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DESTRUCTIVE MATERNITY IN *AURORA LEIGH*

By Laura J. Faulk

WHILE IT IS WELL-KNOWN THAT VICTORIAN WOMEN married for financial stability, sexual desire, or social standing, doctors of the time provided another reason: health. Medical texts warned women to make use of their reproductive abilities, to have children to avoid becoming masculine old maids. One anonymous contributor to an 1851 issue of the *Journal of Psychological Medicine and Mental Pathology* believed the old maid to be physically unwomanly as a result of childlessness. According to him, the old, unmarried woman lost her reproductive organs from lack of use and her very appearance became less feminine:

> With the shrinking of the ovaria and the consequent cessation of the reproductive nisus, there is a corresponding change in the outer form. . . . [T]he form becomes angular, the body lean, the skin wrinkled. The hair changes in colour and loses its luxuriancy; the skin is less transparent and soft, and the chin and upper lip become downy ("Woman in Her Psychological Relations" 35)

Furthermore, as Thomas John Graham noted in *On the Management and Disorders of Infancy and Childhood*, motherhood was thought to benefit a woman's health by protecting her from nervous diseases: pregnancy

> often produces the happiest changes in women, because this accomplishment of the law of nature being attended with considerable determination of blood to the uterus, suspends, as if almost by enchantment, a variety of uncomfortable feelings and diseases, by the concentration of vascular and nervous actions, which arrest irritation and morbid actions in remote organs. (188)[1]

Doctors encouraged women to have children regardless of pregnancy's actual dangers.

By marrying and having children, Victorian women maintained their good health, femininity, and even their appearance of purity as female sexual desire was transformed into a higher desire for children. Victorian society beyond the medical field also advocated the mother's role as the loving, moral center of the home; a contributor to *Reynolds's Miscellany* claims,

> There is no scene . . . more strikingly illustrative of intellectual, moral, and even physical beauty than that presented by a domestic circle, where a mother holds her proper place, as the source of tenderness,

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> the centre of affection, the bond of social union, the founder of each salutary plan, the umpire in all contention, and the general fountain of cheerfulness, hope, and consolation. ("A Mother" 172)

Countless fictional characters fulfilled this notion, even those who originally seem unable or unwilling, such as Elizabeth Gaskell's Ruth and Charles Dickens's Bella. The novels usually reflect exaltation of maternal love, overlooking the risk of painful death to mother and child that is inherent in pregnancy.

High infant mortality rates and the complications many women faced in pregnancy made childbirth a precarious venture, but one that married women almost inevitably experienced. While no information of birthing mortality rates was collected until century's end when more medical discoveries had been achieved, the high infant mortality rates recorded then indicate that the mid-century death rates were no better and, more likely, worse. In 1899, four out of twenty-five children died within their first year (Flanders 78). The mothers had a much better chance of surviving childbirth – one in two hundred pregnancies ended in the mother's death, though lack of effective or socially approved birth control meant many married women became pregnant several times, an average of 5.5 births per wife (Flanders 50). Victorian novels often depict or mention mothers who die in childbirth, including Agnes of *Oliver Twist*, Jane Eyre's mother, and James and Henry Durie's mother in *The Master of Ballantrae*, among many others. These deaths at the opening of stories do quietly portray the life-threatening pregnancy, but they are readily dismissed as a plot contrivance designed to devote the reader's attention to the surviving child.[2] As Carolyn Dever demonstrates, these deaths solidify the maternal ideal: the maternal absence allows and encourages unpolluted devotion to the mother's memory, creating an idol of maternal perfection that no living mother could attain. Furthermore, by placing these dead mothers on pedestals, Victorians both obscured the physical perils of pregnancy and birthing and indicate that women who die in childbirth are the epitome of self-sacrificing femininity as they give up their very lives for their children. Unlike most narratives with absent mothers, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* confronts the problems of maternity itself and the absent mother, addressing female sexuality, pregnancy, and birthing from a female point of view. This novel-in-verse reveals the dangers and resulting fear of maternity, and thereby of sexuality, that the trope of the idealized mother typically obfuscates in Victorian fiction.

Since feminists revived Barrett Browning's poem in the 1970s after years of obscurity, critics have debated the potentially feminist ideas presented in the text, particularly the heroine's artistic ability and the hero's lack of ability. Yet few have commented on the many maternal images associated with the three female protagonists.[3] Marian becomes mother to a fatherless baby, Lady Waldemar is described in bodily terms that emphasize her maternal ability, and Aurora Leigh thinks of herself as a female poet who births art. However, one of the most unusual aspects of the women's prospective maternity, and one that has escaped critical attention, is its correlation with death. Instead of turning to the familiar story of mothers dying in childbirth, *Aurora Leigh* considers other maternal struggles, countering medical propaganda that maternity strengthens a woman's health: Marian wants to die after her impregnating rape but is forced to survive for her child, Lady Waldemar's overt sexuality and feminine body only lead to destruction instead of children, and Aurora invites the demise of her feminine aspects so she can live solely as a poet instead of as a sexual woman and mother. *Aurora Leigh* does not reinforce the Victorian trope of motherhood as a positive female role but presents it as a threat to woman's body and desires, turning her sexuality

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into a peril to herself and others. The text does not represent maternity as a health benefit nor the lack of pregnancy as a beauty debaser. Instead, the poem provides a space for Barrett Browning to criticize social and even medical ideals of maternity.

Barrett Browning was capable of approaching this topic both as a daughter who lost her mother and as a mother who faced difficult pregnancies. Her mother died when Barrett Browning, the oldest of eleven children, was twenty-two (Cooper 36). Three years after the death, she yearningly recalled the strength of her love for her mother, using her diary to venerate the absent figure: "how I felt that to hear again the sound of those beloved, those ever beloved lips, I w^{d}. barter all other sounds & sights – that I w^{d}. in joy and gratitude lay down before her my tastes & feelings each and all, in sacrifice for <the> love, the exceeding love which I never, in truth, can find again" (*Diary* 88). As a working mother who faced difficult pregnancies, she was more informed than the majority of her contemporary authors, especially poets, on the pains of childbirth and motherhood. While the story of Robert and Barrett Browning's romance is well-known, her pregnancies are not. Already ill to the point of invalidism and forty years old at the time of her marriage, Barrett Browning became pregnant several times between 1846 and 1850, with only one pregnancy, her third, ending in a healthy birth. Her last miscarriage was "particularly dangerous" (Calcraft-Rennie 11). The apprehension of pregnancy, which Barrett Browning herself must have experienced, influences the female characters in *Aurora Leigh*. Analyzing the four most prominent maternal figures, I will show how Barrett Browning explores the connection between motherhood and death, presenting female sexuality as a prominent aspect of womanhood that should be feared, not because it demonizes angelic women with physical desires, but because it leads to life-threatening pregnancy.

My Own Dead Mother

A VICTORIAN REVIEWER OF *Aurora Leigh* praises the heroine's description of ideal motherhood as one of the "brilliances" of the poem though he ignores the absence of an actualized perfect mother (*New Quarterly* 34). In mentioning this trope of womanhood but not fulfilling it, the poem exposes the disparity between idealized maternity and the more realistic life-threatening maternity. Within the first fifty lines of the nine-book work, before Aurora gives any description of herself, she describes her mother's death:

> . . . My mother was a Florentine,
> Whose rare blue eyes were shut from seeing me
> When scarcely I was four years old, my life
> A poor spark snatched up from a failing lamp
> Which went out therefore. She was weak and frail;
> She could not bear the joy of giving life,
> The mother's rapture slew her. (*AL* 1.29–35)

Barrett Browning provides no medical reason for the death, yet the poem's iambic pentameter stresses many of the words associated with both maternity and death: life, poor, snatched, fail, weak, and frail. The lines include two metaphors for death, the extinguishing lamp light and the deadly "mother's rapture." Similarly, the word "life" is used twice, once for each metaphor of death, emphasizing that the mother's end is caused by life, by Aurora's birth.

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The "rapture" inherent in maternity kills the mother. The previous line's emphasis on "joy" suddenly becomes ironic – the mother's happiness in giving birth, causes her downfall.

Aurora interrupts her narrative with a description of her mother's portrait and its effect on her as a child. The portrait was painted after the mother's death, thereby reproducing both the mother as well as death in general. Instead of a white English shroud, the Italian mother wears a red dress. This outfit, its color and rigidity in opposition to the pale skin, helps deny the two restrictions the painting attempts to force on the mother: the passivity of her dead body as well as the canvas's frame that confines her presence within the painting. The image assumes a supernatural quality with its ill-confined liveliness: the "white life" "sail[s] upward from the red stiff silk / Which seemed to have no part in it nor power / To keep it quite from breaking out of bounds" (1.139, 140–42). The suggestion of the corpse-portrait's activity is unexpected, encouraging Aurora, her father, and the servant to stare as if afraid the dead figure will emerge.

The lively death picture becomes "mystic," and the depicted woman "by turns" embodies innocent femininity and ideal maternity (a Muse who eyes Death, a stabbed Virgin Mary) and sexual danger (Medusa, the child-killing Lamia) (1.152, 153). Aurora sees her as both murdered and murderess, lifelike and dead, but regardless of the portrait's strange mix of activity and passivity, the mother is constantly tied to death, which sets the background for Aurora's story in which all women are associated with death. The mother's portrait also suggests that the perfect mother is an impossibility – no mother can be an angelic Virgin Mary just as no woman can be a cold-blooded Medusa.

The Living Dead Mother

EXCEPTING AURORA'S MOTHER, Marian is the only character who has a child; ironically, she is also the most timid and child-like, which helps her fulfill the role of devoted mother. Her very body is unassertive; her skin is neither "white nor brown," while her hair is "'twixt dark and bright," and her figure is topped with "so small a head" that exaggerates her "infantine" appearance (3.810, 814, 816, 823). Her voice emits "Meek words that made no wonder of herself / For being so sad a creature" (849–50). Just as Barrett Browning describes Marian's appearance and manner as ambiguously placed between opposites, she is caught between her innate purity and the dangers inherent in her situation of poverty and an immoral family. Leslee Thorne-Murphy argues convincingly that prostitution haunts Marian's life (249); other maternal figures force this upon Marian. Her mother attempts to sell her daughter's body, an action repeated by Lady Waldemar several years later.

The rape that causes Marian's husband-less pregnancy indicates a metaphorical death though she physically survives childbirth. She describes her own life as composed of two deaths; both occur when she is faced with uncontrolled male sexuality and, by conjunction, potential pregnancy. Her first happens when she runs away from her family to avoid being prostituted. Marian wakes in a hospital that she compares to a cemetery, discrediting the life-saving purpose of the medical profession: "She stirred; – the place seemed new and strange as death; / The white strait bed, with others strait and white, / Like graves dug side by side at measured lengths" (3.1106–08). The uniform white beds in their straight rows cause her to think she wakes in a calm and ordered graveyard after death.[4] While hospitals might conjure fear in patients of body-snatching medical men's post-mortem scopophilia via dissection, Marian, as a woman who suffered a hysterical fainting fit, would most likely face

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a newer form of penetrative scopophilia, that caused by the invention of the speculum and its spreading popularity among doctors.

Her second death results from rape. Her mother attempts to sell her daughter's body, and Lady Waldemar causes her to be sent to a brothel. Convincing Marian that Romney cannot love and should not marry her, Lady Waldemar's actions end with Marian being taken to a brothel in France where she is drugged and misused. Instead of waking on display in the graveyard of a hospital, Marian describes the experience as being buried alive:

> To go down with one's soul into the grave,
> To go down half dead, half alive, I say,
> And wake up with corruption . . .
> . . . when waking up at last . . .
> I told you that I waked up in the grave. (6.1199–1201, 1216–17)

Whereas Romney rescues her from her first death, this second is more complete, both socially and emotionally. When first meeting Aurora after the rape, Marian refers to herself in the third person as if to deny herself life and autonomy; she says, "Marian Erle, / Picked up and dropped . . . / And bruised from what she was, – changed! death's a change, / And she, I said, was murdered; Marian's dead" (6.809–10, 812–13). This second, severe encounter with sexual violence leads to her pregnancy and a strong death wish, essentially causing her death because she refuses to live. Ironically, William Buchan, doctor and author of *Domestic Medicine*, assured women that conviction of one's own death in childbirth almost guaranteed that death: "Many of those who die in that situation, are impressed with the notion of their death, a long time before it happens; and there is reason to believe that this impression is the cause of it. . . . Thus the sex often fall a sacrifice to their own imagination" (86–87).

Disappointed that she is not a "sacrifice" to her "imagination," Marian resumes the first-person point of view only when limiting her life to the role of mother:

> . . . I'm dead, I say,
> And if, to save the child from death as well,
> The mother in me has survived the rest,
> . . . I'm nothing more
> But just a mother. (6.819–21, 823–24)

In this passage, Barrett Browning re-emphasizes Marian's ambiguous body by dividing her into both her post-rape self and the generic mother. Marian metaphorically dies while the mother within her survives in the grave solely to raise the child.

In spite of Aurora's tendency to glorify the new mother's love and care for her child, Marian's response to Romney's renewed marriage proposal exposes her fear of intercourse and childbirth. She once again refers to herself in the third person, asking if Romney could accept her and her son in their fallen state, idolizing him for his determination but refusing because she is "colder than the dead" (9.387). Though she reveres Romney's dedication, she is determined to not marry because her life is completely devoted to her child. Maternity has subsumed her, killed every other aspect of her being instead of causing the "happiest changes" of her life (Graham 188). For Marian, motherhood is the teleological end of womanhood, and

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it becomes her figurative death. After all, if, as G. H. Lewes claimed, "The grand function of woman . . . is, and ever must be, *Maternity*," then Marian has fulfilled her life's duty because she is incapable of repeating it honorably in her fallen state (155). With no other purpose, she has nothing else to live for. While one contemporary review suggests her situation is "happy" (*Leader* 1144), another notes her problematic place at the plot's finish; he attempts to reassure his readers that Marian's unwritten fate does not mean her future is bleak: "In the story, too, there is an omission, which seems unintentional, and which the interest excited makes unpardonable – an omission of any mention of Marian Erle's subsequent fortunes" (*New Quarterly* 34). By describing the lack of information as "unintentional," the reviewer tries to lessen the inherent dangers of Marian's position as a fallen mother supported by her friend and former fiancé, but scorned by all others. His hopes for Marian's future are unfounded as all evidence suggests that Marian is dead, at least in spirit, once she gives birth and becomes the generic mother.

In preserving her life for her child, Marian resembles the pure aspects of the mother's portrait, becoming more mythical but less earthly and real. She is the Muse, moving into Aurora's house and inspiring the poet, though she constantly eyes death because she can neither forget her rape nor recover her former identity. Aurora attempts to reclaim part of Marian's pre-partum self by idealizing her friend as a vision of the Virgin Mary, virginal, as Aurora notes, because she is the victim of assault, not ruined by her own sexuality. Yet society will not recognize Marian's attempted purity, especially because medical men would most likely deny she had been raped: because she is drugged, her body would not be marked by struggle, and because she is destitute, doctors would be more likely to attribute any internal indications of rape to the lack of hygiene inherent in poverty-stricken living situations.[5] Though she is a more appropriate maternal figure than either her mother or Lady Waldemar, she is socially scorned. Ironically, her maternity nears the perfection of the Virgin Mary because the circumstances of her pregnancy prevent any distraction, like a husband, from her child. She survives her rape and birth as a ghostly figure who clings to her living child because she is unable to live for herself. Her outcome in the poem indicates that, even if a woman maintains her health after giving birth, ideal motherhood is tantamount to a living death.

The Destructive Mother

ALTHOUGH LADY WALDEMAR DOES NOT have a child, she is associated with maternity through her body, which is the main source of conflict and destruction in the poem. Marian's body is rarely described, even with a suckling child, but Aurora fully details the sensuality of Lady Waldemar's figure. Aurora particularly emphasizes Lady Waldemar's breasts. On hearing the men at Lord Howe's party lust after her, the narrator describes Lady Waldemar's "alabaster shoulders and bare breasts, / On which the pearls, drowned out of sight in milk, / Were lost, excepting for the ruby-clasp!" (5.619–21). The shoulders and breasts are beautifully pale, and the breasts are large enough to "drown" a necklace in their cleavage. The necklace is made of white pearls, yet the whiteness of the flesh is like "milk," overwhelming the pearls' color. The description indicates that her body is dangerously powerful in its attractiveness and ruled by lust, able to drown others in its desires. Yet this concentration on the breasts, and the use of the word "milk" to describe their shade, suggests she should already be a mother. Her lack of children is surprising, especially considering she is a widow. In

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spite of her childlessness, she does not become "angular, the body lean, the skin wrinkled" as Victorian doctors warn ("Woman" 35). Her beauty continues, and she uses her attractiveness and destructive tendencies to prevent other women from enticing Romney, the man Lady Waldemar desires.

Aurora further describes how Lady Waldemar's clothes complement her voluptuous figure "with the audacious press / Of full-breathed beauty" (5.623–24), yet she also compares Lady Waldemar's interior worth to her outside beauty, concluding that the aristocrat's form could not be so beautiful if she were a good, whole person. The "heart within" cannot be half as white as her breasts because, as Aurora says, "if it were, perhaps / The breast were closer covered and the sight / Less aspectable, by half, too" (624, 625–27). Lady Waldemar's insides, her emotions, and her organs, do not and cannot live up to the extremely feminine standard set by her body's shape. Though Lady Waldemar's bodily form fulfills the exterior of maternal womanhood, Aurora's observation indicates that the exaggerated femininity of the body is limited solely to its outward appearance and not her personality or reproductive capability. Lady Waldemar cannot have children. Furthermore, her confidence in her feminine figure prevents virtue and other typically feminine traits that mothers are expected to possess; she can never be a mother much less an ideal mother. Neither sexual desire nor fear of pregnancy intimidates her. Instead, her trust in her beauty only arouses the ambition to destroy Marian, her competitor for Romney's affection. While Marian is socially shunned as a woman ruined by her physical desire, Lady Waldemar, the outward image of womanly perfection, cannot have children because her sexuality consumes her.

Her sensuality and emotional depravity connect her to the troubling images of Aurora's mother, recalling a deadly depiction of womanhood. While Marian resembles the Virgin Mary inherent in the portrait because she conceives a child without sexual passion, Lady Waldemar becomes the

> . . . still Medusa with mild milky brows
> All curdled and all clothed upon with snakes
> Whose slime falls fast as sweat will . . .
> . . . or Lamia in her first
> Moonlighted pallor, ere she shrunk and blinked
> And shuddering wriggled down to the unclean (1.157–59, 161–63)

Her "alabaster" skin is described as milky, like the Medusa's brows, and when telling her story of the rape, Marian refers to her as "that woman-serpent" (6.1102). Similarly, Aurora compares Lady Waldemar to Lamia, the murderer of innocents (7.152). These comparisons highlight her ability to ensnare Romney in her "fatal weeds of love," threatening him with the same early death that terminates her first marriage, and dispose of any female competitors who interfere with her plan (163). Yet neither Aurora nor Marian separates Lady Waldemar from maternity in spite of her devilish aspects; rather, they compare her to Marian's mother by describing her treatment of Marian as "A motherly, right damnable good turn" (10).

Though somewhat debased by selfish motives, one of Lady Waldemar's actions does suggest a conventional maternal and loving instinct, preventing her complete demonization: she nurses Romney to health after his home burns and he develops a fever that leaves him blind. While he is confined to bed, Lady Waldemar cares for him daily, which Romney claims is "kind," "good," and "womanly" (9.36). Unlike the idealized nurturing mother or loving

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woman, however, she abandons him the moment she realizes he will not marry her because he loves Aurora. Lady Waldemar does not love him unconditionally or selflessly. Her former lust for Romney quickly turns to hatred; upon meeting Romney after he learns of her role in Marian's fate, she overcomes all maternal emotion and turns vicious, snapping at him like a predator: "I shot my tongue against my fly / And struck him" (112–13).

Lady Waldemar acts to secure her own sexual outlet and social standing. Although her beauty and social position attract men, her widowhood disrupts her path to matrimony. A widow had less chance of re-marrying than a single woman looking for a first husband. The status carried a deeper stigma as well: excessive sexual activity was thought to lead to the death of one partner, so those looking for marriage tended to be wary of widows and widowers (Michie 136). Because Lady Waldemar's widowed social position and stigma remain until she remarries, she wants to marry both to raise her status and to secure an outlet for her sexuality. Undeniably, she treats Marian cruelly to fulfill her own selfishness, but, in a society that exalts wives and mothers, marriage is necessary for social standing. After all, her behavior towards Marian simply mimics that of Marian's own mother. They both sell Marian's body for money; though only Lady Waldemar's transaction succeeds in harming Marian. She also acts through another: her servant. And while this behavior does demonize Lady Waldemar, it is not as horrifying as that of other imperfect mothers described in Victorian newspapers.

In the fifteen years before Barrett Browning published *Aurora Leigh*, periodicals published several stories of mothers murdering their children and often themselves as well.[6] The accounts of vicious filicide are fairly dry in their presentation of facts about the mothers; they do not lament the corruption of maternity, though they do isolate these women from the idolized mother. The newspapers portrayed the women as acting out of unnatural selfishness, whether greed for the money the burial society would give for a proper funeral or to prevent the children from living with the father after the mother was caught with a paramour ("Assize Intelligence: Child"; "Assize Intelligence: The Esher"). Though destructive maternal figures, Marian's mother and Lady Waldemar better in comparison as they attempt Marian's social, as opposed to physical, death. Lady Waldemar does not seem to desire Marian's death, just her removal as competition in the marriage market.

Aurora Leigh complicates the simple dichotomy of good and evil women by inverting the characteristics of maternity from the unattainable ideal set forth by many Victorians. All the characters have their faults, and none are beyond redemption. Similarly, they upset the typical stories' plots of the dead or perfect mother and the fulfilled, healthy mother of medical discourse. Instead of being fulfilled by rearing her child, Marian views her life as over, so that she must rear her child from the grave. And instead of finding relief in idealistic maternal behavior and desire, Lady Waldemar's brazen pursuit of sexual satisfaction causes Marian's death-life and unknowingly impedes her own path to Romney.

The Hesitant Mother

WHEREAS LADY WALDEMAR'S RELATIONSHIPS are not intended to produce children, Aurora chooses to remain single so she will not have children. Unlike Lady Waldemar, she displaces her womanly figure as if to deny her potential motherhood, neither idolizing men, as Marian does, nor lusting after them, as Lady Waldemar does. She acknowledges Lady Waldemar's milky, motherly breasts but refuses to think of her own physicality in the same way. Instead,

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Aurora shifts symbols of femininity away from her body, preferring a less womanly existence, a childless life, so she can pursue her career ambitions. For instance, she denies her own adult body when travelling to Italy with Marian. While Marian carries a suckling child, Aurora repositions herself as a child of Italy. Italy's landscape becomes a mother's body:

> And now I come, my Italy,
> My own hills! Are you 'ware of me, my hills,
> How I burn toward you? do you feel to-night
> The urgency and yearning of my soul,
> As sleeping mothers feel the suckling babe
> And smile? (5.1266–71).

Confronted with her friend's maternity, Aurora turns the scenery into a mother-figure instead of acknowledging her own femininity or even the physicality of Marian's motherhood.

Furthermore, when considering her poetry's limitations, she tells herself to be humble and gives a list of "mysterious tune[s]" that her poetry will never match (5.2). After several abstract examples, such as God's unknown universe and the human capability for emotion, the list centers on the one sensation she has never accepted or fulfilled: "sexual passion" (5.15). As a virtuous unmarried woman, Aurora feels her innate sexuality but does not act on it and fears its effect on her life as poet; when her catalogue finally gives way to this concrete sensation, she immediately retreats, attempting to diminish female sexuality by aestheticizing the female body and motherhood as something beyond bodily desire:

> . . . with all that strain
> Of sexual passion, which devours the flesh
> In a sacrament of souls? with mother's breasts
> Which, round the new-made creatures hanging there,
> Throb luminous and harmonious like pure spheres? (14–18)

The list of "mysterious tunes" acknowledges that sexual passion is powerful, so much so that Aurora's writing cannot fully represent it. And naturally to Aurora, female sexuality is connected with motherhood, with "mother's breasts." Yet these erotic and life-giving breasts are too intimidating, which causes Aurora to separate them from both sexuality and the female body altogether – they become two unattached, floating spheres. This anatomization of the female body replicates Aurora's own denial of her body and its desires, her fear of sexuality and maternity. Her repudiation of sexuality and marriage protects her body from "the one major cause of mortality that was not a disease" for Victorian women (Loudon 164). Her rejection of familial life continues as she asserts that passion and the body are as powerful as she wants her poetry to be so that "men shall feel [her verses] catch them on the quick" (5.26). Her poetry will inspire men, not her body or maternal perfection.

Aurora both desires and fears motherhood, and her equivocation replicates the contemporary debate about female sexuality, whether it even exists or should exist. Victorian doctors such as William Acton conveniently denied female sexual desire by idealizing motherhood: "The best mothers, wives, and managers of households know little or nothing of sexual indulgences. . . . As a general rule, a modest woman seldom desires any sexual gratification for herself" (*The Functions* 180). However, not all medical men agreed. In his

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book on hysteria, Robert Brudenell Carter argues that women are "compelled" by culture to "restrain" their sexuality though the strain of overcoming the feeling can lead to hysteria and other forms of demise (33). Her society may discourage sexual feelings to maintain purity, but Aurora is more concerned with sexuality and motherhood stinting her work as a poet.

Wanting to be an inspiring poet instead of accepting the more expected role of parent, Aurora connects the two, considering herself a mother who births art. She compares herself as a poet who will die, leaving only her work behind, to a female body preserved by burning lava, like a victim of the Pompeii volcano. Art becomes a dead female body for men to examine: "the men of that [Age] / May touch the impress with reverent hand" (5.217–18). If the men find the art worthwhile, they claim it as a mother to their own age: "behold the paps we all have sucked! / This bosom seems to beat still. . . . this is living art, / Which thus presents and thus records true life" (219–22). The art/woman is both a mother and dead, but she lives through her art. While Marian connects motherhood and death through her child, and Lady Waldemar connects motherhood and death through her sexualized body, Aurora connects them through her poetry. Before Romney's first proposal, she ties her poetry to death by crowning herself in ivy, which is "as good to grow on graves / As twist about a thyrsus" (2.51–52). It is not until after this proposal that motherhood enters the equation, but from the proposal forward, motherhood becomes a prominent image in her narrative. She becomes a mother in birthing poetry for the ages, and in doing so, she lives solely through her art while her body dies, just as Marian dies in living for her child. Haunted by images of maternity and death, Aurora chooses to decline motherhood and live for her poetry instead. She occasionally doubts her decision but keeps this choice until Romney's second marriage proposal is tempered by his own bodily injuries.

Although Aurora rejects the physicality and sexuality of her body, she uses mythic images of rape to describe the birth of poetic inspiration, referencing Zeus and Ganymede, Jove and Danae, and Jove and Io. As Leslee Thorne-Murphy contends, Barrett Browning "portrays her poet Aurora Leigh as a direct recipient of divine truth, and Aurora receives this truth through moments of inspiration metaphorically illustrated by Greek myths of rape" (242). Unlike the unfortunate Marian, Aurora's rape victims happily produce art and not children; they want to make art, so they welcome sexual encounters. In her versions of the myths, Aurora removes the horrifying elements of rape. The descriptions work as another form of displacement for Aurora: fearful of expressing her sexuality, she uses mythic creatures to do so instead. Her mother dies because of birth, so the daughter understandably fears maternity, living through reinterpreted stories instead of interacting with real men. Furthermore, in her determination to write good poetry, she attempts to suppress her physical sexuality and yearning for marriage to prevent their intervention with her intellectual ambitions. But she cannot completely overcome her sexuality and therefore expresses her physical appetite through idealized conceptions of rape myths.

Both Thorne-Murphy and Linda Lewis conclude that these metaphors suggest Aurora "is impregnated with poetic language" by mythic gods (Thorne-Murphy 244), but also question why Aurora connects writing poetry with rape, particularly since she describes the desired effect of her poetry as discouraging rape:

> "If a man could feel"
> The spiritual significance [of poetry] burn through . . .
> Henceforward he would paint the globe with wings

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> And reverence . . . even his very body as a man,—
> Which now he counts so vile, that all the towns
> Make offal of their daughters for its use (7.857, 860, 862–66)

In reading poetry, man feels an excess of spirituality that lifts him to higher beliefs and truths, thus discouraging him from his previous "vile" tendencies, such as rape. Yet this picture of rape as destructive is dropped in Aurora's descriptions of poetic rape. Lewis notes that this is a "bold" move for a female poet because it promotes a rape fantasy in which the woman asks for and enjoys being raped (166), and Aurora does present these mythic rapes as pleasing to the women. Her Ganymede is "still hot / From Zeus's thunder" and Danae is "overbold and hot" with "Both arms aflame" to meet Jove (1.919–20, 3.122, 123). Aurora's position changes in the last rape metaphor as she assumes the perspective of the male god who feels lust "hound" him through "the wastes of life" (7.829). In these first two scenes, Aurora/the goddesses are expected to be passive but instead relish their sexual desire and reach out to the gods, which Aurora eventually does herself as she accepts Romney's love and second marriage proposal. In the third scene, Aurora is not the goddess but the confident and pursuing Jove. As she nears professing her love for Romney, she changes the image of herself from the presumed passive, but actually welcoming, goddess to the active, lustful god. Aurora is not asking for or condoning rape; rather, she pursues poetic inspiration without hesitation like she wishes she could pursue the fulfillment of her sexuality. What prevents her from realizing these desires is her fear of the effects of childbirth on her body and her poetry.

The tension roused by relinquishing domesticity for poetry causes her to wonder if she should have married Romney when he first proposed. She realizes she could more readily succeed in wifehood than poetry: "I might have been a common woman now / . . . Perhaps a better woman after all, / With chubby children hanging on my neck / To keep me low and wise (2.513, 515–17). But maternity is dangerous to her body and her work because of the physical tolls of childbirth and the effort needed to raise children. Furthermore, marriage would destroy the autonomy she maintains a single woman (Surridge 53). Until she succeeds in her poetry, or, as Olivia Gatti Taylor argues, until she loves her poems as her husband and children, she is neither woman nor artist but caught between the two (158, *AL* 2.5).

Aurora eventually fulfills her physical, artistic, and even maternal desires. When Romney explains his respect for her poetry and its capabilities to change the world for the better, she becomes a complete poet. Romney also reveals his loss of the traditionally masculine role. He describes himself as "mulcted as a man" from the fever that causes his blindness (9.564); he is lacking as a man, suggesting that he is to some extent castrated by his illness, losing his former masculine power and perhaps his ability to father children. This idea continues as he grants Aurora the abilities he lost, promising to abandon his own work to follow and aid hers. His encouragement suggests that she will never have to deny her art while fulfilling her sexual desires. She becomes the "sword" and he the "sheath" (9.834).

In spite of his physical lack, Romney does not prevent Aurora's maternity but emphasizes the maternity inherent in her art, which he cannot see when he first proposes. As a woman, she cannot seem to escape maternity; her poetic battle cry for social change will affect the world like a mother influences her children: "New hearts in individual growth / Must *quicken*, and increase to multitude / In new dynasties of the race of men" (9.943–45, emphasis added). Just as she wished for "men [to] feel [her verses] catch them on the *quick*," Romney tells her that

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her poetry is successful, that it will speed her readers' heartbeats (5.26, emphasis added). His words imply the maternal as the phrase "new hearts in individual growth" suggests human conception, and the word "quickening" refers to the movement of the unborn child within the mother ("Quicken"). By describing her poetry as quickening within her readers, she connects the effect of her poetry on others with the experience of a pregnant mother. She can stir men with her poetic vision, and with Romney's help, she will reach even more. Her poetry will create new "dynasties" of men; although she may never biologically have children, her poetry will birth men, more than her body could ever create. The poem concludes its ninth and final book with this idea, a significant number considering *Aurora Leigh*'s connection with motherhood.

Barrett Browning rejects the female "need" for maternity through Aurora's production of poetry and not children. This poem exposes the inconsistencies in both the trope of idealized motherhood and medical assurances of its benefits through the physical and spiritual deaths of Aurora's mother and Marian. Similarly, it dwells on the misuse of maternal authority through the shared actions of Marian's mother and Lady Waldemar, indicating that not all women should be mothers. Furthermore, neither Aurora nor Lady Waldemar confirms the medical supposition that women lose their female organs and femininity if not utilized. Instead, Lady Waldemar's lusciously feminine body remains childless, and Aurora assumes a masculine role in relation to Romney at the same time she completes social expectations of femininity by marrying.

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NOTES

1. I am indebted to Bourne Taylor and Shuttleworth's *Embodied Selves* anthology for providing me with or leading me to many of the medical texts referenced in this essay.
2. As Brooks observes, orphans make interesting protagonists, and the focus on the surviving but motherless child and not the dying mother acknowledges the real danger of pregnancy to some extent but also dismisses the dead mother as unimportant, a mere plot device to raise interest in the child who, however, would actually be far more likely to die (115).
3. For the former set of critics, see Hickok, David, Byrd, Carpenter, Dalley, and Thum. For the latter, see Calcraft-Rennie, Steinmetz, and Gatti Taylor.
4. If Marian had truly died in the hospital, her poverty would prevent her burial in a well maintained graveyard. The Anatomy Act of 1832 gave all unclaimed bodies, or those whose families could not pay for burial, to anatomy or medical schools for dissection (Richardson xv). After the anatomists' perusals, the school was legally responsible for paying for the body's burial, but there are no records of the dissections and burials to ensure this happened, and many accused the schools of not burying the dead properly (106).
5. Acton quotes at length another doctor's story of a girl they both assume is not raped because she has "no traces of recent violence . . . on the surface of her abdomen or thighs" (*A Complete Practical Treatise* 200). In Acton's discussion of rape he explains its relationship to poverty; he notes that many symptoms associated with rape appear when a woman has not cleaned herself properly, thereby tying the hard life of poverty with appalling physicality and disease. Furthermore, he also explains that many poor mothers claim their daughters are raped so they can sue the perpetrator for money (202–03). Two of Acton's subheadings in his small section on rape, "Rape, Reputed Cases Of" and "Rape, Cases That

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May Be Mistaken For," reveal his general skepticism of rape and his encouragement for other doctors to be suspicious of rape charges.

6. The *Examiner* published many of these stories. For examples, see "Deplorable Case of Seduction, Murder, and Suicide" in the 4 November 1848 edition; "Alleged Murder of a Child" in the "Offenses" section of the 29 June 1844 issue; "Child Murder for Burial Money" in the "Assize Intelligence" section of 16 April 1853; "Dreadful Murder of Six Children by their Mother" in the 17 June 1854 issue; "The Esher Murders" in the "Assize Intelligence" section of August 12, 1854; and "The Murder at Uxbridge" in the "Law" section of 12 April 1856.

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