

***Aurora Leigh* and *The Portrait of a Lady*: A Panorama of Art, Sexuality, and Marriage**

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Abstract

In order to appreciate the condition of women in nineteenth-century British literature, we must consider Elizabeth Barrett Browning's eponymous heroine in *Aurora Leigh* (1856-1857) and Isabel Archer in *The Portrait of a Lady* by Henry James (1880-1881). These two heroines are in their early twenties, quick to reject indignant suitors, while articulating their refusals with absolute candor. Arguably, however, the greatest similarity between them is their profound love of art. To her suitor Romney, for instance, Aurora declares: "I / who love my art, would never wish it lower / To suit my stature" (2: 492-494)¹; whereas Isabel's aesthetic devotion is evident as she peruses the art galleries in Italy: "She felt her heart beat in the presence of immortal genius and knew the sweetness of rising tears in eyes to which faded fresco and darkened marble grew dim" (262).²

Art serves to define and liberate both women, but paradoxically, the tension between *woman* and *artist* makes them lose their sexual moorings and threatens to alter their marital status. This essay explores the problematic nature of art, sexuality and marriage in light of *Aurora Leigh* and *Isabel Archer*. What these heroines reveal about art, sexuality, and marriage can teach men and women in the twenty-first century a great deal about the Victorians and an even greater deal about ourselves.

Introduction (Historical and Literary Contexts)

On October 10, 1839, Queen Victoria, only twenty years of age, recalls waiting on the landing as she watched her future husband, Prince Albert, regally ascend the staircase toward her. The enthralled Victoria recorded her observations in her journal entries of October 11—14, wherein she fondly and vividly declared that Prince Albert's

blue eyes were 'beautiful'; his figure, too, was 'beautiful' [...] broad in the shoulders with a 'fine waist.' All in all, he was so 'excessively handsome,' his moustache was so 'delicate', his mouth so 'pretty', his nose 'exquisite'. He really was 'very fascinating.' He set her heart '*quite going*'. Everything about him seemed perfect. He was just the right height, attractively tall as she liked men to be but not so tall as to emphasize her own diminutive size.³

¹ Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh: A Norton Critical Edition*. Margaret Reynolds, ed. (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996). Further references to the poem will be parenthetical.

² Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady*. George Stade, ed. (New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2004). (Further references to the novel will be parenthetical.)

³ Christopher Hibbert, *Queen Victoria: A Personal History*. (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 107.

So enchanted was the young queen with Prince Albert that five days later she wrote him a hasty note summoning him to her presence for a private interview. Each was “trembling” in front of the other, but after Victoria popped the question, claiming that it would make her ‘*too happy*’ if he would marry her, the Prince covered her hands “with kisses”, while “murmuring in German that he would be very happy to spend his life with her.”⁴

As Queen Victoria and Prince Albert were weaving the tapestry of their happy marriage, in the literary arena Charlotte Brontë was weaving the marriage of a governess to Rochester in *Jane Eyre* (1847); Matthew Arnold was urging his young wife: “Come to the window” in *Dover Beach* (1851); and Charles Dickens was orchestrating the marriage of Sir Leicester and Lady Dedlock in *Bleak House* (1852). The portrayal of marriage in these textual landscapes casts an illuminating light—more or less—on the subject of women during the Victorian age but in order to procure a deeper understanding of women and marriage during this time, let us turn our attention to two important masterpieces: *Aurora Leigh*, a novel in verse-form by Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1856-1857) and *The Portrait of a Lady* by Henry James (1880-1881). Both of these works deal with the same complicated dynamics. *Aurora Leigh* is a heroine struggling with her identity as a woman and an artist, just as Isabel Archer, the heroine in *The Portrait of a Lady*, is struggling with *her* identity as a woman and an artist. The struggle in both cases takes place within the context of courtship and marriage, but with one fundamental difference: *Aurora Leigh*’s marriage promises to be successful, whereas Isabel Archer’s marriage proves to be a dismal failure.

How are we to account for the differences between these two marriages? The answer is simple: *Aurora Leigh*’s husband learns to appreciate his wife as both the woman *and* the artist that she is; whereas Isabel Archer’s husband despises the woman that she is and only appreciates her as an art object—an exquisite addition to his valuable collection of paintings that he wants to own so that he himself will be admired in the eyes of society. In *Aurora Leigh*, the husband appreciates the artist and the woman for their true essence; whereas in *The Portrait of a Lady*, art is valued for the prestige that it brings to the husband who marries a beautiful woman so that she will increase the net worth of his art collection. In *Aurora Leigh*, the heroine knows who she is in relationship to art; in *The Portrait of a Lady*, the heroine is oblivious as to who she is in relationship to art, yet in her own way, Isabel Archer loves art just as much as *Aurora Leigh*.

The differences between these two heroines has to do not only with their relationship to art but also with their relationship to *power*. *Aurora Leigh* does not love power *per se* and is not unduly exhilarated when exercising her power over men. Quite the contrary, Isabel Archer loves power *in and of itself* and experiences an inordinate degree of delight when exercising her power over men. This present study will examine how the heroines in *Aurora Leigh* and *The Portrait of a Lady* differ in their relationship to art insofar as they differ in their relationship to power. When the woman’s appetite for power is under control, her love of art remains intact, as in *Aurora Leigh*. But when the woman’s appetite for power is excessive, her love of art is jeopardized and her identity as an artist is subverted, as in *The Portrait of a Lady*. In the final

⁴ Hibbert, *Queen Victoria*, 109; *RAQVJ*, 11-14 Oct. 1839; Royal Archives, Queen Victoria’s Journal.

analysis, the woman who values herself for who she really is (and art for its own sake) is the woman who has little need to exercise power over men; or rather, is the woman who has no need to rejoice over her subjection of men.

***Aurora Leigh* in Light of Art, Sexuality, and Marriage**

The first thing we need to know about *Aurora Leigh* is that Elizabeth Barrett Browning declared it to be “the most mature of my works, and the one into which my highest convictions upon Life and Art have entered.”⁵ From Browning’s own words, then, we know that her love of art comprises the nucleus of *Aurora Leigh*, but the art for which her heroine acquires a passion is not the art of water colors or oil paintings, but rather, the art of *poetry*—the art of Browning herself. Few people realize that *Aurora Leigh* is longer, even, than Milton’s *Paradise Lost* and that it is of “epic scope, with a woman poet as hero.”⁶ More recently, Stephanie L. Johnson points out that *Aurora Leigh* “rivalled Wordsworth’s *The Prelude* in innovation of form and content”;⁷ while Lana L. Dalley claims that “[s]ince its canonical recovery in the 1970s, Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s ‘novel-poem’ *Aurora Leigh* has been a highly contested text in feminist literary criticism.”⁸ Indeed, feminists are intrigued from the very first stanza of the poem in which Aurora proclaims: “And I who have written much in prose and verse / For others’ uses, will write now for mine, / Will write my story for my better self / As when you paint your portrait for a friend, / Who keeps it in a drawer and looks at it / Long after he has ceased to love you, just / To hold together what he was and is” (1: 2-7).

At this point, Aurora is in her mid to late twenties, writing her personal history and drawing a parallel between the telling of her story with the painting of a portrait. For Aurora, writing and painting serve the same purpose. One’s memoirs are likened to one’s portrait—painted for a friend—who needs to look at it in order to keep his own past and present selves intact. Theoretically, he no longer loves the woman in the portrait, but he needs to look at the portrait so that who he was and what he has become may be held together by the portrait itself, or by the woman’s written story. Art and poetry, in other words, last longer than love and continue to exist independent of love. Right away we know the power of art and poetry as far as Aurora Leigh is concerned, and later we will come to realize, as stated by Dorothy Mermin, that at the “center of the story [...] is Aurora’s literary development and her struggle to reconcile the warring claims of work and marriage, art and love.”⁹ Actually, Aurora Leigh’s “struggle” begins in childhood. Born of a Florentine mother who passed away when she was four; Aurora’s father

⁵ Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Dedication*: “To John Kenyon, Esq.,” October 17, 1856. *Aurora Leigh*. Margaret Reynolds, ed. (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996), 4.

⁶ Dorothy Mermin, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning: The Origins of a New Poetry*. (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 183.

⁷ Stephanie L. Johnson, “*Aurora Leigh*’s Radical Youth: Derridean *Parergon* and the Narrative Frame in ‘A Vision of Poets,’” *Victorian Poetry* 44.4 (2006): 425.

⁸ Lana L. Dalley, “The least ‘Angelical’ poem in the language”: Political Economy, Gender, and the Heritage of *Aurora Leigh*,” *Victorian Poetry* 44.4 (2006): 525.

⁹ Dorothy Mermin, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning: The Origins of Poetry*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 184.

died when she was thirteen, at which point she is sent to England to be raised by an austere maiden aunt, of whom Aurora recalls:

She stood upon the steps to welcome me,
Calm, in black garb. I clung about her neck, - ...
A moment she seemed moved,
Kissed me with cold lips, suffered me to cling,
And drew me feebly through the hall into
The room she sat in. (1: 313-314, 321-324)

With these recollections we realize that Aurora's childhood was spent in desolation and the strictest seclusion. Under her aunt's sterile supervision, Aurora Leigh is urged to forget her native Italian language as she becomes proficient in English, German, dancing, sewing, algebra, cross-stitch, history, and mathematics.¹⁰ Her friends and avenues of recreation are scarce, but her love of nature, silence, and stillness prove to be her salvation. As her story continues, Aurora states: "I used to get up early, just to sit / And watch the morning quicken in the grey, / And hear the silence open like a flower" (1.681-683). Indeed, rising early and watching the sun rise provides her the strength and serenity needed to endure the loneliness and tension of the long days and nights that lie ahead. Eventually, she discovers that:

Capacity for joy
Admits temptation. It seemed, next, worth while
To dodge the sharp sword set against my life;
To slip down stairs through all the sleepy house,
As mute as any dream there, and escape
As a soul from the body, out of doors,
Glide through the shrubberies, drop into the lane,
And wander on the hills an hour or two,
Then back again before the house should stir. (1.689-697)

Here we see that the nascent artist in Aurora Leigh thrives secretly on joy—a joy that springs from her love of solitude and her love of nature. The artist, however demure, has a solid streak of independence which she strives to protect and shield from discovery.

By the time she is twenty, Aurora's only companion (besides her aunt and her tutors) is her aunt's cousin, Romney Leigh, a frequent visitor to Leigh Hall, of whom Aurora states: "...I used him as a sort of friend; / My elder by [a] few years, but cold and shy / And absent...tender, when he thought of it" (1.512-514). This description of Romney would hardly lead us to suspect that Aurora harbored sexual feelings for him, but Cora Kaplan points out that "...Aurora resists and denies her passion for Romney lest he suppress or divert her sense of vocation. As a result, Aurora's sexuality is displaced into her poetry, [and] projected onto landscapes...Love denied is

¹⁰ Deirdre David aptly states that "Barrett Browning shows Aurora acquiring a jumble of useless information and social skills designed to make her a desirable commodity in the marriage market." *cf.* "'Art's a Service': Social Wound, Sexual Politics, and *Aurora Leigh*," *Critical Essays on Elizabeth Barrett Browning*. Sandra Donaldson, ed. (New York: G.K. Hall & Co., 1999), 177.

re-routed through language.”¹¹ We get our first sustained glimpse of Aurora Leigh as an artist and a poet on the eve of her twentieth birthday when Romney asks for her hand in marriage. Looking back on the day that she refused Romney’s proposal, Aurora writes as follows:

Times followed one another. Came a morn
I stood upon the brink of twenty years,
And looked before and after, as I stood
Woman and artist, either incomplete, [yet]
Both credulous of completion. There I held
The whole creation in my little cup,
And smiled with thirsty lips before I drank. (2.1-7)

The eve of Aurora’s twentieth birthday is significant in that she clearly perceives that although she is yet unfulfilled as a *woman* and an *artist*, the joy of growing into both of these roles is a joy that she is sure of and one that she intends to slowly relish and quietly savor. Romney’s proposal, then, could *not* have been more ill-timed. Looking back on this day, Aurora later recalls: “I felt so young, so strong, so sure of God!” (2.13). In other words, simply the *promise* of becoming a woman and an artist was fulfillment in itself; Aurora had no need of anything or anyone else in her life, least of all Romney’s marriage proposal, which he begins with the following entreaty:

Aurora, let’s be serious, and throw by
This game of head and heart. Life means, be sure,
Both heart and head, - both active, both complete...
You write as well...and ill...upon the whole,
As other women. If as well, what then?
If even a little better...still, what then? (2.129-131, 146-148)

Apparently, in the midst of proposing marriage, Romney realizes how important the role of art plays in Aurora’s life; that is, he realizes that her yearning to become a great poet is her primary concern and his only rival when it comes to winning her hand in marriage. Hence, he trivializes Aurora’s love of writing, specifically in context with other women writers. If she writes worse than other women, so what? And if she writes a little better than other women, what difference does *that* make?

In other words, Aurora Leigh as writer, poet, and artist is less crucial to Romney than Aurora the woman; but for Aurora Leigh, there is no separating the woman from the artist or the artist from the woman—to be one is to reflect the other; and to deny one is to deny the other.¹² Midway through his marriage proposal, Romney imperiously tells Aurora Leigh: “If your sex is

¹¹ Cora Kaplan, “Introduction,” *Critical Essays on Elizabeth Barrett Browning*. Sandra Donaldson, ed. (New York: G.K. Hall & Co., 1999), 82.

¹² crf. Margaret Forster, “Introduction.” *Selected Poems of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), xvii. Forster claims that Barrett Browning “tried to analyse the relationship between a woman’s art and her biological nature in order to see whether one complemented the other or whether they were mutually destructive” (xvii). In retrospect, we can say that the eponymous heroine of *Aurora Leigh* indeed suggests that a woman’s art complements her biological nature and vice versa, and this present essay revolves around this same premise.

weak for art, / (And I who said so, did but honour you / By using truth in courtship) it is strong / For life and duty” (2.372-375).

By the end of Romney’s proposal, we realize that what he wants in Aurora Leigh is a companion to accompany him in a life-long pursuit of social reform; someone to work by his side in feeding and housing the homeless; a partner in promoting peace and social justice; a co-champion fighting for the rights of the oppressed. Aurora’s refusal is swift and blunt, unconventional for a young lady whose prospects of marriage are slim at best:

.....What you love,
Is not a woman, Romney, but a cause:
You want a helpmate, not a mistress, sir,
A wife to help your ends, - in her no end!
Your cause is noble, your ends excellent,
But I, being most unworthy of these and that,
Do otherwise conceive of love. Farewell. (2.400-406)

Not only does Aurora refuse Romney’s offer, she also takes the opportunity to inform him that her vocation as a woman poet is no less important than *his* vocation as a social reformer, as when she states: “I / Who love my art, would never wish it lower / To suit my stature. I may love my art. / You’ll grant that even a woman may love art” (2.492-495). Without the slightest hesitation, Aurora realizes that marriage to Romney would mean the annihilation of her career as a poet. Comparing Aurora Leigh to the woman’s plight in *Paradise Lost*, Sarah Annes Brown states: “But whereas in the case of Eve the parting with Adam leads to her ruin, for Aurora it is the beginning of a successful career as a poet.”¹³ Refusing Romney’s proposal, then, was critical for the poet in her to survive.

However, the fact that Aurora is swift to reject Romney does not mean that she has no affection or genuine feelings for him. Privately, she considers him “a princely man,” while admitting to herself: “yet I know / I do not love him” (2.508, 505-506). If Aurora is conflicted in her feelings for Romney, we may attribute her conflict, at least in part, to Romney’s misperceptions of Aurora as an artist. Clearly, Romney is intimidated by her creative genius and by the independent streak that it affords her, or as Gregory Giles insightfully maintains:

Romney mistakenly believes that Aurora’s literary vocation will threaten her identity as a woman (Romney’s definition: a selfless helpmate and complementary wife). The versions of her, as they stem from her role as a writer, multiply and, according to Romney, possibly repulse the one version he would rather have: the traditional, marriageable woman.¹⁴

What happens, then, to evoke Romney’s about-face wherein he suddenly gleans that the woman and the poet in Aurora Leigh are to be equally revered and equally honored—without any reservations on his part? First, the two go their separate ways for the next seven or eight years,

¹³ Sarah Annes Brown, “*Paradise Lost and Aurora Leigh*,” *Studies in English Literature 1500 1900*. 37.4 (1997): 730.

¹⁴ Gregory Giles, “‘The Mystic Level of All Forms’: Love and Language’s Capacity for Meanings in *Aurora Leigh*,” *Victorians Institute Journal* (2008):130.

during which time Aurora becomes “a famous and quite formidable poet,”¹⁵ while living off her own earnings as a professional writer. Romney, meanwhile has turned his entire estate—Leigh Hall—over to the homeless in his zeal to bridge the gap between the social classes.

Years later their paths cross again and Romney appears one evening on Aurora Leigh’s terrace and they both converse at length, admitting their errors and their poor judgment of the past. No longer belittling her as a woman or an artist, Romney openly declares: “I have read your book, Aurora...[your] book is in my heart, / [it] Lives in me, wakes in me, and dreams in me: / My daily bread tastes of it...It stands above my knowledge, [and] draws me up” (8.261, 265-267, 285). In other words, Romney has fallen in love with the poet for the beauty of her art and he concedes that the woman and her verses are inseparable. To fall in love with a woman’s verses is to fall in love with the woman herself. *In absentia*, therefore, Aurora Leigh has gotten Romney to fall in love with her by the very power and beauty of her art.

Romney even goes on to admit that when it came to serving the poor and the oppressed, he *had* been overly zealous: “I heard [their] cries / Too close...I beheld the world / As one great famishing carnivorous mouth.../ With piteous open beak that hurt my heart, / Till down upon the filthy ground I dropped, / And tore the violets up to get the worms” (8.392-393, 395-396, 398-400). Romney’s openness and candor are met with a similar honesty in Aurora Leigh, who tells him: “I / have failed too” (8.470); and she then deplors her conduct when rejecting his marriage proposal by admitting: “If I, that day, and, being the girl I was, / Had shown a gentler spirit, [and] less arrogance, / It [would not have] hurt me” (8.496-498).

Romney then reveals to Aurora that the impoverished men and women he had invited to eat and sleep with him in his estate, soon: “Broke up those waxen masks I made them wear...And cursed me for my tyrannous constraint / In forcing crooked creatures to live straight” (8.891 - 893). Romney learned, in other words, that he could not force his political ideals down anyone’s throat, especially not the throats of those on the receiving end of his benevolent social agendas. To do so is to risk incurring their wrath, which is precisely what happened to Romney as self-proclaimed social worker.

Specifically, the destitute men and women that Romney had taken into his home were the very men and women who had set fire to Leigh Hall and burnt it to the ground, leaving Romney the task of informing Aurora that the fire had left him blind: “A man, upon the outside of the earth, / As dark as ten feet under, in the grave” (9.571-572). A blinded Romney, therefore, is humbled to the dust and this arouses not only pity from Aurora but also her open declaration that she loves him and repents of her meanness of spirit when in the past she had resented him for his “power / To give” (9.629-630).

To a totally blinded Romney, she then reveals what she herself has learned: Honor the woman’s instinct *first*, and then the artist’s instinct *after*. “I forgot,” she confides, that “No perfect artist is developed here / From any imperfect woman...O Art, my Art, thou’rt much, but Love is more!” she ultimately tells Romney (9.647-649, 657). Regarding her forms of address, it

¹⁵ Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, “Reconciling Love and Work,” *Aurora Leigh: A Norton Critical Edition*, Margaret Reynolds, ed. (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996), 460.

is important to realize that while Aurora is speaking to Romney, she is addressing “my Art” at the same time, as though her love of art and her love for Romney have become synonymous and the notions of *lover* and *art* are interchangeable. For his part, Romney asks Aurora Leigh to come work with him “among Christ’s little ones” (9.906). In this—his second marriage proposal—a more mature Romney earnestly implores Aurora Leigh and addresses her as follows:

My dear sight,
My morning-star, my morning, - rise and shine,
And touch my hills with radiance not their own.
Shine out for two,¹⁶ Aurora, and fulfill
My falling-short that must be! Work for two,
As I, though thus restrained, for two, shall love...
Art’s a service—mark:
A silver key is given to thy clasp,
And thou shalt stand unwearied, night and day...
To open, so, that intermediate door...
Beloved, let us love so well,
Our work shall still be better for our love,
And still our love be sweeter for our work,
And both commended, for the sake of each,
By all true workers and true lovers born.
(9.907-912, 915—917, 919, 924-928)

Notably, the outcome of Romney’s blindness—the couple’s subsequent declaration of love—is based on their mutual respect for art and will culminate in their happy marriage.

However, when we consider Barrett Browning’s decision to make Romney blind before he marries Aurora Leigh, we cannot help but draw a parallel to Charlotte Brontë’s decision to make Rochester blind before he married Jane Eyre. Did these women writers yield to the temptation to punish their arrogant heroes in order to render them more worthy and more chastened husbands? In both cases, the masters of the manor watched in horror as their homes went up in flames.

Coincidentally, Romney and Rochester both rushed inside to save the lives of screaming victims and both were blinded by searing flames. Not surprisingly, critics are swift to point out these similarities between *Aurora Leigh* and *Jane Eyre*. For instance, Rachel Blau Duplessis states that “Romney, like an escapee from *Jane Eyre*, is first rejected, like St. John Rivers, and then, like Rochester, blinded. This wounding of male heroes is...a symbolic way of making them

¹⁶ Lana L. Dalley, “The least ‘Angelical’ poem in the language: Political Economy, Gender and the Heritage of *Aurora Leigh*,” *Victorian Poetry* 44.4 (2006): 537. Lana L. Dalley astutely states that the “relative positions of husband and wife are reversed...Aurora occupies the traditional male position of worker, while Romney occupies the traditional female position of lover. Romney’s confidence in the division of labor inspires this revised image of the family” (537).

experience the passivity, dependency, and powerlessness associated with women's experiences of gender."¹⁷

Offering a variation on the theme, Angela Leighton claims that "the eye of Romney himself" represents "a controlling external viewpoint, which turns women's art into a sight for men."¹⁸ By the same token, we have seen that Romney's vision of the world (and of the woman he loved) was improved upon his reading of Aurora's poetry. Moreover, "the eponymous heroine" of *Aurora Leigh* "resists love until it can become something attuned to her self-identity; possibly, this even requires the blinding of her lover Romney as he attempts to rescue his lover's likeness from a house fire, reducing his utility as a self-righteous, masculine do-gooder to disillusionment and humility."¹⁹ While the verdict is still out as to whether or not Barrett Browning intended to blind Romney as a form of chastisement or revenge, her own words here are of paramount importance, especially as they relate to the blinding of Rochester. We know, for example, that

when a friend challenged her for making Romney's accident a repeat of Rochester's she had to send for *Jane Eyre* from the lending library to refresh her memory. Romney is merely blinded, she points out, *not* disfigured. "As far as I recall the facts, the hero was monstrously disfigured and blinded in a fire the particulars of which escape me, and the circumstance of his being hideously scarred is the thing impressed chiefly on the reader's mind certainly it remains innermost in mine."... Nonetheless Romney's blindness has a multiple set of determinants. Elizabeth Barrett's earliest teacher and life-long friend Hugh Stuart Boyd, the classical scholar, was blind. Boyd played the role of mentor to the talented young classicist, and his critical attitude towards her early poetry is partly reflected in Romney's slighting remarks in Book II. The image of the "blind poet" shut out from life but with an intense inner life is one which Elizabeth Barrett used about herself.²⁰

In retrospect, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's understanding of herself as a "blind poet" with a rich inner life underscores our understanding of Aurora Leigh before her reconciliation and marriage to Romney. Indeed, to a certain extent, Aurora Leigh and Romney are *both*

¹⁷ Rachel Blau Duplessis, "To 'bear my mother's name': *Kunstlerromane* by Women Writers," *Aurora Leigh: A Norton Critical Edition*, Margaret Reynolds, ed. (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996), 465. For a more explicit analysis of the wounding of the male hero as symbolic of women's experiences of gender, see Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Bronte to Lessing* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1977), 152.

¹⁸ Angela Leighton, "Men and Women: Poetry and Politics," *Aurora Leigh: A Norton Critical Edition* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996), 543.

¹⁹ Gregory Giles, "'The Mystic Level of All Forms': Love and Language's Capacity for Meanings in *Aurora Leigh*," *Victorians Institute Journal* (2008): 123. In order to further appreciate Aurora Leigh's simile of the male observer gazing at the portrait in the drawer, see p.124 of Giles' above cited essay.

²⁰ Cora Kaplan, "Introduction," *Critical Essays on Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (New York, NY: G.K. Hall & Co., 1999), 89.

blinded until they realize the love they have for each other and as we have seen, it is Romney's appreciation of Aurora's poetry which makes him realize that he is in love with the very woman who wrote it.

Expressing his admiration for Aurora's verses leads to an open proclamation of love on his part, which leads to the revelation of his blindness, which—in turn—leads to a proposal of marriage.²¹ In other words, the flame to the fuse of their sexuality is Aurora as a writer of verse, and when a blinded Romney admits as such, Aurora then describes “a kiss / As long and silent as the ecstatic night, / And deep, deep, shuddering breaths, which meant beyond / Whatever could be told by word or kiss” (9.721-724). The more that Romney praises Aurora's verses, the more passionately he describes his blindness, and the more avidly he declares his love, to varying degrees of eroticism. Aurora speaks to this unique cycle of courtship when she later recalls:

His breath against my face
 Confused his words, yet made them more intense.

 Thus, 'twas granted me
 To know he loved me to the depth and height
 Of such large natures, ever competent,
 With grand horizons by the sea or land,
 To love's grand sunrise. Small spheres hold small fires
 But he loved largely, as a man can love
 Who, baffled in his love, dares live his life....
 (9.743-744,752-758)

Given the fact that Romney finally “dares live his life,” we know that his blindness serves as no impediment and that his love of Aurora *as an artist* ignited his subsequent love for Aurora *as a woman*. This epic poem ends when Aurora Leigh places her hands into the hands of Romney, who meanwhile: “Stood calm, and fed his blind, majestic eyes / Upon the thought of perfect noon” (9.960-61). The fact that the story ends at high noon reflects the exquisite equilibrium of the woman as artist, hand-in-hand with the man who loves her because he first learned to love the profound verses that she wrote.

When all is said and done, this marriage is based on the couple's mutual love of art and on their mutual respect for one another. Yet at no time was Aurora Leigh so mesmerized with her own power over Romney that she wielded it to gain control over his life. By the same token, at no time did Romney manipulate Aurora's love of art and use it to promote his own agenda. In this regard, they differ greatly from Isabel Archer and Gilbert Osmond in *The Portrait of a Lady*. In what follows we will examine some crucial differences between these two couples, especially with respect to courtship procedures.

²¹ In a letter to Sarianna Browning dated November 1856, Elizabeth Barrett Browning observes of Romney: “He had to be blinded...to be made to see...”; crf. *Aurora Leigh: A Norton Critical Edition* by Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Margaret Reynolds, ed. (New York and London: W. W. Norton and Company, 1996), 336. For a comparative analysis of Romney's blindness as *metaphor*, see Mary Wilson Carpenter, “Blinding the Hero,” *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 17.3 (2006): 52-68.

The Portrait of a Lady in Light of Art, Sexuality, and Marriage

Upon its publication in 1881, *The Portrait of a Lady* brought to Henry James a solid reputation for genius, yet this does not mean that his masterpiece was universally applauded. For instance, on December 18, 1881, *The New York Times* complained that in this novel, the “good are not made happy or the bad punished any more than in real life, and things are left at the close in a very uncertain and confused condition.”²² This tells us that Henry James was ahead of his time with respect to resisting the urge to tie all loose ends together regarding human nature and human behavior. James was a fascinating realist who wrote utterly beautiful prose when it came to recording the motives and thoughts of adult men and women. The heroine is Isabel Archer, a tall, slender young woman whose grey eyes and abundant auburn hair are visually arresting and whose gracious, intelligent charm intrigues everyone she encounters. As with *Aurora Leigh*, this novel concerns, among other things, the subject of art and the artist. Indeed, with superb craftsmanship:

Henry James creates a haunted portrait of Isabel Archer herself wherein he confronts the problem of establishing some meaningful relationship between art and life...Through the developing consciousness of Isabel Archer, James suggests that the idea of a “picture made real” depends upon a meaningful correspondence between the mind of the artist and the reality which confronts him or her.²³

It is imperative to note from the start that Isabel Archer is frequently perceived as an object of art, not only for her great beauty but for the high value that she subtly places on *herself*, as though she were a connoisseur of her own beauty and worth as a human being. For instance, James informs us quite early in the novel that

Isabel was probably very liable to the sin of self-esteem; she often surveyed with complacency the field of her own nature; she was in the habit of taking for granted on scanty evidence, that she was right; she treated herself to occasions of homage...At moments she discovered she was grotesquely wrong, and then she treated herself to a week of passionate humility. After this she held her head higher than ever again; for it was of no use, she had an unquenchable desire to think well of herself.²⁴

An American girl whose parents have died, Isabel Archer is visiting her aunt and uncle in England where she meets for the first time her cousin, Ralph Touchett, a tall and lean young man who suffers from consumption and is instantly taken in by Isabel’s natural graciousness and ease of manner. The first scene occurs in the hour of afternoon tea “upon the lawn of an old English country-house” where some of the “afternoon had waned, but much of it was left, and what was left was of the finest and rarest quality. Real dusk would not arrive for many hours; but the flood of summer light had begun to ebb, the air had grown mellow, the shadows were long upon the

²² *The New York Times* Literary Review of December 18, 1881 may be found in Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady*. George Stade, ed. (New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2004), 625-626.

²³ Alden R. Turner, “The Haunted *Portrait Of A Lady*,” *Studies in the Novel* 12.3 (1980): 236.

²⁴ Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady*. George Stade, ed. (New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2004), 63-64. Further references to the novel will be parenthetical.

smooth, dense turf” (19). This is the setting in which Isabel Archer makes her first entrance into the novel, and when she walks upon the lawn and wends her way toward Ralph and Ralph’s father; both are at a loss as to who this beautiful girl actually is. Their companion, Lord Warburton, swiftly surmises: “Perhaps it’s Mrs. Touchett’s niece—the independent young lady...I think she must be, from the way she handles the dog” (29). In fact, Isabel has just arrived from the United States, having been brought over by her aunt, Mrs. Touchett, who had gone to visit the girl and brought her back with her to England. When Mr. Touchett wonders aloud where his wife must be, Lord Warburton replies: “I suppose the young lady has left her somewhere: that’s a part of the independence” (29). We are then told that the “young lady seemed to have a deal of confidence, both in herself and in others...She was looking at everything, with an eye that denoted clear perception—at her companion, at the two dogs,...[and] at the beautiful scene that surrounded her” (30).

Already this early in the novel, we see that Isabel is not only a connoisseur of her own fine qualities but also of the fine qualities that surround her. If this novel concerns the portrait of a lady, we must realize that the lady herself has the eye of an artist and she looks at the people and the world around her with artistic appreciation, prompting her to tell Ralph, “I’ve never seen anything so lovely as this place. I’ve been all over the house; it’s too enchanting” (30). Yet we must realize from the start that Isabel’s “clear perception” as a virtual artist is prone to the following paradox: it somehow turns Isabel herself into an object of art, rendering ironic the narrator’s assertion that “[h]er life should always be in harmony with the most pleasing impression she should produce; she would be what she appeared, and she would appear what she was” (65). Our first indication that Isabel is perceived as an object of art comes from Ralph, as when he privately muses on her artistic dimensions: “A character like that...a real little passionate force to see at play is the finest thing in nature. It’s finer than the finest work of art—than a Greek bas-relief, than a great Titian, than a Gothic cathedral” (76).

In other words, Ralph Touchett, deeply in love with Isabel, declares that the forces in her nature are greater than the greatest works of art, or as Gabriel Brownstein goes on to state: “Her beauty competes with the beauty of art, yet it is supremely artless...Of course, the problem is that most everyone will see Isabel, in one way or other, as something to be collected or admired—more or less a yard of calico, albeit an extraordinary one.”²⁵ Isabel resents the notion of being appreciated as a mere object of beauty, but we shall see how she, too, tends to “objectify” men as mere objects of art.

Moreover, when she learns that Lord Warburton is in love with her, we are told that she “was not eager to convince herself that a territorial magnate, as she had heard Lord Warburton called, was smitten with her charms” (115). In fact, Isabel does not want to be a part of Lord Warburton’s territorial possessions, but she only makes this partially clear when she turns down his proposal of marriage, withdrawing her hand from his and stating: “Ah, Lord Warburton, how little you know me!” When he asks her: “You do like me rather, don’t you?” she grudgingly

²⁵ Gabriel Brownstein, “Introduction.” *The Portrait of a Lady*. George Stade, ed. (New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2004), xx, xviii.

admits: “I like you very much, Lord Warburton”; but then she tantalizingly warns him: “Don’t hope too much” (119-120).

The fact is, though, that her rejection of Lord Warburton is less than adamant: “I should be very sorry to keep you in suspense,” she tells him; to which he insists that he would “much rather have a good answer six months hence than a bad one to-day” (120). Accordingly, we then realize that Isabel Archer:

would have given her little finger at that moment to feel strongly and simply the impulse to answer: “Lord Warburton, it’s impossible for me to do better in this wonderful world, I think, than commit myself, very gratefully, to your loyalty.” But though she was lost in admiration of her opportunity she managed to move back into the deepest shade of it, even as some wild, caught creature in a vast cage. (122)

Instead of stating what she initially wanted to say, Isabel ends up saying “something that deferred the need of really facing her crisis” (122). Enigmatically, she then tells Lord Warburton: “Don’t think me unkind if I ask you to say no more about this to-day” (122). In other words, she subtly invites him to say more to her about marriage at *another* time in the near or distant future. Her response to his proposal is a mixed message. And the fact that she feels herself to have receded, like a trapped creature, “into the deepest shade” of its “vast cage” reveals the extent of her reluctance to succumb to marriage.

According to Elizabeth Boyle Machlan, in turning down Lord Warburton’s marriage proposal, Isabel “rebels against both the personal and formal implications of marriage to an English peer”²⁶ but this only partly explains her refusal. Another logical explanation is the fact that Isabel loves her own power as an independent woman and marriage would compromise this power and make her lose her independence. We see how she loves her own power and is yet ashamed of it when she chides herself with the fact that “nineteen women out of twenty would have” jumped at the chance of marrying an English peer (124). Rebuking herself for refusing Lord Warburton’s proposal, Isabel realizes that “she must not be too proud, and nothing could be more sincere than her prayer to be delivered from such a danger: the isolation and loneliness of pride had for her mind the horror of a desert place” (124). Obviously, Isabel is deeply conflicted when it comes to the subject of marriage, yet the fact that she sincerely reflects upon her own pride when turning down Lord Warburton means that—to her credit—she is not without a certain degree of self-awareness and accountability for her own actions.

Ironically, though, she comes to the conclusion that she “liked him too much to marry him;” and yet at the same time she recognizes the “fallacy somewhere in the glowing logic of the proposition” (124-125). Critics are prone to discuss the nature of Isabel’s profound (sexual) ambivalence, as when Juliet McMaster observes: “On the one hand, like a true American, she is ardently engaged in life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; but on the other she is morbidly

²⁶ Elizabeth Boyle Machlan, “‘There Are Plenty of Houses’: Architecture and Genre in *The Portrait of a Lady*,” *Studies in the Novel* 37.4 (2005): 397.

attracted by their opposites, and devotes herself to death, and immobility, and suffering.”²⁷ This stark ambivalence in Isabel Archer has a great deal to do with her love of power and the secret shame she feels for loving the power that she takes guilty pleasure in exerting, especially over men.

We see this played out when Isabel’s first suitor, Caspar Goodwood, comes to visit her from the United States and expresses his feelings of passionate devotion.²⁸

As was the case with Lord Warburton, however, rather than turn him down point-blank, she advises him as follows: “Think of me or not, as you find most possible; only leave me alone.” When Caspar Goodwood asks: “Until when?” she replies: “Well, for a year or two” (170). As the young man’s anguish escalates, he finally implores: “When will you marry me? That’s the only question,” to which Isabel responds: “Never—if you go on making me feel only as I feel at present” (170). Eventually, she states that she would like to travel for two years before she makes a decision one way or the other, which incites Caspar Goodwood to return to America and begin the waiting game which may or may not end in marriage. Upon Goodwood’s wretchedly disappointed leave-taking from Isabel, she returns to her room, listening to the sounds of his receding footsteps, and

then, by an irresistible impulse, [she] dropped on her knees before her bed and hid her face in her arms. She was not praying; she was trembling—trembling all over. Vibration was easy to her, was in fact too constant with her, and she found herself now humming like a smitten harp....She intensely rejoiced that Caspar Goodwood was gone...she bowed her head a little lower; the sense was there, throbbing in her heart; it was part of her emotion, but it was a thing to be ashamed of—it was profane and out of place. It was not for some ten minutes that she rose from her knees, and even when she came back to the sitting-room, her tremor had not quite subsided. It had had, verily, two causes: part of it was to be accounted for by her long discussion with Mr. Goodwood, but it might be feared that the rest was simply **the enjoyment she found in the exercise of her power.** (Emphasis mine, 177-178)

Given what we know, therefore, of Isabel Archer’s delight in the power she wields over men and her penchant for refusing their repeated offers of marriage, readers are baffled at her decision to marry an idle American named Gilbert Osmond, a middle-aged widower without money, rank, or connections. Indeed, his only claim to fame is his collection of old Masters and his pretty daughter named Pansy who is being educated in a convent.

Isabel is first introduced to Gilbert Osmond by her aunt’s closest friend, Madame Merle, noted for her statuesque beauty, elegant manners, and love of music and art. Isabel’s aunt describes Madame Merle as “one of the most brilliant women in Europe” and she proudly tells

²⁷ Juliet McMaster, “The Portrait of Isabel Archer,” *American Literature: A Journal of Literary History, Criticism and Bibliography* 45.1 (1973): 50.

²⁸ Daniel Shaw states: “One of Isabel’s most impressive traits is her ability to stir feelings of love in virtually every man she meets.” “Isabel Archer: Tragic Protagonist or Pitiably Victim,” *Literature Film Quarterly* 30.4 (2002): 250.

Isabel that “Serena Merle hasn’t a fault” (208). In what proves to be a fatal error of judgment, Aunt Touchett tells Madame Merle of her niece’s inheritance of seventy thousand pounds, bequeathed to her at the recent death of Isabel’s uncle. Now a stunningly wealthy heiress, Isabel becomes a source of fascination for Madame Merle, who introduces Isabel to Gilbert Osmond in hopes that he will marry Isabel and consequently, their young daughter Pansy will be loved and well cared for. What Isabel does *not* know, in other words, is that Madame Merle and Gilbert Osmond had previously been lovers and that Pansy is the daughter of their (illicit) sexual relationship.

At the start of their courtship, Isabel has no idea that Gilbert Osmond is interested in her solely for her money and for the prestige that her beauty will bestow once he gets her to marry him. Initially, all Isabel knows about Gilbert Osmond is based upon what Madame Merle chooses to tell her; that he is “exceedingly clever, a man made to be distinguished...No career, no name, no position, no fortune, no past, no future, no anything. Oh yes, he paints...paints in water-colours, like me, only better than I...he has a little girl—a dear little girl...He’s devoted to her...” (211). The more Madame Merle talks about Gilbert Osmond, the more intrigued Isabel becomes. Notably, Madame Merle introduces the idea of Osmond by stating that he is “exceedingly clever” and “made to be distinguished”—two character traits that serve to define Isabel Archer herself.

Madame Merle, in other words, is shrewd enough to hold up to Isabel a mirror that will reflect back her *own* essence just before introducing Isabel to the essence of Osmond. And just as Isabel is captivated with the beauty of the world around her, and learns to enjoy being aesthetically appreciated, so too, is Osmond likewise constructed. Indeed, when Madame Merle first tells Gilbert Osmond that she would like him to meet her new, twenty-three old friend, his first comments are: “Is she beautiful, clever, rich, splendid, universally intelligent...It’s only on those conditions that I care to make her acquaintance. You know I asked you some time ago never to speak to me of a creature who shouldn’t correspond to that description” (255).

Clearly, these are the words of a haughty, prestigious art collector who assesses the worth and value of a woman through the same lens with which he assesses the quality of fine art. Even before he has laid eyes on Isabel Archer, he lays down the requirements necessary for a mere introduction. As Annette Niemtow has pointed out: “Gilbert Osmond personifies the [art] collector. To him, Isabel is not only a source of fortune, but a precious object in herself—suitable for a place in his collection.”²⁹ Indeed, it is only when Madame Merle reveals that Isabel “has a handsome fortune” that Osmond carefully heeds her words in silence, and then ventures to ask: “What do you want to do with her?” When Madame Merle replies: “What you see. Put her in your way” (255), the reader knows what Isabel will not know until the end of the novel—that Osmond has married her only for her money and ostensibly, in order to raise the value of his own art collection in the eyes of society.³⁰

²⁹ Annette Niemtow, “Marriage and the New Woman in *The Portrait of a Lady*,” *American Literature: A Journal of Literary History, Criticism, and Bibliography* 47.3 (1975): 390.

³⁰ For valuable insights into the tendency of Madame Merle to manipulate “people as tools,” refer to Sheldon M. Novick, *Henry James: The Young Master* (New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2007), 420.

Indeed, it is by strategically ushering Isabel through the world of fine art that Osmond triumphantly emerges as her only successful suitor. As a guest in his Italian villa, he shows Isabel his paintings, medallions, and tapestries, “but after awhile Isabel felt the owner much more” interesting than even his works of art; and Isabel soon realized that Osmond “resembled no one she had ever seen...he was an original without being an eccentric. She had never met a person of so fine a grain...He had consulted his taste in everything” (277).

In time, Mrs. Touchett is worried that her niece will marry Gilbert Osmond and she confides in Ralph that Isabel is “capable of marrying Mr. Osmond for the beauty of his opinions or for his autograph of Michael Angelo” (291). With these words, Mrs. Touchett has put her finger on the pulse of Osmond’s success as a suitor. The elite connoisseur in Isabel is drawn to the elite connoisseur in Osmond, but it is only when he says to her: “For me you’ll always be the most important woman in the world” (327) that the snob in her is gratified and she is finally won over. Hearing herself described as the most important woman in the world makes perfect sense to her, or as the narrator informs us: “Isabel looked at herself in this character—looked intently, thinking she filled it with a certain grace” (327). At this stage of her life, being perceived by Gilbert Osmond as an object of art does not offend her because she perceives herself in this very same light.

More to the point, as stated by Juliet McMaster: “Isabel is consciously and deliberately self-creating...she undertakes to make her life itself a work of art...She wants appearance and essence to be identical...She is simultaneously the artist and the critic of her own nature.”³¹ In the final analysis, Isabel is courted and won over by an American-born, indolent male who values art only for its capacity to increase his own worth in the eyes of society. Arguably, Osmond’s love of prestige and self-importance serve as his best drawing cards when it comes to leading Isabel Archer to the marriage altar. Furthermore, it is when he meets the jilted Lord Warburton that Osmond knows that his future wife must surely be Isabel Archer, or as stated by the narrator:

We know that he was fond of originals, of rarities, of the superior and the exquisite; and now that he had seen Lord Warburton, whom he thought a very fine example of his race and order, he perceived a new attraction in the idea of taking to himself a young lady who had qualified herself to figure in his collection of choice objects by declining so noble a hand...It would be proper that the woman he might marry should have done something of that sort. (320)

It is precisely because Isabel pleases his aesthetic sense of superiority that Osmond decides he must have her for his wife. And it is because she had haughtily rejected a fabulously wealthy English peer and then proved to be a wealthy heiress herself that Osmond decided to marry her in “Florence in the month of June” (407). Moreover, it is partly because of his esoteric and exalted sense of self that Isabel (who shares these same qualities) agrees to marry him, but her happiness proves to be tragically short-lived.

³¹ Juliet McMaster, “The Portrait of Isabel Archer,” *American Literature: A Journal of Literary History, Criticism and Bibliography* 45.1 (1973): 57.

Indeed, it was barely after one year of marriage that “the shadows had begun to gather; it was as if Osmond deliberately, almost malignantly, had put the lights out one by one...She knew of no wrong he had done; he was not violent, he was not cruel: she simply believed he hated her” (444-445). Indeed Isabel is not without objectivity, nor afraid of honest self-appraisal. She admits that she had *initially* loved him, yes, but she had also wanted to donate her money, so to speak, to a worthy cause: “Unless she should have given it to a hospital there would have been nothing better she could do with it...He would use her fortune in a way that would make her think better of it and rub off a certain grossness attaching to the good luck of an unexpected inheritance” (446).

In time, Isabel realizes her mistake in marrying Osmond, who tells her that she has “too many ideas and that she must get rid of them,” and who, she learns, “would have liked her to have nothing of her own but her pretty appearance” (447). Above all, her “real offence, as she ultimately perceived, was her having a mind of her own at all. Her mind was to be his—attached to his own like a small garden-plot to a deer-park” (451). The tragedy of her marriage comes to a head when (partly through her own intuition) she discovers that Osmond and Madame Merle had once been lovers and that she had been deceived by them both into a fraudulent marriage. And yet, although no longer blind to the truth, she refuses to leave her husband because—as she later confides to a lady friend—“I can’t publish my mistake. I don’t think that’s decent. I’d much rather die” (508). At first glance, Isabel is acting out of pride but she is also being honest with herself and in doing so, she encounters within herself an astonishing degree of moral strength.

After all, in refusing to run away from Osmond she refuses to run away from herself. She realizes “the magnitude of *his* deception” (447), but she is equally aware of her *own* folly in deceiving herself into marrying a fortune-hunter. In doing so, the most “manly organism she had ever known had become her property, and the recognition of her having but to put out her hands and take it had been originally a sort of act of devotion” (447). In perceiving Osmond as a valuable piece of property, she is doing to *him* what he did to *her*. To treat each other as objects of art is to objectify the spouse as a piece of property and in turn, serves to degrade the value of art, sexuality, and marriage.

Conclusion

In retrospect, we have seen the similarities between Isabel and Gilbert Osmond, but we have not yet considered their differences. While Gilbert Osmond loves art for its ability to raise him in the eyes of society, Isabel—despite her *own* streak of elitism—is a lover of art for its own sake. This is apparent when—while visiting Italy and before marrying Osmond—she “went to the galleries and palaces; she looked at the pictures and statues that had hitherto been great names to her...she felt her heart beat in the presence of immortal genius and knew the sweetness of rising tears in eyes to which faded fresco and darkened marble grew dim” (262). In the inner recesses of her own heart, Isabel loves beauty and art for their own sakes, and not for shallow or mercenary profit. Here we see similarities between Isabel Archer and Aurora Leigh in that just

as Aurora Leigh was truly a lover of art, so was Isabel Archer, but unlike Isabel Archer, Aurora Leigh's love of art was not eclipsed by a love of power, especially of power over men.

The marriage of Aurora Leigh to Romney was successful because they both revered art for its own sake and learned to respect one another's ideas, thoughts, and opinions. On the other hand, the marriage of Isabel to Osmond was a failure because although Isabel truly loved art for its own sake, she allowed herself to be treated as an object of art and she married an art collector because he told her that she was the most important woman in the world—one that would increase the value of his rare and precious art collection—primarily by being his wife and by displaying her beauty to virtual art critics on a daily basis. Indeed, both Isabel and Osmond have subverted the true essence of art, and in the process, have compromised their happiness in marriage.

We have seen that for Aurora and Romney, art was not the means to an end but an end in itself, one that endowed their identity with greater depth and clarity. On the contrary, for Isabel and Osmond, art was the means to an elevated sense of importance and a more exalted position in the eyes of society. In the final analysis, however, Isabel comes to realize that her identity as a lady is far more precious than her portrait as a lady. If this epiphany is late in coming, she (like Aurora Leigh) discovers that a woman's love of art cannot be separated from her love of self, and that the happiness of her marriage depends to a great extent on her willingness to embrace this conviction and in the process, live her life to the fullest.

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