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

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Chapter 1

1. See Steinmetz, “Images of ‘Mother-Want.’”

2. While Geertz contends that religious language perpetuates “pervasive, and long-lasting moods,” those moods, as Braude suggests, underwrite society’s constant reexamination of gender (Geertz 90; Braude xix).

3. The Dictionary of the History of Ideas asserts that the notion of a “Great Goddess” is “well attested in the Neolithic period, and finds subsequent expression in many of the famous goddesses of the ancient Near East” (“Goddess Worship” 2:333). Viewing much scholarship on goddess worship as ahistorical and simplistic, Katherine K. Young notes that that there is no evidence suggesting there was a time when matriarchy was prevalent. Nor does the fact that a culture acknowledges a goddess necessarily mean that women have political power in that culture (Young 105–79). Regarding debates about the existence of a primal matriarchy, see Gerda Lerner’s The Creation of Patriarchy; Marija Gimbutas’s The Language of the Goddess; Naomi R. Goldenberg’s “The Return of the Goddess: Psychoanalytic Reflections on the Shift from Theology to Thealogy”; Kathryn Rountree’s “Archaeologists and Goddess Feminists at Çatalhöyük: An Experiment in Multivocality”; and Mary R. Lefkowitz’s “The New Cults of the Goddess.”

4. See Felicitas Goodman’s Ecstasy, Ritual, and Alternate Reality, which refers to a medical experiment conducted in 1972 describing physical responses to trance, including “considerable increase in the heart rate and, surprisingly, a simultaneous drop in blood pressure. . . . a drop in the so-called stressors (adrenaline, noradrenaline, and cortisol), while the beta endorphins, the body’s own painkillers, began to appear and stayed high even after the end of the trance” (39).

5. I have not found evidence that any of the writers I examine read this text.

6. Describing Christianity as bearing evidence of an “older matriarchal mythology,” Frye suggests that the early Church substituted the Queen of Heaven for the earth goddess and replaced the white goddess with the Holy Ghost (7, 30). Marilyn Butler points out that through their depictions of pagan polytheism, Romantic writers rebelled against the Christian God (59).
7. See Shanyn Fiske on Eliot’s and Brontë’s knowledge of the classics as well as Felicia Bonaparte on Eliot’s study (Fiske 64, 119; Bonaparte 16, 18).

8. The note for Job 35:10 reads: “Heb. ‘makers’ [gods], in the plural number . . . might as well have been put in the singular number, yea, though ‘Elohim’ be plural” (Holy Bible).

9. This includes the time of Jeroboam, when “the goddess shared the temple with Jehovah,” and Jezebel “was pro-goddess and anti-Jehovah and had converted King Ahab to her belief in the goddess” (Davis 67).

10. See Kimberly VanEsvald Adams’s discussion in “Feminine Godhead, Feminist Symbol.”

11. With the rise of armchair antiquarians and professional archaeologists, the notion of deep time had to be faced head-on, especially when the construction of railroads uncovered ancient artifacts (Philippa Levine 5, 7). Some of the works on the Celtic heritage include Stukeley’s Stonehenge (1740); Blair’s preface to Fragments of Ancient Poetry Collected in the Highlands of Scotland (1760); Percy’s Reliques of Ancient English Poetry (1765) and Northern Antiquities (1770); and Higgins’s The Celtic Druids (1827). Works that argue that the Druids came from Noah (Piggott The Druids), include Stukeley and Pezon’s The Antiquities of the Nations (1706); Rowlands’s Mona Antiqua Restaurata (1723); Cooke’s An Enquiry into the Patriarchal and Druidical Religion (1754); Jones’s The Origin of Language and Nations (1764); James’s The Patriarchal Religion of Britain (1836); and, of course, Edward Davies’s works. For further discussion of the influence of the indigenous Celtic heritage on the Romantics see Carruthers and Rawes, English Romanticism and the Celtic World.


13. T. Wemyss Reid notes that Brontë’s father loved telling supernatural stories to his children (215). In contributions to Penzance Natural History and Antiquarian Society, Richard Edmonds describes the May Day festivals, cromlêhs near Penzance, Druidical altars, and other antiquities of which the Branwells would have been aware.

14. Archaeological finds were within walking distance of the Brontë Parsonage. Ostensible remains of Druid ceremonies were found in 1773 at Rishworth in the West Riding of Yorkshire, and Druidical etymology was traced in Ripon and York, just a few miles from the Brontë residence (Piggott 170; Higgins 195).

15. See Houston, Royalties: The Queen and Victorian Writers.

16. Though she notes that the male Romantics’ adoration of Mother Nature was founded on a pre-classical period of matriarchy and goddess worship, Margaret Homans in Bearing the Word argues that Mother Nature could not be a positive type for the woman writer because nature is a fructifying agent in biological rather than linguistic terms.


18. A number of socialist-feminists were writing at this time, including Emma Martin, Eliza Macauley, Margaret Chappellsmith, and Frances Cooper.

19. It is clear that Fourier, Saint-Simon, and Owens ultimately could not break away from sexist views of who was to do the housework and who was to actually lead their utopian efforts.

20. Barbara Taylor maintains that Southcott “laid fertile mental ground in which socialist feminist doctrines could be sown” (“Woman-Power” 130).
21. When feminist-socialist Emma Martin died in 1849, Harriet Martineau was one of the subscribers who helped purchase a headstone for her grave, a fact suggesting how many mainstream Victorian writers may have known and admired Martin and her fellow socialists (Taylor, *Eve* 156).

22. R. Cooper also writes, “Who, possessing the smallest particle of common sense, would suppose for a moment that a God, possessing the attribute of OMNISCIENCE, would place man in a garden, and point out to him a certain tree whose fruits should be of the most alluring character, and yet prohibit him, under the pain of incurring his most bitter and eternal malediction, from eating of them. . . . Such an act, if it was performed by the Deity, . . . evinces a mind which is imbecile, and a disposition which is cruel, rather than a mind which is omniscient, and a disposition which is munificent” (*A Lecture on Original Sin*, 1838, 4).

**Chapter 2**


2. See Kate Lawson’s exploration of this theme in “Imagining Eve.”

3. Brontë’s Angrian pseudonyms include Charles Townshend (otherwise known as Lord Charles Albert Florian Wellesley), Captain “Andrew” Tree, and, of course, Arthur Wellesley, the Marquis of Douro (later named the Duke of Zamorna) (Alexander, *The Oxford Companion* 407).

4. Gaskell writes, “Miss Brontë” had been “as anxious as ever to preserve her incognito in ‘Shirley.’ . . . and thus, when the earliest reviews were published, and asserted that the mysterious writer must be a woman, she was much disappointed” (322).

5. See Elizabeth A. Johnson on the female writer’s need for a female god.

6. In a letter to Lewes in 1848, Brontë notes, “I can understand admiration of George Sand—for though I never saw any of her works which I admired throughout . . . yet she has a grasp of mind which . . . I can very deeply respect” (*Letters* 2:10). In another letter to Lewes in 1848, she says, “It is poetry, as I comprehend the word which elevates that masculine George Sand, and makes out of something coarse, something godlike” (*Letters* 2:14).

7. From the beginning, scholars and biographers have linked Emily with pagan worship. Recalling her conversation with Charlotte about Emily’s being the prototype for Shirley, Gaskell uses Shirley’s language for depicting a goddess. “Emily,” she says, “must have been a remnant of the Titans,—great-grand-daughter of the giants who used to inhabit the earth” (440). Also believing that Charlotte ventriloquized Emily through the character of Shirley, Swinburne writes, “It is into the lips of her representative Shirley Keeldar that Charlotte puts the fervent ‘pagan’ hymn of visionary praise to her mother nature” (73). Stating that Charlotte did not have “Emily’s fine Paganism,” May Sinclair claims that Emily was a mystic (133, 224, 173). In 1925 M. P. Willcocks asserted that Charlotte only saw the visionary “world in mere glimpses” while Emily “gave herself gladly to the great breath” (164, 162). Willcocks explains that Emily’s “intense consciousness of the Earth” and her “pagan love” for it are distilled in Shirley on the “‘Stilbro’ Moor” where “she sees Creative Nature working on the loom as a Woman” (167). David Cecil complains that Charlotte’s unrestrained imagination allows Shirley to indulge “in a flight of visionary meditation” (109).
Robert Bernard Martin agrees that Shirley is based on Emily (129). Robert B. Heilman is the first, as far as I can tell, to suggest that Charlotte’s work preempts the modern goddess movement (289). Curiously, Heilman does not see this aspect of Brontë’s work as crucial, and he drops this line of study to focus instead on how she symbolizes the power of intuition through moon imagery. Late twentieth-century scholarship continues the assertion that Brontë was a conduit for Emily’s mysticism. Lyndall Gordon finds that “the prophetic proto-feminism of Charlotte and the visionary nature of Emily, meet in Shirley” (189); Nancy Pell notes that Jane Eyre replaces the male deity with “the universal Mother, nature” (402). Her article goes no further on the importance of Brontë’s search for a way of embodying a female trope underlying the cosmos. The Oxford Companion to the Brontës explains Brontë’s mainstream Anglican background, but the editors confirm that Charlotte “also described unconventional epiphanic scenes such as that in Shirley,” in which there is a “non-Christian religious fable” using the “central figure, Eva” (Alexander 426). In keeping with other scholars, the editors of The Companion do not track the meaning of this entity elsewhere in Brontë’s work. See also Lisa Wang, “Unveiling the Hidden God.”

8. Of their roles as the four Chief Genii, Christine Alexander refers to the children’s creation of themselves as “pseudo-gods” in the Angrian tales (“Autobiography” 156).

9. “Psychiatrists most commonly refer to dissociation (or more distantly hysteria); anthropologists to trance, spirit possession, and altered states of consciousness; and religionists to visions, inspiration, mysticism, and ecstasy. These discourses are not simply descriptive, but rather reflect the various historical and explanatory commitments of the disciplines themselves” (Taves 7).

10. Questions that would need to be considered: Did she write her trances down immediately after experiencing them, which would explain the erratic handwriting? Or, as she inscribed her trances in a calmer state, did the mere act of transcribing her epiphàanic experience invoke a tumultuous response?

11. See Marianne Thormälen as well as Michael Baumber, who examine the evangelical and biblical influences on Brontë.


13. Many critics have noticed the moon imagery in Brontë’s work, but none mention that it is a feature in the juvenilia and linked to a female god. See Daley’s “The Moons and Almanacs of Wuthering Heights”; Kiernan’s “The Moon in the Brontë’ Novels”; Maynard, Charlotte Brontë; Heilman’s “Charlotte Bronte, Reason, and the Moon”; Lindner in Romantic Imagery in the Novels of Charlotte Brontë; Sabol and Bender’s concordance, which provides numerous references to the moon. See Swinburne’s paean to Brontë’s description of the moon (A Note).

14. See, for example, “Morning By Marquis Douro,” lines 37–40, #40; “Song By Lord Wellesley,” #42. In “Vesper,” Charlotte refers to the moon as “Nights empress” (line 27, #53). In “Reflections on the fate of neglected Genius,” Genius is referred to as a “bright-eyed queen” and “Divinity” (lines 17, 24, #56). In “The moon dawned slow on the dusky gloaming,” the “crescent moon” is referred to as “her” (lines 21–22, #88); in “Long since as I remember well” the moon is a “her” with “holiest light” (line 364, #108). In regard to the sun as male, see “Sunrise,” #12; “The Churchyard,” #19; “The Evening Walk,” #34; “Morning by Marquis of Douro,” #40; “Dream of the West,” #138, all in Poems.
15. In keeping with this confluence of meanings for the moon, Bachofen notes, “Mother right may be identified with the moon and the night, father right with the sun and the day” (148).

16. Neufeldt believes that only half of the poems Charlotte wrote in the juvenilia are not associated with the Glass Town fantasy world (Poems xxxv).

17. At Cambridge, Patrick was enamored of Methodism, which, as J. F. C. Harrison notes, “was essentially a religion of experience. Its appeal was not to specific doctrines as such,” but to emotional, mystical experience (Second Coming 30). Brontë’s trances could have been related to Methodist forms of mystical experience.

18. Regarding the connections between Protestantism and messianic prophets, see the work of Ronald Matthews and Christopher Hill.


20. See Kevin Binfield’s “The French, the ‘Long-wished-for Revolution.’”

21. Brontë researched the Leeds-Mercury for the years 1812–14 in preparation for writing the novel (Alexander, Oxford Companion 100, 464–65). She may also have read The Voice of the West Riding, a radical newspaper published during the years 1833–34.

22. Other places in Shirley (Penguin) that feature the moon in a trancelike moment include pages 202–3, 238–39, 241–42, 249, 373–74, 406, 485. More than any of Brontë’s other novels, Shirley features many allusions to pagan gods and goddesses while also showing a strong grasp of biblical narrative. Some of these pagan references, as cited in the Penguin edition, include Baal (69), Saturn (166, 315), Medusa (194), Tophet (313), Hyperion (315), Oceanus (315), Prometheus (315), Calypso and Eucharis (455), Juno (462, 491), Thalestris (473), Endymion (485), Moloch (499), Dagon (519), and the “god of Egypt” (575).

23. The criticism on Shirley suggests that the schisms are too various to find concors in the discordia. See the Edinburgh Review (“Shirley: a Tale”); Sharpe’s London Journal (“SHIRLEY”). Much modern scholarship typifies Susan Gubar’s view that Shirley is “muddled in subject and point of view” (5). For example, see Terry Eagleton (Myths of Power); Gisela Argyle; Philip Rogers; Miriam Bailin.

Chapter 3

1. The Quarterly Review described the rites in Rome: “the cannon of St. Angelo, re-echoed by mortars in the streets, and the bells of all the churches, announce to the city and the world, urbi et orbi, that some event of great interest to Christendom is consummated.” “The Pope, speaking ‘ex cathedrà,’ has dogmatically defined the ‘Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary’” (“La Croyance” 146). See discussions of the debates about the Immaculate Conception in Carol Engelhardt Herringer 116–43; Maria LaMonaca 160–62, 164–68.

2. See “The Gods of Antiquity” (Saturday 1 August 1868), which reads, “the worship of the Madonna—Mea Domina, My Lady, queen of heaven continued to be practised till the introduction and spread of Christianity, when the people still persisting in rendering homage to the revered goddess of their forefathers, in an evil moment, but with perhaps a good intention, the name of Mary was substituted for the Pagan goddess, the latter be-
ing designated as the symbol, throughout all past time, of the Virgin Mary, the Mother of Christ.”

3. This argument continued in the nineteenth century. See “Dr. Pusey on Marian Devotion.”

4. Ullathorne also writes of Mary, “she is the most wonderful example of exception from the common laws of our nature in so many ways. No mortal, no angel, no creature ever was before, or will be again, the Mother of God. Next to her Divine Son, the created universe has nothing like to her. And from how many laws is she excepted” (40).

5. “The Church of England a portion of Christ’s One Holy Catholic Church” in the Christian Remembrancer 1866 noted that Pusey’s Eirenicon sold about 5,000 copies and thus could be said to have been read by twenty to thirty thousand people but that most had not heard of the Eirenicon until the Times referred to it on 2 December 1866 (176).

6. The press had a field day, and there were barbs enough to go around for both Newman and Pusey. See “Replies to the Eirenicon”; “Doctor Pusey’s Eirenicon”; Rev. of “A Letter to the Rev. E. B. Pusey.”

7. Further, making her conception immaculate raised issues about the immaculateness of the conception of her mother and father and so on.

8. See the review titled “Sacred and Legendary Art”; “The treatment is catholic, not roman catholic,” for she focuses on the “aesthetic,” not “religious” (707). An anonymous review of Legends of the Madonna in Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine remarks: “we must not forget we are reviewing Mrs. Jameson’s Legends of the Madonna, a work which, professing to treat the subject relatively to art, repudiates controversy” (29).

Chapter 4

1. Regarding Barrett’s spiritual leanings see Linda M. Lewis’s Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s Spiritual Progress; David G. Riede’s “EBB: The Poet as Angel”; Patricia Murphy, “Reconceiving the Mother.”

2. See Susan Stanford Friedman’s “Gender and Genre Anxiety” regarding how Barrett “reformulated epic conventions to suit [her] female vision and voice” (203). Regarding EBB’s knowledge of Greek, see Alice Falk’s “Lady’s Greek without the Accents,” which is a good overview of EBB’s immersion in the Greek language and her desire to be both a manly and a womanly poet. Jennifer Wallace’s “Elizabeth Barrett Browning: Knowing Greek” also discusses EBB’s trope of cross-dressing (346).

3. Regarding EBB and Swedenborgianism, see Lewis and Dorothy Mermin.

4. In her study of Barrett’s spiritual life, though Lewis briefly mentions the radical sources of the belief in a female messiah, she does not examine how that tradition structures Barrett’s writing (5).

5. Lewis notes that Barrett’s work continually refers to the prophetesses “Miriam, Eve, Mary Magdalene, the Pythian, Cassandra, and Godiva” (14, 186).


7. See Lynee Lewis Gaillet’s “Reception of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s Aurora Leigh.” The majority of critics recognized the brilliance of EBB’s writing but criticized her metaphors: her hyperbolic metaphors, said one, “are signs of some deficiency in real strength” (National Review 248. One review complained that Romney was a “laughing-
stock” because of his adoration of such an independent woman, noting that “woman was created to be dependent” on “man” (“MRS. BARRETT BROWNING” 33).

8. The breast imagery is also in her “The Seraph and Poet.”


11. See Anne Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain*, who writes that “The basic Celtic goddess type was at once mother, warrior, hag, virgin, conveyor of fertility, of strong sexual appetite which led her to seek mates amongst mankind equally with the gods, giver of prosperity to the land, protectress of the flocks and herds” (233).

12. See Terrance Allan Hoagwood and Herbert F. Tucker on this aspect of *Aurora Leigh*.

13. I am grateful to Sandra Donaldson for her insights on this motif.

14. Regarding the Reform Bill of 1832, EBB writes, “I know little or nothing about it—but I do like a nation to be free,—and I do like to belong to a free nation. And if the meaning of freedom is not, that the majority of the nation, called the people, should have a proportionate weight and influence in the government of the nation, I confess I do not understand what freedom means” (*EBB to Mr. Boyd* 140). She also writes on 9 June 1832, “The Bill has passed. We may be prouder of calling ourselves English, than we were before it passed,—and stand higher among nations, not only as a freer people, but as a people worthy of being free” (176).

15. The blinding of Romney has been much debated among feminists; see Cora Kaplan, “Introduction,” *Aurora Leigh*; Friedman, “Gender and Genre Anxiety”; Steve Dillon and Katherine Frank, “Defenestrations of the Eye”; Carpenter, “Blinding the Hero.”

**Chapter 5**

1. For other correspondence from Concordia, see the following, all in *The Crisis*: 3.32 (5 April 1834): 257–58; 4.4 (3 May 1834): 31–32; 4.9 (7 June 1834): 67–68; 4.10 (14 June 1834): 75.

2. Brontë and Barrett Browning also feature Cassandra in their writings (*Belgian Essays* 348; see also Fiske 98).

3. See Evelyn L. Pugh’s “Florence Nightingale and J. S. Mill” regarding a disagreement similar to Owen’s and Concordia’s about legislation for women. Pugh argues that Mill’s *Subjection of Women* was much influenced by Nightingale’s 1852 *Suggestions*, which included “Cassandra.”

4. Her journals, letters, and jottings held at the British Library indicate a rigorous and, to modern ears, severe sense of being set apart to fulfill a holy mission.

5. Barbara Montgomery Dossey suggests, “In many places, she identifies with major prophets, apostles, and other people on their journeys of faith. She often challenges the masculine imagery of God” (337).

6. Kalton’s description of equality typifies this scene in which Eve/Nightingale’s relationship with deity is one of horizontal transcendence. A horizontal approach would see humans as entwined with nature, in contrast to the traditional Christian view that human-
kind is the pinnacle of God’s creation and the center of and dominating force over nature. If vertical transcendence may be equated with a hierarchical chain of being, horizontal transcendence posits that there can be no spiritual grounding without a material sense of one’s interdependence with all life.

7. See also Christopher Hill.

8. In annotations to her Bible she writes in Greek, Latin, Italian, German, and French (Dossey 337).

9. In April 1861, Jowett writes to Nightingale: “do not let Cassandra die, but live & declare the works of God” (Jowett 4).

10. Jowett writes to Nightingale: “I did not exactly take Cassandra for yourself, but I thought that it represented more of your own feeling about the world than could have been the case” (Jowett 8). “But, how to remedy, or even to describe the evil without doing harm it is difficult to conceive. It seems to require a true woman or queen, a female Christ, as you say, to show the way. It seems to demand a nature which unites all feminine sympathies & in a certain sense, graces, with an heroic temper & firmness of soul. There are so many germs of nobleness in the characters of women that I cannot doubt a great deal might be done to ennoble them still more. But at present, the best women suffer more than any one from the degenerate state of religion & are fed or feed themselves on Methodistical or Catholic fancies” (Jowett 6).

Chapter 6

1. In 1851, she mentioned receiving a call from a follower of Owen, a Mr. Conyngham, who wanted to establish a federation between America and England “with an ultimate view of Socialism” (GEL 1:375). She also refers to Robert Owen’s “Manifesto” in a letter to the Brays (GEL 2:88).

2. J. B. Bullen suggests that Romola progressed through the three Comtean phases, beginning in polytheism under her father, turning to monotheism under the tutelage of Savonarola, and finally attaining a positivist state free of superstition at the end of the novel (430). Pauline Nestor views Romola as a “Positivist ‘priestess of Humanity’” (334).

3. In the 1820s Saint-Simon was a model for young French intellectuals, who looked for meaning in the post-revolution chaos (Pickering 211). After Comte’s rupture with Saint-Simon, Saint-Simon’s followers came to Comte for a clear portrayal of Saint-Simon’s ideas (216–17).

4. “The theories of the master [St. Simon], particularly as modified by his former secretary August Comte, were avidly studied by such figures as Thomas Carlyle, George Eliot, and John Stuart Mill. Mill singled out Enfantin’s movement as the source of many of his own feminist ideas” (Malmgreen 10).

5. Perhaps disingenuously, Eliot put off the repeated appeals from positivist follower Frederic Harrison to create a fictional rendition of a positivist Utopia (see GEL 4:448). She allowed that “an ever present dream of mine that the grand features of Comte’s world might be sketched in fiction,” but in later correspondence explains that her “whole soul goes with your desire that it should be done, and I shall at least keep the great possibility (or impossibility) perpetually in my mind, as something towards which I must strive, though it may be that I can do so only in a fragmentary way” (GEL 4:287, 301).
6. The following deal with the dry-as-dust nature of Eliot’s scholarship and agree about its embalmment: Bullen (434); Henry James in *Partial Portraits* (88; qtd. in Bullen 434); “Romola,” the *Athenaeum* 46; *the Reader* 2.28.


8. After Eliot’s mother lost her twin sons, five-year-old Evans was sent to a boarding school. Though her mother lived until Mary Anne was sixteen, the two never shared a warm relationship (Carpenter, “The Trouble with Romola” 119, 120). To Carpenter, *Romola* is about Evans’s rage at being separated from her mother (“Trouble” 120). Carpenter’s argument attempts to show, as I do, that Romola became a mixture of two divine female entities, though Carpenter suggests that they are the Madonna and the “woman clothed with the sun” of Revelation (“Trouble”).

9. LaMonaca asserts, “Even as Madonna Romola comes across as an essentialist vision of sacred womanhood, it is a vision of womanhood that eclipses male authority” (176).

10. Homans argues that the highest form of translation is that which translates creatively rather than literally and suggests that Eliot grew tired of playing the role of literal translator (*Bearing the Word* 178–79).
