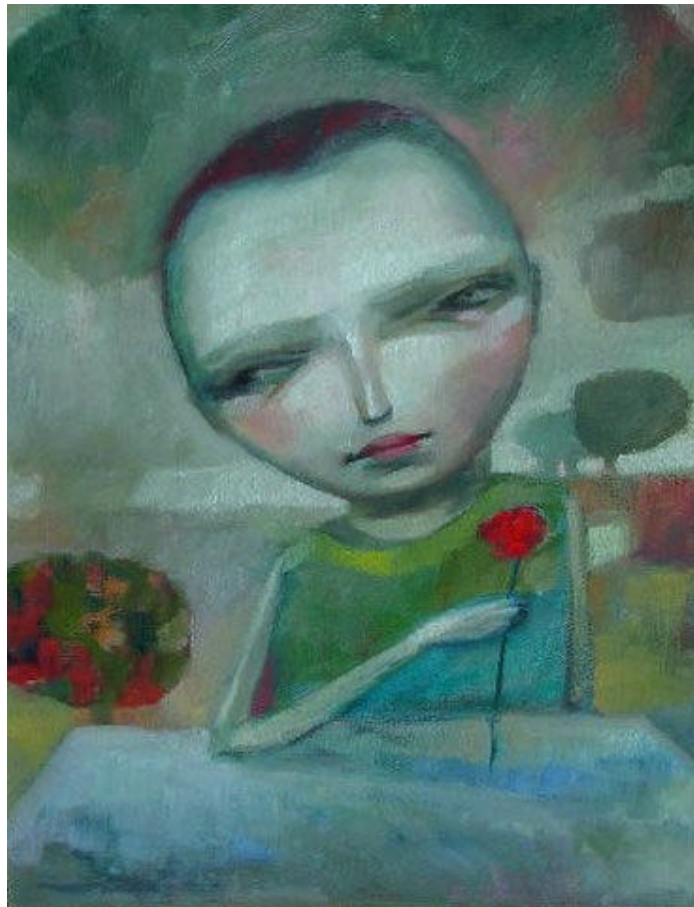


# Aurora Leigh – Love and Revolution

*by dr. temi (brodkey) rose*

*based on Elizabeth Barrett Browning's novel-in-verse - Aurora Leigh*



*Girl at Table with Rose by Amy Scherer-Huddleston*

*adapted by dr. temi rose*

(with additional dialogue by temi rose, harun  
thomas, mark delabarre, shellie sclan, marshall  
berman and czeslaw milosz)

## How do I love thee? Let me count the ways...

Is it possible to be both a woman and also write great literature? Can a woman who writes as well as the greatest male writers, still find love? Elizabeth Barrett Browning says YES! to both in her phenomenal novel in verse, published for the first time in 1856, **Aurora Leigh**.

**Aurora Leigh** is the protagonist, a poet and a woman who must go through creative struggles and emotional entanglements all the while making brave choices and giving voice to a unique yet ancient and venerable philosophy of love.

### Introduction

This play was a labor of love. I first ran across *Aurora Leigh* by accident while cruising the library shelves, I was looking for *The Ring and The Book* by Robert Browning because I had read that it was worth reading. But, perusing it, I was not thrilled with the rhythm of the lines. I picked out Elizabeth's *Aurora Leigh*. I could not put it down. I wanted to dissolve into her magical, liberating language. I decided I needed more time with this book, so I carved out a one-woman show for myself to tour.

The first reading of the one-woman play I culled from the novel, was at The Ensemble Studio Theatre (where else?) in 1992. I was memorizing and rehearsing when my life took a new turn, became a whirlwind, and suddenly we were living in London where I finished re-writing the play but also where I had no theatrical experience and therefore no ability to produce.

Many years later, while working on the trilogy, *Topography: the landscape of my soul*, I met an amazing actress, Lucy McMichael. From the first time I heard Lucy read, I wanted to work with her. I realized that *Aurora Leigh* would be a perfect script for her. She politely declined to do it as a one-woman show but expressed interest in the play if I could re-write it as a multi-character script. So I did. And we did a series of readings so I could keep re-writing and refining. We did readings at Primary Stages, Ensemble Studio Theatre and the Bowery Poetry Club. Finally, I felt the play was ready for a full workshop production.

However, as a director/producer (taking off my writer's hat), I felt that the dance component was still missing. I interviewed several choreographers but nothing clicked. I felt strongly that, even though the language is incredibly passionate, actors would feel

compelled to be true to the Victorian nature of the characters and would have to hold back physically. But I wanted to show a passionate physicality otherwise, for me, the stage would be too bare.

The other challenge I had came about because I had eradicated the politics that Elizabeth had written specific and detailed analyses of current events that I knew would be utterly lost on a modern audience unfamiliar with the events of the mid-nineteenth century. *Aurora Leigh* is a powerful political polemic as well as a romance. Barrett Browning argues for the rights of people to express themselves both as individuals and as groups, cultures, political entities. She was influenced by her translations of early Greek Christian writing and believed that we are all God (as did Mother Theresa in the twentieth century), creative beings, equal and responsible. How could I represent Barrett Browning's politics to a post-modern audience? I experimented with the idea of working with filmmakers, projections, that would play between the Aurora scenes and bring in a relevant social-political perspective. I interviewed some brilliant friends of mine, shellie scan, marshall berman and mark delabarre with the intention of using the recorded interviews as the narration of the films.

I do not ever understand how, after so much hard work and worry, solutions seem to materialize out of thin air, but they often do. My friend and inspiration, guthrie nutter invited me to his lecture at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in which he discussed the importance of gesture in Asian art. He spoke in sign language while a speaking interpreter translated for those of us who are not literate in ASL (American Sign Language). Through what Guthrie was explaining but also through the expressiveness with which he explained, I was able to understand that sign language could be the passionate form of communication I was looking for – meanwhile, our mutual friend, the gifted actress/dancer, alexandria wailes' schedule opened up and she was free and interested in the project. Our concept was two casts, signing and speaking, would represent the complex and shifting relationship between spirit and body. It was a glorious experience. If any other producers want to try it, please do, you will find it well worth the effort. It is my prejudice as a director/producer to always use movement but the script will be fine if done with one cast.

Once the signing component was in place, it seemed to me that film would be distracting, so I created a modern set of characters, Player One and Player Two who could speak a somewhat altered version of the interviews. This secondary script weaves in and out of the *Aurora Leigh*, and attempts to re-introduce the passionate politics I stripped from the original novel.

This show was thrilling for all of us. I have never seen anything like it in my life. I would do it again in a minute. I hope that many other people will enjoy this magical story of love and revolution.

## The Cast

*(the first workshop production at The Ensemble Studio Theatre January 2006)*

Aurora Lucy McMichael\* / Christine Rebecca Herzog\* <sup>ASL</sup>

Young Aurora Alexandria Wailes\* <sup>ASL</sup> / Dawn Harvey\*

Marian Stephanye Dussud\* / Rebecca Friedman <sup>ASL</sup>

Romney Greg Anderson <sup>ASL</sup> / Brian Allard\*

Lady Waldemar Lora Lee Ecobelli\* / Bianca Aabel <sup>ASL</sup>

Player One Katherine Diamond\* / Garrett Zuercher\* <sup>ASL</sup>  
*(also played: Aunt Leigh, Seamstress, Woman in Church, Sir Blaise,  
Vincent Carrington)*

Player Two Guthrie Nutter\* <sup>ASL</sup> / Matthew Hammond  
*(also played: Woman in Alley, Seamstress, Man in Church, Mr. Smith,  
Distracted Man, Parisian Lady)*

*\*appeared courtesy of actors' equity association*  
<sup>ASL</sup> *American Sign Language Performer*

ASL Interpreters: *Katherine Diamond & Rebecca Friedman*

Co-produced by **Nombril Productions**, Stephanye Dussud's Production Company.

Aurora Leigh takes place in London, Paris and Florence in the mid-1840's  
(The players exist in the HERE and NOW, wherever that might be)

**Characters (more or less) in order of Appearance**

*(MAJOR characters in upper case, smaller roles, in italics, can be played by the Players)*

PLAYER ONE	Verbal, opinionated. <i>(any age, gender, race)</i>
PLAYER TWO	Passionate, a teacher. <i>(any age, gender, race)</i>
AURORA	A brilliant poet. The narrator, she tells her story from the vantage point of having experienced it all. (30-50)
YOUNG AURORA	A young poet. (18 – 35)
ROMNEY	Social revolutionary, a committed activist. Serious, strong. (24 – 40)
LADY WALDEMAR	Beautiful, graceful, extraordinary, stunning. (22-40)
MARIAN	A gentle soul, and strong. Mary, the virgin and Magdalene in one. (18 – 35)
<i>Aunt Leigh</i>	Very critical, cold, dutiful.
<i>Woman in Alley</i>	From a horror movie.
<i>Seamstress (2)</i>	Chatty unsophisticated gossips.
<i>Man and Woman in Church</i>	Loud, brash and crass.
<i>Mr. Smith</i>	An elegant, sophisticated gossip.
<i>Sir Blaise</i>	Another elegant, sophisticated gossip.
<i>Distracted Man</i>	Distracted, intellectual.
<i>Parisian Lady</i>	Spoiled rich, impossible.
<i>Vincent Carrington</i>	Painter friend of Aurora and Romney.

## Act One

Prologue What he was and is....

- Scene 1 Candlelight
- Scene 2 There's Only Now
- Scene 3 Awakening
- Scene 4 Truth and Beauty
- Scene 5 My Birthday
- Scene 6 Naked
- Scene 7 Sing the Song You Choose
- Scene 8 Lady Waldemar
- Scene 9 Fully Loaded
- Scene 10 Marian
- Scene 11 Strike

## Act Two

- Scene 1 Revelation
  - Scene 2 Beech Tree Seat
  - Scene 3 Great Power
  - Scene 4 Paris
  - Scene 5 Wounded Bird
  - Scene 6 Lady Waldemar Revisited
  - Scene 7 Labors of Love
  - Scene 8 New Moon
- Epilogue Good Spirits

## Act One

*Prologue*  
(Players, Aurora)

*In the dark.*

PLAYER ONE

No one is safe

PLAYER TWO

Everyone is scared

PLAYER ONE

No one knows what to think

*In the light.*

AURORA

Of writing many books there is no end  
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

ASL PLAYER ONE

No one is safe

ASL PLAYER TWO

Everyone is scared

ASL PLAYER ONE

No one knows what to think



*Scene 1 Candlelight*  
(Auroras)

*Aurora lights a candle centerstage. Younger Aurora comes alive onstage.*

YOUNG AURORA

I write. My mother was a Florentine whose rare blue eyes were shut from seeing me when I was scarcely four years old.

AURORA

She could not bear the joy of giving life, the mother's rapture slew her.

YOUNG AURORA

I, Aurora Leigh, was born to make my father sadder and myself not overjoyous, truly.

AURORA

Women know the way to rear up children. They have a simple, merry, tender knack of tying sashes, fitting baby shoes and stringing pretty words that make no sense and kissing full sense into empty words.

YOUNG AURORA

Children learn by such - love's whole earnest in a pretty play - and get not overearly solemnized.

AURORA

Seeing love is divine, they become aware and unafraid of love.

YOUNG AURORA

Fathers love as well.

AURORA

Mine did, I know.

YOUNG AURORA

But with heavier brains

AURORA

And wills more consciously responsible.

YOUNG AURORA

And not as wisely

AURORA

Since less foolishly.

YOUNG AURORA

So mothers have God's license to be missed.

AURORA

My father was an austere Englishman who, after a lifetime spent at home in college, learning law and parish talk,

YOUNG AURORA

Was flooded with a passion unaware.

AURORA

His whole provisioned, complacent life drowned out from him in a moment,

YOUNG AURORA

As he stood in Florence where he had come to note the secret of Da Vinci's drains.

AURORA

He, musing somewhat absently,

YOUNG AURORA

Perhaps some English question,

AURORA

Whether men should pay the unpopular tax with left or right hand, in the alien sun, in the great square of Santissima, there drifted past him a train of priestly banners.

YOUNG AURORA

Among the white-veiled, rose-crowned maidens holding up tall tapers weighty for such wrists...a face flashed like a cymbal on his face and shook with silent clangor his brain and heart, transfiguring him to music.

BOTH AURORAS

And thus beloved, she died.

AURORA

He made haste to hide himself,

YOUNG AURORA

This prattling child,

AURORA

And silent grief among the mountains.

YOUNG AURORA

Because he thought, unmothered babes have need of mother nature.

AURORA

We lived among the mountains many years.

YOUNG AURORA

We had old Assunta to make up the fire,

AURORA

Crossing herself whenever a sudden flame from the firewood

YOUNG AURORA

Made alive the picture of my mother hanging on the wall.

AURORA

I was just thirteen, still growing like the plants, from unseen roots, when

YOUNG AURORA

Suddenly I awoke to life's needs and agonies with an intense, strong, struggling heart beside a stone dead father. His last word was love, *Love, my child. Love. Love.* Before I answered, he was gone. And none was left to love in all the world.

AURORA

There ended childhood. Then smooth endless days notched here and there with knives. Til a stranger came with authority who caught me up from old Assunta's neck.

YOUNG AURORA

I, my ears too full of my father's silence to utter a cry, stared at the wharf edge where Assunta stood and moaned.

AURORA

The white walls, the blue hills, my Italy.

YOUNG AURORA

Then the bitter sea inexorably pushed between us both

AURORA

And sweeping up the ship with my despair, threw us out as a pasture to the stars.

YOUNG AURORA

Then England. Oh the frosty cliffs looked cold upon me. Could I find a home among those mean red houses through the fog?

AURORA

When I first heard my father's language from alien lips which had no kiss for mine...

YOUNG AURORA

I wept aloud.

AURORA

Someone said,

YOUNG AURORA

"The child is mad." The train swept us on.

AURORA

Was this the great isle? The ground seemed cut up from the fellowship of verdure,

YOUNG AURORA

Field from field, as man from man.

AURORA

The skies themselves looked low.

YOUNG AURORA

All things blurred and dull and vague. Did Shakespeare and his mates absorb all the light here?

*As Aurora lights another candle, lights come gently on the stage. We are in the light of deep night, perhaps three or four a.m.*

AURORA

I see my aunt standing on the hall step of her country house.

YOUNG AURORA

To give me welcome.

AURORA

She stood straight and calm.

YOUNG AURORA

Her somewhat narrow forehead braided tight as if for taming accidental thoughts from possible pulses.

AURORA

Brown hair pricked with grey by frigid use of life.

YOUNG AURORA

A nose sharply drawn.

AURORA

Yet in delicate lines.

YOUNG AURORA

A close, mild mouth, a little soured at the ends through speaking unrequited loves or perhaps niggardly half truths.

AURORA

Eyes of no color. Once they might have smiled

YOUNG AURORA

But never, ever lost themselves in smiling.

AURORA

She lived a harmless life.

YOUNG AURORA

She called a virtuous life,

AURORA

A quiet life,

YOUNG AURORA

Which was no life at all but rather a caged bird sort of life: born in a cage, accounting that to leap from perch to perch was act and joy enough for any bird.

AURORA

I, alas, was a wild bird. Brought to her cage.

YOUNG AURORA

She was there to meet me. Very kind.

AURORA

Bring the clean water.

YOUNG AURORA

Give out the fresh seed.

AURORA

She stood upon her steps to welcome me.

YOUNG AURORA

Calm, in black garb.

AURORA

I clung around her neck.

YOUNG AURORA

In my ears, my father's words,

AURORA

*Love. Love my child, love.*

YOUNG AURORA

She was his sister. I clung to her.

AURORA

For a moment she seemed moved.

YOUNG AURORA

Then she kissed me with cold lips, wrung loose my hands and held me at arms' length.  
Then, with two grey naked-bladed eyes,

AURORA

searched through my face. Stabbed it through and through as if to find a wicked murderer  
in my innocence.

YOUNG AURORA

Then, drawing breath, she told me not to lie or swear.

AURORA

She who loved my father would love me.

YOUNG AURORA

As long as I deserved it.

AURORA

Very kind.

YOUNG AURORA

From that day she did her duty for me, well-pressed out but measured always.

AURORA

And I?

YOUNG AURORA

I was a good child. On the whole.

AURORA

Why not? I did not live, to have the faults of life.

YOUNG AURORA

I learned the catechism, the creeds and various popular inhuman doctrines.

AURORA

My aunt liked instructed piety.

YOUNG AURORA

I read a score of books on womanhood that prove, if women do not think at all, they may teach thinking.

AURORA

Books that demonstrate women's right of comprehending men's talk,

YOUNG AURORA

Husband's talk,

AURORA

When not too deep.

YOUNG AURORA

Books that delineate women's right of rapid insight as long as they keep quiet by the fire and never say no when the rest of the world is saying yes.

AURORA

That is fatal.

YOUNG AURORA

Books which demonstrate women's potential faculty for abdicating power in absolutely everything,

AURORA

My aunt liked a woman to be womanly.

YOUNG AURORA

And I?



AURORA

I had relations with the unseen, derived elemental nutriment and heat from nature.

YOUNG AURORA

As the earth feels the sun at night. As a babe sucks surely in the dark.

AURORA

God, I thank thee for that grace of thine.

YOUNG AURORA

At first I felt no life in me which was not patience. *The child thrives ill in England: She will die.* Some said.

AURORA

My cousin Romney was angry with me -

ROMNEY

You're wicked now? You want to die and leave the world adusk for others with your naughty light blown out?

YOUNG AURORA

He slammed out the door. He left so suddenly, he shut his dog in with me.

AURORA

Ah, Romney. Romney Leigh.

YOUNG AURORA

My cousin, elder by a few years. Cold and shy and absent. Tender when he thought of it which was scarcely often.

AURORA

Always Romney was looking for the worms, I for the Gods.

YOUNG AURORA

A godlike nature his: Gods look down incurious of themselves.

AURORA

And certainly I must remember that in those days, I was a worm and he had time to look on me.

YOUNG AURORA

A little by his looking perhaps but more by something in me, not my will,

AURORA

I did not die but gradually awoke, and rose up.

YOUNG AURORA

Where was I?: In the world.

AURORA

For uses, therefore, I must count worthwhile.

*Scene 2 There's Only Now*  
(Players)

*Players enter to do the set change from Italy to England, in the style of Pirandello (Six Characters in Search of an Author): there's only this.*

PLAYER ONE

How many kinds of love are there?

PLAYER TWO

How many kinds of love are there?

PLAYER ONE

Yeah. *(pause)* How many kinds of love are there?

PLAYER TWO

Ok, I heard you. I'm thinking.

PLAYER ONE

Think faster.

PLAYER TWO *(groans then pauses)*

So: how many kinds of love are there?

PLAYER ONE

How many kinds?

PLAYER TWO

Yeah, Einstein.

*Pause.*

PLAYER ONE

Are we counting lust?

PLAYER TWO

Sure, count anything you want.

PLAYER ONE

As a subcategory in the family of love, in the genus of physical love, the species lust would be admissible?

PLAYER TWO

Sure. I said, sure.

PLAYER ONE

Well then, the list is pretty long.

PLAYER TWO

Yeah, definitely, a long list.

PLAYER ONE

Longingly, he listed off course into love.

*Scene 3 Awakening*

*(Auroras, Aunt Leigh)*

*Aurora turns on lights. Pools of orange incandescence lie like islands softly on the floor in a sea of darkness. Aurora moves around her studio. There are piles of books and plants scattered about. A rug. A tattered couch. A typical writer's garret. Through the window we see the London skyline under moon and stars. A streetlight shines at an angle through the window.*

AURORA

I awoke more slowly than I tell it now. But at last I opened wide the window of my soul. I let the air penetrate, regenerate what I was.

YOUNG AURORA

Oh life, how often we throw it off and say, *Enough!* Enough of life. We must break with life. Here we are wronged. Here we are maimed, spoiled for aspiration. Farewell, life. Then life calls to us in some transformed, apocalyptic voice above us or below us or around. Perhaps we name it nature's voice. Or love's.

AURORA

Tricking ourselves because we are more ashamed to own our compensations than our griefs.

YOUNG AURORA

Still, life's voice. We make our peace with life.

AURORA

And I, so young then, was not sullen.

YOUNG AURORA

I used to get up early just to sit and watch the morning quicken, hear the silence open like a flower. I read books.

AURORA

Bad and good.

YOUNG AURORA

Some good and bad at once. Good aims do not always make good books.

AURORA

From error to error, every turn still brought me nearer to the central truth, I thought.

YOUNG AURORA

There is anguish in the thick of our opinions.

AURORA

Press and counterpress.

YOUNG AURORA

Now up, now down. This throws us back upon a noble trust to use our own instincts.

AURORA

Try it. Fix against heaven's wall the ladder of school logic.

YOUNG AURORA

You won't get far.

AURORA

Now look up with that still ray which strikes from your heart to God and you will see Heaven.

*Aurora helps herself to a glass of something lovely. There is no pause in the dialogue.*

YOUNG AURORA

Books. Books. Books. My books.

AURORA

At last because the time was right I came across the poets.

YOUNG AURORA

As the earth plunges when her internal fires have reached and pricked her heart and throwing flat the markets and temples, the triumphal gates and towers of observation, clears herself, returns to elemental freedom. Thus my soul at poetry's divine first finger

touch let go conventions and sprang up surprised, convinced, convicted of the great eternities between two worlds.

AURORA

What's this, Aurora Leigh? You speak so of poets and not laugh? Those virtuous liars, dreamers after dark, those exaggerators of the sun and moon, those soothsayers reading tea cups.

YOUNG AURORA

I speak so of truth tellers, speakers of essential truth, teachers who instruct humankind to recognize our stature, erect, sublime, the measure of ourselves, the measure of an angel.

AURORA

Yes. And while men and women lay railroads, reign, reap, dine and dust the flaunty carpets of the world for kings to walk on or presidents, the poet will suddenly catch you with her voice like thunder - *This is soul. This is life. This word is being said in heaven. Here's God. What are you about?* Then men and women start, look up from their work and feel that carpet dusting though a useful trade, is perhaps not the imperative labor after all.

YOUNG AURORA

I wrote false poems like the rest and thought them true because I myself was true in writing them.

AURORA

Maybe I write truer ones now with less complacence.

YOUNG AURORA

But I could not hide my quickening inner life. My aunt was suspicious when she caught my soul ablaze in my eyes.

AURORA

She could not bring herself to say that I had no business with a soul.

YOUNG AURORA

But plainly she objected.

AUNT LEIGH

Aurora, have you done your tasks this morning?

YOUNG AURORA

As if to say,

AUNT LEIGH

I know there's something wrong. I know I have not ground you down enough to flatten and bake you to a wholesome crust for household uses and proprieties. You almost grow?

YOUNG AURORA

We'll live, Aurora,

AURORA

Said my soul.

YOUNG AURORA

The dogs are on us

AURORA

But we will not die.

BOTH AURORAS

Whoever lives true life will love true love.

YOUNG AURORA

I learned to love that England.



*Scene 4 Truth and Beauty*

*(Players)*

*Players enter to change the set from inside to outside english countryside, in the style of Shaw (Heartbreak House): truth is beautiful.*

PLAYER ONE

Well, you know. Elizabeth Barrett was a lot more famous than Robert Browning was. I don't know if I'd want a relationship like that, where one of us is way more famous.

PLAYER TWO

Yeah, especially if it wasn't you. But he dug her poetry. She was poet laureate, right?

PLAYER ONE

Nah, I didn't think there ever was a woman poet laureate in England. Do you know? I don't know.

PLAYER TWO

No clue. I don't keep up with that shit. I barely know who's won a Nobel prize, a Pulitzer. The Yankees lost; I know that.

PLAYER ONE

Yeah, she was a superstar. And he was having a really rough time of it, his poems were getting really trashed. She wrote him a letter and said, hey I really dig your poems and he comes over and they talk and she's sickly and over forty and he's gorgeous and really strong. And then he absconds with her from drab nasty London to sexy sultry Florence and they have a kid and -

PLAYER TWO

She was a poet? A superstar poet?

PLAYER ONE

Yeah, it happens sometimes. Look at that Polish guy, that solidarity guy, he was a poet.

PLAYER TWO

Yeah. I remember. I forgot his name.

PLAYER ONE

Me too.

PLAYER TWO

Walesa

PLAYER ONE

No, that's the other guy, the politician not the poet.

PLAYER TWO

Oh yeah. *(pause)* So what happened?

PLAYER ONE

So she's really famous: she's written lots of popular stuff. Her poetry is filled with the awareness that god and nature are the same thing...

PLAYER TWO

But what happened to them?

PLAYER ONE

I don't know. They lived happily ever after I guess. He became poet laureate after she died.

PLAYER TWO

No shit?

PLAYER ONE

Yeah, I think so, I think he gets his success finally. She wrote *Sonnets from the Portuguese* ("How do I love thee? Let me count the ways...") before they consummated their love and Aurora Leigh is the love letter she wrote for him after they'd run away and had a child. They named their kid Pen.

PLAYER TWO

That's ridiculous.

PLAYER ONE

Maybe.

PLAYER TWO

That's major. Two great works of literature for one guy. No one ever wrote me anything except lists of things I had to do.

PLAYER ONE

Yeah, well, she was bad.

*Scene 5 Birthday*  
(Auroras, Romney, Aunt Leigh)

YOUNG AURORA

Not infrequently I walked the third with Romney and his friend, the well-known painter, Vincent Carrington, whom men judge harshly because he holds that, to paint a body well, you paint a soul by implication.

AURORA

Pleasant walks.

YOUNG AURORA

Often we walked only two if Romney pleased to walk with me. We read or talked or quarrelled.

AURORA

We were not lovers nor even friends well matched. Say rather scholars upon different tracks,

YOUNG AURORA

Thinkers disagreed.

AURORA

He overfull of what is

YOUNG AURORA

And I overbold for what might be. Then, when thrushes sang, I made him mark that however much the world went ill, as he believed, certainly the thrushes still sing in it. And his brow would soften with melancholy patience while I, breaking into ecstasy, flattered the skies, the clouds, the fields. *Is not God here on earth?* I said... ankle-deep in grass I leaped and clapped my hands.

*Young Aurora picks up a white dress. It comes on easily, buttons like a coat, more or less covering her more androgynous original outfit of shirt and trousers.*

AURORA

Came a morn I stood upon the brink of twenty years and looked before and after. As I stood, woman and artist, both incomplete, both credulous of completion. I was glad that day.

YOUNG AURORA

The June was in me, with its multitudes of nightingales all singing in the dark and rosebuds reddening where the calyx split.

AURORA

I felt so young, so strong, so sure of life.

YOUNG AURORA

In which fantastic mood I bounded forth at early morning, brushing a green trail across the lawn with my gown in the dew. Took will and way to fly my fancies in the open air and keep my birthday.

*Young Aurora stands on an old wooden chest in her studio.*

YOUNG AURORA

Meanwhile I murmured as honeyed bees hum to themselves, *The worthiest poets have remained uncrowned til death has bleached their foreheads to the bone.* And so with me it must be unless I prove unworthy of the grand adversity

AURORA

And certainly I could not fail so much.

YOUNG AURORA

What if I crown myself today?

AURORA

To learn the feel of it before my brows be numbed.

YOUNG AURORA

Thus speaking to myself half singing it because some thoughts are fashioned like a bell to ring. I drew a wreath of ivy drenched blinding me with dew; and fastening it behind, turning to face my imaginary public. There he was. Romney with a mouth twice graver than his eyes.

AURORA

I stood there fixed.

YOUNG AURORA

My arms up like the caryatid, sole of some abolished temple

AURORA

helplessly persistent in a gesture which derides a former purpose

YOUNG AURORA

Yet my blush was flame as if from flax not stone.

ROMNEY

Aurora Leigh, here's a book I found, no name on it. Poems. No. I did not read it. Not a word. I saw at once the thing had witchcraft in it, calls up dangerous spirits. I rather bring it to the witch.

YOUNG AURORA

My book. You found it.

AURORA

He touched the ivy on my hair.

ROMNEY

These wreaths bring headaches and defile clean, white morning dresses. Men, and still less women, do not need to be poets.

YOUNG AURORA

You judge that because I love the beautiful, I must love pleasure chiefly. Well, learn this cousin - I would choose to walk at all risks. If heads that hold a rhythmic thought must ache, I choose headaches. And today's my birthday.

ROMNEY

Dear Aurora, choose instead to cure, you have balsams.

YOUNG AURORA

Oh, I see. The headache is too noble for my sex. You think heartache would suit me better. Since that's woman's special, proper ache. And altogether tolerable. Except to a woman.

AURORA

Untangled the wreath from my hair. Silently both of us disappointed, both of us wary, we walked back into sight of the house.

ROMNEY

Aurora, let's be serious and throw by this game of head and heart. Life means to be sure both head and heart. Both active, both complete. And both in earnest. Men and women make the world as head and heart make human life. There is work for men and women in this beleaguered earth.

ROMNEY & AURORA

And thought can never do the work of love.

ROMNEY

The chances are that, being a woman, young and pure, with such a pair of large, calm eyes, 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?

ROMNEY & AURORA

We want the best in art now or no art.

ROMNEY

The world is half blind with intellectual light, half brutalised with civilization. Having caught the plague we shriek east to west along a thousand railroads, mad with pain and sin. Does one woman who weeps so easily grow pale to see this? Does one of you stand still from dancing, stop from stringing pearls and pine and die because of universal anguish? You weep for what you know. But, for a million sick you remain unmoved; you would as soon weep for an isosceles triangle. The same world uncomprehended by you, must remain uninfluenced by you. Women, personal and passionate, give us doting mothers and chaste wives, sublime madonnas, enduring saints.

ROMNEY & AURORA

We get no Christ from you. And truly we will not get a poet.

ROMNEY

Not to my mind.

YOUNG AURORA

With which conclusion you conclude?

ROMNEY

That you, Aurora, cannot condescend to play at art as children play at swords, to show a pretty spirit chiefly admired because true action is impossible. You will not be satisfied with the praise that men give women when they judge a book as mere women's work, expressing the comparative respect which means absolute scorn.

YOUNG AURORA

Stop. Better to pursue a frivolous trade by serious means than a sublime art frivolously.

ROMNEY

We are young. The world is swollen hard with perished generations and their sins. All success proves partial failure. All advance implies what's left behind. All triumph something crushed at the chariot's wheels. All government, some wrong. Rich men make the poor who curse the rich, who agonize together, rich and poor under and over, in the social spasm and crisis of the ages. Who can stand by and view these things and never tease his soul for some great cure? I think I was a man chiefly for this; I sympathize with man not with God. And when I stand by a death bed. It is my death. And I, a man, feel with men in the agonizing present.

YOUNG AURORA

Is the world so bad? The world was always evil. But so bad?

ROMNEY

So bad, Aurora.

YOUNG AURORA

I have not stood long on the strand of life and these salt waters have barely had time to wet my feet. I cannot judge these tides. I shall perhaps. A woman is always younger than a man because she is not allowed to mature. Ah, I know men judge otherwise. You think a woman ripens like a peach, chiefly in the cheeks. I can applaud your compassion. Accept my reverence.

ROMNEY

No other help?

YOUNG AURORA

What help? You'd scorn my help as nature has scorned to put her music in my mouth. Do you now ask me for what you say I cannot give?

ROMNEY

I ask for love. For life in fellowship through bitter duties. For wifehood. Will you?

YOUNG AURORA

Am I proved too weak to stand alone yet strong enough to bear such leaners on my shoulder? Incapable of thought yet able to sympathize with such a complicated philosophy? I cannot sing as even blackbirds can but I can love as selflessly as Christ himself? It's always so. Anything does for a wife.

ROMNEY

You translate me ill. If your sex is weak for art it is strong for life and duty.

YOUNG AURORA

What you love, Romney is not a woman but a cause. You want a helpmate, not a mistress. A wife to help your ends, in her no end. Your cause is noble, your aims are excellent. But I do otherwise conceive of love.

ROMNEY

You reject me?

YOUNG AURORA

Sir, you were married long ago. You have a wife you already love, your social theory.

ROMNEY

Was I so wrong then to say bluntly, honestly, *Come, human creature, love and work with me?* Should I have wooed you with, *Lady, thou art wondrous fair and where the graces walk before the muse will follow and turn round and see me or I die of love.*

YOUNG AURORA

You misconceive the question like a man who sees a woman as the complement of his sex only. You forget too much that every creature, female as well as the male stands single in responsible act and thought.

AURORA

As also in birth and death.



YOUNG AURORA

Whoever says to a loyal woman, *Love and work with me*, will get fair answers if the work and love are good for her, the best that she was born for. Women in a softer mood may sometimes only hear the first word, love, and catch up with it any kind of work, just so dear love go with it. I do not blame such women.

AURORA

Earth's fanatics often make heaven's saints.

YOUNG AURORA

But me, your work is not the best for. Nor your love the best. Ah, you force me, sir, to be overbold in speaking of myself. I too have a vocation - work to do - the heavens and earth have set me. And, even if the world were twice as wretched as you represent, my work is as important as any economist's. Unless artists keep open the road between the seen and the unseen, bursting through the best conventions with the best God bids us speak, to prove what lies beyond both speech and imagination. We'll not barter, sir, the beautiful for barley. It takes a soul to move a body. It takes a high-souled man to move the masses, even to a cleaner sty. It takes the ideal to blow an inch inside the dust of the actual and your revolutionaries fail because not poets enough to understand that life develops from within. Perhaps I am worthy, as you say. Perhaps a woman's soul aspires and not creates. Yet we aspire. And if I fail, well, burn me up with everything else that is false. I'll not ask for grace. I who love my art would not wish it lower to suit my stature. You grant that I may love my art. Wasting true love on anything is womanly, past question.

*Romney exits.*

AURORA

I retain every word that was said that day.

YOUNG AURORA

His eyes were fiery points, fixed in my mind, forever after.

AURORA

And yet I know I did not love him, nor he me.

YOUNG AURORA

And what I said is unrepented, as truth is always.

AURORA

Yet, a princely man. He bears down on me though the slanting years, the stronger for the distance.

YOUNG AURORA

My aunt was not pleased with me.

AUNT LEIGH

You turned him down? You have got a fever. You love him. I have watched you when he came and when he went and when we've talked of him. I am not old for nothing. Your mother must have been a pretty thing. Your father threw his inheritance to the wind when he married her. Oh yes, she must have been beautiful to make your father forget his duty. Marry him and claim your Leigh fortune. Romney is a fine man.

*Aurora turns off all the lights and changes the music. She dances a bit, looks at her papers, opens letters, generally does the sort of things one does in one's studio late at night when for all the world we cannot sleep. After some fierce activity, she collapses.*

*Scene 6 Naked*

*(Players)*

*Players enter to change the set from outside to inside aurora's study in london, in the style of Kushner and Larson (Angels in America, Rent): the post-modern emperor is just as naked.*

PLAYER TWO

How do you know if you're feeling lust or love?

PLAYER ONE

Obviously, the sexual revolution was totally lost on you.

PLAYER TWO

What does that have to do with feeling lust or love?

PLAYER ONE

Fuck: Everything. Don't you see it?

PLAYER TWO

Not really.

PLAYER ONE

All around you?

PLAYER TWO

Nope.

PLAYER ONE

What do you notice about a culture that flaunts sexuality as a means of liberation?  
*(PLAYER TWO says nothing)* Ok, our culture sells us shit that's bad for us by teasing our  
lusts.

PLAYER TWO

Boob jobs?

PLAYER ONE

Yeah. Sorta.

PLAYER TWO

Viagra.

PLAYER ONE

Yeah. Adoration of the golden calf. Ignoring the nobility of the natural self. We denigrate everything to the level of appetite, lust.

PLAYER TWO

Buying and selling people.

PLAYER ONE

Exactly: The commodification of love! which can't occur unless love is first diminished to one of its aspects.

PLAYER TWO

Any one of its aspects?

PLAYER ONE

Sure.

PLAYER TWO

Not just love diminished to subcategory lust?

PLAYER ONE

No. Love diminished to subcategory compassion, fellatio, enabling...

PLAYER TWO

Or love diminished to subcategory, no sex at all?.

PLAYER ONE

Yeah, that's really annoying.

PLAYER TWO

Pure love, with no touching. Or pure love with lots of touching?

PLAYER ONE

Exactly. Sure. Fuck, look at what happens to the world when fucking puritans get hold of it! They burned educated, spiritually enlightened women. Terrorizing people out of ever touching skin to skin. Making people criminals when they allow themselves to enjoy necessary pleasures, like dancing.

PLAYER TWO

Diminished to lust is better than diminished to no sex at all.

PLAYER ONE

Don't you remember?

PLAYER TWO

What?

PLAYER ONE

What I was saying in the first place?

PLAYER TWO

No. Not really.

PLAYER ONE

It was hopeful.

PLAYER TWO

No idea.

PLAYER ONE

In the sixties, the cultural revolution had people flaunting love and music, justice, play, joy and freedom of expression...

PLAYER TWO

Championing love, with all its subcategories valued. Yeah, I remember. Sort of. I saw the movie.

PLAYER ONE

Seems like that was a lot of fun, doesn't it? Compared to fucking-now.

PLAYER TWO

No shit, sherlock.

*Scene 7 Sing the Song you Choose*  
(Auroras)

AURORA

I bear on my broken tale.

YOUNG AURORA

Having thrown away my inheritance, for three years I lived and worked.

AURORA

Get leave to work in this world, it's the best you get at all.

YOUNG AURORA

For God in cursing gives us better gifts than men with their benedictions.

AURORA

God says sweat for foreheads.

YOUNG AURORA

Men say crowns.

AURORA

And so we are crowned,

YOUNG AURORA

Yes, gashed

AURORA

By some tormenting circle which snaps with secret spring. Get work.

YOUNG AURORA

And be sure that the work you get is better than what you work to get.

AURORA

Serene and unafraid of solitude I worked the short days out and watched the sun on lurid mornings or monstrous afternoons push out through the fog with its dilated disk to startle the distant roofs and chimney pots with splashes of color.

YOUNG AURORA

Or I saw fog only. The great tawny weltering fog involve the passive city, strangle it alive. And draw it off into the void. Spires, bridges, streets and squares. As if a sponge had wiped out London.

AURORA

Or as if noon and night had clapped together and utterly struck out the intermediate time, undoing themselves in the act.

YOUNG AURORA

Your city poets see such things as not despicable. Mountains of the south when drunk and mad with elemental wines rend the seamless mist and stand up bare, forests chant their anthems and leave you dumb.

AURORA

But sit in London at the day's decline and view the city perish in the mist. Like pharaoh's armaments in the deep Red Sea: the chariots, horsemen, all the host, sucked down and choked to silence.

YOUNG AURORA

Then, surprised by a sudden sense of vision and of tune, you feel as conquerors, though you did not fight.

AURORA

And you sing the song you choose.

YOUNG AURORA

I worked with patience.

AURORA

Which means almost power.

YOUNG AURORA

I did some excellent things indifferently some bad things excellently.

AURORA

Both were praised. The latter loudest. Of course.

YOUNG AURORA

Day and night I worked my rhythmic thought.

AURORA

The rose fell from either cheek, my eyes globed luminous through orbits of blue shadow.  
And my pulse would shudder along the purple veined wrist like a shot bird.

YOUNG AURORA

I worked on. On through the bristling fence of nights and days which hedges time in from  
the eternities.

AURORA

The midnight oil would stink sometimes.

YOUNG AURORA

There came some vulgar needs. I had to live so I could work.

AURORA

And, being poor, I was constrained to work with one hand for the booksellers,

YOUNG AURORA

While working with the other for myself and art.

AURORA

You swim with feet as well as hands or make small way.

YOUNG AURORA

I understood that, in England, no one lives by verse that lives.

AURORA

And, apprehending this, I resolved by prose to make a space to sphere my living verse.

YOUNG AURORA

I wrote for encyclopaedias, magazines and weekly papers. Holding up my name to keep it  
from the mud. Having bread for just so many days, just breathing room for body and  
soul, I stood up straight and worked my veritable work.

AURORA

And as the soul which grows within a child makes the child grow,



YOUNG AURORA

Or as the fiery sap, careering through a tree, dilates the summer foliage out, in green flame - so life, deepening in me, deepened all: the course I took, the work I did.

AURORA

Indeed, academic law, convinced of sin, instructed the critics to cry out on my falling off, regret the passing of the first manner.

YOUNG AURORA

But I felt my heart's life throbbing in my verse to show how it lived. It also, certainly incomplete, disordered, all human in blood, but even its very tumors, still organized by and implying life.

*Scene 8 Lady Waldemar*  
*(Auroras, Lady Waldemar, Romney)*

*A white moon outside the window, a waxing crescent.*

Lady Waldemar

Is this

AURORA

She said

LADY WALDEMAR

The muse?

YOUNG AURORA

No sibyl, even since she fails to guess the cause which taxed you with this visit, Madam.

LADY WALDEMAR

Well, naturally you think I've come here as the lion hunters go to deserts to secure you with a trap for exhibition in my drawing room? Not in the least. Roar softly at me, I am frivolous. And at your mercy. I think you have a cousin, Romney Leigh.

YOUNG AURORA

You bring word from him?

LADY WALDEMAR

I bring word from him. But first: You're not in love with him?

YOUNG AURORA

You're frank in putting questions, Madam. I love my relative relatively, no more.

LADY WALDEMAR

I guessed as much. Yes, I am frank. You stand outside, you artist women. You starve your hearts to make your heads. So run the old traditions of you. I will therefore speak without fear. I love Romney Leigh. My first husband left me young, pretty enough and rich enough. I am mad to love Romney. I have not come here without a struggle. I have so many accomplishments. But, love. We eat of love and do as vile a thing as if we ate

garlic. Then whatever else we eat tastes uniformly acrid til your peach tastes like an onion. Dear, be kind with me. Let us two be friends. I'm a mere woman; the more weak perhaps through being so proud. You're better. As for him, he's best. Indeed he builds his goodness up so high that it topples down to the other side and makes a sort of badness. There. That's the worst I have to say about your cousin. And here's the point we come to -

YOUNG AURORA

Pardon me, Lady Waldemar, but the point's the thing we never come to.

LADY WALDEMAR

Cautic, insolent. I like you. And now, my lioness, help Androcles, for all your roaring. Help me. He'll fall into the pit. And I will lose him. And he will be lost when he is married to a girl of doubtful life.

YOUNG AURORA

Married.

LADY WALDEMAR

Oh. You're moved at last. He has been mad. You must know your cousin. If you do not starve or sin, you're nothing to him.

YOUNG AURORA

You speak too bitterly for the literal truth.

LADY WALDEMAR

Truth is bitter. Had I any chance with Romney, I, Lady Waldemar, who have never committed a felony?

YOUNG AURORA

You jest.

LADY WALDEMAR

As martyr's jest, my dear, upon the axe which kills them. Yesterday, I said to him, *I can scarce admit the cogency of a marriage where you do not love, except the class. Yet marry and throw your name down into the gutter as a fire escape for future generations. I imagine even your kin, Aurora, would conceive this act less sacrifice than fantasy.* At which he grew so pale to the lips that I knew I had touched him.

ROMNEY

Do you know her?

LADY WALDEMAR

Yes, I said, and lied. But truly, we all know you by your books. And so I offered to take you to see this miracle, this seamstress upon whose finger exquisitely pricked by a hundred needles, we are to hang the tie between class and class next week. He promised to put off his marriage long enough for you to meet his betrothed.

YOUNG AURORA

How this serves your ends, I cannot see.

LADY WALDEMAR

Then, despite Aurora, that most radiant morning name, you're as dull as any London afternoon. Be good to me, Aurora, scorn me less, I have kept the iron rule of womanly reserve and wept a week before I came here. Come and see the girl.

YOUNG AURORA

Who tells you he wants a wife to love? He gets a horse to use, not love, I think. There's work for wives as well, and after, straw, when men are liberal. For myself, you err in supposing me able to break this match. I could not. I love love. Truth's no cleaner thing than love. I comprehend a love so fiery hot it burns through veils, will burn through masks and shrivel up treachery. No. Go to the opera: your love is curable.

*Scene 9 Fully Loaded*

*(Players)*

*Players enter to change the set from study to dark alley, in the style of Shephard (True Grit): malevolent, crisp, emotionally loaded.*

PLAYER ONE

Lust can come with contempt, which I find fascinating.

PLAYER TWO

I've been with lovers who absolutely revulsed me. But I could not stop.

PLAYER ONE

That's crazy. I know. But part of me is not revulsed.

PLAYER TWO

Yeah, exactly. And that part is the love and it's stronger than whatever prejudice is hanging us up.

PLAYER ONE

But the prejudice always wins in the end.

PLAYER TWO

But for awhile -

PLAYER ONE

- for a while --

PLAYER TWO

- we were resting in the broad shoulders -

PLAYER ONE

- the oceanic arms -

PLAYER TWO

- of natural affinities.

PLAYER ONE

Affinity.

PLAYER TWO

Affection.

PLAYER ONE

Earthly perfection.

*Scene 10 Marian*

*(Auroras, Marian, Woman in Alley, Two Seamstresses, Man and Woman in Church)*

*Aurora moves like a lion in a cage.*

YOUNG AURORA

Two hours later I stood alone in the square.

WOMAN

What brings you here milady? Is it to find the gentleman who visits his tame pigeon in the eaves? Our cholera will catch you with its cramps and spasms and turn your whiteness dead blue.

YOUNG AURORA

I think I could have walked through hell that day and never flinched. *The dear Christ comfort you, I said. You must be the most miserable to be so cruel.*

*Aurora empties out her pockets. Her change rains down through the light.*

AURORA

Up so high lived Romney's bride to be.

YOUNG AURORA

We talked. She was born upon a ledge, in a hut built up at night to evade the landlord.

AURORA

Marian's father earned his life by random jobs,

YOUNG AURORA

Keeping swine on commons, picking hops or hurrying on the harvest at wet seasons.

AURORA

In between the gaps of such irregular work,

YOUNG AURORA

he drank and slept and cursed his wife because the pence being out she could not buy more drink. At which she turned, the worm, and beat her baby in revenge for her own broken heart.

AURORA

There's not a crime but takes its proper change out still in crime, if once rung on the counter of this world.

YOUNG AURORA

The outcast child learned early to cry low and walk alone. Thus, at three, she would run off and creep through the golden walls of gorse, find some keyhole toward the secrecy of heaven's high blue and nestling down peer out. Oh, not to catch the angels at their games,

AURORA

She had never heard of angels,

YOUNG AURORA

But to gaze she knew not why to see she knew not what -

AURORA

A hungering outward from the barren earth for something like a joy.

YOUNG AURORA

She liked, she said, to dazzle black her sight against the sky. For then it seemed like some grand blind love came down and groped her out and clasped her with a kiss.

AURORA

She learnt God that way. And was beat for it whenever she went home.

YOUNG AURORA

Yet she came again.

AURORA

This great blind love,

YOUNG AURORA

This skyeye father and mother both in one, instructed her and civilized her more than even Sunday school did afterward.

AURORA

To which a kind lady sent her to learn books and sit upon a long bench in a row with other children.

MARIAN

One day,

YOUNG AURORA

Said Marian,

MARIAN

The sun shone that day, my mother had been badly beaten and feeling the bruises sore about her wretched soul, came in suddenly

YOUNG AURORA

And snatching in a sort of breathless rage her daughter's headgear comb, let down the hair upon her like a waterfall.

MARIAN

Then drew me drenched and passive by the arm outside the hut we lived in.

YOUNG AURORA

When the child could clear her blinded face from all that stream of tresses,

MARIAN

There a man stood with eyes that seemed to swallow me alive; body, spirit, hair and all. God free me from my mother,

YOUNG AURORA

She cried and ran.

MARIAN

Famished hounds at a hare,

YOUNG AURORA

The man and her mother ran after her.



AURORA

She heard them yell.

MARIAN

I felt my name like shot from guns.

YOUNG AURORA

Mad fear was running in her feet and killing the ground.

MARIAN

The white roads curled

AURORA

As if she burnt them up.

MARIAN

The green fields melted,

YOUNG AURORA

Trees fell to make room for her.

MARIAN

Then my head grew vexed.

YOUNG AURORA

Trees, fields, turned on her and ran after her.

AURORA

She lost her feet,

MARIAN

Could run no more.

YOUNG AURORA

Yet somehow went as fast.

MARIAN

The horizon, red, so sucked me forward, forward while my heart kept swelling, swelling til it swelled so big it seemed to fill my body then it burst and overflowed the world and swamped the light. And now I am dead and safe,

AURORA

Thought Marian Erle.

YOUNG AURORA

She had dropped and fainted.

AURORA

As the sense returned, she was aware of heavy tumbling motions, creaking wheels.

YOUNG AURORA

A wagoner had found her in a ditch beneath the moon as white as moonshine save for the oozing blood.

AURORA

At first he thought her dead.

YOUNG AURORA

But when he heard her sigh, he raised her up, laid her in his wagon and brought her to the hospital.

AURORA

She stirred.

MARIAN

The place seemed new and strange as death. The white, straight bed with others straight and white, like graves dug side by side at measured lengths and quiet people walking in and out with wonderful low voices and soft steps. And apparitional equal care for each, astonished me with order, silence, law. And when a gentle hand held out a cup, I took it as you do a sacrament, half awed, half melted, not being used indeed to so much love.

AURORA

Oh my God, how sick we must be ere we make men just.

YOUNG AURORA

I think it frets the saints in heaven to see how many desolate creatures on earth have learned the simple dues of fellowship and social comfort in a hospital, as Marian did.

MARIAN

I lay there stunned, half tranced and wished at intervals of growing sense that I might be sicker yet, if sickness made the world so marvelous kind, the air so hushed and all my wake time quiet as sleep.

YOUNG AURORA

She lay and seethed in fever many weeks.

AURORA

Revolted soul and flesh were reconciled and fetched back to the necessary day and daylight duties.

MARIAN

I could creep along the bare rooms and stare out drearily from any narrow window on the street. Then someone said I had to go next week being well enough. *Go next week, next week. Let out into that terrible street alone, among the pushing people. To go where?*

YOUNG AURORA

One day, the last before the dreaded last,

AURORA

A visitor was ushered through the wards.

MARIAN

When he looked, it was as if he spoke. And when he spoke, it was as if he sang.

AURORA

He who came and spoke was Romney Leigh.

YOUNG AURORA

He sent her to a famous seamstress' house, far off in London, there to work and hope.

AURORA

Through the days and through the nights she sewed,

YOUNG AURORA

Struck new thread into her needle's eye, drew her stitch and mused on Romney's face.

SEAMSTRESS ONE

You know the news? Who's dying do you think? Our Lucy.

SEAMSTRESS TWO

I expected it.

SEAMSTRESS ONE

Lucy swooned last night, dropped sudden in the street. The baker took her and laid her by her grandmother in bed. He says he gives her a week.

SEAMSTRESS TWO

Pass the silk. Let's hope he gave her a loaf within reach otherwise she'll starve before she dies.

SEAMSTRESS ONE

Why Marian Erle, you piece of pity, your tears will spoil Lady Waldemar's new dress.

YOUNG AURORA

Marian rose up, went to Lucy's home to nurse her back to life or down to death.

MARIAN

When Lucy slid away so gently, like the light when none can name the moment that it goes though all see when it's gone, a man came in. It was the hour for angels.

AURORA

There stood hers.

YOUNG AURORA

Romney.

AURORA

He had been standing in the room listening to us talking.

YOUNG AURORA

Lady Waldemar has sent me.

ROMNEY

Lady Waldemar is good.

YOUNG AURORA

Here is one who is good. I give you thanks for such a cousin.

ROMNEY

You accept at last a gift from me, Aurora? Without scorn? At last I please you? You cannot please a woman against her will and once I vexed you. Let us not speak of that. For myself, I comprehend your choice.

YOUNG AURORA

You cannot comprehend me.

AURORA

He was a wall of bricks, each feeling boxed in and stuffed and sacked.

YOUNG AURORA

He followed me down the stairs. The night came drizzling downward in dark rain and as we walked, the color of the time, the act, the presence, my hand upon his arm, his voice in my ear and mine to myself seemed unnatural.

AURORA

We talked of modern books and daily papers, marriage schemes, the English climate.

ROMNEY

Was it this cold last year?

YOUNG AURORA

Is London full?

ROMNEY

Is trade competitive?

AURORA

Which way is the wind tonight?

ROMNEY

Has Dickens turned his hinge a pinch too tight upon the great?

YOUNG AURORA

Will the apple die out?

ROMNEY

Are potatoes to grow mythical?

AURORA

We tore up greedily all the silence, all the innocent breathing points.

YOUNG AURORA

As if, like pale conspirators, in haste we tore up papers where our signatures imperiled us to an ugly shame or death.

AURORA

I cannot tell you why it was.

YOUNG AURORA

And then a month passed.

AURORA

Let me tell it at once.

BOTH AURORAS

I have been wrong.

AURORA

We are always wrong when we think too much of what we think or are.

YOUNG AURORA

Though our thoughts be bitter and full of self sacrifice, we're no less selfish. This I say against myself. I had done my duty in the visit I paid Marian. Why did I not tell Romney of Lady Waldemar's designs? Had I any right, with womanly compassion and reserve, to stand aside knowing that she intended to come between them; and hear him call her good?

AURORA

Distrust that word.

YOUNG AURORA

There is none good save God. If he once, in the first creation week, called creatures good,

AURORA

Forever afterward only the devil has done it.

YOUNG AURORA

A good neighbor is fatal sometimes, cuts your morning into mincemeat of the very smallest talk.

AURORA

I have known good wives, chaste or nearly so, and good, good mothers who would use their child to better an intrigue.

YOUNG AURORA

Good friends, very good, who hung around your neck and sucked your breath as cats do to sleeping infants.

AURORA

We have all known good critics who have stamped out a poet's hope.

YOUNG AURORA

Good statesmen who pulled ruin on the state.

AURORA

Good Christians who sat still in easy chairs and damned the general world for standing up.

YOUNG AURORA

Now may the good lord pardon all good men, and women.

AURORA

I should have thought a woman of the world like Lady Waldemar center to herself, who has wheeled on her own pivot half a life in isolated self love and self will as a windmill seen at a distance, radiating its delicate white wings against the sky so soft and soundless, simply beautiful. Seen nearer, what a roar and tear it makes. How it grinds and bruises. If she loves, her love's a readjustment of self love, no more. A need felt of another's use for her own advantage. As a mill wants grain. The fire wants fuel. The wolf wants prey and none of these is more unscrupulous than such a charming woman when she loves. She'll

not be thwarted by an obstacle as trifling as her soul. Much less your soul, sir, she loves you, with passion, to lunacy. She loves you like her diamonds. Almost.

YOUNG AURORA

Well, a month passed so.

AURORA

And the notice came, on such and such a day, the marriage.

YOUNG AURORA

We were bid to meet at Saint James and after contract at the altar pass to eat a marriage feast at Hamstead Heath.

AURORA

Of course people came in uncompelled.

YOUNG AURORA

What a sight.

AURORA

A holiday of misery clogged the streets,

YOUNG AURORA

Oozed into the church in a dark slow stream like blood.

AURORA

The noble ladies stood up in their pews some pale with fear,

YOUNG AURORA

A few red with hate.

AURORA

I've waked and slept through many nights and days since then but to think of that day still will catch my breath like a nightmare.

YOUNG AURORA

We waited for the bride. People stirred, impatient.



AURORA

Romney stood and tried to speak.

YOUNG AURORA

He held a letter in his hand.

AURORA

Silence was in the church.

YOUNG AURORA

I heard a baby sucking in its sleep.

AURORA

Then spoke a man,

MAN

Best look to the food before it all be filched from us like the other fun.

AURORA

Then a woman:

WOMAN

I'm a tender soul. I never beat a child of two and drew blood from him but I cried the next moment. I tell you, I'm tender. I've no stomach ever for beef until I know about the girl that's lost. That's killed mayhaps. Disappear? I ask you, would a girl go off instead of staying to be married? A fine tale from a wicked man. I say he's a wicked man.

YOUNG AURORA

From end to end the church rocked like the sea in a storm and then broke like the earth in an earthquake. Men cried out. Police were crushed. Women swooned. People madly fled or blindly fell. The last sight left me was Romney's terrible, calm face. The last sound,

EVERYONE

Pull him down!

*Aurora takes a ragged piece of folded up paper from her pocket.*

YOUNG AURORA

Here's Marian's letter. He sent the letter to me by our friend, Lord Howe.

*Aurora unfolds the letter, opens it but does not need to read  
it as she knows it by heart.*

MARIAN

Noble friend, be patient with me. Never think me vile who might tomorrow morning be your wife but that once I loved more than your name. Farewell my Romney, let me write it once, my Romney.

*Scene 11 Strike*

*(Players)*

*Players enter to strike the set, in any current style.*

PLAYER ONE

He told me a story about a bunch of people doing a yoga class and he had come to lead the class and they had two hours. Women, men all in this room doing yoga and sweating and like getting to these levels. He said it was unbelievable, it was so sexual but not sexual and everybody had all this feeling together and that's what I think the next revolution needs to be. The industrial and technological revolutions destroyed our communities. We warm ourselves around the fire of Big Business. So we forgot how to love. Now we ask ourselves, "Do I commit to love the way I commit to lust?"

PLAYER TWO

As a society we're becoming more and more isolated as opposed to when we actively had to get together to storytell or to sing around the piano or to go down to the barbershop to find out the news. People were communal cause of necessity. It's the age of information. Everybody can get the information. That's very egalitarian, right?

PLAYER ONE

Ya, but we get our information from the powerful who have centralized the sources of information so that we get all our information from them.

PLAYER TWO

The point for me is that people are becoming more and more enslaved because they don't have to reach out to each other. Rocked in the arms of the machine.

PLAYER ONE

But I think it's an illusion. I think people see all this information and power coming from these power-over centralized, heavily financed interest groups and they feel small and insignificant, powerless. They forget that power is immediately available at all times, right where they are. To me, as a kid, they would talk about revolution, and my naïve reading of it just seemed to be about liking each other. It was like being ok with who we were and liking each other and I still think that's where the revolution is. I think we didn't have that revolution yet.

PLAYER TWO

I think liking each other is born of liking ourselves.

PLAYER ONE

I think it's both. I think you can't like yourself if you're totally isolated, you'd go crazy.  
You need to share love to be able to like yourself.

## Act Two

### *Scene 1 Revelation*

*(Players)*

*Players enter to change the set, packing up the study, in the style of Kanin and Gordon (Adam's Rib): ribald, witty gender revelatory.*

#### PLAYER TWO

I asked my students to make a list of all the roles they play in life. And this one woman said, "I'm a mother, a writer, a dancer, a student, a lover, a democrat; I'm Jewish. I live in a brick house; a grocery shopper, a highway driver..." And she went on and on like that. She must have listed thirty roles she played in her life. Her husband was sitting there, getting smaller and smaller. Finally, when she was done, he asked her, in a trembling, defeated voice, "Wife." She heard him but she didn't understand. She said, "What?" He said, "Aren't you my wife?" I don't mean to be cliché or anything, but you coulda heard a pin drop. Then she says, "It's not a role I play. It is who I am. It is the core, central fact of my existence, as close to who I am as who I am to myself in here," and she touches her heart.

#### PLAYER ONE

And everyone was crying.

#### PLAYER TWO

Oh yeah, everyone.

*Scene 2 Lord Howe's Party  
(Auroras, Sir Blaise, Mr. Smith, Lady Waldemar)*

*Opens in early dawn (gradually increasing) light. The sun coming through partially closed curtains, through the window at a low angle, on a beam, creating a silhouette of the study. Aurora is at her desk answering her correspondence.*

AURORA

Aurora Leigh, be humble. See the earth.

YOUNG AURORA

The body of our soul.

AURORA

The green earth, indubitably human

YOUNG AURORA

Like this flesh and these articulated veins, through which our heart drives blood.

AURORA

There's not a flower of spring that dies but vaunts itself, allied by issue and symbol, by significance and correspondence to that spirit world outside the limits of our space and time whereto we are bound. Let poets give it voice. Critics say that epics died out with Agamemnon and the goat-nursed gods. I don't believe it. Homer's hair turned grey like any plain Miss Smith's. Hector's infant cried. All actual heroes are human beings. And everyone a possible hero. Yes, and every age appears to the souls who live in it, most unheroic. Ours for instance: the poets abound who scorn to touch it with a fingertip. Our age is scum. Spoon off the richer past. We are merely an age of transition.

YOUNG AURORA

That's wrong thinking to my mind.

AURORA

And wrong thoughts make poor poems.

YOUNG AURORA

Exert a double vision:

AURORA

Have eyes to see near things comprehensively and distant things as intimately as if you touched them.

YOUNG AURORA

I distrust the poet who discerns no character or glory in her times.

AURORA

No, if there's room for poets in this world, their soul work is to represent their age, not Charlemagne's.

YOUNG AURORA

This live, throbbing age that brawls, cheats, maddens, calculates, aspires and spends more passion, more heroic heat than King Arthur ever felt for Guinevere.

AURORA

To flinch from modern decadence, to long for togas and picturesque drama is foolish.

YOUNG AURORA

Perhaps Camelot to minstrels seemed as flat as Fleet Street does to our poets.

AURORA

Never flinch but be unscrupulously epic.

YOUNG AURORA

Catch upon the burning lava of a song, the full-veined heaving double-breasted time.

AURORA

So that, when the next age shall come,

YOUNG AURORA

the poets of that time may touch our impress with reverent hand.

AURORA

And say, behold, behold the paps we all have sucked: the bosom seems to beat still.

YOUNG AURORA

Or at least it sets our beating.

AURORA

This is living art,

YOUNG AURORA

Which thus presents and thus records true life.

*The following questions come from the letters that Aurora opens.*

AURORA

What form is best for poems?

YOUNG AURORA

Trust the spirit to make the form, for otherwise we only imprison spirit, and not embody.

AURORA

Five acts to a play?

YOUNG AURORA

And why not fifteen?

AURORA

Why not ten?

YOUNG AURORA

Or seven? What matter for the number of the leaves supposing the tree lives and grows.

AURORA

Exact the literal unities of time and place when it is the essence of passion to ignore both time and place?

YOUNG AURORA

Absurd.



AURORA

Keep up the fire and leave the generous flames to shape themselves.

YOUNG AURORA

Whoever writes good poetry looks just to art. She will not suffer the best critic known to step into her sunshine of free thought and self-absorbed conception and exact an inch-long swerving of the holy lines.

AURORA

Can art for praise or hire still keep its splendour and remain pure art?

YOUNG AURORA

Serfdom. What the poet writes, she writes.

AURORA

Mankind accepts it if it suits and that's success.

YOUNG AURORA

If not, the poem's passed from hand to hand and yet from hand to hand until the unborn snatch it, crying out in pity on their elders being so dull.

AURORA

And that's success too.

YOUNG AURORA

The artist's part is both to be and do. Transfixing with special central power the flat experiences of the common man and turning outward with a sudden wrench, half agony, half exstasy, the thing she feels the inmost, never felt the less because she sings it. Does a torch burn less for burning next to reflectors of blue steel?

AURORA

O sorrowful great gift conferred on poets of a twofold life. When one life has been found enough for pain. We, staggering beneath our burden, support the intolerable strain and stress of the universal and send clearly up, with voices broken by the human sob, our poems to find rhymes among the stars.

YOUNG AURORA

I am sad. I have not seen Romney for two years.

AURORA

They say he's very busy with good works. He has parted Leigh Hall into an almshouse. He made one day an almshouse of his heart.

YOUNG AURORA

It always makes me sad to go to parties. I went tonight among the lights and talkers to Lord Howe's. I like him, he's my friend. The rooms were filled with crinkling silks sweeping about the fine dust of most subtle courtesies. Lady Waldemar is very pretty. her maid must use both hands to twist that coil of tresses. She missed though, a grey hair, a single one, I say it, otherwise the woman looked immortal.

MR. SMITH

Look! There's Lady Waldemar, to the left, in red, whom Romney Leigh, our ablest man is about to marry.

SIR BLAISE

Is Leigh our ablest man? The same, I think, once jilted by a recreant pretty maid adopted from the people? He seems to have plucked a flower from the other side of the social hedge.

MR. SMITH

Mark how she stirs. Just waves her head as if a flower indeed, touched far off by the vain breath of our talk.

SIR BLAISE

A flower, of course. She neither sews nor spins and takes no thought of her garments falling off.

MR. SMITH

If that fairest fair is talked of as the future wife of Leigh, she's talked of too as Leigh's disciple. You may find her name on all his missions and commissions, schools, asylums, hospitals. He had her down with other ladies whom her starry lead persuaded from their spheres to his country place. And there, they say, she has tarried half a week and milked the cows and churned the butter and pressed the curd and said *My sister*, to the lowest drab of all the assembled castaways, worked beside them at the washing tub. Conceive, Sir Blaise, those naked perfect arms, round glittering arms, plunged elbow deep in suds like wild swans hid in lilies all ashake.

LADY WALDEMAR

Miss Leigh, I have a world to speak about your cousin's place in Shropshire where I've been to see his work, our work. You heard I went? You'll like to hear that your last book lies in the schoolroom, judged innocuous for the girls who still care for books. We all must read, you see, before we live, til slowly the ineffable light comes up and, as it deepens, drowns the written word. So said your cousin while we stood and felt a sunset from his favorite beech tree seat. I think he looks well now, has quite got over that unfortunate creature. Ah I know it moved you, tender heart. You took a liking to the wretched girl. Perhaps you thought the marriage suitable? A poet hankers for romance and so on.. As for Romney, it's sure he never loved her. Never. By the way, you have not heard from her? Quite out of sight? Lost in every sense?

YOUNG AURORA

I breathe large at home.

AURORA

We are buried alive in this close world and want more room.

YOUNG AURORA

How she talked to pain me, a woman's spite. You wear steel mail. A woman plucks a delicate needle out as if it were a rose and pricks you carefully beneath your nails, your eyelids, in your nostrils. A beast would roar so tortured but a human creature must not, shall not, no, not for shame. What vexes, after all, is just that such as she with such as I knows how to vex. Sweet heaven, she takes me up as if she had fingered and dogeared me and spelled me by the fireside half a life.

AURORA

And why should I be pained that Romney should marry Lady Waldemar?

YOUNG AURORA

She held her newly blossomed gladness in my face. Clearly Romney wants a wife. So, good.

AURORA

The man's need of woman is greater than the woman's of man.

YOUNG AURORA

And easier served.

AURORA

Where we yearn to lose ourselves and melt like white pearls in another's wine. He seeks to double himself by what he loves and make his drink more costly by our pearls.

YOUNG AURORA

Romney wants a wife. After all, why not?

AURORA

If I could ride with naked soul and make no noise and pay no price, I would have seen thee sooner, my Italy. For I have heard thee crying to me through my life, through the piercing silence of exstatic graves.

YOUNG AURORA

But even a witch these days must melt down gold pieces to anoint her broomstick ere she rides. And poets are ever scant of gold.

AURORA

I wonder if the manuscript of my long poem, sold outright, would fetch enough to buy me shoes to walk there?

YOUNG AURORA

I will sell my father's books. And so be almost rich.

AURORA

Tomorrow, no delay.

*Scene 3 Great Power*

*(Players)*

*Players enter to change the set from london to paris, in the style of Sorkin (West Wing): speed-demon dialogue.*

PLAYER ONE

The humanist progression, from Spinoza to now, passes through these cultural revolutions while the political situation pulls right and left.

PLAYER TWO

How Hegelian of you.

PLAYER ONE

Why, thank you.

PLAYER TWO

But culture simply mimics the politics. People are sheep.

PLAYER ONE

Not so! We have advanced in our conception of what it means to be human.

PLAYER TWO

How the fuck do you explain Hitler and Idi Amin, torture, and shit like that?

PLAYER ONE

Bipolar, obsessive compulsive, control freaks. Drug-addicted, mineral starved, psychotics.

PLAYER TWO

Sometimes, I want to kill you: you piss me off with all that verbiage. Evil is evil. Period.

PLAYER ONE

With great power comes great responsibility.

PLAYER TWO

With great power comes no responsibility AT ALL.

*Scene 4 Paris*

*(Auroras, Distracted Man, Marian, Parisian Lady)*

*The stage is very bare. All that is left is stacked and boxed or covered over. The set has become a series of geometric objects. The light through the window is coming from higher, the stage is getting brighter.*

A

The English have a scornful, insular way of calling the French light.

YOUNG AURORA

Is the bullet light that dashes from the gun-mouth while the eye winks and the heart beats to flatten itself to a wafer on the wall a hundred paces off?

AURORA

Even so direct and sternly undivertible of aim is this French people. All idealists, too absolute and earnest, with them the idea of a knife cuts real flesh.

YOUNG AURORA

I am strong to love this noble France, this poet of the nations who dreams on forever after some ideal good, some equal poise of sex, some un vowed love inviolate, some spontaneous brotherhood, some wealth that leaves none poor and finds none tired, some freedom of the many that respects the wisdom of the few.

AURORA

Heroic dreams. Sublime to dream so,

YOUNG AURORA

Natural to wake.

AURORA

And sad to use such lofty scaffoldings erected for the building of a church, to build instead a brothel or a prison.

YOUNG AURORA

So I mused up and down, up and down the terraced streets, the glittering boulevards, past the white colonnades of fair fantastic Paris.

AURORA

The city who wears trees like plumes, as if man made them, spire and tower as if they had grown by nature tossing up her fountains in the sunshine of the squares

YOUNG AURORA

As if in beauty's game she tossed the dice or blew the silver down-balls of her dreams

AURORA

To sow futurity with seeds of thought and count the passage of the festive hours.

YOUNG AURORA

Here the air thronged with statues

AURORA

Poised upon their columns

YOUNG AURORA

As if to stand a moment were a feat against the blue. What breathing room for a nation that runs fast.

AURORA

Paris has such flowers! But England also... there was a yellow rose by the south window of the little house that Romney gathered in his hand on all my birthdays save that last when I shook the tree too rough, too rough for roses to stay after. I must not linger here. I must on to Italy, my home.

YOUNG AURORA

I walked the day out, musing on life and art and whether after all, a larger metaphysics might not help our physics, a completer poetry adjust our daily life and vulgar wants more fully than -

AURORA

A gentleman, as abstracted as myself, came full against me then resolved the clash in voluble excuses.

DISTRACTED MAN

Madame, your pardon.

AURORA

Obviously some learned member of the academy.

YOUNG AURORA

Then he swerved from me as confounded as if he had heard that Dumas had been called to the academy to teach.

AURORA

Since when was genius found respectable?

YOUNG AURORA

It passes in its place,

AURORA

Which means the seventh floor back or else the hospital.

YOUNG AURORA

Pistols are ingenious things but prudent men,

AURORA

Which academics are,

YOUNG AURORA

Scarce keep them in the cupboard with the prunes.

AURORA

Onward, we play a dreary game of hide and seek. We shape a figure of our fantasy, call nothing something and run after it and lose it and lose ourselves too in the search til clash against us comes a somebody who also has lost something and is lost.

YOUNG AURORA

Academic vs. poet. Man against woman. Against the living, the dead. What face is that?

AURORA

It was a real face. Perhaps a real Marian?



YOUNG AURORA

I ought to write to Romney: Marian's here.

AURORA

Can I write him a half truth? Truly that was Marian's face and just as truly the arms of that same Marian, clasped a child.

YOUNG AURORA

I cannot write to Romney, *Here she is, I saw her in Paris, she's not dead, she's damned.*

AURORA

Stop. I go too fast. I'm cruel like the rest.

YOUNG AURORA

Suppose a neighbor is sick and asked her, *Marian, carry out my child in this spring air.* I punish her for that? I brand her therefore?

AURORA

Tired of hard thoughts I went to wander through the market and make sure that there were still roses in the world.

YOUNG AURORA

I saw her again, asking the price of a branch of mountain gorse.

AURORA

She had been expecting me.

YOUNG AURORA

Had seen me the day before. She led the way and I,

AURORA

As by a narrow plank across devouring waters,

YOUNG AURORA

Followed her. Stepping by her footsteps. Breathing by her breath. And holding her with eyes that would not slip. And so, without a word we walked a mile and so another mile,

AURORA

Without a word.

YOUNG AURORA

I saw her room. Twas scarce larger than a grave, a mouse could find no shelter in it

AURORA

Much less a greater secret.

YOUNG AURORA

Curtainless, the window fixed us with its torturing eye.

AURORA

There he lay upon his back,

YOUNG AURORA

The yearling creature, warm and moist with life. Everything so soft and tender.

AURORA

And love was there.

YOUNG AURORA

She leaned above him, drinking him like wine, in that extremity of love that will pass for agony or rapture.

AURORA

Seeing that love includes the whole of nature.

YOUNG AURORA

Since more can never be than just love.

AURORA

I thought her wicked,

YOUNG AURORA

Unclean, a kidnapper or worse. She faced my accusations,

AURORA

Those I spoke and those I did not.

## MARIAN

He is mine. I am as proud as any mother in the world. I found him. I found him where I found my curse, in the gutter with my shame. What have you to say to that? Those who are happy, who sit safe and high and never speak against my right to suffer, might think me seduced. Do wolves seduce the wandering fawn? I was not ever, as you say, seduced, but simply murdered. There is nothing to do when people are dead. If you are pious, sing a hymn and go. Go by all means. Leave me. Let me rest. I'm dead, I say. And if to save my child from death, the mother in me has survived the rest. That is God's miracle, I'm not less dead for that. I'm nothing more than just a mother. For my child I'm warm and cold and hungry and afraid, and smell the flowers a little and see the sun and speak and am silent. Just for him. I pray you therefore, mistake me not. Do not treat me as if I were alive. And he? How is it with him? Tell me. It was always Lady Waldemar that he loved. No, don't be surprised. I knew. You see, I loved on my knees as others pray. I was his for his uses, not my own, his stool to sit upon, his cup to fill with wine or vinegar, whichever drink might please him. For that was my pleasure. Until Lady Waldemar came.

At first I felt distrust. But still she came. She bade me never tell him that she had come. She liked to love me better than he knew. So very kind she was. And every time she came she brought more light. And her light made my sorrow clearer. Well, I cannot blame her for that. It would be the same if an angel came, whose right should prove my wrong. And every time the lady came she looked more beautiful and spoke more like a flute among green trees. Until at last as one whose heart being sad on hearing lovely music suddenly dissolves in weeping, I broke into tears and asked her counsel. Had I erred in being too happy?

She wrapped me in her generous arms at once and let me dream a moment how it feels to have a real mother and when I looked her face was so bright, too bright not to be a little hard. Though she was kind, Lady Waldemar hurt me. She told me that Romney could not love me. A man like Romney Leigh needs a wife more level to himself. She promised to provide me the means for passage to Australia. Her maid who knew the customs of the world would travel with me. I never liked the woman's face. Or voice. Or ways. It made me blush to look at her. Every time she came my veins ran cold. She spoke too familiarly, touched me. At last I asked Lady Waldemar if such a one could be trusted. She called me silly until I left it. The rest is short. I was obedient. I wrote my letter to Romney. And followed that bad guide.

A woman, hear me, let me make it plain, a woman not a monster, both her breasts made to suckle babes, betrayed me. I, a woman also, young and ignorant, and heavy with grief, my two eyes near washed away with weeping. I was so dull, so blind, only half alive, not

seeing by what road, nor by what ship, not toward what place, nor to what end. You understand? I had the swooning sickness on the shifting ship. No need for her friends to bring their damnable drugged cup and yet they brought it. And waking, I told you, I woke up in a grave. How many weeks, I know not. Many weeks. They let me go when they saw I was mad. They feared my eyes and loosed me, as boys might a mad dog which they had tortured. Up and down I went, through a foreign country crossed everywhere by long thin poplar lines like fingers of some ghastly skeleton hand. Through sunlight and moonlight, pushed out from hell. Some charitable peasants gave me bread and Mary's image to wear around my neck. How heavy it seemed. A woman could be strangled with less weight. I threw it in a ditch to keep it clean. I did not need her protection. Brutal men were stopped short when they saw me. I must have had an awful look.

I lived in a dream until my brain cleared and I found myself on the road one evening. I, Marian Erle, myself alone. Undone. Facing a sunset low upon the flats as if it were the finish of all time. The great red stone upon my grave which angels were too weak to roll away. A miller's wife took me in and spent her pity on me. Made me calm and merely very reasonably sad. She found me a servant's place in Paris. I was quiet as a beaten ass who, having fallen through overloads, stands up to let them charge her with another pack. My Parisian mistress was young and light. She was easy with me, not so much for kindness but because she led such an easy life between her lover and her looking glass, scarce knowing which way she was praised the most. She felt so pretty and so pleased all day she could not take the trouble to be cross. But sometimes as I stopped to tie her shoe, she would tap me softly with her slender foot, still restless with last night's dancing and say,

PARISIAN LADY

Fie, pale face, are you English all pale and silent?

MARIAN

Then came an hour when all went otherwise.

PARISIAN LADY

I think thou mocks't me and my house. Confess, thou will be a mother in a month.

MARIAN

I could not answer her. So that was the meaning then? I had not realized in all my thoughts. Through all the cold numb aching, through all the up-break of the fountains of my heart, the rains had swelled too large. God could make mothers out of victims. Why

not? He overgrows a grave with violets. I would be a mother in a month. I hoped it was not wicked to be glad. I wept and laughed.

PARISIAN WOMAN

Confess! Confess!

MARIAN

What was there to confess? Man's cruelty? This anguish? Or this exstasy? This shame or this glory? She could not take it in. An acorn could sooner take in the sea. I left. The rest is here.

*Scene 5 Wounded Bird*

*(Players)*

*Players enter to change the set from paris to florence, in the style of Kelley and Whedon (Ally McBeal and Buffy the Vampire Slayer): magical realism.*

PLAYER TWO

My wounded bird syndrome. The fact that, you know, I see somebody who I so hurt or lonely or sad or in pain, usually with such low self-esteem that I'm the only person who can save them.

PLAYER ONE

One time I had this great gig and every day I could really see I was helping people and I had so much love for them, it felt huge and I thought: this is it! this is what heaven feels like. This is universal love. Miraculous. But not in one burst of light, a continuity, a continuum of the miraculous, living inside the miraculous. Like what people say heaven is. But here, in the flesh.

*Scene 6 Dear Lady Waldemar Revisited*  
(Auroras, Vincent Carrington, Lady Waldemar)

AURORA

O, Romney, I have your debts to pay. And I'll be just and pay them. My head aches. I cannot see my road along this dark.

YOUNG AURORA

Nor can I creep or grope, as fits the dark, for these foot-catching robes of womanhood. A man might walk a little... but I!

AURORA

I cannot write to him, stop his marriage to Lady Waldemar.

YOUNG AURORA

My letter would be too late.

AURORA

No, I will not let thy hideous secret out to agonize the man I love - I mean, the friend I love.. as friends love. It is strange, to day while Marian told her story, how I listened chiefly to a voice not hers, one that mixed with mine long years ago among the garden trees, and said to me, to me too, *Be my wife, Aurora*. It is strange with what a swell of yearning passion, as a snow of ghosts might beat against the impervious door of heaven, I thought, Now if I had been a woman such as god made women, to save men by love - by just my love I might have saved this man, and made a nobler poem for the world than all I have failed in. But I failed and now he's lost.

YOUNG AURORA

O Romney, my friend.

AURORA

The world's male chivalry has perished but women are knights errant to the last.

YOUNG AURORA

And if Cervantes had been Shakespeare too, he would have made Don Quixote a woman. I wrote a letter to Lady Waldemar. Lady Waldemar, I am very glad I never liked you.

AURORA

You spared me in your turn to like me much.

YOUNG AURORA

Your liking surely had done worse for me than has your loathing, though the last appears sufficiently unscrupulous to hurt.

AURORA

But now you may be Romney's wife.

YOUNG AURORA

You've gambled deep as Lucifer and won the morning star.

AURORA

In that case the noble house of Leigh must henceforth with its good roof, shelter you.

YOUNG AURORA

I cannot speak and burn you up between those rafters so you're safe. You two must grow together til God's great fire.

AURORA

So make the best of time. Hide this letter. Let it speak no more than I shall. How you tricked Marian and set her love digging its own grave within her green hope's pretty garden ground.

YOUNG AURORA

I spare you common curses. Ponder this, if haply you're the wife of Romney Leigh, for which inheritance beyond your birth you sold that poisonous porridge you call your soul.

AURORA

I charge you be his faithful and true wife, keep warm his house and clean his board and when he speaks be quick with your obedience. Grind your paltry wants and low desires to dust beneath his heel though even thus the ground must hurt him. You shall not vex him. You shall not jar him when he's sad nor cross him when he's eager, nor let him see thee too near and unlearn thy sweet seeming. Pay the price of lies by being constrained to lie on still.

YOUNG AURORA

A million more will scarcely damn thee deeper.



AURORA

We'll breathe softly and stir no dangerous embers.

YOUNG AURORA

Fail a point and show our Romney wounded, ill content, tormented in his home, we open mouth and such a noise will follow, the last trumpet will scarcely seem more dreadful, even to you.

AURORA

Romney will push you forth, all other men declaring it well done while women, even the worst, your like, will draw their skirts back to brush you in the street. Then I wrote another letter.

YOUNG AURORA

Dear Lord Howe, Marian lives, is found and will find a home with me.

AURORA

I found a house in Florence on the hills of Bellosguardo. It's a tower of observation over that valley of Arno, holding as a hand the outspread city, straight toward the setting sun, the mountains which sunrise fills as full as crystal cups turned red to the brim because their wine is red. : No sun could die nor yet be born unseen by dwellers of my villa. Morn and eve were magnified before us in the pure illimitable space and pause of sky. Intense as angel garments blanched with God, less blue than radiant.

YOUNG AURORA

A letter came from Vincent Carrington. The painter who used to walk with us in the green.

VINCENT

My dear Aurora, you've been as silent as a poet should when any other is sure to speak. Meantime your book is as eloquent as if you were not dumb. Even common critics ordinarily deaf and loath to seem deaf, pronounce for once aright. You'd think they really heard. And so they do. We think here you have written a good book, and you a woman. I read your book and loved it. Will you love my wife too? Here is my secret I might keep more but I yield it up because I know you'll write the sooner for it. Are you put to wonder by my marriage like poor Leigh? When the fever took him first they tell me that Lady Waldemar mixed drinks and counted grains like any salaried nurse, excepting that she wept also.

AURORA

This room stifles. Better burn than choke. Best have air. Air. Although it come with fire. Throw open the blinds and window to the noon and take a blister on my brow instead of this dead weight. Insufferable crickets, sick and hoarse with rapture of the summer heat, sing like poets til your hearts break, sing.

YOUNG AURORA

Books succeed and lives fail.

AURORA

Do I feel it so at last?

YOUNG AURORA

Hush, Aurora Leigh, : learn to reverence, even this poor myself. The book has some truth in it. And truth outlives pain as the soul does life.

AURORA

I have written truth and I a woman,

YOUNG AURORA

Feebly, partially, inapty in presentation Romney will add, because a woman.

AURORA

The truth in my book is the truth which draws through all things upwards,

YOUNG AURORA

That a two-fold world must go to a perfect cosmos,

AURORA

Natural things and spiritual. She who separates the natural and the spiritual in art,

YOUNG AURORA

In morals or in the social drift,

AURORA

Tears up the bond of nature and brings death.

YOUNG AURORA

Paints futile pictures.

AURORA

Writes unreal verse.

YOUNG AURORA

Leads vulgar days.

AURORA

Deals ignorantly with men.

YOUNG AURORA

Is wrong, in short, at all points.

AURORA

We divided the apple of life and cut it through the pips. Without the spiritual, observe, the natural's impossible, no form, no motion. Without the sensuous, spiritual is inappreciable, no beauty or power.

YOUNG AURORA

Art is the witness of what is behind this show. If this world were all, then imitation would be all in art.

AURORA

We stand here, genuine artists, witnessing for God's complete undivided work. That every natural flower which grows on earth implies a flower on the spiritual side, substantial, archetypal, all aglow, with blossoming causes. Thus is art self-magnified in magnifying a truth which, if fully recognized, would change the world and shift its morals. If a man could feel not one day in the artist's exstasy but every day, feast, fast or working day, the spiritual significance burn through the hieroglyphic of material shows, henceforward he would paint the globe with wings and reverence fish and fowl, the bull, the tree and even his very body as a man which now he counts so vile that all the towns use their daughters on summer nights

YOUNG AURORA

When God is sad in heaven to think what goes on in his recreant world he made quite other

AURORA

While that moon he made to shine at love's first covenant, shines still, convictive as a marriage ring before adulterous eyes.

YOUNG AURORA

Well my father was an Englishman.

AURORA

My mother's blood in me is not so strong that I could bear the stress of this Tuscan noon and keep my wits.

*Lights go to a bright white out.*

*Scene 7 Labors of Love*

*(Players)*

*Players enter to change the set from day to night, in the styles of Martin and Myers (All of Me and Wayne's World): ridiculous and brainy.*

PLAYER TWO

Marx's thing about how we labor defining, creating who we are. I was trying to talk about revision and how important it is for a writer and then I said, "You know, it's labor." And she said, "I don't like that word. I don't like to think about my creativity that way." And I lost it. And maybe it's because I grew up as a labor Zionist and I think the only thing worth having is work and labor and that's what makes things valuable.

PLAYER ONE

Labors of love.

PLAYER TWO

What's so wrong about calling it labor? She made it sound so dirty and disgusting.

PLAYER ONE

It has those associations, connotations. It's menial.

PLAYER TWO

Childbirth?

PLAYER ONE

Well, that's not menial exactly but no one wants to do it and it's kind of messy and dirty in a way and definitely undervalued.

PLAYER TWO

So menials...

PLAYER ONE

... deal with the dirt, the blood, the spilled oil, the stuff no one wants to deal with... butchers, soldiers, nannies...

PLAYER TWO

And what artists do, isn't work, isn't labor because it's not dirty or bloody?

PLAYER ONE

If you can't work, then you can't love either. That woman's gonna portray herself as a fixed entity that has to be loved, or bartered for a better lifestyle and traded up, or down

but she won't enter the field, really experience love because she won't do the work of love. The transformation from the inside. No one wants that cuz it's too disturbing, too out of control, everyone would be late for work and progress would end. Which is the critical labor for survival? The labor of love or the labor for power?

PLAYER TWO

The labor of love.

*Scene 8 New Moon*  
(Auroras, Romney, Marian, Lady Waldemar)

*A new moon.*

YOUNG AURORA

One evening as I sat alone on the terrace of my tower. A book upon my knee to counterfeit reading. The heavens were making room to hold the night.

AURORA

The sevenfold heavens unfolding all their gates to let the stars out slowly, gradually the purple and transparent shadows had filled up the whole valley to the brim and flooded all the city. A drowned city in some enchanted sea, cut off from nature, drawing those who gaze with passionate desire to leap and plunge and find a sea king with a voice of waves and treacherous soft eyes and slippery locks you cannot kiss but you shall bring away his salt upon your lips.

YOUNG AURORA

The duomo bells strike ten.

AURORA

Methinks I have plunged. I see it all so clear.

YOUNG AURORA

I felt him rather than beheld him.

AURORA

And oh my heart,

YOUNG AURORA

My sea king,

AURORA

In my ears the sound of waters.

YOUNG AURORA

Up I rose as if he were my king indeed.

AURORA

Have you brought Lady Waldemar with you?

ROMNEY

I brought a letter from her.

LADY WALDEMAR

Aurora Leigh, I prayed your cousin take you this. He says he'll do it. After years of love, or what is called so, when a woman frets and fools upon one string of a man's name and fingers it forever til it breaks, he may perhaps do for her such a thing. And she accept it without detriment. Although she does not love him anymore. Nor you, I do not love you, muse, who shall repent your most ungracious letter. You've wronged me foully. Are you made so ill, you woman, to impute such ill to me? We both had mothers. Lay in their bosoms once. And, after all, I thank you, Aurora, for proving to me that there are things I would not do, not for my life nor for him. Though some things I have somewhat overdone. For instance, when I went to see a Goddess one morning on Olympus with a step that shook the thunder from a certain cloud. Committing myself vilely. Could I think the muse I pulled my heart out from my breast to soften had herself a sort of heart and loved my mortal? He at least loved her. I heard him say so. It was my recompense when watching by his bedside for fourteen days,

ROMNEY & LADY WALDEMAR

Is it thou? Breathe closer, sweetest mouth.

LADY WALDEMAR

And then, when he was able,

ROMNEY & LADY WALDEMAR

I have loved her well. Although she could not love me.

LADY WALDEMAR

Say instead, I answered, she does love you.

ROMNEY

No, no. No she loves me not. Aurora does better. Bring her book and read it softly.



## LADY WALDEMAR

So I read your book, Aurora. For an hour that day, I kept its pauses and marked its emphasis. My voice impaled upon its hooks of rhyme. I read on calmly. Calmly shut it up, observing, There's some merit in the book and yet the merit in it is thrown away as chances still with women if we write or write not. *Goodbye, Mister Leigh, you'll find another reader next time.* A woman who does better than to love, I hate. She will do nothing very well. Male poets are preferable, tiring less and teaching more. I triumphed over both of you and left. When I saw him afterward, I had read your shameful letter and my heart. He came with health recovered, strong, though pale. Lord Howe and he. A courteous pair. I told them, as I tell you now, that I took some trouble for his sake because I knew he did not love the girl, to spoil my hands with working in the stream of that poor babbling nature til she went, consigned to one I trusted, my own maid, who once had lived full five months in my house, dressed hair superbly, with a lavish purse to carry to Australia where she had left a husband she said. If the creature lied, the mission failed, we all do fail and lie more or less and I'm sorry which is all that is expected of us when we fail the most and go to church to own it.

What I meant was just the best for him and me and her. Yes, best even for Marian. I am sorry for it. Very sorry. Poor child. I would have mended it with gold but he nipped the bud of such a thought with that cold Leigh look which I fancied once and broke in, henceforth she would be called his wife. His wife required no help from me. He was bound to Florence to resume this broken bond. I asked him to carry a letter from me to you. Yes, he said, if such a letter were prepared in time. He's just. He'll wash his hands in blood to keep them clean. And so cold, courteous, he bowed. We parted. Parted. Face no more. Voice no more. Love no more. Wiped wholly out. Like some scholar's scrawl on heart and slate. Spit on and wiped out utterly. I have been too human. Have we business in our rank with blood in the veins? I will henceforth have none. Not even to keep the color at my lip. A rose is pink and pretty without blood. Why not a woman? When we've played in vain the game to adore, we have resources still and can play on at leisure being adored.

I wish you joy, Miss Leigh. You've made a happy marriage for Romney and Marian. You need not wish me joy. I have so much. Observe, Aurora Leigh - your eyes are the same as his, but for you I might have won his love, and to you I have shown my naked heart for which three things I hate, hate, hate you. Ah. Suppose a fourth: I cannot choose but think that with him I were more virtuous than you without him. So I hate you from this gulf and hollow of my soul which opens out to what, except for you, had been my heaven and is instead a place to curse by - love.

AURORA

We sat in stillness.

ROMNEY

Is Marian here?

AURORA

Yes.

ROMNEY

Is she well?

AURORA

Yes.

YOUNG AURORA

And there she was. Marian Erle. And he, so very gentle, asking her to marry him. And she so very kind, spoke to him of her love, of her child, of her life, of her self. And I watched and I listened. Scarce knowing my own feelings. Scarce daring to breathe.

MARIAN

Romney, I love your work. I will gladly do your work. I do not want your hand. I do not love you.

YOUNG AURORA

And then she disappeared back to her sleeping angel.

AURORA

I spoke to him of the wonder of a summer's night, of the beauty of the stars.

YOUNG AURORA

I asked him to wish with me upon a shooting star.

ROMNEY

I have read your book. It rests in my heart. It lives in me. Wakes and dreams in me.

AURORA

I am thinking of a far off June when you and I discoursed on life and art, with both untried. I was thinking how it was morning then and now it is night. If I had known that

morning in the dew that you would say such words to me at the close of many years when speaking of a book of mine, it would have pleased me.

#### ROMNEY

This night is softer than an English day. I was heavy then and stupid and distracted with the cries of tortured prisoners in the polished brass of a phalarian bull society, which though it seems to bellow bravely like ten bulls if you listen, moans and cries despairingly, its victims tossed and gored and trampled by the hooves of other victims. I heard the cries too close. I could not hear the angels lift a fold of rustling air. I could not hear what they said to help me. I saw the world as one great famishing carnivorous mouth. A huge deserted callow black bird thing with a piteous open beak that hurt my heart til down upon the filthy ground I dropped and tore the violets to get the worms. How dark it was that morning in the sun. Oh I recollect the sound. And how you lifted your small hand and how your white dress and your burnished curls went greatening around you in the still blue air as if an inspiration from within had blown them all out when you spoke the words,

#### ROMNEY & YOUNG AURORA

It takes a soul to move a body. It takes a high-souled man to move the masses, even to a cleaner sty. It takes the ideal to blow an inch inside the dust of the actual and your revolutionaries fail because not poets enough to understand that life develops from within.

#### ROMNEY

I yield; you have conquered.

#### AURORA

Softly sir, I had a friend once I held in reverence. If he strained too wide it was not to take honor but to give help. The gesture was heroic. Pray you then, for my sake, use less bitterness when speaking of my friend. I have failed too. You have read my book but not my heart. For you recollect my heart is writ in Sanskrit which you bungle at. I've surely failed, I know, if failure means to look back sadly on work gladly done. I can remember a friend's words as well as you can, sir. Well, no matter - I say so much to keep you from saying more. I am not so high that I can bear to have you at my foot. That June day, too deeply sunk in craterous sunsets now for you or me to dig it up alive, I hold that if I, that day, had shown a gentler spirit, less arrogance, it would not have hurt me. I think, you see, more humbly of myself than when I crowned myself with ivy. Yes, laugh, sir, I'll laugh with you. Pray do laugh. I've had so many birthdays since that day, I've learned to prize mirth's opportunities which come too seldom. Look, I was right upon the whole that

birthday morning. It is impossible to get at men excepting through their souls however open their carnivorous jaws. And poets get directlier at the soul than any of your economists. For which you must not overlook the poet's work when scheming for the world's necessities. We both were wrong that day.

ROMNEY

You have written poems sweet which moved me in secret as the sap is moved in still March branches signless as a stone. You have shown me truths that help me. Truths set within my reach by means of you, presented by your voice and verse the way to take them clearest. Poet, doubt yourself but never doubt that you're a poet to me.

AURORA

I wish that you could see me bare to the soul. I love you.

*Romney and Aurora kiss.*

YOUNG AURORA

Art is much but love is more. Art symbolizes heaven

AURORA

- but love is life and makes heaven.

*White out to sudden black.*

*Epilogue Good Spirits*

*(Players)*

*Players enter to break down the set, in the style of Reza  
(Art): extremely philosophical.*

PLAYER TWO

Intelligent conversation really turns me on.

PLAYER ONE

Me too.

PLAYER TWO

I'm really feeling very sexual right now.

PLAYER ONE

Well, it was a love story.

PLAYER TWO

You know, it's weird, but when I like myself, I feel sexy.

PLAYER ONE

Me too. It's not sexy when people put you down.

PLAYER TWO

Nah. I don't like that.

PLAYER ONE

Negative arousal.

PLAYER TWO

The dry ripping of souls racing to crash into each other.

PLAYER ONE

I prefer the bursting forth of cascades of energy.

PLAYER TWO

Joy.

PLAYER ONE

Life.

PLAYER TWO

People want to be loved for who they are.

PLAYER ONE

Then they should stop pretending to be something they're not.

PLAYER TWO

I remember the Milosz poem.

PLAYER ONE

Go ahead.

PLAYER TWO

**Ars Poetica?** I have always aspired to a more spacious form that would be free from the claims of poetry or prose and would let us understand each other without exposing the author or reader to sublime agonies.

In the very essence of poetry there is something indecent: a thing is brought forth which we didn't know we had in us, so we blink our eyes, as if a tiger had sprung out and stood in the light, lashing his tail.

That's why poetry is rightly said to be dictated by demons, ...It's hard to guess where that pride of poets comes from, when so often we're put to shame by the exposure of our frailties.

What reasonable man would like to live in a city of demons, who ... speak in many tongues, and, not satisfied with stealing the poet's lips or hand, work at changing his destiny for their convenience?

It's true that what is morbid is highly valued today, so you may think that I'm only joking or that I've devised just one more way of praising Art with irony.

There was a time when wise books were read  
To help us bear our pain and misery.  
[Now we take pills to comfort ourselves]

Yet the world is different from what it seems to be  
and we are other than how we see ourselves in our ravings.  
People preserve silent integrity  
earn the respect of their relatives and neighbors.

The purpose of poetry is to remind us  
how difficult it is to remain just one person,  
for our house is open, there are no keys in the doors,  
invisible guests come in and out at will.

What I'm saying here is not, I agree, poetry,

as poems should be written rarely and reluctantly,  
under unbearable duress and only with the hope  
that good spirits, not evil ones, choose us for their instrument.

**Czesław Miłosz**

FIN

England's poet laureates (no Browning among them!)

Edmund Spenser	1591–1599
Samuel Daniel	1599–1619
Ben Jonson	1619–1637
William Davenant	1638–1668
John Dryden	1668–1689
Thomas Shadwell	1689–1692
Nahum Tate	1692–1715
Nicholas Rowe	1715–1718
Laurence Eusden	1718–1730
Colley Cibber	1730–1757
William Whitehead	1757–1785
Thomas Warton	1785–1790
Henry James Pye	1790–1813
Robert Southey	1813–1843
William Wordsworth	1843–1850
Alfred Lord Tennyson	1850–1892
Alfred Austin	1896–1913
Robert Bridges	1913–1930
John Masefield	1930–1967
Cecil Day-Lewis	1967–1972
Sir John Betjeman	1972–1984
Ted Hughes	1984–1998
Andrew Motion	1999-

*article which appeared in the 1874 Cornhill Magazine, pp. 471-90*

*It was taken for this press release from the Victorian Web on 4/23/04*

<http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/ebb/cornhill.html>

[Elizabeth Barrett Browning] has demonstrated what emotional poetry really means...and it cannot be said, either, that she has altogether come short in the matter of design -- the design which stamps the greatest poets. ...Her history, sparse as it is in facts as yet given to the world, is one of intense interest. It is well known how that existence with her was almost one long round of continuous suffering... Her own sufferings could never daunt her in the pursuit of learning, and accordingly we find that as a scholar she was distinguished for the ripest erudition.

...The human heart first, and Nature afterwards, were the teachers at whose feet our poet learned the deep lessons she subsequently transmitted to her species. By these were fostered in her a tenderness which breathes through all her writings, and whose spirit is mirrored therein as the blue sky mirrors itself upon the bosom of the deep.

### **Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Life**

Elizabeth Barrett Browning was born in London, in the year 1809...At a very early age she had written much that was worthy ... Miss Mitford has described her as a "slight, delicate figure, with a shower of dark curls falling on



each side of a most expressive face, large tender eyes, richly fringed by dark eye-lashes, and a smile like a sunbeam." [473/474] She possessed a grace and delicacy which almost defied representation.

With so perfect a mental and spiritual organization it was not given, to her to be equally blessed in the physical. Always frail... The extremest care preserved her life, though the incident was succeeded by a long period of weakness and suffering... For seven long years this period of seclusion lasted; but during that time Miss Barrett devoured all the books she could bring within her reach, and cultivated the art which was afterwards to bring her immortality.

In 1846, that is, when she was in her thirty-seventh year, came the principal event of her life...her marriage to Robert Browning. He bore her away to Italy, where softer skies brought back that health which had so long forsaken her in her native land! The union was most felicitous... [Elizabeth Barrett] Browning died in Florence in 1861...

One beneficial result of the comparative seclusion of Mrs. Browning's life was the habit of introspection which it induced, and which, fortunately for posterity, led to the production of some of the finest subjective poetry extant...

### **Aurora Leigh**

From her earliest years ... Mrs. Browning appears to have had the passion for books -- a passion which is referred to more than once in **Aurora Leigh**... How must her fragile frame have thrilled when, in the course of her reading, as she says --

Because the time was ripe,  
I chanced upon the poets.

[**Aurora Leigh**] is a poem which we could imagine Shakespeare dropping a tear over for its humanity... Were we not amazed with the beauty and fulness of its poetry, we should be struck with its philosophy...

Get leave to work  
In this world --'tis the best you get at all  
For God, in cursing, gives us better gifts  
Than men in benediction. God says "Sweat  
For foreheads," men say "crowns," and so we are crowned,  
Ay, gashed by some tormenting circle of steel  
Which snaps with a secret spring.  
Get work, get work;  
Be sure 'tis better than what you work to get.

[In **Aurora Leigh**] the author's views on Art are set forth with some fulness. Art, ...[488/489] ... notwithstanding all the darkness which has been cast around it by much speaking, means (if we are bound to describe it as concisely as possible) the closest and most perfect realization of the various forms of Truth which it is in the power of man to attain. Some such idea as this certainly possessed the mind of Mrs. Browning; and it was her opinion that that was real art which assisted in any degree to lead back the soul to contemplate God, the supreme Artist of the universe. Yet Art... was not the highest, the ultimate--

Art is much, but Love is more!  
Art, my Art, thou'rt much, but Love is more!  
Art symbolises heaven, but Love is God  
And makes heaven.

...In this poem we have a vantage ground from which we survey the panorama of human life, illustrated by the sun of genius. To attempt to extract its beauties would be futile; it is a garden in which every flower of sweetness blooms. Its aroma is amongst the most fragrant in literature...

### **Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Stature as a Poet**

A dispassionate examination of the poems of Elizabeth Barrett Browning can, we maintain, only lead to this result -- that she is the equal of any poet of our time in genius...As long as one human heart throbs for another she will be held in high esteem. Her poetry is that which refines, chastens, and elevates. We could think that with herself, as with one of her characters, "some grand blind Love came down, and groped her, clasped her with a kiss; she learnt God that way."...

G. B. S