

The Levite's Concubine 1

Running head: THE LEVITE'S CONCUBINE

The Levite's Concubine: A Victim's Fascination with Her Enslavement

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Abstract

In 1864, the Contagious Diseases Acts were passed by Parliament in Britain. They attempted to put a stop to the rampant disease which accompanied prostitution. The central figure in this law was the prostitute and the fallen woman. On one hand, the Contagious Diseases Acts of 1864 viewed prostitutes as commodities in a capitalistic society, and her fallen body was considered to be the source for her identity. On the other hand, opposing groups led by figures such as Josephine Butler sought to give fallen women a more natural identity which focused less on her body and more on her transcendent ability to self-determine. This thesis describes the debates about the Contagious Diseases Acts, Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* as texts which frame and determine the course of debates about the place of fallen women in Victorian society.

Christian people! There is a weak and prostrate figure lying at our door; to this door she turns for help, though it be but in her dying fall; her hands are upon the threshold—dead hands flung forward in mute and terrible appeal to the God above, who looking down from heaven, sees not that prostrate form alone, but on the one side the powers of hell, on the other, in their safe dwelling-place, the selfish sleepers to whom the pale cold hands appeal in vain. The night is far spent. Throughout the world's long night the fate of the Levite's concubine has been outcast woman's fate, cast forth in answer to the clamorous cries of insatiable human lust, and then left to perish in the outer darkness; while "her lord," ordained her protector by nature and by the law of God, slumbers unheeding.

Josephine Butler

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In the Victorian era, a central figure in the discussion about the role of women in society was the prostitute and the fallen women, the Magdalen in the dichotomy of the Magdalen and the "Angel in the House." At the same time that this discussion was taking place, the Contagious Diseases Acts were passed in 1864 which implicitly accepted the sexual double standard in gender roles of the time. This legislation accepted the view that the prostitute was a commodity in a capitalistic society whose fate was to remain fallen and harmfully reified the socially constructed role of women which focused only on her body as the source for her identity. Opposing groups and ideas emerged which sought to give fallen women a more natural identity which focused less on her body and more on her transcendent ability to be morally self-determinate. Thomas Hardy recognized the problem of defining women with a socially constructed identity based on their bodies in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. The Ladies' National Association Recognized this problem as well and fought to get the Contagious Diseases Acts repealed. Their main method of doing so was by recognizing the essential purity of women by identifying with them and transferring their own pure identities onto those of fallen women and prostitutes, much the same way that Aurora does for Marian in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*.

The Contagious Diseases Acts of 1864, made the socially accepted double standard of sexuality a state-sanctioned law which ultimately focused on the body of the prostitute and divorced her humanity from her being, making her into a commodity in line with the Victorian idea of conspicuous consumption. As is evident in Hardy's

Victorian novel *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, the social and legal double standard forced women to lose their moral agency and trapped them into irredeemability. Social change was needed, and the Ladies' National Association, under the direction of Josephine Butler, sought to give women moral agency and an identity which was not reliant on the fallen status of their bodies by accepting them into a community of women and giving them a socially respectable identity. This kind of action is shown in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*, where Aurora accepts Marian Erle into a community of women which is both natural and Edenic but which also recognizes the socially imperfect aspects of humanity by requiring that the fallen woman be self-determined.

The Prostitute as an Economic Commodity

The socially constructed aspect of the prostitute came from the idea that she was a commodity in the capitalistic atmosphere of the Victorian era. Her reasons for becoming a prostitute were economic, and ultimately, she became a commodity which could be regulated by the state. Instead of a person who had moral self-determination, the economic aspects of prostitution replaced a natural identity with a constructed one.

The economic aspect of prostitution is emphasized by the wide availability of prostitutes in England during the Victorian era. Even in the puritanical Victorian society, prostitution was widespread. Especially in London and military towns and ports, a prostitute could be easily found and her services taken advantage of. Even respectable members of society knew about prostitutes and where they could be found. Although prostitution might not fit into a puritanical view of Victorian society, it certainly fits into the consumer view of Victorian society. "Conspicuous consumption" took its hold on the

industrialized, capitalistic new era of wealth and means. In the Victorian era, as capitalism gained hold in an increasingly industrialized society, the consumer began to play a more important role in the economy. Prostitution itself was not exempt from the effects of such a society. New definitions and understandings of prostitution arose as a result of the new focus on consumption. Prostitutes themselves were participants in “conspicuous consumption” in two ways: first, their economic need drove them to make money by becoming a prostitute, and, second, they themselves were a commodity in the market of flesh. Prostitution held a misleading allure for many working-class women because it provided an alternative to the depressing and unstable world of the working class, and prostitutes could become consumers with their earnings of the new goods that capitalism provided. In reality, however, the perceived benefits of participating in Victorian consumption were overcome by the degrading side of the market: prostitutes lost their personhoods and identities as whole women when they became a commodity of flesh.

Prostitution was generally a career or a source of extra income for lower-class women. Lower-class women could barely afford to make ends meet, and their poverty drove them to sell their bodies instead of their needlework (Harrison 229). Not only did the burgeoning “conspicuous consumption” of the Victorian era create a class whose underpaid labor drove them to find other work, but the same focus on consumption swept up all women, not just those who could afford to consume. Lower-class women wanted to be conspicuous consumers as well, and the increased income which prostitution provided drew many women to the streets. Either through impoverished need or

unrealized want, lack of money in the typical working-class lifestyle drew many women into prostitution.

The economic benefits, as well as the perceived autonomy and vitality of the prostitute, were more than likely never realized in the way that a working-class girl thought they would be when she first ventured into prostitution; rather, the prostitute experienced a role reversal whereby she became the product which was being consumed and regulated. While economically and materially better than the near slavery of its alternative of exhausting work for little pay, prostitution provided its own trials and tribulations. Judith Walkowitz takes this fact into careful consideration in her own study of Victorian prostitution:

This form of rebellion could be contradictory and self-defeating. Poor working women often drifted into prostitution because they felt powerless to assert themselves and alter their lives in any other way. Even those young women who were positively attracted to prostitution soon discovered that streetwalking was a more hazardous and precarious occupation than they had anticipated . . . streetwalking may have afforded poor women a certain degree of autonomy, but it did not liberate them from a life of poverty and insecurity. (*Prostitution in Victorian Society* 21)

Rather, the opposite of economic prosperity occurred. In her desire to be a consumer, the prostitute actually became a product herself. In a capitalistic system in which consumption became increasingly important to one's status as an individual, its individuality did not extend to the prostitute, who, despite her seeming economic

autonomy, could not escape the fact that she herself was a product being consumed by men who considered her necessary to their happiness and comfort.

The Prostitute as the Subject of Fear

Despite the prostitute's role as a commodity which was willingly consumed by men, there was still fear of unchecked prostitution and its effect on Victorian society. Those who wished to keep the festering masses in their places—away from the middle- and upper-classes, could do so in a society where the roles and functions of the fallen woman could be closely regulated. The flurry of discussion surrounding venereal diseases and the prostitutes who spread them made regulation seem like the necessity it had never been before. Roles and functions within society were set, and so the regulation which followed matched them very strictly and purposefully, furthering the socially constructed identity of prostitutes. As a result of its position in a consumer society, prostitution necessitated regulation. The primary reason for regulation was the fear of the result of prostitution: widespread and rampant venereal diseases. The necessity for regulation, says Judith Walkowitz, came from “. . . deep-seated social fears and insecurities, most vividly expressed in the images of filth and contagion associated with the ‘Great Unwashed.’ Pollution became the governing metaphor for the perils of social intercourse between the ‘Two Nations’ . . .” (*Prostitution in Victorian Society* 3-4). The fear of prostitution represents and resulted in the distance of the Contagious Diseases Acts from the prostitutes themselves. In combination with the idea that the Acts were primarily meant to regulate a commodity rather than a group of people, the Contagious Diseases Acts were marked by distance.

The Contagious Diseases Acts

In the beginning, the Contagious Diseases Acts targeted military towns with plans for eventual extension to all of England. Subsequent Acts, passed in 1866 and 1869, expanded the scope and enforcement of the initial Acts of 1864. Military towns were targeted primarily because men in the Army and Navy were not permitted to get married while serving; thus, masses of women followed the military to supply the men with a service which they could not get otherwise. The Acts mandated that any woman who was suspected of being a prostitute could be brought into a hospital for compulsory examination. If she was found to be diseased, she could be put into a lock hospital for up to three months (Walkowitz, *Prostitution in Victorian Society* 76). A woman did not need to be caught in the act in order to be brought in; she could be arrested on mere hearsay or an anonymous tip.

The Acts as Social Legislation

Inevitably, legislation with the utilitarian goal of reducing disease caused by prostitution would manifest itself socially as well. Because prostitution, despite its function as an economic exchange in a consumer society, was also bound up in the violation of social norms of the time, the Acts ended up regulating social behavior and social roles. Amanda Anderson notes that early Victorian social criticism was concerned with the problems that arose as a result of industrialism, such as public hygiene. Government intervention in these social issues was characterized by empiricism and arose from utilitarianism. Social policies were based on facts and statistics (Anderson 44). The Contagious Diseases Acts were particularly Victorian in that they attempted to

solve social fears and social problems with pragmatic legislation.

The combination of social and utilitarian legislation placed the prostitute in a different and more harmful social and economic position. Since the social group with fear of the “great unwashed” included middle- and upper-classes who were concerned with preserving their own way of life, the prostitute was the one who ended up being punished. More than addressing simple fear of disease, the Acts also attempted, even if not intentionally, to curtail the freedom and difference of women who did not fit into the standard Victorian gender role for women. A prostitute's autonomy and her aggressiveness were threatening to the male population. In the same way, the diseased masses, left unchecked, were terrifying to the respectable middle- and upper-class Victorians. Walkowitz notes this “added benefit” provided by the Acts:

Increasingly, the acts became openly linked to a tradition of repressive social legislation that tried to enforce a social discipline on the unrespectable poor. From exceptional medical measures for the military, they had been transformed into an important piece of domestic legislation. Paralleling this development was new official propaganda that stressed the social and moral benefits of the acts. (*Prostitution in Victorian Society* 78)

Victorian men in power satisfied their own fears of upper-class adulteration by solving a social problem and passing the fear onto a different group—the prostitute. They disguised this selfish need for social preservation by using morally upright rhetoric in the Contagious Diseases Acts and their justifications which satisfied a Victorian society obsessed with purity and separation from the frightening working-class underworld. The

Acts protected the Victorian values of virtue and family in the eyes of those who approved, and moreover, created the illusion of order. The idea that the motivation, practice, and goals of the Acts were morally askew is marked by the fact that initially, the public knew nothing about the Acts' passage; Parliament had kept it a closely guarded secret (Fawcett and Turner 43).

The Implicit Double Standard in the Contagious Diseases Acts

The reality of the Acts was that they sanctioned vice and operated under the double standard of gender roles promoted by William Acton, a well-known doctor and author of the time, and other social reformers. Implicit in the Acts' assumptions is the acceptance of the use of prostitutes by men. The Acts were not trying to outlaw prostitution; it attempted to curtail the harmful spread of disease and its effects on masculine society. The Acts also admitted that prostitution was necessary for men. According to Judith Walkowitz, who cites Keith Thomas, the Contagious Diseases Acts marked a pinnacle of the officially recognized double standard. The double standard "upheld different standards of chastity of men and women and carefully tried to demarcate pure women from the impure" (*Prostitution in Victorian Society* 70). This was why social legislation marked by pragmatism, especially when it delved into the realm of morality, walked a fine line of invading the self-determinism of a whole class of people. Legislation which was meant to be pragmatic in the reduction of disease brought along the social assumptions of the Victorians, just or unjust.

This interesting mix of social and pragmatic manifests itself in another way: through the doctors who were given authority to create social legislation. Acton gained a

high position of authority on the matter of Victorian prostitution with his book *Prostitution Considered in its Moral, Social, and Sanitary Aspects*. He studied prostitution itself and the reasons why women became prostitutes, and he proposed a solution for the frightening effect of venereal disease. The most notable part of Acton's study of the "Great Social Evil" is his use of the Victorian double standard for men and women:

Perhaps nowhere is the power differential between Victorian males and females more clearly seen than in the sexual double standard, which demanded female chastity (a "moral" standard) while promoting the tradition of male sexual activity prior to marriage as necessary to men's health (a "scientific" standard). Dr. William Acton's *Prostitution*, for example, is a treatise that says little about prostitutes but discusses at length the economic (the need to postpone marriage until able to attain middle-class standards of "conspicuous consumption"), physical (men's health is physically damaged by celibacy), and social connotations of men's need for sexual activity prior to marriage. (Logan 18)

Prostitution was seen as necessary for men to remain healthy, but the women who provided this necessity to men were fallen women who deserved to be treated as a commodity which provided the "necessary evil" and nothing more.

Whereas Acton thought that prostitution should be regulated, he only thought that the female participants should be regulated, not the men who participated equally in the act of prostitution. In his study, *Prostitution Considered in its Moral, Social, and*

Sanitary Aspects, he proposed that “it [the spread of disease] is a matter that must be left entirely to each man’s discretion and good sense.” He goes on to say that bathing facilities should be provided for the men so that they can “follow the dictates of their own prudence” or the instructions of their doctors (Acton 193). Perhaps Acton’s reluctance to institute regulation on men was a result of prior attempts to impose examinations on men: “Indeed, an earlier attempt to institute periodic examination among soldiers had failed because enlisted men violently objected and officers feared that compulsory examination would lead to the demoralization of their men. It was contended that such objections could not apply to prostitutes, who were presumably bereft of “self-respect” and more powerless to protest this intrusion” (Walkowitz, *Prostitution in Victorian Society* 3). A further effect of the market of prostitutes’ bodies can be seen here: if a woman is merely a commodity to be bought and sold on the market, then she can have no feelings or protest against how her commoditization is regulated. In a consumer society, the “product,” the prostitute, loses her autonomy through regulation which is directed only at her.

Allowing for male sexual license during a time of romanticized and idealized female virtue and purity is striking. This double standard for sexuality is reflected in literature and writing of the time. W. R. Greg, author of the 1862 essay “Why Are Women Redundant?” is cited in Mary Poovey’s book *Uneven Developments* as being one such promoter of the double standard: “The reason he imagines controlling women and not men is that, according to Greg, women are not dominated by the irrepressible drive that governs the sexual lives of men” (5). Here is another reason why the lack of sexual

drive in women was so important to the double standard: women were seen as having no natural need for sex, so limiting their sexual lives would not take away from any natural need necessary to their (lacking) personhood. Prostitution was considered to be a “necessary evil” because of this recognition. Men’s natural sexual urges could not be stopped; therefore, prostitutes were necessary. While Greg understood this was a problem, his solution of sending prostitutes away from uncontrollable men (5) did not solve the underlying problem of the conception of gender roles: women were unwilling objects and victims of man’s sexual nature.

The Prostitute's Loss of Moral Self-Determination under the Acts

The Contagious Diseases Acts reinforced the idea that women were objects, giving men power over women. Thus, the ripple effect extended from assumptions underlying the Act itself. Josephine Butler spoke of her experience of working with prostitutes during the repeal campaign in *The Moral Reclaimability of Prostitutes*: “And yet we hear it said, ‘Women who sell their person are already so degraded that even registration for sanitary purposes can degrade them no further;’ henceforth they are to be no longer women, but only bits of numbered, inspected, and ticketed human flesh, flung by Government into the public market!” (126). Under the Contagious Diseases Act, prostitutes were viewed as disposable women with no humanity left in them; therefore, it did not matter that the exams that they were forced to have were humiliating because their sacrifice was necessary for the health of male society.

The objectified existence of prostitutes and their status as fallen allowed them to be ostracized from respectable society. Judith Walkowitz notes that the attitude toward

fallen women during the Victorian era was repression: "Writers like Tait demanded that prostitutes be banished from public gathering and that brothel owners and producers be prosecuted. Prostitutes were labeled public enemies, criminals, and outcasts who had 'abandoned the prerogatives of civil liberty'" (*Prostitution in Victorian Society* 39).

Josephine Butler hints at this attitude when she says in her speech *The Lovers of the Lost* that prostitutes are forced to suffer as if they willfully entered into prostitution (103). The focus on the bodies of prostitutes blotted out the recognition of their humanity and their ability to redeem themselves from their fallen state.

In Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, this situation plays itself out on Tess and Angel's wedding night. After they have both disclosed that each has had sexual relations prior to their marriage, Angel is unable to see Tess in the same pure way he had viewed her before her disclosure:

"In the name of our love, forgive me," she whispered with a dry mouth. "I have forgiven you for the same." And as he did not answer she said again; "forgive me, as you are forgiven. *I forgive you, Angel.*"

"You,—yes, you do."

"But you do not forgive me?"

"O Tess, forgiveness does not apply to the case. You were one person: now you are another. My God—how can forgiveness meet such a grotesque—prestidigitation as that!" (226)

Although Angel and Tess have committed the same sin, Tess is to be punished, even considered an entirely different, *grotesque* person for her unnatural crime while Angel's

sin is excused because of its inevitability. Ultimately, as the novel shows, the double standard and recognition of a "necessary evil" allowed for fallen women to be treated as less than human.

The women who were ostracized from society had thus lost their moral agency. The State, through the Contagious Diseases Acts, stole the individual woman's ability to define herself and thus, her ability to redeem herself from her fallen state. If a prostitute was a victim of social forces beyond her control, and if that victimhood was solidified and reified by the State's final ruling that prostitution must be around in order to make the world turn, then the prostitute became hopelessly trapped in a system which implicitly promoted the double standard. Acton claimed that prostitutes had made three "vulgar errors" once they had gone against their natural state of purity. These conditions included: "1. That once a harlot, always a harlot. 2. That there is no possible advance, moral or physical, in the condition of the actual prostitute. 3. That the harlot's progress is short and rapid" (27). Thus, Acton painted the picture of the prostitute as a woman who, once her purity was lost, would forever remain immoral and had no chance for recovery.

The Acts Perpetuate the Harms they Attempt to Solve

Prostitutes who had not planned on staying prostitutes for a long time suddenly felt like they had no alternative. Many working-class women did not even have a clear definition for the word prostitute and may not have even considered themselves as such. The exams, however, gave them the definition. As a sub-human commodity, the prostitute should be expected to submit to regular exams. Under this logic, the violation

that she experienced through examination would be nothing foreign to her. The Victorian prostitute faced a loss of identity as human and female as a result of this kind of thinking: “. . . fallenness displaces threats to autonomy and discrete identity, to cherished forms of masculine selfhood. Fallenness, with its insistent emphasis on a self driven or fractured by external forces, challenges the very possibility of a self-regulated moral existence” (Anderson 41). Further, treatment as a commodity negatively affected future chances for rehabilitation: “Feminists counted that it was the examination itself that ultimately destroyed the women’s self-respect and rendered their rehabilitation virtually impossible” (Walkowitz 130). By making “casual” prostitutes feel as though they could be nothing else, the Contagious Diseases Act made many prostitutes into career prostitutes, thus prolonging the harmful effects of prostitution on society and further enslaving women to the “necessary evil.” The idea that women were objects would be enforced upon prostitutes permanently, which would extend into society and affect all women. Economic forces drove them to prostitution; social forces kept them there. In combination with the idea that fallen women could no longer be moral agents who could redeem themselves from their status as marketable only as a sexual commodity to be used by men who necessitated their use, the fatalistic attitude taken by most Victorians only served to keep women enslaved by her masculine captors. In a world where men required women to be sexually licentious on the men’s behalf, the double standard made prostitutes victims in that they were condemned for acting out their necessary calling in a market of flesh. Fallen women were not expected to act in a moral manner and could be treated as such. Prostitutes were the sacrifice which was required in order to support

accepted ways of male behavior.

Hardy's use of the Natural/Social Dichotomy in Tess of the D'Urbervilles

Up until this point, the treatment of identification of prostitutes focused on an identity which was socially constructed, denying the human aspect of the fallen woman. She was not seen as anything other than her body. This singular view of fallen women created the problem of a lack of self-determination for the fallen woman and denied her the ability to transcend her body. Thomas Hardy uses his Victorian novel, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, to explain that women could be defined in more than one way. The real question asked by *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* concerns the natural state of a woman. Hardy uses a natural/social dichotomy to point out the damaging effects of the Victorian double standard and its insistence on the irredeemability of the fallen woman. Hardy points out a need for transcendence of both the socially constructed gender roles for women and the focus on the physical body as the definition of one's humanity. Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* dramatizes the effects of the attitude of "once a harlot, always a harlot." The cycle of fallenness and the resignation it created in Hardy's character Tess ultimately ends in death and hopelessness. By pointing out the awful effects of such a society, Hardy also points out the need for change.

Hardy makes a clear distinction between the natural and the unnatural, the physical and the spiritual. He uses the different settings in the novel to indicate how Tess's purity should be interpreted. In the natural setting of the dairy farm, Tess is seen by Angel to be pure, natural, ethereal and free from the social implications of her fallenness. In *Tess*, Hardy uses setting to show Angel's interpretations of Tess's self are

false: the distinctions between natural and unnatural undergird Hardy's dualistic distinctions of the self.

Hardy's natural/unnatural and physical/spiritual distinctions are most clear in the Edenic section of the novel where Tess and Angel work at the dairy farm. The natural setting of the dairy farm makes Tess and Angel into a pre-fall couple, whose relationship is similar to that of Adam and Eve: "The spectral, half-compounded, aqueous light which pervaded the open mead, impressed them with a feeling of isolation, as if they were Adam and Eve" (Hardy 130). The setting of the dairy farm and its Edenic implications, along with its inhabitants, Angel and Tess, cast as the original couple Adam and Eve, creates an aura of purity and simplicity of natural living without surrounding social implications which pervade the outside world.

Such natural living carries further implications for the life which Tess and Angel lead there. In their isolation from the outside world and its corrupted religious influences, Tess and Angel create their own religion: "Unexpectedly he began to like the outdoor life for its own sake, and for what it brought, apart from its bearing on his own proposed [religious] career. Considering his position he became wonderfully free from the chronic melancholy which is taking hold of the civilized races with the decline of belief in a beneficent Power" (Hardy 118). Here, nature replaces monotheistic or organized religion. Such replacement is evident in Tess's comments about how her spiritual essence can leave her physical body when overcome by nature: "'A very easy way to feel 'em go,' continued Tess, 'is to lie on the grass at night and look straight up at some big bright star; and, by fixing your mind upon it, you will soon find that you are hundreds

and hundreds o' miles away from your body, which you don't seem to want at all'" (120). Angel responds to this belief by commenting that Tess is a "genuine daughter of nature" (120). In the setting of the dairy farm, Tess becomes the priestess of nature. In combination with her parallel to Eve and her spiritual transcendence of her physical body, Tess is pure.

The natural setting of the dairy farm also brings out Tess's essential purity for Angel. He recognizes this purity in her especially when they are walking together in the early morning of the dairy farm:

The mixed, singular, luminous gloom in which they walked along together to the spot where the cows lay, often made him think of the Resurrection hour. He little thought that the Magdalen might be at his side. . . It was then, as has been said, that she impressed him most deeply. She was no longer the milkmaid, but a visionary essence of a woman—a whole sex condensed into one typical form. He called her Artemis, Demeter, and other fanciful names. . . (Hardy 130)

There are several key allusions to both Biblical and other theistic themes in the above quote. One is that of the Resurrection. This redemptive event in Christian history lends redemption to Tess's fallen state. Even though Angel does not know the truth about her sexual past, his first, natural impression of her is one of renewed purity, where she is redeemed from her fallen state by the natural setting in which she finds herself. Angel himself does not think of Tess as the Magdalen, or the fallen woman. Her purity, for him, is brought out by nature, which suggests that her purity is natural. Her purity is even

essential, as Angel thinks of her as the “visionary essence of a woman” (130). Also, Angel nicknames her Artemis, the Greek god of chastity. Notably, this setting is where Angel falls in love with the pure, virginal Tess, as revealed by nature: “It was for herself that he loved Tess; her soul, her heart, her substance. . . Her unsophisticated open-air existence required no varnish of conventionality to make it palatable to him” (165). Nature allows Angel to separate Tess from her physical body and to appreciate her for her essential purity.

Contrasting the natural setting of the dairy farm is the d'Urberville mansion where Tess and Angel spend their wedding night. The House itself is a decrepit old place which makes Tess, the once natural priestess, uncomfortable (Hardy 216). Especially telling is the portrait of Tess's matriarchal ancestors, who are characterized by their “merciless treachery” and “arrogance to the point of ferocity” (217). These traits suggest an unnatural personality, defined by artifice and deception. The aristocratic setting also denotes an unnaturalness which manifests itself in the social construction of class hierarchy. This unnatural setting opposes the divine aura of the dairy farm and instead takes on netherworldly characteristics. Right before Tess reveals to Angel her true sexual history, his face, which was once divine and ethereal to Tess, now takes on the appearance of “. . . a Last Day luridness in this red-coaled glow, which fell on his face. . .” (225). He is now something close to hellish, and the transcendence that Tess once saw in him is gone. The transition from the natural setting of the dairy farm to the unnatural setting of the d'Urberville mansion will also reveal new things and change Angel's interpretation of Tess's essence.

His new interpretation of Tess is that she is a completely different person than the one that he first knew. After Tess reveals that she is no longer a virgin, Angel can no longer look at Tess as the natural priestess. At this point, the true views of Angel are drawn out of their idealistic foundation, and he is forced to confront his ideas of what the self truly is. His final decision cannot be shaken even when Tess begs him otherwise: “‘I thought, Angel, that you loved me—me, my very self! If it is I you do love, O how can it be that you look and speak so?’” (228). His response grounds his mistaken views of Tess's body: “‘I repeat, the woman I have been loving is not you.’ ‘But who?’ ‘Another woman in your shape’” (229). Here, Angel treats Tess's physical body as one in the same. According to Angel her fallen body overpowers her once natural, pure essence and recreates her entire being. Because he does not separate Tess's physical state from her transcendent, divine-like state, he cannot view Tess as essentially pure any longer.

Hardy treats this viewpoint as false. He uses the contrasting settings to define the revelations and interpretations of each setting. The dairy farm is the nature-infused, divine, and transcendent setting, so anything revealed there is true and natural. In replacing monotheistic or traditional religion with his pagan religion of nature, Hardy places high value upon the natural revelations which occur there. Nature is not a liar—it only reveals what is true and essential. Tess is the one character who realizes this. As the priestess of nature, Hardy values her “divine” opinion and view of herself and gives her an autonomous personhood, capable of moral self-evaluation. Her sense of fallenness is based on nothing natural, only social convention: “She was ashamed of herself for her gloom of the night, based on nothing more tangible than sense of condemnation under an

arbitrary law of society which had no foundation in Nature" (Hardy 279). On the other hand, the unnatural setting of the d'Urberville mansion is defined by artifice and treachery, as in the portraits attached to the wall. The aristocracy which the mansion represents is merely a social convention, much like the social convention of the "fallen woman" which Hardy attempts to criticize. Anything revealed in this setting will not be true or representative of Tess's essence or her true self. Hardy separates his dualistic view from Angel's when he says:

With all his attempted independence of judgment this advanced man was yet the slave to custom and conventionality when surprised back into his early teachings. . . this young wife of his was as deserving of the praise of King Lemuel as any other woman endowed with the same dislike of evil, her moral value having to be reckoned not by achievement but by tendency. . . In considering what Tess was not, he overlooked what she was, and forgot that the defective can be more than the entire. (Hardy 265)

Angel, despite his claims to be enlightened, is really just the follower of social convention. He is unable to separate Tess's physical body from her spiritual, transcendent being. Hardy's essential-physical dualism allows for the distinctions which separate Tess's pure essence from her physical body. Since she is found to be pure in nature, her self transcends her physical body and makes her into an essentially pure woman.

Hardy uses the distinctions between natural and unnatural as well as between settings to demonstrate the distinctions within the self. There is a difference between what is natural and unnatural, between nature's intention and society's conventions, and between the physical body and the transcendent, essential self of the mind. It is precisely through this transcendence that Hardy shows that Tess is essentially pure. In doing so, Hardy criticizes Angel's viewpoint that Tess's entire self is impure because her physical body is impure. The truth, found in nature, is that Tess can transcend her physical impurity. Hardy's pagan beliefs prioritize this truth over the social idea that Tess is impure, as this is discovered in an unnatural setting. In Hardy's view, Tess is a pure woman.

The ultimate effect of Hardy's novel is an immense sense of the disturbing and destructive nature of such a system. It is one where the only result is the destruction of the physical and the spiritual self. Victorian culture was defined by a reifying discourse of otherness. The prostitute remained the other, women remained the other; the assumptions of such a discourse were made real by it, and the problems that each faced as a result of such a discourse were only solidified. Anderson notes that ". . . the Victorian fallen woman is seen as hopelessly subject to structural forces. . ." and the "stark determinism" that characterizes many Victorian narratives of fallen women which allows them no subjectivity (168). The reason Hardy's novel was so disturbing to his contemporaries was that it brought out the effects of a view that fallenness was mandated by society. Conceptions about the fallen woman had to change. Otherwise, women would be destroyed.

Response to the Contagious Diseases Acts

Like Hardy, there were many who understood the consequences of not allowing the fallen woman to have moral agency. The response to the Contagious Diseases Acts was strong. Starting with small pockets of dissent, the outcry against the injustices of the Acts grew into a widely publicized, national campaign. As the movement grew in power and scope, several petition documents were released which called for the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts. Among those organizations were the City of London Committee for Obtaining the Repeal of Those Acts and, finally, the formation of the Ladies' National Association, which would ultimately be the group responsible for the repeal of the Acts.

The City of London Committee

In 1881, "Seven Reasons for the Repeal of the Contagious Diseases (Women's) Acts, 1866-1869" was released by the City of London Committee. The document listed seven reasons why the Acts were immoral, reasons which can be categorized three ways: the role of the double standard in the Acts, its failure to combat disease, and its violation of English rights. The Acts had underlying immoral purposes: "(1.) The Acts are conceived in the interests of Immorality." Because the Acts applied only to women and were intended to protect the men of the army and navy, they did not actually intend to rid England of venereal disease. Their intention was only to provide healthy prostitutes for men (3). The Acts outraged the public's moral sensibilities: "(2.) Framed in the interests of vice, they have outraged decency, morality, and the Christian sentiment of the country." Hundreds of committees were formed once the Acts became public, many

made up of women who felt it their duty to fight against the Acts, even though they “shrink with pain from contact with such a subject.” At this point, 10,300 petitions with 2,200,000 signatures (roughly ten percent of the population) had been presented to Parliament, and many Christian congregations joined in the fight for repeal (4). The Acts were unjust: “(3.) The Acts are cruel, oppressive, and one-sided in their operation.” They inflict harsh penalties upon the more helpless sex, while men are entirely free from punishment. “Thus, while the Acts, in a spirit of disgraceful unrighteousness, visit the consequences of immorality on women only, they afford to them in return no protection whatever against diseased profligate men.” The Acts also target one class of women and are designed to “bring the law and its administration into contempt, and to create impressions in the minds of men in the humbler walks of life highly dangerous to the State” (4-5). The Acts offended natural rights: “(4.) The Acts violate the first principles of English Constitutional liberty.” They “suspend the most cherished natural rights of every woman without exception” where the law is enforced. She is denied all of the safeguards which typically apply to other criminals under English law (5-7). The Acts actually had the opposite effect of what was intended: “(7.) The Acts, moreover, tend to increase and intensify certain contagious diseases.” It is not right for the State to protect men from the consequences of vice. They provide special provision for those who commit vice, which is not the job of the State, especially not of a wise and humane State. Actually, the encouragement of vice aggravates the spread of contagious diseases instead of lessening their spread (9).

The Ladies' National Association

In addition to the London Committee, the Ladies' National Association formed in order to lead the repeal campaign. The Ladies' National Association (LNA) was not fascinated with prostitution because of its lurid and deceptive draw, nor did they take a purely moralist anti-prostitution approach; they understood the Contagious Diseases Acts were rife with injustice against women. Their work to repeal the Contagious Diseases Acts would benefit all women, not just their "fallen sisters." This drive to change socially constructed gender roles required that Josephine Butler and other Victorian feminists recognize that a woman's role as constructed by Victorians was just that—constructed and not natural. The Ladies' National Association, formed as a result of the passage of the Acts, took an entirely different view of what the Contagious Diseases Acts meant. Its members, mostly middle-class women, recognized its implicit use of the double standard in sexuality and fought to get the Acts repealed.

The goal of repealing the Contagious Diseases Acts could only be achieved if the Ladies' National Association could change Victorian gender roles—the very way in which all women were viewed during this time. The Victorian age was a ripe time for change in gender roles. Mary Poovey recognizes this condition of Victorian England when she says, ". . . the middle-class ideology we most often associate with the Victorian period was both contested and always under construction; because it was always in the making, it was always open to revision, dispute, and the emergence of oppositional formulations" (3). Because gender roles were socially constructed, the LNA could work to change conceptions about those gender roles in order to help the prostitute and, in turn,

help women. They achieved this by casting the prostitute in a new light. John Stuart Mill, a Victorian philosopher, was one of the first men to take a stance that injustice was being done to women. In his *The Subjection of Women*, Mill states, "So true is it that unnatural generally means only uncustomary, and that everything which is usual appears natural. The subjection of women to men being a universal custom, and departure from it quite naturally appears unnatural. But how entirely, even in this case, the feeling is dependent on custom, appears by ample experience" (317). The LNA operated on the philosophy of natural as opposed to social convention, making distinctions when they sought to change societal conceptions about the role of women. Their goal was to change constructed and economized gender roles for women by naturalizing prostitutes and giving them an autonomous identity capable of moral self-evaluation and human feeling. Much like Hardy's call for transcendence from the confines of a solely bodily definition, the LNA sought to give fallen women a natural definition, much like Tess's essential purity based on nature.

Direct action, which was more effective than mere petitions was taken, notably by women, in an effort to see the Acts repealed before their damage became permanent. The leader and most famous catalyst for change in the Ladies' National Association was Josephine Butler. Butler was a remarkable woman in that she went against accepted gender roles of the time and led the "shrieking sisterhood" to ultimate victory in the successful campaign to repeal the Contagious Diseases Acts. All of the women who participated in the repeal campaign demonstrated a marked difference from the way they were expected to comport themselves:

The repeal campaign brought thousands of respectable women, the “shrieking sisterhood,” into the arena for the first time, thus disturbing the public/private division of space along gender lines so essential to the male spectators’ mental mapping of the civic order. Moreover, the repeal campaign and the social purity movement which it inspired significantly impinged on the public face of London prostitution. (Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight* 23-24)

Where previously prostitutes were the only women to occupy the the streets, public spaces were now being occupied by virtuous middle-class women who spoke out vehemently against the Contagious Diseases Acts.

Because of her occupation of spaces where moral women were not supposed to show themselves, Josephine Butler’s outspoken presence in the public arena was a target for much criticism. She spoke in front of men, she wrote essays and books explaining the reasons why the Acts were despicable, and she addressed Parliament. Part of the work of the Ladies’ National Association was to bring the Acts into public light because of the Acts’ initial secrecy. To accomplish this, the rhetoric of Butler and the LNA was marked by passionate religious speech, imagery and references, as Butler herself was a devout Christian woman. Her passionate speech, not to mention the brazen outspoken nature of it, was designed to capture the attention and imagination of the public in order to garner more support for the repeal campaign.

The Arguments of the Ladies' National Association

Her attacks on the Contagious Diseases Acts stemmed from a number of different ideas: that prostitution was an evil system and should be stopped; that women were the victims of social conditions which they could not control; that such victimhood trapped women into the double standard which bound them to sin without hope for redemption; and most importantly that the Contagious Diseases Acts created a system where all women, not just the prostitutes who are punished under its enforcement, were tainted by the double standard it perpetuated.

Josephine Butler took a firm stand that the entire system of prostitution was wrong. It is important to understand that she thought that the institution of prostitution, rather than the prostitutes themselves, was immoral. This idea is important in the context of what Josephine Butler was trying to do: her main goal was to get the Contagious Diseases Acts repealed, while “converting” prostitutes would be a result of first changing the system. The system which had to be changed was one which accepted prostitution as a “necessary evil” and considered it to be an institution which kept the middle-class nuclear family alive under the Victorian feminine ideal. Prostitution, not the prostitutes, was wrong because it was a system which accepted vice at the expense of the lives and personhoods of the prostitutes it enslaved.

The petition created by the Ladies' National Association reflects this system-bucking idea in its rhetoric: “. . . by such a system, the path of evil is made more easy to our sons, and to the whole of the youth of England, inasmuch as a moral restraint is withdrawn the moment the State recognises and provides convenience for the practice of

a vice which it thereby declares to be necessary and venial” (95); also, “. . . the strongest evidence . . . show[s] that in Paris and other continental cities, where women have long been outraged by this forced inspection, the public health and morals are worse than at home” (95). Instead of the morality of the individual, the morality of an entire nation and the immorality which it allowed had to come first. In other words, even if a group of men never touched a prostitute, they were still complicit in the nation's immorality by passively allowing vice to occur. Morality had to start with the State and whether it sanctioned the vice in which few or many participated.

Butler recognized that, in reality, state-licensed prostitution only created more opportunity for vice, and thus, more chance for the spread of the exact diseases that the Acts were trying to eliminate or at least minimize. Glen Petrie, in his studies of prostitution, notes this phenomenon of which Butler was not ignorant: “She realised that medical inspection and the issuing of certificates to infection-free girls raised prostitution to the level of a state-warranted profession whose diploma-ed practitioners children wished to emulate. Under such a system, the hardened women flourished, while the honest working girl was subjected to a permanent threat of blackmail . . .” (19). In this case, the honest and the innocent were the ones who would suffer under State-licensed prostitution, not those whom were guilty or those whom the State or society would have suffer.

The Prostitute as a Victim under the Acts

Because of this unjust system, women and prostitutes became victims. The Ladies' National Association's Petition and the rhetoric of Josephine Butler concentrated

heavily on the idea that the prostitute was a victim of social forces beyond her control. Obviously, if prostitution was to be a necessary evil, then it must necessarily claim someone as its victim. That victim was the prostitute who thought that prostitution would be an easy way out of her poverty. Because of the State-sanctioned nature of the Acts and the fact that police did not need proof of a woman's guilt, the Contagious Diseases Acts extended the label of prostitute and fallen to all women in England. In the Ladies' National Association's Petition, rhetoric of victimization took precedence: "Because, so far as women are concerned, they remove every guarantee of personal security which the law has established and held sacred, and put their reputation, their freedom, and their persons absolutely in the power of the police" (95); "Because it is unjust to punish the sex who are victims of a vice, and leave unpunished the sex who are the main cause . . ." (95); "Because the measures are cruel to the woman who come under their action—violating the feelings of those whose sense of shame is not wholly lost, and further brutalising even the most abandoned" (95).

This last point of the petition was very important to the Ladies' National Association's cause of repeal. The idea that the prostitute had a chance of redemption, that she was not wholly hardened to her objectification, made redemption necessary. If the prostitute was already hardened, then, Contagious Diseases Acts or not, she would, in the end, still be a prostitute, and she would not be worthy of anyone's pity, so she would not be helped by anyone. Rather, the repeal campaign had to paint her as a pitiful victim on the verge of a hardened heart; the only force that could send her over the edge of

hardness would be the State-sanctioned institute of prostitution made final and complete through the Contagious Diseases Acts.

Josephine Butler Gives Prostitutes a New Identity

To Josephine Butler and the Ladies' National Association, the problem started with the system, not the individual. The State system which licensed vice was at the highest moral fault of all. State licensing of vice created a social and moral standard whose tendrils of immorality took root in all aspects of Victorian social life: a system of vice made the prostitute into a victim of social forces beyond her control, trapping her into the double standard of sexuality which made her feel as though she was fallen beyond all hope of redemption. They fought to change those social conditions and to give prostitutes—women—the power to overcome them: “Through repeal, feminists sought to educate the public on the subject of prostitution and the double standard. They hoped that repeal would reflect a ‘revolution’ from below, both a real transformation in social attitudes and habits and a populist attack on established centers of political power” (Walkowitz, *Prostitution in Victorian Society* 141). If a woman was beyond hope of redemption, she would certainly not attempt to redeem herself by turning from her prostituting ways or caring about whether or not she had a contagious disease. In this way, the Ladies' National Association was unique in Victorian society. Notably, Butler's rhetoric was marked by identification with the prostitute, which ultimately had the effect of reversing The Contagious Diseases Acts' implication that the prostitute's status as an economic commodity. Butler brought prostitutes out of the dark shadows of the streetwalking underworld and made her plight known by telling the stories of many

prostitutes she had met and even taken into her home for during the repeal campaign. In order to recognize the individual as a singular social agent who was capable of self-redemption, the repeal campaign had to start by changing the system which stole the personhood from every individual woman in the nation. For this reason, Josephine Butler's rhetoric is riddled with stories of individuals, victimhood, and redemptive language. While she points out that it is the State who is to blame, she dramatizes the plight of the individual, whose redemption ultimately comes from the pragmatic goal of the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts.

The Community of Women Created by the Ladies' National Association

Interestingly, this goal of individual personhood created a community of individuals who were willing to help one another in the redemption process. The most important aspect about the Ladies' National Association's repeal campaign was that they realized that the Acts extended to all women, not just prostitutes. The women involved in the repeal campaign tended to identify themselves with prostitutes, and they classified prostitutes as part of the greater group of all women; all women were affected by the injustices of the Contagious Diseases Acts. By recognizing each other as individuals capable of self-redemption, women were able to create a community which was above the all-encompassing, victimizing State.

Likewise, previous attempts at the redemption of prostitutes were entirely bound up in the redemption of the women's bodies alone, ignoring the spiritual, transcendent aspect which the LNA was so successful at recognizing. Walkowitz says that the attitude of those in favor of the Acts as a way of solving the moral problems of prostitution was

one of “. . . fear and of hostility toward female sexuality. The result was a repressive humanitarianism . . .” (*Prostitution and Victorian Society* 85). Before the Ladies' National Association, philanthropists were only concerned with the redemption of the prostitutes' body. If they could make her healthy, she would be redeemed from the harsh effects of her vocation. They did not deal with her soul or her whole being, for that matter; instead, they would attempt to end her prostituting ways while still treating her as a fallen woman. Redemption efforts were shallow; they could redeem her from prostitution while staying far away from the redemption of her status as “fallen.” Once redemption of the body had taken place, the prostitute was left to fend for herself once more. On the other hand, the LNA made sure that the prostitute was taken care of as a whole person, and the way they did this was through identification.

The rhetoric of Josephine Butler is heavily laced with identification with her “fallen sisters.” Instead of classifying prostitutes as the “Other,” ladies of the LNA spoke of them in more human terms. Judith Walkowitz points out that “Women often expressed an identity of interest with inscribed prostitutes and intense anger at the police and medical domination of their ‘fallen sisters.’ They perceived the acts as a direct threat to their own status and self-respect, whereas most male repealers tended to view repeal as only one of a series of ‘anti-causes’ they espoused” (Walkowitz, *Prostitution in Victorian Society* 6). This kind of identification tended to be a projection of the self onto the Other. While the repeal campaign tended to be motivated by a self-interest, (the effects of the Acts were felt by pure women, motivating pure women to redeem fallen women through the repeal of the Acts), its difference from most other Victorian rhetoric

about prostitution is notable, especially in its recognition of moral transcendence from the body. Whether or not the repeal was motivated by self interest or not is not as important as the fact that women of the LNA gave prostitutes, and thus all women, an identity which was independent from their bodies. By self-identifying with fallen women, the virtuous women of the LNA gave prostitutes a respectable identity. Josephine Butler also gave the prostitute an identity independent of her body by saying that she could transcend it through her own moral agency. She recognized that “. . . God has given to woman, for good and wise ends, an *absolute sovereignty over her own person, and of this no man, no legislation on earth has any right to deprive her*—no not even if she becomes a criminal” (“An Appeal to the People of England” 17). By recognizing that women could control what they would do with their own bodies, and by saying that the government had no right to control or regulate the bodies of women, Josephine Butler and the LNA were the first redemptive organization to recognize that women could have an identity which was not solely dependent on their bodies; this recognition is what made their campaign so unique and powerful.

By classifying prostitutes as having an identity separate from their bodies and by bringing them into the greater group of women, Josephine Butler and the Ladies' National Association created a community of pure and fallen women. This community was unique in that it joined two groups of women who were previously socially separated. Identification and sympathy was the only way that prostitutes could be redeemed from both their body's status as a prostitute and their person's status as a fallen

woman. Amanda Anderson notes that this method was the key to determining success in the goal of repealing the Contagious Diseases Acts:

From one who is simply unrecognizable to her former companions, the prostitute progresses to one who *has no face* and is hence exiled from communal experience, sympathetic or otherwise. It should come as no surprise, then, that sympathy should itself be seen as the precondition, and sometimes the actual guarantee, of the fallen woman's redemption. She not only has to repent; she has to be brought back into the human community. Social reintegration and the production of a kind of self-control—these constitute the two basic prongs of those remedial efforts that value the fate of the woman. . . . Because the fallen condition is one of supreme exclusion, only an ardent and manifest sympathy can transform that condition. (Anderson 65)

The Ladies' National Association made it clear that women were not defined by their bodies and that their status as "fallen" did not have to remain permanent and guarantee their eternal punishment. Elizabeth Gaskell's novel, *Ruth*, discusses the social ostracization experience by a fallen women as well as the ways that sympathy operates in her redemption. Audrey Jaffe notes that "Sympathy in *Ruth* is identified with a threatened disturbance in, and subversion of, the rigid categories of identity—particularly feminine identity—that would exclude Ruth from respectable society. And that subversion is possible only if Ruth's identity retains its transgressive force" (87).

By bringing prostitutes into the group of women, and by giving them control over their own redemption, the Ladies' National Association did something that had never been done before.

Josephine Butler's own personal accounts of her repeal and redemptive work show how her method was the only one which could produce results. Her attitude toward her "fallen sisters" was one of recognition of the prostitutes' wholeness and humanness. This attitude manifested itself in the way that she kindly treated the prostitutes that she met:

It is not the reading out of exhortations by a chaplain only which will restore the wrecked nature to health, and deliver the crushed heart from the bitter hatred of human beings, which so often enchains it: especially is this the case when the patient is *a prisoner*, previously outraged by command of the Government, and maddened with the sense of wrong or hardened into fiendish impudence. A poor repentant girl said to me one day, "Shall I tell you the first thing that softened my hard heart which has withstood all the prayers and all the preaching? It was that day that you came into the ward and to my bed, and stroked back my hair with your hand, and kissed my forehead again and again: I did not speak to you, but I wept all that night, and thought, 'O if I could be loved *once* with a pure love before I die!'" To be loved with a pure love, and to desire such a love is salvation for these." (Butler, "An Appeal to the People of England" 19-20)

In this way, Butler was not separating prostitutes into two separate entities: the body and the soul. She treated the prostitute as a whole human being, as a woman, and this was the only method that would make the prostitute respond in a way where she would start treating herself as a human being as well.

Clearly, Josephine Butler's dramatic rhetoric and narratives were essential in the success of the repeal in 1886 of the Contagious Diseases Acts. By dramatizing the effects of a State-sanctioned attitude that women were merely bodies to be bought and sold, sacrificed for the survival of other Victorian values, she brought the awful effects of a socially constructed view of woman's personhood to the attention of the public, much like Thomas Hardy had done with *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. Another method of the Ladies' National Association, that of identification and the creation of a community of sisters, was also effective in changing the way that fallen women thought of themselves.

The Community of Women in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Aurora Leigh

This same kind of community of women is brought out in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*. Hardy's work was memorable for the way that it pointed out a need for change and foretold the consequences of the status quo, but Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* is notable for its solution to the problem of fallen women. *Aurora Leigh*, the narrator of Browning's epic poem, attempts to redeem the fallen Marian Erle from her condition of total and final fallenness after she is raped.

Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* attempts social change in much the same way as Josephine Butler's repeal campaign: both evoke the natural, Edenic state which found women to be pure by appealing to idealistic views of women as whole within an

accepting community of women. Dorothy Mermin cites *Aurora Leigh* as an epic which could change social order, as the author herself intended for it to do (183). Barrett Browning depicts the community of women as one which could be a source of redemption for the fallen sisters within it. The provocative nature of such an argument through practice and narrative was just as stunning to Barrett Browning's readers as was Josephine Butler's statements to Britain.

In much the same way that Hardy does in *Tess*, Barrett Browning appeals to nature to provide the setting for the fallen woman's redemption; nature provides women with the moral self-determination which was not available to them in a society dominated by the economic determinism of a socially constructed body. In *Aurora Leigh*, Barrett Browning creates a world of a "prelapsarian earthly paradise" (Mermin 206) where the spiritual and transcendent aspect of femaleness takes precedence over the not-yet-sexualized body. This prelapsarian view of the world allows fallen women to be viewed as beings which have not yet fallen who can be accepted into a community of pure women.

Like the failed reformations of the Victorian era before Josephine Butler, *Aurora Leigh* fails in her own theories of woman until she forms a close bond with Marian Erle. When she first finds Marian in France, Aurora wants to take care of her, but for the wrong motives: her offer at this point resembles Romney's sterile version of philanthropy. Marian refuses:

She shook her head.

'A home for you and me and no one else

Ill-suits one of us: I prefer to such,

A roof of grass on which a flower might spring, . . .' (Barrett Browning VI
459-62)

Marian prefers a more natural way of living rather than the artificial one which Aurora would create for her. Marian cannot accept Aurora's invitation until Aurora recognizes essential capability for morality.

This recognition can only come once Aurora allows for Marian to tell her own story so that she can relate to Marian. It is at this point where Aurora's philanthropy framed in self interest is confronted by Marian's need for moral self-determination. Projection of the self onto the other is an important concept in both the repeal campaign and in *Aurora Leigh*. Tension between the self-identification of the LNA and the self-interest which drove them to protect their own statuses as women also exists in *Aurora Leigh*:

. . . even as Aurora assigns Marian a privileged relation to poetry and thereby risks aestheticizing her, she uses the occasion not to reproduce but to interrogate and revise the distorting relation to the other that typifies Victorian inscriptions of impure femininity. By revising her relation to Marian, Aurora at least temporarily moves beyond the stark opposition between aesthetic and intersubjective experience, an opposition that inhabits not only her own conceptions but also the dominant rhetoric of fallenness. But if Aurora confronts the reifying tendencies of the rhetoric of fallenness, she nonetheless fails to address adequately the larger tension

between art and philanthropy, even though she is sharply critical of what she construes as Romney's deindividualizing philanthropic relation to Marian and other members of the lower classes. (Anderson 171-72)

There is a marked shift in the way that Aurora views Marian. At first, she is more of an aesthetic extension Aurora's artistic ideals, but by confronting how she views fallen women, and especially by separating herself from Romney's dehumanizing philanthropic methods, she views Marian as more of a human being:

'But do not blush at all except for sin,'—

That I, who felt myself unworthy once

Of virtuous Romney and his high-born race,

Have come to learn,—a woman, poor or rich,

Despised or honoured, is a human soul,

And what her soul is, that, she is herself, (Barrett Browning IX 325-30)

This change of heart only comes after Aurora hears the full story of Marian's rape. Here, Aurora can relate to Marian through both self-identification and through recognition that Marian is also her own person, capable of moral self-determination.

This kind of moral self-determination, which can only be fostered in an environment where the essential purity of Marian is recognized, is solidified when Aurora views Marian as a mother, a natural role for a woman:

But I, convicted, broken utterly,

With woman's passion clung about her waist

And kissed her hair and eyes,—'I have been wrong,

Sweet Marian' . .(weeping in a tender rage)
'Sweet holy Marian! And now, Marian, now,
I'll use your oath although my lips are hard,
And by the child, my Marian, by the child,
I swear his mother shall be innocent
Before my conscience, as in the open Book
Of Him who reads for judgment. Innocent,
My sister! Let the night be ne'er so dark
The moon is surely somewhere in the sky;
So surely is your whiteness to be found
Through all dark facts. But pardon, pardon me,
And smile a little, Marian,—for the child,
If not for me, my sister.' (Barrett Browning VI 778-93)

By viewing Marian through her most natural role as a mother, Aurora is able to recognize that Marian is also essentially innocent. At this point, Marian can be accepted into Aurora's home, and Aurora is able to project her own identity of purity onto Marian, making her an acceptable member of society and a community of pure women.

Isobel Armstrong speaks of this transformation when she says that "Aurora is altered, not by a change of theory so much as a transformation of her imaginative perception of the poor through her relationship with Marion Erle . . ." (369). Here, it is evident that Aurora's abstract theorizing, even through the poetry she had written up to that point, fails to capture the truth of what women, fallen though they may be, are

capable of achieving through relationships with other women. Her poetry and imagination reach their resolution of conflict and the apex of their truthfulness when Aurora can view her theory through a relationship with another woman.

In fact, it is the relationship that holds the ultimate redemptive quality for Marian, and for the view that violated women are hopelessly fallen. Sisterhood and feminine relationships are a key aspect of *Aurora Leigh*, especially in their functions as redemptive tools for fallen women. Amanda Anderson notes this theme of *Aurora Leigh*: "One of the most remarkable aspects of *Aurora Leigh* is precisely the significance accorded the intimate and sustained relationship between the pure Aurora and the fallen Marian. This relationship indicates that, for Barrett Browning, there was a need for the woman artist to come to terms with the prevalent literary staging of fallenness" (Anderson 168).

By appealing to nature and an Edenic setting, the LNA and Barrett Browning give women a chance to claim essential purity. However, there is also a recognition that social convention and fallenness will never disappear. Fallen women represented a greater state of fallenness which extended to all of humanity. Rather than focus solely on the idea that women can be naturally pure (which would also be an undue focus on the body), the LNA and Barrett Browning give women a claim to moral agency and spiritual transcendence. Anderson says that "As Aurora's statements to Romney emphasize, women must claim their right to vocation and discrete moral selfhood. Thus a gender specific struggle for autonomy accompanies the more general call for spiritual rejuvenation" (176). In this way, Aurora, like Butler, can overcome criticism of self-interest motivating her efforts at redemption. Both women focus on the idea that the

individual must be looked upon as a moral agent capable of redemption rather than a hopelessly fallen women with no chance to once again become a respectable member of society.

Women under the Contagious Diseases Acts were given socially constructed identities which focused on their bodies alone. The Acts forced fallen women and prostitutes into an identity which was one of a regulated commodity. Several Victorian texts dealt with the problem of the double standard of sexuality which was prevalent in Victorian society. Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* was significant because it pointed out the problem with socially constructed identities which trapped women into a state of fallenness. Ultimately, the Ladies' National Association, under the direction of Josephine Butler, sought to change gender roles which relied on socially constructed identities. Recognizing the implicit double standard of the Contagious Diseases Acts, the LNA sought to give women a more natural identity by bringing them into community of pure women. This ability to transcend the physical body and find identity in a natural source is evident in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*. The action of identification with the other through the creation of a community of women has redemptive aspects which go far beyond mere social identities. The moral self-determination which arises from a natural identity was something which the Ladies' National Association recognized as necessary to all women. Their success at repealing the Contagious Diseases Acts and denouncing the sexual double standard had far-reaching implications for the female identity.

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