Victorian Women Writers, Radical Grandmothers, and the Gendering of God

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Introduction

ANTECEDENTS OF THE VICTORIAN
“GODDESS STORY”

England has had many learned women, not merely readers but writers of the learned languages, in Elizabeth's time and afterwards—women of deeper acquirements than are common now in the greater diffusion of letters; and yet where were the poetesses? The divine breath . . . why did it never pass, even in the lyrical form, over the lips of a woman? How strange! And can we deny that it was so? I look everywhere for grandmothers and see none. It is not in the filial spirit I am deficient, I do assure you—witness my reverent love of the grandfathers!

—The Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, edited by Frederic G. Kenyon, 1:231–32

I felt a mother-want about the world[.]

—Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Aurora Leigh 1:40

IF VICTORIAN WOMEN WRITERS yearned for authorial forebears, or, in Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s words, for “grandmothers,” perhaps that longing had something to do with what Barrett referred to as “mother-want,” a sense of the actual and metaphorical absence of a maternal entity (Letters of EBB 1:232). While a multitude of orphans crowd the pages of Victorian fiction, anecdotal and statistical evidence testify to the all-too-common incidence of mothers felled by childbirth. But, as this study shall show, “mother-want” is also inextricably connected to what I call “mother-god-want.” Indeed, the lack so keenly indicated in the phrase “mother-want” exacerbated the need for a Mother in Heaven, which Victorian Protestant-
ism was unprepared to supply. The women writers taken up here—Barrett Browning, Charlotte Brontë, Florence Nightingale, Anna Jameson, and George Eliot—responded to this lack by imagining symbolic female divinities that allowed them to acquire the authorial legitimacy patriarchal culture denied them.

If these writers confronted a want of earthly and divine mothers, I suggest that there were grandmothers who, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, envisioned powerful female divinities that would reconfigure society in dramatic ways. These millenarians and socialist feminists felt that the time had come for women to bring about the earthly paradise that patriarchal institutions had failed to establish. Recuperating a symbolic divine in the form of the Great Mother—a pagan Virgin Mary, a female messiah, and a titanic Eve—Joanna Southcott, Eliza Sharples, Frances Wright, and others set the stage for Victorian women writers to envision and impart emanations of puissant Christian and pagan goddesses. Though the Victorian authors I study often mask progressive rhetoric, even in some cases seeming to reject these foremothers, their radical genealogy appears in mystic, metaphysical revisions of divinity.

Marianne Thormählen remarks that it is a disservice to imagine Victorian religious life as anything less than variable and complex, perhaps more so for the female adherent (2). In keeping with this insight, I assume that while the patriarchal language of Christian God talk was omnipresent in the nineteenth century, it did not prevent the strong agency of women who utilized Christian dogma for progressive purposes. Indeed, though from the Althusserian and Foucauldian perspective religion may be viewed as a disciplinary apparatus, it is also true that women who were profoundly engaged in institutionalized religion were not merely automatons reproducing patriarchal religious systems, for women’s involvement in radical spirituality has historically been aligned with demands for their rights (Rickard 143; Braude xv; Knight 8–9).

Recognizing that patriarchal Christianity is powerful but not monolithic, I couple analysis of the historical record with respect for the writer’s intellectual labor and spiritual—even mystical—pursuit of knowledge. I should firmly state here that my purpose is not to argue that a maternal deity exists. Nor am I interested in debates about matriarchy and goddess worship as precursors of patriarchy or in their contributions to what is called the modern “goddess movement.” While this study provides historical background for the “goddess movement,” I am more drawn to the tantalizing relationship between nineteenth-century British women’s radical politics and the woman writer’s tortuous engagements in gender politics vis-à-vis her profes-
sions as writer and believer. My aim is to show that the rhetorical concept of a female god is important to a number of major, mid-century Victorian women writers who revise Christian and classical mythology to create alternative mythoi that subversively critique nineteenth-century gender politics.

To accept that religion provides culture with a myth system regarding gender also requires the scholar to confine the term “God” to its always already metaphorical representations. Nineteenth-century literati understood this. In *Literature and Dogma* Matthew Arnold captures the linguistic turn concerning the ontology of deity when asserting that “the word ‘God’ is used in most cases as by no means a term of science or exact knowledge, but a term of poetry and eloquence, a term *thrown out*, so to speak, at a not fully grasped object of the speaker’s consciousness, a *literary* term, in short; and mankind mean different things by it as their consciousness differs” (Arnold 10–11).

Likewise, Nietzsche notes that what we call “truth” is merely a “mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms” (“On Truth and Lie” 46). In the twentieth century, feminist religious studies scholar Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza repeats this refrain, cautioning that the Bible allows the reader to converse about deity only in “metaphorical, symbolic, mythological, analogical language” (Fiorenzi, “G*d” 116; see also E. Johnson).

In this study, I generally refer to ‘feminist symbolic deities’ as god and use the capitalized version, “God,” to refer to the Christian metaphor for deity. But since this study cannot be an analysis of God or of knowing God, I gravitate to Martin Bidney’s method for studying literary epiphanies, which he views as analogous to “traditional theophanies or appearances of the divine.” Thus, rather than attempting to describe the divine, Bidney focuses on the “*observed structures*” inherent to the genre of epiphany (1, 9). Such an approach recognizes that although analyzing the writer’s inner feelings and individual personal characteristics alone is problematic, textual remainders can be historicized and analyzed through attentive close reading of a range of rhetorical and textual signs.

**The Epistemology of Mysticism**

Of the writers I study, all but Jameson depict spiritual and aesthetic trance-like experiences—in fact, the agnostic Eliot had an encounter with a painting of the Madonna that was all too immanent, sending the great writer into momentary hysteria. Analyzing such epiphanies requires scholarly consciousness of the body’s intelligence, that is, its ability to represent internal states through intensities of “mood, feeling, sensibility, affectivity” (Code
Analyzing phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of the body’s hermeneutic aptitudes, Carol Bigwood explains that only the con-natural body (the body immersed in the physical world around it) is capable of knowing the world, meaning that all metaphysical knowledge bears physical reminders of the body, and vice versa (Bigwood 108). The connatural body, Rudolph Otto avers, has intuitions that are “cognitions” in a cosmos that is always deeply mysterious (147). Gloria Anzaldúa’s aesthetic might be described as graphically phenomenological when she asserts that literary language actually affects blood pressure, heart rate, and muscles (77). Clearly, the above-named thinkers struggle to find a language to describe the dynamic relation between identity, emotion, the physical world, and the body. Likewise, they share the belief that knowledge is created, transferred, shared, and analyzed by and through complex physical entities that participate in, influence, and are acted upon by physical, psychological, and cultural phenomena. To ignore the body’s knowledge, if that were even possible, would be to negate the original site of knowledge gathering and processing.

If Barrett Browning, Brontë, Nightingale, and Eliot were in some ways mystics, it is important to grapple with the epistemology of mysticism. I turn to descriptions of thirteenth-century medieval Beguine mystics because they exhibited so many similarities with the writers studied here and because these mystics were dependent upon the body’s knowledge. As Alvilda Petroff remarks, in the visions of Beguines Hadewijch and Beatrijs “knowing is performed . . . by the whole person—body, soul, and heart” (61). A strong influence on the Beguines, medieval theologian William of Thierry believes that love was “the only faculty capable of leading” to divine knowledge (Brunn and Epiney-Burgard xxviii). As Emilie Zum Brunn and Georgette Epiney-Burgard explain, “It is Love herself that becomes knowledge,” since “Love alone is able to reach God’s depths which transcend the intellect” (xviii). William of Thierry asserts further that reason can understand God only by examining what He is not, whereas “Love is content to rest in what He is” (qtd. in Brunn and Epiney-Burgard xxviii). In letter 9, Hadewijch illustrates this understanding in her avowal that mystic love can occur only through relationality, in which two beings are “wholly in the other, and yet each one . . . will always remain himself” (qtd. in Petroff 61).

Beatrijs of Nazareth’s treatise titled Seven Manners of Loving describes the phases of spiritual love that begin with a yearning for caritas founded on a desire for perfection and then moves to a recognition of the mortal’s inability to love perfectly. This is followed by the experience of “Excess” and “violence” coming from the suffering invoked by attempting to love divinely (Petroff 58). Having submitted to violence and torment, the seeker is mal-
leable enough to be “‘lovingly embraced’” by God (qtd. in Petroff 58). In the penultimate phases the return of torture converts the soul in the “crucible of desire” so that the seeker experiences serenity when desire is no longer the “object of knowing but a way of knowing” (Petroff 59). In the seventh and final phase the perfected soul awaits being received into heaven by the “‘limitless abyss of Divinity’” (qtd. in Petroff 59). What is so astonishing in these writings is that the mystic’s adoration of the human ability to love almost surpasses her love for God. As Hadewijch writes, “‘Love holds God’s divinity captive in its nature’” (qtd. in Petroff 61). Though each maintained a profound relation with the Christian God, the nineteenth-century writers I examine yearned for a more expansive, loving concept of divinity than they found in the patriarchal God of their fathers.

The writings of at least one medieval female mystic were translated during the Victorian period. Originally published in 1640, Julian of Norwich’s *Sixteen Revelations of Divine Love* was reissued in England in 1843. In the preface, the Victorian editor confesses that it was impossible to judge “how [page break] far these Revelations may be imputed to a fevered imagination,” surely an indication of how essential it was for women writers to manage and mask their own epiphanies (vi–vii). Nevertheless, the publication of Julian’s visions suggests that the age was ripening to the idea of female visionaries and female gods. Seeking metaphors for the excess that the word “God” cannot describe, Julian writes that “the high might of the Trinity is our Father, and the deep wisdom of the Trinity is our Mother, and the great love of the Trinity is our Lord” (*Sixteen Revelations* 14:58). Julian expands upon the female aspect of the Trinity, saying, “I saw that the Second Person which is our Mother substancially, the same deer worthy person is now become our mother sensual; for we be double of Gods making; that is to say, substancial and sensual. Our substance is the higher party which we have in our Father God Almighty: and the Second Person of the Trinity is our Mother in kind, in our substancial making, in whom we be grounded and rooted: and he is our Mother of mercy, in our sensuality” and “in our Mother Christ we profit and encrease” (145).

These excerpts from Julian’s “showings” illustrate the irony that human beings are capable of incorporating the sum total of the Trinity’s qualities, whereas the ostensibly perfect Christian God’s character must be divided into three parts. In addition, like her nineteenth-century descendants, the mystic of Norwich could not conceive of God without imagining a feminine element alongside the implied social (“sensual”) good that such a divine materiality would produce. Mixing gender designations, Julian implies that masculinity cannot account for all that is divine and that an amorphous
gender may be more characteristic of deity and humankind. As I show in the chapter on Anna Jameson, Victorian debates about the Immaculate Conception articulate the subliminal fear that a male God cannot fully comprehend all creation. Uncannily, too, Julian's depiction of Mother Christ is reminiscent of Florence Nightingale's longing for a female savior as well as of Barrett Browning's image of the double-breasted Victorian Age and of the double-seeing female poet who sings a song of a male and female God in *Aurora Leigh*.

Resacralizing the Feminine: *Romanticism and Anthropology*

Distinctive metaphors for female divinity were not born Athena-like out of the minds of the writers I study. Though “God” is an abstraction, my approach to that concept is of necessity materialist, for the writers I examine embody the concept of a female god for the purpose of imagining substantive improvements in the world in general and for women in particular. Hence, I now turn to historicizing the dynamics of mother-god-want to show that the Victorians were at the cusp of a number of heritages from the Romantic period that influenced the production of goddess imagery. I consider the Romantic concept of Mother Nature and poetic creativity; nineteenth-century anthropological debates about the origins of the family and its relationship to the gender of deity; and Victorian interest in Britain's own polytheistic pagan roots. I shall conclude by discussing utopian feminists and millenarians, whose depictions of a female divine foreshadow the mythologies imagined by the women writers I study.

Thomas Vargish argues that prior to publication of George Eliot's novels, fictional inscriptions of providence unified the English novel, meaning that for most early Victorians the universe was a “moral theater” in which history was explained by a Christian deity (3). Providing unity and order, cosmogonies featured deities overcoming chaos and explaining the origins of the universe as well as its historical cycles (Prickett 128). Though polytheism held sway in the ancient world, with the rise of Judaism and Christianity in the West the idea of God became that of a single, unchanging being (Gunton 24). The problem with monotheistic religions, as Colin A. Gunton suggests, is that they often underwrite monolithic political positions (24). These attitudes are apparent in *The Mythology of Ancient Greece and Italy* (1838), when the historian and Trinity College alumnus Thomas Keight-
ley stated that while polytheism is the religion of “unenlightened,” feeble “tribes,” Christian monotheism is the apex of civilization (2–3).

Despite such imperial attitudes, the major male Romantics had revised the literary tradition through what Northrop Frye refers to as a “polytheistic imagination,” given Wordsworth’s sanctification of Mother Nature; Keats’s vow to ensure that the “heathen Goddess” Psyche is not “neglected”; Blake’s extraordinary parallel universe of Ossian-like gods; and Byron’s depictions of Astarte, among other pagans (Frye 16; Keats, *Poetical Works* 7:289–90). With a polytheistic classical tradition that was central to the British cultural and educational apparatus, England itself was rife with variant mythologies, bearing as it did the Celtic heritage so apparent in British landscape and history. Thus, there were more goddesses than one knew what to do with, and it would be surprising if women writers had not been piqued by the female figures represented in sacred and profane texts. Indeed, unlike many of their sister writers, Barrett, Nightingale, Brontë, and Eliot were themselves immersed in classical and Christian mythologies.

If the Romantics were in the process of resacralizing nature, as Kate Rigby argues, we see this exhibited in Rousseau’s *Émile*, which states that only one book is “open to every one—the book of nature,” a declaration subordinating the Bible as the most sacred text (Rigby 24; Rousseau 259). But even the venerable Bible participates in its own deconstruction. Mired in doublespeak, the gloss in the Brontë family Bible regarding multiple gods in the Genesis ur-text reads as follows: “It is plain from many other texts, as well as from the nature and reason of the thing, that God alone is man’s Creator; and it is no less plain from this text than from diverse other places, that man had more Creators than one person.” To annotate a self-proclaimed monotheistic text thusly certainly does not inspire the faith the annotator intended. Hardly monolithic, then, the jealous male Jewish God and his adherents constantly refer to other gods and goddesses who are the enemy of monotheism. There are at least forty places in the Old Testament referring to Jews’ participation in goddess worship (Davis 67). For example, Jeremiah records that Jewish women worshipped Ishtar, burning “incense to the queen of heaven” and pouring out “drink offerings to her” (Jer. 44:17; Parrinder 195). Likewise, the papyri of Elephantiné (a Jewish military colony) report on the worship of “Yahweh but also of other gods of whom one, Anathyahu, bore the name of the female deity Anath” (Parrinder 195).

For all its masculinism, the Bible also teems with feminine images of God, including those of the female pelican, mother bear, female homemaker, and other similar tropes (Mollenkott 44–48, 49–53, 60–68). Fur-
thermore, the Virgin Mary’s ambiguous power troubles the patriarchal Law of the Father, as will be discussed more fully in the chapters on Jameson, Nightingale, and Eliot. Victorian scholars suggest that the early Christian Church would not have obtained its hegemony if it had not bowed to the hoi polloi’s desire to worship the Virgin. For instance, Dean of St. Paul’s Cathedral Henry Hart Milman admits in *History of Christianity* (1840) that the early Church was able to obtain and continue its mainstream status only by becoming polytheistic (3:424). Regarding schisms in the early Church, Milman eschews the idea that “our colder European reason” would accept the intolerable Gnostic fiction of a God who had a “female associate, personating the male and female Energies or Intelligences of the Deity” (2:49). Nevertheless, he adds that debates about the Trinity (always itself polytheistic) and the essence of Christ’s divinity led to the worship of the Virgin, angels, and saints (3:424).

For all Milman’s grumbling, the Victorian period was immersed in popular renditions of the Madonna. As Eric Trudgill’s study shows, at mid-century it became a fad to call women “Madonna,” with Margaret Oliphant among those bearing the moniker (258, 259). Apparently, G. H. Lewes referred to George Eliot as “Madonna,” and some of her friends dubbed her “Our Lady” (Gilbert and Gubar 476). Many fictional characters also were signified with the term “Madonna,” including Eliot’s own cast of characters. *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1858) features Mrs. Amos Barton as “a large, fair, gentle Madonna,” and there is a Virgin Mary motif in *Adam Bede, Middlemarch*, and *Romola* (1:24; qtd. in Trudgill 263).10 Charles Kingsley’s *Yeast* depicts a Freudian rationale for the lure of the heroine as Virgin *avant la lettre* when a High Church curate who contemplates going over to Romanism querulously asks, “Would you have me try to be a Prometheus, while I am longing to be once more an infant on a mother’s breast? . . . Will you reproach me, because when I see a soft cradle lying open for me . . . with a Virgin Mother’s face smiling down all woman’s love about it . . . I long to crawl into it and sleep awhile?” (qtd. in Trudgill 260).

Such fictional renditions of mother-god-want live up to John Ruskin’s dictum that “All beautiful fiction is of the Madonna, whether the Virgin of Athens or of Judah—Pan-Athenaic always” (267). Ruskin’s reference to the “Pan-Athenaic” confesses Christianity’s immersion in classicism and its gods, and if we return to Milman’s history, there, too, he acknowledges and adulates the “beautiful anthropomorphism of the Greeks,” praising the way in which “The cumbrous and multiform idol, in which wisdom, or power, or fertility, was represented by innumerable heads or arms or breasts, as in the Ephesian Diana, was refined into a being, only distinguished from human
nature by its preterhuman development of the noblest physical qualities of man.” As Milman asserts, moving away from depicting gods in female form, “The imagination here took” a “nobler course” and “by degrees deities became men, and men deities” (1:24–25). As we see in this extract, the Western patriarchal tendency was to disavow “multiform” goddesses because their “breasts” and “fertility” were viewed as barbaric in contrast to the ostensibly “grander,” unified, godlike male form.

While Romantic writers revised the culture’s mythoi, they also brought Britain’s Celtic heritage to the fore. Matthew Arnold viewed the Romantics—Keats in particular—as the high point of the Celtic strain of “natural magic” in British literature (Complete Works 9:214; see also “Study of Celtic Literature” 4:123). With the study of Stonehenge and its provenance, late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century historians feverishly recuperated indigenous remains. In his work, eccentric amateur archaeologist Godfrey Higgins refers to a female progenitor of the gods (“Eire, Eirin, Eirean, Eirinn”) (169), while Welsh writer Edward Davies references “Dwy-vach” as “the mother of mankind,” analogous to the “Magna Mater of antiquity” (105). Theosophist Madame Blavatsky would later consult Higgins’s study when she wrote Isis Unveiled. Walter Scott’s recuperation of Scottish artifacts and Thomas Macpherson’s Ossian fueled interest in the gods and goddesses of the Celts for decades. Reviling the polytheism practiced by Druids in the area and describing their worship of the goddess Onvana, Cornish antiquarian H. J. Whitfield conceded that the “rude sublimity” of Druid worship “impressed itself upon nature, and a thousand years have passed over, but not eradicated it” (52).

Likewise, Arnold describes how the English bear a physical and primordial mark on their bodies and souls from the Celts’ rude sublimity. Prescribing Celtic literature as the cure for Victorian malaise and Mammonism, he exclaims that even though Ossian was a forgery, its Celtic Titanism spread “like a flood of lava through Europe” and inspired writers thereafter (Arnold, “Study of Celtic Literature” pt. 4:116). He goes so far as to assert that nothing England might do for the Celts could surpass what the Celts had done for England, for English literature received its passion and “Titanism,” a là Byron, from these forebears (Arnold, “Study” pt. 4:116, 117, 118). Contending that the Celtic imagination glories in nature, Arnold also concludes that the Celts’ “feminine idiosyncrasy” caused their deep connection to “the secret of natural beauty and natural magic” and their need to “be close to it, to half-divine it” (Arnold, ”Study” pt. 3:545–46).

In these passages, Arnold could well have been describing the wild-hearted Scotsman Thomas Carlyle. Unmoved by moribund Christianity,
Carlyle’s Teufelsdrockh asserts in “The Everlasting Yea” that it was crucial to “embody the divine Spirit of that [Christian] Religion in a new Mythus, in a new vehicle and vesture” (*Sartor Resartus*). Carlyle explicitly pays tribute to Nature as god’s sartorial garment of choice, when Teufelsdrockh, ecstatically receiving his longed for vision, exclaims, “O Nature!—Or what is Nature? Ha! why do I not name thee GOD? Art not thou the ‘Living Garment of God’?” Like other Romantics, Carlyle was deeply moved by Goethe’s representation of the “Eternal Feminine” in *Faust*. In “Goethe’s Helena,” Carlyle quotes the climactic moment where Helena enfolds Faust and “her Body melts away,” while her “Garment and Veil remain in his arms.” At this point, Phorcyas interprets the sign to Faust, saying, “Hold fast, what now alone remains to thee. / That Garment quit not,” for “The goddess is it not, whom thou hast lost, / Yet godlike is it. See thou use aright / The priceless high bequest, and soar aloft” (emphasis added). The stage directions read: “HEL-ENA’S Garments unfold into Clouds, encircle FAUST, raise him aloft, and float away with him” (215). In this revelation, Faust learns that the garment of god is more truly the garment of the goddess. In deconstructionist splendor, Carlyle comments of this moment that “symbol and thing signified are no longer clearly distinguished” (217).

Heavily influencing the English Romantics, Continental writers conceived an extraordinary interest in the feminine divine. In the chapter on George Eliot, I discuss Ludwig Feuerbach and Auguste Comte’s representations of the all-but-divine goddess. Here, though, I will mention Novalis’s *Henry von Ofterdingen*, which features a sacrament in which lovers partake of a drink mixed with the ashes of a goddess. Those who imbibe the potation immediately experience a “pleasant greeting of the mother with ineffable joy” for “She was present to each one there, and her mysterious presence seemed to transfigure all” (144). Friedrich Schiller also genders Nature in “On Naive and Sentimental Poetry,” writing that “We see then in nature devoid of reason only a fortunate sister, who remained behind in the maternal home, out of which we stormed in the high spirits of our freedom to foreign lands. With painful desire we long to return thence so soon as we’ve begun to experience the distress of culture and hear in the foreign country of art, the moving voice of the mother” (“On Naive and Sentimental Poetry”).

But then, counterintuitively, Schiller warns the reader to resist nature’s siren call. Rather than desiring to exchange places with nature, Schiller contends that men must “take it into thyself and strive to wed its infinite advantage with thine own infinite prerogative and to produce the divine from both” (“On Naive and Sentimental Poetry”). Thus, Schiller only imagines the feminine (Nature) as an inferior imago of the rational, male divine,
which, nonetheless, has hold on man because of its primal, prelinguistic associations. Imposing masculine will (“prerogative”) upon nature’s fertility is the only way to make her almost vulgar fructifying powers serve the higher intellectual purposes of men. Carlyle makes a similar shift in *Sartor Resartus*, asserting that nature is at once spectacularly and merely the garment that mediates for and protects mortals from the dazzling, superior masculine divinity. In fact, when Teufelsdrockh conceives of the ultimate deity he avers that “The Universe is not dead and demoniacal, a charnel-house with spectres; but godlike and my Father’s!” Though condescending about the female aspect of God, Teufelsdrockh recognizes that he cannot approach the Father God without encountering and loving “The poor Earth” who is “my needy Mother” (*Sartor Resartus*).

And, in fact, for all the attention paid to Mother Nature as female deity, masculinity is still the natural denominator of creative energy in Romantic mythology and aesthetics. As Frye explains, prior to the Romantic period, God was viewed as the only originating actor in the universe. But, boldly asserting that the human mind was a creative agent, male Romantic poets saw themselves as like God in their ability to create sacred texts (37, 157). J. Hillis Miller describes the sacramental heritage the Romantics hoped to revitalize: insisting that the bread and wine are literally God’s body, the Catholic sacrament depends profoundly upon the presence of God (3). Likewise, poetry was seen to “incarnate[s]” the objects it named in the same way that the texts of the sacred Mass were seen as part of the “transformation they evoked” (Miller 3, 6; see also Vargish 22). In contrast, later Protestant understanding of the Eucharist transmogrified the sacredness inherent to literature, for as modern “reference at a distance” replaced medieval symbolism that conceived a web of cosmic connections, so did the Protestant Eucharist illustrate the vast distance between deity and humanity (Miller 6). In response to this dynamic, the Romantics asserted that the poet could create a secular sacrament that would return God, humanity, and Nature to their pre-lapsarian unity (Miller 13–14). Thus, the canonical male Romantics yearned for uncanny, defamiliarized manifestations of Mother Nature.

The increase of women’s political, social, and artistic power during the nineteenth century occurred in conjunction with subliminal mother-god-want. The accession of the professional female author and a long-lived queen, and the establishment of a potent domestic ideology sanctifying the mother, reverberated with the idea of a female divine. Certainly the deaths of so many Victorian women in childbirth—making them actual Mothers in Heaven—and the notion of the Angel in the House partially divinized women, while Queen Victoria’s rule could easily be analogized to that of the
Queen of Heaven. Elsewhere I examine the concerns of mainstream male writers who were apprehensive about the advent of a formidable female sovereign because they worried she would emasculate the age. In fact, in what hardly seems a coincidence given Queen Victoria’s large family, in the nineteenth century historians debated whether the original social system was matriarchal or patriarchal (see Rosalind Coward). Historian J. J. Bachofen was the leading supporter of the hypothesis that matriarchy preceded patriarchy. In his introduction to *Mother Right*, Bachofen asserts that he aimed to describe the trajectory of the matriarchal age and “the primordial character of mother right” (69, 88). Established prior to the classical and Judeo-Christian patriarchal systems, mother right was traced through archaeological symbols from past civilizations that may have worshipped goddesses (xvii).

But if the Romantic age opened a space for viewing divinity as in part female, were professional women writers included in the belief that authors were a special class of mortals who metonymically participated in God’s imaginative powers and spoke to and for that entity? Noting that the Romantics analogized God’s creativity with the poet’s visionary powers, M. H. Abrams suggests that the artist was a creator, who is “likest God because he creates according to those patterns on which God himself has modeled the universe” (42). Attending to the pronoun in this statement illustrates the assumption that divinity and the bard share an essential masculinity. Claims that the male writer’s imaginative powers are metonyms of God’s creativity, then, elide the woman writer’s potential for being viewed as sharing in God’s mental or physical parts (think: Milman’s comment that the male body is symbolic of God while the ostensibly gross female form could not be associated with deity). If, as Hillis Miller comments, the Romantics represented the artist as the “creator” of “hitherto unapprehended symbols . . . which establish a new relation” between “man and God” (13), I argue that it is essential for women writers to suture the gap that still figures humanity as man and God as Father.

The difficulty faced by the Victorian female writer is apparent in Barry Qualls’s discussion of *Jane Eyre* and *Sartor Resartus*. Comparing Brontë’s and Carlyle’s bildungsromans, Qualls contends that feminine nature is not the answer to Jane Eyre’s needs and that she must achieve a higher, Carlylean understanding that “the universe is godlike and my Father’s” (64, 65). Participating in the blind spot of many male Romantics, this analysis suggests that imagining a divine female archetype is an illusory flight into quietism while acceptance of the masculine metaphor for God provides sanity. Indeed, though Carlyle sought a new language for nature and referred to it as “Mother,” his approach was not as radical as it could have been, and
neither did male, and most female, Romantics consider retailoring culture with female equality in mind. Unable to commit to imagining a potent, sacred feminine underlying the universe that would make the metaphor of God new again, the Romantics end up reinscribing the masculine divine. Hence, the longing for Mother Nature featured in Romantic texts, especially those by male writers, produced a trope for God that elides the very entity Romantic texts attempt to descry.

This study of mother-god-want could not have been written without feminist intellectual grandmothers whom I cite throughout this work. At this point, I should note that many feminist scholars have pointed out how problematic the trope of Mother Nature was for nineteenth-century women writers. Margaret Homans argues that the Western canon rejects the mother’s material body and replaces it with “powerless figurative substitutes” (*Bearing the Word* 160). Likewise, Nancy Goslee contends that in male Romantic poetry, women obtain power only as muses rather than as powerful speakers (3–4). Mary K. DeShazer finds that when the muse appears to the Romantics in the form of Mother Nature, the poet, as Mother Nature’s son, co-opted her creative power in order to “give birth” metaphorically to his opus (17). As we have seen, the co-optation of nature is evident in Schiller’s and Carlyle’s writings. But regardless of the exploitation of nature as trope, there were Romantic writers who did change the language for god. As this study will argue, radical early nineteenth-century feminists as well as Brontë and Barrett Browning used Mother Nature as an emblem for a woman-centered mythology featuring the biological, political, and linguistic potency of classical goddesses, a titanic Eve, and a female savior.

Pamela Sue Anderson’s deft feminist epistemology helps explain the mythologies these writers created. Suggesting that the term “exists” may refer to aspirations that we strive to achieve as well as to material, verifiable entities, Anderson argues that although the ideal exists as a “fiction” to be achieved, it can also be understood as a paradigm providing material meaning and identity for individuals and groups (118). Sites of intense desire (such as mother-god-want) or mysticism in women’s religious texts might be seen, then, as eruptive traces of a suppressed desire for actualizing an ideal female deity (100). Anderson calls for feminists interested in religion to create “mythical configurations of their own sex” in new narratives for women (158). By recuperating a symbolic female divine, feminists acknowledge the “legitimacy of female power” and make available women’s “divine horizon,” that is, her highest potentiality (Christ 277; Jantzen 65). Thus the revaluation of the term “God” by Romantic women millenarians and radicals goes a long way toward reversing the patriarchal effects of imagining god, agency,
and the ideal as always and only male, and this revaluation establishes a
genealogy for such imagining on the part of the nineteenth-century British
women writers I examine in this study.

Frantz Fanon suggests that “Mastery of language affords remarkable
power. Paul Valéry knew this, for he called language ‘the god gone astray in
the flesh’” (18; Valéry, qtd. in Fanon 18). This astounding statement is useful
for describing Victorian women writers who attempted to deconstruct the
world established by the master’s language. Not to put too fine a point on it,
in the Victorian period, even though the Christian God was “necrophilia[c],”
as Grace M. Jantzen suggests, He was hard to kill off even with the advent of
the Crisis of Faith. His proxy was written into every institution through legal
language, sacred and profane ritual, and metaphorical governance (8). The
women writers I study wrestle with “the god[dess] gone astray” from literary
language and, in eruptive moments, return her to the flesh and to discourse.
By expanding the divine metaphor to include women as omnipotent beings,
they critique the culture’s mood regarding women’s rights and, in the early
stages of the first wave of feminism, uncover an absent center of late Western
patriarchy: mother-god-want. I would argue that this desire for the existence
of a female mythology and a female divine helped to bring about an extraor-
dinary paradigm shift so that women’s rights gradually became normalized.

Utopian Feminists and Millenarians

In this section, I outline connections between the Victorian women writ-
ers I study and some of their grandmothers. I direct attention first to the
prophetic voices of religious women of the late eighteenth century whose
radical beliefs may have resonated with later Victorian women writers. I then
discuss Romantic-era socialist feminists whose tropes reappear in the work
of Brontë, Barrett Browning, Eliot, Jameson, and Nightingale.

Asserting the importance of genealogical ties between different genera-
tions of women, Christine L. Krueger recuperates early nineteenth-century
women preachers such as Joanna Southcott and Mary Bosanquet Fletcher as
antecedents of women writers previously believed to be “originary” (Kreuger
11; see also Showalter, A Literature of Their Own 7). Krueger suggests that
for a brief time in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the
masculine rhetoric of the evangelical movement abated, and a space opened
up for women to use the “authoritative language of scripture.” During this
period, women preachers feminized evangelical rhetoric and were able to end
many patriarchal evangelical practices and discourses. As will be illustrated
presently, millenarians Southcott, Luckie Buchan, and Ann Lee mastered what Krueger calls the “evangelical ideolect” and used it to recuperate potent symbolic female divinities. By doing so, they endowed the next generation of women writers with this rhetoric as well as with the “camouflage” necessary to make protofeminist demands safely and subversively (5, 6, 9).

Women preachers who claimed to be part of the Christian godhead were, by and large, from the lower classes. Hailing from Glasgow, the much-reviled Elspeth Simpson (1738–91) came to be known as Mrs. Luckie Buchan. Claiming to be the Holy Ghost, Buchan prophesied that the Second Coming was imminent and that she, along with her adherents, would be “translated direct to Heaven” when Christ reappeared (“The Buchanites” 363). As the third member of the Trinity, she was gifted with the ability to grace others with the Holy Spirit simply by breathing on them. Buchan’s politics merged with her heretical theology. Known for their egalitarian ways, Buchan’s adherents ate together at the same table, except for “Mother” Buchan, who helped serve the food to the gathered assembly (Harrison, Second Coming 35). Referring to herself as “mother” and “god,” Buchan appealed to the mother-god-want of those who viewed mainstream patriarchal Christianity as unresponsive to their needs. The Buchanites were a relatively small group who came to a parting of the ways when it became financially impossible to support the communal life style.

From Manchester, Ann Lee was also referred to as “Mother” by her followers (“Extract from Dr. Holley’s Review”). Because Jesus had manifested his godhood in masculine form at his first advent, the Shakers reasoned that Christ’s second appearance would be in female form as Mother Lee. Thus her motherhood also referred to the Shaker belief that Lee was “the Mother Spirit in the Godhead” (Evans 11, 14). Under Lee’s aegis, the Shakers gloried in the feminization of the age and the possibilities for political reform. Adherent William Leonard, for example, expresses the community’s joy that the whole earth was feeling the “emanation” of the redeemer in the form of “increasing agitation upon the subject of the Rights of Woman, the Rights of Marriage, the Rights of Property,—the Rights of Man.” Exhibiting a strong mother-god-want, the Shakers hoped that this agitation would culminate in the millennial revelation of the “true order of the Godhead as Male and Female,—‘the Eternal Heavenly Father, and an Eternal Heavenly Mother’” (Leonard 55). In keeping with a rather literal attempt at gender equity, some Shakers also looked forward to the coming of “the first-born Daughter” of God as a balance for the Son (Evans 14, 24).

Beginning in 1792 and lasting until her death in 1814, another female preacher, Joanna Southcott, received spiritual manifestations based upon
what she saw as three important moments in the Bible when women changed
the course of spiritual history: Eve participated in the Fall, Mary engendered
the Savior and thus the redemption of the world, and “‘a woman clothed
with the sun’” would initiate the Second Coming, as Revelation 12 fore-
told, (Balleine 23). As Southcott claimed in numerous revelations, salvation
would occur only through a female descendant of Eve, who would overcome
Satan’s power and make way for the establishment of God’s Kingdom on
earth (Matthews 59–60). Uniting the entities of the “‘woman clothed with
the sun’” and the “Bride of the Lamb” mentioned in Revelation 19, South-
cott’s Voice claimed that she was “The true and faithful Bride” spoken of in
the Bible and that the world would be reborn only when it acknowledged
her as the Bride who warned the people of Christ’s return (Balleine 23; Com-
munications to Joanna Southcott beginning 1801, 7). Repeatedly she noted
that Christ’s intention was for Southcott to redeem woman from the censure
and subordination she had endured as a result of the Fall (Harrison, Second
Coming 108). Making woman central to Christ’s return—if not replacing
him in his own Second Coming—Southcott revealed that the Savior’s return
would cause the world to “see the truth”: that Eve was the conduit through
which Christ’s “Gospel first did come” [original underline] (Communications
to Joanna Southcott beginning 1801, 7).

Southcott’s heretical notions about salvation focused on a female as sav-
or, thus suggesting that women had not been included in the mainstream
Christian narrative. Her obsessive focus on Eve also implied that Christ’s
sacrifice fell short of paying the cosmic price of evil—a semidivine woman
had to participate in the atonement. Concomitantly, asserting that Adam
was a coward who had defamed Eve, Southcott’s Voice declared that the first
man initiated sin and that it was evil to hold Eve solely responsible for the
Fall (Communication of September 21 and 22; BL Add. 32633 f.98). South-
cott also exhorted the world to understand that men could “not be freed
[“be freed” is double underlined] from the Condemnation of the fall, before
the Woman be made free” (undated letter of Add. 32633, Communications
to Joanna Southcott 1:37–40). Hammering men’s misogyny, the spirit tells
Southcott that Christ would “burst” upon the men who “despise[d]” Eve
and Joanna (BL Add. 32636 f.18). Hence, Southcott’s prophecies suggest
that Christ’s greatest accomplishment was to redeem his all-but-divinized
Mother Eve through one of her divinized daughters.

Many feminist socialists implicitly believed that a secular Millennium
would occur when, as Eliza Sharples exulted in 1832, “woman shall reign,
and the kingdom of the man shall be no more” (“The Second Person of
the Trinity” 615–16). We know that a feminist trajectory to the utopian
movements occurred during the social upheavals accompanying the French Revolution and its aftermath (Goldstein 93). Charles Fourier famously stated, “Social progress and changes of period are brought about by” the “progress of women towards liberty,” and, as Leslie Goldstein reminds us, he was perhaps the first to use the term “feministe” (qtd. in B. Taylor, Eve 29; see also Goldstein 92). Prominent between 1826 and 1834, the Saint-Simonians, like Fourier, advocated for women’s equality and believed that “the feminization of the world was imminent” (Goldstein 96). Influenced by the Saint-Simonians, socialist Robert Owen also believed in female equality (B. Taylor, Eve xiii, 45–46). As “Signs of the Times,” an article in Owen’s The Crisis, suggests, the increase of self-appointed messiahs foretold the precipitous disintegration of the ancien regime’s political ideologies (The Crisis 4:10 [Saturday, June 14, 1834]: 77).

Owen’s associate James Elishma Smith suggested that the female prophets appearing in England in the early 1800s were “forerunners of a great change” (The Crisis 31 Aug 1833; qtd. in B. Taylor, Eve 168). Smith also proclaimed that “Hitherto God has been worshipped as a man; let us now worship the female God” (The Crisis 4 May 1833; qtd. in Taylor, Eve 168). In 1834 two St. Simonian missionaries announced “the advent of the Mother” and a “new Church, wherein the spirit of emancipated women will unfold its germs of moral feelings and be instrumental in building up the new heaven and the new earth” (“St. Simonism in London by Fontana and Prati Chief and Preacher of St. Simonism in London” 1834; qtd. in B. Taylor, “Woman-Power” 127). Similarly, in 1842 Pontiffarch of the Communist Church John Goodwyn Barmby circulated a paean titled “Venus Rising from the Sea: An Ode to the Woman Power,” featuring the following lines: “Woman-Saviour now we muster / To await thy advent sure, / In the cluster of thy lustre, / Come and leave the earth no more” (Promethean 1.1 [Jan 1842]).

The boundary between millenarians and radicals was surprisingly porous, for heretical beliefs in a female savior and millenarian sects led by women accompanied the call for women’s rights and socialist agendas (B. Taylor, “Woman-Power” 122; see also Harrison, Second Coming 222–23). In fact, J. F. C. Harrison asserts that the two groups were “aspects of the same phenomenon” rather than distinct entities (Harrison, “Paine” 80). The connections are fascinating. In their sermons, freethinkers the Reverends Erasmus Perkins and Robert Wedderburn fused Thomas Paine’s ideas with millenarism. Freethinker Richard Carlile, who had published Paine, also had a strong connection to Zion Ward’s millenarian followers (Harrison, “Paine” 83). A significant minority of millenarians were political radicals, including William Blake and William Sharp (76, 82). François Piquet argues that
Blake, Coleridge, and Shelley were millenarian in their hope that the French Revolution would result in a new heaven and earth, while Ernest L. Tuveson suggests that Marx should be viewed through the lens of millenarianism, for Marxist thought included the precept that violent revolution was a purifying force culminating in a secular millennium (Piquet 30, 31, 35; Tuveson 329). And, if George Eliot was enamored of Feuerbach, it should be recalled that Marx recognized him as the first philosopher to undermine Hegel’s idealism and thus facilitate the philosophical foundations of Marxism. Completing the circle of influence, Marxism was profoundly influenced by the radical utopians Saint-Simon, Owen, and Fourier.

For that matter, we can include Barrett Browning, Brontë, Nightingale, and Eliot in the fold of a broader form of millenarianism, for these authors imagined an imminent new heaven and earth, which they would help bring to pass, in part through sublimated incarnations of a feminine divine. Indeed, *Aurora Leigh* ends with Aurora invoking a quasi-secular millennium based on Revelation; Nightingale seeks a female messiah to provide sanitation in the hellish English slums; Brontë imagines a titanic goddess who initiates a form of love that encompasses lords and Luddites; and Eliot analogizes the millennial politics of Victorian Britain with the apocalyptic radicalism of quattrocento Florence, which her heroine oversees. It should be remembered, too, that these writers commented on socialist and millenarian agendas to friends, and at least two of these writers had associations with socialists and millenarians: Barrett and her father were obsessed with millenarian Edward Irving, and after hearing his sermons, she declared that “As a Preacher, he affected me more than anyone I ever heard” (EBB to Mr. Boyd 38; see also *Browning’s Correspondence* 281, 293, 298). Meanwhile, Eliot received at least one social call from Robert Owen, who discussed his political agenda with her.21

Whether early nineteenth-century socialists were atheists or believers, they sought a secular Eden in the here-and-now. Feminist socialist Eliza Sharples, for example, sounds much like Southcott in the myth system she proposes:

>This is the time, when woman shall reign, and the kingdom of the man shall be no more. The man and the woman are the two Messiahs of the Bible. . . .
>
>Woman is the bride—the lamb’s wife, and the Bible says that she comes, when the millennium begins. (“Second Person” 615–16)

Along with her common-law husband Richard Carlile, Sharples published the short-lived journal *The Isis* in 1832. Using Christian rhetoric for socialist
Antecedents of the Victorian “Goddess” Story

ends, Sharples firmly links the Savior’s return with feminist goals, describing the Second Coming as a time of “republicanism and happiness” (614). Secularizing the Madonna, Sharples declares that “the virgin is the personification of wisdom, so personified throughout the Bible, and so personified under the names of Pallas and Minerva in the Pagan Mythology; and the son to be brought forth is . . . Jesus Christ, or Reason, which is the virgin-born principle” (“Sixteenth Discourse” 228). Blasting the all-male Trinity, she declares, “The Pagan had the good sense to find a Juno for their Jupiter, and to perceive the dual quality in the great first cause” (“Tenth Discourse” 228).

Given such proclivities, it is not surprising that Sharples decided she would revere—and name herself after—“Isis Omnia” as well as Eve, both of whom represented for her the highest aspiration for women, the search for knowledge (“To Correspondents” 190; “Editor’s Response” 128). In the inaugural issue of The Isis, Sharples defies gender norms by discoursing publicly on politics. As she notes, many would protest, “Politics from a woman!” Her response is rousing: “YES, I will set before my sex the example of asserting an equality for them with their present . . . masters, and strive to teach all . . . that the undue submission, which constitutes slavery, is honourable to none; while the mutual submission, which leads to mutual good, is to all alike dignified and honourable” (“First Discourse” 1). This passage acknowledges the virtual impossibility that women will be taken seriously as political pundits. But, unlike so many nineteenth-century female writers, Sharples eschews wearing a mask or apologizing for her audacious entry into male territory. Perhaps this explains why her writing could not make headway with a majority of the male and female audience, and thus why her oeuvre is all but unknown today.

Like Southcott, Sharples also recuperates Eve as a semi-divine figure. In a poem in The Isis that merges the eponymous goddess with Sybil and Eve, the writer appeals to Isis because the “Father, Son, and Holy Ghost have fail’d” (“To the Lady of the Rotunda” 112). Denouncing the fallacious Christian myth of the Fall, the poem notes that the religion of Isis includes no trees that “bring forth forbidden fruit.” In Isis’s renewal of the earth, ignorance would be driven from the land, and the primordial divinity, Nature, would not menace human beings with a fictional hell (“To the Lady of the Rotunda” 112). Rewriting the myth of Eve’s Fall, Sharples blasphemes a God that bars women from knowledge. Imagining a different cosmic beginning, she praises Eve, for if hers “were a fall,” it “was a glorious fall, and such a fall as is now wanted” (“Tenth Discourse” 132). The rest of this rather long disquisition is worth repeating:
I will be such an Eve, so bright a picture of liberty! . . . I will . . . distribute the fruit of the tree of knowledge. How much better would the Bible have read, if, in the introductory part of it, God had been represented as saying to his new-made man: ‘Of every tree of the garden thou mayest eat freely; and by thy studies get knowledge; but in the midst of the garden there is a gaudy creation for the shelter of superstition. . . . Beware that thou dost not enter there’. . . . Such a caution as that would have been god-like; and man might rationally have worshipped in wonder, love, and praise. No such thing now. (“The Tenth Discourse” 132–33)

In this astonishing passage, Sharples deftly utilizes the Christian myth to underscore her secular vision of a new world order and of the potentialities and ideals that could exist for women. Turning the Christian God’s cosmology on its head, Sharples’s brilliant discourse makes Eve the only divine and rational being in the garden—while also advancing a more spiritually fulfilling and just atheism. This rewriting of the Fall is at once bracing, passionate, and intellectually acute. Such rhetoric, it would seem, would call forth an exhilarating response from women who felt unjustly and irrationally condemned for participating in a quest for knowledge apparently allowed only to men. Likewise, Sharples’s deconstruction of the biblical Fall would seem to free her male readers to conceive of and support the logical conclusion of the call for the rights of man.

The wry Scots socialist feminist and freethinker Frances Wright engaged her audience through a revision rather than an absolute rejection of the Christian Fall. Dismayed by the current “ignorance of our sex,” Wright notes that the modern “Eve puts not forth her hand to gather the fair fruit of knowledge” because the “wily serpent . . . beguileth her not to eat” (“Lecture I” 38), Pleading with believers not to offend their maker by “imagining him armed with thunders to protect the tree of knowledge from approach,” Wright exhorts her sisters that if they believe they were made by a divine being they must honor him by “employ[ing] his first best gift—your reason” (“Lecture III” 76).22 Another radical feminist reiterates the same theme, suggesting that if the Fall had been written by a woman, “we should have had a very different version of it” because it would have been written to show that Eve’s “great folly” was not the eating of the apple but, rather, in sharing it with Adam (New Moral World 19 July 1845; qtd. in B. Taylor, Eve 146).

Buchan, Lee, Southcott, and Sharples faced a brutal press and public, which could not have been lost on women writers who came after them. Buchan was depicted as an “absurd woman” for figuring herself as the “Third
Person in the Godhead” (Rev. “The Buchanites, from First to Last,” Tait’s 61). One journal jeered at her followers for giving her the Virgin’s moniker of “Our Lady” (Rev. “The Buchanites, from First to Last,” New York Observer 28). Robert Burns leeringly complained that Buchan’s spiritual breathings on her flock were performed with “postures and practices that are scandalously indecent,” reminding one of Milman’s horror of the always already debased female body (Burns; qtd. in “Superstition and Folly” 978). Chambers’s Edinburgh Journal also brayed that in attending to her spiritual ministry, Buchan neglected her housework, and, worse, she affirmed the doctrine that marriage was heretical (“The Buchanites” 363). For these blasphemies this “witch-wife” was, on at least one occasion, the victim of mob violence. Dragged through the streets “nearly in a state of nudity,” Buchan was eventually let go when the crowd decided that her husband was the proper authority to murder her if “he pleases when he gets home” (“Superstition and Folly” 977).

Similarly, an exposé of the Shakers deplores Ann Lee for declaring, “that she was greater than Jesus; that he came to suffer and die, but she should never die” (Dyer 18). Former Shaker William J. Haskett whined in his tell-all that Lee’s refusal to have sex with her husband, even though he was an “inebriat[e]” lout, illustrated her “sarcastic” “misanthrophy” [sic] (15). Meanwhile, the famous critic Francis Jeffrey wrote of Southcott that her “tedious” communications were “ravings” and “unintelligible trash,” while Dickens’s Tale of Two Cities derisively links her with séances and the “Cocklane ghost” (“Review” 455, 454, 461; Dickens 35). And as to the socialist feminists, an article in Fraser’s Magazine titled “Women and the Social System” (1840) lays out the epithets they had to endure: These dissolute “Gorgons” are “plunged into abandoned debauchery” with “libidinous young men” (700, 699, 701).

It is not surprising, then, to learn that a viable movement dedicated to Owenite feminism did not occur. Apparently, as Gail Malmgreen points out, joining socialism with the emancipation of women did not appeal strongly enough to lower-class Owenites (20). Malmgreen argues that this failure negatively influenced later feminist activism and, combined with emerging Victorian domestic ideology, helped tamp down lower-class radical feminist goals (20). Thus, if, as Krueger speculates, women writers gained cover from the evangelical rhetoric their female forebears passed on, they also made the strategic decision to defuse as much as possible discussion of the culture’s misogyny. If, as Amy Christine Billone remarks, Victorian women writers had “to mask what they were articulating” (6), the writers I study were, in Rita Felski’s words, “skilled in the art of deception and concealment, in
putting on masks and performing in elaborate disguise” for political and personal reasons (Felski qtd. in Billone 7).

The following chapters will show how the rhetorical choices made by Barrett, Brontë, Nightingale, Jameson, and Eliot bear and mask traces of the grandmothers I have described in the last few pages. Ann Taves suggests that first-person narrative allows historians to access material reality as well as “the links between experience and the bodily knowledges, cultural traditions, and social relations” that form individual experience (361). In the remainder of this study, I examine the works, first-person and otherwise, of women writers vis-à-vis cultural artifacts to identify how these writers created profound mythoi while also authorizing spiritual desire. As a scholar engaged in always historicizing—in this case historicizing what I call mother-god-want and its repressions—I put a range of Victorian texts in conversation, closely reading biographies, journals, and other personal documents in relation to Victorian sociocultural texts about religion. I also consider engagements with mother-god-want through analysis of the physical condition of the writers’ manuscripts and handwriting, as well as the author’s hermeneutic praxis vis-à-vis her descriptions of bodily effects resulting from trances and revelations.

The chapters of this study are organized chronologically, according to publication date, or, in Nightingale’s case, the date of writing, of the text focused on: Brontë’s *Shirley* (1849), Jameson’s *Legends of the Madonna* (1852), Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh* (1856), Nightingale’s *Cassandra* (1860), and Eliot’s *Romola* (1863). In the second chapter, I show that mother-god-want appears in Brontë’s early writings that feature a “Great Mother” who acts as a precursor to an amorphous female deity in *Jane Eyre* and *Shirley*. By examining Brontë’s juvenilia, letters, journals, handwriting, and editing practices in the fair copy of *Shirley*, I analyze her evolving metaphor of the divine and argue that her recuperation of Eve as a mother of the gods is not only in keeping with Romantic aesthetics; it is also an extension of early nineteenth-century radical feminist socialists and millenarians’ rhetorical challenges to the biblical devaluation of Eve.

In chapter 3, I examine Anna Jameson’s *Legends of the Madonna*, published in 1852, vis-à-vis Victorian debates about the Papal Bull that officially sanctified the Virgin’s Immaculate Conception. As many feminist scholars have shown, the figure of the Madonna acts as a lightning rod for understanding a culture’s constructions of gender, and for this reason alone the Victorian media mêlée surrounding the official institution of the Immaculate Conception is telling. I shall argue that Jameson’s depictions of the Madonna
are so daring that they are reminiscent of the audacious millenarians and radical feminists of the generation that preceded her.

In chapter 4, I take up Barrett’s polytheism. Delineating mother-god-want in her work, I contend that she combines the Christian God with disturbing images of the gods of Greece, primal descriptions of god as mother, and Swedenborgian notions that the spiritual and material worlds are inseparable. I argue that in the spirit of the utopian feminists, Barrett’s tropes upend gender classifications in a poetics that enlarges the notion of god and human identity. I suggest, too, that Aurora Leigh’s need to resolve the degrading effects of poverty through divine poetry must be seen in light of the utopian politics she explicitly sees as the context of her epic.

Florence Nightingale is the focus of chapter 5. A polytheistic reader, Nightingale was dedicated to her own rendition of mystical Christianity. I note the rhetorical similarities between Nightingale’s rendition of a female savior in “Cassandra,” Sharples’s references to Isis and the Savior, and Southcott’s recuperation of Eve as a godlike being. A mystic like Southcott and Julian of Norwich, from an early age Nightingale communicated with God through a “Voice.” In this chapter, I examine her written descriptions of these manifestations, particularly her absorption in images of the Virgin Mary, a female Savior, and the desire to be those divinities. I suggest that when Nightingale refers to the female messiah in the feminist classic “Cassandra,” she co-opts this utopian trope from early nineteenth-century radical feminists and re-envisioned it (and the figure of Eve and the Virgin Mary) for her own private and semipublic engagements with gender and class politics.

In the final chapter, I study George Eliot’s Romola in light of the author’s disturbing encounter with Raphael’s Sistine Madonna. I will argue that Eliot’s choice of setting in Romola allowed utopian opportunities for the heroine that are reminiscent of those called for by radical feminists in the early nineteenth century. As I will show, the unique quattrocento combination of worship of the Virgin, Renaissance research on the pagan archives, and the establishment of the first republic founded on Christian principles provided the dynamic with which Eliot could fuse the Madonna’s value system with that of the pagan goddess Ariadne in order to make Utopia available through the political acts of wise, loving women in the public sphere.