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Paradise Lost and *Aurora Leigh*

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> *Lord Illingworth.* The Book of Life begins with a man and a woman in a garden.
> *Mrs. Allonby.* It ends with Revelations.

The same is almost true of *Aurora Leigh;* although the crucial meeting between Aurora and her cousin Romney in the garden does not take place until book 2, the very last lines of the poem clearly allude to John's vision of the New Jerusalem:[1]

> He stood a moment with erected brows
> In silence, as a creature might who gazed—
> Stood calm, and fed his blind, majestic eyes
> Upon the thought of perfect noon: and when
> I saw his soul saw— "Jasper first," I said,
> "And second, sapphire; third, chalcedony;
> The rest in order—last, an amethyst."[2]

The framing of the poem with recollections of Genesis and Revelation, fall and redemption, can be seen to find an echo in the deeper pattern of *Aurora Leigh,* in which Aurora and Romney

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begin by misunderstanding each other and parting, but by the end of the poem have reached mutual comprehension and love. However, additional tensions and complexities may be identified if we place *Aurora Leigh* not simply within a biblical, but within a specifically Miltonic, context. For although in many ways *Aurora Leigh* most obviously recalls the poetry of Wordsworth, and particularly *The Prelude,* it can also be read as a palinode to *Paradise Lost.* The tensions within *Aurora Leigh,* the way the poem's ostensibly measured plea on behalf of women seems to conceal hints of a more inflammatory view lurking beneath its surface, are mirrored in the poem's slippery relationship with *Paradise Lost.*

The first line of *Aurora Leigh,* "Of writing many books there is no end" is an unmistakable echo of Ecclesiastes 12:12 KJV, "And further, by these my son, be admonished: of making many books there is no end; and much study is a weariness of the flesh." But within the context of reinvented epic, the text most strongly invoked, by means of difference, is not the Bible, but Milton's *Paradise Lost.* We are prepared for a statement of epic content by the very first word—whether it be man's first disobedience, arms and the man, or the wrath of Achilles—but are cheated when we are instead presented with a rather oblique assertion. The apparently epic opening was but a feint. In direct contrast with the public, grandiose, all-encompassing importance of the subject matter of Homer, Virgil, and particularly Milton, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poem seems to be folded inward:

> And I who have written much in prose and verse
> For others' uses, will write now for mine—
> Will write my story for my better self
> As when you paint your portrait for a friend,
> Who keeps it in a drawer and looks at it
> Long after he has ceased to love you, just
> To hold together what he was and is.
>
> (1.2–8)[3]

The immediate retreat into subjectivity, concealment, even sentiment, adumbrates the peculiar problems of writing as a female poet, problems which dominate the entire poem, and which fulfill the hint contained in the first line, that this will be a poem about writing poetry, rather than about the conventional matter of epic.[4]

Instead of Milton's Muse we are taken into the presence of Aurora's dead parents; the influence of her father is particularly

felt. Whereas Milton seeks to be uplifted, Aurora appears to court literal depression:

> What in me is dark,
> Illumine, what is low, raise and support;
> That to the highth of this great argument
> I may assert eternal providence,
> And justify the ways of God to men.
>
> (1.22–6)[5]

> O my father's hand,
> Stroke heavily, heavily the poor head down,
> Draw, press the child's head closer to thy knee!
> I'm still too young, too young, to sit alone.
>
> (1.25–8)[6]

Aurora Leigh's dependence upon her natural father may be aligned with her creator's reliance upon her masculine poetic ancestry, particularly when we remember her oft quoted lament, "I look everywhere for grandmothers and see none."[7] The importance of Milton as a poet against whom later female writers, such as Charlotte Brontë and Mary Shelley, reacted, subverting his supposed misrepresentation of woman through the character of Eve, has been widely discussed.[8] But although *Aurora Leigh* can be seen as a paradigmatic female riposte to *Paradise Lost*, this aspect of the poem has been strangely neglected by Barrett Browning's critics.[9]

Her conversation with Milton began some time before the writing of *Aurora Leigh*. The work which bears the most obvious debt to *Paradise Lost* is her lyric drama set immediately after the Fall, *A Drama of Exile*. In her preface to this piece, Barrett Browning expresses her sense of unfitness to follow in Milton's footsteps: "I had promised my own prudence to shut close the gates of Eden between Milton and myself, so that none might say I dared to walk in his footsteps. He should be within, I thought, with his Adam and Eve unfallen or falling,—and I, without, with my EXILES,—*I* also an exile!" Yet even as she voices her doubts, we are offered a hint of self-assertion, of self-justification:

> For the rest, Milton is too high, and I am too low, to render it necessary for me to disavow any rash emulation of his divine faculty on his own ground; while enough individuality will be granted, I hope, to my poem, to rescue me from that imputation

> of plagiarism which should be too servile a thing for every sincere thinker. After all, and at the worst, I have only attempted, in respect to Milton, what the Greek dramatists achieved lawfully in respect to Homer . . . For the analogy of the stronger may apply to the weaker; and the reader may have patience with the weakest while she suggests the application.[10]

Clearly *A Drama of Exile* is the most obvious starting point for a discussion of Barrett Browning's engagement with Milton, focusing as it does on the role of Eve which the poet claims has been "imperfectly apprehended hitherto" (2:143).[11] Yet an apparently innocuous reference to Milton in *Casa Guidi Windows* could be said to strike an even more important first blow in a battle which is continued in *Aurora Leigh*. In the passage quoted above, Barrett Browning talks of Milton within the context of a literary heritage embracing Homer and the Greek tragedians. Bloom's *Map of Misreading* offers an analysis of one particular aspect of this imitative process, Milton's allusion to the leaves of Vallombrosa, used to express the impotence of the fallen angels:[12] "His legions, angel forms, who lay entranced / Thick as autumnal leaves that strew the brooks / In Vallombrosa" (1.301–3). Bloom traces the relationship between these lines and a whole array of previous comparisons between men and leaves in the *Iliad,* the *Aeneid,* and the *Inferno.* Here, and in other densely allusive passages, Milton is seen to be engaging in a dialectical relationship with his illustrious forebears, eluding anxiety of influence by "troping upon his forerunners' tropes."[13]

By the nineteenth century, references to the leaves of Vallombrosa often specifically alluded to the image's Miltonic provenance. The following quotation from *Casa Guidi Windows* establishes that Barrett Browning shared this consciousness that Vallombrosa was particularly associated with *Paradise Lost*:

> The Vallombrosan brooks were strewn as thick
> That June day, knee-deep, with dead beechen leaves,
> As Milton saw them ere his heart grew sick,
> And his eyes blind.
>
> (1.136–9)[14]

So when Vallombrosa is mentioned in *Aurora Leigh* it seems reasonable to assume that Milton was at the back of Barrett Browning's mind: "Not a grand nature. Not my chestnut woods / Of Vallombrosa, cleaving by the spurs / To the precipices"

(1.615–7). Whereas Milton uses the simile to belittle the fallen angels, for Aurora the woods of Vallombrosa represent an Italian ideal, beside which the countryside of England appears tame and subdued. Immediately prior to these lines comes a description of English sheep who run "Along the fine clear outline, small as mice / That run along a witch's scarlet thread" (1.612–4).

An anxiety of influence slippage seems to be at work here—the puny leaves of Milton's simile have been magnified, transformed into an unattainable object of Aurora's imaginings. If Milton's leaves may perhaps be seen as a sign of the male poet, the lines preceding them invoke a specifically feminine discourse, with their little mice, transgressive witches, and suggestion of some feminine art in the mention of the scarlet thread—weaving or embroidery.[15]

There is a second flurry of Italian leaves in book 2 of *Aurora Leigh,* when the heroine spurns her cousin's offer of financial assistance by tearing up his deed of gift. It is significant that her refusal of masculine support is accompanied by this return to the image of falling leaves—just as Aurora rebuffs Romney, so Barrett Browning explicitly checks herself from emulating Milton:

> As I spoke, I tore
> The paper up and down, and down and up
> And crosswise, till it fluttered from my hands,
> As forest-leaves, stripped suddenly and rapt
> By a whirlwind on Valdarno, drop again,
> Drop slow, and strew the melancholy ground
> Before the amazed hills . . . why, so, indeed,
> I'm writing like a poet, somewhat large
> In the type of the image, and exaggerate
> A small thing with a great thing, topping it.
>
> (2.1162–71)

Again, she is going against the grain of Milton's use of the leaf simile, claiming that it is too large for what she has to describe and not, as in Milton, suggestive of something tiny and derisory. Part of the reason why she thinks it is too large is that it has become part of the male epic tradition. The reappearance of the leaves in the context of a written document highlights their potential to represent leaves in a book such as those in *Paradise Lost* itself.

Another faint echo of Milton's leaves comes in book 5. Aurora has been describing the shortcomings of her poem "The Hills." Yet again, the leaves are associated with the difficulty of living up to a poetic tradition, although perhaps Aurora's gradual growth in

confidence is signaled by the fact that they have returned to their proper Miltonic place as an indicator of weakness:

> For us, we are called to mark
> A still more intimate humanity
> In this inferior nature, or ourselves
> Must fall like dead leaves trodden underfoot
> By veritable artists.
>
> (5.99–103)

A final invocation of leaves which, as they are of the chestnut, are associated with Vallombrosa, comes in book 6:

> Through the grate
> Within the gardens, what a heap of babes,
> Swept up like leaves beneath the chestnut-trees
> From every street and alley of the town,
> By ghosts perhaps that blow too bleak this way
> A-looking for their heads!
>
> (6.114–9)

Perhaps this is the final stage in the battle for poetic control: finally the leaves are no longer a symptom of poetic anxiety, but merely a descriptive tool as they were for Milton. The fact that she uses them to evoke babies might be an indication of Barrett Browning's apparent interest in carving out a feminine niche for herself, a less spectacular but perhaps just as telling detail as the extraordinary passage in book 5, where artistic creation is explicitly associated with the female body:

> Never flinch,
> But still, unscrupulously epic, catch
> Upon the burning lava of a song
> The full-veined, heaving, double-breasted Age:
> That, when the next shall come, the men of that
> May touch the impress with reverent hand, and say
> "Behold—behold the paps we all have sucked!
> This bosom seems to beat still, or at least
> It sets ours beating: this is living art,
> Which thus presents and thus records true life."
>
> (5.213–22)

But it is not only in the imagery of *Aurora Leigh* that we can trace a struggle between Barrett Browning and her poetic ancestor. A

parallel conflict is played out between their two heroines, Eve and Aurora.

Returning to the first allusion to Vallombrosa in book 1, Aurora goes on further to characterize England in feminine terms. It is tame and enclosed, it discourages aspiration, it is conciliatory but stifling—it is also explicitly compared to the prelapsarian Eden. "On English ground / You understand the letter—ere the fall / How Adam lived in a garden" (1.628–30). But although Edenic, the landscape also offers echoes of the temptations faced by Eve. At the beginning of book 5 Eve recounts a troubling dream to Adam:

> methought
> Close at mine ear one called me forth to walk
> With gentle voice, I thought it thine; it said,
> Why sleep'st thou, Eve? . . .
> . . . . . .
> in vain,
> If none regard, heaven wakes with all his eyes,
> Whom to behold but thee, Nature's desire,
> In whose sight all things joy, with ravishment
> Attracted by thy beauty still to gaze.
>
> (5.35–47)

Aurora is also summoned by an external agency—the sun—to wake and rise:

> The sun came, saying, "shall I lift this light
> Against the lime tree, and you will not look?
> I make the birds sing—listen! but, for you."
>
> (1.656–8)

As with Eve, the invitation is made more tempting by the suggestion that Nature's works are in some way there for her special benefit. Aurora goes on to describe her nighttime escapade in terms of temptation and transgression:

> Capacity for joy
> Admits temptation. It seemed, next, worth while
> To dodge the sharp sword set against my life;
> To slip downstairs through all the sleepy house,
> As mute as any dream there, and escape
> As a soul from the body, out of doors,
> Glide through the shrubberies, drop into the lane.
>
> (1.689–95)

The reference to the sword in particular might recall Adam and Eve's eventual exile from Eden, whose gate will henceforth be guarded by "the brandished sword of God" (12.633).[16]

Within the chronology of *Paradise Lost* Eve's disturbing dream is the prelude to her decision to work apart from Adam, and thus to her fall itself. In *Aurora Leigh* too, the heroine's nighttime vision is followed by a disputation in the garden, in this case concerning the viability of Aurora's poetic vocation, and Romney's desire to marry her. Both Eve and Aurora assert their wish for independence and for separation, whereas both Romney and Adam counsel caution and invoke feminine weakness to back up their case. In both works the argument is tossed back and forth, and in each case the woman has the final word and secures her desired independence. But whereas in the case of Eve the parting with Adam leads to her ruin, for Aurora it is the beginning of a successful career as a poet. This very broad structural affinity would not of course in itself suggest a link with *Paradise Lost,* but there is a complex network of allusions to the earlier poem which, taken together, place *Aurora Leigh* in opposition to Milton. One of the most telling connections with *Paradise Lost* is the simple fact that the heroine's name, Aurora, is of course the Latin name for Eos, goddess of the dawn, and she is thus by implication the opposite of Eve. Aurora is thus a second Eve—and yet that is a role which, in Christian tradition, has already been triumphantly fulfilled by Mary. Perhaps there is a further significance in the fact that the name of the poem's secondary heroine is the adjectival form of Mary, Marian.

Garlands have an important function in both poems. Aurora has gone outside to crown herself with ivy leaves:

> Ah—there's my choice—that ivy on the wall,
> That headlong ivy! Not a leaf will grow
> But thinking of a wreath. Large leaves, smooth leaves,
> Serrated like my vines, and half as green.
> I like such ivy, bold to leap a height
> 'Twas strong to climb.
>
> (2.46–51)

Her choice of plant is interesting; the ivy is explicitly connected with feminine subjection by Milton—Eve mentions the need to "direct / The clasping ivy where to climb" (9.216–7). The suggestion that Aurora is reinventing the ivy as a bold and aspiring plant, fitting in with her desire to find a new feminine poetic idiom, is upheld by the apparently gratuitous comparison between the ivy

and the vine, for the latter plant is also a type of woman's dependence upon the male in Milton (4.307–8, 5.215–7).

In *Paradise Lost* Adam weaves a garland for Eve while he awaits her return, only to let it fall in dismay when he realizes she has eaten the apple. This incident is echoed when Aurora, made a little petulant by Romney's caution against writing poetry, drops the wreath she has made as a prelude to speaking to her cousin with defiance:

> "You'll see—you'll see! I'll soon take flight,
> You shall not hinder." He, as shaking out
> His hand and answering, "Fly then," did not speak,
> Except by such a gesture . . .
> . . . . . .
> he abruptly caught
> At one end of the swinging wreath, and said
> "Aurora!"
>
> (2.121–8)

A little later he explicitly invokes Eve:

> You, you are young
> As Eve with nature's daybreak on her face,
> But this same world you are come to, dearest coz,
> Has done with keeping birthdays, saves her wreaths
> To hang upon her ruins.
>
> (2.158–62)

But the difference between the two women is signaled when, at the end of the argument, Aurora bends to retrieve her garland; she, unlike Eve, is capable of crowning her own merit if no one else will do it for her.

The wreath is only one sign of Milton's presence in this section of the poem. One striking passage recalls Eve's dream as well as her debate with Adam:

> "Now," I said, "may God
> Be witness 'twixt us two!" and with the word,
> Meseemed I floated into a sudden light
> Above his stature.
>
> (2.356–9)

Aurora's mysterious assertion that she seemed to float might recall Eve's words to Adam in book 5. She explains that she was tempted to eat the forbidden fruit:

> the pleasant savoury smell
> So quickened appetite, that I, methought,
> Could not but taste. Forthwith up to the clouds
> With him I flew, and underneath beheld
> The earth outstretched immense, a prospect wide
> And various: wondering at my flight and change
> To this high exaltation; suddenly
> My guide was gone, and I, me thought, sunk down,
> And fell asleep.
>
> (5.84–92)

Aurora contrasts her ambition with Romney's wish that she should turn to a more "worthy work" (2.538). Her own side of the debate is imaged forth in language which again invokes her as an overreaching Eve, yet without conceding that her position is evil or flawed. She speaks of Romney:

> finding me
> Precisely where the devil of my youth
> Had set me, on those mountain-peaks of hope,
> All glittering with the dawn-dew, all erect
> And famished for the noon—exclaiming, while
> I looked for empire and much tribute.
>
> (2.532–7)

Clearly the story of the temptation of Christ is on the surface more firmly suggested than Eve's fall. But within the context of an established connection between Aurora and Eve, it is the latter tale which resonates most strongly. The phrase "famished for the noon" might recall the following lines in particular: "Mean while the hour of noon drew on, and waked / An eager appetite" (9.739–40). A further proof that Barrett Browning had Eve rather than Christ at the back of her mind is the strong similarity with a passage from her earlier *Drama of Exile,* describing the moment at which the Fall took place:

> On a mountain-peak
> Half-sheathed in primal woods and glittering
> In spasms of awful sunshine at that hour,
> A lion couched, part raised upon his paws.
>
> (1.347–50)

Perhaps the strongest Miltonic resonance in book 2 may be found in its lines:

> But so,
> Even so, we let go hands, my cousin and I,
> And in between us rushed the torrent-world
> To blanch our faces like divided rocks,
> And bar for ever mutual sight and touch
> Except through swirl of spray and all that roar.
>
> (2.1243–8)

We might recall that lovely, but foreboding, moment when Eve lets fall Adam's hand: "Thus saying, from her husband's hand her hand / Soft she withdrew" (9.385–6) or else the poem's famous final lines: "They hand in hand with wandering steps and slow, / Through Eden took their solitary way"(12.648–9). The reference to their letting go of hands at the end of book 2 is made more prominent by Romney's earlier plea to Aurora: "Ah my sweet, come down, / And hand in hand we'll go where yours shall touch / These victims, one by one!" (2.385–7).

Barrett Browning's reformulation of the traditional relationship between the sexes is twice described in a way which offers a ghostly echo of some of the most famous lines in *Paradise Lost*:

> Not equal, as their sex not equal seemed;
> For contemplation he and valour formed,
> For softness she and sweet attractive grace,
> He for God only, she for God in him.
>
> (4.296–9)

> Always Romney Leigh
> Was looking for the worms, I for the gods.
> A godlike nature his; the gods look down,
> Incurious of themselves.
>
> (1.551–4)

Barrett Browning simultaneously accepts Milton's division between the sexes and slyly questions its validity. If the gods look down on worms they are making scant use of their lofty stature. We might also compare: "he, overfull / Of what is, and I, haply overbold / For what might be" (1.1108–10). Here too present male superiority is presented as having the potential for reversal, for diminution, within itself.

The strength of Barrett Browning's oppositional voice is most evident toward the end of the poem, when Romney reminisces back to that meeting in the garden of ten years ago in terms

which vividly recall *Paradise Lost,* yet which also acknowledge that his own second Eve was right in leaving him:

> you, who keep
> The same Aurora of the bright June day
> That withered up the flowers before my face,
> And turned me from the garden evermore
> Because I was not worthy.
>
> (8.319–23)

He recalls her garland very clearly, saying that he

> came here to abase myself,
> And fasten, kneeling, on her regent brows
> A garland which I startled thence one day
> Of her beautiful June youth.
>
> (8.1219–22)

Their reconciliation is marked by the joining of their hands, which Romney associates with the idea of a "fall":

> Ah, you've left your height,
> And here upon my level we take hands,
> And here I reach you to forgive you, sweet,
> And that's a fall, Aurora.
>
> (8.1237–40)

Indeed their reunion has in a sense less to do with the final note on which the poem ends—Revelation—than with Milton's description of the Fall. It is as though Eve, after leaving Adam in order to court temptation, had returned to him, not to be blamed and wept over, but to be feted, not to have her garland cast down, but to be crowned in triumph with it. This reversal may be compared with Shelley's subversive reconfiguration of Miltonic material in *Prometheus Unbound.* Perhaps it is no coincidence that there are only nine books in *Aurora Leigh.*[17] Barrett Browning gives her heroine the traits which in Eve led to the Fall, and shows them to be the precise qualities which enable Aurora to achieve fulfillment as both poet and woman, binding her and Romney together rather than driving them further apart.

So far there would appear to be a strong degree of congruity between the Miltonic echoes in *Aurora Leigh* and the poem's brave, yet essentially conservative, feminism. The reworking of *Paradise Lost* suggests Barrett Browning's own view of the

relationship between the sexes; she desires greater autonomy for women than did Milton, yet still envisages men and women working together in partnership. Whereas Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* may be viewed as a radical rejection of Milton, *Aurora Leigh* seems to represent a far more measured reinvention of *Paradise Lost,* particularly as there is no overt questioning of divine authority as there is in *Prometheus Unbound.* On the surface at least, *Aurora Leigh* rejects any truly radical attack on patriarchal society, and the poem ends in a comfortingly traditional way, with a marriage and a happy ending. However, the conclusion of the poem is not of course entirely unproblematic. The strong resemblance between the fates of Romney Leigh and Mr. Rochester was apparent to the poem's earliest readers, and the interpretation of *Jane Eyre* as a novel whose hero must be punished, even symbolically castrated, before he is rewarded with the heroine is equally applicable to *Aurora Leigh.*[18]

One of the strangest links with *Paradise Lost* may be found in book 4, in the description of the abortive wedding of Romney and Marian. It is not unlikely that Barrett Browning was in at least partial control of the Miltonic echoes in book 2, in which explicit references to Eve and to Eden are included. According to the pattern of connections already described, Romney must be seen as a type of Adam, who may need to have some of his views modified, but who is essentially a positive force. But in book 4 he seems to have been metamorphosed into a Satanic figure. How far, if at all, this was a deliberate strategy on Barrett Browning's part is difficult to ascertain. In book 10 of *Paradise Lost* Satan returns to Hell to celebrate his supposed triumph against God and Man. But even as he awaits the applause, he finds that he and all his fellow fallen angels are being transformed into snakes. A vision of the tree of life springs up, but when the snakes attempt to eat the apples they taste of ashes.

Many poor people come to the wedding of Romney and Marian. The description of their entrance provides an extraordinary comparison with Milton's account of the fallen angels:[19]

> They clogged the streets, they oozed into the church
> In a dark slow stream like blood . . .
> . . . . . .
> While all the aisles, alive and black with heads,

> Crawled slowly toward the altar from the street,
> As bruised snakes crawl and hiss out of a hole
> With shuddering involution.
>
> (4.553–67)

> dreadful was the din
> Of hissing through the hall, thick swarming now
> With complicated monsters head and tail,
> Scorpion, and asp, and amphisbaena dire,
> Cerastes horned, hydrus, and ellops drear,
> And dipsas (not so thick swarmed once the soil
> Bedropped with blood of Gorgon, or the isle
> Ophiusa).
>
> (10.521–8)

The comparison between the congregation and a bruised snake strengthens the potential biblical and Miltonic resonance, and the shared association of snakes and blood provides a further link between the two passages. A little later in *Aurora Leigh* we are explicitly invited to think of hell: "'twas as if you had stirred up hell / To heave its lowest dreg-fiends uppermost / In fiery swirls of slime" (4.587–9). Satan's audience had been "now expecting / Each hour their great adventurer from the search / Of foreign worlds" (10.439–41). Romney's audience is also expectant, although they pass the time while they await Marian by indulging in spiteful gossip, until it is revealed that Romney has been jilted. The horrific transformation which Aurora witnesses, making it difficult for her to believe it is really him, and his inability to speak both stem from natural causes yet recall the similar effects of Satan's metamorphosis:

> A murmur and a movement drew around,
> A naked whisper touched us. Something wrong.
> What's wrong. The black crowd, as an overstrained
> Cord, quivered in vibration, and I saw . . .
> Was that *his* face I saw? . . . his . . . Romney Leigh's . . .
> Which tossed a sudden horror like a sponge
> Into all eyes—while himself stood white upon
> The topmost altar-stair and tried to speak,
> And failed, and lifted higher above his head
> A letter . . . as a man who drowns and gapes.
>
> (4.793–802)

from the door
Of that Plutonian hall, invisible
Ascended his high throne . . .
. . . . . .
Forth rushed in haste the great consulting peers,
Raised from their dark divan, and with like joy
Congratulant approached him, who with hand
Silence, and with these words attention won . . .
. . . . . .
So having said, a while he stood, expecting
Their universal shout and high applause,
To fill his ear, when contrary he hears
On all sides, from innumerable tongues
A dismal universal hiss, the sound
Of public scorn . . .
. . . . . .
he would have spoke,
But hiss for hiss returned with forked tongue
To forked tongue.

(10.443–519)

Ostensibly, within the narrative of the poem, Romney and the congregation are opposed; however, the Miltonic context serves to draw them together, implicating Romney in the disturbing hideousness of his audience. The crowd of poor people, thinking Romney has cast off Marian, erupts in fury, treating Romney's conciliatory words in the same way Satan's cohorts do the fruit:

Through the rage and roar
I heard the broken words which Romney flung
Among the turbulent masses, from the ground
He held still with his masterful pale face—
As huntsmen throw the ration to the pack,
Who falling on it headlong, dog on dog
In heaps of fury, rend it, swallow it up
With yelling hound-jaws—his indignant words,
Whereof I caught the meaning here and there
By his gesture . . . torn in morsels, yelled across,
And so devoured.

(4.847–57)

But on they rolled in heaps, and up the trees
Climbing, sat thicker than the snaky locks

> That curled Megaera: greedily they plucked
> The fruitage fair to sight, like that which grew
> Near that bituminous lake where Sodom flamed;
> This more delusive, not the touch, but taste
> Deceived; they fondly thinking to allay
> Their appetite with gust, instead of fruit
> Chewed bitter ashes, which the offended taste
> With spattering noise rejected.
>
> (10.558–67)

The context of Satan's metamorphosis sheds some light on these curious echoes. Within the chronology of *Paradise Lost* he has just brought about the fall of Eve. In *Aurora Leigh* the departure of Marian, instigated by the jealous Lady Waldemar, has ensured her own fall in the eyes of society. By aligning him with Satan at the very moment when we learn of her disappearance, Romney is, by analogy, implicated in the brutal treatment of Marian. A literal reading of the poem completely clears him of any such charge, yet Barrett Browning may be unconsciously projecting her own awareness that she lives in a society where a wealthy man is far more likely to seduce and abandon a penniless girl than be jilted by her.

The significance of this link between Romney and Satan is strengthened by a further association between Romney and a snake in book 8, when he apologizes to Aurora for doubting the wisdom of her earlier choice.

> Set down this
> For condemnation—I was guilty here;
> I stood upon my deed and fought my doubt,
> As men will—for I doubted—till at last
> My deed gave way beneath me suddenly
> And left me what I am:—the curtain dropped,
> My part quite ended, all the footlights quenched,
> My own soul hissing at me through the dark.
>
> (8.459–66)

The idea of his real self being revealed and shown to be wanting, the reference to a triumphant spectacle being undercut, and particularly the image of his soul hissing at him in darkness, all contribute to reinforce the Satanic link. These suggestions of a submerged hostility to Romney are consistent with his eventual "punishment."

Helen Cooper believes that the analogy which Barrett Browning draws between Milton and Romney through their shared

blindness, a similarity explicitly referred to in one of the poet's letters, suggests that she has "finally made peace with her precursor" (p. 190). But if Romney may also be aligned with Satan, such "peace" seems more problematic, and Deirdre David's assertion that the poem represents a "ratification of a deep-rooted foundation of Victorian patriarchy—women serve men, and men and women together serve God" (p. 151) is called into question.

NOTES

[1]The epigraph is from Oscar Wilde, *A Woman of No Importance* (London: Methuen and Co., 1969), p. 144. Revelation 21: 18–20 KJV.

[2]Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh,* ed. Kerry McSweeney (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1993), 9.958–64. All references are to book and line number(s) in this edition and will appear parenthetically in the text.

[3]See also Margaret Reynolds, "*Aurora Leigh:* 'Writing her story for her better self,'" *Browning Society Notes* 17, 1 (1987/8): 5–11.

[4]The generic status of *Aurora Leigh* has been discussed by more than one critic. See Susan Stanford Friedman, "Gender and Genre Anxiety: EBB and H. D. as Epic Poets," *TSWL* 5, 22 (Fall 1986): 203–28, for a discussion of the way Barrett Browning reformulated epic conventions to suit a female perspective. Holly A. Laird also places the poem within an epic context in "*Aurora Leigh:* An Epical *Ars Poetica*" (in *Writing the Woman Artist: Essays on Poetics, Politics, and Portraiture,* ed. Suzanne W. Jones [Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1991], pp. 453–70). See also Dorothy Mermin, "Genre and Gender in *Aurora Leigh,*" *VN* 69 (Spring 1986): 7–11.

[5]John Milton, *Paradise Lost,* ed. Alastair Fowler (London and New York: Longman, 1968; rprt. 1971). All subsequent references are to this edition and will appear parenthetically in the text.

[6]For a discussion of hand imagery as a patriarchal motif in *Aurora Leigh,* see Virginia Steinmetz, "Beyond the Sun: Patriarchal Images in *Aurora Leigh,*" *Studies in Browning and His Circle* 9, 2 (Fall 1981): 18–41.

[7]Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Letters,* ed. Frederic G. Kenyon, 2 vols. (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1897), 1:232. The treatment of maternity in *Aurora Leigh* has been extensively discussed. See Sandra M. Gilbert, "From *Patria* to *Matria:* Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Risorgimento," *PMLA* 99, 2 (March 1984): 194–211, and Dorothy Mermin, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (Chicago and London: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1989), pp. 183–224.

[8]See particularly 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, 1979); Joseph Wittreich, *Feminist Milton* (Ithaca and London: Cornell Univ. Press, 1987); and Lucy Newlyn, "*Paradise Lost*" *and the Romantic Reader* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).

[9]Helen Cooper sketches the outline of such a reading of *Aurora Leigh,* but does not expand on her suggestive comments (*Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Woman and Artist* [Chapel Hill and London: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1988]).

[10]Elizabeth Barrett Browning, preface to *A Drama of Exile,* in *The Complete Works,* ed. Charlotte Porter and Helen A. Clarke, 6 vols. (New York: AMS Press, 1973), 2:143–5.

[11]For a discussion of the relationship between *A Drama of Exile* and Milton, see Deirdre David, *Intellectual Women and Victorian Patriarchy: Harriet Martineau, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, George Eliot* (London: Macmillan Press, 1987), pp. 107–10, and Wanda Campbell, "Isabella Valancy Crawford and Elizabeth Barrett Browning," *Canadian Poetry: Studies, Documentary, Reviews* 29 (Fall-Winter 1991): 23–37.

[12]Harold Bloom, *A Map of Misreading* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1975), pp. 135–8.

[13]Bloom, p. 132.

[14]Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Casa Guidi Windows,* ed. Julia Markus (Barre MA: Imprint Society, 1977), pp. 35–6. Cooper alludes to this passage as follows: "Having established her right relationship to the 'dead,' she can make her literary peace with 'John Milton.' Italy provides a common ground: she can praise Milton without being threatened, because she too loves the country that she imagines 'helped to fill / The cup of Milton's soul' (1.1155–56)" (p. 138).

[15]In German folklore witches were supposed to be able to make mice out of cloth which would then come to life. The scarlet thread may recall Joshua 2:18 (explanatory annotation, *Aurora Leigh,* ed. Margaret Reynolds [Athens: Ohio Univ. Press, 1992], p. 596).

[16]Joyce Zonana equates a different passage, Aurora's vision of herself as Ganymede, ravished by Jove and then falling back to earth, with Eve's dream ("The Embodied Muse: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* and Feminist Poetics," *TSWL* 8, 2 [Fall 1989]: 240–62).

[17]The significance of the number nine is not of course limited to the fact that the Fall takes place in book 9 of *Paradise Lost.* Nine is a curious number of books to comprise an epic poem. This point is discussed by Herbert Tucker who remarks that "For the variously divisible number twelve Barrett Browning substitutes the odd square nine, a triad trebled" ("*Aurora Leigh:* Epic Solutions to Novel Ends," in *Famous Last Words: Changes in Gender and Narrative Closure,* ed. Alison Booth [Charlottesville and London: Univ. Press of Virginia, 1993], pp. 62–85).

[18]The other figure whom the blind Romney might remind us of is of course Milton himself. The connection was explicitly recognized by Barrett Browning, and discussed in a letter to Anna Jameson which she wrote from Florence on 26 December 1856: "Afterwards he had a fever, and the eyes, the visual nerve, perished, showing no external stain—perished as Milton's did" (*Letters,* 2:246).

[19]This powerful episode has disturbed many critics of the poem, perhaps because it seems to imply some distaste for the poor on the poet's part. David, for example, is quick to exonerate Barrett Browning from any charge of fastidiousness or snobbishness (p. 125).