

# NINETEENTH-CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

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## Burning Down the House in *Jane Eyre*, *Aurora Leigh*, and *Denzil Place*

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<1>The English manor house set in its hereditary grounds was a visual sign in Victorian times of the power and confidence of the landowning class as well as the stability of the whole Imperial structure (Girouard 2; Wilson and Mackley xvii; Smith 178, McBride 4). The image of such a house on fire would suggest a breach of this confidence—an unthinkable vulnerability in the seemingly indestructible edifices of patriarchy and hegemony. A burning English mansion during the long period of Victorian prosperity and peace would of course have a very different meaning from a similar incendiary event set in a more politically volatile place and time, such as Ireland during the early twentieth century. Whereas the Irish burning of big houses was part of an ongoing political strategy in an environment scarred by unrelenting historical conflict, an English domestic conflagration was a rare, unexpected event, narrated in fiction as the embodiment of unconscious wishes or fears. This event occurs in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* and is repeated with comparable injuries to the hero in Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh*, and in “Violet Fane”’s (1) *Denzil Place* with less harm to the hero. All three of these novelistic texts are women-authored, which in itself suggests a gendered wish-fulfilment in the fictional destruction of a patriarchal home.

<2>A close analysis of the causes and consequences of the house fires in all three texts supports this suggestion. While *Aurora Leigh* and *Denzil Place* are actually composed in verse, their forerunner *Jane Eyre* is written in a fluent, image-embedded prose that uses recurrent motifs, metaphors, and dreams to lyrical effect. Thus, all of these texts are able to use the burning home both novelistically, as a crisis occurring in fictional time that acts as a turning point in the narrative, and poetically, as a symbolic image that combines the two highly reactive elements of house and fire.

<3>Universally, the idea of “Burning Down the House,” as the Talking Heads suggest, is an unsettling one. A house should provide refuge from the elements, but fire inside makes its enclosure more dangerous than the unwalled, unprotected outside. One of the most ominous cards in the tarot pack, the Tower, depicts a lightning-struck building from which bodies are leaping to their ruin. The image is interpretable as radical, violent change, for it suggests not things falling apart so much as actively exploded and consumed by the most destructive element, fire. The iconic image on the card expands into what is in fact a fairly common event in narrative literature. In the novel, as a domestic genre, a family home is of course what burns, an occurrence evident in texts as varied as Henry James’s *The Spoils of Poynton*, William Dean Howells’s *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, George Walker’s *The Vagabond*, Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Daphne du Maurier’s *Rebecca*, Marilynne Robinson’s *Housekeeping*, and Celeste Ng’s *Little Fires Everywhere*.

<4>A burning house, even in a realist novel, represents more than the physical destruction of a building. Both fire and house are significant items in the human treasury of symbols. Fire, hot and dry, is the highest of the old elements. Houses, less fundamental to the originary nature of things than fire, are more intimately human. They are directly associated, in fact, with people and usually conceived as possessing gender.

<5>Sigmund Freud for whom dream symbols are famously gendered, is inconsistent on the gender of houses. In *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis*, he first claims that a house may represent the body of either a man or a woman (*Introduction*, 125, 130-31); but, later in the same text, he writes of both houses and rooms as self-evident “symbol[s] of woman” (*Introduction*, 134). Other theorists, on aesthetics as well as psychology, vary in their gender assignment of houses, a debate that Paula Geyh summarizes in her essay on Robinson’s *Housekeeping* (105-07). Gaston Bachelard, as she points out, emphasizes in *The Poetics of Space* the female, specifically maternal, aspects of the house, with its private domestic spaces and its womb-like, enclosing walls (7). But Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in their groundbreaking 1979 book, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, demonstrate how the male-owned house can comprise not a mirror or refuge but an alienating prison for women (85). Mieke Bal writes of a “father-house” which “becomes fatherhood’s synecdochic metaphor” and which does not protect women in its enclosure; in fact, it makes some women particularly vulnerable to dangers such as domestic rape (171, 179).

<6>In England, whatever the gender of smaller shelters, the great house has always been a display of patriarchal power and possession. Kari Boyd McBride calls the

aristocratic country house from Early Modern times “the metonymy for English male aristocratic hegemony” (4). Although, as several commentators point out, the lady of the house may command some power of management over members of the lower classes or create feminine spaces within the buildings and gardens of a manorial establishment (Mezei and Briganti 839-41; Langland 290-91; Bell 476), the “discourse of husbandry” dictates that “the wife could never be more than *locum tenens* for her husband, to whom belonged the rights and responsibilities for the household’s virtuous ordering” (McBride 5).

<7>This gendered structure of domestic power is related to the distinction between the concepts of “house” and “home.” While a house is essentially a physical structure, a home, traditionally associated with the hearth, may subsist, according to Joseph Rykwert, around a fire on the ground, in the absence of buildings (52-54). Rykwert concedes that houses are normally intended as homes, but once the “home-house” is erected “into a castle which defies its neighbors,” it becomes “much less of a home” (57). Even aristocratic English dwellings had ceased to be actual castles from Early Modern times, but the phrase “the Englishman’s home is his castle” was already a “hoary cliché” by the beginning of the eighteenth century, according to Amanda Vickery (154). The country house may have relinquished the militaristic features of a castle, but it retained the defiant air of masculine self-assertion and could be quite antithetical to the concept of home—and hence, in some cases, to women, as Judith S. Lewis demonstrates (336-42). Although men have needed, created, possessed, and valued their homes throughout history, the widespread belief that women are more invested in the private, comfortable, and intimate “domestic sphere” than men persists tenaciously even into the twenty-first century (Somerville 228; Madigan and Munro 118).

<8>Freud mentions fire as well as houses in his *General Introduction*, claiming that fire is “always filled with sex symbolism” (*Introduction*, 134). However, in the “*Case of Hysteria*” which recounts his famous psychoanalysis of the patient whom he calls Dora, he associates the fire that appears in her significant “First Dream” with “sex” in rather implausible ways. Dora dreams that her father is waking her because the family house is on fire (*Dora*, 81). Freud pores over several features of this dream, but to start with he pays surprisingly little attention to the rather overwhelming presence of the fire itself, and even less to the house as an interpretable entity. He does speculate in a footnote about the female gender of a room within a house (*Dora*, 84); but Dora’s dream house is clearly not female but male. A nineteenth-century paterfamilias taking responsibility for the safety of his family inside a domestic building for which he is financially and socially liable surely identifies this house with the patriarchal male rather than the female. As to

the danger that the fire poses to this “father-house,” the stable patriarchal structure of Dora’s family is during her analysis being seriously threatened. Her father, who has told Dora that he is “afraid of fire” (*Dora*, 82), is having an affair with the married woman whom Freud calls Frau K. At the same time, Frau K’s husband has been pursuing the teenaged Dora, to the extent of sexual harassment (*Dora*, 28-51).

<9>Freud’s analysis of Dora has been criticized by various feminist commentators, whom Toril Moi summarizes in her own critique of Freud’s “phallogocentric epistemology” (60-63, 73). But most commentators do not pay much attention to the house fire in Dora’s dream, or to the weakness of Freud’s interpretation of it. Freud seems blind to the incendiary potential of the dream. He emphasizes that “the meaning of dreams is limited ... to the representation of wishes,” but fails to perceive which way Dora’s “wishes” tend. This young woman, exasperated to neurosis by masculine demands on her person, control of her movements, and definitions of her psyche, dreams into being her desire to bring down the whole patriarchal structure in a violent conflagration (Freud, *Dora*, 86-94).

<10>Freud’s limited interpretation of symbols clearly omits many of the cultural and psychological meanings of fire. Fire is not figured in our iconography only in terms of “sex” or love; it is also Rykwert’s concept of “home” (51) and the Promethean gift to humanity. In an analysis of the Prometheus myth, Stamatis Zografos identifies “an implicit link between fire and knowledge” (41-42), since the gift of fire holds the seeds of all technology, all human culture (Rykwert 51). Bachelard demonstrates in *The Psychoanalysis of Fire* that fire has many other meanings, too, violent and comforting, destructive and creative, to the individual and to all societies (7). Stephen J. Pyne sees fire as “the ultimate dialectical tool, capable equally of deconstructing the text of the world into its constituent parts and of fusing them into a new synthesis.” Pyne also points out “Fire’s power to destroy evil and promote good,” as does Daniel Fisher who, recognizing the association with “danger” and “erasure,” writes also of the “redemptive salvation” in the image of “a healing fire” (Pyne 1-2; Fisher 192).

<11>Focusing on the later nineteenth century, Isobel Armstrong suggests that fire may have been “of all the elements, the most fundamental to the Victorian period, not only to the industrial economy but to the cultural imagination” (“Fire,” 1). By this time, technology had harnessed the pyrotechnic forces to an unprecedented extent but, although human power over the element features in literature, so, too, as Anne Sullivan and Kate Flint point out, do “Unintended conflagrations” and the “Volcanic fiery eruptions” that regularly function as “figures for political uprisings and revolutionary energies” (4). Gemma Clark in her short history of arson

emphasizes the “public spectacle” created by an act of incendiarism and the inseparability of this fiery scene and its representation from revolution and protest through the ages (G. Clark n. pag; see also Ferguson 88-89).

<12>The fire in Dora’s dream is clearly of the destructive variety, though perhaps a liberating “power to promote good” (Pyne 2) imbues it as well. Its potentially mutinous energy is directed at the edifice of the father’s authority. It calls to mind the final shots of Michelangelo Antonioni’s 1970 cult film, *Zabriskie Point*, in which a large house explodes into flames as Daria the female protagonist is struck psychologically by her revulsion towards militaristic patriarchal capitalist America.

<13>In most literary works in which house fires occur, the gender of the house set alight is, as is Daria’s and Dora’s, male. For reasons already suggested, this is especially predictable in nineteenth-century realist narratives when the burning house is a hereditary mansion set in the English countryside. Such a house is a visible part of a landscape, a long-term reminder of the hierarchies not only of gender but of class, recognizable far beyond its inhabitants and their associates. An act of arson on this kind of building is a threat to the whole structure of society, a spectacular symbol of the revolution that every ranked system of power has to be vigilant to prevent.

<14> Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* perhaps includes the most famous burning house in nineteenth-century fiction. Its shock effect is a consequence of its contemporary readers’ assumption that by this time fire, like subversive and immodest behavior, was kept under control within the daily household life of the privileged classes, its old association with revolt and insurrection carefully overwritten. The fire that consumes Thornfield Hall and maims its owner is set by a woman inhabitant of the house, making more explicit than Dora’s dream the gendered nature of the event. Thornfield is a stereotypical emblem of masculine power, for it belongs to the Byronic Edward Rochester and is consistently represented as the outward sign of his social and economic status (136). The great estate is the reason why local ladies desire him as a husband for themselves or their daughters; it is why he is able to use his characteristically commanding tone in interactions with other characters.

<15>The potentially intimidating “grandeur” (130) of what Jane experiences at Thornfield shows off the relationship between social class and gender. A “long and matted gallery” and “slippery steps of oak” are not perfectly designed for a woman’s convenience. Neither is the hall which, with its “grim” portraits, its “bronze lamp,” and “great clock,” strikes Jane as “very stately and imposing,” a judgement that implies admiration but not personal enjoyment. Looking up at the house with its

three stories and “battlements” above, Jane specifically reminds herself that it is a “gentleman’s manor house,” its ownership definitively male (130). As Lewis describes Sarah Churchill, Duchess of Marlborough in the early eighteenth century, who was unhappy and even “appalled” by the “grandiosity” of her husband’s plans for Marlborough House and its grounds, a woman can see no “family home” in the scale and ostentation of such an edifice (345). Mrs. Fairfax keeps the extravagantly furnished dining-room and drawing-room of Thornfield in perfect order at all times not to please her feminine self but because her employer “has a gentleman’s tastes and habits and he expects to have things managed in conformity to them” (136). Upstairs, the ancient, “heavy” furniture and “strange” hangings are decidedly Gothic and a reader understands that, in the Gothic genre, an old mansion tends to hide male secrets that pose a danger to vulnerable young women who venture there. Jane, with all her courage, “by no means covet[s] a night’s repose on one of those wide and heavy beds” (137).

<16>The gender of this “father-house” is further emphasized by the way in which Mrs. Fairfax works against it in her own living quarters. Her apartment contradicts the impression of the whole house in both scale and comfort: words such as “great” and “stately” would never apply here. She manages to create her own feminine home inside, but sequestered from, the masculine house, a process similar to those of some of the historical mistresses of country houses that Lewis discusses (352, 359-60). On arrival at Thornfield, Jane is attracted by the homeliness of “A snug, small room; a round table by a cheerful fire; and an arm-chair” in which the neatly and modestly attired housekeeper is engaged in that most womanly of occupations, “knitting.” Mrs. Fairfax’s familiar, a “large cat [who sits] demurely at her feet” (127) contrasts strikingly with the huge and far from demure Newfoundland dog, Pilot, who is Rochester’s animal companion.

<17>Later in the novel, when Jane inherits money and uses some of it to renovate her own relatives’ home, Moor House, her two female cousins, Mary and Diana Rivers, fully appreciate the “modest snugness” of her achievements (417). Their “pleasant countenances [expand] to the cheerful firelight” on arrival (419), just as Jane’s did on her encounter with Mrs. Fairfax’s room in the depths of forbidding Thornfield. For her male cousin, St. John Rivers, however, Jane realizes that “This parlor is not his sphere” (419). Feminine spaces, which in this novel are on a small scale and designed for human comfort, are generally not admired by male characters. When Jane later pursues the blinded Rochester to his retreat at Ferndean, she finds him in another kind of masculine space, a parlor that she describes as “gloomy,” warmed only by a “neglectful handful of fire” (457). Jane of course brings feminine comfort to the place: she “soon ha[s] the room in more cheerful order” (461).

<18>“Comfort,” according to Franco Moretti, is one of the “keywords” of the bourgeois, and is specifically English in origin. Definable as “everyday necessities made pleasant,” comfort exists between need, the state of the lower classes, and luxury, the aristocratic condition (46-51). Lewis associates comfort with a feminine concept of home (345), an insight that is borne out by *Jane Eyre*. In this novel, comfort, with its care for the wellbeing of the body and its classless refusal to stand upon ceremony, is more a matter of gender than of rank. The female house or room within a house defies both class and patriarchy. The novel’s two important male characters, both of whom are inclined to make other people uncomfortable by their very presence, are drawn to the two different uncomfortable extremes. Rochester, though described as a “gentleman” rather than a “nobleman,” is nevertheless as arrogantly “masterful” as the aristocracy (130, 165), and the pretentious discomforts of his house and his peers’ manners (not to mention his own) reflect this class too. St. John covets the discomfort of the freezing houses of the poor to which he repairs from Jane’s comfortable parlor to tend the sick. Later, he travels to India as a missionary, where his hardships kill him.

<19>Rochester may represent patriarchal primogeniture to the young Jane, who is awed by the size and luxury of his house, but she learns from Mrs. Fairfax that he has not been in possession of his inheritance for very long (159). In fact, Rochester has spent most of his life in the much less privileged position of a younger son, under the influence and even compulsion of his father and elder brother who, he later tells Jane, pressured him into marrying Bertha Mason for her thirty thousand pounds’ dowry (332-33). Thus, although Thornfield Hall with its impressive reception rooms and its Gothic upper stories is associated with him and his mysteriously concealed past for considerable parts of the novel, Brontë explicitly points to a much more organic object as his symbol: the great horse-chestnut tree in the orchard, smitten during the course of the novel by lightning (280, 285). Rochester himself uses it as a personal metaphor (469) and Jane takes this up, transforming the classic marriage emblem, and figuring herself not as a vine but as a self-supported plant that “take[s] delight in” and “lean[s] towards” him of its own volition (469). Presumably because of this feminine vision of mutual comfort, Rochester is finally redeemed and healed of most of the wounds of his ordeal by fire. In the long run, despite the physical damage that it does, the fire is a purifying and healing element in Rochester’s experience (Pickrel 170; Porter 546).

<20>David Lodge (121-31) and Micael M. Clark (699-701) show how, in this novel, fire in both male and female hearths is generally repressed into a provider of warmth and sustenance. But where repression, in the “father-house,” has shifted its force into the real world of actual incarceration, fire breaks out. Locked into the most Gothic,

uncomfortable part of Thornfield Hall and filled with the fury of a woman cheated and excluded by the patriarchy, Bertha Rochester becomes the embodiment of an explosively violent return of the repressed. Like Dora's dream fire, Bertha's symbolizes a complete exasperation with the masculine system but, unlike Dora's, it is the result of Bertha's own deliberate action. That her rebellion is directed against the specific masculine force of the landlord, slave-owner, gaoler, husband, Rochester, is demonstrated when his appearance on the roof precipitates her final act of self-liberation (453).

<21>Following Gilbert and Gubar, it has become commonplace to regard this novel as preoccupied with female rage and to see Bertha as Jane Eyre's "truest and darkest double" (360). The second Mrs. Rochester, almost as much eaten up with incendiary ambitions as the first, has from her childhood characterized herself as a nexus of uncontrolled flames that any wind can transform into a wildfire (Brontë 69; Gilbert and Gubar 343, 344, 362). However, unlike Bertha, Jane does not finally become the victim of her fiery passions. She is able to unite herself in marriage with the maimed Rochester, once he is brought down to her level by his attempt to rescue Bertha. This may be because Jane never, in the course of her narration, fully participates in her own furious anger. Her ambivalence toward her passions is evident throughout the book in the older Jane's wry commentary on the younger's feelings. Jane's later reconciliation with Rochester, her most important patriarchal combatant, close to the tamed comfort of a hearth fire that she is able to make homely for him and her alike (461), shows the resolution and relaxation of her pyromaniacal tendencies.

<22>The burning of Thornfield is the most violent, melodramatic enactment in Brontë's novel of all of its attempts to unsettle complacency about women's subservience and docility. This is probably why the event is repeated and revised in two women-authored verse-novels of the later Victorian period; for the novel in verse is itself an unsettling hybrid in a world of separate spheres in genre as well as gender (Markovits 2; Felluga 171-74). In Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*, the ancestral house of the Leighs is burnt down in an episode that resembles the house burning in *Jane Eyre* in many ways except that, as Armstrong points out, "it is presented in political and social terms rather than in a private, sexual context" (*Victorian Poetry*, 368). The fire in this verse-novel is set not by a woman but by disgruntled members of a lower class, yet the "political and social" gesture that it embodies is nevertheless gendered, for it signals the failure of political reform that excludes women's vision and the poetic imagination. In this fictional autobiography of a woman poet, Barrett Browning specifically associates poetic vision with a female viewpoint. Thus, the burning house again represents a female exasperation with the male hegemony—a desire to raze it all to the ground as in Dora's dream.



<23>Romney Leigh is the legitimate owner of Leigh Hall, an ancient mansion possessed by his family for generations and visible from miles around. The protagonist, Aurora Leigh, never narrates any visit of her own to this male-inherited house, even though she is Romney's cousin. Being a poor relation, she is placed, after her disinherited father's death, with a maiden aunt in a smaller female-oriented house, from which she can see the top of Leigh Hall in the distance. In admiring the view, she appreciates the trees and "folded hills" more than that house. She identifies the male ownership of the establishment by mentioning "Romney's chimneys" (22).

<24>Aurora's aunt's house does not provide Aurora with the feminine comfort of a home, despite the insulated softness of its "carpeted low rooms" (18). The "low[ness]" of the rooms is a sign of the aunt's limitations and the restrictions that she attempts to impose; for the education that she forces upon her niece offers merely the "right of comprehending husband's talk / When not too deep" (17). Aurora's lack of comfort in the house has many causes in addition to this manner of education, which the older Aurora compares with "the water-torture" (18), including the orphan child's longings for her native Italy and for the loving care of her father. But the main cause, which becomes evident later, is that this lesser "country-house" (12) is not the outright possession of its female proprietress. This may explain why it does not offer to its female inhabitants the relaxed intimacy of a home; it belongs to a patriarchal system of possession and inheritance which largely excludes women. The aunt has tenure only during her lifetime and has almost no legacy to bequeath to Aurora, who the aunt fears will be destitute unless she can be tamed to the patriarchy's idea of a suitably demure wife. Aurora uses for herself in this house the image of a wild bird caged (13), but her aunt is more pathetic in the long run. Unlike Aurora, the aunt was "born in a cage" and has lived only the "cage-bird life" of an upper-class woman, a type of existence that Aurora derides as "A quiet life, which [is] not life at all" (13). Fettered to the punishment of "knitting stockings, stitching petticoats" and trapped "Between the vicar and the county squires" (13), the aunt knows as little comfort as Aurora. Her house is not a cheerful woman's home but a cage constructed by men and the women who support them.

<25>The relative dearth of comforting indoor spaces in *Aurora Leigh* may be a consequence of its author's own escape from the claustrophobic restrictions of an English invalid's room in a father-dominated house to the expansive outdoor life of a settler in Italy. According to Rykwert (54), a home need not focus on a hearth, especially in a warm climate. The one room in her aunt's house in which Aurora feels at home is her own "little chamber," which does not seem like an indoor enclosure at all. While houses can be imprisoning, homes, according to Lewis, allow people freedom to "be themselves" (Lewis 340). Aurora's room is furnished

significantly in green, reminding its wild-birdlike inhabitant of “a privet-hedge a bird might build in,” and its window, which “let[s] in / The outdoor world with all its greenery,” makes the space seem not walled off but continuous with the natural world (21). Aurora’s yearning for the outdoors is partly a nostalgia for her early childhood, when her widowed father took her from Florence to a house “Among the mountains above Pelago” because, now “unmothered,” she “had need / Of mother nature more than others” (8). Her father’s house there is not a “father-house” exactly, for it is shaped above all by the constantly mourned absence of the mother. However, it is not a “mother-house” either, for grief deprives both father and daughter of the true comfort of home. Aurora “fe[els] a mother-want about the world” and craves the loving presence of a woman who “know[s] a simple, merry, tender knack / Of tying sashes, fitting baby-shoes / And stringing pretty words that make no sense” (6). Although her father has by marrying an Italian “Thrown off the old conventions, broken loose” (10), his debilitating sorrow after her death prevents him from giving any public form to an alternative lifestyle.

<26>Later in the verse-novel, Aurora makes a kind of family with Marian Erle and Marian’s young child in Florence, and their home there definitely constitutes a woman-house. Far from being stately and flaunting their social position, the two women come from totally different classes but co-exist companionably without ceremony or formality. During the time that they live together, Marian is recovering from the trauma of abduction and rape, and Aurora is saddened by her belief that Romney has married the malign Lady Waldemar, but their shared house is nevertheless comfortable. Here no hearth fires are necessary since the climate is sultry and at “noon,” at least, the sun needs to be “shut out”; but, when it is not as “scorching,” the members of this little household spend much of their time outside. Flowers, so often considered feminine in beauty and as gifts, are mentioned more than once, gathered outside and brought in by Marian and her small son for Aurora (242, 249-50). Aurora’s room is furnished not only with a “vase of lilies” but also with “pictures,” a “statuette” of Psyche and “Love,” and a “low couch where [she] leaned,” clearly at her ease, with a “table near” (242). The atmosphere is redolent of the feminine snugness and cheer extolled by *Jane Eyre*, though in a different climate. So relaxed and happy—and able to “be [herself]” (Lewis 340)—does Marian become here that, one evening, Aurora is “startled” to hear her “laugh,” a sound that Aurora never expected from one so abused (261).

<27>Back in England, Leigh Hall remains a dominant “father-house,” even after Romney becomes a socialist and converts it into a Fourierist “phalanstery,” a self-contained commune in which erstwhile members of the urban poor are brought to live and work. Romney’s experiment embodies his profound dissatisfaction with the

Victorian *status quo*, his attempt to reduce “the great sum / Of human anguish” (44). However, his socialism still retains the stamp of the old patrilineal hierarchy; for he, the male inheritor of this vast property, continues to make the rules and govern the lives of its inhabitants (Barrow 248). At the time of his abortive proposal to the young Aurora, he has made it clear that his vision of society’s “torments” is dependent on his “Being a man” in the most positive interpretation of that status. A true “man,” he implies, cannot “stand calmly by / And view these things, and never tease his soul / For some great cure” (46).

<28>Claiming this manly vocation as his own in the natural manner of the privileged, he is unable to imagine that his young, impoverished, female cousin should herself lay claim to anything so masculine as a personal vocation. His contempt for Aurora’s poetry, which he has not bothered to read, is based entirely on her gender. He describes the language on the flyleaf of her book as “lady’s Greek / Without the accents” (40); whether she writes “well” or “ill” is only by the measure of “other women.” Seeing that her writing cannot, because she is a woman, be “the Best in art,” it is pointless and she should give it up (42). When she tries to convince him that poetry and other arts are capable of “some actual good,” he becomes even more disparaging. He says that because of her gender she has no grasp of the problems of the modern world, “None” of which, he asserts, “Can women understand” (43). After making this absurdly bigoted generalization about women’s understanding, he ironically goes on to accuse women themselves of false generalization. He claims that they use induction to universalize to the whole “human race” from their inadequate, anecdotal memory of “such a child, or such a man, / You saw one morning waiting in the cold” (43). This limited purview he contrasts sharply with his own painstaking, educated study of the statistics of vice, deprivation, and inequality, which exist not as evanescent personal experience but as durable print, “in figures on a page / Plain, silent, clear, as God sees through the earth” (47).

<29>To profess God’s knowledge in this way is hubris, the type of pride that sets up a character for disaster. Catastrophe comes to Romney in the same way as it does to Rochester, despite the fact that Romney’s masculine pride seems less invested than Rochester’s in the traditional class system or the control of women. A fire, set by resentful local peasants, but aided by some of the house’s inhabitants, devours Leigh Hall; and a burning beam, tipped toward him by a particularly ungrateful phalansterian, fells him, leaving him later blinded, after a long illness.

<30>Unlike in *Jane Eyre*, where fire is the wish-fulfilment of more than one woman, the house burning in *Aurora Leigh* is thus essentially a masculine affair—a feature

of Romney's experience. He is the sole narrator of the fire episode, which he describes to Aurora, who was far away in Italy at the time. He mentions no women as involved, either in setting his house alight or contributing to his injuries. Nevertheless, the fiery destruction of all his efforts represents to him a specifically masculine failure: he insists that blindness has "mulcted" him "as a man" (314). Barrett Browning the female verse-novelist, like Dora the female dreamer, uses fire to take down patriarchal aspiration and control.

<31>In the self-righteous pride of his early enthusiasm, Romney did not see himself as demeaning woman—or Aurora in particular—because he was offering her work, the useful occupation denied to upper-class Victorian women. But he is at this stage blind to the individualism of workers' talents and insensitive to their autonomy. Instead of paying heed to Aurora's own calling, he claims authoritative knowledge of all the work worth doing. He envisages Aurora "placing [her] fecund heart / In [his]" and going with him to the "victims" whom he hopes to save (49). But Aurora identifies this role as a "helpmate, not a mistress" (50), since his plans are for her to be entirely under his supervision. Her rejection of his suit runs closely along the lines of Jane Eyre's refusal of her own cousin's marriage proposal. St. John Rivers, who wants Jane to accompany him as a missionary to India, envisions her as "the sole helpmeet [he] can influence efficiently in life," a role that Jane "scorns" as she "scorns [his] idea of love" (431, 433).

<32>At the end of Barrett Browning's verse-novel, Aurora's realization that Romney has lost his physical vision is what turns her toward him. Following a tradition at least as old as *Oedipus Rex*, his blinding is the sign of a dawning inner vision. Aurora offers herself to him in a marriage whose balance of power will clearly not be weighted in favor of the man. This is possible not only because, as with Jane and Rochester, the wife is the sighted guide of the husband, but also because Romney has come to accept Aurora's beliefs about human nature and the imagination. Even before the fire, he has read her work and totally reversed his earlier contempt for her poetic aspirations. Instead of despising poetry in comparison with social engagement, he has found himself under a power that "stands above [his] knowledge, draws [him] up" (270). Now, following her vision, he recognizes his own earlier moral blindness:

*Thank God, who made me blind, to make me see!  
Shine on, Aurora, dearest light of souls,  
Which rul'st for evermore both day and night! (321)*

As Mary Wilson Carpenter points out, Romney's blinding does not represent a fall but an "*elevation* to the position of Aurora's equal" (57). Accepting Aurora's "light"

with his new humility has brought a revision of his socialist reformism. He now realizes that it has been reductive, a “rescue” only by “half means” (316), shrinking humanity to “one great famishing carnivorous mouth” (273), and ignoring “the poet’s individualism” (52, 274). He acknowledges a relationship between this poetic individualism and the specificity of the woman who “weep[s] for what [she] know[s]. A red-haired child / Sick in a fever” (44). While he originally sneered at the ignorance of such a woman, he now sees her focused, compassionate individualism as the basis for understanding and transforming the human condition. Echoing Aurora, he asserts in exactly her words that “It takes a soul / To move a body” because “life develops from within” (274, 52) and reform cannot be “forc[ed]” upon “crooked creatures” (287). He also repents of his sense of masculine entitlement, the “male ferocious impudence” (271), which was the cause of his blindness.

<33>That he has discarded the patronizing “separate spheres” version of women’s part in this work is made clear in his request that Aurora “press the clarion on [her] woman’s lip” (324). He has not given up his old belief that “we must be here to work” (322) or his dedication to the political struggle, but this trumpet metaphor is a sure sign that he has relinquished his vision of himself as privileged and dominant in the allocation and management of work. His apocalyptic trumpet metaphor shows him offering Aurora precedence in what is now a shared attempt to “blow all class-walls level as Jericho’s” (324). The walls of Jericho may not have fallen in fire, but the image is similar to the house levelling that has occurred earlier. A walled city, like a house, can represent a reigning patriarchy and may be destroyed by an act of insurrection. In this case, Romney is not invested in the structure in any way, and is gladly encouraging his beloved to take the lead in destroying it with a stirring musical note—a fitting image of her passionate poetry.

<34>Thus, in *Aurora Leigh*, while a house represents the male-favoring *status quo* just as it does in *Jane Eyre* and in Dora’s dream, the fire that destroys the house is symbolic not simply of female passions and frustrations but of a very general revolutionary threat to order and society that is consequent on a masculine blindness to the individual nature and autonomy of the human soul. The verse-novel characterizes women as not being blind in this way and identifies poets as possessing the imaginative inspiration to awaken people to the need and direction of reform.

<35>Fane’s *Denzil Place* also features a domestic conflagration. This fire only partially destroys the manor house of the protagonist’s elderly husband and, while it injures the principal male character, it does not do any permanent damage to him. Also unlike the house fires in *Jane Eyre* and *Aurora Leigh*, the fire in this verse

novel is not the result of any deliberate act of arson, on the part of Constance the heroine or anyone else. Nevertheless, the destructive burning of Sir John L'Estrange's house, Farleigh Court, resembles that of Thornfield Hall in *Jane Eyre*, for it is a symbol of specifically female passion. The fire episode and its aftermath are clearly intended to undermine complacent assumptions about female sexuality and the morality of patriarchal marriage.

<36>The fire apparently ignites itself “One wild, wintry night” (53) while the adult members of the L'Estrange family as well as their neighbor Geoffrey Denzil are sitting “round the blazing hearth,” the servants “gossiping below” (56), and the boy Roland asleep upstairs. Perhaps the key to the origin of the fire is in the family hearth itself: “blazing” is more violent than comfortable, and keeping fires burning high in an old combustible house is probably inadvisable. Rykwert's vision of the hearth as the center of a home may accommodate the idea that, under some circumstances, “the center cannot hold,” and that a hearth fire may resist the somewhat masculine “Taming” and “control” that underlies his idea of “home” (Rykwert 51). The L'Estrange fire does not break out in the parlor, but on an upper floor where a reader of *Jane Eyre* might expect family secrets to be concealed. However, upstairs in this house exist only the inhabitants' sleeping quarters, not the prison of a madwoman. In this novel the heroine possesses no dark double who can actively ignite the flames that consume her husband's house, though fire does act in the role of her familiar anyway. Constance, unlike Jane, is unconscious of any incendiary features of her own personality, just as her household is unaware of the dangers of any flammable materials near the fireplaces or chimneys of the building. This negligence on the part of the servants certainly contributes to the blaze, for their idle talk prevents them from going upstairs in time to apprehend the fire in its early stages.

<37>Negligence—or perhaps a cruel kind of stupidity—on the part of the patriarch, Sir John, and the whole upper-class system which he represents is similarly responsible for the flaring up within his young wife of dangerous female emotions. The house fire in *Denzil Place* is “filled through and through with sex symbolism” as Freud claims of dream fires (*Introduction*, 134). Just as the flames upstairs in Farleigh Court are “raging” alarmingly (58) before anyone is conscious of approaching danger, so Constance's developing passion for Geoffrey takes her unawares. In describing the fire, Fane anthropomorphizes the surrounding landscape, which is as “startled” by the “hungry” conflagration (58) as Constance is by her own “kindling blood of youth” (51).

<38>As in *Jane Eyre* and *Aurora Leigh*, the hero is injured by the fire while trying to rescue others. Geoffrey Denzil, who is a left-wing political malcontent somewhat

like Romney Leigh, is not the proprietor of this particular burning house, though he does own the eponymous mansion next door, Denzil Place. He manages to save Roland, who is Sir John's son from a previous marriage, and he then returns to help the firefighting efforts of the local retainers and villagers. When he does not reappear from his sortie into the inferno, having been trapped under "fallen beams / And crumbled brick-work" (61), Constance is beside herself; and when she sees two men carrying downstairs "something covered with a cloak," the shock jolts her into realization of what she has so far been too innocent to grasp:

*Then Constance guess'd the worst,  
And all the ills she had not feared before  
Rushed to her heart—the guilty, hopeless truth!— (60)*

<39>This sudden rush of self-comprehension demonstrates some aspects of the "link between fire and knowledge" identified by Zografos (41-42), for fire burns with painful intensity through the surfaces of things and offers a shock to body and mind that strikes down complacency and deception. To the reader, however, Constance's epiphany is no revelation, because the narrator has been warning of approaching "bitter fruit" (48) and of the "dang'rous life of close companionship / With one who is not bound by ties of blood" (31-32). Paying close attention to her protagonist's development, the female narrator has noted as well the "hunger in [Constance's] eyes" (30) and the fact that her "heart" seems "to wait" for a "life" that has "as yet not begun for her" (18). This narrator, a minor witness-character in the story, also recounts neighborhood gossip connecting Constance and Geoffrey that has been going on long before the fire (75-78).

<40>Stefanie Markovits comments at some length on the "surprisingly sympathetic portrayal of an adulterous relationship" (31-35) that this verse-novel offers. Even more seductive to the reader's sympathies than the details of the lovers' early encounters are the facts of Constance's story: that she has been married off at the age of seventeen by the arrangement of a guardian whom she does not even know to a man nearly sixty years old; that she does not actually give her consent to the marriage because she does not understand what Sir John is asking her; and that she has no clue at the time of her wedding what marriage really entails (6, 91-93). For some time she is not exactly unhappy, since she has the playful companionship of the boy Roland, but gradually she starts to "kn[o]w that bitterest of bitter things" which is "not to feel / So much the pangs of sorrow, as to guess / The unsuspected happiness we missed" (93).

<41>The patriarchy has made an arrangement that provides for the material needs of an impoverished young upper-class woman; but it has totally failed to take into

account her emotional and sexual development. Marrying her off before she reaches maturity does not in fact prevent her from maturing. Before the return of Geoffrey to Denzil Place she was simply starting to feel an absence; but in his daily presence her erotic desires are imperceptibly but steadily fuelled and stoked. The fact that she is completely unaware of them allows them to kindle to a blaze that is already uncontrollable before she realizes what is happening to her.

<42>Thus, when Constance is left to watch Geoffrey lying on the library sofa senseless and possibly dying, she is driven beyond sanity in her pain and passion. The narrator uses both the words “madd’ning” and “madness” in describing her (63-64). She is “fill’d with some new desperate resolve / Once—once, before he dies, to tell him all” (62)—and this she does, although he is in fact not dying nor even fully unconscious. He hears her desperate exclamation, “I love you more than life,” and can feel “her hopeless arms [thrown] about his neck” (64). Although he restrains himself at this stage from responding, just as he has in the past, “stifling the desires / That would have risen in his lawless heart” (47), the outcome of this fiery declaration is inevitable.

<43>In *Denzil Place* the burning house is thus the emblem of a female sexual passion which has been ignored at the peril of the patriarchal family and its guardians. As with the appearance of the Tower in the tarot deal, it foreshadows violent disruption and change. Like Dora, Constance is a young woman trapped inside a male-owned house under the laws and mores of a masculine hegemony that ascribes her minimal autonomy. Her declaration leads directly to the breakdown of her marriage and the dissolution of the L’Estrange family, at least in the form that it has taken up to this time. The fiery, destructive nature of love is emphasized in the warning that the event offers. Gossiping local families, recognizing this symbolism without sympathy, enjoy a kind of *schadenfreude* in contemplating it. An acquaintance at a “dull local dinner” makes a suggestive joke about Constance’s recent illness (caused by Geoffrey’s departure for the Continent), when he

*Inquired facetiously which fire had caused  
Lady L’Estrange’s illness? that one lit  
By Mr. Denzil, or the lesser one  
He help’d extinguish? (78)*

This insensitive query may include recognition of the incendiary power of love, but the commentator is not perceptive enough to note that this particular erotic fire was not actively “lit” by either of the lovers under scrutiny: they are both under its power and neither is to blame.



<44>In *Denzil Place*, alternative, female spaces and houses are less evident than in *Jane Eyre* and *Aurora Leigh*. Constance leads a “lifeless life” in her husband’s country house, which is “the grandest ... For many miles,” and she seems to make no part of it hers. She is happier out of doors with Roland than among the “mouldy human vegetables” who visit Sir John (7-8). In the other country house, *Denzil Place*, where the L’Estrange family stay while Farleigh Court is being repaired, she becomes sentimentally fond of the bedroom that she occupies, but this is only because it had been Geoffrey’s (85); it is not a feminine space. However, after she is banished from her husband’s house, she “ma[kes] a home” in an Italian villa. Although, living there, Constance feels “exile[d], “chain[ed],” and “[bound]” by “Despair, ... Hope, ... Self-reproach, ... Jealousy, and Doubt” (134-35), she is nevertheless able to appreciate the “wondrous beauties of that flow’ry land,” sitting “for hours” at the window of a “shady summer-house,” clearly in relaxed comfort, for she is “fann’d by delicious air” as she watches the picturesque landscape and its people. At first her focus—and the reader’s—is, as in the Italian sections of *Aurora Leigh*, on the outdoors. Only when she falls dangerously ill and the nun Sister Theresa comes to tend her does interior domesticity attract the narrator’s attention. The narrator recounts what Constance first notices when she starts to recover, including “her little bed,” a “painted chimney-board,” a “plate of oranges, some fresh-cut flowers” as well as the nun’s outer clothing, prayer book, and rosary lying “on a chair” (154). But this comfortable feminine still-life is merely temporary. Sister Theresa is not a permanent inhabitant of the house and it turns out that she has requested Geoffrey, who just happens to be living nearby, to help look after Constance when her life is in danger. Thus, feminine comfort must give way to romance and guilt once again.

<45>After this the story takes some dramatic turns: Sir John dies unexpectedly, allowing the lovers a short, societally-sanctioned marriage, which ends when Constance dies in childbirth, still in Italy. The tale thus proceeds beyond the courtship stage—even into a second generation of lovers—but, in the final analysis, fiery adulterous love is the main focus of the verse-novel as a whole. The narrator emphasizes this in a highly sympathetic “Epilogue.” The passion of Constance and Geoffrey for each other may seem, like the house fire, an apparently spontaneous combustion, but its chain of unacknowledged causes is made perfectly understandable to the reader.

<46>Thus do all three of these nineteenth-century women’s novels ring changes on the symbols of house and fire, and interrogate the idea of home. All of them use the cleansing, passionate power of fire to burn down the father-house in protest against patriarchal hegemony. In *Jane Eyre* and *Denzil Place* the warning is about female

passion, repressed, frustrated or ignored; in *Aurora Leigh*, female vision, disregarded at the patriarchy's peril, includes poetic inspiration and the power to transform society. None of these texts shows the grandiose masculine country house as offering a real home for a woman. In each narrative the protagonist attempts to make at least one alternative type of intimate, unimposing female-oriented home, though she inhabits it as a single woman only temporarily, before leaving to marry the male character who has survived the ordeal of fire. In the case of *Jane Eyre* and *Aurora Leigh*, fire has blinded this male protagonist, thereby bringing down his masculine hubris and laying the foundation for a co-dependent relationship with a woman. In *Denzil Place* fire also exerts an equalizing effect on the lovers, for its destructive power makes both the male protagonist and the reader aware of the sheer force of female passion. The ensuing marriages all suggest the possibility of creating a home—not necessarily based in a particular place—imbued with the comfort and informality of the female house but embracing a reformed masculinity as well.

## Notes

(1) "Violet Fane" was the pseudonym of Mary Montgomerie Lamb Singleton Currie (1843-1905). (△)

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