“THE LOVE THAT DARES TO SPEAK ITS NAME: QUEER LANGUAGE AND FEMALE HOMOEROTICISM IN *OROONOKO*, *JANE EYRE*, AND *AURORA LEIGH*.”

by

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(Under the Direction of Tricia Lootens)

ABSTRACT

While most scholarship acknowledges the homoeroticism between female characters in *Oroonoko*, *Jane Eyre*, and *Aurora Leigh*, this thesis will provide a semantic study of the queer language used to construct and sustain these erotic relationships while illuminating the nonphysical eroticism drawing the heroines of these works together. By exploring each work as a marker on a continuum, this project demonstrates the ways in which each work’s respective author moves from exploring the dangerous consequences of homosexual panic to searching for a sustainable environment for female homoerotic relationships. Ultimately, this thesis concludes that queer language becomes the medium by which women writers circumvent heteronormative expectations for female heroines.

INDEX WORDS: *Oroonoko*, Aphra Behn, *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Brontë, *Aurora Leigh*, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Gender, Queer Theory, Women, Homoeroticism, Reader Response

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my mother and father, both of whom always believe in me the way only parents can. Mom, thank you for teaching me to speak in moments I am tempted to stay silent. Dad, thank you for showing me what inexhaustible work ethic looks like. Without both of you, I would not have achieved so much.

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INTRODUCTION

Critical Theory

My interests in the often convoluted relationship between public acceptance of female homoeroticism in everyday life and the anxiety around explicit female homoeroticism in fiction engage with gender and queer theorists, notably Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Sharon Marcus.[1] Sedgwick argues in *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* that historical tradition is primarily patriarchal; dissident homoerotic desire acts against the patriarchal, heteronormative culture.[2] In contrast, Sharon Marcus uses her book *Between Women* to argue for a different view of Victorian England, and by extension, the centuries before, in which the binary of homo and hetero remain fluid rather than fixed categories in direct opposition to one another. Marcus seeks to "understand how they were intertwined in ways that make homosexuality and heterosexuality less than useful categories for dividing up the Victorian World" (22). Her work reflects the recent trend in the field of Queer Theory of moving away from assuming Victorians classified heterosexual behavior as normal and homosexual behavior as transgressive.[3] My own argument will place itself between these two opposing positions by arguing that the fictional heroines discussed in this project are not as free from the binaries of homosexual and heterosexual that Marcus argues everyday women in Victorian culture were. Indeed, each work's heroine finds herself facing the restrictive expectations of the heteronormative, patriarchal society Sedgwick describes. Thus, there remained a case for the heroines in these canonical works to be read as transgressive even as Marcus and others like her make compelling arguments that Victorian societal frameworks encouraged female

homoeroticism in daily life. My argument investigates the gap between what is socially acceptable in the private, daily lives of real women compared to what is acceptable in the circulated, public lives of fictional heroines. For real women, any erotic relationships with their gender remains widely out of the public eye, unless these women are famous; in most cases though, real women are free to participate in erotic relationships in private, free from the scrutiny by the public eye. However, fictional heroines do not have this luxury and are subject to public regulation of the female body and fictional text. Thus, the only way a female author can openly express female homoeroticism in her work is by using a female reader to bring the publically regulated life of the heroine into the private sphere of the reader's mind. Ultimately, the different expectations placed on fiction and reality create a space for British women writers to compose scenes of intense homoeroticism between women that subvert patriarchal institutions imposed on fictional heroines.

My project will investigate three works as case studies—Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko,* Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre,* and Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*—and show how each heroine demonstrates different variations of the ways in which female authors navigate the restrictions placed on homoeroticism between female characters. Aphra Behn presents a seemingly heterosexual love story between Oroonoko, the titular character, and his bride, Imoinda, but closer examination reveals that *Oroonoko* is a carefully composed eulogy celebrating the narrator's homoerotic longings for the character Imoinda. Brontë composes her tale of the passionate Jane and brooding Rochester, but along the way, some of Jane's most erotic experiences involve her and other women. Barrett Browning's Aurora creates a marriage and home between herself and Marian in direct opposition to the conventional model of marriage. Even though Jane and Aurora both marry men at the end of their respective tales, they do so

under significantly different circumstances than those of conventional heterosexual romance plots. Each author gives voice to female homoeroticism through queer language as a way to undermine the anxiety the too-explicit manifestation of female homoeroticism. Scenes between female characters become brief moments charged with erotic feeling without the use of explicit sexual acts. Furthermore, readers experience the eroticism between female characters through the act of reading itself; the eroticism that must be cloaked in fiction finds itself manifesting in the mind of readers grounded in reality, a space governed far less than fiction by the patriarchal tradition described by Sedgwick. This transmission of eroticism off the page and into reality bridges the gap between the two divergent philosophies set forth by Sedgwick and Marcus. My project seeks to provide a close semantic study of the queerness of the erotic language, as current scholarship does not scrutinize how certain words coalesce to provide the female reader with an erotic experience. Overall, I will show how queer language permits the transmission of homoeroticism while acting as a transgressive force against the heteronormative expectations reserved for fictional heroines. Through language, fictional homoeroticism roots itself in the reality of the reader's mind.

To access the reader's mind, all three authors engage in erotic narration through the voice of a female speaker actively engaged in erotic relationships with other main characters. Behn, for instance, uses the narrator as a mask to let readers confront the graphic consequences of female homosexuality as they play out on the body of Imoinda. Brontë presents a different experience in which Jane's narration provides the reader with an increasingly pleasurable encounter with female homoeroticism. Barrett Browning pushes her narrator even further as a medium through which to engage in erotic experiments with her fictional characters in search of a sustainable mode of female homoeroticism. Each female author represents her respective narrator in key

ways—her voice, her gaze, her touch—to help readers simulate the erotic experience between the narrator and another character. In turn, the cloaked eroticism in fictional scenes makes an appearance in the reader's minds and finds itself grounded in reality. Each text functions as a subversive force allowing the erotics present between female characters to develop without restrictions in the reader's mind as opposed to openly exposed in the social, public world of fiction.

Should such an avenue of investigation be neglected, the discourse surrounding female homoeroticism misses the overlap of female homoeroticism as both a transgressive but also staple force in the English consciousness. To label passionate relationships between women as either completely transgressive or completely commonplace would be to sell the nuances of these relationships short. It would also neglect the gap between what could be permitted in the privacy of individual women's lives and the publically consumed lives of fictional women. Uniquely, fictional women find themselves circulated on a commercial scale, reaching the English readership in an explicit way that the lives of every day women (leaving out the most famous) do not. Marcus and her contemporaries convincingly make a case for a view of female homoeroticism as a functional rather than transgressive part of English society, but their conclusions come from closely studying the private journals, letters, and writings of every day women. These writings were never intended for publication, unlike popular works such as those by Behn, Brontë, and Barrett Browning. This distinction between not just public, but popularly circulated and massed produced work and those works written in private should not be glossed over when considering how "normal" the English considered female homoeroticism. After all, the private rarely translates without omission or revision to the public sphere. As a result, patriarchal restrictions and heteronormative expectations for female sexuality fell more heavily

on fiction than real life. Female authors could not expect works depicting explicit female homoeroticism to be published without resistance. Thus, the writings I discuss should be viewed as transgressive because of the very nature of the queer language they contain; such language transfers the female homoeroticism from the page to the unregulated space of the reader's mind to undermine the confining restrictions placed on fictional heroines. Rather than categorizing homoeroticism in and of itself as a fundamentally transgressive position, I argue these women express themselves in a transgressive mode. Behn, Brontë, and Barrett Browning employ the mind of a reader as an unregulated space in which patriarchy cannot leverage political, economical, or social agendas against women in order to elicit certain behaviors. Authors bypass any regulations through reader response to a text and allow fictional heroines freedom to explore larger anxieties around female homoeroticism.

Critical Methodology

Pivotal to understanding the erotics of these case studies and the basis for this project is feminist theorist Audre Lorde's definition of the erotic as much more than a sex act; the erotic, declares Lorde, is "how acutely and fully we can feel in the doing" of any activity or interaction (54). The authors discussed in each chapter all use queer language, rather than explicit sexual acts, to build and maintain the erotic relationships between female characters, whether romantic or platonic, and to provide an erotic experience for the female reader. In *Reading with Feeling*, Susan L. Feagin writes extensively on the experience of the reader empathizing with fictional characters in a text. Through a process Feagin calls "simulation," a reader "shares an emotion, feeling, desire, or mood of the character" (83). Female readers of these English works engage in "simulation" of the narrator's homoerotic experiences when they read first-person narrations and experience various sensual encounters (83). Feagin even goes so far as to break down different

types of "simulation" in her book and highlights a set of empathetic responses that rely explicitly on "verbal features in a work," including diction (83, 141). She states that just as people react immediately to certain cues, such as an alarm or a siren, readers "are especially sensitive to subtle linguistic faults" (Feagin 135). I apply Feagin's theory of verbal cues to the works of Behn, Brontë, and Barrett Browning during my semantic investigation of homoerotic language as a framework for discussing how female authors undermine the restrictions on female homoeroticism in fiction.

In addition to Lorde's pivotal definition of the erotic and Feagin's understanding of reader response, I rely on Sharon Marcus' argument in *Between Women* that fashion magazines and advertisements during the Victorian period created a homoerotic relationship between the female viewers and models. According to Marcus, advertisements and magazines functioned in the following way:

> Produced by women, for women [advertisements] . . . solicited a female gaze for images that put women, their bodies, and the objects that adorned them on display. Fashion imagery objectified women as sexually attractive figures designed to be looked at by women in fashion plates wearing clothes that accentuate eroticized body parts, especially breasts and waists. (119)

While Marcus' work focuses on the homoeroticism created in Victorian advertisements without mentioning the work of the specific authors in this project, Behn, Brontë, and Barrett Browning direct their readers in a manner consistent with Marcus' conclusions on Victorian advertisements. Each narrator directs the reader to engage with the erotics of the scene just as advertisements guide the eyes of their viewer to eroticize models. Marcus claims the

"homoerotic structure of looking is intensified by the content and structure of the images themselves," and similarly, queer diction charges the reader with the sensuality experienced by fictional narrators (121). This style of writing draws the reader's attention to queer diction in such a way that the reader "simulates" the erotics occurring in a scene between two or more female characters. As a result, each work becomes a chance for not only covertly expressing female homoeroticism in fiction but incorporating the erotics of the page into the reality of the reader's mind, circumventing the restraints placed on the display of female homoeroticism in fiction. Female authors thus use female readers as the apparatuses to project the erotic experiences of characters off the page and into reality.

CHAPTER 1

EULOGIZING IMOINDA

Introduction

Aphra Behn became the "first woman to earn a living from writing" in history; she composed "nineteen plays, fiction, poetry, and translations" over her lifetime (Todd 1). This vast body of work includes the narrative *Oroonoko*, a fictional account of an African prince's tragic fate on the slave plantations in the Caribbean. Behn uses the novella to articulate and undermine the anxiety about the portrayal of female homoeroticism in fiction during her time. Behn semantically "masquerade[s]," to use critic Janet Todd's words, in this effort (15). This chapter will provide a meticulous semantic investigation of queer language in *Oroonoko* as a means to offer a comprehensive examination of Behn's endeavors to combat heterosexual privilege in fiction by giving direct voice to a woman's homoerotic longings for another fictional character. Often, novels privilege the viewing of women looking at men or men looking at women, but Behn inverts this mode of writing by embedding queer language in her narrator's first-person retelling of events. The narrative privileges the telling of the heterosexual romance between Oroonoko and Imoinda, the two slaves under the narrator's authority, but closer examination reveals that though the narrator pays close attention to the relationship between Imoinda and Oroonoko, she embeds various semantic clues within the heterosexual romance plot that express her erotic desire for Imoinda. Ultimately, the relationship between the narrator and her female slave moves to the forefront of the work, and Behn's narrative becomes a tale about the narrator's homosexual longing for Imoinda and the potentially violent consequences for women

holding sexual desires that directly interfere with the progression of the heterosexual romance plot.[4]

The narrator's thoughts, feelings, and gaze are central to this argument. The narrator presents herself as the daughter of the man intended to be a new lieutenant-general of the colony in Surinam; however, there is debate over whether the narrator is simply a mask for Behn or a completely separate persona. The controversy grounds itself historically in whether or not Behn ever traveled to Surinam, the implication being that if she did, the narrator can safely be assumed to be Behn in disguise. J.A. Ramsaran and Bernard Dhuiq argue Behn provides a precise description of the local culture and physical scenery as proof of her personal travels to Surinam.[5] Janet Todd confirms this scholarship in Chapter 3 of her work, *The Secret Life of Aphra Behn*. However, Ernest Bernbaum counters that any evidence corroborating Behn's personal travels could have been drawn from accounts by William Byam and George Warren available in London in the 1660s.[6] For this project, I will be using the lens of those scholars who suggest Behn is in fact directly speaking through this story; for Behn, the mask of the narrator provides an appropriate distance from which to address very real restrictions facing fictional heroines and the unease surrounding female homoeroticism's place in literature. If Behn openly addresses these tensions without the protection afforded by a fictional narrator, she leaves herself open to extensive criticism during her time period. Behn thus uses the narrator to focus her own personal pushback against heteronormative expectations for fictional heroines by assuming the mask of the narrator and desiring another woman in spite of literary convention. Behn repurposes the narrator to subvert the heterosexual arc typical in fiction of the time, rather than to further it, and in doing so, employs queer language to redirect the reader's gaze. Typically, a narrator would steer a female reader's gaze towards idolizing the hero of a story or desiring a successful

romance between heterosexual couples. However, through projecting themselves onto the narrator, female readers see through the narrator's desirous eyes and participate in undermining the conventional romance plot with queer language as subtle sign posts marking the way. Behn uses the narrator as the focal point through which to examine the anxieties around female-female homoeroticism.

Literature Review

Scholars have correctly emphasized the heterosexual romance between Imoinda and Oroonoko as it intersects with the slave rebellion narrative in *Oroonoko*, but in doing so, they have missed essential aspects of the erotics between Imoinda and the female narrator.[7] This project will not dismiss such heterosexual readings or readings which envision the gaze of the narrator as an essential force in colonizing African characters. My project positions itself alongside them and offers an additional layer through which to examine the narrator's motives throughout the text—female homoeroticism. Though female homoeroticism is not a new topic in Behn scholarship as a whole, in regards to *Oroonoko*, critics have yet to perform an extensive catalogue of the way in which queer language aids in the transmission of such eroticism. Scholars tend to occupy two spaces in the discourse: mentioning the narrator's homoerotic gaze as a footnote in a larger project or remarking on Behn's propensity to incorporate female homoeroticism in her work as a whole without ever mentioning *Oroonoko*. In this first group, critics Jonathan Goldberg and Margaret Ferguson acknowledge the explicit eroticism between the narrator and Imoinda but do not center the focus of their respective projects on detailing the nuances of the female-female erotics. Goldberg notes that various textual clues "show a recognition of female-female erotics," and Ferguson observes that the lesbian desire present between Imoinda and Behn's narrator makes the narrator function as Oroonoko's "rival" for

"Imoinda's body" (Goldberg 48, Ferguson 165). However, neither of these projects goes further to examine the mode of transmission of female homoeroticism, as this chapter will do.

In the second group of scholars, Harriette Andreadis mentions Behn several times as an example of an author who uses "more explicit discourses of transgression" to describe "female same-sex activities" (104). Yet Andreadis mainly examines the way in which sexual acts between women become labeled as "transgressive by public discourse" and only refers to sections of Behn's poetry, not her prose (101). Similarly, Arlene Stiebel refrains from remarking on the explicit female-female homoeroticism within the text, but she notes that Behn uses "masking techniques" in all her work to disguise a general Sapphic content in order to "exempt the poet from social condemnation" (226, 235).[8] This chapter attempts to unmask such language and divulge the truly compelling homoerotic nature of the narrator's gaze towards Imoinda. By situating my argument as one that also examines specific details in Behn's story from start to finish, I explore the relentless and meticulous degree to which Behn codes female homoeroticism throughout *Oroonoko*. Overall, I see this project as a bridge between the two groups of scholars above: group one, which talks about the homoeroticism in Behn but hasn't done a close semantic study and group two, which takes a detailed look at how Behn disguises Sapphic content but focuses on Behn's work outside of *Oroonoko*, such as her poetry.

Homoeroticism and Homosexual Panic

Immediately in the opening of the novella, Behn's speaker launches into a detailed description of the noble qualities of Coramantee's prince, Oroonoko. Within the first page, the narrator extols him as a "gallant . . . [and] courageous" man and goes on to claim he has a "native beauty . . .that . . . [strikes] awe and reverence" into her and others (1, 15). The arresting

figure of Oroonoko clearly affects the speaker, both physically and mentally. The verb the speaker chooses, “strikes,” communicates her intense and sudden visceral reaction to the mere appearance of Oroonoko (15). Additionally, a recognized definition of “awe” at the time was “overawing influence,” which reveals how Oroonoko overwhelms the speaker’s mental faculties (15, OED Online). The narrator accordingly relates his physical appearance in precise detail, from his “piercing” eyes to the “perfect ebony” of Oroonoko’s skin and his “finest shaped” mouth (17). These are only a few of the particulars the narrator provides about Oroonoko, and the physical nature of this information highlights her seeming attraction to the enslaved prince. However, the narrator conveys her desire strictly through her choice of language as she describes her own reaction for her audience, never relying on an overtly sexual act between herself and Oroonoko. At first, this attraction may seem to favor a heterosexual reading of the narrator’s gaze towards Oroonoko, but the narrator subtly undermines such a conclusion when she introduces Imoinda shortly after her description of the African prince.

The narrator only provides a few explicit details about Imoinda, stating that it suffices to describe Imoinda as “female to [Oroonoko’s] noble male” (20). Though the narrator appears to be pointing out how Imoinda is a fit mate for Oroonoko, her simple statement provides a new but pivotal cipher for recoding the paragraphs of detail oriented around Oroonoko. Since the narrator asserts that Imoinda is Oroonoko’s equal, Imoinda must arouse the narrator as much as Oroonoko does. Therefore, all the earlier expostulations on Oroonoko’s behalf have a subtler goal—to convey the narrator’s fascination and desire for Oroonoko’s female equivalent, Imoinda. Every line the narrator reserves for praising Oroonoko, she uses merely to disguise praise and desire for Imoinda. Suddenly, Imoinda, not Oroonoko, possesses a valiant character that captivates the narrator. The time spent lingering over the specific details of Oroonoko’s eyes and

mouth become praise for Imoinda's arresting looks. Female desire cleverly masquerades as the heterosexual marriage plot.[9]

The few details the female speaker does provide about Imoinda only further support a sexual reading of her relationship, with Imoinda as the speaker chooses words and allusions charged with sexuality but again refrains from offering up explicit sex acts. For example, she calls Imoinda "the beautiful black Venus" and "queen of the night" (20). Both images evoke blackness in direct relation to a powerful female figure, one of whom is the goddess of love. Venus as the goddess of love is synonymous with "desire, sexual intercourse, [and] lust" (OED Online). The narrator associates Imoinda directly with a recognizable female symbol of sex, lust, and passion, a reflection of how she perceives the female slave. Furthermore, she gives Imoinda the authoritative title of queen, emphasizing how Imoinda strikes her as a woman worthy of reverence not just for her physical beauty but for her character as well. The narrator also remarks twice on Imoinda's blackness, commonly seen as a mysterious, powerful force. Thus, not only does Imoinda possess sexual and intellectual appeal for the narrator, but her superior qualities also entrance the narrator. As the descriptions of a black queen and goddess of love appear very near each other in the text, they repeat the narrator's sentiments towards Imoinda in very close context, doubly expressing her desire. Based on the names she gives Imoinda, the narrator does not perceive Imoinda as a virginal maid but rather as a highly erotic being and an object of desire. By fixating on the compelling Imoinda, the narrator makes the black goddess the focus of the narrative; the narrator's fixation on Imoinda provides evidence that her main goal is not, in fact, to speak about Oroonoko's heterosexual romance. Instead, the passages the narrator composes in Oroonoko's favor are a façade behind which she subtly exalts Imoinda.

Using the given cipher, other explicit descriptions of Oroonoko take on a new meaning. Before the narrator states Imoinda is "female to [Oroonoko's] noble male," Oroonoko appears to be the sole recipient of the narrator's praise (20) . After this statement however, Imoinda now receives credit for "the shape most exact that can be fancied," and "nothing in nature [is] more beautiful [or] agreeable" than the African princess (20, 19). As the word "exact" demonstrates, Imoinda possesses a body so "perfected [and] consummated" that nothing about her could be improved (OED Online). Variations of "exact" appear no less than three times in the paragraph where these quotations are found, further enhancing the underlying semantic groundwork the narrator uses to express how powerful Imoinda truly is (19). However, the narrator doesn't stop there and commends, again, Imoinda "whose body and soul [are] both so admirably adorned" (20). "Adorned" means both "decorated" and "provided with qualities that confer distinction or give delight" (20, OED Online). This latter definition of the word plays on the reaction of the narrator to Imoinda's nature and appearance. Imoinda not just is beautiful in appearance and spirit, but elicits pure pleasure in the narrator, both physically and emotionally.

Following her elaborate description, the narrator relates the history of Imoinda and Oroonoko and how Oroonoko's father, the Coramantee king, stole Imoinda from Oroonoko to become part of his harem. While it seems the narrator relays these events without bias, small interjections here and there in the text and various plays with language show her suspicion of Oroonoko as well as her clear preference for intimacy with Imoinda. For instance, when she relates how Imoinda met with the angry king and saw his fierce eyes and trembling hands, the narrator interjects within parentheses, "whether with age or anger, I know not, but [Imoinda fancies] the last" (29).[10] The narrator relates the story almost as if she stands there with Imoinda, watching the king's trembling hands; the speaker inserts her opinion of events in the present

tense, intimately and directly in what is supposed to be a retelling of a heterosexual love story. Furthermore, the narrator blames the king's anger for his shaking hands, and her ability to declare this as concrete fact reveals that at some point before this retelling, Imoinda trusted the narrator enough to reveal these painful, private details of her past. This small detail also attests to the narrator's authority over the text and vicariously over Imoinda. The narrator controls Imoinda's story and is responsible for conveying all the intimate details of Imoinda's history. At this point in the retelling, Oroonoko does not know what passes in the king's otan, or harem, which gives the narrator supremacy over him in relation to Imoinda. Behn inserts her narrator into a situation from which Oroonoko is physically distant, as well as from which he is barred through gender. Only women are allowed in the otan. The narrator can therefore enter the scene with Imoinda without disrupting the nature of the retelling. Though Imoinda could have shared these details later with Oroonoko, the narrator ultimately assumes the responsibility and intimacy of recording these details of Imoinda's life. Thus, the narrator displays her authorial power through personal interjections into a place where Oroonoko is explicitly absent.

The narrator even subtly paints Oroonoko's venture into the otan as a rape scene in which the male lover overcomes a protesting female lover. Below is the passage as the narrator renders it, worth examining in its entirety:

> The prince softly wakened Imoinda, who was not a little surprised with joy to find him there; and yet she trembled with a thousand fears. I believe he omitted saying nothing to this young maid that might persuade her to suffer him to seize his own, and take the rights of love. And I believe she was not long resisting those arms where she so longed to be; and having opportunity, night, and silence, youth, love, and desire, he soon prevailed,

> and ravished in a moment what his old grandfather had been endeavoring for so many months. (51)

Though the narrator acknowledges Imoinda's positive reaction to Oroonoko's presence, the narrator also highlights her anxiety about the situation. The narrator deliberately moves into personal assumptions (instead of qualifying the reasons for Imoinda's fears) with the simple statement "I believe" (51). By leaving the source of Imoinda's fears unclear, there remains the question of whether she is fearful of Oroonoko or whether Imoinda is fearful for Oroonoko, each of which have very different implications for their relationship. Though the latter is probable based on Imoinda's positive feelings at the sight of Oroonoko, the speaker seems content to let the cause of Imoinda's fear remain unarticulated. This purposeful ambiguity is meant to at least raise doubts about Oroonoko's integrity and suitability as a mate. In the end, the narrator manipulates the text in the same way as in the scene with the king; she readily implies Imoinda's thoughts and feelings for her.

Moreover, the narrator proceeds directly into a set of personal assertions instead of using the more neutral language in line with a retelling. The narrator's next two sentences start out with "I believe," indicating she has not been told the details that follow this statement by either Imoinda or Oroonoko (51). Even had the speaker drawn her conclusions from details provided by Imoinda and Oroonoko, she depicts these conclusions as purely her own speculations. Additionally, the narrator chooses a very distinct set of words to convey her perception of Oroonoko's actions. She states that she believes Oroonoko omits saying "nothing to this young maid that might persuade her to suffer him to seize his own" (51). This single sentence portrays Oroonoko as a man aggressively convincing Imoinda to sleep with him, as opposed to a lover eagerly accepted by Imoinda. Additionally, Imoinda must "suffer" through the consummation of

her relationship with Oroonoko (51). During Behn's time period, "suffer" had a variety of meanings, all of which Behn and her readers would have been aware of (51). Two definitions are "to endure, hold out, wait patiently" and "to undergo or submit to pain" (OED Online). While Imoinda's joy at seeing her lover might warrant the first definition of "suffer," the second definition seems more in line with the narrator's overall tone in this passage (51). Also, the more sinister definition of "suffer" fits the narrator's critical depiction of Oroonoko as the aggressor (51). However, even the more positive of the definitions still implies passivity and disengagement on Imoinda's part. According the narrator, Imoinda either tolerates Oroonoko's presence in her bed at best, or at the worst, Oroonoko enacts a violent sex act on Imoinda's person. Both scenarios set the narrator in a superior position to Oroonoko, as he is either a rapist or someone Imoinda chooses to detach from during sex. Comparatively, the narrator presents herself as Imoinda's trustworthy confidante.

The final sentence in the same passage again asserts Oroonoko as a violent lover, despite the narrator acknowledging Imoinda's longing to be in Oroonoko's arms. Imoinda "resist[s]" Oroonoko at first (51). This description by the narrator further suggests Oroonoko violates Imoinda's person. Though the narrator implies a series of seemingly contradictory details, the semantic clues point to her desire to depict Oroonoko in an unfavorable light in her retelling of the scene where Oroonoko and Imoinda engage in intercourse; she does this despite what Imoinda's original reaction to her union with Oroonoko might have actually been. After all, the narrator describes how Oroonoko quickly prevails and "ravishes in a moment" Imoinda's body (51). "Ravish" has highly sexual and forceful implications (81). While the word can mean "to fill with ecstasy or sensuous pleasure," Behn uses the word again when referring to what the elderly king attempts to do to Imoinda (OED Online).[11] This repetition of the same word to refer to the

action of both the king and Oroonoko in the same sentence lends to the interpretation of the word in the more negative connotation of "to rape or violate" a woman and to "plunder, rob, or steal from" (OED Online). The unsettling interpretation of the word once again stems from the narrator's repeatedly suspicious and negative attitude towards Oroonoko in this passage and affirms the narrator's desire to depict Oroonoko in an adverse light.

As the narrative continues, the speaker reveals in small ways the intimacy she establishes with Imoinda, independent of Oroonoko, both before and after his arrival to the narrator's island residence. Though there are only a few clues, they establish the authority of the homoerotic storyline constructed behind the heterosexual romance plot. Even before Oroonoko becomes enslaved, the narrator already enjoys an established relationship with Imoinda and esteems her "modesty" and "prettiness" (36). These positive remarks reveal that the narrator has taken the time to get to know Imoinda personally prior to Oroonoko's arrival; had she not done so, the narrator would not be able to remark on Imoinda's character and appearance. While these small praises may seem subdued compared to her earlier remarks on Imoinda's character and physical presence, they play a crucial role in revealing the intimacy and presence of a female-female relationship between the narrator and Imoinda that precedes Oroonoko's reunion with his wife. Even after Imoinda and Oroonoko live together as husband and wife, the narrator still maintains a high level of intimacy with Imoinda. She teaches Imoinda "all the pretty works [she is] mistress of" and obliges her "in all things" within her power (99). They dine together, share stories, and pass time in one another's company for pleasure, maintaining a shared space and regular interaction. Additionally, Imoinda becomes the narrator's pupil in domestic subjects strictly regulated to the female-female social sphere. This interchange cocoons them in the exclusivity of the female-female community, even though Oroonoko is physically present during

all of these exchanges and lessons. He cannot enter into their world of shared "pretty works" (99). The narrator also tries to bring Imoinda to the "knowledge of the true God" by telling "stories of nuns" (99). Nuns themselves are emblems of a lifestyle that involves the intimate position of living and interacting mainly with other women; though nuns do interact with male priests, their positions emphasize chastity, especially pertaining to heterosexual desires and relationships. Furthermore, certain scurrilous writings about nuns and Catholicism at the time accuse convents of encouraging lesbianism among women. The narrator's medium of conversion further excludes Oroonoko because he cannot relate to the appeal of a female-female community that requires rejecting romantic heterosexual relationships and potentially promotes lesbianism. Also, the narrator explicitly mentions attempting to convert only Imoinda. Unsurprisingly, Oroonoko reveals the emerging symptoms of homosexual panic as he calls the stories of nuns the "worst" of all the stories the narrator shares with Imoinda (99).

Oroonoko's objection to both the possible conversion of his wife to a different religion and the medium of conversion—stories of women who live in constant homosocial companionship—reveals his anxiety over the narrator's intentions towards his wife. He refuses to "be reconciled" to the narrator's stories and "ever [makes] jest" of the speaker's attempts to convert his wife (99). While there are religious and colonial implications to the scene of the white woman attempting to convert her black slave to Christianity, the compelling element of this scene, from my perspective, revolves around the mechanism by which the narrator attempts Imoinda's conversion. Instead of endeavoring to capture Imoinda's attention with the Gospel or the miracles found throughout the Bible, the narrator tries to entice her with visions of a life of enduring female intimacy, free from immediate male authority and interference.[12] The narrator deliberately tries to break Imoinda and Oroonoko's shared native faith as a way of breaking apart

common ground between the couple and of creating a space of God and nuns that favors their female-female relationship. Such a conversion would create a space and relationship Oroonoko could not monitor or enter, just as he cannot share in their domestic arts community. Ultimately, Oroonoko prevents the wedge of religion from finding its way between him and Imoinda. However, his attempts to keep the narrator from acting on her homoerotic desire for Imoinda have just begun.

Oroonoko's aversion towards the narrator's homosexual desire for his wife culminates in a violent act of homosexual panic—murder. The royal slave kills his wife in order to "not . . . leave her prey to his enemies" (154). This line undoubtedly refers to those white men in the colony eager to punish Oroonoko for leading a slave revolt and reflects on obvious heterosexual romance between Imoinda and Oroonoko emphasized by so many scholars. However, the mutilation scene cannot be explained on the grounds of colonial tensions alone, considering the compelling case made for the narrator's erotic feelings towards Imoinda. My reading does not displace others, but rather articulates an expanded definition of Oroonoko's adversaries in this scene. His "enemies" are not just the male colonists but also the female narrator who has actively sought to acquire his wife's affections for herself (154). Rather than allow this, Oroonoko reacts in fear to the narrator's homosexual desire for his wife and eliminates the possibility that such a female-female relationship could ever develop. He does not even allow Imoinda a chance to exercise authority over her own sexual desires after his inevitable execution; killing his wife and child ensures Imoinda could never reciprocate the narrator's feelings after his death as well.[13] Nevertheless, Oroonoko's violence does not stop at merely slitting Imoinda's throat; he dismembers her body postmortem. "Only her face" is left bare for anyone to see (154). This dismemberment and incomplete burial of Imoinda's body postmortem is a violent, disturbing act.

Oroonoko intentionally disfigures his wife in such a way that he breaks down the queenly, Venus-like carriage that captivates the narrator throughout the work. Furthermore, he hides her entire body from view, as if not only to destroy but to erase the physical vessel that sparks the narrator's intense reaction. Imoinda's body is not meant to be seen, especially by the narrator. Oroonoko's actions not only condone violent means to contain and eliminate female homosexuality but also suggest that death is a better alternative to allowing women the choice to participate in same-sex relationships.

Still, Oroonoko's act against female-female homoeroticism does not go unpunished. After discovering his failed suicide attempt, the men from the colony retaliate against Oroonoko by cutting off his limbs and setting them on fire; he survives these initial punishments only to be whipped to death. However, remember that Behn ultimately controls the entire work of fiction and the fate of her characters. With this in mind, Behn the author, not necessarily Behn the narrator, orchestrates a fitting punishment for her heterosexual character. The narrator becomes suspiciously absent at the end of the work when the mob comes for Oroonoko. Conveniently, ambiguous others have persuaded the narrator to remove herself from the scene of Oroonoko's gruesome recovery, as she becomes "sickly, and very apt to fall into fits of dangerous illness upon any extraordinary melancholy" (163). Not only does her explanation excuse her from blame when the mob murders Oroonoko shortly after her absence, but Oroonoko inadvertently becomes the reason she removes herself in the first place when he divulges the nature of Imoinda's gruesome death. Imoinda's death no doubt causes extreme "melancholy" in the speaker, as the African princess was the object of her affection, and until now, the narrator has been unaware of Imoinda's fate (163). Accordingly, when she becomes aware of Imoinda's

murder, the narrator very discreetly removes herself from Oroonoko's presence, so she cannot come to his aid.

The explicit details of Oroonoko's death at the hands of the mob ironically mirror the dismemberment of his wife. The rabble treats him like a "dog" and "first [cuts] off his members" (165). Just as Oroonoko seeks to ravage his wife's body to destroy the object of the narrator's homoerotic gaze, so Oroonoko loses the symbol of male heterosexual power, his penis. "Members" means "a penis" but also "a limb or other part attached to the body" (OED Online). However, after claiming that the mob removes Oroonoko's "members," the narrator states that the crowd then removes first one arm and then another, discounting the latter definition of the word (165). Thus, Imoinda's murderer is rendered impotent and unable to pursue future heterosexual unions due to castration. Appropriately, Oroonoko's arms, the limbs that carry out Imoinda's execution, are also removed before Oroonoko is allowed to "[give] up his ghost" (166). Postmortem, the mob cuts Oroonoko into "quarters, and [sends] them to several of the chief plantations" in an act similar to that when Oroonoko separates Imoinda's head from her body and places the head and torso apart in the woods (166). Oroonoko experiences an execution equal to that meted out against Imoinda. Additionally, the disseminated body parts of Imoinda's executioner send a warning to others who might attempt to repeat Oroonoko's act of homosexual panic.

Despite Oroonoko's desperate attempt to exterminate elements of female homosexual desire, the narrator has the final word and creates a story that actively counters Oroonoko's goal of silencing female homoeroticism. By embedding her homoerotic desire within the widely accepted heterosexual romance plot, the female speaker manages to not only tell Imoinda's personal history but to reveal her own desires for the black Venus as well as the tragic

consequences of such erotic desire. Recalling that the narrator's praise for Oroonoko can be recoded as praise for Imoinda, the narrator's closing remarks shift the focus at the novel's conclusion from Oroonoko to Imoinda; though Oroonoko seems to be a man "worthy of a better fate," this statement actually draws the reader's attention the tragedy of Imoinda's murder and the narrator's ensuing grief (166). It is not for Oroonoko that the narrator desires that a "more sublime wit" write the tale but for Imoinda (166). The narrator further undermines Oroonoko's act of homosexual panic by relying on the "considerable" reputation of her pen to make Imoinda's story "survive all the ages" (166). Ironically, the story named after Oroonoko, the man who fears female homoerotic desire, immortalizes female homoerotism under the guise of a heterosexual love story. Even the last line of this tale contradicts the title of the entire piece and ends with the praises of the "brave, the beautiful, and the constant Imoinda," not the exaltations of the main character, Oroonoko (166). The entire body of work becomes an account of the violence towards female-female desire that dares encroach on the heterosexual marriage plot, even as it simultaneously explores the tensions surrounding English colonialism. Within the text, the homoerotic desires of the narrator induce panic and eventually shocking violence; Behn utilizes the space of the reader's mind, however, to circumvent these hostile reactions. By the end of the queered narrative, female readers have longed for, wooed, and wept over Imoinda through simulation of the narrator's feelings. Ultimately, the narrator's homoerotic desire, punished with violence in fiction, flourishes in the free space of the reader's mind and undermines attempts to downplay female-female homoeroticism in literature.

CHAPTER 2

LOVING JANE

Introduction

Female homoeroticism abounds in Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre*, even reaching beyond the pages to encompass her readers in the female-female erotic experience. Like Behn, Brontë accomplishes this through the systematic use of queer language in key scenes between female characters to create an intangible erotic connection, free of physical sex acts. Jane experiences a myriad of sensual relationships with other women, despite the heterosexual romance seemingly at the center of the work. No doubt there exists a heterosexual romance between Rochester and Jane, but this romance should not be seen as the single compelling erotic relationship that shapes Jane or drives the fictional work forward. In fact, Jane's erotic relationship with Rochester depends on her sensual encounters with other women. Furthermore, the use of queer language allows us to read the feminized Rochester at the end of the novel as a stand-in for Jane's first love, Helen Burns. Thus, a study of the queer language in *Jane Eyre* provides insight into the intensely homoerotic experience of female readers encountering these queer semantic markers. By the novel's end, female audiences have actively participated in a homoerotic marriage under the guise of the widely accepted heterosexual union of hero and heroine. The novel touted for its compelling heterosexual romance also displays fictional heroines engaging in erotic encounters and queered marriages. This chapter explores a possible reading of *Jane Eyre* within the sexualized reading practices of its own time while tracing the influence the novel's queer language has on modern readers.

My particular reading of *Jane Eyre* also reverses the emotional impact of the fear and tension surrounding female homoeroticism in *Oroonoko*. In Behn's work, the narrator constantly pursues an unreciprocated erotic relationship with Imoinda, and these desires bring about severe consequences that culminate in Imoinda's mutilation. That is, the anxieties surrounding a fictional heroine expressing homoerotic desire provide another explanation for the grotesque excesses of Imoinda's murder in addition to the anti-slavery narrative within the scene. The heterosexual union in Behn's work does not bring pleasure or enhance the female homoerotic experience, but rather works against it. In *Jane Eyre*, we see the progression of yet another first-person, female account as the focal point for experiencing female desire, but Jane's relationships with women reveal an increasing pleasure in female homoerotic experiences for the reader.[14] The heterosexual romance central to the plot of Brontë's novel facilitates rather than impedes the fulfillment of homoerotic desire in women. The union between Jane and Rochester at the end of the novel is couched in the romantic echoes of Helen and Jane's sensual relationship as children, offering continued homoerotic satisfaction. The novel works towards a progressively enriching experience for the female reader and even greater freedom for the fictional heroine from the tensions surrounding female homoeroticism. For both Behn and Brontë, though, the narrator's first-person perspective remains a key facilitator in mediating the experience between reader and text and in creating the homoerotic experience.

Literature Review

In general, the critical discourse surrounding *Jane Eyre* and female-female relationships in the novel focuses on the homosocial nature of Jane's various female friendships and how women act as mothers to the orphaned Jane. This particular approach to the text is taken by early Second Wave feminist critics. Most notably, Adrienne Rich points out that characters such as

Helen Burns and Miss Temple provide a "moral and intellectual force . . . [that] combines to give young Jane a sense of her worth and of ethical choice" (474). In much the same vein, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar give a nod in their work to Rich's conclusion of Jane's hunger for mother figures. Pauline Nestor further comments that Jane's "primary allegiance is toward the male" at the end of *Jane Eyre*, though Jane hungers for the "constant support and affection" of motherly characters (112, 105). Not until later critics Jin-Ok Kim and Lisa Walker publish their work does female homoeroticism in *Jane Eyre* become an explicit concern.[15]

Since my argument concludes that the female-female homoeroticism extends to the feminized Rochester—read as Helen's double—I must take into account the very specific discourse surrounding Jane and Helen's relationship by the aforementioned critics. Helen specifically was originally seen as a mother figure by the Second Wave feminists. Rich sees Helen as a mother whose influence helps develop Jane's sense of worth and moral compass (474). Gilbert and Gubar cite Rich's point precisely in developing their own arguments but conclude that the influence of mother figures, especially Helen Burns, remains minimal; Helen teaches Jane to "superficially compromise" through her "saintly renunciation" of suffering on earth (347). Later critics continue to frame their arguments in terms of Jane and Helen in a mother-daughter relationship. John Kucich notes, for instance, that Jane learns "something of this self-transcendence" from Helen and posits that Jane, not Rochester, becomes the "parallel" of Helen (295). Furthermore, these later critics see Jane's marriage as signaling "ultimate allegiance to the male" despite her constant hunger for the "support and affection" of motherly characters (Nestor 105, 112). Kim remains the exception among this group of critics as a scholar who sees Jane's marriage to Rochester as a "hidden female-female one" (61). My work builds on the discussion of Jane as a character actively seeking female companionship by noting the queer

language used to build the erotic both on and off the page. Furthermore, I use Kim's scholarship as a starting point for investigating the marriage to Rochester as a female-female experience, but I show that Rochester's feminization makes him a second Helen rather than just a feminized hero.

Queer Language and Queerer Endings

One of the first intensely homoerotic scenes in the novel lasts no longer than a look between the young Jane Eyre and her fellow school mate, Helen Burns; a moment of public punishment turns into an erotic encounter for Jane. After breaking a slate during Mr. Brocklehurst's speech at Lowood, Jane must stand in front of the entire class, "exposed to the general view on a pedestal of infamy" (109). Immediately, the stage is set for an intimate exchange with Jane at the front of the class, under the scrutiny of her entire school. The word "infamy" and "pedestal" jar slightly as pedestal usually implies a positive veneration of an object, but here, Jane suffers humiliation instead of admiration (109). However, the situation creates a heightened moment of feeling and emotion in Jane, and though painful, the dramatic scene has a curiously sensual tension when considering the female gazes no doubt probing Jane, attempting to penetrate her very being to see whatever vices of character Mr. Brocklehurst sees. Ultimately, Mr. Brocklehurst's attempt to humiliate Jane before her peers backfires as Jane overcomes the "shame" of the moment when Helen passes by and lifts her eyes to Jane (109). The visual connection sends "an extraordinary sensation" through Jane and "imparts strength in the transit" (109). Sensation means "an excited or violent feeling," and in this scene between Helen and Jane, the word has a highly sensual connotation (OED Online). Also, Jane describes Helen's gaze as a "ray," setting up her gaze as direct, powerful, and penetrative (109). The rousing power of Helen's gaze completely changes Jane's emotional and physical state, "[bearing her] up" when before she could hardly make herself stand under the weight of her humiliation (109).

The intensity of the encounter does not stop at a mere look from Helen. On passing Jane by a second time, Helen smiles at her, and in one of the few exclamatory statements of the novel, Jane inwardly cries, "What a smile!" (109). The punctuation of this thought clearly denotes the intensity of feeling Jane experiences in reaction to Helen. Jane finds herself completely rejuvenated from the interaction with Helen and begins an enthusiastic outpouring over Helen's superior nature. Though Helen fails to meet the typical picture of Victorian beauty with her "sunken gray eye" and "thin face," Jane praises the "effluence of fine intellect, of true courage" she sees in Helen, roused by Helen's traits to a feverish pitch (109).[16] The constant references to Helen that follow Jane's sensual response to her gaze connect Helen with fire and light, typical representations of desire and eroticism (109). She possesses an inner light, has a gaze like sun beams, and appears to Jane with the "full brightness" of a celestial body (109). Though the girls never touch, the simple exchange of glances and a smile sends Jane into a state of heightened corporeal experience, a moment made intensely erotic by the various diction choices Brontë employs to create the scene.

Female readers picking up these various cues could experience Jane's euphoric connection with Helen as they simulate Jane's public humiliation and then the intense, sensual connection via the visual exchange between the two girls in addition to that between Helen and Miss Temple. Brontë's female readers would be very aware that Helen falls outside the realm of typical Victorian beauty as they themselves experienced the pressures of Victorian standards of womanhood, but through Jane, they would find themselves attracted and responsive to the slight, pale Helen who has a strong interest in books. By the end of the encounter, readers become immersed in an intensely homoerotic moment between two characters that Brontë's queer word cues allow them to experience as their own. On a final note, Jane describes Helen as the

"reflection from the aspect of an angel" (108). "Angel" evokes a divine messenger of God, an otherworldly being capable of causing intense emotion when it meets with mere mortals (108).[17] The Bible also refers to angels as "flaming fire," not only giving Brontë's description of Helen as an angel the undertones of superior power, but once again associating her with fire, a very sensual element (NABS Psalm 104:4). In this scene though, instead of approaching a male hero, Jane and the female readers, stimulated through Jane's experience, approach Helen as their angel. Brontë uses language to queer the trope usually employed by male writers to undermine women as the weaker sex. As a result, a patriarchal trope becomes a homoerotic experience between the two friends and the fictional characters and Brontë's readers.

One of the most telling homoerotic experiences between any two female characters comes early on in the novel when Brontë describes a scene following Helen's "rescue" of Jane from the pedestal. Sitting in Miss Temple's room, Jane observes Helen and Miss Temple talking. Jane finds herself "filled with wonder" despite the "[serene and] refined propriety" of Miss Temple's speech (114). As she watches her friend, Jane sees Helen's powers "rouse . . . within her," and Helen's physical appearance changes to show this awakening by displaying a "bright tint" on her cheek, "liquid luster" in her eyes, and a beauty that, to Jane, is "more singular than that of Miss Temple's" (114). The diction in the first part of this passage clearly reveals that Jane observes her friend with great attention to detail, enough to notice the changes in her physical appearance from her cheeks to her eyes. Also, the description of Helen—flushed cheeks, shining eyes, a sudden rosy beauty—reveals Helen's state of mental and physical arousal. The care Jane takes in describing this very sensual Helen creates an erotic tension in the scene between the two girls. After all, Jane admits Helen's heightened state fascinates her, and she does not remain unaffected by Helen's physical state. Jane cannot take her eyes off Helen, and not just because

Helen has suddenly lost her usual "pale and bloodless" look (114). Instead, Helen's beauty stems from "meaning . . . movement . . . and radiance" (114). Jane's strong emotional reaction towards her friend is not merely a superficial reaction to good looks but is also a reaction on an intellectual, erotic plane. Jane sees beauty in sensual and abstract terms rather than physical. Ultimately, the "pure, full, fervid, eloquence" of Helen's discourse supersedes physical beauty and holds Jane's attention. Jane narrates the passage with an influx of adjectives as she struggles to convey the almost untranslatable feeling of awe she has for her friend, which indicates her homoerotic connection with Helen (114). Following these lines of praise, Jane momentarily reverts back to a more reflective state, noting how she felt "on that memorable evening," and abruptly reminding her audience that she remembers the moments with Helen from the retrospective position of Mrs. Rochester (115). However, even after all the time separating her from this actual scene, Jane still marvels over her friend, lost in the potent memory. Helen still incites powerful passions in Jane, despite how much time has passed since her death.

As Jane backs away from her intense scrutiny of Helen, she relates that Miss Temple and Helen for some time converse on all sorts of topics, "things [Jane has] never heard of" (115). They speak of books they have read, faraway places, and more. Jane's fascination with Helen continues to build until, in language that calls to mind sexual orgasm, Jane's "amazement [reaches] its climax" as Helen begins to read Latin (115). "Climax" during Brontë's time could mean "the highest point of anything reached by gradual ascent; the culmination, height, acme" (115, OED Online). This definition supports a sexually erotic reading of Jane's desire towards Helen as her feelings for Helen build and build until they reach their apex. Furthermore, at the peak of her pleasure in watching Helen, Jane's "organ of veneration [expands] at every sounding line" (115). The word "organ" specifically calls to mind two meanings, one bodily and the other

cerebral (115). The bodily connotation of “organ” reflects the concept of a physical sexual orgasm, but the brain as an organ also presents a very emotional and intellectual aspect to Jane’s climax (115). Helen induces not only an implied physical climax in Jane but an emotional and intellectual one as well.

Undeniably, Brontë presents a very homoerotic scene between Jane and Helen as the reader runs into line after line of Jane’s sensual, feverish language. The relationship between the two girls abounds with sensual connections on both a physical and mental plane. While language clues create sensuality in an emotional, physical, and intellectual sphere, it is imperative to point out that the sensuality of this moment between Helen and Jane occurs without Helen ever looking at or touching Jane. Thus, Brontë relies solely on the power of diction to convey arousal and create a sensually charged atmosphere. With such numerous queer words scattered throughout the passage, creating a sensual atmosphere, Brontë successfully creates a scene where in female readers can consume and share Jane’s arousal through the very act of reading. For Brontë’s audience, the semantics of this passage no doubt create a simulation of the female-female homoerotic experience. After all, when applying the theories of reader response to this passage, Brontë’s audience slowly builds to climax while viewing the object of Jane’s affection, Helen, until they experience an orgasmic moment through embodying the experience of the female protagonist.

Perhaps the strongest scene that uses physical acts between two female characters to create the homoerotic experience comes just before Helen’s death when the relationship between the two characters transitions from looking to touching. In combination with the physical touching present in this passage, Brontë’s language ultimately cements the sensuality of the moment. For example, Kim describes the final scene between the two girls as a “romantic

friendship" with "physical and spiritual passions" (49). Brontë writes that Jane experiences a violent reaction to the news that Helen is near death and feels the "desire—the necessity" to see her friend before she dies (122). Her words express the intense attachment and strong emotions Jane reserves for Helen. Her reaction resembles that of a lover desperate to get to the side of her beloved. Jane desires to "embrace [Helen] before she dies, . . . [and to] give her one last kiss" (123).The physicality and intense longing undermine any interpretations that deny the sensuality of this scene. Once she reaches Helen's bedside, Jane crawls into bed with Helen. In the next few moments, Jane "kisses," "[nestles] close to," and "[clasps] her arms closer around" Helen (124-125). These actions reflect an amorous relationship, as they create a romantic atmosphere. Intimate physicality permeates the text, physicality that echoes of lovers clinging to each other in the moments before a looming tragedy. For the first time in the text, Helen calls Jane "darling," and Jane refers to her friend as "dear Helen," instead of just "Helen," which confirms intensely sexual physicality (125). Their endearing add-ons to each other's name have a romantic rather than playful quality. Their final exchange is not a verbal goodnight but an exchange of kisses. Again, Brontë's language affects the presentation of the kiss. Jane makes a point to say that Helen "[kisses her], and [she Helen]," versus stating they kissed each other (127). Thus, the word choice creates an even greater closeness and emphasizes the mutual desire of both friends to exchange physical intimacies.

The climax Jane experiences intellectually in the earlier scene in which Helen speaks to Miss Temple plays out in a very physical way in this last scene, but the intimacy here is taken from the realm of close friendship to homoerotic by specific choices in language. Also, Brontë selects a very erotic, intimate space for their final moments—Helen's death bed. Jane remains intertwined with Helen in a physically erotic sense in the bed and emotionally intertwined with

Helen until "death do they part." I argue Brontë manipulates the language in these scenes and others in order to express the homoeroticism between Jane and Helen, and in doing so, pulls her reader into the shared experience of physically touching a lover during her final hours. Brontë's readers could connect in a sensual, homoerotic way to this scene and partake in Jane's passion for Helen.

Brontë's queer language extends to Rochester himself when he disguises himself as a woman: a gypsy fortune teller. While Mr. Rochester is obviously male, until Jane guesses at his identity at the end of their encounter, Jane assumes Rochester to be a woman. Therefore, until that moment, the eroticism between them falls under female-female relationships. When Jane enters the room, she immediately calls the fortune teller a "sibyl" (249). During Brontë's time, "sibyl" was a common word used to describe a "prophetess; fortune teller; witch" (OED Online). Right away, the diction of the passage sets up the gypsy fortune teller as a woman who cannot fully be comprehended and who possesses superior powers, making her potentially sensual because of her mystery and magic. Furthermore, Jane's first glimpse of the woman is that of her "reading in a little black book" (249). As gypsies were not afforded formal education, the woman's ability to read stands out significantly and could attract Jane, who has already reacted with orgasmic desire at the sight of women reading. The gypsy woman herself flouts every conception of Victorian femininity, from her "bold and direct gaze" to her hair that sticks out in "elf locks" (249). Her less than demure gaze and elfish physical appearance once again set her outside the bounds of the typical conception of beauty, but they make her more erotic. Her foreign looks connote an exotic physicality and air about her, and her open gaze conveys a strong self-assurance in her own abilities and position, especially in terms of her erotic power as a woman.[18] Brontë's readers, no doubt aware of the connotations of the gypsy woman's

description, would recognize in this scene a woman potentially in possession of dangerous eroticism, intellectually and physically. However, taking a cue from the word clues given by Jane that there is really "nothing indeed in the gypsy's appearance to trouble one's calm," they would remain "as composed as ever," just as Jane does (249). The reader and Jane then embark on an exchange in which the gypsy reads Jane's feelings from "the face, on the forehead, about the eyes, in the eyes themselves; in the lines of the mouth" (250). During the exchange, Jane becomes the subject of the gypsy woman's piercing gaze. The very physical diction here and list of body parts connect Jane and the gypsy in a very intimate way as Jane's body becomes the object of the gypsy's attention, though the gypsy "[pores] over [Jane] without touching" her (250). The physicality and intensity of the gypsy's perusal of Jane's intimate person create more erotic tension when layered on top of the prior sense that the gypsy is a woman of mysterious, sensual energy.

However, strangely enough, Jane succumbs to the woman's gaze and is slowly seduced by her language enough to "begin [putting] some faith in [her] presently" where before she had none (250). Jane unquestioningly "kneels" before the gypsy woman, assuming a physically vulnerable position to take with such a mysterious stranger. Furthermore, Jane's face is suddenly "illumined" by the fire while the gypsy woman is further shrouded in mystery when her face only moves "deeper into shadow" (250). Fire, typically symbolizing desire, breaks across Jane's face as a direct result of the gypsy woman "[stirring] the fire, so that a ripple of light [breaks] from the disturbed coal" (250). The verb "stirring," besides the obvious connotations of physical movement, can also mean "movement of feeling or thought; emotion; impulse" or "a rousing" (250, OED Online). The simple act of stoking the coals, due to the queer language employed by Brontë, implies an erotic component when considering these alternate definitions of the verb

"stirring" (250). The stirring in the passage could be an erotic one in the sense of sexual desire and erotic connection on a more elevated emotional plain. After all, the connection between Jane and the gypsy relies solely on the rhetoric of the gypsy, a certain presence about her, and a complete lack of physical touch. If Jane herself is taken to be the stirred coal, then she becomes "disturbed" or "disquieted; agitated" (250, OED Online). Both "disquieted" and "agitated" are word clues for a female undergoing an erotic awareness in Victorian literature (250). Based on these semantic markers, the gypsy woman stirs more than just the physical fire in the scene.

Brontë's contemporary readers would no doubt have been aware of the connotations of each word, and could have picked up on the erotic energy in the room created by Brontë's language. They also could have viewed the gypsy woman through the cultural lens that sexually potent women are dangerous to society and to other proper women. However, Brontë saves her readers from engaging in the cultural condemnation of the sensual woman by writing Jane feels "wrapped . . . in a kind of dream" (252). Based on the reader's abilities to simulate a fictional character's experience, Brontë builds in a safeguard for her readers to reassure them that the female-female eroticism they encounter through Jane is harmless by continually emphasizing how Jane remains calm and entranced. Furthermore, the reader is reassured by the lack of touching between Jane and the gypsy as well as the small time span they are alone together. In the earlier scenes with Helen, such a semantic safety net was not required, considering that Jane experiences homoerotic bonds with a best friend and has no reason to fear any feelings between them.[19] Here, however, Brontë brings Jane into a sensual encounter with an erotically charged stranger and must soothe her audience by having them experience the same "web of mystification" that Jane does (252).

Brontë skillfully navigates both Jane and her reader through the intimate encounter with the powerful, sensual gypsy through the deliberate manipulation of words, relying on her reader's simulation of Jane's experience to positively embrace the strange but erotic encounter with the gypsy woman. After all, though the stoked fire "scorches" her as she kneels on the rug, Jane is content sit before the gypsy woman one final time (253). What was before but a "ripple" of light from the coals, a mere disturbance, now scorches her (250,253). This change in the nature of the fire represents the intensifying sensual connection between Jane and the gypsy. Jane, however, embraces the experience, and in doing so, leads Brontë's reader by the hand deep into the heart of the homoerotic moment. The spell and sensuality of the moment abruptly break off when Jane realizes the gypsy is indeed Mr. Rochester. However, even when the spell breaks and Mr. Rochester's identity comes to light, Jane wonders, "Had I been dreaming?" (253). After the fact, the spellbinding sensuality of the moment lingers to such an extent that Jane marvels as she reflects back on the surreal experience. Jane clearly feels intensely during the interaction with the gypsy, sensing the heat of the fire physically and erotically in a metaphorical sense, moved by the gypsy's intensely sensual rhetoric and perusal of her body. Keeping in mind Lorde's definition of the erotic as explored earlier in my work, this moment of heightened awareness and intense feeling more than qualifies as a sensual, erotic experience.

Jane's erotic encounters continue when she flees Thornfield and meets Mary and Diana Rivers. Jane, desperate for food and shelter from a coming storm, stumbles to a window of the cottage. Instead of knocking immediately on the door to seek aid, Jane pauses at the sight of "two young, graceful women—ladies in every point" despite her dire circumstances (393). Obviously, the two ladies captivate Jane with their looks, enough for her to take notice that they seem refined. Their appearances, pure "delicacy and cultivation," draw and hold her gaze (393).

Jane's intense perusal of their features and fascination with what she sees create an erotic connection between her and the women she watches, similar to that of the earlier scene in which watching Helen and Miss Temple engaging in reading moves her to an erotic climax. Despite having never seen these women before in her life, Jane feels "intimate with every lineament" of their faces (393). The word "intimate" implies "entering deeply or closely" and "closely connected by friendship or personal knowledge" (393, OED Online). Not only does Jane feel a sudden personal connection to these women simply from viewing them, she establishes this connection by reading the physical appearance of their faces. She is undoubtedly drawn to these women in a very erotic manner based on their appearance.[20]

However, the conversation that she overhears as well as the women's investment in reading and language captivate Jane as much as their physical appearance, introducing an eroticism based on more than just physical appearance. Jane notices immediately that despite being drawn to their appearance, neither of the women is "handsome" (393). However, the intensity that overshadows their faces while they bend over their books makes them look "thoughtful almost to severity" (393). With the unconventional appearance of femininity and the evidence of intellect on their faces, Jane finds them fascinating. Just as when she faces the gypsy at Thornfield, a virile, powerful woman, Jane does not shrink from these atypical pictures of the feminine seen in "faces full of distinction and intelligence" (395). Instead, the unconventional physical and intellectual aspects of the women arouse Jane until she can do nothing but soak up the scene in front of her. Jane's gazing echoes earlier scene of gazing at Miss Temple and Helen and her attraction to the intellectual eroticism offered by the two. The female reader becomes an observer as she simulates Jane's experience outside the window, drawn keenly to the women on display before her. The result is a shared homoerotic experience between reader and text as

Jane's fictional experience once again becomes the medium for a homoerotic encounter between the female reader and female characters.

Jane's experience comes to a close only when the sisters stand up and depart the room before dinner, and she comes back to herself as if snapping out of a trance. She confesses that she "half [forgets her] own wretched position" because "their appearance and conversation . . . excited in [her] so keen an interest" (395). The verb excite has the connotation of "to stir to passion" during this time period, and for Brontë's Victorian readers, the word would denote the sensual mental and physical feelings that Jane experiences (OED Online). Thus, they too would have their faculties excited through embodying Jane's aroused state of mind. Furthermore, Jane's arousal overwhelms her sense of place and condition, despite the harsh weather and her own hunger and fatigue. Similarly, Brontë's readers would forget their surroundings as they read and play out Jane's experience in their imaginations. They would experience the same fascination with the erotic that keeps them from being aware of much else, just as Jane does.

These strangers, later revealed to be Mary and Diana Rivers, end up forming a close relationship with Jane after their brother, St. John, takes her in. As Jane describes her developing relationship with the two women, Brontë continues in her deliberate selection of key semantic markers to create a homoerotic bond between the three women. In the opening of this particular chapter, Jane reveals she finds a "reviving pleasure in [their] intercourse" (412). Just as in earlier moments with close female companionship, Jane finds rejuvenation. "Intercourse" means both "social communication" and "sexual connection" during Brontë's time (412, OED Online). Therefore, Brontë knowingly chooses a word that calls to mind both intimate verbal and physical exchanges between persons. Not to mention, from their "intercourse," Jane explicitly experiences pleasure; pleasure itself can be both physical and mental (412). She gives a description of her

pleasure as one “arising from perfect congeniality of tastes, sentiments, and principles” (412). She connects with the Rivers sisters in a vast number of ways, and though none of them explicitly revolves around sex acts, the sexual undertones of the relationship cannot be ignored. Even without concentrating on the sexual implications of the words describing their relationship, the women are obviously close and find great pleasure in one another’s company, a type of eroticism in itself.

The shared passion for reading and learning between the women defines the erotic connection and feeds into the homoerotic experience of the readers of *Jane Eyre*. With “eagerness” Jane soaks up the knowledge they share, “[devouring] the books” the Rivers sisters lend her, and experiencing “full satisfaction” in discussing her reading with them (412). Jane’s sentiments towards the sisters fall well within the erotic. The word “devour” implies appetite, and her indication of complete fulfillment speaks to an appetite well satisfied (412). However, in this particular passage, these sexual implications of the erotic are mere undertones when compared to the shared intellectual eroticism between the three women. Not only does heightening the erotic experience for Brontë’s readers occur because of these various word patterns that create an erotic map for consumption, but the readers simulate Jane’s pleasure from relating to the sisters. The sisters layer the very act of reading on top of their empathy with Jane’s experience, which also involves reading. Just as Jane connects with her female companions through text and a meeting of the minds, readers meet with Jane and the Rivers sisters through the intellectual media of Brontë’s text and their imagination. In this scene, more strongly than in other places in the novel, intellectual eroticism holds double sway over the female reader as she touches an experience of erotic reading through the medium of erotic reading.

Jane provides the reader with an acute accounts of each sister and what she finds attractive about them. These descriptions only provide another level of homoeroticism as Jane delves into the very specific details about Diana and Mary.[21] Jane describes Diana as "handsome" and "vigorous" (412). Though these might be words used to describe a man, they display Jane's repeated attraction to unconventional beauty. At first sight, neither of the sisters warranted the title of handsome, but as Jane's intimacy with them grows, she changes the adjectives ascribed to her female friends. This shows an increased affection and interest in their physical appearance. Additionally, Jane ascribes to Diana an "animal spirit" (412). The word "animal" implies a very primal, corporeal nature with appetites, all things associated with the erotic (412). As well, Jane sits nightly on a stool at Diana's feet, "to rest her head on her knee" (412). This vulnerable pose puts them in close, intimate physical contact, as well as recalls the sensual scene in which Jane kneels twice before Mr. Rochester disguised as the gypsy fortune teller. Homoeroticism arises on a physical and intellectual level in the description of Diana Rivers.

Jane goes on to describe Mary as the quieter of the two sisters, but Mary is the one who sits and "[watches Jane] by the hour" when she draws, "charmed" by Jane's skills (412). Jane describes her as a "docile, intelligent, assiduous pupil" (412). The praise she layers on Mary and the companionship they share speak to a relationship and connection as deep as the one Jane shares with Diana. Diana's more forward, animal nature simply makes her the "leader" of the trio (412). By the time Jane concludes her description of the Rivers sisters, the reader simulates Jane's experience and has both instructed and been instructed by the pair, experienced Diana's robust nature, and entertained the quiet, steady companionship of Mary. The readers have sat by the fire with their heads in Diana's lap, spent hours under the intense gaze of Mary, and felt intimately connected to the two sisters through simulating Jane's experience. The homoeroticism

Jane feels translates smoothly into the female readership through the empathetic experience triggered by the diction of the passage.

St. John's character contrasts sharply with those of the Rivers sisters, and his marriage plans for Jane eventually threaten the homoerotic community she has built with his sisters. From the beginning, Jane describes St. John as a cold, reserved figure; he is merely a "statue instead of a man" (294). As an inanimate figure carved of stone, St. John lacks the warmth and vitality that mark Diana and Mary. Even St. John's eyes are used rather as "instruments to search other people's thoughts, than as agent to reveal his own" (295). St. John lacks the transparency that allows for a mutually fulfilling relationship between Jane and his sisters; Diana's gaze, for example, is one Jane "delights to encounter" (293). As a result, the intimacy "which [has] risen so naturally" between Jane and the Rivers sisters does "not extend to him" due to St. John's "brooding nature" (299).[22] Though Jane does not form as close a relationship with St. John as she does with his sisters, St. John's inability to connect with Jane does not initially threaten her erotic relationships with Diana and Mary until later; rather, Jane and St. John establish a distant but cordial relationship, especially after he makes her the mistress of the girl's school in Morton.

The distant friendship between them does not last when St. John's desire for a "sufferer, a labourer, a female apostle" to fulfill the duties of a missionary's wife push him to dissolve the intense bond Jane has formed with the Rivers sisters. In preparation for Jane to fill this role, St. John constantly attempts to smother the characteristic which has played a vital role in Jane's relationships with other women: her passionate nature. For instance, when Jane finds out she is the heiress to her uncle's immense fortune, St. John insists she "must really make an effort to tranquillise [her] feelings" (329). Jane responds to the order to calm herself by exclaiming, "Nonsense!" (329). Though the interaction seems miniscule, the exchange is a small part of a

larger pattern in which St. John attempts to regulate Jane's intense feelings and Jane responds by dismissing his suggestions.[23] She views herself as "fire," even as he strives to make her like him, whom she describes as "cold" (327). St. John religiously vows to "stifle and destroy" any "feverish influence" love has over him, and he expects the same from his wife (334). Jane acts in the opposite manner repeatedly throughout the novel, embracing wholeheartedly the feelings other women arouse in her.

Once Jane acquires her fortune, she is in a position to make a home with the Rivers at Moor House that will fulfill "the craving [she] has for fraternal and sisterly love" (330). She wastes no time in restoring Moor House and writing Diana and Mary to return from their working positions in other households. As quickly as Jane can draw her female companions back to her, she does. However, St. John is avidly against Jane's mission to establish a space of female domesticity within Moor House. He will later urge her beyond her desire for "fraternal" love to become his wife (330).[24] Until he proposes, however, he "excuse[s]" Jane's enthusiastic readying of Moor House for Diana and Mary's return, hoping she will "look beyond Moor House and sisterly society" (333). Earlier, Jane expresses a desire for brotherly and sisterly companionship, but St. John asks her to look beyond only sisterly love—forfeiting her relationship with Diana and Mary but not a relationship with him. Consistent with her attempts to push back against such moves by St. John, Jane declares such a thought "wicked," insisting she has "adequate cause to be happy, and [she] *will* be happy" (333). The idea that her relationships with the Rivers sisters could be abandoned for a worthier cause is unfathomable. Jane resists any attempt by St. John to push her away from this sisterly communion and towards what he deems a more "adequate cause" (333). For Jane, there is no more "adequate cause" than her relationships with these women (333). She enjoys their companionship so much that she prefers "sharing in it to doing anything

else" (336). St. John's initial attempt to subtly part these women by urging Jane to look beyond a life of female relationships fails.

When Jane clings steadfastly to her female community, St. John takes a more direct approach to reach Jane and offers marriage. At first, Jane rejects him on the practical grounds that "nothing speaks or stirs" in her when St. John speaks of the missionary's life; she is not passionate about going to India in the way she is passionate about building community with the Rivers sisters (343). However, St. John doggedly urges her to accept his offer, appealing to her on both religious and moral grounds.[25] St. John's words make headway against Jane's resistance, and she begins to meditate that she could go with him to India and fulfill a new purpose in life to replace loving Rochester; for Jane, "consent, then, to his demand is possible" except for the "dreadful" request to be his wife (345). Jane's acquiescence to St. John's proposal comes across as acceptance rather than passionate commitment; she also rejects his offer of the heterosexual union, claiming she will go to India if she "may go free" (345). For Jane, marriage to St. John, a man who does not desire her passion, is "monstrous" (345).[26] Despite his attempt to reason with her that a satisfying degree of love might follow their union, Jane accuses him of offering her a "counterfeit sentiment" and soundly rejects him a final time (348). Jane's vehement refusal to enter into a passionless marriage no doubt speaks to Brontë's concern over how a passionless marriage, both physically and emotionally, can wreak havoc on a woman.[27] However, Jane's rejection of this particular marriage proposal also serves to defend the passionate, erotic relationships she establishes with Diana and Jane. Should she marry St. John, she would betray not only her passionate nature, but she would acknowledges his earlier statement that maintaining sisterly companionship is an inferior endeavor.[28]

The conflict between St. John and Jane does not go unnoticed by Diana and Mary, and they infer that Jane rejects his proposal from the tension between the two. They are not opposed to Jane marrying their brother and picture the union as a means to keep their brother from pursuing the life of a missionary overseas. Rather than interfere with their community, Jane and St. John would stay in England where Diana and Mary are free to continue their relationship with Jane. However, when Jane makes it clear St. John neither loves her or plans to remain with her in England, Diana and Mary without question support her decision not to marry him. Diana exclaims such an arrangement is "in supportable—unnatural—out of the question!" (354). With these words, the Rivers sisters acknowledge the danger Jane sees in accepting St. John's marriage offer: there is not eroticism between the Jane and their brother, and such an arrangement would take Jane away from the flourishing community she has built with her cousins. Neither is an acceptable option for Jane, a woman they have come to love. When they approve Jane's rejection of St. John, they too work to establish the importance of the homoerotic connections binding them together. With the support of Diana and Mary, Jane successfully protects herself from permanent separation from them.

Jane's time with the Rivers sisters and St. John serves as the last set of passages in which Jane spends time in an intimate setting with female characters, but with Jane's return to Rochester, heterosexuality and the marriage plot cannot be read as an abandonment of intense female relationships. Jane frees Mary and Diana to pursue lives of shared reading and study before she leaves by giving them financial independence; her commitment to preserving female companionships and relationships is evident in this action. Furthermore, when Jane returns to Thornfield, she returns to a Rochester very different than the arrogant and hyper-masculine figure she parted from. Before her departure from Thornfield, Jane is Rochester's "plunder" and

he her "possessor" (816). The dichotomy of their relationship is that of master and slave despite Rochester's ability to "make [her] love him without looking at [her]" (225).[29] Rochester's earlier love is savage and selfish. However, the new, feminized Rochester presents a better hero capable of loving Jane as his equal rather than treating her as an inferior.[30] The new dynamic of their relationship exudes mutuality and honesty. Rather than associating Rochester's feminized position with deficiency, Brontë makes clear the gains presented by such a change.

Yet, Rochester comes to resemble a very specific woman—the young Helen Burns—and provides the novel with a marriage between two feminine lovers rather than a conventional heterosexual marriage. Evidence for this doubling comes in Rochester's physical and spiritual changes. The fire at Thornfield leaves Mr. Rochester a sightless, "crippled man" with numerous "infirmities . . . [and] deficiencies" (516). These physical deficits mirror Helen Burns' sickly, consumptive state at Lowood; Rochester becomes physically dependent on others, just as Helen is during the first part of the novel when she falls ill for weeks. Additionally, Rochester professes a faith similar to Helen's emphasis on God as a redeemer and mediator of suffering; Rochester confesses to Jane he has begun "to experience remorse, repentance" and to "acknowledge the hand of God" (517). Mr. Rochester's words eerily echo Helen's when Helen admonishes Jane for focusing too much on the suffering in this world and tells her there is a "Sovereign hand" guiding all things and to "observe what Christ says" (112). Rochester begins to submit to the hand of God that Helen adheres to and to follow the sayings of Christ that preach repentance. Helen's faith plays a pivotal role in establishing the intellectual eroticism between her and Jane, and Rochester's new position as a supplicant before God operates in the same fashion.

The closer Rochester comes to resembling Jane's first love, the more successful the heterosexual union between hero and heroine is. Even more interestingly, these changes in Rochester allow Jane to "love [him] better" now that he no longer "[disdains] every part but that of the giver and protector" (516). Brontë feminizes Rochester by removing him from the typical male role of warrior and provider to a dependency often reserved for women. Not only does the feminized Rochester allow Jane to love him more than she did before, but his transformation into the feminine also thrills her in a way his hyper-masculine self does not.[31] Jane states that Rochester "[depends] on another" to "kindle the luster of animated expression" and ends this statement with an exclamation point, punctuation rarely seen in the text (1214). The exclamatory phrase marks how strongly Rochester's newly feminized character appeals to Jane. Rochester's "powerlessness . . . [touches her] heart to the quick" (1214). His dependency not only moves her, but also touches her "to the quick," the deepest part of her soul (1214). Jane clearly responds to the very feminine, Helen-like qualities in Rochester; her final description of their married life echoes the intellectual and spiritual eroticism Jane shares with Helen. Jane describes how she never wearies of "reading to him," an activity that repeatedly marks Jane's erotic interactions with Helen and other women (1214). Furthermore, Jane remarks that the conversation they share is but "a more animated and an audible thinking" (1214). This phrasing represents their conversation as an explicit connecting of minds rather than a simple exchange of words, and one of the most attractive characteristics of Helen is her intellect. Jane describes their "audible thinking" as so pleasurable that they do it "all day long" (1214). Clearly, Jane enjoys not just a physical attraction to Rochester, but an attraction based on the qualities of his mind and new found faith. The result is a queered heterosexual union that becomes what Kim calls the "hidden female-female" relationship (61). Brontë doubles the emphasis on female-female bonds not only

by feminizing Rochester, but also by setting him up as a double of Jane's first love. Ultimately, *Jane Eyre* refuses to engage in homosexual panic by destroying a heroine who engages in female-female homoerotic relationships. Instead, Brontë's work reinforces these homoerotic female relationships through not only queer language but the queered heterosexual union at the end of the novel. Female readers, therefore, give life to numerous erotic relationships between women through simulation and actively engage in constructing a homoerotic marriage in the unregulated space of their minds.

CHAPTER 3

AWAKENING AURORA

Introduction

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* presents itself as a first-person narrative of a female poet striving to come into her own, but it is also the tale of a poet shaped repeatedly by her intense erotic connections to other women. These connections can take the form of lack—such as with her dead mother—or abundance—seen in her monogamous relationship with Marian.[32] Whether describing a longing for a lack to be filled or an abundance of female companionship, Barrett Browning relies on queer language cues to create the nonphysical erotics between characters as well as to provide an erotic experience for female readers. In fact, the pattern of the heterosexual romance plot becoming a vehicle to cover homoerotic scenes remains strongly consistent throughout all *Aurora Leigh*, just as with *Oronooko* and *Jane Eyre*. In addition to reading *Aurora Leigh* as a record of the trials facing an awakening female poet, I argue we should read the poem as a diary cataloguing Aurora Leigh's erotic experimentation with different modes of female homoeroticism; throughout this chapter, I will show how Barrett Browning uses the character of Aurora to test in what environment erotic relationships between women can realistically survive within heteronormative expectations for fictional heroines.

Barrett Browning's homoerotic experiments use queer language and the free space of the reader's mind as her laboratory to undermine heteronormative restrictions on fictional heroines. To have her characters blatantly experiment within the text would have been too explicit,

especially considering the degree to which the text already sparked controversy for its overt expression of awakened female sexuality. Like Behn and Brontë, Barrett Browning relies heavily on the first-person female narrator as the access point to her erotic experiments for her readers. Without Aurora's first-person account, female readers, both in a historical and modern context, would be limited to the less personal perspective of a third-person narrator. The success of Barrett Browning's pursuit of a sustainable female homoeroticism directly depends on the reader simulating the erotics that fictional heroines must cloak. *Aurora Leigh* builds on the deepening pleasure of the female homoerotic experience witnessed in *Jane Eyre* with Aurora's erotic experiments. Aurora's relationships show not only the deep satisfaction of female homoerotic unions but also test the extremes under which such erotic connections can endure. This culminates in Aurora's unconventional marriage to Marian after finding her in France. Though this marriage does not last, Barrett Browning does not employ the grotesque consequences of homosexual panic seen in *Oroonoko*. Rather than having the marriage collapse in on itself, Barrett Browning concludes with her heroine in a less radical position after marrying a feminized Romney while maintaining a continued connection to Marian.[33] We see in *Aurora Leigh* a heroine who experiments boldly with a type of eroticism previously unseen in Behn or Brontë's work, a closed marriage with another woman.

Literature Review

As Rebecca Stott appropriately states in "'Where Angels Fear to Tread': *Aurora Leigh*," critics have repeatedly framed *Aurora Leigh* as a *Bildungsroman*—whether that of an orphan growing up in search of a mother, a poetess developing her voice, or a woman defining her sexuality.[34] Most prominently, critic Simon Avery offers an in-depth discussion of the "searches" going on in Barrett Browning's work and asserts that *Aurora Leigh* represents how the

"attainment of home *is* finally achieved" (71).[35] Though Avery later posits this stability is temporary when he examines Barrett Browning's poetry as a spectrum from early to late works, I am concerned with his discussion of *Aurora Leigh* as an isolated work. A "search" that must be considered within the larger discourse of other "searches" taking place within the work is Aurora's search for sustainable, erotic relationships with other women. Often, critics frame Aurora's search for, or engagement with, other women in terms of an orphan pining for a mother figure while working out her own role as a mother and woman in society.[36] Specifically, Dolores Rosenblum and Angela Leighton both offer more complex readings of Marian in particular. Rosenblum sees Marian as the "focus for Aurora's recognition of herself in the maternal face . . . [a woman who] stands for the motherless child in Aurora" (331). Leighton states Marian represents Aurora's hunt for the sister, a quest Barrett Browning deals with repeatedly throughout her career.[37] However, none of these discussions present Aurora's many searches in terms of female homoeroticism. Instead, critics often discuss Aurora's search for other women and assertion of her sexuality as an acknowledgement of a vital and active sexual force at play for Victorian women in general.[38] This chapter will approach the already articulated search for female companionship by Aurora Leigh in a new way by exploring the erotics of her encounters with other women; furthermore, the chapter will argue that the success—read as sustainability—of these relationships reveals the conditions Barrett Browning deems necessary for viable female-female relationships to occur. In regards to Aurora's relationship with Marian in particular, my work will add another way in which she is a focal point for Aurora; rather than viewing her as the refining lens for Aurora's mother complex (or as a sort of muse or sister), I see her as the lens through which Aurora refines the ultimate experiment for female homoeroticism—a marriage between two women.

The Homoerotic Experiments of Aurora Leigh

Absence of women marks Aurora's life from the beginning. She finds herself "unmothered" at age four and left with nothing but a portrait (1:95). In a post-mortem encounter between mother and daughter, an unmistaken eroticism marks Aurora's reaction to her mother's portrait; she stares at the painting "half in terror, / half in adoration" (1:137). The emotions Aurora experiences, though seemingly paradoxical, share a unifying feature: extreme degree of feeling. "Terror" implies "intense fear or dread," rather than simple unease (1:137, OED Online). Similarly, "adoration" means "profound reverence" or "worship," as opposed to simple affection (1:137, OED Online). Aurora's reaction fits the criteria Lorde uses to define the erotic, and Barrett Browning conveys the eroticism of the scene through these queer language cues. Furthermore, the connection between Aurora and her mother's portrait keeps her for "hours" in a single spot, transfixed (1:143). Perhaps most tellingly, Aurora describes how "a sudden flame / Which lightened from the firewood, made alive / That picture" on the wall (1:125-127). As discussed earlier, Fire commonly represents vitality and intense desire, marking the intensity of the connection between mother and daughter. The strength of this connection, however, never relies on the physical connection of Aurora with her mother but depends instead on the dedicated, habitual gazing by Aurora at the portrait. The entire erotic encounter develops and is maintained through the act of looking and queer language.

Despite the erotic nature of Aurora's connection to her deceased mother, the encounter still leaves her with "mother-want" (1:40). While there is undeniably a familial longing, there is also the longing for intense, erotic companionship with another woman. The portrait, as compelling and haunting as it may be, cannot satisfy the conditions under which a sustainable erotic encounter can occur. Most explicitly, this can be attributed to the physical absence of the

living, breathing mother; Aurora can only look at the object of her desire. She must resort to "crouch[ing] on the floor" again and again (1:135). Her inability to interact with the object of her desire represents a scenario—a woman confined to a single space or mode of expression—in which female homoeroticism cannot function as a mutual, fulfilling experience. Aurora Leigh can only gaze, not be gazed upon. As overwhelming as the portrait is with its ability to "[break] out of bounds," Aurora finds herself barred from engaging in a sustainable or satisfying homoerotic experience (1:145). This sentiment is only echoed by Aurora's earlier description of her mother's "kiss" as one that could have "left a longer weight upon [her] lips" (1:36); Aurora's ideal homoerotic experience with other women demands an enduring physical component, though not in the form of a sex act, to sustain the relationship. Without such an intimate physical component, Aurora is in need of being "steadied" (1:37). Interaction and mutual exchange play key components in the sustainable homoerotic relationship for Barrett Browning's female characters.

After her father's death, Aurora tries to establish a more permanent connection with her aunt than the one she creates with her mother's portrait. Right away, Aurora's description of her aunt portends the failure of erotic female companionship she will experience. The aunt is a "straight and calm" woman with a face "past bloom" and eyes of "no colour" (1: 272, 286, 282); she has lived a "frigid" life, "which is no life at all" (1: 289, 276). This contrasts sharply with the hypnotic influence Aurora's dead mother's portrait has over Aurora and the intensity of feeling that wells up in her four-year-old self. The flame, a mark of desire when referencing the portrait, is explicitly absent and replaced by images of winter when Aurora describes her aunt. Aurora also emphasizes how she "[clings] to her" aunt repeatedly; the transition from gazing at a portrait to suddenly touching a flesh and blood woman bridges the gap Aurora faced when connecting

with her deceased mother. “Cling” means to “compress” or “adhere together” (OED online). Barrett Browning’s word choice implies not just a physical connection between her two characters but a combining of two separate pieces into a single whole—a highly erotic and intimate image. In her attempt to connect with her aunt, she wishes to become one with her. Also, Aurora does not simply want her aunt to acknowledge a connection between them; Aurora wants her aunt to “feel [the] love” she offers through this act of clinging (1:320). Love becomes not merely an idea or a concept but an integral, physical manifestation that contributes to the erotic connection Aurora wants. Furthermore, there is desperation in Aurora’s attempt to touch her aunt and complete this blending of two people. Clearly, Aurora sees the potential for a bond deeper than that she could only partially establish with her mother.

Though Aurora can touch her aunt, the potential for a sustainable bond between the two proves futile as the aunt rejects Aurora’s craving for an erotic connection. Aurora’s aunt at first “seem[s] moved . . . [and] / Kiss[es] [her] with cold lips, suffer[s] [her] to cling” to her frame (1:321-322); however, the intimate and comforting gesture of the kiss is shrouded in images of winter just as the aunt’s face during their initial meeting.[39] There is no potential for the erotic, passionate connection Aurora desires, either visually or physically. Though her aunt can physically place the kiss her mother could not, the kiss itself lacks passion. Aurora’s caresses are “suffered,” or “inflicted or imposed,” on the aunt (1:322, OED Online). Curiously, though, the aunt does seem to display a moment of erotic connection with Aurora, though it last briefly:

> There, with some strange spasm
> Of pain and passion, she wrung loose my hands
> Imperiously, and held me at arm's length,

And with two grey-steel naked-bladed eyes

Searched through my face,–ay, stabbed it through and through. (1:324-328)

The aunt's "spasm / Of pain and passion" borders on the stirrings of an erotic response (1:325). "Passion" indicates not just understandable pity for her niece, but intense feeling, despite the mixture of pain (1:325). "Spasm" implies a visceral, almost involuntary reaction to Aurora's efforts to establish an erotic connection (1:325). The reaction itself also mirrors the beginning of an orgasm, as a "spasm of . . . pleasure" would be a more than adequate term to describe such an event. Barrett Browning's diction implies the spasms would have only built had Aurora and her aunt maintained a physical and emotional erotic connection left unchecked. However, Aurora's aunt cuts off her own erotic, physical response by breaking "loose" of Aurora (1:325). As if to ensure such a reaction will not occur again, the aunt then uses her gaze—a tool previously used and valued by Aurora as a means of establishing erotic connections with her mother's portrait—and begins stabbing Aurora "through and through" (1:328).[40] By rejecting her niece's touch and staring viciously at her, Aurora's aunt effectively shuts down all lines of communication between herself and niece.

This sudden shift towards using the female gaze to attack rather than admire or connect with another woman foreshadows a barrier to female homoeroticism present in this scene: competition for the attention of the heterosexual male.[41] Aurora explains her aunt sees "her mother in [Aurora's] face" as a means to explain her aunt's callous behavior (1:338). Her aunt is her "mother's hater" (1:360). The hate towards Aurora's mother stems from the aunt's perception that Aurora's mother stole the attentions of Aurora's father and removed him from England:

My Tuscan mother, who had fooled away
A wise man from wise courses, a good man
From obvious duties, and, depriving her,
His sister, of the household precedence,
Had wronged his tenants, robbed his native land,
And made him mad, alike by life and death,
In love and sorrow. She had poured for years
What sort of woman could be suitable
To her sort of hate, to entertain it with;
And so, her very curiosity
Became hate too, and all the idealism
She ever used in life, was used for hate. (1:342-353)

Aurora's aunt felt "depriv[ed]" both of her brother's presence and her "household precedence" (1:345). Without the mother's interference, the aunt would have remained the sole recipient of her brother's attention and held final say over the domestic sphere of the Leigh household. The aunt's resentment at her displacement by Aurora's mother and the ensuing consequences—unsupervised tenants, an absent, suffering brother—are at the root of her extinguished erotic connection to Aurora. Thus, Barrett Browning shows that the potential for fruitful female homoerotic encounters must take place beyond the sphere of competing for male attention in heterosexual relationships.[42]

This failed connection between Aurora and her aunt leaves Aurora just as dissatisfied as the connection with her mother's portrait, and she must again seek out female homoeroticism with another woman. Marian Earle provides the next opportunity for establishing a sustainable

homoerotic relationship. When she initially meets Marian, Aurora's first gesture is to "[look] her in the eyes, and [hold] her hands" (3:802). These actions combine the visual and physical modes of connecting erotically with women that Aurora has tried to employ since childhood. Her gaze is direct, intimate. Her hands mimic the gesture of one lover to another.[43] As Barrett Browning never writes that Marian moves away or breaks contact (as Aurora's aunt does), we can imagine Marian accepts Aurora's initial attempts to establish an erotic relationship with her. As if to make clear the influence Marian has on her, Aurora states, "she touched me with her face and with her voice" (3:805). This particular use of "touched" implies Marian "stir[s] the feelings of" Aurora, an obviously erotic implication (OED Online). Moreover, rather than stating that she was touched, a passive construction which would have put the emphasis on Aurora herself, Aurora implies Marian actively reaches out to return Aurora's erotic gestures through her gaze and her voice. As Aurora reaches out to establish an erotic connection, Marian unreservedly returns her feelings.

Marian's acceptance of Aurora's attempt to establish a homoerotic connection is no surprise considering the homoerotic connections she has established with women in the past. She shares with Aurora the memory of a girl she developed a passionate relationship with as a child:

> She loved indeed, Rose Bell, a seven years' child,
> So pretty and clever, who read syllables
> When Marian was at letters; she would laugh
> At nothing. Hold your finger up, she laughed,
> Then shook her curls down on her eyes and mouth
> To hide her make-mirth from the schoolmaster.
> And Rose's pelting glee, as frank as rain

On cherry-blossoms, brightened Marian too,

To see another merry whom she loved.

She whispered once (the children side by side,

With mutual arms entwined about their necks) . . . (3:909-919)

In this set of lines, Aurora describes Marian's first successful homoerotic encounter with a woman.[44] Rose Bell inspires attraction, however, not just by her "pretty" looks but her "clever" mind too (3:910). Her learning, advanced compared to Marian's ability to read "letters" instead of "syllables," speaks to an intellectual eroticism drawing the two girls together (3:910-911). They bond over their shared education and learning of language. Furthermore, Barrett Browning associates Rose with fertile imagery: "rain / On cherry-blossoms, brighten[s] Marian" (3:915-916). Water refreshes and leads flowers to bloom; Rose acts as a catalyst to stir up intense erotic feeling in Marian as she "brighten[s]" (3:916). Their love, initially sparked by a shared intellectual passion, transitions to familiar touching when Rose speaks to Marian "side by side / With mutual arms entwined around their necks" (3:919). This image recalls the clinging of Aurora to her aunt. Unlike Aurora's aunt, however, Rose reciprocates Marian's touch, and they become physically and emotionally woven together. Furthermore, the positioning of their arms around each other's neck suggests the girls are face to face. The face-to-face contact is an intimate, vulnerable pose and forms a closed space into which others cannot enter; the girls have successfully created a space for themselves to act on homoerotic desires.[45]

I must note that the above description of Marian's past is told to Aurora originally in "simple, rustic turns," but Aurora provides the reader with "rather . . . the thing [she understands], than the thing [she] hear[s]" (4:151, 154-156). However, this does not undermine the authenticity of the encounter between Marian and Rose. Rather than view Aurora's retelling of Marian's past

as a possible embellishment made by a poetess, note that Aurora verbalizes what Marian describes to her: a homoerotic encounter with another woman. Aurora is no stranger to the desire for erotic connection with her peers. She tried to establish such connections with limited success with her mother's portrait and her aunt. However, both of these encounters provided her with enough of an erotic experience that Aurora knows the signs. She knows how to be captivated by a look after watching her mother's portrait; she has felt the briefest spasms of returned desire in her aunt's hands. I argue that Aurora's unsustainable attempts with homoerotic relationships make her all too aware of what is necessary for their success; thus, her account of Marian's relationship with Rose can be trusted at face value as a genuine example of a successful homoerotic encounter between two women. In fact, when Marian finishes relating her history, Aurora feels confident enough in her shared intimacy with Marian to "[kiss] the lips" that tell the story not once but twice (4:167). These women have only just met, yet they share the intimacy of a kiss. Clearly, Aurora senses something in Marian that leads her to believe her advances will be accepted, even returned, despite the newness of their relationship.

After such a sudden and intimate connection, Aurora accordingly feels devastated by the sudden loss of the one woman with whom she has been able to initiate a successful erotic encounter when Marian runs away to avoid marrying Romney.[46] The grief Aurora experiences at her loss is apparent when Aurora finally reunites with Marian and grieves that she "lost her sister . . . And sought her ever" (6:450). "Sister" indicates the intimacy Aurora feels existed between the two women prior to Marian's disappearance (6:450). Typically, sisters are women who are actively involved in the daily and emotional lives of each other in a way mere friends are not. The term indicates a privileged degree of closeness granted to Marian and explains Aurora's plaguing desire to restore Marian to her previous position of intimate and erotic

companion. Aurora claims she has "hungered . . . after [Marian] more than bread" (6:450, 454). "Hungered" in this sense conveys that Marian sustained Aurora in a very particular, erotic way (6:454); Aurora has an appetite for Marian. Marian is also a food in this eloquent line, a provider of nourishment, but also something consumed to become part of the body. The very act of eating becomes an erotic metaphor to express Aurora's desire for Marian. Before meeting Marian, Aurora only suffers from "mother-want," but this general desire for homoerotic connections with women develops into a specific drive to establish an erotic connection with one woman: Marian (1:40). Aurora wastes no time in holding Marian's "two slight wrist with both [her] hands" (6:443). This gesture recalls their initial meeting and physically seals their relationship.

Given an opportunity to renew her connection with Marian, Aurora shifts from seeking a sustainable relationship to creating a place in which it can survive. Boldly, she declares to Marian, "Come with me rather, where we'll talk and live, / And none shall vex us. I've a home for you / And me and no one else'" (6:456-458) Aurora's proposal borrows from the circumstances of the only successful homoerotic relationship she has been privy to—the young love between Marian and Rose. Rose's beauty and mind draw Marian into an intimate relationship, and through these erotic connections, they create a shared space. Aurora offers Marian something similar when she states they will "live" and "talk" (6:456). Their erotic companionship will not just be about the physical connection between them but about shared emotional and intellectual pursuits. Language and daily routine will unite them.[47] Aurora's words describing their new life also exclude outsiders, whether they are men or women who would endanger their new relationship. Aurora also intends for her vow to Marian to be as binding and to function as eternally as conventional heterosexual marriage vows; she pledges, "From henceforth, thou and thine! ye are my own / From henceforth" (7:119-120). They share mutual

ownership of each other, and the repeated statement of "henceforth" implies permanence (7:120). In their new home, there will "burn the lights of love before [Marian's] face," and Aurora will gaze "ever at [Marian's] sweet look" (7: 128, 129). The description echoes the power of the female gaze in both establishing and maintaining key erotic connections between women; furthermore, the fire only Aurora could see thrown on the wall of her mother's portrait will finally blaze with life before a flesh and blood rather than a represented face. The relationship will meet every emotional and physical need of the two women involved. In response to this offer, Marian looks Aurora "in the face and answer[s] not, . . . But [takes] the sleeping child and [holds] it out / To meet [her] kiss" (7:133-136). Marian substitutes an erotic look for a reply and follows up her wordless "yes" with a kiss. Words are inadequate to express Marian's feelings at the offer of an unconventional marriage arrangement, so she speaks in the visual and physical language Aurora has repeatedly employed throughout the poem.[48]

Marian and Aurora's marriage arrangement does not endure, however, when Romney Leigh re-enters the picture. Barrett Browning is reluctant to have her heroine occupy such an explicitly homoerotic position in fiction in a way that excludes fathers and husbands. Therefore, Marian and Aurora mutually dissolve their relationship. Marian devotes herself to nothing "except [her] child," and Aurora is free to passionately declare "I love you, Romney" (9: 402, 607). This sudden divergence of the most functional homoerotic relationship in Aurora's life, however, is not a complete rejection of female homoerotic encounters in general, but rather a compromise that acknowledges the position Aurora and Marian occupy is, for now, too radical. As part of this compromise, Romney assumes the role of a reformed—feminized—hero and is better off for his new qualities.[49] Furthermore, though Marian and Aurora will no longer live as a private family unit, their relationship's erotic component remains intact despite Aurora's

confession of love to Romney. Consider that Marian's voice is constantly referred to as "thrilling" by Aurora even after she begins to realize her romantic feelings for Romney (9:196). Romney can even confidently state Marian "loves [Aurora] well," though their arrangement is no longer the same (9:461). Romney changes nothing between these two women in terms of depth of feeling for or devotion to one another; they are able to successfully maintain a mutually fulfilling erotic relationship with one another without resorting to any sort of competition (a factor the text makes clear will wreak havoc on ties between women). The result is a less radical but still subversive ending that relies more than ever on readers simulating the erotic language cues embedded in the poem by Barrett Browning. Without readers simulating the continued erotics between Aurora and Marian, the end of the novel could too easily be read as a rejection of female homoeroticism all together in the lives of female characters. Instead, Barrett Browning is able to ease Aurora back from a radical position without sacrificing the homoerotic experiences of her heroine all together.

CONCLUSION

By examining the complicated relationship between the public and private spheres as it plays out on the regulated space of women's bodies and writings, I seek to complicate the trend in Queer Theory that argues that female homoeroticism is an integral, thriving part of English society throughout history. My work invites scholars to consider that fictional heroines are not as free as real women because fiction's very nature demands texts be consumed and circulated in a public space. Different rules govern the private and the public spheres; these differences must be taken into account when discussing the ways in which women were allowed to openly express erotic longing for one another in fiction. This gap between public and private also informs the basis for this project's definition of eroticism. Given that fictional women face different restrictions on the public stage, often nonphysical eroticism becomes the only avenue left open to them to express their sensual feelings for one another. These feelings often range from emotional eroticism to pure sexual desire. Defining erotic as an intensity of feeling rather than just sexual acts gives this project the flexibility to examine the cloaked ways fictional women establish and maintain erotic relationships outside of physical sex acts. Should we limit the definition of the erotic to sex acts only, fictional women can only experience erotic connections with those characters they come into sexual contact with. Most often, explicit sex acts occur between male and female characters, consensual or otherwise. Thus, eroticism defined as sex acts severely limits the discussion of female sexuality to a female character's heterosexual relationships. For this reason, an expanded definition of the erotic as an intensity of feeling is necessary to create a complete picture of female sexuality; we thus also avoid privileging heterosexual relationships.

Thus, scholars in the field of Queer Theory and Feminist Theory can better investigate relationships outside of those rooted in sex acts that inform the development and sexuality of fictional heroines.

With this definition of the erotic as my foundation, I plan to expand my work with this project in two key ways. First, I will examine the ways in which the erotic gaze of the narrator in Behn's *Oroonoko* complicates colonial readings of the piece. Behn's narrator occupies a position of privilege as a rich, white woman on the island's plantation. However, I would seek to articulate to what degree Imoinda's position as a colonial subject contributes towards the narrator's desire for her (or how the narrator's desire counters her role as colonizer). For instance, Chapter 1 of this project discusses how the narrator tries to convert Imoinda to Christianity with stories of nuns. While I assert there is a clear element of homoerotic desire in the narrator's motives, her attempt to replace Imoinda's native religion with English Christianity models the white colonizer's efforts to eradicate any hint of indigenous practices in conquered communities. However, the narrator's erotic feelings for Imoinda undermine a purely colonial reading of the scene and provide a less sinister motivation for their conversation; her feelings also raise questions surrounding the erotics of colonialism in general when considering the intensity of feeling involved with master-slave relationships. This scene is just one example of many in *Oroonoko* in which the overlap of the colonial plot with the homoerotic gaze of the narrator deserves further investigation. In general, I am interested in what ways the narrator's position as a white, English woman who desires an African woman both furthers and pushes back against colonial interpretations of the novella.

My second goal for expanding this project involves placing Barrett Browning's "Lady Geraldine's Courtship" in conversation with *Aurora Leigh* in terms of the "searches" I describe

in Chapter 3. In “Lady Geraldine’s Courtship,” the narrator is the Lady Geraldine’s poet-lover Bettram, significantly different from Barrett Browning’s strong-willed female narrator, Aurora Leigh. Though Bettram claims to have been “struck down before her,” he seduces Lady Geraldine into declaring she is not “worthy of [his] poet heart” (LXXXVIII, Conclusion VIII). I am interested in how Bettram’s relationship with the powerful Lady Geraldine and his function as the male narrator might inhibit the presence of female homoeroticism in the poem. I would investigate Bettram as an experiment by Barrett Browning with the narrative techniques needed to convey the female homoerotic experience. Two central questions I might pose are: In what ways does a male narrator interfere with the female reader’s response to the sensual character of Lady Geraldine? Does Bettram serve as a precursor to Aurora Leigh’s character in terms of her role as a narrator? By seeking to answer these questions, I would explore how Barrett Browning engages in narrative experiments in “Lady Geraldine’s Courtship” to arrive at her use of a female poet as narrator in Aurora Leigh (as opposed to a male or third person narrator). This would position “Lady Geraldine’s Courtship” as a “search” for the narrative conditions under which female homoeroticism can be sustained. Overall, I will combine this work of investigating the development of the female narrator as a key tool in conveying female homoeroticism and exploring new modes of eroticism to clarify the gap between the public and private lives of women in my future work.

NOTES

1. Sedgwick and Marcus represent two poles in an ongoing discourse surrounding the binary of heterosexual and homosexual behavior; however, Carrol Smith-Rosenberg's "Female World of Love and Ritual" and Lillian Faderman's *Surpassing the Love of Men* began the discussion of female friendships as an accepted and integral part of society. Both texts call into question the modern assumption of homosexual behavior, physical or otherwise, as transgressive and opposed to the heterosexual relationships experienced by women.

2. *Between Men* (1985): 20.

3. Ruth Vanita argues for a similar approach when tracing the eroticism between women in works by female authors; she sees culture as affirming rather than rebuking female homoeroticism as a feature interwoven into both male and female literary tradition. Vanita argues this affirmation occurred both in a Christian tradition (Marian) and a secular tradition (Sapphic). See "Introduction: Imagined Ancestors" in Vanita's book, *Sappho and the Virgin Mary: Same Sex Love and the English Literary Imagination* (1996): 1-12.

4. The narrator's erotic longing for Imoinda no doubt complicates the colonial plot of the novella as the narrator expresses sympathy for the plight of Imoinda and the other slaves in the text; however, there can still be a case for the gaze of the white female narrator as a colonizing force that simultaneously desires and questions the treatment of Imoinda and other slaves even as she actively participates in their subjugation and tries to convert Imoinda to more "English" ways.

5. J.A. Ramsaran, "'Oroonoko': A Study of the Factual Elements." *Notes and Queries*, cvv. (1983): 144; Bernard Dhuicq, "Additional Notes on Oroonoko." *Notes & Queries*, cvv. (1979): 524–26.

6. Earnest Bernbaum, "Mrs. Behn's Biography, a Fiction." *PMLA* 28 (1913): 433.

7. Stephanie Athey and Daniel Cooper Alaracón, "Oroonoko's Gendered Economies" *Subjects and Citizens: Nation, Race, and Gender from Oroonoko to Anita Hill.* Spec. issue of *American Literature* (Sep., 1993): 415-443.

8. Though Stiebel remarks that Behn was praised by other male poets of her time as a Sapphist, there was undeniable anxiety around female-female homoeroticism during the period, warranting the masked but not indecipherable homoerotic cues in Behn's work.

9. I refrain from making the argument that the narrator's interest in Imoinda is part of a bisexual orientation because the narrator singles out Imoinda, not Oroonoko, throughout the story to build community with. Also, at the end of the story, the narrator remains curiously absent from a fatally wounded Oroonoko instead of remaining by his side once she hears the news of Imoinda's death. I discuss these details in more depth later in this chapter, but they lend themselves to a more "lesbian" reading of the narrator's gaze.

10. Referring to the king's shaking hands.

11. There is no doubt the king means to rape Imoinda, as he is prepared to force her into partaking in sexual intercourse despite her unwillingness to consummate their marriage.

12. This idea of the convent also plays on the earlier negative image the narrator gives of the otan as a women-only space policed by men. In its place, the narrator offers Imoinda a

peaceful alternative where she could be free from male aggressors, including Oroonoko, and live in constant, harmonious companionship with other women without a male overlord.

13. As I argue for the narrator's homoerotic gaze towards Imoinda, not a mutual homoerotic gaze between the two women, Oroonoko's act of murder becomes all the more brutal. There is no textual evidence that Imoinda reciprocates the narrator's erotic feelings and would enter into a relationship with her after Oroonoko's death. However, Oroonoko elects to ignore this fact and kills Imoinda as a preventative measure.

14. In *Oroonoko*, female readers experience the unreciprocated longing of the narrator for Imoinda and the harsh consequences for this homoerotic desire. In *Jane Eyre*, they are allowed to experience mutual and fulfilling relationships with other characters through the narrator.

15. Jin-Ok Kim, "Jane Eyre: Substitute Mother Figures," *Charlotte Brontë and Female Desire* (2003): 45-63; Lisa Walker *Looking Like What You Are: sexual style, race, and lesbian identity* (2011).

16. See John Kucich *Repression in Victorian Fiction: Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, and Charles Dickens* (1987) for a discussion of the stereotypical view of beauty in Victorian culture and a description of threatening images of womanhood.

17. Remembering that Lorde does not limit her definition of the erotic to merely sexual acts but argues for erotic experiences as anything that cause intensity of feeling, even pain or fear, encounters with angels can be seen as highly erotic experiences. The following passages in the Bible demonstrate such encounters and support the view that Jane's perception of Helen Burns as even a mere shadow of an angel can be viewed as intensely erotic experience: Judges 13:19-22, Isaiah 6:1-6, Daniel 10:10-12, Mathew 28:2-4, Luke 2:8-15. In many of these passages, the

people speaking with the angels experience immediate fear or awe, or the angels tell them not to fear, which signals that their presence requires them to reassure the humans before them. Helen even has a personal and passionate faith in angels.

18. Here I would like to emphasize that often in Victorian culture, powerful women who behaved outside gender norms were often seen as a threat, especially sexually. The gypsy woman demonstrates a dangerous sexual eroticism with her confidence and gaze, but she also demonstrates a capacity for intellectual connection with Jane as a woman through her reading. Jane notes immediately that the woman reads over the fire and continues even after Jane enters the room because it "[appears] she [wishes] to finish the paragraph" (249).

19. Helen is also dying, so the possibility of a literal sexual encounter does not exist.

20. I contend there is both an erotic element in the gazing and also a subconscious familial note as Jane perhaps recognizes women from her family who look like her.

21. Diana and Mary's names evoke specific imagery as well. Diana suggests strong, wild female communities in mythology. Mary, also a variation of the Hebrew Miriam, has strong biblical connotations with both the Virgin Mary and Miriam, the sister of Moses who helps her mother defy Pharaoh's edict to kill all male Hebrew children of a certain age. Both women hold prominent historical and religious context as women of power and reverence.

22. Jane refers to Diana, Mary, and herself as a "trio" (298). St. John is explicitly absent from any reference to the budding community she builds at Moor House.

23. Another example is when St. John insists Jane "must take days to consider" whether or not to divide her fortune four ways (329). He accuses her of "acting on first impulses" when she makes the suggestion (329).

24. St. John initially claims he can "easily and naturally make room in [his] heart" for Jane as his "third and younger sister" (331). However, considering he bases this decision off "respect for her worth and admiration for her talents," he seems to merely be placating Jane's desire for acceptance while subtly implying she will make the ideal helpmate (331). He later goes back on his word and insists Jane be his wife when they go to India as she cannot stay at his side and act as his sister.

25. *Jane Eyre* (2001): 344.

26. Jane declares St. John's soul would be "quite absent" from their union as he "does not want" her heart (345, 346). She cannot enter into a relationship with a man who cannot engage with her on a passionate level. In essence, St. John asks her to enter into a marriage that directly contradicts the relationship she currently shares with Diana and Mary, and she abhors the possibility.

27. Jane claims that to marry St. John after knowing he does not want her heart would "kill" her as it is already "killing [her] now" (351).

28. St. John urges Jane to "forbear to waste [her energy] on trite transient objects" in reference to her domestic community with Diana and Mary (333).

29. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *Mad Woman in the Attic* (1979): 352; *Female Friendships and Communities Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, and Elizabeth Gaskell* 108.

30. Most significantly, Kim states that though Jane Eyre "ends with a conventional heterosexual marriage . . . by presenting Rochester with female [qualities, Brontë] emphasizes the strong emotional connections between women" (106). I will show Rochester indeed posses female qualities, but the marriage at the end can be read as a continuation of Jane's original erotic encounter with the now deceased Helen Burns. Thus, the union with Rochester affirms the transgressive nature of Brontë's heroine rather than confining her within heteronormative tradition.

31. Kim notes this in her work but takes Jane's elation as an indicator of heterosexual attraction rather than an attraction to Rochester as a new Helen Burns.

32. I am using this term to mean "devoted to one person" to describe the time Marian and Aurora spend together in Italy after Aurora finds Marian in France.

33. Romney's new state does not mirror that of any other women Aurora comes into contact with during her erotic experiments. In this way, *Jane Eyre*'s ending is perhaps a bit more radical than *Aurora Leigh*, but I do see Barrett Browning as extending the erotic companionship seen in *Jane Eyre* to new levels by having her heroine actively experiment with a marriage between two women, a type of relationship Jane never enters into.

34. Stott notes on p. 182 a lineage of critics who argued that *Aurora Leigh* reappropriates the *Bildungsroman* form to a woman's perspective: "DuPlessis, 1985; Cooper, 1988; Case, 1991."

35. Avery sees Aurora's reunion and marriage to Romney at the end as "outlin[ing] a new political partnership for a potential new world, a partnership which emerges from the combination of that resistance to traditional systems of thought and gender expectations which Aurora has evidenced throughout" (96).

36. See: Helena Michie, “Calling and Falling: Vocation and Prostitution.” *The Flesh Made Word: Female Figures and Women's Bodies* (1987): 59-78; Virginia Steinmetz, “Images of Mother-Want in Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh*” *Victorian Poetry* (1983): 351-367; Sandra Donaldson, “Motherhood’s Advent in Power: Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s Poems about Motherhood” *Victorian Poetry* (1980): 51-60.

37. In *Elizabeth Barrett Browning* p. 141-157, Leighton argues the quest for the sister is the ultimate quest at the center of many of Barrett Browning’s works, more so than the quest for the mother figure.

38. David sees Aurora as a sexually vibrant woman in her chapter, “Woman’s Art as Servant of Patriarchy: the Vision of *Aurora Leigh*” but argues Barrett Browning held a conservative, essentialist view on sexual politics; In “‘School-Miss Alfred’ and ‘Materfamilias’: Female Sexuality and Poetic Voice in *The Princess* and *Aurora Leigh,”* Taylor discusses *Aurora Leigh* in relation to Tennyson’s *The Princess* and argues that the story follows a young woman’s “recognition of her own sexuality” and how this “empowers woman’s poetry” (17). Both of these critics offer Aurora’s assertion of sexuality as a pivotal anchor for their arguments and assert that Barrett Browning confronts the places women and female sexuality occupy in Victorian society and literature.

39. The aunt’s life has been “frigid,” and in her face, there are only “perished summers” (1:76, 85).

40. Though it is clear later that Aurora’s aunt is looking for a resemblance to Aurora’s mother in Aurora’s face, the gaze for women is an important tool for establishing connections as

physical touch often comes later. In this case, the gaze is deliberately used to break any erotic response—physical or emotional—the aunt experiences.

41. Cervetti makes an argument that competition between women is usually "conducive to heterosexism" as opposed to the greater potential for "comfort and stimulation" in female relationships (63).

42. Platonic or romantic heterosexual relationships are both subject to competition. This is not to say either that women can only engage in either heteroerotic or homoerotic relationships; rather, women can only successfully build homoerotic relationships with each other when they have not chosen to set themselves up as adversaries when it comes to gaining the male gaze.

43. Later in the poem, Aurora ask Lady Waldemar if she has ever "touch[ed] [her] hands as lovers do" and then thanks God she "never did (7:291, 292). This shows Aurora considers the act of grasping hands as an act reserved for intimate, erotically involved partners and one reserved for those whom she feels passionately about.

44. Marian did not form an erotic connection with her mother as her mother "beat[s] her baby in revenge / For her own broken heart" (3:869-870). The mother's own ability to form intimate connections with her daughter is damaged due to her toxic interaction with her alcoholic husband and general poverty of her class.

45. Rose acknowledges that she is allowed to bond with Marian because her mother, dead six years, lets her "play and lose . . . time, / And never scold[s] nor beat[s]" her like Marian's mother (3:924). Such a comment could present another necessity for female homoeroticism to flourish: loving mothers. I do not read this statement as disavowal of mothers themselves, but

rather, as a criticism of mothers driven to cruelty because of social and economic circumstances beyond their control.

46. Lady Waldemar plays out the competition that drives Aurora's mother and aunt apart. Rather than exist as friends with Marian or Aurora, she uses Aurora to further her own romantic chances with Romney and manipulates Marian into running away rather than marrying Romney. Aurora and Marian's relationship differs from both relationships (mother-aunt, Marian-Lady Waldemar) in that Aurora and Marian did not let Romney Leigh become a point of competition that sours their relationship.

47. Language is part of the failed connection between Aurora and her mother's portrait and Aurora and her aunt. Aurora's dead mother is not physically present to speak, an obvious impediment. However, her aunt consciously rejects Aurora's native Italian by demanding she speak only in English. The breakdown of speech in both instances contrasts starkly with the open communication Aurora anticipates with Marian.

48. Marian and Aurora establish not only an unconventional marriage for heroines in fiction but also an unconventional family unit by negating the need of the father in the life of Marian's son, a startling precedent: "Being still together, will not miss a friend, / Nor he a father, since two mothers shall / Make that up to him" (7:123-125).

49. Romeny's desire for Aurora is linked to motherly affection. In Book I, Aurora states that mothers rejoice in the "pretty play" of their children (1:55). When he first stumbles on Aurora's self-crowning at the beginning of Book II, he gains immense pleasure from watching her frolic in the woods. While watching her, his mouth is "twice graver than his eyes" (2:59); his eyes "smile" (2:71). He draws the same pleasure from watching Aurora play as a mother would.

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