

**“I use the woman’s figure naturally”:  
Figuring Women’s Work in Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh***

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By the way,  
The works of women are symbolical.  
We sew, sew, prick our fingers, dull our sight,  
Producing what? (1.455-58)

<1>Aurora’s assessment of the symbolic potential of needlework in the first book of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh* has been read both straight and slant. Her words have alternately been taken to mean that women’s work is symbolically shallow, a site of silenced voices forced to stitch instead of speak, and symbolically deep, representing those unspoken and unwritten words in silken threads. Aurora seems to be saying that the slippers, cushions, and stools that women produce are “symbolical” in that they embody the frivolity to which these leisured women are compelled to aspire; the height of their craft results only in luxury items that husbands do not need and do not want. But even if these worked goods are symbolical only in their superficiality, they are still symbolical and still capable of representing and transmitting a meaning that extends beyond a surface of smooth and practiced stitches.

<2>This essay will seek to answer Aurora’s question—“Producing what?”—by examining needlework in *Aurora Leigh* both literally, as a set of materially specific instances drawn from a -century cultural context, and figuratively, as a vital part of Barrett Browning’s poetic vocabulary. Reading needlework in *Aurora Leigh* figuratively as well as literally alerts us to the strange inbetweenness of literary objects which, after all, are neither purely literal nor purely figurative. Literary things, then, aren’t just like other kinds of things; we need to think about how to study them in a way that takes into account their particular textures. I wish to argue that needlework figures and matters in *Aurora Leigh* in ways that depart from other cultural, historical, and literal ways of understanding it.

<3>Biographers, literary critics, and cultural historians frequently look to artifacts like needlework in order to fill in the blanks left by generations of women who either could not or did not record their lives in written words.<sup>(1)</sup> In cases where documents cannot be found to trace the histories of women who did not write but did sew, paint, and spin glass, “all their things become potential text for us to read” (Murphy 641). This awareness of the work that women’s work can do—the silences and spaces in cultural and literary history that it can fill—reflects a widening critical interest in the meanings that lie hidden in the seemingly mundane artifacts of everyday existence. Jules David Prown, a founding figure in the field of material culture, argues that studying material objects through our senses allow us to “make affective contact” with the culture that produced a given object in a way that our invariably prejudiced intellects render impossible (26).

<4>Literary critics working with material culture in mind seek to articulate the relationships between the subjects and objects of fiction. They aim to rectify the widely and perhaps unconsciously granted privilege that we give to things that aren’t “just” things—characters, plots, and dialogue. Elaine Freedgood’s *The Ideas in Things*, which endeavors to redeem objects like calico curtains from “symbolic servitude” by making their meanings explicit, has shown us that objects can—and should—be taken seriously as objects of study (11). In *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature*, Bill Brown asks, “How are things and thinginess used to think about the self?” (18).

<5>But the things of literature aren’t really there—or aren’t fully there. They exist in textual space rather than in physical space. How legible, then, are these things? How do we study immaterial things—things that exist only through the words that describe them—using a methodology that insists upon the truth-telling potential of concrete, physical things? In *Between Women*, Sharon Marcus contends that “interpretation is inevitable: even when attending to the givens of a text, we are always only—or just—constructing a reading” (75). Marcus’s notion of the persistence of interpretation complicates the idea that an object in fiction can ever really be taken literally, for what it is; ultimately, “what it is” is always reading of a thing rather than a thing. Material culture theory, then, cannot be mapped seamlessly onto literary things as though they were just like other kinds of things; the ways in which we

read and feel those things demands an approach that takes into account the inevitable mediation of those encounters.

<6>My analysis of women's work in *Aurora Leigh* considers what these objects can tell us about Barrett Browning's text in particular—the nuances of the role of women's work in the text that other, more literal readings have overlooked—as well as the broader methodological considerations of studying material culture in literary texts. If literary things are just like other kinds of things, then we don't need to examine what literary texts can tell us about objects; whatever those objects have to say will already have been said by artifacts in museums. Through my reading of *Aurora Leigh*, I wish to argue that novels and poems don't just provide lists or catalogs of material objects for us to unpack. Rather, these texts imagine particular things for us. Having all things being equal isn't how Victorian culture—or any culture—works. Literary texts—and their authors—value things for us, singling them out for consideration and inclusion in textual space, marking them as different from the things that aren't there and making them matter in ways that only literary things can matter.

### I. “The Needle or the Pen”

<7>Critical considerations of women's work have generally come to a determined set of conclusions about how—and how much—women's work matters. Despite the differences in the aims of their work, feminist historians, thing theorists, and material culture scholars tend to agree upon the ultimately insufficient creative potential of domestic labors. While women's work can take on as well as transmit important and worthwhile sets of meanings, the worth of such work is still seen as limiting and limited, especially when compared to the expressive potential of words. In *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850*, Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall contend that needlework can “speak forcefully for what is seldom said in words” and fill up “one of the great silences about women's lives” (387). Nevertheless, that silence endures because, as Davidoff and Hall concede, “written evidence is scarce”; despite the tantalizing promise of artifacts worked in stitches, the written word remains paramount (387).

<8>These studies of the expressive potential (or lack thereof) of women's work tend to reflect a particular historical moment in literary studies and feminist criticism. In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar characterize the productive but tense relationship between female artists and their compulsory needlework as “defensive sewing,” something that, given the chance, these women would presumably escape (642). Elaine Hedges' influential essay, “The Needle or the Pen: The Literary Rediscovery of Women's Textile Work,” reveals a similar critical stance; Hedges highlights “the adversarial relationship” between the pen and the needle (340). In *The Flesh Made Word: Female Figures and Women's Bodies*, Helena Michie associates women's work with narrative emptiness, “the loosely defined filling-up of time” where “women sew on unnamed garments, do unnamed and unspecified ‘work,’ to fill up the time before the entrance of the hero” (39; 40).

<9>Literary criticism of *Aurora Leigh* likewise tends towards an understanding of the ultimately insufficient creative potential of domestic labors. Michie argues that “sewing and traditional women's work take on an even more sinister cast” in *Aurora Leigh* (44). Patricia Zakreski argues that Barrett Browning “highlights the absence of real debate, unbiased by patriarchal preconceptions about femininity and domesticity, about the value of women's work” (50). Even so, Zakreski concludes that domestic labors yoke and restrain Aurora, “tying her to the material world of prosaic womanhood” (19). Zakreski concedes that needlework, however limiting, serves a practical purpose in Aurora's progress as a poet: “Needlework may fail as a fulfilling activity and aesthetic object, but it provides a practical aid to her aesthetic development as a screen behind which she conceals the ‘quickening inner life’ of her poetic soul” (21). The work of the needle remains only “practical,” never as fully gratifying or expressive as the work of the pen; sewing is a plot device and an “aid,” but never an expressive form in its own right.

<10>Anne Wallace reads Aurora's estimation of the “symbolical” potential of needlework as “ironic,” contending that what Aurora's account of women's work ultimately produces is “a general denunciation of women's work” (229). Wallace reads poetry and women's work in opposition: “embroidery (and glass-painting, and all the leisurely domestic arts they stand for) not only mocks but displaces poetry's truth-telling mimesis, its practice preventing the practice of poetry” (226). Wallace's evaluation of women's work places a great deal of emphasis upon the role of needlework in the action of the verse novel; while Aurora devotes much of the first four books of her retrospective narrative to naming and specifying the “work” that both she and other women perform, such accounts are largely absent from the second half of the text. Wallace concludes that this apparent narrative imbalance marks a decline in Barrett Browning's investment in a “sewing plot” (249). The result, she contends, is that,

The possibility of reading sewing as true cultivation, of rewriting women's work as a possible source and vehicle of poetry, gradually fades from the poem... But even if Barrett Browning chose not to write the final books as, for instance, confabulations in a seamstress's shop, or conversations conducted as Aurora and Marian weave or hem, sewing imagery might carry the weight of a reconstructed genre. Here again, however, the poem does not bear out its early suggestions. (249)

Because Barrett Browning seems to drop her interest in women's work, the significance of this work is, Wallace suggests, ambivalent: "representations of the relations among women, work and writing refuse complete resolution" (251). Wallace's reading marks literal objects out as ultimately significant only in terms of character and plot development. However, this reading fails to account for the persistence of the language of women's work; Aurora continues to figure her speech in "stitches" long after she escapes the drudgery of literally tying them (VIII.1130).

<11>Michie, Wallace, and Zakreski all read sewing literally, looking for instances of fine or plain stitching and following the action of the plot through the interruptions and detours of women's work that occur along the way towards Aurora's realization as a poet. The resulting readings separate literary labors from these domestic tasks; Wallace, for instance, makes much of the distance between "the inadequate, restricted work of women and the desirable, cultivating, masculine labors to which Aurora aspires" (243). These readings, however, overlook exactly what they claim to redeem: Aurora's agency and authority. Aurora alerts us to the ways in which women's work is symbolically figured as well as literally performed; we should take her at her word when she writes, "the works of women are symbolical." Aurora does not present herself as the victim of a societal structure that demands that women must sew and not write; rather, she chooses to recall her progress as a poet in terms of her progress as a woman who also sewed.<sup>(2)</sup> Barrett Browning's employment of the language and imagery of needlework must amount to something more than the "inadequate" starting point for the action of Aurora's *Künstlerroman*.

<12>I do not wish to dispute the validity of these persuasive and important readings. Rather, I wish to expand upon them by drawing attention to the vital figurative work of the needle, which—at least in critical studies of *Aurora Leigh*—has largely been debased and discounted in favor of more literal readings of the restrictiveness of these separate-sphere notions of the conflict between women's work and Aurora's "veritable work" as a poet (III.328). By collapsing women's work into one unsavory category, such readings overlook both important literal and figurative aspects of women's work. Before we can read women's work figuratively, we need to understand it literally. Material culture methodology insists upon concrete, historical specificity. Such an approach can help us, in this case, to understand the differences between the various kinds of women's work that are otherwise read as collectively undesirable in critical studies of *Aurora Leigh*.

<13>In order to understand what Barrett Browning is doing by figuring women's work, it's important to examine what is literally and historically encoded in the term "work." In the nineteenth century, women of all classes "worked." The phrase "women's work" specifically refers to needlework, but Barrett Browning invokes the potential doubleness of this term when Romney refers to gendered bias of the praise, "Which men give women when they judge a book/ Not as mere work but as mere woman's work" (II.233-34). The literal expansiveness of this term is in itself suggestive. Marian's benevolence towards "Lucy Gresham, the sick sempstress girl" reveals the possibility of another sort of "work" (IV.2). Marian leaves her position as a seamstress to nurse the dying Lucy, thereby sacrificing her own livelihood: "She could not leave a solitary soul / To founder in the dark, while she sate still / And lavished stitches on a lady's hem / As if no other work were paramount" (IV.37-40). Romney's work, too, is charitable: "Such work I have for doing, elbow-deep/ In social problems" (II.1216-17).

<14>Women worked charitable works, poetic works, fancy works, plain works, and sweated works; regardless of their class standing, all women in the nineteenth century almost certainly learned to work a needle. For upper and middle class women who did not work in any capacity outside the home, "'work' in their vocabulary usually meant sewing for the family, preferably embroidery" (Davidoff and Hall xv). The "works of women" that Aurora refers to in the first book of *Aurora Leigh* are of the decorative variety, suited to her position within her Aunt's comfortable household:

Producing what? A pair of slippers, sir,  
To put on when you're weary—or a stool  
To tumble over and vex you... 'curse that stool!  
Or else at best, a cushion, where you lean  
And sleep, and dream of something we are not  
But would be for your sake. (I.458-62)

As Aurora notes, the “work” of upper-class women is entirely removed from any economy where wages are paid. For Aurora, it also fails to produce worth in the sense that it means little to its intended beneficiary. The shadowy “sir” who receives the slippers curses the existence of an apparently worthless stool, which serves only “To tumble over and vex you.” “[A]t best,” these works refer to “something we are not” rather than to the industriousness or skill of their maker.

<15>While these finely worked goods belong to the domestic sphere—a pair of slippers to be worn by a “weary” male wearer during his time indoors—lower class women might have worked in both senses of the word. Marian, for example, both “works” in the sense of receiving compensation for her labor as a seamstress and plies her needle at “darning stockings past their natural age, / And patching petticoats from old to new, / And other light work done for thrifty wives” (III.1037-9). While Marian is paid in both these instances, the valence of “work” is different in each. Domestic “work” belongs to the realm of “thrifty wives,” not to the unforgiving economy of “necessity” that governs labor in the factory (IV.35).

<16>It’s important to understand that in a nineteenth-century context, Marian’s work—which seems, perhaps, very much like Aurora’s needlework—also differs in some key ways. The universality of needlework draws the upper and lower ends of the class spectrum near; as Freedgood notes, “The upper-class handworker performs a kind and an amount of work that puts her into a startling occupational proximity to laboring-class women” (“Fine Fingers” 636). Marian and Aurora’s shared familiarity with needlework speaks to the universality of women’s work in the nineteenth century, but the differences between the kinds of work that they perform—coarse and fine, practical and ornamental, unpaid and paid—enforce their respective class identities.

<17>I’m spending time here pointing out the differences between these kinds of work because readings of the role of women’s work in *Aurora Leigh* can sometimes skirt over the important differences between categories of work: fine work and plain work, work done in leisure and work done for money. Marian-as-seamstress is a figure that attracts a great deal of critical attention, but what I am primarily interested in here is how Aurora envisions and redeems the creative and expressive potential of a specific set of works. *Aurora Leigh* does not explicitly re-envision Marian’s work as a seamstress as productive labor. While Marian does find some comfort in other kinds of work—“I found a mistress-sempstress who was kind / And let me sew in peace among her girls”—she finds even greater ease in Aurora’s house in Italy, where she does not have to sew for money (VII.108-9). This is not to say that Barrett Browning’s treatment of the seamstress is entirely conventional. While Barrett Browning employs what Lynn Mae Alexander calls “the standard iconography” of the seamstress, she does not limit her seamstresses to those initially prevalent conventions: “the long nights, the weariness, the country/city dichotomy, and the sense of doom associated with the occupation” (148). While Lucy Gresham, whose “thread went faster than her breath” succumbs to a traditional fate, Marian, though abducted, raped, and left to raise an illegitimate child, is ultimately redeemed (IV.24).

<18>We may think of sewing as a single category, but to the nineteenth-century reader, the category of “work” was far more expansive. Readers of *Aurora Leigh* would have been familiar with figurative representations of work as well as literal experiences with it. For this reason, I want to contextualize my reading by taking a brief look at two important nineteenth-century literary figures of needlework: Thomas Hood’s “The Song of the Shirt” and Tennyson’s “The Lady of Shalott.” Hood’s “The Song of the Shirt,” which first appeared in the Christmas 1843 edition of *Punch*, was extraordinarily well-known in the nineteenth century. It was reprinted, pirated, and sung on both sides of the Atlantic.<sup>(3)</sup> The unnamed speaker-seamstress of the poem sings:

‘Work—work—work,  
Till the brain begins to swim;  
Work—work—work,  
Till the eyes are heavy and dim!  
Seam, and gusset, and band,  
Band, and gusset, and seam,  
Till over the buttons I fall asleep,  
And sew them on in a dream! (16-23)

The grinding drudgery of Hood’s repetition of “work—work—work,” a line that appears nine times in the poem’s eighty-nine lines, compounds the reader’s understanding of the strenuous nature of this labor. There is no refuge in the chiasmus “Seam, and gusset, and band, / Band, and gusset, and seam”; like the seamstress herself, the reader is carried on “Till the heart is sick, and the brain benumbed” (55). The “unwomanly rags” worn by Hood’s seamstress disallow any elevated notion of women’s work—this is “work” without any of the valences of domestic economy or leisure (3).

<19>Through she would have been equally familiar many to nineteenth-century readers,



Tennyson's *Lady of Shalott* fashions an entirely different sort of work than Hood's seamstress: "There she weaves by night and day/ A magic web with colours gay" (36-7). The Lady, unlike the seamstress, is not compelled to labor by any economic force—"Oh, God! that bread should be so dear" (Hood 39)—and fashions decorative works rather than practical ones. And yet, like the seamstress's "Seam, and gusset, and band," which gives shape to the shirt that she labors over as well as to the verses through which she speaks, the Lady's "magic web" is symptomatic of both her creative agency and her captivity. Death, after all, follows quickly upon her cessation of this work: "She left the web, she left the loom, / She made three paces through the room... Out flew the web and floated wide; / The mirror cracked from side to side" (Tennyson 109-114).

<20>Hood and Tennyson's figures of needlework represent two different kinds of work performed in isolated extremes of the class spectrum. The term "work" contains a great number of meanings that need to be understood in historical and cultural context. Nevertheless, Barrett Browning, it seems to me, uses the expansiveness of this term in ways that are sometimes perhaps intentionally vague. Aurora often plays upon the many meanings that are contained within that single word; by collapsing the term, Barrett Browning performs a sleight of hand that draws Aurora's "veritable work" as a poet nearer to the "crochet work" she longs to abandon (III.328; I.1048). Nevertheless, we must understand and acknowledge the literal differences between kinds of work because these differences would have been foregrounded for the -century reader in a way that they are not for most contemporary readers.

<21>These kinds of distinctions and clarifications illustrate the importance of literal readings and reveal what details a materially and historically specific inquiry can reveal in literary texts. Nevertheless, literal readings aren't enough to understand objects that exist in textual space rather than in physical space. A literal reading of the role of women's work in the text recovers historical and cultural meanings by showing us how Barrett Browning investigates and records details of nineteenth-century domestic life and gender roles. What a figurative reading adds to this literal reading is a more nuanced understanding of how literal details, such as scenes of sewing or embroidery, become something more than purely literal when they become part of a text. The final section of the essay will focus on these "symbolical" aspects and Barrett Browning's use of women's work as a set of poetic tropes.

## II. "a work apart"

<22>For the most part, literary critics who employ material culture concentrate on realist novels rather than poetry. As a relatively unstudied field, Barrett Browning's verse novel provides a suggestive new textual space for examining the work that literary things can do.<sup>(4)</sup> Women's work in *Aurora Leigh* forms the scenery—the backdrop of realism—but it also informs the potent poetic vocabulary through which Aurora speaks. Women's work matters literally, as a real set of actions performed by real women, and figuratively, as a part of the form and language of the text. Literal and historical readings recognize the important details about the role of women's work in the lives of nineteenth-century women that *Aurora Leigh* records and represents; we see, for instance, that Aurora is compelled to sew by her aunt, by her gender, and by her class. However, the manner in which Barrett Browning—and Aurora—communicate and represent these details needs to be more carefully examined. We should study literary things not just as literal things but also as figurative things, paying close attention to the process and influence of representation as well as the thing being represented. These details reveal a more complex reading of the place of women's work in the text and in what Barrett Browning is saying about women's domestic and artistic lives.

<23>The lines that Aurora lavishes on women's work suggest that it is an integral part of her poetry rather than something that she must get away from before she can become a poet. Sewing is, at the very least, worthy in that both Barrett Browning and Aurora give over so many lines to it. While she summarily dismisses wax flower modeling and a variety of other tasks, Aurora seems always to be working out the meanings of her needlework:

Then I sate and teased  
The patient needle till it spilt the thread,  
Which oozed off from it in meandering lace  
From hour to hour. I was not, therefore, sad;  
My soul was singing at a work apart  
Behind the wall of sense, as safe from harm  
As sings the lark when sucked up out of sight  
In vortices of glory and blue air. (I.1049-56)

Although Aurora characterizes poetry here as "a work apart," distinguishing between the work of her hands and that of her "soul," the dense figurative language she uses to describe the lace draws the reader to, rather than away from the thing that she is supposedly producing without thought. Needlework, then, is not the same as "A-doing nothing" (I.449).

Aurora's poetry is located in an inaccessible realm, "behind the wall of sense" and "sucked up out of sight." Although it is "safe from harm" in this isolation, it seems that little good—and little meaning—can come from poetry that is cut off from life in this manner. The oozing, "meandering" lace is infinitely more interesting than the vague "vortices of glory and blue air" associated with poetry. The "lark" seems a tired, imitative figure next to potential of the "patient needle"; notably, the needle is active—"spilt the thread"—though the lark, "sucked up," is passive. The conventionality of the lark brings to mind Aurora's disdain for "lifeless imitations of live verse" (l.974). Its passivity likewise suggests Aurora's early, flawed attempts at poetry:

For me, I wrote  
False poems, like the rest, and thought them true  
Because myself was true in writing them.  
I peradventure have writ true ones since  
With less complacence. (l.1023-6)

The difference between "false poems" and "true ones" mirrors the difference between "lifeless imitations" and "verse that lives" (ll.306).<sup>(5)</sup> Aurora's insistence that "poets should/ exert a double vision" emphasizes the importance of everyday things; a poet, she writes, should be able "To see near things as comprehensively/ As if afar" (V.183-6). The work that Aurora values belongs to her own time, rather than to a romantic and removed setting: "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" (V.189-192). Aurora's "veritable work" draws upon women's work rather than dismissing or rejecting even the most seemingly mundane aspects of it.

<24>Rather than categorically dismissing women's work as meaningless or inferior relative to her poetic project, Aurora revisits such works and redeems the experience of them, if not the practice. While Aurora never returns to crocheting or cross-stitching, suddenly finding these tasks as engaging and stimulating as her writing, the figurative ends to which Barrett Browning employs women's work reveal the value of these domestic tasks. Women's work is always and already intertwined with the redemptive qualities of poetry by virtue of Aurora's agency as an author. Barrett Browning—and, accordingly, Aurora, whom she positions as the author of her own narrative—deliberately feminizes the poem by choosing to narrate and investigate scenes of sewing as both leisure and labor. While in realist texts, we may need some degree of material reality in order to believe a textual representation, there are, of course, no absolutes about what does and doesn't need to be there.<sup>(6)</sup> A character may need a chair to sit in, a wall to lean on, or a fork to eat with, but does Aurora absolutely need a needle?

<25>One could probably argue that for nineteenth-century women, a needle was a kind of necessity. *Aurora Leigh* undeniably represents a social reality wherein women's lives were, at least in part, hemmed in by the obligations of any number of domestic tasks that might fall under the category of women's work: hemming, stitching, darning, patching, embroidering, spinning, knitting, weaving, and crocheting. In the early books of *Aurora Leigh*, Aurora recounts the frustrating and limiting domestic tasks that she is compelled to perform by virtue of the social position that she takes up in her Aunt's household. What I want to examine more closely are the decisions that Barrett Browning makes in representing this household and Aurora's place within it. Aurora's aunt, "who liked a woman to be womanly," wants Aurora to follow a pattern (l.443):

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 [...]  
As long as they keep quiet 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 (l.427-39)

The "angelic" role that Aurora's aunt wants her niece to play sounds very much like Coventry Patmore's famous "The Angel in the House," which first appeared in print in 1854—two years before Barrett Browning published *Aurora Leigh*. Given the pervasiveness of Patmore's poem in the nineteenth century, Barrett Browning may very well have had his angel in mind here.<sup>(7)</sup> In the poem, Patmore describes in notorious length and detail an idealized, angelic notion of female self-abnegation: "Man must be pleased; but him to please /Is woman's pleasure; down the gulf/ Of his condoled necessities/ She casts her best, she flings herself" (73). Of course, Aurora balks against this notion of femininity when she refuses to marry Romney and sacrifice her poetic aspirations to the role that he would have her play as his wife: "You want a helpmate, not a mistress, sir, / A wife to help your

ends, —in her no end!” (ll.402-3). What interests me, of course, is the figure of women’s work woven through Aurora’s disdain for the injustice of an “angelic reach” used “to sit and darn.” Aurora directs her condemnation towards the particular act of darning—literally, a technique for repairing holes or tears in fabric or knitting. Rather than being used to generative ends, the “angelic reach” of women is used here to work at something old. When we unpack this image of a woman darning by literalizing it, the figurative potential becomes more apparent. We see a woman with her head bent over an old sock, perhaps, pulling together the threads of worn garments with subtle stitches that, ideally, will never show at all; this invisible labor, in turn, brings to mind the idealization of female self-abnegation and heightens our sense of the injustice that Aurora perceives in this seemingly innocuous figure. When we read into figures of women’s work rather than reading over them, the subtleties and even the contradictions of Barrett Browning’s employment of these figures begin to emerge; even as Aurora seems to be saying that darning is a useless, futile act, the text enacts its “symbolical” potential.

<26>I want to draw a connection here between the idea of a literal pattern for needleworking and the limiting, self-denying roles of femininity that Aurora rejects. Rather than following those lines prescribed by her social position, her class, or her aunt—rather than “lying quiet there... / and suffering her/ To prick me to a pattern with her pin”—Aurora redraws the boundaries (l.379-81). For the most part, Aurora’s early exertions in the “leisurely domestic arts” exemplify the authority of her aunt: “I danced the polka and the Cellarius / Spun glass, stuffed birds, and modeled flowers in wax, / Because *she* liked accomplishments in girls” (l.424-6; emphasis mine). There is no agency in these tasks: “I felt no life which was not patience,—did / The thing she bade me, without heed to a thing / Beyond it” (l.483-5). Presumably, Aurora models her wax flowers to specifications dictated by both her aunt and “by reading one of the surprisingly many books and pamphlets that taught how to recreate ‘natural’ flowers through the artifice of wax” (Shteir 652). However, Aurora’s much more involved depictions of needlework depict her inability, in these tasks, to “recreate” from instructions and perform “without heed to a thing” beyond her aunt’s wishes. Aurora’s embroidery, for example, clearly suggests her failure to do exactly “the thing she bade me”:

And last  
 I learnt cross-stitch, because she did not like  
 To see me wear the night with empty hands  
 A-doing nothing. So, my shepherdess  
 Was something after all, (the pastoral saints  
 Be praised for’t) leaning lovelorn with pink eyes  
 To match her shoes, when I mistook the silks;  
 Her head uncrushed by that round weight of hat  
 So strangely similar to the tortoise-shell  
 Which slew the tragic poet. (l.446-54)

Like the other aspects of her education, Aurora learns cross-stitch at her aunt’s behest. However, rather than working to precise specifications, Aurora fails to create a facsimile and fashions, instead, a re-envisioning of the pastoral. Though accidental, Aurora’s pink-eyed shepherdess seems more successful than her early attempts at poetry which, she laments, follow the pattern too closely: “I poured myself / Along the veins of others, and achieved / Mere lifeless imitations of live verse” (l.972-4). While, from a certain artistic standpoint, “embroidery is summarily dismissed” because “embroiderers employ patterns,” Aurora’s shepherdess proves, in her poetry, creatively viable (Parker 12). Aurora clearly enjoys plying words more than plying silks. Rather than sinister, her alliterative description of the shepherdess, “leaning lovelorn with pink eyes,” is lighthearted. She plays upon the awkwardness of her embroidery in the awkward tangle of words in line 452, “Her head uncrushed by that round weight of hat.” The reader has to work to see this image clearly; we may presume that Aurora’s needlework presents a similar challenge. Aurora’s evaluation of her embroidery gives way to an allusion to “the tragic poet” Aeschylus, suggesting that, though it is most likely a failure according to her aunt’s standards, the shepherdess represents a success in the larger picture of Aurora’s development as a poet. Rather than representing stagnation or a hindrance to Aurora’s *Künstlerroman*—“A-doing nothing”—the shepherdess points in the direction of her eventual realization as a poet.

<27>Although Aurora the poet no longer crochets lace or embroiders pastoral scenes, she continues to stitch and tie her rhymes, refusing, as Barrett Browning does, to put aside these distinctly feminine figures of creativity. Long after Aurora has gained the liberty to “push my needles down” forever and take up the pen instead, she continues to employ figurative language that draws upon the symbolic worth of women’s work (l.534). While the activity of sewing largely disappears from the text, the figurative richness of needlework informs both Barrett Browning’s poetry and Aurora’s. Rather than a “sewing plot,” the later books of *Aurora Leigh* act out the richness of speech endowed with women’s work, showing that these are not empty things (Wallace 249). The text consistently upholds Aurora’s notion of the “symbolical” worth of these works—the manner in which the familiarity

of these things makes them resonate for readers of both sexes. Barrett Browning also uses the familiarity of that figure—and, more generally, of women’s work—as a means of communicating complex and often unexpected notions about the connections between domestic work, labor, and poetic work. When she leaves off embroidery and crochet, Aurora replaces silk threads with words, but these, too, she works: “I worked my rhythmic thought” (ll.272). Despite her early rejection of the category of “women’s work” in response to Romney’s assertion that women make “doating mothers, and perfect wives” but never poets (ll.222), Aurora characterizes her mode of speech as distinctly feminine:

I’m plain in speech, direct in purpose: when  
I speak, you’ll take the meaning as it is,  
And not allow for puckerings in the silk  
By clever stitches: —I’m a woman, sir,  
I use the woman’s figure naturally,  
As you the male license. (VIII.1127-32)

Aurora’s deliberate feminization of language—“I use the woman’s figure naturally”—echoes Barrett Browning’s feminization of the epic.<sup>(8)</sup> Like the text of *Aurora Leigh* as a whole, Aurora’s speech incorporates familiar and assuredly feminine aspects; here, she deliberately speaks in stitches. Unlike the complexity of Aurora’s early attempts at fancy work—the “clever stitches” required by the embroidery and crochet—these stitches are clear and “direct in purpose.” There are no “puckerings” in the line breaks; the measured lines, like even stitches, emphasize, instead, Aurora’s clarity of purpose. Aurora’s assertion that figures of women’s work come “naturally” recalls, again, the ubiquity of the needle in the nineteenth century; as Alexander remarks, “...people encountering a woman sewing in literature or art could identify with the character—either as women who sewed or as men whose mothers, wives, and sisters sewed” (9). Women’s work, as an everyday thing, enables facile identification with the familiar figure of a woman sewing.

<28>While needlework figures largely as women’s work in the text, Barrett Browning avoids reducing it to an exclusively feminine domain. Aurora emphasizes that women’s work provides a uniquely feminine vocabulary; even so, Barrett Browning does not limit the figurative meanings according to “hard boundaries of cultural usage” which dictate that “men don’t sew at all” (Wallace 250). Importantly, Aurora resists Romney’s reductive views of the division between the sexes and mocks his attempts to define any attribute as “womanly, past question” (ll.497). This line of reasoning, after all, leads Romney to conclude that the female “sex is weak for art” but “strong for life and duty”; Aurora obviously recoils at this suggestion (ll.372, 374-5). Aurora’s similarly inflexible aunt, “who liked woman to be womanly,” regards needlework as a female attribute (l.443). Aurora, on the other hand, confuses the boundaries between woman’s work and man’s vocation: “I too have my vocation, —work to do / ... / Most serious work, most necessary work / As any of the economists” (ll.455-60). Aurora’s insistent use of “work” draws together multiple understandings of this ambiguous, expansive term; her poetic work is at once her vocation and the reflection of another kind of work—needlework. Romney’s vocabulary proves similarly complex; he dismisses Aurora’s poetic ambition to “tie your rhymes,” but even this figure, which collapses threads of thought into the literal threads brought together by a needle, suggests the manner in which women’s work and poetry are intertwined (ll.1217). Romney, too, figures women’s work when he tells Aurora to give up her impractical poetic pretensions and “work for ends, I mean for uses, not / For such sleek fringes” (ll.137-8).<sup>(9)</sup> Aurora makes nearly the same point when she asserts that she is “plain in speech” and shuns the “clever stitches.” These complications and contradictions demand that we regard Barrett Browning’s figurings of women’s work as vital parts of text rather than as detours or distractions along the way. Barrett Browning’s investigation of women’s work clearly amounts to more than just a filling up of time and narrative space; Barrett Browning, Aurora, and even Romney speak through these stitches.

<29>The varied ends to which Aurora applies the figurative language of sewing mirror the many forms that women’s work can take—“clever stitches” or plain ones; “fancy” work or practical work; creating a new garment or patching an old one. Rather than representing stasis—a pause in the action or a silence in the dialogue—Barrett Browning’s figurative fashioning of women’s work is fluid; sewing is not empty, but multifarious. While Aurora works her words through stitches and finds something of use in the experience of women’s work, Barrett Browning’s text resists a wholesale redemption of the value of sewing. Sewing appears in the text as demeaning, dangerous labor as well as productive work; laboring with a needle doesn’t always allow the possibility of “a work apart” (l.1049). Women’s work takes on a range of meanings in *Aurora Leigh*; Barrett Browning implicates needlework in the artistic progress of Aurora as well as the tragic death of Lucy Gresham. Aurora’s text may be held together with stitches as well as words, but stitches, like words, can work to deceive. Aurora figures in women’s work the adulterous mistress who casts Marian out onto the streets of Paris after discovering that she is pregnant:

’Tis the way



With these light women of a thrifty vice,  
My Marian, —always hard upon the rent  
In any sister's virtue! while they keep  
Their own so darned and patched with perfidy,  
hat, though a rag itself, it looks as well  
Across a street, in balcony or coach,  
As any perfect stuff might. (VII.93-100)

Mending takes on a sinister cast in this passage. Unlike Marian's skill in "darning stockings past their natural age, / And patching petticoats from old to new," which reflects her industriousness, this metaphorical patchwork creates an illusion of "perfect stuff" that belies the rents in fabric of the mistress's virtue (III.1037-8). The mistress's "thrifty vice" plays upon the admirable thrift of skillful mending and the innocuous, "thrifty wives" who employ Marian's help (III.1039). The mistress's "perfidy" lies in her despicable attempts at patching the appearance, though not the reality, of her virtue: "she led, herself, an easy time / Betwixt her lover and her looking-glass" (VII.24-5). While Marian, whose ability to successfully turn "old" petticoats "to new" anticipates her own redemption, the mistress's virtue remains "a rag itself."

<30>Women's work takes on a range of meanings in *Aurora Leigh*. Barrett Browning implicates needlework in the artistic progress of Aurora as well as the tragic death of Lucy Gresham. Sewing appears in the text as demeaning, dangerous labor as well as productive work.; laboring with a needle doesn't always allow the possibility of "a work apart" (I.1049). The despicable Lady Waldemar, who professes devotion to Romney's charitable projects, wears gowns produced by sweated labor: "All things I did, / Except the impossible...such as wearing gowns / Provided by the Ten Hours' movement: there, / I stopped—we must stop somewhere" (III.599-602). Lady Waldemar's belief in the impossibility of wearing gowns produced by seamstresses under the protection of the factory bills—which limited the working hours of women in the textile industries—separates her appreciation of fine needlework from any concern for the human hands that must work those needles.<sup>(10)</sup> While Aurora reads her own "symbolical" stitches for traces of the generations of women who have also bent their heads to make largely useless bits of finery, Lady Waldemar pointedly ignores the implications of the stitches that hold together her gowns. Aurora, of course, shows what Lady Waldemar does not care to know: Marian, compelled to stitch unfeeling stitches while Lucy lies dying from the exhaustion of her own endless labors at the needle: "Why, Marian Erle, you're not the fool to cry? / Your tears spoil Lady Waldemar's new dress, / You piece of pity!" (IV.26-8). Rather than giving shape to her thoughts and ambitions, as Aurora's work often does, Marian's labor forestalls any feeling.

<31>My point in examining Barrett Browning's figurings of women's work—some of which seem contradictory—is not to create a catalog of literal objects. We don't need to study *Aurora Leigh* to learn about darning, embroidery, or fringe; if we are interested in the purely literal aspects of these kinds of things, we have artifacts enough to suffice in museums, antique stores, and other repositories of Victorian knick-knackery. The Victorians, after all, for all their overstuffed, velvet-upholstered sitting rooms and silver-laden dining tables, left behind a notoriously dense trail of material culture that extends far beyond the pages of a text. Objects in *Aurora Leigh* resist exclusively literal readings because Barrett Browning returns us, always to the figurative importance of needlework, refusing to identify it solely according to what it literally is. Aurora may be literally embroidering a shepherdess with pink eyes but she is also fashioning verse through a vocabulary of stitches, hems, and threads. What this shows has implications for how we read the material stuff of literature; things in the space of poetry or fiction, of course, are never purely literal because they, like Aurora's shepherdess or the lace that oozes from her needle, are always figured through language. At times, Barrett Browning represents women's work in a way that suggests the redemptive potential of female domestic labors, but women's work isn't generalizable. It is, rather, a nuanced category that demands specific, literal consideration as well as figurative fluidity and flexibility of interpretation.

#### Endnotes

(1)In her study of preliterate and illiterate women, Annis Pratt elegantly untangles the "long threads with which by hook or by crook they have woven a complex, centuries-long tapestry of communication" (163). Stitches, then, can speak; quilts, writes Daryl M. Hafter, "bring a more personal message to the collector who seeks to hear the voices of earlier times in their patterns" (25).<sup>(△)</sup>

(2)After all, *Aurora Leigh* the poem ostensibly belongs to Aurora Leigh the poet; for more see Peggy Dunn Bailey: "She does not speak as a victim. She speaks from a position of narrative authority: this is her life and her text—it bears her name" (118).<sup>(△)</sup>

(3)For more, see Florence S. Boos, "The Poetics of the Working Classes," *Victorian Poetry* 39.2 (Summer 2001): 103-09.<sup>(△)</sup>

(4) In a letter to Robert Browning, Barrett Browning refers to *Aurora Leigh* as a “novel-poem”; critics have since adopted the term verse-novel to describe Barrett Browning’s generic experimentation (“Letter to Robert Browning” 330).<sup>(△)</sup>

(5) Aurora’s preoccupation with writing “true ones” echoes Barrett Browning’s “intention,” in *Aurora Leigh*, of “meeting face to face and without mask the Humanity of the age, and speaking the truth as I conceive of it out plainly” (“Letter to Robert Browning” 330).<sup>(△)</sup>

(6) I’m thinking here of Cynthia Wall’s claim that, in early eighteenth-century novels, “Windows, closets, and wainscotings emerge when jumped out of, hidden in, or fainted against, and not a moment sooner; space is created in the act of narrative” (4).<sup>(△)</sup>

(7) Barrett Browning did not expect that her poet-heroine would appeal to Patmore’s notions of femininity: “I hear he is to Review in the North British my poor ‘Aurora Leigh,’ who has the unfeminine impropriety to express her opinion on various ‘abstract subjects,’—which Mr. Patmore can’t abide, he says” (“Letter to Isa Blagden” 335).<sup>(△)</sup>

(8) For more on *Aurora Leigh* as an epic, see Dunn Bailey, who argues that writing her epic in the hybrid form of the verse novel “allowed her to do with form what she was doing with content; it allowed her to question, critique, and finally dissolve false binaries, creating something revolutionary in the process” (120).<sup>(△)</sup>

(9) Romney’s disdain for fancy work fits his austere ambitions; as Freedgood notes, “Even at the height of its popularity in the Victorian period, most serious (that is to say male and high brow) aesthetic theorists deplored its use” (“Fringe” 257).<sup>(△)</sup>

(10) The Ten Hours’ Movement refers to the Factory Act of 1847, which limited the working hours of women in the textile industries: “It limited the hours of labour to sixty-three per week from the 1st of July 1847, and to fifty-eight per week, from the 1st of May 1848, which with the stoppage on Saturday afternoon was the equivalent of ten hours work per day” (Crooke-Taylor 88).<sup>(△)</sup>

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