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

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Index

Abrams, M. H., artist as creator and, 12
Adams, Kimberly VanEsvald, Feuerbach’s notion of the feminized Savior and, 64
Alexander, Christine: adolescent Brontë as “self-conscious author” and, 26; Brontë’s sophisticated repertoire of male voices and, 25
Allen, Michael J. B., Marsilio Ficino and, 129
Alley, Henry, Eliot’s Romola and Piero, 153n7
Althusserian perspective, religion as disciplinary apparatus and, 2
Anderson, Pamela Sue: concept of the goddess and, 127; deft feminist epistemology and, 13; meaning of “exist” and, 13; mythoi surrounding the Virgin and, 62; patriarchal version of the Adam and Eve story, 37
Anthony, Susan B., 74
Anzaldúa, Gloria, aesthetic of, 4
Arnold, Matthew: Celtic strain of “natural magic” and, 9; English physical and primordial mark on bodies and, 9; Literature and Dogma and, 3; meaning of “God” and, 3
Aurora Leigh (Barrett Browning), 1, 6, 18, 22–23, 41, 73–75, 78–82, 85–86, 90–92, 94, 96–97, 150n7
Bachofen, J. J.: matriarchy preceded patriarchy and, 12; meanings for the moon and, 149n15
Barmby, John Goodwyn: Communist Church and, 17; poem for female savior and, 17
Barrett Browning, Elizabeth: “The Dead Pan” and, 75; description of Eve and, 41; double-seeing female poet and, 6; Edward Irving and, 18; Essays on the Greek Christian Poets and the English Poets and, 73, 79–80, 91; Eve and, 65; expansive spirituality and, 77; gender bending and, 108; gender bending via homoeroticism and, 92; “Glimpses into My Own Life and Literary Character” and, 76; hyperbolic metaphors and, 150–151n7; Iliad and, 76; letters of, 1; Mother Nature and, 13; Owenite principles and, 94; polytheism and, 23; polytheistic imagery and, 91; quotes from, 73; Reform Bill of 1832 and, 151n14; sectarianism of the National Churches and, 79; Swedenborgian immanence of the eternal and, 85
Beatrijs, Beguine, 4, 123
Bentley’s Miscellany, Pope Joan and, 78
Bidney, Martin, literary epiphanies and, 3
Bigwood, Carol, connatural body and, 4
Billone, Amy Christine: female writer’s masking and, 21; Victorian women writers and, 21
Blackwood, John, letter from George Eliot and, 138–39
Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine: Aurora Leigh and, 81; Barrett Browning’s vulgar tropes and, 96; “The Moors” and, 30; review of Legends in, 70; Thomas Aird and, 24
Blagden, Isa, Fourierism and, 95
Blair, Hugh, Ossian and, 31
Blake, William, millenarians and, 17
Bodichon, Barbara, 74; Florence Nightingale and, 129; George Eliot and, 74, 124–25, 129, 138; Romola as rebel in disguise and, 138
Bonaparte, Felicia: Christian and classical culture, 127; Romola’s mise-en-scène and, 127
Booth, Alison, Romola’s astonishing amount of freedom and, 138
Bray, Caroline, 125
Bray, Charles, 125
Brigham Young University, 143
British Library, Brontë’s Shirley and, 40, 151n4
British Quarterly Review: Cardinal Manning’s enthusiasm for Madonna and, 60; Manning as effeminate and, 60
Brontë, Anne, 40
Brontë, Charlotte: Angrian pseudonyms and, 147n3; brilliant use of masking and, 35–36; censoring of her fictional heroine and, 42; Condition of England novel and, 35; description of a female divinity and, 27; epiphany in early poetry and, 31; feminist religious symbolic and, 29; masking the female deity and, 40; “MILTON’S EVE” and, 64; moon imagery and, 148n13; Mother Nature and, 13; omnipotent feminine essence and, 26; ritual summons of the divine and, 30; solution to class warfare and, 45; symbolic female divinities and, 2; titanic goddess and, 18; trances and, 22, 28, 30, 32–33, 39–43, 45, 77; treatment of religion and, 25; view of literary genius and, 28; Villette and, 29, 49; “The Violet” and, 24–26, 31, 38; Woman Question and, 27, 33, 44
Brontë, Emily, 36, 40
Brontë, Patrick, 34
Browning, Elizabeth Barrett. See Barrett Browning, Elizabeth
Brunn, Emilie Zum, love and divine knowledge, 4
Bryant, John, revisions of manuscripts and, 41
Buchan, Luckie, 15, 20, 109; journalistic assaults made on, 78; spiritual breathings and, 21
Bullen, J. B., Eliot’s Romola and, 128, 152n2
Burns, Robert, Buchan’s spiritual breathings and, 21
Butler, Marilyn, pagan polytheism and, 145n6
Byron, Lord, Astarte and, 7

Calliixtus, Nicephorus, 71
Carlile, Richard: freethinking and, 17; Immaculate Conception and, 52
Carlyle, Thomas, 9–10; co-optation of nature and, 13; new language for nature and, 12; Saint-Simonians and, 152n4; Sartor Resartus and, 11; sinister effects of rising capitalism and, 93
Carpenter, Mary: Aurora Leigh and, 90; Eliot’s Romola and, 130; Romola as mixture of two divine female entities and, 153n8
Cecil, David, Brontë’s unrestrained imagination in Shirley and, 147n7
Celtic gods: Anne Ross and, 151n11; “feminine idiosyncrasy” and, 9; Thomas Macpherson and, 9; variant mythologies and, 7; works on, 146n11
Chadwick, Edwin, Nightingale on Mill's death and, 108
Chaney, Christine, *Aurora Leigh* and, 92
Chase, Karen: Christian and classical culture, 127; *Romola*’s mise-en-scène and, 127
*Christian Remembrancer*, Immaculate Conception and, 52
Cobbe, Frances Power, 74
Coleridge, H. Nelson: “discordia concours” and, 83; female and male models of divinity, 69; Mary and new ideas about gender, 70
Coleridge, Samuel Taylor, 18, 83
Comte, Auguste: all-but-divine goddess and, 10; George Eliot and, 126; Saint-Simonians and, 152n3; women and self-sacrificing love, 127
Congressional Library, Susan B. Anthony and, 74
Cook, Edward, Nightingale’s biographer and, 116
Corner, Julian: Eliot’s *Romola* and, 128; *Romola*’s loss of mother and, 135
Coward, Rosalind, original social system and, 12
*Creation of Adam and Eve* (Michelangelo), 110
*The Creation of Patriarchy* (Lerner), 145n3
*The Crisis*, 17: feminist socialists and, 98; legitimacy of religion and, 92–93

Dalley, Lana L., Browning’s rejection of socialism and, 95
Daumer, Georg Friedrich, *The Religion of the New Age* and, 141
Davies, Edward, 9
de’Medici, Cosimo, Marsilio Ficino and, 129
de Medici, Cosimo, Marsilio Ficino and, 129
Derrida, Jacques, definition of empirical events and, 62
de Saint-Simon, Henri, radical socialist reformer and, 126
DeShazer, Mary K., Mother Nature’s son and, 13
de Thierry, William, Beguine mysticism and, 106
Dickens, Charles, sinister effects of rising capitalism and, 93
*The Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, notion of a “Great Goddess” and, 145n3
Dolan, Tim, Brontë’s *Shirley* and, 45
Dossey, Barbara Montgomery: masculine imagery of God and, 151n5; Nightingale’s mysticism and, 115
*Dublin Telegraph*, Immaculate Conception and, 49
Dufour, M. Ariès, 125

*Eclectic Review*, bleeding deity and, 59
*Ecstasy, Ritual, and Alternate Reality* (Goodman), 145n4
*Edinburgh Journal*, Luckie Buchan and, 21
*Eirenicon* (Pusey), 55, 59, 150nn5–6
Eliot, George: conditions necessary for Utopia and, 131; essay on Wollstonecraft and Fuller, 137; foundations of Marxism and, 18; John Bull and, 126; letter to John Blackwood and, 138–39; Madonna and, 8; *Madwoman in the Attic* and, 129; mil lennial politics of Victorian Britain and, 18; “moral glow” of positivism and, 126; mother’s loss of twin sons and, 153n8; painting of Madonna and, 3; positivist Utopia and, 152n5; preserving the essence of Christian self-sacrifice and, 128; Raphael’s *Sistine Madonna* and, 123, 127; rationale for seeing women as part of the Christian godhead and, 64; response to Richard Holman Hutton’s review of *Romola* and, 130; *Romola* and, 8, 22–23, 90, 121–24, 127–42, 152n2, 153n6, 153nn8–9; Saint-Simonians and, 152n4; serio-comic voice of Mary and, 153n11; suffrage and,
Index

137; symbolic female divinities and, 2; trajectory of Eliot’s theological heuristics and, 124; “truth of feeling” and, 122; W. H. Mallock and, 121; women and self-sacrificing love, 127

Émile (Rousseau), 7

English Civil War, heretical notion of the female savior and, 34

Epiney-Burgard, Georgette, love and divine knowledge, 4

Essays on the Greek Christian Poets and the English Poets (Barrett Browning), 73, 79–80, 91

Essence of Christianity (Feuerbach), 122–23, 129

Eternal Feminine, Faust and, 10

Evans, Mary Ann, study of unfulfilled prophecy and, 124

Eve: as godlike being and, 23; as powerful, semi-divine figure and, 34; Brontë’s depiction of, 101; Brontë’s subversive chapter on, 35; Charlotte Brontë and, 38–40; Christian creation story and, 110–11; Christian view of, 38; curse of, 58; Eliza Sharples and, 19; feminist efforts to recuperate and, 34; Florence Nightingale and, 120; heretical incarnations of, 45; independent, separate identity from Adam and, 66; Jameson’s representation of, 64; litany of the goddesses and, 68; Mary Wollstonecraft and, 99; masculine obliteration of Eve’s body and, 90; “Milton’s Eve” and, 64–65; models of femininity and, 64; “Mother of all living” and, 57; New Jerusalem and, 89; Nightingale’s radical grandmothers and, 100; patriarchal version of the Adam and Eve story, 37; relationship with deity and horizontal transcendence, 151–52n6; Sharples’s merging of Isis and Eve, 109; stark imagery of, 97; the Fall and, 16, 19–20, 34, 39, 54, 57, 65–66, 78, 89, 110; woman-centered mythology and, 13

Faber, Frederick William, sharing of blood when Christ was in Mary’s womb and, 59

Fanon, Frantz: Charlotte Brontë and, 27; mastuty of language and, 14

Fawcett, Millicent Garrett, 74

Felski, Rita, Victorian women writers and, 21–22

feminine, resacralizing and, 6–14

feminine images of God, Bible and, 7

Feuerbach, Ludwig: all-but-divine goddess and, 10; Auguste Comte and, 126; Christ’s passion and, 123; Essence of Christianity and, 122–23, 129; German language and, 129; irrationality of a heavenly Trinity and, 123; suffering and gods’ inferiority to humankind and, 142; women and self-sacrificing love, 127

Ficino, Marsilio, Platonism of, 129

Fiorenza, Elizabeth Schussler, feminist religious studies and, 3

Fletcher, Mary Bosanquet, 14

Foucauldian perspective, religion as disciplinary apparatus and, 2

Fourier, Charles, social progress and, 17

Fourierism, 94–95, 112

Fraser’s Magazine: Patrick Brontë and, 34; “Women and the Social System” and, 21

freethinking, 81; Frances Wright and, 20; Richard Carlile and, 17

French Revolution, 17–18, 34, 52, 64, 99, 111–12, 115, 124–25, 130

Friedman, Susan Stanford, “Gender and Genre Anxiety” and, 150n2

Frye, Northrop: major male Romantics and, 7; view of God and, 11

Fuller, Margaret: Egyptian Isis and, 124; rationale for seeing women as part of the Christian godhead and, 64; Woman in the Nineteenth Century and, 124

Gaskell, Elizabeth: Brontë’s father and,
Shirley’s language for depicting a goddess and, 147n7
Gelpi, Barbara Charlesworth, stereotypes of women in art and literature, 84
Gladstone, William, review of “The Glories of Mary” and, 53
God as metaphor: acceptance of the masculine metaphor and, 12; Brontë’s Shirley and, 22; Charlotte Brontë and, 27; Elizabeth Barrett Browning and, 87; how society constructs the divine and, 33; Judeo-Christian metaphor of the jealous Father and, 119; Julian of Norwich and, 5; male yearning for the erotic and, 54; Nightingale’s theology and, 103; Romantics and, 13; women as omnipotent beings and, 14

goddess, 2, 6–7, 9–13, 18–19, 24–27; and Barrett Browning, 73, 75–76, 79, 86; and Charlotte Brontë, 37–38, 41, 43–44, 51; and Nightingale, 108–11, 118; and Eliot, 121, 126–27, 132, 140
Gordon, Lyndall, prophetic proto-feminism of Brontë and, 148n7
Goslee, Nancy, male Romantic poetry and, 13
Great Mother, 142; Brontë lyric poem and, 24; Brontë’s early writings and, 22
Gunton, Colin A., problem with monotheistic religions and, 6
Haight, Gordon, George Eliot and, 124
Harrison, J. F. C., boundary between millenarians and radicals, 17
Haskett, William J., 21
Heilman, Robert B., modern goddess movement and, 148n7
Henry von Ofterdingen (Novalis), 10
Herringer, Carol, Madonna’s identity and, 50
Higgins, Godfrey, female progenitor of the gods and, 9

Hill, Susan E., 122
Hirsch, Pam, George Sand and, 26–27
History of Christianity (Milman), 8, 51
The History of Our Lord (Jameson), 65–66
Hodgson, Peter C., George Eliot and, 122
Holy Ghosts (Taylor), 27
Homans, Margaret: critiquing Romola’s ending and, 137; highest form of translation and, 153n10; Mother Nature and, 146n16; Romola’s self-renunciation and, 135; Western canon and, 13; women’s exclusion from and silencing within literature and, 129
Horne, R. H., Barrett Browning’s writing and, 73
Hutton, Richard Holman, Eliot’s response to Hutton’s review of Romola and, 130

Immaculate Conception: 1854 endorsement of, 69; consolidation of Mary’s power and, 56; establishing the doctrine of, 55; feast of, 58; female blood and, 66; gender concerns and, 52; Jameson’s writings and, 64; Papal Bull and, 22; potentiality for divine womanhood and, 61; Romish dogma and, 49; slippage between what is considered human and divine, 53; Victorian debates and, 6; vitriolic arguments between men about, 71; Woman Question and, 63
Irving, Edward, 18
Isis: female prophets and, 90; nursing Horus of the Egyptians and, 68; Protestants and, 51; Sharples’s merging of Isis and Eve, 109; Sharples’s references to, 23; “Shekinah” and, 129; Veil of Isis and, 118
The Isis, Eliza Sharples and, 19
Isis Unveiled (Blavatsky), 9

Jameson, Anna: art criticism and, 109; difference between the Nestorians
and Monophysites, 70; Eve as holy entity in Christian works of art and, 66; *The History of Our Lord* and, 65–66; *Legends of the Madonna* and, 22, 49–50, 64, 67, 71, 150n8; Madonna as dominant motif in Renaissance and Medieval art, 68; “Milton’s Eve” and, 64–65; moral regeneration of the whole human race and, 68; pagan worship and, 69; rhetorical gifts of, 64; “unchristian confusion” about behavior and, 69; Victorian debates about Immaculate Conception and, 6; Victorian verities about motherhood and, 64; Woman Question and, 62–63

*Jane Eyre* (Brontë), 12, 22, 31, 33, 40, 148n7

Jantzen, Grace M.: being “divine” for others and, 108; Christian God as necrophiliac and, 14; “divine horizon” of potentiality for women and, 62; “feminist symbolic” of “becoming divine” and, 29; feminist theology and, 31

Jenkins, Ruth Y.: Brontë’s *Shirley* and, 37; evangelical expectations and Brontë, 26; Florence Nightingale and, 98; women as holy martyrs and, 113

Joan of Arc, 78

John the Baptist, 99, 116, 138

Jowett, Benjamin, 103, 112–13, 116, 152nn9–10

Julian of Norwich: Florence Nightingale and, 109; multi-gendered god and, 87; *Sixteen Revelations of Divine Love* and, 5

Keats, John: Celtic heritage and, 9; goddess and, 7

Keele, Mary, Nightingale’s open-minded approach to spirituality and, 101

Keightley, Thomas, 6–7

Kenyon, Frederic G., *The Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning* and, 1

Kenyon, John, 75

Kingsley, Charles: sexual abstinence and, 51; *Yeast* and, 8

Kristeva, Julia: critical theories about “gestation and birth of children” and, 82; male-defined Virgin Mary and, 139; mother Goddess and, 121; need for goddesses and, 141

Krueger, Christine L.: early nineteenth-century women preachers and, 14; “evangelical ideolect” and, 15; evangelical rhetoric and, 21

LaMonaca, Maria: Eliot’s *Romola* and, 128, 142; Protestant Victorian women writers and, 61

*The Language of the Goddess* (Gimbutas), 145n3

Larson, Janet L., Brontë’s use of “female messianism” and, 27

Lawson, Kate, “Mother/Eve/Nature” as the heart of “feminist dissent” and, 27

Lee, Ann, 15, 20–21, 109, 112

*Legends of the Madonna* (Jameson), 22, 49–50, 64, 67, 71, 150n8

*Le Globe*, John Stuart Mill and St. Simonians, 112

Leonard, William, 15

Lewes, G. H.: Brontë letter and, 28; Brontë’s pseudonym and, 25; conversation with Eliot and Simcox, 139; George Eliot and, 121; Madonna and, 8

Lewis, Linda: Barrett Browning’s hypothetical Christian ideal and, 95; female messiah and, 111

Lewis, Maria, 124

Liddington, Jill, Brontë’s *Shirley* and, 36

*Literature and Dogma* (Arnold), 3

*London Review*: distaste for the Virgin and, 53–54; Immaculate Conception and, 52; Virgin becoming the omnipotent mediator and, 53

Luddites, 33–36

Ludovisi Gallery, 109
Macpherson, Thomas, *Ossian* and, 9

Madonna: amalgamated with other feminine icons and, 68; appeal of, 119; as cover for Ariadne and, 141; as entity uniting all humans and, 135; *Aurora Leigh* and, 91; Cardinal Manning’s enthusiasm for, 60; Catholic and Protestant interpretations of, 50–51; culture’s constructions of gender and, 22; divine femininity and, 63; dominant motif in Renaissance and Medieval art, 68; Eliot’s *Romola* and, 128; Eliza Sharples and, 135; George Eliot and, 121, 124, 132, 137–39; Jameson’s idea of the horizon of woman’s divinity and, 71; Kristeva and the cult of the Madonna, 141; male yearning for the erotic and, 54; Mary included in Christ’s divinity and Incarnation, 70; “miraculous virginity” and, 51; models of femininity and, 64; Nightingale’s theological understanding of, 118; painting of, 3; popular renditions of, 8; Romola as mixture of two divine female entities and, 153n8; secularizing and, 19; sexuality and, 58; “site of free signification” and, 61; unofficial dogma and, 49–50; value system and, 23

*Maddwoman in the Attic*, Eliot’s view of herself as an editor and, 129

Maguire, Edward: Mary’s postpartum cleanliness and, 59; *The New Romish Dogma of the Immaculate Conception* and, 49

Mallock, W. H., George Eliot and, 121

Malmgreen, Gail, joining socialism with the emancipation of women and, 21

Martin, Robert Bernard, Brontë’s *Shirley* and, 148n7

Martineau, Harriet: death of Emma Martin and, 147n21; George Eliot and, 125

Marxism: as millenarian and, 118; influences of, 18; Karl Marx and, 114

Matriarchy: as underlying Greek and Jewish culture, 141; Bachofen hypothesis and, 12; goddess worship and, 2; questions about its ancient prevalence, 145n3

May, Chad, conflations of Romola with the Virgin Mary and, 128

Mayberry, Nancy, Mary’s virginal integrity and, 59

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, body’s hermeneutic aptitudes and, 4


Millenarians, 93, 142; revaluation of the term “God” and, 13; utopian feminists and, 14–23

Miller, J. Hillis: artist as the “creator” and, 12; sacramental heritage and the Romantics, 11

Mill, John Stuart: arguments for women’s rights and, 98; as gender bending and, 108; death of, 108; Florence Nightingale and, 101; Saint-Simonians and, 112, 152n4; *Subjection of Women* and, 151n3

Milman, Henry Hart, 8; debased female body and, 21; depicting gods in female form and, 9; early Church’s intermixture of pagan elements with the Virgin Mary, 117; female reproductive anatomy and, 59; *History of Christianity* and, 51; Immaculate Conception and, 52; primitive nature of women’s breasts and, 78; views of women and divinity, 86

Mohl, Julius, letter from Nightingale and, 100–101

Monophysites, 70

Moore, Louis, Brontë’s *Shirley* and, 38–39, 42–43

Morris, Pam: human suffering transforming the maternal into a site of love and, 136; material entity that unites all human beings and, 82

Mother-god-want: as site of intense desire and, 13; *Aurora Leigh* and, 81–83, 90; Brontë’s *Shirley* and, 37; dynam-
ics of, 6; Elizabeth Barrett Browning and, 88; fictional renditions of, 8; late Western patriarchy and, 14; Luckie Buchan and, 15; Mother Nature and, 88; mother-want and, 1; repressions and, 22; study of, 13
Mother Nature: Aurora Leigh and, 83, 88, 90, 97; Bronte and, 26–27, 33, 148n7; male Romantics’ adoration of, 146n16; Romanticism and, 11; sanctification of, 7, 13; stark imagery of, 97
Mother Right (Bachofen), 12
mother-want: Aurora Leigh and, 82–83; Brontë’s Shirley and, 37; Charlotte Brontë and, 27; Elizabeth Barrett Browning and, 1; George Sand and, 26–27; mother-god-want and, 1
Murphy, Patricia, “sinister potentiality of maternity” and, 84
mysticism, 106; Barrett Browning and, 148n7; epistemology of, 3–6; Nightingale and, 100–101, 115
mythology: Barrett Browning and, 73, 91; Christianity and, 69, 145n6; revised by women writers and, 3; Sharples and, 19; Shirley and, 38; woman-centered and, 13–14
The Mythology of Ancient Greece and Italy, problem with monotheistic religions and, 6–7

Nature: as objective correlative, 26; Bronte’s heroines and spiritual inspiration, 38; Bronte’s Shirley and, 36, 38; Celtic imagination and, 9; Charlotte Bronte’s trances and, 22, 28, 30, 32–33, 39–43, 45, 77; Christianity and, 19, 151–52n6; cooption of, 13; Elizabeth Barrett Browning and, 73, 75, 85, 87–89; hardheaded literalism and, 35; Jane Eyre and, 12; pagan worship and, 27; resacralizing and, 7; Romantics and, 11; Thomas Carlyle and, 10–11
Nestorians, 70

Neufeldt, Victor A.: Brontë’s Angrian saga and, 30; Bronte’s “The Violet” and, 25–26
The New Moral World, legitimacy of religion and, 92–93, 125
Newman, John Henry, 57–58, 60, 150n6
Nietzsche, Friedrich, truth as mobile army of metaphors and, 3
Nightingale, Florence: amorphous understanding of divinity and, 108; belief in horizontal transcendence and, 115; Benjamin Jowett and, 103, 112–13, 116, 152nn9–10; “Cassandra” and, 22–23, 98–99, 101, 104–5, 111–14, 116, 120, 151n3, 152nn9–10; concept of the female Christ and, 114; descriptions of spiritual ecstasy and, 104; divine inspiration and, 100; Eve as precursor for the female messiah and, 111; female Christ and, 18, 115, 152n10; “God “is always descending into hell” and, 108; God’s meaning and daily lives of the sick and needy, 107; Hermes Trismegistus and, 102, 111, 129; Holy Family and, 113–14; interpretation of Eve and, 110; The Isis and, 113; Judeo-Christian metaphor of the jealous Father and, 119; longing for a female savior and, 6; Lord’s Prayer and, 105, 109; Mill as “Goddess” and, 109; mystical Christianity and, 23; Nightingale Papers XII and, 98; radical horizontal transcendence and, 116; relationship with deity and horizontal transcendence, 151–52n6; Romola as rebel in disguise and, 138; symbolic female divinities and, 2; theological understanding of the Madonna and, 118; theology of, 101–2; Virgin Mary and, 116–17
Nussey, Ellen, Brontë letter and, 29

Oliphant, Margaret; Madonna and, 8
Oliver, Kelly, 141
Ossian (Macpherson), 9, 31
Owen, Robert: Barrett Browning’s vulgar tropes and, 96; English brand of socialism and, 92; female equality and, 17; George Eliot and, 18, 125; “Manifesto” and, 152n1; material effects of the Industrial Revolution and, 93; socialist feminists and, 98

Pagan Celtic Britain (Ross), 151n11
Paine, Thomas, 17
Papal Bull, 22
Parkes, Bessie Raynor, 74
Peake, R. B., 78
Pell, Nancy, Jane Eyre and “the universal Mother, nature” and, 148n7
Perkins, Erasmus, 17
Petroff, Alvilda, aesthetic of, 4
The Philosophy of Necessity (Bray), 125
Piqueur, François, millenarians and, 17–18
Pius IX, 49–50
polytheistic imagination: Anna Jameson and, 68; Barrett Browning and, 73–75, 79, 81–82, 84–85, 88, 91–92, 97; Charlotte Brontë and, 38; major male Romantics and, 7
The Portable Kristeva (Oliver), 141
Pusey, E. B., 55–59, 150n3, 150nn5–6

Qualls, Barry: discussion of Jane Eyre and, 12; The Secular Pilgrims of Victorian Fiction and, 24
Quarterly Review: Immaculate Conception and, 52; rites in Rome and, 149n1; schism within the Church and, 52
Queen Victoria, 11–12

radical feminists, 18–21 (see also socialist feminists; utopian feminists); Anna Jameson and, 15, 66; Barrett Browning and, 74, 97; Brontë’s Shirley and, 36; female savior figures and, 90; Nightingale and, 13, 100, 111;

Nightingale’s representation of the female savior and, 114
Ramses II, 101
Reid, T. Wemyss, Brontë’s father and supernatural stories, 146n13
The Religion of the New Age (Daumer), 141
Renk, Kathleen, stereotypes of women in art and literature, 84
Rigby, Kate, resacralizing nature and, 7
Rogers, Philip, “Brontë’s proto-feminism” and, 44
Romanticism: Charlotte Brontë and, 24; Continental writers and, 10; God’s creativity and, 12; Mother Nature and, 88–89; resacralizing and, 6; re-tailoring culture with female equality and, 13; viewing divinity as in part female and, 12; view of poets and, 11
Romola (Eliot), 8, 22–23, 90, 121–24, 127–42, 152n2, 153n6, 153nn8–9
Rosehill Circle, 125
Rosengarten, Herbert: Brontë’s grief and, 40; Brontë’s Shirley and, 41
Ruskin, John; fictional renditions of mother-god-want and, 8

Sacred and Legendary Art (Jameson), 67
Saint-Simonians, 17, 112, 125–26, 152n3
Sand, George: Brontë’s letter to Lewes and, 147n6; female portraits of, 81; influence on Brontë and, 26
Sartor Resartus (Carlyle), 11
Saturday Review, Eliot’s Romola and, 140
Scenes of Clerical Life (1858), 8
Schiller, Friedrich: co-optation of nature and, 13; “Gods of Greece” and, 75; “On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry” and, 10
Scholl, Lesa, Romola immersed in masculine ideologies and, 137
Scott, Walter, recuperation of Scottish artifacts and, 9
secular feminists, Mary Wollstonecraft and, 120
Seven Manners of Loving (Beatrijs of Nazareth), 4
Shakers, 15, 21
Sharp, William, millenarians and, 17
Sharples, Eliza: Aurora Leigh and, 95; brutal press and, 20; Christianity and, 45; Christ’s self-sacrifice and, 114; Eliot’s Romola and, 140; Eve as a powerful, semi-divine figure and, 34; George Eliot and, 132; God’s meaning and daily lives of the sick and needy, 107; Madonna and, 135; moral regeneration of the whole human race and, 68; revision of the Genesis text and, 90; rhetoric and, 37; Richard Carlile and, 52; Savior’s return and feminist goals, 19; Second Coming and political equality, 115; secular Eden and, 18; secular Millenium and, 16; secular vision of a new world order and, 20; society’s aim to keep women ignorant and, 137; symbolic female divinities and, 2; transformation of sociopolitical systems and, 120; Virgin/Isis as the horizon for female perfection and, 121
Shibden Hall, 36
Shirley (Brontë), 22, 24, 27, 33, 35–49, 101, 105, 147–49
Showalter, Elaine, 105; Nightingale’s “Cassandra” and, 99
Sibree, Jr., John, George Eliot and, 125
Simcox, Edith, Eliot’s influence by men and, 139
Simpson, Elspeth (Luckie Buchan), 15, 109
Simpson, Shola Elizabeth, Eliot’s Romola and, 137–38
Sistine Madonna (Raphael), 23, 121–23, 127
Sixteen Revelations of Divine Love (Julian of Norwich), 5
Smith, Blanche, Nightingale’s letter to, 101
Smith, James Elishma, 112; female prophets appearing in England and, 17
Smith, Margaret: Brontë’s grief and, 40; Brontë’s Shirley and, 41
Snowe, Lucy, masochistic “Reason” and, 29
socialist feminists, 50 (see also radical feminists; utopian feminists); Anna Jameson and, 64; Brontë rewrites the fall and, 39; The Crisis and, 98; death of Emma Martin and, 147n21; earthly paradise and, 2; Elizabeth Barrett Browning and, 78, 90, 93, 99; female savior figures and, 90; Fraser’s Magazine and, 21; George Eliot and, 142; Romantic-era and, 14
Southcott, Joanna, 2, 14–16, 18–21, 23, 33–34, 42, 65–66, 78, 89–90, 95, 112, 114, 120
Spencer, Herbert, George Eliot and, 125
Stockton, Kathryn Bond, Brontë’s tendency to take Romantic and Christian doctrines literally and, 35
Stone, Marjorie, Aurora Leigh and, 89
Subjection of Women (Mill), 151n3
Swedenborg, 23, 74, 85, 150
Swinburne, Algernon Charles: Brontë’s hymn of visionary praise to her “mother nature” and, 147n7; “Hymn to Prosperine” and, 75

Tale of Two Cities (Dickens), 21
Taves, Ann: first-person narrative and, 22; Florence Nightingale and, 117
Taylor, Harriet, arguments for women’s rights and, 98
Taylor, Irene, Brontë’s use of a “Mighty Mother” and, 27
Taylor, Jeremy, manual for Christian living and, 29
Taylor, Mary, 34
Taylor, Olivia: Aurora Leigh and, 82; Browning on poetry and, 73
Thormählen, Marianne: Brontë’s treatment of religion and, 25; heroism of the pilgrim and Brontë, 26; Victorian religious life and, 2
Trismegistus, Hermes, 102, 111, 129; Florence Nightingale and, 129
Trudgill, Eric, Madonna and, 8
Tuveson, Ernest L., millenarianism and, 18

Ullathorne, William Bernard, 54, 61; divine image of the mother and, 69; Mary as type of womanhood and, 150n4; Mary's ambiguous sexuality and, 58; Mary's virginal integrity and, 59
UNA: a paper devoted to the elevation of woman (1855), potentiality for divine womanhood and, 61
utopian feminists' depiction of Adam and, 66; millenarians and, 14–23. See also radical feminists; socialist feminists

Valéry, Paul, mastery of language and, 14
Vanita, Ruth, Protestant Victorian women writers and, 61
Vargish, Thomas, fictional inscriptions of providence and, 6
Villette (Brontë), 29, 49
Vindication of the Rights of Woman (Wollstonecraft), 124
Virgin Mary, 19, 22–23, 118 (see also Madonna); ambiguous power of, 8; Aurora Leigh and, 82; conflation of Romola with, 128; disagreement and, 49; Eliot's Romola and, 142; Florence Nightingale and, 116–17, 120; George Eliot and, 132; Kristeva's male-defined Virgin Mary and, 139; male dread of the emasculating Madonna and, 119; Nightingale's radical grandmothers and, 100; pagan alter egos and, 68; unrealized ideal for women and, 64

Wedderburn, Robert, 17
Westleyan-Methodist Magazine, Immaculate Conception and, 52
Westminster Review, patronizing attitude toward Eliot and, 141
Whitfield, H. J., "rude sublimity" of Druid worship and, 9
Willcocks, M. P., Charlotte Brontë and, 147n7
William of Thierry, love and divine knowledge, 4
Wollstonecraft, Mary, 137; Nightingale's "Cassandra" and, 99; Nightingale's overdetermined commitments to feminist spirituality and, 120; Vindication of the Rights of Woman and, 124
Woman in the Nineteenth Century (Fuller), 124
Wooler, Margaret, 34
Woolf, Virginia, 92; Nightingale's "Cassandra" and, 99
Wordsworth, William, Mother Nature and, 7
Wright, Frances, 77; modern Eves and, 34; revision of Christian Fall and, 20; society's aim to keep women ignorant and, 137; symbolic female divinities and, 2

Yeats (Kingsley), 8
Yeazell, Ruth, social problem novel and, 33

Zonana, Joyce, Aurora's description of her mother and, 84
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Victorian Women Writers, Radical Grandmothers, and the Gendering of God
Gail Turley Houston

Apocalypse South: Judgment, Cataclysm, and Resistance in the Regional Imaginary
Anthony Dyer Hoefer
If Victorian women writers yearned for authorial forebears, or, in Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s words, for “grandmothers,” there were, Gail Turley Houston argues, grandmothers who in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries envisioned powerful female divinities that would reconfigure society. Like many Victorian women writers, they experienced a sense of what Barrett Browning termed “mother-want” inextricably connected to “mother-god-want.” These millenarian and socialist feminist grandmothers believed the time had come for women to initiate the earthly paradise that patriarchal institutions had failed to establish.

Recuperating a symbolic divine in the form of the Great Mother—a pagan Virgin Mary, a female messiah, and a titanic Eve—Joanna Southcott, Eliza Sharples, Frances Wright, and others set the stage for Victorian women writers to envision and impart emanations of puissant Christian and pagan goddesses, enabling them to acquire the authorial legitimacy patriarchal culture denied them. Though the Victorian authors studied by Houston—Barrett Browning, Charlotte Brontë, Florence Nightingale, Anna Jameson, and George Eliot—often masked progressive rhetoric, even in some cases seeming to reject these foremothers, their radical genealogy reappeared in mystic, metaphysical revisions of divinity that insisted that deity be understood, at least in part, as substantively female.

Gail Turley Houston is professor and chair of English language and literature at the University of New Mexico.