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Taste, Totems, and Taboos: The Female Breast in Victorian Poetry

Tom Hood, the Victorian comic genius much appreciated by Dickens among others, is perhaps best remembered today for his rollicking saga of "Miss Kilmansegg and Her Precious Leg": a poem about a wealthy young woman who, through an accident, acquires a golden leg, displays it, is wed for it, and finally, after many adventures, is killed with it. But Hood also wrote poems focussing on other parts of the female anatomy than the leg. In one such poem he asks:

What . . . makes weak women go astray?
Their bumps are more in fault than they.

Hood isn't writing about the most conspicuous bumps on the female body here. The lines comes from a poem entitled "Craniology" satirizing the Victorian pseudo-science of Phrenology, which Hood sums up with a Cockney flourish as very "headifying."¹ I suspect, however, that even an avid phrenologist might visualize another set of bumps than the cranial ones on encountering these lines by Hood out of their context in the poem (and maybe in it too). If so, the lines suggest what is foregrounded when we think of women—and in particular of "weak women" who go "astray"—and it certainly isn't their intellectual endowment or their distinguishing characteristics (all those "nesses," as Hood terms them in "Craniology": Wantonness, Acquisitiveness, Destructiveness, etc.). Nevertheless, to judge by academic discourse on literature, these interesting bumps, so prominent in our minds when we visualize women, might well not exist at all. What is foregrounded in our perception is suppressed in critical discourse. There are many critical essays on other parts of the anatomy, particularly the male anatomy: at least five essays on the hand symbolism in one of Dickens' novels alone, for instance.² And, more to the point, there are many studies of phallic symbolism. But until very recently, there have been very few scholarly essays considering imagery of the female breast. Apparently the subject has been taboo.

Kathleen Tillotson has remarked that we are quick to recognize the taboos of another culture when those of our own appear "as a matter merely of taste and natural refinement."³ So, priding ourselves on our enlightenment, we are habitually inclined to dwell upon the Victorian taboos we have so fortunately left behind. As Howard Mumford Jones ironically observes, "We are all too familiar with the attacks on the Victorians. They conjure up the hair-cloth sofa, the Sunday-school tract, the antimacassar, the what-not, the bustle, the unhygienic skirt. Victorianism is the elder generation. Victorianism is the pretense that if you do not name a thing it isn't there."⁴ Thus Jones wryly acknowledges the lingering stereotypes about an age that was in many ways more energetically forthright than our own. Under the influence of these stereotypes, we criticize the Victorians for their refusal to acknowledge human sexuality, and in particular female sexuality. This is the age when breasts became "the bosom," as Ronald Pearsall suggests—or, alternatively, "the bust."⁵ Writing to Philip Collins about Anthony Trollope's attitude towards bosoms, Ruth apRoberts remarks, "I know Trollope likes them, but I think he generally calls it *bust*, and the resultant image is a sort of undifferentiated area, the clothed swelling form like a dressmaker's dummy—not discrete protuberances."⁶ According to the prevailing conception, the Victorian age is also a period when legs became "limbs" or, in the case of women, disappeared altogether, Miss Kilmansegg's "precious leg" notwithstanding. Victorian literature is often thought to be perversely populated with "legless angels," stationed at the hearth or framed in a window, with eyes bent down towards the cradle or up towards the heavens. Such impressions remain remarkably persistent, despite the contrary evidence of the literature itself, and despite the revisionary work of historians like Michael Foucault, Peter Gay, and Eric Trudgill—who interrogate the myths surrounding Victorian sexuality, and who, in particular, call into question the belief that Victorian middle-class females were supposed to be asexual.⁷

One way of indirectly promoting such historical revisionism is to emphasize that our own taboos about the female body as a whole and the breast in particular may be as strong, or stronger than those of the Victorians. Granted, our age may initially *seem* to be frank and free in its treatment of the female breast, in effect a totem of modern popular culture. Witness, for example, our "topless" waitresses, our silicon-endowed glamour queens. Yet the first phrase, "topless," paradoxically names only by an unfocussed negation; while the second, "endowed," is equally evasive in its substitution of a monetary metaphor for a mammary fact. Indeed, the female breast as mammary fact has, until quite recently, been taboo in our time. In Marge Piercy's

1973 novel about the women's movement, *Small Changes*, one of the protagonists attends a hippy street fair where she encounters a woman nursing her baby and she realizes that "she had never seen anyone breast-feed a baby outside."⁸ Any woman who has breast-fed her baby in public in the last ten or twenty years is painfully conscious of the taboo she is transgressing, but the violence of this taboo is more effectively conveyed by the outraged accusation of a Toronto policeman recorded in Michele Landsberg's *Women and Children First*. Questioned about sado-masochistic pornography and its contribution to the prevalence of rape, this policeman, touted as the resident expert on rape, stated in an indignant voice that women who breast-fed their babies in public offered a "disgraceful provocation."⁹ For the policeman, it seems, a woman's breast was exclusively an erotic icon, to be uncovered—for whatever purpose—at her own and other women's peril. It is only in the last two decades in the poetry of women such as Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, and Robin Morgan that the breast as mammary fact has been acknowledged, explored, and sometimes celebrated.¹⁰ Elsewhere, as Germaine Greer forcefully demonstrated in *The Female Eunuch*, the images of the breast we have encountered and still encounter on every side—in films like "The Graduate," on billboards, on bookcovers and in porn magazines—remain sterile because the breast is everywhere dissociated from its reproductive function. Like Grishkin's "friendly bust" in T.S. Eliot's "Whispers of Immortality," these images "give promise" only of "pneumatic bliss" (or like the red rubber falsies that I remember being very puzzled by as a child of about five when I opened a box with a picture of a man blowing up a tire on it and an inscription, "Fix flats quickly"). These contemporary taboos about the breasts as mammary fact cannot be blamed upon the Victorians. Indeed, as this essay will attempt to demonstrate, Victorian poets "name" the female breast more frankly, more variously and more daringly than we do today, and one Victorian feminist poet—Elizabeth Browning—makes particularly frequent and striking metaphoric use of this powerful female image.

I

Given the iconography of the "angel in the house" dominating Victorian portraits of women, it is perhaps not surprising that Victorian poets celebrate the female breast in its maternal aspect—though the explicitness with which this aspect is depicted can sometimes be startling, given our modern taboos. But Victorian poets such as Tennyson and D.G. Rossetti also present some rather explicitly erotic images of the breast. In doing so, however, they usually dissociate this aspect of the breast from its maternal nurturing aspect, and associate it

with the demonic instead. This is true, to a very limited extent, even of Elizabeth Browning, but the female breast is more often heroic and maternal than erotic and demonic in her poetry. We can consider, for instance, her most striking use of the breast as a heroic or epic metaphor in *Aurora Leigh*, her portrait of the artist as a young woman. As Aurora comes of age artistically and dares at last to attempt an epic, a feat considered beyond the female poet's capacity, she discovers and expresses her aesthetic credo. The "sole work" of poets, she says, is "to represent the age"—their own "live throbbing age," not a previous age:

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."¹¹

The impact of this incongruous mix of metaphors is accentuated by the dynamic series of interpretive acts it elicits, to use Stanley Fish's reader-response terminology.¹² Thus, the reader may initially assume from the locution "double-breasted" that the breast Aurora has in mind is singular in number, male, clothed and buttoned up. But the next three lines, with their images of "paps" and of sucking, force a revision of this initial assumption, and the reader suddenly *sees* the image in all its graphic and particular detail: the breasts are plural in number, female, naked (or at least transparently clothed), and literally—not metaphorically—"full-veined." A similar revisionary process occurs as the reader, having grasped this image, goes on to interpret the meaning of the passage by relating the breast metaphor to the lava metaphor. The metaphor of "the burning lava of song" appears first and from it the reader may infer that the source of the lava (the spontaneous overflow of the song) is the poet-singer, or perhaps the singer's Titanic imagination. But in the succeeding line with its description of the "double-breasted Age," the Age itself seems to become the source of the lava, both because it is double-breasted and heaving, as the breast of a singer is, and because heaving breasts are similar in shape and movement to seething volcanoes, as Victorian pornographers were well aware.¹³ The Poet and the Age her or his work "presents" are thus metaphorically fused in the "burning lava of the song" that holds the "impress" of its Mother Age. Similarly, concave and convex images, images of presence and absence, are fused

in the present image of the “double-breasted Age” and the future image of the hollow “impress”—the “impress” that not only “records” but also “presents,” as Browning punningly puts it, the “true life” of the past.

The complex metaphors Aurora here calls upon to describe art’s mimetic function are, to say the least, more novel and more interesting than the usual hackneyed metaphor of holding a mirror up to nature, a metaphor which is not successful in moving us even when Stendhal makes the mirror move in his variation on this topos in *Le Rouge and Le Noir*. But Browning’s combination of lava and heaving breasts was eyed with alarm as nothing short of “savage” by one Victorian reviewer. “Burning lava and a woman’s breast!,” he declared: “and concentrated in the latter the fullest ideas of life. It is an absolute pain to read it. No man could have written it.”¹⁴ Modern readers may respond to this passage in *Aurora Leigh* with less pain, but no doubt some may find it savage too. Or does it rather seem grotesque, even ludicrous? If so, why? Because it violates our own taboos, the ideology incarnate in what is called “good taste”? Or because it violates some of the criteria of successful metaphors? Whatever the response to these questions may turn out to be, there are several reasons why Elizabeth Browning’s daring use of graphic breast imagery in this instance should not simply be dismissed with contempt, or amusement, or bemused amazement.

First, poetic images that seem grotesque or shocking either to modern or to Victorian readers indirectly reveal a great deal about the taboos, the rules of “good taste,” that so often go without saying, both in the Victorian age and in our own. Violations of the rules define the rules, as it were. In much the same way, metaphors that involve some element of incongruity or improbability may serve to foreground the criteria for uncontroversially successful metaphors. Hamlet’s “taking arms against a sea of troubles” is a case in point. Second and more important, it seems highly likely that Browning’s pulsating mixture of burning lava and a woman’s breast reflects a deliberate rhetorical strategy, since as several critics have noted, images of the female breast recur throughout *Aurora Leigh* and since Aurora elsewhere speaks of her own use of distinctively female metaphors: “women’s figures,” as she terms them.¹⁵ We should at least give Browning the benefit of the doubt, then, and consider that the “double-breasted Age” passage may be metaphorically complex rather than metaphorically confused. Nor is this a matter of interest to feminist poets and to feminist critics only, if we think of the attention now given to metaphor in many disciplines. The work of Paul de Man, Max Black, Julian Jaynes, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson—to name only a few—all reflect the growing recog-

inition of the extent to which metaphors pervade not only literature but also language, philosophical thought, and scientific discovery.¹⁶

Feminist critics have contributed to this growing recognition of the role played by metaphors in structuring perception through their analyses of the metaphors patriarchal culture has projected on and confused with reality. Thus Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar use the opening chapter of *The Madwoman in the Attic* to explore the metaphor of paternity that has dominated our ways of thinking and talking about the genesis of literary texts;¹⁷ while Ellen Moers devotes considerable attention in *Literary Women* to metaphors and images based on the female body and on female experience. Moers comments, in the process, on the lack of adequate terminology to describe these images. She points out, for instance, that there is no real equivalent to "phallic"—a formal euphemistic term, relatively free of distracting connotations—to apply comprehensively to images of female sexuality.¹⁸ Certainly I have felt this gap in terminology in working on this subject, as I searched in vain for a relatively neutral and comprehensive adjective to denote imagery of the female breast. Elizabeth Browning's conscious exploitation of "women's figures" such as the breast is of value, then, because it calls attention to the inadequacies of our critical terminology. Moreover, it also directs our attention to another question now of concern to some feminist critics. Are the "women's figures" Aurora speaks of a product of social conditioning, or do some of them at least spring from innate differences between female and male? Can we say that there is a distinctively female imagination, expressing itself in and/or responding to distinctively female images and metaphors? Elaine Showalter briefly considers this possibility in *A Literature of Their Own* only to dismiss it, nervously, because she believes that it opens the way to a reaffirmation of traditional stereotypes and blocks progress towards an ideal state of androgyny.¹⁹ Despite this danger, however, feminist theorists such as Mary Daly in America and Hélène Cixous in France have celebrated the "remembering" of a female imagination, expressing itself in its own distinctive language—blazing "*her* trail in the symbolic," as Cixous puts it in "The Laugh of the Medusa."²⁰

If a distinctively female imagination does exist, generating its own web of "woman's figures," its presence cannot be detected by considering either female or male writing in isolation. Indeed, as Myra Jehlen suggests, there may be serious limitations in the general attempt to study women's writing apart from the culture that surrounds it. Jehlen calls instead for a "method of radical comparativism" and suggests that "the work of a woman . . . may be used comparatively as an external ground for seeing the dominant literature whole."²¹ On a

small scale, that is the method adopted in the remainder of this essay, where other uses of the breast image in Elizabeth Browning's poetry will be considered in the light of the ways in which her male contemporaries use the same image.

II

As suggested above, male Victorian poets differ most from Elizabeth Browning in their tendency to focus on the breast as an erotic and/or demonic image. Some of their references to the breast are teasingly or timidly coy, others boldly explicit; but usually the more explicit their images of the breast are, the more those images are surrounded with demonic connotations. At the risk of being accused of rhetorical seduction, I'm going to start with the coy allusions, if only because that seems the natural place to start. In this case, the natural place to start is also nature and specifically the landscape—the "lay of the land," to borrow a pun from Annette Kolodny—since, as has often been noted, Victorian poets tend to express erotic images and desires in a displaced form in their descriptions of landscapes.

Robert Browning's "By the Fire-Side" offers a particularly notable image of a breast image hidden in the landscape. Here the speaker imagines himself in old age, sitting by the fire, recalling an autumn walk in Italy when he courted his wife—a walk that climaxed in the "moment, one and infinite" when they became one in the knowledge of each other's love. As the speaker muses, he calls up a vivid picture of minute particulars in the Italian landscape, where thorny chestnut balls and crimson-splashed leaves fall on the "fairy-cupped/Elf-needed mat of moss",

By the rose-flesh mushrooms, undivulged
Last evening—nay, in today's first dew
Yon sudden coral nipple bulged,
Where a freaked fawn-coloured flaky crew
Of toadstools peep indulged.²²

Although there is no direct mention of breasts here, that is surely the image that enters the mind if, like that "crew of toadstools" who "peep indulged," we eye those "rose-fleshed mushrooms, undivulged last evening" and that "sudden coral nipple." Isobel Armstrong suggests in "Browning and the 'Grotesque' Style" that in these lines "the grotesque becomes coy," as the "joke rhymes"—"undivulged," "bulged," "indulged"—bulge at the reader and form what she calls a "jumble of crudity."²³ (There is also the sly wordplay in "fawn-coloured," with its connotation of fauns and satyrs and their characteristic pursuits). One could just as well say of this passage, however, that it shows the coy

become grotesque, but if one asks why the coyness is there in the first place, that is a difficult question to answer. Certainly it seems odd in a poem with so many autobiographical elements coming from the poet who elsewhere asserts “the value and significance of flesh” through the lips of the lusty Fra Lippo Lippi. Perhaps it is those very autobiographical elements, though, that give rise to the décolleté mushrooms in “By the Fireside,” which seems less a dramatic monologue than what Ralph Rader terms a “dramatic lyric.”²⁴ In more thoroughly dramatic poems like “Fra Lippo Lippi” and “The Bishop Orders His Tomb,” where the speaker has a specified identity distinct from the poet’s, breasts don’t peep at us from the landscape. One thinks, for instance, of the former poem, where the Prior savours the “while smallish female with the breasts” in Lippo’s painting; or of the Bishop in the latter poem who lusts after his lump of *lapis lazuli*

Big as a Jew’s head cut off at the nape,
Blue as a vein o’er the Madonna’s breast.

Disguised eroticism is something we tend to expect more in Tennyson’s poetry than in Robert Browning’s, and certainly there are occasions when the expectation is justified. In “The Beggar Maid,” for example, Tennyson begins his description of the bare-footed maid wooed by King Cophetua with these oddly evasive lines—

Her arms across her breast she laid;
She was more fair than words can say

—then suddenly shifts the reader’s attention down to the beggar maid’s bare feet:

Bare-footed came the beggar maid
Before the king Cophetua.²⁵

No peeking here, it seems. The lords described in the second stanza describe other parts of the maiden’s beauty, but not her breasts. To find a match for the grotesque peeking coyness of Browning’s indulged toadstools, we have to turn to another poem by Tennyson entitled “The Talking Oak.” The lovelorn hero Walter in this poem acts like Orlando in *As You Like It* and many swains since by carving the name of the woman he loves—the fair Olivia—on an old oak tree. But he goes farther than that fond testimony; he also talks to the tree, who talks back, and proves to be more garrulous than the lover himself. When Walter asks the ancient oak, alive in Henry the VIII’s time, if ever a woman as wonderful as Olivia lived, the tree confesses its—or rather “his”, since this tree is definitely male—“secret life” as vegetative voyeur.

Ah, the oak begins, what sights hasn't he seen? In Henry the VIII's time, "fresh faces"; in Cromwell's time, maidens

"passing praise,
Strait-laced, but all-too-full in bud
For puritanic stays."

As these lines indicate, the oak has a taste like Henry Fielding's for full-bodied flesh and blood women, and no delight at all in the fairies that flit on the greensward, whom he considers "far too spare of flesh." But none of the women he has seen through the centuries can vie with Walter's Olivia, the oak asserts, as he proceeds to describe how Olivia came to loiter under his boughs and even, in "a fit of frolic mirth," attempted to span his "waist" with her arms. But alas, the oak was "too broad of girth" to be embraced, so despite the sap stirring in his "wrinkled rind," had to content himself with the voyeuristic delights of Browning's elfin toadstools. He allows a sunbeam to slip through his leaves to glimmer on Olivia's neck; then, more boldly, he lets another slip through to slide "from head to ankle fine" as the maiden lies beneath him; at least, bolder yet, he drops "an acorn in her breast"—only to see her immediately pluck it out and throw it away. So the old oak must trust his future felicity and, it seems, fertility to young Walter, who kisses the lucky acorn thrice because it

but a momet lay
Where fairer fruit of Love may rest
Some happy future day.

Walter is generous enough to share these procreative ambitions with the oak, since he assures the latter that his kiss will "magnetize/ The baby oak within" the acorn, vows that the oak's leaf will never fail, and hopes that a saw will never "dismember" the mighty tree.

As the free-sliding mobility of the sunbeam in "The Talking Oak" indicates, that wily old rake the sun is much more capable of satisfying his voyeuristic desires than a tree. After all, he penetrated Danae's tower, just as Lancelot, his brazen greaves blazing in the full light of the sun, penetrates the Lady of Shalott's grey tower and "flashes" into her crystal mirror. Tennyson seems to appreciate the freedoms that the sun, or certain shafts of sunlight, can take and he often depicts its appreciative rays focussing on parts of the female anatomy that the poet can't bring himself to appreciate directly. In "Adeline," for instance, one of the young Tennyson's many poems addressed to a pantheon of young ladies (a group of poems Christopher Ricks irreverently describes as Tennyson's "early girly" poems), the poet wonders wistfully if "spiritual Adeline" is visited by the "low-tongued Orient,"

i.e., by the morning sun in her chamber.²⁶ Does the Orient sun breathe “light” against her head on the pillow, he wonders? Does the sunlight twine his locks around her “neck?” And do the two of them, he asks,

talk together still
In the language wherewith Spring
Letters cowslips on the hill?

He concludes that they do: “Hence that look and smile of thine/Spiritual Adeline.” The cowslips suggest the kind of “language” Tennyson has in mind, here (whether unconsciously or consciously), since as Ricks points out, they probably come from the passage in *Cymbeline* where Imogen’s “left breast” is described as being “cinque-spotted” “like the crimson drops in the bottom of the cowslip.” So it seems that the language is body language. In a slightly later poem, “The Gardener’s Daughter,” the sun is equally amorous and Tennyson is slightly less reticent, as he describes how the “full day dwelt” on the brows of the gardener’s daughter, and sunned

Her violet eyes, and all her Hebe bloom,
And doubled his own warmth against her lips,
And on the bounteous wave of such a breast
As never pencil drew. Half light, half shade,
She stood, a sight to make an old man young.

Even here, though, we note that we’re not really given a graphic image of breasts as discrete protuberances, but rather a swelling form, like the dressmaker’s dummy image Ruth apRoberts finds in Trollope’s novels.

Not all images of the breast in Tennyson’s early poetry are quite this gently vague and wavy. In “A Dream of Fair Woman,” perhaps because of the licence allowed by the dream vision framework, Cleopatra appears and, as she recounts her sufferings, suddenly tears her robe apart and shows the dreamer “half/ The polished argent of her breast” in order to display the mark of the asp’s bite. This is hardly an erotic image, however: “Polished argent” suggests a rather hard cool surface, like the snowy expanse of Mrs. Merdle’s Bosom in *Little Dorrit*. And though Tennyson obviously sympathizes with Cleopatra, it seems likely that he only permits her to engage in this partial disrobing because she is a siren woman. The breast image here takes on a slightly demonic aspect then. These demonic overtones are much more apparent in one of Tennyson’s few open depictions of female breasts, full-faced and completely exposed, in the powerful passage in “Lucretius” where the dying philosopher, maddened by a love potion, dreams that he sees the breasts of Helen of Troy:

Then, then, from utter gloom stood out the breasts,
 The breasts of Helen, and hoveringly a sword
 Now over and now under, now direct,
 Pointed itself to pierce, but sank down shamed
 At all that beauty; and as I stared, a fire,
 The fire that left a roofless Ilion,
 Shot out of them, and scorch'd me that I woke.

The demonic intensity of this flaming surrealistic image leaping at Lucretius out of the gloom is augmented by its position in the poem, immediately following a passage in which Lucretius dreams that packs of "Hetairai" or courtesans—"hired animalisms" he calls them in his loathing—surround him in "narrowing circles." Later in the poem and closer to his death, he hallucinates a naked running Oread followed by a grossly bestial Satyr and, as so often in Tennyson, the licentious sun:

how the sun delights
 To glance and shift about her slippery side
 And rosy knees and supple roundness
 And budded bosom-peaks,

Lucretius says, before he recoils in self-disgust as the Oread draws nearer and nearer to him.

Demonic images of the breast like these "budded bosom-peaks" and the flaming, sword-quelling breasts of Helen are less common in Tennyson's poetry than in Dante Gabriel Rossetti's. We can consider the ballad "Troy Town," for instance, a poem published in 1870 two years after "Lucretius." This ballad is based upon a legend in Pliny according to which Helen, before she became Helen of Troy, offered up a goblet moulded in the shape of her breast to Venus, and images of her bare breast flash at us in the poem much as the bare breasts of Mrs. Robinson flash on the screen in the film "The Graduate."

Heavenborn Helen, Sparta's queen,
 (O Troy Town!)

Had two breasts of heavenly sheen,
 The sun and moon of the heart's desire:
 All Love's lordship lay between.

(O Troy's down,
 Tall Troy's on fire!)

Helen knelt at Venus' shrine,
 (O Troy Town!)

Saying, "A little gift is mine,
 A little gift for a heart's desire.

Hear me speak and make me a sign!
 (O Troy's down,
 Tall Troy's on fire!)

“half-globed/Like folded lilies deepset in the stream.” In the latter poem, as in the superbly subtle “Jenny,” it is the male speaker who, in the end, seems demonic and not the girl he finally murders. Yet even when Rossetti is not presenting the female breast as demonic, he focuses exclusively on it as erotic icon.

Among the male Victorian poets I've been surveying here, it is Tennyson alone who seems to go beyond this kind of exclusive focus on the breast as erotic and/or demonic, and to focus instead on its maternal aspect. Sometimes he does so with a sentimental regressiveness, as in the poem entitled “Supposed Confessions of a Second-Rate Sensitive Mind,” where the speaker says

Thrice happy state again to be
The trustful infant on the knee,
Who lets his rosy fingers play
About his mother's neck, and knows
Nothing beyond his mother's eyes!

In “Locksley Hall” Tennyson more acutely portrays the conflict between the breast's erotic and maternal aspects when the ranting male speaker pictures the woman he loved, but who married “Another,” forgetting him not because of her love for her boorish husband, but because of her love for her baby: “Baby fingers, waxen touches, press me from the mother's breast,” the speaker fumes in impotent jealousy. Very different from this almost comical dramatic depiction of a grown man who sees a baby as his “rival” is Tennyson's use of the breast or related images in two of his late poems to convey a mother's anguish over her lost child. In “Rizpah,” one of Tennyson's finest dramatic monologues, he depicts the half-crazed mental wanderings of an old dying woman whose son, accused of a felony, is hanged and left on the gallows to rot. So, as his dying mother recalls, all she could do was to wait for his bones to be picked clean and then gather them up for burial. It was not a task that deterred her because, as she says, they were “My bones, the bones that had suck'd me, . . . the bones that had moved in my side.” The mother's anguish, conveyed here in a grotesque act (but not so grotesque as the act that precipitates it) charged with pathos, is conveyed with epic dignity in “Demeter and Persephone.” Here the earth goddess Demeter speaks of how she gave her breast to ailing infants in the night after Persephone was ravished away by the King of the Underworld.

Unfortunately, however, Tennyson's most graphic image of the mother's breast and its characteristic function is not marked by this kind of epic dignity. It appears in *The Princess*, that very odd and very interesting poem about an Amazonian princess, Princess Ida, who

withdraws with a group of women and attempts to set up an all-female academy and community, to which males are denied access. As we might expect, three men disguised as women penetrate this feminist separatist community, among them the Prince betrothed to Ida in her infancy, and though the men are eventually recognized by one of Ida's closest associates, a woman named Psyche, they are not exposed and denounced by her. When Ida discovers the men and Psyche's act of betrayal, she takes the latter's baby away from her (there is a baby in this female Arcadia—the worm in the bud, as it were). Ida keeps the baby until near the end of the poem, when her attempt to form a separate female reality lies in ruins around her, and the Prince lies wounded at her feet. At this point in the poem, Psyche re-enters the scene, spies her child on the grass beside the formidable Ida, and clamours to have it back. Psyche is by this point in a desperate state:

wan was her cheek

With hollow watch, her blooming mantle torn,
 Red grief and mother's hunger in her eye,
 And down dead-heavy sank her curls, and half
 The sacred mother's bosom, panting, burst
 The laces toward her babe; but she nor cared
 Nor knew it. (VI, 11. 128-134, p. 823)

Ida looks up from the wounded Prince, sees Psyche with this badge of mother-right bursting forth, but nevertheless still refuses to give up the child. Indeed, she debates the matter with one of the male invaders for a space of many lines, while Psyche presumably stands there with one breast completely exposed. Finally Ida agrees to relinquish the child, acknowledging as she does so the barrenness of her own maiden bosom, and the baby is handed to its mother who grasps it, feels it all over to make sure it's sound and whole, mouths and "mumbles" it in desperate tenderness, and at last hides her bared bosom with it (IV, 11. 192-98).

Poems like "Demeter and Persephone," "Rizpah," and other sections of *The Princess* itself, which really is a subtle and fascinating poem on the whole, call into question the assumption that there is a distinctively female or male imagination, which those of the opposite gender are denied access to—principally because Tennyson demonstrates in these works a capacity to transcend the boundaries of gender, a capacity that I see as characteristic of many great writers—Spenser, Shakespeare, Dickens, George Eliot, Faulkner, for example. But this passage describing Psyche leaves a very different impression. We have already seen how the coy becomes grotesque in some of Tennyson's and Browning's slyly erotic images of the breast. In the description of Psyche's panting, bursting bosom, I think we see the maternal ren-

dered grotesque. Granted, a mother's breast certainly does swell with milk, and milk may even spurt out when a mother simply thinks of her baby, as any woman who has experienced what is called the "let-down reflex" can testify. Early Christian and medieval writers were well aware of this phenomenon too. It is one of the biological facts underlying the fervent worship of the Virgin's breast and milk, which Marina Warner describes in her book on the Virgin, *Alone of All Her Sex*.³⁰ But a mother's breast does not usually pant and burst out of the garments that confine it.

This grotesque exaggeration of the maternal function of Psyche's breast, however ludicrous it may seem, is not without significance. Most importantly, it reminds us of the extent to which the Victorian period was dominated by the worship of a mother goddess figure, a worship characterized by iconographical depictions of the goddess suckling her infant, whether that goddess be Isis, as in ancient Egypt, or the Virgin. Eric Trudgill describes this element in Victorian culture as the cult of the "Angel mother," and suggests in *Madonnas and Magdalens* that it explains why the Victorians permitted such generous décolletage—indeed, to a degree that would raise eyebrows today.³¹ This cult also explains why the Victorians may have had fewer taboos and inhibitions than we have today about the breast as mammary fact. Indeed, the suckling infant and the nursing mother are so much a topos of the period that in *Moby-Dick* Melville can serenely invoke the analogy of human infants suckling at the breast and gazing off into the infinite to describe the way in which baby whales nurse, when some Captain Ahab's crew glimpse this marvellous sight below them in the transparent water.³² Nor was it only human infants and baby whales that were depicted as suckling at the mother's breast in the Victorian period. In *Little Dorrit* Dickens compares Amy's succoring of her father in prison to the act of "a classical daughter" who offered the milk of her breast to her father.³³ Martin Meisel points out in his recent book *Realizations* that this comparison in *Little Dorrit* was probably influenced by numerous pictorial depictions of this tableau, entitled "Roman Charity" in some versions.³⁴ Apparently, the idea of a father suckling at his daughter's breast did not seem disturbing to Dickens and his readers. But as the *TLS* reviewer of Meisel's book points out, it's apt to make a modern audience squeamish.³⁵

The fact that the nursing mother was a Victorian topos susceptible of varying treatments does not completely explain Tennyson's grotesque caricature of it in *The Princess*. That grotesqueness can also be attributed, I suspect, to two additional circumstances. First, Tennyson is pushing an ideological message in *The Princess*—the message that, as George Henry Lewes puts it, "the grand function of woman . . . is

and ever must be, *Maternity*.”³⁶ Second, Tennyson may have been uneasy about the possibility of erotic connotations attaching themselves to Psyche’s exposed breast. Accordingly, he attempts to suppress such connotations by grotesquely exaggerating the autonomy of its maternal function. Marina Warner notes how even in paintings of the Madonna and child, erotic connotations became more and more obtrusive in the Renaissance, as paintings became increasingly secular. Indeed, one French painter went so far as to depict the mistress of Charles VII as the Mother of God, painting her with round firm breast bursting forth from a flirtatious bodice—a breast not in the least bit concealed by the infant who supposedly represents the saviour of mankind.³⁷ This transformation in depictions of the Virgin and her breast seems to have reached a purely erotic end by the 18th century in England, for in looking at Hogarth’s engravings of “The Harlot’s Progress” one cannot help but be struck by the fact that the harlot is frequently shown with one breast completely exposed, as the Virgin was, and as Tennyson’s Psyche is too (only *half* of her “sacred mother’s bosom burst the laces towards her babe”). Given the popularity of Hogarth among Victorian readers, it would not be at all surprising if Tennyson felt uneasy when he came to describe this scene in *The Princess*. Although he presents the breast in more of its aspects than poets such as D.G. Rossetti, he is still very much bound by the totems and the taboos of his age.

III

Elizabeth Browning also reflects the totems and taboos of her time in her use of the breast and related images. But she makes much more frequent use of such images than her male contemporaries do, and in her later poems these images become more and more daring and metaphorically complex. By far the largest proportion of the many breast images in her poems are maternal. A few of these in her early poems are sentimentally vague images of the sort that we might expect from a decorous young Victorian woman. For example, in a poem entitled “Isobel’s Child” published in 1838, Browning employs the topos of the nursing mother, but chooses to focus not on the breast so much as on the milk in the mouth of the suckling child. She uses this image to emphasize, as Wordsworth does in Book II of *The Prelude*, that the child first learns of love through suckling at its mother’s breast. The baby knows love at first only

by the drops of sweet
White nourishment still hanging round
The little mouth so slumber-bound.³⁹

In another poem published in 1844, "A Rhapsody of Life's Progress," she is a little more graphic and explicit in her treatment of the nursing topos. When we're first born, she writes,

The Heavens seem as near as our own mother's face is,
And we think we could touch all the stars that we see;
And the milk of our mother is white on our mouth;
And, with small childish hands, we are turning around
The apple of Life which another has found. (Vol. III, p. 110).

Here the apple becomes a symbol both of life's potential and of the future fall into the knowledge of evil, but certainly too it suggests the breast which the suckling child touches and turns and kneads as it feeds.

Despite her sentimental focus on motherly love in this poem and others, Browning seems to have been quite aware even in her early poetry, written before she had her own children, that suckling is a basic animal action common to human infants and other mammal young, and the recognition of that fact doesn't seem to disturb her. In "An Island" (1838), she describes cows lowing at their calves as if in approval of "the warm mouths milking them for love" (Vol. II, p. 40). Subsequent poems reveal that Browning was also quite aware as some Victorian physicians were of the erotic pleasure that a mother experiences in suckling a child.⁴⁰ Certainly she did not promote the ideology of asexual motherhood that is so conspicuous a part of the Victorian cult of the angel mother and that still shapes attitudes towards breast-feeding today, as Susan Weisskopf has shown.⁴¹ In a late poem (1862) entitled "Little Mattie," for instance, Browning mourns that a young girl dead at 13 will miss so many of life's pleasures, among them "the warmth of a baby's mouth/ At the blossom of her breast" (Vol. II, p. 2). This recognition of the pleasure involved in breast-feeding does not mean, however, that Browning suppresses the pain that is sometimes involved too. In one of her strongest mature poems entitled "Mother and Poet," she speaks of a mother "hurting her breast/ With the milk-teeth of babes, and a smile at the pain" (Vol. VI, p. 71). Nor does Browning suppress the element of bondage in the nursing mother's relation to her child. On the contrary, she depicts that bondage with searing power in "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point," where she presents a black slave who strangles the white child at her breast because when she looks down at its face, she sees only "the *master's* look" that "used to fall" on her like a lash. (Vol. III, p. 165).

Just as Elizabeth Browning is capable of making the breast a symbol of pain or bondage, so she also occasionally presents it surrounded

with erotic connotations that are primarily demonic. Where she differs from her male contemporaries, however, is that she does not often present the breast as demonic, and when she does, she refuses to dissociate this aspect of the breast from its maternal aspect—the breasts of Helen from the “sacred mother’s bosom” of Psyche, as it were. For instance, when she refers to prostitutes as she does in “A Song for the Ragged Schools of London,” she first invokes the stereotypical view of these women as fallen devils by describing them as “women leering through the gas”; and then quickly explodes the stereotype in the next line by observing in parenthesis “Just such bosoms used to nurse you” (Vol. VI, p. 24). Here, as in Rossetti’s “Orchard Pit,” we see a dramatic conflation of faces and breasts, as the leering eyes are replaced by mother’s bosoms, or metonymically by the nipples in those bosoms. But in Browning’s poem the face-breast, eyes-nipples substitution is used for a very different purpose: not to present in an intensified form the stereotypical images of the demonic woman, but to interrogate that image by conflating the fallen women British men see in London with the mothers that once nursed them. On a much larger scale, Browning employs a parallel but reverse strategy in *Aurora Leigh* by depicting the fallen woman Marian Earle as a Madonna figure absorbed in love for her illegitimate child. Since Marian becomes pregnant with this child only after being drugged and raped, however, this conflation of Magdalen and Madonna is less bold than it initially seems.

The only truly demonic woman in *Aurora Leigh* appears to be not the paradoxically pure Marian, but the aristocratic Lady Waldemar, whom Aurora initially sees as being wholly responsible for Marian’s terrible fate. Lady Waldemar occasions one of the very few principally erotic depictions of the female breast in Elizabeth Browning’s poetry when she appears, in décolleté splendour, at an evening social gathering:

The woman looked immortal. How they told,
 Those alabaster shoulders and bare breasts,
 On which the pearls, drowned out of sight in milk,
 Were lost, excepting for a ruby clasp!
 They split the amaranth velvet-bodice down
 To the waist or nearly, with the audacious press
 Of full-breasted beauty. If the heart within
 Were half as white!—but, if it were, perhaps
 The breasts were closer covered and the sight
 Less aspectable by half, too. (V, 11. 618-27, p. 214).

This woman who looks “immortal” is subsequently viewed as a lamia by Aurora, and undeniably Lady Waldemar is somewhat of a false

mother-figure to Marian, much as Geraldine is to Christabel in Coleridge's poem of that title. But the heart within that "aspectable" bosom is nevertheless not quite so black as Aurora assumes it to be. In the end we learn that Lady Waldemar is not responsible for Marian's being drugged and raped. She is not, in other words, a demonic villainess, a lamia; she is merely an ordinary mortal woman scheming to satisfy her own needs and desires, as she reminds Aurora when she tells her in a letter, "We both had mothers—lay in their bosoms once" (Bk. IX, l. 17, p. 360). Thus, the most striking erotic depiction of the breast in *Aurora Leigh* is not, in the final analysis, as surrounded with demonic associations as it initially seems to be.⁴² And in the case of the one other primarily erotic image of the breast that appears in the poem, there are no demonic connotations at all. Aurora's friend the painter Vincent Carrington describes a sketch of

A tiptoe Danae, overbold and hot,
Both arms a-flame to meet her wishing Jove
Half down; and burn him faster down; the face
And breasts upturned and straining, the loose locks
All glowing with the anticipated gold.

(III, ll. 1227-27, p. 118)

Aurora is not at all embarrassed by Vincent's boldly erotic description. Instead, she finds in it a metaphor for her own poetic aspiration—aspersion that she sees as too eager, too "forward," but not in any way evil.

None of these images of the breast in *Aurora Leigh* are quite so startling or metaphorically complex as the epic image of the "double-breasted age" that I began by considering. But taken together, they form a significant pattern of images that we can be sure was deliberate on Browning's part. Moreover, one final example may serve to demonstrate that even when Browning's images of the breast seem most grotesque, on consideration that they can nevertheless be seen to be daring and successful attempts to achieve complex rhetorical and thematic ends. As Book V of *Aurora Leigh* begins, the Book which is most directly concerned with Aurora's artistic aspirations and also the Book in which Browning makes most conspicuous and frequent use of the breast image, Aurora pauses to ask herself if she has the power to write poems "in mysterious tune/ with man and nature"—with, among other things,

all that strain
Of sexual passion, which devours the flesh
In sacrament of souls? with mother's breasts
Which, round the new-made creatures hanging there,

Throb luminous and harmonious like pure spheres?

(II. 14-18, p. 195)

This comparison of mother's breasts to luminous, throbbing spheres may initially seem as incongruous as some of John Donne's metaphysical conceits, particularly if, as seems likely, the terms "luminous" and "harmonious" bring the image of heavenly spheres into the reader's mind. But there are several reasons why, after consideration, Browning's simile seems appropriate and functional rather than outlandish and incongruous.

First, the comparison of mother's breasts to luminous spheres immediately seems less discordantly metaphysical if we consider, as Aurora the artist attempts to do, the perspective of a "new-made creature"—or the "innocent eye," to steal a phrase much in circulation these days. After all, the mother's breast is the only sphere that the newborn infant can see, and all of Heaven that it desires. It has been said that the mother's body is the primary landscape; and perhaps its our primary skyscape too, as Browning herself implies in "A Rhapsody of Life's Progress." Moreover, to the suckling child no doubt the mother's breast does "throb luminous and harmonious"—particularly in the middle of the night or in the grey half-light when, much to the mother's inconvenience, the "newmade creature" will insist on "hanging" there. So much for the innocent eye, then. But what does it have to do with Aurora's artistic ambitions? Well, I think it does have something to do with them because despite her long past apprenticeship, Aurora is still rather innocent at this point in her development, still inclined to adopt the perspective of the child searching for mother-love, and still not at ease with "all that strain/ Of sexual passion" in herself since she is still a virgin. Nevertheless, she is in her own way an ardent feminist who desires to write an epic out of her own female experience and to use "women's figures" in doing so, and this brings us to another important feature of the breasts like spheres simile. It is undeniably a female figure of speech: though men have breasts in some androgynous visions of the future like Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time*, they don't have them now, and didn't in Aurora's time. Moreover, it is an epic figure of speech too if the "spheres" are associated with the heavenly spheres. Alice Ostriker has noted how contemporary women poets employ traditional images for the female body—a flower, for instance—but transform the attributes of those traditional images so that in the case of the flower it comes to convey force and not fragility.⁴³ Through Aurora, Elizabeth Browning seems to be engaging in a similar type of transformation or "re-vision" of the female body, to use Adrienne Rich's term, as she graphically describes a mother's breast with cosmic rather than coy images.

In revisioning this powerful female image in this way, Browning is writing as the French feminist Helene Cixous urges all women to write in her well known essay, "The Laugh of the Medusa." She is working subversively within the discourse of phallogocentric signifiers, dislocating it, exposing its limitations, transcending it. Of her, above all, one can say what Cixous says of all women: that she "writes in white ink."⁴⁴ But as to the question of whether or not *only* a woman could write in this way—of whether a woman like Elizabeth Browning is innately disposed to use images of the breast in a different way than her male contemporaries—that is a much more difficult question to answer. When the Victorian reviewer said of the "double-breasted age" passage that "no man could have written it," he was perfectly right, because no man in his age could have gotten away with writing it. But that doesn't mean no man ever could write it or that no man ever has used the breast as a metaphor in the way Elizabeth Browning uses it. None of the images of the breast in Browning is any more graphic or startling than that which we encounter at the heart of the patriarchal tradition, in the writings of one of the Church fathers, Clement of Alexandria. "The Word alone supplies us children with the milk of the Father," Clement observes, "and only those who suck at this breast are truly happy. For this reason seeking is called sucking; to those infants who seek the Word, the Father's loving breasts supply milk."⁴⁵ Of Clement too it can be said that he writes in "white ink."

NOTES

1. *The Complete Poems of Tom Hood. With Life and Portrait* (London: John Dicks, n.d.), p. 57.
2. In *Great Expectations*. See the essays by Charles Forker, Harry Stone, Jack Moore, and M.H. Levine listed in Joseph Gold's *The Stature of Dickens: A Centenary Bibliography* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971), pp. 172-3. Also I. Ousby, "Language and Gesture in *Great Expectations*," *Modern Language Review*, 72 (1977), 784-93.
3. *Novels of the Eighteen-Forties* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954), p. 67.
4. Howard Mumford Jones, "The Comic Spirit and Victorian Society," in *The Reinterpretation of Victorian Literature*, ed. Joseph E. Baker (Princeton University Press, 1950), p. 45.
5. *The Worm in the Bud: The World of Victorian Sexuality* (1969; rpt. Penguin Books, 1971), p. 17.
6. Philip Collins, "Business and Bosoms: Some Trollopian Concerns," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 37 (December 1982), p. 302.
7. See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Volume I: An Introduction, trans. Robert Harley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), particularly pp. 17-35 on "the repressive hypothesis"; Peter Gay, *The Bourgeois Experience: Victoria to Freud*, Volume I: Education of the Senses (Oxford University Press, 1984); Eric Trudgill, *Madonnas and Magdalens: The Origins and Development of Victorian Sexual Attitudes* (London: Heinemann, 1976).
8. *Small Changes* (1972; rpt. New York: Fawcett Crest Books, 1974), p. 79.
9. Michele Landsberg, *Women and Children First: A Provocative Look at Modern Canadian Women at Work and at Home* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1982), p. 100.

10. See Alicia Ostriker, "Body Language: Imagery of the Body in Women's Poetry", in *The State of the Language*, ed. Leonard Michaels and Christopher Ricks (University of California Press, 1980), pp. 247-263.
11. Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh, With Other Poems*, introd. by Cora Kaplan (London: The Woman's Press, 1978), (Book V, ll. 214-22), pp. 201-2. All other references to *Aurora Leigh* are to this edition.
12. See Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Harvard University Press, 1980).
13. In *The Worm and the Bud*, p. 98, Pearsall cites a pornographer's description of a "finely-developed blonde" named Anne who, the writer says, "had a full heaving bosom, which to me looked like a perfect volcano of smothered desires." This sort of description is "quite unexceptional" in late Victorian pornography, according to Pearsall. Indeed, the fact that the writer uses "volcano" in the singular suggests how dead the metaphor had become.
14. Cited by Cora Kaplan, "Introduction", *Aurora Leigh*, p. 13.
15. Book VIII, l. 1131, p. 356. Kaplan notes in her "Introduction" (p. 15) how the discursive length of *Aurora Leigh* is held together by "a rope of female imagery . . . Approved and taboo subjects are slyly intertwined so that menstruation, childbirth, suckling, child-rearing, rape and prostitution are all braided together in the metaphorical language." Among these subjects, images of suckling and of the breast are perhaps most conspicuous. In "Motherhood's Advent Into Power: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Poems About Motherhood", *Victorian Poetry*, 18 [Spring, 1980], 51-60, Sandra Donaldson relates some of these to Browning's changing portrayal of motherhood in her maturity; while in "Images of 'Mother-Want' in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* (*Victorian Poetry*, 21, [Winter, 1984], 351-67, Virginia Steinmetz presents a psychoanalytic interpretation of the poem's breast and suckling metaphors. Steinmetz argues that they are "negative symbols reinforcing the theme of deprivation and representing the poet's need to bring obsessive infantile fantasies into light where they would serve rather than dominate her" (p. 351). Sandra Gilbert too notes how, "as emblems of nurturing maternity, breasts have obsessed both author and heroine throughout *Aurora Leigh*" in her essay "From *Patria* to *Matria*: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Risorgimento," *PMLA*, 99 (March, 1984), 194-209. All of these critics tend to emphasize the element of personal obsession in their discussions of Browning's use of breast imagery; I wish to emphasize here and below the extent to which these images reflect conscious and sophisticated rhetorical strategies.
16. See Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (Yale University Press, 1979); Max Black, *Models and Metaphors: Studies in Language and Philosophy* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1962), Chapter III; Julian Jaynes, *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind* (University of Toronto Press, 1976), esp. Book 1, Chapter 2, where Jaynes argues that "metaphor generates consciousness" (p. 56). George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (University of Chicago Press, 1980). The bibliography on metaphor is enormous and still expanding at an "exponential rate," as Wayne Booth observed at a conference on metaphor in the late 1970s: "Metaphor seems to be taking over not only the world of the humanists but the world of the social and natural sciences" ("Metaphor as Rhetoric: The Problem of Evaluation," *On Metaphor*, ed. Sheldon Sacks [University of Chicago Press, 1978], p. 48).
17. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (Yale University Press, 1979).
18. Ellen Moers, *Literary Women* (New York: Doubleday, 1976), pp. 243-264.
19. Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: British Novelists from Bronie to Lessing* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), p. 12. In Chapter 1 of *The Female Imagination* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975), Patricia Meyer Spacks surveys some of the conflicting approaches to this issue in feminist writings from Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* to Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics*. See also Alicia Ostriker, "The Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythmaking," *Signs*, 8 (Autumn, 1982), pp. 69-70.
20. *Signs* (Summer, 1976); rpt. in *New French Feminisms*, ed. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (Schocken Books, 1981), p. 258.
21. "Archimedes and the Paradox of Feminist Criticism," (*Signs*, 1981), rpt. *The "Signs" Reader: Women, Gender and Scholarship*, ed. Elizabeth Abel and Emily Abel (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983). The comparative method Jehlen advocates is now well established. Elizabeth Abel points out in her "Introduction" to *Writing and Sexual Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 1-2, that "feminist critical attention has shifted from recovering a lost tradition to discovering the terms of confrontation with

- the dominant tradition. Aware that women writers inevitably engage a literary history and system of conventions shaped primarily by men, feminist critics now often strive to elucidate the acts of revision, appropriation, and subversion that constitute a female text."
22. *Robert Browning: The Poems*, ed. J. Pettigrew and T.J. Collins (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981), Volume I, p. 554. All subsequent references to Robert Browning's poetry are to this edition.
 23. *The Major Victorian Poets: Reconsiderations*, ed. Isobel Armstrong (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1969), p. 107. Armstrong revises this harsh judgment in a later essay, however: "I used to feel that the stanza describing the bulging nipples of the mushrooms, peeped at by the 'indulged' toadstools, was a gross failure of tact: now, knowing Browning better, I feel that it succeeds in miming rank, restless, rapidly growing sexual feeling which can find no direct expression and so becomes lewd and burdensome to itself." ("Browning and Victorian Poetry of Sexual Love," *Robert Browning*, ed. Isobel Armstrong [Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, Writers and Their Background series, 1975], pp. 269-70).
 24. "Notes on Some Structural Varieties and Variations in Dramatic 'I' Poems and Their Theoretical Implications." *Victorian Poetry*, 22 (Summer 1984), 103-120.
 25. *The Poems of Tennyson*, ed. Christopher Ricks (London: Longmans, Longmans Annotated English Poets series, 1969; rpt. Norton, 1972), p. 552. All subsequent references to Tennyson's poetry are to this edition.
 26. Christopher Ricks, *Tennyson* (New York: Macmillan Masters in World Literature Series, 1972), p. 52.
 27. *The Poems of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, Cheyne Walk ed. (New York: Brentanos, 1909), Vol I, pp. 239-40.
 28. "Life's eyes are gleaming from her forehead fair / And from her breasts the ravishing eyes of Death," *The Poems of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, Vol. II, p. 243.
 29. See Virginia Steinmetz's account of Renato Almansi's clinical work in "Images of 'Mother-Want' in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*," p. 365.
 30. *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976), pp. 192-205. Milk is shown spurting from the Virgin's breast in an illustration from the fourteenth-century English Queen Mary Psalter, reproduced as Illustration #30 in *Alone of All Her Sex*. Warner also mentions one classical myth explaining how Juno's milk, when she was nursing Hercules, sprayed across the sky to create the Milky Way (p. 196).
 31. *Madonnas and Magdalens, The Origins and Development of Victorian Sexual Attitudes* (London: Heinemann, 1976), p. 85. In *Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982), Nina Auerbach explores some of the ways in which the cult of the angel in the house intersects with the other "central female paradigms that presided over the Victorian imagination," and suggests how these paradigms contributed to the power of the women they seemed to suppress (p.9).
 32. *Moby-Dick: An Authoritative Text*, ed. H. Hayford & H. Parker (New York: Norton, Norton Critical Edition, 1967), p. 325.
 33. *Little Dorrit*, ed. R.D. McMaster (Toronto: Macmillan, 1969), p. 212.
 34. *Realizations: Narrative, Pictorial and Theatrical Arts in Nineteenth-Century England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), p. 309.
 35. Stephen Wall. "Picture the Scene," *T.L.S.* (10 August 1984), p. 884.
 36. Cited by Trudgill, *Madonnas and Magdalens*, p. 71.
 37. *Alone of All Her Sex*, p. 203.
 38. See in particular, Plates 2 and 3 in "The Harlot's Progress" in *The Complete Works of William Hogarth* (London: The London Printing and Publishing Co., n.d.).
 39. *The Complete Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, ed. C. Porter & H.A. Clarke (New York: Crowell, 1900; rpts. AMS, 1973), Vol. II, p. 14. All subsequent references to Elizabeth Browning's works, aside from *Aurora Leigh*, are to this edition.
 40. In his *Philosophy of Marriage* (1839), Dr. Michael Ryan noted that the "mammas" of women are "the seat of vivid sensibility from uterine sympathy" (cited by Trudgill, *Madonnas and Magdalens*, p. 57).
 41. "Maternal Sexuality and Asexual Motherhood," *Signs*, 5 (1979-80), 766-82.
 42. Even the woman who is directly responsible for Marian's fate, the maid whom Lady Waldemar deputizes to carry the girl off to Australia, is, as Marian herself insists, "a woman . . . not a monster . . . both her breasts / Made right to suckle babes" (Bk. VI, ll. 1183-84).
 43. "Body Language: Imagery of the Body in Women's Poetry," *The State of the Language*, ed. Leonard Michaels & Christopher Ricks (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980), pp. 247-263.
 44. *New French Feminisms*, pp. 255, 251.
 45. Cited by Elaine H. Pagels, "What Became of God the Mother? Conflicting Images of God in Early Christianity," *The Signs Reader*, p. 106.