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“A Task of Glory All Thine Own:”

Hannah More and Women’s Biblical Poetry of the Early Nineteenth Century

In the introduction to their anthology of collected poetry inspired by the Bible, Atwan and Wieder identify English poetry’s “two great heritages” as “the classical and the scriptural or...the Hellenic and the Hebraic” and note that the scriptural tradition, although equally significant, has failed to be awarded the same status and attention as the classical (xix). These anthologies foreground a sidelined and yet significant vein running through our literary heritage and include an eclectic collection of poetic voices representing “a diversity of countries, cultures, communities, and idioms” (xx). Notwithstanding the editors’ attempts to present a range and variety of poetic responses to scripture, there is a disappointingly small representation of female voices, particularly those drawn from the eighteenth and early nineteenth century.¹ Although the editors note that contemporary women poets are playing an important role in reinventing scriptural poetry, they give comparatively little attention to earlier generations of women poets who helped to shape a female scriptural poetic tradition. Within the displaced scriptural poetic heritage women poets are, therefore, doubly displaced and their contributions to this body of work have yet to be fully recognised and explored.

The poet and critic, Alice Ostriker, makes important forays into this territory in her essays, “A Word Made Flesh: The Bible and Women’s Poetry” (1993) and “A Triple Hermeneutic: Scripture and Revisionist Women’s Poetry” (1997) in which she deals with biblical appropriations by a number of nineteenth and twentieth-century American and British poets. In both cases she sets out her critical framework through a study of the poetry of Emily Dickinson, the female nineteenth-century scriptural poet most obviously prioritised by Atwan and Wieder.² On the basis of her study of Dickinson Ostriker argues that “we can locate three strategies, exemplary of women’s biblical appropriations from the nineteenth century to the present;” the first of these is a “hermeneutics of suspicion” in which the female poet, “Insofar as she identifies herself as powerless....mistrusts, resists, and attacks” the Bible as the “embodiment of patriarchal power” (Ostriker, *Word Made Flesh* 66). This first strategy remains the dominant strand within Ostriker’s analysis since she asserts that “a feminist’s stance towards Scripture is inevitably adversarial” (Ostriker, *Triple Hermeneutic* 165). At other moments though Ostriker suggests that we might find a “hermeneutics of desire,” in which the feminist reader “bends” the text to her “wish,” and a “hermeneutics of indeterminacy” in which the poem “retains an irreducible element of the wilful, the made thing, the playful poetic fiction: interpretation never

collapses itself back into the text, never makes what the philosophers call ‘truth claims’” (Ostriker, *Word Made Flesh* 67). While Ostriker sets out this “triple hermeneutics” as “exemplary of women’s biblical appropriations from the nineteenth century to the present” she goes on to argue here, somewhat confusingly, that “Outside of Dickinson we don’t get the hermeneutics of suspicion, and we don’t get the dancing indeterminacies” since her “nineteenth-century sisters...laboured in a vineyard which required (and inspired) heavy doses of piety and right-thinking, especially in women poets” (67). This is a rather disappointingly reductive account of the strategies deployed by other nineteenth-century female poets, including Dickinson’s British predecessors and these alternative poetic voices warrant further consideration, not least because their work relates to the nineteenth-century development of feminist biblical scholarship.

Ostriker’s account clearly prioritises an adversarial hermeneutic model and contemporary Bible scholars reaffirm that the dominant feminist approach to the Bible is a “hermeneutic of suspicion” demanding an “adversarial reading” position, since the “biblical traditions reflect a predominantly andocentric world-view which relegates women to the margins and assigns them a subordinate role in the religious and social life of Israel” (Davies viii and 1). This approach does not, however, reflect either the range of feminist positions available to women throughout history or the variety of approaches to the Bible adopted by earlier feminist scholars. According to Collins, the earliest types of “feminist exegesis and hermeneutics” to appear in Biblical scholarship are: “feminist proof-texting” – the discovery of “passages supportive of women which could be used to counter the biblical passages quoted by those who wished to keep women ‘in their place’” – and the “study and lifting up of historical women of female literary characters in the Bible...as role models for women;” both of these hermeneutic models emerge in the nineteenth-century primarily among American Bible scholars and remain dominant until the more adversarial approach begins to emerge in the later part of the nineteenth-century (4). These early feminist hermeneutic strategies played an important role not just within the field of biblical scholarship but also within the nineteenth-century feminist movement more broadly:

in their struggle for emancipation, feminists tended to embrace biblical passages supportive of liberation....By means of such dexterous proof-texting, feminists were able to argue that the Bible was not as sexist as was often supposed, and that it

contained material which could be used as a valuable weapon in the battle for female emancipation (Davies 26).

Given that the Bible has historically been used to reinforce the oppression of women in a variety of ways, the importance of such strategies in the development of the early stages of the feminist movement should not be underestimated, and some of these early feminist hermeneutic approaches can be traced within the work of an earlier generation of British women poets in a poetic tradition which is spear headed by the influential evangelical poet, dramatist, and novelist, Hannah More.

More, although not a Bible scholar *per se*, remained committed to the possibility of the reformation of society through scripture and through the dissemination of spiritual ideas and values all her life, and she was also deeply interested in women's role within society. She has been described by one recent critic as "the most influential woman living in England in the Romantic era" (Mellor 15-16) and in her authoritative female conduct book of 1799, *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education*, More makes striking claims for the importance of the Bible as a framework for female empowerment by pointing to the level of importance granted women by spiritual history:

The religion of Christ has even bestowed a degree of renown on the [female] sex beyond what any other religion ever did...[.] Some of the most affecting scenes, the most interesting transactions, and the most touching conversations which are recorded of the Saviour of the world passed with women. *Their* examples have supplied some of the most eminent instances of faith and love: *they* are the first remarked as having "ministered to him of their substance:" *theirs* was the praise of not abandoning their despised Redeemer when he was led to execution, and under all the hopeless circumstances of his ignominious death; *they* appear to have been the *last* attending at his tomb, and the *first* on the morning when he arose from it: *theirs* was the privilege of receiving the earliest consolation from their risen Lord: *theirs* was the honour of being first commissioned to announce his glorious resurrection (More, *Works* 5: 243-4).

More recognises the crucial role played by the Bible in the formation of social and cultural attitudes towards women and she stakes an important claim for her sex in relation to the scriptural narrative in this passage, which predates the recognized development of nineteenth-century feminist biblical

scholarship. More's approach also, however, relates closely to what has been described more recently as the ongoing "task faced by feminist biblical critics": to "rewrite women back into the text and to break the conspiratorial silence regarding their role in the biblical narrative" (Davies 87). Davies describes this as a "hermeneutic of literary reconstruction" (86) since the Bible is treated by such scholars as a literary text, but the phrase has particular resonances for the women writers considered here since what poets bring to this hermeneutic practice is the possibility of imaginatively retracing the lost tracks of the female story. More and the poets who follow her utilise hermeneutic strategies which are later deployed by both nineteenth and twentieth-century biblical scholars, but they also move beyond these scholarly approaches in their creative and imaginative attempts to empathise with and give voice to the characters they describe. This body of work has been subject to a double silencing and, although less prioritised than the "suspicious" model, is deserving of our attention, not least because it displays a subtle awareness of the importance of scripture in shaping women's cultural roles and social identity. Although this tradition contains elements of Ostriker's "hermeneutics of desire" and what Davies describes as a "hermeneutics of literary reconstruction" this body of work when considered together might be seen more accurately as evidencing a hermeneutics of empathy and empowerment. The idea of empathy relates to the fact that the women writers claim a particular role in their engagement with scripture, one which is to do with their ability to empathise with and identify psychologically and emotionally with a particular biblical figure or spiritual dilemma. This in turn leads to various modes of empowerment, granting women poets a key role in the interpretation of spiritual matters and allowing for an imaginative identification with often powerful female figures and on occasion with Christ.

In *Strictures* More begins to outline women's peculiar talents in representing biblical material, claiming that "In their Christian course women have every superior advantage ...[.] Their hearts are naturally soft and flexible, open to impressions of love and gratitude; their feelings tender and lively" (More, *Works* 5: 238). This ability to feel deeply and "open" themselves to "impressions of love" places women in a unique position *vis-à-vis* interpreting and imaginatively retelling the biblical narrative. More herself capitalises on these special gendered insights in an earlier publication, *Sacred Dramas*, published in 1782, which represents the first important example of the alternative tradition of British women's hermeneutic poetry explored here. It is a surprisingly audacious intervention in the scriptural poetic tradition consisting substantially of a series of verse-drama reworkings of four biblical narratives. More had written elsewhere of the "combined advantage" of dramatic forms in

simultaneously “addressing...the imagination, the judgement and the heart” and in terms of a reworking of sacred material, the use of verse-drama allows for the creative exploration of the psychological and emotional responses of imagined figures (cited in Mellor 46). The characters are deeply felt and rendered to us as psychologically believable individuals wrestling with spiritual dilemmas. She harnesses the emotional and imaginative possibilities available to her within dramatic forms to explore and develop biblical characters in complex and sometimes unexpected ways.

Somewhat surprisingly, given her focus on female New Testament roles in *Strictures*, More draws entirely from Old Testament material in the collection, presenting dramas on Moses, David and Goliath, Belshazzar, and Daniel.³ Her handling of this material though means that the collection as a whole works to reaffirm the idea that the “central spiritual message” is “one of liberation from oppression” since the stories she selects revolve around the abuse of power and God’s condemnation of tyranny and oppression (Gifford 17). As early feminists clearly realised, this spiritual message has particular resonances in relation to women’s experience and More’s narratives challenge the authority of specific models of patriarchy within society: her representation of the “royal Pharaoh’s unrelenting hate” and “hard oppression” is critiqued and challenged in “Moses in the Bulrushes” and Nebuchadnezzar’s “uncontrol’d ambition.... / Dominion absolute” is undermined in “Belshazzar” (*Sacred Dramas* 29 and 106-7). The dramas repeatedly depict God’s empowerment of those who are apparently weak in overcoming the politically, legally, or physically strong, as the Pharaoh’s “iron bondage” (29) is overcome by a group of women working together and David, the boy shepherd, overcomes Goliath. While the collection as a whole does not offer a sustained focus on female characters, More does offer some well-handled literary reconstructions of female biblical figures which contribute to the hermeneutic practice of writing “women back into the text” and in so doing “breaking the conspiratorial silence regarding their role in biblical narrative” (Davies 86). More’s role as poet-dramatist allows her to imaginatively “recover” such voices and characters in a particularly potent way as she “reconstructs” the story in the light of their involvement. Within the first drama in the collection, “Moses in the Bulrushes,” More offers a powerful portrayal of Miriam, sister of Moses, an intriguing biblical female figure who has generated a great deal of subsequent discussion by feminist biblical scholars as an example of a prophetic female character whose story has been silenced and suppressed. As Davies notes:

...there are some indications in the Hebrew Bible to suggest that Miriam occupied a position of prominence and prestige in Israel...But while the biblical text gives tantalizing hints of Miriam's importance and influence, she is not accorded the attention the few passages concerning her suggest she deserves...Miriam's role was minimized and suppressed by the biblical authors and her contribution was practically submerged within the male-orientated framework of the biblical text. (86)

More's radical re-telling of Exodus prefigures later feminist scholarly responses to the character of Miriam but also offers an imaginative reconstruction of her "submerged" narrative. Miriam's silenced prophetic voice is given dramatic utterance and we learn of Moses' adulthood in the final section of the drama through Miriam's prophetic speech; Miriam "wrapt in extasy" is visited by a "prescient spirit...from on high" who "Reveals the hidden things of unborn time, / And leads my view through dim futurity" (39). Miriam foresees not only the events of Moses' life and his role in the deliverance of the Israelites but also foretells the coming of Christ:

Moses, though great, is but the type of ONE
Far greater; ONE predestin'd to redeem
Not Israel only, but the human race;
ONE who in after time shall rescue men,
Not from the body's slav'ry, the brief bondage
Of life and time; but who shall burst the chains
Which keep the soul enthrall'd, the chains of sin;
Shall free the captive from the galling yoke
Of Satan; rescue from eternal death,
And finally restore, Man's ruin'd race. (46)

More was clearly aware that this act of literary reconstruction entered into the realm of hermeneutics and she adds an apologetic but also defensive footnote, which ironically positions her more firmly as a biblical exegete as she points to the tantalising scriptural hints regarding Miriam's status:

The author is fearful that she may be thought, in this last part, to have exceeded the bounds of poetical licence. For though Miriam, in the chapter which contains the Song

of Moses is called a prophetess; and though the prophet Micah in his sixth chapter, speaks of Miriam assisting jointly with her brothers, Moses and Aaron, in the redemption of Israel from captivity, yet we hear little or nothing of her elsewhere in her prophetic character. (46)

Such interventions place More at the forefront of a line of feminist biblical scholars who attempt to re-read the Bible for evidence of women's special if hidden role and who seek to retrospectively reconstruct this role.

In "Belshazzar" a similar reconstructive process is at work and More again reworks biblical material, in this case to dramatically enhance the role of Belshazzar's mother. In the book of Daniel the role of the unnamed Queen mother is minimal and takes up only a few lines in the narrative relating Belshazzar's feast; her role is purely functional, to suggest that Daniel should be called for to interpret the writing on the wall for her son. In More's verse-poem, however, the Queen is brought to life as a character and is defined in her opposition to Belshazzar and all that he represents:

O my misguided son!
Well may'st thou wonder to behold me here:
For I have ever shunn'd this scene of riot,
Where wild intemperance and dishonoured mirth
Hold festival impure. Yet, O Belshazzar!
I could not hear the wonders which befell,
And leave thee to the workings of despair:
For, spite of all the anguish of my soul
At thy offences, I'm thy mother still! (123-4)

Like most female characters within this poetic hermeneutic tradition her maternal emotions and her capacity for love are emphasised but she is also positioned on the side of God and his prophets, and Daniel himself contrasts Belshazzar, "dissolute" and "Magnificently impious," to his "virtuous mother, sage Nitocris":

Ah! how unlike the impious king her son!

She never mingles in the midnight fray,
Nor crowns the guilty banquet with her presence.
The royal fair is rich in ev'ry virtue,
Which can adorn the queen, or grace the woman.
But for the wisdom of her prudent counsels
This wretched empire had been long undone. (107-9)

One of the most significant aspects of More's retelling is that she gives the unnamed biblical Queen a name. As Davies notes, further evidence of the "marginalization of women in the biblical narratives" is the fact that many are "not even dignified with a name" and these unnamed "women are 'figures' rather than 'characters' in the biblical story" (63); the naming of such women therefore carries important resonances and helps More transform the unknown Queen into a "character" and a genuine player in human history. In her handling of the book of Daniel, More refers reverentially to a blank verse poetic reworking of the Belshazzar story in *Judah Restored* (1774) by William Hayward Roberts, a Cambridge scholar, poet, and biblical critic. While Roberts' poem is clearly an important influence on the *Sacred Dramas*' enterprise as a whole, this earlier poem remains much truer to the biblical account and offers a far less developed depiction of the role of Belshazzar's mother, who is nameless and designated simply the "royal widow" who "hastes to cheer / Her trembling son" (Roberts 421-2). More's emphasis on Nitocris in her dramatic retelling deviates quite widely from the biblical account of Belshazzar and so it seems likely that she is in fact drawing on historical sources, particularly Herodotus, to embellish the biblical account.⁴ The reference to the Queen's influence on the nation in the last two lines of Daniel's speech also supports the idea that More is weaving together non-biblical accounts of the powerful Queen Nitocris with the barely visible mother of Belshazzar from Daniel.⁵ Drawing attention to the earlier poetic version of this narrative published by Roberts, a reputable biblical scholar, functions to insert More's work within contemporary biblical scholarship, since her role as exegete is flagged up by the placing of her own very different reworking of the narrative alongside that of Roberts.

More's *Sacred Dramas* is an important example of an alternative early women's hermeneutical poetry which draws upon the Bible to subtly explore models of female empowerment, and it seems likely that the collection influenced a subsequent generation of women poets who adopt many of the strategies developed by More and who thus continue this feminist hermeneutic poetic tradition. In 1834 a little

known poet and hymn-writer, Maria Grace Saffery, published a volume of poetry entitled *Poems on Sacred Subjects* in which she includes a rather clumsy sonnet to entitled “To the Memory of Mrs. More” which acknowledges More’s literary and spiritual legacy:

....ne’er shall come the day....
When it shall be as if thou hadst not been...
Still radiant is thy path on either shore.
Behind thy footsteps shines the grace of time;-
The glory of eternity before! (199)

Although Saffery lacks much of More’s subtlety and skill as a poet, the influence of the earlier poet’s poetic reconstructions and re-imaginings of biblical incidents from a female perspective is apparent, particularly in Saffery’s attempts to empathise with specific and often marginal female characters. Saffery is in some ways more adventurous than More and she dabbles widely in a range of poetic forms - including blank verse, sonnets, and the six line stanza - as well tackling both New Testament and Old Testament material and delving outside the more obvious Sunday school repertoire to which More restricts herself.

Within *Poems on Sacred Subjects* there is an interesting series of three sonnets on the figure of Hagar who is shifted from the margins of biblical narrative to the centre and who is presented in an unconventionally sympathetic way by Saffery, thus anticipating more modern handling of this character.⁶ Saffery’s imaginative poetic reworking of the scriptural material functions as a form of exegesis since it challenges received scholarly interpretations of Hagar and her spiritual significance by focussing on her plight as a suffering mother and on God’s redemption of this outcast woman. As Davies notes, a key strategy for the contemporary “dissenting” feminist reader is not only to “recover the submerged strains of women’s voices” but also to “view the events from their perspective,” and by way of example Davies questions what the Abraham story would look like if told from the “point of view of Hagar” (46). One answer lies in Saffery’s sonnets where the focus on the figure of Hagar shifts our attention onto her suffering as a mother but also brings about a rethinking of her son’s significance; while Ishmael is traditionally read as a symbol of exile and as the less spiritual of Abraham’s children, he is here described as “The Father of the fearless and the free” (14).⁷ In the first

of the sonnets in the sequence, the treatment of Hagar functions to counter Paul's reading and reinforces instead the biblical message of God's sympathy and support for the lonely and outcast:

'Tis now, as in the wilderness of old.
Art thou alone like Hagar? God will *hear*.
Art thou like her deserted? God will *see*. (14)

Retelling the story of God's deliverance of Hagar from the point of view of Hagar herself allows Saffery to challenge the traditional oppositions between legitimate/illegitimate, spiritual/outcast which are reinforced in Paul's exegesis and to deliver instead a message of divine support for the disempowered and marginalised.

The longest poem in the collection is a substantial blank-verse reworking of the early chapters of the book of Exodus. Placed as it is, almost immediately after the Hagar sonnets, this reworking emphasises the same message of God hearing the prayers of those who are suffering and oppressed, and answering their call. This is reinforced by the choice of biblical epigraph from Acts: "I have seen, I have seen the affliction of my people which is in Egypt, and I have heard their groaning, and am come down to deliver them" (19). The book of Exodus offers the most powerful biblical account of God's intervention on behalf of the outcast and oppressed, and in the poem Saffery lingers over the "forms of tenfold vengeance," meted out in response to Israel's "weeping" (19). As in More's "Moses," the poem culminates in the recovery and celebration of the female prophetic voice:

Then woke the wondrous strain,-- the deathless song
That Miriam answered with the timbrel sound.
It was the song of Moses o'er the deep,
....
It was the outburst of the choral tribes[.]
....
There was a mystic triumph in the tones,--
The triumph of Eternity was there!
....
It was the prelude of the gathering sound,

That shall, like many mingling waters, flow
In one vast anthem, unto Him that saved,
Not from the yoke of Egypt, but of Hell!
It was the whisper of the praise that rolls
In gentler, loftier cadence to the Lamb.
Sweet, as the odours breathing round his throne,--
Deep, as the voice of thunders turned to joy. (35-6).

The juxtaposition in the last line recurs repeatedly in Saffery's poetry and the collection as a whole reinforces and celebrates this idea of empowering inversion, as God turns tears to happiness, suffering to redemption, and weakness to strength, an inversion which might seem to have a particularly powerful resonance for the disempowered female reader.

The second major sequence in the collection is based on the life of Elijah as described in the book of Kings. However, Saffery's reworking of the material does not begin where the Biblical account of Elijah commences, with the prophet's delivery of a message from God to Ahab, but with the Widow of Zarephath and Elijah's sojourn with her following his time in the desert. This unnamed female biblical figure is developed through the poet's attempt to empathise with her experiences. Saffery considers the implications of the widow's story within the Elijah narrative and frames the main story of the prophet himself with an account of female selflessness, love, and vulnerability. There are moments in which Saffery's engagement with the characters displays the sort of "open[ness]" to the emotional significance of the events being described, which is seen by More as women's special contribution to biblical hermeneutics. Here, for example, the mother trusts her son's dead body "To the meek Prophet's holy, kind embrace (45) and the poem asks:

Could not the woe-worn seer unmoved behold,
Stretch'd on his bed, his brow of beauty cold, --
That tender child?—No—thrice the babe he press'd,
As if he would the vital boon impart
From the warm current of his pitying heart[.] (46)

Elijah is subtly feminised here and his spiritual love is paralleled with maternal love. The joy experienced by the mother and the renewal of her faith is linked prophetically by Saffery to the coming of Christ: “So, when that Prophet with a mightier name / To his own world with deeds of mercy came” (46). Here, as in other poems in the collection dealing with the life of Christ, there is an attempt to contemplate spiritual love in terms of an empowered version of feminine love, so that the disciples in the storm-racked boat in “Jesus walking on the Sea” long for “that mighty arm—that pitying heart— / That gentle voice which heaven itself obeys” (140). The linking of female, often maternal love, with Christ’s love occurs more extensively within biblical poetry by the more prestigious and well-established poet, Felicia Hemans, and becomes an increasingly important dimension of this poetic hermeneutic tradition.

In the same year in which Saffery published her *Poems on Sacred Subjects* Hemans, who was reaching the end of her prestigious career, published *Scenes and Hymns of Life, with Other Religious Poems*. Not all poems within the collection are purely scriptural and the opening poems deal more broadly with spiritual and Christian themes, especially death and the consolation of faith. Within the wider selection of Christian poetry Hemans, like Saffery, utilises a range of poetic forms, including blank verse, verse-drama, and the hymn in order to explore spiritual ideas from a variety of perspectives. The collection is dominated though by two sonnet sequences: “Female Characters of Scripture” and “Sonnets, Devotional and Memorial” which represent Hemans’ most overt and sustained intervention in a scriptural poetics.

Like More, Hemans makes claims in her Preface to *Scenes and Hymns of Life*, about her ability as a woman to imbue scriptural poetry with a deeper emotional significance:

I trust I shall not be accused of presumption for the endeavour which I have here made to enlarge, in some degree, the sphere of religious poetry, by associating with its themes more of the emotions, the affections, and even the purer imaginative enjoyments of daily life, than may have been hitherto admitted within the hallowed sphere. (607)

While the Preface begins on a humble note, Hemans stakes a powerful claim for the woman poet’s right to intervene in and “enlarge” this sacred sphere, a sphere which earlier in her career she had

depicted as being most worthy of artistic endeavour; in *The Restoration of the Works of Art to Italy* (1816) she describes the “loftier tasks” of the artist whose eyes are fixed on the “holy shore” and points to Raphael’s painting, *The Transfiguration*, as an example of the powerful function of such art:

Gaze on that scene, and own the might of Art,
By truth inspired, to elevate the heart!
To bid the soul exultingly possess,
Of all her powers, a heightened consciousness[.] (49)

The displaced engagement with sacred material via art which occurs here becomes an important feature of Hemans’ later interventions in scriptural poetry and a number of her 1834 sonnets engage with the Bible only indirectly through paintings of scriptural subject matter by Renaissance Italian artists such as Da Vinci and Correggio. Within these ekphrastic poems it is often the act of gazing on the sacred image which allows Hemans to experience the powerful sense of empathy which she describes in *The Restoration of the Works of Art to Italy*. Her contemplation of the visual image gives her access to a particular kind of emotionally intense spiritual experience. In an early example of this, “On a Picture of Christ Bearing the Cross,” Hemans’ gaze blurs with that of the female watcher in the painting who is looking up at Christ:

....upwards, through transparent darkness gleaming,
Gazed in mute reverence woman’s earnest eye,
Lit, as a vase whence inward light is streaming,
With quenchless faith, and deep love’s fervency. (560)

The poem depicts a shared ardent female response to Christ, in which the women seem to partake of Christ’s own spiritual light, through their capacity for “deep love” and their “quenchless faith.” This gendered emotional response is reaffirmed in another ekphrastic poem from the later 1834 collection, “On a Remembered Picture of Christ: An Ecce Homo, by Leonardo Da Vinci.” In this sonnet Hemans records the lasting impression made on her by a youthful encounter with Da Vinci’s “Awful, though meek” painting of Christ in *Ecce Homo*. In the octave she describes the moment of epiphany in her youth when she was brought face to face with this representation of Christ:

I met that image on a mirthful day
Of youth; and, sinking with a stilled surprise,
The pride of life, before those holy eyes,
In my quick heart died thoughtfully away[.] (646)

The sonnet moves though in the sestet towards a later moment of more powerful empathy with Christ which Hemans experiences as a mature woman; in her later years she achieves a heightened recognition of the meaning of love as a result of her maternal experiences and finds herself able to empathise much more fully and intensely with Christ's suffering:

Now that, around the deep life of my mind,
Affections, deathless as itself, have twined,
Oft does the pale, bright vision still float by;
But more divinely sweet, and speaking *now*
Of One whose pity, throned on that sad brow,
Sounded all depths of love, grief, death, humanity! (646)

The special personal connection with Christ which Hemans begins to establish through these poems is developed more fully within the second sonnet series from the 1834 collection, "Female Characters of Scripture." Here a subtle alignment is developed between women and Christ based on a shared capacity for pity, selfless suffering, and love and it is this alignment which enables Hemans to offer in her late work an empowered reading of those attributes which were culturally assigned to the female sex.

This series of sonnets also functions as a poetic exploration of More's claims about the key roles played by women within the Christian narrative in order to reinforce women's unique spiritual role. The collection is a sustained poetic example of the feminist hermeneutic practice of "lifting up" female biblical characters as role models for women, in which we are presented with a strategically selected body of material from the Bible which emphasises and focuses on the important part played by women within sacred history (Collins 4). The sequence opens with two "Invocation" sonnets mourning the silencing of the female prophetic voice within Bible history; the first calls on these female figures to rise up out of history:

...Come with the voice, the lyre,
Daughters of Judah! with the timbrel rise!
Ye of the dark, prophetic Eastern eyes,
Imperial in their visionary fire;
Oh steep my soul in that old, glorious time,
When God's own whisper shook the cedars of your clime! (641)

This evocative depiction of the “Daughter of Judah” suggests the existence of alternative and empowering female role models in scripture and Hemans goes on in the sequence to explore a range of female figures whose stories have been suppressed and silenced. In “The Song of Miriam” Hemans, like More, recognises the subversive possibilities inherent in the biblical hints about Miriam’s prophetic power, and presents her as a regal and important figure:

When Miriam’s voice o’er that sepulchral realm
Sent on the blast a hymn of jubilee.
With her lit eye, and long hair floating free,
Queen-like she stood, and glorious was the strain,
E’en as instinct with the tempestuous glee
Of the dark waters, tossing o’er the slain,
A song for God’s own victory! (642)

Alongside these visionary and prophetic figures though, Hemans puts forward a cast of female biblical characters including Ruth, Rizpah, the Shumanite woman, the Virgin Mary, the sisters of Lazarus, the women at the cross, and Mary Magdalene, which illustrate the wider range of roles played by women in the Christian narrative. While Melnyk describes many of these women as “poor models for the woman poet,” the sheer extent of women’s involvement in the narrative is important for Hemans’ approach (89). Though it is true that some of the sonnets depicting the lives of New Testament figures such as the Virgin Mary, the sisters of Lazarus, and the women of Jerusalem at the cross, tend to reaffirm traditional roles of submission, sacrifice and obedience, it is significant that the Old Testament figures also embody many of these traits, suggesting that these are not for women “the effect of the new covenant of submission and humility on women” as Melnyk suggests (88), but

rather characteristics that Hemans wants to identify as quintessentially female; she depicts Ruth's "calm heart" and "gentle eyes," Rizpah's capacity for selflessness, and she writes of the "meekness" of the Shumanite "woman's breast, / Where that sweet depth of still contentment lies" (642-3). These qualities are echoed in Mary's "calm spirit" and the "pale stillness of thy thoughtful brow" and are precisely the characteristics which make her suitable to be drawn into God's plan and "Chosen of heaven" to bear the saviour (643). Hemans' poetry has often been critiqued for its tendency to reinforce female gender stereotypes and although this tendency is still present in her late poems it is here more than an act of cultural complicity, since she now offers a hermeneutic interpretation of these traits as suggestive of the connection between women and Christ. Hemans suggests that it is for the most part the very meekness and sympathy of women, their capacity for "exceeding love." (644), which positions them so centrally within the spiritual narrative since they, like Christ, embody the traits which serve as a model for spiritual human behaviour.

It is perhaps significant that Hemans' sequence of sonnets based around specific female figures begins with Miriam, the female character most explicitly developed by More in her *Sacred Dramas*, and ends with Mary Magdalene, whose "honour of being first commissioned to announce his glorious resurrection" is placed in *Strictures* at the pinnacle of More's catalogue of roles supporting her claim that the "religion of Christ has...bestowed a degree of renown on the [female] sex beyond what any other religion ever did" (More, *Works* 5:243). Hemans echoes and develops the significance of the granting of the divine revelation to a woman:

Then was a task of glory all thine own,
Nobler than e'er the still, small voice assigned
To lips in awful music making known
The stormy splendours of some prophet's mind.
"Christ is arisen!" – by thee, to wake mankind,
First from the sepulchre those words were brought!
Thou wert to send the mighty rushing wind
First on its way, with those high tidings fraught[.] (645)

Here Mary Magdalene, not only a woman but "Earth's outcast," is granted the revelation of the truth of Christ's divinity and thus mankind's redemption through the resurrection. The penultimate lines of

the sonnet seem to echo with significance for women beyond the Magdalene story: “Oh raised from shame to brightness! *there* doth lie / The tenderest meaning of *His* ministry” (645). In other words Christ revokes the original shame attributed to women for Eve’s primary transgression and not only forgives but returns women to their true spiritual connection with God. The narrative told by these sonnets suggests a unique spiritual relationship for women, which works to subtly undermine those forms of patriarchal oppression which were seen to be validated by scriptural authority.

Possibly the most significant example of the feminist hermeneutic poetic tradition instigated by More, which raises up submerged female voices and explores connections between women and Christ, is “Pilate’s Wife’s Dream,” a poem published by Charlotte Brontë in 1846. Like More before her, Brontë picks up on a slight textual reference to a barely visible and otherwise silenced female scriptural figure and uses this to imaginatively reconstruct the woman’s story. Treatment of the Pilate narrative in the Bible reminds us that the New Testament offers versions with which the reader negotiates. Brontë intervenes in biblical scholarship by endorsing and emphasising one particular Gospel version over another and by implicitly challenging alternative accounts of Pilate which present him as merely weak as opposed to cruel and tyrannical. Of the four Gospel accounts, that in Matthew offers the most damning portrayal of the governor of Rome, largely through the introduction of a domestic dimension, the reporting of a dream experienced by Pilate’s wife: “When he [Pilate] was set down on the judgement seat, his wife sent unto him, saying, Have thou nothing to do with that just man: for I have suffered many things this day in a dream because of him” (Matthew 27:19). No further reference to the wife is made and even here her voice is represented indirectly via a messenger, but Brontë’s poem presents a complex and detailed imaginative reconstruction of the woman’s experience extrapolated from this obscure reference.⁸

“Pilate’s Wife’s Dream” is not merely an example of the feminist poetic hermeneutic approach experimented with by More in the 1780s but is also a development of this tradition, since Brontë seems to identify herself much more closely with the female character described and the woman’s close affiliation with Christ’s values is deployed to offer a more overt critique of patriarchal power.⁹ One crucial reason for Brontë’s successful handling and development of this poetic tradition is her return to the dramatic genres preferred by More as a means of exploring imaginative insights into character. She utilises the newly developing dramatic monologue, a genre which allows her to reconstruct the voice and thoughts of the wife of Pontius Pilate, and in so doing offer a more vividly

realised extrapolation than was possible within the sonnets and shorter poems of Hemans and Saffery. The dramatic monologue involves a detailed imaginative construction of an individual subjectivity and has a particular appeal for poets interested in exploring the voices of those silenced by history.¹⁰ One theorist of the dramatic monologue has suggested that “women’s dramatic monologues are different from the men’s [since] where men’s poems have two sharply differentiated figures – in dramatic monologues, the poet and the dramatized speaker – in women’s poems the two blur together” (Mermin 75-6). While there are clearly exceptions to this gendered reading, such a blurring is apparent in “Pilate’s Wife’s Dream” and indeed is essential to Brontë’s act of imaginative empathy and the compelling reconstruction of the silenced and suppressed female voice at the heart of the poem.

Brontë transplants the daytime dream recorded in Matthew to night-time and in taking us to the primary moment of the woman’s awakening is able to explore the psychological effects of the dream; Brontë effectively draws the reader into the wife’s interior condition of superstitious unease as she breaks her bedside lamp in awaking violently from disturbed sleep. Waking into darkness, she is caught in that borderline space in which a recent dream seems more vivid than the consciousness of being awake. She draws the curtains, looking to “consult the skies” for explanation of the dream, but the surreal quality of nightmare is still with her and everything is viewed in symbolic terms; she thinks that the “trembling stars” look “wan, / Wild, restless, strange” and the cross itself appears as a “strange spectral thing”:

Dreams, then, are true – for thus my dream ran;
Surely some oracle has been with me,
The gods have chosen me to reveal their plan,
To warn an unjust judge of destiny:
I, slumbering, heard and saw; awake I know,
Christ’s coming death, and Pilate’s life of woe. (3)

Pilate’s wife is the only woman in the Bible whose dreams are recounted and the poem indirectly addresses the question which is raised so tantalisingly by the incident recorded in Matthew: why was this woman chosen to receive God’s message? Within Brontë’s poem there is an implicit suggestion that the answer lies in the woman’s heightened sensitivity and her ability to care for and empathise

with others. From the outset there is evidence of a broadly defined feminist consciousness in the ethic of care she shows towards her female servants: "I'd call my women, but to break their sleep, / Because my own is broken, were unjust" (3). Moreover, the Roman woman's ready acceptance of Christ's divinity and her ability to perceive the "ray of Deity which rests on him" (7) positions her as someone open to receive spiritual truths. The woman's expressions of care towards her servants, her spiritual receptiveness, and her pity for the "blameless head" which is to receive such a "cruel hurt" (5) effectively begins to align her in the poem with Christ himself and what he represents, his "purer light" and "His new ordinance, so wise and mild" (7).

The subtle link established between Pilate's wife and Christ is emphasised by the clear opposition which is established between the shared values of the speaker and Christ, and that which Pilate the patriarch represents:

I do not weep for Pilate – who could prove
Regret for him whose cold and crushing sway
No prayer can soften, no appeal can move;
Who tramples hearts as others trample clay[.] (4)

The patriarchal model represented by Pilate is positioned in opposition both to the wife's spirituality, pity and care, and the ethos of the "stainless" Christ (7). While a similar gendered opposition is established in More's poem dealing with the life of "Moses," the wider feminist implications of this opposition are developed much more overtly here and Brontë goes on to present a vitriolic and sustained attack on all that Pilate symbolises. In his editorial notes Winnifrith comments that the poem "shows a conventional Christian hostility to Pilate, but an unconventional and perhaps unfair disloyalty to him from his wife" (341). It is this "disloyalty" which makes the poem so interesting in hermeneutic terms since Brontë carefully draws out the implications of Matthew's reference to the wife's dream to find biblical support for a critique of specific models of social and sexual oppression. The speaker describes her abhorrence of Pilate's "triple lust of gold, and blood, and power" (4) alongside her own oppression as his wife:

How can I love, or mourn, or pity him?
I, who so long my fettered hands have wrung;

I, who for grief have wept my eye-sight dim;
Because, while life for me was bright and young,
He robbed my youth – he quenched my life's fair ray –
He crushed my mind, and did my freedom slay. (5)

The emotional experience of the woman remains the central focus of attention as Brontë moves beyond the confines of spiritual discourse to depict the woman's disgust at Pilate's sexual advances which are here intimately linked to his tyrannical cruelty as a ruler:

Has he not sought my presence, dyed in blood-
Innocent, righteous blood, shed shamelessly?
And have I not his red salute withstood? (5)

There are moments in the poem when the blurring between character and poet identified by Mermyn becomes apparent and Brontë seems to speak out through her female protagonist and exhibit her thinly disguised anger at certain aspects of patriarchy: "I see him as he is – without a screen; / And, by the gods, my soul abhors his mien!"(5). At least one anonymous contemporary reviewer picked up on Brontë's deep empathetic engagement with her speaker and also on the feminist political implications of her treatment of scriptural material, noting that the text is "characterized by a "sense of wrong; of woman's sufferings under her tyrant" and mourning the circumstances which brought about in Brontë "such bitter impressions of the tyranny of society over her own sex" ("Poems" 394-5). Brontë ventriloquises for the wife and in so doing invests the barely visible biblical wife with a powerful voice with which she challenges her tyrant husband and speaks out for the persecuted Christ. As in earlier poems within this hermeneutic tradition, Brontë chooses to reconstruct a female figure who has access to the wider spiritual narrative through dream and prophecy and in portraying this visionary insight the Roman wife's voice blurs with that of the high Anglican writing in the 1840s, within a context in which Pilate's actions have an established significance and the divinity of Christ has been accepted as fact:

...the vision spread
Into a world remote, an age to come –
And still the illumined name of Jesus shed

A light, a clearness, through the unfolding gloom –
And still I saw that sign which now I see,
That cross on yonder brow of Calvary. (6)

The two voices merge, reaffirming women's instinctive ability to perceive and recognise Christ's "god-like goodness," as well as their support and embodiment of his new set of values which are so firmly opposed to the model of patriarchal law represented by Pilate.

In his discussion of a hermeneutics of "literary reconstruction" Davies notes that "the strategy of recovering and highlighting women's role in the biblical narrative tradition provides a much needed corrective to the predominant emphasis on the part played by male protagonists" (88). He goes on to observe that "however significant the part played by women in the events recorded, the fact is that they usually function to further patriarchal interests" and concludes that "there is little point in highlighting the role of women in the biblical narrative if all they do is act 'behind the scenes' to promote" these interests (88). The poems explored here, however, illustrate the subversive and empowering potential of such acts of imaginative reconstruction. For Brontë and other women poets, the empathetic realisation of female characters from scripture and their subtle gendered identification with Christ through a shared set of values based on acts of pity and love, constitutes a powerful mode of resistance to certain forms of patriarchal oppression in a repressive social and political context. Although the wider endorsement of scriptural values inherent in such texts might be seen as, what Ostriker terms, evidence of "piety and right thinking," we need to be sensitive to the range of possible feminist responses to the Bible, and for a number of British women poets the hermeneutic model described here allows for an intellectual engagement with biblical scholarship, a creative outlet for both imagining and empathising with women empowered by spiritual revelation, and a means of challenging the silencing of women within the biblical account of the world. While the attributes of many of the female characters depicted by these poets may function to reaffirm certain aspects of the nineteenth-century construction of ideal womanhood, the poems negotiate in often complex ways with the implications of this gendered identity and with the wider significance of women's submerged role within scripture. As "Pilate's Wife's Dream" clearly shows, it is possible to use this approach to biblical material to offer a critique of patriarchy through the rejection of specific masculine models of oppression and through the counter endorsement of an alternative model of human relationships based on a feminist interpretation of the teachings of Christ.

Notes

¹ No poems by eighteenth-century female poets are included in the anthology and of the eight nineteenth-century poets whose work is featured (Mary Coleridge, Emily Dickinson, Alice Meynell, George Eliot, Christina Rossetti, and Barrett Browning) only the latter was publishing within the first half of the nineteenth century.

² Dickinson is the only nineteenth-century female poet with sufficient entries to appear as a significant poetic figure within the scriptural tradition. Twelve poems by Dickinson are included with no other female poet from this period, including Christina Rossetti, featuring more than twice.

³ Although More makes no reference to her choice of Old Testament literature in the preface to *Sacred Dramas*, she does shed some light on her preference for working poetically with this material in the Preface to her 1821 pedagogical collection, *Bible Rhymes*. She states here that in respect of creative reworkings of sacred material “Much more latitude is given in the Old than in the New Testament. The latter consists chiefly of fact and doctrine. It has less imagery; it exhibits a more explicit rule of faith; a more spiritualized code of morals; it is more specifically didactic. On this holy ground therefore we must tread with peculiar caution; because here every article of faith is definite; every rule of practice is established; the scheme of salvation is completed: so that all who enlarge on it must carefully avoid the awful sentence denounced on those who add to, or take from, what is written” (More, *Works* 8: 63).

⁴ More identifies a number of male literary influences including Abraham Cowley, Jean Racine, John Milton and William Hayward Roberts, the poet and biblical critic who published a six book blank verse scriptural poem entitled *Judah Restored* in 1774 which includes a description of Belshazzar’s feast. Although More does not cite his work as an influence, there is another earlier important cultural reworking of the Belshazzar story by George Friedrich Handel whose oratorio, *Belshazzar*, was first performed in 1745, the year in which Hannah More was born. This reworking is in many ways much closer to More’s vision than Roberts’ more biblically accurate poem since in the original libretto by Charles Jennens, Nitocris is identified by name as the mother of Belshazzar and has a powerful dramatic role. Jennens himself was a theologian who drew on historical sources such as Herodotus and Xenophon in creating the oratorio; it is possible therefore that both Jennens and More were influenced independently by Herodotus in the construction of Nitocris or that Jennings’ libretto is an unacknowledged influence on More’s text.

⁵ In her commentary on this passage of Daniel, Stanton directs her readers towards the same non-canonical source: “It is supposed that this queen was the widow of the evil Merodach, and was that

famous Nitocris whom Herodotus mentions as a woman of extraordinary presence and wisdom” (103).

⁶ David Lyle Jeffrey identifies only scant literary references to Hagar prior to the late nineteenth-century and in these Hagar features as a problematic character, “usually as the image of the outcast and rebel;” Jeffrey does not mention Saffery’s poems and identifies Blake as the only poet who “anticipates modern feeling” in returning Hagar and Ishmael to Abraham and Sarah in *The Last Judgement*. According to Jeffries, the first substantially sympathetic literary portrayals of Hagar appear in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century American fiction (Jeffrey 326).

⁷ Jeffrey cites and discusses Paul’s treatment of the Abraham story in Galatians 4: 22-31 where Paul distinguishes between the children of Hagar the “bondwoman,” who are children of “bondage,” and “we, brethren,” who are, “as Isaac was... the children of promise;” Paul adds, “Cast out the bondwoman and her son: for the son of the bondwoman shall not be heir with the son of the freewoman. So then, brethren, we are not the children of the bondwoman, but of the free” (Jeffrey 382).

⁸ In extra canonical literature Pilate’s unnamed wife is called Claudia Procla or Procula and there is an apocryphal tradition that she may have been a “secret follower of Jesus” (Jeffrey 615). There is little evidence in the poem that Brontë is drawing directly on apocryphal material, however, since the wife remains unnamed in her poem and her allegiance to the figure of Christ stems directly from her prophetic dream.

⁹ Augusta Webster contributes to the ongoing development of women’s scriptural poetry in the latter part of the nineteenth century with her collection, *A Woman Sold and Other Poems*, which includes four biblical dramatic poems that have some interesting points of connection with More’s *Sacred Dramas*. The most relevant of the pieces in relation to the feminist hermeneutic model outlined here is “Pilate” in which Webster gives both voice and a name to Pilate’s wife in an imagined dialogue between Pilate and his wife, Procla, in the days following the crucifixion of Christ. Procla’s own speech is relatively limited, however, and the feminist implications of the text lie mainly in the ironic subtext to Pilate’s extended speeches in which the audience are able to see through his attempts to dismiss his wife’s uneasy qualms as mere women’s “foolishness” (Webster 53). While Procla’s unease flags up her more attuned moral and spiritual sensibility, there is little attempt in the poem to establish her role as a more significant one or to link her with the crucified Christ. Armstrong notes that in both Webster and Brontë’s poetic treatments of Pilate’s wife, “the woman’s role and moral position is sharply distinguished from association with the husband” (326) but that distinction is much

more graphically reinforced in Brontë's poem since, as Webster's poem proceeds, it is Pilate himself who comes to warrant our sympathy and although he attempts to veil his concerns from his wife, he ultimately is shown to share her uncertainties.

¹⁰ Brontë's poem anticipates contemporary feminist dramatic monologues which present the voices of women silenced from literature, myth and history, such as those included in Carol Ann Duffy's *The World's Wife*, a collection which features some poems based on scriptural material including a monologue in the voice of Pilate's wife.

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