

Creative Fluidity in Art and Love in Barrett Browning's Aurora Leigh

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<https://doi.org/10.15017/1560245>

出版情報 : 九大英文学. 56, pp.35-57, 2014-03-31. The Society of English Literature and Linguistics, Kyushu University

バージョン :

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Creative Fluidity in Art and Love in Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*

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Since its re-discovery and re-exploration by feminist scholars in the 1970s, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* has been mainly read as a portrait of the woman writer. Many critics of this female *Kunstlerroman* have foregrounded the tension between vocation and marriage, art and love. Alison Case, for example, discerns "two seemingly incompatible plots: a female *Kunstlerroman* and a feminine love story," drawing on Rachel DuPlessis's observation that *Aurora Leigh* fuses "the love plot and the *Bildungs* plot" (Case 17; DuPlessis 84-87).

Some critics find Aurora's final acceptance of love and eventual marriage detrimental to her poetry, while others evaluate it in a more favourable light. Elaine Showalter, for example, sees the stereotypical female virtue of "self-sacrifice" in Aurora's marriage, opposed to the "guilt of self-centered ambition" she fails to cope with in her success as a poet (23). Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, meanwhile, accept Aurora's future marriage as "the most reasonable compromise between assertion and submission" for a nineteenth-century woman poet, while detecting Aurora's "revolutionary impulses" behind "the veil of self-abnegating servitude" (575, 579, 580).

On the other hand, critics such as Barbara Gelpi and Helen Cooper seek the source of Aurora's poetic creativity in her womanhood, manifested in her subjectivity of love, desire and sexuality, opposed to the male literary tradition, and wider patriarchal system and conventions (Gelpi 48; Cooper 153). They thus subtly differentiate Aurora's subjective love from conventional marriage intertwined with

female passivity. In either case, critics tend to exclusively focus on romantic love when exploring the theme of love in *Aurora Leigh*.

In this paper, I will broaden the theme of love in *Aurora Leigh* so as to show how the conflict between art and love is resolved. I will first suggest that love in *Aurora Leigh* is not exclusively romantic, but also artistic, parental and divine. Secondly, I will argue that Aurora's incapacity for love, foregrounded by herself towards the end of Book 5, stems from a sense of loss resulting from her early loss of both parents. I will finally argue that the love between Marian and her baby depicted in Book 6 helps Aurora overcome her fear of love and thus her impasse both in art and life, by focusing on a simile drawing on the mythological figure Adonis. While doing so, I will also point out that both love and artistic creativity are represented through images of fluidity, in order to show how love is represented as integral to art.

Artist's Love: Romantic, Parental and Divine Love

In Book 5, Aurora announces her major manifesto as a poet: her advocacy of the contemporary epic. She also completes her latest volume of poetry. Despite the fact that her cousin and future husband Romney will praise in Book 8, she herself is not satisfied with it. She "cannot thoroughly love a work" of hers (5. 411). Contrasting herself with Pygmalion, whose statue becomes alive owing to his love (5. 400-10), she adumbrates love's capacity of giving life to art. Helen Cooper sees in the figure of Pygmalion Aurora's still lingering masculine self, which, Cooper argues, she has internalised. However, comparing oneself to a figure does not necessarily suggest identification with the figure's gender. When Aurora meets Romney in Book 8, for example, she compares herself to Odysseus (8. 514-17). I would rather emphasise that Aurora conflates artistic and romantic love. Aurora associates art with love, intimating that her quest for love overlaps her quest for art.

This interrelationship between artistic creativity and love also features in her friend Vincent Carrington's description of his sketch of the mythological figure Danae in Book 3:

You dimly see her through
 The glittering haze of that prodigious rain,
 Half blotted out of nature by a love
 As heavy as fate. (3. 130-33)¹

Danae was imprisoned in a tower by her father in order to prevent the fulfilment of the prophecy of an oracle which foretold that her son would kill her father. Jove visited her in the form of a shower of golden rain, however, and begot Perseus, who eventually killed his grandfather. Jove in the form of a golden shower is love in the sense of passionate desire and artistic inspiration. In this image of Danae, Aurora perceives a state of “the recipient artist-soul” (3. 139). Danae is also invoked in Barrett Browning’s “A Vision of Poets” (1844) to describe the lady who guides the questing poet towards truth: “... her sleek tresses manifold,/ Like Danae’s in the rain of old/ That dripped with melancholy gold” (205-07). Through these images of fluids, love and poetic creativity thus mingle.

Like Danae, Aurora’s father, whom she describes as leading a dry life, is “flooded with a passion unaware,/ His whole provisioned and complacent past/ Drowned out from him that moment” when he first sees his future wife in Florence (1. 68-70).² Love is thus conceived as fluid like rain or flood.³ Aurora’s father’s whole past is drowned when watery passion floods him, which is comparable to Danae “Half

¹ I will hereafter designate quotations from *Aurora Leigh* by book number and line numbers in parentheses.

² Intimating her father’s dryness before meeting his future wife, Aurora humorously adds that he had noted “the secret of Da Vinci’s drains” (1. 72). Gennis Stephenson suggests that in the episode of Aurora’s father’s falling in love “Love appears as highly idealized, completely irrational spontaneous emotion,” and that “the story contains a traditionally male perspective on love” (94). Sandra Donaldson similarly sees idealization in it and explains this idealization as resulting from Aurora’s unreliable narration.

³ At Romney’s marriage proposal, Marian “Looked blindly in his face, as when one looks/ Through driving autumn-rains to find the sky” (4. 118-19).

blotted out” in rain in Carrington’s sketch. In Aurora’s words, “Self is put away,/ And calm with abdication. She is Jove,/ And no more Danae – greater thus” (3. 135-37).

Aurora remembers, moreover, that in her youth Romney “dropped a sudden hand upon my head ... as soft as rain“ (1. 543-45), which she shook off as if it were dangerous. Romney’s gesture of placing his hand on her head, compared to soft “rain,” is reminiscent of her late father’s affectionate gesture after her mother’s death: “My father’s slow hand ... Stroke out my childish curls across his knee” (1. 20-21). These affectionate hands seem to develop into Jove’s “Hand [which] Shall overtake me [Aurora] wholly and on my head/ Lay down its large unfluctuating peace” (7. 830-32). In this image, Aurora compares herself to another mythological figure Io, who also symbolizes the artist receiving divine inspiration.⁴ Romantic, parental and artistic loves are accordingly intertwined by a series of references to the gesture of placing hands as well as a constellation of fluid images.

Aurora’s Lack of Love and Loss of her Parents

In Book 5, Aurora is not only incapable of loving her own poetry but also insists that she is incapable of love, despite her reputation as a love poet. At Lord Howe’s party before she leaves London, he tries to give a love letter from his friend to Aurora, who, refusing it, asserts her critical distance from love:

‘Love, you say?

My lord, I cannot love: I only find

The rhyme for love, - and that’s not love, my lord.

⁴ This reference to “Hand” — certainly deriving from the mythological episode in which Jove impregnated Io by a mere touch, and thus their son was named Ephaphos, meaning “who was touched” — might be influenced by Barrett Browning’s experience in a séance with the medium Daniel Dunglas Home (sometimes spelled “Hume”) in Italy. On 25 July 1855, the Brownings participated in the séance in which a large hand appeared and placed a wreath on Barrett Browning’s head. Hume attributed the hand to Dante. Although Barrett Browning hesitated to believe it, she treasured the wreath (Chapman 78-79).

Take back your letter.'

(5. 894-97)⁵

She recognises her lack of love already in her youth. In Book 2, refusing Romney's marriage proposal, she insists that the only love she knows is that of her dead parents:

I know so much of love as used to shine

In [my mother's] face and another. Just so much;

No more indeed at all.

(2. 395-97)

She further alleges absence of love between her and Romney: "I know /I did not love him . . . nor he me . . . that's sure . . ." (2. 505-06). After her aunt insists on Aurora's love of Romney, which makes her blush, she reiterates her denial: "I think I loved him not — nor then, nor since,/ Nor ever" (2. 713-14). In Book 4, moreover, Aurora recalls her and Romney's night walk in the rain and repeats her earlier recognition of the lack of love between them, as if she needs to reassure herself of its validity: "'Tis plain/ We had not loved nor hated" (4. 417-18). Aurora seems to shrink from love to the extent to that she questions whether Romney is capable of love: "if he's incapable of love, /Which may be" (5. 1121-22). This series of repeated and seemingly exaggerated denials not only of her love but also even of Romney's love demands attention.⁶

Gelpi and Cooper argue that Aurora's identification with the masculine has prevented her from accepting her womanhood and thus her love of Romney (Gelpi

⁵ See also 5. 474-81: "To have our books/ Appraised by love, associated with love,/ While we sit loveless!"

⁶ Case sees the contradiction between Aurora's initial "I loved him [Romney] not, nor then...." and her later "I loved you [Romney] always" as unsettling and reflecting the conflict between Aurora's right to vocational self-determination, and her abject retroactive repudiation of that right after her reunion with Romney (29). The apparent contradiction can be equally explained by Aurora's later realisation or admittance of her love for Romney.

41-42; Cooper 153). The romantic love between Romney and Aurora is indeed foregrounded towards the end of the story. When Aurora recognises a lack of love in her life, however, love involves not exclusively romantic love but also an artist's love of her work and parental love (5. 411, 540-42). In the Io image in Book 7, Aurora equates love with divine truth (7. 893-97). Thus, when Aurora speaks of love, she does not just mean romantic love. Hence, her lack of love, foregrounded by herself in Book 5, stems from something deeper than her internalization of the masculine.

I would like to suggest that Aurora's refusal of love originates from her loss of both her parents and a resultant fear of love. Her mother died "When scarcely I was four years old," but Aurora represents it as if her mother had died in childbirth: "She could not bear the joy of giving life —/ The mother's rapture slew her" (1. 34-35).⁷ She thus directly connects her birth to her mother's death: "I, Aurora Leigh, was born/ To make my father sadder" (1. 45-46).⁸

Her dead mother's portrait hanging in her childhood home is represented as mingling life and death, since she is enwrapped not in a shroud but in "red stiff silk," her "last brocade" (1. 140, 131). Although much critical attention has been paid to the diverse range of traditional female figures projected on the portrait,⁹ the co-existence of life and death in the portrait has been generally overlooked. Aurora sees in it her mother both still alive — "leaving her last smile/ In her last kiss upon the baby-mouth" — and dead: "without smile or kiss, /Buried at Florence" (1. 163-64, 166-67). She recapitulates its effect thus:

⁷ Angela Leighton identifies the death of Aurora's mother as "not a literal death in childbirth ... but some vague excess of motherly experience" (*Barrett Browning* 120).

⁸ The discrepancy between when her mother died and Aurora's representation of it allows Aurora to have a vague memory of her living mother, while mitigating a slight awkwardness in calling a three-year-old child's lips "milkless," as if she were still unweaned (1. 116). Barrett Browning's own child, for instance, was breastfed by a wet nurse for about eighteen months. On Barrett Browning's close relationship with her son and how she incorporated her own maternal experiences into her writing, see Calcraft-Rennie.

⁹ See for instance Cooper 156, Gelpi 40, Gilbert and Gubar 18-19, Renk 41.

The incoherencies of change and death
Are represented fully, mixed and merged,
In the smooth fair mystery of perpetual Life. (1. 171-73)

This co-presence of life and death in her mother's portrait suggests a continuity between life and death, or even an oscillation between the two, which reflects Aurora's faint hope to retrieve her dead mother, as she "felt a mother-want about the world" (1. 40).

Just as her mother's death is seen as coinciding with Aurora's birth, so the death of Aurora's father is described as coincident with her own growing up to full life:

I was just thirteen,
Still growing like the plants from unseen roots
In tongue-tied Springs, – and suddenly awoke
To full life and life's needs and agonies
With an intense, strong, struggling heart beside
A stone-dead father. Life, struck sharp on death,
Makes awful lightning. (1. 205-11)

Aurora was thus born and has grown up by replacing her mother and father, respectively. Aurora seems to betray an irretrievable indebtedness to both her parents in depriving them of their life in order to attain her life. Leighton notes about the lines on the death of Aurora's father that "it seems like life won at the cost of death" and attributes it to the clash between father and daughter, waking to womanhood and self-expression (*Barrett Browning* 123). I am rather inclined to perceive a parallelism between her representations of both her parents. Just as Aurora's balanced self-introductory narrative shows her two-fold genealogy — "My mother was a Florentine ... My father was an austere Englishman" (1. 29, 65) — so the scenes of

the death of both her parents are constructed to reveal Aurora's sense of an analogous irrecoverable guilt towards her parents.

Young Aurora heard her father say: "And thus beloved, she [Aurora's mother] died" (1. 91-92). Love can destroy a beloved's life, and yet her dying father still exhorts her to love:

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. (1. 211-14)

This exhortation remains in her when she comes to England for the first time: "In my ears, my father's word/Hummed ignorantly, as the sea in shells,/ 'Love, love, my child'" (1. 317-19). Love and water imagery are thus again connected. The simile comparing her father's word to "the sea in shells" emphasises that his word lays in her profoundly and primordially. Quite pertinently, she uses a Wordsworthian image at the beginning of *Aurora Leigh*: "I have not so far left the coasts of life /To travel inland, that I cannot hear/ That murmur of the outer Infinite" (1. 10-12). The simile of "the sea in shells" also intimates Aurora's self-enclosed life under her aunt's roof, where she becomes dry "Like sea-weed on the rock," draining "the last sea-salt" inside her (1. 380-84).¹⁰ The "sea" of her father's last words suggests the fluid, overflowing and boundary-crossing nature of love, though confined in Aurora's shell to seemingly dry up. Aurora accordingly links love to loss, which makes her shrink from love.

Aurora's sense of irrevocable guilt at gaining life by displacing others and of yearning for the lost beloved is partly retraceable in Barrett Browning's own loss of her closest brother Edward, called "Bro," who drowned in a sailing accident off

¹⁰ Rebecca Stott (Avery and Stott 197) understands that Aurora compares her life with her aunt to "water torture" (1. 468-69). However, Aurora is insisting that her life is even harder than suffering a water torture, because, I would suggest, of the dryness she endures.

Torquay in 1840. He went out sailing on 11 July, and his body was washed ashore on 4 August. His body was thus missing for more than three weeks. Barrett Browning was sent to Torquay to recover from a serious illness and her brother stayed there at her request against their father's wishes. She described her grief thus: "The scars of that anguish I shall take down with me to the grave" (*Letters to Mitford* 1: 304). According to her friend Mary Mitford, Barrett Browning "was utterly prostrated by the horror and the grief, and by a natural but a most unjust feeling, that she had been in some sort the cause of this great misery" (*Recollections of a Literary Life* (1852) cited in *op. cit* 3: 345). In Italy, Barrett Browning had an intense friendship with the medium Sophia Eckley not only because of her own growing inclination to spiritualism in general but also because Eckley claimed to be capable of getting in touch with her brother's spirit (Chapman 71-72).¹¹

Aurora's loss of her mother and the maternal images in *Aurora Leigh* have drawn much critical attention.¹² This focus on maternal images often stems from feminist concerns, in which critics are opposing the oppressive patriarchy and seeking after female roots of empowerment. Certainly, Barrett Browning's frequent use of maternal images – especially breast nursing imagery – in *Aurora Leigh* is significant and probably reflects her own experience of having a child.¹³ She was also firmly critical of the patriarchal system oppressing women.¹⁴ Nevertheless, it is not clear that she always employs these maternal images in contrast to and with a view to

¹¹ On Bro's death, see for example Forster 99-100, Taplin 79-81. Mitford's book *Recollections of a Literary Life*, revealing the circumstances of Bro's death, newly wounded Barrett Browning (*Letters to Mitford* 3: xxxv-vi, 343). Gelpi sees Romney as reflecting the dead brother (41).

¹² See for example Donaldson 59, Gelpi 37-39, Gilbert, Kaplan 15, Mermin 193, Steinmetz 351 et passim.

¹³ On Barrett Browning's use of female breasts as a maternal rather than an erotic symbol, see Stone "Totem"; on Barrett Browning's own maternal experiences reflected in her poetry, see Calcraft-Rennie.

¹⁴ See for example Avery and Stott 150-55 on Barrett Browning's criticism on the institution of marriage.

displacing fatherhood and patriarchy.¹⁵ A father in a fictional world is, moreover, not always a straightforward representative of patriarchal society. Aurora's father, specifically, who is disinherited from his native family because of his marriage with an Italian woman and dies in Italy, deviates from Victorian conventional norms, within which Aurora's aunt rather than her father tries to confine her. Furthermore, the most prominent paternal figure in *Aurora Leigh* is God, who is the source of truth and the model of the artist for Aurora. Gender-oriented criticism tends to emphasise the difference between the male and the female. This opposition is, however, I would suggest, one of the stereotypical binary oppositions that Barrett Browning presents and blurs. Aurora has lost both her parents, and her loss of the beloved more deeply affects her than the differentiation between mother and father.

Critics observe that Marian becomes a mother figure to compensate for Aurora's loss of her mother. Given the parallelism in Aurora's sense of indebtedness and guilt towards both her dead parents and Barrett Browning's comparable trauma of losing her brother, however, I would refrain from limiting Marian's significance solely to that of a mother figure. Aurora has felt guilty at Marian's disappearance. She blames herself for failing to inform Romney of Lady Waldemar's possible vile intentions:

I, who should have known,
Forereckoned mischief! Where we disavow
Being keeper to our brother we're his Cain.
I might have held that poor child to my heart

¹⁵ Milk in some contexts can be connected to a paternal figure. The second century Greek Father Clement of Alexandria, for example, linked maternal milk to Christ's blood, thus blurring the gender demarcation: "This is our nourishment, the milk flowing from the Father by which alone we little ones are fed. I mean that He, the "well-beloved," the Word, our provider, has saved mankind by shedding His blood for us." (*Paedagogos* 1. 42.1-2, cited in Berger 75). Barrett Browning was familiar with early Christian writings. She published four essays under the title of "Some Account of the Greek Christian Poets" in 1842 *Athenaeum* (*Works* 4: 347-442). She represented the poets, according to her own words, in "translations of *excerpta* with a prose analysis & synthesis of the original author's genius" (*Correspondence* 5: 201).

A little longer!

(4. 466-70)

This failure suggests that unconsciously she refrained from becoming involved in promoting Romney's marriage to Marian.¹⁶ Marian becomes the object of Aurora's re-enacting hope to retrieve the beloved dead. When Aurora catches a glimpse of Marian's face in Paris, she describes it thus:

When something floats up suddenly, out there,

Turns over . . . a dead face, known once alive . . . (6. 238-39)¹⁷

When Aurora "plunged" into the crowd in search of Marian, she dashes into a gentleman in a "snow-white waistcoat ... pricked ... with honourable red" (6. 242, 268-70). The contrasting colours, white and red, are reminiscent of Aurora's dead mother's portrait. Her confused perception while walking around the city renders Paris a city of imagination and fantasy, where she looks into the watershed of life and death and where she can discover her lost beloved as if she is visiting Hades, as well as the real city where Barrett Browning stayed during 1851-1852.

Love Gives Life: the Adonis Simile in Book 6

When Aurora first sees Marian in Paris, she glimpses a child half hidden under her shawl. Speculating on this, Aurora almost assumes that she has stolen a child, and then considers the possibility that she is taking care of it for a friend (6. 347-76). After

¹⁶ Steinmetz observes that Aurora is not willing to help Marian (357), while Stone points out a similarity between Aurora and Lady Waldemar (*Barrett Browning* 166). Ukai explores the unconscious malice which intervenes at critical points in the plot of nineteenth-century British novels. I have obtained much insight from his discussion.

¹⁷ Rosenblum points out that the female face for the Romantics functions as the desired object, which is not allowed to have subjectivity, and suggest that Barrett Browning shows a way of not sacrificing "female subjectivity" (338).

rediscovering Marian again in a Parisian market, Aurora accompanies her to her shabby room, where her baby is sleeping:

There he lay upon his back,
The yearling creature, warm and moist with life
To the bottom of his dimples.... (6. 566-68)

Aurora's recognition of her want of love towards the end of Book 5 greatly influences her perception of Marian and her baby in Book 6. She repeats the word "love," describing this mother and son (6. 574, 600, 601, 603, 604). The *Westminster Review* (1857) extols this scene:

There is nothing more exquisite in the poem than some of the lines which refer to this infant. [...] [T]he whole of the succeeding pages ... presents a picture of innocence and maternal fondness such as perhaps never before been realized in verse, and which reminds one more than anything else of the masterpieces of Raphael. (225)

Marian, as Patricia Murphy illustrates and several critics note, evinces qualities of the Virgin Mary. Aurora's representation of Marian's baby as living "half with her [Marian] and half with heaven" (6. 593) moreover owes much to the Romantic myth of childhood, archetypically represented in Wordsworth's "Ode to Intimations of Immortality": "trailing clouds of glory do we come/ From God, who is our home:/ Heaven lies about us in our infancy!" (65-67)

Sandra Donaldson suggests that Aurora is an unreliable narrator, idealizing motherhood (56). While calling it a "Madonna scene," Virginia Steinmetz argues that the original readers and critics, fascinated with this scene, failed to notice Aurora's critical distance in this scene (353).¹⁸ Indeed, Aurora occasionally inserts critical

¹⁸ See also Cooper 152, Stone *Barrett Browning* 162-71. Avery and Stott 190-97.

comments such as “it should take such innocence/ To prove just guilt, I thought” (6. 582-83). She also tries to chastise Marian, saying that if a mother’s hands are not clean,

I would rather lay my hand,
Were I she, on God’s brazen altar-bars
Red-hot with burning sacrificial lambs,
Than touch the sacred curls of such a child. (6. 620-23)

In saying this, however, Aurora is “trying to be cold” (6. 612). I would thus suggest that she is herself bewildered at her own perception of an idealistic realization of parental relationship in Marian, who Aurora still supposes has either stolen the baby or has been seduced by a man. Aurora has not yet realised that Marian’s baby is a result of rape. Aurora’s Romantic perception is emphasised by her efforts to keep emotional distance from Marian. In spite of herself, Aurora is dazed by the overwhelming presence of love. I will suggest that this love between Marian and her baby leads Aurora to overcome her fear of love.

Aurora compares the baby to the first rose, evoking another instance of a vital fluid mingling with love:

both his cheeks
Were hot and scarlet as the first live rose
The shepherd’s heart-blood ebbd away into
The faster for his love. And love was here
As instant.... (6. 571-75)

This rose simile probably alludes to the death of the mythological figure Adonis, Aphrodite’s lover. Adonis was deadly wounded in his thigh by a boar, and, according to the Hellenistic poet Bion, “his blood, [turned] to the rose.” This is from Barrett

Browning's translation of Bion's "A Lament for Adonis," first published in 1850 and included in her 1856 *Poems* in the same year as *Aurora Leigh*. From classical Greece onward, Adonis was the object of an important cult, involving the themes of love, life and death, and resurrection.¹⁹ In the Hellenistic period, Bion represented Adonis as a poet, by alluding to the death of the supreme poet-shepherd Daphnis in Theocritus's *Idyll*. Although no critical attention has been paid to it, I would suggest that this Adonis simile – combining vital fluidity and parental love, both strongly associated with artistic creativity in *Aurora Leigh* – intimates Aurora's revelation that love can bestow life.²⁰

In the Adonis simile, a dying young lover is chosen to amplify a description of a baby. Since "the first live rose" corresponds to the baby's cheeks, "the shepherd" occupies the place of the mother despite the difference of gender.²¹ Just as the shepherd bestowed his life on the first red rose through the ebbing away of his heart's blood, so a mother commonly bleeds in giving birth to her baby to impart her life, and sometimes dies. Barrett Browning, despite her feeble health, had given birth to a son in 1849 as well as suffering four miscarriages between 1847 and 1850, before she began writing *Aurora Leigh* in 1853. The bleeding moment of physical separation of baby from mother, a moment in which life and death intersect, seems to underlie the Adonis simile in *Aurora Leigh*. The heart's blood in the Adonis simile moreover recalls Aurora's comparison of her poems to an embryo (3. 245-50).

The romantic love between Adonis and Aphrodite, moreover, overlaps the love between the shepherd and the first rose, a love that can be termed parental, analogous to the relationship between Marian and her baby. The parental relationship explains more clearly why the shepherd's blood is connected to his love: his "heart blood ebbed into/ The faster for his love" (6. 573-74). Barrett Browning's unusual simile of

¹⁹ See Tuzet.

²⁰ In a future paper, I will examine other mythological figures emblemizing artistic creativity in *Aurora Leigh* and argued that they symbolize Aurora's maturation as a poet.

²¹ Aurora also compares the child himself to a rose: "He could not have the trouble to be stirred,/ But smiled and lay there. Like a rose, I said?/ As red and still indeed as any rose" (6. 594-96).

Adonis to represent a mother was probably influenced by Shelley's *Adonais* (1821), an elegy for John Keats's premature death in Rome. In 1831, she found Shelley's elegy "perfectly exquisite" (*Diary* 138). Shelley, as she remarked, "walks in Bion's footsteps" (*ibid.*). Shelley not only consolidated Bion's representation of Adonis as a poet, but also introduced a maternal element into this mythological episode by changing the mourner from the traditional Aphrodite to Urania, figuratively represented as Mother of the dead poet. Urania can be either Aphrodite Urania or one of the nine Muses praised in Hesiod's *Theogony*. Perhaps, the poet left it open so as to modulate the goddess' characteristics. Barrett Browning, then, further conflated the figures of poet and of mother, juxtaposed in Shelley's adaptation of Adonis myth, into the bleeding shepherd.²²

It is difficult to tell in the Adonis simile in *Aurora Leigh* how far the feminization of a male figure becomes an issue. The relationship between the shepherd and the first rose can be termed parthenogenetic, strengthening the equation of Marian with the Virgin Mary. On the other hand, Barrett Browning, a "boundary crosser" in Stott's words (Avery and Stott 127), is far from adhering to any prescribed binary opposition. In one of her sonnets to George Sand, for example, Barrett Browning addresses Sand as "Thou large-brained woman and large-hearted man" ("Desire," included in *Poems* 1844), thus deliberately reversing the attributes conventionally associated with the constructions of gender.²³ I would suggest that the Adonis simile, while bestowing a religious elevation on Marian, transforms the shepherd into an androgynous figure and as a result focuses on a unisexual reproductive relationship between a creator and his or her creation.

²² Olivia Taylor explores Barrett Browning's figuration of the poet as a mother, examining *Aurora Leigh* and her later poem "Mother and Poet" (1861).

²³ In Barrett Browning's terms, George Sand is "man & woman together" (*Correspondence* 11: 31). Uniting qualities conventionally bifurcated into either "male" or "female" into a single writer prefigures Virginia Woolf, who sketched "a plan of soul so that in each of us two powers preside, one male, one female" (96-97). Showalter vigorously dismisses Woolf's androgynous mind as evading femininity (263-97).

The shepherd in the simile is dying, but Marian is alive. The stylistic demarcation between the simile and the narrative seems fluid enough to allow an event represented in the simile to overflow its formal confines into the narrative, as if Adonis's blood overflows the stylistic confines. Marian, "drinking him [the baby] as wine," regains her countenance to her "passionate face," which is "pale," as if she has been losing her blood in giving life, just like the shepherd in the simile (6. 599, 606). Wine signifies the blood of Christ in the Eucharist, and thus the simile linking the baby to wine further intensifies the religious radiance in this scene.²⁴

This reciprocity of blood from mother to baby and then vice versa – procreative and resurrecting fluidity – is represented as if channelling through their exchanging smiles: "slowly as he smiled/ She smiled too, slowly, smiling unaware" (6. 607-08). The repeated reference to the baby's smile (6. 590, 592, 595, 607) is reminiscent of a renowned precedent in Virgil's *Eclogue IV*: "Incipe, parve puer, risu cognoscere matrem" ("Begin, little boy, to acknowledge your mother with a smile").²⁵ Despite the fact that it was written by a pagan, this Fourth *Eclogue* had long been interpreted as anticipating Christ's birth (Clausen 127). In England, according to Clausen, "a sense of the Fourth *Eclogue* as inspired utterance seems to have persisted through most of the nineteenth century; perhaps even longer" (128). The baby's conspicuous smile in Aurora's representation is modelled on this Latin verse perceived in a Christian light, and thus still further enhances the religious atmosphere permeating the scene. Aurora perceives that the love between Marian and her baby enables Marian to receive vital fluid from her baby, as if drinking wine, and to symbolically be resurrected from death. Although the shepherd is bleeding to death in the simile, Marian revives by regaining her lost blood in the following narrative.²⁶

²⁴ Deirdre David curiously finds Marian's leaning above her baby "as if drinking him as wine" (5. 599) "malevolent," describing her as consuming him "greedily in an image of appropriation" (121).

²⁵ My translation.

²⁶ Linda Lewis calls Barrett Browning "a prophet of resurrection" (*Spiritual* 169), and yet focuses on Marian's repeatedly alleging that she is dead due to rape, so as to argue that, in

This figurative resurrection through reciprocal love and flow of blood between a parent and a child is crucial for Aurora, who not only has lost both her parents in her childhood, but also persistently evokes images of fluids in describing her writing. At the beginning of Book 5 Aurora asks if her poems can speak in tune

with the lava-lymph
That trickles from successive galaxies
Still drop by drop adown the finger of God
In still new worlds[.] (5. 3-6)

Here, the image of creative, volcanic explosion is transformed into an image of the circulation of bodily fluids by hyphenizing two words, “lava-lymph.” As the body is sustained by inward circulations of fluids, so this physical world has its own circulation of fluid creation, beginning with the explosion from the underworld towards the sky, from which drops fall down to nurture the new worlds.

The creative fluidity of the cosmos, the human body and poetry overflows also in another passage placed towards the end of Book 5, Aurora bestows a cosmic floating imagery on the book of Homer, elaborated with the image of a mother's breasts and a sucking baby. She compares the creamy coloured paper to the flowing “cream, as rich as any sucked/ From Juno's breasts,” and the printed lines to “babe-gods” who “with their spondaic prodigious mouths ... lap the lucent margins” of creamy pages (5. 1246-50).²⁷

In one of the most often cited passage in *Aurora Leigh*, moreover, she combines the image of “lava of a song” and a woman body with nurturing breasts:

contrast to Aurora and Romney, Marian is denied the full expression of God's love, which requires love experienced through sexual union (“Rape” esp. 63-64, *Spiritual* 150-66).

²⁷ Stone tries to understand the syntax of this passage otherwise, by calling “the broad Homeric lines” an “interpolated hanging appositive” (*Barrett Browning* 156-58). I discussed this passage in more detail in “The Homeric Question in Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*.” *Kyushu Eibungaku Kenkyu* 30 (2014): 11-12.

Never flinch,
But still, unscrupulously epic, catch
Upon the burning lava of a song
The full-veined, heaving, double-breasted Age (5. 213-16)

Aurora thus invokes images of fluids such as lava, lymph milk and blood, in order to express creative energy that enables her to create “living art” (5. 222). When expressing her dissatisfaction with her own works, she resorts again to the image of blood:

If life-blood's necessary, which it is,
...
If life-blood's fertilising, I wrung mine
On every leaf of this, – unless the drops
Slid heavily on one side and left it dry. (5. 353-58)

While Aurora is uncertain whether she effectively “wrung” her “life-blood” on the leaves of her latest volume of poetry, Adonis’s heart blood ebbs away “The faster for his love” to give birth to the “first live rose” (6. 571-75). The Adonis simile thus presents a successful creation by way of blood, prompted by love.

The Adonis simile moreover can be seen as a re-exploration of Aurora’s love for and loss of her parents. I will quote again the passage concerning her father’s death:

I was just thirteen,
Still growing like the plants from unseen roots
In tongue-tied Springs, – and suddenly awoke
To full life and life’s needs and agonies
With an intense, strong, struggling heart beside
A stone-dead father. Life, struck sharp on death,

Makes awful lightning. 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. (1. 205-14)

Adonis assumes a characteristic of a mother figure in the simile, while the motifs of plant, life, heart and love are reminiscent of Aurora's representation of the death of her father. Aurora fails to respond to her father's parting words, "Love, my child," when he died "Ere I [she] answered" (1. 213). Rather than dying to give life to a child as Aurora's parents did, Marian revives by receiving blood from her baby, to whom she has given her blood. Aurora sees their love prompting this figurative reciprocity of blood, and comes to accept that love does not always involve depriving life, but can also be a source of life. The Adonis simile thus illustrates how love can prompt creative fluidity that bestows life. Overcoming her loss of parents by way of retrieving the lost Marian and accepting love's productive aspect, Aurora becomes fully capable of love, the prerequisite in creating "living art."²⁸

Art Brings Love

Although in Book 5 Aurora is not satisfied with her writing — "I cannot thoroughly love a work of mine" (5. 411) —, in Book 7 she admits some "truth" in her latest volume of poetry, tentatively equating the truth with divine "love" in the Io image (7. 762, 827, 897). Aurora's evaluation has changed because she becomes capable of accepting love, which allows her to see the true value of her own latest

²⁸ The contrast between death and love, assimilating the contrast between death and life, is represented in the first sonnet of *Sonnets from the Portuguese*: "Behind me, and drew me backward by the hair,/ And a voice said in mastery, while I strove, ... / Guess now who holds thee?"— Death,' I said. But there, / The silver answer rang ... Not Death, but Love." (11-14).

work. Aurora writes that, even while listening to Marian's story, she listened "To a voice not hers":

... but one that mixed with mine
Long years ago among the garden-trees,
And said to *me*, to *me* too, 'Be my wife,
Aurora.' (7. 178-81, italics original)

With "a swell/ Of yearning passion" (7. 181-82), she feels mortification that she refused Romney only to, as she believes, see him marry Lady Waldemar, who is apparently responsible for Marian's plight. Aurora overcomes her fear of love, which allows her to accept her love of Romney.

Owing to the overwhelming love between Marian and her infant. Aurora comes to admit her love of Romney by connecting love with life rather than death. Marian insists that she is dead and the only life she has now depends on her infant and her maternal status. While condemning the social evil of rape and spiritual murder caused by it, Marian is thus resurrected owing to life-giving maternal love.

In Book 8, Romney's visit to Aurora's residence in Florence is foreshadowed by another watery image of the valley brimming with twilight shadows and the city flooded "As some drowned city in some enchanted sea," in which can be found "a sea-king with a voice of waves" (8. 35-44). This fluid imagery, intimating love and passion, anticipates Aurora and Romney's reconciliation and reunion.²⁹ Romney praises Aurora's latest book as "soft rain," admitting that she has shown him "truths" (8. 595, 608). The combination of rain and truths recalls the images of Danae and Io. He moreover describes his reading of Aurora's book in Eucharistic terms, comparing it to bread and wine (8. 267). This allusion to the Eucharist recalls the marriage of Aurora's parents (1. 90-91).

²⁹ Steinmetz peculiarly reads a "suicidal impulse" in "Aurora's shadow-sea fantasy" (364).

Romney's Eucharistic phraseology in speaking of Aurora's book suggests a connection between his reading and his maturing love of Aurora. Aurora's art thus brings still more love to her, as Elizabeth Barrett's poetry brought Robert Browning to write his first love letter: "I love your verses with all my heart, dear Miss Barrett ... I do, as I say, love these Books with all my heart — and I love you too" (*Correspondence* 10: 17). Love gives life to art, while art brings love.

In one of the most often quoted passages in discussion of the relationship between art and love, Aurora places love higher than art: "O Art, my art thou'rt much, but love is more! Art symbolises heaven, but Love is God/And makes heaven" (9. 657-59). She does not prefer love to art, but recognises love, which gives life, as the prerequisite for living art. In the final pages of *Aurora Leigh*, the heart's blood, rose and love in the Adonis simile reverberate in Romney's words, describing the way in which God's heart reddens all the loves among human beings:

human, vital, fructuous rose,
Whose calyx holds the multitude of leaves,
Loves filial, loves fraternal, neighbour-loves
And civic - all fair petals, all good scents,
All reddened, sweetened from one central Heart! (9. 886-90)

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