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

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Invoking “all the godheads”

ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING’S
POLYTHEISTIC AESTHETIC

[Miss E. B. Barrett] writes . . . like an inspired priestess . . . whose individuality is cast upward in the divine afflatus.

—R. H. Horne, ed., A New Spirit of the Age 140

I was in great danger of becoming the founder of a religion of my own.

—Elizabeth Barrett Browning, “Juvenile Autobiography” 15

Poetry is where God is.

—Elizabeth Barrett Browning, “The Book of the Poets” 92; qtd. in Olivia Taylor 160

OLIVIA TAYLOR notes that Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s statement that “Christ’s religion is essentially poetry—poetry glorified” demonstrates her “conception of poetry as messianic” and the belief that the reform of society occurs through poetry (Letters of EBB to MRM 1:335; O. Taylor 160). Indeed, Barrett avowed that “the religious all-clasping spirit” must be “in degree and measure, the grand necessity of every true poet’s soul” (Essays on the Greek Christian Poets 22). Although she must certainly be viewed as deeply committed to Christianity, Barrett also required the metaphorical flexibility of polytheism, for she was, in fact, drawn to “all the godheads” (Aurora Leigh 1:924). In particular, Greek mythology resonated with her because it offered a numinous sense that gods and goddesses were still vitally present in nature. As Barrett understood, unlike the Christian mythology,
whose monolithic male God ejected humankind from Eden for a mere misdeemeanor, classical mythology made a plethora of gods available to mortals whatever their moral condition.  

In this chapter, I shall examine the polytheism in Barrett’s masterpiece, *Aurora Leigh*. Noting that this epic combines disturbing images of the gods of Greece, Swedenborgian notions that the spiritual and material worlds are inseparable, and primal descriptions of god as Father *and* Mother with depictions of the Christian Father God, I shall show that Barrett interrogates gender norms regarding the nature of god and human identity, similar in kind to Julian of Norwich’s discursive practice. Likewise, I will show that Barrett’s dynamic revision of deity displays traces of the titanic rhetoric and secular messianic yearnings of earlier radical feminists. Although her aspiration to be a poet-prophet was always troubled by Victorian ideas about the impropriety of women speaking in public, let alone speaking like prophets about the nature of God and the ethical duties of humankind, Barrett’s adept masking of her ambitious intentions reflects some understanding of how her plain-speaking grandmothers were treated by the press. I suggest, too, that Barrett uses obscure rhetoric to create a palimpsest through which the savvy reader may access her more radical theological musings. Hence *Aurora Leigh* may be considered a protofeminist testament masquerading behind what appears to be, in the end, a conventional love story.

In a review of *Aurora Leigh*, the *Athenaeum* acerbically noted that it was Barrett’s “contribution to the chorus of protest and mutual exhortation, which Woman is now raising, in hope of gaining the due place and sympathy which, it is held, have been denied to her since the days when Man was created, the first of the pair in Eden” (Chorley 1425). Women’s rights advocates, did, indeed, view *Aurora Leigh* as a feminist classic. Susan B. Anthony took the text with her wherever she spoke on women’s rights and, at the dawn of the twentieth century, donated her copy to the Congressional Library (Chaney 798). She wrote in the flyleaf: “This book was carried in my satchel for years and read and reread—. . . I have always cherished it above all other books—I now present it to the Congressional Library, Washington, D.C., with the hope that women may more and more be like ‘Aurora Leigh’” (qtd. in Dalley 539). Feminists, including Frances Power Cobbe, Barbara Bodichon, Millicent Garrett Fawcett, and Bessie Raynor Parkes explicitly refer to *Aurora Leigh* as having influenced their progressive politics (Dalley 525). And, I suggest, Barrett’s aesthetic and ethical principles were in keeping with those of the radical feminist socialist and millenarian grandmothers who preceded her.
Writing to John Kenyon about her poem “The Dead Pan,” Barrett asked rhetorically, “What pagan poet ever thought of casting his gods out of his poetry?” (qtd. in Hewlett 103) This query illustrates the premier Victorian woman poet’s deep investment in the spiritual importance of poetry and her concern that as Victorian literature became increasingly secular, it elided the Christian God. To Barrett, if God were to have any meaning in modern life, He had to be palpably present in the culture’s poetry in the same way that the gods and goddesses of ancient Greece were felt to be ever-present in nature and art.

Delineating the traces of mother-god-want in Barrett Browning’s work, I suggest that she felt constrained by conventional descriptions of God because they captured neither the unlimited energy, variety, and vastness of the cosmos, nor the woman’s part in its creation. An autodidact like her husband, Barrett had free rein in her father’s library, which was filled with texts from the classical canon (David 101). Barrett, also one of the few Victorian women writers who was a scholar of the Bible, delved into Christian metaphysics and had a passion for Greek, which she mastered in part so that she could read the Greek fathers (Mermin 18).

In order to understand the polytheistic strain in *Aurora Leigh*, it is helpful to examine Schiller’s “Gods of Greece,” which Barrett’s cousin John Kenyon had translated. So intrigued by the verse, which laments the modern period’s loss of the classical gods when Christian monotheism emerged, Barrett asked Kenyon if she could keep his translation longer than originally intended (Hewlett 95). Beginning with an apostrophe to the gods, the poem venerates the early Greeks for whom “life’s blood flowed throughout creation.” Schiller’s persona invokes an age in which the Greeks “Wrapped Truth” with “luminous imagination” whence “all things” “felt the hallowed spirit.” To Schiller, “Heroes, Gods, and Mortals / United in the bond of love,” as mortals became peers with the gods. In contrast, the German writer viewed moderns as able to find only “traces” of divinity, for the “godhead” is “from the picture banished.” As in Swinburne’s later “Hymn to Prosperine,” Schiller found that where Greek culture was joyful, Christianity valued self-denial and shame. Schiller bemoaned the loss and beseeched the classical world to return. In a telling line, the poet mourns that “ye Gods” must “pass away” in order to consolidate the power of Christianity (the “One”), which makes men unaware of the goddess’s presence (Selene) and “Unconscious” of “senses” that “year[n]” for “her all-inspiring flame” (“Gods of Greece”).

The poems Barrett wrote in her childhood reveal a rambunctious attraction to the plenitude of a world rife with gods and goddesses, and she dares to participate with them in the high and holy task of creation. In her girl-
hood, Barrett had built “altar fires in the garden to Athena with matches stolen from the housemaid's cupboard” (Hewlett 26). Also from a young age, Barrett summoned Greek goddesses in her playful birthday poems for family members. In one felicitation for her sister Henrietta's birthday, Barrett pens the initial lines: “I sent a message to the Muse, / Last night, to leave Castalian dews, / And speed here, if twere in her power, / This morning at the breakfast hour— / But, above all, to keep in time, / As Reason would not wait for rhyme! / When lo (I never heard a better) / 'Stead of the Goddess, comes a letter— / A curious MS, to be writ / By hand divine—and this is it!!” (Browning Correspondence 189) With youthful brio, Barrett, the self-conscious child prodigy, all but equates her artistic powers with the puissant goddess she apostrophizes—and thus creates. Making a humorous but telling bait and switch, she wittily implies that her own writing is capable of replacing the frisson attendant upon the appearance of a goddess.

The precocious Barrett wrote a precursor to her full-blown fictional Kunstlerroman in the autobiography she penned at the age of fourteen. Titled “Glimpses into My Own Life and Literary Character,” Barrett’s memoir exhibits exuberance about reading Greek in contrast to poring over shame-based Christian texts. Her budding aspiration to be a poet-prophet is also apparent. She wrote that she had read many novels as well as the Iliad and other Greek literature by the time she was eleven. She remembers reading Locke when she was twelve and recalls that she felt that “I was in great danger of becoming the founder of a religion of my own. [page break] I revolted at the idea of an established religion—my faith was sincere but my religion was founded solely on the imagination” (EBB, “Juvenile Autobiography” 15–16). Barrett came by this religious bullishness rightly. In her prayer book, her father changed “Church of England” to “Church in England” and deleted the word “Established” from the phrase “with notes by a member of the Established Church” (Hewlett 6).

Just after writing that she came close to establishing her own church, the young author commented that this “time was the happiest of my life,” a statement suggesting the freedom she felt when she toyed with the idea of creating a new religion (“Juvenile Autobiography” 16). In light of this declaration, it should be noted that, like Florence Nightingale, Barrett often excused herself from going to church. We would expect that Barrett’s health stopped her from attending, but her diary from 1831 to 1832 indicates that more often than not she avoided the chore of church attendance because the sermons were vapid and the gospel was not “consistently preached there” (Diary 124). Barrett’s diary entries on Sundays also intimate that her study of
classical writers was more inspiring matter than what she found at Christian worship. If, then, one cannot read Barrett’s oeuvre without recognizing its deep engagement with spirituality, it is also imperative to understand that, like Brontë and Jameson, hers was an interrogatory, expansive spirituality constantly in danger of being repressed because of strong obligations to and anxieties about the religion of her fathers. “Glimpses,” in fact, features a teenager who, when she forgets to pray one day, upbraids herself for the “fatal power of my imagination,” which she contends leads her away from Christian devotion. Henceforth, she vowed to support the “cause of the Church of England” (“Juvenile Autobiography” 20).

By the time she turned fourteen, Barrett appeared to others to have gained control of her heretical leanings. However, she notes that “to myself it is well known that the same violent inclinations are in my inmost heart and that altho habitual restraint has become almost a part of myself yet were I once to loose the rigid rein I might again be hurled” far from “everything human everything reasonable!” (22, 23) Nonetheless, Barrett avowed that she reviled “feminine softness” and felt “an almost proud consciousness of independence which prompts me to defend my opinions” (35). In her own attempt to revive Ophelia, the adolescent writer already appears to understand that she must become inured to the “rigid rein” and that straining against the bit of Victorian proprieties was anathema for girls.

Yet, poignantly, she had a strong loyalty to what she felt to be her true robust self and already knew about masking such unfeminine propensities. Oscillating between being the conformist and the rebel, Barrett recognized the need to conceal her imaginative life in order to fulfill obligations to the Christian religion and her family. As we have seen in previous chapters, Anna Jameson experienced a similar form of repression. Likewise, as an adolescent and young adult, Charlotte Brontë often went into trances, and it is more than likely that she did so, in part, to escape the drudgery of female self-sacrifice demanded by her religion. This need to create a double life as an outlet for desirable but unapproved behaviors is reminiscent of Frances Wright’s vehement aversion to Christian “priestcraft” that terrified women into leading straitened, listless lives devoted to selflessness and religious inanity (“Lecture I: On the Nature of Knowledge” 38–39).

As the iconic adult poet, Barrett Browning figured herself as both obedient and staunchly independent, making for some peculiar apologias. Coyly playing with her reader, she accepted that she was worthy of being a preacher/sage but figured herself as above such self-aggrandizement. For example, in
a letter on 8 January 1844, she proclaimed that she was no “Pope Joan the second,” for she has “no manner of pretension to any such dignity” (“The Religious Opinions” 25). As one version of the apocryphal story goes, Pope Joan was a well-educated woman who, at a young age, disguised herself as a man so as to enter and move up through the Catholic echelons of power. Alleged to have become pope in the ninth century, Joan was outed during a ritual procession in Rome when the popess was smitten by childbirth pangs and gave birth in that very public venue. At this point, of course, her gender became obvious as itself a crime (think, again, of Milman’s comments about the primitive nature of women’s breasts and organs of fertility that make them unsuitable for the roles of prophet or deity).

Barrett’s demurral about being a Pope Joan tells us much about the convoluted strategies Victorian women writers utilized in order to retain integrity in their writing in the face of outright misogyny. Journalist R. B. Peake’s piece in Bentley’s Miscellany imagined a scurrilous bit of Joan’s monologue that illustrates, through allusion to the fall, why men should be wary of headstrong women: “Why was not I the first created woman?” his imagined Popess protests. “I would have met the subtle plotting serpent, and by my arts annihilated the shallow fiend!” (150). Any woman seeking such public spiritual power was abhorrent not only to Peake.

With gross crassness and a strong whiff of threatening menace, All the Year Round used the Pope Joan story as a prime example of provocative, unfeminine behavior. In “A Few More Odd Women,” the writer warned that “Women there have been, and probably still are, odd in so far as they renounce their own sex, and follow avocations fitted only for men” (222). The piece includes Joan of Arc in the category of “odd” or “queer” women and malevolently concludes, “Some odd women have been so atrocious, that the sooner we get rid of them the better” (223). Such rhetoric is reminiscent of the journalistic assaults made on Buchan, Southcott, Lee, and socialist feminists. This rhetoric also broadcasts the kinds of attacks writers like Barrett could expect if they appeared to demand the religious or political mantle of authority meant only for men, or if they viewed inflammatory, heretical women in a positive light. No wonder the far-from-obtuse Barrett Browning asserted that she was no Pope Joan.

Regardless of her protestations, Barrett was, like Aurora Leigh, something of a popess. In the same letter in which she denied being a Pope Joan, she asserted that humans should be prophets and that Christians must “think and feel for ourselves in matters of religion,” for “every man or woman of us all is bound to receive into practice the truth he or she consciously discerns, and as he or she consciously discerns it” (The Religious Opinions
Believing that every person imagines deity differently, Barrett suggested that spiritual knowledge must be processed through individual metaphors. Asserting that she was not inclined to put any denomination above another but instead desired to “reverence the Churches,” she was against “sectarianism in any sort or sense” (Letter to Merry 8 Jan 1844; EBB “Edgar Allan Poe,” 11–12).

Thus, Barrett forthrightly stated that the “sectarianism of the National Churches, to which I do not belong, and of the Dissenting bodies [she was a Congregationalist], to which I do—stand together before me on a pretty just level of detestation” (The Religious Opinions 27; EBB, “Edgar Allan Poe” 11–12). Rejecting dogmatic religion, she explained that since “the Christianity of the world is apt to wander from Christ and the hope of Him,” then “Truth (as far as each thinker can apprehend) apprehended—and Love, comprehending—make my idea—my hope of a Church” (11–12). Sounding like a prophet of relativism, the catholic Barrett also argued that just as there are many churches claiming to be of Christ, the “aspects of truth to the human mind are many indeed” (Letter to Merry 8 Jan 1844: 26).

Aurora Leigh should also be read in light of the writer’s dramatic, gender-bending representations of the Christian Fathers (and Mothers). In Essays on the Greek Christian Poets and the English Poets, Barrett asks for an epiphany as she “look[s] back fathoms down the great Past” in order to hear “even” women’s voices “rise up like a smoke” so that they can be heard in modern times (11–12). Essays on the Greek Christian Poets illustrates Barrett’s protofeminist polytheism in its argument that the Greek Christian poets who came after the classical period were not the artists the classical Greek poets were. Barrett employs the image of a goddess to describe the distinction: “Not only was there a lack in the instrument,—there was also a deficiency in the players. Thrown aside, after the old flute-story, by a goddess, it was taken up by a mortal hand—by the hand of men gifted and noble in their generation, but belonging to it intellectually, even by their gifts and their nobleness” (15). In an age that viewed women writers as mimics of male genius, it is no small beer that in this trope for transcendence and art, the goddess is the great artist, and mortal men the clumsy imitators, and Barrett certainly knew she was upsetting staid gender binaries in this metaphorical flourish.

Also important to the themes of Aurora Leigh, Barrett Browning vigorously challenges the idea that any body of male writers or “Fathers” could have full access to truth and beauty, for she questions how great philosophical ideas could be comprehended if women were elided from the process of knowledge gathering. Unctuously acerbic, her assessment is detached and
brutal—even condescending. Breathtakingly cocky, the young female poet and scholar limns the failings of the canonical forefathers whom she refuses to worship. One passage from Barrett’s disquisition deserves to be read in full, for it typifies attitudes Aurora Leigh displays toward the male poetic pedigree:

Still one passing remark may be admissible, since the fact is so remarkable—how any body of Christian men can profess to derive their opinions from the “opinions of the Fathers,” when all bodies might do so equally. These fatherly opinions are, in truth, multiform, and multitudinous as the fatherly “sublime gray hairs.” . . . What then should be done with our “Fathers”? Leave them to perish by the time—Ganges, as old men innocent and decrepit, and worthy of no use or honor? Surely not. We may learn of them, if God will let us, love, and love is much—we may learn devotedness of them and warm our hearts by theirs; and this, although we rather distrust them as commentators, and utterly refuse them the reverence of our souls, in the capacity of theological oracles.” (Essays on the Greek Christian Poets 18–19)

In this raucous deconstruction of “Fathers” worthy of Irigaray, Barrett portrays Aurora’s back-story. Suggesting that women writers do not have to abide by the words of rather silly old men, Barrett knows that in this presumptuous analysis she has undercut the male poetic canon and its assumed brilliance, privileged status, and aesthetic superiority. The rhetoric is also so well designed that she implicitly attacks patriarchy itself without appearing spiteful or extreme. Rather, such intentions seem to be just a throwaway that no one should credit. But, in fact, this remarkable excerpt takes the Fathers to task for their employment of the “god-trick,” that is, the claim that males have a monolithic, objective, disinterested view from outside. Almost satirical, Barrett’s tone out-patronizes patriarchy in its vivid superciliousness toward the supposed “sublime gray hairs.” Furthermore, by not erasing the Fathers tout court, Barrett undermines the “decrepit” old patriarchs and their ostensible “theological oracles” even more than if she had rejected them wholesale. Yet given the arrogant put-down, Barrett also exhibits a measure of love for these doddering grandfathers who have facilitated her rise to achievements higher than they ever could have realized.

But it is the rebel grandmothers to whom we must turn now. If Barrett rewrites Paradise Lost by putting Aurora in the role of Eve, as Sarah Annes Brown suggests, Aurora, like her author, is no cringing violet (723). Indeed,
I suggest that Barrett Browning’s mother-god-want is most fully articulated in her epic, in which Christian patriarchs such as Romney Leigh and God the Father are balanced by a basso ostinato of goddess imagery. As Ranen Omer contends, the poet’s “struggle to legitimize a radical mythos of creative freedom through assimilating it to Christian tradition” ruptures the serenity for which *Aurora Leigh* strives (98). Aptly named after the Greek goddess of the morning, Aurora weaves together the obstreperously different Judeo-Christian and classical Greek myth traditions. In creating her own Homeric epic, Barrett suggests that a fictional female writer singing her tapestry of grace and love in the fallen nineteenth century is the prophecy needed in the modern age, prophecy that comes from a double-breasted being with a double vision who is both mortal and potential goddess.

*Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* complained that *Aurora Leigh* was “not a genuine woman,” that she was too independent and that she “resemble[d] too closely some of the female portraits of George Sand” (“MRS. BARRETT BROWNING-AURORA LEIGH” 32, 33). Barrett, of course, greatly admired Sand, referring to her as a “priestess” after seeing the French novelist reigning over her French salon (Letter #106, 26 February 1852, BL Add. 42231). Barrett Browning shrugged off the press complaints about her epic. She wrote to Anna Jameson that when male writers were panned by the critics, they became whimpering “headless prophet[s],” whereas “We” women “die hard, you know” (Letter #261). Nonetheless, *Aurora Leigh* must not have had the radical impact Barrett Browning thought it would, for she admitted being shocked that it received a positive reception in general. She expected instead to be “put in the stocks and pelted with the eggs of the last twenty years ‘singing birds,’ as a disorderly woman and freethinking poet! . . . Think of quite decent women taking the part of the book in a sort of effervescence which I hear of with astonishment” (Letter #465).

The rhetoric here is stunning. Certainly Barrett knew that atheism was one of the meanings of “freethinking” and that “disorderly,” “freethinking” radical women had been metaphorically “put in the stocks” for treading outside the path of conventional womanhood in her own century. Yet she flirted with being called an “infidel” and seemed disappointed that the public and press were not more scandalized by her female epic. Like her younger poetic self of the “Autobiography” in this admission Barrett Browning vacillates between being appropriately feminine and expressing willful desire to stand out, to be a woman like no other. But neither could Barrett afford to have the majority of her readers see through the palimpsest of *Aurora Leigh* to its polytheistic strivings. Imagining a divine large enough to comprehend all kinds of love and all varieties of life, this modern epic implies that a
monolithic male God simply could not fully encompass all creation and its meaning.

In fact, if, as is conventional in the epic, *Aurora Leigh* begins with an invocation to the God that is most influential in the text, that divinity must be judged as polytheistic. While Olivia Taylor suggests that *Aurora Leigh* foreshadows Julia Kristeva’s critical theories about the “gestation and birth of a child,” I assert that a mythical eternal mother initiates and acts as the metaphysical foundation of the poem (Taylor 155). In the opening lines, Aurora invokes and then merges mother-want and mother-god-want when she announces, “I have not so far left the coasts of life / To travel inland, that I cannot hear / That murmur of the outer Infinite / Which unweaned babies smile at in their sleep / When wondered at for smiling; not so far, / But still I catch my mother at her post” (1:10–15). Certainly, Aurora is describing infantine memories of her earthly mother who has passed away, but the reference to the “Infinite” depicts a maternal essence whispering to the child of its immortal origins, suggesting that the mother is at the heart of the eternal.

In fact, the cosmology represented in *Aurora Leigh* consists of a triune divinity as pictured in Aurora’s primal memories of childhood, from which the “Infinite” speaks to her. Her mother is the chief deity, her father is the second (she remembers his “slow hand, when she [her mother] had left us both”), and the third is Assunta, the nurse whose name, of course, refers to the Virgin Mary ascended into heaven (1:20–21). In creating this trope, Barrett Browning reiterates an image she had used in one of the first poems she ever wrote. Although ostensibly about the male Christian God, this early verse ends by depicting Him as a mother, for He cannot be seen on earth, neither “above the pines” nor in the gold in mines, whereas one can always imagine the presence of a mortal mother. Thus, the young Elizabeth feels “His embrace” as though “my tender mother laid / On my shut lids, her kisses’ pressure, / Half waking me at night, and said, / ‘Who kissed you through the dark, dear / guesser?’” (“A child’s thought of God”).

Pam Morris argues that the mother is the one specific material entity that unites all human beings as a foundation for moral and social behavior, because every person psychically and physically has experienced being birthed (190). Hence, the “archaic memory of maternal love” becomes a veiled but “imaginative symbolization” that socializes citizens to love and feel loyalty to the community as a whole (190, 191). *Aurora Leigh* illustrates this understanding right from its beginning. In the epic invocation, Barrettt implicitly insists that an abstract, distant male God cannot provide the emotional, psychic bond upon which to build a culture. The most sensually
and spiritually effulgent god that she and the “unweaned bab[y]” of the initial lines can imagine is the very tangible mother whose life-giving breasts embody love. This divine female’s all-nourishing breasts will be re-presented explicitly and subliminally throughout the rest of the text as a reminder of the maternal foundation of the universe.

Thus the “mother-want about the world” that Aurora describes has cosmic and microcosmic repercussions, for the invocation registers both a material reminder of Aurora’s deceased mother and the “Infinite” divine for which the earthly mother is a metonym (1:40). That she speaks of mother-god-want at the beginning of the epic intimates that this is one of the conundrums which the text will address and which will accompany all of Aurora’s personal and professional desires. As in all of Barrett’s work, the nature of God is at the core of life’s mystery, and I should point out here that Barrett Browning idealizes the Christian Father in Heaven as an individualized deity who takes personal interest in Aurora’s life.

In contrast, she uses images of classical male and female gods to imagine Aurora’s complicated understanding of her identity as poet-prophet through whom the divine speaks. Barrett’s depictions of mother-god-want, the double-breasted age, and classical gods with motherly instincts register indistinct images linked to the material reality of an absent earthly mother. Through this evanescent imagery, Barrett suggests that the foundations of the universe are feminine. From the beginning, this epic and its prophet-poet subliminally promise to restore that missing element and suckle the reader with intimations of that knowledge.

Because the orphan Aurora is full of mother-want—“father-want” is never really mentioned after her father dies—she has to be nurtured by “all the gods.” As Aurora recalls, her father believed that “unmothered babes” need “mother nature” more than others, and thus “Pan’s white goats, with udders warm and full / Of mystic contemplations” feed the “Poor milkless lips of orphans” (1:112–16). In the same way that Pan’s goats succor her metaphorically, Aurora feeds on the painting of her mother, which portrays the bodily and abstract incarnations of the maternal, including the gorged breast. The painting’s power lies in its divine inclusion of variety and unity, what Coleridge called “discordia concours”:

I mixed, confused, unconsciously,
Whatever I last read or heard or dreamed,
Abhorrent, admirable, beautiful,
Pathetical, or ghastly, or grotesque,
With still that face . . . which did not therefore change,
But kept the mystic level of all forms
Hates, fears, and admirations, was by turns
Ghost, fiend, and angel, fairy, witch, and sprite,
A dauntless Muse who eyes a dreadful Fate,
A loving Psyche who loses sight of Love,
A still Medusa with mild milky brows
All curdled and all clothed upon with snakes
Whose slime falls fast as sweat will; or anon
Our Lady of the Passion, stabbed with swords
Where the Babe sucked, or Lamia in her first
Moonlighted pallor, ere she shrunk and blinked
And shuddering wriggled down to the unclean;
Or my own mother, leaving her last smile
In her last kiss upon the baby-mouth
My father pushed down on the bed for that,—
Or my dead mother, without smile or kiss,
Buried at Florence (1:147–68).

Numerous are the interpretations of this famous description. Patricia Murphy examines Mariolatry coupled with the “sinister potentiality of maternity” featured in these famous lines (22). Joyce Zonana suggests that Aurora’s description of her mother is representative of the patriarchal West’s “traditional, highly bifurcated images,” while Kathleen Renk sees the portrait as a summary of the stereotypes of women in art and literature (Zonana 248; Renk 41). Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi observes that the ambivalent images of “angel,” “witch,” “Medusa,” and “Lamia” illustrate that by choosing to be a poet, the protagonist may reject the mother’s role, but her maternal instincts will ultimately “betray” her art (38).

I suggest, however, that this famous depiction also returns our attention to the beginning of the epic when Aurora equates the “Infinite” with a divine and earthly mother’s succoring at the breast, for even the Medusa in the portrait has “mild milky brows.” If the universe that succors Aurora is effulgenty feminine and polytheistic, Barrett suggests that divinity is manifold and continually mingled with the mortal. The divine, then, is at once Medusa, Lamia, Psyche, Our Lady of Passion generously full with milk, an earthly Father and Pan’s goats, all of which are mystically expressed (like milk) through and in all things. Her depiction also resists patriarchal attempts to transmogrify the meaning of the feminine.

This description of Aurora’s mortal/Infinite mother illustrates Barrett’s belief in the very presence of the “godhoods” in the material world and
the permeable boundary between the holy and the profane. The imagery
also illustrates Barrett’s Swedenborgian sense that earthly existence is liter-
ally accompanied by divine intimations all around, although we need the
poet-prophet to remind us of the unseen (see line 1:858–942). Barrett had
written to her sister Henrietta that she was “a Swedenborgian you know,
and believe[s] in ‘spheres,’ ‘atmospheres’ and ‘influences’” (Letters to Sis-
ter 12 October 1857, 283). Taken by Swedenborg’s idea that souls that
had passed on were actively present in the world, Barrett conceives her
own conglomeration of millenarianism and spiritualism. A true believer in
millennial spiritualism, she writes that “manifestations are deepening and
widening . . . day by day, . . . We read of a prophecy concerning ‘angels
ascending and descending upon the son of man.’ What if this spiritual influx
and afflux is beginning? It seems to me probable—but we have to wait
quietly and see” (Letters to Sister 26 July 1853, 190). In light of this belief
in millenarianism, Barrett was pleased that ex-patriots in Florence spread
rumors that “spirits” had transmitted Aurora Leigh to her through automatic
writing (Letters to Sister 10 January 1857, 265).

In keeping with her attraction to the Swedenborgian immanence of the
eternal, Barrett notes, “No writer can render human nature fully, who does
not render the inner and spiritual life as well as the conventional and mate-
rial exterior of life” (“Charles Dickens” 12). Aurora makes this clear in her
statement that philosophers are wrong who think of the world “too insu-
larly,” as though “No spiritual counterpart completed it / Consummating
its meaning, rounding all / To justice and perfection, line by line / Form by
form, nothing single nor alone” (8:617–21). Aurora Leigh desires to make
the “spiritual counterpart” present to weary, alienated Victorians, so many
of whom, having experienced a crisis of faith, could barely imagine God, let
alone a universe pulsating with the vitality of godheads. Further, like medi-
eval female mystics, Barrett suggests that humans are engaged in becoming
divine just as the divine is ever engaged in infusing the mortal. For example,
when Aurora describes participating in the female accomplishment of paint-
ing, she chortles, “I drew . . . costumes” of “nereids” who wear “smirks of
simmering godship” (1:420–22). In this image, Aurora’s polytheistic mother-
god-want implies that “godship” comes about through a “simmering” or
apprenticeship, meaning that all nature may evolve toward the divine. And
it should be noted that Aurora is the artist and agent who simmers these
aesthetic gods.

As noted previously, Barrett believed that if the gods were in nature and
mortals, their presence should be felt viscerally. The brilliant section that
depicts the soul as a “palimpsest” supports this commingling of the divine
and earthly: man, Aurora writes, is “born in ignorance,” his “spirit-insight dulled / And crossed by his sensations.” But at times in the midst of mundane life, he is “quicken[ed]” with fleeting “oracles of vital Deity.” Thus, she proclaims that the soul is a “palimpsest, a prophet’s holograph / Defiled, erased and covered by a monk’s,— / The apocalypse, by a Longus! poring on / Which obscene text, we may discern perhaps / Some fair, fine trace of what was written once, / Some upstroke of an alpha and omega / Expressing the old scripture (815–32).

As Barrett’s alter ego asserts here, the material self is shot through with divine inklings, and the very intermingling of the celestial and the obscene seems to be the necessary dynamic that creates the divine soul during its apprenticeship on earth. Thus, contrary to Milman’s views of women and divinity, in Aurora Leigh it is possible to see an obscene siren such as Lady Waldemar as a potential palimpsest through which the goddess expresses her dynamic, loving womanhood, pompous breasts and all. Even if Aurora sees Waldemar as her sinister enemy, according to her own idealistic philosophy, the naughty Lady may simply need more simmering before attaining a higher spiritual level.

Concomitant to troping the mortal soul as a palimpsest, Aurora ponders how the finite enwraps the Infinite: “What, if even God / Were chiefly God by living out Himself / To an individualism of the Infinite, / Eterne, intense profuse—still throwing up / The golden spray of multitudinous worlds / In measure to the proclive weight and rush / Of His inner nature,—the spontaneous love / Still proof and outflow of spontaneous life?” (3:750–57) This is one of Barrett’s most articulate inscriptions of the male Christian God and His desire. Putting pressure on language to make the inherent “nature” of this usually individualized monolithic God more extensive, Barrett suggests that He naturally seeks “spontaneous” generation of “multitudinous” forms of life, including “godheads.”

Hence, it is appropriate that Aurora notes that when she is filled with the divine afflatus, it is as though Zeus has “set me in the Olympian roar and round / Of luminous faces for a cup-bearer, / To keep the mouths of all the godheads moist / For everlasting laughters,—I myself / Half drunk across the beaker with their eyes!” (1:922–26). Comprehending, describing, and existing in a world that encompasses all the godheads is Barrett’s answer to mother-god-want. Indeed, describing Marian’s understanding of God, Aurora limns the deity’s “grand blind Love” as coming from “a skyey father and mother both in one” (3:898–99). Even the Christian God’s proclivities are, then, amorphous and divisible, multitudinous and gender bending.12
As noted earlier, Barrett is cognizant that God is a metaphor and that humans create what God might be: thus, not only are humans Gods in process, but they also create that entity. Insisting on the multeity of divinity, Barrett both deconstructs and clings to the trope of the Christian God as a numinous manifestation of the Real. As Barrett’s alter ego preaches, nature cannot exist without the spiritual, just as the spiritual requires the sensuous. Thus mortals must “firmly” grasp the “natural” in order to “pierce through, / With eyes immortal, to the antetype.” This antetype is usually thought of as the “ideal,” but Aurora argues that it should be “called the real, / And certain to be called so presently / When things shall have their names” (7:779–85). God, she exults, is just as real as humans and should be wrestled to the earth by mortals every day. The reality of God cannot be known, she argues, until humanity learns to name things by their real names. The lesson is clear: the poet’s prophetic metaphors open our vision to the divine enveloped within the mundane. It is as though the “skye father and mother both in one” is incapable of articulating its reality except through the poet-prophet, who is invested with both the divine and the mortal, the male and the female, the natural and the man-made.

Barrett’s tendency to image God as gender bending carries over into her descriptions of the male and female characters in the poem. Barrett’s portrayals underscore her sense that the universe is mutable and multitudinous rather than stable and unified, and the portrayals are redolent of Julian of Norwich’s accounts of a multi-gendered god. At one point, Aurora describes Romney as a “male Iphigenia” bound by the inability to think differently about gender, Aurora’s career as a poet, and Victorian conventions about marriage. In the same vein, at the end of the poem Aurora figures her beloved as the Angel in the House (2:779; 9:369). The heroine also repeatedly refers to herself as a man, in one case boldly saying to Romney, “You face, to-day, / A man who wants instruction, mark me, not / A woman who wants protection” (2:1061–63; see also 7:213). Similarly, when attempting to repress her love for Romney, Aurora commands herself to “Let him pass. I’m not too much / A woman, not to be a man for once / And bury all my Dead like Alaric” (7:984–86). The text suggests, too, that the male god Phoebus Apollo is the soul within Aurora’s soul, and, upending gendered stereotypes, Romney avers at the end of the poem that he is the earth that depends upon the nourishment of Aurora’s sun (5:414; 9:907–912).

Deconstructing gender categories, Aurora also takes on the tiresome stereotype that women are changeable, asserting boldly that men are the true chameleons: “But a man— / Note men!—they are but women after all, /
As women are but Auroras!—there are men / Born tender, apt to pale at a trodden worm” (7:1016–19). Stepping from behind a protective mask, Aurora directly chastises men for their centuries-old misogynistic depictions of women as unpredictable and unstable. In a time when men could get away with making all manner of outrageous public statements about women and gender roles, Barrett Browning’s Aurora boldly exclaims that she will define what men are, and, seemingly unafraid of the very real consequences, she demands that men listen—“Note men!” Thus, Aurora repeatedly figures herself as a kind of Pope Joan (or Joanna Southcott) at the head of her own church. Like a seer, she leads her followers to remember the Infinite Mother behind and in all things. At the same time, she limns herself as having the soul of a male god while appealing directly to both men and women to hear her revelations about the gender of deity and the deconstruction of gender. Asserting that gender constantly changes, Barrett implies that polytheism duplicates the polyvalent qualities of humans who should not be labeled under the two puny categories of “male” and “female.”

But what are we, then, to make of Aurora’s exclamation at the heart of the epic that the Victorian age no longer needs “half-gods, Panomphaean Joves, / Fauns, Naiads, Tritons, Oreads and the rest,” that is to say, the idea that the gods were in the reeds, rivers, and all living things (5:112–13)? One expects at this point that Barrett will draw the protective mask over her heretical theology and point to the monotheistic, monological Christian God as the answer to the modern crisis of faith. Instead, she guides the reader’s attention back to Mother Nature, or mother-god-want. She explains:

See the earth,  
The body of our body, the green earth,  
Indubitably human like this flesh  
And these articulated veins through which  
Our heart drives blood. There’s not a flower of spring  
That dies ere June, but vaunts itself allied  
By issue and symbol, by significance  
And correspondence, to that spirit-world  
Outside the limits of our space and time,  
Where to we are bound.” (116–25)

Here Barrett figures Nature as the liminal entry point between the divine and material, the abstract and particular, the human and divine, the male and female. This Romantic image of Mother Nature also figures the earth
as the embodied form of a spirit world that just seems to be only a binary opposite to man’s material condition. This understanding of nature accompanies Aurora’s theory of poetry set forth in the middle of Book V, just a few lines after the paean to nature. In this instance, Aurora compresses her theory in the credo that “poets should / Exert a double vision; should have eyes / To see near things as comprehensively / As if afar they took their point of sight, / And distant things as intimately deep / As if they touched them” (183–88). Here again, Barrett concludes that a complex, multiform universe could be imagined only by a titanic, protean, desiring entity that yearns toward complexity, spontaneity, and double vision.

Aurora’s double vision culminates in what I believe is the most astonishing image in the text: the “full-veined, heaving, double-breasted Age: / That, when the next shall come, the men of that / May touch the impress with reverent hand, and say / ‘Behold,—behold the paps we all have sucked! / This bosom seems to beat still, or at least / It sets ours beating: this is living art, / Which thus presents and thus records true life’” (216–22). Marjorie Stone’s suggestion that this image retains its shock value even for modern readers is apt, especially since, as Stone shows, at the beginning of the description the reader believes that the passage describes a male breast (751–52). Indeed, the image of the cross-dressing breast is shocking when we realize that the veins that pulsate and the “paps” being sucked are female, even though patriarchy is expert at concealing its milkless breasts. If this epic poem is full of double meanings, its protagonist contends that only a female poet with double vision can make sense of the age’s confusing, explosive creativity. If the modern poet-prophet must have the “great gift” of having a “twofold life,” s/he must carry the “staggering” weight of being merely mortal at the same time that s/he must “stand up straight as demi-gods” who carry the “intolerable strain and stress / Of the universal” (5:380–86).

In a bizarre image that leads up to the climactic metaphor of the double-breasted age, Barrett essentially suggests that Eve must be recuperated before any New Jerusalem can be established. The trope is startlingly reminiscent of Southcott’s restoration of Eve. Contemplating the influence of her own oeuvre, Aurora analogizes lifeless poetry with the earth “shut up / By Adam” as a “mere dumb corpse” in a tomb. In millenarian imagery, Barrett envisions Christ as coming “down” to revive the dead earth by first of all “straighten[ing] out / The leathery tongue turned back into the throat” of the dead corpse. Barrett figures the dead tongue as part of Mother Earth’s body. Resurrected, “she”—Mother Earth—“lives, remembers, palpitates / In every limb, aspires in every breath, / Embraces infinite relations” (103–12). In these extremely obscure lines, Barrett reconstitutes the Fall metaphorically
as a masculine obliteration of Eve’s body and tongue as well as of poetry itself. In this revision of the Genesis text, like Joanna Southcott and Eliza Sharples, the female poet-prophet generates a Revelation of her own, in which the Second Coming restores the Word, the female tongue (and the female “Earth” and “Age”) to their original divine essence. I would argue, then, that in the famous “paps” imagery that follows this restoration of Eve, female poetry, and Mother Nature’s dead tongue, Barrett consolidates the radical image of the feminization of the age with the coming of a female messiah/Eve foretold in the early decades of the nineteenth century.

If, in her artistic credo, Aurora asserts that the poet must look backward as well as forward, Aurora’s “full-veined” age looks back to and feeds from the breasts of a previous generation. Indeed, the Amazon-like Victorian age with its bursting, effulgent paps had its grandmothers who imaged a masterful Eve and a potent female Messiah who would initiate the secular and spiritual millennium to which Barrett Browning looks forward. As with Southcott and Sharples, Barrett so closely aligns her female image of the age and its revolutions with the prophet who initiates and voices visions that it is impossible to separate them. Indeed, the poet-preacher-prophets Southcott, Sharples, and Barrett are immediately and always incorporated in the epic female mythoi they create. In other words, these female prophets virtually become the symbolic goddesses they recreate in the form of Eve, Isis, and the double-breasted age, respectively.

But we must wonder where mother-god-want disappears when Aurora links the poet directly with a Heavenly Father. In an ecstatic prayer, Aurora cries, “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!’” (434–38). In terms of the multivalent credo Barrett Browning articulates throughout the epic, this heavenly “Father” must link back to the “Infinite” “paps” that begin the poem and that attain their climactic meaning in the section on the “double-breasted” age. This extraordinary depiction of the age might also connect with the female savior figure imagined by millenarians and radical socialist feminists who preceded or were contemporaneous with Barrett Browning. Mary Carpenter contends that Aurora Leigh seems to have vestiges of the “woman clothed with the sun,” which would also bear connections with the millenarian Southcott, who claimed to be that feminine incarnation of God (“Romola” 116). When Aurora reiterates her belief that divinity demands to be named, she suggests her own power over the divine, because as poet she is the master of naming, just as she has given life to the female tongue that had been buried by Adam. In addition, the necessity of naming returns the reader to the metaphorical
nature of God: the Creator must be named but cannot name itself, and even the naming cannot capture the effulgence of God.

Barrett uses polytheistic imagery to design the relationship between the metaphorical divinity and the metaphor-creating poet. In a violent depiction, she limns the prophetess at Delphi receiving the divine word: “the god comes down as fierce / As twenty bloodhounds, shakes you, strangles you, / Until the oracular shriek shall ooze in froth!” (5:943–45) As is seen throughout this text, if the Word is what God brings, only the poet gives it birth and articulation. It should be noted that there is a messianic cast to the process described, for God allows the self-sacrificing poet to be mangled and torn so that humankind will have access to the Word. Since this God is figured as male and the poet as female, there is an evocation of rape leading to a forced orgasmic “oracular shriek.” Because she is using the tropes of Greek mythology, Barrett is all but forced to see this merging of the divine and mortal as a confluence of the human female/Leda and the male God/swan. Language—and gender ideology—is, at this moment, uncontrollably violent. But Barrett takes heart that the female poet’s double vision and double breasts invoke a double sacrifice producing more meaning and power than are available from patriarchal Christianity’s rigid notions. And in terms of Barrett’s powerful aesthetic and potent sense of self, this description is an image that the gender-bending poet may transform in future incarnations.

The lower-class Marian, of course, is subject to a kind of extended gang rape throughout the text, a subliminal representation of the effects of patriarchy on women. Like the utopian feminists who decried the socioeconomic indignities of marriage just as they condemned the destructive inequities of the class system, Barrett Browning intimates that religion is beneficial only if it actually makes a difference in the material lives of human beings. In regard to the material conditions of England as the first modern capitalist society, just as Aurora Leigh articulates and navigates the crisis of faith, the problem of the Real, and the Woman Question, Barrett Browning’s epic also seeks to answer the Condition of England question. In Essays on the Greek Christian Poets, Barrett argues that God can be found everywhere: “In the loudest hum of your machinery, in the dunnest volume of your steam, in the foulest street of your city” (206–7).

Thus Barrett suggests that the problem of life on “the foulest street” can be solved by marrying the lower and upper classes—not by conjoining Romney and Marian, but by uniting Marian (a “figurative Madonna”) and Aurora as sisters (LaMonaca 148). As the protagonist exhorts Marian, “I being born / What men call noble, and you, issued from / The noble people,—though the tyrannous sword / Which pierced Christ’s heart, has
cleft the world in twain / 'Twixt class and class, opposing rich to poor, / Shall we keep parted? Not so. Let us lean / And strain together rather, each to each, / Compress the red lips of this gaping wound / As far as two souls can,—ay, lean and league, / I from my superabundance,—from your want / You, joining in a protest 'gainst the wrong / On both sides” (4:120–31).

In this naïve, middle-class Victorian approach, Aurora seeks an individualized Romantic response to class inequality rather than a systemic alteration of class structure. Nevertheless, the metaphor carries a shocking alternative. Perhaps Barrett thought that the imagery of gender bending via homoeroticism was an exact analogy of the democratization of the classes. In other words, the “strain[ing] together” of two women from vastly different ranks literally sutures the “red lips” of the “gaping wound” of class warfare as though their own lips—in Irigaray’s double sense—were compressed together in erotic unity. As with Aurora’s self-sacrificing submission to rape in order to attain control of the Word, Barrett suggests that in order to effect class harmony, Aurora’s flights into the abstract Ideal must accompany entry into the obscene hell of Victorian poverty in order for her spirituality to have real consequences. Trudging into the backstreets of the slum Marion inhabits, Aurora exults that she is a savior to the melodramatically downtrodden Marion, just as Barrett’s double-breasted Amazon revels in being part of and succoring the debased humanity inhabiting gritty, capitalized culture.

In this scenario Barrett sounds much like the socialist utopians in her insistence that female saviors must accompany God into the “hell” of the gritty streets inhabited by so many Victorians. Barrett’s graphic consideration of the homoerotic as part of this suturing is in keeping with her polymorphous descriptions of gender and the godheads, for she recognizes that sexuality might be as infinitely variable as the individual characteristics available to each human being. In the spirit of making genealogical connections between feminists, Christine Chaney argues that *Aurora Leigh* “achieves both cross-generic and crossgenerational connections by providing a hybrid textual link” between “the polemical strategies of Wollstonecraft’s self-narration and the gendered subjectivity of Woolf’s fiction” (793–94). In the homoerotic imagery of this particular scene, Barrett also boldly engages in cross-sexuality.

This insistence on crossing the actual threshold of Victorian slums and violating the boundaries of aesthetic decorum also underwrites Robert Owen’s English brand of socialism. More often than one would expect, Owen’s straining after the numinous is startlingly similar to Aurora’s yearning toward Marion. The Owenite journals *The Crisis* and *The New Moral World* boldly asserted that religion has no legitimacy unless it encourages
its devotees to immerse themselves in the material needs of the age. For example, in 1834 in an article titled “Sunday Evening,” Owen could have been preaching from the pulpit when he proclaimed, “The second coming of Christ” announces the truth that there can be no “‘peace on earth and goodwill to man,’” if one does not “‘love his neighbour as himself’” (3). In the same sermon, Owen earnestly implores his audience to live up to the Christian ideal by imagining if not experiencing the material conditions of their poor neighbors. He asks, for example, “Will the followers of the ‘Benevolent Jesus of Nazareth’ stand still, and adhere to olden times, when it was stated that men, for a season, owing to their ignorance or partial blindness, were compelled to see as through a glass, darkly?” Like a prophet, he solicits his listeners to succor those who “are daily dying of famine around us.” Pleading with his listeners to help these brothers and sisters so that there “shall be no wailing or repining in our streets,” Owen calls for an end to “ignorance,” “poverty,” and “crime” (“Sunday Evening” 3).

Using biblical poetics to make political points, the radical Owen, like Barrett Browning, deployed a discourse that pulses with moral affect, making the classes understand the material effects of the Industrial Revolution on the individual body and body politic. Like all writers of the time who saw something sinister in rising capitalism, including Dickens, Mayhew, Carlyle, and the radical socialist feminists, Owen illustrated how capitalism’s elision of Christian love resulted in the loss of the real self, making for a society of soulless souls. Thus, both the poet-prophet Aurora and the political prophet Owen utilized Christian imagery for much the same purpose. Both insisted that Christians should live up to the theology they honor with their lips but too often reject in their daily actions. They wanted nothing less than that Christians truly live according to the Christian beatitudes about succoring the poor and needy. Hence, Barrett shared with early nineteenth-century feminist utopians the belief that poetic language resurrects Christianity’s own radical commitment to the poor and necessarily makes its metaphysics palpable through the actual political work of creating a paradise on earth for all humanity.

Barrett Browning might be expected, then, to applaud the socialist agenda. In 1837 in youthful bravado she declared that while her father and brothers went “the full length of radicalism,” she went “so much beyond them into republican depths” (Letters to MRM 1:25). Whether Barrett knew of individual early nineteenth-century feminist socialists and millenarians is unclear, although it only makes sense that if she had read of their attempts to speak as empowered prophets about gender-bending god(s), she would have been most interested. In any case, she certainly had kept up to date on
Fourierism, socialism, and class agitation: witness her letters and the internal evidence of Aurora Leigh. Given her own progressive politics—she was democratic, anti-slavery, pro-Reform Bill, and pro-Risorgimento—Barrett was well versed in general about the utopian politics of the age (see Lewis on Barrett’s politics).14

Her aesthetic also would seem to support Owenite principles, for she writes that “wherever there is room for HUMAN FEELING to act, there is room for POETICAL FEELING to act. We cant separate our humanity from our poetry—nor, when they are together, can we say or at least prove, that humanity looking downward has a fairer aspect than humanity looking towards God. I am afraid that the matter with some of us, may be resolved into our not considering religion a subject of feeling, of real warm emotion & feeling—but of creed & form & necessity. If we feel, it is wrong to show that we feel!—& this, only in religion!” (142). As Barrett keenly understands, it was offensive to the English to emote publically about religion. Thus, whatever route the utopian radicals took in their hortatory engagements with Christianity—either decrying it as superstition or demanding that it live up to its ideal of loving one’s neighbor—they could not help transgressing the taboo about not speaking with “real warm emotion” about religion. One would imagine that if Barrett had read some of the above-quoted excerpts from Owen, she would have recognized the deep feeling he seems to have had about religion fulfilling its obligation to transcend mere cant.

Nevertheless, given Barrett’s middle-class status, it should be no surprise that Aurora Leigh derides Romney’s Fourierist phalansteries, because, as Aurora explains, Fourier ostensibly eschewed the arts as a force for healing the class divide. “Your Fouriers failed,” she avows, “Because not poets enough to understand” that “life develops from within” (2:483–85). Indeed, she ridicules Lady Waldemar’s reading of the socialists “Fourier,” “Proudhon, Considerant, and Louis Blanc, / With various others of his socialists” (3:584–86). More importantly, the epic ends with Romney admitting to his beloved that the socialists he believed in were at best ineffectual and at worst detrimental to the interests of the poor.

I suggest that this confession is a necessary part of his declaration of love—and submission—to Aurora. In other words, because he has so thoroughly subordinated the feminine in his politics, at this crucial point, when the epic becomes a domestic novel, he must acknowledge her poetics as superior to masculinist socialist rhetoric. Thus, not only is Romney debilitated by his blindness; he almost grovels when confessing that “Fourier’s void,” “Comte absurd, and Cabet, puerile” (9:868–69). When Romney rejects the political system to which he has given his life, it is a more emasculating
prophylaxis than the blindness that has been engineered for him in the denouement.¹⁵

One has to wonder how Barrett Browning’s epic would have changed had her Romney been reading Sharples, Wright, or even Southcott. In any case, Romney’s capitulation is part and parcel of Barrett’s aesthetic argument. She needs to show that resolving the degrading effects of poverty through a poetry that would inspire its readers to actually save the lower classes one Marian at a time is far more effective and emotionally and spiritually authentic than the Fourierism she depicts as the enervating antagonist of her poetry and art. In a letter to Isa Blagden, written in 1850, Barrett declared, “If Fourierism could be realised (which it surely cannot) out of a dream, the destinies of our race would shrivel up under the unnatural heat, and human nature would, in my mind, be desecrated and dishonored. . . . Genius is always individual” (qtd. in Dalley 529). In another epistle, she reviled socialism because it supposedly imposed conformity and thus undermined the genius as rara avis. “I love liberty so intensely,” Barrett exclaimed in 1850, “that I hate Socialism.” She adds that socialism is “the most desecrating & dishonoring to Humanity, of all creeds,” and melodramatically claims that she would rather live “under the absolutism of Nicolas of Russia, than in a Fourier-machine, with my individuality sucked out of me by a social air-pump” (Letters to MRM 3:302). Seeing herself as filled with the divine afflatus, Barrett intimates that her cultural role would be literally deflated by a politics that ostensibly sucked away the essence of artistic genius.

Lana L. Dalley observes that Barrett’s “rejection of socialism is couched in the vocabulary of liberal economic theory, particularly in its emphasis on the individual and the contention that there can be no ‘progress without struggle’” (529). Likewise, Linda Lewis remarks that Barrett’s was a “hypothetical Christian ideal in which the rich will be inspired by love to part with their world’s goods to feed the poor” (130). But Aurora and Barrett’s condemnation of Fourierism also signifies that class struggle must be filtered first through the aesthetic of the individual genius before it can be considered in systemic sociopolitical terms. It is not just that the socialists are not poets; Barrett’s conviction that poetry is where God is compels her belief that the poet must have the first and last Word about love, class issues, and the relations between the genders. Thus Barrett’s alter ego is insulted that Romney would consult political writers about the Condition of England before consulting her own poetic, godlike intellect. Likewise, she cannot imagine a hybrid form of writing that might be political and aesthetic except the writing composed by legitimate, recognized poets like herself. Barrett’s faith in the fluid, amorphous, and permeable thus collapses
at the moment that she declares the monolithic superiority of her vocation and her voice.

In fact, binary logic takes over when Aurora claims that her genius cancels out other, would-be hierophantic tongues, and Barrett Browning protests too much regarding Aurora’s efforts to establish poetry as more powerful and essential to political reform than the rhetoric of political reform itself. After all, like Barrett, the radical utopians knew they needed a new language that would help them establish their claims and have the kind of influence that changes class attitudes. But although she mixes genres in *Aurora Leigh*, Barrett has little taste for such hybridity in radical socialists, whom she sees more as artistic than as political enemies. Although she uses what were considered vulgar tropes in her narrative (*Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* suggests that her images are “hideous,” “revolting,” and “calculated to disgust”), Barrett could not accept the new language developed by socialists such as Owen who created hybrid imagery and themes in conjugations similar to her own (“MRS. BARRETT BROWNING-AURORA LEIGH” 33–34).

Hence, although at the end of the epic, Romney encourages Aurora to put her “woman’s lip” to the “clarion” and “blow all class-walls level as Jericho’s / past Jordan” so as to bring about the “new oceonomies” and “new societies” that God requires to “make all new,” the millennial rhetoric hinges upon Aurora’s individual(ist) voice (9:929–33, 947–48). In the final lines, the poet-prophet-goddess Aurora conceptually builds the millennial New Jerusalem as she names and sees the jewels that are its foundations: “jasper,” “chalcedony,” “amethyst,” and “sapphire” (962–64; Rev. 21:19–20). Like Southcott and Sharples, who rebuked male political systems in favor of female rule, Aurora co-opts from Romney the male right to be a seer because his political systems have been feeble and inadequate. She also seems to bury the radical tongues of the grandmothers in order to give precedence to her own voice, in an age that too often demeaned the female writer.

But it would be too harsh to end with such a critique. I suggest, instead, that the reader must confront *Aurora Leigh* with a kind of double vision. We can see, for example, that Aurora and Barrett spoke like the radical women who had informed secular and spiritual millenarian aspirations with visions of an omnipotent Eve and a commanding, unconditionally loving female savior. But Barrett was also righting and rewriting history in her condemnation of masculine socialist schemes for changing the world. It is as though she were demanding that the fathers of socialism give credence to female tongues instead of deriding them as Romney had inadvertently done. Ironi-
cally, the virtual erasure of earlier radical feminist voices from the historical record—she did not seem to have heard of them—underwrites Barrett’s fierce dedication to the recuperation of female tongues. Seeing herself as the lone female poet who could compete with political and poetic Christian and socialist (fore)fathers, Barrett did not see the shoulders upon which she stood—those of the radical female political figures who preceded her and helped to make her protofeminist rhetoric possible.

This insight must be tempered by the recognition that few twenty-first-century feminists have heard of or acknowledged these same grandmothers, who are still there to be recuperated. In terms of Victorian protofeminists, it may be that Barrett’s poetic ambitions and the profoundly misogynist milieu within which she lived dictated that she see Aurora’s poetry as originary and unique rather than following upon an earlier, if muffled, radical female politics. Of necessity, then, eliding the feminist radical history that comes before Aurora’s invention of a New Jerusalem, Barrett’s inimitable epic, nevertheless, retains its polytheistic, millenial inclinations. With its scandalous, stark imagery of Eve and Mother Nature’s tongue (Word) buried by the old Adam and the female paps that remind the reader of the universe’s founding feminine principle, *Aurora Leigh* masks and circulates the voices of its radical grandmothers.