

**THE REPRESENTATION OF
FECUNDITY AND BARRENNESS
IN THE POETRY
OF ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING,
CHRISTINA ROSSETTI, AND THE BIBLE:
A CRITICAL AND CREATIVE INTERROGATION
OF A CHRISTIAN-FEMINIST POETICS**

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ABSTRACT

This thesis analyses the language of fecundity and barrenness in the poetry of Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Christina Rossetti, as well as producing original poetry in critical conversation with their poetics. Concentrating on key Barrett Browning and Rossetti texts, *Aurora Leigh* and *Goblin Market*, I shall explore how their language of fecundity and barrenness make available a poetics which is simultaneously feminist and Christian in character. This interrogation will be contextualised in Romantic and Victorian theories of women's writing which claim that women's poetry cannot escape conceptions of femininity as bodily fecundity; that is, theories which suggest that women's bodies are suitable to produce children, but lack the character and strength to produce the acme of cultural production, poetry. By analysing Barrett Browning and Rossetti's language of fecundity and barrenness in conversation with feminist literary theory and Christian feminist theology, I shall explore how these critical partners make available fresh readings of femininity as fecundity. I will interrogate how it is possible to argue for interpretations of Barrett Browning and Rossetti's poetry which re-work fecundity as femininity in creative, liberative directions as disruptive excess. The creative aspect of this thesis, *The Priest in the Kingdom of Love*, is a sixty-six section poem. It attempts to create a monological, multivalent voice which investigates its relationships with imagined hearers, gender, faith, and bodily fecundity. The critical chapter which precedes it attempts to interrogate continuities and aporia with the work of Barrett Browning and Rossetti generated by my gender and religious poetic performances.

NOTES AND ABBREVIATIONS

Biblical quotes are taken from the English version most readily available to both Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Christina Rossetti: the *King James's Bible* or *Authorised Version*. All word definitions and etymological derivations are taken from the *OED*.

Standardly, Elizabeth Barrett Browning will be referred to as 'EBB' and Christina Rossetti will be referred to as 'CR'.

Further Abbreviations for key texts used in this thesis are:

<i>AL</i>	Elizabeth Barrett Browning, 'Aurora Leigh'
<i>GM</i>	Christina Rossetti, 'Goblin Market'
<i>TRS</i>	Elizabeth Barrett Browning, 'The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point'
'Artist's Studio'	Christina Rossetti, 'In an Artist's Studio'
'St. Peter Poems'	Christina Rossetti, 'The St. Peter Poems'

When I refer to my new poem 'The Priest in the Kingdom of Love' in critical discussion I shall abbreviate it to *The Priest*.

It should also be noted that *The Priest* poem itself departs from standard double-spaced PhD format. I have sought to present it as it might be printed in a book, that is, a section per page and in single-spaced lines.

INTRODUCTION

*'The other [...] gives birth to me. My identity connects me with my birth. Hypothesis: the unconscious is that umbilical cord.'*¹

In 2014, BBC Online published a story with the seemingly innocuous headline, 'Women's Football: Why are there so many knee injuries?'² The male journalist proceeded to give an account of how these injuries were due to the very nature of women's bodies. The article suggests that a woman's 'wide' child-bearing hips affect the way knees 'land' in the sport. This brief vignette is a reminder that, even in the contemporary era, the fecund bodies of women are commonly read as risky, frail and dangerous. Women continue to be read primarily as visually-constructed bodies over-identified with their fecundity or capacity to reproduce. Advertising concentrates on clothing, make-up and sexual availability. On television, a significant amount of gender-specific advertising focuses on selling menstrual products or indicating that vaginas are dangerous. Canesten produces regular prime-time adverts asking, 'Do you have Thrush or Bacterial Vaginosis?'³ Significantly, male bodies are not advertised in the same way; women are represented as problematic, 'messy' and unclean by

¹ Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, *The Freudian Subject*, trans. by Catherine Porter (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), p. 9.

² Alistair Magowan, 'Women's Football: Why Are There So Many Knee Injuries?', <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/football/29505871>: BBC Sport, 2014> [accessed: 13 November 2016].

³ Canesten, 'Symptoms | Bacterial Vaginosis | Canesten', <<http://www.canesten.co.uk/en/female/symptoms/bacterial-vaginosis/symptoms/>: Bayer Group, 2016> [accessed: 13 November 2016].

virtue of their fecundity – creative, but dangerous and always likely to be read in terms of ‘availability’ or at risk of tipping over into illness and malaise.

That patriarchal representations of women remain ubiquitous in the twenty-first century reminds us that ‘femininity’ may be read as a dangerous, problematic construction for female-coded subjectivities and bodies. This thesis concerns poems by two key nineteenth-century women writers, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Christina Rossetti, yet the examples above indicate that, if liberal, western gains in women’s professional identities and roles mask patriarchal constructions of fecund bodies, the representation of fecundity and barrenness remains a perennial concern. The focus of the critical part of this thesis explores how patriarchal-religious representations of the fecund body may be read as crucial to EBB’s and CR’s subjectivities as poets. The creative dimension of this thesis interrogates what it means for me – as a twenty-first century poet, Church of England priest and a trans woman – to be in critical conversation with patriarchal-Christian constructions of the fecund body now, as well as with a putative nineteenth-century middle-class women’s poetry tradition.

Between ‘Feminisms’ and ‘Faith’ – Negotiating Recent Readings of EBB and CR

Drawing especially on insights from psychodynamic feminists such as Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva, as well as the constructivist feminism of

Judith Butler, this thesis explores how the body – crucially, the body represented as feminine and fecund – is a disputed site of power-relations. In this thesis, the term ‘fecundity’ (and its analogue ‘barrenness’) will be deployed in an expansive and flexible way. This flexibility will be important in order to allow wide critical scope to interrogate the range of representations of fecundity and barrenness in the poetry of EBB and CR. However, the following provisional definition of fecundity may be helpful: by ‘fecundity’ I mean those literary-cultural representations and constructions of women’s creative-making that have been especially tied to gendered concepts like femininity, fertility and the female-coded body. This definition, in the first instance, is broad enough to encompass representations of women’s cultural/bodily production and significance that have interpreted women’s creativity in a reductive way as ‘baby-making’, motherhood, or acting as a beautiful, if passive muse and well-spring for (masculine) poetry. Equally, it offers a point of orientation for attempts – from both some feminists, as well as conservatives – to investigate whether there is such a thing as ‘women’s poetry’ or a specifically ‘female’ experience from which women’s literary production emerges in the nineteenth century.

Building on the feminist literary scholarship of Angela Leighton, Isobel Armstrong, Peggy Reynolds and Marjorie Stone, I shall explore how in patriarchal-Christian discourse, femininity as fecundity is represented as simultaneously valuable and threatening. I seek to examine how EBB and CR negotiated a patriarchal construction of women’s poetry structured through

a femininity represented as 'bodily fecundity'. I shall explore how this discourse fetishised middle-class women's bodies according to a double-bind: on the one hand, women were defined as most themselves when literally fecund with child-bearing and reproduction and/or as metaphorically fecund objects for men's creativity in poetry; yet, on the other hand, this fecundity was dangerous and threatened to disrupt the patriarchal ordering of society.

Equally, this thesis seeks to take seriously the religious dimensions of the poets under consideration. This is thematically important for several reasons. Firstly, during the great post-1970s expansion of feminist re-readings of EBB and CR, scholarship was arguably and understandably marked by a hermeneutic of suspicion towards religion and religiosity. Not least, God was identified as a marker of the patriarchal exclusion of women's subjectivities from discourse.⁴ Equally, as theorists concentrated

⁴ Various routes to the claim that God marks 'patriarchal exclusion' can be traced. Michel Foucault's discourse-analysis of Christianity's role in the formation of sexualities has proven significant for feminist and queer thinkers like Judith Butler. See: Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Vols 1-3*, trans. by Robert Hurley (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990). Equally, Lacanian/Freudian analysis of concepts such as 'The Name of the Father' proved significant reference points for the work of Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray. For a careful, feminist study of Lacan see: *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the École Freudienne*, ed. by Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose (London & Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1982). For a classic psychodynamic critique of religious representations of women see: Julia Kristeva, 'Stabat Mater', *Poetics Today*, 6. 1/2 (1985), 133-52. Equally, the work of Jacques Derrida on Logocentrism (and its religious corollary at the outset of John 1. 1, 'In the beginning was the Word') have proven significant for the original work of Hélène Cixous. For an analysis of Derrida and materialist feminisms, see: Donna Landry and Gerald MacLean, *Materialist Feminisms* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), pp. 68-80. Derrida's Foreword to Hélène Cixous's collection of essays in *Stigmata* is alert to the connections between Derrida and Cixous as well as the latter's wrestling with religious signification. See: Hélène Cixous, *Stigmata* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005 (1998)), pp. ix-x.

on the centrality of the 'text' rather than a writer's 'historicity', a poet's identification as 'Christian' or 'religious' could be treated as incidental. For example, Diane D'Amico suggests that, at the turn of the twentieth century, CR was seen as a writer whose poetry revealed the invisible world of her faith; however, by the 1990s, she was read 'as a highly intelligent woman in a patriarchal society whose poetry reveals both victimization and subversive feminism.'⁵ Writing at the turn of the millennium, Cynthia Scheinberg suggests that, typically, feminist analyses of Victorian poets assume that 'women writers who actively supported religious institutions and affiliations were necessarily didactic, submissive, unenlightened, and uncreative reproducers of male religious hierarchy.'⁶ At the height of feminist re-readings of their texts, the religious significance of EBB and CR's writings were treated as either incidental to their proto-feminist possibilities or as quaint embarrassments. As Karen Dieleman recently concluded, 'many contemporary critics seem to have difficulty imagining Victorian religion, especially the church, as more than a contested cultural category or other than a set of unprobed ideas or language, much less as a generative place for literary work.'⁷

⁵ Diane D'Amico, *Christina Rossetti: Faith, Gender, and Time* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1999), p. 1.

⁶ Cynthia Scheinberg, *Women's Poetry and Religion in Victorian England: Jewish Identity and Christian Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 9.

⁷ Karen Dieleman, *Religious Imaginaries: The Liturgical and Poetic Practices of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Christina Rossetti, and Adelaide Procter* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2012), p. 4. See also: Mary Wilson Carpenter, *Imperial Bibles, Domestic Bodies: Women, Sexuality, and Religion in the Victorian Market* (Athens OH: Ohio University Press, 2003). Her study of the British 'Family Bible' suggestively explores how women consumed religious goods in a Victorian consumer culture and constructed social identities through the illustrated Bibles they acquired.

Since the 90s there has been something of a counter-movement which acknowledges the imaginative and creative significance of Christianity in the work of nineteenth-century middle-class women poets.⁸ In 1998, Dennis Taylor issued, as Dieleman reminds us, a 'call' for 'religious interpretations that are substantial enough to enter into a productive and competitive relation with the reigning critical discourses.'⁹ As recent scholars have indicated, both EBB and CR not only used biblical images as cultural common coin, but represent significant features of their faith beliefs in their works.¹⁰ Simon Humphries suggests, 'some of the most persuasive recent readings of *Goblin Market* have been those which renew that critical tradition in which this poem is to be understood ultimately in religious terms.'¹¹ Yet, at the same time, the critical force of feminist critiques of

⁸ Beginning in the early 1990s, the work of Mary Arseneau on CR has been ground-breaking in this regard. See, for example: Mary Arseneau, 'Incarnation and Interpretation: Christina Rossetti, the Oxford Movement, and "Goblin Market"', *Victorian Poetry*, 31.1 (1993), 79-93; *The Culture of Christina Rossetti: Female Poetics and Victorian Contexts*, ed. by Mary Arseneau, Antony H. Harrison, and Lorraine Janzen Kooistra (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1999); Mary Arseneau, *Recovering Christina Rossetti: Female Community and Incarnational Poetics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004). Equally, Linda M. Lewis has supplied an important study of EBB's religious influences in Linda M. Lewis, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Spiritual Progress: Face to Face with God* (Columbia & London: University of Missouri Press, 1998). Recent books which take the religious dimensions of EBB and CR seriously include: Dieleman; F. Elizabeth Gray, *Christian and Lyric Tradition in Victorian Women's Poetry* (New York & Abingdon: Routledge, 2014 (2010)); Lynda Palazzo, *Christina Rossetti's Feminist Theology* (Basingstoke & New York: Palgrave, 2002); Elizabeth Ludlow, *Christina Rossetti and the Bible: Waiting with the Saints* (London & New York: Bloomsbury, 2014).

⁹ Dennis Taylor, 'The Need for a Religious Literary Criticism', in *Seeing into the Life of Things: Essays on Literature and Religious Experience*, ed. by John L. Mahoney (New York: Fordham University Press, 1998), pp. 3-30. Quoted in Dieleman, p. 3.

¹⁰ Dieleman, p. 5, passim; D'Amico, *Christina Rossetti*; Carpenter, *Imperial Bibles*; Gray.

¹¹ Simon Humphries, 'The Uncertainty of *Goblin Market*', *Victorian Poetry*, 45.4 (2007), 391-413 (p. 391). Humphries suggests that 'Rossetti's writing repeatedly pivots upon contradiction and obscurity, and that its intellectual rigor is nowhere

Christianity as the archetype of patriarchal constructions of femininity as fecundity remains. At its most basic, Mary Daly's famous and venerable claim that 'where God is male, the male is God' retains purchase.¹² This thesis explores the dynamic tension between, on one hand, the criticisms of the privileging by Christianity of patriarchal discourses and, on the other, the religious language crucial to EBB and CR's poetics. To negotiate this dynamic, I draw not only on the feminist literary and philosophical critics already noted, but insights from the work of recent feminist and womanist theologians such as Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Dolores Williams who are alert to the complex, ironic possibilities of biblical language to undermine patriarchal ideas and representations.

This thesis, then, is both indebted to and in critical conversation with an extensive range of literary studies of EBB and CR's work. Writing in the mid-1990s, Armstrong, Bristow and Sharrock claimed that, 'over the last two decades, researchers have gradually begun to rediscover the work of women poets of the nineteenth and earlier centuries.'¹³ The 1970s signalled an explosion of critical reappraisal of nineteenth-century women's literary production which only gathered momentum in the 1980s and 1990s.¹⁴ With

more evident than in this determination to probe the uncertainties of Christian theology.' Ibid, p. 391.

¹² Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Towards a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985 (1973)), especially Chapter 1. Daly's position – with its tendency towards essentialising and universalising 'women's experience' – can be criticised from queer, constructivist and black theological positions. My quote in no way indicates a commitment to her wider theoretical positions.

¹³ *Nineteenth-Century Women Poets: An Oxford Anthology*, ed. by Isobel Armstrong, Joseph Bristow, and Cath Sharrock (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p. xxiii.

¹⁴ Classic/Early Studies include: Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century*

Cora Kaplan's famous 1978 Women's Press edition of *Aurora Leigh*,¹⁵ EBB's work began to be mined for renewed feminist literary significance rather than as an adjunct to Robert Browning studies. Equally, for CR, as Armstrong, Bristow and Sharrock acknowledge, the tendency to overemphasise her 'lightness of touch and lyric sweetness [...] persisted well into the twentieth century.'¹⁶ They add, 'since the 1970s, however, Rossetti's poetry has attracted an immense amount of critical attention, particularly from feminist critics.'¹⁷

Arguably, feminist readings of EBB and CR's work reached a peak in the 1990s before giving way to broader historiographical approaches in more recent decades.¹⁸ If the shifts in focus since the late 90s reflect, perhaps, a dissipation of energy and interest in feminist readings, they also indicate a growing desire to place EBB and CR in their historical, sociological

Imagination (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1979); Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830-1980* (London: Virago, 1987); Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 2002 (1985)). Jan Montefiore, *Feminism and Poetry: Language, Experience, Identity in Women's Writing* (London: Pandora, 1994) offers a detailed statement of many of the key moves in 70s and 80s feminist approaches to nineteenth- and twentieth-century women's writing.

¹⁵ Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh, and Other Poems*, ed. by Cora Kaplan (London: Women's Press, 1978).

¹⁶ *Nineteenth-Century Women Poets: An Oxford Anthology*, p. 520.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ The 80s and 90s produced a plethora of books and studies which remain crucial for the research contained in this thesis, including (to name a few examples): Marjorie Stone, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1995); Angela Leighton, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (Brighton: Harvester, 1986); Angela Leighton, *Victorian Women Poets: Writing against the Heart* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992); Dorothy Mermin, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning: The Origins of a New Poetry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989); Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics* (London: Routledge, 1993); *Women's Poetry, Late Romantic to Late Victorian: Gender and Genre, 1830-1900*, ed. by Isobel Armstrong and Virginia Blain (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999).

and biographical contexts. As Simon Avery claims, 'we are now coming to recognise EBB as important for our understanding of areas as diverse as the experiences of the nineteenth-century woman writer, developments in Romantic and Victorian poetic aesthetics, and the construction of the nineteenth-century *vates* figure.'¹⁹ In a recent summary of EBB scholarship, Marjorie Stone, quoting Alison Chapman, speaks of 'the 'new EBB' "embedded within her complex intellectual, literary, and cultural networks: provocative, politicized, experimental, and modern" – revealed by recent scholarship.'²⁰ Equally, CR scholarship has, to some extent, diversified. I have already noted the desire of scholars like Arseneau to re-state CR's religious significance,²¹ but, for example, there has also been recent interest in CR as a representative of the Gothic.²²

If the post-1970s academic interest in Theory – psychodynamic, feminist, post-structuralist, post-modern, queer – supplied new critical tools to reappraise nineteenth-century women's poetry, recent work has also

¹⁹ Simon Avery, 'Telling It Slant: Promethean, Whig, and Dissenting Politics in Elisabeth Barrett's Poetry of the 1830s', *Victorian Poetry*, 44.4 (2006), 405-424 (p. 405). Indeed, Avery has been a significant voice in contextualizing the range of interests in EBB away from 'text' into politics, exile and marriage. See: Simon Avery and Rebecca Stott, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (Abingdon & New York: Routledge, 2014 (2003)), and Simon Avery, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (Tavistock: Northcote House, 2011).

²⁰ Marjorie Stone, 'Guide to the Year's Work: Elizabeth Barrett Browning', *Victorian Poetry*, 49.3 (2011), 357-76 (p. 358). Stone quotes Alison Chapman, 'Revolutionizing Elizabeth Barrett Browning', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 39.2 (2011), 605-11 (p. 608). See also: Simon Avery, 'Re-Reading EBB: Trends in Elizabeth Barrett Browning Criticism', *The Journal of Browning Studies*, 1 (2010), 5-13.

²¹ See also: Stephanie L. Johnson, "'Home One and All': Redeeming the Whore of Babylon in Christina Rossetti's Religious Poetry', *Victorian Poetry*, 49.1 (2011), 105-25.

²² Serena Trowbridge, *Christina Rossetti's Gothic* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013).

indicated how 80s and 90s feminisms tended to underplay the significance of the socio-cultural-economic contexts which produced Victorian poets. Yet, this thesis seeks to take the trajectories set by the feminist scholarship of Leighton, Armstrong, Reynolds, et al, seriously, not least their interrogations of what might be called a middle-class women's tradition of poetry. In a recent provocative article, Isobel Armstrong states:

I once believed that until the genres, languages, forms, poetics and politics of women poets had been established, it would be right to study them discretely without reference to their male peers, and not to yoke them precipitately to male figures.²³

She adds:

I was wrong. Most female poets have returned to the niche. Yet only by total immersion in both male and female poetry will we see a new historical landscape emerge – new formations, groups and relationships – that genuinely includes both genders.²⁴

Armstrong's claim that female poets have returned to the niche is striking. However, as Alison Chapman argues, 'criticism of women's poetry has lost its momentum: "With the retreat of feminism, publishing has changed."' ²⁵ This thesis self-consciously positions itself in feminist spaces. I shall explore and interrogate how the successes of feminist recuperation of EBB and CR's

²³ Isobel Armstrong, 'The Long Nineteenth Century: Where Have the Women Poets Gone?', <<http://web.uvic.ca/~vicpoet/2011/01/the-long-nineteenth-century-where-have-the-women-poets-gone/>: Victorian Poetry Network, 2011> [accessed: 24 January 2017].

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Chapman, *Revolutionizing*, p. 606.

language resonate in critical conversation with biblical and religious representations of femininity as fecundity.

It should be clear, then, that this thesis explores some significant critical tensions. Valentine Cunningham suggests:

What's striking in recent times is how post-Theory reading has opened up Victorian poetry so convincingly, and (in the best sense) as never before. [...] [T]heorized re-readings of the canon have brought in from the cold many otherwise neglected men and women [...] Christina Rossetti and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, now in the Top Team, jostling hard against the Top Three of Tennyson, Robert Browning, and Hopkins.²⁶

He rehearses two important points: first, that (as Armstrong has recently claimed should happen) we live in a time where at least some women are read alongside the masculine 'canon' and, second, that, of those women, CR and EBB have been singled out as supreme. He makes a strong case for reading male and female voices alongside each other.²⁷ However, if Cunningham's approach has force, this thesis seeks to explore how CR and EBB can still be located in a middle-class women's tradition in the nineteenth century; indeed, in a tradition which emerges around and through women's complex negotiations of patriarchal constructions of fecundity and barrenness. Unlike Cunningham's somewhat supercilious compliment towards Isobel Armstrong's 90s work on Victorian women's

²⁶ Valentine Cunningham, *Victorian Poetry Now: Poets, Poems, Poetics* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), p. ix.

²⁷ He does so by structuring his analysis of Victorian Poetry through the prism: 'Poets, and Victorian poets not least, know the basic poetic equations: poetry = repetition; repetition = rhyme; and rhyme = poetry.' Ibid, p. 58.

poetics,²⁸ this thesis investigates its continued traction. Along with Rosie Miles in her recent overview of Victorian poetry,²⁹ I acknowledge and, indeed, investigate the ongoing resonances of the scholarship of Armstrong, Stone, Leighton, et al. This thesis seeks to be sympathetic to the recent claims of Michael Gbogi that EBB's feminist poetic strategies in *AL* connect closely with those of CR's *GM* and contribute to 'a subversive feminist poetic tradition.'³⁰

Before outlining the specific trajectory of this thesis, one final question should be addressed: why, among the field of Victorian women poets, EBB and CR? Cunningham, et al, are right to suggest that EBB and CR have been exemplified as key, if not the key, voices in middle-class Victorian women's poetry. Given that fact, at one level, there is no need to explain the interest in EBB and CR. Their centrality, by itself, indicates their value. However, such an answer warrants unpacking. Feminist criticism has often been characterised by the desire (*pace* Cunningham's analysis of Isobel Armstrong's 90s work) to reclaim and celebrate marginalised voices.³¹ EBB and CR in most respects do not sit in that category any longer. However, as recent books by the likes of Christine Dieleman and F. Elizabeth Gray indicate, CR and EBB's significance as poets partly depends on their

²⁸ Cunningham calls Armstrong's work on women's writing, 'her biddably sympathetic celebration of the special voice, noise, music of Victorian women's poetry'. Ibid, p. 67.

²⁹ Rosie Miles, *Victorian Poetry in Context* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013).

³⁰ Michael Tosin Gbogi, 'Refiguring the Subversive in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Aurora Leigh and Christina Rossetti's Goblin Market', *Neohelicon*, 41.2 (2014), 503-16 (p. 505).

³¹ See Montefiore for a book-length study of the emergence of feminist practices of reclaiming marginal women voices in the 80s and 90s.

profound engagement with religious and biblical language. After the peak of feminist writing about EBB and CR in the 90s, it now seems timely to revisit that discourse through the additional prism of biblical discourse. Equally, while this thesis is rather less interested in biography than theory, it remains the case that EBB and CR – in relation to questions of fecundity as represented in patriarchal Victorian culture as ‘sick-making’, ‘dangerous’ and akin to illness – offer striking biographical bases for a thesis interested in questions of fecundity. Both EBB and CR have been considered through the lens of illness.³² Their differing, yet intersecting use of language of fecundity and barrenness offers – as this thesis explores – a striking and rich seam through which to interrogate feminist and religious possibilities in their texts.

By analysing the complex performative strategies and the language of fecundity and barrenness in EBB and CR, I shall explore how their central texts, *Aurora Leigh* and *Goblin Market* (among others) make available poetics which are simultaneously feminist and Christian in character.³³ Julia Kristeva in *Stabat Mater* plausibly indicates how the fecund body – characterised as ‘the Maternal’ – is a site where Christian-patriarchal power

³² Frances Thomas’s biography quotes William Rossetti’s line about CR: a ‘sadly smitten invalid’. See: Frances Thomas, *Christina Rossetti* (Hanley Swan: The Self Publishing Association, 1992), pp. 51-52. See also: Jan Marsh, *Christina Rossetti: A Literary Biography* (London: Cape, 1994), Chapter 4. Margaret Forster devotes considerable biographical detail to EBB’s extended periods of illness. See: Margaret Forster, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1988), Chapter 6.

³³ While there may be room for debate about the difference between labelling a poetics ‘Christian-feminist’ or ‘feminist-Christian’, for the purposes of simplicity I shall use both compounds interchangeably.

and control is exercised.³⁴ Iconic representations of fecundity, especially the binary opposition between Blessed Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene function as idealised, regulatory visions of femininity. Given that religious ideas were ubiquitous in nineteenth-century poetic discourse, EBB and CR negotiated, performed and reformed the subjective and poetic possibilities constructed through that discourse. As I will attempt to show, they adopted doubled strategies – double-poems, dramatic monologue, and linguistic excess in tension with poetic reserve – to subvert and reformulate the ‘double-bind’ generated by patriarchal-Christian discourse. I shall argue that these double strategies produce poetic space to reformulate the possibilities of fecundity in Christian-feminist directions. Rather than the fecund body being read as suitable for – in Irigaray’s terms – ‘productive excess’ (baby-making),³⁵ EBB and CR reveal bodily-fecundity as ‘disruptive excess’. The fecund-body as revealed in EBB and CR’s language is suitable for the creative-disruptive work of the poet. By engaging with insights from feminist and queer theology, I shall explore how this claiming of body as ‘disruptive excess’ operates within a reformulated Christian economy grounded in radical equality, mutuality and theological liberation.

³⁴ See: Kristeva, *Stabat Mater*, 133-34. For a powerful analysis of the effect of patriarchal power on representations of women in Christian visual culture see: Madeline H. Caviness, *Visualizing Women in the Middle Ages: Sight, Spectacle, and Scopic Economy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001).

³⁵ See: Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. by Catherine Porter (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), Chapter 2.

Chapter Breakdown

The critical aspect of this thesis, then, develops its claims in the following way. Chapter One interrogates the possibility of a middle-class women's tradition of poetry. It suggests that an emergent tradition may be discerned via women poets' critical and performative interrogations of patriarchally-conceived conceptions of fecundity. These conceptions structured women's creative making as either determined through child-birth or read as secondary, affective and suspect. This chapter also indicates some of the doubled-poetic strategies the likes of EBB and CR developed in order to negotiate, perform and remake the subjectivities available to the poet and women.

Chapter Two analyses EBB's dramatic monologue 'The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point' as a Christian-feminist performance of the 'fate' of fecund femininity under conditions of patriarchy (or, as I shall develop in that chapter, 'kyriarchy'). Chapters Three and Four develop these critical strategies in relation to *Aurora Leigh*.³⁶ Chapter Three concentrates on an examination of *AL*'s marriage plot and explores how EBB performs the male poet in order to critique and reformulate patriarchal-Christian representations of marriage as the way to regulate and control 'dangerous' fecundity. Chapter Four concentrates on representations of fallenness

³⁶ My convention throughout shall be to use the abbreviation, *AL* for *Aurora Leigh* when speaking of the book, and speak of 'Aurora' or 'Aurora Leigh' when referring to the protagonist.

(especially Marian Erle as fallen woman) in *AL*. I shall explore EBB's critique of religious representations of fecundity as fallenness and the ways she presents Marian as a Christ-figure.

Chapters Five and Six interrogate CR's *Goblin Market*, as well as a selection of her other poems. Chapter Five extends the analysis of my chapter on fallenness in *AL* by engaging with CR's striking and subversive readings of fallenness – structured through a discourse of the 'sick', pregnant body – in the 'Eucharistic' community of the sisters in *GM*. I shall argue that CR's dazzling, excessive poetics in *GM* creates disruptive space for a woman to 'steal' the status of poet under conditions of patriarchy. Finally, in Chapter Six I revisit fallenness and redemption in *GM*, as well as a selection of religious poems, through the prism of the 'sainted female body'. This chapter indicates how Christianity – as especially significant to the devout CR – structures the sanctification of women through the regulation of appetite and hunger, and being denuded of the marks of fecundity. I shall explore how CR's poetics negotiate renunciation and regulation of femininity and poetic 'reserve' whilst constructing new creative possibilities in the mutuality of sisterhood and linguistic 'feast'.

The creative aspect of this thesis consists of a new poem-sequence in sixty-six sections, *The Priest in the Kingdom of Love*. It has been written in and through my engagement with the poetry of EBB and CR and the themes of fecundity, subjectivity and voice interrogated in the wider thesis. Before the poem is a bridging chapter which explores the relationships and dissonances between my work and those of EBB and CR; in short, what it

might mean for me – a trans woman, a priest and a poet working in the twenty-first century – to be (or not to be) working within a putative tradition of women's poetry which emerged in the nineteenth century. In this chapter I shall interrogate the critical and creative effects of writing in a twenty-first century context in which religious identity and language is, arguably, treated with cultural conventions of suspicion, as well as exploring the impact on discourses of fecundity and barrenness of my subjectivity as a trans woman.

CHAPTER ONE

Nineteenth-Century Poetics in Context – Understanding the Middle-Class Women's Poetry Tradition as Subversive Performance of Fecundity and Barrenness

As a precursor to detailed analysis of work by EBB and CR, this first chapter interrogates the possibility of a nineteenth-century middle-class women's tradition of poetry. I shall explore how – in the mid-nineteenth century – an emergent women's poetry tradition may be found in a simultaneous performance and subversion of representations of fecundity and barrenness. Women poets like EBB and CR belonged to a putative Women's Tradition that required a subtle, problematic and radically contingent negotiation of religio-patriarchal constructions of femininity. These constructions centre on representations of femininity as located in the affective, the domestic, and, crucially, in bodily fecundity. As Margaret Reynolds and Angela Leighton, among others, suggest, it was possible for a woman in early- to mid-nineteenth century discourse to find an honoured place in poetry, provided she embraced certain stereotyped representations of her abilities.¹ In short, a woman could be honoured if she were willing to

¹ See: *Victorian Women Poets: An Anthology*, ed. by Margaret Reynolds and Angela Leighton (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995); Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry*, pp. 318-77; *Women's Poetry, Late Romantic to Late Victorian*; Leighton, *Against The Heart*; *Victorian Women Poets*, ed. by Alison Chapman (Cambridge: Brewer, 2003); Patricia Pulham, "Jewels – Delights – Perfect Love": Victorian Women Poets and the

accept the title of 'poetess' rather than 'poet'. In one sense, 'poetess' can be read as a neutral term for any female poet, and indeed was conventional in the nineteenth century. However, it was also a disputed, problematic term; this chapter interrogates how women, whether consciously or unconsciously, negotiated its complications.² It attempts to explore how women claimed the status of poet in the mid-nineteenth century by pursuing a doubled strategy: that is, by performing patriarchal representations of her as identified with a fecund, reproductive body and yet reworking those representations in ways which created new possibilities for femininity. As I shall argue in the wider thesis, these emergent representations may be read as substantively feminist and yet significantly Christian.

This chapter interrogates the theoretical and socio-political contexts in which and through which middle-class women poets 'dwelt' at mid-nineteenth century. Yopie Prins and Maeera Shreiber remind us that the notion of dwelling is a helpful one because it is a significantly doubled and displaced term: it gestures towards 'a process of perpetual displacement, [reclaiming] the wayward etymology of "dwelling" not as a hypothetical house to inhabit, but as a verb that also means to go astray, leading us away

Annuals', in *Victorian Women Poets*, ed. by Alison Chapman (Cambridge: Brewer, 2003), pp. 9-31.

² For a good summary of the uses of the term 'poetess' in the nineteenth century, see: Virginia Blain, 'Letitia Elizabeth Landon, Eliza Mary Hamilton, and the Genealogy of the Victorian Poetess', *Victorian Poetry*, 33.1 (1995), 31-51.

and unpredictably elsewhere.’³ As I will attempt to show, middle-class women ‘dwelt in’ – that is, habituated and simultaneously went astray from – patriarchal conditions which sought to determine the possibilities of their subjectivities. The women’s poetry tradition at mid-nineteenth century was necessarily not monolithic and often covert.⁴ That is, poets like EBB used and performed personae and masks (sometimes seemingly conventional) in order to claim poetic space to construct new subjective possibilities.

Central to this analysis is an interrogation of the implications of Romantic poetics for Victorian poetics and women’s poetry more broadly conceived. Valentine Cunningham has noted how Victorian poetry has often been seen as poised between two peak moments in poetry, the Romantic and the Modernist.⁵ Whether Victorian poetry is a poetry of transition between two high points falls outside the scope of this thesis, but the writing of EBB and CR is appropriately contextualised in women’s writing of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Speaking of EBB’s early

³ *Dwelling in Possibility: Women Poets and Critics on Poetry*, ed. by Yopie Prins and Maera Shrieber (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1997), p. 1. In Old English, ‘dwellen’ means ‘to lead astray’, developing into ‘tarry, stay in place’.

⁴ See discussions of tradition and women by Montefiore, esp. Chapters 2 and 3. Margaret Homans writes helpfully about women and tradition in the Romantic era. See, for example, Margaret Homans, ‘Bearing Demons: Frankenstein’s Circumvention of the Maternal’, in *Romanticism: A Critical Reader*, ed. by Duncan Wu (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), pp. 397-400; Margaret Homans, *Bearing the Word: Language and Female Experience in Nineteenth-Century Women’s Writing* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1986). See also *Dwelling in Possibility* for modern poets reflecting on their place and relationship with ‘tradition’.

⁵ Cunningham calls this the ‘mythic Victorian gap’. He dismisses the notion: ‘It would be a distinct historical oddity if suddenly writing were to collapse, fall away, go to the dogs, turn to pish-posh at the beginning of Victoria’s reign and then suddenly recover again sixty or so years later.’ Cunningham, p. 28.

essay for *The Athenaeum*, 'Nature is God's art – the accomplishment of a spiritual significance hidden in a sensible symbol', Dorothy Mermin says:

The congruence between the empathic, expressive poetics of Romanticism and the values and experiences available to nineteenth-century women seemed to open the way for women to write poetry. The essay ends with the affirmation that true poets live, as she has done, in and for their art.⁶

Yet the poetics of the Romantic period, significantly influenced by Edmund Burke,⁷ constructs the poet as gendered. He is male and as a poet is the ultimate heroic male, able to appropriate femininity for male creative purposes. Indeed, as Anne Mellor concludes:

By taking on the feminine virtues of compassion, mercy, gentleness and sympathy, the male Romantic poets could claim to speak with ultimate moral as well as intellectual authority [...] By usurping the mother's womb [and] life-giving power, the male poet could claim to be God, the sole ruler of the world.⁸

This strategy of appropriation constructed a context in which women's fecundity was definitively understood in terms of 'reproductive' excess. Women's writings were ordered as secondary to their reproductive 'duties' and secondary to the works of men whose proper calling was to make poetry that touched 'the Sublime'. Poets were men who sought a muse and that muse was 'woman' or, more specifically, 'the feminine'.⁹ Indeed, one of

⁶ Mermin, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, p. 85.

⁷ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008 (1990)).

⁸ Anne K. Mellor, *Romanticism and Gender* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 23.

⁹ See Susan J. Wolfson, *Borderlines: The Shiftings of Gender in British Romanticism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006) for a recent study of gender discourse in

the markers of the seriousness about distinctive ideas of gender was the reported anxiety about male poets 'crossing lines' from masculine to feminine behaviour. As Susan Wolfson says:

Romanticism is nothing if not a various ever shifting force-field of gender attractions and performances [...] No wonder that when the war with Napoleon was over and England relaxed its military manufacture of the male character, cultural arbiters started to worry about what the poets were effecting [...] The reviews of the day monitored sensuous Keats and fantastic Shelley for the contagion of unmanliness.¹⁰

EBB, CR and other women poets were inheritors of Romantic constructions of femininity structured around bodily fecundity and its lack. A number of critics have noted how, deep into the nineteenth century, 'women *are* poetry. They live and inspire it but they do not write it, while other people – namely, men – have the privilege to do so.'¹¹ Having placed mid-century Victorian women's poetry in this wider setting, I shall examine the complex, sometimes paradoxical negotiations middle-class women traversed in order to claim the position of poet rather than poetess. These will be contextualised in nineteenth-century programmatic understandings of poetry, notably those of Thomas Carlyle and Matthew Arnold. These

the Romantic era. She writes, "Romanticism" refined and institutionalised at the end of the eighteenth century was a men's club, and stayed that way for a long time.' Ibid, p. xv.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 28.

¹¹ For example, Susan Brown, 'The Victorian Poetess', in *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Poetry*, ed. by Joseph Bristow (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 180-202 (p. 181). See also: Dorothy Mermin, "'The Fruitful Feud of Hers and His': Sameness, Difference, and Gender in Victorian Poetry', *Victorian Poetry*, 33.1 (1995), 149-68.

programmes commonly reiterate claims which constructed women poets through narratives which focused on the personal, 'the heart' and what Isobel Armstrong designates, 'the expressive.'¹² I will explore how, in order for women to emerge as poets, they needed to work through patriarchal constructions of femininity and rework them for their own purposes. For as Angela Leighton and Margaret Reynolds remind us, women had to negotiate 'the pernicious assumption that women's poetry was always about personal experience and that its true subjects were home and the heart.'¹³

This chapter concludes by arguing that fundamental to the emergence of this nascent, provisional tradition of women poets is the use of 'voice' and specifically dramatic monologue as a means of interrogating constructions of fecundity. By using the broad poetic strategy that Isobel Armstrong calls the 'double poem' – that is, poems which may contain subversive linguistic strategies beneath often conventional ones or poems which performed multiple representations of femininity – women poets were able to critique established religio-patriarchal ideas of women.¹⁴ By deploying permitted representations of women – that is, established and respectable voices and performances – it could be argued that women created space to extend the range of performance and voice available. As Armstrong suggests, referring specifically to 'early' women poets like L.E.L. or Felicia Hemans, 'it seems a [...] mask is peculiarly necessary for women

¹² See Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry*, especially Chapter 12.

¹³ *Victorian Women Poets (Reynolds)*, p. xxviii.

¹⁴ Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry*, pp. 13-17.

writers.’¹⁵ Leighton adds, ‘as the nature of the woman’s poetic self is imagined and invented in the course of the century [...] its essentialism is at once paraded and questioned. The mask provides a teasing figure for this contradiction.’¹⁶ A mask on this account enables a woman writer to be in control of her objectification by anticipating and, thereby, circumventing it.

A critical analysis of poems by the likes of EBB and CR will show that women poets of the mid-nineteenth century, then, negotiated a double-edged patriarchal culture which simultaneously represented their bodies as valuable and fecund – for child-making, for mothering, for being looked at/gazed at by men, for inspiring poetry – yet dangerously Other. Crucial to women’s emergence as poets rather than poetesses was the adoption of performative critical strategies. These strategies enabled women to foreground oppressive constructions about their bodies and subjectivities and begin to remake them for their own creative, fecund ends. It is in these strategies of exposure and reformulation that a women’s tradition began to emerge. This tradition was necessarily highly ironised, for it entailed the performance of voices and subjectivities that might be read as conforming to patriarchal conceptions of femininity. Crucially, I will argue that those limited performances – which over-represented women as fecund excess or bodily reproduction – become an axis through which women began to redefine femininity and establish a women’s poetic tradition. Through

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 325.

¹⁶ *Victorian Women Poets (Reynolds)*, p. xxxvii.

remaking productive excess as what Luce Irigaray calls 'disruptive excess',¹⁷
women arguably claimed the status of poet for themselves.

***'Winter [...] congeals the melting peach, the nectarine smooth' – The Poetess in a
Time of Romanticism***

Stranger, approach! within this iron door
Thrice locked and bolted, this rude arch beneath
That vaults with ponderous stone the cell; confined
By man, the great magician, who controuls
Fire, earth and air, and genii of the storm,
And bends the most remote and opposite things
To do him service and perform his will, –
A giant sits; stern Winter; here he piles,
While summer glows around, and southern gales
Dissolve the fainting world, his treasured snows
Within the rugged cave. – Stranger, approach!
He will not cramp thy limbs with sudden age,
Nor wither with his touch the coyest flower
That decks thy scented hair. Indignant here,
Like fettered Sampson when his might was spent
In puny feats to glad the festive halls
Of Gaza's wealthy sons; or he who sat
Midst laughing girls submiss, and patient twirled

¹⁷ See: Irigaray, *This Sex*, p. 78.

The slender spindle in his sinewy grasp;
The rugged power, fair Pleasure's minister,
Exerts his art to deck the genial board;
Congeals the melting peach, the nectarine smooth,
Burnished and glowing from the sunny wall:
Darts sudden frost into the crimson veins
Of the moist berry; moulds the sugared hail:
Cools with his icy breath our flowing cups;
Or gives to the fresh dairy's nectared bowls
A quicker zest. Sullen he plies his task,
And on his shaking fingers counts the weeks
Of lingering Summer, mindful of his hour
To rush in whirlwinds forth, and rule the year.¹⁸

Anna-Laetitia Barbauld's poem 'Inscription for an Ice-House' (hereafter, 'Ice-House') represents a striking entry point from which to interrogate the significance of Romantic poetics for the emergence of a nineteenth-century women's poetry tradition. This section explores the extent to which it constructs a poetics that represents and challenges some Romantic era gender norms, but does so by using patriarchal representations of women's bodily fecundity 'strategically' – that is, as a device to undermine those representations. I aim to interrogate the extent

¹⁸ First published in Mrs Barbauld and Lucy Aikin, *The Works of Anna Lætitia Barbauld, with a Memoir by Lucy Aikin* (London: Longman, 1825). Reprinted in, for example, *Nineteenth-Century Women Poets*, p. 7.

to which Barbauld's poetic strategies indicate a way of 'dwelling' within – of being within and yet disrupting – patriarchal diminutions of women. By doing so, I shall interrogate how the poem indicates a direction of travel for an emergent women's tradition and the extent to which these strategies of 'dwelling-in' are reworked and reconfigured as the nineteenth century progresses. However, before analysing Barbauld's poem in detail it is helpful to place it and other women's writing of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in a wider cultural context. Doing so will help clarify the power of Barbauld's poetic strategies.

In her study of the emergence of English national identity, Angela Keane suggests that during the late eighteenth century, 'woman' was interpolated 'into the feminine, maternal subject position in national discourse.'¹⁹ In other words, to be a woman in national discourse was, by default, to be represented as 'mother':

The masculine subject is intelligible both inside and outside of [the domestic] domain, free to define nation/home/woman as object of his desire or his possession; [...] In the Romantic national imaginary, the woman who defines herself beyond the home and as a subject whose desires exceed or preclude maternity, divests herself of femininity and erases herself from the familial, heterosexual structure of the nation.²⁰

¹⁹ Angela Keane, *Women Writers and the English Nation in the 1790s: Romantic Belongings* (New York & Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 3.

²⁰ Ibid. Similarly, Armstrong, Bristow and Sharrock suggest that, 'early in the [nineteenth] century, the woman's body – frequently imaged as a repository of virtue – becomes, rather like Britannia, an emblem of the ideal nation-state, notably in the poetry of Felicia Hemans.' See: *Nineteenth-Century Women Poets*, p. xxvii.

If Keane notes how 'peripatetic' poets like Shelley and Byron are nonetheless at liberty – in virtue of their masculinity – to define the representations of 'reality', this role is equally reserved for poets who 'wander' closer to home. So, for example, the capacity of the Romantic male subject to shape what is creatively intelligible applies equally to Wordsworth, as wandering Lake Poet.²¹ As Keane argues, 'the [masculine] Romantic self presupposed a self-consciousness that had the leisure and space to enshrine itself at the heart of things.'²²

The locus of Keane's claim, then, is that the feminine is represented primarily in terms of relationship and 'woman' is never herself alone. By contrast, the male is at his most masculine when alone, separate, and therefore potentially heroic and capable of shaping the world. A woman, however, is to be represented as most herself when in relation to husband, father or potential husband or, post-nuptials, in relation to her child. To depart from the maternal, bodily fecund is, for a woman, to attempt to depart from her 'natural self'. As Keane concludes, '[woman's] romantic attachment to person and place is sanctioned only by her literal and symbolic reproduction of the national family [...] the archetypal feminine subject of the Romantic nation is the mother.'²³

²¹ See Hazlitt's assessment of Wordsworth: 'He tolerates only what he himself creates; he sympathizes only with what can enter into no competition with him, with 'the bare trees and mountains bare, and grass in the green field.' He sees nothing but himself and the universe.' William Hazlitt, *Lectures on the English Poets & the Spirit of the Age* (London: Dent Everyman's Library, 1967 (1910)), p. 163.

²² Meena Alexander, *Women in Romanticism: Mary Wollstonecraft, Dorothy Wordsworth, and Mary Shelley* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1989), p. 5.

²³ Keane, pp. 3-4.

Indeed, as Meena Alexander adds:

Women preserved the fabric of ordinary life. They cared for the young, watched over the sick and dying, supported other women in childbirth. *Birth and death, the fragile passages in and out of existence, even if sanctified by the patriarchal authority of Church and family, were held with the world of women.*²⁴

Thus, as Jan Montefiore contends, 'Romanticism' presents significant issues for the representation of women, and women's writing in particular. She argues that 'the tenets of the Romantic discourse on poetry' got their classic statement in Wordsworth's preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* (1800).²⁵ Montefiore outlines the key points as follows: 'first [...] the poet is the transcendent representative of all humanity.'²⁶ Second, 'poetry deals with feeling and memory [...] and takes all significant human experience for its province.'²⁷ And third, 'poetry should employ the simplest possible speech, 'the language really spoken by men', this being the most fully human and therefore the most poetic form of utterance.'²⁸ Montefiore concludes, 'the romantic discourse of poetry is less likely to strike feminist readers as determining the ways in which women poets write [...] than as constituting major problems for women poets generally.'²⁹ Essentially, 'these problems

²⁴ Alexander, p. 3. My italics.

²⁵ Montefiore, p. 9.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

can be neatly exemplified by the definition of the poet as 'a man speaking to men', which silently excludes women from poetic speech.'³⁰

Under these conditions, to suggest that a middle-class women's tradition was emergent in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries is fraught with complication. For the construction of femininity in terms of fecundity, maternity and nurture is so over-determined by patriarchal constructions that to talk of a 'women's tradition' risks accepting those conceptions of femininity one wishes to critique. Given that Romantic ideas construct the poet as male, to talk of a 'middle-class women's tradition' seems to accept that women must be poetesses. Indeed, it is perhaps helpful at this point to take note of Catherine Maxwell's claim, quoting Jan Montefiore, that in reflecting on the status of women as poets or poetesses we are in the territory of constructed 'myth': 'The woman poet' or 'the woman writer' [...] is entirely mythical; she doesn't exist in real life, any more than 'the archetypical male poet' does.'³¹

Nonetheless, as will become especially acute in my discussion of Victorian poetics, two tempting possibilities regarding claims about a Victorian middle-class women's tradition present themselves. Isobel Armstrong delineates them thus: firstly, one might argue that a women's tradition is 'based on a full-frontal attack on oppression'. Alternatively, one might suggest it is based on 'a unique modality of feminine experience.'³²

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Catherine Maxwell, 'Tasting the "Forbidden Fruit": Gender, Intertextuality, and Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market*', in *The Culture of Christina Rossetti*, ed. by Arseneau, Harrison, and Janzen Kooistra, pp. 75-102 (p. 79).

³² Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry*, pp. 319-20.

So, either a middle-class women's tradition of poetry is organised around direct, active resistance to women's over-identification with, for example, fecundity or it is organised around an attempt to claim what is specifically feminine in poetic expression.³³

Meena Alexander reminds us that, during the Romantic era, the latter claim – that a women's tradition emerged out of a socially and culturally constructed world of distinctive 'feminine experience' – needs to be taken seriously. For:

Where the Romantic poets had sought out the clarities of visionary knowledge, women writers, their lives dominated by the bonds of family and the cultural constraints of femininity, altered the knowledge, forcing it to come to terms with the substantial claims of a woman's view of the world.³⁴

Indeed, she further asserts:

To grow up female in the age of Dorothy Wordsworth was to recognize that the world of women was distinct if inseparable from that of men [...] The inner-outer dichotomy the Romantic poets played with presupposed a centralizing self that could not be easily translated into the world of women.³⁵

The tensions and aporia inherent in this dichotomy will be examined shortly and I shall argue, along with the likes of Armstrong, that a simple 'either/or' fails to respect the particulars of middle-class women's writing in

³³ Isobel Armstrong's discussion adduces examples of 'protest poems' from both the beginning and end of the nineteenth century. See, *ibid*, pp. 318-19.

³⁴ Alexander, p. 2.

³⁵ *Ibid*, p. 3.

the mid-nineteenth century. However, in order to supply the connective tissue that links and shows discontinuities between Romantic and emergent Victorian women's writings, it is helpful to examine the construction of femininity as maternal fecundity in the Romantic era and outline how Romantic women writers began to construct a tradition in response to it.

Arguably, a central conceptual construct at stake in the Romantic construction of femininity as maternal fecundity was Edmund Burke's reading of the distinction between 'the Sublime' and 'the Beautiful'.³⁶ For, as Armstrong, Bristow and Sharrock acknowledge, the nineteenth century:

Starts with a poetry in dialogue with the dominant ideology of gender still informed by Edmund Burke's understanding that femininity belongs to the non-rational. In other words, the feminine is [...] associated with the aesthetic qualities of the beautiful, which are somatically ordered by the passive female body, rather than the sublime.³⁷

Burke's reading of the concepts of the sublime and the beautiful, definitively defined in *A Philosophical Enquiry* in 1757, may be seen as an attempt to articulate an account of the sublime as the defining human and creative category. Crucially, this category is, for Burke, gendered male. For Burke, the sublime – defined as the experience of a power that exceeds the quantifiable and the usable – is characterised by pain and terror rather than by pleasure and love. The sublime transcends the boundaries of the finite and the mortal – thus the individual has the sense of being threatened with

³⁶ For the rest of my discussion (outside of direct quotes), I shall not capitalise 'sublime' or 'beautiful'.

³⁷ *Nineteenth-Century Women Poets*, p. xxiii.

obliteration when encountering it. The effect is a terrifying thrill rather than pleasurable affection. Fundamentally, 'the passion caused by the great and sublime in *nature* [...] is Astonishment.'³⁸

Burke suggests the sublime is found in properly heroic poetry.³⁹ Indeed, he claims, the ultimate sublime object is God and this object is firmly designated as 'he'.⁴⁰ Not least among the readings of 'sublime master' in the Romantic era is the male poet himself. Aidan Day suggests that 'Burke's ideas on the sublime find a parallel in Wordsworth's celebration of his own imaginative apprehension of a power that transcends nature and the senses.'⁴¹ If God is the ultimate sublime object, then the 'genius' poet must be akin to God. The sublime genius may discern a power that transcends nature, but is not overpowered by 'feminine' nature. Day argues:

The masculine gendering of the ultimate sublime object is, needless to say, no merely superficial convention. Burke defines the beautiful in contrast with the sublime and [...] [its] characteristics [...] which [are] of a lesser order than the sublime, are what have conventionally been thought of as 'feminine' characteristics, such as softness, smallness, smoothness and delicacy.⁴²

Fundamentally, the beautiful is conceived as a sensory phenomenon involved in the generation of love, a passion 'directed to the multiplication

³⁸ Burke, p. 53.

³⁹ Such as in those parts of the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible or Homer which celebrate the superhuman or the Divine. Ibid, pp. 58-59.

⁴⁰ Ibid, pp. 62-63.

⁴¹ Aidan Day, *Romanticism* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 186.

⁴² Ibid, p. 185.

of the species.⁴³ Anne Mellor argues, 'beauty, for Burke, is identified not only with the nurturing mother but also with the erotic love-object.'⁴⁴ The beautiful in Burke's economy of the imagination, then, is connected to traditionally feminine categories like fecundity and reproduction.

Crucially, as Isobel Armstrong contends, 'for Burke the beautiful is a property of bodies, not of reason. It belongs to the senses [...] and sexual drives that make men want to reproduce the species.'⁴⁵ The beautiful, then, is a bodily category. It is a category through which women's fecundity is not only to be read, but in Burke's view, is the category through which the female body should be carefully regulated and limited. As Armstrong summarises, '[the beautiful] has nothing to do with proportion, fitness, or utility [...] It depends on eroticizing the small, the smooth – smoothness is most beautiful "about the necks and breasts" of women.'⁴⁶ On Meena Alexander's terms, the gendered world of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries 'grants the feminine a unique and differentiated status: not power but delicacy, not genius but its domestication, not sublimity but the hold on the near at hand and common.'⁴⁷ To put it another way, this representation of bodily beauty has no space for actual women's bodies. Armstrong continues (quoting Burke):

⁴³ Burke, p. 38.

⁴⁴ Mellor, p. 108.

⁴⁵ Isobel Armstrong, 'The Gush of the Feminine: How Can We Read Women's Poetry of the Romantic Period?', in *Romantic Women Writers: Voices and Countervoices*, ed. by Paula R. Feldman and Theresa Kelley (Hanover NH & London: University Press of New England, 1995), pp. 13-32 (p. 17).

⁴⁶ Ibid, pp. 17-18.

⁴⁷ Alexander, p. 30.

The attributes of variation, delicacy, melting indistinctness, weakness and imperfection contribute to the lack of power and the *sickness* with which we associate the beautiful: “Women are very sensible of this; for which reason, they learn to lisp, to totter in their walk, to counterfeit weakness and even sickness.”⁴⁸

Gary Kelly argues, ‘men [...] appropriated ‘feminine’ themes, styles and genres, combined them with conventionally ‘masculine’ discourses normally barred to women, such as philosophy, scholarship, satire, and the erotic.’⁴⁹ Insofar as his analysis is correct, women were thereby restricted even more to acceptably ‘feminine’, subaltern and sub-literary discourses.⁵⁰

Given the analysis above, women *qua* women and as writers were caught in a series of double-binds. On the one hand, women were identified with ‘the literal’ and the bodily, specifically the motherly function of fecundity. Value and honour could be derived from embracing fecundity (by marriage and by producing children).⁵¹ Yet, this construction of fecundity

⁴⁸ Armstrong, *Gush of the Feminine*, p. 18. ‘Sickness’ as a way patriarchy structures femininity will be a key focus in my analysis of *GM* in Chapters 5 and 6.

⁴⁹ Gary Kelly, ‘Feminine Romanticism, Masculine History, and the Founding of the Modern Liberal State’, in *Romanticism & Gender*, ed. by Anne Janowitz (Cambridge: Brewer, 1998), pp. 1-18 (p. 3).

⁵⁰ The concept of ‘subaltern’, which emerged out of the work of Antonio Gramsci, has been most significantly developed by post-colonial theorist Gayatri Spivak. Writing in response to Gramsci – who Spivak suggests used subaltern as a metonym for ‘proletariat’ – Spivak defines the ‘subaltern’ as those groups/subjectivities which have no or limited access to the imperial hegemony; in order to be ‘heard’ the subaltern voice must use the discourses and language of an imperial hegemony that already constructs it as Other and ‘lesser’. See for example: Gayatri Spivak, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’, in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Reader*, ed. by Patrick Williams & Laura Chrisman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), pp. 66-111. For a critique of Spivak’s criticism of Gramsci’s use of ‘subaltern’, see: Marcus E. Green, ‘Rethinking the subaltern and the question of censorship in Gramsci’s Prison Notebooks’, *Postcolonial Studies*, 14.4 (2011), 387-404.

⁵¹ Marriage will be a key axis for my analysis of *Aurora Leigh* in Chapter 3.

failed to respect the materiality of women's bodies. For, insofar as womanhood and femininity was represented through the category of the beautiful, it was characterised as lack, weakness and delicacy; it invited and produced performances of femininity that acted out weakness and sickness. Crucially, in a time when women were still primarily understood in terms of their reproductive and nurturing capacities, 'the beautiful' ironically redacts away any conception of fecundity as dangerous, excessive, alien and potent. Burke's 'beautiful' redacts women out of their own bodies and lives.

Barbauld's 'Ice-House' is arguably an icon of the poetic strategies and subversions available to women 'poetesses' in the Romantic era. In 1818, William Hazlitt suggested that Barbauld and other well-known women writers were hardly held in high regard as poets: 'I am a great admirer of the female writers of the present day; they appear to me like so many modern Muses.'⁵² Hazlitt re-inscribes the claim that men were poets and women the inspiration for poetry.⁵³ Armstrong, Bristow and Sharrock claim that, 'the language of the 'heart' lies at the centre of women's writing of this

⁵² Hazlitt, p. 146.

⁵³ Quite specifically Hazlitt does not afford Barbauld the title of poet. He says she is a poetess best understood in terms of her work for children: 'The first poetess I can recollect is Mrs. Barbauld, with whose work I became acquainted [...] when I was learning to spell words of one syllable in her story-books for children [...] she is a very pretty poetess.' Ibid, p. 147. Hazlitt considers Barbauld among a trinity of women poetesses, about whom he is mostly scathing: 'Mrs. Hannah More is another celebrated modern poetess, and I believe still living. She has written a great deal which I have never read. Miss Baillie must make up this trio of female poets. Her tragedies and comedies, one of each to illustrate each of the passions, separately from the rest, are heresies in the dramatic art. She is a Unitarian in poetry.' For further commentary see William Keach, 'Barbauld, Romanticism, and the Survival of Dissent', in *Romanticism & Gender*, ed. by Janowitz, pp. 44-61.

period.⁵⁴ However, if 'women were often confined to what was commonly termed the 'poetry of the affections', [...] the 'heart' empowers because it enables the woman poet to mount a critique of masculine values.'⁵⁵

If contemporary critics like Hazlitt characterised Barbauld as a 'pretty poetess', Isobel Armstrong's study of 'Ice-House' reveals the extent to which a woman poet might deploy language of fecundity to question established categories of femininity and masculinity.⁵⁶ Indeed, as Armstrong argues, 'Ice-House' is a determined critique of the sublime and the beautiful. Armstrong contends that Barbauld's poem adopts a strategy which no more opts for the sublime than it opts for the beautiful.⁵⁷ From the outset,

⁵⁴ *Nineteenth-Century Women Poets*, p. xxvii.

⁵⁵ Ibid. Sonia Hofkosh suggests that Armstrong's analysis of 'Ice-House' indicates how Barbauld's controlled use of emotive language in her poetry deploys the affective in a way which can be critical, analytical and indeed be a 'form of knowledge'. See: Sonia Hofkosh, 'Materiality, Affect, Event: Barbauld's Poetics of the Everyday', in *Anna Letitia Barbauld: New Perspectives*, ed. by William McCarthy and Olivia Murphy (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2014), pp. 83-106 (p. 86). For an excellent overview of current trends in Barbauld scholarship see: *Anna Letitia Barbauld*, ed. by McCarthy and Murphy.

⁵⁶ Armstrong, *Gush of the Feminine*. See, also: Josephine McDonagh, 'Barbauld's Domestic Economy', in *Romanticism & Gender*, ed. by Janowitz, pp. 62-77. McDonagh draws attention to Barbauld's critique of Malthusian 'masculine' economics. In a recent essay, Armstrong interrogates Barbauld's work through the prism of the latter's Unitarian commitments. She suggests that 'Ice-House's poetics gesture towards Keats, yet are thoroughly grounded in Enlightenment concerns. See: Isobel Armstrong, 'Anna Letitia Barbauld: A Unitarian Poetics?', in *Anna Letitia Barbauld: New Perspectives*, ed. by McCarthy and Murphy, pp. 59-82 (p. 62). Lisa Vargo, 'Anna Barbauld and Natural Rights: The Case of "Inscription for an Ice-House"', *European Romantic Review*, 27.3 (2016), 331-39, brings out the implications of the poem for 'natural rights' and the environment.

⁵⁷ Olivia Murphy has recently suggested that Armstrong offers a 'compelling reading' of 'Ice-House'. She adds that the poem 'performs its own critical readings of Coleridge's "Kubla Khan," Burke's essay on the concepts of the Sublime and the Beautiful, and Thomas Malthus's *Essay on the Principle of Population*.' See: Olivia Murphy, 'Riddling Sibyl, Uncanny Cassandra: Barbauld's Recent Critical Reception', in *Anna Letitia Barbauld: New Perspectives*, ed. by McCarthy and Murphy, pp. 277-98 (p. 293).

Barbault engages in a strategy which subverts Burkean aesthetic categories. For as Armstrong notes, 'winter was traditionally the quintessentially sublime season.'⁵⁸ Yet in the concept of 'The Ice-House', this designation is disrupted – for winter becomes associated with technology and instrumental control rather than transcendence and self-overcoming. Winter becomes 'fair Pleasure's minister', and yet Burke asserts that the sublime is superior to pleasure and transcends utility. Barbault makes winter 'slave' to both. Armstrong argues, 'the erotic, feminized, and "beautiful" Burkean epithets, "melting" and "smooth," collaborate against Winter.'⁵⁹ The 'violence' of Winter is neutralised like 'fettered Sampson' or Hercules who was condemned to dress in women's clothes and spin among women. Armstrong adds, 'there is comedy in the Sublime expending itself in demasculinized "puny feats" or forced virtually to change gender, cross-dressing in the women's domain. Gross "sinewy" power clumsily handles the small, beautiful object, the "slender" spindle.'⁶⁰ Virility – the mastering, sublime power which impregnates the fecund female body with its 'seed' – here symbolised by the image of 'sinew' (tough, springy, potent) is made clumsy and unfit.

Yet 'Ice-House' is no mere affirmation of an affective, gushing feminised beauty. Armstrong suggests:

Two separate but unsymmetrical power struggles are going on, that between "Man" and the giant "Winter" and that between the feminine and

⁵⁸ Armstrong, *Gush of the Feminine*, p. 18.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

winter. Delilah gains power through seduction: the “laughing girls” – a wonderfully suggestive crowd of giggling girls is conjured here – gain power through ridicule.⁶¹

In short, the structure of gendered relationships is essentially unchanged by the emergence of climate-control technology, despite the seeming reversal of power. Women, locked in the icehouse with Winter, live unequally with him, forced into ruses to control him.

Significantly, Armstrong’s strategy not only foregrounds Barbauld’s questioning of the sublime/beautiful dichotomy, but underlines how fecundity – understood as ‘generative’ or ‘reproductive excess’ – is a double-bind for a woman poet, both potent and restrictive. Barbauld writes:

Congels the melting peach, the nectarine smooth,
Burnished and glowing from the sunny wall:
Darts sudden frost into the crimson veins
Of the moist berry; moulds the sugared hail:
Cools with his icy breath our flowing cups;
Or gives to the fresh dairy's nectared bowls
A quicker zest. (ll. 22-28)

Barbauld deploys images which are highly eroticised and – in Burkean terms – beautifully feminine. Foreshadowing CR’s *GM*, Barbauld’s imagery simply oozes excess, longing and desire. The ‘melting peach’ and ‘moist berry’ are mouth-watering. Along with phrases like ‘nectared bowls’, these images encode a language of ‘generative excess’. That is, this language gestures

⁶¹ Ibid, pp. 18-19.

towards metaphors of making and creativity that have been connected with women.⁶² In short, fecundity. There is a sense in which this fecundity is out-of-control, indeed has to be out of 'male' control; the generative power of women overflows. Yet this fecundity is ultimately inseminated with 'ice' and 'winter'. The melting peach congeals and the nectarine becomes as fixed as a still-life painting. The moist berry has 'veins' frozen. Insofar as these images act as surrogates for women understood as 'generative beings', Barbauld conjures a world where women are, in Armstrong's words, 'little able simply to reverse the place and power of sublime Winter.'⁶³ Armstrong concludes,

The poem [...] conspire[s] to over-determine a feminine symbolism that both subordinated to winter and curiously out of control. The category of the beautiful cannot contain this generative excess, but excess seems to be woman's greatest problem as well as her greatest triumph.⁶⁴

When placed in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century national, economic and cultural concerns, these symbolic representations of fecundity reveal the anxiety and fragility within patriarchal constructions of femininity. The double bind on women – to be reproducers and to suffer controls lest they threaten the masculine world – is revealed clearly in

⁶² For an account of the place of 'generative excess' in the Arts and Church, see: Jeremy Begbie, 'The Future: Looking to the Future: A Hopeful Subversion', in *For the Beauty of the Church: Casting a Vision for the Arts*, ed. by W. David. O. Taylor (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Books, 2010), pp. 165-86. Begbie suggests that this 'excess' is part of the creative structure of reality: 'There is a "generative excess" in reality that calls forth and provokes all human enquiry.' Ibid, p. 173. Begbie uses the term in a slightly different sense to the one used here.

⁶³ Armstrong, *Gush of the Feminine*, p. 19.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

Thomas Malthus's theory of Production and Reproduction. Famously, in *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, he claims that, 'the power of population is indefinitely greater than the power in the earth to produce subsistence for man.'⁶⁵ Notoriously Malthus concentrates on an ecology of production in which the overproduction of children is the greatest threat to prosperity. Indeed, on a Malthusian picture, women's fecundity always logically threatens to tip over into barrenness⁶⁶ – i.e. cultural and social barrenness.⁶⁷ Women's fecundity is a threat to culture's equilibrium because their fecundity always contains within it the threat of barrenness. As Armstrong concludes, 'his pessimistic conservative realism sees famine as the fate of the feminine.'⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Thomas Malthus, *Population: The First Essay* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1959), p. 5.

⁶⁶ Alan Macfarlane's classic study of Marriage in England draws attention to the notion of 'Malthusian Marriage' as a regulatory discourse in English life. He notes how Malthus structures marriage from a masculine and class point of view – that is, he suggests that Malthus concentrates on its social and economic impact on middle-class men. Marriage, for Malthus, always risks damaging social status, especially if a man has a large family. Malthus observes, 'will he not lower his rank in life, and be obliged to give up in great measure his former habits?'. The class factors which risk damaging society concerns the unregulated fecundity of the poor. Rather than seek to solve the issues of the poor via, for example, charity (which encourages marriage and children), Malthus argued that the poor should be educated to develop tastes for other things than children. Thus, as the supply of labour dropped, the value of labour would rise. See: Alan Macfarlane, *Marriage and Love in England 1300-1840* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987 (1986)), esp. Section 1.

⁶⁷ See, also, Maud Ellmann, *The Hunger Artists: Starving, Writing & Imprisonment* (London: Virago, 1993), p. 2. Ellmann argues, 'in the Victorian era, when there was little inhibition on production, Dickens felt free to relish his heroines' plump hands without anxiety [...] but nowadays the image of the fleshy procreative body reawakens the Malthusian anxiety that fecundity is ecologically unsound or, more specifically, that it produces *hunger*.'

⁶⁸ Armstrong, *Gush of the Feminine*, pp. 19-20. Ice-House's use of 'fruit' as objects of consumption intersects intriguingly with economic readings of *Goblin Market*. Readings of *GM* as a text concerned with economic and bodily consumption will be interrogated in Chapter 5 of this thesis. Further reading on *Goblin Market*, economics, Capitalism and consumption includes: Krista Lysack, *Come Buy, Come*

Barbauld's poem, then, offers a powerful account of the way fecundity and barrenness operated within the Romantic era's aesthetic and cultural concepts, whilst indicating some of the doubled strategies women would use into the Victorian period. These strategies interrogate representations of women's bodies, fecundity and reproductive excess. A woman poet like Barbauld discovers new linguistic and critical strategies to fracture and break her assigned subjectivities. She employs the 'ice' of sublime masculinity against itself. She begins to anticipate the strategies of a later generation of women poets like CR and EBB who developed double-poems, dramatic monologue and allegory to interrogate what it meant to be a woman and a poet.

The Woman Poet in Victorian Poetry and Culture – A Fecund and Emergent Tradition of Drama and Performance

During the Romantic era women were readily and consistently identified with the fecund body.⁶⁹ These interpretative strategies limited

Buy: Shopping and the Culture of Consumption in Victorian Women's Writing (Athens OH: Ohio University Press, 2008); Clayton Carlyle Tarr, 'Covent Goblin Market', *Victorian Poetry*, 50.3 (2012), 297-316; Terrence Holt, 'Men Sell Not Such in Any Town': Exchange in Goblin Market', in *Victorian Women Poets: A Critical Reader*, ed. by Angela Leighton (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), pp. 131-47; Elizabeth K. Helsinger, 'Consumer Power and the Utopia of Desire: Christina Rossetti's 'Goblin Market'', *ELH*, 58.4 (1991), 903-33. Victor Roman Mendoza, 'Come Buy': The Crossing of Sexual and Consumer Desire in Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market", *ELH*, 73.4 (2006), 913-47, brings together a psychodynamic and economic reading. Jill Rappoport presents a book-length analysis of middle-class nineteenth-century women and 'exchange' which argues that 'through giving, women engaged in and helped to fashion cultural discourses on female intimacy, property law, religious social action, and scientific discovery.' See: Jill Rappoport, *Giving Women: Alliance and Exchange in Victorian Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 3-4.
⁶⁹ Perhaps the treatment of Felicia Hemans acts as a summary of wider strategies. Wolfson talks of 'the gender apartheid of the 1820s: the use of "Mrs Hemans" in

opportunities for women to construct liberative representations of femininity for themselves. The defining 'positive' image for middle-class women in this era is 'mother'. Conceptually, to be a woman was to be secondary, domestic, and dependent on the agency of men as providers, who impregnated women, and who had freedom to act in the world. The early Victorian era presents both continuities and discontinuities with the Romantic period. Women writers continued to negotiate programmatic conceptions of poetry that excluded them. They continued to be identified with 'the literal', most tellingly as reproductive, fecund bodies. Women were represented as well-springs/muses for male poetry. Middle-class women who sought to step out of carefully prescribed constructions of femininity or sought to make careers as poet/esses were commonly represented as 'fallen' or 'falling short'.⁷⁰

However, new social and cultural conditions offered potential for women to interrogate the constructions of femininity in alternative ways. The Victorian era was, as I shall argue, characterised by an increasing mistrust of and anxiety around established orthodoxies and concepts. As Isobel Armstrong characterises it:

reaction to the rights of "Woman".' She quotes the Anglican clergyman William Archer Butler who, in 1834, wrote: 'Felicia Hemans has, indeed, approved herself a worthy interpreter of the inestimable feelings of the female breast'. See: Wolfson, p. 42 and Chapter 2. For more on gendered spheres and the body, see: Emma Francis, 'Letitia Landon: Public Fantasy and the Private Sphere', in *Romanticism & Gender*, ed. by Janowitz, pp. 93-115, and Tricia Lootens, 'Hemans and Home: Victorianism, Feminine 'Internal Enemies', and the Domestication of National Identity', in *Victorian Women Poets*, ed. by Leighton, pp. 1-23.

⁷⁰ This notion will be interrogated fully in Chapters 3 and 4. I also analyse it through discussions of Leighton and Pulham's claims about fallenness later in this chapter.

Victorian modernism sees itself as new but it does not, like twentieth-century modernism, conceive itself in terms of a radical break with the past. Victorian modernism, as it emerges in its poetics, describes itself as belonging to a condition of crisis which has emerged directly from economic and cultural change.⁷¹

The rapid rate of industrialization, and the vast wealth and social deprivation it generated, raised significant questions about the place of institutions, individuals and cultural ideas in society. The Victorian era was characterised by powerful dialectics between religion and science. The publication of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* in 1859 accelerated the restructuring of relationships not only between faith and nature of the world, but questioned the status of human beings.⁷² For the first time, the idea that 'man' was merely an animal among animals gained widespread purchase. Equally, in Christian theology, humanist and historicist 'German Higher Criticism' from writers like David Strauss and Ludwig Feuerbach raised questions about the divine import of the Bible. In Armstrong's summary, in the nineteenth century, 'the problems of agency and consciousness, labour, language and representation become central.'⁷³

Victorian poetics, then, may be read as coterminous with Romanticism in a number of ways. As Rosie Miles claims, 'poetry [...] inhabits the realm of emotion for the Victorians, as it did for the

⁷¹ Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry*, p. 3.

⁷² Alongside works which challenged Biblical accounts of time, like Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology* (1830-33) and Robert Chambers's *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (1844).

⁷³ Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry*, p. 7.

Romantics.⁷⁴ Equally, Victorian poetry stands alongside Romanticism in negotiating the impact of industrialisation and mass-production on conceptions of subjectivity and poetic making. Poetry for both Romantics and post-Romantics occupied or 'dwelt in' the position of the subjective. However, the Victorian setting pitted the subjective increasingly against, as Miles puts it, 'the objective, the scientifically verifiable, the rational.'⁷⁵ It is in this dialectic that Victorian poetics emerge: for if Romanticism might be read as the masculine-constructed subject – structured around a God-like imagination and sympathy – asserting itself against the inhuman power of the Industrial, Victorian poetics came to question the status of the Romantic 'I' and its capacity to provide a 'lamp' to illuminate the world. This shift represented new opportunities, as well as presaged cultural anxieties. Thus, the poetics of Thomas Carlyle, in acknowledging the impact of the 'Mechanical Age', offers ironic space for women to reconstruct poetic subjectivities and interrogate the prescribed range of feminine performance. The 'fall' of monolithic notions of poet as God-like – despite Carlyle's 'heroic' protestations – in the face of the Industrial, places poet as 'masculine demi-god' under new critical pressure.

'Belatedness', then, becomes a fundamental characteristic at stake in Victorian poetics. Isobel Armstrong goes so far as to argue, that 'to be [Victorian] modern is to be overwhelmingly secondary.'⁷⁶ That is, Victorian

⁷⁴ Miles, p. 24.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry*, p. 3.

modernity placed a whole range of established orthodoxies – centred around the priority of ‘man’ and the ‘I’ – in question. Both Capitalism and Science, as well as the emergence of anthropological readings of Christianity, placed the centrality of ‘man’ and the individual in doubt. Equally, the status of poetry and art were under question. In short, as Miles claims, ‘in some Victorian poetry and poetics there is a sense of belatedness as poets and commentators make sense of what poetry can be and do in a fast-changing age that no longer seems to have any place for it.’⁷⁷

Armstrong indicates a key factor in this deep sense of belatedness: the emergence of a (post-) Kantian notion that art – including poetry – was becoming ‘pure’. As a self-sufficient aesthetic realm, art was ‘*outside* the economy of instrumental energies (for in Kant Art and technology spring into being simultaneously as necessary opposites).’⁷⁸ Post-Kantian accounts of representation exacerbated this sense of disconnection between art/poetry and the world/technology. For representations of the world were understood as constructs of consciousness, constructs that are always at a remove from what they represent.⁷⁹ One of the anxieties generated by this sense of disconnection between poetry and the world is a fear of endless, unstable representations. Victorian poets, then, faced a situation in which their work felt for the first time unnecessary and redundant. Crucially, this situation had been created by the very category of ‘pure’ art.

⁷⁷ Miles, p. 22.

⁷⁸ Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry*, p. 4.

⁷⁹ For a persuasive defence of Kantian Idealism that seeks to address the problem of ‘representation’ see Henry E. Allison, *Kant’s Transcendental Idealism: An Interpretation and Defense* (New Haven CT & London: Yale University Press, 1983).

It is in this context of political, economic and philosophical problematisation that the case for an emergent middle-class women's poetic tradition is to be made. If Romantic poetics performed its gender representations using definitive differences between masculinity and femininity, Victorian poets wrote in contexts of acknowledged anxiety. Even if Romantic gender distinctions were more provisional than some eighteenth-century writers might have admitted, the industrial post-Romantic era was alert to their fragility and provisionality in striking ways. Thomas Carlyle is arguably the figure who most clearly articulated and delineated the anxieties generated by the belatedness of the early nineteenth century.⁸⁰ The poetics suggested by *Sartor Resartus*, *On Heroes*, *Hero-Worship & the Heroic in History*, and *Signs of the Times*⁸¹ are significant for my claim that a middle-class women's tradition of poetry mid-nineteenth-century 'dwelt' in a disruptive use of representations of fecundity.

Carlyle's negotiation of belatedness reveals two key points: firstly, in his account of art and creative production, women are present fundamentally as 'absence'. For Carlyle, they remain part of the reproductive economy rather than participating in the business of 'heroic' making of art (except as Muse). However, secondly, Carlyle's diagnosis of the cultural condition of belatedness – most definitively through his analysis of the concept of 'movable type' in *Sartor Resartus* – ironically undercuts

⁸⁰ See Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry*, pp. 4-6.

⁸¹ Hereafter, *Heroes* and *Signs*, respectively.

and exposes the fictions at the centre of gendered poetic performance. His analysis – which suggests that printing places language and its effects beyond the control of the writer – problematises the supreme position of the male-genius artist. The ability of the ‘male’ poet to define ‘reality’ begins to collapse in the face of the rise of mechanical signs. In short, the Mechanical Age problematises the creative subject. Not least among the effects of this – and one Carlyle perhaps didn’t fully appreciate – is the problematisation of gender and gendered spheres. As the distinctiveness of masculinity faced crisis, so does the distinctiveness of symbolic-poetic space reserved for men. Poetry and the notion of the poet is problematised creating, new critical and imaginative space for women to occupy the symbolic space traditionally reserved for men.

In *Signs*, Carlyle is alert to how new distributions of wealth, fostered by industrialisation, have begun to restructure old established relationships. The Mechanical Age alienates the labourer from the products of labour. Carlyle notes, ‘our old modes of exertion are all discredited, and thrown aside. On every hand, the living artisan is driven from his workshop, to make room for a speedier, inanimate one.’⁸² Cultural production – traditionally in the hands of the skilled artisan – is replaced by the machine and the mechanical process. The mechanical process itself does not require artisanal skills to operate. In *Sartor Resartus*, Carlyle examines the significance of the

⁸² Thomas Carlyle, ‘Signs of the Times’, <<http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/carlyle/signs1.html>, 1829> [accessed: 20th December 2015].

Mechanical Age for language itself. He suggests that printing's capacity to mechanically reproduce and disseminate language is profoundly influential because it makes the printed word available to everyone.⁸³ 'Movable type' printing, Carlyle effectively suggests, takes language beyond the immediate control of the writer. Meaning and signification are thereby problematised. Isobel Armstrong suggests that Carlyle later retrieves a Pyrrhic victory from his analysis by conceiving the sign as 'mythos': 'the *mythos*, a Greek name for 'word', is society's representations, the imaginative symbol by which it lives.'⁸⁴ Yet, this is a pyrrhic victory because – as an idealist conception of meaning – it is not clear how the 'mythos' gains purchase on a constantly changing material world.

One possibility – which reiterates Carlyle's elision of women and fecundity from an economy of cultural creativity/poetry – is Carlyle's 'great man' thesis. In *Heroes*,⁸⁵ Carlyle proposes an account of history and culture in terms of 'great men'. As W.H. Hudson claims, in his introduction, 'the Great Man is supreme. He is not the creature of his age, but its creator; nor its servant, but its master. "The History of the World is but the Biography of Great Men."⁸⁶ In the Mechanical Age, Carlyle offers the Hero as 'Prophet'

⁸³ As Carlyle's 'central character' Professor Teufelsdröckh claims: 'He who first shortened the labour of Copyists by device of *Movable Types* was disbanding hired Armies, and cashiering most Kings and Senates, and creating a whole new Democratic world: he had invented the Art of Printing.' Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus* (London & Glasgow: Collins Clear-Type Press, 1920 (1831)), p. 39.

⁸⁴ Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry*, p. 6.

⁸⁵ Intended as an exploration of the implications of *Sartor Resartus*.

⁸⁶ Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus: The Life and Opinions of Herr Teufelsdröckh; on Heroes, Hero-Worship & the Heroic in History* (London: Everyman, 1967 (1908)), p. xiv.

and 'Vates'/'Poet' as an attempt to address the belatedness and secondary nature of 'man'. Carlyle concludes, 'the Poet is a heroic figure belonging to all ages.'⁸⁷

Carlyle's position has echoes of the poetics of High Romanticism. The place of women in the Poetic Tradition is marked still by absence. Carlyle wishes to construct the poet as a totalising voice from nowhere and everywhere. Equally, when he talks in *Signs* of how labour is alienated in the industrial age, he ignores a different conception of labour – feminine labour as birth and as mothering. It simply does not register as a category of work or creation.⁸⁸ Women and their fecundity are irrelevant to Carlyle's understanding of culture. Women insofar as they are represented at all, are represented in terms of their bodies and considered part of the natural rather than the cultural order. Women's labour continues to belong to the order of natural fecundity and production; women's cultural production as writers – domestic, delicate, merely of the heart – seemingly continues to be secondary to the Heroic work of the true Poet.

However, Carlyle's diagnosis of the implications of the Mechanical Age for cultural and economic production and language offers a new set of symbolic possibilities. Indeed, arguably, a third option for constructing a middle-class women's poetic tradition – structured around the use of

⁸⁷ Ibid, p. 311.

⁸⁸ For an extended analysis of the extent to which women's bodies, birth and reproduction were increasingly represented in mechanical and industrial terms during the nineteenth century, see: Roberta McGrath, *Seeing Her Sex: Medical Archives and the Female Body* (Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press, 2002); See also: Deborah Lupton, *Medicine as Culture: Illness, Disease and the Body*, 3rd edn (New York: SAGE, 2012).

double poems as a formal strategy to interrogate and subvert patriarchal performances of fecund femininity – emerges out of the conceptual shifts foregrounded by Carlyle. For Carlyle’s clear-sighted analysis of the implications of belatedness begins to problematise gender and subjectivity. The mechanical process itself – whether the industrial process of manufacture or the reproductivity of language itself via ‘movable type’ – raises questions about the status of the poet-as-subject and the poet-as-male. For the distinctive power of the Romantic male subject to be a ‘transcendent’ representative of all humanity is diminished in a world of constant material change. Feeling and sympathy can no longer be represented as primary, but secondary. What poetry expresses has no direct link to ‘sublime’ ultimate reality.

In one sense, then, the poet (and poetry itself) finds ‘himself’ in the secondary and second-rate position. Instead of being able to master the world and, thus, occupy the traditional position of masculinity, the poet finds himself ‘feminised’. The poetics of belatedness has seemingly left the poet in a position where ‘his’ representations may no longer be adequate to shifting material reality. The poet’s territory has retreated to *mere* expression and emotion. ‘His’ terrain has shown itself – in large measure – to be coterminous with that of the poetess. As Cunningham summarises, when speaking of John Ruskin’s ‘ranting’ about the status of the poet in ‘Of the Pathetic Fallacy’:⁸⁹

⁸⁹ John Ruskin, *Modern Painters, Vol III: Of Many Things* (Orpington: George Allen, 1897 (1856)), Part IV, Chapter XII, pp. 161-77.

It's the play of poetic selfhood as such which is discombobulating [for] Ruskin – the allegedly morbid, weak, maddened selfhood of the poet which powers an excess of the personal in the poem, and an overly morbid, weak, disturbed set of *prosopa*, of *personae*, at that.⁹⁰

For even if the poet sought – by a focussing on 'heroic' matters rather than 'domestic' affairs of the heart – to maintain his distinctiveness from the poetess, his work was made 'morbid' by the modern world.

At the same time, new space was arguably found for what Isobel Armstrong calls 'a poetics of the feminine.'⁹¹ Certainly, there was a repeated call in the Victorian period for a revitalised national poetry capable of masculine epic rather than lyric poetry.⁹² Indeed, Cunningham claims that, 'from early on Tennyson showed himself as a huge donor of classical masks, the keen ventriloquizer of classical voices, casting and re-casting himself in classical mirrors.'⁹³ Yet, Tennyson's gift for lyric poetry gave rise to charges of effeminacy. Indeed, as Leonée Ormond reminds us, Tennyson's lyric skills were attributed to 'Miss Alfred Tennyson'⁹⁴ and Miles goes so far as to claim that *Idylls of the King* (1859-85) 'charts the collapse of male structural rule, as the Arthurian Round Table disintegrates.'⁹⁵

Arguably, the poetics offered by Matthew Arnold in his *Preface to the Poems* (1853) represents one further attempt to claim a masculine,

⁹⁰ Cunningham, p. 198.

⁹¹ Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry*, p. 323.

⁹² See: Miles, p. 10.

⁹³ Cunningham, p. 455.

⁹⁴ Leonée Ormond, *Alfred Tennyson: A Literary Life* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993), p. 99.

⁹⁵ Miles, p. 10.

heroic conception of the poet in the face of nineteenth century belatedness.⁹⁶ Arnold focuses on the notion of poetry as a cause for action and engagement with the world. The 'best' poetry is grounded not in the expression of feeling or entertainment, but in its ethical and edifying import. Famously he excluded his poem 'Empedocles on Etna' from the *1853 Poems* because it was 'morbid' and 'inadequate'. As Cunningham argues, 'Arnold was [...] hidebound by the classical literary theory he'd been schooled in, and was evidently attracted to the old Aristotelian idea that the most important poetry – epics and tragedies – were 'imitations' of *actions*, and nothing else.'⁹⁷ For Arnold, the morbidity of 'Empedocles' lies in its indulgence of tragedy and suffering without offering a route to action and response.

In *The Study of Poetry*, Arnold suggests, 'only one thing we may add as to the substance and matter of poetry, guiding ourselves by Aristotle's profound observation that the superiority of poetry over history consists in its possessing a higher truth and a higher seriousness.'⁹⁸ For Arnold, the best poetry – marked by seriousness and truth – 'is inseparable from the superiority of diction and movement marking its style and manner.'⁹⁹ This account of poetic 'action' is derived from an individualised account of

⁹⁶ For a helpful account of how the 1853 Preface can be read as part of Arnold's dialogues with fellow poet and critic, Arthur Hugh Clough, see: Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry*, pp. 165-71.

⁹⁷ Cunningham, p. 11. For more on Arnold and 'Empedocles on Etna', see also *ibid*, pp. 196-97.

⁹⁸ Matthew Arnold, *The Essential Matthew Arnold*, ed. by Lionel Trilling (London: Chatto & Windus, 1949), p. 311.

⁹⁹ *Ibid*.

selfhood, in which the self is separate and discrete and to which one is ethically to be held to account.¹⁰⁰ Cunningham, however, astutely diagnoses that this only generates a 'literary modernity [...] as a doomy 'dialogue of the mind with itself'; an unhappy self-dividedness, not to be got rid of just by erasing a poem.'¹⁰¹ This self-reflexive 'dialogue' creates an opposition between the self and the world and only perpetuates the oppositions it wishes to resolve. Indeed, as Cunningham suggests, it perhaps has an inner, self-damaging analogue: 'a reflexive subjectivity sad because the self knows itself as other, as double, *double-minded*.'¹⁰² Armstrong notes that Arnold figures 'action' according to the trope of battle or combat. Poetic 'action' is the individual's battle for meaning and, yet, 'the battle precisely undoes meaning and certainty in action. Its ground shifts, actions signify ambiguously. It is ethically compromising. It is the site of [...] deep sexual doubt and unease about one's male sexuality.'¹⁰³ The poet's struggle with his individuality or 'reflexive' self only makes him more aware of his inability to speak 'the world'; the poet's attempt to act on the world – akin to the masculine sexual power of 'conquest', control and power – is revealed as a mirage.

¹⁰⁰ For a helpful account of this, see: Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry*, p. 174. One indicator of Arnold's valorization of 'true selfhood' in poetry is indicated by his assessment of Chaucer's place in the canon. Arnold asks, 'wherein consists the immense superiority of Chaucer's poetry over the romance-poetry [...] we shall find that his superiority is both in the substance [...] and in the style of his poetry.' Arnold, p. 314.

¹⁰¹ Cunningham, p. 196.

¹⁰² Cunningham, p. 196.

¹⁰³ Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry*, p. 175.

Middle-class women's poetry in the mid-nineteenth century, then, finds itself in a complex set of cultural circumstances. Its negotiation and reformulation of constructions of femininity as fecundity is set within a context of anxieties about the very status of poetry as supreme masculine art-form. However, if middle-class women writers might have found space in belatedness to interrogate constructions of femininity and of 'feminine' poetry in new and liberative ways – not least through the use of the double poem and dramatic monologue – to simply be a woman in Victorian England was to be represented as secondary, lesser and the object of the Male Gaze. Even if the concept of the (male) poet had taken a hit, 'he' was still a 'he'. He continued to occupy positions of social and cultural privilege in virtue of his masculinity. The nexus of patriarchal constructions of femininity as 'fecund object' required, on the part of women poets, subversive and often covert performative strategies to expose and reconstruct. To return to the term offered by Yopie Prins and Maeera Shreiber, in the mid-nineteenth century, middle-class women poets 'dwelt in' – that is, habituated and simultaneously went astray from – a women's tradition marked by patriarchal constructions of femininity as fecundity.

Crucially, new formal possibilities emerged as women negotiated the anxieties and opportunities generated by the emerging problematisation of subjectivity, language and identity. As Armstrong puts it, 'a poetic form and a language were evolved which not only make possible a sophisticated exploration of new categories of knowledge in modern culture but also the

philosophical criticism adequate to it.¹⁰⁴ This might be characterised as the double poem, of which the dramatic monologue represents perhaps its defining form. The 'two poems in one' is 'a structure commensurate with the 'movable type' which Carlyle saw as both the repercussion and the cause of shifts in nineteenth-century culture.'¹⁰⁵ If male poets like Robert Browning used the doubling effect of dramatic monologue as a strategy to negotiate belatedness and 'secondariness' in modern poetry, it was women writers who – through negotiating the patriarchal constructions of femininity – arguably constructed an emergent women's tradition located around subversive-doubleness, the use of masks, and the critical use of voice.

As indicated in my discussion of Romantic constructions of femininity as fecundity and motherhood, to talk of a 'women's poetry tradition' is necessarily to negotiate those conceptions of 'femininity' one might wish to critique. This concern is no less pressing in the mid-to-late nineteenth century. William Michael Rossetti's *Preface* to his edition of Felicia Hemans's poems, written in 1873, stereotypes women's poetry in gendered terms.¹⁰⁶ He calls her mind 'feminine in an intense degree' and her poetry leaves a 'cloying' impression. In addition, 'she is a leader in that very modern phalanx

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, p. 16.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid. Cunningham indicates that Carlyle's preference was for prose over poetry: 'That prose is actually the better medium for the modern subject was naturally axiomatic with the prose-writer par excellence, critical Thomas Carlyle who constantly advised socially concerned poets to take up prose instead.' Cunningham, p. 410.

¹⁰⁶ *The Poetical Works of Felicia Hemans*, ed. by William Michael Rossetti (London: William Blackwood & Sons, 1873).

of poets who persistently coordinate the impulse of sentiment with the guiding power of morals or religion. Everything must convey its 'lesson'.¹⁰⁷

Rossetti supplies a list, then, of classic patriarchal qualities attributed to women's poetry: conventional piety, didacticism, emotion and sentiment.

If these religious and moral representations of 'feminine' poetry and the poetess act as examples of patriarchal constraints on women's writing practice, they also demonstrate the extent to which a certain kind of women's tradition, grounded in a conception of 'feminine experience' existed by the middle of the nineteenth century. Coventry Patmore's (in)famous *The Angel in the House* (1854-62) – which parodies women's religious verse¹⁰⁸ – is only effective insofar as certain clichéd conventions in women's verse existed.¹⁰⁹ These conventions were constructed in part through Industrial Era ideas about middle-class masculine and feminine spheres inherited from the Romantic period. As Miles summarises, 'the masculine, public world of work, action and economics, is set against the feminine, private world of the home, the domestic and emotion.'¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, p. xxvii.

¹⁰⁸ Cunningham calls it, an 'impeccably chaste meditation on married love.' Cunningham, p. 286. For a reading which attempts to 'reclaim' Patmore's poem as slightly more radical than often supposed, see: Natasha Moore, 'The Realism of the Angel in the House: Coventry Patmore's Poem Reconsidered', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 43.1 (2015), 41-61. Moore claims that Patmore offers a picture of how 'the domestic' is suitable for poetry.

¹⁰⁹ Kathy Alexis Psomiades indicates how, for Virginia Woolf (writing post-Great War), Patmore represented the acme of oppression: "'The Angel in the House,'" [...] became for Woolf the name for an oppressive Victorian model of femininity that modernist women writers needed to discard in order to write freely.' Kathy Alexis Psomiades, "'The Lady of Shalott' and the critical fortunes of Victorian poetry', in *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Poetry*, ed. Bristow, pp. 25-44 (p. 25).

¹¹⁰ Miles, p. 8.

Cunningham draws attention to a religio-patriarchal warrant behind these spheres, suggesting Patmore's poem finds 'his wife's enrapturing moral and physical superiority constantly jostling her theologically endorsed subordination.'¹¹¹ Indeed, as popular Victorian texts like Ruskin's *Sesame and Lilies* (1864) indicate, 'complementarity' between the sexes was a potent nineteenth-century ideology. As Ruskin puts it:

Each [sex] has what the other has not: each completes the other [...] they are nothing alike [...] the man's power is active, progressive, defensive [...] but the woman's [...] intellect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering.¹¹²

The Angel in the House – which as an embodiment of religio-patriarchal ideology about femininity will be a regular critical touchstone in this thesis – constructs women through a religiously driven picture of femininity. 'Woman' is both Other ('A woman is a foreign land'),¹¹³ domestically devoted ('Man must be pleased; but him to please Is woman's pleasure'),¹¹⁴ as well as impossibly praiseworthy in her femininity:

For she's so simply, subtly sweet,
My deepest rapture does her wrong.
Yet is it now my chosen task

¹¹¹ Cunningham, p. 286.

¹¹² John Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies*, ed. by Deborah Epstein Nord (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), p. 77.

¹¹³ Coventry Patmore, *The Angel in the House*, Book 2, Canto IX, <<http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/patmore/angel/22.html>> [accessed 01 April 2017].

¹¹⁴ Patmore, Canto IX. Book 1 'The Sahara'. Preludes. The Wife's Tragedy, <<http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/patmore/angel/9.html>> [accessed 01 April 2017].

To sing her worth as Maid and Wife.¹¹⁵

The spectre at this domestic feast is the religiously-derived icon of femininity, the Blessed Virgin Mary. The Virgin, as I will interrogate in discussions of *Aurora Leigh* and *Goblin Market*, represents the ultimate patriarchal idealisation of the female-coded reproductive body: utterly pure in her virginal state and yet a mother fulfilled. The Virgin represents fecundity as a male idealisation of the female body which women won't be able to live up to. Patmore's idealisation of the female body indicates how patriarchy constructs the fecund body as 'precarious'; not simply, in its perceived delicacy, beauty and virtue, but in its idealization of an impossible representation of femininity. This 'structural' impossibility in religio-patriarchal constructions of the female body works to bolster masculine 'univocal' power. Even as the masculine subject uses the 'frail' and 'failed' female body to complete himself, he asserts his power to occupy positions of public significance – as worker, as man of affairs and as poet. Woman, for Patmore, is 'help-meet' to his agent in the world. These representations of the fecund, female body were doubly dangerous for women. Not only did they miss the fecund realities of the female body – the circumscription of women's lives and the bloody and messy realities of child-birth and child-rearing – but presented women with impossible idealisations.

Yet, by the 1830s there were established and popular outlets for

¹¹⁵ Patmore, Canto II. 1 (Mary and Mildred) Preludes. The Paragon, <<http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/patmore/angel/2.html>> [accessed 01 April 2017].

women's writing that demonstrated many of the tropes, idealisations and habits outlined by William Rossetti and Patmore – the Annuals. Angela Leighton and Margaret Reynolds argue that, 'the annuals of the early nineteenth century grew out of the eighteenth-century vogue for pocket books, calendars and almanacs.'¹¹⁶ With names like the *Forget Me Not*, *The Keepsake*, the *Amulet*, the *Literary Souvenir*, and the *Gem* their sentimental purpose is clear. They were an extraordinary publishing phenomenon for over thirty years after 1823, the appearance of the first annual.¹¹⁷ Indeed, Jill Rappoport states, 'they were a triumph of the literary marketplace, earning an estimated £100,000 per season for their publishers during their peak years in the 1830s.'¹¹⁸ They were aimed at women and created new economic opportunities for women writers. Pulham adds, quoting Brian Goldberg, 'between 1823 and the late 1830s, these collections became 'the period's main vehicle for publishing verse'.¹¹⁹ Crucially, 'it was the poetry, particularly the women's poetry, which made the volumes so popular.'¹²⁰

Many criticised the literary status of the Annuals from the outset. As Pulham reminds us, 'male poets [...] were quick to condemn the annuals even as they reaped the financial benefits of their contributions.'¹²¹

¹¹⁶ *Victorian Women Poets (Reynolds)*, p. xxvi.

¹¹⁷ For more, see: Pulham, p. 9. Kathryn Ledbetter indicates that the reason for the decline in the Annuals' popularity lay in the 'competition between publishers for the annuals market and the growth of weekly and monthly periodicals that rapidly began appearing in the 1840s.' For more, see: Kathryn Ledbetter, *British Victorian Women's Periodicals: Beauty, Civilisation and Poetry* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 163.

¹¹⁸ Rappoport, *Giving Women*, p. 19.

¹¹⁹ Pulham, p. 9.

¹²⁰ *Victorian Women Poets (Reynolds)*, p. xxvii.

¹²¹ Pulham, p. 12.

Wordsworth dismissed the Annuals as 'those greedy receptacles of trash,' yet was unable to resist one hundred guineas for twelve pages of poetry. Shelley, Coleridge, Southey, Walter Scott and Tennyson all contributed work to them, quite possibly because they were lucrative, as poetry lost ground to the novel. One thing was clear however: 'for women poets [...] the annuals provided a safe space in which to publish.'¹²² The likes of EBB, Joanna Baillie and Amelia Opie made contributions to the Annuals. The Annuals arguably created, in Margaret Reynolds's term, 'a professional sisterhood'.¹²³ However, as Pulham plausibly claims, 'the predominance of female poetry, female editorship and female readership associated with the annuals was inevitably responsible for what was deemed the 'feminization' of the product.'¹²⁴ The Annuals 'seemed to promote a small and trivialized style of poetry in which women were presumed to specialize.'¹²⁵ Susan Brown summarises the situation thus: 'the devaluation of the poetess had much to do with the annual as a mode of publication.'¹²⁶

Indeed, in some respects they summarise the emergent anxieties about the poet's status and 'his' seeming femininisation under cultural conditions of belatedness. Pulham suggests that the feminised nature of the Annuals offers an explanation as to why many male contributors held them in contempt. She reports that Sir Walter Scott 'regretted having meddled in

¹²² Ibid, p. 12.

¹²³ *Victorian Women Poets (Reynolds)*, p. xxx.

¹²⁴ Pulham, p. 13.

¹²⁵ *Victorian Women Poets (Reynolds)*, p. xxx.

¹²⁶ Brown, p. 192. See pp. 189-92 for a wider discussion of the Annuals.

any way with the toyshop of literature'.¹²⁷ Tennyson distanced himself from the Annuals for fear of feminisation by association. As Pulham concludes, 'in making the gift books their own, women it seems had stamped them with their femininity.'¹²⁸ In effect, women poets and women's poetry were caught up in a marketing culture which reinforced stereotypes about fecund femininity. Quoting Caroline May's introduction to *The American Female Poets* (1848), Reynolds and Leighton delineate the pernicious assumption that:

Women's poetry was always about personal experience and that its true subjects were home and the heart. This was taken for granted in May's introduction: '...poetry, which the language of the affections, has been freely employed among us to express the emotions of woman's heart'.¹²⁹

When Reynolds and Leighton suggest that 'to be a woman and poet was, perhaps still is, a risky business'¹³⁰ not least among the implications of their claim is the assumption that 'women's poetry' must be constructed according to patriarchal constructions of femininity as 'instinctive', 'feeling', 'pious' and 'personal'.

EBB herself was acutely alert to Victorian constructions of the woman writer as poetess and its grounding in affective conceptions of fecundity. Famously she wrote, 'I look everywhere for grandmothers and see none,' and it reads like a rallying cry for remedying women's absence

¹²⁷ Pulham, p. 13.

¹²⁸ Ibid, p.13.

¹²⁹ *Victorian Women Poets (Reynolds)*, p. xxviii.

¹³⁰ Ibid, p. xxix.

from the tradition. Yet as Reynolds and Leighton remind us, 'when she said that she longed for 'grandmothers' [EBB] didn't mean that she couldn't find any women poets.'¹³¹ She lists plenty, including Joanna Baillie, L.E.L. and Felicia Hemans. But, in a letter to H.F. Chorley she suggests that only Baillie is in the full sense a true poet. The rest are 'versifiers'.¹³² If EBB is making space for herself as a poet, she also draws attention to a serious issue for women's writing that emerged in the first half of the nineteenth century: works like the *Annals* created space for women's writing, but did so in a manner which seemed to construct a women's tradition around a particular understanding of sensibility.

There is, then, strong evidence for Angela Leighton's claim that 'Victorian women's poetry [...] grows out of a struggle with and against a highly moralized celebration of women's sensibility.'¹³³ However, I want to analyse how the patriarchal constructions of women's poetry negotiated by EBB and CR was fundamentally located in a femininity structured around bodily fecundity. The 'language of the heart', home, and the domestic was united around discourse which fetishised middle-class women's bodies and bodily subjectivity. This discourse worked according to a double-bind or what I shall term 'doubleness': on the one hand, women were defined as most themselves when literally fecund with child-bearing and reproduction and/or as metaphorically fecund objects for men's creativity in poetry; yet,

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² See: Philip Kelley and Scott Lewis, *The Brownings' Correspondence* (Winfield Kansas: Wedgestone Press, 1992), pp. 3-5 & 13-14. Cited in: *Victorian Women Poets (Reynolds)*, p. xxix.

¹³³ Leighton, *Against The Heart*, p. 3.

on the other hand, this fecundity was dangerous, threatening to disrupt the patriarchal ordering of society. Women's bodies, according to this double-bind, are always ambiguous. For her body is always both dangerously sexualised and honoured for its 'natural' function. Perhaps the icon of this is the female breast. For not only does it have value because it supplies milk for the growing child, but it is also fetishised as a sign of woman's sensuality and sexuality. To 'suck on the teat' is both a natural and sexual representation. Thus, representations of woman as the fecund body were both fundamental to a patriarchal society and acted as a threat to it, to be controlled. This 'threat' could take a range of forms. It might emerge through uncontrolled reproductive excess, in which women's role as mothers of the (future) nation was not carefully structured by the discipline of marriage. It might be via the disruption of the moral order by women using their sensuality and bodies to 'tempt' men into fornication. Or it might be by threatening to hasten the 'decay' of poetry as high art through the undisciplined, excessive display of sentiment and emotion that was considered characteristic of women's 'unreasonable' poetry.

One signal of the impossible double-bind placed on women writers can be discerned in the *Annals* themselves. If they represented safe space for women to publish, the *Annals* invited a fetishised commodification of female subjectivity. As Alison Chapman says, if the *Annals* offered 'their women contributors a lucrative publishing outlet, the feminization of the

annuals commodified both poet and poem.’¹³⁴ Pulham shows how the femininity and sensuality of the Annual-form played a central part in the marketing strategies of its publishers. Such strategies created an implicit sensuality and latent eroticism about the artefact and being published in it. The Annuals raised, among readers and editors, eroticised questions like, ‘If the annual is a woman, what kind of woman is she?’ and ‘Is she the kind of woman with whom the respectable middle-class woman poet should associate?’ For despite their seeming respectability, an Annual – as surrogate woman – was a commodity, like a prostitute, sold in the marketplace.¹³⁵ Like an available, saleable female body, the middle-class woman poet placed herself on display in the Annuals and she did so on terms constructed under patriarchal conditions. If women were writing primarily for a female audience, their writing was constructed according to conventions set by the Male Gaze that identified women with sensuality, prettiness and sentiment.¹³⁶

¹³⁴ *Victorian Women Poets (Chapman)*, p. 3.

¹³⁵ For a full analysis of this claim, see: Pulham, pp. 15-19.

¹³⁶ As Pulham’s analysis of two ekphrastic poems by Lady Emmeline Stuart Wortley and Lady Blessington suggests, women poets in the Annuals adopted a ‘Sapphic gaze’ which eroticised the exchange between themselves and the women in the illustrations. For an impressive analysis of the implications of the figure of Sappho for Victorian Poetry see: Yopie Prins, *Victorian Sappho* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

'O pilgrim-souls, I speak to you!' – Drama, Voice and Fantasy as Strategies to Deal with Doubled Gender Trouble

An analysis of nineteenth-century middle-class women's poetry in terms of femininity as bodily fecundity, then, is helpful for several reasons. Not only does it offer a lens through which to interrogate how being a middle-class woman poet was 'risky business', but indicates why women writers found the double poem a potent strategy to negotiate the double standards applied to their creative fecundity. For, as I shall now explore, if women were subject to doubleness as a means of control, they deployed a set of techniques to negotiate and subvert that double-bind. These techniques deployed critical doubleness – masks and multiple layers – to undermine patriarchal doubleness. Critical doubleness became a strategy women used to develop an emergent middle-class women's tradition of poetry. For, if middle-class women might have been celebrated as 'mothers' and been expected to dedicate their lives to non-economic (re-)production (that is, making children), women's very fecundity made their status and position in Victorian society precarious. To be a woman was to be over-identified with the reproductive body – sensual, weak, 'leaky' and emotional, yet capable of doing something no man could. To be a woman was always to be at risk of being represented as out of control, irrational or creative in an undisciplined way. The fecund feminine body was always doubled: for not only was it alluring, but dangerous.

Furthermore, on this signification, the female body was also ironically most itself when pregnant – ‘ironically’ because that which defines a woman on this picture (the child/baby) is also the thing that leaves her at birth and has a life separate to and distinct from her. And this doubled, dangerous body was thereby always at risk of ‘falling’. Indeed, Angela Leighton argues that, in Victorian discourse, the concept of fallenness was capacious:

For the Victorians, the fallen woman is a type which ranges from the successful courtesan to the passionate adulteress, from the destitute streetwalker to the seduced innocent, from the unscrupulous procuress to the raped child. To fall, for woman, is simply to fall short.¹³⁷

As Patricia Pulham helpfully adds, ‘in Victorian society, one might argue, the woman poet, too, is seen as ‘falling short’.’¹³⁸

The middle-class Victorian woman poet at mid-nineteenth century faced an extraordinary double-bind. To ‘go to market’ – to borrow Krista Lysack’s term¹³⁹ – to ‘sell one’s wares’, ‘show off’ and publish one’s poems was, as Pulham puts it, ‘incompatible with contemporary constructions of femininity.’¹⁴⁰ For, as she adds, ‘middle-class conventions required that men should support women and any woman supporting herself was perceived to be a victim.’¹⁴¹ As I will explore in my first chapter on *AL*, marriage

¹³⁷ Angela Leighton, ‘“Because Men Made the Laws”: The Fallen Woman and the Woman Poet’, in *Victorian Women Poets*, ed. by Leighton, pp. 215–34 (p. 217).

¹³⁸ Pulham, p. 16.

¹³⁹ Lysack, *Come Buy*, p. 2. While Lysack is discussing consumerism, her term has purchase in the current context.

¹⁴⁰ Pulham, p. 16.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

represents a fundamental way middle-class Victorian ideology organised and constructed fecund femininity. As Michel Foucault claims, marriage may be read as a patriarchal power-discourse that regulates sexuality – especially women’s sexuality – and controls bodies.¹⁴² It is the social institution through which reproduction is legitimated and controlled, and women’s bodies are used to assert the priority of masculinity. *AL* and *GM* interrogate the endless danger facing the middle-class woman who dares to depart from, and thereby falls from, the legitimated constructions of femininity. Perhaps most fundamentally – as so many Victorian narratives suggest – the fall from life into death was both metaphorical and literal.¹⁴³ As Angela Leighton powerfully concludes, ‘the story of imaginative creation [is] very often for Victorian women, a death story.’¹⁴⁴

The notion of fallenness is also an important reminder that the regulation of women’s fecundity and creativity was importantly ordered around religious categories. Earlier, I noted how William Michael Rossetti was inclined to characterise the writings of ‘the poetess’ as ordered around a cloying ‘piety’ and moral sincerity. That women’s subjectivities might simultaneously perform iconic religious tropes – as versions of the holy and lauded Virgin and the reviled and fallen Magdalene – represents another significant dimension of cultural doubleness that women poets negotiated

¹⁴² See, for example: Foucault, Vol. 1, pp. 146-47 which discusses the hysteresis/medicalisation of women’s bodies in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century discourses.

¹⁴³ Fallenness and its relationship with death will be interrogated especially in Chapters 4 and 5. Examples of stories in which the ‘fallen woman’ dies, literally or metaphorically, includes Samuel Richardson’s *Clarissa* and Mrs Gaskell’s *Ruth*.

¹⁴⁴ Leighton, *Against The Heart*, p. 6.

as they interrogated the range of performative possibilities available to them. Indeed, the original religious icon of fecund femininity – Eve – embodies the fundamental doubleness assigned to femininity as fecundity under patriarchy. For not only is she the ‘mother of all’, and therefore honoured parent, but she is the cause of sin and fallenness. As I will later explore, poems like ‘The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point’ indicate the extent to which, for a middle-class Victorian woman poet like EBB, religious imagery and themes represented a fundamental context through which women negotiated fragile and limited subjective possibilities. Indeed, as I analyse in Chapter Six, religious representations of femininity work as a profound structural fault regulating women’s bodies through discourses of hunger and holiness, and serve to bolster and structure representations of fecundity used to control and limit women’s subjectivities.

If women were constantly subject to patriarchal doubling, it is perhaps unsurprising that women writers used doubled techniques and strategies not only to expose the impossible strictures generated by patriarchal constructions of fecund femininity, but thereby offered a subversive strand to a nineteenth-century women’s poetry tradition. The anxieties and crises of Victorian poetry, already outlined, created a double possibility or opportunity for women: for if women continue to be absent from most nineteenth-century ‘programmes’ and theories of poetry,¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁵ While John Stewart Mill’s early text ‘What is Poetry?’ (1833/Revised 1859) concentrates on technical aspects of poetry (for example, ‘to act on the emotions’, ‘feeling confessing itself’ and so on) and is limited in its references to women, arguably it should be read in the light of his later (co-authored) text ‘The Subjection of Women’ (1869) which argues for the radical equality between men and women.

women began to claim the title 'poet' as never before. For the anxieties and belatedness that removed poetry from its preeminent literary position and made it 'mere expression' suggested that women's writing could claim a new space alongside men's writing. Crucially, they began to foreground and interrogate representations of femininity (and, thereby, masculinity) using double poems, of which perhaps the dramatic monologue was the acme.¹⁴⁶

E. Warwick Slinn claims that 'the dramatic monologue is arguably the flagship genre of Victorian poetry,'¹⁴⁷ while Cornelia Pearsall contends that 'in large measure a Victorian invention, the dramatic monologue is a central genre in a period rich with an extraordinary array of generic experimentation.'¹⁴⁸ She adds that, 'the dramatic monologue emphatically represents speech (even if presented as an interior monologue or written letter), sometimes though not always addressed to an auditor.'¹⁴⁹ Glennis Byron argues that the 'generally accepted position is that the dramatic monologue was developed simultaneously but independently by Tennyson

This claim perhaps enables one to suggest that Mill is inclusive in a way that Carlyle and Arnold are not. See: John Stuart Mill, 'What Is Poetry?', <http://www.laits.utexas.edu/farrell/documents/Mill_What%20Is%20Poetry.pdf: University of Texas, 1859 (1833)>[accessed: 08 February 2017]; John Stuart Mill, 'The Subjection of Women', <<https://archive.org/details/subjectionofwome00millrich: University of California Libraries, 1869>> [accessed: 08 February 2017].

¹⁴⁶ Richard Cronin reminds us that the use of dramatic monologue to negotiate subjective doubleness was a matter for both men and women. He says, 'Victorian poets often record an awareness that in the act of composition they experience a sense of being divided from themselves.' See: Richard Cronin, *Reading Victorian Poetry* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), p. 28 and Chapter 2.

¹⁴⁷ E. Warwick Slinn, 'Dramatic Monologue', in *A Companion to Victorian Poetry*, ed. by Richard Cronin, Alison Chapman, and Antony H. Harrison (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007 (2002)), pp. 80-98 (p. 80).

¹⁴⁸ Cornelia D.J. Pearsall, 'The Dramatic Monologue', in *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Literature*, ed. by Bristow, pp. 67-88 (p. 68).

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

and Browning during the 1830s.¹⁵⁰ Early examples include Tennyson's 'St Simeon Stylites' (1833) and Browning's 'Johannes Agricola in Meditation' and 'Porphyria's Lover' (1836). Cunningham calls the dramatic monologue, especially in the hands of Robert Browning, the 'great machine for examinations of self, the acme of the Victorian obsession with self [...] and the epitome of the Victorian preoccupation with fraught self-consciousness.'¹⁵¹ In terms of form, Slinn suggests dramatic monologue might be seen as 'a lyrical-dramatic-narrative hybrid' which 'absorbs an emotional expressiveness from lyrics, a speaker who is not the poet from drama, and elements of mimetic detail and retrospective structuring from narrative.'¹⁵² However, while Slinn makes a powerful case, there are also reasons for seeing dramatic monologue as a generic term. Indeed, Cornelia Pearsall goes so far as to claim that dramatic monologue's 'practical usefulness does not seem to have been impaired by the failure of literary historians and taxonomists to achieve consensus in its definition.'¹⁵³

In its broadest sense, the dramatic monologue represents a striking response to the issues raised by belatedness for it represents, in Byron's terms, 'a cultural critique of contemporary theories about poetry and a

¹⁵⁰ Glennis Byron, 'Rethinking the Dramatic Monologue: Victorian Women Poets and Social Critique', in *Victorian Women Poets*, ed. by Chapman, pp. 79-98 (p. 80). As Byron notes, the arguments of Herbert F. Tucker have been significant for the 'standard' position, esp., Herbert F. Tucker, 'From Monomania to Monologue: "St Simeon Stylites" and the Rise of the Victorian Dramatic Monologue', *Victorian Poetry*, 22.2 (1984), pp.121-37; Herbert F. Tucker, 'Dramatic Monologue and the Overhearing of Lyric', in *Lyric Poetry: Beyond New Criticism*, ed. by Chaviva Hosek and Patricia Parker (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 226-43.

¹⁵¹ Cunningham, p. 194.

¹⁵² Slinn, *Dramatic Monologue*, pp. 80-81.

¹⁵³ Pearsall, p. 69.

challenge to Romantic representations of the self.¹⁵⁴ It should not be difficult to see why women poets might have found critical resources within it to resist patriarchal doubling. For, as Byron further indicates, the dramatic monologue may be read as 'putting the self into context, and thereby putting into question the authority and integrity of the isolated lyric voice.'¹⁵⁵ In Joseph Bristow's terms, the poetic 'I' is shown not to be 'a subject guiding language at all but a speaker who was, instead, subjected to language.'¹⁵⁶ Dramatic monologue becomes, in a significant way, a strategy for foregrounding the subject and the 'I'. Slinn suggests that 'Victorian dramatic monologues expose a terrifying prospect for poets and speakers':¹⁵⁷ the singular speaking voice of dramatic monologue speaks to affirm its authority, yet, in speaking, commits itself to social or dialogical intrusion. As Slinn adds, 'dramatic monologues tend [...] to disrupt the authority (and hence the authenticity) of speaking voices, whether authorial or fictive. They problematize questions about who speaks, putting the self into question.'¹⁵⁸

Using dramatic monologue's capacity to work as an interrogation of subjectivity and poetic voice I shall argue that an emergent middle-class women's poetic tradition is located in strategies of doubleness and performativity. That is, the monologue's capacity to perform religio-

¹⁵⁴ Byron, p. 81.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ *The Victorian Poet: Poetics and Persona*, ed. by Joseph Bristow (London: Routledge, 1987), p. 5.

¹⁵⁷ Slinn, *Dramatic Monologue*, p. 84.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

patriarchal constructions of feminine subjectivity whilst leaving them open to reformulation and reconstitution, is a key aspect of women's critique of fecundity and barrenness. For, as Cornelia Pearsall plausibly claims, if the dramatic monologue was a means of foregrounding subjectivity, 'the genre [...] however, is eminently one that requires and therefore affirms a speaking self, working always toward creation rather than destruction of identity, imagining always further changes "of being."' ¹⁵⁹ Pearsall adds:

The form of the dramatic monologue itself represents speech seeking [...] to cause a variety of transformations. The act of the dramatic monologue, its performance [...] simultaneously creates a self and alters that self, and may perhaps ultimately destroy the self it held so dear. ¹⁶⁰

Ironically, then, the dramatic monologue's capacity to perform and interrogate potentially oppressive and limiting constructions of subjectivity may be a strategy to reformulate subjective possibilities.

Early critical studies of dramatic monologue, notably by Robert Langbaum, rarely included women's dramatic monologues in theoretical discourse on the form. ¹⁶¹ However, as Glynnis Byron indicates, even at the turn of the millennium, many critics continued to exclude women's work from their analyses, despite the recovery of Victorian women's writing in the 1980s and 90s. ¹⁶² Yet, my analysis begins to indicate why, at a

¹⁵⁹ Pearsall, p. 75.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Robert Langbaum, *The Poetry of Experience: The Dramatic Monologue in the Modern Literary Tradition* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1957).

¹⁶² Byron notes how Elisabeth A. Howe, 'The Dramatic Monologue' (New York: Twayne, 1996) includes only one female voice, Christina Rossetti.

performative and subjective level, it could be argued that the dramatic monologue represents a version of the double poem especially potent for nineteenth-century women's writing. Indeed, as Isobel Armstrong claims, it is a form that might plausibly be considered to be 'invented' by women.¹⁶³ If the extent to which that is true is moot, Armstrong has drawn attention to the way in which women poets might be said to use the dramatic monologue as a doubled strategy not only for foregrounding claims about 'the self' or "I" of poetry, but of exposing the constructions of femininity.

EBB and CR negotiate and perform doubleness in poetry in distinctive, if related ways. Glennis Byron, following Dorothy Mermin, suggests that, 'surprisingly given the opportunities [dramatic monologue] offers for exploring the problematic nature of the gendered speaking subject, neither poet appears to make much use of the form.'¹⁶⁴ Yet, EBB offers two crucial interventions into the form, broadly conceived. EBB claimed that 'The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point' was an example of 'ballad'.¹⁶⁵ Most modern critics claim it counts as dramatic monologue spoken by a black female slave who seeks out the landing ground of the Pilgrim Fathers who established the United States.¹⁶⁶ In the next chapter, I

¹⁶³ See, especially, Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry*, pp. 318-22.

¹⁶⁴ Byron, 85. See also: Dorothy Mermin, 'The Damsel, the Knight, and the Victorian Woman Poet', *Critical Inquiry*, 13.1 (1986), 64-80.

¹⁶⁵ Quoted in Ann Parry, 'Sexual Exploitation and Freedom: Religion, Race and Gender in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point"', *Studies in Browning and his Circle*, 16 (1988), 114-26 (p. 120).

¹⁶⁶ For example, Melissa Schaub, 'The Margins of the Dramatic Monologue: Teaching Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point"', *Victorian Poetry*, 49.4 (2011), 557-68; Marjorie Stone, 'Between Ethics and Anguish: Feminist Ethics, Feminist Aesthetics, and Representations of Infanticide in "the Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point" and "Beloved"', in *Between Ethics and Aesthetics*:

shall explore how the poem can be read as performing a transgressive subject who deploys language of fecundity and barrenness against patriarchal-religious understandings of the Feminine and of religion. Drawing on Judith Butler's classic ideas regarding performativity, I shall explore how *TRS* – as dramatic monologue – performs concepts of fecundity and barrenness in a way which both subverts and questions patriarchal understandings of femininity and Christian faith and reformulates them as feminist. Equally, in Chapters Three and Four, by concentrating on the dimension of performativity, I shall suggest that EBB's novel-poem *AL* may be read as a dramatic monologue which interrogates, subverts and reformulates religio-patriarchal constructions of femininity as ordered around notions of marriage and fallenness. In its interrogation of the Christian-patriarchal language of fecundity and barrenness, *AL* represents a subversive and doubled strategy by which Aurora can claim the status of poet whilst remaining a fecund woman.

Critical doubleness operates along a different axis in CR's *GM*. Even an expansive notion of dramatic monologue could not bring *GM* within its scope. Its poetics are secretive and complex, affording an extraordinary range of readings and interpretations. Its tone is that of dark fantasy and fairy tale. Concentrating on the poem's representations of the female body under conditions of sickness, fallenness and renunciation, I shall investigate how Rossetti's language of fecundity and barrenness generates strategies

Crossing the Boundaries, ed. by Dorota Glowacka and Stephen Boos (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2002), pp. 131-58.

for the nineteenth-century middle-class woman poet to claim, indeed 'steal', the status of poet rather than poetess. Her dazzlingly excessive linguistic strategies – fecund, lyrical, yet always disciplined – subvert the limiting designations of femininity as bodily fecundity. *GM*'s potent contribution to a Christian-feminist poetics lies in its strategies of re-reading the creative power of female bodies.

Rossetti's poetics in *GM* act as a reminder that the dramatic monologue, even in its role as icon of performativity in middle-class Victorian women's poetics, should be contextualised in the broader strategies of double poems that women used to critique and form a tradition. Rossetti's poetics – by turns secretive and restrained¹⁶⁷ and, in *GM*'s case, excessive and exhilarating – remind us that women's negotiation of the double standards of religiously and culturally legitimated patriarchy was not confined to dramatic monologue. CR's restrained and deceptively simple 'Winter: My Secret' reminds us that women's poetry at mid-century used a variety of doubled techniques to tease out and rework the lyric and subjective possibilities of women's poems.¹⁶⁸ As Constance Hassett notes, it indicates '[CR's] interest in enigmatic exchanges and verbal evasion.'¹⁶⁹ It negotiates secrecy and reserve whilst being flirtatious with the edges of taboo. Hassett suggests it 'considers the wonderfully paradoxical

¹⁶⁷ See Chapter 6 for an examination of CR's relationship with Anglo-Catholic clergyman John Keble's poetic theory of 'Reserve'.

¹⁶⁸ Further examples of 'masking' poems include Charlotte Mew's 'Fame', Mary Coleridge's 'True to myself' and EBB's 'The Mask'.

¹⁶⁹ Constance W. Hassett, *Christina Rossetti: The Patience of Style* (Charlottesville VA & London: University of Virginia Press, 2005), p. 59.

possibilities of flagrant concealment and garrulous reticence.¹⁷⁰ Rossetti

constructs a series of 'teases':

I tell my secret? No, indeed, not I

[...]

Suppose there is no secret after all

[...]

Perhaps my secret I may say,

Or you may guess. (ll. 1, 8, 24 & 25)

The secret could be many things – the writer's 'winter', her frigidity or virginity or the 'golden fruit' of fulfilment. It may be the writer's subjectivity, locked in by the 'I' which is performed at both the beginning and the end of the opening line. As the poem later claims, 'I wear my mask for warmth' (l. 18). The speaker in the poem also wears 'a veil, a cloak, and other wraps' (l. 12). Rossetti's speaker is then both allusive, elusive and fundamentally doubled – a mask wearer whose 'secret' seems to be structurally locked up. As Hassett helpfully summarises, 'Winter' 'manages to be simultaneously flagrant and reserved, to withhold a secret even as it enfolds the hope of a poetry that is sensuous, expansive and self-revealing.'¹⁷¹ Its work of masking creates doubled effects which problematise the poet's subjectivity and generates mysterious effects.

Whether it is through masking or the ironies of dramatic monologue, the readings of Victorian women's poetry undertaken in this thesis will

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ Ibid, p. 63.

return again and again to the doubled constraints imposed by patriarchal constructions of femininity as bodily fecundity. The doubled critical strategies of writers like EBB and CR will be interrogated in order to investigate their subversions and reconstructions of patriarchal constraint. 'Mask' as an icon of concealment and revelation functions not only as a metaphor for the doubled and doubling strategies performed by EBB and CR, but speaks powerfully into the wider attempts of middle-class women poets to articulate a tradition of poetry in the shadow of and beyond the double-bind of patriarchy.

CHAPTER TWO

'I hung, as a gourd': A Christian-Feminist Reading of 'The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point' as Dramatic Monologue of Fecundity and Barrenness

EBB's 'The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point' has been subject to analysis from a wide range of critical viewpoints since its appearance, as a commission, in the US anti-slavery magazine *The Liberty* in 1847. Drawing especially on feminist readings of this poem, this chapter explores how Judith Butler's discussion of performativity can be used to foreground how *TRS* – as dramatic monologue – performs concepts of fecundity and barrenness in a way which both subverts and questions patriarchal understandings of femininity and Christian faith. I shall argue that this poem may, in the light of this analysis, be read appropriately as both feminist and Christian text. By using the concept of 'Chora' deployed by Julia Kristeva, as well as feminist theologian Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's concept of 'Kyriarchy', I shall attempt to show how *TRS* reads against patriarchal notions of religion, yet still performs a religious identity coalesced around concepts of resistance, courage, and faithfulness.

As Sarah Ficke claims, 'the infanticidal plot of "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point" has inspired many articles.'¹ Indeed, as she helpfully lists,

¹ Sarah H. Ficke, 'Crafting Social Criticism: Infanticide in 'The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point' & 'Aurora Leigh'', *Victorian Poetry*, 51.2 (2013), 249-67 (p. 250).

'scholars have written about the poem's relation to Barrett Browning's life and family history, its rhetorical connections to the Garrisonian abolitionist circle, its representations of infanticide, its textual history, and its thematic links to Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*.² Marjorie Stone acknowledges:

'The Runaway Slave' was neglected for the first half of the twentieth century, then denounced in the 1950s as 'too blunt and shocking to have any enduring worth'; criticized in the 1980s and early 1990s for being too idealized and melodramatic by some, and defended as a radical proto-feminist treatment of sexual politics by others; and denounced again in the late 1990s as an exercise in conservative appropriation of voice.³

Most recent critics have agreed that *TRS* should be read as a dramatic monologue spoken by a black female slave who seeks out the landing ground of the Pilgrim Fathers who established the United States as a land of political and religious liberty.⁴ As Margaret Leighton suggests, this slave 'chooses the once 'holy ground' of the pilgrims' landing place on which to kneel – not in awe, to pray, but in anger, to curse.'⁵ The unnamed slave has been raped by her white torturers and impregnated. She gives birth to a white-faced child whom she subsequently kills. As Stone summarises,

² Ibid, p. 250. For examples of the breadth of the analysis of the poem, see, for example: Stone, *Between Ethics and Anguish*; Leighton, *Against The Heart*, pp. 97-102; Schaub, pp. 557-68; Mermin, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, pp. 154-62; Sarah Brophy, 'Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point" and the Politics of Interpretation', *Victorian Poetry*, 36.2 (1998), 273-88, et al.

³ Marjorie Stone, 'Elizabeth Barrett Browning & the Garrisonians: 'The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point', the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, and Abolitionist Discourse in the *Liberty Bell*', in *Victorian Women Poets*, ed. by Chapman, pp. 33-56 (pp. 36-37).

⁴ EBB herself referred to it as 'rather a long poem'. Quoted in Parry, p. 120.

⁵ Leighton, *Against The Heart*, pp. 98-99.

‘fleeing north and arriving at Pilgrim’s Point, she curses the land the Pilgrim Fathers bless ‘in freedom’s name...’’⁶ The slave woman stands ‘on the mark beside the shore | Of the first white pilgrim’s bended knee | Where exile turned to ancestor’ (I ll. 1-3). As Leighton concludes:

The suggestively condensed line ‘Where exile turned to ancestor’ itself contains the paradox of history in miniature: that, even as the Pilgrims landed, here was a subtle transformation and they became, no longer drifting outcasts but powerful originators of a new line.⁷

‘I hung, as a gourd hangs in the sun’ – The Runaway Slave as Performance of Fecundity and Barrenness

XXXIII.

You think I shrieked then? Not a sound!

I hung, as a gourd hangs in the sun;

I only cursed them all around,

As softly as I might have done

My very own child: from these sands

Up to the mountains, lift your hands,

O slaves, and end what I begun! (ll. 224-30)

This stanza, from the final section of *TRS*, offers a prism for opening up a reading of the poem’s performance of fecundity and barrenness,

⁶ Stone, *The Garrisonians*, p. 33.

⁷ Leighton, *Against The Heart*, p. 99.

thereby making available a fresh reading of it that is both feminist and Christian. Its context, however, is interesting. The stanza signifies in a doubled way: it both comes at the culmination of the monologue and yet it also enacts a work of memory and recollection. The narrative present of the poem is the slave kneeling at Pilgrim's Point ('I look on the sea and the sky' (XXIX l. 197)). Yet, as stanza XXXI establishes, in order to address both the 'hunter-sons' (XXX l. 204) of the Pilgrim Fathers (whose children developed slavery) and the slaves (XXXIII l. 231), the slave-woman draws on her historical experience of torture: 'this mark on my wrist – (I prove what | I say) | Ropes tied me up here to the flogging-place.' (XXXII ll. 233-34). The context for the slave's words in stanza XXXIII indicate that her words will deploy a memory of suffering, exploitation and of dignity in its midst, as a means of making a call to slaves to rise up. Stanza XXXIII is striking in the way it deploys the past to speak into the present about a potential future. The way in which stanza XXXIII acts as a focal point for past, present and future indicates its potential axial significance for a close reading of the poem.

Thus, in Stanza XXXIII, the tortured, unnamed slave woman says, 'I hung, as a gourd hangs in the sun'. The simile of the gourd is striking. For a gourd holds within itself the concepts of fecundity and barrenness in a powerfully ironic and subversive way. A gourd is the fruit of a plant of the Cucurbitaceae family. While this family includes cucumbers and melons, gourds technically belong to the genus *Cucurbita* and genus *Lagenaria*. Examples include the calabash and the Bottle Gourd. As a fruit, it embodies

a plant's fecundity, the produce of its fertile life cycle. However, while many gourds may be eaten – as with other fruit – it can also serve a range of human functions. For example, unlike an apple, the fibrous nature of the skin of many types of gourd lends this fruit to being dried out for other uses. A gourd may be used as a cup, as a cooking utensil and so on; in a slave economy, where slaves may have lacked access to the consumer products of the 'masters'⁸ a gourd would be a fundamentally useful item – a source of food and sustenance, but also as the means for creating simple, practical items.⁹ A further striking aspect of a gourd is how one dimension of its usefulness is predicated on it being dried and, effectively desiccated: that is, its fecundity is removed in order for its value to culture to be revealed. It is

⁸ Or are dependent on the munificence or largesse of the 'masters' for access to proper utensils – as reward for services rendered, which for women would have included sexual exploitation.

⁹ The calabash was used as a resonator for musical instruments. In a Brazilian context, slaves developed African instruments into the berimbau, using the calabash as a resonator. The berimbau is notably used in 'capoeira', the martial art/dance developed under slavery. See: Belgium Royal Museum for Central Africa, 'Musical Bow', <<http://music.africamuseum.be/determination/english/instruments/musical%20bow.html>: Royal Museum for Central Africa, Belgium, 2006> [accessed: 08 February 2017]; Capoeira World, 'Berimbau', <<http://www.capoeira-world.com/capoeira-music/capoeira-instruments/berimbau/>: Capoeira World, 2015> [accessed: 08 February 2017]. That the gourd slipped into the mythos of slavery and freedom in the United States is indicated by the folk song, 'Follow The Drinking Gourd', which claims that slaves escaping slavery in pre-Civil War America could use a gourd as a compass. There is serious doubt about the authenticity of the song (it was almost certainly written in the early twentieth century), but its existence indicates the significance of gourds in the slavery-era United States. For an overview of the song see: Joel Bresler, "'Follow the Drinking Gourd": A Cultural History', <<http://www.followthedrinkinggourd.org>: <http://www.followthedrinkinggourd.org>, 2012> [accessed: 23 October 2016]. For critical analysis of the song's authenticity see: Prince Brown, 'Afterword', <<http://www.followthedrinkinggourd.org/Afterword.htm>: <http://www.followthedrinkinggourd.org>, 2012> [accessed: 23 October 2016].

made 'barren' as a natural object in order to bring and sustain 'new life' as a cultural artefact.¹⁰

Given my discussion of doubleness as a necessary poetic/linguistic strategy for middle-class nineteenth-century women poets, the doubled nature of EBB's image is more than striking. A gourd is clearly a significantly doubled representation. As fruit, it holds within itself significations of fecundity and barrenness. In short, the gourd arguably acts as a metaphor for the womb, the very icon of dangerous femininity. Not only can it be suggested that gourds – curvy and spacious – work as a visual analogue to the womb, but in holding both fecundity and barrenness in tension it functions as a representation of femininity's questionable nature under conditions of patriarchy. For, as my discussion in the previous chapter indicated, representations of the female body are tied up in the language of fear – fear of female power and reproduction, but also of femininity as both dangerously fragile as well as presaging death. For wombs bring life, but also expel the baby out into mortality and limit.

Indeed, as a scholar like Elisabeth Bronfen might thereby argue, the gourd, like the womb itself, acts as a representation of death. That, to put it simply, the womb is always tied closely to notions of tomb. In her classic

¹⁰ Alan J. Osborn's study of calabash use among East African indigenous communities investigates the striking claim that decorated calabashes 'are material symbols of the association of women, milk, and children.' In effect, Osborn suggests that there are anthropological grounds for connecting gourds with fecundity and barrenness through the symbol of milk. For more, see: Alan J. Osborn, 'Cattle, Co-Wives, Children, and Calabashes: Material Context for Symbol Use among the Il Chamus of West-Central Kenya', *Journal of Anthropological Anthropology*, 15 (1996), 107-36 (p. 113).

study of the way dead bodies and death itself are handled in systems of representation, Elisabeth Bronfen argues:

Because signification works on the basis of replacing an object with a sign, one can see it as supplementing and substituting its material objects of reference. Therefore, signification can be understood as implying an absent body or causing the signified body's absence.¹¹

Notions of fecundity and barrenness belong to the category of metaphor, but as Bronfen further argues, 'as its root word *metapherein* implies, metaphor transfers a word into a semantically different, though similar realm, so that the ensuing figurative expression articulates both semantic realms simultaneously.'¹² The significance of the way the word 'gourd' can simultaneously represent fecundity and barrenness, life and death, will become clearer later in this chapter when I discuss *TRS* in relation to Kristeva's notion of Chora; for now, it is sufficiently simply to acknowledge that significance.

Thus, the slave woman says, 'I hung, as a gourd hangs in the sun.' EBB's simile is simple, visual and weighty. Its simplicity enables the reader readily to see a human body hanging down from a string or wire, pulling at that wire because of its weight. This is human flesh being dried out and desiccated, but more than that, it is fecund female flesh that the male abusers wish to make barren. As previously indicated, gourds are curvy and

¹¹ Elisabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity, and the Aesthetic* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), p. 6.

¹² Ibid, p. 8. '*meta*' implies 'over' or 'across', while '*pherein*' implies 'to carry' or 'bear'.

fleshy fruit. This is a curvy, fecund body being punished. At one level, one might argue that the torturers – the ‘slave masters’ – are making an example of the woman. Their punishment is precisely about turning her into ‘dust’ or, in the language of Stanza XXXIII, ‘sand’ (‘these sands’ l. 229). They will strip her of her life, but also of her power to create life. They will, like a dried gourd, make her an object or artefact; as a slave, of course, this is what – in a slave economy – she already is, and in part this is what EBB is objecting to.¹³ But the attempt to make of the slave woman a gourd entails another level of objectification: arguably she is to be made barren, a cultural artefact which speaks to other slaves about not trying to be other than a mere artefact. Slaves existed in the masters’ economy as functions of power: more often than not, they were ‘devices’ to produce wealth for the masters by, in the US context, servicing the Cotton economy of the South. Slave women were in a position of double exploitation – not only being worked in the fields or as housemaids, but at risk of being used as sexual objects. If the women happened to be fecund their offspring simply added to the stock of potentially saleable slaves.¹⁴ As the narrative of *TRS* makes

¹³ Laura Fish is surely correct to claim ‘the poem expresses Elizabeth’s hatred of slavery and the plantation system from which her family wealth was derived. It is with extraordinary power and depth of emotion – considering Elizabeth’s situation at the time – that the poet deals with the multiple rape by white plantation workers of a slave woman and the birth of the mixed-race child from whom she feels estranged.’ See Laura Fish, ‘“Strange Music”: Engaging Imaginatively with the Family of Elizabeth Barrett Browning from a Creole and Black Woman’s Perspective’, *Victorian Poetry*, 44.4 (2006), 507-24 (pp. 507-08).

¹⁴ For an account of the economics of plantation-based slavery, see: David Cunningham, ‘The Economic System of Slavery’, in *Encyclopaedia of African-American Society*, ed. by Gerald D. Jaynes (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2005), pp. 768-70. The rape of the slave-woman by the masters may be read as an act of power and

clear, the slave-woman subverts the narrative of slavery: she bears new life which critiques and exposes the rottenness of the status quo. In short, she births a baby that can perform 'whiteness' due to it having the features of the masters.

At the moment the masters wish to make the slave woman 'barren', EBB deploys a striking example of what might be called 'Christian Irony': for it is precisely the masters' strategy of making barren that the runaway slave seeks to subvert as a means for new life and possibility.¹⁵ Stanza XXXIII is not only the moment when the slave is made 'like a gourd hanging in the sun', but in which she deploys a curse to implore the slaves to rise up against their oppressors. This is a woman in control, despite the attempts of the masters to reduce her to a barren artefact: 'You think I shrieked then? Not a sound' (l. 225). Rather, she says:

I only cursed them all around
As softly as I might have done
My very own child: from these sands
Up to the mountains, lift your hands,
O Slaves, and end what I begun! (ll. 227-31)

Once again, the image of 'these sands' arguably has a double function. Certainly they refer to the beach at Pilgrim's Point where the slave has looked 'on the sea and the sky. | Where the pilgrims' ships first

terror which is an analogue to the torture: it underlines that the woman is property and her fecundity is to be regulated according to the masters' economy.

¹⁵ For clarity, this irony may be labelled 'Christian' because it echoes the Christian theological strategy of taking the instrument of torture Christianity's founder was killed by – the Cross – and re-visioning it as the source of redemption and new life.

anchored lay.’ (XXIX ll.197-98) As Stone claims, EBB makes a clear political point about the irony of the landing point of the Pilgrim Fathers – pilgrims seeking after liberation in God and in political practice – being a place from which flowed oppression and torture.¹⁶ But the image of sand is also suggestive of barrenness and bleakness and liminality.¹⁷ The sand of the beach acts as a symbol of dryness and barrenness between the fecundity of the sea and the lushness of the plains and forest. Sand’ – in the form of ‘desert’ – has been a significant icon of the liminal in much historical and recent Christian writings about spirituality. For example, early Christian Fathers and Mothers sought out ‘the desert places’ as places of barrenness, exposure and encounter.¹⁸

EBB’s language of barrenness – gourd, sands, even mountain – is placed in a context of cursing. The slave woman:

[...] cursed them all around

As softly as I might have done

My very own child: from these sands

Up to the mountains [...] (XXXIII ll. 227-30)

¹⁶ Stone, *The Garrisonians*, p. 51. Stone suggests that EBB may have been ironising, among others, poets like Maria Weston and Felicia Hemans, who were inclined to fetishise ‘The Pilgrim Fathers’ as icons of ‘freedom’ in poems like ‘Boston’ (Weston) and ‘The Landing of the Pilgrim Fathers’ (Hemans).

¹⁷ Scholars like Benedicta Ward and Rowan Williams have written substantially about liminality as a feature of the desert experience. See, for example, Benedicta Ward, *The Desert Fathers: Sayings of the Early Christian Monks* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2003) and Rowan Williams, *Silence & Honeycakes: The Wisdom of the Desert* (London: Lion, 2004). For a sophisticated analysis of liminality and metaphors of desert and sand, see: Belden C. Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

¹⁸ As Lane shows, ‘mountains’ can act both as places of sublime and liminal encounter, but also are places of great fierceness, barrenness and exposure. See Lane, esp. Chapters 1 and 2.

Conceptually, cursing functions as a wish or desire for misfortune to befall the target of the curse; it might be seen as the weapon of those who do not have access to more established and effective means of redress and justice. It is revealing, however, to read the slave woman's curse (and EBB's use of it alongside words of barrenness) through the prism of its religious use in the Bible. In both the gospels according to Matthew and Mark, Jesus curses a fig tree. Matthew's Gospel records the incident as follows:

Now in the morning as he returned into the city, he hungered. And when he saw a fig tree in the way, he came to it, and found nothing thereon, but leaves only, and said unto it, 'Let no fruit grow on thee henceforward for ever'. And presently the fig tree withered away.¹⁹

This story – in which Jesus curses a fig tree for not being fecund, an action which leads to barrenness – reveals how (within the Christian tradition) even the notion of cursing might be read as part of EBB's language of barrenness. The runaway slave curses a false dispensation (slavery and slave owners) to barrenness and calls for a springing up of new life, of a legitimate fecundity – a revolution which 'ends what I begun' (XXXIII l. 231).

It is important to acknowledge that the slave's cursing from the torture-pole is provisional, not ultimate. In the final stanza, she states,

In the name of the white child waiting for me
In the death-dark where we may kiss and agree,

¹⁹ See: Matthew 21. 18-19. In the Gospel of Luke, the (uncursed) fig tree is taken as an icon/symbol of 'fecundity': 'Behold the fig tree and all the trees; when they now shoot forth ye see and know of your own selves that summer is now nigh at hand.' (Luke 21. 29-30). The fig as icon of fecundity will be especially important in my analysis of fallenness in *AL* in Chapter 4.

White-men, I leave you all curse-free

In my broken heart's disdain!' (XXXVI ll. 250-53)

As Melissa Schaub argues:

In the end, the slave forgoes the option to curse America after all, leaving them "curse-free/In my broken heart's disdain" (ll. 252-3) but also in the name of "the white child waiting for me/In the death-dark where we may kiss and agree" (ll. 250-251). In death, the slave takes the high road and assures the morally inferior auditors that her child will forgive her. We are left with nothing but her feelings and her opinions about "the Washington-race" (l. 221).²⁰

This refusal of ultimate curse is a seeming denial of the woman's initial aim.

Indeed, Schaub notes:

The slave begins the poem by stating that she has fled the slave-takers to Pilgrim's Point (when presumably she would have been better off continuing north to Canada) for the purpose of cursing the whites of America in return for what they have done to her; she feels her curse will be more effective if she does it there, where she can take advantage of the ghosts' presence: "in your names, to curse this land / Ye blessed in freedom's, evermore" (ll. 20-21).²¹

The pilgrims are there, from the beginning, as her supporters or tools, perhaps witnesses to her vengeance upon their descendants. They are not present as authority figures. Her tone towards the ghosts is aggressive,

²⁰ Schaub, p. 565.

²¹ Ibid, pp. 564-65. Arguably, Schaub's point that the slave-woman's curse will be more efficacious among the ghosts of the Pilgrim Fathers, is a kind of negative analogue of the common belief among religious pilgrims that their prayers will be more efficacious when close to the relics of saints and holy people.

and, as dawn breaks at the end of the poem, they are chased off by shame: 'My face is black, but it glares with a scorn | Which they dare not meet by day' (XXIX ll. 202-03). We might, as Schaub suggests, 'expect [...] the morally upright pilgrims' to 'be the stand-ins for the reader's own judgment.'²² However, they are routed and replaced by 'their hunter sons' (XXX l. 204), and the closing sections of the poem are addressed directly to the slave hunters, as they surround and threaten her. Yet, Marjorie Stone reminds us, the slave woman doesn't entirely abrogate or revoke her curse. If she commits herself to a kind of eschatological lifting of the curse in the name of her white child who will forgive her (as he awaits her in the afterlife), her curse at the end is for barrenness among those who've spread the seed of hate: '[She] curses the slave hunters who surround her at the poem's close, wishing each 'for his own wife's joy and gift/A little corpse as safely at rest' as her own murdered child.'²³

Stone and Schaub's readings are powerful. One should also acknowledge, however, that if there is an 'eschatological' lifting in the curse in her child's name this is grounded in the slave's very fecundity – a fecundity which is defined by doubleness, irony and a subjectivity under question. As indicated in the last chapter, in patriarchal discourses of femininity it is possible to argue that, in essence, a woman *qua* woman (unlike a man) is never truly able to be herself alone. For, according to such discourses what defines a woman is ultimately her fecundity – her capacity

²² Ibid, p. 565.

²³ Stone, *The Garrisonians*, pp. 33-34.

to reproduce. It is in pregnancy, birth, childrearing and the performance of those practices that her identity is defined. Unlike a man who is the icon of independent action and a subjectivity that is performed on the public stage, insofar as women are subjects they are domestic, relational subjects.²⁴ Their identity is never complete in-itself. A woman's identity is double, for it is defined by the children she produces and nurtures. Even in the womb, the growing foetus is not to be simply identified with or be reduced to the mother. And yet both materially and representationally, the foetus/baby is derived from the mother's cells and being. That is, from her reproductive fecundity. In birthing the child, part of her enters the world and separates from her.

Deborah Lupton indicates the doubled complexity and significance of the above claims in medical/feminist discourse. That women's bodies are treated as crucial for healthy foetuses/babies, she says:

[Extends] to the moment of conception and even before. Women are now advised not to drink alcohol or smoke cigarettes [...] some doctors [...] even suggest that a woman *planning* to fall pregnant should be responsible and prepare their body.²⁵

Yet, as Lupton further notes, 'the pregnant woman is increasingly portrayed as separate to and the adversary of her own pregnancy/foetus.'²⁶ This she illustrates with a story from Australia regarding unborn babies suing

²⁴ See my discussion of Victorian models of feminine domesticity in the previous chapter, for example, pp. 64-65.

²⁵ Deborah Lupton, *Medicine as Culture: Illness, Disease and the Body*, 3rd edn (New York: SAGE, 2012), p. 167.

²⁶ Ibid, p. 166.

mothers, noting that the story included, 'a photograph of a foetus encased in amniotic sac, seemingly floating in space, a self-contained and apparently self-sufficient individual separate from the maternal body.'²⁷

It is in this broad context that we should read the runaway slave's seeming revocation of her curse. In the closing stanza, the slave faces death and dies. She says, 'The clouds are breaking on my brain; | I am floated along, as if I should die | Of liberty's exquisite pain' (XXXVI ll. 247-49). These words signal how, as a speaking subject, she is caught between the 'physical' and the 'spiritual' in a liminal, doubled state. She uses both physical words ('brain') and spiritual words ('I am floated along') to represent her subjectivity at the moment of death. Yet, despite her earlier act of infanticide (which acts as both a disavowal of whiteness and of motherhood defined in terms of whiteness), she cannot escape a discourse of motherhood and fecundity. The line 'In the name of the white child waiting for me' signals that even in the phantasy of an afterlife, she is inescapably bound to the child. Insofar as she revokes her curse, it is determined by a discourse that defines her subjectivity as inescapably double. She is never herself alone. She's both of and not of her child.

Yet if the slave woman cannot escape a discourse of femininity that defines her in terms of fecundity, there are grounds for suggesting she uses that discourse to critique and subvert it. Isobel Armstrong casts helpful light here. She claims that:

²⁷ Ibid. The story was taken from the *Sydney Sunday Telegraph*, 13 June 1993.

If [...] a middle-class women's tradition is constructed by reference to the Victorian notion of what was specifically feminine in poetry, it is likely to be formed not only out of what were predominantly male categories of the female but also out of categories which were regarded as self-evident and unproblematic.²⁸

She adds,

The doubleness of women's poetry comes from its ostensible adoption of an affective mode, often simple, often pious, often conventional. But those conventions are subjected to investigation, questioned, or used for unexpected purposes. The simpler the surface of the poem, the more likely it is that a second and more difficult poem will exist beneath it.²⁹

In one sense the closing words of *TRS* might be read as EBB adopting an almost sentimental, certainly affective mode of speech and voice. For example, 'I fall, I swoon!' (XXXVI l. 246) is almost parodic in its locution of stereotyped nineteenth-century femininity. The talk of a 'broken heart' and the resolution of the poem by deploying references to the child who waits in the afterlife can certainly be read through a discourse of conventional femininity in which the female transgressor – a version of a fallen woman –

²⁸ Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry*, p. 324. Clearly, EBB appropriates a black voice in 'The Runaway Slave'. This raises questions about the appropriation of what Gayatri Spivak calls 'subaltern' subjectivities by white, middle-class women, but this issue shall not be addressed here. For more on the concept of 'subaltern' see my footnote on Spivak in Chapter 1, p. 42. For a recent analysis of questions of appropriation, see: John MacNeill Miller, 'Slavish Poses: Elizabeth Barrett Browning and the Aesthetics of Abolition', *Victorian Poetry*, 52.4 (2014), 637-59.

²⁹ Armstrong, p. 324.

is 'saved' by motherhood.³⁰ In the runaway slave's case this would be a salvation, achieved not in this life, but the next.

However, as Armstrong's conclusion suggests, it is possible to read the resolution of *TRS* differently. Located in the text of the poem are more complex possibilities. The intersection between spiritual and physical representations ('*The clouds are breaking on my brain*' (my emphasis)) is indicative of both a place of liminality and the kind of 'in-between' that the philosopher Gillian Rose calls the 'Broken Middle'.³¹ The Broken Middle represents the complex, lived ground or space between binaried philosophical or judicial or theoretical concepts. Rose posits it as a third term between, for example, the universal and the particular, the law and ethics, and actuality and potentiality. In Kate Schick's summary, the Broken Middle is a critique of 'the old, for its prescription and progressivism, and the new, for its rejection of the struggle to know and to judge.'³² She adds,

³⁰ This, of course, is one of the key tropes of nineteenth-century women's writing and writing about women. EBB herself offers a classic representation (and interrogation) of the fallen woman saved by motherhood in *Aurora Leigh*. There is insufficient space in this chapter to address this trope in detail. It is explored substantially in Chapters 4 and 5, which address fallenness in *AL* and *GM*, respectively.

³¹ Gillian Rose, *The Broken Middle: Out of Our Ancient Society* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1992). For an analysis of the concept of the Broken Middle, see Rachel Mann, 'Presiding from the Broken Middle', in *Presiding Like a Woman: Feminist Gesture for Christian Assembly*, ed. by Nicola Slee and Stephen Burns (London: SPCK, 2010), pp. 133-39.

³² See: Kate Schick, *Gillian Rose: A Good Enough Justice* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), pp. 36-37, as well as Section 1, Part 2. Gillian Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law: Philosophy and Representation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) represents Rose's attempt to revisit the concept of the Broken Middle through the political metaphor of the City. In our European discourse, the Politics of reason ('Athens') vies in tension with the politics of the idealised ethic ('New Jerusalem'); behind and between them lies the Third City, the politics through which we live. See, especially, Rose, *Mourning*, pp. 20-35.

‘the difficult [...] work of the middle [...] sits between tragedy and utopia: acknowledging the profound brokenness of actuality, whilst refusing to be paralysed by this brokenness.’³³

This Broken Middle or doubleness in representation is an analogue of the critique of stereotyped femininity embedded in EBB’s work. If elements of this closing stanza conform to a conventional representation of the salvific power of fecundity for women, it also resists that reading. The conclusion takes place in a context where the meanings of subjectivity and identity are questioned and reformed. Crucially this interrogation takes place around the twin axes of whiteness and blackness as well as fecundity and barrenness.

‘The Runaway Slave’ questions and offers potential reformulations of the binaries of black/white, master/slave³⁴ and fecundity/barrenness. It is possible to see how it does so by examining how they are placed into question by EBB’s use of the phrase ‘death-dark’. I shall argue that it is possible to read this phrase and its function in the final stanza as a post-life analogue of Julia Kristeva’s notion of Chora or Khôra. Before continuing it is helpful to rehearse Kristeva’s use of the notion. Kristeva, responding to the psycho-linguistics of Lacan and the psychodynamic theory of Freud, posits Chora as the earliest stage in human psychosexual development. In this initial pre-linguistic stage, the subject does not distinguish itself from that of

³³ Schick, p. 37.

³⁴ For an impressive reading of *TRS* in terms of Hegel’s concept of the Master/Slave relationship and mutual recognition, see: E. Warwick Slinn, *Victorian Poetry as Cultural Critique: The Politics of Performative Language* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003), pp. 76-89.

its mother or surroundings. Borrowing from Plato's use of the term in *The Timaeus*,³⁵ Kristeva says:

A *chora*: [is] a nonexpressive totality formed by the drives and their stases in a motility that is as full of movement as it is regulated [...] [it denotes] an essentially mobile and extremely provisional articulation constituted by movements and their ephemeral stases.³⁶

It is defined, then, by a chaotic mix of perceptions, feelings and needs, without boundaries and taboo; pleasure is not regulated by language. In short, it is the nearest one can get to what Jacques Lacan terms 'the Real'. In an essay on *The Symbolic, The Imaginary and The Real*, Lacan summarises, 'the real is either totality or the vanished instant.'³⁷ Bronfen's account of 'the Real' centres around the language of the body. She argues that:

The corpse can be understood as a representative of the order of the real, which Lacan defines as beyond semiotic, imaginary or symbolic categories: as 'that which is – minus its representation, description or interpretation'. It belongs to what Kristeva has called the 'semiotiké', a violent force disrupting the symbolic order, which must be repeatedly transferred into culture through a sacrifice.³⁸

I suggest that Chora can be applied to the slave's statement:

³⁵ *Khôra* meaning 'space', was classically the territory of the Polis outside the city proper.

³⁶ Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. by Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), p. 25.

³⁷ Jacques Lacan, *On the Names-of-the-Father*, trans. by Bruce Fink (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013). For a classic philosophical-historical analysis of the emergence of Lacan's thought, see Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, *Lacan: The Absolute Master*, trans. by Douglas Brick (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991).

³⁸ Bronfen, pp. 52-53.

In the name of the white child waiting for me

In the death-dark where we may kiss and agree

White men, I leave you all curse-free

In my broken heart's disdain! (XXXVI ll. 250-53)

Chora is typically defined as a space in natality not in death. Yet, given my previous claims that the slave woman's subjectivity is doubled and never quite her own, it is surely not unreasonable to read this 'death-dark' as the mother – symbolically at least – entering the child's Chora. For the child was murdered before it could achieve its own subjectivity. Within the religious economy of the poem, which allows for an afterlife, it is possible for the mother, whose feminine subjectivity is tied to her child, to enter the 'space' of the child who is forever tied to her.

The 'death-dark', then, is offered as a crucible – a post-life Chora – in which new meanings for arbitrary binary notions like whiteness and blackness, fecundity and barrenness and so on can be formulated. For example, the whiteness of the child – which as the poem articulates is tied up with the slave woman's decision to kill him ('I saw a look that made me mad! | The *master's* look' XXI143-44) – is 'lost' to/in the death-dark. Furthermore, this is a darkness in which the slave woman's blackness – socially and culturally defined and performed according to a constructed social discourse – is given space to achieve new meanings. This 'death-dark' Chora, then, is a kind of fecund possibility, not defined by patriarchal rules, in which new meanings and possibilities can be generated.

It is possible to begin to read the notion of 'death-dark' Chora as a

kind of analogue of womb. However, this reading of womb as 'icon of femininity' holds within it a fecund possibility no longer constructed on the classic patriarchal terms which implies 'tomb' or the promise of death. For this space of new meaning takes place *after* death and without the symbolic separation of Child from Mother implied by the Child's entrance into what Lacan calls the 'Symbolic Order' in and through the *Fort/Da Game* and the Mirror Phase.³⁹ For, in short, the child in *TRS* has died before achieving separation from his mother. Indeed, as Elisabeth Bronfen, in her study of Lacan and Freud, claims, it is the mother whose absence is made the condition of entering the symbolic order and made the Other. As the child enters the symbolic order of signs and difference, the mother is made the definition of 'the Literal'.⁴⁰

³⁹ The *Fort/Da* (Gone/There) *Game* is, in essence, simple and well-known. While thinking about the issue of repetitive compulsion in cases of trauma, Freud observed his eighteen-month old grandson, Ernst, playing a game with a cotton reel. The child – whom Freud suggests was not especially precocious, was a 'good little boy', could say only a few comprehensible words and 'never cried when his mother left him for a few hours' – did have an occasional disturbing habit. He took any small object he could get hold of and threw them away from him into a corner under the bed. As he did this he gave vent to a loud, long-drawn-out 'o-o-o-o,' accompanied by an expression of interest and satisfaction. His mother and Freud were agreed in thinking that this was not a mere interjection, but represented the German word '*fort*.' Freud interpreted this behaviour as a way of obtaining satisfaction by causing things to be 'gone'. A short time later Freud observed the child playing with a reel that had a piece of string tied around it. He would toss the reel away from him to where it could no longer be seen, before pulling it back into view and hailing its reappearance with a joyous '*Da!*' ('There!'). Freud also noticed that the boy would utter his 'o-o-o-o' sound with reference to *himself* – notably when, by crouching down below a mirror, he made his image 'gone'. Freud stresses the fact that the *fort* part of the game was much of the time sufficient unto itself, and was 'repeated untiringly' by the child. See: Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (London & Vienna: International Psycho-Analytical Press, 1922), pp. 11-16. For a substantial account of Freud and Lacan's use of the 'Fort/Da' Game and Mirror Phase, see Bronfen, especially Chapter 1.

⁴⁰ See Bronfen, pp. 18-35.

Yet, on the picture I've sketched, this separation or absence has not been produced. In Freud's articulation of the *Fort/Da Game*, the mother is presented as the exclusive object towards which the child can direct its demand for gratification for its needs. Bronfen claims that, for Freud, the game implies:

That what also disrupts and decentres human existence, producing both nostalgia for a previous state (the complete unity of the child with the maternal body) and a directness toward detour and creation in the form of symbolic play, are the many inscriptions of death that mark the human body from birth on.⁴¹

The game enacts a renunciation of total investment in the mother for gratification and meaning. It enacts a separation, that as Bronfen argues, acknowledging Kristeva, is also a form of violence or murder. For in the symbolic action of the game – which may be generated as an act of revenge by the child against the mother for leaving him alone – not only is the child claiming 'mastery' over the mother's absence, he is sacrificing her.

Kristeva describes this process as a form of sacrifice, which sets up the symbol and the symbolic order at the same time. In order for the child to achieve entry into the symbolic order, the mother – the first symbol – is the victim of a (metaphorical) murder.⁴² As Bronfen further adds, this act of murder is not only a break with complete, literal identification with the mother, but the child's conceptualization of and attempted mastery over

⁴¹ Ibid, p.21.

⁴² Kristeva, *Revolution*, p. 75.

death:

It is a renunciation of the demand to have the mother permanently present and involves the narcissistically wounding recognition of her necessary absence. But the play of absence and presence involves, in the first place, the child's conceptualization of death.⁴³

The pleasure of the game includes feelings of mastery – the illusion of control over death and negation and absence – but also aspects of revenge. 'Freud suggests that 'throwing away the object so that it was "gone" might satisfy an impulse of the child's, which was suppressed in his actual life, to revenge himself on his mother for going away from him.'⁴⁴

Significant as Bronfen's analysis is, as I've already suggested, the conditions lack in *TRS* for the child to have achieved this symbolic murder of the mother. They remain one; the speculative 'space' of post-death Chora remains an imaginary gesture towards their union. It is in this context, that the slave woman – who has passed into a place where meaning may be redefined – says, 'White men, I leave you all curse-free | In my broken heart's distain' (XXXVI ll. 251-52). This locution does not simply give 'white men'/the master ideology/patriarchy 'a bye', letting them off without cost. Given my earlier reading of curse – as a synonym for 'a call for barrenness' – the lifting of that curse can be read not as an acceptance of the status quo, but as a new call for fecundity. The term 'white men' is both a specific representation of the vile and oppressive status quo, but is also being called

⁴³ Bronfen, p. 23.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

into creative, transgressive meaning from the perspective of the 'death-dark' Chora – a place where a term like 'fecundity' might possibly be read as possible for 'white men'. This – on the terms of patriarchy – would be a condemnation, a humiliation; in the terms of the 'death-dark' it may be a revolution and a hope. For the slave woman, martyrdom is inescapable. She embraces the ironically fecund possibility of the death-dark in which a kiss, a symbol of love, of bondedness, of recognition and community (and yes, betrayal) may be a revolution; this might seem impossibly bleak and tragic, but she embraces it nonetheless.

Perhaps the slave woman's remission of 'the curse' is an act of power and subversion in the midst of her seeming defeat. It belongs to the category of subversive Christianity in which blessings are hot coals on the heads of the oppressors. This is a category in which those who have sought to deprive others of power discover that they cannot control the meanings of supposed victims; in which the victim claims their own power and chooses to retain or forgive the sin of the transgressor. This is a different picture of power than that defined by the masters. This is a power which seeks to transform meanings, not ossify them. This is a power which looks to reformulate patriarchal discourses of femininity, race and so on. It is to a fuller interrogation of the nature of that subversion – through the poetic form of dramatic monologue – that I now turn.

***Religion, Race and Gender – The Runaway Slave as Dramatic Monologue
of Fecundity and Barrenness***

TRS has been appropriately read as highly charged political rhetoric and as ethical drama centred on the agency and culpability of a woman who commits infanticide.⁴⁵ This drama unfolds within a form – dramatic monologue – that I suggested in the last chapter offers a potent way for nineteenth-century middle-class women poets to foreground voice, gender performance and religious identity. However, as E. Warwick Slinn has suggested, ‘while “The Runaway Slave” lacks the ironic betrayal that is often a feature of that form, it nevertheless revolves around another main structural feature, a relationship with interlocutors.’⁴⁶ The lack of ‘ironic betrayal’ is arguably highlighted by the feature of the poem that is most frequently examined: the speaker’s narration of her infanticide. Indeed, for Melissa Schaub, ‘it is the section that most violates the dramatic monologue’s convention that a reader must sympathize with the speaker but simultaneously judge her as well.’⁴⁷ Arguably, then, one of the disconcerting achievements/effects of *TRS* is to deprive the reader of the authority to judge the speaker. In effect, it is possible to suggest that the poem lacks a key feature of the classic dramatic monologue: dramatic irony.

⁴⁵ See Ficke; Stone, *The Garrisonians*; Leighton, *Against The Heart*.

⁴⁶ Slinn, *Victorian Poetry*, p. 80.

⁴⁷ Schaub, p. 562.

However, the claim that *TRS* lacks dramatic irony – that is, it lacks features which allows ‘the audience or the reader [...to know] more than a character does about the character’s situation’⁴⁸ and thereby judge, pity or laugh at them – is one that warrants further comment. If Schaub and Slinn are arguably correct to claim there is no dramatic irony in relation to the speaker, there remains a further axis regarding dramatic monologue to consider: a dichotomy between the implied ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ audience.⁴⁹ In the dramatic monologue *example par excellence*, Browning’s ‘My Last Duchess’, the inner audience for the poem is a stranger the speaker is showing around his house.⁵⁰ The ‘outer’ audience is the reader of the poem. Thus, on these terms, *TRS* arguably constructs an implied inner audience for its performance: in the first instance, slave-holders and racists and those who hold a Christianity which bolsters and legitimates the gender and race violence held in the text. Yet, EBB’s use of the rhetorical devices of dramatic monologue arguably generate a version of dramatic irony rather different to that considered as lacking by Schaub: it allows the reader, as ‘outside audience’, to pronounce judgment on the poem’s implied inner audience.

⁴⁸ Tom Furniss and Michael Bath, *Reading Poetry: An Introduction*, 2nd edn (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2007 (1996)), p. 244.

⁴⁹ The question regarding ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ audience in *TRS* arose from a critical dialogue between my Director of Studies, Angelica Michelis and me. I’m grateful she raised the question of whether *TRS* constructs an alternative dramatic irony around implied audiences and provoking the discussion in this chapter. Her position draws on a reading of Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of ‘hidden dialogicality’. As Bakhtin puts it, ‘the second speaker is present invisibly, his words are not there, but deep traces left by these words have a determining influence on all the present and visible words of the first speaker’. See: Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Bakhtin Reader: Selected Writings of Bakhtin, Medvedev, Voloshinov*, ed. by Pam Morris (London: Edward Arnold, 1994), p. 108.

⁵⁰ Furniss and Bath, p. 231.

As I shall suggest shortly during my discussion of Butler's classic position on gender and performativity, EBB's language makes available a critical moment which allows the reader to critically assess naturalistic claims about the notion of femininity as fecundity constructed through religio-patriarchal discourse.

EBB also uses the dramatic monologue form for another effect: as a mask which liberates the speaker from objectification. The conscious use of mask and voice is one strategy for foregrounding discourses of femininity, gender and race. Tricia Lootens claims that, 'dramatic monologues invite dramatic performance.'⁵¹ While Lootens is speaking specifically about encouraging her students to perform or read out-loud *TRS* this very practice foregrounds the performative dimensions of discourses around gender and race. The theatrical element of dramatic monologue acts as a performative prism through which to read voice, subjectivity and so on. This should not be surprising. The Ancient Greek from which the notion of 'theatre' derives, *theaomai*, means 'behold' or 'showing': the drama of the theatrical is a way of showing forth meanings and possibilities.

The remainder of this chapter will examine how reading *TRS* as dramatic monologue through the twin prisms of Judith Butler's classic ideas about performativity and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's concept of 'kyriarchy' allows for a Christian-feminist reading of the poem. I begin by

⁵¹ Tricia Lootens, 'Publishing & Reading "Our EBB": Editorial Pedagogy, Contemporary Culture, and 'the Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point'', *Victorian Poetry*, 44.4 (2006), 487-506 (p. 497).

grounding my conclusions in the insights of Angela Leighton. Leighton asserts that:

This is a poem which is almost entirely free of sentimentality because, for all its emotional rhetoric, it holds nothing sacred. Democracy, religious liberty, family ancestry and even mother love cannot be kept, to use [Felicia] Hemans' word, 'unstain'd'.⁵²

Leighton grounds her claim in a comparison between EBB's poetic strategies and those of Felicia Hemans in the ostensibly similar poem, 'The Landing of the Pilgrim Fathers in New England'. Leighton notes, 'in some points, 'The Runaway Slave' recalls Hemans' poem. [However] where Hemans [...] strings together an easy necklace of moral values, and then issues a loud clarion call to faith, Barrett Browning ends by putting faith in doubt.'⁵³ Hemans concludes her poem:

Ay, call it holy ground,
The soil where first they trode.
They have left unstain'd what there they found –
Freedom to worship God.' (ll. 37-40)⁵⁴

Where Hemans speaks in terms of abstract ideals, by contrast, EBB's slave woman speaks into located time and space:

I stand on the mark beside the shore
Of the first white pilgrim's bended knee
[...]

⁵² Leighton, *Against The Heart*, p. 99.

⁵³ Ibid, p. 98.

⁵⁴ *The Poetical Works of Felicia Hemans*, pp. 449-50.

I have run through the night, my skin is as dark

I bend my knee down on this mark:

I look on the sky and the sea. (I ll. 1-2, 4-6)

This sense of contingency is significant for the way the runaway slave relates to religious diktats and authority. For, by locating her voice in time and space, EBB allows the slave to bring concepts afforded universal claims on power and authority – God, liberty and so on – into interrogative question. In Stanza IV, the slave woman says,

I am black, I am black;

And yet God made me, they say.

But if He did so, smiling back

He must have cast His work away

Under the feet of His white creatures,

With a look of scorn, that the dusky features

Might be trodden again to clay. (ll. 22-28)

The woman's reference to clay gestures directly towards the creation story in Genesis 2 in which 'man' is formed from the clay or dust of the earth. By repeating the words 'I am black' she underlines one criterion by which she is judged. By adding 'they say' to the statement 'And yet God made me' the slave woman indicates her questioning of her place in God's economy.

From the beginnings of creation, Leighton suggests:

The white God is complicit with the other half of his creation. The slave, who has seen her black lover killed, who has, herself, been flogged and raped, points with persuasive logic, to those interlocking systems of religious belief, racial authority and simple brute force, which seem to

make up the rationale of her pain [...] Here, the creator God allows a whole race, in a reverse creation, to 'be trodden again to clay'.⁵⁵

At the very heart of the slave's rejection of a system defined in terms of the 'White God' is a rejection of the maternal bond between mother and child. Motherhood – the icon of femininity – is rejected through the 'sin' of infanticide. In stanza XVIII, the woman says:

My own, own child! I could not bear
To look in his face, it was so white.
I covered him up with a kerchief there;
I covered his face in close and tight:
And he moaned and struggled, as well might be,
For the white child wanted his liberty—
Ha, ha! he wanted his master right. (ll. 120-26)

There are serious ironies in EBB's use of the word, 'liberty', something Leighton is helpfully alert to:

[It] is ripe with so many connotations of whiteness, masculinity and racial superiority that the irony is almost lost. Just as 'exile turned to ancestor' so 'liberty' turns to 'master-right'. All values, in this poem, shift from one meaning to another, from good to evil.⁵⁶

It is in this context that the slave kills her child. It breaks the 'natural' line of 'mastership' he signifies.

⁵⁵ Ibid, p. 100. Leighton also claims, 'the image of male power treading underfoot a weaker creature is a leitmotif of Barrett Browning's poetry.'

⁵⁶ Ibid, p. 101.

One of the many striking ironies of *TRS* is how the slave woman's rejection of the fruit of her fecundity, her child, finds its counterpoint in her vision of an afterlife – an absurdly strange and ironical picture of immortality. In Stanza XXIII, the slave says:

But my fruit ... ha, ha! – there, had been

(I laugh to think on't at this hour!)

Your fine white angels, (who have seen

Nearest the secret of God's power,

And plucked my fruit to make them wine,

And sucked the soul of that child of mine,

As the humming-bird sucks the soul of the flower. (ll. 155-61)

The slave's dead child – the 'fruit' which she has killed – has been received into an afterlife in which angels have an almost vampiric character, sucking on the lush 'fruit' of the child's soul to make wine. This cartoon of the afterlife as a banquet of angels sucking new wine is still riddled with the colour scheme of the whole poem. The slave scornfully points out to the reader, these are 'your fine white angels' and this god has a secret power all too similar to the dreaded 'master-right'. God and his angels supply an analogue of earthly power, cruel and bloodthirsty. The blood of the child is sweet as wine to them.

It is difficult not to conclude that EBB – by deploying startling, almost horrifying images of fecundity – strikes a fatal blow to the White God as universal guarantor of goodness. The mother's 'sin' – rejecting her 'natural' relationship with her child by committing murder – is also an act of revolt

and revolution against a totalitarian and totalising system. The slave's act exposes sharp binaries between totalitarian/universal and historicised/relative moralities.

What's interesting is how the poem's rejection of totalising moralities and religions operates around an axis of fecundity and barrenness. *TRS* takes a language of generative excess (typically used in both secular and religious nineteenth-century discourse to prescribe what goodness/holiness/normality for women looks like) in order to expose the barrenness of that discourse. Rather than being a place of fulfilment, nourishment and completion for the slave woman, 'God' and the system he represents offer her nothing but barrenness: even in the afterlife God's 'white' angels feed on the nectar of her child's soul. While the child dies at the slave woman's hand, and she is therefore 'responsible' for his death, her action is determined by the system. For to embrace and keep the fruit of her fecund body would have meant bringing him into the slave economy as a slave (an appalling prospect) or – if she escaped slavery – to have constantly seen in his white face 'a look that made me mad! | The *master's* look, that used to fall | On my soul like his lash' (XXI II. 143-45). The universal system that, in the slave woman's world, mediates meaning and goodness is a place of cruelty, tragedy and sacrifice.

It can be argued, then, that by placing her act of infanticide in a context of language of fecundity and barrenness, the slave woman's performance of voice exposes what Judith Butler (using Foucault) calls a

regulative discourse around gender.⁵⁷ For Butler, '[the] "unity" of gender is the effect of a regulatory practice that seeks to render gender identity uniform through a compulsory heterosexuality.'⁵⁸ She further claims that 'gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance.'⁵⁹ In Victorian culture the claim that a woman found her 'natural' fulfilment in child-birth and rearing was common. Citing Victorian critic Eric S. Robertson, Angela Leighton reminds us of some aspects of what might be called the Victorian ideology of femininity and how it interplays with religious identity:

The ideological swindle in the myth of ' "doting mothers, and perfect wives" ' is a powerful one, particularly because it invokes a religious fervour hard to disavow. In 1883, Eric S. Robertson pointed to the hidden implication of such a myth. 'The trustfulness that is so characteristic of woman's views of existence may be one great cause of her comparative lack of imagination', he asserts.⁶⁰

Robertson's position is as double-handed as Romney Leigh's in *AL*.⁶¹ The age needs women to be saints not poets. For someone like Robertson, women's

⁵⁷ See, for example, Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Abingdon & New York: Routledge (Classics), 2006 (1990)), Chapter 1.

⁵⁸ Ibid, p. 43.

⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 45.

⁶⁰ Leighton, *Against The Heart*, p. 93.

⁶¹ See, for example: 'You give us doting mothers, and perfect wives. | Sublime Madonnas, and enduring saints! | We get no Christ from you, – and verily | We shall not get a poet, in my mind.' (Bk II, ll. 220-225)

saintliness is necessary for male 'completeness' and subjectivity, for as Robertson summarises: 'Faith is woman-like, doubt is man-like'.

Yet as Butler indicates there is a profound sense in which so-called natural gendered, sexed and desiring identities – as inner 'realities' – are constructed through discourses of repetition and anticipation. The performance of gender identities is regulated by discourses which disguise their own contingency. Butler cites Jacques Derrida's reading of Kafka's 'Before the Law' as a way of revealing the way anticipation and repetition 'conjure' objects. In 'Before the Law', the one who waits for the law, sits before the door of the law, attributing to the law for which one waits, a certain force. 'The anticipation of an authoritative disclosure of meaning is the means by which that authority is attributed and installed: the anticipation conjures the object.'⁶² Butler takes that thinking and considers it in relation to gender, wondering if:

It operates as an interior essence that might be disclosed, an expectation that ends up producing the very phenomenon that it anticipates. In the first instance, then, the performativity of gender revolves around this metalepsis, the way in which the anticipation of a gendered essence produces that which it posits as outside itself. Secondly, performativity is

⁶² Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. xv. This thesis prioritises Butler's 'classic' work on the subject and performativity (and their origins in speech-act theory) rather than her recent work on community, body-solidarity, precarity, and assembly. This partly reflects my interest in the speech-drama of poetry and performance over Butler's growing interest in community movements, 'mourning', and solidarity. For examples of her more recent work, see: Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London & New York: Verso, 2006 (2004)); Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London & New York: Verso, 2010); Judith Butler, *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration.⁶³

Femininity and motherhood, defined primarily through the key regulatory discourse of masculine heterosexuality, are presented and re-presented as natural, essential and internal. The slave woman – by rejecting what can be presented as ‘natural’ ‘motherly’ affection for her babe – performs her identity in a transgressive manner. She takes the language of the natural fecund with which women have typically been identified and – by placing it in a context where through murdering her child she transgresses natural assumptions – she exposes the constructed shape of femininity. The ironies of language reveal the points of breakage in the naturalistic picture of the feminine legitimated by religious and patriarchal hegemonies.

This breakage in the naturalistic pattern of the feminine is, significantly, predicated on the slave choosing to perform her ‘blackness’ over her motherhood. The repetitions of ‘I am black’, ‘We are black’, ‘I am not mad: I am black’ which are spoken across and through the poem are acts of resistance to the ‘masters’/‘hunter-sons’ hegemony (‘I know you are staring, shrinking back, | Ye are born of the Washington-race’ (XXXII ll. 220-21)) and an act of embracing a transgressive subjectivity. It is an act of entering a place of absence, where her meaning as black is defined only as that which is not-white. She acts to perform the Other and, in doing so, exposes the violence and negation at the centre of the Master Discourse.

⁶³ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p.xv.

Her performance of blackness in a slave economy, exposes how femininity as motherhood is tied up with the linguistic position of whiteness. If motherhood can hold an honoured place in the Master Discourse for women, it is not available to all women.

The argument above makes it reasonably clear how EBB's runaway slave performs a transgressive subject who deploys language of fecundity and barrenness against patriarchal-religious understandings of the feminine and of religion. It may be less clear how this performance enacts a Christian-feminist poetics. Indeed, as Marjorie Stone notes:

EBB presents a black female martyr to the anti-slavery cause, speaking for her race and articulating the curse that white slaveholders bring upon themselves. 'Your white men', the slave declares in Stanza 35, 'Are, after all, not gods indeed/Nor able to make Christs again/Do good with bleeding'.⁶⁴

She adds, 'It is blacks who 'bleed', but because their weight of suffering is too heavy for human endurance, they cannot become Christ figures: 'We are too heavy for our cross,/And fall and crush you and your seed'.⁶⁵ If Stone's assessment is correct, the runaway slave's martyrdom cannot be read according to the central myth of Christianity. Indeed, Stone notes that after an early draft in which the slave was male, EBB shifts the gender of her speaker and 'portrays her [...] engaged in a Blakean questioning of the white male Christian God she has constructed in her brutal master's image, as the

⁶⁴ Stone, *The Garrisonians*, p. 48.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

slave woman wrestles with her double burden of sexual and racial oppression.⁶⁶ The discourse of the white male Christian God has generated a profound alienation in religious and racial identity of which the slave woman's 'white-faced' babe is an icon:

For hark! I will tell you low, low,
I am black, you see, –
And the babe who lay on my bosom so,
Was far too white, too white for me;
As white as the ladies who scorned to pray
Beside me at church but yesterday;
Though my tears had washed a place for my knee.' (XVII ll. 113-19)

Stone is surely correct to read *TRS* as an interrogation of the white male Christian God, but it remains possible to read the voice of the slave woman as an anticipation of a Christian-feminist poetics. As noted in the opening section of this chapter, EBB makes use of Christian irony, specifically around the intersection of fecundity and barrenness, to question the white totalitarian God. As the slave woman 'hangs like a gourd' it is precisely the masters' strategy of making barren that she uses as a means for 'new life' and possibility. She deploys a curse to implore the slaves to rise up against their oppressors. This is a woman in control, despite the attempts of the masters to reduce her to barren artefact for the status quo: 'You think I shrieked then? Not a sound.' Rather:

I only cursed them all around

⁶⁶ Ibid, p. 51.

As softly as I might have done
My very own child: from these sands
Up to the mountains, lift your hands,
O Slaves, and end what I begun!' (XXXIII ll. 227-31)

However, by concentrating on Stanza XXXVI, in which as I've already noted, the slave woman focuses on her child waiting in the 'death-dark' and 'forgives' her torturers, John MacNeill Miller offers one route by which the runaway slave's behaviour might be read according to Christian pictures of sacrifice. He notes how,

At the moment of her own death and implied assumption into heaven, the slave's final act – her Christian decision to leave the slave owners curse-free – is performed in the name of her own child, who becomes a purposefully ambiguous type of the Christ child in whose name she can swear a sanctified oath of forgiveness and redemption.⁶⁷

Yet, while Miller's talk of an ambiguous Christ is helpful, I want to suggest we can push this Christian picture even further by drawing on the resources of Christian feminist theology.

Feminist Christian theologian Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's concept of 'kyriarchy' offers a helpful prism for understanding the slave woman's strategy of resistance. An intersectional neologism intended as a means of extending the concept of patriarchy beyond gender (to include notions of race, sexism, homophobia, and economic injustice), kyriarchy is especially interesting in the context of *TRS* – the meaning of the Greek 'kyrios' from

⁶⁷ Miller, p. 643.

which it originates includes the idea of ‘master’ as well as ‘lord’.⁶⁸ It falls outside the scope of this chapter to offer a detailed reading of Schüssler Fiorenza’s strategic use of the concept (which explores how systems of thought, belief and practice can privilege and oppress relationships). However, she argues that close attention to biblical (mis-)representations of women and an exposure of the violence done by biblical and religious texts against women and Othered groups provides not only the ‘dangerous memory’ to critique ‘kyriarchy’, but offer alternative feminist readings of Christianity.⁶⁹

The masters who use, rape and who martyr the fugitive slave are representatives and progenitors of what Schüssler Fiorenza would label a kyriarchy: in this nexus of thought God is ‘master’, an idealised analogue of the masters – white, male and so on. Within this picture, there will be various degrees of privilege and oppression. The fugitive slave woman is striking in that she represents an almost complete absence of privilege. Yet, as Schüssler Fiorenza attempts to show, the God of the Biblical equivalent of ‘the masters’ is at odds with a critical, feminist reading of G-d.⁷⁰ In the face of kyriarchal oppression, the theologically and religiously faithful response is resistance and revolt.

⁶⁸ For a full account, see: Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992).

⁶⁹ See, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Empowering Memory & Movement: Thinking and Working across Boundaries* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), pp. 142-44. See also, Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984).

⁷⁰ Schüssler Fiorenza’s technical term which attempts to articulate a sense of the divine from a non-kyriarchal perspective.

Where does this leave a reading of the actions and speech of the runaway slave? I have already suggested – contra Marjorie Stone – that we might read her speech from the torture-pole in Christ-like terms. She takes the weapon of the masters – in this case being hung like a gourd, rather than, in Christ’s case, the Cross – as a way of setting free ‘new life’ in the form of a call to revolt. But perhaps the runaway slave might be read also as a kind of highly-ironised new Eve. The biblical Eve was found guilty of taking and eating the forbidden fruit and punished by a kyriarchal God who expected obedience. The unnamed slave woman follows a different trajectory: she rejects the fruit of her fecundity, forced upon her by the ‘hunter-sons’ of the first Pilgrim Fathers. She rejects the bitter fruit of a vile, unjust system which demands her compliance and acquiescence. Her ‘sin’ is the rejection of that which she is ‘naturally’ expected to love and embrace: a child.⁷¹

EBB’s skill is to make of this ‘sin’ an act of exposure which reveals the injustice of the system of slavery. The slave woman as new Eve commits a necessary act of revolt and resistance.⁷² Melissa Schaub, in writing about

⁷¹ For a striking analysis of another of EBB’s revisionings of the Christian mythos around Eve, specifically in the early poem ‘A Drama of Exile’, see Lewis, Chapter 2. Lewis argues that, ‘*A Drama of Exile* is a bold revision of John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, directing one’s attention to Eve rather than to Lucifer or Adam as the center of the drama of the Fall.’ Ibid, pp. 50-51. For an analysis of *AL* alongside *Paradise Lost*, see Sarah Annes Brown, ‘Paradise Lost and Aurora Leigh’, *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 37.4 (1997), 723-40. Brown suggests that *AL* acts as a palinode in response to Milton’s poem in which EBB offers a riposte to Milton’s misrepresentation of women via the figure of Eve.

⁷² Another way of reflecting on the slave woman’s action is that she chooses to perform the role of Satan, the angel of light cast out into darkness. Rather than being ‘cast out’ she chooses/wills that position, in language, representation and action. The slave woman as ‘Satan’ suggests that the patriarchal/kyriarchal God is

how her students don't judge the slave woman's actions as wrong, suggests this is, 'probably because "Runaway Slave" completely lacks the dramatic irony that often carries the judgment function of a dramatic monologue.'⁷³

She adds:

Because the slave displays an awareness of the opinions of others and addresses herself to them, she violates the pattern of the dramatic monologue, in which the morally questionable speaker inadvertently reveals things about himself to the reader. There is no dramatic irony in this poem [...] As a consequence, the speaker and reader are on the same epistemological plane, just as they are in most lyric poems. We do not judge her, only slavery.⁷⁴

As my earlier discussion indicated, the 'absence' of dramatic irony in *TRS* is moot. If there are grounds for claiming that we don't judge the speaker in the poem, Angelica Michelis has a point when claiming that, insofar as the poem has an 'inner' audience, judgment is cast on them. However, Schaub's pedagogical praxis has indicated that, for many in a modern, outer audience judgment is reserved for slavery and the symbolic matrix that represents.

Yet, EBB's brilliance lies in her ability to leave space for a critical-theological reading of *TRS* that goes beyond political rhetoric. The poem's conclusion – in which mother is reunited with child – creates a surface which looks dangerously sentimental and emotionally excessive. Yet, as this chapter has argued, the conclusion offers both a haunting reminder of the

precisely the kind of tyrannical figure who should be rebelled against – exposing his cruelty and his complicity in violence.

⁷³ Schaub, p. 564.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

way even the slave woman – who chooses to perform her blackness over that of motherhood – cannot escape her identity being defined in terms of her fecundity/motherhood. By suggesting that the hope or space for the reformulation of discourses of femininity, race and gender is only available in a Choric ‘death-dark’, a new womb beyond the tomb, EBB offers a terrifying indictment of nineteenth-century notions of race and femininity. Yet if we dare read that ‘death-dark’ as a place of flux and possibility, there remains in EBB’s poem the hope of investing discourses of race, fecundity and faith with new meanings. The prospect is a slim one. But it is still there.

CHAPTER THREE

‘Do I look a Hagar, think you?’ – Reading *Aurora Leigh* as a Christian-Feminist (Marriage) Manifesto on Fecundity and Barrenness

As indicated in the last chapter, fecundity and barrenness represents a fruitful and revealing axis through which to interrogate the poetry of EBB. I’ve attempted to explore how the language of fecundity in a dramatic monologue like *TRS* makes available a poetics which is both Christian and feminist. This chapter attempts to develop this strategy by focusing on EBB’s central text, *Aurora Leigh*. *AL* is the work in which EBB locates – in her own words – all her ‘highest convictions upon Life and Art.’¹ As Dorothy Mermin claims, ‘its argument is that writing a poem can itself be an epic action that leads, like an epic hero’s, to the creation of a new social order.’² In short, ‘*Aurora Leigh* is about writing poetry, and it *is* the kind of poem it describes.’³ It performs its very nature and, indeed, I shall suggest it may appropriately be read as dramatic monologue. *AL* will be interrogated over the next two chapters. The sheer scope of *AL* – it examines not only the place and possibility of woman as poet, socio-political manners and morals,

¹ Dedication to John Kenyon, 17 October 1856. EBB, in correspondence, also describes *AL* as a ‘poetic art-novel’. See: *The Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, ed. by Frederic G. Kenyon, 2 Volumes (New York: Macmillan, 1897), Vol. 2, p. 228.

² Mermin, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, p. 183.

³ *Ibid*, p. 185.

as well as the relationships and disconnections between Socialism and Christianity, among other things – means this study is inevitably selective. My overall intention is to develop the Christian-feminist poetics of fecundity and barrenness outlined in my previous discussion of *TRS*. EBB's language of fecundity and barrenness in *AL* will be interrogated through two sets of relationships at its centre. These relationships are those between Aurora and Romney Leigh, and those between Aurora and Marian Erle.⁴ Each, in different ways, afford striking scope for reformulating patriarchal understandings of fecundity and barrenness in feminist, yet still recognisably Christian terms.

This chapter concentrates on the relationship between Aurora and Romney, interrogated through two categories: firstly, the category of marriage and, secondly, the category of surrogacy. I shall examine how, in the mid-part of the nineteenth century, middle-class marriage was a primary means through which patriarchal culture organised women's capacity for reproductive excess. As Willem Jones suggests, drawing on the work of Davidoff and Hall, 'it was a particular Evangelical Christian model of gender and family that undergirds the English middle-class moral order in the middle of the nineteenth century.'⁵ It is this kind of picture of marriage that is at stake in this chapter; it is one in which gender and sexual imbalance

⁴ The second chapter will concentrate on exploring fecundity and barrenness through the notions of motherhood, the absence of mothers and fallenness in *AL*.

⁵ Timothy Willem Jones, *Sexual Politics in the Church of England, 1857-1957* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 19. See also: Leonora Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), pp. 71-192.

was legitimated by biblical and Church warrant and which the 'pious' middle-classes deployed to construct their self-image.⁶ I shall explore how Aurora negotiates her agency as a subject through this religio-patriarchal picture of marriage. Aurora's initial refusal to marry Romney, followed by her ultimate decision to wed him, represents a key arc through which Aurora's emergence as artist and active subject is achieved and sustained. Using insights from Luce Irigaray, I will examine how Aurora's initial refusal of marriage is a refusal to participate in patriarchal exclusion of women from subjectivity and the Symbolic Order; she refuses to be treated simply as a fecund being whose value lies merely in her reproductive excess (what Irigaray calls 'productive excess') and exchange value.

Aurora's refusal to be ordered in terms of her reproductive and exchange value reveals further important significations when read through the category of surrogacy. I shall argue that EBB's subversive use of biblical characters – notably the surrogate mother and slave, Hagar – represents an opportunity for a liberative, Christian reading of *AL*. Aurora's rejection of Romney and her pursuit of a poet's life can be read as both a rejection of performing Hagar's role and a reformulation of it. Aurora refuses to play a role for Romney – as his wife – that, at the start of the poem-novel, she reads as having the status of surrogate and slave. She refuses to perform

⁶ Evangelical Christianity could draw its patriarchal-hegemonic picture of marriage from biblical text. Ephesians 5. 23 states, 'For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body.' Anglo-Catholics used sacramental theology to 'supernaturalise' that verse, in effect suggesting that Holy Matrimony was a mark of God's grace in the world.

the role of bonds-woman who will, through her fecundity, produce an heir. Rather, by becoming a poet, she performs a subversive, masculine subjectivity, claiming that space for fecundity. I shall interrogate how Aurora – as a fundamentally doubled character – thereby reformulates fecundity and barrenness in a feminist direction. In short, Aurora’s ultimate decision to marry Romney is no mere capitulation to patriarchal order, but an option to enter into what feminist theologian Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza calls ‘ekklesia’: a community grounded in solidarity, respect and equality.

The Place of Marriage in Aurora Leigh and Early Victorian Culture – Fecundity as Dangerous Excess

Many feminist critics have suggested that *AL* is first and foremost a novel-poem *Künstlerroman* ‘in blank verse about the growth of a woman poet and the education of her heart through pride, sympathy, love and suffering.’⁷ Aurora is born in Florence to an Englishman and the Italian bride

⁷ Gilbert and Gubar, p. 575. Gilbert and Gubar’s now venerable understanding has been echoed by Marisa Palacios Knox, ‘Masculine Identification and Marital Dissolution in *Aurora Leigh*’, *Victorian Poetry*, 52.2 (2014), 277-300. Marjorie Stone claims that *AL* should not be read merely as *Künstlerroman*, but also as an example of Victorian Sage Literature. See Stone, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, Chapter 4. For an extended analysis of form in *AL*, see Alison Case, ‘Gender and Narration in “*Aurora Leigh*”’, *Victorian Poetry*, 29.1 (1991), 17-32. More recently, Mary Mullen makes a case for *AL* as a locus for formal innovations which generate disruptive temporal effects. See: Mary Mullen, ‘Two Clocks: *Aurora Leigh*, Poetic Form, and the Politics of Timeliness’, *Victorian Poetry*, 51.1 (2013), 63-80. Florence Boos’s work draws out how rich *AL* is in pedagogical terms: Florence S. Boos, ‘Let Me Count the Ways’: Teaching the Many-Faceted *Aurora Leigh*’, *Pedagogy: critical approaches to teaching literature, language, culture and composition*, 16.2 (2016), 333-45.

he has been disinherited for marrying. After the death of her father, she comes, as a thirteen-year old, to England to live with her maiden aunt. Her aunt seems bent on initiating Aurora 'into the torments of feminine gentility.'⁸ Aurora resists and – after studying her father's books – determines on becoming a poet. At the age of nineteen, when Aurora is still unformed as a poet, her cousin, Romney Leigh, proposes marriage. Aurora refuses and sets out to become a great poet. Aurora achieves fame, while Romney's attempts to reform the conditions of the poor (including notably his failed political gesture to marry working-class Marian Erle) end in failure. Leigh Hall is destroyed by fire and Romney loses his sight in the attempt to save Marian's drunken father. Aurora returns to Europe, tormented by the belief that Romney – whom she secretly loves – is about to marry the scheming Lady Waldemar. Waldemar has persuaded Marian to renounce Romney and, sent off to Paris, Marian ends up trapped in a whorehouse, drugged, raped and impregnated. Aurora encounters the abused Marian and together they head to Florence where Aurora makes a home for Marian and her child. Finally, the blind Romney – whose blindness Aurora doesn't initially suspect – arrives in Italy and Aurora chooses to marry Romney.

While this summary indicates the extent to which EBB's book 'works' as a romantic novel in which, as Aurora ultimately concedes, "Art is much; but love is more" (Bk IX, l. 656), it does no justice to the sheer range of *AL*'s

⁸ Gilbert and Gubar, p. 575.

concerns. Linda M. Lewis claims the social setting for the writing of the novel-poem is quite extraordinary:

The novel-poem was written following a time of intense political ferment [...] including not only the revolutions in Austria and France but also several important works of political theory, including the *Communist Manifesto* of 1848, as well as numerous socialistic theories and experimental communes in France and England throughout the 1830s and 1840s.⁹

AL, then, interrogates – through Romney’s failed Socialist schemes¹⁰ – the extraordinary social ferment in play across Europe and firmly suggests that a Christian economy of salvation offers more than a well-intended scheme of social reformation. Lewis further argues, in relation to the snobbish Catholic, Sir Blaise, during the dinner party scene:

Certainly Sir Blaise [...] comes in for his share of satire; he is satirized for narrow allegiance to the catholic, apostolic, mother-church that draws the line so plain and straight that everybody outside is, in his view, not Christian but animalistic, a view that [EBB] rejects. (As far as she is concerned, the best Christians may well be outside *all* churches.)¹¹

AL, then, is a skilled and witty satire on religious mores, Salon culture and class.

⁹ Lewis, p. 119.

¹⁰ Which are based primarily on the Socialist ideas of Charles Fourier and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, and those of the Englishman Charles Kingsley. For more details on the nineteenth-century interest in Socialist and Feminist Communities see, Barbara Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem: Socialism and Feminism in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Virago, 1983).

¹¹ Lewis, pp. 121-22.

If it is clearly the case that *AL* can appropriately be read as *Künstlerroman* or, following Marjorie Stone, as 'Victorian Sage Literature',¹² it may also be read as dramatic monologue. Stone herself acknowledges how EBB:

In keeping with her belief that the subjective is 'the nearest approach to a genuinely objective view' she employs a narrative strategy in *Aurora Leigh* that has strong affinities both with the dramatic monologues she experimented with throughout the 1840s and with the experimental first-person form of novels like Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*.¹³

As indicated in the opening chapter, the likes of Glynnis Byron and Dorothy Mermin have suggested that EBB makes very little use of the dramatic monologue form.¹⁴ However, when read through the expansive prism of performativity, I suggest it is possible to push further than Stone's claim that *AL* has 'strong affinities' with dramatic monologue.

Indeed, arguably, the very nature of *AL* as a poem-text written by a woman poet, about a woman poet becoming a poet, in the act of writing poetry, is indicative of its performative horizons. *AL* represents a rehearsal of voice and identities in gendered and sexual spaces and contexts.¹⁵ As

¹² In which wide social concerns are addressed alongside a romantic/artistic 'coming-of-age' narrative.

¹³ Stone, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, p. 138. Mary Wilson Carpenter offers a striking reading of *Villette* through the prism of the text's 'menstrual superabundance' and use of biblical images. Carpenter says, '[*Villette*'s] biblical discourse on menstruation works to translate the Victorian medical discourse of feminine cyclical "instability" into a different "language" in which menstruation also figures as feminine power and passion.' Carpenter, *Imperial Bibles*, p. 71 and Chapter 4.

¹⁴ See: Byron, p. 85, and Mermin, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*.

¹⁵ For an intriguing and alternative analysis of EBB's work, including *AL*, in terms of 'voice' and poetic vocation, see: Steve Dillon, 'Barrett Browning's Poetic Vocation:

Judith Butler indicates, 'performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate "act", but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names.'¹⁶ *AL*'s rehearsal and interrogation of fecundity, the status of female poetic voice and so on, produces an effect of distancing that – typical of classic dramatic monologue strategies – enables a critique of subjectivity and poetic voice. While *AL* may elude a simplistic answer to the question, 'What kind of thing is *this*?', one of its possibilities is as dramatic monologue.

Given its range of concerns, *AL*'s representations of marriage may seem a minor prism through which to explore the place of fecundity within its narrative arc and linguistic performance. Indeed, one of the risks of reading *AL*'s representations of marriage as a critique of patriarchal ideas about fecundity and barrenness is of treating the text as a domestic love affair. It might be argued that such a strategy reads the text of *AL* through the dismissive personal and particularised categories that Romney Leigh himself suggest women cannot escape from. As Marjorie Stone puts it, 'the socialist reformer Romney in [...] *Aurora Leigh* declares that female artists can "generalize/On nothing – not even grief," and scornfully asks if any woman is capable of being deeply moved (as he is) by "the great sum/Of universal anguish?"'¹⁷ Indeed, as part of his proposal of marriage to Aurora, Romney asserts, with unthinking patriarchal surety:

Crying, Singing, Breathing', *Victorian Poetry*, 39.4 (2001), 509-32. Dillon draws especially on the psalmic tradition of crying and singing to analyse EBB's poetry.

¹⁶ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (Abingdon & New York: Routledge (Classics), 2011 (1993)), p. xii.

¹⁷ Stone, *Between Ethics and Anguish*, p. 141.

Women as you are,
Mere women, personal and passionate,
You give us doting mothers, and perfect wives.
Sublime Madonnas, and enduring saints!
We get no Christ from you,¹⁸ – and verily
We shall not get a poet, in my mind. (Bk II, ll. 220-25)

The world of women is, for Romney as ‘patriarchal representative’, affective and personal. Middle-class marriage – on this view – might be read as a domestic, personal category, unworthy of the serious considerations that Romney himself lavishes on the grand human themes of social and political justice.¹⁹ For, as Willem Jones argues, ‘marriage is perhaps the single most powerful gendering institution in society [...] in the ritual of a wedding and the consummation of a marriage the gender ideology of a society is constructed, performed, and reproduced.’²⁰

However, Romney’s assessment of women in the context of his marriage proposal, underlines precisely why Aurora’s negotiation of the implications of marriage is fundamental to unlocking a Christian-feminist

¹⁸ See, ‘The Runaway Slave at Pilgrims Point’, XXXIII & XXXIV, for the slave woman’s ironic reading of this sentiment. My chapter on *TRS* indicates that it may be possible to read the slave woman as occupying the position of Christ in her experience of torture. See, for example, p. 94 for a discussion of ‘Christian Irony’.

¹⁹ Marjorie Stone’s analysis of *AL* goes on to note that Romney’s assessment is shared by most of the influential theorists of western thought. Quoting Susan Sherwin, she says, ‘Not only Kant and Aristotle, but also Thomas Aquinas, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, G.W.F. Hegel, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Jean-Paul Sartre, saw women as having a significantly different character from men, one they consider morally inferior because it was too focused on the particular and inattentive to the level of generality that moral thought was said to require.’ See: Stone, *Between Ethics and Anguish*, p. 141.

²⁰ Jones, pp. 17-18.

reading of *AL*. As I will now suggest, marriage for respectable nineteenth-century, upper-middle class people like Romney and Aurora may be read as representing the primary means through which patriarchal culture organised the female body's capacity for reproductive excess or fecundity.²¹ *AL* is much more than a text about marriage. However, because of the socio-religious significance of marriage – especially in the nineteenth century – it offers a fruitful way to open the text to critical interrogation. At stake is Aurora's very subjectivity and status as a poet. Marriage, in Aurora's initial context – as a young, available and emergent woman – represents the means patriarchal culture seeks to use in order to regulate her fecund body: it offers her the promise of fulfilment in the form of children and being a help-meet. It offers her a choice: between choosing to fulfil patriarchal, societal expectations of what a woman is (creatively fulfilled by being a (re)productive body that makes children) or pursuing another performative path, that of being a poet. And – given that culturally being a poet has been defined in masculine terms, as something only a man can truly perform – to choose to become a poet is to abandon her femininity. It is to become 'barren', lost to the patriarchal order.

At this point, it is worth rehearsing the significance of marriage as patriarchal institution. Marriage is, at one level, a social institution found in

²¹ Avery and Stott indicate that EBB, in her private correspondence, was critical of the institution of marriage. They quote her correspondence with Mary Mitford in the 1840s in which she says, '*Marriage in the abstract* has always seemed to me the most profoundly indecent of all ideas.' They say, '[EBB's] critique of marriage [...] is powerfully and astutely politically alert to the power imbalances and abuses commonly found in it.' See: Simon Avery and Rebecca Stott, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (Abingdon & New York: Routledge, 2014 (2003)), pp. 150 and 152.

various forms in human societies. In Judaeo-Christian contexts, various forms of marriage, sometimes based on examples found in the Bible, have been socially and culturally sanctioned.²² Much has been written about how in western Europe, the Church increasingly sought to appropriate marriage for its own ends.²³ By the High Middle Ages, the church had made of marriage, even for the relatively lowly, a covenantal sacrament – an outward sign of God’s inner grace, dissolvable on death. Among the higher echelons of society, marriage also emerged as a means of contracting not only the exchange of women as sexual bodies, but as property passed from one man to another. This contractual exchange often carried with it the promise of land and capital. The language of covenant and sacrament underlined the sheer social, religious and cultural power of marriage as an institution.²⁴ In much of western Europe, from the High Middle Ages onwards, to get married was not simply to participate in a social and economic contract, but to do so ‘in the sight of God’.

²² There is insufficient space here to examine the wide and various forms of marriage represented in Biblical texts. In 2014, the website Upworthy published a striking and accurate infographic which represents eight types of marriage included in the Bible. See: Adam Mordecai, 'The Top 8 Ways to Be 'Traditionally Married', According to the Bible', <<http://www.upworthy.com/the-top-8-ways-to-be-traditionally-married-according-to-the-bible>> Upworthy, 2014> [accessed: 7 April 2016].

²³ See, for example, Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge MA & London: Harvard University Press, 2007), esp. Chapter 1.

²⁴ See: *The Oxford Handbook of Theology, Sexuality, and Gender*, ed. by Adrian Thatcher (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), esp. Part 3; Adrian Thatcher, *Redeeming Gender* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 78-80, on how eighteenth-century emergent theories of ‘two-sexes’ were used in Christian ideas to bolster the institution of marriage.

Theorists like Michel Foucault have further indicated how marriage was and is a power discourse that regulates sexuality – especially women’s sexuality – and controls/orders bodies.²⁵ It is the social institution through which reproduction is legitimated and controlled and women’s fecund and (to borrow Margaret Shildrick’s phrase) ‘leaky’²⁶ bodies are used to assert the priority of masculinity. As J.G. Merquior claims, for Foucault:

The modern control of sexuality in bourgeois culture was less a weapon for use against the lower classes than an instrument of bourgeois self-idealization [...] The discourse on sex emerged primarily as a technology of ‘the self’ wielded by the bourgeois sculpting his own image.²⁷

Luce Irigaray notes that ‘the society we know, our own culture, is based upon the exchange of women.’²⁸ Irigaray suggests that marriage – as a form of exchange – can be read as a sign of women’s exclusion from the Symbolic Order or full-subjectivity:

The value of symbolic and imaginary productions is superimposed upon, and even substituted for, the value of relations of material, natural and corporal (re)production. In this new matrix of History, in which man begets man as his own likeness, wives, daughters, and sisters have value only in

²⁵ See, Foucault. Volume 1 indicates the regulatory nature of marriage in western discourses, shaped around ‘canonical law, the Christian pastoral, and civil law.’ Ibid, p. 37. Volumes 2 and 3, examine marriage in classical and early Judaeo-Christian understandings of sex and marriage. See, for example: Vol. 2, Part 3 and Vol. 3, Part 5. His genealogical approach suggests that the often asserted disconnect between classical and Christian understandings of sex are over-stated.

²⁶ See: Margrit Shildrick, *Leaky Bodies and Boundaries: Feminism, Postmodernism and (Bio)Ethics* (London: Routledge, 1997), and Margrit Shildrick, *Embodying the Monster: Encounters with the Vulnerable Self* (London: Sage Publications, 2002).

²⁷ J. G. Merquior, *Foucault* (London: Fontana, 1991), pp. 122-23.

²⁸ Irigaray, *This Sex*, p. 170.

that they serve as the possibility of, and potential benefit in, relations among men.²⁹

Marriage serves as a place where men indicate to each other who is and who is not 'on the market'. It serves as a locus for masculine and patriarchal readings of the female/feminine body as secondary. Whereas, in this economy, men participate in 'symbolic' and 'imaginary' productions – read variously as subjectivity, language and creation of cultural artefacts like poetry, literature and so on – women are read as secondary, material bodies focused on reproduction.

If marriage itself represents the way fecund bodies are ordered and controlled, it is also helpful to be aware of the historical context for the construction of the text of *AL*. Julia F. Saville argues that 'marriage in Britain in the early decades of the nineteenth century was an institution seriously in need of reform.'³⁰ As she further reminds us,

No fewer than four book-length 'companionate marriage' poems were published in the late 1840s into the 1850s: Alfred Tennyson's *The Princess* (1847), Arthur Hugh Clough's *The Bothie of Toper-na-fuosich* (1848), Coventry Patmore's *The Angel in the House* (1854-62) and EBB's *Aurora Leigh* (1856). All include poets as main protagonists whose gender identities are made questionable by their poetic vocations.³¹

²⁹ Ibid, pp. 171-72.

³⁰ Julia F. Saville, 'Marriage and Gender', in *A Companion to Victorian Poetry*, ed. by Cronin, Chapman, and Harrison, pp. 526-42 (p. 526).

³¹ Ibid, p. 527.

As explored in my opening chapter, Patmore's poem acts as the acme of patriarchal constructions of middle-class marriage at mid-century.³² Saville remarks that it 'is [...] remarkable for its unusual conservatism – its steadfast promotion of old-world chivalric tropes and mores.'³³ Indeed, she suggests, 'for Patmore, marriage, with the domestic harmony it supposedly entailed, was the especial cultural accomplishment of Victorian England.'³⁴

Mary Lyndon Shanley argues, quoting Anthony Wohl, that middle- and upper-middle class Victorians regarded the home as both a refuge from the tensions and turmoil of the larger society and the nursery of civic virtues: '[T]he Victorians regarded it as axiomatic that the home was the foundation and the family the cornerstone of their civilization and that within the family were first learned the moral, religious, ethical and social precepts of good citizenship.'³⁵ Shanley adds, 'everyone in the Victorian family was thought to have his or her special place in the family circle [...] Husband and wife occupied "separate spheres," and each had distinct, but complementary, functions to perform.'³⁶ The locus of a woman's sphere was home, child-bearing and family. Middle-class women 'directed' and working-

³² Marisa Palacios Knox reminds us that Patmore didn't hold *AL* in especially high esteem: 'Imaginative incursions into male mentality and physicality by female authors were often derided in moral as well as aesthetic terms by critics who at the same time assumed that male authors were able to render faithful portraits of women without being guilty of indecent trespassing. Coventry Patmore labelled *Aurora Leigh* as a "strange book for a modest, sensible little woman like Mrs. Browning to have written".' See Knox, pp. 282-83.

³³ Saville, p. 528.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Mary Lyndon Shanley, *Feminism, Marriage, and the Law in Victorian England, 1850-1895* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 4. See, also, *The Victorian Family*, ed. by Anthony Wohl (New York: St Martin's Press, 1978), p. 10.

³⁶ Shanley, p. 5.

class women 'performed' the work required to maintaining the household. Under such conditions it is hardly surprising that the notion of the 'Angel in the House' could both construct and reflect ideologies about femininity. Not least of the indications of this is the way the title stood as a shibboleth for those who sought to maintain paternalistic, conservative and hierarchical positions re marriage and male authority, debates which raged in parliament in the 1850s.³⁷

Indeed, *AL* was composed in and addresses a cultural context marked by significant ferment around marriage and gender relations. It wasn't until 1870 that the first Married Women's Property Act was passed. This allowed married women to be the legal owners of the money they earned and to inherit property for the first time in modern English law. Indeed, as Angela Leighton reminds us, it was in support of this Bill that '[EBB] herself collected signatures in Paris and which, according to Mary Howitt, was spoken of 'as the petition of EBB, Anna Jameson, Mary Howitt, Mrs Gaskell.'³⁸ Furthermore, as Marisa Palacios Knox notes, the novel-poem was, 'written during the debates surrounding the reform of marriage law [...] and published a year before the passing of the 1857 Matrimonial Causes Act.'³⁹ This significant legislation opened up, for the first time in English law, the realistic possibility of divorce for women.⁴⁰ It also indicated a shift away

³⁷ Ibid, p. 48.

³⁸ Leighton, *Against The Heart*, p. 103.

³⁹ Knox, p. 278.

⁴⁰ For a full and insightful discussion of the Act and its implications for women, see Jones, pp. 20-26. It is worth noting that the Act privileged men seeking divorce, over women.

from a covenantal to contractual understanding of marriage in which women had divorce rights for the first time in modernity.

In the decades leading up to this Act, Britain was engaged in an energetic and sometimes violent debate about the place of women and marriage. This was most active among the adherents of Socialism and those (often in the churches) who reacted against progressive ideas. Some of those theorists AL is most critical of – Charles Fourier, for example, to whom Romney Leigh is a partial disciple⁴¹ – raised profound questions about women's place in marriage. Linda M. Lewis indicates, 'Fourier says that the noblest nations have always been those with most liberty for women, that he recognizes no liberty (including sexual) unless it is extended to both sexes.'⁴² Lewis adds:

[EBB] [...] disliked the socialists and anarchists whom she had recently studied because their atheism was unsettling and because their radical view on women and marriage would undermine the bourgeois family. Nowhere is there evidence that [EBB] [...] found Fourier's opposition to traditional marriage potentially liberating for the female.⁴³

For EBB – whose critique of the Socialism of her day is indicated in Romney's utter failure to establish a successful phalanstery in *AL* – it is not

⁴¹ Romney's plan to turn Leigh Hall into a phalanstery draws on Fourier's ideas. Intriguingly, one of the features of this social unit, for Fourier, was women being liberated from some of the tasks of motherhood by sharing responsibility with other women. For more information see, Lewis, pp. 116-20. Also: Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem*, for example, Chapter 6.

⁴² Lewis, pp. 118-19.

⁴³ Ibid, pp. 119-20.

unreasonable to suggest this socialism would destroy Christian marriage with its willingness to embrace common-law marriage and communal living.

Insofar as Lewis is correct, there are strong grounds for arguing that EBB herself was active in her support for Christian, patriarchally-conceived marriage. She was pure bourgeois. However, the text of *AL* – although ultimately resolved in what look like conventional marriage between Aurora and Romney – affords more feminist, subversive readings. The proposal of marriage from Romney that Aurora negotiates in Book Two is a moment of crisis. It both represents a point of acute danger for Aurora's attempt to take an active place in the Symbolic Order as a creative artist, but demonstrates how she subverts religious and patriarchal understandings of fecundity. Romney's initial attempt to marry Aurora and her spurning of his proposal provides a prism through which to read *AL* as a Christian-feminist text which interrogates and reformulates nineteenth-century ideas about fecundity and barrenness. Aurora's initial refusal to marry Romney places the concept of marriage in question. Indeed, Aurora's refusal is a rejection of a key implication of patriarchally-structured marriage: that to marry places a woman in the position of fecund body purposed with one primary task, that of producing the child who can ensure the survival of the male line. It is an objectified position in which the fecund body has the status of surrogate for meaning – a stand-in for the real focus, the child/baby borne by the body.

Aurora chooses to perform an alternative subjectivity. Indeed, in choosing the path of poet, she chooses to be a subject rather than play the

traditional feminine role of object and muse. Aurora places her identity – in conventional nineteenth-century terms – into question. By embracing her fundamental doubleness as a woman and as Other she questions conventional understandings of fecundity, barrenness and marriage. Her performance as poet exposes the fault lines in religio-patriarchal ideas about femininity and makes available – when she finally chooses marriage to Romney – space for alternate religious, yet feminist understandings of that concept. She embraces liminality by embracing a Broken Middle: she becomes a woman who, as a poet, might be read as a man, yet as a woman is a body who holds fecundity within her. She becomes a dissenting subject who refuses deterministic ideas of both femininity and masculinity. She embraces her doubleness and exposes the contingency contained in both positions.

‘Do I look a Hagar, think you?’ – Reformulating Marriage, Fecundity and Barrenness through Aurora’s Doubled Poetic Performance

‘Farewell, Aurora? you reject me thus?’

He said.

‘Sir, you were married long ago.

You have a wife already whom you love,

Your social history. Bless you both, I say.

For my part, I am scarcely meek enough

To be the handmaid of a lawful spouse.

Do I look a Hagar, think you?’ (Bk II, ll. 406-13)⁴⁴

Aurora’s use of the words ‘handmaid’ is significant. As biblical scholars Candida R. Moss and Joel S. Baden note, ‘handmaid’ is a position adopted by the Blessed Virgin Mary in the Annunciation scene in Luke 1. 26-38. The Gospel uses the Greek word, *doulos*, meaning ‘handmaid’. When Mary says she is the handmaid of God, she adopts the position of Hagar. Moss and Baden suggest ‘that Luke has Mary describe herself as a *doulos* creates a paradox. She is at once a virgin and the self-proclaimed *doulos* of God. The annunciation scene is reminiscent of God’s actions in the lives of the barren, but Mary is no Sarah or Elizabeth. She is, instead, cast in the role of Hagar. She is the slave girl, the vessel [...].’

In order to explore how *AL* affords a Christian-feminist reading of fecundity and barrenness through its handling of tropes of marriage and surrogacy, I turn now to the details of its text. Concentrating on Aurora’s language of biblical fecundity and barrenness in Book Two, I undertake a double reading of her through the prism of the biblical character of Hagar. Mentioned by Aurora in her rejection of Romney’s proposal, the relatively neglected figure of Hagar allows a reading of Aurora’s process of poetic-becoming that interrogates patriarchal models of fecundity and barrenness. Aurora’s rejection of Romney and decision to become a poet can helpfully be read as both a rejection of performing the role played by Hagar – as

⁴⁴ Candida R. Moss & Joel S. Baden, *Reconceiving Fertility: Biblical Perspectives on Procreation & Childlessness* (Woodstock & Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), p. 161.

surrogate mother – and a reformulation of it. The myth of Hagar offers a way of reading Aurora that indicates how she subverts patriarchal ideas about femininity. As a poet, Aurora brings fecundity into a masculine position in a subversive way. As a formed poet, who performs a masculine voice for her own ends, she reformulates the patriarchal institution of marriage for her own purposes. She and Romney can ultimately marry as equals. Her fecundity is not directed towards performing the marital, surrogate role Romney initially expects; rather it is directed through her poetic making, a making which performs the traditionally masculine position of poetry and queers it.

On her twentieth birthday, Aurora is in her aunt's garden, reflecting on her vocation to be a poet. 'In sport, not pride, to learn the feel of it' (Bk II, l. 34), Aurora fashions a poet's laurel wreath and 'crowns' herself with it. As she does so, her cousin Romney comes upon her. As Dorothy Mermin summarises, 'he sees the wreath as just an adornment, a sign of female vanity that flatters his sense of male superiority, his contempt for mere artists, his love, and his hope of marrying her.'⁴⁵ Aurora, in this moment, is the object of an amused, admiring and objectifying Male Gaze and Aurora is embarrassed ('I stood there fixed | [...] my blush was flame.' (Bk II, ll. 60 & 64). Mermin adds, under Romney's gaze, Aurora's 'aspirations dwindle into girlish narcissism. Instead of an artist she becomes a work of art, and an archaic, useless one at that.'⁴⁶ As if to underline this effect of the Male Gaze,

⁴⁵ Mermin, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, pp. 188-89.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, p. 189.

Romney asks Aurora to marry him and explains⁴⁷ that women cannot be poets:

You give us doting mothers, and perfect wives.

Sublime Madonnas, and enduring saints!

We get no Christ from you – and verily

We shall not get a poet, in my mind. (Bk II, ll. 222-25)

As Angela Leighton wittily suggests, ‘after the wreath crowning [...]

Romney adds to his many criticisms of Aurora’s poetry the final insult of a marriage proposal.’⁴⁸ Romney reminds her that, if she marries him, she will legitimately inherit that part of her father’s fortune forfeited when he married an Italian.⁴⁹ As Leighton concludes:

The language of Aurora’s refusal [of marriage] clearly brings out the connection between the terms of Romney’s proposal and his economic power: ‘At least/My soul is not a pauper; I can live/At least my soul’s life, without alms from men’ (ll. 680-2).’⁵⁰

In short, ‘marriage, for women, is a state of sentimental pauperism, of continuing gratitude to the charity of men.’⁵¹

Modern critics, beginning with Cora Kaplan,⁵² have noted how the ‘wreath crowning’ scene is an echo of Madame de Staël’s ‘work about a

⁴⁷ I believe the modern convention (gleaned from Twitter and other social media) would be to call this ‘mansplaining’.

⁴⁸ Leighton, *Against The Heart*, p. 103.

⁴⁹ Though, as I’ve already indicated, until the passage of the first Married Women’s Property Act in 1870, Aurora would not inherit her money directly.

⁵⁰ Leighton, *Against The Heart*, p. 103.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² *Aurora Leigh* (ed. by Kaplan).

doomed female genius' *Corinne*.⁵³ Corinne, the aspirant poet, travels to the Capitol in Rome and – ahead of her crowning in laurel as an 'improvisatrice', a singing poet – stands up and improvises verses with her lyre. 'Like Aurora Leigh, Staël's poetic heroine is the daughter of an Italian mother and an English father.'⁵⁴ Alison Chapman suggests that, 'as an Anglo-Italian poetess, Aurora Leigh acknowledges the legacy of Corinne's affective improvised lyricism as an appropriate model for women's poetics and instead transforms poetry into a public discourse.'⁵⁵ Chapman further argues how 'Corinne as a figure for the Anglo-Italian poetess unravels her multiple "cross dwelling" identities as she also performs the displacement of the lyric affective voice.'⁵⁶ 'The myth of the poetess as *improvisatrice*' – traced, as Linda H. Peterson reminds us, through the twin image of the 'Sappho-Corinne myth' – 'had certain advantages' for the woman poetess like Letitia Landon.⁵⁷ As Peterson suggests:

It linked her to the cult of genius and her work to inspired rather than mechanical or pedantic production. But it also had disadvantages: in its emphasis on the poetess's natural genius and her youthful, sometimes [...]

⁵³ Stone, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, p. 41. Marjorie Stone reminds us that discussion of the connections between *AL*, *Corinne*, *Jane Eyre*, *Ruth*, etc., was not uncommon in nineteenth-century criticism. See: *Ibid*, p. 159.

⁵⁴ Sandra M. Gilbert, 'From Patria to Matria: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Risorgimento*', in *Victorian Women Poets*, ed. by Leighton, pp. 24-52 (p. 31). This essay presents a classic analysis of the significance of Italy as symbol and location for women's poetry in the mid-nineteenth century.

⁵⁵ *Victorian Women Poets (Chapman)*, p. 68.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, p. 67.

⁵⁷ Linda H. Peterson, 'Rewriting a History of the Lyre: Letitia Landon, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and the (Re)Construction of the Nineteenth-Century Woman Poet', in *Women's Poetry, Late Romantic to Late Victorian: Gender and Genre, 1830-1900*, ed. by Isobel Armstrong and Virginia Blain (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999), pp. 115-32 (p. 120).

infantile poetic effusions, it tended to restrict the poetess to a youthful, immature stage of development and mitigate against more mature, serious writing.⁵⁸

Aurora – as surrogate for the prodigious, youthful genius EBB – is in a seeming double-bind. Presented before her in Book Two of *AL* is the mirage of Corinne's laurel wreaths. She's invited to perform 'poetess' in the Lyric, improvisational and emotive tradition (with attendant risks of infantilisation). Yet, equally she is invited to become Romney's wife, which itself would be to perform the role of 'Angel in the House', to commit herself to another version of feminine, sentimental, infantile dependency on men.

Aurora's definitive rejection of Romney's marriage proposal in the garden scene can be seen then as a double and doubled rejection of two available constructions of fecundity. Firstly, Aurora's rejection of Romney's proposal is a refusal to perform the female body as dependent on male munificence and structured around '(re)productive excess'. That is, she refuses fulfilment of femininity via being a wife and making an heir-baby for a husband and, thereby, completing his self-image/lack as master, father and husband. Aurora refuses to complete Romney; she will not structure her subjectivity, or lack of it, around his desire for completion through the expectations of middle-class masculinity. Her fecundity – as Romney and Aurora's argument ends and they go their separate ways – is (in patriarchal terms) left barren or at least fallow. Indeed, as Aurora spurns Romney's

⁵⁸ Ibid.

advances, she indicates that she has abandoned femininity altogether and entered a queered 'trans' time and space:

[...] You face, today,
A man who wants instruction, mark me, not
A woman who wants protection. As to a man,
Show manhood, speak out plainly, be precise
With facts and date. (Bk II, ll. 1061-65)⁵⁹

As Joyce Zonana suggests, Aurora will not play the conventional passive female role for men, either as muse or mother: 'Aurora is not a transcendent, heavenly figure who can only be apprehended by a poet who has closed his senses to earthly temptations and distractions. Nor is she a Victorian Angel in the House.'⁶⁰

Yet, if Aurora rejects the 'Angel in the House' performance, the garden scene and Aurora's rejection of marriage also indicates her – and indeed, EBB's – rejection of the position of poetess. If she will not be a maker of babies, nor will she make poetry as a lyrical, singing poetess. When Aurora tries out the laurel wreath it is 'to learn the feel of it'. It is for sport. Aurora is in performative space, rehearsing the 'feel' of adopting Corinne's position. In one sense, it is under conditions of Romney's Male Gaze that Aurora's rehearsal of the Corinne myth leaves Aurora exposed, embarrassed and blushing. 'Feminine verse' – structured by patriarchy as a kind of

⁵⁹ For a striking analysis of 'queer time' see Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York & London: New York University Press, 2005).

⁶⁰ Joyce Zonana, 'The Embodied Muse: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Aurora Leigh and Feminist Poetics', in *Victorian Women Poets*, ed. by Leighton, pp. 53-74 (p. 56).

linguistic version of bodily fecundity ('merely' emotive, weak, creative, and valuable only for its 'effects') – is exposed as limited and limiting. When placed in the context of Romney's subsequent invitation to become dependent on him, Aurora's flirtation with 'Corinne' underlines the seriousness of her intent to become poet rather than poetess.⁶¹ Aurora refuses to structure and perform her subjectivity on terms constructed via a picture of submissive fecundity, only valuable for what it produces for patriarchal masculinity.

'Farewell, Aurora? you reject me thus?'

He said.

'Sir, you were married long ago.

You have a wife already whom you love,

Your social history. Bless you both, I say.

For my part, I am scarcely meek enough

To be the handmaid of a lawful spouse.

Do I look a Hagar, think you?' (Bk II, ll. 406-13)

Aurora's rejection of Romney's bourgeois-patriarchal offer is constructed in part through a biblical figure, the slave-girl Hagar. Many critics and scholars have commented on the range and nature of biblical and

⁶¹ And, indeed, to achieve success, rather than the tragic fate which befalls Corinne. As Toril Moi puts it, 'we no longer die for love. When relationships break up, we soldier on, seeking solace in work, family, friends or casual sex. Sooner or later we start looking for new relationships. Not so Corinne [...] When her lover marries another, Corinne loses all her formidable talents, her interest in art, books, other people, her voice and, finally, her life.' See: Toril Moi, 'A Woman's Desire to Be Known: Silence & Expressivity in Corinne', *Bucknell Review*, 45.2 (2002), 143-75 (p. 144).

religious images contained in the text of *AL*. Marjorie Stone writes about the significance of the Book of Revelation within the text.⁶² As she argues, ‘the opening line of Book One echoes Ecclesiastes [...] but allusions to various biblical figures are even more pervasive in the opening of Book Three, originally the introduction to the entire work (671-5).’⁶³ *AL*’s culminates in a literary re-visioning of the New Jerusalem found in the Revelation of St John. Indeed, it is possible to read the narrative arc of the poem-novel typologically. The child Aurora is cast out of the idyllic innocence of her Italian Eden, forced to travel through a long process of self-discovery and temptation, ultimately to find redemption in the promise of her final marriage partnership with Romney as his equal.⁶⁴ Aurora might be read, on this analysis, as the personification of a biblical type of redemption – she and Romney are Eve and Adam redeemed by their ultimate union in the Heavenly City of marriage. However, if the text is both littered with biblical images and theological resonances, I want to suggest that EBB’s text affords subversive, feminist and critical readings of biblical notions of redemption and feminine fulfilment. EBB’s treatment of images of fecundity and barrenness indicate how *AL* revisions and reworks patriarchal-Christian ideas about women. One way of examining this is via the figure of Hagar.

While much literary and theological attention has been given to literary and theological representations of figures like Eve, the Virgin Mary

⁶² Stone, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, pp. 134-36.

⁶³ Ibid, p. 145.

⁶⁴ In her dedication for *AL*, EBB indicates that *AL* imagines how woman could become the female Homer. Certainly, it is possible to read *AL* as an exercise in the Heroic according to classic patterns. It is an Epic, but a Christian Epic.

and Mary Magdalene – not least because of their iconic status as types for femininity under conditions of patriarchy⁶⁵ – the biblical figure of Hagar is relatively neglected. Found in a short section of the Book of Genesis,⁶⁶ Hagar is an Egyptian slave and handmaid to Sarai/Sarah, the lawful wife of the first biblical patriarch Abram/Abraham. Abraham is the foundation for the biblical covenant between God and Israel and, indeed, the wider covenant between God and humanity, through Christ. When Sarah is unable to conceive, she says, ‘Behold now, the Lord hath restrained me from bearing: I pray thee, go in unto my maid; it may be that I may obtain children by her. And Abram hearkened to the voice of Sarai.’⁶⁷ Abraham ‘goes into’ Hagar and she conceives a child. Sarah becomes jealous and treats her handmaid with violence. Hagar runs away and comes to a spring of water in the wilderness. Here God speaks to her and tells her to return to her mistress and submit to her. He also promises her a great blessing: ‘I will multiply thy seed exceedingly, that it shall not be numbered for multitude’ and tells her to call her son Ishmael, meaning ‘God hears’.⁶⁸

It is striking that EBB deploys this relatively neglected character at Aurora’s critical moment of decision about her future as a woman and poet. Romney makes his play for Aurora’s hand. He offers her an opportunity for patriarchal fecund-fulfilment as wife and mother. In response, Aurora waspishly deploys the image of Hagar to underline the servitude such a

⁶⁵ See, Gray, especially, pp. 85-135.

⁶⁶ Genesis 16.

⁶⁷ Genesis 16. 2.

⁶⁸ Genesis 16. 10-11.

match would offer. For as Aurora indicates, Romney's proposal of marriage is delivered under false pretences. Aurora correctly sees that Romney is – ironically – already married. He is already in a contracted relationship with History:

[...] Sir, you were married long ago.

You have a wife already whom you love

Your social history.' (Bk II, ll. 408-10)

In one sense, this statement is rhetorical flourish typical of the early sparring between Romney and Aurora. It is of a piece with Romney's mockery of Aurora's pretensions:

You play beside a death-bed like a child,

Yet measure to yourself a prophet's place

To teach the living. None of these things,

Can women understand. (Bk II, ll. 180-84)

Consider also Aurora's sharp retorts:

[...] I would rather dance

At fairs on tight-rope, till the babies dropped

Their gingerbread for joy – than shift the types

For tolerable verse, intolerable

To men who act and suffer. (Bk II, ll. 253-57)

As events transpire, it becomes clear that Romney is indeed looking for a 'help-meet' for his great task of reforming appalling social conditions. It is only after his blinding, that Romney begins to 'see' beyond his self-image as a kind of Christ figure charged with saving the poor. As Linda M. Lewis has indicated, 'Romney Leigh suffers from a messiah complex. He hears and

feels, almost palpably, the world's sufferings.'⁶⁹ Indeed, she adds, 'in the final two books of *AL*, Aurora and Romney are permitted a full discussion of the flaws of Christian socialism. Romney recognizes that he has vainly considered himself as a modern Christ.'⁷⁰ As the blind Romney stands before Aurora towards the end of the book, he confesses his former pretension to be God's right hand:

The government is slipping from [God's] hand,
Unless some other Christ (say Romney Leigh),
Come up and toil and moil and change the world,
Because the First has proved inadequate. (Bk VIII, ll. 674-77)

Equally, Romney casts himself as a type of Moses, suggesting that Aurora should function as his Miriam, Aaron's prophetess sister. As Romney meets Aurora in the garden, he notably describes the young Aurora in Eden(-ic) terms: 'You, you are young | As Eve with nature's daybreak on her face' (Bk II, ll. 158-59). Yet he rapidly moves on from the delicacy of this image to suggest they live in a world of experience, of ruin, corruption and slavery. This is a world defined by male action, where men 'save', and women 'sing' of the glory of male action. He invites her to play Miriam singing as Moses leads those in chains out into the Promised Land: 'When

⁶⁹ Lewis, p. 124.

⁷⁰ Ibid, p. 126. In words which echo the scene in Luke's gospel (Luke 8) where a sick woman touches the hem of Christ's robe, Romney says, "I [...] felt | The whole world tugging at my skirts for help" (Bk VIII, ll. 370-71)).

Egypt's slain, I say, let Miriam sing! – | Before – where's Moses?' (Bk II, ll.

171-72). As Stone argues:

Without exactly claiming to be *the* Moses who will deliver England out of the "Egypt" of social injustice into the promised land of Fourieristic socialism, Romney nevertheless sets himself up as a type of Moses, meanwhile casting Aurora as Miriam, the female adjunct who will sing his victories.⁷¹

Aurora is invited to take on a series of patriarchal masks and performances – Eve, Miriam, Virgin Mary as handmaid to Christ – by Romney. Yet, Aurora reads the invitation to marry through Hagar. She sees that Romney's invitation is an invitation to become a slave; to become a Hagar. If she marries Romney, she allows her body to become his property. She will have colluded in allowing her body, on Irigaray's terms, to be excluded from the Symbolic Order. She will be identified and measured simply by fecundity. Her value will lie in her capacity for reproductive excess. Aurora sees, then, that though Romney's invitation to marry would make her a 'handmaid' (Bk II, ll. 412) – a status that the Blessed Virgin takes on at the beginning of Luke's gospel⁷² – she will be even less than the Blessed Virgin. If the Virgin was handmaid to the Lord, she will be 'the handmaid of a lawful spouse' 'History' (Bk II, ll. 412). Aurora refuses to be raped as Hagar was, simply to supply that which History cannot supply: his heir and child. For that child – via Aurora's fecundity – will complete

⁷¹ Stone, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, p. 147.

⁷² Luke 1. 38.

Romney as Father and therefore as male.

In short, Romney invites Aurora to perform the role of surrogate.⁷³

The concept of surrogate itself is a striking one. A surrogate is a stand-in, a substitute. The term is derived from the Latin, '*surrogatus*' – 'put in another's place'. This itself is derived from two roots, '*rogare*' – 'to propose/ask' and 'sub' – 'in the place of'. Aurora structures her refusal of Romney's *proposal* (his 'rogation', if you will) of marriage in terms of a slave transaction. She indicates and exposes the violence implicit in it. EBB's language further exposes the extent to which Romney's proposal is ordered around fecundity as a bodily category. Margrit Shildrick indicates that 'bodies are a prime site at which power/knowledge is exercised'⁷⁴ and – quoting Foucault's *History of Sexuality* – adds, 'we should remain aware that reproduction too is "managed, inserted into systems of utility, regulated for the greater good of all, made to function according to an optimum"'.⁷⁵ Aurora's reading of Romney's marriage proposal as an invitation into surrogacy and slavery not only exposes the way marriage represents the regulation of her fecund body, but acts as an invitation to place her body into an impossible double-bind. For, as Romney's wife, she will not only be

⁷³ Elly Teman suggests that 'the roots of surrogacy can be traced to the book of Genesis'. In addition to Hagar, she refers to Bilhah (Rachel's handmaid) and Zilpah (Leah's maid). Teman acknowledges the cultural unease generated by surrogacy because of its connection with the commodification of women's bodies and class/ethnicity-based exploitation. However, her ethnographic study indicates the complex and rich emotional bonds that can develop between surrogates and intended mothers. See: Elly Teman, *Birth of a Mother: The Surrogate Body and The Pregnant Self* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2010), p. 1 and Introduction.

⁷⁴ Shildrick, *Leaky Bodies*, p. 183.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

read as valuable for her capacity to reproduce, but even this position of feminine 'honour' will be problematic: she will have the status of slave, handmaid and surrogate. As a surrogate, anything she would produce – child, object, a poem – would not truly be hers, but her master's.

Indeed, the concept of surrogacy, as a substitution for another, has suggestive connections with Derrida's concept of language as a series of substitutions whose meaning is indefinitely deferred.⁷⁶ Surrogacy is a substitution in flesh and this substitution has the structure of language. That is, it defers and problematises meaning. Surrogacy is risky: it problematises what Shildrick calls the 'Patriarchal-Logocentric Principle of Resemblance'. This is simply the idea that a child *is* the parents' – is the heir and is legitimate – because he resembles the Father (and, in a secondary way, the wife/Mother).⁷⁷ Marriage, on this picture, is a way of publicly representing who is permitted to sleep with whom and legally and legitimately produce children. It acts as a public guarantee that the children produced within it are 'legitimate'. To bring in a surrogate places that legitimate line of power and inheritance in doubt by introducing a third party (or term) that may make the principle of resemblance 'impure' and open to challenge. EBB's choice of the figure of Hagar – a slave woman, often identified as black or, in

⁷⁶ See, for example, Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. by Alan Bass (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), especially Section 3.

⁷⁷ For more, see: Shildrick, *Leaky Bodies*, Chapter 6, and Shildrick, *Embodying*, pp. 30-36.

the very least, non-white – adds further significations of miscegenation as a risk to the ‘purity’ of ‘whiteness’.⁷⁸

Indeed, a discussion of surrogacy – that is, of using the slave girl to bear a child for the Master – needs to be alert to cultural anxieties re Social Darwinism which Shildrick – drawing on the pioneering work of Bram Dijkstra⁷⁹ – argues:

Pitted the successful evolution of humanity – or more properly the Aryan races – against the constant threat of degeneration to the lower forms of life figured in our animal past. Both women and non-white peoples were seen as regressive agents capable of dragging down white civilization.⁸⁰

Furthermore:

⁷⁸ *AL* has, for reasonably obvious reasons, been regularly compared to Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. Published at a similar time to *AL*, *Jane Eyre* shares with *AL* (and *Villette*) the mid-century rarity of being (in Dorothy Mermin's words) 'the fictional biography of a woman by a woman.' As Mermin adds, EBB 'denied what might seem like specific indebtednesses.' Certainly both Rochester and Romney end up blind, but 'unlike [...] Rochester, [EBB] pointed out, Romney is not disfigured when he is blinded and his house burnt.' See: Mermin, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, pp. 184-85. There is insufficient space in this thesis to discuss fully the similarities between Jane and Aurora. Both may potentially be read as 'needing' an 'exotic' subaltern Other in order to achieve full status as independent white middle-class women. As Patricia McKee plausibly argues, Jane uses her status as privileged middle-class woman to consign Mrs Rochester to the status of 'dark primitive', thereby clarifying and defining her own status and position. McKee outlines how Brontë identifies darkness with body and materiality. Arguably this is exactly what Sarah does to Hagar in the Biblical narrative, treating the black Hagar as mere bodily-fecundity. Aurora arguably uses Hagar as an icon of over-identification with fecund bodiliness and uses her as a way of asserting her independent power. In the next chapter, I shall examine the question of Aurora's use of a subaltern voice (in the form of Marian) to complete her identity as an artist. For more on *Jane Eyre* and race, see: Patricia McKee, 'Racial Strategies in Jane Eyre', *Victorian Literature & Culture*, 37.1 (2009), 67-83.

⁷⁹ See: Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-De-Siècle Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), and Bram Dijkstra, *Evil Sisters: The Threat of Female Sexuality in Twentieth Century Culture* (New York: Henry Holt, 1996).

⁸⁰ Shildrick, *Embodying*, p. 30.

In particular, the new reproductive technologies with their complications of the lines of paternity (and maternity) have opened up anew the horror of indeterminacy. Just at the moment when technological advances have enabled the extension of surveillance to the womb itself [...] the fear of what goes on unseen in the recesses of the body may be relocated to uncertainty about origins and foundational narratives.⁸¹

EBB's use of the figure of Hagar adds piquancy – via its implications of surrogacy and slavery – to an emergent theme of this thesis: the threat posed by women's bodily fecundity to patriarchal ways of ordering subjectivity as masculinity and, by implication, the 'necessary' regulation and control of fecundity. Romney's strategy from the moment he meets Aurora in the garden is to use Aurora's fecund body as a kind of weapon against her desire to create poetry. Indeed, as Barbara Barrow argues:

Romney points to Aurora's body as an obstacle to political [and poetic] expression. [He] insists that women cannot write about contemporary debates over labor or slavery because they understand everything in terms of their own experience [...] In a powerfully essentializing gesture, Romney invalidates Aurora's poetry by means of her body.⁸²

Meredith Nash reminds us how 'pregnancy is one bodily experience that has been linked with dis-embodiment, pathology and fragmentation in

⁸¹ Ibid, p. 44.

⁸² Barbara Barrow, 'Gender, Language, and the Politics of Disembodiment in Aurora Leigh', *Victorian Poetry*, 53.3 (2015), 243-62 (p. 243). See: 'All's yours and you, | All, coloured with your blood, or otherwise | Just nothing to you' (Bk II, ll. 196–98). Tricia Lootens's most recent work has analyzed these lines and AL's discourse on Moses in terms of slavery and issues of colour and race. See: Tricia Lootens, *The Political Poetess: Victorian Femininity, Race, and the Legacy of Separate Spheres* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), pp. 45-47.

western Europe/North America/Australia since the eighteenth century.’⁸³

The so-called fragility and pathology of women’s fecund bodies has been used as a means of delimiting the creative scope of women for centuries.⁸⁴

In that context, Romney – as a representative of the Master and the Male Gaze – signifies nothing less than a moral and cultural imperative to ‘save’ Aurora from herself and her ultimate failure as a poet implied by the ‘reality’ of her body. Her body is ‘unfit’ for poetry (‘your sex is weak for art’ (Bk II, l. 372)) and fit, if it be fit for anything, for the productive work of carrying Romney’s ultimate desire: his child. And, for Romney, the proper – the regulated – way to do this is via the publicly legitimated means of marriage.

For, as Margrit Shildrick, among others,⁸⁵ claims, under patriarchal conditions, the fecund female body must be controlled by structures like marriage because it constantly threatens to become ‘monstrous’. As she puts it:

In the light of the longstanding association of the feminine with disorder in terms both of the irrational mind and the leaky body, the conflation of women with monsters should come as no surprise [...] We have inherited, in western countries, an ideological burden that explicitly associates

⁸³ Meredith Nash, *Making ‘Postmodern’ Mothers: Pregnant Embodiment, Baby Bumps and Body Image* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 24.

⁸⁴ This point will be especially significant in Chapter 5’s study of *Goblin Market*.

⁸⁵ See also: Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994); Nina Lykke and Rosi Braidotti, *Between Monsters, Goddesses, and Cyborgs: Feminist Confrontations with Science, Medicine, and Cyberspace* (London: Zed Books, 1996); For a recent summary of ‘posthuman’ positions see: Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge & Malden MA: Polity, 2013).

women with danger, particularly in the spheres of sexuality and maternity.⁸⁶

Crucially, the pregnant body is actively and visibly deformed from within. Women – as (over-)identified with bodily fecundity – ‘are out of control, uncontained, unpredictable, leaky: they are, in short, monstrous.’⁸⁷ The female, fecund body is already monstrous on this account; to make of this body ‘a Hagar’, a surrogate and slave, is to double, defer and displace this monstrousness. EBB’s language places Aurora’s fecund promise as a poet not only in a place of danger, but – should she have accepted Romney’s proposal – in a place of endlessly displaced horror. As Shildrick concludes:

It is not just that the mother is always capable of producing monstrosity, but that she is monstrous in herself [...] it is above all the very fecundity of the female, the capacity to confound definition *all on their own* that elicits normative anxiety.⁸⁸

In the concluding section of this chapter I shall argue that Aurora’s initial refusal to marry Romney and, thereby, become his ‘Hagar’, represents not only her refusal to have her fecundity as poet and woman regulated by patriarchal structures, but offers resources for a Christian and feminist reading of EBB’s language of fecundity. Ironically, I shall offer a case for Aurora’s subversion of patriarchal ideas about women, poetry and subjectivity by re-reading that seemingly unpromising figure: Hagar. I have so far suggested that there are good grounds for seeing Aurora as an anti-

⁸⁶ Shildrick, *Embodying*, p. 30.

⁸⁷ Ibid, p. 31.

⁸⁸ Ibid, p. 44.

Hagar. I will re-examine this claim and suggest that Aurora can be read as a heavily ironised and subversive type of Hagar. I want to show how reading Aurora through this doubled lens opens alternative ways of understanding fecundity and barrenness and reconfiguring marriage in a Christian-feminist direction.

Aurora's initial refusal to marry Romney is arguably a refusal to allow her creative fecundity – her disruptive excess – to be reduced to productive excess. Her decision to perform the subjectivity of a (male) poet disrupts and exposes patriarchal categories which says such a performance is impossible for a woman. For, if according to patriarchal strategies, (uncontrolled) fecundity always shades into the monstrous, it also represents extraordinary power to critique patriarchal ordering. As Shildrick argues, 'the pregnant female body itself is always a trope of immense power in that it speaks to inherent capacity to problematize the boundaries of self and other.'⁸⁹ In short, 'as the paradigmatic example of the other within the same, pregnancy marks a monstrous insult to the order of the proper.'⁹⁰ As a 'transgressive signifier',⁹¹ the female body represents a disruptive and promising opportunity for reconfiguring patriarchal representations of 'the proper' and established order which figures masculine and feminine as timeless, natural or fixed categories. 'Women's bodies, paradigmatically, and by elision, women themselves, exemplify an indifference to limits

⁸⁹ Ibid, p. 31.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid, p. 29.

evidenced by everyday occurrences as menstruation, pregnancy, [and] lactation.⁹²

As indicated in the chapter on *TRS*, Kristeva's notion of the Chora offers a further helpful dimension when examining the disruptive, monstrous and transgressive nature of the fecund, pregnant body. Toril Moi suggests, '[Kristeva] has claimed that it is not woman as such who is repressed in patriarchal society, but motherhood. The problem is not women's *jouissance* alone, as Lacan has it in *Encore*, but the necessary relationship between reproduction and *jouissance*.'⁹³ Kristeva herself says, 'maternal authority is the trustee of that mapping of the self's clean and proper body; it is distinguished from paternal laws within which, with the phallic phase and acquisition of language, the destiny of man will take shape.'⁹⁴ The child's entry into language – the Symbolic – is the repression of Chora, the unregulated Imaginary; yet, in Shildrick's assessment:

As Kristeva makes clear, the bond between the mother and child in the semiotic is monstrous in its refusal of the separations demanded by the paternal order. The monstrous feminine frustrates distinction, and in threatening to merge strikes at the patriarchal economy of desire.⁹⁵

Not only then, is the woman's body capable of defeating – as Rosi Braidotti has it – 'the notion of fixed *bodily form* [...] she is morphologically

⁹² Ibid, p. 31.

⁹³ Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics*, p. 166.

⁹⁴ Julia Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror: An Essay in Abjection*, trans. by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 72.

⁹⁵ Shildrick, *Embodying*, p. 46.

dubious',⁹⁶ but her 'creations', her 'children' are monstrous in 'Imaginative Space'.

Aurora acknowledges that the common fate of women and – possibly – fulfilment of women lies in marriage as theatre for fecundity:

I do not blame such women, though, for love,

They pick much oakum; earth's fanatics make

Too frequently heaven's saints. (Bk II, ll. 448-450)

Aurora's choice of the word 'oakum' is telling. The picking of oakum was a prisoner's task. In EBB's Victorian context, the unravelling of old rope in order to rescue or redeem strands of hemp for further use was a workhouse or prison task.⁹⁷ This task – time consuming, monotonous and without clear reward – was akin to taking that which was spent and useless and barren and preparing it for further use. It is, then, an ironic corollary of the slave's task of taking cotton from the plant to be spun into useful cloth. The picking of oakum was a task so destructive to fertile imagination, it was something to be given those who were deemed of little value. That is, to those who were Othered. And Aurora suggests that the devotion to romantic love that leads women to seek marriage ('for love') leads to a stripping away of their humanity into barrenness. Her condemnation of Romney as one of 'earth's fanatics' who turn women into 'heaven's saints' (that is, the celestial dead)

⁹⁶ Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*, p. 80.

⁹⁷ Contemporary accounts indicate that in Tothills Fields Prison, Bridewell, girls aged under sixteen had to pick one pound of oakum a day and boys one and a half pounds. Over sixteen, each expectation went up by half a pound respectively. See: Henry Mayhew and John Binny, *The Criminal Prisons of London: Scenes from Prison Life* (London: Griffin, Bohn & Company, 1862), p. 477.

succinctly captures a repeated feminist refrain about the fate of women under patriarchal conditions: it transforms them into the ultimate Other – death. Aurora’s refusal to marry Romney is an option for fecundity as disruptive monstrosity; her unwillingness to become Romney’s Hagar is a commitment to her body as fit for making new, disruptive meanings. Aurora sees the threat to her emerging subjectivity – her determination to become a poet – for what it is: as a kind of death. For Aurora, it is a horrifying and monstrous prospect. Rather, she claims her monstrosity for herself: her fecundity shall be her own and it shall become poetry.

I’ve argued, then, that Aurora has refused to play Hagar to Romney’s patriarchal lord. She’s seen the danger inherent in his proposal and refused to be a slave. Romney deploys patriarchal logic:

[...] Life means, be sure

Both heart and head [...]

[...]

[...] Men and women make

The world, as head and heart make human life” (Bk II, ll. 130-1, 133)

Yet this offers not so much feminine fulfilment to Aurora, but the barrenness of slavery. Not only will she be measured by her bodily fecundity, but expected to offer it as a sacrifice to a patriarchal system. Even if we impute to Romney the best of motives and he means for her to be a co-worker in his programme of social redemption (Bk II, l. 135), Aurora sees the meaning of his proposal for what it is. Romney projects his patriarchal fantasy onto her:

[...] I took

The woman to be nobler than the man,

Yourself the noblest woman, in the use

And comprehension of what love is [...] (Bk II, ll. 420-23)

Yet, she retorts:

With quiet indignation I broke in.

‘You misconceive the question like a man,

Who sees a woman as the complement

Of his sex merely [...] (Bk II, ll. 433-36)

Aurora as a Kind of Hagar – The Female Poet as Agent of Queerness

Aurora is twenty when Romney makes his proposal (Bk II, l. 2). Book Two opens with a feast of fecund imagery, indicating Aurora’s imminent ‘blossoming’ into adulthood. She stands with ‘thirsty lips’ (Bk II, l. 7) with ‘rosebuds reddening where the calyx splits’ (Bk II, l. 12). At this point of emergent fecundity, Aurora stands ready to speak as a woman for the first time. The word Romney, indeed patriarchy, wishes her to utter as he asks for her hand is ‘yes’ – to embrace the culturally assigned role which her fecundity ‘fits’ her for: wife and, most of all, mother. Yet, she says no. She subverts the pattern and wishes to enter the traditionally male space of poet and subject.

EBB famously claimed, in a letter to her future critic Chorley that she could not find for herself a feminine tradition from which to draw

inspiration for her poetic practice: 'I look everywhere for grandmothers and see none.' As Palacios Knox reminds us, 'her following sentence is not as widely quoted: "It is not in the filial spirit I am deficient, I do assure you – witness my reverent love of the grandfathers!"'.⁹⁸ The extent to which Aurora Leigh is a cypher or surrogate for EBB is not under consideration here. However, Aurora's strategies for becoming a poet might be said to move beyond homage and reverence to identifying her artistic self with men. One might argue that Aurora abandons her fecundity to occupy the position traditionally reserved for men. Indeed, that rather than claiming the monstrous fecund as well-spring for and locus for her poetry, she performs a poetic subjectivity removed from any construction of femininity. As Knox puts it:

As when, in the recurrent breast imagery in the poem, she wants not to nurse but to suck from the paps of poetic inspiration, Aurora prefers to reverse the traditional gender dynamic and be *influenced* – as male writers supposedly are by their muses – by those male writers that she claims as hers: "My own best poets, am I one with you, / That thus I love you, – or but one through love?" Aurora desires to merge her identity into "one" with her predecessors, among whom she names Byron, Pope, and Keats".⁹⁹

Even when Aurora characterises herself as a passive figure – as 'ravished' artistically – she compares herself to male figures like Ganymede plucked by Zeus to serve and drink divine nectar with the gods (Bk I, l. 927).

⁹⁸ Knox, pp. 278-79.

⁹⁹ Ibid, p. 279.

Aurora's project of artistic self-formation as a gendered subject and artist seemingly is predicated on a stepping away not only from a patriarchally-conceived notion of femininity, but of becoming a trans/gressive character who occupies masculine poetic space, voice and performance. This raises several seemingly conflicting issues. Not only questions about the possibility of the woman poet under conditions of patriarchy, but – insofar as that analysis is correct – questions regarding Aurora's ultimate decision, at the end of the novel-poem, to marry Romney. She has seemingly disavowed marriage as a patriarchally-constructed way of ordering fecundity. I've argued that in disavowing marriage to Romney, Aurora refuses to allow her monstrous fecundity to be regulated. She embraces 'disruptive excess' as a strategy for poetry. Yet, as I've just indicated, there are grounds for claiming that the route she takes for making poetry is constructed on a 'virile' rather than 'fecund' model: she has chosen to perform the identity of a poet, a model for masculine virile subjectivity.

One recent strategy, adopted by Barbara Barrow, is to claim that Aurora's route towards poetic achievement is 'disembodiment'. Barrow claims that, '*Aurora Leigh's* political poetics [...] turns on the conflict between two kinds of bodies: the larger social body the poet seeks to represent and the distorting presence of her own embodied, feminine sensibility.'¹⁰⁰ Barrow suggests that Aurora's response to this conflict is to claim disembodiment as a poetic and political strategy. That is, Barrow

¹⁰⁰ Barrow, p. 243.

argues that, 'in Romney's view the female poet's body distorts her political views, causing her to express instead her own embodied sensibility.'¹⁰¹ Yet, *AL*, for Barrow, has an 'unacknowledged investment in *disembodiment* as a political and poetic strategy. Through the transformations and encounters of Aurora and Marian, the poem's second heroine, Barrett Browning's epic advances a desire to escape the female body.'¹⁰²

The language EBB deploys when constructing Aurora's becoming a poet can be read as a divestment of femininity and the fecund, female body. There are grounds for claiming that Aurora wishes to transcend gender categories. However, as I shall now examine, Aurora's performance of masculine voice reformulates the possibilities of fecundity in feminist and Christian ways. Her fecundity is reconfigured as active; as symbolically creative as well as reproductively creative. One of the important effects of this reconfiguration is to offer an answer to a question which rightly concerns feminist readers of *AL*: Aurora's ultimate willingness in Book IX to participate in marriage, the social institution which she has so powerfully disavowed in most of the work. By reformulating the possible meaning of poet and femininity she helps reformulate the possible meanings of marriage. She and Romney are able to marry as equals. Their union will become a symbol of the new Christian order – not defined by male power but by solidarity and equality. Central to my claim is a further analysis of the figure of Hagar.

¹⁰¹ Ibid, p. 250.

¹⁰² Ibid, pp. 250-51.

I've suggested that there are good grounds for seeing Aurora as an anti-Hagar. I now want to re-examine this claim and suggest that Aurora can be read as a heavily ironised and subversive type of Hagar. Indeed, given the doubled strategies of a poet like EBB, a doubled reading of Hagar is revealing. Indeed, both Aurora and Hagar are 'doubled' characters. The text of *AL* indicates how it is possible to read Aurora as conscious of the way patriarchal systems Other and objectify femininity and seek to order and control it through imposing stereotyped positions and behaviours. Aurora interrogates these strategies for Othering – in the form of imposed (death) masks and representations, like Hagar or Eve or the Virgin – to critically reform feminine subjectivities.

It could be argued that EBB writes Aurora as a double agent from the outset. Aurora is a child of an Italian mother and an English father. Italy and England become metaphors, indeed personifications, for fecundity and barrenness. Armstrong has suggested that:

The movement to Italy [in nineteenth-century women's poetry]¹⁰³ is less important in itself than the association of women's poetry with an 'impassioned land' [L.E.L.] or emotional space *outside* the definitions and circumscriptions of the poet's specific culture and nationality.¹⁰⁴

However, Mermin argues that 'such personifications as nature, Italy, and the modern age, are conceived primarily as mothers.'¹⁰⁵ Indeed, if we examine

¹⁰³ 'Italy' is a significant trope not only for EBB, but the likes of Letitia Landon and Christina Rossetti, among others.

¹⁰⁴ Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry*, p. 324.

¹⁰⁵ Mermin, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, p. 190.

the language EBB deploys about Italy and England we see how far they're bound up in images of fecundity and barrenness. Aurora's English father is described as 'austere' (Bk I, l. 65) who 'after a dry life-time spent at home | [...] | Was flooded with a passion unaware' (Bk I, ll. 66 & 68). Even her dusty father is caught up in Italy's fecundity and marries an Italian woman, leading to disinheritance. After his wife's death, Aurora's father experiences a kind of resurrection in Italy and learns to break 'loose | From chin-bands of the soul, like Lazarus' (Bk I, ll. 177-78).

However, when Aurora returns to England, she says, 'England! oh, the frosty cliffs | Looked cold upon me' (Bk I, ll. 251-52). Rather than being a land of promise and possibility – 'the great isle' – Aurora experiences it as 'cut up from the fellowship | Of verdure, field from field, as man from man' (Bk I, ll. 260-61). There's no lushness, a reality echoed in her seemingly dried-up aunt who – as Patriarchy's agent – seeks to initiate Aurora into the ways of being a Lady. Physically her English aunt is barren: 'brown hair pricked with gray | By frigid use of life [...]' (Bk I, ll. 275-76). She embodies the realities of Hagar Aurora later disavows:

[...] She had lived

A sort of cage-bird life, born in a cage,

Accounting that to leap from perch to perch

Was act and joy enough for any bird. (Bk I, ll. 304-07)

Aurora carries these double visions within her from birth. She occupies a liminal space from the outset – a 'broken middle' – into which the dreams of Italy's fecundity and England's austere reality bleed and create dynamic

interplay.¹⁰⁶ She can escape neither and each becomes source of life and death.

Without England, Aurora would not have Romney and the literary opportunities which lead to her to become a famous poet. Out of its bleakness and barrenness come the twin realities which *AL* ultimately affirms: that Aurora and Romney are to marry in love while allowing Aurora to retain her subjectivity and status as a poet. Italy becomes the place she (along with Marian and her babe) head to when she thinks she has been spurned by Romney. It retains for her the lustre of promise and new life and indeed acts as the location for Romney and Aurora's reconciliation and vision of the New Jerusalem. Yet, she comes to realise that, in and of itself, Italy cannot be a place of uncomplicated, uncompromised fecundity: for it is the place where both her mother and father died. It is characterised with death. On her return, Italy is also a sad place:

[...] Tenderly

And mournfully I lived. I knew the birds

And insects – which looked fathered by the flowers

And emulous of their hues [...] (Bk VII, ll. 1052-55)

Italy as Eden has been lost. But when Romney appears in Book VIII, bearing the wounds of his folly (blind, homeless), Italy becomes the fount of new life.

¹⁰⁶ For a classic essay on the significance of Italy as 'mother' in the writings of both EBB and Christina Rossetti, see: Gilbert.

While my case for reading Aurora as an ironised Hagar draws on theological texts, it is helpful to acknowledge Cynthia Scheinberg's point that the Bible offers important examples of women who subvert and critique some of the established Victorian orthodoxies about women's capacity to be poets. Scheinberg acknowledges that, 'in Book II of *AL*, EBB has [...] Romney [...] voice a number of Victorian stereotypes about women poets.'¹⁰⁷ She says, 'defined as essentially non-prophetic in their very existence, women were thus excluded from being the dominant figure for the poet in the period':¹⁰⁸ the prophet. For, to be a poet/prophet,

A speaker must be understood as moving between two realms, the earthly, individual realm and the universal, divine realm; likewise he must be able to move between two rhetorical realms, private devotional utterance and public persuasive utterance.¹⁰⁹

Given the gendered division between private and public, female and male, women were excluded from the prophetic/poetic.

However, as Scheinberg reveals, 'there was at least one obvious and sanctioned source for women to claim this kind of prophetic authority: the Biblical heroines of the Christian Old Testament, or the Hebrew Torah.'¹¹⁰ Indeed, she argues:

By referring to women like Miriam, Esther, Deborah and Hannah – Jewish women who created poetry [...] and interacted in the public and political

¹⁰⁷ Cynthia Scheinberg, 'Measure to Yourself a Prophet's Place': Biblical Heroines, Jewish Difference and Women's Poetry', in *Women's Poetry, Late Romantic to Late Victorian*, ed. by Armstrong and Blain, pp. 263-91 (p. 263).

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid, p. 265.

life of their community – Victorian women poets could construct a viable model for the female poet/prophet in Victorian England, and they could likewise partake in ‘the one dangerous science for women [...] theology, as John Ruskin put it.¹¹¹

Furthermore, as F. Elizabeth Gray adds, ‘nineteenth-century women found a whole gallery of forceful female characters in their Bibles, characters that could be drawn on to help justify multiple social and creative ambitions.’¹¹² Yet as she goes on to demonstrate, most of the key figures, including the Blessed Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene, were drawn from the New Testament.¹¹³

The figure of Hagar presents, in terms of literary analysis of *EBB* and *AL*, fresh territory. She neither fits the ambiguous models of Mary Magdalene, nor is she an obvious Old Testament female-prophet figure like Miriam. The story of Hagar has been represented in theological discourse as an example of what Phyllis Tribble calls ‘a text of terror’¹¹⁴ – that is, a text used to frighten, regulate and demean women; however, it has also been claimed by feminist and womanist scholars as an example of subversion.¹¹⁵ Dolores Williams, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Mukti Barton, among others,¹¹⁶ have sought to recover Hagar for a liberative, feminist reading of

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Gray, p. 87.

¹¹³ Ibid, pp. 85-136.

¹¹⁴ For a full analysis of this term, see: Tribble, esp. Introduction and Chapter 1.

¹¹⁵ The Biblical narrative says that Hagar is Egyptian. This has commonly been read as indicating she was black. Given her status as a slave, this has also made Hagar a particularly suggestive figure for womanist scholars.

¹¹⁶ Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993); Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (London: SCM, 1984);

religion. While acknowledging that Hagar is the victim of Sarah and Abraham's patriarchal practices, Dolores Williams draws attention to often ignored features about the Hagar myth:¹¹⁷ firstly, Hagar has the courage to choose her own way, even though that way means likely death in the desert. Though she initially cannot avoid being used as a fecund body by Abraham, she runs away into the wilderness, determined to follow her own path. Secondly, while in the wilderness Hagar receives a blessing from God. Not only does she come upon an oasis of water, she is told she will bear a son Ishmael and, through this son, she will be the mother of an entire nation. Significantly, as Williams and Barton point out, God speaks directly to Hagar. This is the first time in the Bible that any woman is spoken to by God without the presence of a male figure. Even Eve does not get a 'one-to-one' with God. Sarah – patriarchy's chosen vessel and lawful wife of Abraham – only overhears God's promise that she will, at great age, bear a son. In the stories of the patriarchs – of Abraham, Moses and so on – only men get to speak directly with God.

Mukti Barton, *Scripture as Empowerment for Liberation* (Bristol: University of Bristol Press, 1999), et al. For an account of Hagar that reads her as part of a queered account of the biblical text, see also: Marcella Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God* (London: Routledge, 2003), esp. Chapter 6. For recent developments in womanist thought, see, for example, Monica A. Coleman, *Making a Way out of No Way: A Womanist Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008); Nyasha Junior, *An Introduction to Womanist Biblical Interpretation* (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox, 2015). For an analysis of surrogacy, God and the experience of black women in US culture pre- and post-Civil War, see: Delores S. Williams, 'Black Women's Surrogacy Experience and the Christian Notion of Redemption', in *Cross-Examinations: Readings on the Meaning of the Cross Today*, ed. by Marit Trelstad (Minneapolis MN: Fortress Press, 2006), pp. 19-32. Williams speculates on the extent to which Christ on the Cross represents the ultimate position of surrogate as 'standing in for all humankind'.

¹¹⁷ See Williams, *Sisters*, Chapter 1.

Perhaps, even more powerfully, as both Williams and Tribble have indicated, Hagar does something even more remarkable: she names God. Genesis 16.13-14 runs: 'So she named the Lord who spoke to her, 'You are El-roi' (the God who sees); for she said, 'Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him?' Therefore, the well was called Beer-lahai-roi; it lies between Kadesh and Bered.'¹¹⁸ Not only does she claim the male authority of naming – by naming a well – but she does something not even the greatest Patriarch is allowed to do. As Tribble puts it,

The expression [you are El-roi] is striking because it connotes naming rather than invocation. In other words, Hagar does not call upon the name of the deity. Instead she calls the name, a power attributed to no one else in the Bible [...] the maid [...] after receiving a divine announcement of the forthcoming birth, sees God with new vision [...] her naming unites the divine and human encounter.¹¹⁹

Hagar, the black slave, runs off and receives a blessing from God. She then names God. She performs Adam's role as the maker of names and names God. Certainly, while she is told by God to return to Abraham's household and slavery, Hagar does so renewed. She returns not a frightened slave, but a promise bearer – she's chosen by God as the mother of a great nation. She returns because the survival of her child, of her promise, depends on the practical sustenance Abraham's household offers; however, when she

¹¹⁸ For the purposes of clarity, I have used the New Revised Standard Version of Genesis 16. 13-14 in the text. The King James's Version reads: 'And she called the name of the Lord that spake unto her, Thou God seest me: for she said, Have I also here looked after him that seeth me? Wherefore the well was called Beer-lahai-roi; behold, *it is* between Kadesh and Bered.'

¹¹⁹ Tribble, p. 13.

returns she has filled with a new power. She carries, then, subversion in her being. Her fecundity is no longer passive but active; her fecundity subverts the established narrative and plot.

I have no wish to stretch credibility by suggesting that *AL*'s narrative – post-Aurora's rejection of Romney and their ultimate reconciliation – should be read slavishly as a version of Hagar's escape into the wilderness and so on.¹²⁰ Rather, I want to indicate how it illuminates some key points in Aurora's resistance to patriarchal femininity and, crucially, adds helpfully to some of the existing readings of Aurora as a kind of Eve or even Christ figure. Aurora's decision to pursue the vocation of a poet rather than that of a wife and mother can be read ironically as a Hagar-like determination to step into wilderness and away from the 'performance' society expects of her. Romney says,

[...] If your sex is weak for art,

[...]

[...] it is strong

For life and duty. Place your fecund heart

In mine, and let us blossom for the world

That wants love's colour in the grey of time. (Bk II, ll. 372, 374b-77)

Patriarchy can offer Aurora rewards. Her 'fecund heart' might have blossomed according to the patriarchal ordering of the feminine body. Indeed, Aurora acknowledges that if she had accepted his hand in marriage,

¹²⁰ There is, of course, in the image of Hagar – the slave-girl running off into the wilderness – a kind of piquant analogue to the runaway-slave in *TRS*. Insofar as Aurora can be read through the lens of Hagar, this brings the former into striking conversation with the actions of the runaway-slave.

I might have been a common woman now,
And happier, less known and less left alone,
Perhaps a better woman after all,
With chubby children hanging on my neck
To keep me low and wise. Ah me, the vines
That bear such fruit, are proud to stoop with it.

The palm stands upright in a realm of sand. (Bk II, ll. 513-19)

Vines that bear the fruit of children may be proud to stoop with the weight, but Aurora chooses a different path. She becomes the palm standing upright in the realm of sand – the desert, the wilderness. Aurora perceives that her commitment to her poetic vocation is a stepping away into a seemingly barren wilderness.

Like Hagar, she chooses her own way, outside a man's protection and heads into the wilderness. For she'd rather die in a potentially barren place than be a slave. As she says to her aunt, '[...] I am born,' I said with firmness, 'I, | To walk another way than his, dear aunt' (Bk II, ll. 580-81). The barren 'realm of sand' into which Aurora walks is an ironic one, of course. For it is no more or less than the place traditionally reserved for virility rather than fecundity: the realm of poetry. It is the place occupied by a masculinity charged with the task of understanding the world according to its own lights. In biblical terms, this is the world set aside for an Adam or an Abraham: for those, like Adam, who 'name' the world or Abraham, the Father of the Nations, who is the source of paternal meaning. Aurora is – in an important sense – alone in this world of men: 'I must help myself, | And

am alone from henceforth' (Bk II, ll. 807-08). And this determination to forego her place in the patriarchal order is a kind of death to her fecundity:

Then I stooped,
And lifted the soiled garland from the earth,
And set it on my head as bitterly
As when the Spanish monarch crowned the bones
Of his dead love. (Bk II, ll. 808-12)

The allusion to the 'Spanish monarch' crowning bones refers to the legend of Pedro I of Portugal who crowned his dead love Queen. The crown Aurora takes is one fit for dry bones (like the dry bones in the Book of Ezekiel);¹²¹ the laurel crowns she later receives as a poet are those fit for the realm where bodies have returned to dust. In short:

I had my wish,
To read and meditate the thing I would,
To fashion all my life upon my thought,
And marry, or not marry. Henceforth, none
Could disapprove me, vex me, hamper me.
Full ground-room, in this desert newly made. (Bk II, ll. 955-60)

Aurora enters a world of danger and profound contingency. Her

wilderness is London and her vocation as poet requires that she enters it in

¹²¹ See Ezekiel 37. 1-14. For example: 'The hand of the Lord was upon me, and carried me out in the spirit of the Lord, and set me down in the midst of the valley which was full of bones, And caused me to pass by them round about: and, behold, there were very many in the open valley; and, lo, they were very dry. And he said unto me, Son of man, can these bones live? And I answered, O Lord God, thou knowest. Again he said unto me, Prophesy upon these bones, and say unto them, O ye dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus saith the Lord God unto these bones; Behold, I will cause breath to enter into you, and ye shall live.'

the garb of a man. At the beginning of Book III, Aurora performs the masculine position of St Peter. Beginning with a reference to Jesus's speech in John 21 indicating how Peter was to die, Aurora notes, 'If He spoke | To Peter then, He speaks to us the same' (Bk III, ll. 6-7). The statement underlines the danger and risk to her fecund body of performing the male voice and position. Like Hagar, she enters this wilderness with no prospect of survival. She – like St Peter, crucified upside down – is likely to 'die' humiliated. As Stone claims, 'in earnest emulation, Aurora compares her struggle to realize her ideals in the world to the martyrdom of Simon Peter and the other apostles after the zealous 'first girding of the loins' in youth.'¹²²

Yet, one of the feminine realities Aurora brings into the wilderness is her fecundity. If she performs a masculine voice, it is critiqued by her fecundity, just as her fecundity is reinterpreted through her masculine performance. The figure of Hagar, understood through the concept of surrogacy, is once again helpful. As surrogate for Sarah, Hagar was a double. She gives birth to a child that was 'her own', but was also the property of Sarah's. Aurora, in turn, speaks of her early verses as akin to children. Her verses are simultaneously her own 'children', but also act as surrogates for the children she might have been promised if she'd married Romney. But these early verses are too unformed to survive:

[...] I ripped my verses up,

[...]

¹²² Stone, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, p. 145.

The heart in them was just an embryo's heart,
Which never yet had beat, that it should die;
Just gasps of make-believe galvanic life; (Bk III, ll. 245, 247-49)

As Mermin argues:

When [Aurora] felt something greater burning within her, she could not give it birth (3: 251-60), although later she “felt/[Her] heart’s life throbbing in [her] verse to show/It lived” (3:338-40) [...] Images of creativity as failed maternity are part of her more general realization that metaphorical satisfactions of art do not suffice for life.¹²³

In performing masculinity Aurora becomes, it would seem, a murderous poet-mother of stillborn children. For her, as Mermin has it, ‘poems are not living children, and unlike Pygmalion she cannot create an object fine enough to love (5: 400-413). Shedding her “life-blood” (5: 356) into her work does not make it live’.¹²⁴ But, she is a mother nonetheless. It is her fecundity which is the source of her words.

Aurora labours on. She writes for the periodical press to support herself in her ‘veritable work’ (Bk III, l. 328) and her pen becomes a ‘spade’ in her hand (Bk III, l. 294). She calls out to the Muses and the gods for inspiration. She will become the female Homer, even if that means the death of a patriarchally-conceived fecundity. She will pursue the path of Hagar out to the point of death, in search of blessing:

I laboured on alone. The wind and dust

¹²³ Mermin, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, p. 196. Mermin further notes, ‘later still, however, [AL] compares herself with Niobe (5: 413-20), all her poem-children dead.’

¹²⁴ Ibid, p. 199.

And sun of the world beat blistering in my face;
And hope, now for me, now against me, dragged
My spirits onward, as some fallen balloon,
Which, whether caught by blossoming tree or bare,
Is torn alike. (Bk V, ll. 421-26a)

There is no moment in which God speaks to Aurora and so on. Yet, a critically re-read Hagar offers an illuminating way of interrogating Aurora's performance of masculine poetic space. The pregnant Hagar's extraordinary act of naming God has its analogue in Aurora's work. The amateur radical Lord Howe says of Aurora, 'You, you love your art, | And, certain of vocation, set your soul | On utterance' (Bk V, ll. 927-29). Hagar performs the position given to Adam in the Garden – the one who speaks and names. Aurora does likewise. She chooses to be understood as one who 'utters'. She is an active subject in the world. Aurora becomes the maker of poetry and sells her manuscript (in part to escape to Italy) and it is received as art.

In the wilderness of writing, Aurora calls out to God. It is both an invocation and – rather like Hagar – a naming. She says:

O my God, my God,
O supreme Artist, who as sole return
For all the cosmic wonder of Thy work,
Demandest of us just a word ... a name,
'My Father!' (Bk V, ll. 435-39a)

Aurora calls God the supreme Artist, yet as Patricia Pulham notes, there is a paradox here. She claims:

In *AL*, [EBB] acknowledges the sublimation of a woman's sexual desire in

poetry. As Aurora muses on her fame she concedes that her poems contain
the 'very heart of passionate womanhood',
Which could not beat so in the verse without
Being present also in the unkissed lips
And eyes undried because there's none to ask
The reason they grew moist. (5: 443-47)¹²⁵

However, as Pulham concludes, 'this [...] creates an unsettling paradox. If women's poetry acts as a container for the woman poet's sexual desire, then both poetry and the woman poet are necessarily eroticized in the process.'¹²⁶ The analogue of this is the patriarchal eroticisation and fetishisation of woman as mere containers for 'seed' – as mother who holds the seed within and whose value is transitory.

Aurora, like all women, faces the constant threat that her 'utterance' as poet will be treated as a container for her sexual desire. Her remarks in Book V about 'passionate womanhood' demonstrate her awareness of that danger. Yet, her willingness to perform poet rather than poetess is a work which exposes the contingency of both the Victorian ideology of femininity and masculinity. Aurora chooses to turn her back on patriarchal fulfilment. She refuses to be identified simply as a fecund body that will be completed in motherhood and marriage. She – like Hagar – enters the seemingly barren wilderness and survives. The discourse of patriarchal fecundity is exposed as contingent and limited. Likewise, the regulatory discourse of masculine

¹²⁵ Pulham, p. 17.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

heterosexuality is exposed as a linguistic position and a performance that can be claimed by women who dare to 'utter' and 'speak'.

Under patriarchal conditions, the female body is monstrous; to make of this body 'a Hagar', a surrogate and slave, is to double, defer and displace this monstrosity. Initially Aurora refuses to take up the position of Hagar for Romney. Yet, in her pursuit of poetry she – like Hagar – enters the wilderness and survives. She embraces her 'monstrous' fecundity and enters a place of horror where her 'poetic' children – because they are produced under impossible, patriarchal conditions – appear as stillborn. Yet, Aurora's persistence – as a writer – is a work of survival and creative re-making. She exposes the discourse of patriarchal fecundity for what it is and, in her poetic utterances, survives and becomes a poet. She – *pace* Shildrick – 'confounds' binary definitions which say women and men belong to separate spheres and only men can be public, potent poets. Her fecundity queers the boundaries, as the fecund female body queers the boundaries between public and private. It is in this context that we should understand Aurora's decision to finally marry Romney.

A Beatific Vision? Aurora enters Slavery or Marriage Reformed?

Of course, one cannot realistically deny that there is a sense in which EBB concedes to her Victorian audience in allowing the happy ending. Aurora's confession that, 'Art is much, but love is more!' is set amidst rich, passionate language:

Art symbolizes heaven; but Love is God
And makes heaven. I, Aurora, fell from mine,
I would not be a woman like the rest,
A simple woman who believes in love,
And owns the right of love because she loves,
And, hearing she's beloved, is satisfied
With what contents God: I must analyse,
Confront, and question; just as if a fly
Refused to warm itself in any sun
Till such was *in leone* [...]. (Bk IX, ll. 658-67)¹²⁷

Gilbert and Gubar's claim has purchase:

Married to blind Romney, Aurora will be both as wife and as artist her husband's helpmeet. She will not so much desire the sun (the way she did when younger) as she will study it, harvest it, benefit from it. In other words, the artist, and specifically the woman poet, is neither a glittering and inspired figure nor a passionately self-assertive Jane Eyre. Rather, she is a modest bride of Apollo who labors for her glorious blind master [...] in an "unwearied" trance of self-abnegation.¹²⁸

This is hardly the vision of poet Aurora set out with: 'As her name indicates, therefore, Aurora becomes the dawn goddess who ministers to the god

¹²⁷ Critics have indicated that this vision is drawn from the influence of Emmanuel Swedenborg on EBB's life and thinking. While she was sceptical of Swedenborg's 'mad genius', his view that love rather than art is significant in AL's consummating vision in Book IX. For more, see Avery and Stott, Chapter 6 and Stone, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, p. 182.

¹²⁸ Gilbert and Gubar, p. 578.

Dickinson was to call “the man of noon” by laying “the first foundations” of his reconstructed house.’¹²⁹

Yet, even in the light of seeming capitulation, Gilbert and Gubar acknowledge that ‘for though the chastened Aurora vows to work *for* Romney, the work Barrett Browning imagines her doing is violent and visionary.’¹³⁰ All things in EBB’s scheme will be made new: ‘New churches, new economies, new laws | Admitting freedom, new societies | Excluding falsehood’ (Bk IX, ll. 947-49). As Lewis argues, ‘significantly [...] Aurora’s poetry is not abolished [...] She will continue the practice of art and “work for two,” although presumably her art will now become more mature and more true.’¹³¹ This is a religious, eschatological vision of poetry and society reformed in a New Jerusalem. In Lewis’s terms, ‘when Aurora and Romney stand face-to-face or shoulder-to-shoulder and envision the New Jerusalem of “new societies/Excluding falsehood” (AL 9. 948-49), the poet is alluding both to John’s Revelation and to the eschatology of British socialism.’¹³²

According to Lewis, EBB ‘uses the city Jerusalem as metaphor for the descent of heavenly teaching to the residents of earth, bringing about a new *ecclesia*, a heavenly church.’¹³³ The use of the term ‘ecclesia’ is striking. It arguably finds an analogue in Christian-feminist scholar Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s notion of *Ekklesia*. This concept re-visions the traditional, patriarchal and hierarchical church as a radically equal community grounded

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Ibid, p. 579.

¹³¹ Lewis, p. 122.

¹³² Ibid, p. 131.

¹³³ Ibid.

and centred on mutual respect, solidarity and love. It is a community which seeks to rework social injustice and division and treats this as a work of poetic creation.¹³⁴ Ultimately, Romney identifies himself as a failed, surrogate Christ. As Stone argues:

[When] Aurora finally declares her love to Romney, not once but three times (9: 607-13, 713-14), all signs suggest that the artist will not become a dropped star buried in the bitter waters of a wife. On the contrary, as Romney suggests, Aurora will be a radiant “‘morning-star’” (9: 908) speaking her revelation to the world.¹³⁵

This three-time declaration of love echoes St Peter’s proclamation of love for the resurrected Christ in John’s Gospel;¹³⁶ this might suggest that, for Aurora, Romney is still a Christ. Yet, Aurora’s decision to marry isn’t the choice of submission to her patriarchal Lord. She will be a radiant ‘morning star’. Morning star is one of the traditional metaphors for Christ.¹³⁷ In addition to being the goddess of the dawn, she too will be a Christ. In marrying she will not lose her place in the Symbolic Order as a subject. Nor will she will be identified merely by her fecundity. She enters marriage as someone whose willingness – to pursue the creation of Art in the wilderness – has exposed the limits of patriarchal discourses of femininity and

¹³⁴ For Schüssler Fiorenza’s recent treatment of (to give it its full title) *ekklēsia gynaikōn* see Schüssler Fiorenza, *Empowering Memory*, pp. 228-34. See also Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *The Power of the Word: Scripture and the Rhetoric of Empire* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), Chapter 3.

¹³⁵ Stone, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, p. 136.

¹³⁶ John 21. 15-25.

¹³⁷ The Book of Revelation 22. 14. Intriguingly, the term ‘morning star’ has also been applied to Satan. There is insufficient space in this thesis to explore the implications of that designation for a reading of Aurora.

masculinity and reforms the world. This will be a religious world, but not one in which women are defined by their reproductive capacity. They, like Hagar, will not be mere surrogates for the patriarchal order, but be origins of meaning. Aurora will not sacrifice her fecund poetic power even as she marries Romney.

CHAPTER FOUR

‘Such soft flowers, | From such rough roots’: Purity, Fallenness and Fecundity in *Aurora Leigh*

In the previous chapter, I explored how *AL*’s performance of masculine voice exposes and subverts the limitations placed on the possibilities of the fecund female body. I examined how a doubled strategy, centred around a reading of Hagar, made available readings of poetic performance and marriage that might be construed as feminist and Christian. In this chapter I interrogate an iconic trope of both nineteenth-century literature and Christian theologies: the fallen woman. As Amanda Anderson indicates in her study of Victorian culture and the fallen woman, fallenness – understood as ‘attenuated autonomy’ – is a pervasive aesthetic category often used by the artist-subject to assert ‘his’ full autonomy.¹ Equally, Marina Warner’s classic study of the status of women in Christian iconography and history underlines the extent to which the status of women in the Christian era has been defined by a binary opposition between Virgin (Mary) and Whore (Mary Magdalene).² Feminist literary and cultural theorists³ have indicated the extent to which the notion of femininity is

¹ Amanda Anderson, *Tainted Souls and Painted Faces: The Rhetoric of Fallenness in Victorian Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993).

² Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary* (London: Picador, 1976).

³ See for example, Bronfen; Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. by Gillian C. Gill (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985); Irigaray, *This Sex*.

typically ordered around concepts of purity and fallenness, as well as life and death. Indeed, how in patriarchal ordering, femininity as fecund excess is constantly under threat of 'falling away' from an ideal of chaste purity or the 'safe' order of patriarchal marriage. By drawing on the insights of Julia Kristeva in her seminal paper *Stabat Mater*, I shall attempt to clarify how treating women as focus for fallenness is a mark of the patriarchal ordering of gender, culture and art. Fallenness is a social, ideological and aesthetic category. As the Other of an account of subjectivity constructed according to the privileging of the male, women are always placed in a position of precariousness where they risk 'falling away' from socially and aesthetically constructed ideals. Indeed, I shall investigate how this is the abiding condition of mid-nineteenth century women.⁴ The nineteenth century represents a key moment – not least in the literature of Dickens and Gaskell – when the concept of womanhood as constantly on the edge of fallenness is interrogated.

Specifically, this chapter analyses the nature and place of fallenness in *AL*'s drama of fecundity and barrenness. I concentrate on the place of Marian Erle as an icon of fallenness, and her significance for Aurora's negotiation of artistic and personal subjectivity.⁵ I shall examine how *AL* performs fallenness: that is, how it deliberately 'falls away' from and subverts socially and aesthetically constructed ideals of femininity through

⁴ As will become clear, this fragility and precariousness is predicated on the fragility of representations of the privileged term 'masculinity'.

⁵ As such I address a version of the issue raised in the previous chapter concerning Aurora's use of the Other – in this case, Marian Erle – to complete herself as a middle-class woman.

the twin figures of Marian and Aurora. Developing ideas of Anne D. Wallace⁶ and Angela Leighton,⁷ I shall examine how the concept of fallenness is – as Patricia Pulham puts it, quoting Leighton – ‘capacious’:

[F]or the Victorians, the fallen woman is a type which ranges from the successful courtesan to the passionate adulteress, from the destitute streetwalker to the seduced innocent, from the unscrupulous procuress to the raped child. To fall, for woman, is simply to fall short.⁸

For a [middle-class] woman to aspire to be a poet was to ‘fall short’ of constructions of femininity as natural fecundity. The public display and desire to be paid for work was a form of prostitution. In short, ‘her entry into the public sphere for monetary gain was incompatible with contemporary constructions of femininity.’⁹ Work – for middle-class women – outside of carefully prescribed activities like non-utilitarian sewing was to fall from a construction of middle-class femininity as appropriate fecundity (to have and raise children within marriage).

This chapter, then, suggests that [EBB] interrogates the concept of fallenness as a strategy for examining the limits of femininity ordered around fecundity and barrenness. For Aurora to choose to be a professional

⁶ Anne D. Wallace, ‘Nor in Fading Silks Compose’: Sewing, Walking, and Poetic Labor in ‘Aurora Leigh’, *ELH*, 64.1 (1997), 223-56. Elizabeth Erbeznik draws on the importance of sewing as women’s labour in her study of ‘city-making’ as poetic making. See: Elizabeth Erbeznik, ‘City-Craft as Poetic Process in Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh*’, *Victorian Poetry*, 52.4 (2014), 619-36. For sewing as metaphor for women’s making, see also: Helena Mitchie, *The Flesh Made Word: Female Figures and Women’s Bodies* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

⁷ Angela Leighton, *Victorian Women Poets: A Critical Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), pp. 215-34.

⁸ Pulham, p. 16.

⁹ *Ibid.*

poet is to choose to be soiled, to choose to fall. *AL* exposes the double-bind on female subjectivity: for a middle-class woman to choose to professionally work as poet is to risk becoming 'not-a-woman' or 'barren'. The price of becoming a subject is – like Milton's Satan – to fall. It is an act of disobedience to the patriarchal order.

For women, the socially constructed expectations of fecund femininity always present the risk of fallenness. On one level, Marian Erle acts as a kind of icon of innocence and passive femininity. She is consistently done to: encouraged to become a prostitute by an untrustworthy mother, proposed to by Romney as part of his philanthropic schemes, traduced by Lady Waldemar and ultimately raped. As the likes of Helen Cooper and Virginia Steinmetz have argued, Marian can be read as – at some level – used by Aurora in order for the latter to fully achieve her subjectivity.¹⁰ Yet Marian exposes the fundamental double-bind on feminine subjectivity under patriarchy: while purity and virtue are presented as the feminine ideal, because fecundity is seen as something excessive, dangerous and in need of control, purity is fundamentally unstable, fragile and at risk of destruction. This effect itself is intensified by Marian's class status. Valentine Cunningham goes so far as to say, 'much of *Aurora Leigh* is, of course, built

¹⁰ See, for example: Helen M. Cooper, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Woman & Artist* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988); Virginia V. Steinmetz, 'Images of "Mother-Want" in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "Aurora Leigh"', *Victorian Poetry*, 21.4 (1983), 351-67. See also: Dolores Rosenblum, 'Face to Face: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "Aurora Leigh" and Nineteenth-Century Poetry', *Victorian Studies*, 26.3 (1983), 321-38; Dolores Rosenblum, 'Casa Guidi Windows and Aurora Leigh: The Genesis of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Visionary Aesthetic', *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 4.1 (1985), 61-68.

on how traditional class consciousness gets in the way of the marriage of upper-crust Romney and servant-class Marianne.’¹¹ Marian’s place as the daughter of abusive parents (her drunken mother plans to sell her into prostitution) means that her class position is already constructed as less than or fallen away from the precarious middle-class ideal. Marian may be done to, but in virtue of being servant-class she has, arguably, already fallen away from society’s normative position.

I shall explore how Marian’s exposure of the way that women cannot ‘win’ under conditions of patriarchy indicates how EBB may be read as reformulating categories of fecundity and barrenness. Marian is a woman who ‘falls’ by having a child outside of marriage, yet she remains ultimately unsullied and good and reveals the barrenness of notions of purity and fallenness. Marian’s subjectivity – in which she declares that she will care for her child without husband – is one in which she refuses the consolations of patriarchal marriage. Yet, she offers more. Rather than being read through categories of purity or fallenness, Marian performs the role of a female Christ figure: she reformulates not only parenthood, but also becomes the means for the re-making of Aurora and Romney’s relationship. Marian Erle, the so-called fallen woman, occupies the position of one who enables Aurora’s poetry to be grounded and Romney’s idealism to become meaningful and purposeful.

¹¹ Cunningham, p. 424. ‘Marianne’ is Cunningham’s spelling.

As Amanda Anderson has argued, then, the character of Marian Erle performs a striking subversion of *AL* as univocal dramatic monologue. By the end of the book, 'the poet-heroine thus writes in two voices, producing a doubled ending to her story, one in which the exiled woman claims her exile and the other which capitulates to the conventional consolations of the marriage plot.'¹² After her rape and the 'redemptive' birth of her child, Marian emerges strong enough to speak her own story. As Anderson puts it:

By the end of the poem, the empowered Marian serves as a double for Aurora; and her actions constitute a sort of alternate ending that preserves the claim to independence represented by Aurora the aspiring artist. This explains why, when Marian rejects Romney's renewed offer of marriage in Book IX, she is described by Aurora "as one who had authority to speak/and not as Marian" (IX. 250-51).¹³

If the fallen woman is being used to define the artist, Aurora significantly identifies herself with, and not against, the fallen woman.

This has profound implications for *AL* as a potential manifesto for a Christian-feminist poetics. At one level, *AL* exposes the extent to which positions like Virgin and Whore are performative categories for patriarchal femininity. They act as regulative discourses that create inner accounts of what womanhood means rather than essential, natural categories. Marian acts as a focus for exposing the limits of this binary opposition. Yet, *EBB* is fundamentally concerned with what kind of poetry is possible for a woman

¹² Anderson, p. 196.

¹³ Ibid, pp. 195-96.

under such conditions where a woman is defined in terms of pure or sinful fecundity.

What is the status of her voice? *AL*, as dramatic monologue, gives voice to a performance – through Aurora – that seeks to work with and through Christian categories (notably, the primacy of redemption, hope and love) yet claims poetry as space for women's subjectivity. Indeed, a mark of this radicalism lies in the use of dramatic monologue itself. It represents a way of dramatically exposing the limited performances available for women under patriarchy (for under the expansive understanding of fallenness already noted, both Aurora *qua* poet and Marian as raped woman are fallen) whilst generating subversions of those limitations. The radicalism allows Marian as fallen to still be a kind of Christ, as well as allowing Aurora to be a poet.¹⁴ *AL* demonstrates that women can be poets (and indeed arguably shows how lower-class women like Marian can be subjects, be speaking women and survive fallenness). She shows that if patriarchy characterises middle-class Victorian women's attempts to speak as poets as fallen, the fecundity of women is not to be reduced to physical function. A woman may 'birth' poetry. *EBB* shows, through dramatic monologue, that Aurora as a woman may perform the masculine position, expose its over-determination of femininity, and remain a woman and a person of faith.

¹⁴ In Marian's case, this radical re-reading of the fallen, prostituted woman contrasts powerfully with the fate of, say, Esther, the fallen woman in Mrs Gaskell's *Mary Barton*. Esther's fate is structured through a novel that uses the classic technique of Omniscient Narrator. While it falls outside the parameters of this thesis, it is tempting to speculate that Esther's fate – marginal, cautionary, doomed to die – reflects partly on the voice Gaskell writes in: authoritative, all-knowing, and global.

‘There seemed no sin, no shame, no wrath, no grief’ – The Precarious Place of (Fallen) Women in Victorian Culture

Before examining the precise trajectory of fallenness in *AL*, it is worth rehearsing some of the key cultural and ideological issues at stake when discussing fallenness in the Victorian era. This will enable me to show why fallenness, as Rosie Miles suggests, is ‘the social problem that *AL* cares most about.’¹⁵ It is impossible to do this without acknowledging and interrogating the impact of patriarchal-Christian ideas on concepts of femininity. Julia Kristeva’s classic work on representations of women in religious and linguistic discourse, *Stabat Mater*, offers an illuminating reading of how religious discourse has structured femininity as the Maternal and ordered this through an oppositional discourse between purity and fallenness.

Fallenness and the fallen woman were urgent and definitive aspects of Victorian culture. Amanda Anderson enumerates key texts including *David Copperfield*, Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s ‘Jenny’, Mrs Gaskell’s *Ruth* as well as EBB’s *AL*. As I shall examine in the next chapter, Christina Rossetti’s *Goblin Market* is another text which interrogates the discourse on fallenness.¹⁶ The Victorian era is marked by numerous major and minor

¹⁵ Miles, p. 85. See also Mermin, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, p. 203: ‘Prostitution is the social evil that the poem most cares to cure.’

¹⁶ CR also explores fallenness in a monologic poem like ‘Cousin Kate’.

literary analyses of the woman sexually active and available outside of marriage. Thomas Hood's 'The Bridge of Sighs' (1844) evokes pity for a prostitute who commits suicide by jumping into the Thames. In a late Victorian context, Thomas Hardy wrote 'The Ruined Maid' (1901)¹⁷ and Guinevere – the woman who falls into adultery – is a key trope not only of Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, but of William Morris's *The Defence of Guenevere*. There were numerous poems on fallen women written by women including Dora Greenwell's *Christina*, Isa Blagden's *The Story of Two Lives*, Adelaide Proctor's *A Legend of Provence* and Amy Levy's *Magdalen*, among others.

In literature, the fate of the fallen woman – understood broadly, as prostitute, adulteress, a woman who has lost her virtue through rape or trickery – was handled more sympathetically than in many Victorian social and journalistic texts. Angela Leighton notes how many poems about fallen women written by women use dramatic monologue, suggesting that, 'the fact that [these poems are] spoken in the first person [...] is an act of literary and social transgression.'¹⁸ As Miles puts it, 'the monologue form gives the fallen woman her own voice, and offers the woman poet a way of exploring a potentially taboo topic in a voice other than her own.'¹⁹

The fate of the fallen woman often remained a compromised one. Many notable fallen women, even redeemed from perdition, are killed off.

¹⁷ As well, of course, as the classic *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*.

¹⁸ *Victorian Women Poets (Reynolds)*, p. 276.

¹⁹ Miles, p. 13.

In Samuel Richardson's eighteenth-century text, *Clarissa*, the raped heroine is, effectively, killed off. In Mrs Gaskell's *Ruth*, the heroine combines qualities of both Madonna and Magdalene and, despite achieving the most respectable position a woman of her class might expect, dies of fever.²⁰ Little Emily, in *David Copperfield*, ultimately goes to Australia. However else the narrative of *AL* might be read, it is certainly the case that, as Margaret Reynolds states, EBB explicitly claims 'that Marian should be permitted dignity and purity and that she should "triumph" over Clarissa in being allowed to live'.²¹ Marjorie Stone argues, '[EBB] also alters Richardson and extends Gaskell's analysis by depicting Marian's rape in the economic and social context of systemic prostitution that makes it a sadly representative rather than an isolated act.'²² Further, Angela Leighton observes, '[EBB] constantly emphasizes the culpability of the system, and particularly [...] the class system.'²³

Fallenness was not, of course, simply an aesthetic category. One of the wellsprings for literary discourse was social anxiety about relations between classes and genders in an era of profound cultural change. William Rathbone Greg's 1850 essay, 'Prostitution' claimed there were 50,000

²⁰ As Tess Cosslett argues, the dual iconography behind the character of Ruth was an influence on EBB's Marian. See: Tess Cosslett, *Woman to Woman: Female Friendship in Victorian Fiction* (Brighton: Harvester, 1988), p. 52.

²¹ Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, ed. by Margaret Reynolds (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1992), p. 44.

²² Stone, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, p. 178.

²³ Angela Leighton, *Because Men*, p. 219.

prostitutes in London.²⁴ If prostitution wasn't illegal, it was considered the great social evil, and figures like Prime Minister W.E. Gladstone engaged in rescuing women from 'depredation'. Timothy Willem Jones's study of the place of the Church of England in mid-century England underlines the extent to which the re-established Women's Religious Orders were involved in 'saving' fallen women.²⁵ As Mary Arseneau reminds us, Christina Rossetti and her sister Maria were involved in the *St Mary Magdalene Home for Fallen Women* in Highgate.²⁶

Political debate about the status of prostitution was intense in the 1850s and 60s, culminating in the Contagious Diseases Acts, first enacted in 1864 and only repealed in 1886. This series of measures empowered the relevant authorities to subject suspected prostitutes in military towns and ports to internal medical examinations and, if found to be suffering from venereal disease, to be detained in specified hospitals for up to nine months. The immediate impetus for this coercive legislation was concern over the efficacy of the military due to the high incidence of venereal disease. The Acts were, therefore, primarily aimed at preventing the spread of the disease among the military, though the wives and children of men using prostitutes, who then became infected, were also the subject of concern.

²⁴ William Rathbone Greg, *The Great Sin of Great Cities: Being a Reprint, by Request, of an Article Entitled "Prostitution," from the Westminster and Foreign Quarterly Review, for July MDCCCL* (London: John Chapman, 1853).

²⁵ Jones. See, especially, pp. 46-72.

²⁶ Arseneau, *Recovering*, p. 23.

Why was fallenness a significant aesthetic and social Victorian anxiety? Amanda Anderson suggests that 'to fall' means, literally, 'to lose control'.²⁷ This assessment indicates the extent to which the notion of fallenness was tied up in middle-class self-images of propriety and control. As indicated in the chapter on marriage, Michel Foucault argues that the regulation of sexuality – notably through notions of marriage – may reflect not so much the extent to which a ruling class wishes to control the behaviour of the lower classes, but to project their own self-image.²⁸ On this analysis, the nineteenth-century fallen woman was one aspect of Otherness (other examples being the homosexual, children and so on) that didn't reflect the way the ruling/middle-classes wish to structure subjectivity.

If fallenness might be understood in terms of the middle-classes defining themselves through what they were *not*, other factors were at stake. Fundamentally, fallenness should be read as a dimension of religious, patriarchal representations of femaleness. Traditional patriarchal religious discourse offers one trajectory for exploring the position of fallenness in representations of femininity. As Linda M. Lewis argues, drawing on the work of Marina Warner, fallenness is a category enshrined in biblical discourse and seen as a consequence of feminine disobedience and lack of control: 'in the myth of the Fall, sex and death [...] are seen as twin evils caused by [...] Eve; therefore, the daughters of Eve bear in their physical

²⁷ Anderson, p. 2.

²⁸ See previous chapter, pp. 139-40.

persons and bodily fluids the reminder of filth, decay, and corruption.’²⁹ The ‘corrupt’ and ‘fallen’ nature of femininity is further inscribed in wide swathes of Christian tradition and culture. Lewis adds:

For example, St. John Chrysostom (whom [EBB] read intimately) warns that all women are corruption: “For the groundwork of this corporeal beauty is nothing else but phlegm, and blood, and humor, and bile, and the fluid of masticated food [...] you will affirm that the well-shaped body is nothing else than a whited sepulchre”.³⁰

Indeed, as theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether indicates, in medieval clerical misogyny, woman’s very body is described with violent disgust, for example as a tombstone that reveals a rotting corpse.³¹ By the thirteenth century, *Mundus* or world/nature was represented with a female figure, *Frau Welt*, or dame nature, who from the front is alluring but from the rear is covered with foul, reptilian creatures of hell and the grave.³²

This ordering of femininity around concepts of fallenness achieves its definitive religious expression in the binary opposition between Virgin and Whore, Blessed Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene. Central to this discourse on fallenness is the regulation of maternity. As Julia Kristeva claims in her essay *Stabat Mater*, ‘Christianity is no doubt the most sophisticated

²⁹ Lewis, pp. 160-61.

³⁰ Ibid, p. 161.

³¹ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston MA: Beacon, 1993), p. 81. See also: Fran Porter, *Women and Men after Christendom* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2015).

³² A point made by Lewis, p. 162, referring to Warner, p. 78 and Ruether, p. 81. See also: Pamela Berger, *The Goddess Obscured: Transformations of the Grain Protectress from Goddess to Saint* (Boston: Beacon Press; London: Hale, 1988 (1985)).

symbolic construct in which femininity [...] is confined within the limits of the *maternal*.³³ Fundamental to that discourse were readings of the Blessed Virgin, and her Other, the Magdalene. The historian Carol Engelhardt Herringer argues that ‘the peak years for concern over the Catholic Virgin Mary were roughly 1830-85, the same period in which the feminine ideal – that contradictory, ever-evolving image of woman as the embodiment of selfless, sexless love – was ascendant.’³⁴ Iconographically, then, the concept of the Virgin Mother might be read as a discourse constructing notions of the feminine ideal.³⁵ Indeed, it is not unreasonable to suggest that nineteenth-century discourse on femininity in literature, sermons, medical books and conduct manuals was part of a structural logic implied by religious patriarchal icons of womanhood.³⁶ As Engelhardt Herringer goes on to claim, ‘the timing as well as the content of the Marian debates suggests that [a] significant factor in inspiring them was the anxious attempt, characteristic of much Victorian discourse, to define woman’s nature and duties.’³⁷ At stake was the place of fecundity in the essential understanding

³³ Kristeva, *Stabat Mater*, pp. 133-34.

³⁴ Carol Engelhardt Herringer, *Victorians and the Virgin Mary: Religion and Gender in England, 1830-85* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014), p. 19.

³⁵ It falls beyond the scope of this thesis to offer a full account of the reasons why Marian debates between Catholics and Protestants were especially lively in an era of profound questioning about what femininity consisted in.

³⁶ For an extensive discussion of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century medical representations of the female body, see: McGrath. Religious and social Conduct Books, especially aimed at middle-class women, were pervasive in the nineteenth century. For example, Catharine Beecher, *A Treatise on Domestic Economy for the Use of Young Ladies at Home and at School* (1841), Hannah More, *Essays on Various Subjects, Principally Designed for Young Ladies* (1777), et al. They comprise a branch of literature Aurora’s aunt attempts to foist upon her in Book I of *AL*.

³⁷ Herringer, pp. 19-20.

of womanhood. In short, whether the Virgin represented the ideal of feminine virtue – as pure mother. As Herringer concludes:

This image of womanhood was associated most with the middle classes, but it touched all levels of Victorian society. Working-class movements like Chartism adopted it as proof of their respectability, while its intimate affiliation with organized religion ensured that it had a wide influence. The feminine ideal [...] was one of the defining characteristics of Victorian culture.³⁸

Julia Kristeva reminds us that ‘many civilizations have subsumed femininity under the Maternal, but Christianity developed this tendency to the full.’³⁹ Her interrogation of the Virgin as icon of the Maternal suggests it functions as a patriarchal strategy which ‘[supplies] what the male lacks,’ and can establish ‘the community of the sexes,’ yet at the same time elides ‘what today a woman might say or want to of the Maternal, so that when today women makes their voices heard, the issues of conception and maternity are a major focus of discontent.’⁴⁰ In short, then, the Virgin Maternal or Fecund is a concept defined in male terms. On this kind of patriarchal picture, subjectivity is shaped around what men have – a penis or phallus. As Shildrick summarises, femininity is defined by absence, lack and an emptiness that exists to be filled: ‘the absence of the penis has been taken as the defining factor of femininity. Women are castrated men, their

³⁸ Ibid, p. 25.

³⁹ Kristeva, *Stabat Mater*, p. 135.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

bodies marked by lack, and what is hidden is just a hole.⁴¹ In Luce Irigaray's take on Freud, 'nothing to be seen is equivalent to having no thing. No being and no truth.'⁴² According to the picture outlined by the likes of Irigaray and Kristeva the male is in a state of anxiety about femininity. For the male – which offers itself as complete in itself, as what Subjectivity is, as having no 'lack' – unconsciously relies on an Other in order to define/complete itself. Yet, by supplying an image of the Other as feminine, stripped of her material reality – the reality of sex, intercourse – the male provides for itself an account of Otherness that is limited and seemingly unthreatening. The feminine Other is remastered by the male: the fecund 'castrating' space of the vagina and – crucially – the womb, is re-ordered as a place of 'nourishment' and 'growth', free from the troubling materiality of female bodies.⁴³

This trajectory enables us to give an account of the significance of fallenness in Victorian patriarchal discourse. Patriarchal discourse seeks to articulate masculinity as default, as the place of subjectivity. Femininity – as fecundity – is, then, from the outset a kind of fallenness, a failure to be male. But, under this ordering, femininity itself is idealised on an impossible pattern: for while the power to reproduce is undeniable, it becomes idealised as – at best – sinless, a pure motherhood in the service of God.

⁴¹ Shildrick, *Leaky Bodies*, p. 43.

⁴² Irigaray, *Speculum*, p. 48.

⁴³ As Kristeva argues, within religious discourse, this account of femininity offers a strategy for male mystics like Saint Augustine and Meister Eckhart to occupy the position of the feminine – to take the 'maternal' upon themselves – without shame or loss. See: Kristeva, *Stabat Mater*, p. 134.

This inscribes a further dimension of fallenness between women themselves. For there is a sense in which no woman, apart from the Mother of God herself, can live the feminine ideal. Her modelling of service, self-sacrifice and devotion to a masculine, patriarchal God offers – at best – a pattern for women to aspire to, yet from which all actual women are doomed to fall short.

Fallenness, then, becomes the conscious or accidental loss of a masculine-defined virtue – either taken away from a woman via rape, trickery and foolishness, or through an act of commission (for example, a ‘wicked’ decision to become a prostitute). According to this picture of feminine virtue, the constant shadow is the Magdalene – the tempter of men, the one who sells her body, who reduces herself to the materiality of her body or flesh. Julia Kristeva claims, the notion of virgin as ‘a woman who has not had sex’ is a misreading of the Biblical text. ‘It seems the epithet ‘virgin’ applied to Mary was an error of translation: for the Semitic word denoting the social-legal status of an unmarried girl, translators have substituted the Greek *parthenos*, which denotes a physiological and psychological fact, virginity.’⁴⁴ Intriguingly, the same claim may be made about the cultural translation of the notion of Mary of Magdala into the status of prostitute. The Biblical record merely indicates she was a woman ‘possessed by seven demons’ who became one of the followers of Jesus.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 135.

⁴⁵ See: Mark 16. 9. It is noteworthy that this reference in Mark occurs in the extended version of his gospel – this indicates the reference was added potentially several decades after the gospel’s original composition. The theo-historical factors

To return to Amanda Anderson's definition of fallenness as 'loss of control', patriarchal femininity is ever on the edge of letting lack of control determine a woman's 'limited' subjectivity. The Magdalene is the icon of this loss of control for – in the representations of her, in church tradition, art and so on – she is earthy, material and read in terms of her sinfulness. She is typically painted as dressed in red, the colour of blood, menstrual and otherwise.⁴⁶ She is stereotyped as making her body available for the pleasure and gratification of others. Shildrick claims, 'the very sign of fertility, the menses, has been regarded as evidence of women's inherent lack of control of the body and, by extension, of the self.'⁴⁷ In Elizabeth Grosz's terms, 'women's corporeality is inscribed as a mode of seepage.'⁴⁸ The Magdalene, as the Virgin's analogue, is the icon of this seeping, morally incontinent, material reading of fecundity; a fecundity which must be regulated and controlled, lest it consume society, church and human relations with concupiscence and reproductive excess. Fallenness represents, again, the double bind imposed on women. Fecundity is read as both good – as productive and necessary, as bringing forth new life – but

in the move from 'follower'/'disciple' to 'camp follower'/'prostitute' fall outside the scope of this thesis.

⁴⁶ See Chapter 6 for a discussion of the Magdalene's association with eggs and redness. Red is – in liturgical theology – associated with sacrifice, death and martyrdom. Vermillion in the Medieval Era was second only in cost to lapis lazuli (the colour most associated with the Virgin). The use of vermillion for Mary's robes may be indicative of her closeness to Christ, and most especially her role as the first witness to his resurrection. See: Elizabeth Castelli, *Martyrdom & Memory: Early Christian Culture Making* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); *A Good Year*, ed. by Mark Oakley (London: SPCK, 2016).

⁴⁷ Shildrick, *Leaky Bodies*, p. 34.

⁴⁸ E. A. Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Hoboken: Wiley, 1994), p. 203.

dangerous, because without careful control/regulation it leads to misery and perdition. The very focus of that for which women are celebrated and given praise – their capacity to reproduce – is already read as dangerous. Further doubling is generated not only by the binary nature of representations like Virgin and Whore, but in the psycho-social implications of such representations.

Angela Leighton suggests that, 'the Victorians were the first to acknowledge their double vision, as well as their double standards.'⁴⁹ She draws attention to the way in which doubleness and fallenness were tied up in class and economic issues. Leighton argues, 'the [Victorian age] which so thoroughly explored the underlying reaches of the individual subconscious was also haunted by the social underworld of class. Doubleness was its very nature.'⁵⁰ This is clearly at work in *Casa Guidi Windows* when – as EBB looked from her Florence window towards England – she says,

no light

Of teaching, liberal nations, for the poor

Who sit in darkness when it is not night?

No cure for wicked children? Christ, – no cure!

No help for women sobbing out of sight

Because men made the laws? (2. 634-39)

⁴⁹ Leighton, *Because Men*, p. 215.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

The underside of liberal triumph and mercantile success is a world of ignorance, crime and prostitution. And while EBB's concern strikes a typically middle-class note, Leighton points out:

The last two lines mark a sharpening of her attitude. Her social criticism turns into a specific grievance over the condition of women in England's cities: 'No help for women sobbing out of sight/Because men made the laws?' The figure of the fallen woman elicits from the woman poet her most pointed accusation.⁵¹

While prostitution wasn't – during the mid-Victorian era – subject to specific laws,⁵² there are powerful grounds for structuring its status as fallenness in relation to social laws. Until the 1857 Matrimonial Causes Act,⁵³ for all practical purposes a married Englishwoman had no right to divorce, to own property and so on. As Leighton draws out, this deprivation of civil rights pushed women's authority back into the area of morality:

Deprived of 'civil rights' by the law of the land, hers are the compensatory rights of morality. She is the chief upholder and representer of morality, and also its most satisfying symbol. Thus, angel or demon, virgin or whore, Mary or Magdalen, woman is the stage on which the age enacts its own enduring morality play.⁵⁴

Crucially, the locus for this struggle for 'virtue' as idealised femininity is the material world of the sexual body. It takes up the old story 'on the scene of

⁵¹ Ibid, p. 216.

⁵² Unless it entailed disorderly behaviour.

⁵³ See the previous chapter, especially p. 142-43, for a fuller discussion of this Act and its impact on marriage.

⁵⁴ Leighton, *Because Men*, p. 217.

the woman's sexual body. The 'moral law' has, therefore, 'a glamorous simplicity as well as a fascinating secretiveness. Its simplicity is mythic, and its secrets sexual.'⁵⁵

One final implication of this logic should be drawn out. If the scene of virtue and fallenness is the woman's sexual(-ised) body, it is therefore a reminder of the extent to which fecundity is ordered through commodification and economical terms. If virginity is – as Engels maintains⁵⁶ – treated as the foundation of a whole social and familial system, then it is subject to a physical virtue. Once lost it cannot be reclaimed. A virgin's moral virtue – tied to a physical virtue of undamaged fecund potential – becomes both perishable good (the misuse of which diminishes her 'value') and acquires the status of almost 'holy' absolute. Her virginal virtue is glorious in its fragility, the basis for her family's virtue. She is a (surrogate) 'angel' in the house. She's an 'almost' Blessed Virgin whose greatest asset – virginal fecundity – is constantly at risk of falling into the Magdalene's perdition.

It is in this febrile psycho-social context that one may read *AL*. Given what Leighton says about the doubleness at work in Victorian attitudes towards fallenness it is worth reiterating that such doubleness restates the value of dramatic monologue as a strategy of exposure and reconstruction. EBB's use of dramatic monologue offers a way of foregrounding voice and

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ See Friedrich Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State: In the Light of the Researches of Lewis H. Morgan*, trans. by Alec West (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1972), pp. 125-46.

position and indicating the performative horizons of gender, sexuality and class. Leighton suggests that, 'more than any other poet, [EBB] probes the notion of the moral law as the mythologised superstructure of social inequality. In *AL*, the sexual 'fall' of Marian Erle constantly entails a quarrel with that law.'⁵⁷ Leighton has a powerful point and is surely right to draw attention to the way the Marian Erle narrative draws moral judgment away from the personal to the state of social conditions. Marian's innocence – as will become clear – makes powerful socio-political points. However, I shall also draw out how EBB's language of fecundity and barrenness – in and through Marian's status as fallen and restored woman – is part of an emergent Christian-feminist poetics. Marian exposes the limits of the rhetoric of Magdalene and Virgin as strategies for understanding fecundity. Her performance of motherhood queers patriarchal categories in ways which not only reformulate notions of 'natural' motherhood, but foreground – through Aurora – EBB's commitment to a poetics liberated from categories which stereotype and limit women. *AL* reveals that women's poetry in the nineteenth century is not a moment in women's fallenness. It is a place where poetic labour is revealed as much the province of women as the maternal labour entailed by bodily pregnancy.

⁵⁷ Leighton, *Because Men*, p. 217.

In the Beginning – A Scene from a Garden Fallen and Restored

While Marian, in the garden down below,
Knelt by the fountain I could just hear thrill
The drowsy silence of the exhausted day,
And peeled a new fig from that purple heap
In the grass beside her, turning out the red
To feed her eager child (who sucked at it
With vehement lips across a gap of air
As he stood opposite, face and curls a-flame
With that last sun-ray, crying 'Give me, give,'
And stamping with imperious baby-feet,
We're all born princes). (Bk VIII, ll. 5-15a)

Before unpacking this scene from Aurora's Florentine garden – a scene I shall argue is a key to unlocking a Christian-feminist reading of *AL*'s representations of fecundity and barrenness – it is worth briefly rehearsing the story of the novel-poem's iconic fallen woman Marian Erle. In outline, Marian is the woman serially humiliated, debased and abused who, nonetheless, 'like the Virgin Mary [...] is spiritually unsoiled.'⁵⁸ Marian undergoes debasement to arrive at personal dignity. Ultimately, she arrives at a point in which she fulfils the claim:

[...] a woman, poor or rich,

⁵⁸ Lewis, p. 162.

Despised or honoured, is a human soul,

And what the soul is, that she is herself. (Bk IX, ll. 328-30)

Marian performs a position which quietly subverts the binaries of Virgin and Whore, thereby reworking patriarchal categories of fecundity and barrenness. She exposes the extent to which positions like Virgin and Whore are performative categories for femininity under conditions of patriarchy. Marian acts as a focus for exposing the limits of this binary opposition for women.

Marian enters Aurora's narrative as Romney Leigh's intended bride. Romney – consumed with social reformation zeal ('His phalansteries there, his speeches here, | His pamphlets, pleas, and statements [...] (Bk III, ll. 108-9)) – decides to marry:

[...] a girl of doubtful life, undoubtful birth,

Starved out in London till her coarse-grained hands

Are whiter than her morals [...]. (Bk III, ll. 535-37)

Marian is a:

[...] drover's daughter [...]

Upon whose finger, exquisitely pricked

By a hundred needles, we're to hang the tie

'Twixt class and class in England [...]. (Bk III, ll. 659-62)

Marian, then, is presented – pricked like Sleeping Beauty, but through hard-work rather than fairy magic – as a shop-worn princess. She is Romney's social project. Aurora resolves to meet this child of the masses and at Saint Margaret's Court beholds the worst imaginings of EBB's middle-class mind

(sick children, wasted women). Yet if this is Aurora's equivalent of Christ's Harrowing of Hell, Aurora finds Marian to be pure and respectable:

[Marian] touched me with her face and with her voice,
This daughter of the people. Such soft flowers,
From such rough roots? the people, under there,
Can sin so, curse so, look so, smell so ... faugh!
Yet have such daughters? (Bk III, ll. 805-09)

Aurora hears Marian's story of her patchy, auto-didactic 'education', 'the vileness of her kindred' (Bk III, l. 970) and of a mother who encouraged her to become a prostitute. Yet Aurora perceives Marian's virtuous resilience in the face of her base origins. She hears how Marian runs away, becomes ill ('And now I am dead and safe' (Bk III, l. 1087)) and ends up in the poor hospital. It is here Romney finds her, helps her become a seamstress and proposes marriage. Yet, as the wedding arrives, Marian sends a note to Romney telling him she is not worthy of him. Marian then disappears from the narrative until Aurora – fled from England and heading towards Italy for inspiration – catches a glimpse of Marian's face in a crowded flower market:

What face is that?

What a face, what a look, what a likeness!

[...]

[...] a dead face, known once alive ... (Bk VI, ll. 231-32 & 239)

Marian takes Aurora to her room, where she shows Aurora her baby boy. Aurora reproaches Marian for being promiscuous, but Marian angrily replies that she was attacked, raped and left pregnant. Aurora apologises profusely

for misjudging her and offers her a marriage of sorts: she will protect Marian and her son and take them to Italy with her. Marian accepts.

Several years pass, during which Aurora becomes a celebrated poet. Suddenly, Romney Leigh arrives, having discovered their whereabouts through a friend of Aurora's. Aurora, believing him to be married to Lady Waldemar, is cold. Aurora tells him she still cannot think well of his wife. Romney tells her that he's not married to Lady Waldemar, although he has a message from her to Aurora. Aurora reads Lady Waldemar's letter, which claims she didn't intend to hurt Marian, only to remove her. Her scheme didn't work: even after Marian was gone, Romney did not love her.

Aurora asks Romney what he will do now, and he answers that he will marry Marian and raise her child as his own. Marian refuses him, however, stating that she prefers to remain as her child's only guardian and devote her life to him, rather than a husband, and what she thought was love for Romney was rather hero-worship. She leaves, urging Romney to talk to Aurora. The enlightened Marian thus knows herself to be capable of rearing her child without marrying a man whom she doesn't (and cannot) love. More importantly, she understands that she is 'clean and sweet from devil's dirt' (Bk IX, l. 345) and that, in the eyes of God and angels (as in the eyes of Romney and Aurora), there is no guilt attached to her own soul.

Marian Erle's story is structured through the lens of Aurora's dramatic monologue. We are left in no doubt that Marian is a support character. This means – as numerous critics have indicated – that one of the things at stake when examining *AL*'s representations of fallenness is the

question: who *is* Marian in relation to Aurora? The various answers to that question have significance for how Marian's fallenness and fecundity are to be interrogated. Linda M. Lewis notes that Marian is often read as a function of Aurora's subjectivity: 'Most recent criticism uses Marian's story to uncover Aurora's soul and psyche.'⁵⁹ Helen Cooper represents one broad thread which suggests that Marian is, effectively, the agent of Aurora's achievement of subjectivity.⁶⁰ Within this category, Virginia Steinmetz and Dolores Rosenblum read the Marian plot primarily through the scope of Aurora's ambivalence on motherhood and mother-want. Steinmetz sees Marian as 'Madonna-muse'. She claims Aurora's 'possession' of Marian is management of mother-want for the motherless Aurora, a necessary process for Aurora to acknowledge her own sexuality.⁶¹ Rosenblum argues that Marian's 'dead face' in Paris allows Aurora to enact a symbolic resurrection of both mother and mother's child in herself, that Marian's story is the myth of Aurora's own origins. Further, Rosenblum reads the Marian Erle plot on two levels: as narrative character with a social destiny and mythic character with a cosmic destiny.⁶² In short, as Lewis summarises, 'while Marian has died a cultural death, Rosenblum notes, she is restored to life by her sacred child, a "mythic, miraculous" rebirth, a little world opening out into infinity.'⁶³ The theme of Marian as 'mother-muse', indeed the broad theme of 'mother-want', is taken up by Dorothy Mermin who

⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 155.

⁶⁰ See: Cooper.

⁶¹ Steinmetz, for example, pp. 353-54.

⁶² See: Rosenblum, *Face to Face*, and Rosenblum, *Casa Guidi Windows*.

⁶³ Lewis, pp. 155-56.

suggests 'mother-want' is pervasive in *AL*: 'AL is replete with the presence or felt absence of mothers, babies, feeding, and eating.'⁶⁴

By contrast, Amanda Anderson and Angela Leighton read Marian through the category of 'sister-muse'. Anderson interprets the Marian Erle plot as EBB's conscious absorbing of the rhetoric of fallenness in Victorian culture. For Anderson, Aurora generates a dialectical interplay between aesthetic and intersubjective experience through re-conceptualizing the relation between herself as woman artist and Marian as fallen woman.⁶⁵ She argues that [EBB] both authenticates Marian's voice by allowing her to tell her own story (Marian's having earned the right through suffering) and empowers her sister, Aurora, to redress the reifying distortions of contemporary depictions of fallen woman (Aurora having earned the right through her care of Marian, her informed re-reading of the text of Marian's life).

Angela Leighton claims that in *AL* 'the search for self may [...] take the form of a strange meeting with the other, usually figured as a fallen woman.'⁶⁶ In addition, by the end of *AL*, Aurora has 'sistered' Marian: "come with me, sweetest sister' (Bk VII, l. 117) [...] the class divisions which Romney so notably fails to bridge are bridged by this implicit sisterhood of women.'⁶⁷ Further, this social alignment is doubled by an alignment of voice:

⁶⁴ Mermin, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, p. 192.

⁶⁵ See, especially, Anderson, pp. 170-71.

⁶⁶ *Victorian Women Poets (Reynolds)*, p. xxxvii.

⁶⁷ Leighton, *Because Men*, p. 220.

The speech of *Aurora Leigh* passes from woman to woman – from [EBB] to Aurora to Marian to Lady Waldemar [...] the first person of this dramatic monologue secures her identity, not in opposition to, but in association with, the other women whose speech becomes closely allied with her own.⁶⁸

Leighton further suggests that Aurora's obsession with the deadness of Marian is EBB's quest for a female poetics, saying that Marian alone answers Aurora's desperate call and 'returns from the dead' to make her desert place bearable.⁶⁹

It may not be too bold to suggest that Marian is a female Christ or Christa figure, raised from 'death' to redeem Aurora from her barren, desert fate.⁷⁰ 'Christa' or the 'female Christ' may be a novel term for many scholars, although Nicola Slee suggests that 'Christa has been a recurring motif in Christian feminist theological circles since the 1970s.'⁷¹ Essentially, the term represents a feminist strategy to claim the masculine Christ for feminist discourse. Given that Mary Magdalene was the first witness of Christ's resurrection,⁷² to position Marian as 'Christa' would be a striking literary reversal: a casting of Aurora in the role of the fallen-redeemed. In short, Marian's fecund vitality as mother makes possible a new phase in

⁶⁸ Ibid, p. 220.

⁶⁹ 'What face is that?' (Bk VI, l. 231).

⁷⁰ See Leighton, *Because Men*, p. 225.

⁷¹ Nicola Slee, *Seeking the Risen Christa* (London: SPCK, 2011), p. 7.

⁷² For example, John 21. Mary Magdalene has often been called 'the First Apostle'. For an academic study of this nomenclature, see: Ann Graham Brock, *Mary Magdalene, the First Apostle: The Struggle for Authority* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

Aurora's development from poet to equal partner with Romney in a marriage that is redemptive and mutually life-giving.

My reading wishes to acknowledge the strengths of reading *AL* and Marian's performance as both Madonna-muse and as sister-in-solidarity. EBB's handling of each of those positions represents her exposure of patriarchal hypocrisy, and its stereotyping of women's subjectivity; yet, at the same time, EBB in *AL* may be read as reformulating patriarchal representations of femininity in a Christian-feminist direction. In short, I want to suggest that the language and imagery of EBB's representation of Marian and her relationship with Aurora is consistently doubled. EBB structures representations of fecundity and fallenness, in *AL* not only dialectically, but in such a way that richer, subversive meanings are afforded by a seemingly conservative text. This doubled structure is indicated not only in EBB's handling of imagery and form – to which I am about to turn – but in Marian's very name. For, as Dorothy Mermin reminds us, Marian's name 'retain[s] traces of mythic doubleness [...]: *Marian Erle*, virgin mother of Christ and pagan fairy.'⁷³ Marian Erle's name is suggestive of both Erlking – the fairy king⁷⁴ – and Mary Madonna, the virgin mother. To be mother, to be a woman who embraces fecundity, is to be always double.

'While Marian, in the garden down below,
Knelt by the fountain I could just hear thrill

⁷³ Mermin, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, p. 192.

⁷⁴ See especially Goethe's 1782 poem version 'Der Erlkönig'. The story has been set to music on many occasions, perhaps most notably by Franz Schubert.

The drowsy silence of the exhausted day,
And peeled a new fig...'

The opening scene of *Aurora Leigh's* eighth book offers a moment of almost painterly composition. It is evening and Aurora sits alone 'upon the terrace of my tower' (Bk VIII, l. 2) – in splendid isolation, a book upon her knee – and sees an extraordinary scene unfold. As Dorothy Mermin argues:

The kneeling mother and haloed child are like figures in a Florentine painting, a "madonna of the fig," but the child's imperious demand to suck what the mother withholds (a fig instead of a breast) gives an odd turn to the sacred story. Even Marian, who gives everything, does not give enough.⁷⁵

Mermin is correct to suggest that EBB presents us with a version of the sacred story. However, the trajectory of its 'odd turn' is striking not only for *AL's* performance of gender, fallenness and redemption, but for how these are structured around fecundity and barrenness. A careful reading of this section underlines how fallenness is a discourse of the double bind imposed on women.

The scene from a Florentine garden is fundamentally doubled. Firstly, it is ostensibly about Marian and her baby, yet it is ultimately about Aurora's reading of Marian and baby. It places Marian firmly in the position of visual object. She is seen by Aurora and may be read as performing for her. Aurora sits alone above the scene and observes the action. Hers is the position traditionally taken by the Male Gaze – the gaze of the master-

⁷⁵ Mermin, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, pp. 194-95.

painter who beholds the female form, and the panoramic gaze of God looking down on Creation. Aurora – who has successfully occupied the traditional masculine space of poet – now regards Marian, the woman who, in virtue of motherhood, is an icon of femininity. She regards Marian who, unlike Aurora, has fulfilled her womanhood according to the patriarchal pattern by birthing a child. Yet Marian has done so through rape. She is, then, *de facto* a fallen woman. Despite this, Marian is marked down as a Madonna by Aurora – a figure who remains pure in her fecundity, despite being sullied; a figure who supplies the ‘lack’ in Aurora’s adopted male position, a position characterised by a kind of barren aloneness:

Laugh *you*, sweet Marian – you’ve the right to laugh,

Since God himself is for you, and a child!

For me there’s somewhat less – and so I sigh. (Bk VIII, ll. 25-27)

Marian has brought forth fruit from her womb, a child who in virtue of his masculinity is more highly prized than a female one. Yet EBB’s language reveals the pain implicit in a fecundity structured according to patriarchal power: the male child is imperious and demanding. The fate of a woman under conditions of patriarchy/kyriarchy is to have her subjectivity defined by her fecundity; yet in fulfilling that subjectivity she births something which is not her – and then proceeds, via its demands, to underline that truth. Her subjectivity is never complete because Marian – the woman who, like the Virgin Mary, gives her all to the child – cannot give enough to satisfy his demands.⁷⁶

⁷⁶ This scene offers a kind of analogue to the ‘master’s gaze’ moment in *TRS*. While

In one iconic moment, then, Marian performs for Aurora – and by implication for EBB – the double-bind at the heart of patriarchal conceptions of femininity. The fallen woman is, in one sense, redeemed by fecundity. There is a profound sense in which the ‘Madonna of the fig’ is a picture of holiness and warmth. ‘The drowsy silence’ is a comfortable one. Indeed, the rich, extended vowel sounds embedded in EBB’s lines, (‘The drowsy silence of the exhausted day’) underline that this scene is a near heaven. This is a picture in which, as Mermin has it, ‘nurture is most typically imagined, as in Aurora’s dream of Italy, in terms of breasts and milk – “mother’s breast/which, round the new-made creatures hanging there,/throb luminous and harmonious” (5:16-18).’⁷⁷ Yet, this is a scene, in which the fallen, yet redeemed Madonna cannot offer enough to that very icon of patriarchy: her male child.

The iconography of western art and tradition structures a garden scene almost inevitably in terms of Eden as paradise, and of paradise lost. Eden – as a doubled concept – is very much part of how the scene in the Florentine Garden negotiates and performs representations of fecundity. Both Aurora (as the one who composes the Madonna scene) as well as Marian (the object) have complex relationships with mothers, motherhood

the child dies at the slave woman’s hand, and she is therefore responsible for his death, her action is determined by the system. For, to embrace and keep ‘the fruit’ of her fecund body would have meant bringing him into the slave economy as a slave (an appalling prospect) or – if she escapes slavery – to have constantly see in his white face ‘a look that made me mad! | The *master’s* look, that used to fall | On my soul like his lash’ (XXI ll. 143-45). The universal system that, in the slave woman’s world, mediates meaning and goodness is a place of cruelty, tragedy and sacrifice.

⁷⁷ Mermin, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, p. 194.

and fecundity. Famously, the maternal portrait Aurora studies in Book One (ll. 154-63) is a doubled image, containing representations of ghost and fiend as much as a loving Psyche. Her parental love is found among the hills of Italy, not at her mother's breast. Her father is, for a while, a surrogate mother, but his care and his books cannot supply the absence of the mother. Marian offers a different, if analogous case: Marian's mother seeks to push her into prostitution. Marian goes so far as to say, 'God, free me from my mother, [...] | These mothers are too dreadful' (Bk III, ll. 1063-64), and 'When mothers fail us, can we help ourselves?' (Bk VI, l. 1229)

Virginia Steinmetz structures Aurora's and Marian's⁷⁸ attraction to each other around this 'mother-want' – the absence of mothers and mothering. She claims, '[EBB] is preoccupied through *AL* with the failure of mother-sources and can imagine few female symbols which are not signs of despair.'⁷⁹ EBB offers 'a plethora of maternal images of suckling, sour milk, of breasts and devouring.'⁸⁰ In one of the most striking images from Aurora's meditation on her mother's portrait, Aurora sees an aspect of her mother in which 'Our Lady of the Passion' is 'stabbed with swords | Where the Babe sucked" (ll. 160-61). Dorothy Mermin notes, 'in the most dreadful of all the images of maternal corruption, Aurora compares natural innocence to "babes/Found whole and sleeping by the spotted breast/Of one a full day dead" (4: 1064-66).'⁸¹ Here is an image of fecundity trapped in

⁷⁸ Indeed, Romney's.

⁷⁹ Steinmetz, p. 352.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Mermin, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, p. 194.

the midst of death. Truly, here is a picture in which the womb is a substitution for the tomb. As Mermin adds, the often bleak, religious imagery indicates that:

The representation of motherhood and the loss of Eden is marked as a woman's not only by its extreme literalness but also by the extraordinary balancing of the rejected child's pain on the one side by maternal ambivalence on the other: impulses of exceeding tenderness, and fear that motherhood cost a woman, figuratively or literally, her life.⁸²

If Mermin and Steinmetz are correct to draw attention to the structural loss seemingly implicit in *AL*'s language of fecundity – a lost Eden, in which motherhood costs a woman her life – how should the representations EBB creates in the Florentine Garden be read? In essence, I want to show that if '[EBB]'s ideal mother in the poem is a rape victim who has rejected a conventional, patriarchal union',⁸³ it can be read as a reformulation of fecundity in a direction that is both feminist and Christian. Marian 'translates'⁸⁴ Christian iconography around fecundity and barrenness in a liberative direction – liberative for her subjectivity, but also liberative for Aurora (and Romney). She is the Christ(a) who redeems Aurora; she exposes the patriarchal limits of fallenness and purity in both herself and Aurora. Marian is no mere function of Aurora's subjectivity; if Marian helps

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Steinmetz, p. 351.

⁸⁴ As Kristeva indicates in *Stabat Mater*, the notion of 'translation' is significant for readings of Mariolatry. In some accounts, the Virgin Mary is translated into heaven. That is, she enters heaven in a way in which her prior earthly meaning is preserved in the new realm of heaven. However, there is no such thing as a 'loss-less' translation. Translation – from one language to another, one state to another – always effects changes in meaning and suggestion. See: pp. 139-40.

Aurora achieve subjectivity it is by redeeming Aurora's performance from the crushing economy which defines 'middle-class women who work' as fallen. Marian exposes the fatal limits of the discourse on fecundity that characterises it as either fallen or pure.

The 'fig' is a key image in the scene in the Florentine Garden. Steinmetz suggests that 'the fig [is] a breast symbol [...] red like Aurora's mother's dress in the favourite portrait' in Book One.⁸⁵ She adds, 'here at last [EBB] presents a positive picture of a gratifying mother.'⁸⁶ The image holds within it a striking way of opening out how EBB interrogates fallenness, fecundity and barrenness in *AL*. It indicates a way to reformulate femininity in a feminist and Christian way. Steinmetz's claim that the image of the fig is a surrogate for a breast is helpful,⁸⁷ but an examination of its biblical and symbolic significance suggests that it is much more.

From her vantage point Aurora sees that Marian has:

[...] peeled a new fig from that purple heap

In the grass beside her, turning out the red

To feed her eager child [...]. (Bk VIII, ll. 8-10)

It would take a wilful determination not to read this scene as part of an economy of fecundity. The fig is the breast that feeds. It is red like the aureoles of a milk-filled pap. Its significations run much further than that

⁸⁵ Steinmetz, p. 363.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ At a conference on Aurora Leigh at the University of Westminster, 15 October 2016, at which a version of this chapter was presented, Cora Kaplan indicated, in conversation with me, that fig may also be appropriately understood as a vagina metaphor. I don't disagree with this; Figs have multiple signification – vagina, womb and breast.

clear association. Biblically, the fig is rich with associations both in the Old and New Testaments. The fig is the third tree mentioned in Genesis, after the Tree of Life and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.⁸⁸ It is the first among the named and known species of tree. Its particular significance lies in its being used by Adam and Eve to create garments to cover their shame after eating the fruit of forbidden knowledge. Fig leaves are humanity's first clothes; the fig is associated, from the outset of the Bible, with the Sin of Eve. After all, it is her fallenness that constitutes the need for clothes and signals the expulsion of humanity from the innocence of Eden. The fig is used to cover their exposure and realization of nakedness.

If the fig is associated from the outset with the Sin of Eve and her fallenness, it is also associated in the Bible with fecundity in other ways. In Deuteronomy, the 'Promised Land' of Israel is spoken of as 'a land of wheat, and barley, and vines, and fig trees, and pomegranates; a land of oil olive, and honey'.⁸⁹ Fecund promise is further connected with the fig in the sensuous Old Testament love-poem 'The Song of Solomon': as the female lover ('the rose of Sharon') sings to her beloved she talks of her blossoming love and sexuality in characteristically sensuous terms: 'the fig tree putteth forth her green figs, and the vines with the tender grape give a good smell.

⁸⁸ 'And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat. And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves aprons. And they heard the voice of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day; and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God amongst the trees of the garden.' Genesis 3. 6-8.

⁸⁹ Deuteronomy 8. 8-9.

Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away'.⁹⁰ The fig, then, is an icon of cultural fertility, of personal sensuality as well as sexual promise.

It is a significantly doubled image. It is associated with fallenness as well as fecundity. It also has religious connotations of barrenness. This is most explicit in the Gospel parable of the Cursed Fig Tree. In Luke, Christ says:

A certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came and sought fruit thereon, and found none. Then said he unto the dresser of his vineyard, Behold, these three years I come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and find none: cut it down; why cumbereth it the ground?⁹¹

Equally, as indicated in my chapter on *TRS*, in Matthew's gospel, Christ actually curses a barren fig tree.⁹²

The fig, then, has any number of 'fig'-urations (*sic*).⁹³ Perhaps part of its capacity to contain multivalent meanings lies in its morphology as well as its ability to be useful and valuable in multiple states. Quite apart from the colour of its flesh, the fig's shape is suggestive of wombs, curving fulsomely

⁹⁰ Song of Solomon 8. 13. For an extensive discussion of sexual imagery in The Song of Songs, see Jill M. Munro, *Spikenard and Saffron: A Study in the Poetic Language of the Song of Songs* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press 1995). The radical theologian Roland Boer – in playful reference to The Song of Songs' obsession with sexual signification – goes so far as to re-dub The Song of Songs, 'The Schlong of Schlongs'.

⁹¹ Luke 13. 6-8.

⁹² Matt. 21. 18-20. See Chapter 2, pp. 95-96.

⁹³ Roland Boer suggests, 'figuration' is 'the process by which cultural products signify things entirely other than their overt structure and content would indicate.' The notion of figuration '(With its relation to the Derridean trace and the symptom) owes its formulation to Freud and his discussion of parapraxis, of slips, of the glimpses whereby the unconscious makes its presence felt.' See: Roland Boer, *Knockin' on Heaven's Door: The Bible and Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 114.

about its middle to a cervical point at its tip. It is also a fruit that is valued both in its fresh and dried state. Its fresh, red flesh – suggestive of the womb ready to make a child – holds within itself the possibility of dryness, of shrivelling. Yet in its dried state, it becomes a valued cultural artefact: the dried fig is esteemed for its intense sweetness and sticky flesh. The making of the barren fruit – no longer ideal for planting – is the transformation of the fecund fruit into a valuable economic and cultural artefact. Yet, the barren, dried fruit retains the trace of its fecundity. Its value is predicated on its rich flesh, the memory of its fecundity. The richness of the fig's significations, then, offer a route for breaking open AL's complex representations of fallenness and redemption. It offers one place in which the intersection between religious iconography and representations of women coalesce around the regulative discourse of fecundity and barrenness.

In the Madonna scene, Aurora observes Marian completing an apparently simple, ordinary task – feeding her son from an abundant Italian harvest:⁹⁴ In one sense, the choosing of a fig might be read as incidental.

⁹⁴ It should be acknowledged that, when construed in terms of 'mother-want', this scene is almost endlessly fecund. One possible reading, which there is insufficient space in the thesis to develop, entails Aurora seeing a surrogate for her own mother in this scene. As indicated earlier, Aurora – like a painter – constructs this scene through her gaze, but what she constructs is her own mother; this however is a version of her mother recovered and resurrected from the nightmare image Aurora recalls in Book One. A further reading of the fig scene which I cannot pursue here would be via the lens of the 'Anna Selbdritt' tradition, of which Leonardo Da Vinci's painting is the most famous example. This tradition brings the Blessed Virgin Mary and Child together with her mother Anna; on these terms, Marian might be read as, for Aurora, a doubled composite of Mary – the ideal mother – and Anna – the real mother.

And yet given its profound significations in the iconography of religious and cultural accounts of fecundity and barrenness, its significance for a reading of fallenness and purity can hardly be overstated. In peeling the fig for her son, Marian makes available both a surrogate breast and, also, a womb-substitute. She offers to her male child a symbolic womb that contains within it the horizons of both fecundity and barrenness – of life and death. The child ‘sucks’ at this symbol of fecundity and barrenness ‘with vehement lips’ (Bk VIII, l. 11). This sucking, then, is not with pleasure or satisfaction; the child sucks at the breast and womb with an almost monstrous lack of control. The Latin root of ‘vehement’, *vehemens/vemens*, has implications of violence and ‘deprivation of mind’. Here then is Marian offering her child – her fruit – a symbol of her fecundity. This child – who according to patriarchy – should ‘complete’ her, responds not with love but in an almost monstrous manner. The male child consumes what Marian offers and demands more: ‘crying ‘Give me, give,’ | And stamping with imperious baby-feet, | We’re all born princes).’ (Bk VIII, ll. 13-15)⁹⁵

⁹⁵ The conclusion of this passage – ‘we’re all born princes’ – is, again, a statement with doubled/multiple significations. In psychoanalytic terms, it is suggestive of Freud’s famous claims, in *On Narcissism*, about ‘His Majesty the Baby’ in which parents ‘are impelled to ascribe to the child all manner of perfections.’ See: Sigmund Freud, *"On Narcissism" (Collected Papers Volume 4)*, ed. by Joan Riviere and James Strachey (New York: Basic Books, 1959), p. 48. Equally, it is suggestive to read Marian’s devotion to her male child through Freud’s claim that ‘a mother is only brought unlimited satisfaction by her relation to a son [...]’ for ‘a mother can transfer to her son the ambition which she has been obliged to suppress in herself.’ See: Sigmund Freud, *"Femininity" New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, ed. by Anna Freud and James Strachey (London: Vintage, 2001 (1960)), p. 133. However, in her keynote address at the Aurora Leigh Conference, University of Westminster, 15 October 2016, Margaret Reynolds offered an alternative reading. She suggested that ‘we’re all born princes’ might be read ironically. That is, that EBB, through Aurora/Marian, is claiming the glory of the child *qua* child, even the one that is born via rape. This would indeed offer a radical reformation of

This initial reading of the giving of the fig achieves further layers of signification when placed in the iconography of purity and fallenness. If Marian performs as a 'Madonna of the Fig', she represents a scene of – in patriarchal terms – holiness and naturalness. Marian is a good, virtuous and selfless mother who has been redeemed from fallenness by motherhood. Marian is seemingly utterly identified with what Kristeva calls 'the Maternal' and (in Aurora's eyes) is clearly being presented as the feminine ideal. Yet, as the child's reaction suggests, precisely because that feminine ideal is defined on impossible lines, Marian cannot offer enough. She falls in the face of an impossible ideal.

One issue at stake here might be whether this is because Marian – as unmarried/ raped woman – is herself fallen. In short, is the judgment on her? EBB's answer – when placed in terms of the fig's religious iconography – seems to exonerate Marian. The fig – as an icon of the Garden and symbol of humanity's shame – is that which is consumed greedily by the child and yet doesn't ultimately satisfy. In this scene it is a child who falls – that is, who has lost control. The fig can be read as a substitution for sin and as a representation of the (lost/longed-for) Garden. The child's greedy consumption of the fig, then, might be read not only as a desire to consume the mother, but also indicates its complicity in the ordering of fallenness

fallenness in the economy of female subjectivity.

and purity.

This may seem to deflect blame onto the small child, a substitution that may strike modern readers as undeserved, accustomed as we are to claims that little children are innocents. Rather, this scene may be read as an exposure and critique of a whole religio-patriarchal ordering of fecundity around binaries like fallenness and purity: it exposes the extent to which women, defined through the Maternal and fertile, are always exposed to a symbolic substitution that implies death.⁹⁶ A woman defined by her womb and breasts will be symbolically consumed by masculinity and the male will demand more, for the ordering of femininity on patriarchal grounds cannot supply/satisfy the male lack. Even a woman read as a Madonna – as Marian is – is reduced to insufficiency. Perhaps, especially so, for the demands of purity are impossibly narrow and fragile. Ultimately, only the Virgin can truly achieve them. All women except the Virgin will fall.

What then of Aurora, the figure who ‘constructs’ the Florentine scene in her gaze? Mermin reminds us that ‘AL is replete with the presence or felt absence of mothers, babies, feeding, and eating.’⁹⁷ Having ‘breasts | Made right to suckle babes’ (Bk VI, ll. 1183-84) is proof of being a woman. Yet, Aurora has both a compromised relationship with ‘the maternal’ and also seeks to claim for herself the traditionally masculine position and space of poetry. Aurora negotiates ‘a mother-want about the world’ (Bk I, l. 40).

⁹⁶ Elisabeth Bronfen reminds us that the designation of symbols (as in Freud’s Fort/Da game, where a child uses a spool) acts as a substitute for the mother – an act which replaces the mother with an image and in so doing negates her. Bronfen, p. 27.

⁹⁷ Mermin, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, p. 190.

Yet, as indicated in the last chapter, Aurora arguably constructs that mother-want through figuring feminine icons like breasts on masculine terms.⁹⁸

Perhaps, then, it is not unreasonable to read Aurora's construction of the Florentine garden scene as ordered through a masculine gaze. By reading Marian through the image of Madonna, indeed by composing that scene, Aurora sees Marian through an Othering lens, a lens typical of the Male Gaze. That is, as Bronfen reminds us, Other is derived from the Greek *allos*, which in turn gives us allegory – 'a figurative speaking, a speaking in other terms, of other things.'⁹⁹ As Bronfen further reminds us, woman as Other is typically identified with the ultimate Other, death. This Madonna/Marian scene is initially so still – the drowsiness, the exhaustion – it might almost be that the object of Aurora's gaze is dead. It echoes Marian's 'dead' face when Aurora finds her in Paris ('a dead face, known once alive' (Bk VI, l. 239)). Marian's status as – for Aurora – Madonna is indicative that she retains the trace of death in this scene. For the ideal of Madonna is only fit for the one who has been translated into heaven, the Blessed Virgin herself. Indeed, 'one meaning of 'translation' involves the notion of conveying to heaven or to a non-temporal condition without death.'¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ For example, Book V, ll. 219-22.

⁹⁹ Bronfen, p. 9.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, p. 7.

In the garden scene Aurora might be read as revisiting the ambivalent representations of the maternal inscribed in the doubled image of her own mother in Book I (ll. 151-64). Where that image contained the fearful oppositions of Medusa and Psyche and so on, one might argue that Aurora's vision of Marian as the fallen woman who becomes Madonna in and through her maternity offers a kind of good and positive resolution, or, at the very least, reveals a kind of conservative sexual politics in which a woman is redeemed by motherhood. Such a reading might be in line with that of Deirdre David who labels [EBB] 'an essentialist in sexual politics.'¹⁰¹

David claims:

[EBB] evaluated the bulk of her writings as "quite inferior to what might have been expected from so masculine an intellect." To speak of a masculine intellect evidently presupposes a feminine one, and as far as one can judge from [EBB]'s letters and poetry, the feminine is inferior.¹⁰²

While David's point is pertinent to the marriage plot of *AL* in which she argues Aurora capitulates to the male by relinquishing her identity to 'the more powerful sex,'¹⁰³ David's claim has limited purchase in the Florentine scene.

Insofar as Aurora occupies the space typically reserved for the Male Gaze, the nature of the scene reveals the extent to which this is a position that is structurally toxic. That she is a woman performing the role

¹⁰¹ Deirdre David, "Art's a Service": Social Wound, Sexual Politics, and Aurora Leigh', *Browning Institute Studies: An Annual of Victorian Literary and Cultural History*, 13 (1985), 113-36 (p. 114).

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid, p. 130.

considered traditionally male reveals its performative and positional nature; it is not a matter of essence, but performance. Aurora reveals the inherent fragility and instability of the Male Gaze – it attempts to turn its object into a fixed, deathly Other. Aurora, in the subject position of the gaze, is caught in a double-bind: she wishes to recover her lost mother and, in the garden scene, she beholds a vision of the Maternal that seems to offer an answer. And yet, it is an unstable representation of the Madonna that almost immediately collapses. For, as Marian offers the surrogate breast/womb to the child, the child reveals the barely restrained violence against women concealed in the vision.

The reality of motherhood refuses the deathly lens of the Male Gaze. The child disturbs the composed scene. Bronfen notes that, for Freud, 'touch is both derived from and a natural extension of the gaze, so that the relation between the hand and eyes is contiguous, not oppositional.'¹⁰⁴ This is significant for how we might read Aurora's visual construction, for as Bronfen adds, 'gazing at the body of the [...] feminine Other serves as a form of self-touch or auto-eroticism.'¹⁰⁵ The suggestion is not so much that Aurora – in the masculine position – achieves sexual gratification, but that her erotic need to be completed by a mother-figure is part of this scene's composition. That it cannot actually be supplied by Marian indicates the limits of the Male Gaze.

¹⁰⁴ Bronfen, p. 10.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

Aurora as Fecund Poet Who Resists Becoming a 'Rich White Woman Who Does Not Walk'

The theatre for these significations around fecundity, fallenness and purity is the sexual/ised and fetishised female body and its representations. The fig acts as a representation of female flesh.¹⁰⁶ This indicates another dimension of signification: St Paul's condemnation of 'the flesh' in The Letter to the Romans. He writes:

For they that are after the flesh do mind the things of the flesh; but they that are after the Spirit the things of the Spirit. For to be carnally minded *is* death; but to be spiritually minded *is* life and peace.¹⁰⁷

It offers one further reminder that religious discourse marks out women's bodies as fallen through the identification of femininity with flesh. This has been played out in requirements for post-childbirth purification rites and edicts against menstruating women. Mary, the Mother of Jesus – as feminine ideal – has typically been de-sexed, leading to talk of her 'spotless' womb and even suggesting that, in order to carry Jesus, she had to be sinless.

The queer-feminist theologian Marcella Althaus-Reid – who was brought up in a context of South American Marian Devotion in Roman Catholicism – wittily describes religious devotion to the Blessed Virgin as an

¹⁰⁶ Indeed, the common name for the edible portions of a fig is 'flesh'.

¹⁰⁷ Romans 8. 5-6.

example of the God who 'is a Rich White Woman Who Does Not Walk'.¹⁰⁸

She describes how in the Marian devotion of her continent, the Blessed Virgin is often seen 'on parade' during devotional fiestas and carnivals. She is represented as a beautifully and expensively dressed white European woman wearing a crown and carried through the street.¹⁰⁹ As a statue she cannot walk, but Althaus-Reid's point is that in terms of representation she is always carried everywhere. She has no feet. Her account of *La Virgen* underlines the extent to which the cult of purity (and its shadow, fallenness) is about turning living bodies into statues – simulacra of the living, dead representations. Yet, she also shows how the feminine ideal of purity is predicated on class, privilege and colour. While the full implications of Althaus-Reid's insights fall outside the scope of this thesis, they open-up revealing space for reading the dynamics of fallenness and purity in the poetics of *AL's* drama of fecundity.

Angela Leighton reminds us that 'Aurora's vocation is to be a poet, not a statue,'¹¹⁰ virgin-like or otherwise. She wants to get her hands and dresses dirty. As indicated in my last chapter:

The crowning scene in the garden of Book II is a prolonged, literary in-joke about the Corinne myth. She is [...] caught in the classic pose of a statue by

¹⁰⁸ See Marcella Althaus-Reid, *From Feminist Theology to Indecent Theology: Readings on Poverty, Sexual Identity and God* (London: SCM, 2004), especially Chapter 2.

¹⁰⁹ The Blessed Virgin is always represented in blue – an echo of the Medieval era when lapis lazuli was the most expensive base for paint.

¹¹⁰ Leighton, *Victorian Women Poets*, p. 88.

the unexpected audience of her sceptical and disdainful cousin,
Romney.¹¹¹

Romney wants to keep her as a statue, as one in 'clean white morning dresses' (Bk II, l. 96). Leighton argues, the "'green wreath'" of leaves represents, for Romney, an Aurora who will stay "pretty" and "clean" in her "white morning dresses", and thus will be a more picturesque and pleasing wife.¹¹² Romney wants Aurora to be like Althaus-Reid's *La Virgen*: a carried statue. He wants to preserve the appropriate mores of class and privilege: upper-middle-class women don't work for money and they certainly don't pursue independent careers as poets. They marry respectably and provide children for their husbands. Yet, in the garden, Aurora tells Romney she would rather be dead:

[...] than keep quiet here

And gather up my feet from even a step

For fear to soil my gown in so much dust.

I choose to walk at all risks [...]. (Bk II, ll. 103-06)

The 'peripatetic' is one of the intersections used by Anne Wallace to indicate how [EBB] may be read as refiguring 'poetic labour' or poetics away from a patriarchal ordering.¹¹³ Wallace's focus is on women's crafts and how that might re-gender poetic labour: the 'georgic'¹¹⁴ and peripatetic valorise common, materially productive labours, and metaphorically associate these

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid, p. 89.

¹¹³ Wallace.

¹¹⁴ Referring to agricultural practices.

labours with the work of the poet, firmly attaching the characteristics of “good labour” to poetic composition.’¹¹⁵ More broadly, the peripatetic can be read as an activity of resistance to patriarchal readings of femininity as pure and fallen fecundity. That Aurora chooses to walk at all costs, indicates her performative resistance to being read in terms of the fixity attributed to the Madonna as pure fecundity. Wallace focuses on sewing, an activity undertaken by almost all women, as a means of recasting work, women and poetic making. She connects it with the peripatetic:

In the first two books [of *AL*], [EBB]’s poem sets up a deliberate opposition between the female/domestic labor of sewing and the masculine/artistic “labors” of walking and writing. This opposition, sensible enough given Victorian domestic ideologies, also follows a traditional definition of poetry by means of its difference from “lesser,” specifically domestic, arts.¹¹⁶

Wallace adds:

AL interleaves sewing imagery with the vegetative imagery central to the peripatetic and georgic, producing images of poets’ mantles, of pricking roses and ivy, of green-clothed rooms bridging domestic interiors and poetic paths [...] This kind of imagery pervades the early books of the poem, and while it never fully displaces negative interpretations of sewing, it leaves sewing, walking and poetry problematically entangled.¹¹⁷

Insofar as Wallace is correct, it leaves open some suggestive possibilities for constructing a feminist poetics in *AL* – one that seeks to

¹¹⁵ Wallace, p. 225.

¹¹⁶ Ibid, p. 226.

¹¹⁷ Ibid, p. 227.

subvert patriarchally and class-conceived conceptions of appropriate feminine labour. Wallace indicates that – in a middle-class setting – women’s ‘good’ work, which might include handicrafts and sewing, existed to create the illusion of leisure rather than labour. Labour for middle-class women in the nineteenth century was – in a double sense – about childbirth: it was both women’s ‘proper’ work, but also represented the reality of women’s bodies ‘going into labour’. Wallace cites Nancy Armstrong’s study of eighteenth-century conduct books,¹¹⁸ a work which suggests that this boundary between domestic work and labour is ‘a distinction on which the very notion of gender appeared to depend.’¹¹⁹ Yet, this distinction is profoundly class-based. In *AL*, as in many other nineteenth-century works, sewing is not simply a leisured, domestic activity. It is a productive labour for (lower class) women. Crucially, it is the economy in which Marian Erle participates. Indeed, as Wallace notes:

For Marian, whose labor as a seamstress proves a stable economic support, sewing also resurrects the moral harvest she first gathers in walking and poetry, and functions as the saving cultivating labor that preserves her past into a potential future.¹²⁰

In this chapter I’ve sought to examine how Marian’s performance of motherhood in the Florentine Garden – interleaved with various religious and cultural significations – exposes the limits of a conception of femininity

¹¹⁸ Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

¹¹⁹ Wallace, p. 226.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

ordered around pure and fallen fecundity. We've also seen how that scene exposes the positional nature of masculinity which – as poet – Aurora affects. Her poetic labour leads her to the Florentine Garden where she occupies the space of the male poet/artist. This, however, does not indicate that the woman who creates something other than a baby is doomed to be read through the categories of patriarchy as a failed or fallen woman. This is not the story's end; EBB's poetics – liberative, yet grounded in a reworked faith position based on reconciliation – are definitively revealed in *AL*'s dual ending: Marian's determination to be sole mother and father to her child, and Aurora's marriage to Romney.

Following Marjorie Stone I'm inclined to read Marian's final status in *AL* through the categories of sage and priest.¹²¹ Stone argues that 'both Aurora and Romney have much to learn from the graphically conveyed and particularized suffering of Marian, and from the wisdom she acquires.'¹²² Indeed, 'through Marian's means, the split focus on judgment and redemption fuses in the conclusion with its revisionary interpretation of Revelation, just as Romney and Aurora fuse in a mystical Swedenborgian vision of "the love of wedded souls" (9: 882).'¹²³ As Stone concludes: '[EBB]'s

¹²¹ Stone reads *AL* as a contribution to nineteenth-century Sage Literature, alongside works by Ruskin, et al. I am less interested in whether this is a consistent reading of *AL*, but I am struck by the categories Stone uses to designate Marian. See: Stone, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, pp. 137-88.

¹²² *Ibid*, p. 149.

¹²³ *Ibid*. For an excellent study of *AL* and EBB's indebtedness to the Swedenborgian vision that 'love' rather than 'art' 'makes heaven' (Bk IX, l. 659), see: Avery and Stott, Chapter Six. Equally, Charles LaPorte acknowledges this debt, but suggests EBB's indebtedness 'is foremost a literary and strategic one that she uses to grapple with the demythologizing influence of the higher criticism of the Bible.' See,

representation of a raped, fallen woman as a source of wisdom indicates how radically she subverts the phallocentric discourse of the prophetic and wisdom traditions.¹²⁴ For, in many respects, Marian functions as the priest who brings Aurora and Romney together; she is like Christ, the 'great high priest'¹²⁵ who permits their marriage not via law but via 'grace', the grace of woman who has been outcast and yet received the gift of a child.

Marian is arguably, then, a female Christ or 'Christa' figure who acts as 'great high priest' to bring together others in matrimony. This – unsurprisingly – is a doubled notion that exposes the limits of concepts of purity and fallenness. Why doubled? On the one hand, the idea that a working-class, so-called fallen woman might act as a priest, redemptrix and reconciliator is radical in a nineteenth-century patriarchal context. Of course, such a strategy risks making a good out of rape – of legitimizing it – and suggesting that the socially conservative institution of marriage is the dramatic monologue's ideal conclusion. One might argue that this is simply to use Marian for middle-class purposes¹²⁶ or indicates the essentialist, conservative nature of the text.¹²⁷ Like Anne Wallace, I'm inclined to suggest that no simple resolution of this doubled conundrum offers itself. Yet, it seems clear that EBB offers something striking in 'asserting Marian's right not only to live, but also to mother *and* father her fatherless child.'¹²⁸

Charles LaPorte, *Victorian Poets and the Changing Bible* (Charlottesville VA & London: University of Virginia Press, 2011), p. 24.

¹²⁴ Stone, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, p. 149.

¹²⁵ See the Letter to the Hebrews 4. 14-16.

¹²⁶ See Lewis, pp. 162-63.

¹²⁷ See David.

¹²⁸ Stone, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, p. 179.

Fundamentally, Marian acts as agent of both criticism and reconciliation in the drama of *AL*. She exposes the limits of a false dichotomy between purity and fallenness in discourses around women's bodily fecundity, but also exposes that women's texts – their poetry – should not be read according to those categories. Poetry can be fecund as well as virile. Crucial to that is a grounding of poetics in materialist as well as idealised representations of female subjectivity. Marian makes this available to Aurora. As Stone suggests, in Paris, as Aurora walks through the streets, she sees Marian:

Just as Aurora asserts that 'a poet's word' is worth more to any man than food or warmth, she is struck by the sight of a face: 'God! What face is that?/O Romney, O Marian!' (6:221-7). The doubling of Romney's with Marian's face underlines the role Marian plays in reconciling Aurora's life philosophy or metaphysics with Romney's, the need for 'bread' with the need for 'verses'.¹²⁹

Marian is fundamental to exposing the limits of fecundity read in terms of purity and fallenness. She grounds Aurora as fecund poet – that is, as someone who can claim poetry as fecund space rather than mere virile space. Olivia Gatti Taylor reminds us:

The "heavens and the earth" grant the same "vocation" to both mother and poet: namely, to carry out the "most necessary work" of developing

¹²⁹ Ibid, pp. 169-70.

the human soul (*AL*, 2.455, 460). Thus, Aurora does, in fact, become a mother by means of her literary creations.¹³⁰

Indeed, I am inclined to conclude, along with Mermin, that *AL*'s argument is that 'writing a poem' is an 'epic action' which may lead to the creation of a new social order.¹³¹ Given the place of Marian as a kind of Christa figure who reworks the possibilities of motherhood, it is also possible to conclude, with Gatti Taylor that – in line with her Kristevan analysis – *AL* is a poetic Other made out of EBB's labour. That is, *AL* – rather like mothering a physical child – releases a new energy and life which can be shaped but must ultimately be let go. As Gatti Taylor suggests, 'thus, the child/text becomes a type of Christ, a messianic force which both subordinates and elevates the maternal poet as the agent of a loving apocalypse.'¹³²

In *Stabat Mater*, Kristeva explains that 'the child' is 'irremediably an other.'¹³³ Barrett Browning dramatises this through the consistent masculinity of the child/text described within her works. Aurora makes a 'space to sphere [her] living verse' (Bk III, l. 309) and strives to bear fruit from the 'hot fire-seeds of creation' which burn within her (Bk III, l. 253). When unsuccessful, she destroys her verses, claiming that their 'embryo's heart [...] never yet had beat' (Bk III, l. 247). The successful poet, on the other hand, houses 'poetry, | —Which means life in life!' (Bk I, ll. 916-17). Thus, the poet/mother 'expands with joy' and 'the palpitating angel in his

¹³⁰ Olivia Gatti Taylor, 'Written in Blood: The Art of Mothering Epic in the Poetry of Elizabeth Barrett Browning', *Victorian Poetry*, 44.2 (2006), 153-64 (p. 153).

¹³¹ See, Mermin, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, p. 185.

¹³² Taylor, pp. 153-54.

¹³³ Kristeva, *Stabat Mater*, p. 146.

flesh | Thrills inly' (Bk I, ll. 911-913). The expression of the poem is its birth, when the poet:

[...] turn[s] outward, with a sudden wrench,
Half agony, half ecstasy, the thing
He feels the inmost [...]. (Bk V, ll. 370-72)

As Gatti Taylor concludes:

In these lines, Barrett Browning combines a realistic, almost graphic description of the physical sensations of giving birth with the traditional birthing metaphor frequently used by male poets, presaging the work of twentieth-century feminists like Kristeva who emphasize the importance of integrating the physical into the textual.¹³⁴

Given the Christ-like role of Marian in the text of *AL*, it is not too ridiculous to conclude that it is in and through the wounds of her body – the violence located in her humiliation as a fallen woman, the birth of a child and her idealisation as Madonna – that EBB constructs this integration of physical and textual. She subverts the doubled logic of patriarchy and creates a space in which the dramatic monologue can perform a new Christian-feminist poetics grounded in the provisional and the reconciled.

¹³⁴ Ibid, p. 155.

CHAPTER FIVE

'You should not peep at goblin men' – Eucharist, Fallenness and Fecundity in *Goblin Market*

There are extraordinary Christian-feminist intersections between the writings of EBB and Christina Rossetti. As Catherine Maxwell reminds us, following Angela Leighton, '[EBB]'s *Aurora Leigh*, with its images of male currency, female fallenness, and sisterly redemption, is [...] an important influence on *Goblin Market*.'¹ There's a profound sense in which CR, directly or indirectly, claims EBB as foremother in an emergent women's tradition. Nonetheless, as Rosie Miles argues:

Rossetti's sense of herself as a poet is very different to that of Barrett Browning: whereas the latter consciously took on the male Romantic tradition and addressed contemporary issues via the form of epic, Rossetti's lyrical voice – teasing, mystical, playful, lovelorn, melancholic and richly sensuous – constantly negotiates between public and private.²

Drawing on and extending insights already developed in the last chapter, the focus here will be on the representations of women's bodies as fallen embedded in *GM*. I shall investigate how CR's language of fecundity and barrenness generates strategies for the nineteenth-century middle-class

¹ Maxwell, p. 79.

² Miles, p. 93.

woman poet to claim, indeed ‘steal’, the status of poet rather than poetess. Her dazzlingly excessive linguistic strategies – fecund, lyrical, yet always disciplined – subvert the limiting designations of femininity as bodily fecundity. *GM*’s potent contribution to a Christian-feminist poetics lies in its strategies of re-reading the creative power of female bodies.

However, it is important to recognise that as I move from EBB to CR’s poetics a step-change is involved. As I indicated in Chapter One, *GM* is not a dramatic monologue. Figuring out what it might be is part of its delightful, elusive complexity. Fundamental to my exploration of *GM* is a recognition that its poetics are secretive and complex, affording an extraordinary range of interpretations. The poem’s materiality is elusive and allusive. As Jennifer MaClure suggests:

The experience of reading “Goblin Market” is unusual; it feels, in a sense, like poetry and prose at once. Rossetti fills the poem with rhyme and repetition, but in such a way as to make their recurrence impossible to predict.³

The following two chapters examine selected CR poems from two different, but complementary angles: in this chapter, I pursue a reading of fecundity and barrenness in *GM* through the prism developed in the previous chapter – fallenness. However, if EBB’s poetics in *AL* entails, in part, liberating the fecund female body for new poetic performances, this

³ Jennifer MaClure, ‘Temporal Ghettos and the Poetic Way out in “Goblin Market” and “the Way of the Shirt”’, *Victorian Poetry*, 53.2 (2015), 151-69 (p. 156). MaClure offers a striking study of the ways *GM* questions linear, masculine and Capitalist conceptions of Time.

chapter pays particular attention to a key Christian icon central to Rossetti's Anglo-Catholicism – the Eucharist. This chapter focuses on food and feast as a way of renouncing and subverting patriarchal constructions of the fecund body as fallen. The final chapter of the critical section of this thesis develops my analysis by locating CR's discourse on food, hunger and fecundity in *GM* and the *St Peter Poems* in terms of Christian understandings of female sanctification. Both chapters seek to make a case for a consistent conclusion: that CR's language of excess and renunciation constructs poetic space for a woman to claim a poetic voice that is both feminist and Christian.

A Nineteenth-Century Chamber of Secrets – The Delicious, Unctuous Elusiveness of Goblin Market's Poetics

GM has been constantly mined for secrets. Indeed, Kathryn Burlinson quotes Caroline Norton's review in 1863, which asks, 'Is it a fable – or a mere fairy story – or an allegory against the pleasures of sinful love – or what is it?'⁴ Famously, when pressed for interpretive finality about this tale of two young women who are tempted by goblins to 'come buy our orchard fruits' (l. 3), CR claimed *GM* was a mere fairy story for children, without 'any profound or ulterior meaning'.⁵ Critics have supplied a dazzling range of

⁴ Kathryn Burlinson, *Christina Rossetti* (Plymouth: Northcote House in association with the British Council, 1998), p. 7.

⁵ Mackenzie Bell, *Christina Rossetti: A Biographical and Critical Study* (New York: Haskell House 1971 (1898)), p. 230.

interpretations for *GM*. Gilbert and Gubar's venerable feminist reading suggests that *GM* is grounded in CR's religiously-inspired aesthetics of renunciation:

The conscious or semi-conscious allegorical intention of this narrative poem is sexual/religious. Wicked men offer Laura forbidden fruits, a garden of sensual delights, in exchange for the golden treasure that, like any young girl, she keeps in her "purse,"⁶ or for permission to "rape" a lock of her hair.⁷

As Miles argues, 'having paid with the only currency available to middle-class women – her body – Laura crosses the line from domestic idyll of innocence into the fallen decline of experience.'⁸ Gilbert and Gubar place *GM* in the context of religious/Biblical narratives of fallenness and redemption in which the 'good' sister Lizzie functions as salvific Christ(a) figure, who 'rehabilitates Laura, changing her back from a lost witch to a virginal bride, and ultimately leading her into a heaven of innocent domesticity.'⁹

Other classic readings have sought to interrogate how the poem

⁶ This is a literary convention for vagina. The notion of purse as metaphor for fallenness, sex and prostitution is not difficult to appreciate. The vagina/purse represents exchange and payment; it is the lure offered for money. Its use in literary contexts is as least as old as the eighteenth-century *Fanny Hill*. Dante Gabriel Rossetti uses the metaphor of purse across his poem about a fallen woman, *Jenny*. For a short guide to the literary use of purse and vagina, see: Hannah Aspinall, 'The Fetishization and Objectification of the Female Body in Victorian Culture', <<http://arts.brighton.ac.uk/study/literature/brightonline/issue-number-two/the-fetishization-and-objectification-of-the-female-body-in-victorian-culture>: brightONLINE, 2014> [accessed: 03 November 2016].

⁷ Gilbert and Gubar, p. 566.

⁸ Miles, p. 98.

⁹ Gilbert and Gubar, p. 566.

valorises and constructs sisterhood as a saving lesbian bond.¹⁰ Heather Love, for example, makes a bold attempt to read *GM* as lesbian sado-masochist porn.¹¹ Further broad strategies of reading interrogate the poem's political and economic representations, placing questions concerning the status of women's bodies and desires in the context of exchange and consumerism. In short, they broadly examine the precarious nature of femininity under conditions where women have only themselves and their 'virtue' to sell. Elizabeth Helsinger's classic study argues that Victorian women 'must enter a marketplace in which they are always at risk.'¹² Their successful negotiation of this sexual economy depends on reclaiming the power of money for their own and the mutual support of women for women. Recently, Clayton Carlyle Tarr has drawn even closer attention to the extent to which the economic exchanges contained in *GM* may be grounded in the wild and fecund realities of exchange in the nineteenth-century Covent Garden.¹³

The concept of consumption has been taken in particular directions by some feminist readings of *GM*, suggesting that the poem structures

¹⁰ Mary Wilson Carpenter, "'Eat Me, Drink Me, Love Me': The Consumable Body in Christina Rossetti's 'Goblin Market'", *Victorian Poetry*, 29.4 (1991), 415-34.

¹¹ Heather Love, 'Sister Insider' (review of Sharon Marcus, *Between Women*), *Novel*, 41.1 (2007), 158-61.

¹² Helsinger, p. 924. See also: Holt, 'Men Sell Not Such in Any Town', in *Victorian Women Poets*, ed. by Leighton (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), pp. 131-47. For a key analysis of nineteenth-century constructions of femininity in a time of consumerism, see: Lysack, *Come Buy*. See also: Carpenter, *Imperial Bibles*, esp. Section 1, for analysis of the marketing of Home Bibles in relation to performances of femininity and domestic identities.

¹³ See: Clayton Carlyle Tarr, 'Covent Goblin Market', *Victorian Poetry*, 50.3 (2012), 297-316.

consumption around discourses of anorexia and illness. Elaine Showalter's classic study on 'the female malady' interrogates discourses of 'hysteria' in nineteenth-century women's writing,¹⁴ while recent studies have not only explored anorexia as a discourse of female control, but examined hunger in *GM* as representative of sexual, religious and sensual desires.¹⁵ Anthony H. Harrison has, with others, drawn attention to the fact that CR herself was famously 'ill' for most of her life: 'Illness was a pervasive element in her existence from her second decade forward. Her health was rarely strong after her mid-teens, when she underwent what her best biographer, Jan Marsh, describes as a "severe nervous breakdown".'¹⁶ Illness – whether read in terms of the effects of patriarchal constructions of femininity, the result of abuse and so on – has provided a fruitful key to tease out the poem's mysterious poetics.¹⁷

A further key strand of *GM* criticism concerns historicised readings. These have especially sought to place *GM* in the context of CR's lived circumstances. Attention has centred on Rossetti's involvement (or lack

¹⁴ Showalter.

¹⁵ See, for example, Shelley O'Reilly, 'Absinthe Makes the Tart Grow Fonder: A Note on "Wormwood" in Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market"', *Victorian Poetry*, 34.1 (1996), 108-14; Antony H. Harrison, 'Christina Rossetti: Illness and Ideology', *Victorian Poetry*, 45.4 (2007), 415-28; Rebecca F. Stern, 'Adulterations Detected': Food and Fraud in Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market", *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 57.4 (2003), 477-511; Deborah Ann Thompson, 'Anorexia as a Lived Trope: Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market"', *Mosaic*, 24. 3/4 (1992), 89-106. Alison Chapman has called *GM* 'a consumptive text *par excellence*. [It] inscribes consumption as a multiple trope: at once pathological [...], moral [...], and economic.' Alison Chapman, *The Afterlife of Christina Rossetti* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), pp. 131-32.

¹⁶ Harrison, p. 417. See also: Marsh, Chapter 4.

¹⁷ In Chapter 6 of this thesis, anorexia, regulation of food and the regulation of the fecund body in discourses of sanctification will be central to my analysis.

thereof) in the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, and CR's religiosity. Mary Arseneau, in particular, focuses on the influence of the Oxford Movement on CR, reading Lizzie's sacrificial exposure of herself as a 'Eucharistic offering of herself.'¹⁸ Much of Arseneau's work has sought to counter some feminist readings of *GM* by drawing attention to Rossetti's faithfulness to the Tractarian doctrine of Incarnation: 'the Tractarians saw the incarnation as the vital core of the Church, its sacraments and God's plan for humanity's redemption.'¹⁹ She adds,

In this regard, it is crucial that we recognize that one of the most fundamental assumptions underlying Rossetti's poetry is her theologically based belief that the created world is capable of communicating moral and spiritual meaning, or, in her own words, that "All the world over, visible things typify things invisible."²⁰

Marylu Hill makes her own contribution to this movement in CR scholarship when she uses the Tractarian reading of Eucharist – as both erotic and profoundly physical – to demonstrate how, in *GM*,

Rossetti uses the body not as a symbol or metaphor but rather as the concrete conduit through which humans understand God. In other words, for Rossetti, humans do not so much transcend the body as they experience the transcendent through it.²¹

¹⁸ Arseneau, *Incarnation*, p. 90.

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 79.

²⁰ Ibid. See also: Arseneau, *Recovering*, pp. 31-35.

²¹ Marylu Hill, "'Eat Me, Drink Me, Love Me': Eucharist and the Erotic Body in Christina Rossetti's 'Goblin Market'", *Victorian Poetry*, 43.4 (2005), 455-72 (p. 456).

GM, then, can plausibly be said to afford a plethora of readings, resisting formal and conceptual classification. If *GM* presents different poetic strategies to *AL*, this chapter argues that Rossetti's poem, like *AL*, makes its own critical intervention into mid-nineteenth century discourse on fallenness and femininity. Attentive to the critical strategies outlined above (feminist, economic, and religious), this chapter explores how CR's language of fecundity and barrenness – located in mythic time and space and centred on 'goblin fruit' – interrogates middle-class representations of fallenness and subverts them. Laura – who ingests the 'goblin fruit' and falls ill – may be read through the lens of the female body over-identified with pregnancy or fecund reproductive excess. Laura is, on one level, akin to the pregnant woman negotiating the 'fact' that pregnancy is a doubled representation: yes, it is a place of making, but it is often experienced as a kind of physical poison (as morning sickness and cravings for bizarre food).²² Insofar as CR herself renounced marriage in order to make poetic space available for herself,²³ Lizzie – Laura's sister – models a renunciation of conventional, patriarchally-ordered fecundity; by not eating the goblin fruit, Lizzie makes her body available for creative making. Rossetti demonstrates that if

²² Anecdotally, 'pica' are commonplace. Pregnant friends of mine have had cravings that include coal and plaster dust. The existence of 'pica' – unusual cravings for non-food items – has, significantly, been categorised as an eating disorder by the American Psychiatric Association. In short, pregnant women are categorised as those who are already in a place of psychiatry/mental ill health *qua* pregnancy. See: Andrew M. Colman, *A Dictionary of Psychology*, 4th edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 576.

²³ For a discussion of the relationship between renunciation of marriage and creativity, see, for example, Diane D'Amico, "Choose the stairs that mount above": Christina Rossetti and the Anglican Sisterhoods', *Essays in Literature*, 17.2 (1990), 204- 21 (p. 219).

patriarchal-Christian ideas of femininity are poisonous for women, women can – by claiming the notion of Eucharist as a liberative transaction between material female bodies – claim a poetics of fecundity not reduced to physical function.

The focal point for this materialist reworking of Eucharist as poetic performance and drama between female bodies, then, is the sisterhood between Laura, the fallen woman, and Lizzie, the woman Christ/a. Specifically, the self-offering of Lizzie to Laura – body to body – reformulates the fecund meaning of women's bodies. Laura and Lizzie represent and subvert the patriarchal double-bind of Whore and Virgin, exposing them as performative categories for femininity in a patriarchal economy. Rossetti exposes the barrenness of patriarchal representations of fecundity – the goblin men's 'fruit' – yet demonstrates how women can claim fecundity without being reduced to reproductive function. A woman may 'birth' poetry. A woman may 'master' the masculine position – of whom the classic religious representation is the Christ who saves – by claiming it through her own subversive fecundity.

However, rather than this birthing of poetry being understood as 'productive excess' Rossetti's language demonstrates disruptive excess.²⁴ *GM* bears the marks of what Irigaray calls 'écriture féminine', that is, writing which reaches back beyond the Male Gaze that constructs woman as lack and deficiency. This writing which 'explodes every firmly established form,

²⁴ Irigaray, *This Sex*, p. 78.

figure, idea or concept'²⁵ is in solidarity with Hélène Cixous's notion of women's writing characterised by openness and generosity in which both self and Other coexist in mutually enabling love.²⁶ This is a writing that, as Susan Sellers summarises:

Stresses that the inscription of the rhythms and articulations of the mother's body which continue to influence the adult self provides a link to the pre-symbolic union between self and m/other, and so affects the subject's relationship to language, the other, [her]self and the world.²⁷

Rossetti's language of excess reclaims femininity from patriarchal designations through women's offering of their bodies – as milk, rather than the bread, of Eucharist – to the other.

'Her tree of life droop'd from the root' – A Further Note on Fallenness and the Pathologization of Female Bodies in Nineteenth-Century Culture and Religion

In the previous chapter, I interrogated at length how discourse on fallenness and the fallen woman was an urgent and definitive aspect of Victorian culture. Much of this discourse centred on anxiety around representations of purity and propriety. To reiterate a previous point: *pace* Amanda Anderson, in Victorian contexts, 'to fall' means, literally, 'to lose

²⁵ Ibid, pp. 78-79.

²⁶ Hélène Cixous, *The Newly Born Woman*, trans. By Catherine Clément (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), pp. 63-65.

²⁷ Hélène Cixous, *The Hélène Cixous Reader*, trans. by Susan Sellers (London & New York: Routledge 1994), p. xxix.

control'.²⁸ *GM* belongs to the wide-range of Victorian literature which negotiates and interrogates discourse on fallenness.²⁹ In very many regards my remarks on fallenness in the previous chapter apply to *GM*. However, even a cursory examination of *GM* indicates the many material differences between *AL* and *GM*. *AL* belongs to the category of dramatic monologue which, as Angela Leighton claims, is a form many of the poems about fallen women written by women use, suggesting that, 'the fact that [these poems are] spoken in the first person [...] is an act of literary and social transgression.'³⁰ *GM* is very clearly a narrative poem with elements of fairy tale, ballad and lyric.³¹ If *AL* seeks to create a plausible mid-century social milieu, *GM* constructs a distinctly mythic time and space. *GM* is unafraid of secrets and mystery and, as Isobel Armstrong suggests, 'part of the secret of *GM* [...] is the questioning feminine discourse it masks.'³² It presents itself as a children's story, yet its critical possibilities are almost infinitely fecund.

GM's material differences from EBB's *AL* indicate distinctive concerns about the place of fecundity and barrenness in the patriarchal ordering of femininity. Its representation of fallenness constitutes a way of outlining these distinctive concerns. I will explore how *GM*'s potent

²⁸ Anderson, p. 2.

²⁹ For an enumeration of examples of Victorian literature that explore themes of fallenness, see previous chapter, pp. 197-99.

³⁰ *Victorian Women Poets (Reynolds)*, p. 276.

³¹ Fairy tale, as Kathryn Burlinson claims, was a significant genre for Victorian women writers: 'Women writers [...] took to the form in great numbers and in the process revised the dominant representations of femininity'. Writers included Jean Ingelow, Mary De Morgan, Juliana Ewing, and Louisa Molesworth. See: Burlinson, pp. 36-37.

³² Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry*, p. 347.

contribution to a Christian-feminist poetics lies in its strategies of re-reading the creative power of female bodies. The representations of feminine illness and malaise in *GM* demonstrate the danger to women's bodies of patriarchal representations of femininity. However, CR claims the dangerous power of women's bodies in order to rework and subvert the Eucharist as a feminist icon of sisterly restitution. As I will attempt to clarify, her elusive poetics represents a strategy for interrogating not only patriarchal notions of femininity, but of interrogating the central Christian myth of Eucharist as the mystery of Christ's body who redeems by being both human and divine.

As was suggested in the last chapter, much nineteenth-century discourse on fallenness was concerned with the moral regulation of working-class female sexuality.³³ One of the fascinating dimensions of *GM* is the absence of an obvious discourse on working-class fallenness. For while CR was involved in middle-class efforts to help lower-class 'fallen' women, *GM* occupies what might be called mythic and liminal space. The central figures – Laura and Lizzie – are sisters who, seemingly, are independent in means and have no need for work. They are liberated from one mark of middle-class constructions of fallenness: the need for women to work. Rather, *GM* arguably interrogates fallenness through categories of illness, infirmity, and bodily sacrifice. Feminine malady – specifically the decline of Laura who not only peeps at, but partakes of goblin fruit – is critiqued as a

³³ See: Linda Mahood, *The Magdalenes: Prostitution in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 3.

middle-class discourse about femininity which medicalises and pathologises fallenness as a failure in women's bodies.

Roberta McGrath's striking work on the medicalisation of the female body and its representations offers a helpful insight into emerging nineteenth-century discourses on the bodies of the so-called weaker sex. Like Bronfen, she notes how representations of women's bodies are readily identified with death, not least because women's bodies are so readily understood in terms of fecundity. She argues:

Death is what we most fear in ourselves. This is what lies beneath the skin, what threatens to break through and destroy life. It is our bodies which in the end give up on us [...] It is little wonder that we both love and hate the body, and that we project our desire and fear on to others. In the meantime, there are diversionary tactics: we try to contain or at least limit the progress of death by making more humans; we try to thwart death by making objects. But there is a strict division of labour here between women and men: it is women who produce perishable bodies, while men make lasting cultural artefacts. This divide suggests that images of human reproduction occupy an ambiguous place within western culture.³⁴

To reiterate: the 'womb' is persistently identified with the 'tomb' in patriarchal ordering of gender and sexuality. The womb is the generative organ of sickness: mythically, it generates the 'sickness unto death' (as Kierkegaard might put it, talking of (the wages of) Sin, which Eve brought

³⁴ McGrath, p. 10.

into the world),³⁵ but equally it is represented as the organ which generates malady for women. The womb – *qua* fecund symbol – generates sickness through the pain of menses, but also through the process that is supposed to define a woman: pregnancy (whether in terms of sickness during pregnancy or the pain of childbirth). As Deborah Lupton concludes, 'In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, menstruation and pregnancy were treated as abnormal – as sicknesses rather than normal bodily functions. Women were seen as being controlled by their uterus and ovaries.'³⁶

McGrath's study of medical representations of women's fertile bodies since the seventeenth century reiterates the patriarchal imperative that subjects women to the Male Gaze. By the nineteenth century, there were extensive text books on women's bodies whose visual representations over-identified women with the womb. Works like William Hunter/Jan Van Riemsdyke's *Anatomy of the Human Gravid Uterus Exhibited in Figures* (1774) created detailed, lavish and fetishised representations of women's

³⁵ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening*, trans. by Howard H. Kong & Edna V. Kong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983 (1849)). For Kierkegaard, 'the sickness unto death' is not simply about physical death, but the danger of despair, as spiritual death, if the Christian doesn't align himself with God.

³⁶ Lupton, *Medicine as Culture*, p. 141. Lupton acknowledges that the emergence of 'hysteria' – a term derived from the Greek for 'womb' – was a 'clear example of way in which medically defined and documented illnesses are embedded in social, political and historical conditions.' Ibid, p. 141. The over-identification of pregnancy with abnormality and hysteria is no mere nineteenth century matter. The use of pregnancy as a qualifier in behaviour – even when this qualifier seems utterly irrelevant – can be seen in this example from November 2016: BBC, 'Pregnant Driver Reverses Off Ramsgate Harbour Wall', <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-kent-37880394>: BBC Online, 2016> [accessed: 05 November 2016].

bodies and their seeming failings.³⁷ Stephen T. Asma's popular work on the historiography of monsters reminds us, that with the emergence of modern science, the monstrous was medicalised as an effect of wombs and femininity. He notes how, as early as the sixteenth century, the French surgeon Ambroise Paré moved the discourse on 'birth-defects' from the supernatural to the natural realm. Paré suggests that 'the narrowness or smallness of the womb' is a cause of monsters.³⁸ As McGrath suggests, drawing on Latour,³⁹ 'women's bodies, once they have been inscribed or turned into representation, are easier and safer to look at; they are easier and safer to order, move, preserve or destroy, to take out and put away.'⁴⁰ Crucially, within this scopophilic discourse on women's body, it is the fecund body that is fetishised as life-giver and dangerously fragile:

Fetishised within the realm of art and pathologised within the discourses of medicine, the female body lives a double life. Fetishism is always based on disavowal; socially marginal, woman is, however, symbolically central. Like the inscription, the woman's body is always a trace, a reminder of something else: the mother's body.⁴¹

In short, the woman's body is never simply itself alone. It always signifies beyond itself and its first iteration/representation is as 'the mother's body', fecund, yet deathly and sickly. Insofar as it is reduced to

³⁷ Cited in: Richard Barnett, *The Sick Rose, or, Disease and the Art of Medical Illustration* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2014), pp. 32-33.

³⁸ Stephen T. Asma, *On Monsters: An Unnatural History of Our Worst Fears* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 146.

³⁹ For example, Bruno Latour, *Pandora's Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies* (London & Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

⁴⁰ McGrath, p. 10.

⁴¹ Ibid, p. 13.

representations of reproduction – the womb – the female body is always represented as doubled. For not only is ‘womb’ one step away from ‘tomb’, but woman is represented in terms of her children. Even as she produces new life, that life is not her own. But there are further significations. The fact of birth is a fundamental marker of the reality of mortality. Natality is the ground of masculine fear of death and, ultimately, of women. Indeed, Elisabeth Bronfen argues that ‘the pictorial representations of dead women became so prevalent in eighteenth and nineteenth century European culture that by the middle of the latter century this topos was already dangerously hovering on the periphery of cliché.’⁴² Literary representations of the deathly fecundity of feminine bodies abound in the nineteenth century. Gothic novel *Frankenstein* has Mary Shelley turn a male surrogate, Victor Frankenstein, into a new Eve, whose womb is a ‘workshop of filthy creation’. In *Wuthering Heights*, Catherine Earnshaw dies in childbirth; her presence remains in the novel as a haunting spectre looming over proceedings. In Gaskell’s *Mary Barton*, while Mary is still a young girl, her mother dies in childbirth along with the baby. Crucially, this death is constructed around Mary Barton Snr’s grief about her sister Esther’s disappearance. Esther, it later becomes clear, had disappeared because she had lost her virtue and fallen into prostitution.

The female body becomes, then, both the site of trauma and a traumatic sight. It inspires dread. As Bronfen argues, death and femininity,

⁴² Bronfen, p. 3.

the two enigmas of western culture, are bound together in the concept of castration: the horror for the masculine-constructed subject is in seeing the mother as a castrated version of its own body, who must be mastered if subjectivity is to be assured and achieved.⁴³ McGrath argues:

The terror woman inspires derives from the way in which only she gives life, thus starting the individual's more or less lengthy dance with death.

The navel, as Bronfen points out, is a scar which never quite heals. Woman is a one-way street.⁴⁴

Visually, the fullness of a woman's pregnant belly, near full-term, might be read as akin to a dead body's internal organs bloated and swollen by death gases,⁴⁵ the symptoms of ovarian cancer or, in a time of anxiety about 'fat' and body image, as a sign of mistreating the body. In a patriarchal, scopic economy the fecund body simply looks sick.

One of the ways nineteenth-century medicine sought mastery over the deathly, yet fecund female body was through its attempts to 'make public' its mysterious functions. If male reproduction is by its nature a visually public affair – dependent, historically, on a tumescent penis and readily discernible sex organs – female anatomy has been designated by absence. Before the eighteenth century there was no description of the female skeleton. As nineteenth-century medico-industrial representations

⁴³ Ibid, pp. 32-35.

⁴⁴ McGrath, p. 112.

⁴⁵ Post-battle images of bloated bodies were especially common during the American Civil War. See, for example, John Banks, 'John Bank's Civil War Blog', <<http://johnbanks.blogspot.co.uk/2016/03/antietam-details-in-gardners-iconic.html>, 2016> [accessed: 5 November 2016].

of women's bodies emerged, claims were made that – on the basis that the male skeleton/body is normative – women's bodies were from the skeletal level up, deformed. McGrath reminds us that:

When anatomists began to study the female skeleton in greater detail, it was caught in an already existing web of beliefs about the body of a woman. Unsurprisingly, the female pelvis became the object of obsessive study, which always revealed the same thing: women were not only different from men, but also less than them. Anatomists found out what was already known: woman was malformed.⁴⁶

The female body then, was constitutionally ill and damaged, not necessarily even fit for the productive work of fecund excess it was assigned in a culture increasingly obsessed with manufacture and industrial processes: 'woman did not give birth, but was delivered of a child. A poorly constructed pelvis or an inefficient uterus were mechanical deficiencies that hindered or prevented the extraction of what was literally a vital commodity.'⁴⁷ In short, the pelvis became a metonym for femininity: malformed, necessary, but weak and dangerous.

The very condition of the fecund body under patriarchy, then, is fallenness: in addition to negotiating the problem of falling away from chaste purity or middle-class leisured life, as interrogated in the last chapter, women's bodies *qua* bodies are fallen versions of male ideals. To repeat

⁴⁶ Bronfen, p. 3.

⁴⁷ McGrath, p. 100 & p. 71. See also: Andrea Henderson, 'Doll-Machines & Butcher-Shop Meat: Models of Childbirth in the Early Stages of Industrial Capitalism', *Genders*, 12.4 (1991), 100-19.

Shildrick's point, 'the very sign of fertility, the menses, has been regarded as evidence of women's inherent lack of control of the body and, by extension, of the self.'⁴⁸ This way of stating the fallenness of femininity reiterates the double bind of feminine subjectivity under patriarchy. In my discussion of *AL*, I explored how purity and virtue are presented as the feminine ideal, yet because fecundity is represented as something excessive, dangerous and in need of control, it is fundamentally unstable, fragile and at risk of destruction. This double-bind also operates at the level of the body's representation: the fecund body of the mother or potential mother is fetishised as the feminine ideal, yet the female body is constructed as unstable, fragile and dangerous. Given the previous analysis it is perhaps not inappropriate to say: to fall for woman is simply to be a fecund woman. To be representable as a female body is already to be deformed, less and defective.

One of the mainstays of patriarchal representations of women's fecund bodies as fallen, damaged and deathly is the rhetoric of Christianity. This rhetoric was pervasive in Victorian culture and is especially significant for criticism of CR since she was a committed Anglo-Catholic/Tractarian. As Mary Arseneau reminds us, CR had a copy of and read John Keble's *The Christian Year*.⁴⁹ Keble was a significant figure in the Church of England 'Tractarian' or 'Oxford' Movement. Along with the likes of Edward Bouverie Pusey, Robert Wilberforce and (before his departure to Rome) John Henry

⁴⁸ Shildrick, *Leaky Bodies*, p. 34.

⁴⁹ Arseneau, *Incarnation*, p. 80.

Newman, Keble's theological brilliance led to a recovery of the significance of the Eucharist as central liturgical rite and a revival of interest in pre-Reformation understandings of Church polity and life.⁵⁰ As Marylu Hill notes, 'as early as 1844, Rossetti was attending Christ Church, Albany Street, whose minister was a dedicated follower of the Tractarian movement.'⁵¹ Not least among these effects was the revival of interest in Religious Orders in the Church of England. According to Timothy Willem-Jones, 'in the second half of the nineteenth century, thousands of Victorian women left their comfortable homes and joined the newly revived orders of deaconesses and nuns.'⁵² Amongst them was CR's sister, Maria, who joined the Anglican Society of All Saints. Both she and Christina gave time to serving at the St Mary Magdalene Home for Fallen Women in Highgate.

Colleen M. Conway's study on the construction of gender in the Bible suggests that, from early Christianity onwards, subjectivity in Christianity was constructed in terms of mastery.⁵³ She argues that hegemonic masculinity runs through classical and New Testament writings. It is constructed around 'mastery over non-men', a masculinity that must always be proven in competitive ways, and is a moral value in conflict with

⁵⁰ For accounts of the significance of The Oxford Movement, see, for example: *The Oxford Movement: Europe & the Wider World 1830-1930*, ed. by Stewart J. Brown and Peter B. Nockles (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); *Firmly I Believe: An Oxford Movement Reader*, ed. by Raymond Chapman (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2011).

⁵¹ Hill, p. 456.

⁵² Jones, p. 46.

⁵³ Colleen M. Conway, 'The Construction of Gender in the New Testament', in *The Oxford Handbook of Theology, Sexuality and Gender*, ed. by Adrian Thatcher (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 222-38 (p. 233).

effeminacy and the 'weakness' or 'softness' of femininity. It is an anxious concept that depends on asserting that it is 'not-femininity'. Furthermore, Aristotelian biology had a profound impact on Christian thinking about women's bodies in both the Patristic and Medieval eras. If Christian writers found Biblical warrant for male hegemony in stories like that of Adam and Eve, St Thomas Aquinas's claim in the *Summa Theologica* that women are 'failed men' and merely the passive cause in reproduction was undoubtedly drawn from Aristotle.⁵⁴

The association of masculine bodies with the active and feminine bodies with passivity is significant not only for the patriarchal reading of fecund womanhood, but for the significance of the central Christian ritual, Eucharist. Insofar as classical Christian theology relies on an ordering of gender around active and passive principles, it constructs a picture of God's 'saving work' as essentially male. The body of a woman – weak and soft, made to be mastered – is suitable for carrying God, but not for actually remaking the postlapsarian world. Thus, the Blessed Virgin can be 'theotokos', the 'God-bearer', but cannot be Christ. The Oxford Movement's theology (influenced by Aquinas and medieval theology) to which CR was drawn developed this classic picture of salvation. Mary Arseneau reflects that:

⁵⁴ For a study of Medieval Christian theologies of gender see, Ruth Mazo Karras, 'Reproducing Medieval Christianity', in *The Oxford Handbook of Theology, Sexuality and Gender*, ed. by Thatcher, pp. 271-86. For an analysis of the 'failed men'/'One Sex' theory, see Thatcher, *Redeeming Gender*, Part 1, Section 2.

According to Keble, postlapsarian nature was restored by the incarnation and by Christ's sacrifice, which made nature a sacramental symbol of the divine. Christ's incarnation is thus the source of the analogy which is central to Keble's poetic.⁵⁵

The saving work and sacrifice of Christ, rehearsed in the sacrifice of the Mass or Eucharist, restores people's 'moral sense' so that they can perceive 'the symbolic representations of the supernatural world within the physical world that God has created.'⁵⁶ For Arseneau, this picture of a poetics united in the (Male) Christ's active work of salvation is crucial for CR's poetics: 'the profoundly spiritual possibilities of symbolism in poetry and nature are enabled by the descendent motion of a God who makes Himself available to human kind, especially through that central Christian event and symbol, the incarnation.'⁵⁷

Marylu Hill takes the significance of Anglo-Catholic doctrines on Incarnation and Eucharist in another direction. She suggests that 'Eucharist as sacrifice and saving meal is clearly at the heart of *Goblin Market*.'⁵⁸ The Anglo-Catholic theology of Eucharist in which CR was versed is a 'bewildering and eroticised combination of the physical and the spiritual.'⁵⁹ At the heart of this doctrine is a commitment to the 'Real Presence' of Christ in the Eucharist.⁶⁰ This is the claim that the body of Christ is a real, objective,

⁵⁵ Arseneau, *Incarnation*, pp. 80-81.

⁵⁶ Ibid, p. 81.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Hill, p. 455.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ See: E. B. Pusey, *The Presence of Christ in the Holy Eucharist* (Oxford: J. H. Parker; London: Francis & John Rivington, 1853).

indeed material presence in the bread and wine of the Eucharist, rather than merely figurative. The eating of Christ's flesh is an actual encounter with the Redeeming Lord, even if the bread remains mere bread. The sinful communicant is in an erotic – that is desiring – space where redemption, restoration and the forgiveness of sins are confirmed in the consumption of the longed-for Lord's body. And, as another Tractarian Robert Isaac Wilberforce asserts, since original sin came about through the body of Adam, only the body of Christ can redeem us: 'if the poison of one [Adam] is transmitted through his flesh, so His flesh [Christ] should be the medium through which is transmitted the virtue of the other.'⁶¹

Hill helpfully argues that *GM* constructs a poetics of desire and spiritual satisfaction grounded in the eroticised, spiritual body. For her, 'Rossetti is using the body not as a symbol or metaphor, but rather as the concrete conduit through which humans understand God.'⁶² However, my analysis of the fecund body as 'fallen' in religio-patriarchal contexts suggests that Hill's conclusion may require reworking. The Anglo-Catholic economy of salvation in the material body of the Eucharist is singularly male/masculine. Adam is the 'First Man' who – through the naughtiness of Eve – falls. The marred 'Image of God' is restored by the Man-God 'Jesus Christ'. He is the 'Second Adam', but also God. His body is male and the flesh which the communicant partakes of is, logically, male. The failed and limited body of a

⁶¹ Robert Isaac Wilberforce, *A Rectification of Archdeacon Wilberforce's Work on the Eucharist* (London: [n.p.], 1853).

⁶² Hill, p. 456.

woman is acceptable to carry God, but insufficient for the work of God's redemption and salvation.⁶³ She is called to the Altar of Christ to be redeemed by receiving the body and blood of Christ into her limited body.

CR herself was publicly at ease with Anglo-Catholic Eucharistic doctrine. She indicated no call for the revision of the place of women in the Christian economy of salvation.⁶⁴ However, *GM* can be read as a subversive text which is both feminist and Christian. Its subversions of patriarchal, Anglo-Catholic Eucharistic doctrine are grounded in its willingness to take the creative particularity of women's bodies seriously; it challenges discourse on women's bodies which treat them as constitutionally pathological, especially in their capacity as fecund, pregnant bodies. By remaking Eucharist as a work of embodied female fecundity, in which sisterly bodies feed each other, fundamental Christian images are reworked in striking, radical directions. Rossetti's poetry of excess refuses to be read according to patriarchal strategies which identify 'feminine excess' simply with baby-making and production. Rather – *pace* Irigaray – it disrupts that patriarchal schemata. The excessive self-offering of Lizzie to Laura exposes

⁶³ Herein lies one of the warrants for the Anglo-Catholic tradition of denying the very possibility of women becoming priests. Priests act as 'Icons of Christ' and stand in for him at the Sacrifice of the Mass. Women are constitutionally – *qua* women – incapable of occupying that place at the Mass. For an analysis of women's expulsion from sacramental ministry in history, see Porter, esp. Chapter 3.

⁶⁴ For a considered and broad-based case for CR's Tractarian conservatism structured through 'The Face of the Deep', her commentary on The Apocalypse of John, see: Andrew D. Armond, 'Limited Knowledge and the Tractarian Doctrine of Reserve in Christina Rossetti's "the Face of the Deep"', *Victorian Poetry*, 48.2 (2010), 219-42.

the limits of the patriarchal system which led to Laura's pathology, and generates a new creative space for the women to be whole and liberated.

'You cannot think what figs / My teeth have met in' – The Fallen Body

Redeemed

You cannot think what figs
My teeth have met in,
What melons icy-cold
Piled on a dish of gold
Too huge for me to hold,
What peaches with a velvet nap,
Pellucid grapes without one seed:
Odorous indeed must be the mead
Whereon they grow, and pure the wave they drink
With lilies at the brink,
And sugar-sweet their sap. (ll. 173-83)

It would take a reading of almost wilful obstinacy to deny the significance and centrality of fruit in the narrative and signficatory force of *GM*. Marylu Hill argues:

Goblin Market is first and foremost a poem about hunger and our desire to eat our fill of that which will satisfy us. The profusion of enticing fruits with which the poem opens – "Plump unpecked cherries, /Melons and raspberries, /Bloom-down-cheeked peaches" (ll. 7-9) – speaks immediately

to this hunger as well as setting up a paradigm of temptation.⁶⁵

Kathleen Vejvoda extends the signification of 'fruit as temptation' by bringing *GM* into conversation with Milton:

Rossetti writes about forbidden fruit as temptation, a Miltonic motif central not only to *Paradise Lost* but also to *Comus*. All of these works are about a pastoral world in which temptation lurks and threatens innocence and virtue, and even more specifically, in which an evil masculine creature or creatures try to coerce a maiden into consuming a succulent fruit or liquor.⁶⁶

She adds, 'to confront this threat, both *Goblin Market* and *Comus* posit and celebrate a female saviour.'⁶⁷

Shortly I shall use the passage from *GM* quoted above – part of Laura's ecstatic moment of goblin fruit-based consummation – as a way to unlock a Christian-feminist reading of its representations of fecundity and barrenness. However, before doing so, it is worth rehearsing *GM*'s key features. From the outset, *GM* constructs a world that is simultaneously fantastical, yet presents familiar binary oppositions. The opening lines generate a world divided between 'maids' and 'goblins':

Morning and evening
Maids heard the goblins cry:
'Come buy our orchard fruits,
Come buy, come buy [...] (ll. 1-4)

⁶⁵ Hill, p. 458.

⁶⁶ Kathleen Vejvoda, 'The Fruit of Charity: "Comus" and Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market"', *Victorian Poetry*, 38.4 (2000), 556-57.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, p. 557.

We rapidly discover this is a world constructed around representations of masculinity and femininity. The goblins are 'goblin men'. There are seemingly no goblin women. The women are 'maids', unmarried, inexperienced and presumably virginal.⁶⁸ It is also a world predicated on exchange and sales. The goblin men possess the products and agency. They speak to sell their wares while the maids hear. The goblins initially appear to be the primary agents, the maids the recipients of the goblins' advances. In the goblin men's language – the invitation to buy and the sumptuous list of goblin fruit that follows – it is possible to hear evidence for Clayton Carlyle Tarr's claim that *GM* is an analogue of London's actual Covent Garden Market: 'Rossetti's market does retain remnants of its urban counterpart, at least through the goblins' speech. The area surrounding Covent Garden Market was inundated with pushy sellers, known as costermongers, hawkers, or hucksters.'⁶⁹

GM, then, constructs a topos that Albert D. Pionke claims is shaped around a 'luxuriant aesthetic.'⁷⁰ The goblin-men invite the central protagonists, Laura and Lizzie (and presumably other maids) to buy a plethora of different fruits. It is almost impossible to read without one's mouth-watering:

Apples and quinces,

⁶⁸ Of course, the word 'maid' also signifies ambiguously in the direction of class: 'maid' was a term used of female servants. Arguably, this richness of meaning only underlines how 'maidenliness'/'being a servant' acts almost as synecdoche for femininity itself.

⁶⁹ Pulham, p. 16.

⁷⁰ Albert D. Pionke, 'The Spiritual Economy of "Goblin Market"', *SEL Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*, 52.4 (2012), 897-915 (p. 906).

Lemons and oranges,
Plump unpeck'd cherries,
Melons and raspberries,
Bloom-down-cheek'd peaches,
Swart-headed mulberries,
Wild free-born cranberries,
Crab-apples, dewberries,
Pine-apples, blackberries,
Apricots, strawberries; –
All ripe together
In summer weather, –
Morns that pass by,
Fair eves that fly;
Come buy, come buy:
Grapes fresh from the vine,
Pomegranates full and fine,
Dates and sharp bullaces,
Rare pears and greengages,
Damsons and bilberries,
Taste them and try:
Currants and gooseberries,
Bright-fire-like barberries,
Figs to fill your mouth,
Citrons from the South,
Sweet to tongue and sound to eye;
Come buy, come buy. (ll. 5-31)

The mood of fecund excess is only added to by CR's pause between the list of fruits (All ripe together | In summer weather, – | Morns that pass by, | Fair eves that fly) and the repeated 'Come buy, come buy'. They act as a kind of breath between 'mouthfuls' of succulent fruit. The poetic beat of four short lines is deceptively skilful. Not only does it reiterate the hard economic truth behind the tempting fruit – these succulent fruit exist to be bought – but they give the reader (and in Laura and Lizzie's case, the hearer) an opportunity to cognitively process the lush, fecund language. However, as Pionke suggests, the whole of *GM* overflows:

With sensuous lists of fresh products from the far reaches of empire; populated by supernatural creatures composed of animals from at least four continents; confused conceptually by extended series of similes that combine the saccharinely sweet with the sexually suggestive and the typologically significant; and rendered tongue-twistingly difficult by a profusion of alliteration, consonance, assonance, and internal and end-line rhyme, "Goblin Market" expresses poetic excess at almost every level.⁷¹

GM, then, constructs a world of dangerous and seemingly fecund excess. As Clayton Carlyle Tarr argues, an 1844 *Punch* description of Covent Garden Market might equally be applied to *GM*: 'Beautiful is the fruit piled in the centre walk of Covent Garden market; tempting the fairest and the richest daughters of Eve to touch, and then to make it their own.'⁷² Kathryn

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Tarr, p. 304. Krista Lysack's study of shopping and consumerism in nineteenth-century women's writing is illuminating. She argues that the shopping trip in *Jane Eyre* stages 'a significant moment' in material sexual politics. Jane's refusal of Rochester's largesse is not simply a matter of ethics or aesthetics (a kind of feminine modesty), but a critique of male-authored commodification of women as

Burlinson argues, *GM* is 'sensually outrageous', adding that, '[Rossetti's] use of fairy-tale structure and motifs coexists with formal revisions which upset conventional expectations of stable morals or transparent allegories.'⁷³

Laura and Lizzie, the poem's central protagonists, are part of the cohort of maids who hear the goblin men tout their wares. Their relationship with each other, as virginal/maidenly sisters, is constructed in a context of temptation, danger and risk:

Evening by evening
Among the brookside rushes,
Laura bow'd her head to hear,
Lizzie veil'd her blushes. (ll. 32-35)

Both are conscious of the seductive dangers implicit in listening to the goblin men, and this generates physical symptoms: 'tingling cheeks and finger tips' (l. 39). However, it is Laura who most fully represents the patriarchal feminine position of Eve, the woman who embodies weakness to temptation. Laura knows 'we must not look at goblin men' (l. 42), but ultimately finds their wares irresistible. She goes to the goblins, admitting 'I have no coin' (l. 116), but is persuaded to buy the goblin fruit 'with a golden curl' from her head. The fruits are initially luscious – 'sweeter than honey

representations of exchange value. Jane's caution when invited to consume becomes a moment which stages subjectivity. As Lysack indicates, 'Jane's cautious negotiation of the commercial sphere is emblematic of the vexed condition of the woman shopper who goes to market only to risk becoming an object of exchange herself.' The potential connections with *GM* should be clear: Laura 'consumes' and becomes consumed by capitalist modes of exchange. She becomes commodified; Lizzie, rather, stages a moment of subjectivity by her self-regulation of appetite and renunciation of capitalism's 'delights'. See: Lysack, *Come Buy*, p. 2 & Chapter 1.

⁷³ Burlinson, p. 7.

from the rock' (l. 129) – but lead to an utter collapse of her health. She's transported to utter ecstasy as a prelude to perdition. She tells her sister Lizzie:

You cannot think what figs
My teeth have met in,
What melons icy-cold
Piled on a dish of gold
Too huge for me to hold,
What peaches with a velvet nap,
Pellucid grapes without one seed:
Odorous indeed must be the mead
Whereon they grow, and pure the wave they drink
With lilies at the brink,
And sugar-sweet their sap. (ll. 173-83)

Yet soon:

Her hair grew thin and grey;
She dwindled, as the fair full moon doth turn
To swift decay and burn
Her fire away. (ll. 277-80)

Laura's statement that, 'You cannot think what figs | My teeth have met in,' alerts the reader to the sexual dimension of fallenness in *GM*. In the previous chapter on *AL* and fallenness, I argued that 'the fig [is] a breast symbol.'⁷⁴ This holds good in the context of *GM*, but – given that it's associated with goblin *men* rather than women – becomes highly ironised

⁷⁴ Ibid, p. 7.

and therefore a device to expose the way masculine discourse has appropriated and distorted the female body for its own ends. Whereas it is used in *AL* 'as a positive picture of a gratifying mother,'⁷⁵ in the context of *GM*, the image reveals the strikingly different way CR interrogates fecundity and barrenness and uses the concept of fallenness to reformulate femininity in feminist-Christian ways. CR makes the radical decision to identify the fig (and the other fruits in the poem) with the 'goblin men'; that is, she shows how the 'juice' of the fig and other fruits represent a patriarchal sentence of death – fallenness – for the bodies of women in the poem. The impact of taking the men's 'juice' into Laura's body – of, arguably, getting pregnant metaphorically speaking – is sickness and wasting away.

What is striking and distinctive about Rossetti's use of fig is that it – like all the sumptuous fruits on offer in the poem – is the fruit of men. Pionke reminds us that, 'in total, the poem offers seven encounters with the goblins [...] in five of these episodes, the goblins' wares are consumed either in person or by proxy, but only one is an explicit instance of redemption.'⁷⁶ In short, the fruits of the 'brisk fruit-merchant men' (l. 241) are quite literally damaging to the bodies of women. Rossetti's language for Jeanie – the young woman who falls prey to the goblins before Laura and whom Laura recalls on her sickbed – has sexual connotations. Jeanie 'fell sick and died | In her gay prime. (ll. 315-16) and, as Antony Harrison argues, the use of 'gay'

⁷⁵ Steinmetz, p. 363.

⁷⁶ Pionke, p. 899.

in nineteenth-century contexts can suggest prostitution.⁷⁷ Gilbert and Gubar suggest that, 'Rossetti's allusion to bridal joys does seem to reinforce [the] notion that the forbidden goblin fruit simply signifies forbidden sexuality [...] Jeanie and Laura are both cursed with physical barrenness.'⁷⁸ Rossetti's language of fecundity and barrenness draws attention to how profoundly damaging patriarchal representations of women's bodies are for women. This barrenness is not limited to an over-identification with reproduction; it produces effects on women's works of art, their material fruits of literary creation.

Crucially, Rossetti's critique of patriarchal strategies is persistently iterated through an interrogation of religious representations of femininity. Kathleen Vejvoda reminds us that from *GM*'s outset, the poem is in dialectical relationship with biblical representations and language:

The opening line of *Goblin Market* ("Morning and evening") echoes inversely the biblical account of the creation in the King James Bible: "And the evening and the morning were the first day" (Genesis 1.5). From the outset, Rossetti invites comparisons with Genesis.⁷⁹

Laura – the sister who tastes the fig – is a surrogate Eve. Strikingly, in the Bible, the sin of Eve is rewarded with punishment in her body and, specifically, in her fecundity: 'unto the woman he said, I will greatly multiply

⁷⁷ Harrison, p. 416.

⁷⁸ Gilbert and Gubar, p. 569.

⁷⁹ Vejvoda, p. 567.

thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children.’⁸⁰

Contrast this with the externalised punishment inflicted on Adam:

And unto Adam he said, Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, of which I commanded thee, saying, Thou shalt not eat of it: cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life; Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field; In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.⁸¹

Women pay with and in their bodies under patriarchal conditions. In order to taste the goblin fruit, the price exacted by the goblin-men from Laura is a lock of her hair. She pays for their fruit with a token of her material beauty and is almost destroyed. Given my earlier analysis of medicalised representations of the pregnant body as sickness and pathological, it is not unreasonable to suggest that – figuratively – Laura’s capitulation to temptation signifies pregnancy. Eve’s punishment in Genesis is constructed in and through her fecundity – the pain of childbirth and, more broadly, in the sorrow of making children. What’s clear is that CR reminds us again and again that Laura’s decline is represented in the body: her eyes are sunk and mouth fades (l. 288). This is no mere spiritualised decline, yet it relates profoundly to religious discourse on women’s fecund bodies. As Rossetti puts it, Laura’s ‘tree of life drooped from the root’, that

⁸⁰ Genesis 3. 16.

⁸¹ Genesis 3. 17-19.

is, from the very ground of its being. Her body wastes away in the patriarchal economy of fecundity and pregnancy.

What is the status of this fruit of which Laura partakes? Catherine Maxwell correctly concludes that:

The fruit is directly identified as goblin produce (“goblin fruits”). Its flesh and juice, described as “Goblin pulp and goblin dew” (470), suggests that it partakes of the same bodily nature as the goblin men, that it is a synecdoche for the goblins’ own fleshy, masculine, and potent juices.⁸²

This fleshy sexual representation of masculinity is located – given what I’ve suggested previously – in a fundamentally biblical and religious setting. The goblins are not offering icons of virility – seed, for example – but are touting masculinised versions of fecundity. These are male figures who have ‘stolen’ iconic representations of fecund creativity and deploy them for their own patriarchal purposes. Critics like Vejvoda, Jan Marsh and Catherine Maxwell are undoubtedly correct to connect the discourse on goblins, temptation and fall in *GM* with the Miltonic narratives of Satan. There is something Satanic or demonic about the goblins – “whisk-tailed”, “cat-faced” and “rat-paced” (ll.107-110).⁸³ However, there’s another suggestive signification of the ‘goblin men’ that may be embedded in Rossetti’s text: that of God himself. For if the goblin men claim fecundity – as creativity – for

⁸² Maxwell, pp. 80-81.

⁸³ Krista Lysack reminds us that these images are also constructed through an imperialist and racist lens in which the ‘goblin-men’ may represent the exotic and oriental. She writes, ‘[*GM*] concerns the production of consumer desire at a time when issues of imperialism and race complicated the relationship of women to the marketplace in Victorian Britain.’ Lysack, *Come Buy*, pp. 16-17.

themselves perhaps they are analogues of God the Father who is presented in the Bible as the sole source of all creating, the Originator of Life. He is the maker of bodies and the definitive bodily icon of himself is Adam – the First Man. The fecund body of Eve is always secondary.

Crucially, as I argued in the previous section, if we place this analysis of CR's representations of fecundity and barrenness in the context of the Eucharist, we begin to see how subversive (perhaps despite herself) Rossetti's poetics are. For the Anglo-Catholic economy of salvation in the Eucharist is singularly male/masculine. Adam falls and the marred Image of God is restored by the Man-God Jesus Christ. He is the Second Adam, but also God. Yet, Rossetti's ironic language of fecundity and life-giving – 'such delicate fruits would, in our own age, appear to be a tonic for any illness'⁸⁴ – represent a poison at the heart of Christian-patriarchal appropriations of fecundity and new life, not least in the central symbol of new life, the Eucharist. Patriarchal constructions of femininity, female bodies and their redemption from sinfulness – definitively in traditional notions of Eucharist – are quite literally poison for women's flourishing.⁸⁵

This brings me to perhaps the most famous, discussed and perhaps controversial moment in *GM*: the homo-erotic Eucharist in which Laura's sister Lizzie offers herself as redemptrix:

Come and kiss me.

Never mind my bruises,

⁸⁴ Harrison, p. 415.

⁸⁵ For an alternative reading of the status of the goblin fruits from a broadly Christian perspective see: Arseneau, *Incarnation*, p. 87.

Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices
Squeez'd from goblin fruits for you,
Goblin pulp and goblin dew.
Eat me, drink me, love me;
Laura, make much of me;
For your sake I have braved the glen
And had to do with goblin merchant men.

Laura started from her chair,
Flung her arms up in the air,
Clutch'd her hair:
"Lizzie, Lizzie, have you tasted
For my sake the fruit forbidden?
Must your light like mine be hidden,
Your young life like mine be wasted,
Undone in mine undoing,
And ruin'd in my ruin,
Thirsty, canker'd, goblin-ridden?" —
She clung about her sister,
Kiss'd and kiss'd and kiss'd her:
Tears once again
Refresh'd her shrunken eyes,
Dropping like rain
After long sultry drouth;
Shaking with aguish fear, and pain,
She kiss'd and kiss'd her with a hungry mouth. (ll. 466-92)

The 'overtly erotic'⁸⁶ form Lizzie's sacrifice takes has been read in a plethora of ways. Some claim the scene is an exemplar of Rossetti's repressed sexuality.⁸⁷ Diane D'Amico suggests that the scene should be read symbolically as an emblem of a spiritual rather than physical encounter:

When viewed within the context of [Anglo-Catholic] beliefs, the Eucharistic scene between Lizzie and Laura, though certainly a scene of love, does not appear as an affirmation of female sensuality or sexuality but rather as an affirmation of the power of the spiritual over the sensual.⁸⁸

However, an overly spiritualised reading of Lizzie and Laura's love-feast runs the risk of being faithless both to the text's material fecundity and, essentially, to the representation of Eucharist that operates within the patriarchal Anglo-Catholic economy. Lizzie's redemption of Laura from the effects of patriarchal representations of fecundity is profoundly physical: woman's flesh redeems another female body which had fallen into illness and near-death as a result of its encounter with masculine representations of femininity. The encounter between Lizzie and Laura is bodily and erotic: 'Come and kiss me. | Never mind my bruises, | Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices' (ll. 466-68). Lizzie's body, like Laura's, has been the object of the goblin men/God's masculinist violence, but she's resisted the performance patriarchal Christianity constructs for her. She refuses, unlike Eve, to be

⁸⁶ Hill, p. 464.

⁸⁷ For a relatively recent restatement of this second-wave feminist reading see: Kathleen Jones, *Learning Not to Be First: The Life of Christina Rossetti* (Witney: Windrush Press, 1992).

⁸⁸ D'Amico, *Christina Rossetti*, p. 78.

ruled over by masculine power.⁸⁹ Unlike Laura she resists the hunger for the goblin-men's offerings and refuses their construction of desire. She will not desire men. She will not desire impregnation. Indeed – in a move which, arguably, echoes Rossetti's own renunciation of marriage and the performance of fecundity (motherhood, pregnancy, etc.) that goes with it – Lizzie's renunciation of patriarchal constructions of desire makes space available for her own subjectivity. She focuses her attention on redeeming her sister.

In order to steal the fruits of men, Lizzie places her body in the line of violence and transgression and, though bruised, is not destroyed.⁹⁰ She offers herself completely to Laura in order to sate Laura's profound material hunger for the 'goblin juices'. The refreshment Lizzie offers to Laura is not to some idealised soul, but to 'shrunken eyes'. Even if we agree with Mary Arseneau's conclusion that 'spiritual concerns pervade the poem in the sisters' attempts to interpret symbolically things and events in a moral way,'⁹¹ there is – as she acknowledges – an undeniable embodied significance: 'the juices smeared on Lizzie's face become less important than

⁸⁹ The second part of Eve's punishment for sin is, 'thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee' (Genesis 3. 16b).

⁹⁰ There is a striking parallel between Lizzie's self-offering of her body and the passage in the Book of Isaiah known as 'The Suffering Servant' that has been taken by Christian tradition as foreshadowing Jesus Christ: 'He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.' Isaiah 53. 3-5.

⁹¹ Arseneau, *Incarnation*, p. 91.

Lizzie's Eucharistic offering of herself: 'Eat me, drink me, love me;/Laura, make much of me' (ll. 471-72).⁹²

It is Lizzie's offering of her body that redeems Laura's 'pregnant' body to health. She liberates Laura from patriarchal poison. This is an extraordinary subversion of traditional Christology and Eucharistic Theology. As Burlinson argues, 'here we have a *female* Christ experiencing a physical passion.'⁹³ She goes on to say:

The overarching narrative of temptation, sacrifice, and redemption differs from conventional Christian allegory, because in *Goblin Market* women are both sinners *and* redeemers, sinned against and redeemed. Female sexuality does not bring about the downfall of the world and Lizzie is not just 'good', she is astoundingly strong.⁹⁴

Terence Holt suggests that in *GM*, the sisters are caught in a system in which 'the goblins appear as the more powerful users of language, able to determine the terms of a bargain or of a discourse of gender.'⁹⁵ Lizzie's subversive action claims – indeed, steals back – the creativity of fecundity. In essence, it is the signal that a woman – like a female Prometheus – may steal language, creativity and poetic fecundity from the God/gods who made the original theft. CR's reversals and subversions in *GM* indicate that women may claim the position traditionally claimed by and reserved for men – that of poet – but do so on her own terms and outside of an economy

⁹² Ibid, p. 90.

⁹³ Burlinson, p. 45.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Holt, p. 143.

that requires subjugation to masculine constructions of femininity. The recovery of a fecundity that is simultaneously bodily – signalled not least by Laura’s recovery (the disappearance of grey from her hair in l. 540) – and representative of women’s capacity to construct meaning by remaking male-constructed discourses.

Terence Holt’s classic essay on Exchange in *GM* asks a key question regarding the possibility of feminist poetics: ‘Can women actually profit in a market so dominated by goblins?’ Or, to put it in literary terms, ‘can women find poetic voices in a world where the structures of representation are male?’⁹⁶ This represents a challenge to the emergent argument of this chapter. I’ve sought to suggest that women can ‘steal’ the status of poet through their fecund disruptive excess. Holt’s position suggests rather that ‘the enduring value of *GM* [...] is that it does not offer a simple resolution to an insoluble dilemma.’⁹⁷ His claim that Rossetti’s decision to couch her articulation of female poetics in fairy tale terms is indicative of a fear ‘that women may not achieve such power so readily in the real world’ is certainly chastening.⁹⁸

Catherine Maxwell invites us to consider a different reading of the ways *GM* constructs a female/feminist poetics – a position closer to the claims I’ve made thus far. Noting Rossetti’s familiarity with the tropes and terms of English (male) poetry, most especially Milton, she argues that:

Her goblin men and goblin fruits are her way of indicating a tradition of

⁹⁶ Ibid, p. 141.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid, p. 142.

male-authored poems that use fruit, fruit-juice, and honey-dew as motifs for imaginative inspiration and poetic influence, and her poem shows women poets can claim their place in this tradition by appropriating this “sciential sap” for themselves through theft.⁹⁹

Placed in a context where women are negotiating a dangerous, if unavoidable relation to the male literary tradition this reading has purchase. Gilbert and Gubar’s analysis reminds us of the extent to which the ‘goblin fruits’ are part of a male creative economy: ‘that the goblins’ fruits and flowers are unnatural and out-of-season [...] associates them further with works of art – the fruits of the mind – as well as with sinful sexuality.’¹⁰⁰ Maxwell adds, ‘the goblin fruits are also the fruits of experience, but Rossetti shows women learning to control that experience in order to maintain their own fruitfulness.’¹⁰¹

However, if ‘fruitfulness’ or fecundity in *GM* acts as a metonym for poetic as well as reproductive creativity, this isn’t merely the work of control, but something wrought in women’s bodies offered in solidarity and without reserve to each other. It is striking how the fields through which Lizzie redeems Laura are the haptic and oral. It indicates, I suggest, the extent to which Rossetti’s feminist poetics of fecundity participate in Irigaray’s ‘disruptive excess’. For, as Irigaray indicates, a discourse on feminine terms may be discovered beyond the scopic constructions of patriarchy:

⁹⁹ Maxwell, p. 83.

¹⁰⁰ Gilbert and Gubar, p. 569.

¹⁰¹ Maxwell, p. 84.

Rather [than] repeating/interpreting the way in which, within discourse, the feminine finds itself defined as lack, deficiency, or as imitation and negative image of the subject, they should signify that with respect to this logic a *disruptive excess* is possible on the feminine side.¹⁰²

As I've shown throughout this thesis, patriarchal discourses privilege sight and the capacity to designate the feminine or 'woman' as defined by 'lack', crucially the lack of the phallus (a lack determined, of course, by a simple act of 'seeing').¹⁰³ Irigaray invites a 'écriture féminine' to refuse the privilege of sight and return to the source, which includes 'things tactile'¹⁰⁴ and, arguably, the oral.

Lizzie and Laura's physical encounter enacts and claims the works of creation and fecundity through touch and tongue. Clearly, as some have argued, this has appropriate lesbian connotations, but it also models one version of disruptive excess. Lizzie and Laura demonstrate a poetics liberated from the productive excess constructed by goblins/masculinity. They don't discover their creativity in baby making. For, as the poem seems to imply, baby-making is (under conditions of patriarchy or kyriarchy) poison to the body. The seemingly conservative conclusion of the poem – in which Laura and Lizzie become wives – is not all it seems. For as Catherine Maxwell

¹⁰² Irigaray, *This Sex*, p. 78.

¹⁰³ See Chapter 2 of this thesis for a fuller discussion of Lacan, Freud and the 'mirror phase', especially pp. 104-06. Sight is fundamental to Freud's outworking of the patriarchal or phallogocentric model of (gender) identity/subjectivity: it essentially resolves into the presence or absence of a phallus, something established by sight. For a discussion of the implications of this notion, in conversation with Lacan and feminism/s, see Jacqueline Rose, *Sexuality in the Field of Vision* (London & New York: Verso, 1991 (1986)), esp. Chapter 2.

¹⁰⁴ See, Irigaray, *This Sex*, pp. 79-81 for further discussion.

argues, 'no husbands or men are visible, and the children, who appear to be girls, seem like clones of their mothers.'¹⁰⁵ This is a world in which men have quite literally disappeared. The visual economy that places them at the centre has been thoroughly disrupted. 'The poem ends with a celebration of female community and a new female tradition.'¹⁰⁶

Yet, this poetics of fecundity – of female creation and creativity – is not simply feminist, but grounded in a profound yet authentic disruption of the tropes and representations of Christianity. Louise Janzen Kooistra reminds us:

Feminine subjectivity entails a divided consciousness: a woman is simultaneously aware of her self as an independent ego and her self as object. A woman's awareness of her self as "Other" is constructed both through the gaze of the male subject who has the power to perceive and manipulate objects, and through reciprocal, co-opted consent of the woman who "must pretend to be an object."¹⁰⁷

Traditional Christianity constructs femininity and the female body as Other. The female body is not Adam. It is not Christ. It is Eve or at best the Blessed Virgin Mary who is redeemed through her faithful fecundity, placed at the service of a male god who wishes to sire a male man-god. The female body is ordered according to a scopic discourse that judges her as weak, foolish and precariously prone to fallenness. She is seen and judged as secondary.

¹⁰⁵ Maxwell, p. 85.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Lorraine Janzen Kooistra, "Visualising the Fantastic Subject': Goblin Market and the Gaze", in *The Culture of Christina Rossetti*, ed. by Arseneau, Harrison, and Janzen Kooistra, pp. 137-69 (p. 139).

In Genesis, God makes Eve from Adam and Adam beholds her and names her: 'This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.'¹⁰⁸ She is seen and regarded as secondary.

Lizzie – the female Christ – disrupts and reworks this discourse in feminist directions. Kooistra suggests, 'Rossetti invites her readers to contemplate the ways in which her hero, Lizzie, has the power to be both spectator and spectacle without forfeiting her individual subjectivity.'¹⁰⁹ Lizzie travels to a place of violence – the visual economy of the goblin-men – and sees men looking at her without her subjectivity being destroyed. She resists their gaze. Not only is the very materiality and spiritual effects of the Eucharist reworked along feminist lines, but the redeeming God is transformed. The male God – as ultimate maker of meaning and possibility – is dethroned in the female solidarity of mutual, embodied existence. The Body and Blood of Christ is not to be found in bread and wine, but in woman's ability to make herself milk for her sisters.

¹⁰⁸ Genesis 2. 23.

¹⁰⁹ Kooistra, p. 141.

CHAPTER SIX

The Sainted Body of Christina Rossetti – Hunger, Fasting and the Holy-Fecund in *Goblin Market*, ‘In an Artist’s Studio’ and the ‘St Peter Poems’

In the last chapter I argued that *GM*’s language of fecundity and barrenness generates strategies for the nineteenth-century middle-class woman poet to claim, indeed steal, the status of poet rather than poetess. Rossetti’s dazzlingly excessive linguistic strategies – fecund, lyrical, yet always disciplined – subvert the limiting kyriarchal designations of femininity as bodily fecundity and, by re-reading the creative power of women’s bodies, make a potent contribution to a Christian-feminist poetics. I analysed *GM* as a critical and subversive re-reading of fallen women, the Christian Eucharist and of Lizzie and Laura as co-redemptrix. In this final chapter, I revisit *GM* and a selection of Rossetti’s other poems through a different, if related prism: the concept of the sainted female body. I shall interrogate constructions of Christian sanctification through a variety of concepts: crucially the female fecund body read through the scope of a Male ‘torturing’ and ‘mortifying’ Gaze and, also, the female-coded internalised hunger for a holiness structured through fasting, emptiness and a desire to be ‘filled up’. Drawing on examples from Christian hagiographic tradition in conversation with Rossetti’s writing, I shall attempt to show how Rossetti’s language of fecundity and barrenness deploys notions of

'holy' hunger and feasting in creative ways. In short, I shall suggest that the sanctification of the feminine-coded body isn't performed through traditional methods (nurturing family, making babies) but in poetic excess and fecund making.

"I hear the fruit-call but I dare not look" – The Sainted Female Body in Christian Tradition and Faith

In her essay on femininity and sainthood, Elizabeth Castelli argues that 'from the earliest Christian texts and practices, the human body functioned as both a site of religious activities and a source of religious meanings.'¹ Indeed, as the canon of Christian texts emerged in the first centuries of Christianity it became clear that the body was the locus of significant theorizing and discourse about the meaning of key theological terms like salvation, hope and redemption. A central, orthodox tenet of Christianity is that redemption of the world is wrought through the bodily death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In one sense, early Christianity privileges the body – or at least one male body, Jesus Christ's – as capable of representing all bodies and, through its death and resurrection redeeming the world. Yet, the body remained a disputed site in early Christianity. As Michael Allen Williams has shown, early Christianity faced a number of

¹ Elizabeth Castelli, "'I Will Make Mary Male': Pieties of the Body and Gender Transformation of Christian Women in Late Antiquity', in *Body Guards: The Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity*, ed. by Julia Epstein and Kristina Straub (London & New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 29-49 (p. 29).

‘gnostic’ pressures that treated the body as a ‘prison’ inhibiting holiness and in need of renunciation.² Indeed, as canonical biblical texts including St Paul’s letters suggest, there is evidence that the Bible is at least equivocal about the status of the body.³ Fran Porter has traced how, despite women’s participation in the early life of the Church, as it moved from small sect to official Roman religion, emergent theological understandings about the body excluded women’s bodies from representing Christ. As she notes:

Ecclesiastical authorities issued prohibitions on women’s ministry, banning women from the sanctuary, from the baptistery and attending baptisms, and from singing in church. The Synods of Orange in 441, Epaon in 517 and Orléans in 533 all prohibit the ordination of women as deacons.⁴

These strategies of exclusion achieved their apogee in the Middle Ages when Roman Catholic doctrine explicitly claimed that women could not be priests; in short, they couldn’t represent the definitive human body, Christ, at the altar.⁵

In my last chapter, I began to explore how the materiality and spiritual effects of the Eucharist – represented by the definitive human body of Christ – begin to be reworked by CR’s poetics in *GM*. This chapter investigates how CR arguably pushes this work of remaking further by reconstructing the possibilities of sanctification for women’s fecund bodies;

² Michael Allen Williams, *Rethinking 'Gnosticism'* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996). See, esp. Chapter 6.

³ For a discussion of St Paul’s claims about the status of ‘the flesh’, see: Rachel Mann, *Dazzling Darkness: Gender, Sexuality, Illness & God* (Glasgow: Wild Goose, 2012), pp. 90-93.

⁴ Porter, p. 51.

⁵ Ibid. See, especially, Chapter 5.

indeed, it interrogates how the making of poetry may be read, in CR's poetry, as a holy work generated in and through the fecund body. However, if this claim about CR's poetics is to be plausible, it is helpful to contextualise it in terms of some of the representations of female sanctification available in the Christian tradition. As will become clear, these representations underline how problematic the fecund body is in hagiographic discourse. This discourse is structured through violence directed against fecund bodies: sanctification of women's bodies is predicated on eliding markers of fecundity, as well as objectification via the Male Gaze, or forcing female candidates to internalise male-constructed ideas about control of appetite and desire.

As a noted devotee of Anglo-Catholic ritual and theology,⁶ as well as someone interested in Keble's poetics of Reserve, notions of sanctification would have been significant for CR.⁷ As Scheinberg reminds us, 'in lectures that combined both literary theory and theology, Keble argues that Christian belief has a "handmaid" in poetry: an essential theological tool to help bring Anglicans closer to God and the church.'⁸ CR's devotion not only to Eucharist and Church, but also to Poetry, indicates her serious commitment to growth in holiness; Keble's poetics makes available space for her poetry itself to be a means of sanctification – of growing closer to God.

⁶ I interrogate this claim more fully on pp. 316-18.

⁷ By 'sanctification' is usually meant the process of becoming holy or growing into the likeness of Christ.

⁸ Cynthia Scheinberg, 'Victorian Poetry and Religious Diversity', in *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Poetry*, ed. by Bristow, pp. 159-79 (p. 164).

However, Christian discourse has supplied several strategies for women's bodies to achieve sanctification. These strategies have typically been worked through the body. Yet, the way in which these strategies have been worked out is revealing about the kyriarchal nature of their meanings. One of the most intriguing of the gendered meanings of the body concerns the way that, in order to be true candidates for holiness, women were often made or transformed into men. Castelli says:

The notion that maleness is linked to salvation (and the underside of that notion, that femaleness has a special relationship to sin) is not an innovation on the part of the tradition; what is new is the idea that women can gain access to holiness and salvation by "becoming male".⁹

If early texts like St Paul's *Letter to the Galatians*¹⁰ mark the erasure/surpassing of social markers of meaning, 'later thinkers inscribed some implicit notion of gender distinction even as they embraced the possibility for all humans, male and female, to "become male".'¹¹ Indeed, in the non-canonical Gospel of Thomas, Christ says, 'for every woman who makes herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven.'

If Castelli's analysis is correct, holiness is – for women – a doubled category. For, 'at once [women] are to have access to holiness, while they also can do so only through the manipulation of conventional gender categories.'¹² Crucially:

⁹ Castelli, p. 30.

¹⁰ Notably Galatians 3. 28: 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.'

¹¹ Castelli, p. 30.

¹² Ibid, p. 33.

In the Christian tradition [...] the female can and should strive to become male – to overcome gender distinction, since the male embodies the generic “human” and therefore the potential for human existence to transcend differences and return to the same.¹³

Castelli and Valerie Hotchkiss supply many examples of the way this ordering is worked out in Christianity, and commonly a female body’s spiritual progress is marked by the physical movement from a female to a male body; these processes of transformation signify her increasingly holy status. Fecundity is abandoned as disposable, indeed as a hindrance to true holiness. Indeed, arguably, fecundity and femininity are treated in Christian sanctification of this period according to what Kristeva calls, ‘abjection’.¹⁴ As Robert Mills summarises:

Kristeva has defined the abject not simply as that which is filthy or amoral, or lacking in cleanliness or health, but that which ‘disturbs identity, system,

¹³ Ibid. Castelli cites a number of female-to-male ‘trans’ saints including Thecla and Syncletica. ‘Thecla would remain a model for generations of women who dedicated their lives to virginity [...] she first cuts her hair as a sign of her renunciation of the world and later puts on men’s clothing in order to travel the world as a teacher.’ Ibid, p. 44. A key story concerns the martyrs Perpetua and Felicitas. Castelli claims, ‘most striking is the highly elaborated weaving together of Perpetua’s female body with its social functionings, and how her series of visions lead her ultimately to cast off the female body. As Perpetua moves closer to the arena, she strips off the cultural attributions of the female body – first figuratively in leaving behind her child and in the drying up of her breast milk, and then finally and ‘literally’ in her last vision, in the transformation of her body into that of a man; here she stripped off all the physical marks of femaleness (‘I became a man’) and the social roles and ties it has enacted in her life.’ Ibid, pp. 34-35. Valerie Hotchkiss argues, ‘many female saints manifested or attained their holiness through cross dressing [...] Dressed as men, holy women lived as hermits or monks, undetected in most cases until death [...] with few exceptions the transvestite saint, by inverting signs of gender, illustrates problematic views of the inferiority of women as well as anxiety about female sexuality.’ See Valerie R. Hotchkiss, *Clothes Make the Man: Female Cross Dressing in Medieval Europe* (New York & London: Garland, 1996), p. 13.

¹⁴ See: Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, pp. 2-31.

order', a 'jettisoned object that continues to manifest danger from its place of banishment.'¹⁵

Femininity and fecundity represents, in this picture, a threat to God's economy of sanctification and must be jettisoned. Fecundity represents, in terms of sanctification, the scene of what Mills calls, 'an unliveable, uninhabitable zone that produces the defining limit, the 'constitutive outside,' of a particular identity, institution or abstraction.'¹⁶

At first sight, Christian hagiographic elision of fecundity's embodied 'realities' may seem tangential to an analysis of CR's poetics. However, as will emerge in my analysis of CR's 'In an Artist's Studio,' there are grounds for claiming that the religious economy of sanctified femininity (which strips it of its embodied particularity) finds an analogy in the scopic violence of the artist represented in 'Artist's Studio'; CR's artist arguably elides the fecund richness of his model as the Religious Gaze does so with female saints. As I shall shortly explore 'Artist's Studio' arguably engages in a violent elision of the artist's model analogous to its operation in Christian tradition. The achievement of the model's visual perfection for the artist is akin to the Christian accession of women to the holy body of the Saints in and through a spectacle of violent transgression that erases their femininity.

Before analysing CR's 'Artist Studio', 'St. Peter Poems' and further aspects of *GM*, however, it is helpful to ground this exploration of holiness, the female body and fecundity in one further notion that both arises in

¹⁵ Robert Mills, *Suspended Animation: Pain, Pleasure & Punishment in Medieval Culture* (London: Reaktion Books, 2005), pp. 68-69.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 103.

patriarchal religious discourse and is arguably significant for CR's poetics: 'appetite'. As Elizabeth Ludlow implies, these factors are significant not least in *GM*, for in that poem, 'Rossetti extends her vision of what self-possession and holiness means.'¹⁷ The concept of appetite runs through another significant discourse regarding the sainted female body available in Christian tradition. This concerns fasting, hunger and the desire to be 'filled up' by holiness. In this discourse, 'fill me up' becomes the subconscious, eroticised cry of the female sainted body to the Divine, in which the Eucharistically-ordered God – as the desired lover, the patriarchal master (and sometimes the queered liberator) – becomes a surrogate for ordinary food or vaginal sex.¹⁸

As Joan Jacobs Brumberg argues, 'in the medieval period fasting was fundamental to the model of female holiness.'¹⁹ Indeed, 'in Medieval Europe, particularly in the years between 1200 and 1500, many women refused their food and prolonged fasting was considered a female

¹⁷ Ludlow, p. 91.

¹⁸ Mother Julian of Norwich, the medieval celibate mystic, captures something of this in her famous image of the hazelnut: 'And with this insight he also showed me a little thing, the size of a hazelnut, lying in the palm of my hand. It seemed to me as round as a ball. I gazed at it and thought, 'What can this be?' The answer came thus, 'It is everything that is made.' I marvelled how this could be, for it was so small it seemed it might fall suddenly into nothingness. Then I heard the answer, 'It lasts, and ever shall last, because God loves it. All things have their being in this way by the grace of God.' See: Mother Julian of Norwich, *Enfolded in Love* (London: Darton, Longman, & Todd, 1980), p. 3.

¹⁹ Joan Jacobs Brumberg, *Fasting Girls: The History of Anorexia Nervosa* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000), pp. 43-44. See also: Walter Vandereycken and Ron Van Deth, *From Fasting Saints to Anorexic Girls: The History of Self-Starvation* (London: Athlone Press, 1994). For a study of anorexia in Victorian texts, see: Anna Krugovoy Silver, *Victorian Literature and the Anorexic Body* (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

miracle.’²⁰ Outstanding among these fasting saints was Catherine of Siena (1347-1380). She was reputed to eat only a handful of herbs each day and occasionally shoved twigs down her throat to bring up any other food she was forced to eat. Although fasting was a characteristic of medieval spirituality, it was primarily women who were praised for it as a mark of saintliness. Indeed, it led to learned texts of the era labelling this extraordinary phenomenon, ‘Anorexia Mirabilis’ or ‘Inedia Prodigiosa’. These were not necessarily medicalised terms like ‘Anorexia Nervosa’, but tokens of esteem. For this refusal to eat was structured around a legitimated theological narrative: the hunger of the holy woman might only completely be stanchied by the ‘true’ food of the Eucharist. As Brumberg claims, ‘the medieval woman’s capacity for survival without eating meant that she found other forms of food: prayer provided sustenance, as did the Christian Eucharist – the body and blood of Christ – ingested as wafer and wine.’²¹

The importance of food rituals in medieval culture is certainly an important factor why fasting, women’s bodies and holiness were ‘read’ through each other. Pre-Reformation, Christianity was arguably structured as much around shared practices – reception of the Eucharist twice a year, Saints’ Feasts, practices of confession – as in shared belief.²² The

²⁰ Brumberg, p. 43.

²¹ Ibid, p. 44.

²² Brumberg contends that ‘women who were reputed to live without eating – that is, without eating anything except the Eucharist – were particularly numerous in the thirteenth through fifteenth centuries, a time when food practices were central to Christian identity.’ Brumberg also notes how cults of fasting female saints were more persistent in Catholic parts of Europe, while in England the last ‘case’ were

Reformation – with its focus on individual salvation and the Bible – began to shift Christian identity towards orthodoxy rather than orthopraxis.

Brumberg claims, ‘by the eighteenth century, abstinence was a medical problem to be resolved by a set of predictable empirical validation techniques.’²³

However, as has emerged in other parts of this thesis, the representations of women’s bodies and their fecundity are not simply effects of changing social practices. As Silvia Federici argues, ‘women’s bodies have been the main targets, the privileged sites, for the deployment of power-techniques and power-relations.’²⁴ The history of representations of women’s fecund and sainted bodies reiterates that it is a fundamentally disputed site of power-relations. Under conditions of religiously-sanctioned patriarchy, women’s bodies have been regulated through the careful control of fecundity and sexuality. So, early Christian discourses allowed women to be saints primarily through privileging virginity and/or the elision of marks of femininity. Feminine bodily icons – breasts, marks of pregnancy – were

found in the early nineteenth century. Ibid, p. 44. See also: Taylor, *A Secular Age*, esp. Chapters 1 and 2.

²³ Brumberg, p. 57. The case of ‘miraculous’ abstinence shown by Ann Moore, who came to British public attention in 1807, divided opinion. She claimed that her fast was a symbol of her ‘moral reclamation’ despite having had two illegitimate children. She claimed she couldn’t keep ordinary food down and her ‘final food was a few delicate black currants.’ Ibid, p. 58. She was, unlike her medieval forebears, subject to scientific investigation in the form of the Royal College of Physicians. After several years of investigation she was found to be feeding on handkerchiefs moistened with water, vinegar and medicine. In 1814, the local authorities forced her to make a confession of her imposture. As Brumberg concludes, ‘she was decried by everyone as a fraud and cited in medical books as evidence of the scurrilous nature of religious fasting claims. Here was a woman who made a mockery of Christian piety and scientific learning.’ Ibid, p. 61.

²⁴ Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (Brooklyn N.Y.: Autonomedia, 2014 (2004)), p. 15.

subject to 'holy' violence, in order to produce sainted bodies. In the Medieval era, this direct work of violation was, arguably, supplanted by an internalised regulation of appetite. Sainted bodies were produced by the control of appetite, desire and hunger structured around food – the basic sustenance of bodies. Femininity existed to be stripped away or internally regulated as a potentially out-of-control appetite. The appropriate way for a sainted female body to be filled up was by the body of Christ, represented by the bread of the Eucharist.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the iconic pure/holy woman, the Blessed Virgin Mary, becomes the central site through which potentially sainted female bodies were stripped of their danger and fecundity. Caviness argues:

This most gazed-upon woman of the Middle Ages turns out to epitomise the problematic of the female body as an object of the gaze. Not only was St. Mary fetishized [...] as when an abundance of sumptuous clothing masks the site of gynaecological power, but there are instances when our physical rendition was reiterated as in our museums [...] Furthermore, she was as often given a prominent role in a narrative as was immobilized as icon; but even so, ideology was at work to deny her agency.²⁵

Indeed, 'not allowed to be an ordinary woman, she was idealized as a virgin so pure that her mother St Anne also conceived without sexual intercourse.'²⁶ St Mary, the Blessed Virgin, becomes simultaneously the ultimate saint – because she mothers and bears God – yet utterly impossible

²⁵ Caviness, p. 2.

²⁶ Ibid, p. 3.

because her embodiment is stripped of human gynaecological power. She becomes hidden from representation as an actual woman.²⁷

Fundamentally, the treatment of the Blessed Virgin Mary in western patriarchal Christianity encapsulates what Caviness calls 'western ocular economies.'²⁸ These visual regimes structure feminine, fecund bodies as fundamentally unstable. They're visually untrustworthy and liable to shifts in appearance; they're bodies which prioritise appearance over reality and authenticity, and are thereby not to be trusted. The Blessed Virgin is one summary of what ocular economies 'do' to representations of the fecund body: 'It is subject to metamorphosis, de-humanization, truncation, amputation, division, even fragmentation.'²⁹ The transformation of the dangerous fecund body into 'a sainted body' is, as I've shown, ordered so often in Christian discourse around violence against done to it and through it. This has taken the form of violent amputation of breasts, beheading, torture after recent pregnancy as well as through internalised practices of oral discipline in the form of fasting and refusal of nourishment; food becomes symbolic of the disciplining of the impure body that it may be transformed into the holy body. Perhaps iconic of this transmutation is the other great representation of femininity in the western tradition: St Mary Magdalene.

²⁷ Indeed, as Caviness goes on to argue, commenting on Chartres Cathedral (which is dedicated to 'Our Lady'), 'the immense [...] building in her honor literally caused her images to recede from the viewer [...] [for] she is everywhere and nowhere, the lost mother of the search for the holy Jerusalem.' She is overwhelmed by the 'erection' in stone. Ibid, p. 14.

²⁸ Ibid, p. 19.

²⁹ Ibid, p. 15.

Intriguingly, the Magdalene has often been represented in art and icons, especially in the Orthodox tradition, as carrying a red egg. Indeed, in Orthodox tradition, Mary Magdalene is attributed with having started the tradition of giving Easter eggs. One folk story concerns the Biblical story of how it was Mary and a group of women who were first on the scene at Jesus's tomb on Easter Sunday. Mary brought eggs for the women to eat, for they were a traditional food of mourning. However, upon meeting the risen Christ, Mary's eggs immediately turned red, signifying not only death (Jesus's blood), but salvation (as when the enslaved Israelites' smeared their doors in Egypt to save them from the final plague of the Lord).³⁰ Thus, there exists in Orthodox Christianity a tradition of dyeing eggs red at Easter and blessing them as a symbol of Jesus's death and resurrection.

Of course, the egg is a primal symbol of sex, life and fecundity. It's an icon of gynaecological power. The redness of the Magdalene's egg also acts as an obvious representation of blood and, crucially, menstrual blood – the blood which in flowing out of the vagina 'washes away' an egg. It acts then as an analogue of Jesus's blood which 'washes away' a Christian's sins. Yet an egg also operates as a representation of food and sustenance. Indeed, it is arguably a staple. It is a fundamentally versatile food that's both eaten alone and used to make other dishes. Yet, its significance stretches beyond

³⁰ Another folk story concerns Mary travelling to Rome after Christ's Ascension. She was granted entrance to the court of Tiberius Caesar and at dinner, she told Caesar that Jesus had risen from the dead. He did not understand. To explain, Mary Magdalene picked up an egg from the table. Caesar responded by saying that a human being could no more rise from the dead than the egg in her hand turn red. The egg turned red. Thus, there exists in Orthodox Christianity a tradition of dyeing eggs red at Easter and blessing them as a symbol of Jesus's death and resurrection.

that into the theological. In addition to the Easter use, already noted, a roasted hard-boiled egg is one of the symbolic elements of a Jewish *Seder* meal. It symbolises the *korban chagigah* (festival sacrifice) that was offered in the Temple in Jerusalem and roasted and eaten as part of the meal on *Seder* night. The *chagigah* is commemorated by an egg, a symbol of mourning (as eggs are the first thing served to mourners after a funeral), evoking the idea of mourning over the Temple's destruction and the inability of God's chosen people to offer any kind of sacrifices in honour of Pesach.³¹ An egg, then, symbolically occupies multiple spaces: religious, gendered and sexual. However, it is essentially coded female and fecund. It is – like the womb itself – a symbol of new life and death. As I have asserted elsewhere, womb is an analogue of tomb. This also applies to the meaning of egg.

Angelica Michelis has drawn attention to the way food signification coalesces around both the ordinary and transcendent, the profane and the sacred. As she argues, 'food and eating combines the mundane with the sublime.'³² Indeed, she continues,

We have to eat in order to survive, to maintain the physical integrity of our bodies; but on the other hand food is also a major source of pleasure, a

³¹ While it is the case that since the destruction of the Temple, an egg serves as a visual reminder of the *chagigah*, some people eat a regular hard-boiled egg dipped in saltwater as the first course of the *Seder* meal.

³² Angelica Michelis, 'Eat My Words: Poetry as Transgression', in *Theory into Poetry: New Approaches to the Lyric*, ed. by Eva Müller-Zettelmann & Margarete Rubik (Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2005), pp. 81-95 (p. 81).

way to socialize with our lovers, friends and families and sometimes it is already sexualized foreplay to more exciting things to come.³³

It is, hopefully, not difficult to appreciate the potent intersections between representations of bodily fecundity, holiness and sanctification, and food (or its absence). Food has an obvious orality. As Michelis argues, 'food is [...] – at least under 'normal' circumstances – internalized and incorporated when it vanishes into our bodies'³⁴ and we do so through our mouths. What is striking in my discussion of sainthood is the extent to which sanctification for female bodies has been ordered around a disciplining and control of the oral. In some respects, it is hardly surprising that sacral identity might be ordered around and through the body – the body being central to human identity³⁵ – but the use of orality in organizing feminine sainthood is striking. It indicates the way that the feminine body is coded as dangerous and excessive and thus in need of control. As my discussion of early Christian saints indicates, for patriarchal Christianity the feminine body was so excessive and dangerous to sainthood that it not only must be made proper for sanctification – by having its femininity removed – but also be seen to be made proper. That is, made male under and through the Male Gaze.

Michelis clarifies that if food is liminal, coalescing in meaning around representations of the bodily and the symbolic, etc., then so is poetry. As she summarises: 'words like food are processed and what becomes of them

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid, p. 82.

³⁵ See Michelis for a powerful psychoanalytic take on this claim. Her reference to Gilles Deleuze's claim, 'We do not know what a body can do!' is a forceful one.

is not determined by what they intrinsically are, but by the interpretative meaning they gain during their “procession” through our bodies.’³⁶ In short, food, poetry and, I would add, their intersections with representations of sanctification are ‘in the business of articulating subjectivities.’³⁷ For, as Michelis concludes, ‘poetry as well as food and eating can be envisaged as ways in which we perform and create reality and bodies that fit into it.’³⁸

In the remaining part of this chapter I want to bring my analysis of Christian sanctification and the regulation of hunger and appetite and food’s significance into critical conversation with CR’s language of fecundity. I shall examine how CR’s language performs poetic excess in ways that reconstruct the possibilities of the Christian female poet. I’ll attempt to show how Rossetti’s language of fecundity and barrenness deploys notions of holy hunger and feasting in creative ways. In short, suggesting that the sanctification of the feminine-coded body is not performed through the traditional Christian methods (self-denial, self-sacrifice, motherhood) but in poetic excess, fecundity and making. Central to this analysis will be a discussion of *GM*, however, I begin this section by framing her sanctifying linguistic strategies as a work in opposition to the scopic ‘violence’ of masculine-divine visual cultures outlined earlier.

³⁶ Ibid, p. 82.

³⁷ Ibid, p. 83.

³⁸ Ibid, p. 82.

'A nameless girl in freshest summer greens, | A saint, an angel' – The Fate of the Fecund Body in the Studio of God

That mirror gave back all her loveliness.

A queen in opal or in ruby dress,

A nameless girl in freshest summer greens,

A saint, an angel. ('Artist's Studio', 4-7)

Christina Rossetti's early sonnet, 'In an Artist's Studio' (1856) represents a key and critical summary of the effects of scopic violence on the fecund body, effects which arguably include producing a sainted body suitable for the patriarchal gaze. Terry L. Spaise reminds us that in this poem, 'the idea of "woman as object" is clearly evident, as is Rossetti's acute analysis of Dante Gabriel's relationship to his art, models and women in general.'³⁹ The poem interrogates the meaning of a male artist's canvasses, oeuvre and representations of women, as well as what it means to be a woman represented in and through his gaze. Given both that CR was one of her brother's early models⁴⁰ and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood's tendency to genericise feminine beauty, it is not unreasonable to claim that *Artist's Studio* is a direct comment on her brother's work. Indeed, as Spaise concludes, 'the opening line, "One face looks out from all his canvasses," is

³⁹ Terry L. Spaise, 'Not "As She Fulfils His Dreams" but "As She Is": The Feminist Voice of Christina Rossetti', *Rocky Mountain Review of Language & Literature*, 51.1 (1997), 53-68 (p. 59).

⁴⁰ She was the model for the Virgin Mary in Dante Gabriel's first completed oil, *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin*.

quite literally the truth since Dante Gabriel tended to idealise and mould the features of all his models into one generic figure.⁴¹ Dolores Rosenblum argues that the poem acts as a comment on the pathos of model and Pre-Raphaelite beauty manqué Lizzie Siddal's life:

One woman is the model, or, in this case, the pictured woman, and another is the watcher. The relation between them, however, can be taken to stand for the relation between aspects of a single self. Looking at the portraits, the speaker is struck by their reductive sameness.⁴²

Rosenblum adds, 'the woman vampirized by art, in life more dead than alive, in art endowed with ghostly life, suggests the kind of depersonalization that woman-as-model experiences. The watcher commemorates her symbolic death.'⁴³ The model's body, on this picture, quite simply represents food to satisfy a hungry, eroticised male gaze, underlining the link between the visual and the oral.

Whatever, the historical context of CR's poem, it is clear she interrogates the effects of masculine scopic culture on the fecund body. Indeed, though, as Constance Hassett claims, the poem was 'prompted by the romance between Gabriel and Elizabeth Siddal [it] goes beyond this fact to entertain a serious worry about a time-honored aesthetic circumstance': the artist's obsession with visual fecund beauty.⁴⁴ Esther Hu draws attention to the way the model's face feeds the artist's 'scopophilia'. CR writes:

⁴¹ Spaise, p. 59.

⁴² Dolores Rosenblum, 'Christina Rossetti's Religious Poetry: Watching, Looking, Keeping Vigil', *Victorian Poetry*, 20.1 (1982), 33-49 (p. 39).

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Hassett, p. 155.

He feeds upon her face by day and night,
 And she with true kind eyes looks back on him
 Fair as the moon and joyful as the light:
 Not wan with waiting, not with sorrow dim;
 Not as she is, but was when hope shone bright;
 Not as she is, but as she fills his dream. (9-14)

Hu argues:

The off-rhyme, "dream," aurally foregrounds the consequence of an objectifying male gaze: the model's face, as an image, reduces "queen," "girl," "saint," "angel" (ll. 5-7) to the "one face," the "one selfsame figure" (ll. 1-2). "Dream" provides the only consolation for the implied dimming of hope, and does so simply by arresting an earlier time "when hope shone bright".⁴⁵

Other critics have also been alert to the scopic violence at work in 'Artist's Studio'. Suzy Waldman, who brings a Lacanian approach to bear, argues that CR comments on and critiques the corrupting power of the hierarchical structure of the symbolic order which degrades 'the lovers' gaze between men and women'. She claims that, 'while the male figure based on D. G. Rossetti looks upon his models consumptively, "feed[ing] upon her face (1. 9), the female based on Elizabeth Siddal looks back only demurely, or looks down and listens.'⁴⁶ Spaise draws an uncompromising conclusion:

What Rossetti is presenting to us is a one-dimensional view of woman –

⁴⁵ Esther T. Hu, 'Christina Rossetti, John Keble, and the Divine Gaze', *Victorian Poetry*, 46.2 (2008), 175-89 (p. 183).

⁴⁶ Suzy Waldman, "'O Wanton Eyes Run Over": Repetition and Fantasy in Christina Rossetti', *Victorian Poetry*, 38.4 (2000), 533-54 (p. 539).

the view Dante Gabriel created over and over again, and which Christina quite rightly saw as a dream vision which could never truly exist or be obtained by any man.⁴⁷

CR locates the patriarchal-scopic discourse as part of one kind of religious discourse: hagiography. In the portrait, the 'nameless girl' is identified as 'saint'. At one level, this may read as a metaphor which gestures to the model's idealised status in the eye of the artist. As Spaise argues, 'this woman has ideal loveliness, both in physical and moral terms. She is a queen, a saint, an angel; beautiful to look at, she is also adoring and pure.'⁴⁸ However, as I outlined in my earlier discussion of the Blessed Virgin Mary in western ocular economies, female sanctity has commonly been structured in and through a male-coded gaze. These visual regimes structure feminine, fecund bodies as fundamentally unstable. In Christian discourse, the transformation of the dangerous fecund body into a sainted body is commonly ordered around violence done to it and through it.

Arguably, then, CR's poetic reference to the artist's representation of the model as a saint, can be read as a work of transmutation and transformation. Dante Gabriel's skill or violence ensures that 'One face looks out from all his canvasses' and 'every canvass means | The same one meaning.' The peculiarities and particularities of the fecund body – its bumps, blemishes, oddities, strengths and fragilities – have been excised, just as the marks of distinctive femininity were removed from female saints

⁴⁷ Spaise, p. 59.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

in antiquity. The body is turned into paint and canvas, the peculiar power of the female body is reduced to a nameless girl, 'in freshest summer greens'; and if that image, of 'fresh summer' and 'greenness' might be suggestive of fecundity and promise, it is a promise that has been painted to go nowhere. The saint in the picture is as fixed by the male gaze as the Blessed Virgin ever was. As Tricia Lootens argues, "'In an Artist's Studio" deals with the creation of heroines, and its implications go straight to the heart of Victorian canonization.'⁴⁹ The artist makes a dream woman for himself. She exists to look only on the artist who made her, not at herself or at the world. She embodies – as queen, as saint, as angel – 'the same one meaning, neither more nor less' (l. 8).

Lootens's work also reminds us that canonization is a process of creation. It is a literary/textual work; sinners are transformed into saints via revision and redaction. The dangerous, fecund female body is 'cleaned up' to be made suitable for sanctification. As Lootens puts it herself, if canonization is:

Always a process of creation, [it] is also inevitably a process of loss.

This has no doubt been especially true in the cases of "sinners" who are already subject to (and subjected by) the status of the other –

⁴⁹ Tricia A. Lootens, *Lost Saints: Silence, Gender, and Victorian Literary Canonization* (Charlottesville VA & London: University Press of Virginia, 1996), p. 71. Arguably one horizon of canonization concerns the very status of CR in Victorian and women's poetry discourse. As Chapman notes, when CR died in 1894, a wave of elegies were generated which transformed 'the poet into a suffering saint whose death is the culmination – apotheosis, even – of her exemplary life.' Chapman, *Afterlife*, p. 2.

including women.⁵⁰

Indeed, as indicated in my earlier discussion, for a woman to pursue sanctity was dangerous. As Lootens summarises:

For female saints, the call to grace has tended to be in some sense a call to rebellion. Divine authority supersedes earthly authority, after all: where the wishes of God the Father or of the spiritual Bridegroom conflict with those of mortals, higher authority must take precedence.⁵¹

Female sanctity, on this picture is disobedient for it entails a stepping away from 'assigned role' into new territory. It is always 'open to question' and accusation. Indeed, thus, 'the lines between female saints and witches have often been difficult to draw, even for saints themselves.'⁵²

'Artist's Studio' is a Petrarchan rather than Shakespearean sonnet, using a classic *abbaabbacdcdd* rhyme scheme.⁵³ The Petrarchan form perhaps only underlines CR's critical strategy in the poem, for – unlike Shakespeare's variant – the Petrarchan form works well as a means of constructing an 'argument'. Classically, the opening octave (*abbaabba*) serves to set up the argument or proposition of the poem, while the closing

⁵⁰ Ibid, p. 9.

⁵¹ Ibid, p. 46.

⁵² Ibid, pp. 48-49. While it falls outside the central focus of this thesis, arguably, one way of translating this 'danger for women who depart their assigned roles' into a literary context is through that key representation of feminine inspiration for many female nineteenth-century writers, Sappho. To pursue a path of creative disobedience, was for women to court Sappho's fate: death. For a profound and detailed analysis of Sappho in nineteenth-century literary culture see: Prins.

⁵³ See: Michael R.G. Spiller, *The Development of the Sonnet* (London & New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 3.

twin tercets or sestet serves to offer a resolution. Within this structure the volta in the ninth line presents ‘a turn’ in the argument.⁵⁴ ‘Artist’s Studio’ presents a quite shocking ‘cannibalistic’ or ‘vampiric’ volta: ‘he feeds upon her face by day and night’. After the seeming stillness and repose of what – at first sight – appears a conventional picture of the beautiful artist’s model in the octave, this volta presents a genuine, disturbing shock. The artist is presented as a gothic monster, not only feeding on her beauty, but seemingly feasting upon her flesh night and day. This shocking turn only underlines the power of the closing sestet as the model – the objectified model beauty – stares back at the artist. She stares and she ‘fills his dream’, which now, via CR’s argument has surely turned into a nightmare. This ‘filling’ is not simply a gesture in the visual field. That is, it is not simply a matter of the artist finding his visual field filled up with ravishing beauty, as a reward for his mastery of his subject matter. Rather, his Male Gaze is stared back at, in resistance; the artist, in feasting on the model’s flesh/face discovers her looking back and ‘filling up’ his imaginary, arguably with nightmares.⁵⁵ Given that the Petrarchan form is associated with the medieval idea of courtly love,⁵⁶ whereby the male poet admires from afar

⁵⁴ As Spiller summarises, the Petrarchan Sonnet has this classic structure: ‘Two quatrains and two tercets, marked always by a change of rhythm and nearly always by a break of syntax and thought at the ‘turn’ (*volta*) between octave and sestet.’ Ibid, p. 51.

⁵⁵ While Serena Trowbridge gives no attention to *Artist’s Studio* in her recent book on Rossetti and Gothic, there is, perhaps, in this volta grounds for bringing the poem into the scope of fear, terror and fallen nature that Trowbridge marks out as gothic. See Trowbridge, pp. 20-22.

⁵⁶ Though as Spiller argues, the sonnet’s tone of ‘courtly [and] learned pleading’ was established over the period of a hundred years before Petrarch. See: Spiller, p. 28 and Chapter 2.

the beautiful woman (and the woman remains silent, a mute object), CR's critical undermining of that Male Gaze via the sonnet's argument is startling.

The flattening of meaning wrought by the male visual artist in 'Artist's Studio' may be read as a strategy to bring the disobedient fecund body to task and under control of the patriarchal gaze. In a Victorian context, the male artist offers an (admittedly sophisticated and skilled) analogue to that established poetic, domestic picture of sanctity captured (indeed ensnared) in Patmore's *The Angel in the House*. And, as Lootens claims, 'clearly, behind and before the Angel in the House stands the Virgin Mary in a number of guises.'⁵⁷ Indeed, Marina Warner argues that in the later Middle Ages the BVM was allowed to be aligned with the wives of merchants and tradesmen. It marked the nascent origins of a later idea that Holy Womanhood was in line with bourgeois wifehood – the Middle Class 'Angel in the House.'⁵⁸ As Lootens argues, drawing on Judith Butler,

If the "virile" female saint is a difficult model, Mary is an impossible one. By definition, she stands "alone of all her sex." Indeed to use a phrase from Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*, celebration of Marian virtue as a model for mortal women explicitly establishes the feminine "gender norm" as "finally phantasmatic, impossible to embody".⁵⁹

Lootens adds:

A nineteenth-century woman could not become an angel any more than an aspirant to sanctity can become a virgin mother, immaculately conceived.

⁵⁷ Lootens, *Lost Saints*, p. 52.

⁵⁸ See Warner, pp. 179-91, for the ways in which the BVM was increasingly adopted as icon for women of the mercantile class.

⁵⁹ See Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 141. Cited in Lootens, *Lost Saints*, p. 56.

Yet if a dominant tradition of advice to Victorian women was correct, a historical woman could become what I call an Acting Angel.⁶⁰

Of course, one strategy towards sanctification was a life of denial and asceticism. I am inclined to push Lootens's claim that the 'strenuous heroism' of medieval female ascetics represents a 'suggestive counterpart' to nineteenth-century glorifications of female strength in suffering further.⁶¹ In my analysis of CR's poetry we begin to see a fecund analogue. Indeed, in the Victorian era, the likes of Sarah Stickney Ellis who produced several popular Conduct Books for women, represent examples of sanctifying 'asceticism' suitable for the Victorian age. Such books invited the virtuous/holy woman to set aside self and assume a new nature: feminine domestic perfection.

If the artist represented in 'Artist's Studio' might be seen as iconic of the transliteration of Victorian virtuous femininity into visual art, Rossetti brings to bear a sharp critique of this male-constructed gaze. As Terry L. Spaise argues, to make the female body a candidate for a masculine-constructed visual perfection, the Male Gaze seeks to strip it of its power and distinctiveness. Indeed, the concluding sestet:

Forces the reader to view Dante Gabriel's actions in a very different and highly destructive light [...] The man "feeds upon her face by day and night," obviously forsaking living women for this illusionary one he has created himself, and the woman, captured in time, looks back with

⁶⁰ Lootens, *Lost Saints*, p. 57.

⁶¹ Ibid, p. 59.

kindness and joy, thereby reinforcing his view of her as an object of desire.⁶²

However, CR pushes her critique of scopic sanctity by inviting the reader to consider the face on the canvas as an embodied woman. This woman is 'wan with waiting' and 'with sorrow dim'. She has been completely objectified and voiceless. She has been made to be looked at and admired, but she's admired only on the artist's terms. Spaise supports this helpfully when she concludes, 'the last word in the sonnet emphasizes the figure's position as an illusion ("Not as she is, but as she fills his dream").'⁶³ Indeed, there are strong grounds, when 'Artist's Studio' is placed in the wider context of Rossetti's canon, to claim:

It is a clear example of her awareness of and dissatisfaction with how her gender was viewed by Victorian men in general, and how women were expected to repress their emotions and [...] personalities if they wished to gain male approval.⁶⁴

Tricia Lootens concludes, 'Artist's Studio' 'stands as a powerful reminder of how transcendent feminine representations may serve both to mask and to mark historical women's metaphoric and actual absence.'⁶⁵ Indeed, I am inclined to conclude, along with her, that the sitter in the poem is far more elusive than the vision of the artist would have us believe.

⁶² Spaise, p. 59.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid. Spaise also offers *In Progress* as an example of a critique of Patmore's *Angel in the House*.

⁶⁵ Lootens, *Lost Saints*, p. 71.

'Open to Me, look on Me eye to eye' – The Divine Gaze and the Fecund

Body in the 'St Peter Poems'

It is clearly possible to read 'Artist's Studio' as a critique of patriarchal-religious representations of the sainted fecund/female body. However, it very much represents CR in secular mode. Given her extensive corpus of religious poetry it is not unreasonable to ask how and if CR handles those representations in religious mode. It is unrealistic – given the sheer size of her body of work – to make any more than glancing (sic) and passing remarks on her religious poetry.⁶⁶ However, before concluding this chapter with my analysis of fecundity and the sainted body in *GM*, it will be helpful to comment on a small sample of later religious poems, specifically CR's 'St Peter Poems' (published in 1893).

At the turn of the millennium Emma Mason argued that 'recent work on Christina Rossetti has increasingly taken into account her theological position within nineteenth-century debates about religion and faith.'⁶⁷ Certainly, CR's connections with the Oxford Movement and the Tractarian poetics of the priest John Keble have been extensively explored and remarked upon.⁶⁸ Diane D'Amico and David Kent remind us that 'beginning

⁶⁶ For a recent essay on CR's religious oeuvre see: Joseph Taft, 'The Forms of Discipline: Christina Rossetti's Religious Verse', *Victorian Poetry*, 51.3 (2013), 311-30.

⁶⁷ Emma Mason, 'Christina Rossetti and the Doctrine of Reserve', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 7.2 (2002), 196-219 (p. 196).

⁶⁸ See, for example, Robert M. Kachur, 'Repositioning the Female Christian Reader: Christina Rossetti as Tractarian Hermeneut in "The Face of the Deep"', *Victorian*

in 1843, she attended Christ Church, Albany Street, the church often described as the leading London church of the Oxford Movement.⁶⁹ Suzy Waldman has noted that 'Raymond Chapman has described Rossetti as a major practitioner of Tractarianism.'⁷⁰ Dolores Rosenblum claims:

In his [...] study of Tractarian poetry, G. B. Tennyson has shown how Rossetti is influenced by Tractarian aesthetics, sharing topics and formal strategies with the poets of the Oxford Movement. [Rossetti's religious poetry was] shaped by an aesthetic which includes the doctrine of "Reserve".⁷¹

Equally, Emma Mason argues:

Not only did reserve rule that the religious content of poetry be held back, it showed that God's scriptural laws were deliberately hidden to all but the faithful. Reserved writing employed metaphor, figure, and allegory in a way only the initiated believer and reader could understand.⁷²

Mary Arseneau has gone so far as to attempt to articulate a Christian Incarnational poetics for CR, grounded in a Tractarian poetics of reserve and symbol.⁷³ Drawing specifically on Keble's poetics⁷⁴ in which Christ's Incarnation acts as the meeting point of this world and the next, Arseneau

Poetry, 35.2 (1997), 193-214; Sharon Smulders, "'A Form That Differences': Vocational Metaphors in the Poetry of Christina Rossetti and Gerald Manley Hopkins", *Victorian Poetry*, 29.2 (1991), 161-73.

⁶⁹ Diane D'Amico and David A. Kent, 'Rossetti and the Tractarians', *Victorian Poetry*, 44.1 (2006), 93-104 (p. 93).

⁷⁰ Waldman, p. 553.

⁷¹ Rosenblum, p. 34.

⁷² Emma Mason, 'Tractarian Poetry: Introduction', *Victorian Poetry*, 44.1 (2006), 1-6 (p. 3).

⁷³ Esp. in Arseneau, *Recovering*, pp. 67-95.

⁷⁴ Found primarily in *The Christian Year*.

argues that CR's poetry under this analysis is never merely analogical – because the poetry is not simply about pointing beyond this life, but is grounded in human community. Christ acts as the incarnational fulcrum about which serious human living – ethical and spiritual – orientates. Just as Tractarian reserve demands that the believer be cautious in their pronouncements on the nature of God and doctrine and the church (as Christ himself was reserved), so a Tractarian poetics influenced by Keble is marked by reserve, allusion and restraint in its role as handmaid of theology.

Equally, much has been made of Rossetti's involvement with the St Mary Magdalene House in Highgate and her sister's profession as one of the first Anglican nuns since the dissolution of the monasteries in the sixteenth century.⁷⁵ Indeed, D'Amico and Kent note that Rossetti 'and her sister, Maria, supported the work of The Society of All Saints.'⁷⁶ Jill Rappoport argues that *GM* should be read through the lens of the economics of the Sisterhoods. She claims, 'Lizzie's dealings with the goblin men parallel the economic structure of other mid-Victorian sisterhoods – Anglican women's communities.'⁷⁷ Indeed, 'according to [Anna] Jameson (advocate for sisterhoods), religious sisterhoods cast off market calculations and considerations; their economy is modelled on religious service rather than

⁷⁵ For an extensive and detailed account of Anglican Sisterhoods in nineteenth-century England, see Susan Mumm, *Stolen Daughters, Virgin Mothers: Anglican Sisterhoods in Victorian Britain* (London & New York: Leicester University Press, 1999).

⁷⁶ D'Amico and Kent, p. 93.

⁷⁷ Jill Rappoport, 'The Price of Redemption in "Goblin Market"', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 50.4 (2010), 853-75 (p. 855).

salary.⁷⁸ Furthermore, as Spaise concludes, there's evidence to suggest that Rossetti's theological sensibilities – prioritizing service, divine love and friendship – criticised marriage. She argues:

Whether Rossetti rejected the marriage state because, as D'Amico suggests, her "faith actually led her to believe the unmarried state closer to God" (219), or because she was aware of the socioeconomic disadvantages of marriage to women of her era and chose not to place herself in such a position is open to speculation.⁷⁹

The 'St Peter Poems' were published in 1893 by the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge (S.P.C.K.) in a compilation of CR's poems from her devotional books. They are part of a series of poems for the liturgical calendar.⁸⁰ As with so much of CR's work the language is saturated with deep engagement with the Bible. Indeed, lines like ' "Launch out into the deep," Christ spake of old | to Peter' (Sonnet 1, l. 1-2a) are essentially direct quotes from the King James's Version.⁸¹ They confirm Frances Thomas's claim that 'the language of the Bible is so dense in [CR's] poems as to go beyond quotation, being intrinsic to the structure of her language.'⁸² The question remains about the extent to which her religious poetry is

⁷⁸ Ibid, p. 859.

⁷⁹ Spaise, p. 55.

⁸⁰ For an interesting study of CR, John Keble and the way that the liturgical year and calendar produce 'heavenly' time as opposed to 'industrial' time, see: Krista Lysack, 'The Production of Time: Keble, Rossetti, and Victorian Devotional Reading', *Victorian Studies*, 55.3 (2013), 451-70. Lysack suggests that by 'dividing Keble's week into the even smaller snippet of the day, Rossetti's reading diary becomes a means for her to organize heavenly time as if it were leisure, an emptiness to be populated and articulated in one's spare moments.' Ibid, p. 455.

⁸¹ Luke 5. 4.

⁸² Thomas, *Christina Rossetti*, p. 283.

‘Tractarian’. Esther Hu makes a strong case for a Tractarian-basis to Rossetti’s religious poems, yet also claims that her devotional poetics are distinctive from those of Keble. Analysing the ‘St Peter Poems’ alongside Keble’s ‘St Peter’s Day’ she claims that:

Whereas Keble emphasizes St. Peter's prerogative and power of apostolic responsibility transmitted from Christ's divine commission, Rossetti emphasizes individual penitence and humility inspired by St. Peter's denial of knowing Christ, and Christ's movement in subsequently turning and looking at him.⁸³

Whatever the status of the ‘St Peter Poems’ relationship with Keble’s poetics, I want to explore how they make a helpful intervention into my analysis of patriarchal-religious representations of the sainted fecund/female body. They offer evidence of CR’s alertness to and critique of a totalising Male Gaze. For, as Elizabeth Ludlow suggests, ‘in the four St Peter poems [...] [Rossetti] continues to explore the virtuosity of the moment when Jesus ‘turned and looked straight at Peter’ (Lk. 22.61).’⁸⁴ As will become clear, the ‘St. Peter Poems’ offer a critique of the gaze represented in ‘Artist’s Studio’. For, if ‘Artist’s Studio’ criticises a Male Gaze that constructs a passive object, the ‘St Peter Poems’ construct a dialectical relationship: the writer (as the object of the ‘Divine Look’) makes her response and creates what Hu calls ‘a moment of sustained encounter.’⁸⁵ As

⁸³ Hu, p. 175.

⁸⁴ Ludlow, p. 228.

⁸⁵ Hu, p. 175.

Karen Dieleman summarises, 'these poems all involve the gesture of turning and looking, which then becomes a sustained encounter, a gaze.'⁸⁶

Consider, for example, these lines from 'Vigil of St. Peter':

Thou Who dost search me thro' and 'thro'

And mark the crooked ways I went,

Look on me, Lord, and make me

Thy penitent. (ll. 4-8)

Karen Dieleman notes how 'the speaker implores Jesus to look on her and make her his penitent as he did with Peter, who denied knowing him but then broke down and wept when Jesus looked at him'.⁸⁷ This picture of the penitent/Christ relationship is shot through with compassion and mutuality and desire. The imploring words are an invitation. In Hu's terms, the speaker welcomes 'a state of repentance which leaves her vulnerable and exposed, but also divinely protected.'⁸⁸ In short, as Dieleman, concludes, 'the distance between speaker and Jesus is overcome by the relationship that follows from the divine look',⁸⁹ or as Hu argues, 'in Rossetti's religious poetics, comfort and hope originate from both gazing upon the Divine and the Divine gaze.'⁹⁰

This mutuality is carried through into Rossetti's second 'St Peter' sonnet. Echoing Peter's denial, CR requests the Divine to look her 'eye to eye':

⁸⁶ Dieleman, p. 143.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Hu, p. 178.

⁸⁹ Dieleman, p. 144.

⁹⁰ Hu, p. 175.

Lord, I have heard the crowing of the cock
 And have not wept: ah, Lord, Thou knowest it.
 Yet still I hear Thee knocking, still I hear:
 "Open to Me, look on Me eye to eye,
 That I may wring thy heart and make it whole;
 And teach thee love because I hold thee dear,
 And sup with thee in gladness soul with soul,
 And sup with thee in glory by and by." (ll. 7-14)

Hu is surely correct when she claims this poem demonstrates 'sensuous immediacy'⁹¹ in the sound of a cock crowing and a Divine hand knocking. God is imagined knocking persistently at the door of the poet's heart, something underlined by repetition of knocking in lines 2 – 'Lord, dost Thou stand and knock' – and 9. There is a suggestion in this of a recasting of Donne's 'Batter my heart, three-personed God', yet as Hu reminds us, if Donne's sonnet is violent in its imagery, 'Rossetti's sequence of verbs evokes calm courtesy.'⁹² This then is a picture of poet and Christ in relationship, engaged in mutual love. Both the poet (as one who prays) and Christ (as the God who hears) is permitted to speak and perform subjectivity.

Hu and Dieleman correctly indicate that the tenor of these samples of CR's religious poetry is different to that found in a poem like 'Artist's Studio'. If the latter constructs an objectifying and totalizing Male Gaze which represents the fecund body as sainted when it submits to masculine

⁹¹ Ibid, p. 181.

⁹² Ibid.

scopic constructions, the 'St Peter Poems' seem to represent something else. The Divine Gaze is responded to with a demand for mutuality of regard. The fecund body – represented by the female voice – asks for mutual love rather than objectification. It gestures towards the voice represented in some of the writings of women saints themselves (rather than the writings of those who wrote about women). In the writings of medieval mystical saints like St Julian and Mechtilde of Magdeburg there is a desire for union and mutual regard:

Mechtilde of Magdeburg, Hildegard of Bingen and Julian of Norwich are all mystics unafraid of Divine Love as a burning passion. As Mechtilde has God say in *The Beguines*, 'Your heart's desire shall you lay nowhere/But in my own Sacred Heart/And in my human breast'.⁹³

Significantly the mutuality of regard and gaze in CR's 'St Peter Poems' is structured ultimately through a hunger in the fecund body. Thus, when CR writes 'Open to Me, look on Me eye to eye, | That I may wring thy heart and make it whole;' it is enacted in a context of desire for Eucharistic communion:

And teach thee love because I hold thee dear,
And sup with thee in gladness soul with soul,
And sup with thee in glory by and by. (Sonnet 2, ll. 12-14)

Sanctification is constructed in and through a hunger 'to sup' in the company of the divine object.

⁹³ Mann, *Dazzling Darkness*, p. 47.

'Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices' – Poetic Excess and the Fate of the Sanctified Fecund Body in Goblin Market

In CR's canon, the fullest construction of sanctification through the communion of fecund bodies is found in *GM*. I shall conclude this chapter by revisiting it through the prism of the sanctified female body constructed through hunger and appetite control. I want to interrogate how CR's language of fecundity performs poetic excess in ways that reconstruct the possibilities of the Christian female poet. I shall attempt to show how Rossetti's language of fecundity and barrenness deploys notions of holy hunger and fasting in creative ways. In short, suggesting that the sanctification of the feminine-coded body is not performed through holy traditional methods (self-denial, self-discipline, motherly virtue) but in poetic excess, fecundity and making.

It is striking how far the Christian-patriarchal tradition orders the sanctification of female bodies around the disciplining and control of the oral. It is indicative of the way that the feminine body is coded as dangerous and excessive and thus in need of control. While Rappoport and others are undoubtedly correct to draw attention to the oral excess of *GM*, arguably the initial trajectory of the poem reflects the patterns of Christian-patriarchal claims about sanctity and control of fecundity. Laura's fate – as one who peeps at 'goblin men' and tastes their fruits and then falls into perdition – arguably represents the fate of all 'good' girls who give away their one 'coin', their virginity and purity. As I've sought to show in other

parts of this thesis, it can be read as a key example of that Victorian trope, the fallen woman. Oral excess on this picture acts as iconic of giving into unregulated fecundity. The sanctified body on this picture would be the one that performs control and ascetic self-denial: the female saint as a version of the *Angel in the House*. Initially, Laura arguably represents the fate of those who chose to depart from the patriarchal script which requires middle-class women to protect their virtue and become domestic angels with all the power of a plaster saint.

Suzy Waldman's Lacanian analysis draws attention to both *GM*'s Christian dimension and the ways it constructs a fantasy of forbidden desire and subsequent punishment. She argues that 'the narrator of *Goblin Market* takes obvious delight in looking licentiously at a brightly colored scene; the poem's original manuscript title, "A Peep at the Goblins," emphasized the theme of forbidden vision.'⁹⁴ As a Christian allegory:

We might be made to lust after the sensual fruits and admire the spunkiness of the sisters, but it is orthodoxy nonetheless that motivates Lizzie's solemn warning to Laura "We must not look at goblin men"; and the transgressions in this poem do not go unpunished.⁹⁵

Waldman further argues that *GM* represents a parable of castration or punishment. When the initial taboo on 'looking' is transgressed in and through Laura's oral pleasure, pain is caused. Yet, as Waldman observes:

The first penance is suffered by Lizzie [...] when she goes back to the scene

⁹⁴ Waldman, p. 547.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

of the initial crime is to be pelted with the fruit she needs to cure her sister [...] Rossetti's extravagant description of the goblins' violence against Lizzie during this episode would have to seem gratuitous if it were not relevant.⁹⁶ In short, the temptation of looking elides into that of eating, suggesting 'a possible equivalence between the two operations.'⁹⁷

Waldman helpfully connects this picture of visual temptation sliding into oral temptation with Milton's *Paradise Lost*, in which:

The forbidden fruit is culpable because it causes them to see what they should not. As Satan invites Eve to "Eat thereof, [that] your Eyes that seem so clear, / Yet are but dim, shall perfectly be then / Op'n'd and clear'd, and ye shall be as Gods'.⁹⁸

In short, if we can accept the claim that 'seeing' is 'knowing' then there are strong grounds for inferring from the violent fall Laura experiences that, as Waldman expresses it, 'she has strayed far enough into the terrain of the imaginary to invite castration, or forceful subjection to the symbolic order.'⁹⁹ As Waldman concludes, 'castration is literally signalled in the detumescent imagery through which Laura is depicted after eating.'¹⁰⁰

Yet if it is possible to read *GM* as a parable of punishment for the transgression of patriarchal-Christian laws about holiness and fecundity, it is

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid, p. 548.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid. Such a reading is suggested in the detail that Lizzie leaves the scene of the goblins as if blinded, as she 'knew not was it night or day' (l. 449). Intriguingly, Waldman's castration argument offers an explanation why Laura, when she has an opportunity to suck the juices Lizzie brings her, experiences them as toxic rather than tasty as before.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. See, for example, 'Like the watch-tower of a town | Which an earthquake shatters down, | Like a lightning-stricken mast' (ll. 514-15) and so on.

also possible to discern in Rossetti's language a delight in revolt against those 'laws'; indeed, *GM* performs a narrative which reconstructs Christian injunctions about the sacred-fecund in feminist-liberative directions. Rappoport is correct when she claims, 'the rich, bountiful descriptions signify poetic enjoyment.'¹⁰¹ If this is structured around and through a pleasure at transgression and temptation, that's arguably because 'the Law of the Father' invites transgression. Rappoport argues:

When Lizzie tells Laura to "make much of" her, the poem responds in equally exaggerated terms (line 472). Laura does not just "kiss" her sister but "kissed and kissed and kissed her" (line 486). This paratactic, repetitious line replicates the excessive approach of the entire poem, in which sales pitch follows sales pitch and simile chases simile.¹⁰²

In the face of patriarchal regulation of language and subjectivity, *GM* performs poetic excess.

Strikingly, Rossetti's poetic excess is not simply ordered around pleasure – a pleasure in disobedience or anything else – but what Rappoport calls 'a sense of gratuity.'¹⁰³ In short, *GM* performs a narrative that's constructed around gift and thanksgiving (which, of course, is an English translation of 'Eucharist'). As the title of Caroline Walker Bynum's *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* suggests,¹⁰⁴ an analogue of 'holy fast' is 'holy

¹⁰¹ Rappoport, *The Price of Redemption*, p. 869.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1987). For more on the religious power of food, see also: Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1994).

feast': self-mortification may be a preliminary to the full Eucharistic erotic ecstasy of feasting on Christ. As I suggested earlier, the desire to be 'filled up' can be extraordinarily erotic.¹⁰⁵ Feasts can act as a powerful surrogate for sex. Yet, the boldness of Rossetti's Eucharistic reworking in *GM* lies in configuring Lizzie as a Christ-figure on whom Laura feasts in order to bring about redemption and new life. Lizzie's self-offering – 'suck my juices | Squeezed from goblin fruits for you, | Goblin pulp and goblin dew | Eat me, drink me, love me' – not only recodes the Eucharist as female feasting, but makes a critical intervention into discourses on sanctity and fecundity.

Rappoport concludes that *GM*:

Rejoice[s] in giving to excess, in sacrifice. In the verses it coins [...] "Goblin Market" shows how gift offerings - of poetry, of religious service, of sisterly sacrifice - can be pleasures for giver and recipient alike, as much a realization of the self as its repudiation.¹⁰⁶

If the Christian tradition orders feminine sanctity in terms of denial, fasting and the elision of fecund excess, Lizzie and Laura's communion claims a deliciously excessive and fecund picture of holy union. Overflowing 'gift' rather than 'restraint' becomes the currency of holiness.

Indeed, in the midst of the excess, is a narrative of 'reserve' that searches for the correct moment to give in all its fullness. For as Ludlow notes, 'the choice of the name Lizzie for the sister who saves resonates with Rossetti's interest in the life of St Elizabeth of Hungary.'¹⁰⁷ Ludlow adds:

¹⁰⁵ See, for example, pp. 281-82.

¹⁰⁶ Rappoport, *The Price of Redemption*, p. 869.

¹⁰⁷ Ludlow, p. 91.

St Elizabeth's refusal to consume any food that might be morally tainted foreshadows Lizzie's insistence on purchasing the wares of the goblin men on her own terms, and her acts of giving away food to the poor and nursing the sick chime with her Eucharistic redemption of Laura.¹⁰⁸

Walker Bynum notes how, in the myth of St Elizabeth, sacred and healing milk oozed from St Elizabeth's body.¹⁰⁹ Ludlow links this 'milk' to the goblin juices that Lizzie attains in order to save her sister, claiming this indicates 'Rossetti's investment in what Bynum defines as the medieval perception of the body as porous, and of the body on the cross as, in some sense, female.'¹¹⁰ Ludlow's key point is this: 'it is not until the climactic Eucharistic scene that their porosity of being is brought to the fore.'¹¹¹ In short, the fecund excess of self-giving, is arguably still constructed in tension with 'control' discerning the appropriate moment to 'let go'.

The departure from 'fecundity controlled' into 'fecund excess' signalled by Rossetti's language in *GM* represents a bold claim on poetic space and performance. Fecundity is not simply a term to be structured according to classic patriarchal designations as female reproductive power, but as a category of bodily sanctification which generates poetry. In claiming the position of Christ in the Eucharistic feast – as both holy food, living sacrifice, and place of salvation – Lizzie and Laura claim another of Christ's designations, The Word. In short, Rossetti's narrative constructs new

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ For a narrative-theological account of the leaky body of Christ coded as 'female' see, for example: Mann, *Dazzling Darkness*, pp. 69-75.

¹¹⁰ Ludlow, p. 91.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

meanings for the female poet, beyond cliché and the generic. In this context, even the seemingly conservative conclusion of *GM* is validated. For as Lynda Palazzo argues, one may read the conclusion, ‘there is no friend like a sister’, ‘as a statement of female spiritual strength and empowerment, the spiritual power of female domestic ritual subverting the power of the Church.’¹¹² The text Rossetti supplies is no ‘relic’ of women’s true fecundity understood as bodily reproductive power. It is the sacred body itself, living poetry, indicating that fecundity is disruptive excess worked through ‘the Word’ claimed, indeed stolen, as a feminist category. In the narrative Rossetti constructs, she indicates that women do not need to be masculinised or be turned into self-deniers to become saints. They can simply claim the holiness of creation for themselves on their own terms.

The medieval historian Sarah Stanbury tells a story, drawn from the fourteenth-century *Henry Knighton’s Chronicle*, of how two Lollards ‘inflict’ a second ‘violation’ on St Catherine.¹¹³ They took a sacred image of her,

¹¹² Palazzo, p. 25.

¹¹³ In Stanbury’s account, the story of St Catherine (from whom we get the name of the ‘Catherine Wheel’ firework) runs as follows: Catherine was a virgin saint. During the persecution of Christians inaugurated by the Emperor Maxentius (fourth century CE), Catherine went to him and rebuked him for his cruelty. The Emperor tortured her to no avail, and finally after refusing to marry him, he placed Catherine on a wheel of knives designed to cut her to bits. However, before this happens God sent a thunderbolt which frees Catherine, but shatters the wheel, killing thousands. Catherine is sentenced to beheading, but, as Stanbury suggests, ‘at the moment of her martyrdom angels descend, Christ’s voice speaks from heaven, her blood turns to milk, and angels transport her body to Mount Sinai.’ This milk – fecund, nourishing and healing – becomes available at the point of death. Catherine was, after St Christopher, the most popular saint in England in the fourteenth century. See: Sarah Stanbury, ‘The Vivacity of Images: St Katherine, Knighton’s Lollards, and the Breaking of Idols’, in *Images, Idolatry, and Iconoclasm in Late Medieval England: Textuality and the Visual Image*, ed. by Jeremy Dimmick, James Simpson, and Nicolette Zeeman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 131-50 (p. 133).

ripped it up and burned it as fuel for their cabbage stew:

One Lollard says to the other, “Aha [...] my dear chap, now God has sent us fuel to cook our cabbage [...] This holy image will make a holy bonfire for us. By axe and fire she will undergo a new martyrdom”.¹¹⁴

Stanbury notes how this scene – played out in the discourse of an heretical group who don’t believe in saints and relics – mimes elements of Catherine’s original death. Just as Catherine was sentenced to death by decapitation and burning, the icon is ripped up and burnt. Stanbury uses the story to make a point relevant to this thesis: that, in Christian patriarchal contexts, the female body – sanctified or otherwise – is always marked for possession. That is, the female body is assigned an exchange value. In Catherine’s case, the female body is marked down for one of two economic options: as either a body suitable to be a mother and wife,¹¹⁵ or, refusing that, for the sake of achieving virginal sanctity, as an iconic saint who can quite literally be passed about for devotional purposes. As Stanbury puts it, ‘the body of the beautiful, learned, rich young woman as object for possession, and that body’s cult image – troubling the market as contested property – are closely intertwined.’¹¹⁶ The female body – either as fecund reproductive flesh or translated into holy paper/image – is marked to be passed around.

¹¹⁴ Stanbury, pp. 131-32.

¹¹⁵ Catherine is sentenced to be cut up on the Wheel because she refuses to be the Emperor’s wife and mother of his children.

¹¹⁶ Stanbury, p. 136.

The power of Rossetti's poetic strategies in a poem like *GM* is to subvert, from within, that patriarchal exchange value. As Lysack argues, putting *GM* directly in the context of the seductions of Imperial Consumerism, '*Goblin Market* [...] reveals the insidiousness of such a marketplace without downplaying the reality of its seductions.'¹¹⁷ Referring to what she describes as the sisters 'shared bodily economics',¹¹⁸ Lysack claims that 'together, Lizzie and Laura carve out forms of resistance within an imperial space and, in the process, trouble forms of imposed consumerist desires manufactured by new technologies of spectacle.'¹¹⁹ Yet, as I've shown, the Christian-patriarchal inheritance of western culture has older technologies of spectacle shaped around the meanings of female bodies as suitable candidates for holiness. Lizzie and Laura's sisterly love and bodily communion – structured through poetic excess and a feast of self-giving – is a work which both reworks the Christian inheritance and yet subverts its patriarchal-scopic nature. In doing so, it offers a striking example of a Christian-feminist poetics in which poetic excess resists patriarchal pressures on the fecund female body and reformulates its extraordinary possibilities.

¹¹⁷ Lysack, *Come Buy*, p. 41.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid, pp. 41-42.

CONCLUSION (PART ONE)

EBB and CR: Poetics of Fecundity, Performances of Faith and Feminism

This thesis has explored a range of poetic and linguistic strategies deployed by EBB and CR. Its intention has been to examine the extent to which those strategies – through their negotiation of religio-patriarchal representations of fecundity and barrenness – make poetics available which are recognizably Christian and feminist. I am now in a position to offer a number of conclusions. In seeking to reveal how EBB and CR's distinctive poetic strategies make complementary contributions to an emergent middle-class women's nineteenth century poetry tradition, I've interrogated how they faced double-binds on their creative work and subjectivity. This thesis concludes that central to this patriarchal double-bind is the claim that women are most themselves when literally fecund with child-bearing and reproduction and/or as metaphorically fecund objects for men's creativity in poetry; yet, as I've sought to show, this very fecundity was coded as dangerous and threatening to the patriarchal ordering of middle-class society. This thesis has explored and interrogated the various strategies middle-class Victorian culture and society deployed in order to control that perceived danger, including delimiting women's creative performances and prescribing marriage as the appropriate social structure through which fecund creativity should be regulated.

I have sought to explore and analyse the doubled-strategies CR and EBB deploy in order to subvert, reconstruct and make available fresh possibilities for fecundity as disruptive, creative excess; I suggest that in trying to foreground how EBB and CR critically perform representations of women as identified with a fecund, reproductive body one effect is that they rework those representations in ways which created new possibilities for femininity. Specifically, as analysed in my chapters on 'The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point' and *Aurora Leigh*, I've explored how EBB's doubled use of language and image offer rich, subversive and multivalent meanings. I conclude, in the light of my analysis, it is plausible to suggest these doubled uses of language can be read as operating along an axis of fecundity and barrenness as well as being amenable to religious significations. These doubled uses both expose the oppressive limits of religio-patriarchal constructions of fecundity, whilst subversively claiming new Christian and feminist space for fecund-making.

Thus, in 'The Runaway Slave' the signifiatory and critical possibilities of EBB's use of the image of 'the gourd' opens up space for a doubled reading of this dramatic monologue: the poem represents a haunting performance of the slave woman's inability to escape an identity defined in terms of her fecundity/motherhood, yet also offers hope for the reformulation of discourses of femininity, race and gender in a Choric 'death-dark', a new womb beyond the tomb. EBB's subversive language reworks the patriarchal associations of 'womb' with 'tomb' and offers – when read through the works of Butler, Kristeva and feminist-Christian

scholars – an eschatologically-conceived and subversive conception of fecundity beyond the cruelties of ‘this world’.

My chapters on *AL* develop this trajectory through analysis of the performative possibilities generated by EBB’s handling of religio-patriarchal discourses around marriage and fallenness. EBB’s use of the metaphor of ‘fig’ in a key encounter between Aurora and Marian and her child breaks open the religious and patriarchal language of fecundity in such a way that EBB is able to critique Victorian notions of fallenness as they affect both the middle-class woman poet and working class women. EBB’s language of fecundity subverts the patriarchal double-bind of Whore and Virgin, exposing them as performative categories for femininity in a patriarchal economy.

Equally, EBB’s metaphorical and typographical use of the Biblical figure of Hagar affords fresh insights into the structuring of marriage through patriarchal constructions of fecundity; read through the insights of womanist and feminist theology, Aurora models a striking model of emergent possibilities for the woman poet. The language of faith may be authentically claimed, but so may the language of fecundity, critically freed from mere patriarchal representations. The seemingly conservative marriage plot of *AL* in which Aurora concedes that Art is much, but Love is more and ends up marrying blind Romney has been shown to afford more feminist, if still Christian conclusions: the union between Aurora and Romney is as equals, in which her poetic performance claims the position of

male poet for women. Aurora remains, in the midst of her marriage, a subject and maker of rich, fecund words.

I further conclude that CR's distinctive poetics provide strong evidence for new possibilities for the woman poet of faith. In *GM*, in particular, the dynamic between her language of excess and secrecy supplies subversive and creative possibilities for representations of fecundity. The poem's representations of the female body under conditions of sickness, fallenness and renunciation have proven especially fruitful (sic!) for interrogating how CR's language of fecundity and barrenness generate strategies for the nineteenth-century middle-class woman poet to claim or steal the status of poet rather than poetess. Her dazzlingly excessive linguistic strategies – fecund, lyrical, yet always disciplined – subvert the limiting designations of femininity as bodily fecundity. *GM*'s potent contribution to a Christian-feminist poetics lies in its strategies of re-reading the creative power of female bodies. As this thesis has sought to explore, CR's texts provide ample evidence for claiming fecundity as both sacral and sainted, yet liberative and critical: her texts as living poetry indicate that fecundity is disruptive excess worked through the Word. In the narrative CR constructs, women can claim the holiness of creation for themselves on their own terms.

Perhaps the most striking conclusion this thesis has made available is the extent to which the differing poetics of EBB and CR can hold and reconstruct poetics which are clearly feminist and yet Christian. As indicated in the introduction, the past forty years have seen significant interest in

both feminist and Christian/religious readings of EBB and CR's poetry.

However, given the association, by many critical theorists, of patriarchal positions with Christianity there has been an understandable disassociation of feminist, psychoanalytic and queer readings of EBB and CR from much of the language of faith. Equally, some recent critics who've sought to locate EBB and CR in their contexts, including their faith ones, have perhaps been a little less convinced by the wilder assertions of the theorists.

However, this thesis has sought to locate theoretical and feminist readings of EBB and CR firmly in their poetic language of fecundity and barrenness. Representations of the female-coded body have been investigated in and through the body of their poetry. EBB and CR's extraordinary and imaginative negotiations of representations of patriarchal fecundity have been foregrounded. What has emerged is the possibility of reading the biblically- and religiously-alert and committed language of these poets as radical texts: texts which both engage faithfully with tropes of redemption, hope, love and revelation and extend them in liberative and expansive directions. Writing in contexts where their writing could be coded as the work of fecund poetesses rather than virile poets, their linguistic subversions – grounded as much in faith as a nascent feminism – made available new performances for women: the fecund poet.

CONCLUSION (PART TWO)

Between Criticism and Creativity – Negotiating ‘Narrative’ and ‘Performance’ as a Twenty First-Century Woman Poet of Faith

The remaining section of this conclusion, which also serves as a bridging chapter to the poetry, seeks to indicate some of the intersections between the critical dimensions of the thesis and my attempt to interrogate the possibilities of fecundity and barrenness in my own creative writing. One of the key research problems at stake in my creative work concerns the impact of shifting cultural and social possibilities of fecundity. In the present context, the relevant shifts concern both religious as well as gendered possibilities. For, as I shall examine, it is reasonable to claim that the place of religious belief in cultural performance has been so transformed since the mid-nineteenth century that its ‘availability’ to the contemporary poet has been placed in severe question; equally, that the range of gender performances available to middle-class women has arguably been widely reconstructed. In the opening paragraph of this thesis I indicated how, at the level of popular culture, representations of women in terms of bodily fecundity continue to be significant in western contexts. However, the extent to which they remain regulative is moot and falls beyond the scope of this thesis. At a practical level, middle-class women have a range of performances available – from university professor, politician, priest,

doctor, lawyer, etc. – that were basically unavailable in mid-nineteenth century Britain. Yet, if fecundity is no longer regulative in quite the manner it was in 1850, discourses around it continue to generate long paradigmatic shadows.

In this thesis's opening chapter, I explored how there are certainly grounds for acknowledging that – in the middle of the nineteenth century – the place and status of faith and religion were under question on many fronts. Harmonious pictures of nature had been problematised by Thomas Malthus; Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology* (1830-33) made a case for the world behaving according to natural laws that was influential on the evolutionary theories of Charles Darwin, Robert Chambers, Alfred Russel Wallace and Herbert Spencer. Through his work and others, the miraculous was being 'naturalised'. Equally, the status of 'man' was in question from mechanization and industry. Matthew Arnold's famous 'Dover Beach' poem, with its line about 'The Sea of Faith | Was once, too, at the full', has been taken as a summary of the pressures brought to bear by Victorian modernity on faith and human creativity.¹

However, religious sentiment and language was ubiquitous in much nineteenth-century poetic and cultural production. The serial popularity of poems like Patmore's *The Angel in the House* or texts like Ruskin's *Sesame and Lilies* offer evidence of religion's ongoing moral effect; equally, that a

¹ Most notably in the 'Sea of Faith' Movement established by naturalistic theologian Don Cupitt. Subject of a TV series in 1984, 'Sea of Faith' became a rallying cry for Christians who wanted to take seriously the belief that religion is a human creation. See: Don Cupitt, *The Sea of Faith: Christianity in Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988 (1984)).

churchman like Keble might produce an influential poetics which spoke beyond mere church contexts into the work of a substantial poet like CR is significant; EBB's poetry is rich in biblical and religious allusion, even to the point where *Aurora Leigh* concludes with a vision of the New Heaven and Earth in the union of Aurora and Romney. The presumption in Victorian British society, even post-Darwin and Marx, would be that a person would be an active Christian.² The language of the *King James's Bible* was common-coin.³ By contrast, in our contemporary British contexts, the presumption that a middle-class person has Christian faith would, at best, be in question and more likely be for 'no'. Not only is twenty-first century Britain markedly secular in the presentation of its public institutions,⁴ but both religiously

² As late as 1914, a significant majority of the English population attended Sunday School. See: Alan Wilkinson, *The Church of England in the First World War* (London: SPCK, 1978); Rachel Mann, *Fierce Imaginings: The Great War, Ritual, Memory & God* (London: D.L.T., 2017), Chapter 2.

³ Michael Schmidt has argued that until the mid-twentieth century the language of the Book of Common Prayer and the King James's Bible formed a foundational set of references for poets and writers in English. See: *The Harvill Book of Twentieth-Century Poetry in English*, ed. by Michael Schmidt (London: Harvill Press, 2000), p. xxxviii.

⁴ For a recent overview of the relationships between secular and religious institutions in the twenty-first century see: Craig Calhoun, 'How does Religion Matter in Britain's Secular Public Sphere?', <<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/how-does-religion-matter-in-britains-secular-public-sphere/>: London School of Economics Blog, 2016> [accessed: 05 April 2017].

diverse⁵ and, in terms of many population groups, in retreat from organised religion.⁶

Equally, compared to the mid-nineteenth century, contemporary contexts supply an alternative range of performances for middle-class women. Male voices in poetry remain prominent and, arguably dominant,⁷ yet it is rare in serious public discourse for women to be represented by the term 'poetess'. If the use of double strategies like dramatic monologue is something that has been significant for contemporary women writers like Carol Ann Duffy,⁸ the extent to which contemporary poets like Duffy continue to be read via categories of bodily fecundity falls outside the limits of this thesis. What is clear in terms of my own praxis has been the negotiation of the implications of being a trans woman writing as a poet into constructions of fecundity and barrenness. As I shall explore, alongside my discussion of the religious tensions in my new creative work, fecundity raises striking questions for me as a trans woman. As I analysed in the main section of this thesis, fecundity has typically been constructed as a category

⁵ The most recent UK Census included a question about individual religious affiliations. The report and data can be found here: <<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/religion/articles/religioninenglandandwales2011/2012-12-11>>: Office for National Statistics, 2012> [accessed: 05 April 2017].

⁶ For a contemporary study of the shifting nature of faith away from organised religion see: Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion Is Giving Way to Spirituality* (Malden MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2004).

⁷ For example, Alison Flood, 'Men Still Dominate Book World, Study Finds', <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/mar/06/men-dominate-books-world-study-vida>>: The Guardian, 2013>

[accessed: 15 February 2017]; Frances Levison, 'This Great Poets List Only Has One Woman. About Right Too', <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2008/mar/13/gender.poetry>>: The Guardian, 2008> [accessed: 15 February 2017].

⁸ For example, Carol Ann Duffy, *The World's Wife* (London: Picador, 1999).

applicable to women's natural bodies. What that means for me as trans will shortly be analysed especially by paying attention to the distinction between 'narrative' and 'the performative' in the work of Jay Prosser.

Narratives of Self and Performances of Faith – The Place of fecundity in a Trans-Feminist-Christian Poetics

The central critical theme of this thesis is the representations of fecundity and barrenness in the poetry of EBB and CR as icons of nineteenth-century middle-class women's poetry. I've interrogated, critically and creatively, a Christian-feminist poetics and attempted to make a case for a (nineteenth-century middle-class) women's tradition performed through a critique of the double-bind of patriarchal fecundity. This critique centred on the use of doubled strategies: dramatic monologue, masks and secret subversions. I've explored how in nineteenth century contexts, femininity – both in terms of bodily and poetic making – was typically read through religiously-sanctioned categories of (re-)productive excess; I've equally suggested that, in the writings of EBB and CR, it is possible to argue for an emergent tradition constructed through fecundity as disruptive excess.

As a twenty-first century trans woman who is a Church of England priest, I write in an apparently quite different context to EBB or CR. The very notions of 'trans woman' and 'transgender' arguably represent post-

nineteenth-century linguistic/conceptual developments.⁹ This raises potential interesting critical intersections and aporia. I am conscious that among the factors in this PhD's genesis was an acknowledgement that fecundity and barrenness have long been themes in my writing.¹⁰ I am alert to how fecundity and barrenness are concepts structuring my subjectivity. To put it simply, my experience of being a trans woman has placed me in a problematised relationship with bodily fecundity. Arguably, 'problematisation' is the position of all women who cannot readily perform heteronormative femininity (that is, anyone who has a questionable relationship with 'baby-making' ordered around religious and patriarchal representations of femininity).¹¹

However, I'm conscious that, structurally and conceptually, to be a trans-feminine body raises particular questions. My experience of body has also included being represented as male, virile, as well as being represented

⁹ As many have noted (post-)modern trans people have negotiated their subjectivities in a time of psychiatry, which has – for good or ill – structured those subjectivities and their bodies in particular ways. For historical and theoretical accounts of trans identities, see, for example, Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*; Kate Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us* (New York: Routledge, 1994); Mann, *Dazzling Darkness*, et al. Julia Epstein and Kristina Straub, *Body Guards: The Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity* (London & New York: Routledge, 1991) contains a number of historical studies.

¹⁰ Mann, *Dazzling Darkness*; Rachel Mann, *The Risen Dust: Poems and Stories of Passion & Resurrection* (Glasgow: Wild Goose, 2013) contains work developed over several years. Rachel Mann, *A Star-Filled Grace: Worship & Prayer Resources for Advent, Christmas & Epiphany* (Glasgow: Wild Goose, 2015), contains poems and stories which reflect my explorations of gender, fecundity and barrenness, partly during this PhD.

¹¹ And, as I've argued repeatedly in this thesis, the failure to perform heteronormative femininity applies to women who identified as poets at mid-nineteenth century.

as (post-transition) sterile and barren.¹² I've experienced the category of the fecund as exile and as longing. I have found my Otherness doubled: that is, as trans I am alert to my non-normative status; however, awareness of my body as a woman also makes me alert to the Otherness of women. The fact that I cannot, on a patriarchal pattern, perform fecundity (i.e. have babies) has been experienced as a kind of judgment on my 'failed' body. That is, insofar as femininity is structured through a patriarchal productive excess, my body – lacking womb, ovaries – is coded as a double lack, as Other of the Other. For if – as I argued in an earlier chapter – femininity is constructed through lack (lack of penis/phallus, lack of position, lack of control etc.), as a result of my incapacity to (re-)produce, my lack is doubled. Not only do I lack a penis but I lack the capacity to reproduce. I am unable to perform the redemptive category available, under religious patriarchy, to women: to reproduce.

Women's writing – most significantly in the Romantic and Victorian eras – has been stereotyped as a work of the heart.¹³ As I argued in the first chapter of this thesis, women's poetry has been represented as secondary and, indeed, in exile from the Tradition of poetry. In the religio-patriarchal picture, the limited, leaky, reproductive body is most itself making children; it is not made for poetry-making and creating meanings, or for speaking into

¹² For more on this, see: Mann, *Presiding*, p. 134; Mann, *Dazzling Darkness*.

¹³ See: Leighton, *Against The Heart*. Furthermore, Alison Chapman notes, 'the sentimental tradition, seen in the nineteenth-century as the only properly feminine mode for women poets, insists that women's poetry is confessional and personal, for female creativity is posited as a direct experiential reflex.' Chapman, *Afterlife*, p. 6.

the Sublime and the Sacral. In a recent public lecture, the Catholic poet Michael Symmons Roberts explored the claim that, even in the twenty-first century, poetry can 'dare the depths', can attempt the Metaphysical or Transcendent. Quoting a pronouncement of Seamus Heaney's, Symmons Roberts suggested that 'poetry has never been fully secularized.'¹⁴ Symmons Roberts adds, 'I took that to mean that poetry still has a semi-sacred role.'¹⁵ He concludes:

One of the hallmarks of poetry when it's working at its best and fullest [is that] it is fundamentally an exploratory medium. Poetry, more than any other literary form, is trying to work at the very edges of language, to explore parts of our world or our experience that resist our attempt to put them into words.¹⁶

However, for those classically Othered by that poetry tradition – women, trans people, queers, people of colour – daring the depths may not always be the presumed mode of writing. Rather than making poetry which dares the Metaphysical, feminine poetry on this account becomes stereotyped as confessional and expressive. That is, making something private or hidden – a kind of literary analogue of female reproductive organs – revealed or known. It is not a wrestling with the facts of the world, or God, or the Transcendent (as one might expect of masculine poetry, alive in public space), but the making manifest of her fecundity, as a baby makes

¹⁴ Michael Symmons Roberts, *'Manchester Cathedral Lecture'* (2016), Manchester Literature Festival, 11 October 2016.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

manifest/proves her creativity. This is no mere historical matter. Pascale Petit speaks of how in 2010 she took part in a round-table discussion about 'The Female Poem.'¹⁷ She suggests that the panel – which included Jo Shapcott – was drawn to the 'idea of the woman poet as outsider' and stranger; indeed, 'the strangeness [of women's poetry] may come from women's marginal position as well as their closer relationship with the body, and its wonder, shock and messiness.'¹⁸ Petit acknowledges the influence of Confessional poets like Anne Sexton who made taboo subjects public and available. Quoting Charlotte Otten, she says, 'Women's bodies became the poetry. No aspect of pregnancy was considered too embarrassing, too trivial, or too private for a poem.'¹⁹

Throughout this thesis I've sought to explore and indicate EBB and CR's negotiations of nineteenth-century stereotyping of the fecund body. EBB constructs a series of performative strategies using dramatic monologues like *TRS* and *AL* which enables her to claim the position of poet and dare the depths. CR's poetics generate different strategies. By turns extravagant and excessive (as in the unctuous language of *GM*) and reserved and simple (as in some of her devotional verse), there is a sense of teasing in her linguistic performances. Elusiveness, as I've suggested in my analysis of

¹⁷ Pascale Petit, 'Do Women Poets Write Differently to Men?', *Poetry Review*, 102 (2012), 68-74 (p. 68).

¹⁸ Ibid, pp. 68-69.

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 72. Perhaps the acme of recent confessional poetry is Sharon Olds. She even managed to mock her self-exposing style in the poem 'Calvinist Parents' which quotes a review that says, 'Sometime during the Truman Administration, Sharon Olds's parents tied her to a chair, and she is still writing about it.' See: Sharon Olds, *One Secret Thing* (London: Cape, 2009), p. 23.

GM and a poem like *Winter: My Secret* represents a *modus operandi* for CR; her way of negotiating the confessional is to remain always slightly out of sight.

The notion of confessional, of course, has both a religious and a poetic connotation. The Latin root, *confiteri*, has implications of acknowledgement, especially acknowledgement together with another. In its early religious senses, it referred to martyrs who acknowledged, held to and admitted to their faith in the face of persecution or danger. It is a making public of a private truth, belief or fact. Equally, in the developed religious practice, 'Confession', more properly known as the Sacrament of Reconciliation in the Roman Catholic Church, represents a way for a penitent to publicly acknowledge her sin in the sight of God and be absolved by a minister *in persona Christi*. Confession on this picture is not truly creative; it is making available that which pre-exists in a person's narrative. It is an expressive work – a speaking of a truth, fact, or event more-or-less well hidden. It is acknowledgement. It places that which is hidden in the hands of another – typically, a masculine subject – who grants or withholds forgiveness on behalf of another, most especially, God.

Indeed, one of the horizons for a woman, trans or not, negotiating the position of priest is how that term has etymologically and practically always been connected with masculinity. A signal of that is reflected in the widespread rejection of women as priests in the Church of England in certain traditions to the present day (and women's complete exclusion from priesthood in Roman Catholicism). There has been and remains

theological/cultural fear of women making 'priest' into 'priestesses'; the diversification of priesthood remains something many in the churches remain resistant to, indicated not least in claims that allowing women to be priests feminises the church.²⁰

There is a further consideration when thinking about the logic and language of confession: the extent to which it has been represented as structuring 'truth'. Foucault reminds us that 'since the Middle Ages at least, western societies have established the confession as one of the main rituals we rely on for the production of truth.'²¹ At its broadest – as a power-structure which runs through a culture that produces simplistic and authoritarian representations of truth, authenticity and, crucially, the subject – the pervasiveness of confession as a sign for truth, indicates that 'western man has become a confessing animal.'²² In western cultural imaginaries – grounded in religious truth performance – the concept of confessional runs the risk of indicating that truth is something that lies within and only needs to be revealed to be recognised; it can be taken as a sign that there is consistent, unitary self behind the complexities and potential obfuscations of language; the sincerity of confession (either willingly or unwillingly given) proves this.

This line of analysis indicates that perhaps the central problem to be explored by the creative aspect of this thesis is to find a non-confessional

²⁰ See Porter, Chapter 4. Anxieties about the feminisation of the church was also a major feature of later Victorian church discourse. For more, see: Mann, *Fierce Imaginings*, Chapter 7.

²¹ Foucault, Vol. 1, p. 58.

²² Foucault, Vol. 1, p. 59.

poetics. Potentially, one reason for my struggle to find that poetics lies in my subjectivity as a trans woman and, as previously indicated, the specifics of my relationship with fecundity/femininity. Jay Prosser's study of trans subjectivities has indicated that trans people may face specific issues when negotiating issues of sincerity, authenticity and situated truth.²³ Judith/Jack Halberstam suggests, '[Prosser's] formulation of the role of narrative in transsexual transition has established itself in opposition to what he understands to be a queer preference for performativity over narrativity.'²⁴ While, for Judith Butler, the trans person acts as an icon of gender performativity, exposing (by the disconnect between gender and sex) the constructed non-naturalness of sex and gender for all subjects,²⁵ Prosser indicates an issue raised by some trans people: 'there are [...] transsexual trajectories that aspire to what this scheme devalues. Namely, there are transsexuals who seek very pointedly to be non-performative, to be constative, quite simply to be.'²⁶ Halberstam glosses this as, 'many transsexuals do not want to represent gender artifice; they actually aspire to the real, the natural, indeed the very condition that has been rejected by the queer theory of gender performance.'²⁷ In Prosser's terms, 'narrative *composes* the self. Conforming the life into narrative coheres both "lives" on either side of transition into an identity plot.'²⁸

²³ See: Prosser, Chapter 3, for an extended analysis of the significance of 'autobiography' and 'true' self/bodies in relation to trans identities.

²⁴ Halberstam, p. 50.

²⁵ See, for example, Butler, *Gender Trouble*, Chapter 2.

²⁶ Prosser, p. 32.

²⁷ Halberstam, p. 50.

²⁸ Prosser, p. 120.

Whilst sympathetic to Prosser's claim, Halberstam goes on to question quite what the desire for 'the real' in the trans body might consist in (penis or vagina, everyday life as man or woman). Halberstam makes a forceful point. As indicated in other writing,²⁹ and in this wider thesis, I am inclined to favour the performative as an axis through which to read gender and sexuality; however, the force of Prosser's point in the present discussion concerns my sense of fecund lack. He indicates a powerful subjective force in some trans identities: the desire to be conformed to the natural. One of the horizons of my subjectivity is a deep, almost pre-rational desire, as a body, to conform it to an iconic representation of femininity as fecundity. In short, in my imaginary I should like to be able to have a womb, ovaries, give birth to children and be a mother. At the level of pre-critical, expressive and confessional living, my hunger to embody the natural-fecund and my acknowledgement that this cannot be the case has been emotionally and psychologically resonant.³⁰

Crucially, in terms of poetry and poetics my want of bodily fecundity has presented significant issues. I've been inclined towards an emotive, expressive mode characterised by confessional. I have negotiated the temptation to treat 'biography', 'narrative' and 'subjectivity' non-critically, as if one can simply foreground it; as if making public and acknowledging the self is sufficient poetics. Intriguingly, my sense of creative secondariness

²⁹ Mann, *Dazzling Darkness*, especially Chapter 1.

³⁰ It is certainly the case that, for me, one of the most difficult aspects of negotiating being trans is accepting that I cannot bear children. In my late twenties and early thirties, despite knowing – at an intellectual level – that I can't and will never bear children, I struggled to accept it at an emotional level.

has arguably been doubled: firstly, because of a sense of exile from both the traditional male mode of making as well as exile from traditional female ones as well. I've struggled to locate myself in creative space and that sense of uncertainty has generated a tendency to over-perform an un-critical 'I' and emotive surety. For example, in early drafts and sketches for the creative work included in the PhD, I was over-reliant on performances of emotional authenticity, whether talking about my past, biblical tropes of fecundity, or simply trying to find form for my attempts at poetry-making. Consider, the short sequence, 'Sleeping Habits' below. It was written about eighteen months into the PhD process and constitutes an attempt to 'write' my childhood desire for transformation:

Sleeping Habits

1. Bed

It was the footboard I sought. Eyes only
for that knot of wood near the middle,
True North, my star in the dark.

Just the right height to rest my hands
as I knelt, touching it night after night.
Dialling up God, I said, to the quivering

mercury of my heart. Unable to receive
the cool of linen, till I'd made my offering.

Each night asking that the bed

might be a clean miracle, from which a girl,
my new self, would emerge.

2. Sleeping Bag

I only dared approach it in winter,
our house so cold the bag slept.

I'd slip in, and burrow down,
growing drowsy, whispered *lully-lully-lully*

to keep me safe. Each night I'd slide further,
alert to its stir, the swallow-reflex jolt that would tip me

into the abyss. Alert to that hand which waits
to grab your foot, to drag you down

to who knows where - the world of the dead,
a labyrinth of stomachs each darker than the last.

3. What Lay Beneath

Some nights I'd lie awake,

imagine another me
asleep beneath the bed.

I'd think about how
she was dressed. A nightie.
White brocade. No bows or frills.

She never stirred or made a sound.
And her skin. Clear and clean,
like a child's in an Old Master.

Some nights I'd speak to her,
tell her about my day,
but she never stirred.

She never made a sound.

This sequence has not (except in an extraordinarily redacted and playful way) appeared in the final creative work.³¹ Firstly, however, it is worth acknowledging that, broadly, it is a competent, focused sequence. It is (within the bounds of these things) 'publishable'. In confessional terms, the poems play with personally significant themes I wanted to make

³¹ See, for example, Section 29 of *The Priest* sequence.

available; there is a core of fact in the narrative (e.g. the nightly prayers for transformation). Lyrically, it broadly fits the current poetic fashion for sticking with the concrete and the specific. It also attempts to create moments of transfiguration, that is, it attempts to use those specific ideas and images to create poetry which arrests and invites the reader to discern a moment of stillness or wonder. The longish lines in the second section seek to give the reader time to receive the image and information the poem offers. Yet, the sequence reads as curiously lacking in intensity and focus. Perhaps part of the issue here is the lack of trust in the poetry itself – for example, it rather resolves itself into a series of short sentences disguised as lyric. More revealingly – regarding the focus of this chapter – its desire to make itself known makes the sequence too available; the lines, ‘a clean miracle, from which a girl, | my new self, would emerge’, are sincere and plangent, but they simply give too much away. They lack the technical and crafted restraint required to both appropriately interrogate and interestingly (i.e. for a reader) make available the questions about subjectivity, desire, fecundity, and so on, the poem sets out to investigate. The poem as it stands has yet to find the linguistic resources to foreground issues of ‘Who is ‘I’ in this poem?’ and ‘How does one think in and through poetry as well as express?’

The emergence of *The Priest* as a formed sequence was predicated on resources only available from within my interrogation of the poetry of EBB and CR. Fundamentally, given a tendency to take my self – represented by the terms like ‘I’, ‘me’ – as given or achieved or assumed I’ve been

inclined to take a route in my poetics which has been conservative, safe and lacking in genuine poetic risk. Prior to a rigorous encounter with EBB and CR, I was inclined to trust in narrative-safety rather than dare to play fully with performative possibilities. I have been unprepared to place my subjectivity in question or at risk. Perhaps, as a trans person who has experienced significant Othering at a social, emotional and cultural level³² – that is, whose public subjectivity has so often been under question – I have been unwilling to risk my subjective gains for artistic ends. Given the struggle to achieve public acceptance as a woman this lack of ambition is comprehensible. Prosser's point about the transgender tendency to 'want' narrative rather than the performative has generated curious effects on my ongoing development as poet and artist.

Yet as I have argued consistently in this thesis, EBB and CR offer striking poetic strategies, in a nineteenth-century context, to negotiate a female subjectivity overdetermined by discourse around fecundity as natural, ordained by God, and essential. Their use of doubled strategies, of dramatic monologue and secret subversions provide 'connective tissue' between their poetics and the approach I've begun to explore in *The Priest*. For while my own relationship with constructions of femininity, fecundity and barrenness is arguably different to those faced by EBB or CR, insofar as I've been tempted to treat my achieved, womanly 'I' and/or body as having

³² This has ranged from negotiating the medico-psychiatric establishment in the 90s, through to abuse from co-religionists both in the UK and around the world, through to hate crime which has led to criminal investigations.

the character of approximate realness or 'the natural', EBB's and CR's performative categories have destabilised it.

In short, a fundamental gambit at stake in *The Priest* is the performative. I've sought devices to distance the speaking subject in the poem/collection from an unquestioned 'I'. In *The Priest*, I attempt to interrogate gender and narrative and biography with a range of devices pioneered and mastered by EBB and CR. So, consider my negotiation of trans narratives in *The Priest*. If the 'Sleeping Habits' sequence relies on an unquestioned 'I', confession and expression, in *The Priest* a post-Rossettian poetics of secrecy takes centre stage.³³ At one level, my interrogation of 'the gendered I' – the 'I' coded as the 'natural' – attempts to do its work through restraint and reserve, balanced against a rejoicing in the possibilities of language.³⁴ Perhaps one of the theoretical or theological ideas at stake here is an attempt to engage and ally my poetry with a tradition that – as my discussion of Anna-Laetitia Barbauld's poem 'Inscription for an Ice-House' in Chapter One indicated – has negotiated women's exclusion from creative subjectivity. Winter is coded in Barbauld's poetics as sublime, masculine, and as subject. Insofar as CR herself engages with that discourse around Winter in her poem 'Winter: my Secret', she foregrounds a teasing, secretive strategy. She does not use a direct route. Her negotiations of the

³³ For example, see: Sections 14-15 and 23-24 of *The Priest* which very consciously echo CR's locutions.

³⁴ Examples of this gambit in relation to my interrogation of religious language and possibilities can be found at sections 19-20, 23-24. Section 23 self-consciously quotes CR's 'Winter: My Secret', exploring how her lyric gestures resonates in an obviously religious context (i.e. a questioning of the status of religious discourse).

problematic relationship between subjectivity and fecund femininity in nineteenth-century poetic discourse is deliberately elusive. Those strategies have proven crucial to the problematisation of my own subjectivity. The poetics at work in *The Priest* indicate a trajectory that, if grounded partly in CR's secrecy, represent perhaps a beginning rather than an end. In short, the creative destabilisation of a desired narrative 'realness' in my fecundity; an exposure of my desire for reproductive excess, or some simulation of it, by the performance of a disruptive excess.

Equally, *The Priest* attempts to interrogate performative possibilities explored in my discussions of EBB. My poem references a range of interlocutors who never directly speak in the first-person. The status of these interlocutors – which include 'Gospel Eve/Eva' (who might represent a former lover, an aspect of the Priest's subjectivity, the biblical Eve), 'God' (as object of prayer, as lover, as judge) and 'Salem' (a representation of a physical city, a beggar, heaven) – is itself problematised. As a putative monologue, *The Priest* seeks to be in conversation with EBB's monologic works like *AL* and *TRS*; specifically it aims to occupy similar possibilities to those explored by EBB. If EBB's Aurora performs the poet (as opposed to poetess), thus revealing the poet's performative horizons and the gender constructions in that performance, then 'my' priest offers a way of foregrounding some of the performative gestures and voices of faith and religious subjectivity.

One way of explicating this point is via the poet and critic Christian Wiman's claims on the place of the religious in poetry. Wiman writes:

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, after being in prison for a year, still another hard year away from his execution [wrote] “There are things more important than self-knowledge.” Yes. An artist who believes this is an artist of faith, even if faith contains no god.³⁵

Self-knowledge is one of the paths that may be followed by the religious initiate and suppliant. It may be discovered through confession, and the honest and sincere expression of a person’s self-understanding in relation to the Divine, desired object. But Wiman indicates, through the voice of a twentieth-century theologian who faced the depredations of the Nazi Regime, that a poet as artist is involved in something more – a kind of rigorous engagement with the possibilities of language. As Wiman puts it, it is a ‘crisis of consciousness.’³⁶ As I’ve argued in this thesis, those whose subjectivity is always under question or excluded from the dominant position encounter this crisis in a doubled way. It becomes a crisis of attempting to say anything of value at all (a crisis for any artist who wishes to speak), but more than that – a crisis that says their making is already secondary. For women, read as primarily makers of flesh rather than words, fecund creativity is used as a weapon against her. For a trans woman like me, I am not even in a position to make with my flesh.

Perhaps this is where my writing most significantly finds ‘connective tissue’ or ligaments with EBB,³⁷ and I sense shall continue to do so as I

³⁵ Christian Wiman, ‘God’s Truth in Life’, *Poetry Review*, 98 (2008), 63-68 (p. 65).

³⁶ Ibid, p. 64.

³⁷ Symmons Roberts quotes an intriguing gloss on the notion of ‘ligament’ or ‘connective tissue’ made by David Jones: ‘I understand that more than one opinion has prevailed with regard to the etymology of the word *religio*, but a commonly

develop as a poet. EBB represents the acme of nineteenth-century woman poet who sets out to be Poet or Artist. Her ambition as indicated by *AL* is extraordinary. Yet as I've argued consistently in the thesis, dramatic monologue becomes a crucial critical strategy in order for her to perform the masculine position, expose its performative nature and subvert it for a fecund and disruptive excess. *The Priest* is a modest poem in comparison to *AL*. Equally, I would not wish to suggest that I have aspirations to be, like EBB, 'the female Homer'! However, EBB – both through *TRS* and *AL* – generates strategies to interrogate religio-patriarchal constructions of fecundity and subjectivity whilst generating a poetics in which she can think as well as feel. This is a poem which dares not only big cultural subjects, but dares the Metaphysical and Transcendent and aspires to be more than a confessional poetry of the heart. The most thrilling development in my poetics in *The Priest* is beginning to find, through my engagement with EBB, a way to think as a poet, not simply express.

The significance of my finding strategies to think in poetry as well as emote or express should be contextualised in terms of the problem of subjectivity I flagged up early in this chapter: the performance of 'thought' in my poems represents a key performative strategy through which I can

accepted view is that a binding of some sort is indicated. The same root is in 'ligament', a binding which supports an organ and assures that organ its freedom of use as part of a body. And it is in this sense that I here use the word 'religious'. It refers to a binding, a securing. Like the ligament, it secures a freedom to function. The binding makes possible the freedom. Cut the ligament and there is atrophy – corpse rather than corpus. If this is true, then the word religion makes no sense unless we presuppose a freedom of some sort.' See: Michael Symmons Roberts, 'Poetry in a Post-Secular Age', *Poetry Review*, 98 (2008), 69-75 (p. 72).

interrogate my self-stereotyping as a 'woman poet' and my internalization of patriarchal tropes of fecundity and barrenness. Clearly, at one level, I want to claim the possibility of being a 'woman poet' for myself, but to claim that 'title' requires ongoing critical work exposing and delimiting the patriarchal traces it contains.

Long Poems, Big Poems? – Indicating a Conclusion and a Path Ahead

In an essay about the status of the poet's subjectivity and the concept of 'long' poems in twentieth-century women's poetry,³⁸ Susan Stanford Friedman explores women's problematic relationship with easy assumptions that, in poetry, 'length' signals 'big' (for which one might read important and significant). Given her concentration on a group of twentieth-century women writers, a number of her considerations fall outside the purview of this thesis. However, some of her analysis throws helpful light on one further place of intersection between EBB and CR's poetics and those I've sought to examine in my creative work for this thesis: the question of formal scope and what it means for women negotiating constructions of femininity in the Tradition. As I shall conclude, the question of form represents one of the ongoing challenges for my future work as I continue to investigate the limits and possibilities of fecundity and barrenness in my

³⁸ Susan Stanford Friedman, 'When a "Long" Poem Is a "Big" Poem: Self-Authorizing Strategies in Women's Twentieth-Century "Long Poems"', in *Dwelling in Possibility: Women Poets and Critics on Poetry*, ed. by Yopie Prins and Maara Schreiber (New York: Cornell University Press, 1997), pp. 13-37. For more on Victorian approaches to the 'Long Poem' see: Cronin, *Reading Victorian Poetry*, Chapter 6.

poetics.

Stanford Friedman indicates her distrust of the term 'long poem' and argues that women have made a complex, sometimes fraught relationship with the notion. She says, 'the name "long poem" is deceptively simple and descriptive [...] It is the great umbrella for everything that is not "short".'³⁹ However, she further argues, 'in its seeming neutrality, however, the term may obscure the exclusionary politics inherent in genre categories.'⁴⁰ In essence, Stanford Friedman suggests that 'the descriptive simplicity of the term "long poem" – with its implicit ideology of pure form and value-free aesthetics – represses awareness of [...] gender-inflected politics with a displacement that substitutes the description "long" for the prescription "big".'⁴¹ Length according to this metric signifies value and importance. Even leaving aside the phallic implications of an obsession with size, length and bigness, Stanford Friedman certainly gestures towards something that – on slightly different terms – has been threaded through this thesis: the place and significance of women's poetry under conditions where their work has been marginalised and read as outside the 'big' work/tradition of proper poetry. Stanford Friedman speaks back into a situation in which women's poetry was read through a Male Gaze which marked it as inferior, limited, failing and the product of weak bodies.

³⁹ Ibid, p. 13.

⁴⁰ Ibid. Friedman deploys Derrida's suggestion, contained in 'The Law of Genre' that 'genre appears to be a *description* of literary types [...] but *description* [...] always implies *prescription*.' Ibid, pp. 13-14. For more on Derrida's analysis of genre, see: Jacques Derrida, 'The Law of Genre', *Critical Enquiry*, 7.1, 1980, 55-81.

⁴¹ Ibid, p. 15

The 'Long Poem' in relation to the 'Short Poem' (which might be read as 'Big' vs 'Small', 'Mighty' vs 'Delicate' and so on) has been one of the shadows of this thesis both in terms of its creative and critical aspects. At a surface level, this thesis has (for the most part) concentrated on what might be called big poems written by women. Whatever else it is, EBB's *AL* represents a singular achievement from a woman who – ever alert to Epic – set out to be 'a female Homer'. 'The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point', whilst lacking the scale of *AL*, is no delicate lyric. CR brings her own formal and stylistic issues. Given the sheer levels of attention lavished on *GM* in the past forty years, its status as both a long and big poem is surely not in doubt. If – as I've argued, along with other critics⁴² – CR's poetics are marked as much by lyric sensitivity, reserve and secrecy, these dimensions of her poetics sit alongside her capacity for excess and ambition. In terms of my creative work in this thesis, it consists of one long poem; either consciously or unconsciously it thereby presents itself as sufficient, substantial enough in itself to bear the weight of my poetic investigations.

Stanford Friedman says that when we equate long with big poems we are making claims about the 'geometry of forms'. That is, we claim the poem:

Has volume – it is a many-sided figure that swells up to take space. As a long sequence, it also takes up time – literally, lots of time to read. In this horizontal-vertical discourse, vast space and cosmic time are the narrative coordinates within which lyric moments occur [...] Big, long poems go far,

⁴² Other critics include Hassett, Rosenblum, Mason and Arseneau.

tunnel deep and fly high. They have scope. They are “potent, important”.⁴³

Where these considerations impact on my new poem and its relationships with EBB, CR and fecundity is where this ‘geometry of forms’ meets a ‘geography of forms’. Stanford Friedman puts the distinction like this:

This geometry of forms – long poems, big poems – may itself be a displacement for a geography of forms: the territorial imperative of literary history to map literary *landscapes* and *terrains*, chart pathways to *horizons*, canonize *centers*, define *margins*, patronize the *borderline*, and dismiss what is *beyond the pale* – to exercise, in short, the tyranny of categorical *boundaries*, to declare what is inside, what is outside, us and them.⁴⁴

As I’ve explored, EBB and CR negotiated boundaries around their subjectivities as poets and women which marked them as marginal, on the boundary, and secondary; a key indicator of that marginalization was a nineteenth-century tendency to read women’s poetry as defective because it was produced out of women’s bodies, bodies only suitable for natural, fecund production. Yet, by transforming their productive excess into disruptive excess they reworked the canon, and the horizons or possibilities of poetry. In short, they claimed the status of poet. The extent to which that was modelled most clearly through taking on and performing the long poem represents one future line of research emerging out of this thesis. What is suggestive is the extent to which – as this thesis has sought repeatedly to

⁴³ Stanford Friedman, p. 15

⁴⁴ Ibid.

explore – the female-coded body (read as permeable, leaky, never itself alone, creative) is perfect for transgressing borderlines, simply because that is what it is always doing.

For my own work – written out a subjectivity that is trans and religious, and with a creatively problematised relationship with bodily fecundity – Stanford Friedman’s question mark around the long/big poem is striking. Her indication that the big poem is marked by claims of going far and ‘tunnelling deep’ intersects with Symmons Roberts’s speculations about poetry never being fully secularised and daring the deep. When his claims are set alongside Stanford Friedman’s, a challenge is raised specifically for me as a poet working with faith and religious themes. *The Priest in the Kingdom of Love* is a long poem which, as Wiman might hope, attempts to wrestle with the possibilities of language, religious and otherwise. Its performance of voice – multivalent and, by turns, gendered and non-gendered – is marked by a desire to foreground subjectivity and yet Stanford Friedman’s questioning of the long poem as an attempt to claim a place in a male-defined canon represents one of the striking formal issues for my writing as I move forward from this thesis. In short, how do I, as a subject who, *qua* trans and queer, is always under question by dominant ideas about the subject, poetry and the body find ways to perform and claim ‘voice’ without falling over into un-critical narratives and confession?

One provisional answer I’ve explored in *The Priest* is to construct the poem as simultaneously long and short, rigorous and delicate. The poem consists of sixty-six sections – a conscious echo of the number of books in

the post-Reformation Bible – yet those sections aim for brevity, tautness and restraint. If it would be bold to claim they’ve been guided by Keble’s poetics of Reserve (which anyway has a quite specific focus),⁴⁵ the structure of the poem seeks to model a synthesis between the ambition of EBB and the often scrupulous restraint of CR, shown in many of her shorter works. I have sought a doubled strategy which brings together a kind of lyric delicacy and epic ambition. It is an horizon of doubleness which – in a thesis located so much around doubleness – I suspect will offer rich ‘fruit’ for my work going forward as I attempt to make poems in the context which poet Les Murray calls ‘the new, chastened, unenforcing age of faith.’⁴⁶ Of all the fecund riches available in current and future interrogations of EBB and CR, or in my own poetic explorations, surely the richest and most fecund body is the Poem itself. As I seek to locate myself and their work in tradition and in practice, it is the doubled possibilities of the poem as text and body which challenges and guides: elusive and yet available, complete and yet provisional, discrete and yet leaky, the body which feeds and gives itself away.

⁴⁵ Joshua Taft quotes Keble in relation to Tennyson, saying, ‘John Keble, the major Tractarian poet, wrote to “justify the endeavor of writing sacred poetry” on the grounds that literature, like all else in life, should be an “occasion of devotion” (Tennyson, pp. 31, 33).’ Taft, p. 314. If *The Priest* is engaged in a poetry of devotion, it is not one centred on a pietistic adoration of God in the conventional Christian sense.

⁴⁶ From review of Michael Symmons Roberts, *Corpus*, (London: Cape Poetry, 2004). (Quoted on the cover of Third Printing of *Corpus*.)

The Priest in the Kingdom of Love

A Poem

The Priest in the Kingdom of Love

'To imagine a language means to imagine a form of life.'
Wittgenstein. *Philosophical Investigations*

'There's blood between us, love, my love.'
Christina Rossetti. *The Convent Threshold*

1.

If the world is all that is the case,
If it is the totality of facts, not of things,
What then of prayer?

I sit in church, say authorised words,
The Lord almighty grant us a quiet night
And a perfect end. Amen.

Say them out loud though I'm alone.
That is how it is at this hour,
I make my singular witness

Offer the fact of prayer – a formula,
And more: the compromise of centuries
Made *valid*.

What matter is it if there is no god
To validate? The conditions lack,
Prayer's a game and a fine one,

Our help is in the name of the Lord. Selah!
Night after night, words lock into place,
A game without novelty.

There is no reference point,
No object grounding it,
Beyond imagined Love.

2.

I speak of origin, of need:
Mother, father, country, land,
From whence does Word and Table come?

Faith offers a rule: *All of us*
Carry Her trace, blighted blood,
But Love, what is its sufficiency?

I bite my tongue, taste body's rust,
The heart's black sap, sweet and ripe.
Can this be Apple's final form?

Speak, Eva, speak.

3.

Imagined Love. Day by day
I remember its founding form:
A man at supper with friends,
The night before he died, etc.

'Re-member,' theologians say.
Too clever, I think, this attempt
To make the holy whole,
Reverse the violation.

The priest's business is sacrifice,
The people approach with open hands,
I bear bread and shame, we say *Amen*.
We know many things without proof.

4.

We learn the world, the first world
Of love and drool and sweet milk
Through lips.

What surprise that prayer shares
A language with kisses?

5.

On behalf of the dead I speak,
For the sake of the living;
At funerals I deploy sentences
He was a good man, defended the weak.

I am master of tautology:
God is Love, Hope is Tomorrow,
Some days I know nothing at all:
What is Sin but a life's doxology?

6.

Sin is hymnal,
Body's original psalm,
It is love-chorale,

Never forget, never,
Rome used criminals as victims
In feasts – as Icarus

Thrown from a roof,
Dismembered as Orpheus,
Castrated as Attis.

Imagine! Mouth, skin, bone.
To sing such sweet mar,
Broken! Such sin!

7.

Accept my body as transgression,
My lungs for greed, guts for sloth,
My bones for pride, oh envy, my loins,

Receive my tongue with all its
Honeyed compromise; there will be tears.
My skin: confessional,
My face: a slate cleaned.

8.

I am wracked by assertions:
God is *not* a name,
God is Love, God is, God *is*.

A person without a name is not,
That is one of history's truths
(I have seen the films of the camps

Where names were erased).
If God, if if if, if God
Is to be claimed as lover

I must multiply names:
Pneuma, The Three-in-One,
Mother, Tetragrammaton,

Al-Wajid, Bhagavan, Diabolos,
Jesus, Jesus puts a tongue
Into my mouth, I Am.

I am wracked by sense,
And the meaning of a name
Is sometimes explained.

9.

Before 'Holy' or 'Righteous', before 'The Law',
Before sound was distilled into *bet, aleph, niqqud*
(So many crossings-out), before all that: 'Song'.

Oh, to taste fricatives – damp from lip and palate –
Dental trills, the Spirit chewed by teeth,
Ejected from lungs, an offering!

Oh, to know before, before, before the Book: 'Decision'.
Should the Apple be plucked or crushed?
And, love, what place love?

10.

I've anointed the dying, smeared oil
On the book of human skin,
I've seen what we're written in –
Creases, scars, scabs –
Witnessed terminal breath,

I've known the final room;
Christ lies, sunken angles of bone,
Brittle on a hospital bed.
He dreams of Cross, of ash crumbled
Into grey earth beyond, soon

It will be accomplished, soon.
He dreams of milk, of drool –
O bitter birth, O brush of prayer
On lips, the mother's kiss,
Her exile word!

11.

Eve, I think of you in the first days,
Your touch at night. Nakedness is never

Merely a matter of skin and nipple and quim,
Of breath and lips, a stroke along the spine;

It is World come close,
Our bodies mingled, a fluid-dance –

Glory of finger and eye, of tongue and teeth,
It is Eden's river. Behold! God flows, divides.

12.

I've lived for the feelings of others,
That's a listening of sorts,

What have I learnt? That self
Is bitumen, black as tar,

Oh, how slowly we flow, oh
How slowly we flow, we crack with age.

I've lived for the feelings of others,
A philosophy of sorts. I've heard

Self give up its final word,
Coughs and whispers in

Hospitals and nursing homes.
Oh, how slowly we flow, oh.

13.

Christ gibbers on a hospital bed,
Who knew the Divine could shake and groan?
Something slips free, a syllable of self –
Sweet trill. Deep, deep the sound goes –
Almost name, almost word, almost soul.

14.

Here's what I've learnt:

Every Christ carries a secret,
Warm and worn as a pocket,
Deep in the coat of self;

My God, why have you forgotten me?
Merely template for a frailty of love.

15.

You could be my secret, Eva,
You could agitate, be a Rib of doubt;

I'll lick you in the night, *weep for me*,
I'll ache in the garden of flesh. I'll dream.

O Eve, your blood is honey!
O Eve, for you why do angels never sing?

16.

The dead wash their hands of us
(I've dreamed their secret toil)
And if sin be sin, let it be buried,
Sealed in the Tomb, palsied and black,
Till the body's Glorious Day.

All mutates – bodies, gods, dreams –
The salt of love becomes tasteless,
Cast-away. I ask, I pray:
Why ever should some act
Be more sinful than something else?

17.

O Spirit, O bird! Moved
Only by lean demands: by hunger,
A need to be elsewhere. Migrant!
Oh, to feel air change in lungs, the taste

Of salt and warmth and dry continent.
To be bird, a vagrant swallow;
That feathers might hold the facts of self,
A steadying, soul's compass.

18.

But a philosopher must have conclusions:

*Whereof we cannot speak, Esse est percipi,
The Owl of Minerva spreads its wings...*

I have voices in the head:

*Lord, in your mercy, buy milk, remember Betty,
It's the Summer Fair, selah! Hear my prayer;*

I am Legion, I am traffic, I am mobile phones.

19.

I try to form prayer's capital word
On my tongue. O sweet imagination
Give it shape enough! *Love!*

Love should taste of something,
The sea, I think, brined and unsteady,
Of scale and deep and all we crawled out from.

Of the first day, the Spirit's début,
The frantic dove torn apart,
Her feathers ash on Eden.

Yet of that of which we cannot speak
We must pass over in silence –
Selah!

*The Spirit itself maketh intercession for us
With groanings
Which cannot be uttered.*

20.

On Ash Wednesday, I smear foreheads
With holy fact: *You are dust,*
To dust you shall return.

My hands stain with Cross and oil,
My fingertips fragrant and black
As his who fell. O Imagined Love –

Gospel Eve, Morning Star, Living God –
Forget me not. Meet me in secret,
Teach me your first world

Of breast and milk and touch,
Teach me sin-kissed sin,
The taste of prayer on Eden's soiled skin.

21.

There are always two cities,
The corrupt and true,

Knit together in secret,
Slave and free, male and female, Greek and Jew.

Yet, if the body, if *the Body of Christ, etc.*,
Is the City of God where all is made new,

Glorious things of Thee shall be spoken,
Though I am sinner from my mother's womb.

22.

And what does 'I' signify?
'Language gone to the bad',
An addiction,

A verbal tic, perhaps,
Syllable invested with belief
That if repeated enough

Self will hold firm;
Like Aristotle said – we are
What we do most,

Drunk for ever
Identified with bottle,
Priest with Sin;

It's no shame
To believe in ghosts,
Even the Ghost within,

The corona
About the black eclipse
Of words.

23.

*Suppose there is no secret after all,*¹
The centuries of stone and Table,
High chorale of boys,
Bishop and priest,

All the lines of doctrine,
The aching knees (oh, the aching knees)
Even the work of Him for whom we gather,
And the Mother, *O Blessèd Mother,*

No more than arrangements
Of rumour, misapprehension
For spectacle's sake;
As if the absence of His body

As if the excitement of disciples
Were sufficient
For toil and chant and festival,
A pageant of secrets, *a veil, a cloak.*²

¹ Christina Rossetti, 'Winter: My Secret', l. 8.

² Ibid, l. 12.

24.

*I wear my mask for warmth,*³

Behold! My tea-stained teeth,

My Collar – white on black – a signal:

Snow and innocence (the easy thoughts)

Such hush, shhhhh, keep your lips tight!

³ Rossetti, *Winter: My Secret*, l. 18.

25.

In college we learnt
Morning and evening star are not the same,
'Meaning' different to 'reference';

Thus, he who fell could be Venus,
His magnificence so bright
It challenged the utter uniform of dawn.

Lucifer, a point of flame
Plunging (ha! a thermometer),
Enough to draw crowds to point and gasp,

To ask the question we all ask
When nature (faith?) abandons its course:
What private possibility dies in this display?

26.

Some days I know nothing at all,
Which is to say, a priest is not special.
In college we argued over the being of Being,
Whether God is a name,
What virtue lay in mystery.

Virtue is not a body on a table,
No matter how neat the chapel, no matter
How kind the attendants, such seemly suits.
Blood is dark, skin is wax, is yellow peel
Best burnt, yes! We should all end up in the ash.

The family asked me to come, I repeat in my head.
To kiss the cold forehead of dad, brother, lover, with oil,
A charm against the day we shall be so still.
In college I said the priest is liminal, once (a flourish)
He is Kharon plying his repetitive trade.

27.

Why should I not have lovers too?
Which is to say, when no one else
Comes near, God will have to do.

Prayer is the body's work, *is*,
I was taught to steeple my fingers
As a child, form a spire, *Like this!*

Prayer ascends, it is naked, *shiver*.
O God, avert thine eyes! Thine eyes
Are multitude, thy tongue is bitter.

28.

Suppose prayer is a work of 'the heart' –
Cordiform, split and chambered,
Each half requites the other;

O, unquiet continent! That beats within,
Do not o'erwhelm the sea of my blood,
The rivers of vein! Or so a prayer might go;
Yet *cordiform* overheard might proceed other ways –

Along the line of a stave,
Hold the shape of a song, heart's chord.
A prayer to sing a person's latitudes.

29.

Suppose, suppose, suppose
Prayer is a captive, *the girl of the deep*.

She hides me beneath a tiny bed
Among the games and Lego bricks,

The girl of the deep,
Who keeps my secrets within her skin,

Night after night we drown
In silks and frills, blue and green,

She never stirs or makes a sound,
I offer her supplication, *oh god, please*;

The girl of the deep, who never stirs,
Who never makes a sound.

30.

Suppose *True North* were a name for prayer,
And prayer a kind of ice;

Suppose orisons form and crust
Above the black of a body's need,

Suppose I've searched Love's arctic skies,
Suppose. Suppose I'm adrift in a heart's slurred sea.

31.

Behold! Chariots of God are ten thousand,
They smite hairy scalps of Sin,

The Lord, Lord!, shall dip His feet! Blood!
Faithless, the faithless are trampled,

Dogs lick their sores,
Bones are midden-bound, God's shitehouse!

Yet flesh faints for Thee, for Thee, my flesh,
Marrow and fatness mine in thy Holy Place;

Marrow my soul, Fierce Sanctuary, marrow me,
Melt wax, burn mine iniquity!

32.

At Matins, I say authorised words,
O Lord, open thou my lips,
And my mouth shall proclaim thy praise.

Say them out loud,
This uttering by rule a glory of mouth:
Love as call, a bird desperately sings

Your black-dust words
From a city tree:
Eli, Eli, lema Sabachthani,

O glorious hour of need!
A mating cry, the last, the last
Departure, O exile, O world!

33.

Yet, surely Word also declines
Along a female line, *selah!*
I've sisters, mothers, grandmothers⁴

Who tasted orchard fruits, grapes fresh
From the vine, pomegranates full and fine,
How fair the vine must grow.⁵

And if I kiss you, sisters,
Will it be for love or to betray? Both?
Oh, refresh my sunken eyes.

⁴ See: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Letter to Chorley: 'I look everywhere for grandmothers and see none.'

⁵ See: Christina Rossetti, *GM*, ll. 18-20

34.

The Word! Oh, that I might know!
Meaning is honey,

Meaning is honey-gold, and angels are bees,
They seethe in the Hive of Heaven;

Psalms sting my lips, take themselves off to die;
O Honey, O Word, O Queen!

Origin! The sweet quim of dreams,
O honey-mother, feed me,

Feed me memory,
O Honey, O Hive, O Queen!

35.

Let me reframe my words.

Can you be real, Gospel Eve?

Real. Oh, beguiling term.

Language is not a picture of reality,

Sprachspielen play us night and day.

Eva, Eva, Eva, we are the cheap strings.

36.

Chalice, ciborium, paten, pall,
Lavabo, veil, burse, corporal.
My litany: *One Bread, One Body, One Lord.*

Words! Oh, to tear Body in two
Discover mansions of heaven, Oh,
To find a universe of Roods,

Latin syllables uttered
From Quires, Oh, to believe!
To find a reliquary of self.

37.

Outside is rumour, is murmur, is groan –
Traffic is liturgy, rush-hour chorale,
Listen! Joggers tap weary orisons;

Inside, the Table heaves,
A man waits for Mass to begin,
His breath: Spirit-rasp.

Thus, day draws in,
Oxygen scarce as true prayer, Oh
Curse his aquatic coughs,

Curse the day, stagnant, mucal!
Outside is rumour of air,
I hear tyres sigh, squeal. Sweet frequencies.

38.

The Table, the Table, the Table!
Love's work occulted in domestic terms?

Thus, Herbert's point: that for all
Our dust we're bade welcome,

Scene of our shame not misericords
Or sepulchres, but a supper at home

Among friends, our sinful bodies –
Emptied and cast off, a winding-sheet.

39.

Supper is a catalogue of sin,
We water His blood with spit,
I finger His paten, I touch His crusted skin.

I gather silver at service end,
My night a Book of Sleepless Hours,
I pray by rule: O *Lord, your guardian angels send!*

40.

O Eva

You attend me in secret

In my wonky third eye

Among the words

That edge towards sentences

Never quite

I think I will never be free of you

You are singular pain

Lingchi

41.

Prayer is a sickness
And Love grows in bones:

Like cancer it replicates,
Indifferent to what we ask or want.

God – old stump, calcified –
Tries and fails to heal,

And memory, O memory.
Eden grows through me,

(It grows through us all),
That's a pretty conceit, anyway;

The Garden grows black with past.

42.

Speculation:

God died to save us from Words –

Self, Divine, Son, History, Spirit, Love,
Ah, the Cross! Certainty's last huzzah.

43.

Am I required to believe
In the uncorruption of saints,
The Mother's timeless womb?

There is limit, even if limit
Is never drawn. (I cannot
Give an instance of every rule.)

I don't know what 'believe in' means
In the vast majority of cases,
Which is to say I think it enough

To acknowledge glamour of words –
Relic, body, bone – I think
Mystery is laid in syllables, syntax,

Miracle a kind of grammar,
Milk to train the tongue.

44.

A kind of grammar...

Explicable,

Available, then;

Though, how can miracle
Be anyone's native tongue?
Even for Him who found cosmos

In fish and loaves, who spat on dirt,
Unsealed eyes. Though that would
Be something – to be able to find a way

Back to Singularity,
Its wild expansion of mass, electron,
Simply through touch:

To feel in soil's cool dark
The gravity of human need; to take fish,
Find the sea's spine and snap.

45.

So if He might be all in all,
Then why shouldn't you
Be my recording angel?

Door-scratcher, you come
Without prompting
For a bowl of milk,

You mark down my sins and praises
In a frame of wood,
Your purrs are psalms, hot and precise,

Glossolalia too lofty for me;
I cannot read the fierce hymnal
Of your eyes,

I am tempted to trust your fur, black silk,
But my skin, O arch-backed prince,
My skin knows your claws.

46.

What is Church if not
Mercy and *Forgiveness* limed?
The Spirit-bird struggles –

A Collect, gift-song snared,
From whom no secrets are hid;
Writhe, Mother, writhe,

Ghost, angel, fiend! Your love
Is swords, your love is fraught,
Fairy, witch, and sprite,

Your love, *Our Lady Passion*,
Stabbed with swords
*Where the Babe sucked.*⁶

⁶ See: Aurora Leigh, Bk 1, ll. 150-161

47.

We gather at church door
For a body, and perhaps
This is creak of Last Day,

Ten of us, eyes downcast,
Behold! A universe in pavement cracks;

I hold a Word in my hands – *Eleison* –
I whisper, *In God, nothing is ever truly lost*,
But already a Seal

Is broken and I am sick
Of rain and storm, and pale horse,

And pale horse comes to my door
And perhaps this is the Last Day,
And rain, and rain, and angels

Silent in Heaven, and dare I believe,
In God, nothing is ever truly lost?

48.

A body dies and I sing Requiem,
Man hath but a short time to live,
Man hath but the validity of material things!

Requiem is black universe,
Word is gravity,
Body is praise!

49.

Ow-ur Far-ther. I stretch the syllables
And late they realise
This is not solitary prayer;

I hear faint echoes, hallowed-owed,
Owed to whom? Be-bee, your-or,
Incantation, a series of stutters

To *Thy Name*. O memory,
You love to tease, release impressions
Drip, drip, no wonder

We're slow to find prayer's metre,
It's been so long since we tried;
Lead us not into temptation,

But deliver us, deliver us!
No stragglers, no laggards,
Keep us till the end,

Bitter funeral-music:
For thine is the Kingdom,
For thine. For thine. For thine.

50.

Unless a seed falls to earth
And die, unless,

Unless Adam takes
A knife, unless

He becomes
A Daughter of Eve, unless;

I watch a quince fall
From my garden's tree,

All summer I've seen it
Throw off green,

I've watched it
find the butter-gold

Of fulfilment,
I've watched it tremble.

Any moment, any moment,
Unless the seed falls,

Unless Adam;
Unless...

51.

Yet to find one's final form,
Surely that's the meaning

Of spes contra spem?

The ashes of a neighbour wait

In my study for burial in a garden
Of grit and peonies and loam,

Soon to be carried a final time,
Soon to be earthbound,

A statement in ontology.
Ecstatic. Cool. Unravelling.

52.

Eva, if you and I were permitted feast –
Incense, statues, the full, painted parade –
I might kneel in our sanctuary, the room
Where we fucked and dreamt,
Perform benediction, disclose a relic:

Behold! The Blessèd Body, Tantum Ergo!
She stabbed me here, here, here!
I might lift mirror as monstrance, *Behold! Her face!*
I might sing; call you mother, lover,
Every secret name, or weep grandly

Like Abelard or was it Heloise? I might.
I might rest my head on a pillow,
Indulge all the fantasy of grief –
I might inhale the last of you, sweet, sweet myrrh,
I might let you lift from the bed, body's petrichor.

53.

The rendered self. Always heavier
Than expected, it's the language
That tricks us – *ashes to ashes*

Makes us think two hundred pounds
Of redaction becomes flakes,
Fly-away, burnt paper.

And if a paper trail is the best
We can hope to leave behind,
A few lines of bequests, *that vase you liked,*

Biology is kinder. Fire cannot kill
Marrow, cold neither. Earth resumes
Its affair with stolen bone.

54.

The body crumbles into its appointed place,
Two foot by two, powder swirls above the hole's lip;
I sing my words, *ashes to ashes, dust to dust,*
Sing, *we are people of unclean hands,*

As I pour damp afternoon into Sheol,
My skin dark with soil and burnt bone;
Take me with you, the dim day responds,
Take me, priest; we understand each other, let us thrive.

55.

The body crumbles into its appointed place,
I survey *The Life Everlasting* from grave's lip,
Witness flesh give consent to earth, its work
Of forgiveness, the ministrations of worms

And *Death No More*. I scrape the last of self's
Gritted truth from the tub and walk away,
Sure of nothing except soil and winter and joy,
That our end is a wreckage of heaven.

56.

Self, self, self. Everlasting liturgy!
Hear my repetitions – moist sibilance;

Surely Christ was supposed
To set us free from all that,

The Divine tumbled to earth,
Given over to paps, milky dreams.

Study the Renaissance:
Art's Madonna nurses her Child,

Sometimes instructs him in his own Book,
Her nipples raw with love, nectared milk

Hardly enough to raise a smile.
He stares out from oil, sick of holy cream.

57.

Gospel Eve, let me count your secret names:
Unction, Kyria, Hapax, Grief.

Gospel Eve, I'd thought you dead,
Shed skin, a discarded Rosary,

Gospel Eve, you return in secret names:
Unction, Kyria, Hapax, Grief.

Gospel Eve, sweet groin, queen of lick,
Even now I save your side of the bed,

Gospel Eve, the mattress sags with secret names:
Unction, Kyria, Hapax, Grief.

Gospel Eve, your touch is knives,
Your tongue is spark, your smile...

Gospel Eve, your smile is blackened ice.
You stole my virginity, I stole your secret names.

58.

Eve and Priest. Bound together,
Like Madonna and Son
In a History of Art,

Though have you ever noticed
How in the Old Masters
Her hands are always full?

The Fruit of her recklessness
Held up, cherub as trophy –
Behold! See what I've done.

Or at the end, Son crushed
And bruised in her arms,
Her tears mingled with

Divine sweat and Calvary,
A re-learning:
Milk is not so different from blood.

59.

I return from the garden of remembrance,
I wash the dead from my hands,
I sing the versicles for Evensong, *O Lord*,
My larynx trembles with mucus and awe.

60.

Pure throat. That is how a city sings after birds:
Basso profundo, jug-jug-juggernaut, Listen!
Children laugh, and fucking two-strokes –
Bad soprano – everywhere;

Hi-rises hold up sky and church is small,
Father, Son and Holy Ghost
Were swallows and autumn's come,
New trinities emerge: concrete, glass and diesel fumes.

61.

*And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem,
Coming down from out of heaven...*

City! City, City of God, Salem, *selah!*
Heaven's cast-off, stained with spite and oil,
Oh, shining damp cobble land, breathe!
Fume with old coal and soot and shale!
You make all things new, the tired mills sing,
Derelict song. Salem, old friend, we dream,
We wear rain for tears. Miracle us,
Glass-clad our shame, our need!

62.

Pray for me, Padre. Salem leans close,
Diesel lunged, makes a request:
Pray for me. Unpronounceable street names,
Road junctions are woven in his greasy chest,

Each ribbon a small campaign.
Decision grows dirty so quickly,
Pray for me, Padre, and I ask for prayer in return.
Change is spared and Salem sighs,

Shuffles, fat-arsed, on a damp cardboard mat,
Resumes patrol, disappears again.
See, I am conjuror! Love erases doubt,
Can be measured in silver coin.

63.

Suppose, suppose, suppose
Prayer is a spark thrown

On a wall, a shadow;
Suppose it's fire,

Though flame is surely
Spent metaphor;

We lay the trap
In candle and stone,⁷

For Him who delights in light,
We say:

He shews His wings, yes,
Perhaps he shews His wings.

I have teeth-music –
Shivery and stained.

⁷ See: R.S. Thomas, 'The Empty Church', l. 1.

64.

Oh that my words were now written!
Oh that they were printed in a book!
That they were graven with an iron pen
And lead, for ever in the rock!

65.

Christ's body revives – white husk –
Presents itself for inspection
Mass by Mass.

My flesh is confession, a tour of ruin,
Behold! My hands tremble
As I lift The Cup:

Drink this, all of you,
A new Covenant. Forgive, forgive!
Words pile up like bodies –

Salem, Sin, Gospel Eve. Love.
Bodies pile up like words,
Come to this: remember me.

66.

Night. A communion rail:

Behold, The Holy Name!

Behold, The Bread of Shame!

(It hardly matters if it's a dream).

And I might believe light can be sour,

The moon red, that I kneel

At world's rim, a herald;

I might believe in Return,

His discalced step sensitive as a fox's,

A tap and scratch on stone,

His scent, pelt and forest,

That this is what new creation

Smells like, an unlearning of words.

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