

“Unscrupulously Epic”: Examining
Female Epic in the Poetry of
Felicia Hemans and Elizabeth
Barrett Browning

by

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AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners. I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

Abstract

Virginia Woolf once remarked that, “[t]here is no reason to think that the form of the epic ... suit[s] a woman any more than the [masculine] sentence” (Woolf 84). This thesis represents an attempt to explore what the epic genre, as imagined and written by women, might look like in regards to the verse of fellow women poets Felicia Hemans and Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Despite the persistent critical misconception that women’s poetry of the Romantic and Victorian periods is comprised mainly of light, lyric verse and tends to lack that “great effort” – for example, the epic poem – which often appears in the work of their male contemporaries, this thesis will argue conversely that Hemans and Barrett Browning do assume certain aspects of traditional epic poetry – a genre “almost coterminous” with masculinity (Schweizer 1) – in their work, while also managing to transform the genre in order that their work might successfully embody a more feminine perspective. The first chapter of the thesis examines the ways in which these two women poets are able to bridge the private and public spheres by transforming the quintessential role of the female poet as record-keeper into that of the poet as prophet and visionary in their political poetry. The two following chapters will highlight the ways in which both Hemans and Barrett Browning remodel the epic form in order to draw attention to the female voice (chapter two) and to examine new and unconventional prototypes of female heroism, for example the pioneering female artist and the militant mother (chapter three). With strong ties to a masculine tradition of epic, yet incorporating aspects of femininity hitherto foreign – perhaps even inimical – to the traditional conception of the genre, female epic, while admittedly something of a hybrid, arguably represents a distinctive genre in its own right and one which certainly merits more critical attention in the future.

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Dedication

To my parents, Gordon and Wendy Robertson, for their unfailing love and support.

Table of Contents

AUTHOR'S DECLARATION	ii
Abstract.....	iii
Acknowledgements	iv
Dedication.....	v
Table of Contents	vi
Introduction.....	1
1 “We thinkers ... we hoppers ... we poets”: The Poet as Prophet in <i>The Restoration of the Works of Art to Italy</i> and <i>Casa Guidi Windows</i>	12
2 “Shall I speak?”: The Female Voice in <i>The Forest Sanctuary</i> and <i>A Drama in Exile</i>	39
3 “[B]ehold the paps we all have sucked!”: The “Unscrupulously Epic” Heroine in <i>The Siege of Valencia</i> and <i>Aurora Leigh</i>	67
Works Cited and Consulted	90

Introduction:

A reviewer writing in April 1820 in response to Felicia Hemans' poem, *The Sceptic*, writes of Hemans' future poetic career:

It will become her now to change her course, and to try a more expanded and adventurous flight. After the successful experiment of her powers within the limits to which she has hitherto circumscribed them, she may now collect herself for a more continuous effort, and, braving all their vicissitudes, wing her way through the lofty and troubled regions of passion. (qtd in Behrendt 108, emphasis mine)

This “great effort” to which the reviewer is referring is, historically-speaking, that of the epic poem or, at least, what the reviewer deems an extended poem on a “subject of commanding interest” (Behrendt 108). Sadly, towards the end of her career, Hemans believed that her writing career had lacked such an effort, despite self-described attempts to produce longer, more serious works in *The Restoration of the Works of Art to Italy*, *The Siege of Valencia*, and *The Forest Sanctuary*, the last considered by Hemans herself to be her greatest achievement. In a letter to a close friend, Hemans confessed that:

It has ever been one of my regrets that the constant necessity of providing sums of money to meet the exigencies of the boys' education, has obliged me to waste my mind in what I consider mere desultory effusions ... My wish ever was to concentrate all my mental energy in the production of some more noble and complete work; something of pure and holy excellence ... (qtd in Behrendt 109)

By contrast, Elizabeth Barrett Browning published her first poem – one in the vein of

Alexander Pope's 1715-20 translation of *The Iliad* entitled *The Battle of Marathon* – anonymously at the age of fourteen in 1820, at a time when Hemans was already verging on the midpoint of her career. Although Barrett Browning later dismissed her early epic effort as “simply Pope's Homer done over again, or rather undone” (qtd in Friedman 207), this first publication proves that Barrett Browning was experimenting with the genre from an extremely young age. Later on in her career, Barrett Browning's famous long poem *Aurora Leigh* was almost automatically deemed as being worthy of the epithet “epic” – the nineteenth century critic Charles Hamilton Aide classified it as “an epic, inasmuch as it treats of the passionate struggles, and the half-conquest, half-failure, of two heroic natures in their life battle” (qtd in Stone 141).

How, then, has the term “epic” been traditionally defined, so that one woman poet's work might satisfy its definition and another's be found wanting? As Bernard Schweizer writes in *Approaches to the Anglo and American Female Epic, 1621-1982*, in terms of both subject matter and verse form, “epic may well be the most exclusively gender coded of all literary genres”; that is, epic and masculinity are “almost coterminous” (1). Susan Stanford Friedman writes further that the epic is “the preeminent poetic genre of action in the public domain”:

As a narrative of brave men's deeds, the epic often centres on the ‘destiny’ or ‘formation of a race or nation,’ reflecting a comprehensive sweep of history, a cosmic universality of theme, and an elevated discourse of public ceremony. (204)

Functioning almost as a prerequisite to the notion of epic is, of course, the epic hero, who is traditionally either a warrior or a leader or some combination of the two – figures, from

Odysseus and Beowulf to, arguably, Harry Potter, who have overcome the trials and obstacles set out for them by demonstrating at least some degree of physical courage. It is precisely because definitions of epic have long been curtailed by what are regarded as standard parameters of the genre – “heroism, the quest, nation-founding, scope, length, and elevated language” (Schweizer 4) – that women writers’ epic-worthy efforts have, unfortunately, often been excluded from considerations of the genre.

Because women writers have traditionally – and also more or less stereotypically – been focused more so on the exploration of the private and the personal as opposed to the public and the universal, poetry as it is written by women has often been classified under the category of lyric poetry – shorter poems, by definition, which are concerned somehow with the expression of emotion (Friedman 204). Although lyric was the dominant generic mode for both male and female authors in the Romantic period, epic was still seen primarily as being the domain of the male poet, while female writers have been consistently characterized as writers of light lyric verse. For example, although there has been a considerable movement since the 1980s to redefine women poets of both Hemans’ and Barrett Browning’s generation – in other words, the early and mid-nineteenth century – as being worthy of study and to legitimize their inclusion within “the canon” of British literature, many of the critics precipitating this movement seem to tacitly agree with Hemans’ own self-critique: women’s poetry of this period, although no doubt worthy of study, falls short of that greatness or that “great effort” presumably exemplified in the work of their male peers.

This thesis project is part of a larger, more recent effort to explore the potential new genre of the female epic by pondering the question of what the epic genre, as

imagined and written by women, might look like. Virginia Woolf's famous words in relation to epic in her feminist treatise *A Room of One's Own* – “[t]here is no reason to think that the form of the epic ... suit[s] a woman any more than the [masculine] sentence” – seem to indirectly point to the possibility of transforming the genre so that it might present a woman writer's perspective (Woolf 84). As such, instead of simply examining the ways in which women writers have lived up to, or rather failed to live up to, traditional conceptions of the epic genre as it has previously been imagined by male authors, I will be attempting to explore not only the ties between the work of my chosen authors, Felicia Hemans and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and the traditional, masculine-authored version of the epic, but also the different ways in which both Hemans and Barrett Browning are intent on depicting experiences that are unique to women in their work – amounting to what Schweizer and others have more recently coined as a new and distinctive genre, the female epic.¹

Because even the masculine tradition of epic-writing does not easily lend itself to what Schweizer calls “a finite set of conventions and rules,” constantly re-inventing itself as a genre over the course of time, it is difficult to identify distinct parameters with which to classify existing female epic poetry, particularly seeing as works consistently identified as female epics have been as much about resisting so-called traditional epic requirements as they are about adhering to these standards regarding both form and content (Schweizer 4). Thus, as Schweizer further argues:

What we need, instead of such descriptive commonplaces, are inquiries into how language might create gender differently through a reconstruction of generic categories such as the epic, as well as studies

exploring female texts that either have been clearly called epics or can reasonably be identified as being aligned with epic and the aesthetic of epic. (Schweizer 2, emphasis his).

In terms of the more formal characteristics required to define women's poetry as indeed part of the genre of female epic, I have essentially borrowed criteria from the seminal works on female epic authored and edited, respectively, by Adeline Johns-Putra and Bernard Schweizer in order to claim Hemans' and Barrett Browning's poetry as examples of female epic. These criteria include critical reception – both past and present – which has identified the work as epic, the author's intention to write an epic poem, the poem's subject matter, that is, poems dealing with traditional concerns such as events of political/national importance as well as the quest motif, the poem's chosen metre, its length, and its division into books or cantos (Johns-Putra 16-17; Schweizer 4-5).

All of the poetry that I intend to examine in the following chapters meets the above criteria to some degree – often in terms of both subject matter and verse form – although some of these efforts have unfortunately been overlooked. A few of the poems are more or less obviously modeled after the traditional masculine definition of epic; for example, both Hemans' *The Forest Sanctuary* and Barrett Browning's *Casa Guidi Windows* have been consistently identified by various critics as epic, use verse forms linked to the epic genre (Spenserian stanza for Hemans and iambic pentameter for Barrett Browning), are both of a substantial length, are divided into sections or epic "books," and deal with large-scale events of political, religious, and national importance.² Other poems which I will be examining, however, are less conventionally epic; these are the poems which make up "the most tenuous category of female epics," but also those which

offer the “strongest revisionist potential” according to Schweizer (5). For example, while critics have repeatedly laid claim to Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh* as an epic poem, its subject matter most closely resembles that of the more female-oriented genre of the novel, as the story of the titular character’s growth as both an artist and a woman – a Bildungsroman and a Künstlerroman at once.

The concept of the female epic, then, as it appears both in the work of Hemans and Barrett Browning comprises quite a variety of different shapes and forms. In regards to works such as *Aurora Leigh* and *A Drama in Exile* – the latter being a kind of feminist sequel to the events depicted in Milton’s *Paradise Lost* – I hope to examine the ways in which Hemans and Barrett Browning come to blend such “feminine” concerns and subject matter with the masculine-influenced genre of epic, and perhaps to begin to recognize what Schweizer identifies as “gender traits” that pertain specifically to female as opposed to male epic poets. For example, while Schweizer writes that “some female epics embrace more traditional views regarding wifely duties or the need for masculine prowess in war and politics,” most instead “offer a critical awareness of gender roles and gender identity” (13). Building upon Schweizer’s observations, I would like to argue similarly that there are two sometimes-conflicting tendencies in the poetry of Hemans and Barrett Browning. The first is the drive, especially early on in their careers as poets, to meet their male counterparts on their own terms by writing within the established, masculine tradition of the epic genre. For instance, Barrett Browning’s *The Battle of Marathon* resembles a traditional epic poem, celebrating the titular famous battle in which Barrett Browning adopts a masculine persona in an attempt to mimic Pope’s famous translation of Homer (Hurst 116). Similar attempts at a masculine epic form

include Hemans' *The Forest Sanctuary*, a monodrama or perhaps early dramatic monologue spoken from the perspective of a knight and written using the Spenserian stanza, made famous by Spenser's epic romance *The Faerie Queene*.

However, even while re-constructing a masculine definition of the epic genre in their writing, it is still clear that these female poets are attempting to infuse a distinctly feminine sensibility into their verse – the second tendency commonly observed in female epic. In the first chapter of my thesis, I will discuss how both Hemans and Barrett Browning are able to transform their feminized role as the record-keeper into that of the healing singer and prophet in *Restoration of the Works of Art to Italy* and *Casa Guidi Windows*, a strategy which involves a complex translation of their seemingly confined role within the private and domestic sphere into one of political influence and import in the public and national sphere. In doing so, both women poets go beyond passively memorializing great art to calling for a renewed, albeit revised, version of militaristic glory and individual heroism from a perspective that is at once heroic and inherently feminine.

Hemans' *The Forest Sanctuary* and Barrett Browning's *A Drama in Exile* also illustrate what I hope to argue is another widespread trend of female-generated epic: the power of the female voice. In my second chapter, I hope to further John M. Anderson's original argument that Hemans' emphasis on the auditory in her poem "suggests destabilizing alternative approaches to established epic" which, as a genre, has traditionally relied upon the construction of concrete visual worlds (Anderson 56). Barrett Browning's work similarly privileges the female voice; not only does *Aurora Leigh*, arguably her major life's work, recount the story of the titular character's growth

as an artist and a human being as narrated in the first person, but her closet drama *A Drama in Exile* also foregrounds the female voice in a surprising way – as a dramatic reprise of Milton’s epic from the perspective of the female protagonist, Eve. This newfound focus on the female voice allows both Hemans and Barrett Browning to counter one-note, stereotypical representations of women – such as that of the Eve figure – with portraits foregrounding the complexity of women’s lives.

Similarly, in my final chapter, I will examine Hemans’ and Barrett Browning’s various representations of women in their work, primarily in the famous *Aurora Leigh* as well as Hemans’ closet drama “The Siege of Valencia”; the representations that I will be focusing on in particular include that of the mother figure as well as that of the woman as artist, as represented by the titular character of *Aurora Leigh* herself. The image of the mother featured in the poetry of these two women poets is not always the typically nurturing figure one might expect: from the murderous mothers who figure in their shorter poetry, such as “Indian Woman’s Death Song” and “The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point,” to the interrelated figure of the militant mother in the more epic *Aurora Leigh* and “Siege of Valencia,” Hemans’ and Barrett Browning’s mothers are anything but conventional. By suggesting that the women who figure in their poetry are worthy of their status as heroines in their female epic poetry, Hemans and Barrett Browning implicitly redefine the traditional, masculine definition of the term “heroic,” commonly used in epic poetry to connote courageous feats performed in battle.

By examining the traditional genre of the epic in relation to the poetry of Hemans and Barrett Browning, I hope to begin to shed light on this nascent genre of the female epic. Schweizer has acknowledged that “[m]uch more work can and needs to be done,

especially in the field of intertextual influences and literary history, to do justice to the aesthetic, civic, and philosophical achievements of women attempting to write in the epic mode” (14). In this respect, I am looking forward to studying the work of Hemans, generally considered to be part of the Romantic period, alongside that of the Victorian poet Barrett Browning and, in doing so, to explore the many similarities between these poets that transcend their respective literary and historical periods. By examining what I will claim as the female epic poetry of Hemans and Barrett Browning in relation to one another as well as in relation to the male peers and standards which have preceded them, I hope to further probe the tentative gender traits that I have introduced here – the strategic merging of the private with the public in their political poetry, the power of the female voice, and the significance of unconventional representations of heroic women as mothers and as artists – and to make a claim for such traits as being part of a nascent Romantic/Victorian tradition of female epic. With strong ties to a masculine tradition of epic, yet incorporating aspects of femininity hitherto foreign – perhaps even inimical – to the notion of epic, female epic is something of a hybrid, yet still a distinctive genre in its own right. In effect, Aurora Leigh – fictional author of the poem of the same name – symbolizes the genre’s uniqueness in the passage of the poem in which she crowns herself as an epic poet; by rejecting both the bay leaf – traditionally recognized as the crown of choice for male poets, because of its association with Apollo, the god of poetry – and the myrtle, associated with femininity and love through its connection to Venus, Aurora symbolically rejects both traditionally male and female literary traditions, choosing instead the unconventional ivy with which to fashion her crown (II. 38-59).

While incorporating aspects of both gendered literary traditions, Hemans and Barrett Browning are able to fashion an entirely new genre – one that I believe is certainly deserving of more critical attention in the future.

Notes for Introduction

¹ In addition to the collection of articles edited by Schweizer claiming epic status for a variety of poems written by British and American women writers, both past and present, see also Adeline Johns-Putra's book-length examination of British women's epic poetry in the Romantic period. In regards to Hemans and Barrett Browning's poetry specifically, see Diego Saglia's and John M. Anderson's essays on Hemans' "The Siege of Valencia" and *The Forest Sanctuary*, respectively. Some of the many scholars who have examined Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* as epic include Susan Stanford Friedman, Joyce Zonana, Chris Vanden Bossche and Laura Haigwood, Olivia Gatti Taylor, Sarah Annes Brown, Peggy Dunn Bailey, Holly Laird, and Herbert Tucker.

² See John M. Anderson's essay on *The Forest Sanctuary*. Barrett Browning's early editors, Charlotte Porter and Helen A. Clarke, probably best described *Casa Guidi Windows* as a "condensed lyrical epic of a modern nation's birth" (qtd in Stone, "Cursing," 192); other critics who have examined the poem's epic qualities include Dorothy Mermin, Dolores Rosenblum, and Leigh Coral Harris.

“We thinkers ... we hoppers ... we poets”: The Poet as Prophet in *The Restoration of the Works of Art to Italy* and *Casa Guidi Windows*

Esther Schor writes in “The Poetics of Politics: Barrett Browning’s *Casa Guidi Windows*” that not only has poetry as a political outlet become less and less practiced by writers, but so too has what she deems the “poetics of politics”: the “Shelleyan sense in which a political agent is a poet, a maker” (306). This critical assessment, however, was also true in Shelley’s time. In particular, the politics of women’s writing in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries has only recently come to widespread critical attention after having been consistently overlooked in the past; as Elizabeth Fay writes, “Romantic studies has traditionally considered politics to be the preserve of the great male writers of the period” (51).

This lack of well-deserved recognition for women writers’ literary ventures into the field of politics can at least partially be explained by the predominance of the separate spheres ideology at the time which separated duties for the sexes into two distinct realms: the public, masculine realm of politics, economics, and social order and the private, feminine realm of the home and domestic duties. Participating in politics – even in writing about them from the seclusion of one’s home – was thus figured as a transgression, a breach of the gender contract. Although Hemans was able to more or less successfully use her family ties to the military to justify her military poems, one of her early biographers, Henry Chorley, still felt obliged to dismiss the political motives behind her poetry as mere “involuntary reflections” and “gentle” biases (qtd in Morlier 73). Elizabeth Barrett Browning, by contrast, did not escape a backlash against her more politically-minded poetry during her lifetime. Particularly concerned with social issues involving the welfare of women and children, Barrett Browning became increasingly

outspoken in her opinion on these subjects as she matured as a poet and gained independence from her family. Prior to her marriage, Barrett Browning was discouraged from writing on political subjects; for example, she was effectively prevented from writing a piece in support of the Anti-Corn Law league by her father, brothers, and mentor John Kenyon, who thought it an unfit subject for women (Lewis 159). Later in life, Barrett Browning became increasingly outspoken in regards to her political opinions, speaking out through poems such as “The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point” in favour of the abolition of the slave trade, despite the fact that her family’s wealth was largely derived from slave plantations in the West Indies (Stone “Cursing” 192). Her increasing outspokenness, however, often led to Barrett Browning being publicly criticized for her views, in particular her admiration for Napoleon in her collection *Poems before Congress* (1860). A reviewer in *Blackwood’s* magazine writing in regards to the poem “A Curse for a Nation” publicly chastised her for her political subject matter, on the grounds that “we love the fair sex too well, to desire that they should be withdrawn from their own sphere, which is that of adorning the domestic circle, ... to figure in the public arena.” Barrett Browning wrote in a subsequent letter to a friend that, as a result of the poem’s reception, she felt as if she had been “held up at the end of a fork” like an “unnatural she-monster” (qtd in Stone “Cursing” 198).

Barrett Browning, however, was not as “unnatural” or as unusual as she was made to feel during her lifetime for writing political poetry. Critics such as Nancy Armstrong, Elizabeth Langland and Mary Poovey have claimed that many women were in fact able to convert their (supposedly) confined role within the private, domestic sphere into a form of influence within the public sphere – a power which I will extend to both Hemans

and Barrett Browning in this chapter. In their dual capacity as both women and poets, Hemans and Barrett Browning are able to transform their initial and often feminized role as record-keepers into that of the healing singer and prophet; in *Restoration of the Works of Art to Italy* and *Casa Guidi Windows*, both women poets go beyond passively memorializing great art to calling for a renewed, albeit revised, version of militaristic glory and individual heroism from a perspective that is at once heroic and inherently feminine.¹

By focusing on the ways in which Felicia Hemans' poetic subject matter and influence moved beyond the private sphere and into the public sphere, I will be taking a markedly different approach to the woman poet than previous literary critics. Despite the more recent effort to canonize her as a poet worthy of study, the critical consensus on Hemans remains, much as it did two hundred years ago, caught up within her partially self-constructed image as a poetess whose domestic persona allowed her to escape from dealings within the public sphere (Ruwe 137). As such, critics have failed to recognize the "masculine code of military glory and individual heroism" – what Anne Mellor calls the other set of values which inspired Hemans creatively since childhood – which stimulated much of her early poetry and quietly propped up much of her later verse as well (Mellor 135). However, because the vast majority of critics have largely ignored Hemans' early poetic efforts, which indicate an obvious and enthusiastic militant patriotism, it seems that these same critics have consequently misunderstood the focus on courage and glory both on and off the battlefield in her later poetry. Whereas critics like Mellor have tended to examine her later work as simply a thinly veiled critique of masculine militaristic values, I will argue instead that Hemans' poetry has been more

focused on celebrating these values, not questioning them as it has been previously assumed.

Judging from its title, “The Homes of England” – one of Hemans’ most famous and most anthologized poems – initially presents itself as a simple celebration of the domestic realm, in which “gladsome looks of household love” are exchanged “Around [the] hearths by night” (Hemans 2002 l.11, 10). In this context, the poem’s final stanza – a salute to the home as the foundation of potential militaristic strength – comes as a surprise:

The free, fair Homes of England!
Long, long, in hut and hall,
May hearts of native proof be rear’d
To guard each hallow’d wall!
And green for ever be the groves,
And bright the flowery sod,
Where first the child’s glad spirit loves
Its country and its God! (l. 33-40)

It is this unequivocal and unabashed celebration of the home as the basis of the child’s (and later, the soldier’s) firm militant patriotism – what Tricia Lootens deems as one of Hemans’ “bloodthirsty British victory and battle songs” (239) – which so many critics have overlooked in this poem and in her poetry in general, tending to focus instead on the message expressed in her most famous collection of poetry, *Records of Woman*: an implicit critique of warfare which brings destruction to the domestic sphere and to Hemans’ female protagonists.

“Casabianca,” another of Hemans’ most famous poems, has also been commonly misread as what Myra Cottingham calls a “critique of the absence of a father, the failure of the male Word, and an indictment of war” (Cottingham 179). There is, undoubtedly, a kind of critique behind the obvious courage evoked by her opening line, “The boy stood on the burning deck” (Kelly l.1); as Mellor notes, the young boy’s simultaneous filial loyalty to his father and to his assigned military post proves to have disastrous consequences (141-2). However, although the domestic, in the form of the boy’s relationship to his father which has been transplanted from the home to the battlefield, and the heroic cannot be successfully reconciled in this particular poem – and although the boy’s sacrifice may seem futile from our more cynical, contemporary perspective – there is no doubt that Hemans wrote the poem as a tribute to this unexpected act of heroism during the Battle of the Nile in 1798. Ultimately, to question the boy’s function in the poem as a hero is to suggest that Hemans’ motive behind writing the poem was ironic – a possibility which neither Cottingham nor Mellor seems willing to argue but which they nevertheless imply by their reluctance to acknowledge what, in effect, made Hemans so posthumously famous in the Victorian period: her intense, militant patriotism. “Casabianca” does not simply function as an indictment of war, nor for that matter as a “jolly naval battle” in Cottingham’s dismissive words; it is instead a complex but bold tribute to valour in times of war that also does not shy from depicting the costs of these displays of courage.

Hemans’ devoted tribute to military glory is most clear in her early poetry, and nowhere more so than in her poem *The Restoration of the Works of Art to Italy* (1816), which, being written in 500 lines of heroic couplets, matches a suitably epic form to its

equally epic subject matter: her long poem is at once a traditional celebration of glory well earned in battle and a uniquely feminine perspective on these traditional militaristic values from within the domestic sphere. In *Restoration*, Hemans is able to legitimate her commentary on events within the public sphere by transforming the persona of what Jean Bethke Elshtain calls the “Beautiful Soul.” The concept, as it was originally conceived by Hegel, was used to describe someone who displays an “appearance of purity by cultivating innocence about the historical course of the world” (qtd in Elshtain 4). Elshtain, in turn, applies this definition to women who, she argues, have come to represent the culturally designated role of the Beautiful Soul in Western culture: “women work and weep and sometimes protest within the frame of discursive practices that turn one out, militant mother and pacifist protestor alike, as the collective ‘other’ to the male warrior” (Elshtain 3-4). While the man fights in battle, the woman is necessarily left to observe and comment on the situation from the sidelines. This female commentary, however, is not incompatible with the culturally potent genre of poetry, even of epic poetry; as Adeline Johns-Putra writes, “It is not untenable that such working, weeping, and protesting could be encompassed by the act of epic writing” (43-44).

Throughout her poetry, Hemans’ female protagonists often take up this feminized role of the record-keeper. As in “The Homes of England,” the “woman’s voice flow[ing] forth in song” – that is, woman and her power to memorialize through poetic song – encompass women’s duties within the domestic sphere (Hemans 2002 l. 13). In “Tasso and his Sister,” for example, the sister of Torquato Tasso, the famous Italian Renaissance epic poet, memorializes her brother by reading his poetry aloud to her small children (Hemans 18-- p.482). Canonicity here becomes dependent, as Donelle Ruwe writes, on

the feminine private sphere; Tasso's sister becomes the canon mediator and thus the canon creator by selecting and then transmitting texts from one generation to the next (Ruwe 138-51). Similarly, in "Körner and his Sister," the German poet's sister creates a tribute to her deceased brother in art, lingering "but to trace/ [Körner's] image from the image in her breast" before subsequently dying herself out of grief for his loss (Kelly l. 37-8). In both of these examples, the woman holds the position of the record-keeper from within the domestic realm, and it is from within this realm that she is able to extend her writing into the public sphere. This is ultimately the role which both Hemans and later Barrett Browning will assume in their own poetry in order to legitimate their commentary on events in the public sphere.

In "History, Imperialism, and the Aesthetics of the Beautiful: Felicia Hemans and the Post-Napoleonic Moment," Nanora Sweet argues that Hemans "adopts a Mediterranean aesthetics of the beautiful whose instability and productivity work against the sublimity of monument and empire" in poems such as *Restoration* that foreground locales like Italy and Greece (171). By highlighting tropes such as flowers and plundered artwork, Hemans' focus in the poem is "not the restoration of sublime monumentality, but the recuperation of the productivity of the beautiful" (175); as such, *Restoration* becomes an argument for "an alternative understanding of history as fragmentation, evanescence, and feminization" (175). Sweet's reading of Hemans' poem as a critique of a masculine version of history, however, ignores what to my mind seems to be a far more bloodthirsty representation of war and its casualties in the same poem. In *Restoration*, Hemans directly adopts the poetic persona of the record-keeper – a Bard whose "immortal strains" will echo over "classic plains" – in order to revivify the classical

greatness of Italy as embodied in its glorious battle dead and its renowned works of art (Hemans 18-- 1.1-2). Though Hemans at first seems to question whether or not she, by finally taking up the role of the poet-prophet, will be able to capture this lost sense of Italy in her artistic and military prime, writing in despair that “degraded Rome! thy noon is o’er;/ Once lost, thy spirit shall revive no more” (l. 309-10), Hemans clearly attempts and, as I will argue, succeeds at resurrecting Italy’s glory-days, though not simply for the sake of Italians; in *Restoration*, she succeeds in writing a tribute not only to Italy, but also implicitly to her own country, which has been responsible not simply for the defeat of Napoleon but also for the restoration of Italy’s artwork back to its former home. By indirectly assuming Italy’s former military glory and artistic achievements since Napoleon’s invasion, Britain – as Hemans seems to be arguing – has taken possession of these two elements of classical greatness and, more generally speaking, of epic greatness; as such, Hemans’ poem moves from the simple task of record-keeping into the realm of prophecy and revision.

Restoration begins with Hemans imploring the “Muses of Etrurian shades” (l.15) to “Seize with bold hands the harp, forgot so long” (l.26) and “Sing of that Leader, whose ascendant mind,/ Could rouse the slumb’ring spirit of mankind” (l.33-4). Although by “Leader” Hemans is, according to Gary Kelly’s footnote, referring to the British armies who fought against Napoleon, and more specifically their leader the Duke of Wellington, it is Hemans who increasingly fulfills this position of “Leader” throughout the poem by presenting herself as the Bard who will remember Italy’s glory days to itself. Her role resembles that of the anthropomorphized figure of “Grecian Freedom” in the poem, who acts as “Nurse of the Mighty” (l.380): “her voice its parting accents breathed,/ A Hero’s

image to the world bequeathed” (l.383-4). Although Hemans seems to diminish the importance of her role as poet towards the end of *Restoration*, imagining the task which she undertakes of recuperating Italy’s former brilliance as being that of a future leader who will finally “realize, in some unclouded sphere,/ Those pictured glories feebly imaged here!” (l.515-6), it is clear within the poem that Hemans as narrator does much to inspire her audience to begin to rebuild Italy’s greatness.

In order to take up this politically-charged role, Hemans transforms her position as a woman in the domestic sphere into that of the poet in the creatively-potent bower. In traditional poetic terms, the bower is the “enclosed yet accessible green space ... identified with female sexuality and the questing subject who entered the garden with masculinity” (Crawford 255). However, in *Restoration*, as elsewhere in her poetry, Hemans “disconnects the naturalized continuity between authorial presence and the male wanderer”; by “feigning the voice of the bower’s inhabitant,” Hemans “bring[s] to bower conventions a new angle of vision, one from which authorial power is seen as linked to female characters” (Crawford 270). By transforming the role of the male wanderer into that of the female poet, Hemans by extension changes the notion of the bower from being one typically associated with the private, feminine sphere – its French counterpart, as Crawford notes, being the boudoir, a room in the house specifically designated to women – to being instead associated with the public, masculine realm (255).² In order to demonstrate how Hemans manages to effectively recast the notion of the bower in terms of the public sphere in order to substantiate her own role as prophetic Bard, I will focus on both Hemans’ descriptions of flora and of the displaced works of art that figure throughout her poem.

In regards to another of Hemans' early "triumph" poems *Modern Greece*, Sweet argues that by smothering her descriptions of such famous cities as Sparta and Athens in various flora, Hemans is effectively undertaking a "subversive aesthetic commentary"; she is criticizing a masculine vision of history which focuses on preserving the memory of empires and famous battles that turn out to be even more passing than the mere flora which quickly swallow up their burial places (177). However, I would argue the exact opposite of Sweet here: by paying close attention to the particular flora described in Hemans' poetry, it becomes clear that flora are used not as part of a feminist critique of masculine history, but rather as a means towards recuperating and celebrating the memory of the long-dead warriors. Instead of validating peaceful domesticity, Hemans' bower in *Restoration* becomes a flowery tribute to the public sphere: a "sepulchre" filled with the glorious dead that "flowers suffice those graves to crown" (l. 64, 67). Further, the flora named in the poem often connote particularly heroic meanings; the myrtle-vale, a branch symbolizing erotic love and associated with Venus, is juxtaposed with the laurel-grove, symbolizing victory in battle (l. 26). Indeed, more often than not in Hemans' poetry, flora signifying victory, like the laurel and the palm branch, take precedence over the more conventionally feminine connotations as signified by the myrtle. As such, flora are not conventionally linked to femininity, as Sweet has argued, but are transformed into symbolizing a masculine heroism so that when the "Bard [of] future ages" treads over the graves, his poetic memorial will consist of simply blessing "each wreath that blossoms o'er the dead" (l.70). Thus, flora in *Restoration* serve the emotional and heroic function of "records" which "mark where sleeps heroic dust" (l.79, 61); in place of the typical "sculptur'd trophy" or "breathing bust," Hemans' flowers will

instead become the means by which “loftiest feelings” of militant patriotism shall “[w]arm in [people’s] souls” (l.80).

Similarly, the works of art plundered by Napoleon’s armies but soon to be restored to Italy also become a means towards recapturing Italy’s former glory. Because art lives, according to Hemans, in “spheres encircling glory’s throne” (l.98), Italy’s paintings and sculptures will play an important role in recuperating her bygone military success; the cultural enlightenment provided by “sad scenes of lost renown” as depicted in Italy’s artwork is likened in the poem to the “bright Sunset” which “gilds some Hero’s tomb,” thus linking art to military glory and prowess. Hemans further links these two elements when, in the section in which she describes individual works of art, she gives her reader a startling portrait of masculine glory in deadly combat. Although Hemans also pays tribute to the ideal femininity of the Venus de Medici in this section, described as “Love’s radiant Goddess, Idol of mankind!” (l.188), Hemans reserves her longest description for the sculpted image of the Laocoön and his sons. Adopted from an episode in Virgil’s ancient epic the *Aeneid*, the sculpture depicts the Trojan priest and his two sons being attacked by a sea monster. However, although the work of art depicts a rupture of the domestic affections – of paramount importance to Hemans, particularly in her later career – the “stern combat” it illustrates is surprisingly and somewhat paradoxically revered by Hemans here as an image of “suffering nature and enduring mind” (l. 393-4). While the Laocoön’s sons look with “suppliant eyes” upon their father, they also direct their gaze upward, “implor[ing] the aid avenging fate denies” (l.398). Laocoön himself similarly becomes a symbol of courage in the face of death:

Yet the strong spirit lives – and not a cry,

Shall own the might of Nature's agony!
That furrowed brow unconquered soul reveals,
That patient eye to angry heaven appeals,
That struggling bosom concentrates its breath,
Nor yields one moan to torture or to death! (l. 403-8)

While on the one hand Hemans admits that the Laocoön sculpture's depiction of a family under siege "congeal[s] the heart" with "speechless horror," its overriding importance, she seems to conclude, is that it may "teach the spirit how its lofty power,/ May brave the pangs of fate's severest hour" (l.413-4). As Kelly's footnote to this particular poem explains, the "secret grace" of the composition was commonly thought to reside not in its physical depiction of suffering but rather in "the majestic air of the head, which has not yielded to suffering, and in the deep serenity of the forehead which seems to be still superior to all its afflictions" (Hemans 2002 p.121, fn.).

The image of the Laocoön, as well as the heroic function of the flora mentioned throughout *Restoration*, reveal another side of Hemans' poetic persona which is seldom given its due recognition in contemporary scholarship – that which revels in depicting warfare or combat and which glorifies and memorializes those who have died in battle. The blatantly militant image which Hemans recreates in poems such as "The Homes of England," "Casabianca," and particularly *Restoration of the Works of Art to Italy* is one which has too often been ignored or, conversely, condemned by critics who, like Percy Shelley, have found in Hemans' poetry an "approv[al] of sanguinary war" which is distasteful to them (qtd in Cottingham 278). However, although critics such as Nanora Sweet and others have preferred to regard Hemans' patriotic verse as part of a subversive

feminine critique of masculine warfare, I have attempted to demonstrate instead that Hemans' glorification of combat suggests that the posthumous "Victorianised" image of Hemans as an imperial warmonger and female precursor to Rudyard Kipling is perhaps not as false as it has hitherto been assumed (Morlier 73).

In contrast to Hemans, who transforms the role of the female record-keeper used throughout her more sentimental poetry as a means to insert herself into the realm of politics, Elizabeth Barrett Browning conversely attempted, as Alison Chapman writes, to "put the heart back into Italy and into political poetry" without succumbing to what she saw as her predecessor Hemans' "excessive sensibility" (282). As Margaret Morlier writes in her examination of the two women poets, Barrett Browning saw at once the value of Hemans' literary work and its limitations; as such, she deviated from her predecessor both in her self-constructed image as a female poet rather than a "poetess" as well as in her poetic depiction of Italy, her adopted country, as I will demonstrate.

Along with the majority of Barrett Browning's political poetry, *Casa Guidi Windows* (1851) has all too often lacked critical attention, becoming part of the "presumed poetic wasteland" largely thought to characterize her poetic career, apart from such seminal works as the *Sonnets from the Portuguese* and *Aurora Leigh* (Rosenblum, 62). Part of the reason for the lack of attention given to her more political poems seems to have arisen out of the "canonical critical myth" of Barrett Browning as an "unstable and emotional political observer" given, unlike her more politically astute husband, to "ardent polemical excesses," a term used to criticize her much scorned poetic praise of Napoleon and the poem *Casa Guidi Windows* itself. But although William Irvine and Park Honan criticized the poem in their critical biography for being overtly sentimental,

writing that, “Metaphoric violets, swords, crowns, and croziers accumulate until there is no room for realities” (qtd in Markus xviii), Barrett Browning’s refrain of “bring violets” throughout *Casa Guidi Windows* in fact comes with its own implicit reality check, suggesting that, as critics have only rather recently begun to recognize, Barrett Browning was less politically naive than previous literary critics have realized.

Unlike Hemans’ *Restoration*, which unabashedly glories in the artwork of an Italy firmly rooted in the past and which itself becomes a kind of tributary wreath like the flora featured throughout the poem, Barrett Browning’s violets, by contrast, become a subtle critique of the traditional representation of Italy by British authors as a classical treasure trove – in effect, she offers a “moral corrective to elegies for a dead Italy” (Schor 317). As Sandra Gilbert writes, from the eighteenth century and onward “tropes of Italy proliferated like flowers in Fiesole, so much so that the country ... would seem to have had no reality except as a metaphor” (195). In Barrett Browning’s nineteenth century Britain, Italy had become, according to Brigitte Bailey, “the locus of the feminine and silent properties of space, painting, nature, and the body – a place outside of history where temporal motion had ceased” (qtd in Harris 109). The most predominant metaphor by far was that of Italy as a sort of fallen woman; indeed, as Gilbert further writes, “[t]he trope of Italy or of one of ‘her’ city-states as a living, palpable, and often abandoned woman had become almost ubiquitous by the time Barrett Browning began to write her poems about the risorgimento ...” (Gilbert 196). It is not surprising, then, that Barrett Browning herself falls prey occasionally in her poetry to what she herself refers to this seductive rhetoric. In “Napoleon III in Italy,” a poem from her politically-charged collection *Poems before Congress*, Barrett Browning portrays Italy as a sick and

powerless woman, a version of Juliet:

With a wound in her breast,
And a flower in her hand,
And a grave-stone under her head,
While every nation at will
Beside her has dared to stand,
And flout her with pity and scorn. (*Poetical Works* 1.113-8)

In this instance, Barrett Browning adopts the persona of a “nurse at the bedside of an imperiled relative, almost as if she were a sort of literary-political Florence Nightingale” (Gilbert 194). *Casa Guidi Windows*, however, represents a sharp departure from this adopted persona; like her predecessor Felicia Hemans, Barrett Browning becomes the prophetess she herself seeks in the poem, who not so much rejects the clichéd image of Italy as a fallen woman, but who re-imagines this representation in a uniquely maternal way, transforming a once-bject figure into a heroic new woman in much the same way that she later does with the character of Marian Erle, the quintessential fallen woman, in *Aurora Leigh* (1857) (Alaya 53).

At the outset of *Casa Guidi Windows*, it seems at first as though Barrett Browning is going to comply with her male predecessors, such as Byron and Shelley, in their depiction of Italy as a victimized woman. She begins the poem by listing the conventional ways in which Italy has typically been described, in this instance by the Italian nationalists:

They called it Cybele, or Niobe,
Or laid it corpse-like on a bier for such,

Where all the world might drop for Italy

Those cadenced tears which burn not where they touch, –

‘Juliet of nations, canst thou die as we? ...’ (*Poetical* I. 32-6)

As in “Napoleon III in Italy,” Italy is characterized by the image of an entombed Juliet – a helpless and “void” corpse for which her citizen-children, and particularly citizens of other countries who have consumed this mythic representation, are left to mourn (I. 43). Using the classical analogy from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* in which the god Pan fashions a pipe from the reeds that make up the transformed body of the nymph Syrinx, Alison Chapman argues that both its own citizens as well as the poets paying tribute to the country in verse have made Italy into a broken reed – an act which destroys the very entity which it is meant to memorialize. In other words, the weight of the cumulative representations of a feminized Italy have only hampered the real political struggles of Italians (Chapman 272). However, Barrett Browning makes it clear that she will not continue to uphold this “personating Image” in her own poetry (I. 30); it is merely a ruse which countries such as England have long used to shelter themselves from confronting the harsh reality of Italy’s political situation since, as she aptly recognizes, “... ‘tis easier to gaze long/ On mournful masks and sad effigies/ Than on real, live, weak creatures crushed by strong” (I. 46-8).

In analyzing *Casa Guidi Windows*, critics have generally argued in one of two possible ways. Those like Sandra Gilbert and Dolores Rosenblum who have been eager to claim the poem as an important precursor to her acclaimed feminist epic *Aurora Leigh* have neglected to recognize the ways in which Barrett Browning also works within the masculine tradition of epic. However, others such as Christopher Keirstead and Jean

Hoffman Lewis have argued conversely that Barrett Browning's long poem represents her more or less unsuccessful attempt to establish a feminine poetic style apart from that of her masculine predecessors. In contrast to both of these familiar arguments, I would argue instead that *Casa Guidi Windows* both negotiates a new, uniquely feminine style of epic poetry while also acknowledging the tradition out of which Barrett Browning gradually learned to craft her own verse; Barrett Browning illustrates this balance herself when she writes at the beginning of the long poem, "Where worthier poets stood and sang before,/ I kiss their footsteps yet their words gainsay" (l. 49-52).

At first, *Casa Guidi Windows* very much resembles traditionally masculine epic poetry. Most obviously, it is written in iambic pentameter and occasionally in heroic couplets, devices which are both very common in English epic poetry. Leigh Coral Harris writes further that Barrett Browning "places herself in the (male) Italian tradition of Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio" in adopting a distorted version of terza rima, a rhyme scheme employed most famously by Dante in his *Divine Comedy* but used rather infrequently among British poets, with the notable exceptions of Byron and Shelley (119).³ Barrett Browning also introduces a startlingly masculine image into her poetry by picturing Michelangelo's unfinished bust of Marcus Brutus. As Harris writes, Marcus Brutus had become a fixed symbol of the classical republican hero by the time Barrett Browning was beginning to write and publish; as such, Michelangelo's bust – "a fragment, a maimed Brutus" (l. 564) – functions as a sort of call to arms, an image of budding revolution in the form of potent masculine violence (119-21). By assuming such a well-established epic rhyme scheme and by invoking such a violent image of bloody revolution, Barrett Browning seems initially to be grounding her poetry in a more

classical model of the epic form, similar to the way in which her first published poem, *The Battle of Marathon*, was modeled after Pope's translation of *The Iliad* (Friedman 207).

However, Barrett Browning also immediately signals the originality of the perspective that she takes up throughout the poem. In her preface to the first edition of *Casa Guidi Windows*, Barrett Browning writes that the poem represents an eye-witness account of the events leading up to the Italian revolution in 1848 and its disappointing aftermath in 1851 "from a window":

No continuous narrative nor exposition of political philosophy is attempted by her. It is a simple story of personal impressions, whose only value is in the intensity with which they were received, as proving her warm affection for a beautiful and unfortunate country. (qtd in Mermin 166)

Various critics have read – or rather misread – Barrett Browning's preface as an explicit apology for the politics of her poetry and thus have tended to question the efficacy of her role as both narrator and political agent in the poem. Mermin writes that Barrett Browning here lives up to the virtues (spontaneity and affection) and the defects (a lack of sustained thought and organizing purpose) that nineteenth century critics had come to expect in regards to women's poetry of the period (166). Others are even more critical of her aesthetics: Jean Hoffman Lewis writes that Barrett Browning fails to express the same high level of confidence in the poetic style of *CGW* that she expresses, alternately, in regards to the politics of the poem, ultimately retreating behind the windows of Casa Guidi as opposed to crossing any new frontiers as a poet (160, 171), while Christopher

Keirstead argues similarly that Barrett Browning encounters a problem of authority when she attempts to move beyond her role as passive witness to embody a more direct influence in the poem (74). But to deny the power and importance of Barrett Browning's role in *Casa Guidi Windows* amounts in effect to denying the biographical context out of which the poem initially arose. Although she has been criticized for distancing herself from Italy's political turmoil, in reality Barrett Browning was finally "not looking at life 'from a window'" while composing the poem but was "actually well enough to experience the Italy she had previously only known through literature" (Markus xxxi). As such, it necessarily follows that *Casa Guidi Windows* becomes both an autobiographical as well as a poetic flight from the confines of the domestic space into the realm of politics; instead of retreating from a position of authority as so many critics have accused her, Barrett Browning self-consciously creates herself as a poet-prophetess – the singer of the new day who is so desperately needed towards the creation of a new, politically unified Italy.

Instead of imagining another Queen Victoria, Barrett Browning, like Hemans, seems at first to be seeking what critics have called a male Captain of Industry to lead a divided Italy. She writes:

Whatever man (last peasant or first pope
Seeking to free his country) shall appear,
Teach, lead, strike fire into the masses, fill
These empty bladders with fine air, insphere
These wills into a unity of will,
And make of Italy a nation. (I. 835-40)

Yet Barrett Browning's command to "strike fire into the masses" – for nations to roar like lions in an ancient Roman amphitheatre – quickly dies out. In contrast to the bloody battle-cry of Hemans' *Restoration, Casa Guidi Windows* adopts a far more critical, yet ultimately pragmatic, view of warfare. Helen Cooper writes that Barrett Browning's poem offers a critique of warfare, scorning a "childlike reliance on the 'fist' rather than the 'brain'" (134). However, Barrett Browning tempers her critique with the realistic acknowledgment that

... the sight and proof
Of lion-strength hurts nothing; and to show
A lion-heart, and measure paw with hoof,
Helps something, even, and will instruct a foe. (I. 678-82)

Here, the poet does not reject the possibility of war, but rather asks her would-be leader and teacher to focus more on creating "thinkers in the place/ Of fighters" (I. 727-8), to "expand/ The inner souls of men before you strive/ For civic heroes" (I. 793-5).

Central to this expansion of the soul is, Barrett Browning notes, the power of song; as such, the poet herself, seemingly unconsciously, fulfills the model of the future prophet who will one day unite Italy. In an interesting passage, Barrett Browning writes that,

The poet shall look grander in the face
Than even of old (when he of Greece began
To sing 'that Achillean wrath which slew
So many heroes') – seeing he shall treat

The deeds of souls heroic toward the true,
The oracles of life, previsions sweet
And awful like divine swans gliding through
White arms of Leda, who will leave the heat
Of their escaping godship to endue
The human medium with a heavenly flush. (I. 731-40)

This passage prompts Mermin to write that, though the new poet who will surpass Homer is envisioned as pronominally male, the description of his visionary powers as Leda's reception of Jove causes her to argue that a "sexually adult woman" will one day come to embody heroic vision (171). As such, Barrett Browning is in essence staking a claim for herself as a Miriam prophetess figure, pictured in the poem "clash[ing] her cymbals to surprise/ The sun between her white arms flung apart,/ With new glad golden sounds" – in other words, a prophet who will unite the Italian people in song as well as in body (I. 314-6). Like the child singing "O bella liberta" who functions as her muse, inspiring the writing of *Casa Guidi Windows*, Barrett Browning herself takes up the role of prophet-bard who uses her hopeful song towards healing her foster country and, according to several contemporary Italian reviews of the poem praising her for her insightful treatment of the failed Italian revolution, to a high degree of success (Harris 125). As she herself remarked in a letter to a friend, had the poem been published earlier, making her distrust of the Pope and the Grand Duke known to the public sooner, "Then *I* might have passed a little for a prophetess as well as George Sand!" (qtd in Markus xxv).

However, Barrett Browning's self-reflexive role as the bard whose song will achieve a vision of national self-determination for the Italian people only partially

denotes the political power she takes up through her role in the poem; the poet also transfigures the influence of the mother in the domestic sphere into the public sphere. As Elizabeth Fay writes, discussion of motherhood and the role of the mother became a powerful means for women to assert themselves within the public sphere in the nineteenth century, allowing women to claim their own brand of authority unique to the female sex. Mothering was formerly put towards political use during the French Revolution, in which the figure of the mother was used by the revolutionaries to signal a new relationship between the citizen and the state; however, although this mother figure would have a certain degree of political responsibility and influence in rearing her citizen-children, she had no political agency herself. By contrast, the British – as evidenced in the writings of nineteenth century women poets like Hemans for example – opened up a larger degree of political influence for women in their own right by imagining a metaphorical relation in which the mother actually becomes the nurturing nation-state, representing the home and hearth which are in turn associated with the nation (Fay 67-9). Although Fay writes that this British version as it is represented by writers like Hemans is “a passive figure who does not support or actively inspire” (69), I would argue that in *Casa Guidi Windows*, Barrett Browning’s representation of the mother figure becomes a movement towards women’s empowerment within the political sphere – a movement which, in effect, mirrors Barrett Browning’s own progression from being the invalid poet sequestered within her family home to a mature and politically astute writer and happy mother of one son.

Mermin writes that, “The image of Italy that frames the poem, scornfully rejected in the first part but reluctantly accepted at the end, is that of Niobe, the mother who lost

all her beautiful children” (172). However, there is more to Barrett Browning’s Niobe than, as she writes, mere “garlands for the graves” and “death-songs” (II. 729-30); the poet does not simply rehash what has been a traditional representation of Italy but rather reinvents it as an image of courageous, militant motherhood in the face of tragedy. While *Casa Guidi Windows* does feature the masculine republican hero Marcus Brutus, Barrett Browning later introduces a vision of female heroism in battle through the figure of Anita Garibaldi, wife of Giuseppe Garibaldi, one of the three leaders who finally helped to achieve Italy’s independence in 1861 (Schor 313). Barrett Browning pictures Garibaldi’s wife as a woman

who, at her husband’s side, in scorn,
Outfaced the whistling shot and hissing waves
Until she felt her little babe unborn
Recoil, within her, from the violent staves
And bloodhounds of the world, – at which, her life
Dropt inwards from her eyes and followed it
Beyond the hunters. Garibaldi’s wife
And child died so. (II. 678-84)

Anita Garibaldi’s fate and the fate of her unborn child is without a doubt tragic, but nonetheless heroic; like Hemans’ description of the dying Laocoön, Garibaldi’s wife also bravely withstands the pangs of death with a face that stubbornly “never stirred/ From its clenched anguish” (II. 690-1). Both Anita Garibaldi and Barrett Browning’s own poetic persona, who is made a mother through the course of the poem, offer alternative readings of the tragic figure of Niobe.

If Italy is figured in *Casa Guidi Windows* as “childless among mothers” (I. 22), then it necessarily follows that Italy’s citizens are pictured as orphaned children seeking a mother-surrogate. At first, they believe they have found one in the figure of Grand Duke Leopold II, who seems to demonstrate an appropriate paternal affection to the crowds of people at a celebration in his honour on September 12th, 1847 (Markus xx), drawing “His little children to the window-place” with eyes “overfilled/ With good warm human tears which unrepressed/ Ran down” (I. 558, 562-4). However, it turns out that Barrett Browning, one of the masses who held out hope that the Duke would finally unite Italy (although she later denied this), finally asks her audience to “Absolve me, patriots, of my woman’s fault/ That ever I believed the man was true” (II. 64-5). Barrett Browning here seems to blame her sex and her pregnancy as the reason that she misjudged the Duke’s affectionate public overtures, writing that:

I saw the man among his little sons,
His lips were warm with kisses while he swore;
And I, because I am a woman – I,
Who felt my own child’s coming life before
The prescience of my soul ...
I could not bear to think, whoever bore,
That lips, so warmed, could shape so cold a lie. (II. 93-9)

However, Barrett Browning’s misplaced faith in the Duke has less to do with her “woman’s fault” than with a general belief among the Italian populace that Leopold would become the saviour of his people. Although Schor writes that it is Barrett Browning’s pregnancy which “estranges her from her own ‘prescience’ of the [Duke’s]

deceit to follow” (312), her pregnancy also serves to intensify the maternal feelings which are the strength of her political position throughout the poem.

As solution to Italy’s political woes, Barrett Browning imagines a new mother-child dynamic which will help restore the country to itself; as Gilbert writes, she “imagines Italy as ultimately redeemed by the voice and visions of mothers and children” (200). Harkening back to the small child whose singing prompts her to write “a meditation and a dream,” Barrett Browning’s poem ends with the image of her own son Pen, at once an English citizen and a Florentine, as her “blue-eyed prophet” who will teach Barrett Browning “to hope for, what the angels know/ When they smile clear as thou dost” (II. 1, 757, 750-1). Ultimately, Barrett Browning puts her faith in the “young children, lifted high on parent souls” who represent the youthful spirit that will be able to one day reinvigorate the mother country of Italy. It is this hopeful endnote which prompts Mermin to conclude that the poem is “a hymn to progress and human possibility that is also, and not coincidentally, a song of motherhood” (173).

Political poetry by writers such as Felicia Hemans and Elizabeth Barrett Browning has thus far been underappreciated by literary critics, perhaps because poems such as Hemans’ *Restoration of the Works of Art to Italy* and Barrett Browning’s *Casa Guidi Windows* disrupt the image of the poetess who, like the Lady of Shalott, quietly removes herself from political debate to concentrate on the domestic affections. Re-examining political poems written by women in this period will help us to re-evaluate these poets as in fact poets, capable of writing impressive verse in a wide variety of genres, and will hopefully mark the end of the influence which the long-standing myth of the poetess – the woman poet who writes only short, lyric poems concerned with the emotions – has so

long held over critics and readers alike.

Notes for Chapter One

¹As Gary Kelly points out in the introduction to his edition of Felicia Hemans' poetry, Hemans often emphasized the importance of memory in her writing as "record." Mindful of the fact that the Latin root word for "record" was *cor/cordis* meaning heart, Hemans used the word to signify her concept of writing the heart into history as opposed to writing mere "documentary records" (Kelly 28-9).

²For more on Hemans' treatment of the bower, see Diego Saglia's essay, "Epic or Domestic?: Felicia Hemans's Heroic Poetry and the Myth of the Victorian Poetess."

³While Barrett Browning's *Casa Guidi Windows* does not strictly make use of the traditional rhyme scheme of terza rima (aba, bcb, cdc, etc.), Barrett Browning's rhyme scheme of abba, abba, cdc, dcd in the opening lines of the poem does echo the chain rhyme evoked by this verse stanza. Further, as Harris points out, either a single line or a couplet (as Barrett Browning uses) is acceptable for repeating the rhyme of the middle line of the final tercet in terza rima.

“Shall I speak?": The Female Voice in *The Forest Sanctuary* and *A Drama in Exile*

By and large, the epic as a genre has traditionally been preoccupied with the visual. From Homer's *Odyssey*, which famously opens with a description of Odysseus' chaotic household in the wake of his long absence, to Milton's *Paradise Lost*, which begins with Satan and his fellow fallen angels writhing on a lake of fire, the writers of established epics have all traditionally been concerned with contextualizing their storylines within concrete visual realms. Female-generated epics, however, make for an interesting contrast to this trend; as John M. Anderson writes, epics written by women, such as Felicia Hemans' *The Forest Sanctuary*, the subject of his essay, have often placed more emphasis on the vocal as opposed to the visual, thereby suggesting what Anderson deems a “destabilizing alternative approach to established epic” (56).

If, as Anderson remarks, the vocal in general has often been neglected in epic poetry, the female voice in particular has suffered from this neglect, often being either sidelined or ignored entirely. Helene P. Foley writes that women in epic have traditionally derived more power in the role of the listener – as an audience-member listening to the storytelling of another, for instance – than as the narrators of their own stories. For example, although we do hear her speak about her problematic situation, *The Odyssey*'s Penelope – arguably the most famous woman of classical epic – never divulges the subject matter of the web that she weaves and reweaves daily (117).

The most predominant role for women in epic is, of course, that of the muse; however, as is the case with the character of Penelope, the muse is not permitted to narrate her own story, but is rather valued solely as an accessory or inspiration to the

male epic poet's storytelling. As Milton implores his "Heav'nly" muse in the famous invocation which begins *Paradise Lost*,

I thence
Invoke thy aid to my advent'rous song,
That with no middle flight intends to soar
Above the Aonian mount, while it pursues
Things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme. (l. 12-16)

While women do have a place in traditional epic poetry, usually as supporting characters or in the role of the muse, it is most often secondary to the main purpose of the poem, which is to trace the journey of the male protagonist, the epic hero; the female voice, when it is featured in epic poetry, is always filtered through a male consciousness. Thus in foregrounding the female voice, the epic poetry of Felicia Hemans and Elizabeth Barrett Browning offers a unique angle on a well-established genre. By taking up the voices and the personas of various women in their poetry, in some ways similar to but ultimately dissimilar from themselves, Hemans and Barrett Browning are able to eschew (or in some cases to counter) pre-existing stereotypical representations of women, and to instead bring to the forefront the complexity of both women's lives and minds.

Before launching into a discussion of women's voices specifically in epic poetry, I would first like to examine the similarities between Hemans' and Barrett Browning's treatment of the female voice in their epic poetry with the treatment of that same subject as it is featured elsewhere in their poetry, specifically in the unique form of the dramatic monologue. Although critical consensus still insists that the dramatic monologue was developed "simultaneously but independently" by Tennyson and Robert Browning in the

1830s, in the past decade a number of critics have made the alternative suggestion that women poets like Hemans as well as contemporary Letitia Elizabeth Landon, both writing in the transitional period of the 1820s, might instead be credited with “inventing” the genre (Byron 80). However, in discussing what attractions this genre may have held for such women poets, critics such as Glennis Byron and perhaps most notably Isobel Armstrong paradoxically seem to question the fact that women’s poetry can even rightly be called dramatic monologue. Both Armstrong and Byron have argued that the dramatic monologue form allowed women to avoid what Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have termed the “anxiety of authorship” which women writers experienced as women in what was then a field overwhelmingly dominated and controlled by masculine authority. Armstrong writes that the dramatic form is “used as a disguise, a protection against self-exposure and the exposure of feminine subjectivity” (325). Byron agrees, remarking that, “Speaking in the voice of a dramatised ‘I’ allows women to assume the position of the authoritative speaking subject while insisting that the voice is not to be identified as her own” (81). However, both critics later question the efficacy of what Byron calls this “distancing strategy” (81); instead of using the dramatic monologue form in order to explore the consciousness of an individualized speaker, often framed with a certain sense of irony as is common in the established masculine tradition of the dramatic monologue, women’s use of the genre “appears to function in the service of the celebration of the hegemonic inscription of woman” (84). For example, by emphasizing the links between artist Properzia Rossi in her eponymous poem and other famous women torn between a career and the domestic affections in her collection *Records of Woman* (1828), Felicia Hemans is able to layer the lives of other women – across boundaries such as time,

race/ethnicity, and culture – onto her speaker, thus creating a multi-dimensional persona that, as Byron writes, “exploit[s] the dynamic of the self in context in a manner diametrically opposite to the way now considered characteristic of the form” (84). According to Armstrong and Byron, then, the dramatic monologue as it is written by female poets becomes less about exploring the consciousness of an individual poetic speaker and more about expressing a common femininity which all women to some degree share. Thus, while both critics conclude that Hemans and Landon remain “crucial predecessors of the dramatic monologue,” Tennyson and Browning still remain the fathers and founders of the poetic form.

However, to argue that female dramatic monologues lack the same complex examination of an individual speaker that characterizes famous dramatic monologues written by men – Browning’s “My Last Duchess” for example – is, in my opinion, to effectively deny or at least to misrepresent the subtle skill of these women writers at their craft. In her examination of Hemans, Byron concludes that she uses her dramatized speakers in order to reproduce and confirm, rather than challenge, masculine representations of women, effectively erasing the woman as a subject in her own right (82). Byron’s argument is certainly not an uncommon one in terms of general criticism on Hemans; however, in examining what is arguably her most famous monologue “Properzia Rossi,” I hope to demonstrate that what Anthony John Harding refers to as Hemans’ “effacement of women” is in reality just a long-standing critical misjudgment of Hemans’ work that does not stand up to direct examination of her verse. In “Properzia Rossi” for instance, Hemans does not merely give voice to the sufferings of a love-starved woman, as critics have all too frequently claimed about the poem, but also

explores the very real complexities involved in the life of a woman torn between her love for her profession on one hand and her desire for marriage and domestic life on the other – two facets of a woman’s life that were largely incompatible with one another during the nineteenth century.

In her essay, “Enlarging the Heart: L.E.L.’s ‘The Improvisatrice,’ Hemans’s ‘Properzia Rossi,’ and Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh*,” Margot K. Louis argues that Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh* both resists the sentimental tradition which she inherited from her female predecessors and subsumes this tradition within her own “sacramental vision of art” (2). Barrett Browning’s “vision” is unique in that it extends the scope of Landon’s and Hemans’ sentimental poetry beyond solely “the site of passively gushing feeling” and into the public realm of influence and interaction with worldly affairs – a process which Louis deems “enlarging the heart” (10). Barrett Browning’s heroine Aurora does not merely aim to use her art for the sole and, according to Louis, implicitly shallow purpose of communicating with an alienated male lover, but rather treats her writing as an important job in and of itself, using it to “communicate a vision which both includes and transcends her personal desires” (4). By contrast, Louis writes that Hemans’ “Properzia Rossi” becomes nothing more than a record of a “lost self” (4). Having once endeavoured “for praise” in her own right, Rossi’s “high longings” have finally disappeared entirely, to be replaced with an all-consuming desire to “invade the male’s sensibility, to force him to feel her feelings” (4). However, I disagree with Louis’ argument here; while it is clear that Hemans’ heroine is clearly heart-broken over the fact that her lover does not reciprocate her affections, Rossi’s art does not simply fall victim to her desire to communicate her love to the man who scorned

her. Instead, it takes on a rather more complex function in Rossi's life: both as an accursed hindrance to her desire for a more conventional life as a domestic woman and, paradoxically, as her emotional asylum from the personal disappointments in her life.

"Properzia Rossi" begins with an epigraph, which as Gary Kelly writes was probably written by Hemans herself, that reads in part: "Tell me no more, no more/ Of my soul's lofty gifts! Are they not vain/ To quench its haunting thirst for happiness?" (Hemans 2002 l. 1-3). However, in the next few lines, Hemans complicates her previous words by adding that, "I depart/ Unknown, tho' Fame goes with me" (l. 8). In Hemans' poem, fame is represented as Rossi's consolation, not merely because it may posthumously win her the "tears/ As would have made life precious" (l. 11) but because for Rossi, the simple joy of sculpting and indulging her artistic gift brings her happiness in itself. Indeed, the poem begins with Rossi asking for the opportunity to create one last great work of sculpture, "[o]ne dream of passion and beauty more!" (l. 1). Though she follows this up with the exclamation, "For thee alone, for thee!" (l. 7), Rossi expresses here and elsewhere in the poem a desire for fame in its own right, not simply in order to provoke sadness or guilt in the lover who has rejected her. Though Rossi seems initially to dismiss "the power/ Within me born" as her "fruitless dower/ That could not win me love," she also paradoxically greets her artistic inspiration

proudly, with its rushing train
Of glorious images: – they throng – they press –
A sudden joy lights up my loneliness, –
I shall not perish all! (l. 28-31)

As is made clear in these lines, Rossi takes pleasure in her own artistic gifts; her creative

power is the comforting refuge that she turns to in the face of the disappointments in her personal life. Thus Hemans' poem, consistently dismissed by critics like Louis as conventional because it upholds the importance of the domestic affections in women's lives, at times hints towards a far more complex reading of a nineteenth century woman's fickle attitude towards her own creativity and the resulting fame which it has brought her. Though she attempts to compare herself to the feminine ivy, begging for "Something round which [the drooping vine's] tendrils may entwine" (undoubtedly the sturdy masculine oak, referring to a common poetic trope of the time period which I will explore further in this chapter), Rossi – and Hemans' poem by extension – clearly cannot help being unconventional according to gender ideals of the nineteenth century in asserting a woman's desire for fame and creative achievement.

In his essay "The Fragile Image: Felicia Hemans and Romantic Ekphrasis," Grant F. Scott also addresses the unconventionality of "Properzia Rossi," observing that Hemans' poem refuses to describe its central image of Rossi sculpting the classical figure of Ariadne – a detail highly unusual and almost radical, considering that ekphrasis has traditionally been dedicated to the narrative description of visual works of art (43). Rather than concentrating on describing the artwork itself, Scott argues that Hemans instead highlights the importance of critical response to an artist's work; as such, he suggests that Rossi ultimately "renounces fame and immortality in favour of an immediate physical response from the human viewer" (Scott 42). Although I agree with Scott concerning the poem's unconventionality, I disagree with his assertion that Rossi is disinterested in the public's attention. In my mind, central to Rossi's unconventionality is the fact that she seems to seek out and covet fame – the very thing that nineteenth

century women were encouraged to avoid as unwholesome and above all unfeminine. While Rossi at one point curses the “Worthless fame!/ That in *his* bosom wins not for my name/ Th’ abiding place it asked!,” it is clear throughout the poem that she does not completely shun what in effect is her “Earth’s gift” (81-3, 110). Fame is above all the motivation behind the creation of her last sculpture, as Rossi makes clear at the poem’s outset: “Let the earth retain a trace/ Of that which lit my being, tho its race/ Might have been loftier far” (l. 3-5). Rossi is preoccupied throughout the poem with the question of how the current level of fame that she enjoys will ultimately fare after her imminent death – a concern not unknown to the poet who immortalized her in verse. Like Rossi, Hemans herself was thought by others to covet a little too much the fame which, as both a woman and a poetess, she ought to disparage and avoid at all costs; as Kathleen McConnell writes, both William Wordsworth, with whom Hemans shared a somewhat tenuous friendship, and Sara Hutchinson, the object of Coleridge’s affections and sister to Wordsworth’s wife Mary, are known to have criticized Hemans for supposedly enjoying the attention she received from the public (92). With this argument in mind then, perhaps it is not unrealistic to suggest that Hemans enjoyed the same sort of love-hate relationship towards her fame that Properzia Rossi expresses in Hemans’ poem.

In the case of both Hemans the poet and Rossi the poetic subject, fame takes on a powerful vocal register. Although Rossi initially dismisses her art – the “brief aspirings from the chain” – as “some wild fitful song,/ Rising triumphantly, to die ere long/ In dirge-like echoes” (72-5), a mere few stanzas later, she revels in the fact that her name will one day become “a deep thrill” that

may linger on the lyre

When its full chords are hush'd – awhile to live,
And one day haply in thy heart revive
Sad thoughts of me. (122-5)

Rossi likens her posthumous fame here to a persistent and therefore powerful echo. While once again, Rossi attempts to distance herself from the implications of this fame, discussing the importance of her art's endurance in terms of its ability to move the lover who has scorned her instead of for her own personal gain and triumph, it is clear from Hemans' treatment of fame throughout the poem that Rossi's celebrity becomes a source of both power and pleasure for her. Like Echo, the nymph of Greek mythology whose voice remained behind after her death, Rossi's undying voice becomes more than just a passive token of love lost but also a persistent reminder of her own posthumous existence that persists through the artwork which she left behind. The "deep thrill" which will ultimately linger on the lyre is connected with Rossi's name and reputation, not with her failed romance. Similarly, in Letitia Elizabeth Landon's poem written to commemorate the death of Hemans, the author of "Properzia Rossi" herself is described as a "viewless spirit" whose artistic influence both in her lifetime and after her death will function like "music on the air" that, with a "gentle sway," will effectively create a "heart's sweet empire over land and sea" (Landon l. 9-10, 25-6). Contrary to popular critical reception of the poet and her work, then, Hemans was both personally and professionally interested in ambition, fame and the posthumous endurance of art. Although Grant F. Scott suggests that the burning question of the poem is not "Will my work endure?" but rather "How will my work be perceived?," I have attempted to demonstrate instead that there is a preoccupation with fame for its own sake that lingers throughout the poem which has

perhaps willfully escaped critical attention due to a refusal to acknowledge the unconventionality of its departure from Hemans' poetess persona.

While Hemans' "Properzia Rossi" blurs the boundaries between the poetic subject and author, Elizabeth Barrett Browning highlights the female voice in an altogether different way in her dramatic monologue "Bertha in the Lane." In her essay on "womanly dramatic monologue," Byron makes the argument that women writers of dramatic monologues often sympathize with their poetic subjects; instead of objectifying or framing their speakers with irony as do their male counterparts, female poets more often target "the systems that produce the speakers than the speakers themselves" (87). As an example of this general rule, Byron cites Barrett Browning's "Bertha in the Lane," whose speaker, despite her manipulateness, is "nevertheless shown to be the almost inevitable product of a repressive gender ideology" (87). It is undoubtedly true that Barrett Browning's speaker, who remains nameless throughout the poem, is a victim of nineteenth century gender ideology which more or less resigns her to either married life or death, as symbolized by the two garments which the speaker sews for herself and her sister: a wedding gown and a funeral shroud. However, the fact that she has been victimized by the dominant gender ideology of her time does not seem to win the speaker Barrett Browning's sympathy; rather, it is clear that, like her male counterparts, Barrett Browning is also distancing herself from her speaker through the use of irony, suggesting that the relationship between author and speaker in so-called "womanly" dramatic monologues is profoundly more complicated than Byron would have us believe.

"Bertha in the Lane" has gathered some fairly mixed reviews from contemporary critics. As Glennis Stephenson writes, the poem has often been singled out for praise by

critics in the past (3), seemingly for what Helen Cooper deems its “admirable” demonstration of woman’s self-abnegation (70). The poem records the death-bed speech of a woman who, having learned that her fiancé Robert has fallen in love with her younger sister Bertha, renounces her claims to Robert and prepares to die. However, although the speaker has all too often been dismissed as a “dying angel” and the poem as “just a simple romantic ballad,” Stephenson’s essay examines the darker undertones inherent in the speaker’s dialogue (Stephenson 4, 8). Although the speaker attempts to make the ultimate sacrifice for her sister, it is not wholly without a certain degree of self-motivation. As Stephenson aptly summarizes:

The reader’s response to elder sister [the speaker] is ... ambivalent. Her self-sacrifice may be admirable. Her need for proof of affection and gratitude is understandable. But she extracts a terrible price for her own suffering and loss: her heroic love feeds on Bertha’s guilt and ultimately leaves the younger girl with little chance for future happiness with Robert. (6)

Repeatedly addressing her younger sister Bertha as “Sweet” and with other terms of endearment, the speaker’s “rather unsettling insistence on closeness,” as several critics have uneasily noted, is part of her obvious attempt to inspire feelings of guilt in her sister. For example, the speaker insists on holding her sister’s face between her cupped hands in order to examine her features, concluding that, “‘Tis a fair, fair face in sooth –/ Larger eyes and redder mouth/ Than mine were in my first youth” (19-21). When the speaker’s observation inevitably causes Bertha to burst into tears out of apparent guilt, her sister figuratively rubs salt in the wound by initially pretending not to understand the real

reason behind Bertha's sudden emotion, mistakenly attributing it to her bashfulness at being so closely scrutinized (29-34).

The speaker also indirectly serves to heighten her sister's already poignant grief by dwelling on the earthly pleasures that she will soon forsake. She begs the spirit of her mother, haunting over the entire poem, to "keep aloof" so that she may yet enjoy "Earth's warm-beating joy and dole!" for one hour more, including the bitter-sweet memories of that sunny day when she first learned of her sister and her fiancé's mutual attraction (56, 59). In recollecting that ill-fated day, the speaker describes in painstaking detail a delightful spring day in May:

What a day it was, that day!
Hills and vales did openly
Seem to heave and throb away
At the sight of the great sky:
And the silence, as it stood
In the glory's golden flood,
Audibly did bud, and bud. (77-83)

The abundant fertility described in the above passage effectively mirrors the speaker's obvious sense of excitement and anticipation at her impending marriage; as Stephenson writes, "Her desire for erotic satisfaction, now frustrated, is displaced into an almost voluptuous landscape" (7). In lingering over her lost happiness in such a way, the speaker seems evidently keen on eliciting feelings of either gratitude or grief (or perhaps both) in Bertha. By continuously wallowing in bitter self-pity, the speaker makes it abundantly clear that she cannot in effect sacrifice herself with the same degree of

selflessness as exhibited by her obvious role-model, Christ. Though she calls to her mother's spirit to "Stand up on the jasper sea,/ And be witness I have given/ All the gifts required of me, –" (43-5), the speaker has failed at her goal to "aspire as I expire" (168). Dorothy Mermin writes in her review of the poem that its "mawkish and mealy-mouthed tone makes one doubt that Elizabeth Barrett was fully aware of the conflicting impulses it evidently embodies" (92). However, I would argue instead that Barrett Browning's tone remains intentionally ironic throughout the poem; by establishing the speaker's intention early on in the poem – to sacrifice her own happiness for the sake of her sister's – and then proceeding to detail the many obvious ways in which she fails to achieve her goal, Barrett Browning seems to be mocking the self-pitying and manipulative speaker of "Bertha in the Lane" – and, in turn, to be perhaps poking fun at her own supposed reputation for "unnecessarily indulging in the sentimental" (Stephenson 8).

Similar to their treatment of the female voice in their dramatic monologues, both Hemans and Barrett Browning also use the epic genre in order to explore and challenge stereotypical representations of women. While technically *The Forest Sanctuary* seems to fit into the category of Romantic monodrama – a drama (though not necessarily meant to be staged) which showcases the thoughts of a singular character and, as such, a kind of precursor to the dramatic monologue form – Hemans' poem also initially establishes itself in terms of a conventional epic. Although Hemans' original epigraph to the text seems to dislocate its similarities to the conventional epic tradition, protesting that it is "intended more as a *record of a Mind*, than as a tale abounding with romantic and extraordinary incident" (Hemans 2002 p.228 fn.), *The Forest Sanctuary* does fit the traditional quest motif of the epic as its male protagonist undergoes a search for religious

understanding, taking him on a physical journey from Spain to North America as he battles with his primary obstacle – his struggle between two conflicting religious doctrines. However, Hemans’ poem departs from traditional epic in a way that warrants critical attention; as John M. Anderson writes, *The Forest Sanctuary* is actually a “prolonged meditation on the idea of voice” – more specifically, a collective voice specifically gendered as female (56). Although the three women featured in the poem – Inez, Theresa, and Leonor – all die before its conclusion, they continue to survive as voices that come to haunt the speaker as he struggles to let go of his ties to earthly existence and turn his mind fully towards God. By foregrounding the female voice in what several critics (as well as Hemans herself) have named her best work, Hemans introduces a new revolutionary female-centric approach to an established genre.

Upon first examination of *The Forest Sanctuary*, the subject of the female voice may at first seem to be an odd topic for discussion, seeing as none of the poem’s three main female characters are given the chance to narrate their own perspective in the first person; the “blessed household voices” of which the Spaniard speaks (I will hereafter use Anderson’s term to refer to Hemans’ speaker and protagonist) never appear in the poem directly, but are always mediated by its central narrator and protagonist. However, as I have previously discussed in the first chapter in regards to Hemans’ poems “The Homes of England,” “Tasso and His Sister,” and “Körner and His Sister,” the female voice is consistently equated with music and the power of song throughout the course of *The Forest Sanctuary*. The voices which come to haunt the Spaniard are in fact the “mountain-songs of old” (II. 494) which bring back the memory of “vintage-scene,/ And flowering myrtle, and sweet citron’s breath” (II. 492-3) – songs which originate from the

lips of the women in the poem (in this particular instance, Leonor). As I have already mentioned in the previous chapter, Hemans' female protagonists frequently take up the feminized role of the record-keeper – a role which, in *The Forest Sanctuary* at least, is generally mediated through the power of their music and their song. For example, Inez and Theresa's singing and lute-playing recall a period of happy domesticity in their father's life; however, in the wake of their deaths, their aged father is "doomed to pine/ For sounds departed in his life's decline" (I. 284-5) in silence. Thus, although they are never given the opportunity to speak for themselves in the poem, it is clear that the female voice is endowed with great power in *The Forest Sanctuary*, namely the power to "restore/ Love's buried images with one low tone" (II. 237-8) to the Spaniard which impacts, both positively and negatively, his epic quest for spiritual fulfillment.

Hemans' preoccupation with the female voice in *The Forest Sanctuary* is signaled by the Spaniard's exclamation "The voices of my home!" in the very first line of the poem (Hemans 2002 I.1). In *Forest Sanctuary*, women's voices provide two important functions in the poem; while the imagined voices of the deceased women he has known in the past are effectively preventing the Spaniard from letting go of worldly things, they are also paradoxically what fortify his spiritual strength during his exile from his beloved homeland. As Hemans suggests by including an epigraph to the poem from the German play *Die Jungfrau von Orleans* about Joan of Arc, *Forest Sanctuary*, despite the centrality of its male protagonist, is as much about commemorating female heroism as it is about celebrating the heroism of its male protagonist.

As the Spaniard himself identifies, the "voices of my homeland" which sustain him in the wilderness are in fact the "blessed household voices" belonging to the three

women to whom he has been closest throughout his life: the sisters of his childhood friend and comrade-in-arms Alvar, Inez and Theresa, as well as his wife Leonor. It is the voices of these three women which bring to the Spaniard's mind both joyful and painful memories of his homeland and his childhood home, "[s]inging of boyhood back" (Hemans 2002 I.9). Comparing his longing for his birthplace to the "moan[ing]" of an ocean-shell, the Spaniard at once determines to "find mine ark" within which he may presumably preserve his memories of comforting domesticity and then, paradoxically, protests to shake off these memories, using the simile of an eagle shaking water droplets from its wings (I. 36, 19, 38-9). Yet, despite his effort to cast off all recollection of his former life, the Spaniard also seemingly questions whether his religious freedom is enough of a reward for the amount of time he has spent in exile with his young son, asking,

Is it not much that I may worship Him,
With nought my spirit's breathings to control,
And feel His presence in the vast, and dim,
And whispery woods, where dying thunders roll
From the far cataracts? (I. 55-9)

Though the Spaniard claims to "rejoice," having won an "unfetter'd way" for a new-found, direct communication between his soul and God, it is clear that he can never be completely content with living in exile, and being away from his previously close relationships with friends and family. Thus, claiming to have a "charg'd heart" that must "pour itself, or break! (I. 89-90), the Spaniard recounts his memories of the voices of his loved ones which haunt him, thus signaling the beginning of the narration which in fact

becomes the poem.

While exploring the power of the female voice and different types of female heroism in *The Forest Sanctuary*, Hemans is able to re-interpret a common trope used to describe the relations between the sexes in the Romantic period that portrays women in a negative light, into a positive symbol of women's strength.¹ In describing his spiritual dilemma – the fact that he is effectively torn between his ties on earth and his ties to God – the Spaniard repeatedly refers to the allegory of Plato's cave. Upon gazing on his long-estranged friend Alvar's face, the Spaniard recounts that,

...in that rush of visions, I became
As one that by the bands of slumber wound
Lies with a powerless, but all-thrilling frame,
Intense in consciousness of sight and sound,
Yet buried in a wildering dream which brings
Lov'd faces round him, girt with fearful things!
Troubled ev'n thus I stood, but chain'd and bound
On that familiar form mine eye to keep –
– Alas! I might not fall upon his neck and weep! (l. 262-70)

In the Spaniard's descriptive words, he becomes like one of the chained prisoners who, as Plato describes in his allegory, doomed to look only upon what is in fact merely a train of shadows for the entirety of their lives. Alvar's face, in this comparison, functions as a glimpse of the greater religious truth (in the context of the poem, Protestantism) to which the Spaniard has long closed himself, forcing it into the background among the "rush of visions" which he involuntarily experiences and from which he longs to disengage.

Earlier in the poem, the Spaniard uses another trope to connote this same idea, describing “man’s mind” as an oak which

... might have flung
Its hundred arms to Heaven, still freshly green,
But a wild vine around the stem hath clung,
From branch to branch close wreaths of bondage throwing,
Till the proud tree, before no tempest bowing,
Hath shrunk and died, those serpent-folds among. (I. 92-7)

This image of the oak tree and the clinging ivy here also functions in much the same way as does the earlier reference to Plato’s allegory of the cave: the strands of ivy clinging to the oak’s trunk, like the shadows on the cave’s walls, become the metaphorical earthly bonds which are preventing the Spaniard from achieving his ultimate spiritual goal of a full union with God.

In his edition of Hemans’ poetry, Kelly reads this image in a historical/ political context: he writes that, “liberals and reformists considered that the energy and glory of Spain had been sapped by parasitic institutions of church and state, as the parasitic vine saps the energy of its host plant” (p. 232 fn). While I admire Kelly’s analysis of this particular section of the poem, I would like to propose another potential reading, which picks up on both the image’s religious and gender implications. In its religious context, the ivy could function symbolically as religious error that is considered responsible for dragging down the minds of the Spanish, in keeping with the negative stereotypical representations of Catholicism, common in Hemans’ Protestant England, as superstitious, material, and feminine.

Moreover, by making use of what was then a well-established trope to describe relations between the sexes, Hemans also introduces the subtext of gender into the potential religious reading of her poetry. In the second portion of the poem, the Spaniard indirectly refers to the trope of the oak and the ivy again, but this time as a means towards elucidating his take on gender relations. In describing the “Strange heart of man!” the Spaniard remarks that,

His spirit rises with the rising wind;
For, wedded to the far futurity,
On, on, it bears him ever, and the main
Seems rushing, like his hope, some happier shore to gain. (I. 285-8)

In contrast to the Spaniard’s vision of the exemplary man – always striving to remain detached from the world, with eyes firmly fixed on traversing “some happier shore” (I. 288) – women instead “twine” their hearts “with ev’n each lifeless thing/ Which ... seem’d to bear its part/ In her calm joys” (I. 290-2):

For ever would she cling,
A brooding dove, to that sole spot of earth
Where she hath loved, and given her children birth,
And heard their first sweet voices. (I. 292-5)

Woman is again associated with the human voice here; however, this association in the Spaniard’s mind is far from positive. Because she will be forever “twined” or emotionally attached to aspects of her earthly life, the Spaniard suggests here that a woman cannot reach the higher plane of spiritual awareness and unity with God which men at least might potentially achieve. Further, as Hemans has suggested by previously

making reference to the trope of the oak and ivy, women's cleaving to earthly, transient objects is detrimental for men as well who, in their attachment to the women around them, find themselves unable to let go of worldly life and to resign themselves to death. Haunted by the "household voices" of his childhood and young adulthood, which signal memories of happy domesticity, the Spaniard becomes a kind of mourner, left pining for some sort of voice to tell him that his wife and his friends still somehow live on and continue to think of him in the afterlife. In connecting the allusion to Plato's cave with the gendered trope of the oak and the ivy, Hemans seems to suggest, through the voice of her narrator, that women are in fact the ones to blame for men's failure to transcend their earthly selves and to unite – at least in mind, if not yet in body – with God.

However, in an interesting twist, Hemans, refusing to blindly reproduce a trope that she recognizes has often been used to implicitly criticize women, does much to reinterpret the image for the benefit of her sex by creating female characters whose bravery in times of great suffering make them truly deserving of the title of heroine. Far from being the passive damsel-in-distress types that the image of clinging vines seems to suggest, Hemans instead celebrates the "strength which clings/ Round woman in such hours!" as her three female characters are made religious martyrs in the poem. Although Inez does at times resemble the clinging ivy looking to the masculine oak in order to support her – she dies with her "clasping arms, so passionately twin'd" around the neck of her protective lover (l. 508-9), arriving to attempt to rescue her on a "tall white steed" no less – Hemans does not exclude her from her representation of women's strength in the face of adversity, explicitly demonstrating her unwavering devotion to her cause, with her "clasp'd hands, and dark eyes fill'd with prayer" (l. 466) despite her obvious terror in

light of her circumstances.

Both Inez's sister Theresa and the Spaniard's wife Leonor are similarly able to comport themselves heroically in the face of their own mortality. Theresa is pictured as more or less the quintessential religious martyr whose "suppressed" inner strength allows her to put up a brave front for the sake of her brother, who joins with her in singing a "hymn of martyrdom" as they are both burned at the stake by the Spanish Inquisition (I. 632). Several critics have written on the unconventionally feminine representation of what Sharifah Aishah Osman has deemed Hemans' "Byronic" heroines: namely, the long, unbound hair and expressions of fiery determination and defiance (Osman 7). But although Theresa's gaze is similarly characterized by a "kindled eye" (I. 319), she is still clearly within the boundaries of conventional femininity according to Hemans, who likens her to a "rose brav[ing] the storm" (I. 315). The emblem which Hemans uses to describe Theresa is important in that it emphasizes her strength and perseverance, but without negating or diminishing her character's femininity; she remains a feminine heroine as opposed to a masculinized heroine. Leonor similarly meets adversity with strength; while she does not agree with her husband's new religious standpoint and in fact despairs that he is now "one from hope for ever cast" (II. 333), she continues to support him out of love, prompting her husband to remark that, as with the sisters of his dear friend Alvar, Leonor would have followed him had his pathway led "Even to the scaffold" (II. 353-4).

The courage which the women in *The Forest Sanctuary* demonstrate and exemplify in both their actions and their song becomes an acute source of strength from which the men in their lives continuously draw in order to fortify themselves. Once

deprived of his wife and of his friends' company, the Spaniard comes to resemble Alvar, Inez, and Theresa's lonely and aged father who pines for the memory of his deceased children in silence (I. 284-5). Inez's bereaved lover is similarly affected. Having borne her "soft voice in [his] soul" across the ocean in his travels (I. 540), Inez's lover is completely devastated after her death; his heart is compared to a lute with "breaking strings" (I. 582) – the same instrument which has "[hung] hush'd upon the wall" of Inez's childhood home since her death (I. 281). The power of song and of music in general is what essentially sustains all of the characters in the poem. While Leonor attempts to sustain both herself and her family by singing religious hymns that "brin[g] thoughts of Spain" (II. 383-4), she ultimately declines and eventually dies once she has been removed from the "singing voices" of her Spanish homeland (II. 454). The Spaniard also begs for "Glad music round me" in the forest, so that his thoughts will not stray back to his time in prison in the stale "dungeon's air" (II. 9). Although the haunting voices of his beloved friends and family and the pleasant memories which they evoke may be preventing him from achieving the degree of religious piety and deference to God's will that he longs to possess, these voices are also what sustain the speaker through the many trials which he undergoes throughout the course of the poem.

Like *The Forest Sanctuary*, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poem – a kind of sequel to Milton's *Paradise Lost* about Adam and Eve's exile from Paradise – is concerned with the subject of exile, as initially signaled by Barrett Browning's chosen title for the work. And also like Hemans' poem, *A Drama in Exile* could possibly be classified within the genre of drama – what Dorothy Mermin deems a "sort of cross between Greek and Renaissance drama" (88). However, there are also obvious reasons, as is the case with

Hemans' *Forest Sanctuary*, that *Drama in Exile* should be considered as epic, or at least examined for its traditional epic-like qualities, including both Barrett Browning's chosen subject as well as her chosen meter, blank verse, used by authors of epic poetry such as William Wordsworth in his autobiographical *Prelude* and, of course, Milton's *Paradise Lost*. As Helen Cooper remarks in regards to the preface to *Drama in Exile*, Barrett Browning at first denies but ultimately accepts having modeled her poetry after Milton. Outlining her initial intention to "shut close the gates of Eden between Milton and myself, so that none might say I dared to walk in his footsteps" (qtd in Cooper 58), Barrett Browning remarks later on in her preface to the poem that, Milton's subject and "his glory covering it" ultimately "swept through the gates" and Barrett Browning here acknowledges the traditional roots of her epic poem, claiming that, "After all, and at the worst, I have only attempted, in respect to Milton, what the Greek dramatists have achieved lawfully in respect to Homer" (Cooper 59). However, although Barrett Browning's poem is in many ways clearly indebted to both the epic tradition and to Milton, one of its most celebrated authors, *Drama in Exile* also diverges wildly from its predecessor *Paradise Lost*, particularly in its treatment of its central female character, Eve. As several other critics have previously noted, Barrett Browning often takes pains to represent Eve's perspective and to foreground her voice amongst the many male characters throughout the course of the poem, making for a uniquely female viewpoint on the Biblical story of Adam and Eve.

As Barrett Browning herself recognized and expressed in her own preface to *Drama in Exile*, the figure of Eve was one greatly in need of recuperation and rehabilitation in the nineteenth century. Margaret Morlier writes that Eve's voice had become commonly

read as the voice of deception within the Christian tradition, due largely to misinterpretation of Milton's *Paradise Lost*. And, because Milton's epic poem was highly influential during Barrett Browning's time – Morlier includes a note that Milton was quoted almost as much as the Bible in nineteenth century pulpit oratory – it is entirely reasonable to assume that Barrett Browning intended her crafting of Eve to be a kind of response to the misogyny spawned by Milton's poem (127). Indeed, Barrett Browning writes in the preface to *Drama in Exile* that her express intention in writing the poem was to give

peculiar reference to Eve's allotted grief, which, considering that self-sacrifice belonged to her womanhood, and the consciousness of originating the Fall to her offence, - appeared to me imperfectly apprehended hitherto, and more expressible by a woman than a man. (qtd in Cooper 58)

As Morlier writes, Barrett Browning's goal in regards to her portrayal of Eve was to transform her voice from being deceptive (or rather from being perceived as such) to being authoritative. Throughout the course of the poem, Eve gradually claims just such a voice for herself; although she may initially “vacillat[e] between boldness and temerity,” she is also the first to tread “from this swordglare/ Into the outer darkness of the waste” (l. 75), as well as the first to confess her transgression and to accept punishment (Lewis 7).

While she at first seems to defer to Adam out of shame, begging her spouse to punish her for her sinning and calling herself his “undoer” and even his “death” (l. 424, 423), Eve overcomes her legacy of shame – what her figure had come to signify to the

nineteenth century Christian church – by owning up to her actions. Lucifer, in conversation with Gabriel in the opening scene of the poem, portrays both Adam and Eve as completely consumed by their feelings of shame, so much so that “They dare not look in one another’s face, –/ As if each were a cherub” (l. 193-4). However, as soon as Eve gets her chance to speak in the following scene of the poem, she tells Adam, “Have I not strength to look up to thy face?” when he asks her if she has strength enough left to look back towards the gates of Eden (l. 394). Contrary to Lucifer’s representation, Eve, although evidently overcome with shame and guilt here, is still able to claim responsibility for her past actions.

Because she immediately owns up to her sins in the poem, Eve’s personal growth throughout the course of the poem becomes her effort to speak – not in the form of curses as both Lucifer and her husband would have her do, but instead by communicating love and understanding. At one point, Lucifer wagers an apple from the Tree of Life that Eve “[can] curse too – as a woman may – / Smooth in the vowels” (l. 664-5). However, Eve merely replies that, “Let thy words be wounds, –/ For,so, I shall not fear thy power to hurt” (l. 666-7). While her husband would willingly fight fire with fire, proposing to curse Lucifer with his and his wife’s bitter tears, it is Eve who wisely refuses to retaliate against Lucifer on his own terms. When he asks her if he is not beautiful, she responds by telling him that true beauty only derives from love and, as such, Lucifer only possesses “no more” than a certain “glorious darkness” (l. 754, 752). Later on in the third scene of the poem, when the spirits of the earth and the earth’s creatures are bemoaning their mortal fate as the result of Adam and Eve’s sin, Adam is initially combative, declaring that “[t]here must be strife between us, large as sin” (l. 1175-6).

However, Eve takes an entirely different, and ultimately more effective, approach to this confrontation. She first reprimands Adam, exclaiming,

No strife, mine Adam!
Let us not stand high
Upon the wrong we did to reach disdain,
Who rather should be humbler evermore
Since self-made sadder. (l. 1176-80)

In contrast to Adam's desire for outright conflict, Eve again refuses to resort to violence, instead reminding Adam of his own weakness in an attempt to make him more sympathetic towards the plight of the earth spirits. Then, asserting her own particular form of wisdom over Adam, Eve tells him that she has been "schooled by sin to more humility" than her partner, and thus is better equipped to make amends with the spirits. After quietly assuming this authority by asking Adam, "Shall I speak humbly now that once was proud?" Eve is ready to plead their case before the spirits in an attempt to win their "pardoning grace" (l. 1188) which, though not entirely successful, serves to demonstrate Eve's strength and Adam's weakness: humility. Eve takes action by speaking up; the female voice here is explicitly used to challenge male combative forms of epic action.

As such, Eve provides a welcome contrast in the play to its two central male characters who are both overtly concerned with achieving power and greatness – Lucifer, whom Barrett Browning herself describes as an "extreme Adam" in her preface, as well as Adam who sees himself as king of the earth and looks up to Lucifer, considering him to be fallen monarchy (Lewis 6-7). By contrast, as Lewis writes, Barrett Browning

makes Eve into a symbol of hope (6); while on one hand she is, as she deems herself, “first in sin,” she is also – and more importantly – “sole bearer of the seed/ Whereby sin dieth” as her husband points out (l. 1837-9). In the end, Barrett Browning’s poem does much to counteract Eve’s traditional representation as the downfall of humankind by insisting that both Adam and Eve are “flawed” and share in the guilt of the sin of eating the apple. Ultimately, the solution which Barrett Browning represents in response to this guilt is for both sinners to “live and love ... live and work” (l. 1995-7) – a welcome contrast, as Lewis writes, to Romney Leigh’s belief, in *Aurora Leigh*, that it is women (and women only) who are suited to dedicating their lives to charity work. In effect, Eve comes to represent a new role model for the nineteenth century woman; unlike the innocent and inexperienced Angel in the House ideal, Eve gains strength from the fact that she has been “schooled by sin” and has consequently grown wise from her experiences (Lewis 11).

In their dramatic monologues “Properzia Rossi” and “Bertha in the Lane” as well as their epic poems *The Forest Sanctuary* and *A Drama in Exile*, both Felicia Hemans and Elizabeth Barrett Browning respond to common misconceptions of women, such as women’s relationship to fame and female heroism (Hemans), and attempt to debunk common female stereotypes such as the figure of the Angel in the House and the much-maligned Biblical figure of Eve (Barrett Browning). By foregrounding the female voice in their work, Hemans and Barrett Browning are not only able to reproduce women in a way that is more true-to-life, but they also introduce a new and potentially revolutionary focus to established epic poetry – one that is certainly worthy of increased critical attention in the future.

Notes for Chapter Two

¹ A variation of this trope of the feminine ivy and the masculine oak is also used in Mary Robinson's poem of the period "Ode to Beauty" (1791), in which it appears as a diminutive feminine "infant Forest flower" which is overpowered and overwhelmed by an implicitly masculine "aged oak's wide spreading shade" (l. 51, 55). Several instances of this trope, this time in relation to epic, also occur in Milton's *Paradise Lost* (5. 215-7; 9. 216-7). For example, Eve's hair is repeatedly associated with the ivy: "As the vine curls her tendrils, which implied/ Subjection, but required with gentle sway,/ And by her yielded, by him best received" (l. 307-9). As Sarah Annes Brown writes, the vine in *PL* comes to symbolize "woman's dependence upon the male in Milton" (731).

“[B]ehold the paps we all have sucked!”: The “Unscrupulously Epic” Heroine in *The Siege of Valencia* and *Aurora Leigh*

In Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s novel-epic poem *Aurora Leigh*, the poem’s titular character argues that:

All actual heroes are essential men,
And all men possible heroes; every age,
Heroic in proportions, double-faced,
Looks backward and before, expects a morn
And claims an epos. (5. 151-55)

While Barrett Browning uses a masculine noun here, her grand poetic achievement *Aurora Leigh* demonstrates that all men – and all women – past and present, have the capacity to become epic heroes. In place of the male warriors and wanderers who traditionally figure in epic poetry, both Felicia Hemans and Elizabeth Barrett Browning offer portraits of the female heroine as, alternatively, militant and sometimes even murderous mothers, soldiers in combat, and revolutionary artists battling against the patriarchal standards inhibiting their work. By at once striving to assert that the women who figure in their poetry are in fact worthy followers in a long line of epic heroes and not compromising their heroines’ femininity, both Hemans and Barrett Browning make gestures towards questioning and even reinventing the traditional definition of the term “heroic.”

In Adeline Johns-Putra’s book-length study of epic writing by female Romantic poets, the author questions the traditional qualifications expected of the epic hero:

What, then, is an epic hero? The hero is a paragon, an ideal. He is also a

quester and often a warrior, striving to defeat evil and to impose order on to chaos. He is, in addition, a representative of his people, their saviour, their leader, and sometimes their god. Finally, and significantly for the purposes of this chapter, a hero is almost always male, a criterion which feminist critics see as a result of all the other characteristics of the hero.

(132)

Johns-Putra goes on to credit at least in part the epic's traditional focus on masculine prowess in war and politics as deterring would-be women writers from exploring the genre further; however, as Bernard Schweizer alternatively argues, female writers of epic frequently remediate this problem by "validating a set of heterogeneous values such as fortitude, courage, independence, nurture, sensibility, and communal responsibility" (13). While the poetry most often deemed as epic – from Beowulf to Wordsworth's autobiographical *Prelude* – recurrently centres itself around the physical and spiritual journey of a singular male protagonist, complete with various quests and obstacles, Schweizer argues that women writers of epic "engag[e] in a complex negotiation between validating traditional concepts of femininity – such as cooperation, nurture, intuition, and love – while attacking the evils of male dominance, female submissiveness, and prescribed domesticity which often flow from misconstructions of these very same qualities" (13). Similarly, in my consideration of Hemans and Barrett Browning, I will examine both traditional aspects of femininity in their writing as well as the many ways in which both poets gesture towards the unconventional in their representations of women – for example, the figure of the murderous mother. In balancing these two concerns – validating the traditional while emphasizing an entirely new and uniquely feminine

perspective – Hemans and Barrett Browning are able to introduce new and sometimes surprising conceptions of the epic heroine into their poetry.

In her essay “‘Some Epic Use for My Excellent Body’: Redefining Childbirth as Heroic in *Beloved* and ‘The Language of the Brag,’” Ellen Argyros writes that Toni Morrison’s and Sharon Olds’ representation of mothers giving birth in their respective works “challenge[s] us to examine our criteria regarding what constitutes a heroic act and reflect upon how and why birthing women have traditionally been excluded from the category of heroes” (141). Argyros argues that pregnancy in these works constitutes a heroic act because it involves the potential risk of the mother’s own life in order to bring forth a new member of the community; in this context, mothering is figured not simply as a personal act but as a social one as well (142). Felicia Hemans and Elizabeth Barrett Browning similarly heroicize mothering as being of social benefit to the community as a whole; however, the militant, murderous mothers who are recurrently featured and validated by both Hemans and Barrett Browning in their work make for both interesting and controversial choices in terms of female heroism. As Julie Kipp further explores in “Naturally Bad or Dangerously Good: Romantic-Era Narratives of Murderous Motherhood,” mothers who did harm to their own children were represented, from the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth century, in two very different and opposing lights. Kipp writes that, “the infanticidal mother’s behaviour is characterized as either savage and untenable within a modern, civilized society; or as nearly heroic, a response to the injustices of modern civilization” (237). In poems such as Hemans’ “Indian Woman’s Death Song” and Barrett Browning’s “The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point” as well as *Aurora Leigh*, both women poets attempt to portray their flawed female

protagonists with a sympathetic light and, in doing so, revolutionize this potential category of female heroism.

In regards to Hemans' poetry specifically, Kipp argues that it is the emotional connection between mother and child, not their physical bond, which so often proves deadly (250) – certainly the case in her poem “Indian Woman’s Death Song.” This is certainly one of Hemans’ poems which, as Sharifah Aishah Osman writes, “call[s] into question the nobility of military acts of valour and sacrifice, and endorse[s] instead the fierce nationalistic spirit that underlies a feminine martyrdom based on the domestic affections” (4). As I have already addressed in my initial chapter on Hemans’ and Barrett Browning’s political poetry, motherhood during the nineteenth century became, for women, an “influential metaphor through which to address men” as well as a relatively safe way to imagine a public role for themselves that was “reassuring rather than transgressive” (Osman 6). By contrast, the desperate suicide and infanticide which Hemans’ protagonist in “Indian Woman’s Death Song” undertakes is simultaneously reassuring, yet disturbingly transgressive; it represents both as a transgression of the protagonist’s role as nurturing mother for both the purpose of revenge, as well as an act made out of desperation (and thus deserving of the reader’s sympathy).

The Indian (or rather Native American) woman who figures in the poem, overcome with grief after her husband’s desertion of her for another woman, decides to row herself and her baby daughter in a canoe towards a cataract to their deaths. The woman, as she is represented by Hemans, clearly exhibits the generic characteristics of one of Hemans’ so-called “Byronic” heroines: the woman undertakes her journey both “[p]roudly and dauntlessly” (Hemans 1996 l. 7) and is further endowed with typically

“Byronic” features such as her “dark hair wav[ing]/ As if triumphantly” (l. 11) and her “warrior’s eye” (l. 20). However, Hemans seems to refrain from complete empathy with her subject; the woman’s death song expresses not simply her emotional bond with her infant but also her anger and desire for revenge upon her husband. In reference to “The Wife of Asdrubal,” another poem in which Hemans addresses infanticide, Osman writes that Hemans uses the liminal figure of the Orientalized heroine

as a means to contemplate two ‘fantasies’ that would have been deemed inappropriate for her female readers to even consider: revenge against a treacherous husband, and the murder of one’s innocent children to gratify one’s desires. (8-9)

While the abandoned wife and single mother seems to be primarily motivated by her love for her infant daughter and her desire to save her from “woman’s weary lot” (l. 37), one cannot ignore the speaker’s evident desire for revenge upon the husband who has “[flung] away the broken reed” (l. 23), who will not miss “[t]he heart of love that made his home an ever sunny place” (l. 30). This sentiment of revenge and could also quite possibly be mingled with feelings of resentment that her husband’s desertion of her and their infant daughter has seemingly left herself and her child displaced in their society. As the protagonist bitterly exclaims, her husband will not miss his wife’s role as his helpmeet and emotional support in life, leading to the “woman’s weary lot” – heartbreak – from which the protagonist hopes to spare her young daughter (l. 37). In this sense, the heinous action committed by Hemans’ protagonist is at least partially motivated out of genuine concern for her daughter.

Thus Hemans implicitly communicates a mingled sense of both empathy and

rebuke towards the murderous mother who figures in “Indian Woman’s Death Song.” However, while Hemans’ speaker initially appears to be entirely unconventional, the poet later threatens to disrupt the strength and originality of her chosen narrator. Although she is described as “[w]afting a wild proud strain, her Song of Death” (l. 15), the female protagonist of Hemans’ poem is also recurrently described in (stereo)typically and unflattering feminine terms. The protagonist characterizes herself as weak, describing herself as a “broken reed” (l. 23) seeking death from the “Father of ancient waters” which Hemans footnotes as the Native American name for the Mississippi (l. 17). As Osman writes, the Indian woman’s death becomes not a “destructive act of defeat” but rather a “renunciation of one cruel patriarch (a heartless husband) for the welcoming embrace of another: the Mississippi river” (11). While Hemans works for the most part towards featuring a strong yet unconventional mother figure in her poem, she almost negates this description by finally gesturing towards the Indian woman’s inherently feminine weakness.

Like Felicia Hemans, Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s murderous mother in “The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point” also elicits both sympathy and censure at different turns. As with the Indian Woman featured in Hemans’ poem, the slave woman who is the narrator of Barrett Browning’s poem is also guilty of the crime of infanticide; however, unlike Hemans, Barrett Browning examines more closely the implications of race relations in her poem. Although she murders her own infant during the course of the poem, the question of the slave woman’s guilt is clearly complicated by the fact that her baby is a product of another crime – her rape at the hands of her white slave owner. Thus, the baby’s death is at least partially motivated by his mother’s clear desire for

revenge. The infant, who turns out to be “as white as the ladies who scorned to pray/
Beside me at church but yesterday” (XVII. 5-6), prompts his mother’s vengeful act
simply by looking at her:

Why, in that single glance I had
Of my child’s face ... I tell you all,
I saw a look that made me mad!
The *master’s* look, that used to fall
On my soul like his lash ... or worse!
And so, to save it from my curse,
I twisted it round in my shawl. (XXI. 1-7, Barrett Browning’s emphasis)

This passage effectively communicates the slave mother’s mingled sense of grief and
revenge as she strangles her child; while she does it in effect to “save it from my curse”
(l. 10), the mother is also clearly provoked by the look on her infant son’s face,
mimicking an expression of his father the slave owner, concluding that, “A child and
mother/ Do wrong to look at one another/ When one is black and one is fair” (XX. 5-7).
As several critics have previously pointed out, it is only after his death that the child can
effectively be reconciled with his mother:

Yet when it was all done aright, –
Earth, ‘twixt me and my baby, strewed, –
All, changed to black earth, – nothing white, –
A dark child in the dark! – ensued
Some comfort, and my heart grew young;
I sate down smiling there and sung

The song I learnt in my maidenhood. (XXVII. 1-7)

Once the baby has been buried by his mother in the sand – changing him figuratively in her eyes from black to white – then and only then can the slave woman sing the “only song I knew” (XIX. 7) to her child, which she had dared not sing to him when he appeared to her as “white-faced” (XIX. 6).

Despite the terrible crime that the slave woman commits, however, Barrett Browning is not without sympathy for her speaker. Although the slave woman, as she carries her child to its burial ground, imagines that, “Through the forest-tops the angels far,/ With a white sharp finger from every star,/ Did point and mock at what was done” (XXVI. 5-7), Barrett Browning herself withholds judgment or outright condemnation in regards to her speaker’s actions within the poem, and allows her some of the reader’s sympathy by highlighting the terrible circumstances leading up to her crime: the woman’s love for another slave, who is later killed at the hands of her master; her rape by that same man and her resulting, unwanted pregnancy. Barrett Browning also takes pains to represent the slave mother as being not without a certain degree of maternal affection. At one point in the poem, the mother seems, as Elizabeth H. Battles remarks, to be rocking her infant (96):

And, in my unrest, could not rest:

Thus we went moaning, child and mother,

One to another, one to another,

Until all ended for the best. (XVI. 4-7)

Even after the infant’s death, his mother is clearly pictured as being full of regret; she envies her white master’s wife who, “May keep live babies on her knee,/ And sing the

song she likes the best” (XXXI. 6-7). While refusing to evade the heinous nature of the slave mother’s action – indeed there are five “agonizing stanzas dedicated to the description of the baby’s suffocation (Battles 95) – Barrett Browning also refuses to demonize her speaker, even going so far as to empathize with the plight of this slave mother, making for a realistic, if fictional, depiction of the horrors of the slave trade and of a mother whose precarious social position leads her to commit a desperate act.

Barrett Browning’s long epic poem *Aurora Leigh* also represents the figure of the murderous mother as embodied by Marian’s mother. Because *Aurora Leigh*’s eponymous main character is left motherless at the age of four after the death of her mother, the poem is everywhere concerned with the question of proper mothering, as well as with Aurora’s quest for a mother surrogate. The first mother figure to be fully developed in the course of the poem is that of Marian’s mother, who is guilty of figuratively attempting to murder her daughter by trying to sell her into sexual slavery with the village squire. In Barrett Browning’s representation, the man is described as having “beast’s eyes/ That seemed as they would swallow her alive/ Complete in body and spirit, hair and all” (3. 1050-2). By plotting the loss of her virtue here, the squire – and, by extension, Marian’s mother – are at least metaphorically guilty of attempted murder; as Marjorie Stone points out, the same language of animal drivers and tramping/ trampling used here recurs again in the account of Marian’s rape in Book 7 of the poem. The squire’s inhumanness and animal-like qualities – as emphasized by his “beast’s eyes” and snorting breath – also link him in Barrett Browning’s terms to Marian’s mother. As Marian herself recounts, her alcoholic father, plagued by unsteady employment, retaliated against his wife by beating her and “curs[ing her] because, the pence being out./ She

could not buy more drink” (3. 867-8). In return, Marian’s mother – described by Aurora who is recounting the story in brackets, as “the worm” – “beat her baby in revenge/ For her own broken heart” (3. 869-70). It comes as no surprise, then, that after her mother attempts to prostitute her, Marian begs to be cut off from mothers altogether, crying out, “God, free me from my mother ... These mothers are too dreadful” (3. 1063-4).

However, although Barrett Browning appears to demonize Marian’s mother here, the poet also represents the desperation which has driven this mother to beat her own child: the domestic abuse she suffers at the hands of her husband, as well as the general stresses and strains of a life spent “tramping” from one place to another in abject poverty. Barrett Browning even foreshadows what will be her mother’s guilty conscience in the future; the look that Marian gives her mother as she attempts to sell her to the squire is so “piteous” that Aurora remarks, in parentheses, “(Be sure that mother’s death-bed will not want/ Another devil to damn, than such a look)” (3. 1060-1). As Barrett Browning appropriately writes, Marian’s relationship with her parents is similar to that of a child who is forced to work in factories where her parents “... might have had their pennyworth out of her” (3. 1028). Although this assertion, from Aurora’s perspective, condemns Marian’s parents for their actions, it is also clear from Barrett Browning’s description here and elsewhere that the social circumstances of her parents are partially to blame for their treatment of Marian. Like Hemans, Barrett Browning is able to demonstrate some sympathy towards a character who, in another author’s hands, might simply have been vilified.

Different yet equally unconventional as the image of the murderous mother recurrent in both Hemans and Barrett Browning’s shorter poems is that of the heroic

mother, in Hemans' longer, more epic *The Siege of Valencia*, a drama which Henry Chorley, her first biographer, deemed her "masterpiece" (Saglia 137). As Diego Saglia writes, "The Siege of Valencia" is one of several of Hemans' poems that fail to conform to the poet's consistent critical reputation for upholding unquestioningly the so-called domestic affections; as Saglia further remarks, Hemans leaves the conclusion of the poem "ambiguous and does not deny the possibility of a double identity for women" (145). This notion of women's double identity is played out dramatically in Hemans' *Siege of Valencia* through its two primary female characters – Elmina, the wife of Gonzalez, the governor of Valencia whose sons have been kidnapped and held for ransom by the Moors besieging their city, and her daughter Ximena – who represent respectively a confrontation between the domestic beautiful (mother) and the military sublime (daughter), pitting private affections against public duty (Saglia 137-8).

In the figure of Ximena, the governor's daughter, Hemans represents a vision of Burke's notion of the beautiful veering instead towards the masculine sublime by engaging in warfare and thus subscribing to the law of the father. Ximena initially appears very much as a representative of Burkean beauty; she opens the poem by singing about a familiar theme – a woman mourning the loss of happy domesticity after her knight and lover's death. However, when her mother Elmina enters and attempts to cheer her daughter with a vision of a "beautiful and pacifying landscape," Ximena counteracts this image with one of nature besieged by a violent storm, turning her mother's picturesque image of nature into a vision of the sublime (138). Even Ximena's physical appearance begins to morph from the beautiful to the sublime; as her mother notes, her once rosy cheeks have become withered as if infected with a "pestilence" (139). The

opposition between mother and daughter is finally solidified when Elmina begs Ximena to pray with her for Gonzalez to change his mind and free his sons at the cost of the surrender of Valencia. Ximena refuses to bend to Elmina's privileging of the domestic over the heroic and exits, prompting Gonzalez to praise her as his "heroic child!" (Hemans 2002 I. 403). As her father remarks, Ximena's masculinization is complete in this scene; Gonzalez's daughter comes to "put on/ Courage, and faith, and generous constancy,/ Ev'n as a breastplate" (I. 381-3). Although Ximena is still effectively confined to traditional women's roles as helpmates in war – "[b]inding the warrior's wounds, and bearing fresh/ Cool draughts to fever'd lips" (I. 385-6) – the soldiers still regard Gonzalez's daughter, a "Majestic vision" of "gentle fortitude" (I. 389, 388), with considerable respect and awe, almost as their superior.

Ximena's representation as a masculine woman who commands wholeheartedly the respect of the men around her continues in scene 6 of the drama in which Ximena persuades a group of reluctant citizens to fight the invading Moors. In the first scene of the poem, Elmina tells her husband that he will be left alone and lonely "when loneliness doth seem/ Most heavy to sustain" (I. 467-8), while she and her "lovely ones" shall "sleep,/ Wrapt in earth's covering mantle!" (I. 471-3). Later in scene 6 of the poem, Ximena responds to her mother's trope by telling the group of citizens that,

It is too much
Of luxury for our wild and angry times,
To fold the mantle round us, and to sink
From life, as flowers that shut up silently,
When the sun's heat doth scorch them! (VI. 62-6)

As Saglia writes, this scene is “conducted along inverted gender lines”: Ximena is “the masculine and heroic voice who tries to infuse military pride into the resigned and passive, that is feminized, male citizens” (140). In this scene Ximena effectively proves herself to be more masculine than her fellow male citizens – as she herself expresses it, her courage has become “as a flame/ Wasting the womanish heart” and converting her to a masculine sublime (VI. 98-9). Thus it is Ximena who is able to inspire the citizens to take up arms and embrace the sublime by reminding them of their legendary hero the Cid and his famed interventions in the long battle between the Christian Spaniards and the Moors who are constantly attempting to invade their territory. The song that the female leader sings to her troops at the conclusion of the scene ultimately just reinforces her complete conversion over to the sensibility of the masculine sublime: the lyrics speak of chiefs leaving their halls and feasts, peasants quitting their olive-grounds and livestock, and bridegrooms deserting their weddings in order to join in arms against the Moors. As this song fittingly depicts, the value system which Ximena adopts throughout the course of the poem represents the subversion of the private, domestic values in the face of larger, public concerns, such as military defense. Although Hemans arguably subverts Ximena’s unconventional tendencies by bestowing upon her the fate of a typical heroine of sentimental poetry, dying of grief over the death of a loved one, she cannot effectively undo the revolutionary promise previously embodied in her character; indeed Ximena herself upholds the code of masculine military honour by which she lived and died by telling her mother, in her last words, that she must not mourn her passing, but should rather feel “Joy, for the soldier when his field is fought” (VII. 127). As Saglia remarks, through Ximena, the poem is responsible for “open[ing] up disturbing vistas of female

rule and female intrusion into the arena of politics and war” (Saglia 137).

Despite Ximena’s fascinating militancy however, “The Siege of Valencia” in effect belongs to the matriarch Elmina, as Saglia remarks (141). While she may seem at first to embody the characteristics of the typical domestic woman and sentimental heroine, Elmina is revealed later in the poem as an entirely ambiguous character. At the beginning of the “Siege of Valencia,” Elmina is depicted as a woman overcome with anger and desperation at the impending loss of her two sons. Declaring that, “My heart is bursting, and I *must* be heard!” (I. 281), Elmina proceeds to tell off her husband Gonzalez, accusing him of being “cold and hard of heart” (I. 272) for keeping with his strong religious faith and leaving the fate of his two sons in God’s hands. Elmina, however, will have none of this; claiming that she has ever been a faithful wife to Gonzalez, standing in solidarity with him “through the beating storms of life” (I. 341), Elmina invokes the language of Burkean beauty in pleading with her husband to spare her the “bitter cup” of an “unpeopled home” in which she will sit forever like “a broken stem,/ O’er its fall-n roses dying!” (I. 350-3). In a very interesting passage, Elmina even goes so far as to dismiss men’s love for their children as mere pride; she tells her husband further that the opposite sex cannot fathom the depth of a woman’s love for her child, having not been the one to keep watch at their bedside, greet them upon their wakening, sing them to sleep, and soothe their crying (I. 424-59). However, Elmina’s appearance towards the end of the poem complicates this initial representation of her as simply a proponent of the domestic affections. Like her daughter Ximena, Elmina masculinizes herself, at least outwardly, by dressing herself like a soldier in order to infiltrate the camp of Abdullah, leader of the Muslim army, begging him on her knees to spare her sons and

asking piteously, “Have you no children?” (III. 141). Yet she still tells him defiantly,

Chief! My heart is nerved
To make its way through things which warrior-men,
– Aye, they that master death by field or flood,
Would look on, ere they braved! – I have no thought,
No sense of fear! (IV. 94-8)

Here Elmina attributes a super-human, even sublime strength of mind in the face of danger – an ability which she derives specifically from her capacity as a mother; she in fact embraces a courage stronger than that which dwells “in breasts that set their mail against the ringing spears” (IV. 91-2). Elmina’s final speech in the poem also endorses the value system of the masculine sublime in the form of reprising military honour and glory in battle. Far from normalizing domestic femininity, the matriarch and sole surviving family member’s final words actually function as “a hymn to military valour, individual heroism and the fame of her dead husband” (Saglia 141), concluding with:

Ay, ‘tis thus
Thou should’st be honour’d – And I follow thee
With an unfaltering and a lofty step,
To that last home of glory. (IX. 219-22)

Contrary to popular critical opinion, Felicia Hemans, instead of merely trotting out the same stereotypical representations of women in her poetry, actually represents an entirely unconventional, yet inarguably heroic figure in the characters of Ximena and Elmina; both women, particularly Elmina, use their femininity to their advantage in order to claim for themselves an entirely new and superior brand of heroism.

A completely different, yet no less important version of female epic heroism is that of the pioneering female writer, Aurora Leigh. Aurora more or less begins the poem in the vein of a typical male epic hero: orphaned by the age of twelve, Aurora is forced to journey to a new adoptive country (England) and to experience the world as a lone heroine who “fe[els] a mother-want about the world” (I. 40). From a young age, Aurora is geared towards her final occupation as a poet by a steady stream of masculine literary influences initiated by her father; as she herself recounts, her father “wrapt his little daughter in his large/ Man’s doublet, careless did it fit or not,” much in the same way as Achilles’ mother hid her young son among women when she feared that he later would be killed in the Battle of Troy (I. 722-8). In a variation of the epic trials or obstacles that epic heroes are typically required to face, Aurora tropes her childhood reading as one long, continuous quest filled with many potential impediments. In contrast to the conventionally feminine lifestyle which her aunt represents and encourages her niece to follow – what Aurora deems as “[a] sort of cage-bird life, born in a cage,/ Accounting that to leap from perch to perch/ Was act and joy enough for any bird” (I. 305-7) – Aurora retreats into a childhood spent reading the great works of literature to which her father introduces her. The budding poet represents her search for books as a kind of epic task in itself:

... creeping in and out
Among the giant fossils of my past,
Like some small nimble mouse between the ribs
Of a mastadon, I nibbled here and there
At this or that box, pulling through the gap,

In heats of terror, haste, victorious joy,

The first book first. (I. 835-41)

In Aurora's description here, even the choosing of a book is elevated to the level of an epic trial – in “heats of terror,” Aurora is troped as a “small nimble mouse” who must face a terrifying mastodon skeleton in order to secure her sustenance – a book.

As Aurora makes clear, however, this threat that follows her favourite pastime is not simply a skeleton lurking in the back of her imagination. Rather, Aurora finds reading to be potentially dangerous for much the same reason as did Plato; with no moral guidance or advice on what to read and what not to read, children are left susceptible to material which might potentially have a harmful influence on them.

Aurora expresses this fear in the form of an apt question:

Would you leave

[A] child to wander in a battle-field

And push his innocent smile against the guns;

Or even in the catacombs, – his torch

Grown ragged in the fluttering air, and all

The dark a-mutter round him? not a child. (I. 773-8)

Nevertheless, being orphaned at a young age and with no one to guide or even to encourage her reading, Aurora is forced to set “[Her] child-heart ‘gainst the thorny underwood,/ To reach the grassy shelter of the trees,” a “babe I’ the wood, without a brother-babe!” (I. 733-6). In another instance of metaphor, Aurora further describes her journey through reading the classics as a difficult journey by sea which she undertakes “with some struggle, indeed,/ Among the breakers, some hard swimming through/ The

deeps” (I. 794-6). Although she is “dashed/ From error on to error,” every turn is credited with bringing her “nearer to the central truth” surrounding religion and God (I. 798-800). By troping her girlhood self-education through reading as a kind of epic trial, Aurora, by extension, represents herself as a heroine worthy of the epic status that Barrett Browning’s poem confers upon her.

As she grows older, Aurora’s vision of art and of herself as an artist similarly takes on a very traditional, masculine representation. Linda M. Lewis remarks that Aurora experiences an “androgynous stage” in her quest to be a poet, in which she describes herself using various masculine metaphors and phallic symbols, including that of a hunted stag, a lion, and the afore-mentioned comparison to Achilles. In one particularly interesting instance, Aurora compares herself to Ganymede, the male paramour of Zeus:

poetry, my life,
My eagle, with both grappling feet still hot
From Zeus’ thunder, who hast ravished me
Away from all the shepherds, sheep, and dogs,
And set me in the Olympian roar and round
Of luminous faces for a cup-bearer ... (I. 918-23)

Aurora here imagines her poetic inspiration as originating directly from her imagined rape, as Ganymede, by Zeus. Given that we are subjected as readers to a harrowing description of the actual rape which Marian suffers later on in the poem, Aurora’s choosing to describe her artistic inspiration through the metaphor of sexual violation seems in bad taste, to say the least; Joyce Zonana also seems to be made particularly

uneasy by Aurora's (and, by extension, Barrett Browning's) association of "poetic inspiration with sexual possession or, indeed, rape by a male muse" (253).

However, Aurora's relationship with the muse comes to differ widely from the typical sexual connection between muse and (masculine) poet. While Aurora does identify with her artist-friend Vincent Carrington's portrait of Danae after she has been raped by Jove in a shower of golden particles, she values it not for its depiction of rape, but rather for its illustration of unity with a greater entity and its resulting artistic inspiration. The image of Danae "flat upon her prison-floor" is significant to Aurora in the fact that it demonstrates a woman who has achieved ultimate spiritual/ creative fulfillment and, by extension, a desirable self-effacement, in an encounter with the muse; as Aurora herself remarks upon examining her friend's sketch of the painting, "Self is put away,/ And calm with abdication. She is Jove,/ And no more Danae – greater thus" (III. 135-7). Yet in seeking a spiritual relationship with a muse-figure, Aurora has only partially realized her aim of becoming a great poet; in order to fully achieve this goal, Aurora must finally unite both the physical body and the spirit in her relationship with the muse. Although her father's last words to her were "Love, my child, love, love!" (I. 212), Aurora, when first given the opportunity, rejects her cousin Romney's love (although she seems to reciprocate it) in order to work at her career as a poet in a solitary garret room in London – a sacrifice which she feels is necessary in order to pursue her art to the best of her ability.

But in making this sacrifice, Aurora also sacrifices the quality of her art. By refusing her physical and sexual needs, Aurora only produces bloodless, passionless poetry; when she rips up her early poetic efforts, Aurora finds only an "embryo's heart"

which has never beat, but dies in “gasps of make-believe galvanic life;/ Mere tones, inorganised to any tune” (III. 247-50). Although Aurora attempts to imbibe “individual life” in her efforts to write in the same vein as her masculine predecessors, she succeeds only in producing “Mere lifeless imitations of live verse” (I. 972, 974). As Aurora herself finally realizes, in order to finally produce great poetry she must stop attempting to write falsely as a man and instead begin to express her femininity as a means towards writing unique and authentic poetry. She initially mocks her early poetry, describing her effort to

counterfei[t] epics, shrill with trumps

A babe might blow between two straining cheeks

Of bubbled rose, to make his mother laugh. (I. 900-2)

However, while Aurora initially trivializes her early efforts to write a feminine epic, it is precisely her attempt to write about feminine and domestic concerns – in short, to write about something about that concerns herself personally – that results in her most successful poetic effort: the autobiographical poem which the reader is led to believe is *Aurora Leigh* itself.

In writing the poem that becomes *Aurora Leigh*, Aurora finally makes a break with the tradition of masculine epic poetry that she initially attempts to imitate. As such, she comes to confer with her cousin Romney, who disdains any and all attempts to embrace a neo-classical tradition of poetry, concluding that, “The time is done for facile settings up/ Of minnow gods, nymphs here and tritons there” (II. 150-1). The poet who once sought connection with a muse – a Jove to her Danae – eventually scorns the concept of relying on a greater being to provide poetic inspiration. She writes that,

We call the Muse, – ‘O Muse, benignant Muse,’ –
As if we had seen her purple-braided head,
With the eyes in it, start between the boughs
As often as a stag’s. What make-believe,
With so much earnest! what effete results
From virile efforts! (I. 980-5)

In place of the traditional muse-poet relationship, then, Aurora finds another means to help inspire her poetry – herself. As Joyce Zonana argues in her essay, appropriately entitled “The Embodied Muse: Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh* and Feminist Poetics,” Aurora in fact becomes her own muse through the course of the poem; in fact, Lord Howe and Lady Waldemar often refer to her as “the Muse” and she never contradicts them (250). As Aurora writes in Book Five of the poem, the section in which Aurora discusses her aesthetic vision for her poetry, she concludes that poets must

Never flinch,
But still, unscrupulously epic, catch
Upon the burning lava of a song
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.’ (V. 213-22)

Aurora here embraces using her own femininity and inner maternalism as a means towards achieving poetic inspiration; in an overwhelming image of female fertility, she imagines herself as a poet sucking on the breasts of her own contemporary “Age” in order to inspire her work.

It is this final embrace of her own femininity that helps to alter Romney’s opinion of her verse; after reading the poem which we are led to assume is in fact *Aurora Leigh*, he begins finally to appreciate Aurora’s gift for poetry. As he himself tells Aurora, her poetic masterpiece is finally able to show him “truths” which are “separate from [herself]” (VIII. 608, 606) – presumably, Aurora’s newfound appreciation for human love as a means towards achieving the greatest possible art, what Hemans’ Properzia Rossi also realized and ultimately desired. As Zonana observes, Aurora’s “final maturation as woman and poet comes when she acknowledges and articulates her love for Romney” (251); instead of denying her physical self as she has done previously, Aurora comes to embrace her need for human love, understanding that, although “Art symbolizes heaven,” Love is ultimately God who “makes heaven” (IX. 658-9). By gradually ridding herself of traditional (masculine) epic conventions and a vision of art that lacks humanity, Aurora Leigh – and, by extension, Elizabeth Barrett Browning herself – are then able to embrace a new more personal and entirely feminine ideal of epic and with it a concept of art as relying more so upon human love than a traditional concept of divine inspiration.

By featuring women in their poetry who are far from the nineteenth century ideal of the Angel in the House – women as heroic or vengeful mothers, sublime daughters or aspiring artists – Felicia Hemans and Elizabeth Barrett Browning are able to accomplish

two things: not only are they able to challenge nineteenth century representations of women in general but their poetry also implicitly questions the traditional epic definition of who in effect deserves to be called heroic. In imagining epic-worthy heroines in the place of heroes, Hemans and Barrett Browning move that much closer towards an entirely new consideration of the genre of female epic.

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