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Erotics and Poetics in
the Poetry of
Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Robert Browning:
The Construction of the
Poetic and Amorous Subject

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A Thesis
in
The Department
of
English

Presented in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements'
for the Degree of Master of Arts at
Concordia University
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

February 1995

c. Luba Szkambara, 1995

ABSTRACT

Erotics and Poetics in the Poetry
of Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Robert Browning:
The Construction of the Poetic and Amorous Subject

Luba Szkambara

This study is an exploration of the inter-relationships between the discourses of poetics and erotics in selected writings of Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Robert Browning, with a particular focus on the mutual articulation of gender and genre. The Brownings' courtship correspondence is read as an epistolary fiction in order to investigate the poets' negotiation of multiple subject positions in the articulation of their respective poetic and erotic identities. Similar questions are addressed in the sections of the thesis dealing with the construction of the amorous and poetic subject in the poetry of the Brownings. Elizabeth Barrett Browning attempts to reconcile amorous and poetic subjectivity for women, while Robert Browning tends to split the amorous and poetic subject in his poetry in order to contain the amorous within the private sphere.

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This thesis looks at the inter-relationships between the discourses of poetics and erotics in selected writings by Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Robert Browning (hereafter EBB and RB), with a particular focus on the mutual articulation of gender and genre. Poetics, as it is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary, is "the branch of knowledge that deals with the techniques of poetry". I would like to propose erotics as a term referring to a branch of knowledge that deals specifically with the techniques employed in amorous writings. The works central to this thesis are: *The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Barrett: 1845-1846*, EBB's *Sonnets from the Portuguese* and a selection of earlier poetry by EBB and RB, RB's *Men and Women* and EBB's *Aurora Leigh*. The study focuses on the writings produced during the overlapping period of the two poets' lives, which terminated in 1861 with EBB's death. Poetry which pre-dates EBB and RB's 1845-46 correspondence is also considered, since much of it is central to their discussions in the letters, making it relevant to an exploration of the poets' respective self-representations.

The correspondence is considered in this thesis as creating a paradigmatic scene of writing and desiring, making it an important starting point for the exploration of poetics and erotics in the poetry of the Brownings. The dialogic character of the epistolary exchange allows the poets to alternate between the roles of writer and reader, and move back and forth between the positions of poet and critic, lover and beloved. EBB's and RB's preoccupations with different modes of poetic expression,

articulated by both poets throughout the correspondence, mark the intersection of gender and genre concerns. I explore the importance of the choice of genre in relation to how the construction of the poetic subject is foregrounded by exploring EBB's appropriation of the traditionally male forms of the love sonnet and the epic to express the particular concerns of a woman and a poet, and by studying RB's development of the dramatic monologue and his innovative use of the conventions of the lyric and the romance in relation to the articulation of a male poetic and amorous subjectivity.

Despite the existing wealth of Browning scholarship, few critics, with the exception of James McNally and Nina Auerbach, have embarked on a comparative study of the Brownings' work. McNally explores traces of EBB's 1856 epic *Aurora Leigh* in Browning's *The Ring and the Book* (1869), while Auerbach contends that these traces are in fact misappropriations, distortions of EBB's central poetic concerns. These studies are concerned with RB's retrospective interpretation of his relationship to EBB and her work as a poet. They do not, however, investigate work produced by the two poets during the course of their courtship and marriage, and therefore do not attempt to explore the influence and impact of EBB and RB's relationship on their work.

The thesis is divided into three chapters. The first focuses on the courtship correspondence, the second on the constitution of the amorous subject in selected poetry by EBB and RB, and the third on the construction of a gendered subjectivity

in the poets' work.

CHAPTER I: The Correspondence

This chapter discusses the courtship correspondence of Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning.

A compelling romantic narrative certainly does unfold through EBB and RB's letters. In Daniel Karlin's *The Courtship of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett*, the only scholarly work dealing specifically with the courtship correspondence, Karlin successfully uses the letters to dispel the myths surrounding the Brownings' courtship and finds echoes of the letters in the poets' later work. However, by failing to address the correspondence as a literary and erotic dialogue, Karlin overlooks issues of subjectivity and gender.

In order to develop an understanding of this initially private correspondence as a co-authored literary production, it is necessary to approach the correspondence not simply as a biographical document, but as a literary epistolary co-production, with the recognition of both its expressive and its critical content. Epistolary fiction, as Janet Gurkin Altman points out in her study *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form*, is laden with paradox and contradiction. The courtship correspondence is no exception to this rule. EBB and RB use the conventions of the letter form to strengthen the impact of their epistolary voices. EBB contends that the letter form brings her closer to RB as it brings him her writing, while RB often laments the insurmountable distance of time and space underlined by epistolary exchange. Altman's elaboration of the

conventions of the epistolary genre is central to the discussion of the letters.

The dialogic nature of the letters allows them to serve as a forum for the two poets' thoughts -- a workshop where ideas are put forth and responded to. The letters are both expository and responsive. The two poets discuss their positions on poetry and love and offer their reflections on and reactions to each other's ideas. The letter form allows both EBB and RB to comment on one another's poetic and epistolary voices, and question one another's opinions. As both en-coders and de-coders of poetic and amorous discourses, the two poets are seen negotiating multiple subject positions constructed to accommodate their respective self-representations as both lovers and beloveds, poets and critics.

CHAPTER TWO: The Amorous Subject

The second section of this project focuses particularly on the construction of the amorous subject in selected writings of the Brownings.

EBB's poetic development, leading up to the *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, starts a transition from her more traditional representation of female passivity to a revisionary handling of the lyric form. Both "Bertha in the Lane" and "Caterina to Cameons" present women who are dependent on their positions as objects of desire to affirm their worth. Neither Bertha nor Caterina escapes what Sandra Lee Bartky would define as a position of feminine masochism.

In the *Sonnets from the Portuguese* EBB uses the traditionally male form of the love sonnet in order to document her courtship with Robert Browning. However, in doing so, EBB revises the traditionally male poetic subject position to allow for a

woman's poetic and amorous voice (Mermin, Stephenson). By positioning the woman in the role of lover in the sonnet sequence, EBB must speak from outside the conventions of amorous expression, thus taking a revisionary stance vis a vis the genre. EBB's reassessment of the terms defining the poetic and erotic subject in order to inhabit this position as a woman entails a simultaneous refashioning of the position of the object of desire, and consequently a renegotiation of the romantic paradigm which reinforces the notion of feminine masochism.

This configuration is further complicated as the addressee/love object is also a poet and cannot be granted a voice of his own without potentially jeopardizing the poetic power of the speaker. EBB's anticipation of the beloved's reflections on her practice as poet, on the manner in which she expresses her love, positions him as critic, introducing a tension into the process of writing. The communication of feelings through the writing becomes secondary to their inscription, making an erotic object of the writing itself, which comes to stand in for the lover.

Just as it is necessary to take into account that Barrett Browning constructs a position from which she can speak of love and desire as both a woman and a poet, it is also necessary to explore how a poetic male subject is constituted in and through amorous discourse. RB, as a poet, also uses the discourse of love and positions himself in relation to it as a poet and a man. *Pauline*, Browning's first published work, is traditionally read for the attitudes it explores regarding the poetic legacy left to RB by Shelley and not for its amorous content. RB's poetic theory and his experiments with genre which led him away from the work of Shelley, his primary poetic influence,

toward his own poetic innovations, have been well documented (Collins, Hair). However, this early poem not only foreshadows generic transformations to occur in Browning's later work, but deals specifically with the conjunction of the poetic and amorous. The speaker's confession to his beloved Pauline expresses the conflict he feels when faced with the choice between the security and stability love represents and the freedom necessary for his poetic aspirations. There is no attempt made to reconcile romantic love with poetic aspiration. Instead, Pauline, as representative of the containment of love, is positioned in direct opposition to the impulse toward freedom, represented by Shelley.

In "The Flight of the Duchess" and "My Last Duchess" Browning presents two different stories of love. Here, the conscious splitting of poetic and erotic subject positions creates a tension which works to contain the subjectivity constituted through the amorous discourse. Jessica Benjamin's work which develops the notion of intersubjectivity as an alternative to subject-object relations, allows for an exploration of the poetic and amorous subject as it is articulated by RB. Viewed from this perspective, the constraints of a traditional understanding of gender roles become evident in RB's construction of the poetic and amorous subject in his poetry and are symptomatic of tensions inherent in the articulation of the male subject through amorous discourse.

CHAPTER THREE: The Gendered Artist

This section focuses on the two poets' self-awareness as artists in order to establish the role gender plays in the construction of poetic subjectivity. In EBB's

poetry the work of gender ideology is explicitly addressed, as she is directly concerned with reconciling poetic and erotic life for the female subject. The work of ideology, although equally active in the construction of male identity, is less visible due to the successful naturalization of the male subject as universal. Thus, for RB the question of poetic subjectivity is not problematized along gender lines. The manifestations of the investment of ideology in male gender identity must be deconstructed in order to identify the terms of male artistic identity.

Aurora Leigh presents a woman who is a poet attempting to reconcile the two roles which had been traditionally considered mutually exclusive. Thus in this epic poem the concerns of the poetic subject and the amorous subject are fused, and problematized, because the subjectivity is female. Feminist critics of nineteenth century poetry have investigated the constitution of a gendered subjectivity and the intersection of gender and genre in EBB's work. Both Dorothy Mermin and Helen Cooper have pointed out that *Aurora Leigh* transgresses genre boundaries between poetry and fiction. This is mirrored in Aurora's challenge to gender boundaries in her attempt to create a place for herself as "hero" and subject of her own quest narrative.

In the case of Robert Browning's *Men and Women*, the concerns of the artist and the lover/beloved are dealt with, for the most part, in separate poems, coming together perhaps most obviously in "Andrea del Sarto," "Fra Lippo Lippi" and "One Word More," the final poem in the collection, which is addressed to EBB. RB's use of the dramatic monologue and the resulting development of a fragmented poetic subjectivity in reaction to the unified subject of Romantic poetry creates a conflict in

his work, which stems from the desire to speak from a unified self, obstructed by an awareness of the interactional and fragmentary nature of speech (Martin). Though the work of Browning scholars is fundamental to the understanding of the speaking subject in RB's poetry, a central concern of this thesis is the investigation of poetic and amorous subjectivity in RB's work with a particular emphasis on the role gender plays in its construction, an element which is not often foregrounded by Browning scholars. Thus, theories of subjectivity, including the work of Teresa de Lauretis and Jessica Benjamin inform the readings of RB's poetry in order to account for the role gender plays in the development of poetic and amorous discourses in his work.

The reconciliation of the concerns of the amorous and poetic subject in EBB's *Aurora Leigh* is an attempt to redefine the ideologically circumscribed private/female and public/male spheres. This is contrasted with Browning's compulsion to split the poetic and erotic subject, in order to contain the amorous within the private sphere. The assessment of what is gendered as female and male in EBB's and RB's poetry exposes the inscription of gender through the workings of ideology.

This thesis relies on the work of a number of theorists investigating the concepts of subjectivity, sexuality and amorous discourse. The informing theories have been integrated into the readings of EBB and RB's poetry. Michel Foucault's work on sexuality, particularly his articulation of the function of discourse, power and knowledge in the development of an individual's self perception and Teresa de Lauretis' elaboration of this concept to include gender as a factor and product of the

effects of discourse, are central to the understanding of sexuality and subjectivity informing this thesis. The notion of intersubjectivity put forward by Jessica Benjamin as an alternative to the model of subject- object relations, is referred to extensively to reflect on the functioning of discourse in the construction of the erotic subject in the poetry of both EBB and RB. René Girard's elaboration of triangular desire in literature, as well as Sandra Lee Bartsky's work on feminine masochism provide further important insights on the paradigms which function within amorous discourse.

ENVELOPING DESIRE:

The Negotiation of Amorous and Poetic
Subject Positions in the Courtship
Correspondence of
Elizabeth Barrett Browning
and
Robert Browning

The correspondence is an important point of departure for a discussion of erotics and poetics in the writings of the Brownings, for it functions as a paradigm setting up a complex scene of writing and desiring. The correspondence most closely approximates the literary genre of the epistolary novel. Indeed, in an early letter RB suggests that he and EBB collaborate on a literary project. In order to explore the issues raised by the correspondence, it is necessary to approach the courtship correspondence as more than a biographical document, regarding it as a literary co-production in epistolary form, and recognizing its expressive and critical content. Its dialogic character allows the poets to alternate between the poles of writer and reader, to move back and forth between the positions of poet and critic, lover and beloved.

The courtship of Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning has given the two poets a unique and almost mythological position in the popular imagination. More widely known than the work of either poet is the story of their romance, which focuses on the frail poetess' rescue from seclusion by a dashing young poet. The correspondence documenting this courtship was first published in 1899, ten years after RB's death, and consists of the 573 letters the poets wrote to one another during the 20 months of their courtship between January 1845 and September 1846. Though initially a private correspondence, these letters can be regarded as a co-authored literary production. Of course, they tell the story of this literary romance, but the letters also served as a workshop for the two poets, a "space" where ideas

could be put forth and responded to. The letters are expository -- presenting the two poets' ideas on poetry and love -- as well as responsive -- offering their reflections on and reactions to each other's ideas. As both en-coders and de-coders of poetic and amorous discourses, the two poets can be seen to negotiate multiple subject positions constructed to accommodate their respective self-representations as both lovers and beloveds, poets and critics.

The correspondence between RB and EBB was instigated by a letter of thanks from RB to EBB acknowledging a compliment paid to him in her poem "Lady Geraldine's Courtship," published in *Poems (1844)*. Wordsworth and Tennyson also received complimentary mention in the poem, but Browning received the only detailed acknowledgement. EBB writes:

Or from Browning some 'Pomegranate,'
which, if cut deep down the middle,
Shows a heart within blood-tinctured,
of a veined humanity.
(ll. 325-28)

Browning's first letter, however, does not directly thank EBB for the compliment, but returns it with praise of her work, thereby setting the stage for the correspondence which is to follow. In the first letter dated January 10, 1845 Browning writes "I love your verses with all my heart, dear Miss Barrett," and later "I do, as I say, love these books with all my heart -- and I love you too." He finds himself somewhat compromised as a "fellow craftsman," because he finds no fault with her work and cannot offer any constructive criticism.

as a loyal fellow-craftsman should, try and find fault and do you some little good to be proud of hereafter! -- but nothing comes of it all -- so into me it has gone, and part of me has it become, this great living poetry of yours, (1:3-4)

The seeds for both amorous and poetic dialogue are planted in this first letter from RB. From the outset he speaks of himself as a lover and as a reader or potential critic of her poetry. The constant battling between the two poets to lay claim to the inferior position for their work in comparison with the other's also begins with the first letters exchanged.

EBB's response to this letter is focused on Browning's hinted offer to act as critic, while virtually ignoring his effusive declaration of love which comes in his attempt to conflate the poet and the poetry he claims to love.

What I was going to say...after a little natural hesitation..is, that if ever you emerge without inconvenient effort from your "passive state," & will tell me of such faults as rise to the surface and strike you as important in my poems, (for of course, I do not think of troubling you with criticism in detail) you will confer a lasting obligation on me, and one which I shall value so much, that I covet it at a distance. (1:4-5)

His criticism of her poetry is valuable because she recognizes his worth as a poet. "Such a letter from such a hand!" she says in the same letter, underlining that his praise is valuable because it is "the sympathy of a poet, & of such a poet." Initially EBB asks Browning to act as her poetic tutor, while RB attempts to position himself as a prospective lover. He sends her poetry, accepting both her praise and her criticism, while almost exclusively praising her work. Most prominent in the early correspondence are discussions of Browning's "The Flight of the Duchess" and EBB's "Lady Geraldine's Courtship". Both poets comment on one another's poetic and

epistolary voices, and question one another's opinions, as for example in the many letters which deal with the morality of duelling. In her study of the epistolary novel, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form*, Janet Gurkin Altman points out that the

content of letter novels divides into two basic categories -- erotic and educational. At the center of the erotic correspondence stands the lover-seducer; crucial to the educational sequence is the mentor-guide. (p. 196)

The Brownings' correspondence fits into both of these epistolary models. However, what is crucial to the understanding of EBB and RB's correspondence is the fact that they were both conscious of themselves, and of the other, as makers of texts. Though the first letters seem to establish certain roles, both EBB and RB seek to define themselves as poets and lovers, assuming the roles of both critic and beloved. Neither remains static in either set of roles but moves from one to the other. The way the techniques available to the epistolary writer are used to articulate these subject positions is indicative of, if not parallel to, the styles which distinguish the two as poets.

Altman's study presents epistolary fiction as laden with paradox and contradiction. The letter can function as either a bridge or a barrier, a portrait or a mask. It implies privacy and intimacy, and yet the letter is addressed to an other, and thus begs for an audience. Altman outlines six different sets of polarities which define epistolary narrative. The letter can work as a bridge or a barrier between correspondents, which can inspire either confidence or non-confidence. The correspondents are compelled to move between the roles of writer and reader, roles which underline the polarities of I/you, here/there and now/then. The letter form also

underlines the tension in a relationship resulting from the possible discontinuation or continuation of a correspondence. Letters are simultaneously self-contained units and fragments of a larger text.

These attributes of epistolary fiction are present in EBB and RB's courtship correspondence. Read within the framework set up by Altman, the articulation of erotic and poetic subjectivity in the correspondence can be seen to develop through the dialogic character of the epistolary mode and the negotiation of its paradoxes and contradictions.

The first element of epistolary fiction outlined by Altman explains how a letter can function as either a bridge or a barrier, a distance breaker or a distance maker:

The letter's mediatory property makes it an instrument that both connects and interferes...As an intermediary step between indifference and intimacy, the letter lends itself to narrative actions that move the correspondents in either direction. (186)

Early in the correspondence RB observes that EBB is able to speak directly through her poetry, whereas he finds it necessary to create men and women through whom he can speak. This preoccupation with different modes of poetic expression marks the intersection of gender and genre concerns and signals the beginnings of RB's strategic use of epistolary technique. In order to eventually make his case to be admitted to visit EBB, RB begins by representing her writing as a bridge, while characterizing his own writing as a barrier to intimate dialogue. RB compliments EBB's poetic style, focusing on the difference between the two of them as poets.

--for you do what I always wanted, hoped to do, and only seem now likely to do for the first time. You speak out, you,--I only make men &

women speak--give you truth broken into prismatic hues, and fear the pure white light, even if it is in me. (1:6-7)

As Daniel Karlin points out, referring to Browning's *Essay on Shelley*, RB would have considered EBB a subjective poet. According to Browning, when approaching subjective poetry,

we necessarily approach the personality of the poet; in apprehending it we apprehend him, and certainly we cannot love it without loving him. Both for love's and for understanding's sake we desire to know him, and as readers of his poetry must be readers of his biography as well. (*Essay on Shelley, Poems*, vol. i.p. 1002.)

RB identifies himself as an objective poet, one whose poetry comes not from the expression of his inner feelings, of his self, but from the observation of the outside world. EBB, on the other hand, is seen as the subjective poet who can speak in her work. As Dorothy Mermin points out, this conflation of the woman and the work was typical of Victorian attitudes toward women and art:

The cliché that the style is the man arises more readily and with much greater literalness and force when the stylist is a woman, and it is often, as in Browning's letter {the first}, charged with erotic intensity. Edgar Allan Poe remarks in his review of *Poems* (1844) that "a woman and her book are identical." The identification of women with poems was likely to discourage them from writing: Ladislav in *Middlemarch* tells Dorothea that she needn't write poems because she is one. (1989, 118.)

The objective poet is aligned with the more "masculine" types of poetry, such as the epic, whereas the subjective poet speaks through the lyric, a form considered more appropriate for female poets.

EBB is not unaware of this distinction and in her praise of RB's work she emphasizes that he is not limited to the realm of the objective poet, as he may like

to think. EBB's praise of RB's poetry is also an assertion of her ability to understand the man through his writing, and the ability of his writing to function as a bridge in building intimacy.

You have in your vision two worlds -- or to use the language of the schools of the day, you are both subjective & objective in the habits of your mind. You can deal with both abstract thought & with human passion in the most passionate sense. Thus you have an immense grasp in Art and no one at all accustomed to consider the usual forms of it, could help regarding with reverence & gladness the gradual expansion of your powers. (1:9)

Browning, however, continues to use this difference in style to further his pursuit of intimacy with EBB throughout the earlier part of the correspondence. In order to persuade EBB to agree to a meeting with him, RB presents his letters as a barrier to real intimacy. Since, as a dramatic writer, he is not represented in his work she cannot really come to know him through his writing. On the other hand, her letters function to create intimacy, since as a subjective poet she is capable of truthfully representing herself in her writing. Like his dramatic poems in which he speaks through men and women, his letters are a mask, while hers provide him with a faithful portrait of her soul.

The first significant instance where Browning indicates his inability to correctly express himself in letters comes shortly after his first visit, in the form of an apology for what was no doubt a declaration of his love for EBB, which she rejected. The letter in which this declaration was made is the only letter in the correspondence to have been destroyed. RB's apology is nonetheless quite telling.

Will you not think me very brutal if I tell you I could almost smile at your misapprehension of what I meant to write? -- Yet I will tell you, because it will undo the bad effect of my thoughtlessness, and at the same time exemplify the point I have all along been honestly earnest to set you right upon...my real inferiority to you; just that and no more. I [spoke] wrote to you, in an unwise moment, the spur of being again "thanked," and, unwisely writing just as if thinking to myself, said what must have looked absurd enough as seen apart from the horrible counterbalancing never-to-be-written rest of me -- by the side which, could it be written & put before you, my note would sink to its proper & relative place, and become a mere "thank you["] for your good opinion -- which I assure you is far too generous, -- for I really believe you to be my superior in many respects, and feel uncomfortable till you see that, too -- since I hope for your sympathy & assistance, and frankness is everything in such a case. I do assure you, that had you read my note, only having "known" so much of me as is implied in having inspected, for instance, the contents, merely, of that fatal and often-referred-to "portfolio" there (*Dii meliora piis!*) you would see in it, (the note not the portfolio) the blindest utterance ever mild gentleman gave birth to: (1:74-5)

RB's offers not so much an apology for his over-stepping of the initial boundaries of his epistolary relationship with EBB, but a re-interpretation of his own letter as a text. He compares his epistolary voice to his poetic voice and finds fault with EBB as a reader of his text, while praising her abilities as a writer. He attempts to underline the degree to which his epistolary/poetic style inhibits the reader from gaining any real knowledge of him as the writer of the text.

EBB's response defends her position as reader of RB's texts. She simultaneously accepts his apology and rebukes him for attempting to alter the implications of his previous letter through what she seems to feel is a willful misinterpretation.

I owe you the most humble of apologies dear Mr. Browning, for having spent so much solemnity on so simple a matter, & I hasten to pay it, -- confessing at the same time (as why sh^d I not?) that I am quite as

much ashamed of myself as I ought to be, which is not a little. (1:78)

The tension which Altman describes between the elements of confidence and non-confidence become evident at this point in the correspondence. As Altman explains,

Confidence/non-confidence. If winning and losing of confidence constitute part of the narrative content, the related oppositions confidence/coquetterie (or candor/dissimulation) and amitié/amour represent the two primary types of epistolary style and relationship. These distinctions, as well as the blurring of these distinctions, are a function of the letter's dual potential for transparency (portrait of a soul, confession, vehicle of narrative) and opacity (mask, weapon, event within narrative).

EBB continues in the letter to emphasize her understanding of his intention through her ability as a reader of his texts. She interprets the destroyed love letter as one would a poem, bringing her understanding of RB's poetic technique to bear on her interpretation of his letter.

Also, I sh^d have understood "boots" where you wrote it, in the letter in question; if it had not been for the relation of two things in it -- & now I perfectly seem to see HOW I mistook that relation ("seem to see," -- because I have not looked into the letter again since your last night's commentary, & will not --) inasmuch as I have observed before in my own mind, that a good deal of what is called obscurity in you, arises from a habit of very subtle association, so subtle, that you are probably unconscious of it, ..and the effect of which is to throw together on the same level & in the same light, things of likeness and unlikeness -- till the reader grows confused as I did, & takes one for another. (1:78)

She also compares this letter to a poem, teasingly referring to RB's determination to prove her his superior, and requesting that he burn the letter:

from the heights of my superior..stultity, & other qualities of the like

order,... I venture to advise you..however (to speak of the letter critically, & as the dramatic composition it is) it is to be admitted to be very beautiful, and well worthy of the rest of its kin in the portfolio,... 'Lays of the poets,' or otherwise,... I venture to advise you to burn it at once. (1:79)

The interpretive act in the reading of letters is made equivalent to the reader's task in the reading of poetry. Every letter can be seen as a unit of artistic merit, and every response as an interpretation of the preceding letters. As Altman makes clear,

The letter's duality as a self-contained artistic unity and as a unit within a larger configuration make an apt instrument for fragmentary, elliptical writing and juxtaposition of contrasting discrete units, yet at the same time the very fragmentation inherent in the letter form encourages the creation of a compensating coherence and continuity on new levels. (187)

Thus EBB and RB act as critics of each other's poetry in the correspondence, but also as interpreters of each other's self-representation through the text of their letters. While commenting on the preceding letter, the letter writer underlines the self-standing nature of the letter as a unit, while incorporating it into the larger body of the correspondence. This is closely linked to the roles of reader and writer that EBB and RB play as correspondents. As Altman points out, each correspondent simultaneously plays the roles of both writer and reader.

The epistolary situation evokes simultaneously the acts of writing and reading, as correspondents alternate, often within the same letter, between the roles of narrator and narratee, of encoder and decoder. Reader consciousness explicitly informs the act of writing itself. The movement from the private to the public in much of epistolary fiction lays bare another paradox: as a reflection of self or the self's relationships, the letter connotes privacy and intimacy, yet as a document addressed to another, the letter reflects the need for an audience, an audience that may suddenly expand when the document

is confiscated, shared or published. (187)

Due to the reciprocal nature of epistolary exchange and the responsive element necessary to this exchange, the correspondence functions not only as a site of self-articulation, but also as a mirror through which the two poets come to better recognize themselves. The act of letter writing becomes fused with artistic production, and the act of letter reading with critical interpretation. The form and style of the letter become as important as the form and style of a poem, as the letters are meant to be read by another poet who is also cast in the role of critic. Though their letters are part of a private relationship, they are written self-consciously, and with some anxiety, due to an awareness of their intended audience. EBB emphasizes the reader's role as interpreter and critic of the letters by initially denying it, before stating her position on the quality of RB's epistles.

I agree with you that if I could play critic upon your letters, it would be an end! -- but no, no .. I did not for a moment. In what I said I went back to my first impressions -- & they were vital letters, I said -- which was the resumé of my thoughts upon the early ones you sent me .. because I felt your letters to be you from the very first [...] (1:477)

However, RB continues through the correspondence to emphasize his inability to articulate his feelings in words. Many of his letters, even after the poets' marriage, emphasize the intensity of his feeling in the very claim that words are inadequate to express them. "So feeling so much, I say so little!--,"(1:387), "I have no words for you, my dearest, I shall never have--" (1:378) or "that I might somewhat more, -- never so little more, -- conform in the outward homage to the inward feeling." (2:1062) are phrases that strategically emphasize the distance and the masked pose which

is created through the epistolary medium. EBB, however, recognizes the use of this technique and underlines her understanding of it in her responses.

I have your letter..you who cannot write! [...] After all it seems to me that you can write for yourself pretty well -- rather too well I used to think from the beginning. (2:749)

EBB's letters, on the other hand, draw attention to the connecting quality of epistolary discourse, the ability of epistolary discourse to create a particular intimacy between correspondents. This is linked to her poetic style, but also to her self-perception -- and self-presentation -- as secluded and unworldly:

And what you say of society draws me on to many comparative thoughts of your life & mine. You seem to have drunken of the cup of life full, with the sun shining on it. I have lived only inwardly, -- or with sorrow, for a strong emotion. Before this seclusion of my illness, I was secluded still -- & there are few of the youngest women in the world who have not seen more, heard more, of society, than I, who am scarcely to be called young now. I grew up in the country .. had no social opportunities .. had my heart in books and poetry...& my experience, in reveries. (1:41)

Acknowledging her lack of experience in society works simultaneously to emphasize RB's broader experience and invites RB to act as something of an interpreter of society for her. In a letter written to RB on May 15, 1845 she gives her reasons for not admitting visitors to her rooms.

it w^d be unbecoming to lie here on the sofa & make a company-show of an infirmity, & hold a beggar's hat for sympathy. I sh^d blame it in another woman -- and the sense of it has had its weight with me. (1:65)

This self-consciousness about her frail health is expressed in her feelings regarding her relationship to her poetry. Despite her earlier resistance to RB's equation of this love for her poetry with his love for her, later in the same letter she describes her self

through her work, divesting herself of everything but the written word.

There is nothing to see in me; nor to hear in me -- I never learnt to talk as you do in London, although I can admire that brightness of carved speech in Mr. Kenyon & others. If my poetry is worth anything to any eye, -- it is the flower of me. I have lived most & been most happy in it, & so it has all my colours; the rest of me is nothing but a root, fit for the ground & the dark. (ibid.)

As she claimed in an earlier letter "I seem to live while I write -- it is life for me" (1:42). So while Browning's letters openly ask EBB to act as poetic critic and tutor, her letters beg him to read her into her text, to come to a knowledge of the woman through her writing. For EBB, just as it will be for her epic poetry and for Aurora, poetic and amorous subjectivity are fused. Browning himself cannot separate his understanding of EBB the woman from the poetry.

I have been reading among other poems that sonnet -- "Past and Future" -- which affects me more than any poem I ever read. How can I put your poetry away from you, even in these ineffectual attempts to concentrate myself upon, and better apply myself to what remains? --poor, poor work it is, -- for is not that sonnet to be loved as a true utterance of yours? I cannot attempt to put down the thoughts that rise;[...] (1:272)

He presents himself as an inadequate critical reader of her texts, but as the best interpreter of herself. This, however, poses a difficulty, in that EBB has represented herself as defined by her texts. Thus for RB to take a critical stance regarding EBB's poetry, would be to imply criticism of the woman as well as the poet. RB's attitude toward poetry and poet is, however, parallel. In his first letter Browning praises EBB's book saying "so into has it gone, and part of me has it become, this great living poetry of yours," (1:3). EBB's poetry is not only part of EBB but of RB as well, making his criticism of it impossible because it is so close to him that it has

become part of him, been included in his very being. Later he expresses the same desire for inclusion when describing his love for her.

for, love, what is it all, this love for you but an earnest desiring to
include you in myself, if that might be, -- to feel you in my very heart
and hold you there for ever, thro' all chance and earthly changes?
(1:283)

Despite Browning's attempts to persuade her to the contrary, EBB also feels she has more of his true self through his letters than through his initial visits. Reflecting on the development of their relationship later in the correspondence, EBB notes how his letters brought him closest to her. She writes of a

curious double feeling I had about you..you personally, & you as the
writer of these letters,..& the crisis of the feeling, when I was positively
vexed & jealous of myself for not succeeding better in making a unity
of the two. I could not! -- And moreover I could not help but that the
writer of the letters seemed nearer to me, long..long..& in spite of the
postmark..than did the personal visitor who confounded me, & left me
constantly under such an impression of its being all dream-work on his
side, (1:359-60)

EBB was obviously concerned that if she was part of Browning's "dreamwork", then she was being masked in his images of her which were based on fantasy and not the reality she wanted to convey. She stated in a letter dated September 16, 1845 that, "you overlook in me what is unsuitable to you..that I know, & have sometimes told you" (1:195). Much of EBB's anxiety surrounding her relationship with RB is focused on his misinterpretation of her. Considering that she felt she was to be best understood through her work, this anxiety reveals an implicit criticism of RB's capabilities as a reader of her work. RB, however, makes clear that he recognizes both the woman and the poet by assuring her that

I would not have dared to take the blessing of kissing your hand, much less your lip .. but that it seemed as if I was leading you into a mistake, -- as did happen -- and that you might fancy I only felt a dreamy, abstract passion for a phantom of my own creating out of your books and rest you shall give me. In every event, I am your own. (2:753)

For EBB it was important that RB's love for her not be based on romantic images which permeated representations of her as poet in literary circles, and which seem mirrored in RB's image of her as a jewel in a crown (1:428). As the correspondence progresses, EBB becomes, paradoxically, resistant to RB's conflation of her with her poetry.

Being self-conscious as a writer of texts leads EBB to a heightened awareness of strategies of representation and their implications. She complains to him

Seriously .. gravely ..if it makes me three times happy that you should love me, yet I grow uneasy & even saddened when you say infatuated things such as this & this .. unless after all you mean philosophical sarcasm on the worth of Czar diamonds --! No -- do not say such things!-- If you do, I shall end by being jealous of some ideal Czarina /which>who/ must stand between you & me .. I shall think that it is not I whom you look at [...] (1:432)

The image created to represent EBB distances her from Browning, because the image, as a mediator of RB's desire, comes to stand between them. Though both EBB and RB create images to represent the other in their letters, the more intimate the relationship becomes the more the letters themselves come to embody their writers, signaling a displacement of desire for greater physical intimacy. Thus the letters can be understood as simultaneously expressing intimacy and creating barriers, creating both contact and distance between the lovers.

Using Jacobson's terminology, Altman defines the two types of figures

common to epistolary narrative as

metaphoric (a metaphor of the lover is generated by the epistolary situation, which conjures up interiorized images and comparisons) and metonymic (the letter itself, by virtue of physical contact, stands for the lover). (p. 19)

Later in the correspondence EBB and RB are more likely to allow the letters to stand in for the beloved than they are to construct images to represent their beloved object. This signals not only desire for the physical presence of the other and greater physical intimacy between the two poets, but also implies a move away from representation and toward a greater acknowledgement of EBB and RB's respective self-representation as presented through their letters. After the letters which contain their disagreements on the morality of duelling, EBB blurs the distinction between RB and his letter by kissing the letter, when his letter asks her to kiss him:

When your letter came, I kissed it by a sort of instinct .. not that I do always at first sight, (please to understand) but because the writing did not look angry .. not vexed writing. Then I read .. "First of all, kiss"....

So it seemed like magic. (2:607)

The letter preceding this one shows how RB attempted to bridge the gap established through the very act of correspondence. He evokes EBB's presence in the letter by invoking her presence by his side while he is writing to her. "First of all kiss me, dearest, -- and again -- and now with the left arm around you, I will write [...]" (2:601). The gesture indicates a desire to bridge the spatial and temporal gap that is necessarily part of epistolary communication by evoking the presence of the letter's addressee.

As Altman emphasizes, the present tense of the narration of a letter "is

precarious and unseizable" because "the present of the letter writer is never the present of the addressee" so that

epistolary discourse is caught up in the impossibility of a dialogue in the present. That is, "I feel" cannot be interpreted by the addressee as "you feel" but rather as "you felt when you wrote this letter." (129)

EBB and RB's constant concern with each other's health underscores this fact. Neither can know how the other is in the present, because the present is always past by the time the letter is being read. The questioning evokes a feeling of anxiety, surrounding not so much the health of the addressee, but around the possibility of what could change in the interval between sending and receiving a letter. Though there does seem to be genuine concern for health expressed by both EBB and RB. EBB writes

Beloved, when you write, let it be, if you choose, ever so few lines. Do not suffer me (for my own sake) to tire you -- because two lines or three bring YOU to me .. remember .. just as a longer letter would. (1:541)

What is important is that the correspondence continue, that Browning continue coming to her through his letters. Altman points to the tension that the simultaneous finality and open-endedness that the letter form creates. She argues that

The dynamics of letter narrative involves a movement between two poles: the potential finality of the letter's sign off and the open-endedness of the letter seen as a segment within a chain of dialogue. Finality is actualized in epistolary terms by motivated renunciation of writing, the death of the writer, the arrival of the addressee, whereas enigmatic silence realizes the letter form's potential for open-endedness. (187)

The constant possibility that the correspondence could come to an end, or its motives change, is a cause of anxiety for EBB particularly:

Good Heavens! -- how dreadfully natural it would be to me, seem to me, if you DID leave off loving me! How it would be like the sun's setting .. & no more wonder! -- Only more darkness more pain -- (2:608)

Though this seems to be a real source of anxiety for EBB throughout the correspondence, it is also part of the strategy both poets use to express their desire for the other. Both lay claim to the inferior position vis-a-vis the other, be it as poets or as lovers, in an attempt to elevate their object of desire. EBB claims that

To judge at all or a work of yours, I must look up to it, -- & far up -- because whatever faculty I have is included in your faculty, & with a great rim all round besides! And thus, it is not at all from an over-pleasure in pleasing you, not at all from an inclination to depreciate myself, that I speak & feel as I do & must on some occasions -- it is simply the consequence of a true comprehension of you and of me -- (1:125)

What follows in the letter is perhaps more important than the strategic positioning of Browning as the superior poet. In rebutting his praise of her work she claims her right to speak her mind, even if she does not share his opinions or feelings. What she lays claims to is "liberty to breathe & feel naturally .. according to my own nature" (ibid.). She may be willing to offer herself in service of his poetry, but she will not be servile. Nor does she expect him to defer to her opinion on matters, as becomes clear after their arguments regarding the morality of duelling. In fact, she understands that despite RB's efforts to convince her he defers to her opinion when he claims that "YOU ARE RIGHT and I am wrong and will lay it to heart and kiss, not your feet this time, because I am the prouder,[...]by this admission and retraction --" (2:612), he can not truly defer to her in a matter of opinion. She tells him "After all, you too,..with that preternatural submissiveness of yours, of the

obeisances, that you can do very much what you please, with your High priest" (2:614). There is no real abdication of will in this relationship, but offers of submission are tangled in the discourse used to articulate love and desire.

The growing intimacy of the relationship between EBB and RB becomes clear through the growing number of confidences that are revealed in the letters. The first significant confidence comes when EBB writes of the loss of her eldest brother and the unspoken guilt she feels about his death (1:167-72). Later, revelations about her father's attitude toward his children, particularly in regard to his prohibition of marriage, indicate EBB's desire to share her fears and hopes with RB. As their romantic intimacy grows, these confidences turn them into conspirators. EBB represents herself in the letters as a dutiful and obedient daughter. This self-perception is important to her as it symbolizes her attempt to repay the unpayable debt she owes her father for what she considers to be guilt in the death of her brother. Her relationship with her father reaches a crisis point when he, disregarding the advice of doctors, refuses to agree to EBB's spending the winter in Pisa. She describes her father's reaction in a letter dated September 25, 1845:

I have spoken again, & the result is that we are in precisely the same position, -- only with bitterer feelings on one side. If I go or stay they must be bitter<er>: words have been said that I cannot easily forget, nor remember without pain -- & yet I really do almost smile in the midst of it all, to think how I was treated this morning as an undutiful daughter because I tried to put on my gloves .. for there was no worse provocation. At least he complained of the undutifulness & rebellion (!!!) if everyone in the house -- & when I asked if he meant that reproach for ME, the answer was that he meant it for all of us, one with another. And I could not get an answer. He would not even grant me the consolation of thinking that I sacrificed what I supposed to be good, to HIM. I told him that my prospects of health seemed to me to

depend on taking this step, but that through my affection for him, I was ready to sacrifice those to his pleasure if he exacted it -- only it was necessary to my self-satisfaction in future years, to understand definitely that the sacrifice was exacted by him & not thrown away blindly & by misapprehension. And he would not speak -- he would not say that he was not displeased with me, nor the contrary: -- I had better do what I liked: -- for his part, he washed his hands of me altogether --
(1:211)

In issues concerning her father's displeasure, EBB wants to submit to RB's will, trusting that his decisions on her behalf prove his love for her. Later in the same letter she tells him to "Think for me. [...] Do think for me --" (1:212) and make her decision about Pisa for her. The other instance she allows RB to think for her is in the arrangements for their marriage and elopement. She seems to want to defer their marriage. In a letter dated September 9, 1846 she feels that "It seems quite too soon & too sudden for us to set out on our Italian adventure now [...]", but ends the letter assuring Browning that "I will do as you wish -- understand" (2:1058). The next day she writes again saying "Dearest, I write one word, & have one will which is yours" (2:1061). This abdication of will seems to be something of a pose as the speed with which arrangements for their marriage were made was precipitated by EBB's fear of possible discovery and therefore probable end of her relationship with Browning (2:922). A long period of separation between the two lovers was also a possibility, as the Barretts had discussed leaving London for a period of time. Submission to the will of the other is never exacted by either EBB or RB, though the offer to submit is made frequently by both. These offers are made around issues where they share a similar desire. Submission in this sense is not indicative of a loss

of power, but serves as a sign of willingness to worship the beloved. It expresses the subtle competition between the two to fulfill the role of lover and not concede to the role of worshiped beloved.

To view the story told by the correspondence as a simple seduction, a progressive weakening of EBB's will and resolve until Browning's eventual victory over her, would be to over-simplify the narrative developed in the letters. Both poets exhibit anxiety at the thought of an eventual end to the correspondence and often close letters with openings, claiming that they have only begun the letter and have much more to say. For EBB the idea of love was fraught with her fear of her father's displeasure as well as with concerns for her health. "What could I give you, which it would not be ungenerous to give?" (1:179) she asks Browning, implying that in exchange for his love, she can only give him sorrow that comes with disappointment. Karlin remarks in his discussion of what he terms "The Pisa Affair" that

before she could allow herself to accept Browning's love, she had to be sure that she was in a fit condition to reciprocate it. That is why she seized so eagerly on the idea of wintering abroad: it was a kill-or-cure-test of her own principle that she would only do Browning harm by encouraging his affection. If she did not recover in Italy, it would prove her ill health to be 'irremediable', and she would therefore be justified in continuing to refuse Browning -- for his own sake. But if Italy gave her the 'counter-proof' --
(p. 103)

The repression of desire on EBB's part can not be seen as the traditional female pose designed to elicit desire. For EBB, the articulation of desire was inhibited by factors which extended beyond the traditional restrictions constituted by gender-bound conventions. In her letters, EBB often criticizes love as it was

represented and lived. She understands lovers' quarrels as occasioned by "The growth of power on one side .. & the struggle against it, by means legal & illegal, on the other" (2:844). She also expresses her distaste for "what passes in the world" as love. She describes it as "that word which rhymes to glove & comes as easily off and on" (1: 340, 341). Such comments contrast with the feelings she expresses for Browning.

However, her desire to submit to RB's will regarding their marriage at the end of the correspondence, indirectly confirms the suspicions which contribute to EBB's ambivalence towards the discussion of love. Though her submission is strategic, it also marks the desire to represent love with a traditional romantic paradigm which dictates feminine submission to masculine power. Despite her attempt to develop a new language for love in her correspondence with RB, EBB cannot divest herself of the desire to represent her love in traditional terms.

As Sandra Lee Bartky points out in her essay "Feminine Masochism and the Politics of Personal Transformation," sexual desires can be in conflict with moral principles, particularly for women who attempt to challenge patriarchal ideas, will still be embedded in the patriarchy's structure of desire. For some women, Bartky explains, desire often has a masochistic dimension (47). What is

essential to masochism is the eroticization of domination. Now women are regularly attracted by power, its possession and exercise. Male power manifests itself variously as physical prowess, muscular strength, intellectual brilliance, worldly position, or the kind of money that buys respect...In a sexually inegalitarian society, these manifestations of male power are precisely the instruments by which men are able to accomplish the subordination of women. Hence, insofar as male power is eroticized, male dominance itself becomes erotically charged. (47)

Read in this light, EBB's desire to invest RB with power over her fate indicates inability to represent that relationship outside the framework of a traditional romantic paradigm in her letter writing.

Her previous lack of interest in romance, however, works to increase the value of her desire for Browning by contrasting the uniqueness of the development of such a feeling with her opinions on traditional romance. Browning also emphasizes the intensity of his desire by focusing on the singularity of his desire for EBB. He was convinced of "the impossibility of loving any woman," finding that he felt "rather proud of it than sorry..." so the recognition or true love could come only after "overturning all my theory" (1:198). Toward the end of the correspondence he tells EBB "Before I knew you, women seemed not so much better than myself, therefore, no love for them!" (2:950).

Fear of discovery resulting from the secret nature of what came to be communicated in the letters between EBB and RB heightened the degree of intimacy the letters came to symbolize. As Daniel Karlin points out, quoting from a letter written by RB on February 15, 1846, "'Real letters', in this scheme, constitute a private and privileged discourse, an 'originally enclosed spot' reminiscent of Eden before a 'third person' intruded" (p. 8). Toward the end of the courtship the threat to this intimacy existed in its discovery by EBB's father, and the end of the courtship and the literary co-production was hastened by this threat of discovery. EBB claims that her father thought of her as "the purest woman he ever knew," because she did not "trouble him with the iniquity of love-affairs, or any impropriety of seeming to think about being married" (2:1072). EBB's self-perceptions are tied to her position regarding romance, making it interesting that just before her marriage EBB seems to almost mourn the end of the correspondence asking "Is this my last letter to you, ever

dearest?" (2:1086), as though she regrets losing the medium through which she learned to speak her desire as much as she looks forward to fulfilling that desire.

The articulation of desire into the courtship correspondence is marked by the fact that both EBB and RB were poets who knew and respected each other's poetic work. The traditional roles of lover and beloved were thus not adequate in the epistolary development of this relationship, since the acknowledgement of the beloved's position as poet rendered problematic a representation of the other as a silent, adored object of desire. The recognition of the beloved as a subject, with desires and voice separate from those of the lover, was fundamental in the development of EBB and RB's courtship. The ways in which the two poets came to speak of their love in the letters mirrors their respective styles as poets and is laden with the tension created by the knowledge that the addressee read the letters not only for the sentiments expressed in the writing but also for the form of the writing itself.

The epistolary genre necessitates movement between the roles of writer and reader, and consequently makes possible a movement between the roles of lover and beloved, mentor and student, poet and critic. EBB and RB benefited from the potential mobility offered by the epistolary mode in claiming various subject positions and defining themselves through their self-representations in the letters as lovers and

beloveds as well as poets and critics. The letters also offered them reflections of themselves as seen through the eyes of their beloved. Self perceptions were not necessarily mirrored directly back to the writer of a letter, thus self-understanding, and with it subsequent self-representation, became entwined not only with the act of writing, but with the act of reading as well.

MUSING ON AMOROUS SUBJECTS:

The Construction of Erotic Identity

This section of the thesis is concerned with the articulation of an amorous subject in the poetry of the Brownings. EBB's early ballads are attempts to revise traditional stories of love by telling them from the perspective of female narrators. However, representation of passive female roles in the ballads inhibits any radical refashioning of romantic paradigms. In *Sonnets from the Portuguese* EBB makes a transition to a revisionary handling of the representation of love, motivated by the need to evaluate her role as woman, poet and lover in relation to a beloved who is also a poet.

RB's first published poem, *Pauline*, which is best known for its commentary on RB's relationship to Shelley and the Romantic tradition, is read for the sites of conflict it uncovers between the poet's desire for stability and love and the impulse toward freedom and poetic creativity. What becomes evident, even in this early stage of RB's poetic career, is his inability to reconcile the amorous with the poetic and resulting split that occurs within the subject between the poetic and erotic impulses.

EBB's literary reputation became firmly established with the publication of her *Poems (1844)*, the success of which depended largely on the strength and emotional impact of her ballads. The collection was particularly well received, compelling critics to list her among England's most gifted poets. What her contemporary critics failed to recognize was the impulse to question the traditional notions of womanly virtue which runs through the seemingly traditional narratives of the ballads. Many of the lyrics in the collection focus on romantic love. However, in these love narratives EBB scrutinizes the

role constructed for women in traditional love lyrics and imposed on them through societal conventions. Barrett Browning's treatment of love in her ballads reveals an attempt to uncover the myths surrounding the woman's role in amatory narratives, and a concomitant interest in revising the perceptions of this role. The ballad form, historically associated with the recording and transmission of stories in the oral tradition, is, as M.H. Abrams has noted, "[T]ypically...dramatic, condensed and impersonal" (12). Consequently, the ballad inhibits, though it does not preclude, deeper exploration of individual development, and limits personal reflection or revelation by the narrator. The focus in the popular ballad, and later in the lyrical ballad made popular by the Romantic poets, is the story. For example, in Keats' "La Belle Dame Sans Merci," there is no reflection on the reason for the knight's sickly appearance and depression. The explanation for his condition is given in the form of a story, which is for the most part descriptive, concentrating on external events and not on his inner state.

EBB used the ballad and the traditional stories of love associated with the form to draw attention to the powerlessness inherent in the passive role assigned to the woman in the love narrative. None of EBB's heroines in the ballads, with the limited exception of Geraldine in "Lady Geraldine's Courtship," successfully inscribe their own desires into the narrative of romantic love. All of their attempts result in disappointment or death. However limiting EBB found the ballad form in her attempts to discover a genre suitable for the articulation of a feminine amorous subjectivity in poetry, her romantic ballads are an important period in her poetic development leading up to the writing of the *Sonnets from the Portuguese*. The study of EBB's early work is necessary in an exploration of the

transition from her more traditional representation of female passivity to her revisionary handling of the lyric form

Dominant gender ideology which prescribes the passivity of the woman's role and her exclusion from the public/male domain posed an obstacle not only in love, but in poetry as well. The contradictory or inappropriate desires that the heroines of EBB's ballads have to contend with are indicative not only of the difficulties, the powerlessness and frustration the passive role creates for women in love narratives, but they also reflect the difficulties confronted by the woman poet in the nineteenth century. Dorothy Mernin concludes that although both men and women confronted obstacles in the writing of poetry, the traditional conceptions of the poet were "inherently masculine" and thus "for women, cultural and psychological barriers were reinforced by the difficulty of situating themselves within the inherited structures of English poetry" (1986, 65). Little Ellie's punished ambition in "The Romance of the Swan's Nest," the unwilling, but necessary sacrifice made by the narrator in "Bertha in the Lane," and Catarina's inability to view herself as anything but an object of desire in "Catarina to Camoens," expose the hardships inherent in their position in the love narratives, as well as the fears and contradictions confronted by EBB in attempting to situate herself as a woman and a poet within the English poetic tradition.

As Gilbert and Gubar point out, literary works by women in the nineteenth century were often palimpsestic, with surface narratives that worked to "conceal or obscure deeper, less accessible (and less socially acceptable) levels of meaning" (73). EBB's ballads, which on the surface develop traditional love narratives presenting men and

women in roles consistent with societal expectations, function through layers of meaning undercutting the feminine virtues they seem to extol. Consequently, EBB brings into question the language of romance through which gendered roles are created, often masking, as A. Leighton remarked, "a real social injustice and inequality between the sexes" (96).

"The Romance of the Swan's Nest" examines romantic fantasy while questioning the values underlying the courtly tradition which creates such fantasies for women. The poem begins with a tone of light-hearted sensuality, evoking an atmosphere of freedom around Little Ellie. The poem is framed by a narrator, who describes Little Ellie's real world before and after the telling of her fantasy. Ellie's fantasy -- the dream of an imagined lover, both a knight and a nobleman, whom she will command to prove his courage and skill before granting him her love and knowledge of her most precious secret -- is narrated by Ellie herself.

The imagined lover's actions are the attributes most important to Little Ellie. There is little description of the knight's physical appearance in the poem. His actions are central to his worth as a man and a lover. Little Ellie imagines that

the lover shall be noble,
With an eye that takes the breath;
And the lute he plays upon
Shall strike ladies into trouble,
As his sword strikes men to death.
(ll. 26-30)

In the preceding passage the lover/knight is always removed to some degree from the actions and effects attributed to him. It is not he, but his "eye that takes the breath"; he may play the lute, but it is the lute itself that strikes "ladies into trouble,"

just as his sword is responsible for striking "men to death " This use of language makes objects, and not the lover himself, the grammatical subjects of the action The choice to distance the lover from his active role can be read as an impulse, symptomatic of Little Ellie's desire for the active role denied her by the concepts of chivalry and courtly love which construct her romantic fantasy As Mermin points out, Little Ellie's fantasy

is a fantasy of power, ambition, and fame, not simply of love But even in daydreams her ambition is displaced onto a man, and while she dreams she loses the one thing she does have the swan's nest among the reeds with which, in her fantasy, she will finally reward her knight. (1989, 94)

It is important to Little Ellie that her knight's lute "Shall strike ladies into trouble" (l.29) and that "the world must love and fear him / Whom I gift with heart and hand" (ll. 47-48). Even in her fantasy life, Little Ellie does not express a desire of her own, but one which is mediated by the value conferred upon her knight by others. In René Girard's terms, the desire Little Ellie experiences is triangular, "a desire according to Another, opposed to this desire according to Oneself that most of us pride ourselves on enjoying" (p. 4). In Little Ellie's imagination, the existence of a rival, either real or imagined, for the knight's affections elicits two simultaneous responses. On the one hand the notion arouses her, but on the other it is the source of some anxiety. Since the source of her power is her passive ability to attract, Little Ellie cannot do anything to win the knight's love. In the end Little Ellie cannot even give her love -- her lover must come and "take" it -- if Ellie is to triumph over her

rivals through an affirmation of her desirability Little Ellie does not actively love, but becomes the beloved object for her lover/knight in her own fantasy.

The only power allowed a woman in this discourse of courtly love is the power to command feats of courage from the lover and the power to defer rewarding the lover with her love. Little Ellie exercises both these powers in her fantasy, though she finds it difficult to remain silent, as her role requires. As she imagines sending her lover off to prove himself, she feels her "own lips tremble/With a yès" (ll. 50-51) that cannot be uttered.

Since her fantasy can not accommodate a position from which she can express her love and desire, the swan's nest among the reeds becomes a substitute for the love Ellie cannot speak. This is implied early in the poem when Little Ellie makes her gift of the swan's nest equivalent to the love felt by her suitor. She imagines how,

He shall love me without guile,
And to him I will discover
The swan's nest among the reeds.
(ll. 20-22)

The destruction of the swan's nest puts Ellie's fantasy in jeopardy. As Mermin suggests "while she dreams of annexing male power -- because presumably she dreams of it -- she loses her one treasure" (1989, 94). This one secret treasure is emblematic of the power Ellie attributes to herself in the context of the exchange system which dictates the courtship's progress. Feats of bravery are required by Ellie for her lover to win her hand, while she intends to give her lover the secret swan's nest in exchange for the love and the glory he brings her. In the end, she loses the

swan's nest, the one thing which was her own discovery and can thus be seen as emblematic of her own power and desire. It is taken from her, and with it she loses the feeling of freedom and sense of discovery evident at the outset of the poem. Material punishment may come in the destruction of the swan's nest, but the simultaneous disintegration of the atmosphere of freedom signifies a much greater loss--the loss of the symbol of her own potential empowerment through discovery. What is emphasized in the poem's conclusion is the disempowerment inherent in the emphasis placed on woman as a passive love object, central to the chivalric model which provides the foundation for Ellie's fantasy of romantic love.

The heroine in nineteenth century poetry had few appropriate ways of acting heroically. Heroic deeds were part of the masculine sphere of action, while heroines were left to passively await their lovers. Self-sacrifice, however, was one heroic act acceptable for heroines. The heroine/narrator of EBB's "Bertha in the Lane" demonstrates the heroism of self-sacrifice. After discovering that her fiancé loves her younger sister, Bertha, the speaker gives the wedding dress she had been preparing for her own wedding to Bertha. The sacrifice she is required to make is not just her earthly happiness, but her earthly life. Soon after the dress is completed the speaker asks to be lead to her bed and she sees her mother waiting to lead her into death. The narrator's self sacrifice does not seem completely willing, nor does it come without resentment. Though on the surface the narrator of "Bertha in the Lane" speaks of her love for Bertha and the qualities which make Bertha best suited to earthly happiness, the poem is interrupted by moments of tension which point to the

speaker's resentment at the outcome of her experience with love.

The narrator's self-sacrifice for Bertha's happiness is a form of behavior learned from and demanded by the mother. Before she makes the first appeal to her mother in heaven the narrator asks Bertha

Have I not been nigh a mother
To thy sweetness - tell me, Dear?
Have we not loved one another
Tenderly, from year to year,
Since our dying mother mild
Said with accents undefiled,
'Child, be mother to this child!'
(ll.29-35)

The narrator fills the role of mother left to her by her own mother and in doing so must, like the mother, "give up every thing" (Mermin, 1989, 92). However, the narrator exhibits a contradictory impulse which points to something other than "Love's divine self-abnegation" (l. 223) motivating her actions. Bertha must learn the details of her sister's suffering, while she is asked to comfort her with kisses and helps her prepare for death. The narrator tells of the day she learned of her fiancé Robert's love for Bertha. She describes the day in terms that burst with sexuality. The "[h]ills and vales did openly / Seem to heave and throb away" and the silence "[a]udibly did bud, and bud" (ll. 72-73, l. 77). This is contrasted to her own loss of a sense of sensuality prompted by the discovery that she does not have the love of her fiancé but only his "esteem" (l. 130). Like the flowers she carries, her life and sensuality also wither (XXII). All the subsequent descriptions of the two sisters align Bertha with robust sensuality and the narrator with fragile delicacy. The sister's resistance to the death which will finally eliminate any desire she has in the earthly

world points to the rejection of

the fate and the moral authority of the mother, whose claim to the life of the daughter is not based on love but on the duties of their shared womanliness. (Leighton, 66)

The self-sacrifice the speaker is ready to make is not intended to go unnoticed, neither by Bertha nor by Robert. The desire to have her self-sacrifice exhibited contradicts the image of the silent suffering woman the narrator seems to want to portray and points to a desire for some degree of control over a situation that allows her none. She wants control of the impression she will make after death, as well as on the unnamed visitor, presumably Robert, she expects throughout the poem. She gives directions regarding her shroud, the ring -- no doubt her engagement ring from Robert -- that should remain on her finger, and the rosemary which is to sweeten the air in the room. Thus she keeps her thoughts on the earthly world until the last two stanzas of the poem. By forcing her sister to listen to the details of Robert's betrayal, the speaker ensures this memory of her suffering will be ever present in the new lovers' union. The inappropriateness of the verbal play in the last line of the poem, "I aspire as I expire," as Helen Cooper points out "undercuts the seriousness of the poem" (72) reinforcing the sense of conflicting emotions present in the narrator's sacrifice. Although the surface narrative points to heaven as the speaker's aspiration, the narrative's underlying tension invites the reader to further question the narrator's seemingly easy acceptance of her fate and to wonder if what is aspired to is not a different kind of closure for her tale.

"Catarina to Camoens" was one of EBB's first poems to deal with sexual love.

As Mermin points out, it is important that in this first attempt to position herself as a poet within the tradition of love poetry EBB does not imitate a male poet, but chooses to write a response to the love poetry written by a man to his beloved, thus giving a voice to Catarina, a woman committed to silence by "both social and literary decorum" (1989, 103). EBB wrote the poem after reading a collection of poems translated by Viscount Strangford, whose introductory remarks recount

the love of Camoens, whom he depicts as a rather Byronic poet-wanderer-lover for Catarina, a lady of the Portuguese court whose family opposed his suit. "Portuguese delicacy," Stangford says, "suppressed all avowal of her passion," but on the day he was sent into exile she confessed her reciprocating love. Camoens went off to fight the Moors, lost one of his eyes in a sea battle, and lived a gallant and honourable life that ended in penury, disease, and death in an almshouse. He never saw Catarina again before she died at the age of twenty (Mermin, 1989, 103).

In EBB's poem Catarina, who is conscious of her approaching death, responds to the poem written by her absent lover/poet, Camoens. Catarina's imminent death is required for her to find the courage to express the love she had long felt for Camoens, but had kept hidden with her silence. Although it is a woman picking up the pen to take a place within the tradition of amatory poetry, she does not take a position of subject in this context, but continues to depict herself as the object of the male poet's desire.

Her desire for Camoens is not central to the poem she writes, whereas his desire for her is. The poem's constant refrain, "[s]weetest eyes, were ever seen," not only emphasizes the woman's position as object by focussing on her as viewed by her lover, but also ignores her ability to see. Consequently, the refrain's reference

to the poem written by Camoens places him at the root of Catarina's self perception. She can not speak of herself or her love for him without returning to his valorization of her beauty through his desire.

As a narrator, Catarina emphasizes her own desirability as the source of her power in the poem. She further underlines it by imagining herself as a mediator for the desire of other women for Camoens after her death:

When the palace ladies sitting
Round your gittern, shall have said,
'Poet, sing those verses written
For the lady who is dead,'
Will you tremble,
Yet dissemble, -
Or sing hoarse, with tears between,
'Sweetest eyes, were ever seen'?
(XIII)

The idea of overcoming rivals in winning the love of the man is an important factor in the development of Catarina's desire. In this example of triangular desire, Catarina's position as unattainable object of desire is made secure through her death. She also seems inspired, however, by the fact that her own desirability will serve to heighten the value of Camoens in the eyes of other women, thus ultimately making her a paradigm of attractiveness and further confirming her desirability.

Despite its repetition of the traditional dynamic of courtly love which positions the man as active subject and the woman as passive object, "Catarina to Camoens" is a re-visioning of this dynamic. By entering the traditional narrative of courtly love through a female narrator and therefore constructing it from a woman's point of view, EBB diverts attention from the romance and excitement characteristic of the

traditional courtly love poem and allows the frustration and powerlessness that accompany the woman's passive role to become apparent.

EBB's skill as a story teller was largely responsible for the success of the ballads in the 1844 collection. As with the other ballads in the collection, the impact of the narrative is extremely important in "Lady Geraldine's Courtship." This poem, subtitled "A Romance of the Age," is set in modern times, unlike the other ballads which are set in the past, most often in medieval times. The contemporary setting gives EBB more freedom in the development of the love plot, as she is not bound by limitations a medieval setting can impose. EBB uses a fairly simple plot in "Lady Geraldine's Courtship," placing significantly more emphasis on the development of the characters' feelings than she does in the other ballads. This focus allows her to explore the issues surrounding love and desire more thoroughly and begin to work towards the articulation of a specifically female amorous subjectivity.

"Lady Geraldine's Courtship" tells the story of Bertram, a low-born poet with democratic principles who falls in love with the noble and beautiful Lady Geraldine. Despite his belief in the equality of all men, Bertram can not believe that his suit could be taken seriously by the noble Geraldine and thus he takes the position of the traditional lover/poet, admiring and elevating the object of his desire, creating a Petrarchan ideal of perfection, but often disregarding Geraldine as a human woman. The climax of the poem comes when in the midst of an angry outburst, prompted by what Bertram imagines is an expression of hypocrisy by Lady Geraldine, he confesses his love for her. When hearing her respond with only his name, he faints

and is taken to his chambers. The bulk of the poem is in the form of a letter written by Bertram to a friend while he recovers from the fainting spell. The poem's conclusion, however, which describes Bertram's reaction to Lady Geraldine coming to his room to admit his love is reciprocated, is spoken by an omniscient narrator.

Both Bertram and Lady Geraldine can be considered lovers in this narrative. Bertram, like the traditional lover/sonneteer, hides his longing, expressing it only in verse that focuses on the superior qualities of Lady Geraldine and the unattainable nature of his love object. Despite the fact that Bertram attempts to fashion Lady Geraldine into the silent muse figure Petrarch made of Laura, Bertram is not capable of transforming Geraldine into an object of art. Though he compares her to mythological figures and aligns her with nature, he cannot ignore the fact that as much as he may see her as a piece of art, she creates art as well. This is most evident in Bertram's description of Geraldine's singing in which she is the singer as well as the song.

Oh, to see or hear her singing! scarce
I know which is divinest -
For her looks sing too - she modulates
her gestures on the tune;
And her mouth stirs with the song, like
song; and when the notes are finest,
'Tis the eyes that shoot out vocal light
and seem to swell them on.
(ll. 345-52)

Bertram's descriptions of Lady Geraldine foreground her desirable feminine appearance. The sensuous qualities he attributes to her seem unconscious, allowing Bertram to find her innocent of consciously arousing his desire. Consequently,

Bertram not only attempts to reduce Geraldine's desirability to her appearance, but in claiming desire as his own fails to recognize Lady Geraldine as subject of her own desire.

Bertram's attempt to make a Petrarchan Laura for a Petrarchan lover is undermined by the delight he expresses in conversations he has with Lady Geraldine in which they talk "upon all things" including "mankind in the abstract, which/Grows slowly into nature" (ll. 380-90). The woman he watches sing, the woman he converses with, seems too human to be the woman he describes at the outset of the poem, whom he views as nearer to the angels than the earth, when he claims,

Oh, she walked so high above me, she
appeared to my abasement,
In her lovely silken murmur, like an
angel clad in wings.
(ll. 37-40)

He does not seem content to speak only of the woman, as he returns again, near the end of his narrative, to praise Geraldine as a muse figure, erasing the qualities of the human woman to focus on his role as lover.

She was patient with my talking; and
I loved her, loved her, certes,
As I loved all heavenly objects, with
uplifted eyes and hands!
As I loved pure inspirations, loved the
graces, loved the virtues,
In Love content with writing his own
name on desert sands.
(ll. 425-32)

Though self-denigration in comparison to the beloved object is characteristic of the poet expressing his love, Bertram's elevation of Geraldine is also related to the

difference in their social positions. The "kingly blood" and "princely eye" Bertram attributes to Lady Geraldine function not only as signifiers of her noble status but of the power traditionally associated with a masculine role which in this case is Geraldine's. Her power to "threaten and command" goes beyond the beloved's power to command the lover, to extend or deny love, and is indicative of her ability to act.

Bertram, on the other hand, presents himself in a fashion inappropriate to either the role of courtly lover or passive feminine object. It is he who hides his love with silence, favouring to sit apart from company than to actively pay court to Lady Geraldine, while she coaxes him into a growing intimacy.

Convinced that Lady Geraldine would not return his love, Bertram often misinterprets her actions and reactions. When she blushes during the silence following her invitation to Bertram to be her guest at Wycombe Hall, he interprets it as shame, which her subsequent words indicate as embarrassment caused by others surrounding them. She claims to be

seeking
More distinction than these gentlemen
think worthy of my claim.
(ll. 110-12)

She then continues her invitation with words meant to praise Bertram, and consequently takes some of the traditional lover's role for herself. She praises him again, in fact Bertram admits that "her custom was to praise" him (l. 197) when they were in conversation. It is only when the narrative is taken over by the omniscient narrator that Geraldine's appropriation of elements of the Petrarchan lover's role no longer has to be deduced, but are plainly uncovered. She, too, questions her

worthiness to be beloved and questions Bertram if she really has won his love:

'Dost thou, Bertram, truly love me?
Is no woman far above me
Found more worthy of thy poet-heart
than such a one as I?'
(ll. 797-800)

Lady Geraldine's active pursuit of Bertram becomes obvious to the reader through Bertram's narrative though he hardly seems aware of it himself. Geraldine defies both the social convention delegating women to a passive role in love, as well as society's edict against women marrying into lower social stations. Barrett Browning, according to Glennis Stephenson "is quite clearly showing how unimportant social standing can become once a woman is permitted to feel normal sexual desire" (26). The inequity of social standing between the lovers is central to "Lady Geraldine's Courtship". Barrett Browning uses it to alter the traditional balance of power between men and women and, as a result, can begin to explore representations of women as active subjects pursuing the fulfillment of their own desires.

Despite the distortions which arise from Bertram's misinterpretations, with Geraldine EBB creates a heroine who does not hide her power and abilities, but uses them to seduce her beloved. When the party arrives at Wyncombe Hall, Geraldine takes them to view the grounds, leading them to a clearing where there is a statue, a rather unconventional representation of Silence. She proceeds to engage Bertram in a discussion on the nature and value of the symbol, but when their opinions are at odds she staunchly defends her own.

'Not so quickly,' she retorted, - 'I confess,
 where'er you go, you
 Find for things, names - shows for
 actions, and pure gold for honour clear;
 But when all is run to symbol in the
 Social, I will throw you
 The world's book which now reads dryly
 and sit down with Silence here.
 (ll. 272-265)

Geraldine may tremble in the presence of her lover like a traditional heroine, but she does not sacrifice her opinions when confronting his.

By attributing qualities generally distributed along strict gender lines to both Geraldine and Bertram, Barrett Browning manages to revise elements of the traditional amatory plot and begins to create one which makes room for a desiring female subject. In EBB's work, as Dorothy Mermin points out, there was an awareness that "she would have to play two opposing roles at one time -- both knight and damsel, both subject and object" (1986, 65). The necessity for double identification as a woman poet is mirrored in the characters of Geraldine and Bertram, and it is perhaps EBB's attempt "to split her identification between a male poet and a female object, to equalize the two figures and participate equally in both" (Mermin 1989, 110) that divests "Lady Geraldine's Courtship" of the "articulation and psychological tension that is generated by difference" (Mermin 1989, 111) in the other ballads.

In her use of the ballad genre EBB manages to question the traditional love plot, but she is not successful in revising it and articulating a feminine plot of love and desire. Even in "Lady Geraldine's Courtship" -- the only narrative which depicts a

heroine successfully pursuing her desires without suffering reprimand or death -- the active nature of Lady Geraldine's role must be deduced from the narrative spoken by Bertram. Geraldine is depicted as the object of Bertram's love, and though he may be the object of her implied pursuit, because she is never given the role of narrator -- her words are reported in Bertram's narrative -- Bertram is never positioned as an object vis-a-vis Lady Geraldine, but retains the position of subject. The male supremacy of the traditional love plot may be challenged, but it is not successfully revised.

It may have been the ballad and the tradition it carries which hindered the revisionary tendencies in EBB's work. The primary concentration on impersonal, non-reflective narrative that the genre requires limits the degree to which characters' thoughts and feelings can be explored and thus creates obstacles to an effective rewriting of the gendered scripts of the amatory plot. EBB's attempt to look at traditional love narratives from a woman's perspective in the ballads exposes the myths and fantasies on which they depend and thus can be considered, in Adrienne Rich's terms, "re-visions" since the woman's point of view exposes the frustration and the powerlessness of her position which had been hidden within traditional articulations of the love plot. Rich claims that

Re-vision -- the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction -- is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival. (167)

Rich also contends that the exercise of revisionary practice is essential, for "[U]ntil we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know

ourselves" (167). Part of this process is learning

to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have
ever known it, not to pass on a tradition, but to break its hold over us.
(186-7)

However, EBB was not completely successful in finding a way to use the ballad form to "re-vision" the role she criticized. It is not surprising that EBB turns away from the ballad form and looks to the sonnet, a genre which demands introspection and articulation of the self, when she embarks on the exploration of her own romantic and sexual desire in the *Sonnets from the Portuguese*.

In *Sonnets from the Portuguese* EBB uses the traditionally male form of the love sonnet in order to document her courtship with Robert Browning. By positioning the woman in the role of lover in the sonnet sequence, EBB must speak from outside the conventions of amorous expression, thus taking a revisionary stance vis a vis the genre. However, this configuration is further complicated as the addressee/love object is also a poet, who thus both 'requires' a voice and potentially threatens the poetic power of the speaker. EBB's anticipation of the beloved's reflections on her practice as poet, on the manner in which she expresses her love, positions him as critic, introducing a tension into the process of writing. The communication of feelings through the writing of poetry becomes secondary to their inscription, making an erotic object of the writing itself, which in turn, comes to stand in for the lover.

In choosing to write and eventually to publish a sonnet sequence, EBB was

choosing to position herself within a prestigious and almost exclusively male literary tradition. As Sandra L. Berman points out, the sonnet distinguishes itself with a play of repetitions and difference. Though Berman speaks of the formal elements of the sonnet -- the asymmetry of repetition characteristic of the sonnet's structure -- she also notes the importance of history and how repetition and difference over time have made the sonnet tradition. She emphasizes that

tradition actually implies space as well as time, difference and similarity. Over the course of time, the sonnet tradition gathers definitional space through conventions of exchange and complicity that make literary tradition as much a community or a state as a genealogical line. It gathers laws and ideologies. And, like the larger social state of which it is a part, literary tradition breeds its own discontents, seeking to revolutionize it. (7)

Shakespeare can be considered among the most notable "re-visionary" writers of the love sonnet for placing the young man in the position of desired object in many of his sonnets and thus altering the power dynamic between subject and object which generally underlies amatory verse. However, Shakespeare could do this from within the sonnet tradition. EBB, as a poet who was also a woman and already on the outside of a male dominated poetic tradition, had "to assert her right to use it at all" (Mermin, 144). EBB's *Sonnets from the Portuguese* attempt to integrate the notion of a woman as the subject of desire into the tradition of amatory verse, not alienate the expression of female desire from that tradition and entrench it in the margins.

In his study of the sonnet, *The Birth of the Modern Mind*, Paul Oppenheimer emphasizes that the sonnet's importance as a genre lies in the fact that it was the first poetic form not intended for performance, but to be read silently. Therefore he

claims that the sonnet "is the first lyric of self-consciousness, or of the self in conflict" (p.3). The rhymed fourteen line structure of the sonnet, which as Anne D. Ferry notes, demands "an especially complex interrelationship of structural units -- single lines, groups of four, groups of eight and six, couplets" (15), as well as a resolution of an argument within its single stanza, works to align the poetic voice of the sonnet more closely with the poet than other lyric forms and focuses attention on the working of the poet's mind. Sandra L. Berman notes in *The Sonnet Over Time*:

In the lyric, with its concentration of first person pronouns and deictics that together gesture towards a moment and source of utterance, the element the reader fictionalizes most powerfully is generally the poetic persona, the voice of the text. Presenting itself variously -- more or less distant, sincere, questioning, meditative -- this image of a lyric self serves to organize, even to ground with its apparent authority, the other images of the poem. As one poem follows the next in a lyric collection, this poetic persona establishes itself more fully in the reader's mind (5).

The scrutiny of values, being and ontology in the sonnet, which according to Oppenheimer "the form seemed to require" (p. 4), posed a threat to the status quo from the sonnet's very beginnings. There was no guarantee that the answers poets arrived at through self-reflections in the sonnet would "harmonize with Church teachings and what was generally known about the world" (4). However, inward experience and the inner self, two concepts important in the study of the sonnet, are not independent of the external experiences of the individual, but are in fact formed through the interplay of the individual and external reality.

In thinking about how outer realities work to shape inward experience, particularly in regard to the experience of romantic or sexual love, it is important to

note Foucault's ideas on sexuality, elaborated in *The History of Sexuality*. For Foucault sexuality is not a biological given, but a concept which must be verbalized and as such must be viewed as a construct of a society in a historically determined time and place.

Sexuality must not be thought of as a kind of natural given which power tries to hold in check, or as an obscure domain which knowledge tries gradually to uncover. It is the name that can be given to a historical construct: not a furtive reality that is difficult to grasp, but a great surface network in which the stimulation of bodies, the intensification of pleasures, the incitement of discourse, the formation of special knowledges, the strengthening of controls and resistances, are linked to one another, in accordance with a few major strategies of knowledge and power (105-6).

Foucault underlines knowledge and power as the two co-ordinates in discursive strategies. Discourse unites power and knowledge. In order to understand how the experience of sexuality is constructed through discourse, the functioning of knowledge and power in discourse must be understood. According to Bruce R. Smith, who distinguishes between Foucault's "special knowledges" and knowledge as a co-ordinate with power by equating the former with the French *connaissances* and the latter with *savoir* which he terms "ideology" to avoid confusion,

"Ideology" is one aspect of sex put into discourse; "power" is the other. The power implicit in a text is ideology put into action. It is a speaker exerting control over a listener, a writer exerting control over a reader. It is a listener or a reader internalizing the text and exerting control over himself. Power, in Foucault's view, is not just a matter of negative prohibitions, a central authority telling people what they may or may not do, what they may and may not feel. Power is also a matter of positive excitations: it is people, situations, and objects that a particular culture endows with erotic value (13).

Foucault makes it clear that one cannot look at discourse as simply divided

along the lines of a dominant or accepted discourse and marginal or dominated one, but that "the multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies" must be acknowledged. Strategies will vary and achieve different effects "according to who is speaking, his position of power, the institutional context in which he happens to be situated" (100). One must understand an individual's position vis-a-vis the dominant culture and the dominant discourse it produces, but it is equally important to grasp that the dominant discourse influences the structure of discursive strategies developed in opposition to it. "Discourse," for Foucault, "transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but it also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it" (101).

When speaking of sexuality Foucault does not explore the implications of the different positions constructed for men and women in society. By ignoring the impact of gender Foucault positions the male paradigm as the standard against which female experience is assessed. "*The construction of gender*," according to Teresa de Lauretis, "is the product and process both of representation and self-representation" (9). In the love sonnet tradition roles have been delineated along gender lines. As Leighton emphasizes, in the sonnet "there is a man, who speaks, and there is a the woman who is admired, described, cajoled and pleaded with from a distance" (p. 96). The sonnet then as a "technology of gender" has represented women as the passive objects of desire and men as active desiring subjects. "The experience of sexual desire at a given moment in history," according to Smith, "is shaped by the ideas people happen to entertain at that historical moment" (13). Thus for EBB, to

take on the position of amorous subject in her sonnet sequence was to learn to present herself as a woman in a way that she had not traditionally been represented. To present herself as the conscious subject in amorous verse was to position herself in opposition to the qualities Victorian society valued in women. The lack of consciousness regarding the self exhibited by woman in Victorian literature was a

sign of sexual innocence and moral worth... This moral commonplace, that only the woman without consciousness of self is sexually pure, tends to reinforce the status of the woman as an object of sexual appreciation rather than a subject (Leighton, 102).

In EBB's case, writing about her role as lover and poet in the sonnet form presented specific difficulties, which were related to her role as a woman and further complicated by the fact that her object of desire was a poet in his own right. For her to simply reverse the roles of subject and object, lover and beloved would be problematic, as it would deny the beloved the power to speak and would put his own subjectivity -- both amorous and poetic -- in jeopardy. However, for EBB to speak only from the position of the muse figure and the sonnet's traditional love object, would limit the expression of her desires as lover and poet. Mermin underlines EBB's strategy of doubling in writing poems in which "there are two poets" and "two poets' beloveds" (1989,130). EBB writes with the awareness that the object of her desire is a subject in his own right, and the space she creates for their love is what Jessica Benjamin would call an intersubjective space, which allows for the interaction of two autonomous subjects. Benjamin understands intersubjectivity in opposition to the intrapsychic mode which operates according to subject-object relations. The intersubjective mode, where two subjects meet, were both woman and

man can be subject, may point to a locus for woman's independent desire, a relationship to desire that is not represented by the phallus.
(93)

In EBB's sonnets the reflection on inward experience that the sonnet form demands will be the inward experience of a woman in love trying to express the inner conflict the situation creates, within a tradition which gives her no voice as a woman to express it. EBB's *Sonnets from the Portuguese* reflects the difference of female experience in love relationships and puts into question the universality of the male-centred reality on which the amatory poetic tradition was founded.

The last sonnet in EBB's sequence is the one which establishes Robert Browning, her beloved, as the intended audience of the *Sonnets from the Portuguese*. The poems are presented as a gift to her beloved in return for the flowers he had sent to represent his love. However, her poems are not to be accepted passively. She recognizes that he will read them not only as her beloved, interested in the emotions she is expressing, but as a poet as well, who will act as a critic of the poetic form her expression takes. She offers him her thoughts:

...which on warm and cold days I withdrew
From my heart's ground. Indeed, those beds and
 [bowers
Be overgrown with bitter weeds and rue,
And wait thy weeding; yet here's eglantine,
Here's ivy! - take them, as I used to do
Thy flowers, and keep them where they shall not
 pine.
Instruct thine eyes to keep their colours true,
And tell thy soul their roots are left in mine.
(44)

She asks him to do more than keep and cherish the gifts of her garden. The speaker

underlines her awareness of her beloved's subjectivity, encouraging him to "weed" through her garden of poems, in his role as poet and critic. By asking him to deal with her gifts as she has dealt with his, she reminds him that she, too, acts as a critic and interpreter of the poetic "flowers" he brings her. While she asks for his reaction, for him to assert his own voice, she preempts it by interpreting/identifying for him "Here's eglantine/Here's ivy". This sonnet, which acts as a dedication to the beloved, also functions to explain some of the tensions underlying the composition of *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, which stem from the need to protect the subjectivity of the beloved, whose own poems have aroused the speaker's love. However, to allow the beloved a voice in the *Sonnets* would threaten the speaker's own poetic voice.

When EBB compares herself as poet to her beloved, it is she who is "[a] poor, tired, wandering singer" (3), while he plays the "part of chief musician" (3). The disparity in these images underlines the distance traditionally placed between lover and beloved in amatory verse and conforms to the convention of the lover idealizing the beloved, but it also establishes both the lover and the beloved as poets and therefore potential speakers and active participants in the amorous plot. "Barrett Browning," Glennis Stephenson points out,

appropriates a number of sonnet conventions and adapts them in order to delineate a form of love quite different from that which the conventions would typically suggest (70).

This is true of the speaker's self-deprecation and her idealization of the beloved. The images that EBB uses to represent herself as a lover are hardly the kind of images that one would expect from a figure who is also conscious of herself as the object of

opposition to one another. It is love itself that overpowers the speaker, not the beloved. Thus, even in this opening sonnet, where EBB seems to be presenting herself as an object rather than a subject, she does not do so in the traditional manner. She is not the object of desire here, but subject to the force of love itself, which, it becomes clear as the sonnet sequence progresses, is a force she learns to share responsibility for. Contrary to the movement of the love letters, which were written at the same time the *Sonnets* were being composed, the *Sonnets* open with an image which recreates the paradigm of feminine masochism, by presenting the speaker as submitting to an erotically charged dominating force. However, the speaking subject comes to recognize the force of love as part of her own strength and works towards an equitable revision of the romantic dynamic.

The concept of love is transformed from its personification as an external force into a dynamic which exists between two lovers. In Sonnet 10 a sense of empowerment and self-transformation is already evident.

Yet, love, mere love, is beautiful indeed
And worthy of acceptation. Fire is bright,
Let temple burn, or flax; an equal light
Leaps in the flame from cedar-plank or weed:
And love is fire. And when I say at need
I love thee...mark!...I love thee - in thy sight
I stand transfigured, glorified aright,
With conscience of the new rays that proceed
Out of my face toward thine. There's nothing low
In love, when love the lowest: meanest creatures
Who love God, God accepts while loving so.
And what I feel, across the inferior features
Of what I am, doth flash itself, and show
How that great work of Love enhances Nature's.

(10)

As the sonnet sequence progresses, the speaker becomes more accustomed to her position as subject of desire, and comes to realize that her desire, her ability to feel and express love, is part of her strength and her beauty. It may be the beloved who aroused the speaker's desire and inspired "the new rays" that emanate from her, but these rays signal the arousal of qualities she already possessed, the qualities which initially drew her beloved to her. It is the beloved's kisses (38) which, falling on "this hand wherewith I write" (38), make it grow more "clean and white." The sensuality of the kisses is a purifying force enabling the speaker to write about her love. Her awareness of herself as an object of desire becomes a catalyst for her self-representation as the subject of desire, allowing her to speak of "My love, my own" (38).

As aware as the speaker is of her position as both subject and object in the dynamic of the amorous plot, she acknowledges that her beloved also plays these two roles. The representations of both speaker and beloved move between these two positions. In Sonnets 12 and 41 the speaker focuses on how her beloved can act as teacher and mentor. It is by his example that she has been shown how to love (12) and it is he who must "Instruct me how to thank thee!" (41). Yet, what is central to the speaker is that it is she who must

...shoot
My soul's full meaning into future years,
That they should give it utterance, and salute
Love that endures, from Life that disappears!

(41)

The speaker recognizes that she has gained a great deal in her relationship with her beloved and that still more can be achieved within it. Yet her active role in the development of her self, and perhaps more importantly, her function in giving love "utterance" -- expressing it through her poetry -- are the speaker's main concern.

The next sonnet also asks the beloved to take on the position of subject and "write me new my future's epigraph" (42), yet the sonnet sequence continues with EBB's best known declaration of love, in which the beloved has no physical presence and the speaker's concern is to express the limits and powers of her desire. "How do I love thee? Let me count the ways" (43), with its constant repetition of "I love thee," stresses the speaker's resolve to love, but blurs the actual object of that love, making the beloved less significant than the ability to love.

EBB asks her beloved to reclaim his subjectivity as a consequence of the threat her own poetic voice poses. Thus it is not in the recognition of weakness that she requires her beloved to act as subject, but in recognition of her own poetic strength. In Sonnet 29 the speaker's thoughts of the beloved threaten to overtake him

...as wild vines, about a tree,
Put out broad leaves, and soon there's nought to
[see
Except the straggling green which hides the wood.
(29)

The power of her desire and the expression of it in poetry is strong enough to undermine the subjectivity of the beloved and she commands him to

Renew thy presence as a strong tree should,
Rustle thy boughs and set thy trunk all bare,
And let these bands of greenery which insphere thee
Drop heavily down, - burst, shattered, everywhere!
(29)

Yet it is she in this case who commands and lets her desire be known, thus retaining her control and subjecthood while recognizing the subjectivity of her beloved. Similarly, in Sonnet 37 the speaker becomes aware of her power to make an object of her beloved and criticizes herself for this impulse. Through her overt self-criticism, a powerful image of the beloved is nonetheless developed and never completely undermined. She stresses that any image she creates cannot contain the complexity she recognizes in her beloved and any image is "a worthless counterfeit" of the beloved's "worthiest love" (37). The sonnet ends with the speaker comparing herself to "a shipwrecked Pagan" constructing monuments of false gods within a temple. However, the reader is left with the impact of the final image which represents the beloved as "a sculptured porpoise, gills a-snort/And vibrant tail" which simultaneously repositions him as an object of desire while underlining his own power and virility through the sexual strength behind the image itself

Distance is used metaphorically throughout the sonnet sequence to illustrate the difference between lover and beloved. However, love itself functions to eliminate distance as an obstacle. Distance then works to underline the strength of love itself. The speaker offers her self as muse to the lover/poet (17). But, in making this offer, she confounds the traditional distance which exists between poet and muse. She will not be the passive, elevated muse, but one who will serve his poetry

Antidotes
Of medicated music, answering for
Mankind's forlornest uses, thou canst pour
From thence into their ears. God's will devotes
Thine to such ends, and mine to wait on thine.
(17)

Elevation of the beloved comes in the form of praise of his poetry, of his position as poet and subject. Her offer to function as a kind of muse comes in the form of one of her own poems. She offers herself as an assistant to poetry, not as an inspiration for it, thus to some degree protecting the position of "poor, tired wandering singer" (3) which symbolizes the role of desiring subject in the amatory tradition.

Many early sonnets in the sequence are punctuated with the speaker's demands that the beloved move away and put distance between them. The lines "Stand further off then! go." (5), "Go from me." (6) and "Go farther!" emphasize the proximity of the two lovers and the speaker's struggle with the force of her representations of her own desire.

The two sonnets that describe the exchange of locks of hair between the lovers show most explicitly the equality the speaker finds essential for the development of a love relationship and her resolve to double the roles of subject and object necessary to establish it. Sonnet 28, in which EBB considers the implications of giving her lock of hair to Browning, make her acutely conscious of her position as beloved and her acceptance of this position seems contingent on Browning's recognition of himself as object of her desire (19) by reciprocating her gift with a lock of his own hair. This must be an equal exchange and she insists she will "barter curl for curl upon that mart" (19).

By the end of the sonnet sequence the poems are offered to the beloved as a gift, a gift equal to the poems he has previously given, and a gift which demands a response from the beloved in his roles as both lover and critic. EBB has established a relationship in the *Sonnets* that is characterized by the awareness that both the female poet and the male beloved function simultaneously in the roles of lover and beloved, subject and object. The image of love she creates is relational and intersubjective, dependent upon the interaction of two separate beings who recognize one another as amorous subjects.

Pauline: A Fragment of a Confession, written between October 22, 1832 and January of 1833, is one of Robert Browning's earliest published poems. The poem is not traditionally read for its amorous content, but for the poetic legacy left for the poet by Shelley. However, this early poem not only foreshadows generic transformations to occur in Browning's later work, but deals specifically with the conjunction of the poetic and the amorous.

RB's use of the lyric confession, a genre traditionally associated with the Romantic poets, as much as the content of the poem, which pays homage to Shelley as the "Sun-treader" and evaluates the influence of the older poet on the younger, clearly position RB as an inheritor of the Romantic tradition, particularly as it came to be represented by Shelley. However, even at this early period in his poetic career, Browning begins to differentiate himself from his Romantic predecessors.

For Shelley,

Poetry...may be defined to be 'the expression of the Imagination': and poetry is connate with the origins of man. Man is an instrument over which a series of external and internal impressions are driven, like the alternations of an ever-changing wind over an AEolian lyre, which move it by their motion to ever-changing melody. ("A Defense of Poetry", 480)

Poetry is characterized by a spontaneity which results from the forces which work upon man. Though these forces may work differently upon different men, the idea of an Absolute truth is central to Shelley's thoughts on what poetry is meant to express. "A poem," he claims, "is the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth" (485). It is

the creation of actions according to the unchangeable forms of human nature, as existing in the mind of the creator, which is itself the image of all other minds (485).

The poet's function becomes to uncover the true essence of man and the world he inhabits.

Poetry lifts the from the hidden beauty of the world, and makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar; it reproduces all that it represents, and the impersonations clothed in Elysian light stand thenceforward in the minds of those who have once contemplated them, as memorials of that gentle and exalted content which extends itself over all thoughts and actions with which it coexists (487).

The lyric confession could be considered a strange choice of genre for the young RB, the poet who came to be most closely associated with the dramatic monologue and considered a master at masking himself as the poet behind the revelations of the characters he creates therein. Clyde de L. Ryals, in his study entitled *Becoming Browning: The Poems and Plays of Robert Browning, 1833-1846*, emphasizes that

[a]s a genre the lyric confession was fraught with danger: first, he might reveal too much of himself and second, and probably more importantly, he might not gain sufficient distance from his putative speaker or narrator (9).

Yet, RB chose to write *Pauline* as a lyric confession, a genre which gained much of its popularity during the Romantic period. However, in *Pauline* the speaker's confession is not spontaneous, but planned. Furthermore, the poet-speaker does not attempt to unveil his true nature through his confession. In fact, in order to complete his confession the speaker does not unveil himself, but decides he "will tell/My state as though 'twere none of mine (ll. 585-6). This gesture of masking self-scrutiny

functions to doubly distance RB, writting in the voice of a young poet, from the thoughts expressed in the poem. According to Donald S. Hair, RB himself

skirts the question of self-revelation ("The present abortion [*Pauline*] was the first work of the Poet of the batch, who would have been more legitimately *myself* than most of the others...") and goes on to imply that he was portraying a poet as he should be (according to his youthful concept) and not as he himself was (12).

The purpose of the poet's confession is to explain how he came to this point in his development, a project which necessitates that he take the characteristics of his prior self, that he be "as I shall be no more" (l. 27). As Douglas Hair points out, in *Pauline* RB is beginning to explore "the development of the soul" (3-4), or as Clyde de L. Ryals puts it, the poem is concerned with "the principle of becoming," which "is at the very heart of his [RB's] thought and practice as a poet" (3). RB's focus on self-evolution puts him at odds with the "Romantics' notion of union of self and nature and the work of art as a revelation of the meeting of the self and the Absolute" (Ryals, 3). The beginnings of the bifurcated subject are also in evidence in *Pauline*, as Browning refuses to associate himself as poet with the speaking subject in the poem. Although the distinction between poet and speaker is not as strictly delineated as it is in RB's dramatic monologues, the beginnings of his dramatic impulse, and its implications in regard to the construction of subjectivity are in evidence in this early poem. Nonetheless, through a conscious evaluation of the influence of Shelley, the speaker is able to place himself within the literary tradition as a descendent of the Romantic poets, while establishing a path for his own literary endeavors which can distinguish him as a poet from his Romantic forefathers.

Pauline, the poet's beloved, is not only the addressee of the poem, but the poem's editor as well. In these two roles Pauline provides a framework for the writing of the poem. She also comes to represent the stability of love, a love the poet both desires and resists. His resistance is indicative of his drive toward the freedom needed for poetic endeavor represented by Shelley. His confession becomes a justification of his shortcomings as a lover to his beloved, as well as an explanation of his love for her. What becomes most evident is the unresolved struggle between the amorous and the poetic subject and the poet's inability to reconcile the impulse toward love with the impulse toward poetry.

In his confession the speaker describes himself as fundamentally active and searching. From his youth he adventured through books (ll. 317-325) and claims that he is

...made up of an intensest life,
Of a most clear idea of consciousness
Of self, distinct from all its qualities,
From all affections, passions, feelings, powers;
And thus far it exists, if tracked, in all:
But linked, in me, to self-supremacy,
Existing as a centre to all things,
Most potent to create and rule and call
Upon all things to minister to it;
And a principle of restlessness
Which would be all, have, see, know, taste, feel,
[all -
This is myself; and I should thus have been
Though gifted lower than the meanest soul.
(ll. 268-80)

The restlessness of his soul leads him to try to experience as much as possible to gain knowledge and attain the heights he imagines experienced by the poet he

modeled himself after. Shelley, the Sun-treader, provides the young poet with the initial impulse to explore the powers of his own imagination. However, before the speaker tells of his progress he evokes the image of the Sun-treader "as a star to men!" (l. 171), as an elevated, but fixed and eternal, figure whose accomplishments are well beyond the young poet's reach.

Sun-treader, life and light be thine for ever!
Thou art gone from us; years go by and spring
Gladdens and the young earth is beautiful,
Yet thy songs come not, other bards arise,
But none like thee: they stand, thy majesties,
Like mighty works which tell some spirit there
Hath sat regardless of neglect and scorn,
Till, its long task completed, it hath risen
And left us never to return, and all
Rush in to peer and praise when all in vain,
The air seems bright with thy past presence yet,
But thou art still for me as thou hast been
When I sat with thee as on a throne:
(ll. 151-164)

In positioning his poetic mentor in such an unreachable position, the poet can continue to respect and love the older poet, while justifying a movement away from the poetic project and concerns of his mentor. Already in this early portion of the poem, the poet implies his disillusion with his Romantic predecessor by displacing himself from his position near the throne of the Sun-treader, without deposing Shelley himself. Shelley for him embodies a purity he does not possess and thus he must compare himself negatively to the older poet.

For I have nought in common with him, shapes
Which followed him avoid me, and foul forms
Seek me, which ne'er could fasten on his mind;
And though I feel how low I am to him,
Yet I aim not even to catch a tone

Of harmonies he called profusely up;
So, one gleam still remains, although the last.'
Remember me who praise thee e'en with tears,
For never more shall I walk calm with thee;
(ll. 212-220)

The self-denigration the speaker expresses here seems much like the self-denigration of the traditional poet-lover, who debases himself in order to emphasize the purity and worth of his beloved muse. A dynamic similar to the one in evidence through courtly strategies is put into practice here. Self-abasement allows the poet to side-step the issue of having perhaps chosen to love an improper object, without having to question the choice, while defusing the power of the object by positioning it on an unattainable pedestal and fixing it with the silence of the traditional muse. As much as the path to self-discovery provided by Shelley is proven to be disappointing to the young poet-speaker, he cannot dismiss the drive toward experience and discovery of his own powers that the Sun-treader's influence initially provided.

Each disappointment seems to lead the speaker to a recognition of new powers in himself he had not been aware of before.

And of my powers, one springs up to save
From utter death a soul with such desire
Confined to clay - of powers the one
Which marks me - an imagination which
Has been a very angel, coming not
In fitful visions by beside me ever
And never failing me; so, though my mind
Forgets not, not a shred of life forgets,
Yet I can take a secret pride in calling
The dark past up to quell it regally.
(ll. 281-290)

His powers are dependent on freedom. A sense of himself as solitary is necessary to this freedom, which keeps him isolated and centred on the self in a way which does not admit another being. His focus is continually on his inner self and inner development. He first feels "a vague sense of power though folded up" (l. 341). He frees this power by singing in a way reminiscent of the images of the AEolian harp used by Shelley in his "Defense of Poetry" to emphasize the spontaneity of poetic creation.

...I had
An impulse but no yearning - only sang.
And first I sang as I in dream have seen
Music wait on a lyrist for some thought,
Yet singing to herself until it came.
(ll. 375-379)

The discovery of poetry leads to a recognition of the freedom the poet needs to explore his powers. When the poet begins to reflect on his self-realizations all his "powers/Burst out" (ll. 397-398) and he "dreamed not of restraint" (l. 398). Every period of disillusion seems to be accompanied by the emergence of new powers that keep the poet from being able to limit his direction or his "craving after knowledge" (l. 621). "I cannot chain my soul: it will not rest/In its clay prison, this most narrow sphere" (ll. 594-595) he claims, and thus finds his loss of faith and hope

...no decay, because new powers
Rose as old feelings left - wit, mockery,
Light-heartedness; for I had oft been sad,
Mistrusting my resolves, but now I cast
Hope joyously away: I laughed and said
'No more of this!' I must not think: at length
I looked again to see if all went well.

My powers were greater: as some temple seemed
My soul,
(ll. 462-470)

The development of the poet's soul seems to be a continuing expansion and ascent. Pauline, who is given her own voice in a footnote (implying her role as editor of the piece) believes that

il fait allusion à un certain examen qu'il fit autrefois de l'âme, ou plutôt de son âme, pour découvrir la suite des objets auquel il serait possible d'atteindre, et dont chacun une fois obtenu devait former une espèce de plateau d'où l'on pouvait apercevoir d'autres buts, d'autres projets, d'autres jouissances qui, à leur tour, devaient être surmontés.
(footnote to l. 811)

She makes no other comments in her role as editor. Her one footnote reflects only on her lover's aspiration as a poet, making no reference to his reflections on her and their relationship. Somewhat curiously, Pauline's commentary is in French. The poem gives no other indication of her background or other details about her life which are not of immediate importance to the poet. The use of French in the footnote implies another degree of distance between Pauline and the speaker. She is positioned further from the centre of the poet's life, which is focused on writing and language. Despite the language difference Pauline exhibits an understanding of her lover's desire to exceed each level attained in the progress of the poet's soul and to experience the power he feels he possesses. It is clear to her that in order to achieve this he requires the freedom to which he so often refers.

The young poet's understanding of his own power, however, is put into jeopardy by the power he attributes to those he loves. As Ryals notes

The speaker's relation to both Pauline and the Sun-treader involves a

concept of love and power: he can love only that to which he attributes power. This puts him in an anomalous position because he feels a strong sense of power within himself. (21)

He manages to contain the power of the Sun-treader by positioning Shelley in a sphere to which he has no access. The distance between the narrator and Pauline, however is not physically insurmountable.

Pauline's role as editor gives her the power to frame the confession and prepare it for publication, and it is with her image that the poet intends to frame his piece of work.

Look on this lay I dedicate to thee,
Which through thee I began, which thus I end,
Collecting the last gleams to strive to tell
How I am thine, and more than ever now
That I sink fast:
(ll. 870-874)

Her power to act as a frame for the work suggests the power of the romantic impulse to contain, and thus threaten the freedom needed for poetic expression. Romantic love as it is represented in the figure of Pauline is in direct opposition to the freedom the poet continually refers to as necessary to the development of his own powers. From her initial portrayal at the outset of the poem, Pauline and the kind of love she has for the poet are associated with images of protection and enclosure.

Pauline, mine own, bend o'er me - thy soft breast
Shall pant to mine - bend o'er me - thy sweet eyes,
And loosened hair and breathing lips, and arms
Drawing me to thee - these build up a screen
To shut me in with thee, and from all fear;
(ll. 1-5)

As much as the poet claims the need for freedom in his quest to attain the knowledge and experience necessary to fully realize his own powers, he also craves the stability he associates with his beloved objects, the Sun-treader and Pauline. He must believe that Pauline's love for him is unchanging. Thus, he represents it as static throughout the poem, contrasting it to his ever-changing self. Early in the poem the narrator claims,

I had been spared this shame if I had sat
by thee for ever from the first, in place
Of my wild dreams of beauty and of good,
(ll. 28-30)

Later, he comes back to the unchanging nature of Pauline's love for him.

Life's vanity, won by a word again
Into my own life - by one little word
Of this sweet friend who lives in loving me,
Lives strangely on my thoughts and looks and words,
As fathoms down some nameless ocean thing
In silent course of quietness and joy.
(ll. 237-242)

Pauline, unlike Shelley, is seen only in relation to the narrator. Even when he can offer no love, but only faith, she is characterized by her love for him (ll. 39-44). Throughout the poem the narrator resists the impulse to define himself in relation to Pauline, but attempts to define himself in autonomous terms. He places Pauline in the position Jessica Benjamin, in the article entitled "A Desire of One's Own: Psychoanalytic Feminism and Intersubjective Space," considers a traditional one. Referring to the ideas of Simone de Beauvoir, Benjamin claims that women, much like Pauline, are "trapped in immanence while men could heroically struggle for transcendence, for the personal glory that comes with sacrifice and valor" (79)

The narrator tries to contain Pauline's power through creating a muse figure out of her, thereby establishing a distance between them, which in certain instances places him in a position superior to her.

...I have her still,
With her delicious eyes as clear as heaven
When rain in a quick shower has beat down mist,
And clouds float white above like broods of swans.
How the blood lies upon her cheek, outspread
As thinned by kisses! only in her lips
It wells and pulses like a living thing,
And her neck looks like marble misted o'er
With love-breath, - a Pauline from heights above,
Stooping beneath me, looking up - one look
As I might kill her and be loved the more.
(ll. 892-902)

Pauline is seen as so static and unchanging in her love for the narrator that she can be described as more dead than alive, more like art than like a living, desiring being. Thus even though constantly in the act of loving, Pauline does not seem to desire. She does not become or develop; she simply is. However, Pauline's role as muse is often described more traditionally and the narrator elevates her by focusing on her purity (ll. 903-910) and questioning his worthiness of her (ll. 709-715). In both cases Pauline remains static and is not empowered with the transcendence which accompanies Shelley's elevation to the position of unattainable poetic model.

In Benjamin's terms, Pauline is the holding mother (91), to the child the narrator imagines himself to be. Early in the poem he wishes that Pauline had led him "[t]hrough youth" (ll. 36-7), much like he believed himself protected by God, whom he "[s]till trusted in a hand to lead me through/All danger" (ll. 307-308). Towards the end of the confession he returns to the image of himself as a child,

saying that he and Pauline "will go hand in hand,/I with thee even as a child - love's slave,/Looking no farther than his liege commands" (ll. 947-949). If Pauline does represent the holding mother, the feminine principal of nurture and control, the figure of Shelley seems to embody the impulse toward freedom, which Benjamin identifies with the image of the exciting father (91). What the Sun-treader represents, and what the narrator tries to emulate is "the idealization of a particular form of one-sided autonomy" which "permeates the Western notion of the individual as thinking subject, as explorer of the world" (Benjamin, 80).

Towards the end of the poem, the narrator is ready to accept the love Pauline has for him and desires a life with his beloved. He requires, however, that it be on his terms.

Pauline, come with me, see how I could build
A home for us, out of the world, in thought!
I am uplifted: fly with me, Pauline!
(ll. 729-731)

Pauline is invited to share in his experience of transcendence, though she is not allowed this experience on her own. According to Ryals, "Soul-making," the process the narrator elaborates in his confession to Pauline,

involves us in a moral problem. For the self is restless and aggressive in its attempts to increase the soul's wealth. As it encounters the not-self, it may be overcome and thus live only as a reflection of the object encountered; or it may attempt to absorb the not-self into its own orbit of value, thereby robbing the not-self of its freedom and distinctiveness. In the case of human encounter, the will of the one violates the will of the other. Considered morally, action of this sort must be condemned. Yet if the self does not engage in such activity, the soul can never grow; which is to say, the self can never be a soul - unless it engages in immoral conduct. It is a paradoxical situation, the self being damned if it does, damned if it doesn't (11).

Shelley is protected from appropriation into the narrator's "orbit of value" through his access to transcendence. Pauline, however, is "deprived of her own agency and desire" (Benjamin, 82) because the narrator's "absolute assertion of independence requires possessing and controlling the needed object" (82). Thus Pauline's

alien otherness is either assimilated or controlled, that her own subjectivity nowhere asserts itself in a way that could make his dependency upon her a conscious insult to his sense of freedom. (Benjamin, 80)

The narrator comes to a crisis point near the end of the confession where he loses faith in the song he tries to create and attempts to protect himself in the enclosure of Pauline's love.

...Words are wild and weak,
But what they would express is, - Leave me not,
Still sit by me with heating breast and hair
Loosened, be watching earnest by my side,
Turning my books or kissing me when I
Look up - like summer wind! Be still to me
A help to music's mystery which mind fails
To fathom, its solution, no mere clue!
(ll. 924-931)

One could say the subject in the poem is split between the desire for Pauline, which represents the desire for enclosure and the stability of love, and identification with Shelley, who represents individual autonomy and creative power. The conscious splitting of the poetic and erotic subject creates a tension which works to contain the subjectivity constituted through erotic discourse within the unchanging stability of the private/female sphere related to Pauline. Despite gestures to integrate himself into Pauline's world, the fact that the poem ends not with Pauline, but with the image of the Sun-treader, points to the narrator's continued determination to resist the

enclosure he identifies with romantic love, instead elevating the model of exploration and self-discovery initially represented by the elder poet.

...so, I would lean on thee!
Thou must be ever with me, most in gloom
If such must come, but chiefly when I die,
For I seem, dying, as one going in the dark
To fight a giant: but live thou for ever,
And be to all what thou hast been to me!
(ll. 1023-1028)

The traditional model of desire which is set up in *Pauline* is one that does not recognize the will and agency of the beloved, relegating her to fantasy and giving her the status of object. For the narrator in RB's poem there is a danger inherent in attempting to mix the worlds of love and poetry. Pauline who represents holding and enclosure is a threat to the freedom the narrator needs in order to achieve his goals as the poetic explorer. Moments of self doubt, when he questions his ability to live up to the expectations of his poetic father, lead him to reconsider the value of amorous or romantic desires. Shelley, on the other hand, represents the freedom needed to succeed as a poet. The threat represented by erotic desire inhibits the narrator from participating in both spheres simultaneously. He presents himself as either an aspiring lover or an aspiring poet, but never both at the same moment. As a result, the subject is split to allow for the movement between the private/feminine sphere represented by Pauline and the excitement and freedom of the public/masculine sphere of poetry.

"My Last Duchess", published in RB's *Dramatic Lyrics* (1842), and "Flight of

the Duchess" published in 1845 in *Dramatic Romances and Lyrics*, seem to present two different attempts to contain the amorous in artifice. In both cases the potential of the life force is repressed in an attempt to control its power through containment within a system of representation. Questioning erotic subjectivity, however, can only be viewed as incidental to each poem. The question of love in male/female relationships is never specifically addressed in either poem, despite the fact that both poems deal with marriage. Marriage is viewed only in economic terms. The Duchesses as representative of the life force in both poems are linked to poetic subjectivity; however, they never come to directly embody the transcendence of the poetic.

Perhaps one of RB's best known poems, "My Last Duchess" contrasts the life force embodied by the Duchess to the static nature of art, as it is represented by the Duke of Ferrara. For the Duke art is a possession, like his "nine-hundred-years-old name" (l. 33) and is important only as an indication of wealth and social position. The monologue is framed by two pieces of art: the portrait of the Duchess by Frà Pandolf and Neptune riding a seahorse, "[w]hich Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze" (l. 56). The emphasis is on the wealth these pieces of art represent, and on the notion of ownership itself.

As a painting the Duchess can be controlled by the Duke: as a living woman she could not be. She did not appreciate her position as his wife, and consequently his position as a husband, and was guilty of taking too much pleasure in the world around her. She was not discriminating:

Sir, 'twas all one! My favour at her breast,
 The dropping of the daylight in the West,
 The bough of cherries some officious fool
 Broke in the orchard for her, the white mule
 She rode with round the terrace -- all and each
 Would draw from her alike the approving speech,
 Or blush, at least. She thanked men, -- good! but
 [thanked
 Somehow -- I know not how -- as if she ranked
 My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name
 With anybody's gift.
 (ll. 25-34)

The Duke can control the Duchess, or least the viewing of her image in the portrait "(since none puts by/The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)", (ll. 9-10), and he assumes he can interpret her to the viewers he allows to see the painting. The ominous implication of the Duke's monologue, the possible murder of his "last Duchess" in order to successfully make an object out of her and create another indicator of his wealth, has equally ominous implications for the Count's daughter whose interests the interlocutor has come to represent. The Duke claims that the "fair daughter's self, as I avowed/At starting is my object" (ll. 52-53), implying that her future, too, is in jeopardy.

The Duke attempts to contain amorous desire in the most horrific fashion. What is ultimately critiqued in the poem, however, is not the Duke's denial of an independent subjectivity to his Duchess, but his attempt to create a static moment through art, thereby denying the power of individual aspiration and striving necessary to the creative act.

As Loy D. Martin points out in *Browning's Dramatic Monologues and the Post-Romantic Subject*, the moment of the poem is connected to both an implied past

and an implied future (99). The opening lines of the poem ("That's my last Duchess painted on the wall/Looking as if she were alive" [ll. 1-2]), imply a previous exchange of information creating the sense that the poem begins at the mid-point of a conversation. The last lines of the poem which speak of the Duke's prospective marriage and the negotiations regarding dowry that are about to begin elicit the future conversation not recorded in the monologue. The progressive aspect of the poem functions to display "The distinction between a verbal art form that can 'display' life in its 'rise and progress' and a plastic art that cannot 'catch' that flux" (Martin, 101). It is poetry, ultimately, that has the power to transcend, a power the Duchess does not possess.

In "Flight of the Duchess" the story of another Duke, who tries to repress the life force exhibited by his wife, is told. This man is not a lover of art, like the Duke of Ferrara, but is preoccupied with the recreation of Medieval ways of life. This engagement with the past hinders him from living in the present, making impossible the recognition of his wife's qualities, which are based on a joy in living. He represses her nature with the role he envisions for his wife, which contrasts directly with the Duchess's impulse toward life and activity.

Never in all the world such an one!
And here was plenty to be done,
And she that could do it, great or small,
She was to do nothing at all.
There was already tis man in his post,
 This in his station, and that in his office,
And the Duke's plan admitted a wife, at most,
 To meet his eye, with the other trophies,
Now outside the hall, now in it,
 To sit thus, stand thus, see and be seen,

At the proper place in the proper minute,
And die away the life between.
(ll. 180-91)

In this role the Duchess would become as much of an object defining the Duke's wealth and position as the Duke of Ferrara's portrait of his Duchess.

The Duke becomes angry with his Duchess when she refuses to "preside at the disemboweling" (l. 267) after his hunt and take her place as part of the Medieval ritual the Duke is enacting. This, in addition to her liveliness, become the Duchess' tragic fault in the Duke's eyes, which he perceives as childish stubbornness. To teach his wife sorrow he sends her to an old gypsy. However, it is this woman who offers the Duchess fulfillment in the form of an escape to a life which, though it will not be easy, will also not be limited by the objectifying roles set out for her by the Duke.

For there is probation to decree,
And many and long must the trials be
Thou shalt victoriously endure,
If that brow is true and those eyes are sure;
Like a jewel finder's fierce assay
Of the prize he dug from its mountain-tomb --
Let one vindicating ray
Leap out amid the anxious gloom,
And steel and fire have done their part
And the prize falls on its finder's heart;
So, trial after trial past,
Wilt though fall at the very last
Breathless, half in trance
With the thrill of the great deliverance,
Into our arms for evermore;
(ll. 598-612)

The gypsy offers her a life which includes both fulfillment through aspiration and the reward of love as part of the gypsy community. The Duchess, though she

does manage to escape the constraints of her role as the Duke's wife, must choose the alternative of an unstructured nomadic life with the gypsies. Her only choice is between stasis with the Duke or life on the margins.

EBB's attempts to revise the traditional romantic paradigm in the love ballad was not completely successful. Though the stories of love in EBB's ballads are told from a woman's point of view, the narrators are limited to playing out traditionally passive feminine roles in the love narratives, wherein they understand themselves and find power in romantic relationships only as objects of desire. The questioning of amorous subjectivity and a woman's position within the discourse of erotics enables EBB to move towards a re-writing of the gender-based romantic script in the *Sonnets from the Portuguese*. In the sonnet sequence the speaker moves from an image of herself as overpowered by love toward an understanding of herself as an amorous subject. The dynamic EBB creates in the *Sonnets* is not a simple reversal of feminine and masculine roles. She must account for the fact that her object of desire is also a poet, and therefore cannot be cast in the role of the silent muse.

RB's early work also reveals anxiety regarding the representation of the amorous subject. This anxiety, however, is not explicitly addressed. *Pauline* shows a subject split between the poles of amorous and poetic identity. RB juxtaposes the figure of Pauline, as embodiment of the amorous, with the freedom necessary for poetic production, represented in the figure of Shelley. In the later poems "My Last

Duchess" and "Flight of the Duchess," the traditional paradigm of male domination and female submission is operating. Amorous concerns are an extension of the need to display the source of the Dukes' power -- wealth and social position. The first Duchess can escape this living objectification only through death, after which her portrait replaces her as object. In "Flight of the Duchess" the Duchess escapes to a marginalized, though fulfilling life. She must live in obscurity, disconnected from society and her past, remembered only through legend.

POETIC LICENSE:
The Construction of Poetic Identity
in
Aurora Leigh
and
Men and Women

By articulating a woman poet's desire for her beloved in the *Sonnets from the Portuguese* EBB successfully develops a strong lyric voice for a female subject. Using the intimate narrative voice and the focus on the personal, characteristic of the lyric mode, EBB's *Sonnets* can explore desire and love, along with the complications and apparent contradictions which emerge with a perspective particular to a woman poet. However, the sonnet as a genre inhibits a further questioning issues the issues raised through the self-exploration elaborated in the *Sonnets from the Portuguese*. EBB's project in *Aurora Leigh* extends beyond the romantic self-questioning of the *Sonnets'* speaker to explicitly address and attempt to resolve the difficulties facing a woman poet in nineteenth century England who chooses to write and love. The dual focus on the poetic as well as the romantic in *Aurora Leigh* allows Susan Stanford Friedman, in her study of EBB and H.D.'s revisionary treatment of epic genre conventions, to point out the important links between the *Sonnets* and *Aurora Leigh*. Friedman writes:

The *Sonnets* focus directly on the central dilemma of Aurora's development. They also anticipate the aesthetics Aurora comes to advocate: an art that emerges out of contemporary experience, not the classics; out of a fully lived life, not imitation; out of a union of body and soul not abstraction. Learning a personal discourse from the intimate lyric freed Barrett Browning to develop the particular mode of the epic that *Aurora Leigh* represents. (208-9)

EBB's *Aurora Leigh*, published in 1856, is clearly about a woman who is a poet trying to find a way in which she can fulfill herself in both these roles. Thus, in this

epic poem the concerns of the poetic and the amorous subject are fused and problematized through the person of Aurora, woman and poet. In the attempt to re-evaluate female experience by making it the subject of *Aurora Leigh*, EBB grapples with objectives that run parallel to the three major tasks of feminism outlined by Jessica Benjamin. Benjamin feels these tasks are:

to redeem what has been devalued in women's domain, to conquer the territory that has been reserved to men, and to resolve and transcend the opposition between these spheres by reformulating the relationship between them. (78)

Furthermore, she feels that:

The structural tension between male and female categories and the difficulty of reformulating it are as pertinent to the problems of sexuality as to those of politics. (78).

In EBB's case the problems of poetics would have to be added to the list.

The task EBB sets out for herself in writing *Aurora Leigh* -- as well as for Aurora Leigh as hero of the poem -- can be understood as three-fold. First, the poem is to focus on the lived experiences of women. Second, the poem is to be written in the epic form, a form traditionally reserved for the telling of the heroic deeds of men by male poets, in order to redefine the heroic to incorporate the feminine and reclaim women's lives from the margins of epic tales. Finally, as a consequence of these two objectives, terms which define the male as subject and the female as object of male narrative must be re-negotiated in a way that would not simply reverse the roles played by male and female, but allow for a female subject as well as a male one.

EBB was already acknowledged as a fine lyric poet with the publication of

Poems (1844). The lyric was considered appropriate for a female poet because, as Friedman argues:

[The] central contrasts between epic and lyric norms evoke the wider gender codes that permeate western culture. The binary contrast between lyric and epic overlaps with the dualistic patterns of patriarchal ideology: masculine-feminine; public-private; objective-subjective; external-internal; action-emotion; conscious-unconscious; reasoned-spontaneous; national-individual; universal-particular; of history-outside history. Epic norms -- public, objective, universal, heroic -- coincide with western norms for the masculine. Lyric norms -- private, subjective, personal, emotional -- overlap with the concept of the feminine. (205)

The epic ranked very highly in the hierarchy of literary forms. According to Aristotle it was considered "second only to tragedy, and by many Renaissance critics as the highest of all genres" (Abrams, 51). M.H. Abrams defines the epic as

a work that meets at least the following criteria: it is a long narrative poem on a great and serious subject, told in an elevated style, and centered on a heroic or quasi-divine figure on whose actions depends the fate of a tribe, a nation or the human race. (51)

Use of the epic was essential for fulfilling the scope and intent of the project EBB outlined for herself in *Aurora Leigh*. However, its use by a female poet intent on writing the story of a writing woman's life was not unproblematic. The form allowed the male subject to play the hero with great tasks to perform which were important to all of humanity. For women the epic provided no active role. They "have mainly existed at the symbolic peripheries as static rewards or temptations, as allies or antagonists, as inspirations or nemeses" (Friedman, 205). Jessica Benjamin also recognizes the elevation of the epic project and its relationship to notions of

masculinity in western culture and how this has functioned to devalue concepts traditionally associated with femininity. Referring to Carol Gilligan's discussion of the *Aeneid*, Benjamin asserts that:

the notion of social responsibility conceived as duty or obligation has gone hand in hand with the representation of the self as separate, bounded and autonomous. This notion of sacrifice is inextricably associated with the idea that one is responsible only for one's self and that one can consider the web of immediate personal connections as less important than, for example, the abstract, universal cause of humanity, the founding of Rome, or the liberation of the oppressed. (78-79).

Friedman points to important cultural reasons to explain women's absence from the ranks of epic poets. She explains that:

For male poets, writing within the epic tradition has been an extension of a culturally granted masculine authority to generate philosophical, universal, cosmic, and heroic discourse. For women, no such cultural authority existed. (205).

Both Friedman and Benjamin uncover a direct relationship between poetic genre and gender. This relationship is articulated through genre conventions which directly mirror and reinforce established notions concerning gender roles. Thus, it is possible to understand poetic genre as among one of the many "technologies of gender" described by Teresa de Lauretis. Building on Foucault's explanation of sexuality as a "technology of sex," de Lauretis understands gender roles as constructed by sex/gender systems which place all individuals in one of two mutually exclusive categories based on biological sex, but not synonymous with it. Gender difference is constructed and upheld through a variety of cultural discourses, or "technologies of gender." To use de Lauretis' own words: "The construction of gender is both the

product and process of its representation" (5). The result is the maintenance of two spheres of social reality. The epic in its very definition supports gender-based distinctions, creating two oppositional spheres of social reality.

In order to achieve her objectives in *Aurora Leigh*, it was necessary for EBB to redefine the nature of the epic quest. Aurora does this through much of Book V of the poem, which can be viewed as something of a poetic manifesto. Aurora asserts the need for poetry to be contemporary and relevant to the modern age.

But poets should
Exert a double vision, should have eyes
To see near things as comprehensibly
As if afar they took their point of sight,
And distant things, as intimately deep,
As if they touched them. Let us strive for this.
I do distrust the poet who discerns
No character or glory in his times,
And trundles back his soul five hundred years,
Past moat and drawbridge, into a castle-court,
Oh not to sing of lizards or of toads
Alive i' the ditch there! -- 'twere excusable;
But of some black chief, half knight, half sheep-lifter
Some beauteous dame, half chattel and half queen
As dead as must be, for the greater part,
The poems made on their chivalric bones,
And that's no wonder: Death inherits death.

Nay, if there's room for poets in the world
A little overgrown, (I think there is)
Their sole work is to represent the age,
Their age, not Charlemagne's, -- this live, throbbing age,
That brawls, cheats, maddens, calculates, aspires,
And spends more passion, more heroic heat,
Betwixt the mirrors of its drawing-rooms,
Than Roland with his knights, at Roncesvalles.
(5:187-210)

It is clear that Aurora does not agree with the critics who claim "that epics

have died out/With Agamemnon" (5:141-42). Instead, she claims that the concept of what is heroic must change to accomodate the age and to include the "heroic heat/Betwixt the mirrors of its drawing-rooms" (5:208-9), just as EBB did in an early letter to RB outlining the project that came to be *Aurora Leigh*:

[M]y chief intention just now is the writing of a sort of novel-poem -- a poem as completely modern as "Geraldine's Courtship," running into the midst of our conventions, & rushing into drawing-rooms & and the like "where angels fear to tread"; & so, meeting face to face & without mask the Humanity of the age, & speaking the truth as I conceive of it, out plainly. That is my intention. (1:31)

Through an intensely sexual metaphor, which serves to define the contemporary age as feminine, it is implied that the recognition of the heroic in the contemporary age is linked to the recognition of the heroic in feminine narratives.

Never flinch,
But still, unscrupulously epic, catch
Upon a burning lava of a song,
The full-veined, heaving, double-breasted Age:
That, when the next shall come, the men of that
May touch the impress with reverent hand, and
say
'Behold, -- behold the paps we all have sucked!
That bosom seems to beat still, or at least
It sets ours beating. This is living art,
Which thus presents, and thus records true life.'
(5:218-27)

EBB's revisionary treatment of the traditionally masculine and most elevated form of poetry, the epic, mirrors Aurora's (as well as EBB's) eventually successful attempts to gain acceptance in predominantly male literary circles, not just as a writer, but as the most elevated of writers, a poet. What is at stake in a revisionary

position which attempts to reinterpret the epic in such a way that it can incorporate a woman's life in its narrative, is the nature of femininity itself. Friedman argues that

such rebellion carries with it an awareness of how this act violates cultural prescription and a fear that the consequence will be an irreconcilable separation between sexual and artistic identities. (205)

The narrative of the poem presents two different plot lines: the poetic and the amorous. Aurora becomes acutely aware that her vocation as poet is at odds with the private sphere to which women are delegated and she often reflects on both the sacrifices she must make in order to be a poet, and the difficulties being a woman imposes on her writing life. Poet and woman appear to be mutually exclusive categories. Aurora feels she must choose between the two roles despite her unhappiness at what she comes to view as sacrifice of the common woman's life. These two narrative threads intertwine throughout the poem, despite Aurora's attempts to separate them. The reconciliation of the concerns of the amorous and poetic subject in EBB's *Aurora Leigh* is an attempt to redefine the ideologically circumscribed private/female and male/public spheres.

During her early childhood in Italy, until the death of her father when she was thirteen -- a time, as Dorothy Mermin points out, "when gender distinctions come inexorably into play" (192) -- Aurora seemed relatively unencumbered by the limits that gender distinctions imposed on young girls. The posthumous portrait of her mother functions as one source of anxiety for the young Aurora; however, the portrait serves to create some ambiguity around gender. Despite the fact that she recognizes the portrait as that of her mother, there is no indication that she identifies herself with

it. Aurora regards the picture "half in terror, half/In adoration" (1:137-38) and claims that:

as I grew
In years I mixed, confused, unconsciously,
Whatever I last read or heard or dreamed,
Abhorrent, admirable, beautiful,
Pathetical, or ghastly, or grotesque,
With still that face...which did not therefore
change.
But kept the mystic level of all forms
And fears and admirations; was by turn
Ghost, fiend and angel, fairy, witch and sprite,--
A dauntless Muse who eyes a dreadful Fate,
A loving Psyche who loses sight of Love,
A still Medusa, with mild milky brows
All curdled and all clothed upon with snakes
Whose slime falls fast as sweat will; or, anon,
Our Lady of the Passion, stabbed with swords
Where the Babe sucked; or Lamia in her first
Moonlighted pallor, ere she shrunk and blinked,
And shuddering wriggled down to the unclean;
Or my own mother
(1:146-64)

What is indicated is a certain amount of confusion around femininity and motherhood, as Aurora is both attracted and repelled by the image of her own mother. This ambiguity takes on fictional proportions, as the image in the portrait depicts not only her own mother, but a wide range of literary representations of women. As Helen Cooper argues, it becomes "part of Aurora's task as a poet to test these representations against her own experience" (156).

Aurora identifies more closely with her father and is thought to resemble him: "I am like/They tell me, my dear father" (1:198-99). Her identification with him also includes their shared love of books and learning. Under her father's tutelage she

received the kind of education usually reserved for boys. It is among the books of her past that she finds comfort once she lives with her aunt in England after her father's death.

Among the giant fossils of my past,
Like some small nimble mouse between the ribs
Of a mastodon, I nibbled here and there
At this and that box, pulling through the gap,
In heats of terror, haste, victorious joy,
The first book first. And how I felt it beat
Under my pillow, in the morning's dark,
An hour before the sun would let me read!
My books! (1:836-44)

It is only in retrospect that she comes to understand the gender-based boundaries set up around learning and knowledge and consequently the transgressive nature of her early education. Reflecting on the education provided by her father she states:

Thus, my father gave;
And thus, as did the women formerly
By young Achilles, when they pinned the veil
Across the boy's audacious front, and swept
With tuneful laughs the silver-fretted rocks,
He wrapt his little daughter in his large
Man's doublet, careless did it fit or no.
(1:722-28)

She sees herself as a "mouse" and feels dwarfed by male clothing in relation to the education that books represent, as though her access to these things has become a source of anxiety. This is made apparent when the contrast between her English education overseen by her aunt, and the education provided by her father becomes evident to her, signaling her growing awareness of gender distinctions. The

fragmented and superficial nature of a woman's learning is described with a bitterness focused on the subservient position women are assigned through such an education:

I read a score of books on womanhood
To prove, if women do not think at all,
They may teach thinking (to a maiden aunt
Or else the author), -- books that boldly assert
Their right of comprehending husband's talk
When not too deep, and even of answering
With pretty "may it please you," or "so it is," --
Their rapid insight and fine aptitude,
Particular worth and general missionariness,
As long as they keep by the fire
And never say "no" when the world says "ay,"
For that is fatal, -- their angelic reach
Of virtue, chiefly used to sit and darn,
And fatten household sinners, -- their, in brief,
Potential faculty in everything
Of abdicating power in it: she owned
She liked a woman to be womanly,
And English women, she thanked God and sighed
(Some people always sigh in thanking God)
Were models to the universe.
(1:427-46)

Aurora's confrontation with Romney on the morning of her twentieth birthday functions to solidify her understanding of ideologically entrenched and culturally imposed gender roles. Their meeting begins when Aurora, crowned in ivy to symbolize her self-identification as a poet, is caught and paralyzed by Romney's gaze:

I stood there fixed,--
My arms up, like the caryatid, sole
Of some abolished temple, helplessly
Persistent in a gesture which derides
A former purpose.

(2:60-64)

As Helen Cooper emphasizes, "Romney's appearance transformed her from a woman actively crowning herself a poet to an art object for his gaze" (157). This image becomes symbolic of the position Romney takes in the exchange which precedes his marriage proposal. Echoing accepted notions of the role of Woman, Romney questions Aurora's potential capabilities as a poet, claiming that as a woman she is incapable of generalized, abstract thought and relates only to the personal.

-- Show me a tear
Wet as Cordelia's, in eyes bright as yours,
Because the world is mad. You cannot count,
That you should weep for this account, not you!
You weep for what you know. A red-haired child
Sick in fever, if you touch him once,
Though but so little as with a finger-tip,
Will set you weeping; but a million sick. . .
You could as soon weep for the rule of three
Or compound fractions. Therefore, this same world,
Uncomprehended by you, must remain
Uninfluenced by you. -- Women as you are,
Mere women, personal and passionate,
You give us doting mothers, and perfect wives,
Sublime Madonnas, and enduring saints!
We get no Christ from you, -- and verily
We shall not get a poet, in my mind.
(2:209-25)

He continues by emphasizing to Aurora what a woman poet's fate is at the hands of the critics who will trivialize her poetry as mere woman's verse:

You never can be satisfied with praise
Which men give women when they judge a book
Not as mere work but as mere women's work,
Expressing the comparative respect
Which means the absolute scorn. "oh, excellent,"

"What grace, what facile turns, what fluent sweeps,"
"What delicate discernment . . . almost thought!"
"The book does honour to the sex, we hold."
"Among our female authors we make room"
"For this fair writer, and congratulate"
"The country that produces in these times"
"Such women, competent to . . . spell "
(2:232-43)

Aurora recognizes that the inequity between men and women alluded to by Romney has its roots in the unequal access to experience which begins from the time children enter the sex/gender system. She counters by proclaiming that:

A woman's always younger than a man
At equal years, because she is disallowed
Maturing by the outdoor sun and air,
And kept in long-clothes past the age to walk.
Ah well, I know you men judge otherwise!
You think a woman ripens, as a peach,
In the cheeks chiefly. Pass it to me now;
I'm young in age, and younger still, I think,
As a woman.
(2:329-37)

When Romney asks Aurora to marry him and become his helpmate in his social project she will not accept his proposal because his vision of their shared life does not include her work, but only her participation in his. Romney offers:

"Ah, my sweet, come down,
And hand in hand we'll go where yours shall touch
These victims, one by one! till, one by one,
The formless, nameless trunk of every man
Shall seem to wear a head with hair you know
And every woman catch your mother's face
To melt you into passion."

(2:385-91)

Aurora responds with a firm statement confirming her beliefs in the need for equality between men and women, the value of the poet's project, her right to her vocation as poet and with it a life of her own outside the private/feminine sphere:

Whoever says
To a loyal woman, 'Love and work with me,'
Will get fair answers if the work and love,
Being good themselves, are good for her -- the best
She was born for.
(2:439-43)

But me your work
Is not the best for, -- nor your love the best,
Nor able to commend the kind of work
For love's sake merely. Ah, you force me, sir,
To be overbold in speaking of myself:
I too have my vocation, -- work to do,
The heavens and the earth have set me since I changed
My father's face for theirs, and, though your world
Were twice as wretched as you represent,
Most serious work, most necessary work
As any of the economists'.
(2:450-60)

Aurora recognizes that Romney desires her only as an object, and not as the subject of her own life. Her insistence on her right to a vocation of her own, equal in importance to Romney's, is equivalent to demanding the position of hero in her own story. This runs counter to the traditional paradigm for woman's ideal love outlined by Jessica Benjamin, whereby the girl's recognition of the father's possession of the phallus -- symbolic of power, separation and individuation -- and simultaneous

recognition of her lack of the phallus "[relegate] her to a passive envious relationship to father and phallus...in which the girl is deprived of her own agency and desire" (82). This disempowerment is considered "the hallmark of femininity" (82). Within this framework, a girl can only experience agency and desire vicariously, and therefore love is often "directed to a hero such as she herself would be" (89). Aurora refuses to hero worship and dismisses Romney in his proposed role as hero claiming the position of subject as her own.

However, faced with the force of cultural representations of women as passive objects, it is difficult for Aurora to integrate femininity into her self-identification as subject. She assumes the position of subject and poet by denying and repressing her desire for fulfillment as a woman. The apparent necessity of such a choice seems confirmed by the attitudes which surround her. Lady Waldemar clearly articulates the distinction between the artist and the woman:

You stand outside,
You artist women, of the common sex;
You share not with us, and exceed us so
Perhaps by what you're mulcted in, your hearts
Being starved to make your hearts: so run the old
Traditions of you.
(3:406-11)

Aurora herself compares herself to a man in order to assert herself as poet:

you shall not speak
To a printing woman who has lost her place
(The sweet safe corner of the household fire
Behind the heads of children), compliments,
As if she were a woman. We who have clipt
The curls before our eyes may see at least

As plain as men do. Speak out, man to man.
(5:1037-41)

After her aunt's death, Aurora can strike out on her own and live the life of a writing woman. Rejecting Romney's offer of financial independence in a scene that Mermin describes as "a comically legalistic argument (marked as an heroic battle by unusually formal epic similes [2:1120-24, 1162-68]," (187), Aurora moves to London and lives alone, supporting herself by her pen. However, Aurora is still not free of the constraints of womanhood. Denied the experience of men, not only must a woman be "always younger than a man/At equal years," (2:329-30), but Aurora also finds that she

[I] cannot see my road along this dark;
Nor can I creep and grope, as fits the dark,
For these foot-catching robes of womanhood.
(7:147-50)

Aurora resists submitting to the expectations imposed on women, as well as to the yearnings she defines as female. At this point her association of the feminine with the personal translates into a desire to repress her yearning for fulfillment in the personal sphere, as she cannot reconcile this desire with her desire for fulfillment as a poet. This results in her identification with a male subject position and a complicity in the devaluation of the feminine and the personal.

Yet, so, I will not. -- This vile woman's way
Of trailing garments shall not trip me up:
I'll have no traffic with the personal thought
In Art's pure temple. Must I work in vain,
Without the approbation of a man?
It cannot be; it shall not

(5:59-64)

Articulating an understanding of romantic relationships which evokes Benjamin's description of the hero worship inherent in a woman's fantasy of ideal love, Aurora sees romantic relationships as a dissolution of self for the woman:

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.
(5:1078-81)

Despite her success as a poet, Aurora questions her choice, finding that poetic success alone is not enough to alleviate her sense of isolation. She laments her loneliness, linking it directly with her choice of a life as a poet:

How dreary 'tis for women to sit still,
On winter nights by solitary fires,
And hear the nations praising them far off
Too far! ay praising our quick sense of love,
Our very heart of passionate womanhood,
Which could not beat so in the verse without
Being present also in the unkissed lips
And eyes undried because there's none to ask
The reason they grew moist.
(5:439-64)

However, it becomes clear that the loneliness Aurora experiences as a poet is linked to gender. Male poets do not have to make the choice between love and vocation that she has had to make and she envies male poets the love of mothers and wives she feels she is denied.

and so, Mark Gage,

I envy you your mother! -- and you, Graham,
Because you have a wife who loves you so,
She half forgets, at moments to be proud
Of being Graham's wife, until a friend observes,
'The boy here, has his father's massive brow,
Done small in wax..if we push back the curls.'
(5:534-40)

Aurora questions, at different points in her career, whether or not she would have been happier as "a common woman.../...less known and less left alone,/perhaps a better woman after all" (2:513-15). After success as a poet she claims that "[t]he end of woman (or of man I think)/Is not a book" (7:883-84). Thus, when she finds Marian in Paris with her child and offers to make a home with the two of them in Italy, what she in fact tries to do is find an ideal love with Marian as her hero.

"I am lonely in the world
And thou art lonely, and the child is half
An orphan. Come -- and henceforth thou and I
Being still together will not miss a friend,
Nor he a father, since two mothers shall
Make that up to him."
(7:120-25)

Marian's tale of abandonment, rape and motherhood becomes the subject of Aurora's poem, with Marian the story's hero. This is the contemporary tale that can run "into the midst of our conventions" and meet "face to face the Humanity of the age" (RB and EBB, 1:31) as EBB had intended. According to Helen Cooper:

Barrett Browning effects the transformation of woman as object into woman as subject via the stories of women who, like...Marian Erle, are outside the linguistic, social and political systems typified by middle class white men. Whereas Aurora, a middle-class woman, could assume a male identity as a poet, the slave and Marian are bound by

their biological destiny. Through the stories of such marginal women Barrett Browning and her creation Aurora Leigh, Identify with the female voice essential to their true maturation.

The writing of Marian's story and Aurora's desire to participate in a child's mothering indicate a readiness on Aurora's part to identify and come to some reconciliation with her femininity. It is in Marian the mother that Aurora looks for the ideal love and identification with a hero that she dismissed with her rejection of her cousin Romney on her twentieth birthday. But, in the same way that a woman's desire for agency, when transferred to the worship of a man who is seen as possessing the phallus and therefore authority and power, will be left unsatisfied, Aurora cannot be satisfied with the vicarious experience of motherhood through her ideal love of Marian. Despite her desire to mother Marian's child, Aurora cannot participate in the relationship between mother and child or deny her feeling of alienation.

Marian's good,
Gentle and loving, -- lets me hold the child,
Or drags him up the hills to find me flowers
And fill those vases, ere I'm quite awake, --
(7:p268)

Aurora begins to realize her dilemma, the double bind she must contend with if she cannot reformulate the roles of poet and woman. Aurora feels that she has failed as a poet, because as she says "I cannot find love: I only find/The rhyme for love" (5:895-96). This indicates failure as a poet because she does not feel she has managed to write from a life fully lived, but has only managed imitation. She

"forgot/No perfect artist is developed here/From any imperfect woman" (9:647-9).

She also feels that she has failed as a woman due to her inability to recognize her love for Romney and offer it to him:

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.
(7:184-88)

Friedman argues that,

Aurora's resounding feminist refusal [of Romney's marriage proposal] makes possible her success as an artist, but the development of her aesthetics is at odds with the choice between life and art that she was forced to make. At the pinnacle of success and loneliness in the Fifth Book, Aurora realizes that being a poet has cut her off from love, indeed from the very feeling that she has determined to be the life blood of living art. To be a poet who expresses the "burning lava of a song," she must be in touch with "true life," love and feeling. But to be a poet, she must renounce womanhood. (218)

EBB uses another image of dissolving to show Aurora in despair: unsatisfied with her poetic work and believing that she has lost Romney to Lady Waldemar, Aurora becomes incapable of any action. The image created around her loss of self recalls the earlier image of the dissolving pearls, but lacks its beauty.

I did not write, nor read, nor even think,
But sat absorbed amid the quickening glooms,
Most like some passive broken lump of salt
Dropped in by chance to a bowl of oenomei,
To spoil the drink a little and lose itself,
Dissolving slowly, slowly until lost.
(7:1306-11)

Romney's arrival at Aurora's house in Florence is preceded by a highly

eroticized description of twilight, which foreshadows the possibility of erotic union:

Gradually
The purple and transparent shadows slow
Had filled up the whole valley to the brim,
And flooded all the city, which you saw
As some drowned city in some enchanted sea,
Cut off from nature, -- drawing you 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
Their salt upon your lips.
(8:34-44)

In proposing an alternative model for the articulation of desire, Jessica Benjamin attempts to renegotiate the terms which define the male as subject, and the female as object. She outlines what she calls

[t]he intersubjective mode, where two subjects meet, where both woman and man can be subject, may point to a locus for women's independent desire, a relationship to desire that is not represented by the phallus. (92)

Essential to such an understanding of desire is the recognition of the other as a subject with an independent will and agency, which sets "a limit to the power of fantasy and self" (92). Benjamin feels that

the heightened awareness of both self and other, the reciprocal recognition that intensifies the self's freedom of expression is actually the goal of erotic union. (92)

On her twentieth birthday, Aurora rejected Romney's marriage proposal, precisely because he could not *recognize* her as a subject in her own right. Ten years earlier Romney's proposal could be seen in terms of phallic desire which

represents "the one-sided individuality of subject [Romney] meeting an object [Aurora]" (98). His views on poetry and women limited his ability to understand Aurora, letting him see her role as an adjunct to his life. Ten years later, blinded during the burning of his and Aurora's ancestral home, and having failed in attempts to put his social theories into practice, Romney comes to Italy a changed man. "Romney's blindness," according to Cooper, "means that Aurora is no longer object of his gaze" (184), and becomes symbolic of the changes that have taken place in his understanding of the world. Experience has altered him as much as it has altered Aurora. He has read Aurora's poetry and scorns his earlier notions.

"/ should push
 Aside, with male ferocious impudence
 The world's Aurora who had conned her part
 On the other side the leaf! Ignore her so,
 Because she was a woman and a queen,
 And had no beard to bristle through her song
 My teacher, who has taught me with a book."
 (8:327-87)

Recognizing her abilities, he simultaneously recognizes her subjectivity because the Aurora present in his fantasy as object can no longer exist. It allows him to see Aurora's poetic project differently. He does not marginalize it, or undervalue it as he did ten years earlier, but can see it is part of a larger project benefiting humanity. Thus, Aurora's life is understood as having epic significance, because her

clarion-blast will "blow class-walls level as Jericho's (9:932). Renewal in individual hearts will create "new dynasties of the race men;/Developed whence, shall grow spontaneously/New churches, new oeconomies, new laws/Admitting freedom, new societies." (9:945-48) (Mermin, 213)

The scene is set for a significant erotic union, in which both Aurora and Romney play equal roles and the relationship can take on the qualities of the intersubjective mode, "where subject meets subject" (Benjamin 98). Again, EBB uses an image which implies the dissolution of self to represent romantic union, but here losing oneself in the other poses no threat:

Could I see his face,
I wept so? Did I drop against his breast,
Or did his arms constrain me? Were my cheeks
Hot overflowed, with my tears, or his?
And which of our two large explosive hearts
So shook me? That I know not. There were words
That broke in utterance .. melted, in the fire;
Embrace, that was convulsion,..then a kiss..
As long and silent as the ecstatic night, --
And deep, deep, shuddering breaths, which meant
beyond
Whatever could be told by word or kiss.
(p.343)

Recognition as a subject is fundamental to the reconciliation of the poetic and amorous subject positions which is the goal of the quest EBB creates for Aurora. Through a union of equals with Romney, Aurora can fulfill her role as a poet, without sacrificing her life as a woman. What occurs however, is not a simple role reversal. Romney's position as subject is not put into question. He is not a static figure through the course of the narrative and it is his ability to change which is indicative, and in fact essential, to his subjectivity.

Through the narration of Marian's tale, as well as her own, Aurora has blurred the distinction between the private/female sphere and the public/male sphere. Romantic union with Romney results in the fusion of the erotic and poetic subject

positions, treated initially as mutually exclusive by Aurora. EBB succeeded in reevaluating the epic and the concept of the heroic to incorporate a story based on a woman's lived experience.

Aurora Leigh is clearly about a poet who is a woman trying to find a way in which she can fulfill herself in both roles, and make a life in which the woman and the poet can co-habit. Thus in this epic poem the concerns of the poetic subject and the amorous subject are fused, though problematized because the subjectivity is female. In EBB's poetry the work of gender ideology is explicitly addressed, as she is directly concerned with reconciling poetic and erotic life for the female subject. The work of ideology, although equally active in the construction of male identity, is less visible due to the successful naturalization of the male subject as universal. Thus for RB the question of poetic subjectivity is not problematized along gender lines. The manifestations of the investment of ideology in male gender identity must be deconstructed in order to identify the terms of male artistic identity.

The poems in RB's *Men and Women* were written after his marriage to Elizabeth Barrett. The collection, published in 1855, has been viewed as both RB's response to his wife's *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, as well as an assertion of "his artistic independence from EBB," which had to be achieved "without damaging the intimacy of their marriage" (Haigwood, 98). RB's poems from *Men and Women* can best be dealt with in two groups. First, those specifically about art and artists ("Fra Lippo Lippi", "Andrea del Sarto", "A Toccata of Galluppi's" and "How It Strikes a

Contemporary"); and second, the poems concerned with male/female relationships, of which there are two sub-groups, those narrated by women ("A Woman's Last Word" and "Any Wife to Any Husband") and those narrated by a male voice ("By the Fire-side", "Two in the Campagna" and "The Last Ride Together"). "In a Balcony" and "One Word More" are two other poems in the collection which, although they do not fit particularly well in either group of poems, are specifically relevant to the issues surrounding the construction of male identity with regard to poetic and amorous subjectivity.

In RB's *Men and Women* the concerns of the artistic and the lover/beloved are dealt with, for the most part, in separate poems. In contrast to EBB's *Aurora Leigh* which emphasizes the reconciliation of the concerns of the amorous and poetic subject to redefine the ideologically circumscribed private/female and public/male spheres, Browning tends to split the poetic and erotic subject, containing the amorous within the private sphere. An assessment of what is gendered as female and male would begin to expose the workings of ideology and the inscription of gender through the poetry of RB.

In a discussion regarding RB's use of irony, Clyde de L. Ryals emphasizes Browning's preoccupation with the philosophical irreconcilability of the fixate and infinite. Ryals asserts that RB's

belief in the principle of becoming marks him as one embracing philosophical irony, which is grounded on the denial of any absolute

order in the nature of human events as they occur in fertile abundance of the phenomenal world. According to Friedrich Schlegel, the foremost theoretician of philosophical irony, the essence of reality is not being, a substance in itself, but becoming. In his view infinity is an ever-growing center of fixate expressions and finitude a momentarily limited infinity...Reality is thus an interplay between the fixate and the infinite, and in the creative process everything is simultaneously itself and something other. (4)

Ryals, in keeping with the work of Schlegel, proceeds to equate the infinite and becoming with power whereas the fixate and being become associated with stability and love:

this conception of the universe entails a tension in the individual, who simultaneously desires order and coherence -- being -- and chaos and freedom -- becoming. The desire toward stability is usually experienced as love, the desire toward change as power. (4)

To equate finitude and being with the desire for stability and love aligns these concepts with the private/female sphere. Consequently, infinity and becoming in their relationship to freedom and power are aligned with the public masculine sphere. RB is not interested in negotiating a philosophical reconciliation of these concepts through his poetry, but he maintains, according to Ryals

that it is the function of the imagination not to reconcile opposites but to transcend them by accepting them as antinomies, thereby substituting for the Romantic's circle of enclosure an upward tending spiral. (3-4)

The dramatic monologue, the genre that has come to be most closely associated with Browning, develops the irony implicit in the double vision necessary to transcend the discrepancy evident in the simultaneous recognition of the fixate

and infinite. The genre is well suited to the maintenance of such tension since the development of a dramatic monologue is based on exposing discrepancies, and as Donald Hair points out, relies on the irony which

arises...: from the discrepancy between motives and action, from the discrepancy between what is said and what is meant by the speaker, between what is meant by the speaker and what is understood by the reader. (104)

RB's dramatic monologues combine the lyric and dramatic modes to create poems which focus on a particular moment in a character's life. However, this focus on a moment ought not to be confused with a desire for enclosure. As Loy D. Martin points out,

The ideological goal of the Victorian dramatic monologue is a transformation of the Romantic lyric. Its concept of homogeneity has shifted from one of wholeness to one of continuity. As the Romantic lyric perpetuates the illusion of discretely boundaried discourse, the dramatic monologue instantiates an open-ended discourse that only invokes traditional poetic devices of symmetry and closure ironically, in order to deny their traditional effects. (25)

Another important aspect of the dramatic monologue is the bifurcation of poet and speaking subject, or as Park Honan states, the genre depends on presenting a point of view by developing "a single discourse by one whose presence is indicated by the poet but who is not the poet himself" (quoted in Hair, p. 100). It is this characteristic RB refers to in a letter to EBB, a letter from which the title of *Men and Women* is presumably taken.

you do what I always wanted, hoped to do, and only seem now likely to do for the first time. You speak out, you, -- I only make men and women speak. (1:7)

What is characteristic of RB's strongest work, according to Hair, is his ability to "enter into, and try to understand, points of view not" his own (Hair, 102), while creating an intense irony through the play of discrepancies, the most complex of which is the irreconcilability of the infinite and the finite.

The four dramatic monologues which deal specifically with art and artists: "Fra Lippo Lippi", "Andrea del Sarto", "A Toccata of Galuppi's", and "How it Strikes a Contemporary", reflect on different aspects of creative production, which bring different obstacles or conflicting desires into play. However, each poem presents artistic success as dependent on freedom, on the aspiration toward the infinite.

"Fra Lippo Lippi" focuses on the incongruence between the artist's understanding of the value of his own work and the demands placed on him to conform to public tastes to gain respectability and to earn a living. In Lippo's case the argument is one of art theory and its relationship to theology, but the difficulty comes in Lippo's inability to reconcile his own ideas with the conventional views on art he has internalized. In Constance W. Hassett's view, "Lippo is polarized by the struggle between a spectral, but truly cogent Prior-within and an authentic, original Beast" (131).

Superficially, the implication is made that Lippo's view is the less worthy of the two. His monologue initially sets out to justify his enjoyment of earthly pleasures to a guard who "catches" him making his escape from the streets "[w]here sportive ladies leave their doors ajar" (l. 6). The street, however, is where Lippo finds freedom and the inspiration for his work in the form of "three slim shapes,/And a face

that looked up..." (ll. 59-60). The place where he produces his work is described in confining terms:

And I've been three weeks shut within my mew,
A-painting for the great man, saints and saints
And saints again. I could not paint all night--
Ouf! I leaned out of window for fresh air,
There came a hurry of little feet,
A sweep of lute-strings, laughs, and whiffs of
[song,--

(ll. 47-52)

Lippo feels compelled to explain his beastly nature to the disapproving guard and justify the incongruity of a monk who seeks the pleasures of the flesh through a socio-economic rationale. "Come, what am I a beast for?" (l. 80), he asks the guard before beginning his life story:

I was a baby when my mother died
And father died and left me in the street.
I starved there, God knows how, a year or two
On fig-skins, melon-pairings, rinds and shucks,
Refuse and rubbish.
(ll. 81-85)

Entering the monastery was not a choice between earthly pleasures and spiritual fulfillment, but a choice between starvation and life. In return for life Lippo had only to renounce the "Palace, farm, villa, shop and banking-house," to which he had no access in the first place. For Lippo, the need to explain his attraction to the street and the life he finds there is parallel to if not symbolic of his need to confirm the value of his art, which is based in the belief that through realistic representation of

the flesh the spiritual side or soul of the subject can be better represented.

Can't I take breath and try to add life's flash,
And then add soul and heighten them threefold?
Or say there's beauty with no soul at all --
(I never saw it -- put the case the same --)
If you get simple beauty and naught else,
You get about the best thing God invents:
That's somewhat: and you'll find the soul you have
[missed,
Within yourself, when you return him thanks.
(ll. 213-20)

His own description of his painting, despite his remarks on the awe the likenesses inspired among the other monks, are linked to Lippo's morally questionable descent into the streets through the emphasis on downward, earth directed vision. There is the "boy who *stoops* to pat the dog!" (l. 169, emphasis added) and

...good old gossips waiting to confess
The cribs of their barrel-*droppings*, candle
ends,
To the breathless fellow at the *altar-foot*,
Fresh from his murder, safe and *sitting* there
(ll. 147-50, emphasis added)

This reading of his own work betrays Lippo's own doubts as to the spiritual value of his work, despite his defense of his own artistic theories. His work, despite its technical quality, elicits horror from the Prior.

.....it's devil's-game!
Your business is not to catch men with show,
With homage to the perishable clay,
But lift them over it, ignore it all
Make them forget there's such a thing as flesh.
Your business is to paint the souls of men --
Man's soul, and it's a fire, smoke...no it's not..
It's a vapour done up like a new-born babe --
(In that shape when you die it leaves your mouth)
it's... well, what matters talking, it's the soul!
Give us no more body than shows soul!
(ll. 178-88)

Lippo's self-correction, indicated with the "no it's not" (l. 184), and the parenthesis he adds to explain the significance of vapour (l. 186), marks a moment in his recounting of the Prior's reaction, when Lippo catches himself revealing his internalized beliefs. As he says "And yet the old schooling sticks, the old grave eyes/Are peeping o'er my shoulder as I work,/The heads shake still -- 'It's art's decline my son!" (ll.231-33).

The tension between the two contradictory forces operating in Lippo, the confining internal Prior, and the freedom-loving Beast, is evident in Lippo's rage which takes two forms. While he paints to please the Prior his rage is internalized. "I swallow my rage" (l. 242), he says before describing himself in terms which make him sound somewhat beastly, "[c]lench my teeth, suck my lips in tight, and paint" (ll. 243-44). The outward expression of his rage comes in his pleasure:

And my whole soul revolves, the cup runs over,
The world and live's too big to pass for a dream,
And I do these wild things in sheer despite,
And play the fooleries you catch me at,

In pure rage!
(ll. 250-54)

Lippo comes to no conclusion by the end of his monologue. He is no closer to bridging the gap between his desire to incorporate the earthly into his art and the accepted notion, which is held by his patrons, that reminders of fleshly existence sway one from spiritual aspirations. To his credit, however, he does come to recognize the irreconcilable split in his own artistic identity and seems at the end prepared to battle with the contradictions it creates.

Lippo is not directly concerned with questioning amorous subjectivity. His preoccupation with the earthly has less to do with love than it does with experience and its relationship to art. In "Andrea del Sarto," however, the conflict between art and love seems to be more prominent, if not focal. But, Andrea is a failed artist, and what he presents as a choice between art and love is in effect a choice between the freedom to aspire and a desire for security and enclosure which masquerades as love. As Loy D. Martin points out,

Andrea is enclosed within the prison of himself and cannot "reach," as other painters do, whether toward others or toward God. This much at least he knows about himself... (141-42)

Andrea's relationship to his wife mirrors the relationship of his art and the world. Andrea requires only Lucrezia's cold, perfect beauty, he does not require any real response from her or communication with her. Similarly, the technical perfection of Andrea's art does not elicit any response from the world. Never, in the course of

his monologue, does he question the way his art functions, but convinces himself that he has sacrificed the possibility of recognition for his talent for the love of Lucrezia, who has proven to be an inadequate muse:

Had you enjoined them on me, given me soul,
Nay, Love, you did give all I asked, I think --
More than I merit, yes, by many times.
But had you -- oh, with the same perfect brow,
And perfect eyes, and more than perfect mouth,
And low voice my soul hears, as a bird
The fowler's pipe, and follows to the snare --
Had you, with these the same, but brought a mind!
Some women do so. Had the mouth there urged
'God and the glory! never care for gain.
The present by the future, what is that?
Live for fame, side by side with Agnolo!
Raphael is waiting: up to God, all three!'
I might have done it for you.
(ll. 118-32)

Andrea did not make a choice between financial "gain" through art for Lucrezia and "glory" through art as this passage implies. Even Andrea must acknowledge that "incentives come from the soul's self" and not from outward motivations, yet he continues to represent his failure as a painter as a sacrifice to love.

He makes no significant connection to Lucrezia through the monologue. The first lines of the poem address her directly, yet the reader is not given any indication as to her response. Similarly, all the questions he asks her are rhetorical. When recounting his days in the French court Andrea asks "A good time, was it not, my kingly days?" (l. 165). The implied answer is yes, yet Andrea's comment about Lucrezia's restlessness make this response questionable. He leaves the court

because "You called me, and I came home to your heart" (l. 172). Though his talent was promising, that promise was not fulfilled under the patronage of Francis. Andrea later reveals that he closed the door to any future benefits from this relationship by stealing money from Francis. "I took his coin, was tempted and complied" (l. 248), he admits.

The two inter-personal relationships that come to define Andrea, the relationship with his wife and with Francis, are both characterized by the painter's inability to make any significant connection. Similarly, his art, despite its perfection, does not illicit any significant reaction from the world. He paints "from myself and to myself" (l. 90), in isolation from the world around him and cannot capture any life in paintings characterized by a monotone quality, by "A common grayness" that "silvers everything, --" (l. 35). He recognizes that one must aspire, that "a man's reach should exceed his grasp,/Or what's a heaven for?" (ll. 97-98), but, "All is silver-gray/Placid and perfect with my art" (ll. 98-99). Other painters to whom he compares himself may not have his technical ability, yet their art communicates something to the viewer which his art, much like Andrea himself, cannot do.

Andrea's pretended choice between the French court and love for Lucrezia is not a choice between the freedom to produce art and the limits imposed by love. His move is from one situation characterized by enclosure to another. Each became, in its own way, a justification for Andrea's own shortcomings. At court Andrea was "*In* that humane monarch's golden look, --" (l. 153, emphasis added), and recalls sitting with the King who had "One arm about my shoulder, round my

neck,/ The jingle of his gold chain in my ear," (ll. 156-57). The situation he moved to in leaving France for Lucrezia is similarly described in terms of enclosure. He does not "leave home all day" (l. 145), and claims that "I'm the weak-eyed bat no sun should tempt/Out of the grange whose four walls make his world." (ll.169-70). He even imagines heaven with his wife at his side as "[f]our great walls in the New Jerusalem,/Meted on each side by the angels' reed," (ll. 261-62), where he expects one more chance to fulfill the promise he did not strive to fulfill in his earthly life.

Andrea makes no choices between an identity as an artist and an identity as a lover. He is a failure in both roles. He has a wife, who is unfaithful as he implies by calling her "My face, my moon, my everybody's moon" (l. 29), and makes clear toward the close of the poem by asking "Ah, but what does he,/The Cousin! what does he to please you more?" (ll. 242-43). He abuses the opportunity he had for artistic success and can only fantasize about "How I could paint, were I but back in France," (l. 229), unwilling to acknowledge that he has made any artistic attainment impossible through his own inability to aspire beyond the cloistered environments he can feel safe in. His artistic failure is not a result of the stability of love, but of his own inability to strive toward achievement.

"A Toccata of Galuppi's" and "How it Strikes a Contemporary" differ from "Fra Lippo Lippi" and "Andrea del Sarto" in that neither of the former poems is spoken in the voice of the artist represented, but by an individual reflecting upon the life and work of the artist. In "A Toccata of Galuppi's" the speaker attempts to address the musician, looking for answers to his questions in the music. He desires to come to

an understanding of the workings of art. The speaker in "How It Strikes a Contemporary" places himself at a distance from the poet's life he attempts to describe and regards his subject as more of an oddity, as a being separate from normal life.

"A Toccata of Galuppi's" questions the function of art and its relationship to the aspiration toward the infinite in the speaker's attempt to neutralize death. The speaker addresses Galuppi through his music, as though he were still living; however, his musings lead him to consider the first auditors of the Toccata he is listening to. In stanza VII he imagines what the music must have communicated to the men and women of Galuppi's Venice.

What? Those lesser thirds so plaintive, sixths
[diminished, sigh on sigh,
Told them something? Those suspensions, those
[solutions -- 'Must we die?'
Those commiserating sevenths -- 'Life might last we
[can but try!'
(ll. 19-21)

Realizing the fact that those men and women are now dead, the speaker comes to a realization of his own mortality. His attitude toward the music changes. He relates to it sensually and not intellectually and Galuppi's "cold music" makes him "creep through every nerve" (l. 33). The subject becomes split between the achievement of immortality through art and the realities of mortal existence. Neither, in the end, negates the other. The speaker, despite the cold note of mortality that has entered his musings, still feels that "[b]utterflies may dread extinction, -- you'll

not die, it cannot be!" (l. 39), yet this does not alter the fact that the speaker wonders "What of soul was left, I wonder, when the kissing had to stop?" (l. 42).

The musing of the speaker in "How It Strikes a Contemporary" is much less complex and interesting primarily because this poem provides the only direct representation of a poet in this collection. The poet is described as outside the lives of every day people. He is an observer of life, not a participant:

He took such cognizance of men and things,
If any beat a horse, you felt he saw;
If any cursed a woman, he took note;
Yet stared at nobody, -- you stared at him,
And found, less to your pleasure than surprise,
He seemed to know you and expect as much,
(ll. 30-35)

The poet figure in the poem fits quite well with Browning's description of objective poetry, in that observation seems to be at the centre of his poetic activity. However, this activity is presented as somewhat threatening. The poem's speaker claims "We had among us, not so much a spy,/As a recording chief-inquisitor" (ll. 38-39), who reported to the King on the activities of his subjects.

The speaker seems to have some degree of fascination in the life of the poet, yet the whole poem is set off by the last lines, which seem to undercut the poet's value and the poem itself. "Well, I could never write a verse, -- could you?/ Let's to the Prado and make the most of time" (l. 114-15), the speaker says to end the poem, simultaneously distancing himself from the act of writing poetry as well as the life of seclusion it represents.

"Browning's theory of art", according to Samuel L. Chell,

follows closely..., upon his view of love, both of which are based on his understanding of time as duration, of continuous becoming. The function of art is to imitate the dynamic, purposeful whole which, through an aspiring love may be directly experienced. To the artist love comes first; one must live duration in order to express it. (84)

RB's attitude toward love in the poems that deal with male/female relationships in *Men and Women* is certainly similar to his attitude toward the production of art. Love is a spiritual concern; it can elevate a person to a more profound level of experience. However, love and art are nonetheless two *separate* concerns for Browning. Art and artistic production are associated with the infinite and are part of the process of *becoming* associated with the male/public sphere, whereas love is aligned with stability and the finite, and part of the female/private sphere.

The speaking subject's struggle and the source of irony in many of RB's love poems results from the fact that,

the desire for coherence in the system of social and natural ties arises only in concert with the desire for the individual autonomy, or "freedom," of the speaking subject, and the two stand in a relation of radical contradiction. (Martin, 25)

In order to explore the implications of gender in RB's construction of amorous identity in his poems the differing presentation of female and male speaking subjects in the love poems must be taken into account. A different relationship to desire is

articulated by the women and men who speak in Browning's poems.

"A Woman's Last Word" and "Any Wife to Any Husband," the two poems with female speakers, are poems which attempt to appease doubts about love and romantic relationships. Though "A Woman's Last Word" seems to offer appeasement to a husband after an argument, it becomes clear that the speaker does not so much want to soothe her partner, but desires to reconcile herself to her position within her marriage. She seems conciliatory and loving, however her real desire seems to be escape through sleep. In the first stanza of the poem the woman says,

Let's contend no more, Love,
Strive nor weep:
All be as before, Love,
-Only sleep!
(ll. 1-4)

The following stanzas, however, prove that nothing can "be as before" since the words have been spoken and the threat that disharmony poses to the relationship has been uncovered. It is too late to "Hush and hide the talking," (l. 11). The recognition of the threat to the Eden the two lovers have created enters the poem in the form of the "serpent's tooth" (l. 15) before the speaker's warning in the following stanza:

Where the apple reddens
Never pry --
Lest we lose our Edens,

Eve and I.

Eve has lost her Eden, and the serpent has already been acknowledged within the boundaries of the garden of the speaker's relationship. She still desires the enclosure and security of love implied in the garden of Eden image. Her demands requiring her husband be "a god" (l. 21), and "a man and fold me/With thine arm!" (ll. 22-23) point to the fact that this desired security does not exist in the relationship and will not unless she learns to sublimate herself to his desire and "speak thy speech, Love,/Think thy thought --" (ll. 27-28).

Superficially the speaker in the poem seems willing to do what is required of her for this relationship to continue, but the repressed hostility hidden by her conciliatory tone throughout the poem becomes clear in her deferral of the promised gift of her "flesh and spirit" (l. 31). Before she can open herself to her husband, she must "bury sorrow/Out of sight:" (ll. 35-36). In the end, it is the speaker who is weeping and proves that it is she who needs to be soothed. The relationship can continue only at the expense of the speaker's desires and autonomy. She is torn between the expression of honest emotion, which would be the striving and weeping of the first stanza and which puts the lovers at odds, and the abdication of will which would lead to the security of love -- albeit a superficial and false security.

In "Any Wife to Any Husband" the speaker questions the strength of the foundations of the love she and her husband share. The source of the woman's anxiety is the transient nature of physical beauty, and the heightened potential for her husband's infidelity with the fading of her beauty. Her soul will not change with

her physical appearance because "the soul/Whence love comes, all ravage leaves that whole;/Vainly the flesh fades; soul makes all things new." (ll. 16-18)

Despite her concern with change in regard to her physical appearance, she is associated with stability and the unchanging source of love. She proves her constancy by claiming that the inability to see her beloved would not alter her love, nor would her eyes be able to stop reflecting that love back at her husband. Her physical changeability becomes the proof of her inner constancy:

It would not be because my eyes grew dim
Thou couldst not find the love there, thanks to Him
 who never is dishonoured in the spark
He gave us from his fire of fires, and bade
Remember whence it sprang, nor be afraid
 While that burns on, though all the rest grow
 [dark.
(ll. 19-24)

The husband's physical changes are never referred to, the focus is on his emotional changeability. When the speaker begins to see love as occurring in a finite moment and recognizes the moment's passing, she hopes for at least mimicry of love. "Canst thou take/The mimic up, nor, for the true thing's sake,/Put gently by the efforts at a beam?" (l. 61-63), she asks. What she hopes for is some sort of recognition and gesture of respect for a love past. This becomes impossible, because women's currency in love is seen as their ability to attract, to function as an object of desire. Youth and beauty in woman are considered wealth (l. 69) and this currency is as impermanent as a "dew-drop" (l. 72). The husband can, however,

"[r]e-coin" (l. 91) himself, thereby constantly re-establish his value.

The speaker of this poem, much like the speaker of "A Woman's Last Word," desires the security of enclosure implied by love. "Thy love shall hold me fast/Until the little minute's sleep is past/And I wake saved. --" (ll. 124-26) she claims, trying unsuccessfully to console herself at the poem's end. Neither she nor the speaker of "A Woman's Last Word" imagine themselves outside of the romantic relationship in which they are involved. Both keep their place, creating a false stability through the repression of their own desires and autonomy. The only way the speaker of "Any Wife to Any Husband" can imagine herself outside the relationship is through her death which she envisions as a kind of vengeance to "show" (l. 103) her husband her true value.

Failed love is characterized in a manner similar to failed art in "Andrea del Sarto", as a failure to strive beyond one's grasp. Love, unlike art, seems only to be able to exist in the moment because its stability is threatened by change rooted in the desire for individual autonomy, which seems incompatible with love.

The poems narrated by a male voice which deal with male/female relationships, differ from those narrated by women in that the reader derives a fuller, more individualized sense of the male speaker, who appears somewhat distanced from the relationship he describes.

"Two in the Campagna" is also a poem about the failure to catch and hold the moment of love. Nature seems to provide the possible paradigms for love in its "endless fleece" (l. 21), and its "[s]ilence and passion, joy and peace,/An everlasting

wash of air --" (ll. 23-24), exhibiting an ever changing constant which seems to capture the infinite within the finite. However, after his romantic reflections on the scene before the two lovers, the speaker finds himself moving out of "the good minute" (l. 50).

The speaker acknowledges that despite himself, there are limits to his love, and to his beloved. In stanzas VIII and IX he muses,

I would that you were all to me,
 You that are just so much, no more.
Nor yours nor mine, nor slave nor free!
 Where does the fault lie? What the core
O' the wound, since the wound must be?

I would I could adopt your will,
 See with your eyes, and set my heart
Beating by yours, and drink my fill
 At your soul's springs, -- your part my part
In life, for good and ill.
(l. 36-45)

The speaker makes all the traditional romantic claims in the negative, distancing himself from the beloved by asserting his separateness from her and claiming that true union is an impossibility. He cannot, will not, dispense with or repress the desire for autonomy in the name of love, and the unity of love cannot contain his individual aspirations. The moment of love is the moment when the speaker can "pluck the rose/And love it more than tongue can speak --" (l. 47-48), but the moment cannot be sustained, just as the plucked rose will wilt and die after it has been picked. The speaker has been chasing the "good minute" and then managed

to run past it, without knowing.

The speaker of "A Last Ride Together" tries to superficially create a similar static moment in which he can play out his love. However, he wants this moment to be static, he cannot see, nor does he wish to see beyond it. The stability implied by love becomes misconstrued as stasis. Thus this speaker, like the speaker in "Two in the Campagna", is doomed to fail in love as love is something he cannot grow or aspire through. As Samuel L. Chell points out,

There is no genuine development in the speaker's thoughts nor is there the acquisition of new or deeper understanding at the end. The speaker's mad attempt to stop time, thus fixing an ecstatic moment, is the whole and sufficiently compelling experience conveyed by the poem. (77)

The speaker's mind is focused on creating an eternity in the moment of the ride. At the end of stanza two he says almost hopefully "Who knows but the world may end tonight?" (l. 22) and he would be pleased that his last moments would be spent with the beloved who had rejected him. He echoes these sentiments in stanza IV "Where had I been now if the worse befell?/And here we are riding, she and I" (l. 43-44), further fixing the ride as an end stop to his consciousness. Every train of thought the speaker embarks on, which for the most part deals with the uselessness of working for achievement beyond the desires of the moment, comes to an abrupt end with every stanza in a shift of focus back to the present ride.

His beloved has lost significance by the end of the poem. She is necessary to his moment, but her being is superfluous. It is not until the end of the poem that he realizes that she has spent most of this monumental moment in silence. Ultimately, this does not matter to the speaker. His only motive has become extension of this ride into "eternity".

"By the Fire-side," in contrast to other poems focused on male/female relationships, presents two individuals as both striving and loving. What Browning describes is similar to Jessica Benjamin's proposal for an inter-subjective paradigm for the individual's relationship to desire, which requires a "balance of holding and excitement" (97), along with the recognition of the other as a subject separate from the self. To use terms more relevant to RB, an intersubjective relationship is one that negotiates the tension between enclosure and individual autonomy for both partners.

According to Leslie Brisman, in an essay entitled "Back to the First of All": 'By the Fire-side' and Browning's Romantic Origins", this is achieved because,

temporal anxieties and those related to the vertical ladder of love are transmuted into a myth of horizontal landscape. (42)

The speaker establishes this landscape in the first half of the poem. Looking into the future toward "life's November" (l. 5), he imagines his life with his beloved as the perfect moment which continues, thus allowing him to look back into their shared past, to their "first of all" (l. 146) from this imagined future. The moment is defined

by the landscape they return to which seems infinite, a space for infinite possibilities. The speaker describes it as "a vista opening far and wide,/And I pass out where it ends" (ll. 19-20).

Nature is described with a lush sensuousness, implying the constant change in a landscape that has remained familiar to the speaker:

By the rose-flesh mushrooms, undivulged
Last evening -- nay, in today's first dew
Yon sudden coral nipple bulged,
Where a freaked fawn-coloured flaky crew
Of toadstools peep indulged.
(ll. 61-65)

The place "is silent and aware:/It has had its scenes, its joys and crimes,/But that is it's own affair." (ll. 98-100).

The speaker does not address his wife Leonor until the mid-point of the poem, where the reader finds her "[r]eading by fire-light" (l. 113). The relationship is defined by the tension between union and separateness. The speaker firmly establishes his own identity in the first half of the poem but needs to be recognized by his wife, by the other who can confirm his separate identity through her relationship to him. "My own, confirm me!" (l. 121) the speaker insists. But the two are also fused into "one soul" (l. 131).

The tension between unity and separateness functions as a means toward growth. The speaker recognizes both Leonor's separateness from him and his connection to her:

Oh I must feel your brain prompt mine,
Your heart anticipate my heart
You must be just as before, in fine,
See and make me see, for your part,
New depths of the divine!
(ll. 136-40)

The speaker creates images of union which evoke elements of Benjamin's theory of inter-subjectivity. He claims that Leonor "filled my empty heart at a word" (l. 227). Since the speaker's identity is well established through the first part of the poem, images of union do not threaten his separate identity, the space within him that she fills is understood in terms of the speaker's receptivity as a subject (Benjamin, 95). Even through the mixing of their souls, the moment when "a bar was broken between/Life and life: we were mixed at last" (ll. 233-34), the speaker is aware of "the mortal screen" (l. 235), that prevents complete mingling. The two lovers' souls are mingled "once and for good" (l. 248), yet they retain their separateness.

This is further invoked by the second to last stanza, where the speaker watches Leonor reading at the fireside. He invokes the spatial metaphor fundamental to Benjamin's theory. She describes "what is experientially female" as,

the association of desire with a space, a place within the self, from which this force can emerge. This space is in turn connected to the space between self and the other. Ideally, in the psychoanalytic process the analysand gains access to transitional experience. As play in this transitional space develops, spatial metaphors may articulate the search for a desire of one's own. In them, a union of balance of holding and excitement is finally achieved. Within this space one's own desire can emerge, not as borrowed but as authentically one's own. It is thus not a different desire but a difference relation of self to other that is at stake. (97)

The tension of the split subject articulated by many of RB's speakers is more comfortably negotiated by the speaker in "By the Fire-side". The desires for union between self and other and individual autonomy prove to be only seemingly incompatible. The union of souls occurs in a moment, but the passing of the moment, the fact that the "powers at play" (l. 237) "relapsed to their ancient mood" (l. 240), does not negate the implications of that moment.

"In a Balcony" deals directly with the conjunction of the amorous and aspiring subject, and emphasizes the dangers of abdicating one's will to the will of the beloved. For Norbert, the poem's male protagonist, his work and individual aspirations are inextricably linked to his romantic desires. He serves his Queen to gain access to the love of Constance, the Queen's cousin. In an article entitled "Gender-to-Gender Anxiety and Influence in Robert Browning's *Men and Women*", Laura E. Haigwood feels that the poem suggests "the artist's need for a delicate balance of intimacy and independence, with emphasis on independence." (p. 106). She goes on to liken the character of Norbert to Browning, asserting that "like Browning", he

is the self made man, the newcomer on the scene, not of "royal blood," with a new style. The result of his capitulation to his mistress certainly justifies what appears to be the poem's moral: no matter how much a poet may love a woman, they are both better off if he remains true to his own critical judgment. (106-107)

Norbert's service to the Queen was motivated by his love for Constance. However, against his better judgement, Norbert does not ask for Constance's hand directly, but agrees to Constance's plan of presenting his love for her as an extension of his true love for the Queen. Constance believes that the Queen will be insulted to learn that Norbert served her, not for herself, but for the love of Constance.

You love a rose; no harm in that:
But was it for the rose's sake or mine
You put it in your bosom? mine, you said -
Then, mine you must say or else be false.
You told the Queen you served her for herself;
If so to serve her was to serve yourself,
She thinks, for all your unbelieving face!
I know her.
(II.96-103)

Constance claims to have a better understanding of the Queen and is convinced that her age and position will deter her from accepting Norbert's love, and will grant him Constance's hand. Much of what Constance believes about the Queen is true, but what she does not recognize is the degree to which the Queen's actions have been mediated by external reality and others' perceptions of her as Queen.

Men say -- or do men say it? fancies say --
'Stop here, your life is set, you are grown old.
Too late -- no love for you, too late for love.'
One takes the hint -- half meets it like a child,
Ashamed at any feelings that oppose.
'Oh love, true, never think of love again!
I am a queen: I rule, not love forsooth.'
So it goes on; so a face grows like this,

Hair like this hair, poor arms as lean as these, Till, -- nay, it does not
end so, I thank God!
(ll. 360-70)

Norbert's declaration of love for the Queen allows the limits she had constructed as a consequence of her age and position to fall away and she begins to perceive reality differently. From the moment she believes herself desired, the Queen's self perception changes.

This hair was early grey;
But joy ere now has brought hair brown again,
And joy will bring the cheek's red back, I feel.
(ll. 481-84)

By submitting to Constance's will Norbert presents himself as the Queen's lover, and though he resists playing out the game which casts him in a role that eroticizes the power of the Queen, a role which could be considered a masochistic one in Sandra Lee Bartky's terms, he nonetheless becomes subject to the power he pretends to love. As Bartky points out, in the attraction to power comes

the recognition that it can overwhelm and subdue as well as protect and impress. Power can raise me from my lowly status and exalt me; it is also that *before which I tremble*. (p.47)

Norbert does not love the Queen as a woman, but loves and respects her in her role
as

Queen. He tells Constance that "I am the Queen's; she knows only my brain" (l. 845), implying that she cannot know his heart and consequently, that he cannot love her. However, by playing the role of her lover, he puts himself in the dangerous position of being overwhelmed by her power.

For EBB love and life were the same. In *Aurora Leigh* she tried to prove that amorous and poetic subjectivity could co-habit in the life of a woman. It was fundamental for the female subject to reconcile the ideologically determined split between the female/private sphere and the public/male sphere. For RB, the co-existence of the amorous and poetic is not overtly problematic, because the male subject is not denied the private/female sphere where love is positioned, at the expense of access to the public/male sphere of poetry. RB splits the subject and can thus contain the amorous within the private sphere. This separation of the poetic and amorous in RB's work, however, signals the anxiety which marks the construction of the amorous subject.

"One Word More" the poem which serves as an epilogue to *Men and Woman* and is dedicated to EBB, both praises EBB and positions RB's poetry in contrast to his wife's. Through the publication of a poem written in his own voice, openly declaring his love and regard for his wife, RB blurs the line between the public poet and the private man which his other dramatic monologues work to establish.

Nonetheless, the poem clearly positions poetry and the poet in the male/public sphere, and the lover/beloved in the private/female sphere. Central to the poem is the reference to Raphael's sonnets to his beloved and Dante's painting for Beatrice. They expressed their love, which was private, in a medium that they did not present to the public:

What of Rafael's sonnets, Dante's picture?
This: no artist lives and loves, that longs not
Once, and only once, and for one only,
(Ah, the prize!) to find his love a language
Fit and fair and simple and sufficient --
Using nature that's an art to others,
Not, this one time, art that's turned his nature.
(ll. 58-64)

Similarly, although RB is expressing his love in poetry, his own media of public expression, he is doing so in his own voice, thus in a mode which is alien to him. "He who writes," says RB "may write for once as I do" (l. 128), drawing attention to the difficulty of the task of self-revelation he has undertaken for his beloved. Thus the boundary between the public and private begins to falter with this love-inspired gesture.

Still a split exists between the man and the artist, underlining the uneasy co-existence of both identities within the same sphere. "So be the man and leave the artist,/Gain the man's joy, miss the artist's sorrow." (l. 71-72) he says. He does not question whether a man can be fulfilled as both lover and poet. Access to amorous and poetic subjectivity is not problematized for RB, but nor are amorous and poetic

identities fused. The subject is split in order to allow for both the erotic and the poetic to continue existing:

God be thanked, the meanest of his creatures
Boasts two soul-sides, one to face the world with,
One to show a woman when he loves her!
(ll. 184-86)

He speaks of EBB in a similarly split fashion. She is his "moon of poets", and he is proud of her position in the eyes of the world.

Ah, but that's the world's side, there's the won-
[der,
Thus they see you, praise you, think they know you!
There in turn I stand with them and praise you --
Out of my own self, I dare to phrase it.
(ll. 189-92)

It is the hidden private side of the relationship, however, that he prizes most:

But the best is when I glide from out them,
Cross a step or two of dubious twilight,
Come out on the other side, the novel
Silent silver lights and darks undreamed of,
Where I hush and bless myself with silence.
(ll. 193-97)

EBB's two sonnets written to George Sand, "A Desire" and "A Recognition" (1844), present a different image of the woman who is a writer. In the sonnets George Sand is also presented as dual aspects -- masculine and feminine -- but the

sonnets express a desire for the fusion of these competing aspects and hope for a transcendence beyond dualism. EBB celebrates this possibility, as the transcendence of dualism leads to true genius. In "To George Sand: A Desire," Sand is both a "large-brained woman and large-hearted man" (l. 1). Genius comes not in a masculine or feminine form but in the androgynous form of an "angel's grace/Of a pure genius sanctified from blame;" (ll. 11-2). Transcendence is an important element in poetic genius for EBB, but as she makes clear in the second sonnet addressed to Sand, "To George Sand: A Recognition" is that Sand is a "True genius, but true woman!" (l. 1). Sand is criticized because she is perceived as disregarding the woman she is, in favour of the poet.

And while before
The world thou burnest in a poet-fire,
We see thy woman's-heart beat evermore
Through the large flame. Beat purer, heart, and
higher,
(ll. 9-12)

EBB's concern is with Sand's masculine masquerade, and presenting Sand's attempt to hide behind a man's name not only as vain, but as a threat to the power of the woman's voice.

EBB rebels against the split between masculine and feminine spheres of influence and her poetry begs for the inclusion of women in the traditionally masculine sphere of poetry as women who are poets writing from the position of a woman's life, which by traditional definition encompasses the private sphere. RB, on the other hand, while proud of his wife's position as poet, works to separate her

public/poetic side from the private amorous side. Herein lies the fundamental difference in the strategies used by EBB and RB in their articulation of poetic and amorous subjectivity.

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