

## Book Reviews

Linda M. Lewis. *Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Spiritual Progress: Face to Face with God*. Columbia: U of Missouri P, 1998, 272 pp., \$34.95.

Linda M. Lewis begins her *Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Spiritual Progress: Face to Face with God* by asserting that "Barrett Browning's poetry concerns itself with the struggle to know God and truth, as well as to know her own soul and to transcend spiritual limitations." In saying this, Lewis states nothing new. Lewis acknowledges as much, yet she argues that current criticism on Elizabeth Barrett Browning has shied away from Barrett Browning's role as a religious poet, calling her religiosity overly sentimental. To correct this oversight, Lewis looks at the spiritual ideologies in Barrett Browning's poetry, "her 'everlasting face to face with God,'" by dividing the poet's "religious quest" into four stages: "1) the rejection of pride and acceptance of grace, 2) the affirmation of the gospel of Suffering and the gospel of Work, 3) the internalization of the doctrine of the Apocalypse . . . and 4) the ascent to divine love and divine truth." To do this, Lewis focuses on a major work for each stage of the poet's development, looking at "how and where the poet followed and took issue with the tenets she inherited from the Christian theological tradition," particularly the male tradition and Milton. Ultimately, Lewis's study of Barrett

Browning yields a highly flattering view of the poet's religiously inspired poetry.

Lewis's introduction defines what she means by Barrett Browning being "face to face" with God. Barrett Browning's phrase initially referred to expectation regarding her own death, but grew to symbolize her quest for spiritual truth. However, such a quest was problematic for Victorian women writers, and for current critics of Victorian women's literature, since traditional religion is patriarchal and, although Barrett Browning challenged patriarchy itself, she accepted the patriarchy of God. But Lewis defends Barrett Browning by insisting that the poet "sought out the giants" of traditional patriarchal theology and philosophy "and engaged them in philosophical and religious debate." The importance of Barrett Browning's theology is thus not simply in the conclusions she reaches, but in her exploration of traditional theology, since she "appropriates myth and dogma to her own ends" and revises classical and biblical myths. Lewis finishes her introduction with an overview of the problems Victorian women faced in exploring religious issues (such as patriarchy and fear of pride), as well as the problems Barrett Browning herself faced and the reading and efforts she took to overcome these difficulties.

Chapter One, "Prometheus and Jesus as 'Free Souled Reverent Love,'" looks at Barrett Browning's fascination with the Romantic idea of Prometheus. Focusing mostly on "The Seraphim," Lewis argues that the poem is a response to both *Paradise Lost* (1667) and *Prometheus Unbound* (1820). Instead of identifying herself with Prometheus as did Shelley and others, Barrett Browning instead parallels Christ with Prometheus and identifies herself with Mary Magdalene, who must renounce her pride and accept the grace of Christ. Barrett Browning herself found her sympathy with the pride of Prometheus disturbing, particularly as a woman in claiming a strong poetic voice. Thus, she identified with the humble Magdalene, showing Mary Magdalene avoiding pride and accepting the "free souled reverent love" offered by the Promethean Christ. Lewis compares "The Seraphim" with Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* to show the difference between the two poets' perceptions of Christ and humanity. She criticizes Barrett Browning's poem, as Barrett Browning herself did, for lacking "a guiding unity" making the poem seem "chaotic." However, Lewis defends Barrett Browning's treatment of Christ, Prometheus, and the role of the woman poet, arguing that "Since Barrett [Browning] believed that pride is her own worst sin, she deliberately attempts . . . the better choice by equating

woman's position as nearer that of Christ's humility than Satan's hubris." For Barrett Browning, "The loving—free souled, reverent love—seems to be the answer to human pain, making restitution for sin, binding up human wounds, reforging the broken chain linking earth and heaven."

In Chapter Two, "Eve in Exile," Lewis shifts from looking at Barrett Browning's fear of her own pride in desiring to be a poet to this poet's revision of Eve. In "Drama of Exile," Barrett Browning again responds to *Paradise Lost*, this time actually revising the role of Eve in the Fall. In a point by point comparison with *Paradise Lost*, Lewis shows how Barrett Browning saw herself, like Eve, outside Eden, having gained "knowledge by suffering," that knowledge being the key to regaining innocence. Barrett Browning argues that Eve's Fall, unlike Milton's portrayal of it, leads to redemption by helping her understand God and his grace. Therefore, Eve symbolizes not a fall but a hope for redemption. Furthermore, all women enlightened like Eve are equals, not minions to men, becoming literally the "best and last gifts to men." Ultimately, according to Lewis, Barrett Browning uses her portrayal of an empowered, equal, redeemed Eve to preach the Gospel of "Pity, Humility, Suffering, and Work," a gospel that justifies Barrett Browning as a poet.

Chapter Three shifts to Barrett Browning's political poems, focusing particularly on her impractical vision of an ideal government. In "The Politics of 'Planting the Great Hereafter'" Lewis argues that Barrett Browning believed government is for fallen beings who need Promethean leaders to act as teachers, not dictators. This world is therefore not simply a disposable "stopping-off place" but an object of love, work, and concern as Swedenborg argues. In her discussion of Barrett Browning's Italian nationalism in *Casa Guidi Windows* (1851), *Poems before Congress* (1860), and her portrayals of Romney in "Aurora Leigh," Lewis shows Barrett Browning's advocacy of liberating governments which allow individuals self-actualization and the right to chose their own political destiny. Seeing herself as a poet of God, Barrett Browning needed to speak against oppression, believing that all Christians are called to act to "extinguish hell," "plant the great hereafter now," and internalize the apocalypse now. Lewis points out that Barrett Browning's political ideologies are far from practical for actual reform, yet maintains her praise of the poet for those ideologies nonetheless.

Chapter Four, by far the most interesting chapter in the book, focuses primarily on "Aurora Leigh." In "Death and Resurrection," Lewis shows how

Barrett Browning works out, via her principal characters, the tension between her premonitions of death and her belief in immortality through resurrection, a working out Lewis calls a “testimony of her Pauline and Swedenborgian beliefs about the immortal soul and its destiny.” Lewis argues that Barrett Browning’s focus on death, which pervades her poetry, stemmed from the death of her brother and her assumption that she, too, was slowly dying. This morbidity shows up in the portrayal of Marian Erle in “Aurora Leigh,” and in Marian’s somber, fatalistic reactions to her rape. Marian’s fatalism parallels Barrett Browning’s own refusals to marry Browning out of fear of burdening him. Yet, despite this morbid focus on death, Barrett Browning also believed in resurrection and immortality. In “Aurora Leigh,” faith in resurrection is central to Christian hope and in application to all areas of the main characters’ lives, particularly Marian Erle’s after her rape and Romney Leigh’s assisting in restoring life to the dying, literally doing God’s work. By following Swedenborg’s beliefs about the soul, and with the support of Robert Browning, Barrett Browning in her writing found a way to maintain herself in eternity, seeing death as not the end of life or even relationships. However, Lewis argues that this aspect of Barrett Browning’s work is overlooked and in her interesting treatment of the subject justifies the importance Lewis applies to studying Barrett Browning’s focus on death and resurrection.

The title of the last chapter, “Prophetess of Divine Love and Wisdom,” not only applies to Barrett Browning’s vision of herself, but also describes Lewis’s treatment of the poet. Lewis argues that Barrett Browning saw herself as a mythical incarnation of wisdom (literally deciding in her childhood to become Minerva) and cast herself in a number of idealistic Victorian female roles: prophetess, sister, wife, daughter, etc. In short, she cast herself as all the idealized roles of women. As a prophetess and, as such, a speaker for God, Barrett Browning felt compelled to speak on social issues, including the idea that humans need agency to create freedom. In “Aurora Leigh,” Barrett Browning teaches this message by preaching Swedenborg’s gospel of Divine Wisdom and Divine Love. Lewis describes “Aurora Leigh” as “a bildungsroman about a woman’s *evolving* into wisdom,” comparing the evolution of Aurora Leigh to such Victorian heroines as Esther Summerson, Shirley, and Dorothea Brooke, and definitely praising Aurora for her successes. Ultimately, however, Aurora can only become wise if she learns divine love and

wisdom, a lesson which she does learn and which comes on her very much like a revelation. Ironically, as Lewis points out, Aurora and others learn this wisdom only via male wisdom, yet Lewis argues that this does not matter, since Barrett Browning functions outside gender. This is an odd claim, considering how strongly the poet focused on her role as a woman and on gender issues in general. However, given the title of the chapter and Lewis's opinion of the poet, this statement is not surprising.

Nor is it surprising that in her conclusion Lewis characterizes Barrett Browning as the single British woman poet who paved the way for all her female contemporaries. Lewis argues that Barrett Browning explores and introduces ideas others do not, such as Swedenborg's theories of resurrection, politics, and Divine Wisdom. Lewis then spends the bulk of the conclusion discussing Barrett Browning's successors and their connections with her poetry: Felicia Hemans with her standard Victorian morality and patriotism; Mary Hewitt with her religious poems and ballads; Jean Ingelow with her political, spiritual, and mystical focus and vision of a feminine Victorian Christ. Lewis's longest and best comparison looks at Christina Rossetti's belief that one must at once neither love this world nor leave it but focus on one's work here, anticipating, as Barrett Browning does, her own "face to face" with God. Overall, Lewis sees Barrett Browning as the only godmother of Victorian women religious poets.

Lewis's study does precisely what it sets out to do—explore the implications of Barrett Browning's religious ideologies and poetry and praise Barrett Browning for her work. While her tone is occasionally highly flattering, even to the point of overlooking problems in the poet's theories, Lewis does offer strong and interesting arguments, particularly in her look at "Aurora Leigh" and the poet's discussion of death and resurrection. And while the book occasionally drags with an overabundance of biographical information and comparisons with contemporary works, for the most part Lewis's work is useful and informative, bringing Barrett Browning's religiosity back as an accepted area of study, not merely as a part of her often criticized sentimentalism but as an area that reveals her developing religious ideas.

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Richard J. Douglass-Chin. *Preacher Woman Sings the Blues: The Auto-biographies of Nineteenth-Century African American Evangelists*. Col-