrator foresees that she will "die of my own thorns/ Which I could not live without" (185-86). Her choice of words mirrors the thorns that Christ bore as a crown, placed on his head by men whom he loved; although the narrator loves her husband, his thorny sins against her have proven too much for her to bear and she too is martyred for them. She knows it is her very dedication to an unworthy spouse that will lead her to a tragic end. Bertha's unnamed sister, an icon of wifely perfection, gravely suffers for her submissive nature and for her dedication to an unfeeling husband. Her dogged commitment to live up to the Victorian ideals of self-sacrifice and devotion has proven to be both futile and foolish; she is painted as a martyr for an unworthy cause. Through this character, Barrett Browning shows how the unrealistic expectations of women and the double standards for men promoted by Victorian society directly contribute to unsuccessful, unhappy marriages.

When, in 1844, Barrett Browning published "Lady Geraldine's Courtship," contemporary critics took notice of its strange tone toward marriage. One noted, "From this beautiful poem alone, we might argue Mrs. Browning's capacity for producing a great domestic tragedy" (Gilfillan 249). "Lady Geraldine" is also one of the few poems

that speaks of marriage from a male point of view. The narrator of the poem is a poor poet who falls in love with an upper-class woman, but he despairs as he overhears her reject another suitor, saying, “Whom I marry, shall be noble,/ Aye, and wealthy. I shall never blush to think how he was born” (263-64). The poet is outraged at her words because he believes she has encouraged his affection, and he demands of Lady Geraldine,

What right have you, madam, gazing in your palace mirror daily,  
Getting so by heart your beauty which all others must adore,  
While you draw the golden ringlets down your fingers, to vow gaily  
You will wed no man that’s only good to God, and nothing more? (301-  
304)

He is incensed that she may deem him unworthy as a potential husband based solely on his class, and so despite his professed love for her, he insults and berates her when he believes he cannot claim her as his prize. Remaining calm in spite of his crude and rash behavior, Lady Geraldine simply asks him, “Dost thou, Bertram, truly love me? Is no woman far above me/ Found more worthy of thy poet heart than such a one as I?” (399-400). After the poet’s outburst, Lady Geraldine is aware of the power she now possesses over him. It becomes her choice whether to accept or reject him, and as the individual with the higher social rank, Geraldine is also allowed the power to break from or conform to Victorian class prejudices (Stephenson *Love* 60). At last, she declares, “It shall be as I have sworn!/ Very rich he is in virtues,—very noble— noble, certes;/ And I shall not blush in knowing that men call him lowly born” (410-12). It is apparent at this point that Geraldine has been enamored with the poet from the start, and by the end all is well as the lovers declare their mutual affection. The lovers in this poem appear to have a better

chance of a happy marriage than most figures in Barrett Browning's poetry, and this can be attributed to the woman's active role in their engagement and the control she is able to exert in their relationship. "Lady Geraldine's Courtship" also represents one of the first occasions in a Barrett Browning poem demonstrates that "the relationship is shown to succeed primarily because the heroine is not confined to that restrictive position of passive and silent beloved against which Barrett Browning's earlier female characters so vainly rebelled" (Stephenson *Vision* 245).

An extreme example of a wife with power is found in the 1840 poem, "Crowned and Wedded," which celebrates the wedding of Queen Victoria. In this poem, Barrett Browning offers a marital blessing much more effusively happy and hopeful than her poem to her friend Victoire seven years earlier. Barrett Browning praises Victoria as she enters into her seemingly "contradictory roles of self-reliant monarch and dependent wife," emphasizing the complementary nature of these two titles (Langland 63). Victoria is depicted as a happy, blushing bride, grinning with a "child-smile" (I.3) and described as "young, fair" (II.21) and "lovely" (III.5); she seems the embodiment of beauty and femininity, despite her position as monarch. Barrett Browning describes Prince Albert as the queen's "chosen" rather than vice-versa, referencing the fact that Victoria was said to have proposed marriage to Albert herself, and says that the queen will "vow to love" in the same way that she "vowed to rule" (III.13). Victoria, head of one of the most powerful nations in the world at the time, must take on the social role of the dominant, even more masculine partner in this union, and Albert must become the more nurturing, maternal figure (Langland 64).

Barrett Browning does not find this role reversal incompatible with Victoria's femininity or her role as a bride, however, noting that "she is no less a queen" (III.8) and "she doth maintain her womanhood, in vowing love to-day" (III.4). It is apparent that Albert, her groom, loves her dearly, and so Barrett Browning blesses the union and offers the following advice to the prince: "Esteem that wedded hand less dear for scepter than for ring,/ And hold her uncrowned womanhood to be the royal thing" (III.25-26). Barrett Browning reveres Victoria as a model of ideal femininity since, although she is a queen, she and her husband share mutual devotion and Victoria does not renounce her strong sense of "womanhood" for queenship. Although she enjoys higher rank and status over her husband, she does not abuse her power, as a lesser woman in her position might be tempted to do. This poem represents Barrett Browning's most enthusiastic endorsement of a marital union. Victoria's marriage bears all the hallmarks that Barrett Browning deems ideal for a happy relationship: the woman is independent, strong, and even more powerful than her husband. Later, Barrett Browning will recreate a similar "ideal" marital arrangement in her 1857 "novel-poem," *Aurora Leigh*.

By contrast, two short, complementary poems that demonstrate Barrett Browning's cynical, pessimistic views on Victorian love and marriage at the time are "A Woman's Shortcomings" and its partner piece, "A Man's Requirements." The former piece is about a woman who has been intimate with up to six lovers and claims to have loved each one. The poet reproves her and chides that "Unless you can feel, when left by One,/ That all men else go with him....Unless you can swear 'For life, for death!'—Oh, fear to call it loving!" (27-32). With this poem, Barrett Browning demonstrates that a woman's control of her relationships does not necessitate that she take advantage of her

position by harming the men who love her. Barrett Browning makes explicit that her poems do not promote women mistreating and taking advantage of men in the same way that men have often mistreated women. Instead, she is a believer in marital love and devotion, but with the caveat that the wife be allowed authority in the relationship, just as she illustrated in “Crowned and Wedded.” The counterpart to this poem, “A Man’s Requirements,” is a caustic piece told from the point of view of a man who wishes to be loved completely and submissively by his chosen woman. He demands of her:

Love me, sweet, with all thou art,  
Feeling, thinking, seeing;  
Love me in the lightest part,  
Love me in full being. (1-4)

He goes on to entreat her to love him at her “prayers” (31), and even on to the “grave” and “something higher” (39-40). However, true to what Barrett Browning perceived as his nature as a man, he concludes:

Thus, if thou wilt prove me, Dear,  
Woman’s love no fable,  
*I will love thee—half a year—*  
As a man is able. (41-4)

Like the woman of “Shortcomings,” the man of “Requirements” represents the worst characteristics of his sex; he demands devotion and obedience to his whims, but does not demonstrate affection or tenderness toward his lover. He makes no promise but to remain faithful for only half a year, claiming that it is the very nature of his sex that prevents him from practicing long-term fidelity. Through these poems, Barrett Browning

urges men and women to avoid those pitfalls of male-female relationships, and to strive for an ideal, harmonious union in the context of marriage. To avoid becoming detestable figures like the subjects of the two poems, a married couple must create a relationship in which the woman holds authority over the husband, but refrains from abusing this power as both men and women are wont to do.

In the last two years of her life, Barrett Browning produced some works of poetry that demonstrated a maturation of style and the sophisticated understanding of human nature that she had gained over the years, but she still remained true to her ideas of the balance of power between spouses. In 1860, she wrote "Void in Law," a poem that shows the tragedy that a lack of personal strength and social influence can bring for a woman. Like Luti in "Ganges" and the dying woman in "Bertha," the narrator is a woman who has been grievously wronged by her husband, but she recognizes that it was her own lack of power in her marriage that led to her tragic state. The woman sings a bitter lullaby to her child, venting her frustration about the folly of Victorian laws and the privileges given to men that are denied to women. Her marriage to the child's father has been declared void due to "Something wrong/ In the forms" (IV.1-2). Her husband has taken advantage of this mistake to marry a woman of higher social rank. His former wife now realizes that despite swearing "'Till death part us two," her husband treated their union like "a game" because he was able (IV.2, III. 5). Now that her wifedom has been stripped from her, she has lost her only source of power and is left to cling to the only existing link left between her and her former husband, their child. She attempts to overcome her weakness and vulnerability with this tenuous connection, singing to the child:

He's ours, though he kissed her but now;  
He's ours, though she kissed in reply;  
He's ours, though himself disavow,  
And God's universe favour the lie;  
Ours to claim, ours to clasp, ours below,  
Ours above,..if we live, if we die. (VIII.1-6)

From her position as an abandoned, poor woman, the narrator perceives that the “universe” itself favors “the lie” that a man can so easily dissolve the bonds of matrimony, leaving his former wife powerless and bereft (VIII.4). She fully realizes the superior position he enjoys because he is able to treat marriage as “a game,” but remains helpless and unable to prevent her own ruin (III.5). This mother in her pathetic desperation represents the quintessential weak, exploited woman, powerless in her own marriage and in society. The following year, Barrett Browning wrote a poem that, by contrast, characterized a strong woman, certain of her own identity, of high social rank, and unafraid of men.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning published “Lord Walter’s Wife” in 1861, the year of her death. The poem was initially rejected by Thackeray for publication in *The Cornhill Magazine* for being too scandalous (Garrett 122). Barrett Browning was amused by this reception, since it was apparent that the editor had missed the point of the poem. Even a century later, critics still misunderstood the poem, deeming it a “failure,” and claiming that “there is not enough scope in it to shift the characterization so rapidly” (Radley 115). In reality, this last poem Barrett Browning wrote about marriage shows the development of her understanding of marriage and relationships between men and women. At the

poem's beginning, the married female narrator appears to attempt the seduction of her husband's friend, who is already engaged to another woman. However, this is only a ploy; the narrator in reality is intent on exposing the man's cowardice and his bias against women. He has been flirting with her, but the moment she appears to reciprocate and suggests an affair, he retreats in terror, offering feeble excuses, and, when cornered, is reduced to hollow insults and jabs. Lord Walter's wife then berates him for his obvious sexism and double standards. Although engaged to be married, the man feels comfortable making advances toward his friend's wife, because he deems her "safe." The poem exposes the Victorian assumption that while it is socially acceptable for men to engage in affairs with other women, it is incomprehensible for a married woman of high social rank to stray from her husband. Far from promoting promiscuity, as Thackeray presumed, Barrett Browning is exposing the wide chasm between Victorian standards of behavior for married men and women. Barrett Browning's narrator remains faithful to her husband, but she stands up for herself, demanding straightforward behavior from fickle men. "Lord Walter" also attacks the egotism of Victorian men who abuse the sexual power that their society allows them to wield over women. Overconfident men such as the one in this poem appear full of bluster and self-confidence until a woman with power is able to turn the tables and reveal their true nature.

It is apparent from "Lord Walter's Wife" that Barrett Browning had strong feelings about the Victorians' inequitable idealization of wives' roles. While the narrator's would-be suitor protests that he would not have an affair with her because he "values" her husband, he continues to flirt with her, claiming she is "far too fair" and may "strangle [his] soul in a mesh of [her] gold-coloured hair" (IV.2, II.2). He presumes not

only that she will reject his advances out of marital obligation, but also accept his insulting insinuations as a matter of course. As a man, he feels free to objectify her, but expects her behavior to mimic Patmore's famed "Angel in the House." Thus, he defends himself against what he perceives as her advances by reminding her of her obligations to her husband and her daughter, who was "laid/ In [her] lap to be pure" (VIII.1-2). Lord Walter's friend also assumes unquestioned purity from his own fiancée, believing that she "alone from afar loves [him]" (VI.2). Ultimately, however, the man stoops to insults, angrily crying to Lord Walter's wife, "Why now, you no longer are fair!/ Why, now, you no longer are fatal, but ugly and hateful, I swear" (X.1-2). After this breaking point, Lord Walter's wife drops her façade and delivers a tirade against the man's sexist and unpardonable behavior. She proclaims her devout love for her husband, and explains the purpose of her charade, saying, "I determined to prove to yourself that, whate'er you might dream or avow/ By illusion, you wanted precisely no more of me than you have now" (XXIII.1-2). She then sums up his view of women by snapping, "You take us for harlots, I tell you, and not for the women we are" (XXV.2). Striking a final blow for sexual equality, Barrett Browning's narrator charges that "the eyes of such women as I am are clean as the palm of a man," insinuating that both sexes have sexual urges and desires, but only a woman is considered unclean if she acts upon them (XXIV.2). The narrator argues that wives are human beings, neither angels on earth nor untouchable temptresses. She points out that while women are just as apt as men to have sexual thoughts and feelings, they are also able to curb these desires as they wish, just as men can and should. This is a powerful, very pointed poem, and although on the surface it appears to be another work about the fickleness of men, it is also a testament to fidelity in

a loving marriage in which the wife is allowed power, sovereignty and the right to make her own decisions.

Reading through this array of shorter poems written over the course of her career, one discovers the extent to which Elizabeth Barrett Browning is unconventional in her depiction of marriage because she has strong convictions about what an ideal spousal relationship could and should be. Although in her very early poetry, she seems wary and distrustful of the subject, as her poetry progresses, she tackles the topic in a variety of ways, increasing her scope and insight into it. She depicts successful marriages in which spouses continue to love each other even beyond the grave, and marriages that are denied success from the start. She shows the folly of men and the repercussions of marital infidelity, whether or not the guilty party suffers for his or her crime. Barrett Browning reverses traditional Victorian gender roles, allowing wives to perform masculine roles and hold power over their husbands and other men. She depicts women as knowledgeable and worldly, and suggests that men may benefit by taking instruction and learning from their wives. Passive, weak women are spared no pity in Barrett Browning's work; they fare no better in her poems than they would in Victorian society. Strength, not submission, is what ultimately saves women from unhappy marriages, and thus, she argues, assertiveness is a trait that should be encouraged. Since her own successful marriage remains one of the most famous couplings in literary history, perhaps her views proved to be well justified.

### Chapter Three: Marriage and *Aurora Leigh*

The “ideal” marital relationship advocated by Barrett Browning in her short poems such as “Lady Geraldine’s Courtship” and “Crowned and Wedded” is one in which the wife is allowed to exercise power and maintain her own independence and identity. In 1857, Barrett Browning expanded upon this concept in writing her “novel-poem” *Aurora Leigh*, a blank-verse epic longer than Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, which “offers a drastic revision of the terms of romance” (Leighton 91). Written a decade after Barrett Browning’s 1846 wedding to Robert Browning, the poem ends on a hopeful note with the two main characters engaged to be married. At the time of its publication, critics were unsure what to make of a work as ground-breaking and unconventional as *Aurora Leigh*. It was deemed a very “masculine” poem for its scope and tone, and critics attributed this to “the influence of [Barrett Browning’s] husband upon her habits of thought and style of expression, an influence which has not been happy for her general popularity” (*Notices* 80). The headstrong heroine of *Aurora Leigh* proved particularly vexing for some critics, who seemed unsure whether or not she could be taken seriously. One critic dismissed the character’s early rejection of a marriage proposal as the whim of a frivolous female, scoffing, “Strange freaks have proud girls! She will not descend to the dull uses of wifehood. No, never—that is, not then!” (Simonds 613). Since this initial reception to the poem, critics have reconsidered *Aurora Leigh* as a text that methodically and purposefully “rejects conventional wisdom about women at virtually every point” (Hickok 132). The modern critic Deborah Logan explains the significance of the poem’s subversiveness, since:

in a society in which women are prohibited from employment which would allow them economic independence from men, a society in which marriage is a woman's primary source of economic security, such characters as those in *Aurora Leigh* stand outside its moral, and therefore economic, prohibitions. (Logan 303)

*Aurora Leigh* was a notably unusual poem for its time in the way it violated Victorian readers' expectations of its female characters. Logan has also remarked that:

Significantly, not a single 'angel in the house' exists among the women characters in *Aurora Leigh*. Marian and Aurora, Waldemar's maid and Aunt Leigh, are all unmarried. Of those married, Waldemar is a widow scheming for a lucrative match....Mrs. Erle would sell her daughter's sex for a drink, and the French mistress is an adultress. Aurora's mother might have been an angel [but she died while Aurora was a child]. (Logan 295)

*Aurora Leigh* tackles and subverts the conventions of Patmore's "Angel in the House" one by one through the many strong female characters in the poem.

One of the most intriguing characters in the poem is Marian, a virtuous working-class woman who is raped and then, as a single mother, must support the resulting child. By creating such a unconventional background for her character, "Barrett Browning complicates Victorian definitions of 'fallen woman' and 'prostitute' by insisting on Marian's moral integrity; her respectability is inherent rather than acquired through birth or marriage into a higher class" (Logan 296). In Victorian England, "virtue" was one of the highest valued traits in a woman, and laws against adultery and prostitution were severe; Marian defies categorization since she is both virtuous and "fallen." Logan

suggests that “by thus refusing to participate in a class- and economically-inscribed sexual ideology, either as redeemed deviant mother (through marriage to Romney) or as sexually degraded and spiritually damned woman, Marian creates a place for herself” (Logan 300). However, it has also been noted that “although Barrett Browning challenges the Separate Spheres ideology by her refusal to create any satisfactorily conforming female characters, she does not carry this through to the poem’s conclusion” (Logan 304). Logan is likely referring to another unique character, Aurora herself, who also refuses to be easily categorized; she fights against fulfilling the passive, supposedly “female” role society attempts to foist upon her. However, she ultimately capitulates to wifedom at the poem’s conclusion, although it is on radically different terms from those of the “ideal” Victorian marriage. The eponymous heroine is a figure very similar to Barrett Browning herself: a young female poet who has dreams of writing great works that will change mankind. She is intelligent, capable, and certain of herself, but at the beginning of the book she has not yet realized her lifelong ambition to be a great poet. As the poem progresses, Aurora achieves fame as a poet, but she continues to struggle with her conflicted feelings toward love and marriage. Aurora not only wishes to choose a spouse on her own terms but she also wishes to marry for love, even if this means rebelling against the norms and values of Victorian society. In her depiction of marital relationships in *Aurora Leigh*, Barrett Browning attempts to destabilize her readers’ traditional views of marriage and defamiliarize marriage as an institution.

The first instance of marriage depicted in *Aurora Leigh* is the loving relationship between Aurora’s mother and father; they represent the strongest, most positively depicted marriage within the poem. Aurora’s parents are an example of Barrett

Browning's ideal concept of a successful marriage based on love, although this union is ultimately broken by the death of her mother. The Leighs' relationship bucks Victorian tradition in certain ways, but none that would be too shocking or disturbing for Victorian audiences, so contemporary readers too would have viewed the union in a positive light. Later in the poem, Barrett Browning presents more unusual, subversive unions, but maintains the early union of Aurora's parents as the foundational example of an ideal marriage. The love felt between Aurora's parents is very similar to the depiction of marital love from Barrett Browning's short poems on the widow Theresa del Riego. Barrett Browning was inspired to write her earlier poems of marital love that is maintained even beyond the grave when she viewed a painting of Rafael del Nuñez Riego's widow. Similarly, Aurora's mother is deceased at the poem's beginning, and she is only present in young Aurora's life in the form of a portrait which "the painter drew...after she was dead" (I. 128). The painting of Aurora's mother hangs over the fireplace, and sometimes Aurora observed that the crackling of their fire "made alive/ That picture of my mother on the wall" (I. 126-27). Like Theresa del Riego, Aurora's father mourns for his late spouse, and is unsure how best to continue loving her, as he keeps his "poor melancholy eyes still pointed" toward the painting of his beloved wife (I. 144-45). Aurora too cannot look away from the haunting picture of her dead mother, since she never knew her mother but feels "a mother-want about the world" (I. 40).

Aurora's mother is portrayed as a devoted wife who embraced motherhood, the most valued role to which a Victorian wife should aspire. However, she proved too "weak and frail;/ She could not bear the joy of giving life,/ The mother's rapture slew her" (I. 33-35). Thus, Aurora Leigh believes she "was born/ To make my father sadder,

and myself/ Not overjoyous, truly” (I. 45-47). Aurora’s father was so stricken after her mother’s death, that he “made haste to hide/ Himself, his prattling child, and silent grief” (I.108-09). Although throughout *Aurora Leigh* Barrett Browning questions many of the conventional roles delegated to Victorian women, she consistently emphasizes the importance of motherhood. Aurora praises the critical role that mothers play in the Victorian household, citing that “Women know/ The way to rear up children, (to be just)/ They know a simple, merry, tender knack/ Of tying sashes, fitting baby shoes,/ And stringing pretty words that make no sense” (I. 45-51). Aurora mourns the loss of female supervision and guidance in her life, and admits that without his wife’s direction, her father was ill-equipped to parent her as well as he might have otherwise. She observes, “Fathers love as well/ -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” (I. 60-64). Here, Barrett Browning may be suggesting that gender roles should remain flexible within a marriage; if Aurora’s father had been willing to take on a more “womanly” role and nurture Aurora, she would not have felt such a strong sense of “mother-want.”

Even though she does not grow up with the benefit of a mother, Aurora still is able eventually to thrive as she matures into a strong-willed, independent woman. Her father, however, is lost and utterly broken without his wife. As Aurora relates:

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 and talk and walk

Or grow anew familiar with the sun,-  
Who had reached to freedom, not to action, lived,  
But lived as one entranced, with thoughts, not aims,-  
Whom love had unmade from a common man  
But not completed to an uncommon man,-  
My father taught me what he had learnt the best  
Before he died and left me, -grief and love. (I.176-86)

Like Theresa del Riego, Aurora's father cannot live in the world without his spouse and appears to die of a broken heart. He is unable to conceive of either life without his spouse or an identity apart from her; the married couple is so inextricably connected that when she dies, he becomes like Lazarus, a walking dead man. He is consumed by grief and love, and ultimately, he surrenders wholly to these two emotions in death. Despite his grief for his wife and the torment he endures from his broken heart, Aurora's father encourages his daughter to follow in his footsteps and to choose a worthy spouse. Although the affection he felt for his wife has led to pain and tragedy, he has no regrets. Even when he dies, Aurora's father advocates with his final breath the one human experience that makes the heart's pain worthwhile, since "his last word was, 'Love-/' 'Love, my child, love, love!'-(then he had done with grief)/ 'Love, my child.' Ere I answered he was gone,/ And none was left to love in all the world" (I. 211-14). This emphasis on romantic love becomes an important theme in the poem as Aurora heeds her father's advice and follows his example by seeking to choose a spouse for love rather than for wealth or social status, as was often the case in Victorian England.

Inspired by her father, Aurora intends to marry for love, not convenience, and will not settle for a marriage that will be anything less than a partnership of equals. When the young Aurora moves to England and receives her first proposal of marriage from her cousin Romney, she must consider his offer in light of the example of her parents' marriage. Romney even mentions that he can see aspects of Aurora's mother in her daughter's face, and Aurora acknowledges that the comparison is apt, since her knowledge of love is based on the love shared by her parents in Italy. She admits, "I have not seen/ So much love since.../ As answers even to make a marriage with,/ In this cold land of England'" (II.393-400). Barrett Browning thus points out the lovelessness endemic to so many traditional Victorian marriages in England. The poet once made a similar statement herself, writing in a letter to Robert, "To see the marriages which are made every day!—worse than solitudes & more desolate!" (*Browning Courtship* 175-76). Barrett Browning's heroine shares the author's belief that true love is crucial to a marriage, and a marriage without love will never be a successful one. Thus, when Aurora's cousin Romney protests hollowly that he "loves" her, she refutes him, accusing:

"What you love,  
 Is not a woman, Romney, but a cause:  
 You want a helpmate, not a mistress, sir,—  
 A wife to help your ends . . . in her no end!  
 Your cause is noble, your ends excellent,  
 But I, being most unworthy of these and that,  
 Do otherwise conceive of love. Farewell." (II. 400-06)

Although Aurora's insistence on love in a marital relationship may seem a self-evident

criterion today, at the time when *Aurora Leigh* was published, love was often a luxury rather than a necessity for a marital engagement. Prior to her own wedding, Barrett Browning expressed her great fears of being trapped in a loveless marriage. Aurora's demands of sovereignty and mutual affection as decisive factors in her acceptance of a proposal of marriage might therefore have struck contemporary audiences as unrealistic and impractical.

Even after rejecting Romney's proposal, Aurora continues to offer her cousin her advice and opinions on marriage. She claims that just as she is essentially "married" to her dream of becoming a poet, Romney too has an all-consuming goal for his life. She contends, "'Sir, you were married long ago./ You have a wife already whom you love,/ Your social theory. Bless you both, I say'" (II. 408-10). Aurora declares that she and Romney will find their best success in life remaining "married" to what they love, even if it is only a concept or a dream. With an assurance that her decision is final, Aurora leaves Romney and ponders the words she has just spoken to him. She deliberates, "And yet I know/ I did not love him . . . nor he me . . . that's sure . . ./ And what I said, is unrepented of,/ As truth is always" (II. 505-08). Aurora is impressed with Romney's heroic intentions, even though she is unwilling to become his bride. She remains unapologetic for her words, but she cannot help but wonder how events might have been different if the critical element—love—had played a part in their relationship. Aurora vows to keep herself in check in the future for hankering after a mere "supposition, a potential love" (II. 524). She longs to experience fulfilling love in a relationship but will refuse to accept any "vile" imitation her cousin might offer so that she might one day feel love in its true form (II. 530). She wishes to be treated as a companion, a beloved

woman, and as an individual. Aurora curses the influence of the culture in which she lives, a society that treats love like currency and sets young women on “mountain-peaks of hope” only to wait for a man to sweep her off her feet by saying, “‘Come,/ 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.530-41). Aurora cannot accept his proffered “coin” of marriage; she detests the notion of love as mere commodity; to her, the ideal marriage is one created from a union of minds and hearts, not economic necessity or ambition.

When Aurora later speaks to her aunt about Romney’s proposal, the spinster warns that her niece may have spoken in haste, since, as she says, “‘Yet, foolish Sweet,/ You love this man. I have watched you when he came/ And when he went, and when we’ve talked of him/.... I can tell/ The weather-signs of love—you love this man’” (II. 687-91). Upon hearing her aunt’s words, Aurora can feel her face flush, but dismisses it, convincing herself that, “although/ I blushed indeed, as if I loved the man.../ I think I loved him not..nor then, nor since../ Nor ever” (II.706-14). Aurora cannot afford to entertain the notion that she might love Romney, since she believes love to be the best reason to marry, and she is yet unwilling to consider marriage to her cousin before she has achieved self-actualization as a great poet. Once Aurora is again alone, she convinces herself that Romney, like many other Victorian men, treats love as a commodity. She postulates that for Romney, love is:

A simple law-clause. If I married him,  
I would 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! (II. 775-90)

In order to achieve a successful marriage, Aurora is determined to obey her father's dying wish for her to "Love! Love!" but she cannot fathom that Romney's proclaimed love for her might be anything more than mere words. Later that night, Aurora is again faced with the two cousins' divergent attitudes on love when she receives a note from Romney that asks:

Did you hate me quite  
But yesterday? I loved you for my part;  
I love you. If I spoke untenderly  
This morning, my beloved, pardon it;  
And comprehend me that I loved you so,  
I set you on the level of my soul...  
—be my wife. (II. 821-34)

Aurora judges that Romney may again be attempting to woo her with pretty but hollow words, so she replies to him with a note of her own, reading "I did not surely hate you yesterday;/ And yet I do not love you enough to-day/ To wed you, cousin Romney" (II. 840-42). Aurora believes so strongly in equitable love as the key to a marriage that she cannot consider Romney's proposal without it. Her rejection of his offer even after he has claimed love for her defies the conventional marriage plot of the nineteenth-century novel (Friedman 218). Although Aurora does eventually satisfy this convention, she

spends a great deal of time in between struggling with the true nature of love, especially in the context of marriage.

Both contemporary and modern critics have noticed the tendency of the young Aurora to romanticize the idea of love, perhaps drawing her ideals from an exaggerated version of her parents' "fairy tale" relationship (Rosenblum 330). Other characters in the novel also accuse Aurora of being overly sentimental about the importance of love. When the widow Lady Waldemar asks Aurora her opinion of Romney's proposed marriage to a working-class woman and Aurora does not balk at the prospect, the aristocrat scoffs:

"You find, probably,  
No evil in this marriage,—rather good  
Of innocence, to pastoralise in song:  
You'll give the bond your signature, perhaps,  
Beneath the lady's work,—indifferent  
That Romney chose a wife, could write her name,  
In witnessing he loved her." (III. 717-23)

Lady Waldemar believes that Aurora is guilty of regarding a legal union as if it were instead a romantic ballad or poem and implies that Aurora may have an unrealistic view of the role of romantic love. Aurora immediately refutes Lady Waldemar's assessment of her feelings, and cries, "Loved!.../Who tells you that he wants a wife to love?/ He gets a horse to use, not love, I think:/ There's work for wives as well,—and after, straw,/ When men are liberal" (III. 724-27). Aurora does not deny the importance she places on romantic love in a marriage, but she disagrees with Lady Waldemar that Romney might

possibly “love” Marian. Aurora recalls Romney’s earlier stance on marriage and wifehood, and divulges her belief that Romney wants from Marian no more than what he wished for Aurora to be, a helpmate and work partner. Aurora does not believe Romney capable of choosing a wife for love, but instead for reasons of practicality or ideology. Although Aurora says she “would not” and “could not” be willing to “break this match,” she does agree to meet with Romney’s chosen bride and give an honest assessment of her (III. 729-30).

When Aurora speaks to the prospective groom herself, she is surprised when Romney freely admits the absence of love from his considerations in choosing his bride. However, her cousin replies that love is an unnecessary component in a modern marriage:

“We're fallen on days,  
We two, who are not poets, when to wed  
Requires less mutual love than common love,  
For two together to bear out at once  
Upon the loveless many. Work in pairs,  
In galley-couplings or in marriage-rings,  
The difference lies in the honour, not the work,—  
And such we're bound to, I and she. But love,  
...love!—love's fool-paradise  
Is out of date, like Adam's.” (IV. 329-40)

Like Lady Waldemar, Romney expresses his belief that mutual love in marriage is nothing more than an unattainable ideal devised by poets. Romney believes the idea of romantic love is so outdated only fools would insist upon it as a requirement for

marriage. Aurora still maintains that love is the greatest reason of all for a marriage, but she nonetheless gives her consent for the two to be married, since she refuses to sabotage the wedding and be Lady Waldemar's tool to use for her "crooked purpose" (IV. 454). However, Aurora still remains somewhat troubled by the idea of Romney's nuptials, observing, "this marriage somewhat jarred;/ Or, if it did not, all the bridal noise.../Was scarce my business..../I threw myself aside,/ As one who had done her work and shuts her eyes/ To rest the better" (IV. 458-66). Although Aurora cannot identify the specific source of her discomfort, she continues to feel uneasy about Romney's marriage.

Aurora's forebodings about the marriage soon bear fruit when, on the wedding-day, Marian fails to appear and leaves a letter saying that she will not marry Romney because she loves him too much to hurt him through an inequitable marriage (IV. 894). Several weeks after Romney's ill-fated wedding day, Aurora attends a dinner party where she once again encounters Lady Waldemar, who descends upon Aurora to give her unsolicited opinion of the situation, accusing:

"Tender-heart!  
You took a liking to the wretched girl.  
Perhaps you thought the marriage suitable,  
Who knows? a poet hankers for romance,  
And so on. As for Romney Leigh, 'tis sure  
He never loved her,—never." (V. 1016-20)

Aurora, however, realizes that Lady Waldemar herself does not love Romney either, despite her claims. After Aurora moves to Italy, she receives word indicating that Romney may have wed Lady Waldemar, and Aurora grieves because she knows the

marriage would be a loveless one. She has learned Lady Waldemar to be deceitful and cruel, and she struggles with her conscience whether to tell Romney the truth of Lady Waldemar's hypocrisy, even if he has already married her. She wonders, "Would I show/ The new wife vile, to make the husband mad?" (VII. 168-69) Finally, Aurora decides, "I will not let thy hideous secret out/ To agonise the man I love—I mean/ The friend I love..as friends love" (VII. 172-74). Although she attempts to deny it, Aurora finally reveals that she loves Romney herself, and her love is so selfless that she does not want to sabotage his relationship with his potential new wife. Aurora at last experiences the pure, self-sacrificial love her parents shared, although she believes her love to be unrequited.

As Aurora deliberates on the subject of marriage, she cannot help but be reminded of Romney's proposal to her several years earlier, when "among the garden-trees,/ And said to *me*, to *me* too, 'Be my wife,/ Aurora!'" (VII. 180-82). Aurora admits that his proposal aroused a "yearning passion" within her, and she even thought at the time that had she been a different woman, she "might have saved this man" with her love (VII. 183-86). She agonizes that through her failure in this regard, Romney has become "lost" and she laments, "O Romney, O my Romney, O my friend!/ My cousin and friend! my helper, when I would,/ My love that might be! mine!" (VII. 184-86). Now that Aurora is willing to admit her passionate love for her cousin, she cannot tolerate the idea that he might presently be married to a woman so unloving as Lady Waldemar. Barrett Browning was a firm believer in the "saving" power of a loving marriage, since her own relationship with Robert Browning improved her health and "liberated" her from a melancholy existence (Karlin 260). The moral of *Aurora Leigh* has been said to be "the

insufficiency of Fame and Ambition, be either ever so generous, to make up for the absence of Love:— a class-vindication wound up by an appeal against class separation” (Chorley 404).

By Book Nine of *Aurora Leigh*, Aurora fully embraces Barrett Browning’s ideal of the honest, devoted love that must precede a successful marriage. Although she has at last realized her passion for her cousin, Aurora does not attempt to destroy his relationship with Lady Waldemar, as the widow herself would. Instead, Aurora offers her beloved cousin her own feeble blessing of the union, saying:

“I wish you well through all the acts of life  
And life's relation, wedlock, not the least;  
And it shall 'please me,' in your words, to know  
You yield your wife, protection, freedom, ease,  
And very tender liking. May you live  
So happy with her, Romney, that your friends  
May praise her for it.” (VIII. 1165-71)

Aurora is a renowned poet, but her words to honor his marriage ring hollow. She truly wishes for her cousin’s happiness, but she cannot wholeheartedly praise a marriage she does not believe in. The verses are reminiscent of Barrett Browning’s early poem, “To Victoire, on Her Marriage,” since while they accept the union, they do not celebrate it.

However, before Aurora can speak further, Romney hands her a letter from his presumed bride, and as Aurora reads it, she is shaken to see Lady Waldemar admit in print, “I...do not love [Romney]” (IX. 11). Lady Waldemar explains that although she had planned to marry Romney herself, once Romney learned of Marian’s tragic fate, he

announced that “Henceforth she was called his wife./ His wife required no succour: he was bound/ To Florence, to resume this broken bond” (IX. 107-09). The letter reveals that Romney abandoned his wedding plans with Lady Waldemar, and because of this, the Lady admits to Aurora, “I hate, hate, hate you” (IX. 166). Lady Waldemar’s stormy letter concludes, insincerely, “I wish you joy, Miss Leigh./ You’ve made a happy marriage for your friend;/ And all the honour, well-assorted love,/ Derives from you who love him, whom he loves!” (IX. 157-60). With these words, Lady Waldemar admits that her wiles and the allure of wealth have been trumped by the power of loving. Like the cruel lord in Barrett Browning’s “The Rhyme of the Duchess May,” Lady Waldemar is a villain whose incapacity for love ultimately proves to be her undoing. However, she still vainly believes, “but for you, I might have won his love” (IX. 164). She ends the letter with a parody of the final words of Aurora’s father, rendered from a blessing to a curse: “LOVE” (IX. 172). When Aurora finishes reading the letter, she is “dazed,” and she realizes her cousin is not married after all (IX. 176). Thus, Barrett Browning denies success to the union that, on the surface, would appear to be the perfect Victorian match of shared wealth and class status, because the two are unable to love one another.

Romney then reveals his next secret: he is in love with Aurora (IX. 456, 497). He also informs her that he not the man he once was, since his estate has burned down, and he has been blinded. After listening to his shocking confessions, Aurora too finally admits aloud to her cousin, “I love,—/ I love you, Romney” (IX. 607-08). Aurora assures him that she does not simply love him out of pity, but “I love you, loved you..loved you first and last,/And love you on for ever. Now I know/ I loved you always, Romney” (IX. 683-85). Aurora recalls her father’s dying words as she at last appreciates that she and

Romney have finally discovered a shared, passionate love for one another. One critic, Alison Case, notes the “unsettling” contradiction between Aurora’s claim that she did not love Romney “then, nor since,/ nor ever” (II.713-14) and this later proclamation of loving him “always” (Case 518). The contrast between these two statements points “to a deeper contradiction between Aurora’s self-confident, bitingly insightful argument for her right to vocational self-determination, and her abject retroactive repudiation of that right after her reunion with Romney” (Case 518). However, it is requited love that Aurora has desired throughout the novel, and once Romney renounces his earlier claims of power over her, she too can recant her words denying her love.

Romney concedes that he had been enamored of Aurora from the day of their first meeting:

He had loved me, watched me, watched his soul in mine,  
Which in me grew and heightened into love.  
For he, a boy still, had been told the tale  
Of how a fairy bride from Italy,  
With smells of oleanders in her hair,  
Was coming through the vines to touch his hand;  
Whereat the blood of boyhood on the palm  
Made sudden heats. And when at last I came,  
And lived before him, lived, and rarely smiled,  
He smiled and loved me for the thing I was. (IX. 760-72)

The two cousins appear to have been destined for each other from their early childhood, but not because of their arranged betrothal. The two grew up harboring romanticized,

“fairy tale” dreams of love, and now they have realized them to be true in their desire for one another. Aurora and Romney complement each other, since each is flawed but has found redemption in loving the other. Like Aurora, Romney now claims love as the greatest reason for marriage, citing that he loves his cousin well beyond the values that many Victorians traditionally held dear: “over all,/ All wealth, all lands, all social privilege” (IX. 787-88). He claims he is even “happy” in his blindness because he can now “see” Aurora’s true love for him (IX. 830-33). For her part, Aurora now realizes the power she has held over Romney for so many years as his unattainable “bride of dreams” (IX. 797). She proclaims the complementary nature of poetry and passion, citing that “Art symbolizes heaven; but love is God/ And makes heaven” (IX. 658-59). Barrett Browning suggests that when a couple enters into a marriage based on mutual love like Romney and Aurora, it is a union blessed by God, not merely endorsed by human law. Emphasizing the sacred nature of marriage, Romney observes that “Love’s holy kiss shall still keep consecrate” (IX. 930). Many of the critiques offered in *Aurora Leigh* could be considered radical or subversive, but by ending the book with a union ordained by love and consecrated by God, Barrett Browning’s characters elaborate “upon the tactful notion that a loving Victorian marriage will sanctify even revolution” (Gilbert & Gubar 580).

Many of *Aurora Leigh*’s more revolutionary ideas are concerned with the implementation of Victorian marital law. Contemporary critics of the poem noted with wonder the eponymous heroine’s disdain for the expectations of marital law and her refusal to conform to them. One critic could not fathom how any woman could afford to spurn her cousin’s “generous attempts to smooth the path of life for her by tendering a share of the family fortune” (Chorley 404). Barrett Browning was well-versed in

Victorian marital law, and in this poem she sought to expose the folly she perceived in restrictive laws such as the Married Women's Property Acts. Aurora first learns of the harsh impact of Victorian marriage and inheritance laws from her unmarried aunt.

Aurora explains:

For she, my aunt,  
Had loved my father truly, as she could,  
And hated, with the gall of gentle souls,  
My Tuscan mother, who had fooled away  
A wise man from wise courses, a good man  
From obvious duties, and, depriving her,  
His sister, of the household precedence,  
Had wronged his tenants, robbed his native land,  
And made him mad, alike by life and death,  
In love and sorrow. (I.339-48)

According to Victorian codes, Aurora's aunt would have enjoyed a position of higher status if her brother had never married. During this era, the rights of a man's wife would take precedence over those of his sister, so Aurora's mother usurped Aurora's aunt's position within the household, and she is unable to forgive this offense, even after her sister-in-law has died. Once Aurora was born, her aunt knew that Aurora too would enjoy preferential treatment as a daughter, and she resented her niece for it. However, years later, Aurora's aunt reveals that because of the circumstances of her father's marriage, Aurora is not even entitled to inherit her father's estate. The rules of marriage within the Leigh family are strict even by Victorian standards, since there was a "clause set up a

hundred years ago” to restrict Leigh descendants from marrying foreign wives, a rule Aurora’s father deliberately ignored in choosing his Tuscan bride (II. 615). Aurora’s aunt scoffs, “Men do not think/ Of sons and daughters, when they fall in love,/ So much more than of sisters; otherwise,/ He would have paused to ponder what he did” (II. 608-11). In his sister’s eyes, the marriage of Aurora’s father was an ill-conceived union that would result only in pain and sorrow for his family and offspring. The aunt fervently wishes that Aurora’s father had complied with Victorian customs, and instead chosen a mate deemed “suitable” for him. By marrying for love, Aurora’s father denied Aurora her inheritance; in spite of this, Aurora continues to uphold their union as a perfect marital model, and she instead resents the unreasonable laws that hindered her parents’ match.

Although Aurora might disdain the practice of marrying for monetary gain, in the nineteenth century, most marriages involved financial considerations and repercussions, and Aurora learns this firsthand when she speaks to her aunt about Romney’s proposal. The aunt is shocked to hear that Aurora has refused Romney when he asked her to be his wife, but Aurora objects, rebutting, “Did he ask?/...I think he rather stooped to take me up/ For certain uses which he found to do/ For something called a wife. He never asked” (II.564-75). Aurora’s aunt is distressed by what she perceives as Aurora’s flippant attitude toward such a socially acceptable union. She poses to Aurora, “You suppose, perhaps,/ That you, sole offspring of an opulent man,/ Are rich and free to choose a way to walk?” (II.586-94). Her aunt then reveals that according to Victorian law, Aurora will inherit neither her father’s nor her aunt’s estate because she is a woman. Before Aurora can respond to this revelation, Aurora’s aunt next discloses that when Aurora was born,

her cousin, Vane Leigh, betrothed her to his son, Romney, so that they could inherit the Leigh estate together. Vane wrote Aurora's father a letter, entreating:

“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” (II. 626-30)

After exposing these circumstances, Aurora's aunt chides her niece for her foolishness in rejecting a proposal that was not only part of a prearranged agreement but would also allow Aurora to become heir to the Leigh estate. She views the match as an “economic necessity;” without Romney as Aurora's husband, when Aurora's aunt dies, her land and assets will revert to Romney, and Aurora may be left homeless and penniless (Rosenblum 330, II. 636-38). Convinced that her niece will see the error of her ways, the aunt attempts to persuade Aurora to reconsider Romney's proposal, claiming that Romney is a “fine young man” despite his “dreams of doing good/ To good-for-nothing people,” which is something that “a wife/ Will put all right” (II. 642-48). Aurora, however, reminds her aunt that she has “escaped/ That danger” of becoming Romney's wife, and she defends her answer to Romney's proposal, despite the fact that she may now receive no inheritance (II. 642-55). She cheers herself, “At least/ My soul is not a pauper; I can live./ At least my soul's life, without alms from men,/ And if it must be in heaven instead of earth,/ Let heaven look to it,—I am not afraid” (II. 680-84). Thus, Aurora sees a marriage to Romney under such circumstances akin to entering into “a state of sentimental pauperism, of continuing gratitude to the charity of men” (Leighton 104).

Aurora maintains that she can live without money as long as she does not compromise her soul, her integrity, and the love of her art, the aspects of her life she believes to have the truest value.

Aurora struggles to maintain her convictions after her aunt dies and she again meets with Romney to change the title of the estate. Her cousin claims that he can perceive the unjust nature of the transaction from Aurora's point of view, admitting, "I oust you from your father's halls and lands,/ And make you poor by getting rich—that's law'" but he then asks if Aurora might "'scruple to accept from [him]/ some compensation'" in the interest of "'justice'" (II. 1021-25). He reminds her of the fiscal benefits of a marriage to him, but also proclaims, "I love you.. that's mere nature!—you reject/ My love..that's nature also'" (II. 1033-34). However, Romney's declaration of "love" is belied by his preoccupation with the fiscal aspects of marriage. Romney's attempt to convince Aurora to marry him for money is thwarted primarily by Aurora's insistence on marriage and independence, but also by the realities of the Married Women's Property Act, which would not allow a wife to inherit money anyway. Elizabeth Barrett Browning was well aware of the impact of such statutes on married women and had passionately fought against this law (Leighton 103). It is thus to Aurora's advantage to remain single; Aurora also retains her financial independence by inheriting a sum of money from her aunt and seeking to support herself by writing poetry.

By refusing to marry Romney and attempting to live on her own indefinitely, Aurora is, to an extent, aligning herself ideologically with her spinster aunt, although the similarities seem to end there (Logan 300). Aurora's aunt is an austere woman who remains very cold to Aurora, and her niece observes that she appears to have lived "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)” (I. 288-290). In this respect, Aurora’s aunt ironically resembles the “Angel in the House,” a woman who has not attempted to overstep the bounds her society imposes on her, but who instead remains content in her home and her own sphere of influence. Aurora is appalled by the tameness of her aunt’s life, and suggests that “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” (I. 304-07). Aurora deems her aunt’s limitations of passion and interest for the world outside her own home “silly,” and marvels that she never sought to escape from the “cage” of her home (I. 308). In contrast, Aurora views herself as “a wild bird scarcely fledged” who refuses to be domesticated and have her spirit broken like her aunt (I. 309). Barrett Browning’s depiction of Aurora’s aunt reveals the emptiness and inanity of living the kind of life extolled by Conventry Patmore.

Despite being unmarried herself, Aurora’s aunt is a firm believer in the Victorian marital ideal in which the husband reigns as master in his home, and his wife is a devoted helpmeet. She encourages Aurora to think in a similar vein, allowing her to read books that promote a wife’s “right of comprehending husband's talk/ When not too deep, and even of answering/ With pretty 'may it please you,' or 'so it is'” (I. 425-27). These works support the view shared by Aurora’s aunt that wives are meant to “keep quiet by the fire/ And never say ‘no’ when the world says ‘ay’/ For that is fatal” (I. 436-38). Through the voice of the aunt, Barrett Browning creates a parodic version of John Ruskin’s views on the function of women’s education in “Of Queen’s Gardens.” Aurora does not heed the advice since, like Barrett Browning herself, she believes that women should have the

freedom to be well educated for any future role or profession they may wish to choose. In contrast, Aurora's aunt strives to imitate the wifely attitudes encouraged by these books, despite the fact that she has never been married. She considers herself virtuous, and refrains from extending her "angelic reach" beyond the borders of her own home (I. 438). If only she had a husband, she would be a model wife; however, since she is single, she hopes to convince Aurora to follow her example. Aurora's aunt deems her cousin Romney an appropriate match for Aurora, so although she is not generally kind or warm to her niece, it is apparent to Aurora that "she almost loved him" and her aunt "even allowed/ That sometimes he should seem to sigh my way" (I.529-32).

Aurora is much less certain than her aunt about Romney's qualifications as her suitor. She believes he presumes too much too quickly, and she resents his assumption that he might be able to presuppose her returned affection for him. Aurora describes how:

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. (I. 542-47)

Most women of mid-Victorian England were supposed to be under the guardianship of a man throughout their lives; they were under their father's influence when they were young, and once married, they were ruled by their husbands. Aurora's love for her father remains so strong that she is not yet willing to allow a new man to take his place and

assume authority over her. She has not yet begun to achieve her dreams for herself, and the idea of living a “caged-bird” life as a stereotypical Victorian wife is intolerable to her. Aurora remains strong in her conviction that she must follow her heart and her instincts despite the opinions of others; she truly believes that “Whoever lives true life, will love true love” (I. 1067). Aurora remains honest in her assessment of her relationship with Romney and tries not to romanticize his potential as a mate, concluding that they “were not lovers, nor even friends well-matched—/ Say rather, scholars upon different tracks” (1106-07). She notes the differences in their dreams and life goals, claiming he is “overfull/ Of what is, and I, haply, overbold/ For what might be” (I.1103-09).

Unlike many contemporary women, Aurora aspires to be a poet, not a wife, and it is on this goal that she focuses her attention. Her cousin fails to understand her artistic drive and instead, like her aunt, encourages Aurora to settle down and focus her energy on more realistic objects. He tells her,

“But men, and still less women, happily,  
Scarce need be poets. Keep to the green wreath,  
Since even dreaming of the stone and bronze  
Brings headaches, pretty cousin, and defiles  
The clean white morning dresses.” (II.92-96)

Aurora will not be dissuaded, and she refuses to be hindered by Romney’s limited imagination of her potential, and thinks to herself that despite his warnings, she will soon “take flight” on her own path (II. 121). Romney warns her that her dreams are unrealistic and unattainable, and he suggests she settle for a more “womanly” course in life, saying:

“Women as you are,

Mere women, personal and passionate,  
You give us doting mothers, and chaste wives.  
Sublime Madonnas, and enduring saints!  
We get no Christ from you,—and verily  
We shall not get a poet, in my mind.” (II.220-25)

Romney subscribes to a Petrarchan, or even Patmorian, view of women as virginal goddesses fit for being worshipped but little else, and he ridicules Aurora’s desire to create great art. He outlines the aspirations he considers appropriate for “mere women” such as Aurora, the roles of wife, mother, or saint. After criticizing Aurora’s aspirations, Romney then adds “the final insult” by boldly attempting to recruit Aurora to fulfill one of these roles as he asks her to become his wife (Leighton 103). He says, “I ask for love,/ And that, she can; for life in fellowship/ Through bitter duties—that, I know she can;/ For wifhood—will she?” (II.353-56). Romney’s proposal is honest but unromantic, and he speaks of Aurora as a third party, asking her not to be “his” wife, but simply to enter into the state of “wifhood.” His proposal is an impersonal declaration, not a heartfelt question; Aurora’s cousin speaks as though he too has been reading her aunt’s books on marriage, and he craves a marital union exactly as they depict it.

However, Romney has neglected to consider Aurora’s feelings about facing a future as a stereotypical Victorian housewife. She surprises him by mocking the conflicting characteristics expected of such wives, asking,

“Am I proved too weak  
To stand alone, yet strong enough to bear  
Such leaners on my shoulder? poor to think,

Yet rich enough to sympathise with thought?

Incompetent to sing, as blackbirds can,

Yet competent to love, like HIM?" (II.359-64)

Aurora maintains that husbands cannot expect wives to readily accept such paradoxical treatment from a society that at the same time venerates women and strips them of their civil rights. She contends that her strengths should be acknowledged rather than ignored, and she refuses to concede power to a spouse simply because of her sex. Romney's proposal thus "collapses multiple dimensions of nineteenth-century patriarchy [as] he attacks her poetry as irrelevant and feminine...[and] offers marriage as a woman's only route to fulfillment; absorbed in his work and being, her life will achieve significance" (Friedman 218). Throughout *Aurora Leigh*, Barrett Browning argues through plot and characterization that women's lives can achieve significance in a number of ways without marriage as a prerequisite.

Aurora also maintains that neither one of them is ready to be married, since she is "scarcely meek enough/ To be the handmaid of a lawful spouse" (II. 408-12). Aurora admits she is unwilling to adapt to the stereotype of a subservient Victorian wife, but she also has damning words for Romney's view of marital relationships. She accuses him of treating "marriage too much like, at least,/ A chief apostle; you would bear with you/ A wife . . . a sister . . . shall we speak it out?/ A sister of charity" (II.415-18). The crux of her argument is that not only is she unwilling to be the kind of wife he might wish for, but also that he would not even know what to do with such a wife. Barrett Browning here reveals Aurora's sexually charged nature; the heroine is neither virgin nor saint as society would want her to be. She is an independent woman, and she desires sexual as well as

romantic fulfillment in her ideal marriage. Romney is taken aback by Aurora's accusations, and he defends his words as fair and honest. He points out that he had enough respect for Aurora to be candid and blunt in his proposal, by essentially saying, "Come, human creature, love and work with me" instead of simply flattering her with idle and empty words (II. 419-32). Aurora confesses that for many women, such a proposal would elicit delight and immediate acceptance, but Aurora will not be persuaded to marry solely by Romney's appealing words. She tells him, "Whoever says/ To a loyal woman, 'Love and work with me,'/ Will get fair answers, if the work and love/ Being good themselves, are good for her—the best/ She was born for" (II. 434-8).

As she promises, Aurora gives him a fair answer to his question, but Romney still cannot comprehend why Aurora continues to reject him despite the allowances he is willing to make for her. Aurora rebuts:

"You misconceive the question like a man,  
Who sees a woman as the complement  
Of his sex merely. You forget too much  
That every creature, female as the male,  
Stands single in responsible act and thought  
As also in birth and death." (II. 434-39)

Aurora attempts to remind Romney that women are individuals with their own wills and minds, and in order to achieve a successful marriage, he must be willing to accept his wife's unique requirements, wishes, and needs as well as his own. Aurora believes that while in a successful marriage, a husband and wife will complement each other, a man cannot assume that every member of the opposite sex is willing or able to be his perfect

foil. Although Aurora sees merit in Romney's philanthropic goals, she reiterates, "But *me*, your work/ Is not the best for,—nor your love the best,/ Nor able to commend the kind of work/ For love's sake merely.... I, too, have my vocation,—work to do...." (II. 450-55). Aurora gives numerous reasons against a marriage to Romney, but her greatest stipulation is that she must remain true to herself and her first great love, poetry.

After Aurora's aunt dies and she rejects Romney's final proposal, Aurora realizes that she may be free for the first time to choose her own path in life. She muses, "I had my wish,/ To read and meditate the thing I would,/ To fashion all my life upon my thought,/ And marry, or not marry" (II. 955-58). Aurora reasserts that she does not aspire solely to wifedom, as many contemporary women might, but instead, she hopes for a life in which she is able to achieve great artistic accomplishments, whether or not she ever assumes the role of a wife. Aurora's attitude would have been surprising for contemporary readers, since marriage was meant to be one of the highest aspirations for every young woman. Through her heroine's unusual perspective, Barrett Browning demonstrates that women can and should have goals beyond wifedom, and therefore must not be educated strictly in domestic subjects. Barrett Browning advances the idea that marriage should be an option for women, rather than a necessity, and should only be a consideration if both the man and woman enjoy a high degree of mutual respect and affection.

Aurora next revisits the idea of marital roles when the aristocratic widow Lady Waldemar informs the poet that her cousin Romney is again seeking a wife, this time turning to a woman of lower class named Marian Erle. Lady Waldemar claims that she values Aurora's judgment on the union because as a female poet, "You stand outside,/

...You share not with us, and exceed us so/ Perhaps by what you're mulcted in, your hearts/ Being starved to make your heads” (III. 406-10). Lady Waldemar believes that as a woman with the “masculine” occupation of a poet, Aurora must not be influenced by her heart as other women are. Elizabeth Barrett Browning was also frequently deemed “masculine” for her poetic prowess, and she has her fictional alter ego similarly defy gender stereotypes. Aurora is not “mulcted in her heart” as Lady Waldemar accuses, but instead achieves a balance of heart and mind that is neither overtly masculine or feminine. However, despite Aurora’s distaste for rigid gender stereotypes, she too is guilty of categorizing men in unflattering ways. When Aurora is afforded the opportunity to speak to Romney about his impending nuptials, she is dismayed to discover that Romney’s feelings toward marriage have not matured significantly since he last proposed to her. Aurora is appalled at his egotism, despite his noble ideals. She ponders:

How arrogant men are!—Even philanthropists,  
Who try to take a wife up in the way  
They put down a subscription-cheque,—if once  
She turns and says, ‘I will not tax you so,  
Most charitable sir,’—feel ill at ease,  
As though she had wronged them somehow. (IV. 300-05)

Aurora’s categorical dismissal of men as “arrogant” is perhaps unfair, although Romney’s attitudes are representative of many Victorian men’s attitudes toward the process of engagement. Aurora believes that Romney does not have a clear conception of what constitutes an ideal marriage, aside from his vague objective that two spouses work toward a common philanthropic goal.

Aurora wonders what other motives Romney might have for wishing to get married. She reflects, “’Tis clear my cousin Romney wants a wife,—/ So, good!—The man's need of the woman, here,/ Is greater than the woman's of the man,/ And easier served” (V. 1072-75). Aurora believes that husbands are dependant on their wives, because while a wife may allow herself to be overshadowed by her husband, a husband seeks to “double himself” by molding a wife in his own image (V. 1080). Victorian coverture laws reinforced the idea of men being “doubled” in their wives, since the husband legally acted for both spouses and gained ownership of his wife’s property in addition to his own. Through Aurora’s words, Barrett Browning reveals this practice to be the ultimate manifestation of male arrogance. Aurora submits that Romney wants a wife primarily because he thinks, “At board, at bed, at work, and holiday,/ It is not good for a man to be alone” (V. 1082-83). Aurora thinks that like so many other men of the era, Romney may have the fault of mistaking “self-aggrandisement” for love, and thus make himself “great/ By doing rightly and kindly” (V. 1088-90). In her opinion, Romney sought to marry Aurora solely “for charitable ends” and then Marian “for social” ends—neither being acceptable motives to her (V. 1091-94). Aurora wonders whether Romney might even be incapable of love (V. 1121). Aurora renounces her cousin for the lack of imagination he demonstrates in his view of spousal roles, despite the progressive social ideals he champions.

Aurora, on the other hand, reimagines the gender roles within marriage in a number of ways. Her most radical vision of a union is the scenario she envisions of herself and Marian raising a child together without a male presence. The connection between the two unmarried women, Aurora and Marian, “points to an alternative love

story...by comparison with which Romney's marital cravings seem obsessively money-minded" (Leighton 103). Aurora proposes, "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. 122-25). Critics have interpreted Aurora's offer of creating with Marian "'a home for you/ And me and no one else'" (VI. 458-59) as an unusual way of "proposing marriage" (Mermin *Origins* 193). Barrett Browning created this idea of a strong, female-headed family unit as a challenge to the patriarchal system of Victorian England.

Although the women do not realize this dream, Aurora strongly believes it could be done, even though such a scenario would be protested as subversive to the fundamental beliefs of contemporary society. Aurora would adopt the masculine role and support the family, so the women would have no need for a man. By presenting this concept in her poem, Barrett Browning develops an "alternative construct, [in which] deviation becomes the norm" (Logan 297). Barrett Browning then "presents the angelic 'norm' as the anomaly, and invites readers to consider the implications of women's culture-wide inability to embody angelic ideals" (Logan 297). Barrett Browning perceives gender roles as malleable; women can perform in masculine roles as easily as well as they can live up to the role of the "Angel in the House."

Aurora views the "angelic ideal" as a part that a woman can play, but she does not believe it is a role in which many women can truly be happy or fulfilled. Thus, when Aurora believes that Romney will marry the diabolical Lady Waldemar, she decides to pen a scathing letter to the woman, demanding:

If haply you're the wife of Romney Leigh,  
(For which inheritance beyond your birth

You sold that poisonous porridge called your soul)  
I charge you, be his faithful and true wife!  
Keep warm his hearth and clean his board, and, when  
He speaks, be quick with your obedience;  
Still grind your paltry wants and low desires  
To dust beneath his heel. (VII. 341-48)

Aurora advocates that Lady Waldemar attempt to prove herself the embodiment of the ideal Victorian housewife, despite her selfish nature. Aurora wants to fulfill her cousin's desire for an "angelic" wife, but she also believes that by adopting this role, Lady Waldemar will be made suitably low and humble as punishment for her wrongs. Aurora turns Lady Waldemar's own declared feelings toward "unequal" marriage on their head by implying that while the two spouses may be of the same social class, she is the "ignobler" one and he the "nobler" (VII. 351). Aurora does not resent her cousin for his marriage, but instead thinks, "As husband of the Lady Waldemar/ You're granted very sorely pitiable!" (VIII. 214-16).

After Aurora sends her letter to Lady Waldemar, she is surprised one day to be paid a visit by Romney, who confesses that as young as Aurora was when he first proposed to her, she was "right" to refuse his proposal, and he now believed that by proposing in such haste and attempting to relegate Aurora to a subservient role, he "built up follies like a wall" (VIII. 379-81). As the two cousins continue their conversation, Romney realizes that Aurora seems melancholy, so he wonders aloud, "'O love,/ O best Aurora! are you then so sad,/ You scarcely had been sadder as my wife?'" (VII. 519-21) Aurora gloomily replies, "'Your wife, sir! I must certainly be changed,/ If I, Aurora, can have said a thing/

So light” (VIII. 519-24). Now that Aurora has discovered her love for Romney, she has realized that she cannot dismiss, as she once did, the important role marriage could play in her life. Although when she was younger, she passionately fought against marrying her cousin, she now has an equal passion to become his wife. Alison Case suggests that these seemingly irreconcilable attitudes toward marriage can be explained by Romney’s “disavowal of the right he earlier claimed to ‘use’ Aurora for his own ends” (Case 518). Aurora knows that their roles have undergone a reversal, since “it is now he...who will provide the kind of full-time emotional support for her work he once asked her to provide for his” (Case 518). The balance of power in their relationship has shifted, and Aurora no longer will be asked to submit to a submissive, feminine role.

Since his last proposal, Romney has become blind and therefore feels he is “mulcted as a man,” but Aurora has become more self-assured in her womanhood by becoming a renowned female poet (IX.563). Stripped of both his ancestral estate and his sight, Romney is now in a state of utter dependence, and Aurora’s poetic voice must now “substitute for his vision” (Kaplan 90). His blindness not only “gives the cousins a parity they did not have before, but it also symbolizes the exchange of insight and merging of sexual identity in sexual passion” (Kaplan 90). Aurora, however, appeals to his former sense of authority by asking him to “stoop so low to take my love,” while at the same time claiming her newfound strength by taking the initiative to propose marriage herself (IX. 674). Romney knows that Aurora has already achieved financial and creative independence, and is keenly aware of his own dependence on her. He acknowledges and accepts the arrangement, advising Aurora, “Shine out for two, Aurora, and fulfill/ My falling-short that must be! Work for two,/ As I, though thus restrained, for two, shall

love!” (IX.910-12). Although she accepts the convention of marriage, Aurora also remains true to herself and her muse and “continues to dedicate herself to her art. Indeed, in a reversal of the usual Victorian domestic contract, Romney finally dedicates himself to the service of her art as well” (Stone 122). By the poem’s conclusion, Aurora has essentially inverted Romney’s original vision of their marriage from Book Two, casting herself in a traditionally masculine role. Romney and Aurora’s impending marriage now meets the criteria for a strong and successful union that Barrett Browning described in her earlier poems. Aurora will not have to compromise herself or her beliefs, and she shares a genuine, selfless love with her groom. Romney, for his part, will not claim dominion over his bride, and he will allow her freedom to make her own choices, never insisting that she attempt to fill the role of the “Angel in the House.” Although the conclusion of *Aurora Leigh* ostensibly articulates “a patriarchal doctrine of female servitude, Barrett Browning’s compromise aesthetic of service conceals (but does not obliterate) Aurora Leigh’s revolutionary impulses” (Gilbert & Gubar 579). Aurora and Romney envision their marriage as heralding the beginning of a new era, and liken it to the building of the New Jerusalem as described in the book of Revelation. The cousins realize that their honest, equitable, love-based marriage is unique in the Victorian era, and Aurora hopes that its success might inspire similar, loving unions.

While Aurora, as a middle-class woman, must fight against being placed on a pedestal by men, women of the lower classes faced very different problems. The Victorian ideal of the “Angel in the House” and her ornamental status and leisure-filled life was not applicable to working-class English women. Only women of the upper- and middle-classes could afford to pass their days in idleness and comfort. One such woman

is Lady Waldemar, who pursues Romney as though it is a game. Although she claims to love the man, she does not admit to being under the influence of love in her previous marriage or in other relationships (III. 437). As she describes it:

“My first husband left me young,  
And pretty enough, so please you, and rich enough,  
To keep my booth in May-fair with the rest  
To happy issues. There are marquises  
Would serve seven years to call me wife, I know:  
And, after seven, I might consider it,  
For there's some comfort in a marquise  
When all's said.” (III. 429-36)

Lady Waldemar's assessment of marriage seems frivolous to Aurora, since she cites only financial and social reasons as grounds for getting married. Lady Waldemar represents the worst, most hypocritical characteristics of the attitude toward marriage among the Victorian middle and upper classes. Aurora, however, believes that it is love that is the most critical element in a marital relationship, and Lady Waldemar admits she cannot claim to be “worthy” of Romney by Aurora's definition of love. She asks that Aurora allow this point to “pass,” however, and also notes for Aurora's benefit, “And yet I save him if I marry him;/ Let that pass too” (III. 502-03). Lady Waldemar elaborates that Aurora must help her “save” Romney by preventing the inconceivable union of “a Leigh;/ To a girl of doubtful life, undoubtful birth;/ Starved out in London, till her coarse-grained hands/ Are whiter than her morals,” and she beseeches, “even you/ May call his choice unworthy” (III. 530-38). Lady Waldemar demands that Aurora must help her

prevent what she believes “shameful marriage” because of the wide discrepancy in class between the groom and bride (III. 623). The classism that Lady Waldemar expresses is extreme, but just as Barrett Browning has demonstrated in her earlier poem, “Lady Geraldine’s Courtship,” at the time, was a matter of course that men and women would marry within their own class, and inter-class relationships were severely discouraged.

Lady Waldemar explains that she defines marriage as a way to continue a family name, and she shudders to think of a Leigh bestowing his great name on a common working-class woman. She admits:

“‘Tis true  
Even I can scarce admit the cogency  
Of such a marriage..where you do not love  
(Except the class), yet marry and throw your name  
Down to the gutter, for a fire-escape  
To future generations!” (III. 633-38)

Thus, Lady Waldemar continues, she offered to solicit advice for Romney from his cousin on the merits of such an “undesirable” union. For Lady Waldemar, the concept of an upper-class marriage to a working-class woman is nearly impossible to grasp. She tells Aurora she cannot conceive how Romney can give his ancestral name to a “drover’s daughter.../Upon whose finger, exquisitely pricked/ By a hundred needles, we’re to hang the tie/ ‘Twixt class and class in England” (II. 659-62). The image of an expensive gold band being worn on the scarred and coarse hand of a member of a working woman becomes symbolic of the nearly irreconcilable disparity between classes in Victorian England. Lady Waldemar states bluntly that she wants Aurora to come to the conclusion

that Romney's wish to marry Marian would result in "an execrable marriage" (III. 689). She pleads for Aurora to "break it up./ Disroot it" so that she can eventually "plant a better fortune in its place" (III. 689-91). Lady Waldemar cannot conceive that Romney would marry a working-class girl when a "better," or at least wealthier, woman, would be willing to become his wife.

When Aurora meets Romney's fiancée, Marian, she learns Marian's miserable history, beginning with her tortured childhood. The marriage between Marian's parents is representative of many similar situations that existed within the lower classes of Victorian England. Marian's lower-class parents shared an abusive, unhappy union, and her alcoholic father was frequently unemployed. Marian relates how her father "drank and slept,/ And cursed his wife because, the pence being out,/ She could not buy more drink. At which she turned,/ (The worm), and beat her baby in revenge/ For her own broken heart" (III. 866-70). Thus, the first marriage to which Marian is exposed is a horrific example of lovelessness and neglect. In his study of the incidences of domestic violence among the Victorian working class, James Hammerton has discovered that a history such as Marian's may paint a fairly accurate picture of some working-class marriages (Hammerton 35). At a very early age, Marian also began working herself, "darning stockings past their natural age,/ And patching petticoats from old to new,/ And other light work done for thrifty wives" (III. 1037-39). In order to earn money, Marian became a kind of surrogate wife herself, taking on the odd jobs that middle-class wives were expected to do but were unwilling to attempt. These women were allowed to remain delicate and decorative creatures while she performed the less desirable wifely duties. When Marian grew older, her mother attempted to prostitute her to a squire, a

large man with “beast’s eyes” and “burning stertorous breath” (III. 1050-53). Recovering in a hospital from her near fatal escape from this monster, Marian met Romney. Romney was moved by her story, and he eventually asked Marian to marry him so that they could acknowledge to the world “that they two, standing at the two extremes/ Of social classes, had received one seal” (IV. 138-39). Romney believes that together, they can overcome class prejudices and work toward Romney’s philanthropic goals as a married couple. His proposal to her is pithy and direct: “My fellow-worker, be my wife?” (IV. 150). Marian accepts Romney’s proposal, although she is aware it is driven by his social activism, not by his romantic feelings for or devotion to her. When Aurora asks Marian, “So indeed/ He loves you, Marian?” (IV. 168-69), Marian candidly replies, “Loves me! he loves all,—/ And me, of course. He had not asked me else/ To work with him for ever, and be his wife” (IV. 173-75). From Marian’s subdued response, Aurora realizes that “Obviously/ She had not thought about his love at all” (IV. 182-83).

As an Englishwoman of the lower class, Marian believes she cannot afford to marry for love, but instead must marry to survive. Aurora reflects, “would she ask/ Who crowned her?—it sufficed that she was crowned” (IV. 185-86). Aurora also realizes the differences in marital unions among the classes:

With women of my class, 'tis otherwise:  
We 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. 187-92)

Aurora muses that the practice of marriage among the upper classes may be as objectionable as certain aspects of marriage among the lower classes. She remarks that, across class lines, marriage is often a financial arrangement, and mutual love is often an indulgence that cannot be afforded. Aurora discerns a certain “uncivilized” element in such arrangements, and marvels how marriage, which should be an intimate, private pact, can become instead an obscene spectacle. She continues:

And certain brides of Europe duly ask  
To mount the pile, as Indian widows do,  
The spices of their tender youth heaped up,  
The jewels of their gracious virtues worn,  
More gems, more glory,—to consume entire  
For a living husband! as the man's alive,  
Not dead,—the woman's duty, by so much,

Advanced in England, beyond Hindostan. (IV. 193-202)

Aurora is appalled at how a sacred, spiritual bond such as marriage can be tainted by capitalism. Instead of love, she perceives that greed is the driving emotion behind many contemporary marriages, and the only difference between the “civilized” country England and a “savage” nation like India is that an English wife spends her husband’s wealth *before* he dies. By making such radical comparisons, Barrett Browning rejects class constructs as either grounds for or obstacles against making a marriage. As Deborah Logan has noted, “Barrett Browning’s focus on the class bases of gender and economic

issues emphasizes that, insofar as sexual stereotypes are social constructs to begin with, they can be reconstructed in more sexually equitable terms” (Logan 297).

Barrett Browning’s character Marian, however, is certain that society at large will never accept her union with Romney. She asks Aurora, ““You are kind./ But are you, peradventure, vexed at heart/ Because your cousin takes me for a wife?”” (IV. 205-07). Marian admits, ““I know I am not worthy—nay, in truth, / I’m glad on’t, since, for that, he chooses me./ He likes the poor things of the world the best”” (IV. 208-10). Marian’s identity has become inseparable from her class. Not only does Marian believe herself to be “unworthy” of her own prospective husband, but she considers herself a “thing,” or social commodity, in his eyes. Despite this, she still maintains her wish to marry Romney, claiming:

“I know myself for what I am  
Much fitter for his handmaid than his wife,  
I’ll prove the handmaid and the wife at once,  
Serve tenderly, and love obediently,  
And be a worthier mate, perhaps, than some  
Who are wooed in silk among their learned books.” (IV. 226-31)

Marian vows that, since she believes herself to be an unworthy spouse to a man such as Romney, she will attempt to fulfill the dual roles of a devoted servant and a wife to him. Although Marian does not anticipate requited love, she promises to love her husband—albeit “obediently,” as a servant might—and she hopes that in this way, she might overcome the bounds of her class and prove a “worthy” mate of the high-born Leigh.

On the day Romney and Marian are to have their wedding ceremony, Romney

waits with Aurora at the altar, flanked by “other noble gentlemen/ And high-born ladies” as the guests anticipate the arrival of the working-class bride (IV. 606-07). The gathered crowd gossips, and one woman of high rank is heard to remark, “They say the bride's a mere child, who can't read,/ But knows the things she shouldn't, with wide-awake/ Great eyes. I'd go through fire to look at her” (IV. IV. 645-47). In her depiction of the assembled lords and ladies at the wedding, Barrett Browning once again exposes the folly of class prejudices; the assumptions the upper-class guests make about the lower-class bride are often ludicrous and cruel. Because of the great discrepancy in class between Romney and his chosen bride, the wedding is regarded by the elite not as a sacred event, but as a kind of spectacle. The audience judges that although Lady Waldemar was kind to organize this event for a “poor thing” such as Marian, “She'd have served him more/ By marrying him herself” (IV. 652-53). Others in attendance view the union as indicative of the crumbling of English society; one gentleman deems the wedding “A hideous sight, a most indecent sight,” and likens his witness to watching an execution (IV. 672-75). He recalls that when an assassin was drawn and quartered, “women of the court/ Stood by and stared, exactly as to-day/ On this dismembering of society,/ With pretty troubled faces” (IV. 675-78). Lord Howe, another aristocrat present at the church, voices his belief that the wedding is Romney's own attempt at staging a kind of morality play. Howe says that Romney must fancy himself a Hamlet figure, and he will wed this “pretty maid” as a kind of “symbol, to instruct us formally/ To fill the ditches up 'twixt class and class, / And live together in phalansteries” (IV. 752-56). He dismisses Romney as “mad” for carrying out such a “fine actor-piece” instead of a true wedding (IV. 756, 767). Romney, however, views his wedding as a momentous, solemn occasion

that may serve as an example of charity and acceptance for other couples to follow. Therefore, Romney feels utterly defeated when his bride never appears at the church, and instead sends him a letter stating, “I never could be happy as your wife” (IV. 956). When Romney reveals to the assembly that there will be no wedding, a poor woman from the crowd believes there must be foul play and cries out, “We’ll have the girl, the girl! Your ladies there/ Are married safely and smoothly every day, / And *she* shall not drop through into a trap/ Because she’s poor and of the people: shame!” (IV. 842-45) Like many of the onlookers, the woman supposes that Romney will no longer wed Marian because of her class status.

One year after the ill-fated wedding day, Marian also explains to Aurora that it was due to class differences that she chose not to wed Romney. Lady Waldemar had convinced Marian that Romney was not eager to wed her personally, but simply to “espouse [her] class” (VI. 1017). Lady Waldemar also voiced to Marian her belief that it was “plain a man like Romney Leigh/ Required a wife more level to himself” (VI. 1026-27). The Lady believed that if Marian and Romney were married, her husband would have to “bend” to think on her low level, and stoop to converse in terms understood by the lower classes (VI. 1028). Lady Waldemar also told Marian that:

“He’d feel it bitter to be forced to miss  
The perfect joy of married suited pairs,  
Who, bursting through the separating hedge  
Of personal dues with that sweet eglantine  
Of equal love, keep saying, ‘So *we* think,  
‘It strikes *us*,—that’s *our* fancy.’” (VI. 1016-39)

Convinced that she could never be equal to her husband, nor that he could ever consider her his equal, Marian decides not to marry Romney, failing to understand that Lady Waldemar was manipulating her to sabotage the wedding. Aurora imagines that even as she listens to Marian tell her sad tale of treachery, Romney might be making a marriage vow to Lady Waldemar, whom she now recognizes as less of a woman than a monster, describing her as a “Lamia-woman” (VII. 152) and a “woman-serpent” (VI. 1102). Barrett Browning thus represents a member of the upper class as a “creature,” an epithet more commonly applied to the lower classes. The sympathetic characterization of Marian contrasts with the grotesque depiction of Lady Waldemar, who, by Victorian custom, would generally be seen as the more “appropriate” bride for a man of Romney’s class. Barrett Browning ensures that her readers will instead empathize with Marian and realize that class should not be a consideration for a marriage, which instead should be based on character.

Aurora does not dwell on Romney’s potential match with Lady Waldemar again until she sees Marian in Paris and learns that her cousin’s former fiancée has a year-old child, the result of rape. Aurora now perceives that Marian is “not dead,/ But only..damned,” since unmarried mothers like Marian were not only shunned by society, but were also deprived of their civil rights by the law (VI. 365-66). Such women were scorned for their “immoral” behavior, although the fathers of their illegitimate children were rarely punished in the same manner. Although Marian herself is blameless of any sin and had no choice in her “fall,” “to the cultural collective conscience she is as much a sexual deviant as any prostitute; Barrett Browning forcefully clarifies this elision of terms by portraying her as inherently pure, and sexually, socially, and economically victimized”

(Logan 295). Marian's pure and innocent nature allows her to rise above the cruelties the world inflicts on her for her gender and presumed sexual sin. Although the law denies her the rights allowed to married mothers, Marian maintains she has a love for her child equivalent to that of any woman "Who sets her darling down to cut his teeth/ Upon her church-ring" (VI. 663-64). Marian claims equality in the name of the laws of motherhood, and attests that since she is his mother, she has a right to love her child and happily proclaim him as her own. Marian has already witnessed the hatred of society against unmarried mothers, and she denounces it as merciless and unmerited. Marian explains to Aurora that after her rape, she worked for a time as a maid for a miller's wife, but did not realize that she was pregnant until her mistress confronted her and demanded that Marian confess her "filthy secret" (VII. 74). The mistress insisted that the "unchaste girl" leave her house and wondered aloud that Marian could have been so impudent as to dare to look her in the face (VII. 71-72). Marian's employer may have reacted so violently in part because, according to Victorian ideology, "strictly on the basis of class, Marian Erle's sexual deviance as an unmarried mother, regardless of the circumstances, links her with prostitution" (Logan 296). However, upon hearing this part of Marian's tale, Aurora observes wryly, "Yet she herself,/ A wife, I think, had scandals of her own,/ A lover not her husband" (VII. 87-89). Through this exchange, Barrett Browning derides the blatant double standards that a woman like Marian experiences in Victorian society, whether due to her morality, her sex, or her class.

In an effort to "redeem" Marian from her perceived "sin," Romney again proposes to Marian, once more citing reasons of law and obligation rather than love or respect. Romney explains that he now believes that even ostensibly "virtuous" acts

such as marriage are often committed as penance for “worn-out sins,” and thus are driven by the compulsion to duty, not by love (VII. 1052). By this point in the poem, the cousins have almost reversed their roles from the beginning; Romney has become cynical about the act of marriage, while Aurora has become idealistic about its prospects.

Romney asks her:

“Is it right,  
For instance, to wed here, while you love there?  
And yet because a man sins once, the sin  
Cleaves to him, in necessity to sin;  
That if he sin not *so*, to damn himself,  
He sins *so*, to damn others with himself:  
And thus, to wed here, loving there, becomes  
A duty.” (VIII. 1053-60)

Romney speaks of marriage as a “damnation” rather than a blessing, and admits his dilemma in wedding a woman whom he does not love. Romney knows that Victorian laws would cruelly punish an unwed mother like Marian for not having a lawful relationship with a husband, and the church would condemn her as a sinner. Romney’s sense of duty is so strong that he seeks to maintain his broken bond with his fiancée and legitimize Marian in the eyes of the law and of the Lord. Romney tells Aurora, “I’m married. Is not Marian Erle my wife?/ As God sees things, I have a wife and child;/ And I, as I’m a man who honours God,/ Am here to claim my child and wife” (IX. 176-81). Although Romney is motivated by sympathy, his proposal to Marian can still be viewed as an attempt to “make moral and emotional beggars of women” by which he can

“purchase moral cleanness for both himself and Marian, although neither seems to have committed any sin” (Leighton 104-05).

Romney readily accepts that Marian has committed sin, but he appropriates it for himself, believing that as a man, only he has the power to purge it through the holy union of marriage. He asserts that Marian should be considered his lawful spouse, claiming to Aurora, “Yet she, 'tis certain, is my very wife;/ The very lamb left mangled by the wolves/ Through my own bad shepherding” (VIII. 1062-64). As Romney speaks, he is unaware that Marian has been listening for some time, and when she reveals her presence, she tells him, “I heard you speaking, . . . friend!—Confirm me now./ You take this Marian, such as wicked men/ Have made her, for your honourable wife?” (IX. 192-95). Her words imitate the wedding vows the couple once planned to take, but her tone is laden with irony. Just as Lord Howe once posited that Romney’s first wedding day was an exercise in play-acting, Marian puts on a performance to parody the ceremony the two never had. Her mock-vows are a burlesque of the stereotypical Victorian wedding arrangement; she adapts the words conventionally spoken by a holy cleric, but she is a “dishonored” woman by Victorian standards. As Marian speaks, Romney reaches out as if to embrace her, and replies immediately, “I take her as God made her, and as men/ Must fail to unmake her, as my honoured wife” (IX. 199-200). Romney replies to Marian’s mocking words with unaffected sincerity, so Marian continues the charade. Posing in a typical bridal posture, Marian stands still with her eyes lowered and asks Romney, “You take this Marian's child, which is her shame/ In sight of men and women, for your child,/ Of whom you will not ever feel ashamed?” (IX. 203-05). Romney confirms that he will, and Marian ceases their “vows” to confront Aurora.

In this scene, it becomes apparent that the demure Marian Romney once knew has been transformed dramatically by society's callous treatment of her. She changes the tone of her sham wedding by asking Aurora whether she has any objections to their union. She demands to know if Aurora will be a true "friend" to her cousin and explain to him that:

“... the nest is surely spoilt,  
And Marian what you know her,—though a wife,  
The world would hardly understand her case  
Of being just hurt and honest; while for him,  
'Twould ever twit him with his bastard child  
And married Harlot.” (IX. 237-42)

Marian knows that a union like hers and Romney's would never be deemed acceptable in Victorian society. She appeals to Aurora to convince Romney of the folly of such a marriage, but Aurora instead takes the feigned bride's hand and deems it pure, replying that if Romney and Marian were married, she would be willing to “witness to the world/ That Romney Leigh is honoured in his choice,/ Who chooses Marian for his honoured wife” (IX. 271-73). Aurora claims that she draws her authority for this affirmation from her status not only as a fellow woman but also as “a Leigh,” a reference to the power accorded to family ties and class (IX. 270). Marian seizes upon this connection and avows:

“That I, who felt myself unworthy once  
Of virtuous Romney and his high-born race,  
Have come to learn,.. a woman poor or rich,

Despised or honoured, is a human soul;  
And what her soul is,—that, she is herself,  
Although she should be spit upon of men.” (IX. 326-31)

Marian no longer believes that a match with a “high-born” man such as Romney will compensate for her class, her sex, or her status as a nonentity in society. She has learned to be self-reliant, and she finds her worth expressed in her humanity, morality, and her soul.

Romney’s former fiancée has discovered that she does not need his assistance, nor wish for his help, although she does admit, ““it does me good,/...That Romney Leigh should think me worthy still/ Of being his true and honourable wife!”” (IX. 343-46).

Angela Leighton has written that by summarily rejecting Romney’s proposal,

Marian not only condemns the hypocrisy of the world; she also refuses to accept the world’s version of respectability. Romney’s offer of marriage and legalized paternity has no attraction for her. She rejects the social authority of the father’s name with indignation. (Leighton 479)

Marian renounces the world’s limited view of legitimacy, saying, ““We only never call him fatherless/ Who has God and his mother”” (IX. 414-15). Thus, Marian rejects Romney’s proposal without reservations, and justifies her decision by confiding, ““I do not love you, Romney Leigh”” (IX. 355). Marian wonders aloud whether she ever loved Romney or only ““worshipped”” him, and postulates that she may even have set him ““so high”” in her mind that he became ““above love itself”” (IX. 362-66). Marian admits that she is unsure whether she could ever have proven herself to be a good wife to Romney, since did not know how to act the part of his wife. Instead, she only knew how ““To be

your slave, your help, your toy, your tool./ 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” (IX. 370-72). Despite the social, financial, and familial benefits that a marriage to Romney might afford her, Marian remains true to her heart and her instinct, and she embraces her new role as mother rather than the role of bride. She proudly subverts Victorian ideology by proclaiming, “Here’s a hand shall keep/ For ever clean without a marriage-ring” (IX. 431-32). Through the character of Marian, Barrett Browning reinforces her belief that marriage is not a necessity for every woman, and women should resist conforming to society’s expectations for them to marry. Although Victorian society encouraged women to become wives for legal, economic, sexual, and social reasons, and Marian refuses to wed for any of these reasons because she has embraced her life as a self-reliant and free woman.

*Aurora Leigh* is Barrett Browning’s longest work, and is also the one that deals the most extensively with the concept of marriage, questioning the era’s preconceptions of various rationales behind marriage and the dynamics of power within it. However, for a book so absorbed with marital relationships, few marriages are actually depicted. The first marriage Barrett Browning represents in the poem, the relationship between Aurora’s parents, is a model of loving devotion that Aurora vows to follow. Although the reader does not witness the married couple interact while both members are still alive, it is understood that Aurora’s parents married for love, and Aurora’s father urges Aurora to follow their example. By the conclusion of the poem, Aurora and Romney mirror her parents’ relationship and divulge their mutual admiration; similarly, their married life together is never expressly depicted, but it is presumed to be a successful one. Ironically,

some of the characters most outspoken on the subject of marriage are unmarried themselves; Aurora's aunt, for example, plays the part of an idealized housewife despite never having been married, and advises Aurora to marry according to society's expectations. Marian, who becomes an unmarried mother, imagines that living as a wife is similar to working as a servant, and she mocks the spurious "honor" associated with being a bride. In contrast, Lady Waldemar, who has been married once before and plots to marry again, regards marriage simply as a useful tool for obtaining increased wealth and social status. Only Aurora, who has been resisting wifedom and debating the merits of marriage from the beginning, forms a positive and complete view of the possibilities of marriage. Drawing upon her own marital experience, Elizabeth Barrett Browning creates a heroine who is cynical about marriage as it is commonly practiced in her society, but who amends her opinions after she finds a man whom she truly loves and once she reconsiders what their marriage could be. Aurora only agrees to marry Romney after she has reimagined the ideal Victorian marriage as a marriage of equals, one in which the gender roles are flexible, and the couple share for each other a mutual respect and affection. The Leigh marriage is allowed success because Aurora has not subscribed to the popular Victorian ideal; she is intelligent, assertive, enjoys a "masculine" occupation, and she will govern her spouse with love. When such a relationship is juxtaposed with the numerous unhappy marriages in the book, Barrett Browning makes evident that while her new conception of marriage may be somewhat radical, it has great potential for success.

## Conclusion

Although *Aurora Leigh* is very different in style and scope from Barrett Browning's shorter poems, it shares many themes in common with her earlier poetry. During the course of *Aurora Leigh*, Barrett Browning presents her readers with four visions of what a marriage to Romney might be like; three of these visions represent common types of unsuccessful unions Barrett Browning witnessed in the era, but the last vision is a model of the successful marital unions that the future could bring if readers heed Barrett Browning's advice. The vision scenes of *Aurora Leigh* and the scenarios found in Barrett Browning's shorter poems show many parallel ideas regarding marriage, especially concerning its dangers and risks. In Book Two, Aurora has a vision in which she imagines herself as the mother of Romney's children, acting the part of the Angel in the House, and remaining in her designated domestic sphere. She muses:

If he had loved,  
Ay, loved me, with that retributive face,..  
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. (II. 509-17)

The vision Aurora entertains of her potential life as Romney's wife is not entirely hellish, but it is not the life she desires. This might seem an idyllic scene to many Victorian readers, but Aurora is not content with this vision because she wants to achieve great

feats of her own and feels she cannot be shackled by the constraints of wifehood if she is to be a self-fulfilled artist. Through this vision, Barrett Browning turns the presumed dream of many young Victorian women into a kind of dull nightmare, revealing this form of marriage to be little more than a socially legitimized means of imprisonment and suppression of women. The sentiments expressed here also echo of Barrett Browning's poem "Bertha in the Lane," a poem that also paints a picture of an unhappy wife whose subscription to Victorian domestic ideology has proven to be her downfall. The narrator of the poem marries a man like Romney whose words were "kind and good" and who claimed to "esteem" her, and although she believes she "could not live without" her husband, her seemingly perfect home is turned upside down by his infidelity (160-61, 186). Just as Aurora imagines she might do, the narrator of "Bertha" plays by the rules, accepts Victorian values as her own, and is content to be the submissive partner in her marital relationship. She is kept "low and wise," as Aurora says, but her passivity and acceptance of Victorian mores proves to be her undoing when she dies, still remaining true to her unfaithful husband. Through both of these scenarios, Barrett Browning unravels the unrealistic ideals supported by men such as John Ruskin or Coventry Patmore and reveals them to be unjust, impractical, and dysfunctional.

The next vision described in *Aurora Leigh* is one of Lady Waldemar's marriage to Romney, a "sad, bad dream" in which Romney's capitulation to social norms has left him married to a demonic wife (V. 1160). Aurora agonizes that through his failure to marry for love, Romney has become "lost" and she imagines that while he might marry Lady Waldemar:

...his empty house

Sucks in, at this same hour, a wind from hell  
To keep his hearth cold, make his casements creak  
For ever to the tune of plague and sin. (VII. 180-3)

Barrett Browning's description of the repercussions of this potential marriage is horrific. She demonstrates in an extreme manner how, without love, a marriage based on contemporary Victorian ideology can be transformed from something holy into something hellish. She elaborates upon this concept as Aurora envisions Lady Waldemar's wedding day:

And then we'll have  
The call to church; the broken, sad, bad dream  
Dreamed out at last; the marriage-vow complete  
With the marriage-breakfast; praying in white gloves,  
Drawn off in haste for drinking pagan toasts  
In somewhat stronger wine than any sipped  
By gods, since Bacchus had his way with grapes. (V. 1160-66)

In such a scenario, Aurora imagines, the institution of marriage will at last no longer even possess the pretense of a holy act. Marriage would become a sybaritic mockery of the ideal of love that Aurora holds dear; it would devolve into a pagan ceremony enacted for social and financial advantage. Since this would be a marriage based on lies, Aurora dreams that she is in a position similar to the Indian maiden Luti in the poem "A Romance of the Ganges." In this work, Luti must watch helplessly as her lover marries another woman, Nuleeni; Luti curses the marriage not only because of her lover's betrayal but also because she knows that neither partner can be happy in a marriage based

on false pretenses. The marriage has been arranged and will go through as planned, but there is no love present. Similarly, Aurora imagines that if Romney were to marry Lady Waldemar, love would not be an obstacle nor even a consideration; however, if her cousin is incapable of love as Aurora suspects him to be, it is the only kind of union he would be able to achieve. Barrett Browning has earlier warned against loveless marriages in her companion pieces “A Woman’s Shortcomings” and “A Man’s Requirements.” In these poems, Barrett Browning cautions that what passes as “love” in the Victorian era is not usually the self-sacrificial devotion she champions. She reminds her readers that men and women alike should never use love as either a bribe or a weapon in negotiating the power dynamics within a relationship. In this vein, Barrett Browning demonstrates time and again that a marriage built on the delusion of untruthful love cannot last. Barrett Browning demands that her readers exercise caution before entering a marriage, and, as she says in “A Woman’s Expectations,” to “fear to call it loving” unless it is requited, mutually fulfilling love (32).

Just as with Lady Waldemar, if Romney had ultimately married Marian, it would have been for social and legal incentives, rather than the reasons of love and devotion. When Romney proposes to Marian, she too shares a grim vision of what her wedding to Romney might be like:

“... I'll get up from my grave,  
And wear my chin-cloth for a wedding-veil,  
And glide along the churchyard like a bride,  
While all the dead keep whispering through the withes,  
'You would be better in your place with us,

You pitiful corruption!” (IX. 391-97)

Marian is considered “corrupt” by society because of a sin she never committed, but she would consider marriage to Romney to be the greatest “corruption” of all, since she believes such a wedding would make a mockery of marriage as an institution. Now, Marian regards herself as “dead” and therefore is unwilling and incapable of ever marrying (IX. 391). Marian’s self-identification as a nonentity echoes the feelings of the narrator in Barrett Browning’s 1860 poem “Void in Law.” Like Marian, the narrator of the poem is an unwed mother who is ignored by the law and shunned by society at large. Because this woman, like Marian, has no husband, she essentially has no legal standing and will have difficulty earning her own wages and even surviving under such circumstances. The father of the narrator’s child has left her because of his preoccupation with class and social status, although unlike Romney, he seeks to marry above, rather than below, his own class. Barrett Browning abhorred the explicit divisions among classes in Victorian society, especially since these limited how and whom a person could choose to marry. As evidenced in her poems, she also contested the ethics of laws and customs that would discriminate against a person based on class, gender, and marital status. Through the character of Marian and the tale of “Void in Law,” Barrett Browning highlights the ludicrous nature of laws that cannot recognize a human being as such simply because she is unmarried.

Aurora is a character who fights society’s pressure to wed almost throughout the entirety of *Aurora Leigh*. By the poem’s conclusion, Aurora has become a self-sufficient woman, but when she discovers the fulfilling, mutual love she shares with Romney, she eventually becomes willing to wed. The final vision of marriage in *Aurora Leigh* is

found in the last verses of the poem, after Aurora has decided to marry Romney. She envisions the two of them laying the “first foundations of that new, near Day/ Which should be builded out of heaven to God” as they work together to build the New Jerusalem (IX. 956-57). The reference is to Revelation Chapter 21, which begins, “And I...saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband” (Rev. 21:2 KJV). Barrett Browning suggests with this language that the model of marriage offered by Aurora and Romney is one sanctioned by God, not mere men, and is therefore the highest form of union. Aurora, who has consistently defied society’s expectations, at last bows to the marital convention, but it is on her own terms. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar note that “concealed behind the veil of self-abnegating servitude,” the conclusion of *Aurora Leigh* also demonstrates a “Romantic rage for social transformation” (Gilbert & Gubar 580). Aurora will not abandon her vocation as a poet, and will meet many of the societal expectations of a husband rather than those of a wife. She willingly shares her vision of marriage with Romney, but the dream is her own; the “celestial city” Aurora envisions “is, after all, Aurora's and not blind Romney's to see, perhaps because it is that shining capital, the *new* Jerusalem. If the ‘heat and violence’ of Aurora Leigh's heart have been tamed, then, at least her dawn-fires have not been entirely extinguished” (Gilbert & Gubar 580). Aurora, the quintessential idealist, entertains a grandiose vision of her “perfect” marriage to come, which might prove both implausible and impracticable for most of Barrett Browning’s readers. Barrett Browning thus suggests that if her readers choose to embrace the convention of marriage, they should attempt to subscribe to a more practical version of Aurora’s core values and seek to reclaim marriage as an institution based on

equitability and love. Aurora also follows a marital model based on Barrett Browning's depiction of the real-life Queen Victoria and Prince Albert's relationship in the poem "Crowned and Wedded." In this paradigm, the Queen "retains her womanhood" although she is in a superior, "masculine" role as a monarch (III.4). Like Aurora, the balance of power in the relationship tips in the Queen's favor, but she "vows to love" and thus will not take unfair advantage of her position of authority (III.13). These two marriages bear all the hallmarks of the ideal marital relationship extolled by Barrett Browning: the gender roles are not fixed, the balance of power is not unduly imbalanced, they do not strictly subscribe to patriarchal ideology, and they are rooted in love. Just as the crowning of Victoria ushered in a new era, the marriage of Aurora and Romney heralds the beginning of a new kind of marriage for the period. In her role as a social critic, Elizabeth Barrett Browning created this alternate model as a means of acclaiming the potential virtues and benefits of marriage, while at the same time combating the egregious injustices common to many marriages of her time.

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