CHAPTER IV

FEMINISM AND CONVENTION

It is appropriate, though not necessary, that the involved Poet who is a woman should write about issues that concern women beyond the common ground shared with men, and that she take a woman's perspective on issues for which there are clear differences between a man's and a woman's point of view. In Elizabeth Barrett Browning's work such poems are about women's roles and about wifely and maternal feelings. As a woman, Barrett Browning brings to many of these themes first-hand knowledge instead of guesses or projections on which male Poets have had to rely. As an established literary figure in Victorian England, she validated specifically female topics and approaches by including them in her published work and by defending them as subjects for serious poetic consideration. Also, one sees, how Barrett Browning's own stages of maturity as a woman are reflected in her treatment of women's topics. In her early mature poetry, she simply flouts a few traditions, albeit timidly. In her later poetry she abandons sentimental notions in favour of a bolder articulation of the need for a woman to develop human depth and
wholeness. The growing assurance in expressing her beliefs accompanies her marrying and becoming a mother herself. The culmination of these ideas, which were important to Elizabeth Barrett Browning throughout her life, is found in *Aurora Leigh*.

Although it is logical that a woman who is a Poet would write about aspects of life which are peculiar to being a woman, it is not inevitable. Nor is it inevitable that a Poet who does write about women's experiences should do so from a feminist perspective. It is logical, however, that a woman who cared as much as Barrett Browning did about the development of her talents and her individuality should place high value on those basically humanist attitudes now called feminist.\(^1\) Thus, we see in the youthful Elizabeth Barrett an independent spirit and a fierce desire to maintain her integrity as a Poet and as a person -- the spirit and desire which make her a feminist Poet. She read Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* at an early age; and as an introspective, aspiring writer she recorded at age fourteen these feminist sentiments, which were to echo throughout her subsequent writings:

> My feelings are acute in the extreme but as nothing is so odious in my eyes as a damsel famed in story for a super-abundance of sensibility they are carefully restrained!

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My mind is naturally independent and
spurns that subserviency of opinion
which is generally considered necessary
to feminine softness. But this is a
subject on which I must always feel
strongly for I feel within me an almost
proud consciousness of independence
which prompts me to defend my opinions
& to yield them only to conviction!!!!!!

*** *** ***

Better Oh how much better to be the
ridicule of mankind, the scoff of
society [,] than lose that self
respect which tho' this heart were
bursting would elevate me above misery
--above wretchedness & above abasement!!!
These principles are irrevocable ! It
is not [--] I feel it is not vanity
that dictates them ! It is not [--]
I know it is not an encroachment on
masculine prerogative but it is a
proud sentiment which will never
never allow me to be humbled in my
own eyes !!!2

Elizabeth Barrett Brownings' feminism can be
ascertained by examining her use of various conventional
attitudes about women's experience. Also, she expressed
her feelings about those emotions she felt are a woman's
most profound ones: Love as a wife and as a mother. Although
she sometimes wrote poetry for particular political purposes,
she was not a feminist crusader and as a result her poems
emanate the warmth of deeply felt convictions.

2 "Two Autobiographical Essays by Elizabeth Barrett," Browning
The way in which Elizabeth Barrett uses the conventional and unconventional with respect to women may be seen in three sets of early poems: two sonnets on George Sand, three poems on Queen Victoria, and a medieval romance. In the first type of poem, she presents a most unconventional woman showing George Sand as androgynous and transcending conventions. In the second category she exploits conventional attitudes toward women showing that conventionally attributed feminine characteristics can be worthy and admirable. And in the third type of poem she combines conventional situations and stereotyped attitudes with a feminist perspective that shows sympathy with and understanding of the character caught in the trap of convention.

Seen from the woman's side, androgyny posits as complete persons self-assured women, women who have the best characteristics of their own sex and gender plus those usually associated with "manliness." Only George Sand seems to have achieved in Elizabeth Barrett's eye any balance between attributes conventionally called "manly" and "womanly." To John Kenyon she wrote from Paris in 1852:

She (Sand) seemed to be, in fact, the man in that company, and the profound respect with which she was listened to a good deal impressed me.*** A scorn of pleasing she evidently had; there never could have been a colour of coquetry in that woman. Her very freedom from affectation and consciousness had
a touch of disdain. But I liked her.
I did not love her, but I felt the
burning soul through all that quiet-
ness, and was not disappointed in
George Sand. 3

In the first sonnet on Sand, subtitled "A Desire"
and published in Poems of 1844, Elizabeth Barrett points out
how masculine and feminine dualities are united in her as well
as in her two names:

Thou large-brained woman and large-hearted man,
Self-called George Sand! Whose soul, amid the lions
Of thy tumultuous senses, moans defiance***.

[II.1-3]

She is a woman with a brain and a man with a heart, and thus
she transcends being typed by gender. As a genius and angel,
she achieves perfection as others do only in heaven:

***thou to woman's claim
And man's mightst join beside the angel's grace
Of a pure genius sanctified from blame.
Till child and maiden pressed to thine embrace
To kiss upon thy lips a stainless fame.

[II. 10-14]

What Elizabeth Browning concludes about George Sand is also
true of herself: like Elizabeth Barrett, Sand burns "in a poet-
fire" [1.10] while also revealing that her "Woman-heart beat
evermore/Through the large flame" [II.11-12]. Thus Sand combines

3 The Letters of Elizabeth Browning, ed. Frederic G. Kenyon,
traditionally masculine and feminine qualities and becomes
the ideal person, as Robert Browning became.

Elizabeth Barrett's treatment of women in her poems
can be unconventional in the way she presents women who are in
traditional roles: in "The Romaunt of the Page" a woman decides
which traditions of behaviour she will accept and which would
be intolerable for her; and in "A Drama of Exile" Eve accepts
the roles that are to become traditional for women, but she
does so in a rational, and therefore, non-traditional, way.

The courageous new bride in "The Romaunt of the Page"
disguises herself as a Page to assist her husband at war, but
she learns to her dismay that he is unable to conceive of a
wife as anywhere but on a pedestal. He says to his Page/Wife:

Look up--there is a small bright cloud
Alone amid the skies!
So high, so pure, and so apart,
A woman's honor lies.

[II. 230-33]

Any other activity than weeping and praying on his behalf would
make her "Unwomaned" [I. 196]. The Page, however, thinks a true
wife should share her husband's life (as she is doing by secretly
accompanying him to war, though he does not know it), rather
than decorate it:

Your wisdom may declare
That womanhood is proved the best
By golden brooch and glossy vest
The mincing ladies wear;
Yet is it proved, and was of old,
Anear as well, I dare to hold,
By truth, or by despair.

[II. 198-204]
Predictably, however, the Page/wife sacrifices herself under a saracen's sword. She does so for several reasons: to divert the saracens from the knight who is riding ahead and defend his name as a warrior, but it is also an act of despair knowing that the knight could not love her once she revealed her masquerade to him and also knowing that her life with him would be most unpleasant because of his stereotyped ideas about women. The convention of wifely self-sacrifice taken literally is given a feminist turn in Elizabeth's having the wife realize that her husband is trapped in stereotyped images of what is feminine and thus suitable for a wife. The Page practically tells the knight who she is by suggesting that one would be a most noble wife who disguised herself to accompany her husband into war. But he replies, "I would forgive, and evermore/Would love her as my servitor,/But little as my wife" [II. 227-29]. In agony the page muses, "Have I renounced my womanhood,/For wifehood unto thee??" [II. 276-77]. Then she despairs, resigning herself to death in preference to a loveless life and anticipating truer love in heaven:

Yet God thee save, and mayst thou have
A lady to thy mind,
More woman-proud and half as true
As one thou leav'st behind!
And God me take with HIM to dwell--
For HIM I cannot love too well,
As I have loved my kind.

[II. 280-86]

Eve in "A Drama of Exile" represents the woman in traditional, even archetypal, roles. Nevertheless she is not
seen as an adjunct to man, as Milton sees her in *Paradise Lost*, but as a person who intends to bring all her power to understand and fulfill her role as Adam's wife and the mother of the human race, in addition to being a child of God. Elizabeth Barrett said of "A Drama of Exile,": "The object is the development of the peculiar anguish of Eve—the fate of woman at its root—and the first step of Humanity into the world-wilderness, driven by the curse.*** The principal interest is set on Eve; the 'first in the transgression,' 'First in the transgression' has been said over and over again, because of the tradition—but first and deepest in the sorrow, nobody seems to have said, or, at least, written of, as conceiving."4

"A Drama of Exile" concerns only Eve's despair and reconciliation since she both committed the first sin and will bring forth future generations of sinners; perhaps it should have been titled "A Drama of Eve." Barrett's Eve is as much involved in the discussions with Lucifer, with the spirits of the earth and the beasts, and with Christ as is Adam (Eve has nearly one hundred speaking lines more than Adam, one-fifth of the poem—466 to his 373 out of 2270). Milton's conception of how Eve accepted the roles of womanhood is misogynistic when compared to Elizabeth Barrett's treatment.

Elizabeth Barrett's Eve Participates in the discussion with Adam and Christ, and she fully understands and knowingly accepts her roles and responsibilities. Rather than depicting Adam as a step higher than Eve in the hierarchy of creation, Elizabeth presents him as one who has an equal role in the proceedings. He is the conciliator between the suffering Christ, who will take on the sins of the world, and Eve, who feels she alone is responsible for all sin. However, since Eve knows she is to be the first mother of the sinful race, she despairs at the thought that she and they will cause pain to God and Christ.

In "A Drama of Exile," Barrett is well served by the conventional division of the sexes. As the imperious ruler, Adam represents the merciless Old Testament rule of law, while Eve's asking for pity and displaying humility represents the New Testament rule of charity. Thus, Adam becomes the prototype of the Old Testament Patriarchal rulers, while Eve becomes a type of suffering Christ. Just as Eve is to learn the rules (for womanhood) from Adam, so Adam learns forgiveness from Eve. As in Aurora Leigh, the representatives of the two sexes gain something from one another, making themselves complete individuals rather than relying on the other for complementary traits or exaggerating and exploiting the different characteristics given to them by God, according to Milton.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's ideas on equality in marriage were consistent throughout her life, and an actual marriage brought confidence to their expression. In her early
mature works there do appear strong and assertive women, such as Lady Geraldine, who manage to survive and thrive and love. Elizabeth Barrett's most optimistic thoughts on the subject of marriage are consistent throughout her life and are confirmed in her marriage with Robert Browning. Also her conventional association of love and death ceases upon her marriage, when she also abandons the ballad form, with its staples of violence and death in love. Also an interesting feature of the early poems is the association of unsanctioned sexual activity with the punishment of childbirth or death. Later, in *Aurora Leigh*, the unmarried mother, Marian Erle, is treated with understanding and is allowed to live, although she regards herself as dead... old habits die hard.

Looking at the Sonnets in the context of the development of her feminist strengths, one must remember that the sonnets were written during a transitional period. Marriage for her meant great change in her life for until she met Robert Browning she felt she lived as full a life as was possible for one with her illnesses. The Sonnets were written as meditations on her new life and necessarily include a look at her old life.

After marrying and writing her poems in praise of marriage, Barrett Browning's theory of love takes a further step, into the political arena. In *Casa Guidi Windows*, the highest matrýrdom is not self-destruction in the name of love
but a patriotic self-sacrifice that will benefit one's family
(One's country is, in a larger sense, one's family).
Garibaldi's wife, called, simply, "Her" in Part one, fought
bravely at her husband's side and died along with their
unborn child:

Perhaps, ere dying thus.
She looked up in his face (which never stirred
From its clenched anguish) as to make excuse
For leaving him for his, if so she erred.
He well remembers that she could not choose.

[II. 689-93]

From the close relation of love and politics, the
marriage of a feminist, is the logical next step, which
Elizabeth Barrett Browning takes in Aurora Leigh. Much of
Mrs. Browning's political energy goes into describing issues
and ideas that concern women, including the traditions and
conventions that limit all women and the joys that many
women find in marriage and motherhood. As with her opinions
on the Poet's role, her opinions on the status of women do
not radically change in the course of her life, although in
their growth, they deepen in complexity and subtlety. The
truly radical change in her life, her marriage to Robert
Browning, is easily misperceived as being a magic which he
worked on her, an impression that is encouraged by some of
the images in the Sonnets from the Portuguese. But she was
not passively swept off her feet by a masterful Svengali;
rather, the commitment and the risk depended on her willingness to trust the sincerity of her own, newly discovered, love. Discovering in herself the strength of this capacity to love liberated her to live out her visions. That is why *Aurora Leigh*, although containing much theorizing characteristic of her in her unmarried state, could only be written several years after her marriage. She had been thinking of the subject generally throughout her life, but more intensely and specifically for ten years. Only after she tested her theories for herself and found them to be valid could she write about them as "a truth," which as we have seen, is the Poet's role to convey.

Although, it is appropriate that the story of a Poet by a Poet should be written as a poem, *Aurora Leigh*, does not fit happily into the mode, Verse-Novel, as do the *Sonnets from the Portuguese* into the sonnet sequence form. The idea of the poem, came to Elizabeth in the early forties when the connection between a woman's art and a woman's life was unnaturally close, so that it is impossible for the most austere of critics not sometimes to touch the flesh when his eyes should be fixed upon the page.

Virginia Woolf has suggested that given the limited experience and education that women received before the twentieth century, the novel of manners would have been the best form of literary expression for a woman, because her
life was confined to observing people in the drawing room and neighbourhood. Jane Austen's novels are given as proof of the theory. Also, Virginia Woolf says: "Then, again, all the literary training that a woman had in the early nineteenth century was training in the observation of character, in the analysis of emotion. Her sensibility had been educated for centuries by the influences of the common sitting-room. People's feelings were impressed on her; personal relations were always before her eyes. Therefore, when the middle-class woman took to writing, she naturally wrote novels..."[^5] Also, Aurora Leigh is uncomfortable in the Verse-Novel mode and because Elizabeth Barrett Browning was trained in and expected to lead the kind of life that was conventional for a nineteenth-century woman, some reviewers have suggested that her magnum opus would have been more successful as a novel in prose. Coventry Patmore was among the first in February of 1857.[^6] Also Paul Turner in "Aurora Versus the Angel," accounts for Patmore's less than enthusiastic reception of the poem by pointing to the lack of attention accorded to Patmore's own long poem about women, The Angel in the House. Turner also suggests that Elizabeth Barrett Browning intended a veiled critique of the stereotypes


in Patmore's poem by referring to its title in Aurora's list of boring domestic duties imposed upon her by her aunt; see "angelic" and "household" [I. 438-40].

But Elizabeth Browning herself anticipated such suggestions and set forth her plan for the experiment:

A few characters -- a simple story-- and plenty of room for passion and thought -- that is what I want-- and am not likely to find easily... without your inspiration... And now tell me, -- where is the obstacle to making as interesting a story of a poem as of a prose work-- echo answers where. Conversations and events, why may they not be given as rapidly and passionately and lucidly in verse as in prose-- echo answers Why. You see nobody is offended by my approach to the conventions of vulgar life in "Lady Geraldine"--and it gives me courage to go on, and touch this real everyday life of our age, and hold it with my two hands. I want to write a poem of a new class, in a measure-- a Don Juan, without the mockery and impurity, ... under one aspect,-- and having unity, as a work of art,-- and admitting of as much philosophical dreaming and digression (which is in fact a characteristic on the age) as I like to use. Might it not be done, even if I could not do it? -- and I think of trying at any rate...

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She finally called the poem a "Poetic art novel." In satisfying the three elements of being poetic, artistic, and novelistic, *Aurora Leigh* takes verse form and is about personal feelings which also concern or can be shared with other people, is about an artist's life and is written artfully, and is a sustained work of fiction which speaks an essential truth.

Written as a diary with the entries in the form of nine books averaging over twelve hundred lines each, the poem ranges in time from describing the events of several years to recalling what happened only a few moments previously, although sometimes the dramatic intensity that the Poet-author achieves makes the entries seem to be a transcription of present reality. Thus, because the events of Aurora's life are only mildly exciting (she rejects a suitor, works hard at writing, finds a friend desolate in Paris, moves with her and a child to Italy and rejoins the rejected suitor) and because its form is not structurally satisfying, the interest in the poem must lie elsewhere to sustain a reader through one of the longest poems in English. It is the record, fictive but only barely and superficially, of a woman's thoughts about her roles in life: the Poet's role and a woman's role. Barrett Browning's

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^Letters, II. 228.
multitude of ideas and passions may be poorly served by the form, verse-novel, but *Aurora Leigh* remains worthy of study as semi-autobiographic fiction by one of the few successful woman Poets before the twentieth century.

*Aurora Leigh* is the culminating work of Barrett Browning's career. She acknowledged that there were imperfections in the poem and that she was not wholly satisfied with it. To Mrs. Jameson she wrote in 1857: "But I see too distinctly what I ought to have written. Still, it is nearer the mark than my former efforts-- fuller, stronger, more sustained and one may be encouraged to push on to something worthier, for I don't feel as if I had done yet--no indeed." In it her poetic theories, the abstract intellectual issues that occupied much of her artistic life, are united with one of the basic beliefs that ruled her actions as well as her thoughts: the belief that women deserve the freedom to develop their individual selves, whether conventional or unconventional. In dealing with this contemporary issue, Elizabeth Browning fulfills her major criteria for Poets. Whereas "A Vision of Poets" is lifeless because it is an attempt to dramatize a theory without recourse to familiar content, *Aurora Leigh* is vital because the substance dramatizing her theory is interesting and alive. As well as being

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10 *Letters*, II. pp. 252-53.
Elizabeth Browning's topic, feminism, is one that continues to affect her posterity. Feminism is both political and philosophical; its basis is humanism and its purpose is to bring women into full humanity, a goal that Elizabeth Barrett Browning sets for Poets as well. Barrett Browning's feminist vision in *Aurora Leigh* is progressive in that she suggests androgyny as an ideal, positing the necessity for people to develop their unique selves and urging a union of attributes commonly called masculine and feminine. She describes the stages some women find necessary to pass through, if not find rest in, in order to achieve this ideal: separating oneself from convention first, then finding strength and support with other women. In passing through these stages, Aurora moves from the physically safe but emotionally demanding Leigh Hall to a garret in London in an attempt to be alone and thus free to pursue her career. When London and the career prove cold, she seeks the supposed warmth of Italy. In Paris, on her way to Italy, she finds Marian, who needs companionship as much as Aurora does (though this phase of sisterhood neither lasts very long nor brings with it much that is useful in solving Aurora's problems). And finally her residence in Italy and Romney's arrival at her villa brings the satisfying union for which both have been longing and to which their respective educations in life have been leading.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning writes not only of the
difficulties associated with a woman's pursuit of a career (problems she knew intimately) but also of the problems other working women frequently face -- her sympathies with women's issues ranged wide. Rape, drugged prostitution, unwanted pregnancy and resultant dismissal from employment: it was radical indeed in the middle of the nineteenth century for an upper-middle class woman artist to raise these issues and deal with them sympathetically in a work of art. Barrett Browning wrote to her friend, Mrs Jameson, that she expected to be castigated as "a disorderly woman and free thinking Poet," and to Mrs. Martin she wrote:

What has given most offence in the book, more than the story of Marian -- far more! -- has been the reference to the condition of women in our cities (prostitution), which a woman oughtn't to refer to, by any manner of means, says the conventional tradition. Now I have thought deeply otherwise. If a woman ignored these wrongs, then may woman as a sex continue to suffer them; there is no help for any of us -- Let us be dumb and die. I have spoken therefore, and in speaking have used plain words -- words which look like blots, and which you yourself would put away -- words which, if blurred or softened, would imperil perhaps the force and righteousness of the moral influence.¹²

She defended the necessity for treating such themes in her poem and earned the admiration of the Pre-Raphaelites.

¹¹Letters, II. 252 (2 February, 1857).
¹²Letters, II 254 (February, 1857).
for so doing. Dante Rossetti wrote to Robert Browning in 1859: "I can recall my first feeling on reading that book [Aurora Leigh], only as a sort of wonder that one should be able actually to know, as a person, the origin of so much that was new in this world." 13 Although Marian's ruin, subsequent "death" as a person, and limited life of total devotion to her child may be melodramatic, the presence of these issues in a poem in which Barrett Browning put much of herself -- "My soul, my thoughts, emotions, opinions" 14 -- indicates that she regarded them as both serious and significant.

In *Aurora Leigh*, Aurora, the Poet, develops into a sensitive yet strong person, making her an ideal Poet in Barrett Browning's terms (involved, humble, unifying). Aurora is again seen as an embodiment of Barrett Browning's ideas informed by some of her own experiences, and also Barrett Browning sees what special obstacles a patriarchal culture presents to a woman. Problems related to gender, like those related to the Poet's role, are pursued further in *Aurora Leigh* than in earlier poems. In *Aurora Leigh*, Mrs. Browning attains a complexity and subtlety that reflects the wisdom, age and experience brought to observation and conjecture.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning transcends the need to use stereotypes of women, because her political point in

14 Letters, II. 228 (28 February 1856).
Aurora Leigh is that it will benefit all people to give women time and opportunities to develop themselves. The further step Barrett Browning takes in the poem is suggesting that for some women there are three stages of development toward self-sufficiency and self-awareness: separatism, sisterhood, and androgyne. Aurora Leigh is essentially about Aurora's inner life and only incidentally about the events that happen to her. Thus, it is to the detriment of the ideals set forth in the poem regarding the full development of one's capacities that Romney is presented first as a misogynist from whom Aurora's independence must be won; only later, when Aurora has established an identity for herself, is she allowed to become more humane, in Barrett Browning's attempt to depict an androgynous marriage.

In Elizabeth Browning's dramatization of feminist issues, the woman who seeks to break away from convention finds such a step to be a struggle which requires a physical separation from the source of the pressure towards convention. Barrett Browning recognizes that it is often necessary for a woman to break away from the type of education females were traditionally given, but that imitating the form a male's education traditionally took is not the answer. In 1847, Tennyson had made an attempt to treat the theme of the unconventional, self-sufficient women in his long poem, The Princess. Barrett Browning gives her opinion of its failure in two letters to Mitford: "I begin by agreeing with you as to his implied under-estimate of
woman, and again in 1848: "What woman will tell the great poet that Mary Wollstonecraft herself never dreamt of setting up collegiate states, proctordoms, and the rest which is a worn-out plaything in the hands of one sex already, and need not be transferred in order to be proved ridiculous?" Aurora's initial attitude toward her work is that although not necessary, it is at least expeditious for a woman artist to remain single in order to develop her talents, unless, of course, her talents are those of nurturing others. A woman's familial obligations, as Elizabeth Barrett knew being the eldest daughter of a widowed patriarch, interferes to varying degrees with private pursuits. Romney's offer of marriage to Aurora includes not only building their own family but working to improve the lives of his larger family, the tenants on his estate, as well as bettering conditions for the whole human family. Romney's philosophy is paternal, and his grand plans would leave Aurora neither time nor energy for her poetry. Barrett Browning shows both young idealists taking an extreme stand. Although such stands may have been necessary at that time of their lives, Romney's conception of family proves to be too expansive and Aurora's, too exclusive (she intends to be a family of one).

In Book I youthful Aurora experiences and escapes

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15 *Letters*, I. 345 (1847).

16 *Letters*, I. 367 (1848).
from suicidal despair caused by the restricted upbringing which her duty-bound aunt imposes on her. Aurora rebels inwardly while conforming outwardly to the double crimp of the genteel English atmosphere and a woman's education. She cynically details her "accomplishments" in a long list, which includes the following:

I danced the Polka and Cellarius,
Spun glass, stuffed birds, and modelled flowers in wax,
Because she liked accomplishments in girls.
I read a score of books on womanhood
To prove, if women do not think at all,
They may teach thinking (to a maiden aunt
Or else the author),-- books that boldly assert
Their right of comprehending husband's talk
When not too deep, and even of answering
With pretty "may it please you," or "so it is,"--
Their rapid insight and fine aptitude,
Particular worth and general missionariness,
As long as they keep quiet by the fire
And never say "no" when the world says "ay,"
For that is fatal, -- their angelic reach
Of virtue, chiefly used to sit and darn,
And fatten household sinners,-- their, in brief,
Potential faculty in everything
Of abdicating power in it***.

[I. 424-42]

While he was alive, her father had given her training in the classics, which later served to counteract such sexist influences as her aunt's restrictions:

...The trick of Greek
And Latin he had taught me.*****
He wrapt his little daughter in his large
Man's doublet, careless did it fit or no.

[I. 714-15,727-28]
He introduced her to androgyny early.

Her English aunt's bitterness toward Aurora's late mother, a liberal-minded and loving Italian, is only barely concealed. Her aunt regards it as her duty to train Aurora for "household uses and proprieties" [1042]. Like the woman spinning in "work and contemplation," Aurora performs the tasks her aunt specifies, even as "my soul was singing at a work apart/Behind the wall of sense" [1053-54]. As a first step in separating herself from conventional pressures, Aurora maintains an interior life while functioning in the world of social obligations-- much like the two worlds of Dairy by E.B.B. 17 Romney aligns himself with Aurora's aunt, who is trying to impose conventional ideas of femininity on the girl. Aurora resists both the mystical stereotype of a wife, which her aunt holds ("But a wife/Will put all right, and stroke his temples cool/With healthy touches," II.646-48), and the helpmate stereotype that Romney holds. She interprets Romney's place for her in marriage thus:

I have some worthy work for thee below,
Come, sweep my barns and keep my hospitals,
And I will pay thee with a current coin
Which men give women.

[II.538-41]

The "Coin" is not money but merely praise for her sacrifices.

The issue of marriage between Aurora and Romney is further complicated by the fact that their father had contracted a betrothal for the children long before the children met. Aurora fears that an arranged marriage would be even worse because the husband would have the right or feel the temptation to be "a little cold and dominant in love" [782].

Intellectual pursuit in women, Romney says, "Brings headaches, pretty cousin, and defiles/The clean white morning dresses" [95-96]. Pushed into this corner by the people nearest her, Aurora can hardly be blamed for overreacting to defend her choices:

"I would rather take my part
With God's Dead, who afford to walk in white
Yet spread His glory, than keep quiet here
And gather up my feet from even a step
For fear to soil my gown in so much dust.
I choose to walk at all risks. -- Here, if heads
That hold a rhythmic thought, must ache perforce,
For my part I choose headaches ***."

"Dear Aurora, choose instead
To cure them. You have balsams."

"I perceive.
The headache is too noble for my sex,
You think the heartache would sound decenter,
Since that's the woman's special, proper ache,
And altogether tolerable, except
To a woman."

[II.101-15]

In her defence she claims that as both a Poet and a person, she is not afraid of involvement with the world outside their
home, choosing "to walk at all risks," and she is more conscious than he of what half of the world's people, the women, suffer.

Romney is not quite as fatuous as he sounds in the first exchange between him and Aurora at the beginning of Book II, for he goes on to explain that women and men, heart and head, must combat suffering in the world: "Men and women make/The world, as head and heart make human life/Work man, work woman, since there's work to do" [132-34]. Nevertheless, Aurora resists such generalizing by gender, for she does not see the sexes as complementary. She says, "You misconceive the question like a man,/Who sees the woman as the complement/
Of his sex merely" [434-36]. The problem Romney must overcome in the course of the poem is his tendency to generalize too much, which later leads him to propose marriage to Marian Erle—a proposal based on a theory rather than on love. Because, later, when Romney discusses his fiancee, Marian, he confirms Aurora's suspicion that, to him, marriage has very little to do with love. He says that marriage:

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 do, I and she.***

[IV. 331-36]

With regard to Romney's view of herself, Aurora points out "You know the world,/And only miss your cousin" [99-100]. At
this point in the story, both characters would make a complete whole if joined because their strength and weaknesses complement each other, but Barrett Browning's ideal marriage requires that each partner should develop a whole self.

Romney is also unable to see that he has his categories reversed: that Aurora, though a woman, is the intellectual and he the prosaic one. He claims to have a greater usefulness in the world because:

```plaintext
***I sympathise with man, not God (I think I was a man for chiefly this),
   And when I stand beside a dying bed,
   'Tis death to me.  
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[II.294-97]

Aurora admits the importance of his beliefs and respects him for his commitment, but she cannot accept his despair at the state of the world. He asks her to marry him "for life in fellowship/Through bitter duties" [354-55]; but Aurora refuses, recognizing the inequality of the proposition and noting that, for Romney, "Anything does for a wife" [367]-- apparently. She acknowledges her own immaturity and asks only to be left alone to develop in her own way: "Better far/Pursue a frivolous trade by serious means,/Than a sublime art frivolously" [257-59]. She also points out that one reason for her not being mature is the prolonged adolescence and dependence that characterize the kind of upbringing she has endured:
A Woman's always younger than a man
At equal years, because she is disallowed
Maturing by the outdoor sun and air,
And kept in long-clothes past the age to walk.

[II. 329-32]

Aurora's sufferance is tried further by the inconsistency of Romney's accusations. He does avoid the mistake of claiming that only men can be logicians, for if he had made such a claim, Aurora would have proved him wrong in two ways: first, through exposing the illogicality of the following argument and, second, through her ability to see its illogic. She says:

***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]

And Romney, parenthetically thinking himself quite the liberal, replies,

***If your sex is weak for art
(And I, who said so, did but honour you
By using truth in courtship), it is strong
For life and duty.

[II.372-75]

But Aurora has had enough of such fallacious arguments and
tells Romney quite plainly: "What you love/Is not a woman, Romney, but a cause" [400-401].

Responding once more to his attempts to flatter and shame her simultaneously, she points out that she, too, has a vocation, and that it is "Most serious work, most necessary work/As any of the economists" [459-60]. He is unable to see that his ambitions reflect an intolerance and that her work is just as necessary for the world as is his.

Aurora does feel uncertainty in the face of Romney's outright opposition to her plans; after all, he has the power to prevent her penury -- quite a temptation. Her doubt recurs later when her job seems too frustrating, and the appeal of a financially comfortable life with Romney again surfaces. Aurora nearly succumbs to a common temptation: Women who are put into low paying jobs or whose goals are frustrated at least in part because they are women come to see marriage as a refuge or escape and think that perhaps they did make a mistake in choosing to work outside the home. As Aurora says, while thinking of her parting with Romney and their subsequent lives:

...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. Ah me, the vines That bear such fruit are proud to stoop with it. The palm stands upright in a realm of sand.

[II.511-19]
But she is forgetting the subtler point she made when discussing the issue of women, work and marriage with Romney:

***
every creature, female as the male,
stands single in responsible act and thought
As also in birth and death. 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. Woman of a softer mood,
Surprised by men when scarcely awake to life,
Will sometimes only hear the first word, love,
And catch up with it any kind of work,
Indifferent, so that dear love go with it.
I do not blame such women, though, for love,
They pick much oakum; earth's fanatics make
Too frequently heaven's saints. But ma 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.***

[II.437-53]

It turns out that, at this point in their lives, Aurora has made the right choice, given Romney's Ideas about women and her own need to be unfettered. Aurora's aunt dies, and entail complications force Aurora to leave Leigh Hall with only three hundred pounds, which amount is very meagre as compared to five hundred pounds per annum which Virginia Woolf, in A Room of One's Own, recommends a woman needs for the freedom to develop her artistic talents. Romney makes a most generous offer by asking her to marry him and be free to "write woman's verses and dream woman's dreams" [831]. Barrett Browning does not describe Romney's proposal as 'legal prostitution" as Mary
Wollstonecraft regarded such offers, the scruples that Aurora displays in reaction indicate that she is deeply offended, even though his motive is generous.

The pressures and demands made by Aurora's relatives force her to choose a separatist course in order to maintain poetic and personal integrity. Though not codified the way marriage and motherhood are, separatism and even sisterhood, to some extent, are necessary stages many women find they must pass through on the way to emancipation, separating themselves, often physically, from the sources of conventional thought and behaviour in order to be free of those conventions. For otherwise, she tells Romney that she would feel "Like your pensioners" (1007). Knowing that Romney's father had betrothed his son to Aurora, his brother's daughter, to save her from being disinherited, Aurora, determines not to marry him for convenience, assuming as well that the marriage would be loveless. She thinks:

...If I married him,
I should not dare to call my soul my own
Which so he had bought and paid for:***

...I must help myself,
And am alone from henceforth.

[II. 785-87, 807-808]

A Vindication of the Rights of Woman, ed. Charles W. Hagelman, Jr. (New York: Norton, 1967). Ch. 4, p. 104. Barrett read Wollstanecraft when she was twelve years old (Taplin, p. 9; but Hayter says she was fourteen, pp. 184-85).
Aurora's resistance to stereotypes of the feminine continues to the point that it seems that she is spiting herself by refusing Romney's generous monetary offers after her aunt dies. He even tries to deceive her about the source of the money, but she tenaciously maintains her independence from him at all costs and in the bargain reminds him that she refuses to be treated lightly:

...I believe
In no one's honour which another keeps,
Nor man's nor woman's. As I keep, myself,
My truth and my religion, I depute
No father, though I had one this side death,
Nor brother, though I had twenty, much less you,
Though twice my cousin, and once Romney Leigh,
To keep my honour pure. You face, to-day,
A man who wants instruction, mark me, not
A woman who wants protection. As to a man,
Show manhood, speak out plainly, be precise
With facts and dates.

[II. 1054-65]

He cannot provide her with any proof that the money is hers, so she refuses it. Suddenly, Aurora at the end of Book II is an independent adult, as free as she has longed to be, with her ideals and integrity intact:

...I go hence
To London, to the gathering-place of souls,
To live mine straight out, vocally, in books;
Harmoniously for others, if indeed
A Woman's soul, like man's, be wide enough
To carry the whole octave (that's to prove),
Or, if I fail, still purely for myself.
Pray God be with me, Romney.

[II.1181-88]
The debate between Romney and Aurora about woman's role, the Poet's role, and ultimately the woman Poet's role is rather more sophisticated and complex than one would expect from these two characters. The unlikelihood of sheltered twenty-year-olds mustering both the common and uncommon arguments on the issue is probably one factor in the criticism that Mrs. Browning's characters are sometimes deficient in verisimilitude. Nevertheless, this colloquy retains its pertinence for readers more than a century later. The issue is clearly one of intolerance: like many men raised in a patriarchy, Romney cannot understand that a woman for whom he has plans has planned her own life, as he has, and that she is obliged to live out her convictions and satisfy her needs. Thus the poem is also about Romney's education in life, although his awakening is more traumatic and less sympathetically described.

Since the poem is based on Elizabeth Browning's own life in many ways, the poem provides a close look not only at the struggles one woman underwent in developing her talent and honesty, but also, by extension, at the problems of being a serious and sensitive person trying to do what numerous other people do but finding that blatant and subtle restrictions confront one simply because one is female. Of course, some of the obstacles that face Aurora, such as conflicting suggestions from critics, also face male
Poets, but others do not, such as her need to insist that her work not be given special consideration (which would amount to condescension) by male critics because she is a woman. To Mrs. Jameson, Barrett Browning wrote in 1844 regarding Harriet Martineau: "Also, I do not at all think that because a woman is a woman, she is on that account to be spared the ordinary risk of the arena in literature and philosophy. I think no such thing. Logical chivalry would be still more radically debasing to us than any other. It is not therefore, at all as a Harriet Martineau, but as a thinking and feeling Martineau (now don't laugh), that I hold her to have been hardly used in the late controversy."\(^1\)

Thus, certain issues or restrictions may also be true for males in a similar situation, but the problem is frequently intensified for a woman because of restrictions associated with gender. J.M.S Tompkins, in her lecture on *Aurora Leigh*, points out how Barrett Browning, through *Aurora*, dealt with the "otherness" of being a woman artist: "to carry genius and intellect in a woman's body through a masculine world of letters, remains a matter of conscious adjustment." Wilsey sees George Sand as the best representative of this attitude because she "proved it possible to be both a great artist and a true woman, to do a man's work without losing one's

\(^1\) *Letters*, I. 227(1844).
natural emotions. George Sand's important position made such success highly conspicuous and symbolized for Mrs. Browning an adjustment which gifted women everywhere and for all time would endeavour to make.\textsuperscript{20}

At this stage in her life particularly, Aurora feels that being female must not be a consideration in any work she does; nevertheless, she is frequently reminded that other, more conventional people have different ideas about how she should lead her life and about what work would be appropriate for her. The obligations that Aurora's aunt and Romney outline for Aurora only restrain and do not thwart the Poet:

\ldots I lived, those days, 
And wrote because I lived -- unlicensed else; 
My heart beat in my brain. Life's violent flood
Abolished bounds**.

\textit{[1.959-62]}

Looking back, she regards what she wrote during the early period as "false poems"\textsuperscript{1023} because they are imitative, but it is in poetry that Aurora has been able to retain her integrity as a person and an artist.

Aurora reveals her growing androgyny when she points out what she feels is the biggest restraint on her development: *Poets needs must be\textit{ or} men or women-- more's the pity*\textsuperscript{[11.90-91]}. She resists segregation by gender, but Romney

misunderstands her and thinks she is denying her womanhood. He reveals his chauvinism, replying, "But men and still less women, happily, /Scarce need be poets" [92-93]. Denying any significance to her chosen profession, Romney uses flattery, guilt, inducement, and condensation in his attack on her as both a woman and a Poet. Not only does he de-value poetry, saying it is not needed, but he ranks any participation by a woman lower than a man's. (Romney does admit the possibility that poetry is frivolous because feminine, a suspicion one has all along, when he tells her that as his wife she can, in her spare time, "Write woman's verses and dream woman's dreams.") In his impetuousness and arrogance, the youthful Romney lumps together his arguments against Aurora's desires, objecting to poetry in general and to women writing poetry. Wilsey says, "Romney's proposal of marriage startles Aurora to revolt. Against his one-sided belief in a practical philanthropy, she fights armed with the sword of art. Against his male egotism, she struggles for her integrity as a woman. The two battles are closely interwoven."

With regard to women writing poetry, Romney claims that even mediocre poetry could not result:

The chances are that, being a woman, young
And pure, with such a pair of large, calm eyes,
You write as well... and ill... upon the whole,

---

As other women. If as well, what then?
If even a little better, ... still, what then?
We want the Best in art now, or no art.

[II.144-49]

He asks if any woman could ever "Pine and die because of the
great sum/Of universal anguish?" [208-209] and chastizes
Aurora with "You weep for what you know" [213].

Romney's argument against women writing poetry is
wrong for several reasons. First, it is a fallacy that women
are incapable of generalizing. Second, poetry's effectiveness
can come from treating a subject either in a general way,
depending on magniloquence for its power, or it can come
through as a more personal, specific treatment of one aspect
or example of an issue, the implication of which can be left
to the reader. Third, the world is large enough to hold all
varieties of people, who contribute to the general good what­
ever talents they may have, without compromising anyone else's
contribution or approach to the important issues. Aurora does
not wish to pit "beauty against barley" [475] -- a polarization
that can accomplish nothing, for poetry could never determine
whether a starving person would live or die, but neither can
even the most ambitious of Romney's efforts prevent all
starvation.

Nevertheless, Romney's conclusion is that, with such
limitations, the caste, woman, could certainly never produce a
saviour.
Facing such impossibly lofty requirements for poetry, not to mention life, and such a constricted view of women, Aurora is correct in concluding that her integrity would be compromised by a life with this man.

Romney, does, however, have insight into how the rest of the world views women poets (it is a view not unlike his own), as well as some understanding of her temperament:

You never can be satisfied with praise
Which men give women when they judge a book
Not as mere work but as mere woman's work,
Expressing the comparative respect
which means the absolute scorn.

[II. 232-36]

Romney is an adroit debater, but he lacks the sensitivity to see that whatever points he may feel he has gained in the debate, he is losing Aurora's affections. She, however, cannot resist a final ironic defence of women poets:

...I
Who love my art, would never wish it lower
To suit my stature. I may love my art.
You'll grant that even a woman may love art,
Seeing that to waste true love on anything
Is womanly, past question.

[II. 492-97]

This thought later comes back to torment Aurora when she is in despair about her life and her career.

After leaving Romney, she finds that along with the freedom, separation also brings some difficulties. The
incidental comments of the other characters regarding her career provide their share of annoyance for Aurora, adding to her difficulties. After asking if Aurora loves Romney and being assured that any affection for him is only "cousinly" [III. 403], Lady Waldemar says half in praise and half with disdain:

...You stand outside You artist women, of the common sex; You share not with us, and exceed us so Perhaps by what you're mulcted in, your hearts Being starved to make your heads: so run the old Traditions of you.

[III. 406-11]

Later, thwarted in her attempt to marry Romney by the strength of Romney's love for Aurora (revealed when Lady Waldemar reads Aurora's latest book to him), she writes:

...So I read Your book, Aurora, for an hour that day: I kept its pauses, marked its emphasis; My voice, impaled upon its books of rhyme, Not one would writhe, nor quiver, nor revolt; I read on calmly,—calmly shut it up, Observing, 'There's some merit in the book; And yet the merit in 't is thrown away, As chances still with women if we write Or write not: we want string to tie our flowers, So drop them as we walk, which serves to show The way we went.

[IX. 50-61]

Lady Waldemar understands Aurora's ambivalence toward Romney (she sees that Aurora would return Romney's love, and that
this inclination is revealed in the poems -- Lady Waldemar 
considers such exposure a fault); but she meanly says:

A woman who does better than to love,
I hate; she will do nothing very well:
Male poets are preferable, straining less
And teaching more.

[IX. 63-66]

Even teasing friends can inflict pain by failing to understand
that women see themselves as people first, women second. Vincent 
Carrington writes to Aurora in Italy to give her news of England.
In describing the success of her latest book, he has said:

We think here you have written a good book,
And you a woman! It was in you, -- Yes,
I felt 'twas in you: Yet I doubted half
If that od-force of German Reichenbach,
Which still from female finger-tips burns blue,
Could strike out as our masculine white heats
To quicken a man.

[VII. 565-69]

But he also condescendingly reports his fiancee's reaction to
Aurora's book:

...'Tis pretty to remark
How women can love women of your sort,
And tie their hearts with love-knots to your feet,
Grow insolent about you against men,
And put us down by putting up the lip,
As if a man -- there are such, let as own,
Who write not ill-- remains a man, poor wretch,
While you --!***

[VII. 612-19]

Aurora is stung by Carrington's reminder that there is more
to life than being a Poet, that one must also acknowledge one's
natural feelings:

The book, too-- pass it. "A good book," says he, "And you a woman." I had laughed at that, But long since. I'm a woman, it is true; Alas, and woe to us, when we feel it most! Then, least care have we for the crowns and goals And compliments on writing our good books.

[VII. 738-43]

But she does point out Carrington's error: "For the truth itself, / That's neither man's nor woman's, but just God's, / None else has reason to be proud of truth" [752-54].

In Aurora's self-evaluation in Book V, she faces the failures that have accompanied her apparent success, compelling her to make changes in her life. She decides to move to Italy, a choice necessitated in part by the loneliness that has marked her career and by the insufficient income her work provides. This drastic move is accompanied by, and perhaps symbolizes a new view of her position in life: she is both more conscious of and more certain that separatism is necessary for her to conduct her life as she chooses.

Book V opens with vibrant images of life and sexuality with which Aurora feels her more spiritual poetry must compete in order to bring people to a higher sense of themselves in relation to God. Humbled because Romney is unmoved by her work, she regards her lofty hopes as chimerical. Then she thinks that pleasing a man is not a sufficient justification
for a woman to devote her life to writing, and she thinks angrily about the attitude she as a woman sometimes has:

We women are too apt to look to one,
Which proves a certain impotence in art.
We strain our natures at doing something great,
Far less because it's something great to do,
Than haply that we, so commend ourselves
As being not small, and more appreciable
To some one friend. We must have mediators
Betwixt our highest conscience and the judge.

[V. 43-50]

She determines to avoid the traps that typically beset woman:

...This vile woman's way
Of trailing garments shall not trip me up:
I'll have no traffic with the personal thought
In Art's pure temple.

[V. 59-62]

She wants to avoid the pitfalls of "Women, as they are" and still hopes to be part of "Whatever they may be." Barrett Browning's perceptions of the limitations of the way in which women were (and still are) socialized appear often in her letters. She wrote to Robert Browning just before their marriage about the state of women. "Another truth (to my mind) is, that women, as they are (whatever they may be) have not mental strength any more than they have bodily; have not instruction, capacity, wholeness of intellect enough. To deny that women, as a class, have defects, is as false I think, as to deny that women have wrongs."22

22Barrett-Browning, Letters, 2, 282.
The issue is not that it would be impossible for a woman to have a capacious mentality (a biological attribute, basically) but that girls were not trained and encouraged to expand and pursue the utmost in mental powers. Woman's minds were neither instructed nor developed in any systematic way: thus she comments on "Women, as they are (whatever they may be). "And her conclusion shows that she is an idealist, believing in the potential of women. She is also a realist, recognizing that the potential is only rarely achieved largely because "Women have wrongs," i.e. are wronged. As Jeanette Marks observes, "E.B.B.'s loyalty to women was marked and seems to have been part of her sympathetic understanding of the nature and problems of women and of her intellectual courage and power."23

For Aurora, neither fame, the "approbation of the general race" [65], nor the approbation of one man shall be her goal. Rather, "We'll keep our aims sublime, our eyes erect,/ Although our woman-hands should shake and fail;/And if we fail... But must we?—Shall I fail?" [71-73]. Here is one woman who will resist her programming toward failure and who asks only that people "Deal with us nobly, women though we be,/And honour us with truth if not with praise"[82-83].

Despite the success, both popular and critical, of her work, it brings only partial satisfaction:

...To have our books appraised by love, associated with love, while we sit loveless! Is it hard, you think? At least, 'tis mournful. Fame, indeed, 'twas said, means simply love. It was a man said that:
And then, there's love and love: the love of all (To risk in turn a woman's paradox)
Is but a small thing to the love of one.

[A. 474-81]

Aurora sees the contradiction of being a successful poet of love who is unloved and alone. Because that makes her sad she says ironically that she is one more example of Romney's assertion that women do not do well with generalizations:
She has the generalized love of many and the particular love of none. Her human needs are now stronger than the extraneous demands that being a woman makes. She is in despair and admits that she hungers for love-- a particular, even mundane, love:

...And since we needs must hunger, -- better, for man's love, than God's truth! better, for companions sweet, than great convictions! Let us bear our weights, preferring, dreary hearths to desert souls.
Well, well! they say we're envious, we who rhyme; but I, because I am a woman perhaps
And so rhyme ill, am ill at envying.

[V. 497-504]

Mrs. Browning's involuted ironies and associative leaps need explaining. Recognizing how sterile life is as a poet in London and as a woman without Romney, Aurora thinks even
the dullest woman's role, by a "dreary hearth," would be preferable to the lifeless and sexless role she has lived so far. Despite her claim of choosing to walk among people, she has actually separated herself from them as well as from her own human feelings. Moreover, because Poets have been criticized for being envious, she obstinately insists on doing so -- but she is not even envying properly and goes on to envy even worse. Since women have been criticized for being poor Poets, it is only logical that she do poorly what Poets are faulted for doing, because she is both a woman and a Poet. She envies other Poets not for their style or poetic successes but for their being loved by wives, parents and children.

Feeling that her career has demanded that she deny herself comforts enjoyed by most people -- particularly most women, since she is a woman -- she says rather poignantly, "I called the artist but a greatened man./He may be childless also, like a man./I laboured on alone" [419-21]. Her use of generic "man" in one line and specific "man" in the following is slightly confusing. This passage comes after her thoughts on the intensity of being an artist -- one has a heightened sense of being a person. But she also recognizes that in trying to achieve this heightened state, usually, attained by men, she has had to function like a man and be childless (since only a woman can give birth to child). Thus, like male artists, she must work alone. But, although males are denied the pleasures
(as she sees them) of childbirth and childcare, Poets or not, they can participate in family life -- at least more than Aurora can -- and so she envies them. She is neither woman nor man. Rejecting one and being excluded from being the other, she is left alone, without gender, without a place in a family. Aurora has observed the paradox attendant upon being an artist: that one must give up certain family comforts in order to have the time and energy to write professionally, but that one must have a full life from which to write.

In addition, Aurora's particular status as an orphan makes her life intolerably lonely for "Death quite unfellows us" [552].

Denying herself any womanly passion, Aurora mistakenly assumes all Poets must act the way men Poets do and, in a conversation with her friend, Lord Howe, she says,

***"my dear Lord Howe, you shall not speak To a printing woman who has lost her place (The sweet safe corner of the household fire Behind the heads of children), compliments, As if she were a woman. We who have clipt The curls before our eyes may see at least As plain as men do. Speak out, man to man; No compliments, beseach you."
..."Friend to Friend,
Let that be.***"

[V.805-13]

Aurora has been thinking of how long she has been separated from Romney, and then she recalls an offer of marriage she has received from someone she dislikes. Contrary
to the conclusions Aurora has just reached about preferring a dreary hearth, she has refused the offer. Aurora's second refusal of a marriage offer is an encapsulated reiteration of her refusal of Romney and serves to reconfirm the importance to her of her work, despite the toll it takes. Nevertheless her despair has humanized her and forced her closer to a recognition of her love for Romney, but she maintains her artistic and feminine integrity by refusing to debase herself simply to be married and free of financial worries.

Lord Eglinton wants "a star" [915] to grace his home. Anyone will do for a wife as long as she has achieved some popular recognition in the arts: he would like an actress, or a dancer, or an opera singer, or a poet. Aurora's friend, Lord Howe, who is carrying this marriage offer, warns her, "A happy life means prudent compromise" [923]. He continues by describing what she knows too well: the difficulty, verging on physical pain, that being a woman writer brings. He compares her to a possessed oracle, first calling her "my prophetess" [942], then grotesquely detailing an oracle's life:

...Think,— the God comes down as fierce
    As twenty bloodhounds, shakes you, strangles you,
    Until the oracular shriek shall ooze in forth!

[V. 943-45]

The age-old argument against a woman working, that she can never earn enough to survive so she should avoid all the trouble and marry someone who will provide for her, is
another difficulty that Aurora is willing to endure, especially because she finds Lord Eglinton repulsive. Instead, she reasserts the primacy of her art in her life:

***I will not bate
One artist-dream on straw or down, my lord,
Nor pinch my liberal soul, though I be poor,
Nor cease to love high, though I live thus low.

[V. 968-71]

Her assertion must be taken with a grain of salt considering the meditation on the artist's loveless life the reader has just been privy to. Her employment is a good excuse to refuse an unpleasant marriage of convenience, and her refusal, made when she is most desperate about her loveless life, shows that her union with Romney at the end of the novel is not a capitulation or merely an escape from a dreary life.

At this point, too, Lady Waldemar's announcement to Aurora that she and Romney are engaged to be married causes Aurora once more to think sorrowfully:

'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; for where the man discerns A sex (ah, ah, the man can generalise, said he), we see but one ideally
And really: where we yearn to lose ourselves
And melt like white pearls in another's wine,
He seeks to double himself by what he loves,
And make his drink more costly by our pearls.

[V. 1072-81]
Such a marriage, she thinks, would be a dilution for the woman while strengthening the man. Barrett Browning recognizes the double standard which prevails in some marriages, and she often warned young friends of the dangers in an unequal partnership. Barret Browning's awareness of the possibilities for exploiting women in marriage was perhaps heightened by the contrast to her own marriage. Wilsey remarks, "...after her elopement with Browning, she was grieved by the attitude of her brothers which showed plainly that they thought she had been foolishly persuaded beyond her powers of resistance. Little did they realize that it was Browning alone who gave her a sense of true protection, because he alone recognized her right to liberty as a responsible and single being." Aurora has to be disappointed by Romney's ideas of marriage this third time because she and he are not yet equals in maturity. He is still too egocentric, and she needs to feel that her profession can co-exist with a life that is satisfying in other ways.

Believing that Romney is no longer single and free, Aurora finds that, having decided to remain single herself, she now has no choice in the matter. She also comes to feel that, while separatism may be effective for accomplishing the goals of one's career, it also involves the renunciation of certain

pleasures. It has become necessary to check her sensuousness (and, by implication, her sexuality); we learn just how well she holds her passion in check when she first sees Romney after several year's of separation:

I felt him, rather than beheld him. Up
I rose, as if he were my king indeed,
And then sat down, in trouble at myself,
And struggling for my woman's empery.
'Tis pitiful: but women are so made.
We 'll die for you perhaps,... 'tis probable;
But we 'll not spare you an inch of our full height:
We 'll have our whole just stature,... five feet four,
Though laid out in our coffins: pitiful.

[VIII. 62-70]

Also Aurora's sensuousness is clear in the following lines:

My loose long hair began to burn and creep,
Alive to the very ends, about my knees;
I swept it backward as the wind sweeps flame,
With the passion of my hands. Ah, Romney laughed
One day... (how full the memories come up!)
"--Your Florence fire-flies live on in your hair,"
He said, "it gleams so." Well, I wrung them out,
My fire-flies; made a knot as hard as life
Of those loose soft, impracticable curls,
And then sat down and thought***.

[V. 1126-35]

In Books VI Aurora begins her journey to Italy, which starts the adventure that brings her in close contact with people who need her, Marian and her baby. This is the sort of contact, she, too, needs to give both her life and her work vitality, and it is the second phase, though rather brief, of her development as a woman trying to make the
necessary adjustments a working person must make. Her actual first step, in the Book VII, is to allow herself typically womanly feelings -- a protective sisterliness toward Marian and parental love for Marian's child:

Come with me, sweetest sister,***
I am lonely in the world,
And thou art lonely, and the child is half
An orphan. Come, -- and henceforth thou and I Being still together will not miss a friend,
Nor he a father, since two mothers shall
Make that up to him.

[VII. 117,120-25]

Aurora also feels she is partially fulfilling the paternal role she mistakenly thinks Romney has abdicated: "Oh, Romney Leigh, I have your debts to pay,/And I'll be just and pay them"[143-44] (The child, however, is not Romney's).

It is also in Book VI that Aurora lays the groundwork for a new view of her life and for her resolution to change her attitudes and actions. Aurora ironically notes her dual citizenship, "a poet's heart/can swell to a pair of nationalities,/However, ill-lodged in a woman's"[VI.50-52], And she goes on to observe that France, "This Poet of the nations" [54], strives.

Human complexity is localized for Aurora in the fact that her mother was Italian and her father, English. While she was growing up, this duality was a source of conflict, for her English aunt continued the family's opposition to anything Italian (Aurora has been disinherited because
of her father's marriage). While in Paris, on her way to Italy, she thinks sadly of the oppositions people with ambition are subject to: "Philosopher against philanthropist,/ Academician against poet, man/A against woman, against the living the dead" [VI. 290-92]. Throughout the poem Aurora is conscious not only of the way other people divide the world into two parts-- male/female, man/woman, masculine/feminine-- but of the way she herself contains both parts.

Being androgynous, that is, feeling that one's personality includes attributes commonly called "Masculine" and "feminine" does not at this point in the poem mean she is undivided and does not prevent her from experiencing the conflicts of those traditional divisions. In her moments of despair, whether over her life, her career, or her love for Romney, she expresses her doubts and regrets being cursed with androgyne. Instead of broadening her life, she feels dualities have unduly complicated it. She is thinking of her feminine weakness in being so tormented by thoughts of Romney and says, "It seems as if I had a man in me,/Despising such a woman" [VII. 213-14]. But the "man" in her takes charge and allows her to act and not succumb to her grief: "I'm not too much/A woman, not to be a man for once/And bury all my Dead like Alaric"[VII.984-86]. And she goes on to talk of the Strengths and weaknesses of man in the generic sense, then stops and realizes that she is in fact talking about everyone, including herself:
...But a man--
Note men! -- they are but women after all,
As women are but Auroras! -- there are men
Born tender, apt to pale at a trodden worm,
Who paint for pastime, in their favourite dream,
Spruce auto-vestments flowered with crocus-flames.

[VII. 1016-21]

She has always seen that the traditional divisions of attributes are often proved inaccurate in reality, but being aware of the fallacy does not always lead one to avoid it. Aurora usually speaks ironically of gender division, but here the point is made dramatically.

Mrs. Browning's use of the words "man" and "woman" is ambiguous. She frequently speaks ironically of characteristics attributed to women, and, if the reader should miss her irony, he or she might think Barrett Browning's own attitudes were as sexist as those she criticizes in Romney. She does not make it clear when she is speaking of "woman" ironically, implicitly criticizing the feminine upbringing, and when she is speaking of inherent and biologically determined female characteristics. This confusion most often occurs in the scenes where Aurora expresses despair or regret about the price her career has demanded. Losing Romney makes her life seem empty and makes her conclude that she is not a "true woman" instead of concluding that she has resisted his sexist attitudes and allowed herself to develop as a "true person." For example,
a misinterpretation might arise from the following passage
if one assumes that Aurora does accept a division of attributes according to gender:

...Poor mixed rags
Forsooth we're made of, like those other dolls
That lean with pretty faces into fairs.
It seems as if I had a man in me,
Despising such a woman.
...Yet indeed,
To see a wrong or suffering moves us all
To undo it though we should undo ourselves,
That's womanly, past doubt, and not ill-moving.
***** 'tis our woman's trade
To suffer torment for another's ease.

[VII. 210-18, 222-23]

However, she then states that Don Quixote should have been "a Donna" [227] because of his self-sacrificing tenderness.
Barrett Browning's private opinions on masculinity are instructive: about Tennyson she wrote, "I do like men who are not ashamed to be happy beside a cradle." Also about Kingsley she wrote, "I hate and detest a masculine man. Humanly bold, brave, true, direct...." and it was about Robert Browning, she wrote that she admired his "womanly tenderness." Aurora remarking on Don Quixote's tenderness concludes this thought by making the statement conditional:

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25 Letters, II. 84.
26 Letters, II. 134
27 Letters, I. 298.
If, as I have just now said,
A man's within me-- let him act himself,
Ignoring the poor conscious trouble of blood
That's called the woman merely.

[VII. 229.32]

Note that the "trouble" is only "called" womanly.

As feminist critics like Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi
in her essay, "The Politics of Androgyny" [pp. 151-160];
Cynthia Sector in her essay, "Androgyny: An Early Reappraisal,"
[pp.161-69]; and Daniel Harri's in her essay,"Androgyny: The
Sexist Myth in Disguise" [pp. 171-84] have noted, one of
the dangers of a theory of androgyny is that the base the theory
works from is the traditional division of attributes into "manly"
and "womanly." Thus, in Aurora's first feelings of androgyny,
she seems to be accepting the divisions and acting "manly" by
regarding her "womanly" attributes with scorn. What needs
to be made clearer, then is Barrett Browning's opinion about
whether womanly and manly attributes are inherent in each sex
and exclusive to them, or if they are simply convenient
categories that are not necessarily rigid or even true of every
member of the sex. The distinction is important in a work
about a woman's position in an exclusively - male world and
about a man's and a woman's development into recognition of

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28 See Women's Studies, 2 (1974), 2, in which several papers in
androgyny are reprinted from the 1973 MLA Convention.
their full humanity. Barrett Browning does display a fine feminist touch regarding the use of generic "man" in a passage about the effectiveness of dramatists who:

From the imagination's crucial heat,
Catch up their men and women all a-flame
For action, all alive and forced to prove
Their life by living out heart, brain, and nerve,
Until mankind makes witness, "These be men,
As we are,"and Vouchsafes the greeting due
To Imogen and Juliet---sweetest kin
On art's side.

[V. 310-17]

By including two female characters among the life-like "men" Shakespeare created, Barrett Browning makes the point that women are people despite their sex.

In the third, and final phase of Aurora's development, she like Romney, recognizes and accepts androgynous harmony as the most satisfying way of living. When Aurora and Romney meet at last in Italy they are both changed in major ways, although they still love one another. Romney's blindness and his awakening to Aurora's spiritual message have coincided. Aurora's recognition and admission of love for Romney have been accomplished by her acknowledging that poetry, although sometimes useful, is merely words and not substitute for life. Both characters have modified their aspirations, which suffered from youthful overstatement; they have also grown in personal stature. Romney gains an appreciation of the human soul while Aurora releases herself
from her self-imposed emotional exile.

Romney's experiences have made him sensitive and even humble. After describing how his blindness came about, he says, "I am quiet now,/As tender surely for the suffering world,/But quiet,—sitting at the wall to learn" [IX. 594-96]. He recognizes that earlier he had been blinded in a different way—by his excess of conventional masculinity:

The world's Aurora who had conned her part
On the other side of the leaf! Ignore her so,
Because she was a woman and a queen,
And had no beard to bristle through her song***.

[VIII. 324-27]

Romney now empathizes with Aurora even to the point of repeating to her, her own words to him concerning the importance of "the poet's individualism/To work your universal" [429-30].

One aspect of Romney's awakening and humbling is his discovery of what some real marriages are like. He has found that the people whose lives he tried to reform object to him as one:

Who would not let men call their wives their own
To kick like Britons, and made obstacles
When things went smoothly as a baby drugged,
Toward freedom and Starvation***.

[VIII. 920-23]

Romney's education has humanized him. Marian says to him, "I know you'll not be angry like a man/(For you are none)" [IX. 353-54]. The price Romney pays for his growth, however, is
that he now feels "powerless" [598] where once his schemes and statistics made him feel powerful-- he did in fact have a great deal of power through his money. But his becoming "man-womanly"-- a Virginia Woolf's term for the man with an androgynous mind,\(^{29}\) has also brought with it one of the major disadvantages of being a woman in a sexist society. Since Aurora has attained little enough power for herself in the world, things seem to be made worse for the two of them by Barrett Browning's matching Romney's gain in sensitivity with a loss of power. Romney's condition is a liability: he is blind and presumably has lost part of his fortune along with his ancestral Hall. He is as passive and dependent as any overly feminized woman.

If Romney's feminization is what Elizabeth Barrett Browning meant by "the double action of the metaphysical intention"\(^{30}\) of the story, then the underplot of Romney's education serves only to counterbalance, Aurora's gains. He is diminished in proportion to her growth, and, although the process might appear to be an equalizing one, Aurora and Romney are not equals at the end. The change in Romney's fortunes and personality, although necessitated by the structure of the plot, is so drastic that it taxes the reader's credulity.


\(^{30}\)Letters, II. 243. Barrett Browning wrote to Isa Blagden in 1856.
He does embody many recognizable traits -- he is most vivid as a self-satisfied figure of masculine power— but the traits never cohere into a person who changes and is believable, though that is what we must think at the conclusion if we are to accept Elizabeth Browning's vision of Aurora's future as satisfying. The reason for his debilitation, however, must be questioned: does Barrett Browning intend to undercut her unifying vision, her application of the ideals of androgyny; does she feel that for a man to partake of the womanly aspects of androgyny he must necessarily be reduced; or worse, does Romney's symbolic castration indicate an underlying misanthropy. Present day feminist critics disagree with regard to interpreting what Eliot called the "lavish multilation of heroes' bodies." In "The Printing Woman who Lost Her Place," Mary Jane Lupton offers this reading of the blindings of Rochester and Romney: "The Suppression of woman in the age of Victoria was so great that the destruction or symbolic castration of the male was often the only fantasied resolution..." About Aurora Leigh specifically, she says, "the depth of Aurora's musings convinces me that the question was a persistent one in Mrs. Browning's consciousness and that Elizabeth had some strongly ambivalent feelings about her own marriage which are reflected in her character, Aurora." Moers, on the other

hand, offers a more ingenious interpretation, seeing the man's wounding as necessary for "the scene of choice" for a "feminist in love," in which she can "improve herself spiritually but not socially and that is important." Thus, Moers objects to regarding Charlotte Bronte as castrating because Rochester is blinded in *Jane Eyre*. Instead, "It is only a Rochester reduced from glory-- improverished, crippled, and blinded-- that Jane can give herself to, in the pride of her soul..." because, although he has proven himself worthy of her love, he cannot appear to be a means for Jane's social advancement -- she must choose him alone and not his manor, his status, or his money." With regard to *Aurora Leigh*, Moers says, "The marriage proposal and the blinding of Romney Leigh in the poems are returns to *Jane Eyre*, though St. John Rivers, Charlotte Bronte's icy missionary, is more important than her Rochester in providing Mrs. Browning with ideas for the man a literary woman must not marry when he is in his arrogant prime, but may marry when he is suitably prepared to accept her guidance in the reformation of the world." St. John Rivers as a model for Romney Leigh is

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is also recommended by Hewlett\textsuperscript{35} and Taplin.\textsuperscript{36}

Thus, Romney does regain some self-respect and usefulness at the conclusion when he says that they "must comprehend/Humanity and so work humanly" [IX. 851-52]--the semantic change from "man" to "humanity," though not absolutely consistent at the end, is worthy of notice.

Aurora in turn recognizes that she has attempted to act according to her stereotyped impression of how a man would act in her place, an attempt that has brought her the disadvantages of being cold and efficient, she says.

\begin{quote}
I'm not a generous woman, never was,
Or else, of old, I had not looked so near
To weights and measures, grudging you the power
To give, as first I scorned your power to Judge
For me, Aurora.
\end{quote}

[IX. 627-31]

Her single-mindedness about her career has been at the expense of her development as a person and a woman. While separatism may have been necessary to give her room to grow in her chosen career, she recognizes that she can no longer deny her love for Romney. But perhaps she is going to another extreme in attempting to compensate for her


Exaggerating the importance of the artist's supposed unimpeachableness, she has denied herself the freedom to make mistakes, to suffer human weakness and passion -- and, particularly, she has sought to deny loving tenderness and generosity commonly associated with femininity. Her outrush of feeling at this point in the story, however, is merely the result of her having restrained her feeling for so long, not a negation of the importance of avoiding an oversentimentalization of traits called feminine. Aurora realizes that a perfect artist cannot immunize herself from emotions consequent upon involvement with other people-- as the Poet in "The Poet's Vow" learned, such isolation is death. Speaking self-critically about her past behaviour, she describes herself in this way:

I would not be a woman like the rest,
A simple woman who believes in love
And owns the right of Love because she loves,
And, hearing she's beloved, is satisfied
With what contents God: I must analyze,
Confront, and question***.

[IX. 660-65]
Aurora sees too that Romney's earlier haughtiness obscured for her an awareness of his love for her: "He had loved me, watched me, watched his soul in mine" [IX. 763]. Aurora's this feeling finds identification in Barrett Browning's as a beloved in a letter to Robert Browning, in 1846: "Always I know, my beloved, that I am unworthy of your love in a hundred ways-- yet I do hold fast my sense of advantage in one,-- that, as far as I can see, I see after you... understand you, divine you... call you by your right name. Then it is something to be able to look at life itself as you look at it -- (I quite sigh sometimes with satisfaction at that thought!)" 37.

In their discussion, Aurora and Romney see that they have both come to the same conclusions though by different routes. Aurora has learned that there is more to being an artist than just claiming that one is:

...I'm an artist, Sir,
And woman, if another sat in sight,
I'd whisper,--Soft, my sister! not a word!
By speaking we prove only we can speak,
Which he, the man here, never doubted. What He doubts is, whether we can do the thing
With decent grace we've not yet done at all.
Now, do it***.

[VIII.826-33]

37 Barrett-Browning, Letters. 2, 422, (1846).
She and Romney agree that people talk too much and do too little, a fault they each had when younger. Instead, one should work, and "The universe shall henceforth speak for you,/And witness, 'She who did this thing was born/ To do'" [339-41]. By expressing oneself through satisfying work, which includes writing poetry with a purpose, a person will recognize her or his bonds with humanity while serving the general good.

Finally, however, it is Marian who is the only self-reliant person in the last book. In her devotion to her child, she realizes that she does not own him when he grows up. She will:

...tend my boy until he cease to need
One steadying finger of it, and desert
(Not miss) his mother's lap, to sit with men.
And when I miss him (not he me ), I'll come
and say "Now give me some of Romney's work,
To help your outcast orphans of the world
And comfort grief with grief."

[IX. 433-39]

Despite Marian's calling herself "dead," she shows great dignity inspite of past degradations:

***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,
As is the pavement of the churches here,
Still good enough to pray in.

[IX. 326-33]
Although, it is a tenderer Romney who proposes marriage once again to Marian "The very Lamb left mangled by the wolves/ Through my own bad shepherding" [VIII. 1063-64], and who offers her "protection, tender liking, freedom, ease" [1071]. Hewlett sees Romney's proposal as exonerating him from his "bloodless idealism": "It is with marriage to Marian Erle that Romney proposes to atone, by a warm act of human compensation, for the failure of cold philanthropy.... [But Marian] shows more pride, more self-respect than to take the conventional course of being made an "honest woman." 38

Romney does not propose to Marian out of the kind of love he still has for Aurora. It is therefore, ironic that his promise to marry and care for Marian and her child echo the words of the marriage vow. Marian, "dilated, like a saint in ecstasy" [IX. 188], leads him through the litany:

..."Confirm me now.  
You take this Marian, such as wicked men  
Have made her, for your honourable wife?"

The thrilling, solemn, proud, pathetic voice.  
He stretched his arms out towards that thrilling voice, As if to draw it on to his embrace.  
--"I take her as God made her, and as men  
Must fail to unmake her, for my honored wife."

She never raised her eyes, nor took a step,  
But stood there in her place and spoke again.  
--"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?"

38 Dorothy, Hewlett. Elizabeth Barrett Browning: A Life  
The thrilling, tender, proud, pathetic voice.
He stepped on toward it, still with outstretched arms, 
As if to quench upon his breast that voice.
-- "May God so father me, as I do him,
And so forsake me, as I let him feel
He's orphaned haply."***

[IX. 193-211]

Love is not the basis for this proposal. It is Romney's sense 
of fairness and generosity. Marian turns to Aurora for her 
response, and Aurora says, "Accept the gift, I say,/My sister 
Marian, and be satisfied" [255-56]. Marian is satisfied, 
knowing the generosity of her two would-be benefactors; but, 
like Aurora at the beginning of the poem, she can accept 
neither a loveless marriage nor one that would obstruct a 
union of the two lovers, Aurora and Romney. She wants to 
hear that Romney would marry her even after he knows how she 
had been abused; but once his acceptance of her is confirmed, 
she admits she does not love him. Because in the poem Romney's 
and Aurora's love for each other finally takes precedence 
over all other considerations, Marian, too, must relinquish her 
place to them; but she does so with self-awareness:

...Did I indeed
Love once; or did I only worship? Yes,
Perhaps, O friend, I set you up so high
Above all actual good or hope of good
Or fear of evil, all that could be mine,
I haply set you above love itself,
And out of reach of these poor woman's arms
Angelic Romney. What was in my thought?
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.

[IX. 362-72]
Thus, Marian has achieved what Aurora fails to achieve — she is emotionally self-sufficient. Economically she must depend on the bounty of others, but she does retain her integrity by refusing a loveless marriage that would make financially comfortable. Marian is concerned lest there be rival siblings for her first child, and she swears that love for the child is the only feeling she has or could have. For anyone else, she says, "I am colder than the dead" [387], and she releases Romney from his bond to her. Marian is as just and generous to Aurora and Romney as they are to her, but her emotional self-sufficiency seems suspect because its premise is a moribund, or at least limited, life. Although self-sufficient, she is finally, neither androgynous nor whole.

Absolved from all inhibitions owing to social and moral obligations, Aurora and Romney are free to look back at their mistakes and look forward with hope. Aurora recalls, of Romney:

That, just because he loved me over all,  
All wealth, all lands, all social privilege,  
To which chance made him unexpected heir,  
And, just because in all these lesser gifts,  
Constrained by conscience and the sense of wrong,  
He had stamped with steady hand God's arrow-mark  
Of dedication to the human need,  
He thought it should be so too, with his love.  
He, passionately loving, would bring down  
His love, his life, his best (because the best),  
His bride of dreams, who walked so still and high  
Through flowery poems as through meadow-grass,  
The dust of golden lilies on her feet,  
That she should walk beside him on the rocks  
In all that clang and hewing out of men,  
And help the work of help which was his life**.

[IX.787-802]
The chastened lovers survey the wreckage of their plans and muster their resources. They sing an antiphony, planning their life together in service and love:

"Beloved" it [Romney's voice] sang, "We must be here to work; And men who work can only work for men, And, not to work in vain, must comprehend Humanity and so work humanly, And raise men's bodies still by raising souls, As God did first".

"...But stand upon the earth," I said, "to raise them (this is human too, There's nothing high which has not first been low; My humbleness, said One, has made me great!) As God did last."

"...And work all silently And simply," he returned, "as God does all; Distort our nature never for our work***." [IX. 849-60]

What such work may be is not defined, except by negatives:

"Less mapping out of masses to be saved, / By nations or by sexes," says Romney as he renounces all socialist action and submits himself to God's will [867-68]. They agree that God's love and "the love of wedded souls" [882] are mysterious, and they choose not to try to understand. Romney passes to Aurora the charge that he once felt, and he takes on the role of verbalizer:

Shine out for two, Aurora, and fulfil
My falling-short that must be! work for two,
As I, though thus restrained, for two, shall love!

[IX. 910-12]
"Art's a service" [915], and it is Romney who articulates the ideals they must jointly strive for. Then he describes their future life:

...The world waits
For help Beloved, let us love so well,
Our work shall still be better for our love,
And still our love be sweeter for our work,
And both commended, for the sake of each,
By all true workers and true lovers born.

[IX. 923-28]

Barrett Browning's politics and her theory of love are joined at the conclusion of the poem, expanding the concept of love between two individuals to include the influence of that love on the rest of the world with which they come into contact. Their vision projects a unity of love and work in both the personal and public realms.

The autobiographical form of the poem limits the reader's knowledge of Aurora's and Romney's growth to what Aurora experiences and reports. Virginia Woolf calls the poem "one long soliloquy" ["Aurora Leigh," p.229]. Until the very end, Aurora has been the verbalizer while Romney has been the actor. Both fail to attain their highest hopes but both learn for themselves, and only indirectly through the other, the strengths of the other: they complete themselves, not each other. Aurora has learned and developed something about herself that is traditionally termed "masculine" (she has become a successful writer) and Romney
has learned something "feminine" about himself (he has abandoned his grandiose schemes for social reform as arrogant and prideful and has become more tolerant and accepting). The humanist harmony of the last scene recalls the conclusion of *The Merchant of Venice*, where the lovers sit together contemplating the new dawn after a long night of revelation, both metaphoric and actual. Aurora's and Romney's new dawn may be personally satisfying, but the plans they propose do not seem any less vague or more practicable than those proposed at the outset. Also, the changes each has undergone are significant: Romney is now powerless, and Aurora, in an excess of humility, concedes that she was "so wrong, so proud, so weak, so unconsoléd, so mere a woman!" [712-13]. -- they must "give up much on each side, then take all" [848]. Both share equally in the self-abasement that almost overwhelms the narrator of the *Sonnets from the Portuguese*. Like the *Sonnets*, *Aurora Leigh* depends on this dramatic humbling, Barrett Browning's Romantic inheritance.

At the conclusion of the poem, the reader is meant to feel that the balance Romney and Aurora achieve between their human attributes and the characteristics traditionally associated with their respective sexes enables them to think and feel harmoniously. The ability of two people to act both tolerantly and cooperatively is the hope
that Barrett Browning holds out, because a satisfactory resolution of the conflicts within this smallest possible group, of two, as well as within the individuals themselves, is an important accomplishment. Although, their plans for the future are vague, they have settled the major differences between themselves and have vowed to work together.

Although Elizabeth Barrett Browning is not unwilling to exploit stereotypes of women if an issue more pressing so demands, she does retain a vision of the unity of human kind which includes the androgynous ideal which, in turn, necessitates making every effort to explain and value issues and ideas which are commonly regarded as a woman's sphere. Thus, she is willing to resort to stereotyped attitudes of masculine and feminine to make an emotional political appeal if she regards it to be for the greater good of all the people involved. For example, Casa Guidi Windows, Part One, is filled with calls on manhood, urging the people to be strong and wrest power from the few corrupt rulers and Austrian interlopers. When this effort fails, she feels betrayed and, three years later, attempts to explain her apparently naive optimism in terms of her individual womanly weakness and willingness to be trusting. Once she hoped that Italy could "sustain/The faint pale spirit with some muscular stuff" [II. 14-15]; but when Duke Leopold fails the Italians, she asks, "Absolve me, patriots, of my woman's failure/that ever I believed the man was true!" [II.64-65].
Elizabeth is primarily a Poet, using all the emotional resources available to her, particularly -- in this appeal to specific males -- those available to her as a woman. Nevertheless, the political nature of feminism must be recognized in that it addresses itself to a relationship between groups of people and Barrett Browning is concerned throughout her life with defending women's essential similarity to men in addition to regarding the status of human kind as a whole.