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## “NOR IN FADING SILKS COMPOSE”: SEWING, WALKING, AND POETIC LABOR IN *AURORA LEIGH*

BY ANNE D. WALLACE

The November 1993 conference, “Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Victorian Culture,” opened with readings from a drama based on *Aurora Leigh* and continued with eleven presentations, in a total of forty-two, on Barrett Browning’s novel-poem.<sup>1</sup> The MLA Bibliography tells a similar story. Of 142 Barrett Browning entries from 1981 through early 1995, thirty-one name *Aurora Leigh* as a specific object of study, more than any other single Barrett Browning title.<sup>2</sup> Such a concentration of effort may be problematic, but there it is: *Aurora Leigh* is the text of the moment in Barrett Browning studies. Our primary concern, as revealed by both these conference presentations and other recent scholarship, is to describe *Aurora Leigh*’s position in the contemporary discussion of women and in our current discussion of gender.

Like Susan Brown and Laura C. Berry at the 1993 conference, readers often approach such a description through genre study, regarding Barrett Browning’s poem as a simultaneous reiteration and explosion of established genres.<sup>3</sup> Marjorie Stone, in her comparative study of *Aurora Leigh* and Tennyson’s *The Princess*, articulates the critical rationale for this approach:

assumptions about gender interact in complex ways with the assumptions about genre that structure the creation and reception of literary texts. Analyzing the writing of texts, feminist critics have explored the ways in which women write between existing genres or adapt male-defined genres such as the bildungsroman to their own needs and rhetorical purposes, often creating new hybrid genres. Analyzing the reception of literary works, they have shown how the privileging of certain genres, the use of misleading categorization by genre, and the formulation of generic features in female or male terms have functioned to perpetuate the marginalization of women’s writing.<sup>4</sup>

In adopting such methods, we may pursue the questionable course of reading a text in the ways it says it wishes to be read. Certainly *Aurora Leigh* explicitly sets out a necessary connection between genre revi-

sion and gender revision, so that our work along this line functions conservatively (at least with respect to *Aurora Leigh's* aesthetic proposals) rather than otherwise. Nonetheless, in this essay I too follow *Aurora Leigh's* suggested methodology, and our current critical bent, to the end of addressing what seems a more immediate problem.

Given Stone's expression of our general perception that gender and genre "interact in complex ways," our conclusions about these interactions in Barrett Browning's poem reduce to the curiously simple dichotomy Stone then implies: subversive hybridization or continuing marginalization. Stone's own work exemplifies the celebratory argument that Barrett Browning's hybridization of epic, romance and novel successfully subverts dominant categories: "Setting up a dialogue of genres to reinforce her dialogue of genders, she challenges the 'violent order' of gender and genre hierarchies: turning men into compulsive nurturers and women into knights-errant, substituting Aurora for Achilles, bringing plain Miss Smith face to face with Homer's Helen and Homer's heroes."<sup>5</sup> Dierdre David represents what currently seems the only alternative. Pointing to the often-questioned end of the poem, she concludes that "the novel-poem *Aurora Leigh* becomes a form-giving epithalamium for the essentialist sexual politics formed primarily through Barrett Browning's very early apprenticeship to male modes of intellectual training and aesthetic practice. In this poem we hear a woman's voice speaking patriarchal discourse—boldly, passionately, and without rancour."<sup>6</sup>

Nowhere in Barrett Browning studies, whether genre focuses the discussion or not, does there seem to be any way around one of these two resolutions of *Aurora Leigh's* conflicted representations of gender. That *Aurora Leigh's* constructions of gender *are* conflicted is well-accepted, and, like most other critics, neither Stone nor David suppresses the poem's difficulties in the progress of her interpretation. But all finally press for what I regard as unfruitfully restrictive "solutions" to these difficulties. I wish to argue that we cannot, after all, choose either the essentialist endgame, or the revisions of genre/gender most prominent in the early books, as the final disposition of the poem. In particular, *Aurora Leigh* resists a conclusive reading of its attitudes toward the crucial relations among women, work and writing.

I suspect that this resistance plays a large part in our repetitive interrogation of Barrett Browning's poem, for it refuses our own desires. It is surely obvious to anyone working in literary criticism that these relations among women, work and writing form an ideologi-

cal nexus at which we now, in late twentieth-century literary culture, most vigorously seek resolution. For many of us, this is no abstract or “purely literary” matter. Women writers paid (albeit indirectly) for what we write, we feel an immense, personal, at times desperate need to limn clearly and so shift the cultural constructions that inflect our own lives. Feminist readers of various persuasions, pressuring textual constructions of gender, seek some overriding principle by which the apparent paradoxes of Barrett Browning’s narrative might be settled. Traditionally, however, our discussions ignore the important connection between the issues of women and artistry, and of women and paid labor, confining “work” to professional writing itself and not relating (except by opposition) that work to other kinds of work, laborious or professional, paid or domestic. I want to return our attention to this connection by reading gender against the genres which metaphorize art as “labor.” Thus, rather than considering the genres most prominently “named” by the poem—poem, novel, epic, lyric, bildungsroman and kunstlerroman—I turn to the *sotto voce* genres of georgic and its early nineteenth-century extension, peripatetic.<sup>7</sup>

A reading of these genres, made available for us in *Aurora Leigh*’s linked representations of sewing and walking, foregrounds the relationship between the poem’s shifting valuations of “women’s work” and its accompanying efforts to regender poetic labor.<sup>8</sup> Georgic and peripatetic valorize common, materially productive labors, and metaphorically associate these labors with the work of the poet, firmly attaching the characteristics of “good labor” to poetic composition. Any poem that invokes these genres in representing a woman poet necessarily undertakes a larger task: since georgic and peripatetic have already gendered “labor” and “writing” as masculine, the poem must now re-define the relations among women, work and writing, selecting for its celebration a material labor commonly practiced by women.

In the case of *Aurora Leigh*, as we shall see, this labor is sewing, a kind of work done by almost all women, of all classes, both as unpaid domestic labor and as paid public employment. But here, as one might suspect, further complications arise from mid-nineteenth-century English ideologies of labor. In Nancy Armstrong’s influential commentary on eighteenth-century conduct books, she describes the codification of “an absolutely rigid distinction between domestic duty and labor that was performed for money,” a distinction still plainly governing representations of women’s work in Barrett Browning’s time.<sup>9</sup> Domestic duty, as Armstrong maps the category, is

private, unpaid, and offers the appearance of leisure, which is to say that women's good work is precisely *not* "labor." If, as Armstrong suggests, this boundary between domestic work and labor is "a distinction on which the very notion of gender appeared to depend," then revaluing women's work in order to regender poetic labor would dismantle not just an effect, but a foundation of constructed gender.<sup>10</sup>

It is in the negotiation of these difficulties, indicative of complex interactions indeed between gender and genre, that *Aurora Leigh's* irresolution on the crucial relations among women, work and writing becomes evident. In its first two books, Barrett Browning's poem sets up a deliberate opposition between the female/domestic labor of sewing and the masculine/artistic "labors" of walking and writing. This opposition, sensible enough given Victorian domestic ideologies, also follows a traditional definition of poetry by means of its difference from "lesser," specifically domestic, arts. Anne Finch's "The Spleen" (1701) perhaps most memorably sets out this poetics. "Whilst in the Muses' paths I stray," her frustrated poet tells us,

My hand delights to trace unusual things,  
And deviates from the known and common way;  
Nor will in fading silks compose  
Faintly th'inimitable rose,  
Fill up an ill-drawn bird, or paint on glass  
The Sovereign's blurred and undistinguished face,  
The threatening angel and the speaking ass.<sup>11</sup>

To a certain extent, Barrett Browning's poem follows this account, in which embroidery (and glass-painting, and all the leisurely domestic arts they stand for) not only mocks but displaces poetry's truth-telling mimesis, its practice preventing the practice of poetry. But in *Aurora Leigh*, sewing is not only a leisurely, decorative, domestic art, but a productive labor of women working for wages in public, rather than domestic, economies. Moreover, the poem's extended metaphorical representation of poetry as walking relies not on the tradition of contemplative poetry embodied in Finch's straying lady, but on Wordsworthian peripatetic, in which fatherly pedestrian-poets' laborious, materially productive walking performs intellectual and moral cultivation.<sup>12</sup>

Peripatetic inevitably implicates its source-genre, georgic, and here the reader may notice the possibility of a more positive reading of sewing.<sup>13</sup> Some eighteenth-century georgics include passages in which domestic sewing functions as a labor imitative of agricultural

cultivation and so *imitative*, in a positive sense, of poetry. But *Aurora Leigh*'s attention to sewing as public wage-labor, and its proposal of a woman poet who imagines herself as one of Wordsworth's pedestrian-poets, suggest further complicating connections between sewing and walking and poetry. Peripatetic, like georgic, figures a common material labor—walking in peripatetic, farming in georgic—as cognate with the “labor” of poetry-writing, and constructs these labors' mutual function as cultivating forces in the poet's/laborer's society.<sup>14</sup> If sewing appears as productive labor, and if women may be walking poets, then no simple opposition between women's domestic work and men's public, cultivating, poetic work may be drawn. Nor may women's sewing be seen as merely imitative of men's cultivating labors. Rather, it must be recognized as yet another possibly cognate labor, a potentially cultivating agency in itself.

The poem deliberately carries these complications forward. *Aurora Leigh* interleaves sewing imagery with the vegetative imagery central to peripatetic and georgic, producing images of poets' mantles, of pricking roses and ivy, of green-clothed rooms bridging domestic interiors and poetic paths. This kind of imagery pervades the early books of the poem, and while it never fully displaces negative interpretations of sewing, it leaves sewing, walking and poetry problematically entangled. Marian Erle's story sets out the full dimensions of this entanglement. For Marian, whose labor as a seamstress proves a stable economic support, sewing also resurrects the moral harvest she first gathers in walking and poetry, and functions as the saving cultivating labor that preserves her past into a potential future. In Marian's story, indeed, it seems as if Barrett Browning might be constructing sewing as georgic labor, using the same tactics of juxtaposition and replacement that Wordsworth used to construct peripatetic—“adapting a male-defined genre,” in Stone's terms.<sup>15</sup> But that adaptation, if underway, is broken off, the negative force of the first oppositions never fully denied. The last two books of *Aurora Leigh* rarely image either sewing or walking as the sister-labor of poetry; metaphors of material agency give way to those of transcendent love. The apparent impossibility of either exchanging or separating male and female labors suggests an ideological impasse, in which the poem's varying pressures on the categorical boundaries of art, labor and gender leave us with no clear solutions to the problems it describes. The reading that follows sets out the successive stages of the developing deadlock: a thorough devaluation of women's work, a

reconstruction of women's work as materially and artistically valuable, and a tacit refusal to use the rhetorical weapon so constructed.

Barrett Browning saturates *Aurora Leigh* with references to sewing, a term I will use broadly to indicate the multiple overlapping categories of processes, materials and products of sewing named by the poem.<sup>16</sup> Varieties of sewing mentioned in the poem include tying, stringing, darning, pricking, knitting, stitching, wrinkling, pressing, wreathing, twisting, spinning, embroidering, netting, braiding. As we would expect, these things are done to threads, yarns, silks, brocades; they produce or are wrought on veils, gowns, shrouds, skirts, mantles, fringes, baldaquins, stoles, shoes. But literal sewing expands quickly, and everywhere, into metaphor. Children hang on their mothers' skirts like living ornaments; hair is braided or "pricked with grey"; conscience becomes wrinkled, duties are smooth-pressed; a distant horizon becomes a "witch's scarlet thread"; talk is a different, masculine thread, while women may string pearls and rhymes and cowslips alike; nets of money catch the metaphorical lioness-poet; ivy is wreathed and twisted and worn as a pricking crown.<sup>17</sup> By my own rough count (of instances, not necessarily discrete images), there are more than fifty such references in the first two books alone.

Such an extensive and various system of imagery refuses any single reading, but its earliest consistent use is decidedly negative. In Aurora's account of her education, sewing provides the primary symbols of conventional limitations on women's lives. Aurora's first image of her aunt shows her aunt's "somewhat narrow forehead braided tight / As if for taming accidental thoughts / From possible pulses; brown hair pricked with grey / By frigid use of life" (1.273–77). The image's connection of braiding and pricking with intellectual and emotional confinement corresponds with the following account of the aunt's "cage-bird life," defined in part by her clearly insufficient expression of Christian charity in "knitting stockings, stitching petticoats / Because we are of one flesh after all / And need one flannel" (1.298–300). Submitting to her aunt, Aurora lets her "prick me to a pattern with her pin" (1.381): she braids her own curls and follows a course of education that keeps her learning metaphorically and literally in skirts. The sciences are "brushed with extreme flounce"; she copies costumes from engravings for her drawing lesson, learns to spin glass (a decorative art), and reads instruction manuals which show a proper woman's "angelic reach / Of virtue, chiefly used to sit and darn, / And fatten household sinners" (1.404,

438–40). Last of all she learns to cross-stitch, producing a miscolored shepherdess whose “round weight of hat” reminds her of the tortoise shell that crushes the “tragic poet,” Aeschylus (1.453, 455).<sup>18</sup>

Helena Mitchie, drawing out the psychosexual implications of such representations, connects sewing’s status as inferior artistry with Freudian repression, reading sewing as “a way of repressing and controlling the self,” particularly in “the sacrifice of physical self and the repression of bodily urges.”<sup>19</sup> Placing Aurora in the company of Maggie Tulliver and Caroline Helstone, Mitchie argues that “sewing is the tiny and fragile channel into which their creativity and their sexual energies must be poured to maintain feminine decorum.”<sup>20</sup> Even if one wishes to avoid the possible anachronisms of such a reading (a reading I feel is at least partially justified by the passage above), the traditional poetic devaluation of sewing is plainly in play here. The final image, particularly, recalls Finch’s rendering of embroidery as a false art that distorts its subjects while displacing (in this case “killing”) the true art of poetry.

At this point, however, Aurora breaks off her account of her education to add a general denunciation of women’s work. I want to attend to this “aside” in detail, unfolding the various ways in which it compounds the simpler opposition of sewing and poetry:

By the way,  
The works of women are symbolical.  
We sew, sew, prick our fingers, dull our sight,  
Producing what? A pair of slippers, sir,  
To put on when you’re weary—or a stool  
To tumble over and vex you . . . “curse that stool!”  
Or else at best, a cushion where you lean  
And sleep, and dream of something we are not,  
But would be for your sake. Alas, alas!  
This hurts most, this . . . that, after all, we are paid  
The worth of our work, perhaps. (1.455–65)

“Symbolical,” although ironic and, in this limited context, perhaps no more suggestive than Finch’s “composed,” gestures toward a possible conflation of sewing and poetry. Mitchie suggests that the sheer weight of the poem’s references to sewing implies such a conflation. Repressed though they are, “leisure-class sewers” like Aurora seam the texts, leaving “a trace of the heroine’s physical presence.”<sup>21</sup> Thus, despite Barrett Browning’s particularly “sinister” figuring of Aurora’s whole body into fabric to be marked and pricked, Mitchie postulates the simultaneous elevation of sewing as epic figure: “female occupa-



tions, however, [*sic*] trivialized by the culture are—to use Browning’s idiom—the fabric of the poem.”<sup>22</sup>

Perhaps because of her focus on the (Freudian) body, however, Mitchie does not notice the grounds on which these implicit connections eventually become explicit, grounds indicated by this passage’s shift away from “leisure-class sewers” toward paid needlewomen.<sup>23</sup> Here the products of sewing shift from purely decorative to more utilitarian items, domestic furniture unregarded by the men of the household but nonetheless designed for their use (specifically, their comfort). At the same time, explicitly economic language drives us toward a perception of sewing’s public potential as production and paid labor.

These rhetorical moves underscore other effects of Barrett Browning’s mass of specialized sewing terms: we are constantly being reminded that there are many different kinds of sewing, with different interpretative potential, and that the issues raised by variant terms include, rather prominently, issues of class. In the common shorthand of nineteenth-century British novels, for instance, the relatively simple distinction between “fancy” and “plain” work signals the difference between Maggie Tulliver, who has mastered only the plain hemming that earned some money during her family’s indebtedness, and Lucy Deane, who (like Aurora) has been trained for a respectable upper-middle-class “lady’s” station and plays at pretty embroidery.<sup>24</sup>

These class differentials are further complicated, as we might expect, because they are attached to issues of feminine virtue by the “separate spheres” clause of domestic ideologies. As Maggie’s case partially demonstrates, women who sew for money, whether doing plain or fancy work, may read as virtuous in their devotion to the family they help support, or in their desire to maintain themselves without resorting to various forms of prostitution (including loveless marriage). But these women also read as sexually vulnerable, apparently as a result of a combination of innocence, passion, beauty, poverty, and a lack of both male protection and female supervision. In this ideological double-bind, paid sewers’ sexual virtue seems threatened both by the inadequacy of their pay, which makes them vulnerable to various seductions, and by the fact that they are paid at all, the acceptance of money for a properly domestic task mimicking prostitution.<sup>25</sup> As Nancy Armstrong observes, even that most genteel of paid women, the governess, still violated that harsh line between “domestic duty” and paid labor, “a distinction so deeply engraved

upon the public mind that the figure of the prostitute could be freely invoked to describe any woman who dared to labor for money."<sup>26</sup> That women's domestic sewing is not paid for at all, on the other hand, is precisely the sign of domestic sewers' "worth," both in the sense of economic well-being and in that of sexual / social respectability.

So one meaning of Barrett Browning's economic language in this passage, not a surprising one given the indictment of middle-class women's education that precedes it, is its literal claim that domestic sewing is "worthless" in domestic terms as well as in the market terms in which it is figured. Providing neither pleasant decoration, useful furniture, nor emotional connection, women's domestic sewing serves only to support men's sleepy fantasies "of something [women] are not, / But would be for your sake." But the figuring of domestic worth in the language of production and pay also identifies domestic sewers with those who are paid for their labor. Our attention is drawn, briefly but uncomfortably, to the sexual economies of domesticity: a respectable married woman's unpaid work is always, silently, sexual as well as domestic. The distanced but suggestive signs of the pillow, sleep, and dreams of women may help extend our covert recognition of this possibility. Thus the domestic and paid varieties of sewing implicate each other in an involuted field of negative values ranging from low pay to sexual failure or promiscuity.

The apparently simple terms "works" and "work" which frame Aurora's aside amplify its reciprocal devaluations of domestic and paid sewing. Raymond Williams notes the stable, extremely broad function of the word "work" from its Old English origins to the present day as "our most general word for doing something, and for something done."<sup>27</sup> The "predominant specialization to paid employment" as a dominant meaning of "work" occurred gradually, Williams says, as "the result of the development of capitalist productive relations," presumably from the late eighteenth century forward (he implies rather than names the period).<sup>28</sup> Williams offers "one significant example" of this usage: "an active woman, running a house and bringing up children, is distinguished from a woman who *works*: that is to say, takes paid employment." A paragraph or so later, he recurs to this example as he more fully describes the specialization of the term: "*Work* then partly shifted from the productive effort itself to the predominant social relationship. It is only in this sense that a woman running a house and bringing up children can be said to be *not working*."<sup>29</sup> As Williams's repetition suggests, the exclusion of domestic labor from the status of "work" is not just "one significant

example,” but *the primary* rhetorical distinction effected by the simultaneous processes of industrialization and the increased ideological separation of private and public spheres.<sup>30</sup> The possible movement between a general sense of “work” as a productive effort, a sense essentially cognate with older meanings of “labor” and “toil,” and a specialized sense of “work” as paid labor (allied to the more specialized “labor” as productive of *value*) provides the ironic force of Barrett Browning’s usage: women’s work is not, in one sense, work at all.

There is, however, a further detail of the usage of “work” which Williams does not explore. From the fourteenth through at least the late nineteenth centuries, “work” also meant sewing, in the expanded sense I have employed throughout this essay. The *OED* places this definition of “work” (substantive) sixteenth in its extensive list of possibilities: “The operation of making a textile fabric or (more often) something consisting of such fabric, as weaving or (usually) sewing, knitting, or the like; *esp.* any of the lighter operations of this kind, as distinctively feminine occupation; also *concr.* the fabric or the thing made of it, *esp.* while being made or operated upon; needlework, embroidery, or the like.” The tone of this entry, with its implicit equation between “lighter” and “feminine,” speaks to the traditional distinctions made above. But it also tells us that even while “work” changed to exclude women’s domestic labor, it retained another specialized sense, one defined as feminine and, despite the depreciating tone, vital to certain public as well as domestic economies.

It is in this sense that nineteenth-century novels so often use the word “work,” unqualified by any explanation as to the *kind* of work at hand. Adjectives modifying the kind of sewing—plain, fancy, or even “company,” as in Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Wives and Daughters*, are common, and context generally adds a gloss.<sup>31</sup> We know, for instance, that Dinah Morris has been hemming a sheet when she “let[s] her work fall” to speak of her call to preaching, and that Hetty Sorrel’s basket of “little workwoman’s matters,” which Arthur Donnithorne’s advances make her drop, holds sewing implements because she is returning from her lessons with the lady’s maid.<sup>32</sup> But the unadorned word “work” nonetheless plainly carries an understood meaning, “sewing,” which would be unavailable in a twentieth-century text.

Moreover, in nineteenth-century fictional accounts of domesticity, sewing “stands in” for almost all domestic labor. As in the ideal middle-class practice of housekeeping, in which all signs of actual physical labor were to be kept from view, cooking, water-carrying, cleaning, washing, and so forth, are relentlessly elided.<sup>33</sup> *Adam Bede*

offers a few moderately extended discussions of a wider range of domestic work, but these are constrained by class boundaries. Mrs. Poyser, Dinah and Lisabeth, although fully respectable, fall just below the classes of women defined by their laborious maintenance of an *appearance* of leisure.<sup>34</sup> Occasionally, nursing appears, offering pathetic scenes of self-sacrifice, or child care provides charming views of maternal emotion. Both Gaskell's Ruth and Barrett Browning's Marian Erle engage in such domestic work—and, interestingly, in both cases the visible labor is done by a woman who earns money by sewing, a woman already in the “working” classes.<sup>35</sup> But I believe we may state more strongly Mitchie's observation that sewing is “perhaps the most common feminine occupation” of leisure-class heroines: the most common meaning of “work,” as read in the nineteenth-century and applied to a middle-class respectable woman, is “sewing.”<sup>36</sup>

I have played out Aurora's aside to such an extent in order to establish the comprehensiveness of the poem's early devaluation of “the works of women.” Aurora's indictment of sewing as constraining, superficial, trivial, spiritually retrograde, fatal to poetic arts, and economically worthless, constitutes an indictment of women's work in every sense. The needlewoman working for pay, the domestic sewer darning her family's clothing, the (apparently) leisured lady embroidering items both useful and decorative, all are discounted, the very variety of their cheapening enforcing the most negative views of women's work and women's worth. This indictment operates, moreover, at every rhetorical level, literal, figurative, and linguistic. Paradoxically, this same conflation of domestic and paid sewing opens the door to new interpretations of the most positive sort, as peripatetic intervenes in the generic structure of the poem. As Book I closes, however, what we *feel* is the sharp contrast between the enforced worthlessness of sewing and the deliberately chosen, excursive possibilities of walking.

Barrett Browning narrativizes Aurora's growing self-consciousness, and particularly her identity as a poet, as an increasing ability to walk alone outdoors, literally outside the domestic realm defined by sewing.<sup>37</sup> Her poetic walks begin, Bunyan-like, with dreams of walking. In the early morning or before she goes to sleep, Aurora looks out of her window, seeing beautiful grounds which nonetheless limit her vision. She can only imagine the lane, “sunk so deep” beyond the bounding trees that “no foreign tramp / Nor drover of wild ponies out of Wales / Could guess if lady's hall or tenant's lodge”

lies inside the line of woods (1.589–91). Although the negative syntax reinforces their purely speculative existence, these poor or working walkers from outside England proper suggest the possibility the poem will open: that Aurora will walk and work in foreign lands, becoming a tenant instead of a lady. But at the moment, we remain focused on the smaller possibility that she will walk out of her house. “Then, I wakened up,” Aurora writes, “More slowly than I verily write now, / But wholly, at last,” taking actual walks in a lane she no longer has to imagine:

It seemed, next, worth while  
To dodge the sharp sword set against my life;  
To slip down stairs through all the sleepy house,  
    . . . and escape  
As a soul from the body, out of doors,—  
Glide through the shrubberies, drop into the lane,  
And wander on the hills an hour or two,  
Then back again before the house should stir. (1.661–63, 690–97)<sup>38</sup>

In the following lines, we learn that the only activity that gives Aurora comparable relief from the constraints of domesticity is reading. The juxtaposition alone suggests some equivalence between walking and reading, but Aurora makes it explicit by metaphorizing her reading as walking. She describes her reading as following

The path my father’s foot  
Had trod me out, which suddenly broke off,  
    . . . alone I carried on, and set  
My child-heart ‘gainst the thorny underwood (1.730–31, 733–34)

On her path of reading Aurora finds the classics, a hodgepodge of “books bad and good,” and finally poetry, in which she recognizes her own potential identity as a poet. Walking then becomes a sign, in both her practice and her metaphors, of writing as well as reading, and so of her vocation, her livelihood, and her art.<sup>39</sup>

But Aurora does not always walk alone. Besides her “unlicensed” morning walks, Aurora also walks, by her aunt’s permission, with her cousin Romney, sometimes with his painter friend Vincent Carrington as well (1.1093). When she is in this company, another potential interpretation of her walking threatens Aurora’s construction of herself as pedestrian-poet. Aurora claims that she and Romney walk not as “lovers, nor even friends well-matched; / Say rather, scholars upon different tracks, / And thinkers disagreed” (1.1107–8). But she cannot completely evade the meaning implied by her disclaimer, the

traditional meaning of a woman's rural walks with a man as "courtship," "engagement," even "sexual intercourse."<sup>40</sup> Aurora holds this old country meaning at bay by shaping the natural images gathered on their walks into argument against Romney's social philosophy—a Wordsworthian tactic in full accord with her vision of herself as pedestrian-poet. But the possibility of reading their walking as a courtship which might lead to Aurora's complete domestication challenges Aurora's interpretation of her deliberate, solitary walking as poetic labor.

The poem makes this challenge explicit in Book II. Aurora, taking one of her solitary walks on the morning of her twentieth birthday, crowns herself with ivy "to learn the feel" of the laurel wreath to which she aspires (2.34). What this walk means to her, plainly enough, is agency and aspiration, specifically the power to work and succeed at poetry. Unexpectedly, however, Romney joins her, engaging her in a long conversation on art and women's proper roles which rather rapidly resolves into a proposal of marriage—the natural result, to his mind, of walking with Aurora all this time. When Aurora rejects his proposal, her aunt appears to continue the confrontation, demanding that Aurora consider before she gives a final answer. The impasse between them ends with the aunt's death and Aurora's decisive rejection of Romney's financial support (which, to do his character full justice, he offers without expectation of their marriage).

The plot of Book II opposes Aurora's poetic walks, open-ended walks intended to continue into the future, to the courtship walk favored by Romney and her aunt, which would end with marriage, "stopping" Aurora's youthful walking. The supporting imagery sets up this opposition a bit differently, rendering domesticity as clothing, especially long dresses, that hinders walking. Both the narrative description of Aurora's walk and the three-way debate that follows rely on images of women's work (here, quite appropriately, the results of women's work, the sewn "works" themselves) and of walking to realize the difference between protected domesticity and the physical, moral, and economic effort of an independent, potentially artistic life. As Aurora leaves the house, she does not stop "even to snatch my bonnet by the strings, / But, brushing a green trail across the lawn / With my gown in the dew," hurries to her self-coronation as poet (2.20–22). The images convey both the potential for constraint by a tied bonnet and a gown that must be dragged through the wet grass, and Aurora's refusal of that constraint, even a partial reversal as the gown becomes an instrument of path-making.

Romney's language, on the other hand, emphasizes the propriety of domesticating clothing. He advises her to keep her aspirations in bounds since "even dreaming" of great or lasting fame "[b]rings headaches, pretty cousin, and defiles / The clean white morning dresses" (2.94–96). Rather paradoxically, he identifies poetry as a kind of decorative sewing (different somehow from those white dresses) that accomplishes no

work for ends, I mean for uses, not  
For such sleek fringes . . .  
as we sew ourselves  
Upon the velvet of those baldaquins  
Held 'twixt us and the sun. (2.137–41)

But the point of both figures is the same: women's work gains its only worth through the very thing that renders it useless, its restriction to the cleanly private sphere.<sup>41</sup> Even when Romney presses her to accept the fortune he meant to give her through her aunt, he seems concerned not so much to give her personal autonomy as to remove any taint of labor or earned money from her work at poetry:

Dear cousin, give me faith,  
And you shall walk this road with silken shoes,  
As clean as any lady of our house  
Supposed the proudest. (2.1022–25)

If Aurora must walk and write, then Romney wants to be sure that she remains a lady, kept stainless by the silks of domesticity.

Aurora, of course, rejects Romney's consignment of her life to "ease and whiteness," using the figure of walking as poetry to assert her art as both moral and laborious:

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. (2.99, 101–6)

As the language of this passage suggests, Aurora's formulations most often connect walking with the transcendent spiritual mission of poetry. Romney's best social reforms mean nothing, she asserts, "Unless the artist keep up open roads / Betwixt the seen and the unseen" (2.468–69). Nonetheless, Aurora's exchanges with Romney also make it plain that her work must be public, worldly, and paid

work. Her figure of the road-opening artist comes just after Aurora argues that her poetic vocation constitutes “Most serious work, most necessary work / As any of the economists’;” a little later, she comments pointedly on Romney’s implied offer to “pay [her] with a current coin / Which men give women,” the domestic coin which precisely is *not* coin and, to Aurora, has no value (2.459–60, 540–41).

Interestingly, it is Aurora’s aunt who engages in direct discussion of the relations among money, marriage, and poetry. Interestingly, too, when she hears that Aurora has turned Romney down, the aunt first accuses her niece of too great a reliance on her status as a leisured lady, and figures that reliance as greed for fancy work. “Are they queens, these girls?” she asks, complaining that “They must have mantles, stitched with twenty silks” laid before them by their suitors “before they’ll step / One footstep for the noblest lover born” (2.576–79). Aurora, asserting her own interpretation of walking against this image of walking as an approach to domesticity, responds, “But I am born . . . / To walk another way than his” (2.580–81). Her aunt turns the metaphor again, telling Aurora that “A babe at thirteen months / Will walk as well as you,” and then asking if Aurora thinks herself “rich and free to choose a way to walk” (2.582–83, 588). Despite her own desire to read Aurora’s walking as courtship, as an avenue to respectably unpaid domesticity, the aunt here explicitly sets out the economic dimension of the figure, raising the specter of public, paid work: Aurora’s walking potentially means an out-of-doors economic independence.

Ellen Moers and Helena Mitchie both have commented on the function of walking for women in nineteenth-century fiction, and specifically in *Aurora Leigh*, as an assertion of self, a physical effort that provides an outlet for otherwise repressed physicality and may signal the woman’s struggle for personal independence.<sup>42</sup> Mitchie classes walking as the most common “pastime” of leisure-class heroines, but also notices the possible interpretation of walking as domestic work, work leading toward the desirable domesticity of marriage: “Aimless as the heroine’s walking sometimes appears to be, it beats out a path toward marriage and physical fulfillment; it is an important effort on the part of the heroines to influence the direction of the novel and of their lives.”<sup>43</sup> Clearly, however, Book II of *Aurora Leigh* asserts an alternative reading of walking. Barrett Browning’s construction of Aurora’s walking follows the conventions of Wordsworthian peripatetic: walking coincides with the writing of poetry; both walking and writing are figured as labor, materially and



economically productive; and both traditionally are identified with the masculine.

William Wordsworth derives peripatetic from classical georgic, replacing Virgil's virtuous farmer with a moralizing pedestrian.<sup>44</sup> One may think here of the many Wordsworth poems in which pedestrian narrators and characters link poetry, material economies, and moral renovation. "The Old Cumberland Beggar," "Michael," "The Brothers," "When to the attractions of the busy world"—the list is quite long and includes both Wordsworth's earliest publications and his two book-length poems. While these poems vary in their emphasis on particular aspects of peripatetic's rhetorical equations, they participate in a common strategy. Juxtaposing agriculture with walking, and then representing walking's greater effectiveness as a cultivating agent, Wordsworth transfers the multiply-cultivating powers of Virgil's farmer to the Wordsworthian pedestrian-poet. Aurora's beliefs about poetry's power to effect reform correspond to peripatetic's expectation that the labors of the pedestrian-poet will mediate cultural conflicts, reconciling old and new, rural and urban, public and private, poor and rich. As the rhetoric of *The Excursion* claims far-reaching effects for the Wanderer's discourse, so *Aurora Leigh* asserts the potentially culture-wide effect of Aurora's poetry.

As one might suspect from this brief overview, Wordsworth's pedestrian-poet, like Virgil's farmer, is male. Certainly there are women walkers in Wordsworth's peripatetics. They often appear as members of the discursive community necessary to produce poetry, and are sometimes represented as uttering the raw materials of its composition. Joanna's laughter echoes among the mountains and, recalled by her companion, impels his inscription of the rock and his composition of "To Joanna"; "The Solitary Reaper," singing as she walks the field, becomes the subject of the passing poet. Significantly, however, these women walkers' utterances are usually wordless, and are always re-narrated to us by a male pedestrian-poet. Even when the woman of "There is an Eminence" names a mountain after her poet-companion, the reader reads it in the poet's first-person voice:

. . . She who dwells with me, whom I have loved  
With such communion, that no place on earth  
Can ever be a solitude to me,  
Hath to this lonely Summit given my Name. (14–17)<sup>45</sup>

Although the woman names, she does not narrate or make poetry. In

the rhetorical constructions of these closing lines, the impetus for her naming becomes the male poet's active love of her, which creates a permanent sense of community *for him*. He then narrates the act of naming into a first-person poetic event, the attachment of "my Name" to the Eminence (these disturbingly egoistic capitals are Wordsworth's). Interestingly, Wordsworth's revisions of the last line further submerge the woman's power of speech: in the earliest published version of this poem, the last line reads "Hath said, this lonesome Peak shall bear my Name."<sup>46</sup>

Significantly, too, Wordsworth's women walkers rarely participate in any public, materially productive activity. Most, like the "dearest Maiden" of "Nutting," or Emma of *Home at Grasmere*, remain inarticulate companions in the metaphorical cultivations of walking, never shown "laboring" at anything but walking, their economic condition simply not an issue. One of the few exceptions is "The Solitary Reaper," whom we see "at her work, / And o'er the sickle bending," and whom we may infer earns a livelihood (27–28). But this inference is possible precisely because the poem is completely silent about the Reaper's material well-being. Instead, the male pedestrian-narrator draws our attention to her wordless, exoticized song, and to his own emotional use of the music. In Book I of the *Excursion*, Margaret works in her garden and spins flax, and the poem associates both productive labors with path-making (1.690–96, 882–87). But her cultivation fails, the garden falling into ruin, and her poverty steadily increases, her flax spinning insufficient to keep her from illness and death. In fact, the poem frames Margaret's most extensive walking, her accustomed wanderings in the fields near the cottage, as simultaneous sign and cause of her growing neglect of her garden (and her child, who is left to cry inside the cottage while she walks) (1.710–76). For Margaret, as for Wordsworth's various female vagrants, walking functions not as productive cultivating labor, but as a sign of economic and moral failure. With the possible exception of the Reaper, then, Wordsworth's women walkers may strive, but do not succeed, at material labor and economic self-sufficiency.

Since genre always carries all its interpretative baggage, there is a level at which Barrett Browning's use of peripatetic implicitly reinforces the differences between male and female work, hardening the distinction between walking and sewing, between public, paid work (or "works") and domestic labor. But *Aurora Leigh's* representation of a woman pedestrian-poet, its crucial placement of her as narrator, and its recurrence to the possibility of her walking being materially

and economically productive, necessarily shifts and opens peripatetic, using peripatetic conventions to unsettle the gender distinctions the mode implicitly supports.

Although the poem's use of peripatetic is concentrated in its first three books, the figure of Aurora as the Wanderer's successor persists in plot and imagery. Aurora first figures her travels in Europe as a walking tour, wondering whether selling her manuscript "Would fetch enough to buy me shoes, to go / A-foot" (5.1214–15). Both her search for Marian in London and her chance meetings with her in Paris are accomplished on foot (and have the character of arduous walking as well). And despite the disappearance of walking images from the poem's conclusion, a typically Wordsworthian scene of Aurora walking and "musing," "imagining / Such utterance" from the faces of poor Florentian women, occurs as late as the end of Book VII (7.1257–58).

More importantly, Aurora does not merely emulate Wordsworth's pedestrian-poets, but succeeds both at poetry and at economic self-sufficiency. From the beginning of Book III, with scarcely any lapse in reader's time between her peripatetic resolutions and the beginning of their fulfillment, we learn that Aurora's poetic achievements have gained admirers and critics. While she generally sets aside others' praise for the products of her writing, driving herself on toward her own standards, she nonetheless claims success through the process itself:

*I prosper, if I gain a step, although  
A nail then pierced my foot: although my brain  
Embracing any truth, froze paralysed,  
I prosper. I but change my instrument;  
I break the spade off, digging deep for gold,  
and catch the mattock up. (3.290–95)*

Typically, Aurora speaks of spiritual matters: she defines the "I" of this passage as "the conscious and eternal soul" rather than "the doublet of the flesh" (3.284, 286). But, also typically, she figures these spiritual gains in terms of labor and economic value—prospering, digging, gold. Indeed she does not cast off the doublet of flesh, the material metaphor, in her rhetoric of poetic gain. When we read the next words, "I worked on," we are well aware of their reference to the self-cultivation of poetic labor (3.295). But we are also well-prepared to follow their other implications into the succeeding passage, in which Aurora describes earning money by writing prose: "being but poor, I was constrained, for life, / To work with one hand

for the booksellers, / While working with the other for myself / And art" (3.302–5). Although inheritances from her aunt and her father (his books, which she sells to get to Europe) give Aurora some support, she works for pay in the public (literally published) world in order to survive. How well she does this may perhaps be measured by her ability to take Marian in when she finds her in Europe: although Italy may not have been as expensive as England, Aurora nonetheless becomes the sole support of a family of three.

By now it is no doubt obvious that the apparent opposition between walking and sewing in *Aurora Leigh* must be complicated by a field of more positive relations. Aurora's linked poetic and material achievements are, by definition, "women's work," and yet are public, cultivating, artistic, self-sustaining. If women's work makes poetry, then poetry may be sewn—or, to play the peripatetic rubric back into georgic, to sew is to sow. And if sewing itself reads as material and economic production, if even domestic sewing is figured as wage-labor, then sewing becomes "work" in every sense of the word, a construction fully capable of supporting these rhetorical links to walking and writing.

If, without recognizing peripatetic, one only reads classical georgic in *Aurora Leigh*, a part of this revaluation is still possible.<sup>47</sup> In English georgics of the late eighteenth century, sewing is one of the figures through which women may (briefly) enter the otherwise decidedly male preserve of cultivation. One important example is the passage in Book IV of William Cowper's *The Task*, which begins satirically but rapidly settles down to a serious celebration of laborious, secluded, middle-class rural life.<sup>48</sup> This book, "The Winter Evening," extols the virtues of a family gathered to "Fireside enjoyments, homeborn happiness, / And all the comforts that the lowly roof / Of undisturbed retirement, and the hours / Of long uninterrupted evening know."<sup>49</sup> First among these is the women's work at hand:

here the needle plies its busy task,  
The pattern grows, the well-depicted flower,  
Wrought patiently into the snowy lawn,  
Unfolds its bosom; buds, and leaves, and sprigs,  
And curling tendrils, gracefully disposed,  
Follow the nimble finger of the fair;  
A wreath that cannot fade, of flowers that blow  
With most success when all besides decay.<sup>50</sup>

Here is a woman's form of cultivation, embroidery yielding a kind of permanent decorative harvest, and rhetorically identified with "the

task," that is, both the general task of cultivation by the private rural farmer lauded by Cowper and Cowper's own poetry-writing, as signaled by the title of his poem. The difficulties of carrying this identification to the point that *Aurora Leigh* does, however, are manifest. Not only is the women's work merely imitative of actual cultivation (and then only of the growing of feminized flowers), but it is confined to the presumably leisurely evening hours of "enjoyments," "comforts," and "retirement."

Susanna Blamire makes similar identifications, and practices similar containments, in her "Stoklewath; or, The Cumbrian Village," which valorizes the life of rural villagers. It is only when "The morning toils are . . . completely o'er" that "The daughter at the needle plies the seam," while her mother goes to check the "long webs" of bleaching linen spread by the stream.<sup>51</sup> Blamire's brief portrait of two old women at their spinning wheels, mourning the loss of old values, figures revolutions industrial and political as the end of spinning, weaving, and home-sewing: "the world's turned upside down," Margaret says, "And every servant wears a cotton gown, / Bit flimsy things, that have no strength to wear."<sup>52</sup> Although the moment is humorous, it seriously identifies women's work with the conservation of culture, and sets out spinning as discursive. But once again, although these women are engaged in productive work, work actually associated with factory labor in their talk, Blamire prefaces the section in which their portrait appears with the comment that "From noon till morn rests female toil."<sup>53</sup> It seems astonishing that Blamire excludes sewing, spinning, and textile manufacture from the realm of "toil," but she clearly does, and that exclusion makes it impossible to make a full identification between women's work and men's cultivation.

In both georgics, typically, the ideological lines between women's work and men's, and between the domestic enclosure and the more public world of farming, hold firm. In *Aurora Leigh*, Aurora deliberately undertakes work that is traditionally male, and succeeds at it. More importantly, however, the early books of *Aurora Leigh* change not only the gender of the worker, but the gendering of the work. Barrett Browning's use of peripatetic alludes to the possibility of reconstructing "sewing," as Wordsworth does "walking" (a similarly improbable move, given earlier ideas about walking), as genuine georgic labor, redrawing women's work as true cultivation. In her crossing of the vegetative imagery common to georgic and peripa-

tetic with sewing imagery, and in Marian Erle's tale, Barrett Browning seems bent on just such a reconstruction.

In georgic and peripatetic, the details of vegetative images signify the nuances of cultivation's success. Lush vegetation, plants let go to seed, weeds overrunning gardens, orderly gardens—these kinds of images characterize the cultivator's work and so, in the extended meaning of cultivation, indicate the quality and success of poetic work.<sup>54</sup> Assisted by the sheer pressure of her constant references to sewing, Barrett Browning reconfigures this conventional signification to implicate sewing in a three-way conflation. The prime locus of vegetable images is Aurora herself, the poet constantly figured as plants ranging from seaweed to roses. In Book II, the ivy wreath she chooses to signify her dedication to poetry seems opposed to the rose, the emblem Romney uses to emphasize her sexual / generative blooming and potential for married love. Both images, however, carry traces of sewing with them. The ivy's "serrated" leaves and long vines suggest the scissors and needles and threads of sewing; Aurora wreaths and twists the vines around a comb to form a crown. Although the poem emphasizes the scarlet color and budding or mutlifoliate forms of the rose, the thorns are always there too, mimicking the pricking needles of the seamstress.<sup>55</sup> Similar vegetative images connect Aurora and Marian. Appearing as a rose, a nettle (again a pricking plant), a buttercup, an arranger of lilies, Marian the seamstress bears a figurative resemblance to Aurora the poet, providing another extended juxtaposition of walking and poetry with sewing (3.818, 853–57, 4.212–18, 7.669–71). Implications of women's work, together with Aurora's success as poet, not only shift our sense of these vegetative images in the early books, but potentially undermine Book IX's almost frantic recurrence to rose imagery in its claims for marital love.

Similarly, the occasional appearance of sewing or clothing as the agents or accoutrements of the poet makes it impossible to distinguish completely between the inadequate, restricted work of women and the desirable, cultivating, masculine labors to which Aurora aspires. Just before Aurora figures her reading as following her father's path, for instance, she speaks of the "large / Man's doublet" of his learning, in which he wraps his girl-child, "careless did it fit or no" (1.727–28). We twice hear that Kate Ward regards Aurora's cloak as the emblem of her poetic prowess. In Book III she asks Aurora for

the pattern of the cloak, and in Book VII Vincent Carrington reports that Kate insisted on wearing a cloak like Aurora's for her portrait, suggesting that Kate sews or has sewn the copy she wears for the sitting (3.53–54, 7.590–600). And the women around Leigh Hall give Romney a copy of Aurora's poems "bound in scarlet silk, / Tooled edges, blazoned with the arms of Leigh" (8.913–14). Certain figures of this sort imply the inferiority of sewn poetry. Dubious poets may string rhymes "As children, cowslips;" a "smell of thyme about my feet" means true admittance to the company of poets, while "the rustling of [their] vesture" happens in a dream of such community (1.947, 883, 886). To some extent, however, the presence of adjacent vegetative imagery reinfects the implication by alluding to georgic.

The "green room" passage of Book I demonstrates the importance of peripatetic and its walking images to *Aurora Leigh's* conflation of vegetation, with its implication of poetic harvests, and sewing. This passage is the second of two textual bridges between Aurora's description of her domestic education and her first dreams of walking out alone. The first is a description of Romney's early relations with her, including her aunt's encouragement: "At whiles she let him shut my music up / And push my needles down" to walk out with him (1.533–34). But this kind of walking leaves the gap between men's and women's worlds as broad as before: when Romney ventures to touch Aurora, "dropp[ing] a sudden hand upon my head / Bent down on woman's work," she shies away from his protective male affection (1.543–44). How she finds her way out is through a rhetorical transformation of woman's work into man's, sewing into sowing, and then into walking.

I had a little chamber in the house,  
As green as any privet-hedge . . .  
  the walls  
Were green, the carpet was pure green, the straight  
Small bed was curtained greenly, and the folds  
Hung green about the window which let in  
The out-door world with all its greenery.  
You could not push your head out and escape  
A dash of dawn dew from the honeysuckle  
But so you were baptized into the grace  
And privilege of seeing . . . (1.567–79)

The green fabrics of Aurora's domestic space, the carpet, bed-hangings, and curtains, become continuous with the green plants of the outdoor world, the province of the male pedestrian-poet. By

pushing through the green-hung window and on through the second green curtain, the honeysuckle, the inmate baptizes herself into poetic vision—and sees, just before the passages about the “deep lane” quoted earlier, a mass of vegetation, a lime, broad lawns, shrubs, acacias, elms, arbutus, laurel. This vegetable curtain keeps her from seeing the lane; she actually will see the path only by actually walking. But Aurora’s movement into poetry hinges on a conflation of sewn fabrics and cultivated vegetation that gives her access to walked paths.

This reconfiguration of imagery closely resembles Wordsworth’s rhetorical strategies: juxtapose and conflate the metaphorical terms, and then replace one with the other. The problem seems to be in the last move. That is, to reconstruct sewing as true georgic labor, sewing should replace cultivation, or walking, or both, and this does not happen in Aurora’s story. In Marian Erle’s story, however, sewing functions as a salvation from walking.

Aurora twice retells part of Marian’s life story. In both cases, the stories are framed like Wordsworthian peripatetic: the narrator seeks or encounters another person while walking, recalls or hears that person’s story, and then retells it to the reader. Wordsworth generally asserts a symbiotic relationship between narrator and character as necessary to the production of poetry. For instance, “while” the narrator of *The Excursion* walks to the ruined cottage to meet the Wanderer, he recalls how he reencountered his old friend on the road, recollects the time they spent walking together when the narrator was a child, tells the story of the Wanderer’s life; arriving at the cottage, he hears (and recounts to us) the story of the cottage, which the Wanderer learned in his repeated visits (on foot, of course) as a peddler. The narrator explains his desire to tell us these stories as a desire to “record in verse” the Wanderer’s “eloquent speech” and high moral views (1.103, 98). The Wanderer, he claims, is one of the “Poets sown / By Nature” who lacks only “the accomplishment of verse” to be recognized as a poet in the world’s eyes (1.77–78, 80). Poetry results, then, from the joint efforts of the two walkers, the natural philosopher and the versifier.

With respect to this collaboration, Marian more nearly resembles Wordsworth’s leech-gatherer or his old Cumberland beggar, walking characters who less consciously articulate moral lessons, than his magisterial Wanderer. But like the narrator of the *Excursion*, Aurora must perform laborious, searching walks through the poor quarters of London and the streets of Paris to find Marian before she can tell



her story. In the latter case, once Aurora finds Marian, first one and then the other must serve as guide to the place where the story will be told, leading and following as if they walked “by a narrow plank / Across devouring waters, step by step” (6.4882–83; 6.501–3). And like the narrators of Wordsworthian peripatetics in general, Aurora draws attention to the collaborative requirements of poetry and to her own “poeticizing” of Marian’s moral content:

She told me all her story out,  
Which I’ll retell with fuller utterance,  
As coloured and confirmed in after times  
By others and herself too . . .  
I tell her story and grow passionate.  
She, Marian, did not tell it so, but used  
Meek words that made no wonder of herself  
For being so sad a creature. (3.827–30, 847–50).

Equally striking, despite some obvious differences, are the similarities of Marian’s childhood to the Wanderer’s childhood. Like the Wanderer, Marian is born to parents who earn a marginal existence with agricultural labor, and whose livelihood requires walking—in Marian’s case, constant tramping in search of “random jobs / Despised by steadier workmen” (3.858–59). Like the Wanderer’s, too, Marian’s outdoor life, although materially impoverished, provides moral instruction reached by walking. Having learned very early to “walk alone,”

This babe would steal off from the mother’s chair,  
And, creeping through the golden walls of gorse,  
Would find some keyhole toward the secrecy  
Of Heaven’s high blue . . .  
This skyey father and mother both in one,  
Instructed her and civilised her more  
Than even Sunday-school did afterward (3.883–86, 898–901)

This is, of course, pure Wordsworth, as is the quick contrary validation of Marian’s book-learning. Significantly, her experience of books outside of the ineffectual Sunday-school comes to her through manifestly Wordsworthian peddlers whom she meets on the road:

Often too  
The pedlar stopped, and tapped her on the head  
. . .  
And asked if peradventure she could read:  
And when she answered “ay,” would toss her down  
Some stray odd volume from his heavy pack,

A Thomson's Seasons, mulcted of the Spring,  
Or half a play of Shakespeare's torn across

...

Or else a sheaf of leaves (for that small Ruth's  
Small gleanings) torn out from the heart of books,  
From Churchyard Elegies and Edens Lost,  
From Burns, and Bunyan, Selkirk, and Tom Jones  
(3.968–69, 971–75, 979–82)

The conflation of book-leaves with plant leaves, again straight out of the *Excursion*, turns tramping Marian into a harvester, a participant in cultivation and (note the particular texts named) in poetry.<sup>56</sup> Nor does she merely accept what she is given, but selects and recomposes it, becoming an active cultivator: “she weeded out / Her book-leaves, threw away the leaves that hurt . . . And made a nosegay of the sweet and good” (3.988–89, 990).<sup>57</sup>

At this point Marian's story functions like pure peripatetic. Even her despicable parents, so unlike the Wanderer's upright, settled family, feel the expected moral influence of walking in rural lands:

though perhaps these strollers still strolled back,  
As sheep do, simply that they knew the way,  
They certainly felt bettered unaware  
Emerging from the social smut of towns  
To wipe their feet clean on the mountain turf. (3.957–61)

But in the end Marian's walking leads not to greater moral wisdom, nor to the Wanderer's economic self-sufficiency, but to continued dependence and endangered virtue. Marian proves useless at most odd jobs, and walking cannot remedy that insufficiency. “In this tramping life,” Aurora tells us, “Was nothing to be done with such a child / But tramp and tramp” (2.1032–33). This materially unproductive circuit irks her abusive parents, and eventually Marian's mother tries to sell her to a man, driving Marian to flight and illness.

That Marian's walking should lead toward a possible loss of virtue matches the traditional association of women's walking and sexual straying, an association not significantly altered by the masculinist constructions of peripatetic.<sup>58</sup> What saves Marian, the figure that replaces walking as generator of moral and economic value, will not now surprise us: it is, of course, sewing. Though Aurora ironically revoices the parents' view that nothing can be done with Marian but to “tramp and tramp,” the next lines show Marian's way out:

And yet she knitted hose  
Not ill, and was not dull at needlework;

And all the country people gave her pence  
For darning stockings past their natural age,  
And patching petticoats from old to new,  
And other light work done for thrifty wives. (3.1033–39)

When Marian, after running away from her pandering mother, recovers from her illness in the London hospital, her new patron Romney places her in “a famous sempstress-house / Far off in London, there to work and hope” (3.1231–32). Again, in Book VII, we learn that after Marian’s rape, wandering, and brief unhappy work as servant to an adulteress, finds a place with “a mistress-sempstress who was kind / And let me sew in peace among her girls,” thus earning enough to support herself and her son (7.108–9).<sup>59</sup>

Sewing promises not just material but moral sustenance. When Romney provides for Marian to enter the seamstress’s house, he does so not only for her livelihood but “to snatch her soul from atheism, / And keep it stainless from her mother’s face” (3.1229–30). Similarly, Marian’s return to sewing after her rape saves her from the repugnant alternatives that always threaten penniless, ruined women in Victorian stories, prostitution and loveless marriage. Most significantly of all, it is while Marian sews, not while she walks, that she recollects the poetry passed on to her by Wordsworthian peddlers:

[Marian] told me she was fortunate and calm  
On such and such a season, sat and sewed,  
With no one to break up her crystal thoughts:  
While rhymes from lovely poems span around  
Their ringing circles of ecstatic tune (3.1015–19)

Although Aurora here emphasizes her difference from Marian, noting her shame at Marian’s superior cheerfulness, they share the experience of sewing as the labor enabling poetry. After she has realized her vocation, hiding the “quickenning inner life” fostered by walking and reading, Aurora bends to her sewing:

Then I sat and teased  
The patient needle till it split the thread,  
Which oozed off from it in meandering lace  
From hour to hour. I was not, therefore, sad;  
My soul was singing at a work apart (1.1049–53)

For Aurora, as for Marian, poetry sings in the silence of her sewing; the book-leaves gleaned from peripatetic wanderings are revoiced in her stitching.<sup>60</sup>

Barrett Browning's reconstruction of sewing as georgic labor, worked through peripatetic, seems complete. In Marian's story, sewing replaces walking as a superior agent of cultivation. But once this reconstruction is accomplished in the middle of Book IV, sewing gradually disappears from *Aurora Leigh*. Despite the reiteration in Marian's second narrative of the pattern of a wanderer redeemed by sewing, sewing never again appears as a present activity in the plot. Imagine, if you will, an *Excursion* in which the walking tour ends with Book I, or perhaps with the single reiteration of a journey to the Solitary's hut in Book III, and in which walking is rarely alluded to again. Imagine, more to the point, an *Excursion* which ends without the promise extracted from the Solitary "That he would share the pleasures and pursuits / Of yet another summer's day, not loth / To wander with us through the fertile vales, / And o'er the mountain-wastes" (9.776–79). Despite the endless discourse on other matters in Wordsworth's poem, walking remains the fount of the discourse, the structuring principle of the plot, the foundation of that last appeal to Wordsworthian community. Not so with sewing in *Aurora Leigh*. The possibility of reading sewing as true cultivation, of rewriting women's work as a possible source and vehicle of poetry, gradually fades from the poem.

One might feel, although I do not, that there are problems with a "sewing plot" not presented by a "walking plot." But even if Barrett Browning chose not to write the final books as, for instance, confabulations in a seamstress's shop, or conversations conducted as Aurora and Marian weave or hem, sewing imagery might carry the weight of reconstructed genre. Here again, however, the poem does not bear out its early suggestions. Of about 125 instances of sewing imagery in *Aurora Leigh* as a whole, roughly two-thirds—about 85—of those instances occur in the first four books; in the last two books, there are only twelve instances of sewing imagery, none of them illustrating the famous exchange of love and work Romney proposes in Book IX.

Certainly I am not suggesting that Barrett Browning "should" have written *Aurora Leigh* differently, in accordance with late twentieth-century notions of gender and gendered labor. But imagining the alternatives helps reveal the implications of her choices, as we strive to understand the poem's ideas about women, work and poetry. The elaborate set-up for the generic exchange effected by Marian's story, and the compelling construction of the story itself, suggest Barrett Browning's thorough comprehension of the possibilities opened by that exchange. Nearly everything that follows, on the

other hand, refuses those possibilities—almost immediately, in fact. The famous opening of Book V, the defense of domestic epic, has long been lauded as one of the finest parts of the poem, and so it is. But this same section also revises the wheel of Virgil, the progress of genres, in a telling way: Aurora moves from pastoral directly to epic, omitting the “middle way” of georgic.<sup>61</sup> Swept along by the fiery beauty of Aurora’s manifesto, we scarcely notice that this omission retroactively excludes the moral lesson of Marian’s story, in which sewing relies upon its relation to peripatetic and georgic for the valorization of labor and natural religion.

It is easier to find this dislocation at the end of the poem. In books 8 and 9, Barrett Browning almost completely drops her references to the laborious material agencies of walking and sewing in favor of an abstract discourse on love, which now is made to transcend labor. The final quotation of Revelation underscores the interpretative difficulty. The lines directly foreshadowing that quotation are spoken by Marian at the beginning of her second narrative, as she chides Aurora for righteous ignorance:

You’re great and pure; but were you purer still,—  
As if you had walked, we’ll say, no otherwhere  
Than up and down the New Jerusalem,  
And held your trailing lutestring up yourself  
From brushing the twelve stones, for fear of some  
Small speck as little as a needle-prick,  
White stitched on white,—the child would keep to *me* (6.711–17)

In this formulation, Aurora walks in the New Jerusalem, carrying an instrument of poetry analogous to the threads of sewing, her purity signified by the invisibility of pricked, stitched “faults.” As usual, the connotations are complexly mixed. But the juxtaposition of walking, poetry, and sewing is entirely consistent with Marian’s reiterated reliance on sewing as saving labor. In the poem’s final lines, on the other hand, only the stones and the Biblical text remain.

Satisfying though the poem’s last books may be in other ways, their appeal to divine and transcendent human love simply passes over the questions of gendered labor set out in its beginning, leaving us with what I have come to regard as unresolvable textual ambivalence.<sup>62</sup> I want to privilege what I believe are the hard boundaries of cultural usage, to claim that rhetorical and generic definitions of women’s work ultimately prove intractable, holding Barrett Browning to her own version of the old laws: if women walk, they must not walk alone; and men don’t sew at all. But I cannot honestly say that

the readings I have done here permit such comfort. Rather than settling into any of our proposed positions, feminist or patriarchal, *Aurora Leigh's* representations of the relations among women, work and writing refuse complete resolution. In this irresolution, then, combined with our own preoccupations, lies one part of our current fascination with Barrett Browning's poem.

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NOTES

My thanks to Laura C. Berry, Bruce Graver, and Richard Sha, whose comments were instrumental in shaping this essay, and to Jacqueline Rhodes, who helped me edit the final text.

<sup>1</sup> I presented an early version of this essay at the conference, which was held 4–6 November, 1993, at the Armstrong Browning Library, Baylor University.

<sup>2</sup> This number is conservative. I used the MLA Bibliography on CD/ROM, searched under "Elizabeth Barrett Browning," and counted entries that named *Aurora Leigh*. So this number excludes even extensive commentaries on the poem which appear in general studies of Barrett Browning, or in studies for which the Bibliography may have named topics differently—for instance, Dierdre David's *Intellectual Women and Victorian Patriarchy*, which offers an influential discussion of *Aurora Leigh* (cited below). The real number of important readings of the poem, then, is probably somewhat higher than my rough count.

<sup>3</sup> Susan Brown, "Writing Beyond the Ending: *Aurora Leigh* and the Married Women's Property Campaign," and Laura C. Berry, "When fathers say 'my child': Settlements, Illegitimacy and *Aurora Leigh*," as presented at "Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Victorian Culture." See also Alison Case, "Gender and Narration in *Aurora Leigh*," *Victorian Poetry* 29 (1991): 17–32; Dierdre David, "A Clerisy of Poets and the Softer Sex," in *Intellectual Women and Victorian Patriarchy: Harriet Martineau, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, George Eliot* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1987), 97–113; and Marjorie Stone, "Genre Subversion and Gender Inversion: *The Princess* and *Aurora Leigh*," *Victorian Poetry* 25 (1987): 101–27.

<sup>4</sup> Stone, 101.

<sup>5</sup> Stone, 127.

<sup>6</sup> David, 157.

<sup>7</sup> For a full account of the mode I have termed "peripatetic," in which walking replaces farming as the agent of georgic cultivation, see Anne D. Wallace, *Walking, Literature, and English Culture: The Origins and Uses of Peripatetic in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993).

<sup>8</sup> In this essay, I use the terms "labor" and "work" both in their general senses of productive activity, and in the more specialized senses that appeared in the eighteenth century. As Raymond Williams formulates these, "labor" came to mean "that element of production which in combination with capital and materials produced commodities," while "work" specifically referred to paid employment. (*Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* [New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1976], 146, 282). See also the extended discussion of "work" below, in which further complications arise.

<sup>9</sup> Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1987), 79.

<sup>10</sup> Armstrong, 79.

<sup>11</sup> Anne Finch, "The Spleen," in *The Poems of Anne Countess of Winchelsea*, ed. Myra Reynolds (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1903), 250. See also "A Description of One of the Pieces of Tapistry at Long-Leat," which proposes the same deprecatory poetics (47–51). Carol Shiner Wilson details the interaction of this poetics with the cult of the "Good Mother" in late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century women's writing, charting its simultaneous persistence and growing subversive uses. "Lost Needles, Tangled Threads: Stitchery, Domesticity, and the Artistic Enterprise in Barbauld, Edgeworth, Taylor, and Lam" in *Revising Romanticism: British Women Writers, 1776–1837*, ed. Carol Shiner Wilson and Joel Haefner (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), 167–90.

<sup>12</sup> See Wallace, 119–165, for a detailed account of Wordsworth's definitive extension of georgic into peripatetic. A brief discussion of *Aurora Leigh* as peripatetic appears on 208–10.

<sup>13</sup> For traditional histories of georgic in English literature, see John Chalker, *The English Georgic: A Study in the Development of a Form* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969) and Dwight Durling, *Georgic Tradition in English Poetry* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1935). See also arguments by Anthony Low and Kurt Heinzelman for the continued viability of georgic after 1800, and for "georgic" as a critical term in the twentieth century (Low, *The Georgic Revolution* [Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1985]; Heinzelman, "Roman Georgic in the Georgian Age: A Theory of Romantic Genre," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 33 [1991]: 182–214).

<sup>14</sup> See Chalker, 9–10, and Low, 6.

<sup>15</sup> On Wordsworth's tactics, see Wallace, 120–23.

<sup>16</sup> I use "sewing" as Mary Lamb does "needlework" in her 1815 essay to include any work done with needles and/or fabrics, including such various activities as millinery and darning. But I also extend Lamb's usage as Barrett Browning's language seems to direct. See "On Needle-work" in *The Works of Charles and Mary Lamb*, ed. E. V. Lucas, 5 vols. (London: Methuen and Co., 1903; rpt. in facsimile by G. P. Putenham's Sons, New York, 1968), 1:176–80. See also the *OED*'s use of "sewing" in their entry on "work," quoted below.

<sup>17</sup> Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, ed. Cora Kaplan (London: The Women's Press, 1978), 1:106, 273–75, 356, 363, 614; 2:245, 206; 1:946–47; 2:1097, 46–53. All further quotations from *Aurora Leigh* will be drawn from this edition, and will be cited by book and line numbers in the text.

<sup>18</sup> See the matching allusion to Aeschylus at 5.292–99.

<sup>19</sup> Helena Mitchie, *The Flesh Made Word: Female Figures and Women's Bodies* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1987), 41.

<sup>20</sup> Mitchie, 42.

<sup>21</sup> Mitchie, 42.

<sup>22</sup> Mitchie, 43, 44. Similar arguments about sewing's subversive sexual content/textual function are made by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press), 519–28, and by Pamela Royston Macfie, "Sewing in *Ottava Rima*: Wyatt's Assimilation and Critique of a Feminist Poetic," *Renaissance Papers* (1987): 25–37. The difference between these arguments and mine is their

formulation of sewing as subversion, whereas I think Barrett Browning reconstitutes sewing as positive agency. However, for material more apt to Mitchie and others, see Barrett Browning's contemporaneous short poem "Amy's Cruelty" (1857). Finally, see also David's extended discussion of *Aurora Leigh's* frank sexual expressiveness in *Intellectual Women and the Victorian Patriarchy* ("The Social Wound and the Poetics of Healing," 114–27; "Women's Art as Servant of Patriarchy: the Vision of Aurora Leigh," 143–58). David concludes that the language of sexual love is turned to conservative uses, assisting in the assertion of Barrett Browning's "essentialist sexual politics" (157).

<sup>23</sup> Mitchie does not mention Marian Erle in "Working Class Women: A Public Body," the section closing the chapter in which Mitchie discusses Aurora. Given Mitchie's use of T. J. Edelstein's important work on the "iconology" of seamstresses (see note 25 below), her continued attention to sewers in her commentary on working-class women, and Marian's aptness to Mitchie's points about sewing and the body, this seems an odd omission.

<sup>24</sup> George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, ed. Gordon S. Haight (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1980), 378–79. See also 363. The presence of the dubious Stephen Guest in both scenes suggests the interactions between sewing and sexual respectability discussed below.

<sup>25</sup> The most thoroughly developed example of this pattern, and one of the many source texts for *Aurora Leigh* is, of course, Elizabeth Gaskell's *Ruth* (1853). In this essay I remain focused on rhetorical constructions of "sewing," but see T. J. Edelstein's commentary on the relationship between artistic representations of the seamstress and the material conditions of the impoverished needlewoman in Victorian England, and Mary Lamb's proposals, based on her own experience as a working sewer, of the measures necessary to change those conditions. Edelstein, "They Sang 'The Song of the Shirt': The Visual Iconology of the Seamstress," *Victorian Studies* 23 (1980): 183–210; Lamb, "On Needle-work."

<sup>26</sup> Armstrong, 79.

<sup>27</sup> Williams, 281–82.

<sup>28</sup> Williams, 282.

<sup>29</sup> Williams, 282.

<sup>30</sup> For a discussion of the way census terminology followed and enforced this development, see Nancy Folbre, "The Unproductive Housewife: Her Evolution in Nineteenth-Century Economic Thought," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 16 (1991): 463–84. See also Armstrong's commentary, 59–75.

<sup>31</sup> In one of the many sewing scenes in *Wives and Daughters*, Molly takes her "company worsted-work," obviously a particularly beautiful, useless piece of sewing, in to Mrs. Hamley. Mrs. Hamley observes, "Ah! you've got your sewing, like a good girl," and then offers a revealing explanation of her own lack of work at hand: "Now, I don't sew much. I live alone a great deal. You see, both my boys are at Cambridge, and the Squire is out of doors all day long—so I have almost forgotten how to sew. I read a great deal. Do you like reading?" (Elizabeth Gaskell, *Wives and Daughters*, ed. Frank Glover Smith [Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969], 96). Sewing, for Mrs. Hamley, is what women do while they keep men company, and signifies labor rather than leisure. But "good girls" should sew: only women at relative leisure, living "alone" and not engaged in attending to men, can choose to read.

<sup>32</sup> George Eliot, *Adam Bede*, ed. Stephen Gill (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980), 136, 178.



<sup>33</sup> An early essay by Patricia Branca, although naïvely celebratory in some respects, partially articulates this “disappearing” of domestic labor. (“Image and Reality: The Myth of the Idle Victorian Woman,” in *Clio’s Consciousness Raised: New Perspectives on the History of Women*, ed. Mary S. Hartman and Lois Banner [New York: Harper Colophon, 1974], 179–91). Armstrong offers a brief comment on the same subject (79). For a detailed account of the “nitty-gritty” of keeping house (again presented in rather conservative dress), see Caroline Davidson, *A Woman’s Work is Never Done: A History of Housework in the British Isles 1650–1950* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1982).

<sup>34</sup> Eliot, *Bede* 117–26, 148–54.

<sup>35</sup> Contrast these examples with two scenes of the Meyrick household in Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda*, in which the narrator mock-delicately speculates that a servant might have been beyond their means “before Kate got paid work” as an illustrator, and, later, in which the embroidery frames of the other sisters literally fill up the front rooms, leaving little space for Klesmer to enter and hear Mirah’s singing. The possibility that these women once had “to light their fires and sweep their rooms” themselves remains a matter of speculation—they cannot be seen to do so—while sewing, although undertaken for pay, displaces any other public or domestic labor. (*Deronda*, ed. Barbara Hardy [Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967], 237, 538). Dickens’s novels are full of similar confirmations of the elision of domestic labor and the exceptions made when women fall below the middle class. In *Bleak House*, for instance, Esther Summerson’s domestic labor is firmly displaced into her keys, and visible signs of housekeeping in Mrs. Jellyby’s house mean she has failed at it; but Charley is first seen with the suds of the washbasin on her hands (although not actually washing), and Mrs. Bagnet washes and cooks (although briefly) in plain view. See also the former governess Ruth Pinch cooking in *Martin Chuzzlewit*—and so forth. But while Hetty’s buttermaking, like Ruth Pinch’s cooking, is heavily sentimentalized, *Bede* remains unusual in its relative lack of distancing of “visible” labor.

<sup>36</sup> Mitchie, 41.

<sup>37</sup> Wordsworthian peripatetic requires at least two walkers to produce poetry, and generally favors a large community of walkers engaged in renovating discourse. As we shall see, Marian Erle fills out this minimum community for Aurora (and Romney arguably joins them). At this point, however, the poem emphasizes Aurora’s solitude as a sign of her departure from the domestic world.

<sup>38</sup> David establishes an “informing structure of wounding and healing” in *Aurora Leigh*, a structure she describes as “emphatically etched by the imagery of knifing” throughout the poem. While I have not done so in this essay, the sword in this passage, and indeed all David’s knifing images, may also be connected with the piercing, cutting tools of sewing, further supporting David’s reading by underscoring the role of women’s domestic education (the immediate contextual reference) in the wounding of the body social (David, 122–24).

<sup>39</sup> See also 1.739–47, in which she becomes “a young wayfaring soul” venturing into the world of books. I should pause to emphasize that, of course, walking is just *one* sign of Aurora’s art. My commentary here is certainly not meant to exclude the various other symbolic systems in play—for instance, the classical regendering *via* the Ganymede story at 1.915–34—but to underscore the particular interpretative possibilities of peripatetic.

<sup>40</sup> See Wallace, 29–30, 57, and 221–22; and, for a fuller discussion, Kim Taplin, *The English Path* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 1979), 65–84.

<sup>41</sup> See Mitchie, 33, for a brief discussion of the material and metaphorical connections between cleanliness and respectability.

<sup>42</sup> Ellen Moers, *Literary Women* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977), 130; Mitchie, 40–41. See also Meena Alexander's commentary on Dorothy Wordsworth in *Women in Romanticism: Mary Wollstonecraft, Dorothy Wordsworth and Mary Shelley* (Savage, MD: Barnes and Noble, 1989), 78–99.

<sup>43</sup> Mitchie, 41.

<sup>44</sup> For a different view of Wordsworth's uses of georgic, see Bruce Graver, "Wordsworth's Georgic Pastoral: *Otium* and *Labor* in 'Michael,'" *European Romantic Review* 1 (1991): 119–34.

<sup>45</sup> Unless otherwise specified, all quotations from Wordsworth are drawn from *William Wordsworth: The Poems*, ed. John O. Hayden, 2 vols. (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1977), and are cited in my essay by line number only. *The Excursion* appears in 2:35–289.

<sup>46</sup> This is the version published in the 1800 *Lyrical Ballads*, chosen by Stephen Gill for his Oxford Authors *William Wordsworth* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1984) in keeping with Gill's decision to print "a text which comes as close as possible to the state of a poem when it is first completed"—in this case, as in most, "the text of the first appearance in a Wordsworth volume, i.e. not in a newspaper or magazine" (xxxi). "There is an Eminence" appears in Gill, 203.

<sup>47</sup> I have not undertaken to read georgic, as distinct from peripatetic, in *Aurora Leigh*. Among the specifically georgic allusions are 2.27, 4.1161–68, 5.8–11, 7.669–71, and 7.732–33.

<sup>48</sup> According to Gardner B. Taplin, Barrett Browning read Cowper's biography (by Robert Southey) and included him in "a summary of English verse" published anonymously in summer 1842. (*The Life of Elizabeth Barrett Browning* [1957; Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1970], 96, 102.)

<sup>49</sup> William Cowper, *The Task*, in *The Poetical Works of William Cowper*, ed. William Benham (1870; London: Macmillan and Co., 1921), 234. The reference is to 4:140–44.

<sup>50</sup> Cowper 4:150–57.

<sup>51</sup> Susanna Blamire, "Stoklewath; or, The Cumbrian Village," in *The Poetical Works of Miss Susanna Blamire*, ed. Henry Lonsdale (Edinburgh: John Menzies, 1842), 5.

<sup>52</sup> Blamire, 11.

<sup>53</sup> Blamire, 8.

<sup>54</sup> See, for instance, the descriptions of Margaret's garden in Book I of the *Excursion*, or the fir-grove in "When to the attractions of the busy world."

<sup>55</sup> For one reading of the rose's red in *Aurora Leigh*, see David, 119–22.

<sup>56</sup> Again, see the passages in the *Excursion* describing the decay of Margaret's garden—at, for instance, 1.715–29—and the parallel description of her disordered books at 1.824–28.

<sup>57</sup> Marian's nosegay may also allude to millinery and/or sewing, since arranging and rearranging nosegays was evidently part of preparing a proper costume, and could involve sewing. In Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters*, Cynthia pulls flowers from the nosegays sent to her and Molly to make Molly a wreath for her head. "There!" she tells Molly, "when that is sewn on black velvet to keep the flowers from dying, you'll see how pretty it will look." Cynthia has ulterior motives, of course, but earlier passages emphasize her skill at millinery and dress-trimming (Gaskell, 319). Lynn

M. Alexander remarks the conflated usage of “dressmaker” and “milliner”: “most shops made entire outfits encompassing both so that the terms became interchangeable.” (“Following the Thread: Dickens and the Seamstress,” *Victorian Newsletter* 80 [1991]: 1, note 3.)

<sup>58</sup> Besides the references to Wallace above, see Laurie Langbauer, “Dickens’s Streetwalkers: Women and the Form of Romance,” *ELH* 53 (1986): 411–31, and Ellen Moers, “Bleak House: The Agitating Women,” *The Dickensian* 69 (1973): 13–24.

<sup>59</sup> Edelstein discusses the explosion of visual and literary representations of seamstresses after the December 1843 publication of Thomas Hood’s “The Song of the Shirt,” describing a consistent iconology widely available in popular as well as artistic circles. Marian fits this iconology in many respects. A country girl moved to the city, she lives alone in rooms above the street; seduction, starvation and disease threaten her; and she is figured in various ways as a saint (Aurora explicitly calls her “my saint” at 7.127). There are also telling variations—the evils that threaten Marian, for instance, are at first located in the countryside. A fuller analysis of Barrett Browning’s use of seamstress iconology would no doubt underscore *Aurora Leigh*’s conflicted stance toward women’s work, since the iconology itself, in Edelstein’s view, is fundamentally conservative. Hood’s “Song,” Richard Redgrave’s painting “The Sempstress” (exhibited at the Royal Academy six months after Hood’s publication), and the flood of similar work that followed, intended a trenchant criticism of seamstresses’ virtual enslavement. But their coherent design of an admirable, beleaguered seamstress with whom their audience might feel strong sympathy involved the stabilization of the very structures responsible for the terrible conditions they decried. In Edelstein’s words, “these visual [and literary] works tend to assuage concern while they incite it” (184).

<sup>60</sup> See also Barrett Browning’s “Work and Contemplation” (1844).

<sup>61</sup> While georgic is usually called “pastoral” after 1800, Aurora’s condemnation of her pastoral suggests that this is not what is happening here. Rather than the scenes of rural labor or tales of common life in nineteenth-century “pastorals” like Wordsworth’s “Michael,” landscape, classical allusion, and unpeopled nature seem to have been the substance of Aurora’s poem. Without even sheep on the scene, one may wonder if it is classical pastoral. Certainly, however, the charges Aurora levels against it—“pretty, cold, and false”—sound like the charges made against eighteenth-century English pastoral, rather than those against the “realistic pastoral” that silently encompassed georgic a little later. For a longer discussion of the transformation of pastoral, see Wallace, 133–44.

<sup>62</sup> Of course the poem asserts the primacy of spiritual love from its opening pages, and the last books thoroughly complete that line of thought. David notes that the first line of *Aurora Leigh* quotes Ecclesiastes; Biblical allusion and Christian ideologies permeate the poem. Formally, then, and in terms of its fulfillment of the Judeo-Christian image/idea structures of the poem, the final quotation of Revelation also is consistent and satisfying.