

Laura J. Faulk, “Destructive Maternity in *Aurora Leigh*.” *Victorian Literature and Culture* 41.1 (2013): 41-54.

Feminist readings of *Aurora Leigh* (1856) are *de rigueur*. Indeed, as Laura J. Faulk acknowledges, “feminists revived Barrett Browning’s poem in the 1970s after years of obscurity” (42). Yet, Faulk’s essay suggests that most of these critics, though obsessed with Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s romance and marriage, have neglected to discuss her difficult experiences with pregnancy. They have also overlooked the division of the poem into nine sections, “a significant number considering *Aurora Leigh*’s connection with motherhood” (52). Faulk’s essay is not the first work to discuss writing, rape, prostitution, and childbirth in the poem as separate concerns; she cites articles by Deborah Byrd, Mairi Calcraft-Rennie, Deidre David, Linda Lewis, Dorothy Mermin and several others. But Faulk hopes to redirect critical attention away from ubiquitous discussions of the dangers of childbirth for Victorian women, and towards the equally damaging before and after: the violent physical effects of pregnancy (sometimes exacerbated by rape or prostitution) and self-sacrificial mothering as akin to being “buried alive” (45).

Faulk’s essay arranges the major female characters in the poem into categories based on the mothering “type” they seem to represent: Aurora’s mother as the ideal dead mother, Marian as the ideal “living dead mother” (44), the childless Lady Waldemar as “The Destructive Mother” (46) and Aurora herself as “The Hesitant Mother” (48). The least compelling reading, which focuses on Lady Waldemar as “destructive mother,” depends primarily on references to her milky white skin. While the most compelling is the analysis of Aurora herself as troubling the relationship between giving birth to children and giving birth to art. Together, Faulk argues, the women “expos[e] the inconsistencies in both the trope of idealised motherhood and medical assurances of its benefits” (52).

Scholars of literature and science will note Faulk’s discussions of medical discourse as a source of misconceptions about mothering. Medical journals and tomes, according to Faulk, offer “the old maid” as “physically unwomanly” (41), pregnancy as a “benefit [to] a woman’s health” (41), and an overall strategy to “den[y] female desire by idealizing motherhood” (49). The challenge for Faulk’s essay, as for all historicist readings, is the strain of coming to general conclusions about “Doctors” (41) or “Victorian society” (41) based on a limited number of primary sources. Faulk credits Jenny Bourne Taylor and Sally Shuttleworth’s anthology *Embodied Selves* (1998) for her primary sources in medicine and physiology. Judith Flanders’ *Inside the Victorian Home* (2003) is a crucial reference for information about mortality rates at the end of the century; Faulk suggests that earlier records are unavailable.

In making her case for *Aurora Leigh* as unique, Faulk only sketches its place within the canon of representations of mothering. However, she does allude to “countless fictional characters” (42) who represent the Victorian “exaltation of maternal love” (42). Equal numbers of characters offer a strong counternarrative (Becky Sharp, Hetty Sorrel, Leonora Halm-Eberstein, Isabella Linton, Tess Durbeyfield, Sue Bridehead). Such characters, from novels by William Makepeace Thackeray, George Eliot, Emily Brontë and Thomas Hardy, join *Aurora Leigh* in figuring mothering as “a threat to woman’s body and desires, turning her sexuality into a peril to herself and others” (42-43). Ellen Rosenman and Claudia Klaver’s

essay collection *Other Mothers: Beyond the Maternal Ideal* (2008) offer a starting point for readers interested in supplementing Faulk's conclusions. Faulk references several articles from the *Examiner* that gesture towards the rich conversation about infanticide and unnatural mothering conducted within the periodical press, while Nicola Goc's *Women, Infanticide, and the Press, 1822-1922* (2013) offers a number of additional leads.

Faulk is correct that what was common in fiction and the popular press was rare in poetry. Perhaps Faulk's longer project, a dissertation about female physicality in Victorian literature, offers suggestions about this generic distinction. Faulk's study also gestures towards a second avenue for future research: how women participated in the myths about motherhood that limited their self-expression. Aurora's poetry, in "attempting to diminish female sexuality by aestheticizing the female body and motherhood as something beyond bodily desire" (49), performs the same work Faulk attributes to the medical discourse, which leads to further questions about how women writers may "embody," or even perpetuate, the patriarchal discourses that describe them. In summary, Faulk's essay offers two important reminders to scholars of literature and science. In discussing scientific or literary understandings of reproduction, scholars must not neglect the crucial period between conception and birth. In discussing maternity within works of literature, we should remember that poetry, as well as prose, should be part of the conversation.

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