

**'Such leaves! What leaves!': Traces of Daphne in *Aurora Leigh***

*"Apollo has stolen Daphne's laurel branch to make his own crown, has locked up her version of the story inside his, has pretended she is captive and silent inside the tree, has claimed that women do not make poets and storytellers, that poets and storytellers make women."* (Michèle Roberts, *The Book of Mrs Noah* xxx)

In Book V, halfway through *Aurora Leigh*, the narrator speculates at length about the possibilities of poetry, going through various genres, which is more than appropriate in a verse-novel, a text that, by definition, experiments with genre.<sup>1</sup> Among other genres, like the ballad, dismissed as too fast, and the sonnet, which is too static or "momentary," Aurora also enlarges upon descriptive landscape poems, more precisely, her own ventures into this field, discussing in a general sense how poetry is supposed to approach nature.

A tree's mere firewood, unless humanised—  
Which well the Greeks knew when they stirred its bark  
With close-pressed bosoms of subsiding nymphs  
And made the forest-rivers garrulous  
With babble of gods. For us, we are called to mark  
A still more intimate humanity  
In this inferior nature, or ourselves  
Must fall like dead leaves trodden underfoot  
By veritable artists. (V.95–103)

Apparently dismissing the Greek strategy of animating nature as somehow inadequate, Aurora claims that earth (that is, nature) remained "stiff and dry, / A mere dumb corpse, till Christ the Lord came down" (V.105–6). It is, thus, the Christian view of nature that enables us to discover ("mark") "a still more intimate humanity" in "inferior nature", for, as Aurora goes on to argue in a chiasmic construction, if we – artists, that is – fail to do so, we will be no more than "dead leaves", that is, like the "firewood" insufficiently animated by the Greeks. It is as a result of the coming of Christ that earth "lives, remembers, palpitates / In every limb, aspires in every breath..." (V.110–11). There is, Aurora argues,

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<sup>1</sup> The contemporary reception of the Victorian verse-novel was largely determined by the different attitudes to its generic mixture. The volatile state of this hybrid genre is indicated by the fact that even its name was unfixed: Barrett Browning herself referred to *Aurora Leigh* as a "poetical novel" (*novel-poem*) and as a "verse-novel" (Edmond 35; Markovits 36). These "generic anomalies" (Mermin 184) were often dismissed as unsuccessful epics, novels or lyrical poems, even though most of these texts reflected on their own generic hybridity, in fact, gaining much of their energy from such reflections (cf. Markovits 16; Bacskai-Atkari).

no need for the gods and other mythical beings as vehicles of a connection between nature and humanity that, as revealed by Christ, is both deeper and more intimate. We

want no half-gods, Panomphaean Joves,  
Fauns, Naiads, Tritons, Oreads and the rest,  
To take possession of a senseless world  
To unnatural vampire-uses. See the earth,  
The body of our body, the green earth,  
Indubitably human like this flesh  
And these articulated veins through which  
Our heart drives blood. (V.113–20)

The Greek method of animating nature is, thus, rejected not simply as inadequate but also as fundamentally wrong, harmful, a “vampire-use,” a parasitical draining of life, that is, the very opposite of animation, of giving life. This claim also has a meta-rhetorical stake, exposing the ancient (pre-Christian) strategy of personification and animation as inherently parasitical. Instead, Aurora outlines a Swedenborgian system of correspondences between the natural/physical and the invisible world, and claims that it is to this that poets must give voice.<sup>2</sup> She suggests that her own efforts in pastoral poetry were all failures (presumably because they were unable to express or render this sense of living interconnectedness), yet, when talking about her own artistic failure, she once again resorts to a Greek metaphor or motif in her account of how her poems fell short of what she had hoped:

He has shot them down,  
My Phoebus Apollo, soul within my soul,  
Who judges, by the attempted, what’s attained,  
And with the silver arrow from his height  
Has struck down all my works before my face  
While I said nothing. (V.413–8)

The above quotes also indicate some of the higher stakes of the role of mythology, especially the parallel presence of the Christian and the pagan (Greek and Roman) strands in Barrett Browning’s verse-novel. The first, very modest claim of this essay is that, even though Daphne’s name is not even mentioned in *Aurora Leigh*, the mythical narrative in which she appears is present through allusions to the Daphne myth and its two

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<sup>2</sup> In fact, the Greek view of nature, with its theophanic, metamorphic logic, in which everything is alive, could and would be in line with Aurora’s poetics, and, despite this dismissal, the text is pervaded by Greek (mythological) images and allusions – including allusions to the stories of Danae and Io – that don’t seem to be less ‘authentic’ or indeed less pertinent than the equally numerous Biblical ones. According to Marjorie Stone, the allusions of *Aurora Leigh* “draw on classical as well as Biblical texts, combining them in a textual palimpsest” (154).

protagonists (the tree that is also a nymph and mighty Apollo) as well as other motifs,<sup>3</sup> and that its traces, investigated in my reading of an important scene in Book II, are integral not only to a submerged, disavowed Greek plot in the text but also its (proto)feminist strand, a symptom of Barrett Browning's troubled awareness of "her revolutionary and problematic status as a woman writer" (Machann 58). With aspirations well beyond those of "poetesses" such as Joanna Baillie, Felicia Hemans and Letitia Landon, Barrett Browning was both frustrated and liberated by her role as "the first woman poet in English literature" (Mermin 1). Some feminist critics stress how the conservative nature of Barrett Browning's ideas of gender and creativity, informed partly by her strong religious views, put the lid on any protofeminist aspirations, claiming that, in the conclusion, Aurora's artistic creativity is ultimately subsumed in the traditionally feminine stance of self-sacrifice (DuPlessis 87). This view is summed up by Deirdre David: "the appropriation of Aurora's art and sexuality by male power is executed with such certainty that whatever defiance of androcentric authority we may discern in the poem is overwhelmed by the orgasmic reconciliations of male and female, politics and art, material and spiritual" (152). In this reading, any feminist claims we might have discerned in the poem are obliterated by the ending of the verse-novel (David 142), by what Gilbert and Gubar call "the self-abnegating servitude with which Aurora Leigh concludes" (580).

Others, however, see the verse-poem and its conclusion in potentially more empowering terms. Herbert Tucker, for instance, argues that, although at first she cannot conceive of a woman speaker in the role of poet-genius, Barrett Browning "gradually assigns that role to a female speaker and poet-genius in a number of ways which overlap incrementally, until in *Aurora Leigh* the role is unconditionally given to a woman" (93; cf. Helen Cooper (185–7; cf. Mermin 217). Reading Barrett Browning's verse-novel in terms of the difference and particular difficulties of the female poet's awareness of and attempt to deal with the influence of the past (predecessors), Helen Cooper suggests that, according to Aurora Leigh, "as long as poetry is imagined as a predominantly male endeavor, a female poet enacts her liberation by transforming herself from being the object of male narrative to being the subject of her own story" (145). Cooper emphasizes the relevance of the generic aspect to this issue: "In the blank verse of Milton's epic, Barrett Browning writes of a heroine who refuses to be merely a helpmate. In spite of being taught by her aunt and lectured by her cousin Romney in the Miltonic ways of womanhood, Aurora insists on claiming for herself the Adamic privilege of naming the world" (146). Crucial to this argument is the gendering of genres: for Cooper, the verse-novel is a successful synthesis, in which Aurora's voice is formed by "the male epic tradition and the female novel" (147).

The traces of the Daphne narrative might also be seen in these terms: the metamorphosis of Daphne is revised by Barrett Browning in terms of the transformation of Aurora as

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<sup>3</sup> Daphne was not a particularly popular mythological figure in Victorian literature, except for George Meredith's early long poem „Daphne" (1851); to a certain extent, the amorous pursuit in his *The Egoist* (1879) might be seen as a rewriting of the Daphne story.

described by Cooper, from an object of the male gaze to a subject. Thus, Aurora's empowerment is enacted not simply through revisions and reversals of the chivalric quest and rescue story, as Dorothy Mermin claims (187), but also through the rewriting of the Daphne story. The presence of the myth also affects the generic properties of *Aurora Leigh*. While Greek and Roman mythological allusions and analogies would seem to reinforce the epic ('masculine') qualities of Barrett Browning's text, which was conceived and received partly in terms of the epic tradition, I suggest that the presence of the Daphne narrative is both more 'hidden' and more 'novelistic' – in fact, it might be seen in terms of what Rod Edmond refers to as Barrett Browning's rethinking of this very masculine genre as a feminine text (134). This claim, of course, is not altogether surprising given that the text which contains the most widely circulated ancient version of the Daphne narrative, Ovid's 'epic' *Metamorphoses*, can itself be seen as a novelisation of the epic *avant la lettre*. There are, however, other generic implications of this set of motifs, as I shall argue in the conclusion of my essay.<sup>4</sup>

The traces of Daphne make up a strand in *Aurora Leigh* that is present in the form of small motifs. Although the centrepiece of my talk is the scene in Book II (II.74–497), it has to be noted that the concentrated presence of this set of motifs in this episode is not entirely unexpected, since Book I contains several traces of the latent Daphne plot or subtext. Aurora is four when her Italian mother dies and, at the age of thirteen, she loses her English father. In the lines that describe the sudden death of the father, Aurora compares herself to a tree:

I was just thirteen,  
Still growing like the plants from unseen roots  
In tongue-tied Springs—and suddenly awoke  
To full life and life's needs and agonies  
with an intense, strong, struggling heart beside  
A stone-dead father. (I.205–10)

The orphan is taken to England, to the house of her father's sister. From the start, England is described as a place of lovelessness and lifelessness, a spiritually deadening environment where Aurora is withering away, although she does begin to regenerate slowly, mainly through her ability to connect to the "sweet, familial nature" of England (I.641), intimated through vegetal symbols, including what might be seen as the text's only reference to Daphne/Laura: "the overflow / Of arbutus and laurel" (I.588).

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<sup>4</sup> The traces of Daphne might also be seen as integral to *Aurora Leigh*'s meditations on love, making up a trajectory through the persistent vegetal metaphors: we seem to be moving from the burning bush (maternal love) to the Rose of Sharon at the end, with many stops on the way (metaphors of trees and flowers abound throughout). A full discussion of this theme is beyond the scope of the present essay. I simply note that the text's Christian and Christological trajectory is, if not subverted, at least complemented and troubled by the scattered traces of the (revised) Daphne story as well as other Greek mythological motifs (e.g. Amor and Psyche).

It is also in this section that the tree motif makes a more marked appearance. Her aunt orders Aurora to turn her chair away from the window while she is in her room: "With back against the window, to exclude / The sight of the great lime-tree on the lawn, / Which seemed to have come on purpose from the woods / To bring the house a message" (I.486–9). While the tree, animated and invested with a will of its own, seems to have some affinity with the girl, its role is not unequivocal – its "message," for instance, is never revealed. Many critics have noted that these passages reflect upon Coleridge's "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison," where the lime tree is a spiritual companion for the speaker. Here, however, it is not a source of comfort: "I had enough there, of the lime, be sure, / My morning-dream was often hummed away / By the bees in it" (I.579–81). According to both Herbert Tucker and David Sigler, the lime tree is an anti-Coleridgean allusion, indicating that Barrett Browning "has now given up the belief in the male poet as genius. She creates her poet-genius-speaker as a woman, living and working in a fertile feminine environment literally (and literarily) overshadowed by male genius" (Tucker 93); Sigler argues that, rather than an homage to Coleridge, this detail might be seen as part of how Barrett Browning is wresting back this space for the women's side.

If read in these terms, the lime tree anticipates the tree motifs<sup>5</sup> in one of the best known episodes of *Aurora Leigh*, the famous proposal scene in Book II, which is the focus of the present essay. While the content of the episode is also important, I shall be focusing here on its mise-en-scène, which tells its own little narrative: this set piece, which takes up the first half or so of Book II, can also be read as a revisiting of the Daphne narrative, which is reappropriated in two ways. The most obvious strategy of reappropriation is that the story is retold by the Daphne figure, Aurora, but what makes Barrett Browning's engagement with the Daphne story unique is that, rather than conceiving it as a rape narrative,<sup>6</sup> Barrett Browning uses the mythological episode to revisit the themes of poetry, art, and marriage. It can be seen as a female response to a prevalent and patriarchal understanding of the Ovidian narrative, one that relies on the conclusion of the Ovidian text. Here, Apollo, who seems to be far from being disheartened by Daphne's rejection, redefines the metamorphosis as the story of his own triumph rather than the failure of his amorous pursuit:

'My bride', he said, 'since you can never be,  
At least, sweet laurel, you shall be my tree.  
My lyre, my locks, my quiver you shall wreath;  
You shall attend the conquering lords of Rome

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<sup>5</sup> The tree motif recurs throughout *Aurora Leigh* in different guises and contexts, including a self-reflexive one when Aurora is speculating about questions of poetic form, suggesting that, instead of rigid conventions, we should trust the spirit to make the form and invoking the tree as a metaphor of organic form: "What matter for the number of the leaves, / Supposing the tree lives and grows?" (V. 231–2)

<sup>6</sup> One could argue that the rape narrative in *Aurora Leigh* is displaced into the story of working-class girl Marion Erle.

When joy shouts triumph and the Capitol  
Welcomes the long procession [...]’  
Thus spoke the god; the laurel in assent  
Inclined her new-made branches and bent down,  
Or seemed to bend, her head, her leafy crown. (I.556–64)

That is, in Ovid, the narrative and its conclusion are reinterpreted by Apollo as reinforcing and monumentalising his authority, particularly over poetic creation and glory: Daphne, as laurel, will forever be the symbol of his might – and of patriarchal authority in several spheres, including that of poetry.

The episode in *Aurora Leigh*, which features several motifs of the Ovidian narrative, gets off to an extremely upbeat start; at daybreak on a glorious summer day, which is also her twentieth birthday, Aurora goes out, plunging into the outside world somewhat in the manner of a youthful Clarissa Dalloway, identifying herself with nature, especially vegetation:

The June was in me, with its multitudes  
Of nightingales all singing in the dark  
And rosebuds reddening where the calyx split (II.10–12)

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In which fantastic mood I bounded forth  
At early morning—would not wait so long  
As even to snatch my bonnet by the strings,  
But, brushing a green trail across the lawn  
With my gown in the dew, took will and way  
Among the acacias of the shrubberies,  
To fly my fancies in the open air (II.18–24)

The passage contains clear echoes of the Ovidian text, where Daphne is consistently metaphorised through her fastness and her untied, free-flowing hair: “A careless ribbon held her straying hair [...] / He sees the loose disorder of her hair / And thinks what if it were neat and elegant [...] she / Flies swifter than the lightfoot wind” (Ovid I.480; 498–504).<sup>7</sup>

Aurora, however, is very different from Daphne: rather than admiring the freshness and liveliness of the early summer day, she is dreaming about poetic glory, and, in a playfully defiant mood, contrives the idea of crowning herself:

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<sup>7</sup> This identification starts already in Book I, when Aurora’s unruly hair is forced into a more orderly structure by her strict aunt: “I broke the copious curls upon my head / In braids, because she liked smooth-ordered hair” (I.376–86). At the end of Book V, when Aurora mistakenly believes that Rodney loves Lady Waldemar, she, as it were, erases her Daphneesque attribute, her loose hair: “My loose long hair began to burn and creep, / Alive to the very ends, about my knees: / I swept it backward as the wind sweeps flame, / With the passion of my hands / ...made a knot as hard as life / Of those loose, soft, impracticable curls.” [V.1126–34] (see also V.1037–41)

what, therefore, if I crown myself today  
In sport, not pride, to learn the feel of it,  
Before my brows be numbed as Dante's own  
To all the tender pricking of such leaves?" (II.33–36)

She sets about trying to find the right kind of leaves to make a crown for herself.

'Such leaves! What leaves!'  
I pulled the branches down  
To choose from,  
Not the bay! I choose no bay  
(The fates deny us if we are overbold)  
Nor myrtle – which means chiefly love; and love  
Is something awful which one dares not touch  
So early o'mornings. (II.37–40)

This is an ambiguous reappropriation of the myth (and of the poetic tradition) not only from Ovid, but also, and perhaps more importantly, from the Petrarchan tradition. Aurora has cast herself both as Daphne and Apollo, just like Petrarch's speaking persona, who, in the *Canzoniere*, and often within individual poems, comes to occupy all the possible roles in the story (Sturm-Madox 52), and yet, in the final moment, Aurora chooses the ivy rather than the bay:

Ah – there's my choice – that ivy on the wall,  
That headlong ivy! Not a leaf will grow  
But thinking of a wreath. Large leaves, smooth leaves,  
Serrated like my vines, and half as green.  
I like such ivy, bold to leap a height  
'Twas strong to climb; as good to grow on graves  
As twist about a thyrus; pretty too  
(And that's not ill), when twisted round a comb. (II.46–53)

Deciding not to choose the bay (laurel) seems like an act of feminine modesty, refraining from usurping the traditional symbol of poetic glory, while it can also be read as Aurora's refusal to identify herself with Daphne. As Angela Leighton suggests (130), it can also be seen in terms of Aurora's obsessive mourning for her dead parents ("good to grow on graves"), while, on the other hand, this choice might also be seen as a refusal of the entire Apollo/Daphne scenario: by choosing the ivy, Aurora disdains the culturally accepted (patriarchal) symbol of poetic greatness.

Ivy, a parasitical plant,<sup>8</sup> apart from its funereal associations, is often represented emblematically as the female principle, climbing around the noble (male) oak tree, but it is also a plant associated with Dionysus, and its choice can be seen as a defiant gesture on the part

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<sup>8</sup> Ivy, actually, is not quite parasitical, at least not in the sense in which mistletoe is parasitical: ivy does not drain the sap of the host plant.

of Aurora: she opts for the anti-Apollonian plant.<sup>9</sup> The Dionysian allusion is reinforced by the reference to the thyrsus, a staff or spear made of giant fennel, covered with ivy vines and leaves, topped with a pine cone (or a bunch of vine-leaves, grapes and berries). Carried along during Dionysian festivals, it represented prosperity, fertility, pleasure, enjoyment.<sup>10</sup>

Whatever her motives for choosing ivy, she does make for herself a wreath, and puts it on, that is, crowns herself as a female poet, just like Corinne, one of the archetypal figures of the female poetess as monumentalised by Georges Sand as well as a number of early 19th-century female poets, only to be surprised by the unexpected appearance of her second cousin Romney Leigh. Stunned and somewhat abashed by Romney, she is frozen in what seems to have suddenly become an awkward rather than dignified pose:

I stood there fixed –  
 My arms up, like the caryatid, sole  
 Of some abolished temple, helplessly  
 Persistent in gesture which derides  
 A former purpose. Yet my blush was flame,  
 As if from flax, not stone. (II.60–5)

Her pose evokes not only the caryatids – petrified objects of the male gaze (Cooper 157) –, but also the best known early pictorial representation of the Daphne story, Antonio del Pollaiuolo's painting (ca. 1470–80), with Daphne's arms reaching upwards, transforming into symmetrical branches. In line with the Daphne story, although reversing its logic by having the coronation precede the metamorphosis, the scene dramatizes one of the key dichotomies of Ovid's version, the general transformation from dynamism, light-footed movement to "fixed" immobility and heaviness. One could even argue that these lines also appropriate further Petrarchan motifs from "Canzone XXIII," often referred to as "the canzone of metamorphoses" (Barkan 210), like the change of condition or substance, the wavering between fluidity and stony hardness, immobility, something that is both vegetal and mineral-stony. It is important that, in their reunion in Book VII, although Romney comes like the prince to Sleeping Beauty "to bestow the kiss of sexual awakening," he is blind as well as helpless, and it is Aurora who "captures Romney with a transfixing gaze" (Mermin 189), seeing him as a work of art, "pale and patient" like a statue (VIII.1100), while he will never objectify her with his gaze (Mermin 190).

If Aurora is here a Daphne figure, then Romney, the possessor of the male gaze, becomes something of an Apollo, an association playfully anticipated by the passage in Book I in which he is first introduced:

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<sup>9</sup> It has to be said, though, that the Apollo–Dionysus dichotomy did not become prevalent before the turn of the century.

<sup>10</sup> As Sigler suggests, there might be a bit of Coleridge, too, in Aurora's choice of ivy: the speaker of "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison" expresses his pleasure in how "a deep radiance lay / Full on the ancient ivy."

Always Romney Leigh  
Was looking for the worms, I for the gods.  
A godlike nature his; the gods look down,  
Incurious of themselves; and certainly  
'Tis well I should remember, how, those days,  
I was a worm too, and he looked on me (I.551–6)

Although he is introduced as godlike, and the text maintains the playful association between him and Greek gods, it has to be said that Romney's credentials as an Apollo are questionable to say the least. Now, when he startles Aurora, he has brought along a book of poems, belonging to her, that he has found by a beech tree overhanging the stream – the very stream “of which you said / the Oread in it has a Naiad's heart / and pines for waters” (II.82–4). Romney rejects Aurora's poetry well before she rejects his proposal, refusing to read it, claiming that “the thing had witchcraft in't, / Whereof the reading calls up dangerous spirits” – and that / I rather bring it to the witch” (II.78–80). Romney's words not only reinforce the kinship between Aurora and ‘nymph-hood,’ but also create a link between her nymph identity and her unruly ‘witch-hood’: the kinship is part of the way Romney dismisses both Aurora's creativity and her closeness to nature.

From this point, the scene might be read as a post-metamorphic reenactment of the Daphne-Apollo intercourse, with Romney inevitably playing the double role of Apollo: he is Daphne/Aurora's suitor (or aspirational rapist, as in Ovid) as well as the representative of patriarchal cultural authority that considers poetry a masculine prerogative. His proposal amounts to little more than trying to persuade Aurora to give up her poetic aspirations, to forget forever the stone and the bronze wreath that would prove too heavy for her (II.95). Romney's proposal, thus, is a thinly disguised devaluation of women:

Mere women, personal and passionate,  
You give us doating 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. (II.221–5)

It is, in fact, not his ardent wooing that morphs into a definition of Aurora in her proper Miltonic and Victorian womanhood, but the other way around: it is his curtailing of Aurora's proper activities that becomes, at least formally, a proposal.

On the other hand, although the choreography of the Daphne/Apollo scene is fully recognisable, it is not only Romney who does not seem to be able to fill Apollo's divine boots: neither protagonist fits the archetypal role. Romney is an extremely inadequate Apollo primarily because, unlike Apollo, he does not lust for Aurora-Daphne, who has already had her run in physical terms before the wooing and thus her escapade is entirely verbal. Aurora is an anti-Daphne in that Daphne denies her own sexuality (detesting her own beauty because she feels it is alien to her inner core [cf. Ovid II.549]), whereas birthday girl Aurora is jubilant, exalting in her young womanhood which is only now beginning. Also, unlike the

silent and fugitive Daphne, Aurora does talk to her wooer; in fact, she expresses her dissatisfaction with the insufficient ardour of Romney's wooing in no uncertain terms: "What you love, / Is not a woman, Romney, but a cause: / You want a helpmate, not a mistress, sir." (II.400–1) She feels that the lukewarm quasi-proposal of Romney-Apollo is denying or erasing her awakening sexuality<sup>11</sup>. In turn, sensing that he is failing as a 'lover-Apollo', Romney eventually indulges in a kind of mock-wooing which, he claims, he has deliberately avoided so far, believing Aurora more dignified and above such flattery:

'Lady, thou art wondrous fair,  
And, where the Graces walk before, the Muse  
Will follow at the lightning of their eyes,  
And where the Muse walks, lovers need to creep:  
Turn round and love me, or I die of love.' (II.428–32)

It is probably not by chance that this clichéd exercise in wooing, the last line of which could be a quote from Ovid's Daphne narrative, abounds in classical references (as part of tired Petrarchan clichés), perhaps connecting their alleged artificiality to that of this hackneyed amorous discourse.<sup>12</sup>

The relevance of the Daphne motif is erased by Romney on another level, too: in dismissing Aurora's poetic efforts, Romney is also trying to replace the Greek frame of reference with a Christian one, associating the former with what he sees as the vacuity of feminine poetry. First, he does this directly, claiming that the passing of Greek and Roman religion has also made mythological imagery obsolete and inauthentic:

'The time is done for facile settings up  
Of minnow gods, nymphs here and tritons there,  
The polytheists have gone out in God.  
That unity of Bests' (II.150–4)

Then he goes on to reiterate the argument in an indirect manner, comparing Aurora herself to Eve rather than to a nymph, while – paradoxically – appropriating her Roman mythological name for his own purposes: "You, you are young / Eve with nature's day-break on her face" (II. 158–9). The – Petrarchan – motif of the daybreak mobilises the meaning and the mythological origins of Aurora's name, very much in line with Petrarch's similar strategies and ruses: in several of his Laura poems, Petrarch's speaker avails himself of the paronomasia between Laura and Aurora (Sturm-Maddox 19–20). At this point, therefore, Aurora's insistence on her nymph identity (a virginal young woman) and

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<sup>11</sup> One could argue that Romney's trajectory follows, or inverts, the order of Jane Eyre's wooers: starting out as a kind of St. John Rivers, needing a helpmeet rather than a wife, he ends up like blind and reformed Mr Rochester.

<sup>12</sup> In Book VIII, when this scene is revisited at length in a conversation between Aurora and Romney ten years later in Tuscany, Romney self-disparagingly describes himself as an anti-Apollo: "I built up follies like a wall / To intercept the sunshine and your face" (VIII. 381–2).

her outright refusal of Romney's identification also have a gendered slant: the pagan allusions serve to emphasise her femininity, her sexuality and her poetic creativity at the same time.

She insists that the work and the love that Romney offers are not fulfilling for her, since she has her own work cut out for her, no less important than Romney's: "I too have my vocation – work to do [...] Most serious work, most necessary work / As any of the economists" (II.455–60). Aurora thus rejects Romney's proposal not least because it is not even a proper proposal (II.572–5), and vindicates her autonomy as a person, as a woman and as an artist.<sup>13</sup>

In her account of the scene, Aurora once again broaches motifs from the Daphne narrative, for instance, that of a natural, loose-limbed fastness that is struck dumb by the sun: "We all begin / By singing with the birds, and running fast / With June days," until "the sun / Strike down upon us like a friend's sword caught / By an enemy to slay us" (II.754–8). Looking back on this scene from the age of 27, just before she leaves England for Italy, she has no regrets about her refusal, knowing that, even if there was love on both sides, her love for Romney would have been inevitably monetised as payment for his generosity, and she knew she had to fend for herself, without benefactors and helpers. The scene in Book II concludes with a repetition of the symbolic gesture before Romney's arrival and proposal, Aurora taking up the besmirched wreath of ivy and crowning herself:

Then I stooped  
And lifted the soiled garland from the earth,  
And set it on my head as bitterly  
As when the Spanish monarch crowned the bones  
Of his dead love. So be it. I preserve  
That crown still – in the drawer there! 'twas the first.  
The rest are like it – those Olympian crowns,  
We run for, till we lose sight of the sun  
In the dust of the racing chariots! (II.808–16)

If the sun is still, at least up to a point, Apollo, this final verdict makes a distinction between solar Apollo as a primal force of (poetic and other) energy and Apollo as the overseer of institutionalised poetic glory. But there is more to this act of self-crowning and

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<sup>13</sup> There is yet another trace of the Daphne story here. After the proposal, and after she has been rebuked by her aunt, Aurora cries out to her dead father, just like Daphne, who begs her father to save and transform her (Ovid I.547–9). Only too aware that there is no father to appeal to, Aurora is standing alone in the garden, "and looked up / The Deaf blue sky that brings the rose out / On such July mornings" (II.748–50). After her morning exaltation, she experiences the aftermath of the proposal scene as one of existential alienation and utter solitude. As Angela Leighton writes, "Aurora's real choice is not so much one of motherland or fatherland, as it is the choice to survive in a world which, because of the father's absence, is all a desert" (124). For Mermin, the plot, at least from halfway through, is organised by the daughter's quest for a mother (190).

the image of the crown in general. In Book IV, Aurora speculates about love, defining it in a reciprocal context, imagining this new conception of love as a circle, “[a] perfect round of love” that “includes . . . being loved” (IV.179–80), an idea that gives rise immediately to the idea of a crown: “The cataracts of her soul had poured themselves / And risen self-crowned in rainbow: would she ask / Who crowned her? it sufficed that she was crowned.” (IV.184–86) As Herbert Tucker suggests, “the crowning celebrated in *Aurora Leigh* is not earned by virtue; it is the kind one gets for oneself [...] In Barrett Browning’s text of experience the poet has become an autonomous, mature woman, a poet – equal to ‘the poet,’ who recognizes that in order to be crowned, she must crown herself.” (102–3)<sup>14</sup>

Later that day, Romney sends Aurora a letter in which he properly proposes to her, using vegetal metaphors once again, thus perpetuating the presence of the Daphne myth.<sup>15</sup> In her reply – a refusal –, Aurora accepts the new vegetal metaphor, but turns it against Romney.

But certain flowers grow near as deep as trees,  
And, cousin, you’ll not move my root, not you,  
With all your confluent storms. Then let me grow  
Within my wayside hedge, and pass your way!  
This flower has never as much to say to you  
As the antique tomb which said to travellers, ‘Pause’,  
‘Siste, viator’ (II.844–54)

The vegetal metaphor persists into the scene at the end of Book II, when Aurora tears up the document that would make her a wealthy heiress: the pieces of paper “fluttered from my hands, / As forest-leaves, stripped suddenly and rapt / By a whirlwind on Valdarno, drop again, / Drop slow, and strew the melancholy ground / before the amazed hills” (II.1165–8). The leaves of written sheaves are transformed into “forest leaves”; the image of the fluttering pieces of paper, however, evokes not only the vegetal associations of Aurora but also her most Daphne-like attribute, her unruly hair – an attribute she retains until the end.

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<sup>14</sup> Crowning as a motif persists throughout the verse-novel, right up to the closing image that presents Aurora as a woman crowned with the sun (Stone 182): golden-haired Aurora stands with the moon beneath her feet in her final passionate embrace with Romney (IX.842), as both “[g]aze on, with inscient vision toward the sun” (IX.913). The crown motif connects the theme of (female) poetry and the idea of (the female) Christ. Marjorie Stone argues that Aurora becomes a female prophet-poet, a representative of Victorian sage discourse (137–8), while, for Corinne Davies, Aurora becomes an active, creative female Christ figure, a “female Christ-poet” (55).

<sup>15</sup> Towards the end of the wooing scene, when revising both his general approach and at least some of his metaphors, Romney insists on vegetal metaphors when he implores her once again: ‘Place your fecund heart / In mine, and let us blossom for the world’ (II.375–6). This overtly vegetal metaphor, however, is a very mixed one, both endowing Aurora with fecundity and withdrawing it from her with the same gesture. About the heart metaphors of *Aurora Leigh* in the context of the Victorian (gendered) culture of the heart, cf. Blair 119–22, 129–44.

If we consider the proposal scene in terms of the Ovidian narrative, the transformation that is urged by Romney would be the metamorphosis of Aurora into an angelic Victorian woman, shedding her witch-like attributes lamented and rejected by him in Book II. It might be argued that the traces of Daphne (together with some other pagan motifs) represent these non-integrable, demonic qualities, unacceptable for young Romney, but accepted by him after he comes to appreciate her. In terms of genre, the presence of Daphne remains something of a problem: *Aurora Leigh* is clearly a Bildungsroman, its entire rhetoric predicated on and permeated by this logic. The story of Daphne, however, is one of arrested development – thus, not one that can be embraced by an aspiring female poet. This is perhaps what accounts for the absence of Daphne in Book VIII, in the long conversation between Aurora and Romney that is a quiet and harmonious repetition of the proposal scene. The Daphne allusions in the proposal scene of Book II are about the female reappropriation of poetic creativity, and their absence here, rather than a disavowal, might suggest that, after her volume has become a soul-changing experience for Romney, this reappropriation has been accomplished by Aurora-Laurel.

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