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From Dark Corinne to Fair Aurora: Barrett Browning and Female Physical Representations

Hiromi Hamamoto

The eponymous heroine of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* has blonde hair and blue eyes. Her fairness is worth exploring against the background of a binary opposition that permeates Western culture: fair and dark women.¹ Although in *Aurora Leigh* this opposition is not overtly exploited, I would like to argue that introducing this opposition enables a profounder appreciation of Barrett Browning's characterization of Aurora and other female protagonists in this "novel-in-verse." The representation of female physical appearance, moreover, embraces the issues of womanhood, nationality and artistic activity, all of which play a thematically significant role in *Aurora Leigh*.

In this paper, I will first show how widely the opposition of fair and dark women is disseminated in Victorian fiction, and suggest that, despite the fact that she herself is fair, Aurora has a deep affinity with dark heroines. Secondly, I will illustrate how Barrett Browning exploits this conventional colour opposition to explore the question of womanhood in her earlier poems. I will finally argue that this opposition helps clarify the representations of the three main female characters in *Aurora Leigh*, and explore the issues of Aurora's nationality and artistic creativity.

¹ Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) – a story of a black girl who desires blue eyes – can be seen as one of the latest, cruellest variations of the opposition.

The Fair and the Dark

In *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), Maggie Tulliver attests to the dissemination of the fair and the dark opposition in the representation of women in nineteenth-century fiction when she returns Germaine de Staël's *Corinne ou l'Italie – Corinne or Italy* – to Philip Wakem:

“I didn't finish the book,” said Maggie. “As soon as I came to the blond-haired young lady reading in the park, I shut it up, and determined to read no further. I foresaw that that light-complexioned girl would win away all the love from Corinne and make her miserable. I'm determined to read no more books where the blond-haired women carry away all the happiness. I should begin to have a prejudice against them. If you could give me some story, now, where the dark woman triumphs, it would restore the balance. I want to avenge Rebecca and Flora MacIvor, and Minna, and all the rest of the dark unhappy ones.” (Eliot 270)

Philip suggests that Maggie perhaps “will avenge the dark women in your own person, and carry away all the love from your cousin Lucy” (270). Philip's remark turns out to be partly true, since Maggie and Stephen Guest, the blonde Lucy's fiancé, are passionately attracted to each other and he tries to elope with her. It is only partly true because Maggie eventually rejects him, but is ostracized by her community and dies in a flood. George Eliot creates her own pair of dark and fair, Maggie and Lucy (deriving from Latin “lux” or “light” just like Corinne's half-sister blonde Lucile), and, by having Maggie refer to this convention, foregrounds her own self-conscious adaptation of it in her own story.²

Ellen Moers notes the importance of dark versus light hair both in *Corinne* and *The Mill on the Floss* (175). The contrasting hair colours signify two types of

² On Maggie's reading of *Corinne* as reflecting her own character and concerns, see Golden 85-90.

womanhood, the dark passionate lover and the blonde maiden fitted to make a virtuous wife. In *Corinne* they also represent two nations, Italy and England. Lord Nelvil falls in love with the dark half-Italian, half-English Corinne, a highly gifted *improvisatrice*, but eventually marries her half-sister, the fully English blonde Lucile. Moers points out the monumental influence of “the myth of Corinne” created by this novel, blended with the legend of its author’s life, on literary women in the nineteenth century (173-210). In her *Germaine de Staël, George Sand, and the Victorian Woman Artist*, Linda Lewis similarly argues that *Corinne*, together with Sand’s *Consuelo* – a story of a gypsy girl, who becomes a prima donna in Venice – created a guiding myth of the woman of genius. It seems to me that *Corinne*, published in 1807, also contributed to the formulation of the fair and the dark opposition in the representation of women in Victorian fiction.

As in *Corinne*, in Walter Scott’s *Waverley* (1814), *Ivanhoe* (1820) and *The Pirate* (1822), to which Maggie alludes, the blonde women (Rosa, Rowena and Brenda) get married, while the dark women (Flora, Rebecca and Minna) remain unmarried.³ Across the Atlantic, James Fenimore Cooper – the American Scott – invented a pair of half-sisters in his *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826): dark Cora and fair Alice, born from a mulatto and Scottish mother, respectively.⁴ Alice gets married to the British Major Heyward, while Cora is eventually killed. Considering the fair Scottish Alice and the dark Scottish Flora in *Ivanhoe*, the connection between nationality and female physical appearance can be fluid according to what contrast is required in each fictional world.

The contrast between the two women sometimes originates from the difference in their nationality (English Rosa and Scottish Flora) or in their races (Saxon Rowena and Jewish Rebecca, Scottish Alice and half-mulatto Cora). The Troil sisters in *The Pirate*, Minna and Brenda, meanwhile, show distinction not in their

³ For more information on Scott’s “Blonde and Brunette,” see Welsh 48-55.

⁴ The kinship between Cora and Alice seems to have been inspired by *Corinne*, which James Cooper read before completing *The Last of Mohicans* (Cooper 107). It is thus not Cooper’s invention, *pace* Fiedler (297).

nation or in their genealogy but in their natures and characters, like the first cousins Maggie and Lucy in *The Mill on the Floss*.

Leslie Fiedler observes that “All through the history of our [American] novel, there had appeared side by side with the Fair Maiden, the Dark Lady – sinister embodiment of the sexuality denied the snow maiden” (296). This polarity in representations of women is conceptually equivalent to what Galia Ofek calls “the Victorian Medusa-Rapunzel dichotomous paradigm” (104). According to Ofek, in the Victorian era, fascinated with hair both as a fetish object and as an evocative symbol, the dichotomized fair/dark typology was not confined to the fictional world, but was deeply rooted in cultural premises and permeated all sort of discourses produced not only by artists but also by scientists involved in branches such as criminal anthropology and physiognomy (61-62). Male scientists often described women with dark and profuse hair as “criminal, aggressive or wanton” (61) and “portrayed the owner of fair hair as innately weak, passive, and therefore a more ‘womanly’ woman, as opposed to the owner of dark hair, who was typified as a strong, independent, energetic and therefore threatening woman” (62).⁵

Certainly, Victorian novelists exploit this hair colour codification creatively, defying an easy stereotypical reductionism. *Jane Eyre* for instance does not have a blonde rival, except Rosamond Oliver whom St John passionately loves but gives up since he does not believe she would make a missionary wife.⁶ Rochester’s wife Bertha Mason is a dark woman. Blanche Ingram, moreover, who first seems to be Rochester’s intended has raven-hair, thus darker than Jane’s plain brown hair. The incongruence between her black hair and her name “Blanche,” meaning “white,” may intimate her treacherous nature and scheme to marry Rochester for his fortune. Catherine Earnshaw in *Wuthering Heights*, meanwhile, shares her dark hair with

⁵ Ofek cites books such as Lombroso and Ferraro’s *The Female Offender* (1895), Baughan’s *The Handbook of Physiognomy* (1885), and Frith’s *How to Read Character in Features, Forms, and Faces: A Guide to the General Outlines of Physiognomy* (1891).

⁶ Sekine tries to illustrate how in *Jane Eyre* the blonde women are depicted negatively, while the dark-haired women are represented either positively or negatively.

Heathcliff, her brother Hindley and her nephew Hareton, while the Lintons are blonde-haired. The contrast is thus more between two families than between two women.

For all the complexities developed in each fictional world, the fair woman is typically represented as a desirable future wife, rosy-cheeked, chaste and obedient. Victorian readers would have recognised these hair colour codes and based their expectation about who would get married to whom on them, as does Maggie. The dark woman, by contrast, can embrace more than one dimension or identity, not necessarily assuming a destructive Medusa figure.

Aurora and Dark Heroines

Barrett Browning wrote in a letter to her friend H. S. Boyd on June 9, 1832: “I have read *Corinne* for the third time, & admired it more than ever. It is an immortal book, & deserves to be read three score & ten times – that is, once every year in the age of man” (*BC* 3. 25).⁷ It is widely recognized that *Corinne* served as one of the models for the figure of Aurora Leigh (see for example Lewis, *Staël* 107). Like *Corinne*, Aurora was born from an English father and an Italian mother, has spent her childhood in Italy, and eventually leaves England for Italy. *Corinne* is a highly accomplished, publicly admired poet, which Aurora aspires to be. However, Aurora does not inherit *Corinne*’s raven hair and dark eyes, which visually encapsulate *Corinne*’s Italian origins and her art, which is closely intertwined with the country. I would suggest that Barrett Browning gives Aurora’s golden hair as a deliberate modification of her model *Corinne*.

Like *Corinne* and her creator *Staël* (as well as George Sand and her *Consuelo*), Victorian woman artists and intellectuals tended to have dark hair: Mary Shelley, her mother Mary Wollstonecraft (whose hair is preserved in a necklace owned by

⁷ I will use the abbreviation *BC* for *The Brownings’ Correspondence*.

the Bodleian Library), Jane Austen, the Brontë sisters, George Eliot, not to mention Barrett Browning.

Aurora chooses to pursue her poetic vocation by refusing Romney's marriage proposal. In reality, Victorian married women could write to publish, as in the case of Mrs Gaskell and Mrs Trollope, but a woman's intellectual activity could be seen as undermining her femininity. Nathaniel Hawthorne offers an interesting pair of woman artists in *The Marble Faun* (1860): dark Miriam and fair Hilda.⁸ The story is set in Italy and draws on *Corinne*.⁹ Hilda is a copyist of the great painters of the past and eventually gets married, while Miriam, who has a mysterious past, is a highly talented painter, but tragically disappears. These two polarized women epitomize a widely spread stereotypical idea of disjunction between womanhood and creativity. The dark Miriam can be an artist, but not happily so, while the fair Hilda can only insufficiently exercise her authoritative creativity and thus remains marriageable.

It is generally agreed that Romney's first marriage proposal and Aurora's refusal of it are modelled on St John's marriage proposal to Jane Eyre to become his helpmate for his missionary vocation and her refusal. Although Barrett Browning wrote in 1856 that she was not conscious of its influence (cited in Reynolds 340), *Jane Eyre* is one of the sources for *Aurora Leigh*.¹⁰ Romney's losing his sight in the fire is also reminiscent of the blind Rochester.

Along with Jane Eyre, we can name other dark heroines in British and American fiction who reject marriage proposals. In *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), Elizabeth Bennett famously turns down Darcy as well as her relative Collins. She

⁸ Hilda is "fair-haired," though she is elsewhere described as "brown-haired" with "little brown ringlets" (Hawthorne 56, 63, 389, 403). On Hawthorne's frequent use of fair and dark women, see for example Fiedler 292-303, Birdsall.

⁹ By the Fountain of Trevi, for instance, Miriam directly refers to "the interview ... between Corinne and Lord Nelvil" (Hawthorne 146). See also Rodier. Hawthorne was among the friends of the Brownings. Not only *Corinne*, but also *Aurora Leigh*, published in 1856, could have influenced his Italian romance written during 1859-60.

¹⁰ On Barrett Browning's reading Charlotte Brontë's novels, see Holloway.

has dark eyes, through her hair colour is not specified. In *Middlemarch* (1870), Dorothea Brooke, before her unfortunate marriage with Casaubon, rejects the landowner Chettam as her suitor, who eventually marries her sister Celia. Mary Garth – another dark girl, contrasted in this case with blonde Rosamond Vincey – thoughtfully postpones her acceptance of Fred Vincey’s proposal. In Henry James’s *The Portrait of a Lady* (1880), Isabel Archer twice refuses a suitor’s hand, first the American Casper Goodwood, and then the English aristocrat Lord Warburton, before she accepts Gilbert Osmond as her husband.

A heroine’s rejecting a marriage proposal is one of the most conspicuous moments depicting a woman deviating from the conventional female roles imposed by society. Aurora can be included in this lineage. Not yielding to socio-economic pressures, but determined to be independent, she has a deep affinity with these fictional dark women. From Corinne onward, the dark woman in nineteenth-century fiction generally evinces a livelier, profounder and more complex personality than the fair woman, and therefore often assumes the role of central heroine and the focal point of the story. Aurora’s golden hair is therefore an intriguing exception in this fictional lineage, considering her half-Italian mother, her artistic engagement and her marriage refusal, all of which are typically attributed to dark women – literary descendants of Corinne – in the Victorian imagination.

Dark and Fair in Barrett Browning’s Ballads

In this section, I will explore Barrett Browning’s use of these colour codes in three of her earlier poems, ballads involving a heroine and her husband or would-be husband: “The Romaunt of the Page” (1838), “Rhyme of Duchess May” (1844) and “Lady Geraldine’s Courtship: the Romance of the Age” (1844). These three poems were later included in Barrett Browning’s last self-edited volume, the 1856 *Poems*. All three poems deal with the question of womanhood, for these heroines act in various ways contrary to female conventional roles.

In “Rhyme of Duchess May” (1844), the dark-haired Duchess, an orphan with a fortune, having refused the fiancé chosen by her uncle and guardian, chooses her husband by herself. When the rejected fiancé attacks the couple to retrieve her and her fortune, despite her husband’s objection she jumps to death with him from the castle wall. Her dark hair intimately corresponds to her passionate nature, her refusal of socially imposed marriage and her eventual tragedy. The issue of womanhood is foregrounded when, in refusing her husband’s admonition to stay away the battle, she swears, “by all my womanhood, which is proved so, true and good” (299).¹¹

In “Rhyme of Duchess May,” Barrett Browning thus follows the stereotypical hair codification, but in an earlier poem, “The Romaunt of the Page” (1838), Barrett Browning has chosen to violate it. Here, a newly married fair-haired woman disguises herself as a page to accompany her husband to Palestine. He does not realise his/her identity, as he had not seen her face at their wedding ceremony before his departure. This cross-gender motif is already found in John Donne’s *Elegy 16*, which involves warning against playing a lady-page: “Temper, O fair love, love’s impetuous rage,/ Be my true mistress still, not my feigned page;/ I’ll go, and, by thy kind leave, leave behind/ Thee.” Another lady-page figure, Kaled, dark-haired and unwed, appears in Byron’s *Lara* (1814). Her dark appearance is certainly appropriate for her oriental, Palestinian origin, but at the same time suggests that these bold acts are considered suitable for an exotic, passionate woman.¹²

As in Byron’s poem, the knight and the page in Barrett Browning’s ballad are on their way back from Palestine (3). The wife’s hair colour is alluded to as “dark or bright” three times (99, 107, 195), yet her real hair colour is not revealed until her death (321). The colour terms could also refer to her skin or eyes, but they mainly focus on her hair. Without realising that he is speaking to his own wife, the knight refuses to countenance a wife who would fight at her husband’s side, thus denying her womanhood: “My love ... shall require/ No woman, whether dark or bright,/

¹¹ Number in parentheses refers to line numbers in the poem.

¹² In her youth Barrett Browning had a cross-gender fantasy of becoming Lord Byron’s page (*BC* 6.42, 192, cf. 1.360-2).

Unwomaned if she be" (193-196), "for my lady ... No casque shall hide her woman's tear" (216-220). The knight compares his ideal woman to "a small bright cloud" (230), thus implicitly betraying his expectation that his wife should be a "bright" blonde-haired woman. In despair, the page reveals her identity in an interior monologue (276-277), and, fighting by herself, dies disclosing her "golden ringlets" (321).

This postponement of disclosing the page's hair colour to the reader until the moment of her death plays a thematic role in this narrative ballad, which calls into question the conventional idea of womanhood through the figure of the page-wife.¹³ Like Byron's dark Kaled, the page is acting against Donne's warning, but, unlike Kaled, the page is already his wife and not of oriental origin. The page has thus reasons enough to be either "dark or bright." As far as this courageous action is taken by a dark, oriental woman like Kaled, the question of womanhood is not explicitly emphasised, since, being dark and exotic, Kaled is by nature deviating from the Victorian ideal wife-figure. In Barrett Browning's ballad the page's finally revealed "golden-ringlets" visually claim that the wife disguised as a page could have been an admirable wife despite her apparent unwomanliness. Barrett Browning seems to adapt the hair colour codes to suit to her own purposes, and by bestowing golden ringlets on the page takes a more radical step to assert that her bold acts paradoxically manifest her true womanhood. The page herself says "Have I renounced my womanhood,/ For wifehood" (276-7), but the narrator calls her a "False page, but truthful woman!" (297).

Barrett Browning's use of golden hair therefore can be seen as a self-conscious criticism of conventionally imposed womanhood. Geraldine in "Lady Geraldine's Courtship" also has "golden ringlets" (95, 303). This poem is a precursor to *Aurora Leigh*, as it is shown in Barrett Browning's letter on December 30, 1844 (*Barrett Browning to Mitford* 3. 49; See also *BC* 10. 102-103). Among the common features between the two are the contemporary setting (the ballad's subtitle is "the Romance

¹³ Leighton observes that "male conventionality" kills the heroine, comparing this poem with Byron's *Lara* (*Victorian Women* 81-85).

of the Age”), marriage refusal, cross-class marriage, happy ending (“Geraldine’s Courtship” is the only example among her ballads) and first-person narrative by a poet. Aurora fictionally writes *Aurora Leigh*, while the poet Bertram writes a letter that constitutes the major part of “Geraldine’s Courtship.” Geraldine refuses a marriage proposal from an aristocrat, and chooses instead the lower born Bertram, whom she loves, not unlike the dark Duchess in this taking an active role in romantic relationships. Geraldine is capable both of wilful acts shared with the Duchess and the page, and of a future life denied to the other two heroines. Stereotypically speaking, however, Geraldine’s independent acts could have been attributed to dark-haired women. As in the case of the page, Geraldine’s golden hair seems to involve a similar, though implicit, selection between “dark or bright.”

In “Geraldine’s Courtship” Glennis Stephenson observes “an important turning point in Barrett Browning’s conception and treatment of the question of love,” partly because of a new emphasis on woman as proactive lover in this successful romantic relationship (54-55). Dorothy Mermin and Linda Lewis, on the other hand, see in it rather a stage in Barrett Browning’s poetic development (Mermin 111, Lewis *Spiritual* 180-181). Lewis suggests that Geraldine – and Aurora – can be placed in “the tradition of woman as wisdom,” originating in the figures of the Greek goddess Athena and the Judeo-Christian Wisdom/Sophia, to which for instance Dante’s Beatrice belongs (*Spiritual* 171-210, esp. 180-1; See also *Staël* 112-115).

It seems that this “Romance of the Age” embraces at least two layers, the romantic relationship and the poet’s quest, essentially because the main narrator is a poet. Geraldine is not only a subject and object of romantic love, but also embodies the divine truth to which the poet aspires. In both respects, she can be seen as a precursor to Aurora. In tune with Lewis’s observation, Marjorie Stone suggests that *Aurora Leigh* belongs to the Victorian sage discourse (134-188).

As Lewis points out (*Spiritual* 182), Geraldine in this respect is comparable to the lady in “A Vision of Poets” (1844), also included in the 1856 *Poems*. This lady guides the questing poet into wisdom and truth: “let me free/ Thy spirit into verity” (101-102). Her hair also appears to be golden: “... her sleek tresses manifold,/ Like

Danae's in the rain of old/ That dripped with melancholy gold" (205-207). The golden colour thus intimates divine intervention and inspiration. Just as "Geraldine's Courtship" can be read in two different layers, romantic relationship and poetic quest, so her golden hair not only violates the conventional hair codification, but also intimates an intrinsic relationship between poetry and divine truth for Barrett Browning. It is worthwhile recalling that Petrarch's Laura – the archetypical object of this combination of love and poetic quest – was also golden-haired (*Canzoniere*, Sonnets 11.9, 52.6 et al.).

Aurora seems to inherit her golden hair from the page and Geraldine, as part of Barrett Browning's pattern of deliberate hair codification violation. The golden hair is selected partly as a result of avoidance of dark hair to show that golden-haired women can have a lively, independent mind – often found in novelistic dark heroines – and thus deftly asserts womanhood outside the angelic womanhood stereotypically attributed to the fair woman in the Victorian imagination.¹⁴ Geraldine's golden hair moreover accentuates a poetic vocation, divinely inspired and questing for wisdom to spiritually guide human beings.

Aurora Leigh, Lady Waldemar and Marian Erle

In *Aurora Leigh*, readers are reminded of Aurora's fairness when the problematic relationship between love and writing becomes foregrounded in Book 3. Lady Waldemar, an aristocrat who wants to marry Romney, visits Aurora in order to ask her to prevent Romney from marrying the working class Marian Erle. Both Lady Waldemar and Marian Erle are thus candidates for Romney's wife. Lady Waldemar associates Aurora's blue eyes with "bluestockings":

¹⁴ According to Ofek, two pieces anonymously published in 1860, both entitled *The Woman with the Yellow Hair*, parodied "the 'golden-haired domestic goddess' trope" by "inverting the equation of golden hair and angelic femininity and undermining the traditional system of codification" (185).

Perhaps if I had found a literal Muse,
The visit might have taxed me. As it is,
You wear your blue so chiefly in your eyes,
My fair Aurora

.

Is the blue in eyes
As awful as in stockings after all ... ? (3. 367-370, 379-380)¹⁵

Here, Lady Waldemar categorizes Aurora as one of the bluestockings, intellectual women, while nuancing them “awful.”

Suspecting that Aurora is an invincible love rival against herself, Lady Waldemar emphasises Aurora’s status of poet by calling her “Muse,” and ingeniously interprets her blue eyes as a sign of her intellectual engagement rather than as a conventional sign of a future wife. Lady Waldemar partially deciphers Aurora’s appearance so as to exclude her from the rivalry over Romney. Once she extracts Aurora’s statement that she loves Romney “cousinly – no more” (3. 403), she presents a common view concerning the antipathy between intellectual activity and womanhood:

You stand outside,
You artist women, of the common sex;
You share not with us, and exceed us so
Perhaps by what you're mulcted in, your hearts
Being starved to make your heads: so run the old
Traditions of you. (3. 406- 411)

¹⁵ I will hereafter designate quotations from *Aurora Leigh* by book number and line numbers in parentheses.

As I have noted, prominent Victorian intellectual women were generally dark-haired. Lady Waldemar draws a meaning from Aurora's blue eyes different from its traditional value of womanly virtue attributed to the fair woman.

Lady Waldemar also refers to her own physical appearance when she sarcastically complains of Romney's indifference to herself:

– you [Aurora] 'll ask him [Romney] presently
The colour of my hair – he cannot tell,
Or answers 'dark' at random (3. 616-618)

Aurora mentions “Her heavy ringlets” (3. 444), without specifying their colour, as if Aurora too is indifferent to their colour. Aurora's reticence and Lady Waldemar's self-mocking suggestion of her own hair colour certainly draw the reader's attention to her physical appearance. When told that she was not “dark,” Victorian readers would have wondered if she were “fair.” This scene is Lady Waldemar's first appearance and thus crucial for constructing her character. She evinces a strong will in visiting Aurora by herself, deeply conscious of her own beauty and class, as well as being wittily, intelligently eloquent. Lady Waldemar's hair colour, if specified, would have contributed to the reader's perception of her character.

Aurora for her part is severely critical of Lady Waldemar's elaborate appearance, her way of talking and her purpose to visit Aurora. Later, at Lord Howe's party in Book 5, Aurora describes Lady Waldemar's hair tresses as “the rich/ Bronze rounds” and malignantly notices “a grey hair” (5. 615-616).¹⁶ Aurora reveals Lady Waldemar's hair colour only when she finds a flaw in it. Lady Waldemar's bronze hair moreover evades the stereotypical opposition of the fair and the dark.

¹⁶ Both Japanese translators of *Aurora Leigh* understand “Bronze rounds” as referring to metal ring-shaped accessories rather than Lady Waldemar's hair (Katsura 142, Oshio 151), but this seems unlikely.

While Aurora's description of Lady Waldemar's appearance at their first encounter seems to be deliberately selective, Aurora's description of Marian Erle, when she visits her in the poor districts of London, presents intriguing ambiguity and complexity:

No wise beautiful
Was Marian Erle. She was not white nor brown,
But could look either, like a mist that changed
According to being shone on more or less:
The hair, too, ran its opulence of curls
In doubt 'twixt dark and bright, nor left you clear
To name the colour. (3. 809-815)

Although Aurora meets Marian face to face, she cannot describe Marian's physical appearance in colour terms either about skin, "not white nor brown," or specifically about hair colour, "In doubt 'twixt dark and bright." This ambiguity employs the same contrasting alternatives as in "The Romaunt of the Page," in which, as we have seen, the phrase "dark or bright" is thrice repeated alluding to the heroine's hair colour.

Aurora's inability to describe Marian's appearance figuratively conveys her uncertainty as to how to perceive Marian and understand her, how to categorize this woman whom she has been told Romney has chosen as his wife. Aurora reports a comparable, though much more extended, experience in her childhood, when she gazed at her dead mother's portrait and saw in it an extraordinarily diverse range of traditional female figures from Psyche and the Virgin Mary to Medusa and Lamia (1. 128-173). As Barbara Gelpi has observed, this mirrors Aurora's ambivalence toward femininity itself (40).

In Book 4, Marian disappears on the day of her wedding ceremony. In Book 6, after leaving England, Aurora finds Marian in Paris. When she catches a glimpse of Marian's face, she recalls their first encounter: "The small fair face between the

darks of hair,/ I used to liken, when I saw her first,/ To a point of moonlit water
down a well” (6. 313-315). Marian thus has dark hair. It is later specified as brown:
“With all its brown abandonment of curls” (9. 277).

The descriptive ambiguity concerning Marian’s physical appearance at their
first encounter reflects a conflict within Aurora, split between her rational
appreciation of Romney’s decision and her emotional reluctance to accept his
marriage. The framework she adopts here to characterize Marian, “twixt dark and
bright,” moreover reveals her restricted categorical perspective towards womanhood.
In Book 6, when Marian is no longer considered a possible wife for Romney, Aurora
misrepresents her own perception of Marian at their first meeting, and
retrospectively imposes her stabilized perception on it as if she had been able to
“name the colour” (3. 815).

Barrett Browning carefully avoids the stereotypical correspondence between
her protagonists’ physical colouring and their character, while using it both to
delineate the characterizations of her female protagonists and to reveal her narrator
Aurora’s limited and confused perception.

Nationality and Art

Early in the story, it is made clear that Aurora has golden hair and blue eyes.
Her golden hair is compared to gold coins, and emphasised in relation to her father’s
tenderness after her mother’s death, when “My [Aurora’s] father's slow hand ...
Stroke out my childish curls across his knee” (1. 20-22). She remembers the maid
Assunta’s jest about

... how many golden scudi went

To make such ringlets. O my father's hand,

Stroke heavily, heavily the poor hair down

.

His large man's hands afraid to touch my curls,
As if the gold would tarnish (1. 24-26, 96-97)

Golden hair is often associated with golden coins in the world of fairy tales, many of which involve the heroine's golden hair at the focal centre, as Margaret Reynolds notes concerning this line (5-6). The Victorian age saw a literary vogue for this genre, beginning with translations of the Grimm brothers and Hans Andersen in the first half of the century. Aurora spent her childhood in a mountainous region near Florence, where Pan and God presided side by side (1. 114, 122). Set in this Arcadian Italy, Aurora's childhood is fantastically reconstructed and idealized in her retrospective narrative. All the same, the equation between golden hair and monetary, material gold adumbrates Aurora's later economic plight in London.¹⁷

The Italian ambiance, moreover, accentuates her idealized representation of her childhood. In the Victorian imagination nurtured by the Grand Tour, the geographical distance of Italy from England is metaphorically equated with a chronological distance, symbolically constructed between past and present, as well as with a distance from the quotidian reality of daily life. Italy represents not only the historical past with Classical and Renaissance artefacts, but is also imaginatively constructed as a place where extraordinary, romantic and even supernatural events could happen, as exemplified in the gothic novel. As Chapman notes (75-76, 82), Barrett Browning, as well as Anglo-American travellers such as Dickens and Hawthorne, figured Italy as a land of dreams and visions.

Barrett Browning's representation of Italy has drawn much critical attention, especially concerning *Casa Guidi Windows* and her investment in the Risorgimento. In addition to gender issues such as the female perspective foregrounded in the poem,¹⁸ and her characterization of Italy, which Sandra Gilbert has called a "matria," Barrett Browning's relationship to the past becomes an issue. Angela Leighton and Bing Shao, for instance, interpret Aurora as discarding the past.

¹⁷ On the ambivalent nature of golden hair, see Gitter.

¹⁸ See for example Cooper 124-144.

Leighton identifies past with father, both of which need to be abandoned before the poet can grow (*Barrett Browning* 114-140), while Shao explains Aurora as rejecting the past “in order to plunge deeper into the present life and to have a rebirth in Italy” (113). Alice Falk, on the other hand, takes a more subtle approach to Barrett Browning’s relationship to the past, defining it as “productive connection” rather than “rejection” (86).

Aurora’s two-fold nationality is foregrounded in her balanced self-introductory narrative: “My mother was a Florentine ... My father was an austere Englishman” (1. 29, 65). Her fairness becomes an issue concerning her national identity as she has inherited her Italian mother’s “rare blue eyes” (1. 30). From English people’s point of view, however, her blue eyes suggest her affinity to England:

The Italian child,
For all her blue eyes and her quiet ways,
Thrives ill in England (1. 495-497)

Aurora’s physical colouring is thus casually connected to her affinity to England, while defying any instant connection since, despite her blue eyes, she does not fit in in England. Aurora’s blue eyes, inherited from her Italian mother, resist an easy identification of her nature with either England or Italy. In Book 1, Aurora’s fairness – golden hair and blue eyes – is thus carefully established, involving her idealized childhood set in Italy and her ambivalent national identity, vacillating between England and Italy.¹⁹

In *Corinne*, the association between female colour representation and nationality has a thematic significance, since, as the title *Corinne ou l’Italie* illustrates, Corinne – raven-haired and dark-eyed – is an embodiment of Italy, a country of the distant past, of imagination and art, opposed to northern, modern

¹⁹ In Book 7, Aurora finds Italian sunlight is too glaring for her: “Well, well! my father was an Englishman:/ My mother’s blood in me is not so strong/ That I should bear this stress of Tuscan noon/ And keep my wits” (7. 898-901).

prosaic England.²⁰ By contrast, Corinne's blonde and blue-eyed half-sister Lucile is fully English.

Unlike Corinne, Aurora's poetry does not belong to Italy. In Book 5, Barrett Browning has Aurora explicitly advocate the contemporary epic, essentially set in England, the modern industrial country *par excellence*. This is a deliberate choice, going against the grain of Victorian poetry, since many Victorian poets habitually found their poetical inspiration in the past or remote places, as in Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* or Arthur Clough's *Amours de Voyage*, set in Italy despite its French title. What Aurora aspires to capture in her poetic project is the Victorian age, over whose "true blankness and barrenness, and unpoetrylessness" Matthew Arnold grieved in a letter to Clough (Lowry 126). Thus, defying a full identification of Aurora's poetry with Italy and accordingly the past that it represents, Aurora's fairness is in tune with her engagement with contemporary England.

Aurora's golden hair, on the other hand, figuratively corresponds to her predominant concerns with the spiritual over the material. As in the case of Geraldine and the lady in "A Vision of Poets," golden hair can suggest celestial, spiritual and divine inspiration. Aurora's aspiration to write a Victorian epic involves an attempt to restore the spiritual in an England that is growing increasingly materialistic.

Golden hair is however also associated with material gold, as when Aurora's golden hair is compared to "golden scudi" (1. 24). Living in London, where "even a witch to-day/ Must melt down golden pieces in the nard/ Wherewith to anoint her broomstick ere she rides" (5. 1196-1198), Aurora writes to sustain her life and sells her father's books to return to Italy. Barrett Browning carefully links Aurora's golden hair to monetary imagery so as to signal the realistic economic concerns of contemporary society. Writing in the Victorian age was inexorably intertwined with economic reality.

²⁰ Her admirer Castel-Forte calls her "l'image de notre belle Italie" (Staël 57). The contrast between England and Italy is subsumed under a wider, more general symbolic contrast between north and south. See for instance Jenkyn 39-52.

In Book 8, when Romney visits her in Florence, Aurora assumes that the colour of her hair has helped him recognize her, despite her changed appearance:

A dog would never know me, I'm so changed,
Much less a friend . . . except that you're misled
By the colour of the hair, the trick of the voice,
Like that Aurora Leigh's. (8. 514-517)

Aurora alludes to Odysseus's old dog, who alone knew his master in spite of his disguise as a beggar (*Ody.* 7. 290-327). Like Odysseus, Aurora returns to her native country. Unlike him, however, she does not have anyone to receive her there. Certainly, her sad joke about how she has changed physically is partly ironic since, unknown to Aurora, Romney is now blind. Aurora perhaps recalls that in her youth Romney admired her gleaming hair as if lit by "Florence fire-flies":

Ah, Romney laughed
One day . . . (how full the memories come up!)
'— Your Florence fire-flies live on in your hair,'
He said, 'it gleams so.' (5. 1129-1132)

Just as Aurora's memory of her father is connected with her golden hair, so is her memory of Romney. She associates her golden hair with her personal memories of earlier stages of her life, her childhood and her youth before living in London, and thus presents it as an indispensable part of her identity. The colour of her hair is one of her essential characteristics, which would not change despite superficial alterations.

Here, moreover, Romney sees in her hair a sign of her Florentine origin. This representation of her physical appearance thus again resists any easy attribution of her nationality. Despite all her ambition to write an epic set in modern England, her Italian origins and eventual return to Italy strongly suggest that her life and her

poetry, which is anyway inseparable from her life, are rooted in this southern country, her past and her future.

In summary, Aurora's golden hair can accordingly be seen resulting from a self-conscious selection between the fair and the dark opposition, which involves the issues of nationality, womanhood and artistic activity. First, her golden hair resists an easy identification with Italy and thus epitomizes her oscillating existence between England and Italy. As a subject of her poetry, her golden hair corresponds to her commitment to contemporary England, while also suggesting the commercial reality of her chosen vocation as a writer. Her belonging to Italy in her past and future nevertheless intimates the importance of Italy in her life and art. Secondly, Aurora inherits her golden hair from the page and Geraldine in Barrett Browning's earlier ballads, golden hair that raises more radically the question of womanhood, which is shared with heroines in the novelistic tradition. Finally, as in Geraldine's case, Aurora's golden hair is also in tune with her poetic quest for divine and spiritual truth.

Aurora's golden hair places her in a liminal space. She lives in both England and Italy, involved with both the present and the past, represented both with the mind of novelistic dark heroines and poetic engagement in the spiritual. Blind Romney is symbolically contrasted with Aurora, who becomes his light. As a poet, she has an aspiration to shed light on people's life. Appropriate to her name "Aurora," she shines liminally, a light that breaks the darkness.

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Barrett Browning had been working towards this position for several decades and had continually sought to push boundaries in terms of both style and subject matter. Certainly she was never one to stay within conventions, even if this meant that reviewers were often highly critical of her work. Her original and experimental approach began early with her first major poem, *The Battle of Marathon*, which she wrote in her early teens and which was privately printed by her father in 1820. The *Battle of Marathon* initiated Barrett Browning's consistent desire to test different styles and forms of poetry and to tackle complex subject matters. Her subsequent volume, *An Essay on Mind, and Other Poems* (1826), was another bold intervention in this way. *Aurora Leigh* (1856) is an epic poem/novel by Elizabeth Barrett Browning. The poem is written in blank verse and encompasses nine books (the woman's number, the number of the Sibylline Books). It is a first-person narration, from the point of view of Aurora; its other heroine, Marian Erle, is an abused self-taught child of itinerant parents. The poem is set in Florence, Malvern, London and Paris. The author uses her knowledge of Hebrew and Greek, while also playing off modern novels, such as *Corinne* or Barrett Browning never veered from the rime scheme ABBAABBACDCDCD, which is a remarkable restriction imposed on herself for the duration of 44 sonnets. (Please note: The spelling, "rhyme," was introduced into English by Dr. Samuel Johnson through an etymological error. For my explanation for using only the original form, please see "Rime vs Rhyme: An Unfortunate Error.") As promised, I have gone back to look at that picture of Elizabeth Barrett Browning and it turns out to be a print of a sketch (unsigned) of a sitting portrait concentrating on the facial more than the pose. There is also a portrait there of Robert Browning who to me, comes across here in this picture as a dashing 'man about town'. Ross, Amy Suzanne, "Exploration of female relationships in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*" (1995). *Retrospective Theses and Dissertations*. For Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *Aurora Leigh* expresses Barrett Browning's "protofeminist philosophy" (Norton Anthology 259). Similar praise can be found in much of the literary criticism concerned with *Aurora Leigh*, and many of these same critics believe that *Aurora Leigh* is an accurate recording of Barrett Browning's progressive ideas about women, art, and love. While it is fair to call attention to the feminist ideas conveyed in the poem, it is also important to celebrate it as one that, through female interrelationships, presents a revised image of female subject formation.