

Motherhood, Creativity and Gender in *Aurora Leigh*

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I

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's verse novel *Aurora Leigh* has been compared with Alfred Tennyson's *The Princess* by critics such as Cora Kaplan, Beverly Taylor and Marjorie Stone. Both poems deal with the prevailing woman's issues in the nineteenth century. They also share similar plots: strong-willed heroines, motherlessness, rejection of marriages arranged by their male parents, and final discovery of their love for the lovers who are converted to the heroines' cause. Both poems' emphasis on motherhood is one manifestation of the similarities. Noting the importance of motherhood in them, Taylor observes that "by introducing babies into text poets could represent what they could not narrate: even "pure" women physically consummated relationships...In both *The Princess* and *Aurora Leigh* woman's acknowledging her sexuality empowers her poetic voice" (9).

Motherhood, in *The Princess*, however, does not go beyond the convention. The prince more than Ida is obsessed with motherhood and idealizes his own dead mother, whose example Ida will possibly follow. On the other hand, in Browning's poem, only Aurora is obsessed with nurturing breasts as a metonymy motherhood. We can call *Aurora Leigh* the female protagonist's *Bildungsroman*, in terms of her completing passage to a woman-poet by subverting the conventional motherhood, while Ida only accommodates herself to it.

Recent feminist psychoanalytic theorists such as Nancy Chodorow, Dorothy Dinnerstein and Jane Flax have revised the traditional account of psychosexual difference. They trace the influence of gender or identity to the dynamics of their mother-infant bond. Daughters see themselves as continuous with their mothers. Female identity is therefore shaped by fluctuations of symbiosis and separation from the mother. According to the nineteenth-century ideology of motherhood as the ideal femininity, the patriarchal power could easily influence daughters' growth into womanhood. The female novelists such as Jane Austen, Mary Shelley, George Eliot and the Brontës deal with motherless heroines in their fiction. Significantly, this maternal absence gives the heroines the freedom necessary to circumscribe their own developmental course (Hirsch 44). In the same sense, maternal absence in *Aurora Leigh* also motivates the

plot of the text: Aurora's mother-quest leads her to her own identity as a woman-poet.

II

As Tennyson's Princess Ida's mother died when Ida was young, Ida is raised by Lady Blanche. Lady Blanche, a widow, says "she was wedded to a fool" (III: 62), despises men, and has fed Ida feminist separatism. Ida establishes the female university, "to leap the rotten poles of prejudice,/Disyoke their necks from custom" (II: 126-27), to "learn whatever men were taught" (II: 130). She thinks women "undeveloped men" (VII: 259) and despises womanishness. She contemptuously describes the fondly loving Prince as "Poor boy" who nurses "a blind ideal like a girl" (III: 198, 201). Ida teaches women in the university not to marry and to become independent of men.

Ida's "iron mood" (VII: 321) begins to melt when she sees another widow Lady Psyche's maternal love for her infant child. Lady Psyche, after having left the child with Ida as a hostage for a while, claims her against Ida.

She the appeal

Brooked not, but clamouring out 'Mine-mine-not yours,
It is not yours, but mine: give me the child'
Ceased all on tremble: piteous was the cry:
So stood the unhappy mother open-mouthed,
And turned each face her way: wan was her cheek
With hollow watch, her blooming mantle torn,
Red grief and mother's hunger in her eye,
And down dead-heavy sank her curls, and half
The sacred mother's bosom, panting, burst
The laces toward her babe. (VI: 123-33)

Ida awakens to her own motherhood at Psyche's sad sight and decides to open the university as a hospital for the wounded men in the tournament.

Here Psyche's motherhood remains within the nineteenth-century cultural formulation. She is described as an ideal mother. Moreover, she is powerless that she needs Cyril as a mediator to get the child back. Eventually the marriage of Psyche and Cyril will follow. Ida's awakened sense of motherhood is also conventional. She nurses the Prince and yields to his suit after all. Although the Prince says "woman is not undeveloped man" (VII: 259), he seems to acknowledge gender distinction.

...at last she set herself to man,

Like perfect music into noble: (VII: 269-70)

The Prince's ideal woman model is his dead mother, who "[n]ot learned, save in gracious household ways," was "not perfect, nay, but full of tender wants" (VII: 299–300). After Ida reveals her uneasiness at his love ("It seems you love to cheat yourself with words" (VII: 314)), she loses her voice. Ida's claim for autonomy and equality remains questionable at the end of the poem. Motherhood/womanhood and autonomy for both Ida and Psyche are incompatible.

III

"Suckling becomes a multi-purpose symbol of nurturing and growth," remarks Cora Kaplan in her introduction to *Aurora Leigh*. According to her, one purpose is to "link the narrative theme of Aurora's development as a poet and Marian's rehabilitation to the philosophical and aesthetic themes" (15). Aurora's mother died when she was only four, and could not suckle/love Aurora sufficiently. Consequently, suckling for the motherless daughter comes to symbolise dissatisfaction rather than positive nurturing, contrary to Kaplan's remark.

Aurora searches for nurturing love, always feeling this dissatisfaction. Surely her "mother-want" motivates her obsession with suckling breasts and eventual loveless life.

I felt a mother-want about the world,
 And still went seeking, like a bleating lamb
 Left out at night in shutting up the fold—
 As restless as a nest-deserted bird
 Grown chill through something being away, though what
 It knows not. (I: 40–45)

If "children learn by such,/Loves holy earnest in a pretty play...Become aware and unafraid of Love" (I: 54–59) by mothers, Aurora has not learned love. As a result, she becomes unable to love her own poetry—her creation, her child—as will be evident later.

Maternal absence robs daughters of their conventional gender distinction. Aurora is only given her mother's portrait after her mother's death. "The portrait of a dead woman" is a *topos* in nineteenth-century English literature: Tennyson's "The Gardener's Daughter", Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess" and D. G. Rossetti's "The Portrait" imply that Victorian stereotypical women are metaphorically dead or in men's possession. Aurora's mother's portrait not only gives her an image of woman metaphorically killed into art, but seems to mingle with "whatever I last read or heard or dreamed" (I: 148) about woman, the object of worship, desire, aversion and horror.

Ghost, fiend, and angel, fairy, witch, and sprite,
A dauntless Muse who eyes a dreadful Fate,
A loving Psyche who loves 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
Moon lighted pallor, ere she shrunk and blinked
And shuddering wriggled down to the unclean; (I: 154–63)

This portrait haunts her as an image of perplexing ambivalence of woman. Even the image of milk, which is a metonymy for “suckling” image, is mixed with Medusa’s snaky hair.

Since her Italian mother died, Aurora’s scholarly English father educated her. He gives her a boy’s education such as “the trick of Greek/And Latin” (I: 714–15), which leads to her autonomy. He dies when Aurora is thirteen and she is inducted to teach femininity by his sister in England. The aunt gives her the lessons proper for a woman and the books on womanhood “that boldly assent/Their right of comprehending husband’s talk/When not to deep, and even of answering/With pretty ‘may it please you,’ or ‘so it is’” (I: 430–33). Her mother’s absence, her father’s masculine education and her aunt ornamental education are unable to give Aurora the identity of a woman. Rather she thinks a woman’s life is incompatible with her vocation as a poet. Arguing against Romney’s conventional gender distinctions of woman with the heart and man with the head, she refuses his proposal because his idea of marriage threatens her autonomy.

“You misconceive the question like a man,
Who sees a woman as the complement
Of his sex merely. You forget too much
That every creature, female as the male,
Stands single in responsible act and thought
As also in birth and death.” (II: 434–39)

After leaving Romney, she establishes herself in London as a poet, but she expresses dissatisfaction with her poetry in spite of popular praise. When she destroys her poems, she realizes her barrenness in creation as a poet.

I ripped my verse up
And found no blood upon the rapier’s point;

The heart in them was just an embryo's heart
Which never yet had beat, that it should die; (III: 245–49)

In her frustrating poetic experience she tries to find new poetry, which reveals her continuous obsession with “mother’s breasts,” nurturing “the new-made creatures hanging there” (V: 16–17). Aurora, however, is unable to see herself as a woman-poet with “mother’s breasts.” Instead she expects the new “double-breasted Age” (V: 216) to nourish poets and make their art alive.

Moreover, she sees Danaë not as a woman welcoming the lover Jove, but as an artist expecting golden inspiration (V: 122–43). Although she realizes the need of love, “passionate womanhood” (V: 443) in creativity, she still searches nourishing mother not within herself but outside of her like “unweaned babes” sucking their thumbs (V: 489).

The story of Aurora’s relationship of Lady Waldemar and Marian Erle is important for Aurora’s development toward a woman-poet. Lady Waldemar’s selfish and open-hearted love for Romney rouses Aurora’s envy and jealousy. At Lord How’s party in particular Aurora is drawn to Lady Waldemar’s conspicuous breasts.

How they told,
Those alabaster shoulders and bare breasts,
On which the pearls, drowned out of sight in milk,
Were lost, excepting for the ruby-clasp!
They split the amaranth velvet bodice down
To the waist or nearly, with the audacious press
Of full-breasted beauty. If the heart within
Were half as white! (V: 618)

On the one hand, she is repulsed by Lady Waldemar’s breasts because they are used for sexual lure rather than for mothering nurturance. Indeed Lady Waldemar plays an untrustful mother for Marian to deliver her to the more degraded woman. On the other hand, the rumor that Romney is engaged to Lady Waldemar makes Aurora jealous of her and she unloosens the bands of her hair when she arrives home. Her act unquestionably reveals release of her repressed love for Romney. At this point, however, her feminine passion is released only temporarily. She soon goes back to mother breasts’ image:

How I burn toward you? do you feel tonight
The urgency and yearning of my soul,
As sleeping mothers feel the suckling babe
And smile? (V: 1208–71)

Then she decides to return to her motherland, Italy.

Aurora reaches a new stage in searching her identity when she discovers Marian living with her illegitimate baby in Paris. Angela Leighton says "the figure of Marian represents a significant advance in the literature of the fallen woman...Instead of retiring into a self-effacing and conventionally innocent silence, she accuses the world around her" (147-48). Amanda Anderson moreover digs into the subjects and suggests the woman artist's "possibilities for mediating between aesthetic isolation and intersubjective experience" (169) in the poem. As these critics mention, Browning revises the conventional idea of "fallenness." Her revision through Marian as a double for Aurora subverts the binary oppositions of women in terms of pureness.

When Marian is seduced in a brothel, she is "simply, murdered" (VI: 771) and resurrects only for her child. Using the Christian image of death as victim and resurrection as a blessing, she justifies her motherhood. She is a passive victim of male lust and therefore remains as pure as any mother.

I have as sure a right
As any glad proud mother in the world,
Who sets her darling down to cut his teeth
Upon her church-ring. If she talks of law,
I talk of law! I claim my mother-dues
By law—the law which now is paramount—
The common law, by which the poor and weak
Are trodden underfoot by vicious men,
And loathed for ever after by the good. (VI: 661-69)

She accuses the common law which negatively stigmatizes single mother. Marian's justification and purification of motherhood is quite different from the conventional idealization. When Marian says, "Did God make mothers out of victims, then,/And set such pure amens to hideous deeds?" (VII: 56), she implies all mothers' sexual consummated acts and undercuts the binary between mothers and fallen women. Her purification comes from her victimized experience not from patriarchal ideology.

Marian also revises the conventional idea of a silent and selfless mother. It is notable that she strongly tells the story of her own victimization to Aurora and claims her right of innocence and her right to motherhood. This scene presents a striking contrast to their first meeting, where Aurora retells Marian's narrative and as a result appropriates her voice.

She told the tale with simple, rustic turns—
Strong leaps of meaning in her sudden eyes
That took the gaps of any imperfect phrase

Of the unschooled speaker: I have rather writ
 The thing I understood so, than the thing
 I heard so. (IV: 151–56)

Aurora, who once robbed Marian of her autonomy by retelling, now realizes Marian's autonomy in her eloquent narrative and discovers a new mother's image in her.

We can hear Marian's more eloquent and more powerful autonomous narrative once again when she rejects Romney's proposal in Florence. He comes to Italy to atone for Marian's misfortune for marrying her. Marian, however, renounces his offer, seeing her early love for him as unequal infatuation and her present love for child as excluding marriage which would legitimate the son.

Perhaps, O friend, I set you up so high
 Above all actual good or hope of good
 Or fear or evil, all that could be mine,
 I haply set you above love itself,
 And out of reach of these poor woman's arms,
 Angelic Romney, what was in my thought?
 To be your slave, your help, your toy, your tool.
 To be your love...I never thought of that:
 To give you love...still less. I gave you love?
 I think I did not give you anything;
 I was but only yours..... (IX: 364–74)

We only, never call him fatherless
 Who has God and his mother. (IX: 414–15)

Marian, different from another mother Lady Psyche in *The Princess* who needs a male protector for herself and her child, subverts the conventional image of a helpless mother. She as a mother is independent of man.

Aurora's quest to recuperate woman's voice and autonomy without spoiling mother's nurturing love ends. Her perplexing ambivalent mother image disappears and the powerful new image of Marian takes the place of it. It is interesting that Aurora's quest story yields to Marian's recuperating story in Book VI and VII. Marian almost takes over the story (Anderson 195). After all Marian as a double for her is the object of Aurora's quest and Aurora the poet finally takes up Marian's story as her own. Marian embodies nourishing and autonomous motherhood. Aurora gains womanhood through Marian. She recognizes no split between her identity as a poet and a woman any longer. She accepts Romney's marriage proposal, and it does not reduce her to the status of dependent which she much feared initially. Her obsession with "mother-want"

disappears, too. She does not need a suckling mother any more since she conceives herself as an autonomous and nurturing woman-poet. Instead of mother's breasts Aurora drops against Romney's at the end.

I flung closer to his breast,
As sword that, after battle, flings to sheath. (IX: 833-34)

She gradually became grown a woman.

Whereas Tennyson unsettles conventional gender distinctions in *The Princess* only to reconstitute the idealization of motherhood, Browning questions the convention from beginning to end and subverts it. Ida, once having written unfeminine "awful odes" (I: 137) and despised sentimental lyrics such as "Tears, idle Tears" and "O Swallow, Swallow," reads love lyrics at the end. Aurora's poem begins with her powerful manifesto to "write my story for my better self" (I: 4) and ends with a vision of the New Jerusalem, taken from the imagery of St. John's Revelations. Having claimed poetry for women at the beginning, she aspires after the founding of a new world with "the clarion on thy woman's lip" (IV: 929). Both Aurora and her creator Browning can be called feminist writers in the nineteenth century.²⁾

Notes

- 1) See Steinmetz. She takes the maternal images as "negative symbols reenforcing the theme of deprivation and representing the poet's need to bring obsessive infantile fantasies into light" (351).
- 2) See Nancy Miller (8).

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