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“GROWING LIKE THE PLANTS FROM UNSEEN ROOTS”: THE EQUALIZING ROLE OF PLANT  
IMAGERY IN *AURORA LEIGH*

by

SARAH STEINER

Under the Direction of Paul Schmidt

ABSTRACT

Plant imagery abounds in Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s novel-poem, *Aurora Leigh*, and critical readings have not thoroughly explored the meaning of and intent behind that imagery. Plant metaphor and images in *Aurora Leigh* are used to challenge the concept of Victorian women’s inherently inferior “nature” and to present an argument for female equality. When traced throughout the work, plant imagery foreshadows Aurora and Marian’s ultimate personal independence and familial harmony and helps the reader to understand the poem’s controversial ending. Ties to three of Browning’s literary influences in the selection of plant images are explored: Emanuel Swedenborg, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Each of these

three understood and used nature imagery to significant effect in their own writings, and Browning adopted and developed those images in her work.

INDEX WORDS: *Aurora Leigh*, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Plant imagery, Gender studies

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SARAH STEINER

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

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2011

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2011

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

From her early youth to her final reconciliation with her lover and life-path, the title character in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* is regularly compared to and even defined through the plant life that surrounds her. Furthermore, the roles and beliefs of the other female characters Marian, Lady Waldemar, and Aurora's aunt can be understood and interpreted through examination of the plant images used to describe them. These comparisons of women to trees, leaves, flowers, and nature at large have been interpreted in passing by several *Aurora Leigh* and Elizabeth Barrett Browning scholars, but have not been addressed directly or at length. This thesis will focus specifically on the function of the poem's plant imagery and associations, which present an implicit argument in favor of female equality and predict Aurora and Marian's ultimate personal success. Throughout the work, plants not only surround Aurora, but are frequently used to define her and the other female characters. Plant images can be found in every section of the poem. I will argue that these images have more import than just serving as generally useful metaphors, as they do in so many works of literature. Rather, they serve as an argument in favor of gender equality, balance between nature and the natural order, and harmony with, rather than isolation between, the sexes.

In the first chapter, I will explore authors who had a documented influence on Browning's writings and consider how they might have resulted in her choice of plant images. I will focus specifically on the influence of Emanuel Swedenborg, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. In the second chapter I will investigate the significance of Browning's association of plants to human (specifically female) nature, and how those associations relate to the

ideas of gender held by her contemporaries. In the third and final chapter I will discuss how the plant images in the novel-poem prefigure the ending of *Aurora Leigh*.

The mid-1800s, when Elizabeth Barrett Browning lived and wrote was a time of large-scale devaluation of the female sex. Female capabilities were sweepingly underestimated, and both sexes often subscribed to the paralyzing and widespread belief that women existed only to serve men. Coventry Patmore's *The Angel in the House* was released in the same period as *Aurora Leigh*, and it offers a useful point of reference for the common Victorian understanding of gender. Women were forced into straightly confined, highly limited roles: a woman could be a "doll like miss... swooning on a sofa, or a sickly mother dying under the strain of a dozen births, or a straight-laced, thin lipped, middle class prude," but very few other socially acceptable roles existed (Crow 13). During the time in which Browning lived and wrote, almost all women were forced to rely on men in one way or another, for the subjugation of women was ingrained at every level of society. Well-to-do women had slightly better opportunities to gain education and equality, but they were still hobbled by the social expectation that their most appropriate vocations were the maintenance of the household and the production of children. Browning was one of many Victorian woman who railed against the futility of women's "education" and pastimes; in *Aurora Leigh*, she meaningfully states, "the works of women are symbolical," and that women, who work either for free or for very little, "are paid / The worth of our work, perhaps" (l.455; l.464-5). Women who were born into poverty or thrown there by the death or abandonment of a male financial supporter were often forced into menial labor, or worse, prostitution. In one essay from the 1861 research collection *London Labour and the London Poor*, Henry Mayhew asserted his findings that as many as 80,000 prostitutes may have

been working in London (4: 213). William Acton, another researcher, believed that as many as “one in twelve of the unmarried females in the country above the age of puberty have strayed from the path of virtue” (18). Women were also denied equal education because of their perceived social role and intellectual inferiority, and they were often attacked as unladylike and unnatural if they made attempts to learn or showed self-interest. As a result, many women were left uneducated and incapable of (or uninterested in) producing thoughtful works. Joan N. Burstyn writes in her book, *Victorian Education and the Ideal of Womanhood*, that education was viewed as a means of social control for both the lower classes and women, who were “taught primarily to know their place, and were given only the rudiments of literacy” (11). This system of control was embedded into the education presented to women, which “cast women as an entity and left little room for variations among individuals” (11).

In addition to being denied the basic rights of earning an education and making a number of basic life choices, the concept of female artistic output was often dismissed as impossible in the Victorian era. Many men and women vilified females who attempted to enter the male dominated world of writing, because, to them, female writers represented a presumptuous departure from the traditional path of intellectual subordination, early marriage, and the commencement of child production. Conformity to this response was common, but there were women who fought against the idea that they could not simultaneously be artists and “true” women. Scholar Linda M. Lewis notes that Germaine de Staël’s *Corinne*, *Mirza*, and *Sappho* and George Sand’s *Consuelo*, *Thérèse*, *Daniella*, and other female characters “as well as many of their successors, do ‘make it’” as artists in the Victorian period (6). She goes on to name a host of other women authors who believed in the same concept, including Jewsbury, Heman, Lan-

don, Armstrong, and the Brontës. In *The Madwoman in the Attic* Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar detail the ire with which Victorian female authors were commonly received and illustrate it with germane and summative comment from author Anne Finch:

Not only is 'a woman that attempts the pen' an intrusive and 'presumptuous Creature,' she is absolutely unredeemable: no virtue can outweigh the 'fault' of her presumption because she has grotesquely crossed boundaries *dictated by nature*.... Because they are by definition male activities... writing, reading, and thinking are not only alien but also inimical to 'female' characteristics. (8 Emphasis added)

The use of the word "nature" in this passage has particular relevance to this thesis, as it highlights the Victorian belief that a woman's intellectual and spiritual inferiority were a part of her inherent qualities. The existence of *Aurora Leigh* itself was Browning's contribution to the body of work that defied this assertion—that the pen was not "a metaphorical penis" (Gilbert and Gubar 3), but a tool that could and should be used by both men and women.

Browning's nine book *Künstlerroman* novel-poem, published in 1856, presented a female character who defied a number of social mores. While Browning was in good company as the creator of a defiant Victorian female character, she, like her fellow authoresses, met with a sudden and stunningly varied critical response. In many parts of the world today, Browning's views of equal female intellectual nature no longer seem revolutionary, but in the mid-nineteenth century they were rejected as categorically unnatural by a large percentage of readers. In 1856, the year of the novel-poem's publication, at least eighteen reviews were printed. In 1857, at least 26 more were released (Donaldson, Stiles). These initial reviews illu-

minate the pervasive Victorian battle regarding what behavior and thoughts were appropriate for women: a reviewer for *Press* found her work and characters “artificial and egotistical” (1120) while another for the Dublin-based *Tablet* condemned it as “a great blow to the dignity of woman” (762). Others found great strength in the work. One reviewer for *Globe and Traveler* noted that *Aurora Leigh* contained “a wealth a beauty, truth, and the noblest thoughts” (1). George Eliot found Browning to be, perhaps not surprisingly, “the first woman who has produced a work which exhibits all the peculiar powers without the negations of her sex” and brings to the work a “feminine subtlety of perception, feminine quickness of sensibility, and feminine tenderness” (306). Some reviewers specifically noted that not all readers would find *Aurora* palatable as a result of her strength and drive; an 1856 reviewer from *Globe and Traveler* noted that the work was simply not “for the multitude” (918).

American reviews of the period show that the reception in the states was far more positive (Donaldson, Stiles). In the *New-York Daily Times*, Browning was called “an honored mother of England,—an intellectual exponent of her sex for the world” (2). The work was widely read in both England and America at the time of its publication, but from the time of Browning’s death until the 1970s, it suffered a marked decline in popularity. In her doctoral dissertation, Tricia Lootens notes that while some of Browning’s works rose in public esteem and circulation after her death, *Aurora Leigh* became so unpopular that it “virtually disappeared not only from conventional accounts of Victorian literary history, but from print” (v). Lootens concludes that for many Victorian and later readers *Aurora Leigh* jarred with Browning’s other works in terms of its depiction of women and the female role. To these readers, *Aurora Leigh* “appeared as an anomalous work unworthy of its prettified author,” and it was therefore dismissed in favor of

her other, less controversial works (v). In 1932, Virginia Woolf lamented of Browning, “nobody reads her, nobody discusses her, nobody troubles to put her in her place... Elizabeth, so ... loudly applauded during her lifetime, falls farther and farther behind” (182). The late 1970s brought a marked increase in Aurora’s popularity in scholarly writing; after the 1977 release of Cora Kaplan’s critical edition and the 1979 release of the landmark work *The Madwoman in the Attic*, scholarly attention to the poem became far more plentiful.

Since then, the scholarship related to *Aurora Leigh* has included a consistently high level of focus on her unevenly perceived status as a proto-feminist or feminist and on her also unevenly perceived commentary on the class structure of England. Her attention to female equality has been explored in foundational pieces by Cora Kaplan, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Marjorie Stone, Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi, and dozens of others: these authors primarily find merit in *Aurora Leigh* and credit it as a proto-feminist work in spite of various flaws. Cora Kaplan finds in her 1977 introduction to *Aurora Leigh* that the poem represented a bold “venture into a male stronghold” and the “fullest and most violent exposition of the ‘woman question’ in mid-Victorian literature” (8; 5). Though Kaplan questions Browning’s treatment of poverty, she notes that Browning nonetheless attempted to attack, “however tentatively,” not just the issue of patriarchal domination, but all the other social issues of the day (10). In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Gilbert and Gubar refer to *Aurora Leigh* as “an epic of feminist self-affirmation,” and note that the work “may well have been the most reasonable compromise between assertion and submission that a sane and worldly woman poet could achieve in the nineteenth century” (575). In the article “Genre Subversion and Gender Inversion,” Marjorie Stone finds that Browning subverts “conventional gender expectations” (115) and presents a “detailed and cutting sa-

tire of the kind of education genteel young women actually received in Victorian England” (116). She notes that while *Aurora Leigh* is often compared to Tennyson’s *The Princess*, the inclusion of males in Aurora’s educational sphere represents a significant difference from Tennyson’s work, wherein males are excluded from the female environment. Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi also argues in favor of the “feminist consciousness” of the work (35). She specifically defends the controversial quote, “Art is much, but Love is more!” (*Aurora Leigh* IX.656). She disagrees with scholars who find that the quote represents “Aurora’s utter capitulation and retreat into Victorian domesticity as the angel in Romney’s house” (Gelpi 46). She argues that this line does not describe her surrender, but rather, shows the ability of “vision to transcend any possible expression” (47).

The ending of the work, which features the happy marriage of the characters Romney and Aurora, is the section that has been most often attacked as a failure to maintain the argument for female independence. Deirdre David makes a particularly convincing assault on Browning’s “feminism,” noting a number of passages wherein Browning herself finds fault with the workings of the female mind (113). She concludes that Browning has “conservative sexual politics,” and offers the rather damning assertion that “Barrett Browning believed woman the intellectual inferior of man” (115). However, other works (notably Cora Kaplan’s) cite additional, more egalitarian passages from *Aurora Leigh*, and find that while Browning may have had conflicted or even deprecating ideas about femininity and female abilities, she did not dismiss women as inherently unequal. Kaplan points out that Browning’s poem includes a “conscious snobbery” toward the majority of the female sex, “mitigated by her contradictory belief that ‘the difference between men and women arose from the inferiority of education of the

latter' and her strong defense of women as writers and reformers" (7). Kaplan also argues that Browning may have unknowingly accepted and exhibited some of society's unfairness in her own personal views, especially in the scenes where the London poor are described.

Few works of scholarship have centered on the imagery in the work. Virginia Steinmetz has contributed greatly to the area of imagery in *Aurora Leigh*, composing pieces on solar, self, and "mother-want" images in the poem. Gilbert and Gubar have done much to focus on the image of woman in the work, and they pay particular attention to images of the female as "angel," "monster," and "other" (18-19). Other works have lent focus to the image of the muse as self (De Manuel), to portraits and "the gaze" (Yook), and to bird imagery in the work (Doyle). This thesis will contribute to the area of image analysis through focus on the primarily uncovered topic of plant imagery in *Aurora Leigh*. Special focus will be placed on tree imagery, which has been almost entirely unconsidered.

Other scholars have explored documented and possible literary influences on *Aurora Leigh*, but not with relation to her inspiration in the selection of plant images. A small number of pieces that relate to Swedenborg, Wollstonecraft, and Coleridge will be investigated in chapter 2, but scholars have also tied Browning to Milton, to a number of Romantic authors and poets (including Tennyson, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Blake), to Lord Byron, to Charlotte Bronte, and to Jane Austen.



## 2 INFLUENCES: SWEDENBORG, WOLLSTONECRAFT, COLERIDGE

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's use of nature imagery was surely inspired, in part, by any number of the authors whose works she read and found intellectually agreeable, but three documented influences can be shown to have especial relevance: Emanuel Swedenborg, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Though the influences are intermingled, I argue that she found each of these authors' literary depictions of nature and plant life meaningful and resonant with her own developing concept of gender equality and spirituality.

The writings of eighteenth-century philosopher Emanuel Swedenborg laid the foundation for plant images as symbols of gender equality in *Aurora Leigh*. His works had a fundamental influence on Browning's understanding and use of nature images and in the characters. While it is unclear when exactly Browning began to read Swedenborg, her devotion to him is well-documented in letters she wrote in her twenties and thirties. Nathan Camp points out that at the time Browning composed *Aurora Leigh*, her attention and belief in his philosophy was "manifest" (63), and Richard Lines notes that "there are over 120 references to Swedenborg in the Brownings' correspondence" (26). In a letter to her friend Isa Blagden, Browning states, Swedenborg "is wonderful, it seems to me—his scheme of the natural and spiritual worlds and natures appears to me, in an internal light of its own, divine and true" (qtd. in McAleer 596). Swedenborg, a Christian, argued that ties existed between the natural world where humans live out their lives and the spiritual world where their souls go after death. In his 1763 work, *The Divine Love and Wisdom*, he asserts that the heavenly (spiritual) and the physical (natural)

world are separate, but that they are inseparably linked by the divine maker that created them. While he finds nature to be physical rather than spiritual, “there is a continual influx” between the two (Swedenborg, *Compendium* 571). He ascribes the power to perceive this connection, to view both worlds and the bond between them, to only a small number of divine seers. Kathleen Renk writes on this subject, and concludes that Aurora can “see the natural and spiritual worlds” and eventually, she can even “see as [god]” (44). These seers can comprehend and respect the spiritual in nature, and furthermore, they help others to see it. When Aurora reaches maturity as an artist and as a person, she gains the ability to facilitate enlightenment. Her realized potential can best be seen in the final book, when Romney is enlightened by reading the universal truths conveyed in Aurora’s writing. The acquisition of his new “sight” is brought to attention through its symbolic juxtaposition with his loss of ocular vision; though he has lost the ability to view the physical world with his eyes, he can use his heart and mind to “see” the spiritual world in a more significant and nourishing way. Furthermore, he finally understands that Aurora, a person whom he previously accused of literary incompetence as a result of her sex, was the one whose works brought him this sight.

Scholars Nathan Camp and Kathleen Renk explore Browning’s use of Swedenborgian philosophy in *Aurora Leigh*. Each author covers, at least tangentially, the concept of the spiritual in the natural. Renk argues that like Swedenborg’s divine seer, Aurora,

develops a god-like comprehensive and intimate vision of the levels of life, of the natural material world that merely reflects the goodness of the spiritual that is the essence of the earth. This ‘double vision’ then sees both worlds at once and hardly differentiates between them since they are so close in nature....

[E]arth and heaven are so closely intermingled that a natural phenomenon on earth has its spiritual component in the heavenly side. (Renk 44-45)

This intermingling of the spiritual and the physical appears repeatedly in *Aurora Leigh*, even though Browning does not name Swedenborg because of her understanding that his ideas were not popular with a large percentage of her readership.<sup>1</sup> The development of Aurora's own ability to "see" begins as she gains understanding through the ingestion of great books and poems. First, she explores the works of others "that prove / God's being" (l.782-3). Later, she speaks of her own early poetry as "[m]ere lifeless imitations of live verse" (l.974) in which "the living answer for the dead, / Profaning nature" (l.75-6). Only when she has gained an enlightened understanding of the ties between the spiritual and natural worlds can she truly illustrate nature and cease to profane it—but that enlightenment takes time to achieve. Only toward the end of the novel-poem, in book VII, does she realize her ability to truly portray the world. She notes,

If this world's show were all,  
 Then imitation would be all in art;  
 There, Jove's hand grips us!—For we stand here, we,  
 If genuine artists, witnessing for God's  
 Complete, consummate, undivided work;  
 That every natural flower which grows on earth  
 Implies a flower upon the spiritual side,

---

<sup>1</sup> In one letter she states that she has withheld Swedenborg's name from the work out of a "conviction that the naming of the name of Swedenborg, that great Seer into the two worlds, would have utterly destroyed any hope of general acceptance and consequent utility" in the work (Browning, *Letters to her Sister 2*: 272).

Substantial, archetypal, all aglow  
 With blossoming causes—not so far away,  
 But we, whose spirit sense is somewhat cleared,  
 May catch at something of the bloom and breath.... (VII.835-45)

This passage highlights the maturation of her thoughts on the Swedenborgian role of the artist. In adulthood, she comes to understand that presenting nature itself is not art, but that art must showcase the spiritual as it appears in the natural. Aurora herself comes to see nature and spirit simultaneously, and she is able to channel and articulate both in such a way that others can be made to understand. Only when she understands this concept does she conclude that her art contains “Truth” rather than falsity (VII.827).

Nathan Camp, also speaking of Swedenborg in relation to *Aurora Leigh*, notes “that [Aurora] in no way relinquishes the natural, but sees the material world as making ‘appreciable’ the otherwise invisible spiritual world” (66), and that the goal of the true poet is to “present the conjunction of material reality and the Divine Truth” (67). My argument regarding Browning’s presentation of female nature uses Renk and Camp’s arguments as its foundation. I believe that in Browning’s eyes, the untamed woman (like the outdoors in Italy) reflects the untainted, unfiltered creation of her god, rather than an uncultivated mess that should be mown closely and tied up into controlled gardens. Browning believed in the natural beauty of the unrestrained, as evidenced in her descriptions Aurora, Marian, and Italy. In contrast, the English landscape, rather than presenting a “natural” taming of women and the landscape, is an inhibition of the divine hand on earth. As Aurora reclaims her nature by reading, seeing, and learning in defiance

of her aunt's restrictions, she states that she can feel an approving "touch from God." She notes,

And as the soul  
Which grows within a child makes the child grow—  
Or as the fiery sap, the touch from God,  
Careering through a tree, dilates the bark  
And roughs with scale and knob, before it strikes  
The summer foliage out in a green flame—  
So life, in deepening with me, deepened all  
The course I took. (III.328-35)

In this passage, all children are likened to growing trees illuminated by the "sap" of God's touch. The divine imbues the physical, and the free growth of plant life represents the Christian concept of the enlightenment of the human soul. By creating plant representatives, Browning argues that if women are allowed to grow naturally in accordance with the will of God, rather than constricted by the false nature of society, they can achieve the highest levels of spiritual sight and artistry. However, like many of the individuals in Browning's time, Swedenborg thought ill of female capabilities. He states that even though some readers

imagined that women are equally capable of elevating the sight of their understanding, into the sphere of light in which men may be, and of viewing things in the same altitude; an opinion to which they have been led by the writings of certain learned authoresses. But these being examined in their presence in the spiritual world were found to be projects not of judgment and wisdom,

but of genius and eloquence... and... appears as if it were sublime and erudite,--  
but only to those who call cleverness wisdom. (Swedenborg, *Compendium* 473)

This passage bears a striking similarity to Romney Leigh's statement to Aurora: "we get no Christ from you,—and verily we shall not get a poet, in my mind" (*Aurora Leigh* II.224-25). I believe that Browning ultimately created Aurora as evidence of her belief that a woman was capable of Swedenborg's highest level of insight, in defiance of what Swedenborg himself believed. Swedenborg clearly found the female-penned examples under inspection to be lacking, so through Aurora, Browning offered him a woman author that would meet his criteria.

Though she withheld mentioning his name in the text of *Aurora Leigh*, Swedenborg was clearly a heavy influence on the most basic levels of plant and natural imagery in the text. His belief in the ability of the natural world to reflect the spiritual world became a significant inspiration to Browning, and that inspiration can be especially well-seen through her comparison of humans to trees. It is through his concept of visual sight versus spiritual sight that the ending of the work can be understood symbolically, rather than as a defeat of Aurora's independence.

Another significant influence on Browning's integration of natural imagery was Mary Wollstonecraft, particularly her work *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Both women had a deep and abiding interest in the modification of the societal role and perception of female nature, and both believed that women had the capacity to write and reason as well as men, when uninhibited by societal constraints. Though over sixty years passed between the composition of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and *Aurora Leigh*, the role and rights of women had not changed significantly. Women were still often seen as mere playthings for men, intended only

to respond to their needs, support them when asked, and accept their social station without question. These expectations are all contained in Romney's marriage proposal, wherein he entreats Aurora to abandon her quest to become a poet and instead support his aims. He devalues her choices by stating that "none of" the necessary issues for great poetry can be understood by women, who can at best be found "competent to... spell" (ll.182-3; ll.243). He goes on to muse thankfully that he hasn't seen his cousin "too much / Witch, scholar, poet, dreamer, and the rest, / To be a woman also," as though the former things preclude the latter or even negate her femininity (ll.85-7). The gender inequality represented by Romney was a result of an educational and social system that convinced most men and women that females who dared to question the status quo were utterly unnatural—"hyena[s] in petticoats," as Wollstonecraft was once dubbed (Walpole 373: 31). Because of the deep entrenchment of these beliefs in England throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the outrage expressed by Wollstonecraft regarding the general perception of women's abilities in her *Vindication* was still a relevant source of inspiration as Browning composed her novel-poem. Browning adopted Wollstonecraft's use of nature images as illustrations of gender equality. These images grow from a basic establishment of natural versus unnatural gendering, then spread into specific uses of flower and tree images.

Browning mentions an early attention to Wollstonecraft in at least three of her letters, and she is cited as an "avid defender of Wollstonecraft's radical notions about gender" (Inboden 2). Marjorie Stone notes that repeated references to Wollstonecraft's writings prove that her works provided one of Browning's more significant "self-defining memories" (Stone 124). Perhaps the lack of extant scholarship on Wollstonecraft and Browning stems, in part, from

Browning's assertion that she "look[s] everywhere for grandmothers and see[s] none" (*The Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning* 2: 232). Various scholars have found reason to question the seriousness of this statement (or fairness, if it was made seriously) but Robin Inboden notes that Browning's ties to Wollstonecraft might have been diminished in Browning's own mind because of her choice of form. Inboden notes, "Wollstonecraft was not known as a poet, and so could offer no paradigm to her young reader for poetic subject matter, stylistic innovation, or shaping a womanly bardic role" (2). Whether or not Browning viewed Wollstonecraft as a grandmother in poetic writing, her influence cannot be discounted. Browning stated in an 1852 letter to a friend: "I read Mary Wollstonecraft when I was thirteen: no, twelve! ... and, through the whole course of my childhood, I had a steady indignation against Nature who made me a woman, & a determinate resolution to dress up in men's clothes as soon as ever I was free of the nursery, & go into the world 'to seek my fortune'" (*Brownings'* 6: 42). In her early years, Browning felt that she must abandon her female nature and adopt a more male appearance and attitude in order to accomplish her life goals, and she blamed nature for having made her female. Aurora's development and ultimate success offer evidence that as Browning aged, her attitude changed. She found that her sex was not the problem; rather, society's training and perception of women was unfairly restrictive and often resulted in inferiority. She realized that she should not have to become male in order to receive the benefits of that sex, but rather, that females would have to reject the false educational system imposed upon them, as Wollstonecraft suggests (and Aurora does), and prove their equality.

In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft repeatedly notes instances wherein she finds the present training and behavior of women to be unnatural. She points criti-



cism at the women themselves and at the prominent men whose teachings she feels enforce the falsity, immorality, and inferiority of the female sex—however, her distinction that negative results are learned, rather than inherent, is highly significant. Wollstonecraft argues heartily against the concept that the present system supports women’s inherent inferiority, and she finds examples to show that the system unnaturally creates and perpetuates that inferiority. Jean-Jacques Rousseau notably falls to her accusation of unnaturalness. Rousseau, she states, “pretends to draw from the indications of nature” (97) and “labours to invert the law of nature” (116). She integrates Rousseau’s belief that by teaching women and the poor “to read and write you take them out of the station assigned to them by nature” (139). The young Romney Leigh’s rhetoric when he proposes to Aurora, wherein he states that women are “weak for art” but meant for “duty,” bears strong echoes of these thoughts, and Aurora rejects them utterly, just as Wollstonecraft does (II.372; II.375).

In addition to adopting her general understanding of natural versus unnatural gendering, Browning borrowed Wollstonecraft’s use of floral images. Rather than depicting flowers as only things of innocent beauty (though they are sometimes used in that capacity in *Aurora Leigh* as well), Wollstonecraft and Browning often use them to represent the false posturing of women who have adopted the societal construct of the day. Wollstonecraft attacks women who cultivate beauty and other superficial accomplishments, when they come at the expense of learning and general development. Wollstonecraft scorned the training of women as lovely, pointless playthings for men, comparing women educated thus to “flowers which are planted in too rich a soil,” for whom “strength and usefulness are sacrificed to beauty; and the flaunting leaves, after having pleased a fastidious eye, fade, disregarded on the stalk, long before the

season when they ought to have arrived at maturity" (*Vindication* 75). This "barren blooming" presents the dichotomy of false and true nature. In the same vein, Wollstonecraft says that the present educational system forces women into subservient roles, robbing "the whole sex of its dignity, and class[ing] the brown and fair with the smiling flowers that only adorn the land" (*Vindication* 128-9). Browning read these depictions of women as flowers, and they may have come forth in descriptions of Rose, Lady Waldemar, and Aurora herself.

Rose, a friend of Marian's who works as a prostitute, is detailed as

a dubious woman dressed

Beyond us both: the rings upon her hands

Had dazed the children when she threw them pence;

'She wore her bonnet as the queen might hers,

To show the crown,' they said—'a scarlet crown

Of roses that had never been in bud.' (IV.1033-8)

This description of the prostitute Rose echoes the flower images used by Wollstonecraft, and may also reference her political belief that royals are often the planters of corruption in larger society. In several instances, she attacks the highest social classes as "weak, artificial beings" who shed "the seeds of false- refinement, immorality, and vanity" to be emulated and grown by the lower classes (*Vindication* 77). The flagrant presentation of wealth and the roses "that have never been in bud" show that Rose is one of the "smiling flowers" who adorns the land as pointless decoration. She has amassed wealth as a result of her spiritual depravity, but both her monetary achievements and her physical appearance are false and fleeting.

In book V of *Aurora Leigh*, the deceitful character Lady Waldemar is likened to a flower. In this case, the comparison is made by a group of young men who admire her beauty. Another slightly more enlightened male character comments, “With low carnivorous laugh—‘A flower, of course! / She neither sews nor spins—and takes no thought / Of her garments... falling off’” (V.663-5). Unlike the others, this gentleman seems to recognize Waldemar’s posturing for what it is, and he easily dismisses her. He goes on to note that wives should be chosen not “As doublets, by the colour,” but due to their honor (V.686). He says, in an assertion that Wollstonecraft would have appreciated, that an honorable woman, unlike the “flower” Lady Waldemar, would keep her “bosom holy to her babes” (V.690). Through these passages we gain important insight into Browning’s concept of contrived versus natural beauty, and we see a depiction of a more egalitarian, spiritually sighted male. While some of the men are fooled by Waldemar’s superficial beauty, not all are.

Wollstonecraft also uses tree imagery at several points throughout the text of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. She compares the growth of children to the growth of trees, and she likens education to tree growth. In one instance, she compares memorization-based instruction without understanding to “shooting tendrils to the proper pole.” In her mind, guided memorization rather than genuine thought creates blind followers rather than useful adults—or, stated another way, it creates clinging vines rather than free-standing trees. She argues that parents who force their children to memorize facts without understanding “do not consider that the tree, and even the human body, does not strengthen its fibres till it has reached its full growth” (198). Additionally, she notes that

trees are now allowed to spread with wild luxuriance, nor do we expect by force to combine the majestic marks of time with youthful graces; but wait till they have struck deep their root, and braved many a storm. –Is the mind then, which, in proportion to its dignity, advances more slowly towards perfection, to be treated with less respect? (191-2)

Her arguments in all of these cases are gender neutral, and the reader can assume that she hopes they will one day apply to both male and female children, though they might not at the time she wrote.

On similar occasions in her letters and writings, Wollstonecraft depicts women as parasitic plants clinging to strong, tree-like men for support. In one letter to her American lover, Gilbert Imlay, she states that she is not a “parasite-plant,” though she hopes that she has “thrown out some tendrils to cling to the elm by which I wish to be supported” (Wollstonecraft, *Letters* 40). Also in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, she states that Rousseau encourages women to be like “graceful ivy, clasping the oak that supported it,” to “form a whole in which strength and beauty would be equally conspicuous,” but she concludes that corruption in both the “ivy” and the “oak” make this ideal frequently unattainable (93). She does not go so far as to liken women to trees specifically, but I believe that Browning took that final step and assigned Aurora her own tree-strength. Her power and independence stand in defiance of the societal expectation that the goal of beloved wife and mother should be sufficient for any woman; Aurora echoes Wollstonecraft when she asserts that she will “stand upright” rather than being “a woman like the rest, / A simple woman who... hearing she's beloved, is satisfied.... I must analyze, / Confront, and question (II.520; IX.660-6).

When viewed together, these repeated images from Browning and Wollstonecraft show the significant influence that Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* had on Browning's ideas of femininity and on her subsequent writings. Though the tie is not emphasized in much scholarship, Elizabeth Barrett Browning was a devotee of Wollstonecraft early in her life, and Browning's use of outdoor nature images in comparison with female nature show marked similarities to Wollstonecraft's. The pair, though separated by time, had a similarity of vision that could be explored at more depth to yield other similarities. Only a few passages are explored here; there are many more instances in *Aurora Leigh* wherein general nature, animals, plants, flowers, and trees, are used to characterize falsified versus true female nature.

Browning was also a student of Romantic trends in thought, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge was one of the poets whom she particularly appreciated and read avidly in her youth. I believe that the tree outside Aurora's window may have been a lime, in part, as a reference to Coleridge's poem, "This Lime-tree Bower My Prison." Not only is the lime tree a fitting symbol for Aurora in the ways described in the previous chapter; it is also a symbol that her readers would have associated with Coleridge's Romantic treatment of nature and with the poem's theme of spiritual freedom from both mental and physical constraints.

Though I will compare Coleridge specifically to Browning here, the general influence of Romantics' treatment of nature must also be mentioned, as it provides a basic picture of how different Browning's ideas of the world outside her door were from many of her contemporaries. Like Browning, the Romantics maintained a "conviction in the common spirituality of Man and Nature, which bound them together" (Forsyth 216), but for many Victorians, the concept of nature had become unhinged from the spiritual world. Nature had grown into a complex and

fearsome beast as a result of scientific discovery. In his article "The Myth of Nature and the Victorian Compromise of the Imagination," R. A. Forsyth speaks to the conflicts and concerns addressed by Victorians, whose world had been dramatically changed by the ideas of scientists like Alfred Russel Wallace and Charles Darwin. Forsyth notes that as a result of the introduction of evolutionary theories and other scientific discoveries, many Victorians felt that

'England's green and pleasant land' had become... the scene of a remorseless struggle for survival.... What the "new philosophy" of Evolutionism, then, led to was the gradual substitution of the general Christian-humanist attempt to adapt man's nature to his environment to suit his nature. When the Laws of Nature were established as absolute, they could no longer be regarded as ontological decrees of heavenly dispensation through the interpretation of which the human mind might learn to appreciate the Divine intelligence. Instead their mythical potentialities were stripped from them, and they became the servants of empiricism, man-made explanations of the nature of things based on scientifically-controlled observation of them. It was from these explanations that man's new environment was created. (228)

Given her devotion to Swedenborg, Browning was surely working against the Victorian concept that England had become a Godless battleground rather than a manifestation of divine goodness. Unlike the Victorians described by Forsyth, Browning treated nature as divine equalizer, rather than animal "red in tooth and claw" (Tennyson LVI.15). Her continued belief in nature as an extension of the divine shows just one more way in which her thoughts differed from many of her contemporaries.

To return to Coleridge, references to his influence can be found in a number of Browning's letters, especially those to Mary Russell Mitford, for whom he became a "shared mentor figure" (Inboden 129). Scholar Robin L. Inboden notes that "Browning recalled reading Coleridge enthusiastically while yet a girl at Hope End," so his influence was, like Wollstonecraft's, one of those that formed her early world-view. Like Browning, Coleridge was a student of Swedenborg's writings, and though he could not reconcile himself to several of Swedenborg's views, he believed in the Swedenborgian concept of the "sublime landscape" and a blurring of the boundaries between the natural and the spiritual worlds (Mellor 263). Browning was aware of Coleridge's critical attention to Swedenborg's concepts of nature and the divine, and both were empathetic to the struggles of oppressed females. Inboden notes of Coleridge, "Browning found him to be particularly sympathetic in terms of attitude toward gender; Browning celebrates Coleridge's 'masculine' status as a Romantic genius, yet she recognizes and embraces 'feminized' elements of his poetry, poetics, and public image that reflect and validate her own experience" (129).

The inspiration for "This Lime-tree Bower My Prison" was an unfortunate incident wherein Coleridge was prevented from accompanying friends on a walk because of a physical ailment—a burn on his foot. One scholar notes that at the start of the poem there is a "tension... between the inner response of the soul to nature, and the natural landscape itself.... The tree is the symbol of this tension, for the sense of barrenness felt by the poet issues not from the garden in which the lime-tree stands, not from external circumstances, but from the impoverished soul of the poet himself" (Raiger 68). Coleridge's language shows a separation from nature, even though it surrounds his speaker (himself) even in the bower; truly he is divided

from his own nature, and reflection brings him back to understanding of himself as represented in the lime tree. As the poem progresses, it becomes clear that the lime tree represents the speaker's own soul and imagination, and that the tension he feels is directed toward himself. Once he realized the truth of his surroundings, his mental return to the bower "is not a return to a cold prison, but to a whole world of light and love, affectionately embraced" (Raiger 71). Ultimately the speaker comes to appreciate the beauty of the trees that surround him and his own beauty. He finally sees the bower as a spiritual place of self-reliance rather than a place of restriction.

Aurora's situation bears striking similarities to the one detailed by Coleridge. She finds herself imprisoned not only by her own self doubts as to her life choices, but by the false confines imposed by society. As a man, the sense of entrapment described by Coleridge stems primarily from within himself, but Aurora is forced to deal with not just self self-doubt and confusion, but with seemingly permanent externally imposed devaluation and physical confinement. She too finds that her natural surroundings have been converted to a prison in her green room, and the lime tree, which is depicted according to her moods, reflects her internal discord and development. Eventually she comes to find strength and self-enlightenment, and sun shines symbolically on the lime.

One scholar says that Coleridge's poem "leads the reader's mind out of its own narrow scene and prison house of the self to a wider intellectual view (Engell 110). Though his comment relates to Coleridge, it could just as easily relate to Aurora's green room and the concept that her nature is there, even though society attempts to block it out and replace it. Even in the green room that imprisons her, Aurora can achieve spiritual enlightenment and ultimately be



born into her full potential. The terms “narrow” and “small” are used by the poets to describe the environments in which they find themselves, but they ultimately break free, in a spiritual sense (“This Lime” 62; *Aurora Leigh* l.573). In both poems, the sun against the lime functions as a symbol of the speaker’s enlightenment. In *Aurora Leigh*, the sun comes to say “Shall I lift this light / Against the lime-tree, and you will not look? / I make the birds sing—listen!” and in “This Lime-tree Bower My Prison,” the speaker “watch’d / Some broad and sunny leaf, and loved to see / The shadow of the leaf and stem above / Dappling its sunshine!” (l. 656-8; 49-52). John Gutteridge notes that Coleridge’s “spiritual ecstasy [is] stimulated by the natural scene” (161), and the same could be said of Aurora. He goes on to say that those “who had tutored their souls in the Biblical knowledge of God, would easily perceive God’s handiwork in nature and free themselves from the prison of the senses” (Gutteridge 161). Coleridge at first resents his bower-prison, but then mentally leaves it and “guides” his friends on their walk, helping them to truly see the world, not just on the surface level, but as a manifestation of the divine—the similarity to Aurora’s Swedenborgian “seer” abilities are clear. He then realizes, through his imaginings, that the lime tree bower has just as much beauty as the larger world his friends are exploring. “Henceforth I shall know / That nature ne'er deserts the wise and pure; / No plot so narrow, be but Nature there” (60-2). Aurora does the same, also with the help of a lime tree which reflects not just her feelings, but the divine. The lime tree helps her to understand her present confinement in relation to the larger world and acts as a messenger or envoy—in *Aurora Leigh*, the lime is the first symbol of nature in England that opens Aurora’s mind to her potential as a spiritual guide.

Where Swedenborg and Wollstonecraft provide the basic framework for nature as a physical manifestation of the divine and the concept that a woman can stand as an independent tree, I believe that Coleridge inspired Browning to choose the lime, specifically, to stand for Aurora. Not only would she have related to Coleridge's proto-feminist leanings, she might have been inspired to reference him due to his role as one of the "grandfathers" whom she loved so reverently (Browning, *Letters 2*: 232).

Together, the literary influences of Swedenborg, Wollstonecraft, and Coleridge came together as inspirations for Browning's prominent use of plant imagery in *Aurora Leigh*. Each author can be proven as an influence through Browning's letters, and there are also marked similarities in image use—to the spiritual in nature, to women as strong trees and ephemeral flowers, and to Aurora and Coleridge's speaker as guides who equate their spiritual states to lime trees. I believe that Browning found that the beliefs and teachings of each of these three authors fell into alignment not just with her own beliefs, but with each other's, in spite of the fact that each came from a distinctly different period and background.

### 3 NATURE, PLANTS, AND TREES IN *AURORA LEIGH*

The novel-poem *Aurora Leigh* addresses a number of timely social themes, one of the most extensively researched of which is Elizabeth Barrett Browning's argument for the equality of women and men. Though many scholars have paid attention to proto-feminist themes of the work, few have attended to the imagery that presents and buoys up the argument for equality, and only passing attention has been paid to Browning's use of plant imagery throughout the text.

First, Browning's uses of the word "nature" must be surveyed, as the term takes on multilayered meaning in the text. The number of definitions of the term throughout the centuries have been dizzying; Basil Willey notes that by the seventeenth century a natural philosopher "could enumerate eight senses of the word as used in philosophy and natural science" alone (2). However, the definitions in the *OED* can be winnowed to a few relevant entries that were used during the nineteenth century. The first defines "nature" as "[t]he inherent or essential quality or constitution of a thing; the inherent and inseparable combination of properties giving any object, event, quality, emotion, etc., its fundamental character" ("Nature," def. 8a). The second defines something "natural" as being "[b]ased upon innate moral feeling; instinctively or immediately felt to be right and fair, though not prescribed by any enactment or formal compact; having a claim to be followed or acted on even if not legally prescribed." ("Natural," def. 1) In *Aurora Leigh*, Browning seeks to juxtapose and emphasize the connection between these two meanings. She ultimately finds that the nature of woman—her "inherent or essential

quality”—is not the same as that commonly believed to be natural at the time. In spite of the fact that many find the subjugation of women to be a “natural” result of women’s inferior “nature,” Browning argues that the opposite is true. She finds that women’s nature results in a natural equality—Virginia Steinmetz even refers to it as “androgyny”—and that the subjugation of women is distinctly artificial (*Beyond* 18). Browning seeks to prove this point through an integration of images from outdoor nature, defined by *OED* as “The phenomena of the physical world collectively; *esp.* plants, animals, and other features and products of the earth itself” (“Nature,” def.11a). Browning ties these images of outdoor, “physical world” nature, through careful comparison and repetition, to the idea of female equality; she believed that societal inequality was an unnatural construct, rather than an expression of women’s natural inferiority.

Definitive plant images that relate to Aurora appear most frequently and poignantly in book I, as her character is established. In this early section of the work, the natural world reflects Aurora’s feelings, thoughts, and qualities, just as she reflects the natural world. All of the individuals who positively influence her young life understand, though perhaps subconsciously, her connection to nature. Her father seems most aware of the connection; his early actions upon the death of his wife, Aurora’s mother, prove his understanding. He takes her to live in the mountains “Because unmothered babes, he thought, had need / Of mother nature more than others use” (I.112-13). He realizes that the natural world from which Aurora sprang can be used as a surrogate for maternal love and attention. Nature acts as mother, friend, and kin, while her father, who believes in Aurora’s intellectual equality, teaches her with “Strong words of counselling souls confederate / With vocal pines and waters—out of books” (I.188-89). Here nature itself seems to support Aurora’s needs and her father’s socially unorthodox instruction.

Aurora, gaining spiritual nourishment from the natural world, continues to grow “like the plants from unseen roots” (l.206). Sandra M. Gilbert’s identification of Italy as Aurora’s “mother country” and England as her fatherland make her growth seem less mysterious; though we cannot see her roots, they do exist, and she thrives by drawing sustenance through them from her motherland, where her path to learning and enlightenment is not separated from that of male children (Gilbert 197). When her father dies and she must uproot, travel to England, and stay with her cold spinster aunt, Aurora’s ties to that motherland make her departure from it almost as painful to her as the death of her birth parents.

When Aurora arrives in England, she immediately senses the change in her natural surroundings. The change is evidenced by descriptions of the English landscape, which, as in Italy, could be used to describe the country’s women as well as its greenery. Aurora states that “The ground seemed cut up from the fellowship / Of verdure, field from field, as man from man” (l.260-61). Browning’s concept, that the people of England unnaturally divide themselves according to a variety of social constructs, pervades not just this section, but the entire work; her chosen language suggests that the people of England have limited, tamed, and sterilized nature and spirit as it exists in themselves, and the results of those actions are reflected both inside and outside their homes.

The change in human and natural landscape is so severe and crippling to Aurora that outsiders begin to speculate that she will soon die (*Aurora Leigh* l.498); however, she does adjust to the transplant and begin to grow again. To describe Aurora’s failing health and eventual recovery, Browning often uses images that liken Aurora to trees and plants and show the disparity between Aurora’s goals and her aunt’s. For example, when Aurora begins to recuperate,

she believes that her caretaker aunt is not pleased, as one might expect, but indignant over her newfound strength. Aurora imagines her aunt saying,

I know there's something wrong;  
 I know I have not ground you down enough  
 To flatten and bake you to a wholesome crust  
 For household uses and proprieties,  
 Before the rain has got into my barn  
 And set the grains a-sprouting. What, you're green  
 With outdoor impudence? You almost grow? (l.1039-45)

Here Aurora's aunt laments the fact that Aurora is finding and claiming her autonomy, because this autonomy directly defies the educational program and subjugation that the aunt and the larger society expect Aurora to accept. Rather than allowing herself to be molded for "household uses," she has already begun to sprout into a strong and free-standing tree *a la* Wollstonecraft.

Though at this point in the poem Aurora takes charge of her education and future (as evidenced by her renewed growth), she continues to lament the loss of her untamed native soil, and expounds at length on the contrasting "clipped" and "domestic" nature of her new surroundings.

All the fields  
 Are tied up fast with hedges, nosegay like;  
 The hills are crumpled plains, the plains parterres,  
 The trees, round woolly, ready to be clipped,

And if you seek for any wilderness

You find, at best, a park. A nature tamed

And grown domestic (l.629-35)

While the language here describes her natural surroundings, it also describes expectations for the women of the country, and for Aurora, who, as a new arrival, must be tamed and domesticated before she can fit in. In another echo of Wollstonecraft, this section implies that everything natural must be bound and cut unnaturally in order to fit the restrictive molds expected in English society.

Where Aurora sees and rejects this confining cultivation, her aunt has come to embody it. The nameless aunt epitomizes the restrictive, spirit-severing social expectations of mid-nineteenth-century England. She has internalized her social role and severed her true feminine nature so effectively that the only natural tie that remains lies in her “cheeks, in which was yet a rose / Of perished summers, like a rose in a book, / Kept more for ruth than pleasure” (l.283-85). This passage is the only one in which Aurora’s aunt is associated with any form of plant life, and the association shows Browning’s thoughts on the unnatural result of compliance with the Victorian English subjugation of women’s spirit and intellect. Aurora’s aunt immediately attempts to tame and indoctrinate her niece into the British social order that she has internalized and come to represent. In book I, Aurora is forced to replace the natural surroundings of her motherland with green paint (568), wax flowers (425), “stuffed birds” (425), and “washed-out” paintings of nature (423). Additionally, pointless memorization and the study of “a score of books on womanhood... that boldly assert / Their right of comprehending husband’s talk /

When not too deep” replace the scholarly reading previously sanctioned by Aurora’s father (I.430-32).

Hillel Schwartz notes in an article on the activities of Victorian women that “‘women’s work’ – in thread, shells, ivory, paper, foil, and wax flowers – was being demoted by a patriarchate intent upon defining an exclusively male public sphere.... Wax figures... were being reduced as women themselves were being reduced, to a confining domestic correctness” (104). These replacements were intended to denigrate and subjugate women by eliminating valuable mental and physical output, and furthermore, the change was made ubiquitous and socially unquestionable out of a hope that no alternative could be desired or even imagined. Aurora’s aunt has been socialized by this patriarchal denigration so thoroughly that she has come to represent it, and she can no longer see or value the difference between true and falsified nature. Early in book III, Aurora again mentions the unnatural process of acculturation, saying,

We are apt to sit tired, patient as a fool,  
 While others gird us up with the violent bands  
 Of social figments, feints, formalisms,  
 Reversing our straight nature.... (III.16-19)

In this passage, women seem very much like Japanese bonsai trees, which, unlike Chinese bonsai (which are grown small for a specific functional purpose) are clipped and cultivated into unnatural shapes solely for their aesthetic value. The cultivation of bonsai trees in Japan is very similar to the cultivation of women in England, wherein plants and women are intentionally stunted to grow in confined spaces, and they produce no food or shelter. Aurora recognizes



that her nature would have her grow straight and tall, but that “social figments” instead render her feeble and twisted.

Aurora seems to submit to her aunt’s attempts to “exclude” her nature and restrict her “privilege of seeing” it, and she seems to be forming a new, socially acceptable self (l.485; l.578). However, she locates and begins to read a collection of books that belonged to her father. As Aurora notes, “I sat on in my chamber green, / And... read my books, / Without considering whether they were fit / To do me good” (l.698-702). The books help her to find strength to view nature on her own, and help her to replenish her spirit and bring her back from her depression and potentially impending death (l.834). Aurora manages to avoid the fate of her aunt by rebelling against expectations and maintaining constant visual ties to the outdoors. In book I, Aurora offers an over seventy line description of the view from her bedroom window. Kathleen Renk says, "Aurora's aunt attempts to kill her spirit, yet Aurora finds a way to continue to develop her insight and intellect. Aurora covertly reads the classics while she gazes out of her window, viewing nature's limes and laurels" (41). Renk’s argument reflects the idea that Aurora’s intellect is tied to freedom and nature; while that idea is hardly revolutionary today, a Victorian treatment of female ailments was mental and physical rest through restriction from all excitement, travel, and intellectual pursuits, either in the home, as in *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, or in the asylum, as described by Elaine Showalter in her article “Victorian Women and Insanity.”

Maureen Thum also partially, if briefly, supports this positive interpretation of the symbolic role of nature. She notes that Aurora “hears the implicit call of a natural world beyond the conventions of the house and the narrowness even of the attached garden” (234). As Thum

notes, Aurora appreciates the garden and uses it as the starting point for her reclamation of freedom and growth.

Summoned by the natural world, which penetrates the house and her room, the child gradually moves out of the imprisoning domestic confines into the garden and then beyond... into a wider world that stands in symbolic opposition to the narrowly defined domestic space over which her aunt presides. (234)

Thum notes a positive meaning of the natural world outside Aurora's green room, and she postulates that Aurora's negative emotion is directed at her aunt and at societal repression rather than at the garden or its inhabitants. She notes that nature in *Aurora Leigh* represents freedom from "domestic confines" and repressed feminine talents and needs.

As Aurora continues to read, learn, and gaze out the window, she gains a growing understanding of the repression of feminine nature in England. She also realizes while that nature has been tamed to the point of near nonexistence in cases like her aunt's, it does still exist, and it can be regrown and rediscovered by England's women. Like Coleridge in the bower, he eventually finds that the strength of nature is within her even during her confinement; her container is irrelevant, for there is "No plot so narrow, be but Nature there" ("This Lime" 60-2). The nature to be had in England is not "grand" (l.615), "electric" (l.624), or free, as it was in Italy, but it has the same potential and spirit. By their nature, clipped plants and tamed landscapes grow out if not constantly maintained.

While many critics view Aurora's green room as a true refuge, I believe it represents yet another attempt to supplant her nature. Aurora says,

I had a little chamber in the house,

As green as any privet-hedge a bird  
 Might choose to build in, though the nest itself  
 Could show but dead-brown sticks and straws; the walls  
 Were green, the carpet was pure green, the straight  
 Small bed was curtained greenly, and the folds  
 Hung green about the window which let in  
 The outdoor world with all its greenery.  
 A dash of dawn-dew from the honeysuckle,  
 But so you were baptized into the grace  
 And privilege of seeing...

First, the lime... (l.567-78)

Some see Aurora's green room as a positive "paradise and place of refuge" (McCraw 28), but I argue that the green room, perfect fake plants, and stuffed dead animals represent the successfully indoctrinated Victorian woman and the role that she is expected to adopt. The green room is, like the other false natural elements introduced by the aunt, a model. I believe the room is another piece of the complex construct that Aurora must identify and escape, both spiritually and physically, in order to enter the true world that grows outside. Mary Grace Doyle, in addressing bird imagery in *Aurora Leigh*, notes that the green room leaves Aurora "insulated as a bird in a cage, hidden behind a wall of pure sensibility" (17). The room has been outfitted to seem nest-like, but it is still a cage—or perhaps even a grave—in disguise. While the words "green" and "pure" are used as descriptors, the other adjectives in the passage show that some level of animosity has crept into Aurora's perception. Her reference to "dead" sticks

and straws and the “straight small bed” show that this room is not a part of nature, though it is masquerading as such. The overbearing usage of the color green seems like a desperate bid to provide the growing woman with a palatable replacement for the wide outdoor space of her true habitat.

Aurora has strength enough to make the room suit her needs, and she ultimately uses it as a literal and figurative jumping off point for her return to the outdoors. Her room is where she reads, dreams, and comes into her understanding of herself, so it is, in some sense, a Coleridgian refuge, in spite of its designer’s intent. However, only by pushing her head out her window like a new baby (as implied through Browning’s use of the term “baptized”) can Aurora interact with true growing things and fully reclaim her own true nature.

Readers are also exposed in book I to the Coleridgian lime tree that stands outside Aurora’s English window. Aurora is placed by her aunt with her “back against the window, to exclude / The sight of the great lime-tree on the lawn, / Which seemed to have come on purpose from the woods / To bring the house a message...” (l.485-88). This passage, wherein Aurora is forced to face away from the lime tree as she reads the teachings and engages in the pastimes assigned to her by her aunt, appears close to the section that describes Aurora’s false acculturation process through the creation of wax flowers and washed out paintings. I believe that the lime tree represents Aurora’s true nature, from which her aunt symbolically forces her to face away. The lime’s descriptions throughout the poem echo Aurora’s emotional state precisely. Many *Aurora Leigh* scholars mention or briefly explore the connections between Aurora and nature, but none provides a full exploration of how specific nature images from *Aurora Leigh*,

and not one acknowledges Aurora's possible tie to the lime tree as a positive representation of herself.

As the spiritual is reflected in the natural according to Browning's personal philosophy, the lime tree represents Aurora's natural self and spirit and her equality of poetic vision. The lime has ventured from the woods just as Aurora will venture from negative socialization into a genuine understanding of her skills and abilities, and use those abilities to help enlighten others by tending to their spiritual needs. The lone tree, "come on purpose" with its seeming "message," foreshadows and represents her pioneering foray into the world of meaningful and intellectual female-written poetry. Later in the work, the tree seems to embody Aurora's moods and thoughts. For example, as Aurora discovers her love for reading and consults books in secret before her aunt awakens, she finds that her books "beat / Under [her] pillow, in the morning's dark, / An hour before the sun would let [her] read!" (l.841-43), just as the bees surrounding the lime tree often "hummed away" her "morning dream" (l.580). Later, as she begins to reclaim her nature in spite of her aunt's teachings, she writes,

The moon came,  
 And swept my chamber clean of foolish thoughts.  
 The sun came, saying, 'Shall I lift this light  
 Against the lime-tree, and you will not look?  
 I make the birds sing—listen! (l.656-8)

Here, her actual self is addressed by the moon in her chamber, and her symbolic self is helped to grow by the shining of the sun on her leaves. While she feels pained and trapped inside her green cage at first, her unencumbered nature still exists and grows.

I have already argued in chapter 1 that the choice of the lime is a reference to both Coleridge and Wollstonecraft, but I believe it has additional layers of meaning. In one telling passage, Aurora contemplates what her life might have been like had she accepted Romney's proposal of marriage:

I might have been a common woman now  
 And happier, less known and less left alone,  
 Perhaps a better woman after all,  
 With chubby children hanging on my neck  
 To keep me low and wise. Ah me, the vines  
 That bear such fruit, are proud to stoop with it. (ll.513-18)

By implication, had she chosen to marry and have children instead of producing poetry, perhaps Aurora would have been represented by a trunkless ("parasite") plant that grows fruit more nourishing than the lime (Wollstonecraft, *Letters* 40). Aurora does bear fruit, but it is not the sweet type produced by the common woman in the form of babies. Also along those lines, the choice of the lime may be a comment on the role of poetry to the common society; rather than being a sustaining fruit, the lime is seen by most as a garnish or a flavoring. The tartness of the lime may also be a tongue-in-cheek reference to Aurora's defiance of the unfair convention that women cannot generate significant prose. Finally, the limes may represent Browning's thoughts on the fact that Aurora requires time and maturity in order to produce fruit as sweet as the great poets who came before her. Bing Shao supports this interpretation in a brief address of the import Aurora's green room, where "the 'green' image suggests, among other things, that Aurora is still 'green' in her art" (108). Given Aurora's lack of confidence in her early

poetic talent and life choices, this interpretation seems apt. Aurora even doubts whether her poetry is fruit at all, instead comparing herself to another tree—the barren palm in its “realm of sand” (ll.519).

*Aurora Leigh* scholars have dealt with the lime tree, but have generally interpreted it as a negative male symbol. Dolores DeLuise and Michael Timko argue that Browning’s lime represents not Aurora, but her rejection of the masculine. They write that instead of a male protagonist being crowned by another (as in Browning’s “Sonnets from the Portuguese”), Browning’s new protagonist, Aurora, recognizes her skill and “crowns herself” (98). When speaking of the lime tree, the authors state:

Even though she cannot see it, Aurora can yet get a sense of the ‘message’ the lime tree delivers. Having come seemingly of its own volition out of the woods, the solitary tree... conveys the trope of masculine sexuality and masculine genius, one which is very disturbing to Aurora.... Out of context, this discernment of the lime tree, bordering on resentment, is perplexing. If one remembers, however, the circumstances surrounding the lime in ‘Lady Geraldine’s Courtship’ and ‘This Lime Tree Bower My Prison,’ it is clear that she has now given up the belief in the male poet as genius. She creates her poet-genius-speaker as a woman, living and working in a fertile feminine environment literally (and literally) overshadowed by male genius. (98)

Aurora does “crown herself,” but she does not ever seem “disturb[ed]” by or “resent[ful]” of the maleness or any other aspect of the tree. The negative emotions in the passage are focused not on the tree, but on the aunt, who represents a limiting societal construct of

femininity, and later, on the bees that buzz in the lime's branches. I argue that the presence of the tree is not meant to represent a malevolent male presence, but rather, that it is an assertion of female intellectual and artistic strength and, perhaps, a nod to the writings of the male poets whom Browning and Aurora cherish. Aurora does not seek to cast aside the poets whose works she loves and emulates simply because they are male—rejection or denigration of skill based on gender is precisely what she argues against in her conversations with Romney. During the time she lives with her aunt, she secretly reads and cherishes the male-authored works that her father saved out of “hope” that she might follow in his intellectual footsteps (I.730). Aurora seeks an environment where society at large does not find women, like vines, “too weak / To stand alone” and conclude that “Nature’s self... scorn[s] to put her music” in their mouths (II.359-60; II.346-8).

Browning found many “clipped” female poets to be lacking as sources of inspiration, so she turned to males as examples of what she could achieve. As noted earlier, she stated in an 1845 letter, “I look everywhere for grandmothers and see none. It is not in the filial spirit I am deficient, I do assure you—witness my reverent love of the grandfathers” (Browning, *Letters 2*: 232). Whether or not her dismissal of her grandmothers was jest or jab is irrelevant; clearly she did value the influence of male writers. In book I of *Aurora Leigh*, Aurora names some of the authors that set her “soul... singing” and whom she felt at “one with.” All of the writers listed are male: Theophrast, Ælian, Keats, Pope, and Byron (I.1053; I.881). Browning also describes a love for Coleridge (as documented in chapter 1) and notes in a letter to the *Aurora Leigh* critic Richard Hengist Horne, that “Your best compliment to me is the truth at all times, without reference to sex” (Browning and Horne 2: 24). Given these direct quotations from Browning, Auro-



ra's devotion to her poetic forefathers, and the huge number of textual comparisons of women to plants and trees, accepting arguments that the tree is a negative male symbol is difficult. Aurora, who shares many personal similarities with Browning, never gives up on or resents her forefathers, even though she may resent the society that denies her gender's abilities. She longs to work with men as an acknowledged intellectual and emotional equal, and Romney's ultimate realization of Aurora's skill in book IX echoes the type of acceptance that Browning would like women to be able to receive, regardless of sex. Browning rejected the concept of male superiority versus female ineptitude, but her deep appreciation of her male predecessors shows that she did not reject or resent male skill itself. The achievement of balance and gender equality is, at all times, an integral thematic underpinning of *Aurora Leigh*.<sup>2</sup>

Sarah Annes Brown provides a less combative but still gender-hostile argument in her essay on the echoed use of leaf imagery borrowed from Milton's *Paradise Lost* in *Aurora Leigh*. Annes Brown notes that Browning had a clearly documented devotion to Milton, and that references to his leaf imagery (specifically the leaves of Vallombrosa) in *Paradise Lost* appear in *Aurora Leigh* (727). However, she still tentatively assigns negative gender connotations to those leaves. She notes that Browning's leaves "may perhaps be seen as a sign of the male poet" (10) and as a sign of the "male epic tradition" (11), but she goes on to state that the text places Aurora in an engendered "battle for poetic control: finally the leaves are no longer a symptom of poetic anxiety, but merely a descriptive tool" (11-12). While this description takes into account Aurora's obvious debt to, desire to live up to, and devotion to her male predecessors, I would again argue that the leaves in *Aurora Leigh* represent a positive integration of the imagery from

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<sup>2</sup> Chapter 3 will deal more fully with the relationship of gender equality and plant imagery in the work.

*Paradise Lost* rather than a battle for “control.” Aurora does have anxiety regarding her poetic talent, and she seeks to realize her full potential, but the realization of that potential does not come at the expense of her respect for other poets who happen to be male. She seeks to defeat unfair devaluation of her skill, not devalue other works of art. In all aspects of the work the concept that feminine equality is supported by nature appears; of course, the concept of male equality, while dealt with far less, must also be respected.

The attribution of tree-strength may not apply only to the title character in *Aurora Leigh*. When Aurora pays a visit to Marian’s home after discovering her, shamed and outcast with her child in France, she finds that “A great acacia with its slender trunk / And overpoise of multitudinous leaves” stands just outside her home (VI.537-41). This tree represents Marian, just as the lime represents Aurora. Marian, the only other spiritual female character in the poem, is also the only other character who also has extensive plant associations and a symbolic tree. The choice of the acacia gives the reader clues regarding Marian’s character. According to *The Dictionary of Symbols and Imagery*, the acacia tree has come to symbolize friendship, platonic love, fecundity, reproduction, incorruptibility, and immortality, but according to *OED*, it means “thorny tree” (“Acacia,” def. 3; “Acacia,” def. 1). As these wide-ranging definitions imply, the imagery surrounding Marian is, like her life, mixed. In her first textual appearances she is likened to a rose and to nettles, and she describes her own life as “thorny” (VI.1127). While Marian has been rejected and abused by a society that views and judges her unfairly, the presence of the tree shows that she has not allowed her innate virtue and strength to be compromised. The “line of rigid poplars” which “elbowed” from behind the house seems reminiscent of a room full of judging onlookers, who would very much like Marian, in her house “too high and

slim / To stand there by itself," to fall into a more traditional, helpless, and dependent female role (VI.527-8). Society would rob her of her tree-strength and subjugate her, but she, like Aurora, finds the strength to refuse such subjugation. Early in her youth her own mother attempts to sell her into prostitution, and the text implies that this unnatural act leaves Marian at odds with her surroundings and herself. During her crazed flight from the attempted sale, "The green fields melted, wayside trees fell back / To make room for her. Then her head grew vexed; / Trees, fields, turned on her and ran after her" (III.1076-8). Clearly in this passage the trees and even the fields take on a malevolent aspect. When Marian gives birth, her perception of the natural world changes and becomes more welcoming. Her strength and devotion develop and grow throughout the novel-poem, and at the close of the work her sole interest is her maternal duty. At one point late in the text Marian's baby is likened to a pomegranate (VI.566); her fruit-child helps her bring her perception of the natural world back into alignment and helps her to understand her role as mothering tree.

Her newfound strength is exhibited most pointedly when Romney agrees to marry Marian for the second time. Upon his initial proposal, Marian accepts, willing to be his "slave," "help," "toy," or "tool," (IX.370), but upon his second proposal, she "bound[s] off" and "light[s] beyond reach, / Before him, with a staglike majesty / Of soft, serene defiance" (IX.289-91). The expression of her independence is made clear throughout this section, wherein she also uses the leaf-like descriptor "green / And smooth" to detail how her life must be lived from that point forward (IX.335-6). She makes the choice to stand on her own and honor her natural bond with her child, rather than clinging like a Wollstonecraftian vine to another person for support; through her loving relationship with her child, Marian achieves the same personal bal-

ance that Aurora achieves through her final admission that marital love can coincide with independence.

Taken individually, the recurrent plant images in *Aurora Leigh* may seem more like generic metaphors or simple landscape descriptions, but when viewed as a whole, they offer a useful method of understanding the actions and fate of Aurora and Marian and the contrasting roles of Aurora's aunt and Lady Waldemar. The plant images used by Browning in *Aurora Leigh* set up the characters as individuals that defy Victorian assumptions and expectations of gender and provide the reader with a symbolic understanding of each woman's individual strengths.

#### 4 PLANT IMAGERY AND THE POEM'S CONCLUSION

Aurora's strength throughout the poem develops primarily from within herself, but it does not grow entirely without assistance from others. While she deserves much of the credit for her ultimate independence, Romney does offer support for her inherent equality, and that support can be seen in the surrounding imagery. Though evidence can be found in any number of theme or image threads, the nature images tied to the lovers Aurora and Romney provide rich indications that Browning planned and foreshadowed their union. The natural images selected throughout the work reflect each individual's growth and maturation and their eventual egalitarian pairing.

Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi pithily sums up the concept that Romney and Aurora are not only intended to marry, but that they have a deep compatibility even in youth. She notes, "the resemblance and relationship between them are significant in that they make of Romney Aurora's 'alter ego,' the brother in her soul" (36). Each lover is on a path to maturity and the realization of Swedenborgian divine in the natural, Wollstonecraftian self-dependence, and Coleridgean self-enlightenment. As they arrive at a greater fullness of vision, they can see that they have been compatible all along, and their separate identities as male and female merge to form an egalitarian support structure to which each contributes. Throughout the work, Aurora is continually compared to trees and plants, but the men are far more often depicted by Browning as the forces of nature that support plant growth and strength. Time must pass before the somewhat rigid roles adopted by Aurora and Romney soften into maturity and they can come to-

gether in mutual harmony, but Romney's associations with rain and the sun show that he is, even in his youth, Aurora's intended mate. Before their union can be realized, both children must grow into complete, mature individuals who truly appreciate themselves and their similarities.

Many scholars have already argued that Aurora's acceptance of marriage on her own terms was always Browning's intention,<sup>3</sup> while others argue that the final reconciliation was either a concession to societal gender restrictions or showed Browning's continued internalization of those restrictions.<sup>4</sup> Though scholars have named different reasons why the ending of *Aurora Leigh* is not a failure of Browning's social critique or mindset, they have not related that ending to nature imagery in the work. My argument echoes the basis set by many of the ending's supporters, but will provide the first focused analysis of how the plant and nature images that pervade the text also foreshadow and are present in the poem's final book.

Nathan Camp provides a germane defense of the ending's equality in his work on *Aurora Leigh* and Swedenborg:

Without love, [she] is incomplete, personally and artistically. While many feminist critics have argued that the ending of *Aurora Leigh*, with its long-delayed heterosexual love bond and its implication of marriage, is a conventional capitulation to social roles, Barrett Browning certainly would have seen it otherwise. Linda Peterson has shown that Aurora represents... a re-visioning of the possibilities of the woman poet.... Aurora deliberately challenged the generic

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<sup>3</sup> Camp, Carpenter, Gilbert and Gubar, Peterson, Sutphin, and Thum argue that the ending of *Aurora Leigh* was carefully planned and supportive of equality, rather than a collapse of the theme of female independence.

<sup>4</sup> David and Shenk have both found the work and its ending to be un-feminist for these reasons.

double standard, writing the epic poetry traditionally seen as masculine. Christine Sutphin has convincingly argued that Aurora's choice of both marriage and poetry can be seen as the most radical idea of the poem in its original context: Barrett Browning refuses to endorse the socially prescribed either/or choice between marriage and artistic career, and argues that Aurora is strong enough to be herself, even within marriage. (69)

As Camp notes in this summary, Aurora's acknowledgement of her desire for love does not dampen or lessen her strength; rather, she finally comes to the realization that independence and romantic love are not mutually exclusive. Aurora's path to personal fulfillment is lined with many difficulties and a significant amount of personal insecurity. As she ages, her strength grows, and the development of that strength can be traced through the plants which Aurora uses to describe herself. Upon her arrival in England she compares herself to "sea-weed on the rocks" (I.380). The use of sea-weed in this early descriptor provides evidence that after Aurora's parents' deaths she feels rootless and lost. In this initial stage of her time in England, she lacks all independence and feels tossed by the waves of fate. Later in book I, as she begins to gain her sense of self, she uses language that likens her growth to seedlings (I.557-65) and even the strong lime tree which she is forced to keep her "back against" by her aunt (I.485). As a result of her growing sense of sex-related injustice and, not insignificantly, her sense of personal insecurity, she rejects and resents Romney for his attempts to help anchor her in marriage. While she states that she views him "defyingly" and sees their "differences...intimately" in book I (504; 550-1), she harbors a confused longing for his company. She berates herself for her emotions because she fears they represent her desire to acquiesce to weakness and societ-

al norms by accepting his proposal: the “current coin / Which men give women” (II.540-1). After his requests of marriage, she speaks of her “vile remorse” at having turned him down (II.523), and she wonders in frustration if the mere naming of the word love can cause her “To hanker after a mere name, a show, / A supposition, a potential love!” (II.524-5)

In the years following her rejection of marriage and the social order, she gains the independence and poetic success that she longs for, but she finds her achievements less than satisfying, emotionally. As she grows, contemplates, and becomes more secure in herself, her level of personal insight also grows. She recognizes her own strength and realizes her feelings for Romney do not adulterate or negate that strength. She overcomes her own concerns that love will damage her sense of self and sense of independence, and she understands that she and Romney are not so poorly matched as she once thought. However, only after she has fully grown, physically and spiritually, can she view her longing not as acquiescence, but as a natural need for an equal lover-companion.

Other passages support the argument that plant and nature imagery relate Aurora’s process of self-actualization to her eventual union with Romney. While early in the text she resents Romney’s attention and refuses to acknowledge her desire for it, Aurora’s own descriptions show that Romney Leigh plays a role in her acclimation and new growth. Her willingness to acknowledge that role changes as the text progresses. In book I, immediately before Aurora’s recovery, Aurora notes that Romney “dropped a sudden hand upon my head / ... as soft as rain- / But then I rose and shook it off as fire” (I.543-5). She goes on to say, after he touches her “soft as rain,” that, “A little by his act perhaps, yet more / By something in me, surely not my will, / I did not die. But slowly, as one in swoon, / ... I woke, rose up” (I.557-65). In this passage,



the language of Aurora's growth could just as easily describe the growth of a seedling tree; her assertion is that the strength necessary for survival is contained primarily within herself, and that very little outside influence is necessary to basic survival in either men or women. The same sentiment of self-sufficiency appears in a slightly earlier passage:

Certain of your feebler souls

Go out in such a process; many pine

To a sick, inodorous light; my own endured:

I had relations in the Unseen, and drew

The elemental nutriment of heat

From nature, as earth feels the sun at nights. (I.470-75)

These two passages attribute only mild credit to Romney's attention, but the reader might again argue that in this early stage of her life, Aurora denigrates the import of his presence because of her own mixed feelings and desire to feel independent. Later textual passages show her growing realization that she that while she can survive with very little external support, a family (represented by fruit) brings her life more meaning than her complete independence (as a "palm stand[ing] upright in its realm of sand") (II.518; 519). In another early passage, Aurora states, "Always Romney Leigh / Was looking for the worms, I for the gods... I was a worm too, and he looked on me" (I.550-6). This description helps to show how multifaceted the motivations for Aurora's rejection of Romney are. She longs to "stand upright" (II.520), instead of being a spineless worm, trunkless clinging vine, parasite plant, or clinging "sea-weed" (I.380). Perhaps she also finds it too soon or too presumptuous for a man to attempt to unseat her deceased father as her primary male mentor; she refers to Romney's hand upon her hair as "The

stranger's touch that took my father's place / Yet dared seem soft" (I.546-7). Aurora's resentment probably also stems partially from the fact that Romney's opinion of women has not yet matured into one that she finds acceptable; not only does he call to mind her own concerns regarding her talent and ability to operate independently, he reminds her of the unfairness of the social system by which she is constrained. Kathleen Renk and Nathan Camp both note that the young, unenlightened Romney represents commonly held beliefs regarding a woman's talent; Renk states that he "never takes seriously [Aurora's] claim that a woman can comprehend the mysterious and sublime transcendental realm" (42). Romney's dismissive mocking of Aurora's poetic skills as a "mere woman's work" galvanizes Aurora (II.234).

Solar images are also arguably used in conjunction with Romney on many occasions throughout the text. In a 1981 article, Virginia Steinmetz traces the use of solar images throughout the work, and she finds that Browning's use of solar images may "reveal Elizabeth Barrett Browning's struggle with her internalized father image and her attempt to derive her vision of androgyny from images of patriarchy" (18). The theme of sun as a patriarchal image predates and figures largely in *Aurora Leigh*, and Aurora's frequent scorn for the sun bears striking similarities to her scorn for Romney. As with the touch of rain offered by Romney, at first the plant-like Aurora dismisses the sun's influence almost entirely, and claims to use the "mother nature" recommended by her father in book I as her primary support, instead (I.113). The previously mentioned passage wherein she claims to draw her sustenance from nature and the "Unseen" at night is most relevant; in that passage, she states that she "had relations in the Unseen, and drew / The elemental nutriment of heat / From nature, as earth feels the sun at nights (I.473-5). Here Aurora argues that she draws heat from her mother, the earth, rather

than from the traditionally patriarchal sun as represented by Romney. Even though she feels the sun's presence in this passage, she states it is not vital to her growth. Much later Aurora recalls that at this point her actions made her like an insect that "Refused to warm itself in any sun" (IX.666). Perhaps the strongest evidence that Romney can be tied to solar images appears in Aurora's aunt's speech, after Romney's marriage proposal. Aurora's aunt angrily states that Aurora is "groping in the dark, / For all this sunlight"—in Aurora's aunt's eyes, Romney's love is the sun that Aurora ought to embrace (II.585-6).

Readers can also find evidence of Romney's role in his language. Romney uses the term "nature" and references Aurora's plant nature several times. He says,

place your fecund heart

In mine, and let us blossom for the world

That wants love's colour in the gray of time.

My talk, meanwhile, is arid to you, ay. (II.375-8)

He later says, "Henceforth, my flower, / Be planted out of reach of any such [thoughts], / And lean the side you please, with all your leaves!" (II.828-30). His reference to Aurora as "fecund" and his mention of blossoms and aridity show that he has at least a glimmer of understanding regarding Aurora's spiritual bond with nature, and that he seeks to support her independence—though in these passages, his description of her as a lovely flower rather than a strong tree probably pushes Aurora further from his grasp. Aurora chooses to correct his metaphor with this response:

blow about my feelings, or my leaves,

And here's my aunt will help you with east winds

And break a stalk, perhaps, tormenting me;  
 But certain flowers grow near as deep as trees,  
 And cousin, you'll not move my root, not you,  
 With all your confluent storms. (II.845-50)

Through this passage, the reader can further understand the development of Aurora's self-perception as tree rather than flower—unlike her early “sea-weed” self, she presents herself as an individual who grows, stands tall, and flourishes in spite of the negative conditions that surround her (I.380). Clearly Romney's words have had an impact on her emotional state, for her “feelings” and “leaves” are blown about and even broken, but Romney's verbal storm leaves Aurora more resolute in her desire to stay independent. Romney's coaxing, rather than weakening her, strengthens her resolve and her self-image.

Romney and Aurora also conflict on the concept of “natural” versus “unnatural” when Romney attempts to give Aurora money upon her aunt's death. Romney says his gift, which represents male support of the weaker female sex, is “very natural,” but Aurora vehemently disagrees (II.1086). She tears the gift up, and she describes its falling pieces as “forest-leaves” (II.1165). Again, Aurora's rejection of Romney highlights the development of her independence. Aurora finds the strength to survive, but by implication the refusal could lead to Aurora's demise, just as the leaves on a tree would die and fall if denied sunlight and rain. Romney's attempted gift is unacceptable to Aurora because he has internalized the gender roles and beliefs of the day, and they have tainted his vision of the world. Even immediately after his first proposal, Romney's language reflects the theme of plants and water—he says after Aurora's first rejection, “I set you on the level of my soul, / And overwashed you with the bitter brine / Of

some habitual thoughts" (II.826-28). Upon his first request, both Romney and Aurora are unprepared and unable to modify their ideals, so even though they work together and need each other as naturally and obviously as plant and rain, Aurora cannot see or accept their compatibility because of his intervening assumptions. Aurora's rejection of his support proves that she is willing to risk death rather than accept assistance from a system that subjugates her. To Aurora, acceptance and submission are not natural, and she stands alone without support.

The natural harmony of their separate goals can be seen in yet another element of his first proposal: their parallel attention to eliminating societal divisions. The descriptive language used by both lovers describes these divisions as furrows or wounds in the natural landscape. Through his phalanstery, Romney wishes to provide assistance to the poor, and through his proposal to Marian, he shows he does not respect the common concept that poverty coincided with moral bankruptcy or other negative traits. Aurora notes that Romney seeks to "Wipe out earth's furrows of Thine and Mine, / And leave one green for men to play at bowls" (II.463-64). While she seems to trivialize his endeavors by comparing them to a game, the language echoes her own desire to eliminate sex-based societal furrows in the lands "cut up from the fellowship / Of verdure" (I.260-1). Later in book II, after Aurora has rejected Romney's hand and inherited money, Romney tells Aurora that his aim is to

bring the uneven world back to its round,  
Or, failing so much, fill up, bridge at least  
To smother issues some abysmal cracks  
And feuds of earth, intestine heats have made  
To keep men separate. (1219-23)

This repetition supports the argument that while Romney and Aurora's goals are congruent, their immaturity of vision prevents them from achieving the natural harmony that might otherwise come easily. The text clearly shows that Romney has not yet fully comprehended the true significance of love, nature, and the spirit—but neither has Aurora. Aurora herself notes in the final book that her youthful vision was not complete, again by tying plant growth to her own growth into spiritual understanding:

I forgot

No perfect artist is developed here  
 From any imperfect woman. Flower from root,  
 And spiritual from natural, grade by grade  
 In all our life. A handful of earth  
 To make God's image! The despised poor earth,  
 The healthy odorous earth—I missed with it  
 The divine breath.... (IX.647-54)

In another late passage, Romney chides Aurora for the loss of her natural sight in interpreting his goals and intentions. In book IX, he says,

Are you the Aurora who made large my dreams  
 To dream your greatness? You conceive so small?  
 You stand so less than woman, though being more,  
 And lose your natural instinct (like a beast)  
 Through intellectual culture? (1227-31)

In the final section of the work, both Romney and Aurora chide themselves for their youthful behavior, and each is secure enough to willingly receive constructive criticism from the other. Aurora chastises herself for not having been “gentler” and less arrogant, and Romney notes that he was “not worthy” and “had not learnt / God’s lesson” when he insulted Aurora on the day of his first marriage proposal (VIII.323; VIII.324-5). Nathan Camp notes that in their youth, Romney and Aurora each neglect one half of the Swedenborgian dual world—Romney, the spiritual, and Aurora, the physical. Each must come to realize the import of the neglected part before their respective (though similar) aims can be achieved and they can settle happily in marriage—perhaps the most symbolic union of spiritual bonding in the physical world. Swedenborg believed that a life devoted entirely to poetry or anything else could only be imbalanced, and that love was required for general harmony. Ultimately, the lovers achieve this Swedenborgian ideal when Aurora realizes her pursuit of poetry and equality does not prevent her from having a male lover, and when Romney accepts that women can develop a comprehensive understanding of generally male-dominated areas. Browning brought this theme into physical existence by tying Aurora to plant life and Romney to the supportive elements that plants require. In book IX, after the burning of his phalanstery and the loss of his vision, Romney finally recognizes Aurora’s wisdom and skill. He is elevated into divine sight himself as a direct result of reading her poetry—he refers to her as “poet” repeatedly in book VIII (591), and tells her that she should “never doubt” her poetic skills, for she has “shown [him] truths” (VIII.608). Once her role as seer and sharer has been actualized, she can accept her role as lover and become a full person, free of the fear that she felt in response to social inequity.

Once she has gained her strong sense of self and realized that she no longer needs to scorn Romney's support entirely, her descriptive language changes dramatically. In stark contrast to the early passages, wherein she shakes off Romney's hand that falls "as soft as rain" and refuses "to warm [herself] in any sun" (I.544; IX.666), she feels fulfilled and joyous about the "passionate rain" and "grand sunrise" that accompany her realization of Romney's ongoing love and support (IX.727; IX.756). In reflection on his first proposal, she uncertainly says, "I think I loved him not" (II.713), but in the final book she confidently tells Romney, "I love you, loved you... I loved you first and last" (IX.683). Finally, Aurora comes to understand that Romney's youthful opinions and actions were, like hers, based in a misunderstanding of the true nature of life. Their final meeting results in a change in the gendered nature of those rain and sun images. Instead of the sun scorching with a negatively patriarchal "fixed unflickering outline of dead heat," it becomes genderless, and both parties become flexible and compromising in the new dawn of their life together as equals (III.173). At the very end of the text, Romney, who has been brought into enlightenment by Aurora's skillful writing, sees "The first foundations of that new, near Day" (IX.956), and he "[feeds] his blind/majestic eyes / Upon the thought of perfect noon" (IX.960-1). The passionate rain Aurora speaks of is composed of both of their tears, and she notes that she cannot tell which tears belong to her and which belong to Romney (IX.717); the implication is that society's divisions no longer matter. Aurora and Romney may not have "wipe[d] out" the "furrows" of social disparity for all people, but they have successfully wiped them from their own relationship (II.463). At the conclusion of the text, the concept that men can be supporters of women, rather than oppressors, is realized—as is the concept that women can support men without losing their identities.



As shown in these few passages, the nature images in the text surround Romney and Aurora from their earliest meeting to the time of their final pairing. These images transform and grow to reflect perspective changes and points of insecurity in each lover. Once the two individuals have found personal enlightenment, they can finally come together as equals who realize the congruency of their goals and needs. The theme of female equality and independent strength is not abandoned; rather, the joy of a love that stems from mutual respect rather than societal requirement is realized and added to create a fuller picture of the natural world. Only after true independence and enlightenment have been achieved by Romney and Aurora can they come together in a perfect natural and spiritual harmony that overcomes external societal constructs.

## 5 CONCLUSION

As a close reading of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* shows, plant images pervade the text and provide a vital context for understanding Browning's argument for female equality. Browning's novel-poem offers a complex, multifaceted vision of "natural" versus "unnatural" gendering. Her ideas were carefully and shrewdly tailored to target the widest possible audience without sacrificing or adulterating controversial themes. Browning's depiction of Aurora presents a call to action for all women—a call to stand against the social order which constrains them and falsely restricts their view of the nature of femininity.

Browning does not present a utopia wherein all women are perfect and equal; rather, she presents a case study of one courageous woman. Browning's heroine, Aurora, displays a growing sense of strength and independence in spite of the early loss of parental guidance and the removal of her native mother soil; she is meant to provide an example for all women regarding what they can achieve, even in an environment almost totally bereft of support. Aurora chooses to reject the role of a pointless but pretty flower or parasitic clinging vine, and she finds the strength to stand on her own, instead. The journey to self-actualization is not easy for Aurora, but she consistently shows a sense of self-trust and a strong tenacity. Both of these qualities spring from her nature, and cannot be subdued by the English system which seeks to bind and crush her. At times she feels weak and tossed, as "sea-weed" (I.380), and at times her leaves are "blow[n] about" and broken by emotional storms (II.845), but the reader is meant to note she never gives up. Aurora rejects the patriarchy and finds her own spiritual sustenance

and internal strength, and she uses those things to realize her potential. Not only does she achieve personal actualization, she spreads that actualization to her male companion, Romney, through her works.

Browning's presentation of the poet Aurora shows the author's respect for those women who find the internal strength to defy the social order and trust in themselves. *Aurora Leigh* was surely intended to spark feelings of independence in other women, young and old, who might find themselves in green rooms and parlors similar to Aurora's Aunt's. Through both Aurora and Marian, Browning shows that women possess the innate strength to stand against social restriction and achieve a comprehensive inner peace and personal freedom. Her belief in the power of women extended beyond the traditional limitations of social class or standing; rather than being split by class-based differences, Marian and Aurora are unified by their internal strength and their devotion to the greater good. Each woman achieves a harmony of self reflection, self-actualization, and flexible giving to others.

Though the work focuses on female skill and equality, Browning avoids unfairly discounting the positive influence of men. While some scholars have argued that the plant images, particularly the lime tree, represent Aurora's rejection of male strength and influence, these individuals largely discount Browning's own assertions that what she sought was unbiased judgment for herself and for all writers. Her argument in favor of the power of women was highly personal, as reviews prove that her own writings were often dismissed as "artificial" and unnatural by a social system that dismissed her because of her sex (Rev. *Press* 1120). In spite of her pain and anger at this perceived injustice and with the men and women who helped it to continue, she did not seek to similarly dismiss the power or talents of men. Her female "trees"

joined the extant male tradition without denying the influence and talent possessed by the authors who contributed to that tradition. I conclude that what she sought and argued for was not subversion or dismissal of males as retribution for female subjugation, but an acknowledgement that females possessed the capacity for equal mental output.

Swedenborg, Wollstonecraft, and Coleridge served as fundamental influences on Browning's system of values, and even though Browning does not mention them by name in her novel-poem, their thoughts and images form the basis for her character descriptions and story arc. Without an understanding of these vital influences, the meaning and ending of the work can be (and has been) interpreted as a failure of her belief in the independent power of females. I argue, on the other hand, that the plant images inspired by these authors show Browning's intention to depict women who could achieve a truly full life. The ending of the novel-poem, wherein two intellectual and spiritual equals find love based on mutual respect and recognition, reflects an intentional maintenance of natural balance. Only at the time of that ending, when Romney and Aurora find spiritual and physical peace, does all the natural imagery become calm and positive. Up until that point, it reflects the incomplete perception of each individual.

In *Aurora Leigh*, Browning's beliefs in the possibility for equality and in the importance of spirituality appear on almost every page. Browning glorifies the exploration of how the self relates to the larger world, and how the individual relates to and can defy the social order. Certainly her presentation of the strength of female nature was not the first of its kind, but the attention her work was paid at the time and in later generations shows that her argument in favor of equality and women's rights has had an impact.

Additional research could be conducted on plant and other images in *Aurora Leigh*. Marian Erle has been a secondary focus of this thesis, and therefore many nature comparisons relating to her have been omitted, but there are many relevant passages that could be explored. Additionally, the ties between Browning and Wollstonecraft could easily be expanded to include works besides *Aurora Leigh* and *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*. In particular, a strong thread of similarity exists between the caged bird images in the two works. Finally, the imagery used to define and describe the other secondary female characters Lady Waldemar and Aurora's aunt could be the subject of more focused research.

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