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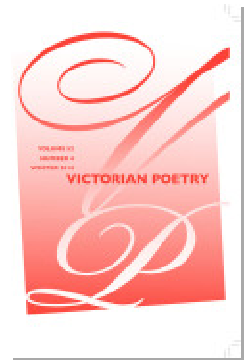

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Slavish Poses: Elizabeth Barrett Browning and the Aesthetics of Abolition

JOHN MACNEILL MILLER

Elizabeth Barrett Browning arrived late to the party. By the time her sonnet "Hiram Powers' Greek Slave" appeared in *Household Words* in 1850, a slurry of similar poetic tributes to Powers's sculpture had been published on both sides of the Atlantic. Her decision to compose poetry on the *Greek Slave*, then, was conventional in the strictest sense of the word: it shared both subject matter and conceptual preoccupations with a far larger body of work that is now more or less forgotten. On an even broader level, however, her sonnet is built upon conventions, as it purposefully examines the political potential of convention itself. Barrett Browning uses her verses to ruminate on Powers's controversial manipulation of classical ideals of femininity to ignite cultural controversy—in particular, his canny deployment of a traditional female nude to arouse indignation about slavery and sexual double-standards. In its meditations on the artistic means to political ends, "Hiram Powers' Greek Slave" constitutes an aesthetic treatise in miniature, one that plays a central but mostly overlooked role in the development of Barrett Browning's antislavery poetry.

The second of three poems on American slavery that she published during her lifetime, "Hiram Powers' Greek Slave" revisits conventional discourses about sexuality and Christianity that shape Barrett Browning's earlier abolitionist work, "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point." The ideas advanced in the sonnet provide a window onto the process by which Barrett Browning reworked the tropes of race, sex, and religion that appear in "The Runaway Slave" into the sophisticated, subversive aesthetic strategies of her final antislavery work, "A Curse for a Nation." Close attention to the forms of conventionality running through Barrett Browning's three poems thus reveals the importance of both "Hiram Powers' Greek Slave" and the statue it memorializes to Barrett Browning's formulation of an aesthetic strategy that would allow her to denounce slavery from her complex cultural position as a white, British, woman poet in the mid-nineteenth century.

The difficulties of staking out her speaking position manifest themselves most clearly in the formal and ideological intricacies of the poems themselves. As she struggled to create political poems that could proselytize for an internationally divisive cause, Barrett Browning also had to overcome conventional notions of what constituted appropriate female poetic "subjects." She had, in other words, to rework both the subject position of the white, British, female speaker and the idea of her proper subject matter. This reworking plays out in the tensions visible within the poems, where conventional discourses about female passivity and the sanctity of motherhood tug against the political points the poems advance. The same tensions are visible in the body of scholarly work devoted to Barrett Browning's abolitionist poems, which tends to focus rather single-mindedly on either the works' radical commitments or their conservative conventions. A full appreciation of these poems, however, requires attention to their extraordinary ability to turn apparently oppressive conventions to progressive sociopolitical ends.

This ability evolves over the course of Barrett Browning's oeuvre, so exploring it in detail involves tracing her changing commitments to convention across all three of her antislavery works. In her earliest abolitionist publication, "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point," Barrett Browning imposes a Marian Christian narrative on a runaway slave's story in order to locate a site of specifically feminine intervention into those earthly politics long supposed to be the exclusive sphere of men. The same tropological preoccupations reappear in "Hiram Powers' Greek Slave," where Barrett Browning theorizes the advantages of locating her abolitionist appeal not in the voice of a slave herself but instead in the persona of a conventionally "pure," white, and thoroughly Victorian woman. Moving from theory to practice, Barrett Browning deploys the strategy she formulates in her sonnet in the multi-layered formal structure of her final abolitionist poem, "A Curse for a Nation."

Radical Revisions in "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point"

With its overtly political origins—it was Barrett Browning's response to an invitation she received from abolitionists associated with the American antislavery giftbook the *Liberty Bell* in 1845—"The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point" began to receive renewed interest from critics in the 1980s, as scholars turned to its "blunt and shocking" subject matter to render explicit the radical potential of Barrett Browning's poetry.[1] "The Runaway Slave" is a dramatic monologue featuring an enslaved black woman as its eponymous speaker. Hunted down and cornered as the poem opens, she tells the story of her rape and impregnation at the hands of a gang of slave owners. She ran away, she explains, after killing the resulting baby; she now stands at Plymouth Rock, speaking defiantly to her pursuers in the final moments before her capture.

The divisive politics of the poem should be apparent; Barrett Browning herself expressed surprise that a poem so harsh and politically embittered could be published in the United States (*WEBB*, 1: 413). The poem's polemical nature extends to the critical tradition that has grown up around it. Most scholarship on "The Runaway Slave" dwells almost exclusively on the more radical aspects of the work. So, for instance, because of the direct and resentful tone of "The Runaway Slave," some critics have argued that the poem constitutes a turning point in Barrett Browning's poetics: not only does it feature a woman dramatically confronting her oppressors, but its composition coincides with the poet's personal decision to flee patriarchal power and become a runaway.[2] The poem's appearance in the *Liberty Bell*, the organ of one of the more extreme abolitionist organizations active in the United States at mid-century, provides another lens through which to understand those elements of the poem that overtly support radical emancipation.[3]

While the majority of critics focus on these and other liberatory elements of the work, a few have maintained that, whatever its origins or intentions, "The Runaway Slave" is bound into a conservatism inextricable from its aesthetic conventions. Sarah Brophy emphasizes the speaker's appeal to the pilgrim fathers, which idealizes some patriarchal political structures in the very process of critiquing others.[4] According to this suspicious reading, the poem falls victim to a trap that Karen Sánchez-Eppler has described as a feature of many "domestic and sentimental antislavery writings [which] are implicated in the very oppressions they seek to reform."[5] This risk would seem to be heightened by Barrett Browning's decision to use a black slave as the poem's speaker. Although such a decision might constitute a kind of empowerment, it appears equally vulnerable to charges of interracial puppeteering.[6]

The polarized politics scholars read into "The Runaway Slave" are more than mere interpretive invention. Instead, they highlight certain tensions within the poem itself. "The Runaway Slave" contains both radical and conservative elements, but as yet critics have mostly chosen to focus on one or the other rather than tracing the relationships between the apparently disparate positions embedded within the poem.[7] As a result, the work's experiments with conventional tropes of womanhood and religion in the service of radical abolitionism have gone unremarked. These experiments foreground important connections between "The Runaway Slave" and Barrett Browning's later antislavery writings. "The Runaway Slave," in this reading, constitutes only the earliest published example of Barrett Browning's evolving efforts to turn the energies of oppression into emancipatory channels. More specifically, it inaugurates her attempts to mobilize conservative discourses of bodily and social difference, especially with respect to motherhood and spirituality, in the service of progressive social change. Her first exploratory

attempts in this ongoing process emerge in the shifting ideological revisions discernible in "The Runaway Slave" itself.

"The Runaway Slave" begins with a gesture towards tradition—but a gesture especially interested in the black female speaker's right and ability to engage that tradition. The poem opens as a sort of revisionary inheritance narrative with an unorthodox appeal to origins: the runaway slave stands at the very spot of the mythical foundation of America, "on the mark beside the shore / Of the first white pilgrim's bended knee" (stanza 1, ll. 1–2).[8] E. Warwick Slinn has rightly seen the slave's kneeling into this indentation "as an entry into a cultural and discursive matrix—literally as a point of origin and figuratively as a medium for structural and structured mediation." He also notes the admittedly distasteful pun on the Latin *matrix*, meaning a womb or a breeding female, with the female slave here occupying the horrifyingly literal position of "breeding the system that enslaves her."[9] But this mark serves as a matrix in another, more straightforwardly symbolic sense: it is the transformative cavity in the virgin continent that marks the founding of the pilgrims' lineage, where the flight of the pilgrims ends and their fatherhood begins, "[w]here exile turned to ancestor" (1.3). Even as this vaginal indentation emphasizes the central place of women in the propagation of every patriarchal lineage, it suggests in that very fact an opportunity for female intervention in such traditions.

The slave stages such an intervention in the stanzas that follow, where she insists that her own poetic lines descend more purely from the pilgrim fathers than the literal descendents who share their bloodlines. She thus plays on the notion of questionable descent and female intervention by suggesting the bastardization of the pilgrim fathers' line—even if that bastardization is more ideological than sexual. Whereas, on the pilgrims' arrival, "God was thanked for liberty" (1.4), the descendants of the pilgrim fathers have gone wrong—the slave confesses to the pilgrim spirits that she has just run "All night long from the whips of one / Who in your names works sin and woe" (1.13–14). This use of the pilgrim fathers' names by their descendants can be read as a twisted speech act, one that parallels and perverts the pilgrims' earlier act of blessing and the foundation of the land "in freedom's [name]" (3.21). But it is worth taking literally as well, as an invocation of patronymics: the surnames of the slave owners and bounty hunters who chase the slave are the pilgrims' familial names, names whose once meaningful associations with liberty have been perverted by their misapplication to "their hunter sons" (30.204) "born of the Washington-race" (32.221) who now appear "in their 'stead" (30.204).

The slave's wresting of the authoritative power of the pilgrims' surnames nicely encapsulates the work's broader desire to link forms of conventional

authority with progressive possibility. Although the slave does call on the authority recognized by her male auditors, she never seeks their approval or consent; instead, she seizes upon their names and seeks to redefine them, using their originary power to curse the very land they founded. She has sought out Plymouth Rock, she explains to them, and now kneels there "in your names, to curse this land / Ye blessed in freedom's evermore" (3.20–21). This move is radical in the purest sense of the word: it is "relating to a root or to roots."[10] It casts off the contemporary status quo in search of a purer exemplar, in this case embodied by the lost meaning of the pilgrim fathers' names. The slave's act is also revolutionary; it involves the "recurrence . . . of a point or period of time" from which American society has departed, the turn to a prior and higher authority that, Raymond Williams has argued, has historically divided truly revolutionary movements from mere rebellions.[11] A similar radical return occurs on a more formal level here, as a relatively established convention—the poetic invocation of the pilgrim fathers in the name of universal manumission—receives renewed political vigor when invoked by an eloquent runaway slave.[12] Putting this political juxtaposition in the mouth of a slave speaker, then, radicalizes the aesthetic convention in the same way that the convention itself strives to radicalize patriarchal tradition more generally.

These sorts of revolutionary returns to roots make the poem hard to plot on any simplified political axis, as its very progressiveness relies on a conservative return to some older authority—a strategy that might account for some of the critical difficulty with identifying its politics.[13] The slave's appropriation of the names and lineage of the pilgrim fathers is a relatively clear example of a trope that, because it smacks of a reactionary appeal to established authority, gets little critical attention. But even those moments of the poem that seem overtly emancipatory can suffer from this sort of simplification. Most critics who emphasize the radical possibilities of "The Runaway Slave," for example, turn away from the early appropriation of patriarchal lineage, focusing instead on the slave's confrontation with the "hunter sons" after she flees the plantation and the site of her infanticide.[14] Here, too, critics have misleadingly read the poem through polarizing political binaries that miss substantial textual complexity.

In this confrontation, the slave voices her desire for retaliation and raises a sudden exhortation to her fellow men and women in bondage: "From these sands / Up to the mountains, lift your hands, / O slaves, and end what I begun!" (33.229–31). Despite all the critical attention it receives, this call to revolt is almost immediately overwritten within the poem itself. It quickly yields to an appeal to another originary belief system: Christianity. Instead of climaxing in violence, the runaway slave's theodicy ends in a return to the Christian framework that she questions near the start of the poem. She observes that slaves, unlike Christ,

possess "countless wounds that pay no debt" (34.238), a failure that, in a rather complicated conceit, signals a lack of divinity on the part of white slave holders:

> Our wounds are different. Your white men
> Are, after all, not gods indeed,
> Nor able to make Christs again
> Do good with bleeding. *We* who bleed
> (Stand off!) we help not in our loss!
> *We* are too heavy for our cross,
> And fall and crush you and your seed. (35.239–45)

To a reader who equates violent revolution with social progress, these lines are stirring stuff, a powerful repudiation of any imposition of Christian symbolism onto slave bodies in favor of an image of slaves crushing out the evil line of their owners. But to read these lines in such a manner is to relish an anarchic affect that the lines do not have, one that renders the end of the poem inexplicable. Why, after such a call to revolution, would the slave repent and leave her persecutors "curse-free" in the last stanza?

Rather than reading stanza 35 as a continuation of the slave's brief suggestion of a wider uprising, we should understand it for what it is: the key moment in the re-imposition of Christian signification onto the slave's story. After her call to arms (or, at least, to curses), the slave imagines the way American slavery has set up

> Two kinds of men in adverse rows,
> Each loathing each; and all forget
> The seven wounds in Christ's body fair,
> While HE sees gaping everywhere
> Our countless wounds that pay no debt. (34.234–8)

Her remembrance of what others have forgotten—the suffering of Christ to redeem mankind—prompts her to reassess her behavior and the suffering of slaves in general. What many critics want to read as the slave's rebellious salvo is actually a lament: "[W]e help not in our loss! / *We* are too heavy for our cross, / And fall and crush you and your seed" (35.243–45). This vision is one of actors who are all too human on both sides: white men incapable of making Christs of the slaves they torture, and slaves whose fleshliness causes them to fall from their crosses and thereby contribute to the cycle of violence and oppression rather than converting it, Christ-like, into a tale of universal ascension. The slave in Barrett Browning's poem narrowly avoids this fall back into secular, cyclical violence, as the empyrean nature of her final perceptions reveals:

I fall, I swoon! I look at the sky.
The clouds are breaking on my brain.
I am floated along, as if I should die
Of liberty's exquisite pain. (36.246–49)

The previously rebellious slave literally falls back into the passivity of a feminine swoon, one identified with assumption into the clouds of heaven at the moment of death. Politically, it appears that we are back where we started, trapped in a narrative that—despite a brief flirtation with violent rebellion—re-imposes conventional discourses of Christian passivity on the formerly subversive heroine. But this ending must be valued fairly within its specific location, as a move within the metaphorical register of the poem itself and as a precursor to Barrett Browning's later works that use conventional feminine imagery to argue for abolition.

The importance of this final return to a Christian framework lies within the complicated conceit that begins this last ideological about-face. The slave remarks that "white men / Are, after all, not gods indeed, / Nor able to make Christs again / Do good with bleeding" (35.239–41). This tactful metaphor, spelled out in plain language, has very particular implications within the poem, implications that scholarship thus far has ignored. The failure of white men to make Christs is relevant to the slave's understanding of her own story because God makes His sons the same way that men make theirs: by implanting them in women. Thus the white men's failure to make meaning out of their violent impregnation of the slave opens up an opportunity, a site in which the slave can leverage her own utter powerlessness as a slave and rape victim to transform her experience, reinvesting it with a reparative meaning and significance borrowed from a Christian framework. Suddenly—bypassing, for now, the endless differences between "The Runaway Slave" and the gospels—the slave's story sounds strikingly familiar. It is the story of the birth of a child to a woman by an unknown father not her lover, a child whose eventual murder is foretold as though it were preordained ("His little feet that never grew" [19.128]) and whose death paradoxically restores a sort of wholeness to human existence. At the moment of her own death and implied assumption into heaven, the slave's final act—her Christian decision to leave the slave owners curse-free—is performed in the name of her own child, who becomes a purposefully ambiguous type of the Christ child in whose name she can swear a sanctified oath of forgiveness and redemption:

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! (36.250–53)

This conclusion again revises the poem's concerns with sites for female intervention, as the slave's body, like the mark on which she kneels, becomes another matrix through which the actions of men must pass, a necessary step (like the springing onto land of the pilgrim fathers) in the transference and perpetuation of power but one that allows the possibility for some transformative agency through the slave's intermediation. The slave only arrives at the realization of this particular agency at the end of the poem, of course, and the vision is never satisfactorily fleshed out in these final stanzas. But these apparent imperfections reflect the provisional and hard-won nature of Barrett Browning's early attempts at carving out a space for an appropriate moral response to slavery without departing too wildly from her cultural position as a white female poet in Victorian Britain. The narrative and thematic elements visible in "The Runaway Slave" continue to be revised over time. Indeed, even here they are the product of an unusually complicated revision process: as Marjorie Stone and Beverly Taylor note, the speaker in the earliest draft of "The Runaway Slave" was a man (*WEBB*, 1: 413). The revision of the poem to incorporate a female slave speaker constitutes only the first of Barrett Browning's multiple revisions of her abolitionist poetics. Her later works further refine her engagement with tropes of femininity, spirituality, and slavery through the conceptual crucible of her next abolitionist poem, "Hiram Powers' Greek Slave," resulting in the complex political aesthetic of her final antislavery work, "A Curse for a Nation."

Slavery and Sex Appeal: Hiram Powers's *Greek Slave*

While "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point" remains politically unstable, engaging with a series of different ideological models to revise its own politics as its verses proceed, "Hiram Powers' Greek Slave" serves as a concise and clarifying work in which the author directly engages the roles of art, race, religion, and womanhood in the abolitionist movement. In the sonnet, Barrett Browning reflects on Hiram Powers's *Greek Slave*, a scandalous neoclassical portrayal of a nude woman in marble. Her reflections demonstrate an awareness of both the statue's complicated politics and the conventions of the poetic tributes that grew up around it, and both inform her targeted poetic intervention.

Barrett Browning's familiarity with Hiram Powers's work was at once aesthetic, political, and personal. Powers, an American expatriate, moved his family to Florence in 1835. There he eventually met and befriended the Brownings, who saw a version of the *Greek Slave* at his studio shortly after they became acquainted in May 1847.[15] By the time of his emigration, the sculptor had already made a name for himself in the American portrait market with realistic busts of high-profile Americans like Andrew Jackson, John Marshall, and Daniel Webster.[16]

For all his prior success in America, however, it was the popularity of the *Greek Slave* that made Powers into an international name.

While the *Greek Slave* comes draped in its own historical narrative—it is supposedly a representation of a Hellenic woman captured and sold into bondage by the Ottoman Empire during the Greek War of Independence—it is, strictly speaking, simply a marble statue of a life-sized naked woman. No wonder, then, that so many Victorians came to stare at it; Powers's *Slave* was by many accounts the most-viewed artwork of the nineteenth century.[17] The first marble replica of the statue, completed in 1844, sold to a retired British Army Officer, Captain John Grant, who put it on display in London at Graves' gallery in Pall Mall (Crane, pp. 204–205). The second replica began a successful tour of the United States in 1847, where it touched off a national debate about two highly controversial aspects of nineteenth-century American culture: the representation of nudity and the continued national sanction of slavery.[18]

Barrett Browning's sonnet engages with both of these issues, but it is most striking for the way it expresses a hope that the two will be linked. Barrett Browning acknowledges the desires the statue's naked beauty will generate in viewers and theorizes the possibility of harnessing those desires to progressive political change.[19] Her sonnet understands the tantalizing inaccessibility of the slave's beauty as a motivating force, picturing the slave's form standing in a liminal position "[o]n the threshold" of the "house of anguish" (l. 2), "as if the artist meant her . . . To, so, confront man's crimes in different lands / With man's ideal sense" (ll. 4–8; *WEBB*, 2:150). "[M]an's ideal sense" is, here, the perception of the beauty of the naked slave. But its ideal nature is inextricably mixed with the sexual desire it generates. Man's sense blends with men's sensuality when Barrett Browning envisions the statue carrying out its sociopolitical purpose in explicitly penetrative terms: "Pierce to the centre, / Art's fiery finger! – and break up ere long / The serfdom of this world!" (ll. 8–10).

This "fiery finger" is a motif that Barrett Browning uses more than once to unite the sexual, the spiritual, and the aesthetic. It recurs in another, far longer poetic rumination on art theory: the fifth book of *Aurora Leigh*. There, Barrett Browning imagines poetry acting like "lava-lymph / That trickles from successive galaxies / Still drop by drop adown the finger of God / In still new worlds" (Book 5, ll. 3–6), a process linked "with all that strain / Of sexual passion, which devours the flesh / In a sacrament of souls" (5.14–16).[20] In both cases she understands the female body and its correlatives as transformative conduits, as means of turning male heterosexual energy to positive ends by acting as the nexus of divine perfection and corporeal materiality. She has, in other words, eroticized and feminized her longstanding interest in the traditionally male role of "mediating poetic agent

between a debased, fallen world and a harmonious, transcendent order" (David, p. 99). In the sonnet, this newly gendered function is described in unusually explicit terms, with the statue's sex appeal serving to convert divine ethical prerogatives into more practical legislative appeals: "[A]ppeal, fair stone, / From God's pure heights of beauty against man's wrong!" (ll. 10–11).

This metaphor of penetration as a mediating function returns to and re-forms the notion of seizing on the female body as a transformative pathway between divinity and corporeality represented in the final Christian turn of "The Runaway Slave." It arrives at this altered understanding through close attention to the specific positioning—both physical and cultural—of the statue it memorializes. Powers's slave is carved so that the only thing cloaking her nearly perfect nudity—the only thing that maddeningly intervenes between the viewer and the possibility of penetration, visual or otherwise—is a manacled hand and the arc of its attendant chains, which hover delicately in front of the slave's otherwise exposed sex. Thus, in an aesthetic reversal of the grim realities of female bondage, the Greek slave's servitude visually thwarts erotic desire and makes its satisfaction an impossibility. The statue's pose enlists libidinal energy in the service of abolition by presenting bondage as a problematic frustration to, rather than enabler of, sexual satisfaction. If the male viewer wants to "[p]ierce to the centre" (l. 8) of the erotic image in front of him, he will have to "break up ere long / The serfdom" (ll. 9–10) that precludes that possibility.

Contemporary responses to the statue testify to the sexual frustration generated by this coy positioning of the chains. Grant, the first purchaser of the *Greek Slave*, wrote to Powers to express his hope that, in future renditions of the statue, the chains would be removed, or at most replaced with a comparatively flimsy piece of cord. (Powers kept the chains, though he did alter them slightly in later productions, swapping out the link chain associated with American slavery for more historically accurate rectangular manacles.)[21] Likewise, American publications debating the propriety of the *Slave*'s nudity dwelled on the scandalous possibility of having the chains removed, with one Christian publication noting: "Take off that chain—present no fiction of its being a helpless slave, and what remains but a licentious exhibition?" (Quoted in Yellin, p. 109).

The *Greek Slave* traveled with more accoutrements than just its chains, however. It was chaperoned by a decorous pamphlet assembled by Powers's close friend Miner Kellogg, the manager of the statue's American tour. Kellogg's pamphlet instructed viewers in the proper understanding of the Slave—she was to be read first in her historical context, then abstracted into a Christian ideal:

> The ostensible subject is merely a Grecian maiden . . . The cross and locket, visible amid the drapery, indicate that she is a Christian, and

> beloved. But this simple phase by no means completes the meaning of the statue. It represents a being superior to suffering, and raised above degradation by inward purity . . . [It] may be regarded as a type of resignation, uncompromising virtue, or sublime patience. (Quoted in Yellin, p. 107)

Thus viewers are instructed in the process of looking first upon the "ostensible subject" of the nude, then to the (relatively miniscule) trinkets that encode her nudity as acceptable by providing it with historical specificity. Finally, they should make the leap to moral instruction through typification.

The careful calculation of reception is equally visible in Powers's private discussion of the statue, which tends to emphasize his own agency in using contemporary visual semiotics to smuggle the nude into a country notorious for its aesthetic conservatism. He purposively cast about for a historical context that would justify his work, writing: "It is a difficult thing to find a subject of modern times whose history and peculiarities will justify entire nudity" (Quoted in Crane, p. 205). His first documented mention of his idea for the statue likewise speculates on the ways to control its interpretation and rationalize its undress. He will pose her, he writes, with

> her hands bound and in such a position as to conceal a portion of her figure thereby rendering the exposure of nakedness less exceptional to our American fastidiousness. . . . [T]he face [will be] turned to one side, and downwards with an expression of modesty and Christian resignation. That she is a Christian will be inferred by a cross, suspended by a chain around her neck and hanging resting on her bosom. (Quoted in Yellin, p. 102)

The allure of the slave was calculated far in advance to persuade a conservative audience in every detail down to the submissive positioning of her head, which is turned aside in deference to the real-world viewer.

This naked ploy has exposed the statue to over a century of political critique. For example, the racial problematic that the statue both suggests and deflects through its emphasis on the violation of white rather than black femininity arguably diverts attention away from true interracial sympathy. Although the marble statue is, technically speaking, colorless—it represents skin, drapery, chains, and lockets in the same unadorned white stone—such colorlessness might not have facilitated an imaginative racial displacement of sympathy onto black slaves. The choice not to color marble was itself ideologically loaded in the nineteenth century: it could imply both racial whiteness and ideal rather than coarsely real and sensual subject matter.[22] Powers's ambivalence about the political significance of the statue corroborates this criticism of the work as noncommittal at best. Prior

to the Civil War, the sculptor diplomatically refused to admit that the *Greek Slave* might be a commentary on the American slave system, although after emancipation he freely took credit for the progressive abolitionism of his earlier works, including the *Greek Slave*.[23]

Even aside from the chromatic politics of Powers's work, many critics take issue with the statue's objectification of both women and slaves. Jean Fagin Yellin, for example, considers the statue a shameless co-optation of older, more legitimate feminist-abolitionist images of female slavery—in particular, the female version of Josiah Wedgwood's famous "Am I Not A Man and A Brother?" cameo. "Although its nudity challenged one group of American gender conventions," she writes, "by fundamentally reversing the signification of the iconography of the antislavery feminists, Powers's *Greek Slave* pressed that powerful iconography into the service of patriarchal discourse." Yellin argues that the statue depicts both womanhood and slavery as variants of passive victimhood, idealizing that passivity so as "to valorize a response to oppression that opposed the activism urged by the free black and white antislavery feminists" (Yellin, p. 124).

These critical responses to Powers's work have set the terms of the discussion of Barrett Browning's sonnet to the *Greek Slave*. As with "The Runaway Slave," polarized political interpretations have inadvertently evacuated the objects under discussion—both the sonnet and the statue—of much of their complexity and interest. Among the handful of critical mentions of the relationship between Powers and Barrett Browning, a few scholars yoke the two together, condemning Barrett Browning's admiration and Powers's artwork in the same breath.[24] For the most part, though, critics try to save Barrett Browning from such associations, reclaiming her poetry at the expense of Powers's work by insisting that Barrett Browning's homage is really a damning critique. Yellin, for example, applauds Barrett Browning's sonnet about the statue as "implicitly condemn[ing] the Christian resignation of Powers's *Greek Slave*. Urging instead a vital political art, Barrett Browning . . . presents a critique of Powers's sculptural celebration of woman's passivity."[25]

Yellin, like so many of the critics writing about "The Runaway Slave," has been misled by isolating a single poem of Barrett Browning's and reading it without reference to her broader oeuvre. If Barrett Browning intends the sonnet purely as a critique of the idealization of female passivity, the strategies of her final abolitionist poem, "A Curse For a Nation"—which turns on the appeal of a bashful and politically hesitant female speaker—become unthinkable. While Barrett Browning does indeed express a hope for active political change in her poem, the nucleus of "Hiram Powers' Greek Slave" is its recognition of the sculptor's manipulation of conservative cultural conventions, including female passivity and the idealization of white womanhood, in ways that could promote such change.

She understands the *Greek Slave*'s "passionless perfection" as a deliberate tool employed by the sculptor towards progressive ends, something "which he lent her" (l. 5) in order to "confront man's crimes in different lands / With man's ideal sense" (ll. 7–8). The paradoxical possibilities of the statue's race and gender politics—its use of objectification to suggest emancipation, and of white marble to suggest black bodies—find a correlative in the paradoxical metaphor Barrett Browning uses to describe the statue's political power, in which oppressive power will be struck and shamed by "thunders of white silence" (l. 14). Her vision of the mechanism by which the *Greek Slave* operates, then, is the highly self-conscious one suggested by Powers's own discussion of his work, one in which the artist creates works that perform normative standards of female passivity and beauty to generate desire in the viewer. Although the politics and ethics of Powers's particular usage of such strategies may remain open to debate, what Barrett Browning admires is the statue's suggestion that such conventional postures may be turned toward the progressive cause of abolition.

The sexuality of the *Greek Slave* was, of course, widely denied not merely by its creator and tour manager but by an enthusiastic public. Barrett Browning's suggestion that the slave's "passionless perfection" might be an effective political tool finds confirmation in the unique response of the statue's admirers, a response that combines undeniable attraction with an insistent disavowal of any sexual intent in either the statue or its fans. The popular American writer Grace Greenwood, for example, noted "[t]he total absence of all voluptuousness in the person of the slave."[26] A poem by "J. E. S." appearing in the Baltimore *Patriot* in May 1848 insists that the apparent shamelessness of the statue is proof of its virtue, as

> . . . There mount
> Of need, to Virtue's cheek, no blushes deep.
> If they their scarlet mantle should spread o'er,
> 'Tis proof that Purity doth lie asleep,
> Or dead within. No! in thy wondrous store
> There's that which biddeth Lust to flee forevermore.[27]

Likewise, in the *Knickerbocker Magazine*, "R. S. C." begins another sonnet:

> NAKED, yet clothed with chastity, SHE stands;
> And as a shield throws back the sun's hot rays,
> Her modest mien repels each vulgar gaze.
> Her inborn purity of soul demands
> Freedom from touch of sacrilegious hands,
> And homage of pure thoughts. (Scrapbook, p. 39)

The R. S. C. sonnet would prove popular on the reprinting circuit, appearing with surprising frequency in American newspaper notices of Powers's statue.[28]

The striking similarities across these responses demonstrate the success of another strategic move by Powers and Kellogg, a logical trap in the style of *Honi soit qui mal y pense* whose structure would be replicated by Barrett Browning in "A Curse for a Nation."[29] A major issue in the *Greek Slave*'s national tour—especially as the statue moved farther south and west, into more provincial cities like Cincinnati—was the matter of single-sex viewing periods. Kellogg maintained a hard line against the imposition of such segregated viewings in general, reasoning that to give in to demands for gender separation on the grounds of propriety would be equivalent to conceding that there was something improper about the statue: "[T]here [is] nothing in the statue that the most delicate & modest lady should not see & study and be delighted with, but if I should set apart an hour for them it would in effect be saying that there was something they should not witness in open day & before folks" (Quoted in Wunder, p. 234). In essence, Kellogg argued that only the impure and common would see the statue as impure or common, using a kind of Pauline logic to stave off criticism and smuggle the eroticism of the slave into traditional communities. As the vast bulk of admiring poems and articles attest, fans of the statue followed Kellogg's lead.[30] In fact, the popular acceptance of the strategy nettled some of the statue's more conservative viewers. Nicholas Longworth, one of Powers's earliest patrons, described to the sculptor his personal decision not to take his wife and daughters to see the statue, complaining about one vocal admirer at the exhibition: "But I may be wrong, & that one of your bloods is right. I heard him observe, 'that none but vulgar ladies would hesitate to go with gentlemen & that vulgar ladies had no business there'" (Quoted in Wunder, p. 234).

Thus the rhetoric in which Powers's nude had been so successfully clothed took the very cultural discourse that most threatened its success—nineteenth-century American preoccupations with propriety and sexual purity—and pressed them into its service, silencing criticism by accusing critics of violating their own standards in the very act of criticizing the work. These are the aesthetic tactics that Barrett Browning identifies and admires in her sonnet to the *Greek Slave*. In her final abolitionist work, "A Curse for a Nation," she would go a step further and remediate the statue, incorporating its artistic and political structures into her own poetic form.[31]

Presumed Innocence and the Prologue of "A Curse for a Nation"

The poem-within-a-poem structure of "A Curse for a Nation" strives for the same effects as the discourse that so effectively shielded the *Greek Slave* as it moved

through the United States. "A Curse for a Nation" tells the story of a poetess figure being forced to deliver a curse to the United States for the slave system, with the entire poem spoken by the poetess herself. In the prologue she describes the arrival of an angel, who forces her to write the ensuing curse. The poem thereby continues Barrett Browning's exploration of women as agential intermediaries by beginning "A Curse" with the trope that ended "The Runaway Slave": she again puts a Marian narrative into play, figuring the female speaker as a sort of unwilling virgin greeted with the angelic annunciation that she has been chosen as the vessel of divine intervention into a corrupt world. In contrast to Barrett Browning, who famously argued in her letters for the necessity of women's speaking out publicly against slavery, this speaker is deeply opposed to international political intervention.[32] Her resistance is vital to the poem's strategy of turning conservative cultural conventions to its own progressive work, as the speaker—amanuensis, really—embodies a kind of idealized Victorian female whose instinct is *not* to write the poem, but rather to make as little fuss as possible and to admit her own weaknesses repeatedly: "I faltered" (l. 5), "I am bound by gratitude" (l. 9), "My heart is sore" (l. 18), "For I, a woman, have only known / How the heart melts and the tears run down" (ll. 39–40).[33]

In her indispensable analysis of Barrett Browning's poetic curses, Marjorie Stone rightly reads this prologue "as a calculated manoeuvre" that gives Barrett Browning "the freedom to pronounce the sort of curse women were conventionally not allowed to utter."[34] But Barrett Browning's "calculated manoeuvre" works on more levels than even Stone notes, as the poetess figure traps the reader, setting up a paradoxical structure in which the speaker's very piety, submissiveness, and compliance with normative sexual conventions require her to deliver her radically progressive message. This strategy makes criticism of her actions on any grounds—of either insufficient political activism or, conversely, unbecoming insubordination—equally impossible. When she finally gives in to the angel's demands, she does so tearfully ("So thus I wrote, and mourned indeed" [l. 49]), and the poem-within-a-poem internalizes the intense labor (to continue the bodily Marian metaphor) she goes through as she delivers it, ending each stanza with the rhythmic labor pain of the word "Write." The poetess's emphasis on her own suffering in the delivery of the curse is further reflected in the ambiguity of the curse's deictic self-reflexiveness: "This is the curse." This ambiguity plays on the implied treble entendre of bearing a curse: the poem bears the curse "over the Western sea" (l. 52) to America through an allusion to Marian childbearing, but the maternal suffering makes it seem almost as though the poetess bears the curse on her own head. Indeed, the way in which the curse is painfully borne by the speaker is, itself, a form of bondage, a doubling of the very slavery it is written

against, and an appeal to male guilt to release the submissive poetess from her labor (which, as the final "Write" of the poem implies, constitutes a recursive curse that has yet to end) by releasing American slaves from theirs.

The speaker, then—like the Greek Slave—exists to perform the role of innocent feminine propriety enslaved and violated. "A Curse for a Nation" replicates the structural logic of Powers's statue while making its political message explicit, turning the formal strategies that Barrett Browning identified in the ambiguously pornographic statue to more directly progressive ends. At the same time, "A Curse for a Nation" constitutes a kind of revision or development of the elements Elizabeth Barrett Browning first experimented with in 1846 in "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point," a refinement of a poem whose confusing political contradictions demonstrate its own struggle towards self-revision. In "The Runaway Slave," Barrett Browning adopts the voice of a slave and mother in an attempt to locate a site of intervention in the perversion of ideals from their proper ends; she lands on the idea of a potential for transformation located in the application of Christian narratives to the objectified, exploited female body. Barrett Browning's understanding of the role of the artist in creating and deploying such conventionalized female bodies becomes self-conscious in "Hiram Powers' Greek Slave," a sonnet whose formal turning point around the *volta* reflects the turning point in the poet's own understanding of how to link representations of femininity and slavery together to achieve progressive political ends. She deploys the strategy she had already theorized in her final abolitionist work, "A Curse for a Nation," where—rather than speaking through a female slave—Barrett Browning invents a white female speaker internal to the poem. The runaway slave has been replaced by a Victorian lady cruelly enslaved by the double-bind of her own progressive conservativism: her submissiveness, spirituality, and moral purity compel her to break the very political silence that these traits would seem to demand, creating a figure whose message will work toward the political aim of emancipation by appealing to the very audience least likely to approve of it.

It is perhaps surprising, then, that "A Curse For a Nation" enjoyed neither the political response of a work like *Uncle Tom's Cabin* nor the widespread popularity of Hiram Powers's *Greek Slave*. Instead, it is primarily remembered for the vituperative reaction it engendered when it appeared in *Poems Before Congress* in 1860. There, British and continental critics alike misinterpreted it as a curse for British isolationism in the face of the Italian struggle for independence.[35] More than anything else, the vindictive response to "A Curse" demonstrates the profound influence of publication history on the reception and interpretation of a literary work. "A Curse For a Nation" was first published in 1855 in the pages of the *Liberty Bell*, where its particular strategy of poetic displacement would have

had little impact on an already sympathetic audience who would have welcomed the political message of "A Curse" with or without the complicated framing device of the prologue. Its first British periodical publication in the *Athenaeum* omitted the prologue containing the fictionalized poetess persona, effectively sabotaging the poem's aesthetic engine—much to Barrett Browning's dismay (Donaldson, p. 40). Finally, it was published in *Poems Before Congress*, where it came at the end of a book that favored direct political criticism over the sly displacement of "A Curse," rendering the strategic subtlety of the poem invisible to an audience already infuriated by pages of "unpatriotic" sentiment.

These unfortunate historical and material contingencies have obscured the experimental sophistication of Barrett Browning's abolitionist writing and the peculiar aesthetic economy in which "A Curse for a Nation" and the *Greek Slave* participated. Both works strove to alter the contemporary sociopolitical realm by circulating representations of traditional figures as surrogates that allowed the figures signified—here, women and slaves—to break free from the very traditions the works represented. This play of substitution between art and life was especially visible in the American tour of the *Greek Slave,* where it became a favorite subject of conservative critics and a promising field for exploitation by enterprising locals. Throughout the statue's circuit, abolitionists trumpeted the work and pointed out the hypocrisy of being moved by the *Greek Slave* while remaining deaf and dumb to the actual existence of American slavery. They marveled at "the wondrous hardness of that nature which can weep at the sight of an insensate piece of marble . . . and yet listens unmoved to the awful story of the American slave!" (Scrapbook, p. 14). The abolitionist struggle to determine the meaning of the *Greek Slave* depended on the traffic and circulation of this bodily representation of slavery in hopes of a unique sort of slave "trade," one that exchanged the relative harmlessness of slave images for the grim reality of slavery. In response, papers like the *New York Saturday Emporium* gleefully reversed the equivalence implied by abolitionists, twitting them for their unwillingness to free the *Greek Slave*: "Strange to say, the abolitionists have paid frequent devoirs to this enslaved Greek, and we have not heard that a single habeas corpus has been obtained for her release" (Scrapbook, p. 13).

The unpalatable politics of such gibes should not distract from the phenomenon they astutely point up: namely, that progressives were actively endorsing and disseminating representations of the very realities they strove to abolish. In its simplest form, the promotion of these representations by activists bears all the marks of the consciousness-raising that remains a mainstay of political activism today. But the controversies surrounding both Powers's statue and *Poems Before Congress* suggest the ways in which the elastic relation between the real and its representational surrogates could become a major space of social, political, and

even economic contention. While conservative satirists were playfully insisting that to admire the representation of an atrocity and despise its reality constituted its own form of hypocrisy, entrepreneurs were seeking to profit from the slippery relation constructed by the statue between reality and its representation, staging expositions in which live women posed as Hiram Powers's *Greek Slave*. These *poses plastiques*, often situated close to the actual venues for the display of the *Greek Slave*, actively competed with the artwork for viewers, substantially reducing ticket sales in cities like Baltimore and Washington, D.C. (Wunder, pp. 227–229).

This competition for viewers between the *Greek Slave* and live models suggests the challenges of using aesthetic surrogates toward progressive ends.[36] The progressive political impact of the *Greek Slave* depended on an unstable combination of spectatorial desire and its displacement: the viewer had to be struck by the erotic appeal of the nude while at the same time feeling horrified by the lustful gazes to which her body would be subjected in the Turkish slave market. The *Greek Slave*, in other words, had to reflect the gaze back onto itself—or at least deflect it onto its vilified Oriental cousin (Kasson, p. 55). Grace Greenwood exemplifies this process (and independently observes the statue's obstructed penetration) when she comments on the courage of the Christian slave beneath the evil gaze of the Ottoman Turk: "Though [the Turk's] bold, licentious gaze may linger upon her unprotected form, it cannot pierce into her heart's sanctuary of sorrow" (p. 346). Observers are touched only if they manage to project this kind of spectatorial self-loathing onto the fictional gazers against whom the slave shields herself, so that the fear of their own complicity in the slavers' possessive desires results in an even more vehement abolitionist response. But there is a fine line between guilt-ridden gazers and thoughtless gawkers, and the success of live models indicates the ease with which this delicate aesthetic mechanism can be lost on an undiscerning audience, simplified into a sadomasochistic fantasy that aligns the viewer's gaze with the orientalized Turk's.

The contemporary critical response to *Poems Before Congress* likewise illustrates how Barrett Browning's attempt to position a conventionalized female surrogate between her conservative audience and the radicalism of her own political opinions could backfire. In a barrage of savage reviews, critics repeatedly returned to the incompatibility of Barrett Browning's attested womanhood with the political topics she attempted to cover; they refused to recognize the distinction between the living female poet and her fabricated female speaker, using the conventional feminine signs of the latter to conventionally dismiss the former. "A Curse for a Nation" demonstrated a "hysterical antipathy to England," critics cried, and Barrett Browning was an "illogical renegade" who showed the dangers of allowing women "to interfere with politics" (Quoted in Arnstein, pp. 38–39).

If the subtle positioning of Barrett Browning's political aesthetics failed to reach her historical audience, however, that should not undermine scholarly appreciation of her subversive experiments with cultural conventions. Her antislavery poems index her continuous experimentation with the ways Victorian notions of womanhood, motherhood, and religion might be bent to progressive ends. This experimentation culminates in the extraordinary promise of "A Curse For a Nation": the paradoxical promise of a return to normative female passivity only through radical political action. Transforming the symbolic register of her earliest abolitionist work through the aesthetic techniques suggested by the *Greek Slave*, Barrett Browning barters away an image of the proper Victorian lady in exchange for emancipation—emancipation of both the American slaves and of Barrett Browning herself from the constraints of "proper" feminine versifying. Taken together with her earlier antislavery works, then, "A Curse for a Nation" suggests Barrett Browning's advancement of an aesthetic in which artists create such conventional images strategically, a method that put representations of traditional female bodies and roles into transatlantic circulation only to mask its contributions to an ever more progressive, emancipated reality.

Notes

The author would like to thank Carolyn Williams, as well as the anonymous reviewer at Victorian Poetry and the participants in the "Abolitionist Productons" panel at the North American Victorian Studies Association in 2011, for their valuable feedback on earlier drafts of this essay.

1. Gardner Taplin, *The Life of Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1957), p. 194. Though Taplin used the phrase to dismiss the poem's aesthetic value, precisely these qualities facilitated its rise to critical prominence several decades later. For a summary of scholarly treatments of the poem, see the headnote in the authoritative *Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, ed. Sandra Donaldson, vol. 1, *General Introduction and "Poems, 4th edn (1856),"* ed. Marjorie Stone and Beverly Taylor (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2010), pp. 415–416. All analyses here use the versions of EBB's poems found in this edition, hereafter abbreviated *WEBB*. For the transatlantic origins of "The Runaway Slave," see *WEBB*, 1:409–15.
2. EBB received the invitation in 1845, but probably did not complete a draft of the poem until after she rejected her father's injunction that she never marry and emigrated with Robert Browning in the fall of 1846. See *WEBB*, 1:413. As Stone and Taylor there note, however, EBB may have begun trying her hand at the composition as early as February 1846. For readings that connect "The Runaway Slave" and Barrett Browning's biography to argue for the poem's radicalism, see especially Helen Cooper, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Woman and Artist* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1988), pp. 98–100; and Simon Avery and Rebecca Stott, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (London:

Longman, 2003), pp. 107–109. For a broad survey and critique of such biographical readings of EBB's relation to male and female traditions, see Linda Shires, "Elizabeth Barrett Browning: Cross-Dwelling and the Reworking of Female Poetic Authority," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 30, no. 1 (2002): 327–343. Shires's reading of Barrett Browning's performative experiments with gender positions aligns with my own.

3. *WEBB,* 1:409. Important evaluations of the poem as a surprisingly radical work include Ann Parry, "Sexual Exploitation and Freedom: Religion, Race and Gender in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's 'The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point,'" *Studies in Browning and His Circle* 16 (1988): 114–26; and Marjorie Stone, "Elizabeth Barrett Browning and the Garrisonians: 'The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point,' The Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, and Abolitionist Discourse in the *Liberty Bell*," in *Victorian Women Poets*, ed. Alison Chapman (Cambridge, UK: D. S. Brewer, 2003), pp. 33–55.

4. See Sarah Brophy, "Elizabeth Barrett Browning's 'The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point' and the Politics of Interpretation," *VP* 36, no. 3 (1998): 273–288. For a broader reading of Barrett Browning's career as reactionary in its attempt to appeal to patriarchal society, see Dierdre David, *Intellectual Women and Victorian Patriarchy: Harriet Martineau, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, George Eliot* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1987).

5. Karen Sánchez-Eppler, *Touching Liberty: Abolition, Feminism, and the Politics of the Body* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1993), p. 16.

6. For a discussion of the ethics of speaking from the slave's perspective, see especially Laura Fish, "Strange Music: Engaging Imaginatively with the Family of Elizabeth Barrett Browning from a Creole and Black Woman's Perspective," *VP* 44, no. 4 (2006): 507–524; Susan Brown, "'Black and White Slaves': Discourses of Race and Victorian Feminism," in *Gender and Colonialism*, ed. Timothy P. Foley, Lionel Pilkington, Sean Ryder, and Elizabeth Tilley (Galway: Galway Univ. Press, 1995), pp. 124–138; and Marjorie Stone, "Between Ethics and Anguish: Feminist Ethics, Feminist Aesthetics, and Representations of Infanticide in 'The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point' and *Beloved*," in *Between Ethics and Aesthetics: Crossing the Boundaries*, ed. Dorota Glowacka and Stephen Boos (Albany: SUNY Press, 2002), pp. 131–158. Although they offer varied and nuanced perspectives on the issue of interracial voicing, all three writers ultimately consider Barrett Browning's treatment of slave subjectivity more progressive than exploitative.

7. Majorie Stone is almost alone in devoting serious attention to the conventionality of "The Runaway Slave," although she remains most interested in places where EBB "departs from convention," rather than the work performed by the topoi themselves. See her excellent analysis in "Elizabeth Barrett Browning and the Garrisonians," pp. 51–54.

8. This text comes from the authoritative variorum edition found in *WEBB*, 1:421–30. Stanza and line numbers for this and other poems are cited parenthetically.

9. E. Warwick Slinn, *Victorian Poetry as Cultural Critique: The Politics of Performative Language* (Charlottesville: Univ. of Virginia Press, 2003), p. 58.

10. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. "radical, adj. and n.," http://www.oed.com.proxy.libraries.rutgers.edu/view/Entry/157251 (accessed December 19, 2012).

11. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. "revolution, n.," http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/164970 (accessed December 19, 2012); and Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1983), p. 272.
12. For the abolitionist conventions of the *Liberty Bell*, see Stone, "Elizabeth Barrett Browning and the Garrisonians," 51–54. For nineteenth-century poetic engagements with the pilgrim fathers, see Tricia Lootens, "States of Exile," in *The Traffic in Poems: Nineteenth-Century Poetry and Transatlantic Exchange*, ed. Meredith L. McGill (Piscataway: Rutgers Univ. Press, 2008), pp. 15–36.
13. For another interpretation of this critical difficulty—one that understands the confusion as the result of an oversimplified humanist politics—see E. Warwick Slinn, "Elizabeth Barrett Browning and the Problem of Female Agency," in *Tradition and the Poetics of Self in Nineteenth-Century Women's Poetry*, ed. Barbara Garlick (New York: Rodopi, 2002), pp. 43–55.
14. See, for example, Avery and Stott, pp. 110–111; Cooper, p. 122; David, pp. 139–40; Linda M. Lewis, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Spiritual Progress: Face to Face with God* (Columbia: Univ. of Missouri Press, 1998), pp. 191–192; Parry, pp. 121–125; and Slinn, *Victorian Poetry as Cultural Critique*, pp. 87–88.
15. *"Poems" 4th edn (1856), continued*, ed. Marjorie Stone and Beverly Taylor, *WEBB*, 2:247.
16. Sylvia E. Crane, *White Silence: Greenough, Powers, and Crawford, American Sculptors in Nineteenth-Century Italy* (Coral Gables: Univ. of Miami Press, 1972), pp. 180–81.
17. Sara Hackenberg, "Alien Image, Ideal Beauty: The Orientalist Vision of American Slavery in Hiram Powers's *The Greek Slave*," *Victorian Newsletter* 114 (2008): 31.
18. For in-depth analyses of the statue's history and appeal in America and abroad, see Vivien M. Green [Fryd], "Hiram Powers's *Greek Slave*: Emblem of Freedom," *American Art Journal* 14, no. 4 (1982): 31–39; and Joy S. Kasson, *Marble Queens and Captives: Women in Nineteenth-Century American Sculpture* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1990), chap. 3.
19. Female viewers could of course experience desire in the statue's presence as well. The penetrative and reproductive imagery of Barrett Browning's sonnet, however, operates within an implicitly heterosexual logic.
20. *"Aurora Leigh," 4th edn (1859)*, ed. Sandra Donaldson, *WEBB*, 3:120.
21. Jean Fagin Yellin, *Women and Sisters: The Antislavery Feminists in American Culture* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1989), p. 122.
22. See Charmaine A. Nelson, *The Color of Stone: Sculpting the Black Female Subject in Nineteenth-Century America* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2007), esp. chaps. 3–5. For critiques of the statue along these lines, see Jennifer DeVere Brody, *Impossible Purities: Blackness, Femininity, and Victorian Culture* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1998), pp. 67–69; and Eve Kosofksy Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2003), pp. 80–81.
23. See Green [Fryd]; and Nelson, pp. 92–93.
24. See for example Brody, pp. 67–69.

25. Yellin, p. 124. For examples of other readings of the sonnet as a critique of Powers's reactionary work, see Dorothy Mermin, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning: The Origins of a New Poetry* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 170; and Stone, "Between Ethics and Anguish," pp. 132–35.

26. Grace Greenwood, *Greenwood Leaves: A Collection of Sketches and Letters* (Boston, 1853), pp. 344–45.

27. Scrapbook, "Notices of Powers' Work," 1847–1849, 1873–1876, Hiram Powers Papers, 1819–1953, Bulk 1835–1883, Series 8, Box 14, Folder 1, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution,Washington, DC, 81. Hereafter cited as Scrapbook. The scrapbook is now available online through the Terra Foundation Center for Digital Collections: http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/container/viewer/Scrapbook-Notices-of-Powers-Work--284830.

28. Notices that include the sonnet appear in Scrapbook, pp. 39, 105, 106, 110, 111, and 155.

29. Kellogg responded to critics in the *New York Morning Courier* by quoting the motto of the Order of the Garter in the statue's defense—see Richard P. Wunder, *Hiram Powers: Vermont Sculptor, 1805–1873. Vol. 1: Life* (Newark: Univ. of Delaware Press, 1991), p. 226.

30. These articles and tributes fill pp. 3 through 240 of the Powers Scrapbook, but because of space cannot be discussed fully here. Poetic tributes appear in Scrapbook, pp. 11, 15, 29, 30, 38, 39, 47, 55, 62, 74, 80, 81, 83, 89, 99–100, 109, 118, 122, 138, 144, 156, 168, 195–96, 214, 227, 228.

31. I borrow the term "remediation" to describe such a process from Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000).

32. Barrett Browning writes: "Oh, and is it possible that you think a woman has no business with questions like the questions of slavery? Then she had better use a pen no more. She had better subside into slavery . . . herself . . . and take no rank among thinkers and speakers." See Elizabeth Barrett Browning to Anna Brownell Jameson, Florence, April 12, 1853, in *Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, ed. F. G. Kenyon, 2 vols. (London, 1897): 2:110–11.

33. *"The Battle of Marathon" (1820), "An Essay on Mind, with Other Poems" (1826), from "Prometheus Bound, and Miscellaneous Poems" (1833), from "The Seraphim and Other Poems" (1838), "Poems Before Congress" (1860), Other Previously Published Prose and Poetry*, ed. Sandra Donaldson, headnote by Sandra Donaldson and Marjorie Stone, *WEBB*, 4:601–2.

34. Marjorie Stone, "Cursing as one of the Fine Arts: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Political Poems," *Dalhousie Review* 66 (1986): 167.

35. Both David J. DeLaura and Robert W. Gladish have done an admirable job of documenting the misinterpretation of "A Curse for A Nation." See DeLaura, "A Robert Browning Letter: The Occasion of Mrs. Browning's 'A Curse for a Nation,'" *VP* 4 (1966): 210–12; and Gladish, "Mrs. Browning's 'A Curse for a Nation': Some Further Comments," *Victorian Poetry* 7 (1969): 275–80. For an argument that the ambiguity of the poem's national references are deliberate guerilla attacks on Britain, see Leonid M. Arinshtein, "'A Curse for a Nation': A Controversial Episode in Elizabeth Barrett

Browning's Political Poetry," *Review of English Studies* 20, no. 77 (1969): 33–42. For a thorough, helpful exploration of nineteenth- and twentieth-century receptions of "A Curse," including an argument that the poem's ambiguity demonstrates a broader concern with human rights, see Sandra Donaldson, "'For nothing was simply one thing': The Reception of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's 'A Curse For A Nation,'" *Studies in Browning and His Circle* 20 (1993): 137–44. For an evaluation of the poem and the poetess figure within the context of *Poems Before Congress*, see Katherine Montwieler, "Domestic Politics: Gender, Protest, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Poems Before Congress*," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 24, no. 2 (2005): 291–317.

36. Stone sees this challenge in the opening lines of "Hiram Powers' Greek Slave," which alludes to the difficulties that arise when "[i]deal beauty" is used in, and perhaps distracts from, portrayals of "[t]he house of anguish." See Stone, "Between Ethics and Anguish," p. 136.