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The Embodied Muse:  
Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*  
and Feminist Poetics

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At the conclusion of her “unscrupulously epic” feminist poem *Aurora Leigh*, Elizabeth Barrett Browning offers a striking image of a woman artist who is simultaneously poet and muse. Empowered by her acknowledgment of her love for her cousin Romney, the poem’s narrator-heroine, Aurora Leigh, dictates to her blind lover words that constitute a vision of the New Jerusalem only she can actually see. From the terrace of her Italian tower, she looks out towards the east, where

Beyond the circle of the conscious hills,  
Were laid in jasper-stone as clear as glass  
The first foundations of that new, near Day  
Which should be builded out of heaven to God. (IX, 954-57)<sup>1</sup>

Like the Muses whom Hesiod reports having met on Helikon, Aurora has heavenly knowledge, even as she stands on a “promontory of earth” (IX, 847). The blind man, listening to her, sees with “inscient vision” (IX, 913). As he asks Aurora to “breathe thy fine keen breath along the brass” (IX, 931), Romney calls to mind both ancient and modern examples of the inspired blind poet, listening to the divine song of a muse: Homer, Demodokos, Thamyris, Milton. Aurora simultaneously sees, names, and is the dawn for this man who has asked her to “fulfil” (IX, 910) his inadequacy:

“Jasper first,” I said;  
“And second, sapphire; third, chalcedony;  
The rest in order:—last, an amethyst.” (IX, 962-64)

Aurora here takes her place as a triumphant goddess, embodying through her words the promise of her name, conclusively demonstrating that the woman artist can both see and sing, by her own eyes inspired.

While Barrett Browning’s figuring of Aurora as muse seems unmistakable,



Frontispiece of *Poetical Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell & Co., 1886). From Edmund Wilson's copy in McFarlin Library Special Collections, The University of Tulsa.

none of the many fine, recent feminist readings of the poem has even considered this possibility. Instead, critics interested in Browning's treatment of inspiration have argued either that the blind Romney is Aurora's male muse, "both infant son and father/lover," or that Marian Erle, "the unmentionable, fallen other woman of Victorian society," is a female sister or mother muse.<sup>2</sup> These readings suggest that, as a female poet, Barrett Browning challenges patriarchal poetry's vision of the muse as the passive female object of the active male poet's quest, but they do not consider that she might question the more basic—and equally patriarchal—premise that the muse must be external and Other to the poet, the "object" of a quest. To believe that the muse must be an objectified other is to ignore not simply the claims of numerous feminist critics and poets but the words of Aurora herself, who insists that "life develops from within" (II, 485) and who throughout the poem emphasizes the importance of internal inspiration and urges an abolition of the subject/object dichotomy.<sup>3</sup> One might argue that to figure the muse as Other is simply to project an internal aspect of the self, but, as I shall hope to show below, even this seemingly innocent form of self-division is contrary to Aurora's theology and aesthetic.

Among the critics who have taken Romney to be Aurora's male muse, Helen Cooper has offered the most subtle analysis, arguing that Aurora must first overcome Romney's inhibiting gaze, the gaze of the "composite precursor" who can silence and objectify the woman poet seeking to claim and speak her own subjectivity. Cooper views Marian as the instrument of Aurora's transformation into a poet who reconciles being a woman with being an artist, and she suggests that Marian's child serves as a transitional muse for Aurora, who becomes empowered as she assumes a maternal rather than a daughterly relation to her inspiration. Because Romney, after his blinding, "becomes dependent on Aurora . . . as a young child, dependent on his mother," he too can become a positive muse, even while he continues to function as "father/lover," an "authoritative precursor" who recalls the "blind Milton writing of the old Eden" (p. 187).

Cooper recognizes (and even insists on) the parallel between Romney and the blind Milton; yet she claims it is Romney who is the muse, although it clearly is Aurora who dictates words to him. Cooper criticizes one aspect of Harold Bloom's model of poet, muse, and precursor poet engaged in a "triangular oedipal struggle" when she argues that the "preoedipal figuration between parent and infant" may be a more appropriate model for Barrett Browning's (and other poets') construction of the muse (p. 187). Yet she seems uncritically to accept Bloom's psychosexual model of gender and creativity: if a male poet depends on a female muse, then a female poet must depend on a male muse; or, in Jungian terms, if a male must draw on his

anima for creativity to flourish, then a female must turn to her animus, discovering what Barbara Gelpi has called the “man within.”<sup>4</sup>

Angela Leighton avoids the patriarchal (and heterosexist) presumptions of Jungian anima-animus psychology when she persuasively argues that Aurora, after her “emancipation” from “the long shadow of the father muse” (p. 140), takes the female Marian to be her liberating sister muse of “contemporaneity and commitment” (p. 154). Leighton’s argument is compelling, even exhilarating, particularly when she suggests that Aurora’s mature voice no longer speaks a “poetics of the daughter, but of the woman” who daringly allies herself with her fallen sister (p. 154). But Leighton stops just short of an even more emancipatory vision of female poetic authority: that the poet finds her voice within herself, that the muse as well as the poet is liberated from her status as object to become a fully empowered subject.

If Aurora’s identification with Marian is to be the radically feminist act Leighton (I think correctly) takes it to be, then Marian must cease to be an object to Aurora. And if she is the muse, then she must be a new kind of muse, one who is fully integrated with the poet, a subject in her own right. Aurora moves from her rediscovery of Marian in Paris to her discovery of her self in Italy. Marian helps her along her path, for she is, as Leighton, Cooper, Rosenblum, and others have shown, an essential mirror in Aurora’s process of self-discovery. But it is trivializing Marian to see her only as an “instrument” of Aurora’s growth. If Marian teaches anything to Aurora, it is that all individuals must be perceived as subjects, never as objects in other people’s social schemes or literary representations. Thus, in the final pages of the poem, Marian vanishes from the narrative, for Barrett Browning refuses to place her in any position in relation to Aurora. Aurora must speak her own truth, affirming—and naming—a muse (the dawn) who is nothing less than her very self.

The reluctance of feminist critics to read *Aurora Leigh*’s concluding lines as a portrayal of Aurora as muse is understandable. To regard the female poet as a muse appears to be a denial of her subjectivity, a negation of her quest to be a poet rather than the object or inspirer of male poetry.<sup>5</sup> Yet such conclusions are necessary only if we are confined to the traditional, Christian and patriarchal, conception of the “heavenly”—and “otherly”—female muse. We might be persuaded otherwise if we could see that Elizabeth Barrett Browning began the process (which has perhaps reached its apex in the recent work of Mary Daly) of reclaiming the muse as a powerful image of female divinity, creativity, and sexuality—for women as well as for men.<sup>6</sup> Aurora is an earthly not a heavenly muse: what enables her to function as a muse is her full subjectivity, her radical embodiment, her complete acceptance of herself as woman and artist. Elizabeth Barrett Browning abandons

the idealization and objectification of the female that have been a part of the Western tradition of the muse since the overlay of Christian neoplatonism on ancient Greek myth, offering instead a corporeal muse who has “herself a sort of heart” (IX, 27).<sup>7</sup> Aurora is not a transcendent, disembodied, heavenly figure who can only be apprehended by a poet who has closed his senses to earthly temptations and distractions. Nor is she a Victorian Angel in the House, the nineteenth century’s version of Milton’s Urania. Instead, she is an immanent, embodied, earthly woman who teaches that the only “way” to heaven is through a complete valuation of “the despised poor earth, / The healthy, odorous earth” (IX, 652-53).

The proper conceptualization and function of both poet and muse is a focus of much of Barrett Browning’s poem. Beginning with Aurora’s celebrated analysis of her mother’s portrait, the term “Muse” is introduced early in Book I, and it recurs throughout the poem, reminding us that we are in an epic environment where one might legitimately expect to encounter muses. As Hesiod had observed in the *Theogony*, at the opening of the Western tradition of epic, the Muses had instructed him “always to put [them] at the beginning and end of my singing,” and so most male poets had complied.<sup>8</sup> But in Barrett Browning’s “unscrupulously epic” work (V, 214), the poet and the reader must learn to “let go conventions” (I, 852). Aurora meditates:

What form is best for poems? Let me think  
Of forms less, and the external. Trust the spirit,  
As sovran nature does, to make the form;  
For otherwise we only imprison spirit  
And not embody. (V, 223-27)

Aurora may refer to the Muses but only in ways that will “embody” rather than “imprison” her poetic spirit.

Thus there are no explicit invocations to the muse in the poem. At the outset of her nine-book epic, Aurora begins with a brash self-confidence: “I . . . / Will write my story,” she proclaims, “for my better self” (I, 2-4). She has no need for a muse because she is writing of what she knows; muses had primarily functioned as guarantors of poetic truth for poets writing about historical or cosmic subjects for which they required authoritative witnesses. Milton places his trust in a muse that “from the first / Wast present”; Homer appeals to muses who “know all things”; and Virgil calls on goddesses who “remember” and “can tell.”<sup>9</sup> In contrast to these epic singers, Aurora is her own authority, and she places herself at the beginning and end of her epic. In doing so, she goes even further than her recent precursor Wordsworth in a romantic revision of classical tradition, for Wordsworth, also writing an autobiographical epic, nevertheless maintained his dependence on the

“correspondent breeze” in *The Prelude*, and in his “Prospectus” to the *Excursion* he called on a muse “greater” than Milton’s Urania.

In another contrast with her male predecessors, particularly in the English tradition, Aurora is content to sing from a vantage point on earth. Not only does she not require an external muse for authoritative knowledge, she also does not ask to fly or be raised as both Milton and Wordsworth had requested. Rather, she deliberately insists that to write effectively and authentically, she must stand—or at times even lie—on the earth.

Aurora’s full acceptance of her position as an earthly singer comes late in the poem. At first, following the patriarchal tradition she has imbibed in her father’s books, she envisages inspiration as elevation and transcendence of the senses, imagining that Zeus’s eagle has ravished her

Away from all the shepherds, sheep, and dogs,  
And set me in the Olympian roar and round  
Of luminous faces for a cup-bearer. (I, 921-23)

A moment later, however, she “drop[s] the golden cup at Herè’s foot” and “swoon[s]” back to earth, where she finds herself “face-down among the pine-cones, cold with dew” (I, 929-31). Eventually Aurora will not have to fall but will choose to lie among the pine cones.

Aurora’s vision of inspired flight recalls Eve’s dream in *Paradise Lost*; she has moved up to the realm of the gods too quickly, failing to recognize what Romney will later emphasize:

“You need the lower life to stand upon  
In order to reach up unto that higher;  
And none can stand a-tiptoe in the place  
He cannot stand in with two stable feet.” (IV, 1207-10)<sup>10</sup>

Or, as Aurora herself puts it,

No perfect artist is developed here  
From any imperfect woman. Flower from root,  
And spiritual from natural, grade by grade  
In all our life. A handful of the earth  
To make God’s image! (IX, 648-52)

Heaven is to be gained not by abandoning but by embracing earth. As Milton expressed it in *Paradise Lost*, humans can only “put on” divinity through a full acceptance of their mortal limits. Yet while this is the thematic import of the action in *Paradise Lost*, the epic narrator needs to soar, “upheld” by Urania, in order to report that truth properly. In contrast,

Aurora moves closer to the earth, deeper into her own embodied spirit, as her poem articulates its own transforming truth, “which, fully recognized, would change the world / And shift its morals” (VII, 856-57).

Before considering some aspects of the process by which Aurora arrives at the full knowledge of her “truth” and her muse, it may be helpful to examine briefly some of the central tenets of her philosophy and their implications for her poetics. Most simply stated, Aurora’s mature message, presented in Book VII of the poem, is that “a twofold world / Must go to a perfect cosmos” (VII, 762-63). The material and spiritual worlds are so intimately and necessarily intertwined, she claims, that “who separates those two / In art, in morals, or the social drift, / Tears up the bond of nature and brings death” (VII, 764-66). For Aurora, it is the division of spirit and flesh, not disobedience to Reason or God, that constitutes the Fall, bringing death into this world. As she states, to “divide / This apple of life” – “The perfect round which fitted Venus’ hand” – is to destroy it “utterly as if we ate / Both halves” (VII, 769-73).

Aurora condemns both those who value only spirit and those who believe that only the material is real. Yet while the world is twofold, spirit and flesh inextricably intermingled, epistemologically and developmentally the material is primary. One cannot apprehend spirit except through flesh. Thus, the artist “holds firmly by the natural, to reach / The spiritual beyond it” (VII, 779-80). And hence Aurora’s epic will be grounded in the “natural” world of the poet’s life; she will tell a story of contemporary experience, and she will rely on highly concrete “woman’s figures” (VIII, 1131) to communicate her twofold truth that

Without the spiritual, observe,  
The natural’s impossible—no form,  
No motion: without sensuous, spiritual  
Is inappreciable,—no beauty or power. (VII, 773-76)

That an embodied, visible muse will preside over the work of a poet with such a message and such a technique should not surprise the reader.

Aurora’s conviction of the “twofold man” living in “this twofold sphere” (VII, 777) is rooted in a typological, Christian perception of the cosmos. As she says, “nothing in the world comes single” (VII, 804); all things are “patterns of what shall be in the Mount” (VII, 806). Or, even more explicitly, she insists that the artist “fixes still / The type with mortal vision, to pierce through, / With eyes immortal, to the antitype” (VII, 780-82). Yet Aurora goes much further than her contemporaries in her application of typology. She uses it to challenge the traditional Christian mind-body dualism, to overturn the view of woman’s flesh as evil, and to criticize Miltonic hier-

archy and division. In the end, she sounds far more like a twentieth-century feminist or ecologist than a Victorian divine.<sup>11</sup>

In the passage that functions as the centerpiece of the exposition of her aesthetics, Aurora explains that the truth that “would change the world” is a constant awareness of “the spiritual significance burn[ing] through / The hieroglyphic of material shows” (VII, 860-61). If the artist’s audience could perceive this, then each individual would

paint the globe with wings,  
And reverence fish and fowl, the bull, the tree,  
And even his very body as a man—  
Which now he counts so vile, that all the towns  
Make offal of their daughters for its use. . . . (VII, 862-66)

With these strong words, Aurora makes plain her profound valuation of the earth, the natural world, the human body, and especially the female body. She points to the abuse of women and argues that it is the result of a failure to see spirit in matter; she dramatically concludes her meditation on art with an image of woman treated as “offal.” This, then, is the “death,” the rift in the “bond of nature” that makes God “sad in heaven” (VII, 867) and that her work is intended to correct. Again the reader can see why, to communicate this truth, she would choose a female muse who dwells on the earth and who demonstrates in herself the infusion of all body with spirit.

Early in her life, before she turns to poetry as a compensation for her loss, Aurora does have an experience of such an earthly female muse. This muse is her mother, a woman who is consistently characterized in terms that evoke the traditional muses even as they insist on her physical embodiment. When the father first encounters the mother in Italy he is “transfigur[ed]. . . to music” (I, 89) by her face, which “flashed like a cymbal on his face” (I, 87). Shaken with “silent clangor” (I, 88), the father “throw[s] off the old conventions” (I, 177) of his “provisioned and complacent” (I, 69) English past, entering into a deep, transforming love. The words and images Aurora uses to characterize her mother’s effect on her father recur later in the poem, applied to poetry and to the poet. When she first encounters poetry, Aurora’s soul “let[s] go conventions” (I, 852). Choosing to be a poet, she compares herself to the Biblical Miriam, touching cymbals (II, 175); when Romney has finally come to hear her song, he calls her “My Miriam” (VIII, 334). And, as I shall show more extensively below, Aurora paradoxically chooses a form of “silence” as the most evocative and significant of her “songs.”

Aurora’s mother dies while her child is still young, and so Aurora is denied the permanent experience of this earthly muse who “might have steadied the uneasy breath, / And reconciled and fraternized my soul / With the new

order" (I, 37-39). Instead, she is left with a portrait of the dead mother, a portrait in which she finds:

Ghost, fiend, and angel, fairy, witch, and sprite,  
A dauntless Muse who eyes a dreadful Fate,  
A loving Psyche who loses sight of Love,  
A still Medusa with mild milky brows  
All curdled and all clothed upon with snakes  
Whose slime falls fast as sweat will; or anon  
Our Lady of the Passion, stabbed with swords  
Where the Babe sucked; or Lamia in her first  
Moonlighted pallor, ere she shrunk and blinked  
And shuddering wriggled down to the unclean;  
Or my own mother. . . . (I, 154-64)

In her childhood experience of the portrait, Aurora sees how the apparently competing images of woman as heavenly and earthly cohere; she notes that the face, though colored by varying perspectives, "did not therefore change, / But kept the mystic level of all forms, / Hates, fears, and admirations" (I, 151-53). Thus, although a nineteenth-century critic found the passage to be a "perfect shoal of mangled and pompous similes," and twentieth-century critics read the passage as a representation of "male-defined masks and costumes," Aurora as a child does not have difficulty accepting the complex of images.<sup>12</sup>

The images of womanhood that Aurora finds in her mother's portrait are of course the traditional, highly bifurcated images of Western patriarchal literature—as Aurora herself acknowledges. Yet these images serve as appropriate characterizations of the mother and function to define the possibilities of womanhood for Aurora; the mistake she makes is not that she accepts these "male-defined" images but that she believes they cannot coexist in one being. For, indeed, a truly "twofold" woman or muse will include in herself all the characteristics of womanhood, positive and negative, heavenly and earthly, male-defined and female-identified. Aurora is correct to see that her mother contains Lamia, Medusa, Madonna, and Psyche. To the sister-in-law in England, Aurora's aunt, the mother was a seductive and dangerous, fleshly Lamia, taking her brother away from his duty. Like "Our Lady of the Passion," the mother was "stabbed with swords / Where the Babe sucked": "the mother's rapture slew her" (I, 35). In death, she "petrifies" both husband and daughter, and, as a model of a "loving Psyche," she causes Aurora, identifying herself as pure spirit, temporarily to lose "sight of Love."

Although as a child Aurora uses her mother's portrait to hold together

competing visions of woman, as she matures she learns the lessons of her culture and begins to split the once-coherent image, projecting its various fragments onto the different women in her life. She suffers a double loss of her mother: first in life and then in imagination. But in her nine-book poem of self-portrayal, Aurora undergoes a healing gestation, giving birth anew to the mother with whom she can finally identify herself. In recreating her mother in herself, Aurora becomes a fully embodied, earthly muse. But first she must experience division and disembodiment, becoming what her culture has called “heavenly.”

Beginning with the garden scene in Book II, Aurora identifies herself as a disembodied, spiritual muse or Psyche, teaching truths to a world led astray by materialism. Though she rejects Romney’s attempts to make her into the angel in his house, she becomes an angel all the same—the Angel in the House of poetry. While Romney, with what he later calls “male ferocious impudence” (VIII, 328), insists on the importance of attending to mankind’s material needs, Aurora aligns herself with a purely spiritual principle, the Victorian poet’s “feminine ideal.” As E. L. Bryans was to put it some fifteen years later, the Victorians believed that women more than men possess “natural gifts particularly adapted” for the production of poetry: pity and love, and the capability of “dwelling on the unseen.”<sup>13</sup> It is not so much “unfeminine” to be a poet as it is “unmasculine”; in choosing to be a poet, Aurora does not so much challenge her century’s gender rules as confirm them.

Thus, though Helen Cooper has argued that after Book II Aurora imagines herself as male, I would claim rather that she continues to see herself as a woman, but as a disembodied, spiritual woman—the “heavenly” female whose guises include the Christian muse and the Victorian angel. Cooper believes that because Romney scorns women’s poetry, Aurora, to maintain her identity as poet, must redefine herself as male. Cooper reads Aurora’s quest in the second half of her poem as the reclaiming of her female identity. Aurora, however, never abandons her female identity; she simply focuses on one aspect of the female (or any human) self—the spiritual. Her quest is to reclaim the material as an integral aspect of her already female, “heavenly” being.

Romney in the garden does not simply argue against “woman’s verses” (II, 831); he questions the value of any commitment, poetic or feminine, to spiritual truths. He insists that his allegiance as a man is to the earth and to other men:

“But I, I sympathize with man, not God  
(I think I was a man for chiefly this),  
And when I stand beside a dying bed,  
’T is death to me.

. . . . .  
And I, a man, as men are now and not  
As men may be hereafter, feel with men  
In the agonizing present." (II, 294-97; 302-04)

Romney's view of "man" is that he is a virile actor in the world. In the face of Romney's gendered commitment to the material, Aurora makes an equally gendered choice for the spiritual. As Romney chooses the male path of the body and Aurora the female path of the spirit, each divides and destroys the twofold "apple of life." Here in the garden is Elizabeth Barrett Browning's version of the Fall, the division between spirit and flesh, female and male, heaven and earth that will be "restored" in Books VIII and IX when Romney and Aurora acknowledge their love and the "twofold" nature of reality.

Because by her own and her culture's definition, poetry is a "feminizing," "angelic" pursuit, Aurora moves, as a poet, towards an excruciatingly disembodied experience of herself. Her contemporaries address her as the Muse and she does not contradict them.<sup>14</sup> She visualizes the landscape of the muse as a "melancholy desert" (I, 1021), and she takes this desert to be her home, seeing herself as a "palm" that "stands upright in a realm of sand" (II, 519) and feeling "the wind and dust / And sun of the world beat blistering in my face" (V, 421-22). In imagining the muse's (and her own) realm as a desert, Aurora does violence to the memory of her mother, who had "drowned" (I, 70) and "flooded" (I, 68) Aurora's father with passion. The classical Muses too had always been associated with water, singing, as Hesiod tells us, "by the dark blue water / of the spring" (*Theogony*, ll. 3-4). Aurora goes further than her male precursors in making the muse a disembodied, infertile female figure. She must exaggerate the myths of patriarchy in order finally to free herself from them.<sup>15</sup>

As Aurora becomes a disembodied muse/Psyche, so she perceives the other women in her life as each representing separate aspects of the once composite image. Her English aunt becomes a deadening Medusa, Lady Waldemar a threatening Lamia ("that woman-serpent"—VI, 1102), and Marian a suffering Madonna. Each of these categorizations allows Aurora to distance the other women she encounters, to see them as different from, and potentially destructive to, her own "spiritual" essence as Psyche or muse. Yet eventually she discovers that she has in herself, as her mother's daughter—as a woman—the very qualities she has denied and projected onto others.<sup>16</sup>

In Book V, she is startled to discover her hair beginning "to burn and creep, / Alive to the very ends" (V, 1126-27); she is beginning to recognize herself as a Medusa that has transfixed Romney, even as she repressed her desire for him. To escape this perception, she flees to Italy, only to encounter

in France Marian Erle (a lower-class woman who had been betrothed to Romney but who fled from him when she became persuaded that he was marrying her out of charity rather than love). To some extent, she begins to identify with Marian, insisting that together they will be “two mothers” (VII, 124) for Marian’s unnamed fatherless child. At the same time, however, she distances Marian by making of her a Madonna:

And in my Tuscan home I'll find a niche  
And set thee there, my saint, the child and thee,  
And burn the lights of love before thy face,  
And ever at thy sweet look cross myself  
From mixing with the world's prosperities. (VII, 126-30)

In setting up Marian as a saint, Aurora promises to strengthen her already well-developed alienation from her physical self and from her world.<sup>17</sup>

Aurora’s final maturation as woman and poet comes when she acknowledges and articulates her love for Romney, the “sea-king” (VIII, 60) risen from the depths of her desire. Significantly, Romney appears on a night when Florence appears to Aurora as “flooded” (VIII, 37) and “drowned” (VIII, 38) in shadows. Aurora is no longer in an arid desert; the muse is returning to her source. In the course of admitting to herself and to Romney the nature of her feelings, Aurora unites herself with the women she had previously distanced:

Now I know  
I loved you always, Romney. She who died  
Knew that, and said so; Lady Waldemar  
Knows that; . . . and Marian. I had known the same,  
Except that I was prouder than I knew,  
And not so honest. (IX, 684-89)

The Medusa, the Lamia, and the Madonna all know the muse better than she knows herself; Aurora does not so much penetrate beneath the “masks” of womanhood as incorporate them into herself. Muse, Medusa, Madonna, Psyche, and Lamia need no longer be opposed as conflicting aspects of the female. The muse can be both spirit and flesh, heavenly and earthly, taking on a role not merely as the mediator between two realms but as their manifold embodiment.

Aurora offers an especially striking image of the “twofold” union of spirit and flesh in Book V during her meditation on her goals as a poet. Articulating her desire to “speak” her poems “in mysterious tune / With man and nature” (V, 2-3), Aurora enumerates various aspects of the world she hopes

her art will express. Among these are “mother’s breasts / Which, round the new-made creatures hanging there, / Throb luminous and harmonious like pure spheres” (V, 16-18). The poet seeks to “tune” her verse, not to the harmony of the inaccessible heavenly spheres, but to the music of these very earthly, tangible, and visible spheres of the female body. In just three lines of concentrated imagery, Barrett Browning offers a compelling alternative to the centuries-long tradition of cosmic harmony associated with disembodied and ethereal muses.<sup>18</sup> The idea and the image are echoed when, joined in an embrace with Romney, Aurora feels “the old earth spin, / And all the starry turbulence of worlds / Swing round us in their audient circles” (IX, 838-40). Through physical passion the female Aurora is suddenly surrounded by the harmony once considered accessible only to males who had transcended their fleshly, mortal limits.

Intimately related to Aurora’s ability to hear celestial harmony in mothers’ breasts and through her own passion is her linking of the rhythm of blood with the rhythms of her verse—again, a radical alteration of tradition. She reports that, as a young woman, her “pulses set themselves / For concord,” that the “rhythmic turbulence / Of blood and brain swept outward upon words” (I, 896-98). Later as she articulates her mature poetic theory, she insists, while

(glancing on my own thin, veined wrist)  
In such a little tremor of the blood  
The whole strong clamor of a vehement soul  
Doth utter itself distinct. (VII, 818-21)

Aurora here espouses what contemporary feminists have defined as a poetics of the body, and she takes this poetics to its extreme when, dropping her head on the “pavement” of an Italian church, she prays that God

would stop his ears to what I said,  
And only listen to the run and beat  
Of this poor, passionate, helpless blood—And then  
I lay, and spoke not: but He heard in heaven. (VII, 1269-72)

Aurora, the poet, silences her voice, allowing her blood to speak.

The reader may object: Aurora’s God may hear the beat of her blood, but can a reader? The poetics of the body seems to be a poetics of silence, Aurora’s denial of her ambition to speak, a return to the dumbness imposed on women by patriarchy. But in its context, this is an expressive silence, signifying far more than what Aurora elsewhere calls the “full-voiced rhetoric of those master-mouths” (IV, 1108), the “pregnant thinkers of our time”

(IV, 1098). Aurora's silence in the church recalls the "green silence of the woods" (IV, 164), the silence of nature that she hears "open like a flower" (I, 683). It is a silence actively opposed to the noise of the "master-mouths," a writing with white ink that articulates the truths of what we perhaps should call "mistress-bodies."<sup>19</sup>

In her espousal of silence, Aurora, prostrate on the floor of an Italian church, mimes the prostration of other women (legendary and contemporary) she has referred to throughout the poem. Specifically, she recalls her own allusions to descriptions of rape victims, whether they be the mortal women figuratively ravished by Zeus or the mortal woman—Marian—literally subjected to "man's violence" (VI, 1226). These problematic descriptions and associations force us to ask if Aurora (and through her Elizabeth Barrett Browning) in fact associates poetic inspiration with sexual possession or, indeed, rape by a male muse. In several discussions of art and the artist, Aurora pointedly refers to two classical rape stories, that of Danae and the shower of gold and of Io and the gadfly. While each story appears at first to suggest that Aurora imagines her inspirer to be a male divinity—or even, perhaps, her male lover-to-be Romney—closer analysis, supplemented by a consideration of Marian's rape, reveals that Aurora's comparisons of herself to these ravished maidens may lead us to see the female body itself—not the male divinity—as the ultimate source of poetic truth and power.

The first story of divine rape is that of Danae. The painter Vincent Carrington introduces it into the narrative when he asks Aurora to help him judge two new sketches:

"A tiptoe Danae, overbold and hot,  
Both arms aflame to meet her wishing Jove  
Halfway, and burn him faster down; the face  
And breasts upturned and straining, the loose locks  
All glowing with the anticipated gold.  
Or here's another on the self-same theme.  
She lies here—flat upon her prison-floor,  
The long hair swathed about her to the heel  
Like wet seaweed. You dimly see her through  
The glittering haze of that prodigious rain,  
Half blotted out of nature by a love  
As heavy as fate." (III, 122-33)

The passage is resonant with echoes and anticipations of other significant moments and images in the poem. The "tiptoe" Danae may remind us of the Aurora who sought in Book I to fly up to heaven, the same Aurora who would later hear Romney insisting that "none can stand a-tiptoe in the place / He cannot stand in with two stable feet" (IV, 1209-10). Other aspects of the

passage strike other chords, revealing the centrality of the Danae figure to Aurora's understanding of herself as woman and artist.

Both Carrington and Aurora prefer the second sketch, Carrington because it "indicates / More passion" (III, 134-35), Aurora because

Self is put away,  
And calm with abdication. She is Jove,  
And no more Danae—greater thus. Perhaps  
The painter symbolizes unaware  
Two states of the recipient artist-soul,  
One, forward, personal, wanting reverence,  
Because aspiring only. We'll be calm,  
And know that, when indeed our Joves come down,  
We all turn stiller than we have ever been. (III, 135-43)

Aurora's preference for the second sketch is unsettling, suggesting a passivity that ill accords with the determined activity we know to be necessary for the fulfillment of her "vocation." Yet the Danae "half blotted out of nature by a love / As heavy as fate" recalls the "dauntless Muse who eyes a dreadful Fate" in the mother's portrait. The Danae overcome by Jove is transformed; she has what the figure in the first sketch can only aspire to. Divinity burns—and drowns—her, making her into a resonant image of the "twofold world" Aurora wants her art to reveal. In Carrington's Danae we literally see "the spiritual significance burn[ing] through / The hieroglyphic of material shows" (VII, 860-61). Danae is the artist/muse who embodies the truth of her art.

The "prodigious rain" that falls on the prostrate Danae has affinities with other "rains" in Aurora's narrative. In Book I she recalls how once, Romney "dropped a sudden hand upon my head / Bent down on woman's work, as soft as rain— / But then I rose and shook it off as fire" (I, 543-45). Romney's hand is alternately rain and fire, a fragmented version of the fiery rain that will be Jove. But Aurora will not allow Romney's hand to "calm" her; she awaits, not her mortal lover, but her Jove. And, as Romney later tells her, her Jove has come down, entering into her poetry and finally into him:

"this last book o'ercame me like soft rain  
Which falls at midnight, when the tightened bark  
Breaks out into unhesitating buds  
And sudden protestations of the spring.

. . . . .

in this last book,  
You showed me something separate from yourself,

Beyond you, and I bore to take it in  
And let it draw me." (VIII, 595-98; 605-08)

Aurora becomes the vehicle for a truth that transfigures Romney just as Jove transfigures Danae. Aurora herself becomes the "prodigious," fertilizing rain that, in the ancient myth, generates the hero Perseus. It is Perseus who kills the Medusa, whose blood, transformed into Pegasus, ultimately gives rise to Hippocrene, the spring that sustains the Muses.

Of course the most dramatic echo of Danae "flat upon her prison floor" is the moment, already referred to, when Aurora flattens herself on the pavement of the Italian church, no longer striving, no longer reaching up to God, but submitting in silence to the "run and beat" of her own blood. As we have noted, this is a passive Aurora, who has finally given in to the impulses of her own body, the impulses of desire and love. She does not give in to Romney's desire, for at this point she believes him to be married to Lady Waldemar. Rather, she accepts and acknowledges her own passion, taking it to be, finally, divine. Her "blood," then, becomes the equivalent of Danae's "Jove." This is the divinity to which she submits, not to any male within or without. And it is a divinity that has been "in" her all along.

The point is made more explicitly earlier in Book VII when Aurora uses the story of Io and Jove to figure her experience as an artist. She explains that she has felt the "truth" expressed in her poetry to "hound" her

through the wastes of life  
As Jove did Io; and, until that Hand  
Shall overtake me wholly and on my head  
Lay down its large unfluctuating peace,  
The feverish gad-fly pricks me up and down. (VII, 829-33)

The gad-fly image indicates that the truth Aurora has perceived (of the "twofold world") has tormented her into expression. The "Hand" she awaits seems to promise the reconciling stillness of death. But the Hand is the gad-fly transformed, the "truth" deepened to a fuller experience:

When Jove's hand meets us with composing touch,  
And when at last we are hushed and satisfied,  
Then Io does not call it truth, but love. (VII, 895-97)

Aurora equates the "truth" that has pursued her with "love," the very experience her father had insisted on in his last words: "'Love—' / 'Love, my child, love, love!'" (I, 211-12). Similarly, Jove's hand recalls her father's hand, the hand that as a young woman she had longingly remembered: "O my

father's hand, / Stroke heavily, heavily the poor hair down" (I, 25-26). Romney had attempted to replace the father, and Aurora had rejected him. But the father's hand itself is a poor substitute for the dying mother's kiss, and the "love" the father had urged on Aurora was only what his wife had taught him. The imagery of a male muse/raptor that seems to pervade Aurora's figure of Jove as gad-fly/hand resolves into its female substrate, the love made manifest by Aurora's mother. And so we may also speculate about why Barrett Browning, who knew her classics well, apparently mistakes the identity of the gad-fly. In the story of Io as told by Ovid and others, the gad-fly is not Jove at all but a creature sent by the jealous Juno to torment her husband's latest mortal mistress. By conflating male and female divinities, Barrett Browning—or her Aurora—appears to signal that the gender of the divinity is less important than its truth—a corporeal/spiritual love that makes manifest the divinity inherent in the body.<sup>20</sup>

It is in Book VII in the passages just discussed that Aurora offers the fullest articulation of her aesthetic, theological, and social message. Significantly, these passages, as numerous critics have noted, occur after Aurora's reunion with Marian Erle. While Aurora first wrote these truths into the manuscript completed before leaving England (at the end of Book V), the presentation of these ideas after Aurora's reunion with Marian suggests that for the reader if not also for Aurora the full understanding of them is contingent on knowledge of what has happened to Marian. Marian has experienced complete profanation of the human body and shows what can and will occur to a woman when the body is treated purely as body, divorced from spirit. To exalt pure spirit (as Aurora had in her disembodied pursuit of poetry's "spiritual" truth) or to embrace the material to the exclusion of spirit (as Romney had in his utilitarian attempt to improve society) is to create the conditions that caused Marian's rape. It is precisely because of the separation of spirit and flesh that, as Aurora puts it, "the towns / Make offal of their daughters," and both Aurora and Romney are guilty of that separation. Even Marian's rape can be described as a consequence of Aurora's willful denial of her own body and Romney's stubborn denial of his own spirit because their denial kept Aurora and Romney apart leading Romney to choose Marian and Aurora initially to abandon her. Marian's rape serves as a crucial counterweight to Aurora's idealized visions of divine rape and must be considered in any attempt to understand them. Marian too is both Danae and Io, though her Jove is certainly no god.

Marian experiences two devastating betrayals in her life, one when she is sold to a man by her mother, the second when Lady Waldemar's former servant sells her to male desire. The first experience, a near-rape, identifies Marian with Danae; the second, an actual rape, links her with Io. Aurora reports how "one day" Marian's mother,

snatching in a sort of breathless rage  
Her daughter's headgear comb, let down the hair  
Upon her like a sudden waterfall,  
Then drew her drenched and passive by the arm  
Outside the hut they lived in. (III, 1044-48)

"Blinded" by "that stream / Of tresses," Marian finds herself confronted by a man "with beast's eyes" (III, 1049-50),

That seemed as they would swallow her alive  
Complete in body and spirit, hair and all,—  
And burning stertorous breath that hurt her cheek,  
He breathed so near. (III, 1051-54)

Characterized in terms that recall Carrington's second Danae, Marian flees from this horribly material "Jove," whose heavy breath seems a parody of the longed-for "breathings" of a muse.

In her next encounter with female betrayal and male lust, Marian cannot escape:

"Hell's so prodigal  
Of devil's gifts, hunts liberally in packs,  
Will kill no poor small creature of the wilds  
But fifty red wide throats must smoke at it,  
As HIS at me. . . when waking up at last. . .  
I told you that I waked up in the grave." (VI, 1213-18)

Drugged and raped, she finds herself "half-gibbering and half-raving on the floor" (VI, 1232), reduced like Io to the life of a beast. And like Io she takes to the road, "hunted round / By some prodigious Dream-fear at my back" (VI, 1266-67), imagining as well "some ghastly skeleton Hand" (VI, 1243) pursuing her through the landscape.

Marian's experiences of literal rather than figurative rape show Aurora that her own figures but weakly represent the truth she claims to perceive. Marian teaches in her own body the terrible cost of separating spirit and flesh—a lesson that Aurora claims to have known before, but only, we must admit, in her spirit. Through her experience with Marian she comes to know and acknowledge this truth fully in her body, submitting to "the run and beat / Of this poor, passionate, helpless blood."

Marian moves from being treated as pure body to spiritual redemption effected by her maternity, "God's triumph" (VII, 331). For Marian, utter physical abasement results in spiritual elevation, just as Aurora's spiritual elevation, as disembodied muse/artist, requires her descent to the level of her

own blood. The two women are necessary counterparts of one another, graphically illustrating through their complementary experiences and language the “twofold” world Aurora and her creator seek to make manifest. The stories of divine rape are completed by the reality of human rape, something that would not occur if the earth, the body, and woman were valued as both material and spiritual. Similarly, the story of human or earthly rape is completed by the stories of divine rape: Marian comes to the fullest experience of divinity on earth through the birth of her child. She speaks of being “beaten down / . . . into a ditch” (VI, 676-67) where she awakes to find “bedded in her flesh / . . . some coin of price” (VI, 679-81). She reports that God tells her: “I dropped the coin there: take it you, / And keep it,—it shall pay you for the loss” (VI, 683-84). Marian’s “coin of price” figure echoes the Danae imagery used earlier by Aurora. Yet what Marian calls God’s “coin” is the product of woman’s normal biological capacity. It is Marian’s female physiology, her “blood,” that becomes her token of divinity.

Rather than reifying or valuing the male muse/raptor, then, Aurora’s figures of Danae and Io finally show that any “earthly” woman is, in herself, divine. She has no need of an external source of poetic or spiritual power but contains it within herself. This is the “truth” (“Love”) that inspires Aurora, the truth she utters and embodies as both poet and muse.

To read Aurora as the muse—for Barrett Browning, for herself, for Romney, and, ultimately, for the reader—is, finally, to be in a better position to understand why Romney “had to be blinded . . . to be made to see.”<sup>21</sup> Modern critics, following the lead of Barrett Browning’s contemporary Anna Jameson, persist in reading Romney’s blinding as analogous to (and perhaps even modeled on) Rochester’s blinding in *Jane Eyre*, a “punitive equaliser” insuring that this powerful Victorian man cannot “reassert” his “dominant functions.”<sup>22</sup> Such a reading ignores Barrett Browning’s protest that she was not thinking of Charlotte Brontë’s novel when she wrote her poem.<sup>23</sup> More importantly, it fails to take account of a far older cultural archetype that would have been present to Barrett Browning’s imagination: the classical stories of a conflict between a mortal singer and the immortal Muses.

One of the most dramatic of such stories is the tale of Thamyris’s blinding. As Homer tells the story in *The Iliad*, the poet Thamyris had “boasted that he would surpass” the “very Muses”: “these in anger struck him maimed and the voice of wonder / they took away, and made him a singer without memory.”<sup>24</sup> Early in *Aurora Leigh*, Romney rejects the transfiguring potential of poetry, claiming that he intends to “impress and prove” that “nature sings itself, / And needs no mediate poet, lute or voice, / To make it vocal” (II, 1204-06). Romney assumes the role of Thamyris, claiming that the material world—without any spiritual dimension to it—can sing. Later, of course, after the

failure of his schemes and after his blinding, he admits that he was wrong to view

Our natural world too insularly, as if  
No spiritual counterpart completed it,  
Consummating its meaning, rounding all  
To justice and perfection, line by line. (VIII, 617-20)

Romney admits that the poetry of earth can only emerge, "line by line," if one believes that the material is infused with the spiritual. No mortal can sing without a muse who embodies the union of heaven and earth. Romney's blinding is his punishment, not for being a Victorian man, but for his presumption in challenging a goddess. At the conclusion of the poem he accepts Aurora as muse, a woman who will, in Aurora's terms, both "be and do" (V, 367). This goddess, unlike her precursors in the poetry of men, is made of earth and committed both to living upon it and transforming it.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> All citations from *Aurora Leigh*, documented parenthetically in the text, are from Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *The Poetical Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, ed. Harriet Waters Preston (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974).

<sup>2</sup> Helen Cooper, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Woman and Artist* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), p. 187; Angela Leighton, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), p. 156. (Subsequent references to Cooper or Leighton are cited parenthetically in the text.) In their focus on either Romney or Marian as muse, Cooper and Leighton epitomize the concerns of a good number of other critics of the poem. For earlier discussions of Romney as implicit or explicit muse, see Deirdre David, "'Art's A Service': Social Wound, Sexual Politics, and *Aurora Leigh*," *Browning Institute Studies*, 13 (1985), 113-36; Joanne Feit Diehl, "'Come Slowly—Eden': An Exploration of Women Poets and Their Muse," *Signs*, 3 (1978), 572-87; Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi, "*Aurora Leigh*: The Vocation of the Woman Poet," *Victorian Poetry*, 19 (1981), 35-48; and Virginia V. Steinmetz, "Beyond the Sun: Patriarchal Images in *Aurora Leigh*," *Studies in Browning and His Circle*, 9, No. 2 (1981), 18-41. For discussions of Marian as muse, see Nina Auerbach, "Robert Browning's Last Word," *Victorian Poetry*, 22 (1984), 161-73; Sandra M. Gilbert, "From *Patria* to *Matria*: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Risorgimento," *PMLA*, 99 (1984), 194-211; Dolores Rosenblum, "Face to Face: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* and Nineteenth-Century Poetry," *Victorian Studies*, 26 (1983), 321-38; and Virginia V. Steinmetz, "Images of 'Mother-Want' in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*," *Victorian Poetry*, 21 (1983), 351-67.

<sup>3</sup> For a sustained argument that women poets may figure the muse as self, see Mary K. Deshazer, *Inspiring Women: Reimagining the Muse* (New York: Pergamon,

1986). Examples of contemporary women poets who regard the self as muse include Adrienne Rich and May Sarton.

<sup>4</sup> Gelpi, p. 48. For a powerful commentary on the patriarchal assumptions embedded in Jung's theory, see Naomi Goldenberg, "A Feminist Critique of Jung," *Signs*, 2 (1976), 443-49. Regarding the belief that a female poet's muse must be male, see Lillian Faderman's and Louise Bernikow's "Comment on Joanne Feit Diehl's "Come Slowly—Eden": An Exploration of Women Poets and Their Muse," *Signs*, 4 (1978), 188-95.

<sup>5</sup> See Dorothy Mermin, "Genre and Gender in *Aurora Leigh*," *Victorian Newsletter*, 69 (Spring 1986), 7-11, and "The Damsel, the Knight, and the Victorian Woman Poet," *Critical Inquiry*, 13 (1986), 64-80, for eloquent expression of this view. Helen Cooper similarly argues that "a female poet enacts her liberation by transforming herself from being the object of male narrative to being the subject of her own story" (p. 145). My argument, simply, is that the muse too may be liberated by the female poet's quest.

<sup>6</sup> See Mary Daly, *Pure Lust: Elemental Feminist Philosophy* (Boston: Beacon, 1984), pp. 301-03, and *Websters' First New Intergalactic Wickedary of the English Language* (Boston: Beacon, 1987), p. 147.

<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of how the ancient Muses were appropriated by early Christian writers, see Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. W. R. Trask (New York: Harper and Row, 1953). Two important texts in the development of the Christian muse are Macrobius's *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, trans. William Harris Stahl (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952), and Fulgentius's *Mythologies*, in *Fulgentius the Mythographer*, trans. Leslie George Whitbread (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1971). Macrobius links the Muses with the Pythagorean harmony of the spheres and insists that the heavenly music they make can be "apprehended only in the mind and not by the senses" (p. 196). Similarly, Fulgentius is advised by the Muse Calliope to "let fade the whole mortal nature which is yours" (p. 47), so that he might perceive her allegorical truths. Milton is heir to this tradition, and through his reliance on Urania, he makes it a central part of the English imagination. See also Leo Spitzer's *Classical and Christian Ideas of Cosmic Harmony: Prolegomena to an Interpretation of the Word "Stimmung"*, ed. Anna Granville Hatcher (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1963).

<sup>8</sup> Hesiod, *Theogony*, trans. Richmond Lattimore (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1959), l. 34. Subsequent references are cited parenthetically in the text.

<sup>9</sup> John Milton, *Paradise Lost, Complete Poems and Major Prose*, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes (Indianapolis: Odyssey, 1957), I, 19-20; Homer, *The Iliad*, trans. Richmond Lattimore (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), II, 485; Virgil, *The Aeneid*, trans. Allen Mandelbaum (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), IX, 702.

<sup>10</sup> Romney's formulation echoes and critiques Tennyson's description in *The Princess*, in *The Poems of Tennyson*, ed. Christopher Ricks (London: Longman, 1969), of a conventional, idealized muse figure. Tennyson's Prince describes his mother:

No angel, but a dearer being, all dipt  
In angel instincts, breathing Paradise,

Interpreter between the gods and men,  
Who look'd all native to her place, and yet  
On tiptoe seem'd to touch upon a sphere  
Too gross to tread, and all male minds perforce  
Sway'd to her from their orbits as they moved,  
And girdl'd her with music. (VII, 301-08)

Although at first Aurora finds her earth "too gross to tread," her "music" will finally be rooted in earth, rather than suspended from heaven.

<sup>11</sup> For a lucid exposition of Biblical typology and Victorian aesthetics, see George Landow, *Victorian Types, Victorian Shadows: Biblical Typology in Victorian Literature, Art, and Thought* (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980). For an example of the contemporary union of feminism and ecology I have in mind, see Susan Griffin, *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978).

<sup>12</sup> John Nichol, "Aurora Leigh," *Westminster Review*, 68 (1857), 401; Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 19.

<sup>13</sup> E. L. Bryans, "Characteristics of Women's Poetry," *Dark Blue*, 2 (1871), 484. See Carol Christ, "Victorian Masculinity and the Angel in the House," in *A Widening Sphere: Changing Roles of Victorian Women*, ed. Martha Vicinus (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977), pp. 146-62, for a careful analysis of the "feminine" elements in Victorian (male) poets' self-representations. Dorothy Mermin explores the same issues in "The Damsel," though she concludes that "the association of poetry and femininity . . . excluded women poets" (p. 68).

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, III, 363; III, 77; V, 796; and IX, 26.

<sup>15</sup> Angela Leighton reads Aurora's "desert" imagery as a positive definition of the place where "true creativity" (p. 127) can be found. Leighton thus ignores Aurora's own movement towards a more fertile landscape and towards an identity, not as a solitary poet, but as a poet in a vital relationship of love and community. Surely one of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's major achievements in *Aurora Leigh* is the revision of the Romantic (and Victorian) notion of the poet as a solitary, alienated quester, confined to mountaintops or what Leighton calls "the imagination's desert plains" (p. 155).

<sup>16</sup> Helen Cooper (p. 157) makes a similar argument, though she shares Gilbert and Gubar's view that Aurora must utterly reject—rather than integrate—these images of womanhood.

<sup>17</sup> Sandra Gilbert has celebrated Aurora's identification with Marian, calling their domestic arrangement in Italy an "unfallen garden of female sexuality . . . [planted] in the richly flowering earth of Florence" ("From *Patria* to *Matria*," p. 204). But Aurora in her Italian tower is parched and dry, unable to blossom. Aurora experiences herself as excruciatingly—and destructively—isolated. Worship of her private Madonna may be the beginning of Aurora's development of a "specifically female theology," perhaps even her discovery of a "mother tongue" (p. 204), but Aurora must go even further if she is not to remain a disembodied muse locked in a high tower of her own creation.

<sup>18</sup> Marjorie Stone, in her illuminating essay "Taste, Totems, and Taboos: The Female Breast in Victorian Poetry," *Dalhousie Review*, 64 (1985), 748-70, remarks that Barrett Browning's use of the breast/sphere image invests the female body "with cosmic rather than coy images" (p. 767), contributing to a feminist "revision" of traditionally phallogocentric signifiers. Susan Stanford Friedman, "Gender and Genre Anxiety: Elizabeth Barrett Browning and H. D. as Epic Poets," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 5 (1986), 203-28, also cites these lines, suggesting that this metaphor "anticipates contemporary feminist aesthetics of the body" (p. 211). May Sarton, in her *Letters from Maine: New Poems* (New York: Norton, 1984), provides the clearest gloss on Aurora's revisionary aesthetic when she independently asserts in "Contemplation of Poussin" that "celestial harmony would never move / Us earthlings if it had not sprung from blood. / The source flows bright from every carnal love" (p. 14).

<sup>19</sup> For the concept of writing with white ink, or signifying with the female body, see Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," *Signs*, 1 (1976), 875-93. The reader of Cixous's essay may well be struck by how many of her images have their analogues in Barrett Browning's own "woman's figures."

<sup>20</sup> Io herself was, in the nineteenth century, identified as the moon, a priestess of Hera, or a form of Hera herself, the earth. "The nymph is an epithet of the goddess," wrote Thomas Keightley in his popular *The Mythology of Ancient Greece and Rome*, 2nd ed. (London: Whittaker, 1838), p. 408. Thus we may discern an even more compelling reason for Aurora's identification with Io and for her appropriation of the gad-fly/hand as an image of love.

<sup>21</sup> Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Letters*, ed. Frederic G. Kenyon (New York: Macmillan, 1897), II, 242.

<sup>22</sup> Cora Kaplan, Introd., *Aurora Leigh and Other Poems*, ed. Cora Kaplan (London: The Woman's Press, 1978), p. 24. See also Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), p. 24, and Mermin, "The Damsel," p. 80.

<sup>23</sup> *Letters*, II, 246; see also Julia Bolton Holloway, "Aurora Leigh and Jane Eyre," *Brontë Society Transactions*, 17 (1977), 130-33.

<sup>24</sup> *The Iliad*, II, 597-600.