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## Transferring the Mantle: The Voice of the Poet Prophet in the Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Emily Dickinson

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Transferring the Mantle:  
The Voice of the Poet/Prophet in the Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Emily Dickinson

by

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A Thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Gardner-Webb University  
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## Introduction

Robert Atwan & Laurance Wieder created a unique anthology in 1993 called *Chapters into Verse*, a collection of English poetry inspired by specific scriptures in the Bible. Within this collection, there were surprisingly many poems written by the American poet, Emily Dickinson. Often mislabeled by readers as an atheist, Dickinson's poetry reflects a strong sense of spirituality that countered traditional beliefs of the nineteenth century, and upon further exploration of her verse, one could argue that far from being an atheist, she in fact demonstrates prophetic qualities and a vast knowledge of the Bible. Although much twentieth century scholarship has either ignored, misrepresented or shortchanged Dickinson's biblical knowledge and Congregationalist heritage as central to her poetry, current scholarship is taking another look at her poems within her religious heritage and culture. In a similar way, the devotional poetry of her poetic mentor, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, who is widely recognized as a devout Christian poet, has often been minimized as lacking "struggle" as Dorothy Mermin asserts. (Dieleman 65). Many feminist scholars in the past had a hard time reconciling the strength of the woman poet within the traditional hierarchy of a patriarchal Christian dogma. For many, separating the woman from her faith seemed to be necessary to consider her work innovative, groundbreaking, or liberating. Within the last twenty years, people have begun to reconsider how faith shapes not only poetic voice, but a woman's poetic prophetic voice. In light of current scholarship, I will examine the poetics of Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Emily Dickinson within each poet's Congregationalist background and cultural context. By examining how Barrett Browning influenced Dickinson, I maintain that Elizabeth Barrett Browning was not only a poetic mentor and inspiration to Dickinson, but also instrumental in helping Dickinson develop her poetic prophetic voice, much like the mentor/protégé relationship between the prophets Elijah and

Elisha in the Bible. Consider this Dickinson poem, based on 2 Kings 2:12-14, in Atwan & Wieder's anthology:

Elijah's Wagon knew no thill  
 Was innocent of Wheel  
 Elijah's horses as unique  
 As was his vehicle--

Elijah's journey to portray  
 Expire with him the skill  
 Who justified Elijah  
 In feats inscrutable -- (244)

The biblical text of the poem recounts the reaction of the prophetic protege Elisha upon his mentor, Elijah's miraculous ascension into heaven by the means of a fiery chariot. After which, he exclaims, "My Father, my father, the chariot of Israel and the horsemen thereof!" tears his own clothes in half and assumes the vacated mantle of his mentor. Upon putting on the cloak, Elisha calls out to God, "Where is the Lord God of Elijah?" then strikes the water on the bank of Jordan, which parts for him to cross over. Reading the biblical text in conjunction with the Dickinson poem enhances the meaning of the poem by giving it context. At this moment, the protege is without the mentor, suddenly taken by a chariot that didn't need wheels or a thill in which to contain the celestial horses. The only evidence that it happened is the witness of the protege, Elisha and the cloak Elijah leaves behind. Putting on the cloak gives the protege the authority to speak prophetic truth, and when he asks, "Where is the Lord God of Elijah?" God demonstrates his presence by allowing him to part the waters to cross on dry ground. Thus, the

protege is left not only with the testimony of the event and the prophetic authority of Elijah's mantle, but also the divine gift of prophecy to carry on the mentor's work. In the nineteenth century, the idea of a poet functioning as a prophet to speak to the moral instruction of society was commonplace, but it was usually a role assumed by men; however, Elizabeth Barrett Browning defied tradition by assuming the role of a poet prophet through her intellectual and spiritual authority. I maintain that much like the Elijah/Elisha relationship, Emily Dickinson looked to her poetic hero, Elizabeth Barrett Browning as an artistic and spiritual mentor, and upon Barrett Browning's sudden death, Dickinson assumed her mantle to carry on the work of the female poet prophet.

Chapter 1, "The Prophet in the Poet," explores the concept of the prophet from the Judeo-Christian perspective and applies George Landow and John Holloway's ideas about Victorian sage discourse to situate Barrett Browning and Dickinson within not only a common definition of a prophet, but also within the literary discourse of the nineteenth-century. Although Holloway and Landow primarily focus on men as prophets, I maintain that Barrett Browning and Dickinson also exemplify their concept of sage discourse and a poet as prophet. Because both British and American cultures were largely Christian at this time, I narrow the prophetic definition to those worldviews, although many faiths have their own concept of the sage or prophet as a speaker of spiritual truth. In addition, through the work of Marie Ann Mayeski, we see how the early church father, Rabanus Maurus conceptualized the idea of prophecy being a gift from the Divine that can be enhanced and honed through study. Maurus also cites biblical examples of female prophets to highlight the Bible's claim that prophecy is a gift not bestowed exclusively to men. Applying both Maurus' ideas of women being accepted as prophets and the concept of their receiving a prophetic gift from God that they can nurture through study and hard

work is key to understanding how Barrett Browning and Dickinson simultaneously hone their craft of writing poetry and develop their prophetic voice.

Using the framework of the definition of the prophet, I examine in Chapter 2, “Congregationalism: Weaving the Mantle,” how the history, theology, and worship of Congregationalism weaves a mantle of authority under which Barrett Browning and Dickinson can prophesy through poetry. Using the works of Rev. Charles Jefferson and Dr. L. Rumble to understand the theology of Congregationalism, in conjunction with the works of religious historians William Warren Sweet, John von Rohr, and Sydney Ahlstrom, we get a clearer sense not only of the theological underpinnings of the overarching polity of Congregationalism, but also the historical implications of its impact on religious and social thought. As a mantle, Congregationalism did not give the poets the *ability* to speak, but rather the *authority* to speak their versions of poetic and spiritual truth. From a literary standpoint, I examine scholars Simon Avery and Rebecca Stott to see from a biographical perspective how Barrett Browning fits into her time, while Karen Dieleman, Linda Lewis and Cynthia Scheinberg examine how Congregationalism affected her literary works.

In Chapter 3, “Elizabeth Barrett Browning: Assuming the Mantle,” I claim that Barrett Browning uses the hymn and sermon formats, integral liturgical elements of dissenting faiths that adhered to the polity of Congregationalism, to develop her prophetic poetic voice. I focus on earlier poems and her prophetic progression as it relates to using liturgical influences, and the pinnacle of her poetic prophetic voice as a woman poet demonstrated in her epic poetic novel, *Aurora Leigh*. Barrett Browning initially uses the culturally accepted vehicle of women’s hymn writing in poems like “The Measure, Hymn IV,” but she later experiments with the dialogical sermon format and innovative speakers in her poems *The Seraphim* and *Drama in Exile*. In her

more mature poetics, she exhibits her prophetic voice most clearly as she addresses social ills in “The Cry of the Children,” “Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point,” “Curse of a Nation,” and *Aurora Leigh*. Relying on the scholarship of hymnody by Ian Bradley, C. Michael Hawn and June Hadden Hobbs, as well as the Barrett Browning scholarship of Simon Avery, Rebecca Stott, Karen Dieleman, Heather Ciancola, Linda Lewis, Cynthia Scheinberg, and Alexandra Worn, I examine a progression of Barrett Browning’s development as a poet prophet through the authority of her tremendous intellect and Congregational liturgical forms in an effort to elevate not only women as poets within the literary community, but also women as prophets with the authority to call out the sins of her nation and deliver warnings to those who will not turn from them.

Chapter 4, “Transferring the Mantle: From Protege to Prophet,” traces the impact of Barrett Browning’s untimely death on American poet Emily Dickinson, who was not only dealing with the death of her poetic mentor, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, but she was also exploring her own calling to poetic prophecy. Using Elizabeth Petrino and Ann Swyderski’s discussion of Dickinson’s Barrett Browning fascicles, I examine individual poems within the elegiac fascicles, and demonstrate how Dickinson was not only affected by Barrett Browning’s death as a fan, but also as a poet. Questioning her own poetic calling, Dickinson works through the fascicles to grow in her security to take up the mantle vacated by Elizabeth Barrett Browning and become a new poet prophet for her time.

Chapter 5, “Emily Dickinson: An American Prophet,” chronicles Dickinson’s development of her own poetic prophetic voice through the same liturgical and prophetic lens as Barrett Browning. I examine the nuances of American Congregationalism and how the sermons and oratories of nineteenth century America gave not only ministers, but also secular thinkers



speakers, and writers, the sense that America itself was a prophetic voice to the world. As such, they explored the blessing and the responsibility that the prophet voice had to expound on truths to his/her audience. Exploring the work of Victoria Morgan, who examines Dickinson's use of the hymn format within hymn culture, and Hawn and Hobbs and their discussion of the language of intimacy in nineteenth century women's hymns, I demonstrate how Dickinson both employs and deviates from the hymnic form, notably in meter and content. In addition, using Beth Doriani, Jennifer Leader and Sharon Leiter's work, I consider how Dickinson also used the sermon format to speak prophetically to her audience, often using the plain style of the Puritan sermon to raise complex questions about spiritual truth. Her poems often served as neatly packaged sermons, using the traditional Congregationalist sermon format of presentation of text, doctrine, and application in their structure. By utilizing these traditional formats, Dickinson concurrently works within the familiar forms of worship and against what she sees as errant dogma.

By looking at not only the individual talent of Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Emily Dickinson, but also their uniquely shared Congregationalist history, personal backgrounds, sense of calling to a poetic vocation, and search to find a place as a prophet, we can appreciate how both women struggled in unique ways to communicate to their audience what they believed to be a prophetic message through the medium of nineteenth-century poetry.

## Chapter 1: The Prophet in the Poet

For the sake of this discussion, I will focus on the Judeo-Christian concept of the prophet because Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Emily Dickinson were personally and culturally influenced by the Judeo-Christian worldview. The seer or prophet is an archetype that is evidenced throughout the centuries in many major religions. From the Christian perspective, many people think of prophets as wilderness dwellers, miracle workers, or prognosticators--some kind of hairy, honey-eating, eccentric man whose charisma is infectious, but whose lifestyle is a little different. Although the prophet as seer is a type of prophet, often in the Old Testament, another type is the prophet as teacher and moral instructor. The New Testament privileges this type of prophet, as Christ the Great Prophet is the fulfillment of Old Testament future-predicting types of prophecy. With the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, the need of the future seeing prophecy is minimized and the need of prophetic moral instruction is maximized. How can people correctly interpret the nudging of the Holy Spirit? The prophet is one to help encourage and exhort believers as they try to make sense of the world and their places in it. Considering the poet as prophet, one must first see what the prophet is and how the poet fits within that context.

In contrast to the common belief that the prophet is a seer, Dr. W. Harold Mare in his article *Prophet and Teacher in the New Testament Period* suggests that the Hebrew word, nabhi refers to a “spokesman, speaker, prophet” (139). This definition could not only apply to one through whom God reveals warnings or future events, but also one who God uses as a speaker to comment on moral instruction. Mare further uses extra biblical references, notably the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Apocrypha and the Pseudepigrapha to further clarify the ancient understanding of the role of the prophet. According to references in the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Old Testament prophets

revealed “things through God’s holy spirit;” however, the understanding of God’s holy spirit is somewhat ambiguous; the general understanding is that the prophets were under the “control and direction of God” (Mare 140). The prophet seems to be more of an instrument of God, a sort of mouthpiece through whom God speaks whatever truth he needs for the benefit and instruction of God’s people. Although the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha have little to offer about the nature of the prophet, there is indication that he is a spokesman for God (Mare 141). As such, the prophet was to exemplify “. . . truthfulness and on the reliability of his words” (Mare 144). Much like Samuel and Jeremiah in the Old Testament, the prophet was expected to “. . . command and teach the people concerning their responsibility to the statutes of the Lord” (Mare 144). What Dr. Mare notes is that the both biblical and extra-biblical ancient sources seem to agree on the function of the prophet as a predictor of events, a spokesperson of God, and a person whose role is to teach; however, sources differentiate on the New Testament idea of the prophet as the miracle worker (146). In the New Testament, the connection between miracles and the prophet is limited to Jesus and the apostles, whose ability to perform miracles validate them as having the authority under the Holy Spirit to exemplify a new kind of role as a prophet. When the Holy Spirit descends on believers, however, it opens the door of opportunity for others to be a different kind of prophet, an idea that Marie Anne Mayeski explores in *“Let Women Not Despair”: Rabanus Maurus on Women as Prophets*.

Focusing on the medieval theologian Rabanus Maurus, Mayeski examines the view of women as prophets in the early Christian church. Maurus makes a point in his theological exegesis of Judges to note Deborah as a prophet, and he says that she is “. . . no small encouragement to the sex of women and it challenges them not to despair because of the weakness of their sex, since they are able to become capable of the gift of prophecy. Let them

know and believe that this grace is given according to purity of mind rather than according to the differentiation of the sexes” (qtd in Mayeski 238). The significance here is twofold—1) that prophecy is something that can be earned, rather than an immediate gift, and 2) according to Rabanus, it is a gift bestowed regardless of gender, rather a purity of mind and spirit. In I Corinthians and Romans, Paul validates the importance of prophecy, and explains two critical elements for people to use in discerning a true prophet: an intelligible message and a building up of the Christian community; these two rules later serve as a standard by which Christians measure the prophetic calling, making it a more practical ministry that proclaims moral truths to the Christian community (Mayeski 239). Within the framework of the Pauline texts, we can see how the understanding of what it meant to be a prophet gradually emphasizes the moral teacher precedence over the seer. In a similar way, when the prophet’s words and deeds matched, the prophet was authenticated to the community. Paul warns that false prophets reveal themselves through self-interest, abusing hospitality, or requesting money (Mayeski 240). Based on the outward signs, believers had the power to judge prophets by their own conscience instead of trusting the words of a prophet who claimed truth. Ironically, as important as the prophet is to the community, he or she often seems to be set apart from it. Being in the position of outsider gives the prophet the clarity to speak truth without the distractions of community culture, politics, or even personal relationships. Emily Dickinson scholar Beth Doriani observes

. . . nonconformity to societal expectations sets the prophet apart from the wisdom giver, at least in the scriptural tradition. While the latter figure positions himself or herself within the community, the prophet in the Scriptures usually speaks from a place just outside the community . . . Distance rather than social acceptance seems to be prerequisite for prophecy, as it was for John the Baptist and

Jesus. (24-25)

In the New Testament prophet, we see a tension not explored in the prophecy of the Old Testament. Maurus explains that “The genus of prophecy is two-fold; one side belongs to the teaching, the other, to divination. But while divination flourished more in the past times, teaching grows more important in the present” (Mayeski 240). The Holy Spirit’s indwelling gives all believers an opportunity for divination, much like a cord to a lamp and an electrical outlet. The power source is there if the owner will take the time and energy to plug it in. Without the intervention of the owner, neither the lamp nor the outlet can fulfill its purpose. In a similar way, Maurus continues, “When the teaching prophet pricks the consciences of those who hear, he then indeed, reveals hidden things, the hidden things of the hearts of those who listen” (Mayeski 242). Likewise, theologian Cassiodorus relates, “Clearly the prophet builds up the Church when through the function of this foretelling he makes wholly clear matters exceedingly vital that were unknown” (Mayeski 242). Here Cassiodorus suggests that when the authentic prophet interprets the scriptures, clarifying important truths to build up the Church as a whole, the moral instruction and understanding of the Christian community and the individual Christian in his/her walk, then the prophet has accomplished a divine goal for clarity and truth; thus, based on Cassiodorus’ explanation of the role of the prophet, subsequent generations understood that prophecy was a gift of “. . . interpreting the Scriptures in a manner that was both pastoral and practical” (Mayeski 242). Just as a gift of the spirit could be given in a wide range of measure, Maurus agrees with the theologian Ambrose that one could receive the gift of prophecy “according to the measure of limits of the recipient;” likewise, from the theologian Origen, Maurus takes the idea that Paul “assigns the function of prophecy to the eye because (prophecy) is to the mind--which is the interior eye--what seeing is to the eye” (Mayeski

243). Together, these two concepts invite the believer to ask if prophecy is totally from God or partly from human exertion, talent, or skill (Mayeski 243). In other words, can a person work toward a better understanding and stronger gift of prophecy by exerting study, work, and a development of talent? Part of the gift may be divine, whereas the other part of it may be nurtured and developed. Rabanus Maurus certainly seemed to think so when he writes, “Therefore it is possible for us to apply ourselves to zealous study (*studium*) for this kind of prophecy and it is in our power to give ourselves to this work (*operam*), and if we do this according to the measure of our faith, that prophecy which is given by God may be added to us. This has been said to us about the grace of prophecy” (Mayeski 244). By applying his understanding of Deborah within the context of his theological views of not only the definition of the prophet, but also how the believer achieves the gift of prophecy, we can infer that because prophecy is a gift that can be nurtured through study, and that women are capable of studying Scripture, then prophecy would be a gift that God could grant to a woman *and* augment it based her willingness to study and labor for the purpose of exhorting and teaching the Christian community God’s truths. Although Mayeski notes that Rabanus Maurus is a largely forgotten church father, overlooked for those that posed a more traditional patriarchal view of theology and a woman’s place in the church, his insightful exegesis suggests that there were others with a more enlightened view of not only prophecy, but also women and their place in the faith (250-251). Although scholars have often explored the idea of a male poet prophet, especially in the Victorian era, Maurus’ theological context demonstrates that women were also certainly capable of fulfilling the role of the poet prophet.

Scholar John Holloway noted the ability of the writer to serve in the role of a sage in his book *The Victorian Sage*. Holloway suggests that the function of the sage was to speculate “. . .

what the world is like, where man stands in it, and how he should live” (1). Using the writings of Carlyle, Disraeli, George Eliot, Newman, Arnold, and Hardy, Holloway discusses how these authors invited readers to have a fuller understanding of the world, man’s place, and how he should live (2). Much like Rabanus Maurus who saw the prophet’s role as inspiring others to find hidden truths, Holloway sees that the Victorian sage has a responsibility to open the eyes of the audience and see truths that they were blind to before; however, he only mentions how male poets work within the framework of sage discourse (9). By looking at old things in a new way, the sage has the power to fuse the divine with human imagination expressed by the written or spoken word to reveal truth, but contrary to Holloway’s limited definition of the male, I maintain that based on Rabanus Maurus and Dr. Mare’s understanding of the prophet, women poets were just as adept in fulfilling the role of prophetic speaker in the nineteenth century.

George Landow’s *Elegant Jeremiahs* expands on this idea by reminding us that all cultures have wisdom literature and that “. . . wisdom literature solaces and aids men and women in difficult times because it rests on the assumption that the world, no matter how difficult a place in which to live, has meaning and order” (22). Landow further relates that “when a people can no longer follow its own wisdom literature, then it needs the writings of the sage. When a people ignores the wisdom that lies at the heart of its society and institutions, the sage recalls that people to it” (23). Although the message may not be new, the sage stands apart from society, observes it and uses his/her voice and creative ability to open the eyes of people to the blindness of their own sin. Landow notes that even people without orthodox beliefs sees the role of the prophet as a divine messenger by using the observation of T. H. Huxley, “the term prophecy applies as much to outspeaking as foretelling; and, even in the restricted sense of ‘divination,’ it is obvious that the essence of the prophetic operation does not lie in its backward or forward

relation to the course of time, but in the fact that it is the apprehension of that which lies out of the sphere of immediate knowledge” (Landow 25). The universality of the idea of the prophet apart from traditional biblical understanding implies that regardless of faith, there is a human need to listen to a voice crying in the wilderness that can inspire people to reject, repent, and renew their own shortcomings in an effort for self and social improvement. Landow suggests that there is a prophetic pattern common to the Victorian sage, much in the vein of the Old Testament prophets: interpretation, attack on the audience, warning, and visionary promise (26-27). In response to the changing Victorian world--advancements in technology, science, colonial expansion and industrialization, the calming effect of a shared faith using biblical allusions, imagery, tropes and schemes helped the sage reach a changing audience and help those people make sense of a changing world, man’s changing place, and how people should live. By relating to the audience through the Bible, the prophet can interpret events, call out the audience, give warning and promise a hope for renewal or redemption. Although both Landow and Holloway offer a male perspective of the prophet in Victorian literature, how do we reconcile not only the power of the female poet, but also her ability to serve as a prophetic voice in her own right?

By examining the rise of Congregationalism and the subsequent opportunity for women to explore alternative ways to write and worship, we can see how, much to the delight of Rabanus Maurus, female poets such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Emily Dickinson fused both their divine gift of prophecy and their innate and developing poetic talents to reach readers by helping them understand their world, their place in it, and how people are supposed to live.



## Chapter 2: Congregationalism: Weaving the Mantle

At its most basic definition, a mantle is a loose cloak or outer garment; symbolically, the biblical mantle is an outward visual sign of God's calling. Several times in Old Testament literature, the mantle is worn by the prophets to demonstrate an authority to share prophetic truth. Perhaps the most famous prophetic use was that of Elijah, whose hairy mantle was so familiar to his contemporary audience, that King Ahab identified Elijah merely by a description of his garment (Evans). Eli Evans recounts that the mantle of Elijah was not some sort of talisman, but rather an outward signifier of the authority of the prophet. Thus, when Elijah drops his mantle before being whisked away into heaven, his *power* is not transferred to his pupil Elisha, but when Elisha picks up the mantle, his prophetic calling is accepted, and the *role* of prophet is transferred from mentor to student (Evans). The mantle does not give the prophet the power of the message, but the authority to speak the message to the people. Although the power of the message is always there, until the mantle is assumed, the prophet does not have the authority to speak. Using this analogy, one could draw some distinct parallels between the Victorian poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning and American Romantic poet Emily Dickinson in that even though they possessed the poetic talent and prophetic message as artists; as women, they had to be granted the authority to assume their roles as poet prophets by taking up the symbolic mantle. In other words, they had to have a platform in which to communicate their message to a receptive audience. To appreciate the mantle of the poet prophet, it is helpful to examine the threads that weave together to make the prophetic voice a possibility in the nineteenth century. The mantle is the symbol of prophetic authority, and the prophet who wears it bears the responsibility for disseminating prophetic truth. I maintain that the mantle of the poet prophets Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Emily Dickinson is composed of the history, theology, and worship style of Congregationalism, a broad term used to define dissenting churches that wanted

to simplify worship, maintain individual church autonomy, and break with the strict hierarchal structure of the Roman Catholic and Anglican churches. Over time, the Dissenters, branched into different denominations, but for the purpose of my discussion, I will use the broad term of “Congregationalists” to reference people, regardless of specific denominations, who followed the theological tenants of simple, scriptural based worship in autonomous, self-governing churches. This is the context of Congregationalism used by religious historians John von Rohr, William Sweet, and Sydney Ahlstrom, and literary scholar Karen Dieleman. Understanding these unique threads individually helps in understanding how these threads work together to give the poet prophet a voice. As nineteenth-century poets, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Emily Dickinson lived in a unique time in which humanity’s relationship to God, the natural world, and each other were being explored and questioned in new and diverse ways; as a result, new and personal ways to approach God and a faith community developed, and with new freedoms came new opportunities for women to engage in the Bible and community worship. Karen Dieleman asserts that although women were not included as preachers in European Congregationalism in the nineteenth century, they were able to help select ministers, visit candidates for membership and give faith commitment testimonies to the church on behalf of a candidate for membership; in short, Dieleman states, “In other words, Congregationalist churches took the words of women seriously” (50). A tie that binds both poets is a strong upbringing in the study of scripture and Congregationalist teachings, which provided a forum for each poet to explore her voice. To fully understand how new directions in religious thought provided a foundation on which these poet prophets could gain a vocal footing, one must first discover how Congregationalism was born and nurtured in European religious thought.

## Threads of History

When the Roman Empire converted to Christianity, it took the message of Christianity and “converted the simple message of our Lord into a cumbrous and mysterious thing which only ecclesiastical experts could understand” (Jefferson). With the intricacies of the message came a complexity of traditions, rites, and an elaborate hierarchy of clergy that served as a governmental system that followed the lines of the Roman government (Jefferson). According to nineteenth-century theologian Rev. Charles Edward Jefferson, “Under the sway of this hierarchy, the virtues and graces of the Christian life in many places drooped and died, clergymen in appalling numbers became dissolute and idle, while the masses of the people floundered in ignorance and superstition.” God had not changed over time, but man’s corruption of the church into more of a business or means for personal gain at the expense of the faithful made many people disillusioned of the organization and structure of the church. The dissenters were determined to restore New Testament simplicity to worship and relationships--with God and each other. Jefferson, in his work, *Congregationalism*, accounts of men who tried to fight against the corruption and bureaucratic nature of the organized church, often to their own personal peril and sacrifice--men like John Wycliffe, John Huss, and the Italian priest Savonarola, who were willing to lay down their lives in protest for a worship that was more aligned with the New Testament. These men were a few of many who paved the way for German priest Martin Luther’s pivotal “95 Theses” which were written early in the sixteenth century, and these ideas germinated a new strain of religious thought that would forever change the spiritual landscape of the world.

The seeds of what would later be Congregationalism were planted, but ironically, the birth of Congregationalism was not the product of a union, but a separation between the English

monarch King Henry VIII and the Roman Catholic Church in 1534 (Rumble). King Henry wanted to usurp Papal authority and declare himself the head of the Church of England, but essentially keep religious practices and worship the same; thus, he resisted the ideas of Protestant reformers which resulted in very little change for the masses (Rumble). Upon the succession of his son, Edward VI, the boy king was guided by council of regency, which happened to be controlled by the reform party who wanted to convert the Anglican church from Catholic to Protestant in its theology and worship styles (Sweet 10). Under Edward's reign, and the subsequent influence of his council of regency, official Prayer Books, which were Protestant in nature, were published, as well as changes in worship style that included using English in the service instead of Latin, making the sermon a more focal point in the service, and adding congregational singing (Sweet 10). Unfortunately, just as Edward's reign was short-lived, so was tolerance of Protestant worship.

After Edward's untimely death, his sister Mary, a devout Catholic with a bitter grudge, assumed the throne and married King Philip II of Spain; these Catholic monarchs wanted to eradicate any trace of Protestantism and those who had become known practitioners and outspoken advocates for Protestantism fled to Germany and Switzerland or faced horrible persecution (Sweet 11). In another twist of fate, Mary dies, and her sister, the once disregarded daughter of disgraced Anne Boleyn, becomes queen. Elizabeth I brings favor to the Protestants again, and those expatriates returned spiritually revived with even more extreme notions of Protestantism as practiced in the reformed congregations of their homes while in exile (Sweet 11). These repatriated Englishmen spread their message to the homeland and gathered support for reforms that would simplify the worship style and organization of the Church. Had Elizabeth not favored the stately and grand religious ceremonies of the Anglican Church, the Puritans, and

later the Congregationalists, might have been radically different (Sweet 11). Elizabeth wanted to protect the worship style so much that she did not permit any freedom of worship whatsoever; those who did not prove obedient subjects to her rule as defender of the faith would be treated as criminals, excommunicated or imprisoned (Sweet 12). Her unwillingness to bend on religious issues paired with the religious experiences of the exiled English abroad became a catalyst for the creation of Puritanism and ultimately Congregationalism.

Although the Protestants were glad to be home, they could not undo what their hearts and souls led them to believe, and they felt that Elizabeth's desire to return to worship as blueprinted by her brother Edward was not adequate in purifying the church (Rumble). Some people were content to work within the structure of the Anglican church and slowly change it from within, but others believed that the church could never truly be purified within the Anglican church structure; these Independents desired a break from the Anglican church to form new congregations where they were free to make their own covenants with God and each other in an attempt to find among themselves people worthy to lead them (Rumble).

Following Elizabeth, James I and his son Charles proved to be marginal leaders, but they did continue to support strict adherence to Anglican worship. While some Puritans looked to the New World as the greatest hope for religious freedom, others stayed in England hoping to make a change in their homeland. Under Charles I, the political and religious conflicts between the monarchy and non-Anglicans came to a head when Charles I began to transition the Anglican church back to its Catholic roots (von Rohr 21). For the English people, who for generations had not practiced a nationalized Anglo-Catholic form of worship, the time was right to fight back against the king, and joining forces, the Scots, Parliament, and the Puritans waged war against the king in the English Civil War (von Rohr 22). Under the direction of Puritan Oliver

Cromwell, Lord Protector of the Commonwealth, Congregationalism was allowed to flourish until Cromwell's death and the subsequent restoration of Charles II to the throne in 1660, after which they lived in persecution until William and Mary restored religious liberty with the Act of Toleration of 1689 (von Rohr 25-26). Throughout the long 18th century, Congregationalism was allowed to grow, and grow it did through the Enlightenment period. A cultural emphasis on reason and God's gift of reason to man fits nicely within the ideas of man's place in the world and relationship to God and continuing scientific discoveries and advancements. History and culture nurtured new ideas that flourished within the Congregationalist framework and theology.

According to Rev. Jefferson, there were four factions that broke with the church, each more extreme than the one that preceded it; these four factions represent the scope of Puritanism. The first revolt was the Episcopal Revolt--these people adhered to the church's worship style and tenets but believed that the corruption could be purged by ridding itself of not only the Pope, but also Romanesque ceremonies and traditions. Jefferson describes the second faction as those who wished to have their own clergy and laity, these eventually became Presbyterians. A third more radical faction believed that the head of the church was Jesus Christ, not Queen Elizabeth, and that a church body should be a true democracy with Christ as its head, and all other decisions belonging to the collective will of the church body (Jefferson). These were the Separatists, and though they had cast off every governing element of the organized church, they maintained the creed, rites, and clergy (Jefferson). The final faction, the Quakers, were even more radical--these people rejected all forms of organized church governance, creeds, symbols, and sacraments in favor of worship at its purest form--only God and man. The third

faction, the Separatists, are the group which ultimately became divided into Baptist and Congregationalist denominations.

Collectively, the broad spectrum of Puritanism not only made its religious mark on the theological world, but it also made an imprint on the political and cultural landscape of human history. According to religious historian Dr. Sydney Ahlstrom, “the impact of the Puritan century on English civilization is incalculable” (97). Although we tend to relegate our Puritan ancestors to a uniquely American stereotype of severity, hard work, staunch devotion, and a pioneering spirit; in fact, the influence of the Puritans was just as organically European as it was Colonial American. To further emphasize his point, Ahlstrom quotes notable English economic historian, R. H. Tawney, “The growth, triumph, and transformation of the Puritan spirit was the most fundamental movement of the seventeenth century. Puritanism, not the Tudor succession from Rome, was the true English Reformation, and from its struggle against the old order that an England which is unmistakably modern emerges” (97). Ironically, across the “pond” the colonies experienced a similar struggle between religious factions and their struggle with and against other communities for religious recognition, survival, and acceptance.

### **Threads of Theology**

Weaving the mantle of the poet prophet not only involves the threads of history, but it also involves the threads of theology. What made Congregationalism the perfect paradigm for the female poet prophet was the liberation of the intermediary of the priest as the go-between between a believer and God. By elevating the laity to the role of “priest,” women are given freedom to be a part of the governing body of the Congregationalist church although their leadership often fell just short of the role of preacher. The core principle of Congregationalism is that the believer has immediate access to the throne of God (Jefferson). In addition, the Bible

is deemed the ultimate authority, not a governing body or ecclesiastical tradition (von Rohr 26). Congregationalists believe in a person's ability to reason and use that reason to interpret scripture, and that once God restores a person to Christ, then the person receives a gift of enlightened reason (von Rohr 27). Once restored, the person becomes a "priest" who is able to reach God directly, as opposed to using a priest or clergy as a mediator. Rev. Jefferson states, "Every believer is a priest and has the right to enter the holies of holies and commune with the Eternal. To every seeking child of God is given directly wisdom, guidance, and power." To reciprocate in this covenant relationship between God and his child, the believer must take upon himself/herself the responsibility to carry out God's business by managing church affairs and engaging in personal spiritual devotion and reflection (Jefferson). Ultimately the congregation decides what is best for the church body in worship style, leadership, activities, and administration. As a more democratic body, no one interpretative voice had more authority than the others of the community (Dieleman, *Religious Imaginaries* 49). Members were qualified not by gender or formal education, but by the Holy Spirit to participate in the community; in addition, any member regardless of gender could be called to any church office as deemed fit by the Congregational body (Dieleman, *Religious Imaginaries* 49). Whereas women in other faiths might be relegated to restricted roles in the church, in the Congregationalist church, women enjoyed a more active participation in church life and public worship. Scholar Karen Dieleman observes, "... the entire dynamic involving Bible study, sermon, and preacher underscored the belief that collective investigation in a dialogic community would be ... 'better for Truth'." (Dieleman, *Religious Imaginaries* 49). This active participation by all congregational members was nurtured and encouraged by personal devotion and study and not restricted by gender. Members were qualified and called by the Holy Spirit to offices within the



congregational body (Dieleman, *Religious Imaginaries* 49). Although Elizabeth Barrett Browning never commented on her position of women as preachers, because of the democratic nature of Congregationalism and the dialogic nature of the worship experience for all members of the community, she would have certainly felt more freedom as a woman within this worshipping body as opposed to the Anglican or Roman Catholic, which did have more restrictions on women (Dieleman, *Religious Imaginaries* 49).

### **Threads of Worship**

As history and theology intertwined to create Congregationalism, the method of its expression was most definitely worship. Because the Puritans wanted to simplify and purify worship to its most basic components, Congregationalism privileged the Word as demonstrated in the scripture and the words of man to explicate it. Without the trappings of fancy robes, rites, and visual clutter, they believed that worshipers could focus on what really mattered--God's Word and humanity's language being used to explicate it to believers. According to Dieleman, "The entire Congregationalist worship experience embodied a confidence that God and his saving grace are not hidden in language but made explicable by it. Because of this high regard for the Word/word, the liturgy privileged the verbal over other forms of religious expression" (30). As such, the sermon was the focal point of the service, but the verbal expressions of prayer, hymns, and Bible readings were all integral to praise, worship, and spiritual growth (Dieleman 30). In addition, the purpose of sermon went beyond informing the congregation; the purpose was to transform or ". . . to serve as an instrument in the hands of the Spirit for radical change and renewal" (von Rohr 43). Likewise, prepared prayers were discouraged in favor of spontaneous public prayers which demonstrated a genuine expression from deep within (von Rohr 45). Another unique element of worship was the informal question and answer time or

“prophesyings;” during this time, those inspired by the Spirit would have extemporaneous interpreting of the Scripture within the service (voh Rohr 44). The privileging of the verbal and elevation of women as active participants in the congregational body are two key elements in creating a framework in which the female poet could use her gift and platform to speak to the church body.

In addition, the Congregationalist practice of singing hymns later becomes a means by which the female poet could develop her spiritual voice in worship. As we will later see, the hymnic form which early on was limited to choral readings of the biblical Psalms, later allows for the poet to express truths that are founded on scripture. According to Ian Bradley, in his book *Abide With Me: The World of Victorian Hymns*, “In the nineteenth century, hymns were seen as a central and mainstream literary and musical form. The genre appealed to poets, academics and distinguished classical composers as well as to a host of distinguished amateurs. . .” (xii). Hymns were used to transition from choral singing by a choir to congregational singing by the audience, which coincided with an upswing in interest in teaching singing to not only school children, but also adults (Bradley xiii). In addition, hymns were not confined to the liturgy of a worship service, but pervaded the home, school, and community (Bradley xiii). In the nineteenth century, hymns were a cultural phenomenon that indicate the power of religion to permeate every facet of personal, religious, and community life. In the Victorian mind, fusing religious faith and poetic talent seemed to be a natural extension of artistic expression. As noted by Kirstie Blair in her work, *Form & Faith in Victorian Poetry & Religion*, Victorian scholar and writer Charles Kingsley maintains, “Without faith there can be no real art, for art is the outward expression of firm coherent belief” (1). Kingsley’s observation seems to be reiterated by Barrett Browning’s belief that “Christ’s religion is essentially poetry--poetry glorified” (Lewis 9).

Although twentieth century scholarship has minimized or dismissed the religious nature of Victorian poets like Elizabeth Barrett Browning as, how Dorothy Mermin suggests, “somewhat simplistic and naive in their treatment of spiritual issues. . .,” modern scholars such as Karen Dieleman and Linda Lewis take another look at the theological context of the poems (Avery 27-28). Using the hymnic form proves to be a first step in Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s poetic development of a prophetic voice. In her book, *Women’s Poetry and Religion in Victorian England*, scholar Cynthia Scheinberg notes the close ties between poetry and scripture. John Keble, nineteenth-century Anglican theologian and poet, estimated that about half of the holy scriptures were written in verse, and that “. . . it is sufficiently clear that a kind of relationship exists between those subjects which God has ordained to prepare the way for his Gospel and the dispositions and tone of mind of those whom we honour as pre-eminently as poets or at least as disciples of the poets. . .” (Scheinberg 32). Keble suggests that the sheer volume of verse in the scripture validates the fact that God uses the poets to convey his Truth; as a result, Keble relates, “. . . Therefore, I cannot help believing that it was in more than one way that the Hebrew seers and poets prepared their nation to receive the later revelation of Truth” (Scheinberg 32). Using the poetic form, in tangent with the freedom of Congregationalist theology and worship, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and later, Emily Dickinson were each able to wear the mantle of authority and use her poetic voice to speak transcendent prophetic truth not only unique to her time and culture, but to humanity as a whole.

### Chapter 3: Elizabeth Barrett Browning: Assuming the Mantle

In Elizabeth Barrett Browning's seminal work, *Aurora Leigh*, the speaker, Aurora describes her early learning and the impact that her father's teaching has on her life. When her father wraps her in a man's doublet in Book One lines 727-728, he gives her an outward signifier of her inner ability (Avery and Stott 30). The oversized doublet serves as a mantle of sorts, which gives the speaker authority to use her God-gifted intellect. As a woman, she needs that male doublet to grant her permission to gain knowledge in a man's world--not because of any limitation inherently imposed by God, rather by the limitation of society in allowing her to have knowledge. In a similar way, the mantle woven by the history, theology, and worship styles of Congregationalism is assumed by the poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning as a signifier of authority to use her innate ability and carefully honed intellect to speak prophetically to her audience. Much like the speaker Aurora's father, who looked beyond gender to recognize and encourage Aurora's intellect, Barrett Browning's father, Edward Barrett began the process of developing his daughter's poetic prophetic voice by giving her the same early education as his son (Avery and Stott 30-31). Avery notes that the challenging classical studies, such as Greek and Latin, routinely offered to young men were often considered too challenging for women; however, Edward Barrett continued to encourage his daughter's insatiable thirst for learning by hiring private tutors to advance her education; in doing so, he ". . . committed an act of cultural transgression which overtly challenged the established relations between knowledge and gender" (Avery and Stott 30). Scholar Anthony J. Elia, in his article "An Unknown Exegete: Uncovering the Biblical Theology of Elizabeth Barrett Browning," examines Barrett Browning's handwritten notes in her personal Bibles to glean not only her understanding of scriptures, but also how her marginalia contribute to her later poetic works. Elia notes that those marginal notes demonstrate

that Barrett Browning was not only brilliant and talented, but also motivated to not only understand texts, but also use language to create literary works that were not only beautiful, but also intellectually stimulating (Elia 9). In addition to studying Latin, Greek, and the classics, she was also well-read in the early Christian writers, and in her own Bible often demonstrated the breadth of her knowledge of theological content and biblical languages through the handwritten margin notes in her personal Bible (Elia 9). Elia observes that Barrett Browning often wrote notes in Greek and Hebrew, and upon studying those handwritten notes, one could get a sense of “EBB’s inner searching, deep and life-long commitment to learning and curiosity, her scholarly rigor, and devotion to the Bible; this last point for Barrett Browning could only be thoroughly understood by studying the original tongues” (11). Not only does Barrett Browning demonstrate a desire to learn the languages merely to demonstrate her intellectual prowess, but she uses them to linguistically engage with biblical text so that she might glean the full intent of the words for a better understanding of Truth. By writing in these languages in her own Bible, she reveals an ability to *think* in Greek or Hebrew. Had Mr. Barrett not recognized and encouraged her intellectual genius, the bloom of her full potential might not ever have been realized.

Because of her vast knowledge and poetic talent, Barrett Browning was able to develop her prophetic voice spiritually in tandem with a stylistic progression of various genres, namely the hymnic form and sermons. Through this progression we see how Barrett Browning experiments with a variety of genres and fulfills the role of prophet as described by Holloway to understand man’s world, his place, and how he should live (2). In her 2012 book, *Religious Imaginaries: The Liturgical and Poetic Practices of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Christina Rossetti, and Adelaide Procter*, scholar Karen Dieleman examines how these three poets infused their poetry with the liturgical practices of their respective faiths. Drawing on Dieleman’s work,

we can see how Barrett Browning uses the didactic, conversational nature of Congregationalist worship to shape her poetic voice. Recent scholarship has reevaluated Barrett Browning's relationship with the Congregationalist denomination, and although Barrett Browning's pre-marriage worship participation was almost exclusively in Congregationalist gatherings, her post-marriage letters do not name any Congregationalist chapels (Dieleman 25). Critics use this fact to suggest that Barrett Browning moved away from orthodox worship; as Simon Avery claims that during Barrett Browning's time in Italy, she "took up the firm dissenting stand of staying at home to read and interpret the gospels by herself" (qtd in Dieleman 25). Although her vast knowledge and intellect would suggest that she was certainly capable of doing that at home as well as in any church, other scholars claim that she often participated in communal worship when her health permitted (Dieleman 25). One reason for Barrett Browning's failure to mention worship in Congregationalist services was because, according to W. B. Selbie's study on church history, that in greater Europe, there just were not any Congregationalist churches (Dieleman 26). Because Barrett Browning was less concerned with denominational affiliation and more concerned with biblical adherence, she was just as happy worshipping in places where, as the Free Church of Scotland's creed proclaimed, "God is her Author, Christ is her King, and the Bible is her law." (qtd in Dieleman 26). As a result, Barrett Browning often intimated to her sister Arabella through her letters that she was either looking for or happy to find a Scotch church in her neighborhood (Dieleman 27). Barrett Browning longed to worship in a place that simply focused on the Bible as its authority and encouraged its members to dive deeply into the Word to arrive at truth. In reality, she became someone impatient with the bickering among Christians as demonstrated in an 1834 letter to Henry Stuart Boyd in which she states she was "weary of controversy in religion. . . The command is—not, 'argue with one another.'—but,

‘love one another.’ . . . They who lie on the bosom of Jesus, must lie there TOGETHER!” (qtd in Avery 29). Although Barrett Browning was raised in the Congregationalist denomination, in her later years, she demonstrates more of a tie to the Congregationalist polity as expressed in a variety of independent churches. In fact, she claims “[I am] a believer in a Universal Christianity,” and “I could pray anywhere & with all sorts of worshippers, from the Sistine chapel to Mr. Fox’s [Unitarian Chapel]” (Dieleman 25). Under the mantle of Congregationalism, she also was able to flourish as a prophet of moral instruction as defined by Rabanus Maurus--one who developed as a result of not only divine gift, but also intense work and study.

### **The Prophet’s Prelude**

When we think of religious poetry, we often think in terms of soaring epics, the biblical Psalms, or the works of Milton or Dante. Rarely do we think of hymns as having literary merit. In fact, many people think of hymns as musical tunes as opposed to religious poetry that can be set to music and sung. The earliest versions of religious text set to music for the purpose of corporal worship were the biblical Psalms set to music, called psalmody. Over time, people began to experiment with using their own words, often connected to a biblical text, set to music for use in a worship experience; these were called hymnody. In Victorian Morgan’s book, *Emily Dickinson and Hymn Culture*, Morgan cites Cheslyn Jones’s definition of the hymn as corresponding to “those ritual situations when the congregation acts as a group, whether to reply to the word of God or to utter praise and entreaty. The hymn acts as a mirror in which the congregation can see itself” (qtd in Morgan 24). In addition, “the containing structure of hymn metre found in congregational hymnody and the act of singing reinforces the representation of an agreed or communal version of the divine” (Morgan 26). Eighteenth-century minister and hymn

writer, Isaac Watts was instrumental in transforming the way people worship by relaxing the strict adherence to singing the biblical Psalms (Morgan 26). Watts' hymns drew from scripture but did not attempt to simply paraphrase it; as a result, hymns combined "the personal mode with a more liberated and looser expression of spirituality. It was the congregational hymns, more than the singing of the psalms, which held sway in the period of religious revivals during the early to mid-nineteenth century" (Morgan 26). In addition to content, Watts' hymns set the standard on the hymnic form: short, direct in structure and approach, usually written in the Hymnic Common Metre in a 4-3, 4-3 formulation, demonstrates a more personal faith experience than the general expression of scriptural paraphrase, and employs a plain style instead of ornate language to communicate truth simply to the audience (Morgan 28).

To delineate the difference between poems and hymns, Morgan uses Tom Ingram and Douglas Newton's 'acid test' questions as described in the introduction of their 1956 anthology *Hymns as Poetry* (31). Ingram and Newton asked, "Does this express any kind of relationship between the worshipper and God?" and "Was this hymn ever sung, or was it at least written for singing?" (qtd in Morgan 31). The fact that Ingram and Newton used these two questions to sift through what would be considered "hymns" in their collection speaks to the broad range of poetry that could be adapted as hymns in a worship experience.

Although there was great controversy and push back to transitioning from actual biblical passages set to music to an individual poet's own words and ideas set to music and sung by the church body, over time, the hymn offered a metrical freedom that the psalms did not (Dieleman, *Religious Imaginaries* 40). One concern was that moving away from singing the Psalms in favor of singing original hymns could be a threat to scriptural authority and religious stability (Dieleman, *Religious Imaginaries* 41). However, the hymns that became popular during the



nineteenth century were more than religious expressions in a church service, they were the active, physical way in which the congregation could participate in the worship service. Dieleman observes that the physical act of singing, using the lungs, mouth, voice, muscles, creates a “body memory” which is instrumental in making a physical connection to the experience of the service (Dieleman, *Religious Imaginaries* 38). For Congregationalists, the hymn provided yet another opportunity for the Word to be explicated through the words of the hymn.

Originally confined to the marginal sects, which encouraged congregational involvement, hymns became more mainstream in the nineteenth century, and more popular because of their beautiful words, doctrinal truths, and powerful tunes (Bradley xvi). In fact, scholars C. Michael Hawn and June Hadden Hobbs note that although hymn singing as understood by modern Christians didn’t really get its start until the early nineteenth-century, we notice a transition within the Anglican church from singing variations of the Psalms to original hymns; toward the mid-nineteenth century, hymn singing as we know it became a more universal normal liturgical practice (71). Ian Bradley notes that the Victorians were responsible for taking the hymnic form and turning it into what we think of today—“the folk songs of the church and the most powerful single medium for the transmission of Christian doctrine and the expression of religious feeling, speaking both to committed believers and to the much larger ranks of half-believers” (xvi). In addition, women were allowed to write hymns as a part of congregational hymn books for collective worship, and these hymns were often noted for their emotive appeal.

One linguistic phenomenon with women’s hymns was the intimacy used to describe the Savior/believer relationship. According to Hawn & Hobbs, “. . . many female hymnists described their relationship to God in exactly the same terms that authors of secular poetry used

to describe earthly relationships” (62). An example of this is Charlotte Elliot’s “Just As I Am,” a British hymn which included a part of Ephesians 3:18 in a later edition: ‘Just as I am, of that free love, / The breadth, length, depth, and height to prove ... / O Lamb of God, I come!;’ ironically, this is the same phraseology Barrett Browning would use to describe her passionate love for Robert Browning in Sonnet 43, her most familiar love sonnet (Hawn & Hobbs 62). Whereas people today often confuse intimacy with sexuality, Hawn & Hobbs suggest that for the nineteenth century mindset, intimacy was much more complex and broad in scope than a purely physically passionate understanding. For example, Hawn and Hobbs recount an especially tender hymn written by Harriet Beecher Stowe entitled “Still, still with Thee” that depicts an incredibly close relationship with God (64). An editor for the 1911 edition of the Methodist hymnal felt that perhaps it was “‘very suitable for private use’, but adds, ‘I doubt if this hymn ever becomes popular for the public congregation;’ the editor’s delineation between public and private sphere suitability demonstrates the idea of the woman’s domestic sphere being a place for intimacy and passionate devotion, whereas the man’s public worship sphere would be more restrained” (qtd in Hawn & Hobbs 64). Dieleman agrees with this distinction as she notes that most hymns penned by women were about more emotive topics such as weakness, humility, and fear, and they were often found at the end of the hymnal in the “Private and Family Worship” section; in contrast, men wrote the hymns with more intellectual or rational power (Dieleman, *Religious Imaginaries* 41-42). Thus, even though women could write hymns, culturally, there was an expectation that they stick to their own topics to avoid controversy in the collective body.

Another challenge was that the hymns published by the hymnist would belong to the congregational body, where the work would be subjected to editing without the author’s consent;

hymn writing further constrained the hymnist by offering just a few metrical variances, which limited creativity for a poet looking for innovation (Dieleman, *Religious Imaginaries* 43). Despite its limitations, Elizabeth Barrett Browning chose to use the hymn format for some of her early religious poetry. We see the traces of the hymn format not only in the titles or subtitles of many of her early religious works, such as “A Supplication for Love, Hymn I,” “The Mediator, Hymn II,” “The Weeping Savior, Hymn III,” and “The Measure, Hymn IV” but also through the hymnic meter and devotional voice of the poems; in fact, many of the poems not designated as hymns were constructed in the same meter and with the same devotional voice (Dieleman, *Religious Imaginaries* 43). Through her engagement with this format, we see not only a progression of style, but also a progression of substance. Building on the scholarship of Dieleman’s *Religious Imaginaries*, Linda Lewis’s *Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s Spiritual Progress: Face to Face with God*, and Cynthia Scheinberg’s *Women’s Poetry and Religion in Victorian England: Jewish Identities in Christian Culture*, which specifically address the religious nature of Barrett Browning’s poetics, in conjunction with the biographical scholarship of Simon Avery and Rebecca Stott, and Heather Cianciola’s explication of Barrett Browning’s devotional poetry, I will examine the poetic progression of Barrett Browning as she develops her prophetic voice, proving that she is very adept in functioning within both the emotive and intellectual spheres. Her unique position as a female poet prophet demonstrates that she has not only the immense intellect necessary to claim herself an authority as a prophetic voice, but also the emotional tenderness to move her audience to action.

What was appealing to Barrett Browning was perhaps the fact that she knew from her own personal worship experience the emotive power of the hymn--how it moved the congregation to feeling and engaged believers in the worship experience; in addition, she could

see possibilities for communicating her scriptural interpretation through the hymn (Dieleman, *Religious Imaginaries* 43). She often uses scripture as epigraphs in her poems and uses the poem to explore the text thematically or intellectually; in addition, she often integrates intellectual and devotional threads within the hymn so that they appeal to the mind as much as the heart, which counters the limits of traditional feminine hymns as explained by Bradley, Dieleman, and Hawn & Hobbs. One poem that is often regarded as the best of her hymnic experiments is “The Measure: Hymn IV.” After 1838, Elizabeth Barrett Browning seems to have abandoned the hymnic form, and only published “The Measure” in the subsequent 1850 edition of her poems (Dieleman, *Religious Imaginaries* 74). In a letter to her sister, Arabella, Barrett Browning relates that she found her other hymns—“A Supplication for Love,” “The Mediator,” and “The Weeping Savior,”--“weak & inferior” (Dieleman, *Religious Imaginaries* 75). However, “The Measure,” as an example of the influence of the hymnic form, demonstrates not only Barrett Browning’s power to move the heart, but also her ability to practice dialogic engagement with scripture as she begins to develop the voice of a prophet:

“The Measure, Hymn IV”

*He comprehended the dust of the earth in a measure—Isaiah 40:12*

*Thou givest them tears to drink in a measure—Psalm 80:5*

God the Creator, with a pulseless hand

Of unoriginated power hat weighted

The Dust of earth and tears of man in one

Measure, and by one weight;

So saith his holy book.

Shall we, then who have issued from the dust  
 And there return—shall we, who toil for dust  
 And wrap our winnings in this dusty life,  
     Say ‘No more tears, Lord God!  
     The measure runneth o’er’?

### III

On, Holder of the balance, laughest Thou?  
 Nay, Lord! Be gentler to our foolishness,  
 For his sake who assumed our dust and turns  
     On Thee pathetic eyes  
     Still moistened with our tears.

### IV

And teach us, O our Father, while we weep,  
 To look in patience upon earth and learn—  
 Waiting, in that meek gesture, till at last  
     These tearful eyes be filled  
     With the dry dust of the death. (Browning 58)

When examining the poem, the reader is immediately drawn to the epigraphs of Isaiah 40:12 and Psalm 80:5. The epigraphs give the Hebrew word “Shalish,” meaning “measure” in both scriptural references; in addition, Barrett Browning suggests in a footnote to the epigraphs that she believes these are the only two places in the Hebrew scriptures where this word occurs (Browning 58; Elia 10). The significance of the epigraphs is that the inclusion of these scriptures not only demonstrates the education of the poet, but also a linguistic sensitivity to the use of this

word in the context of both verses. Immediately, this poem would be classified as a traditionally masculine hymn subject because of the poet's knowledge of not only the scriptures in translation, but also their original language. In addition, the reader infers from the footnote that if Barrett Browning believes these are the only places in the Bible to find this Hebrew word, that the poet herself has read the entirety of the scripture in the original Hebrew. As Cynthia Scheinberg observes, Barrett Browning's use of the actual Hebrew text is at once jarring for the reader, but a means by which "Barrett Browning insists on her primary, exceptional Hebrew knowledge, emphasizing her own theological authority and using it to justify certain moments when she believes her work to be possibly radical in intention or interpretation" (70). Here she is putting on the mantle of knowledge to assume the authority to speak outside her normally emotive, womanly hymnic sphere to a more nuanced, intellectual discourse. Dieleman notes that in this poem, Barrett Browning "actually scrutinizes her biblical epigraphs, poses a question that arises from them, and proceeds to answer that question as well as pray for understanding" (Dieleman, *Religious Imaginaries* 43). Extending beyond Dieleman's assertion, I maintain that the rhetorical structure of the poem describes the receiving, interpreting, and disseminating of a prophetic message as it chronicles the communication between God and the poet; the application of the message to the human experience, and prophetic transmission of that truth from the poet to her audience.

The epigraphs begin the dialogue as the Scripture inspired by God engages the speaker's intellect and learning using the Hebrew word for "measure." With the mantle of knowledge expressed through Congregational discourse, the poet prophet speaker is open to the message of God as revealed in the scripture. In the first stanza, Barrett Browning uses declarative statements to describe the poet prophet's understanding of God's truth as it is received through the

epigraphs. The speaker declares with confidence her interpretations of the scripture that God uses one measure to weigh the “Dust of earth and tears of man” (l. 3). In the second stanza, the speaker questions fellow believers, “Shall we, then who have issued from the dust . . . shall we, who toil for dust. . . Say ‘No more tears, Lord God! The measure runneth o’er’?” (ll 6-10). In these lines, she acknowledges that since we are from dust and work for temporal things that will be reduced to dust, only for us to die and return to dust, that humanity may be tempted to ask God to hold his hand, that the measure of tears and sorrow is just too much. Stanza three offers a direct address from the speaker to God, asking in a familiar way, “Oh Holder of the balance, laughest Thou? / Nay, Lord! Be gentler to our foolishness” (ll 11-12). The familiarity with which the speaker both questions and petitions God in these lines suggest a close intimacy between the speaker and the Divine, much like the Old Testament prophets who both questioned and engaged with God in a dialogical relationship in private, but demonstrated public complete submission, obedience, and reverence.

In Stanza Three, the dialogue suggests that the speaker has approached God alone and engaged in the dialogue privately; however, in the final stanza, the petition seems more collective, when she says, “And teach us, O our Father, while we weep” (l. 16). The use of the collective pronoun “we” suggests that the prophet has returned to the faith community to ask God to help the community learn patience as they learn to live with and mitigate their sorrows with the hope of the future in heaven after they have returned to dust. Much like Moses, who intimately engaged with God on the mountain privately, but engaged more reverently as a part of a public community, the speaker of “The Measure” demonstrates the ability of the poet/prophet to serve as both the intercessor on behalf of humanity in private, and a part of the regular worship community in public. In Karen Dieleman’s article “Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s

Religious Poetics: Congregationalist Models of Hymnist and Preacher,” she references John Holloway’s explication of Thomas Carlyle’s understanding of sage discourse and the role of the Vates which “whether Prophet or Poet. . . is a man sent hither to make it [the divine mystery of the Universe] more impressively known to us” (135). In the context of the Victorian sage discourse, only male poets could assume this role and the “visionary authority of an Old Testament prophet to critique Victorian culture and offer alternative world views” (Dieleman “Barrett Browning’s Religious Poetics” 135). By assuming poetic prophetic discourse, even in the hymn, “The Measure,” Barrett Browning challenges both the tradition of male intellectual/rational topics in hymns, and the ability of a female to assume the mantle of authority in a prophetic relationship/engagement with God.

What is unusual about “The Measure” is that it breaks from the traditional hymnic meter because it doesn’t rhyme and uses pentameter and trimeter as opposed to the usual tetramic quatrains (Dieleman, *Religious Imaginaries* 74). This structure would make the hymn difficult to sing in a congregational setting, which suggests that she did not write it for this purpose. In addition, the fact that Barrett Browning chose to publish her poems in literary journals instead of religious magazines indicates that she did not want to use them solely for congregational purposes and wanted to maintain creative control of her work (Dieleman, *Religious Imaginaries* 44; “EBB’s Religious Poetics” 143). Considering the limitations of traditional hymnic meter, lack of poetic ownership, and limited subject matter, although Barrett Browning seemed to experiment with the form to blend the emotive and intellectual elements of her faith, she found that as a genre, it fell short in serving as a medium through which she could develop her religious poetic voice. Ultimately the limitations of the hymn format cause the poet to recognize its boundaries, which encourages her to grow beyond the hymn to her next phase of poetic and



prophetic growth. In her later work, we see her experiment with another form, the sermon, which was the central point of Congregationalist worship.

### **The Poet Preacher**

One unique aspect of the Congregationalist sermon is that it is not regarded as an authoritative lecture, rather it is a social dialogue between the minister and congregation; as a participant of the wider worship community, the preacher's sermon is one part of the conversation in Scripture interpretation (Dieleman, *Religious Imaginaries* 45-46). Each member has a responsibility to personally study and engage in the text and bring that knowledge to the worship experience. This practice was encouraged to improve the dialogue for all believers, as Barrett Browning notes, "The more thought & enquiry, the better for Truth. Error is the result of half-thinking" (qtd in Dieleman, *Religious Imaginaries* 47). Theoretically, the more the participants engage in the text, the richer the discourse for all concerned, including the preacher. Dieleman states, "When Congregationalists, therefore, sat in church with open Bibles, figuratively they held in their hands entire conversations that involved the preacher, themselves, and other commentators. The sermon not only produced but also, in its very nature, demanded this kind of conversational interchange" (*Religious Imaginaries* 46). In the Congregationalist body, it seems that the intellect, knowledge, and scriptural interpretation of a member mattered more than gender in being a viable and vibrant part of the faith community. Dieleman notes that as Barrett Browning transitioned from the hymnic form to sermon mode, her work became more "explicitly social in dimension and by investigating and expounding from new perspectives the essential stories of the Christian faith rather than single devotional texts or moments" (*Religious Imaginaries* 75). In addition to subject matter, Barrett Browning employs *sermocinatio*, imaginary dialogue often used not only by the church fathers that she studied, but

also by the apostle Paul in his letters, notably Romans, a book she studied extensively with her tutor, Hugh Boyd (Dieleman, *Religious Imaginaries* 75). With this Congregationalist worldview of the sermon in mind, we see in Barrett Browning's mid-career poems, an experiment with this dialogical sermon format as she further develops her prophetic voice--first in the issue of perspective of the poet speaker and then through her subject choice and development.

*The Seraphim* and *Drama of Exile* are two poems in which the speakers take on perspectives that were daring and original, almost shocking to some of Barrett Browning's critics. Simon Avery recognizes the significance of "a conscious shift here to a much more intellectual and intricate consideration of theological issues which is derived, in part, from Barrett Browning's understanding of the more discursive nature of the sermons associated with her Congregationalist background" (Avery 31). *The Seraphim* retells the story of Christ's passion through the eyes of two angels watching the story unfold on Golgotha's hill. For a believer to assume this perspective, "EBB depicts herself climbing up to heaven, 'endeavour[ing] to count some steps of the ladder at Bethel, --a very few steps, and as seen between the clouds'" (Avery 32). To gain this perspective, the mortal female believer has to put herself on par with the angels to tell the story through these dramatic voices, which pushes the boundary of "poetic decorum" (Avery 32). In "The Culture of the Soul: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Poetics," Rebecca Stott observes that the originality and ambition of the poem in both subject and form is heightened by the intellectual discourse between the angels concerning grace and sin (Avery & Stott 72). In addition to fusing the emotive and intellectual, much as she did in the hymns, Barrett Browning fuses two genres--the lyric and the drama (Avery & Stott 72). True to the dialogic nature of Congregationalist sermons, fusing these two genres opens the speakers up to interactions and conflict with one another in a balanced perspective, not just from the vantage

point of a single poetic speaker. Stott agrees, maintaining that “Elizabeth Barrett Browning is using voice here in new ways to explore the nature of the poet as prophet or as transcendent being” (Avery & Stott 72). As scholar Heather Cianciola discusses Barrett Browning’s comments and prophetic approach in the Preface to *The Seraphim*, she notes that Barrett Browning’s purpose of recasting the Crucifixion in a unique way was “to glance at it, as dilated in seraphic eyes, and darkened and deepened by the near association with blessedness and Heaven,” and states considering the familiar story through a new frame of reference allows the reader to see “beyond the common estate of man.” In addition, in this poem, one of the main speakers in the text, Zerah, feels that watching the horrific experience makes it necessary for a new kind of speech, which suggests that he has moved from the innocence of knowing only language of praise to the realm of experience--that of suffering, pain, and death. His heavenly language lacks what human language can capture because we are a part of a fallen world, but he is not. In the “Epilogue” of *The Seraphim*, Barrett Browning picks up where the seraphim’s narrative ends and reflects not on the horror of the scene, but the hope of the resurrection (Cianciola). Because the seraphim have never known sin, or the need for grace, it takes the language of a mortal to articulate the hope of the resurrection.

From a Christian theological perspective, it stands that only those who recognize the need for and receive the gift of salvation, can truly appreciate what it means to them. As Barrett Browning states in Book 4 lines 1035-1038, “Forgive me, that mine earthly heart should dare/ Shape images of incarnate spirits/ And lay upon their burning lips a thought/ Cold with the weeping which mine earth inherits” (qtd in Cianciola). Perhaps in addressing her potential critics, she is reminding them that for all the controversy in reaching beyond the scope of earth into the mind of the supernatural seraphim, that mankind is the only one uniquely capable of

articulating the story of the crucifixion. In addition, line 1037 is an allusion to Isaiah 6, when the prophet Isaiah encounters God and declares himself unclean and a part of a people who are unclean. In verse six and seven, the seraph takes a live coal, touches the prophet's lips and tells him that the sin is atoned for. In verse eight, God asks "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" to which the prophet Isaiah replies "Here am I send me" (*NIV*, Isaiah 6.6-8). Ironically, in Barrett Browning's lines 1035-1038, she is the one bringing words to touch the lips of the heavenly seraphim; by giving them a voice with the language of fallen humanity, she feels she can better capture the emotion and experience of salvation and express it through the poem. In this shift in power, she is the one with the message and power to give words, not the seraphim. The Victorian audience would have been aware of that allusion and the subsequent interchange between God and Isaiah, where God asks for a messenger, and Isaiah volunteers. Likewise, Barrett Browning, in using her poetic gift and scriptural knowledge, sees that God has given her a message, and she is willing to communicate it. In this allusion, she aligns herself with Isaiah, both in a tone of humility and willingness to be the messenger. We know, based on a letter correspondence with a friend, that Barrett Browning believed, "The poet is a preacher & should look to his doctrine," which by extension Dieleman suggests, "poetry, like preaching, is not self-preoccupation; like preaching, it publicly declares religious truth, and its declarer bears a responsibility to speak only after careful examination of Scripture" (*Religious Imaginaries* 52). Based on her personal study and how it is manifested in her poetry, we see that Barrett Browning took the responsibility to prepare seriously.

In a similar way, *Drama of Exile* uses the same dramatic lyric format, but with a more ambitious list of characters--those involved in the fall of humanity and the subsequent exile from paradise. Instead of two major characters, she finds a dramatic voice for many more: Adam,

Eve, Lucifer, Christ, Gabriel, and a variety of other spirits. One should note that Barrett Browning gives a relatively balanced perspective from all characters, not privileging the perspective of one over another (Dieleman, *Religious Imaginaries* 86). Much like the Congregationalist sermon, in the poem there is not one authoritative voice, rather a dialogue of all parties, each bringing his or her own emotion and experience to the conversation, each individually enriching the conversation to lead to a greater understanding by the community. Dieleman acknowledges the scholarly debate over Barrett Browning's treatment of Eve—by asking is she an “acquiescent woman” who is silenced through the poem, or does she really subvert Victorian ideas of gender limitations to become Adam's teacher (*Religious Imaginaries* 87)? Dieleman suggests that Barrett Browning may have been less concerned with this debate than Eve's ability as a woman to capture and express the emotion of the moment better than a man, to show that “Eve's emotional response to the fall into sin and exclusion from the Garden expresses a deep understanding of justice, mercy, and consequence” (Dieleman, *Religious Imaginaries* 87). After the fall, Adam seems hostile, with a desire for continued reverence by the spirits, yet Eve realizes the significance of the moment when she contradicts him in lines 1512-1518, “We confront them from no height / We have stooped down to their level / By infecting them with evil / And their scorn that meets our blow / Scathes aright” (Browning 88; Dieleman, *Religious Imaginaries* 88). Both people have experienced the same event (text), yet each approach the text with a different understanding. Adam's appeal to the intellect/power/rational is gently rebuked by Eve's appeal to pity from God through her grief of sin. Adam sees that humanity has been wronged, yet Eve recognizes that God has been wronged (Dieleman, *Religious Imaginaries* 88). An audience might see Eve's tears as an indicator of weakness, while Adam's lack of tears shows strength, control, and power; however, Christ

declares in lines 1976-1978, “The tears of my clean soul shall follow them [sins] / And set a holy passion to work clear / Absolute consecration” (Browning 94; Dieleman, *Religious Imaginaries* 88). Christ’s use of tears indicates that tears, or Christ’s compassion, is necessary for redemption. Thus, Eve’s understanding of the consequences of sin and guilt are validated by Christ. She understands the significance of the text more than Adam. One cannot help but infer that Barrett Browning, as a unique female voice, implies that she is a powerful poet prophet because she has both the tenderness and emotional sensitivity traditionally attributed to women and the intellectual ability and logic traditionally attributed to men. Barrett Browning spiritually and artistically seems to be standing in the gap between the social expectations of men and women.

In a similar way, Rebecca Stott notes that in both *The Seraphim* and *Drama of Exile* the setting is on thresholds--not quite earth and not quite heaven in *The Seraphim* and not quite paradise and not quite the fallen world in *Exile* (Avery & Stott 72). In both poems, angelic beings are genderless and in *Exile*, the time of day is twilight--a space between day and night (Avery & Stott 72). It is important to recognize the significance of the moments in these two poems as well--*The Seraphim* is on the threshold of redemption--the act of the crucifixion having been completed, yet the fulfillment of hope not quite realized. *Drama of Exile* is on the threshold of the fall; the act of sin having been committed, yet the full impact of the consequences not quite realized. In Christian theology, the Bible hinges on these two moments, so Barrett Browning’s choice in narrating these two specific stories is significant. As a poet, she is choosing to frame her story within a space between, perhaps much as she sees herself, in a space between what women were limited in doing in the past, and what they have the potential to do in the future. By assuming bold perspectives in these two poems and using innovative

storytelling to move the reader's emotions and intellect, she proves to be an able poet preacher to her audience. Although the preacher has the power to speak to a Congregational community, Barrett Browning's mid-career poems of the 1840's demonstrate a passion to speak to a wider audience, beyond the scope of even the greater Christian community. By speaking about the social ills of her time notably child labor, slavery, and the social limitations of women, Barrett Browning as a poet prophet seeks not only the introspection of her audience regarding spiritual truths, but also a commitment to act in the public square.

### **The Poet Prophet**

In a letter written in 1843, Barrett Browning states, "If a poet be a poet, it is his business to work for the elevation & purification of the public mind" (qtd in Dieleman, *Religious Imaginaries* 91). Her vision of the responsibility of the poet parallels that of the teaching prophet, which fits within the prophetic definition supported by biblical and extra-biblical sources examined earlier. In the first chapter, I discussed the framework for our definition of the teaching prophet as described by Dr. Mare and theologian Rabanus Maurus, and how that theological definition is situated within Landow & Holloway's literary analysis of sage discourse and the concept of the literary prophet. George Landow reminds the poet prophet, "when a people can no longer follow its own wisdom literature, then it needs the writings of the sage. When a people ignores the wisdom that lies at the heart of its society and institutions, then the sage recalls that people to it" (23). In her more mature poems, Barrett Browning assumes this role of the sage to bring about change. Linda Lewis, in her book *Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Spiritual Progress: Face to Face with God*, expounds on Landow's differentiation between wisdom literature and sage discourse. Whereas wisdom literature "embodies the accepted, received wisdom of an entire society. . . the pronouncements of a Victorian sage--like the biblical

prophet--counter the norms of contemporary society" (Lewis 188). Likewise, ". . . the sage points to an evil sign of the times, interprets the phenomenon as a symptom of falling away from the paths of God (or nature), warns of disaster, and offers a vision of future bliss if the erring people or nation return to its God or its values" (Lewis 188; Landow 3). As a spokesperson of God, the poet/prophet can use his or her God-given ability to write and commit to intense study to communicate truth to an audience, a responsibility supported by Rabanus Maurus, who advocated for a prophet's use of knowledge and study to hone the Divine gift of wisdom and prophetic calling. As such, these people were able to help others understand what Holloway describes as man's world, his place in it, and how he should live (2). Elizabeth Barrett Browning's later works, notably "The Cry of the Children," "Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point," and "A Curse for a Nation" demonstrate how she uses her knowledge of current events, Congregational Christian beliefs, and poetic talent to serve as a teaching prophet to a wider audience to inspire positive social change.

"The Cry of the Children" was inspired by R. H. Horne's *Report of the Commissioners on the Employment of Children*, the culmination of three years of investigation on the working conditions of children in the mines and factories of England, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales ("Report on Child Labour;" Lewis 189). The thousands of pages of testimony from children as young as five shocked the public and ultimately led to legislation to set guidelines for the employment of children and establish minimum safety standards ("Report on Child Labour"). According to Rebecca Stott, "'The Cry of the Children' would itself be influential on later literary representations and has often been seen as helping to fuel the political debates which eventually led to the passing of the 1847 'Ten Hours Factory Act' for women and young persons" (Avery & Stott 99). In response to the report, Barrett Browning's poem "The Cry of



the Children” offers a passionate, prophetic plea to those in power to do their Christian duty and protect the most vulnerable victims of poverty and child labor.

As in her hymn writing, Barrett Browning uses the epigraph to immediately establish her learning when she quotes a line from Medea in the original Greek: “Alas, alas, why do you gaze at me with your eyes, my children?” (Browning 156). Because most women would not have been educated in Greek, the epigraph immediately speaks to male readers. From the beginning of the poem, she is demonstrating her intellectual ability to engage with any reader--man or woman. Like the hymn “The Measure, Hymn IV,” this epigraph establishes her authority to speak in the traditionally male sphere of intellectual engagement and politics. In choosing this quote, she references a strong, albeit despised, woman from the classical tragedy, *Medea*, with which her educated audience would have most likely been familiar. In the play, the quote is spoken just prior to Medea’s murder of her own children. Medea’s maternal instinct to love and protect her children is suppressed by her sinful desire for revenge against her husband and she commits the unspeakable act of murdering her own children. Likewise, Barrett Browning uses the epigraph to suggest to her male audience, whom she addresses in the first line, that they knowingly allow practices that kill innocent children for their sinful greed for increasing profit. Medea’s children look to her for protection, not knowing her true intent, just as the children who are victims of child labor look to adults to protect them, not knowing their true callousness toward the children’s personal expense for their private profit.

Mimicking Old Testament rhetoric, Barrett Browning uses rhetorical questions as she addresses her Christian “brothers” in the opening lines of the first two stanzas (Lewis 189). In Stanza I, she asks “Do ye hear the children weeping, O my brothers, / Ere the sorrow comes with years?” (Browning 156. ll 1-2). Choosing to address men as “brothers” gives a familiar sense of

shared experience—a closeness, like a member of the same family. In addition, using this diction demonstrates an equality--spiritually as a Christian, intellectually as someone with a comparable education, and socially as a fellow Englishman aware of the current social issue and the need to act. By opening the poem with a direct address to her brothers, she asks first if they are aware of the situation. It is important to note here that she addresses the men because they are the only ones who have both the power to do something about it legislatively and from a standpoint of voting. The women, who would be just as interested in the plight of the children, are powerless to take any other action except for writing, speaking, and drawing attention to the problem. The rhetorical question that opens Stanza II, “Do you question the young children in the sorrow / Why their tears are falling so?” goes a bit further to imply whether the men care about the situation by engaging with the children (Browning 156. ll 13-14). She ends Stanza II with another poignant question, “Do you ask them why they stand / Weeping sore before the bosoms of their mothers, / In our happy Fatherland?” In this moment, she shows the disparity of the audience’s perception of their country and the reality of what was happening in the “happy Fatherland” (Browning 156. ll 22-24). Ironically, in these lines, much like *Drama of Exile*, the female element’s emotional sensitivity is more astute than the male logic. Logically, child labor made sense for production of goods and enhancement of wealth, but emotionally, ethically, and spiritually, it was a horrible practice. Like Eve’s understanding of Christ’s tears and the ultimately reality of transgression, the mothers understand the implications of child labor more clearly than the men who continue or validate the practice. By countering the socially accepted norm of the practice of child labor, Barrett Browning is fulfilling Landow’s description of sage discourse in which she calls out the evil of the time, interprets the phenomenon as a falling away from God, and warns of pending disaster. Stanza IX suggests that society has fallen away from

God in that the speaker asks the audience, after detailing the horror of their experience in Stanzas III through VIII, “Now tell the poor young children, O my brothers, / To look up to Him and pray; / So the blessed One who blesseth all the others / Will bless them another day” (Browning 157. ll 101-104). By juxtaposing the unmitigated reality of child labor with the sudden command to tell the children to pray for God to bless them another day, Barrett Browning highlights the hypocrisy of Christian men who have allowed this practice to happen, and in Stanzas X and XI, through the perspective of the children, she points out their failings as Christians to teach the children how to pray, or for the men themselves to practice what they preach in their pious sermons. Because of their falling away from their Christian duty to show Christ’s love and compassion to those in need, she notes that the children doubt God’s love and even his existence (Browning 158. ll 134-136). Her final admonishment of her Christian brothers in Stanzas XII and XIII warn that as the children look up to heaven, with the faces of angels turned to God, that there will be retribution for the sin of neglecting their pain as “Our blood splashes upward, O gold-heaper, / And your purple shows your path! / But the child’s sob in the silence curses deeper / Than the strong man in his wrath” (Browning 158. ll 157-160). What she is lacking in this poem, however, is the hope of the sage discourse-- the promise of a blissful future upon a returning to God. As Linda Lewis observes, “In admonishing England about the unmitigated greed and cruelty of her ‘gold heapers,’ she further performs the office of prophet, delivering, in the final lines, not her own curse or God’s, but that of a child” (189). In leaving out the hope of the discourse, she fully puts the burden on the brothers, not to be reconciled to God, but to do what is right as serve as God’s instrument of compassion on earth.

Just as Barrett Browning dares to experiment with the voices of characters such as angelic beings or Christ, a perspective that society would question bordering decency because

they were above mere mortals, she also dares to serve as a prophet through the voice of one of perhaps the most marginalized people in “Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point,” a female slave. By speaking truth through the voice of the female slave, Barrett Browning “indict(s) the slavery system for its particular cruelty to women” (Lewis 190). This poem opens with the speaker noting that she is standing on the shore where the Pilgrims landed to enjoy the freedom of faith. The speaker states in lines one through four, “I stand on the mark beside the shore / Of the first white pilgrim’s bended knee, / Where exile turned to ancestor, / And God was thanked for liberty” (Browning 192). In Stanza II, she directly addresses the ghosts of the Pilgrims and relates, “O pilgrims, I have gasped and run / All night long from the whips of one / Who in your names works sin and woe!” (Browning 192). Stanza III relates her purpose in coming to that place--to curse the land that the Pilgrims and their ancestors blessed for freedom because it has resulted in her own personal enslavement and sorrow. In these first three stanzas, the speaker has identified the socially accepted and endorsed social ill of slavery in America, thus calling out the evil sign of the time that had strayed from the path of the original purpose of the Pilgrims to escape their own persecution and establish a community where they could worship as they see fit.

Stanzas IV through VII demonstrate the speaker’s belief that God made her black yet cast her away under the feet of his white creatures, while making other dark creatures that live harmoniously as a part of nature, not subjugated by it. The speaker exclaims in Stanza VI, lines thirty-six through forty-two, “But *we* who are dark, we are dark! / Ah God, we have no stars! / About our souls in care and cark/ Our blackness shuts like prison-bars:/ The poor souls crouch so far behind, / That never a comfort can they find, / By reaching through the prison-bars” (Browning 192). In recognition that God has made other dark things that live in harmony

throughout nature, the speaker infers that it is the white man who has oppressed them. They cannot enjoy the stars or any other part of God's creation because of their fellow man's subjugation of them. Only their skin color condemns them to the prison bars, and as the speaker notes, there is no comfort from anyone on the outside. Stanza VIII continues by the speaker acknowledging that God's creation affects dark people physically in the same way that it does other members of humanity. In these stanzas, much like "The Cry of the Children" the speaker draws attention to what the oppressed have in common with the oppressors, and the reader should logically infer that from God's perspective, their lives have an equal value to others. Stanzas IX through XVII tell the story of the speaker falling in love with a fellow slave and knowing the joy of that relationship, only to have him taken from her; afterwards, she is raped by white men and gives birth to a child as a result of that crime against her. Stanza XVIII through Stanza XXIX describe in vivid detail the mother's murder of her white-faced child to free him from her fate, though she claims that the white angels took the baby's soul and that there was no curse on her own. The amount of time that the speaker devotes to describing this part of the narrative highlights that brutality of slavery and how its practice has inverted the family structure. As a result of this structural inversion, a mother sees murdering a mixed-race child as a mercy so that he might not experience the horror of growing up in a part of the slave system. Just as in "The Cry of the Children," God is silent in "Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point." God chooses in both poems to allow "humans to take responsibility for social justice or injustice" (Lewis 191). Lewis observes that "human agency is required to effect freedom and justice" (Lewis 191). In light of this, the ending of the poem, Stanzas XXIX through XXXVI pick up in real time back at the Pilgrim's shore where the slave hunters have caught the speaker to punish her. Appealing to images of the suffering Christ, the speaker states that the white men

must answer for their whips and curses because in allowing slavery, they have forgotten Christ's wounds, but HE still sees the wounds that they inflict on others (Browning 195). She reminds them that they are not gods and cannot "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" (Browning 195). In this direct address to the white man, the speaker serves as a prophet who claims that although the white man has forgotten his Christian obligation, Christ still sees what they are doing to others and that their actions will eventually cause them and their descendants to experience a curse in the future. As Linda Lewis relates, "In warning her persecutors of their own curse, the slave performs the role of prophet; in writing her story as a warning to slavers, the poet is doing the same" (192). In a similar way, Barrett Browning's poem "A Curse for a Nation" also addresses American slavery, and perhaps is most closely identified not only with sage discourse, but also the rhetoric and form of a prophetic message.

The speaker in "A Curse for a Nation" exhibits elements of both the Old Testament prophet Moses and the New Testament apostle John. Like Moses, she asks the angel who instructs her to "Write a Nation's curse for me" in line three to find someone else to do the job (Browning 423). Whereas Moses claims a lack of eloquence and a fear that his audience will not believe his encounter with God, the speaker of "A Curse for a Nation" claims to be too bound by gratitude, love, and kinship to curse her brother, and that her own country has its own sins (child labor) which she should address before the sins of another land. (Browning 423). In addition, she claims that the angel should choose a man because as a woman she has only known "How the heart melts and the tears run down" (Browning 423. l 40). Like Moses, her heavenly visitor requires that she write and deliver the message because "A curse from the depths of womanhood / Is very salt, and bitter, and good" (Browning 423. ll 47-48). Perhaps *because* of her ability to

feel compassion and grief over sin, much like Eve in *A Drama in Exile*, the angel chooses this speaker to deliver the prophetic curse, with the hopes that the messenger can move the nation to change. The situation of the poem echoes that of Revelation 1:9, when John was instructed audibly by an angel to write what he saw and heard to the seven churches. Lewis relates “By placing herself in the company of St. John . . . Barrett Browning again wraps herself in the mantle of the sanctified prophet--convicting of sin, speaking God’s disfavor and God’s curse” (193). Because of her scriptural acumen, the weaving of both Old and New Testament elements creates a unique perspective for her prophetic speaker. Evoking both Old Testament authority and New Testament prophecy, Barrett Browning situates her speaker so that she can deliver the message although it is a painful one. As Karen Dieleman observes, “That Moses and the woman of the poem both eventually capitulate has less to do with their willingness to be prophets, whether man or woman, than with their inability to resist the divine command, coupled with their real desire to free those who are enslaved” (*Religious Imaginaries* 98). Once the speaker in the Prologue of the poem takes up the mantle and agrees to write, she “liberates herself to pronounce the type of curses women were conventionally forbidden to utter” (Lewis 193).

The second part of the poem “The Curse” relates what the angel requires the prophet to dictate, and in good biblical form, offers parallel sets of three--three charges, three curses of what they will see, and three curses of character. The first three stanzas of the actual curse are the indictment, where the speaker charges that the people have demonstrated hypocrisy for breaking their own chains in forging a nation only to shackle others to work it, for advocating and basking in freedom for some, only to deny it to others, and for prospering in God’s name and claiming to honor the old world while “doing the fiend’s work perfectly/ In strangling martyrs” (Browning 423. ll 1-18). The consequences of the indictment are that “Ye shall watch . . .” while kings

conspire, and nations strive to take freedom and wage war, while strong men see to strangle the weak. (Browning 424. ll 19, 26, 33). In addition, curses of character are that when good men pray, their prayers will sound like the tramp of an enemy, when wise men praise them, they will always fall short of praise because of the stain of slavery on society, and when fools taunt them, they will look back at them realizing that they are worse than the fools (Browning 424). In short, the curse is that they will never be fully secured in their own freedom nor pure in their collective national character. In the final stanza, the prophet speaker commands the people to “Go” and wherever they plant the flag of the country, the stain of their curse will follow them, and God will always see the curse of their sin. Lewis notes that this poem follows Landow’s sage discourse model of an indictment and a curse, but it lacks the hope of the reward, much like “The Cry of the Children” (192). Although Dieleman argues that Barrett Browning prefers the more democratic poet preacher mode, in the case of slavery, where democracy has failed, an authoritative prophet mode is necessary. When she wrote about the prophetic voice of the poem, Barrett Browning states, “In fact, I cursed neither England nor America--I leave such things to our Holy Father here: the poem only pointed out how the curse was involved in the action of slave-holding” (Dieleman, *Religious Imaginaries* 99). “A Curse for a Nation” represents the fulfillment of Barrett Browning as a poet prophet because she uses her poetic talent and knowledge of a current issue to speak to a wide audience to promote change. She fulfills her vision of a poet as one uses intellect and emotion to move the audience to an “elevation & purification of the public mind” (Dieleman, *Religious Imaginaries* 91). In addition to her later poetics demonstrating a commitment to speak prophetically to the social ills of her time, Barrett Browning’s masterpiece *Aurora Leigh* demonstrates the culmination of her development of the female poet prophet through its main character, Aurora Leigh. Written around the same time as



“Curse for a Nation,” Barrett Browning the poet was realizing the full potential of her prophetic voice. As demonstrated in “Curse for a Nation,” Barrett Browning uses poetic voice as a teaching prophet who is exposing a sin of society, warning about the implications of the sin, and offering a vision of the consequences of that sin. The full power of her prophetic authority shines through in “Curse for a Nation,” but *Aurora Leigh* uses that voice in a different way to express Barrett Browning’s “critique of her own Victorian society and her proposal that the arts be used to improve social conditions” (Worn 136). Although not strictly adhering to the hymn and sermon forms as demonstrated in her prophetic progression thus far, *Aurora Leigh* merits discussion in that it not only represents the height of Barrett Browning’s prophetic maturity as presented through a poetic speaker, but it also serves as an inspiration to Emily Dickinson’s prophetic development.

Through *Aurora*, Barrett Browning exemplifies the female poet prophet through a work that is, as fin-de-siècle scholar and theologian Amory Howe Bradford describes, “at once a novel, a social study, a poem, and a glorious hymn to pure love” (14). In his work *Spiritual Lessons from the Browning’s*, Bradford opens by stating that “The noblest and most inspiring religious teachers in all ages and lands have conveyed their messages through the medium of poetry. Theology always runs in a prosaic mould; ethics is very likely to take the form of apothegm; but the truth which inspires, which is the result of vision rather than of reasoning, usually finds poetic expression” (5). Bradford claims that the Hebrew prophets were all “sublime poets” and that their “vision and diction were always of the nature of poetry” (5). He likewise observes that most great poets were also religious, citing Dante, Milton, Wordsworth, Tennyson, the Brownings, and Whitter as “all in the truest sense prophets” (Bradford 5). About Elizabeth Barrett Browning, he claims, “no prophetess or Sibyl was ever more evidently filled

with a divine passion than was Mrs. Browning” and that she was “an intensely practical preacher” (Bradford 6). Although Bradford includes Barrett Browning with other male poets, he focuses more on her emotive power than her intellect in his discussion of her work. The spiritual lesson that Barrett Browning teaches according to Bradford is the lesson of Christian service, a lesson that can only be learned by demonstrating an intense emotional sensitivity to the plight of others to inspire compassionate action. While simultaneously praising her as the “greatest poetess who ever lived” and evoking the praise of others including that she was “Shakespeare’s daughter” or “Tennyson’s sister,” he also claims that she had “a soul of fire in a body of a pearl” (Bradford 14). This conditional praise points out that although her soul was passionate and strong, her body was delicate and weak. Superficially, he could be referencing her delicate health, but it could also be an assessment of the limitations of the female prophetic voice. Instead of focusing on Aurora’s talent, independence and intellect, Bradford focuses on the lesson of service demonstrated by Romney, who realizes after his own suffering, that he sympathizes with man, not with God, when he claims, “And I, a man, as men are now, and not / As men may be hereafter, feel with men / In the agonizing present” (qtd in Bradford 15). While Bradford rightly claims that “Such identification with the sufferings of others is essential to good work for humanity,” he misses the overarching point that Aurora, who has developed her own poetic prophetic voice throughout the course of the work, has known all along what Romney realizes in the end—intellect and emotion exemplified through the work of the poet has more power to influence humanity than a mere recognition of need without the understanding and empathy for the needy. As Karen Dieleman notes, “Romney learns from her poetry that social duty without love has no results and no rewards” (*Religious Imaginaries* 97). When Romney states in Book 9 lines 849-852, “we must be here to work; / And men who work can only work

for men, / And, not to work in vain, must comprehend / Humanity and so work humanly,” he acknowledges that he has missed the point of good works (qtd in Dieleman *Religious Imaginaries* 97). Dieleman recognizes that Romney’s role caring for the poor and sick in contrast to Aurora’s as a poet offering spiritual hope “reverses Victorian assignments of domestic and hortatory roles. The poem indicates that a thoughtful woman imbued with religious understanding and possessing talents of poetic expression can function as a poet-preacher just as well as a sympathetic man can function as a care-giver” (97). By reversing these roles, Barrett Browning challenges society’s expectations of the intellectual nature of man and the nurturing nature of women. It was through what Bradford describes as passion and practicality that Barrett Browning speaks through her character Aurora Leigh, not merely to support empathetic service to others, but to address the poetic world, a woman’s place in it, and how she should live.

In her article, “Aurora, the Morning-Star: Shedding a New Light on 19<sup>th</sup> Century Christology, University of Cambridge scholar Alexandra Worn examines Aurora Leigh as a female Christ figure in the novel-poem, thus becoming the female embodiment of the ultimate prophet in the Christian tradition. Worn notes that Barrett Browning explains her purpose in writing *Aurora Leigh* in a letter to her husband:

. . . But my chief intention just now is the writing of a sort of novel poem. . .  
 running in the midst of our conventions, and rushing into drawing-rooms and the  
 like, ‘where angels fear to tread;’ and so meeting face to face the Humanity of the  
 age and speaking the truth as I conceive of it out plainly. . . (qtd in Worn 136)

In these lines to Robert Browning, Barrett Browning articulates her purpose to speak truth to her age as she conceives it, thus expressing the purpose of a teaching prophet as defined

earlier. Her message centers around the questions of the main character's role in society: Where does a female poet fit in Victorian society? and Can she stay true to her calling as a poet and marry? In writing *Aurora Leigh*, Barrett Browning assumes the most challenging role of wearing the prophetic mantle: addressing the role of the female poet and challenging society's view of who she is and how she fits in society.

The novel centers around the main character, Aurora Leigh, who demonstrates not only a spiritual passion, but also great intellect and creativity. Although she has a lonely childhood, she appreciates beauty and has a Romantic sensibility about how nature, art, God, and beauty are interrelated. According to Worn, "Unusually for her era, she thinks and decides for herself, insisting upon a woman's right to her own individual growth" (136). As a free spirit of sorts, she counters the expectations and culturally accepted norms for women and "views her freedom as a gift from God that orient her toward God in her art and life" (136). Her foil is Romney, an idealistic man whom Worn describes as "the modern representative of the social reformer," and although he seems liberal in his ideas, Worn notes that he does not apply those liberal ideas to gender relations (136). In lines two through five in Book 2 of *Aurora Leigh*, the book opens with Aurora contemplating that she "stood upon the brink of twenty years, And looked before and after, as I stood Woman and artist,--either incomplete, Both credulous of completion. . ."(Browning 270). As she is contemplating her youth, the beauty of nature around her and her work, she observes in lines 28-31, "The worthiest poets have remained uncrowned / Till death has bleached their foreheads to the bone; / And so with me it must be unless I prove / Unworthy of the grand adversity" (Browning 270). In this moment, she recognizes that acclaim for her work may not come in her lifetime, so she decides to crown herself, not out of pride, but to learn how it feels to wear the crown of success. In making her own crown, she demonstrates her own

power to find worth in her work regardless of commercial success or public acclaim. By making an ivy crown, the crown of poets, she validates herself as a poet. When she turns around with her arms raised “like the caryatid, sole / Of some abolished temple,” to face her public, she comes face to face with Romney. Ironically at this pivotal moment, Romney enters and challenges her freedom to pursue her art by initially minimizing the role of the poet, suggesting that men and even less so women “Scarce need be poets” in line 93; to which Aurora Leigh replies, “But learn this; I would rather take my part / With God’s Dead, who afford to walk in white / Yet spread his glory, than keep quiet here . . . I choose to walk at all risks” (Browning 272; 2, 101-104; 106). The fact that Aurora removes her wreath while she talks with Romney suggests that although she is not letting go of her dream, she does listen to his proposal. Romney discusses his ideals of work and the concept of a wife as an extension of himself as he goes about his work, and in doing so, he selfishly suggests that she must give up the childish whims of art and do something that “really matters” according to him. In lines 181-183 he claims, “You play beside a death-bed like a child / Yet measure to yourself a prophet’s place / To teach the living. / None of all these things / Can women understand. . .” (Browning 273). In addition, he further minimizes her ability as female poet when he says in lines 220 through 225, “. . . Women as you are, / Mere women, personal and passionate, / You give us doating mothers, and perfect wives, / Sublime Madonnas, and enduring saints! / We get no Christ from you, --and verily / We shall not get a poet, in my mind” (Browning 273). Aurora replies that she cannot be a mistress to his love, his social reforms, and that her heart is already taken by poetry; therefore, she flatly rejects his offer of marriage. Worn notes that “Through the attitudes of Aurora and Romney, the reader is confronted with a conflict between two souls: the masculine, damaging, self-centered Romney versus the awakening, feminine, creative, self-awareness of Aurora; as such, in an effort to

preserve her freedom as a woman and a poet, Aurora has no choice but to reject Romney, a choice which has economic and social consequences for an orphaned woman in Victorian England (Worn 136). The great irony of Romney's words is that through the character, Aurora, Barrett Browning does create a unification of Christ and poetry to counter the nineteenth-century belief that a woman falls short of representing either Christ or the poet (Worn 137). Similar to Christ, who is the Word made flesh, Aurora realizes through her progression that the poet's ideas made "flesh" in the words of the poem have the power to bridge the gap between God, nature, art, beauty, and humanity. Much like the angelic speakers' inability to have language that describes the event of the crucifixion in *The Seraphim*, Aurora notes in Book 5 that poets must give voice "to the spirit world / Outside the limits of our space and time" before they "miss the thought" and the opportunity to capture the spirit world (qtd in Worn 139). In *Drama in Exile*, it is Eve's emotive nature that allows her to have a better understanding of the consequences of sin, and the need for Christ to serve as mediator between God and Man. As the Great Prophet, both future seeing and teaching, Christ's emotive ability to empathize with humanity is essential in his sacrifice. As fully God, he knows the severity of sin; as fully man, he knows the inability of humanity to ever bridge that gap. Aurora as a female poet prophet also stands in the gap between the spiritual and the physical. As a woman, her intellect and emotion give her the ability to speak truth through her poetry; as a poet, her talent gives her the words made flesh through the poem to minister to the needs of others; thus, as Worn relates, "Poetry can, to some extent, be an analogy to Christ's incarnation: it can convey the mystery of God's truth to its readers and listeners" (139). In addition to Aurora serving in the role as a Christ figure, we see that through the narrative structure, she functions as a teaching prophet, much like Christ in his parables.

As the poem progresses, Aurora realizes that she does love Romney, and through a series of tragedies, Romney comes to the point where he realizes Aurora's gift and becomes worthy of her love. He must apply his liberal ideas to not only his concepts of social reform, but to complete his understanding of women, their place in society, and their abilities (Worn 136). Likewise, the reader, whether male or female, has no choice but to see through Aurora Leigh's eyes, her reflective progression as a poet throughout the novel, and Romney's progression in his world view of women as individuals and artists. We are drawn to the protagonist and experience her poetic progression so that we empathize with her throughout the poem. Barrett Browning uses the epic-narrative-lyric hybrid to promote the conversational voice reminiscent of her poems *Drama in Exile* and *The Seraphim*. As readers, we put down our guard to hear her prophetic voice about the role of women as poets through the dialogical nature of the poem. It is neither preachy nor authoritative but offers a teaching prophet's guide to revealing social truth. The story causes the reader to come to the prophet's desired conclusions, much like Jesus' use of parables to teach truth to his audience—he presents the story and the audience comes to the logical moral conclusion; likewise, Barrett Browning offers the story and her audience, whether it likes it or not, can logically come to only one moral conclusion—the prophetic gift of the poet is not limited to men any more than the empathic nature of service and nurturing is not limited to women. Another way in which Barrett Browning uses narrative structure is to demonstrate the progression of Aurora's prophetic and poetic growth.

Karen Dieleman notes that *Aurora Leigh* is narratively structured as Aurora's account of the progression of her own poetic growth (*Religious Imaginaries* 93). Early in the poem, she has a more authoritative, prophet as seer attitude; for example, in Book 1 she claims that poets are the only "truth tellers now left to God," they "thunder" to the populace in an effort to get their

attention about their souls, and they are “cup-bearer” to the gods (qtd in Dieleman *Religious Imaginaries* 93). As early as Book 2, we see that Aurora is already maturing as a poet because she “criticizes her earlier exalted view of the poet, calling it the proud ‘devil’ of her ‘youth’ that set her on ‘mountain peaks’ where she inappropriately demanded ‘empire and much tribute’ from those who were below” (Dieleman *Religious Imaginaries* 93). The narrative becomes autobiographical as opposed to reflective in Books 5 through 9, and we see a narrative tension between the voice of the authoritative prophet and the teaching prophet. For example, in Book 5, “Aurora remarks that poets are ‘called to stand up straight as demi-gods’—but she immediately adds that one must produce a poetry that validates the claim;” likewise, in Book 6, Aurora claims ‘We thunder down / We prophets, poets—Virtue’s in the *word!*’ (Dieleman *Religious Imaginaries* 94). In the middle of the poem, she seems to learn that although the poet as prophet has a calling, the experience of the common man is essential to connecting the message with the people. If the poet totally stands apart from man, the message is less effective, thus the prophet should practice what she preaches by engaging with others while proclaiming truth. At the end, Dieleman asserts Aurora’s lesson that “Neither poetry nor philanthropy can save the world, but each needs the other in conversation, in community” (*Religious Imaginaries* 94). Once Romney and Aurora recognize that in addition to needing each other, they need to be in communion with those who have neither the means for the philanthropy nor the gift of poetry because they ground both the poet and the philanthropist in the human experience of the populace. As Rebecca Stott asserts, “We see Aurora’s strong opinions forming through conversation with herself and others, so that the views the poem champions are passionately championed, yet never held up as the only views” (qtd in Dieleman *Religious Imaginaries* 95). Aurora, as more of a teaching prophet as opposed to an authoritarian seer, shows that the mature prophet speaks truth but listens to



others and is willing to be a part of a community instead of an isolated prophet. Like Christ, the poet prophet interacts and engages with others, offers wisdom and truth, then leaves it up to the individual to accept or reject that truth. This type of prophet echoes the influence of the dialogic nature of the Congregationalist sermon, in which the preacher as a part of the worship community, becomes *a* voice, not *the* voice in the worship experience.

Through the sensitive spirit of a devout Christian, poetic talent of a strong intellect, and bold vision of a female poet, Elizabeth Barrett Browning proved to be not only able, but also adroit at flourishing in a man's literary world. She was so successful, that upon Wordsworth's death, she was proposed to be the subsequent Poet Laureate by one reviewer in the April 1850 edition of *The Athenaeum*:

. . . an honourable testimonial to the individual, a fitting recognition of the remarkable place which the women of England have taken in the literature of the day, and a graceful compliment to the Sovereign herself. There is no living poet of either sex who can prefer a higher claim. (qtd. in Avery & Stott 7)

By developing her voice through experimentation in the emotive/intellectual hymn and dialogical sermon formats of her Congregationalist upbringing, Barrett Browning became a prophetic voice that not only spoke to her British contemporaries, but also to her audience across the Atlantic. While Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poetic prophetic bloom was in full vigor, across the sea, another female poet, Emily Dickinson was nurturing her own poetic talent, feeding it with an infusion of Barrett Browning's voice, themes, allusions and language, so that she might one day present her own unique voice as the bearer of Barrett Browning's poetic prophetic legacy.

## Chapter 4: Transferring the Mantle: From Protege to Prophet

Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote a letter to her friend Henry Chorley in 1845 that laments the fact that she had no literary “grandmothers” to follow:

England has had many learned women, not merely readers but writers of the learned languages, in Elizabeth’s time and afterwards, --women of deeper acquirements than are common now in the great diffusion of letters: and yet Where were the poetesses? The divine breath which seemed to come and go, &, ere it went, filled the land with that crowd of true poets whom we call the old dramatists, . . . why did it never pass even in the lyrical form over the lips of a woman? How strange! And can we deny that it was so? I look everywhere for Grandmothers & see none. It is not in the filial spirit I am deficient, I do assure you--witness my reverent love of the grandfathers! (qtd in Avery & Stott 3)

Although current research and recovery work demonstrate that there were women poets who came before or were contemporaries of Barrett Browning, what seems to be true is that she wanted to establish herself as a different kind of poet that contradicts the type of poetry penned by the traditional woman writer (Avery & Stott 3). Simon Avery notes that Barrett Browning’s desire was to challenge the “seemingly narrow, undemanding, conservative and ‘feminine’ subjects which she saw in the work of her immediate female literary forebears” (Avery & Stott 5). Through her ability to match wit and intellect with men in her subject matter, innovation in establishing perspective through non-traditional speakers, and willingness to engage politically on issues such as child labor, slavery, and women’s roles, Barrett Browning was considered “a shocking poet, a risk-taker, an innovator, a rebel, an iconoclast even” (Avery & Stott 2). Her contemporary, poet Christina Rossetti noted “It is not in me, and therefore it will never come out

of me, to turn to politics or philanthropy with Mrs. Browning: such many-sidedness I leave to a greater than I” (qtd in Avery & Stott 6). Rossetti recognizes that for all her innovation in writing *Goblin Market*, Barrett Browning still sets the standard of speaking prophetically to a society that needed it.

Because of Barrett Browning’s poetic pioneering, many reviewers balked at the innovation of her work, as described in an 1842 review of *The Seraphim*, as “lawless extravagance . . . In her wish to avoid what is prosaic, tame, and commonplace, she passes into the opposite extreme, and mistaking reverse of wrong for right, accumulates image upon image, and lavishes with too profuse a hand her poetical vocabulary . . .” (qtd in Avery & Stott 7). Regarding her seminal work, *Aurora Leigh*, some reviewers expressed that it was “coarse in expression and unfeminine in thought,” “the poem’s liberties were ‘repulsive’,” and it had something “very hideous or revolting. . . around it, and produces a sensation of loathing, from which we do not immediately recover” (qtd in Avery & Stott 8). In contrast, there were reviewers who looked beyond tradition to recognize the value of what she was doing. Regarding *Aurora Leigh*, it was praised by some as “the greatest poem in the language, surpassed only by Shakespeare” and “the greatest poem by a woman of genius” (qtd in Avery & Stott 8). *Aurora Leigh* established Barrett Browning as a poet with a powerful voice and originality, thus “firmly secured her place as a leading woman writer of the day” (Avery & Stott 8). In addition, Simon Avery notes, “Oscar Wilde argued that Barrett Browning’s style and subject matter--the ‘wonder of the prophet’ in her work, her refusal to ‘sandpaper her muse’, and her overall ‘force and fervour’--had been an important influence on many subsequent writers and a major catalyst for the further rise to prominence of the professional woman poet in the second half of the nineteenth century” (qtd in Avery & Stott 9). Elizabeth Petrino relates the acknowledgement of

the Brownings' friend, American actress, Kate Field, who believed Barrett Browning's "own beautiful words are our words, the world's words, --and though the tears fall faster and thicker, we search for all that is left of her in the noble poems which she bequeaths to humanity" (qtd in Petrino 15). Through her recognition by an American as a global citizen, Barrett Browning demonstrates her power as a poet prophet, who speaks beyond the preacher's limited scope, but to humanity. As Field notes, "Mrs. Browning belonged to no particular country; the world was inscribed upon the banner under which she fought. Wrong was her enemy; against this she wrestled, in whatever part of the globe it was to be found" (qtd in Petrino 15). As a teaching prophet, Barrett Browning's mantle of authority gave her to those not only within Europe's borders but also across the oceans. In addition, through her innovation, intellect, and talent, Barrett Browning becomes the literary grandmother she longed for in 1845 and serves as role model for her literary daughters to follow.

To understand the extent of her influence, one need look no further than the adoring verses written by other female poets which celebrated her work and its influence on them. Avery notes that this was a common practice in the nineteenth century "as women attempted to establish both a supportive literary sisterhood and a self-conscious poetic tradition" (Avery & Stott 9). Author Dora Greenwell writes in her poem "To Elizabeth Barrett Browning, in 1851," "I lose myself within thy mind--from room / To goodly room thou leadest me, and still / Dost show me of thy glory more, until / My soul, like Sheba's Queen, faints, overcome. . ." (qtd in Avery & Stott 9). The biblical allusion to the Queen of Sheba, who traveled from the east to visit King Solomon and test his wisdom, parallels with the speaker, who is overcome with the wisdom and riches of Barrett Browning's poetry. By comparing Barrett Browning to the monarch considered the wisest and wealthiest in the Bible, we sense the speaker's admiration of

not only the beauty of Barrett Browning's words, but also the wealth of her mind. Instead of losing herself in the poems, the speaker loses herself within the mind of the poet, and Barrett Browning as a gracious host, willingly shares her mind to the delight of the speaker until she is overwhelmed. In a similar way, novelist, essayist, and poet Dinah Mulock Craik writes in her poem "To Elizabeth Barrett Browning on Her Later Sonnets. 1856," "Many a time thy soul's white feet / Stole on the silent darkness where I lay, / . . . / And I rose up and walked in strength complete/ . . . / Clung to thy garments when my soul was faint, ---/ Touching thee, all unseen amid the throng" (qtd in Avery & Stott 9). These lines suggest that to Craik, Barrett Browning was like a Christ figure or a saint, who ministers to the lowly sinner through the power of her work. The allegory of Barrett Browning as a Christ figure demonstrates the limitless power of the words to encourage and sustain a lesser poet. In both examples, the poet speaker considers Barrett Browning as an exemplary poet in comparison to herself.

Despite the glowing praise by other female poets, Avery suggests that the greatest tributes written to Barrett Browning were not from a fellow European, but "her transatlantic literary daughter," Emily Dickinson, whose three poems "Her--Last Poems," "I went to thank her--," and "I think I was enchanted" demonstrate the influence Barrett Browning had on the poetics of Dickinson. As Avery notes, ". . . it was her discovery of Barrett Browning which subsequently enabled her own poetic development into America's greatest nineteenth-century woman poet" (Avery & Stott 10). By examining these three poems, within the context of their fascicles, we can see how through death, Barrett Browning shed her mantle like the prophet Elijah, only to be taken up by her Elisha--Emily Dickinson.

Although we can never fully realize the impact of Barrett Browning on Emily Dickinson, we do have some indication that it was immense. Betsy Erkkila explores the influence of Barrett

Browning on Dickinson's poetics in her book, *The Wicked Sisters: Women Poets, Literary History & Discord*. Erkkila references a letter from Dickinson to her friend Henry Emmons, thanking him for what seems to be a copy of Browning's *Poems of 1844*:

I find it Friend--I read it--I stop to thank you for it, just as the world is still--I  
thank you for them all--the pearl, and then the onyx, and then the emerald  
Stone. My crown indeed! I do not fear the king, attired in this grandeur. Please  
send me gems again--I have a flower. It looks like them, and for its bright  
resemblances, receive it. (qtd in Erkkila 68)

As the first known reference to Barrett Browning's poems, Erkkila notes that Dickinson "represents them as 'gems' and a 'crown' that empower her in her own poetic quest" (68). By clothing herself in the borrowed robes of Barrett Browning, Dickinson has confidence to challenge the male sphere of literary tradition. The fact that she writes a poem described as a 'flower' that is like Barrett Browning's 'gems' and sends it to her friend shows that she is at once inspired and encouraged by the poems to pursue her own poetic voice (Erkkila 69). Ann Swyerski cites scholar Ruth Miller, who observed that "Dickinson's interrogation of the 'circuit and the circumference worlds' is focused on either her experience as a woman or as a poet, but Dickinson's reading of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's 'novel-poem', *Aurora Leigh*, had empowered her to think of herself as both a woman and a poet;" consequently, Swyerski suggests that both *Aurora Leigh* and Dickinson's fascicles are "texts which explore the experiences and development of a both a woman and an artist" (qtd in Swyerski 77). In addition to the elegiac poems, we know that in the summer of 1862, a year after the death of Barrett Browning, Emily Dickinson wrote her friend, Samuel Bowles, who was traveling in Europe, "Should anybody where you go talk of Mrs. Browning, you must hear for us -- and if

you touch her Grave, put one hand on the Head, for me -- her unmentioned Mourner” (qtd in Petrino 6; Swyerski 7). Her statements speak not only to the reverence that she had for Barrett Browning, but also suggest how Dickinson thought of herself in relation to one of her favorite authors. As the “unmentioned Mourner,” Dickinson places herself among the throngs of other fans who grieved the loss, not as a poet who sees herself as a contemporary or literary equal.

Elizabeth Petrino, in her article, “‘I went to thank Her--’: Dickinson’s Tributes to Literary Celebrities,” suggests that Dickinson’s personal response to the death of Barrett Browning was intensely felt, but that because of the phenomenon of celebrity culture, her response was not unique (7). Much like fans today seek any news at all about their favorite celebrities, nineteenth-century people looked for any details about literary figures whom they admired (Petrino 7). Even though actual relationships between fans and literary celebrities was rare, there was a pseudo intimacy between them through a “semblance of reciprocity” through published interviews, stories, articles, and photographs; even tours of their homes created the sense of a relationship between people and celebrities (Petrino 7). People also traded *carte-de-visite* photographs of their favorite authors, much like people trade baseball cards today (Petrino 8). We know that Dickinson had three such photographs of Barrett Browning because in a letter to Wentworth Higginson, she offers to send him one since she already had three, one of which hung in her bedroom (Petrino 8 & 12). Beyond the superficial suggestion of Dickinson’s regard for Barrett Browning, Ann Swyerski chronicles the “battle recorded by Dickinson in establishing an empowering relationship with her predecessor” in her article “Dickinson’s Enchantment: the Barrett Browning Fascicles” (78).

Most Dickinson scholars would agree that presenting the collection of her work has been problematic by editors since her oeuvre was published posthumously. Her unusual use of

punctuation and the organization of her poems has been debated by scholars for over a century. When R. W. Franklin published the first facsimile edition of the fascicles in 1981, he “provides a context many critics had felt to be missing” (Swyerski 77). Swyerski suggests that although the elegiac poems were “transcribed during a short period of 1863, . . . the three elegies may have been written earlier but the deliberate construction of the three fascicles suggests that for a period of several months Dickinson was persistently contemplating Barrett Browning’s life, work and death” (78). Current Dickinson scholarship recognizes that the fascicles were organized in such a way in which each collection has a layer of meaning beyond that of an individual poem. Scholar Ruth Miller “acknowledges that the range of emotions, conflicts, continuities, and ruptures which occur in individual poems are replicated within each of the fascicles” (Swyerski 77). Consequently, Miller believes that:

They do not all say the same thing, but they all do have an intrinsic dramatic narrative as their central structure. Each poem modulates an image of a preceding poem. Each leads on to what follows. Each has a unity that is verbal, ideational, and dramatic, and at the same time functions as a part of a larger construct that is in its turn unified by carefully modulated imagery, deliberately discursive argument and transforming emotional tone. (qtd in Swyerski 77)

In her article, Swyerski examines the elegies within the context of their corresponding fascicles--26, 29, and 31, thus looking at each poem not only individually, but as a part of the discourse of the fascicle--how each poem “speaks” to and with the other poems in the fascicle and what the message of the greater context might be (78). In this way, we can see not only Barrett Browning’s influence on Dickinson’s poetics, but also her progression as a poet as she contemplates and assume the mantle of poet prophet.



## Fascicle 26--The Vacant Mantle

Fascicle 26 demonstrates the impact of *Aurora Leigh* on Dickinson through the integration of allusions from the poem within Dickinson's poems in the fascicle. Scholar Ellen Moers acknowledges that the Dickinson "had the whole of *Aurora Leigh* almost by heart" based on her parallel readings of both texts (Swyerski 78). Moers notes that "the Dickinson poems serve almost as arias in rhyme to break up the onrushing blank verse recitative prompting the suggestion that Dickinson may have written a verse or two with just that complementary function in mind" (qtd in Swyerski 78). The central poem of Fascicle 26 is "Ourselves were wed one summer--dear--"

Ourselves were wed one summer--dear--

Your Vision -- was in June--

And when Your life Lifetime failed,

I wearied -- too -- of mine --

And over taken in the Dark --

Where You had put me down--

By Some one carrying a Light --

I -- too-- received the Sign --

'Tis true-- Our Futures different lay --

Your Cottage -- faced the sun --

While Oceans -- and the North must be --

On every side of mine

'Tis true, Your Garden led the Bloom,

For mine -- in Frosts -- was sown--

And yet, one Summer, we were Queens --

But You -- were crowned in June -- (Dickinson 272; Swyerski 79)

The opening stanzas suggest the impact of the death of Barrett Browning on the speaker and the subsequent grief of losing her poetic hero. "Your Vision" in line two references Barrett Browning's death, on June 29, 1861 (Forster 368). Although the speaker is grieving, lines seven and eight suggest that someone pulls her out of grief and gives her a sign to go on. A literal reading might suggest that a person pulls her out of her grief to give her hope to endure; Erkkila suggests that Barrett Browning, "and in particular Aurora Leigh, as a figure of dawn and light, may have been the 'Some one carrying a Light' who gave Dickinson the 'Sign' of her poetic vocation and thus guided her out of the 'Dark'" (70). Another interpretation would be that God, as the "Some one", gives her the light of inspiration as a "Sign" to pick up the mantle and write. The ambiguity of Dickinson, to some, maddening; to others, liberating, offers several viable interpretations that support multiple layers of meaning. Swyerski relates that although Dickinson was tired of living, the sign "presumably had enabled her to resume writing" (79). In stanza three, the speaker notes the differences between herself and Barrett Browning--one is in brilliance of eternity, the other living across the ocean in the American North. In this moment, Barrett Browning can no longer write, but lives in the eternity of her written word, whereas the speaker still has life and the ability to create. Barrett Browning's cottage faces one direction--upward toward heaven, but the speaker's cottage is multi-directional. Her future can go in any direction, just as the possibility of influence through her writing. In the final stanza, the poet

speaker notes that Barrett Browning led the way with the ‘Bloom’ of her garden--her poems helped to sow the seeds of the speaker, which have yet to be fully realized as they lie waiting in the frost. On the surface, this final stanza implies some insecurity about whether she will enjoy the same growth and poetic recognition as Barrett Browning, but one could also infer that since the poets were both of equal royal status one summer, while Barrett Browning has gone on to receive her heavenly crown, the speaker has yet to realize the full power of her poetic work. The final line is also a nod to the character Aurora Leigh, “who on her June birthday decided that as, ‘The worthiest poets have remained uncrowned / Till death has bleached their foreheads to the bone,’ she would crown herself with ivy” (qtd in Swyerski 80). Swyerski further notes, “Although the speaker remains secondary, Dickinson’s claim is nonetheless a bold one; she positions herself alongside the most respected woman poet of the day. . . (but) has begun to openly express her fears” (80). In this same fascicle, the next elegy, “Her--last Poems--” references the final volume of Barrett Browning’s poems, published posthumously in 1862 (Swyerski 80).

Her--last Poems --

Poets ended --

Silver -- perished -- with her Tongue --

Not on Record -- bubbled Other --

Flute -- or Woman -- so divine --

Not unto it’s Summer Morning --

Robin -- uttered half the Tune

Gushed too full for the adoring --

From the Anglo-Florentine --

Late -- the Praise -- 'Tis dull -- Conferring

On the Head too High -- to Crown --

Diadem -- or Ducal symbol --

Be it's Brave -- sufficient Sign --

Nought -- that We -- No Poet's Kinsman --

Suffocate -- with easy Wo --

What -- and if Ourselves a Bridegroom --

Put Her down -- in Italy? (Dickinson 274; Swyerski 81)

This elegy compares in imagery and theme to the poem "Ourselves were wed one summer--dear--," also in fascicle 26. As in the previous elegy, Dickinson opens with a strong admiration of the poet, referencing the title of her last collection, and the declaration that poetry died with Barrett Browning, as "Silver--perished--with her Tongue--" (l. 3). Ironically, coming from a poet, the hyperbolic declaration of the death of poetry is significant. Does Dickinson see that she can revive it? In the previous elegy, Dickinson's speaker claims that she has lost her will to live, yet someone brings a light and gives her a sign (ll 3-8). The speaker also notes the fact that unlike many female writers of the time, who wrote under a male pen name, Barrett Browning was successfully published under her own name (Swyerski 81). Lines 6-9 echo back to the previous elegy in the with the reference to summer, not only the season in which Barrett Browning died, but also symbolically the season of most growth and flourishing in her work. Lines 8 and 9 allude to a criticism regarding Barrett Browning's use of too many words or

gushing images, but the use of the word “full” could imply that either the reading public was unable to fully understand the genius of her work, or that the beauty of her work was wasted on those who did not appreciate it (Swyerski 81). In Stanza Three, Dickinson criticizes those who now praise Barrett Browning in death when they did not appreciate her in life. As Elizabeth Petrino observes, “Dickinson appears to have distance herself from the public grief and homage that were paid after the poet’s demise. Praise and fame come too ‘late’ to confer anything but a ‘dull’ remembrance of her achievement (19). The final stanza harkens back to “Ourselves were wed. . .” as well, with the marriage imagery that “weds” Barrett Browning to the speaker.

As the speaker views that they are both married to poetry in the earlier poem, she now sees herself not as a literal relative, but one who can empathize with the plight of the female poet. It is important to note here, as described in Hawn & Hobbs’ “‘Thy Love . . . Hath Broken Every Barrier Down’: The Rhetoric of Intimacy in Nineteenth Century British and American Women’s Hymns,” the use of intimate language was commonly used by female hymnists as an act of religious devotion, a practice Dickinson employs herself, not in devotion to God, but to describe the mental and poetic intimacy she feels with Barrett Browning (64). In response to this innovative intimacy, Swyerski claims, “In boldly linking herself to the poet husband, Dickinson is claiming an intimacy to Barrett Browning which simultaneously positions herself as a literary heir, one who can carry on where the ‘Anglo-Florentine’ left off” (82). The ambiguity of the last line however, implies perhaps that as Robert Browning “Put Her down -- in Italy” through burial, could the poet speaker have the ability to take up the mantle and carry on, or would her poetic shortcomings confer, as the poem opened, that poetry died with Barrett Browning? The endings of both elegies turn from praise of Barrett Browning to the

contemplation of Dickinson's speaker about whether she has the talent and calling to continue the work of the female poet at the same level of excellence as Barrett Browning.

### **Fascicle 29--The Magic of the Mantle**

The next of the Barrett Browning Fascicles is number 29, which contains two poems referencing Barrett Browning. These two poems, in addition to demonstrating threads of continuity with the others from fascicle 26, also interject a spiritual element. Within these poems, Swyerski notes the use of dream references in "Her sweet Weight on my Heart a Night" that "anticipate the enchantment exercised by Barrett Browning in the fascicle's principal poem 'I think I was enchanted'" (84).

Her sweet Weight on my Heart a Night  
 Had scarcely deigned to lie --  
 When, stirring, for Belief's delight,  
 My Bride had slipped away --

If 'twas a Dream -- made solid -- just  
 The Heaven to confirm --  
 Or if Myself were dreamed of Her --  
 The power to presume --

With Him remain -- who unto Me --  
 Gave -- even as to All --  
 A Fiction superseding Faith --  
 By so much -- as 'twas real -- (Dickinson 301; Swyerski 85)

Using the wedding imagery from the poems in the earlier fascicle, Dickinson here suggests a mental/emotional intimacy with Barrett Browning as a union of poets. Just as Dickinson aligns herself with Robert Browning in the final stanza of “Her--last poems--,” she again uses the imagery of the bride and groom in stanza one of “Her sweet Weight on my Heart a Night” to describe the physical union of husband and wife as an allegory of the impact of Barrett Browning’s poetry on the speaker. Dickinson scholar Jane Eberwein makes sense of the poem by identifying the speaker of the poem as male, but I suggest, like Swyerski, that the poet speaker is Dickinson herself in light of the fascicle context of the other poems (Swyerski 85). Although Barrett Browning was Robert Browning’s soul mate, Dickinson’s speaker sees her as a poetic kindred spirit. The diction of “weight,” “Heart,” “Night,” “lie,” “stirring,” “delight” and “Bride” in the first stanza suggest the physical intimacy between a man and wife; however, on another level, considering the poems and imagery in the other fascicles, Dickinson’s speaker continues elaborating on the poet’s impact on the mind. Just as a husband can know and enjoy the physical presence of his wife, the speaker sees that she knows the mind of poet with the same degree of intimacy. As Hawn and Hobbs note, “In fact, these hymns are often instruction in the art of love with a heavenly lover who fulfils the role of an intimate friend at a time when it may have been difficult for many people to envision a bosom companion of the opposite sex. . .” (63). Dickinson shows her innovation in her wedding imagery because instead of describing the devotion of a believer to Christ, she declares her devotion for poetry and for her mentor, Barrett Browning. As the speaker contemplates the words of the poems, growing closer in understanding and admiration for the poet, the poet dies, leaving the speaker to wonder if the experience were real. As Swyerski relates, “The poem conveys a sense of betrayal at the bride’s desertion which leave the speaker unable to ascertain the veracity of the experience” (85).

In the second stanza, the speaker evokes Heaven as the only power to validate the experience because only God could create both the situation and the poet Barrett Browning herself (Swyerski 85). In the third stanza, as in the first, there is an ambiguity about the meaning of the ending.

Considering that Dickinson often grappled with her faith--a constant tug of war between traditional Congregationalist beliefs and her own struggle to comprehend the goodness of a God who allows suffering in the world, on the surface it seems that the speaker is suggesting that she believes more in the power of the poems than in God himself. However, considering the poem in relation to other fascicles, and how current scholarship has re-evaluated not only the religious underpinnings in Barrett Browning's poetry, but also in Dickinson's poetry, the third stanza may suggest something vastly different. In an earlier poem in the fascicle, Dickinson describes life as being the ultimate 'Romance' or fiction (Swyerski 85). In the last stanza, after just acknowledging that God was the one who created Barrett Browning, which in turn made her poems a reality, the speaker states, "With Him remain -- who unto Me-- / Gave -- even as to All" (ll 9-10). In the Christian tradition, this would be a common typology for the crucifixion --a reference to Jesus giving not only his life, but also the Holy Spirit to remain in his physical absence. The indwelling of the Holy Spirit would be the inner light to guide the believer in his or her faith walk. Using this language would immediately resonate to a nineteenth-century Congregationalist, thus shaping the understanding of the poem within the familiar, traditional tropes of Congregational Christianity, but Dickinson's speaker takes it a step further. If we think of the gift as not the Holy Spirit, but the gift of Barrett Browning to the world, the speaker suggests that Barrett Browning's life and work supersedes Faith "By so much -- as 'twas real --" (l.12). "Supersedes" could mean "replacing in power or authority", or it could mean "to set aside



as useless.” I maintain that here the speaker uses “supersedes” in terms of replacing, not setting aside faith as useless. Dickinson recognizes that God gave the world Barrett Browning, just as he gave Christ--as a gift to the world. By elevating Barrett Browning’s poems as a form of salvation of sorts, Dickinson uses the familiar Christian language, but suggests that salvation was not the only great gift given by God. Perhaps, as some know God through experience in the natural world, Dickinson presumes that others can come to know him not through sermons or scripture, but through his working through the poet as a prophet, an idea I will discuss further in the next chapter. Because Barrett Browning used so many religious images and intellectual discourse in her poetry, I think that Emily Dickinson, who had a similar Congregationalist background, found a spiritual mentor in Barrett Browning.

Whereas Dickinson struggled in her private faith with what was unseen, it was very possible for her to arrive at spiritual meaning through the text of Barrett Browning’s poems. Because Barrett Browning was real--a contemporary, a woman, a poet, a bold visionary, Dickinson found hope in her work--both spiritually and intellectually. As Swyerski states, “Dickinson’s belief in Barrett Browning and poetry was more ‘real’ than conventional religious ‘Faith’ and offered her a strategy in her quest for meaning” (85). In the same fascicle, “I think I was enchanted” supports this reading of the final stanza of this poem, as it describes the magic that the poetry has over the speaker.

I think I was enchanted

When first a sombre Girl--

I read that Foreign Lady --

The Dark -- felt beautiful --

,

And whether it was noon at night --

Or only Heaven -- at noon --

For very Lunacy of Light

I had not power to tell --

The Bees -- became as Butterflies--

The Butterflies -- as Swans --

Approached -- and spurned the narrow Grass --

And just the meanest Tunes

That Nature murmured to herself

To keep herself in Cheer --

I took for Giants -- practising

Titanic Opera --

The Days -- to Mighty Metre step --

The Homeliest --adorned

As if unto a Jubilee

'Twere suddenly confirmed --

I could not have defined the change --

Conversion of the Mind

Like Sanctifying in the Soul --

Is witnessed -- not explained --

'Twas a Divine Insanity --

The Danger to be sane

Should I again experience--

'Tis Antidote to turn --

To Tomes of solid Witchcraft --

Magicians be asleep --

But Magic -- hath an element

Like Deity -- to keep -- (Dickinson 308; Petrino 17-18)

The suggestion of bewilderment in the first stanza reflects to the earlier poem “Her sweet Weight on my Heart a Night,” in which the speaker questions whether the experience with Barrett Browning was a dream or a reality; in addition, Swyerski notes the similarity of the meter and rhyme between the opening stanza of “Her sweet Weight . . .” and the second stanza of “I think I was enchanted” (86). Reading these poems in conjunction with each other also draws attention to Dickinson’s inability to presume in one versus her inability to tell in the other. The experience with Barrett Browning has left her at a loss to express, perhaps due to the awakening of the spirit within her, that which she might not yet fully understand as a woman and a poet.

Using the typology of Christianity, the idea of coming from the darkness to the light in the first two stanzas closely resembles a salvation experience. Scholar John Walsh suggests that “I think I was enchanted” alongside about seventy other poems which use the dark and midnight symbolism were culled from *Aurora Leigh* (qtd in Swyerski 86). Considering this connection,

we can see how Dickinson reflects an interest in the development of the female poet--as the poet reads the poems, she is enlightened through the enchantment and transformed, almost possessed by the power of poetry in everyday life and nature. Many nineteenth-century American Congregationalists took theologian John Calvin's advice to "' . . . take pious delight in the clear and manifest works of God' in 'this most beautiful theater': they should 'contemplate the immense treasures of wisdom and goodness exhibited in the creatures, as in so many mirrors [of God]'" (qtd in Leader 7). For Dickinson, who had an immense appreciation of the spiritual in the natural world, we also see an equal appreciation of the spiritual in the words of the poet. The canvas of a poem seems to be just as valid a 'beautiful theater' as a lovely sunset in serving as a 'mirror of God.' Thus, her enchantment in the poem is no less valid a spiritual experience as the enchantment of a beautiful garden or sunrise.

Again, using Christian typology in stanza six, Dickinson compares her poetic conversion to that of a salvation experience, much like she does in the final two stanzas of "Her sweet Weight. . ." (Swyerski 87). Both the poetic and salvation experience cannot be explained by logic, but by the intensity of feeling from the experience; thus, faith, like poetry, must be experienced to be understood. The final two stanzas remind the reader that if the speaker loses the magic, the spell book of the poems remain although the magician is gone. Just like God touching the soul and spirit of the believer, the poems will always have the power to enchant again (Petrino 18). In another allusion to *Aurora Leigh*, in the final stanza, Dickinson recalls Romney's fear of witches upon returning Aurora's poetry book, when he exclaims, "Read it? Not a word/ I saw at once the thing had witchcraft in't, / Whereof the reading calls up dangerous spirits: I rather bring it to the witch' (qtd in Swyerski 88). Considering the imagery of the poem, Dickinson sees herself as enchanted by Barrett Browning, thus she has the power of

the book that can be called upon in the absence of Barrett Browning, the magician. Here, Swyerski suggests that “. . . her final words suggest that in her estimation poetry has a power comparable to that of God” (88). I maintain, however, that Dickinson is not committing sacrilege, rather that poetry for her is like Calvin’s suggestion of a ‘mirror of God.’

Although each of Dickinson’s Barrett Browning poems here demonstrate both an admiration of Barrett Browning and an awakening of the spirit within the speaker through her works, we still do not see that Dickinson has symbolically picked up the mantle to accept the calling to be the poet prophet in Barrett Browning’s absence.

### **Fascicle 31--A New Voice in Borrowed Robes**

As Dickinson works through her grief in not only losing her literary hero, but also her mentor, in this fascicle we see that Barrett Browning has a less prominent position in the elegies. With a renewed faith in poetry and her own ability, Dickinson begins to exercise more confidence in her own voice, though she still acknowledges and appreciates the influence of Barrett Browning (Swyerski 89). Turning again to *Aurora Leigh*, Dickinson uses her guidance in a quest for resolution in her own poetic doubts (Swyerski 89). Swyerski chronicles the connections between Aurora and Romney as a reflection of Dickinson’s poetic relationship with Barrett Browning (90). The poem “Sweet -- You forgot -- but I remembered” expresses a sense of betrayal; however, the speaker recognizes that as an outsider, she has the power to create her own poetic style (Swyerski 90). While reading Barrett Browning seemed to both enchant and shake her confidence in herself, the central elegy in this fascicle promotes the idea that the speaker has come to grips not only with losing her hero, but in her own ability to develop her poetic voice.

I went to thank Her --  
 But She Slept --  
 Her Bed -- a funneled Stone --  
 With Nosegays at the Head and Foot --  
 That Travellers -- had thrown--

Who went to thank Her --  
 But She slept --  
 'Twas Short -- to cross the Sea --  
 To look upon Her like -- alive --  
 But turning back --'twas slow --(Dickinson 322; Swyerski 90; Petrino 20)

Like Barrett Browning, Dickinson demonstrates an experimentation with the hymn form, using “standard hymnic meter with alternating tetrameters and trimeters” (Swyerski 90). Using the metric experimentation, we get a sense that perhaps Dickinson is beginning her own journey as a prophet, first developing her voice in the same way that Barrett Browning did, through the hymn. We know based on a letter from Dickinson’s friend, Higginson, to his wife that Dickinson gave him a picture of Barrett Browning’s tomb, originally given to her from Dr. Holland (Petrino 21). Photographs of a burial site would give fans who couldn’t travel abroad a visual of the final resting place of their heroes. Petrino notes that design of Barrett Browning’s tomb included stone flowers that represented a woman’s purity and a laurel wreath, symbolic of a poet (21). Dickinson’s inclusion of flower imagery in the poem has a double purpose. Dorothy Oberhaus mentions the fact that Dickinson often used the word “nosegay” as a synonym for “fascicle” (Swyerski 91). In addition, as a reference to the tomb and the flowers of tribute

left by other fans, the flower imagery here could represent that Dickinson's nosegays are really the fascicles of poetic tribute that she leaves for Barrett Browning. In addition, although the turning back is slow, Dickinson realizes that to best honor Barrett Browning, she must return to her writing and assume the mantle left vacant by her predecessor. As discussed earlier, taking up the mantle does not give her poetic power, rather it is an acceptance on the part of the prophet to answer the calling to be a conduit of the spirit and a messenger to the people. Dickinson's poetic power is already there, but it is up to her to develop, exercise, and use it.

Once the mantle has been assumed by Dickinson, the question remains, how does she use the authority of the female poet prophet to develop her own poetic voice? By examining Dickinson's own Congregationalist history and unique faith story, we can see that in the borrowed robes of the female poet prophet, Dickinson certainly develops her own unique voice. Like Elisha who asked for a double portion of his mentor's spirit, Dickinson's negotiation of her grief over Barrett Browning's death, own poetic insecurities, and ultimate acceptance to continue the work of the female poet prophet are significant first steps in her calling to become perhaps the most powerful female voice in American poetics, certainly so in the nineteenth-century.

## Chapter 5: Emily Dickinson, An American Prophet

When Elizabeth Barrett Browning died in 1861, Emily Dickinson was on the verge of her most fruitful poetic period. As I discussed earlier, the Barrett Browning fascicles reveal both adoration for Barrett Browning's work and her role as a successful female poet. In addition, the fascicles demonstrate Dickinson's own timidity in developing her poetic voice, yet she was resolved to write because she felt it was a calling for her. Chronologically, the death of Barrett Browning occurred early in what scholar Sharon Leiter calls Dickinson's "flood creativity," or a period of seven years of prolific poetry writing between 1858 and 1865 (14). Before 1858, there are only five known poems; in 1858, she wrote forty-three; in 1859, there were eighty-two; Fifty-four in 1860, eighty-eight in 1861, and no fewer than 227 in 1862 (Leiter 15). At the crescendo of this period, Dickinson writes the Barrett Browning fascicles in 1863, the same year in which she writes about 300 poems (Leiter 18). In addition, Dickinson scholar Linda Freedman claims that during this peak of Dickinson's creative power, many of her most interesting religious poems were composed (1). Ironically, in Dickinson's most creative period, based on line sixteen in "Ourselves were wed one summer--dear--", she still believed her garden was sown in frost and had yet to exhibit the beauty of Barrett Browning's (Dickinson 272). In the absence of Barrett Browning, it seems that Dickinson took the job of assuming the mantle of woman poet seriously, but did she fit the role of a prophet?

### **The American Experience**

To answer the question of Dickinson's prophetic role, it is first helpful to understand the nuances of American Congregationalism. Although the basic tenets of English Congregationalism were upheld in America, the unique American experience did give the Dissenting faith its own distinct flavor. Theologically, Congregationalism fit nicely with the



democratic ideals of the fledgling nation. The ability for each church to self-govern and democratically call its leaders was appealing to those with a hard work ethic, an education, and a desire to discover truth through self-directed learning and dialogical interaction in worship. In addition, there were several people who saw that the great American social experiment of democracy seemed to be ordained by God as a part of prophetic fulfillment. American Puritan theologian Jonathan Edwards compiled a series of sermons as a part of a greater project that he personally never finished but was later published by his son in 1774 (Leader 2). Edwards' work, *A History of the Work of Redemption*, was a popular book that justified America's independence from England as a result of America being a part of a larger redemptive plan (Leader 2). Not only was the book recognized for its religious importance, but it was included in George Bancroft's *History of the United States*, published in 1840 (Leader 2). In this work, religious historian John Wilson suggests

It may not be too much to suggest that Edwards's history was as influential as any other single book in fixing the cultural parameters of nineteenth-century American Protestant culture. It securely anchored American experience in a cosmic setting, locating it by means of reference to sacred Scripture and investing it with preeminent significance for concluding the drama of Christian redemption. It legitimated the social experiment that was the new American culture. (qtd in Leader 2)

Based on this theological view, America was chosen as an instrument of God to serve as a beacon to the world of the importance of freedom and faith. As a part of a prophetic country, it stands to reason that Americans collectively saw themselves as chosen and set apart to communicate God's truth to the world. Doriani maintains that in addition to nineteenth-century

preachers and theologians, secular people such as Thoreau, Emerson, Whitman, and Margaret Fuller reflected New England's "preoccupation with prophecy, especially as the Civil War approached;" however, Doriani also suggests that Dickinson had the most direct contact with prophecy through the minister's books in her family library and sermons, not with the secular prophets (7). With the swelling tension of the Civil War looming, Shira Wolosky points out that apocalyptic rhetoric from ministers, orators, and politicians claimed that the Civil War was God's judgment for the sin of slavery (Doriani 7-8). After all, how could a nation be a beacon of freedom and faith if it sanctioned and supported the subjugation of one group of people to another? Dickinson would not have escaped this rhetoric, which coincided with her most prolific writing period (Doriani 8). As a result of the ideology that America was a prophetic country, many ministers, orators, and writers of the day assumed the authority of the mantle to prophesize first by being American. This claim was not limited to ministers, because the prophetic voice was central to transcendental poetics (Doriani 8).

As an American, transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson claimed that poetry was a spiritual medium that he compared to the biblical gospels, and that the poet's office was to articulate "the spiritual facts of earthly existence, with the effect of emancipating humanity through the poet's sublime vision" (qtd in Doriani 8). As such, Emerson equated the poet with the prophet since they both were "utterer[s] of spiritual truth" (Doriani 8). We know that Dickinson owned a copy of Emerson's essay "The Poet", which perpetuated this idea (Doriani 8). In the essay, Emerson speaks of the three children of the Universe—the Knower, the Doer, and the Sayer; he compares these to the Holy Trinity—the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, and he suggests that they are archetypal in all systems of thought (Emerson). He relates that the Poet is the Sayer, or mouthpiece of man, and through his words all the beauty of nature, human

experience, and theology itself can be expressed; as such, the Sayer has a power to see and handle “that which others dream of, traverses the whole scale of experience, and is representative of man, in virtue of being the largest power to receive and impart.” According to Emerson, the Poet has power because he can effectively use language to speak on behalf of others, and as a part of this transcendental trinity of sorts, The Poet connects to God and Nature by serving as a conduit of expression and experience because “words and deeds are quite indifferent modes of the divine energy. Words are also actions, and actions are a kind of words.” Because not every human has the power to use language effectively to express experience, the Poet possessing the gift of language has a responsibility to articulate truth about the human condition and capture the beauty of nature. In many of Dickinson’s works, she uses nature imagery to speak truth about man’s world, his place in it and how to live. One poem that poignantly captures the transcendentalist connection between God, man, and nature is “Some—keep the Sabbath—going to church”

Some—keep the Sabbath—going to church

I—keep it—staying at Home—

With a Bobolink—for a Chorister—

And an Orchard—for a Dome—

Some—keep the Sabbath, in Surplice—

I—just wear my wings—

And instead of tolling the bell, for church—

Our little Sexton—sings—

“God”—preaches—a noted Clergyman—  
 And the sermon is never long,  
 So—instead of getting to Heaven—at last—  
 I’m—going—all along! (Dickinson 115)

This poem is indicative of Dickinson’s understanding of Emerson’s definition of the Poet and his power to connect God, man, and nature through language. By using the diction of “Sabbath,” “church,” “Chorister,” “Surplice,” “Clergyman,” “sermon,” “Sexton” and “Heaven,” Dickinson exemplifies the traditional way to “keep” the Sabbath—in a church service. Her choice of capitalization in these word choices is interesting, however, because she gives importance to all the religious words except “church” and “sermon.” In choosing to lowercase these, she communicates to her audience that the what is traditionally the highlight of the traditional worship—the church and the sermon—is secondary to her home worship experience. Nature serves in the roles of the liturgy and God himself, through nature, preaches the sermon. The final lines imply that while people in a traditional church service look to the heaven of the future, she gets to experience it in the present as she interacts with God through nature in her own private worship. As a poet, she is putting into practice, Emerson’s definition of the poet prophet—she is using language to articulate spiritual truth through the medium of poetry and nature. In addition to the idea of a prophetic poet, Dickinson was also exposed to the concept of a woman’s intense emotional and spiritual intuition, which made her a uniquely qualified poet prophet.

Feminist Margaret Fuller agreed with Emerson’s assessment that women were “oracular and intuitive beings, possessors and speakers of wisdom, but she went farther than Emerson in the ways she explained women’s particular gifts of prophecy” (Dorani 9). Fuller believed

women possessed a special kind of genius “electrical in tendency, intuitive in function, spiritual in tendency,” and as a result would use this genius to express weighty visions in the form of prophecy or poetry, or perhaps a fusion of both (qtd in Doriani 9). Although Doriani notes that Fuller wanted to completely discard the Bible, other more conservative women recognized the power of women to prophesize within the framework of the scripture (9).

In Lydia Maria Child’s 1835 work *History of the Condition of Women*, Child explores whether women were more naturally prophetic than men because she believed that women were more immediately connected to heaven (Doriani 10). In this work, Child cites the female biblical prophets such as Deborah, Mary, Miriam, and even the witch of Endor as evidence of biblical endorsement of female prophets (Doriani 10). Doriani notes that Child’s work offered Dickinson a contemporary source that focused on prophetic women in the Bible (10). Another supporting female writer of this ideology was Sarah Josepha Hale, editor of *Godey’s Lady’s Book* for almost fifty years (Doriani 10). In 1853, Hale wrote *Women’s Record* which proposed that the Bible gave as much religious power to women as to men; scholar Nina Baym asserts that Hale not only defends the Bible’s acceptance of women in positions of religious power but also suggests that women were superior to men because of her gift of intuition (qtd in Doriani 10). In *Women’s Record*, Hale recounts the lives of 1,650 women in 900 pages from a broad scope of history and nationalities; Hale parallels their progress with the progress of Christianity and suggests that women were responsible for the moral improvement of men and subsequently the future of their culture through the rearing of children (Doriani 10). This responsibility would not only give her great cultural importance, but also demonstrate that her nature is “specifically suited to Christianity and religious power” (Doriani 10). As a result, Hale encourages educated Christian women to boldly speak their religious convictions instead of speaking softly within

their small groups as “women are invited to prophesy, to address each other in public, and to exploit the power of the word” (Doriani 11). Hale believed that they had not only a right, but also an obligation to speak truth because men needed to hear them, but she advocated for a use of “stealth” when they spoke out so that men might be receptive to their message (Doriani 11). In a time in which women were gaining power in their voices but had yet to fully be recognized as equal to men, Hale’s advice to use stealth would suggest that any message by a woman would be better received through culturally appropriate mediums. Poetry would be the perfect medium for such a message and would certainly have been an attractive way for Dickinson to fulfil her “prophetic duty to focus on the giving of wisdom and vision” (Doriani 11). Like Barrett Browning, Dickinson enjoyed an excellent education although her educational path was an easier one than her predecessor, partly due to the democratic nature of not only Congregationalism, but also the American experience.

Congregationalism encouraged a “long standing commitment to education as important for an informed electorate and an enlightened church” (von Rohr 271). Well-informed congregants were not only responsible for electing godly leaders in government, but also in the church. In addition, Dickinson’s New England American culture emphasized learning not just for arriving at truth and beauty, but for the practicality of creating an educated populace. This education not only extended for boys, but in the early nineteenth-century, Congregationalists led the way in developing education for women (von Rohr 273). In the early nineteenth century, college opportunities began to flourish for women, and Antoinette Brown Blackwell, the first woman to be ordained in the ministry, received her theological instruction at Oberlin College (von Rohr 272). In a similar way, Mary Lyon’s Mount Holyoke Seminary (College), founded in 1837, advanced women’s higher education, and it became a model for other women’s colleges

throughout the country (von Rohr 274). Dickinson lived in the thick of these advancements for women, and she certainly benefited as a student of Amherst Academy and Mount Holyoke. Leader states that these, “. . . were both highly devout and intellectually rigorous institutions, founded and taught by men and women firmly ensconced in the Congregational and New Divinity persuasions. In Dickinson’s Amherst, the social, spiritual, and intellectual realms were inextricably intertwined (65).

### **A Question of Faith**

Emily Dickinson has been an enigma for readers and critics alike since the bulk of her poems were first published posthumously in 1890. Since Dickinson was gone, she could never clarify or answer questions about her work. Early editions “cleaned up” her odd grammar and capitalization, but in doing so, changed the meaning of the poems. Scholars have examined not only her poems, but also her letters to glean some sense of who she was as a poet, a person, and a Christian. Anne West Ramirez, in her article “The Art to Save: Emily Dickinson’s Vocation as Female Prophet” gives a succinct discussion of the history of Dickinson scholarship. Because of Dickinson’s eccentric reputation, Ramirez notes that many readers have been under the impression that her reclusive lifestyle was the product of unrequited love affairs, family dysfunction, or possible neurotic disorders (387). Dickinson scholars Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar revolutionized thinking about Dickinson with their 1979 feminist classic, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*.

In this work, Gilbert & Gubar argued that Dickinson was not a passive victim of nineteenth-century patriarchal society, but that her “anxieties about her art and her anger at female subordination” caused her to rebel against traditional religion (qtd. in Ramirez

388). Feminist scholar Suzanne Juhasz analyzed Dickinson's exploration of inner life with little reference to her religious heritage and concluded that Dickinson's commitment to craft and doing her best work made it possible for her to be in charge of creating the best life and version of herself (Ramirez 388). Ramirez also notes that some scholars such as Dorothy Huff Oberhaus, have de-emphasized the feminist facet of her poetry and examined it only within the context of her Christian heritage; for example, Oberhaus follows the devotional threads in Dickinson's Christological poems, but does not address the unconventionality of her female speaker resembling the risen Christ, "claiming authority through her dedication to an ambiguous Master to bring healing to others" (Ramirez 388). In addition, scholar Herbert Schneidau expounds on Dickinson's "affinity with the antinomian tradition of biblical prophecy" (Ramirez 388). As Schneidau observes in his essay, "The Antinomian Strain: The Bible and American Poetry," "a pervasive suspicion of communal orthodoxy runs through the Bible," as it does in Dickinson's poetry (Ramirez 388). Ramirez observes that Schneidau does not "address the poet's remarkable assertiveness as a female critic of society's institutions, and he greatly exaggerates the degree of her isolation from her religious and literary milieu" (388). The more recent scholarship of Karl Keller, Jane Donahue Eberwein, and Beth Maclay Doriani has attempted to reconcile both the religious and feminist approaches to Dickinson (Ramirez 389).

Beth Maclay Doriani sums up the gaps in focusing on only one perspective when she states,

Although they have correctly challenged critics who have ignored the importance of Dickinson's womanhood to her art, almost all feminist critics have assumed that Dickinson was distanced from her repressive nineteenth-century American culture around her, including her religious heritage. Similarly, religious critics of Dickinson's poetry have generally seen Christianity as a negative influence on her



work, either limiting her in some way or, more often, stimulating her to protest against her theological heritage. Often the religious critics have failed to consider how Dickinson's gender might have shaped her art. (2)

Doriani's work, *Emily Dickinson, Daughter of Prophecy*, argues that religious tradition and the Bible itself empowers female writers, thinkers, and speakers so that they use "models and devices found in the scriptural rhetoric. . . as a principal vehicle of power and authority" (ix). Likewise, in her recent book, *Knowing, Seeing, Being: Jonathan Edwards, Emily Dickinson, Marianne Moore, and the American Typological Tradition*, Jennifer Leader examines how Christian Puritan typology influenced the works of Edwards, Dickinson, and Moore, thus connecting each with common threads of a shared heritage expressed differently in their respective centuries. Leader credits the current Dickinson scholarship of Cristanne Miller and Faith Barrett, and two essay collections--*Emily Dickinson in Context*, edited by Eliza Richards, and *Emily Dickinson and Philosophy*, edited by Jed Deppman, Marianne Noble, and Gary Lee Stonum, with resituating Dickinson within her historical, cultural, religious, intellectual, and literary context (Leader 61). Gone is the vision of the ghost like recluse that disconnects herself from every part of the public sphere, and we see that Dickinson is very much connected with the world beyond the walls of her home. Jennifer Leader notes that Dickinson

. . . lived in both an environment and a historical moment in which leading thinkers viewed the world through overlapping religious, philosophical, and scientific lenses, envisioning human life as an amalgam of sacred and secular experience in which most perceived no inherent conflict. Whatever degree of personal faith Dickinson may or may not have held at any given moment, her proclivity for thinking about the ways nature might fill the gap between heaven

and earth was indelibly marked by the discourses of the Reformed typological tradition. (8)

In consideration of Doriani and Leader's works, Karen Dieleman's analysis of the Congregational liturgical influence on Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and the influence of Barrett Browning on Emily Dickinson as demonstrated by Ann Swyerski and Elizabeth Petrino, I maintain that by examining Dickinson through the same liturgical lens and applying the same prophetic definition to Dickinson, we can expand our understanding not only of how Dickinson considered herself a female poet prophet, but like Barrett Browning, used the mantle of Congregational theology and liturgy to proclaim truth in her own unique prophetic voice.

### **Hymnic Forms**

As I discussed earlier, the hymn was an important part of nineteenth-century Congregationalist worship, and as Ian Bradley reminded us, the hymn was not held within the bounds of the church but became a popular culture phenomenon in the public square as well. Because hymn writing was a way in which women could engage in the worship experience both creatively through the writing of the devotional hymn and spiritually as they expounded on religious texts or explained doctrinal truths, the hymn proved to be an excellent way for women to move from the devotional poetry of the private domestic sphere into the public sphere of communal worship. Hawn and Hobbs explored the language of intimacy in the hymn format and how women were able to express an intimate oneness with God "in which the personal boundaries of the believer broke down entirely so that God could enter, control and use that person. Although words like 'boundaries' and 'enter' seem to describe a physical experience, the intimate language employed by many hymnists reflects a spiritual rather than physical reality."

(67). Because women were culturally considered more emotive, their ability to articulate this type of spiritual intimacy in the hymn helped to harness the spiritual passion of the salvation experience; thus, they were able to contribute to a collective Congregationalist worship experience by moving the audience to acceptance of this Savior/ Believer relationship either in the church or in the home. Although both Barrett Browning and Emily Dickinson worshipped in the transitional phase of moving from psalmody to hymnody, they both saw the power in the hymn to give a poetic prophetic voice in worship. Based on the emergence of women's hymns and the accepted presence of women's hymns in the public sphere of congregational worship, we can see how, like Barrett Browning, the hymn would be an intriguing and viable genre for Dickinson to express her own spirituality.

Based on Dickinson's admiration for Barrett Browning, exposure to her hymn experiments and her family's strong commitment to the Amherst First Congregational Church, we can imagine that Dickinson was steeped not only in singing the psalms and hymns from a congregational perspective, but also from an artistic one. Listening to the cadences of the meter and familiar images would have impacted her creatively, whether consciously or not. Like Barrett Browning, who ultimately found the hymnic form too restrictive for her complex theological ideas, we also see how the Dickinson manipulates the hymn format to speak her own truth as a prophetic voice. In her book *Emily Dickinson and Hymn Culture*, Victoria Morgan explores Dickinson's engagement with not only the hymn format, but also the hymn culture and orthodox hymn content.

As stated earlier, Morgan uses Tom Ingram and Douglas Newton's 'acid test' questions to differentiate between religious poems and hymns: "Does this express any kind of relationship between the worshipper and God?" and "Was this hymn ever sung, or was it at least written for

singing?” (qtd in Morgan 31). By using these two questions, it would be easy to categorize some of Dickinson’s poems as hymns due to their relational subject matter; however, the consideration about whether she ever intended on them being sung is more problematic. Morgan notes, however, that many poems from other authors, which were never meant to be classified as a hymn, have been adapted and included in hymnals (31). Recognizing this fact, in classifying a hymn, content seems to take precedence over singing intent when considering the value of a poem as a hymn. In addition, Morgan notes that to determine a hymn from a lyric poem requires one to consider how the work “both dramatises a speaker’s relation to the divine and presents a clear narrative in which the speaker and God are defined” (29). As to the effect of hymns in nineteenth-century culture, Rev. Robert Baynes reflected on the power and purpose of the hymn in 1867 when he stated

Next to the Bible itself, hymns have done more to influence our views, and mould our theology, than any other instrumentality whatever. There is a power in hymns which never dies. Easily learned in the days of childhood and of youth; often repeated; seldom, if ever forgotten; they abide with us, a most precious heritage amid all the changes of our earthly life. (qtd in Morgan 29)

Dickinson would have been aware of the expectations of the hymnic form, thus in choosing to write poetry about the relationship between the speaker and the divine, and to use the Hymnic Common Metre, or some derivation of it, she actually uses the traditional format to challenge theology and the accepted communal dogma of the believing body (Morgan 29). By working within the frame of the hymn, she challenges theological ideas, and fulfills the role of prophet as earlier established by Rabanus Maurus, which was to stand apart from society, observe it, and open the eyes of the people to hidden truths (Mayeski 242).

When considering Dickinson's hymnic poetry, looking at how she deviates from the traditional while working within it complements the content of her verse. Kirstie Blair observes that "when Victorian poetry speaks of faith, it tends to do so in steady and regular rhythms; when it speaks of doubt, it is correspondingly more likely to deploy irregular, unsteady, unbalanced rhythms" (1). Consequently, Victorian Morgan notes "when Dickinson uses metre it is often only to disrupt it; presenting to the ear the idea of regularity which has gone askew" (37). For example, let us consider the poem "A transport one cannot contain"

A transport one cannot contain

May yet, a transport be--

Though God forbid it lift the lid,

Unto it's Extasy!

A Diagram--of Rapture!

A sixpence at a show--

With Holy Ghosts in Cages!

A universe would go! (Morgan 37; Dickinson 136)

Morgan observes that the first stanza employs a common hymnic meter exactly--alternating 4/3 metrical feet; however, the second stanza forces the reader to consider the dash to reconcile the expectation of another eight-syllable line (37). By lingering on the word 'Diagram,' the reader must consider the thought of containing God (the transport) (Morgan 37). The irregular meter of the second stanza communicates a disruption in the natural order of things. This disruption illustrates "the impossibility of holding or containing the 'transport' which links the poet to the

divine” (Morgan 37). Just as the ear longs to hear the regular pattern of the rhythm of the poem, the Christian audience would find discomfort in the theological content of putting God in cages. If humanity were to limit God by containing Him, then humanity would be the master over God Himself. If He were limited, much like a tiger captured for the pleasure of a viewing audience at a circus or zoo, He would be at the mercy of His captors. This thought would make most Christians uncomfortable, even considering it heretical, yet Dickinson suggests that organized religion attempts to contain God in such a way. The ‘six-pence at a show’ could refer to the offertory collection at a church service to view the ‘Holy Ghosts in the cages’ during the sermon. Even the use of the word “show” implies a spectacle, and perhaps a sense of transiency. If the show is a traveling circus, then its “illusions” are not permanent; thus, they will ultimately end. Dickinson could be implying that Christian dogma attempts to contain God by its man-made rules and could have disastrous consequences.

For humanity to limit God through its rituals, liturgical practices, and extra-biblical restrictions, Dickinson warns that people become observers of God, but not participants in His work. Morgan also suggests that Dickinson’s use of hymn meter, or her deviation from it, “always implies a challenge to the notion that religious faith is ‘agreed,’ simple and known” (38). Thus, in a prophetic sense, the speaker stands apart from society, directly addresses her audience in an effort to open its eyes and warns the people of the consequences of limiting God. In a similar vein, Dickinson critiques a pastor’s sermon in this poem:

He preached upon “Breadth” till it argued him narrow--

The Broad are too broad to define

And of “Truth” until it proclaimed him a Liar--

The Truth never flaunted a Sign--

Simplicity fled from his counterfeit presence  
 As Gold the Pyrites would shun--  
 What confusion would cover the innocent Jesus  
 To meet so enabled a Man! (Morgan 38; Dickinson 564)

Morgan observes that this poem has more syllables per line than the previous one, perhaps to mimic the idea that the preacher cannot convey his message to the audience with simplicity; however, Dickinson still uses the 4-3 / 4-3 meter despite the excess syllables per line (38). By adhering to the common hymn meter, Dickinson suggests that the pastor is working within the structure of accepted traditional worship, but that he is counterfeit in his message. Ironically, in using the hymn meter common in actual worship experiences, Dickinson is describing a worship experience that falls short of her expectations. The repetition of the word “broad,” accompanied with the emptiness of the message supports that language is unable to “capture the essence of such an all-encompassing knowledge of the divine” (Morgan 38). “Truth” has proclaimed him a Liar in the first stanza, and in the second, Dickinson warns him of the consequences. In a clever pun in line six, Dickinson plays on the sound of Pyrites, meaning the mineral “fool’s gold” but also the homophone ‘pirates,’ raiders who would never shun real gold (Morgan 39). The simplicity of truth is the real gold; however, it is shunned by the counterfeit preacher who muddies the water of truth with convoluted, empty words. If the purpose of the preacher, or prophet for that matter, is to communicate a divine message to an audience, any attempt to hinder the clear and concise understanding of that message would be a sin. In addition, the final two lines to the Christian audience would resonate as a biblical allusion to Matthew 7: 22-23, “Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name

drive out demons and, in your name, perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’” Here Dickinson reminds us that there are eternal consequences to people who function as “fool’s gold.” Following the prophetic pattern again, the speaker stands apart as an observer, opens the eyes of the audience to the sin, and warns of the consequences. In addition, she follows Landow’s prophetic pattern of the Victorian sage of interpretation, attack on the audience, warning, and visionary promise (26-27).

### **The Poetic Prophet Preacher**

In the Dickinson family library, there was a collection of sermons by F. D. Huntington who preached that nineteenth century America was ushering in a new age of prophecy:

We are in a day of a new order of worship . . . the day of the prophet has come, --bold rebuker of kings and chieftains--sharp discerners between light and darkness, between truth and lies, --the unsparing censor of the corruption of government, of the abuses of law, of the idolatries and worldliness of the people. (qtd in Doriani 12)

In conjunction with the Romantic ideals that focused on emotion, Huntington proposed that true spirituality was demonstrated through emotional spirituality; Doriani suggests that “Dickinson adopted the spiritual and emotional forms or structures of prophecy that Huntington called for, more than the content or dogma that can “prove hollow when not rooted in heartfelt spirituality” (12). Although Dickinson often challenged, inverted, and contradicted some of the tenets of orthodox faith, as a prophet preacher, she still maintained Huntington’s emphasis on spirituality (Doriani 12). In addition, much like the dialogical nature of Congregationalism that I discussed earlier, Dickinson’s speakers often communicated in a conversational dialogue. Consider the



following unfinished poem which employs the same *sermocinatio* dialogue Dieleman noted in Barrett Browning's *Drama of Exile*:

You're right--"the way is narrow"--

And "difficult the Gate"--

And "few there be"--Correct again--

That "enter in--thereat"--

'Tis Costly--So are *purples*!

'Tis just the price of *Breath*--

With but the "Discount" of the *Grave*--

Termed by the *Brokers*--"Death"!

And after *that*--there's Heaven--

The *Good* Man's--"*Dividend*"--

And *Bad* Men--"go to Jail"--

I guess--(Doriani 12; Dickinson 122)

In the first stanza, the speaker engages in a dialogue with a Christian who blindly accepts his/her faith. She concedes the points in the argument that her Christian readers would infer is the concept of the elect, or that path of the faith is narrow and only a few Christians will be able to enter the kingdom of heaven. Using the quotation marks, she speaks the diction of the faith that others in her family, friend circle, and community would readily identify. The quotes also suggest that she is not claiming that these are her ideas or perhaps that she is being sarcastic. Her uses of the dash simultaneously give the reader a chance to ponder the line and mimic the

dialogue between the speaker and the Christian. Dashes give an opportunity for the speaker to “listen” to the implied response, so that she might respond. In addition, her audience becomes a part of the conversation. Whereas Barrett Browning had a closed dialogue with the characters in *Drama in Exile*, where the audience is an outside observer, Dickinson has an open dialogue where the audience is invited to participate. The reader can interject within the space of the dashes. Doriani suggests that the speaker “in reiterating the platitudes of nineteenth-century Christianity, exposes the easiness of the formulations and suggests the shallowness of the beliefs” (13). In this poem, Dickinson challenges the average Christian to think beyond the basic tenets of his or her faith and think more deeply about the validity of those dogmas. Much like the preacher in “He preached upon ‘Breadth’ till it argued him narrow--,” we see the speaker challenge her reader to look beyond the trappings of dogma and ritual and look for simple truth.

Simplicity of language does not necessarily translate to simplicity of thought, as we see in most of Dickinson’s poems, which use plain spoken English to communicate challenging ideas. As Doriani observes, “We sense the poet’s preference for a spirituality more complex, a religion that goes beyond logical propositions;” in addition, she notes that in this poem we see two common characteristics of Dickinson’s prophetic mode: challenging both religious shallowness and the dogmas of the faith (13).

Although the poem is identified as unfinished in Doriani and Cristanne Miller’s collection, I maintain that there is significance in the fact that it ends abruptly, not with answers or a final piece of wisdom, but with a simple “I guess.” The final stanza of the poem discusses the afterlife, and the fact that the speaker ends with a sense of doubt supports the idea that although we might agree with traditional dogmas that have been fed to us throughout our lives, in the end there is no certainty in the what happens after we die. The reader is forced to consider

the short final line and the dash--an invitation for the reader to contemplate not only what he or she blindly believes, but what might come later. Perhaps in being unfinished, the poem really does conclude. We cannot know more than what we know this side of heaven. For any type of prophet, a seer or teaching prophet, there is still the unknown experience of what happens after death; thus, in death, even the prophet is just one member of humanity facing the uncertainty of what lies beyond the grave.

In *Emily Dickinson, Daughter of Prophecy*, Dorani suggests that the two greatest influences on Dickinson's concept of prophecy are the Bible and sermon collections of contemporary preachers; as such, there are four features Dorani claims that both the scripture and sermons had in common: 1) the belief that the prophet was a guide or visionary 2) the emotionally charged, spiritually intense prophetic voice 3) a conversational, simple style rich with vivid concrete images 4) rhetorical strategies of both the biblical prophets and contemporary preachers (27). In addition, Dorani notes that the sermon form consisted of a logical four-step structure: presentation of the text, introduction of doctrine, elaboration, and application; in over half of Dickinson's poems, we see her use this form or some variation of it, usually emphasizing reason and evidence (45). A terrific poem to examine prophetic voice is "To mend each tattered Faith." Although this is one of Dickinson's more orthodox poems in imagery and theme, we can see how she challenges tradition through her use of prophetic voice:

To mend each tattered Faith

There is a needle fair

Though no appearance indicate--

'Tis threaded in the Air--

And though it do not wear

As if it never Tore

‘Tis very comfortable indeed

And spacious as before--(Dorani 32; Dickinson 612)

Using the familiar image of a spiritual garment, frequently referenced in the Bible as clothes of righteousness, holiness or spiritual power as in the Old Testament, or garments such as the “armor of God” as described in Ephesians, Dickinson creates a central image that would be relatable to her audience. Her voice is authoritative, offering a sense of hope in that if faith becomes damaged that it can be repaired (Dorani 32). Heaven, as the “holy seamstress” can repair the damage so that it looks like new but is not restrictive for the believer to wear. From a practical standpoint, most garments that are torn must be altered in the restoration process so that they never fit quite as well as before. This “good-as-new” garment demonstrates that although God knows that people face challenges which strain their faith, He can restore it completely, with no punishment for the damage; there is no discomfort or strain as a result of the repair. Dorani notes that Dickinson is unique in that as a prophet, she is admitting that faith can be tested and strained to the point of tearing, an idea that is not explored by other biblical prophets (32). In addition, Dickinson seems to be speaking in the manner described in Isaiah 61: 1-3, where the prophet states, “The Lord has anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek. . . to comfort all that mourn . . . to bestow on them . . . the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness” (Dorani 33). It seems that Dickinson has identified not only a hopeful prophetic voice in this poem, but also creates the poem itself as ‘a garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness.’

In addition to the prophetic voice, we also note the application of the sermon format to this poem. The presentation of text is the poem itself, with the biblical allusion to Isaiah being supplementary to the poem--scriptural evidence to support the poetic truth. The doctrine would be presented in stanza one, in which the broken faith is mended by heaven, and the application would be in stanza two, where the believer receives the “good-as-new” mended garment of faith and is restored to relationship with God. Dickinson’s concise, simply articulated poems provide neat little spiritual packages of prophecy to her reader--as a preacher prophet she successfully presents the gold to the reader with no fear of it being counterfeited through ornate, convoluted language; however, simplicity of language cannot be confused with simplicity of content. Just as any good sermon should, Dickinson invites her reader to think deeply about the implications of her words and apply them to their own situation.

Some people may argue that since Barrett Browning was published, thus had wide access to an audience, that she would be considered more prophetic than Dickinson; however, as Doriani notes, the biblical prophet often lost awareness of audience because the focus on speaking the vision was “so great that the audience became subordinate” (36). One example of such a prophet would be John of Patmos in the Revelation; The worth of the articulated vision was not measured by audience reaction or numbers, rather the effectiveness of the prophet in carrying out the role of spiritual visionary (Doriani 36). Because Dickinson shunned publication, she was free to “express her spiritual vision to an audience of her own invention, one appropriate to her time and gender;” in this way, she could speak more prophetically because she was not subject to the conventional demands by editors (Doriani 37). Immune to the stress of pleasing a reading public and meeting the standards of editors, Dickinson could focus solely on her spiritual vision, perhaps leaving them to posterity through her own brand of publication--the fascicles

(Doriani 36). An example of her poetic prophetic impact is best exemplified through the reaction of her British contemporary, Christina Rossetti, who commented to her brother about receiving the 1890 publication of Dickinson's work, "There is a book I might have shown you. . . *Poems* by Emily Dickinson lately sent me from America--but perhaps you know it. She *had* (for she is dead) a wonderful Blakean gift, but therewithal a startling reckless of poetic ways and means" (qtd in Doriani 37). By comparing Dickinson to William Blake, "the British poet renowned for his unearthly prophetic poetry," Rossetti demonstrates that Dickinson ultimately did have an audience, even an international one, that recognized the prophetic nature of her poetic voice; consequently, Rossetti's sentiment echoes the American reception of her work, based on critics' reviews (Doriani 37). As mentioned earlier, the outsider positions, much like John the Baptist and Jesus, creates the distance between the prophet and the community necessary to achieve a clear vision of a situation, need, or problem. Doriani quotes a letter to Mabel Loomis Todd from Rev. E. Winchester Donald of New York's Episcopal Church of the Ascension about his reaction to the copy of 1890 *Poems* that she had sent him

One other thing: was the inexorable cost of all this illumination her seclusion renunciation & ache? Would John Baptist [sic] be forerunner without the years in the desert, the locusts and all that? Is the nun's self-effacement, her veil and her virginity, the explanation of her unquestioned power? We cannot wear lace and pearls—go often to town & the play, be experts in salads beers and truffles, know what to do with our hands—and we expect either to see heaven or to have anyone believe we have seen it. (qtd in Doriani 24)

Considering this facet of prophetic effectiveness, Dickinson's reclusively was a help, not a hinderance to her success as a prophet.

Upon taking up the mantle vacated by Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Emily Dickinson developed her own unique prophetic voice through her adaptations of the hymn and sermon formats utilized in independent churches which followed Congregationalist polity. As an American, she was steeped in the ideology of America's prophetic role in the Christian redemptive plan, as advocated by theologian Jonathan Edwards, and the transcendental movement that developed secular prophets as well as religious ones at the dawn of the Civil War. Whereas Barrett Browning was a female poetic prophet pioneer, clearing the way for women to come after her whether they chose to compose quietly at home or boldly in the marketplace, Emily Dickinson proved that wearing the mantle of authority to prophesize did not mean that the prophet had to mimic the voice of her mentor.

## Transferring the Mantle: Conclusion

Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Emily Dickinson are arguably two of the most familiar names in nineteenth-century poetry--One as a successful poet in the marketplace, widely admired, revered, and acclaimed during her lifetime and mourned by people who had never even met her upon her passing; the other quietly composed an astounding number of poems, many of which were carefully sewn together in fascicles, only to be discovered and published after her death to an audience that could never show their appreciation to her. One woman knew the power of her prophetic voice in her lifetime; the other's prophetic voice was only heard when her physical voice was forever silent. Two women with one calling--to speak truth through a divinely inspired gift. Although they came from similar religious and socioeconomic backgrounds, they had different ways of looking at spirituality and different visions of the world, their place in it, and how to live.

Though stylistically different, both Barrett Browning and Dickinson employ the hymn format for similar reasons--they both recognize that it is a socially accepted way for a woman to communicate spiritual truths to an audience, and they both see it as a way to communicate prophetically to a Christian audience. Though Barrett Browning abandons the hymn format because it is too restrictive for her intellectual pursuits and creativity, Dickinson explores the format in an effort to work within a familiar space for her Christian audience but deviates from the format to communicate unorthodox messages. Although Barrett Browning demonstrated a progression to her prophetic calling through her exploration of the hymn and sermon formats, Dickinson's prophetic voice seems to have integrated both the hymn and sermon formats simultaneously through her "flood creativity" from 1858-1865 (Leiter 14).



Using the familiar modes of the hymn and sermon, both women worked within the frames of Congregationalist liturgy to speak about the certainty of their faith or their doubts, the power of their religious community or its shortcomings, the hope for their future, or their warnings about it. Regardless of the message, the mantle of authority assumed by both women through the unique religious democracy of Congregationalism was essential in granting them the power to proclaim.

Hopefully, scholars will continue to explore the complexities of faith demonstrated in the poetry of both Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Emily Dickinson. To trivialize the impact of their astute biblical knowledge and religious heritage on their verse is to ignore a part of each poet as integral to her being as her womanhood. To fully appreciate the layers of meaning and truth proclaimed in their verse, one must consider that as a woman, a Congregationalist, a poet and a prophet, each poet understood the gravity of using her talent to communicate messages not limited to herself, but to the instruction and edification of the greater human community.

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