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Cursing As One of the Fine Arts: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Political Poems

In her letters to Robert Browning written before their elopement, Elizabeth Barrett is wont to satirize the judgments and pronouncements of the "critical Board of Trade" (Kintner 1:58). Her metaphor still applies very well to the school of literary critics that habitually attempts to fix literary values, manipulate supply and demand, promote the monopoly of the canon, or police the plenitude of texts. Such self-appointed policers are responsible for works like *Fifty Works of Literature We Could Do Without*, an Index Librorum Prohibitorum that includes Dickens' *Pickwick Papers* and Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*. No doubt we all have our own secret dismal catalogues of such works, but a more creative pastime might be to speculate on literary works we don't have but could do *with*. One such would be an essay by Barrett Browning entitled "On Cursing Considered as One of the Fine Arts," along the lines of Thomas DeQuincey's subtly perverse essay "On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts." Cursing has a better claim than murder to be viewed as a fine art, both because its practitioners do not stoop to crude implements like axes and daggers, and because it is an art often practised by poets who, like witches and prophets, weave dire spells with words. And Barrett Browning is the most likely author of such an essay, among the Victorian poets at least. She not only curses more often than her male contemporaries, when they are speaking in their own voices; she also curses more daringly and resoundingly, yet at the same time with more finesse and feeling.

The range and ingenuity of Barrett Browning's cursing are indeed remarkable. She is capable of turning the cry of children or the silent gesture of a statue into a curse. She shows how blessings can function as curses, and how the very act of revoking a curse can have all the force of pronouncing it. Moreover, she is capable of writing a curse that can be recycled in different polemical contexts, yet lose none of its force. Her poetry also reveals her exploiting the full range of meaning

in the term “curse,” which can refer to the act of pronouncing a malediction, the malediction itself, or the evil effects engendered by it, as well as to profane or blasphemous language or the act of uttering it. Most often, however, and particularly in the poems written after her elopement and escape from a repressively patriarchal home, Barrett Browning tends to focus on the act of cursing in the strong sense of pronouncing a malediction, and to depict women engaged in this act. At first, the women articulating curses in her poems are fictive figures, initially carefully dissociated from the poet herself, and subsequently more closely allied to her own voice and vision. But in the poems of her maturity — most notably in “A Curse For a Nation” — she speaks out boldly in her own voice, cursing the corruptions of her times with all the passion and thunder of the Old Testament prophets whom she emulates in all but her gender. In this late poem there is no attempt at the male impersonation characteristic of some of her earlier works, such as “The Battle of Marathon.” Barrett Browning makes it very clear that “A Curse For a Nation” is delivered by a woman.

As the poem opens, the voice of an angel commands a poet to “Write a Nation’s curse for me, / And send it over the Western Sea” (*Works* 3:354). The reference to the Western sea, combined with other details in the poem and its initial publication in the Boston abolitionist magazine *The Liberty Bell* in 1856, indicates that the nation addressed is America and that the curse is both the curse of and a curse against the evil of slavery. Commanded by the angel to “write,” the poet at first falters at his harsh imperative, pleading that “I am bound by gratitude, / By love and blood, / To brothers of mine across the sea” (lines 9-11). When the angel overturns this objection, she — though at this point in the poem there is no clear indication that the poet is female — then objects that there are sins enough to write of in her own country. The angel over-rules this objection too, as well as the third and most telling one: “To curse, choose men. / For I, a woman, have only known / How the heart melts and the tears run down” (38-40). But the overbearing angel is unrelenting, arguing that the poet’s gender, like her love for her brothers across the sea and her consciousness of her own country’s sins, is not an obstacle but a justification for her writing the curse.

“Therefore,” the voice said, “shalt thou write
 My curse to-night.
 Some women weep and curse, I say
 (And no one marvels), night and day.

“And thou shalt take their part to-night,
 Weep and write.

A curse from the depths of womanhood
Is very salt, and bitter, and good." (41-48)

As these powerful lines reveal, Barrett Browning was well aware that nobody in her time marvelled at women weeping and cursing "night and day" in futile privacy or, like Bertha Rochester in *Jane Eyre*, screaming and cursing locked up in an attic. What was unprecedented was for a woman to curse publicly and politically like the Old Testament prophets — not only to "weep," but also to "write" and publish a curse that is "for a nation," yet one that nevertheless springs from the depths of a woman's personal experience. Through her fusion of weeping and cursing, Barrett Browning emphasizes that she is producing not the salt tears conventionally associated with woman's melting "heart," but salt and bitter curses springing from "the depths of womanhood," the depths of woman's oppression, as well as of her anger and passion.

Like the "salt, and bitter, and good" curse in this poem, most of the curses portrayed or pronounced in Barrett Browning's works have political dimensions, whether the politics at stake be those of nations or the politics of gender — or both, as in "A Curse For a Nation." A consideration of the nature and frequency of cursing in a number of poems written throughout her career can help to show how Barrett Browning came to express her increasingly interconnected political and feminist views with more radical directness and rhetorical sophistication in her later poems. Paradoxically, as her curses move out of the private realm conventionally associated with women and become more explicitly political, they also become more personal, and are more often uttered in her own voice. This paradox is in part explained by her realization that, as contemporary feminists like Adrienne Rich and Marge Piercy stress, the personal *is* the political. For Barrett Browning such a realization was a part of the "deepest truth" in her own heart and head that she felt compelled to utter as an artist, in the spirit of her credo that art is "essential truth that makes its way through beauty into use" (Kenyon 2:383). But such intense truth-telling in the public sphere of politics was not without its risks, particularly when Barrett Browning, an English wife and mother, assumed the prophet's prerogative of polemical cursing traditionally monopolized by males and a male God. Something of its risks may be reflected in the fact that, although Barrett Browning produced the largest and most historically significant body of political poetry of any major Victorian poet, her political poems remain almost completely unrepresented in the canon of standard Victorian poetic works, and in studies of the political poetry of the period.

I

Next to "A Curse For a Nation," where the word "curse" appears twenty-four times in one hundred and nineteen lines, *A Drama of Exile* is the work by Barrett Browning in which cursing is most frequent. This lyrical drama modelled on classical Greek tragedy is the most ambitious work in her two-volume *Poems* published in 1844, a publication that led Edgar Allen Poe to dedicate *The Raven and Other Poems* (1845) "To the Noblest of Her Sex — Elizabeth Barrett Barrett" (Quinn 485). Unconcerned with the politics of nations, *A Drama of Exile* is very much concerned with gender politics. But the assumptions it reflects about the relation of women to language and power are very different from those manifested in a later work like "A Curse For a Nation." The differences reveal how much Barrett Browning's vision evolved in the space of little more than a decade.

Elizabeth Barrett begins in *A Drama of Exile* where Milton leaves off in *Paradise Lost*, as the gates of Eden close upon Eve and Adam. That this is perilously lofty subject matter for a woman she acknowledges in her Preface, an elaborate apology for daring to tread on Milton's sacred ground. She justifies her venture in part by emphasizing that her work gives special attention to "Eve's allotted grief" and her guilty consciousness of originating the Fall, emotions "imperfectly apprehended hitherto, and more expressible by a woman than a man" (*Works* 2: 143-44). These emotions indeed constitute a thematic concern in *A Drama of Exile*: Eve bewails her grief and guilt again and again in the longest and most moving speeches given to any of the characters. Eve has brought God's curse down upon Adam and herself, and upon Earth and all things on it. Worse, as the Earth Spirits remind her in a haunting refrain, Eve is "bringer of the curse" on all future generations (lines 1658, 1692, 1698).

Eve is always the accursed, never a curser in this drama that might well have been entitled "A Drama of Curses," since curses and cursing are mentioned thirty-six times, far more often than exile. God curses, although we never see His divine dignity compromised by the act. The weight of God's curse on Eve and Adam for their transgression broods over the play. Lucifer, accursed though he is, nevertheless curses copiously and felicitously himself. Adam at least threatens to curse Lucifer, although he chivalrously refuses to curse Eve when, mortifying herself in abasement, she begs him to strike her down with a curse as God has struck both of them down with His. But Eve, who is "crazed with curse" like the Earth (911) and who calls herself Adam's "cursemete" instead of his helpmate, never curses (1305). She does not yield to the temptation to curse even when Lucifer taunts her by sneering

that "she could curse too — as a woman may — / Smooth in the vowels" (664-65). Neither does Eve bless, as Christ and Adam do in the drama, Adam blessing Eve and Christ blessing a humanity that shall be redeemed.

In her emphasis on the guilt-crazed Eve's self-abasement, Elizabeth Barrett was apparently trying to arouse in her male readers as much sympathy as possible for fallen womanhood. If only all men were as chivalrous as her Adam is shown to be in refraining from cursing Eve! But Barrett was well aware they were not. Adam acknowledges how in the fallen world to come women will suffer "pressures of an alien tyranny / With its dynastic reasons of larger bones / And stronger sinews" (1865-67). This euphemistically circuitous description of wife-battering is replaced in the later *Aurora Leigh* (1857) by a blunter reference to wives whom men "kick like Britons" (8.921); but like her Eve, Elizabeth Barrett eschewed such bluntness in *A Drama of Exile*. A cursing Eve, even an Eve cursing Lucifer, could hardly arouse the protective chivalry Barrett seeks to inspire, even as she implicitly and subversively criticizes the "alien tyranny" of bone and muscle power that makes it necessary. Indeed, another poem published in the 1844 volumes reveals that she knew very well a cursing woman was apt to be seen as a witch.

In the strangely intense romantic ballad "The Lay of the Brown Rosary," we find not just a cursing woman but a cursing nun — or rather, the ghost of one. Alive, the nun had "'mocked at the priest when he called her to shrive'" (line 47); consequently, she was buried, still alive, in a wall for her sin, whereupon she "'shrieked such a curse'" that her own abbess swooned to death at the sound (48-50). Dead, the nun carries a mysterious brown rosary and acts as a corrupt mother confessor to the young heroine of the ballad, Onora, leading her to repudiate simultaneously God, her dead father, and her priest in conventional witch fashion: "'Aroint thee, father mine!'" (214). The cursing nun is undoubtedly portrayed as an evil figure by Elizabeth Barrett, yet the poem remains ambiguous in its moral implications. Is this nun one of the "Hags" whom Mary Daly celebrates in *Gyn/ Ecology*, we wonder? For the nun only curses the priest because she is going to be buried alive, and Onora only falls under the nun's influence because God the Father has mysteriously condemned her to die just as she is about to wed her young lover. And quite naturally, both women wish to live.

Despite these troubling ambiguities, however, it is clear that, as a woman poet, Elizabeth Barrett took care to dissociate herself from the cursing nun in "The Lay of the Brown Rosary," and indeed from cursing in general in her poems of and before 1844. This tactic is particularly apparent in one of the strongest poems included in the

1844 volumes, "The Cry of the Children," which concludes with a rhetorically complex and resounding curse articulating the poet's own thoughts and feelings, but doing so indirectly. "The Cry of the Children" is a poem that deserves to be ranked with Blake's subtly bitter "Songs of Experience," and like some of those lyrics, it focusses on the image of children weeping. It is also very much a polemical poem, written and published first in 1843 immediately after Elizabeth Barrett read her friend Richard Horne's "Report on the Employment of Children and Young Persons in Mines and Manufactories" (3: 362). The poem builds to a palpably intense impression of the children's physically and spiritually suffocating environment amidst the endless turning of factory wheels, the wheels that produce their weeping. As the poet articulates their silent suffering, the children cry:

"For all day the wheels are droning, turning;
 Their wind comes in our faces,
 Till our hearts turn, our heads with pulses burning,
 And the walls turn in their places:
 Turns the sky in the high window, blank and reeling,
 Turns the long light that drops adown the wall,
 Turn the black flies that crawl along the ceiling:
 All are turning, all the day, and we with all.
 And all day the iron wheels are droning,
 And sometimes we could pray,
 'O ye wheels' (breaking out in a mad moaning),
 'Stop! be silent for today!'" (77-88)

Driven in these dark whirling mills, the children know no words of prayer except "Our Father," but they despair of addressing God even with these words because they are told that their masters are made in God's image:

"Go to?" say the children, — "up in Heaven,
 Dark, wheel-like, turning clouds are all we find.
 Do not mock us; grief has made us unbelieving:
 We look up for God, but tears have made us blind." (129-32)

As the children weep, the poet asks, "Do you hear the children weeping and disproving / O my brothers, what ye preach?" (133-34). But she does not rest simply with an appeal to the pity of these "brothers" who own and run the factories and mines, and who preach in the churches that justify economic exploitation. Knowing that many will hear and not be moved, she transforms the weeping image at the close of the poem into a forceful curse: "But the child's sob in the silence curses deeper / Than the strong man in his wrath." Moreover, she does not show the children speaking this curse, nor does she articulate it herself. The words are spoken by "angels in high places" who utter God's wrath

(151). This displacement of children by angels, accompanied by the metaphoric transformation of weeping into cursing (the same transformation later used in "A Curse For a Nation"), is very effective rhetorically because it permits Elizabeth Barrett to pronounce a curse upon the employers and their justifiers without either speaking a curse herself or making the suffering children curse. Thus she ends her poem with a bang, not a whimper, stealing a little of God's thunder to arouse dread in her "brothers," while at the same time maintaining the appeal to pity.

The same combined rhetorical appeal is evident in a later polemical poem written in 1854, "A Song For the Ragged Schools of London"—this one Shelleyan rather than Blakean in its imagery, with notable echoes of "The Mask of Anarchy." Barrett Browning wrote this now completely neglected poem for a benefit bazaar organized by her sister Arabella Barrett to raise money for the Ragged Schools; it was sold at the bazaar, bound together with a poem by Robert Browning entitled "The Twins" (6: 364). Since women were actively involved in charitable work in and for the Ragged Schools, Barrett Browning knew that much of her immediate audience was female, and thus it is not surprising to see her addressing not her "brothers," but her "sisters" in this poem. Again, she takes it upon herself to speak for the inarticulate suffering children, this time pauper children "Spilt like blots about the city," as she ironically describes them (line 46). And again, she appeals to pity, imploring her "sisters" to imagine the children's plight and to "take them into pity" (93, 128). Her appeal gathers added resonance from its echo of a line in a section of *The Iliad* that she translated in which Andromache pleads with Hector not to go to war but to "take me into pity" (6: 158).

Both the appeal and the Homeric passage it echoes reflect Barrett Browning's increasingly woman-centered consciousness, yet the "Song For the Ragged Schools" is not a poem addressed only to women or relying upon only an appeal to pity. The poem begins with a bold satire of the "ruins worse than Rome's" at the heart of the ascendant British Empire, human ruins in the form of England's paupers whom the poet envisions from her vantage point among the ruins of Rome much as Shelley envisioned England's anarchy in the Peterloo Massacre while he "lay asleep in Italy" (line 1). Barrett Browning decries the corruption and violent order of English society as Shelley does in "The Mask of Anarchy," but with fewer poetic abstractions and less visionary hope. Thus in Shelley's poem, the masses for whom he speaks are envisioned with "Science, Poetry, and Thought" as their "lamps," and accordingly they do not "curse" their lot (254-57). In Barrett Browning's grim satire of England's human

ruins, she does not take it upon herself to speak for the adult impoverished because, as she forcefully says to her middle and upper class readers, “women leering through the gas” and “men, turned wolves by famine” — “Those can speak themselves, and curse you” (41-44). In *Aurora Leigh*, these paupers, taught cursing from the time when they hung like rags “forgotten in their mother’s neck” (4. 576-77), curse Aurora from their tenement windows when she ventures into their slums (3. 767); moreover, even the idealistic Christian socialist Romney Leigh finds himself “cursed” for his attempts to reform the poor in his phalanstery (8.893).

Like some sections of *Aurora Leigh*, both “A Song For the Ragged Schools” and “The Cry of the Children” attack evils in Barrett Browning’s own country. But in “The Runaway Slave At Pilgrim’s Point,” her most powerful polemical poem before “A Curse For a Nation,” she treats the evils of another country, and perhaps for that reason is more outspoken, sympathetically presenting a cursing woman for the first time. “The Runaway Slave” was written in late 1846 at the request of an American anti-slavery friend. Barrett Browning said it was “too ferocious, perhaps, for the Americans to publish” (Kenyon I: 315). But *The Liberty Bell*, the Boston abolitionist publication in which “A Curse For a Nation” later appeared, did print it in the 1848 issue, which was for sale that same year at a mammoth anti-slavery bazaar in Boston (3: 385).

If ferocity can be measured by curses, “The Runaway Slave” is certainly more ferocious than Barrett Browning’s previous poems. As the title implies, it is a dramatic monologue, or more accurately a dramatic romance, in which a runaway female slave ends her flight at Pilgrim’s Point, where she addresses first the spirits of the pilgrim fathers and then their “hunter sons” in the flesh as they close in around her in pursuit (line 204). The slave’s past is revealed and relived as she speaks: a love affair with another slave, forced separation from him followed by his death, her subsequent pregnancy after being raped by her white master, her strangling of the baby that is born because when she looked down to her breast she saw “The *master’s* look, that used to fall / On my face like his lash” (144-45), the flogging she received as punishment, her flight and arrival at Pilgrim’s Point. As the woman speaks, she also recalls the curses she uttered in the past, and she adds to these curses. To the spirits of the dead pilgrim fathers she declares that she has come to Pilgrim’s Point to “curse” in their names the land they blessed in the name of freedom (20-21). She strangles her white-faced child in order to “save it” from her curse (147). She curses the descendants of the pilgrim fathers as they hunt her down and one lifts the first stone, wishing each of them “for his own wife’s joy and gift / A

little corpse" like the corpse of her strangled baby (213-14). She recalls how she made no sound as they flogged her — "only cursed them all around / As softly" as she might have cursed her own child had she not buried it in the kind blackness of the earth (227-28). (This "soft" cursing is evidently the type Lucifer refers to in *A Drama of Exile* when he taunts Eve about the way women curse "smooth in the vowels.") But the slave woman does not always curse softly. "Whips, curses; these must answer those!" she declares to her hunters, thereby locating the cause of her curses in the white sons of the holy pilgrim fathers (232).

In the course of her monologue, the slave questions and finally discards her faith in the benevolence of the white man's God with his "fine white angels." She is as little able to believe in such a divinity as are Blake's little black boy and Elizabeth Barrett's crying children (157). More rebellious and outspoken than they are, however, she asserts near the end that white men are not gods nor "able to make Christs again / Do good with bleeding" (239-43). Blacks who bleed and who hang "too heavy" for their cross are suffering martyrs, but their martyrdom brings destruction not redemption (244).

Unexpectedly, yet in keeping with her final focus on Christ, suddenly at the end of the poem and her life the slave revokes her curse on the white masters:

In the name of the white child waiting for me
 In the death-dark where we may kiss and agree,
 White men, I leave you all curse-free
 In my broken heart's disdain! (250-53)

However much one might wish to see the slave as adopting a doctrine of Christian forgiveness here, her last words are surely a case of reiterating her curse and absolving herself of it too. Indeed, the final wrenching reference to her "broken heart's disdain" assumes additional force because it appears in an extra last line, breaking the pattern of seven lines maintained throughout the poem's thirty-seven stanzas. Barrett Browning recognized in an earlier poem entitled "A Valediction" that human blessings, even when well-intentioned, can "curse and kill" (2: 279, line 31); and in the slave's case we cannot be sure of benign intent. There is none of Eve's meek self-abnegation in this fierce woman who compares herself to the "black eagle" (208), and who rises in the moral loftiness of her heart's disdain as she falls into the welcoming blackness of death. She does not accept the curse on Eve as a cause of her oppression as a raped and impregnated woman any more than she accepts the curse on Ham as a cause of her oppression as a slave. Like the white man's God and His prophets, she

is the one who curses and who, serene in the authority of her righteousness, revokes her curse at her will.

Barrett Browning was herself a member of a family that, like Mr. Rochester's in *Jane Eyre*, derived part of its fortune from West Indian slave plantations, and there is little doubt that she felt closer to the white masters than she liked. In a letter to John Ruskin written nine years after "The Runaway Slave," she said, "I belong to a family of West Indian slaveholders, and if I believed in curses, I should be afraid" (Kenyon 2:220). However, as a woman who in December of 1846 had recently rebelled against the patriarchal master in her own house, the father who forbade any of his children to marry, her sympathies were obviously with the black woman she treats so heroically. "Oh, and is it possible that you think a woman has no business with questions like the question of slavery?" she asked her friend Mrs. Jameson with respect to Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. "Then she had better use a pen no more. She had better subside into slavery and concubinage herself, I think, as in the times of old, shut herself up with the Penelopes and the 'women's apartment,' and take no rank among thinkers and speakers" (Kenyon 2: 110-11).

Casa Guidi Windows (1851), focusing on the 1848 revolutions in Italy and their aftermath, is Barrett Browning's first major attempt to take a rank as a speaker on political subjects. Strikingly original in form and conception, this work can be assigned to no established genre. It is perhaps best described by Barrett Browning's turn-of-the-century editors, Charlotte Porter and Helen A. Clarke, as a "condensed lyrical epic of a modern nation's birth" (3: xv). In her critical edition of *Casa Guidi Windows* (1977), Julia Markus notes as particularly unprecedented the "daring subjectivity" with which Barrett Browning fuses her personal experience as poet and mother with the political upheavals of a nation struggling to be born (xix). Not surprisingly, then, in *Casa Guidi Windows* Barrett Browning first curses in her own voice. She utters "the poet's curse" on art critics who scorn the achievement of early Italian painters like Cimabue simply because they have not reached the "heights of Raffaelhood" (Markus ed. Pt. 1, lines 351-57). This curse is presented warily, however: behind a mask of sorts still ("the poet's"), and in the sphere of the arts where Barrett Browning was confident of her authority, not in the political sphere that forms the more immediate focus of the poem. She clearly recognized the complex interaction between these two spheres, as well as the connections between the politics of nations and gender politics. Thus she satirizes the hackneyed tropes of Italian patriots, "Bewailers of an Italy enchained," who perpetuate their country's oppression by casting her either as a barren woman or a shamed one — "Cursing her

beauty to her face, as brothers / Might a shamed sister's" (l. 21-26). But while she implies that there are subtle connections between art and politics, she does not directly address them. Nor does she pronounce political curses. The curses that she does depict in the political sphere are paradoxically silent curses, articulated by the poet but not pronounced by her. Emphasizing the silent response of the Florentines to their renewed suppression by the Austrian overlords, she writes:

Meantime, from Casa Guidi windows, we
Beheld the armament of Austria flow
Into the drowning heart of Tuscany.
And yet none wept; none cursed, or, if 'twas so,
They wept and cursed in silence. Silently
Our noisy Tuscans watched the invading foe;
They had learnt silence. (2.352-58)

No doubt Barrett Browning's experience as a woman who had also "learnt silence" — at least insofar as expressing her anger was concerned — contributed to her imaginative identification with the oppressed Italians. The motif of silence speaking recurs in her poetry, most notably in "Lady Geraldine's Courtship," where a statue of silence is the central symbol. In *Casa Guidi Windows* too, a statue is associated with the most complex instance of silence speaking when Barrett Browning uses a statue in snow to articulate an artist's curse on a political tyrant. Narrating the story of how Michelangelo was ordered to erect a snow statue to serve the mocking pleasure of the ruler of Florence, she depicts the great artist creating a statue erect as Jove with "The right hand raised . . . as if it cursed," then watching his creation melt and the hand drop, "a mere snowball" (l. 117-18). This raised hand initially seems to articulate Michelangelo's silent curse on the tyrant who mocks him, but as Barrett Browning develops the image, the raised cursing arm reduced to a mere snowball finally becomes a symbol of the heavyhanded oppression of the tyrant. Like Shelley's Ozymandias, the sneering tyrant is the one whose fame is obliterated, while the story of the ephemeral statue built by the artist endures as a sign to succeeding generations of "what is true princedom" (l. 143). Michelangelo's snow statue thus resembles the statue of a Greek slave sculpted by one of Barrett Browning's contemporaries, which she celebrates in one of her best sonnets, "Hiram Power's 'Greek Slave.'" The Greek slave is mute and passive in stone, yet the statue's "Ideal beauty" and the evil of slavery it symbolizes "shame the strong / By thunders of white silence, overthrown" (3: 178). Power's "Greek Slave" epitomizes Barrett Browning's vision of art as "essential truth that makes its way through beauty into use."

II

Barrett Browning's vision of art did not change in her later works, but her acceptance of silence did. In her poems after *Casa Guidi Windows* and most notably in "A Curse For a Nation," she no longer limits herself to thundering in "white silence," to cursing indirectly through gestures and silent cries or, if aloud, in fictive voices not her own. She asks in one of her late poems, "Where's Agnes?", whether a "low and soft" voice can "Take open and actual part / With Right, —maintain aloft / Pure truth in life or art . . . ?" (6: 31, lines 55-60). Her changing treatment of cursing as a speech act reflects her answer to this rhetorical question. I have already shown how in the dialogue between the angel and the poet forming the "Prologue" to "A Curse For a Nation" she dramatically foregrounds the fact that the poet is a woman. There is no reason to interpret this woman as anyone other than Barrett Browning herself, speaking out here for the first time as boldly as her runaway slave. Barrett Browning's pet name among her family and intimate friends such as her mentor John Kenyon was "Ba." But as Elizabeth Barrett confessed to Robert Browning in 1845, "Mr. Kenyon & I agreed the other day that there was something of the tigress-nature very distinctly cognizable under what he is pleased to call my 'Ba-lambishness'" (Kintner 1: 225). This "tigress" no longer wears lamb's clothing in later works such as *Aurora Leigh* and "A Curse For a Nation," where Barrett Browning assumes the role of a Miriam or a Cassandra, the two figures in the Jewish and Classical traditions respectively upon whom she modelled herself as her poetry became more woman-centered and outspoken. "I am Cassandra you know, & smell the slaughter in the bathroom," she said to Robert Browning (Kintner 1: 240). In "A Curse For a Nation" she becomes a Cassandra in earnest, and writes at the angel's behest "The Curse" that makes up the main part of the poem, emphasizing her act of writing with the refrain that thunders at the close of each of the ten stanzas: "This is the curse. Write."

"'Oh, Ba, such dreadful curses!'" was the response of Barrett Browning's own sister Henrietta to this fiery poem, a response that the poet said she "couldn't help laughing at" (Kenyon 2: 376). Her laughter implies a measure of detachment from even this work, a poem that more than any other reflects the "poetical devil" she described as burning in her (Kenyon 2: 369). And indeed, precisely because she writes such "dreadful curses" in "A Curse For a Nation," she takes care to frame the poem with fearful symmetry. It is tightly structured, controlled in tone, subtle in its rhetorical strategies, and measured in its ironies. Structurally, it falls into three parts, with successively

longer stanzas in each part: the "Prologue" presenting the dialogue between the poet and the angel, the first section of "The Curse" setting forth the reasons for the curse, and the second section prophesying its consequences.

The rhetorical strategies determining this tripartite structure become apparent if one considers how it contributes to the forcefulness and complexity of the curse Barrett Browning "writes." The introductory dialogue with the angel not only dramatizes and justifies the fact that a woman has been chosen to "write" the curse, but also invests her words with all the authority of patriarchal Christianity. The angel is emphatically male and masterful, and he is the one who sanctions the woman's right to curse. In fact, the right becomes an obligation, and she becomes no more than the mouthpiece of the host. This apparent reduction of the woman to a subservient vessel by no means represents a capitulation of Barrett Browning's feminist vision. The use of the angel as a commanding muse may instead be seen as a calculated manoeuvre, the pragmatism of which is apparent in the context of a political and ethical distinction noted by Wayne Booth: the distinction between "*freedom from* external restraints and the power of others to inhibit our actions, and *freedom to* act effectively when restraints disappear" (Booth 52). Barrett Browning appears to surrender her freedom from the authority of the patriarchal tradition, but only in order to gain the freedom to pronounce the sort of curse women were conventionally not permitted to utter. And despite her apparent capitulation, she subverts the tradition that empowers her, in part through her use of the male angel and in part through the manner in which she progressively complicates the origin and nature of the curse as she writes. Who is responsible for the curse? we find ourselves asking. The woman? The angel? Or the nation itself?

The question of origin and responsibility becomes particularly complex as we encounter the refrain — "This is the curse. Write." Who speaks the command and who acts in response? The final stanza of the "Prologue" indicates that the poet herself has written the curse ("So thus I wrote"); it is therefore she who most obviously issues the command "Write" to the wrongdoers in the nation she addresses. But the refrain also reminds us that she is responding to the angel's command to write, just as presumably the angel is responding to God's command. Insofar as the command is addressed to the nation, either by the poet or by the angel acting through the poet, Barrett Browning implies that the nation that perpetuates wrongs such as slavery in effect "writes" or causes its own curse. Moreover, she reinforces this implication by emphasizing the notion of causation in the first section of "The Curse" (all three stanzas here begin with "Because"), and by playing

upon the pun of "Write" and "Right." This pun is activated by the juxtaposition of the final word "wrong" in the second-last line of the first stanza in "The Curse" with the final word "Write" in the last line activates this pun:

BECAUSE ye have broken your own chain
 With the strain
 Of brave men climbing a Nation's height,
 Yet thence bear down with brand and thong
 On souls of others, — for this wrong
 This is the curse. Write. (53-58)

Thus the imperative in the refrain becomes a command to the nation that causes or "writes" its own curse through its wrongs to right those wrongs.

If the nation fails to right the curse that it in effect writes through its acts, then it will suffer the evil consequences Barrett Browning presents in the second section of "The Curse." Here she further exploits the polysemy of the refrain by playing upon the various senses of the term "curse" and the ambiguity of the demonstrative pronoun "This." The reference of "This" shifts as she moves into Part II of "The Curse," just as the reference of "curse" shifts from a malediction or cause to its evil effects. The most agonizing effect is the nation's consciousness of its own evil, of the curse that stains it, as Barrett Browning emphasizes in six stanzas that describe first what the nation will "watch," and then what it will hear (three for each mode of perception). She thus implies, with acute psychological insight, that consciousness of the curse *is* finally the curse. This guilty consciousness "writes" the curse that is engraved on the conscience of the nation. But the same guilty consciousness is also the only way of ending the curse by righting it. Hence the write/right pun continues through this section up to the envoy in the seventh stanza, where Barrett Browning further complicates the polysemy of the refrain and extends the consciousness of the curse:

Go, wherever ill deeds shall be done,
 Go, plant your flag in the sun
 Beside the ill-doers!
 And recoil from clenching the curse
 Of God's witnessing Universe
 With a curse of yours.
 THIS is the curse. Write. (113-19)

Here an important distinction is introduced between the "curse / Of God's witnessing Universe" — in effect, the righteous curse the angel asks the poet to write — and the self-confirming evil curse of anger, which is for the first time directly attributed to the nation that has

created it. Only if the nation "clenches" God's curse with its own will the curse continue in a vicious echoing circle. As the ambiguous "THIS" in the final lines suggests, the nation can choose which curse to "write."

When one considers how the meanings of the keyword "curse" and of the entire refrain are altered and complicated in "A Curse For a Nation," it becomes apparent that Barrett Browning was strictly accurate when she maintained in one of her letters that *she* did not curse any nation in the poem. She left such cursing to Rome's "Holy Father," she wryly remarked; "the poem only pointed out how the curse was involved in the action of slave-holding" (Kenyon 2: 367). The title of the poem supports her assertion, since it implies that she writes not a curse *on* a nation but "A Curse *For* a Nation," not a curse expressing hate or anger but one written out of love. As the angel expressively puts it, "From the summits of love a curse is driven, / As lightning is from the tops of heaven" (15-16).

Barrett Browning's contemporary readers heard the thunder of her curses, but not many seemed to see the "lightning" of love generating them. Nor did they perceive the poet as being as uninvolved in the cursing as she maintained she was. Ironically, however, it was not her American audience that was shocked and incensed at the curse "for" their nation. It was her own countrymen. As Leonid M. Arinshtein and Robert W. Gladish have shown, English readers took little notice of "A Curse For a Nation" when it was initially published in the 1856 issue of *The Liberty Bell*. But when Barrett Browning reprinted it as the final poem in her 1860 volume *Poems Before Congress*, there was a violent uproar among English reviewers. Many of the poems in this highly polemical volume were harshly critical of England's time-serving non-intervention in the Italian liberation movement. Even more outrageous for patriotic English readers was the high praise Barrett Browning accorded Napoleon III of France in *Poems Before Congress* for his initial support of the Italian nationalists — this at a time when many Englishmen had paranoid fears of a French invasion, and when Tennyson, Poet Laureate, had recently published a ranting, jingoistic poem in *The Times* (May 9, 1859) urging, "Form! form! Riflemen, form! / Ready, be ready to meet the storm! / Riflemen, Riflemen, Riflemen, form!"

Because of her praise for Napoleon III and her criticisms of England in *Poems Before Congress*, most reviewers of the volume assumed that Barrett Browning was cursing her own country in the final poem, and they fulminated at the idea of an English wife and mother engaging in such an act. The *Saturday Review* reviled her as an "illogical renegade," a "denationalized fanatic," and denounced "A Curse For a

Nation" for its "hysterical antipathy to England," its "delirium of imbecile one-sidedness" (quoted in Arinshtein 38-39). *Blackwood's* deplored the intervention of a woman in politics: "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." It held up the example of Florence Nightingale for Mrs. Browning's edification, and reminded her that "to bless and not to curse is woman's function" (quoted in Taplin 377). Barrett Browning summarized the hysterical response to *Poems Before Congress* and especially to "A Curse For a Nation" by noting that she had been "held up at the end of a fork as the unnatural she-monster who had 'cursed' her own country" (Kenyon 2: 380). Even her longtime friend Henry Chorley, writing in the *Athenaeum*, had censured "A Curse For a Nation" as "improper and unpatriotic" (Kenyon 2: 364), leading Barrett Browning to observe that she had been "dishonored before the 'Athenaeum' world as an unnatural vixen, who, instead of staying at home and spinning wool, stays at home and curses her own land." She sardonically added, "If, indeed, I had gone abroad and cursed other people's lands, there would have been no objection. That poem, as addressed to America, has always been considered rather an amiable and domestic trait on my part. But England! Heavens and earth! What a crime! The very suspicion of it is guilt." On the same occasion (in a letter to Isa Blagden), she also privately acknowledged that certain stanzas in "A Curse For a Nation" "do 'fit' England 'as though they were made for her,' which they were *not* though" (Kenyon 2: 374-75). Barrett Browning had insisted to Henry Chorley that the poem was addressed to America and that her reviewers were mistaken in interpreting it as a curse aimed at England. However, her private remark reveals that, like the Old Testament prophets, she was not averse to employing the same formula in different rhetorical contexts.

Barrett Browning was well aware that much of the furor excited by "A Curse For a Nation" derived from her violation of the taboo against women prophesying and cursing. Of her treatment in *Blackwood's* she said to a woman friend, "you and all women, though you hated me, should be vexed on your own accounts" (Kenyon 2: 387). *Blackwood's* might praise women such as Florence Nightingale, but Barrett Browning was caustically sceptical of such fulsome sentiments. After meeting Florence Nightingale in London, she praised her as "an earnest, noble woman," but also criticized the idealization of nursing her work brought about as a "retrograde" step, "a revival of old virtues! . . . Every man is on his knees before ladies carrying lint, calling them 'angelic she's,' whereas, if they stir an inch as thinkers or artists from the beaten line (involving more good to general humanity than is

involved in lint), the very same men would curse the impudence of the same women and stop there. . . . I do not consider the best use to which we can put a gifted and accomplished woman is to *make her a hospital nurse*. If it is, why then woe to us all who are artists! The woman's question is at an end." (Kenyon 2: 189)

Barrett Browning expressed these opinions in 1855, but her remark about men cursing women who "stir an inch as thinkers or artists from the beaten line" proved prophetic in her own case. All of her political poems, and particularly her later more outspoken ones, represent a swerving from the "beaten line" laid down for women in her century and persisting into our own. That may be one reason why her political poetry has been suppressed, with the occasional exception of "The Cry of the Children," the early political poem whose rhetorical strategies and subject matter most accord with conventional views of women's sphere. Although critics such as Gladish, Arinshtein, and Gardner B. Taplin have examined the controversy surrounding the publication of "A Curse For a Nation" in *Poems Before Congress*, they do not consider how the gender bias and patriotic hysteria of the reviewers obscured the artistry and complexity of the poem. In fact, they give no attention to the poem as a work of art, or to *Poems Before Congress* as a carefully orchestrated series of poems recording Barrett Browning's changing views of Napoleon III, the Italian liberation struggle, and the European political situation. Other political poems by Barrett Browning — even a major work such as *Casa Guidi Windows* — have received even less attention from mainstream critics.

The neglect of such a large and historically significant body of political poems is a notable example of how, as Edward Said observes, canons of standard literary texts often have "very little historical accuracy to them" (23). Indeed, the failure to consider Barrett Browning's achievement as a political poet has led to some startling omissions and distortions in the treatment of the Victoria period. Most notably, in a study of "Politics and the Poet's Role" in Victorian poetry John Lucas fails to mention any of her major political poems or collections of poems; he briefly discusses "The Cry of the Children" only to dismiss it as a "specific polemic" (29-30, 37). E. D. H. Johnson, in a now classic study, can speak of *The Alien Vision of Victorian Poetry* in part because he omits to consider the social and political engagement of Barrett Browning and of many other women poets in the period, poets responsible for much of the Victorian poetry of social protest, as Kathleen Hickok points out (156). Even more disturbing is the recent assertion by Donald A. Davie in 1982 that feminist criticism has never considered the concept of patriotism: "An Italian woman may well, we must suppose, be an Italian patriot; but where, in the current vocabu-

lary of feminists, is that dimension of her 'woman-ness' allowed for?" (40). The question overlooks, among much else, the recovery and analysis of *Casa Guidi Windows* in 1977-78 by Julia Markus and Flavia Alaya, and the reprinting of Barrett Browning's fine late poem "Mother and Poet" by Cora Kaplan in *Aurora Leigh and Other Poems* (1978). "Mother and Poet" is a moving tribute to the Italian poet and patriot Laura Savoi by the feminist poet who was herself accorded the highest praise as an Italian patriot by the citizens of Florence on her death (Alaya 21).

The critical distortions obscuring Barrett Browning's achievement as a political poet do not spring only from omission, however. Flavia Alaya has incisively shown that a canonical critical myth has been created and perpetuated, depicting Barrett Browning as an unstable and emotional political observer whose blind hero worship of Napoleon III of France and other ardent polemical excesses were the cause of numerous disputes with her more judicious and politically astute husband. A full consideration of how and why this extraordinary myth has developed is beyond the scope of this essay. But clearly it has functioned to promote Robert Browning's reputation at the expense of his wife's, it reflects and reinforces stereotypical assumptions about women held by a predominantly male hegemony, and it accords with the New Critical axiom that poetry should be apolitical. The myth may also be a reaction formation against Barrett Browning's forceful and radical expression of her feminist political vision in her later poems, manifested in her increasing mastery of the fine art of political cursing.

Like so many women writers, Barrett Browning was faced by the dilemma summarized by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar in "Sexual Linguistics." Citing Xaviere Gauthier, they observe "that 'as long as women remain silent' — that is, as long as women remain linguistically 'female' — they will be outside the historical process. But if they begin to speak and write as men do, they will enter history subdued and alienated" (521). In Barrett Browning's case, however, the choices were slightly more complex. She could choose to remain conventionally female in her poetic speech acts, as she was careful to do in "The Cry of the Children" by cursing indirectly through the children and the mediation of God's wrathful angels. Or she could attempt to speak like a man, either disguising her own sex in the process as she did in her early poems, or asserting it as she did in late poems like "A Curse For a Nation." Every choice involved suppression and alienation. If she was conventionally female, she faced marginalization outside the male mainstream of major poets. If she wrote like a man, but disguised her sex, she did so at risk of being alienated from her own womanhood. If she wrote like a man, simultaneously declar-

ing her womanhood, she did so at risk of being suppressed for her assumption of male power.

She chose the last risk in her later poems and, predictably, she has been suppressed. The canon politely acknowledges the lady who asks, "How do I love thee? Let me count the ways." But with the exception of feminist scholars who have recently made their way on to the "critical Board of Trade," the canon-makers have steadfastly ignored the woman-poet who maintained that "the liberation of a people and the struggle of a nation for existence" will always be "right arguments for poetry" (Kenyon 2: 380), the woman-poet who evidently asked herself how she might address nations and powers so as to change the course of history. The canon-makers have ignored the woman who evidently asked, "How can I curse, creatively? Let me explore the ways."

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